

Chapter

One

“*B* *abushka*, I’m not marrying Alejandro!”
 “Why not?” pakli ni Victoria Cantemirești,
 may bahid ng histerya ang aristokratong boses.

Tumiim-bagang si Lidya at pinaypayan ang mukha gamit ang palad.

*Don’t strangle grandmother, paalala niya sa sarili.
 You love her.*

Inayos niya ang hawak sa cellphone at tumuwid ng upo sa kanyang personalized office chair. The warm, smooth leather felt good against her skin, its vibrant red color powerful yet feminine. Ganoon ang buo niyang opisina—strong but alluring.

Everything was, from *Maxalto*, her favorite Italian furniture brand. Solid wood and rich fabric. Strong

carvings and deep tones. Its neoclassical design invoked the noble allure of ancient Rome and Greece, two of her favorite time periods.

“*Babushka*,” ulit niya sa kanyang lola. “I’m not marrying Alejandro. I do not intend to get married.”

“Oh, no, my dear *vnuchka*. You are going to get married. Kung hindi kay Alejandro, sa lalaking pipiliin mo. I know you like Dmitri, but he’s already engaged. We’re sad about that. But *radi Boga!*” *For God’s sake*. “You will get married!”

“*Babushka*—”

“*Nyet!*” matigas na putol ng matanda.

“Pinagbigyan ka na namin, Lidya. Sinuportahan ka namin sa lahat ng gusto mo. You don’t want to enter the family business, we supported you. You want to build a school for arts and literature, we supported you! Hindi ka namin pinagkasundong ipakasal sa kahit na sino dahil gusto naming ikaw ang pumili ng makakasama mo habang buhay. But you’re turning thirty-one, *vnuchka*, you need to get married and give us grandchildren!”

Grandchildren! ngitngit niya sa sarili. Iyon lang ba ang essence ng babae? Ang magkaanak?

Thank you very much, Sushmita Sen!

Hinilot niya ang noo at tumitig sa mga puno sa labas ng kanyang opisina. Tanaw niya ang ilang mga

estudyante sa damuhan sa di kalayuan, nagpipinta o di kaya ay naglalaro ng bola.

“So what is this, *babushka*?” sambit niya.

“Sinusumbat n’yo ang mga ginawa n’yo sa ’kin?”

“You are leaving us with no choice.”

“Obey you or what? Tatanggalan n’yo ’ko ng mana? Go ahead. I don’t–”

“We will turn the summer house into a hotel, Lidya.”

Daig pa niya ang sinampal ng six-inch *Christian Louboutin* stiletto. Namanhid ang kanyang mga kalamnan, at muntik na siyang malaglag sa kanyang mamahaling office chair.

“What?” bulalas niya.

“You are forcing our hand. We don’t want to do this, but you’re giving us very little choices.”

The summer house. Her mother’s house.

Magha-hyperventilate yata siya.

“You can’t do that!” angil ni Lidya.

Blyad! F*ck! Were they kidding her? Her mother loved that house! For the first eight years of her life, the quaint little house and the nearby beach had been her entire world. If she closed her eyes, she could still smell the sultry ocean breeze and sweet scent of roses in her mother’s garden.

She grew up sitting beside her mother in that rose

garden. Kukulamin niya muna ang mga lolo at lola niya bago niya hayaang maging hotel ang bahay na iyon.

“We can and we will, my dear Lidya.”

“That’s mama’s house. Your own daughter! How could you just turn it into a hotel?”

“You know we dearly love Antonina, bless her soul. Pero ibebenta pa rin namin ang summer house kung iyon lang ang paraan para makumbinsi ka naming magpakasal at bigyan kami ng apo.”

“You’re blackmailing me using my mother’s memories?” Nangingitngit siyang tumayo at nagpabalik-balik sa kahabaan ng kanyang maluwang na opisina.

Lidya spied her reflection on a glass case. Tall and resplendent in her tight red leather skirt and white silk blouse. Her hair spilled down her back in a silky cascade of rich golden brown, her amber eyes flashing with hurt and fury.

“I can’t believe you, *babushka*. I never expected this from you. From Papa, yes. Pero sa inyo? How could you?”

“Now, now!” Tuluyan na ring tumaas ang boses ng kanyang lola. Nakikita niya rin ito sa isipan. Nakapusod ang malago at golden brown nitong buhok, nagniningning ang mga mata sa galit. “Don’t you

dare try to make us feel guilty! We've done everything we could for you. Do not dare compare us with your father! We made a mistake with him, we made a mistake with your mother. But we did all we could for you!

“Ito lang ang hinihingi namin. Matanda na kami ng lolo mo. His heart surgery went well, pero hindi na kami bumabata. Ito lang ang hinihingi namin sa 'yo. Choose your own husband, *vnuchka*, or we'll choose for you. Or say goodbye to the summer house.”

