

**My Quiet Beach Vacation
Is Actually a Government Population Initiative,
as I Suspected**

Story Starts

-=&<o>&=-

Chapter 1.2 -

**Naturally, Government Initiatives
Have My Best Interests at Heart**

The silence lasted exactly one point three seconds. I counted—well, estimated. My internal clock had been recalibrated by trauma to measure time in units of humiliation rather than seconds, and by that metric the silence lasted approximately one lifetime.

In that window, every woman in the row processed the image of my nineteen-year-old sister wearing a prop eyepatch on a government video feed, and the collective cognitive dissonance produced a vacuum of sound so complete I could hear the air conditioning cycling through its rhythm above us.

Then the room detonated. Again. The room had been detonating at regular intervals for the past twenty minutes. At this point, detonation was the room's resting state.

"KOMACHI-CHAN?!"

Yui's shriek pierced through first, followed by a cascade of overlapping voices that blurred into white noise. But Komachi—bless her sociopathic little heart—was already moving. She clapped her hands together once, fingers splayed, then hovered them beside her cheek in that pose she'd perfected sometime around age twelve. The one she deployed when she wanted something unreasonable and had calculated that cuteness would reduce resistance by approximately forty per cent.

She smiled. The smile of someone who had orchestrated a government-backed breeding programme for her older brother and felt zero remorse about it.

"Good... ummm, what's the time—" She glanced off-screen, squinting at something. "Oh, it's afternoon!"

A beat.

"Good afternoon, everyone!"

The room stared. The video feed stared back. Komachi's grin didn't waver. It never did. My sister's smile operated on the same principle as a shark's forward momentum—stopping meant death.

I should clarify something. When I said earlier that I wanted the ground to swallow me, I was speaking metaphorically. Now I was speaking literally. I wanted geological intervention. Tectonic. Volcanic, if available. A sinkhole opening beneath my chair and depositing me into the earth's mantle would have been a mercy the universe owed me and would never deliver, because the universe maintained a strict policy of non-intervention in Hikigaya affairs.

"Now," Komachi continued, her tone shifting into something businesslike that sat unnervingly well on her nineteen-year-old frame, "before I continue, please hand everyone but my dear older brother the button and wireless earphones."

Staff materialised. Of course they did. They moved through the row distributing small wireless earbuds and what appeared to be palm-sized devices with a single red button—sleek, government-issued, embossed with the B.R.E.E.D. logo. Everyone except me received one.

I sat in the excluded centre of the distribution, buttonless and earbudless, which somehow made me feel more naked than the actual nakedness. A new tier of exposure I hadn't known existed—informational nudity on top of the physical kind.

Komachi waited for the distribution to finish, then tilted her head. Patient. Benevolent. Holding all the cards and enjoying the view.

"So! As some of you might have already figured out, aside from the volunteers who are also participants in this programme, I have specifically handpicked the remaining people as participants and future wives to my dear older brother."

She said it the way someone might announce a dinner reservation. Casual. Cheerful. As though the sentence didn't contain the words "handpicked," "future wives," and "my dear older brother" in an arrangement that violated several layers of social convention and possibly international law.

"Hold on—"

Miura's voice cut through first, sharp and incredulous. Even without looking, I could picture the expression—the narrowed eyes, the set jaw, the particular brand of Miura fury that had once terrorised the entirety of Sobu High's social hierarchy.

"You can't just decide—"

"Iroha didn't agree to this either!" Isshiki's protest overlapped; her carefully cultivated cute-kouhai persona abandoned entirely in favour of raw indignation. "Senpai's... senpai... can't just—"

My sister's voice sailed over both of theirs like a paper aeroplane over a bonfire. Untouched. Unbothered.

"Of course, I didn't just randomly pick you guys. I carefully vetted and checked if you all have at least some interest in my brother."

The protests died. Not because the statement was reassuring—it was the opposite of reassuring—but because the implication behind it required processing time that temporarily disabled the speech centres of everyone in the row.

At this point, both Isshiki to my right and Hiratsuka-sensei to my left had gone so still that neither even flinched when my gaze drifted sideways. And my gaze did drift. I'm not proud of it. I am, technically, a gentleman, and a gentleman's eyes stay on a lady's face. But a gentleman is also a biological organism with peripheral vision and a pharmaceutical compound actively sabotaging his higher brain functions, and in that moment my eyes performed the involuntary equivalent of a right-click, save-as—an image of each of them captured and filed into a mental folder I'd have labelled *tax deductions* if my brain had any remaining capacity for ironic self-organisation.

'Interest. In me?!'

'Komachi, what did you do? What metrics were you using? What data did you collect, and through what means, and over what period of time, and—'

Actually, I didn't want to know. Knowing would make it real. Not knowing preserved the possibility, however slim, that this was all a fever dream induced by the waxing trauma—my mind manufacturing an elaborate delusion as an escape from that sadistic doctor's handiwork, and any moment now I'd wake up on the massage table, hairless but sane.

Though, come to think of it, that should have been the first red flag. They'd waxed everything below the neck with the thoroughness of a deforestation campaign, but hadn't touched a single hair on my head. What kind of ecological parasite prevention protocol cares about body hair but not scalp hair—the one place most common lice actually live? The answer, obviously, was the kind that had nothing to do with parasites and everything to do with whatever was happening in this room right now.

'You missed it, Hachiman. You missed it because someone was giving you the best massage of your life and your brain went offline at the exact moment it should have been asking questions.'

"Now then!" Komachi raised a finger. "I'll outline the reasoning and evidence for everyone's interest in—or love for—Onii-chan. And the button I gave you? If there's a particular piece of evidence you don't want Onii-chan to hear, just

press it. It'll mute me on the public display while you can still hear me through your earphones."

