



UNTIL THEN

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Until Then

is a novel that follows the life of Mark Borja, a high school student in the Philippines, as he navigates adolescence, friendship, and the quiet weight of unspoken grief. At first glance, Mark's days are filled with the ordinary rhythms of school life—classes, group chats, after-school hangouts—but beneath the surface lies a quiet struggle with emotions he doesn't fully understand or acknowledge.

As the story unfolds, Mark and his friends begin to confront personal traumas they've long kept buried. Each character carries invisible wounds: grief masked by humor, guilt hidden behind routine, and love overshadowed by fear. For Mark, the mystery lies not just in the world around him, but in the fragmented memories of a tragedy his mind has blurred to protect him.

The novel's emotional core revolves around denial and the slow, often painful journey toward acceptance. Through subtle narrative turns and deeply human moments, *Until Then* becomes a story about the walls we build to avoid pain—and the ways those walls eventually crack. It's a quiet, moving exploration of how we process trauma, and how healing often begins with the courage to remember.

This book is not meant for everyone. The story might seem slow paced at first, but trust when I tell you it is worth it. Have patience. It's a narrative that will change your way of seeing things, be it love, friendship, grief, acceptance or even the smallest things in life.

Author's note:

This adaptation was lovingly done by hand, as a tribute to *Until Then* and to all the fans whose hearts were moved by the beautiful story this game tells. Most parts are my interpretation of what was happening. Some things may be slightly different to

make sense in a literary format. You might find spelling mistakes in certain parts, they are intentional and are meant to keep the essence of the original texts.

This book does not intend to infringe copyright laws in any sense and will not have revenue of any sort.

All characters, story elements and references belong to “*Polychroma Games*” and “*Maximum entertainment*”

She
was missing that night
we looked everywhere
searched everywhere
Shouted her name everywhere

Yet not a single trace of her

Not even a **Ghost**

Not even a **Shadow**

Not even a **Trail**

It's been a long time since it rained like this
"Ah, I love the touch of raindrops sliding down my face"

I never knew what she meant by that
but I'm content the night sky
was showering rain for her
The heavy rain tells me you are there
But at the same time
you are nowhere

A million cries and hours have passed
I finally surrendered at last
I ran as far as I could
Like she told me I should
until eventually

I found myself missing

Within me, I looked everywhere

Searched everywhere

Shouted my name everywhere

yet not a single trace of me

It felt like the world had ended,
but a part of me wants to believe that...

The world hasn't ended yet

Chapter I

And there it goes again—my alarm, buzzing relentlessly like it has a personal vendetta. Maybe if I just ignore it, it'll vanish out of sheer willpower. Why can't it leave me alone? I just want five more minutes. Start the day a little later...

But no. It keeps buzzing.

What a way to start. At this point, I might as well surrender to the morning—but not without a fight. I slam my hand onto the off switch. Jeez. Hopefully it stays quiet for a while.

Well, I've got to get up eventually. I sit on the edge of my bed, squinting at the blur that is my room. There's my nightstand. My own personal villain—the alarm clock—and a framed picture. Can't really see it yet, so I move on. Oh. The dirty laundry bin.

“Good luck, buddy. You're staying like that for weeks.” Can't get distracted now. God, I wish I could say that when I'm doing homework. My eyes drift to my desk. Laptop still open from last night.

“Did homework for a minute, then got distracted conquering digital monsters. I tried.” Not that I can do anything about it now.

It's all *Darkfiend's* fault, honestly. At least somewhere in that world, I accomplish things. Ah—the piano. I think I've got time to squeeze in a little practice.

I sit down and start playing “Wedding Day.” It's off. No tempo. Mistakes every few seconds.

“Well, guess we're sticking with ‘Twinkle Twinkle.’”

Still, I try. That counts for something. Time to check what the night saved for me. I grab my phone, open my inbox, and let the parade begin.

Virtuoso 23 application status: *Blah blah blah... "Was not selected for further consideration."*

Yeah. Expected. They tried to sugarcoat it—didn't do a great job, but hey, better than saying "you suck" straight to my face.

JEFF ZUCKI ONE TIME OFFER [NOT A SCAM]: Wow. Real subtle. Wonder what that could be.

Totally not a scam. Better luck next time, Jeff.

Re: Xmas homecoming [Paolo Borja]: No update on when they're coming back. At least Dad's fine.

FAST REMIT [No-reply]: *"Hello Mark Borja, You received 3,000 AED from Paolo Borja via FastRemitt International Remittance."*

Nice. And with it, a little message:

"Also, this is your second warning. For the love of God, don't spend it on pointless video games."

Less nice.

I head out, backpack slung over my shoulder.

"Yet another very exciting day."

The walk to school is routine by now. Not much to see—a bus stop, a few meters ahead, the entrance to the metro station. School's just one stop away. Still, I've always preferred the train. A few steps later, I spot a familiar figure: my dear old friend, Jimmy the rat, lying dead on the sidewalk.

“Poor thing,” I murmur. “You may now rest in peace, Jimmy. I’ll always be with you.”

My phone buzzes. A message.

Louise Ordunia.

Ding ding ding. Correct.

Louise Ordunia (active now)

Hey Mark

How’s the slide deck?

—Wha- What slide deck?

What do you mean?

Huh?!

Don't tell me you forgot about

the book report

Wait, you're kidding right?

—Oh shi...

Don’t worry pres, finished it

yesterday!

Alright, that ought to be good,

since we’ve been given weeks

I'm honestly unsure if I fully

understood it

But we Just have to get the

main themes and points out

Oh Louise snap out of it, you're

the batch genius!

—Gotta make sure she isn't suspicious at all.

So I'm confident you got it right

Well that's good to hear.

It's just a relief we have slides

now, unlike last time.

—In the bag

You can count on us now!

Great, see you later then

See ya!

—That's one way to get out of it.

“Looks like this is gonna be one fun friday. —Nothing new” just me and my responsibility.

And just as I keep walking...

—Hey kiddo! Freshly dyed and colored chicks! Want some? —says a street seller.

—Color me uninterested.

—Thirsty? Need a smoke? I've got it all here. —Asks another street seller just when I walk another few steps.

—No thanks, I already get my dose from this air pollution.

—Er, suit yourself.

Well, that was something.

I keep walking toward the station, heading down the steps to the ticket machines. One of them's already out of service.

"Now this one's out of order. I wonder who's next."

Naturally, I move to the next available one.

One Liamson ticket. 15 pesos.

Just a few meters ahead sits the Passenger Assistance Office.

"If only they could assist me in making a slide deck in five minutes."

My phone buzzes just as I start waiting on the platform. What a surprise—it's not Louise. It's my other group member.

Ryan Soriano. Hooray...

Ryan Soriano (active now)

Let me guess
we have no slides

AGAIN

Bingo!

So you didn't do it?

You know me

lol didn't you at least read the
chapter or something?

Uhh no but I leveled up
yesterday. Didn't you see the
leaderboard?

son of a

dude i don't wanna think ur

hopeless

but like

ok youre hopeless

You're one to talk so what did
you do?

Hey i read parts of it!

dont ever compare me to you or

to khyle.

Come to the dark side

ugh if Louise snaps at you

in front of the class too

Louise's rage would silent

the whole class

Then they're gonna start calling

you like the new Khyle.

God you didn't have to bring

that up.

see? haunting to be Khyle'd eh?

and that might just happen

again bcos of you!

Like idk why do we even do shit

that'd provoke her?

What do you mean?

dude come on dont even

pretend ur not into her

Ooh so you must be into her?

just like everyone else sadly

umm

lets just say that...

WAIT does she know?

That you like her?

NO

That there are no slides?

YES

I just told her we made em

WTF DUDE! WE'RE DEAD MEAT

YO she nearly had it last time

Remember?!

—Shi-

Oh shit you're right, gotta take

this srsly right now!

DAMN RIGHT YOU SHOULD

—We can still save this.

Ok ok we can just cram this like
the last time right??

Are you nuts??

You think we got enough time??

Idk man but considering the
stakes we just gotta try our
best!!

ok if we get to school on time
then we got 10 mins top to
cram this shit

Gotcha I'm on my way.

I'M TAKING IT BACK! THIS ISN'T ONE TYPICAL FRIDAY. GOTTA HURRY!
Alright.—You can do this...

The train finally arrives. I get on. But inevitably I pay more attention to my phone than saving my skin. Well, I mean... I'm already on the train so it won't hurt. A few minutes of doom scrolling in my phone passed. Not much of my interest, maybe just some cool tree art kinda thing from a classmate... Oh! and Louise got to the regional chess tournament, that might be useful. Maybe...
—“Why am I not studying for the report again?”

phone buzzes

Ryan Soriano (active now)

yo dude i think i see you from

here

Where?

in the train obviously

just come forward will ya

Okay creep

So forward we're going then.

—Let me guess. You didn't review in here. —Says Ryan with an unsurprised voice. How right he is.

—Uh, Louise just got qualified for regionals. Hooray!! —I say sarcastically.

There is an awkward pause before his answer.

...

—You're so hopeless. —He says disappointed.

—And you? What did you do in here? —I ask, trying to bring him down with me.

—And now you're threatening me? These hands are built for speed! If this wasn't our last report. I could really teach you a lesson. —He says confidently

—Wow, that's coming from a fellow cramer.

Treason brother.

—Look, we don't have much time. Do I have to fill you in again?

—Much appreciated! —I respond

—Ugh, you do at least know the title, don't you?

Yes... I think I do?

—Crime and... punishment?

—Uh-huh, written by Fyodor Do... —Dammit.

Is this the guy that criticized me a few seconds ago? He sounds as confused as I.

—Dostoevsky, comrade.

—Right so there's this guy Rody Raskolnikov. Then he has a sister, name's Dunya.

After a few minutes and a quick summary from Ryan we're almost there, thankfully everything he said will be enough. Who knows it may be even better than the other time's today.

—And that's it!

Alright, good enough coming from him.

—Thanks creep, I think I got it.

—I was all over the place, wasn't I?

—Very, but I got this down to the thematic level. —I answer

—Dude, if only you actively made more use of your brain like that. —He says

—Hey, I'm no nerd.

—Not that, but I see someday you'll be more... Nah, you'll get it someday.

—I'll be more what? Spit it out. —I insist

—Never mind. —He says, trying to move on. And with that I give up.

—So, same old act, right? —I ask, waiting for his confirmation.

—Yeah, I do the slides and you fill me in quick.

—Why do I have to do the slides in the first place anyway? —I ask.

Or well, better said, why did I get in charge before anyways.

—Louise said I'm busier 'cause BB (basketball) practice. And we think you have a knack for designing slick slides.

Well that's a shame. 'Cause...

—I literally just scrap templates online.

—Shit— Okay, forget about that. —He says feeling a bit dumber now.
—Like you just gotta search. “Modern slide templates 2014 free download”.
—And “no virus”? —He asks.
—Yeah. You’ll want to keep your private files safe. —I say with a insinuating voice.
—I just wish we make it out alive. —He says worried.
—W-We just gotta knuckle down! —I say getting hit back into reality.
—But what if...

Nope, no negativity for this.

—Stop! No ifs or buts! We’ll make it out alive. We have to. —I reassure him
—Like dude, don’t we have a backup plan.
—This *IS* the backup plan. —I give him the realization.
—Right, what a genius.

The voice of the train driver begins to sound on the speakers announcing our imminent death. Time is running out.

—That’s our cue. Get ready. —He warns me.
—Ready when you are.

We arrive at school, no time to waste, we head on straight to the library so we can speed through this. Brain don’t fail me now.

—Ok, let me just boot this sucker up. It can smell urgency so stay still. Or it’ll lag like hell. —says a Ryan fearing for his life.
—Isn’t that a decent model? —I ask confused.
—I know, but my brother made this thing crawl. Stupid ass live wallpapers. Okay, here we go!
—Roger. —Final stretch, just got to give him all the data — Book info! Let’s start with the basics. Title and author. — I tell him, getting ready for what’s coming.

—Right, crime and punishment by... Fyodor Dostoev... — He seems to forget.

—Sky. S-K-Y. — I remind him.

Ryan begins writing like he never did in his life. Like if it depended on his whole existence. ‘CAUSE IT DOES!

We continue with the plan. He writes I tell.

— NEXT! — He says.

— Main idea and themes!

— Yeah, crime, murder, and stuff.

— Uh-huh, more or less. — I confirm.

And there he goes...

— NEXT!

— Characters! Raskolnikov and gang.

— Ah, shit. I forgot how to spell ‘em.

— That search engine’s your friend.

— Shit!

The internet starts lagging like hell.

— Sheesh, the internet couldn’t get any slower than that!

Ryan’s phone vibrates with a message.

—DUDE, NO! I felt my phone vibrate! THAT MUST BE LOUISE!
SHOULD I EVEN BOTHER?!

—Let’s get this over with first! Then we can get to her later.

—DUDE, CLASS IS STARTING ANY MOMENT NOW!

—I know so let’s hurry!

We need to get this over with!

—Okay, next!

—Character analysis! If I remember correctly, Louise has that in the group chat?

—Really? I love her.

Oh

Quick, next! — Ryan continues.

—Setting and quotes! I don't know, search for cold images of... Places drowned in poverty and bars or something! — I tell him.

—Too easy for this place.

There he goes... wait... what is th—?

—Shit! My phone's ringing! — Says Ryan getting more worried by the second.

—Okay, okay.. Let's calm down for a moment. WE'RE ALMOST THERE!

— I say trying to motivate him to keep going.

—I tolerate cramming, BUT SURELY NOT LIKE THIS! — He says almost at his limit.

—Look man, we're at slide 16 thanks to your weird skill!

—Oh and how dare you call that weird?! If it's helping you and just you!