Binabaan siya ng telepono ng matanda bago pa siya makaangil. Gusto niyang tumili at ihagis ang telepono sa dingding.

“*Blyad!*” mura niya at ikinuyom ang mga palad sa kanyang mga sentido.

A freaking husband. A freaking child. Ano ba ang tingin ng mga ito? Parang pag-order lang ng alahas ang paghingi ng apo at asawa sa kanya? ‘Give us a golden-haired grandchild, *pronto!*’ ganoon?

It's the old aristocratic Russian blood, angil niya sa sarili.

Her grandparents came from an old line of Russian nobility. Her ancestors were from a Moldavian boyar family in Bulgaria. Pangalawa sila sa mga tsar na namumuno noon sa feudal Bulgaria. Nasa history books ang ilan sa mga ninuno nila. Ganoon din ang

pamilya ng kanyang ama. Her father was hailed from the aristocratic line of Volkonsky, at isa ang pamilya ng ama sa nanatiling maunlad at maimpluwensiya hanggang sa kasalukuyang panahon.

Sinamantala ng pamilya ng kanyang ama ang perestroika sa Russia noong 80s at nagpuslit ng mga alak, at iba pang mga kagamitan sa Russo at ibinenta sa black market. Malaki ang kinita ng pamilya nila roon.

Hanggang ngayon, parang feudalism pa rin ang sistema ng kanyang mga lolo at lola.

Umiling si Lidya sa sarili at mariing pumikit.

No, hindi iyon totoo.

Nagmulat siya at inilibot ang tingin sa kanyang marangyang opisina. Money and elegance dripped from the surface of every textured and colored wood tables, giltwood carved chairs and plush fabrics.

She was a trust fund baby. At galing doon ang ginamit niyang pera sa pagtayo ng eskwelahang ito. She couldn't have done it without the money from her grandparents.

Humugot siya ng hangin at napasulyap sa kanyang mahaba at puting kahoy na mesa.

Her mother smiled at her from a photograph. Beautiful as a summer rose, sad as a fading moon.

If only they did the same for her mother.

Tumiim ang kanyang mga labi at hinagilap niya ang bag sa upuan niya.

No time for sentimentality. She needed to act. She had to meet with her good friend Ivanka and tell her about this.

Tinanguan niya ang kanyang sekretarya pagkalabas ng opisina niya.

“Umuwi ka na rin, Claire,” aniya. “Si Auntie Priscilla, nasa office pa niya?”

“Yes, Ma’am. May kausap po siyang mga estudyante sa office.”

Tumango si Lidya sa kanyang tsinitang assistant at sinulyapan ang hallway papunta sa opisina ng headmistress. Kahit na sa kanya nanggaling ang capital para sa pagtayo ng eskwelahan, ang tiyahin niya ang pinakiusapan niyang maging punong tagapamahala ng *Antonina School of Arts and Letters*.

“Sige, see you tomorrow, Claire.”

Dumerecho siya sa parking lot ng gusali.

Sinalubong siya ng malamig na hangin sa kanyang paglabas. The cool fresh scent of trees and wild flowers helped calm her emotions. Sandali niyang pinagmasdan ang matatayog na puno sa gilid ng bundok. May kaunting hamog na gumapang sa mga damo at puno, nagmumukha tuloy hardin sa mga ulap ang daan paakyat sa eskwelahan. Bagay na bagay para

sa creative at artistic process ang payapa at luntiing tanawin ng Tanay.

Whenever she visited abroad, she always made sure to visit schools of higher learning. *Harvard, Brown, Princeton, Yale, Oxford, Briar, Cambridge, Comunidad Autonoma de Madrid, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven*. At laging prominente ang kapaligiran sa bawat tanyag na unibersidad. Gusto niyang maging ganoon din ang *Antonina*.

Her mother would have loved this place.

She would have loved that it was named after her, too.

Sighing, she shook her head, unlocked her silver *Benz* car using her key fob and adjusted the strap of her leather bag on her shoulder.

“Lidya Volkonskaya?”

Napalingson siya sa lalaking tumawag sa kanya, at gumapang ang kaba sa kanyang mga ugat nang lumantad mula sa anino ng gusali ang isang matangkad na lalaki.

Napaurong ang dalaga. “Yes?” pakli niya, at pasimpleng kinapa ang snap ng kanyang bag para kunin sa loob ang pepper spray. “What can I do for you?”

Tumaas ang sulok ng mga labi nito, at lalong nanayo ang kanyang mga balahibo.

Oh, for heaven's sake!

“Come with us, and we’ll tell you.”

Uh-huh. Gusto ba niyang uminom ng muriatic acid? No, thank you!

Tumili siya at kumaripas ng takbo pabalik sa gusali. May guard sa gusali at sigurado siyang maririnig siya niyon. Pero may humablot sa kanyang buhok at may tumakip na tela sa ilong niya at bibig.

Blyad!