She said this as though it were a generous concession. A kindness. *Here, I'm going to dissect your private feelings on a government broadcast, but don't worry—you can redact the really embarrassing bits.*

My sister had weaponised consideration itself. Somewhere in the ancient past, Hannibal looked up from his Alpine campaign maps and gave a solemn nod to a future tactician of his own calibre.

"Now let's start with the easier ones."

Easier. The word hung in the air like a guillotine blade that hadn't decided when to drop. If these were the easy ones, the difficult ones would require emergency medical intervention.

"First up—Yukinoshita Haruno-san!"

The screen behind Komachi's feed split. On one half, my sister's face. On the other, a profile. A dossier. The sort of comprehensive biographical breakdown that intelligence agencies produced on persons of interest, except intelligence agencies typically had the decency to keep theirs classified.

Name: Yukinoshita Haruno. Age: twenty-three. Blood type: O. Height: one hundred and sixty-five centimetres.

Then the numbers.

Three sizes. Listed. Displayed. On a screen. In a room full of people.

I averted my eyes on pure instinct, the same way you'd flinch from a flashbang, but the data had already seared itself onto my retinas with the permanence of a brand. My brain, the traitor, had already committed the figures to long-term memory where they would live rent-free for the rest of my natural life, filed alongside the quadratic formula and the lyrics to songs I hadn't listened to in a decade.

The profile continued. Interests: psychology, social manipulation, wine tasting, political theory. Relationship history: several casual boyfriends. And then, at the bottom, in a font size that suggested the designer had understood the cruelty of what they were typesetting—

Virginity Status: Not a virgin.

The room held its breath.

Haruno didn't.

She shrugged. One shoulder, lazy, like she was adjusting a coat that had slipped. Then she turned her head—I felt the movement more than saw it, the way you feel a change in air pressure before a storm—and whatever expression she directed at me carried heat.

"Ara."

That single syllable. Loaded with amusement and something predatory and an absolute absence of shame that I envied with every fibre of my being.

Yukinoshita Haruno existed in a world where privacy violations were entertainment, embarrassment was a spectator sport, and she had permanent front-row seats. The rest of us were drowning in this situation. Haruno was doing laps.

She flashed me a smile. Sultry. Deliberate. A smile that didn't ask permission and didn't apologise afterwards.

I looked at the ceiling. The ceiling was safe. The ceiling had no three sizes and no virginity status and no Haruno smiling at me like I was something she'd already decided to unwrap.

Komachi continued, unfazed. "Haruno-san is pretty straightforward! She doesn't really mind whether she gets a husband or not, as long as she's interested in them and they won't get in the way of her career. And Haruno-san has always—always!—expressed how interesting Onii-chan is. So I don't think she'd object to this arrangement at all!"

Another shrug from Haruno. She leaned back, crossing her arms beneath her chest and her legs at the knee—settling in for a show she expected to enjoy immensely.

"You're not wrong, Komachi-chan."

Four words. Said with the ease of someone confirming a lunch order. Not a marriage arrangement in a government breeding programme. Not a lifelong commitment to producing children with a man she'd spent three years calling *interesting* the way entomologists call rare insects interesting—with fascination and a pin already in hand. A lunch order.

I was losing my mind.

"Great! Moving on!" Komachi beamed. "Next—Hiratsuka Shizuka-sensei!"

Every muscle in my body went rigid.

No.

Not Hiratsuka-sensei.

'Komachi, if you have any mercy left in whatever passes for your conscience, any residual sibling loyalty that hasn't been corrupted by your descent into government-backed eugenics—'

"So, Hiratsuka-sensei!"

She had no mercy. She'd never had mercy. Mercy was a resource Komachi had strip-mined years ago and replaced with strategic cuteness and a complete absence of ethical guardrails.

To my left, I heard a frantic clicking. Rapid. Desperate. The sound of a button being pressed with the urgency normally reserved for nuclear launch abort sequences.

Hiratsuka-sensei was mashing her mute button before Komachi had even started.

The feed continued uninterrupted.

"One night," Komachi said, her voice taking on a storytelling cadence that made my stomach drop through the chair and into the floor below, "I had to go pick up a very, very drunk Hiratsuka-sensei from an izakaya near—"

She paused. Blinked. Looked off to the side as if struck by a tangential thought.

"Actually, now that I think about it, a lot of these stories involve several of you while drunk. Like, a lot a lot. You'd think there'd be more sober confessions, but no. It's mostly izakayas and wine and that one time at the—anyway!"

The clicking intensified. Staccato. Panicked. Morse code from a woman watching her dignity approach the event horizon of a black hole from which no reputation returned.

Then Hiratsuka-sensei's profile appeared on screen.

The format was identical to Haruno's. Name. Age. Blood type. Height. Three sizes—I looked away. Interests—I looked away faster. Relationship history—

Virginity Status: Not a virgin.

A breath. Mine. The room's. Everyone's and no one's simultaneously.

But the profile didn't stop there. Beneath the status, in smaller text that nonetheless radiated cruelty with the precision of a targeted strike:

Note: One sexual experience (freshman year of university).

The clicking stopped.

The silence that replaced it was worse. Infinitely worse. The clicking had been panic. This silence was the sound of panic dying and being replaced by something beyond vocabulary.

