

Cote 411

Chapter 411: Building a Snowman

Naturally, the snowman-building location wasn't at the mall.

The moment they stepped outside, the biting cold hit them.

Though it had stopped snowing, scattered patches of snow still lined the roadside.

They didn't linger on the streets, instead deciding to leave Keyaki Mall behind—there was too little snow here.

Kaoru followed behind as Yume Kobashi and Chihiro Shiranami clustered around Honami, especially Chihiro, who had been silent earlier but now wore an exceptionally happy smile directed at Honami.

While he understood why she acted cold toward him, it was still somewhat strange.

If she opposed his relationship with Honami, she could at least be considered to dislike him.

Yet Chihiro made no moves, nor did she seem to have told Honami about that day's incident, making her thoughts completely inscrutable.

"Though it's a bit late to say this now, I'm sorry for interrupting your date," Mako said beside him, sounding genuinely apologetic.

"Yume and Rin got too excited about taking photos with Honami."

"Don't worry about it. We didn't have any concrete plans anyway—just wandering around the mall and having dinner." Kaoru didn't deliberately create distance, even though Mako's presence made their group attract considerable attention, with even girls stealing glances.

"But this is a Christmas date, right?" Mako asked doubtfully.

"Are you expecting me to have planned some grand outing for Honami?" Kaoru chuckled.

"Ice skating on the artificial lake? Watching the fireworks show at night?"

"I wasn't talking about those things!" Mako protested slightly, knowing full well those weren't realistic options—Koudo Ikusei's entertainment facilities only met basic needs.

"You just seem a bit..."

When she hesitated, Kaoru finished for her.

"Seem calm and indifferent?" Amikura Mako nodded while also observing his reaction.

The guy's profile was strikingly handsome—no wonder people kept mentioning something about a celebrity.

"I was a bit excited about the date earlier, but not anymore." Kaoru recalled the earlier scene and couldn't help glancing at Ichinose.

Her delicate face remained unchanged, her smile as warm as ever.

No one would imagine something strange had once lingered at the corner of her lips.

Still, he touched his scarf.

Desire was desire, warmth was warmth—but a girl's sweetness contained far more.

Amikura Mako noticed his movement.

The scarf looked familiar—she seemed to have seen it in Ichinose's room before.

She didn't say anything, only instinctively hugged her own arms.

Before long, Kobashi Yume and the others finally found a spot to build a snowman.

"I'm gonna make the tallest, biggest snowman!"

"Dummy, there's not enough snow here. I'm gonna build the entire Heian-kyō!"

"Guh... T-that's cheating! Picking something I've never even heard of! I'll make one Rin-chan's never heard of either!"

"Honami-chan, wanna join us?"

"Sure, sure!"

The grassy field had turned into a snow-covered expanse.

The trees planted by the school were draped in frost, their branches weighed down by heavy snow that occasionally tumbled off, eliciting startled cries from the girls.

Not far away, the artificial lake had already frozen over.

The thin ice reflected glimmering light, and the school had put up warning signs nearby—apparently, some students had once tried playing on the ice, only to fall through because it was too thin.

The last time he'd built a snowman was probably during a vacation.

He'd taken some exhausted idols to Nagano for skiing and hot springs—it had been wonderfully relaxing.

"Kaoru, what should I do?" Ichinose looked troubled. "I don't think I can make a big snowman."

"Small ones are cute too." Kaoru eyed the lopsided little snowman she'd made and lied through his teeth.

"The top layer's been melted by the sun, so it's hard to shape."

"You make one too." Ichinose's cheeks were flushed pink.

Kaoru guided her in gathering snow, rolling it into a ball.

The two of them pushed the snowball around, letting it grow bigger and bigger.

"What kind of snowman do you want, Honami?"

"Hmm, something cute?"

"How about Olaf?"

"Of course!"

It's just a snowman at school—Disney probably won't send a lawyer's letter over this, Kaoru mused.

As he sculpted Olaf, Ichinose watched obediently beside him, eagerly helping with whatever he needed.

Meanwhile, Hirano Rin's attempt to recreate Heian-kyō had failed.

She blamed the snow for not cooperating and decided to give up.

Kobashi Yume, however, had piled up a massive snow mound, while Shiranami Chihiro's snowman looked a bit limp.

Amikura Mako stood nearby, offering guidance to the two of them.

"It's a bear."

"Why does it look like a ball?"

"It's tall and huge—a fearsome bear roaming the snowy mountains."

"Can't tell."

"Your eyes are the problem."

Amikura Mako realized her guidance wasn't getting through and turned to Shiranami Chihiro, who was still trying to salvage her snowman.

"Chihiro, it's leaning. This part's too small—it won't hold."

"Oh."

"Let me help you build it taller."

"Okay."

"Wait, its head fell off!"

"It's okay."

After a while, Amikura Mako noticed that Shiranami Chihiro clearly wasn't focused on building the snowman.

Who would keep sneaking glances in another direction while trying to stack snow?

Feeling a bit frustrated, Amikura Mako walked over to Kaoru and Ichinose, watching as the two of them carefully shaped Olaf's features.

She couldn't help but gasp in delight.

"Is this Olaf?"

"Yeah! Kaoru even knows how to make his front teeth!"

"So cute!"

The two girls huddled together, their eyes sparkling with excitement—though no one expected Amikura Mako to be into this kind of thing.

Even with someone watching closely, Kaoru didn't feel the slightest bit nervous.

His hands remained steady, and soon, the vague lump of snow began to take the unmistakable shape of Olaf.

"His arms are made of sticks, right?"

"The nose is a carrot!"

"What about the eyes?"

"Maybe we can use a rock as a placeholder?"

"It even has buttons on its body."

Listening to their lamentations, Kaoru found it somewhat amusing and chimed in.

"We can just buy carrots and buttons at the convenience store. It's not far from here anyway."

"Great idea!" Ichinose's eyes lit up.

Amikura Mako volunteered, "Hmm, should I go buy them?"

"I'd be worried if you went alone," Ichinose thought for a moment before suggesting.

"Kaoru, why don't you go with her?"

Kaoru's expression turned odd.

Him and Amikura Mako going together?

"I can go by myself," Amikura Mako averted her gaze, her voice slightly softer.

"Ahaha, that's not what I meant. It's just that Mako-chan is too adorable right now—what if some guy tries to hit on you along the way?" Ichinose wasn't just making things up.

She herself had been approached by upperclassmen, and some had even confessed to her.

Though she had turned them all down, it proved that even in this prestigious school, there were shallow guys who only cared about looks.

Since his girlfriend had spoken, Kaoru tactfully added.

"I actually need to buy a few things too. Amikura, would you mind accompanying me?"

Amikura Mako exchanged a brief glance with Ichinose before closing one eye playfully.

"Fine, I'll go with you. But I'm not scared of any flirty guys."

"Is that the result of your training?"

"Don't make me sound like some violent girl!"

"No need to worry. I'm the student council's vice president—feel free to hit them."

"Before that, I might just hit you instead."

"Aren't I helping you here?"

"Doesn't look like it. Someone's just egging me on to fight."

"I'm just saying I'll back you up. No matter what you do, I'll make sure nothing happens to you."

"..."

On the way, Amikura Mako crossed her arms and slightly turned her face away.

Their footprints stretched long shadows across the snow, one after the other.

Chapter 412: Pain

They had only walked a short distance when Amikura slowly exhaled, feeling like she had mentally prepared herself.

Just then, a snowball suddenly smacked her right in the face.

The icy chill instantly wiped away all her thoughts, freezing her brain in place.

"Ah, sorry! We didn't see you there!"

Kaoru turned toward a group of students playing in the snow.

They had been having a snowball fight, their faces still flushed with excitement, but now they looked timidly at Kaoru and Amikura.

"Be more careful next time."

"We're really sorry!"

"..."

With such an unexpected mishap, Kaoru couldn't really say much—except that their aim was impressive.

"You okay?" Kaoru turned to Amikura.

Snow clung to her face like a makeshift mask, her eyes devoid of their usual spark.

"I-I'm fine." She forced a smile, unconsciously hugging her arms.

Just as she was about to leave the awkward scene, she suddenly sneezed, shivering all over.

"Doesn't look like you're fine to me." Kaoru frowned as her nose gradually turned red.

"Is that outfit even warm enough?"

"Of course it is! Look, it even has fur lining." Amikura pouted, pointing at her sleeves.

Though her dress had an off-shoulder design, she had specifically worn a fur-trimmed shawl over it.

However, when she raised her arms, the full and perky curves of her chest faintly revealed themselves, a glimpse of delicate, fair collarbones flashing by.

Her pristine arms further exposed the clean underarms of a maiden, exuding an unusual allure.

Especially with her slightly indignant expression, it was clear she felt no impropriety in her actions—or perhaps she was simply accustomed to being this close to Kaoru, unaware of the charm she currently possessed.

"Down there too?" Kaoru cast a skeptical glance at her straight calves.

The hem of her Christmas outfit was slightly short, revealing a sliver of thigh as well as legs clad in white thigh-high socks.

The thick material didn't appear coarse in the slightest; instead, it had a polished, smooth sheen that only made one want to reach out and feel their texture.

