

Cote 401

Chapter 401: Everyone Will Have a Wedding

Due to the cooldown effect of "Black-framed Glasses," Kaoru exchanged for a "Teleportation Scroll" outside the school and successfully teleported back to campus.

However, perhaps because it was his first time using it, the landing spot wasn't ideal—he nearly fell into the artificial lake.

By now, it was already past 8 PM.

After straightening his clothes, Kaoru returned to the student dormitory.

Yet, when he noticed light seeping from under his door, his heart skipped a beat.

Before leaving in the morning, he had specifically told Karuizawa that he had business to attend to today.

Karuizawa shouldn't have come over, and it was unlikely to be Ichinose either—she had a date with him tomorrow.

Kushida, then?

Kaoru couldn't figure it out, so he pushed open the door, only to find Horikita Suzune standing in the entryway, arms crossed, her beautiful face cold with indifference.

'Where did she get a key?'

For a moment, Kaoru froze.

Just then, a figure suddenly rushed out from the side and swiftly slammed the door shut behind him.

"Who were you on a date with today?"

As the voice rang out, the person hugged him from behind, her warm, soft chest pressing against his back while her slender hands roamed his pockets with mischievous intent.

Clearly, the one behind him was Kushida.

"No one. I was handling business," Kaoru replied, sensing that the two had been lying in wait for him.

If he had brought a girl back tonight, he'd have been in deep trouble.

"What kind of business requires you to leave your phone in your room?" Kushida didn't believe him. Dressed this sharply for "business"?

Without waiting for an answer, she rummaged through his pockets but found nothing suspicious—only a sheet of paper.

Frowning, she asked, "What's this?"

"My assets," Kaoru said, taking it back from her. "With this, I dare say no one in Class A can compare to me."

"That's quite the claim."

Though Kushida wasn't particularly interested in Class A, his absolute certainty piqued her curiosity.

Kaoru handed the document—more accurately, the contract—to Horikita across from him.

Puzzled, Horikita took it, but the moment she read its contents, her eyes widened in shock.

"Is this real?"

"Of course," Kaoru said. "There are also a few blank checks below. I could burn money like scrap paper right now if I wanted."

"Impossible. The Shinomiya Financial Group is one of the Big Four conglomerates. How could you possibly have something like this?" Horikita instinctively rejected the idea.

This was a financial behemoth with assets in the hundreds of trillions, controlling thousands of subsidiaries and holding Japan's economic lifeline in its grasp!

Though Kouenji Rosuke was also the son of a major conglomerate, compared to this titan, he was merely an ordinary scion of a prestigious family.

Yet, Kaoru had produced a transfer contract—someone voluntarily relinquishing their shares, inexplicably transferring 1% of the Shinomiya Financial Group's equity to him.

Had it been shares in a subsidiary, Horikita might have reluctantly believed it.

But this was equity in the Shinomiya main family.

Even just 1% meant the contract was worth trillions of yen!

The problem was—he wasn't even a Shinomiya!

Horikita racked her brains but couldn't recall anyone named Kaoru in the Shinomiya Financial Group, unless Kaoru had changed his surname—perhaps he was originally a Shinomiya.

Wait, that doesn't add up!

Suddenly, she remembered another financial group whose surname was Mitoma.

In recent years, they had been making waves, implementing numerous reforms and aggressively expanding overseas through mergers and acquisitions.

"Stop overthinking it. I'm not anyone's son," Kaoru interrupted her train of thought.

"This document is genuine, but I can't explain its origins to you."

When he had obtained "1% of Shinomiya Financial Group's shares," Kaoru had already formed a rough guess.

Running an idol agency meant he occasionally dealt with these financial groups—after all, making money inevitably involved navigating the world of corporate giants.

Seeing familiar names, Kaoru suppressed the urge to act immediately.

Only today, with the security of "Black-framed Glasses" and a "Teleportation Scroll," did he finally step beyond the school gates of ANHS.

As expected, he hadn't been transported to another world.

No wonder Hasebe Haruka often remarked how much he resembled a certain celebrity.

How could he not?

Besides, he had only appeared on a few variety shows with Tooru and the others—he never intended to debut as an idol himself.

There was no way he was a star!

Kaoru remembered dying around the age of 25, only to be brought to this world by the Wish Machine and thrust into the role of a producer.

By the time he died a second time, he must have been 27.

Now, at 17, a full decade younger, it was impressive that Hasebe Haruka had recognized him at all.

Beyond verifying things firsthand, Kaoru had also exchanged for "1% of Shinomiya Financial Group's shares" today.

Thanks to the effect of the "Black Formal Suit," the Shinomiya family, wary of provoking him, didn't dare cause trouble during the transfer.

They probably assumed he was some privileged heir of the Mitoma Financial Group, making a move against the Shinomiya empire.

With the shares secured, Kaoru began drafting another contract.

This had been his original plan, but after recently obtaining the "Cup of Greed" and "The Midas Touch," his schemes could now unfold with even greater ease.

"You're being so cryptic! What on earth are you two talking about?" Kushida, unable to contain her curiosity any longer, finally released her grip on Kaoru and sidled up to Horikita Suzune.

Seizing the opportunity, Kaoru smoothly slipped past them into the hall, where he spotted his phone on the table.

He powered it on and checked it briefly, exhaling in relief—neither of them had pulled any pranks.

"A trillion!?"

In an instant, Kushida's voice echoed through the entire room.

"You're being too loud," Horikita frowned before calmly analyzing. "This is an asset valuation. It might not actually be worth a trillion, and no one could produce that much liquidity on the spot. Still, these shares could overpower many major corporations."

Kushida shuddered, swallowing hard. "T-this is terrifying!"

They were all just high school students—how could something like this suddenly appear?

Kouenji Rosuke was one thing.

He always did as he pleased, and Kushida had long since stopped acknowledging his existence.

Besides, she'd never seen any signs of extreme wealth from him.

But for Kaoru to casually produce a contract worth trillions? That completely shocked her.

"It's not that scary. I can't just let you support me forever, can I?" Kaoru stood behind, watching the two girls at the entrance.

"Ordinary people can't 'Take all.' Having multiple wives has always been the privilege of the wealthy—that's just the reality of material conditions."

Horikita Suzune shot him a cold glance, while Kushida curled her lips in disdain.

"That sounds awful. Who wants to be one of your multiple wives? Don't think holding this will make us obedient."

"Frankly, I don't care about this," Horikita Suzune said, shoving the contract back into his hands.

"The only reason I agreed to your shady deal is because I find you barely tolerable, not because of this."

It seemed they were both a bit sensitive—perhaps the impact of the equity was too overwhelming, making them think Kaoru intended to solve everything with money.

"I never said I'd use money to keep you as lovers," Kaoru said, putting the contract away.

"Even marriage requires financial backing, or your parents would never agree."

Horikita and Kushida both froze.

Marriage? What was he talking about?

"W-wait a minute! Explain yourself! What do you mean by marriage?!" Kushida grabbed Kaoru's collar, her face flushed red, making it hard to tell if she was angry or embarrassed.

"Legally, getting a certificate might be impossible, but we could still hold a wedding—say, in a private setting where only your families and friends would know."

His face was right in front of hers, his expression one she saw often, yet Kushida could feel his sincerity.

He wasn't joking at all!

Even if it was sweet talk, hearing it like this—how could she possibly stay indifferent?

"You shameless foot-fetishist! Aren't you embarrassed saying things like this?" Kushida suppressed her emotions, putting on a fierce front.

"You're just being lecherous. Cut the act—who'd marry you?"

"How else am I supposed to take responsibility?" Kaoru leaned closer, not letting her to refuse.

"Or should I just watch you marry another man?"

His breath brushed her lips, their eyes locked at this intimate distance, making Kushida's chest heave uncontrollably, her breathing ragged.

Seeing this, Horikita confirmed her suspicion—Kaoru genuinely loved all of them, not just her alone.

Strangely, Kushida's reaction didn't seem like she was being forced by him.

Realizing this, Horikita felt exasperated.

Had the two of them teamed up to bully her for fun?

Chapter 402: Double Interrogation

Originally, the plan was to interrogate Kaoru—whether he was dating someone, whether he'd define their relationship.

Who could've guessed he'd already considered marriage? Kushida was momentarily flustered—she hadn't even thought about it yet.

It felt like stumbling upon the final boss right after leaving the tutorial.

After a brief panic, Kushida quickly regained her composure.

She was still a high school student; even if marriage was on the table, it'd have to wait until after graduation.

Besides, the one who should be stressed about this was Kaoru, not her!

"How can you even say that? Bigamy isn't child's play. With so many people together, just the arguments could last for days."

Kushida scoffed at his thoughts, even believing he shouldn't inform his family.

What kind of parents would agree to let their daughter marry a playboy?

"And another thing, the law doesn't allow bigamy, but it never said you can't register a marriage with someone," Kushida shot a sharp glance at Kaoru.

"This is your official wife we're talking about. Who exactly do you plan to register with?"

Kaoru was unbuttoning his Black Formal Suit when he heard her question.

After a brief pause, he replied.

"I don't plan to register with anyone. They're all mine—no need for paperwork."

Kushida felt a twinge of dissatisfaction, thinking he was just dodging the issue.

Then she noticed he had changed out of the Black Formal Suit and curiously reached out to touch the fabric.

"This feels amazing, and the style is so formal. Were you really just handling business?"

"Of course."

"I heard you were on a date with a senior student yesterday while wearing this."

"So that's why the two of you are here to ambush me?"

Now dressed in a white shirt and shorts, Kaoru felt slightly annoyed that neither of them seemed bothered by him changing clothes in front of them.

"Hehehe, why don't you use that high IQ of yours to figure it out?" Kushida sat on the bed, sinking into the soft mattress with a pleased smile.

"I wonder when Mitoma-kun plans to bring a girl home?"

Kaoru, hesitated, realizing his mistake—he hadn't properly managed their emotions.

