

Love Is Second Best

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STORYPDF

Complete English text · A4 reading edition

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About this edition

This StoryPDF reading edition contains the complete English text, with its original paragraph and section order preserved.

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Chapter 1: ART'S START

Carmella's POV

It was 5:30 in the morning to be exact. I can't remember the last time I ran so fast just because I am not having a choice chasing somebody. The day is still young and yet my whole day is almost ruined because of what some people are doing to me. This is pure injustice!

"Hey! You jerk! Come back! I will really kick your ass off!" I shouted as I chased someone who got my last bill for this day. I never thought I could be this unfortunate even if the day is almost starting.

That was the last hundred-peso bill that I am reserving for the whole day. For everything that I have to spend for myself. That's including my meal and everything. However, it was gone in an instant because of some opportunists coming my way.

I almost gasped for air but the one I am chasing is already gone from my sight. I tried stopping myself from crying but I feel like today is totally unlucky. Earlier, I only got five out of ten items on that quiz that our teacher gave us. I never reviewed anything and she surprised us with that.

Remembering all the unfortunate events that I've been through today, I feel like giving up. And one girl came into my mind all of a sudden.

Elise Hope Glitz.

Our transferee who came all the way from America. She's half-Filipino, half-American. From the very first time our teacher introduced her to all of us, everyone was in awe. Her beauty is striking. I can compare it to Gal Gadot, the one who played the role in the movie, "Wonder Woman".

"Hello everyone. I am so happy to meet all of you here. Thank you for the warm welcome. I hope I could be friends to all of you." She said, never letting her smile fade away from her beautiful face.

I rolled my eyes as I mimicked what she said using my mouth.

I don't think she's kind or what. For me, she's plastic and a 'too-good-for-everyone' type of girl. I knew a lot of people trying to be kind and yet the truth is, they are mean and evil deep inside.

I think she has that attitude. A part of me doesn't like her at all even if she appeared to be very kind to my other classmates. In fact, after her introduction, a lot of my close friends flocked to her and shook hands with her.

They look very excited as they welcome Elise, they forgot that I am also existing. I entered our room as most of my classmates were all eyes on me. They were all loud and they were all having

fun before I stepped inside the room. I noticed that as soon as they saw me glancing at them, they all stopped. I looked at them and they also did the same. It was too awkward.

They started to murmur with their seatmates. The hell I care anyway. I have a lot of things inside my head and I don't like my classmates to be a part of it.

"Hello class! How's your day?" I felt like I was saved by the bell. Everything went to normal after we all greeted our teacher who just stepped inside the room five minutes before our class time would start in English.

The whole day ended like a flash. Since my best friend is in another section, I had no choice but to stay all alone and sit inside the mini-forest talking to nobody. Here I go again, thinking how fortunate our transferee Elise Hope is. Her life is so different from me that I can't help but be envious.

I sighed as I wiped my tears using my hands. Irritated and sad at the same time, I almost stomped my feet as I am nearing one of the benches to the mini-forest that's located at the heart of our school. It's the only place where I could destress. It's the quietest place for the record. This is only the place where I find my solitude if I am sad or I am not in the mood for anything.

I sat down feeling really disappointed. I got my book inside my bag and I started to scan some pages. However, no matter how I tried to study or know what I am reading, I am ending up with a problematic sigh.

"Hello." Somebody greeted me as she stood in front of me. When I looked up, I saw Elise Hope smiling at me.

"Oh, hi." I awkwardly smiled at her. I remembered how I hated her a bit a while ago. It's really amazing how she can instantly change that mood in me.

"Can I sit down here? I am sorry this is the only vacant seat that I found here."

"Of course, yes. I don't mind." I nodded as I answered. She smiled as she followed what I said.

"Do you like to be alone?"

"No, not really. I just wanted to hang out here for a while."

I can see that her smile suddenly faded a little. She looked down and awkwardly smiled again.

"I'm so sorry. I guess I bothered you."

"No. I'm sorry you seem to misunderstood that. Of course I'd love it when someone will hang out with me. It so happened that most of our classmates went home already." I can't help but chuckle. The way she's telling me is too adorable. She looked amazing. She became more beautiful than I ever expected.

"Oh? Is that so?" She said as she glanced at her wristwatch. "I am also here because I am waiting for my father to drive me home. Would you mind if I wait for him, here?"

"No, not at all." I smiled at her. I suddenly felt guilty because I thought of bad things against her. But I guess, she's really kind-hearted.

"Oh, it's already four in the afternoon. Why are you not going home yet?"

"W-Well, I am still studying here."

"Oh, I see." I saw her smile as she roamed her eyes around the place. She looked really amazed from what she could see in the mini-forest.

"I'm sorry I never had a chance to welcome you here in our school. By the way, my name is Carmella Ruth Fleur. I am happy to finally meet my new classmate." I smiled as I offered my hand. She chuckled a little and it made her more charming in my eyes.

"You know what? You're a bit funny. You don't have to be too formal if you make friends. Just be yourself." She accepted my hands and we did a cute handshake. She giggled as we did it. I can't help smiling, too.

"I am Elise Hope, but to tell you a secret, I prefer my close friends to call me Hope."

"I am not your close friend so I guess I will call you Elise." I smiled as she jokingly frowned in front of me.

"Now, I am pleased to request to you that from now on, you'll be my close friend. Will that be okay?"

"Deal." We continued the handshake like silly, little children. A few moments later, a car honked beside us. The bench where we are sitting right now is near the pavement of the mini-forest where cars slowly passed by.

"Carmella, I have to go now. Oh, by the way, what's your phone number?" She said as she smiled. I was able to give her my phone number right away. She bid goodbye as she waved her hand while inside their family car.

"See you tomorrow, Carmella!" Her voice still resounded meters away. It made me laugh a little. No wonder she's loved by many because she's really fun to talk to. I heaved a sigh when I couldn't see their car from a distance anymore.

I slowly got up and packed all my books and placed them inside my backpack. Now, I have to go back to reality. I guess six kilometers is not a bad distance. I will just sing and dance along the way until I reach home. I am really sad because that thief doesn't know how to find a real victim. I only got that last fifty-peso bill and yet...argh! I almost scratch my head vigorously as I frown.

Life is really unfair.

I walked slowly until I noticed I had been walking for more than twenty minutes nonstop. I felt really tired, hungry and sleepy at the same time. I stopped when somebody honked at me while

I walked beside the road. It was a beautiful car. The glass window slowly went down and I realized it was Elise Hope Glitz, my classmate.

"Oh my! Are you just going to walk all the way to your house?"

"Y-Yes. It's a great exercise, you see." I smiled at her but all I can see is the worried look on her face as she talked to me.

"What? It's already late. C'mon. I will just tell father to drop you off to your house before we go home ourselves."

"Really?" My tired eyes glistened.

"Yes, please get inside now." She said as she smiled. She even went outside the car and opened the door for me.

"Oh, there you are, dear. I saw Carmella going inside the car so I also bought some for her."

I saw Elise Hope's father get some take-out food from Burger King. He ordered three hamburgers, some pasta and drinks.

"Thanks daddy! You're the best! Good thing you also ordered something for Carmella."

"Thank you so much for the food, thank you too, Elise."

We started eating the food that's on our lap. I am so happy I got to taste these foods again. It's pure heaven after starving for a long time while walking a while ago. Having a best friend like her feels great. It soothes my whole being.

"It's a pleasure, dear. Oh, before I forgot, where do you live by the way?" She asked in an enthusiastic manner as she looked into my eyes.

"I live at Apartment 4B, 12 S, 42nd St. Lucena City. How about you?"

"Seriously, Carmella?" We only live five houses away from you! I am very happy to know this!"

"That's really good to know! Thank you once again."

"Not a problem. We're already close friends, right?"

I nodded as I smiled. She's really amazing. The way we express ourselves to one another, it's like we've known each other for a long time.

"By the way, why did you decide to walk for six kilometers going to your house? I think the road is really dangerous because there's a lot of criminals and thieves around, you can never be so sure." She said, feeling curious at the same time.

"I actually have my reason why I only walk all the way to our house. A while ago, a thief stole the last fifty-peso bill that I intend to reserve as my fare and allowance as I go home."

"Oh my! Is that the reason why you seem to be sad a while ago?"

"Yes. He badly ruined my allowance. That's why I looked mean and stressed while I talked to you a while ago. Please forgive me, Hope."

"Good thing you came just in time." I added. I can see her glistening eyes as she faced me.

"It's okay, dear. I am happy to meet new friends and I am happy to know someone like you. Close friends?" She said while offering me a pinky-white promise. I know this day will be better very soon.

Chapter 2: CLOSE FRIENDS

Carmella's POV

I am really happy because of what happened today. This day seemed to start worse but it ended up so well, thanks to Elise Hope Now, I truly proved that she's really kind-hearted. I am also very happy I got to also eat my favorite fast foods.

I was smiling as I entered our house but it faded when I met my mother's gaze.

"Where have you been?"

"I've been from school, mom."

"What school? I called your teacher and she told me that the time of dismissal was at 4:00 PM this afternoon."

"There were some unfortunate things that happened to me, I--"

"Get inside. I don't want to hear your explanations! You're now fifteen years old. You're supposed to become responsible for your actions this time."

"Can't you let me explain first, mom?" Instead of listening to me, she slapped me on my face right away. I was able to hold my left cheek as tears ran down on my face.

"If I will hear our neighbors talking about you and the things you're doing at school that I don't like, you will get more than that!"

She walked out as she slammed the door on my back. I am now left alone in front of our house, crying as I am still holding my cheek that's a bit swollen because of what my mom did to me.

Yes, she's always like this. From the very beginning, she was always cruel to me and I don't exactly know why. It is very seldom that I have seen her smiling at me. That's why I grew up, trying so hard to catch up with her endless mood swings. I grew up thinking about the things that could make my mother love me at the very least of her able effort to do so. I grew up trying so hard to please her that I even studied well for me to always get the top spot in class.

I know, if I continue to be the top, she'll be happy. In every awarding ceremony where I am being proclaimed as the top one, it's the only day where I can see her sweetest smile at me. She's very proud of putting on my medals to me and ribbons for endless awards. It's the only time of the year where I could hear her saying, 'this is my beloved daughter...'

Beloved daughter.

How I wish she will treat me like this when she's the very opposite of what she's talking about during our awards night and even graduation.

I opened the door again by twitching the doorknob and it opened right away. I glanced at the wall clock and when I realized that it is already 7:00 PM, I went straight to the kitchen. I just brushed my teeth and when I'm done, I went straight into my room. I got ready for bed by taking a hot shower and putting on my set of pajamas.

I checked my phone and I noticed three text messages, all came from Elise Hope. The first one is her message of confirmation that she's indeed Elise Hope. The second message was, she's asking me if I am already fine or if I went inside the house safely. The third one is the review that we both should and shouldn't do inside the class and library as well. I suddenly remembered that we need to review this one for our short quiz in English.

"You're really sweet. Thank you so much!" I replied to one of her messages. She answered right away with smiley.

"See you tomorrow, Hope!"

"I am really really happy to meet you, dear Carmella! Thank you for starting to call me Hope. Remember, we are close friends now so don't get too awkward at me."

"I am happy to know that you considered me as your close friend. I don't know what to say."

"Do not mind it at all. When I first met you, I knew we were going to be the best of friends!"

"What made you say so, Hope?" I smiled as I typed those words on my phone.

"Well, I can always have this best feeling within me that you should be my close friend here among others."

"But I don't think I am good enough."

"Why you? Of all the people around the campus, I am certain that you're the best among them."

"You don't know me too well, Hope."

"If you will not give me a chance to know you, then I would not, definitely."

I chuckled as I read her last text. She's really awesome and frank at the same time. I also wanted her as a friend. It's a different kind of budding love as sisters. This is the exact feeling that's igniting within me.

I am happy to meet her because she's one of a kind and she's very easy to love.

"See you tomorrow, dear. I am excited to meet you again, Hope." I chuckled as she replied with a GIF about a giddy, dancing frog. Even her humor is outstanding.

The next morning, I woke up really early because I want to see Elise Hope right away. I almost forgot to eat my breakfast, too because of too much excitement.

"Hello, Carmella!"

"Hello, Hope! I am happy to see you here this early."

"I am always a morning person way back in America. I think my body is already used to waking up early, that's why I decided to just go here as early as this one."

"That's really awesome of you. I will also try to do that too." I said and she nodded in agreement.

"Have you eaten your breakfast yet?" She asked in a worried tone.

"Uuhh..." I don't know what to answer. I guess she heard how my stomach rumbled. She suddenly grabbed me by the hand.

"Let's go. My breakfast treat." She said as she winked at me.

"Wow! Really, Hope?"

"Of course. We can talk a lot about other things, too. While we are still there, talking. We still have an hour left before the exact time of our first subject.

"That's a great idea." I nodded as I said those words. My eyes glistened with hope and anticipation to the things that were going to talk about. I know she's not yet too familiar with the things and places here in the Philippines since she was born in America. I know she had a lot of things to remember and know about from me.

I think the closeness is happening between us and I just can't stop it. We sat on one of the chairs inside the cafeteria. She's smiling while looking at me.

"What shall we order?"

"Hmmm, if you ask me, I'd rather have some rice meals. For example, sausages, eggs and rice in one meal."

"Oh, I see. Back in America, I used to have fresh fruits and yogurt for breakfast. But I guess I have to also try the meals that you're talking about since I am in the Philippines now."

"Well, it's up to you, dear Hope. I just want you to try new things if you like."

"Of course. Whatever you suggest that I think will be the best, I'd gladly try it myself, too."

We ate some rice meals and we had a lot of things we shared together. Mostly, our topic is about reviewing the lessons that's why I feel full. Not only in that mind-enriching review but the best feeling Hope is selflessly sharing with me.

We got up from our seats and we rushed into the room because our first period is about to start. Junior high school life has never been easy. The lessons are getting difficult and the teachers are becoming too strict when implementing rules. Unlike the previous years in school, I can feel that the whole world's pressure is on my shoulders. Being the top one in grade 10 is

no joke. I am more than desperate in maintaining my spot. Studying should be my first priority among others.

I sat on my chair and I glanced at Hope who is on the second row, fifth column while I am seated in the adjacent direction. We were greeted by a reading activity and later on, we'll be making a reaction based on what we have read. As I am doing my own activity, I can't help but to glance at her again. She seemed to be very focused and I noticed she's not easily distracted.

When the activity was over, our English teacher collected our papers one by one. When she stood next to Hope, she gently got her paper. I simply looked up and observed our teacher's facial reaction. As she looked over Hope's paper, I saw her smile.

My heart beat fast all of a sudden when it was my teacher's turn to collect mine. My teacher did what she exactly did with Hope with my paper and she also smiled. I sighed with relief and smiled, too.

"As always, Carmella Ruth did an outstanding reaction paper." Our teacher commented that made the whole class applaud with glee. They were all eyes on me that I can't help but to smirk at my daily bashers. Of course, it's another victory for me and a loss to them.

"I also want to commend Elise Hope for a job well done." As soon as they heard it, my classmates clapped and cheered even more.

Did I hear it right? Elise Hope? I glanced at her and I can't help but clench my fist because she's enjoying the announcement our teacher made for all of us. She caught me staring at her. I didn't have a choice but to smile and cheer for her, too. Even if I am starting to hate her big time. This can't be!

I awkwardly smiled at her as everybody was cheering both of us. Right now, I am not having a good feeling.

Chapter 3: SHREVAKHUK'S ENCOUNTER

Carmella's POV

The next day, we agreed to see each other at 6:00 AM, the opening of the school library. Fortunately, we haven't got a first period of class because our teacher went to a very important meeting. We both decided to go back to the library to study. Some of our classmates followed us but most of them already headed to the school cafeteria, while others loiter around the school campus.

I am sitting in front of Hope this time. I looked at her as she focused on reading our books to review for tomorrow's quizzes again as we sat on one of the long tables.

"Huh?" She looked at my facial reaction as she met my gaze. I was a bit shocked when she noticed that I have been secretly observing her.

"Is there a problem?" She added as she smiled at me. I shook my head as I awkwardly smiled back at her.

"N-Nothing."

"You seem to be bothered with something. You can tell me." She said as she still looks at the book. It seems like she's really interested in what she's reading right now. Adjusting her eyeglasses made her look charming for me even more. I wonder how she does it effortlessly.

She's reading one of our boring Literature books. I am wondering why she seemed to show a lot of interest as she reads it. She softly chuckled as she read the book silently. It's like something caught her attention all of a sudden.

I stood up and transferred next to her as I moved my face nearer to the book that she's reading. I am suddenly curious to what she's reading about right now.

"You know what? I think this poet is really a fan of nature to the point of doing crazy things about his admiration." She said, still not looking at me.

I frowned as I also tried reading which part that she meant by what she said earlier. I skimmed the exact page and I also shifted my gaze to her facial reaction.

"Oh, that...I think it is not a big deal to start with."

"I guess I should agree with you. Yeah, you're right. I just can't imagine how he ended up marrying a plant." She shook her head as she chuckled again.

"Well, you see...it's not always the literal meaning poets describe in their poems. What if he's only exaggerating?" I answered in a defensive manner. Of course, that's what all poets do. Many readers will just be too fascinated by the words that they are saying. Most of the time, they are the ones who were adding some meanings to some of the words, figuratively speaking.

"I've read some of Shrevakhuk's poems. They were all weird. I don't believe that she could do such things for the sake of his poems." I added but it didn't change her facial expression.

She faced me and heaved a sigh. She looked more serious now.

"Well, you know what? That's also what I believed in at first. It all changed when we paid a visit at the mini-museum his relatives built to commemorate his vulgar and scandalous works."

"Wow! Really?" I said. She nodded right away as she smiled in an enthusiastic manner like what she's always doing.

"Yep. It was one of our field trips in New Jersey three years ago."

"W-What's the feeling of finally getting to know more about his works straight from his relatives?" I said as I leaned closer to her even more. She smiled at me as if she's highly encouraged all of a sudden to tell me more about Shrevakhuk.

"It's really a once-in-a-lifetime visit. Our tour guides almost took four months to book in advance for that trip to be possible."

I was left speechless. What can I argue more about? I only read some of Shrevakhuk's poems but Hope went straight to his place to gather meaty facts! I can't believe her so much that I am gaping in awe of the coming experiences that she already experienced. I think that's one of the greatest things one will ever experience in his/her lifetime.

"One of his great grandmother told me that in order for him to feel his poem, he loves to experience it first-hand before he gets to put it on paper."

I am too amazed I can't help but to cover my mouth. I can't believe I am hearing the truth and nothing but only it. I thought poets only imagine things and put them to paper. I never realized that there were actual people who put their reality and what they're doing in print. That's such a complete badass!

"So it means, she really killed her own wife and dressed it to the point of getting her wife's skeletal system, not missing any bone for the record?"

"Yup. That was really gory but she did it to his wife." She said almost in a whisper that I can't help but to chuckle. Seriously, it made me feel really nervous. The way she's telling me these things is somewhat creepy; it gives me goosebumps.

My eyes widened as I listened to Hope more. She's also a great storyteller from what she had experienced in America.

"I can't believe him. I mean, I really thought that poets do really love to play with words without applying it in actual situations."

"It is not always the case. We are all born to be unique, some, gifted to the point of doing crazy things." Hope replied, glancing a little to the book and shifted her gaze at me as well.

"I hope to meet poets with a normal way of thinking." I jokingly said that made her chuckle.

"How I wish writers were always like that. You see? He even became popular because he chose to think outside the box. Too bad he was also murdered because of his works."

"I guess he deserves it," I commented as I looked in a different direction.

"Nobody deserves death caused by other people. In fact, we don't have all the right to end our life for ourselves. For me, we don't own our own lives, either. I guess what happened to him was really bound to happen in the first place."

"You know what, you're a bit weird but on point. I like it."

"How I wish he didn't die yet. I have a lot of questions in mind for him." She answered. I saw Hope smiled mysteriously as she turned her gaze at the book that she's reading again.

"Aren't you content about the information that came from his relatives when you went to New Jersey?"

"Well, they don't tell all those detailed information about him and the things he did. I guess they still want to protect Shrevakhuk until the very end."

"Maybe. If I am related to him, I will also try my best to also protect him at all cost. Even if some of what he did was unforgivable based on what I have read from his works."

"Protecting his name from the very end is different from tolerating him and his works. I hope they are doing the first that I mentioned."

I got the book that she's holding and gently closed it in front of her as I smiled. "You know what? Let's just go to the school canteen. I am hungry already. We've been reading for two hours non-stop here. We somehow deserve a break, right?"

"Oh, sorry. This book got me hooked up. Let's go?" She said as she smiled back. She's packing everything she owns on the table as she puts it inside her backpack. She straightened the handle and put it around her shoulders. I also did the same as I neatly arranged my notebooks inside my backpack as well.

We walked happily going to the school cafeteria. Good thing it's a bit nearer to the school library that's why it's not that difficult to reach. I offered to treat her this time and she nodded. As we walked on the aisle where the tables were being placed, I noticed that a lot of guys who were in different sections were taking a glimpse of her. She just awkwardly smiled in return.

"This is my favorite." I proudly presented her the snack that I loved the most. Sugar-coated bananas on a stick. She smiled as she got the other stick from my hand. I also bought two little boxes of chocolate drinks for both of us.

"Wow! This is so nice! You're as sweet as this snack. Thank you, Carmella!" She cheerfully took a bite and when she realized it's too hot, she opened her mouth and produced some air to let it cool from her tongue.

"Oh my goodness I am so sorry! I was too excited I am not able to tell you that it is still very hot!" I said, shocked at the same time, chuckled upon looking at her.

"No, don't be guilty. My fault. I knew that it's hot but I never realized that it's too hot for me to handle. Sorry to make you worry." She said, as she now managed to chew the small bite that she took minutes ago.

"I hope you will enjoy that snack. I always enjoy myself whenever I eat that one. It's a must to recommend."

"Yeah, you're right." She answered while chewing the sugar-coated banana. She looked awkward yet cute as she fanned her mouth with her hands as she chewed our snack. It made me laugh a bit.

"What do you mean, 'enjoy myself'? Don't you have friends who usually hang out with you?"

"I have, Hope. It's just that, I am too shy to interact with them. They also knew me for being strict and serious. They even think I am a snobber, too."

"Oh my! That's too rude! I don't even feel any of what you have mentioned when we're together."

I held her hand and smiled at her.

"It is because you knew my value from the very start. You believed in me at first that I am not what they are telling me about."

"Yeah and I believe you can also prove them wrong, dear." She said as she tapped my shoulders.

"I know. I hope it will be sooner than we expect." I smiled and as we finished our snack, we talked a lot about many things. Hope is a bit funny because she also shared a lot of weird jokes that we only both understand.

Chapter 4: DISCOURAGED RAGE

Carmella's POV

We had fun with how our conversation went. I never expected that within that short period of time, we'll become closer even more.

Sometimes, I felt as if I have known her for a very long time already. However, we went to our second period class, nervous. This is one of the strict teachers I've ever had. I should never go wrong on this. I simply took a glance of Hope who seemed to not have any reaction at all.

I am wondering what she's thinking at this very moment. Is she also nervous? Excited? Or she simply doesn't care?

I noticed her turn to me and she chuckled when she saw me looking so nervous. She secretly held my hand tight as she whispered to my ear...

"Carmella! We can do this! I am also feeling nervous but remember this, we came inside this room prepared so there's nothing to be really worried about."

"Sorry, I can't help it." I said, gently biting my lip as well.

If only she knew how I became amazed on how she's being enthusiastic when she's only a newbie to our school. She's the type that's never running out of confidence to whatever she desires to accomplish. I wonder where did it all come from?

When most of us noticed our Literature teacher arriving, most of us scampered as we went back to our proper seats, sitting straight as we held our chins high as we glanced at what's in front of us.

"Okay class. I am expecting that you're ready for this quiz. Please get a piece of paper and write item one to thirty." I can hear most of my classmates gasped and groaned as quietly as they can. I turned my gaze to my teacher who seemed to enjoy the whole thing. What he's doing right now is really unforgivable. I wonder how could most of the teachers make their students suffer? Is it really what they truly wanted?

"Yes, you all heard it right. Our quiz will be about Shrevakhuk's biography. Are you all ready?" It made my heart race very fast because of excitement and happiness. It is when I realized I am more than ready for this.

I smiled from ear to ear as I glanced at Hope who was giving me a 'thumbs up' sign and a wink.

"Number 1, where is he from?" I secretly glanced around and I can see most of my classmates are scratching their heads. I answered right away until I noticed that the last quiz is for everyone to write our teacher's whole name. Wrong spelling also means wrong. I can't help to chuckle as the crowd continued to groan with tiredness and confusion.

"Okay, please pass the papers as I count from one to five. Everyone's quiz paper should all be on your class monitor's hands before the time."

My classmates became wild as they answered the missed items that they failed to write on."

"One, two, three..."

The class monitor started to gather all the sheets. After I pass mine. I managed to breathe freely when I saw that our teacher gathered the sheets of paper that we answered on.

"Oh my I hope I will get a favorable score from this." I muttered to myself. I glanced at Hope who was giving me a thumbs up again. How I wish I can get that calm and confident reaction, too.

The whole duration the test is really painstaking. Even if I am confident, I can't help but to be nervous since I know I have a secret competitor.

That is, no other than Elise Hope, my best friend. It is really weird. I am not scared of the test itself. I am confident in all of my answers. The only thing that stresses me out this time is the turnaround of events.

I have a lot of questions clouding my mind right now...

"Okay. Times up. Pens down. Please pass your papers in front. This is my final call now."

I noticed a lot of my classmates followed our teacher's order even if some of them are obviously not done yet. Our teacher usually had this rule: pass your paper or get a zero mark in the quiz if you're not following instructions.

I sighed with relief. We checked the papers right away. He made us check our papers by exchanging them to the one beside us.

"As usual, I commend Carmella Ruth for getting the full score." He announced it right away in front of my classmates. I can see that Hope clapped her hands along with the others. I can see that she's very proud of me that I can't help but to awkwardly smile, too.

"Wait, Hope also got the highest score. We have a tie, everyone!" My classmates cheered louder this time around. I secretly closed my fist as I also forced my smile at her. I saw that she's shocked that she stopped clapping. Her facial reaction also changed a bit. I saw her glancing at me as she scratched her head and smiled a little, too. I gave her a two thumbs up even if I don't feel very well.

A part of me can't easily accept that for the first time, somebody tied my score. I feel so bad that I am being stressed out. It gave me a terrible headache all of a sudden.

I never even noticed our teacher already left and we still have less than ten minutes for any kinds of short breaks. I slowly got my water bottle inside my backpack and drank some water. I saw Hope coming towards me. Since one of our classmates is absent, she sat beside me.

"Wow! We did it, Carmella! I am so proud of you!" She giggled in excitement. I just smiled weakly at her.

"You know what? This is my first time answering a quiz since I transferred here. So this is really the feeling." She added, but when she noticed that I was just looking at her, she stopped what she's about to say.

"Are you okay?" She added in a worried tone.

'No, I am not.' I smiled but I just kept these words to myself.

"Y-Yes, of course. I guess I am just tired today, I think."

"Gosh me too! The questions are even tricky, we're only the ones who got everything right! Isn't it amazing?"

'Well, it would be if I am the highest, alone.' How I badly wanted to tell this one in front of her face but I guess I will become too mean for her. Better keep some words to myself.

"Yeah. Staying in the library for two hours helped a lot. I also want to thank you for telling me more about Shrevakhuk."

"See? I told you. He's really awesome. Who would have thought the surprise quiz is all about him. I find the quiz fun!"

"I agree with you. I never expected the things that he did for the sake of his works. He's a badass poet."

"Right. Nobody ever did that but only him." She nodded and chuckled because of how I describe Shrevakhuk.

"Thanks for your help, Hope. If not for you, I will not get an incredible motivation and the highest score like we did right now." She smiled as we both did a high-five. Even if I admire her personality, I shouldn't be too swayed. I can say I am becoming threatened to death. I'll make sure this won't happen again.

The hours passed like lightning and it's the time for our dismissal. Hope said goodbye to me because she's going to accompany his father in buying groceries inside a supermarket. I nodded, smiled and waved goodbye at her. When I am getting ready to pack my backpack going home, I accidentally overheard my classmates and whom they are stalking right now.

"My gosh girls, Carmella Ruth's reign will surely be over this year. I think we'll have someone who can finally beat her off her throne."

"Oh? I don't think so. Don't belittle Carmella. She's full of surprises, you know."

"I don't really think so. Let me tell you something."

My other classmates also giggled as they came closer to Lila. She whispered those things and yet my auditory skills are not fooling me even a little.

"Really? Why? What's the catch?" Hilda said as she came even closer. She's the famous gossip-finder inside the campus.

"I am sure you won't be jumping into conclusions without your facts."

"Duh. You know me too well." Marielle smirked as the five of them came closer to each other. Maybe they were also aware that I might be hearing everything Marielle will tell them...of course I can if I am the one they're gossiping about.

"Did you know that Elise Hope is also the top one in their school in America?" Most of my classmates gasped, that also includes me, following their facial reaction.

"Oh my gosh! Are you really serious?"

"Of course! Look at this." Marielle made them look at her smartphone as if showing evidence for everyone to finally believe her. They all gasped as they covered their mouths.

"Let the games begin."

"Yeah, Carmella's reign this year will surely be over."

So my intuition is never wrong. She's more of a threat rather than being a good friend. I should do more in class now that I already learned something about her.

Chapter 5: READY, STEADY

Carmella's POV

I readied my bag, packed my things and when I noticed that the cleaning minutes were over, I walked fast until I reached our school gate.

I should be happy with that perfect score but honestly, I felt like I am the lowest because of what she's making me feel. Why did she ever transfer here in our school in the first place if she's already the top student in America? What is she up to? What is she trying to prove?

I stomped my feet while I was standing on the aisle of the bus. I never realized too soon that it will catch a lot of the passenger's attention. The bus stopped right in front of a lamppost meters away from my house.

I walked as slowly as I could, I even played with dust as I slightly burrow my black shoes on the soil front to back for many times until it hurts my foot. I can't even count how many times I sighed.

"I should not let this pass! I can't just relax knowing that I might not be the top student for this year."

I hurriedly went inside our house. I noticed that mom isn't there yet. I took a glance at the food that's on the table. I smiled when I realized they all looked delicious, I decided to stay in my room for a while. I will just wait for her until she comes back home. Maybe she bought something outside and she'll be back after a few minutes.

When I opened the door, it suddenly felt weird. Why did I even feel as if somebody went in my room while I was gone? I looked around and observed my room. It's neat and arranged well but why is it that I am feeling odd?

I always arrange everything, from my set of clothes, to my shoes and my stationery. I guess that is the reason why I will know if someone is touching any of my things. My cabinet caught my attention. It's a bit open with my clothes seeping through it.

When I fully opened my cabinet, I could see that there's nothing wrong with it. When I attempted to close it, a picture slowly fell on the floor. It fell upside-down and I could see it's plain white back.

I picked it up and looked at it closely. I noticed there was a cursive writing that says:

With love,

Leonard, 2005

When I flipped the picture in front of me, I saw a younger man holding a baby girl in his arms. Their background is a theme park. It made my forehead wrinkled a bit.

It's the first time that I have seen this kind of picture. Who is Leonard?

"Carmella Ruth, go down now. Don't let the food wait for you."

My mom's voice surprised me that I almost missed my grip on the picture. I looked at the door of my room and good thing mom didn't go upstairs to invite dinner.

"Yes, mother." I answered, still looking at the picture. I hurriedly buried it under the stacked clothes inside my closet as I closed it. I took giant steps as I hurried outside of my room.

I descended the stairs fast and I noticed my mother putting the white plates on the table. She also placed the spoon and fork on it. I sat on the chair but I was glued at her facial expression. She seemed to be sad and tired at the same time.

Well, like she always used to. I never usually initiate the conversation because it will make her mad even more. I just talk if she'll start to ask me about random things.

"What?"

"Huh?" I stopped getting rice from the bowl as I met her eyes.

"Why are you looking at me?" She asked as she raised her eyebrows as she met my gaze. I avoided my eyes right away as I looked down on my food. She prepared steamed vegetables and pork steak with plain rice for dinner.

As much as possible, I never showed my shaky hands to her as I reached for the pork steak from a different plate. Even if I am not looking at her, I can see her observing me in my peripheral vision. I guess what I am doing right now is weird to her.

"Nothing, mother. Let's eat." I said while forcing myself to smile to lessen the tension. She showed no reaction. Instead, she started eating silently facing me.

I badly wanted to ask about the picture I saw a while ago. Who's Leonard? And who is that young baby girl? I am sure it is not me, either. I have a lot of baby pictures inside my cabinet. Is he our relative? Is he my mom's brother? I don't know much about our family and relatives since mom and I have been living separately from them for a long time.

"What happened in school?" Her question made me look at her directly on her eyes. I can't see any favorable expression. What I am seeing is a face that thinks a lot about something I don't know about.

"I got a perfect score in my exam, mom."

I glanced at her and she just nodded a little as a response.

"You know what to do about it."

"Y-Yes mom. I will always get that score for you."

"That's what I want to hear. You just have to keep it up." I stole a glance as she said those words. Even if she's saying it, she's eating quietly. I have a lot of questions but I am afraid that she will mistook this on something else. I don't want her to get mad at me anymore.

We ended our dinner after a few minutes. I politely told her that I will go upstairs. I will have to study my lessons to keep up my pace. She agreed right away and washed the dishes in the kitchen. I hurriedly went upstairs and I even locked my room. I opened my cabinet right away and searched where I stuck that picture somewhere.

"Here it is!" I exclaimed in excitement as I found it once again. I turned my back and observed if mom would go upstairs too. Good thing, she's not yet coming. If she does, I probably heard her steps as she goes upstairs right now.

I don't want to inform her that I saw something in my cabinet. It might add to the stress that stacked her thoughts already.

I looked at the picture as if memorizing every detail. I have a lot of questions in my mind but I am afraid to ask my mom about it. I remember just now. The cabinet in my room used to be mom's. It's already fourteen years old and it's kind of old already that she decided to transfer it in my room. I never thought that I was seeing an unknown picture inside when I do the cleaning once a week.

I guess, I will be finding answers myself. If mom can't tell me about Leonard, I will have to find it out for myself very soon. I got the picture ready and inserted it inside my wallet.

The next morning, it's another day for our endless activities. Our English teacher faced us with folded arms and raised eyebrows. Good thing Hope and I are seatmates.

"Is our teacher married already?"

"Nope."

"Oh, I guess I know the reason why she's being like that." We both giggled when I got what Hope meant by what she said.

"Yeah, she has no love life that's why she loves to make us suffer by letting us have endless group activities and seatworks.

"Okay, class. Enough with the chitchats. I want you to form a group of two. I will assign Carmella Ruth as the leader of group 1 and Elise Hope as the leader of group 2. As soon as we heard our names, we looked at each other, giving weird expressions. I can't easily accept that we'll be forced to be rivals in front of our classmates.

I felt like my heart beat very fast. Of all my classmates, why will it be Hope? I don't want to see myself working against someone I am considering my best friend now.

"Because Hope is still new to our school, I want you to cooperate with her. I want to remind everyone again that I always treat group activities seriously."

I swallowed as I took a glimpse at Hope who was also looking at our teacher as she nodded.

"Start going to your desired group and have someone from each group pick a paper that explains the rules. You can also see the things you need to do for your group activity there."

I can see that Hope glanced at me as if she's worried about what's happening. I came to her and held her hand and looked straight into her eyes. I bit my lower lip to somehow hide my frustrations.

"Let's do this! Fighting!" I even showed her my closed fist as I smiled. Well, deep inside, I don't like the idea. I guess our English teacher already heard from our Literature teacher about Hope. I have a feeling that she also wanted to prove Hope's ability to herself. I was like being placed in a hot seat because of our teacher's decision.

We were tasked to stand in front of our classmates. I am standing beside Hope but we're two meters away from each other. Our teacher let my classmates decide whom to choose as their leader.

My other classmates started to go to Hope while some of my close friends went to me, as expected. I never thought the whole class would also be divided so evenly.

"Carmella we are one, babe." One of my best friends since primary years stood behind me without a doubt. We had a slight fist bump as our sign of friendship.

"Aren't we, always?" My other friends said as they put their hands on their hips as they began to say similar things too. It made me chuckle as I nodded. My other friends joined behind them as they lined up behind me.

When I looked beside me, some of my quiet classmates greeted Hope in a timid manner. She welcomed them all wholeheartedly as she showed her positivity and good vibes.

"Hope, don't be nervous. We will help each other." I heard our classmate Jessie motivated her as she started to stand behind her. She nodded as she smiled. I can see that they even held Hope's hand for moral support.

"We can do this!" One of my shy-typed, nerdy classmates who joined her, too. I don't know if I can last this sight anymore. I secretly rolled my eyes because of what I am witnessing right now.

We are forty-two in class and for this activity, it should consist of twenty members and one leader. Our teacher grinned as she folded her arms and nodded. I think she's pleased with the distribution of the members for each group for the mini-skit she prepared.

"Well, I guess the group one and two are evenly distributed. Very well, let's begin."

I assigned someone from my group to get the instruction paper from our teacher's table. I am the leader of group 1. We were tasked to perform a skit from one of the famous scenes of Romeo and Juliet. I got really nervous when I knew that my group would be the first to perform.

