

# Chapter intro

*But I don’t know how to thank you… I don’t know what I should do.*

*I don’t know what could ever be grand enough or truly worthy*

*Of what you’ve given me—a love freely shared without demands, And the way you’ve shown me, without hesitation,*

***What love truly means.***

**Chapter 0 :**

**Year 2006 (Grade 11)**

On the way home from a certain high school,

Phimmanas, a strikingly beautiful girl, caught everyone's attention with her sharp, expressive eyes that seemed to shimmer as if they held tiny drops of water. Her well-defined nose and full lips added a sweet yet intriguing charm to her face. Her cheeks, faintly flushed pink from the sun, complemented her perfectly tied pigtails adorned with white ribbons. She wore her convent school uniform impeccably, adhering to every detail of the dress code.

At that moment, Phimmanas was half-running, half-walking, desperately trying to catch up with someone ahead of her.

That someone was Kiran, a tall and athletic girl dressed in a white polo P.E. shirt and deep red sweatpants. Her slender face, accentuated by long almond-shaped light brown eyes, sharp eyebrows, and a straight, prominent nose, made her look both fiercely confident and irresistibly captivating.

Kiran, with her long legs, strode briskly ahead without glancing back at the petite girl who was hurrying to keep up, her face now glistening with sweat. Even the strands of hair sticking to her flushed pink cheeks testified to her efforts.

"Kiran, slow down, will you? Why are you in such a rush?"

Kiran, carrying her light school bag slung over one shoulder, stopped and turned around slowly. She removed her earphones, her face devoid of any expression.

"I'm just walking normally. Maybe it's you who's too short to keep up," Kiran replied, raising a brow.

Phimmanas glared at her in mock frustration, unable to do much else.

"You know I walk slower, so why can't you wait for me?"

"Am I supposed to adjust my pace so we can walk together? I thought I was just supposed to lead the way home. And by the way, I’m carrying your backpack too," Kiran retorted, her tone laced with mock indifference.

"We’re supposed to walk together!"

"Why?"

Kiran raised an eyebrow again, still unconvinced.

"So we can be by each other's side," Phimmanas replied simply, her voice softening.

"...and also, if I’m walking behind, I wouldn’t get to see your face."

Kiran remained silent, her expression as neutral as ever. Yet, her cheeks turned a deep shade of red, like ripened tomatoes.

Without saying another word, Kiran slipped her earphones back on and continued listening to her music. But this time, her pace slowed to match Phimmanas's, as if she couldn’t resist the latter's request.

Phimmanas, however, kept chattering on, oblivious to the fact that Kiran couldn’t hear a word she was saying because of her music. Realizing this, she stood on tiptoe and shouted directly into Kiran’s ear.

"What are you listening to? Let me hear it too!"

Kiran flinched, startled. After a moment, she sighed as if she had no choice and handed one earbud to Phimmanas.

Phimmanas beamed, delighted that Kiran was finally giving in to her whims. But the moment the music reached her ears, her cheeks—already pink from the sun, turned a deep crimson. A shy smile tugged at her lips, and she couldn’t stop grinning for the rest of their walk home that evening.

*"Closer… too close to say a single word. Closer… too close to see anyone else.*

*When we’re this close…*

*I feel like I might stop breathing.*

*This close… it’s just you and me today."*

**Chapter 1 : ᴛʜᴇ ᴛʜᴇᴏʀʏ ᴏꜰ ʀᴇʟᴀᴛɪᴏɴsʜɪᴘꜱ**

**Year 2005 (Grade 9, preparing to enter Grade 10)**

At a certain high school in the heart of Bangkok,

I was lounging on a bench beside the petanque court, located next to the traditional Thai music building, admiring the beauty of over ten "Peeb" trees that were blooming, filling the air with their sweet fragrance. I was feeling completely relaxed when a soft voice suddenly spoke next to me.

"Hey, can I sit here and wait for my friends too?"

I jumped up in surprise, almost falling off the bench. The voice belonged to a girl about my age, but what set her apart from me was her strikingly beautiful face—so beautiful, in fact, I couldn't find the right words to describe it. If I had to borrow a word from my grandmother, it would be something like "breathtakingly beautiful."

Phimmanas, from class 3/2, one of the few faces I could recognize at school. I wouldn't say I merely "remembered" her face—it was a face I could never forget.

"Sure..."

I awkwardly made space for her to sit, feeling confused and a bit uncomfortable. She took off her backpack and placed it in the middle of the bench, choosing to sit on the right side of me.

"You're from class 1, right?"

I turned to look at her and raised an eyebrow in surprise. I couldn't hide my curiosity, especially since I never expected Phimmanas to know me. After all, the only time we spoke was at a sports event, and we didn’t even have a chance to exchange names.

"Yeah, but how do you know me?"

Her large, sparkling eyes twinkled as if she was amused by something.

"Of course I know you. You're pretty famous. But still... how do you know me?"

I glanced at the Thai music building in front of us before answering, avoiding eye contact.

"I've seen you walking to practice here a lot. I like to play petanque on this court." I gave her a long reply, which made me feel like my answer might not have been very convincing. "Is that strange?"

"Well, a little. I thought you seemed like the type who doesn't really care about anyone—except for your close friends. That big guy you hang out with... what's his name? Oh, Pok, right?"

Phimmanas was referring to Pok, my only close friend in this school. It’s not that I didn’t get along with others; I could have fun and chat with anyone. But only Pok truly understood me.

"Pok, huh? Of course. He's my best friend."

"So, what are you doing here at school? I thought it’s the school break. Are you here for extra lessons, like me?"

I shook my head quickly. Just hearing the word extra lessons made my head hurt.

"No, I’m too lazy for that... The holidays are short, so I try to spend them wisely."

Phimmanas smiled softly and swayed her legs back and forth, now starting to feel more at ease.

"So, what are you really here for?"

I slouched back down on the bench, resting my neck against the backrest like a lazy person. I had been sitting up straight out of excitement earlier, but it didn't last long. Soon enough, I was lying down again, as if I had no spine. I pointed to the stone table in front of us while answering her question.

"I'm waiting to play chess with Pok."

Her wide eyes grew even wider, and Phimmanas didn't hide her surprise at all.

"You came all the way to school just to play chess?"

I smiled. "Yeah, I like the atmosphere here. At home, we don’t have these Peeb trees or a pond."

Phimmanas tilted her head, looking at me like I was a little kid she was fond of.

"You like the Peeb trees?"

"Yeah, they’re delicate and beautiful, and they have a cool, sweet scent."

"Do you come here every day?"

"Often, but not every day. Pok and I live around here."

"Really? Just like me! Where do you live?"

"On Soi 12."

"Really? I live on Soi 14, just on the same side. So, if you're done with chess today, how about we go back together? Come back here to pick me up."

Ah.

I was surprised because I hadn't expected Phimmanas to be this friendly. Her soft eyes kept chatting away, and on top of that, she was inviting me to go home with her. It made me realize that the world isn't so bad after all.

"I’ll pass, thanks. I like to walk home."

"Walk? You can walk that far? Isn't it tiring?"

I could see that Phimmanas was surprised again, while I was just as surprised by her reaction.

"Yeah, actually, it’s quick. But if I take a car, it takes forever because of traffic."

Phimmanas nodded, still looking a bit puzzled, then flashed me a sweet smile and looked at me with those innocent eyes.

"Well, next time, I'll walk you home."

"......."

Thud, thud, thud, thud.

Oh, my God, is that my heart? I wonder if she can hear it too.

"Phim, have you been waiting long?"

Phim’s friend, Ploy, called from across the building. Phim turned to wave at her before turning back to bid me farewell with a smile.

"Kiran... I’m going now. See you again."

"Oh, okay."

In reality, sometimes the world is still full of obstacles. Phim took a few steps, then turned back to me, saying something that made me freeze. "Oh, next term when we move up to Grade 10, we’ll be in the same class." How should I respond to that?