Back at the office, Suzuki Hana and the others often reminded him not to get too absorbed in work.

"We want to know how many women you have," Horikita Suzune stated bluntly. "This time it's a senior student—next time, will it be a junior?"

'Next year's juniors aren't even here yet!' Kaoru thought to himself.

"Standing around talking is tiring. Let's sit down first."

The moment he sat down, Kushida immediately draped her legs over his shoulders.

Her petite feet, clad in white ankle socks, dangled like scoops of ice cream—her feet seemingly trying to hook around his neck as her toes playfully poked his cheek.

"See? These are your favorite feet. You'd better come clean."

Rather than seducing him, it felt more like Kushida was interrogating him.

The slight pressure of her legs on his shoulders added psychological weight, and the position left him no room to escape.

Kaoru adjusted slightly, leaning back against the bedframe.

Her calves slid down, resting on his chest, while the smooth skin of her thighs pressed against him.

Tilting his head back, he ended up nestled between her thighs.

"What are you doing?" Kushida's smile twitched.

She was wearing a pleated skirt today, leaving her thighs bare.

She could feel the warmth of his breath and the ticklish sensation of his hair brushing against her inner thighs.

"Nothing, just a bit tired today." Kaoru inhaled her scent, his eyes half-lidded.

"I do want to tell you, but will you really not get angry?"

"More than five?" Horikita Suzune ventured a guess.

Any more than that, and she couldn't even imagine the future.

How should he put it? Just by looking at Horikita's expression, Kaoru could sense Kushida behind her holding her breath.

After pondering for a moment, Kaoru decided to start from the beginning.

He recounted all the misdeeds he'd committed against Ichinose Honami, then Amikura Mako, Karuizawa Kei, and Airi Sakura, finally ending with Asahina Nazuna and Tachibana Akane.

Calculating it this way, it didn't seem too exaggerated after all.

"Including the two of us, you've actually targeted seven or eight people?" Kushida felt an indescribable emotion.

Her first reaction was that this was utterly perverted—simply scum.

Yet, when she considered it was Kaoru who did these things, it felt perfectly reasonable, even making her think the number was too small.

"Setting aside Ichinose-san for now, what about Karuizawa-san?" Horikita Suzune was equally shocked

"Wasn't she Hirata-kun's girlfriend before? You didn't even spare someone else's girlfriend?"

"Kei and Hirata were in a fake relationship. She thought having a handsome, responsible boyfriend would help her, so she asked Hirata to play the role," Kaoru explained simply.

"Later, she decided I was more suitable, so she broke up with Hirata."

"No wonder she suddenly broke up with Hirata. I thought she'd lost her mind." Kushida was quite familiar with their classmates.

Though she hadn't known the details, she had guessed their relationship was fake.

Because there was never any real couple-like atmosphere between Karuizawa and Hirata—especially Hirata's attitude.

Kushida often noticed he treated Kei with detached professionalism, offering no special treatment.

The illusion of closeness others saw was due to Kei playing the role of a gyaru to the fullest.

Naturally, a gyaru would be more energetic and lively than most girls, easily keeping conversations going with Hirata on various topics.

"I have a question." Horikita stared directly at Kaoru. "If it were just lust, that wouldn't explain your feelings toward us. You could've easily moved on to the next after playing with one. Why insist on taking all of them?"

This wasn't the first time Kaoru had faced such a question.

He hesitated before answering, "Selfish desire, I suppose. I can't stand the thought of you being with any man other than me."

"What a lecher." A glint of I-knew-it flashed in Kushida's eyes.

"From the moment I first saw you, I knew you were up to no good."

However, she didn't expect Horikita to be the one to contradict her.

"Undeniably, he is lustful. But if it were just lust, he wouldn't have said he wants to marry us earlier." Horikita pointed out.

"In fact, he doesn't even need to explain any of this to us now. He could continue threatening us like before and still fulfill his vulgar desires."

Kushida froze momentarily before retorting, "I wouldn't let him threaten me forever. Such methods only work temporarily. If he dares threaten me again, I'd rather take us both down."

"Before you could take him down, you'd likely be devoured by the very lecher you speak of." Horikita saw through it clearly.

"After all, he only wants your body. Having you would be a huge win for him—any consequences would be a problem for later."

Kushida's expression froze as she pondered carefully, realizing there was some truth to it.

If Kaoru had wanted her body and simply forced her into submission, she might have truly yielded.

Back when he had forced her, Kaoru had taken photos of her, which could easily serve as new leverage.

"Don't think of me as that despicable. Forcing someone into that kind of relationship is the lowest of acts—I wouldn't go that far," Kaoru said, somewhat frustrated.

Had his image really fallen so low?

"Obviously, you're already disgusting and utterly terrible," Kushida patted his head.

Couldn't this guy have some self-awareness?

"You still have those photos of me, don't you?"

"Want me to send them to you?" Kaoru naturally remembered the photos from back then.

"Pervert." Kushida was a little angry, though not too much.

Looking back now, aside from the humiliation, she didn't really care anymore.

Even if Kaoru wanted to take more photos, she'd probably agree.

Since Kushida knew he wouldn't share it with anyone, it could now be considered a little playful flirtation.

"Back to the main topic," Horikita said coolly. "Your previous answer was unsatisfactory. Please respond again."

This time, Kaoru remained silent for a long while.

Horikita stared at him unblinkingly, while Kushida grew inexplicably nervous.

She didn't even know why she was so tense—after all, they had agreed beforehand that she was just accompanying him in mischief, nothing more.

Before meeting Kaoru, Kushida had never even considered dating, let alone fooling around with a man.

Just a few days ago, she had even been practicing her techniques on him, feeling quite smug when she saw the helpless look on his face.

But after hearing Horikita's words yesterday, it suddenly dawned on her—she actually harbored different feelings for Kaoru.

Her thoughts had always been simple: she was a two-faced, hypocritical person who only agreed to his antics because he was even worse than her.

Kushida didn't believe someone like her could have any brightness in her life.

Just as oranges weren't the only fruit, she thought being with Kaoru like this wasn't so bad.

She had only intended to play around, but at some point—maybe during summer break, or perhaps in their daily interactions—she had unknowingly started caring about him.

She had heard that physical intimacy could deepen emotions and easily raise affection levels.

Given how often she and Kaoru fooled around, maybe her affection for him had already maxed out.

After all, she had already taken so much that her mouth couldn't hold any more.

Biting her lip, Kushida knew she cared—no matter how much she denied it, she cared deeply about Kaoru's answer, about how he saw her.

What kind of answer would he give?

"I suppose... happy," Kaoru finally said.

"I'm happy when we fool around, happy when we don't, and happiest just being with you. Having you by my side makes me feel like I might have some meaning after all."

Kushida hadn't expected such an answer.

She lowered her gaze just in time to see his faint smile—content, perhaps, or relieved.

"What an idiot," the girl murmured, unaware of the softness in her own voice as she gently patted his head.

"What kind of answer is that? Of course anyone would be happy surrounded by so many girls."

"That's exactly why I'm selfish. I want to stay this happy forever," Kaoru said quietly.

"And I don't want any of you to be unhappy. Coercion may be the start, but willingness is the only true ending."

Horikita Suzune studied his expression and sighed deeply.

There was no mistake—this was his genuine feeling.

To be honest, wanting both his own happiness and theirs was indeed a rather self-serving thought.

Chapter 403: No Favorites

"Aside from this, what else did the two of you want to ask?"

Kaoru sensed their purpose wasn't just about questioning his relationships.

The issue might seem serious, but everyone already had some understanding—if they truly couldn't accept it, they wouldn't have even considered ambushing him like this.

Kushida and Horikita exchanged a glance before asking in unison.

"Among us, who do you like the most?"

In that instant, Kaoru couldn't hold back—this was really the question they were asking?

Leaving aside that Kushida might genuinely be curious, why was Horikita asking this?

She had always treated him coldly before, making it clear that there could never be any unnecessary emotions between them.

By asking this now, wasn't she completely revealing her own thoughts?

Horikita Suzune seemed to realize she had overstepped as well.

Her face flushed slightly, but she forced herself to remain composed and said.

"Since we've been together, I've never heard you mention anyone else's name. Besides, there's an order to everything—even if it's just about attraction, you must have someone you're so fond of that you can't let go. I want to know if there's someone special in your heart."

Her reasoning was flimsy, and by the end, she had inadvertently exposed her true feelings—she wanted to know who he preferred, to confirm her place in his heart.

Even Horikita wasn't immune to such common sentiments.

However, her feelings for Kaoru might not entirely be romantic; perhaps they stemmed from her own sense of identity.

In Kaoru's presence, Horikita had experienced setbacks and failures, followed by forced resignation to fate.

Then came her belief that Kaoru liked her.

In truth, this could be seen as a continuous evolution of Horikita's perception of Kaoru.

There was no normal romantic affection between them.

Horikita Suzune had always been in the subordinate position, passively accepting the ideas Kaoru imposed on her—including reflections on failure.

If Horikita Suzune had resigned herself to fate before, it was because she realized she couldn't handle Kaoru alone and might need to unite with others to stand a chance.

This also proved that her hostility toward Kaoru had never truly faded; subconsciously, she was still thinking about how to defeat him.

However, after the sports festival and the forced kiss, Horikita's subconscious underwent a dramatic shift.

Her hostility transformed into a mix of extreme panic and ambiguity.

The forced kiss, in particular, made her acutely aware that she was merely Kaoru's possession—her own strength was so insignificant that she couldn't even resist him in the moment, and she had prepared herself to endure further violations.

When she spoke to Kushida about Stockholm Syndrome, wasn't she also worrying about herself?

Thus, Horikita needed to confirm that Kaoru actually liked her—otherwise, she would fear what awaited her next.

Why couldn't it be that she liked Kaoru?

The answer was simple: subconsciously, Horikita already saw Kaoru as the superior.

Only he could like her, while she could only accept what the superior imposed.

Though Horikita wasn't entirely clear about her own feelings, she knew she cared deeply about Kaoru.