Amikura's cheeks flushed slightly.

Truthfully, when girls wore skirts out, they always felt a bit of a draft below, and even with stockings, that sensation never completely faded.

She was used to it, but she had somewhat underestimated this outfit's resistance to the cold.

Even so, Amikura was too embarrassed to say it outright and only murmured.

"I'm wearing warm safety shorts underneath, so it's fine."

Because the skirt was a bit short, she had deliberately worn safety shorts to prevent any accidental exposure.

Kaoru blinked, momentarily stunned.

The sight of the blushing girl inexplicably made him want to see those safety shorts.

"Achoo—" Another odd sound escaped Amikura, her little nose now thoroughly red.

Seeing this, Kaoru had no choice but to take off his own coat and drape it over her without hesitation.

"I know you look adorable right now, but adding a coat won't ruin that. You can take it off when we take photos later."

His coat carried a lingering warmth—the heat of a man's body—making Amikura's mouth go dry and her heart beat faster than usual, her breathing growing uneven.

"Achoo—"

Instinctively, she tightened the coat around herself before realizing how improper that might seem.

"Y-you're quite considerate of girls, no wonder you have a girlfriend."

"Because I only take care of cute girls," Kaoru said offhandedly. "I'll buy you a hot drink later. Just be careful when you get back, and you probably won't catch a cold."

Amikura didn't register the rest of his words, only hearing "cute girls" echoing in her ears.

How many times had he called her "cute" today?

Leading the dazed girl along, Kaoru soon arrived at a convenience store, picking up a few small carrots.

Though black buttons were rare, this store happened to sell them too.

Spotting dango, Kaoru bought a few skewers to feed Amikura, along with a cup of instant coffee, finally managing to perk her up.

On a bench outside the convenience store, Amikura sipped the steaming coffee, her previously uncomfortable body gradually warming up, the sneezes finally subsiding.

Kaoru checked his phone—it was about time.

Turning to Amikura, he said, "There's something I want to talk to you about. Can you come with me for a bit?"

"Can't we talk here?" Amikura found it strange, but seeing his serious expression, her heart began to pound.

"This place is too crowded. I want you to meet someone."

Seeing Kaoru stand up, Amikura hesitated for a moment before following, though she couldn't help wondering who she was supposed to meet.

The two left the convenience store and walked down a secluded path, where they spotted the figure of a girl leaning against the railing by the artificial lake.

Amikura stiffened—she recognized her.

It was Shiho Manabe from Class C.

"Bringing this up now might feel like reopening old wounds, but you probably haven't forgotten what happened at the start of the school year. Shiho accused you of stealing in the library. Even though it was a setup by Class C, it left you depressed for a long time."

Hearing Kaoru's words, Amikura was momentarily stunned.

What was going on? Why was Shiho Manabe here?

"Back then, Ryuen ordered us to do it. Ibuki planted the item, and I was the one who framed you." Shiho Manabe lowered her head.

"I'm sorry for what happened."

Amikura stared blankly at the girl before her.

She had never expected an apology, let alone for Shiho to admit the truth on her own.

After all, so much time had passed—hadn't it?

Even she had nearly forgotten about it.

Did anyone from Class C even remember what they had done to her?

"Even though Ryuen made us do it, that doesn't mean I bear no responsibility. Honestly, I really resented you Class B students back then. I was unhappy about being in Class C, so I was more than willing to go along with it."

Shiho's candid words left Amikura at a loss.

"But now, I don't think any of that matters anymore. Whether you're in Class C or Class B, it doesn't make a difference. As long as there's someone you care about, someone who pays attention to you, what you do—"

Kaoru coughed, cutting her off.

She was clearly going off-topic, and if he didn't stop her, she might end up confessing something else entirely.

"Anyway, I realized I made a terrible mistake, so I wanted to apologize to you properly. Whether you forgive me or not is up to you." Shiho still didn't raise her head. "I know I don't deserve it. I've done a lot of bad things, not just to you, but to many others."

Amikura glanced at Kaoru.

Was this his doing?

She looked back at Shiho with a complicated expression.

Honestly, she had been furious about what happened back then—but what could she do now?

Slap her?

Amikura wasn't the type to do that.

After spending time with Ichinose, she had come to understand one thing—if she sought revenge just because someone else had wronged her, how was she any different from them?

So, Amikura didn't want to stoop to Shiho's level.

"It's in the past. I'll might accept your apology." Amikura paused. "But you didn't ask for my forgiveness, and I won't give it that easily. Let's just treat each other as ordinary classmates."

Shiho Manabe finally looked up, exchanged a glance with Kaoru and then smiled knowingly.

"That's more than enough."

Amikura watched as Shiho walked away before turning to Kaoru.

"Did you arrange for her to apologize to me?"

"Are you unhappy with it?" Kaoru asked.

"No, I'm just frustrated. On one hand, I don't want to let her and Class C off the hook, but on the other, I don't want to stoop to their level." Amikura felt conflicted, perhaps this was the common plight of most honest people.

Before coming to ANHS, she had always been a well-behaved student who wouldn't do anything outrageous, and that hadn't changed much.

Kaoru remained silent for a moment.

"Actually, before giving you the gift, I had planned to apologize to you."

"Huh?" Amikura was surprised, not understanding what he meant.

"The framing was indeed Class C's doing, but I was the one who fanned the flames." Kaoru revealed the part of the truth that Ichinose had kept from her.

"At the time, I wanted to make Honami submit to me, so I used you."

As he slowly recounted the entire sequence of events, Amikura stood frozen in place, completely motionless.

Chapter 413: Shamelessness

The world was utterly silent, snow weighing down the branches, the occasional sound of snowflakes falling to the ground startling Amikura Mako awake.

She tightened her coat around her, feeling the weather grow increasingly colder.

The warmth from the hot coffee earlier had gradually faded with the wind blowing across the lake, leaving her chilled again.

She thought it was lucky she had worn gloves, or her fingers would have frozen stiff.

However, the cold had stealthily crept in through her collar.

She had thought the choker might block some of it, but it proved useless.

Normally, one or two students would pass by this area around this time, which would at least allow her to leave quickly.

"I'm sorry for keeping it from you for so long," Kaoru said. "Because I didn't know how to handle my relationship with you, I kept it hidden until now. But after you saw what happened with Kiryūin-senpai, I knew I couldn't hide it anymore."

"I want to go back." Amikura Mako felt her voice had gone hoarse.

Without meeting his gaze, she turned to leave.

Kaoru grabbed her wrist—perhaps because of the gloves, the touch felt peculiarly icy and unbearable.

"Even if you don't want to hear it, I'm going to keep talking."

"About what?" Amikura Mako stopped but didn't turn around. "About how you manipulated me and used me to get close to Honami?"

"It's true that I used you, but it's also true that I'm genuinely happy to see you now." Kaoru's expression was complicated.

"I know this was despicable, but I've already prepared myself."

"Hahaha, prepared for what? To keep lying to me?" Amikura Mako clenched her teeth. "It was all a lie. You've never spoken a single word of truth."

"Maybe there's a misunderstanding. I never intended to deceive you. I'm just a despicable person by nature—I'll do whatever it takes to get what I want."

"Congratulations, Honami is yours now."

"If I had planned to keep lying to you, I wouldn't have told you any of this."

"You're overthinking it. Honami already told me everything."

"Did she?"

Kaoru didn't call out her bluff.

If Ichinose had told her the whole truth, she would have already given him the cold shoulder long ago.

"What kind of person do you think I am in your eyes?"

"I don't know, probably a combination of a lecher and a fraud."

Disgust flashed in Amikura Mako's eyes.

She must have known from the start, ever since seeing Kaoru eating Kiryūin Fūka—this guy was nothing like his simple surface appearance.

"Better than I imagined." Kaoru shamelessly nodded. "This shows Mako is getting to know me better."

"Don't call me by my name!" Amikura Mako was furious.

Couldn't this guy understand what she was saying?

"Because I didn't know you well, I was always worried you might have expectations of me. Now I'm relieved—you've gained a basic understanding of me."

Hearing this, Amikura Mako abruptly shook off his hand but accidentally dropped her coat, which landed on the snow with a dull thud.

Kaoru picked up the coat just as the girl turned to look at him, her eyes moist and her pretty face carrying a cold sternness.

"I'm returning your coat now."

With that, Amikura Mako decisively walked away.

"Aren't you going to ask why?" Kaoru called after her.

Amikura Mako walked for a while before stopping, resisting the urge to turn back.

"At the very beginning, you didn't know me, and I didn't know you. To me, you were just a student from Class B. Other than being cute, you left no impression on me."

"On the day of the framing, I started paying attention to you. When the rumors hit you, I tried to get closer because I found you interesting. I told you to train yourself, and you actually did it."

"After getting to know you slowly, I noticed you possess the most ordinary qualities of a girl—trusting friends, emotionally sensitive, naive and adorable, prone to self-pity, fond of cute things, preferring sweets, sometimes stubborn, sometimes protective of friends, and never harsh with others even when unwilling..."

"Of course, all this is nonsense. You can now curse me for how despicable I am, because I'll do whatever it takes to have you, just as I did with Honami."