—Well, I...

—Okay, it stopped, breath. You're right, we're nearly there. Maybe it's just a friend I haven't paid yet.

Wha—?

—What?

—None of your business, NEXT! — He says changing the subject. I honestly didn't care.

—Story analysis! Ctrl+C, Ctrl+V.

So this is what I could've done one week ago... meh.

—Preach!

He begins writing again.

Come on, I believe in you Ryan. Our lives depend on it.

Anything else?!

—Our own take on it!

—Yo, Almost forgot that! I'll be surprised if you already have one.

— Formulating one at the moment. — I say.

—Mark, ladies and gentleman.

Ha ha ha. How funny.

—Careless acts of violence lead to huge repercussions. — I give him what I can.

—This act may not be of violence... But boy it has huge repercussions if Louise finds out. — Says Ryan, letting me know yet again how much danger we're in.

—I'll try to get my act together now. — I say trying not to let him down

—Sure, Mark.

It's the final stretch everyone, one last push and we'll be alive. He begins writing once more with everything he has.

—Wow.

—Wow.

We say one after the other.

You never cease to amaze me with that hand-eye coordination. — I praise him with my words.

—I can't believe we did it, again! — He raises his voice excitedly.

Like hell we did!

—I'm really sorry for being a terrible groupmate, man, but... *YOU* did it. — I reassure him.

—Don't apologize. This is thankfully the last time I'm boosting you up. But seriously, for the nth time... I can't believe we did it!

—Did what? — Said Louise

Ohhhhh... shi— There she was. Leaning on the doorstep with her soul eating stare. We're screwed aren't we... Just when everything was going smoothly. How did she— Since when— May god save us all. Ryan was shaking... I was shaking! Our voices were shaking too. but most of all... The slides were still open.

—Uh... W-we...

—We...

We said, or rather tried to.

Oh boy we truly are getting ourselves deeper into this. Why does she look at us like that?! Does she know?!

—We... Beat the boss... Uh, you know, video games? — I said
Really? The boss? Is that the only thing I came up with?

—Yeah, the legendary... — said Ryan

Sheesh at least he's following.

—Uh, th- the legendary minotaur. — I stuttered

—Yep, that minotaur— Demon... Evil... Force. — Ryan added.

—Oh really? — She asked. Not really knowing if she knew what we were up to.

—Yeah.

—Kicked... it's big butt.

Ryan and I said while trying to convince her somehow

—May I see? — She asked

—OH NO No no! — Ryan quickly responded scared to the bone, raising his voice more than expected.

—Uh, what he meant was... No no no, boss is gone, big dead. — Were the words I said whilst trying to save this.

—What the heck?!

Oh no...

—I can't believe you guys! You're at it again!

Yep... Big dead.

—It's all my fault! — I say louder than intended. Prepared to give myself in.

—What? — Louise asks, confused.

Wait? Huh?

—Huh? — I clearly sound confused.

—That's darkfiends 3, right? I play that too, sometimes. I never got past the third witch's lair even with the nerf exploit. And you've already beaten that boss?!

How does she... doesn't matter.

—Uhhh, yes- we apparently did!

—And now it's vanished to nowhere so you can't- uh, see it! — Said Ryan, trying to make her want to leave.

I think it's safe now.

—I know, that's still insane. Nothing beats the original though, darkfiends 1. — She added, already convinced, we were doing what we say we are.

—Yeah, I definitely agree!

—But in all seriousness. Sir just arrived and is waiting for us to get set up. That game can wait. So get going. — She orders us.

And just as swiftly as she came, she had left. At last, we can breathe easily.

—Yet another powerful being showered sheer luck on us. — Commented Ryan.

—God I was so ready to turn myself in.

Thank god she believed us.

—Dude let's just...

—Yeah, let's just stop this cramming bullshit.

—Preach. — Ryan agrees.

—So she plays DF. — I say changing of topic.

—Why does she know about our progress?!

—No idea, she must be lurking our stats.

—Wait, so who called? — I curiously ask.

—Coach, for some practice game.

—Whew, that was a truly miracle.

—That came outta nowhere though. Come on? darkfiends?! — He says loudly, clearly surprised.

I've got to say that was unexpected.

—Ticked one more box for you, huh? — I ask him.

—Like it didn't tick yours.

—Whatever, let's just get this over with...

We wrap everything up, and start heading to class. Almost over now. And just as expected sir was already there when we got there. As always speaking to the class

about his personal life. No one cares really, we just wait until it's our time. But underneath him talking and the noise of fans cooling the air. I hear something else. "I can hear you, Ryan. — I can hear you memorize every word of your report underneath your breath."

I look to the left where Louise stands. "She plays DF? No way." — I think to myself in disbelief but also... I don't know.

"I hate her. she shouldn't have said that. Well, good luck, she's out of my league anyways. I remember last year's valentine's. We weren't classmates back then. — I look at a row of students on the left side of the class.— Those three popular senior boys were waiting for someone. There were flowers, chocolate, and whatnot. Then this Louise girl came out. The three musketeers greeted her in sync. But she just walked right past them as if they didn't exist. She must be stuck-up. But hey, she plays DF! — I think excitedly. After I look again at Louise. — Yeah, that's the same face we saw that day."

Louise notices and looks right at me. I get nervous.

—What are you looking at? — She asks, looking at me.

—Uh, nothing, I mean... Th— the clouds are looking pretty today, huh? — I stutter

—Yes, I'm rather glad the raining has stopped.

—Wha—?

It hasn't rained in weeks.

—What's the matter? — She asks

It seems that she doesn't know. But how?

—It hasn't rained in the past month.

—You're kidding. — She says thinking it was a joke.

—No, really.

Everything suddenly has a weird feeling.

—S- seriously?

—If my memory serves me right, yeah.

—I must be mixing them up again. — She says as if it was normal for her.

—Uh, you okay?

—Yes yes, I'm fine. No big deal.

That's weird. I swear I remember no rain. Well, at least I got away with that! Man, I was just reminiscing. Guess I'll just listen to Sir now. He keeps going with his story, but it doesn't take long before boredom kicks in again.

“Surprise, surprise. Why did I even try? Sure, it was touching the first time. But this is, what, the tenth retelling? In a row?”

I glance around the room to see if I'm the only one suffering. Nope. One girl who usually listens intently is now just blankly staring at the window.

“Ah, even the attentive ones have fallen.” Yawns echo from across the classroom.

“There we go. Yawns launching a full-scale attack.”

I spot Junjun, already asleep. Of course. He's the principal's son. No surprise there. Sir finally wraps up the tragic tale of his cat and allows us to move on with the class presentation.

May God have mercy.

—*Okay, class, let's begin. Next book report is from Louise... and... company.*

Ouch.

—*You may set up and begin, hm?*

And so we do. Ryan sets up the slides. I try to look composed. Sir's already back on his phone, not even pretending to listen.

“Alright, here goes nothing. Wait... the slides. What if we missed something? What if we got it all wrong? What if she knows?”

I can feel the sweat creeping down my neck.

“She'll murder me. She'll literally kill me and—”

—Mark? — Louise says, pulling me back to Earth.

—Oh! Yeah, my turn, sorry. — My voice trembles.

—So yeah. Hi Mark. I'm classmates.

Some students chuckle.

Cathy, sitting a few seats up front, laughs to herself the hardest. Of course she does. She's my best friend—and my worst critic.

—Today, I'm accompanied by my groupmates... Ryan and Louise.

I clear my throat and reset. Enough with the panic.

—We're presenting our book report on Crime and Punishment by Fyodor Dostoevsky. It's arguably one of the best works of Russian literature—exploring themes of psychology, morality, crime... murder, consequences, repentance, and more.

I pace myself, speaking with clarity now.

—The story begins on an exceptionally hot day in St. Petersburg. And when I say "*exceptionally hot*," the author means it—there's a symbolic link between the heat and the crime itself. But we'll get to that.

Somewhere in that moment, Cathy's amused expression shifts into something more surprised.

But I didn't notice.

I mean, how could I? For all I know, I'm bombing this.

My part ends. Louise takes over.

Naturally, *now* Sir puts his phone down.

Figures.

—Hey dude — Says Ryan in a lowered voice.

—Don't even say a word. I know I messed up.

—No, not that. Though that was undeniably nice — He says.

What is he talking about.

—Shut up — I say, thinking he's kidding with me.

—What I mean is, that was... That was honestly well done. Which is-
unexpected of you.

—Are you nuts? — I say, still not believing a word. — I barely even
studied for this. How was that well done?

—Come on, didn't you see their faces? — He asks.

—I didn't and I didn't want to.

—Oh... I get it. You don't wanna be Khyle'd. — He says, as if
understanding everything.

—I was hanging by a thread, man. — I explain to him.

—Well, we're safe now.

—No way. I felt pressure just from Louise's presence. It's like we could
destroy her immaculate grades. Just by messing up one bit. — I tell him.

We begin whispering.

—I spy with my little eye that's not happening. — He says leaving me in
suspense.

—What do you mean? — I ask curious about it.

—Look at sir. He even looked up from his candy crush game. — He says.

—Whoa — I whisper, amazed by that fact.

—Right? He's actually listening.

—That is genuinely a rare occurrence.

—Look at him...

Both of us proceed to look at Sir. There he was, with a 3 day beard and a wannabe
French mustache. His phone not in his hands but in his pocket. And actually looking
what we do. But I don't believe it so easily.

—I think everyone listens when she talks. — I refute him, still not buying
it.

—Well, you've got me there.

Sir begins speaking.

—Excuse me for a moment, Ms. Ordunia. Mark and Ryan — He says pointing at us with his finger — Perhaps you wanna share the conversation with the whole class, hm? — He waits for a moment —If you can't let us know... Then we'd appreciate your silence. Since Ms. Ordunia is doing all the talking here. Sorry about that Ms. Ordunia. Please continue.

—She's a teacher's favorite for a reason — I say to Ryan.

—Shh. — He answers.

The rest of the class goes as usual until it's over. We get to go out.

Everything is as expected. Kids running around and gossiping everywhere. “Surveyed the area. No sight of Louise ready to kill me. She's probably in some club meeting. Come on, I just need my lunch break.

I keep walking but see a girl, looking up at the sky for some reason. “Man, it never ends on a good note with this girl. She's the only classmate left I haven't had a chat with! I guess there's always that one person. But maybe this time I'll pull it off.

—Hey there Jessica. What's up? — I use to start the conversation. No answer. — Jessica?

—The skies.

What?

—Okay? Uh, cool! I just wanna say... That tree art thingy you posted? I like it. Good job!

—Oh... That isn't— meant to be— complimented. — She said without taking an eye out of the sky.

—Uh, wha-? — I say, clearly confused by what she said. — Well then. Have a— nice day!

I flee the conversation that was clearly going nowhere.

That was an attempt. — I keep walking through the hallway. but stop when I see a folded paper in the ground — Ooh, is this another preteen breakup letter?

Dear Mae,

I hate you Mae giv m3

back my queen elsa pencil
or we are no longer friends!!!

Regards, Jhen.

Poor Gal, Jhen needs to let it go. I have to say that letter-writing lesson was retained very well.

Anyways, I keep moving forward and see a coffee machine. — This sold like hotcakes in its first week. Now it's just collecting dust. — I ignore it and walk a few steps before getting interrupted by an itty tiny little bug named Cath.

—Hoho! Hey Mark! — Says Cathy.

Great. I walk back to where she is leaning.

—Hi Mark, I'm classmates! And today I'm dumb!— She makes fun of me.

But she ain't going without backlash.

—Oh hey Jaggy, I think this is yours... Oh please love me! — I say imitating her.

—Hey! Shut your foul mouth! You're lucky the seniors aren't here... Or you'd be dead meat. — She says, trying to intimidate me.

—As if only the seniors know him.

—How do you remember that line? That was ages ago! — Says Cathy going back to when I imitated her. — And for your information, I didn't say "please love me."

—And I didn't say "today I'm dumb."

—You are though. — She says.

—You wished you had the guts to say "please love me" though. — I reply.

—Argh! Shut up! — Says Cathy blushing a bit. — Only Louise is my one true love. — She says with a daydreamer voice — And no one can stop me!

—Liar.

—You know. You killed it back there. — Says Cathy changing of topic.

Really? Second person to tell me that.

—Damn right I totally did. My storytelling was so on point... That I totally explained everything well. — I say with some sarcasm— So I'm not buying it, Cath.

—No, really! That was like the 3rd time your smart-ass form came out. — She adds.

—Meh, Ryan literally told me a convoluted summary in minutes.

—Damn it Mark, I knew it! There's an inner genius sleepin' right there in your noggin!

—And I'm afraid it'll never wake up. — I say, disappointing her.

—You know, for someone mostly living alone... You're actually something. — She says. And still I am not buying it.

—I'm waiting for the punchline.

—No, Mark, can't you see? You're holding something back! You could be maximizing all those brain cells... Instead of slackin' off all day!

—I wouldn't call leveling up slacking off. — I say referring to darkfiends.

—You silly. Where the heck is Ridel anyway?

—Oh, by the way, I don't like saying this, but... Louise... — I say completely ignoring her question.

—You like her now? — She says smirking. — Oh yeah, welcome to the competition, baby!

—I wouldn't say I like her...

—So you like her a bit now? —Cathy teases, that sly grin not leaving her face. — Is that what you mean, new challenger? — She adds playfully.

—Kind of? I guess?

—Wow, you're actually talking about her. This is new.

—Because, you wouldn't believe this... She plays Darkfiends.

—Holy cow... — Says Cathy, blushing a little. — Are you for reals?

—For reals. — I answer.

—I... didn't see that coming. I thought you could only choose between good grades or good scores. I... I'm...

—Oh boy, here we go again. — I say, already knowing what's coming.