She also knew she had gambled correctly—Kaoru cared about her too.

And now, she wanted to know who he cared about more.

"Don't complain that this question is cliché," Kushida murmured, leaning in close behind him.

Her soft chest seemed to press against Kaoru's head as she wrapped her arms around him, her sweet voice lingering by his ear.

"It's not really about putting you on the spot. Everyone has their favorite things—saying it out loud would actually make you seem more open."

Kaoru fell silent for a moment.

"I'm not avoiding the question. It's just that... I don't know the answer either."

"That's not the kind of answer that makes us happy, you know?" Kushida's tone showed no trace of dissatisfaction, yet she subtly tightened her grip around Kaoru's neck, her ample bosom pressing against his head.

"I get it, but what you're asking is like saying, 'Out of pears, cantaloupes, apples, grapes, dragon fruit, watermelon, bananas... which one do you think best represents what a fruit should be?'" Kaoru voiced his thoughts.

"The problem is, they're all fruits. There's no such thing as one being more of a fruit than another."

Kushida narrowed her eyes—clearly, what he meant was that all of them were his favorite girls.

However, Horikita interjected, "Then let me rephrase it. Who do you think is... tastier?"

There was no avoiding this question.

It felt like an interrogation now, and Kaoru was getting a headache.

"You can't pick either of us," Kushida suddenly added. "We're included, but you can't say our names. So, who's your favorite?"

Kaoru froze for a moment.

What kind of situation was this?

Horikita reacted faster than him, immediately understanding Kushida's intention, and added.

"And include your past—every girl you've met from middle school all the way back to elementary."

Kushida clicked her tongue.

She had forgotten about that.

Kaoru had only mentioned the girls now, not anything from before.

A lecher like him couldn't possibly have no experience.

He'd probably flirted with plenty of girls in middle and elementary school too.

"Just kill me already," Kaoru surrendered outright. "I like Suzune, I like Kikyo, I like Honami, I like Kei, I like Airi... I like all of you."

"Hey, hey, hey! You're giving up way too fast!" Kushida shook his head, both annoyed and amused.

Horikita pressed her lips together.

It seemed they wouldn't get anything out of him, but she could sense that Kaoru was aware of their little schemes.

The reason they made him consider both of them but forbade him from saying their names was simple—Horikita and Kushida lacked confidence.

They were afraid of hearing a rejection.

Hope, unease, and fear—that was their current state.

So even if Kaoru had an answer, he wouldn't say it out loud.

That's just how girls were.

Even when they knew they shouldn't ask, they'd still poke the bear.

Kaoru was used to it by now.

"The two of you showing up here—I haven't even asked what you're planning," Kaoru said, grabbing Kushida's wrist.

Turning his head, he caught sight of her incredibly smooth, delicate thighs, her skirt slightly disheveled.

"Coming to my place on Christmas Eve... can I take that as a certain kind of hint?"

Kushida felt his warm breath brush against her thighs as he spoke, sending a faint, ticklish shiver through her.

A blush spread across her cheeks, and noticing his gaze lingering on her skirt, she instinctively covered his eyes with her hand, her small feet kicking wildly at his shoulders as she tried to push him away.

"You shameless pervert! Who'd spend Christmas Eve with a foot-fetishist who's always dating someone?!"

As her flustered voice rang out, Kaoru took a few kicks before catching hold of her ankle, a faint smile playing at his lips.

"Strange. Why would you join forces with Suzune to interrogate me? Have you two made up?"

Kushida froze momentarily, a twinge of guilt surfacing.

Truthfully, she hadn't revealed much—only confessing to Horikita Suzune about their first time here.

It wasn't exactly betrayal.

But reconciliation? Absolutely not.

"Don't be ridiculous. There's no way I'd make up with her," Kushida declared without hesitation, her disdain evident.

"I despise her. The only reason I'm being civil now is because of you."

"I thought as much. Though your hostility still baffles me," Horikita replied impassively. "Regarding that situation back then—"

"Ah, it's not about that anymore," Kushida cut her off sharply. "I just don't like you—especially people like you."

A glimmer flickered in Horikita's eyes, uncertain whether Kushida's words held sincerity.

Kaoru sighed inwardly.

Kushida likely resented Horikita's type—talented yet aloof.

"And you—how long are you planning to keep touching?" Kushida pressed a hand against his head, her cheeks flushing wine-red as his palm trailed upward from her delicate ankle, past the smooth curve of her calf to the porcelain softness of her thigh.

His breath ghosted against her inner thigh, sending a shiver through her.

"I've been exhausted lately. Just wanted to find some comfort in you, Kikyo."

With that, Kaoru buried his face against Kushida's thighs.

The pillowy warmth and faint floral scent were uniquely intoxicating—a sensation only a girl could offer.

She must have bathed recently; traces of shower gel lingered subtly.

"Exhausted from dates, my foot!" Kushida snapped, though her protests lacked bite.

Her hand gradually settled atop his head, her voice dropping to a murmur.

"Tomorrow's Christmas... We prepared gifts for you."

Christmas presents.

Kaoru had nearly forgotten—his ring inventory was running low.

Chapter 404: Gifts

Just as Kaoru began mentally cataloging his remaining rewards, Horikita poked his cheek.

"You have a date with Ichinose tomorrow, don't you?"

Turning toward the voice, Kaoru found himself eye-to-eye with her usually expressionless face.

Her proximity highlighted the rare hint of pink dusting her cheeks.

She bit her lip lightly before whispering, "I'd planned to give this to you on Christmas, but now it seems... too late."

Meanwhile, Kushida bowed her head, strands of hair cascading like liquid light along her face.

Her gaze—softened with amusement—rested on him.

"So we decided to give them tonight instead. Merry early Christmas," she said, punctuating it with a delicate sniff.

"Don't get your hopes up, though. This is embarrassing enough."

"Even if you handed me two fistfuls of air, I'd treasure them as first gifts," Kaoru replied, warmth blooming in his chest.

In their previous coercive dynamic, they'd never have considered presents—they'd have probably wished him dead sooner.

"Horikita, since he's saying that, maybe we shouldn't give him anything at all." Kushida couldn't stand his expression—as if he'd done something extraordinary when it was just Christmas gifts.

"Someone's overthinking this. We can always decide when his birthday comes around."

"Birthdays are birthdays, Christmas is Christmas. I'm still looking forward to your Valentine's gifts too."

As he spoke, Kaoru suddenly remembered something.

"Oh right, your birthdays are coming up soon, aren't they?"

Kushida was a popular beauty, and she had publicly shared her personal details like birthdate on her social media—anyone on her friends list could see it.

Kaoru recalled hers was January 23rd, meaning her birthday would arrive next month.

Horikita Suzune had also defaulted to making her information public—her birthday was February 15th.

Come to think of it, Kamuro Masumi's was February 20th, Karuizawa Kei's was March 8th, and Sakayanagi Arisu's was March 12th.

He'd almost forgotten—Asahina Nazuna's birthday was January 6th.

Next spring was going to be exceptionally busy.

Tachibana Akane's birthday was May 6th, but by then she'd have already graduated.

There probably wouldn't be a chance to celebrate with her.

Even so, it reminded Kaoru of the terror of being at the mercy of over twenty idols' birthdays back then.

The gift-giving had been downright overwhelming.

"At least you're being considerate. But I'm spending my birthday with everyone else, so you're excused." Kushida said half-jokingly, flashing a mischievous grin.

"That said, I'll still take your gift. If it doesn't satisfy me, don't expect anything for Valentine's."

"You won't let me join your party but still demand a gift?" Kaoru raised his hand and pinched her cheek lightly.

"Don't push it, little angel."

"You're the one pushing it—you never even told us when your birthday was back then." Kushida swatted his hand away, annoyed.

"You really think you would've given me anything?" Kaoru sounded skeptical.

"How would you know if you never asked?" Kushida denied it outright. "Even if I hadn't, you could've just threatened me into it."

Ever since she started caring about him, the past humiliations had become something she could look back on with amusement, even fondness—deliberately ignoring the violence and cruelty, focusing only on the good memories.

Kaoru was speechless.

Just then, Horikita turned toward a nearby cabinet.

As she moved, the alluring curves of her petite figure became visible beneath her fluttering skirt—the hem of her top riding up to reveal a slender, pale waist and the faint outline of her soft stomach.

But what caught Kaoru's attention was what she held—a mug that had been sitting on the cabinet.

He found it odd because he didn't remember having a cup like that in his room.

"I don't have any Personal Points. This is from the convenience store." Horikita's cheeks flushed slightly.

She didn't even have gift wrapping—she was that broke.

"Merry Christmas, Mitoma-kun."

With both hands, she shyly offered him the mug.

Kushida, seemingly amused, leaned in and whispered in his ear.

"Buy one get one free—Horikita has a matching one in her room. Couple items."

At this moment, Kaoru even felt a pang of guilt in his heart.

If it weren't for him, Horikita Suzune wouldn't have been reduced to such dire straits.

"Alright, I'll take it," Kaoru said as he accepted her mug. "I'll cherish it from now on."

Horikita averted her gaze and murmured, "It's just a cheap thing. It's fine if it breaks."

"No, this is an important token of your willingness to accept me. No matter how inexpensive it is, it's become priceless to me at this moment." Kaoru examined the mug before turning his gaze back to Horikita.

"Thank you."

The final "thank you" was spoken with such sincerity that Horikita instinctively turned her face toward him, meeting his eyes.

Her heart fluttered faintly.

Kaoru smiled and was about to say something more when suddenly, the girl knelt before him, then leaned in lightly—so quickly it was almost fleeting—and pressed her moist lips to his in a timid, tender kiss.

The softness against his cheek was as delicate as a dragonfly skimming water.

By the time he regained his senses, Horikita was sitting properly on the floor again, as if nothing had happened.

She glanced at him with perfect composure.

"Don't misunderstand. I haven't accepted you yet."