A sound came from Hiratsuka-sensei's direction. Not a word. Not a scream. A low, tectonic growl that originated somewhere near her diaphragm and

emerged as something that wasn't language but communicated more clearly than any sentence ever composed: *Someone is going to die for this, and the only variable is velocity.*

The button made one final sound. Not a click. A crack. Plastic giving way under force that exceeded its design specifications by a factor the engineers had never anticipated, because no engineer had ever stress-tested a button against the grip strength of a woman experiencing the simultaneous destruction of her privacy, her dignity, and her will to let anyone in this room continue breathing.

I did not look at Hiratsuka-sensei. Looking at Hiratsuka-sensei right now would be the last voluntary action my eyes ever performed.

"So anyway!" Komachi pressed on, either oblivious to or delighted by the destruction occurring in real time. "That night at the izakaya, after I finally got sensei into the taxi—"

She straightened her posture. Squared her shoulders. Then her entire demeanour shifted. Her eyes went half-lidded. Her voice dropped an octave and acquired a slight slur, a wobble, the unmistakable texture of someone who had passed through the barrier between pleasantly tipsy and confessionally drunk and kept going until they'd reached the uncharted territory where the truth comes out whether you've signed a release form for it or not.

"Komachi-chan," she began, and the impression was devastatingly accurate, "Komachi-chan, you're a good girl, y'know that? A reaaally good girl. Hic. Your brother—" She paused for effect, the way sensei did when she was building to something she thought was profound. "Your brother ish a no-good... good-fer-nothing. Hic. Wait, I said that backwards. No. I said it right. He's both. He's no-good AND good-fer-nothing. Thash two things."

Then she leaned to the left and propped her elbow on an imaginary shoulder, her face adopting an expression of sly, alcohol-glazed cunning—the universal look of someone who'd just had what they believed was the greatest idea in the history of ideas.

"Komachi-chan, how could shweet Komachi-chan be related to— hic—"

Then she clapped her hands as if struck by divine revelation, her eyes still glazed, her words running into each other like commuters on a rush-hour platform.

"I'll take 'im off your hands! Hic. If he's shtill single after thirty—no, lissen, lissen—" She grabbed an invisible person's shoulders with both hands, the way drunks do when they need you to understand that this is the most important thing anyone has ever said. "'—if he's shtill single after thirty, I'll gladly... gladly relieve your family of thish burden. Marry 'im. Hic. Done. Problem sholved."

Komachi dropped the impression. Returned to her own voice. Grinned with the radiance of someone unveiling a masterpiece.

"She said it exactly like that! She even tried to pinky-swear on it, but she missed my hand three times."

I felt the weight of every gaze in the row converge on a single point to my left. Every pair of eyes—except Ebina's, which were probably recording this for future creative reference, mentally transposing the scenario into source material that would surface in manuscript form within the week—finding Hiratsuka-sensei. Synchronised. Precise. Searchlights locking on to a single target.

Hiratsuka-sensei.

The silence from her direction was no longer the silence of rage. It was the silence of a woman who had been petrified. Medusa'd. Turned to stone by the revelation that her drunken ramblings had been recorded, catalogued, and were now being performed by a teenager in an eyepatch for an audience that included the subject of said ramblings, a roomful of strangers, and several of her former students she'd been forced to sit naked beside—well, minus Orimoto Kaori.

I risked the smallest possible glance. A quarter of a second. Committed to plausible deniability about its own existence.

Hiratsuka Shizuka sat absolutely motionless. Her back had gone straight as rebar. Her jaw was locked. The crushed remains of the mute button sat in her white-knuckled fist like a small animal she'd killed to make a point. Her face had achieved a shade of red I'd only seen in particularly aggressive sunsets and the warning labels on industrial chemicals.

Komachi was still talking.

"And that wasn't even the best part! After that, she said—"

The audio cut out.

Silence on the feed. Komachi's mouth moved, forming words with animated enthusiasm, but no sound emerged. The disconnect between her visible excitement and the absolute silence was its own kind of horror—a predator documentary with the narration removed.

The button. Someone had pressed the button.

My eyes moved left, then right. Every hand in the row was accounted for. No one was pressing anything. Hiratsuka-sensei's button was in fragments between her hands—thumbs still trying to mash the destroyed device.

Someone among the staff, then. One of the volunteers stationed behind us, watching this unfold, had shown mercy where my sister had shown none. A silent act of compassion from an anonymous benefactor. Whoever they were, I owed them a debt I could never repay.

Sound returned.

"—and then she cried for about twenty minutes about how she'd never—"

Cut again.

Silence. Komachi's mouth moved. Animated. Enthusiastic. Detailing something that, judging by her hand gestures, was either deeply personal or involved interpretive dance. Possibly both.

Sound returned.

"—which is honestly really impressive flexibility for someone her—"

Cut.

This pattern continued for approximately a minute. Sound, silence, sound, silence—Komachi's monologue arriving in fragments like a radio signal passing through a tunnel, each audible snippet worse than the last, not because of what was said but because of what was implied by the gaps between them. The redacted portions loomed larger than the spoken ones, each silence a door that imagination flung open and reason desperately tried to close.

Then, mid-sentence, the audio stabilised.

"—oh! Looks like I was muted!" Komachi blinked at something off-screen. A monitor, probably. "There might be quite a significant delay between the button and the mute. Sorry about that!"

So nobody gave Hiratsuka-sensei mercy. There was no anonymous benefactor. No compassionate staff member pressing a button on her behalf. It was just her own frantic inputs, fired off in desperation and arriving too late to stop anything that mattered—each delayed mute catching only the tail end of whatever revelation had already detonated in the room three seconds prior.

Which meant everything we'd heard in those audible gaps—the marriage proposal, the crying, the flexibility comment—had been the parts she *failed* to mute in time. The parts she'd successfully redacted were, by definition, worse.