—I'm madly in love! — Says Cathy day dreaming and her eyes shining with a sing-song voice.

—Yeah whatever, Jaggy.

—Jaggy who? Sorry I only know Louise. A top achiever, a chess master, and now... A hardcore gamer! — Adds Cathy, smiling even harder than before, swinging her arms back and forth. — Like what more could you ask for? Jaggy boy's out of the question!

—Sure.

—Out of the question? — Asks Ridel, appearing out of nowhere.

—Woah! Where'd you come from? — I ask, surprised.

—I wonder who was the one chatting with me yesterday... About that Jaggy boy being so handsome... And so damn good at basketball. I believe she said J-Boy's got it all. — Adds Ridel to take her down even more.

—Nice one, Ridel! — I add.

—Ridel, I swear to god! Once I discover your love interest... I'll endlessly haunt your existence with never-ending mockery. Mark my words! — Says Cathy "trying" to intimidate Ridel. — You too Mark, uh, mark my words.

—Good luck finding my nonexistent love interest. — Confidently, says Ridel.

—You can't fool your best friends, hipster boy. — Comments Cathy.

—Guys, I mean it when I say this... It's not on my list. — Repeats Ridel.

—Then how do you explain that time you went malling with Angel? — Says Cath, trying to bring him down.

—Angel? — I ask, surprised. While Ridel's expression shows slight annoyance.

—And how about that time you were on a bed with Trixie?! — Adds up, Cath.

—Trixie?! On a freaking bed?! — I react.

—And Alex? Outside the bar, late at night?!

—What the?! I never knew photographers get all the girls! — I say.

—Watch out, Cath. You're jumping to conclusions. — Ridel defends himself.

—Oh yeah?! Then explain! — she fires back, her voice raised, not quite angry—just not letting it slide.

—Duh? What else could I be doing? It was a shoot.

—Nice excuse for picking up girls... But not on my watch! — Says Cath.

—Look, I get the bar 'cause neon signs... But shit, what about the bed? — I ask, concerned.

—They asked me if I could take some shots wherever they prefer... That's all! — Says Ridel, already tired about it.

—Shots? What kind, hm? — Says Cath with that same expression on her face.

—Oh, for god's sake.

—And is that really *all*? — I ask

—You guys... You guys have grown up so fast. — He tries to change the topic.

—You're growing up faster. — I respond. — I mean, look who's directing a short film here.

—No one even knows what it's about! — Adds Cathy

—In due time, my friends. — He excuses. — The wait will be worth it.

—Just make sure I don't shudder in distaste when I watch it.

—Well, as long as we get to watch it together... — Cath adds. — That's good with me.

—Of course! — Ensures Ridel. — If you want, I can even ask my producer to arrange a private screening. Just for you and J-boy — He says jokingly.

—Huh? What'd you say? For me and Ms. Louise? — She says, smiling like before but somehow even more convincingly.

—Or, who knows? — Says Ridel. — One of those new students might top Louise.

—How dare you speak so ill of our goddess!

—Wait, what? Did you say new students? — I ask.

—You livin' under a rock bro? — She says laughing at me.

—Word's going 'round new students will transfer soon.

—That's... strange. — I get a weird feeling, as if I knew something was about to happen. — 9th graders? — I ask, intrigued.

—Dunno, that's all we have right now. — Says Ridel.

—Hoho, yes! It's my time to shine! And impress those new girls with my undeniable charm! — She says having the same smile of a daydreamer.

—Sure. — I say. — Fake it 'till you make it.

—You know what J-boy? Let's eat before break's over. — Comments Ridel.

—Ugh, I hate you two.

We all go to eat and get over with the day.

A few hours have passed, it's already night time. I'm sitting on my bed checking my phone.

CHATS

MCR: Various messages from: Cathy

Guess it's the prom dance info.

MCR [active now]

seniors, are you all ready

for Prom Night 2015? We're

proud to announce this

year's theme -- Greek

deities!

Where: Liamson Integrated

School grounds

When: March 2015 (exact
date TBA)

Keep an eye out for rates
and more details to be
announced soon. See you!

-LIS Admin

[Cathy]

Who y'all gonna dress as?

[Ridel]

Eyy, that's sick 100% going
for Poseidon.

That's nice and all but how

much we gonna pay?

[Cathy]

TBA hehehe :3

[Ridel]

Big ka ching baby!

[Cathy]

Bettin they'd serve the
same freaking cafeteria food

Betting it's for the principal's
crusty makeup.

[Ridel]

Wait it's happening on the
school grounds?

[Cathy]

always has been!! zzzz

Concrete dance floor FTW!

[Ridel]

TFW you'll dance on the
same floor where u do

jumping jacks.

[Cathy]

a friend alumni told me

They paid 750 for their first

prom so that was 2013.

Then 800 pesos last year.

[Ridel]

What?!

Alumnus*

[Cathy]

whatevr :P

800?? That's bullshit.

[Ridel]

Can someone tell the

principal's son about this

bullshit?

OOP can't do that!

[Cathy]

OOP WHY OH WHY

Cause he's still asleep LOL

[Ridel]

HAHAHA

[Cathy]

HAHAHA fuck yall

Never gets old.

[Ridel]

Reminds me of the good ol
days

I wish we were still
classmates

Screw this year's shuffle man

[Cathy]

So if prom cost 800 last
year whaddya guys think
now?

Increments in 50 so... How does

850 for one night sound?

[Ridel]

My BS alarms are going off

I'd rather treat myself to a

dinner buffet for the same

price

[Cathy]

yikes! ill think about it

for sure.

Louise Ordunia

Hey

Huh? What's going on?

Louise Ordunia [active now]

Hey

Hey there

I want to say thanks for earlier
The slides were in no way the
best but they were good!
It must've taken you a day to
polish them

Uh thanks!

Didn't take me a whole day
though

An hour I guess??

That's impressive
To be honest, after that
penultimate report when we
had absolutely nothing, I was
almost going to erupt
I just don't want confrontation
anymore

I'm really sorry about that

You presented clearly as well,
perhaps even better than I did
You must've prepared and
studied hard for this

It was nothing

Just doing my part

I've always seen you as this lazy
student

Slacking off until the timer's
about to set off

Ouch!

Well, you just proved me wrong

I knew you had it in you. Keep it
up! :)

A smile gets on my face.

Thanks pres!

Say, do you wanna go watch my
chess match tomorrow?

Woah, am I that handsome?

No, it can't be.

If you didn't know, Sir Armando
gave our group a perfect grade

Really? That's very nice of him.

Yeah, so I thought maybe you
guys would wanna come and
watch.

I asked Ryan too but he said he
has practice tomorrow
My best friend Sofia will come
though.

What do you say?

Got nothing for tomorrow soo
why not?

Great! I'll send you the details
later

Just curious, have you beaten

DF3?

Binge played it right after
release

That's insane!

Perhaps we could play DF3
together sometime?

I AM TOTALLY NOT STRIKING.

Yes definitely! I'll teach you the
exploits, tricks, and all that.

Sounds fun, though I might not
have time to play soon.

You know, exams, school,
projects, and what have you.

Oh right you are one busy
student

I'll inform you when I find the
time :)

Also, I have something quite

important to tell you tomorrow.

STILL NOT STRIKING!

What might that be?

You'll know

Okay no rush pres

Oh please you can drop the
pres. Makes me feel superior :)

See you tomorrow then!

Oh sure see ya!

Did *that* just happen?

9-Pearl 1415 \m/ [Various messages]

[Louise]

Same message that Cathy sent

[Ryan]

nicee

[Cathy]

hoho BIG HYPE

[Brian]

The hell?? What are they
thinking??

[Ryan]

Which goddess ya gonna be
cath?

[Cathy]

Imma be zeus who gets all
the girls.

And boy(s)?

[Cathy]

hey! you better shut ur big
fat mouth!

[Brian]

Greek gods?? LOL am I
supposed to have my nips
out??

[Louise]

No, Brian

[Khyle]

Eww why not norse? Is this
set in stone?

[Brian]

Lol is that a Medusa
reference

[Louise]

Yes Khyle, it's final

[Khyle]

Guess I'm not going then

You can be Thor no one's
stopping you, it's your money.

[Khyle]

As if it's gonna be worth
paying for lol

[Cathy]

HAHAHAHA

[Karen]

hahaha XD

[Ryan]

duuude LMAO

[Khyle]

inb4 overpriced fun run

[Angel]

HEY KHYLE HAVE YOU

FINISHED OUR

GROUP WORK?

[Edward]

HEYY KHYLE you're not

opening our PMs!!

[Angel]

Aaand he's offline again

[Brian]

LMAO way to go Khyle

[Louise]

Oh dear

[Jamie]

Guyss about math

homework how did you

solve #3?

[Edward]

Pres! any update on the

transfer students?

[Louise]

Nothing official but I heard

there'll be two HS girls.

[Cathy]

ayyyy nicenicenice

Here she goes again

[Jamie]

Guys??

[Charles Dan]

Anyone wanna buy quality

umbrellas?

I'm selling it to my dear

classmates at 30% off.

[Angel]

Hoping one of those
transfer students replaces
Khyle

[Karen]

can vouch for that XD

New message MCR from Cathy.

[Cathy]

OMG
TWO GIRLS

Just in Louise messaged me

[Ridel]

Hey look who's going places

[Cathy]

louise what??

She invited me to her chess

game tomorrow

[Cathy]

JSFJFKSJKASJ

[Ridel]

Nice one!

[Cathy]

WHATS SHE THINKIN??

if she rly is that smart she'd

know im the smart

choice!!! GRR

also who tf watches chess

games??

No you've got the wrong idea

Her best friend is going too so

yeah

[Cathy]

but it isnt that big of a deal

is it?

[Ridel]

If you're someone like

Louise then it is

[Cathy]

nooo it must be that...

[Ridel]

She's into Mark? OOOH

[Cathy]

Exactly!!!

HAHAHA betcha Mark's

shaking uncontrollably outta

love rn.

Yep

If I send the picture of you and

Jaggy, I would bet the same

[Ridel]

HAHAHA

[Cathy]

OH DONT YOU DARE

DONT YOU FREAKING DARE!

I scroll through my gallery until I find the photo—the one from the gym. Jaggy’s grinning wide, red varsity jersey clinging to him, basketball tucked under one arm. His other arm is over Cathy’s shoulders. She’s leaning into him, half-laughing, cheeks red.

I SEND IT.

Oops it wasn’t me!

[Cathy]

ARGH I HATE YOU

DICKHEADS

[Ridel]

Uh oh now I bet Cath is the
one shaking HAHA

[Cathy]

FDMJKDLKSKDL YES OUT

OF ANGER GRR

BUT sorry i dont think a
braindead crammer and a
pretty genius make a good
couple :P

[Ridel]

They're like yin and yang
that way, so I disagree

[Cathy]

WOW!! :O SURE MR. LOVE
GURU
anw good luck man
dont be a klutz or ill take
her from ya!!

Yeah yeah whatever

[Cathy]

ALRIGHT gnight camera boi
& lover boi!

Gnight Jboy <3

[Ridel]

Sweet dreams jboy <3

[Cathy]

--

Well, that was a night.

I *should* go to sleep soon.

I check social media—nothing new, as expected—so I lock my phone and toss it aside.

My eyes land on the same framed picture from this morning. It's too dark to make out the details, but still, I reach for it and wipe away the dust. Don't know why. Just felt right.

Before bed, I decide to squeeze in a few minutes of piano practice.

A ritual now, I guess.

— *Thanks, Louise,* — I mutter, more to myself than anyone. — *V23 Keep dreaming, my ass.*

I start playing the same song I butchered this morning.

Still flawed, still messy... but at least I miss fewer notes this time. That's something.

Eventually, I call it a night.

And the night turns into day.

Game day.

I get ready and head to the venue.

It takes a while, but then I see her—Louise—already on the field, mid-game.

— *There she goes,* — I think. — *Racing through my brain. Good luck, Louise.*

I move closer and spot someone off to the side. Someone really *standing out*.
That must be her best friend. First time I've seen her outside school.

She's... eccentric? Stylish?
Stylishly eccentric?

Whatever it is, it works.
I walk up to her.
Time to start a conversation.

—Hello? Uh, are you Sofia? — I say.

—No answer.

—Excuse me? — I insist more.

—Would I be interested in whitening soaps and pyramid schemes? No one gets rich by selling soaps in just a month. So no thanks. — She says.

—Uh... Louise brought me here. — I say.

—She'd never fall for scammers. — She says, leaving a long pause after that. — Oh my! That look on your face! — She says laughing, while I have a confused expression — I... I can't! — She says.

—Oh, so you're that type of person. — I say with an unsurprised voice.

—Hehe, so you must be Markt, right? — She asks.

—Markt. Without the y. — I say.

—Just in time, Marky! No actually, you're minutes late, but no problemo!

Nice to meet ya! — She says.

—You too Sofia, uh... — I say.

—Dingleberry. — She completes.

—It's on the tip of my tongue. — I say ignoring on purpose what she said.

—Dingleberry. — She says.

—Ruby? — I say.

—Hmm, that'll do! — She says.

—So you're Louise's best friend? — I ask curiously.

—The best of the best! — She says excitedly. — Like did you know, contrary to popular belief... Louise plays video games?! You heard that right! Video games! — She says.

—Wow!! How shocking!! — I spoke with sarcasm. — Everyone knows that by now.

—W- what? — She says with an open jaw. A bit disappointed in herself too. — No way... I thought... — She says.

—The word's out there. — I say.

—Nevermind, but here... Did you know she can do pretty much everything? Well, except for illegal stuff, and... 20, 21, 22... 23 activities she detests. I have them listed here on my phone. Wanna see it? — She asks.

