



No one would think she was seventeen years old. Rad let his gaze travel from her red high heels up to her long, toned legs. Her short black dress barely reached her mid-thighs, showcasing creamy smooth skin. He wondered what she would taste like if he ran his tongue over that soft creamy flesh.

His mouth curved into a smile.

She shouldn't be wearing that, he thought idly as he ran his eyes over the curve of her hips and narrow waist. Her dress was not made for barely eighteen-year olds. That dress was made for women willing to be f*cked long and hard.

Yelena Florence Valderama may look like a sex siren in her little black dress and long wavy brown hair, but she was just a little bratty girl playing dress up.

“Hey, Rad, baka matunaw na ‘yung babae n’yan.”

Ibinaling niya ang titig kay Joshua. Nakangisi ito sa kanya habang tumutungga ng beer.

Nakataas naman ang sulok ng mga labi ni Patrick habang nakatitig din sa grupo nina Yelena. “That’s one fine piece of ass,” sulsol ng dating kaklase.

Tipping his head back, he returned his gaze to the girl. Tumatawa ito sa kung anong sinabi ng kaibigan nito. The

pulsing lights danced across her face, splaying shadows and lights over her wide dark eyes and flushed cheeks. His eyes drifted to her full pink lips, and he lazily wondered what it would feel like to have those soft lips wrapped around his arousal.

He took a swig of his beer as his gaze flicked to the smooth column of Yelena's neck, down to the soft swell of her breasts. Patrick was right, he thought as he put his beer down; Yelena Valderama was one fine piece of ass, and he would enjoy f*cking with her.

“So, ano na, Rad, may ibubuga ba ang mga babae dito sa mga babae sa States?”

Ibinalik niya ang titig kay Joshua, at nakitang mapanukso ang tingin nito. May curiosity din doon at kaunting inggit. Rich preppy boy, poster boy noon si Joshua. Eighteen years old ang mga ito pero mukhang gatas pa rin dapat ang iniinom at hindi beer.

Physically, he was a year older than them, but in all other aspects, he had always been older than most twenty-five or thirty-year-olds. He never had the same innocence as most kids. Never had the same boyish excitement.

“I didn't come to the States to play around.”

Tumawa ang dalawang kausap.

“Of course, of course.” Tumungga ulit si Patrick ng beer nito. “But still, give us deets, bro. Come on, two years din tayong naging magkakaklase. Spill it.”

Umiling si Rad sa mga ito at bumalik ang titig niya kay Yelena. Nakaupo pa rin ito sa may bar, may kung anong alcoholic drink na iniinom. Sarcastic siyang ngumiti.

The little princess sure was getting naughty. He wondered what her father would say if the bastard found out sweet princess Yelena was not as sweet and innocent as everybody thought.

Tinawag niya ang isa sa mga server at lumapit ito sa kanila. May ibinulong siya rito at pasimpleng itinuro si Yelena. Kunot-noong napatitig din ang server sa dalaga.

“Do it,” utos niya.

Kahit lito pa rin, tumango ang server at umalis.

“What’s that?” usisa ni Joshua.

“Nothing.”

“Wow naman, Rad, ang damot mo naman. What was that?”

“Just a message from my father.”

“Yeah, yeah, fine, ‘wag mong sabihin. It must be nice to own a place like this.” Inilibot ng dating kaklase ang titig sa paligid ng club.

Makabasag-eardrum ang tugtog ng banda sa stage, at matatalas ang ilaw na pumupulso sa dance floor.

“Kapag naka-graduate na tayo ng college, let’s open a club like this. Tayong tatlo nina Patrick. Since your father owns this, you’d know the ropes, gawin natin, ha?”

Simple lang siyang tumango.

“Ba’t di ka na nga pala babalik sa *Ateneo*? Ba’t sa ibang high school ka pa papasok? One year na lang, bro, di mo pa tapusin kasama namin.”

“I have some things to settle,” sagot niya.

“Settle?” Tumawa ulit si Joshua. “Wow naman, ang bigat pakinggan. Ba’t meron bang may utang sa ‘yo sa

school na papasukan mo?”

Utang. He ran his fingertips up and down the cool beer bottle as he stared at the girl laughing with her friends as if the whole world was created to please her. She looked so happy and pretty he wanted to smash something and spill dirt and blood all over her.

Mapait siyang ngumiti. Napakababaw ng salitang ‘utang.’ It was more than that. They took more than that from him.

“Something like that,” mababang tugon ni Rad, nakatitig pa rin kay Yelena.



“God, Des, ‘wag kang kumuha ng pictures!” Tumatawang hinagilap ni Yelena ang smartphone ng kaibigan para pigilan ito sa pagkuha ng larawan. “Ebidensya ‘yan, ano ka ba!”

“Come on, tayo-tayo lang naman. Wala namang ibang makakakita nito. Cheese, dali!”

Tumatawang tinakpan niya ang mukha para hindi siya makunan. “No! You’ll never get evidence I was here!”

Binunggo ni Melissa ang balakang niya. “Ano ka ba, girl! Okay lang ‘yan.” Hinawi nito ang hanggang balik na buhok at ibinaba ang boses para sila lang ang makarinig. “Safe ang fake ID natin, walang makakaalam sa school. And ‘andito sina Kuya, we’re safe here.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Inabot niya ang baso ng piña colada at uminom. Kumalat ang lasa ng rum at pineapple sa kanyang bibig, at pinigilan niyang mag-squirm sa tapang ng flavor.

She couldn’t look awkward or inexperienced in front

of the bartenders and bouncers. Tatadyakan sila ng mga ito palabas ng club at baka i-report pa sila sa school nila kapag nalamang underage siya. She'd die of humiliation if her school and her parents would find out about this.

“Chill out, girl!” sulsol ni Desiree saka hininaan din ang boses. “Okay lang ‘yan. Your parents won’t find out. Kakuntsaba natin ang maids nina Melissa. Sasabihin nila na natutulog na tayo kasi napagod tayo sa pag-aaral.”

“Yeah, yeah.” She waved her hand to dismiss her friend.

She didn’t want to think about it. Lalo lang siyang kinakabahan. Ang akala ng mga magulang niya ay nag-overnight siya kina Melissa para mag-aral. But here she was, partying with her friends in a club.

“Come on, sayaw tayo!” Hinila sila ni Melissa. “It’s my birthday tomorrow, let’s just party!”

Ibinaba niya ang inumin at sumama sa mga ito sa gitna ng dance floor. The heat and beat of the music melted into her blood. Napaligiran sila ng mga nagsasayaw na katawan, at halos hindi na niya marinig ang tawanan ng mga kaibigan sa lakas ng pintig ng musika.

She laughed and threw up her arms, letting her body move into the pulsing rhythm. Her eyes drifted shut, and she moved her head from side to side. Ramdam niya sina Melissa at Desiree sa kanyang tabi, sumasabay rin sa pulso ng tugtog. Drops of sweat slithered down her back and between her breasts as heat rose around her. It felt good to dance. To just close her eyes and feel the rhythm pumping into her blood.

“Sa susunod na buwan, you’ll turn eighteen, too, and

we'll all be legit!” tili ni Melissa sa tabi niya.

She laughed and jumped up and down. Music hummed in her blood, pounded in her head. The energy and heat felt like a drug blasting through her bloodstream. Tila dinadala siya ng alon sa paggalaw ng mga katawan sa paligid nila. It felt awesome. God, she could—

She felt a tingling sensation at the base of her neck. Wala sa sariling napamulat siya. Colors and lights pulsed around her amid the writhing bodies on the dance floor. Pero tila nakatayo pa rin ang kanyang mga balahibo sa batok. It felt as if someone was watching her.

Nakakunot ang noo, nagpatuloy si Yelena sa pagsabay sa pintig ng musika at iginalang ang titig. She found herself staring into cool dark eyes. Sandali siyang natigilan, at bumunggo siya sa kung sino sa kanyang likuran.

“Sorry,” mabilis niyang paumanhin sa nakabangga na parang hindi naman napansin ang nangyari. Patuloy ang lahat sa pagtalon at pagsabay sa tugtog. Ibinalik niya ang titig sa lalaki sa isang sulok ng club.

And there he was, his gaze still fixed on her. A smile played at the corners of his mouth as he stared at her, and she felt prickles of heat crawling across her skin.

What the hell, Yelena? she thought, suddenly feeling uneasy.

“Girl, pupunta lang ako ng restroom!” sigaw ni Desiree sa tainga niya.

Wala sa sariling tumango siya sa kaibigan kahit nakatitig pa rin sa lalaki. Even while curled in his seat, he looked like a big dangerous cat. Iyong tipong biglang

tatalon at manghahabol ng biktima. Madilim sa puwesto nito at medyo malayo, pero aninag ni Yelena ang mga linya at anggulo sa mukha ng binata. Deep set eyes, strong nose, chiseled cheekbones and hard jaw, he looked like every painter's wet dream. He looked close to her age, yet he seemed... older, harder, stronger. Intimidating.

Nag-unat ito ng katawan at tumayo mula sa mesa nito. Nanlaki ang mga mata niya at muntikan na siyang mapaatras.

Tall, lean and powerful, he had badass pulsing through the air around him like static electricity. Her body froze as she watched him walk toward her.

“Yelena, what's wrong?” sigaw ni Melissa sa tabi niya.

Bumuka ang kanyang bibig para magsalita, pero parang paos ang lalamunan niya. Tumikom siya at lumunok.

“Nothing,” sagot niya sa kabila ng dagundong ng tugtog.

He wove through the throng of gyrating bodies, his cool gaze never leaving her face. May mga humawak at humila dito para sumayaw, pero nagawa nitong tanggalin ang hawak ng mga iyon nang walang hirap. Her heart thumped hard in her chest, and her blood roared in her ears. Tila nalunod ang musika sa paligid, at ang pintig ng kanyang puso at pagbugso ng dugo ang tanging naririnig niya.

He wore all black, and he could have been a fallen angel roaming the earth among mortals. Cheesy, she knew. Nahawa na yata siya kay Desiree na mahilig magbasa ng mga romance novel at manood ng mga telenovela.

Huminto ang lalaki sa harap niya, at tila magliliyab ang damit niya sa init na inilalabas nito. God, he was tall. 5'6" na siya at three inches ang heels niya, pero kailangan pa rin niyang tumingala nang todo para matitigan ito. And she was right, he was gorgeous. Dark eyes, a straight-edge nose, chiseled jaw and full sensual lips. Leonardo da Vinci would love this guy.