'What could possibly be attached to "impressive flexibility for someone her age"?''

I decided, with the conviction of a man who valued his continued existence, that I never wanted to find out.

She bopped her head to one side. Stuck out her tongue. The universal Komachi gesture for *I have done something unforgivable, and I am going to be adorable about it.*

'Hiratsuka-sensei is probably regretting calling me the problem child now. The problem had been genetic all along, and it skipped a generation sideways into my sister.'

The noise Hiratsuka-sensei made defied transcription. It was the sound of a thirty-two-year-old woman's dignity leaving her body. Not loudly. Not with fanfare. Just a slow, structural collapse—foundations quietly removed, walls cracking, the whole thing settling into rubble that was technically gradual but felt, to anyone close enough to hear it, instantaneous and total.

She slumped.

Hiratsuka Shizuka, who had faced down delinquents and administrators and the entire Sobu High faculty with her fists and her will and a cigarette that never seemed to go out, slumped in her chair like a puppet whose strings had been snipped. Her chin dropped to her chest. The crushed button fragments fell from her open hand and scattered on the floor with tiny plastic sounds that were somehow the loudest thing in the room.

I wanted to say something. Offer condolences. Solidarity. Some acknowledgement that we were both victims of a Hikigaya sibling who had apparently spent her gap year between high school and university studying psychological warfare under a curriculum that would have made intelligence agencies take notes.

But what could I possibly say? *'Sorry my sister exposed your drunken marriage proposal and sexual history on a government broadcast?'* Aeon didn't make that card. No one made that card. No one had ever needed to, because the situation it described had never existed before in the entirety of

human civilisation, and I doubted it would exist again, because the universe rarely repeated its cruelest jokes—it preferred originals.

Komachi's face filled the screen again. Bright. Unrepentant. Already scanning her notes for the next target—a predator selecting its next meal from a diminishing herd.

"Alright! Next—"

Every shoulder in the row stiffened simultaneously, a synchronised flinch that rippled down the line like a wave through a field of grass that had just heard the lawnmower start.

She held up two fingers. The peace sign. But in context, it felt less like peace and more like a countdown.

I hovered my hand over Hiratsuka-sensei's shoulder but froze mid-reach, fingers curling uselessly in the space between intention and contact.

'Don't look down. Don't look down. For the love of everything that has ever been sacred in this godforsaken—'

My eyes dropped.

Of course they did. The air conditioning had turned the banquet hall into something approaching a refrigeration unit, and Hiratsuka-sensei's exposed chest made that fact impossible to overlook—her nipples standing at rigid attention against the cold, as though the temperature itself had conspired to make this moment maximally unbearable for everyone involved, but specifically, surgically, personally for me. My brain, that treacherous organ, registered the detail with the clinical detachment of a medical textbook and the mortified horror of a student who had once sat in this woman's office discussing career prospects. Those two responses collided somewhere behind my frontal lobe and produced a third sensation that I refused to name.

And it didn't stop there. It couldn't stop there, because the medication—whatever cocktail of pharmaceutical cruelty they'd slipped into

the refreshments—had done its work with ruthless efficiency. The flush across her skin, the sheen of perspiration that had nothing to do with exertion, and lower still, where my gaze had absolutely no right or reason to travel and yet travelled anyway with the unstoppable momentum of a man falling off a cliff—glistening. *Glistening*. The word lodged itself into my consciousness like a splinter, unwanted, immovable, and deeply, irreversibly informative. Her folds were slick with an arousal that was chemically induced and visually undeniable, and my mind, already operating in full catastrophe mode, helpfully filed this image into the vault.

'I am going to remember this on my deathbed,' I thought, with the grim certainty of a man who knew exactly how his own memory worked. *'This will be the last thing I see before the void takes me.'*

"Ahem." Komachi's voice cut through the feed. Precise. Sisterly. The voice of someone who had cameras and no boundaries.

"Oww!"

Isshiki's fingers found the soft flesh above my hip and pinched with a force that suggested she'd been waiting for an excuse. Then her hands clamped over my face, turning my head toward her as I flinched sideways.

My thoughts—betraying me, myself, and I in that order—were already composing the observation that this intervention had come too late. Every image had already been committed to the mental archive, filed and catalogued alongside my future tax deductions in a folder my conscious mind had neither authorised nor could delete—that part of my mind had become immutable.

I kept this observation to myself. Survival instincts, at a minimum, were still operational.

"Onii-chan, behave!"

The twitch started in my eyebrows and radiated outward. I could feel the row's attention shift—every gaze in my peripheral vision recalibrating from the screen to me, drawn by the sound of my sister publicly scolding me for ogling

a naked woman on what was essentially government television. I stared forward with the rigid determination of a man who had decided that the middle distance was the only safe coordinate in the entire room.

'Ignore them. Ignore all of them. You are a stone. You are a geological formation. You have no eyes and no circulatory system and no sister.'

"Next up—a triple feature!"

Komachi held up three fingers. A game show host announcing the lightning round. She said *triple feature* like she was introducing a cinema event, not the systematic demolition of three women's private lives on a government broadcast. My sister had missed her calling. Or perhaps she'd found it, and the calling just happened to involve emotional terrorism with a smile.

"Miura Yumiko-san, Ebina Hina-san, and Orimoto Kaori-san!"

Three profiles materialised on the screen simultaneously, arranged in a triptych of personal devastation. Three columns. Three names. Three complete biographical breakdowns that no human being had consented to having displayed in a room full of naked acquaintances.