Kaoru froze for a moment before tapping his lips with a chuckle.

"Be a little braver next time. You can aim here."

Hearing his teasing words, a faint blush finally crept up Horikita Suzune's ears, like the radiant clouds of dusk, glowing and captivating.

"I underestimated you, Horikita. Is that the real Christmas gift?" Kushida, who had also been momentarily stunned, quickly regained her composure and smirked.

"You're so nosy," Horikita feigned calmness. "What about your gift? I didn't see you buy anything at the convenience store."

"Ahaha, I already bought mine in advance." Kushida Kikyo grinned as she rummaged through her pocket before pulling something out.

"Here's my Christmas gift for you, you foot-loving pervert."

She waved the small item in front of Kaoru's eyes, its contents glaringly obvious, leaving him momentarily speechless.

A box of Condoms.

This was the so-called Christmas gift from Kushida Kikyo.

"Have you lost your mind?" Kaoru grabbed her wrist. "What the hell are you thinking, pulling this out?"

Horikita Suzune didn't recognize the brand.

She knew such protective measures existed in the world but had never seen the packaging before.

At first glance, she mistook it for chewing gum.

Now, she was utterly confused—what kind of temptation could chewing gum possibly hold?

"Didn't I already say it?" Kushida pouted defiantly. "I'm definitely going to do it with you. Even if you don't make a move, I'll seduce you."

"That's not what you used to say," Kaoru remarked darkly.

The past was the past, and the present was entirely different.

Kushida pursed her lips but still offered a reasonable justification.

"Because I want to be number one."

Kushida had already made up her mind.

She couldn't stop Kaoru's intentions, nor did she feel she had any reason to.

She was clear about her position—she didn't love Kaoru, so she couldn't be considered his girlfriend, much less part of his harem.

Their relationship was equal, one of mutual indulgence.

She didn't need to compete for his affection; she just needed to extract enough pleasure from him.

Simply put, Kushida would rather be his partner in pleasure than join some harem.

Because the idea of being conquered by him felt too humiliating.

Still, even if she wasn't competing for favor, that didn't mean she wouldn't take the lead.

She'd already let others have the dates—was she supposed to let them take the first step in bed too?

"We've already done so much together. What's one last step?" Kushida maintained a playful grin, though her heart was pounding.

She could feel her tongue trembling with nervousness.

"For a foot-loving pervert like you, this is the greatest reward, right? Be grateful and thank me properly."

Horikita finally understood—and she was completely dumbfounded.

Seriously, couldn't they at least give her a heads-up before doing something like this?

Chapter 405: The Second Duo Adventure

The room fell into silence.

The curtains had long been drawn, and the warmth from the heater made Kaoru feel increasingly restless.

His head rested on the girl's plush thighs, soft and tender with the suppleness unique to youth.

Above his line of sight stood a pair of full, perky breast, entirely encased in a knit sweater that stretched taut, as if ready to burst free at any moment.

His gaze didn't seem to escape Kushida's notice, as she slightly curled her lips before pressing the condom into his hand.

"Whatever you're thinking, this is my Christmas gift. As for next year's Valentine's gift... we'll talk about it then. I've changed my mind." Kushida cupped his face with both hands

"There are twelve inside. You probably know better than me, but you won't finish them in one night, right? So the deadline is before Valentine's Day."

"You've prepared so thoroughly. It's hard to remember what you were like a few months ago," Kaoru murmured with a sigh.

"Can we stop bringing up the past?" Kushida shot him a sidelong glance. "The girl who was once full of resentment has now surrendered before you—even offering herself up. That must feel really satisfying for you, huh?"

[Kushida Kikyo: Nervous, expectant, wary...]

[Suggestion: Pin her hands down, then you can begin.]

No strange emotions—so was she being genuine?

Kaoru didn't respond immediately, lost in thought.

Seeing this, Kushida suddenly sighed, pinching his nose lightly before whispering.

"You're exactly as I imagined right now. You're overthinking things—worried we'll be angry, worried we won't accept it, worried we're being insincere. Even now, are you still thinking of running away?"

For a moment, Kaoru froze, a complicated thought flashing through his mind.

Lately, he had been acting timid.

"Well, you are a perverted foot fetishist. I can understand how you feel." Kushida smiled faintly.

"But if you want to Take all, it's only natural that people would resist. You'll have to force it—then bear the responsibility that comes with it."

"I promised Ichinose I wouldn't make anyone unhappy," Kaoru finally spoke.

"And I've always believed that forcing things is the lowest method."

"You're the last person who should be saying that." Kushida dismissed his words. "Just because someone's unhappy now doesn't mean they'll stay that way forever."

Kaoru's eyelid twitched—that was a dangerous statement.

"Horikita, were you happy when he forced you back then?" Kushida turned to the girl beside them.

"No." Horikita Suzune shook her head. "Even if it happened again, I'd still kick him."

Even after doing plenty of wicked things with Kaoru, she didn't think she'd ever come to enjoy that kind of feeling—much less lose herself in pleasure.

She had only accepted that Kaoru could do wicked things to her—not that any man could.

"Ahaha, same here." Kushida looked back at Kaoru. "I'm no different. Because I'm in a better mood now, I'm willing to overlook your past coercion. Do you get it?"

Kaoru sat up from her lap, still holding the condom.

"I understand. It's just a little strange—a little rabbit advising the big bad wolf to have better table manners."

"Who's the big bad wolf isn't so clear-cut."

"...I really should reflect on myself."

"Oh?"

Horikita Suzune, watching their exchange, stood up to leave—she didn't want to interrupt whatever was about to happen.

But Kaoru suddenly grabbed her wrist.

"It's not time to go back yet, is it?" Horikita hesitated for a moment before asking, "Do I need to leave?"

"Pfft—"

The first to laugh was Kushida, who looked at Horikita as if she were an idiot, her tone laced with exasperation.

"We've both already helped him with that. What exactly are you trying to avoid here?"

At the mention of this, a faint blush crept onto Horikita's delicate face.

"Besides, you still owe him interest, remember? There's no way he'd let you off the hook, Horikita."

Horikita's heart skipped a beat just as Kaoru flashed her a grin.

It was too late to escape—the next moment, his arm wrapped around her slender waist, and the warmth of his lips pressed against hers.

She was being kissed against her will again.

"Suzune, this is what you call a real kiss."

"Mmm... Mph..."

(A threesome, just imagine it i guess)

....

Awakening from his slumber, Kaoru felt an unfamiliar sense of comfort, as if all the accumulated stress had been thoroughly released.

His entire body felt as relaxed as if he'd just soaked in a hot spring, and his mind involuntarily drifted to the image of Karuizawa Kei.

He slowly opened his eyes, taking in the dim ceiling above.

A sliver of morning light slipped through the curtains, scattering like flower petals across the sheets.

At the same time, he felt a heavy weight pressing down on him.

Turning his head, he saw Kushida lying beside him, curled up on her side.

Her eyes were shut, lips slightly pursed, sleeping peacefully without a care in the world.

Her angelic sleeping face brought him a strange sense of reassurance.

However, her sleeping posture was far from proper.

The blanket that had once covered her had slipped down, revealing her smooth, delicate shoulders and a slender, pale arm draped across Kaoru's chest, as if she were hugging a plush toy in her sleep.

Her position gave him a clear view of her elegant collarbone and the soft, snow-white curves beneath, tinged with a striking rosy hue.

Her natural fragrance only heightened his appetite, making it difficult to suppress the rising impulse within him.

Perhaps it was the passage of the night, or perhaps it was the release of pent-up frustration, but Kaoru felt revitalized, brimming with newfound energy.

Still, after the intense activities of the night, the girl's body must have been exhausted.

Silently, he moved her arm aside and pulled the blanket back over her.

As he turned his head, he met a pair of unblinking eyes.

The usually icy expression on that delicate face was now tinged with a faint blush.

She had curled up beneath the blanket, but given the cramped single bed, no matter how much she tried to hide, patches of skin inevitably peeked through.

Rather than shrinking away, it seemed more like she was clutching the blanket to her chest, her head slightly lowered as if embarrassed.

Thankfully, the room was heated—otherwise, someone would surely have caught a cold last night.

The thought crossed his mind—should he spend some Personal Points to have the school assign him an apartment?

"Good morning, Suzune," Kaoru whispered with a soft smile, careful not to wake Kushida beside them.

"If you're not feeling well, you can sleep a little longer."

It seemed she had woken up earlier than him but had stayed quiet the whole time.

"I usually wake up around this hour. It's a habit," Horikita replied just as quietly, her gaze flickering with unease as she looked at him—a far cry from her usual aloof demeanor.

"Last night, I was a bit rough with you. I'm sorry," Kaoru said, moving slightly closer as he reached out to wrap his arms around Horikita's waist, pulling her into his embrace.

Horikita allowed him to hold her, her delicate skin once again brushing against the man's scorching body heat, reminding her of the previous night's experience.

Her usually cool and composed face flushed with a faint pink hue.

"I already told you, I don't dislike it when you're like this. And as long as you're not angry with me, that's enough," Horikita murmured, biting her lip. "Starting today, you can do whatever you want to me. I won't resist."

Kaoru stroked her head—how could he possibly be angry with her?

After all, she was willing to accept him.

Still, he couldn't resist teasing her a little.

"Does that mean next time we don't have to use protection?"

Hearing his shameless words, Horikita instinctively puffed out her cheeks.

She knew he was deliberately trying to embarrass her—this guy was absolutely doing it on purpose.

Kaoru chuckled and pinched her nose, amused to see Horikita Suzune displaying such a girlish expression.

Chapter 406: A Fragile Alliance

After Kaoru left, Horikita began clearing the dishes, the sound of running water filling the sink as she washed the plates.

Suddenly, she caught sight of the ring on her finger and hesitated over whether to take it off.

Originally, she hadn't wanted it—after all, she and Kaoru weren't engaged.

But she hadn't expected it to be so beautiful, and before she knew it, she had accepted it.