It took me a moment to think of something suitable to say, but by the time I did, Phim had already walked quite far. It was at that very moment that Pok, my best friend, walked in with his bag slung over his shoulder.

"That’s Phimmanas from class 2, right? She’s so cute..."

Pok, my best friend, the only one who truly understands me, one of the members of our Pokki gang (a group of only two people—Pok and me). He murmured while keeping his eyes locked on Phim as she walked away.

"Yeah, I think she’s here for extra lessons." I replied.

Pok, the tall and broad guy, had a suspicious look on his face as he continued watching me.

"She’s talking to you?"

"Yeah, why?"

"I’m not sure, but I’ve been in the same club as her for a year now, and she never spoke to me."

"Why not?"

"She smiled, but I don’t know... she just seems like someone who keeps to herself, doesn’t talk to strangers."

"I didn’t see that earlier. She seemed pretty chatty."

Pok, with his sharp face and thick eyebrows, stared at me seriously, like a detective trying to get the truth out of a suspect.

"Well, I guess that’s true. She's just too attractive for both young and older girls, even for someone like you."

"That’s crazy..."

I didn’t want to dwell on what Pok had said, but after that day, whenever I came to school to play, I would often run into Phim, who came early for her extra lessons. Sometimes, she’d sit with me and play chess while waiting for Pok. It was nice, but the problem was, she didn’t know how to play, so it felt more like she was distracting me.

On some days, Phim would bring expensive snacks from home, sharing them with Pok and me. My friend would start showing up earlier because he was worried that I might take more snacks than I was supposed to.

"This is nice."

Phim said one day when we were alone together.

"How so?" I asked lazily, still slouched on the same bench, speaking in a slow, tired tone.

"Well, you’re so smart, without having to try. You don’t need to stress out over extra lessons like I do."

"I think you could do just as well without extra lessons, Phim. You probably just want to build your confidence more."

"No way... if I didn’t have extra lessons, I’d have to study really hard."

"......."

"I want to be like you sometimes. Just sitting around, watching birds, playing chess, playing petanque—living like a retired person."

I almost choked on the green tea and sugar I was sipping when I heard her long sentence.

"Wait, did you just compliment me?"

Phim laughed, clearly enjoying my reaction.

"I’m not just talking about your studies. You don’t have to try, but there are other things that people try so hard to achieve, but they still can’t get it. Meanwhile, you don’t have to do anything at all."

I was surprised by her words and frowned before looking into her deep eyes, trying to understand what she meant.

"What do you mean, Phim? What do I have that I didn’t try for?"

Phim swung her legs playfully, then stuck out her tongue at me and smiled sweetly.

"I won’t tell you!"

Ugh! Apart from making my heart race, her words didn’t really help me understand anything more.

# Chapter 2: ᴛʜᴇ ʟᴀᴡ ᴏꜰ ᴍᴏᴍᴇɴᴛᴜᴍ

**2006 [4.5]**

A high school in the heart of Bangkok

Suddenly, the cheering from the sidelines, which had been intense moments ago, turned into a buzz of excitement over something. This made me, as I was desperately running to catch the basketball on the court, turn my head to see what was going on.

It was Phim, standing at the sidelines, wearing the neat and proper uniform of a convent school with her long, silky hair tied up with a white ribbon, flashing a big smile.

Ah... it was her team that was causing the stir. As soon as I realized that, I

almost lost all focus on chasing the ball and found myself sneaking glances at her more often.

And then, the worst timing occurred. I turned just in time to see Bom, a tall, athletic friend from class, walking toward Phimmanas. He was holding a piece of paper, fanning it like he was trying to cool off the team nearby, all while being overly affectionate. That moment made me stop dead in my tracks... right in the middle of a fast-paced, intense game.

The last thing I heard before everything went blank was...

“Kiiiii, you idiot!”

“Kii, are you okay?”

In my dazed state, I struggled to open my eyes. The first thing I saw was Phimmanas’ face, so close that I could practically count her eyelashes. I instinctively jerked back, and in doing so, my forehead collided straight into hers.

“Ouch! What the heck?” she groaned.

Not only did she say it, but she also pushed my head back down, and I realized I was lying on something soft. Slowly, I started to process things, like a computer booting up, and my eyes scanned the surroundings.

I realized I was still in the gym, but had been dragged off the court to the sidelines. What I saw was the ceiling above, followed by Phimmanas' face right in front of mine.

Wait! Was I actually resting my head on Phim's lap by the basketball court? Was this really happening? This was not how I imagined it would go. The cool guy image I had been trying to maintain in front of the younger high schoolers was now shattered as I lay there in a position like this... Great, just great!

“Ki, are you okay? You’re so red. Are you still in pain?”

Phimmanas gently brushed my hair away from my face, then placed the back of her hand on my forehead, checking my temperature (although I didn’t know if that was the right thing to do).

“Phim, what happened? Why am I lying here?”

“Well, you got hit hard by Fah... You were knocked out cold.”

Ah, momentum before impact equals after impact, I see.

Fah, a giant of a guy who ran like a building coming at full speed, collided with my smaller frame while I stood still. After calculating the momentum, I guess it was a miracle my body didn’t break into pieces.

Oh my God, this is so embarrassing.

“But what about you, Phim? What are you doing here?”

Phimmanas, who had been looking at me with concern, looked a little puzzled by my question. She then scowled, clearly displeased, before responding in her usual firm tone when she’s annoyed.

“Why are you asking strange questions? I came to cheer for your basketball game, obviously!”

“And how did the game go?” I asked, feeling guilty since I remembered my team was struggling when I fainted earlier, and I had to leave the court midgame.

“Well, I don’t know. I was just watching, but…”

Her sweet face remained calm, but I could feel the heat on my own face rising again.

“Ki, what’s going on? Why is your face so red again?”

Pok, who was about the same height as me but much stockier, with a face that had sharp jawlines and a foreigner-like look, suddenly stopped walking. He then grabbed my face, turning my head to the left and then to the right, inspecting it closely as if he were a detective.

“What did you do to me, you idiot?”

“I was just making sure your face wasn’t collapsing! It took a full hit from Fah—such a blow! I needed to check if your nose was still fine.”

After Pok had his fun teasing me, we continued walking to the ice shaved shop. I ordered a large bowl of shaved ice with red syrup, bread, and extra sweet potato chunks. Pok, being the weird one, added basil seeds on top.

“Do you know? After you were knocked out, the team managed to turn the game around and won.”

“What? Are you saying that after I left the court, the team actually won? That’s crazy!”

“Well, yeah—wait, no! I mean...”

Pok didn’t seem to care much about the conversation anymore, as he was too busy devouring his ice.

“Hey, what’s going on with you?”

“Oh, sorry! Got carried away.”

"........"

“Okay, let me explain. When it all happened, everyone in the gym turned their attention to you. They were all running around like crazy,” said Pok, chewing on her ice with a loud crunch.

“So, who carried me out of the court?”

“Phi Tae, of course. He was really worried about you. He rushed over first, looking like a madman. At first, he was going to carry you to the nurse’s office, but...” Pok trailed off dramatically, focusing on her bowl of shaved ice.

“But what?”

“He was stopped."

“By who?”

“By Phim! She wouldn’t let Phi Tae touch you."

“What?!” My voice came out higher than intended.

“Yeah, I know. Weird, right? Even I was confused."

Apparently, when Phi Tae lifted my unconscious body, Phim had sprinted over from the sidelines and intervened. She wouldn’t let him carry me and even refused to let me rest on Phi Wan’s lap—Phi Wan being part of the first-aid team and, apparently, gorgeous.

“So instead of Phi Wan’s lap, you ended up on Phim’s. She insisted." I groaned and buried my face in my hands. “This is too much,” I muttered.

“Hey, don’t pass out again. You already turned red as a tomato once today. Don’t make it a habit.”

“But how did that help our team win? I’ve been listening to you for ages, and I still don’t get it.”