I looked at my team member and I looked at him sternly. That's really too bad. I am somehow hoping we'll be the second to perform so that I will see how Hope managed some of my classmates. Now, the pressure is really on me.

"Wow, our teacher is not serious, right?"

"Yes, everyone. You have ten minutes to prepare, a minute or two to wrap things up and another 10 minutes to present your skit in front of each of your classmates. The winning group will get a score of thirty to the graded recitation for today and the losing group will get twenty points. I wish everyone good luck."

"Everyone, please gather in one, big circle. Let's start planning for the mini-skit." I can hear the gentle voice of Hope but shows authority. I also looked at my members and nodded at them as I smiled. We did the same as we started to form a big circle as well.

This is when I realized this shit is getting real.

Chapter 6: DIVIDED WE STAND, UNITED WE FALL

They started to form a circle to discuss what they are going to do with their skit. Their English class only lasted for an hour. They were only given ten minutes to work with it. Carmella was just looking at Hope's group when one of her members poked her.

She returned to her members that seemed to be chilling out, most of them not interested in joining the skit.

"Aren't we doing something, perhaps?"

She looked around. She only had eight members who were really looking at her as they paid attention. Others are just doing their own thing, not even minding the ten-minute chance to practice for their mini-skit.

"Oh, I am so sorry." She apologized but she looked at some of her members who even sat to their own seats.

"Gosh, guys, c'mon. Let's not waste time. Aren't you gonna practice for our skit?" Carmella's bossy classmate took over her at that moment.

"Let me add some suggestions." Someone stood behind her. When she looked back, it was her overly enthusiastic friend who loved to share her ideas.

"Are you sure it won't be a mess, girl?" One of Carmella's close friends answered.

"Well, let's just add some romantic words as part of Juliet's lines in some parts. I guess it would be awesome."

"Well, what if our teacher will check every word from our skit? Remember, we need to be careful with the words Juliet says." Carmella pointed out, looking worried. Some of her classmates nodded as they agreed to what she said while folding their arms.

"Most definitely, Carmella. Our teacher is particular with the original lines from that scene. We can't eliminate or add any single word...that would be a big No-No." One of her classmates who is wearing a pair of eyeglasses suggested.

"So, what should we do then? Our time is running up and we're still on the planning stage." Upon hearing that to one of her classmates, Carmella glanced at her wristwatch.

"I guess what we're going to do is to improve the acting part. I guess that's more important." Someone talked behind them. They transferred their gaze at the other member who is busy doing his make-up even if he's wearing a boy's uniform.

"I think John will play the role of Juliet. I guess her eyelashes are more than ready for it." One of Carmella's classmates from her group commented. There was a sudden burst of laughter from Carmella's group that the other group's attention was on them for a while.

"Four minutes more." Their English teacher reminded them of the time.

She gently pulled her hair as she frowned. Her other classmates just look at her while whispering to each other.

"See? I told you we should select Hope. She's always bad as a leader."

"Yeah. I'm sorry. I should agree with you. She's selfish and she only thinks of her own and not other people around her."

Carmella panicked when one of her classmates cried because the other one from their group was a bully as well. She wanted to shout and express her disappointment but she was already caught off guard.

She didn't know what to do first: To comfort her groupmate or to continue their remaining minutes for practice. She's torn between two decisions.

"Can we all focus, just this once? Please? I am your leader, not a referee. Six minutes has passed and yet we haven't done anything yet." Carmella calmly told her members which made the others argue among themselves.

"This is Dee's fault. I don't know if she's a crybaby, I should've given her some feeding bottle full of milk." Dina cried even more when she heard Lissy.

She seemed to be tough and insensitive even if Dee is crying right now. It almost stopped everyone from what they are doing, especially in Carmella's group.

"What is happening?" Their teacher roared all of a sudden that caught the attention of most of them in the room.

The group became silent, however some whispered and blamed each other for the commotion.

"Dee and Lisa, what happened?"

"It's her fault! She's teasing me. She keeps on telling me that I am a crybaby!" Dina said between sobs.

"Duh! Are you not?" Lisa rebutted with raised eyebrows. She's too unafraid to air her opinions even if our teacher is now looking really mad yet trying to look composed.

"I am just suggesting something and you always tell me I have bad opinions. Why, are you even perfect?" Dina said between sobs.

"You easily cry. Do you think our classmates will find you cute? Grow up, will you?"

"Silence! Both of you! I want you to sit down. You're not getting any score from me. I also want you to go with me at the guidance office later. You have some explanations to do with me and your parents."

Carmella followed them with her eyes. Dee is wiping her tears with her hands while Lisa is folding her arms as she frowns. They both stomped their feet as they went back to their seats because of what they did.

"Now, to those who are not involved, please continue your practice. You only have less than two minutes before you wrap up."

Now, it is Carmella's turn to feel bad. She wanted to break down and cry. Right at the very moment. She now lacked two important members of her group. As she glanced from the others, they were silent as they all listened to Hope. Some were giving suggestions and she smiled as she took some notes from them. Carmella closed her fist because of annoyance. She feels as if she can't accept what is happening right now. From the sight of it, it is unfair and too unacceptable to endure.

"Everyone, please polish everything. I need you all to act a good skit. If you need a lot of props, please feel free to use our resources inside this room."

Everyone was overjoyed and they even had a high five to some of their classmates.

"Let's start presenting." The teacher finally said. She gave each group ten minutes to present what they have prepared as a graded activity.

Carmella looked really worried because she knew they didn't prepare well enough. Carmella's group started with some few lines, with some songs inserted. When their classmate who acted Romeo started to step in front, he already forgot his lines and paused for almost two minutes. The other group members whispered aloud the lines which caused a funny scene. Some of the members from Hope's members laughed at them. Their teacher told them to be quiet which they obliged right away.

The class skit presentation ended a bit okay but it was described as 'messy' overall. Now, it's now time for Hope's group to present. Everyone even stood at once which amazed the group of Carmella. They are all well-disciplined and full of confidence. Maybe Hope even taught them about how to execute confidence and style at the same time. She was able to let them follow her with the way she wanted the group to start and finish the lines assigned to each group member.

She secretly closed her fist. She never even noticed the tears running on her cheeks already. Good thing nobody ever saw that because she wiped her tears with her hands right away.

When everyone is in front, each member executed their own lines perfectly. With chins up, they were able to present as if they've been practicing for one, whole week. Carmella's group members started to blame each other for the mess. The announcement of their teacher even confirmed that they were all 'losers'.

"See? I told you we should've selected Hope's group instead of Carmella's."

"Of course. That will be the rule next time." Not a word from her group mates escaped from her hearing which made her feel bitter even more.

She can see some of her classmates, even her best friends gave their high-fives to Hope. She can see some of her 'best friends' smiling at her too. Everyone cheered with delight in their eyes. She looked very happy from the results of their teamwork which Carmella failed to implement discipline among her members.

She saw Hope coming towards her. She suddenly felt terrified seeing her. She felt as if she's not ready to greet her victory.

She was looked down by her other classmates and because of confusion and bitterness, Carmella stood up and told her seatmate that she'll be going to the comfort room. Before Hope reached her, she already left the door of their room. Hope tried to catch up with her but Carmella was too fast in going outside that's why she didn't have the chance to follow her anymore.

Carmella locked herself inside one of the cubicles of their comfort room. She never even minded the strong, putrid scent of the comfort room from what she's feeling right now as she can't stop herself from weeping uncontrollably.

Good thing there was no student at that time. It would be too embarrassing for her to pour everything as she sobs when a lot of students will see it.

Meanwhile, Hope noticed the disappointment in Carmella's eyes as she went outside. Does she really hate her for what happened? Hope wished that Carmella didn't hate her just because her team won.

"Did you really overdo it? Poor Carmella..." Hope can hear her other classmates saying something against her best friend.

"Why do you say that to Carmella? I knew she tried her best. You can't just blame the group's fault to a single person alone!" She replied to some that silenced them as they all looked down.

"Gosh, haven't you seen what happened earlier? Your group won. Of course the leader of the losing group will really be anxious."

"Duh...C'mon Hope. You pulled it off with us, I'm sure if she's good at handling our other classmates, they should've won the presentation. We all know that our teacher gave them the best scene, and the boring one to us." Her classmate baffled as she folded her arms. She looked around and she saw her other classmates agreeing as they nodded.

"But it is so unfair to only put the blame on her. Remember, it is a group activity and I have seen that most of you did not listen to Carmella."

"She's being irresponsible and you're always there to defend her. Is that being fair to you? Because for me, it is not." Thelma said while folding her arms facing her.

"Yeah I agree with Thelma. Why are we going to listen to someone that's too bossy? She's also overreacting to things which made it worse." Her classmate defended the first to argue with Hope that made her look sad.

"Of course Carmella is her friend. She can't help but to react to what they were saying against her.

"Everybody, go back to your seats." Their English teacher interrupted their argument. They all scampered as they went back to their seats.

"Half of you here did your best. I saw it with my two eyes. While the other group was too messy." Everyone started to whisper and argue again.

"Please be quiet," Their teacher stopped them. "I know you all did your best. I hope it will not happen next time. Please listen more to your leaders for they know what to do the most."

"Yes, Ms. Sevilla." The whole class chorused.

As their teacher walked at the center aisle of the room, she roamed her eyes around the room, she noticed someone was missing.

"Where's Carmella?"

"Ms. Sevilla, she went to the comfort room." One of her classmates said as she raised her hand.

"Ms., I'm sorry I went outside for a pee break. I am back now." Everyone turned their backs on the door and they saw Carmella. They noticed her swollen eyes and her gloomy expression.

"Please go back to your seat, Carmella. We'll start with the written activity about what you have presented." She slowly walked towards her seat. She sat quietly and got her activity book inside her bag. While most of the eyes were on her, the teacher reminded them to look at their own activity workbooks.

Hope looked at her best friend as if feeling everything she's feeling right now. She's answering her activity workbook, looking very unmotivated. She felt guilty all of a sudden after she witnessed how Carmella took the presentation seriously. She needs to talk to her after the class. She felt like she needed to do it because she's partly to be blamed.

Chapter 7: TAME BLAME

"Are you sure you're alright?" Hope tapped her shoulders as they sat on one of the benches of the mini-forest.

"I will be lying if I say I am." She replied, dryly. Hope sat in front of her as she offered her a stick of sugar-coated bananas and a small box of chocolate drink as she grinned at her.

Even if she looked weary, she's thankful to Hope for defending her. Some of her classmates told her a while ago how Hope said things that boost her moral and dignity.

She accepted it and took a bite. Carmella also tried sticking in the plastic straw but it's not getting inside. Hope got it from her hand as she did it for her. She's secretly amazed how Hope did it when her eyes focused on her facial reaction as she faced her.

"It's just a presentation." She looked at Hope as she said those words. She looked unharmed to what she said that meant everything to her, on the other hand. She's enjoying the snack that Carmella introduced to her. She's also sipping her favorite chocolate drink in a loud slurp. Even so, she still looked stunning even if she's being silly sometimes.

"Well, for others, they'll just think that it's just a 'presentation' but for someone, it's their only chance to prove themselves." Carmella explained which made Hope frown a bit. She also took a bite from her snack because it somehow cooled down.

"What do you mean?"

"Some people considered that presentation to be a life-and-death situation."

"That might not be the case..." Hope looked at her with a calm reaction. She even looked at her as if she's making it easy for her to accept their defeat.

"Well, for you it's not. For me, it is always the case. Sometimes, I can't just easily get away with it."

"That is too unfair. Sorry for saying these things to you."

"It's okay, don't worry. I will be honest with you right now. I always felt as if I had to please the world to have my own validation."

"If you always think about that, you will not have a happy and satisfied life. Can't you just let it go, Carmella?" Hope said in a gentle way as she held her hand to comfort her.

"Nope. It's a part of me. I tried letting go of it but the more I do, I am just feeling miserable." She said as she rested her head sideways on top of her folded arms on the concrete table they are now. She felt down until now.

"I think I am not in the situation to tell these things to you. I am so sorry for being hasty."

"Thanks. I think those are the words that I want to hear for now."

"I can't blame you for feeling it. I hope I can do something to ease what you feel right now." Hope sighed as she looked at Carmella.

"Please remember that not everyone is thinking the same way, especially in dealing with different kinds of situations."

"I'm sorry once again. I hope I can do something for you. I'd gladly do it, Carmella. Please don't be shy."

'I want you to chill and not give your 100% best in class. Can you do it? Give me the top spot at the end of the school year and the years to come while you're still here in school...' But these words, she just kept it to herself. She looked at Hope and when she noticed that she's looking at her, she looked the other direction.

She does not blame Hope for thinking the presentation lightly. Anyway, they are two different situations that she can't simply compare hers to Hope. The important thing is, she knew her views about many things this time.

How could she explain that she badly needed the top spot every year? She thinks that Hope is very lucky to have her father. While her? She doesn't even know what her mother thinks of her as her own daughter. She's more concerned with other things more than her feelings. That's why Carmella is afraid of not receiving a high score in her exams. She's worried about the outcome if she doesn't try harder. She's thinking that if she'll not be the top student every year, she'll only be abandoned.

Looking at Hope who looks really enthusiastic and kind, she doesn't think she could say it right in front of her face. Carmella felt like she's torn between her ambition and friendship that's both important to her. She admits to herself, she already loved Hope like a sister because she never had to experience having a sibling of her own.

"Carmella, are you still listening to me?" Hope distracted her thoughts as she looked at the people that surround her.

"Y-Yes. What were you saying?"

Hope giggled as she pinched her cheek. She smiled as she gently massaged her cheek that became red because of what she did to her just now. Carmella could notice how she simply deals with the situation.

"I just want to tell you that everything will turn out fine. Don't worry too much about it."

"Sorry, it's in my nature that I can't help it."

"You know what? You're silly. I said, let's go back to the library because we have to review for our quiz. We still have an hour left."

"Yeah, I think that will be a very good idea more than being an overthinker."

"That's what I am talking about." Hope nodded as she tapped her shoulders.

"Good thing our Math teacher is absent today. We can still go to the library." She replied to her as they started walking on the hallways going to the library.

"Yup, so better finish your snack because we'll be busier this time around."

She nodded. On the other hand, if this is the positivity and enthusiasm that her friend is showing her, then it will be too difficult to decide on every matter. She's now wondering if Hope also felt this way, or it is just her and her talent when it comes to overthinking?

As they went inside the library, Hope even held her hand and smiled. It made her heartbeat faster than usual. How dare she give her mixed emotions when she only wants to hate her? Can she really do it to Hope?

They sat down quietly and Hope started to read books about literature. I noticed she picked five different books about our subject. She even picked a book for Senior high school students. She caught Carmella glancing at what she did and she smiled sweetly right away.

"Sorry, I guess you also have to know that I could be a book hog at times."

"Yeah, the truth is, I guess you're a "bookhog" most of the time. Someone could notice right away you're unbelievable." Carmella shook her head as she turned her eyes to the two books Carmella picked. Upon hearing it, Hope teased her more by grabbing three more hard-bounds as she grinned.

"Wow...can you read all of these?"

"I am reading a few pages in each book. That's how I study sometimes."

"That's really nice. I guess we have our own way of studying habits." Carmella replied with a smile.

The two girls stayed there for one straight hour. They enjoyed reading their books that they almost forgot the next class, which is also their 'so-called' quiz class. When Carmella held her pen, she felt like her knees started to tremble because of nervousness.

"Okay, class. Do your best." Their Literature teacher reminded them as he passed the test questionnaires to their classmates seated in front. They got their papers and passed it backwards. As soon as Carmella got her paper, she read the directions as quickly as possible. Due to the lack of concentration, she was caught by the time constraint. She answered the test in the fastest way possible.

"Times up!" The teacher counted up to five until all the papers were being forwarded on his table. He agreed that everyone will have to check the papers of their seatmates. Carmella swallowed as she glanced at Hope who was looking very confident at this moment.

The exam took around thirty minutes and less than five minutes to check, minus if a student becomes noisy in dealing with the test papers.

Carmella knew their literature teacher, he would really announce everyone's score until the one who got the lowest. He said that it's a form of motivation for the students to study and do more in class. She swallowed hard as she looked at him. She began to get curious because their Literature teacher didn't even glance at her direction.

"Only one got the perfect score." Everyone murmured among themselves.

"What's new? Of course it is Carmella. Who else can defeat her?"

"Yeah. She will always do everything to get a perfect score."

"She'll not do everything because she can't even cheat during the exams. She's just smart to get perfect scores."

"She's addicted to ace every exam. What's new?"

She looked around and she could hear the majority of her classmates talk about her. She can't help smiling because they always put their confidence on her, and pressure at the same time.

"It is no other than Glitz, Elise Hope. Please stand up to be recognized more my dear." Everyone from the class gasped aloud. They seem to not believe everything they've heard from their teacher. It created a silent buzz among others. They looked at each other and started arguing among themselves.

"Gosh, that was so unexpected."

"Wow. That's a bomb."

"Seriously? Can someone tell me our teacher announced a name wrong? I can't believe it! Gosh!"

"Yeah, and I guess Hope will be the top student for this year."

"How can you be so sure of that? It is just the start of something more interesting."

These are only some of the words that she heard from the mouths of her classmates who praised her a while ago. She frowned about the idea. Traitors. Now, she realized that they could easily be swayed.

Carmella glanced at her. She looked worried again as she met her gaze, too. She can obviously see that Hope is just forcing herself to smile because their other classmates are cheering to her right now. Hope sat back on her seat without turning her gaze away from Carmella who looked miserable, right now.

Carmella was down with two points from Hope's score while others were okay with their average scores. It turned out that only the both of them got the highest score.

"I just feel that she can be the top one. Have you seen even the way she managed the skit, right?" Her close friend continued as they talked to their seatmates behind her. Carmella felt the happiness of her friend as she expressed her opinions about Hope. They saw her frowning but they never cared for her. She noticed that Hope got all of her classmates' sympathy.

"Yes, but of course. We can never be so sure of what's gonna happen in the future. Don't celebrate too early yet.

"Well you got the point? Do not tell unrealistic future events that's within our reach."

"Ok. I will not, but I will always choose Hope's group, rather than Carmella's."

"Yeah, if there would be next time, I will choose Elise Hope and not Carmella."

She turned her head at her back. When her two classmates realized that she heard them talking about her, they stopped talking. She rolled her eyes at them which made them look at the other direction. Some of them even left in front of her as they talked more about Hope.

It is really obvious that not everyone liked her without any reason at all. She can't blame them though. She's too busy studying that she can't hang out with her friends from her primary school. She's not the type that would hang out to them easily because she never knew how to reach out. She's not even sure of how to approach them. Her classmates would easily assume that she's weird and selfish, only thinks about herself but that's not the case.

She felt really bad right now for being so careless. Is there someone more unfortunate than her today?

Chapter 8: ON AND BEYOND

Carmella's POV

After the test, Hope asked me if I am okay. I tried my best to appear tough in front of her. Of course, I will lie if I will tell her I am totally fine when that's not what I feel.

"I'm sorry, Carmella." Hope said as she looked down. She looked guilty instead of being happy from our teacher's announcement.

"Whew, don't mind it, dear. You don't apologize for being great. Remember that."

I can see the worried look from her. I think she's also putting herself in my shoes and the humiliation and the pressure that I am experiencing right now. Funny, I am also trying my best to feel positive despite my 'best friends'-turn-bashers because of what happened. They only side to where they think is great without even considering my feelings.

"I guess it must be hard for you." She bit her lip as she tried meeting my gaze. I tapped her shoulders as I smiled.

"Yes. That's true. But I guess I should also accept that I will not always be the first."

"Carmella, I really feel guilty. I think I am being responsible for what happened a while ago."

"If you ask, it is totally fine with me. However, not all people around me can easily accept it to the point of them making a buzz out of it." I can see Hope sighed as she tapped my shoulders back.

"Don't mind them. The important thing is you know yourself more than their judgement on you. The important thing is, we believe you more than them. Okay?"

"Let's study harder. I will also convince our classmates to stop what they are doing to you."

"Hope, don't mind them. Let them air their own opinions. Everyone is entitled to their own thoughts."

"You don't deserve to be hated this much."

"I am just accepting that I can't please everyone."

"Yes. That's true. However, remember that there will always be people who will love you for who you are."

"Thank you Hope." I find myself hugging her. I didn't expect that her words would be very comforting that it made me cry. She let me go as she smiled. She held both of my hands.

"You know what? Let's just eat snacks before we go home, my treat." Hope rested her arms on my shoulders. She called her dad to pick us up somewhere. She told me that she wanted to

experience riding a public utility vehicle around our school. I gladly agreed since she's still new to our place and school.

We rode a jeepney and she happily looked outside the window. I also told her to cover her mouth and nose. We can easily smell unpleasant smoke because of the air pollution caused by a lot of cars and vehicles. She points to a place where we could eat our snacks.

"Wow! Burger King!" She giggled when she noticed how enthusiastic I am as I entered the fast-food restaurant.

"Yes. I noticed it made you feel better the last time."

"Yeah. I love their chicken sandwich and burgers, even their fries!" I enumerated my favorite foods that made her laugh as she nodded.

"Okay, okay. We will order all of it. Make sure to finish everything, okay? I will help you, don't worry." She said as she smiled.

We lined up at the counter and we ordered foods worth six-hundred pesos in total. I am amazed by Hope's allowance that's given by her father. I only get one-hundred or even lower than that because my mother will always tell me that we are not rich. She's also telling me to be content at all times.

"How are you feeling now?" She asked between chuckles. I hurriedly chewed my chicken sandwich before I answered her.

"Of course! I love it! Thank you so much Hope!"

"I love to see you happy. I'm sorry once again."

"Huh? What for?" Curious, I stopped eating as I dropped my fork as I ate my spaghetti.

"I still feel guilty. I can't help but feel like I am the one responsible for what you're feeling right now." Hope said looking into my eyes. I can instantly feel the sincerity from her tone of voice.

"Don't feel guilty. I am okay now, Hope. Thanks to you." I encircled my hand around her arms and it made her smile. I felt happy about our food trip that I almost forgot the bad feeling that awaits me at home.

Hope requested her father to drop me off in front of the street where our house stands. I can't imagine how my heart pounded when I slowly twisted our doorknob of our front door. The worried look from my eyes never escaped from my mom. She cooked stir-fried vegetables and fried fish. Even if I am very full, I feel like I have to swallow whatever she cooked for me or else I will be dead.

"Eat your dinner quickly because I will be asking you something."

From what I heard from her, I felt like losing my strength from my single nerve. She looked at me as if she's very serious. She's raising her eyebrows as she observes every single thing I do.

When I was done washing our dishes, she faced me right away.

"Where's your test papers?"

I am shaking as I showed her my papers. I tried controlling my tears but to no avail.

"You know what to do." She said as she slapped my test paper on my face. I nodded as I got the container full of rock salt and spread it on our tiled floor. She's just looking at me when I started kneeling on it.

"Stay there for thirty minutes. The time starts now." I nodded as I wept silently. I can't even look at her straight on the eyes because my knees started to hurt so bad it is now numbing too much.

I am used to these punishments. This is not the worst, for the record. Because I am only down with two points, thirty minutes is the minimum minutes for every punishment she's giving me.

However, whenever she'll do it, it always breaks my heart. I am always asking myself if I am really her daughter or not at all. I slowly looked around and the living room was already silent. I think mom is already sleeping in her room.

I can see that five minutes already passed but it already hurts like hell. I remembered I received a punishment similar to this last three months ago that's why it feels new to me right now.

I am thinking of standing up but what if she's secretly watching me? I know she'll add some minutes more if she'll discover that I am cheating her required time for the punishment. I sighed and waited for a lot of minutes, not feeling my knees anymore this time.

"Get up and study." I slowly opened my eyes when I heard my mom's voice. I glanced at the wall clock and I saw that I spent thirty-five minutes kneeling on the rock salt. I waited for a minute before I slowly got up. When I looked at my knees, I noticed that both of my knees were bleeding because of the rock salt that bruised my skin badly. I started crying again which made my mother angrier even more.

"Do you want me to give you another punishment for not shutting your mouth?"

"S-Sorry, mom." I replied between sobs. I started moving a bit fast as I went to the bathroom to clean my wounds. I can see from my peripheral vision that she's following my every move with her meticulous eyes.

"Stop crying and pull yourself together. You don't cry and get perfect scores. You study more and get real results."

"I will always remember it, mom."

I was crying silently when she left me. She went back to her room and I guess, right now, she will sleep because she needs to wake up at two in the morning for her first hour at work inside our house.

I looked at her as I closed my fist. I have to strive harder to prove her wrong. I will study more for her to tell me I am the best again...even if I will just hear it from her once a year, in front of many people.

The next day, I got up at five in the morning and prepared for school. I knew that the library would be opened at exactly six in the morning. I have to be early because I have no complete set of books. My mom prepared my breakfast but she slept again before I woke up because of the nature of her work as a home-based call center agent. I know she doesn't want to be disturbed when she's slept. That's the reason why I just left a simple 'thank you' note because somehow, she never lets me starve.

I walked until I reached the bus stop. I can see some students from other schools get on the same bus where I am at. I think they are also going to school early because they also need to study. I experienced a lot of difficulties last night. I decided to never inform Hope that I will be going to the library today. We have two major quizzes in Science and Math today. I have to show my mom that I can always live to her expectations from me and nobody can ever change it, even Hope.

I opened the door from the library with high hopes. Nobody should ever let me down, even myself.

Chapter 9: SCARS KEEPER

Carmella's POV

"Wow, I never thought you'd be earlier than the usual." Hope greeted me as soon as she saw me within the vicinity of our school on the way to our room.

"Oh, Hi Hope!" I stopped walking as soon I saw her rushing towards me, smiling as she waved her hands. Hope saw me along the hallway on our way to our Math class. It is almost quarter to seven in the morning when she also rushed into our room.

"I never thought you'll be arriving a bit late."

"Uh, yeah. I honestly didn't want this. My dad's car went broken in the middle of the street. I have to hire a cab and wait for it to reach here. My, what a way to start my day." She looked haggard as early as this but she's still looking so beautiful. She's a bit worn out but her smile is never fading away, even a little.

"I hope it will be fixed soon." I answered as I walked next to her. We slowed down a bit when we saw that we were already near the room.

"Yeah. I think she went to a repair shop to be fixed this afternoon so that he could fetch me later. You know how hard it is to commute, right?"

"Let's wish for the best." I smiled. When we're at the front door of our room, she held my hand as she took a deep breath. She smiled with confidence as he held her chin up high.

"Are you ready for the math exam?" She cheerfully asked, but her tone is more of being very motivational this time around. I just nodded in response. When our classmates saw the both of us, they can't help but whisper among themselves as they started to create a buzz again. She never cared anyway. She's always the girl who would often promote peace rather than conflict inside our room.

"Hello dear classmates!" Hope went in front while the teacher was coming nearer to our room. I could see that most of our classmates focused their attention to her calm, authoritative voice. Even the ones sitting on the back also stopped to look at her because of a certain announcement she's about to say to all of us.

"Let's all do our best in our math exams. Let us focus more on studying and avoid negativity at all times." I can see that those classmates who talked against my back went quiet in an instant. We all went back to our seats when our Math teacher finally arrived.

"We can do this! Thank you!" She added as she also left the front to make way for our math teacher who just went inside the room. I could see that our teacher is so grateful to her.

"Good morning, Mr. Lancey!" We all chorused. He smiled and let us take our seats.

"Good morning class! Please get your test papers here so that we could start productively." I can feel that everyone is pressured as of the moment. Not everyone gets a perfect score in our math exams. Our teacher is the kind that usually gives tricky problem-solving questions. The questions alone were quite confusing but I can feel that I am more than ready. When I received my test paper being passed from the front going backwards, I started to grip my pen as I grinned silently.

Let the test begin...

That day went really tough for almost everyone of us, that included Hope who seemed to be sad after we finished our two tests.

"That's quite unfair."

"Huh? Why?" I responded, feeling curious this time.

"The two exams were really tough. I admit I had a hard time answering the last four problem-solving questions in math. Also, the enumeration part to the other exam."

"Maybe, you're not used to the way they give tests here in the Philippines."

"Yup. I sometimes find everything really weird. No worries, I am also enjoying everything and I am learning from it as well. How about you?" She faced me as if studying my expression on how I would answer her questions.

I sighed as I looked at her eyes. Sometimes, the way she would look at me would make me feel guilty for not being honest to her.

"I guess I am used to the kinds of exams that's why it is not hard for me to cope up. Well, I admit the test in Math is a difficult one." I simply responded. She smiled as if feeling relieved.

"Good thing I am not the only one who considers it to be difficult." She smiled at last.

"You're not a normal person if you think Mr. Lancey's exams are just easy." I chuckled as I looked at her amused reaction. "You got a point there." She replied as we did the high-five.

"The test results will be out two days from now so let's just be patient." I assured her.

"I will. I guess the only choice that we have is to wait for the results."

"Are you going home right now?" She asked as she held my hand. I glanced around and I could see our other classmates whispering to each other. I think not all of them like the sight of us being good friends.

"Nope. I will go to the library again to study. You?"

"Of course I'll go with you, dear." Hope answered honestly. I am trying my best not to look awkward. I hope she's not feeling that I am being sarcastic at her today. I need to study more than she does. I badly needed to get the top by hook or by crook. I am getting the hang of being

on top, so I will always get it if I will be more serious when it comes to studying this time around.

I started to walk and yet my knee is still hurting that's why I have to slow down. I frowned as I bit my lower lip, walking ahead of her.

"C-Carmella?" When I turned my back, I noticed that Hope had been looking at me from my feet going up and eventually meeting my gaze.

"Yes?" I answered, smiling. I can instantly see the worried look on her face.

"I can see that you're not walking properly. A-Are you alright?" I felt as if my heart suddenly stopped.

"Why do you think I would not be fine? Of course. I think it is because I stumbled on the ground and both of my knees were badly affected." I tried closing my fists secretly as I faced her.

I am not planning to tell her what happened. It's a secret that me and my mom should only know about. What happened last night should be only kept to myself.

"I never thought you're that careless." She's a bit worried but frank at the same time."

"You know what? You're silly." I answered between chuckles.

"I hope you're doing fine." She held my hand again as if guiding me to sit down on one of the tables inside the library. She gently examined my bruises as she raised my skirt a bit. Good thing my skirt is two inches below my knee that's why it is somehow covered. She looked horrified and worried at the same time.

"Gosh, that looked terrible. Have you cleaned this already?" I bitterly chuckled as soon as I saw her reaction.

Honestly speaking, I can't even look at my knee because of the scars and bruises in one. I stopped dreaming of having a flawless, perfect skin because of my mom.

"Yup. Please don't worry, Hope. I am really fine. Don't look at me with the way I walk. This will just heal soon."

I heard her sigh as she looked me in the eyes again. I am avoiding it as much as possible because I don't want to accept sympathy from anyone. I don't want to think that my rival worries about me. That will only make me feel bad about myself. That would only make me think that I am weak and a crybaby.

"Maybe we should start studying so that we can go home early." I added as I stood up, making my way as quickly as I could to one of the library aisles. I can feel that Hope is quietly following me. I guess she understood that we need to focus this time. That we need to read books rather than talk in a whispery tone most of the time.

I glanced at her. When she caught me stealing a glance at her, she smiled right away. I hope she'll not think of it as my way of being sarcastic to her starting today.

Her reaction changed when she felt her phone vibrate from her pocket. "Excuse me," she mouthed at me. "Sure," I whispered back as I continued reading the book that I picked for studying. I saw her leaning on one of the library shelves as she hides herself at the sight of our librarian.

Good thing she has a natural, soft-spoken voice that's why speaking quietly is more of a skill for her. She held her phone on her left hand as her right covers the lower part of her phone.

"Yes," She said in a whispering tone as she nodded. She looked at me and smiled a bit. "Yeah, she's here, too." I was surprised when I realized I was the one that they meant. Is it Hope's father speaking to her?

"Wow! That's a relief, dad. Sure, I'll tell her right away. Please take care on your way here. Love you!" She ended the call right away. I was right, too.

"Gosh! Good thing dad was able to get the car from the repair shop just in time."

"That's a relief!" I exclaimed that some of the students shushed us from becoming noisy all of a sudden. We both giggled as quietly as we could. We also did a high-five.

"Daddy even asked if you're here with me. I told her we're still in the library. He told me that since we're only blocks away, we'll drop you off in front of your house."

Wow! Is this my lucky day today?

Chapter 10: CARMELLA REIGNS ONCE AGAIN

Carmella's POV

After more than forty minutes, we're standing outside the library to wait for Hope's dad. When I saw the car coming toward us, I couldn't help but smile. Good thing their car was fixed just in time for our dismissal. It is more comfortable to stay in your private car rather than thinking of commuting and waiting for a bus to arrive. There will be a lot of passengers who were also rushing on their way home.

I don't know why but seeing Hope's dad makes me happy for no reason at all. It's just that I feel my heart is racing fast whenever I will see his smiling face getting out of their car.

"Hi dad! You're just in time!" Hope hugged her dad tightly right away that he's scratched his head. He shifted his gaze to me and his daughter and on what she did just now while looking at me. I can't help but smile because of the sight I just witnessed. Hope is really close to her dad and they usually keep an open communication would be very effective in keeping a close bonding. Sometimes, I wish that I could be that close to my mom, too.

I will not be only close to her on the day of my graduation but I also wish we could communicate as normally as possible even without any occasion at all.

"Please get in the car so that we can go home early." He said as he let go of Hope's arms around her waist. He opened the door of the backseat for the both of us. Hope held my hand as we went inside the car. She didn't even plan to let it go as she proudly presented it to her dad.

"Wow, that is one, possessive bestie." I think that gesture didn't escape her dad's eyes that we both giggled.

"Yup. She's one of a kind, dad." Hope cheerfully answered that her dad shook his head and laughed heartily to her daughter's weird expressions.

"Carmella, please do understand my daughter. She's like that all the time."

"Daddy! Carmella is awesome! She's very approachable from the first time I knew her. I know she will be my greatest friend ever!"

"Don't worry, sir. I think I am getting used to her right now so don't worry." I responded that made Hope smile even more.

"See, dad? She's also understanding!" Hope even clapped her hands that made her father laugh.

"Oh, you silly one," He said to Hope as his eyes were fixed on the road now since the car would be going outside the gate of our school now. "Carmella, you're her first close friend here in the Philippines. Thank you for easing my burden to be my daughter's 'only friend' all these time."

"Being her friend is a pleasure, sir. Hope is kind, not only for me but to all of us, her classmates. She's not having a hard time getting to know us."

"Wow, really? That's nice to hear." I can feel the delight in her dad's response to me. Hope is just smiling as she listens to us.

"See, my princess? The Philippines is a great country." He even added.

"Yes dad. You're right when you said that most people here are friendly as well. Carmella proved it first to me." I smiled observing the both of them. From the way they talk to each other, they were really close. I felt sad all of a sudden. I hope I can always experience it from my mom. Comparing her to Hope's dad? She's very cold and distant the way she treats me. She's more of a cold-hearted stone without any feeling towards me at all.

Sometimes I ask myself why my mother is always treating me unfairly? I often feel as if she's more of a stranger rather than a 'real mom' to me. I also feel that her work is more important to her than anything else. When her friends will also go to our house while I am there, I often feel jealous. How could she talk to them for more than three hours, even have an overnight to their houses while she only talks to her daughter for only five minutes maximum?

She's only asking questions answerable by 'yes' or 'no' and nothing more. Sometimes, I let myself experience a low score for me to hear her words as she gets mad at me. At least, from it, she can say more words compared to the moment when I only achieve perfect scores.

"We're here." Hope's dad brought my drifting thoughts back to reality. As much as I would want to stay, I couldn't do it because I am in front of our house right now.

"Thank you, sir. Please take care!" I said after I got off of their car. He nodded and smiled as I waved goodbye. I can also see Hope waving goodbye at me before she closed the glass window of their car. I stood beside their car as the engine started again. I waited until I couldn't see them as the car drove away silently. I glanced at my wristwatch and it was almost six in the evening when I reached home.

When I checked the dining table, there was fried chicken and rice left. I smiled as I quickly ate my dinner. I noticed my mom ate beforehand because she's at work right now.

I slowly twisted the doorknob of her room to confirm and she's indeed working at this hour. I can see her wearing her headset and she's talking while typing on the computer. She looked really busy, I just closed the door once again. I decided to just stay inside my room so that I can have my study time for another ten minutes more to refresh what I read from the library.

The days started to happen like a flash of lightning. Now, we're in front of our Math teacher as he asked one student to give us our own test papers.

"Wow..." I saw her gasped in awe as she glanced on my paper before she passed it to me. I looked at her as I rolled my eyes.

What I really hate the most is when someone looks at my paper and he/she will know my score before I do. That's a bit unfair.

We already had all our papers when our teacher smiled in front of us all.

"Look who regains her throne, let's congratulate Carmella for having a perfect score in Math. Keep it up, dear!" I can see that most of my classmates clapped their hands. Some glanced at Hope who also clapped happily at the results of my score in Math.

I smiled and nodded in front of everyone when our math teacher told me to give a simple message or inspiration.

"Greatness comes to those who live up to their dreams. Do not think of negative things when you try. Think of greater things and do your best. Regret can't bring you to the places you want when you decide to give up on yourself."

"I always love to hear something from you, our dear Carmella. So my students, please follow Carmella's words of wisdom." Mr. Lancey clapped his hands followed by my classmates.

"Gosh, those words again from her." I heard someone murmuring behind me. Good to know, they already knew what I am capable of doing.