Kaoru stepped across the snow-covered lawn, moving past her before stopping in front of her as if to block her path.

Then, he extended a fist and slowly opened his palm in front of Amikura Mako's eyes, revealing a tiny plush keychain.

Amikura Mako's eyes widened slightly because the plushie somewhat resembled her.

"This is a two-faced doll. The front is the adorable Mako, and the back is the despicable me." Kaoru flipped it over, and the image instantly transformed into his likeness.

"If you're unhappy, you don't have to look at me."

Amikura Mako pressed her lips together.

Clearly, this doll was either custom-made or handcrafted, as she could see obvious stitching marks on it.

"Even if you don't like it, you have to take it." Kaoru forcibly placed it in her hand.

"Merry Christmas, Mako."

The essence of this two-faced doll was the "Chaos Doll," an item that allowed the cursed party to transfer negative effects onto the other.

Though it sounded somewhat frightening, it was actually the most normal reward Kaoru could find.

"Don't think this makes us even." Amikura Mako had already cooled down quite a bit.

While she still felt betrayed by someone she trusted, remembering how Kaoru had even dared to threaten Ichinose made her feel like being one more victim didn't change much.

What bothered her more was that Kaoru had used her to get close to Ichinose.

That was what truly hurt—the realization that she meant nothing to him.

"Hmm, even with that kind of judgment, this still matters to me."

Amikura Mako unconsciously tightened her grip on the doll.

Despite finding it annoying, she felt an inexplicable reluctance to let go, even a desire to treasure his gift.

"After all that, are you saying you still think we can be friends?" The girl raised her head slightly.

"Or are you planning to explain what you meant earlier by 'having me'?"

Amikura Mako knew about Kaoru's affairs, but he didn't know that.

Unsurprisingly, the question left Kaoru momentarily silent, as if he was pondering how to respond.

Amikura Mako waited for his answer—what he said next would determine the future of their relationship.

"I want to fall for you."

In the end, that was Kaoru's reply.

Not "I love you," but "I want to fall for you," making Amikura Mako understand his true feelings.

Their relationship hadn't reached the point where they could openly confess love, or perhaps Kaoru feared triggering an extreme reaction from her.

"Are you planning to cheat on Honami?" Amikura Mako said coldly.

"Can't I like you as well as Honami?" Kaoru countered. "I like oranges—does that mean I can't like apples?"

"It's different. Honami and I are good friends. What you're doing is cheating." Amikura Mako knew he was unaware that she knew the truth, and he certainly didn't know what she and Ichinose Honami had discussed.

"Are you saying if Honami agrees, you'd agree too?" Kaoru didn't fall into her moral trap but calmly pointed this out instead.

Amikura Mako was momentarily speechless before retorting, "You're being presumptuous. Why should both Honami and I have to comply with your wishes?"

"Because I'm not a good person. I choose to Take all," Kaoru stated bluntly.

"Don't you find that disgusting?" Amikura Mako couldn't hold back.

"Who shares their boyfriend in a relationship? And you have shady connections too. Would any normal person lick their senpai's feet?"

"I'd like to lick yours now too," Kaoru replied.

Amikura Mako was so furious she wanted to hit him.

This guy really wasn't listening to a word she said!

"Fine, even if we concede that Honami agrees with your idea, why should I have to be with you?"

The girl's voice suddenly rose several pitches.

"Do you think I'd actually fall for you?"

Did she seem that easy?

That a few sweet words would make her join his harem?

"I'm not that arrogant. Before love comes, I want to understand you better," Kaoru said sincerely.

"Hmph, all smooth talker," Amikura Mako coldly averted her gaze.

"Saying these things on Christmas—I can't tell if you're mocking me or confessing."

"Confessing," Kaoru affirmed firmly.

Amikura Mako shot him a sidelong glance and silently walked past him, seemingly ready to leave.

This time, Kaoru didn't stop her but followed behind.

After a short while, Amikura Mako suddenly halted, leaving Kaoru puzzled.

"Whatever. Overthinking won't change anything. Not seeing your true nature sooner was my mistake."

The girl turned around, her crimson skirt flaring like dancing flames against the snowy backdrop.

This time, her eyes weren't moist—they were clear and radiant.

"It's rude to receive a gift without giving one in return, so I'll give you a present too," Amikura Mako said.

"But before that, I have something to say."

"If you're going to scold me, say it louder," Kaoru reminded her, advising against bottling up bad feelings.

"Idiot." Amikura Mako didn't hold back before pausing. "I'm an idiot too. Even now, I still think you helped me a lot back then. Though Honami and the others encouraged me too, I didn't want to cry in front of them—it was too embarrassing."

She took a deep breath.

When frustrated, vigorous activity was indeed a good way to vent.

But some emotions couldn't be exhausted so easily.

If they lingered by day, they'd ferment further by night.

"I hate the Kaoru Mitoma who used and deceived me, who still says disgusting things even now!"

Kaoru slightly turned his gaze—she really wasn't holding back, completely unconcerned about drawing attention.

"But—" Amikura Mako pressed a hand to her chest.

"I like the Kaoru Mitoma who knows how to make me happy!"

Even Kaoru, who had just cheated using "Emotion Perception," couldn't help but feel astonished by the girl's words at this moment.

"However, since I still can't accept the other side of Kaoru Mitoma, I won't agree to what you just said." Amikura Mako bit her lip. "Until I can accept it, let's start as friends."

Kaoru blinked, his expression odd.

"I might end up wanting to nibble on a girl's feet. Is that still okay?"

"Go nibble on Honami. I won't let you do that to me." Amikura Mako's face flushed pink—no girl would agree to such a thing in this situation.

"At most, I'll let you look."

"If we're just looking, I'd also want to see your safety shorts."

Kaoru continued pushing his luck, finally provoking Amikura Mako's anger.

She promptly gave him two solid punches.

"Ow."

"Friends don't think about peeking at safety shorts!"

"The problem is, I'm different." Kaoru caught her fist as she tried to punch him again. "Because Mako is just too cute, I can't help but want to look a little longer. I don't want you to hide away."

Amikura Mako glared at him, then suddenly remembered the photos she had once sent him.

Her confidence wavered, and she averted her gaze.

"Aren't you going to ask why I like you?"

"Probably because Mako likes the version of herself when she's with me—she seems even cuter than usual."

"Ugh... you're so smooth-talking. You weren't like this before."

"Because pretending was exhausting."

"..."

Chapter 414: Schemes and Rivalries

Legend has it that every year on December 25th, an old man driving a reindeer-drawn sleigh flies around the world, carrying a sack full of gifts.

He delivers presents to children everywhere.

By his side, there's a list of good children and naughty children.

The naughty ones receive no gifts—this is their punishment for misbehaving throughout the year.

As for the good children, as long as they sleep soundly on Christmas Eve, Santa Claus will climb down the chimney, staining his bright red coat, and personally tuck gifts into their stockings.

However, Kaoru encountered a rather different Santa Claus today.

She, too, wore a bright red coat—though hers was an off-shoulder dress.

She didn't climb down a chimney because Kaoru didn't have a house.

This Santa Claus originally had two little reindeer, but they were busy building snowmen, so they couldn't pull the sleigh for now.

Even so, she still managed to hand Kaoru this year's Christmas gift.

"Hey, say something. Your silence is making me nervous."

After watching Kaoru stay quiet for a long while, Amikura Mako grew increasingly tense.

"I was just thinking how lucky I am that Mako isn't angry." Kaoru examined the gift bag in his hands, surprised that the girl's pockets could hold more than his.

"Can I open it now?"

"No!"

The moment she said it, Amikura Mako regretted it and quickly corrected herself.

"Actually, fine. Go ahead. If you don't like it, just give it back."

"Even before seeing it, I already like it." Kaoru unwrapped the package to find a pair of fluffy gloves inside—likely bought from a store.

One gave a handmade scarf, the other gave gloves. It was a strangely fitting coincidence.

"I'll cherish these for a lifetime." Kaoru slipped them on earnestly.

He wouldn't be disappointed by the difference between the two gifts.

Even if it wasn't handmade, the girl must have put considerable thought into selecting it.

"Not bad," Amikura Mako said, trying to hide the slight upturn of her lips.

If not for his earlier words, she might have at least given him a warmer expression.

In truth, Mako had been somewhat prepared for what he said—it wasn't entirely unexpected.

After all, Ichinose had already given her a heads-up.

What angered her was Kaoru admitting that he had been using her at the time.

Before long, the two returned to where they had started.

Though it had taken a while, Ichinose didn't comment.

Instead, she watched with keen interest as Kaoru decorated Olaf.

At one point, Hirano Rin noticed Kaoru's gloves and asked if he had bought them.

Kaoru replied that they were a Christmas gift but didn't say who had given them to him.

Before Rin could press further, Kaoru handed her a present.

Shiranami Chihiro and Kobashi Yume also received Christmas gifts from him.

The surprise delighted them.

Yume gave Kaoru one of her jingle bells in return, Rin promised to get him something next year, and after hesitating for a long time, Chihiro finally managed to say.

"Merry Christmas."