“It’s only been five minutes, Kiran. Keep up,” Pok shot back, rolling her eyes. “Anyway, because you’re famous and Phim is... well, Phim, people couldn’t stop looking. No one focused on the game anymore. The coach called for a time-out to tell the team to ignore you two and focus. And bam, they came back stronger!”

“Great. So I’m some kind of unintentional distraction."

“Pretty much. Oh, and the other team was totally distracted, too. Like when Phim brushed your hair aside? Boom! Three-pointer by Puay, because the blue team was too busy staring.”

I covered my face, feeling the heat rise again. “Why do you know all of this, Pok? Weren’t you playing?”

“Oh, right. You forgot. I’m the sixth substitute. I was sitting on the sidelines the whole time!”

“Ah... I see. Sorry about that.”

Pok, clearly over it, waved down the vendor for another round of buttered toast.

“By the way, you’re not staying for practice? Isn’t Phim going to be mad?”

That question hit me like a brick. It was true. Ever since Phim had gotten permission to walk home instead of taking the car, it had become my job to accompany her. It was an arrangement born out of necessity, not choice. Our houses were only a block apart, and her parents would only agree to let her walk if she had a companion. Somehow, that responsibility landed squarely on my shoulders.

I hadn’t minded at first. In fact, walking with Phim every day had its perks. I got to see sides of her that no one else did. But over time, things began to feel... different.

I was pulled out of my thoughts by the buzz of my phone. Flipping it open, the bright orange Sony Ericsson W550i displayed a new message.

Phim: Kiran, did you already leave? I was waiting for you, but I didn’t see you. T-T

I felt a pang of guilt. I had left without saying a word. I glanced at my Baby-G watch. Phim must’ve been waiting for over 15 minutes.

Kiran: Sorry, Phim. I felt a bit dizzy, so I went ahead.

The reply came almost instantly.

Phim: Oh, I see. Don’t worry. I’ll ask Uncle Lerm to pick me up.

I sighed, relieved that she wasn’t mad. I was about to put my phone away when another message arrived.

Phim: Kii, make sure to take some medicine and rest. I’m worried about you.

My face heated up again. Phim had a way of making my heart race in the most unpredictable ways.

“Oi, Kii! Don’t just sit there blushing. Help me finish this ice before it melts!” Pok called out, snapping me back to reality.

But my hands felt weak, and my heart wouldn’t stop pounding. It was all I could do to stir the ice aimlessly with my spoon, trying to calm down.

At this rate, Phim was going to give me a heatstroke from blushing too much.

# Chapter 3 : ᴛʜᴇ ᴛʜᴇᴏʀʏ ᴏꜰ ᴄᴏɴsᴘɪʀᴀᴄʏ

"Your story has blown up... Did you know that?"

Pok blurted out while we were in the middle of our math class. The two of us sat at the very back of the classroom, where casual conversations during lessons had become a routine. On days when Pok stayed silent and focused, it usually meant something was seriously wrong with him.

"What are you talking about?"

I asked without looking at him, my eyes still glued to the blackboard. From the corner of my eye, I saw Pok scratch his lip before launching into full gossip mode.

"The thing about you and Phimmasa sitting together by the basketball court. This morning, some underclassmen came up to me asking if you and Phim were dating."

"What? What did you say to them?"

I turned to Pok, startled and defensive, leaving the lesson on the board to fade into irrelevance. What Pok said was the one thing I had always dreaded—people starting rumors about me. If that happened, I had no idea how Phimmasa would handle it, especially with me being the source of those rumors.

"I covered for you, of course."

"And said...?"

"I told them... I didn't know. Then I said I'd ask you instead."

"You traitor!"

I forgot myself and raised my voice—exactly the wrong thing to do in Mr. Manoon's class.

"Kiran, Pok, what are you two talking about?"

There it was. Mr. Manoon, whose superhuman ears could pick up whispers from twenty decibels and above. There was even a rumor he could hear people’s thoughts.

"I'm sorry, sir. I had a question about the lesson, so I asked Kiran for help," Pok said smoothly, finding a way to deflect the attention.

But Pok's quick thinking just put me in the spotlight.

"If you’re confused, why not raise your hand and ask me? Or is Kiran smarter than your teacher? Kiran, since you’re so brilliant, come solve this equation on the board."

Pok's eyes widened in horror as I sighed inwardly, rising from my seat. No matter how aloof I seemed, I couldn’t bear upsetting anyone, especially not a teacher.

I trudged reluctantly to the front of the room under the watchful eyes of my classmates.

On the right side of the board was a monstrous equation filled with complex variables, so dense it looked like someone had crammed the entire Greek alphabet onto the board.

On the left was a simpler example with a solution spanning 12 meticulous lines written by Mr. Manoon himself.

I glanced at his convoluted method and couldn’t help but shake my head slightly. Then I turned to tackle the harder equation on the right, solving it in just three lines—my preferred way of using math: simplifying the most complicated problems into something straightforward.

"Well, that’s one way to do it," Mr. Manoon said, surprised. "Everyone, give

Kiran a round of applause. She’s made us proud as our school’s representative."

As I returned to my seat, I caught Phimmasa glancing at me from the front row, her eyes filled with admiration. I quickly looked away, keeping my face neutral. Sliding back into my seat, I shot a glare at Pok, the root of all my troubles. He gave me a sheepish smile and a thumbs-up before whispering, "I’m so proud of you, bestie."

Don’t be too proud too often, Pok.

Lunch break confirmed that Pok hadn’t been exaggerating about the rumors. Have you ever heard of the conspiracy theory phenomenon? It’s when people take unrelated events, string them together, and create a new truth out of thin air. I understood its meaning all too well when a group of giggling sophomore girls ambushed me in the cafeteria.

“Is it true, Kiran? Are you and Phimmasa a thing?”

“You stole Cream’s heart, didn’t you? She’s been obsessing over you nonstop!”

Pooklook, whose petite frame matched her name, referred to Cream, a school marching band member known for her doll-like features. Cream stood at the edge of the group, her pouty face signaling she was seconds away from tears.

The incessant questioning, with no one listening to anyone else, drained my patience. I snapped, raising my voice to end the madness.

“Listen up! Phimmasa and I are just friends. That’s all. Got it?”

As soon as the words left my mouth, I felt relieved. Truthfully, I didn’t mind if people thought I was into girls. But Phimmasa—someone who had always followed every rule and stayed in line—would she be okay with people assuming the same?

Once the Candy Gang finally got their clear answer, they stopped their commotion and dispersed. Part of the group walked over to Cream, who had been standing by, waiting. Before leaving with the group, Cream turned and gave me a sweet smile, then disappeared into the direction of the school building.

"Hey, Kiran, I think you're in trouble."

Pok whispered, trembling behind me, his voice shaky. Startled, I spun around to find Phimmasa standing there. And not just standing—she was alarmingly close. Close enough to have heard everything I'd just said.

Phimmasa looked directly at me with an expression I couldn’t decipher, one I had never seen on her face before. Her gaze held a meaning I couldn’t grasp, but it made my heart plummet, like falling from a great height with no safety net.

Without saying a word, she brushed past me, her petite frame close enough

to feel the air move. I stood frozen, my eyes trailing her until she disappeared from sight.

"Did I say something wrong, Pok?" I asked, my voice barely audible. My eyes lingered on the hallway where Phimmasa had disappeared, my chest weighed down by a feeling I couldn’t name.

"You didn’t say anything wrong. What you said was the truth."

"Then why does it feel...off?"

Pok sighed, his voice tinged with something that felt heavier than his usual lightheartedness. “Because, Ki, sometimes the truth—when it’s too blunt— leaves no room for imagination. And the truth you told? That’s the truth of what is."

"......."

I didn’t respond, but Pok continued, his words cutting deeper than I expected.

"But there’s also a truth of what you feel. Have you ever really, seriously asked yourself what you feel, Ki?"

"......."

The words hung in the air like a weight I couldn’t shrug off.

"What do you really think about Phim? Only you know the answer to that."