—Uh, I don't think I need to lay my eyes on that. — I say.

—Oh, right right! Confidential bestie info, my bad. — She says.

—Also, you know you don't bring pompoms to chess games, right? — I say.

—Hey, why don't we take a look around? — She says.

—Sure, Dingle-B. — I say.

—That's more like it. — She says.

And as expected, it was just a few steps before something else caught her attention.

—Wait. They look familiar. Think I've seen their faces before. — She says making us stop.

—I'm just looking at that guy sweat. Either it's scorching hot in here... Or he already feels like losing. — I say.

—Hmm, I don't know. Looks like he's losing!! — She says loud enough

for the guy playing to actually hear it and turns to look at us.

I cover my face with my hand, ashamed of what just happened.

—Oh no! I'm sorry! Sure is hot in here, isn't it? It's not like you're losing or anything. — She says, trying to apologize.

—Hey hey, cut it! — I tell her before it gets any worse. — Let's just... move on. — I say.

Just ahead was Louise still playing.

—Yes, Louise. I believe in you. You can do this! You've always done this!
— She says.

—Pretty please tone it down now. — I advised her.

—Oh, was I loud? Sorry, Louise!! — She yelled.

Louise notices us. How awkward... for me at least, since she doesn't seem to have any trouble.

—Please kill me. — I say, covering my hand again.

—See? She's fine. — She says.

—Not long 'till they kick us out. — I say.

—Hehe, I'm starving though. How 'bout you? — She asks.

—Sure, let's kick ourselves out. — I say sarcastically.

But, what a surprise. Not even three meters past and she already found something else... Or someone in this case.

—Oh my goodness. What have we here? — She says.

—Yeah? — I ask, not giving a care anymore.

—Polly, the best player from Manzanero. — She says as if I knew her.

—Polly who? — I ask.

—The one in yellow! — She says.

—She beat Louise two years ago. Can't believe she's back. — She says.

—What happened last year? — I ask.

—Dunno didn't show up. Must've gone soul-searching. — She says.

—She must be winning this one. — I say.

—Oh boy. Trust me when I say this... She and Louise are both dang good at this. But Louise ain't going to let us down! — She says.

—You think Louise can take her down this time? — I ask.

—Honestly, I doubt it. — She says.

—What?! Why would you say that? — I ask.

—It's dead obvious. — She says.

—Bestie ain't muscular enough for that. There's an oath of sportsmanship for a reason too. — She says.

—That was not what I meant. That's it. You must be very hungry. — I say.

—Yep, let's head out! — She says.

We finally manage to get out. It's already the afternoon when we get to the food stands. The lighting is all orange. Food related I spot an ice cream cart.

—How about ice cream? — I ask.

—My taste buds are craving salt. — She specifies.

We walk some more steps.

—How about fishball? — I ask again, stopping in front of the cart.

—Yeah! Game on! — She says happily.

We play a little game called the same as the food. I win, of course. It was fun.

—Oh my goodness! — She says out loud. — This is so good, sir! A balance of the finest spice... And the perfect dazzle of saltiness. Hmm, if only there's a way to make it taste even better... AHA! I have an idea, sir! What if I passionately immerse it... In your stunning homemade sweet sauce once more? — She says while looking at the guy attending us with a cute face as if it was going to work.

—No. One dip only. — Says the man with a plain serious voice.

—Pleeease... — She says.

—No. — He replies.

—Pretty pleeease... — She says.

—Not gonna happen, kid. — He replies.

—Pretty pretty pleeease... — She insists for the last time with her pretty face still on.

The dude just places a top in the jar and ends the nonsense.

She looks back at me dissatisfied.

—I tried. — She goes.

—One dip's already fine though. — I tell her.

—Eh, you'll be paying for this anyway. — She says confidently.

—What? And where did that bold assumption come from? — I ask.

—Huh, that's oddballs. Boys would do whatever in hopes of me setting them up with Louise. Which I never did, by the way. — She says.

—Easy peasy, it's because... I'm not one of them! — I say with a smug on my face.

—Hmm, I sense a subtle strategy going on here. — She says with an expression of suspicion on her face. — Or maybe... You're in denial, aren't you? — She says.

—Oh no, not at all! I'm just Mr. Friendly living his ordinary life. — I say confidently.

—Hmm, what smells fishy here is the fact that... She casually invited someone she isn't even close to yet! — She says.

—Well, that's what friendly people do! — I say.

—This level of friendliness isn't typical of her. Something weird's going on here. Maybe she... She likes you! — She says teasingly but also making fun of me in a way.

—Uh, how funny! A classmate was supposed to be here too. Plus, you're here. — I say.

—I know! Just kidding! But she's just acting... different lately. — She says.

—She does seem more outgoing than usual. — I say.

—Yeah, she’s making more time to socialize. — She says the final word with a weird tone, as if it was a new historical discovery. — Normally she’d just be studying. She’s getting out of her shell. — She says.

—She studies a lot, huh? — I ask.

—With sisters like her’s, I’d be studying too. It’s a miracle we ever became best friends in the first place. But I feel like that’s gonna... fade out soon. — She says with somewhat of a sad voice but also worried.

—That’s actually a good thing. — I say, without thinking how she might understand it at first.

—Good what?! — She asks.

—I mean, the getting out of her shell part. — I specify.

—Oh, righty. Seeing her spend time with others more often... It’s a strange sight... But still. I’m happy for her. Yet at the same time... I feel like it’s not gonna be the same anymore. — She says.

—You know. Some think she’s a teacher toady... So, I’m glad she’s changing for good. — I comment.

—Say, is she trying to be like me? — She asks.

—You? A jolly girl? — I ask with a pinch of incredibility.

—If that’s your impression. — She says.

—But with those pompoms? — I ask, making fun of her a bit. — I doubt it.

—Come again? — She says.

—I mean, yeah. Hooray for pompoms! — I say with some sarcasm but still having quite a fun time.

—Yeah! Righty! Whatever happens... I shall stay by my bestie’s side! I gotta support her through thick and thin! — She says.

—That’s the spirit! — I say.

—Oh wait, I almost forgot! Do you mind if I add someone to the treat?
—she says.

—Uh, not at all. Who is it? —I ask.

—I planned on telling Sofia about this if she didn’t have to leave... I’m the one who should be telling her so... Promise me you won’t tell her or anyone? —she asks, her tone suddenly serious.

—I... I promise —I say, caught off guard.

—This is going to be startling... Especially coming from me, but... I have a boyfriend —she confesses.

There's a moment of silence between us.

—Oh... Th-That's cool. Who might that... lucky guy be? —I manage to say.

—Mike. The guy from the other class. You know him? —she says.

—Why wouldn't I? He's the lead guitar guy! —I reply.

—Woah, you follow the band? —she asks, surprised.

—Absolutely. Their indie style's right up my alley. So, how did it, you know... —I trail off, curious.

—We've been together for a month now, behind closed doors. I've been testing the waters and... I think I've made the rational choice —she says with a soft smile.

—That's... great —I say, trying to sound genuine.

—I never realized how... closed off I was. Studies were all there was to my life... But he showed me there's more to it. And that there's value in having people close to you. People who really know you. So here I am, getting out more, making friends. And hopefully... doing a good job at it? —she says, half-laughing, half-questioning.

—Ohh, so that's why... —I mutter without thinking.

—What? —she asks, raising an eyebrow.

—Nothing! You're doing pretty well —I say quickly.

Safe.

—I used to decline all romantic possibility. Thinking it was superfluous. But I was wrong. Maybe all you need is someone who reminds you... it's okay to loosen up... and let people in. People who can help you find the right path —she says, looking thoughtful.

—Th-That's great, Louise —I say.

—Hold on, will you be fine third-wheeling for a bit? Don't get me wrong. I just want to thank you for taking your time here —she says kindly.

—Sure, I don't mind at all —I reply.

—Okay, about the thing I’ve been meaning to tell you... —she begins.

—Yeah? —I prompt.

—You know, you caught me back there... And I’ve been thinking hard about it... It hasn’t really been raining, has it? —she asks.

—As far as I remember... yeah, it’s been hot and dry. And rainy season isn’t supposed to happen for a couple more months. You know, we can look it up right now. Just to be sure —I offer.

—Okay. How mindless of me —she says.

I check my phone, and as I expected, it hasn’t rained in weeks.

—So? —asks Louise, watching me.

—My memory serves me well. Nothing. Not even a raindrop —I confirm.

—That’s... bizarre. It was raining outside my room last week. But... it can’t be —she says, eyes narrowing.

—Maybe a vivid dream? It might’ve been one. And it felt so real to you —I suggest.

—Tell me, did you ever have a strong déjà vu? —she asks, her tone growing more serious. The whole situation starts getting an eerie feeling, as if it wasn’t meant to happen. —So strong you feel highly confident that it happened... but it actually didn’t?

The same feeling keeps growing inside me.

—No? Probably... just small ones I forget about in no time —I answer, trying to shake it off.

—You see. I talked to three other people... and we’re sharing the same experience —she says, almost whispering.

—False memories? —I ask.

—Confabulation, you mean? No, it can’t be. It can’t possibly be this common... let alone shared! —she insists.

—It might be... some kind of unusual coincidence? —I say, though not convinced.

—It could be. But the chances are extremely slim. You’re even likelier to win the lottery... twice in a row! I... I badly need to know what—

—Hey guys! What’s up? —says Mike, just coming in.

—Oh, there you are! —exclaims Louise. —Wait, is that...

—A cake? Yes! Congratulations! —says Mike, grinning.

—Isn’t that a bit too much? —asks Louise, chuckling. —It was just quarter-finals.

—A victory’s a victory for the proton of my life —says Mike, being cheesy as ever.

—Mike, let’s keep those cheesy lines private, please —Louise says, playfully nudging him. —Anyway, meet Mark. My classmate and friend.

—Nice to meet you, bud —says Mike, turning to me.

—Nice to meet you too —I say with a smile. —Hey, I was at your benefit gig last month.

—Thanks, bud, appreciate it —he replies, flashing the typical rock sign with his left hand. He’s a chill guy. —Gotta do it for the victims, y’know?

—If you don’t mind me asking... where’d the money go? —I ask.

—We donated it to ACF and other nonprofits supporting the cause —he answers.

—Cool —I nod.

—We’re planning one more gig before the year ends. Especially now that our new single’s coming out —he adds.

—Right, I saw that. ‘This is it’, right?

—Heck yeah! ‘This is it’, baby! —he says, fired up.

—So, aren’t we going now? —asks Louise, checking the time.

—Let’s go! —Mike replies.

We went out to the pizzeria and got our food — but not without them wanting me to take a selfie of us. Really awkward moment for me. They had me take it: Louise leaning into Mike, his arm around her. Both grinning like a magazine ad. Pizza, lights, a milkshake. I smiled too — the kind you wear when you’re not sure what to think and are in kind of an awkward moment.

After that, not much happens until the next night.

I go to a 24/7 mini mart to talk with Cathy. I take a seat on the benches outside the place. I take my phone out.

Cathy Portillo (active now)

On my way zzzz

Just got here

okaaay wait for me

I get a new message

Ryan Soriano (active now)

so is it legit?

What?

the rumors

Louise and Mike

Shit, I promised Louise, I'd tell no one.

What about them?

oh come on dude

just say yes or no

you went to her game yesterday

right?

Yeah you should've skipped

practice

cant do that

bb is life dude

so yes or no??

Neither confirming nor denying

goddammit

So yeah goodnight

nah hang loose

lots of fish in the sea

Like?

like alex

jk obviously

like..

nvm bye

Sweet dreams

Sofia Rubio (active now)

YO MARKY

What's up DingleB

Please drop the Y

O MARKY

Have u heard of da rumors???

Hate to tell ya this but

ITS REAL !!

Yeah I know

Howwww ??

I was the third wheel yesterday

OHHH

Ha that musta hurt big time !!

Big sad Marky

Setting up a yofundme for u rn

We gotta get u a gf stat

I don't think that's the right
platform for that.

Plus I've been telling you

I just like her as a friend

HMM OK that's all

TTYL BYE !!

Hey I wish your granny well

Aww thanksss !!

Cathy gets to the place. wearing a curious selection of clothing... She was presenting herself with a theatrical flair smiling.

—Wha-? Pajamas?— I ask, intrigued by her decision. —Convenience stores aren't the coziest places to sleep.—

—I venture to always be the most authentic version of myself! So this is what you get.— she says, her mood briefly dampened by my comment. But not for long—she bounces back.

—Uhh sure. But really what were you thinking when you put that on?— I ask.

—Oh, this? Not a fan, are you?— she asks.

—That’s not what I’m saying. I mean, pajamas never leave the house.— I say.

—Come on, Mark! Don’t let your dull lifestyle spoil you. Pajamas are so comfortable...— she says, stretching her back. —I just wanna wear them all the time!— she adds.

—If you say so.— I say.

—They’re literally the symbol of freedom in the clothing industry. You see, with this, I feel like I want to... Fly, sway, and be free!— she says with an up-tone voice.

—Wow! How compelling!— I say sarcastically.

Cath sits down next to me.

—Man, nothing impresses you.— she says.

—Some things do.— I answer.

—Like?— she asks, expecting nothing.

—Refusing to wash your clothes for days... Just ‘cause your crush bumped into it.— I say with a smile, screwing with her.

—How do you even?! Okay, That’s it! I’m out!— she exclaims.

—You know this wouldn’t be a genuine talk... Without me pulling your leg. But that’s all you’re gonna get for today.— I say.

—But that’s unfair! There’s nothing to make fun outta you. ‘Cause you’re so...— she says with a mad expression.

—Interesting? Why thank you.— I interrupt.

—There’s gotta be something.— she says, disappointed.