"Well, what's new? She's always competitive and we should always know it."

"Guys, I don't know whom to side anymore. Who's team Hope and team Carmella here?" Someone also whispered back. When I gave them an icy stare, they all became quiet.

"She's scary so I am team Hope."

"She's awesome like a kick-ass heroine, I am with her." One of my boy classmates answered. I guess he's the third placer in our room. From what I heard about some gossip, he had a crush on me.

I can't help but to grin. I am just warming up. This is simply my greeting for those who will try to put me down.

Carmella's POV

Hope greeted me as if she's the happiest and ever-supportive friend alive. It made me feel better, honestly speaking. I am happy that my efforts are all getting paid off.

"You know what, Carmella? You're beautiful and sweet. Please do not ever change. She whispered as she shook hands with me. I nodded and tapped her on the shoulder as well.

Right after our math class, we're able to proceed to our Science class. I was the one who got the highest score again. Everyone can't believe what I am capable of doing.

"She's a monster."

"Yep, a monster that's always hungry for being on the top spot."

You know what? I really admire Carmella. She's always proving herself that she could pull herself together whenever she has low scores."

"I think she deserves to be on the top for her dedication to learning."

I grinned as I heard them talking behind us. Hope is also smiling as she nodded while listening to those whose topic is all about me.

"I never thought my close friend is really popular here in this school. I feel so happy for you, dear." Hope said as she hugged me from my back all of a sudden.

"I don't believe that." I said, not knowing what to respond to her.

"That's why you have to, now. Look how our classmates admire you like I do."

"Thank you so much for always believing in me, dear. I will always be thankful."

After that tiring Science lessons, I told Hope that I have to go back to study in the library until its closing time. She looked at me as if not wanting to hear what I just said.

"Are you serious? Don't tell me you plan to live here?"

I let a hearty laugh because I find her really funny plus her facial expressions as she disagrees with me.

"Please, I will tell dad to come here quickly so that we can all go home now."

"Well, what can I do if you're the one who is telling me to go home?"

"Yeah I am your mom so you need to listen to me." Hope said between laughs.

Chapter 11: MEGAMIND

Carmella's POV

I went home smiling a lot. As usual, I ate my dinner alone that's left covered on our dining table. When I was done with it, I was able to get upstairs. I slowly twisted the doorknob as I checked on mom. I felt pity at her all of a sudden when I saw her napping in front of her computer table. I guess she's been working really really hard today. I hope she's just alright.

She looked really tired and she even wore her eyeglass in an awkward way already. I think it fell a bit from the bridge of her nose because she felt fast asleep without her even noticing it. I can't even wake her up because she might get angry at me.

I tiptoed slowly as I went inside my mother's room. I noticed that she only turned off the AV and the computer. I guess she's too tired to transfer to her bed. I hurriedly fixed the soft mattress of her bed and arranged the pillows. I gently put her arm around my shoulders as I tried to get her up and help her transfer to her bed. She's a bit heavy but I don't mind at all.

I am right. She's tired, she never even felt what I did to her. When her back touched the bed, I could hear her snoring soundly. I gently touched her cheek as I smiled.

"Hello mom. I hope you're not too stressed right now."

Silence. She never dared speak any word that answered my questions. I already expected it since this is the only time that I am able to talk to her about my feelings. She's so tired and asleep that I guess she never heard any of what I told her.

"I love you so much. Don't worry, when I will become a lawyer someday, I will make sure to give you everything that you want. I will make sure you will not be working for long hours. I will make sure to give you the kind of life that you want. Someday, mom. I hope you can wait for me a little."

I smiled as I stood up. I looked for a blanket since her room is a bit chilly because of the AC being turned on. She has to do it so that her computer will not be overheated for a long time while she's working. I tucked her on the bed as I hugged her. I tried my best to be as quiet as possible as I closed the door behind me as I went outside. I sighed. The only thing I wish for my mother to do for me is to accept me and love me as much as I love her.

I went back to my room. As I lay on my bed, I just stared on the white ceiling until I noticed that I was slowly closing my eyes... I never realized I already succumbed to a dream with my mother in it.

"No! Don't do this!" I can see my mom running away from a big, black monster without a face. We're in the middle of a forest that's more of a maze. The walls were so narrow and high. It looked sturdy and scary we got nowhere to hide anymore.

"Mom! Mom! Run!" I shouted but she seemed to not hear me at all. I can see that we're only running in circles and there's no way out. I can't seem to know what to do anymore. It looked vivid and real. My heart was beating so fast.

"Mom! Please run faster!" I shouted on top of my lungs. I felt like losing my strength to run but the monster just wanted to catch my mother and not me. I can hear the monster's roaring laughter. It is resounding the whole place that I want to cry.

"I-I can't run anymore." She weakly replied. In an instant, the monster caught her on the neck with his two, bare hands. His pointed nails dug into my mother's skin and I can see a lot of blood flowing from it!

"Carmella...please save me!" A shrill voice resounded the whole place. It was the voice of my mother that was slowly dying in front of my eyes.

"Mom!" I shouted as I opened my eyes. I quickly got up as I held my chest with my hands. I noticed I had perspired a lot as if I did run.

I felt relieved when I realized it is just a nightmare. It's only a dream that I am very much thankful for. However, why is it that it looked real? Why is that monster hunting my mom but can't even hear me? I noticed that even if I am shouting on top of my lungs, the monster was just ignoring it.

From my dream, it is my mom whom that monster really wanted to catch, but what was that for?

I went downstairs to get a glass of water. Maybe if I will go back to sleep, that dream will not continue again. Before I went back to my room, I sneaked to my mom's room to check on her. When I confirmed that she's sound asleep, I went back to my room.

I prayed to God as I slept back on my bed. I hope my mother is fine right now.

However, this dream is too strange. I wonder what was it all about?

I woke up the next morning still feeling very confused. That dream even bothered me until I got on the bus as I looked through the window. Someone sat beside me. I just glanced at his pants and when I realized he's a male student. I avoided my gaze and focused looking at the scenery of the metro district on our way to school.

I noticed the one seated beside me get off the bus at one of the universities exclusively for boys. Alwin Geroche University. I am now wondering why on earth is he riding a bus and not his own car?

I rolled my eyes as I focused on the scenery that I am looking through the bus' window.

"Hey...you seem to think about something. Care to share?" Kara greeted me with a fist bump. She was my best friend before Hope came into my life. However, she's in a different section that's why I don't see her that often.

"Nothing." I shook my head. She grinned from ear to ear as she expected a lot from me, too. I know she wanted to hear more words from me.

"Duh. I know you like how I know the reason why dinosaurs went extinct. C'mon, tell me." She even poked my shoulders using her fist. I chuckled as I touched where she poked me at.

"You never disappoint me. You're weird."

"C'mon, don't change the topic." Kara insisted. I sighed as I looked at her.

"It's just a dream about my mom."

"What about it?" She asked further, as she munched some kitkat bars. I grabbed some from her hands and I can see that she pouted her lips because of annoyance.

"It's really a terrible dream. My mom is chased by a monster."

"Wow, don't ever watch fantasy TV series at all times, there might be a continuation of that tonight." She responded as she giggled. I sighed as I rolled my eyes. She simply laughed at my reaction.

"You're silly. That's the reason why I don't want to tell you about it."

"I am just joking, you know. I can see that you look really stressed and the day is just starting."

I looked down and said nothing. Wow, she's really my friend because she could understand my non-verbal gesture even if I would not tell her about it.

"I guess it meant something. Did you tell your mom about it?"

"Well, what reaction do you want me to get from her? I am sure she'll be angry at me for thinking about many stupid things."

"Oh my, yeah. I almost forgot your mom is a real-life monster, I guess someone wants to take some revenge because of what she's doing to you."

I gave her an icy stare which made Kara shut up and gave me a "peace sign" instead as she grinned.

"But seriously speaking, based on what I have read from the 'dreams and their meanings' is that, maybe your mother is dealing with a big problem or someone that is stressing her out lately..."

She looked at me as if waiting for a reaction from what she said. Yeah, she's indeed serious now. I know this brat.

"You know, like the daily monsters that we're dealing with our lives."

"You know what? You don't seem to fit being sentimental, you look funny." I said between laughs. She gently pinched me on my cheek and ran away inside their room.

"I will surely get you later!" I shouted as I giggled.

"Who's that?" I was surprised when Hope appeared from nowhere behind me. She also looked at Kara's direction.

"Oh, she's Kara. One of my close friends since primary school."

"Oh, I see. It is so unfortunate that you're not classmates." I smiled as I faced her.

"Yeah. She's a bit lazy when it comes to studying but she loves reading books."

"I hope she'll be our classmate when we're in our senior high school years." She answered cheerfully.

"I really do hope so, too. Don't worry Hope, I will introduce you to her if our vacant schedule matches theirs."

"I'd be glad to! More friends, more fun!" We did the high five. As we heard the buzzing of the bell, we hurriedly went back to our room. I am thankful to Kara because I felt relieved from what she shared to me about dreams and their meanings.

However, a part of me wants to also share it to my mom. I realized that maybe I am also the one who always gave her too much stress lately. Thinking about it makes me feel sad and bad at the same time. I hope this is not really a big deal.

Chapter 12: LOVE BEGINS WITH ONE HELLO

Carmella's POV

We spent the day in school exhausted because of the lesson activities and more group work. It would be so helpful if all my other group members were also cooperative. However, we have a lot of contrasting ideas that I can't help but to be disappointed.

"I am mentally tired, I swear." Carmella heard Hope mutter to herself.

"I am so sorry to hear that from you, dear. Are you okay?"

"No, I am not." She smiled and shook her head. She's still holding a lot of our homework. As I look at her facial expression, it's as if she's about to cry. It's this moment that I saw her being so down because of the homework that's stressing her so much.

I hugged her right away. We're beside the entrance of the library and some students were looking at us as if we're making a scene. My goodness! Even how I comfort a friend will be an issue to them and I really hate it.

"I guess we have to get inside the library first. I don't want to see you standing here for a long time." I gently pulled her hand as we went inside. She looked really unmotivated and tired. When she saw a monoblock chair, she pulled it in front of her as she sat comfortably and rested her arms on the table. She even put her head on her arms as she heaved a sigh.

"It's not so you, Hope."

"Yeahhh..." She groaned as she scratched her head and smiled at me.

"You look funny." I commented which made her scratch her head even more as she frowned. She still looked cute.

"Even if you're my close friend right now, I wish you're not meanie." She replied, smiling weakly.

"Let me have that." I smiled as I grabbed her notebook from her. I could sense that she's having a hard time understanding our math seatwork activity a while ago that she only got seven out of ten marks.

"Don't blame me, I am not used to this." She buried her head on her folded arms on the table. I poked her with the use of my elbow. I'm afraid our librarian would see Hope and assume that she only went inside to enjoy her sleeping session like what other students are doing.

I encouraged her to face me and smile. I offered to explain the lesson like how the teacher explained it to us a while ago. I noticed she started smiling as she solved the problems by herself this time.

I looked at her and I can feel happiness deep down. Moments like this would make me enjoy her company more. I feel like I am also setting aside this rivalry once in a while. What's the point of having a competition when it is unhealthy, afterall?

"Thank you so much my dearest Carmella. You're a blessing!" She cheerfully said after she solved the last item of our homework correctly.

"It is always a pleasure. I promised your dad to be a good friend to you and I will always do it for you."

"Thank you dear Carmella! Oh, speaking of dad, it's his birthday today!"

"Oh my! Really? Happy birthday to your dad, Hope! I am sure you're also happy today."

"Earlier today, I am not. You knew it! However, you turned it upside-down. Thank you so much!"

"Always welcome, Hope."

"By the way, please go with us today after school."

"Oh sure! But why?"

"My father loves to cook. Every time we have birthdays, we only both celebrate it without the presence of others. I want you to be a part of it, this time!"

"Oh my! I am more than willing, Hope. By the way, I am so sorry if I don't bring a gift for him."

"It's not the gift that matters, dear. It's your presence that mattered the most to him."

"Thank you in advance!" She simply answered, even hugging me tightly. I can't help but to smile as I can see Hope's dad as he gets out of their car.

"C'mon, hurry up, girls. We should start early." He almost ran as we went inside the car. As we reached their house, I admired it for being really spacious and big. It's a two-storey house with an indoor pool. I never thought they're this rich. I mean, I knew Hope for being simple and yet they live in this kind of house.

"Wow!" I said as I roamed my eyes around as we stepped inside.

"We'll go swimming as we wait for a few minutes more. Our maids are arranging the final touches for our desserts."

"That sounds really yummy. I feel hungry by just hearing about it."

"Yes. My nana Hannah is good at making Crème brûlée's."

I smiled as I looked at her. I can't understand how happy I am as I sit down on one of their Sofa inside their living room. We even watched cartoons for a few minutes.

"Hello lovely girls, the food is ready." Hope's father called us from the kitchen. She smiled as she pulled my hand as we went to their dining room. On the table, I can see a lot of food. There's a vegetable salad, steaks, fried chicken and spaghetti with meatballs.

"I hope you will like it, dear Carmella."

"Oh, this is too much sir. I've never seen this much food often. Thank you so much for inviting me here."

"It's always a pleasure to welcome those people who are good friends with my daughter."

"Thank you sir." We started eating and we talked about random things.

"By the way Carmella, who do you live with?"

"Oh, sir. I live with my mother but she's always busy."

"What's her job?"

"She's a home-based customer service representative for a Telephone company, sir."

"Oh, that's nice of her. These kinds of jobs are really popular nowadays, most especially if your mom is an introverted one."

"Yes, indeed sir. She doesn't want to go out that much. I am always the one who ran errands for her. Sometimes, if she likes to go to the supermarket, she will go there as early as four or five in the morning."

"I think your mom is a shy-typed kind of person. I hope to also meet her one day."

"Yes, sir. I'd gladly let you meet her one of these days if she's not busy."

"Wow! How I wish I could feel having a mom like you do, dear Carmella"

"Oh my, Hope. With the kind of mom that I have right now, you won't be really wishing that anymore."

I said this to myself as I smiled at her. We continued eating and as Hope promised, after we ate food, we rested for a few minutes and went swimming in their indoor pool. It's my first time and I really enjoyed it a lot.

"Let's go to my room to have our final shower. I will also show you some of my books." I nodded as I followed her into her room. I am awestruck as I go inside. I don't know if I just went inside a bedroom or I am inside a wide library.

"Oh my gosh."

"Welcome to my place." She grinned as she pulled me inside. I think all of the books that you wish to read are all here.

"Now I know why you don't like going inside the library because you already have your own right here!" I said as I roamed my eyes around. We're still wrapped with body towels and our rash guards were dripping wet on the floor. Some of their maids were following us as we went inside. There were three maids in total. One was mopping the floor, the other one was smiling while holding three extra body towels and the other one went ahead of us to adjust the temperature of the water from Hope's room. She also prepared the bathtub with milk and topped it with red Hope petals.

"Go." She said as she nudged my shoulders.

"Huh?"

"Enjoy your bathtub experience, dear Carmella." She said as she winked at me.

"Oh my! Really?" I am smiling like an idiot while dipping myself into the bathtub that Hope asked her maids to prepare for me. I am lucky indeed to have her. This is a once-in-a-lifetime experience that I am enjoying right now.

After we enjoyed the bubble baths and showers, we were sitting side by side on her soft bed.

"Thank you so much dear. I am so happy to eat and stay here in your house."

"I'd love to invite you here if you have time, Carmella." Hope answered, hugging my waist sideways.

I roamed around and I spotted a small picture frame on her bedside table. It is the picture of Hope and her dad when he's still younger. However, I noticed that the picture is a bit blurred. It is very obvious that the picture is already too old, the crumpled part is still evident. I carefully touched it and smiled.

"Oh, that..." she smiled as she got it from my hand.

"You look so cute while your dad is carrying you on his arms."

"I am two years old here. My dad said that it is my mom who took this picture." I moved closer to her and looked at it carefully.

The carousel behind them and the rides...

"We're inside an amusement park, Carmella."

"Wow! You looked happy here with your dad." I said but I can see that her smile is slowly fading away.

"I miss my mom so much."

"Where is she by the way?"

"She died a year after this picture was taken by her. I am sad that I am not able to meet her while she is still alive."

"I'm so sorry to hear that, dear Hope." I hugged her and I can feel that she's sobbing on my back as she rested my head on my shoulders.

"You're lucky you still have your mom. Please love her."

"You're also lucky to have your dad with you. Let's be happy because we still have our parents."

"Yeah, you're right."

Chapter 13: CARMELLA'S TRUE COLORS

Carmella's POV

It was already past eight in the evening when I asked Hope that I should go home. She agreed right away and she even told her dad about it.

"I will drive you home, Carmella. It's a bit late and it is my responsibility to return you home. Your mom might get angry if you will go home later than this time."

"T-Thank you so much, sir. I think it's a bit too much already."

"No, I insist. You're my guest and I personally invited you. You are my responsibility, that's why I should do this."

"T-Thank you, sir." I bowed down because I am really thankful. From a fraction of time, I am able to experience what's like having a sweet and understanding father like him. Hope is really lucky to have sir Leonard as her father.

"You're always welcome, Carmella. Thank you for helping my Hope as well."

"It's a pleasure, sir. I love to be friends with your daughter."

"I am glad to know that she's getting along with you very well. She's too shy, I am worried that she might not get any friends for herself. I am glad that she was able to get comfortable with you."

Hope's dad drove me quietly and when the car's engine stopped in front of our gate, I saw the light from my mom's window. I swallowed hard.

"S-Sir, I really have to get going." I am about to get out when he insists on the Crème brûlée made by Nana Hannah. I awkwardly smiled as I grabbed the paper bag.

"Sir, thank you so much."

My heart raced fast. I am really nervous when I am anticipating my mom to wait for me. I am not always feeling well whenever I think about it.

"Please take care." I still heard Hope's dad and his voice as I shut the door behind me as I went inside the house. As soon as she heard my steps, I could hear her roaring voice.

"Where have you been?"

"Mom, I told you...I will be going to Hope's house."

"I don't care who the hell is that nor where you've been. I want you to be mindful of the time! Since when do you plan to lie to me?"

"M-Mom, I am so sorry. It's not my intention to lie to you."

I got a slap from her as a response. When I started to cry, she left in front of me and slammed the door of her room. I even shut my eyes a bit because of the impact it made.

When I am inside my room, I can see that I have a red mark on my left cheek as I cry in front of the mirror. I looked at myself as I closed my fist. I slowly glanced at my wallclock and it was almost ten minutes to nine in the evening.

No, I don't have any reason to hate my mom because it is my fault. I got a cube of ice and placed it on my swollen cheek. I hope it will heal by tomorrow. I can't imagine myself being pitied by anyone. It is not me. I can't just accept it that easily.

The next morning, right after I wake up, I check my cheek. Thankfully, it's not too swollen compared to last night. I almost avoided everyone's gaze and their judgements. As I entered our room, I can feel that all eyes are upon me now.

"Gosh, I think she's being harsh on her again."

"Yeah. I wonder what is the reason for this time..." I overheard from my other classmates. From that, I haven't fought back my tears anymore. Some of my classmates saw what happened but they seem to be ignorant about it.

Well, what's new? I am not the type who will show how weak I am. I wiped the tears from my eyes and as I looked up, I could see the worried face of Hope.

"W-What happened?"

"I slept for a long time and I think that made my eyes red a bit."

She touched my shoulders and gently massaged it. I also held it back with my hands and nodded at her. I tried my best to force a smile so that she'll not be too worried about me.

Hope's POV

We're seated a bit far from each other in our Computer class. Even if we're doing some activities, I can't help but to worry for Carmella.

As soon as I arrived, most of our classmates were looking at her as she wiped her tears as quickly as possible before it even rolled on her cheeks. She thought I didn't see it but right after I entered the door, I already witnessed how it started. Now, I am wondering what my other classmates mean by what they've talked about earlier. Whom were they referring to?

"Hey, Hope. Wassup?"

"Hello, Thelma." I smiled at her. I guess she noticed me looking at Carmella from afar.

"Hmm...wanna know something interesting?" She whispered in my ear as she looked at Carmella's direction. I saw her smirk.

"What is that?"

"Don't get too close with that bitch, she will just ruin your life." I faced Thelma as I closed my fist. She's looking at me in a mocking facial reaction.

"W-What are you trying to tell me?"

"I am saying the truth. Everyone hates her because she's crazy and a trying-hard bitch."

"You know what, Thelma? I do not tolerate mean judgement towards other people. Do not do unto others if you don't want it to happen to you too."

"Hope, why are you trusting her very well even if you don't know her yet?"

"I am not sure what you're talking about but I know her."

"Really? How well do you know that girl?" She sounded as if challenging me as I glanced at Carmella.

"I am sure you're wrong about what you're saying. Carmella is one, good friend. She doesn't deserve that much hate coming from you guys."

"Girl, if I were you, I won't be protecting someone like her. I knew her more than you do."

"So, are you not ashamed of me? You knew her very well and yet you're the one to judge her more."

"Hope, a friendly advice. Please keep away from her company or just regret it later on."

"What do you mean?" I asked, really curious. It's as if my head wanted to explode because of what Thelma is feeding my thoughts.

"She's a monster for the top spot. She will do everything just to reach there and she will eliminate whoever comes in her way."

"Can she really do that?"

"Why do you think she has no friends at all? Can't you observe it yourself?"

I paused from what I am doing from my computer and looked at Thelma straight into her eyes. I shifted my gaze on Thelma and Carmella who was busy with other things.

Who is telling the truth right now? I think I also have the right thing to know since I am also Carmella's friend as of the moment...

I was a bit surprised when someone sat beside me.

"Hi, Marielle!" Thelma greeted her other dear friend. I am now in between them. I felt really awkward and cornered at the same time.

"Oh, what's hot?" I am more than sure she's asking about what we've been talking about before she arrived. I roamed my eyes around the computer room hoping that our teacher is around but I am just really unlucky.

I really have to force myself to talk and interact with the both of them even if I don't want to. I don't want to appear rude, either.

"Oh, I guess it's Carmella, right girls?"

"Yup. I am just giving Elise Hope a heads up of what she's like."

"Oh, that snake." Marielle chuckled. She folded her arms as she said those words. She even rolled her eyes pertaining to Carmella.

"Why are you guys like that? Can you even hear or see yourselves? How can you be so mean to someone who doesn't care to the both of you?"

"Because we're concerned about you, Hope. You're still new here so she's free to manipulate you." It's more sarcasm than fact. I can't even feel that she's really 'concerned' about me.

"I don't think so."

"Wilms, don't mind that psycho. She needs to be at the top more than all of us." As soon as I heard this one, I became more interested all of a sudden. Are they really saying the truth?

"If she can't get high scores, her mom will beat her to death or even kneel on some rock salt or mung beans for an hour."

I widened my eyes when I heard it from here. I remembered the bruises on her knees. Was it all because of her mother? How is it possible that she will do that to her daughter? Were the both of them really saying the truth?

"Wait, you're all joking, right?"

"Why will we ever joke around? That's what happens to her if she'll not be on top. That's why no one dared to try to beat her."

"Yup. We don't want her to be dead, so..."

"Eli, please do us a favor." Thelma smirked at me. They all shifted their eyes at me as if expecting something.

"Beat Carmella. Please? I know you can easily do it because you're an achiever." Marielle added as Thelma nodded in agreement.

"Girl can you still remember the look upon Carmella's face when she knew that Hope got the highest score in our Literature class last time?" They said as they did a high five. I suddenly

stood up from between them as I frowned. I don't care if what they say is true or not. The most important thing right now is for me to leave Thelma and Marielle because they're getting toxic. I couldn't stand listening to them anymore. I don't know why but I am not used to hearing those kinds of conversation. Hearing them talking behind Carmella's back is hurting me too much. It is because I often go with her and I am somehow getting closer to her more than them. However, I am also wondering...is it true about what they are talking about her mom?

Chapter 14: MEETING THE OTHER HALF

Hope's POV

As usual, she asked me to go with her to the library. It is supposedly time to go home and yet she's still going there. I glanced at my wristwatch to see the time. It is 4:45PM right now.

"Are you going ahead? Okay, sure." She smiled and was about to go inside when I stopped her. She looked at me and our eyes met right away.

"Why?," She added in a curious manner.

"I should ask you that." Her forehead started to wrinkle.

"What am I saying? Oh, never mind me." I forced a chuckle. She is still looking puzzled as she stepped inside the library while glancing at me from her back.

I quietly followed her and it made her smile. We did our usual routine of roaming between the library aisles to get some books. I decided to go to the aisles of fiction books which made Carmella look at me as if she can't believe it herself.

"Are you not studying?"

"Why, is it a mortal sin to read fiction books now?"

"I just find it weird looking at you reading that." She said as she sighed. I noticed she looked at the book she's reading again. She looked really serious and driven in learning more about it.

I can see that she wanted to borrow the books inside this library but I know they only limit students in borrowing books. I guess that encouraged her to visit this place everyday.

If I am to compare myself to hers, I could say I am indeed very lucky because I have a lot of books. Books of different kinds. While she still needs to borrow a lot for herself.

"Are you bored here already? I'm so sorry, ." I can see that she's worried about how I might react. I chuckled as I faced her.

"No. It's just that the fiction book is really cute."

"Oh, I see." She nodded.

"But I do not recommend you to read it if you're still studying there. Just don't mind me." I grinned as I also focused my eyes to Shrevakhuk's literary works.

I quickly glanced at her and I can see that she's trying hard to memorize by uttering something that she only hears. She does it by many repetitions. She uttered words, looked back to the book and memorized aloud again.

"A-Are your knees okay now?" I asked as I looked down. She stopped from what she's doing and became quiet all of a sudden. I noticed she's trying to avoid her knees from my sight.

"Yeah. They are healing now."

"That's good to know." I smiled but she avoided her gaze at me. Her facial reaction became gloomy all of a sudden.

"Don't worry. It will only hurt a little but it will be alright soon." I assured her. However, it didn't change her facial reaction even a little bit. Her eyes looked gloomy and sad. It's as if she wanted to tell me something but she's afraid to say so.

She looked at me straight into my eyes as if studying my reaction. I smiled to take her doubts away, I hope. This time, I want to believe Thelma and Marielle. Looking at Carmella, I can see the desperation in her eyes right now.

"Are you going home, dear?" She shut the book right away as she looked at me. I smiled as I tapped her shoulders.

"Yep. I will be going ahead of you dear. I am so sorry. I forgot dad has to buy something and I need to come with him." I said as I stood up. I guess I have to also give her the time that she needed for herself.

"Oh, I see. It is fine with me. Anyway, I will also go home twenty minutes from now." She smiled as she glanced at her watch and then shifted her gaze at me. She's looking at me as if she's still studying my expression,

"Please take care dear." I can see the relief in her eyes. I looked down and I suddenly felt pity towards her. I have to do something for her, that is, to at least not become a burden in reaching her goals before I even transferred to our school. I felt sorry now that I know the reason why. Thelma and Marielle were just quick to judge but they never had the chance to understand what's going on, that's why.

Carmella's POV

I went home wondering a lot of things. This day seemed to start oddly. I noticed Hope's action to be really weird right now, especially earlier today, inside the computer class and when we're about to go home. She seemed to be up to something that she's not telling me about. Whenever I look at her face, she will often avoid my gaze.

Did something happen without me knowing it? Did she discover something I am not aware of? I am sitting on my bed and scanning my notebook full of written notes when I hear my caller ringtone all of a sudden.

"Yow, yow, yow..." I automatically giggled when I heard her rapping voice. Seriously, my friend is really something. She has this incredible sense of humor that she could use anytime.

"Kara..." I said between chuckles. She also laughed on the other line.

"I'm sorry to bother you but I really wanna call you because I can't wait for tomorrow."

"What is it? Is it that important?"

"Well, I think it's not really important. Ask me what's it like?" This witch sounded very excited.

"What's it like?"

"Yummy and interesting."

"Oh my! Did your mom cook macaroons again?"

"Gosh, what a silly girl you are, Carmella. It's not a literal kind of yummy. Besides I am not talking about food, you know."

"How would I not know how crazy you are?"

She burst out laughing that I can't help but to smile again.

"Like what I am telling you, it is not about food, okay? It's a person!"

"How could you call a person yummy? You're really a perverted girl."

She giggled and groaned at the same time because of my reaction. From her voice, she sounded very excited and she just can't hide it from me anymore.

"I just want you to meet my cousin."

"Who? Did I miss knowing someone from your family? Duh, I even knew your first pet cat."

"Yeah, you don't know him yet, my dear."

I wrinkled my forehead all of a sudden. Him? Does she mean her boy cousin?

"Oh,"

"He's really nice and sweet. Of course I love you as my best friend, that's why I am rooting for you as my favorite cousin's soon-to-be-girlfriend."

"My goodness! Are you even thinking of what you're trying to say?"

"Carmella, don't be nuts. Of course you also need a guy friend. I am not telling you to have a boyfriend now, but soon."

"Are you crazy?" I literally screamed in excitement that I covered my mouth right away. She laughed because of my sudden outburst of emotions.

"And you really care about my love life, huh?"

"That's how I love you, Carmella." Kara said on the other line that made her smile a lot.

"If you love me, we should be classmates when we're already in the senior high."

"Yeah, I can work that out. That's just easy. Let's meet my cousin tomorrow after our 4:00 P.M. class.

"Okay, that's a deal." I ended a call while smiling a lot. Knowing Kara, she usually pranks or jokes around with other people except me."

Gosh, she's always mindful of my lovelife, I don't even mind it myself.

I smiled as I lay on my bed. The anticipation of knowing someone suddenly excites me.

The next morning, I am really inspired and energized to go to school. I am even happy to face a lot of group activities. This time, I am careful of what to do with my group members. I became stricter when it comes to how we're going to present it later on.

"Are you going with us?" Hope smiled as she was standing beside the car. Her father slowly opened the window but I shook my head.

"I'm sorry, Hope and sir. I will be going out with my friends."

"Oh, I see. Please take care always!" Hope entered the car and waved goodbye to me through their car window."

I breathe deeply and exhale slowly. I went to the mini-forest and smiled. I can see Kara's hands as she waved at me from afar. I adjusted my glasses. I can see a guy sitting beside her. He's wearing a different school uniform.

As I went near them, I realized that this school uniform is familiar to me. I've seen this before but I don't know exactly when.

"Hello Carmella! This is my cousin Adrian, and Adrian she's my best friend, Carmella." Kara introduced us to each other right after I appeared in front of them with a serious facial expression. He smiled right away as he offered his hands. As shy as I am, I looked down as I accepted his hand for a handshake and it is really cold.

"It's nice to meet you." He said and when I looked up, I met his gaze right away. Gosh, he's so handsome. He's almost 188 cm tall, his tantalizing brown eyes. It felt like it's a pair of magnets before you can make thar one. He caught my attention the most as I looked at him. We both chuckled as we sat down.

"Wow, you're both acting as if you knew each other for a very long time."

"Of course, Kara. The first time I saw her, it makes me feel that I am being welcomed here in your school even if I am an outsider."

"Anyone that's being friends with my best friend Kara is also my friend. I hope you'll enjoy her company while you're still inside."

"Thank you. As a matter of fact, outsiders can freely roam around if the school's over. I was just really bored. I got to talk to Kara to accompany me in going to new places."

"Wow. Interesting." I can't help but to smile because Adrian is really cute and charming for me.

Chapter 15: THE PRINCESS AND THE PAUPER

Carmella's POV

"Oh my, I never thought I would be a super chaperone today." Kara sounded annoyed while both of us chuckled.

I glanced at Adrian and I caught him stealing a glance at me too. I smiled and I could feel the warmth of my cheek. I hope he didn't see me blushing or something.

"We never require you to do so." Adrian replied, grinning. He looked at the other way around when I caught him looking at me. I wonder what he's thinking right now.

"See, I told you Carmella is a great friend."

"Yeah, I strongly agree, Kara. Thank you for introducing me to her." I smiled as an answer. We stood up and we all decided to part our ways in going home.

Kara walked past us and Adrian walked slowly beside me as well.

"You looked like Princess Diana from her younger years." He commented and it made me blush.

"Whoah, she's a royalty, I am a nobody." I said between chuckles. He seemed to be amused with my reaction as well.

"Yeah, but I am being honest. You're like her, simple yet beautiful." He said while his facial reaction is quite serious this time.

I felt like my whole world stopped as my heart raced fast. He's too frank I can't seem to process what he's telling me right now. I never see it coming. I am becoming too overwhelmed all of a sudden.

"Are you alright?"

"Yeah," I said as I gasped. I awkwardly smiled when I realized that he's still looking at me.

"Am I having dirt on my face or something?"

"Nope. I find it amusing to look at you." He said as he suddenly pinched my cheek for a second. He let go of it and walked past me quickly. I laughed as I ran after him. He really loves to tease and yet I am wondering why I am loving it.

"Gosh girl, I told you, right?" Kara almost shrieked on the other line as I answered my phone. I can't help but to laugh at how she did it.

"You know what, Kara? You're really silly I wanna punch you hard."

"You can't do that to me, honey. I made you happy today."

"You're too much, you know." As soon as she heard it, she giggled too much as if loving the whole thing.

"I really like you for my cousin, Carmella. You're a great friend and I am sure, being a part of our family will keep us best friends for life!"

"Oh my goodness! Do you not consider me as your best friend for life right now?"

"Of course yes, Carm. I just want it to be official. Maybe someday, you will discover you're both meant for each other, thanks to me." She said sounding really confident on the other line.

"I don't think of having a boyfriend right now. You know my mom very well."

"Of course. I always bear that in mind. Your mom is a monster if she'll be angry at you. I always know that."

It made me silent for a while. I can hear that Kara cleared her throat.

"Anyways, I just want you to be friends with my cousin. He's really nice and sweet, and smart, too! I know you can relate to each other so well."

"Thank you Kara. I am happy to meet Adrian. You're right about him. There's nothing in him that you will not like."

I smiled as I listened to Kara's voice on the other line. I can't help but to feel happy because Kara has been very supportive of me ever since.

"There's something that I want you to know more."

"What is it?" I can't help but to be curious about what she said just now.

"Well, Adrian might transfer to our school next year."

"What?" The best line formed through my lips. I think that it is the best news that I've ever heard of after a long while.

"Yes, girl. He's going to transfer to our school from A.G University."

And it was confirmed. He's the one who sat next to me on that bus when I went to school very early last week.

"A. G University is already a top-calibre school for Junior High students. Why is he transferring schools when he's in his last year of school before we'll be going to college?"

"Family problems, dear. It is too complicated to explain to you because it's their own conflict. One thing that's clear to me is, it is already set. Uncle said that Adrian will really transfer from A.G University to our school."

"I hope he's doing well and he's not really having a hard time relating to this matter."

"Yeah. We have to help him, too. This is one of the reasons why I also introduced him to you."

"Thanks Kara. I am happy to be a part of it. I promise to be his good friend to let him know more about our school."

"I trust you a lot, Carmella. Thank you so much."

I ended the call with a smile. I can't help but to put my palms on my chest as I feel my heartbeat. Anticipating what Kara told me excites me to the core. I am distracted when someone sends me a message because it was included in my facebook message request. When I opened it, my eyes widened.

Ian Peep

This is the name that registered from the message request.

Hello Princess D!

It followed by a smiling emoji that made me giggle as I lay on my bed. I rubbed both of my eyes to see if I was only fooled by my own sight, but I was not.

I am looking at his message and I am thinking of what to reply that I get to close my eyes while smiling from ear to ear.

I woke up because of the rays of the sun that touched my cheek through the glass window from my room.

"Oh my gosh!" As soon as I remembered Adrian, I suddenly got up to find where my phone was. I found it under my pillow and, as nervous as I am, I closed my eyes as I opened my phone through my fingertips.

I realized I never replied to his message, although he might see that I've already seen his message. Oh my goodness what have I done?

I got off from bed and prepared for school earlier than usual. I have to be inside the library at exactly 6:00 A.M as they open. I left home at exactly 5:30 in the morning.

When I got on the bus, I sat beside the window and closed my eyes to nap for minutes. It is a twenty-minute ride from home to our school.

I felt that someone sat beside me but I never bothered opening my eyes because I am a bit drowsy. When I started to smell a familiar scent, I froze all of a sudden.

"Hello, Princess D." I opened my eyes and smiled at him.

"You know what? You're silly. I am not Princess Diana." I said between chuckles. He smiled when he saw me giggling.

"Yeah, I know. Why didn't you reply to my message last night? Am I being mean or something?"

"Oh, no, no, no! Sorry for letting you feel this way. I was really sleepy last night. I missed replying to your message."

"Oh, I see." He nodded and looked at me straight into my eyes.

"It's more of a compliment you know," I looked at him as if my gaze is glued to the way he will look at me.

"What?" I awkwardly smiled as I asked him.

"Because you really looked like Princess Diana. I love watching her and the way she smiles."

"Oh, I see. Thank you then." I can feel my cheeks getting warm. I shifted my gaze on the window as if pretending that something got my attention outside the bus.

Gosh, why is he being like this? Is he a natural flirt or something? As he smiled back at me, it's as if everything around me is moving slowly. It's only his face who is now focused on me. His scent is also addictive. It's the kind of smell that I only wanted to smell all day long.

"Sorry, I got to go now. See you when I can." He said that brought me back to my senses.

"I-I see. Take care." I smiled as I nodded. The bus stopped in front of A.G University where he's attending right now. Well, not next year anymore. The thought of him transferring to our school is already making my day. I can't help but to day-dream. I never noticed how I even got off the bus and walked on the hallway going to our classroom.