With Pok off attending his Buddhist Club meeting during our free period, I was left to my own devices. Normally, we’d sit together playing crossword puzzles, but today I found myself sitting cross-legged in the back of the classroom. A pen in hand, I idly doodled on a piece of paper while music played softly through my headphones.

Unexpectedly, the Princess Clique—who usually spent this period cramming English vocabulary—settled near me. Their giggles and chatter filled the back of the room. I couldn’t help but steal a glance, noticing Phimmasa among them, looking uncharacteristically uneasy while her friends seemed more animated than usual.

Curiosity got the better of me. I paused my music, but I kept my earbuds in, pretending I wasn’t eavesdropping.

"Alright, Ploy, your turn. What’s your ideal type? Spill it!" That was Kate, the ringleader of their group.

Ah, so today’s topic was dream guys. Intriguing. I doodled a little heart on my paper while keeping an ear on their conversation.

"I like bad boys, you know? Hehe!" Ploy’s answer drew a chorus of squeals and laughter.

I smirked and sketched a guy with a backwards cap, sunglasses, and a skateboard in hand.

"And you, Jane?" Kate pressed.

"Muscular guys! Big arms, big chest—ugh, so hot!" Jane replied, her exaggerated laugh echoing through the room.

The noise level rose again, and I chuckled quietly, drawing a cute little cartoon crab flexing its claws.

"Alright, the best for last—Phim! What about you? What's your type? We’ve been dying to know," Kate teased, her tone dripping with anticipation.

My hand froze. My heart raced. I hadn’t even considered that Phim would have to answer this question too.

"Um... do I really have to answer?" Phim’s voice was soft, hesitant.

"Yes!" her friends chimed in unison.

I could feel the pencil trembling in my grip. My sketchpad, once filled with cute doodles, was now marked with erratic, aimless lines.

"I like... someone tall, with a sharp nose, and really, really smart."

Her voice trailed off, but it was enough to make my chest tighten. My heart thudded in my ears.

"Doesn’t that sound like Ki?" Ping blurted out, her comment causing my pencil to slip, nearly dropping it altogether. I barely managed to catch it.

"Don’t be ridiculous, Ping. Kiran is a girl," Kate interjected, laughing.

"Right, Phim?"

There was a long pause. Phim’s response was barely audible, but it was clear enough to ring in my ears.

"Yeah..."

The single word echoed, louder than anything else in the room. If Ping’s comment had sent me floating on a cloud, Phim’s quiet confirmation felt like being shoved off it, crashing back to earth.

"Then maybe... Bom fits the description? He’s tall, has over a 3.0 GPA, and isn’t bad-looking," Kate added, twisting the metaphorical knife.

I clenched my pencil tighter, pressing it to the paper. My sketch turned into a spiky cartoon bomb with an exaggerated fuse.

"Bom, huh? I guess he’s close—" Phim answered hesitantly.

I crumpled the paper in my hand, unable to listen anymore. With a sharp motion, I tossed it into the trash can across the room. The Princess Clique glanced my way but quickly returned to their conversation. I didn’t care anymore.

Picking up my phone, I turned my music back on and cranked the volume to max.

*"All I can do is ache, knowing the dream I’ve held for so long is nothing but an illusion... a fool’s imagination. It hurts so much, but my heart still clings*

*to you."*

# Chapter 4: ꜱᴏᴜɴᴅᴡᴀᴠᴇs

For the past two weeks, I had been letting Phimmasa go home with Uncle Lerm. It was a break from our usual routine—one we’d followed since the start of 10th grade—where we’d always head home together after school. Over the past year, it had become such a natural part of our lives that I couldn’t remember when it had started to feel normal.

But there was one thing Phimmasa had never known about.

I had adjusted my entire after-school schedule to match hers.

Phim always had something to do after classes. If she wasn’t taking extra English lessons with her Princess Clique, she was practicing the hammered dulcimer at the Thai Music Pavilion.

And me? The one who never signed up for tutoring sessions? I’d kill time by pretending to practice basketball, half-heartedly dribbling and shooting hoops. On days when that got boring, I’d play pétanque with some of the older teachers or just hang out with Pok. But whatever I did, it always ended the same—I’d be waiting for Phim by the school gates, ready to walk her home.

Phim thought I was passionate about basketball, practicing hard every evening.

She never knew the truth.

Now that I’d started going home alone, I thought it would feel awkward. But surprisingly, it wasn’t so bad. At least I didn’t have to hang around school, waiting endlessly for someone who had no idea why I was even waiting.

Sure, in the beginning, it was tough to find excuses when Phim asked why I wasn’t around and waiting for her. Sometimes, I’d avoid her entirely, sneaking off before she could catch me.

And honestly? That felt easier than facing her.

“Today too, huh?”

I flinched, my entire body tensing at the sound of her voice. Whipping around, I found Phimmasa standing just a step behind me. Her large, piercing eyes locked onto mine, unyielding, searching for something I couldn’t decipher. Her lips, usually soft with a hint of a smile, were set in a firm, unsmiling line.

Caught off guard, I instinctively tried to meet her gaze with an empty, indifferent look of my own.

Before I could respond, a familiar voice interrupted us.

“Ki! Oi, let’s go—oh, wait… uh… never mind!”

It was Pok, waving enthusiastically as he called out. But the moment he saw who I was standing with, his hand dropped like a rock, and his voice shifted into an exaggerated opera-like tone. He made a hasty exit, his farewell trailing off like a poorly tuned melody.

“You don’t seem to practice basketball anymore."

Phim remarked, her voice quieter now but still sharp.

“I’ve decided to cut back. I’m... bored of it."

Her eyes flickered with an emotion I couldn’t place—something more complex than I’d ever seen in her before. Her lips trembled as though forming words had become a monumental task.

“If you don’t want to go home with me anymore…” she began, her voice breaking slightly. “You could’ve just told me.”

Her words hit me like a blow. I prided myself on being tough, but I wasn’t tough enough for this. Not for the weight of those words or the rawness in her voice. Swallowing hard—a reflex of mine when I was cornered—I struggled to form a coherent response.

But what could I say? Everything I thought of felt like an excuse.

“Okay.”

“What is it, Ki?”

“I don’t… want to go home with you.”

The words came out cold, clipped. They were the truth, but not the whole truth. How could I explain that my feelings had become a tangled mess since that free period two weeks ago? That I’d been running away not from her, but from the overwhelming emotions I couldn’t control?

I couldn’t.

So I didn’t.

I turned and walked away, leaving Phimmasa standing there, frozen in place. My pace quickened, but I felt her gaze on my back, heavy and unrelenting.

For a split second, I thought I saw tears welling in her sharp, dark eyes as I spoke those words.

But I wasn’t sure. I didn’t dare look back to confirm it.

Pok was waiting for me by the school’s exit, just as I had expected.

“You’re still here?”

“I’m not dead yet."

Pok responded while running after me, not looking at anyone's face as I quickly moved forward.

“I thought you were in a hurry to practice opera singing or something, Pok?"

“Can you even hear me?”

“If I mumble in the dark, I’m dead… without anyone helping.”

“Relax, I’ve checked, the team doesn’t have knives!”

“Argh!"

It’s hard to get angry with Pok. In the end, we ended up sitting on a bench by the pool in a public park on the way home.

“What’s wrong with you… Why did you run away?”

“......”

“That day, I waited for you outside the gym... for hours.”

“You didn’t practice again, Pok?”

“That day, I had to serve drinks... Please, don’t change the subject.” "......."

I didn’t respond, instead doing my classic move of picking up a stone and tossing it into the pool, watching the ripples spread out, getting bigger and bigger until they eventually faded away... It’s probably not much different from relationships, right?

Bigger and bigger... and eventually, it’s over.

“About what Phim said, that Bom is close to the type of guy she likes, is that true?”

I quickly turned to look at Pok, nearly straining my neck. Sometimes, my friends seem to know everything.

How does he know everything?!