She opened her mouth to say something, but he just shook his head, and cupped her hips with his palms. The heat of his palms seeped through the fabric of her dress, spreading across her skin and permeating her flesh. Napasinghap siya at napahawak sa biceps ng estranghero.

His coiled muscles flexed under her fingers, and a slight flush tainted his cheekbones. He bent his head, his hot breath gusting over her ear.

“Just dance with me.” Hinila siya ng lalaki palapit sa katawan nito.

The naughty beat of drums vibrated through the dance floor, and shot up to her legs. Nakita ni Yelena sa gilid ng mata si Melissa, nakanganga at nanlalaki ang mga matang nakatitig sa kanya. Nilingon niya ito. Her friend grinned and gave her two thumbs up.

Oh, shoot...

She felt his big hand splay across her back, searing her skin with the heat of his palm. Parang mahihilo siya.

“What are you—”

He pulled her harder against him, pressed her breasts against the solid wall of his chest.

“You’re beautiful,” he murmured against her cheek.

Randam niya ang pag-iinit ng kanyang mga pisngi.

The music continued to pound around them, and he held her close as their bodies pulsed into the beat. He was hard and warm everywhere. His arms around her, his body curved against her and his...

Nanlaki ang mga mata niya. Oh, my God. He was....

She couldn't even say it.

Gusto niya itong itulak pero parang naparalisa siya. A foreign heat pulsed low in her stomach, awakening something she couldn't understand. Her heart wouldn't stop beating so fast.

Sinapo ng malaki at magaspang nitong palad ang kanyang batok at itinaas ang mukha niya. His eyes were dark pools of liquid heat.

At the back of her mind, someone was screaming at her to stop it. *Danger! Danger! sigaw nito. This was out of your league!* tili nito.

But she felt like a moth mesmerized by the flame. Beautiful, enticing, fatally compelling...

She would burn, she could already feel the fire licking along her skin, but she could not stop it. He was beautiful in a wild, primitive way. Like fire, like the sea, like a freaking erupting volcano.

He leaned toward her and her breath hitched.

She knew self-defense. Her father had always been overprotective, so she knew how to take care of herself. It wouldn't get out of hand. She could handle it. And Melissa's brothers were around. Nothing could go wrong. She's safe. She's a big girl.

Just a taste.

His mouth brushed against hers and it felt like she was jolted with electricity. She gasped against his mouth, her hands fisting in his shirt.

His grip tightened on her nape, his fingers tangling in her hair. He tugged at her locks, and the bite of pain sent shivers of heat through her veins.

Oh, God...

His gaze bore into hers, and she was drowning, free falling...

His mouth covered hers and the world started spinning. Hot, wet, and soft. He tasted like beer and lemon. And mint. And him. Yelena was sure that strong, tangy flavor was all him.

Bumigat ang mga talukap niya at kusang sumara ang mga mata. She pressed harder against him, her arms winding around his neck. Hard, warm and solid, he surrounded her. He smelled a little like smoke and something cold and woodsy. His tongue tangled with hers, stroking her deep, and he groaned in her mouth. She felt the vibration across his hard chest, thrumming against her own breasts. Heat suffused her blood, flooded her head. And everything felt sharper, his scent and taste stronger.

His hand flexed against her back, pulling her closer, pressing her harder. Mas nakakalasing ang lasa nito kaysa sa piña colada.

“Oh, my God! Yelena!”

Napatalon siya sa sigaw ni Desiree malapit sa kanya.

Hinila niya ang sarili mula sa yakap ng binata, at

namimilog ang mga mata na napatitig dito. Hinihinala ito kagaya niya, namumula ang mga labi dahil sa halik nila. Hunger, iyon lamang ang maitatawag niya sa nasa mga mata nito. The wild lights gleamed across the hard lines of his face, sharpening the angles, highlighting the strong curves.

Oh, my God... Napaatras siya.

Then, his mouth curved into a smile, the hunger in his eyes fading into cold emptiness. Nakakaloko ang tingin nito sa kanya.

“You’re easy,” he said.

Iyon lang at tumalikod ito sa kanya.

Pakiramdam ng dalaga ay may sumampal sa kanya.

“Yelena!” sigaw ulit ni Desiree. Naramdaman niya ang paghawak nito sa kanyang balikat.

May sinasabi pa ito at si Melissa pero hindi niya maintindihan. Pumipintig ang lahat ng ugat sa kanyang katawan, at ayaw tumigil ng pagbugso ng dugo sa mga tainga. Mainit na mainit ang mga pisngi niya at parang ang bigat ng ulo.

The cold eyes, the derisive smile...

“You’re easy.”

Parang mag-aapoy siya sa hiya. Hinagip niya ang mga kamay ng dalawang kaibigan. Marupok ang tinig ni Yelena nang magsalita siya. “Let’s get out of here.”

Hinila niya ang mga ito palabas ng dance floor.



He watched Yelena walk out of the club.

“F*ck, Rad! What was that?” bulalas ni Joshua nang

makalapit sa kanya.

“The hell, bro. Ba’t di mo sinabi sa ‘min na kilala mo ‘yung chic na ‘yon. F*ck, she’s hot,” dagdag ni Patrick.

Hinanap ng mga mata ni Rad si Desmond, ang server na tinawag niya kanina. Nakita niyang palapit ito sa kanya.

“Nakuha mo?” tanong niya nang makalapit ito.

Tumango ang lalaki. “Yes, sir.” Ibinigay nito sa kanya ang isang maliit na case.

Naglabas siya ng dalawang one thousand bill sa wallet at ibinigay sa server. Tumango ito at umalis.

“Whoa!” Tumawa si Joshua. “Ano ‘yan?”

“Not drugs,” malamig niyang sagot. He would never deal with drugs again. He had enough of that. Ibinulsa niya ang case sakto sa pagtunog ng kanyang cell phone. Inilabas niya iyon at nakitang *Father* ang nakalagay sa screen. His fingers closed around the phone. Yes, Renato Javier would always be the only man he’d call father.

Binalingan ni Rad ang dalawang kasama. “I need to take this.” Naglakad siya palayo sa mga ito at tinungo ang staff room. “Papa.”

“You saw her?”

Pumasok siya sa silid at isinara ang pinto. “Yes.”

“What can you say about her?”

Naalala niya si Yelena. Ang mahabang buhok, ang malalaking mata, ang mapupulang labi. Her sweet heady scent, her soft skin, her honey-like taste. He pursed his lips. “Rich, spoiled, privileged.”

“Like the man who raised her.”

Mapait siyang napangiti. “Like the man who raised

her.”

“He’s going to try to sway you when he finds out about you. He’s going to spin lies and lies to deceive you.”

“I know he will.”

“Never believe him. He’s a monster.”

Tumitig si Rad sa dingding. It was red and black, the color of blood and death; of misery and pain and nothingness.

Nakita niya sa isipan ang isang babae, pagod ang mga mata at payat ang katawan. Umiiyak, hirap na hirap.

Tumiim-bagang siya at kumuyom ang palad. “I know.”

“Happy birthday, Rad.”

Isa pang imahe ang nakita niya. Ang parehong babae, nakangiti, maliwanag ang mga mata, masayang nakatitig sa kanya. “*Happy birthday, Rad!*”

He swallowed the lump of pain in his throat.

“Yes,” he muttered, “happy f*cking birthday.”

2

“Yelena, hurry up, don’t forget to eat breakfast!”

“Yes, Mom!” sagot niya rito mula sa silid.

Hinagip niya ang bag sa dresser at muling sinipat ang sarili sa salamin saka nag-apply ng frosted pink lip gloss.

Pero natigilan siya nang lumapat ang lip gloss brush sa kanyang mga labi. An image flashed through her mind. Hot, wet, firm lips moving against hers. His strong body around her, the heat of his skin, the scent of smoke and rain and—

Umiling ang dalaga sa sarili at mabilis na ibinalik ang brush sa lip gloss. God, she needed to stop thinking of that prick!

“Yelena—”

“Yes, Mom!” Tumakbo siya palabas ng kuwarto niya. Bumaba siya ng hagdan at tinungo ang kitchen. Naroon ang kanyang mama, nagtitimpla ng favorite energy drink niya sa counter.

“Morning!” Nakangiting lumapit siya rito at matunog na hinalikan ang mga pisngi ng ina.

“Morning,” bati din nito. Pinapaliguan ng malamalam na pang-umagang araw ang itim na itim na buhok ng ginang. Forty-six na ang mama niya, pero mukha lang itong nasa

thirties. Her mom's chic fashion taste also helped. Bumagay sa balingkinitan nitong katawan at maputing balat ang suot nitong light brown polka dot pencil dress.

“Ang lakas ng Jacqueline Kennedy vibes n’yo, Mom. Si Dad?” Umupo si Yelena at naglagay ng fried rice sa plato.

Sandaling nagtaas ito ng tingin, pagkatapos ay maliit na ngumiti. “Nasa Blue Room. It’s September 9 today.”

Napatigil siya sa akmang pagsubo ng kanin. “Oh.”

Tumango ang kausap. “Mamaya pa siya papasok sa opisina. You know how he is when it’s September 9.”

Tumitig siya sa kanyang plato at absentminded na tinusok ang tapa at itlog doon.

“You’re going to be late, ‘wag mong paglaruan ‘yang pagkain,” sita sa kanya ng mama niya.

Maliit siyang ngumiti. “Opo.”

Sumubo siya at itinuon ang atensyon sa almusal.

“Sabay kayo ni Dad na aalis?”

“No, mauuna ako. May meeting ako sa architect ng resort sa Batangas.”

“Then go, you don’t have to cook breakfast for me everyday, Mom. Nand’yan si Ate Dita.”

Kumunot-noo ang mama niya at hindi niya napigilang ngumiti. Her mom might not be as overprotective as her dad, but her mom could be just as fussy. Tingin yata nito ay five years old pa rin siya na kailangang i-monitor sa pagkain at pagligo.

“I’m a big girl, Mom. Stop babying me.”

Pinatakan siya nito ng halik sa ulo. “You’ll always be my baby.”

Umakyat si Yelena sa silid para mag-toothbrush pagkatapos kumain. Napadaan siya sa Blue Room, at napatigil siya sa pinto noon. She hesitated, then she bit her lip and knocked. “Dad?”

