Aftermath Story Part 3: The Assignment

The taxi moved steadily through the morning traffic, Yokohama passing beyond the window in a blur of glass, concrete, signs, and people.

I stared out the passenger window, watching the towering, modern glass facades of the coastal business district reflect the overcast morning sky. Rina sat beside me, holding the meeting folder against her lap. Every now and then she glanced at the documents, checking the agenda we'd already reviewed twice, her dark ponytail swaying slightly with the motion of the car.

I tried to do the same.

I couldn't concentrate.

I hadn't slept a single minute after waking up at 4:12 AM.

The dream still clung to me in fragments I couldn't fully shake off.

Hina’s voice.

The Boss’s presence.

When Mom finally knocked on my door, I was already awake.

When I put on the new suit my mother had bought me, it was a revelation. It didn't hang off my shoulders like before. The dark grey fabric was masterfully tailored, sitting flush against my waist and wrapping securely over my breasts. It was a men's suit, yet it completely felt perfect.

Then came my hair.

Mom gathered the length carefully in both hands.

"Hold still."

"I am holding still."

"Your head keeps moving."

"I'm thinking."

"That’s worse than moving."

Despite everything, I smiled faintly.

"I’ll try not to think then."

"Good luck with that."

Her fingers worked through the long strands, smoothing them with ease before twisting them into the large bun she had decided suited the suit better than my usual braid.

"You know," I said quietly, "you didn’t have to wake up this early."

"I heard you moving around before I even knocked," she replied.

I went still.

She noticed.

"You were already up, weren’t you?"

"...Yeah."

A pause.

Then she sighed softly.

"Bad dream again?"

I didn’t answer.

When she finished, she stepped back.

"There."

I looked at myself in the mirror.

The bun made me look more formal.

Mom adjusted the knot of my tie.

"You’ll do fine."

She squeezed my shoulder once.

"Go."

And I had gone.

I looked at my reflection in the window.

My hair was still perfectly in place.

My tie was straight.

The dark suit fit well.

Everything about me looked prepared.

I didn’t feel prepared.

Beside me, Rina turned another page.

"Are you alright?"

I looked at her.

"Yeah."

She studied my face.

"You still look tired."

"I had a bad night."

She didn’t ask anything further.

Just nodded.

"We can get coffee after the meeting."

I smiled faintly.

"That sounds good."

The taxi slowed as we approached a modern office complex.

"We're here," Rina said, her voice pulling me back to reality.

We paid the driver and stepped out onto the bustling pavement. The cool sea breeze coming off the Yokohama bay tugged at the lapels of my jacket. I turned to the tinted glass of the building's exterior, using it as a makeshift mirror for a final check. I smoothed down the front of my suit, ensuring my tie was perfectly straight and that the underwire of my bra wasn't noticeably pinching through the fabric of the dress shirt.

Rina stepped up beside my reflection, adjusting the collar of her own blouse and running a quick hand over her ponytail. She caught my eye in the reflection and offered a firm, grounding nod.

Rina adjusted her bag and looked toward the building.

"Ready, Senpai?" she asked softly.

I took a breath.

"Ready."

The lobby was brighter than I expected.

Large glass doors opened onto a polished reception area with dark stone floors, minimalist furniture, and the quiet efficiency of a company already deep into its workday.

People moved through the lobby carrying laptops and files.

Nobody paid us much attention.

For a moment, I was simply another employee arriving for a meeting.

I liked that.



We approached the reception desk.

"Good morning," I said, my voice steady and pitched in my standard, polite professional register. "My name is Haruto Akiyama, and this is my associate, Rina Sato. We are here for the 10:00 AM preliminary consultation regarding the coastal development infrastructure project."

The receptionist, an elegant woman in a sharp black uniform, looked up from her monitor with a welcoming smile. "Welcome. Just one moment while I confirm your—"

"One moment, please."

Her eyes moved across the screen.

Then back to me.

There was the briefest flicker of surprise.

It was subtle.

Most people wouldn’t have noticed.

I did.

Her gaze dropped briefly toward my long hair, then returned to my face.

She composed herself immediately.

"Yes, I see your appointment right here. The executive team is currently setting up the main conference room for your presentation."

She stood up, gesturing toward a sleek, frosted-glass corridor to the left of the desk.

"If you will follow me, I will escort you to our guest reception room," she continued, her eyes actively avoiding making direct contact with mine now. "It will just be a brief wait. Someone will come down to fetch you in about ten minutes."

"Thank you," I replied, keeping my expression perfectly neutral.

We followed her down the silent, carpeted hallway. The deeper we walked into the building, the colder the air conditioning seemed to get, prickling against the skin of my neck. The receptionist opened a heavy wooden door, revealing a small, immaculately clean waiting room with leather sofas and a glass coffee table.

"Please make yourselves comfortable."

"We will. Thank you."

The door closed behind her.

For a moment, neither of us spoke.

I set my briefcase beside the sofa and sat down.

The room was quiet.

Ten minutes.

Just ten minutes before the meeting.

I looked at Rina.

She was already reviewing the agenda again.

I smiled faintly.

She looked up.

"What?"

"Nothing."

I leaned back.

"Just..."

I glanced toward the closed door.

"...Let’s do this."

She smiled.

"Let’s."

Outside, somewhere beyond the waiting room, footsteps approached and disappeared again.

I looked down at my hands.

My fingers were steady.

For now.

And yet, beneath the calm...

Something from three years ago seemed to be waiting for me.

The next ten minutes passed more quickly than I expected.

Rina and I went through the documents one last time, checking the proposal, the client profile, and the notes from our earlier discussions. We weren't looking for anything new anymore. Mostly, we were making sure we hadn't overlooked something obvious.

"Budget section?" I asked.

"Checked," Rina replied without looking up.

"Implementation timeline?"

"Checked."

"Supporting documents?"

She lifted the folder slightly.

"All here."

I nodded.

"Good."

She finally looked at me.

"You really are nervous."

"I'm trying not to be."

"I know."

A small smile.

"You're doing fine."

I exhaled slowly and looked down at the edge of the folder.

"Thanks."

For a moment, neither of us spoke.

Then Rina stood.

“I’m going to freshen up before we go in.”

“Good idea.”

I followed a minute later.

The men’s washroom was empty.

The silence inside felt heavier than the lobby outside.

I stood in front of the mirror and looked at myself.

For a second, the reflection didn’t feel like mine.

Dark charcoal suit.

White shirt.

Navy tie.

And the large, neatly tied bun at the back of my head, still unfamiliar, still slightly surreal in a corporate setting.

The suit fit better than I had expected. Mom had been right.

I adjusted my cuffs.

Then my tie.

Then, almost without thinking, I reached back and touched the bun.

Still there.

Secure.

I let out a small breath.

“You’re fine.”

I wasn’t sure if I was talking to myself or the reflection.

I turned on the tap, splashed cold water on my face, and took a moment longer than necessary to steady myself.

When I straightened up, I checked everything again.

No loose strands.

No crooked tie.

No visible mistakes.

Just me.

I exhaled once more.

Then left.

When I returned to the guest reception room, Rina was already waiting. Standing beside her was a young, sharp-looking executive in a navy suit, holding a clipboard.

"Ah, Mr Akiyama-sama?" the young man said, turning toward me. His eyes widened slightly, a brief flicker of confusion crossing his features as he took in my appearance, but he recovered smoothly, dropping into a deep, respectful bow.

I straightened slightly.

“Yes.”

He offered his hand.

“Ito. Client Relations.”

I shook it.

“Thank you for having us, Ito-san.”

He nodded.

“Of course. We appreciate you coming in today.”

He turned to Rina.

“And Ms. Sato?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you as well.”

A brief exchange of polite bows followed.

Ito-san glanced at the documents in my hand.

“The meeting room is ready. Everyone is already inside.”

“Understood.”

He gestured down the corridor.

“I’ll give you a quick rundown on the way.”

Rina and I followed him.

As we walked, Ito-san spoke in a calm, professional tone.

“On the client side, we have four attendees today. Director Takeda from Operations will be leading their side. Mizuno-san from Finance, Okabe-san from Systems, and Tanaka-san from Project Coordination.”

I listened carefully, nodding once.

“Takeda-san will open the discussion. After that, we’ll move into your proposal overview.”

“Got it,” I said.

Rina stayed quiet, already reviewing the flow in her head.

Nothing sounded unexpected.

Still, I paid attention to every detail.

It helped keep my thoughts anchored.

The meeting room door slid open.

A long table dominated the space, polished and formal, with neatly arranged name placards already in place.

On the opposite side, four people were seated.

As we entered, they stood in unison.

I bowed first.

“Good morning.”

“Good morning,” came the response.

Ito-san stepped slightly forward.

“Thank you for waiting. I’d like to introduce our team.”

He gestured toward us.

“This is Haruto Akiyama, lead consultant for today’s session, and Rina Sato, supporting the project.”

I bowed again.

“Thank you for your time today.”

Rina followed smoothly.

“Thank you for having us.”

The senior client representative stepped forward.

“I’m Takeda, Director of Operations.”

He gestured to the others in turn.

“Mizuno, Finance.”

“Okabe, Systems.”

“And Tanaka, Project Coordination.”

Each gave a short nod as their names were called.

We exchanged brief greetings around the table—polite, efficient, standard.

Then Takeda gestured toward the seats.

“Please, let’s begin.”

We sat.

Rina placed the documents in front of her with careful precision.

I opened my notebook.

Across the table, the clients settled into their chairs, expressions neutral but attentive.

The room quieted.

I took a slow breath.

Three years ago, I walked into a room like this believing I was stepping into my future.

Today, I knew better.

This wasn’t the future.

It was the present.

And I was ready to work.

I looked up.

“Shall we begin?”

Rina

The first twenty minutes passed almost exactly as expected.

Introductions gave way to our company's overview, and then seamlessly into the complex logistical problem they had asked us to address. Haruto handled the opening presentation calmly, moving through the financial figures and zoning timelines without a single hesitation.

I sat to his right, handing him the supplementary documents exactly as he needed them, but my primary focus was on him.

I'd seen him in meetings before his three-year absence. But watching him here felt entirely different.

There was no trace of the trembling, anxious man I'd seen at the station this morning. His shoulders were relaxed beneath the new suit. His voice was incredibly steady, pitched in that soft, elegant register that commanded the room simply by never needing to rise. He didn't rush when Director Takeda interrupted him, and when a particularly aggressive question came from Okabe-san, the finance representative, Haruto paused for a thoughtful moment before answering, entirely ignoring his prepared notes.

He was completely in control.

This was the Haruto Akiyama I had admired from afar for years. Sharp. Rational. Impossibly difficult to rattle. Even as his physical posture remained undeniably feminine, his knees pressed tightly together, his hands resting gracefully on the table, his intellect dominated the space.

For a few minutes, I simply watched him.

There you are, I thought, a quiet smile touching my lips.

Then, something changed.

It was a shift so small that I wasn't sure anyone else in the massive conference room noticed. But I knew him.

Director Takeda had stopped taking notes, his expensive pen resting idly on his legal pad. Mizuno-san, the operations lead, had folded her hands tightly on the table, her posture rigid. Okabe-san had just asked the exact same question we'd already answered ten minutes earlier, only dressed up in slightly different corporate jargon.

And every time Haruto patiently explained a solution, Takeda-san responded with the exact same hollow words.

"That's reasonable." "Yes, that makes sense." "Understood."

But his stern expression never changed. The tension in their shoulders remained locked.

Haruto noticed it.

I saw it in the way his fingers stopped moving across his own notepad. He let the silence stretch for a fraction of a second, his eyes calmly scanning the faces of the Yokohama executives.

Then, with quiet, deliberate grace, he closed his notebook.

Usually, this would have been the moment to transition into the Q&A segment of the presentation. Instead, Haruto leaned back slightly in his leather chair.

"Before we continue..."

Everyone at the table looked at him, completely captivated by the sudden shift in the script.

"May I ask something that is a little outside the bounds of the proposal?" Haruto asked, his tone perfectly polite.

Takeda-san blinked, clearly caught off guard. He offered a slow nod. "Of course."

Haruto looked directly at him, his gaze unyielding yet incredibly gentle. "What are you actually worried about?"

The massive room went completely, deafeningly quiet.

I felt my eyebrows rise, my hands tightening in my lap. That definitely wasn't one of the questions Nakamura-san had prepared for us.

Takeda-san recovered quickly, offering a stiff smile. "Our concerns are all thoroughly outlined in the preliminary documents, Akiyama-san."

"I am sure they are," Haruto replied smoothly, his tone remaining deeply respectful. "But I don't think the budget is the main issue here today."

Mizuno-san looked at him sharply.

Haruto continued, his voice gentle but carrying absolute clarity. "You've asked about implementation delays three times, Mizuno-san." He turned his head slightly toward Okabe-san. "You asked whether the rollout could be instantly reversed if the metrics dropped." Then, he looked back to the head of the table. "And Takeda-san, you've asked twice about the chain of command, specifically inquiring who would be ultimately responsible if the transition doesn't go according to plan."

Nobody spoke. The executives were staring at him as if he had just read their minds.

Haruto rested his hands back on the polished table. "Those aren't cost questions."

The silence became even heavier.

"They're risk questions," Haruto said quietly. "You aren't worried about the math. You're worried about the fallout."

I felt something shift inside my chest.

This wasn't just the sharp, analytical Haruto I'd known before his disappearance.

Finally, Takeda-san let out a long, heavy sigh. He leaned back, the stiff corporate behaviour completely falling away. "...You're right."

Haruto said nothing, simply offering a quiet space for the man to speak.

Takeda-san glanced at Mizuno and Okabe before continuing, his voice much quieter now. "We attempted a similar infrastructure transition three years ago. It went exceptionally badly."

Mizuno-san quietly added, staring down at her folded hands. "There were massive delays. Internal complaints skyrocketed. We lost a highly respected senior employee over the stress of the project."

"Since then," Takeda-san continued, meeting Haruto's eyes, "no one in this division wants to be responsible for another failure. We cannot afford it."

Haruto nodded slowly.

There was no triumphant expression on his face. There was no arrogant *'I told you so'*.

I watched him carefully from my seat. He looked almost... familiar. But not quite. The Haruto I'd known before had always been excellent at solving logistical problems. But this was entirely different. He seemed to intimately understand exactly *why* the people sitting across from him were terrified of solving theirs.

Haruto reached out, gracefully reopening the proposal binder.

"Then I don't think we should ask your team to blindly trust the entire project right now," Haruto said gently.

Takeda-san looked at him, genuine curiosity overriding his suspicion. "What do you suggest?"

"Give your team something smaller to trust first," Haruto replied. He turned the heavy binder around, sliding it across the table toward the executives "We start with just one department. A strictly limited scope. We define the success criteria today, and we schedule a hard review after the first phase."

He looked up, his eyes steady. "And if the agreed targets aren't met... you have the absolute contractual option to stop the project before moving to the next stage, with zero penalty."

Okabe-san leaned forward, adjusting his glasses. "So you're suggesting a test program."

"Exactly," Haruto confirmed with a soft smile.

"And if the test succeeds?" Mizuno-san asked.

"Then we move forward with the larger implementation, with the data to back it up," Haruto said, looking around the room. "Nobody has to pretend they're confident before they actually are."

For a few seconds, the only sound in the room was the faint hum of the air conditioning.

Then, Mizuno-san slowly nodded, the tight lines around her mouth finally relaxing. "That... that would make the internal approval considerably easier."

Takeda-san looked at her. "You think so?"

"I do," she agreed firmly.

The atmosphere in the room was completely transformed. The executives were sitting differently now, leaning in, engaged, the defensive walls entirely dismantled. The tension hadn't disappeared completely, but it had cooled down a bit.

Haruto hadn't just given them empty corporate reassurance. He had given them a tangible way to proceed without gambling everything at once. He had given them a safety net.

I found myself staring at his profile, completely mesmerised.

How did you learn to do that?

The question echoed in my mind before I could stop it. I knew enough about his three-year absence to know that something horrific had happened to him.

But sitting here, watching him navigate this room, I finally understood a terrifying, beautiful truth.

He was noticing their fear because... he knew exactly what fear looked like. He knew what it felt like to be completely overwhelmed, to be terrified of making a mistake, to desperately need a safe way out.

That thought deeply unsettled me, twisting my heart with sorrow for what he had endured. Yet, simultaneously, it made me admire him even more. He had taken the darkest, most traumatic experiences of his life and forged them into a profound, razor-sharp empathy.

The rest of the meeting moved rapidly.

The discussion became intensely practical. Timelines were eagerly adjusted. Responsibilities were clarified. The test program was mapped out and slightly expanded. By the end of the hour, Takeda-san had completely changed his tone.

When we finally stood up to adjourn, Takeda-san walked around the massive table and extended his hand to Haruto.

"I'd like the revised proposal to reflect today's discussion, Akiyama-san," he said warmly.

Haruto shook his hand with a polite, measured grip. "Of course, Director. We will have it drafted by Thursday."

"And..." Takeda-san hesitated for a fraction of a second. "I'd prefer that you personally remain involved during the implementation phase."

Haruto looked mildly surprised, his eyes widening slightly. "I would be happy to."

"I think having someone who understands both the technical and... human sides of this project will be invaluable," Takeda-san noted quietly.

Haruto gave a deep, flawless bow. "Thank you very much."

I quickly gathered our materials, exchanging a brief, fleeting glance with Haruto as we turned toward the doors. There it was again. That strange, electric feeling.

We said our final goodbyes and followed the junior coordinator, Ito-san, back out of the executive wing.

We maintained our absolute professional silence until we reached the lobby elevators. Ito-san bowed and left us. The heavy steel doors slid shut, sealing just the two of us inside the quiet, carpeted cab.

For a few seconds, the only sound was the mechanical whir of the elevator descending.

I turned my head, looking up at him. "You were amazing."

Haruto blinked, snapping out of a deep thought. He looked down at me, his head tilting slightly. "I was?"

"Yes."

He offered a faint, incredibly shy smile. "You sound surprised."

"I am."

"That's a little harsh, don't you think?" he teased softly.

I laughed, a bright, relieved sound that echoed in the small space. "I've always known you were brilliant at your job, Senpai. I've known that for years." I paused, my smile softening into something much more sincere. "But today..."

"What?" he asked, his voice dropping to a whisper.

I looked directly into his eyes. "You stopped trying to convince them with numbers. You figured out what they were actually afraid of."

His expression became quiet, the teasing warmth fading into a poignant, vulnerable stillness.

"...They weren't asking about the math," he murmured, looking away to watch the floor indicator tick downward.

"I know."

"That's why," he finished softly.

The elevator pinged, reaching the ground floor lobby. The doors slid open to the expansive marble hall.

We stepped out together. I fell half a step behind, just taking a moment to watch him walk ahead of me. The dark grey suit fit flawlessly across his frame, moving with a fluid grace, the massive, perfectly arranged bun at the nape of his neck barely swaying with his steps.

For a passing second, my heart ached. I wondered what those three years had truly done to him.

I looked away, gripping the strap of my tote bag tighter.

There would be time to ask. I would wait for him. I would wait however long it took for him to feel safe enough to tell me.

Outside the towering glass doors, the overcast sky had finally broken. By the time we stepped out from beneath the corporate awning and onto the Yokohama pavement, a steady, cool rain had started falling, washing over the city streets.

Haruto

We stepped out of the building together.

The rain had started while we were inside, falling in a steady sheet over the pavement and turning the Yokohama streets into a blur of reflected lights. I looked up at the dark sky, letting out a long, quiet breath.

We had done it. I had done it.

The meeting had finished much earlier than we'd expected.

And somehow, it had gone better than I could have imagined.

They'd accepted the revised approach.

And when Takeda-san told me he'd like me involved in the implementation, I'd felt something I hadn't felt in a long time.

Pride.

Not the nervous kind that came from wanting to prove myself.

Just the satisfaction of knowing I'd done something well.

Then I remembered Rina.

"You were amazing."

The words returned almost embarrassingly easily.

I could still hear them.

I glanced beside me.

She was standing beneath the building's awning, looking at the rain.

She caught me looking.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"You've been smiling."

"...Have I?"

"Yes."

I looked away.

"I think I'm happy."

"Because of the meeting?"

"Mostly."

She narrowed her eyes playfully.

"Mostly?"

I hesitated.

"...Your compliment helped."

Her expression changed immediately.

The tips of her ears turned pink.

"I was only telling the truth."

"I know."

For a moment we stood there listening to the rain.

Then I glanced at my watch.

We had plenty of time.

More than enough time.

And suddenly, I didn't want the day to end yet.

The victory in that boardroom had given me something I hadn't felt in a very long time: a surge of courage.

"Rina."

"Hm?"

"I was doing some research on Yokohama last night. There's a café near the Minatomirai district... It's famous for its seasonal delicacies and varieties of coffee. It's not too far from here." I paused, forcing myself to hold her gaze. "Would you like to go with me?"

Rina stopped moving.

Her eyes widened. She gripped the strap of her tote bag with her free hand, suddenly looking incredibly flustered.

"Senpai..." she murmured, her voice barely a whisper as she looked up at me. "...As coworkers? Or... is this a date?"

A few months ago, a question like that would have sent me into a total panic. Even yesterday, it might have made me retreat. But today, standing in the rain with the girl who had defended me against the world, I found a quiet, entirely new kind of confidence.

I let out a soft, breathy laugh. I reached out, gently tucking a stray strand of her dark brown hair behind her ear.

"Yes," I replied smoothly. "It's a date."

She stared at me for a long second, her eyes shining. She immediately ducked her head to hide her face, but not before I saw the brilliant, beautiful smile taking over her features.

"...Okay," she said, nodding enthusiastically. "I'd love to."

Something warm moved through my chest. "Good."

The rain was coming down harder now, and neither of us had brought an umbrella. With a shared, unspoken laugh, we quickly ducked into the brightly lit Lawson convenience store on the corner.

I picked up two simple, transparent vinyl umbrellas and paid. When we stepped back outside, I handed one to Rina.

"Here. You get the good one."

She looked at the umbrella, then at mine. "They're identical."