“How do you know about that?”

Pok didn’t seem to care about answering my question. He was looking eagerly at a food cart parked far away. He left me with the unanswered question, and after a while, he came back with a bag full of different kinds of fried meatballs.

“I also bought crab sticks for you.”

“Thanks... But can’t you answer my question first?”

“Hmm... What was the question again?”

“I asked how you knew about Phim’s type of guy.”

“Well... I’m always faster than anyone else with this kind of thing. Phim’s pretty popular, and her friends are pretty well-meaning.”

“How?”

“Well, after they gossiped that day, Kate, who’s close to Bom, passed the news on to him.”

“......”

“Now, you get it, right? Bom’s been bothering Phim since then.”

“.....”

“It’s only you who hasn’t noticed or paid attention.” “I did notice... I just thought they were already together...”

There it is.

I was right.

After a while of silence, I thought Pok might be concerned about me, but when I looked at him, he was still busy with his fried meatballs, as if he might spill the bag to lick it or something.

“You only care about eating meatballs, huh?”

“No, the meatballs ran out, so I’m searching for cucumbers to eat.”

Sometimes, I feel like jumping into the pool instead of throwing the stone just to feel something!

“Why do you care so much about this, Ki?”

“What?”

“About what Phim said.”

“You’re asking about something you already know, aren’t you?”

“I mean, it’s just some fun gossip among friends, isn’t it?”

“...But she said it out loud.”

“It’s just words, Kii.”

“You’re the one who’s making it a big deal, Pok.”

“My grandma always told me, when you judge a person, don’t just listen to their words, look at their actions.”

“......”

“People can say anything, but they can’t always feel or do everything they say.”

“Really?”

“Honestly, I don’t think she cares about Bom at all. In fact, she probably finds him annoying.”

“......”

“I’m serious. I’ve seen how she treats you differently from everyone else.”

“You’re so observant.”

“Of course. I’ve got the qualities of a scientist.”

“Not a celebrity gossip journalist?”

“Hey, maybe I am?”

I slowly processed what Pok said. His grandmother’s words were indeed wise, but for some reason, I couldn’t shake the sound of Phim’s voice echoing in my head, saying,

*“Bom? Maybe he’s close to my type…”*

It was just a passing comment, wasn’t it?

Just... a ripple of sound, or was it really your true feeling, Phimmasa?

**Chapter 5: ᴛʜᴇ ᴄʜᴀɪɴ ʀᴇᴀᴄᴛɪᴏɴ**

The situation between us and Phimmanas has only worsened. It's not getting any better. Phimmanas didn't’t wait for me to go home like she used to. She didn't talk, didn't greet, and didn't even look at me.

And honestly, isn't that fair? Imagine if someone told us to our face that they didn’t want to go home with us like that. Even if we’re the type to act tough, we probably wouldn’t dare to get involved with that person again. We might even end up hating them.

Right now, I feel like a fish that jumped from cold water into hot. The sweet feelings I had toward Phim before slowly built up, step by step, and I liked it that way. Everything was smooth, like slowly climbing a mountain. It’s a stark contrast to how things are now.

The coldness from her is triggering intense feelings inside me, like someone suddenly pulling me to the top of a mountain, making me realize in that split second that I really can’t live without it!

But what can I do? As my mom once described me:

"She's the granddaughter of Grandma Kim, who is willing to die, but never lose her form or dignity to anyone."

Just as my mom said, even if it feels like I’m burning up inside right now, turning into ashes, I won’t beg or try to make up with anyone first, even if that person is Phimmanas.

"Classmate, those who are group 1, gather here please."

Ping, called for the group. The teacher had assigned us into six groups during the Social Studies class.

When will this group division stop? How many times have me and Pok been separated by this kind of grouping?

"Okay, now we’re all here. Group 1 will consist of Ping, Phim, Golf, Art, Bai, Ja, and Kiran."

This time, what’s worse than being separated from the Pokki gang is the fact that the teacher assigned the two people who haven’t been speaking to each other for days to sit together, making things incredibly awkward in front of others.

Phimmanas face is still cold. Her sharp gaze is focused on everything around her except for me.

Ping continues to cheerfully assign tasks for the group’s report, but I can’t hear a word. How could I? My mind is consumed by the sound of my own heartbeat, which feels both loud and painful, like it’s about to make me faint.

"Ping, can we switch tasks?"

"Is the task I gave you really that bad?"

So that’s why Ping’s pairing was so careless. No wonder the small one couldn’t stand it and immediately raised her hand to ask for a switch.

So this is it. We’ve reached a point where even the smallest bit of interaction with the team is no longer possible, right?

"Well… I’d like to switch to being the one who presents the board instead." The small one looked straight at Ping with determination, her face devoid of any smile or hint of enjoyment.

"Okay, since you were supposed to do it, Phim, I guess you’ll have to take over," Ping said.

Phim, the diligent student who didn’t really know anything, adjusted her thick glasses before timidly accepting the request. It was clear she couldn’t refuse Phimmanas’s demand—look at that serious face! If anyone annoyed her right now, they might as well disappear.

"Sure, I’ll do whatever you need, but will you be able to handle it?"

I furrowed my brows, looking just as tangled as a pair of headphones stuffed in my pocket, trying to keep my face as normal as possible before I responded to Phim's question.

"No worries, Phim. You help with Bai’s research. I’ll handle the rest on my own."

"Are you sure?"

Phim asked again but she still refused to look at me, her arms crossed and her face as cold as ever.

"Yeah, don’t worry about it. I’ll prepare the materials for the craft first, and then we’ll be good."

As soon as I finished speaking, I got up and left. Phim followed me, thinking I was upset, which, honestly, I was. But it had nothing to do with Phim.

"Wait, I’ll help you cut the paper or do anything else you need," Phim said, running after me, clearly worried.

I turned to look at Phim, who was shorter than me and still out of breath, feeling both affectionate and amused. People with good hearts are really good, aren’t they? Compared to Phim, Pok and I are more like dark-zone types.

"Okay, Phim, you cut the paper, but don’t hurt your fingers, alright?"

"Yes, ma’am!"

Phim replied, giving me an exaggerated bow, the kind you’d see in a comedy café show. I didn’t realize she could be funny like that.

But...

Phim wasn’t exaggerating, and my worries weren’t unfounded.

As Phim started cutting the paper, she eventually took it too far and tried to use a cutter to create a pop-up design, which was what I had originally planned. But fate wasn’t on Phim’s side, and before she could finish the first one, she accidentally cut her finger.

I quickly took Phim, with her pale face, to the nurse’s office. Luckily, the cut wasn’t deep, and the nurse patched it up quickly. Our group members who heard about it came to offer support.

Of course, Phim, who felt responsible for the accident, ended up comforting me instead.

"Ki, I’m really sorry. I couldn’t even finish this simple task."

I scratched my head, feeling sorry for the girl. I was concerned for Phim, but at the same time, it wasn’t Phim’s fault.

"It’s okay, Phim. You’re fine, and it’s nothing serious. We’re almost done. I’ll finish it up in a second."

"How about this, Ki? Tomorrow, we’ll all help you, and we can present on Friday. We should be done by then," Ping suggested, trying to calm everyone down.

Everyone agreed, except for Phimmanas, who still kept her eyes down, pressing her lips together so tightly it looked like she might snap.

But I’m still me.

I’m the kind who’ll do everything alone, no matter how tough it is!

Even though Ping insisted on helping, I didn’t feel right about it. After all, I had said it was my responsibility, and it didn’t feel fair for others to take it on.

When I was with Ping, I didn’t outright refuse their kindness, but I didn’t agree either. Once everyone went home or went to their tutoring classes, I stayed behind, working on the props in silence.

"Ki, are you still working on it?"

"Of course."

Pok, who had to leave early, asked with genuine concern, but he knew me too well. He once said, after we stayed up all night fixing a group report: "You’re the type who’ll die for your work… and do it alone too."