Hindi ito sumagot kaya ibinaba niya ang kamay. She should go. Her dad wanted this alone time with *him*. She shouldn't intrude and—

“Come in, Yelena.”

Napatuwid siya ng tayo at napalipad ang titig ulit sa pinto.

“Nakabukas ‘yan,” sagot ng kanyang dad mula sa silid.

Muli niyang kinagat ang pang-ibabang labi, at pinihit ang seradura pabukas.

Nakaupo ang tatay niya sa isang black leather couch, may hawak na parihabang kahon sa kandugan. Nakabalot iyon ng blue wrapper at may blue ribbon din.

Napatitig siya sa silid. Light blue ang ceiling at dark blue ang mga dingding. May malaking kama sa gitna, at napapaliguan ng sinag ng araw ang buong silid mula sa malaking bintana. Dati ay puno ng laruan ang silid—trains, bears, basketballs, and baseball bats. May mga glow-in-the-dark stars at planets din noon sa mga dingding at kisame. Pero wala na iyon ngayon. Napalitan na iyon ng giant LED TV, malalaking speakers at personal computer. The child's room was a young adult's room now.

Nagtaas ng tingin ang kanyang ama at maliit na ngumiti sa kanya. “He'll be nineteen today.”

Tumango si Yelena, at umupo sa tabi nito. “Ano ‘yan, Dad?”

“The newest *iPhone* model. Do you think he’ll like it?”

Sumikip ang kanyang lalamunan pero tumango siya. Her father had just given her one the other day. “He’ll love it.”

“We’ll we ever find him, anak?”

Yumakap siya sa ama. Was loneliness and grief contagious? She thought so. Because she could feel her dad’s pain in her bones.

“We will, Dad. We will.”



“Sige, Kuya Simeon, mamaya na lang. Ingat sa pag-drive.” Isinara ni Yelena ang pinto ng kotse at pumasok na sa gate ng school.

The early morning air felt cool to her skin, but damn, magiging frizzy na naman ang hair niya dahil sa humidity. “Yelena!” Yumakap sa kanya mula sa likod si Desiree at muntikan na siyang madapa.

“Des!” Tumawa siya. “Ano ba!”

“Ooh! I like your hair today!” Hinapulus-haplos nito ang kulot niyang buhok. “How’d you do that! They look so pretty!”

“Headband curls. Madali lang, kailangan mo lang iwan overnight and voila! Pretty curls in the morning.”

“I love it!” Hinawakan nito ang mahaba at tuwid na tuwid na buhok. “Tingin mo uubra sa hair ko? Ang hirap kulutin nito. Laging tumutuwid agad. Ayoko namang gumamit lagi ng heat curlers, nakaka-damage ng hair. ‘Yang hair mo kasi madaling kulutin. Naturally wavy na, madaling sumunod.”

“P’wede rin ‘yang sa ‘yo. Buhok din ‘yan, ‘no.”

“Yelena! Des!” Yumakap din sa kanila ang kadarating lang na si Melissa. “Ooh! I love your hair!”

Tumawa siya nang hinawakan din nito ang buhok niya. Kinawit din nito ang braso sa niya.

“Hey,” untag ni Desiree, “sigurado ka bang hindi mo kilala ‘yung hottie last Saturday?”

Nanigas siya sa narinig. If she licked her lips, she was sure she could still taste him. Umiling si Yelena sa sarili. God, she was turning into a pervert. “No, hindi nga.”

“Sayang, he’s really hawt! Parang siya ‘yung bida sa pinanood ko ngayon, si Sebastian Rulli! Although mas parang mas malapit siya sa bad boy image ni Ivan Sanchez. You should see him in *La Tempestad*! He’s so badass and psycho and awful and hot!”

Pinaikot ni Yelena ang mga mata. “Well, he’s a prick,” pakli niya. Tinitigan siya ng dalawa. “What?”

“Well...” Ngumisi si Melissa.

“It’s nothing, okay?” bulalas niya, ramdam ang pamumula ng mga pisngi. “He’s a jerk and I was tipsy. He’s a first-class a*shole.”

Tumango si Desiree at kinawit din ang braso sa kanya. “Yes. We agree!”

“Okay, okay,” suko ni Melissa. “Anyway, lumabas na ‘yung result ng quiz sa Math last Friday. Check natin sa labas ng room.”

Sabay-sabay silang naglakad sa pagitan ng matatayog na puno ng acacia papunta sa kanilang building. Isa iyon sa mga paborito niyang lugar sa kanilang school. She loved

the soaring trees lining the streets intertwining above to form a canopy of branches and leaves. Sa kanilang kanan ay ang malawak na open field kung saan may mga naglalaro ng soccer at baseball. Kapag ganitong umaga at katatapos lang umulan nang nakaraang gabi, malamig ang hangin at amoy-kalikasan ang paligid.

“I bet you got a perfect score, Yelena,” Desiree blabbered as they climbed the stone steps of their building. Like most of the buildings in their school, makabago at high end iyon. Glass ang front wall entrance nito at irregular geometric shape ang kabuoan ng stone gray na gusali.

“It’s not fair. You’re already pretty and rich and you’re also smart. Tama na, girl. Ipapakulam na kita.”

She grinned and patted her friend’s head. “You just have to study harder.”

Tumawa si Desiree at huminto sila sa tapat ng pinto ng room nila. Agad pumunta ang paningin niya sa tuktok ng listahang nakapaskil sa pinto. Hindi na niya tiningnan ang ibang mga pangalan. Napako na sa top two ang kanyang paningin.

Geraldine Fuentes 100 %

Yelena Florence Valderama 97%

Ninety-freaking-seven. *What the eff?*

“Oh, you didn’t get a hundred again, Yelena?”

Nilingon niya ang babaeng nagsalita. Nakangiti ito sa kanya, nakahalukipkip ang matatabang mga braso. Frizzy ang hair nito at parang mga wires ang bangs. God, tingin ni Yelena ay hindi ito tumitingin sa salamin. Her bangs were so out of style. And the pink headband and ponytail? *Puh-*

lease. Like seriously, what was this girl thinking? *Hello, teh, may rebond na!* Mukha itong overweight version ni *Edna Mode* sa *The Incredibles*. Frizzy nga lang ang hair nito at hindi oily kagaya ni *Edna*. Puwede rin itong younger at fat version ni *Umbridge* sa *Harry Potter*. Pareho silang mukhang palaka.

She pasted her sweet smile. “Hi, Geraldine.”

Tumango ito at binalingan ang dalawa niyang kasama saka maikli ring ngumiti. “Hi.”

Pilit na ngumiti sina Melissa at Desiree. “Hi,” sabay na bati ng mga ito.

“Excuse me.” Dumaan ito sa pagitan nila para makapasok sa kuwarto.

“She’s so arrogant,” usal ni Melissa.

“Feelingera,” dagdag ni Desiree.

“Fatso,” sapat niya. Tumango ang dalawa. “Like really, ang lapad niya, ‘no? Mukha siyang penguin. And she really has to do something about her hair. Gaano ba kahirap mag-ayos ng buhok? Those bangs? My God. What the eff is she thinking? Ang nipis ng bangs, di ba? ‘Tapos, parang wire sa tigas? Mukhang nilagyan pa yata niya ng hair spray. I feel sorry for her actually.”

“I agree.” Napahawak si Desiree sa sarili nitong buhok. “She just looks so sad. No friends, no extracurricular activities. Pero s’abi niya, may boyfriend daw siya.”

Sabay-sabay silang tumawa.

“Ilusyonadang froglet,” natatawang sabi ni Yelena. “Boyfriend, really? Siya? Saan, sa panaginip niya? Puno siya ng pantasya.”

“Or puwedeng totoo,” kontra ni Melissa. “Pero good luck na lang sa hitsura ng boyfriend niya.”

Sabay-sabay ulit silang tumawa.

“I bet kagaya niyang majuba,” aniya. “Mister and Miss Piggy.”

Pumalakpak si Desiree. “Or parang taga-*Mordor!* Rashashorawsho!” tumatawang gaya nito sa language sa *Lord of the Rings*.

Umiling si Melissa. “I don’t even want to think about it.”

Tumatawang nagpasukan sila sa classroom.

Umupo si Yelena sa kanyang desk at inilabas ang libro para sa first period. She would get a hundred on the next test. She would make sure of it.

Pumasok ang Home Room at Mathematics teacher nila nang tumunog ang bell.

“Morning, class,” bati ni Mrs. Laurencio.

“Morning, Ma’am,” sabay-sabay nilang sagot.

She frowned as she stared at Mrs. Laurencio. Nakasuot ito ng standard uniform na blue blouse at knee-length pencil-cut skirt gaya ng ibang mga teachers nang araw na iyon. Good for Mrs. Laurencio at bagay sa morena nitong balat ang lahat ng kulay ng uniforms ng mga guro. Some of their teachers weren’t so lucky.

Nakapusod sa isang eleganteng French twist ang buhok ng kanyang guro, at halos wala rin itong makeup. Mrs. Laurencio had always looked good and good at teaching. Pero nagdududa na siya rito. Lagi nitong binibigyan ng extra points si Geraldine. *What the hell?*

“You have a new classmate and he’s starting today. Nahuli siya ng pasok dahil nasa US sila ng father niya nitong nakaraang buwan dahil sa business. Be nice to him. I expect all of you to make him feel comfortable in our school.”

May halong panlalaki ng mga mata si Mrs. Laurencio bilang babala sa kanila. Hindi niya napigilang mag-angat ng kilay.

She would bet super yaman ng tatay ng bagong transferee kaya parang tinatakot sila ng teacher nila na maging mabait dito. Iyon din siguro ang dahilan kaya tinanggap ito ng school kahit isang buwan mula nang magsimula ang school year. Baka galing pa ito sa angkan ng mga pulitiko.

She inspected her fingernails. *Well, that’s great.* She hoped they could be friends.

“Everyone, meet your new classmate, Rad Damian Javier.”

Itinaas ng dalaga ang tingin sa matangkad na lalaking pumasok sa classroom. At parang sinuntok siya sa tiyan ng matabang kamao ni Geraldine. Umawang ang kanyang mga labi.

“Hi,” he said, his cool gaze absently passing over the faces in their class.

Bumagsak ang kamay niya sa desk. *Oh. My... Sh*t!*

She’s going to faint, she’s going to scream, she’s going to vomit!