"I know."

She laughed, a bright, melodic sound. "You're strange, Senpai."

"I've been told."

We popped them open, the transparent canopies framing the grey sky and the towering Yokohama skyline. I stepped out onto the pavement first, looking back over my shoulder at her.

"Ready?"

"Lead the way," she beamed, stepping up right beside me.

We started walking side-by-side through the rain. The city sounded different beneath the umbrellas. Quieter. Softened by the constant rush of water. Rina walked close enough that our transparent canopies bumped lightly against each other, our shoulders almost brushing. Neither of us moved away.

For the first time since waking from the nightmare, I felt the tension in my chest truly loosen. The fear hadn't completely disappeared. The past was still waiting, and I knew I couldn't run from it forever.

But for today, I was allowed to walk beside someone I cared about. And let myself be happy.

The café wasn't far from the station.

It was an older place tucked between two newer buildings, the sort of restaurant that looked almost deliberately untouched by the rest of Yokohama. Warm light spilt through the windows, and the smell of coffee and freshly baked pastries reached us before we even opened the door.

Rina stepped inside first.

"It's nicer than I expected."

"I told you."

She looked over her shoulder.

"You researched this."

"I had time."

She smiled.

"Of course you did."

We were shown to a small table near the window, far enough from the other customers that we could speak without having to raise our voices. Rain streaked the glass beside us, blurring the street outside into soft lines of light.

I set my briefcase beside my chair.

For a moment, neither of us said anything.

The meeting had gone well.

The coffee was warm.

Rina was sitting across from me.

Everything should have felt easy.

Instead, the weight I'd carried since four in the morning was still there.

I looked toward the rain.

"Do you mind if I..."

I gestured toward the hallway.

"Bathroom?"

"Of course."

"I'll be back."

She smiled.

"Take your time."

I stood and walked away.

The restroom was empty.

I locked the door behind me and stood in front of the mirror.

For a moment I simply looked at myself.

The dark suit.

The white shirt.

The tie.

The large bun Mom had made that morning.

It still looked neat.

But my neck had begun to ache.

The bun was carrying too much weight.

My hair had become heavier than most people realised. Waist-length and thick, it wasn't something I could pile up on my head for hours without eventually feeling it.

I reached behind my head and carefully removed the pins.

The bun loosened.

Black hair fell down my back.

I breathed out almost immediately.

"Better."

I gently rolled my shoulders.

The tension there had eased.

I reached into my pocket, pulling out a simple black velvet scrunchie I always carried as a spare. I gathered my hair and tied it into a ponytail, keeping the weight closer to my back instead of pulling it upward.

One loop.

Then another.

I adjusted the tension until it felt secure without pulling.

A few strands had fallen forward.

I combed my bangs into place with my fingers.

Then stopped.

I was fussing with my appearance.

Again.

For Rina.

The realization made my face warm.

"...What am I doing?"

I looked back at the mirror.

For a few seconds, I saw only myself.

Then I remembered the dream.

My chest tightened.

I placed both hands against the edge of the sink.

"Stop."

I took a breath.

Then another.

I looked at my reflection.

"You're Haruto."

If I wanted this date to be real... if I wanted *us* to be real, I couldn't let Hina and the Boss hold my past hostage anymore. To truly move forward, I had to be brave enough to show her the shattered, broken pieces they had left behind. I had to tell her the truth about my "training assignment."

I opened my eyes, the lingering fear in my chest solidifying into a quiet, heavy resolve. I smoothed the lapels of my suit jacket, took one last, grounding breath, and unlocked the door.

It was time to face her.



"Okay."

I straightened my tie.

Adjusted my bangs one last time.

I unlocked the door.

The hallway outside felt brighter than it had a few minutes ago.

My hands were still cold.

My heart was still beating too fast.

The moment I stepped back into the café, I saw Rina looking toward the doorway.

Her eyes moved over me once, then stopped. "...Senpai?"

I slid back into the leather booth, my hair now resting comfortably over my shoulder. "Don't tell me you preferred the bun."

She smiled. "No. I was just wondering."

"It was starting to pull at my scalp," I admitted, reaching up to self-consciously adjust the velvet scrunchie holding my ponytail. "When it gets this long, keeping it pinned up all day is a bit much. I hope it’s not a bother."

"Not at all," she said warmly, studying it for another second. "It looks smoother this way. It suits you."

I touched the end of the ponytail, suddenly very aware of her gaze. "...You're going to make me self-conscious."

"Sorry."

She didn't sound sorry at all.

I laughed. "You're enjoying this."

"Maybe a little."

The tension I'd carried from the morning loosened. For a few moments, we talked about the meeting.

"I meant it about what I said earlier, too," Rina continued, her tone shifting into a gentle, profound admiration. "I was so surprised by how you handled the Director. You completely commanded that room."

"I did my job."

"No." She shook her head, leaning slightly across the table. "You did more than that. When you realized they weren't convinced, you completely changed your approach. I've seen you handle difficult clients before, but that was different."

I looked down at the table. "...Different how?"

"You were watching them." She smiled. "You knew what they were feeling."

I didn't answer immediately. The dream came back for a moment. Hina. The Boss. *You know what people look like when they're afraid.*

I pushed the thought aside. "I couldn't have done it without you keeping me grounded. I had a very good assistant by my side."

Rina tilted her head, a playful, shy light dancing in her eyes. "Just a very good assistant?"

My heart gave a sudden, traitorous flutter. I leaned in just a fraction, the newfound confidence from the street returning. "Maybe... someone who is becoming much more than that."

We both fell into a flustered, incredibly sweet silence just as a server arrived with our drinks, mercifully breaking the tension.

"Your coffee."

"Thank you."

Rina picked up her steaming mug immediately and took a tentative sip. Her eyes brightened. "Oh, wow. This is amazing. You definitely have a good eye for cafés."



"I told you I did my research."

She laughed. "For once, I'm impressed."

"For once?" I shook my head playfully. "You've become meaner lately."

"I've become comfortable."

That answer caught me off guard. I looked at her. She smiled into her coffee.

"...So have you," she added softly.

I felt something warm settle in my chest. She was right. I had become comfortable around her. Comfortable enough to laugh. Comfortable enough to flirt. Comfortable enough to want more.

And that was exactly why I couldn't keep avoiding the truth. I couldn't simply bask in this warmth. Not yet.

My smile faded slightly. I set my coffee cup down, wrapping my cold fingers around the ceramic. "Rina."

She looked up. "Hm?"

"What I said in the archive room... I meant every word. I like you. I like you a lot."

She slowly lowered her mug. The teasing light in her eyes was replaced by absolute sincerity. "I like you too, Haruto. I think I have for a very long time."

Hearing her say my name, without the professional honorific, made my chest ache in the best possible way. It would have been so easy to leave it there. To enjoy the warmth. To pretend I could move forward without looking back.

But I couldn't. I forced myself to pull back, looking down at my trembling hands.

"Before we take this any further," I started, my voice dropping into a shaky whisper. "Before we become something real... there is something I have to tell you. About my three-year absence. About my 'training assignment'." I swallowed hard, the name tasting like ash on my tongue. "I need to tell you about Hina."

Rina blinked, confusion washing over her features. "Hina? Who is Hina?"

I stared into the dark surface of my coffee. "She... was me."

Rina went completely still. I opened my eyes to look at her. "I know that sounds strange."

She looked frightened for only a second, then deeply concerned. "Haruto... you don't have to force yourself. If it hurts too much, you don't have to tell me."

"I do," I insisted gently. "If I keep saying I'll tell you later, then later becomes tomorrow, and tomorrow becomes next week. And I'll keep leaving that part of myself back there in that clinic. I won't be able to move forward with you if I'm constantly terrified of you finding out the truth."

I searched for the right words, glancing between us. "If we're going to become something more than this... you deserve to know exactly what they did to my body, and what they did to my mind. You need to know who I became."

Rina shook her head softly. "I don't think you're something I need to evaluate."

"You might after you hear it."

"I'll decide that." Her answer came without hesitation.

I fell silent. She reached across the table and placed her hand near mine. Not touching. Just close enough that I could choose.

I looked at it, then slowly laced my fingers through hers like a lifeline. Her grip tightened, offering a silent, unwavering anchor.

"You don't have to make it easier for me," she said quietly. "Just tell me the truth."

My throat tightened. "Even if it's ugly?"

"Especially then."

I looked at her for a long moment. The fear was still there, but it didn't feel quite as powerful anymore.

"Okay," I whispered.

I closed my eyes, taking one last breath of the warm, vanilla-scented air.

"It started exactly three years ago," I began, letting the walls of my memory fall. "At first... everything was normal. I thought I was there to learn." I took a shaky breath. "I didn't know I was walking into the worst three years of my life."

I kept my eyes focused on our intertwined hands resting on the café table, anchoring myself to her warmth as the memory took over.

3 Years Earlier. Haruto



I arrived in Chiba on a Saturday afternoon. The company had set me up in a modest corporate apartment, and a local representative had shown me around the neighbourhood to point out the nearest grocery stores and train stations. I spent the rest of the weekend walking the

unfamiliar streets alone, trying to shake off the nervous anticipation. The assignment was a massive stepping stone for my career. My primary role was to travel across the Chiba and Ibaraki prefectures, providing training and technical support at various client sites, while also managing the internal IT infrastructure for the local branch. It was a heavy workload, but I was eager to prove myself.

On Monday morning, I arrived thirty minutes early.

The Chiba branch was much smaller than our sprawling Tokyo headquarters, but it was impeccably clean and well-maintained. The receptionist greeted me politely and escorted me directly to Human Resources.

That was where I met Naoko Fujisawa. She was a composed woman in her early forties with gentle eyes and a patient, professional demeanor that immediately put my nerves at ease. After walking me through the standard paperwork, she smiled warmly.

"There's one more person you should meet," Fujisawa-san said, standing up. "Your director. You'll be working directly under his supervision."

She led me down the hall to a spacious corner office. Sitting behind a pristine mahogany desk was Takashi Kuroda.

He didn't look like a corporate tyrant. He looked like the exact kind of mentor every junior employee dreams of having. At forty-five, Kuroda was tall and polished, with neat black hair dusted with gray at the temples. His suit was understated but expensive, and he had a warm, intelligent gaze that made you feel like the most important person in the room.

"Akiyama-kun," Kuroda smiled, standing up to shake my hand. His grip was firm and reassuring. "Welcome to Chiba."

"Thank you."

"I've been looking forward to meeting you," he continued, motioning toward the chair opposite his desk. "Tokyo has sent me nothing but glowing reviews about your work ethic. I hear you're

particularly good with clients. They say you have a habit of fixing problems before people realize they're problems."

I laughed, feeling immediately at ease. "I don't know about that."

"It's a useful habit. I expect great things from you."

I studied him carefully as we spoke. I was naturally cautious in new environments, but Kuroda's charisma was absolutely flawless. He didn't speak to me like a subordinate; he spoke to me like a valued partner.

"My door is always open," Kuroda assured me, his voice rich and steady. "If you face any issues, whether personal or professional, you report directly to me. I want you to make the most of the next three years. I protect my team."

I believed every single word. Within the first twenty minutes, I had formed a profound, unwavering respect for the man. Capable. Friendly. Someone I could learn from.

Looking back, that absolute certainty is the part that frightens me most.

Kuroda leaned forward and pressed a button on his desk phone. "Takahashi-kun, could you step in for a moment?"

A few seconds later, the office door opened, and a petite young woman slipped into the room. She had long, dark-brown hair, large expressive eyes, and thin-framed glasses. She looked incredibly innocent, carrying a heavy stack of folders hugged tightly to her chest.

"Perfect timing," Kuroda smiled, his tone fond and paternal. "Akiyama, this is Yui Takahashi. She handles our data management and acts as my secretary. She'll show you to your desk and introduce you to the rest of the team."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Akiyama-senpai," Yui bowed, her voice soft and slightly nervous.

"Likewise, Takahashi-san," I replied with a polite nod.



We stepped out of the director's cabin together. As soon as the door closed, Yui let out a long exhale.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"For what?"

"I get nervous around Kuroda-san. He makes everything sound so official."

"He seemed alright," I laughed.

Before I could ask her about the floor layout, Yui shifted her grip on the heavy folders. They slipped. A cascade of papers and plastic files scattered across the carpeted hallway.

"Oh no! I'm so sorry," she squeaked, immediately dropping to her knees in a panic to scramble for the loose papers.

"It's fine, let me help," I said quickly, dropping down to assist her.

I reached for a blue folder at the exact same time she did. Our heads collided with a dull thwack.

"Ow!" I winced, pulling back to rub my forehead.

Yui let out a tiny gasp, her hands flying to her head as she looked up at me. Her large eyes were wide behind her glasses, and her cheeks bloomed with a deep, embarrassed red. "I am so, so sorry, Senpai! I'm always so clumsy, I completely ruined the introduction..."

Seeing how genuinely distressed and small she looked, my rigid professional exterior melted. I couldn't help but let out a, reassuring laugh. "It's really okay. I've only known you for five minutes, so I can't confirm if you're actually clumsy yet."

She blinked, a shy, smile breaking across her face. As we stood up and dusted off our clothes, the stiff, formal barriers dividing us melted away entirely.

She guided me through the main floor, her nervous energy giving way to a sweet, chatty enthusiasm. She showed me to my desk and introduced me to my immediate seniors. Daichi Moriyama was a loud, easygoing guy with a quick smile who instantly offered to buy me lunch. Sitting across from him was Junko Kanzaki, a sharp, composed woman who offered a polite greeting but observed me with a quiet intensity.



By lunchtime, the Chiba office felt welcoming. The workload was intense, but Kuroda was relentlessly supportive, always making sure I wasn't burning out. Daichi was a great friend to have around, and Junko kept the administrative gears turning perfectly.

And Yui... Yui was always there. She was kind, a little shy, and effortlessly endearing. Because I was older and naturally protective, I easily fell into the role of her reliable senior. I felt comfortable around her. I felt important.

Three months passed more quickly than I expected.

By then, Chiba no longer felt like a temporary place. I knew which convenience store stayed busiest after nine, which restaurant near the office had the best set meals, and which roads flooded first when it rained. Work itself had begun to settle.

The Chiba office was smaller than Tokyo, and because of that, people seemed to know one another better. What started as polite corporate pleasantries quickly grew into a genuine routine.

Junko became the first person I naturally leaned on. She had a habit of answering questions before I finished asking them.

"You're thinking about whether that report needs another approval, aren't you?"

"...How did you know?"

"Your face."

She would say it with complete seriousness before pointing me toward the correct procedure. She had started calling me her "younger brother" after I accidentally stayed late three nights in one week.

Daichi was different. He was nearly ten years older, but the age difference disappeared outside the office. Within a few weeks, he stopped calling me Akiyama-san and just called me Haruto. He dragged me to small bars after work and once spent twenty minutes explaining why a particular ramen shop was the only correct choice. He had a way of turning a new city into something familiar.

Sometimes Junko came with us. Sometimes Yui did too.

Yui became part of that routine. At first, I simply helped her because she needed it. A jammed copier, a misplaced document. Then it became habitual. She made mistakes. A lot of them.

Once, she sent a file to the wrong department and came running to my desk in an absolute panic.

"Senpai."

"What happened?"

"I made a mistake. The kind where I may have ruined my career."

I took the keyboard from her. "You're twenty-four. Your career has survived worse than an email."

I fixed the problem in a few minutes. She stared at the screen, looking at me with this genuine, starry-eyed admiration that made it impossible not to smile.

Looking after her reminded me of someone.

Mio.

The resemblance wasn't physical. It was the little things. The way Yui became flustered when she made a mistake. The way she tried to hide embarrassment behind a smile. Without meaning to, I'd find myself watching her and thinking of my little sister.

I never told Yui that. Saying it aloud would have made the feeling too real.

And then there was Kuroda-san.

Directors rarely interacted with trainees beyond quarterly reviews, but Kuroda was unusually involved. He would casually drop by my desk to ask about my work, but also about my apartment. Whether I was eating properly. When I caught a cold, he quietly left medicine and bottled water on my desk.

When I mentioned the assignment was feeling overwhelming, he didn't criticize me. He just listened.

"You're trying to do everything at once," he told me quietly. "Slow down. There's no need to prove yourself in the first three months."

His advice helped. At the time, I thought I was lucky. I thought that was just what good management looked like.

Perhaps that's why remembering those first months is so difficult. Because nothing felt wrong. Not then.

I paused.

Across the table, Rina hadn't touched her coffee. She'd been listening quietly since I started.

I looked down at my hands. "...And that's about how the first three months went."

Rina's expression changed. "There was something you said."

I looked up. "What?"

"You said Yui reminded you of your younger sister."

I went still. I'd almost forgotten I mentioned her.

Rina hesitated. "You never told me you had a sister."

I looked toward the rain-streaked window, my chest tightening. "...I didn't?"

She shook her head.

I gave a small, embarrassed smile. "Sorry. I... I don't talk about her."

"You don't have to apologise," she said quickly.

I was quiet for a moment. Then I took a slow breath.

"Her name was Mio. My little sister. Three years younger than me."

"How old was she?"

"When she died..." I swallowed hard. "She was fifteen."

Rina's eyes lowered. "And you were?"

"Eighteen."

"Mio was a good kid," I said, with a smile. "Loud. Fiercely independent. She used to steal food from my plate and then act like I was imagining it."

Rina gave a small, sad smile. "Sounds like a little sister."

"Yeah."

For a moment, the memory was warm. Then it wasn't.

"She died because of an accident."

Rina's expression changed. "What happened?"

I looked down at the tabletop. "She was the type of person who couldn't look away when someone was hurting. There was a girl in her class being bullied. I knew about it. She even asked me what to do days before."

My voice dropped. "I told her to ignore it. I told her to focus on her own studies. I was a senior, entirely focused on my university exams. I told myself someone else would help."

I rubbed my thumb against the side of my cup. "They didn't. Mio intervened after school. There was a scuffle near a busy intersection. She fell backward into the street. It was a freak accident. The driver couldn't stop in time."

Rina gasped, her fingers tightening around her cup.

"I wasn't there," I said quietly, the old, familiar guilt hardening in my stomach. "I prioritized my own ambition over her. I thought I had time. I thought there would always be another day. There wasn't."

Silence settled between us.

"I've carried that regret ever since." I looked toward Rina. "That's probably why, when someone asks me for help, I find it very difficult to say no."

Rina looked at me, realization dawning in her eyes. "That's why you helped Yui so much."

I nodded. "She reminded me of Mio. I suppose some part of me was trying to make sure I didn't make the same mistake twice. Every time I see someone struggling... I remember her. And I think, maybe this time I can do something."

Rina was silent for a long moment. She reached across the table, gently covering my hands with hers.

Then she asked softly, "Haruto... did you ever forgive yourself?"

I didn't answer.

Because I honestly didn't know.

I took a breath, letting the steady hum of the café’s jazz music ground me as I plunged back into the memory.

It happened in my fourth month in Chiba.

I had spent most of the day at a client's office near the harbor. By the time I was finally on my way back, the sunset was painting the sky in deep bruises of purple and orange.

I called Mom from the train.

"I'm telling you, Mom, it's going perfectly," I laughed, leaning against the train window as we passed rows of houses. "The workload is heavy, but the team is incredible. Kuroda-san is looking out for me, and I’m really finding my footing here."

Everything is fine, I had told her. I am safe here.

I hung up the phone smiling.

When I returned to the Chiba office, it was past eight o'clock. The main floor was mostly dark, the day's work nearly over. I stopped by my desk, packed my laptop into my briefcase, and draped my coat over my arm.

As I rounded the corner toward the main exit, a small figure stepped out from the shadows near the reception desk.

"Good work today, Haruto-san."

I jumped slightly. It was Yui. She was holding a stack of folders against her chest, adjusting her glasses.

"Yui? You startled me," I chuckled. "What are you still doing here? It's past eight."

She smiled sheepishly. "I made a mistake."

"Again?"

She looked offended. "...Maybe."

I laughed. "What happened?"

"I entered the wrong numbers into one of the reports. I wanted to fix them before tomorrow morning so Junko-san wouldn't scold me."

It was exactly the kind of diligent, clumsy excuse I had come to expect from her. My protective instincts flared immediately.

"You shouldn't push yourself so hard, Yui," I said gently. "Come on, let's get out of here. Are you heading toward the station?"

She nodded quickly. "Yes. Let's walk together."

The evening air was cooler than I expected. For a while, we talked about work, and then the conversation drifted to a television show we'd both been watching. She seemed unusually relaxed, laughing more than usual.

We reached a large pedestrian intersection just a block away from the station. The traffic light was red, the crossing guard's electronic melody chiming softly into the night.

Intersections always made my chest tight, a lingering, phantom anxiety from the way Mio had died. I shoved my free hand into my pocket, trying to shake the feeling off.

"Haruto-san."

Yui’s voice was incredibly small.

I turned to look at her. She wasn't looking at the crossing signal. She was looking directly at me. She stepped slightly closer, her fingers tightly clutching the strap of her bag.

"Can I tell you something?"

"Sure. Is everything okay?"

She took a breath. "I like you."

The world seemed to stop. The traffic light turned green, a small sea of commuters washing past us, but I remained completely frozen on the curb.

My mind went completely blank. I had spent the last four months looking at her through the lens of a grieving older brother. I saw her clumsiness as something to protect. Not once had I viewed her in a romantic light.



"Yui..." I started, after adjusting my voice. "I... I don't know what to say. I am so incredibly flattered."

Her eyes searched mine, shining with a desperate hope.

"But I can't," I said, the rejection tasting bitter in my mouth. "I'm not looking for a relationship right now. I need to focus on this assignment."

Her smile faded for a second. I quickly continued.

"It's not because there's anything wrong with you. You've become important to me. Just... I see you as a very dear friend. Almost like a younger sister. Someone I want to protect."

There was a brief silence. I braced myself. I fully expected tears. Anger. The awkwardness of breaking her heart.

Instead, Yui let out a slow, trembling breath. She closed her eyes for a brief second, and when she opened them, the fragile, panicked girl was gone. A surprisingly calm, mature smile came to her lips.