Before leaving, Pok tossed me a bag of fried chicken and sticky rice, almost making me feel emotional—until he said the next line:

"I still have some leftover from lunch. Make sure you handle it."

"......."

"Goodbye..."

Six o'clock came, then seven, and the Pop-up paper cutting project still wasn’t anywhere near finished. I forgot to mention, I’m not just the type of person who sacrifices myself for the task at hand; I’m also a perfectionist. Once I set my mind on something, I always aim to do it to the best of my ability.

"Why didn’t I do it better?"

It was around 8:00 PM when I finally allowed myself a small smile, after checking and double-checking until I was satisfied. I gathered my materials and put them away in the storage room, surrounded by the quiet of the classroom, while thinking about tomorrow. At least if I finished my work today, maybe some people would stop blaming themselves.

8:15 PM...

I grabbed my thin student bag, ready to head home, but I had to stop abruptly on the second floor. From the balcony, I could see Phim standing in front of the building’s lower floors...

I looked at my watch again. It was Wednesday. Phim was supposed to be in chemistry class until 8:30 PM. So why was she standing there, waiting?

Uncle Lerm really is careless to let Phim wait outside alone at such a late hour!

I hurriedly took a few steps down the stairs, anxious, but then I had to pause again when I saw Bom talking to Phim.

I froze... not because I was watching them, but because I just couldn’t move. The idea in my head that they might be waiting to go home together made me feel weak.

But it seemed Phim shook her head. Bom stood there for a while, talking to her like they were negotiating something. Then he waved goodbye, looking down, and walked away in the direction of the back exit.

I couldn’t help but breathe a sigh of relief. At least my fate wouldn’t be sealed tonight.

Phim was still standing there, and my heart sank again when she looked up and made eye contact with me as I stood frozen. Even though we weren’t close, I could still see a flicker of hurt in her eyes.

I looked away and began walking down the stairs. Every step felt heavier, knowing that the destination ahead was something I feared most.

Confrontation.

"Why are you still standing here? Where's Uncle Lerm?" I asked.

Phim stared at me for a long time, almost as if she were trying to make up for not looking at me for days. She didn’t answer my question. Maybe it was because it was so soft, I could barely hear my own voice.

"I’m sorry... I made everyone worried... both Ping and you..."

"Where’s Uncle Leim?"

"I... wanted to help, but I didn’t dare..."

We kept talking in circles. One of us asked a question, and the other answered something else. In the end, I had to speak up to break the silence.

"It’s fine. I’m done now. You don’t need to worry."

"......"

"Can you finally tell me where Uncle Lerm is?"

Phim lowered her head and spoke in the softest voice, almost too quiet for anyone to hear.

"Uncle Lerm said he would go home on his own, so I didn’t let him pick me up."

How should I feel when I hear that?

"So why aren’t you home now?"

"......"

"Phim?"

"I’m waiting for you..."

"......"

“Waiting… even though you probably don’t want to go home with me.”

That single sentence nearly melted my hardened heart. Phim looked so pitiful. How could I have been so cruel to her?

I didn’t say anything else. Instead, I grabbed her school bag, which she'd been holding, and carried it before walking ahead of her.

When I didn’t hear her footsteps following mine, I turned back to see that Phim was still standing in the same spot.

“Phim, come on. Let’s go home together.”

At that, the little girl with braided hair ran to me in a hurry. My cold, heartless self felt an even deeper pang of guilt. All I could do was quicken my pace, not knowing what else to do.

I must have looked like a thief running from the police.

As we left the school gates, I was startled to feel a small hand tugging at the hem of my gym shirt. It was Phimmasa, holding onto it lightly while walking silently behind me.

Realizing this, I slowed my pace. But unfortunately, as I glanced back at her short strides, I tripped over a loose brick on the pavement. The misstep caused Phim’s delicate face to collide with my back.

Startled, I turned around to check on her, but before I could, Phim grabbed my shirt with both hands, pulling it forward as if signaling:

Don’t turn around!

With her face buried in my back, I felt what I feared most—a quiet sobbing that shook her small frame. I could hear her muffled cries as she tried her best to stifle them, but to me, they were heartbreakingly clear. Every single sob, every quiver of her small shoulders—everything was painfully evident.

Unable to move, I tilted my head upward to look at the moon, avoiding the glances of passersby. This situation couldn’t have been more awkward.

There we stood, right next to a utility pole. I held my thin bag in my left hand and Phim’s heavy, bulging school bag in my right, while she clung to my back, crying her heart out. How was I supposed to fix this?

“What can I do to make you stop crying, Phim?” I finally asked.

She paused between sobs before responding in a voice muffled by my back. “Wa... wait... for... me...”

Her broken words left me utterly confused.

“Walk while eating bananas?” I guessed, utterly clueless.

Thud! Her small fist hit my back with surprising force.

“Oh, I get it! Walk slowly? Is that it?”

Phim responded with a gentle bump of her forehead against my back.

“Alright, that’s no problem. Is that all you want? Will you stop crying if I do that?”

She shook her head, rubbing her forehead against my back. Clearly, my guess was wrong again.

“Then what do I need to do?”

“Wa... wait... for... me... more...” she repeated softly.

This time, I understood. “Wait for you to go home together, right?”

Thump! Another forehead bump landed on my back, more playful than before.

“Okay, okay. I’ll do it.”

“......"

“Phim, stop crying now, alright? I promise to walk you home every day. And I’ll walk slowly, too.”

It took her a moment, but eventually, the little crybaby loosened her grip on my shirt and lifted her face from my back. Her face—and my shirt—were in the same sorry state: a mess of tears and snot.

I pulled a handkerchief from my pocket and handed it to her. She accepted it shyly, turning away to wipe her face. Then, to my surprise, she tried to clean my back too, though it didn’t help much—it was still damp and sticky.

After that, we started walking again. Phim had stopped crying, but she was still visibly subdued, her quiet demeanor marked by a slower-than-usual pace, almost like a crawl.

When we reached the crosswalk, I couldn’t help but worry. If she walked this slowly and absentmindedly, would she even make it across safely? Without a second thought, I shifted both our bags into my right hand and used my free left hand to grab her small hand.

Phim looked up at me, wide-eyed. I might’ve even seen a faint smile from the little crybaby.

It was just a four-lane road, but somehow it felt like it took forever to cross. Probably because I held my breath the whole time.

Once we were safely across, I slowly let go of her hand, almost reluctantly, as if moving in slow motion.

You couldn’t just drop her hand suddenly—it wouldn’t feel right.

Even then, I noticed a faint smile lingering on her small face.

Finally, we arrived at Phim’s mansion. She reached out to take her bag from me, moving hesitantly. We waved goodbye, and I had turned to leave when I heard her soft voice call out.

"Kiran?"

I turned back to see those familiar eyes, still flickering with a hint of doubt and uncertainty.

“Get home safely, Phim."

“And tomorrow?”

I gave her a gentle smile—a rare one I didn’t show just anyone. Very few had seen it, and Phim was one of them.

“Yeah. Let’s go home together tomorrow, too.”

# Chapter 6: ɢʟᴜᴄᴏsᴇ

“What exactly happened last night between you and Phim? Tell me now.”

Pok blurted out the question as we were eating noodles at the cafeteria, catching me so off guard that I almost choked on the spicy, steaming-hot soup. Chaos erupted as I desperately called for water. Once I recovered, I found myself under Pok's piercing hawk-like gaze. I tried to act clueless for a while, but there was no resisting the power of her stare.

“What nonsense imagination inspired you to ask me this?”

“Your eyes.”

“...What about them?”

“They’re sparkling like you just won the lottery or something.”

I pretended to keep eating my noodles as though I didn’t hear a thing, but Pok, as expected of our resident gossip queen, wasn’t about to drop the matter so easily.

“And Phim? Don’t get me started on her. She was sulking like a grumpy little monkey for two or three weeks straight. But this morning? She showed up all bright and cheerful, like My Little Pony prancing through a lavender field.”