Washing dishes might dirty the ring.

"I didn't expect you to treasure his gift so much. I thought you'd throw it in the trash," came a teasing voice from behind her.

Kushida stood there with a mocking smile.

Both of them were now dressed—Horikita in her own clothes, while Kushida wore Kaoru's shirt and pants.

They hadn't showered together.

Even though they had slept in the same bed, there was still some distance between them.

Horikita would bathe after Kushida finished.

Right now, Horikita was in a foul mood.

She had already figured out that Kushida had conspired with Kaoru to trick her—especially since she had foolishly believed their lies.

Looking back, it was obvious that Kushida had been involved with Kaoru long before.

Horikita Suzune recalled the contract—if it hadn't been for Kushida enthusiastically recommending it to her, she wouldn't have fallen into Kaoru's trap.

"Wasn't it you who claimed you didn't want anything to do with him?" Horikita replied coolly. "You talked big, yet here you are, happily wearing his ring."

"It's an equal exchange. I let him do bad things to me, so it's only fair he gives me a pretty ring," Kushida said, having long since justified it to herself.

"Still, I have to admire his taste. I wonder if he gave one to everyone?"

She examined the ring on her finger, which sparkled brilliantly under the light, resembling a delicate snowflake made of crystal.

The more she looked at it, the more she adored it.

More importantly, she noticed that her ring wasn't the same design as Horikita's—meaning Kaoru had put effort into studying their preferences.

But there was one question.

What did Kaoru's ring look like?

If everyone's ring was different, what kind of ring would he wear?

Kushida was somewhat curious, but since there were no answers now, she could only lie back on Kaoru's bed.

He had already changed the sheets, erasing any traces from last night.

Recalling the events of the previous night, a belated shyness finally colored Kushida's face.

Though it had been an impulsive decision at the time, she was the one who had pushed him down.

Not only that, but she had also fiercely ridden on top of Kaoru, making her first time unbearably painful.

That alone would have been fine, but his words had nearly made her lose face in front of Horikita Suzune for a lifetime.

Fortunately, she had held back.

Kushida gently touched her lower abdomen.

Her undergarments were currently in the washing machine, and if she slightly lifted the hem of her shirt, she could see her soft, fair stomach—inside which seemed to linger the memory of scorching heat.

Before long, Horikita Suzune emerged from the kitchen and happened to see Kushida lying on the bed.

The curves of the girl's figure were wrapped beneath a slightly loose shirt, yet her perky, full chest was particularly eye-catching, as if threatening to burst free from the buttons.

Her fair, slender legs stretched out from beneath the hem, her delicate little feet swaying lightly.

Nearby lay last night's stockings, now torn in several places.

"Hey, why did you say those things last night?"

At Kushida's sudden question, Horikita paused slightly, her expression unchanging.

"Even if I told him to be rougher with you, you didn't have to say those things, did you? In the end, it felt like we were just playing some little game." Kushida's tone carried no emotional fluctuation.

"Does it make you feel better to think that way? That you were just forced into it, that you didn't lose yourself in it?"

"You can just consider it a little game between him and me." Horikita Suzune clearly had no intention of delving deeper into the topic.

"Besides, he enjoyed it too. That's enough."

"Hmm, I never thought someone who usually acts so frigid would play that kind of game. You know quite a lot." Kushida clicked her tongue.

"Pinning the usually untouchable you beneath him, watching you struggle helplessly, seeing that stubborn, unwilling expression on your face—it's like defiling something sacred. There's a certain pleasure in that."

Horikita remained unmoved, replying coolly, "And yet, the girl who usually wears such an innocent smile was the one who forcefully pushed a man down. That cute face of yours can also show such lewd expressions. That, too, has its own delightful charm."

The atmosphere between them grew tense, the two locking eyes as if they had returned to their old dynamic.

Then, in the next moment, Kushida suddenly smiled.

"Stop lying to yourself, Horikita. If you didn't like it, why would you have been willing?"

With that, Kushida sat up, her face full of smiles, her eyes gleaming with an all-seeing light.

"You only like him because you're afraid he doesn't like you enough, which is why you made sure to leave a strong first impression, right?" She snorted. "Acting like you were being forced, all reluctant at first, then clinging to him like an octopus in the end."

The tables had turned, and now it was Kushida dissecting Horikita's little schemes—something that inexplicably irritated the latter.

However, Horikita suppressed her emotions and replied coolly.

"I don't think you're any better. Even now, you're still stubbornly telling him, 'I'm not yours,' aren't you? Do you think that makes him feel like you're not fully conquered yet, so he'll pay more attention to you?"

Kushida averted her gaze.

Well, now it was just the two of them tearing into each other, both fully aware of the other's little games.

"I'm leaving."

Kaoru wasn't here, and Horikita didn't feel like staying any longer—especially not in the same room as Kushida.

The fact that she hadn't settled scores with her yet was already being generous.

"Wait, I still have something to say to you." Kushida stopped her.

"If you're planning to interfere with his date, I won't join you. That's just boring."

Horikita didn't see the fun in it.

Besides, Ichinose Honami hadn't even gotten anywhere yet, so there was no need to worry about her.

"That's not what I meant." Kushida paused for a moment. "I know this might sound a bit forced, but... want to team up?"

Team up? That word coming from her mouth left Horikita momentarily stunned.

"Don't look at me like that, like I'm some kind of freak." Kushida pursed her lips. "Did you hear the nonsense he was spouting last night? The number of women around him is more than we can count on both hands. If we keep fighting among ourselves, like with today's date, all we can do is sit here and watch helplessly."

"Didn't you say you wouldn't compete for his favor?" Horikita smirked faintly.

"I'm not competing. This is about our rights. He might brush off an invitation from one person, but he won't ignore one from two." Kushida said. "We can let her have this date, but next time, it's our turn—nothing strange about that."

"I don't think going on a date with you would be any fun." Horikita stated bluntly.

"Heh, same here. But who cares, as long as he likes it? Men are like that—especially a perverted foot fetishist like him."

As she spoke, Kushida couldn't help but laugh.

It was clear she was in a good mood.

If doing something bad felt good, then doing something bad with someone you liked felt even better.

And if it made that person happy? Well, that was probably the best feeling in the world.

"You're hopeless." Horikita sighed.

Kushida glared at her coldly. "Do you really think our infighting doesn't make him uncomfortable? Relying solely on him won't satisfy everyone. If he weren't around, it'd be a miracle if we didn't start throwing punches."

Horikita blinked, her expression turning odd.

"Heh, you were just thinking how annoying and in-the-way I am, weren't you? That's why you wanted to leave."

Naturally, Kushida saw right through her—because they were both in the same boat.

"Do you want to improve your relationship?" Horikita slightly frowned.

Given Kushida's usual behavior, it wasn't surprising she would think of such things.

Still, it felt somewhat strange—Kushida was actually trying to manage his harem.

"At the very least, we shouldn't cause him trouble," Kushida mused.

"Don't forget, there are people from our class involved with him too. We can't just awkwardly avoid them forever."

That didn't sound too bad.

Horikita fell into thought.

"Besides, we're classmates. Compared to others, we have a natural foundation for cooperation."

Kushida smiled faintly.

Her idea was simple—if everyone moved in sync, they could make Kaoru yield.

They couldn't let Kaoru run wild anymore.

At the very least, they couldn't allow any new members to join.

Horikita Suzune and Kushida Kikyo exchanged glances, both silently agreeing on the same unspoken thought.

Though, such a fragile alliance might not last very long.

Chapter 407: Christmas Date

After waiting downstairs for a while, Kaoru finally saw Ichinose.

Unlike usual, the girl had taken extra care with her appearance today.

A black woolen coat hugged her slender figure, a small bag slung over her shoulder.

A light-colored scarf wrapped around her neck like cotton candy, leaving only the hint of her adorable lips visible.

Her long hair swayed gently with her movements, like a feather drifting down to rest against her full, perky chest—despite the coat's coverage, the effect was undeniably eye-catching.

Beneath the coat's hem peeked a pair of slender, straight legs, clad in what looked like sheer black tights—120D velvet, giving them an incredibly smooth and delicate texture.

Her feet, encased in slightly student-like loafers, made soft, cheerful sounds as they touched the ground.

Seeing Kaoru, she happily waved and called his name, jogging over to him.

"You look great today, Kaoru." Ichinose was also studying him.

He wasn't wearing his Black Formal Suit today, looking more ordinary, yet still carrying his usual clean-cut, boyish charm.

His clear, bright eyes didn't give off any sense of intrusion.

Sometimes, Ichinose would think about how this very person was completely different in private, and the contrast made her heart race inexplicably.

"This lovely and beautiful lady, might I have the honor of holding your hand and spending a wonderful Christmas with you today?" Kaoru, unaware of her strange thoughts, smiled and extended his hand.

Suppressing a laugh, Ichinose wondered where he had picked up such a frivolous pickup line.

In the past, she would've ignored someone like this—but now, her eyes curved into crescents as she placed her small hand in his, feeling its warmth.

"Why not, you handsome and lewd guy."

Watching her struggle to hold back her laughter, Kaoru felt a bit frustrated.

Being a bit of a pervert wasn't a crime, so why did every girl feel the need to tease him about it?

Perhaps because it was Christmas, the two of them encountered quite a few students along the way, and among them, there were no shortage of young couples like them.

On this holiday, no one bothered to hide anything anymore.

However, Kaoru had underestimated Ichinose's popularity.

The entire way, students kept greeting her.

Far from distancing themselves from her over the so-called theft incident, they seemed to have grown even more fond of her.

On top of that, the news of his relationship with Ichinose had gradually spread, leading many to regard him with intense curiosity.

"You know way more people than I imagined. No wonder people always say you and Kikyo are the angels of the first year," Kaoru remarked as he watched her greet the seventeenth passerby, feeling like he was standing next to a celebrity.

"Hmm, really?" Ichinose caught his casual reference to Kushida but pretended not to notice, maintaining her soft smile.