As Olaf stood tall on the snowy ground, the girls grew excited, snapping countless photos in the freezing landscape—dragging Kaoru into the shots as well.

Of course, a snowball fight soon followed.

By the time he came to his senses, Kaoru realized he now had plenty of photos with them, including group shots with Ichinose and Amikura Mako.

"Eh? Honami-chan, are you coming back with us?" Yume exclaimed in surprise, sneaking a glance at Kaoru's reaction.

"That's right! I plan to spend the evening with you all!" Ichinose replied cheerfully.

"Is that okay?"

Though the question was directed at Ichinose, Yume's eyes flicked toward Kaoru.

"I still have some business tonight," Kaoru said without disappointment.

On one hand, he had a prior arrangement with Sakayanagi Arisu.

On the other, Ichinose had whispered something to him earlier.

Yes, she didn't want to monopolize Kaoru's entire day, even if she had her own selfish desires.

Knowing others were involved, forcibly keeping Kaoru to herself would only strain their relationships.

This was simply the downside of sharing a boyfriend.

"What a shame!" Yume said, both saddened and happy. S

he had thought Ichinose was no longer part of their group, but now she was back.

Kaoru waved goodbye, deciding to use what little time he had left to deliver more gifts.

...

After changing out of her Christmas outfit, Mako returned to her regular clothes.

As she stepped out of the changing room, she caught sight of Ichinose smiling.

"Mako-chan was so cute today," the girl hummed playfully. "If it were me, I wouldn't have been able to resist confessing to you."

Confessing—the word brought back memories of the earlier scene, leaving Mako with mixed feelings.

She wasn't sure if the plan had succeeded or failed.

"Those gloves were your gift to him, weren't they?" Ichinose giggled. "In the middle of a snowy landscape, a Santa Claus appears before him, shyly handing over a present with all the bashfulness of a maiden. Hehe, for a pervert like him, it must've been quite the surprise."

"Can we not talk about this?" Amikura Mako's face turned slightly red. "And when have I ever been shy?"

"Right now." Ichinose Honami grinned and pinched her cheek.

"Well, it's pretty much like you said, but the gift he gave me was a bit unexpected." Amikura Mako averted her gaze, struggling to find the right words.

Ichinose Honami studied her expression and asked, "Did he tell you about what happened back then?"

"You knew about it too?" Amikura Mako's mood darkened.

"I did. I didn't tell you because I didn't want to upset you." Ichinose Honami hugged the girl in front of her.

"I know he was despicable, but we were just as bad."

There had never been any Christmas event at the boutique.

They had privately contacted the store to stage the whole thing, all to make Kaoru let his guard down.

"Everyone has a dark side. Some things are unacceptable, while others can be forgiven. It's not just about what he did back then, but also what he's done since."

After the theft incident, Ichinose Honami had become more open-minded—no one was perfect.

"Why can Honami accept it?" Amikura Mako couldn't help but ask.

"Because I've already decided I like him. Whether he's like this or not, I like him." Ichinose smiled. "Of course, if there are things about him that aren't good, I'll help him change."

"But... but isn't this just letting him off too easily?" Amikura Mako couldn't bring herself to say it—not just two people, but so many others were involved with him. "

If you keep being with him, Honami, you'll just keep letting him go meet other people like you did earlier."

"What else can I do?" Ichinose murmured. "Should I just let him go?"

Just like Kaoru's "Take all" philosophy, she too had reasons she couldn't let go.

Amikura Mako fell into a long silence until Ichinose Honami broke the quiet atmosphere.

"What about you, Mako-chan?"

"I haven't decided yet. My reply to him was to start as friends."

"Mhm, that's enough."

Ichinose patted her head, but Mako guiltily buried her face in her chest.

This so-called "friendship" might not be an ordinary one—perhaps she would even allow Kaoru to peek at her safety shorts.

Of course, it might not stop at just safety shorts.

After all, Ichinose had permitted her to get close to Kaoru.

Chapter 415: A Kiss

"Is this the Kiyomizu Temple's lucky cherry bell?"

Taking the bell from Kaoru's hand, Asahina Nazuna examined it carefully and noticed it didn't quite match her impression of the famous charm.

This one was engraved with a legendary phoenix, its flames swirling and dancing within, giving it an almost sacred appearance.

"What are you thinking? We can't go out right now. I bought this amulet online—it's said a highly respected master specially blessed it with spiritual power."

This was Kaoru's reward, so of course he had the right to spout nonsense.

In truth, this was the "Wind-Summoning Bell."

If rung at the right time with the correct number of chimes, it could immediately summon the weather effect desired by its holder—including storms, thunderstorms, typhoons, tornadoes, and other extreme conditions.

Because the effect was a bit terrifying, Kaoru had used another reward to seal the bell's power, rendering it temporarily inactive.

Unaware of the truth, Asahina Nazuna gently shook the Wind-Summoning Bell, listening to its crisp, pleasant chime as a small smile curled at her lips.

"Is this a special gift for me?" Asahina feigned a sigh. "You know I already have a charm—where am I supposed to put this little bell?"

"Hang it on the back of your bag or use it as a keychain." Kaoru had considered every possibility.

"Besides, your charm has expired. My bell is better."

Asahina Nazuna let out a soft hmph, as if expressing her dissatisfaction, before smiling again.

"Well, since it's my junior's kind gesture, I'll gratefully accept it."

"Merry Christmas," Kaoru said.

"You already said that earlier!" Asahina Nazuna pulled a gift box from her small bag.

"Now it's my turn. This is a gift Santa entrusted me to deliver to Mitoma-kun. He thinks that although you're a pervert with strange tastes, you're still a good kid overall."

So she could still insult him like this.

Silently, Kaoru accepted the gift box—from the outside, there was no telling what was inside.

"Don't open it now," Asahina stopped him as he tried to unwrap it.

"Why?" Kaoru asked, puzzled. "Does it contain your treasured little H book?"

"You're the one who'd give H books!" Asahina glared at him.

Such perverted behavior—how could she ever do something like that?

"Could it be that you're embarrassed?"

The moment he said it, he noticed her subtly avert her gaze.

"Fine, I'll open it when I get back."

"That's more like it."

As if trying to hide something, Asahina picked up the hot coffee on the table and took a small sip.

It was slightly sweet—had she added too much sugar?

Ding-dong—

Someone pushed open the café door. It was a familiar figure—golden hair, a carefree smile, leading a girl inside.

"Your relationship seems pretty strained lately," Kaoru met the newcomer's gaze.

For a moment, the other's expression twisted grotesquely before quickly returning to normal.

"Yeah, thanks to someone," Asahina also noticed him and sighed softly.

"Actually, I've been reflecting on myself too. Maybe I took things for granted before, which led to Nagumo-kun misunderstanding and made our relationship drift away from what childhood friends should be."

"Did you never like him?" Kaoru asked.

Asahina looked at him with a faint, ambiguous smile, though she quickly reined it in.

"Let me think—if you had a really amazing friend since childhood, would you fall for her?"

"Possibly. I am a bit of a horndog, after all."

"..."

Asahina wasn't sure if he was joking

Given his usual demeanor, it didn't seem like he was.

"Nagumo-kun has always been incredible. I've never seen him lose to anyone, not even once. Everyone always gathered around him," Asahina murmured.

"After people found out about our relationship, some thought I was in the way—that I didn't deserve to be near him. So, I used to minimize my presence, avoiding Nagumo-kun and them."

"So, you were never happy?" Kaoru could somewhat understand that feeling.

If the gap between two people was too wide, it could make one feel like they were dragging the other down.

"Mitoma-kun, if you keep teasing me like this, I might just hit you, okay?" Asahina smiled sweetly, but her tone was icy.

"No, I'm just jealous of Nagumo," Kaoru said. "He got to see you when you were little. I didn't. That makes me a little jealous."

Asahina froze for a moment, her heart skipping a beat.

Before she could process her reaction, the corners of her lips had already curled up.

"My, my, is that all it takes to make Mitoma-kun jealous?"

"Because I'll always love Asahina-senpai."

"..."

She had been planning to keep teasing him, but his sudden declaration left her expression stiff.

Had this guy really gotten so comfortable casually saying "I love you" now?

"In the sixteen years of your life before we met, I regret not finding you sooner. It really frustrates me."

"Ahaha, i-is it really that frustrating?"

"I wanted to be your childhood friend too."

Under his gaze, Asahina grew flustered.

Just like when he had kissed her out of the blue, her heart betrayed her, pounding wildly.

No one had ever made her feel this way before.

Perhaps it had started the day they met—when he had taken her foot in his hand, her heart had already begun to flutter against her sensitive chest, as if fate itself had orchestrated their encounter.

'Fate, huh?' Asahina thought it could stand to be a little more flexible.

"Hmm, childhood sweetheart is out of the question for you."

The girl reached out and took Kaoru's left hand that had been resting under the table—they say this side is closer to the heart.

"But how about being your first love?"

Kaoru was slightly taken aback this time.

He had expected Asahina to struggle with the decision for much longer.

"What's with that look? Did you think I wouldn't agree?" Asahina glared at him disapprovingly, yet her fingers interlaced with his.