Sumigaw si Lidya at nagpumiglas, pero pumalibot ang tila bakal na mga bisig sa kanyang mga balikat. Nanuot sa ilong niya ang matapang na amoy mula sa panyong nakatapal sa kanyang mukha.

No, no, no, no, no!

Pilit siyang lumaban pero nasaktan lang siya sa tigas ng katawan ng lalaki.

God, bakit ba hindi siya nag-aral ng self-defense? Why were they kidnapping her? Hindi siya Chinese! Pati ba mga mamayamang Russo ay kinikidnap na rin ngayon?

Nakarinig siya ng sigaw mula sa kung saan, pero hindi niya magawang lumingon dahil lumalabo na ang kanyang paningin.

Goddamn it, Lidya! Don't lose consciousness!

“Lidya!”

Nagitla siya nang may marinig na ingay. Christ.

Putok ba iyon ng baril?

The students! The staff!

Heavy, heavy... Her lids felt like lead.

No, fight it!

May isa pang putok at narinig niyang sumigaw ang lalaking may hawak sa kanya.

Bumagsak siya sa sahig pero may sumalo sa katawan niya. Mainit na pumalibot sa kanya ang mga braso ng isang lalaki.

He smelled like the trees, too. And leather and spice and mint. Cold and dark. He smelled familiar.

Pinilit ni Lidya na imulat ang namimigat na mga talukap.

Inky black hair and steel gray eyes. Hard jaw and chiseled lips. Obviously, he wasn't happy to see her.

Well, the feeling was mutual, you bastard.

Tuluyang nagdilim ang lahat sa kanyang paligid.



Chapter

Two

Napabalikwas ng bangon si Lidya at hinalughog ng kanyang paningin ang paligid. Cream walls, dark wood furniture, a queen-size bed. Sumusuray sa hangin ang kulay kahel na kurtina, at rinig niya ang hampas ng alon sa dalampasigan. Sumisilip ang araw sa malaking bintana.

Umaga na? *Blyad*. Gaano katagal siyang nawalan ng malay?

Napahawak siya sa noo at dibdib. Pain pounded in her head, and her throat felt like it was stuffed with cotton.

It felt like the worst hangover of her life.

Kinapa niya ang sarili at sinipat ang buong

katawan.

Suot pa rin niya ang kanyang sedang blusa at tight leather skirt. Nanakit ang mga braso niya pero walang ibang masakit na parte ng kanyang katawan. Okay, good. She wasn't raped, thank God. Wala ring dugo, another plus.

Nasaan siya?

Pinilig ni Lidya ang ulo at pilit inalala ang nangyari. Some goons tried to kidnap her. Pero may dumating.

Black hair and cold gray eyes. The guy had looked like he wanted to shove her down a ravine. Her savior? Hah. As if Ivan Terrasov would do anything to help her.

Heart hammering inside her chest, she scrambled out of the bed and ran to the door. Sinalubong siya ng mga boses pagkabukas niya niyon.

“We shouldn't have gotten ourselves involved,” pakli ng isang lalaking boses. “Gulo nila 'to, hindi na tayo dapat nakialam. Mapapahamak lang ang pamilya mo rito, Dmitri. Leave them alone in their goddamn mess.”

Oh, how gentlemanly of you, you mudak. Asshole.

Kinagat niya ang pang-ibabang labi at naningkit ang kanyang mga mata habang nakatitig sa likod ng lalaking nagsalita. Tall, dark hair, and muscular build.

So hindi pala siya namalikhata. It was Mr. Cold, Hard and Bitter, after all.

“They’re an old family friend, Ivan, hindi natin sila p’wedeng pabayaan. Lalo na si Lidya. Her mother and my mother were best friends,” sambit ng isa pang lalaking boses.

“It’s too goddamn dangerous. Kasalanan ’to ng tatay niya. The greedy bastard kept doing business with the Bratva! He should pay for his involvement with those criminals.”

Bozhe moi. *Oh, my God.*

Napasuray si Lidya. Nanlamig ang kanyang mga kamay at umikot ang paligid niya. The Bratva. The Brotherhood. The Russian mafia.

Father, you bastard!

Pumikit siya at umungol.

Napaharap sa kanyang direksyon ang dalawang lalaking nagtatalo.

Dmitri Markovic’s dark eyes clouded with concern when he saw her. Malalaking hakbang itong lumapit sa kanya.

“Lidya, hindi ka muna dapat tumayo.”

Umiling siya at tinanggihan ang pag-alalay nito sa kanya. She could walk, damn it. Matalim niyang pinukol ng tingin ang pangalawang lalaki.

Ivan’s chiseled jaw was clenched tight, his

unsmiling mouth hard and unforgiving.

She'd be damned if she let herself look weak in front of this egoistical, self-serving bastard.

"I'm okay," paos na sambit ng dalaga. Humawak siya sa likod ng isang sofa at pilit itinuwid ang kanyang likod. "Ano'ng nangyari?"