"Wow, you looked so happy today." Hope greeted me as soon as I sat beside her. Every Thursday, we are seatmates to our first subject which is English.

"I am happy as always."

"But it looked different compared to yesterday." She smiled at me.

"I think the reason why I am all smiles today is that I slept early and woke up early that's why. Also, I studied for two hours."

"I see. I think if that happens to me, I will be happy myself, too."

Our conversation was cut off because our teacher suddenly entered the room and started the class on time. Telling him about Adrian may be impossible this time. I guess I need to be selfish this time. Noticing Adrian's attention to me might lead to something even deeper than friendship. I can't afford to share it with Hope. I just can't.

Chapter 16: TO LOVE AND LOSE YOU

Carmella's POV

After class, Hope told me to go home right away because she's not feeling well. Even if I wanted her to stay, I remembered her, having the entire library to their house.

Instead of stopping her, what can I do? I waved goodbye as she smiled back at me too, before closing the window of their car. I followed their car with my eyes until the car was out of my sight.

I was about to enter the library when I felt my mobile phone vibrate from my pocket.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Princess Diana of England." It was followed by a chuckle. I wasn't able to hide my smile anymore. All the passersby looked at me feeling so odd.

"Hello?" I suddenly panicked when I heard his voice again.

"Hi, I'm still here." I answered, and believe me, I am almost catching my breath. He chuckled as a response.

"I can imagine your reaction right now."

"You're really silly." I shook my head as I put my phone on my left ear. My smile is never fading this time.

"Are you free at this time?" My heart started to race.

"Y-Yeah. I am. Why?"

"I'm thinking of eating a burger and a cold drink for snacks. I'm really hungry right now."

"Wow. I thought only girls crave for food."

"I've been playing basketball with my team and the team practice is over. I am thinking of going home but I remembered you."

I can't help but to put my other hand to cover the widest grin the world has ever witnessed. How come he remembered me, of all people?

"Don't worry, my treat. Just come and eat snacks with me, please?" I can't really believe this guy. Of all the girls around, he's selecting me to eat with him. Is there anyone luckier than I am right now? Because I think there's no one. There's no other girl in the world luckier right now more than I do.

"How can I refuse if you're already making it too impossible for me to even say 'no'?" I said between chuckles.

I can feel my knees are a bit shaky as the bus stopped in front of the main gate. As it opens, I can easily see his smiling face that's making my heart beat like crazy. I ended his call as he came near me.

"Let's go?" He asked as he suddenly grabbed my hand as we followed the way going to the left of my school. There were a lot of restaurants in that area but I've never been here before.

"Let me introduce to you one of my favorite restaurants within this area."

"What? How did you know this place? Sorry, I've never been here before." I smiled as I roamed my sight around the place. It's cozy and the overall interiors were designed like we're in Hawaii. It's summer-themed. I also noticed that it has a lot of juices and coolers to choose from. We stopped from one of the tables inside near the bar counter.

He pulled one of the chairs for me to sit on.

"Thank you." I said as I smiled. I gently sat down, facing him.

"How did I know this place? Maybe I am a natural food lover. I also post food restaurants and recommendations on my blog."

"Wow! No wonder you know this place well."

"That's why Kara also recommended you as my friend because she said you're nice."

"That's weird. What did she say more about me?"

"Well," She shyly sighed as he scratched his head. "She told me that you don't often go out to eat because you're too busy in the library."

"What? How embarrassing!" I covered my face as I heard that from him. Oh my, Kara! What did you do this time?

"No, no. Please believe me when I say that these qualities are actually admirable rather than boring."

"Yeah, sometimes I feel like I am too boring to be with. I seldom meet new friends because of it."

"You know what, Charm...it depends upon how people look at you. If they think that way, well I am definitely not like them."

"Thank you so much, Ian. What about Charm?"

"I want to call you Charm because you have a unique name. Your personality suits your name very well."

"Thank you, Ian"

"Look, I even have my nickname from you, too." He said between chuckles. I can't help but to laugh because he's being silly too.

That conversation was stopped for a while because the waiter already served what Adrian craves to eat for snacks. Two pieces of hamburgers and a cold soda drink.

"I am not giving you an endearment. I just called you that because that's your name on your facebook, right?"

"Yeah. I understand." He nodded as he continued eating like a hungry bear. I can't help but to smile as I look at him.

"Why are you not eating?" He suddenly stopped from what he's doing as he looked at me. I can't help but to smile because I can see that a pint of ketchup is seen on his left cheek.

I got a tissue and gently wiped it off. He held my hand as I was about to withdraw my hand off his face.

"Thanks." He met my gaze and smiled. I avoided it right away because I think I can't last it anymore.

"I will also eat now. I just find you really amusing."

"Why?"

"You ate the burger as if it is the most delicious food this restaurant could offer." He chuckled as a response.

"I will treat that as a compliment." He answered. When I take a bite, I am also amazed about how this burger tastes. The meat is really perfect. The texture, taste and flavor blended very well. I nodded as I chewed what he ordered.

"That's their smokey beef burger. That's one of their bestsellers."

"Oh my! I want to believe you now! The taste is to die for."

"I know right." He said as he smiled. We talked more about many things that I never noticed at the time. When I glanced at my wristwatch, it was almost 7:00 P.M.

"Oh my! I have to go now. I'm so sorry."

"I will go with you to the bus stop. I'm also on my way to our house."

"You don't have to."

"I insist. I am the one who invited you for a snack. It is my fault that you're going home late."

"Okay. If you insist then it's fine with me. Let's go?" He paid the bill at the counter and we left right away. Because it is already night time, he walked by my side. I was surprised when she held my hand as he smiled.

"Thank you for giving me the chance, Charm." I don't know why but it tickles my heart if he'll call me that way. Nobody ever called me 'Charm' that's why I really find it weird.

"Will this happen again?" He added out of the blue when we're sitting next to each other as we get on the bus. I am somehow thankful because there's not too many passengers that's with us on the bus on my way home.

I looked at him and caught him staring at me already. I chuckled and tapped his arms.

"Thank you, Ian. Of course. I will never say no to a friend who will always treat me." I jokingly said that made him laugh as well.

"Very well then. I will always bear this one in mind."

When I looked at the window, I realized that I was near the bus stop on my way to the street of our house.

"I guess I will go ahead of you." I said as I stood up. The bus stopped right in front of the waiting shed where I usually wait for the bus wherever I go.

"Thanks for being with me today, Charm. I hope to see you again on one of these days. Take care!" He even waved goodbye as I got off the bus and waited for it to go away.

I walked on the street on the way to our house with a smile. The happiness I feel today is three times more than having a full mark on the exams.

When I went inside our house, I noticed that my mom's room is still lighted. I guess she has a lot of workloads that she'll never notice when I am already here. I went straight to my room after a hot half-bath and sat on my bed.

When I opened my facebook, I noticed that he left a message for me. A message of thanks again. I smiled as I put my phone on my table. I took my bag and pulled several books as I sat on my bed. I started to browse our math activity book, got my scratch paper and pen as well.

I need to study for our math activity. What happened today is just a matter of a fully-loaded inspiration coming from Adrian. I just met him but I guess I am started to become hooked on his presence. I shook my head as I smiled.

Gosh, I have to stay focused. I have to focus on what I am reading now because I will be really doomed if the thoughts of him will take over my thoughts.

I have to stay focused, not distracted or I will lose what I have already started.

Chapter 17: BOX FULL OF HAPPINESS

Hope's POV

I noticed Carmella's glow as I entered the room. I noticed her weird smiles and everything like that as I sat beside her. She has this cheerful vibe that lighted up the whole room.

"Wow, you seem to be happy today, dear." I complimented and it made her smile more. She looked as if she's the happiest.

"Well, not really a special day. I just promised myself to stay happy whenever I can."

"Hmm, that's a great start then." I replied as I looked at her. She's really weird because she can't stop herself from smiling. This isn't the normal facial expression that Carmella wears everyday.

"You should try it, too. It's nice." She started to get her notebook as soon as our teacher entered the classroom. I saw Carmella scribbling something in her notebook. She's still smiling. I just shook my head and was happy with what my best friend is showing right now.

I am sure something happened to her that she's really happy about. A part of me was relieved. Were they able to reconcile with her mom? Were they happy right now? If that's the case, then I am happy for them, too.

I hope to see her reaction like this always. I noticed that she's not that willing to tell me about what's happening with her and her mom if ever she's getting a low mark. A part of me still hopes that what Thelma and Marielle told me is not true.

We had a short quiz after our teacher's short discussion about our new lesson. I took a glance at Carmella and I can see that she's more focused this time. I shifted my gaze on my own paper. I looked at my answers very well. I am sure I got them all correctly...

"Three minutes more." Our teacher called out. I looked at Carmella again and I noticed her looking at the window. She already passed her papers in front.

I deleted the other item and changed it to a wrong one. I passed my papers before the time ran up.

I smiled as I looked at Carmella. As I did this, I felt peace deep within me. I hope that being the top one of this class will keep her happy and her mom, too.

It's time for the checking of papers. I am nervous as hell but I never intend to show it to the people around me. When the teacher announced the score, I smiled when Carmella got perfect again.

"Oh, let's congratulate Elise Hope, too. She only got one mistake out of thirty items." Everyone looked at me as if very confused. I smiled at all of them as I scratched my head.

"Oh dear, if only you never changed your answer, you should have been perfect on your quiz, just like Carmella."

I slowly glanced at Carmella who was looking at me with that mysterious expression. I don't exactly know why but it suddenly made me scared. She's looking serious and mad...is she really mad at me?

I smiled at her as I smiled at everyone.

"Gosh girl, she's too much." I heard Thelma's overpowering voice.

"Yeah, how could you be that stupid for the sake of friendship?" I heard Marielle's voice answering me.

"I guess that's how they love each other. They love pretending and stabbing each other's back at the end."

"I wish both of them luck." I can feel Marielle's sarcasm as she said those words. She even rolled her eyes that I can't help but to secretly close my fist.

How could they ever be like that? Is that how friendship works here in the Philippines? I am feeling attacked right now. I can't help but feel pity towards Carmella who is always trying to fit in. After I heard about her situation, I can't help but to feel for her. I am trying my best to fit in her shoe. I've been thinking what if I am in her place? What if my mother will also put all the pressure on me? I guess it is hard to catch your mother's attention to the point of you trying your best to get the top spot to gain her love for you as well.

I sighed. We had more activities before we even called it a day. I decided to go to the library now to make it up for Carmella. I remembered her urging me to come with her last week. I always came up with urgent things that's why I haven't met her.

I am in my best mood as I step in the library. After I surrendered my library card, I looked around the spacious area full of tables and chairs. There were few students who are napping. Some of them are busy with studying and taking down notes. However, I've never seen Carmella sitting on her favorite spot located near the corner of the first aisle.

Where is she? It is weird. I usually see her inside the library during this exact time. It's odd that I can't see her right now, knowing we have three short quizzes for tomorrow.

I dialled my phone and called her right away. I am starting to get worried right now.

"Hello, Hope!" She greeted me first with a very happy tone.

"Are you home right now?"

"Huh? Uhm..." I heard some background noise as if she's walking on a sidewalk somewhere.

"Yeah, I am going home right now." I can sense that she's stammering.

"Are you alright?"

"Huh? Of course I am. Why did you call, by the way?"

"I'm so sorry. I really thought you're here in the library so I went here a while ago. I never expected you'll come home very early."

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry dear! I forgot to text you ahead of time because I was in a hurry. My mom texted me to have dinner with her. That's why I am not able to go to the library today."

"Oh, I see. Wow, that sounded like a delicious dinner. Please enjoy it dear!"

"Thank you so much, Hope. I will be at the library tomorrow. I hope you'd still be there."

"Sure, I will. I answered as I ended the call. Oh, I guess I am right all along. She's indeed reconciling with her mom. I am proud of her. I hope she will not be beaten by her mom for any minimal wrong doing anymore.

Carmella's POV

I ended the call but I felt a little nervous. So this is the feeling of lying for the sake of trying to save something for myself.

I am walking on the sidewalk going to the restaurant where we're gonna eat early dinner with Adrian when Hope calls. I put my phone inside the pocket of my skirt.

I sighed and pushed the door as I went inside the restaurant. An awkward smile formed my lips as I see Adrian waving his hand from the center of the place. I slowly go to his direction. When he saw that I am almost near the table where he's at, she stood up. He pulled a chair for me to sit on. He's really a gentleman.

"Did you wait for me for a long time?"

"No." He shook his head as he smiled at me. That looked really pure. I admire the way he gives me this kind of effect.

"I ordered for both of us already. This restaurant serves the best red pasta in town." He cheerfully said that made my heart flutter.

"Wow! I did not see it coming!" I said between chuckles. I can see that his facial expression changed a little.

"Why? Don't you like pasta? I'm sorry."

"What?" I can't help but to giggle. "I love pastas. I call it spaghetti you know. Calling it red pasta is just a classy term but it is still spaghetti."

"Hmm...good to know. Thank you." He nodded. I can't help but to be amazed when I can see the red pasta topped with meatballs being served on the table. I almost drooled as I smiled at Adrian who is now looking really amused.

"Wow! This even exceeded my expectations!" I was about to get the fork when he stopped my hands as he held it in a gentle way. He might never know it but it almost made my heart stop, too.

He smiled as he took his phone. "Sorry, Charm. I wasn't able to take photos of us when we ordered some burgers at that restaurant meters away."

What? Is this guy nuts? I am only thinking of eating snacks with him, why is it that he wants to take photos of us all of a sudden? My mind panicked and I started to get anxious that it got obvious on my actions.

"It's alright. You're already beautiful. You don't have to retouch or what. Just smile, alright?" He said as his face almost touched my cheek. I smiled in a very awkward way that made him chuckle and that's the exact scene that his phone captured.

"Can I see it?" I ask, worried because he's chuckling as he glanced at our picture.

"I look funny here and yet you gave me the sweetest smile. Thank you, Charm." Adrian smiled as he let go of my hand in a gentle way. I smiled and told him that we should eat the pasta before it gets too cold.

"That's why I love inviting you whenever I eat snacks. You cared a lot and I am starting to like it."

Chapter 18: EPITOME OF BEAUTY

Carmella's POV

"My goodness! Did my cousin really do it?" Kara giggled as I told her of the good news.

"I don't know but he always invited me to have snacks with him. Isn't that weird?"

"Yeah. I should agree. He's not usually fond of girls. Hmm..."

"Well, I think he's just bored, that's why he invited me for always." Kara noticed the change of tone in my voice that she chuckled all of a sudden.

"You know what, Carmella? You're cute. Why are you thinking about that?"

"Of course. Why, me, of all people? How can you explain that?"

"I guess he liked your personality. Let me tell you something." I can sense Kara being really serious this time around. Whenever she does this, she often creeps me out.

"What?"

"Since then, for the record, you're the first girl he dates with. You must be very happy and proud."

"Oh my, really?"

"Are you happy now?" Kara seemed to giggle on the other line that I am beginning to believe she's really crazy.

"Gosh, Charm-Ian loveteam! I am your number one fan! Gosh!" I can't help but laugh after Kara said that out of the blue. She's really being silly.

"I don't think about that. You and your malicious mind does. Can you stop it?" I said between chuckles. She even teased me more.

"I really love you future sister. I welcome you in the family in advance!"

"Silly girl. Even if we're not meant for each other, I already accepted and loved you more than a sister. Please don't be like that."

"Well, I am just making sure." She replied and giggled with me, too.

"Oh, by the way," she immediately changed the topic for us. "I saw Hope inside the library looking at you."

"Yeah. She called me this afternoon before she went inside the library."

"Did you already tell her about Adrian?"

"K-Kara...could you keep a secret?"

"Huh? What do you mean?" I heaved a deep sigh as I answered my best friend.

"I haven't told Hope about him yet."

"Really? Why?" I can sense that she's getting more curious this time.

"I don't want to make a big deal about Adrian. I don't want my classmates to know and will create a buzz out of my friendship with him." She started to look at me, a weird, questioning look to be exact.

"But you're close with Hope, right?"

"We're closer."

"Oh, I almost forgot." She giggled as she responded.

"I will tell her about him soon. But I think I can't tell her right now. We're having a lot of quizzes and it may create a distraction..."

What did I say just now? Oops, I am dead. Kara chuckled as she heard those words.

"Well of course. I am not surprised with that. My clan is a powerhouse of beauty and grace. It is just a normal kind of reaction to my cousin because he's really damn attractive."

"Kara!"

"What? Of course it is true! Look at me?"

"Need I say more?" We both chuckled as we spoke. I can feel that my phone is already getting hotter because of our conversation.

"Can I trust you?" I finally said.

"Of course, why not?"

"Please do not ever tell Hope that I'm already friends with Ian."

"Ok. It's as if I have a choice." I can hear she's annoyed at me already. I chuckled as a response.

"Thank you so much Kara. I love you. Let's call it a night. We're still gonna study for tomorrow."

"Aye, aye, captain!" She ended the call right away. I smiled as I put my phone on my bedside table.

I opened my Economics book and read the designated pages to study. Good thing I was able to have some notes with me beforehand when I was studying in the library yesterday. I easily got the points as I understand more about the topic.

"Oh, let's congratulate Elise Hope, too. She only got one mistake out of thirty items. Oh dear, if only you never changed your answer, you should have been perfect on your quiz, just like Carmella."

I suddenly recalled this statement from our Math teacher that made me stop from what I am reading.

What does he mean by it? Did Hope erase her correct answer on purpose? Or is it only a coincidence?

Did she let me have the perfect mark on purpose? But why? Why would she do it? Why would she let her opponent win the game when she has all the options to do it, too?

I massaged my forehead because everything gets weird. This thought alone made my headache all of a sudden. I don't even know where it came from.

I need to talk to her to know it myself. I have to hear it from her personally so that I'll stop assuming things.

The next morning, I went early to school to meet Hope. I saw her sitting next to mine. Since we still have thirty minutes to start our class, I sit on my chair near her.

"Good morning, Carmella!" She cheerfully greeted me as she stopped reading her book.

"Good morning. I am so sorry yesterday." I started.

"No, please don't make a big deal out of it. I understand." She said as she smiled at me, a reassuring one.

"Next time, I will be sending you a message that I will be at the library."

"Are you not going there after this class?" She asked. I scratched my head and smiled.

"I don't know." I can't help but smile. I think Hope noticed it and she gave me a curious look.

"You know what? I noticed you look really happy these past few days. Would you mind sharing what it was all about?"

"I am just happy that I am getting a lot of perfect scores in a row." I said as I opened my notes for our subject this time.

"I'll be going to the library after class. I miss Shrevakhuk's stories. Our library only had them so I decided to hang out there."

"Sure I'll hang out with you there later." I told her. Maybe Adrian will not ask me to go out later because we've been eating together for two days in a row now.

"We'll just go there together if you want."

"Deal."

The long hours finally came to an end. We're inside the library now but I am just finding some good timing on how I can ever ask her about what happened during our math quiz. I look at her as she's smiling while reading Shrevakhuk's literary works. I am just standing behind her. When she noticed that I am looking at her, she stopped from what she's doing. She placed the book on the table carefully and smiled at me. She tapped the vacant chair next to her and I sit down right away.

"Are you alright?" I can sense her worried tone.

"I am supposed to ask you that." I replied as I met her gaze.

"Why? I am ok."

"I want to ask about what happened during our math quiz."

"What about it?" She looks cute when she's curious.

"Uh...that single mistake. I remembered our teacher told everyone that if only you didn't change the answer, you can also get a perfect score."

"Oh, I remember now." She looked at me with a relaxed facial expression. "I was confused about which one is the correct answer. I'm sorry."

"Really?" I reacted in a low voice. Now, I proved that it was only an honest mistake. I thought she did something that I didn't know about.

I was right. Adrian told me that he will be joining his group for a long-hour practice after class. As much as I want to see him, it is better for me to miss him somehow. After we read some books in the library, we both parted ways. Hope waved with a smile as she got inside the car. They insisted on driving me home but I politely refused. I just want to ride on a bus on my way home so that I can be as comfortable as I can.

As soon as I reached home, I went right inside my room right away. I opened my laptop and decided to relax for a while. I browsed some educational videos when Adrian came into my mind all of a sudden.

I smiled as I typed his youtube account: IanPeepzOfficial

I covered my mouth as I saw some of his vlogs and basketball videos. I can't help but to smile and be excited. I even touched my chest to feel my heart beating uncontrollably. I noticed that he already uploaded seven videos as of the moment. When I scrolled up to the bottom, a short clip caught my attention. When I clicked it, I almost fainted.

It was a video specially made for that restaurant where we ate the burger. I got some stolen shots as I ate it. However, it was not obvious that it is me because my face was hidden for a purpose.

I am thankful for what he did. I admit, it made me really, really happy because he's a great photographer. He took pictures with great effects even without the help of modern camera gadgets and the likes.

Although he didn't get my permission to post those for himself. I want to make everything clear as I got my phone and searched his number.

Chapter 19: UNLOVE YOU NOT

"Hello?"

"Hi, Charm!" She heard a familiar voice on the other line that made her heart flutter right away.

"Ian...hi." She can't help smiling as she responded in an awkward manner.

"What's up? Everything okay?"

"I just want to ask you about what you posted on your youtube video account."

"Oh, that," He responded right away. She thinks that Adrian knew what she exactly meant by what she said to him.

"I'm sorry. I was about to tell you that in person but something really came up. I supposed to invite you again this afternoon but we had a team practice and I shouldn't miss it."

"Oh, I see."

"Sorry that I don't get your permission right away. I was just too excited to upload that one. If you want, I can take it down."

"Oh, no,no,no! Please! Don't get me wrong. I actually love it. I think I am just shocked because I saw it on your youtube account."

"Wow. Really? Did you watch my vlogs?" She could hear his cheerful tone on the other line that made her glad, too.

"Y-Yes. I was bored as I was browsing youtube. I just remember your username and tried searching it."

"Thank you so much! I consider this as a compliment. Thank you for supporting one of my passions in life."

"Yep. I am one of your subscribers now." Carmella felt really happy every time she talked with Adrian. Whenever she does it, she feels like she could handle any kind of pressure and even problems. That call lasted for another two minutes before she hung up.

She sure can't get enough of Adrian but she also needs to study. She hopes that her happiness for the recent times will not be the reason for her regrets later on. Besides, she's thinking of slowing everything down. She doesn't want to assume things or even overthink. It's not in her vocabulary. As of the moment, she's just enjoying whatever they have right now. Friendship and fun as they also enjoy different kinds of food in some of the restaurants that Adrian loves to eat.

Days turned into several months. Hope and Carmella's friendship blossomed into a much deeper kind of love. As Hope knew Carmella more, she realized why she's desperate for the top spot. Some of their classmates might never know the real situation but upon hearing it from Carmella herself, she gave way.

"Hope...why?" Carmella said between sobs as they were hanging out to one of the benches of the mini-forest of their school.

"What why?"

"Why are you doing this? Look, you had a lot of mistakes on your exams. Are you nuts? Are you doing this on purpose? Why?"

Hope hugged her and she can't help but to pour out her emotions, too. After a minute, she let go of her, sighed and smiled as she faced Carmella.

"I'm from America. Remember, I still have a lot of things that I never knew of, compared to you who is always more than ready."

"I am so sorry. I feel selfish right away. I am so sorry if I am used to competing. To others, I may be desperate...but--"

"I will never, ever unlove you. What I knew about you will always remain in me."

"What did I do to deserve someone like you, Hope?" Carmella can't stop her tears. Hope pulled her handkerchief from the pocket of her skirt and wiped her tears for her.

"You did nothing. You just accepted me for what I am, that's why you deserve happiness in life, always."

"We'll still be classmates when we go back here again for our Senior High year, right?"

"Of course. I guess Kara will also be our classmate since she's the top student from section 2."

"Wow! That's great news! We'll be going out together soon. The three of us." Hope said as she excitedly clapped her hands.

"Yes. I am looking forward to it." Carmella replied as she hugged her again. Hope can't help but smile as she touched Carmella's back as she rested her head on her shoulders.

"Congratulations for being the top student among all Junior high students, my dear." Hope held her hand and they both walked together back into their classroom to comply for many requirements for the signing of clearance.

Summer came like lightning. Since Carmella and her mom are not fond of going on trips, Carmella used to spend her summer days in their house. That's why when Hope came, she's able to go outside their house and her comfort zone as well.

They often went to malls to hang out, eat delicious foods and even went to many rides with Hope.

"I love the rides here. It's not too big and yet it's enough for us to enjoy everything that's in here."

"Thank you Hope! Because of you, I get to enjoy the roller coaster. I am so happy!"

"I think they are right! It is more fun in the Philippines." Hope answered, too.

"I can't explain how I feel right now. I never get to experience this one with my mom, that's why. I'm sorry for being really silly. I just can't help it."

"What? Who told you that you're silly? You're fun to be with, okay?" Hope defended her being harsh on herself. She's but a lovely soul trapped in a beautiful body and an almost perfect life. I guess Hope doesn't need anything that much in her life that's why she's easily happy.

We went around the theme park with all smiles when a familiar guy waved at me. When Carmella realized who it is, I almost fainted to where I am standing right now.

Adrian? He's indeed Adrian! But what is he doing here? Carmella's heart almost skipped a beat as I looked around. She spotted Hope buying two cotton candies for the both of us. Since Adrian is a bit far from her, she immediately hid to the crowd of people around them. Carmella also grabbed Hope's arm.

"What?" She said, looking puzzled as Carmella roamed her gaze on the crowd.

"I think I saw some of our classmates. I don't want to even greet them here." She said, not avoiding her sight to the people around her.

The truth is, I don't want her to see Adrian. I already imagine the awkward moment if he will greet me and Hope doesn't know how on earth did I know Adrian without her knowledge.

"Oh, I see. Okay. Let's hide somewhere." She said as she nodded. She took a bite from her cotton candy as she gave her the other on her other hand.

"Thank you. Let's go."

He was able to pass before Carmella and Hope but he didn't know Carmella's there. He seemed to be finding someone around the place.

"Did we lose them?" Hope giggled as she hid her head behind her back.

"Yeah, I think so." She said, looking around very carefully. When she felt that Adrian was already out of sight, she sighed feeling relieved.

"Let them speak all they want. It's your life anyway."

"I can't help it. They really want to make up stories that it's really crushing me down sometimes." Carmella said as she looked down.

"Don't worry. Even if they will see us, I will be here to defend you. Just don't mind them."

"Sorry Hope. I can't help but to worry too much."

"Don't be. Somehow, I understand where you're coming from. People will have a lot to say you know. All you have to do is to ignore them and spread love instead."

"I hope that's how easy everything goes."

"I think it is not a bad way to start over again. You can try it. A little a day will make a huge difference later on."

"Thank you Hope. You don't know how much I appreciate it so much."

"No biggie. Let's go. Just ignore them and we'll go for rides that you haven't tried yet."

"Wow! I'm up for it! Let's go!" I said as I simply looked around once again.

"I'm sure I saw you at the West theme park yesterday." Adrian mentioned that almost made her choke on what she's eating right now.

"Really? But I haven't seen you."

"That's odd. I even waved at you." He insisted that she can't help but bite her lower lip. "Well, I guess you really never see me. I just thought you did." He added and smiled. They ate at a famous Barbeque restaurant on this very fine afternoon.

I was about to eat my food when my phone vibrated. When she saw that it was Hope, she panicked and became anxious all of a sudden.

"Who is it? Are you not going to answer it?"

"Oh, I think it's one of those prank callers. I'm sorry." I cancelled the call and turned off my phone as I slid it into the side pocket of my pants. I smiled to let him know that I am not getting nervous or what.

"I see. You should block those numbers for security purposes." He said as he smiled. I did the same, too. I hope I am not being obvious in hiding Hope for a while. I hope she could forgive me for cancelling her call.

"I will. I'm sorry. I'll just keep my phone for a while."

Chapter 20: MY KIND OF 'ALWAYS'

Hope's POV

I looked at my screen, really confused right now. Why would Carmella cancel my calls all of a sudden? I sat down near the window of my room as I looked at the trees around the house from the second floor where my room is located.

I tried remembering what I have done wrong but I never recalled any. That's why this sight is giving me a headache. I dialled her number twice and I can see that she kept on cancelling it over again. I tried to dial her number for the third time.

'Please answer it...Carmella' I murmured as I put my phone on my left ear. I can't help but to worry because of what is happening.

"The number you are calling is out of coverage. Please try your call later."

What? I looked at my phone screen and attempted to dial but I am hearing the same alert over again. It is weird that I can't reach her out without even knowing where she is right now. Usually, she'll tell me where she will be going but now? I am not sure...

"Elise? Dear? Please go down now. Time to eat."

I looked at the time from our wall clock. It was exactly six in the evening. Hearing it from my father made me hungry all of a sudden. I decided to go downstairs because it is already our time for dinner as well.

I looked at our table and as usual, it is full of delicious foods. There's fried chicken, some slices of pineapples and melon. There's sauteed vegetables and marinated steak too.

"Good evening, dad."

"Good evening, my lovely daughter. Are you alright?"

I sit down beside him. He started to get the bowl of rice and put some on my plate.

"Thanks, daddy."

"You looked weary. Are you alright?" My dad asked as he gently put the bowl back to its place. He touched me gently on my forehead.

"You're not having a high temperature as well. What happened? How do you feel right now?"

"Daddy, I am okay. I think I am a little tired because I swam almost the whole day."

"You should invite Carmella to swim with you."

"Hmm...that's quite impossible dad. She can't be contacted as of the moment." said as I smiled at him. I started getting my own steak and placed it on my plate. I started eating quietly as I chewed my food very well.

In my peripheral vision, I can see that dad is still looking at me as if waiting for something that I will tell him.

"I guess she's just busy, dear."

"Yeah. I think so too, dad." I said as I smiled. When he noticed that I was concentrating on my food, he slowly got his spoon and fork back to his hands as he started eating, too.

I don't want to tell my dad. I don't want him to know that Carmella cancelled my calls. He might think of this as a big deal. Growing up, I was used to having my dad as my guardian angel. I am used to him protecting me always. For him, I am still his precious baby after mom died.

I smiled as I glanced at him eating our dinner in a delicious manner.

Don't worry, dad. I might not tell you what's happening right now but I hope you'd also understand. Someday, I will be forced on my own to the point of solving my own problems and worries without dad knowing it.

I finished dinner and spent a few talks with dad. I also told him that I will go to Carmella and I will not last for more than thirty minutes.

"Okay. Please don't stay there for so long. You got to sleep early." He reminded me one last time as I went outside our gate.

"Yes dad! I will be right back real quick." I shouted back because I am already far from our house. Good thing there were a lot of streetlights to the sidewalk where I am walking right now. It added to my confidence that nobody will do me harm, ever.

I held my cellphone with me as I saw Carmella's house. I inhaled slowly as I knocked on the door. Carmella said that if the light from her mother's window is still on, it means her mom is still working. Good thing, I noticed Carmella's mom is not really busy as of the moment. I may not be a great disturbance for her if ever.

I knocked again and I felt some steps going near the door until someone opened it from inside the house.

It was Carmella's mother that's looking at me right now. She's not having any facial expression that scares me.

"Hi, ma'am." I smiled in a very awkward manner that made her look at me so intently.

"I just want to know if Carmella went home already." I added, trying to hide my nervousness. I don't know but Carmella's mom is really hard to please. She can't hardly smile which made the fine lines from her face visible already.

"She's not yet home." She dryly replied, standing still on the door while putting her hands on her hips while looking at me. She's only wearing a plain T-shirt and khaki shorts with that messy bun hairstyle. However, despite all of it, I still find her beautiful.

"Oh, I see. Thank you so much, ma'am. I just want to check on her."

"Did you send her a chat or text message? I'm sure she'll send a lot to you when she misses your call."

"Oh, I almost forgot. Yeah, thanks ma'am, I will do it right away."

"Okay. Do you need anything to say? I still have work to do." She said. I guess that's only a simple message of actually telling right in front of my face. That's how she usually tells me to go home in a polite manner, at least.

"Oh, no ma'am. I'm sorry for disturbing you. I will be going now. Have a great night, ma'am." I nodded. After two minutes, she gently shut the door in front of me. One thing I noticed about Carmella's mother is she didn't know how to smile. She seemed to be stressed all the time. She even looked old for her age. I don't know but something in me pity her too much. I think there's a reason for her to look like that. I sighed as I walked back to our house.

Usually, Carmella is already inside their house at this time. I am wondering why she's not home yet. Her mom seemed to not care, either. She didn't even know where she was. It was when I attempted asking her about her daughter.

"Did you see her?"

When I opened the door, my father greeted me with a worried look.

"No, dad. She's still not home. I wonder why."

"Maybe she hung out with her other friends that's why."

I sat on our sofa as I kept thinking about Carmella. Something is going on without me knowing it.

"Maybe she misses them so much. Remember, some of her friends aren't your friends. It is just normal for her to spend time on them, too."

"I think so, dad. I guess overthinking really sucks."

"Try again tomorrow. Maybe she doesn't want to touch her phone for a while. She may be enjoying the company of her friends as much as possible."

"I will dad. Thanks." I slowly went upstairs as I realized dad's words. It may be true. I am not only Carmella's friend. There are lots of students who were there for Carmella first before I did.

I lay down on my bed and stared at the ceiling. I have to accept that not everyone could be there for you at all times.

Carmella's POV

We went outside the restaurant at quarter to seven in the evening. I attempted to go where buses usually pick up their passengers when Adrian stopped me. He held my hand all of a sudden that I faced him with a confused look.

"Aren't we going home now?"

"I got my car with me. I also told my driver to drive me home because it is getting late."

"Oh, I will go ahead then." I tried pulling my hand out of his when he tightened his grip.

"Where are you going?"

"Go home?" I answered him by asking a question. Until now, I did not get what he meant. He chuckled as he looked at me.

"I will not allow you to go home unless I will be the one to drive you there."

"Oh, I see." I giggled as we walked near his car. I can't help but to smile as I looked at him holding my hand as if I am his. By the sight of it, he has no intentions of letting my hand go. He has a red car and a handsome-looking driver five years ahead of his age, I should say.

"Hi, sir. Shall we go home?"

"No, not yet. We will go to my friend's house first. I need to drive her home safely."

My heart fluttered so much because of his sweetness. I can't seem to get enough of it. I wish this will be the usual routine that we will have. This is the 'always' that I have been wishing for.

Chapter 21: SUGAR RUSH

Carmella's POV

The car stopped in front of our house. When I get outside the car, I can see some of our neighbors checking who's in the car.

When they saw me, I got scared all of a sudden. I can see that they are whispering to each other. I think what made it worse is the time I arrived. I simply glanced at my wristwatch and I realized it is almost quarter to eight in the evening.

"Oh my! Look at Gina's daughter! I never knew she already had a boyfriend!"

"Yeah, I don't know it. Does her mother know already?"

Those words never escaped my hearing. I can't help but bite my lower lip because of disappointment. How can they judge me that easy when they don't know the real thing?

Adrian got off from his car and held my hand. He smiled sweetly as he gazed straight into my eyes. I want to melt at his sight.

"Thank you so much for the ride. Please take care in going home."

"Sure. I will. I'll just message you as soon as I get home."

"Yeah. I should go." I waved at him as his car went away.

"Carmella, is he your boyfriend? Your mom wants you to study first, right?"

"Mrs. Chua, he's just a friend. He just drove me home because it's getting late." I politely answered her despite wanting to burst out.

"Hmm, please don't break the trust of your mother, okay?"

"Don't worry, Mrs. Chua. I will never follow what your daughter did to you. By the way, you are invited to my graduation party next year as the top student." I said, not holding back anymore. I guess a little sarcasm would do for them to stop those gossips and talk behind people's backs.

I stomped my feet as I went inside our house. All the weary and unnecessary feelings are eventually fading away whenever I think about Adrian and what we had the whole afternoon.

I guess he's already used to going with me whenever he will shoot his vlogs and appearances whenever he will be invited to some restaurants. I can't believe that from his 18-year-old self, he can be this confident to be independent. He even shared how much he's getting from his sponsors and for being a taste tester alone. I smiled as I lay on my bed.

****flashback****

(Hours ago)

"Why me? Of all your friends? I am sure many of them are willing to be with you just to accompany you for this one."

He just smiled as a way of response. I can't help but to avoid his gaze because I guess his charm is way too much for me. He is effortlessly making my heart pound too much without him knowing it. I am being silly but it is true.

"Hmm...why you? I don't know. I guess I am just comfortable being with you. And I think I will beg to disagree when you say I had a lot of female friends."

"Oh, what do you mean?"

"I am only friends with Kara and my other girl cousins. It is my first time to be friends with a girl because I don't know how to do it."

I can't help but to chuckle. "So you mean, I will thank Kara because she's responsible for why we met?"

"Yeah, you should be. I mean, I am thankful the most. If not for her, I won't be able to meet someone sweet and nice like you."

"You even called me Princess Diana. You're silly, you know."

"Sorry. I can really see her in you, especially with the way you smile."

"Gosh, what you've said could make me feel like I am a royalty, you know." I flipped my hair on the side as I played the fork by twisting it in between the pasta bowl. It made the pasta form a big lump and it looked delicious for me to resist.

I ate it in one bite as I covered my mouth. I widened my eyes as Adrian took a picture of it. Oh my! How embarrassing!

"Oh, please stop it!" I said between munches. I can't help but laugh as I look at his amused reaction. He felt like laughing so hard, too.