"Maybe it's just that Kaoru doesn't interact with others much? I've heard you only hang out with girls in class and often eat lunch with Kamuro-san in the classroom."

"That's not true at all. Even if I did socialize more, it'd still pale in comparison to your popularity," Kaoru denied immediately.

He had spoken with guys like Katsuragi and Hashimoto before—it wasn't just girls.

"How suspicious." Ichinose Honami let out a light hum but didn't press further.

Instead, she sighed slightly. "But I haven't done anything special. I just naturally talk to everyone, and before I knew it, things turned out this way."

"That's because being with Honami feels natural. It's not about one or two small things you've done—it's who you've always been." Kaoru squeezed her slender yet soft hand.

"No one would dislike spending time with a good girl like you. That's exactly what you are."

This guy really knew how to make someone blush.

Ichinose Honami turned her face away, a few strands of hair fluttering in the wind, brushing against her slightly reddened earlobes.

....

At this moment, Keyaki Mall was fully decked out in Christmas colors.

The streets were lined with festive decorations—Christmas trees adorned with colorful lights and ribbons, Santa Claus cutouts, reindeer stickers, and all sorts of hanging lights.

A light snowfall the night before had left traces of snow on the ground, and a few snowmen stood beside the storefronts, likely the handiwork of the staff, attracting groups of girls taking photos.

From the nearby mall, the classic tunes of Christmas songs drifted over, and promotional posters occupied the most eye-catching spots—discount sales, couples-only photo events, and the like.

"Did you prepare Christmas presents?" Ichinose asked somewhat shyly.

"Yep, I've got them on me right now." Kaoru had stayed up late going through his rewards and found a few small items perfect for gifting, saving him the trouble of shopping.

"I meant presents for Mako-chan and the others." Ichinose seemed to be hiding something as she added.

"Well, I mean, presents for people other than me. Your... girls, their gifts."

She hesitated over a certain word, as though saying it out loud would mean acknowledging that Kaoru truly had a sprawling harem.

No, she had to get to the bottom of it today.

"I still haven't decided yet." Kaoru felt rather guilty.

Every time this kind of holiday came around, he felt like he was dying countless deaths.

"Mhm, seems like it's just as I expected. Let's go shopping at the mall first." Ichinose wrapped her arms around his, her face lit up with a smile, looking more and more like a couple deeply in love.

"You don't have to do this. After all, I promised to spend today with you." Kaoru wasn't completely lacking in emotional intelligence—these gifts weren't meant for just anyone.

To be honest, the fact that Ichinose wasn't angry was already a surprise.

Now she was even helping him pick out gifts, which made him feel even more uncertain.

"Ahaha, I'm your girlfriend, after all." Ichinose also felt a little guilty. "Besides, I want to try to accept them too. If Kaoru can say 'Take all,' I can't just stand by and do nothing."

Kaoru recalled the words Kushida had once said to him and sighed inwardly.

Then, he tightened his grip on Ichinose's hand, interlacing their fingers.

"Give it some more time. I want you all to meet."

Of course, not in the literal sense—they had already met before and were familiar with each other.

What Kaoru meant was a formal introduction.

However, this introduction would only include Ichinose Honami, Karuizawa Kei, Kushida Kikyo, Horikita Suzune, Asahina Nazuna, and Manabe Shiho.

The others would have to wait.

At the same time, Kaoru was also considering whether to tell them about his past.

Coming back from the dead wasn't a miracle everyone could accept.

Not to mention, his actual age was much older than theirs.

Back at the agency, people often called him "old man."

"I'll look forward to it."

A faint smile appeared on Ichinose's face.

She wanted to know how the others felt about Kaoru.

If their feelings couldn't compare to hers...

Sorry, but they'd have to bow out gracefully.

Even if Kaoru insisted on "Take all," she wouldn't acknowledge them.

This was Ichinose's principle.

Without enough affection, they would inevitably leave Kaoru someday or grow resentful of his actions.

If that was the case, it was better to have them step aside sooner rather than later.

Ichinose knew Kaoru's way of thinking was terrifying.

She could allow hesitation and conflict, but she wouldn't tolerate them not truly loving him.

With that thought, the girl tilted her delicate face slightly, catching a ray of sunlight falling on his features.

His serious expression was actually quite handsome—enough to make even someone like her, who wasn't obsessed with looks, feel her heart skip a beat.

While she was changing him, it seemed he was also twisting her in some way.

Deep down, Ichinose knew her mindset was strange.

Perhaps it was because she had always suppressed her desires, yielding what she liked to her younger sister and endlessly accommodating her.

It made her unconsciously restrain her own possessiveness too.

"Though it might not be my place to say this, no one exists who's willing to share everything. That's why I agreed to go on this date with Honami today."

Ichinose blinked in surprise as he continued, "It's not you accommodating me—it's me forcing you to accept all this. Today, let's just focus on our date and forget about them."

With that, Kaoru firmly led Ichinose toward the various snack stalls.

"Do you want to eat daifuku or taiyaki right now?"

Ichinose snapped back to reality and hugged his arm even tighter, slightly parting her lips as she stood on her tiptoes to plant a kiss on his cheek.

Then, while Kaoru was still stunned, she smiled nonchalantly.

"Hehe, I want taiyaki!"

Before he could say anything, Ichinose was already leading Kaoru toward the shop selling taiyaki, her movements so natural it was as if she hadn't just sneakily kissed him.

Not only was Kaoru caught off guard, but a few nearby students also didn't react in time before their eyes lit up with excitement.

What could be more thrilling than witnessing a handsome and beautiful couple sweetly flirting in public?

Chapter 408: A Gift from the Little Sister

From taiyaki, tamagoyaki, daifuku, and tri-colored dango to crepes and ice cream cones, the two spent quite a while wandering outside—until snowflakes as light as willow catkins began to fall.

Fortunately, the sudden snowfall was light. Kaoru quickly pulled Ichinose into the shopping center, their hair and shoulders only lightly dusted with snowflakes that soon melted away.

"Your hair's a mess." Ichinose stood on her tiptoes, leaning closer as she reached up to adjust his bangs.

"It's a little damp. Hold still, let me wipe it for you."

The girl always carried her own handkerchief—a blue one with floral patterns, faintly scented, much like the citrus fragrance that always lingered around her.

Kaoru stayed still but gently brushed the snow off her shoulders.

After their time outside, her cheeks were flushed red from the cold, and even the tips of her ears peeking out from her scarf had a delicate pink hue.

"These dango are pretty good." Kaoru held a box of tri-colored dango in one hand, spearing one with a stick and casually offering it to Ichinose's lips.

"Hmph, this is the most popular dessert from the most beloved sweets shop among girls." She took a bite of the dango he offered while tucking her handkerchief away.

"Mmm, that should do it."

Just as Kaoru was about to speak, he noticed her pulling out a gray scarf with a cross pattern from her small bag, casually wrapping it around his neck.

"I was planning to give this to you at the end, but since it snowed, it's perfect timing." Ichinose took a step back, eyeing him up and down.

"It suits you, just like I imagined."

Kaoru touched the scarf.

Though he couldn't see how it looked, it was undeniably warm.

"Do you... not like it?" Ichinose watched him nervously.

This was her first time giving a gift to a boy, and she couldn't bring herself to admit she had knitted it herself.

Yes, back when she had jokingly "reserved" him for Christmas, she had already decided to knit him a scarf.

While preparing for final exams, Ichinose had hidden in her room knitting, which was why she had rarely seen Kaoru during that time.

Thanks to her past experience, she hadn't struggled at all—in fact, she had knitted four or five scarves in different styles.

But thinking Kaoru might not prefer anything too flashy, she had settled on a simple, elegant design.

"Quite the opposite, I like it immensely."

In truth, Kaoru already had an inkling—this scarf came without packaging, and its design differed from store-bought ones.

"Good thing I wasn't planning to buy a scarf, or I'd have missed out on Honami's gift."

"If you'd bought one, I wouldn't have given you this," Ichinose puffed her cheeks slightly in displeasure.

She'd been observing Kaoru carefully, after all!

Had he owned a scarf, she would've opted for gloves instead.

And if he'd had gloves too, she still had other gifts in mind.

"Just kidding. No store-bought scarf could ever compare to Honami's gift. I'd throw away any others without hesitation." Kaoru chuckled.

Receiving a handmade gift from a girl was priceless in itself—let alone a handmade scarf from his girlfriend.

That sounded exactly like something he'd do. Ichinose's cheeks flushed slightly pink.

Noticing this, Kaoru promptly handed her the box of dango and picked up her handkerchief, carefully drying the snowflakes from her hair.

"I might've gotten a bit carried away."

"That's alright. Kaoru can be surprisingly gentle sometimes."

"Don't say that—I'm just returning your kindness."

"Have I changed you at all, Kaoru?"

"I suppose you have."

"Then isn't it perfectly natural for the Kaoru I've changed to become more gentle?"

"That does sound logical."

As Kaoru worked, the girl's long hair cascaded freely.

He handled it with deliberate care, avoiding any roughness that might disturb her carefully arranged style.

Many girls took great pride in their meticulously styled hair and wouldn't tolerate anyone mussing it up.

Perhaps due to their height difference or the earlier haste, he could see that Ichinose Honami's coat had shifted slightly ajar, revealing a glimpse of her white sweater beneath the scarf.

The snug garment tightly embraced a pair of full, perky fruits, allowing one to almost visualize the shape of tender pink flesh pressed together in delightful abundance.

Ichinose stood still, allowing him to wipe her long hair without noticing his gaze.

Even if she had known, she wouldn't have minded.

She took a bite of a dumpling, then mimicked him by skewering one and bringing it to his lips.

Having already shared kisses and more intimate moments, this kind of mutual feeding was now a trivial, everyday occurrence—though the first time had been a little nerve-wracking.

Watching him bite onto the skewer she had just held between her lips, the girl pursed her own, her mind swirling with thoughts.

"Should we go see a movie next?" Kaoru asked.