"Okay," she said, her voice steady.

I stared at her, genuinely shocked. "Okay?"

"Yeah." She tucked a strand of dark brown hair behind her ear. "I kind of knew you'd say that. You're always so focused on your work. But... I just couldn't keep it in anymore. I needed to get it off my chest so I could breathe."

"Yui, I'm really sorry if I gave you the wrong impression"

"You didn't," she interrupted gently, offering a brave, reassuring laugh. "Please don't worry about it. I just wanted you to know. And I feel better now."

"Really?"

"Really." She looked up at me, her eyes clear and unbothered. "Can we still be friends?"

"Of course."

She nodded. "Good. Besides... I'm a patient person. Maybe I'll just try again when you're actually ready."

I stared at her, a wave of relief and admiration washing over me. She had handled the rejection with a grace I never would have expected.

"Thank you, Yui," I breathed out, the tension completely leaving my shoulders. "You're really strong."

"I'll see you tomorrow, Haruto-san," she smiled, stepping out onto the crosswalk.

"Good night," I called back, watching her disappear into the crowd.

I walked back to my apartment that night feeling lighter than I had in months. I thought we had successfully navigated a difficult hurdle. I thought her mature response proved what a deep, trusting bond we had.

I couldn't have been more wrong.

Over the next few weeks, work became even busier. We hit a massive milestone, successfully integrating a new regional system ahead of schedule and securing a highly lucrative support contract with a new client in Ibaraki. The atmosphere in the Chiba branch was electric.

To celebrate, Kuroda announced he was treating the entire department to a *nomikai* at a high-end izakaya downtown.

It was my very first company drinking party since transferring.

"Come on, Haruto," Daichi said as we left the office that Friday. "Tonight you're officially one of us."

"I thought I'd already joined the team three months ago."

"Professionally, yes." Daichi clapped me on the shoulder. "Tonight it's official."

Junko laughed. "Don't let him pressure you into matching him drink for drink."

Daichi looked offended. "Why does everyone assume I'm the problem?"

"Because you are."

Yui giggled beside us. Kuroda followed behind, smiling at the conversation. "She's not wrong," he added smoothly.

It felt good. Really good. There was no tension in the group anymore. I wasn't the new Tokyo employee. I wasn't an outsider. I belonged.

The restaurant was loud, smoky, and packed. Because I had spent the last few months so entirely focused on proving myself, I was genuinely excited to finally let my guard down. We ordered food, drinks came out one after another, and before long the whole table was louder than the restaurant needed us to be.

Kuroda was surprisingly easygoing outside the office. He joked with Daichi, listened to Junko complain about her commute, and even teased Yui about how many times she'd misplaced her access card that month.

"I've only lost it twice," she protested.

"Three times," Kuroda corrected.

She frowned. "...You remembered?"

"I remember everything."

Everyone laughed. I did too. Yui sat right beside me, making sure my glass of beer was never empty.

I've never been a lightweight. I knew my limits well enough to handle standard corporate networking events. But that night, something was different.

By the second hour, the noise of the restaurant started to echo weirdly in my ears. The edges of my vision blurred, smearing the warm lights of the izakaya into streaks. I tried to stand up to go to the restroom, but my legs felt like they were made of wet concrete. I stumbled hard against the table, knocking over a plate.

"Whoa there, Haruto!" Daichi laughed, catching my arm. "You really overdid it tonight, huh?"

"I... I don't know," I mumbled, my tongue feeling thick and numb. "I only had a few..."

"You can barely stand." Kuroda's calm, authoritative voice cut through the noise. He was suddenly right beside me, his hand resting firmly on my back. "You've been working incredibly hard, Akiyama. It's catching up to you. I'll make sure he gets home safe, everyone."

I was vaguely aware of Daichi and Junko saying their goodbyes, assuming I had simply drunk too much on an empty stomach. I couldn't protest. My brain was functioning, but the connection to my muscles was completely severed.

Kuroda wrapped my arm over his shoulder. On my other side, Yui slipped her arm around my waist. Together, they practically carried me out of the loud restaurant and into the cool, sharp night air.

We reached the parking lot. Kuroda unlocked a sleek, black sedan. They guided me into the backseat, and Yui slid in right beside me. The door slammed shut, cutting off the city noise completely. The interior of the car was dead silent, smelling of expensive leather and something faintly chemical.

I slumped against the window, staring at the streetlights strobing past as Kuroda pulled out into traffic. My breathing felt unnaturally slow.

"Senpai?" Yui's voice came from the darkness next to me.

I tried to turn my head, but it was too heavy. When she leaned over, the streetlights caught her face.

The clumsy, shy junior was entirely gone.

Her expression was completely blank, her eyes cold and observant. Her movements weren't fumbling; they were precise and steady. She opened a small, unmarked plastic bottle and pressed it to my lips.

"Drink this. It will help settle your stomach."

I didn't want it, but my body wouldn't obey me. The liquid was cold and tasted bitterly metallic, hiding beneath a sharp, artificial sweetness. I swallowed it fast.

"Good," Kuroda said from the driver's seat. He didn't look back in the rearview mirror. His voice was smooth, rhythmic, and strangely echoing in the confined space of the car. "Just relax, Akiyama. You're exhausted. You don't need to fight it. Just listen to my voice and let go."

The moment the liquid hit my stomach, the world didn't just fade, it was like a heavy iron switch was violently pulled down in my brain. My eyelids snapped shut. The normal, dizzying spin of alcohol was replaced by a something else.

I have fractured, disjointed flashes of the rest of the night.

I remember the distinct click of my own apartment door unlocking, though I hadn't given them my keys. I remember the sensation of being guided down my hallway. I remember lying on my bed, staring up at my ceiling as a heavy, dragging weight settled deep into my bones, while Kuroda's kept murmuring something I couldn't quite understand.

Then, absolute nothingness.

I woke up the next day at nearly two in the afternoon.

I bolted upright, instantly regretting it as a sharp, pulsing headache spiked behind my eyes. I scrambled out of bed, my feet hitting the floorboards, but I stumbled. My center of gravity felt slightly off. My limbs felt heavy and unnaturally loose, like I had spent hours doing intense physical therapy that I couldn't remember. There was a weird, fuzzy static lingering in the back of my mind, a mental fog that refused to clear.

I walked into the bathroom and splashed cold water on my face, gripping the edges of the sink. I looked at myself in the mirror. I just looked hungover. Pale, exhausted, with dark circles under my eyes.

I dragged myself back to the bedroom and checked my phone. There were missed calls from my mother, Junko, and Daichi.

I spent the next hour trying to establish some sense of normalcy. I took a hot shower, drank two glasses of water, and called my mom back, making up a quick excuse about sleeping in. Then I called Daichi.

"Man, you completely crashed last night!" Daichi laughed through the speaker. "Kuroda-san said you were out cold before you even got in his car. You feeling okay?"

"Yeah," I lied, rubbing my temples. "Just a bad hangover. I guess the exhaustion caught up with me."

"Rest up, buddy. See you Monday."

I spent the rest of the weekend in my apartment, trying to shake the lingering, unsettling feeling that something had been fundamentally altered inside me. But I rationalized it. I told myself it was just a bad reaction to the alcohol. I trusted Kuroda. I trusted Yui. There was no reason to suspect anything malicious.

Then came Monday.

I walked into the office expecting a normal start to the week. At the time, I didn't know that this was the last Monday I'd ever experience as the man who had arrived in Chiba three months earlier.

I thought the strange feeling I'd had that weekend would pass.

It didn't.

Monday morning began with exactly the kind of embarrassment I had expected.

The moment I sat down at my desk, Daichi rolled his chair over from the next workstation, coffee in one hand and an irritatingly pleased expression on his face.

"There he is."

I looked at him. "What?"

"The man who was defeated by four beers."

"I had more than four."

"That doesn't make it better." He laughed and dropped a hand onto my shoulder. "You were completely finished by the end. I had to listen to you mumbling nonsense for ten minutes before Kuroda-san finally decided you needed to go home."

I rubbed the back of my neck, embarrassed. "I'm sorry. I really didn't mean to cause trouble."

"You didn't, mostly."

"Mostly?"

Daichi grinned. "You tried to argue with Junko about whether convenience-store coffee was better than proper coffee."

I stared at him. "I did?"

"You were very passionate about it."

Junko, working a few desks away, looked over without lifting her head. "He also thanked everyone for welcoming him to the branch."

I smiled awkwardly. "That doesn't sound so bad."

"It wasn't," she said. "The problem was that you thanked us four times."

Daichi laughed. I covered my face with one hand. "Please let me forget Friday."

"Never." He rolled back to his desk before I could throw anything at him.

I smiled despite myself and turned toward my computer. The office was busy in the familiar way it usually was on Monday mornings. Everything looked normal. But I still felt slightly strange. There was a dull pressure behind my eyes, and a weird fuzzy static lingering in the back of my mind.

I had just started opening my email when I noticed someone standing beside my desk.

Yui.

She was pale. Her shoulders were tense, and both hands were wrapped tightly around a clipboard against her chest. She looked as though she hadn't slept properly.

"Yui? Are you all right?"

"Yes." The answer came too quickly. She looked away. "Kuroda-san wants to see you. He asked me to bring you to his office."

I lowered my voice. "Did something happen?"

"No." Another immediate answer. Then she hesitated. "I mean... I don't know. He said it was important."

I glanced over. Kuroda was inside his cabin, looking in our direction. I stood up, telling myself I would ask her what was wrong after the meeting. It seemed strange at the time that I accepted that so easily.

I knocked on the glass door and stepped inside. "Good morning, Kuroda-san."

"Haruto. Sit down."

There was no trace of his usual easy smile. His hands were clasped together on the desk, his brow furrowed. He looked concerned. Not angry. Concerned.

I sat in the chair opposite him. "Is something wrong?"

"Before we discuss that... How are you feeling? Do you remember Friday night?"

I hesitated. "Most of it. I remember the dinner. I remember drinking too much. After that... things get blurry. I assumed I passed out."

Kuroda sighed heavily. "I was hoping you'd remember." A nervous feeling spread through me. "After the others left, it was only you, me, and Yui. You became agitated, Haruto. You argued with one of the servers. She tried to calm you down, and you became aggressive. You grabbed her arm when she attempted to walk away. Then you stumbled into the service area and knocked over a tray stand. Several dishes were broken."

I stared at him. "I wouldn't do that."

"You did," his voice remained quiet. "She had some bruising."

The answer hit harder than the rest. I felt heat rise in my face. "I don't remember any of it."

"I know." He reached for his laptop, turned the screen toward me, and opened a video.

It was grainy security footage from the restaurant. But there was no mistaking me. Same shirt. Same tie. I watched myself standing unsteadily. A female staff member approached. My body language changed. I took a step toward her, reached for her arm, and as she pulled away, I stumbled sideways. A stack of dishes went down.



Kuroda immediately stepped between me and the staff member. Then the video ended.

For several seconds, I couldn't even breathe. My hands started shaking. "Did the restaurant call the police?"

"They considered it. The manager was understandably furious." Kuroda closed the laptop. "I spoke to them. I apologized, paid for the damage, and covered compensation for the staff

member out of my own pocket. I didn't want one drunken night to destroy your career. HR doesn't know."

I bowed my head, my throat tightening with guilt. "Kuroda-san, I'm so sorry. I don't know what happened, I'll repay everything."

Kuroda watched me. "Control your drinking from now on."

"I will. I understand." I bowed deeply again. "Thank you. Really."

Kuroda waited until I straightened. "There's something else."

"Yes."

"I might need your help with something confidential." His tone shifted, becoming strictly professional. "There are several clients of our company whose business relationships with the company have become complicated. Politically connected. They ask for private meetings and unofficial gatherings that Tokyo doesn't want circulating through the regular branch structure. They specifically requested that I attend personally to handle it discreetly."

"That sounds serious," I said. "Why involve me?"

"I need an assistant. But there is one condition." He sounded genuinely annoyed by it, his jaw tightening slightly. "They explicitly demanded that I bring a female companion. A hostess of sorts, from our own corporate employees, to prove our 'dedication'."

I stared at him, a sick feeling settling in my stomach. "A woman? Who did you choose?"

Kuroda was silent for a moment. "Yui."

I looked through the glass wall instinctively. She was sitting at her desk, looking small and fragile.

"I spoke to her this morning," Kuroda continued. "She was frightened, but she didn't say no. She knows how important these clients are."

My expression hardened. "She shouldn't go. She has almost no experience with this kind of situation. Those people aren't going to care that she's uncomfortable."

"I agree," Kuroda said quietly. "That's why I spent the weekend looking for another option. You."

I actually laughed, thinking he'd made a mistake. "Me? Kuroda-san, I'm not a woman."

"I know. But I mean you could take Yui's place."

I stared at him, unable to formulate a response. "That isn't possible."

"Haruto, I don't mean this as an insult. Quite the opposite." He assessed me clinically. "Your face is delicate. Your jaw is narrow. Your eyes are large. Your shoulders aren't particularly broad, and your build is quite slim. With your current appearance, you're obviously a man. But you have the kind of facial structure that can read differently with enough changes. Hair, clothing, grooming, makeup, posture. With some time and proper coaching, I believe you could pass."

I couldn't believe the conversation. "You want me to pretend to be a woman in front of clients? What about everyone here? What if someone recognizes me?"

"They don't need to know. Only Yui would know." Kuroda's voice softened. "I'm not ordering you to do this. It's your decision."

I looked down. It should have been easy. One word. *No.* This wasn't part of my job. The sensible thing was to refuse immediately.

But I simply couldn't seem to turn it into a decision. My thoughts felt strangely slow. The room was quiet. There was no pressure in his posture. Just that calm expression. Kuroda had just saved me from a career-ending disaster, shielding me from the police and paying out of his own pocket. He had saved my future, and I owed him an unpayable debt. I couldn't say no to him.

I looked through the glass again. Yui was still sitting at her desk. I remembered my sister. Mio. Fifteen years old. I had failed her once. I wasn't going to sit there and watch another young woman walk into something dangerous simply because I was too afraid to take her place.

I lowered my eyes. "I'll do it. I'll take Yui's place."

Kuroda studied me for a few seconds. "Are you certain?"

"I don't want her involved in something like this."

"I understand." He closed the folder in front of him. "Then we don't need to rush. Tokyo hasn't given us a fixed date yet. We have somewhere between one and three months before the first serious meeting. That gives us time to prepare you properly."

I felt a little relief. At least I wasn't being thrown into this immediately.

"We'll work on your appearance first," Kuroda explained, as though discussing an ordinary spreadsheet. "We'll make gradual changes and see what works. You'll be briefed on the business side separately. That's why we're starting this Friday. We'll keep the first session simple. Yui will help you. She knows you better than most people here."

"Does she know everything?"

"She knows enough. I'll tell her she won't be participating in the client meetings, only assisting with your preparation. For now, just keep this between the three of us." Kuroda stood and opened the door for me. "Thank you, Haruto. You're protecting someone younger than yourself by taking responsibility. That says a lot about you."

I bowed slightly. "Thank you, Kuroda-san."

I stepped out. The door closed behind me.

I stood in the corridor for several seconds, my hand going automatically to the edge of a filing cabinet as my legs suddenly felt weak. My heart was pounding. I had to take a slow breath.

One to three months. At least I had time.

But then another thought came. *Why had I agreed so quickly?*

There should have been more resistance. More hesitation. Instead, there had been a strange moment where the idea of refusing simply seemed impossible to hold onto. I pushed the thought away. Maybe it was the crushing guilt of the video. Maybe seeing Yui frightened had simply brought back too many memories of Mio.

I glanced toward Yui's desk. When our eyes met, her shoulders relaxed and she gave me a small, grateful smile. I smiled back. At least she was safe. For now, that was enough.

I sat back down at my computer, looking at my shirt and tie. Nothing about me had changed yet. That was what frightened me. Because I'd just agreed that by Friday, it would. And I still couldn't explain why I had been unable to say no.

The next four days were a grinding, constant panic.

At work, I stared at my monitor but processed nothing. I kept answering emails, checking reports, and eating lunch with the others. I even forced a laugh when Daichi made another joke about Friday night. But whenever there was nothing demanding my attention, my thoughts returned to the same conversation.

You could pass as a woman.

On Wednesday night, I finally gave in to curiosity and locked myself in my corporate apartment's bathroom. I opened my phone and typed the most awkward search I could think of: *How can a man look convincing as a woman?*

I immediately regretted it.

The mechanics of it, voice modulation, cosmetic contouring, hip pads, posture correction, were overwhelming. I had never paid attention to any of those things before. I tried to apply what I had read. I pushed my shoulders back, pinched my elbows to my sides, and angled my chin down. I tried to walk across the small bathroom while consciously moving my hips less stiffly.

Then I caught my reflection.

The result was pathetic. I looked exactly like what I was: a stiff, awkward twenty-five-year-old man twisting his spine into unnatural angles. A hot wave of shame made my face burn. I sat on the bathroom floor with my head between my knees, wondering how I could possibly fool a room full of corrupt executives when I looked ridiculous in a mirror.

I almost went into Kuroda's office to quit.

But on Thursday afternoon, I found Yui near the breakroom. She checked the hallway to make sure Daichi and Junko were at their desks, then turned to me and bowed so deeply her hair touched her knees. When she straightened up, she was crying.

"Kuroda-san told me everything," she said, her voice shaking. "Senpai... I can't believe you are doing this. You saved me. I was so terrified of those men, and you just took it all on yourself."

Looking at her tears, my chest tightened. All I saw was Mio. I saw a fragile girl who needed someone to stand between her and the danger.

She wiped her eyes behind her glasses. "I am going to help you. Kuroda-san said, "I need to assist with your training, and I promise, I will do whatever it takes to support you."

I swallowed my pride. "I spent half an hour last night trying to figure out how to stand differently," I admitted, giving a nervous laugh. "I looked ridiculous."

"How ridiculous?"

"Very."

She covered her mouth, trying not to laugh. I smiled despite myself. It was the first time since Monday that the whole thing had felt slightly less frightening.

"Don't worry, Senpai," she said, her voice finding a steady certainty. "I'll help you. We'll figure it out."

I believed her. At least, I wanted to.

Rina’s grip tightened on my hands across the café table.

"You did it because you couldn't let another younger sister get hurt," Rina said quietly, her eyes full of sorrow.

I nodded, staring down at my cold coffee. "I thought I was being a protector. I thought I was making a noble sacrifice to keep her safe." I took a slow, heavy breath. "I didn't know I was just walking into a cell."

By 6:00 PM on Friday, the Chiba branch was empty.

I sat rigidly at my desk, listening to Daichi and Junko say their goodbyes for the weekend. The moment the glass doors shut behind them, the silence in the office settled over me like a heavy blanket.

I packed my laptop into my briefcase. When I looked up, Kuroda was standing at the edge of the cubicle partition. Yui stood a few steps behind him.

"Let's go," Kuroda said. His voice was entirely devoid of its usual mentor-like warmth. It was flat and instructional.

We left the building and walked to the executive parking garage. Kuroda unlocked the same black sedan from the night of the *nomikai*. I climbed into the back seat, and Yui slid in beside me. The doors locked automatically.

Kuroda drove us away from the commercial district, navigating toward a quiet, affluent residential neighbourhood. It was far from my corporate housing, but very close to where he and Yui lived. The streets were lined with high hedges and discreet security gates.

Every few minutes, another thought came into my head. What was inside this apartment? How much had the company already arranged? What exactly was Kuroda planning to do to me?

He pulled up to a low-rise apartment building. We took the elevator to the third floor in silence. Kuroda stopped in front of a heavy steel door, pulled a set of keys from his pocket, and unlocked the deadbolt.

He pushed the door open, switched on the overhead lights, and turned back to me. He reached into his pocket and held out a spare silver key.

"Take it," Kuroda said.

I reached out. The metal was cold against my palm.

"I leased this apartment under a shell company," Kuroda explained, switching on the overhead lights.

The living room was pristine, fully furnished, and completely devoid of any personal touches. The blinds were already drawn tightly shut.

"You cannot practice or store your new wardrobe at your corporate apartment," Kuroda continued, locking the heavy door behind us. The deadbolt engaged with a loud, final click. "If Daichi drops by unannounced, or if a neighbor sees you and talks, word will get back to Tokyo. The operation fails, and your career is over. From tonight onward, this is your preparation space. You come straight here after work."

I stood frozen in the center of the sterile living room, clutching the silver key. I suddenly understood that this place was going to become a significant part of my life for however long this assignment lasted. One month. Three months. Maybe longer.

"This is your training ground," Kuroda stated, his eyes locking onto mine. His voice was entirely devoid of its usual warmth. "And we are going to start immediately."

Kuroda sat us down on the sterile, modern sofa in the center of the living room.

"The executives Tokyo is trying to appease are deeply embedded in regional politics," Kuroda explained, his tone strictly business, not even looking up from his notepad. "I don't want you thinking this is something we'll finish in two weeks. These private engagements will happen regularly. This operation could continue for six months. A year. Potentially more."

"At least," Kuroda confirmed. "But you will be compensated. Every single expense for your preparation…clothing, cosmetics, salon appointments, and dietary supplements, will be entirely covered by the company. Furthermore, both of you will receive significant off-the-books stipends for your participation. Akiyama, your payout will be considerably higher, given the physical demands of your role."

He leaned forward, his dark eyes locking onto mine. "But this must be managed flawlessly. Your privacy is paramount, but your execution must be perfect. If you fail to maintain the illusion, the fallout will ruin us all."

Kuroda stood up and gestured to the boxes on the table. "We begin today. I instructed Yui to use the company card to shop for your initial necessities. Clothes, a high-quality wig, makeup, and the supplements." He turned to Yui. "Take him to the bedroom. Get him changed."

"Yes, Director," Yui said obediently.

She picked up the largest box and led me down the short hallway into the master bedroom. Once the heavy door clicked shut, the clinical atmosphere Kuroda projected faded, and Yui's soft, supportive persona returned. I stood rigidly in the center of the room, my hands clammy with fear.