Bumukas ang pinto ng living room, at pumasok ang isang matangkad at may-edad na lalaki.

"*Dyadya* Stepan!" Humangos siya patakbo sa lalaking itinuturing niyang tiyuhin, ang ama ni Dmitri at ng best friend niyang si Ivanka.

Maagap nitong hinawakan ang kanyang balikat. Pagkatapos, tumango ang lalaki at masuyong pinisil ang kanyang braso. The man's dark gaze roved over her face with fatherly concern. Hindi sila magkadugo, pero mas naging ama ito sa kanya kaysa sa sarili niyang tatay. Aside from her grandparents, *Dyadya* Stepan and his family had been her refuge since her mother died when she was ten.

"Lidya..."

"Ano'ng nangyari? Si Papa, sangkot sa Bratva?"

Tumiim ang mga labi ng may-edad na lalaki at napatingin kina Dmitri at Ivan.

Ang huli ang sumagot sa piping tanong ng matanda.

"We can't keep this from her, Uncle." Ibinaling ng

lalaki ang mala-yelong titig nito sa kanya.

Damn those eyes. Cold and gray like storm clouds.

“Da.” Yes. “Your father’s involved with the Bratva, Lidya.”

Nanghina ang kanyang mga tuhod.

“Sit down, child.” Inalalayan siya ng matanda sa sofa.

“But...” usal ng dalaga. Denial was a stubborn son of a b*tch. Pilit niyong itinatangi ang mga sinabi ng lalaki. “He didn’t have to, he wasn’t... Nasa wine at real estate business si Papa, he wouldn’t...”

“He’s not completely with the Bratva, Lidya.”

Masuyong tinapik-tapik ng kanyang Uncle Stepan ang likuran niya.

“Then, ano’ng sinasabi ni Ivan?”

Matalim niyang pinukol ng tingin ang binata.

The latter merely snorted and crossed his muscular arms. Like Dmitri, he wore a simple black shirt and jeans. The material hugged the wide span of his shoulders and strong hard chest. Out of his expensive designer suits, he didn’t look like the Markovics’ ruthless lawyer. He looked more like one of those thugs from the Bratva.

O siguro ay prejudiced lang si Lidya. She hated the guy.

“Let’s not sugarcoat anything, Uncle,” pakli ng

lalaki. “Her father’s involved with the Bratva. Bago pa ang perestroika, sangkot na ang pamilya niya sa Russian mafia. Come on, Lidya. Don’t be naïve. Tingin mo, paano naipasok ng pamilya mo ang kontrabandong mga alak at mga materyales sa Russia kung hindi sila humingi ng tulong sa Bratva? Paano nila naibenta ang mga ’yon sa black market? Your father and grandparents had always been in league with the Russkaya Mafiya.”

God, the Bratva. She couldn’t even deny it now. As if she needed another reason to resent her father!

Binalingan ni Lidya ang ama ni Dmitri. “My father’s family?” pakli niya.

Tiim-bagang na tumango ang kanyang Uncle Stepan.

“Wag kang mag-alala, *malyshka*.” Little one. “Sa ilang negosyo lang sangkot ang tatay mo. Hindi siya sangkot sa buong organisasyon. Wala siyang kinalaman sa mga pagpatay, o sa drugs, o sa human trafficking. At worst, money laundering lang ang maaaring ikaso sa ama mo.”

“The Bratva would never let your father off the hook so easily.”

“Ivan,” puna ni Dmitri sa lalaki.

Pero hindi iyon umubra sa binata. Sa halip, dumilim ang kulay bakal nitong mga mata at umigting

ang bawat linya ng guwapo nitong mukha.

“Wag na tayong magkunwari. Alam na natin kung saan pupunta ’to. It’s the f*cking Bratva we’re talking about. Halos mamatay ka para lang makaalis sa organisasyon, Uncle Stepan. And it wasn’t enough. They had to murder Anton, too. Tingin n’yo ba ganon kadali nilang papakawalan si Volkonsky? At ngayon, pagkatapos ng lahat ng ginawa n’yo para makaalis sa kuko ng Bratva, heto na naman kayo at nadadamay ulit! For what? For some pompous greedy bastard? You’re endangering your family for that worthless scum! It’s not f*cking worth it, Uncle!”

“Ivan!” Tumalas ang titig ni Stepan sa lalaki, at humigpit ang hawak sa kanyang balikat.

Her eyes watered but she didn’t dare let them fall. Si Anton Markovic, ang panganay na anak ni *Dyadya* Stepan at kuya nina Dmitri at Ivanka. He had died in the hands of the Bratva. Ito ang naging kapalit ng pagkalas ng pamilya Markovic mula sa Russkaya Mafiya.

She blinked to stop her tears. She’s Lidya Antonieta Volkovsky. She would never let Ivan see her cry.

Tumiim-bagang si Ivan at tinapunan siya ng matalim na titig na para bang siya ang dahilan ng isang nalalapit na apocalypse. And he was probably right.