“Hey, this duck leg is still as tender and delicious as ever. Want a bite?” “Sure, give me a piece. Wait—no, you’re changing the subject that easily.”

“........"

“Put that duck leg on my plate, then spill the tea about last night.”

It was Thursday.

In the afternoon, we had our PE class—one that Pok and I absolutely loved. This term, we were learning sepaktakraw. That’s right, sepaktakraw, the sport where teams of three play with a rattan ball. It sounds tough, doesn’t it? We thought so too. The kicks, headers, and acrobatics didn’t exactly scream “ladylike.”

Most of the class didn’t mind, but the rich-girl clique was a whole different story. Every time they tried to head the ball, they shrieked like banshees. One even complained about popping a zit. Instead of running to hit the ball, they scattered like startled chickens to their own corners.

Luckily, our class had already passed the chaotic beginner phase. Today, the teacher split us into teams of three and arranged matches. The winning team would earn a whopping ten bonus points.

Of course, Pok and I teamed up as always, and we recruited Pui—a sports prodigy—to complete our dream team. After the teams were sorted, we gathered by the court, waiting for the draw to determine our opponents.

Somehow, by fate or Pok’s scheming shove, I ended up sitting next to Phim.

After last night’s events, I could barely meet her gaze. Still, I couldn’t ignore the fact that she was smiling—a soft, bashful smile that made her cheeks blush so deeply they could burst.

When the draw was announced, guess who we were up against? Phim’s team. Her teammates, Fam, Jay, and Ploy, were all delicate sweethearts.

Pok, Pui, and I exchanged triumphant high-fives, celebrating our inevitable victory right in front of Phim, without a shred of subtlety.

A team of bunnies, deer, and gazelles going up against rhinos, wild buffaloes, and a tank? No contest.

“You’re way too smug, Ki. You think you’ll beat us that easily?” Phim shot me a challenging look and even pinched my arm for good measure before leaning in to whisper menacingly, “We’ll see who wins.”

“Hmph, let’s see if you’ve even touched the ball in the past two months.”

“How about we make it interesting? A bet.”

“A bet?”

“If I win, you treat me to ice cream.”

“........"

“But if I lose, I’ll take you out to a movie.”

“Deal.”

Before I could fully process what I had just agreed to, Phim skipped off to join her team on the opposite side of the court. As usual, my brain lagged behind. No matter who won, we’d end up going out together.

Was this... a date?

Five minutes later, the game began—and ended just as quickly.

How could it not? Every serve landed without challenge. Every time the ball was in play, Phim’s team scrambled around looking for it, even though it had already landed ages ago. Pok, bored by the lack of competition, tried spicing things up with trick shots—serving blindfolded, imitating the boys’ acrobatic kicks, and even purposely hitting the net. Somehow, even her “for fun” shots ended up scoring.

After the match, I approached Phim to gloat, only to find her utterly unbothered. Instead, she smiled knowingly and leaned in to whisper, “Don’t forget our deal.”

This girl… what’s going on here? What do you call this kind of behavior?

"......"

"Uh... uh..."

"Alright, alright. I'll treat you to ice cream then."

We decided to watch a popular movie first since the next showing was conveniently timed. Phimmasa was in a noticeably cheerful mood, smiling constantly and chatting away, a stark contrast to the teary, moody person she had been days earlier. While she was busy enjoying the moment, I found myself lost in thought, wondering how someone could change so much in such a short time.

As we passed the popcorn counter, she suddenly stopped in her tracks, tugging at my sleeve with those small hands of hers.

“Ki... Phimmasa wants popcorn. Do you want some too?”

The way she call her name in her sentence was so sweet it practically sent me floating. If anyone were to die from sweetness overdose, I'd probably be the first. At least, that’s what I thought—until she snapped me back to reality.

"Ki! Are you listening? Do you want popcorn or not? You're just standing there!"

Well, Phimmasa was still Phimmasa after all. Sweet but with a sharp edge. Even when she tries to be sugary, it doesn’t last long.

“Why are you asking me? If you want popcorn, just get it.”

“But Phim’s scared of gaining weight. And there’s ice cream later too. You’ll help Phim finish it, won’t you? Promise?”

“Fine."

"Okay. Miss, one combo set, please. Cheese-flavored popcorn and Coke for the drink.”

“......”

Seriously? With the way she eats, she’s worried about gaining weight?

It was hard to focus on the movie with Phim sitting so close to me in the dim theater. The faint, sweet scent she carried was impossible to ignore. She seemed thoroughly engrossed in the film, though, laughing and reacting at all the right moments.

At some point, a small hand extended toward me with a piece of cheese popcorn. She held it so close to my lips that I startled, accidentally bumping my head against the seat's headrest.

“What are you doing?” I whispered, flustered.

She smiled mischievously. “Just eat it. You're helping me finish it, remember?”

I reached out hesitantly to take the popcorn, but she pulled her hand back slightly.

“Why are you grabbing it? I’m feeding you. Just eat from my hand.”

Before I could respond, she brought another piece of popcorn directly to my lips, leaving me no choice but to awkwardly nibble on it. Her giggle was quiet but infectious.

By the time the movie ended, I was beyond full.

As we exited the theater, Phimmasa wasted no time dragging me over to an ice cream shop, determined to get what she wanted. I wasn’t even hungry anymore, but a promise was a promise. So there I was, letting her order away.

“What would you like?” the server asked.

“Strawberry Overload Sundae, please,” Phimmasa replied. “Make sure it’s fully loaded.”

I sighed, trying to keep things simple. “Little Prince for me, cookie and cream flavor.”

While we waited for our orders, I noticed her mood had suddenly shifted. She was no longer as bubbly, and her expression seemed distant. Her fingers absentmindedly played with the rose placed in a glass on the table.

“Phim, are you okay? You seem off all of a sudden.”

“......”

She didn’t answer immediately. Instead, she kept fiddling with the rose before finally speaking in a cool tone.

“Why did you order cookies and cream?”

What? Was she seriously upset over ice cream flavors?

“What’s wrong with it? It’s not that strange, is it?”

“It’s not strange... I just don’t like cream.”

Her words hit me harder than they should have. The way she said it made my chest tighten as my mind raced. She’s not talking about... Cream—the drum majorette, right?

“And what flavor should I have ordered then? I don’t eat many other kinds.”

“That’s true…”

"......"

“Why don’t they ever have a flavor name Phim?”

“What flavor do you want?”

Phimmasa leaned her chin on her palm, smiling softly as she looked at me with eyes that made my heart feel like it had been stolen.

“Coo**Ki**es and... **Phim**.”

# Chapter 7: ᴄᴀᴛᴀʟʏsᴛ

Sometimes, I surprise myself. The oddity in question? I’m a student who hardly ever wears a school uniform. Thanks to my school’s daily elective classes, my friend Pok and I have managed to wear P.E. attire every single day. Naturally, we signed up for every sports-related elective possible.

On Mondays, it’s basketball—makes sense since we’re basketball players.

Tuesdays, volleyball—where all we do is set balls no one ever spikes.

Wednesdays, table tennis—a class spent chasing after balls and dropping paddles.

Thursdays are P.E. for the whole class, and this term we’re learning sepak takraw. Saved!

And Fridays? The best of all—we picked pétanque, a sport that feels miles away from teenage life at 16.

So, yeah, Pok and I managed to avoid wearing the school uniform all week long. At first, our classmates thought it was strange, but we couldn’t care less. Eventually, they got used to it, and no one batted an eye anymore.

Well, no one except for Ms. Pitsamai.

“So, are you two trying to avoid wearing the school uniform on purpose, Kiran and Pok?”

Ms. Pitsamai, our strict Ethics teacher, peered at us over her glasses one day. She had caught the two of us walking along the corridor outside the 11th-grade classrooms.

“Well, you see, I’m just very health-conscious, ma’am,” Pok replied with her usual deadpan expression. “Sports are the best medicine, you know— Aha!”