"Please? Can I have this shot for myself?" He even stopped me before I even told him to delete the picture. I jokingly frowned as I pouted my lips.

"Don't worry, you're beautiful here. If ever an advertising page will get this picture, many people will be convinced that this pasta is so delicious."

"Whoah? You think so?"

He nodded as she cheerfully grinned. Gosh, please Adrian. Don't be like that! The more you show that kind of smile, the more you're making me feel that I am special somehow.

"Hmm, that's quite a convincing power. How can I even say no? Okay. You can keep it."

****end of flashback****

I hugged my pillow as I smiled. I even touched my chest. How did I ever get betrayed by my own heart? It is beating really fast even without my permission. How can it get crazy when he's only doing that for me? Is this the little crazy thing they called 'love'? Am I feeling it only for myself?

"Carmella..." Everything went back to reality when I heard the cold voice of my mom. Her voice even made my heart beat faster, this time because of fear.

Did our neighbor tell her already?

"Coming, mom." I went outside my room and walked to the other room slowly. I even swallowed hard because of her voice. It is always unpredictable.

I knocked at her door. I closed my eyes as I slowly leaned my ears on the door.

"Come in." I twisted the door slowly as I heard the clicking sound, I opened the door.

"Where have you been?"

"M-Mom, I told you. We still have our summer project in school."

"Your friend went here a while ago."

"Who?"

"Elise Hope."

I almost froze when my mom mentioned Hope. I almost forgot her!

"Now, tell me. Where did you go? Are you lying to me now, young girl?" I can sense a full sarcasm from her tone.

"No, mom. I'm sorry I haven't mentioned my other friends. I went with them. I never told Hope about it."

"Well, at least inform her where you're going. She's even lost in here while looking for you."

"Yes, mom. I will." I nodded and after I excused myself, I rushed into my room and searched for my pants. My cellphone is still inside my wallet. As soon as I found it, I turned it on. I saw two missed calls from Hope. Weird thing, though...she never left even a single message.

I typed a message for her. However, I deleted it when I realized that I cancelled her call a while ago. I admit I felt anxious right away. What will I tell her? I hope she'll not think that I am being rude or something like that.

It just so happened that we're in the middle of our dinner date with Adrian. I know answering her calls will lead her to asking a lot of questions. One of that is asking where I am at that

moment. Of course, I never want to waste any time spending it on Adrian. I don't want to spoil a lovely moment with him, either.

I'm sorry, Hope.

I decided to put my phone on my bedside table and sighed. I guess I have to just meet her at our favorite spot in school since we still have to go back. We had a lot of ongoing clearances that we need to be early even if we don't want to.

I think I could explain everything and tell an alibi better in person rather than sending her a vague text message.

I woke up early and I arrived at the bus stop at exactly five in the morning. Even if school days are over, I think I can never change my morning routine anymore. Good thing the school library still opened its doors for the students at a scheduled time in summer. They're open at seven in the morning until four in the afternoon.

At least I still have time to have my early breakfast somewhere before I will go to the school library to study.

"Wow! You're also early!" Someone tapped my right shoulder while I was riding the bus. Before this one, the bus stopped somewhere and I felt that some passengers were going in. My heart almost skipped a beat when I heard his cheerful voice.

"Adrian!"

"I must say, it is not a coincidence anymore. I guess we should be bus buddies from now." He grinned.

"Yeah! I can't agree more!" I replied as I bit my inner lower lip as if stopping myself from smiling a lot. I noticed that he sat right next to me. It felt really awkward but I am learning to love his presence around me for always.

"Are you going to school this early?"

"Yeah, why?" I gave him a confused look because he kept on smiling at me. Gosh, Adrian can you please stop it? I am about to melt.

"Oh, good thing! I will be going there too!"

"What?"

Chapter 22: UNBURNT FLAME

"Yep, you heard me right." Adrian winked at her that Carmella can't help but blush so hard.

"W-Why?"

"I had guy friends in your school who wanted to play basketball with me. I think it's a good idea because I remember you."

"You know what? You always remember me. Why?" Carmella hides her happiness with a slight chuckle for her to not sound very obvious that she loved everything she heard of.

"You're in that school and you're a dear friend. How can I forget you?"

"Oh," She smiled as she looked into another direction.

"I was hoping to find you later today since we'll play there but I never expected that I would see you this early."

"As if you're never used to us being seatmates here. As what you told me a while ago, we're bus buddies."

"Yeah but in days like this? Gosh, are you not even bored to not explore out of your comfort zone?"

"I am exploring out of my comfort zone. You're teaching me how to do it."

"Well, I think you need some leisure. I don't want you to be left out."

"Not anymore ever since those times you're inviting me to some restaurants for delicious meals."

"I am more than pleased to invite you, Carmella. You're actually helping me as well because you're also giving honest reviews to what you think of their food."

"Not a big deal."

"You're serving as my voice whenever I am running out of ideas. You're such a great help."

I blushed. I could really feel it. That's why I moved my face as I looked entirely at the window. I bit my lower lip as I smiled.

The awkwardness suddenly faded away when the bus stopped in front of our school. He smiled as he stood beside the door, making way for me to pass. Him, being a real gentleman is giving me a great impression of him more and more.

Who can unlove this person? When he's always nice and approachable all the time? We walked on the hallways that I can't help but to glance at his face. We are walking side by side and I can see his calm face right away.

"What time is your basketball game with friends?"

"They're weird. Did you know that most of them selected the 6:00 A.M schedule? I admit, I find it something new and interesting."

"Whose team invited you?"

"The ."

I chuckled that he looked at me intently. "Why?"

"I understand now. They're known to be the 'early birds' beating other teams for this title. They love to do work-outs early in the morning, including playing basketball."

"Wow! Now I know why they wanted me to play with them this early." He nodded in agreement.

"You should expect them to do it. They're used to it."

"Thanks, Charm. I learned a lot from you."

"It's my pleasure." He said as he's about to turn left going to the gym while I turned to the right side of the hallway. I saw him glancing at his wristwatch.

"Charm!" I turned my back and I saw him smiling at me.

"Yes?"

"It's only 5:45 in the morning. Would you mind coming with me for a light breakfast? They texted me that our game will be moved at exactly 7:00 in the morning."

"I'd love to. The library will be opened at 7:00 in the morning anyway."

"Let's go?" He smiled again. This time, it's the kind of smile that is too inviting for any girl to fall in love with him.

After eating breakfast, Adrian told me that he'll be going in my opposite direction. I nodded and smiled as I went to the library. It was already 6:55 A.M and I will only wait for five minutes for the library to open.

"I hope I will see you later." He smiled as he walked away from me. I was too speechless to even respond so I just waved back at him.

When I was at the door of the library, I got my phone in my pocket. When I checked it, I saw a text message coming from Hope. She's informing me that she's on our school gate and she's rushing to where I am right now.

"Sorry. Am I late now?" I chuckled as I saw her gasping for air. It was so obvious that she ran all the way here.

"No, Hope. You're being silly. It's summer anyway. We don't have classes so you're not considered late."

"By the way, I am so sorry about last night. We hung out with my friends outside. I will not hear you because we're walking on the sidewalk."

"It's fine. I understand dear." Hope smiled as she grabbed my hand as we went outside the library.

We sat on our favorite corner as I opened our own books. I looked at Hope and she's reading Shrevakhuk's biography again. I smiled as I read mine.

"Gosh, you're the only person I know who studies calculus books and still you're smiling."

"What? Am I?"

"Yes, you do." She chuckled as she insisted. I looked at my calculus book, too. All I can see are numbers and letters dancing around the pages. I understand what I am reading somehow but Adrian is the reason for my smile.

"You look happy these days. I hope I will always see you that way." Hope said as she tapped my shoulder. She read her books again.

"Thank you so much."

"Oh, where are you going?" I said as Hope suddenly stood up and packed her bags.

"Sorry, Carmella. I will go to our room, first. Some of our classmates are looking for me. We need to sign our clearance to Mrs. Charize as a group."

"Okay."

"I will be back in a jiffy." She winked as she walked outside the door.

I followed her with my eyes until she's lost in my sight. I smiled again as I continued reading my calculus book. I even got my thick pad paper and pen as I started solving problems.

Am I going to see Adrian again?

Hope's POV

"Sorry Thelma. I am going there now. Please wait for me. I'll be there in a minute." I was rushing as we went to our room when someone caught my attention. I stopped walking as I passed by the gym.

"Hey! Pass it here!" I saw a guy who has a gray basketball uniform playing with the Blazing Phoenix.

Kalix passed the ball to the guy as he did a three-point shoot. The ball shoots into the ring effortlessly which made the other team cheer for the guy. I can't help but to look at him as he smiled. His dimples caught my attention. He is tall, fair and incredibly charming. Who is he? I've never seen him in school before.

"Whoa! That's amazing Ian!" The other team members went to him as they did the high-five. I saw him smile at them, too. He got his towel that's placed on his knapsack from one of the benches beside the court.

"Nice job! We should do this more often." Kalix did a fist bump which he responded too.

I can't help but smile as I look at him more. I am pretty sure he's not from here, either because it is the first time I saw him playing here. I felt my phone vibrate from my pocket. I frantically got my phone, that it fell on the ground.

It made a sound which made all the boys look at my direction. I hurriedly got my phone on the ground and hid behind the tall wall from the corner of the gym.

"Who was that?" I heard the guy's voice which made my heart flutter. Why is this happening to me all of a sudden?

"Oh, there's no one." Kalix, the team captain of the blazing Phoenix answered him.

"I thought I heard someone."

"Don't mind it. Maybe it is just some of the fans who wanted to watch us play." Some other players joked around that made them chuckle.

I slowly left the basketball court and headed to a different direction in going to our classroom. I rushed as I passed a different way farther before I could reach the classroom.

"Where are you?" I can hear Thelma's sarcasm as I answered her call. I noticed a tiny crack on the screen of my phone but I don't mind at all. I guess this one should be the remembrance after I saw that guy.

"I'm coming, please don't be angry."

"Wow! You said you're coming five minutes ago. Are you still walking until now?"

"Sorry. Something unexpected came up. I will make it up to you."

"How? Mrs. Charize already left because we're already late."

"Nope. I already messaged her. She's happy to wait for us in her office."

"Oh my, really?" Most of my classmates gasped in excitement.

I opened the door of our classroom. I saw three of my classmates turning their backs on my direction. Thelma is still holding her phone while placing it on his left ear. I nodded and smiled.

"See, Thelma? I told you everything will be fine when Elise Hope is in our group." She sighed as she folded her arms.

"Let's get that clearance signed!" I said as I smiled to all of them. I thought going back to school was boring but it turned out to be one of my luckiest days ever!

Chapter 23: MY ALL-TIME BUDDY

Carmella's POV

"Hello?"

"Where are you?"

"I am still in the library, Hope." I covered my hands on my phone as I lowered my voice as much as possible. I looked around and luckily, the librarian was not looking in my direction. Cellphones and excessive talking and loud noises were prohibited inside so I have to be really careful.

"I am coming back. I'm sorry. We talked with Mrs. Charize. That's the reason why I am coming back a little late. See you!" She ended the call that made me glance at my wristwatch.

It was exactly 9:00 A.M. Two hours has passed and I wonder if Adrian's game is already done. I closed the book that I am studying right now. I scrolled on my newsfeed to see updates on facebook when I received a text message just now.

IanPeepz: Hi, Princess Diana!

It made me smile like an idiot again. I glanced around me to see if other students are looking at me smiling like crazy here right now. Good thing they are not.

"Hello Ian!" I waited for two minutes to reply to him. My goodness, I kinda like him but I don't want to look desperate as well.

IanPeepz: Our basketball game is over. Wanna join me for lunch?

I am about to reply to him when Hope's message pops up. Caaarmeeellaaa! Join me for lunch later please! I am near the library now!"

Oh no. What am I going to do? I am holding my phone, thinking of who to reply when somebody is covering my eyes.

"Who's this?" I knew it was Hope and she was being silly but I clicked the side button of my phone to hide my messages. I don't want her to see that Adrian and I were texting each other. She would ask a lot about him. I don't want to make a choice, either.

"Hope?"

"Hmmp, you should pretend not to know me sometimes. You're bad." She chuckled as she pouted her lips.

"Silly girl. How could I not know you if you're noisy?"

"Oops." She giggled in a soft voice. We looked around to see if we were already drawing attention. Good thing we're not. She sat in front of me with a smile.

"Carmella..." She called my name as she looked at me with that glistening eyes.

"What?"

"Have you ever been in love before?"

Whoah, I never see that coming. Why did Hope ask this question all of a sudden?

"Hmm...yeah." I smiled as I looked at her, too. "Here." I added, getting the books as I showed it to her. She jokingly frowned as she shook her head from side to side as she clicked her tongue.

"Of course, we love books. What I mean, have you ever fallen in love with a guy before?"

I could see that she's getting serious already.

"I don't know. I guess not. I am focused on my studies. I don't have time for that and you know it."

"What? My gosh! Are you even human?"

"For Pete's sake Hope, we're only sixteen. We're still young."

"I never expected your reaction. I guess the way people think in America is different from here."

I nodded as I agreed to what she said just now.

"Yeah. Asians are conservative. When you're sixteen here, you're still considered as a kid, just take a look at my mom."

She covered her mouth as she laughed.

"Well, I will not argue with that anymore."

"Why did you ask? Have you?" I asked the question back to her. She said nothing but her sweet smile says it all.

"Who is the lucky guy?" I whispered as I leaned my face near her.

"Who's lucky? No one." She smiled as she covered her face.

"Please tell me. I am good at keeping secrets, I promise."

"Hmm...before I tell you, may I know your type of guy, dear Carmella?" She said with glistening eyes.

I automatically smiled as I remembered Adrian.

"I like guys who have a great sense of humor. I also like it when he loves to eat different kinds of food. I want a food buddy, that's why." I grinned. I can see Hope nodded.

"Interesting." She commented as she heard my kind of guy. I wonder what she's thinking right now. I've known Hope for a couple of months now but I never asked her if she had a boyfriend when she's still in America.

"Did you have a boyfriend in America?"

She shook her head as she smiled.

"It may be hard to believe but I never had a boyfriend, Carmella."

"Oh my! I should've never judged beautiful girls like you."

"Why are you saying that? You're beautiful, too. It's just that my dad is too strict that I am never allowed to date anyone."

"Of course. Any dad will be protective of their princess, you know."

"Yeah. I am happy that even if we lived in America, the Filipino values are still present within me. Dad never failed to teach me how to be conservative and on how to respect myself and other people as well."

"Yeah, my mom does it for me, too."

A moment of silence happened before us. I looked at Hope as she looked outside the window. She seems to be thinking about something while smiling sweetly.

"Carmella..."

"Hmm?" She smiled as she looked at me straight into my eyes again.

"Do you believe in love at first sight?"

"I don't know. It never happened to me that's why I guess I can never tell. What about you?"

She scratched her head and smiled.

"I guess I am right now."

"What? Really?" I suddenly got excited for Hope.

"Yeah. It's weird but it indeed happened."

"Why? Where did you see the lucky guy?"

"He's wearing a gray basketball uniform. He's so good at playing it, I fell in love with his dimples right away."

I nodded.

"Wow. I guess he's a great guy."

"Yeah. I hope to meet him someday."

"Did you know his name?"

"I was too shy to come near him. I don't know his name yet."

"I wish you will know him soon. I wish the best for you, Hope."

"I also wish the best for you too, Carmella."

"We'll be having a great lovelife and we'll attend each other's wedding."

"Wow! I love how advanced you think, Carmella!" I giggled as I heard her reaction. She's also enjoying what I said. I hope I will also meet the guy she's telling me about. By that time, I will also be prepared to introduce Adrian to Hope.

We still spent two more hours and I have decided to decline Adrian's lunch offer because of Hope. I am also thinking of making it up to her because of what happened yesterday.

"Where do you want to eat?"

"I want to eat at Jenny's Cafe."

"Wow, that's just near our school. Is it open today?"

"Yeah, I know they're open even on a rainy day."

She chuckled as she got my joke. She hugged my arm as we went outside the gate. When I turned my gaze to my left, I suddenly spotted Adrian with Kalix and some of the Blazing Phoenix.

"We better hurry, Hope." I grabbed her hand as we rushed into Jenny's Cafe. This time, I am praying hard hoping that Adrian will not eat at Jenny's because we're here already. I selected a seat near the window to see people coming in and out of the restaurant.

"What's wrong? Are we hiding from someone?" Hope asked as she also looked to the direction of where I am looking at right now.

"No. I decided to hurry up because their fried chicken will be out of stock after ten minutes if we'll be a little late."

She nodded as she understood what I am talking about.

"Let's order their famous fried chicken now." Hope said as we both stood up. I sighed with relief when I saw Adrian went inside Xyler's Steakhouse across Jenny's Cafe. Now I am confident that our paths will never cross this time around.

We both went to the counter and paid for our lunch. Since it is a buffet style kind of lunch, I enjoyed getting foods that I miss eating the most.

"You know what? I am starting to love Filipino cuisines. The combination is perfect." Hope commented that made the servers smile.

"Thank you!" She said as she got her plate from the chicken's section. The server gave her a large helping of chicken tinola (chicken soup).

"I should try complimenting the food aloud so that I can get that kind of serving, too." I whispered in her ear that made her giggle so much.

We sat on our table and I glanced at the window one more time. I shifted my gaze on my food when I couldn't see Adrian from the window.

"Gosh, their chicken tinola is delicious!" Her eyes almost glistened as she said between munches.

"Yeah, and their fried chicken, too. You should try it."

"Wow, Carmella. I never knew you're good at selecting the best restaurants in town."

"Not really. It so happened that this restaurant serves the best food that's why I also want you to try it to believe it."

"And you're right, dear. I also proved it myself that they serve great food."

I looked at how Hope enjoyed the food while we ate in silence, This is all thanks to Adrian. He was the first to invite me to try this place and their chicken dishes. He's really the best.

Chapter 24: CARMELLA'S CHANCE

Carmella's POV

Some of those words I just kept everything myself. Even how excited I am, I know I can't tell Hope about him. I don't want her to ask some questions about how I meet him.

I don't want her to eventually ask me about how I feel towards the guy. I am afraid that I might mess at everything. I would tell Hope of my true feelings for him when that time will come.

I don't want to assume things that are only starting. I don't want to assure myself of what I feel is true this time. I am most certain that I can ever be so sure about his feelings for me too.

I am used to heartaches and disappointments around me. This time, all I want is an exemption. I want to think of Andrian as my happy pill without expecting something in return.

I know, the more I expect that he'll return the favor, the more I'll be hurt once the opposite will happen instead.

"Is that fried chicken so delicious that you were left speechless all of a sudden? Hey..." I blinked when Hope waved her hand in front of my face as if making my wandering thoughts go back to where it is supposed to be.

"Oh, yes...what are you saying?"

"Gosh, the fried chicken is indeed delicious you forgot you're talking to me. I should try that, wait a minute." She chuckled as she stood up, carrying her plate with her.

I followed Hope with my eyes and I noticed she went to the chicken dishes again. She had another serving of chicken tinola and got a piece of fried chicken. As she came near me, I almost choked on my food when she ate the fried chicken as she held the leg part. Many people looked at her and they were shocked, too.

She giggled and mouthed 'sorry' and some people smiled at her because of amusement. Imagine a beautiful woman suddenly did that.

She sat down on her table in front of me, still munching the fried chicken that she's holding.

"My goodness, this is one, crunchy and delicious chicken leg. I guess I can eat four of these more."

I laughed because of what she said. She looked really cute and charming, I am like watching a television advert of those people who encourages the viewers to eat fried chicken.

"You still looked gorgeous. Did they hire you as a model of their fried chicken?"

"What?" She said between chuckles. She munched some more that I am encouraged to also take a good bite from my chicken leg, too.

"I was just joking but I hope they'll get you as their model. You looked good as you eat that one."

"You're making me happy too much. Thank you Carmella."

"Well, I am your number one fan." I said as we proposed cheers using the chicken leg instead. After that, we took a bite at the same time and we did a high five.

We spent another great hour non-stop talking. I am glad that Hope liked the experience, food and place I recommended her. I noticed she was just so happy all throughout the time. I invited her to a nearby park and we played there.

"Carmella? Wanna know your weight?"

"Huh? There's no weighing scale here. How can I know it?"

"Come, let me show you." She grinned as if thinking of something new.

"Here." She proudly tapped the metal ladle-like seat at the end of the seesaw.

"What?" I said between chuckles. Instead of talking to me more, she positioned the metal ladle between her legs as she sat on it.

"Go to the opposite side. We'll play this. If my seat goes down, it means I am heavier than you. If I will go up, it means you're heavier than me."

"Gosh, that made sense!" I smiled as I hurriedly followed her instructions. We both laugh when we're both suspended at the center of the seesaw as we ride on it.

"Well, this only means one thing."

"Our weight is exactly the same. That's really weird." We got off from the seesaw as we did the high five.

"Let's go to the swing. I really miss that!" She pointed at the metal swings that's attached on poles using bigger chains.

"Yep. We're still kids. We should enjoy these moments in the possible ways we can." Hope said that made me turn to her as she sat on the swing beside me too.

"Gosh, your being sentimental often creeps me out, Hope."

"Why?" She softly giggled as she gave me a curious look.

"Sometimes, talking to you means talking to my grandma, too. I mean, most of the words are too deep."

"Thanks to Shrevakhuk."

"I forgot you're weird too. Silly girl," I laughed as I heard her mentioning her favorite author and poet again.

"Well, I am just thinking...what if we're gonna be old and have our own families? Can we still have these kinds of moments?

"I think, yes?"

"Hmm...you may bring your children here, even your grandchildren but you can never bring back the chance of you, yourself playing these kinds of equipment and places where your childhood remains."

"I know where this is going. Do you want us to play in this place often, right?"

She grinned and nodded as a response. I held her hand and we both smiled.

"Let's enjoy our childhood to the fullest!"

"Yeah!" I put both of my palms open near my mouth to let out what I am feeling. I can't help but to shout with her on the football field near the park. Because of the spacious landmark of this park near our school? People will not easily hear us because it's not a secluded place, too.

She's holding both of the chains of the swing as she moves it slowly with her body. She controlled the movement of the swing by the use of her feet.

"Do you want me to push you?"

"Sure!" I stood up and went behind her. I held the big chains as I gently pushed the swing. She let out an excited shout as I pushed faster this time. I can't help but laugh because her expression is really epic. I guess she's not used to being surprised all the time.

We parted ways at exactly four in the afternoon. They still have to go to the mall with her dad. That's why, I am left alone as usual.

I was about to go outside the school when someone covered both of my eyes using his hands as he stood behind me.

"Guess who?"

"Ian?" I chuckled as I heard him groan. I guess he expected that I would say the name of another guy in school.

"Hey, that's not fair!"

"What's not fair?" I said between chuckles as I faced him. He almost looked at me down because he's really tall. He's 5'9, taller for his age. When I meet his gaze, I can't help but to lock my attention to the curve of his lips. The shocking thing is, we're like only one breath away from each other!

"Am I the only guy in this school that you already knew it was me? Can't you not befriend any guy there?"

"All the answers would be yes." I smiled.

"It's not fair because I even changed my voice just for you to not know me right away!"

"Gosh, as if you're good at it. Try again next time." I chuckled as I pinched his nose which made him get my hand off his nose and held it longer as we walked side by side with each other. I can see some of my schoolmates looked at me with judging eyes. Some even looked at me from head to toe and then shifted their gaze at Adrian, who is like a very handsome greek god.

Gosh, I guess they can't believe this kind of handsome guy will date someone like me. Of course it is possible!

"Are you going home?"

"Yep, but I am thinking of going somewhere because it is still early."

"Hmm...can I go with you? I bring my car and driver with me. We can go anywhere."

"You know what? I am still feeling awkward whenever you invite me to go with you."

"Why do you even think about that? Do you want me to also think about it whenever I see you? Do you want that?"

"I'm sorry. I think I am still not getting used to this."

"Well, right now, you should be," He said, even winking at me. "Remember, we're friends and there's nothing to be awkward about."

I smiled as I looked into his pair of lovely eyes. We got in his car and he told his driver to drive us to the nearest mall in school.

We had endless window shoppings. We even get inside the elevator going to the third floor of the mall.

"Let's go." He pulled me by my hand as he held two buckets of popcorn and a white plastic that contained two cans of sodas.

"Huh? Where?"

"Please watch a movie with me," He asked, smiling. That exact smile she's showing many people for them to not say 'No' anymore.

"I promise. It is only one hour and thirty minutes. We'll be going home at five thirty in the evening."

"Ok, fine. I am still okay if I will go home at six."

"Oh, it's a deal, then?"

"Most definitely." I nodded as I smiled.

Chapter 25: LOST IN YOUR EYES

"Gosh, it's been a while since I last went to the cinema." Carmella can't help but to hug her arms. Adrian put off his jacket right away. He gently put it on her shoulders. Carmella thanked him as they went to the upper box.

It is really cozy and nice. The place is dimmed. When they went inside, good thing the show started right away.

"Thank you. This is really unexpected. I am happy that I am watching cartoons with you."

"I think you're the right person to watch "Pile Of Dreams" with.

He is holding her hand as he guides her to the seats because it's too dark. The only light that they can see are the led lights being placed in every stairs for the viewers to not trip on it.

"Did you know? Some of the scenes were dedicated to Shrevakhuk. He has a great contribution for that movie. Most of the remarkable lines came from his literary works that's effective to what the cartoon is telling about: The strength and unity of the family." He added as they sat down next to each other.

"Wow. At least I know what to expect now."

"Sorry to spoil you a bit."

"Not a problem." Carmella answered. They waited for two minutes more and the film started right away.

Carmella and Adrian looked at each other with a meaningful grin. Carmella hoped that he couldn't see her blushing underneath the flickering light from that dimmed place, or else she'll be busted.

When she saw that Adrian was putting his hands on his popcorn, she also did the same. After that, they both gave a piece of popcorn to each other, Adrian putting his popcorn near Carmella lips as Carmella did the same to him. They did a silent chuckle which made the people around them think they're one of those sweet and clingy couples.

Most of the people there show their public display of affection to their partners. If other people will see them but they didn't know them, they will instantly think they are lovers.

Carmella turned to his side as she whispered near his ear..."Thank you," he smiled as a response.

"If you keep on thanking me, it will not happen again so you better not be thankful all the time." He whispered back. Carmella almost lost her sanity when his scent reached her nose. He smells sexy and manly at the same time. It is obvious that the perfume he's using is very costly.

'Wow, if only Hope is here. She will definitely enjoy this cartoon for sure...' Carmella kept some of these words to herself as they were both seated next to each other.

'But...sorry Hope. I guess I also have the right to be happy all by myself.' She kept these words all by herself as she looked at Adrian on her side. She's a bit surprised when Adrian holds her hand while his eyes are fixed on the wide screen.

'Is this how it feels like having a boyfriend of your own?'

Carmella enjoyed the movie very much from start to finish. Adrian was also happy seeing her smile all throughout the duration of time that they're watching.

When the lights are on, they slowly stand up, this time they're on their way home. When they are both seated in the backseat, Adrian faces her.

"Did you like it?"

"Of course! I love Shrevakhuk's literary works. The movie gave justice to the plot and on how it was perfectly inserted to every scene."

"Wow. That was a nice comment for "Pile Of Dreams". Good job.

"I never knew you're also a fan of his. That's nice." He nodded as if he's loving what he's hearing from Carmella. As promised, as soon as the movie ended at exactly 5:30pm, he drove Carmella to their house. She thanked him for everything that happened that night. As soon as Adrian reached their house, he never forgot to message Carmella before he prepared for bed.

"What? He did that?" almost shouted as she giggled.

"Yep." Carmella can't help but smile.

"Oh that punk! Why is it that when it comes to me, he can't offer me a movie treat? That's unfair." She chuckled as she said her sentiments. Carmella only laughed at her friend as she put her hand on her left ear to hear Kara well.

"Well, maybe because I am Carmella and you're Kara?"

"He should favor me the most because if not for me, he won't be able to meet someone like you."

"Don't worry I will tell him."

"No," She said between chuckles. "Let his conscience disturb him." She added.

"I guess he's just used to you because you're his cousin that's why he never does this to you already."

"I hate him for that. So, what's the update now? Are you both in a mutual relationship?"

"What mutual relationship? M.U my ass." I answered right away and we both giggled as I told the truth to Kara.

"I do not expect that kind of reaction."

"Well, you shouldn't. We don't have any kind of relationship that you're thinking about."

"You're crazy. Of course you are in that stage now. C'mon, it's been more than seven months that you both have been out. What should I think? That you're still friends?" Kara answered as if not believing everything I just said.

"Are we not? My goodness Kara you and your assumption theories."

"Can you blame me? I can't help it. My cousin is acting weird when it comes to you. What should I think about it?"

"Of course, you have to think that we're just friends."

Kara mimicked the last phrase Carmella told her in a joking manner.

"Carmella...what if,"

"What 'what if'?

"Well, what if you tell him your true feelings?"

"Kara, what true feelings?"

"You're in love with my cousin, aren't you?"

"My goodness! In love?" Carmella asked between chuckles. She seems to be anxious because of what her best friend is asking her.

"Carmella girl, you know what? Being stupid is different from acting stupid. What's wrong with you? Are you still not in love with my cousin after all this time?"

"You are putting me on the spot, you know."

"But, am I right or right?" Carmella can't help but let out an exasperated sigh.

"Why do you ask me questions I am not ready to answer?"

"I'm your best friend and I have the right to know something that concerns my future."

"Future?"

"Yes. We'll be relatives in law someday."

"What a silly, advanced

Carmella bit her lower lip as she smiled.

"Yes. I am in love with your cousin. Happy?" Kara shrieks and giggles on the other line. Carmella shushed her to keep quiet because she's really noisy on how she reacts.

"So, who's doing the 'assumption theory' now?" She proudly boasted.

"I hate you, really..."

"Carmella, being in love is really fine. You're not a non-living thing that you can't feel anything after all my cousin did for you. My goodness."

They stayed silent for more than two minutes, observing what the other line would say. She left speechless after Kara made her realize everything right now.

"Carmella..." They both made a sound that seemed to be surprised. Carmella could hear the voice of her mother calling her downstairs.

"Oh my gosh, the monster is there already. We'll just talk tomorrow. See you!"

"Don't call my mom like that! You're so bad!" Carmella chuckled but she only heard a disconnecting line sound.

"Mom, I am coming!" Carmella hurriedly ran downstairs as she placed her cellphone on her bedside table. Even if she's not sure about the reason why she called her, I don't feel scared anymore. This exact feeling I discovered deep within me is greater than what will happen.

Her mother is looking at her sternly as she folded her arms.

"Where have you been?"

"I've been to school, mom." Instead of answering me with words, she answered me with a forceful slap on my left cheek. Carmella held the affected area and massaged it slowly. She's closing her fist secretly as she stopped herself from crying. Her mom's hand is always heavy. Whenever she received this one, it was always painful until she got used to it.

"What did I hear from outside our house? Who's that guy?"

"H-He's only a friend, mom. Please do not think about him for something else."

"What do you mean? I just don't want them to be talking about you behind my back."

"Mom, I assure you. I have no boyfriend. He's only a friend and he always supports me whatever I do."

She nodded as she raised one of her eyebrows.

"It's good that I am hearing it from your own mouth. You have to prove it to me that you're keeping my rules."

"Y-Yes, mom." Carmella

"We're both good. Now, go back to your room and study your lessons. I will be working by now for our '10pm' schedule"

Carmella nodded as she slowly took some glance at her mom as she went upstairs to her own room. She felt bad for having neighbors who don't know what to do but to spread gossip. They only assume what they are seeing without knowing the whole thing.

What Carmella doesn't like the most is the fact that their neighbors are worse than them. They literally watch your every step and take it against you if they are bored.

Chapter 26: IT MUST HAVE BEEN LOVE

Carmella's POV

"Carmella...please watch a movie with me. "Pile Of Dreams" is showing now! Please! Please!" I look at her as she is persistent in my "yes" to her invitation.

If only she knew that we already watched it with Adrian. I never thought she'd invite me too since Hope already gained a lot of friends in our classroom.

"I thought you'll watch it with Thelma and Dani."

"Wow, when did you learn how to be jealous?"

"You're silly, Hope. I am not. I am just letting you enjoy the company of others."

Hope encircled her arms on my left arm as she smiled.

"Well, I don't think they can't relate about Shrevakhuk like you do. I want to watch with someone who enjoys the show more than I do."

I sighed as I smiled at her. "Well, who am I to say no if it makes you happy?"

Hope hugged me tight as she almost jumped with joy. I already pictured out her reaction to what I will say but I never thought it would exceed my expectations.

"Gosh, I think if I will ask you who's your boyfriend, I know the answer already."

I don't know but I guess what I said was misunderstood by Hope as a joke. She almost laughed out loud while tapping my arm.

"Not really. Shrevakhuk was already thirty-four years old when he died."

"Well, age is just a number."

"Yeah, I admit I really love him because of the impact of his stories and poems to me. It is really meaningful."

"Well, if I understood my friends and on how they love Harry Potter as a character, who am I to judge you when you love Shrevakhuk? I will support you, don't worry."

"Thank you so much, dear Carmella. My treat, don't worry. Father will be driving us to the cinema. He'll watch a different film that will start at four thirty this afternoon and will end at six."

"Is he not going to go with us? Anyway, Pile Of Dreams is rated PG and it is suitable for all audiences."

"Dad would rather watch action films than cartoons, Carmella. He's not into "Pile Of Dreams."

"Oh, I see. So we'll have more time for ourselves."

"I hope you will focus on the story more rather than converse with me while the movie is playing."

Hope blushed a little. She looked at me and smiled in an awkward manner.

"I'm gonna buy some snacks." She said changing the topic while clapping her hands. Whenever she's busted, she would often do this.

We stayed more in the library for two hours before Hope called her father to drive us to the mall.

"But it is still very early. Why would you decide to go here already?"

"I feel like strolling around with you. Don't you like it?"

"Of course I do. I think it's just weird that after how many months of endless studying, we're able to enjoy this for a while."

"Yeah, we're having this one now. We have to seize the moment while our time does not demand from us yet."

I am following her right now when I received a text message coming from Adrian.

"Hey Charm. I am here at Halley's mall. Where are you?"

It made me stop walking right away and Hope noticed it. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. I think I felt dizzy all of a sudden."

"I'm sorry maybe you're not really used to many people roaming around the mall."

"I guess so."

"Oh, it's already 3:30 in the afternoon. We'll just buy our snacks and we'll go to cinema 4 right away." Hope glanced at her watch to see the time. I nodded and held her arms.

We treated ourselves with chips and some sodas as snacks for the movie treat. As soon as we're done buying everything in the supermarket, we headed towards the cinema 4 right away.

"I just went to the mall with a friend." I replied. After less than two minutes, I already received a message coming from him again.

"Whoah, which mall?"

My goodness! I knew it! I should've never responded from his text message. This would lead to ruining all of my plans from the very beginning.

I slid my phone inside my pocket because we're heading inside the mall. It's amazing because this is the place where I went with Adrian yesterday. Exact cinema number of the show.

"My gosh, dear Carmella! This is it!" She let out a suppressed shriek as she giggled. Other viewers even shushed her because she caught their attention while sitting on their respective seats.

"It's not obvious that you're not excited. Don't worry." Hope responded with a giggle as they both sat down.

"Carmella, Pile Of Dreams is really cute. I think she's the apple of the eye of the family." Hope started talking to me. I tried to look at her, wearing my poker-faced reaction. I hope she'll get what I mean.

Hope grinned. "Sorry," She whispered. I can see her gaze returning on the widescreen as she slid her fingers on the bag of chips we bought. She looked funny when she ate the chips while her eyes fixed on the widescreen. She's so adorable and charming as she focused on watching the entire show.

I roamed my hands on the pocket of my jeans. When I felt my phone, I slowly pulled it off and opened my phone using my fingerprint. I observed Hope and when I saw her focused on what she's watching, I decided to reply to Adrian.

"Sorry...I'm a little busy."

Message sent. I sighed anxiously. I heard a beep tone and I knew it was him.

"Ah. Okay. Please take care." I can't help but smile from what I read from the text message he sent me.

"Carmella?"

"Huh? Were you saying something?"

"Are you watching the movie or not?"

"Uh...yeah. I am. Sorry, I just replied to some of my friends. It's an urgent message."

"Oh, I see." She nodded and returned her gaze back to the cartoons. She seems to be enjoying it so well.

After our movie watching, we held hands as we went outside.

"I hope you enjoy the movie, Carmella." She said as she smiled back at me. I snatched the bag of chips from her hands.

"Of course," I said as I got a piece of potato chip and chewed it in front of her. She chuckled as she also did the same by getting some inside the bag of chips I am holding right now.

"Pile Of Dreams is really a touching movie. I love Laura as one of the major casts." Her eyes glistened as she started talking about the main character from the movie.

"Yeah, she's exactly just like you, dear."

"Do you think Shrevakhuk dedicated it just for me?"

I laughed because Hope is really silly. I can say she's head over heels with one of the famous writers from a long time ago. It's a part of our literature lesson.

"I will always support you when it comes to Shrevakhuk. I will always be supportive with everything related to him."

"Thank you my dear Carmella. I know I can always count on you." I was a bit surprised when she hugged me all of a sudden. I hugged her back as I smiled. Hope is always sweet in nature. She's not afraid to show it that's why many people love her so much. She's approachable and amazing in everything she does.