—Anyway, what did you want to talk about?— I ask.

—First of all, the rumors! Is it legit my future wife’s taken?— she asks.

—That shit’s spreading like wildfire, huh?— I say.

—Of course! It’s the universal crush getting’ a boyfriend!— she says as if this was a historical event.

—Who happens to be a universal crush as well.— I say.

—Eww, I despise your taste in men. Why him, Louise?!— she says to herself.

—The dream is over.— I say.

—So what did she tell you?— she asks.

—Nothing of interest to you.— I say, keeping Louise’s promise.

—Come on, spill the beans! So with Louise crossed out... That leaves you with no one to crush on, right?— she says, changing the subject.

—Woah! Did you really just—— she says, thinking I forgot about Jaggy.

—Except Jaggy.— I say with the same smile as before.

—Fuck it.— she says, giving up.

—Hey, leaks on the new students are out.— I say, trying to change the topic once and for all.

—Oh shit, you’re right! The names are even there! New crushes! You thinkin’ what I’m thinkin’?— she asks.

—Roger. Stalker mode activated.— I say.

Cath takes out her phone so we can check if the new students have socials.

—Let’s see...— she says. —Dear teachers, please be informed of our two new transfer students... Bla bla useless shit bla bla. 9-Pearl will have welcomed one new student.— she reads.

—Hey, that’s ours.— I say.

—Just one?! I hate life.— she says.

—And her name is... Kate Corpuz.— I say.

The situation gives off a strange feeling only I seem to catch. That name... It feels oddly familiar.

—It’s a girl though! Sounds crushable! Alright, movin’ on.— she says.

—Whereas 9-Sapphire will also have welcomed a new student...— I read aloud.

—And their name is...— she prompts.

—Nicole... Nicole G. Lacsamana?— I say.

—Impressive! Louise got it right. Rumor mills are on another level these days!— she says. There’s a pause. I zoned out. —Mark? Mark!!— she screams, trying to get my attention. I finally snap back.

—Shit.— I mutter.

—You're always braindead. But never like that! What's wrong with you?— she asks.

—Nothing. It's just that... The names sound familiar... For some reason.— I say, hoping she might get it.

—Yeah, whatever, nice joke. Let me guess... You're gonna scare me again... About how these girls were KIA'd during World War I. I've had enough of that. Something fresh please!— she says.

—No, it's not that. Uh, never mind.— I say.

—I'm going home when you lapse on me again.— she says, pissed at me.

—Agreed. Let's get back to stalking.— I say.

—Alright, detective. Let's see what this Kate's got.— she says.

—No results found?— I ask.

—Nada.— she replies.

—What about... Katie? Maybe, her internet name's Katie.— I suggest.

—Zilch. What about Katherine?— she asks.

—Go ahead.— I say.

We look her up with every name possible she might have.

—ARGH!— she yells, giving up. —I surrender!—

—There's no helping it. We've tried every alternative name.— I say, accepting defeat.

—Screw this! Our new classmate must be a full-on introvert.— she says.

—Or a tech illiterate.— I propose.

—In this day and age?!— she scoffs.

—We'll see her soon anyway.— I say.

—Fair enough. No point in bangin' our heads against the wall.— she says.

—You know, we've still got one more.— I say to Cathy.

—Oh well. Crossin' my fingers for the last one. What's her name again?— she asks.

—Nicole G. Lacsamana.— I say.

For some reason, that puts a smile on Cath's face.

—Woah, Mark! You pay for those memory training apps?— she asks.

—I fell for the free trial.— I reply.

—There, there.— she says. She puts her phone up again. —One Nicole Lacsamana comin' right up.— she says. —Here she is! Hey, she's our age. And I think I like her?— she adds.

—Wha—?

—What?— she checks the profile, scrolling through pictures. I feel something bizarre—why does it feel like I've known her for lifetimes?

—She's... She's charming!— she says, excited.

She has long, dark hair that falls in gentle waves down her back, gathered loosely by a ribbon that lets a few strands slip free around her face. Her build is slim, with softly defined arms and legs, giving her a presence that feels both grounded and light, like a figure drawn in clean, certain lines. Her eyes are large and dark, steady and expressive, framed by thick lashes.

She keeps scrolling.

—Aww, this one's cute.— she says.

Every picture feels more surreal than the last. I'm locked in the sensation.

—I wonder where this is.— she says as she keeps scrolling. —Her look will grow on me for sure. She might just be my next Louise! What do you say?— she asks.

I don't answer.

—Mark?— she says.

Why the hell does it feel like... I've known them... I've known her, for so long? Could this be... Whatever Louise was talking about?

—ALRIGHT, THAT'S IT! I'm outta here!— she says, annoyed by my attitude.

—No, don't! It's just that...— I say.

—What?? She died during the Great War? Then resurrected by a satanic cult?— she mocks.

—It- It's just... Yeah, sh- she looks nice. C-could be one of your future wives.— I say, stuttering.

—Well now that you just stared at her like a creep. She could be yours instead.— she says, less angry.

—No, s- seriously. If ever she's as smart as Louise, then go for it.— I say.

—Really? Heck yeah!— she says, her energy rising again. —Fell to the bottom and here I am risin' right back up!— she says with an up-tone voice. But then she gets interrupted by a phone call.

—Shit shit, it's mom. Gotta take this.— she says, switching to a flat tone. —Hey mom. — What?! —No no no, please no. — B-But mom! — Argh, yeah yeah, I'm going! — Yeah, I will, I will. Just give me a few more minutes! —Yeah. Whatever. —Bye.— she says.

—Wh- What's the deal?— I ask.

—You know!— she lays back on the bench, exhausted. —Moms being moms! Like I just came here... And now I gotta go home?!— she complains.

—Oh... Well, uh... To be fair, it's kinda running late now.— I say.

—Sure.— she replies, clearly annoyed. —Lucky you, your mom's not home.— she says.

—But y-your mom... She must be worried, you know?— I say.

—I... I don't care. After all, I am home. Hold on a sec.— she says. Her attention drifts. —Did you hear that?!— she asks.

It starts raining suddenly. Odd timing. Fitting, though.

—Woah...— she says, calm but amazed.

—Why? Were you born yesterday?— I ask.

—It's been a while, hasn't it?— she asks.

—Y- yeah.— I say.

—And now it's pouring down... Like it's reachin' out to me.— she says. She stands and walks into the middle of the parking lot. I try to grab her hand—but I miss. She keeps walking, getting soaked. I panic, then spot a random umbrella by our seat. I grab it and follow her. She stands still in the rain, face tilted up, searching the sky.

—Hey, you're gonna catch a cold.— I say.

—Thanks.— she says.

—Okay, speak up. Didn't you take a shower today?— I ask.

—I did. But the water at home stinks. I'm sick of it.— she says.

—You're acting freaky today. What's gotten into you?— I ask.

—I could say the same to you, you know.— she says.

—Er, why do you look so impressed?— I ask.

—Damn it, Mark. Have you forgotten? I told you. I'm a pluviophile.— she says.

—Huh?— I ask.

—Pluvio what now?— I add.

—Ugh, it ends with "phile." Guess.— she says.

—Uhm, you like... You like... Getting wet?— I say.

She looks at me, disappointed.

—Sorry, it sounded funnier in my head.— I say.

—No, dumbass, I love the rain.— she says.

—Then I must have forgotten.— I say.

—Hey, try this out. Reach out your hand.— she says. —Like this.— she holds hers out into the rain.

I follow.

—And?— I ask.

—Do you feel it?— she asks calmly.

—Yeah, it's rain, duh?— I say.

—The raindrops... Feel them slide down your wrist gracefully.— she says, wearing a peaceful expression. She's full—grateful.

—Uh, and?— I ask.

—You'll never understand how a pluviophile admires this.— she says.

—Since when did you get this weird kink?— I say.

She laughs, and I join her.

—You dickhead.— she says jokingly. —Say, have you ever wondered...

How butterflies fly under the rain?— she asks.

—Uh they... They don't?— I say.

—Right. They're powerless against this powerful force. They just... Hide wherever they can.— she says.

—And what if they can't find a place to hide?— I ask.

—They... They get tattered. Or even— Die.— she says.

—I can tell you were listening to Ms. Alma.— I say.

—Biology was the shit, man.— she says.

—So, should we go home now? Gotta study for exams tomorrow, you know.— I say.

—Liar.— she says.

—Gotta study tomorrow for exams, I mean.— I say.

—Liar.— she says again.

—Gotta sleep all day!— I say, finally giving in.

—Attaboy.— she says.

—I just remembered, where's Ridel? Is he coming?— I ask.

—No.— she replies.

—Missed the memo?— I ask, clueless.

—No, the exams won't let him out. He's missing, yet again. God I wish he was here.— she says.

—Then we'd push each other out of the umbrella.— I say.

—Then Ridel's face will fall flat on a puddle.— she adds.

—Then I bet you'll get so rain-soaked.— I say, targeting Cathy.

—Nuh-uh, I bet you'll clumsily trip in one push.— she says.

We both laugh.

—Though I wouldn't recommend pajamas for that.— I add.

She grabs my arm.

—Hey.— she says.

—Yeah?— I reply.

—If you dickheads... If you ever run away from me... I won't ever forgive you. You got that?— she says.

—On behalf of Ridel... Copy, princess.— I say.

She rests her head on my shoulder.

But still... a sudden wave of determination strikes me. Like there's something I have to do.

Chapter II

I walk through the door of our classroom, half asleep. It's really early in the morning, at least for me it is, not that I slept much anyways. —Dang it, Cath. You didn't have to pull me into this.— It's not a big deal dude, it's just the new girl, geez... —Hey, exam results are out. Can't wait to see which ones I flopped.— I grab one folder, it's chemistry. I look through the results of my classmates until I grab the lowest grade, thinking it would be mine. —Wait, am I not flopping this one? — It was khyle's 29/50. I grab another one, it was mine. 39/50 —Okay nice, but which did I flop this time?— Math folder is next, I grab the first one I see, 36/50 —Huh, seems to good to be true.— Filipino class is next, I grab mine —It's over 30!— English is next, I pick mine. 36/50 —Woah, is this really mine?— History goes after that one, 39/50 —Cool, but where's the one that's below 30?— I grab the last folder, it's art class. Most grades are good except for one, it's even marked with two exclamation signs. 13/50 —Ah, there it is. Of course, couldn't go without a flunk-worthy score. Guess I better make up to Mrs. Flores.— I grab all my results and go to the back of the class to take a sit. —Yeah, not bad. —I think to myself with a bit of hope. But come on, let's be realistic. —Nah. That's just a fluke. — But

something else catches my eye. —Wait, what was that? —I turn left to get a better look at what is that. —Oh.

It's a poster laying on the desk next to me. By pure coincidence it's piano related, like a club or something. After seeing it, I get a sudden hit of inspiration. I check my surroundings and see not a single soul around. So I proceed...

I place my hands in the air as if I was about to play an imaginary piano, I relax, close my eyes and try to remember a piece I once heard. My hands and fingers start playing, the sound of the song begins to feel as if I was there. But my mind being what it is I misremember. —Wrong.— I commence again. This time it's better, I keep on playing. It was like a shovel digging through my memories, as I was playing I saw... I saw my mother. She was playing the piano as she used to. —The notes... They're lost in this hazy memory. I have to rearrange them.— I kept playing but not long before I stopped after misremembering. —No! That's not how I remember it. Try to remember. Please.— I start again and a similar memory floods my mind.

— She's such a lovely, talented kid. Do you like it? —Says my mom in my memories. At least, that's what I can recall. But who is she talking about? I have to remember.

I get send back to reality, sort of. I still was with the imaginary piano where I kept playing until I made another mistake. —Focus. Concentrate.— I think to myself as I keep playing once more. At the same time Cath enters the room. She sees what I'm doing and laugh quietly to herself about my doings. She begins to walk towards my place before coming to a stop next to me. She stands there with a face that indicates nothing less than a mischievous prank coming in, but more in a Cath way. She gets in action and move one of her hands below mines and use it to whip them, kicking me out of the zone and giving a ginormous scare, almost like a heart attack.

—What the hell!! —I say loudly grabbing my chest.

—Going all-in on this piano thing, huh? Though you might want to tone it down if you don't want to look like a possessed idiot.—She says with a playful smirk.

—You didn't have to do that! God you nearly gave me a heart attack. —I say.

—Poor guy. —She says still making fun of me.

—Just you wait, Cath... I'm telling you. —I say, but is nothing more than a void menace.

—Just look at those sunken eyes. You absolutely needed that energy surge. —She says justifying herself.

—And whose fault do you think that is? —I ask Cath, blaming her.

—Well, well... Don't accuse me of your own wrongdoing. I told you we'd go early today, and still... You chose to sleep late over some lame-ass MMO. —She says cleaning her name.

—But who's the one responsible... For dragging me into this stupid plan? —I blame her once more.

—Huh, right. I wonder who. —She says still with a smile, though not as big as before.

—Don't you-

—Hey, look! —Cath interrupts me.

—You still haven't answered my questio-

—The results are out! —She ignores me. —Hmm, let's see... Just get enough sleep next time, please? God knows what other creepy shit you'd be doin' alone. —She finishes while my expression is dead flat. Not a smile, not angry or maybe just a bit, but I was there just waiting to collapse.

—Ugh, I was... Forget it.

—Anyone will be here any moment now then they'll be like... Whoa, Mark! Is that you? This early? —She says the last one with a fake surprised voice. I yawn just after —Looks like you need another scare to wake you up.

—I got a 13 on art. A third scare would just be overkill. —I say.

—Hmm, are you sure?

—I'm wide awake now. Don't you... —I yawn again. —worry.

—If you say so.

Cath comes back with her hands holding her results, she has a neutral face expression.