But f*ck him. She kept her gaze hard and icy.

Tumalikod ang lalaki at malalaking hakbang na lumabas ng living room. Halos ibalibag nito ang pinto sa paglabas nito.

Her fists tightened, and her teeth clenched. *Mudak.*

Marahang pinisil ni Stepan ang kanyang balikat. “Pagpasensyahan mo na si Ivan, Lidya.”

Gusto niyang tumawa nang pagak. They should have asked her to cut her face, too.

Lumunok siya at iniiwas ang tingin sa matanda.

Umupo si Dmitri sa sofa sa tapat niya, at parang nakatatandang kapatid na hinawakan ang kanyang ulo. “Wag mo nang masyadong isipin si Ivan,” alo ng binata.

“What happened, *Dyadya* Stepan?” anas ni Lidya.

Parang tumanda nang sampung taon ang lalaki, at kiniskis nito ang palad sa aristokrato nitong noo.

“Ang head ng Bratva, the vor, tinutugis siya ngayon. The *FBI* and *CIA* are hot on his tracks. May nakuha na silang mabigat na ebidensya para ikulong si Pavel. Ang papa mo, isa siya sa mga tinitingnan ng *FBI* at *CIA* para makakuha ng impormasyon kung saan nagtatago si Pavel. The Bratva, of course, wanted to keep your father silent. Gusto ka nilang gamitin para ‘wag kumanta ang papa mo.”

“Oh, God, si Papa? Sina Lola? Si—”

“It’s alright, Lidya. Ligtas sa New York ang lola at lolo mo. We already sent someone to look after them. Nasa *FBI* na rin sa Amerika ang papa mo. Ikaw ang delikado rito. May nakuha kaming impormasyon na may tao ang *Bratva* sa mga pinadalang tauhan ng Amerika dito sa Pilipinas. We can’t let them take you. It’s too dangerous. We plan to keep you here until Pavel is arrested.”

Mariin siyang pumikit at napahawak sa kanyang ulo.

The *Bratva*, spies, *FBI* and *CIA*. *Mission: Impossible*, anyone? Her life just turned into a goddamn action movie.

“Pero kapag naaresto na si Pavel, hindi d’on matatapos ang lahat,” pakli niya. “Ivan’s right. It wouldn’t–”

“May nangyayari ring gulo sa loob mismo ng *Bratva*, Lidya. Kapag naaresto si Pavel, malaki ang tsansa na magkaroon ng bagong vor sa organisasyon. Kapag nangyari ’yon, mas gugustuhin nilang tuluyan nang makulong si Pavel. You and your family would be safe then.”

So easy, so smooth, so simple.

Sana ay ganoon talaga ang buhay.

“We will be here to help you, Lidya.” Pinisil ni Dmitri ang kamay niya, at maliit na ngumiti sa kanya.

Mabigat siyang tumango at gumanti ng pisil sa kababata.

Bumukas ang pinto ng living room at pumasok ang malamig na hanging dagat.

Nakatayo si Ivan sa pintuan, mataman ang eskpresyon at malamig pa rin ang mga mata.

His cold gray eyes locked on Dmitri's hand gripping hers. His stony gaze flicked to hers, his eyes scathing.

What was his problem?

Magaang na tinapik ulit siya ni Uncle Stepan sa balikat.

“Sige na, Lidya. Dito ka muna hanggang maayos lahat. Don't worry about anything else. We'll take care of it. You'll be safe here with Ivan.”

Daig pa niya ang kinuryente nang ilang boltahe.

“What?” bulalas ng dalaga.

Ivan let out an irritated breath, and she shot him a furious glare.

“Don't worry, Ivan is highly qualified to protect you. You are safe with him. No harm will come to you.”

“*Dyadya* Stepan, what the hell are you talking about?”

“Lidya—”

“You can't leave me here with him!” Dinuro niya si Ivan, pero mapang-uyam lang na tumaas ang sulok ng

mga labi nito.

“Princess, I don’t want to babysit you any more than you want to be left here with me.”

“Enough, the two of you!” Tumayo ang may-edad na lalaki at pareho silang tinapunan ng masamang tingin.

“But *Dyadya*—”

“No, Lidya, you’ll stay here with Ivan. Wala akong ibang mapagkakatiwalaan na iwan sa ’yo maliban sa kanya. At, Ivan, behave yourself.”

“*Dyadya*—”

“Lidya, enough.”

She wanted to scream.

Nagngingitngit na tinapunan niya ng tingin ang binata, at sa dilim ng titig nito, mukhang pareho rin sa kanya ang iniisip ng lalaki.

Forget about the Bratva, she and Ivan might just end up murdering each other.



Chapter

Three

“Open the goddamn door, Lidya.”

“Go away, I don’t want to talk to you!”

“Open the goddamn door and f*cking eat, you spoiled brat!”