"It's okay, Senpai," Yui said gently, setting the box on the bed. "Take a deep breath."

She opened the box and pulled out a fresh towel, a small tube of depilatory cream, and a set of plain, beige female undergarments. She held them out to me.

"Go to the bathroom and take a hot shower," Yui instructed. "Use this cream on your arms and legs. When you dry off, put these on."

I stared at the delicate fabric of the bra and panties in her hands. "Yui... the underwear too? Is that really necessary right now? Nobody is going to see it."

"It is necessary," she replied patiently. "Female clothing rests differently on the body. You need to get used to the structure and the posture it forces you to adopt. If you don't get used to this now, you'll look nervous every time you touch your own clothes in front of a client."

She made it sound so logical that I couldn't argue.

I took the items and retreated into the attached bathroom, locking the door. The whole process felt strangely clinical. I used the cream sparingly on my arms and legs, rinsed thoroughly, and stood under the hot water for longer than I normally would.

When I stepped out and dried off, I noticed the difference immediately. My skin felt unusually smooth, soft, and sensitive to the cool air. I picked up the underwear. My hands shook as I slid the panties up my legs. The fit was entirely unfamiliar, snug and restrictive in ways that made me feel incredibly vulnerable.

Then came the bra. I tried fastening it from the back. It didn't work. I tried twisting it around. That was worse. After five minutes of fighting with the tiny metal hooks, I gave up. Humiliated, I wrapped the bath towel securely around my waist and cracked the bathroom door open.

"Yui?" I called out, my face burning. "I... I need help."

She walked over, trying very hard not to smile. "With the bra?"

I closed my eyes. "Yes."

"Turn around," she instructed, her voice devoid of judgment. She adjusted the elastic band snug against my ribs and expertly snapped the hooks into place. "For next time, hook it in the front across your stomach, then spin it around your waist and pull your arms through. It's much easier."

"I spent five minutes fighting with it."

She laughed softly, adjusting the straps over my shoulders. "That's why I'm teaching you now. You'll need to learn this yourself eventually. This assignment might last months, remember?"

That brought me sharply back to reality.

She guided me out into the bedroom and handed me the clothes she had bought. I dropped the towel and slipped them on. The fabric of the long-sleeved, cream-colored blouse felt light against my skin, complete with a delicate ruffled collar and a brown ribbon tie. Then came a high-waisted, pleated brown skirt that fell cleanly from my waist, hiding the straight lines of my legs.

I looked down at myself. I felt impossibly stiff.

Yui stepped back. "Relax your shoulders. You're too tense."

"I'm nervous."

"I know," she said, gently adjusting my posture. "Don't try to exaggerate anything. You're not trying to act like a woman from a movie. You're just trying to stop looking like someone who's frightened of his own clothes. Drop your shoulders. Let your arms rest naturally."

I followed her instructions, letting out a breath.

"Better," she smiled. She guided me to sit at the vanity table. "Before we put the wig on, we need to deal with your actual hair."

She pulled a snug mesh wig cap over my head, carefully tucking my short hair underneath until it was completely hidden. It was surprisingly uncomfortable. Then, she lifted the wig. It was a straight, midnight-black bob that ended around the shoulders, with thick bangs. She placed it over my head, taking a few minutes to adjust the sides and style the ends so they fell naturally.

"Your eyes are going to be the important part," Yui murmured, opening a small makeup pouch. "I don't need to do much. Your face is already doing half the work."

I squeezed my eyes shut as she applied a light foundation to even out my skin. She concealed the faint shadows under my eyes, brushed a soft color across my cheeks, defined my eyebrows subtly, and applied a muted, glossy balm to my lips.

"Okay," Yui whispered, stepping back. "Open them."

I opened my eyes and looked into the full-length mirror.

All the breath left my lungs.



For several seconds, I couldn't move. The person standing in the mirror was obviously me. I recognised my own eyes. I recognised the shape of my jaw. But everything around them had changed.

The shoulder-length black hair framed my face entirely differently, the thick bangs softening my forehead. The light makeup emphasized my eyes without making me look heavily painted. The

cream blouse gave my upper body a much softer outline, and the high-waisted brown skirt made my frame look delicate and slender. Standing there, clutching the fabric of my blouse with both hands, I looked younger. Much younger.

My heart beat increased. A massive wave of embarrassment washed over me, but right beneath it was a completely foreign, terrifying sensation. It was a sharp mix of surprise and a strange, undeniable thrill. I wasn't repulsed. I wasn't laughing. I was simply stunned that my own face could look like this. That I could look so effortlessly pretty.

"This is me?" my voice was barely an unsteady whisper.

Yui stood behind my reflection, genuinely amazed. "Yes. You look really good, Senpai. I understand why Kuroda-san thought this could work."

I felt my face getting hot, blushing. "Don't say it like that. I just... I look okay. It's only because you did all the makeup."

"You're blushing," she teased gently. "Honestly? You could probably walk past someone on the street like this and they wouldn't give you a second look."

I looked down at the pleated skirt, my fingers trembling slightly. For a brief second, the whole thing felt almost like a strange, impossible dream.

Then I looked at the mirror again, and the reality of what I had agreed to slowly returned, freezing the blood in my veins. This wasn't cosplay. This wasn't a joke. I was preparing to walk into rooms filled with corrupt, powerful men, presenting myself as someone I wasn't. And this was only the first evening.

I had no idea what the next few months were going to do to me.

For a few seconds, neither of us said anything.

I was still standing in front of the mirror, looking at myself without really knowing what I was supposed to think.

Yui broke the silence. "You're still staring."

"I know."

"You've been doing that for almost a minute."

"I can't help it. I still feel like I'm just... playing a prank," I muttered, my voice tight and lacking any real conviction. "If someone looks closely, they'll know."

"It doesn't look like a prank, Senpai. It looks incredibly natural." She gently patted my shoulder, her tone shifting to something slightly more urgent. "Now, we need to show Kuroda-san. He's waiting."

My stomach instantly dropped.

The initial shock of seeing myself as a woman had momentarily distracted me from the reality of the situation. It was one thing to let Yui see me like this behind closed doors. It was an entirely different nightmare to walk out into the living room and present myself to my department director.

I swallowed hard, forcing myself to stand up. My legs felt strangely exposed, the hem of the skirt brushing against my knees in a way that made me acutely aware of every movement.

I followed Yui down the short hallway. Kuroda was standing by the large windows in the living room, checking his phone. He looked up as we entered.

I instantly froze, my shoulders hiking up in defense. I cast my eyes toward the floor, my face burning with embarrassment. I wanted to hide behind Yui. I felt entirely stripped of my dignity.

For the first few seconds, Kuroda didn't say anything. His eyes moved over me meticulously, taking in the white blouse, the high-waisted brown skirt, and the perfectly styled dark hair. He didn't laugh. He didn't mock me.

Instead, a slow, deeply satisfied smile spread across his face.

"I was absolutely right to choose you for this, Akiyama," Kuroda said, his voice echoing with genuine approval. "You look perfect."

"Thank you, Director," I mumbled, still unable to meet his gaze.

"Don't look down," Kuroda commanded gently but firmly. "If you act ashamed, you will look like a man in a dress. You need to carry yourself with the same confidence you have in the boardroom. You possess excellent problem-solving abilities, Haruto. Apply them here. This is an unconventional assignment, yes, but adapting to this environment will teach you invaluable lessons in corporate maneuvering and client psychology."

His words did exactly what they were designed to do. They wrapped the humiliation in a layer of corporate duty, making my submission feel like a professional milestone. I forced my chin up and met his eyes.

"Understood."

"Good," Kuroda nodded. "Now, I am going to stall Tokyo. I will delay the initial client engagements for as long as I realistically can. You are not ready to sit in a room with those men yet. You need time to practice so that it becomes second nature."

He walked over to his briefcase resting on the coffee table and unlatched it.

"To help expedite the process, there are three things you must start doing immediately," Kuroda instructed. "First, cancel any upcoming appointments with your barber. You need to let your natural hair grow out."

I touched the ends of the synthetic wig. "My actual hair?"

"Yes. Stop cutting it. A wig is fine for practice, but natural hair will hold up much better under close scrutiny."

I nodded slowly, but a strange, unsettling feeling washed over me. I had always found long hair on women beautiful, it was a trait I naturally admired. But the concept of growing my own hair out to replicate that standard, crossing the boundary from an observer to the one actually possessing that feminine trait, twisted my stomach into a confused knot. I had never considered it for myself.

"Second, you must adjust your physical routine," Kuroda continued. "Building broad muscles will ruin the silhouette we are creating. You need to start doing targeted yoga and light cardio to maintain a slender shape. Yui will guide you through the proper exercises."

"I can do that," I replied.

"And third," Kuroda said, pulling two small, white plastic bottles from his bag and placing them on the table.

I stepped closer, picking up the first bottle. *Biotin 5000 mcg.*

"For your hair and skin," Kuroda explained.

I picked up the second bottle. *Endo-Vitality Synthesis.*

"These are mandatory," Kuroda said, his tone leaving no room for argument. "It is a specialized metabolic vitamin blend designed to help soften the skin and maintain a leaner, more delicate physique. Take one pill from each bottle in the morning, and one at night."

I stared at the bottles. A faint, distant alarm bell rang in the back of my head, a primal instinct warning me not to swallow unmarked pills given to me by my boss. But something stopped me, I owed him my obedience to save my career and protect Yui.

"I'll take them."

"I expect dedication, Haruto," Kuroda said, picking up his briefcase. "Practice here regularly. A couple of hours every evening. Yui will oversee your progress. I will see you both at the office on Monday."

Without another word, he walked out of the apartment, the heavy security door clicking firmly shut behind him.

The oppressive weight in the room immediately lifted. I let out a long, shuddering breath, my rigid posture collapsing as I sank onto the sofa.

Yui sat down next to me, offering a comforting smile. "You did amazing, Senpai. See? Kuroda-san was really impressed."

"It's just so much to take in," I admitted, rubbing my temples. I looked at the two white bottles sitting on the glass table. "I really have to become someone else entirely."

"We will take it one step at a time," Yui reassured me, reaching out to gently squeeze my hand. "We'll come here after work. We'll practice walking, sitting, and doing your makeup. You won't have to do it alone. You're going to be great at this."

Her unwavering support was the only lifeline I had left. I looked at her earnest, smiling face and felt a deep wave of gratitude. I was doing this for her. I had to succeed.

"Okay," I finally smiled back, the tension easing slightly. "Let's get this off. I need to get back into my own clothes."

Yui led me back into the bedroom. She helped me carefully remove the wig, setting it on a stand on the vanity. I turned around, and she expertly unhooked the bra for me, completely unfazed by the intimacy of the act. I quickly changed back into my men's dress shirt and trousers.

Buttoning my collar felt jarring. The stiff, masculine fabric felt rough against my freshly shaved skin, a stark contrast to the soft blouse I had just taken off.

I packed the white bottles into my briefcase, we locked the apartment, and walked to the station together in the cool night air. I went home believing I had survived the hardest part. I thought the clothing and the makeup were the peak of the humiliation.

"I thought I would look in that mirror and feel sick," I confessed, my thumb gently tracing the back of Rina's hand on the café table. "I thought I would see a freak. But the terrifying part was... I didn't. I was shocked by how natural it looked. There was this strange, undeniable thrill. A part of me…a part I didn't even know existed, felt genuinely pretty. And I didn't hate it."

I took a shaky breath before continuing. "I eventually called my mother and told her I'd started exercising for a change, but I kept everything else completely hidden from her. I couldn't bring myself to mention my hair until much later."

I looked down, bracing myself for her judgment. Instead, Rina just offered a warm, fond smile, completely unbothered by my admission.

"I'm not surprised at all," she said softly. "You always had that pretty-boy look, Senpai. Even when you were working yourself to death in Tokyo, the female staff used to talk about your eyelashes and how delicate your features were."

My head snapped up, my face instantly heating up. "They did?"

Rina giggled, a bright, musical sound that cut through the heavy atmosphere. She leaned in a little closer, her eyes dropping to the dark, waist-length ponytail resting over my shoulder. "They did. Though, honestly... I think you look even prettier now."

A fierce, unexpected blush spread all the way to the tips of my ears. My heart skipped a beat, and I quickly hid my face behind my free hand, entirely disarmed by her teasing. "Rina, please. Don't make fun of me."

"I'm completely serious," she smiled, her eyes crinkling with affection.

For a brief, beautiful moment, I felt like a normal person on a normal date. But as the heat faded from my cheeks, the crushing weight of reality settled back in. That initial, innocent spark of vanity I felt in front of the mirror three years ago was exactly what Kuroda and Yui had systematically exploited.

The very next morning after that first fitting, Yui handed me a printed schedule. It was a strict daily physical regimen.

My new reality quickly became a rigid, meticulously controlled loop.

Every morning at 5:30 AM, my alarm went off. I would walk into the kitchen, pour a glass of water, and swallow the two white pills, the Biotin and the Endo-Vitality supplement. Then, I would spend an hour sweating through targeted yoga and mobility exercises.

I would shower, put on my men's suit, and go to the office. I played the part of the reliable, hardworking Haruto Akiyama from nine to five. Nobody there knew what I was doing after

hours. But the moment the office cleared out, Yui and I would head straight to the rented apartment.

That was where the second part of my day started.

Every evening, Yui had a different outfit waiting for me. One day it was a blouse and skirt, the next a simple dress, the next a knit top and cardigan.

At first, I was painfully shy. I'd stand in front of the mirror feeling awkward, constantly checking my wig or crossing my arms.

"Relax," Yui would tell me.

"I'm trying."

"You're trying too hard."

She became my director. She paced the living room, analyzing my every movement. She taught me how to walk without looking stiff, how to sit with my knees securely pinned together, and how to keep my hands from revealing how uncomfortable I was.

Kuroda visited the apartment once a week to monitor my progress. He never yelled. He never threatened me. Instead, he would sit on the sofa, watch me walk across the room, and smile that deep, satisfied smile.

"You look entirely natural, Haruto," he would say, his voice thick with pride. "You were made for this. You look beautiful."

Because my brain was already wired to seek his approval as my mentor, those compliments felt like addictive bursts of relief. I started trying harder just to hear him say it.

Around twelve or thirteen days into the routine, the escalation happened.

I was in the apartment living room, practicing a sequence of walking to the table, picking up a tray, and sitting down. I looked over at Yui.

"How was that?"

Yui hummed, tapping her chin. "Better. But it still looks practiced. You're still performing."

I sighed, dropping my shoulders. "I don't know what else to do, Yui. I'm trying."

"I know," she said quietly, walking over to me. "When you're dressed like this, you're still thinking about being dressed like this. You're aware of the wig. You're aware of the skirt. That's why it looks like you're acting. We need to blur the line."

I frowned, concerned. "What do you mean?"

"Your undergarments," Yui said matter-of-factly. "You should stop wearing men's underwear entirely. If you wear a bra and panties all day, even under your normal suit at the office, your body will subconsciously remember how to move. It will force your posture to stay completely feminine, twenty-four hours a day."

My eyes went wide. "No. Absolutely not. Yui, if someone at the office notices, my life is over. I can't hide something like that."

"You can wear an undershirt," Yui countered smoothly, sitting down opposite me. "Right now, your mind separates everything into two categories. Haruto at work and the person you're practicing here. Eventually those two have to stop feeling completely disconnected. Besides... Kuroda-san expects this to be perfect. You don't want to disappoint him, do you?"

The moment she invoked his name, that heavy, something clicked inside my mind. The panic and logical resistance in my brain were instantly smothered by an overwhelming compulsion to obey.

I owe him. I have to do this.

My jaw clamped shut. I stared at the floor, the fight completely draining out of me. "Okay," I whispered.

Yui smiled brightly. She opened the wardrobe and brought out several simple, seamless sets designed for everyday wear. Nudes, whites, and soft pastels. "These won't show through your work clothes."

The following morning, I wore one of the sets under my normal office clothes.

It was agonizing. I stood in front of my bedroom mirror before leaving for work. White shirt. Dark trousers. Tie. Everything looked completely ordinary, but I knew.

On the train, the elastic band of the bra hugged my ribs tightly, a constant, physical reminder. I was terrified someone would notice. The first few days at the office were pure torture. Every time Daichi clapped me on the back, I flinched, terrified he would feel the clasp between my shoulder blades. When I went to the bathroom, I checked my shirt and trousers before leaving the stall.

But then... the fear started to fade.

By lunchtime on the third day, I realized nothing had happened. Nobody had looked at me differently. The day continued exactly as it always did.

By the end of the week, I wasn't just used to it. I realized, with a quiet, terrifying sense of shame, that I actually liked it. The seamless, stretchy microfiber was infinitely softer than my standard cotton boxers. The snug fit provided a weird, comforting security. When I finally did laundry on the weekend and looked at my old, loose men's underwear, they just looked rough and unappealing.

I didn't want to wear them anymore.

Without even realizing it, I had willingly surrendered another piece of my identity, locking it away in a drawer while I embraced the cage they had built for me.

Yui was right. I hated to admit it, even to myself, but she was absolutely right.

The constant, physical presence of the female undergarments beneath my suit did exactly what she said it would. It completely erased the mental boundary I had built. Because I spent eight hours a day aware of the bra against my ribs and the seamless fabric of the panties, my brain simply stopped fighting the transition.

When I arrived at the rented apartment in the evenings and Yui handed me a dress or a skirt, the panic was gone. It no longer felt like a man putting on a dress. It just felt like changing from

one set of clothes into another. My movements smoothed out entirely. I stopped overthinking my center of gravity. I didn't have to consciously remind myself to keep my knees pinned together when I sat down, or to keep my elbows tucked close to my waist when I walked. My body just naturally adapted to the form the clothing demanded.

With my physical posture finally secured, Yui immediately shifted our focus to the next major hurdle: my voice.

This was the part I had been dreading the most. I was terrified I would just sound like a man doing a cheap, mocking falsetto, which would instantly give me away to Kuroda's clients. But to my own profound surprise, I was actually a natural at it.

Back in middle school and early college, before the pressure of a corporate career took over my life, I used to mess around doing voice impressions with my friends. We would mimic anime characters or dub over commercials just for a laugh. Because of that, I already understood the basic mechanics of vocal manipulation. I knew how to pull the resonance out of my chest and push it up into my throat and nasal cavity.

"Use your normal voice, just softer," Yui instructed, handing me a sheet with ordinary sentences.

I didn't want to sound like a high-pitched, squeaky cartoon character, that would attract the wrong kind of attention. I needed something professional and unremarkable. I practiced softening my tone, lowering the volume, and adding a slight, breathy lilt to the end of my sentences. I spent hours sitting on the sofa, reading corporate brochures and fashion magazines out loud to Yui, adjusting my pitch until I found a register that didn't strain my vocal cords.

I eventually settled on a voice that was perfectly calm and sweet.

The first time I used it naturally, looking up from a magazine and asking Yui to pass me a bottle of water, she actually dropped her pen. She stared at me, her eyes wide behind her glasses, before a massive, delighted smile broke across her face.

"Have you done this before?" she asked, stunned.

"Not seriously," I laughed, using the softened pitch. "But I can change my voice."

She told me it was flawless. She told me that if she closed her eyes, she wouldn't even know I was in the room.

A full month passed like that.

Thirty days of waking up early, swallowing Kuroda's pills, and doing targeted yoga. Thirty days of hiding my new undergarments beneath my suit at the office, and thirty evenings of intensive behavioral conditioning at the apartment. The physical changes from the supplements were starting to manifest quietly; my skin was clearer and distinctly softer, and the sharp angles of my jaw seemed less pronounced in the mirror. Haruto Akiyama was slowly fading into the background, and the girl in the mirror was taking up more and more space.

At the end of the month, on a Friday evening, Kuroda arrived for his weekly inspection.

I went through the routine effortlessly. I wore a fitted beige cardigan and a dark skirt, served them both green tea without a single clumsy movement, and answered his questions using the calm, sweet voice I had perfected.

Kuroda took a slow sip of his tea, his dark eyes tracking my every movement. He set the cup down and exchanged a long, silent look with Yui.

"You have exceeded my expectations, Haruto," Kuroda finally said, "You have completely absorbed the mannerisms. The apartment is no longer enough."

My breath hitched. "Director?"

"A controlled environment is easy," Kuroda stated, standing up from the sofa. "If you are going to survive sitting in a private room with dangerous men, you need to know exactly how the rest of the world looks at you. You need to experience the pressure of being perceived as a woman in public."

Yui stepped up beside him, her eyes gleaming with a mixture of excitement and strict professional duty.

"It's time to go outside, Senpai," she said.

The command hung over me for the rest of Friday night.

I spent the entire night lying awake in my corporate apartment, staring blindly at the ceiling. A closed living room was one thing; stepping out into the unforgiving daylight of Chiba, surrounded by hundreds of strangers, was an entirely different level of exposure. I was terrified. But I have to follow what Kuroda had said; in my mind completely blocked any thought of refusing. I had to do it.

On Saturday morning, I arrived at the rented apartment. Yui was already there. She noticed my hands shaking as I reached for the clothes she had laid out and immediately stepped in, offering a warm, steadying smile.

"Breathe, Senpai," she said softly. "You know how to walk, you know how to sit, and you know how to speak. We are just going to roam the shopping district for a bit and sit at a café. I will be right beside you the entire time."

I nodded, swallowing the lump in my throat, and focused on getting dressed.

When Yui finished my makeup and stepped back, I turned to the full-length mirror. I didn't look like a man in a costume.

A crisp white blouse with a subtle collar, the sleeves casually rolled up to my forearms, tucked into a dark navy skirt that flared just above my knees and tied with a neat bow at the waist. A grey shoulder bag hung from my arm. The high-quality wig fell into a soft, chin-length bob that perfectly framed my face, drawing attention to my large eyes and the delicate slope of my jaw.

"You're perfect," Yui finalized, handing me my compact. "Let's go."

Walking out of the apartment was the hardest part. The moment the lobby's glass doors slid open and the warm weekend sunlight hit my face, my heart hammered against my ribs. We walked toward the main pedestrian street. I kept my head down, my hands tightly gripping the strap of my shoulder bag. I was fidgeting constantly, crossing my arms, terrified that every single person walking past could see right through the foundation and the clothes.