He looked more intimidating in the morning light. He was over six feet, she was sure of it. She never thought their

uniform looked special, but now that he was wearing it, she was sure the plain white polo and black pants could be used in a runway show. The sun bathed him in golden light, warming his skin and dark hair. His strong bone structure was so defined he would make sculptors weep. He was so goddamn gorgeous it was infuriating.

Sa loob ng ilang segundo, walang ibang nagawa si Yelena kundi tumitig lang dito. Ramdam din niya ang gulat nina Desiree, pero hindi niya magawang lungunin ang mga ito. Hindi niya maialis ang titig sa lalaking nasa harapan ng classroom.

His gaze flicked to hers, and the corners of his mouth turned up in a smirk.

What the f was he smiling at? The jerk! Napakuyom-palad siya. *Dear Lord, why is this happening?*

“Okay, Rad, you may seat behind Yelena.”

Nanlaki ang kanyang mga mata at muntik na siyang mapatalon sa kanyang upuan. As if her bad luck wasn't enough! Tinuro siya ng teacher nila at parang gusto niyang magprotesta.

He sauntered toward her, and she felt like screaming. Iniiwas niya ang tingin dito at pinigil ang paghinga habang palapit ito nang palapit. She could actually *feel* him coming toward her. Parang may inilalabas itong energy field at bumabangga iyon sa kanya sa bawat hakbang nito.

Maybe he didn't recognize her?

Oh, God, please... She couldn't do this!

He passed her, his knuckles lightly brushing her arm. Parang nakuryenteng iniiwas niya ang braso. Naramdaman

ni Yelena na umupo ito sa likuran niya, at parang may libu-libong maiinit na karayom na tumusok sa kanyang batok. Napapikit siya. If the school would find out about last Saturday...

Gusto niyang tumili. She couldn't even think about it.

Naramdaman niyang may nahulog sa kanyang likuran, at lumuhod si Rad para pulutin iyon. Madiin niyang kinagat ang pang-ibabang labi, lalo nang maramdaman niyang hinawakan nito ang likod ng kanyang upuan.

Pasimpleng nitong inilapit ang bibig sa tainga niya nang tumayo ito. His hot breath burned the side of her neck and all her muscles stiffened. "Relax, Yelena, or everyone's going to notice."

Then, he was gone. Okay, so he recognized her. *Great.* Pass her the kitchen knife now. She had to murder somebody.

Sh*t. Sh*t. Sh*t.

Nagmulat siya at pinilit ang sariling tumitig sa harapan ng klase.



"Okay, class, ipo-post ko mamaya ang mga magpa-partner at ang topics para sa project n'yo."

Tumayo ang Social Studies teacher nila at dinampot ang mga libro nito. Tumayo rin ang isang kaklase nila para tulungan si Mrs. Magalona na dalhin ang ibang gamit nito.

Nagtayuan na rin ang mga classmates nila para sa lunch period.

Her classes had passed by in a blur. Ni hindi niya maalala kung ano ang sinabi ni Mrs. Magalona five minutes

ago. Thank God at walang quizzes nang araw na iyon. Else, she would have tanked them.

Naramdaman ni Yelena na tumayo si Rad sa likuran niya, at agad din siyang tumayo para harapin ito.

Why the hell was he so tall? Kailangan niyang dagdagan ang heels niya. Hindi tama na nakatingala lagi siya kapag kaharap ito. She glared at him. Nag-angat lang ito ng kilay.

“We need to talk,” madiin niyang simula.

His face remained impassive, his gaze steady. “Talk.”

“Not here.”

Nakita niyang nakatitig sa kanya sina Melissa; may pag-aalala sa mga mata. Umiling siya sa mga kaibigan at iginalaw ang ulo para sabihing mauna na sa canteen ang mga ito.

Halatang nag-alangan, pero tumango sina Desiree at lumabas ng silid.

May ilan pa silang classmate na hindi lumabas at mukhang sa loob ng classroom magla-lunch. She couldn't kill him with an audience! Hinagip niya ang kamay ni Rad at hinila ito palabas ng room.

His hand was big, and it felt rough against her palm. Umiling ang dalaga sa sarili. She couldn't believe she was thinking about the texture of his palms right now.

Hinila niya ito patungo sa isang bakanteng classroom, at ini-lock ang pinto nang makapasok sila. Hinarap niya ito. “Don't you dare tell anyone about last Saturday.”

His lips curved into a derisive smile. Sumandal ito sa malapit sa bintana, at pinaliguan ito ng tanghaling araw. “Tell what? That sweet princess Yelena isn't exactly sweet

and innocent?”

“What?” Her hands balled into fists. “You misunderstand. We were just fooling around last Saturday. We’re not like that. It’s harmless.”

“Right,” he drawled, his dark gaze cold and judgmental. “I wonder kung ‘yan din ang tingin ng mga teachers dito. How old are you, Yelena?”

Oh, God. Kailangan na ba talaga niya ng kitchen knife ngayon? “None of your business.”

“Ah.” Lumawak ang ngiti nito at gumapang ang panunuya sa mga mata. “Defensive. I bet you’re not even eighteen yet.”

“That’s none of your—” Napaurong siya nang humakbang ang lalaki. “What are you doing?” asik niya.

“Clubbing and drinking while you’re still underage.” Umiling ang kausap at tumaltak. Patuloy ito sa paghakbang habang patuloy siya sa pag-urong.

Pilit niyang pinatatag ang boses. “Who said I’m still underage?”

“Madaling malaman ‘yon. I can ask the teachers while I tell them about your rendezvous last Saturday—”

“Don’t you dare!”

“Or what?”

Bumangga ang likod niya sa pader. Trapped, she felt her heart going into overdrive. What was she thinking? Parang magandang ideya kanina na hilahin niya ito sa isang pribadong lugar para makausap. Pero ngayon ay parang hindi na. Tila kinakain ng presensya ng lalaki ang buong paligid at kinukulong siya. *We’re in school*, paalala

niya sa sarili. Isang sigaw lang at magtatakbuhan ang mga estudyante at teacher para sakloloan siya.

She's safe. She knew she was safe.

But it didn't seem to matter as he stalked toward her. The impassive look in his dark eyes sent tingles of uneasiness down her spine. The hard set of his jaw, the firm line of his sensual mouth, they all screamed danger to her.

Her chest rose and fell as she breathed hard, and his gaze flickered down to her breasts. May kung anong init na gumapang sa mga mata ng binata, at may kumalat ding init sa kanyang dibdib paakyat sa leeg at mga pisngi.

"Don't look at me like that," singhal ni Yelena.

"Like what?" Ipinatong nito ang mga braso sa pader sa magkabilang bahagi ng kanyang ulo.

He leaned down until she could feel his hot fragrant breath against her lips. Her body trembled. He was so close she could feel the heat radiating off his body and smell the clean warm scent of his skin. It made her dizzy.

Inilapit ni Rad ang mga labi sa kanyang tainga at parang may ilang boltahe ng kuryente ang umarko sa katawan niya.

"What will your parents do if they find out you kissed a total stranger, Yelena?"

"Shut up, don't drag my parents into this."

"Alam ba nila na nasa club ka nang gabing 'yon? I bet they don't. I was surprised when I saw how different you are here."

She felt his fingertips tracing a lazy line up her neck, and she fought the urge to shiver.

“Sweet, prim and proper. So different from the girl who kissed me last Saturday.”

Itinaas ni Yelena ang mga kamay at inilapat sa dibdib ng lalaki para itulak ito. Pero para siyang tumutulak ng pader. She could feel his hard muscles flex underneath his polo and shirt.

His fingertips brushed her jaw, and lightly grazed her lower lip. Heat flickered from his fingertips and the warmth spread across her skin. Bumaon ang mga daliri niya sa kanyang mga palad at iniwas niya ang mukha rito.

“What will the teachers and your parents say, Yelena?”

“You don’t have evidence. You don’t have—”

“Ever heard of CCTV cameras?”

Tuluyang nanigas ang sikhmura ng dalaga. Lumipad ang tingin niya kay Rad. Sunlight bathed him from behind, drenching his stony face in the shadows.

“You’re lying.”

“Am I?” His lids had gone heavy as if he was sleepy, but the heat in those dark eyes was anything but lethargic. And to her horror, she felt something equally hot suffusing her blood.

“I don’t believe you.”

“Want to try?”

“Why... Why are you doing this?” anas ni Yelena.

“Hmm... why, huh? I guess I’m bored.” His lips curved, and his dark gaze drifted down to her mouth. “What will they do if they find out, Yelena?”

“Don’t.” She hated the plea in her voice.

Puwedeng nagsisinungaling lang ito. Pero kung

totoong may footage...

The image of her parents' shock and worried face made her chest cramp. And the school. The memory of Rad kissing her pierced through her thoughts. Her skimpy dress, her arms around him, her body moving against him. Kung makikita iyon ng mga taga-school, kung lalabas iyon sa social media at makikita ng lahat... God, she'd never be valedictorian. Kahit salutatorian ay malabo na rin. Worst case scenario, she would be expelled.

Mariin siyang pumikit.

"My father owns the bar," usal nito, "I have the footage, want to see it?"

Gumalaw si Rad at nagmulat siya. At nanigas ang buo niyang katawan nang makita ang screen ng phone nito. Malinaw ang kuha at nakasentro sa kanya na para bang siya talaga ang kinukunan. Kitang-kita ang mukha ni Yelena sa screen. Tumatawa siya at tumatalon kasabay nina Desiree sa dance floor. Her skin was flushed, her long hair messy and glinting in the sharp lights. Then, Rad was in front of her.

Gusto niyang ipikit ang mga mata para huwag makita ang susunod na mangyayari. Pero nanatili siyang nakatitig sa screen na para bang naparalisa ang buo niyang katawan. His arms came around her on the screen, and she saw herself melting into him. And the kiss...

Oh, God. Did she really kiss him like that?

Nakapalupot sa leeg ng lalaki ang kanyang mga braso, at nakadikit siya sa katawan ni Rad na para bang gusto niyang nakawin ang init nito. She watched herself move

against him.

“You used fake IDs. Walang liability ang club sa pag-serve ng alcoholic drink o pagpapapasok sa inyo. At kung meron man, malamang fine lang ang hingin sa club. But you, Yelena, what will happen if the school sees this?”

Itinaas niya ang paningin dito. Matigas ang ekspresyon ni Rad at malamig ang titig sa kanya. Yet even through his coldness, he was beautiful. He was a demon with a face of a god.