Tuluyan nang nagpanting ang kanyang mga tainga. Spoiled brat? Siya? She was a goddamn perfect grandchild!

Fuming, she tossed her long hair and marched to the door. Marahas niyang binuksan iyon at hinarap ang lalaki.

Ivan towered over her, his strong frame filling the doorway. His cold eyes glimmered with pure distaste, his hard lips curving into a mocking smile.

“Eat, or do you want me to spoonfeed you,

princess?”

Nangingkit ang mga mata niya, at nangati ang kanyang mga daliri na kalmutin ang guwapo nitong mukha.

The son of a b*tch really wanted trouble.

Pero tiim-bagang na tumalikod ang lalaki at dumerecho sa kusina. Breathing heavily, she closed her eyes and ordered herself to breathe.

Murder is a criminal offense, asik niya sa sarili.

Don't murder him.

Padabog na sinundan ni Lidya ang binata papakusina.

Simpleng pork chop, java rice at vegetable salad ang nakahain sa mesa. Sumandal ang lalaki sa counter at malamig na tunitig sa kanya.

Stupid, but she suddenly felt self-conscious. Suot pa rin niya ang damit kahapon, at hindi pa rin siya naghihilamos. She had smudged lipstick, her eyes probably grubby with eyeshadow. Habang ang lalaki ay parang magpo-photoshoot para sa isang billboard.

Oh, she hated him!

“What?” angil ni Lidya, at taas-noong hinarap ang binata. She'd be damned if she let him intimidate her. “Babantayan mo ba 'kong kumain?”

Mayabang itong humalukipkip na lalong nagpainit sa bumbunan niya.

“What?” he drawled. “Hindi ka ba sanay d’on? You’ve always had maids waiting for you, haven’t you? Like you’re some f*cking royalty. Oh, yes. Your family is from an old Russian aristocracy. Forgive me, princess.”

“What the hell is wrong with you?” She stepped up into his face; her blood boiling, her breath coming out in angry pants.

The guy had hated her since they met when she was eleven and he was thirteen. And she had never done anything bad to him!

Noong mga bata pa sila, nakita siya nitong tumitili dahil napaligiran siya ng mga bulate sa garden ng mga Markovic. Ano ang ginawa nito? He just sneered and stomped away. The asshole! Si Dmitri ang dumating para tanggalin ang mga bulate.

Noong teenager sila, nakita siya nitong sumemplang sa bisikleta sa putikan. Ano ang ginawa nito? Of course, inisnab ulit si Lidya. Mabuti na lang at naroon ulit si Dmitri para tulungan siya.

Ivan’s list of offenses was endless.

“Ano ba’ng problema mo, ha, Ivan? Do you have a crush on me, is that it? Kindergarten boys bully their crushes. But you’re a f*cking grown adult! Haven’t you matured yet?”

“Ah, the arrogance.” His hard mouth twisted,

derision flashing in his steel gray eyes. He stepped closer to her, their noses almost touching. “Crush on someone like you? Some spoiled princess who thinks the world owes her a favor? You’re delusional, Lidya.”

“Then what is it, *mudak*? Why the f*cking animosity? Ano ba’ng ginawa ko sa ’yo?”

“Maybe I just don’t like you. Maybe because your family kept working with the Bratva to keep your wealth and power, and you’re too stupid and too arrogant to accept it. Siguro kasi nagpapanggap ka na ang linis mo, samantalang ginagamit mo rin ang perang galing sa mafia na may halong dugo ng ibang tao.”

“How dare you!” Itinulak ito ni Lidya pero ni hindi man lang natinag ang walanghiya. *Blyad!* Curse those muscles! “Pamilya lang ni Papa ang may kinalaman sa mafia, walang kinalaman ang pamilya ng mama ko! Ikaw ang arogante. Nilalahat mo ang buong pamilya ko na para bang kasalanan naming lahat ang kasalanan nina Papa. You hate me because of my aristocratic blood? Newsflash, *mudak*. That’s called discrimination! Ano’ng pinagkaiba mo sa nangmamaliit ng ibang tao dahil lang mahirap sila? *Mudak!*”

He grabbed her arm and hauled her against him, her heaving breasts crushed against the hard wall of his chest. His eyes flashed like gray sky blazed with

lightning.

“See? Still pretending to be clean, princess? Tell me. Saan mo kinuha ang pera na ginamit mo sa pagtatayo ng *Antonina*? Hindi lang ’yon galing sa pera ng pamilya ng nanay mo, ginamit mo rin ang trust fund na galing sa mga Volkonsky. You used their f*cking money too, so don’t act like you’re so f*cking clean.”

“Let go of me, you bastard!”

Binitawan siya ng binata at isinalya sa mesa. Mabuti na lang at hindi na siya naka-heels kung hindi ay baka nabali na ang kanyang bukung-bukong. She would murder him one day, the motherf*cker.