"What's this all about? Is that all the lesson learned from 'Pile Of Dreams'? Hope's father commented behind us. We barely noticed him because we've been talking about the movie, 'Pile Of Dreams' as we expressed our own opinions.

"Yes, dad. It's a pity you missed it. You'll surely love the movie when the twist is revealed to you all of a sudden."

"Hmm, I should watch it online if I have time."

"Sir, I have a suggestion. Just let Hope tell the whole thing to you, you'll surely enjoy it more." Hope's father let out a hearty laugh after she heard what I said. We got inside the car and I am always thankful for the ride as soon as we reached the gate of our house.

"Thank you so much Hope." I hugged her and she did the same. I opened the car and slowly closed it. I waved goodbye to them as the car went away. I am still smiling even if I am already inside our house. I checked on my mom as I twisted the doorknob. The light of her room is still open. She fell asleep on her computer keyboard. Good thing she already shut down her computer before she slept. She looked really tired from her work. I slowly put her arms around my shoulder and stood up, trying my best to put her to bed with all my strength because mom's heavier than me. I lay her on the bed, facing the ceiling. Good thing she didn't even feel what I did.

I got her blanket and gently tucked her on her bed. I got the remote of our aircon and adjusted it to the ideal temperature that she always wanted. I sit on the chair beside her bed. I looked at her beautiful face and she closed her eyes. Who would've thought this woman would be able to hurt me most of the time when she looks innocent and harmless? Indeed looks can be deceiving.

Chapter 27: REALITY AND NIGHTMARES IN ONE

Hope's POV

"Darling, you looked weary. Is there something wrong?"

"No, dad." I avoided my gaze and tried to smile but I think dad's not buying it.

"Aren't you happy watching 'Pile Of Dreams' with Carmella?"

"Of course I am. Sorry dad. I am just tired, I guess." I slightly pouted my lip as I sighed quietly. I am playing with my spoon and fork on my plate. We had some fried chicken, steak and mixed veggies for dinner.

"Hmm, that's why I noticed you're not in the mood to eat even if these are your favorite foods too."

"Sorry dad."

"I should try Carmella's suggestion of asking you about Pile Of Dreams." I can't help but grin. I saw my dad smiling too.

"I think Carmella's right. You really love Shrevakhuk so much. I noticed that your mood could change in seconds when it comes to him."

"I think I just love Shrevakhuk so much, his writing, the way he would express his words through short stories and poetry."

"I am proud of you, dear."

"Why dad?" I said between chuckles.

"You're a wide reader. You even excel now that we're here in the Philippines. The way you adapt to this environment is impressive. I did not expect that it would only go easy on you."

"Of course. Most of my friends are the best dad, especially Carmella and you know it."

"Yup. I am always grateful to her as a good influence to you."

"I will always do my best to make you proud dad." He smiled as he sliced a thin portion of meat and got it by the use of his fork.

"Here," I giggled as I opened my mouth to what my dad was giving me.

When we're done with our dinner, dad went with me inside my room to talk more.

"Do you need milk or cookies?"

"Daddy, please do not spoil me. I might demand all the things you're offering now, you'll be out of money for sure."

He laughed and put his hands on my hair and gently crumpled them.

"Sometimes, it is so hard for me that my baby is growing too fast now."

"Dad, I'll always be your precious Elise Hope."

He got his wallet in his pocket. He pulled the old picture of our family taken ten years ago. He handed it to me as he smiled.

"Yeah, I will always be like this adorable baby, dad. I promise."

He just showed me a weak smile as a response. He is sitting beside me on my table and I am holding the little picture of the three of us when I was really young back then.

"It's sad that it's our first and last picture as a family."

"Yeah, if only I can bring back the time, dad." I said as I gently touched the surface of the picture.

"Dad, do you have a clearer version of this picture? This picture is really faded and old already. I can't see mom's face through this one."

"I'm sorry but that's the only picture I got back then, dear."

"Oh," I looked at my father's face. He may never tell it to me directly but I can see the regret upon his eyes.

"Do you miss her, dad?"

"Yeah, so much. For me, she's the only girl I ever want to love even in the next lifetime."

"You know what, dad? I want to be married to a guy who possesses traits like you have. For me, you're a perfect daddy. I also want to have someone who will love me like how you do."

"Yes, my darling. The right man will come at the right time even without you knowing it. But first, prioritize your studies. Catch your dreams and establish your goals first."

"I will always keep that in mind, daddy."

"No! Please! No!" I am awakened by a hoarse cry. When I opened my eyes, I could see my mother sweating a lot. She's also moving her head from side to side and I can see tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Mom, please wake up. Can you hear me? Mom?" I shook her body for almost a minute. The sight of her crying in horror made my heart pulsating to death. She's having a nightmare, that I am sure of.

When she opened her eyes as she pants, I felt a jolt of relief all of a sudden. She sat on her bed with her feet stretching, feeling the mattress. I can see that she roamed her gaze around the room and when she saw me, rage filled the once innocent, looking pair of eyes.

"Leave," Her voice roared inside the room that made me close my eyes.

"B-But mom, are you okay now? D-Do you need some water?"

"Leave! And don't show your face to me and I hope you die, too!" Her voice is even louder than her first word that he shouted at me a while ago. She stretched her arm wide and her pointing finger pointed to the door. I nodded and turned my back on her. I noticed that tears were already flowing on my cheeks.

"...I hope you die, too!" The last words from her are crushing me so much that it hurts. No matter how I tried to conceal my feelings, I lost it at that moment. When I opened the door to my room, I walked towards my bed and dove on it, laying on my stomach as I buried my face on my pillow.

I never knew that I would fall asleep on the side of her bed. I woke up, noticing that my head is resting on my folded arms that's leaning on the side part of my bed.

Why is she wishing me to die all of a sudden? Did she really mean it? Is that how worst her dreams were that she got mad at the sight of me? Am I bringing her a real-life nightmare?

I pulled the blanket over my head as I wiped my tears. I reached out for my phone on the bedside table placed beside my bed. I checked on the messages and as usual, I got a text message from Kara, Adrian and Hope.

I opened the message of Hope and she sent me a sweet quote about friendship. I also opened Adrian's message and I am spoiled by a sweet quote that means he misses me already.

The last message I opened is from Kara.

"Bff, please check your messenger. I sent screenshots and videos there."

I wrinkled my forehead as I read the messages again. I followed what Kara said. When I opened my messenger, there were nine candid photos of Adrian wearing a basketball uniform in different sets and colors. What caught my attention is the video of three minutes.

'My goodness Kara. Whatever this is, I will really pinch you when I see you.'

My jaw almost dropped when the video is Adrian playing basketball with his friends. I guess Kara is with them because she took this video on her iphone, I am sure with it.

I played the video for almost ten times that I already knew where Adrian would smile and shoot for three. I guess I already memorize every detail from the video because watching it feels so addicting.

"Girl, you never know how this video means to me." I typed on the screen and sent it to Kara. After a minute, I can see a caller alert on my screen.

"Hey. What happened?" She asked in a serious manner. As soon as I heard her voice, I cried and poured her emotions to my best friend.

"What is it, this time?" She added, after she waited for less than three minutes. I could feel her sympathy from the sound of her voice.

"Thank you so much. At least this video is making me cry, this time with tears of joy."

"You really managed to joke around after what happened to you. You're really something."

"Of course, I can't hate my mom and you know it. She's everything I have, together with grandma but she's living far away from our house."

"I can't blame you. I am happy that I get to cheer you up somehow. I thought I will only send it to you just to give you random happiness."

"Your timing is really amazing. I love it."

"Gosh, when it comes to my cousin, your mood changes so easily. I guess I will have to tell him to make you happier everyday."

"What? So you mean you're only telling him to be sweet to me and he didn't really mean it?"

"Silly girl. Ian is not like that. He's a guy with good intentions. I am the only black sheep in the family."

"Yeah. I agree. I can't even believe how I get to be friends with you." I said between chuckles.

"I hate you thirty percent. Anyway, what I am saying is true. If he likes something, he's gonna get it on his own. You don't have to tell or remind him of that."

"Oh, I see..."

"I am confident that you're the kind of girl he'd wanted to be his as he will treat you right. Just be patient and wait for it."

"Kara, I love you so much. Thank you for tonight."

"Yeah, I love you too, even if you love Adrian more than me I would understand."

"Kara!" I can't help but laugh.

"Gosh, a while ago you're crying miserably, now you're laughing like a crazy girl. We're really best friends."

Chapter 28: BE AWARE OF

Carmella hurried in going back to school the next day. She knew that Kara would be meeting with her. She missed her friend indeed that they really have to talk, especially if it concerns Adrian.

"You almost saved me from last night. Thank you so much!" As soon as she saw Kara, she hugged her tight.

"Only for you my dearest Carmella. Please get used to my presence right now because I am in section one in the next school year." They giggled at the same time as they clapped their hands together.

"I am so happy you are studying very well now."

"Of course, we are the incoming senior high students. I have to leave a mark for myself to remember, especially that it is my last chance to prove myself."

"I am glad you're making that kind of decision now, Kara. I am proud of you."

"Well, I have to. I need to get updates as much as possible from my Charm-Ian love team."

"Silly girl..." Carmella blushed when Kara nudged her shoulder from behind her.

"Yeah, time to get that relationship to the next level."

"What level? Do you really want to unleash the monster that's only familiar to you?"

Kara laughs but she's a bit nervous now. She knew that Carmella refers to her mom. She already witnessed how she will get angry.

"Hmm, what I mean is, even if you're not in an official relationship yet, you'll both let the whole school know that you're both not available because you own each other."

"My goodness!" Carmella chuckled about Kara's idea.

"It's a good thing, right? So that other girls here will know that you're his and you also own him."

"Duh, I never say that. You know what, you're too much of a bad influence, you know."

"Well, I am since the day you're born."

Kara moved her eyebrows up and down as she grinned.

"We're friends. And whatever development we will be getting in the next couple of days and months, it's for us to enjoy. Forced relationships don't last." Kara was left dumbfounded as she gazed at Carmella.

She held her hand as they walked on the hallways of the school.

"Let's go to the library, Kara."

"Okay, if that's what you want. Oh, by the way, where's your other bff Elise Hope?"

"She told me she'll not be going to school today. She'll go shopping with her father. She told me she's not sure what time she'll be going to school."

"Hmm, the mall opens at nine in the morning. If she'll go shopping with her dad, I guess she can't go to school anymore since it will be closing at four in the afternoon."

Carmella slowly nodded as she surrendered her bag at the library counter. Kara did the same and they entered the library, giving their library cards to the librarian.

"Carmella, we need to change your log card."

"Huh?" Carmella and Kara looked at each other.

"Well, isn't it obvious? You're always here in the library and you already borrowed hundreds of books. I am one, proud librarian dear."

"Oh, that," She smiled while scratching her head. Kara poked her arms too.

"Yeah, I am also one, proud friend here."

"Okay, okay. I know. Let's go. Thank you miss." Carmella nodded as she blushed to what the librarian told her.

They sat at one of the tables. Carmella saw Kara walking towards the aisle of comic books. When she came back, Carmella frowned.

"I think I should tell the librarian to ban comic books here because it's a distraction to students."

"C'mon, Charm. Don't be silly. Have a life, too." She giggled that made her frown even more.

"What is life? I am having a great life."

"I mean, stop being a killjoy to someone. It's actually my first time in two weeks to read it again."

"Huh? Why? I thought you have three sacks of comic books in your house."

"Well, my mother kept all of those. She said she'll be giving it all to me when I will be in section one again."

"See? You know what, sometimes someone will really have to force you to be successful. You have to do your part this time."

Kara sighed as she rested her head to her arms leaning on the table. She groaned because she's being reminded of Carmella again.

"You know what, Charm, talking to you feels like I will be old in an instant."

"Why?"

"I don't feel I am only sixteen years old, you know." Carmella chuckled as soon as she heard Kara.

"Hi." Carmella froze after hearing someone's voice behind her.

"Eh, why are you here?" Kara folded her arms as she jokingly frowned.

"Why? Do you own this library?" Kara replied. Carmella slowly turned her back to confirm if she's not really dreaming.

"I knew I could see you here."

"Why?"

"Actually, I asked for a letter of permission from your school to use your library for my research. Sorry I haven't informed you about this."

"Well, it's a surprise for me." Adrian sat down beside her. Kara cleared her throat as if teasing the two. She also sat beside Adrian and poked her arm.

"I hate you. You never asked me to watch `Pile Of Dreams."

"What do you know about Shrevakhuk? I know Pile Of Dreams isn't your type of movie." Adrian said that Carmella can't help but chuckle.

"Seriously? What do you know about what I know and don't know?"

"I knew you even the dirt of your fingers and feet."

"Adrian Kai Perez!" Kara shrieked as she covered her face. Adrian and Carmella laugh out loud that the librarian told them to keep quiet.

"You really knew each other." Carmella whispered aloud to all of them. Kara leaned her head closer as she put her hand on her cheek. "Yeah, even his deepest secrets."

"Try to reveal it and you're dead."

"You can trust me, Kai-yu." Kara winked. Carmella looked at them with confusion.

"Kai-yu?"

"That's her endearment to me."

"His second name sounds Japanese I learned to call him that." Kara confessed. Carmella felt her phone vibrate from her pocket.

"Sorry, Carmella. I guess we'll be spending time at the mall. I can't go there anymore." She could see Hope's name registered on the screen of her phone. She admitted, she felt relieved all of a sudden. It only means she could spend her time with Adrian and Kara.

They spent another two hours reading quietly. Kara kept herself busy in reading every comic book that interested her at this moment. Adrian also read some books related to his research, while glancing at Carmella. She's also doing her own thing, as she's working with some of the problem solvings she's having a hard time with.

"Wow, It's really amazing how you're able to do self-studying so effortlessly."

"I think I am already used to it, that's why."

"It's still a challenge for me up until now. I don't know how to really focus effectively as much as you do."

"Don't be too humble. As far as I know, you never gave the top three spots away ever since you started."

"That's right. But you're admirable the most. You've never fallen from the top spot since kindergarten, is it true?" He smiled as he leaned his head closer to her face. She could smell his cologne which became her favorite ever since the time she smelled it from him.

"She loves studying. Even in her dreams, she's still doing that."

"Kara!" Carmella said between chuckles. Kara winked at her as she teased her more.

"Isn't it true? You really love studying to the point that your way of thinking becomes mature. I think I am not talking to someone my age anymore."

"Yeah, I agree to that. She even gives great recommendations when it comes to everything."

"She's a lawyer in the making." Kara whispered to Adrian's ear but Carmella heard what they are talking about.

Carmella felt her cell phone vibrating again. When she checked her phone, her heart suddenly beat fast.

"Hey, Charm. I forgot my Math books at the library counter. I am on my way there with dad. I might hang out in the library for thirty minutes while he is inquiring for the following school year."

I stood up that made the two look at me. I pulled Kara's hand as we went away from Adrian.

"Kara, Elise Hope is on her way here."

"What? Oh my gosh. Wait let me tell my cousin to eat with me at the cafeteria."

"Alright. Please go the other direction and not on the main entrance of the library."

"Will do. Will you go there with us after this one?"

"I will. She'll hang out with me for thirty minutes the most and she'll get going after that."

"Okay. Got it. I will tell him what you said. I will think of an alibi when we get there. Promise me you'll be going to the cafeteria, too."

"Yes, of course. I will go there. Please wait for me patiently."

"Okay. Anyway, we had a lot to talk about." She nodded and winked at me. I stayed in the aisle of books. I pretended getting a book and scanned it in front of them. I glanced at Adrian and Kara. I saw her talking to him. He glanced at me and eventually nodded at Kara. I waved at them as they went out from one of the exits of the library near the cafeteria.

"I'm here!" Hope appeared in front of me that I almost jumped because of being surprised.

"My goodness! It's like you've seen a ghost just now." She chuckled as she hugged me from my back.

"Have you gotten your book at the counter?"

"Yep." She said while proudly showing it to me. We sat on one of the tables facing each other.

"Sorry, we have to go back to the mall. Will you be okay here?"

"Yep. Anyway, a few minutes more and we'll be having our lunch. I will just eat with some of my friends in the cafeteria. Don't worry about me." I said. She hugged my arm and leaned her head on it.

"You can join us at the mall for lunch. I will tell my dad."

"No, no dear Hope. My mom prepared a packed lunch for me. I will be eating this one. The mall is far from our school. I have to go back to study, you know."

"Oh, I see," I noticed her disappointed reaction. We read books and we waited for another couple of minutes before she finally stood up.

"Dad texted me just now. Our car is waiting for me outside."

"Okay dear Hope. Please take care as you go back to the mall."

"I will. Please enjoy your lunch at the cafeteria."

"You too, dear." She even kissed my cheeks and hugged me. As soon as she left, I rushed to our school cafeteria.

"Whoa...you're here now." Adrian greeted her first while Kara gave her a meaningful grin.

"Let's eat?" I nodded and I got my packed lunch and opened it in front of them. I noticed they already ordered their food. It looks hot and delicious, while I only have rice and chicken nuggets. Adrian noticed this. He got my tupperware right away and closed it. He stood up and

went to the microwave area. They both look at him while he's buying sets of fruits and vegetables at the counter. He waited for more than two minutes. When it was done, he went back to their table.

"Here you go." He smiled as he opened Carmella's tupperware again. He also placed a small bowl of stewed vegetables and fish fillet beside Carmella's lunch.

"Oh my gosh! Cous, you're so sweet. Carmella will really fall in love with you more because of that. Ouch!"

Carmella kicked her leg under our table that made Kara quiet in an instant. Adrian looked at her and she awkwardly smiled. "I'm okay...I really am." She said while showing two thumbs up. Carmella chuckled as she put her hand on her mouth. She also noticed a lot of mango, apple and pineapple slices that Adrian bought for the three of them.

"This is a healthy meal. I noticed your meal is too dry." Carmella blushed as she met his gaze.

"Yeah. I guess mom is just too busy. She only prepared this one. She is also cooking vegetables for me, don't worry."

"That's nice. Now, let's enjoy this lunch."

"Don't worry about me guys. I am still here. Let's enjoy lunch." They all laughed together when Kara said that.

Chapter 29: THE SOFT-HEARTED FEELING

Hope's POV

"Dear, are you okay?"

"Yes, dad."

"You're not in the mood."

"No, it's just I am tired, dad."

"If that's the case, then we can go back to the car to rest for a while. Anyway, the day is almost ending and we're about to go home now. Dad tapped my shoulders as I looked up to him. I nodded and we started walking to the parking lot where our car is located.

I don't want my dad to feel worried about what's bugging my thoughts. I watched the trees become smaller as our car passed by them in a swift motion. If this is how my dad drives our car, it only means he wanted to rest as much as I do, too. It's been almost a day since we strolled the mall. However, the weird actions of Carmella lately is making me worry even if I don't want to.

Is she keeping something from me? I also noticed that she's fond of going with Kara more than I do. That's why I am just making an alibi for them to enjoy what they have to do. I know I am out of it. I know that they are more familiar with themselves more than I do with both of them. As much as I want to also go to Kara and Carmella, it felt really awkward.

"Here we are now." We started to get out of the car. I helped dad in emptying the backseat of the groceries and necessities we bought from the mall.

"You can tell me what's on your mind, dear."

"Dad, have you ever felt being left out with your friends? I mean I don't want to get jealous but sometimes I can't help it."

"I can't blame you dear," Dad sat beside me. We are in the living room and the maids are bringing the groceries to the kitchen to sort them all.

"It's the feeling that you're getting used to that person being by your side for the longest time, and then out of the blue, that person is changing little by little. Sometimes, you feel like you're not being a priority anymore."

"Yeah, that's the exact feeling, dad."

I felt dad's hand resting on my shoulders as he pulled me closer to him.

"It's alright, dear." He gave me a warm smile that somehow eased what I felt.

"Dear, remember, we can love our friends but I hope you will always reserve something for yourself."

I nodded as soon as I heard my dad's advice. He is having a good point there. I should never force friendship to anybody because it's like begging for attention. Dad is right. I should always remember to be patient and just enjoy as I go with the flow.

Days seem to pass like lightning. I noticed that our senior high year started roughly. As our first week started, I have proven what came into my mind during our summer times. Carmella loved going with Kara more than I did. Sometimes I tried fitting in but I guess they knew each other more than I am just getting disappointed.

"Elise? Are you alright?" Kara approached me one time as I put my hands on my cheek. I am looking through the window during one of our vacant hours. It happened that Kara is my seatmate and Carmella sat four rows away from us.

"Oh, yes Kara. Thank you. I'm fine. Don't mind me."

"Don't mind me, mind your own. Don't care for me, instead care for the love of your own."

I smiled as I faced her. She jokingly rolled her eyes.

"Gosh, Shrevakhuk can really make you feel fine. I proved it myself now." I giggled as we did the high-five. I felt my cheeks blushed but yeah, Kara is right.

"How do you know that I liked Shrevakhuk so much?"

"Carmella mentioned it to me when I saw her marking the pages where Shrevakhuk's life and works are located in our literature book."

"Oh, I see. That's cool."

"She said you both love it."

"Yes. In fact we watched "Pile Of Dreams", a cartoon movie inspired by Shrevakhuk's words of wisdom, especially about family.

She smiled at me and I never noticed that we both glanced where Carmella is. For a minute, we observed what she's doing. She was able to talk to our other classmates while laughing. I think one of our classmates shared a joke to her that made her laugh so hard.

"Okay class, please go back to your proper seats and sit straight." We almost never noticed how our teacher went inside our classroom.

"Okay, it's the start of the week for all of you. This is your final year to prove yourselves more, especially you, our dearest Carmella." Our class adviser looked at her. We also glanced at where she was and I noticed that she smiled at all of us in the room in a very timid manner.

"Well, I bet Hope will be in the first spot this time,"

I heard our other schoolmate whisper to his seatmate behind me.

"How sure are you?"

"Remember, Hope was a transferee last year and she got the second spot already." Our classmate next to him replied in a very sure manner.

"Hmm, wow, I never realized that." As soon as I heard them, I turned my head on my back as I look at those who talked behind me.

"H-Hello, Hope. We're on you."

"I don't like what you're talking about. Please stop the gossip. It's going nowhere."

"Hmm, we'll stop if you tell us that you love having a competition with Carmella." Dan's voice is like challenging me to tell what's in my mind.

"No. There's never a competition. Carmella and I are best friends. Everyone is doing their best to have good grades. Please stop the hate." Because I am getting annoyed, I got back at Kara who seemed shocked with what I did just now.

"Wow. That's too badass!"

I can't help but chuckle because of how Kara reacts to what I did.

"You know what, Elise, I thought you're just sweet and harmless. I never thought you can be this awesome!" I can see that she's really amazed.

"I will always speak for what is right, Kara. Nobody can ever stop me from doing it." I smiled as she nodded. We even had a high-five.

"I like you. You're true and you always show what you feel. I hope you will always be like that. Please teach me how to do it, too." Kara encircled her arms around mine as if wanting to establish a kind of friendship.

"Of course. I love having a lot of friends."

"I guess we'll be forming a squad. You will be the muse while Carmella will be the leader. I'll just be a member."

"What, muse?"

"Yeah, you're Gal Gadot. You look like a goddess. I find you really, really beautiful. Don't mind Carmella, she's used as a leader. No doubt about it." I can't help but to chuckle because of Kara's outrageous ideas.

"Well, we can be called a squad without labelling ourselves such names. That's a bit off for me."

"Okay, this is noted."

"In short, we can be friends without any reason at all. At the end of the day, it's all about trust and acceptance."

"You know what, Elise? I am happy that I am finally here in your section. I made it after a year of studying for real."

I can't help but laugh at Kara's goofy sense of humor. She's really effortless when it comes to making other people happy.

"What do we have here?" I can see that Carmella is coming towards us as we enjoy our ten-minute break after some few introductory pointers about the start of classes and some requirements.

"We are just talking about starting afresh and anew."

"Kara, how do you like that? Wow I didn't know you're also fond of that."

"This is for a change. You seem to not notice but I've been working hard since last year so I really deserve to be back on top, watch out, I might oust you as the reigning top one in class." Kara laughed as if mimicking a cackle of a witch. I can see Carmella shaking her head as she listens to her friend. I can see how close they are and somehow, I am thrilled to be a part of their friendship as well.

"We can always make our circle of friends bigger than the usual. Since it's the last year, I have decided to make friends with everyone. I hope it's not yet too late."

"Of course, everyone gets that chance." I tapped her shoulders and I can see a beaming smile that formed from her lips. She looked so fresh and happy and inspired as well. I hope she'll always feel this way. As students, we deserve to find happiness not only in academics but to develop friendship and trust in everyone around us.

"Well, friendship unlocked! It's the three of us now! Go girl power!" Kara cheered that everyone turned their heads on us.

"Alright!" We both cheered with glee.

"We should go to the library to study." Carmella interrupted us all that made us all giggle.

"Hey library addict, we still have our English class. We could do that after class at 4:00 PM."

"Wow. This will be bloody for real."

Chapter 30: LAST YEAR'S CHANCE

Carmella's POV

"So, when do you plan to tell everything to her?"

I looked at the reaction of Kara's face. She seemed worried about what she intended to tell me.

"Huh? Tell what?" I replied. Somehow, I got what she meant. I saw her swallowed as she met my gaze.

"Tell Elise about Adrian." I faked a laugh and it made her look annoyed. "Look, I am not joking, okay." She added. I sighed as I smiled.

"Why do I need to tell her?"

"Do you want to be the bad guy here? Let me remind you, Carmella...she's honest, like freaking honest I couldn't help but to feel guilty." She responded, even avoided my gaze.

"I am thinking about how to do it. However, I can't help but worry too much."

"Worry about what?"

"Well, I am thinking that if I tell her about Adrian, then it's like admitting I have a boyfriend or something like that."

"What? Oh my goodness how did you come up with that, all of a sudden?"

"Well, it's been a long time since we started going out. If she finds out that I am keeping all these stuff to her, I feel like everything will be messed up."

"Messed up with what? With whom? I always know you'll never think about that."

"She's not malicious, that's a fact. I don't want her to think that something is happening between the two of us."

"Whoah, Carmella, you know what? You're a more advanced thinker than I thought. I am liking it." Kara said as she chuckled. I glared at her because of her funny response.

"Nope. That would not happen, never."

"But you just admitted to me that you liked him, right? Don't tell me it will never go somewhere, like in a deeper lane?"

"You're crazy," I shook my head but I felt my cheeks flustered.

"Hey, you're blushing!"

"No, I am not!" Too late, too bad, Kara knew me more than anyone. I just covered my face because I looked like a red tomato about to burst out.

"Hello, Kaka!" My heart almost jumped when someone greeted behind us. It is Hope. I hope she didn't hear what we're talking about just now.

"Kaka?" Kara and I almost chorused. It made her laugh so much. We were scratching our heads and laughed with her since hers is really contagious.

"Carmella and Kara." She said between chuckles. We replied a long, amazed 'ohhs' as our response.

"I just think that it will be cool to call you that since both of your names have similar first syllables when pronounced."

"I really like this girl. Where did you get her?" Kara referred to me. She puts her left arm on Hope's shoulders, pulling her close as she stands beside her.

"She found me, okay? It's like a gem is finding her owner on her own." We laughed altogether.

I looked at Hope and she looked really charming and innocent. Kara is right. I am starting to feel guilty. All these months of friendship with her, she never failed to share every little detail of her life to me. She's always honest. The truth is, she's too good for me. I haven't even remembered getting angry at her because she'll be the first to say sorry if she thinks things are not happening her way.

Her good heart is always admirable. She's really kind. If you're her best friend, there's never a way you will try to hurt her in any way.

We went inside our room. Everyone gets too focused on listening to our professor because it's the last year before we go to college. We have to stay focused or else we will lose track of our goal.

Yeah, I almost forgot. That goal. My goal to be number one, as always. I glanced at Hope who was smiling as she listened to our professor.

How could she get so relaxed in everything? I can't deny the fact that I envy her too much. Her father loves her so much that she doesn't need to prove herself. I sighed and scribbled some notes. Kara gasped with amazement on how organized my notes were.

"Oh my, that's effortless for you. Gosh, I wish I could do that, too."

"Miss Kara..."

I could hear most of my classmates chuckle because of what our professor did. Kara sat straight and focused on her notes as well.

"Everyone, I need you to stay focused and treat everything with confidence and perseverance."

I could hear some murmurs coming from my classmates as they mentioned my name and Hope, too.

This is the part where I hate the most. I have to admit it. We are being compared.

"Imagine, a newcomer beating Carmella? That would be really exciting!"

"That's not impossible. Hope only gave Carmella a chance last school year. Hope should be the first if not for her kindness."

My two gossiping classmates were the worst. How could they even talk when they know that I would hear it?

"I know, right? That's why we have to observe them closely. That's really fun." Thelma secretly did a high-five with Denise under the table as they smirked.

I sighed as I began to feel anxious. If only looks can kill, those two were already dead by now.

I glanced at Kara who looked at them as she closed her fists. I shook my head from left to right as I gazed at her. She shifted her attention at them and glared at the two. When they realized that Kara is looking at them as if warning them, they stopped talking and comparing Hope and me, for now. However, I know they will never stop until they will see me at number two.

Our English class is done without me even feeling it. I saw Hope coming towards us. Her sweet smile brightened everyone. She's giving us the lighter aura like that of an angel.

"Whoah, if I am a guy, I would court you right now." I chuckled because Kara almost say my thoughts out loud, it's amazing.

"Kara, stop harassing Elise Hope, will you?" I said between chuckles. I can see Hope covered her mouth as she chuckled, too. She put her arms around Kara's shoulders so that it made her blush.

"Why would you even think about that?"

"Well, aside from you looking exactly like Gal Gadot, I am really a fan of beautiful girls." She said while raising her eyebrows up and down while grinning.

"That's why we became the best of friends." I answered that it made Kara laugh. Hope is really cool because she nodded as if agreeing with me.

"Right. I will not agree more." Hope replied, enjoying what she's seeing right now. I noticed that most of our classmates seem to judge the three of us from head to foot. From the look of their eyes, I noticed that they are not in favor of us, Hope, being best of friends. Well, who would want rivals to become friends, right?

As Hope looked at me, I could see how genuine she is that I couldn't help but to avoid my gaze. She's literally killing me with kindness that it hurts me so bad. It is making me feel really guilty even for no reason at all.

"If I am a guy, she's my crush for a lifetime." I added which made Kara snort out. She's really outrageous when she laughs. It is causing too much attention.

"Oh boy...you gals are amazing. I regret not studying more for this section."

"You're not too late, dear. You still belong because it is like saving the best for last."

"Thanks Elise and Carmella. Thank you both for welcoming me."

"Welcome to the club, babe." I even wink at my first best friend before Hope. If I have a lot of bashers, they are both enough to keep me going. My thoughts were disturbed when my phone rang.

When I looked at the call register, I realized that it was Adrian. Hope and Kara gave me a confused look.

"Why won't you answer?" I gently swallowed after Hope said those words. She even smiled that it made me nervous all of a sudden.

"Guys, please wait, I'll just answer this call." I stepped almost four meters away from them before I answered my phone.

"H-Hello?" I even put my hand on the lower part of the phone as I answered. I heard a cute, chuckling voice on the other line.

"Hey, you sounded like you just finished a sprint. What happened?"

Gosh, Adrian why are you being like this? I just kept the thoughts to myself as I bit my lower lip.

"Uhm, nothing. Sorry, I ran outside the room to answer your call."

"I miss you. Let's eat after school please? Wait, let me go there to fetch you."

A rush of panic swept through me as I looked around. Carmella and Hope are also looking at my direction. When Kara slowly got my point, she tried to talk to Hope to distract her.

I sighed with relief before I answered back. "Yes, of course."

Chapter 31: THE SURE UNCERTAINTY

Carmella's POV

"Great. Wait for me..." I heard a pause on the other line. "Oh, so it's the dismissal of class. You don't have a reason to reject my offer anymore."

My heart is about to burst out, well not because of excitement but it is more of mixed emotions. I came back to where Kara and Hope is. They are looking at me as if waiting to tell them something.

"Girls, I have to go ahead of you, ok? My mom needs me at home and it is urgent." Gosh, I can't even make eye contact with Hope. When I glanced at Kara, she winked at me. She knew that I would be dating her cousin again.

"Please take care, Carmella."

"Should I call my father? Just join us because I am sure dad will be on his way too." Hope insisted. I swallowed hard when I got a text message coming from Adrian. He's here.

"Thanks but no thanks. Maybe some other time, dear. I really have to go. Take care girls! Kara, please stay with Hope for a while, alright?"

"Aye, aye, Carmella!" Kara glanced at me again and when our eyes met, she gave me a meaningful smile. I hope Hope didn't see that.

I rushed at the gate and as expected, I saw Adrian's car stopped in front of it. He lowered the glass window and waved at me. I smiled as soon as I saw him.

"Oh my, is that Carmella?" My heart suddenly beat very fast when I saw Thelma, one of the best gossipers in our school. I covered my face with my book and ran towards Adrian's car.

I looked back to see if they were still looking. I bit my lip when they both stopped taking another step just to observe what I will do next. I opened the backseat and I sat next to Adrian.

"I noticed you're always in a rush. Everything alright?" Adrian asked and I can see his worried look. I smiled as I poked her arm.

"There's not a problem except for my classmates. They like to find any fault in me. Our meeting might be a big issue later on, you know."

"Oh, I see." He nodded and became silent for a minute. The car started to move away from our school gate going to one of Adrian's favorite snack houses.

"Mr. Hale, please drive us to Stars unlimited."

"Yes, sir."

"Where's Stars Unlimited? I've never heard of that before..." I whispered near his ear which made him chuckle a bit.

"Look, I am so sorry for being a bit ignorant about the situation. I have decided to go to Stars unlimited. It's a bit far from here, about 9 kilometers."

"What?"

"Don't worry. I am sure that nobody could ever know you in that snack bar because it's an exclusive bar." He grinned as he held my hand. I sighed. My, he's giving me this kind of feeling again. I thought 'butterflies in the stomach' is a myth but why am I feeling it now?

I looked at him and as I met his gaze, he automatically smiled. "Am I that handsome enough that you really look at me like that?" He said between chuckles. Gosh, he's becoming handsome even more.

"I will lie if I will disagree. Besides, you will treat me with some food so I have to return the favor, right?"

"Point taken." He smiled as he held my hand tighter this time. I've never felt secured all my life, just now. The car stopped in front of a small bar that seemed like on top of a hill. It is covered with LED lights that seemed to sparkle like stars at night. I suddenly remembered the movie "The Hobbit" because of the design of this snack bar, however, it is placed on top of the hill instead of being inside a hill.

"Whoah, I've never seen this place before." I gasped with amazement. He didn't let go of my hand even if we already got out of the car.

"Mr. Hale, please come with us. You can also enjoy yourself inside. Go grab some snacks, too."

"Thanks, sir Adrian." I can see that Adrian's driver is so happy about what he said a while ago.

He opened the door for me. As I stepped inside, the rustic design of the snack bar made it more homey. I love the wooden scent that greeted us. There were potted plants and minimalist designs of cats. There were abstract portraits and words of wisdom placed on the walls, too. The jazz music that's being played as background gave me this feeling of relaxation.

I am also glad that I can only see five customers in total. They were also minding their own business and were seated far away from each other.

"See?"

"Wow, this place is really beautiful."

"I know. It's one of the restaurants that I love going to whenever I feel stressed from a lot of school-related activities." He said as he gently pulled me close to one of the tables that seemed his favorite corner. It is placed next to the window overlooking the lake downhill.

"You really know where to go depending on the situation you're in. I should ask you about this one often." I replied. It made him smile. I can see that he's genuinely happy. I guess he felt successful in pleasing me about the place.

"Hello, Ian. How are you?" One of the good-looking male waiters approached us. He smiled at me, too.

"I'm good, Sean. By the way, this is my dear friend Carmella." I felt like blushing because of the word "dear" coming from him, although I didn't like the next word after it.

"She's beautiful, Ian. Good catch." He winked.

"What?" I shyly responded that made both of them chuckle.

"No, don't mind Sean, Charm. He's just fooling around. By the way, the usual, please."

"Coming right up!" He gave Adrian a fist bump before he walked away.

"Wow. This place and everyone is really cool."

"I know you will also like it here. I ordered their signature caesar salad and roasted chicken. That's my best combination."

"That's good. It's a healthy choice." I smiled and it made him ecstatic. I can see it through his eyes. He showed me some of his video edits. He's also taking pictures of our food orders before we eat. I never thought that he's taking pictures of me whenever he gets a chance.

I admit, I love the food and I am also starting to love the person who ordered me this food. I smiled as I cupped both of my cheeks while facing him. He chuckled as he placed his camera in front of me. Before I can even react, he already pressed the button and got that shot of me smiling really wide.

"That's seemed unfair." I said while pouting my lips. He chuckled a bit as he stood up. My heart almost fell down as he sat beside me. He leaned closer as he clicked on the screen of his camera. He proudly showed me my stolen shots while leaning even closer to me. I can almost smell his breath and his face closer to mine, we're almost inches apart!

"Wow, I've never seen such a beauty even if you're eating a mouthful already."

"Oh my goodness! I know you're just telling me these things so that I will allow you to keep my pictures, am I right?"

"Well, let's just put it that way, too." He chuckled as he nodded. I smiled as I agreed right away. I have a choice to let him delete my pictures but since he's enjoying it, then I just let him have it.