"You've already pushed me this far. Even if I wanted to turn back, there's no place for me beside Nagumo-kun anymore. What else could I possibly do besides being with you?"

Grr—

For some reason, Kaoru faintly heard someone gnashing their teeth, even catching fragments of loud shouts as if trying to draw his and Asahina's attention.

"So, senpai has decided to be with us then?"

Not "me," but "us"—this phrasing held their little secret.

"If Honami was willing to accept me, why shouldn't I accept her?" Asahina smiled, though her eyes gleamed with dangerous light.

"If I were the type to refuse, the old Nagumo-kun would've been more than enough to make me walk away."

"This feels unreal," Kaoru murmured.

"But let me make one thing clear upfront—you can't be too much of a playboy." Asahina's expression turned stern.

"That's my bottom line. Besides, with too many people, even you wouldn't be able to handle it all."

This time it was Kaoru who subtly averted his gaze, making Asahina narrow her eyes suspiciously.

"You. Won't. Be. A. Playboy. Right?"

"Of course not."

"I'll trust you for now."

Though still somewhat doubtful about Kaoru, Asahina reasoned few girls would ever accept his unconventional ideas anyway, so she didn't press further.

Meanwhile, Nagumo Miyabi's glare burned toward them with particular intensity.

As if proving he no longer needed Asahina, he deliberately wrapped his arm around another girl nearby, spouting some show-off lines.

"Should I kiss you now?" Kaoru asked.

"Hey now, I just agreed to this. Doesn't mean I'm ready for that." Asahina shot him a sidelong glance.

"Even if you're a pervert, no early H-scenes allowed."

"Wasn't planning on lips anyway." Kaoru's logic was simple—girls had more kissable spots than just their mouths.

"Not the face either—too many people here." She poked his cheek away. "Even if I'm okay with it, think about how others would see us?"

Indeed, several had already noticed Kaoru.

"Fine."

Kaoru didn't insist.

Once he ruled the entire school, there'd be plenty of time for recklessness.

What he didn't expect was the sudden sensation of warmth against his cheek—

Sweet. Soft.

Carrying the girl's delicate fragrance as her hair brushed against his neck and earlobe, tickling slightly.

"There. Nobody saw that." Asahina withdrew casually, sitting primly like the proper senpai she was.

Kaoru instinctively touched his cheek, only to notice her ears turning faintly pink.

"Pathetic. Chitose, let's go to our next dating spot."

Nagumo Miyabi's voice came from nearby—having undoubtedly witnessed the scene and finally reached his limit.

"Don't do this again," Asahina suddenly said.

"Because he was following you, senpai. I don't think he's given up on you yet." Kaoru could vaguely guess Nagumo Miyabi's thoughts.

After all, he knew the effect on Nagumo hadn't worn off—he was probably trying to feign a proper departure to catch her attention.

Unfortunately, Nagumo Miyabi had to witness her kissing another man.

"I'm not upset about that," Asahina said. "If you wanted to kiss me, you could've just done it outright, like before. The fact that you asked first made me feel a little uncomfortable."

Kaoru froze for a moment.

His intention had been to make Nagumo give up, and Asahina understood that.

But her feelings were different—it almost felt like she was being forced to prove her loyalty.

Realizing this, Kaoru tightened his grip on Asahina's hand, interlacing their fingers.

"Senpai, how about we visit Tokyo Daijingu together next time?"

Asahina paused.

Was this a promise for after graduation?

The corners of her lips twitched, her eyes brimming with amusement.

"Why not Izumo Taisha instead? I've heard it's especially auspicious."

Ah, this senpai now had an extremely flexible approach to matters of faith.

Chapter 416: Count Me In

Asahina was pleased.

She had finally gained the upper hand over Kaoru, no longer letting him toy with her as before.

The two didn't continue holding hands and soon left the café, stepping onto the streets bathed in the faint glow of twilight.

The city lights flickered to life, gradually illuminating the world before them, while Christmas carols would linger well into the night.

"So, are you sticking with me now, or do you have other plans?" Asahina asked nonchalantly.

"Tachibana-senpai plans to confess to Horikita-senpai. I wanted to see how it turns out," Kaoru admitted, unfazed by the first half of her question.

"Oh? Just to see the outcome?" Asahina hadn't forgotten how Tachibana Akane treated Kaoru.

"Honestly, I don't think Tachibana-senpai stands much of a chance. Horikita-senpai doesn't seem interested in romance."

"Who knows? There might be a twist," Kaoru said, turning to her. "Are you heading back soon?"

"Hmm, someone's curious about the answer?" Asahina flashed a mischievous grin. "If you'd agreed to my offer earlier, you'd already know."

"Well, if you don't mind, I could take you along to meet them," Kaoru suggested, thinking it might be a good chance for introductions.

"..."

Asahina tilted her face slightly, pouting.

He was teasing her again.

If she really went along, wouldn't she just be delivering herself straight to him, turning this into a double date?

"Long time no see, Asahina, Mitoma."

At that moment, Kiryūin Fūka appeared not far from them, greeting the pair with a smile.

Asahina Nazuna wasn't particularly surprised—she had encountered this free-spirited girl before.

"Merry Christmas, Kiryūin-san," Asahina Nazuna replied warmly.

Kaoru also greeted her, though inwardly, he was a little frustrated.

He hadn't had the chance to prepare a Christmas gift for Kiryūin Fūka yet.

"I heard you had a fight with Nagumo?" Kiryūin Fūka didn't bother with pleasantries, cutting straight to the point.

"Not only does your decision interest me, but the person beside you does as well."

Though Asahina was familiar with Kiryūin's bluntness, she hadn't expected her to be this direct.

"Does Kiryūin-senpai usually enjoy gossip?" Kaoru subtly stepped slightly in front of Asahina. "If you don't mind, I can talk with you alone for a bit."

Asahina blinked in surprise, then suppressed a faint smile.

"Did my tone just now upset you?" Kiryūin chuckled, seemingly unbothered by his response.

"Let me rephrase it—when are you going to take responsibility for me?"

Kaoru fell silent.

Even the calmest person would falter at that.

"...Responsibility? What do you mean?"

Sure enough, Asahina voiced the obvious question.

"Unfortunately, though I'm an untouched maiden, he offered so much that I couldn't refuse. So I indulged his... particular tastes."

By the end, Kiryūin seemed too embarrassed to elaborate further.

Even though she knew she was stating the facts, why did this subtle feeling linger?

"Mitoma-kun?" Asahina tugged at his sleeve, offering a faint smile.

"Could you explain a little?"

Having first-year students around was one thing, and she could even tolerate Tachibana Akane's presence—but why was Kiryūin here too?

"The situation was a bit special at the time. I'll explain later," Kaoru quickly deflected.

"By the way, Kiryūin-senpai, aside from wanting me to take responsibility for you for life, was there anything else today?"

"..."

Kiryūin froze for a moment.

Hadn't this guy been panicking just earlier?

Why could he now casually talk about taking responsibility for her as if she were some scorned woman showing up at his doorstep?

"Fufufu, so you won't even spare a pitiful maiden like me?" Kiryūin suddenly laughed with amusement.

"I heard you already have a girlfriend. Asahina knows about this too, right? But your relationship seems a bit... strange?"

Unaware of the full context, Asahina assumed Kiryūin was in a similar situation to hers and nodded.

"As you can see, I had a fight with Nagumo-kun. For now, I'm temporarily Mitoma-kun's... Just how many girlfriends am I?"

She turned to look at Kaoru as she finished speaking.

"My first older-type girlfriend," Kaoru replied without batting an eye. "Also the third one I've officially confessed to."

Kiryūin was stunned, but Asahina simply chuckled and continued.

"That's our current situation. Sounds pretty bad, doesn't it?"

"...You two are bold," Kiryūin admitted, finding herself thoroughly enlightened today.

Coming from an elite family, she had seen so-called mistresses before, but none were as harmonious as these two, discussing it like it was the most normal thing.

"I just stopped overthinking. Sometimes indulging yourself and enjoying life as it comes isn't so bad," Asahina said. "I hope this gossip satisfies you?"

"Without you, Nagumo probably won't have an easy time moving forward," Kiryūin remarked, eyeing Kaoru.

"Also, I find you quite dangerous now."

"Wasn't I always?" Kaoru wondered—hadn't it been obvious when he'd licked her feet back then?

"It's different from before. Now, you give me the creeps. Like if I get any closer, I might end up as your mistress too."

With that, Kiryūin took a few steps back, her expression screaming that a cute girl like her shouldn't be wasted on trash.

Kaoru couldn't be bothered to argue.

Instead, he pulled out a Bluetooth earpiece from his pocket.

"Merry Christmas."

"Is this my Christmas present?"

"What else would it be?"

"If you're trying to woo a girl, at least put in some effort. What's so special about this earpiece?"

"Weren't you just saying you needed to keep your distance?"

"...Fair enough. I'll take it, then toss it in the trash later."

"Were you always like this?"

"Thanks for the compliment."

"Whatever. Just be careful when using it."

Kiryūin dismissed his warning.

What could possibly be dangerous about a simple Bluetooth earpiece?

After handing over the gift, Kaoru bid farewell to the two of them.

Chapter 417: So Cringe!