“Why are you doing this?”

He shrugged, his cold eyes flat and indifferent. “Boredom.”

Sarcastic siyang tumawa. “You carry CCTV footages of strangers you’ve kissed on your phone because of boredom?”

“I thought it was entertaining. You were very responsive and eager. You practically ate my mouth, Yelena.”

Namula ang kanyang mukha sa magkahalong galit at hiya. Her hand itched to slap him, but her parents did not raise a violent child.

Stupid. She was so stupid. She shouldn’t have gone out with Melissa and Desiree to the club that night.

“What do you want?” nanginginig niyang tanong.

His mouth curved, and she felt her heart thudding painfully fast. His smile made the hairs on her nape stand up.

“What do I want?” nakakalokong tanong nito. “That’s a loaded question, Yelena.”

“Just spit it out. Ano’ng kailangan mo para tumahimik

ka? Iyon ang point nito, di ba?”

“What?” Mapang-uyam ang tono ng kausap. “That’s it? No threats, no fire? You’re disappointing me.”

“Let’s cut the bull, Rad. Alam mong na-corner mo ‘ko. Great. Perfect. You win. Applause. Applause. As long as you have that video, I’ll be at your mercy. And I’ll never even be completely sure that you’ll destroy all copies. But there’s nothing I can do, is there? I don’t want my parents or the school to find out about this, so all I can do is do what you want me to do and pray that would be enough to shut you up.”

The bastard laughed. Nag-init ang bumbunan ni Yelena. Maybe she could use the heavy globe sitting on one of the shelves instead of a kitchen knife.

Bumalik ang titig ni Rad sa kanyang mukha, at naroon pa rin ang nakakalokong ngiti sa mga labi. “Well, that was straight.”

“What do you want?” ulit niya.

His dark eyes cooled, and his jaw hardened. Parang gusto niyang bawiin ang tanong, pero kinagat niya ang dila. There was just something about him that was... terrifying. Something that seemed too deep and too dark for her to comprehend.

Then, he shook his head and pushed himself away from her. Parang gumaang ang hangin at nawala ang mabigat na presyon sa kanyang dibdib. Nanghihinang napahawak ang babae sa pader.

“One month,” matigas na sambit ni Rad.

Lumipad ang tingin niya rito. Nakasandal ulit ito sa

may bintana, malamig ang mga matang nakatitig sa kanya. “I want you to do everything I want you to do for one month.”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me.”

“You’re crazy if you think—”

“One month.”

“One week!” F*ck! Umungol si Yelena. Gusto niyang inuntog ang noo sa pader. Oh, God, what was she doing?

“One month,” ulit ng kausap.

“One week.”

“You think you can bargain with me? You forget who’s the—”

“One week and three days.”

“Are you trying to be funny?”

“One week and five days.”

He leaned back against the window and crossed his arms, the fabric of his polo stretching over the hard muscles of his shoulders. “No.”

“You’re an a*shole.”

“You just figured that out?”

“Two weeks,” she bit out. “I’ll do whatever you want in two bloody weeks. That’s it. If you don’t want that, go ahead and do whatever you want. I don’t freaking care!”

Impit siyang tumili at ibinaon ang mukha sa mga palad.

What was she doing? She should just come clean and tell her parents and teachers about what she did. Mas malala ang pinapasok niyang ito. Para siyang umiwas madulas para lang malunod. Walang sense na makipag-

usap sa mga kagaya ni Rad. He would ask and ask and ask, and it would be more demanding each time. She should just—

“Fine. Two weeks.”

Marahas na umangat ang mukha ng dalaga.

His hard mouth thinned in annoyance, and a muscle ticked in his jaw. He looked like he had tasted something bitter, and he wanted to spit it out on her face. “Two weeks. You’ll do everything I say in two weeks.” Itinulak nito ang sarili palayo sa bintana at malalaki ang hakbang na tinungo ang pinto.

“You mean—”

“Shut up,” marahas nitong putol sa kanya sabay hinila pabukas ang pinto. “Meet me at the gate after class.”

Lumabas ito at ibinalibag pasara ang pinto.

3

“Yelena, don’t do this!” Pumulupot ang mga daliri ni Melissa sa braso niya at namimilog ang mga mata nang umiling sa kanya. “Baka ano’ng gawin n’un sa ‘yo!”

“Oo nga, Yelena.” Hinawakan din siya ni Desiree sa balikat. “We don’t know him, and now he’s blackmailing you. Delikado ‘to.”

“I know.”

Tumingala siya sa kisame habang nakahawak sa counter. Malamig ang semento at lalong nakadagdag iyon sa panlalamig ng kanyang mga kamay. Napatitig siya sa salamin ng girl’s restroom. Medyo namumutla siya dahil sa kaba.

“I know. Chances are, he won’t hold his end of the bargain. Ang totoo, we haven’t even talked about his end of the bargain. I have to clear that with him. He has to destroy all copies after two weeks. But of course, ano’ng assurance ko, di ba? Ang naiisip ko na lang ngayon, maybe I can find out something about him in these two weeks and use that against him.”

“Still too dangerous, girl,” pilit ni Melissa.

Niyakap siya ni Desiree mula sa likod. “We’re so sorry, Yelena. Dapat hindi ka namin pinilit—”

“It’s my fault. I kissed him.”

Bumuntong-hininga ang dalawa.

“He’s still an a*shole,” usal ni Desiree.

“I second the motion,” dagdag ni Melissa. “Anyway, here.”

May kinuha ito mula sa bag at inilagay sa kamay niya. Pepper spray at taser iyon. “Dalhin mo. My brothers gave that to me. Be careful, okay?”

“Yes, thank you.”

Bumukas ang pinto ng restroom at pumasok ang isang estudyante. They’d better get out now before somebody overhears them talking about her problem. The last thing she needed was more complications. Ipinasok ni Yelena sa bag ang mga ibinigay ni Melissa at lumabas sila ng restroom.

“Tatawag ako sa bahay para sabihing hindi agad ako uuwi at nasa bahay n’yo ‘ko, Melissa, for a school project.”

“Sige, okay lang. I’ll cover for you.”

Thank God for her friends. Matamlay na ngumiti si Yelena at bumalik sila sa classroom. Agad nahila ang mga mata niya sa upuan ni Rad.

And there he was, lounging like a king as their classmates surrounded him. He looked bored as he sat there, a polite smile on his hard mouth, a passive haze in his dark eyes.

“The red *Ferrari* outside is yours?” manghang tanong ni Paul, isa sa mga classmates nila at captain ng basketball team ng kanilang school. Kasing-tangkad ito ni Rad at malaki rin ang pangangatawan. Mestizo rin ito gaya ng

huli. But unlike their new classmate, Paul looked cute and harmless.

“Yes.”

“Wow. I want that for graduation, but I think I’ll be stuck with a *BMW*. Hey, you play basketball?”

“Sometimes. But I’m not particularly good at it.”

“Hindi nga?” Tumawa si Paul. “Yang tangkad mong ‘yan? Subukan natin minsan, siguradong lalakas lalo ang team natin kapag sumali ka.”

The other guy merely smiled, and lifted his gaze to meet hers.

Gusto ni Yelena na bigyan ito ng dirty finger. His smile turned cocky, but his dark eyes hardened like diamonds.

Pilit niyang iniwas ang tingin dito at lumapit na sa upuan niya. She could feel his gaze as she sat at her desk.

“Class, take your seats,” bungad ng English teacher nila.

“Let’s play ball some time, Rad,” alok ni Paul bago bumalik sa upuan nito.

Kumuha ng marker ang teacher nila at isinulat ang *Animal Farm* sa whiteboard. She stared hard at their teacher’s short curly hair and tried her best to forget about the terrorist sitting behind her.

“Everyone has read the book, yes?” Humarap si Miss Cruz sa klase.

Nagtaas ng kamay si Jason.

“Yes, Jason?” tawag dito ng teacher.

“We have a new classmate, Ma’am.”

“Oh, yes.” Hinagilap ng tingin nito ang lalaki, at sumilay ang ngiti sa maamo nitong mukha. “Rad Javier, yes?”

“Yes, Ma’am,” narinig niyang sagot ni Rad.

“You haven’t read the book yet, I supposed. That’s alright—”

“I’ve read the book, Ma’am.”

Bumakas ang gulat sa mukha ng may-edad nilang guro pero tumango ito. “That’s good. Well, now, does anyone want to share his or her opinion about the book?”

Nagtaas si Yelena ng kamay. Literature was one of her favorite subjects. She would take Business Administration in college. Naturally, nasa *Accounting, Business and Management* strand siya ng senior class nila. But even so, she still planned to take higher literature classes in college just to enjoy herself in.

Ngumiti sa kanya si Miss Cruz. “Yelena, what can you tell us about the book?”

“I find it very interesting. The book is obviously a symbolic representation of a totalitarian system, particularly, Joseph Stalin’s regime after the Russian Revolution of 1917.”

Tumango ulit ang kanilang guro. “What made you say so?”

“In the beginning of the book, the animals were disgruntled by the treatment of the men. They complain about the hard work and the injustice of being worked to the bone. It reflects the woes of pre-Russian revolution. The peasants were increasingly getting dissatisfied by the hard labor forced upon them and burgeoiose lifestyle of the elite ruling class. It’s one of the main reasons of the revolution. After the revolution, Stalin imposed a socialist

system that was meant to make everyone equal. The same is true in the book. Pig made rules that were supposed to make everyone equal. But just like how the socialist system failed to impose equality, the rules in the farm failed to equalize everyone.”

Tumango ang teacher nila at binalingan ang ibang kaklase. “Why do you think is that so? Why did the system fail?”

Nagtaas ng kamay si Luigi, ang currently third rank ng section nila. “The people in power are the problem, Ma’am. Just like Stalin, Pig became power-hungry and wanted to control everyone. The same can be argued about North Korea. The people in power abuse the system and the people. They keep the power centralized in order to remain more powerful. Ideally, Communism should start with dictatorship, much like a Totalitarian System. But the end goal is an egalitarian society. It doesn’t happen. Dictatorship just goes on and on because people in power want to remain in power.”

Nagtaas ulit si Yelena ng kamay at tinawag ulit siya ni Miss Cruz. “I agree with Luigi, Ma’am. The people in power are the problem, but I think the system itself is problematic. Socialism, or Communism for that matter, rests on the principle that people are inherently good. Marx visualized Communism partly due to the influence of the scientific enlightenment period. He wanted to apply the same rules used in hard sciences in social sciences. He failed to realize that people are not as predictable as the elements in nature.”