While we're enjoying looking at more pictures, I received a text message coming from Kara.

"Hey Charm...did you two go out for a date again?" My goodness! I can imagine Kara's cute giggles as she types this one.

"Yep. Gonna update you as soon as I reach my room. We're going home at this moment." I smiled as I put my phone inside my pocket. Adrian glanced at me but he never minded asking who I am replying to on my phone. As usual, he sent me home, three meters away from our front gate to avoid our gossiping neighbors.

"Hi Kara!"

My best friend screamed with excitement as soon as I called her. She's really silly.

"What happened? Gosh I am so freakin' sorry, I just couldn't wait to hear from you."

"What do you expect? Of course we only ate snacks, that's all."

"Really? Why? Nothing more?"

"You're crazy! Of course there's nothing else. What do you expect, a proposal?" I chuckled as soon as I said those words.

"Who knows? I mean, c'mon. Please try having a boyfriend. We can keep it a secret, I promise."

"Gosh, and what if my mom will swallow you alive for being a 'bad influence' to me, huh?"

"Bad influence, my ass! She's already used to me, you know."

"I don't want to see you double-dead, so it is still a 'no' for me."

"Hey, on a serious note, though. What if Adrian will confess his feelings to you one day? Will you accept it?"

Gosh, for the first time, Kara is not being herself. She's being damned serious and it made me think about it as well...

What if there's a possibility that it will happen sooner? What should I do?

Chapter 32: LOVING THE MOMENTS

Carmella's POV

"We'll be crossing the bridge when we get there. I can't tell right now."

"Well, you should be taking it into consideration too."

"It would always depend upon the approval of my mom. You know her pretty well, right?"

"So, you will let her control your life forever? Like, hello? Who the fool could ever perfect every quiz, exams and even recitations with no errors at all?" In a few minutes, there was silence until I could hear a low chuckle on the other line.

"Oops, I forgot you're that fool...hehe" She even added. I frowned as I got annoyed all of a sudden.

"Wait a minute til I get there. You'll surely be dead."

"Sorry, alright? I'll just keep quiet to save myself. I almost forgot you're an old maid in the making." She chuckled and before I even reacted, she ended the call already. Kara is really one, silly best friend you'll ever wish you have and hate at the same time.

I tried sleeping that night three hours after Adrian sent me home. I turned side to side but I failed to sleep. Kara had a point, though. There's a possibility that I am not even sure about.

What if he will really confess his feelings to me? What should I answer? How would I even react? This is way too impossible. I closed my eyes to rest my head. I have to put this in mind so that I could prepare and be ready if that is the case.

The next day came and today is the deadline for the submission of the money that we decided to give to our adviser. It's a simple gift for her birthday which is tomorrow.

"Hey, Kams, is your mom okay with the financial problem she has recently had?"

"She's dealing with it." I said as we walked side by side as we went to our respective seats.

"By the way, about that birthday thing...How much is it?" Kara is scratching her head as she leaned closer to me.

"It will be 200 each." I whispered back and it made her smile.

"Whoa...why is it that costly?" I poked her arm to prevent her from saying the next words aloud. She chuckled as she gave the bills to me.

Kara is only complaining but the truth is, she's rich among all of us. Well, I have to say it is Hope. I experienced going to their house and she has two maids at least for her own. However, she is not vocal about herself that's why Kara is always treated as 'queen' inside our room.

"Well, our adviser had a dream dress and it cost at least eight thousand pesos. We have to give it to her to make her happy at least." I told Kara that she nodded in agreement right away.

"That seemed reasonable." I handed the total number of money that I collected from Hope and Kara to our class treasurer. I smiled at her but she just rolled her eyes. Oh, I remembered she's one of Thelma's best friend.

She walked away from me and walked towards her group of friends. Three minutes had passed and our class began. When our class for that subject is over and our teacher went outside the room, our class president Elieria stood in front of us.

"Jess, can I have the money now? I have to buy it right after our class." Jess smiled at our president as she held her pocket at the same time.

"Oh, no! I think the envelope is missing!" Jess cried in panic. Everyone murmured as they looked around. Thelma even helped her find the envelope by opening her bag and emptied everything but they couldn't find it.

"Where would it go? I am just here inside the room when I completed all of it to hand it over to you." Jess started to cry because she's being blamed by almost everyone around her.

"Don't be a fool, it's not your fault! Someone stole it! That's for sure! To whom did you last talk with before you returned to your seat?"

"I talked to Carmella before I sat on my seat." She said between sobs as she wiped her tears.

Suddenly, everybody's attention is on me. To my horror, they went around me and started whispering to each other again. Some of my classmates even started throwing crumpled papers as they made fun and even cursed me to death.

Kara and Hope stopped them by standing in front of me. Some of my classmates stopped from what they were doing after seeing my two, respectable classmates and my best of friends.

"Hey, I guess it is not also proper to just put the blame into someone innocent."

Thelma suddenly stood up to Jess' defense.

"Oh yeah," She put one of her hands to her hips and raised one of her eyebrows.

"Why don't we check Carmella's bag for us to really find out?" Denise stood beside Thelma as she grabbed my bag on my chair. She started unzipping it and everyone gasped when an envelope fell from my bag.

"Why did that envelope get in there?" I asked out loud that made most of my classmates angrier even more.

"See, Hope? You don't even know who you are trying to defend in the first place. If I were you, start eliminating Hope from your friend's list to get you out of trouble." Thelma said as she

smirked. My heart really beat fast as tears started to fall down on my cheeks. I ran as fast as I could, out of our room. My other classmates were too shocked they haven't got the chance to follow me.

The commotion continued inside the room. Kara and Hope stood up from where Carmella left. Kara started to cry while Hope closed his two fists.

"Thelma, you will never get the chance to get away from this, I promise."

"Oh, yeah? I don't even understand how you treat Carmella as a dear friend when all she does is to bite you back."

"I will report this to our principal. I know you're behind this. I saw you awhile ago opening Carmella's bag." Everyone gasped and whispered words to one another while others started to throw crumpled papers to Thelma.

She swallowed as she looked around. Most of their classmates got really mad and annoyed at the same time.

"T-That's not true!"

"Do you still want evidence?" Hope said in a warning tone. Kara waved her phone as she smirked.

"Everybody, please listen," Hope calmly said as she hovered her gaze around the room. It made everyone gather closely as they turned their focus to her.

"Bullying someone for your own satisfaction is not funny. It will never be funny especially that you're already hurting someone in the process." Thelma started to cry as Jess was hugging her.

"But hating someone for doing it for a longer period of time is also bad, isn't it?" Most of their classmates nodded.

"Let's not let this issue reach the principal's office to maintain the reputation of this section."

"Okay, Elise Hope. What you think is good will be okay for us."

"Guys, I am really sorry. I really am. I just want to make fun of Carmella. I never thought it will end up this way."

Everyone, are you willing to forgive Thelma?"

"Yes, Elise Hope." Most of their classmates nodded as they looked at Thelma.

"Of course. However, I couldn't forgive her that easily. Your apologies should not end from this room alone." Hope smiled as Thelma met her gaze. She tapped her shoulder and she let Thelma face her.

"Y-Yes, Elise Hope. I will follow Carmella right now and apologize to her."

"You have to. And please, never do it again. It is not right to just make fun of others for your own satisfaction. It is not even funny in the first place."

Thelma ran outside the room. Even if she's still crying, she followed Carmella to where she's heading.

"You know what? I never thought Thelma is that bad..." Most of their classmates murmured as they formed themselves into their groups of friends.

"Guys, let's not make this one a big issue. Nobody deserves hate. Let's try to forget everything and move on."

"Wow, Hope, you know what? I admire you so much. You make everything easy."

"You're everybody's dream."

"Stop it, silly." Kara chuckled when Elise responded to one of their boy classmates. It seemed like he's very interested in her, he's able to say those words. Sadly, I guess he's simply not her type of guy.

"You got Hope-ted!" Elise and Kara laughed out loud and their classmate chuckled, too. Kara is also full of humor, that's why everyone loves her being around. Thelma apologized to Carmella but she's always into her and on how she'll have her revenge. She always knew she could, and she'll have to make sure she'll not get caught by anyone, not even Elise Hope herself.

Chapter 33: THE LOVE TRAP

Carmella's POV

Months became shorter for me to even notice it. We're in the last two months of senior high. I can't help but be excited for what's in store for me. I don't want to assume but I could see that I am going to maintain my spot from last year. It is making me feel inspired even more.

I was walking through the hallway when someone blocked my way.

"Hello Carmella..." It was Thelma, the lead gossip of the school. My goodness. I want to ask her if she's really liking her title so much she's living it.

"Hi," I answered as I tried avoiding her by walking in another direction. She blocked my way by going there, too.

"What do you want? A password?" I frowned as I met her gaze. She chuckled because of what I said. She's like a door from a narrow pathway that I couldn't enter easily.

"Nope. I just want to let you see this." She placed her hand on her pocket as she pulled her phone. She raised her hand while holding her phone, showing me her phone screen. There's a video that's been paused for a while.

She really intended to show me this one. Probably a new scoop. She clicked the 'play' button and the video showed someone playing basketball. When I realized that it was Adrian, I swallowed hard.

So, Thelma knew all along? What is she up to, this time?

"W-What do you mean by this?" I met her gaze and she's smirking. It creeps the hell out of me, swear.

"Gosh, you're only seeing seconds from the video, keep watching, baby girl.

I blinked and from the video, there's a girl who is observing Adrian from one corner. My eyes widened when I realized it was Elise Hope. My best friend. She's smiling and blushing as she claps her hands. She's really focused on watching him and she's not even wasting any seconds to give her attention to somebody else.

"Well, what can you say?" I blinked when I realized that the video is over but my eyes never left Thelma's phone screen. I avoided her gaze because her smirking is irritating me so much. It gets me annoyed easily.

I tried stepping into a different direction and yet she's too fast to let me pass. She's intending to block my way.

"What should I say?" I exclaimed out of annoyance. Seeing my heightened emotion excites her so much. She's really evil.

"I shouldn't ask, right?" She stepped on her left foot, giving way for me to pass. What I saw kept repeating inside my head. I felt like crying. I got the opportunity to walk away before it will be too obvious for her.

"Looks like the friendship will be over soon." Her voice resounded the empty hallway. I closed my fist and turned to face her again.

"Nice try girl, but it will never happen." I said as I turned my back. She kept on blabbering nonsense words that's adding pain to my wounds. I don't care anymore. It's a good thing that I have been warned, anyway.

I admit, my world is like falling apart right now. I don't know why she has to also like the one that I like.

"Hey!" Kara approached me as she tapped my shoulders. She noticed my facial expression that made her wrinkle her forehead.

"What happened to you? You look miserable." She said in a very straightforward mode. I found myself crying as I hugged her tight. Elise Hope looked at our direction but I don't feel like talking to her right now. Even if she's an angel, I don't have the courage to talk to her.

"Sorry, dear, Carmella had a problem. She just doesn't want it to talk to most of us, including me, right now." I heard Kara explaining to Hope. As I glanced at her, I saw her nodded.

I really admire Kara for being a good friend. She knew me really well. She's able to see my situation whenever I cry or whenever I feel miserable.

"Thank you," I mouthed. She winked at me as she gave me a gesture which more like, "text or chat me" with the use of her hands. I nodded. That's always the thing that usually happens.

I received a text message coming from Hope. I looked at my phone and to her direction. She smiled and winked at me.

"I hope you're alright. I will always be here if you want to talk about it, okay? Don't be shy." I sighed. Our classes continued. I tried focusing myself on our lessons. I also replied to Hope about what happened. Of course, using my mom as an alibi again. We met at the library and we sat next to each other. Kara got some books in the other aisle while we're already done. We're already reading our books. She's tapping my shoulders and it made me annoyed secretly.

"I will also tell you something. You'll be the only one who will know this secret of mine, dear." All of a sudden, I felt like my heart beat really fast.

"W-What is it?" I faked a smile, like I always do.

"Dear Carmella, I think I am in love." I looked at her in the eyes. She cupped her cheeks with both her hands.

"Wow, who's the lucky guy?" I bit my lip as I stopped myself from crying. I shouldn't feel this way, right?

"Well, I don't know his name yet but I admire his basketball skills so much. He's really good at playing basketball."

"Is he our classmate? Or schoolmate? Do I know him?" Gosh, I never thought pretending could be this hard.

"Hmm, I doubt you know him. I guess he's not from here."

"Why? How can you say so?"

"Well, I never see him often. He's a new face." While she's telling me these things, I can see her blushing too much.

"Wow, how I wish I will know him too. I am sure he's handsome." I replied. It made her describe Adrian's face almost similarly to his crush and it made all of what I feared come true.

She's also in love with someone I love, too.

"What?" Kara exclaimed as I told her everything. From what Thelma showed me and from what Elise Hope confirmed to me.

"You know what, Charm, I don't know what to feel right now. I want to curse my cousin for being 'too handsome'."

I sighed as my reply. She held my shoulders and tapped it as if to comfort me.

"And what a coincidence, you both liked the same guy! Is this a joke of the 21st century?"

"I guess I will agree to that."

"Well, if I will choose whom to bet, I should probably be on your side. Of course, I am your best friend before Elise Hope."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"It made me doubt this time, though."

I can't help but to glare at Kara. What does she mean by this one? Doubt?

"What?"

"Kamz, look, Elise Hope is really kind. She's beautiful inside and out. She's been defending you and helping you most of the time."

"Keep talking..." I responded coldly. I guess I knew where this conversation would go.

"Can you still remember the last time she asked any favor from you or from anybody?"

Suddenly, I am confused. I want to hit my best friend for being silly at cliffhangers.

"Can you please tell me everything straight to the point?" I said as I put my hands on my hips.

"Okay, okay, what I am saying is, what if she'll ask Adrian for a favor from you? She's really blushing and she's so in love."

"What? Kara, you can always give your cousin to her."

"Do you mean it or it was meant for sarcasm? I knew you, dear." Kara said as she smiled.

"I don't know, Kara. I just want things to happen when they will happen. Why do I have to answer you in the first place?"

"Well, your opinion would always matter."

"If it matters then honestly, I want Adrian for myself."

I could see the shocked expression from Kara's face. Shocked, at the same time, pleased from what she heard from me.

"Finally, I am hearing something I wanted the most."

"Wanted the most?"

"That you want Adrian for yourself. I mean, friendship would be there but you can't easily get away with love. You have to make decisions sometimes."

"Kara, you know what, please admit it. Do you have a boyfriend?"

"Nope. Just a bunch of friends from my previous section who love to get along with guys. They love to play with love and it bounced back to them."

"Ooh, I see."

"I am speaking from other's experiences."

"That's why you're certain of what you're talking about."

"Yep. I just want to make things clear to you, dear. Now that you told me you'll fight for your love with my cousin, I hope that would be until the very end." She hugged me, on the other hand, Kara is giving me a weird vibe.

'Fight for your love until the very end...'

Chapter 34:SHINE YOUR WAY

Carmella's POV

'Fight for your love until the very end...'

These words coming from Kara really bothered me for days. I don't understand what she really meant by it.

The secret dates kept on for months until our graduation came. I have succeeded being the first in my class. I could see Thelma not happy with it. I know her group and herself wanted Hope to be on the number one spot, badly. So sad, it is always meant for me.

Our pre-graduation pictures came. It is my most awaited day of the year. It's the only time my mother would come to our school with her best attire. She chins up as she walks past the group of parents who also wanted my spot. I've never seen her this proud of me so I should also seize the chance, too.

In our pre-graduation picture taking, students are allowed to take their parents with them to take their pictures. It is every student's chance to have their parents in their graduation picture. With their best attires and togas, everybody dolled up for this event. Even our male classmates. I've never seen them so handsome before, just now. Everyone is really excited for today's event.

Since I ranked first in academics among the nine-hundred graduates, I already expected a VIP treatment from the school organizers and even from my teachers. I was the very first that's allowed to be taken pictures of.

It was the happiest for me because I am like the queen of the school this time. All eyes were on me. I am given the extra time that I need. I also experienced loving gestures from my mom. Although I know she's loathing most of it, I don't care. From this experience, however, Kara and Elise Hope couldn't talk or even interact with me.

I looked around and yeah, it is quite impossible because all of us are busy. Many of my classmates were busy talking to their parents. I saw others who were snacking and hugging their parents. I guess they miss them so much, too.

I know I am not alone. I always know I belong to those students whose parents are always busy with their jobs and businesses. I know they only have their chance right now, too.

"Shall we?" Mom disrupted my thoughts as she tapped on my shoulders. I smiled as I held her hand. We had a lot of pictures taken by a lot of organizations, departments, especially our teachers and the class picture, too. The event almost took us one whole day.

I am the happiest because this is the longest time that my mom bonded with me. It never felt this good. I want to cry with tears of joy.

Kara and Elise Hope updated me with their own family pictures. I had fun watching them while we were waiting for our orders. Mom made it really special for me because she picked one of the restaurants that I loved the most.

"Carmella, look at the menu. Please enjoy yourself more. I will let you pick what you would want to eat, alright?"

"Yes mom." She also looked at the pictures from my phone that I let her browse the pictures of Kara and Elise Hope for me. All of a sudden, her facial expression changed when she gazed at the pictures of Elise Hope and her dad.

"Mom, what's wrong?" I gave her a curious look.

"This is Elise Hope's dad?"

"Yes, mom. He is Mr. Leonard Guirre. Do you know him?" I smiled as I asked her. She gave me a weak sigh as she handed my phone back to me.

"No. I just thought he looked like my classmate from a long time ago."

Our order came right before I could say any reply to my mom. We had a nice mother-daughter bonding. She even fed me by putting a spoonful of rice to my mouth.

"Thanks, mom." I want to giggle with happiness but I am stopping myself because there were a lot of people who were glancing at us. I am ashamed a little but I always love it when it happens.

I also noticed someone sent me a chat message. I secretly opened it under my table while mom is busy with the shrimps and crabs.

"Wow. My Princess Diana...you look stunning." It made me smile. Positive words of admiration coming from the one I love is I guess, more than enough. I love it because it completed my day.

I can't help but be excited for tomorrow's graduation. I can't even sleep anticipating the event. I went home with mom full of happiness. I never thought she could file a leave for five days from work and the reason is me. I can't help but to feel really special.

"Thanks, mom." I smiled as she tucked me to bed. She touched my cheek and gave me a weak smile, too.

"There's always a reward for being hard-working. I am very proud you have that. Please continue doing a great job, not for me but for yourself."

"No, mom. I am doing it for us. I am not doing this for myself, either. I want to give you a good life."

She stood up and turned her back to me right away, as if never wanting to hear from any of it.

"I promise mom. I will do my best to give you a good life. You don't have to work all day long and get tired all the time." I heard her chuckle from my words as if feeling amused more than impressed.

"You have a long way to go. Just prove it to me." She gently stepped towards the door of my room.

"I will. I love you so much, mom."

I saw her twisting the doorknob of my door. "Rest well. You will still have your big day tomorrow." She went outside without even answering what I desire to hear from her.

Well, that's alright. I judge actions more than I judge words so it is fine.

She went to her room right away. After seeing that picture from her daughter's phone, it started bothering her so much.

She slowly sat down on her bed as she reminisced the moments...

How could she even forget him when he's the only man that she loved from the very start.

Leonard Glitz...she never thought they will be able to cross paths again. How could she be so busy? Too busy to even know everyone?

flashback

"Please take care of Elise Hope, honey. I will be going there after two months. I can't wait to see my baby girl." She excitedly called her boyfriend who had several businesses in America. Leonard had dual citizenship that's why he could go both to the Philippines and America.

"I can't wait to marry you, too." She exclaimed with excitement. She couldn't help but cry with tears of joy.

He arranged her documents ready for her to go to her family, too. Being reunited with the one that she really loved the most feels so right.

However, one rainy night, when she's walking home from work, she met a man. A colleague from a long time ago. She remembered turning him down a couple of times because she's choosing Leonard among all.

He was so drunk that he forced her to ride her car and raped her inside. Everything shattered into pieces from then on. Her hopes, her everything when she found out she's pregnant from the man she learnt to hate the most.

She was successful in putting the man behind bars but then Carmella came into her life without warning. She learnt to hate her with all her heart. However, Carmella grew up to be a responsible and loving daughter.

She grew up thinking about how to please her and to make her happy even if she's already hurting her physically and emotionally. It is all at the same time.

end of flashback

She looked at the picture of her baby Elise Hope from the moment she's already two years old and her recent picture. She closed her fist as tears gushed on her cheeks.

She's trying her best to stop being so obvious to her baby girl. She wanted to hug her so bad. She also wanted to face Leonard but how could she? More than ten years had passed and she made a big mistake. She just vanished into thin air, without even telling where she is. She left their house. She refused to even inform her mom where she would stay so that Leonard could not trace her.

From then on, she spent all of her time working and earning money to the point that she's not even caring about her physical appearance. It's like she became ten years older because of stress. Her figure is not even as good as before because she gained a lot of extra weight, too.

She slowly looked at herself in the mirror as she cried.

How she missed her family so much. There's never a time in her life that she forgot them. If they will all know the truth, will Leonard forgive her? Will he be able to forgive her for bringing Carmella into this world? For leaving him and Elise Hope without even saying a word?

Chapter 35: TRUTH UNFOLDS

Carmella woke up with a smile. She still refused to believe that today is their graduation day. This is the time where she will get the reward that she'd been waiting for all her life.

She stretched her limbs and smiled as she faced the mirror. She combed her hair, after that, she brushed her teeth. She's really in her greatest mood. She looked at herself again in the mirror and as she blinked her eyes, it all came back to her once more...

flashback

A month before this event, she remembered a time where she walked past the principal's office. It was half-opened.

"Hope, why did you do that? You should be the top one if you got perfect scores in all of the exams."

She stopped and stepped aside. The voice of their principal was too loud and she could clearly hear what they were talking about.

"Sir, there's nothing wrong. I did my best but I guess it wasn't good enough." Carmella felt a slight pinch on her heart.

What does she mean by that?

"Are you doing this because of Carmella? Hope, please reconsider. At the end of the day, it is not a charity for you to give. You also have to think about yourself."

"Sir, please judge according to grades. I am also doing all my best as a student but do not disregard what Carmella could do, too."

"Elise Hope..." Their principal tried to warn her.

"Let things be the way they used to be. Please don't worry about me, sir. I know the title will fall to those who really deserve it best."

Carmella felt footsteps going outside the office. It alerted her right away. She ran as fast as she could with tears in her eyes.

'Oh, Elise Hope, you're too much...'

end of flashback

She wiped her tears as she recalled that moment. It only added to her suspicion that Hope is not intending to snatch her academic rank away from her.

Instead, she's willingly giving it away, but why?

She got up and prepared for the big day that's happening especially for her. Her mom helped her prepare everything. She's even touched by her kindness because she even hired a make-up artist for her glammed up look. Bought her a pricey dress and the shoes of her dreams that she will wear under her white toga.

They reached the school grounds full of graduates. The moment that most of them have been waiting for.

The program started at three in the afternoon and ended at seven in the evening. Everyone is almost going home. However, Carmella, Kara and Elise Hope gathered inside their room with their classmates for the last time.

Hope got the second spot while Kara landed on the top ten.

"Guys, I am really proud of myself!" She shrieked, which made both of them laugh.

"Gosh, I thought you will congratulate Carmella for being the first and my rank, too." Hope replied right away.

"Duh, Carmella is already full of praises. Her rank is overrated and predictable, already. Can't you see? Nobody is even congratulating her this time because they knew how this year would end." Carmella laughed as she poked Kara on her arm.

"Ow! That hurts!" Hope chuckled as Kara poked Carmella back.

"Hey! I've never been poked by anyone before! Am I that good? Please let me experience it!"

"Shut up!" Carmella and Kara chorused that Hope couldn't help but giggle. Kara bid the two goodbye as she followed her parents. They will go to their family-owned five-star hotel for dinner. Kara also booked Carmella and Hope but they have decided to follow later. It was because many teachers and sponsors were too busy interviewing and taking photos of Hope's dad and Carmella's mom. They noticed that they were the only ones left inside the room.

Someone looked from left to right as if observing if somebody might have caught her peeking through their classroom's window.

From the outside, she could see Carmella and Hope having their heart-to-heart talk.

She saw her chance this time. Pranks are common nowadays, why not do a lock-in-the-room prank, right? She smirked as she gently closed their classroom's door and locked it using a big lock that she bought at a hardware. Nobody saw what she did. After locking Carmella and Hope inside their classroom, she kept the key inside her pocket and left the place right away.

Their parents will eventually discover that they were inside the room and let them out anyway. She just wants to have fun.

"Hey, I need to talk to you," Carmella couldn't help but cry with tears of joy. She walked towards Hope as she hugged her tight.

Hope was caught off guard she just chuckled as her way of response to what Carmella did.

"Do you have a problem?"

"You are my problem." Carmella replied in a very straightforward manner.

"What?" Her voice started to change, too.

"Why are you being good? I mean, why are you doing these things to me?"

"What things?"

"You don't have to give up being the first. You could always aim for the top, too. Why are you giving it to me?"

"Huh? Carmella, please don't talk nonsense. I am doing my best. It happened that you are too good at being on top, who am I to spoil it?"

"You silly girl," Carmella gently poked her arm that made Hope laugh a little.

"I will always support you in everything. That's what friends are for, right?" Hope answered as she gently poked Carmella back.

"Let's go out from here. I guess our parents were waiting for us now." Hope smiled as she held Carmella's hand.

"Okay," They were nearing the door when Hope felt something weird.

"Gosh, I am beginning to feel dizzy. Carmella, don't shake the chairs."

"H-Hope...the ground is shaking!"

"What?" Carmella's eyes grew wide when she felt the tremors were getting stronger and their feet were feeling it. The movement of the ground from the second floor of the building was uncontrollable at that time they could both hear shrieks to most of the people left inside the school premises.

"Hope! Don't ever leave me please! I am scared!" Carmella shouted at her as she held her hands tight.

"No, I will never!" Carmella felt Hope's hands grip hers tight. They both saw the chairs began turning down and dust from the ceilings began to fall down. They could see cracks on the walls as they began to form from the four corners of the room. The shelves began to collapse. All of a sudden, there's a strong wave of tremor that separates them. Hope was pushed on the left side, under where the metal chairs were turned down. Carmella was pushed on the right, near the door.

"Carmella! Save yourself! Go outside! Now!" Hope shouted at the top of her lungs. Carmella could see Hope's head with blood gushing down her face as she tried her best to push the chairs that covered her body on the left side of the room.

"No! I will never leave you here!" Carmella stepped back when the bookshelf near the door collapsed in front of the door that's located on the right side of the room.

The tremor stopped for a while, however, aftershocks continued. Carmella bent down on four limbs as she crawled to where Hope was located.

"D-Don't be afraid, I am here now." They both found themselves crying because of the horror that instantly happened. There was a total blackout and they were unfortunate enough because their classroom was located inside an old building already.

With all of her strength left within her, Carmella tried getting up and lifted the chairs that almost covered Hope's entire body.

"Hope, please answer me! Are you there?"

"Carmella, thank you," she heard a weak voice that responded to her right away.

"I'm here, look! I am a wonder woman!" She chuckled as she lifted more metal chairs as fast as she could and threw it to the other side. Carmella tried to joke around despite her knees shaking uncontrollably. She could hear Hope's weak chuckle, too.

She cried silently as she tried to move fast. She has to save her best friend this time. She has to repay her kindness, whatever it takes.

Even if it will cost her life this time.

She gently pulled her under the chairs. She assisted her to stand up and put her arms around her shoulders as they headed towards the door.

They felt tremors of aftershocks again. This time, it made them fall on the floor. Carmella felt the wall where the glass window began to crack.

'No...the glass window will break!" She felt her heart beat really fast as the thoughts rushed from within her. She suddenly pushed Hope away from the window before the fine crystals fell to most parts of her body including her eyes.

"Carmella!" Hope's loud wailing, shouting her name was the last word she heard before everything went blank.

Chapter 36: BEAUTIFUL BOW OF COLORS

The whole city was saddened by the earthquake that happened that night. Carmella and Hope were all over the news. It was a pure luck that they were both alive when rushed to the hospital after being rescued by the firefighters and related personnel that helped them as fast as they could. They were confined and Carmella was the last to regain her consciousness.

She could hear a lot of voices. It's like she's being placed inside a room full of people.

"I can't accept it! I just can't!" Carmella could hear her mom's voice. Yes, she's very sure that it was indeed her.

"Let's respect her decision. She insisted on it before she even fainted."

"She doesn't need to do that!" She felt like her mom ran out of words already.

They stayed in the hospital for nearly about two months. Kamila and Elise Hope both made it but these were the days that they needed to rest and heal from the operation they shared together.

"C-Carmella?" She heard a familiar voice. She's very sure that it was Mr. Leonard, Hope's father.

She slowly opened her eyes. When she felt like the light almost pierced her, she closed her eyes again. She could hear soft cries of someone. Was that her mother? She never heard of her crying before that's why she's not sure, either. Is she crying for her situation? Or is she crying because Elise Hope was able to decide something for herself that both of them didn't like?

"Carmella...please open your eyes." Leonard encouraged her to do it. She followed right away. She opened her eyes again and this time, she could see blurry faces. She slowly blinked her eyes until she could recognize the faces that's inside the room.

"Dear, how was it? Can you see us clearly?" She slowly looked at the one beside her. She could recognize him as the doctor because of what he's wearing. She looked at them for a long time, shifting her gazes from each one of them.

"Y-Yes, doctor." Carmella answered in a weak voice. Her mother stood up as she cried while going out of the room.

"M-Mom?"

When Carmella remembered Hope, a rush of panic ran through her veins.

"H-Hope! Where is Hope? Sir, I need to talk to Hope!" Carmella shrieked as she moved her hands and body as if wanting to get away with all the apparatus that's connected to her body.

"My dear Carmella...please calm down. You need to rest first." Carmella tried so hard to move that the doctor decided to inject her to calm and sleep for a while.

When Leonard was sure enough that Carmella slept again, she followed Carmella's mom outside. He could see the frustrations in her eyes. She tried stopping her tears from falling and yet she couldn't. It made her feel worse even more.

"Why did you let her decide that way? Why?" She held his collar as she closed her fist. She's crying miserably as she hits his chest with her closed fist. He tried to stop her by getting both her hands and hug her instead.

"That was Elise Hope's wish, love. She never asked anything from me, ever since. It was the very first request she'd made all her life."

"You're her father! You should've stopped her. Leonard, I will never forgive you for what you did to my baby!" She said between sobs.

"I am so sorry. I can never stop someone's dire wish, especially if it comes from Hope, love. It's her only wish."

"You should have persuaded her to think things twice." Gina, the mom of Carmella and Hope said in her miserable tone.

"I have no choice as well. Love, Carmella will die if Hope will not decide the soonest time possible."

He caressed her back to comfort her. He couldn't blame her for feeling this way. She never experienced being with Elise Hope for a very long time. She must've been really hurt from what Elise Hope decided for herself.

flashback

The night after Carmella fainted, many rescuers came inside the room. Hope witnessed all the glass residues pierced on most parts of Carmella's body, including her face. There was a splatter of blood everywhere. She could see it clearly through the flashlight that the rescuers flashed before them.

"Sir, please...do your best to save my best friend! Please!" Hope weakly pleaded the rescuers as they also gently lay her down on the stretcher.

"Yes, dear. We will do our best. Please don't worry too much." There were a lot of ambulances rushing towards the hospital. Hope was wounded but seeing Carmella's situation, it affected her so much. She couldn't stand looking at her best friend that's almost dying trying to save her from the glass residues that was broken from the window of their room.

Carmella underwent an operation while Hope was treated as well.

"Are you the guardian of Carmella?" The doctor asked as he went near Hope and her father. They nodded. Hope was crying while pleading to her father. It was a life and death situation to be decided right away.

"Sir, we need an eye donor right away. The patient's eyes were greatly affected. If we couldn't perform an operation right away, it might damage her brain and it would cause her death."

"I am willing, dad!"

"Elise Hope, no!"

"Dad, please. I want it. I really do. Just please save Carmella for me."

Leonard held both of her shoulders as he looked at her. He cried as he saw her baby smile with tears on her eyes. How could she be this selfless? It made him question himself of what kind of father he was to her. She was able to give a piece of her own, no questions asked. No pride allowed. All selfless acts involved.

He hated himself for raising an angel more than a daughter of her own. He swallowed and by agreeing to her wish, the doctor put her to sleep right away.

end of flashback

"How could you allow your daughter to be permanently blind? How, Leonard?" She said, pulling his sleeve as she wailed in front of him. A lot of people were looking at Thelma but she doesn't care anymore.

"Please don't blame me. She did all of that for Carmella. You're never there to know everything that they've been through for her to decide on it right away."

"You're her guardian! You should've known better! I hate you!" She shouted on top of her lungs that caught the attention of most patients and their folks that stayed outside the hospital.

He gently pulled her closer to him. He led her inside his car for them to talk more in private there. When Leonard felt that she's calmer, he held her hands.

"You also need to consider Carmella and the future that lies ahead of her. She's been really dear to Elise Hope."

"I've never loved her. Not even once. In fact, when I gave birth to her, I felt I got all the bad luck in the world."

"You should be thankful that both of our children were alive by now. Elise Hope did not only save Carmella but herself, as well."

"W-What do you mean?"

"Would you like Elise Hope to live all her life full of regrets? What if Carmella really died because she refused the kind of help she should've offered her if given a chance?" Leonard could still see tears flowing on her cheeks as she looked at him. This time, she became silent as she listened to his side.

"Your baby Elise Hope is brilliant, love. She knew what to do before I could even realize it myself."

"I feel sorry for Elise Hope. She deserves better."

"Have you tried loving Carmella with all of your heart?"

"She's not my child. She's a daughter of the devil."

"Please...open your heart in loving Carmella. That guy," She met her eyes as she cried once more.

"He told me everything. He regretted everything that he has done to you. He is still serving his imprisonment for a lifetime until now. However, I admire him because he reached out for me and told me everything."

Carmella's mother hugged Leonard right away. From the days she stayed in the hospital, it was their only chance to have a heart-to-heart talk because everybody is busy taking care of both parties: Elise Hope and Carmella.

"I am willing to accept Carmella in the family. After all, they were sisters no matter how often you will deny Carmella from me."

"Leonard, I don't know what to say. You're exactly the boy version of our baby Elise Hope." She said between sobs. She felt her heart is overflowing with happiness because of what she heard from him.

"You heard me right. Carmella will be staying in my house as soon as she will be discharged from the hospital." They hugged once more. When Leonard told Elise Hope everything, she couldn't help but cry out loud. That was mixed emotions of love, fulfillment and completeness that she felt for the first time in her life.

"Mom, my decision was right all along. I have loved Carmella from the very first time I saw her. Who would've thought that she's really my sister? I am really happy."

"My baby...I don't know what to say. Y-You're blind now—"

"Mom, I don't consider myself as one. I could adapt to this environment right away. The important thing is my sister is alive."

"My baby, you're one in a million. You're the best thing that happened in my life. I love you so much." She hugged Elise Hope. And when she let go of her, Elise Hope slowly reached out until she could feel her mother's cheek. She caressed it as she smiled.

"I love you too, mom. I miss you more even if you're just beside me."

"My precious baby, mommy will be here now. I will never, ever leave your side. I promise."

"Thank you mom. Thank you for your love." She transferred her hands down to her mother's hands. As she held both of it tight, she could see Elise Hope's face lightened up.

"Mom? Can I ask a favor?"

"Anything from you, my baby."

"Mom, would you promise to love Carmella as much as you love me, too?"

Chapter 37: GETTING STRONGER TOGETHER

he looked at the hopeful eyes of Elise Hope that's only looking in one direction. She couldn't help but to cry in front of her daughter because of her condition. Despite her being permanently blind, there she is. Still looking very beautiful and radiant. She's also smiling like everything that happened to her was just nothing. Looking at her in this situation is crushing her heart into pieces.

She donated her one eye to Carmella but she had a complication which resulted in her being permanently blind for as long as she lived. However, she had an incredible sense of positivity. She couldn't help but to pity her daughter and what future would await her.

"Mom?" Elise said that word again. It touched her heart so much. Being called 'mom' again after a decade of not seeing her is everything.

"Y-Yes, dear. I promise. I will love Carmella as much as I love you. Please rest well."

"I am already fine, mom. It is Carmella that I am very concerned about. She had a lot of broken glasses pierced all throughout her body. Is she doing fine?"

"Y-Yes...she's recovering, dear. But she hasn't awakened yet."

She saw Elise nodded.

"If you ask me, I don't want to stay in here. I feel like being in the hospital for the longest time now."

"Please be patient. It's for your own good, dear."

"Yes, mom."

"I am just thankful that this accident happened right after your graduation."

"Thank you for loving her mom. I promise, I will be a good daughter to you as well. I will dedicate my life studying just like what Carmella does for you to be happy."

Upon hearing it, Thelma couldn't help but burst out her tears. She realized how Elise Hope loved her sister so much. So she knew how she treated Carmella even if that's their top secret? She is slowly coming to her senses now. She realized that Elise Hope wanted to think about Carmella's bright future ahead of her. She could see her younger sister's potential in studying and everything in life. I guess that's also what made her decide for the both of them in a short period of time.

She stooped down to her level and scooped her face and kissed her cheeks. "No, my baby. Please don't ever think about that. I loved you just the way you are."