—What you got there? —I ask.

—Well... —She places her papers on top of mine. they're all over 40. —It's decent. Nothing surprising.

—Your definition of 'decent' is what's surprising here. —I say surprised by her standards.

—Well, unlike you, my bar is higher. —Says Cath.

—To be fair, my bar's higher than yours. Mine's just upside down. —I say with some kind of sarcasm.

—Well... I guess they... I can live with this. —Says Cath with a worried face.

—Wow. You don't have to play humble with me, you know. —I reply.

—Huh? —Cathy is confused.

I show her my results.

—Well Cath, look at these! What do you think of my —Disgraceful— scores? —I ask her, with a weird voice change.

—Eh, let me guess. The usual 30-34s barely passing. Maybe you got lucky this time and got a 36. —She says without looking at the results.

—I said... Look at my scores! —I say again.

—Fine. —She says before taking a look. —Wha-? Thirty?! Thirty what?! —Cathy is in flat disbelief. Processing how to even react, leaving her with a blank expression.

—Uh-huh, you saw that right. Humbly, I did get a 36. —I say with a funky smile.

—What have you done? Where you sitting next to Louise?! Did you just cheat?!—Says a surprised Cath.

—How dare you accuse me of such a thing. I'd, unfortunately finally tried my hand at actual studying. —I say, as if it was a crime to my beliefs I had just committed.

—H-How did you study?! When?! —Asks Cathy confused by the fact.

—I don't mean to brag but... It took just 2 good hours of studying without distraction. All just a day before the exams. No biggie! —I say proud of myself.

—Shit, man. Remember what I told you last time? —Asks Cath. Now with the same kind of smile as mine.

—About that sleeping genius in my noggin?

—Yeah! And just like that... Like a phoenix rising from the ashes... It has awakened from the eternal slumber! —She says putting up a fake voice. It clearly makes her happy I do something with my life.

—That's it. Playtime's over. —I get serious and erase my smile, Cath follows. —This is a fluke. Teachers were forgiving. Exams were just too easy.

—No they weren't! —Says Cath, as if offended by my statement.

—Period.

—Hell no! —Loudly says Cath. —I'd argue it wasn't easy at all!

—Oh really?

—Yeah! —Cath adds once more. —It was-

Our conversation gets interrupted by the sound of steps coming in. It's the new girl... Ta-da! She went in silently, didn't say a word. She just came in and took a seat in the corner in front of the class.

—Speaking of flukes... This stupid plan actually worked. —I told Cath after both of us saw her come in.

—Shh! Not yet! Lie low and keep it down. Remember, we have to establish a strong connection with the target at the soonest. —She gets all tactical and stuff. She's going dead serious on this.

—You weren't kidding... New students do come in early. —I say pointing out the certainty of her prediction.

—Newbies like her would want to attract attention. So they can mingle as much as they can before classes start. —She says, explaining her reasoning.

—And you really think that... Being her first new friend is worth sleeping early for? —I ask, bamboozled by this plan.

—That's correct. You get higher chances of winning her heart. I read that online, by the way.

—So why the heck did I get drag into this if it's just about you? —I ask confused.

—Duh? 'Cause you're the backup plan. —Says Cath as if I had already agreed to this.

—Wait, what? That wasn't part of the plan! —I say concerned about my dignity.

—Shh! Quiet!

We both look at the new one, she's just there sitting next to a window watching outside.

—Now what? So much for 'they want to attract attention and mingle.' —I say, citing what Cath said before.

—Trust me, she might be a meek one. I've seen this kind before. Quiet as a mouse, but once you get to know her... Well, you'd be surprised. —She replies with a serious, concentrated voice. She hasn't taken her eye out of her. Like a predator searching for prey, except now it's like a house 'Cath' searching for a little silent mouse. The power scales are whole different worlds apart.

—We'll see about that.

The new girl pans her sight around the front part of the room, letting Cath get a good look at her face.

—Oh my, she's pretty. Did you see that? —She says, making her get into a more happy and relaxed mood. Meanwhile my expression is the same old. Too tired to care.

—Yeah. And I can also see where this is headed.

—I know, right? We'll get together and become good friends. Then I'll ask her on a date. Then we'll watch the stars. Then do whatever they do in the movies! —Says Cathy getting excited by her plans, having a big smile and getting her cheeks a bit red. She even starts moving her arms back and forth.

—Hate to break it to you but... This isn't Hollywood.

—It's now or never, man. Here I go. —She says.

—Great. —I say, as I watch from afar her approach.

Cath gets to where she is sitting, forcing a confident smirk trying to show off. The new one doesn't make it easy, she doesn't even look at Cath.

—Hey there! Kate, right? —There's an awkward pause. “Off to a great start.” —Uh, I'm Catherine Joyce. But you can just call me Cath. I'm the friendliest one you'll ever meet here. As you can probably tell. —Still no answer, not even a look. She gets nervous and sweats a little. But she keeps the smile up. —Your name's Kate, right? It kinda sounds like mine, you know? What a coincidence! I'm sure that means we'll be good friends! —The new girl lightly slams her fist on the desk. Cath's voice starts shaking nonstop. —Ah yes, I know that feeling, my friend. Sucks transferring to a new school, I know. You'll get used to it for sure! We're all nice around here... specially me! —No wonder you haven't had a girlfriend yet. But then, I'm one to talk. —So, uh, welcome to Liamson integrated school! This is class 9-pearl. Cath at your service! Uh, you must be the silent type, huh? —As Cath finishes the new girl slams again her fist at the desk but this time stronger.

—I'm the polar opposite of the silent type if you keep talking. So it would be very nice of you... If you keep- that- mouth- shut. Thank you.

—I... But I... —Says Cath, intimidated by her. Her voice still shakes even stronger than before.

—I said thank you, didn't I? —Says Kate finally looking at Cath. Cath's expressions changes to one I would only see in traumatized people. She has a blank expression, but she, being Cath still manages to be quite goofy looking. She walks back to where we were.

—So? Welcome to Hollywood, eh? What's the problem? Cat got your tongue? Or should I say... Kate got your tongue? —I say to her, making fun of what she just lived.

—YOU DICKHEAD! THAT SHITTY JOKE DID NOT HELP AT ALL! I'VE BEEN STRIPPED OF ALL MY DIGNITY DON'T YOU SEE?! —Says Cath getting mad at me grabbing me by my shirt. Her expression shows a fusion of shame and anger. I on the other hand remain calm, just seeing everything come down. I had my fun watching her try. Besides I was too tired to care so I just let it happen.

—I did. And it was fun. —I say with voice tone making fun of her.

—Well, let's see who's laughing now.

She begins to push me with all her strength toward Kate. After all, I am the backup plan.

—What the hell are you doing?! —I ask worried for my sake.

—I told you. You're the backup plan. —Says Cath.

—Who said anything about that? —I question her.

—Just face it! Now go and talk to her! —She replies, not caring what happens to me after that.

I get in front of where she is. It's not like I have any dignity to lose anyways.

—Uhh... Sorry for the commotion back there. That was just my friend who's, uh, too friendly. She's just like that sometimes. —She does the same movement she did with Cath. I instinctively get nervous. —Look, I don't wanna meddle in your affairs... But... I just wanna welcome you. This place sucks but... It's got its moments. —As expected, I'm talking to a wall. This is pointless. I'm out. I then begin walking back to where I was, but I get interrupted.

—Wait.— Kate says. I stop dry, and Cath is still there just standing, confused or traumatized by what's happening.

—Go ahead. You're free to make a comeback.— she says.

—Did someone tell you?— she asks, leaving me confused.

—Uh, tell me what?— I say.

—About the...— she hesitates.

—The?— I ask.

—Never mind.— she says.

—Uhh... Wanna talk about it?— I ask.

—No, you may leave now.— she replies.

—But we just talked... Kind of.— I say.

—I'm not fond of all this yapping.— she says.

—Okay?— I respond.

—Name's Kate. If that helps shut your mouth.— she says.

—Uh, I'm Mark. Nice to meet you... I guess?— This conversation is leaving me more confused than before. But before I could understand better she already had come back to just staring outside the window. — And that's out new classmate, folks. Hooray. —I think with sarcasm. I then walk back to Cath.

—Man, I don't know what just happened back there. —I say.

—B-But that ain't fair... I'm the social butterfly here... N-Not you! —She says amused by what happened.

—I'd think twice about that title if I were you. —I tell Cath.

—B-But... But just how? She even introduced herself! —Says Cath not accepting what just happened.

—If you could even call it that. —I yawn— Now that this mission has failed. Would you please let me take a nap? —I ask.

Ryan walks in.

—Woah, Mark! Is that you? *This early?*—He says just as Cathy predicted.

—Put a sock in it, Ryan. —I answer, I already am in position to get some more sleep at my desk, at last.

—Hey dude, that must be... Katrina, right? —Ryan says, misremembering her name

—What's up, Katrina? —Kate does not answer. As he pans around he notices Cath.

—Woah, you too, Cath? Dude, why'd you guys come in so early? —Cath is just there with an empty look.

—Cath? Hello? —No answer— Yo? Cath got your tongue? —He says pun intended

—ARGH!! SHUT UP!! —Says Cath

The room goes quiet, or maybe I just stopped listening. All I know is that I fell asleep, god knows how long I will be dead on my desk. I shouldn't really let it last that long, I have class in no time.

A few hours go by.

—Wake up, sleepyhead! It's lunch time! Don't you wanna play air piano again? —Cath says mucking me.

—Hngg. —I groan.

I wake up and sit right, passing my hand through my face.

—Finally! Rise and shine! Just how much sleep did you get? One measly hour? —Says Cath.

—Make it two. —I say.

—It's a good thing you got lucky today, JunJun. —She says making fun of me, calling me JunJun.

—What? —I am confused.

—You slept through three classes in a row, you know, just like JunJun over there.

We get a look at JunJun, he's still sleeping.

—I did what?! —I ask surprised and worried. —Why didn't anyone wake me up?

—Well... We tried but it was no use, you were in a deep sleep... And we couldn't get the sleeping beauty up... And no one wanted to kiss you... So yeah. —Cath tells me.

—What did the teachers say? —I ask.

—They didn't want to kiss you either. I'm sorry. —She says jokingly.

—Am I kissing my grades goodbye?

—That's where you got lucky, man. They didn't give a damn... At least for now.

—What a relief. I sweat, just one more warning from Mr. Alfonso... And I'm outta here.

—He was in a surprisingly good mood. They say he got his ex-girlfriend back. Good for him. —She says with a funky smirk.

—What about Mrs. Flores?

—What are you talkin' about? Art's after lunch break. Hey, speaking of! What did you paint?

—Uhh... Paint what?

—You know! For our poster project!

I see everyone starting to put their posters on the front board getting ready to present. Man, I'm in trouble. Shit.

—I know! It's so cliché! —Says Cath while showing me her poster. —But man, I did it all on my own... And I'm so proud of it! What do you think? —She says proud of her work.

—I think... I think I'm in trouble. —I answer, letting her know I didn't do it.

—There's no way! Cramming this is flat-out impossible! —She says.

—I have to or I'm getting kicked out for real. Say, how many minutes do I have left? —I ask getting ready to cram yet again.

—Seven minutes! Are you crazy?! —She says worried.

—I've always been.

—I know you cram but this is just insanity!

I stand up and begin running through the hallway.

—Hey!! —She says with a preoccupied look.

Just gotta dash my way to the supplies store! I can do this! Shit, there's people on my way. —I see someone with a pile of books standing in the hallway. I stumble with him but keep running, his books fall due to the impact.

—I hate life! —He yells.

—You know it! —I answer.

I keep running through the hallway and just a few seconds later, I encounter another dude. He was eating in the middle of the hallway so I sped up and went through. Luckily his food didn't spill.

—What the hell, bro?

—Excuse me! Just dashing through!

I'm going to paint something so avant-garde and pretentious... It'll knock flores' socks off!

There's a couple of girls moving a paper sign of the team covering the whole hall. I somehow manage to slide down and evict that thing.

—Hey, no running in the halls! —They say.

—It's an emergency! —I answer. I mean it is for me.

Aha! I got it! I'll just splash paint around... And just like that, I'm the next pollock! Man what is that?! A Christmas tree?!

—Ow!! No! our precious tree! —Says the girl of the tree after I send it to the ground.

—Sorry! my bad!

I can already see the supplies store! Target locked, baby! We're almost there!

Uh-oh. —I see a girl standing in the middle of the hall. Long, dark hair that goes all the way down her back. Barely gathered by a big green ribbon on her hair. It lets a few gentle bangs to the side of her face. She's painting something. —What are you doing out here?! I can't brake.

She notices me running towards her. Her face changes expression, from a proud smile to a panic fueled face of pure shock. I also get the same expression, but it's more about me worrying about my grades. Out of all the numbers from 0 to 50... I got a score of 13. —I think, remembering my Art score.

As expected we have crashed. Could this day get any worse?

—Hey Mark! —Says the store attendant

—H-Hey, Billie my guy. W-What's up?—I say.

—What's the last minute rush today? Need anything? Marker pen? Printing? Zerox? —Billie asks.

—I did need something... But I don't think... I don't think I'm in good shape to cram now. —I say still feeling the impact of before.

—That girl isn't in good shape as well, it seems. —Billie says.

—Uh-oh. —I say without really caring.

I look at her, she's laying on the ground, is she dead? —She starts moving and sits down —Oh thank god, she's ok... I think. —She looks mad.

—AAARGH!!! —She screams. She removes what she can of paint from herself. I walk towards her and extend my hand trying to help her.

—YOU! YOU MONSTER! I don't need your hand! —She says. I look at her without any expression.

—I have two and I can stand on my own, okay?! —She says still quite angry about it.