"Senpai, stop hiding," Yui teased quietly, nudging my side as we walked. "You're slouching. When you fidget like that, you just look like a very shy, cute girl. People aren't staring because they know. They're staring because you look good."

I forced my shoulders back, taking a shaky breath. As we approached the edge of a local park, I finally started to pay attention to the people around me.

Yui was right. They weren't looking at me with suspicion.

A group of college boys walked past us on the pavement. As they passed, I heard one of them mutter to his friend, "Hey, look at her. The short-haired girl is cute."

His friend glanced back. "Yeah."

My stomach did a violent flip. I quickly glanced away, my face flushing hot. Yui was trying very hard not to smile.

"Did you hear that?" she whispered.

I nodded, lowering my voice. "That feels weird. They actually believed it."

"That was the point."

But the real test came five minutes later, near a crosswalk.

I was looking at a café menu displayed on the sidewalk when someone stepped backward and bumped hard into my shoulder. I stumbled slightly, and Yui caught my arm.

"Oh, my apologies, Miss!" a male voice said.

I looked up, and my blood ran absolute ice. It was Matsuda, a junior associate from my branch's sales department. We had stood next to each other at the office coffee machine just three days ago.

I froze completely. My mind screamed at me to run before he recognized me. I waited for his eyes to widen, for the realization to set in, for the inevitable humiliation to destroy my career.

Matsuda looked at my face. He paused, his brow furrowing slightly as he looked closer. My heart pounded so hard I thought I was going to be sick.

Then, his cheeks turned a slight shade of pink.

"Excuse me," he stammered awkwardly, rubbing the back of his neck and offering a flustered, polite bow. "I thought I recognized someone. My mistake. I'm really sorry about that, I wasn't watching where I was going."

He didn't see Haruto Akiyama, the IT specialist. He just saw an attractive, startled young woman.

"It's... quite alright," I replied, forcing my voice into the soft, breathy register Yui had taught me.

Matsuda nodded nervously and hurried across the street to catch up with his friends.

I stood completely still on the pavement, watching him disappear into the crowd. The sheer panic slowly drained out of my body, leaving something entirely unexpected in its wake. A massive rush of adrenaline flooded my veins.

It was a thrill. A deep, intoxicating, and completely terrifying thrill.

For the first time in my life, I was completely unburdened by the heavy, suffocating expectations of being the responsible older brother or the reliable corporate man. At that moment, I was just a pretty girl on the street, and the world was treating me with a soft, gentle leniency I had never experienced before. It was incredibly freeing.

And as Yui grabbed my hand to lead me toward the café, I realized the scariest truth of all.

I didn't dislike it. I actually wanted to feel it again.

We left the edge of the park and merged into the heavier foot traffic of the shopping street. Although I remained on edge, the initial wave of panic from the crosswalk incident had settled into a steady, watchful awareness. I stopped checking over my shoulder every few seconds. I kept my head level, one hand securely clutching the strap of my shoulder bag, and stayed close to Yui's side.

After a few blocks of navigating through the weekend shoppers, Yui pointed to a modern café with large glass windows.

"Let's go in there."

I stopped on the pavement. "Already?"

"You've been walking outside for over an hour, Senpai. You need to practice sitting and speaking in public."

"Walking past strangers is one thing," I hissed quietly, acutely aware of a woman passing by us. "I am not ready to hold a conversation with a waiter."

"You will be fine," Yui insisted, her hand gently pressing into my back to guide me forward.

I gave her a hard, doubtful look, but I didn't resist. I pushed the glass door open, the entrance bell chiming above us. A wave of cool air conditioning and the rich, bitter scent of roasted espresso washed over me. The café was moderately busy. A few people were typing on laptops by the windows, and two female university students were chatting near the counter.

We found a small, secluded table in the corner and sat down. I immediately crossed my ankles and tucked my knees together beneath the table, the movement happening entirely on autopilot.

I picked up the laminated menu, staring blindly at the print.

"Coffee?" Yui asked, already knowing the answer.

"Yeah," I mumbled, my throat suddenly dry.

A waitress in a black apron approached our table, holding a digital tablet. "Welcome. Are you ready to order?"

My heart was beating against my ribs. The moment of truth. I looked at Yui in a silent panic, but she just offered an encouraging nod. *You go first.*

I swallowed hard, forcing my shoulders to relax. I channelled the hours of practice in the apartment, pulling the resonance up into my throat.

"I'll have an iced coffee, please," I said. In a feminine voice.

The waitress didn't blink. She didn't look at me twice. She just tapped the screen. "Certainly. And your name for the order?"

I froze.

The blood drained from my face. My mind went entirely blank. Name? We had thought every physical aspect of this disguise, but we had completely forgotten the most fundamental piece of a human identity.

I couldn't say Haruto. I couldn't even say Akiyama, it was too masculine, too recognizable if anyone from the office happened to walk in.

I looked at Yui, my eyes wide with panic.

She leaned across the small table, smoothly covering my silence. "Sorry, my friend is a little indecisive today." She looked at me, her eyes locking onto mine with a sudden, calculating intensity. "What should we put it under?"

"I... I don't know," I whispered back, my real voice almost slipping out.

Yui hummed quietly, pretending to think. She listed a couple of common names, but I shook my head sharply. They felt alien. They sounded fake.

She stared at me for a long second. She looked at the white blouse, the dark hair, the makeup.

"Hina," Yui stated simply.

I blinked, completely thrown off guard. "Hina?"

"Yeah," she nodded, a small, satisfied smile touching her lips. "It suits you."

"That makes no sense," I whispered frantically, my cheeks flushing. "Why Hina?"

"It doesn't need to make sense," Yui pushed back, her tone dropping into that firm authority she used during my training. "Just try it. Say it."

I hesitated, my heart racing. The name felt heavy on my tongue. I looked back at the waitress, who was waiting patiently, completely oblivious to the psychological war happening at our table.

I took a shaky breath.

"Hina," I said.

The waitress tapped the screen without a second thought. "Hina-san. Thank you. I'll bring that right out."

She turned and walked away.

I sat rigidly in my chair, staring blankly at the empty space where she had just stood. The ambient noise of the café faded.

Yui rested her elbows on the table, watching me closely. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," I breathed out, my hands trembling slightly in my lap. I looked toward the counter. "She just... believed me."

"Of course she did, Senpai."

"I know. It's just..." I looked down at the table, the reality of what had just happened crashing over me. "I have never introduced myself like that before. It was just a lie to get coffee."

Yui shook her head. "It was only a name."

"I know."

But it didn't feel like only a name. For the very first time in my twenty-five years of life, someone outside of that rented apartment had looked at me, addressed me as a woman, and called me something other than Haruto. And they hadn't questioned it for a single second. It felt like I had just signed a contract I couldn't back out of.

A few minutes later, the waitress returned, carrying a tray.

"Hina-san? Iced coffee."

My head snapped up instantly. "Thank you."

The second the words left my mouth, a cold shock rushed down my spine. I hadn't consciously processed the name. I hadn't translated it in my head. I had just responded to it. Reflexively. Naturally. Like it actually belonged to me.

Yui noticed it immediately. A slow, smile spread across her face, but she didn't say a word. She just took a sip of her own drink, letting the silence do the work.

I pulled the iced coffee toward me, the condensation chilling my fingertips.

"Hina," I murmured quietly,.

Yui tilted her head. "It still feels strange?"

"You could say that," I replied, my voice perfectly pitched.

"You'll get used to it."

I nodded, taking a slow sip of the bitter coffee. I looked around the café. The university students were still laughing. The business people were still typing. Nobody was paying attention to me. Nobody had figured me out.

I should have felt only relieved. I had successfully passed my first public test.

Instead, as I sat there with my knees pressed together in a navy skirt, responding to a girl's name, I felt something else too.

A small sense of excitement.

I couldn't explain it. But as I looked at my reflection in the dark glass of the café window, I didn't dislike hearing that name.

That first visit to the café broke the dam.

Over the next two and a half months, the public outings escalated from brief walks in the park to completely immersive tests of my new identity. We stopped practising in the apartment. Kuroda demanded that the training happen in the real world.

Yui became my shadow. She took me to department stores in the Ginza district, dressing me in different outfits each time so I wouldn't become dependent on just one silhouette. She dragged me to noisy restaurants on Saturday evenings, where I had to practice maintaining my feminine posture and eating delicately while men occasionally stared at me from across the room. I learned to look at people without worrying that they were looking at me.

The hardest tests, however, were the ones conducted by Kuroda.

Once a month, he would pick me up in his black sedan without Yui. He drove me to discrete, dimly lit cigar bars and exclusive lounges that catered to the corporate elite. He would introduce me to the bartenders as a junior associate named Hina.

"Sit up straight, Hina," he would murmur, his hand resting lightly on the small of my back. "Smile when he hands you the glass. Let your eyes drop before you take a sip."

I was terrified during those lounge visits. The air was always thick with smoke and the heavy gaze of older businessmen. But the pressure forced me to adapt faster. The mannerisms, the way I crossed my legs, the way I held a glass, the way my voice naturally defaulted to a softer pitch, became ingrained. I was no longer translating everything in my head. My brain was actively rewriting Haruto Akiyama's default state.

I wore seamless women’s undergarments twenty-four hours a day now. The initial shame had gradually faded, replaced by a quiet comfort that I still found difficult to explain to myself. But the most alarming changes weren’t the clothes or the behavioral conditioning. They were physical.

The strict daily yoga regimen, combined with the two white pills I swallowed every morning and night, seemed to be changing the way I looked. My waist had narrowed slightly, while my thighs and glutes had become firmer and fuller, giving my lower body a shape that was increasingly difficult to conceal. My chest, however, remained flat. I had started choosing slightly looser men’s trousers for the office, hoping nobody would notice the difference.

My skin had cleared considerably, becoming smoother and more delicate in texture. I had also been following Yui’s instructions religiously, using the biotin and Endo-Vitality supplements Kuroda had given me as part of my daily routine. Whatever the actual cause, my hair had grown to my shoulders, with the ends resting against my collarbone. It was remarkably thick, straight, and glossy, and it no longer sat the way it had when I first arrived in Chiba.

At the office, I had begun tying it into a short, low ponytail. It was the simplest way to keep it from falling into my eyes while I worked, though a few loose strands invariably escaped around my temples and cheeks. I was getting used to the style, even if I still found it strange to see my reflection with my hair tied back like that.



By the end of those two and a half months, the changes were becoming difficult to ignore, even beneath my usual office clothes.

One Tuesday afternoon, I was standing beside my desk, reviewing a set of server logs. I wore my usual white dress shirt and dark navy tie, with my hair gathered neatly at the nape of my neck. A few strands had slipped loose near my cheek, and I was tucking one behind my ear when Daichi rolled his chair back and stared at me.

“Are you ever going to cut that hair, Akiyama?”

I looked up, startled, my hand stopping halfway to my ear. “What about it?”

“It’s getting long.” He leaned against the edge of my desk, giving me an exaggeratedly thoughtful look. “First the clear skin, now the ponytail. You’re looking a bit too pretty for an IT guy.”

“Pretty?” I repeated, trying to sound more offended than embarrassed. “That’s a new one.”

Junko glanced away from her monitor. Her eyes moved from my face to the short ponytail behind my neck, then back again.

“I’ve noticed it too,” she said. “You look different lately, Haruto. You seem to have slimmed down a little, and your skin is unusually clear. Are you feeling all right?”

A flicker of panic went through me. I slipped my free hand into my trouser pocket, partly to hide my carefully maintained nails, and forced myself to laugh casually. I had to catch my voice before it drifted into the softer register I had been practising with Yui.

“I’m fine. I’ve just been trying to take better care of myself. I started doing yoga in the mornings.”

Daichi raised an eyebrow. “Yoga? Seriously?”

“It’s mostly stretching.”

“Right. And what’s with the hair? I thought you’d have cut it by now.”

I hesitated, then shrugged as naturally as I could. “I suppose I wanted a change.”

“A change?” Junko asked.

“Yeah. I’ve kept my hair short for most of my life. At some point, I started wondering what I’d look like with long hair.” I rubbed the back of my neck, suddenly a little self-conscious about admitting it aloud. “I figured I should try it at least once in my life. If I hate it, I can always cut it later.”

Daichi looked at me for a moment, then grinned. “You’ve been secretly wanting long hair all this time? That’s surprisingly sentimental, Akiyama.”

“It’s just hair.”

“Easy for you to say. You’re the one who has to put up with it while it grows.”

“Which is why I’m keeping it tied back.”

Junko smiled faintly. “Well, I suppose that’s a reasonable explanation. It does suit you, actually. Though you might want to keep it neat if you’re planning to grow it much longer. I don’t think HR would appreciate it if you turned up with hair down to your waist.”

“I’ll keep it under control,” I promised.

She seemed satisfied, but her gaze lingered on me for another second. Junko had always been observant, and I had the uncomfortable feeling that she noticed more than she said aloud. Still, neither she nor Daichi pursued the subject.

I picked up a stack of files before they could find something else to ask. “I need to finish these server logs before the end of the day.”

That seemed to settle things. Daichi rolled his chair back toward his desk, already moving on to something else, while Junko returned to her monitor.

I sat down and faced my screen, forcing myself to breathe normally. I had survived the conversation. My explanation was simple, believable, and not even entirely a lie. I had never grown my hair long before, and there had been a time when I genuinely wondered what it would be like.

What I hadn't told them was how much of my current routine had begun with someone else's instructions, or how difficult it had become to separate my own choices from the life I was being made to practise.

My eyes drifted toward the faint reflection of my face in the dark edge of the monitor. The short ponytail was barely visible from the front, but I reached back and checked the hair tie anyway, tightening it slightly at the nape of my neck.

The movement came without thought. That was what unsettled me.

My colleagues had accepted my explanation for the hair, and I could hardly blame them. From their perspective, I was just a man trying something new.

But I knew how it had started, and I knew how little of the larger situation I had chosen for myself. As I turned back to my work, I wondered how many more changes I could explain away before even I stopped recognising where my own decisions ended and Hina's began.

The jazz music in the café seemed to swell as I let out a long breath, pulling myself back to the present. I looked down at the table.

"It became a complete double life," I told Rina, my voice quiet against the chatter of the café. "A strict split right down the middle. Nine to five, I was Haruto Akiyama. After hours, I was Hina."

I looked up, meeting her eyes. I braced myself for a flicker of disgust or confusion, but it never came. She was just listening, her thumb tracing slow circles on the back of my hand.

"The worst part, Rina…the part that makes me feel the most guilty even now…is that I actually started to enjoy some of it," I confessed.

Rina didn't interrupt. Her expression just softened.

"When I was with Yui in that apartment, or walking around the city as Hina, the pressure of work vanished," I explained. "Yui treated me like a sister. We talked, tried on clothes, and she corrected my mistakes without judging me. I stopped feeling like I was being forced, and started feeling like I was just hanging out with a friend. It was a weird kind of freedom."

"They isolated you," Rina said softly, her grip tightening in understanding. "They made Hina feel safe so you wouldn't fight it."

"Exactly," I nodded. "And that safe space started bleeding into my real life. Around that time, I even had to tell my mom on a weekend call that I was growing my hair out."

Rina tilted her head slightly. "How did she react to that?"

"She was shocked," I said with a faint, dry smile. "She knew I had never paid much attention to my appearance before. She immediately asked if I had met someone, or if I was doing it to impress a girl."

"What did you tell her?"

"I lied, just like I lied to everyone at the office. I told her I just wanted a change after moving to Chiba and was trying something new. She thought it was strange, and teased me a bit, but she accepted it. Lying to her made me realize how deep I already was."

I squeezed Rina's hand, remembering how quickly the routine had taken over.

"Every morning, putting on my men's suit felt more like wearing an uncomfortable costume. I still had to police myself at work. I was careful not to use Hina’s voice on client calls, checked my collar so Daichi wouldn't see my underwear straps, and stiffened my posture before Junko noticed how differently I was sitting."

I looked down at our hands.

"But the most terrifying part wasn't the fear of being caught," I said quietly. "What really scared me was how *normal* it had become. I was managing both lives without panicking anymore. The wall between Haruto and Hina wasn't collapsing, it was just my everyday routine. I had gotten completely comfortable living a double life."

Rina looked at me with quiet sympathy, understanding how unsettling it was to lose yourself like that without noticing.

"So what happened next, Senpai?" she asked gently.

I took a sip of the watered-down coffee.

"That was the point where I stopped being able to tell myself it was just practice," I said. "Because after that, things moved much faster."

The rest of that week at the office was an exercise in calculated breathing.

I sat at my desk, burying myself in server logs and network updates, hypersensitive to every passing glance. My hair was becoming increasingly difficult to manage. I found myself unconsciously tucking the heavy strands behind my ears, my appearance softening in a way that my crisp white shirt and dark tie could no longer fully offset. I survived the days by deflecting casual questions from Daichi and Junko with polite smiles and fabricated health routines, but the underlying anxiety was exhausting. I was living on borrowed time.

That borrowed time finally ran out on a Friday evening.

I was sitting on the sofa in the rented apartment, dressed in a simple navy skirt and a white blouse, running through conversation drills with Yui. The front door unlocked, and Kuroda walked in. He set his briefcase on the table, his posture rigid and authoritative.

"I have an update," Kuroda announced, turning to face us. "The client meeting has been confirmed."

The room went completely quiet. My stomach plummeted, the air suddenly feeling incredibly thin.

"When?" Yui asked, closing her notebook.

"Next Friday."

I stared at him. "Next Friday? Are you sure? I thought we had more time."

"I stalled them for as long as I could," Kuroda replied smoothly. "Tokyo is getting impatient. The meeting will be held in a private suite at a high-end hotel in Chiba itself. There will be two executives from the client side."

He walked over and looked down at me, his eyes analyzing my appearance. He didn't look concerned.

"For now, your job is to be ready," Kuroda instructed. "Stay composed. Listen carefully. Don't volunteer information, and don't try to impress anyone. Just remember you are there as part of a business meeting." He offered a firm, measured smile. "You know the mannerisms, your voice is flawless, and you understand the psychology of the room. You just need the final polish."

He gestured toward my head.

Over the past two and a half months, the Biotin had done its job. My hair had grown out significantly, falling in thick, glossy strands past my chin. It was long enough, but the ends were blunt and untamed.

"Your natural hair has the necessary length now," Kuroda stated. "The wig was useful during the early training, but you cannot depend on it forever, especially in a serious client environment. Yui, take him to a premium salon tomorrow. Have them style it properly. No more wigs."

My hands gripped the fabric of my skirt. Just thinking about the hotel suite was terrifying enough, but the immediate threat of the salon was suffocating.

"A stylist?" I asked, my voice wavering. A wig could be taken off. Makeup could be washed away. My real hair couldn't. "What if someone at the office notices?"

"They'll notice that your hair is longer. They already have," Kuroda said, his logic entirely unyielding. "Besides, the stylist won't cut it dramatically. We'll keep it professional. You've come this far, Haruto. Don't let one more visible change make you panic. Trust your preparation."

Kuroda gave me one last approving nod, told me to rest well, and left the apartment.

The heavy security door clicked shut. I stared at the floor, thinking how to handle it.

"Alright," Yui said, clapping her hands lightly to break the tension. "Tomorrow is Saturday. Come here first thing in the morning. We'll get you dressed and do your makeup, and then we'll head to the salon."

I looked up at her, frowning. "Do we have to change first? Can't I just go as... normal? I can just tell the stylist what I want in my regular clothes."

Yui let out a sharp laugh. "Senpai, think about that for a second. Do you really want to walk into a high-end women's salon wearing a men's corporate suit, and ask the stylist to give you a cute, feminine style?"

I flushed, the absolute absurdity of the scenario hitting me. She was right. If I walked in as Haruto, they would either refuse service, ask uncomfortable questions, or give me a modern men's cut. I had to go in as Hina to get the result Kuroda demanded.

"Fine," I muttered, rubbing my forehead. "Tomorrow morning."

"It will be fun," Yui smiled reassuringly.

I changed back into my men's clothes, packed my bag, and walked to the station alone that night.

Even the female undergarments could be hidden beneath a thick dress shirt. But a professional, styled women's haircut was permanent, I would have to carry it into the Chiba branch office on

Monday morning in broad daylight. The line between Haruto and Hina was about to be permanently erased, and I had absolutely no idea how I was going to hide it.

Saturday morning sunlight filtered through the blinds of the rented apartment. I sat rigidly in front of the vanity mirror, wearing a simple beige knit sweater and a dark mid-length skirt.

Yui stood behind me, gently working a comb through my natural hair. Because the salon stylists would need to wash and cut it, I couldn't wear a wig today. My real hair had grown out awkwardly over the last few months, the dark strands now brushing against my collarbone in unruly, uneven waves.

I felt entirely exposed. For months, the synthetic wig had been my normal thing, a physical boundary that I could take off at the end of the night to prove to myself that I was still Haruto Akiyama. Without it, that boundary was gone.

Yui finally set the comb down and stepped back, looking at my reflection with a satisfied smile.

"Honestly, Senpai," she said, leaning against the vanity, "you actually look way better with your real hair. The wigs always looked a little stiff to me."

I shot her a flat look through the mirror. "Are you admitting you have terrible taste in wigs? Because you picked all of them out."

Yui laughed, a bright, unapologetic sound. "Hey, I was working with Kuroda-san's initial budget back then! But seriously, your natural hair frames your face perfectly. It just needs shape."

My brief smile faded, the heavy reality of what we were about to do settling back in. "Yui, I'm terrified," I admitted, my voice dropping. "If I sit in that chair and they give me a distinctly feminine cut, I can't undo it. I have to walk into the Chiba office on Monday. Daichi and Junko are already asking questions. I won't be able to hide this."

"Stop overthinking it," she said firmly, resting her hands on my shoulders and giving them a reassuring squeeze. "You already look incredibly feminine, and your behavior has improved so much that it's second nature now. No one at the office is going to connect the dots to you cross-dressing, and nobody at the salon is going to clock you as a man. I booked a really good place called Izumi Hair Salon. They treat their clients with total professionalism. Just relax. You're going to be fine."