"Huh? You're not leaving with him?" Kiryūin looked at Asahina in surprise.

"I'm not some clingy little girl. Life is long—there's plenty of time." Asahina didn't seem bothered at all.

She was about to enter her third year of high school, while Kaoru would only be a second-year.

On the surface, time seemed limited.

But there was still university ahead.

Hearing this, Kiryūin grew even more intrigued.

It was her first time seeing someone so openly maintaining a harem.

"Are you free now?"

"Of course. There's something I wanted to ask you too."

"Great, let's talk about something meaningful."

The two exchanged glances and smiled.

....

Thanks to their previous date, Kaoru had a rough idea of where Tachibana Akane and Horikita Manabu might be—assuming Akane hadn't changed her mind midway.

As evening approached, the temperature dropped further.

Snowflakes drifted down from the dusky sky, and the faint glow of neon lights cast colorful hues over the passersby, painting the white scenery with vibrant warmth.

A Santa Claus handed out flyers nearby, while the jingling bells of a sleigh echoed intermittently. Judging by these scenes alone, it hardly seemed like a strictly closed-off school.

Kaoru arrived at the so-called "Legendary Tree" and glanced up, but it didn't appear any different from usual.

He then looked around but saw no sign of Horikita Manabu or Tachibana Akane—just a young couple.

Strange, haven't they arrived yet?

After a moment's thought, Kaoru decided to hide somewhere.

Just as he put on his black-framed glasses and was about to slip into a corner, someone suddenly tapped him from behind.

"Mitoma-kun?"

The clear, melodious voice sounded familiar.

Kaoru turned around calmly and saw Tachibana Akane standing there, tilting her head slightly as if puzzled by his actions.

"What are you doing here?" Kaoru glanced behind her but didn't spot Horikita Manabu. "Weren't you supposed to be confessing?"

"Uwah! You were secretly following me? You creep!" Akane pouted in displeasure before eyeing his black-framed glasses.

"Hmm... this actually kinda works..."

Her last words were muttered so softly that Kaoru barely caught them.

"My date with Honami ended, so I thought I'd check how things went with you." After explaining himself, he frowned slightly.

"Wait, did you not manage to invite Horikita-senpai out?"

"How rude! What kind of impression do you even have of me?!" Akane huffed, puffing her cheeks.

Did she really come off as that timid?

"Did the confession already happen?" Kaoru considered another possibility.

"Pretty much." Akane sighed deeply, her gaze lowering. "I gave him the Christmas present, and that was it."

Kaoru thought for a moment, then pulled out a tissue from his pocket.

"Need one?"

"I wasn't rejected at all! What are you thinking about!"

"Then why are you so down?"

"Because I'm confused. After thinking about it, I decided not to confess after all."

Tachibana Akane slightly turned her delicate face away, revealing only half of her face.

Her long eyelashes trembled faintly, and the dazzling light reflected on her tightly closed eyelids.

Light snowflakes settled on her head, dusting her once-adorable bun hairstyle with white.

Should we take shelter from the snow together now?

As Kaoru was considering this, she gently tugged at his sleeve and whispered.

"This time, you're not allowed to call me a coward—not even in your thoughts."

At the very last moment, the girl had retreated.

Kaoru didn't know what to say.

"I just feel like I'd be rejected. Horikita has never seen me as someone of the opposite sex—I know that much. He's always carrying this suffocating pressure in his heart. To him, I'm just a classmate."

"Maybe you're right. The distance between us feels so vast. I've been trying so hard to keep conversations going, but his reactions are always so indifferent. I don't know what to do—I want to get angry but don't dare to, want to feel hurt but can't let myself."

"Before today's date, I secretly asked Michi and the others. Turns out, my crush is pretty much an open secret, so everyone deliberately gave us space. I thought they just weren't interested in Horikita."

"But... can someone like me really keep up with him?"

Perhaps today's experience had left Akane even more lost.

Unlike her date with Kaoru, where they happily shared food and even at the cinema—though a little shy—she let him tease her freely.

Yet, with Horikita Manabu, the atmosphere was stifling.

She didn't dare do anything with him, even eating with reserved politeness.

Forget feeding each other—they hadn't even held hands!

This kind of interaction felt completely unnatural to Akane.

It wasn't how a date should be. Being with Kaoru was far more comfortable.

For the first time, she felt an immense distance between herself and Horikita.

"Do you like him?" Kaoru asked.

"Eh?" Akane was caught off guard by the sudden question, freezing for a moment before stammering.

"I—I..."

"Feeling happy just seeing him, wishing to meet him again, genuinely hoping these moments would happen more often," Kaoru said. "No reason needed—just being near him is enough. Do you like him to that extent, senpai?"

Just seeing him would make her happy.

Akane racked her brain, trying to recall her past interactions with Horikita.

Maybe she had felt that way before.

'The first time I saw Horikita Manabu's calm and composed demeanor, the way he blocked the advances of other classes, how he swiftly rectified my mistakes, always giving off a reliable vibe—when serving as the secretary in the office, the first time I saw Horikita Manabu's hopeful gaze toward newcomers—I was so jealous of this guy.'

'My frustrations were always ignored by him.'

'He accomplished something even Horikita Manabu couldn't do.'

'He caught me slacking off.'

'He actually guessed what was going on between me and Horikita Manabu. With that cold face of his, he still sneaks glances at girls' chests—so rude!'

'Just a mere newcomer, yet he dares to look down on me? How bold! And then he touched my chest—ugh! Though he does occasionally help classmates... Still, I hate this guy the most.'

'Even Nagumo, who keeps harassing our class, can't beat him? He even sleeps on the sofa—ehehe, his sleeping face is kinda cute.'

'So fast for just a junior. Who does he think he is, acting all cool? Shameless! At least pretend to be a little sad about my resignation—so mean...'

"Senpai?"

Hearing his voice, Tachibana Akane snapped back to reality.

What was she even thinking about?!

Her mind was completely filled with images of this guy—she must be exhausted!

"L-Later! I still have things to do!"

Facing Kaoru's gaze, Akane flusteredly waved her hands and instinctively turned to flee.

Kaoru sensed something was off and was about to chase after her when she suddenly spun back around and crashed straight into his chest—it was a heavy impact.

"Don't just ram into people out of nowhere!"

"I-I didn't mean to... B-But there are people behind me!"

Too panicked to find a hiding spot nearby, Akane hastily tugged open Kaoru's coat and buried herself inside.

Kaoru froze for a moment as the girl clung tightly to him, her slightly rounded chest pressing against him.

His arms were suddenly filled with a soft, sweet warmth.

"What are you doing?"

"It's... it's too embarrassing! Michi and the others are behind me—I don't want them to see me with a guy," Akane mumbled, her voice muffled.

"Besides, Michi would definitely guess I'm on a date with Horikita today—ugh, I can't even say it!"

Kaoru couldn't follow her train of thought.

After a brief hesitation, he wrapped his arms around her, using his body to shield her bun-haired head.

Just then, he spotted a group of girls approaching, chatting and laughing.

"Hey, I thought I saw Akane just now. Weird."

"Ahaha, no way. Maybe she's already with Horikita by now."

"Ugh, so jealous."

Noticing Kaoru and the girl in his embrace, they flashed knowing smirks, likely assuming they were a couple.

Whispering among themselves, they passed by.

Seems like Class 3-A students really ship Horikita Manabu and Tachibana Akane together.

Kaoru glanced down at the girl in his arms. Admittedly, this senpai was incredibly soft.

At this close distance, he could even feel her heartbeat—wild and frantic.

For some reason, Akane remained motionless, lost in thought, her warm breath tickling against Kaoru's skin.

"Senpai, the person has already left. If you don't get up now, I won't be polite anymore."

As he spoke, Kaoru slightly lowered his palm, tracing along the slender waistline until it was about to touch the plump, perky ass.

Perhaps because Japanese girls are more resistant to cold, Akane Tachibana was wearing a pleated skirt today.

The slight upward curve hinted at the softness beneath, while the long over-the-knee socks accentuated the straight, elegant lines of her legs—though they were noticeably thicker than usual, giving them a more delicate appearance.

She didn't react at all.

Kaoru hesitated for a moment before tentatively giving it a couple of pats.

Sure enough, it was soft.

Chapter 418: A Strange Fan

By the time she ran off, Kaoru finally realized he hadn't given her a Christmas gift yet.

'Looks like it'll have to wait until next time.'

Since it wasn't too late, Kaoru headed to the mall and personally picked out a few gifts, which he then gave to Shiho Manabe and the others.

Kamuro Masumi, Airi Sakura, Haruka Hasebe, Sakayanagi Arisu, Karuizawa Kei...

Compared to the days at the agency, the number of people had dwindled significantly, and Kaoru couldn't help but feel a little relieved.

Still, he hadn't forgotten about Ai Morishita, Miki Yamamura, and Hiyori Shiina.

It was just that they rarely had opportunities to interact, and suddenly giving them gifts would seem too odd.

If he had held a Study Group gathering a few days earlier, it might have been easier.

He could have handed the gifts to Airi Sakura, Haruka Hasebe, and Miki Yamamura in person.