"Mom, I also want Carmella to let her feel that she's not left out. We are both your daughter. We should share equal love from you." Hearing it from Elise Hope, she hugged her right away. She could sense how Hope loved Carmella so much. Even before she knew that she's her half sister, she loved her already like one. She's more of a best friend to her. Of course she will do everything because it is the life of Carmella who was at stake at that time.

"I promise, baby. I will do it as you wish."

"You will really make me happy, mom. I love you so much."

"I love you too my sweetheart." She welled up in tears. How her heart crushed upon seeing the present situation of her beloved daughter.

"Thank you mom. I guess I couldn't ask for anything anymore." Elise Hope smiled without showing even a hint of remorse or regret to what she did. Thelma admired her kind of upbringing Leonard did to her. It suddenly came to her that she's not worthy to be her mom. She has a pure heart that she can't see in other people. Elise Hope is one of a kind. She could love someone more than herself. Thelma thought that it would be impossible.

However, her daughter just slapped this truth on her cheeks. This kind of love is existing indeed. This kind of love is unbelievably true. All through Elise Hope's selfless decision.

The thing that also amazed her was Elise Hope donated her eyes to Carmella even before she knew her as her long lost younger sister. She couldn't even fathom what kind of love is that for another person. If she will ask herself, she would definitely not succumb to that decision right away. Of course, she would think of herself once and for all. But she was suddenly ashamed of herself when her own blood...her own daughter did it without any hesitation coming from her.

It was a decision made out of love. It was an act out of everlasting bond and kindness to another person. She has never seen this selfless act of love before. She never saw it around her, even from herself. That's why when Hope decided to save Carmella's life, it has even come into her mind that she's not a good mother to her. It's because she's too good to be her daughter.

"I may not be studious like Carmella but I will try my best to study more so that you will be proud of me."

"No, my love. Please don't say that. I love you just the way you are. Don't think of those things. From now on, I will be a good mother for you and Carmella, I promise." They hugged each other tight. Elise Hope was very happy. Although she's starting to accept that she will be blind forever, what she did produced positive results.

"Girl...how are you?" Kara walked towards Carmella with teary eyes. She is the one who couldn't believe that Carmella and Elise Hope got into that tragic accident.

"I'm fine," Carmella answered, not looking at her directly. Kara sighed as she sat beside her best friend.

"Please, don't blame yourself for what happened, okay? Nobody wanted that to happen."

"Kara, I've been very bad. How I wish I died on the spot that day," Kara hugged Carmella in a gentle way as soon as she heard those words from her. She caressed her hair as she pulled her closer to her. She could feel Carmella holding unto her like she's holding to her dear life.

"Please...don't ever say that dear. Just be thankful that you're still alive and well now."

"No. This is all crazy. Everyone is blaming me for what happened. Do you know the feeling of being alive and yet people are cursing you and blaming you for everything?"

"Nobody wanted to wish for that accident to happen. Let's move on, dear."

"Kara..."

She looked at her best friend's eyes. It looked dark and gloomy. It's as if all the hope was lost from it.

"Do you think I can face Elise Hope after everything?"

"Why not?"

"I don't think I can, Kara. I am guilty of it. I am guilty of getting her life from her."

"Why is your mom being so epic even at the last minute?" Kara couldn't help but murmur in front of Carmella.

"Imagine? It was supposed to be confidential. I knew every protocol of hospitals. The receiver shouldn't be supposed to know who his/her donor is. But your mom spilled the tea like a crybaby. I hate her so much." She added. Carmella looked at her and she covered her mouth with both of her hands right away.

"I'm sorry. I couldn't stop myself." She said, hiding her face from her sight. Carmella couldn't hate her mom, either. She knew she couldn't hate someone who moulded her to become the adult that she is right now.

"It hurts me the most because she's my sister, Kara. My long, lost sister."

Kara hugged her again, a little bit tighter this time. She wanted to assure her that she is willing to be with her for as long as she liked. It was their long vacation anyway. The accident was a little bit a blessing in disguise for they couldn't miss the opening of the class just in case they will be back to school once again.

"Be happy, then, Carmella."

"What do you mean?"

"I guess fate aligned everything to happen. There's always a purpose why everything happened between the two of you."

"Kara, I will always do my best to give everything my sister liked. I will help her in everything that I can, that's a promise."

"Why don't you tell her about it?" Kara said, touching both of her shoulders.

"I will not be good with words. I will always do everything I can to show her I care. I will be her shadow if I needed to. I will do my best to be a good sister for her this time."

"I know you will do your best, dear."

Kara took care of her from that time forward. She never failed to bring her fruits. Since Carmella didn't want to talk to someone, especially to her mom and Elise Hope, Kara visited her as often as usual.

"Here's your fruit and meal."

"Thank you, Kara! You're the best!" She received it with glee. She got the spoon and fork and dug into the bowl of rice and meat with stewed vegetables.

"When do you plan to talk to Elise Hope?" Kara asked all of a sudden.

"I will talk to my sister when it is the right timing."

"I wish you both happiness and I hope you will talk sooner." Kara answered as she munched with her best friend.

"By the way, do you want a surprise?" Kara raised both of her eyebrows up and down as if teasing her this time.

"Kara, I am not in the mood for jokes, okay?"

"No. You'll love this surprise. I promise." She said as she gently put her bowl and utensils on Carmella's bedside table. Carmella couldn't help but to smile because of Kara's enthusiasm.

"What is it?"

"You'll see." She giggled as she slowly opened the door. Carmella saw a familiar figure smiling standing tall in front of her, holding a bouquet of flowers.

Chapter 38: HE LOVED ME AS I LOVE YOU

"Adrian!" Carmella exclaimed happily. It's as if she couldn't believe what she saw. It's been more than a month since they last dated.

Kara pulled her inside the room and shut the door. The room is a bit private that's why the three of them enjoyed their company together.

"Cous, long time, no see." Kara nudged his shoulders. Adrian's cheek flustered right away because Kara teased her in front of Carmella. He just scratched his head as he shyly gave her a bunch of flowers.

"Thank you,"

"I missed you so much." He sat on the chair beside her bed as he held her hands.

"I..." She hesitated saying the next words because Kara's giggle resounded the whole room.

She cleared her throat after Carmella frowned at her for trying to ruin their 'sweet moments'.

"Guys, it's just me, okay? Calm down. Just imagine that I am not here in this room, alright?" She said as she continued giggling nonstop. Adrian couldn't help but chuckle because of his cousin's being silly.

"How are you?"

"I've been feeling great."

"Well, she's frowning and she's always in a bad mood, but that's before you came."

"Kara..." She mentioned her name with a hint of warning.

"What? I am just saying the truth."

"I am willing to be present here just to lighten your mood."

"Gosh, for the record, you're being the best cousin so far."

"Yeah. I mean it. I want you to get a speedy recovery so that we can go back to our dates." Adrian was a bit surprised when Carmella hugged him tight.

"Thank you so much!" She could hear her best friend cheering from behind them. Carmella thought that from this day forward, she will be the happiest. Having this new life, and most probably the new love of her life if ever.

"My cousin missed you so much. He's been asking me countless times if how are you doing now."

"I am trying to get a lot of rest for me to recover very fast. I want to get well soon so that I can get out of this hospital. I am sick and tired of looking at the white background and four corners of the room."

"I will be here to support you, Carmella." Kara cheered when she noticed the bouquet of flowers he just gave her.

However, everything that happened between the three of them was kept in secret from Elise Hope. This is the only request of Carmella since she felt that Adrian is the only man she has for herself. For her, Adrian is the only person whom she can call her own.

Days turn to weeks and weeks turn to months. Carmella and Elise Hope talked and restored their friendship. This time, they were even closer because Carmella decided to take the course that Elise Hope wanted to take. The family even requested that they will be in the same class so that Carmella could help Elise Hope in everything.

"Mom, we will be in the same class with Elise Hope."

"Make sure you will take care of your sister. Be responsible and make her happy always." She replied coldly.

That's always the scenario if ever they were alone together.

"Don't you dare tell them about this or you will regret it, Carmella."

"Y-Yes, mom." She looked down as she avoided her gaze. At that moment, she tried to stop her tears but her mother didn't care about what she felt. She only looked at her and said nothing. Her tears are not worth being noticed by her mom. She knew that her mom only loved her turned father Leonard and Elise Hope. She happened to be her half-sister. What an irony.

She glanced at the window in their living room. She could see Hope waving her hand as she smiled at her. She didn't face in her direction, instead, she's waving to where their entrance door was located.

Leonard, their father guided her hand to wave in front to where she is standing right now. She saw her mom standing near her, pinched the back of her arm secretly. It's as if she wanted Carmella to wave at them also.

"Bring the packed lunch to Elise and Leonard."

"M-Mom..."

"Don't you ever dare to call them your sister and father whenever they're not around."

"W-Why mom? Can't I tell them about that since they already treated me as family?" Carmella tried to reason out and her mom chuckled mockingly in front of her.

"Wow. Don't you ever dare to do that. Remember, they only treated you as family because I already have you."

"Mom?" Carmella can't stop her tears from falling. She can't believe that her mom was able to tell her about this one right in front of her face.

"Just follow what I am telling you so that you may live longer with us, on one roof. If only I have a choice, I will choose Elise Hope over you. I will always do it." She said while pointing at her fingers to her forehead.

"Remember what I told you. Never ever dare forget about it or else you will regret everything."

Carmella nodded as her heart pounded fast and hard. So, it was all a show? She was disappointed how her mother treats her whenever her daddy Leonard and Elise Hope is not around.

She never planned to change her treatment to Elise Hope as well. She would prefer to wear a mask whenever they're around. She's even difficult to be with her sister now that they're living on the same roof this time. Carmella could feel that she owed her sister big time. For the eyes she has given her, for a new-found loving father whom he treated her as her own as well. She took a deep breath as she held her sister's hand while they were sitting close to each other inside the car.

Leonard, their father who is driving their car said nothing. For the first time, Leonard was quieter than usual. I tried looking at Hope and she is smiling meekly as if she has no problem at all.

"Dad? Do you have any music there? Can you play my favorite song, please?" As usual, her sweet voice touched both our hearts. I gripped her hand tightly so that she also did the same.

"Are you okay?" She asked in a worried tone. Wow, she was the one who managed to ask me about it when I was the one who was supposed to be asking that to her. I have a clear vision right now but I feel like having a blurred life.

"I am okay. Don't worry. How about you?"

"Well, I want to hear sounds as much as possible because I am not comfortable being so quiet since everything is a bit darker this time." She said as she chuckled. I saw our father Leonard sniffed a little. He's like trying so hard to stop his tears from falling because of what Elise Hope said.

"Alright sweetheart. I will play your favorite song. Please wait a minute, okay?" Our father Leonard clicked something in front of him. I noticed he is clicking something on the built-in car radio scrolling some songs.

"Why do birds suddenly appear? Every time, you are near? Just like me, they long to be, close to you..." So this is the classic song by The Carpenters. The voice of the singer calms my nerves as well.

As soon as she heard this melody, she sang along with it. I can't stop my tears from falling this time. However, our father Leonard tried to make the volume louder for me not to be obvious. I knew our dad got what I meant. I cried silently looking at Hope's situation right now. She was completely blind and yet her enthusiasm never changed. She's even more confident this time as if not regretting her decision to give her eyes to me.

Father Leonard looked at the rear mirror and our eyes met. I quickly avoided my gaze because I am feeling guilty about everything. For what Elise Hope did and all the things resulted in that decision that she made for herself, considering my life as well.

I am sometimes thinking, I wish I already died than to experience these kinds of things. This sight is all too much to bear. Now that my half sister is completely blind, it's as if I am accountable for her life forever, too. It's as if I owe everything to her and I must do everything to make her happy all her life after she saved mine.

I quietly sighed. I tried not to be obvious for Hope and father to notice it. We arrived in school twenty minutes earlier than the exact time for class. This is to assist Hope to her needs too, as she adjusts to her new environment.

"By the way, why didn't mom accompany us?" Hope asked all of a sudden that Father Leonard and me looked at each other.

"She's a bit busy, dear. She's baking your favorite cookies at home. Also, she wanted to cook food for dinner. That's why she preferred staying inside the house."

"Oh, I see."

Father assisted us until we reached our classroom. When father left, she smiled as she inched closer to me.

"How are you, dear?"

"I'm okay, you silly girl." I also chuckled. She personally requested to not treat her as a blind girl but instead, the way we used to be. She preferred that way. Hope wanted that nobody will prevent her from reaching her dreams despite her condition. I have also learned that Adrian enrolled in the same University where we are right now. That made me feel very happy and ecstatic. I am excited that I will be with him and I will get to have endless dates with him. Although Kara enrolled in a different University because her course is Education, still she often visits us. She also asks about how Hope is.

"I am glad that you're adjusting, dear." Kara complimented. She giggled as a response.

"Thanks Kara. I will never ever forget Kaka. That will always be my favorite tandem for a friendship partner you know."

We did the high five. The three of us. We also promised that nobody could ever ruin this friendship until the rest of our lives.

Chapter 39: DECISIONS

Carmella assisted Hope as they went inside their room. Carmella has no choice but to also get fine arts as her course because she wanted to support her half sister. Even if she wanted to be a lawyer in the making, she respected her decision since she has to give her care and support.

After all, she owed Hope her own life and happiness. It's now time to bring back all the favor her sister gave to her freely. She's also assisting her in all the possible ways she could. From whatever personal concerns she might be needing up to the smallest details of that physical life she's now limited of doing.

"Sis, have you experienced being in love?" Hope blushed as she asked her. She smiled as she pinched her cheek.

"Nope. I have to study. You know, priorities." She reasoned out, wanting to hide Adrian from her.

"Well, I have someone I liked the most when I had my sight way back then." She started. Carmella didn't understand the way her heart beat very fast. She's like never wanting to hear from her of what she wanted to say.

"Wow...so who is the lucky guy?"

"I haven't got his name dear. But I remembered he had a basketball game at school last time. He was the tallest member among the players." She said as she giggled.

Was it Adrian that she meant? Why, of all guys, why is it that it was Adrian?

"Hmmm...describe him to me. I might help you meet him, who knows?"

"Wow, really?" Her face lit up and she held her hands.

"Of course, sis. Kara had a lot of spy friends at school the last time. She could get a lot of information about that guy, you know."

"I will be very happy if I will meet my crush at last, Carmella!"

Hope was the happiest as she told Carmella about some details of Adrian. So it was really Adrian that she described after all. For the first time, after the author of their favorite book, it was Adrian whom she fell in love with. Why do they have to like the same guy at once? It's way too unfair for her to feel the same to the only guy that she loved the most for almost a year ago.

"Gosh, girl! Really? Why is it that my cousin is really a handsome guy? There are a lot of girls who wanted to meet him."

"Yeah...I guess I can't do anything about it."

"So, what do you plan to do?" Kara frowned as she looked at me. I wanted to cry in front of my best friend but I am just stopping myself. They were inside a coffee shop and it was so crowded someone might see her crying for no reason at all.

She's too hurt about what she had discovered. She thought that Adrian was the only one who could be with her when she felt all alone in life. But then when Hope came in, it was changed forever. Yes she has the sight but she could feel a deep hole inside her heart. She could feel that she's incomplete with the way situations could happen. It's as if everything is not liking her as a person, even her existence.

How she wished that she's a whole new different person. So that she could freely live her life without anyone or anything to worry about.

Kara followed what she instructed her to do. She gathered all the possible information about Adrian. She started to tell it to Hope. She could see that it made Hope very happy and excited day by day. While her? She's crying herself every night for the unfortunate destiny that she is experiencing. As days passed, she started to let go of every feeling she has with Adrian.

If father Leonard and her mother will know that she let go of Adrian for Hope, they will praise her for doing a great job. For considering the feelings of her half sister and for being selfless enough to let go, even if it is very hard for her.

"Carmella, you never know how happy I am because of what you're telling me." She giggled, almost gasping for air because of too much happiness and excitement.

She felt happy somehow that she caused this feeling to her half sister. She knew it's the least that she could do for her.

She is only stopping herself from crying so hard because of the decision that she's about to do. If Hope did not think twice about her love for her when that earthquake happened, then she has no right to think twice letting go of Adrian for Hope, too.

"I will do everything I can for you, sis." She hugged Carmella after what she heard from her.

"Thank you, Charm. It's the first time I ever felt this happy. All thanks to you, dear."

"I will always do what you want, dear. I will always be there for you because I love you."

"I love you too." She looked afar as if never meaning what she had said. However, Hope could not see her eyes. She knew that she couldn't even see her crying so hard at the moment. She knew she would make a decision that will change her life forever.

"Girl, Adrian told me that he will see you at your favorite restaurant." Carmella looked at her and said nothing.

"Can you hear me?" Kara added and she sighed with a heavy heart.

"Y-Yeah."

"He has a bouquet of roses, dear." Carmella looked at her as if she was analyzing what she said a while ago.

"Bouquet of roses?"

"Yeah, girl. That effort of my cousin. He's someone who wanted to show affection to someone that he liked so much."

"Alright. Please tell him I will see him there. Same time." Kara nodded and left. She took a deep breath and looked at her reflection on the mirror in front of her at that corner of the coffee shop.

She learned that they will be seeing each other at exactly four in the afternoon. She got ready. She put on her favorite dress and shoes. She made sure she would look good on their last date.

Yes. She promised herself that it will be the last date with the love of her life, Adrian. It's time for him to appreciate the love of Hope to her instead of what she could offer.

After all, it is impossible for her to be happy with Adrian when she knew to her conscience that Adrian is the only one that Hope also wanted in her life. Her father even mentioned to her that Hope didn't have any relationship even if they were in the states because she's also too busy and focused on her studies.

Now, it's her turn for her to give her what she wanted the most in her life, and that is Adrian.

"Hello, Charm..." Adrian cheerfully greeted her with a smile. Yes, Kara was right. He has a bouquet of Hopes with him. She could feel that this day is a bit special because she noticed that the food in front of them is a bit grand compared to their usual menu when they were dating.

"H-Hi," She answered in a timid manner. Adrian couldn't help but chuckle.

"What happened? How are you? Are you feeling alright?"

"Yeah. I am. Please don't mind me." She smiled at him.

Deep down, she could feel that she's the most beautiful and luckiest girl in the whole world because he's very handsome. She can't even believe why she's the only girl he's giving attention to.

"You know what, you looked more beautiful today. Your dress suits you very well."

"Thank you so much for the compliment. I thought you would not like it."

They looked at each other as if their eyes understood what their heart intended to tell each other.

"I invited you to this date because I have to tell you something."

"You're always telling me a lot of things. What's the difference now?" Carmella chuckled. Adrian held her hand and grip her tight as he looked into her eyes.

"I want to tell you and our plan about us."

"What?"

"You heard what I say, right?"

"Adrian, you know that I don't want to be in a relationship unless I am already a college graduate, right?"

He looked down and she could see his face suddenly got sullen. It's as if she never expected it for her to answer.

"Really? Don't you love me, Charm?" He finally dared ask.

She swallowed as she clenched both of her fists under the table. If only he knew she's been stopping herself from the possible breakdown that might happen. She has to be strong and tough not for herself the most but for the happiness of her sister.

She knew that if she refused him and his love, she could give Hope a chance to meet him and let him feel her love more than she could offer herself.

They ate in silence. Adrian even sends her to their front gate without Hope's parents knowing it.

"I'm so sorry. I guess I was just being unfair to you. I will not ever ask for it again."

"I could only offer friendship to you, Adrian. Hope you understood what I felt."

"Yeah. I am so sorry once again. This will be the last one."

As his car went away, Carmella couldn't hold her tears any longer. The things that happened today are too much to handle. If only she could have a choice of her own, she would gladly accept her offer. She would gladly accept his proposal to be his girl even for a lifetime. He was her first love and her first heartbreak as well. I guess nothing beats every first.

"I love you Adrian. If I will have to have another lifetime with only us, I would be glad to choose you again and again. I love you goodbye."

Chapter 40: I LOVE YOU GOODBYE

(Flashback, months before Adrian finally confessed to Carmella)

I am sitting on the table that Adrian has prepared for the both of us. It's been months since we knew each other and we have a lot of things we shared that's both common and different to both of us.

"Well, what can you say to the most handsome friend you got?"

"What?" I can't help but chuckle. I shook my head and he laughed even more from the reaction I am showing him.

"How sure are you for it?" I asked him back with a challenging tone. He grinned as he held my hand all of a sudden. I am busted. I mean, my heart can't help but beat a little bit faster this time. I hope he didn't see me blush or something like that. Gosh, Am I looking like a big tomato about to burst.

"I can see it the way you reacted to what I said a while ago." I tried pulling my hand off his touch but then he gripped it tightly so that I can't let go anymore.

"Not so fast, my princess."

"I told you I am not Princess Diana..." I looked down as I chewed my inner lower lip because I can't stand how my heart went giddy.

"You know what? You should stop this. We're in a public place, you know." I reasoned out. However, the way he's looking at me is too much I guess he's not buying what I am telling him. I looked around and I can see some people our age starting to whisper to each other.

Of course, I will not wonder anymore because he's very popular. He's IanPeep, a famous vlogger and influencer. Not only that, he's popular with girls and he has a lot of fans that are mainly composed of them all.

"Well, I just do what makes me happy and not look at the validation of other people. I guess you should also learn to do that too."

I swallowed as I met his eyes. He looked dead serious, gosh!

"Well, I get your point, you know. What I mean is that, I am not really used to many people looking at us as if we're already a..." I paused. I could see him smile as if expecting a continuation to my sentence. I swallowed again. My goodness! Why is this so hard! I felt like I am sandwiched in the middle of something I don't even understand.

"Couple?" How can he read my mind! Is he a mind reader or something? He's so unbelievable!

“Y-Yeah...sort of.” I stuttered as I looked down. He grinned as he lifted my chin up for me to meet his gaze again. Why is he doing it as if it is his hobby? I can’t even stop him or something. There’s like a magnet that’s pulling me to follow what he’s doing. I can’t even tell my heart to stop or pause or what. It’s all over giddy and giggling and happy...happy. Yeah, that’s the exact word.

“If I ask you about love, what will be your response?”

“Hmm, that depends.” I answered right away before his eyes. We’re facing each other.

“I mean, you can’t stop love...” He added. I chuckled in a bitter tone and I guessed he sensed it right away.

“Tell that to my mom. I guess she’ll definitely have a word for you.”

“I guess I am lucky enough to have my understanding parents with me. They support me in everything that I do in life.”

“Not every person is given that chance, Ian. I guess you’re both lucky and blessed to have them, while I have the very opposite of what you’re talking about.”

“What do you mean? Is it your mom?”

“Yeah, long story to tell. I guess you’re in Alwin Geroche University that’s why you’re not familiar to my ‘terror’ mom.” I laughed but I can see that he’s feeling my hurt from deep within. I liked this part of Adrian. He’s being sensible in all situations.

“Hmm, I guess that’s just normal. Moms could be overprotective at all times.”

“Wait till you meet my mom.”

“Wow, hearing those words from you? I can sense that your mom is someone to be scared of. Is she a lioness or something?” I just looked at Adrian and he stopped from laughing in a lower voice. I took a deep breath and I guess he knew what I really meant by it.

“I guess I can’t confess my love for you just in case?” I can’t help but freeze. Did I hear words right? What did he mean by ‘confessing’ his love for me? Does he really mean it? Or is it only a big joke?

“W-What did you just say?”

He grinned and shook his head. He started to eat the food that’s on our table. “Don’t mind that one. It might not let you sleep tonight.” I jokingly frowned and he chuckled even more.

“But you know...I mean it.” He said in a very low voice as if a whisper. However, it didn’t escape my ears. My heart never stopped racing as if I am finishing a marathon. How can he be this harsh? How can he be this straightforward? How can he be this direct to the point of telling me he loves me?

Is it the answer to my prayers every night? To finally know he felt the same way too? How could he confess this indirectly that's bringing me confusion this time? I am scared to risk it. I also followed what he's doing right now. He's eating some snacks. Burgers, pasta and fries. However, I guess I am only chewing or eating just because I have to. He bought all of these for both of us to eat. However, I am more digesting what he said a while ago.

"You know what's very hard?" He said and I lifted my head up from eating my pasta. He chuckled a little when he noticed the sauce stains beside my lips. I also smiled in return.

"Hmm?"

"You're sure of your feelings to that person but that person is not even sure of you." I almost choked on what I was eating after he said those words. I could see that he's too worried he stood up to transfer to the chair that's beside me. He gently massaged my back as I continued coughing. I can feel some parts of the residue of the food went inside my nose because of those shocking words from him. I didn't even see them coming in the first place.

"Are you okay?"

"More than okay, thank you..." I nodded when I saw his killer smile now that he's even near me. I can feel like we're inches afar. I can smell his manly, sexy scent.

Not okay. You're giving me a headache. I never knew this love could be very confusing too.

---end of flashback---

"Hey, dude." Kara tapped my shoulders. I looked at her with eyes swollen because of too much crying. She's staying in my room after father Leonard's permission that she will be staying with me for a while.

"Hey..." I chuckled but the tears were like having their race down my cheeks.

"Gosh, do not give me that face, I want to cry too, you know." She said as she rushed towards me to hug me tight. I responded as I hugged her more. I could almost feel my bestfriend's erratic heartbeat. Her heart is racing too fast.

"Thank you, best. You know what? I can feel that you're the only one who could ever understand me right now."

"Well, who could it be aside from me? Duh?" I jokingly pulled her hair as I chuckled but she got irritated that she stopped me from what I am doing to her and scolded me instead.

"I don't want you to appear crazy in front of me. Stop that laughing, dude. You're scaring the hell out of me. Cry if you have to but please be consistent. Cry only and that's all, okay?"

Upon hearing those words from my bestfriend, I can never measure the tears getting out of my eyes. I realized I am saying things right. She's the only one that's on my side. Although we're all okay with my family now, I can never hide the fact that they were all into Elise Hope's

condition. They loved Elise Hope more than I did. I could not ever take that fact away from her now that she's having a disability I can't ever heal forever, no matter how I will try to.

"Kara, do you love me? Please tell me you love me."

"Of course I do, my dear."

"Thank you so much. I just want to hear those words. I guess I need them right now." I can see that Kara couldn't help but to cry with me too. She hugged me tight again, maybe to let me feel that she's sincere with the words she told me.

"I can't believe that it was just so easy for you to let go of my cousin. I partly hated you for that."

"If you're in my situation, you will do the same, Kara." She cupped both of my cheeks and let me face her, meeting her eyes.

"You're one, amazing woman dear. I am really proud of you."

"That's so nice for you to say, Kara. I always appreciate it. I love you my dearest best friend. I will never ever trade you for anything in this world."

Chapter 41: TRUTH AND NOTHING BUT THE TRUTH

Carmella's POV

One month has passed since that confession happened. I guess I hurt Adrian the most because it's been almost two weeks that he never texted or called me.

"How's everything?" Kara randomly asked me some questions about Adrian and me. I looked down as I swallowed. "W-Well, I am okay. Please don't mind me." I smiled at her however, she's my best friend. I almost forgot. She knew me even before I told her certain things to her.

On the other hand, I am feeling happy because it made way for Hope to go to Adrian's games. Through Kara, they were able to know each other.

After two months, Hope told me that she accepted Adrian's proposal to be his girlfriend.

"Congratulations..." I told them both. Kara looked at me with a meaningful look. It's as if she wanted to make sure that my greetings for the couple are not bitter by the sound of it.

"Thank you Carmella..." Adrian also answered with a smile as he rested her hands on Hope's shoulders. Hope blushed too hard. It was so evident because she has naturally pinkish cheeks and fair skin tone.

"Thank you, sis. I am so happy that my crush is the love of my life, now." Hope said as she looked at the same direction with a smile. Adrian never minded it anyway. I could see from his eyes that he is so in love with Hope and she also felt the same way too.

"Congratulations, Hope. I guess Adrian is really for you. Sometimes, you just have to think love and not the other way around. It's a risk you know."

I stepped on Kara's feet as soon as I heard those words from her. If I won't do it, she might overdo everything and spill what's not needed to be spilled. She's really talkative. I can't believe she's my best friend.

"Ouch, Carmella you're so bad!" She exclaimed as she almost jumped with pain. Adrian and Hope checked on us and I denied doing anything to Kara. I am only reasoning out that she's being silly.

"What happened? Is everything alright?" Adrian stood up, looking worried as he checked under the table. Hope also waved her hand as if wanting to hold someone who's in pain. I held her hand instead and whispered to her ear that it was me.

"We're fine, dear."

"Oh," She looked relieved and smiled right away. I looked at my half-sister not knowing what to really feel. I don't know if I will feel good that she smiled right away or I will feel bad because she's still fine. She's doing alright. She's feeling okay even if she's totally blind. It hurts me to see her being at the heights of happiness despite her condition? While me? I may have the complete physical features but I am lacking the happiness I always desire to have from the people I loved the most.

"Oh, I guess everything is in control."

"What was it?" Hope insisted and we looked at each other, the three of us.

"Guys, I told you. Kara is just being silly. Why? Do you still need to go somewhere?" I initiated the conversation again.

"I am so sorry, dear. I never meant that joke. Please forgive me."

"No. Don't mind me. Just don't do something silly in front of the couple, okay?" She nodded. I was able to meet Adrian and I told him about everything. When he realized it, he couldn't help but to shed a tear.

"I promise I will take care of your sister. I will always love her so much."

"Thank you Adrian. If you will just assure that you will love my sister like the way I expect you to be, I guess that's already my happiness."

"I promise. I will always love her all the days of her life because I know she deserves it."

Of course, she deserves it so much. She's the one and only Elise Hope. My ever-loving and selfless half-sister. Who am I to stop great things from happening in her life? I know this is not enough, I mean letting go of Adrian is not enough for me to compensate for what she had sacrificed only for me. My half-sister loved me so much even before we learned the truth, that we're really sisters by blood.

"Thank you, Adrian." He looked at me with those familiar eyes. However, it shifted right away to my half-sister. It left a pang in my heart that he is now looking at her the way he's looking at me before. The way he looked at my sister is so valuable and loved it hurt me so much.

"Yeah, we're about to eat our snacks, right, love?" Adrian looked at Hope and my half-sister blushed too much it was too obvious for the three of us to notice.

"Y-Yeah," She responded in a very timid manner. I can't help but look at Kara whom I caught looking at me first. It's as if she's really studying my every reaction to the kind of sweetness that these two are showing us.

"B-But, you know...if you guys like, then you can also accompany us. The more, the merrier!" Hope suggested. Well, too late. I won't even let that happen, even in my dreams. Well, I never said those words to them but I just kept them in my heart.

"You know what, guys? Please go ahead. We'll also have our bonding. Ka-Ka will be roaming around the mall, you know."

"Oh, I see. Love, let's go! We'll go ahead." Adrian started to wave at us goodbye. She also assisted Hope in the gentlest way possible. He made sure he held both of her hands as they went ahead. After the couple left, I cried hard that Kara hugged me tight.

A lot of things came to my mind. If I did accept his confession to me a long time ago, I guess I am the happiest girl enjoying his love now. Maybe, I am the one he's looking like that with a lovable pair of brown eyes.

If only in another life, I could have that precious chance again. If only I could grab the opportunity to bring back the time when you confessed your love for me, I would say yes along the way. Maybe, I will also be happy and smiling just like what my sister is doing right now.

After knowing that they were in a relationship, I tried letting myself heal for more than two months. It's been hard for me since I always see them sweet together. They were a happy couple and admired by many. They were even featured in our school magazine and they've been tagged as the best couple that the University has for being true to each other. By loving each other despite the physical differences that they have.

"I hope you're somehow okay now." Kara greeted me as soon as she sat down to her favorite chair of the restaurant where we often eat.

"Somehow."

"Good thing Adrian offered a helping hand in accompanying Hope most of the time. At least, you can be free to wherever you want to go."

"Yeah." I said while sipping on my favorite mango puree.

"My goodness! You're not even talking to me!"

"Sorry... I guess I am not in the mood."

"I'm sorry too, dear." Kara held my hand as I was about to cry again.

We talked about my regrets and my true feelings about the couple. I know Kara felt me more than Hope. Somehow, I am very happy about what happened to her. It broke my heart. My decisions and everything and yet it also made her dreams come true.

I came home with a heavy heart and mom came to greet me with her usual, hateful tone. I was so used to it that I just ignored her as I started to go home.

"How dare you to turn your back when I am not even done with you, yet?"

"Mom, please, I am tired. You can just get angry at me tomorrow after a goodnight's sleep." She grabbed me by the arm and started slapping me from my left cheek to my right. I was stunned for a moment that I just kept silent.

"How dare you to ignore me when I am talking to you? Stupid asshole!" I just cried silently as a response. I know there's nothing I could do right now. She's my mother and I still have all the respect for her despite the things she does to me.

"Thelma!" I heard my father Leonard exclaimed as she was caught in the act of hurting me physically. He rushed towards us and hugged me tight while mom's face became red with embarrassment. She never thought that father would appear somewhere any time.

"What are you doing?" He exclaimed. I could sense that he was so angry at mom that I was able to stand between the two of them because they've been arguing in a raised voice.

"Mom, dad, please stop it. I don't want this anymore. Sorry dad, it was my fault. I am so sorry, mom." I said between sobs. I can see that father Leonard clenched his fists.

"I was able to witness what happened a while ago. From the very beginning. From what you told your daughter."

My mom was silent all of a sudden. I guess she never thought that she would be busted to what she's been doing whenever they were not here in the house. We're all shocked when we heard someone cry behind us. It was Hope and just like father Leonard, she also heard everything from the very beginning. Mom rushed towards her to try to explain everything but then she didn't want to talk to her again from what happened.

"Please forgive mom, Hope." I pleaded as I held her hand. She cried as she cupped my cheeks.

"Are you insane? Why are you being so blinded by this one? Let me tell you this. It is okay to hate someone and not talk to them when you feel like you're hurting the most." She replied.

Oh, so coming from my half sister, I am allowed to do that? I guess it's a little too late right now. I can't hate them. I know for a fact that no matter how I try hating them, I would end up being miserable the most because I will be the one that would be very affected by my own actions. I don't want to hate those people who were with me during both my shining and darkest hours. I choose to forgive them not because they deserve it but because I want peace for myself.

I deserve love and affection. I don't want to hate people that were already a part of who I am now and who I will become someday.

"Nope. It's alright. After all, mom was the only one who was there for me when there's no one else I could turn to."

"Carmella..."

"She's our mom. We can't hate her. All we need to do is to understand her situation and what she's been through." My sister cried even more from what she heard from me. Without noticing it, mom heard everything I said. She visited me one day and hugged me tight. She told me that from what she heard from me, it made her realize many things.

First, she doesn't want Hope to get angry at her forever, nor father Leonard hating her so much that he would prefer sleeping in the guestroom more than sleeping in the master's bedroom.

Days turned into weeks. Mom tried her best to keep up with what she has done to all of us. I appreciated how she's willing to change for the better. She wanted to prove herself that she will turn to her bad, wicked ways to restore our family as the complete one.

She also did all the efforts to prove to me that she's changing by giving us all we need. She even went inside my room one particular night.

"Mom? What are you doing here?" I asked as soon as I saw that it was indeed her who knocked on the door of my room.

"I just want to tuck you to bed, sweetie." She said with teary eyes as she hugged me tight. I let her get inside and she hugged me even more.

I heard her sobbing from behind me as she rested her head on my shoulders.

"I am so sorry. I know this is not enough to prove to you that I am indeed willing to change for you my dear."

"Thank you so much mom. This is the thing that I have been waiting for so long. I thought that I will never have the chance to experience this one again. I thought I would be only wishing for love from my mother all by myself. I can't believe this one is happening right now."

"Yes it is, dear. I want to change because I realized that I needed my complete family more than what I have been through from the past."

"I love you so much mom. You will always be my favorite mom and nobody could ever replace you for me."

We hugged each other. That reconciliation alone felt like the best highlight of my life so far. Being in good terms with mom on a normal day feels heaven here on earth. I thought that I would only live my life to the expectation of my mother every graduation day. But now? I guess she has changed a lot. I hope that she will always do this for me and to all of us as one, big happy family.

For Hope and Adrian, I know they deserve each other. Everyday, they were very sweet to one another. Hope said that he completes her so much that she's inspired about living despite her condition. He became her light during her darkest hours, literally and figuratively speaking.

We were still the best of friends with Kara. She has never changed ever since highschool. She's the same, quirky best friend who will be really willing to be with you through thick and thin.

Now, as I live my life, I realize that I may be below cloud nine or there were a lot of people more fortunate than me, I could still be the best version of myself. I proved that your past person should be the only rival of your present one. Never give up on things if you feel like giving up when you can sense that you can still do something about it. Choose to forgive and forget rather than forgiving alone. Understand that we are not perfect but life could bring us lessons to correct past mistakes. We should also pray as often as possible. Whatever we're doing, wherever we are and whatever our life's decisions will be. It could lead us to beautiful destinations if we are too positive about life.

As of the moment, I am happy and content. Hope may be above cloud nine but I am always that cloud that she could see with her when she decides to fly and her wings when she wanted to soar higher than what she's been dreaming of having in life.

I loved Adrian but I love my sister. I choose to let go to give chance to love someone that I feel she deserves the best in life. As for me? I will continue to aim and reach for my dreams. I know if love will have its chance to me, nothing could ever stop it. Nothing could ever stop me from falling in love once again. At the right time, at the right day. Maybe someday...I am not sure. I will just live my life to the fullest and never give up.

----THE END-----