“Is Communism impossible, then? Is Capitalism our only choice?” tanong ng guro sa klase.

Muli siyang nagtaas ng kamay. At dahil walang ibang gustong sumagot, nakangiting tinawag na lang ulit siya ng teacher nila.

“Yes, Ma’am. I believe Capitalism is the best economic system available. The fall of the Soviet Union is a good example. The abuse and hardship endured by North Koreans is also a prime illustration. Communism is just not possible. Equality is nice, but it’s hardly possible. Meritocracy and competition, two of the main tenets of Capitalism, are the best options to run the society. We should let the market run itself. The government should not control the free market. Centralizing power is very dangerous and inefficient.”

Binalingan ng teacher ang klase. “Do you agree, class?”

“I disagree.”

Napatuwid ang likod ni Yelena nang marinig ang boses ni Rad. Hindi niya napigilang lingunin ito.

Nakasandal pa rin ang lalaki sa likod ng upuan nito, bagot na nakatitig sa harapan. Then, his gaze drifted to hers, his expression still bored and cold.

“Why do you disagree, Rad?” tanong ni Miss Cruz, puno ng interes ang tono.

“Capitalism is just as problematic as Communism. The principles of meritocracy and competition rest on the basis that people are equal, that there are no externalities to hamper competition and flow of information. Which, obviously, is not the reality. To assume otherwise is stupid

and delusional. Meritocracy and competition can only work in a perfect system where everyone starts on an equal playing field, everyone has the same equal access to resources. There is no meritocracy in a capitalistic system. It is merely a delusional principle propagated to keep the system alive.”

Nagtaas ulit si Yelena ng kamay kaya tinawag siya muli ng guro. “There is meritocracy in a capitalistic system. People are rewarded according to their merits. You work hard and get the fruits of your labor. To each his due. Competency and ability is the basis for reward. Competition is the best way to run a system.”

Hindi na nag-abalang magtaas ng kamay si Rad. “That is only possible if everyone has the same starting point. You cannot assess a person who grew up with nothing the same way you assess a person who grew up with everything. To do so would be inaccurate and disserving. Brain development starts at three-month pregnancy. If the mother did not get the right nutrients while pregnant, the child’s brain development is greatly hampered. As the child grows up, the next six years are crucial for further brain development. Those who grow up in disadvantageous families who barely had anything to eat would not get the right nutrients necessary for brain growth. At this point, the child is already at a disadvantage. As this child grows older in an environment where basic needs are hardly met, the disadvantages pile up. And now you want to judge this child according to his competency when the government fails to provide him with the proper environment and

support needed to help him.”

“People always have a choice.” Hindi na rin nag-abala si Yelena na magtaas ng kamay. “People can do something to help themselves, you cannot lean on government for everything.”

Sarcastic na ngumiti ang lalaki. “Do you really believe that? Choice? Between what? Be burned alive or jump from the rooftop of a burning building? You call that choice?” Umiling ito at tumitig sa teacher nila. “This is the problem with privileged kids. They live in a bubble where they think everyone has the same choices as them. They’re not in touch with reality. What kind of choices does a child who grew up with nothing have? A child who has been hampered from birth.” Binalingan siya ni Rad. “Have you ever been hungry, Yelena? And I’m not talking about starving yourself to keep your weight under one hundred pounds.”

Naramdaman niya ang pamumula ng mukha.

Nanatili ang nakakaloko nitong ngiti. “Of course, you haven’t. And you talk about meritocracy. How can a child who hasn’t eaten dinner and breakfast compete with a child who has full meals everyday? How can you expect the child to concentrate on reading and solving math problems when his stomach is growling? Is that the basis of your meritocracy? Is that what you call competition? Wow. I seriously hope you don’t plan to run for any government position.”

The whole class went silent. She could feel all eyes on her. Alam ng dalaga na pulang-pula ang mukha niya at

naramdaman din niyang nanginginig nang kaunti ang kanyang mga kamay. Rad had essentially called her stupid, delusional and out of touch with reality in a span of three minutes.

“People have choices,” diin niya. “The parents should have—”

“Ah, now you’re blaming the parents.” Umiling ito at bagot na tumitig sa harapan. “The parents who went through the same circumstances as the child. You expect them to provide for their children when they themselves were not equipped to do so. You expect them to make good choices when the choices were not even there to begin with. You condemn people who never even had the chance to defend themselves. You call that fair? That’s the way you want to run the system? That’s the way you want people to compete? If you leave the market alone without proper government intervention, people will eat each other. You’re just as naïve as Marx. You say Communism rests on the principle that people are inherently good, and you said that’s the reason for its failure. And yet you also believe the market will function smoothly and fairly on its own. The market, dear Yelena, is still run by people. Yet you believe the market will be fair and just to everyone. Naïve, aren’t you? Leave the market alone, and the people in power will dominate the system, they will take advantage of the weak and will propagate a vicious cycle where the helpless will remain helpless and the powerful will remain powerful. That’s the reality of free market.”

Bumuka ang bibig ni Yelena, pero ayaw gumana ng

utak niya. Ang lakas ng bugso ng dugo sa kanyang tainga at parang tambol sa lakas at bilis ang pagtibok ng puso niya.

Nag-ehem ang teacher nila. “Very good, both of you. You both have valid points. A Communist system is inherently problematic due administrative difficulties. It’s difficult if not entirely impossible for the government alone to provide for all the needs of the people. Centralizing power and functions is both inefficient and ineffective. And yes, Capitalism has its own flaws and failures. That’s why we have social support programs and government restrictions to regulate the market and even-out the playing field. Jason!” masiglang tawag nito sa kaklase nila.

“Ma’am!” gulat at may halong takot na sagot ng huli.

“Tell us more about the injustices experienced by the characters in the book at the hands of Pig.”

Nagpatuloy ang discussion, pero ramdam pa rin ni Yelena ang tension sa hangin. Ramdam niya ang pagsulyap-sulyap sa kanya ng mga kaklase na para bang hinihintay siyang umiyak.

She kept her mouth shut and her fists clenched.

4

“**H**e is such an a*shole,” deklara ni Melissa habang naglalakad sila papunta sa gate ng school.

Hindi siya umimik at nanatiling nakatikom ang mga labi.

“But you have to admit,” singit ni Desiree, “may point siya. I mean, that’s why we have social programs, di ba? To equalize the system and...” Pinandilatan ito ni Melissa kaya tumikom ang bibig.

Nginitian niya ang mga kaibigan. “It’s okay. I do agree that he has a point.”

Dumerecho sila sa gate.

“But he’s still an ass,” patuloy ni Desiree. “Sayang ang guwapo pa naman niya. He could have stressed his point without being so... vicious. He’s so mean! He practically called you an idiot, shallow and a spoiled rich br-” Hinila ni Melissa ang buhok nito. “Aw!”

Maikli siyang tumawa sa dalawa.

“It’s okay,” ani Yelena, kahit na parang may mabigat na nakadagan sa kanyang dibdib. “That only shows how much of an ass he is.”

Tumango si Desiree. “Siguro ipakulam na lang natin siya.”

Sa kabila ng lahat, nagawa nilang tumawa.

“I’m serious!” pilit ng kaibigan nila nang palabas na sila ng gate.

“Sige,” aniya, “susubukan kong kumuha ng buhok niya at—”

“Oh, you’re interested in Biochemistry, too? That’s great!”

Natigilan siya nang marinig ang high-pitched na boses ni Geraldine. Nagtaas siya ng tingin at nakita ang babae na nakasandal sa isang pulang sportscar. Nakangiti ito at namumula ang mabibilog na pisngi habang nakikipag-usap kay Rad.

“My uncle’s a chemist,” patuloy ng kaklase nila. “He’s in this project where they’re using spores to siphoned oil spills. It’s very interesting. Want to go with me some time and tour the lab? My uncle would love it.”

She watched Rad’s lips curve into a smile as he stared at Geraldine. “Sure, let’s set a date.”

Halos mapunit ang pisngi ng chubby nilang classmate sa pagngiti. “That’s great! I have some copies of his projects when he was still in college, you might want to look at them, too.”

“I do. Your uncle’s researches seem interesting. I have some papers you might want to look at, too. I’ll bring them some other time.”

“Oh, that’s really awesome, Rad!” Tumatawang hinawakan nito sa braso ang lalaki.

Nakangiting tumango lang ang binata. The soft smile

and the faint glow in his eyes as he talked to Geraldine made in her stomach curl. Nagtaas ito ng tingin at nagtama ang kanilang mga mata. His smile faded, his dark eyes cooled and his jaw hardened.

Lalong humigpit ang buhol sa kanyang sikmura.

His body language changed, too. From comfortable and relaxed, his muscles hardened into tense lines. Sumandal ito sa sports car at inihilig bahagya ang ulo habang nakatitig sa kanya. She could practically taste the derision radiating off his skin as his dark eyes followed her.

Pilit niyang hinarap ang dalawang kaibigan. “Sige.”

“Call us when you get home, okay?” paalala ni Desiree at hinalikan siya sa pisngi.

Gumanti siya ng halik sa dalawa.

Pinilit niya ang sariling humakbang palapit kay Rad. His eyes remained cold as he watched her walk toward him.

“Oh, Yelena!” gulat na bati ni Geraldine.

Tinapunan niya ng tingin ang kaklase. “Geraldine.”

May mayabang na kinang sa mga mata nito. “Why are you here? Wala pa ang sundo mo—”

“See you tomorrow, Geraldine,” mababang paalam ni Rad sa babae.

Napatuon sa binata ang namilog sa gulat na mga mata nito. Pero agad ding nagsalubong ang mga kilay ng babae nang binuksan ni Rad ang passenger seat para kay Yelena.

“Oh, you two know each other?” May talas sa tono nito. “I mean you two know each other before you transferred

here?”

Rad's cold gaze never left her face. "Something like that. Get in, Yelena."

Napakalayo ng matigas nitong boses sa tuwing nakikipag-usap sa kanya sa mahinahon at relax nitong tono kaninang nakikipagkuwentuhan ito kay Geraldine. Nilunok niya ang mapait na lasang umahon sa kanyang lalamunan, at walang imik siyang pumasok sa kotse.