Though Keyaki Mall had decent facilities, it couldn't compare to the vibrant world outside.

It merely met the basic needs of students.

Places like amusement parks, arcades, and aquariums were practically nonexistent here.

Besides, after two semesters of living on campus, they had already explored every corner worth visiting.

But wasn't this supposed to be the gift-giving part?

Though it felt a little odd, Ichinose didn't dwell on it.

She knew Kaoru wouldn't forget something like that.

"Sure, let's watch a movie."

Kaoru withdrew his gaze from the top of her head and took her small hand in his.

The two strolled leisurely toward the screening room, passing Kouenji along the way, who was shopping with a few senior girls.

This was a small theater with only two screening rooms, often struggling with low attendance.

As a result, showtimes were limited.

Today, however, the place was unusually packed, with the best seats nearly full.

Left with no choice, the two settled into seats near the back, quietly waiting for the film to start.

But several other young couples had also chosen the rear rows. In the dim lighting, the suggestive atmosphere seemed to stir impulsive urges—Kaoru could already spot a few pairs kissing.

Ichinose noticed them too.

Her hands unconsciously gripped the hem of her clothes, her cheeks flushing.

Had she made that same expression when kissing Kaoru?

"There's actually something I wanted to tell you," Kaoru said slowly.

"What is it?" Ichinose snapped out of her thoughts, her mind racing with possibilities—perhaps something about his harem.

Kaoru reached into his pocket and pulled something out.

In the darkness, she could barely make out the shape—something slender.

Just as confusion set in, he uttered two soft words.

"Hair clip."

The girl froze.

Kaoru placed the clip in her palm.

The texture confirmed it—a delicate little hair accessory, likely adorned with a cute design.

It had been so long since Ichinose had touched a hair clip.

From the time of her apology to her enrollment in this school, over nearly two years, she had deliberately avoided all hair clips—even anything resembling one.

Even though she had long since moved past that emotional knot, the old fears and guilt flickered through her mind, making her fingertips tremble slightly.

"Eh... i-is this a gift from you, Kaoru?" Her voice wavered, her expression stiff.

But surely he couldn't see her clearly in the dark.

Yet Kaoru shook his head.

"This is a Christmas present from your little sister."

Ichinose's eyes widened instantly, even more stunned than before.

She completely forgot about the hairpin, staring at Kaoru in disbelief.

"Y-you mean... my sister? Are you joking? Is this for real?"

Faced with her agitation, Kaoru nodded.

"I went out yesterday and ran into your sister. I told her I was your boyfriend, and she gave me this hairpin, saying it was her Christmas gift for you."

"You left the school yesterday?" Ichinose was dumbfounded.

What shocked her even more was—"Not only did you go out, but you actually found my sister?"

"I checked the school's admission records and saw the name of your previous school. After that, I asked around the area and happened to meet your sister," Kaoru explained simply.

"She didn't believe I was your boyfriend at first, so I showed her a photo of us together."

"W-wait, why did you have to show her that?!" Ichinose's face flushed completely red.

"She looked really skeptical, so I had to prove it," Kaoru said. "After seeing the photo, she suddenly became really friendly and even took me to your house—"

"S-stop! Don't say anymore!" Ichinose covered his mouth, her face burning.

Her heart pounded wildly—what kind of situation was this? He actually went to her home?!

Kaoru gently pulled her hand away and continued.

"I told her how you've been at school. She was happy, but also a little guilty. She felt like it was her fault that you were so down for so long."

Ichinose fell silent, the blush on her face slowly fading.

"This hairpin was something she picked out herself. She asked me to give it to you." Kaoru picked up the hairpin that had fallen to the ground earlier and placed it back in her hand.

Ichinose clutched the hairpin tightly.

In the dim light, it was hard to tell whether she was happy or upset—only that her shoulders trembled slightly.

"I... I never blamed her. Not once. I've always loved her, loved my sister, loved Mom... They're my favorite family. She didn't have to do this..."

No matter how hard she tried to suppress her emotions, a hint of tears still seeped into her voice.

"That's not it," Kaoru countered. "It's not about whether you love them or not. Even though you're the older sister, sometimes you need to understand how your little sister feels and accept her apology."

"A-apology?" Ichinose watched as he pulled out his phone, confused by his actions.

"At home, she was too embarrassed to say it to you directly. But if it's through a phone, it should be fine." Kaoru held the phone up, pressing the speaker close to her ear before playing a recording.

The next moment, a familiar voice reached Ichinose's ears.

"Big sis... how have you been lately?"

Chapter 409: Coming Back Soon!

People often praised her for being a good kid.

She was smart, polite, cute, obedient, gentle, considerate, great at housework, and always responded to others with genuine warmth.

When her mother fell ill, she took on the responsibilities of their small household.

The first thing she did upon waking was prepare lunchboxes for herself and her younger sister, then take her sister to school together.

After classes ended, she would rush to the supermarket—the money she had was only enough to buy discounted ingredients, and if she went too late, they would go hungry.

While caring for her sister, she also had to visit their mother in the hospital.

Unable to afford a nurse, she tended to her mother's daily needs herself, listening to her mother's self-pitying laments while counting the money they had left for tomorrow.

Even on weekends, she took on part-time jobs.

Her sister had always been well-behaved, never crying or making a fuss, so despite such a life, she never felt the slightest unhappiness.

Sometimes, her mother would feel guilty, apologizing for making such a young child shoulder the family's burdens.

Then, with a sigh, she would say what a good daughter she was.

What was so good about her?

At the time, she was only in her second year of middle school.

The housework and part-time jobs nearly ruined her studies, but it was her sister's obedience that allowed her to push forward, gritting her teeth to study until she became the top student in her grade.

She thought her sister was the truly good one—never complaining, always listening to whatever she said, so well-behaved that it made her, as the older sister, ache with tenderness.

So when her sister mentioned that hairpin, an improper thought arose in her.

Even after facing her mother's harsh scolding later, she never blamed her sister.

The one at fault was herself—for failing to fulfill her sister's wish.

Though Kaoru had helped her resolve those feelings, after entering Advanced Nurturing High School, she still sometimes wondered what her sister was doing now, unable to let go of that good child in her heart.

And now, Kaoru had granted her wish once more.

"I'm so glad I met you."

Under the heat of their kiss, Ichinose Honami's voice came out as a soft murmur.

She clung tightly to Kaoru's neck, her eyes shimmering with tender emotion.

"What should I do... I think I'm falling for you more and more. Becoming a bad girl... I don't hate it at all."

Trembling faintly, she could feel Kaoru's tongue trace her earlobe before trailing down to her sensitive neck.

"Am I strange...? Mmm... ah, I almost forgot—I was always a bad girl to begin with... You can do anything to a bad girl..."

"Bad girls aren't this cute." Kaoru whispered, his palm cupping the soft swell of her chest.

"And good girls aren't this eager, either."

"I wouldn't act like this with just anyone!" Ichinose pouted. "Besides, if a boyfriend is perverted, the girlfriend has no choice but to become perverted too! That's just how it is!"

For the girl, she had never really understood men's desires—what was so fun about this?

Ichinose had noticed the way others looked at her before.

Boys seemed to like girls who were especially well-endowed and even other girls often expressed envy.

It bothered her a little.

Being this big wasn't even convenient—there weren't many suitable clothing styles, a lot of things didn't fit, and it was tiring.

Ever since Kaoru had touched her there, she had secretly tried touching herself too.

Strangely, she didn't feel anything—it wasn't the same as when Kaoru teased her.

But if he liked it, Ichinose was more than willing to let him do as he please.

Even if it seemed indecent, she would do her best to match his desires.

Even in such a setting, she felt more like a mischievous child now.

Ichinose glanced around guiltily—no one seemed to be paying attention here.

Everyone was engrossed in the movie.

"I'm glad you liked my gift," Kaoru said as he picked up her hairpin and fastened it onto her hair.

"It's normal to do something naughty once in a while, but Honami, you shouldn't be so eager. It makes it hard for me to hold back."

Ichinose's heart skipped a beat.

She knew exactly what he meant by "holding back"—and what would happen to her if he didn't.

So, with flushed cheeks, the girl kissed him again.

Kaoru was momentarily stunned before chuckling.

"You're getting bolder."

"Not my fault. You never stopped," Ichinose retorted, her face burning as she referred to the hand still resting on her chest.

"You get to touch, but I can't kiss?"

Kaoru felt his restraint truly wavering.

Though he had already taken care of things in the morning, his body possessed extraordinary stamina, brimming with youthful vigor.

At this point, neither of them was watching the movie normally.

As if to teach this naughty girl a lesson, he kissed her again.

"Mmm..."

Ichinose's heartbeat quickened, and the image of her younger sister flashed through her mind.

She would never imagine her older sister acting like such a bad girl right now.

But being the good girl was exhausting.

She had never truly been one—she had simply played the role of the responsible older sister, forcing herself to accept reality as it was.

Even now, even with Kaoru, the darkest thoughts lurked in the depths of her heart.

She didn't want to share him, wanted to greedily claim every part of him for herself.

The reason she accepted his harem was because she realized she might be the first girl to embrace him fully.

The reason she brought them up today was because she knew Kaoru would never leave her—if anything, it would make him pay even more attention to her.

And the reason she said those things to Amikura Mako was because she wanted an ally, someone to help her monopolize Kaoru's attention.

She was that kind of bad girl.

Ichinose's breathing grew increasingly ragged as her small hand unconsciously wandered toward Kaoru's most sensitive spot.

"Wait, where did you learn that?" Kaoru pulled away from her lips, amused.

He hadn't expected her to take the initiative like this.

"B-Because you always... always do that, so I got curious..." Ichinose stammered. "But don't worry, I'll help Kaoru take care of it."

She had already found it, the familiar texture making her nervous.

"There are people around," Kaoru whispered. "Let go. It'll calm down on its own soon."

"I won't. This is what bad girls do," Ichinose declared suddenly, grabbing her coat.