My eyes, operating on a self-destructive autopilot I'd long since stopped pretending I could override, swept across the data before my brain could erect its defences.

Miura Yumiko. Age: twenty-one. Blood type: A. Height: one hundred and sixty-one centimetres. Three sizes—*don't look, don't look, don't—*looked. Filed. Archived. Interests: fashion design, trend forecasting, social media curation. Relationship history: tried dating Hayama Hayato (unreciprocated).

Virginity Status: Virgin (no sexual experience).

Ebina Hina. Age: twenty-one. Blood type: B. Height: one hundred and fifty-eight centimetres. Three sizes—filed before conscious thought could intervene. Interests: manga illustration, BL narrative theory, creative writing,

"field research" (the quotation marks were the profile's, not mine, and they radiated an energy I chose not to examine). Relationship history: none formal.

Virginity Status: Not a virgin (one experience—participated with a BL couple who expressed curiosity about including a female participant).

Orimoto Kaori. Age: twenty-one. Blood type: O. Height: one hundred and fifty-nine centimetres. Three sizes—at this point my brain had stopped resisting and was simply stamping everything *received* without reading it, a mail clerk who'd given up on the holiday rush. Interests: social media, travel vlogging, nightlife photography, "vibes" (again, the profile's word choice, not mine). Relationship history: several casual relationships.

Virginity Status: Not a virgin.

The room absorbed this information the way a sponge absorbs acid—reluctantly and with structural damage.

"HINA?!"

Miura's voice cracked through the silence like a whip. Not the controlled fury she'd deployed earlier—this was genuine shock, bypassing social filters entirely and arriving raw.

"When did—with a—you never told me about—a couple?!"

Somewhere down the row, Ebina made a sound. A chuckle. Low, warm, distant—her attention turned entirely inward, replaying a memory she had no intention of sharing but every intention of enjoying.

"Hmm? Oh, that."

I could hear the grin without seeing it. A grin that didn't need to explain itself because it was already having a better time than everyone else in the room.

"It was... educational."

"Educational?! Hina, you can't just—when was this?! Was it during university? Was it before? Oh my god, was it during high school—"

"Yumiko, relax. It was a learning experience. For all parties involved."

"That's not an answer!"

"Isn't it?"

Ebina had achieved a serenity that bordered on the transcendent—a cat stretching in a sunbeam whilst the house burned down around it. Miura sputtered. Orimoto, somewhere further down the row, let out a low whistle that suggested impressed detachment rather than judgement.

I had questions. I suppressed every single one of them. Asking questions in this room was volunteering for additional shelling during an artillery barrage. You kept your head down. You did not raise your hand. You prayed for the bombardment to end and catalogued the damage after.

'Educational. She said educational.'

My mind unhelpfully supplied a cascade of imagery—eggplants and peaches bouncing through my consciousness like a fever dream's screen saver—and superimposed over all of it, Ebina's face wearing *that* expression. The one fujoshi made when inspiration struck—nose bleeding, eyes glazed, tuned to a frequency no sane person should receive. I'd seen that face before. I'd been the subject of it. Ebina had authored an entire unofficial catalogue of Hayato x Hachiman scenarios during high school, each one more elaborate than the last, each one making eye contact with me in the hallway slightly more difficult.

Though I hadn't minded the Hachiman x Totsuka ones as much. Especially now, knowing what I knew. Knowing that the confused feelings I'd spent three years filing under *aesthetic appreciation of an unusually pretty boy* had been, in fact, exactly what they'd looked like from the outside—attraction, unambiguous and correctly targeted, directed at someone who had been female the entire time.

I shut that line of inquiry down with the decisiveness of an emergency bulkhead sealing against rising water. Some doors, once opened, could not be

closed, and I had already accumulated enough indelible mental imagery today to furnish a gallery that would haunt me into my sixties.

Komachi, who had waited for the exchange to play out—a director watching her actors hit their marks—clapped her hands together.

"Great chemistry! Love it! But let me get to the good stuff."

'The good stuff. She called what came before the preamble. We haven't even reached the good stuff yet. The couple revelation, the virginity statuses, the "educational" experience—that was the warm-up. The safety briefing before the crash.'

"So! This one time, Orimoto-san invited Hayato-san out to a bar in Chiba—"

A small, strangled noise from Orimoto's direction. Someone who had just recognised the opening line of a story they desperately wished didn't exist.

"—and by pure coincidence, me, Yumiko-san, and Hina-san happened to be passing by the same bar, and obviously we joined them!"

'Pure coincidence.' My sister did not believe in coincidence. Komachi believed in reconnaissance, strategic positioning, and the tactical exploitation of social opportunities. The idea that she had *happened* to be passing a bar where Hayama Hayato was having drinks was about as plausible as the idea that I had happened to end up naked in a government breeding facility.

Actually. Bad example.

"Everyone except me was drinking, of course, since I'm underage and a responsible citizen." She held up her hands in mock innocence. "But eventually, like always—"

She paused. Let the words land.

"—Hayato-san excused himself early."

The phrase *like always* did more work than any two words had a right to. It compressed years of social history into a single observation—Hayama

Hayato's perfected art of the graceful exit, the way he could extract himself from any situation before it demanded anything real from him. He'd done it in high school. He was still doing it at twenty-one. Some people never stopped running; they just got better shoes.

"So then it was just us girls!"

The clicking started.

Not one button. Multiple. A percussion section of panic—three distinct rhythms layering over each other, turning the muting system into an instrument of competitive desperation. Where Hiratsuka-sensei's muting had been a solo performance—one woman against the machine—this was an ensemble piece. Three women, three buttons, three overlapping attempts to silence different parts of the same story, each pressing at moments that mattered to them and inadvertently leaving exposed the moments that mattered to someone else.