—Hey, I- Uh... —I get interrupted by the same strange feeling. As if... As if we have already met.

—Wha-? —She says, also confused as if she felt it too. —W- What's your deal?!

—Sorry, but I didn't mean to. —I say, trying to be apologetic.

—Didn't mean to ruin someone's first day in this school? Okay, sure! Thanks, I guess! —She says sarcastically. Clearly she won't go over this easily.

—To be fair, you were blocking the halls, right in the middle!

—Wow! So are we just totally ignoring the fact... That someone was ruthlessly barreling through the halls?

—I know. But sorry, you're in the wrong, too.

—I lost my consciousness for a moment there! You almost killed me for pete's sake!

—Hey! I'm- —I try apologizing once more, but before that... She freaking pushes me to the ground!

—Look at this mess! Look at me! I'm a mess! —she bursts out, her voice sharp, raw, trembling on the edge of breaking. Her eyes dart around the scattered pieces of her project, then back to him. Furious, and wounded.

—This is... I was so excited to... To start a brand new life here. —she continues, her voice faltering as if each word cuts deeper than the last,

— And you're just gonna... gonna mess it up like that?!

Her arms fall to her sides, fingers curling into fists as if holding in the rest of what she wants to scream. Her shoulders rise and fall in shallow, erratic breaths.

—What am I supposed to do? —she says, barely above a whisper now, her voice catching. But after that she calms down a bit. As she does, a teacher walks from behind.

—Whatever! I never want to see your face again. —She says.

She turns her back and get front to front with a teacher, getting all ashamed. Really not what we need now. —Great.

—Both of you! Principal's office! Now!!!

And that ladies and gentlemen, is how we get dragged once more to the principal's office.

We were in the waiting room sitting on the same couch, each on one corner leaving a big gap between us, she wouldn't even dare to look at me.

—Fortunately, we have extra uniforms for students. —Says the teach', still mad. She had given us a new pair of clothing to both of us. The same white shirt, green pants or skirt in that case. Not really much thought into it.

—You ought to return them next week. You understand? —None of us answer.

—Do you two realize the consequences of your misbehavior? Let this day teach you a well-deserved lesson.

Scary.

—You will stay here until dismissal. I've called the principal. She'll be here in a few hours. —She says.

—Wait a second... —She adds before almost leaving.

—Have I seen your face here before? —She asks with a confused expression.

—Uh, me? —I ask.

Well duh, who else could it be.

—Yes. —Says Ms. Legaspi.

—Why, I have no idea what you mean, Ms. Legaspi. —I say with my sarcastic tone.

—I knew it! Just how many warnings do you have left... Before you get expelled?! —She says, trying to make me feel worried. Absolut miss.

—I don't know. I'm invincible? —I add with a smug smile.

She just leaves.

—Hey, uh... Candy? You want one? —I look at her. Still no answer.

So this is how it is huh? Maybe she just doesn't want that.

—Mint? Fruit? —I ask her once more.

What was I thinking? Candy won't be enough to tame the beast. There's gotta be something in here. —I begin exploring the place. I've been here plenty of times already. Let's see... What could help make this situation less worse. Aha! —I spot the coffee machine —Let's give her a taste of fancy shmancy coffee. That'll lift her spirits up! —I turn around and get into character with a big artificial yet purposeful smile.

—Hi! Welcome to starbonks! What can I get for you? —I say with a fake voice, trying to imitate the usual tone of the workers.

—You know... They've got a coffee maker with a grinder here. Top of the line gear. —I say quitting the voice. But still no answer.

—They've got Arabic beans too or whatever. Cream of the crop. You won't find this anywhere else. —I say.

—It's arabica, you jerk. —She says, finally spilling some words. So coffee makes her talk. —Hey! Now we're *talking*. So you want a cup of arabica? —I say with a beaming smile.

—This is the best coffee you'll ever have, I promise. My hipster friend would kill for this.

No answer.

—I'll take that as a yes.

I turned around to face the coffee machine on the wall so I could make some coffee for both of us. Somehow, she seemed interested enough to turn her head toward the right side of the room—where I was standing.

—Smells so good, doesn't it? —I say turning around. But so does she, quickly turning her head back returning that flat unpleasant expression. Her arms are crossed as they've been now for all the time we've been here.

—Nearly done! I know you can't wait. —I say as the coffee is getting ready to be served.

I grab both coffees and begin walking towards our seats.

—One cup for you. —I say placing her cup in front of her. —And one cup for me.

I take a sip.

—Mm-hmm. It never disappoints.

I take another sip.

—Don't let that speciality go to waste. You don't always get a chance to taste overpriced tuition. That's where it all goes.

No answer.

—Come on, before it gets cold.

Geez she looks mad. Maybe she'd rather have iced coffee.

I walk around trying to find something to entertain myself and also try to make her feel better. She refuses to even see me.

Ooh what is this?

—Woah, this one's new. I haven't seen this before. Would you look at this bad boy? —I say as I sit down like a child in front of a fan blowing air. —Hey, look! It's not severing my arm! Just amazing what overpriced tuition can buy. She yawns at him. As if saying "try harder." Apparently, bladeless fans are unexciting.

I decide to stand up and go a few more steps forward. And there they are, three certificates and two medals. "Most competitive. Liamson 2010." "Best school in Liamson 2008" "Most competitive. Liamson 2011" It all went downhill from here. Luckily there is something better than depressing memories from when this school wasn't just fancy, overpriced diplomas.

—Watch this. —I say as I grab a pair of keys hanging from the wall.

—Our lavish principal has three cars.

A pickup...

I use the first key.

A sedan...

Then the second

And an SUV.

And the last one.

They all have a different tone.

—What you just heard was the SUV. *I love it. It has the best beep.*

No answer. Not interesting enough for her.

What am I supposed to give *you*? A whole performance to call your attention?
Yeah, as if... Yeah! As if! Bingo! —I think to myself.

I grab a small stand underneath the couch we were seating. It's not big, but it will work for what I have planned. Heck, she even looks at least curious for what I'm about to do. So, if a show is needed, a show will be given.

—Greeting, my fellow Liamsonians. —I say with a fake political voice to suit my speech to my imaginary public. Standing closely in the little seat I took, looking at the hidden camera in a bookshelf next to us.

—I just wanna announce that... You can never get rid of me! I keep this school running... With my pockets as deep as the marianas. —I take my *iconical* rock on pose plus a wide, smug grin.

—No matter how many times you detain, warn, or punish me. You won't ever have the balls to let me go! —I strike an even more confident pose!

—I may not be a genius or a dreamer but... I've got, uh... EPIC BANGS! She laughs in the background but immediately remembers she must be mad at me cuts it. But hey that's progress!

—That's all for my beloved school. Thank you for your attention. Too bad security cams don't record audio.

—What an audience! I'd at least appreciate a round of applause here. I've tried everything now. Forget it. This is useless.

—I give up. —I say after sitting on the couch once more.
I sigh.

—I did all I could possibly do. Nothing could make you speak besides stupid Arabic beans.

There is nothing I can do, but let the time go.

—2,995

A few hours have passed already.

—2,996

How long is she gonna keep this up? She looks completely unmoved for everything I try.

—2,997

How long will I keep this up?

—2,998

I'm getting bored.

—2,999

I'm quitting this.

—3,000!

There's a long pause before I say anything.

—*Oh wow! Would you look at the time?* —I say with a bit of a mocking tone, but not with a bad intent.

—It appears we have three more exciting hours left. Imprisoned here, with nothing to do. Except, you know... Socialize like humans do. If we would just all cooperate.

—You do not deserve my cooperation. —She says.

Finally.

—Finally! Thank God! But after all I've done to cheer you up?

—Oh, I'm sorry. After what *you* have done? Either way, try harder. But I'm sure you'd die trying.

—You haven't even taken a sip of my coffee yet. That surely calms your nerves, miss.

—Mister, you're dodging the real issue here. You're just wasting my time.

—I told you. You were literally taking up half the width of the hallway.

Even worse, right in the middle!

—And you were running. Read the handbook section 7.4.

Oh wow.

—I'm surprised a novice like me knows more than a supposed veteran.

—She says, mocking me.

—Whoa. Look who's so gung ho about transferring. *She* knows the handbook like the back of her hand.

—Why thank you. That's what the back of my hand is for. The front is for, you know... Dealing with you. Just in case. —She answers. Quite the teaser.

—If you didn't know. Normal people would do their business at the side. To make way for others. But I guess some people simply aren't part of that population.

—Sir, have you ever heard of speed limits? I think someone here could take a page from traffic etiquette.

—Getting this show on the road, huh? Well... Ever heard of middle-lane hogging? Go ahead! Take a page!

—Oh my. Get this show on the road? Did you just use an idiom literally? How cheesy. —She answers me back.

—Actually, that was a double *entendre*. I used the idiom both literally and as intended. Too bad my ingenuity went over your head.

—I wish "ingenuity" were an antonym for "genius" right now.

—Running out of fuel? 'Cause that was lame. Admit it. Your car has crashed.

—Is it my fault your car crashed into mine?

—Flat tire.

—Huh? What's that even supposed to mean?

—I said... You're a... Flat tire.

—Wha-?

She's confused.

She looks down.

—OHH, YOU MONSTER! —She says extremely angry, even more than when we crashed just before.

—You really wanna get it, do you?!

—I'd be... Flat-tered.

Good one there Mark.

—YOU DIRTY SICKO!

Just as she was about to slap me, the director came in. Making her stop in motion with her arm almost extended towards me.

She stands with a practiced, slightly impatient posture, idly flicking open and shut her pink abanico—not for authority, but as a small comfort she refuses to leave behind. Her hair is pinned beneath a bright pink headband, matched by a long scarf draped around her neck, adding color not out of vanity but to brighten the day. Large earrings sway as she shifts her weight, thick glasses catching the light, framing a calm but faintly tired face, her lips set in a line that says she has better places to be.

She wears an olive blouse with fitted brown pants, pink shoes peeking out as she moves, hints of someone who enjoys spending on small comforts simply because she likes nice things. The colored glass panels behind her echo the tastefully cluttered office she likely overspent on—not to intimidate, but to make it feel “less miserable.”

—Uhh... I'll talk to you later. —Says the director.

—Good afternoon, um, Mrs. Chavez. —She says standing in a more *adequate* posture.

—Good day, Mrs. Chavez. Lookin' fancy today! How are we doing?—I say with a smile.

—Of course, it's you again. Although it's the first time you brought someone with you.

—I... I sincerely apologize for the trouble. I hope we can resolve this asap. —She says.

—Whatever. I'm in a hurry. Come on, follow me.

We followed her into her office.

—Okay, let's begin. Ms Legaspi has told me everything. I have to say... What you've committed is one serious offense.

—Serious indeed. —I say yawning.

—But it's his fault! —She says.

—Hold your horses, miss. You'll get a chance to speak up later.

—Understood. I'm sorry.

—Flat tire. —I say.

—Come again? —The director asks.

At the same time the girl in front of me crosses her arms.

—Your sedan. I think it has a flat tire.

—How do you know? —She asks.

—I just saw it earlier.

—And?

—There it was. A flat tire. So flat you wouldn't be able to drive it.

She now gets all red faced and angered.

—That sounds horrible. I have to get that fixed.

—Absolutely.

The one in front of me stands up annoyed by how this is being taken care of.

—That's it!! —She says.

—Miss! —Says the director. She sits down again. —Where are your manners?!

—It's his fault! All his! He was blazing through the hallway without a care in the world!

—Mister, no running in the halls! —The director says to me. —We made that clear in the handbook, didn't we?

The girl I crashed into gets a smug smile.

—You guys did make it clear. Props to you for that. Four thumbs up. But little missy here was blocking the middle of the hallway.

—Oh miss... —Says the director. —I'm sorry but you can't do that. You should've known to give way, right?

Now I'm the one with the satisfied smile. On the other hand, she gets quite the opposite.

—No, but look... Isn't it clear who should be held accountable? —She says.

—Clear as day. —I answer.

—If he weren't running in the first place... None of this would've happened!

—Same outcome if she weren't blocking the hallway. Plus you wouldn't have annoyed a bunch of your schoolmates.

—Pretty sure you annoyed a bunch of them along the way too. You just don't wanna admit it.

—Silence! —Says the director getting all stressed 'cause of our discussion. —I've had enough of you two. I'm calling your parents now!

—No, please! I just transferred here! —She says, taking all her fighting spirit away. —They'd be so-

—NO!! *Please* don't. — I say...

—Don't look at me like that, Mark. You surprise me. —Says the director. No one is really used to or has even seen me react like that.

—M- Mark? —She says.

—Well then. If you don't want me to call your parents. For the love of everything good and holy. Just make up with each other.

—What?! —She says.

—How?! —I add.

—Figure it out or I'll call your parents now. I've got a mall-wide sale to catch so make it quick.

—Hmm... —I say, grabbing my chin. —Okay, fine. I'll cover everything. I'll pay for the repainting of the walls and flooring.

—That's good.

—I'll get you a cool gift too. Because I love this school and I love you. —I say to the director.

—You don't have to, but okay. —She answers.

—And lastly... I'll pay for little missy's new art supplies. So she can redo her poster. —I say.

—That sounds like a good plan then. It covers everything we'd otherwise worry about.

—My pleasure.

—But Mark, I've been hearing about your grades. Remember, you can't make up for that in any way. You have to study harder if you want to stay here.

—Yeah, I will. I'm gonna miss you guys if I leave. —I say with my subtle sarcastic style.

—So miss, how does Mark's plan sound to you? —The director asks.

—Uhh... I can take it, I guess. —She replies.

—Alright. You two may go home now. —The director adds.

—Wait, what about schoolwork due today? —She asks.