I took a deep breath, smoothing the skirt over my knees, and nodded.



We left the apartment and took a short train ride toward the central shopping district. Walking through the crowded streets without the wig was nerve-wracking. Every time the breeze caught my hair, I instinctively reached up to adjust a hairpiece that wasn't there, terrified that a stranger would look too closely at my hairline or my jaw. But Yui's conditioning held strong. My posture remained flawless, my steps were measured, and the people bustling past boutiques

and cafes didn't give me a second glance. I was just another young woman running errands on a Saturday.

We eventually stopped in front of a sleek, frosted-glass storefront nestled between a high-end cosmetics shop and a boutique.

IZUMI HAIR SALON

The lettering was simple, mounted above large glass windows. Through them, I could see a row of styling chairs, mirrors, and neatly arranged shelves of hair products.

I stood outside for a moment longer than necessary.

"Well?" Yui asked.

"I'm trying to prepare myself."

"For what? A haircut?"

I gave her a look.

She smiled and opened the door.

We walked inside. The interior was cozy but distinctly upscale, bathed in warm amber lighting. The air was thick with the sweet, luxurious scent of botanical shampoos and the low, steady hum of blow dryers. It was a purely female environment. A few women were sitting at the mirrored stations with foils in their hair, chatting comfortably with their stylists.

The place looked professional without being intimidating.

That helped, although my nervousness hadn't disappeared.

Yui, completely unfazed, walked straight up to the polished wooden reception desk.

"Good morning," she smiled. "We have a reservation for Hina at ten-thirty."

The receptionist tapped her tablet, her face lighting up with a polite, welcoming smile. "Ah, yes, Hina-san. Perfect timing. Let me call your stylist up."

A moment later, a woman emerged from the back of the salon.

She looked to be around forty. She had dark, straight hair that fell just past her shoulders, thin gold earrings, and delicate glasses. She wore a black turtleneck beneath a dark salon apron, with scissors, combs, and clips neatly arranged in its pockets. Her appearance was understated, but there was something assured about the way she moved through the salon.



She looked like someone who knew exactly what she was doing.

"Mizuki-san will assist you today," the receptionist announced.

Before I could even introduce myself, Yui intercepted Mizuki near the desk. They stepped a few feet away, keeping their voices low. I sat rigidly on the waiting area sofa, clutching my bag to my chest. I watched them anxiously, my heart hammering. Yui was gesturing to her own chin and the nape of her neck, clearly relaying Kuroda's strict instructions on exactly how my hair was supposed to look.

I couldn't hear a single word of the exchange, which only made my stomach twist tighter into knots. My autonomy was being completely stripped away; my appearance was being negotiated like a corporate contract, and I had no say in the outcome.

Mizuki listened intently, gave a brief, understanding nod, and then turned toward me.

She walked over to the sofa, offering a warm but direct smile that completely lacked any suspicion or hesitation. She didn't see a man in a sweater. She just saw a nervous female client.

"Hina-san?" Mizuki asked gently, her voice soothing and entirely professional. "I'm Mizuki. I'll be taking care of your hair today. If you'll follow me, let's get you settled into the chair and we can get started."

I swallowed the lump of panic in my throat, gave a small nod, and stood up to follow her past the mirrors.

I followed Mizuki toward the back of the salon, while Yui gave me a reassuring wave and sat back on the waiting sofa.

The moment I stepped out of the lobby and into the quieter washing area, the transition happened. I swallowed my male instincts, pulling my shoulders slightly inward, softening my posture, and adopting the quiet presence of Hina.

"Step right this way, Hina-san," Mizuki said, gesturing to a row of heavily padded, reclining washing chairs.

I sat down, and she draped a waterproof cape around my neck.

"Is the water temperature alright for you?" she asked, the warm spray hitting my scalp.

"Yes, it’s perfect, thank you," I replied, my voice naturally hitting the calm, sweet pitch of Hina.

She began working a rich shampoo into my hair. The sensory overload of the warm water and the soothing head massage made the tension in my shoulders melt.

"Your accent doesn’t quite sound like Chiba, Hina-san," Mizuki remarked casually as she worked. "Are you from around here?"

"No, actually," I said, keeping my hands resting quietly on my lap beneath the cape. "I moved from Tokyo a few months ago for work."

"Oh, Tokyo? What do you do?"

"Just office work," I deflected, keeping it vague. "Administrative support."

"I hope you're settling in well." Mizuki began rinsing my hair. "You know, you have incredibly healthy, thick hair. It’s naturally so straight and strong."

"Thank you," I said, a slight flush warming my cheeks. I thought of the daily supplements Kuroda provided, realizing the physical changes were already being recognized by a professional. "I've been trying to take better care of it lately."

She wrapped a towel snugly around my head and helped me sit up.

I followed her back to the main styling station. The damp weight of my natural hair felt foreign as Mizuki uncoiled the towel. She gently combed the wet, dark strands straight down.

She stood behind me, studying my reflection before picking up her shears. "Have you always kept it on the shorter side? You have such great hair, I was curious."

I froze for a split second. My heart did a nervous flutter. I suddenly remembered Yui telling me I needed a consistent backstory, but we had forgotten to brainstorm one.

I forced a natural smile, inventing a story on the fly. "Actually, no. Back in college, I had really long hair…almost down to my waist. But after I graduated, I wanted a complete change, so I chopped it all off. I've just been letting it grow out blindly since then."

"I would never have guessed you kept it that short," Mizuki said, her eyebrows rising in amusement as she began sectioning my hair with clips. "You have such a delicate, pretty face, Hina-san. With your bone structure, you would look amazing with long hair again."

"Maybe eventually," I murmured, my cheeks turning pink at the compliment. The irony was almost suffocating, a professional stylist was telling me I had a "delicate, pretty face" as a woman, entirely blind to the fact that I was actually a twenty-five-year-old man.

"Alright, let's give you that fresh, manageable look you need," Mizuki said warmly.

For the next forty-five minutes, I sat in silence, watching the scissor blades snip through the dark strands, falling onto the black cape. Mizuki worked with meticulous speed. She cut the back and sides, then worked on my forehead.

As she blow-dried my hair, brushing it straight to bring out its natural gloss, the shape finally took form. She ran a flat iron through the ends, curving them slightly inward to frame my face, before using a tiny bit of styling oil to hold the shape.

Mizuki stepped back. "There. What do you think, Hina-san?"

I stared into the mirror, completely stunned.



The person looking back at me was Hina, entirely. The unkempt hair of Haruto Akiyama was completely gone, replaced by a sleek, rounded long bob with thick, straight bangs that framed my face, dramatically emphasizing my large eyes and making my jawline look incredibly small. It was soft, stylish, and undeniably girly.

My heart beating fastly against my ribs, a rush of adrenaline flooding my chest. It wasn't a wig that I could just peel off when I got home. This was my real hair, permanently styled like this. I looked beautiful.

I genuinely liked the haircut. That realization made me incredibly uncomfortable.

But right alongside the thrill was a dark, cold realization. I was going to have to walk into the Chiba branch on Monday morning looking exactly like this. There was no going back now.

Mizuki stepped aside, allowing Yui to walk over.

Yui’s eyes immediately lit up, a massive, delighted smile spreading across her face as she looked me up and down. "Oh my gosh, Hina-chan! It’s absolutely perfect for you! It makes your face look so tiny, and the bangs are so cute! I knew she’d do an amazing job."

I shot Yui with a sharp side-eye in the mirror, my heart doing a nervous dance against my ribs. I had expected a simple, generic trim to make my growing natural hair look slightly neater, something I could brush off at the office. Instead, Mizuki had given me a completely stylized, feminine bob.

"Thank you, Mizuki-san," I said, forcing my voice to maintain that gentle, breathy Hina register, though my stomach was tied in knots. "You really have a gift. It looks... very different, but it’s wonderful."

"I'm so glad you like it, Hina-san," Mizuki said, brushing a stray snip of hair off my shoulder before untying the black cape. "When you’re at home, be sure to blow-dry the bangs straight down from above so they don't split. Your hair has enough density that longer styles should work very well for you. If you decide to let the length grow, just come see me."

"I'll remember that. Thank you so much," I said, offering a polite bow as I got out of the chair.

We walked back to the reception area. Yui pulled out her bag to handle the payment using the allowance Kuroda had set up, and I thanked Mizuki once more. She smiled warmly, waving us off with a cheery, "Please come visit us again!"

The second we pushed the glass door open and stepped back out onto the bustling pedestrian street, my composure vanished. I instinctively reached up, my fingers brushing against the blunt, straight edge of the bangs across my forehead, feeling the soft weight of the bob brushing against my neck.

"I'm ruined," I hissed quietly, staying close to Yui as we walked past the shopfronts. "Yui, look at this. It's not just 'different', I look entirely like a girl! How am I supposed to walk into the Chiba office on Monday like this? Daichi is going to rip me apart, and Junko isn't stupid. She's going to know."

Yui laughed, looping her arm playfully through mine as we navigated the busy crowd. "Senpai, relax! You're completely panicking over nothing. People change their hair all the time."

"It's a feminine bob, Yui!" I whispered back, my face burning as we passed a clothing boutique. "Men don't just 'accidentally' get their hair cut with thick, styled bangs."

"Then tell them you lost a bet," she shot back, her eyes crinkling behind her glasses. "Say we had an office wager on the regional system launch, and since I won, you had to let me choose your next haircut. They'll laugh, they'll call you a push-over, and they'll move on."

I gave her a dry look. "I am not a pushover."

"Sure you aren't," she teased, giving my arm a gentle squeeze.

We walked in silence for a few moments, the cool autumn breeze rustling the leaves along the shopping street. My fingers were still hovering near my temple, brushing against the smooth, glossy strands.

"So," Yui said softly, her teasing tone fading into something more genuine. "Do you actually like it? Be honest."

I quieted down, staring at the pavement. My hand lingered on the side of my hair. Over the last two and a half months, the harsh, stiff reality of Haruto’s life had been completely overshadowed by this double identity, and today felt like the final, physical seal. It felt so soft, so incredibly smooth against my fingers, and it framed my face in a way that made me feel entirely different. Smaller. Protected, in a bizarre, backward kind of way.

"I don't know," I murmured, keeping my voice low so only she could hear. "It’s... it’s so feminine. It doesn't feel like my hair at all. It feels like I'm completely disappearing."

"That wasn't the question, Senpai," Yui said gently, her eyes searching my face. "Does Hina like it?"

Looking at our reflections in the passing glass storefronts. The girl in the window was undeniably pretty, completely natural, and entirely distinct from the stressed man I used to be.

"Yes," I admitted, the truth barely a breath. "It feels... really nice. It’s so smooth."

Yui smiled, a look of quiet triumph in her eyes as she pulled me closer. "See? You look beautiful, Hina-chan. Let's get some lunch before we go back."



After the lunch, we walked toward the station together. I had the excuse, I had the support, and I had the hair. But as we boarded the train back to the apartment, the ticking clock in my head grew louder. Next Friday was the hotel suite, and there would be no more practicing.

Hina was finally going to have to face the real world.

"Looking back on it now, it was completely humiliating," I told Rina, staring down at my coffee. "I walked out of that salon with a textbook feminine bob. I felt like I was wearing a neon sign on my head."

Rina smiled gently, her eyes drifting up to my current hairstyle. "I can imagine the shock, Senpai. But you have to admit, it's a little ironic. You still keep those bangs today, even with your hair down to your waist."

I reached up, reflexively brushing my long fringe, and let out a tired sigh. "I know. It's different now. I've actually grown to like it over the years. I've learned how to look after it, and it feels like me. But that first weekend? I was losing my mind. I couldn't go five minutes without checking it."

Rina covered her mouth, trying to muffle a sudden, genuine laugh. "I'm sorry," she giggled, her shoulders shaking slightly. "It's just... imagining you, the serious corporate IT guy, nervously checking your cute new bangs in the mirror... it's really funny."

I offered a dry, self-deprecating smile. "I'm glad you find my psychological crisis entertaining."

But sitting in that apartment three years ago, there was nothing funny about it.

It was Sunday afternoon, and the silence of my own apartment was suffocating. I wanted to spend the day doing nothing, trying to ground myself. I was wearing my most comfortable men's clothes a baggy dark grey t-shirt and loose grey sweatpants. I was desperately trying to feel like Haruto on a normal weekend off.

I walked out of the bedroom and stopped dead in front of the full-length mirror.



I stood there, my hand nervously rising to adjust the straight, thick bangs resting perfectly over my eyebrows. My posture was a mess. I tried standing straighter, squaring my shoulders to look like a man, but the face staring back at me completely ruined the effort. The sleek, dark bob framed my jaw, softening every angle of my face, while a deep, humiliating blush warmed my cheeks.

Even in men's clothes, I didn't look like a guy with a bad haircut. I looked like a pretty girl wearing her boyfriend's oversized loungewear.

The disconnect was jarring. Haruto and Hina were actively fighting for space in the same reflection. The supplements and the yoga had already softened my body over the last few months, but this haircut pulled the trigger on my face. There was no ambiguity left.

I dropped my hand from my bangs and gripped the fabric of my t-shirt. *How am I supposed to present this on Monday?*

I went back to my desk and opened my laptop, determined to distract myself with work. I managed about twenty minutes before closing it again. The problem wasn't really the haircut. It was the office. I had to sit across from Daichi, who would almost certainly comment on it. Junko's sharp eyes would dissect me. I was going to have to walk into that office, sit at my desk, and pretend that nothing was wrong while everyone stared at me. Yui had suggested telling them I lost a bet. It was plausible enough, but I still didn't want to spend the entire morning defending my appearance.

But the worst part wasn't the fear of Monday. The worst part was the quiet feeling creeping up my spine as I stared at the person in the mirror.

Despite the sheer panic, despite the looming threat to my career and my identity, a part of me felt a distinct rush of warmth. The hair felt incredibly smooth against my neck. It framed my eyes perfectly. It looked good.

I hated myself for liking it. I was a man preparing to lie to his colleagues to hide a double life he was coerced into, yet I was standing in my own bedroom, blushing at my own feminine reflection. I liked how soft my hair felt. I liked how it looked when I dressed as Hina. But I didn't know what to do with those feelings. Enjoying one part of it made me uncomfortable, as though I were somehow making Kuroda's decision easier for him.

The boundary between who I was and who I was being forced to become was dissolving. And the most terrifying realization was that I wasn't fighting it as hard as I should have been.

Monday morning arrived with a cold, unforgiving finality.

I was awake long before my alarm went off, having spent most of the night tossing and turning, my mind looping through a hundred different disastrous scenarios. I finally dragged myself out of bed at five o'clock.

I went through my morning routine on autopilot. I swallowed Kuroda's two white pills with a glass of water and rolled out my yoga mat in the living room. The exercise was more awkward than usual. My newly cut hair kept slipping forward whenever I bent down, the thick bangs falling close to my eyes and the shorter ends brushing my cheeks. After a few minutes of pushing it aside, I got tired of dealing with it.

I remembered the pack of neutral-coloured scrunchies Yui had given me weeks ago and retrieved one from my drawer. Gathering my hair at the nape of my neck was familiar enough by now; I had been tying it back for work long before the haircut. The new bob was a little too short for a neat ponytail, so some strands slipped free around my ears and the tied ends formed a small, uneven tuft. Still, it kept most of my hair out of my face, which was all I needed. I finished my routine without giving the hairstyle another thought.

Afterward, I removed the scrunchie before stepping into the shower. Under the hot water, I considered how to handle my arrival at the office. I could leave late and hope everyone would already be absorbed in their work, but walking into a full office with my new haircut would only draw more attention to it. Leaving early seemed the better option. If I arrived before most of the team, I could settle at my desk and deal with the inevitable comments one person at a time.

I stepped out of the shower, dried myself, and slipped into the bra and panties that had become part of my everyday routine. Then I picked up my towel to wipe the steam from the bathroom mirror and paused.

My hair was damp, clinging softly to my cheeks. Without the rigid structure of my office clothes to act as camouflage, the physical changes I had been trying to ignore were undeniable. The

daily supplements had left my skin unusually smooth, my waist had pulled in, and the shape of my thighs had become noticeably fuller. Even with a flat chest, framed by the new haircut and the female undergarments, I looked surprisingly like a young woman.

A wave of shyness rushed over me. My face warmed, and I quickly turned away, heading into the bedroom to put on my standard white dress shirt and dark trousers. If my colleagues were going to notice the hair, I needed everything else to look as ordinary as possible.

Once dressed, I spent several minutes drying the bangs straight down and using a comb to keep them neat, curving the ends slightly inward just as Mizuki had instructed.

When I finished, I stood in front of the full-length bedroom mirror, looking closely at my reflection.



The visual contrast was staggering. I was wearing my formal male work attire, buttoning the cuffs of my crisp shirt, adjusting the striped navy tie, and the dark tailored trousers, but the person wearing them looked entirely different. The blunt bangs made my eyes appear larger, while the sleek bob softened the outline of my jaw. Even without a trace of makeup, the slight flush on my cheeks only added to the effect. I didn't look like an IT specialist but a girl who had borrowed a man's uniform for the day.

I briefly gathered the sides of my hair behind my head, considering tying it back again. I let it drop a second later. With the bangs still framing my forehead and the short ends sticking out, it just looked like I was awkwardly trying to hide a feminine haircut. There was no disguising it.

It's just a haircut, I told my reflection, adjusting my tie one last time. *Just tell them you lost a bet to Yui. People change their hair all the time.*

I picked up my laptop bag and left the apartment.

The commute was uncomfortable from the beginning. When I went out with Yui, I expected people to see me as Hina; their reactions were part of the exercise, and I had a persona to hide behind. Today, I was supposed to be Haruto.

Walking to the station, I was hyper-aware of every passing glance. At the platform, a young man looked at me twice, his expression shifting in quiet confusion as he tried to reconcile the masculine suit with my face and hair. A little later, a woman standing near the train doors glanced at my bob, then down at my tie. Perhaps neither of them thought much of it, but I was so conscious of my appearance that every ordinary look felt like an interrogation. I kept my head down, staring at my phone until my stop arrived.

I reached the Chiba branch building just past seven-thirty. I greeted the security guard in the lobby, who nodded back without comment. That gave me a small burst of relief.

I took the elevator up and stepped onto our main floor. The office was mostly quiet. The air-conditioning was humming, and only a handful of early arrivals were settling in at their desks.

As I walked down the main aisle, an associate near the entrance looked up. His eyes paused on my face before moving immediately to my hair. Near the printer, the receptionist stopped sorting her files, her mouth parting slightly in surprise as I passed.

I didn't stop to explain. I gave a quick, polite nod and kept my pace steady, walking straight to my workstation in the back corner. I set my bag down and switched on my computer.

I buried myself in the quarterly server migration logs, letting the dense rows of data act as a shield. For the next thirty minutes, I barely blinked, my fingers flying across the keyboard. I had

decided that the best way to handle the morning was to behave as normally as possible. After a while, I became so absorbed in comparing the figures against last week's records that I forgot, for a brief, merciful moment, about the weight of the hair resting against my neck.

Then, I heard footsteps approaching the aisle behind my desk. Junko and Naoko had arrived together, talking quietly about an afternoon meeting. When they came around the row of workstations, both of them slowed down.

From behind, someone with a smooth, glossy black bob was sitting in my chair, facing the monitor. Since I was wearing my usual white shirt and dark trousers, they couldn't see my face.

"Are we expecting a new temp from another department?" Junko murmured quietly.

"Not that I know of," Naoko replied.

The footsteps stopped directly behind my chair.

"Akiyama-kun?" Naoko called out, her tone laced with deep confusion.

"Mm? Yes, Naoko-san? Just a moment, I'm checking a discrepancy," I answered without looking away from the monitor, still completely focused on the report. Then I pushed away from the desk and spun my chair around to face them.

As I turned, the momentum made the bob sway slightly, the thick bangs shifting across my forehead before settling neatly back into place.

Both women froze. Junko actually gasped, spilling a few drops of her coffee onto the carpet. Naoko stared at me, her mouth slightly open.

It took me a second to remember why they were looking at me like that. Then the cold reality of the haircut crashed back down. I became painfully aware of the bob framing my face. I stood up, clutching a black folder against my chest with one hand while my other hand instinctively rose to hover awkwardly near my ear, a hot, uncontrollable flush spreading across my cheeks.

"Haruto?" Junko finally breathed out, staring at me as if I were a complete stranger. "Your hair!"

"Wait, is this a prank?" Naoko asked, her voice pitching up in pure shock as she leaned in closer. "Are you wearing a wig? A really high-end one? It looks so... styled!"

"It's not a wig, and it's not a prank," I said, trying to keep my voice steady and casually masculine despite the intense embarrassment burning my face. "I got it cut on Saturday."

"You got proper bangs!" Junko said, her eyes wide as she examined the immaculate, rounded cut. "Thick ones, too. Did you actually walk into a salon and ask for this?"

Just then, Daichi walked down the aisle, coffee mug in hand. "Morning, team! Hey Haruto, did you run the…"

He stopped dead by my partition. He stared at my bangs, then at my face, and then back at my hair. For a second, he said nothing. Then a loud laugh erupted from his chest.

"Haruto! What the hell happened to you?!" Daichi wheezed, leaning over the desk with a wide grin to get a better look. "Are you pulling a prank on us? Where did you even get a wig that realistic?"

"It's my real hair, Daichi," I muttered, my face burning hotter as all three of them crowded around my workstation, inspecting me from every angle. "Keep your voice down."

"You disappeared for one weekend and came back looking like my little sister!" Daichi laughed, though there was no malice in it. "Why would you do this to yourself?"

My heart hammered against my ribs. I swallowed the panic and delivered the script Yui and I had prepared.

"I lost a bet," I explained, with an awkward smile. "With Takahashi-san."

"You lost a bet to Yui?" Junko blinked, folding her arms. "What kind of bet ends with you getting a woman's salon blowout?"