“You bastard,” she hissed. “What about the Markovics? Saan galing ang perang ginamit na kapital ni *Dyadya* Stepan para simulan ang *Markovic Corp*? Galing din ’yon sa perang naipon niya n’ung nasa Bratva pa siya! He used that to take care of you, too! Iyon ang ginamit niya sa pag-aaral mo. And you dare criticize me? I used that money to build a school for children!”

“You’re comparing yourself with the Markovics?” He took a threatening step toward her. He leaned forward, every line of his face tightening with fury. “You’re nothing compared to them. You build that school to satisfy your enormous ego, masquerading

it as some sort of snobbish charity. Admit it, Lidya. You're bored. Tinayo mo ang school na 'yon para lang pabanguhin ang sarili mo. Does it make you feel good, huh? Does it make you feel like you're better than the rest of us? And you didn't even work hard for that money. All you did was use your trust fund money covered in blood and tears."

"That's not true!"

Marahas itong tumawa at tinulak ang sarili palayo kay Lidya. Tiim-bagang na tumaas ang sulok ng mga labi ng binata sa mapanuyang ngiti. She wanted to claw at his face!

"Not true? Stop lying to yourself, princess. Just eat your goddamn dinner. Or I might just shove it down your throat."

Tumalikod si Ivan at iniwan siya sa kusina.



She should have learned Russian voodoo. O kahit anong klaseng voodoo na lang. Pinangako ni Lidya sa sarili na gagawin niya iyon sa susunod na mag-abroad siya. African, Mexican, Thai, Vietnamese, Italian, Peruvian. All of them!

She would learn all types of voodoo and cast curses on that bastard. Bibigyan niya ito ng hadhad, buni, alipunga, kulugo, at bad breath! Paglalagasin niya rin ang buhok nito!

Inis na isinuot ng dalaga ang simpleng asul na bestida at ipinusod ang kanyang mahabang buhok.

Nakita niya ang bag ng mga damit at toiletries sa labas ng silid niya nang nakaraang gabi pagkatapos kumain ng gabihan. Mukhang dinalhan siya ng mga gamit nina Dmitri bago umalis ang mga ito nang nakaraang araw.

Sinipat niya ang relo. Alas cuatro y media pa lang ng madaling araw. Madilim pa ang kalangitan sa labas at kulay malamig na bakal pa ang maalong dagat.

Good.

Malamang ay hindi pa gising si *Shrek*. Plano niyang humakot ng pagkain sa kitchen at dalhin sa kanyang silid. She'd rather not talk with that *mudak* again.

She stomped into the kitchen, not bothering to turn on the lights. Pero natigilan siya nang maaninag ang ilaw sa may kusina.

Great. *Cerberus*, the three-headed dog monster and gatekeeper of hell, was awake. She needed to buy him a leash.

Inis na umungol si Lidya at tumalikod pabalik sa kanyang silid, pero narinig niya ang boses ng lalaki.

“We’re okay, Auntie. We’re safe here.”

Naningkit ang kanyang mga mata sa malambing na tono ni Ivan.

Look at that. *Using your human being mode, ogre?* she hissed at herself.

She could almost believe he was not the sociopathic *mudak* who terrorized her her whole damn life when he talked like this.

Scowling, she peeked into the kitchen.

Nakaupo sa counter si Ivan, nakatalikod sa kanya. Nakabukas ang laptop nito at tanaw niya ang video ng ina nina Dmitri at Ivanka sa screen. He was video chatting with *Tyoty* Darya?

“How human!” she quietly sneered to herself.

“Masyado pang maaga d’yan, Ivan. Dapat natutulog ka pa. You’re turning into Dmitri. You have to rest properly!”

Maikling tumawa ang lalaki, at lalong lumalim ang kanyang simangot. His rich laughter made her want to strangle him, and his gentle voice made her jaw clench.

Don’t murder him!

“Don’t worry about me, Auntie. I’m fine. Kayo din, mag-ingat kayo d’yan sa Switzerland, okay?”

“Gusto na naming umuwi ng mga bata. ’Yang Uncle mo at si Dmitri, masyadong kabado. We should be home with all of you!”

At once, tumigas ang likod ng lalaki. Naging parang bakal din ang boses nito.

And Cerberus is back! She stifled a snicker.

“No, Auntie. You have to stay there until this is over. You can’t come back here right now.”

“But—”

“Auntie, please.”

She scowled at his cold voice. Pero mukhang hindi iyon ininda ng kanyang *Tyoty*a Darya. Dahil nang magsalita ulit ang ginang, hindi iyon iritable. Malambong iyon. Malungkot.

Nakaramdam tuloy si Lidya ng bigat sa kanyang sikmura.

“It will always be like this, wouldn’t it, Ivan?” usal ng may-edad na babae. “Lagi tayong matatakot at titingin sa likuran natin?”

Napaiwas siya ng tingin at napatitig sa kanyang mga paa.