Kaoru sent a message to Kamuro Masumi, asking if Sakayanagi Arisu had assigned her any tasks.

Soon, Masumi replied in the negative.

Seeing this, Kaoru simply wished her a Merry Christmas and told her that magic would appear in her room tonight.

Masumi warned him that stealing keys was a capital offense, and breaking into a girl's room was an even graver crime.

Ignoring her warning, Kaoru returned to the dormitory and left a pack of cold medicine he bought from the convenience store outside Mako Amikura's door, with a small note attached.

Next, Kaoru headed to Haruka Hasebe's room.

"Merry Christmas."

Since he had asked Haruka in advance, Kaoru had no trouble seeing the girl in her loungewear—a slightly loose nightgown that hid her curvaceous figure.

She clearly had no plans to go out, and the sound of a TV drama playing in the background confirmed she was quite the social butterfly.

"I thought you were joking. Instead of spending time with your girlfriend, you're here giving me a gift?" Hasebe Haruka looked surprised, her eyes shining with unconcealed delight as she gazed at Kaoru.

"Aren't we friends?" Kaoru handed her the gift box. "Though, I'm not entirely sure what you like."

"No, it's fine. That makes me really happy. No wonder Kaoru has a girlfriend." Haruka smiled brightly.

"Am I the only one?"

Understanding her implication, Kaoru quickly added, "I'll be giving gifts to Airi and Miki later too."

"A bit of a playboy, aren't you?" Haruka's tone was oddly teasing. "Can I open it now?"

"Go ahead." Kaoru nodded.

Haruka unwrapped the gift box and found several CDs inside.

"These are the complete commemorative editions of Straylight, Cometik, and Noctchill. And this one is a personal solo I really like. If you're interested, I think you'll enjoy these girls' voices."

As he spoke, Kaoru carefully observed Haruka's reaction.

"That's surprising. Do you usually like idols too?" Haruka seemed thrilled, as if she had found a kindred spirit.

"When I asked you before, you didn't seem interested. I thought you didn't care for them."

"I looked them up afterward and realized I actually liked them," Kaoru replied, noticing nothing unusual.

"Then I remembered you seemed really into them, especially mentioning that grand stage performance, so I bought these CDs for you."

"Because their producer is amazing. That grand stage was on par with some top girl groups, and they even invited special guests—it was an all-star show. I heard they might even go on tour later." Haruka smirked playfully.

"Honestly, Kaoru, you're so much like him. Are you his secret love child or something?"

"Yeah, and I even have the idols' phone numbers. Want them?" Kaoru shot her a sidelong glance.

"Of course! Can I also get an autograph?" Haruka naturally extended her small hand. "Even on my palm is fine—I don't mind."

"If you want autographs, you'll have to come with me," Kaoru said. "Twenty-eight idols—just name who you want."

"Hmm, I want twenty-nine autographs." Haruka blinked at him.

A sense of unease crept over Kaoru.

Why did this feel so deviously familiar?

"The producer's already dead."

"Yeah, what a shame."

"Why are you so curious about him?"

"Did I say I was?" Haruka tilted her head. "From the start, I just thought you resembled him, that's all."

Kaoru couldn't probe further.

This woman seemed easy to handle, but her mind was just as sharp as theirs.

"Well, since I've given you the gift, I'll take my leave. Don't want to bother you."

"Wait." Haruka stopped him. "I haven't given you anything yet."

With that, the girl dashed back to her room, her skirt fluttering over her pale thighs, her chest rising and falling with each step.

The sound of her quick footsteps soon signaled her return.

"Here, this is for you."

Kaoru looked at the item she had shoved into his hand.

Though familiar, he feigned ignorance and cautiously asked, "What is this?"

"This? It's a souvenir from when I attended the live performance." Hasebe Haruka showed a hint of nostalgic smile before leaning in slightly and whispering into Kaoru's ear.

"It was given to me by the late producer. I feel like it has a connection with you, Kaoru, so I decided to give it to you."

"T-this is too valuable." Kaoru swallowed hard.

This was an early commemorative item—back then, he only had idols like Hiori and Tanaka Mamimi around him.

"Don't worry, I still have plenty of things like this." Hasebe Haruka sighed. "Speaking of which, I was really disappointed I couldn't get tickets for the grand stage back then."

Kaoru felt his fingers trembling but managed to steady himself in time.

"Maybe there'll be another chance."

"I hope so."

"..."

Hasebe Haruka watched him leave, the corners of her lips curling slightly.

It seemed her instincts weren't wrong—she had indeed caught his attention.

She had thought it was just a coincidence of names, but who knew miracles could really happen in this world?

Could it be that he had faked his death before?

Her gaze darkened as memories of the past surfaced.

Truthfully, she had only stumbled upon a live performance video online before.

While she found it pleasant, it hadn't been enough to make her a fan.

What truly drew Hasebe Haruka's attention was a chance encounter.

One morning, she heard that an unknown upperclassman at her school had passed an idol audition, causing quite a stir.

Perhaps out of curiosity about the agency the upperclassman belonged to, even middle school students sneaked into the performance venue.

Hasebe Haruka was dragged along by her only two friends.

Though it wasn't the upperclassman's performance, the live show left a deep impression on her.

During the final thank-you segment, Hasebe Haruka met the producer—a tall, slender figure who exuded an inexplicable sense of reassurance.

Returning to her room, she placed the CD on her bedside table next to a photo of the producer.

After staring at it for a while, she lay down, her fingers instinctively reaching downward.

"I-I had already given up on getting close to you... But you came to me yourself... D-don't blame me..."

With slightly ragged breaths, the girl turned on her side, squeezing her fingers lightly as her soft murmurs seemed to sink into quicksand.

Chapter 419: Exposed

The earlier probing had been a complete failure.

Kaoru felt as though he had been exposed.

But it wasn't entirely his fault.

He had assumed Hasebe Haruka merely suspected him—he never expected her to be an original fan.

Racking his brain, Kaoru tried to recall if he had ever met Hasebe Haruka before.

She carried so many wishes within her; she should have stood out in a crowd.

Why couldn't he remember her?

Buzz—

His phone vibrated. Sakayanagi Arisu was calling.

"Are you back at the dorm yet?"

"Are you coming over?"

"Hehehe, try not to answer questions with questions in the future. It might upset girls."

"Having the privilege to upset you is my honor."

"Such a smooth talker. I heard you were with Ichinose today, then holding hands with a senior. You're even more impressive than I imagined."

"I'm about to play Santa Claus later. Are you done?"

"Am I interrupting something good?"

"Ran into some trouble earlier. I'm in a bit of a bad mood."

"Is that so? Come to my room later then."

Kaoru froze for a moment.

Though her tone was casual, as if discussing trivial matters, the content somehow felt strangely unsettling.

"Come to your room?"

"You dont want to?" Sakayanagi Arisu's voice carried a hint of regret. "I wanted to show you a girl's room, but I suppose Mitoma-kun must be tired of seeing them. My apologies."

"I'd love to, but I have a girlfriend now." Kaoru walked to the elevator just as several girls were exiting.

He nodded and smiled at them before stepping inside.

Silence lingered on the other end.

Kaoru only saw the girls blushing slightly as the elevator doors closed, catching fragments of their whispers.

"What does that matter?" Sakayanagi finally said. "First you steal Nagumo-kun's childhood sweetheart, then flirt with other girls. You're the most shameless boyfriend ever."

"Either way, I won't be at a disadvantage. What about you, Sakayanagi-san?" Kaoru watched the elevator stop at his floor.

"Almost forgot—we still have that promise. A preview might be nice."

"Heh, even if you're trying to provoke me, it won't work, idiot." Sakayanagi chuckled. "Come over. I have a gift prepared."

Exiting the elevator, Kaoru spotted Sakayanagi's room down the hallway.

Passing Miki Yamamura's room number, he finally understood how she'd caught this invisible girl.

Outside, darkness drowned in black tides as chaotic snow curtains fell.

Kaoru stood before her door and knocked.

"I believe the doorbell still works."

It had been a while since he'd seen her.

Kaoru realized she seemed shorter than he remembered—perhaps because she wore unguarded loungewear tonight, something like a sleep dress with long hemline brushing her calves, revealing only a glimpse of pale ankles and bare feet.

A faint fragrance lingered, and her hair seemed slightly damp.

Had she just bathed?

"I expected someone to check who's visiting Sakayanagi's room." Kaoru found himself staring—this was his first time seeing her barefoot.

"This is my territory." Sakayanagi turned, leaning on her cane as she walked back inside. "Close the door. It's cold."

Leaving the young mistress to live alone here seemed rather harsh.

Kaoru removed his shoes in the genkan, glancing at the shoe rack—no extra pairs in sight.

Entering her room surprised him.

Contrary to expectations, the space carried a girl's warmth, filled with neatly arranged personal items—even a teddy bear.

For all her usual arrogance, she was still just a girl at heart.

Seeing that Sakayanagi Arisu was about to make tea, he stepped forward to help.

After the tea was ready, he sat across the table while Sakayanagi settled on the bed.

They both took a sip of tea.

"I originally planned to have you wait in your room for an hour or two before I came over, but I figured you'd get angry, so I abandoned that idea."