"We had a wager on the regional system launch metrics," I lied smoothly. "She won. Her condition was that she got to pick my next haircut. You'll have to ask her for the details,

because she wouldn't let me back out. And since I don't like going back on promises to a junior... here we are."

Junko and Naoko exchanged a long look, processing the story. Slowly, the shock on their faces morphed into quiet, objective appraisal.

"Well," Daichi shrugged, still grinning. "Yui definitely did you dirty. It's completely feminine."

"Actually," Junko interrupted, tilting her head slightly as she studied the shape around my jaw. "It's not bad, Haruto. It is definitely a feminine cut, yes, but... it doesn't look unnatural. Because your hair is so straight, it suits your bone structure much more than I'd expected."

"I agree," Naoko nodded, a warm smile breaking through. "You honestly look like one of those androgynous fashion models from Tokyo. The ones who can wear men's or women's clothes and make both look convincing."

"You've always had a rather pretty face, Akiyama," Junko added softly. "The haircut just makes it impossible to ignore. You look younger."

I looked down at my shoes, completely overwhelmed. Having my peers stand around me in broad daylight and openly discuss how pretty and feminine I looked—while I was wearing a man's shirt and tie with a bra hidden underneath—made my stomach twist in a dozen different directions.

"Can we please stop discussing my face?" I asked quietly.



That made both women laugh. Junko tapped Daichi on the arm with her clipboard. "Alright, leave him alone. It's a haircut, not a criminal investigation. Let's get to work."

"Good luck with the hair, buddy," Daichi chuckled, giving my shoulder a friendly clap before heading to his desk.

I sat back down, letting out a long, breath. The morning settled into its usual rhythm. A few other colleagues noticed and commented as they passed by, and I gave them all the same simple excuse about trying something different. The line became easier to deliver with repetition. Kuroda was out at an external meeting all day, which spared me from having to endure his knowing approval in front of the staff.

At lunchtime, I walked down to the cafeteria and found Yui sitting alone at a small table near the window. I set my tray down opposite her and slumped into the chair.

"So?" Yui smiled, pressing her lips together to hide a laugh. "How was your morning?"

"You know perfectly well how it was," I groaned, rubbing my temples. "Junko and Naoko thought I was a new female temp from behind. When I turned around, they thought I was wearing an expensive wig as a prank. And Daichi laughed loud enough for the whole floor to hear."

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't find that funny," she giggled, not sounding sorry at all. "I spoke to them earlier, though. I backed up the story about the bet so everything is consistent. Honestly, Senpai, nobody is suspicious. They were just surprised."

"Naoko said I looked like an androgynous model," I muttered, taking a sip of water.

"She has good taste," Yui grinned. Then she looked at me more closely. "You look exhausted, though. Did you sleep at all?"

"Barely," I admitted. "I spent all of Sunday panicking and checking every mirror I passed. And that wasn't even the worst part. Yesterday evening, I went to the convenience store to buy a few things for breakfast."

"And?"

"I bought a baseball cap while I was there," I said, looking away. "To try and hide the hair."

Yui stared at me for a second, trying to see if I was joking, before bursting into laughter. "A cap? Why?!"

"Because I didn't want people staring at me!" I sighed, feeling ridiculous all over again. "I put it on before leaving the store. It covered the top, but the sides of the bob still poked out, and the bangs were pushed right into my eyes. I caught my reflection in the glass door and realized it hadn't helped at all."

Yui wiped a tear from the corner of her eye. "So you bought a cap to hide your feminine haircut, and it didn't even hide it?"

"It gets worse," I deadpanned, though a small smile was tugging at my mouth. "When I was paying at the register, the cashier called me 'Miss.' I was wearing loose sweatpants and a men's t-shirt. No makeup. Just my new hair and that stupid cap."

Yui's laughter faded into genuine surprise. "Really? How did you respond?"

"I just said 'It's fine' and walked out as fast as I could."

"Well," she said thoughtfully, resting her chin on her hand. "Your face is already soft, and now your hair frames it completely like a woman's. Pulling a cap down probably hid your brow and made you look like a girl trying to go incognito."

"Thank you for explaining how I accidentally made myself look more like a woman while trying to look like a man."

She laughed again, bright and genuine, and for the first time all day, the tight knot of tension in my chest began to loosen. Yui knew why I was terrified, and she understood that the physical changes were becoming impossible to hide. Being able to sit with her and laugh at the absurdity of it all without having to defend myself was the only thing keeping me grounded.

"You survived Monday morning, Senpai," Yui said warmly as we finished eating and stood up to leave.

As we walked out of the cafeteria, I caught my reflection in the glass doors. The sleek black bob swayed gently against my jaw. The thought of carrying this look through the office every single day was still deeply unsettling.

But the panic was gone. My colleagues had seen it, teased me, accepted the lie, and moved on. The disguise was now out in the open, hiding in plain sight. And with Monday behind me, there were only four days left until the hotel suite in Chiba.

The rest of Monday afternoon passed more easily than I had expected, settling into a strange, manageable rhythm.

Daichi couldn't completely let the joke go, of course. Around mid-afternoon, he stopped beside my desk with a folder in his hand, leaning over the partition.

"So, Akiyama, how long did it take you to work up the courage to get those bangs? Do you need recommendations for expensive conditioners now?"

I didn't look away from my monitor. "About as long as it took you to decide on that tie this morning."

He looked down at his chest. "What's wrong with my tie?"

"Nothing. I'm just trying to understand how much thought you put into your appearance."

He laughed, tapping the edge of my desk. "Look at you. One haircut and suddenly you've developed opinions about fashion."

I shook my head and went back to my server reports, relieved that he was treating the haircut as an ordinary reason to tease me rather than something that required a serious discussion.

Before clocking out for the evening, Junko and Naoko stopped by my desk.

"Can I ask you something about your hair?" Junko asked, pulling a chair closer. "Does it feel different now that it's been properly styled? Having bangs on your forehead takes a lot of getting used to."

I reached up, my fingers lightly brushing the blunt edge of the fringe. I could have complained and played up the annoyance of losing a bet, but the truth slipped out before I could stop it.

"It does, actually," I admitted, keeping my tone casual. "It feels lighter around the sides, and the ends are much smoother than before. Mizuki-san told me I have to dry the bangs straight down every morning so they don't separate. That's the part I hadn't really thought through."

Junko smiled warmly. "They're very neat. At least you don't have to spend ages styling curly hair. Just wait until the summer humidity hits, though. You'll be begging Yui to let you cut it off."

"You seemed really embarrassed this morning," Naoko added. "We were just surprised. It genuinely suits you, Haruto. Just make sure you're comfortable with it,you don't have to keep a style simply because other people like it."

"Thank you, Naoko-san. I'll keep that in mind."

It was a completely mundane conversation, yet my heart beat a little faster the entire time. I was casually talking with my female colleagues about hair maintenance and salon routines. They were accepting the softer, feminine aspects of my appearance without a hint of suspicion, treating it as a harmless personal change rather than a disguise. It made the lie much easier to sustain, though it also made the line between my two lives feel dangerously thin.

At five-thirty, I packed my bag, left the office, and headed to the rented apartment.

The moment the heavy door locked behind me, the quiet tension of playing Haruto Akiyama finally lifted. Yui was already there, having laid out a casual outfit for the evening: a cream-colored knit turtleneck and a long, pleated beige skirt.

"I thought we could go to the cinema tonight," she said as I loosened my tie. "There's one near the shopping center. We can watch a thriller, get something to eat afterward, and come back."

"Is this still training?" I asked, giving her a tired look.

"Partly," she smiled. "You need practice spending time in crowded public spaces without constantly thinking about how you're presenting yourself. Plus, I figured you earned a break from walking back and forth across the living room."

I couldn't argue with that. I went into the bedroom, took off the stiff corporate suit, and slipped into the turtleneck and skirt, the soft fabrics resting comfortably over my seamless undergarments. When I sat down at the vanity, Yui only needed a few minutes to apply a light foundation and some lip gloss.

The new haircut changed the entire routine. There was no tight wig cap, no synthetic strands to pin down, and no fear of anything shifting out of place. Yui simply combed my bangs straight and adjusted the sides around my jaw.

When I stood in front of the full-length mirror, the reality of the cut fully set in. Without the masculine context of a shirt and tie, there was no trace of Haruto left in the reflection. Because it was my real hair, the obvious boundary between my own body and the disguise was gone.

The bob brought the clothes, my softened jawline, and the light makeup together effortlessly. I just looked like an ordinary, pretty young woman getting ready for an evening out.

"It's much easier without the wig, isn't it?" Yui asked from the doorway.

"Yeah," I admitted, touching the smooth ends near my collarbone. "You look at it and it just feels... real."

"You look really good, Hina."

Before I could reply, the heavy click of a key turning in the deadbolt echoed from the hallway.

The front door opened, and Kuroda stepped inside. He looked tired after a long day of external meetings, a folder tucked under his arm as he unbuttoned his suit jacket.

"Sorry to interrupt," Kuroda said, setting the folder on the coffee table. "I was tied up all day, and I wanted to check in before Friday."

He turned and looked at me. For a few seconds, he didn't say anything, his dark eyes moving from the neat bangs to the way the bob framed my face. The strict, clinical expression he usually wore gave way to genuine satisfaction.

"Very good," Kuroda said. ". You look completely natural, Haru... Hina."

He corrected himself smoothly, without missing a beat.

"Thank you, Kuroda-san," I replied, my voice naturally settling into Hina's soft pitch.

"I heard from Yui that people noticed the haircut at the office this morning," Kuroda continued, his tone shifting into something almost paternal and reassuring. "You must have had an uncomfortable morning."

"It was awkward at first," I said. "Junko and Naoko thought I was a new temp from behind, and Daichi laughed loud enough for the whole floor to hear. They kept asking about the bet, so I told them to ask Yui."

Yui folded her arms with a small smile. "Which is completely fair, since I won."

Kuroda gave a quiet laugh. "I'm glad you handled it without creating a scene. I know managing this preparation alongside your regular duties isn't easy, and it takes composure to deal with that kind of attention at work. I appreciate the effort you're putting in."

After spending the morning bracing for disaster, his approval brought a surprising wave of relief. My shoulders relaxed. "Thank you, Director. We're actually heading to the cinema down the street now. Yui thought it would be good practice."

"That sounds sensible," Kuroda nodded, checking his watch. "Enjoy the evening. You need to be comfortable enough in public to relax, rather than treating every minute like an examination."

Then his expression grew serious again. He reached into his briefcase, pulled out two fresh bottles of the Biotin and metabolic supplements, and placed them beside his folder on the table.

"Don't forget that Friday is approaching," he said, looking between the two of us. "I have the client profiles and meeting details ready in that folder. We will review everything together over the next few days, especially how to handle unexpected questions. The executives in that hotel suite will be paying close attention."

My brief sense of relief faded at the reminder. "Understood."

"You've made remarkable progress," Kuroda said, offering a brief, encouraging nod before turning back toward the door. "Trust the work you've put in. Have a good evening, both of you."

Once the door clicked shut behind him, the apartment fell quiet again. I looked at the fresh bottles of pills on the table, then picked up my shoulder bag.

"You heard him," Yui said lightly, trying to ease the sudden tension. "We have a movie to catch. And yes, I partly planned this so you wouldn't spend the whole night worrying about Friday."

"At least you're honest," I smiled faintly, following her out into the corridor.

For the next few hours, we were just going to watch a film, eat dinner, and act like two ordinary friends on a Monday night. I wanted to enjoy that normalcy while I could, knowing that in just four days, the practice would be over.

By Wednesday, the initial shock of the haircut had completely faded.

The thick, straight bangs resting over my eyebrows felt normal, and I stopped checking my reflection every time I passed a window. Without realizing it, I even started developing small habits to manage the length. While sitting at my desk reading through server migration reports, I found myself reflexively hooking a stray strand of the sleek bob behind my ear to keep it out of my face.

Yui noticed the shift in my comfort level and immediately intensified our evening sessions.

We no longer just walked through the mall or ordered coffee. She forced Hina into situations where I had to handle problems on my own. On Tuesday evening, she took me to a busy department store cosmetics counter and made me ask the female clerk for recommendations on foundation shades, forcing me to maintain eye contact and test products on the back of my hand without looking to Yui for help. The next night, when a restaurant hostess sat us right next to a noisy kitchen door, Yui stayed quiet and made me politely ask to be moved to a better table.

"You're not rehearsing every sentence in your head anymore," Yui noted afterward.

"I think I'm just getting tired of being nervous," I replied.

"That helps too."

The most invasive change, however, happened at home.

On Tuesday night, before I left the rented apartment, Yui handed me a shopping bag filled with soft cotton camisoles, silk sleep shorts, and loose knit loungewear.

"Why do I need these?" I asked, frowning at the bag.

"Because you're still treating Hina like a three-hour shift," Yui explained calmly. "You change clothes, we practice, and then you go home and switch back. If you want this to be completely natural by Friday, you need to stop treating the clothes like a costume you take off at the end of the night. Wear these when you're at home."

I wanted to argue that I had already given up enough of my normal life. I was wearing women's underwear under my suit every day, and I was walking around the office with a woman's haircut. Adding sleepwear felt completely unnecessary.

But with Friday hanging over my head, the fear of failing in front of the clients outweighed my pride. I took the bag home.

For the next two nights, after stripping off my corporate suit and showering in my own apartment, I put on the women's loungewear. The reality was jarring, I was now only Haruto Akiyama between the hours of nine to five. The rest of my life belonged to Hina. I spent my late evenings sitting on my sofa in silk shorts and a soft cardigan, watching Japanese television dramas. I wasn't watching the story. I was studying how the actresses tilted their heads when they listened, how they held their hands in their laps, and how they responded in ordinary conversations without rushing.

Then, Thursday arrived.

Just after lunch, Yui discreetly stopped by my desk and nodded toward the director’s cabin. I locked my computer screen and followed her inside.

Kuroda had cleared his desk, save for a thin dossier resting in front of him. He closed the folder as we sat down, his expression serious and focused.

"The meeting is confirmed for tomorrow afternoon," Kuroda stated, getting straight to business. "It will be held in a private executive suite at the Grand Seiran Hotel here in Chiba. Our clients are senior representatives from a major manufacturing and infrastructure firm in Nagoya. The main decision-maker is an executive director named Shibata, accompanied by a senior planning manager."

Kuroda leaned forward, lacing his fingers together. "There is one more detail. They are bringing two of their own female assistants with them to handle their documentation."

Fooling two older businessmen who didn't know me was one thing. Sitting in a closed room with two professional women was an entirely different threat. Women noticed everything, how makeup sat on the skin, the cut of a blouse, the smallest hesitation in posture or voice.

"Do not panic," Kuroda said, his sharp eyes catching my reaction immediately. "The official agenda covers the technical proposal for the next stage of their project, along with private terms Tokyo wants to keep off the regular branch record. You will accompany me as a secretary, and you will be introduced as Hina."

Hearing the name spoken inside his office while I was wearing a shirt and tie made me sit up straighter.

"Let their assistants handle the practical coordination," Kuroda continued smoothly. "You do not need to compete for attention or try to impress anyone. I will lead the negotiation. Your role is to sit beside me, manage our presentation materials, and observe. However, I chose you for a reason, Haruto. You know the technical architecture better than anyone in this branch. If they raise a system issue that requires a precise answer, step in and address it. Otherwise, if they ask you personal or casual questions, keep your answers short, polite, and friendly without volunteering details."

Having a clear, defined role helped settle the sudden tightness in my chest. I wasn't just going there to be an ornament; I could actually rely on my real job skills if needed.

"Because of the preparation required, you do not need to come to the office tomorrow," Kuroda added. "Go straight to the rented apartment in the morning. Yui will meet you there to handle your hair, makeup, and wardrobe. I will pick you up at one o'clock sharp, and we will travel to the hotel together."

"What should I tell the others?" I asked.

"Tell them you are accompanying me to an off-site client meeting to support the technical pitch. It is the truth." Kuroda paused, studying my face for a second before his tone softened into that familiar, mentoring warmth. "Of course you're nervous, it's your first time dealing with executives at this level. But you have learned remarkably fast. You have the analytical mind of my best engineer, combined with a presentation that will completely disarm that room. Trust your preparation, and let me handle the heavy lifting."

A strong wave of professional pride and conditioned loyalty washed over me. I didn't want to let him down, and more importantly, I needed this arrangement to succeed so Yui would never have to step into that hotel room herself.

"Thank you, Kuroda-san," I said firmly. "I'll be ready."

We stood and walked back out to the main office floor. As we passed the printer, Yui glanced over at me.

"You look calmer than you did before lunch," she murmured.

"Having an actual plan helps," I admitted quietly.

I spent the rest of the afternoon clearing my queue, making sure no urgent tickets would pop up while I was gone on Friday. Before packing up for the evening, I walked over to Junko’s desk, where she was reviewing a stack of invoices.

"Junko-san, I wanted to let you know I won't be in the office tomorrow," I said, keeping my tone casual as I hooked a strand of my bob behind my ear. "Kuroda-san pulled me into an off-site client meeting for the day to help with the technical side of a proposal."

Junko looked up from her monitor, raising her eyebrows in genuine respect. "A full-day meeting with the Director? He’s really putting a lot of trust in you lately, Akiyama-kun. That's great for your career. Don't worry about your Q3 server logs—I'll keep an eye on your pending reports tomorrow. Just focus on the clients."

"Thank you, Junko-san. I appreciate it."

I walked back to my desk, shut down my computer, and packed my bag.

For over two months, the client meeting had been a distant threat we were constantly preparing for. Now, the cover story was planted, my work was handed off, and the timeline was up. Tomorrow morning, Haruto Akiyama was taking the day off, and Hina was going to work.

On Thursday night, Yui told me not to come to the rented apartment after work. Instead, she handed me the Nagoya company profiles and told me to go straight home, review the documents, and get a full night of sleep.

For once, I did exactly as I was told. I locked the door to my apartment, took off my work suit, and changed into the women's loungewear Yui had given me. It was unsettling how quickly the soft fabric was beginning to feel like my normal evening routine. I sat at my desk for a couple of hours, making notes on the proposed schedule, the technical architecture, and the corporate backgrounds of the executives we were meeting. Before going to bed, I stood in front of the bathroom mirror for a few minutes, testing the composed pitch of Hina's voice to make sure I wouldn't sound overly sweet or nervous.

When I woke up on Friday morning, my first thought was that there was no more postponing it. The meeting was finally happening.

By the time I arrived at the rented apartment, Yui already had my outfit steamed and laid out across the bed. It wasn't the casual blouses or pleated skirts we had used for shopping trips. It was a structured, high-quality navy skirt suit paired with a cream pleated blouse, sheer stockings, black low-heeled pumps, and a formal leather handbag.

I went into the bedroom to change. As I fastened the skirt and buttoned the tailored jacket.

I sat in the vanity while Yui checked my hair. My bob needed very little work, just a quick brush to keep the blunt bangs sitting evenly above my eyebrows. She kept the makeup restrained and professional: concealer, subtle definition around my eyes, a touch of blush, and a muted rose lip color.

When she finished, I walked out to the entryway, slipped on the black pumps, and picked up the leather handbag. Looking into the hall mirror, I saw a composed, polished young woman ready to accompany a senior executive to a high-level meeting.



Yui stepped in front of me, placing her hands firmly on my shoulders. Her usual teasing demeanor was completely gone.

"Listen to me, Hina-chan," she said seriously. "You are not Haruto Akiyama trying not to get caught today. You are Hina. You are a capable, professional woman who has worked as Kuroda-san's assistant. You know his schedule, and you know the technical side of this project better than almost anyone in that room. Don't forget that just because you're wearing a skirt."

"What if someone makes a weird comment, or I make a mistake?" I asked quietly.

"If you make a mistake, you correct it calmly and move on," Yui replied. "And if one of the men makes you uncomfortable, you don't have to encourage them. Stay polite, keep your distance, and let Kuroda-san handle the room. You belong there. Own it."

Her words steadied my breathing. A second later, her phone buzzed.

"Kuroda-san is downstairs," Yui said, checking my handbag one last time. "Did you pack the white phone?"

"Yes." A few days earlier, Kuroda had given me a separate smartphone with a dedicated number and business contacts registered under Hina's name. Before leaving the bedroom, I had switched my personal phone off entirely.

We took the elevator down to the street. Kuroda's black sedan was parked by the curb. When he saw us step out of the lobby, he looked me over briefly and gave an approving nod.

"Very good, Hina," Kuroda said as I approached. "The suit fits you remarkably well. You look completely prepared."

"Good morning, Kuroda-san," I replied, bowing slightly.

He opened the rear door for me, then turned to Yui. "Stay near your phone this afternoon in case we need any local server files pulled."

"Of course, Director. Good luck, Hina," Yui smiled, giving my arm a quick squeeze before stepping back.

I settled into the leather seat, smoothing my skirt beneath me as the door shut. Kuroda got in and we pulled out into traffic toward the Grand Seiran Hotel.

"Are the shoes comfortable?" Kuroda asked during the drive, glancing over at me.

"Yes, they're fine," I answered, keeping my voice in its calm, measured register. "I'm just being careful not to crease the jacket."

"You don't need to sit like a statue. Relax your shoulders," he advised evenly. "Remember, the first hour will likely be informal, drinks and general conversation before we touch the actual

contract. Don't feel pressured to fill every silence. Listen first. If they ask for your contact details or hand you a business card, use the new phone."

"Understood."

Forty minutes later, we arrived at the Grand Seiran Hotel. Even from the covered driveway, the atmosphere was heavy with wealth and quiet authority. Staff moved silently across polished stone floors, anticipating guests' needs before anyone spoke. I walked half a step behind Kuroda as a concierge greeted him by name and escorted us down a carpeted upper corridor to a set of heavy double doors.

Once the staff member stepped away, Kuroda paused outside the room and turned to face me. His expression was calm, carrying that quiet, expectant weight that always seemed to push my doubts aside.

"Everything all right?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Good. Let's go, Miss Hina."