—Turn them in next week. Your teachers will understand.

—Awesome! —I say. —More time to do that stupid art project.

—Er, I guess.

—Okay, this is my final warning. Mark, please don't run in the halls. Miss, please don't block them. Do you two understand?

—Understood, Mrs. Chavez. It won't happen again.

—Yeppers.

—Meeting adjourned. Be safe on the way home.

She then proceeds to leave in a hurry. Leaving us both alone again.

—So, uh... —She says. —That happened. You got away with it just like that?

—Just like that! Cool, eh?

—For the record... Since you still ruined my first day... I'm totally not forgiving you.

—Cool.

—Not yet, that is.

—They never bothered to ask your name. So what is it?

—As much as I hate to introduce myself to you... I'm Nicole Lacsamana.

What a coincidence.

—Uh...

—Uh, you can call me Nicole.

—Nice to meet you, Nicole.

—Disgusted to meet you, Mark.

—So, what are we gonna do? —I ask.

What else Mark, duh. Go to the store and buy her new art supplies and then help her redo her art project. Though I don't think I'll be of much help there.

I have to admit she is being more talkative in our travesty to the store and her home. Chemistry flows again.

Yeah right, as if there was something...

—I COULD'VE USED A LITTLE HELP BACK THERE. —I say, already tired of carrying the supplies. Luckily we're already at her door.

—You carried all of that, Mark? *For me? Aww.*

—YOU ForCED Me TO!

—Oh you, you're such a gentleman. Not a lot of gentlemen these days, you know.

—Why'd you even shop this *much*? I thought we were just gonna buy art supplies. Like do you really need a new toothbrush holder?

—Uh-huh, we buy one every week. The house ghosts keep *stealing* it.

—And all these plastic hooks and clothespins?

—Why yes. I collect clothespins as a hobby. There's a subgeddit for that.

—And all these skirts and shirts? Really? Have you been wearing the same set of clothes everyday?

—Eww, absolutely not. I'm not as filthy as you.

—And seriously? A knife set?

—I'm gonna need more than one knife if you misbehave.

—Let’s just get this over with. What’s taking you so long to open that door?

—Your nagging.

MY GOD FINALLY SHE OPENS THE DOOR.

—Welcome to our humble abode. —She says.

The living room is all messy, moving boxes around literally everywhere.

—Our *new* humble abode.

—So that’s why. —I say.

—We just moved in a few days ago. Still needs work, I know.

—Uh, is no one else home?

—Ha, you wish.

Yeah, as if.

—My parents are sleeping in the back. So you better keep it down.

—And your siblings?

—Well, I wish I had one.

—It’s a hassle-free life, I’d say. No trouble, no drama, no petty arguing.

—Where’s the fun in that?

Emm... Literally everywhere.

—Hey, I’m gonna get changed. Stay right here and DON’T TOUCH ANYTHING! —She warns me.

—Do touch everything, got it.

—Hey! Can I use the bathroom?!—I add.

—Whatever happened to KEEPING IT DOWN?!

—I was just asking.

I leave the things on the ground and then do the *obvious* thing. Touch e v e r y t h i n g.

Alright ladies and gentlemen, box numero *uno*. What have we got here? It’s a bird thingy, it stands on its own by its peak in the tiptop of my finger. Nerds will be like “*center of ass*” or whatever. But really, this is magic to my eyes.

I go to the other side of the room. There are some framed pictures of Nicole on the wall. But none of my convenience.

Alright, box *numero dos*. Ah, of course, the staple of every home. Good ol' pirated DVDs. Let's see what flicks they've got.

"Micromind" — "A dumb supervillain inadvertently defeats his enemy with his inherently deplorable IQ."

Next we've got...

"Bratatat" — "Rem, a professional rat chef, gives up his culinary ways... And commits to a savage gangster life of robbery and gang wars." Oh wow.

Coming up.

"Sardyant Benny" — "A gay soldier fights terrorists with a fart gun... But people are going to watch this movie anyway."

Following...

"Boom boom pak XIV: The final amazing pow!" — "Starring 36 local artists all mashed up into one star-studded film. That's it! Don't ask about the plot. There's none."

Going next is...

OH HELL NAH WHAT IS THAT! DAMN IT, POPS! MY EYES!

They just never keep their porn stash somewhere safe. Don't they? I better go check something and somewhere else.

As I begin walking something catches my eye.

Wait. —I think as I stop dry.

A framed picture of her family and her is kinda dusty, covered in a thin layer of well emm... dust.

For some reason I decided to clean it.

—I'm afraid we didn't hire a housemaid. —She says, just after creeping up on me.

—HEY!!

Geez you almost gave me a heart attack.

—Oh my. Do we have a scaredy-cat here? —Says Nicole teasingly.

—Don't tell me you wouldn't jump too if someone just appeared out of thin air.

—I would, but... your face would just make me burst out laughing.

Oh, we have a comedian here.

—Anyway, we're painting here, right?

—Of course. You think we're doing this in my room? Don't get any funny ideas.

—Oh, I'm not that low. The only funny idea I'm having is painting circles on your face.

—Oh well, we're going in circles. Let's just start, shall we?

And so she goes.

There's a little desk at knee level where she is now sitting, ready to do again what I ruined... sorry. She does look more relaxed than before. Even— happy —of being here.

The golden rays of the afternoon sun cover her as a warm mantle of happiness and self enjoyment.

Not like me, covered by the dark shadow of a wall that keeps me in here.

None the less. Nature doesn't care about our doings. The birds are still chirping outside,

—I kinda want to put the knife set beside me... You know, for self-defense. Do you mind? —She says jokingly, with a smile.

Really? After all *we've* gone through? You think I'll leave you all the knives for yourself?

—If I can have half of the knives to protect myself as well... Then not at all. —I answer following the game. Going along with the chemistry.

—Good! Let's begin then! How about you go first?

—That’s inefficient, don’t you think? How about we just paint together?

—I wanna see your potential. *Impress me*. Heck maybe you’d even inspire me.

—All I’m hearing is... “I want to boss you around” coated in sugar.

—Haha, no really. —She says within a laugh. —Let’s see what you’ve got.

—Prepare to be amazed. This is a master at work.

Okay Mark. What have we got... No, really. What do we have?

...

Ah, I’ve got it. I’ll go with something so “*avant garde*, contemporary and creative” no one, not even me. Will know what the hell this is.

A few paint strokes here and there. Ooh yeah, that looks good. She’s not expecting thi-

—Uh, what are you doing?

—Painting?

—In black?

Ummm...

—What’s wrong about that?

—But the theme’s mother earth.

—I know. — Climate change, environment, or whatever.

—So why does it look like you’re painting nonsense?

—Hey, watch your words. This is *avant-garde* at its peak. And if you know our teacher well... She gets off on weird art.

—Exploiting her pretentious taste with pretentiousness. Hmm, I see.

—I had that epiphany back when I was running my ass off in the halls. —I say with a slight smirk.

—I never thought to ask... Why were you running in the halls in the first place?

—I had about seven minutes to cram this shit. I rushed to the store, but there you were... *Majestically blocking the way.*

—Say what?! Seven minutes?!

—That shouldn't come as a surprise from me. —I say with a naughty smile.
—Oh that's right, we just met.

How could I've forgotten I just met her? It's just that it felt like... I was talking to an old friend.

—It wasn't your first time at the principal's office, was it? —Says Nicole worried.

—Oh, it was. I just happened to flawlessly operate the coffee maker by accident. Lucky me. —I answer with sarcasm. But her next words come out with an intention of sympathy.

—Crazy. You weren't fearing for your life one bit.

—Why would I? If they wanted to get rid of me... They would have.

I get my focus back on my painting. It's a black mess. Luckily now it's time for blue to come into play.

—I... I don't get it. —Her tone is serious, but mostly concerned than anything. But even then she still keeps the smile. Maybe to hide her concern for my lifestyle choices. Maybe, so it doesn't seem that she's trying to judge me. Maybe, because she *cares* and wants to be more sympathetic to me. But she keeps it, that gentle smile.

—AH YES! A brilliant representation of oil spills destroying our lovely oceans. I can already see flores' eyes *sparkling*. —I avoid the question.

—Hold on. I don't get it. Why do you live like this?... Why? —She asks.

—Shut up. I need to concentrate. I'm channeling my inner pollock. —And again.

—I mean, are there even any upsides?

—Ask our classmate Khyle. He crams way more than I do. He’s the true expert. —And again.

—You know what? I suggest that could definitely use more effort.

—I suggest not spending my time precious effort on this.

—Could also use more color! You know what I mean?

She’s gently pressing for understanding

—I’ve no time for your color theory bullcrap.

—You don’t need to know color theory. You just have to, you know... Let it shine! —She uplifts the last part, bringing back her smile. Not for long though.

—We didn’t buy glossy paint.

She’s patient, slowly trying to get an answer from me.

—I mean, are you seriously okay with this? Settling for this pollock ripoff?

—She asks worriedly.

—Look, all I need to do is to get the job done... With the least possible effort.

—But do you even find enjoyment in it?

—Of course not. Not that it matters, right?

She looks down at my “painting”. She looks, disappointed? I don’t know.

She then grabs it and takes it to her side of the desk.

—Hey!

—Watch! I’ll show you how it’s done!

She begins painting. Driven by sheer passion. Her smile returns, but now it’s not full of whatever that was. She truly enjoys this.

—Oh great. Someone's doing the dirty work for me. Thank you so much.
—I say looking at the side.
—Hey! Look at me! —She exclaims.
—Fine, fine.
—We can still turn this pitiful artwork to a lively one. Just you wait and see.
—Hooray.
—I think it needs more color.
—Okay.
—A dash of white! A splash of red! A drop of blue! Do you see it? It's coming together now.
—Woah.

That left me, mouth open. Did not expect that at all. My whole face is showing a big expression of surprise, just like a little kid on Christmas.

—It's much better now, right? —She asks with a smirk.
—I don't like saying this to your face, but... It is.
—You see. Mark. I just enjoy the things I do. And whenever I find that enjoyment... Everything else naturally shines.
She's probably right.

She looks up at me. She smiles.

Everything shines.

—You just have to find that spark. —She says.
—You're crazy. —I say, teasing her. With my voice plane. Giving her the reason.
—I like to think I am.

We look at each other. But...

A flashback comes to me. It's an airplane in the middle of a storm.

My eyes break eye contact drifting apart to a corner of my sight. My smile fades.

—Getting there. —Says Nicole, getting back to her painting.

—Uh, are you done? —I say, with a tired expression. After all, I still hadn't slept in a long time.

—Just a little bit more!

—Hey, that's enough. You've already helped.

—And done!

It's planet earth in space, surrounded by darkness and stars. With a smile and red cheeks, with hearts all around it.

—So? What do you think?

No answer.

—Why the long face now? —She asks worriedly.

—Don't get me wrong... It's nice and all, but... I really wanted to illustrate climate change.

—That sounds kinda bleak, doesn't it?

—I don't know. I guess it's realistic and down-to-earth.

—Really?

I grab the other paper that's below the other one. She doesn't take this well. At least for the next five seconds.

—Hey! That's mine! —She says with an angry expression.

—Plus, my work shouldn't look that good. Flores knows that.

—Then just switch it up! She won't catch it. —She says.

There it is again, the same smile from before. As if she pitied me.

—Even if I do, it doesn't feel like it's mine.

—Sprinkle your personal finesse then! Add your own touch! —Nicole suggested.

—That's not gonna work.

—Wait a minute. I know what it's missing. —She says.

—There's nothing missing.

—I'll make the stars bigger! Maybe even cuter! —Says Nicole.

—Go ahead. It's yours after all.

—To be clear, this is yours and that is mine. Just gimme a moment to perfect this. —She clears.

She keeps on painting.

—Better now! Look! —She says.

—Awesome. It deserves to be yours. —I say, focused on my job.

—No, you deserve this! Hold on, I'll give it more stars.

I paint something that resembles my signature.

—Here it i-

She sees it. My signature. Then she looks at the one in her hands.

—You're right. This is mine.

—Don't mention it. And don't worry. I won't need half of the knives.

—I wish I could stab you.

—That'd be an honor.

We say jokingly.

—I wonder... What's living here like? —She asks.

—Brace yourself. Everything's unique here at Liamson. They've got exotic tentacles for Christmas. And wrestling mechas for new year's. Quite a culture shocker. —I say sarcastically.

—I wish that were the case but I was asking nicely.

—Same old, same old. You're still in the dreary heart of the capital.—I answer. My voice is flat, as if trying to ignore the questions.

—Do you have siblings? —She asks.

—We're both only children. —I answer.

—And you think it's hassle-free?

—Did I stutter?

—And your parents? —She asks. —What do they do for a living?

—Unlike yours, neither of them are talk show hosts.

—What if I told you I wanna be one someday? —She says jokingly. Almost laughing at what she says.

—And drown people in your hollow questions? Good luck.

—So what do they do for a living?

—Since you won't shut up... What if I told you I live all alone?

—What? —She asks with a concerned expression.

—It's true. Both of them work abroad. Pay's good. Well, too good they don't wanna stop working.

—What do you mean?

...

—That's sick! Pollock, look at this! You must be so proud of me right now. She gets annoyed that I've been avoiding her questions. I can see it on her face.

—I get that they're both overseas workers... But what do they do?

—Oh boy, would you look at that? The sun's setting. Guess I should be going now.

—Is your dad like an engineer or something?

—He repairs giant wrestling mechas, you annoying talk show host.

Oh yeah right before I leave.

—Hey, where's the bathroom?

—Sadly, a wrestling mecha ripped it apart yesterday. You'll have to pee outside.

—I'll try my luck then.

I stand up, leaving her alone. She stops painting.

—Try not getting sucked in, snub!