The result was a Frankenstein's monster of redaction. Fragments stitching together across the gaps into something worse than the whole.

"—and then Yumiko-san started complaining about how Hayato-san always does this, always leaves early, always keeps everyone at arm's length—"

Cut.

"—and Orimoto-san said she'd specifically worn her—"

Cut.

"—which led to Hina-san theorising about Hayato-san's—"

Cut.

Each woman was protecting her own secrets, but in doing so they were leaving each other's exposed. Miura's button caught Miura's confessions but missed Ebina's. Ebina's caught Ebina's but missed Orimoto's. The three-way redaction created a rotating door of vulnerability—each gap in one woman's coverage was another woman's unguarded moment, and the audible

fragments assembled into a mosaic that was, collectively, more damning than any single uninterrupted monologue could have been.

Sound stabilised. Komachi had apparently found a rhythm between the muting attempts, timing her sentences to arrive in the gaps between button presses.

"—so after a few more rounds, the conversation shifted! As it does! And Yumiko-san, who was on her..." She glanced at her notes. "Fourth? Fifth highball? Made a very interesting observation."

The clicking from Miura's direction intensified to a frequency that suggested the button was approaching the same structural fate as Hiratsuka-sensei's.

"She snorted—actually snorted, it was adorable—and said—"

Komachi straightened her spine. Tossed her hair—mimicking Miura's signature gesture with eerie precision. Her eyes narrowed into the half-lidded, alcohol-loosened expression of someone who had crossed the threshold from sociable drinking into confessional territory. When she spoke, her voice shifted—higher, with Miura's clipped cadence and the slight nasal quality that emerged when the queen of Sobu High's social hierarchy dropped her guard.

"Hayato is... he's handsome, obviously. Hic. Duh.—"

A shrill sound erupted from down the row—not a word, not a scream, something more primal—and Miura's mute button arced through the air. The trajectory spoke of athletic fury and zero concern for consequences. It struck the screen with a pathetic thud, bounced once, twice, three times across the stage floor, and settled at the base of the display like a spent cartridge.

Miura was standing. Breathing hard. The rise and fall of her chest was—*don't finish that thought, Hachiman, that's a circle of hell you're not coming back from*—I could see the flush spreading across her cheeks—*wait, those were the wrong cheeks, look up! look up!*—which were the only part of her I was allowing my eyes to register, and even that felt like trespassing.

"Ow!" A pinch from both sides simultaneously. Iroha on the right, Hiratsuka-sensei on the left—the latter apparently having recovered enough motor function to participate in punitive measures even from the depths of her catatonic state.

Down the row, Ebina caught Miura's arm and pulled her back into her seat. She'd been managing Miura's outbursts since high school. The drill hadn't changed.

Komachi, on screen, hadn't even paused.

"Hayato is handsome, everyone knows that. Hic. But you know who—" A hiccup. Perfectly performed. "—you know who's actually packing? Like, actually? Hikio."

The room contracted. I felt it physically—a tightening of the air itself, as though the atmosphere had clenched in response to my middle school nickname being deployed in a context that involved the word *packing*.

'She did not say that. Miura Yumiko did not say that. This is fabricated. Komachi has fabricated this. My sister has gone fully rogue and is now manufacturing false testimony to—'

"And then!" Komachi continued, leaning forward, gleeful, practically vibrating. "Hina-san, being Hina-san, immediately pressed for details."

Another voice shift. Ebina this time. Komachi's impression was unsettling in its accuracy—the slightly breathless quality, the forward lean, the eyes that sparkled with an interest that existed somewhere between academic and predatory.

"Details, Yumiko. Details. Dimensions. Context. I need the full report."

Back to Miura-voice. The cadence slowed. The mock-drunk confidence wavered, replaced by something quieter. Komachi looked away from the camera—a deliberate acting choice, replicating the exact motion of someone

who'd said more than they intended and was now confronting the reality that the words were already out and retrieval was impossible.

"It was... during that shummer trip. The one in the mountains. Hic. Everyone was there. And Hikio—he went off to..."

Komachi paused. Bit her lip. Performed the gesture of embarrassment with such fidelity that for a moment I saw Miura herself sitting behind that screen—the flush, the averted gaze, the way she tucked her hair behind her ear as though the action could retroactively undo whatever she was about to confess.

"He went to take a leak. And I was... I wash right there. Behind a tree. I washn't trying to look. Hic. I just... didn't look away."

Silence.

It didn't settle. It crashed. It arrived with weight and mass and flattened everything beneath it—conversation, thought, dignity, the fundamental capacity of every person in this room to ever make eye contact with me again.

I remembered that trip. The mountains. The group outing Hayama's clique had organised, which I'd attended against my will because Komachi had packed my bag and Yuigahama had sent seventeen consecutive messages about carpooling. I remembered excusing myself to find a tree. I remembered the relief of solitude. I remembered the birds chirping.

I did not remember Miura Yumiko standing behind a tree, watching.

'She saw. She was there and she saw and she told people and my sister weaponised it and now it's being broadcast in a government facility whilst I sit here with the very organ in question on full pharmaceutical display—'

Oh.

Oh.

The realisation hit like a freight train. The medication. The drug they'd slipped into my drink. The visible, undeniable, structurally significant arousal I was currently experiencing in a room full of women who had been forced to sit naked beside me.

They didn't need to imagine it. The evidence was right there. Present. Accounted for. Standing at attention with the unwavering commitment of a soldier who had never learned the meaning of *stand down*.