Hearing the formal title acted like a switch. The lingering anxiety in my chest dulled into a focused, obedient calm. I straightened my spine, held my handbag with both hands in front of my skirt, and followed him inside.

The private suite was spacious, featuring a long conference table, a lounge area with leather sofas, and a sideboard stocked with premium whiskey and catered refreshments.

Two women were already inside organizing document folders. The older one, in her early forties, wore a sharp dark suit and carried herself with relaxed experience. The younger one, late twenties, looked strictly businesslike as she aligned stacks of printed schedules.

"Kuroda-san, it's been a while," the older woman greeted warmly, standing to bow.

"Fujisawa-san. Thank you for arranging the room," Kuroda replied, before gesturing toward me. "Allow me to introduce Hina, my personal secretary. She'll be assisting me today."

I bowed at the precise angle I had practiced. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Likewise. I'm Ayako Hasegawa, and this is Emi Takeda," she smiled warmly. "It's always nice to have another woman on the team for these long regional sessions."

For the next few minutes, I stood by the side table coordinating the schedule and document order with Ayako and Emi. Emi was all business, confirming attendee names and follow-up protocols, while Ayako casually asked if our drive over had been smooth. Being spoken to by two professional corporate women without a flicker of hesitation cemented everything. They didn't see an intruder; they just saw a younger colleague doing her job.

A moment later, the double doors opened, and the Nagoya executives walked in.

The room's energy shifted immediately. At the front was Executive Director Shibata, a man around fifty-five with graying temples and a reserved, authoritative presence. Beside him was Fujimori, a confident manager in his mid-forties with an easy, talkative grin.

Then, a third man stepped into the suite behind them, a slim, sharp-eyed man around thirty-five carrying a thick briefcase.

I felt a brief flicker of tension. The dossier I had memorized the night before only listed Shibata and Fujimori. We had only prepared for two executives.

Beside me, Kuroda didn't show a trace of surprise. Before stepping forward, he leaned in slightly toward me, keeping his voice low enough that only I could hear.

"That is Kanda from their strategic planning division," Kuroda murmured smoothly. "He wasn't on the original manifest. Sharp, detail-oriented, and overly ambitious. Don't let him catch you off guard—he likes to test people."

I gave a barely perceptible nod and quietly signaled to Emi near the side table. While Kuroda stepped forward to exchange handshakes and formal bows with Shibata and Fujimori, Emi and I smoothly adjusted the seating arrangement and added a third set of documents and glassware to the table without interrupting the flow of the greetings.

"Kanda-san," Kuroda said warmly, shaking the younger man's hand last. "A pleasant surprise. I wasn't aware strategic planning was joining us today."

"Director Shibata wanted an extra set of eyes on the regional integration timelines," Kanda replied evenly, his gaze already sweeping the room.

Once the initial pleasantries were finished, Kuroda turned and gestured toward me. "And this is Hina, my personal secretary. She'll be assisting me today."

I stepped forward and bowed at the precise angle I had practiced. "It is an honor to meet you all."

Shibata gave a polite, measured nod. "Thank you, Hina-san." Kanda let his eyes linger on my face for a second longer than necessary, taking in my appearance with a calculating look before asking if I would be handling the meeting records, which I calmly confirmed.

Fujimori, however, smiled broadly, looking me up and down with open appreciation. "Your director keeps a very polished company, Hina-san. Does Kuroda-san insist that everyone in his office be this presentable?"

I kept my expression pleasant and professional. "He expects us to be properly prepared for our clients, sir."

Fujimori laughed. "A diplomatic answer."



We moved to the seating area, where hotel staff brought in the first round of drinks and appetizers. As Kuroda had predicted, the first hour and a half barely touched on the technical proposal. It was an exercise in corporate socializing. Shibata talked about the strain of overseeing multiple infrastructure bids, while Kanda mostly listened, occasionally making dry, pointed remarks about regulatory paperwork.

I sat slightly behind and to the left of Kuroda, keeping my knees together and my back straight. Whenever a glass grew low, I rose smoothly and refreshed their drinks without letting the bottle clink against the crystal.

As the whiskey flowed, the conversation loosened. Fujimori made a few pointed jokes about rival firms, followed by a crude remark about how certain executives only brought female staff along to look pretty and pour alcohol.

A flash of irritation tightened my chest. Months ago, as Haruto, I would have stiffened and let it show on my face.

Instead, I glanced across the table. Emi simply ignored the comment and checked her tablet, while Ayako offered Fujimori a dry, practiced look.

"Some of us also make sure those executives remember what they promised to deliver on Monday morning, Fujimori-san," Ayako replied evenly.

Even Shibata chuckled at that, and Fujimori raised his glass in mock surrender. Taking their cue, I kept a polite, neutral smile on my face and didn't rise to the bait.

A few minutes later, Fujimori turned his attention back to me. "What about you, Hina-san? Do you actually enjoy these private gatherings, or are we just another tedious item on your schedule?"

I paused for a beat, keeping my voice calm and clear, aware that Kanda was watching me from across the table. "A little of both, sir. They're very useful for understanding how everyone works together outside of formal emails."

"Most people either complain or pretend they love every minute," Fujimori grinned. "I like that answer."

"It depends on the company," I added lightly, which earned another laugh from the table before the topic moved on.

As I sat back in my chair, I realized my hands weren't shaking at all. Even with Kanda's unexpected presence, I had stopped monitoring every breath and every movement. Because I was concentrating on reading the room and doing the job, the role was maintaining itself naturally. To the five people sitting around that table, Haruto Akiyama didn't exist. I was simply Hina.

Across the table, Kuroda caught my eye for a fraction of a second and gave a small, approving nod.

The social test was over. As Shibata set his glass down and Kanda reached for his thick briefcase, I knew the real work was about to begin.

Around two-thirty, the hotel staff wheeled in a catered lunch, breaking the opening tension of the room.

Kuroda smoothly guided the three Nagoya executives toward the lounge chairs near the windows to eat, keeping their conversation focused on travel schedules and golf handicaps. Ayako and Emi moved to a smaller side table by the counter, and I joined them with a small plate.

It was a genuine relief to step out of the executives' direct line of sight. Even though the social opening had gone smoothly, sitting beside Kuroda required constant focus.

"First time at this hotel, Hina-san?" Ayako asked warmly, pouring herself a cup of green tea.

"Yes," I replied, keeping my voice in its soft, measured register. "I've passed it near the station before, but I've never been inside."

"It's one of the better places when our directors travel to Chiba," Emi said, setting her tablet aside. She looked at me, her gaze dropping briefly to my blazer before returning to my face. "Your suit is very sharp, by the way. It's difficult to find a jacket that fits the waist that cleanly without pulling at the shoulders. And your haircut really suits you."

"Thank you," I smiled, resisting the urge to touch my bob. "I just had it cut last weekend. I'm still getting used to styling the bangs every morning."

"They look very neat," Ayako laughed softly. "You handled the morning well, too. Fujimori-san can be exhausting once he has a drink in his hand."

"I just focus on the schedule and let Director Kuroda handle the personalities," I said lightly.

"It's the only way to survive," Emi agreed with a knowing smile.

Standing there trading quiet workplace observations about clothing fit and difficult bosses with two women felt remarkably natural. I didn't feel like I was putting on an act; for those twenty minutes, I was simply another female assistant sharing a lunch break.

Before we returned to the main table, Ayako pulled her smartphone from her jacket pocket. "Hina-san, let's exchange contact details. Since we handle the Nagoya office coordination, it will be much faster to message you directly for follow-ups."

My stomach tightened slightly. I reached into my handbag and took out the sleek white phone Kuroda had given me. The screen was unlocked, but I hadn't memorized the phone number attached to it yet, and digging through the settings menu in front of her would look strange.

I offered Ayako an apologetic smile. "Our IT department just issued me this new work phone yesterday, so I haven't memorized the number yet. If you give me yours, I can call you right now so it shows up on your screen."

"Of course, that's much easier," Ayako said, reading off her digits.

I typed them in and tapped the call icon. A second later, her phone buzzed in her hand. I ended the call and sent a quick text reading *Hina - Kuroda's Office* so she had it in writing. It was a small detail, but watching her save my name into her contacts made Hina feel less like a temporary cover and more like an official corporate record.

Once the dishes were cleared, everyone took their seats at the main conference table, and the mood turned strictly to business.

Kuroda opened the proposal folders and walked them through the implementation schedule. For the first twenty minutes, things moved smoothly. Then Shibata tapped his pen against the printed timeline, his expression sceptical.

"I understand your proposed milestones, Kuroda-san, but this schedule is tight," Shibata said evenly. "Your company has given us dates before that had to be pushed back. What assurance do we have that this rollout won't stall?"

Kanda leaned forward immediately, pointing to the third page of the chart. "Specifically the data migration stage. If syncing our legacy databases with your new regional servers causes latency during peak operating hours, the entire schedule falls apart."

Kuroda was a sharp negotiator, but he wasn't a systems engineer. He paused, turning his head slightly to look at me. "Hina, do you have anything to add regarding the migration architecture?"

Every eye at the table shifted to me.

I felt a brief flare of nerves, but the moment I looked at the diagram in front of me, my regular training took over. I knew this system inside and out. I sat up straight, keeping my hands folded neatly on the table, and addressed Shibata and Kanda directly.

"The latency concern is valid if we rely on a standard transfer while both systems are live," I explained, keeping my voice clear, calm, and unhurried. "The current schedule assumes your existing system can handle the full load during testing. To prevent any bottleneck during peak hours, we can deploy localized edge-caching servers on your premises first and run a limited two-week pilot. That buffers your legacy data locally and lets us verify the volume under a real workload before committing to the full cutover."

Kanda looked back down at the chart, his brow furrowing as he traced the numbers. "A separate pilot would require an additional review point."

"Yes, sir," I replied smoothly. "However, if the pilot runs cleanly, we stay on the exact timeline in front of you. If an issue does appear, we catch it locally without disrupting your daily operations."

The room went quiet for a few seconds. Kuroda seamlessly picked up the thread, outlining how the review point would be written into the service agreement.

Shibata slowly nodded and closed his folder. "That addresses my main concern. I prefer a realistic schedule with a safeguard over an empty promise. Revise the document to include that pilot, and we have a path forward."

Fujimori leaned back in his chair, a wide grin spreading across his face as he looked from me to Kuroda. "Well, I'll be damned, Kuroda-san. Beauty with brains! You have a very pretty girl

pouring our drinks, and she actually knows how backend server architecture works. Where did you find her?"

The remark reduced months of actual engineering knowledge to a novelty trick, and I felt a familiar flash of annoyance. Still, I kept my posture composed and offered a polite, professional smile.

"Thank you, Fujimori-san. I'm glad the explanation was useful."

"When it comes to system architecture, Hina is far more knowledgeable than I am," Kuroda stated smoothly, giving me credit without breaking the flow of the room.

For the first time that afternoon, a genuine rush of pride warmed my chest. I hadn't just survived the disguise; I had used my real skills to lock down the agreement.

As the formal session wrapped up, the atmosphere turned relaxed and celebratory again. Shibata and Fujimori stood near the windows talking with Kuroda, while Ayako and Emi began gathering the extra briefing binders.

I was standing near the side bar organizing our signed notes into my folder when Kanda walked over.

He didn't stop at a polite distance. He stepped right into my personal space, close enough that I could smell the whiskey on his breath and the sharp scent of his cologne.

"You really saved the room today, Hina-san," Kanda said, his voice dropping into a low, conversational tone. His eyes moved slowly over my face before lingering on my bob. "That haircut really suits you, too. You're far too cute to be stuck behind a desk handling server logs. Do you travel with Kuroda-san often?"

"When my work requires it, sir," I answered politely, taking a half-step back toward the table.

He followed the movement without hesitation, smiling as if my stepping back were part of a game. "I'm in Chiba a couple of times a month for site reviews. Give me your personal line. We should go out for a proper drink next time I'm in town."

"You have my work number through Hasegawa-san," I said, keeping my tone pleasant but firm. "I keep my personal contact details separate from work."

"Come on, we're all adults here," Kanda chuckled, leaning in slightly closer. "There's no need to be so stiff after a successful meeting."

Before I could anticipate what he was doing, he raised his hand and reached right for my face. His fingers brushed against my jawline as he caught the ends of my bob, rolling the smooth dark strands between his thumb and forefinger.

"Such soft hair," he murmured. "May I?"

My entire body went rigid. A hot spike of raw, masculine anger flared in my chest. Every instinct I had as Haruto screamed at me to slap his hand away and shove him backward against the bar. Instead, I was trapped inside a tailored skirt suit and low heels, forced to calculate how to pull away without blowing up a major corporate deal.



I stepped back sharply, pulling my head out of his reach. "Please don't touch my hair, Kanda-san."

From a few feet away, Emi noticed immediately and stepped forward, her expression tight. "Kanda-san, the cars are waiting downstairs, and Director Shibata is nearly ready to leave."

"We're just talking, Takeda-san," Kanda said without looking at her, his eyes still locked on me as his smile turned slightly cold. "Don't be so guarded, Hina-san. Or should I ask Kuroda-san if he allows his secretary to have a social life?"

My stomach twisted. He was actively using his position as a client to corner me.

Before I could answer, a heavy presence stepped directly beside me.

Kuroda didn't raise his voice, and his expression remained calm, but as he stopped next to me, he slipped his arm firmly around my lower back, resting his hand against my waist and drawing me slightly against his side.



The physical contact caught me completely off guard. It felt remarkably intimate and possessive, and I had to force myself not to flinch against his grip.

"Is there a problem here?" Kuroda asked smoothly, looking straight at Kanda.

"Nothing at all, Kuroda-san," Kanda said, though his posture straightened slightly. "I was just inviting Hina-san out for a drink next time I'm in Chiba."

Kuroda offered a cold, easy smile, his hand staying planted firmly on my waist. "I'm afraid she is completely spoken for Kanda-san. Her boyfriend is a very protective man, and I doubt he would appreciate you putting in this much effort."

A fierce, uncontrollable blush rushed up my neck and across my cheeks. Having my boss hold me by the waist while inventing a jealous boyfriend to fend off another man's advances was deeply humiliating. I lowered my gaze toward the carpet, knowing my burning face would look to everyone else like a flustered woman embarrassed on behalf of her partner.

Kanda looked from my flushed face to Kuroda's steady, unblinking gaze, instantly reading the unspoken warning in the room. He let out a short, awkward laugh and raised both hands slightly.

"Right. I didn't realize," Kanda said, stepping back. "My apologies, Hina-san. No offense intended."

"Of course," Kuroda replied evenly. "Shibata-san is waiting for you by the doors."

Kanda picked up his briefcase and walked off quickly. Emi gave me a brief, sympathetic nod before following him out with Ayako and the other executives.

A moment later, the heavy doors clicked shut, leaving the suite completely quiet.

Kuroda immediately removed his arm from my waist and stepped back to the conference table to close his laptop. I stood near the bar, letting out a long, unsteady breath as the adrenaline began to fade. My hands were trembling slightly as I gripped my folder.

"Are you all right?" Kuroda asked, zipping his briefcase.

"Yes," I managed, my voice slightly hoarse before I cleared it. "Thank you for stepping in, Kuroda-san. I wasn't sure how to make him stop without causing an issue."

"You handled yourself well," Kuroda said, turning to face me. The cold authority he had used on Kanda was gone, replaced by deep satisfaction as he looked me over. "You made your boundary clear without becoming confrontational, you worked seamlessly with their female staff, and your technical intervention secured the agreement. Today was a complete success, Hina."

I looked down at the folder in my hands, my cheeks still warm. I had walked into the hotel terrified of being exposed as a fraud. Instead, I had solved the engineering problem, passed every test in the room, and experienced firsthand how quickly a man like Kanda would try to take advantage of a young woman…and how completely I depended on Kuroda to control the room.

"Come on," Kuroda said, checking his watch with an approving smile. "Let's head back. You've earned a rest tonight."

I picked up my handbag and followed him toward the doors, believing the hardest test of the assignment was finally behind me.

The ride back to the apartment was quiet. Once we were on the road and the hotel disappeared behind us, I finally let out a breath and settled back into the leather seat.

"I didn't realize how tense I'd been until we left that room," I admitted, keeping my hands folded neatly over my skirt.

Kuroda glanced at me from the driver's seat, his harsh corporate exterior completely gone. "That is normal for a first meeting. You can relax now, Hina. The difficult part is over."

He drove in silence for a few blocks before speaking again.

"You exceeded every expectation I set for you today," Kuroda said, his calm, deep voice filling the quiet cabin of the car. "I was particularly pleased with how you handled the technical objection. You identified a risk in the proposal, explained it clearly, and offered a practical solution without trying to dominate the table."

I had worked hard to prepare for that exact moment, and hearing him acknowledge my actual engineering skills brought a warm rush of relief. "I'm glad it helped. I was worried they'd ask something I couldn't answer."

"You handled it brilliantly," Kuroda replied. He paused at a red light and turned to look at me, his gaze moving over my face, the neat bob, and the tailored navy suit. "And your presentation was flawless. You didn't just play a role today, Haruto. You were the perfect woman for that room…composed, attentive, and understated enough to make those men feel comfortable while we steered the agreement. Even when Fujimori made those remarks, or when Kanda pushed his luck, you kept your poise."

My fingers moved instinctively toward the ends of my bob, remembering the feel of Kanda's hand brushing my jaw and the sudden, firm weight of Kuroda's arm pulling me against his side.

"Thank you for stepping in with Kanda-san," I said quietly.

"Of course. I wasn't going to let him cross a line," Kuroda said smoothly. "You were the right choice for this assignment. You have the appearance, the intelligence, and the temperament it requires."



My face grew warm. Being praised for my technical work was one thing. Being told by my director that I made a "perfect woman" should have unsettled me. Instead, because I was so exhausted and so conditioned to seek his approval, the compliment settled into my chest like a reward. I looked down at my lap, a strange, humiliating surge of pride mixing with my relief.

"Don't look so embarrassed," Kuroda laughed softly as the light turned green. "Accept the compliment. You'll need that confidence for the next meeting."

My head snapped up. "The next meeting?"

"Of course," he answered immediately, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "This arrangement involves several key accounts. Today was only the first. Tokyo is sending two more

high-profile clients to us next month. Some engagements will be daytime negotiations like today; others will be private dinners where you'll need to handle longer, more informal conversations. I expect this same standard going forward."

My breath caught slightly, though I forced myself to nod. "I understand. I'll do my best."

"I know you will. I'm counting on you."

I turned toward the window, watching the evening streetlights blur past. My reflection looked back at me from the dark glass: the sleek black bob, the blunt bangs, the muted lipstick, and the fitted suit jacket.



All week, I had treated this Friday like a final exam, something I just had to survive once so I could prove myself and get back to normal. Sitting in that car, feeling the smooth lining of the skirt against my legs, the reality finally sank in.

By succeeding so completely, I hadn't finished the assignment. I had just proven to Kuroda how useful Hina really was.

The ambient sounds of the café slowly filtered back in around us, the soft clink of porcelain cups, rain sliding down the windowpane, and the low hum of weekend conversation.

I let out a long breath and looked across the table at Rina.

She was holding her cup with both hands, her expression a mix of deep sympathy and quiet unease. She hadn't taken a sip in minutes.

"So the meeting went well," Rina said quietly. "And that was the trap."

"Yeah," I nodded, looking down at my cold coffee. "At the time, I took his praise as encouragement. I was relieved that I hadn't failed, and a part of me was genuinely proud that I had somehow succeeded. I believed that managing the presentation flawlessly would keep everything contained. I didn't understand then that Friday wasn't the end of the nightmare. It was merely the beginning."

Rina reached across the table, resting her fingers lightly over mine. "Looking back, he made sure you depended on him for everything in that room."

"Even when he protected me from Kanda, he was the one deciding who I was," I agreed, a bitter edge creeping into my voice. "He introduced me as Hina, gave me a separate phone, and even invented a boyfriend on the spot to claim territory. By the time I realized how deeply my life was being rewritten, I was already in too deep."

Rina's thumb brushed the back of my hand. "How did you even cope with that every day, Senpai? You couldn't talk to Daichi or Junko. You couldn't tell your mom. You were completely cut off."

"The isolation was deliberate," I said softly. "Kuroda set it up so there was only one person in my daily life who knew the whole truth. Only one person saw both Haruto and Hina."

I paused, my throat tightening as I forced myself to say the hardest part out loud.

"Yui."

Rina watched me carefully, sensing the shift in my tone. "You two spent almost every evening together at that apartment."

"We did," I admitted, meeting her eyes. "She was the one training me, dressing me, and pushing me deeper into the role every week. But back then, I didn't see her as a handler. I saw her as my lifeline. She saw me when I was panicking, when I looked ridiculous, and when I couldn't figure out how to get through the day. When I sat with her, I didn't have to lie or hide anything."

A faint, complicated smile touched my lips as the memory surfaced. "We talked for hours while she did my hair or fixed my makeup. She teased me constantly, made me laugh when I was terrified about the office, and stood right beside me when we went out. I started looking forward to going to that apartment after work. When something happened during the day, she was the first person I wanted to tell. Her approval started mattering to me more than anything else."

Rina went very still across the table. "Haruto... are you saying..."

"I thought it was just gratitude at first, or the relief of not being alone," I confessed quietly, the admission heavy between us. "I kept telling myself I was doing all of this to protect her. But somewhere along the way, spending all that time in that secret world together changed things for me. By the time that first meeting ended... I was starting to fall for her."

For a few seconds, neither of us spoke. Behind the counter, a barista set a stack of saucers down with a soft clatter.

Rina's eyes widened slightly. It wasn't anger on her face, just raw, unmistakable surprise. Slowly, almost unconsciously, she drew her hand back from mine, resting it in her lap.

I didn't try to reach for her. I couldn't blame her for pulling back, I had just told the woman sitting across from me that, during the most vulnerable period of my life, I had fallen for the girl who helped put me in that cage.

"You really loved her?" Rina asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

"I thought I did," I said, looking out at the rain against the glass. "At least, I loved the version of Yui she wanted me to see. And what happened next changed the way I understood every single moment I ever spent with her."

END PART 3