Kaoru's lips twitched.

What kind of mindset did she have to even consider doing that—and then casually say it out loud to him?

"You're overthinking it. I'd hit you not only in my room but also in yours," Kaoru said expressionlessly.

"In other words, I don't follow any rules."

"I see." Sakayanagi nodded thoughtfully. "In that case, I suggest you hit me sooner rather than later."

As she spoke, she used her nearby cane to hook the hem of her skirt, lifting it slightly to reveal a generous stretch of soft, pale calf—plush and delicate.

"And here are the feet you love so much, Mitoma-kun. I just took a bath, so there shouldn't be any unpleasant scent." Sakayanagi's cheeks flushed faintly as if she were teasing him.

"Well? Do you want to... do it now?"

"Is this my Christmas present?" Kaoru shot her a sidelong glance.

"Could it be that Ichinose-san is really better than me?" Sakayanagi pressed. "Aside from her figure, I surpass her in every other way, don't I?"

"Are you sure it's just her figure?" Kaoru looked at her strangely.

"Otherwise? The girls you pick all seem to have great bodies." Sakayanagi counted them off on her fingers.

"Not just Ichinose-san—there's Asahina-senpai from the upperclassmen, Masumi-san from Class A, and then Kushida-san, Horikita-san, Hasebe-san from Class D... Did you come here just to date?"

"There's no law saying high schoolers can't date, is there?" Kaoru countered.

"Hmm, no, there isn't." Sakayanagi tilted her head. "So why not me? Weren't you so bold with me before? Why hesitate now?"

"Take down the cameras first, then we'll talk." Kaoru wasn't fooled.

As she had said earlier, this was her territory—she could have hidden cameras anywhere.

"Strange. The Mitoma-kun I know would charge ahead even if he knew there were cameras."

Sakayanagi looked genuinely surprised, as if witnessing something unexpected.

"Since you can predict that, it's all the more reason not to." Kaoru took another sip of tea. "I don't know what you're scheming, but caution never hurts."

"Who knows? Maybe there are no cameras—maybe I just drugged your tea?" Sakayanagi smiled faintly, like a mischievous child.

Kaoru froze for a second.

Surely not—he had helped prepare the tea himself.

"Ahaha, just kidding. I'm not as underhanded as a certain someone." Sakayanagi pulled out her phone, tapped a few times, then turned the screen toward him.

His own face appeared on the display.

"Good evening, Producer."

Chapter 420: Granting Her Wish

Kaoru didn't panic.

There was no need for him to panic—as a 27-year-old producer and a 17-year-old high school student—he had no reason to show even a hint of fluster.

Who would believe in the miracle of resurrection?

Back then, he had meticulously calculated the exact moment Madoka Higuchi would open the door before calmly hanging himself, leaving his corpse in the room.

No one would believe his current identity.

To confirm, he had even asked the Wish Machine, which replied that his previous body had indeed been cremated.

"Does Sakayanagi-san also think he looks a lot like me?" Kaoru's eyes were calm as still water, even slightly furrowing his brows.

"Even though we share the same name, he's clearly just some middle-aged man."

"I have their phone numbers," Sakayanagi Arisu said, even calmer and more composed than him.

Kaoru nearly faltered.

If they found out he was here, they might rush over immediately.

"Do you believe someone can come back from the dead?"

"No. It might be a scam, or some elaborate deception. But either way, his presence here is inappropriate." Sakayanagi Arisu put away her phone.

"Anything you'd like to say?"

"Do you want me to leave?" Kaoru asked.

"Don't answer a question with another question. I'm just curious—who are you?" Sakayanagi Arisu said.

"Remember when I mentioned I'd seen your records?"

Kaoru nodded.

It had been his birthday, so her gift had taken him by surprise.

"Actually, my father personally told me before the semester started. Your name was on the list—same name, same appearance." Sakayanagi Arisu continued.

"He told me to keep an eye on you in class. I thought it'd be boring at first, but then I realized you were quite interesting, so I've been observing you."

"A producer doesn't warrant this kind of attention, does he?" Kaoru sounded a little exasperated.

"Turning an unknown talent agency into a rising star that shook the entire nation—that's not something an ordinary producer could do." Sakayanagi Arisu spoke with a faint smirk.

"Barging into the entertainment industry with just a few young girls, even handling the yakuza, and later breaking into Seoul's scene—all in just two years."

Kaoru felt slightly uncomfortable and averted his gaze.

"Some say he's an alien with advanced weapons, others say he's a psychic who hypnotized an entire yakuza syndicate in one go. Oh, and some claim his agency is actually his harem, where every idol is forced to endure his... conditioning—like performing on stage with their legs tightly pressed together—"

"That's a bit of an exaggeration, isn't it?"

"So, I wanted to ask for your personal opinion."

"..."

"I've checked—the school convenience store didn't sell any sleep-inducing medication that day. I also reviewed the administrator's records, and you didn't order anything online."

It seemed she was serious.

Perhaps she had already been testing him on his birthday.

"From the beginning, you pretended not to know me just to get close, didn't you?" Kaoru said quietly.

"That was part of it, but as I mentioned earlier, the reason I became interested in you is because you're inherently fascinating," Sakayanagi continued.

"Setting aside your identity as a creator, your previous performance far exceeded my expectations. If left unchecked, you might not just dominate the first-years—even the second-years could fall under your influence. Next year's freshmen would likely stand no chance either."

"The rules are too simple. The school retains class-based competitive exams while allowing students to accumulate Personal Points without restriction."

Just as Nagumo Miyabi had made promises to other classes, if Class 2-A pooled twenty million Personal Points, the lower classes would inevitably fall into chaos.

After all, not everyone would be content staying in their original class, nor could everyone withstand such pressure.

Nagumo Miyabi could easily crush the lower classes just by fishing for opportunities, and now Class 1-A also had the qualifications to do the same.

However, this year's Class 1-B and Class 1-C were somewhat special.

"The rules, you say?" Sakayanagi fell into thought.

"Taking a step back, even if we don't win the competition outright, as long as we eliminate the opponent's king, the rest will scatter like headless chickens," Kaoru said.

"People like Katsuragi, you, Horikita, or Ryuen—though the queen, rook, knight, and bishop are all troublesome, there's only one king."

Sakayanagi roughly understood now.

Even if this guy weren't in Class A, he could quickly rise to it.

"It seems there's no difference between you and Nagumo-kun."

"The difference is I have other methods at my disposal, so I don't need to resort to that."

"Not necessarily." Sakayanagi slightly raised her eyes, her tone calm.

"Next semester is our promised showdown. The loser might face immediate expulsion."

In truth, she harbored similar thoughts.

This guy likewise didn't care about sacrificing his pieces—if he could take down the opponent's king, he wouldn't hesitate.

"Are you worried about being expelled?" Sakayanagi noticed the shift in Kaoru's expression.

"Or is there some reason you absolutely must stay here?"

"I haven't cleared the game yet," Kaoru said. "For example, you—you're also one of my targets."

"Me?" Sakayanagi smiled. "Are you referring to fulfilling some H-related fantasy of yours?"

"Want to know?" Kaoru pulled out his phone. "If you want answers, why not play a game with me? If you win, I'll satisfy your curiosity—why I came here and whether I'm really the creator."

Sakayanagi narrowed her eyes.

She had to admit, he had pinpointed her thoughts perfectly.

If not for her curiosity, she wouldn't have investigated this far.

At this point, she had countless questions she wanted answered by Kaoru.

Compared to burying a false genius, this industry legend and the mysteries surrounding him were far more compelling, stirring her restless heart.

"Fufufufu, actually I don't need to play chess with you. The advantage is mine now—you don't want to leave, you don't want them to know, so you have no choice but to listen to me."

Faced with Sakayanagi Arisu's verbal threat, Kaoru couldn't help but ask, "Are you planning to use your privilege to contact the outside world?"

Sakayanagi Arisu's expression stiffened slightly, only to hear him continue.

"If that's the case, I have nothing more to say. After all, you're the chairman's daughter and have already reviewed our classmates' files in advance."

"I know you're trying to provoke me, but what's the point?" Sakayanagi said. "If I report this to my father, someone might force you to withdraw from school under the pretext of being your guardian."

Kaoru nodded. "If that counts as your victory, then of course our Sakayanagi-san has won."

Sakayanagi couldn't hold back any longer, her eyebrows twitching slightly.

This wasn't the outcome she wanted.

"Or perhaps Sakayanagi-san has already foreseen losing to me in chess?" Kaoru said. "What a shame. I suppose I'll have to leave then."

Sakayanagi finally snapped, her cane striking the floor with a dull thud.

"Fine, I'll indulge you. Let's play chess now," the girl took a deep breath. "If you lose, you'll tell me everything."

"With pleasure," Kaoru smiled faintly. "But if you lose, you'll have to grant me one request as well."

"Why not?" Sakayanagi agreed without hesitation.

She absolutely believed she couldn't lose—judging from their previous two matches, their skill levels weren't even comparable.

There was no way she could lose, at least not in chess against Kaoru.

To this, Kaoru had only one response.

'Wish Machine, three wishes—help me win this chess match!'