I brought both hands to my lap with a speed that suggested divine intervention and a desperation that confirmed its absence. Too late. Approximately forty-five minutes too late. The horse hadn't just left the barn; it had circumnavigated the globe and returned with souvenirs.

"Ara ara," Haruno murmured from somewhere down the row, and the amusement in those two syllables could have powered a small city.

From my periphery, I could see Ebina and Orimoto leaning forward in their seats, craning past whoever sat between them to steal a glance in my direction. Ebina's expression combined scholarly assessment with the feverish inspiration of an artist who'd just found her next subject. Orimoto's was simpler—frank curiosity undercut by a grin she wasn't trying very hard to suppress.

'Please stop looking. For the love of every deity in every pantheon humanity has ever worshipped, please stop looking.'

"We thank the government for this gift and opportunity!" Ebina declared, one hand raised as if swearing an oath.

N.E.R.V. wasn't right. God wasn't in His heaven. And nothing—absolutely nothing—was right with the world.

She didn't stop looking.

Komachi—and at this point the distinction between oblivious and sadistic had been academic for approximately thirty minutes—pressed forward.

"So after that revelation, Orimoto-san and Hina-san both expressed their interest in..." She tilted her head. Selected her words with the care of someone defusing a bomb, which was ironic, given that she was the one who'd built it. "...experiencing it firsthand? With Onii-chan?"

The remaining mute buttons fired. The fragments resumed—

"—Orimoto-san specifically said she wanted to—"

Cut.

"—and Hina-san's exact words were 'for research purposes,' which—"

Cut.

"—both agreed that given the apparent—"

Cut.

The audible snippets painted a picture that the redactions couldn't erase. They'd said it. Both of them. Orimoto Kaori and Ebina Hina had, in a bar in Chiba, after Hayama Hayato had performed his signature vanishing act, expressed a specific and anatomically motivated interest in me.

'Stop. Stop processing. You have exceeded the maximum daily intake of humiliating personal information. Further consumption may result in permanent psychological damage. Please contact your nearest therapist—who does not exist, because no therapist has been trained for this scenario. I would rather have my chuunibyou notebooks from middle school read aloud on national television than endure another thirty seconds of this.'

"I mean," Orimoto said from down the row, breezy, casual, denial weighed against honesty and found too much effort, "I won't deny it."

The muting stabilised. Komachi's voice flowed uninterrupted, which meant either the buttons had finally been exhausted or the women had collectively surrendered. Neither option provided comfort.

"So! The night continued! More drinks were had, more confessions were made—"

Cut.

"—Yumiko-san cried a little when she talked about—"

Cut.

"—and Orimoto-san demonstrated what she meant by using a—"

Cut.

"—which Hina-san sketched on a napkin, and I still have the napkin, it's actually really—"

Cut.

Each fragment was a shard of a mirror I didn't want to look into but couldn't stop staring at—reflections of a night I hadn't been present for, a conversation I hadn't been privy to, during which my body had been discussed with the clinical enthusiasm of wine critics evaluating a particularly surprising vintage.

Then the muting stopped.

Not gradually. Completely. Either the buttons had finally died, or she'd reached a part of the story the three women had collectively decided was beyond saving.

"So! When the night finally ended, I called taxis for everyone because I was the only sober one—"

She held up her hands again. Innocent. Responsible. The designated driver who had been driving this entire catastrophe from the backseat.

"—and I escorted everyone home one by one. Hina-san first, then Orimoto-san, and Yumiko-san was last because her apartment was furthest."

Her posture shifted again. Immediate. Spine loosening, shoulders dropping, chin tilting at the exact angle of a woman who had consumed enough alcohol to dissolve the carefully maintained social architecture she'd spent years constructing.

Miura-voice returned. Slower this time. Quieter. The slur had deepened into something that wasn't just physical impairment but emotional—the voice of someone who'd been drinking not to celebrate but to excavate, digging through layers of composure to find whatever lay beneath.

"Komachi-chan..."

A pause. Komachi blinked slowly, replicating the heavy-lidded deliberation of someone marshalling the last of their cognitive resources for one final declaration.

"Even if... even if Hikio ish shometimes... hic... problematic..."

She swayed slightly in her chair. A method actor committed to the role.

"He'sh trushtworthy. Y'know? Hic. He's actually... he's actually shomeone you can trusht. Which is..." A long exhale through the nose. "Which ish why..."

Komachi's cheeks puffed. She looked away from the camera with such convincing embarrassment that for a moment the performance transcended imitation and became channelling—Miura's spirit possessing my sister's body for the duration of one devastating sentence.

"...I named my dildo after him. Hic."

Silence. Again. The silence in this room had developed its own taxonomy—there was the shocked silence, the horrified silence, the mortified silence, and now this: the silence of eleven people and an unknown number of staff members collectively processing a piece of information that the human brain was not designed to receive.

'She named her—'

'Miura Yumiko owns a—'

'And she named it—'

'After me.'

'There is a sex toy in Miura Yumiko's apartment. It has a name. That name is Hikio.'

The synapses responsible for forming coherent thought staged a walkout. Higher cognitive function filed for bankruptcy. My internal monologue, which had been gamely narrating this catastrophe with diminishing returns, hit a wall and crumpled against it like a car in a crash test.

Komachi, displaying the showmanship of someone who understood that comedy operated on the principle of escalation, reached off-screen and produced her phone. She held it up to the camera. Exhibit B. The DNA match.

"Now, I have sources within the Miura household—" She scrolled through something. Clinical. Thorough. A field agent delivering a sitrep. "—who can confirm that Yumiko-san does indeed possess a personal device she refers to as 'Hikio.' My source was able to verify its existence during a routine cleaning whilst the asset was in university."