Isinara ni Rad ang pinto niya saka tumango ito kay Geraldine bago umikot sa kabilang side ng kotse.

She felt suffocated the moment he entered the car. He slid beside her, his big warm body moving beside her with the grace of a sleek cat. The heat of his body, the clean scent of his skin, they filled the car and engulfed her. They saturated her senses until it felt like all she could breathe and feel was him.

"Seatbelt," he said. He leaned over her and her whole body stiffened. Hinila nito ang safety belt sa gilid niya kaya dumampi ang braso sa balakang niya. Parang may init na pumintig sa parteng iyon ng kanyang katawan saka umakyat sa ibang bahagi.

Napakalapit ni Rad, she could smell the faint scent of his shampoo and soap. His gaze flickered to her eyes and her heart stopped beating for second. His jaw worked, then he tore his gaze away from her. Mabilis din itong tumuwid sa upuan nito.

Sandali siyang pumikit at huminga mula sa kanyang bibig. "Where are we going?"

“My place.”

Pinilit niyang huwag mag-panic. Surely, may kasama ito sa bahay. Naroon ang mama nito, kapatid, o kasambahay, hindi ba?

God, this idea was starting to sound more and more stupid with every passing minute.

“Let’s set some rules here,” simula ni Yelena, pilit pinatatag ang boses. “You have to destroy all the copies after I do everything you want me to do in two weeks.”

Binuhay nito ang makina at sinulyapan siya mula sa rearview mirror. “Sure.”

Gusto niyang sumigaw sa inis. Yeah, right. Sure her ass. As if gagawin nito iyon nang ganoon kadali.

The engine purred smoothly, and the power vibrated through the floor of the car, and shot up to her legs. The rhythmic pulse teased her muscles, and she felt heat spreading across her skin. Napakuyom-palad si Yelena. What the hell was happening to her?

She felt hot and...

Oh, God. Gusto niyang inuntog ang noo sa bintana ng kotse. Inis na ibinaling niya ang titig sa labas ng bintana at tumitig sa mga dinadaan nilang bahay.

“And just to make it clear,” matigas niyang patuloy, “I won’t do anything remotely sexual for you. I won’t steal, I won’t do anything illegal—”

“Of course, because using fake ID is not illegal.”

“Why are you so angry with me?” bulalas ng dalaga, hindi na mapigilan ang sarili. Naramdaman niya ang pag-

iinit ng mga mata, at kumuyom-palad siya. “Why is it that you’re so mean and–”

“Angry with you?” Rad’s smile remained sarcastic. “Masyado mong binibigyan ng importansya ang sarili mo. I’m not angry with you. I’m bored.”

“No, you’re not,” mainit niyang kontra. “You’re angry with me. I think you even hate me. And I don’t understand why. Wala naman akong ginawa sa ‘yo. Ganyan ka na sa club. You looked at me as if I was trash. And this morning, then, this afternoon during English. It’s like you’re determined to humiliate me.”

Pagak itong tumawa. “You really have a heightened sense of self-importance, Yelena. Determined to humiliate you? Naririnig mo ba ang sarili mo? I disagreed with you on a topic, and everything I said is true. Talaga namang hindi mo naiintindihan ang sinasabi mo. And now, just because I disagreed with you, you think I have a personal grudge against you? Ganyan ba ang tingin mo sa lahat ng taong hindi sumasang-ayon sa ‘yo? Tingin mo, may galit sila sa ‘yo? Ever heard of the term ‘conceited’?”

“You’re twisting the situation and you know it. You have something against me, and you’re using every possible opportunity to slam me.”

“I don’t even want to dignify your delusion with a response.”

Kumuyom-palad si Yelena, sabay itiniim ang mga labi. Ramdam niya ang pag-iinit ng mga mata sa magkahalong frustrastion at inis. God, she hated this feeling.

Iniiwas niya ang titig dito at muling tumitig sa labas ng bintana.

“The rules,” matigas niyang patuloy. “Nothing sexual. Nothing illegal. That’s my limit. Kapag pinilit mo ‘yon, the deal’s off. Ilabas mo na ang gusto mong ilabas, I don’t care. It wouldn’t be worth it. Ayaw kong mapahamak kaya ayaw kong ilabas mo ang video na ‘yon. Kung gagawa ako ng mas malala na mas makakasira sa ‘kin, then, what’s the point? It’s defeating the purpose of getting into this deal with you in the first place.”

“Your logic is compelling,” sarkastikong sagot ni Rad.

“Thank you,” sarcastic din niyang balik.

“Don’t worry. I assure you, I won’t force you to do anything sexual. You’ll want to do it yourself.”

Bumaon ang mga daliri niya sa kanyang mga palad at parang mapupunit ang balat niya sa sobrang pagkuyom ng palad niya. “Now, who’s conceited?” she bit out.

“Well, you did rub yourself all over me while shoving your tongue inside my mouth last Saturday.”

Halos magliyab na ang mga pisngi niya sa init. “You’re an a*shole.”

“Is that an insult? You have to do better than that.”

Why did she kiss him? Ano ba ang sumapi sa katawan ni Yelena noong gabing iyon at hinalikan niya ito? She should have slapped him and shoved him away from her. Wala sana siyang problema ngayon kung iyon ang ginawa niya.

Matalim niyang ipinukol ang titig sa harapan.

Pumasok ang kotse sa isang exclusive subdivision. Rad used a remote control to open a gate of a wide bunggalo. Ipinarada nito ang kotse sa tabi ng isang *Mercedes Benz*.

Hindi niya napigilan ang sarkastikong ngiti. “You call me a privileged kid who lives in a bubble, yet you live in a place like this. Hi, pot, I’m kettle. Oh, you’re black.”

Lumingon ito sa kanya, at pinigilan niyang umatras. Parang may yelong gumagapang sa kanyang mga ugat sa malamig na titig nito.

“You’re really shallow,” mababang usal ng lalaki. Pinatay nito ang makina at lumabas ng kotse.

Ramdam ng dalaga ang muling pag-iinit ng mga pisngi. Inis na binuksan niya ang pinto ng kotse at lumabas din. Malalaki ang kanyang mga hakbang nang sinundan ito papasok ng bahay. “I’m shallow? Well you’re—Aww!” Bumangga siya sa matigas na likod ni Rad kaya napaatras siya at napahawak sa ilong. “Ano ba!”

“You’re noisy. Close the door.”

Bumuka ang kanyang bibig para sabihing ito ang magsara ng pinto, pero naalala ni Yelena na kailangan niya nga palang gawin ang mga ipinapagawa nito. Kinagat niya ang pang-ibabang labi sa inis at sumunod sa utos nito.

Hinarap niya si Rad. Nakatayo ito sa gitna ng malawak na living room, nakapamaywang at magkasalubong ang mga kilay.

“What?” depensa ng babae.

His scowl deepened, and she watched his jaw work and the muscles underneath his shirt move as he breathed.

Ano na naman ang problema nito ngayon? She swore this guy was worse than a girl under the influence of PMS.

“Clean the house, cook dinner, do my laundry then, do my assignments.”

Gulat na bumalik sa mukha nito ang titig niya. Nakasimangot pa rin ito sa kanya na para bang siya ang dahilan ng kaguluhan sa Syria. “What?”

“You heard me,” he snapped. Kinuha nito ang ilang notebooks sa bag nito at ibinagsak iyon sa coffee table. “Kung gusto mong makauwi bago mag-alas siete ng gabi, magsimula ka na.”

Tumalikod ito at iniwan siya sa living room.



Inis na tinitigan ni Yelena ang mga karne sa loob ng freezer ni Rad. May manok, baboy at baka roon. What was she supposed to do? She had never cooked anything more complicated than sautéed corned beef all her life!

Inis siyang umungol at napahawak sa noo. Siguro dapat ay lutuan niya ito ng sunog na pritong manok at malatang instant noodles. Then, what? Sasabihan ulit siya nitong privileged kid na walang alam sa buhay? F*ck him.

Napapikit siya at napaungol. Ngayon, nagmumura na rin siya dahil sa lalaking iyon. The f*cker! Ugh!

Nanghihinang nagmulat si Yelena at hinila ang ilang container ng karne mula sa fridge.

She supposed she should be grateful. Maglinis, magluto, maglaba at gumawa lang ng assignments ang pinagawa ni Rad sa kanya. It was a bit lame and unoriginal, actually. It

could have been way way worse.

Isinara niya ang ref at dinukot ang telepono sa balsa para maghanap ng mabilis at masustansyang recipe.

Tapos na niyang gawin ang assignments nila. Isinulat ni Yelena sa isang pad paper ang mga sagot dahil baka mahalata ng kanilang teacher at classmates na siya ang sumagot ng mga assignments nito dahil sa penmanship niya. Tapos na rin siyang maglinis ng bahay. There was nothing to clean actually. Malinis at maayos ang bahay na parang walang nakatira doon. As for his laundry, she decided to do that next day, or on the weekend. She didn't even want to think about touching his boxers and–

“Ugh!” Napapadyak siya sa inis.

Nagdesisyon siyang magluto ng tinola. Because come on, ano pa ang mas dadali sa tinola? She could definitely cook something that simple.

Nagsimula siyang maghiwa ng manok.

“Sh*t!” sigaw ni Yelena nang mahiwa niya ang hintuturo. Agad niyang isinubo iyon sa bibig at sinisip. Pagkatapos ay umungol siya. *That's so unhygienic!* inis niyang sita sa sarili.

Hinugasan niya ang maliit na sugat sa lababo at pinagpatuloy ang paghihiwa. It took her almost an hour to prepare everything. By the time she was done slicing onion and crushing ginger, she was near tears. Naiinitan na siya at napapagod na ang mga braso. And she smelled like onion and fish sauce!

“What? Tired already?”

Lumipad ang tingin ni Yelena sa lalaking nakasandal sa hamba ng pinto. Hindi kagaya niya na nakasuot pa rin ng uniform, nakapambahay na si Rad. He wore a white shirt and basketball shorts. The shirt stretched over his broad shoulders as he stood crossed arm in the doorway. His hair was damp as if he just came out of the shower, and the ends curled slightly at his nape. The hard lines and angles of his face showed no amusement, his sculpted mouth pressed in a firm line.

“I’m not,” she snapped. Inis na ibinalik niya ang titig sa mga ingredients. Isinalang niya ang kawali sa stove at binuksan ang kalan. Nilagyan niya iyon ng mantika saka hinintay iyong uminit.