“Everything will be okay, Auntie. We will make sure of it. Hindi namin hahayaang may mangyaring masama sa inyo nina Ivanka at Mira. Don’t worry about anything.”

“Si Lidya, you have to take care of her, too.”

She glanced at Ivan and saw the muscles in his shoulders tightening with tension.

Darya Markovic had been her mother’s best friend. Naging kasambahay sa pamilya ng mama niya ang nanay ng kanyang *totya* kaya magkasabay na lumaki ang dalawa. But they had lost contact when her

mother got married.

Pero nang magkasakit ang nanay niya noong eight years old si Lidya ay muling naging malapit ang dalawa. *Tyoty*a Darya had been like a mother to her since then.

Muscles still rigid, the man nodded. “We will do everything to keep her safe and protected.”

“Thank you, Ivan.”

“*Babushka!*” tawag ng isang batang tinig sa ina nina Dmitri.

Naaninag niyang ngumiti ang may-edad na babae sa screen. “Tinatawag na ako ng apo ko. Sige na, Ivan. Bukas na lang ulit. Take care.”

“*Da, Auntie, kayo rin.*”

Muling ngimiti si Darya Markovic bago tuluyang tinapos ang tawag.

She glared at her feet, suddenly feeling worse than she did when she woke up this morning.

“How long do you plan to hide behind the door?”

Napapitlag si Lidya at nanlalaki ang mga matang napatitig sa likuran ni Ivan. *Blyad*. May mata ba ang lalaki sa likod ng ulo nito?

Hindi siya nilingon ng binata, tumayo lang at nagsalin ng kape sa mug nito. Heat bloomed across her cheeks as she stepped into the kitchen.

No need to hide now. *Cerberus*, the monster

already smelled her presence.

Ivan leaned back against the counter top, swallowed a mouthful of coffee and stared at her over the rim of his mug. Basa ang dulo ng buhok nito na para bang galing lang ito sa shower. His midnight black hair gleamed in the harsh white light, his gun-metal eyes as cold as the stormy ocean outside.

“I didn’t mean to eavesdrop,” sambit ng dalaga.

Lumapit siya sa counter para kumuha rin ng kape, pero siniguro niyang may malaking distansya sa pagitan nila ng lalaki. Hindi sa naiilang siya kay Ivan o kung ano pa man. She just wanted to keep her distance, that’s all.

Nagsalin siya ng kape at nilagok iyon. The strong caffeine hit her system, helping clear the cobwebs in her head.

“Nasa Switzerland sina Auntie?” untag niya.

Payak na tumango ang lalaki at lumagok ulit ng kape nito. He wore a white shirt today, the cotton fabric stretching across his muscular shoulders.

“Dahil baka madamay sila sa gulo ni Papa?”

“What do you think?” he shot back.

Ah, there went the calm and peace. It was good while it lasted.

Would it kill him to be nice to her?

Umismid si Lidya at humigop ulit ng kape.

“Look,” pakli niya mayamaya. “I get it. Naiinis ka dahil nadadamay ulit ang pamilya nina Dmitri dahil sa gulo ng tatay ko. I’m sorry. Pero wala ’kong magagawa d’on. Hindi ko rin gusto ’tong nangyayaring ’to. I’m grateful *Dyadya* Stepan’s helping me, I won’t deny that. But I am sorry that his family had to be dragged into this.”

He clenched his jaw, his strong fingers curling tighter around his mug. “Naiinis? That’s understatement of the year. You don’t know how difficult this is for the family. You don’t know how it’s tearing everyone apart. This whole dangerous situation is dredging up painful memories.”

Her gut twisted, her heart thundering as she saw *Tyoty*a Darya’s face in her mind.

“It will always be like this, wouldn’t it, Ivan? Lagi tayong matatakot at titingin sa likuran natin?”

Tumitig siya sa kanyang kape. God, she wanted to personally strangle her father.

“Look, I don’t know what to say. All I know is we’re stuck here for God knows how long. I don’t want to burden any of you, and I wish there’s someone else who could guard me here. Heaven knows you hated this job.

“Pero pareho tayong walang magagawa sa utos ni *Dyadya* Stepan. So we’re stuck here. So can you set

aside your animosity for a while so we can behave like civilized adults?”

Itinaas ng dalaga ang tingin kay Ivan, at nakitang magkasalubong ang mga kilay nito. Nakatiim-bagang pa rin ang lalaki, malamig pa rin ang kulay abong mga mata.

“Don’t worry. I won’t ask you to paint my nails, Ivan.”

His scowl darkened, his gray eyes glinting with malice. Without a word, he turned his back on her and dumped his mug in the sink. Pinihit nito ang gripo at hinugasan ang malaking tasa.

“Just don’t get in my way and don’t cause any trouble. Puno ng pagkain ang ref. Make your own breakfast.”

He stormed out of the kitchen like some angry demigod.

Tumiim-labi si Lidya at tumitig sa bintana.
So much for behaving like civilized adults.