'Sources. Sources within the Miura household. My sister has intelligence assets. My nineteen-year-old sister has cultivated a human intelligence network that extends into the private residences of my former classmates for the purpose of confirming the nomenclature of their sex toys.'

I thought about this.

I thought about it carefully, from multiple angles, with the kind of thorough analytical attention I usually reserved for dissecting the structural failures of romantic comedy protagonists.

My sister was not a normal person. This much I'd always known—the way you know the sun rises in the east or that convenience store onigiri tastes best at two in the morning. Background knowledge. Ambient truth. But there was a

difference between knowing your sister was unusually proactive about your social life and discovering that she had, over a period of years, assembled a dossier of intimate intelligence about every woman in your social orbit.

Methodical. Patient. A Cold War case officer running agents behind the Iron Curtain, except the Iron Curtain was Chiba Prefecture and the agents were housekeepers.

The eyepatch wasn't a prop. It was a statement. Komachi had looked at the world of espionage, romance, government policy, and sibling intervention, and decided she could do all four simultaneously whilst maintaining a cute aesthetic.

Somewhere, in whatever facility housed the B.R.E.E.D. programme's administrative offices, there was a filing cabinet. In that filing cabinet, there were folders. In those folders, there were notes—handwritten, probably, in Komachi's neat script, with little hearts dotting the i's and margin doodles of cats wearing sunglasses. Notes about Hiratsuka-sensei's drunken marriage proposals. Notes about Miura's named intimate devices. Notes about Ebina's napkin sketches and Orimoto's bar confessions and god knew what else about god knew who else in this row.

My sister had been building this. Not for weeks. Not for months. For years. Every casual hangout, every taxi ride, every sleepover and izakaya trip and group outing had been data collection. Every smile had been an access point. Every act of kindness had been a dead drop.

I had been raised alongside a spy, and I had never noticed, because the spy was cute and brought me pudding and called herself Komachi-chan in the third person.

The room hadn't recovered. It couldn't recover. Recovery implied a baseline to return to, and whatever baseline had existed before Komachi's triple feature had been reduced to archaeological sediment—buried beneath layers of revelation that would take years of therapy to excavate.

From Miura's direction, silence. Not the active, furious silence of someone planning retribution. The still, hollow silence of someone who had vacated her own body. Astral projection induced not by meditation but by the public revelation that she had named an intimate device after a boy she'd spent three years calling Hikio with varying degrees of contempt and something else that neither of us had ever examined closely enough to name.

The mute buttons across the row had gone quiet. The war was over. The buttons had lost.

Komachi tucked her phone away and returned her attention to the camera—crisp, focused, already transitioning to the next slide in the presentation from hell.

"So to summarise!" She raised a finger. "For Orimoto-san and Hina-san, I don't think they'd particularly mind being partnered with Onii-chan. Especially given his, umm..." She coughed delicately into her fist. "...generous endowment? Plus all the programme benefits—funding for Hina-san's BL manga career, travel support for Orimoto-san's content creation. It's a pretty sweet deal when you think about it!"

'She's pitching it. She's actually pitching it. Like a venture capitalist at a funding round. "Invest in my brother's reproductive capacity and receive government subsidies for your dream career. Limited slots available. Act now.'"

"But Yumiko-san..." Komachi's voice softened. Not dramatically—Komachi didn't do dramatic shifts. The change was subtle, like a room's lighting dimming by a single increment. Enough to notice. Enough to alter the atmosphere without announcing the alteration.

"Yumiko-san actually likes Onii-chan. Not just as a... practical arrangement. Not just because of the, um, physical aspects. She genuinely has feelings for him."

She let that sit.

"The way she talked about him that night—even drunk, even embarrassed, even after naming her... personal item... after him—it wasn't just attraction. She talked about trust. About reliability. About how Hikio—her word, not mine—was someone who'd actually show up when it mattered."

Komachi's expression shifted into something I recognised. The look she wore when she'd stopped performing and started being honest—rare, brief, and always aimed at moments she considered important enough to deserve sincerity.

"Yumiko-san has spent years watching Hayato-san walk away, and she never once described him as trustworthy. But she used that word for Onii-chan. Drunk, in a taxi, at two in the morning, when she had no reason to lie to anyone, least of all me."

The screen held on Komachi's face for a beat longer than necessary. Then her expression snapped back to its default brightness—

"So yeah! Yumiko-san is actually a genuine romantic prospect! How exciting!"

—and the sincerity evaporated like it had never been there.

I stared at the screen.

Miura Yumiko liked me.

Not tolerated. Not grudgingly acknowledged. *Liked*.

The queen of Sobu High's social hierarchy, who had spent our entire high school career addressing me with the same tone one might use for a persistent stain on an otherwise acceptable piece of furniture, had—in the privacy of a taxi, in the honesty of intoxication, in the small hours of a night where Hayama Hayato had once again proven that he'd never stay—called me trustworthy.

And then she'd gone home and—

'No. We're not going there again. That door is closed. Welded shut. The key dissolved. Move on.'

Isshiki's fingers still rested against my hip where she'd pinched me earlier. She hadn't moved them. Whether this was intentional or merely forgotten in the chaos was a question I lacked the cognitive bandwidth to process.

Komachi adjusted her eyepatch.

"Alright! Moving right along—"

The row flinched. Again. Pavlov would have wept.

==&<o>&=-

End

**Follow me on my other socials
and stack additional voting
points on the story of your
choosing.**

[XTwitterX](#)