“Masyadong madami ang mantika mo at masyadong malakas ang apoy,” sita ng binata.

Tinapunan niya ito ng masamang tingin.

Nakatayo pa rin ito sa may pintuan, mapang-uyam na nakatitig sa kanya. Gusto niya itong tapunan ng kumukulong mantika. He wouldn’t look so smug after that, would he?

“Go away. I know what I’m doing.”

He smirked, shook his head and walked out of the kitchen.

Hininaan niya ang apoy at binawasan ang mantika. She’d show him. Magluluto siya ng masarap na tinola at kakainin ni Rad ang lahat ng sinabi nito tungkol sa pagiging shallow at spoiled brat niya.



“Oh my God! Oh my God!” Halos madapa si Yelena sa pagtakbo papunta sa umaapoy na frying pan. “Sh*t! Sh*t! Water! Water!”

“What the hell’s going—what the f*ck!” mura ni Rad pagkapasok sa kusina at makita ang nasusunog na lutuan.

“Get water!” sigaw niya at akmang aabutin ang knob ng stove para patayin ang apoy.

Pero hinila siya ng lalaki at itinulak palayo. “Are you crazy? Back off!”

“We need water—”

“Back off!”

Humanap si Rad ng basahan at mabilis na binasa iyon ng tubig mula sa faucet. Itinapon ng binata ang tumutulong basahan sa umaapoy na pan. Umusok ang basahan pero hindi tumagos ang apoy rito. Agad din nitong pinihit pasara ang knob ng stove.

Patuloy sa pag-usok ang kawali. Kumuha ulit ang lalaki ng isa pang dish towel na binasa nito ng tubig at itinaklob din sa pan.

Kinakabahang napalapit si Yelena. “Is it okay now?”

Madilim ang mukha na humarap sa kanya ang binata. “What the hell are you doing?”

“I’m not trying to do anything! Magpiprito lang ako ng fried chicken!”

She might have hated the bastard but she was not about to commit arson! Napahawak siya sa dibdib. Malakas pa rin ang tibok ng puso niya.

“So you can’t fry chicken without burning the pan.

What? Pati ba pagpapakulo ng tubig hindi mo kaya?”

Gusto niya itong sampalin. Ito ang unang beses na nagluto siya ng kahit ano. Siyempre mahihirapan siya. Nobody’s perfect! But of course, she couldn’t even say that because he would undoubtedly sneer at her pampered life.

Binalingan ng binata ang iba niyang niluto. Tinitigan nito ang mala-lugaw na kanin at nagkukulay-brown na sabaw ng tinola. Itinaas ni Rad ang titig sa kanya, pero hindi niya magawang salubungin iyon. Yelena clenched her teeth and forced herself not to cry.

God, she wanted to die.

Bumuga ng hangin ang binata. “What is this?”

“Kanin, ano pa ba?”

“May rice cooker,” he said.

“I know,” she snapped, trying so hard to keep her voice from breaking. “I don’t know how to use it, okay? So what? I bet maraming hindi marunong gumamit ng rice cooker!”

“You mean, hindi mo alam kung gaano kadaming tubig ang dapat ilagay sa bigas?”

“I do! Tiningnan ko ‘yan sa *Google*! It said one to three fourth cups of water per one cup of rice! I followed it! Hindi ko alam kung bakit ganyan ang kinalabasan n’yan!”

What was wrong with her? Kaunti na lang at iiyak na si Yelena. And the flat look Rad gave her made her want to cry even more. He was no longer angry. He was not even sarcastic or condescending, nagtataka lang ito kung bakit hindi niya nakuha ang isang napakasimpleng instruction. She wanted to hit him.

Tumayo ang binata at naglakad palayo sa mesa. Kumuyom-palad ang babae at pinigil ang sariling ihagis ang mga plato ng pagkain sa dingding.

Dinampot ng kaklase ang home phone at nag-dial. “Yes, one *Bucket Meal*, please.”

She choked back a sob. She hated this feeling. Mariin siyang pumikit habang nag-o-order ng pagkain si Rad sa telepono. So what kung mukhang dog food ang niluto niya? It was not her fault! Sinunod niya ang sinabi sa *Google*! It was not her fault.

At least I did his assignments, pilit niyang konsuwelo sa sarili. Padabog siyang naglakad papunta sa living room. Kinuha niya ang mga libro sa coffee table, pero nahagip ng mga mata niya ang answer sheet na ginawa niya para kay Rad. May pulang sulat sa number five and seven.

Find the values of x iyon. Nilagyan nito ng cross ang solution niya at pinalitan. Mali ang pagkakagawa niya ng number line kaya mali rin ang mga range ng x niya. Inilagay nito ang tamang sagot sa tabi ng mali niyang sagot.

“We’re looking for the positive values,” sambit ni Rad mula sa kanyang likuran. “It should be negative infinity to -10 union $+10$ to positive infinity.”

It was the onion, pilit niya sa sarili. Iyon ang dahilan kaya nag-iinit ang kanyang mga mata. It was not because she felt stupid and upset. It was not because she couldn’t seem to do anything right in front of him. It was not because she tried so hard and still failed. It was not because he seemed to point out every weakness she had. Sino ba ito

sa akala nito? Diyos at si Buddha?

“I’ll pay for it,” matigas niyang hayag habang hinahanap kung saan niya inilapag ang school bag sa living room. “The ingredients and the food delivery. Pati ‘yung pan. I’ll pay.”

“No need.”

“I said I’ll pay for it!”

Hinablot ni Yelena ang bag sa couch at binuksan iyon. Kinuha niya ang wallet at naglabas ng tatlong one thousand bills. Allowance niya iyon para sa buong linggo, pero may savings siya kaya hindi siya magigipit. Isinampal niya sa coffee table ang pera saka tumakbo palabas ng bahay.

Hinagip ni Rad ang braso niya bago pa siya makarating sa pinto. “Where the hell are you going?”

“Uuwi na! Ano ba!”

“Get inside the car, I’ll drive you.”

“No need—”

“I said get inside the car, Yelena.”

“I said don’t want to!”

“Get inside the car!”

Gusto niyang kagatin ang lalaki. “Yung delivery mo!” singhal na lang niya. “You have to wait for—”

“Dadaanan ko na lang.”

Hinila siya ni Rad papunta sa kotse nito. Pero umiling siya at hinawakan ang pinto sa passenger seat bago pa iyon mabuksan ng binata.

“Sandali!”

“What?” he snapped.

Why couldn't the bastard take a hint? Gusto niyang mapag-isa. "You can't drive me home. Magugulat sina Manang!"

His eyes narrowed; his mouth tightened. He was so good at that. Ang iba ay mukhang sasabog na bulkan kapagalit. Kabaligtaran si Rad. The angrier he got, the colder and calmer he became. "What?" malamig nitong pakli.

"Baka makita ka ng mga kasama namin sa bahay. Hindi nila kilala 'tong kotse mo. I said I was with Melissa, magugulat sila kapag may nakitang naghatid sa 'kin na iba."

A muscle ticked in his jaw but he nodded. Dinukot nito ang phone nito. Kinabahan siya at hinagip ang braso nito.

"Ano'ng gagawin mo?" she asked.

"Calling a ride for you."

Gusto pa niyang makipagtalo pero tiniim na lang niya ang mga labi. *Just get this over with, damn it.* Pagod na siya. Mabigat ang pakiramdam na sumandal siya sa kotse.

Matapos nitong mag-text sa phone, sumandal din si Rad sa sasakyan at isinuksok ang cellphone sa bulsa.

Magse-seven o'clock na pero may kaunting liwanag pa rin sa langit. Malamig ang hangin sa kanyang balat, at nakatulong iyon para tangayin ang panlalagkit niya. Sigurado ang dalaga na oily na ang mukha niya. She knew she smelled awful, too. Dumikit ang amoy ng luya at patis sa kanya. And here was Rad, standing beside her—fresh, clean and freaking gorgeous as hell. The faint scent of his soap and clean skin wafted around her, and she became

even more conscious of her own scent.

“You’re blushing.”

Nanlaki ang mga mata ng babae at napalipad ang tingin niya sa kasama. Nakatitig ito sa kanya, magkasalubong ang mga kilay.

“I’m not.”

“You are.” He reached over and lightly brushed his knuckles across her hot cheek.

Pareho silang natigilan. Confusion and a spark of anger flashed in his eyes. Tumiim-bagang si Rad at marahas na binawi ang kamay. Iniwas nito ang tingin at tunitig sa harapan.

Iniwas din niya ang titig dito. Alam niyang lalong namula ang kanyang mga pisngi. Thick silence spread between them as they waited for the car.

Huminto at bumusina ang isang itim na sedan sa labas ng iron gates, at halos madapa si Yelena sa pagtakbo papunta roon.

Rad was beside her, opening the gate for her. Ito rin ang nagbukas ng pinto ng kotse. His arm brushed against her arm as he opened the door and they both jerked.

Narinig niyang mahina itong nagmura, at mabilis siyang pumasok sa sasakyan.

“Manong,” tawag ni Rad sa driver at may inabot ditong 500-peso bill.

“What’s that?” angil niya.

“Fare.”

Isinara nito ang pinto bago pa siya makapagsalita ulit.

Akmang bubuksan niya ulit ang pinto pero umandar na ang sasakyan. *What the hell was wrong with him?*

Nag-vibrate ang phone sa kanyang bulsa kaya dinukot niya iyon. May nakapa siyang papel at kunot-noo niya iyong hinila. Napaawang ang kanyang mga labi nang makitang tatlong tig-iisang libong bill iyon.

“What the...”

Napalingon siya sa bahay ni Rad, pero hindi na niya tanaw ang bungalow. Nag-vibrate ulit ang kanyang telepono. Umuungol na sinagot niya ang tawag.

“What happened? Are you okay? Nasaan ka na?”

Humugot ang dalaga ng hangin bago sinagot si Melissa. “I’m on my way home.”

“Ano’ng nangyari? Are you okay? You don’t sound good, Yelena.”

Muli siyang napatitig sa tatlong one-thousand-peso bills. Malamang inilagay iyon ni Rad sa bulsa niya nang buksan nito ang pinto ng kotse para sa kanya. The bastard was mocking her.

Kumuyom-palad siya at isinuksok ang pera sa bulsa. “I’m okay, Melissa,” pagsisinungaling niya.

And by God, she’d be okay. She’d show him.