"Kaoru doesn't have to worry. I'll make it behave right away."

"It's just a physiological reaction," Kaoru said, dumbfounded.

Of course she knew that.

But not all physiological reactions were the same—this one was because of her, which meant, in theory, it belonged to her alone.

Without another word, Ichinose draped the coat over her head and lowered herself, perfectly covering Kaoru's lap.

From the outside, it was impossible to tell what she was doing—only that there was a person hidden beneath the coat.

Kaoru's Adam's apple bobbed as he felt the warm, damp sensation accompanied by soft breaths.

Unconsciously, he straightened his posture slightly.

The next moment, his gaze landed on the surveillance camera in the corner.

In truth, screening rooms always had cameras that could capture many subtle movements, and this one was no exception.

He had ignored it earlier, but now, Kaoru decisively used one of his rewards.

"Flexible Editing"—a reward he had favored back when he worked as a producer, perfect for dealing with unwanted recordings.

It allowed him to freely cut out any footage he chose.

Kaoru withdrew his gaze.

He had already edited out today's video, even trimming away the next second of the future.

With the problem resolved, he gradually surrendered to the girl's tenderness—an irresistible charm no one could refuse.

As if afraid of being discovered, Ichinose Honami didn't make a single sound.

Her clumsy, inexperienced movements betrayed her lack of practice.

Fortunately, she was a quick learner.

After their last encounter, she had vaguely figured out Kaoru's weak spots.

Kaoru pressed her head down, barely holding back.

Yet, she mistook this as encouragement and redoubled her efforts.

Before long, Kaoru applied a bit more force, and a muffled whimper finally escaped from below.

Even so, he could tell she was enduring the discomfort, not letting a single drop go to waste.

Ichinose lifted the coat, covering her mouth with a small hand

. Noticing Kaoru's gaze, her face flushed crimson as she swallowed a few times.

"Sorry, I couldn't hold back at the end."

"N-no, no! It's fine! You don't need to apologize, Kaoru. Actually... I'm happy."

"Because it tastes bad?"

"Huh? Not at all. I thought it was... okay." She tilted her head slightly—this wasn't her trying to humor him.

"At first, it was pretty strong, but since it was your scent, I... kind of lost myself in it. The end was a little scary, but I didn't dislike it. It was just... strange."

Kaoru understood.

At her core, Ichinose Honami wasn't much different from Horikita Suzune.

Combined, the two of them probably still knew less than Kushida Kikyo.

Precisely because she knew nothing, Ichinose could say such things with complete sincerity—even swallowing it all twice.

In her mind, since she had gone this far, of course she had to take it all in.

The idea of spitting it out had never even crossed her mind.

"Did it... feel good for you just now?" Ichinose finally showed a hint of shyness, her heart pounding nervously.

Because she was bad—not at all the kind, gentle girl Kaoru thought she was.

Her mind was filled with nothing but selfish thoughts.

The more she realized this, the guiltier she felt.

She even considered confessing all her petty schemes to him in one go.

"Very comfortable," Kaoru said earnestly. "I'm really happy to be with Honami today, let alone doing something mischievous together."

Ichinose Honami was equally delighted.

She glanced at him again, then immediately blushed and whispered, "It seems like we're not done yet. Let's go again."

Seeing she wanted to continue, Kaoru quickly pressed her shoulders and murmured.

"That's enough. The movie's about to end. If we keep going, everyone will notice."

"!"

Only then did Ichinose realize they were still in the theater.

The screen showed the main couple's happy ending scene, making her face flush crimson.

Noticing this, Kaoru chuckled and tapped his lips.

"You'd better visit the restroom now."

The girl instinctively licked her lips, tasting something unusual.

When she touched her cheeks, her fingertips felt a cool, sticky sensation, causing her to blush even harder.

"I-I'll be right back!"

Chapter 410: Reindeer, Elves, and Christmas

As the lengthy movie concluded, Kaoru exited the theater and leaned against the railing while waiting for Ichinose.

His gaze inadvertently fell upon some distinctive figures downstairs.

Amidst the crowd of ordinary passersby, their outfits were far too eye-catching—especially the incessantly chattering girl who hadn't stopped talking.

"Wow! Mitoma-kun!"

Having spotted Kaoru, Kobashi Yume excitedly waved at him from three floors below, her voice noticeably loud.

Kaoru watched as she dragged Hirano Rin and Amikura Mako upstairs, practically bouncing with each step.

"What a coincidence running into you here!" Kobashi's eyes sparkled blindingly. "If you're here, Honami-chan must be too, right? Right?"

"Idiot, they're obviously on a date," Hirano adjusted her glasses with composed detachment.

"Meaning your excitement is making us intrude on Honami-chan's romantic time."

"Ah! I got too carried away and forgot!" Kobashi's face fell with remorse.

"No, it's fine. You're Honami's friends—there's no intrusion. She's just in the restroom now. Would you like to wait?" Kaoru harbored no resentment toward them.

"Eh? Really? I thought I'd be bothering you!" Kobashi clasped her hands. "Though it's too bad we missed Honami-chan today!"

Shiranami Chihiro stared intently at Kaoru, but averted her gaze the moment he looked her way.

"Did you just finish watching a movie?" Amikura suddenly asked.

Kaoru nodded, then inquired curiously, "More importantly, what's with these outfits?"

As mentioned earlier, their costumes made them impossible to ignore.

For some reason, Kobashi and Shiranami were both wearing full reindeer mascot suits—complete with adorable antler headbands and jingling bells around their necks.

Hirano, meanwhile, was dressed as an Elf, holding a peculiar magic wand.

Her typically expressionless face now bore a painted red star, with tiny wings sprouting from her back like a snow fairy.

Amikura Mako was dressed as Santa Claus, wearing a red off-the-shoulder dress.

Probably afraid of the cold, she had thoughtfully added a small shawl that only revealed a section of her snow-white arms.

Her hands were clad in gloves, exuding an elegant and intellectual aura.

A black belt cinched her slender waist, further accentuating the delicate curves of her youthful figure—the slight swell of her chest, the collar and bell hanging around her neck, the dress hem stopping just above her thighs.

Her legs were wrapped in white thigh-high socks, leaving a small stretch of pristine thigh skin faintly visible beneath the swaying skirt, tantalizing the imagination.

Her dainty feet were tucked into small leather shoes, giving her a slightly taller and more refined appearance—clearly the result of careful preparation.

Of course, the Santa hat on her head didn't make her look overly sexy but instead added to her cuteness.

"Nn-hmm, Mitoma-kun, do you think it looks good?" Kobashi Yume twirled in front of him a few times.

"This is the cutest Christmas reindeer, Santa's most capable helper!"

"It's adorable and suits you well," Kaoru replied, though slightly puzzled.

"But don't reindeer pull sleighs? Where's yours?"

"Right here," Hirano Rin said, pulling a small toy from her pocket and holding it up for him to see.

"This is our little sleigh."

"Yep, yep! This is our sleigh— isn't it cute?" Kobashi Yume nodded eagerly.

A toy sleigh? Were they trying to fool a child?

"How many gifts can fit on it?" Kaoru asked with genuine interest.

Kobashi Yume and Hirano Rin froze for a moment while exchanging glances.

Oh no—they hadn't thought of that question at all.

What a failure!

Watching the two of them deflate, Amikura Mako's lips twitched slightly.

She couldn't help feeling like she was babysitting two kids.

"Strange, aren't you going to ask where we got these outfits from?"

Amikura Mako decided to take the initiative.

His reaction was too bland—after all, she had put so much effort into looking cute today, even styling her hair carefully.

"I saw posters outside. These outfits are available for rent, right? You got them from the shop on the first floor?" Kaoru was referring to the usual fashion boutique.

Although the school's stores had performance caps—more symbolic than practical, mainly to meet students' basic needs—holidays were still holidays.

There were bound to be special events.

So today, students could rent Christmas costumes from the boutique, though supplies were limited.

The fact that these three managed to get them was probably due to good luck.

"They said the rentals were time-slot based. We just happened to snag the afternoon slot—any later and they'd be gone," Kobashi Yume said, looking relieved before breaking into a grin.

"We're planning to go build a snowman and take photos!"

For the girls, outfits like these were practically made for photo ops.

Kaoru patted his pockets.

Since he'd run into them here, he might as well give them their Christmas gifts.

Of course, his pockets couldn't possibly hold that many presents—this was just for show.

In reality, he was redeeming rewards.

"Eh, everyone's here?"

Ichinose Honami finally emerged from the restroom and was surprised to see Kaoru with Amikura Mako and the others.

"Honami-chan!"

"Perfect, you actually managed to rent the outfits!"

"Don't they look cute?"

"Super adorable!"

"Honami-chan not coming is such a pity. We even had a reindeer costume prepared!"

"Wuu..."

Seeing their excited expressions, Kaoru had to pause his reward redemption action.

The atmosphere wasn't quite right—he'd have to wait until they finished chatting.

"What were you doing just now?" Mako Amikura inexplicably moved closer.

Her attention had been fixed on Kaoru the whole time, so she naturally noticed his small movements.

"Checking my phone." Kaoru took out his phone and glanced at the weather forecast.

"It shouldn't snow later, but it's still very cold. Aren't you freezing dressed like that?"

"How rude to say that now! Girls who wear outfits like this have obviously considered that already." Mako shot him a sidelong glance.

Even if she said she was cold, could he magically make the weather warmer?

"Freezing on Christmas reminds me of the Little Match Girl." Kaoru checked a few messages before putting his phone away.

"That's because everyone was indifferent to the little girl, which led to the tragedy in the end," Mako countered.

"Besides, we don't have partners—what else can we do except hang out with friends?"

As soon as the words left her mouth, she realized her statement carried strange implications.

Her face flushed slightly—did having a partner mean you wouldn't need to go out anymore?

Kaoru looked at her with an amused expression, making her blush even harder, until Ichinose's voice interrupted them.

"Kaoru, do you want to build a snowman?"