Pok’s sharp, angular face and thick eyebrows always gave her an air of authority. I’d always believed that her serious look could make even the silliest excuses sound convincing.

But Ms. Pitsamai shook her head in disapproval.

“And you, Kiran?”

Uh-oh. I hadn’t prepared for this. I blurted out the first thing that came to mind.

“I play sports to remember, ma’am.”

“Remember what?”

“Um… I play basketball to remember myself. Volleyball reminds me of Tik Jesdaporn in The Iron Ladies. Table tennis? That’s for my uncle’s cat named Ping Pong. And pétanque… well, I play that in memory of my grandmother.”

“......."

While Ms. Pitsamai furrowed her brows in confusion, Pok and I took the chance to bow politely and slip away as quietly as possible.

But as much as I hate wearing the school uniform, there are times when I can’t avoid it—like today. I was chosen to represent the 11th grade in a science quiz competition during National Science Week, hosted by our school this year.

Yep, me—Kiran, the oddball who lives in P.E. clothes—is the top student of my grade. I’ve been first in every class ranking since elementary school, though I’ve never tried that hard to be.

So here I was, fully dressed in the school uniform: skirt, tie, and neatly tied hair adorned with a navy blue ribbon. My hair is only shoulder-length, so when I tie it up, loose strands frame my face, softening my naturally sharp features.

I hate this look, not because of the outfit itself, but because of everyone’s reactions.

“Whoa, Kiran! You’re adorable today!”

“You should dress like this more often—it’s melting my heart!”

“Be my girlfriend, Kiran!”

As soon as I stepped into school, the group of loudmouths at the gate— friends of mine, mind you—began their relentless teasing. I just gave them a thumbs-up, withholding the details of which thumb it was.

“Oh my gosh, she’s in uniform! So cute!”

“Kiran, you’re amazing!”

Then came the chorus of squeals from a group of excitable 10th-graders, the “Candy Crew,” who always acted like they were performing in a Broadway musical. I kept a straight face, hoping they wouldn’t get too close.

“Lookin’ sharp today, Kiran!”

Of course, Pok couldn’t let the moment pass without a comment. What caught me off guard, though, was the shy figure in the distance. Phimmasa didn’t approach me like she usually would. Instead, she glanced at me, then quickly looked away, her cheeks turning a deep shade of red.

I must’ve been imagining things because later, when I took the stage for the quiz, Phim sat at the front of the audience, waving enthusiastically to show her support. She didn’t seem the least bit shy anymore.

The quiz wasn’t hard at all. Science, math, physics, chemistry, biology— they’re like candy to me. But subjects like social studies and geography? No, thanks.

As expected, I scored the highest, securing first place for our school in the competition. When they announced the results, cheers erupted from every corner of the auditorium. But the first person I looked for was Phim. Sure enough, she was clapping non-stop, her eyes sparkling with pride as if she’d won the prize herself.

After the competition, it was lunchtime. My classmates and I, nearly 20 of us, took over a large table in the cafeteria. I ended up sitting on one end, while Phim was on the other. The table was alive with laughter and chatter, the kind of lively camaraderie we hadn’t had in a while.

And yet, even amidst all the noise, I couldn’t help but glance over at her.

Things could have been almost perfect today, if not for Phi Tai—a senior in Grade 12 who happens to have a crush on me—showing up unexpectedly.

“Hey, you were amazing today! I was cheering so loudly down there I almost lost my voice,” Phi Tai said as he ruffled my hair in front of everyone in the cafeteria.

In front of Phimmasa.

I seriously question why all my supposed “athletic skills,” honed from five PE classes a week, failed me at that moment. Instead of dodging his hand, I just froze, wide-eyed and stunned.

Sitting next to me, Pok nudged my leg with his foot and leaned over to whisper, “Ki! Watch yourself! Phim’s staring at you, and her eyes are practically shooting daggers!”

Hearing Phim’s name in a situation like this made my heart drop to my stomach. My face felt like it was on fire.

“Wow, your ears are so red—it’s adorable!” Phi Tai quipped, his hand now moving to pinch my ear.

And just like that, the situation escalated. I heard the loud clatter of cutlery hitting a plate. Turning towards the source of the noise, I saw Phimmasa at the head of the table, standing abruptly and slamming her chair back. Without a word, she stomped off to return her tray, with Ploy from her clique hurriedly following behind.

“You’re in deep now, buddy,” Pok said, clicking his tongue and shooting me a look that screamed, I told you so.

Pok always had a knack for predicting Phim’s mood swings. He often called me the ultimate “catalyst” for what he dubbed the “Phim Explosion”—a phenomenon he claimed to be studying as if it were some kind of science experiment. His warnings? Always accurate, like clockwork.

“Phi Tai, get lost already!” Pok said sharply. “You can’t just touch someone else’s friend like that. She’s not some stray you can mess around with!”

“Yeah, exactly!” I quickly chimed in, trying to salvage the situation. “Touch me again, and I’ll bite your hand off!”

Phi Tai just laughed it off, thinking we were joking. If not for the time he carried me off the basketball court after I got hit, I might have actually clocked him one.

But of course, the National Science Day wasn’t over yet. And neither was my string of bad luck.

In the afternoon, my class, Grade 11/1, was stationed at our science booth, which this year showcased the science behind making fermented sausages. It didn’t sound glamorous, and it wasn’t. But every step of the process could be explained with scientific principles.

Our unique twist? We were making oyster mushroom sausages. At the booth’s entrance, we handed out free samples to attract students. Once they were hooked, we reeled them into the booth to listen to Phimmasa and her group explain the fermentation process and bacterial cultures.

I was tasked with carrying trays of freshly fried sausages, while Pok manned the frying station. Meanwhile, Phim handled the academic presentations inside the booth.

The problems?

For Pok, it was his habit of snacking on the sausages he was frying, leaving me short on samples.

For me, it was the crowd of people coming over with ulterior motives.

“Phi Ki, can I take a picture with you?”

“Oh my gosh, Phi Ki just smiled! She’s so cute!”

“Nong Ki, those trays must be heavy. Let me help you!”

Some visitors were harmless enough. But the Grade 10 Candy Crew—a group notorious for fangirling over me—was another story. This time, even Nong Cream joined them, and once inside the booth, they didn’t seem inclined to leave.

“Phi Ki, are you tired?” Nong Cream asked sweetly, dabbing at my sweat with a handkerchief.

With my hands full of the tray, I couldn’t fend her off. Pok, noticing the brewing storm, ran over with his spatula in hand, trying to warn me. But it was too late.

A loud bang echoed as Phimmasa’s pointer stick struck the booth’s presentation board.

“Juniors, could you all keep it down?” she said, her tone sharp and icy. “I can’t explain anything to the other students with all the noise you’re making.”

The entire booth fell silent, as if everyone were holding their breath. Even the Candy Crew froze, wide-eyed.

Only Pok dared to move, leaning in to mutter, “You’re doomed, my friend.”

After the chaos of National Science Week, Phim’s lingering frustration seemed to extend well beyond the event. That evening, after we finished cleaning up the science booth, everyone packed their belongings and headed home.

As usual, Phim waited for me at our usual spot.

But something about the atmosphere this time was... different.

The short-legged girl stomped her feet impatiently, walking far ahead of me. To top it off, her arm muscle weakness seemed to have miraculously disappeared today. She carried her heavy schoolbag all by herself—without her usual pleading for me to do it. As for her expression? Don’t even mention it.

It was sour. So sour it might as well be bitter!

That left me, the long-legged one, rushing to catch up with Phimmasa instead. Was this what they called being sulky?

I couldn’t help but recall the parting words from my dear friend, Pok, just before I left school earlier.

“May the Gods protect you.”

Pok didn’t just say it. No, he cupped my face with both hands, staring at me with a look akin to a mother bidding farewell to a child going off to war. “But I’m Buddhist.”

“Then may all the holy spirits guide you.”

“Is it really that bad, Pok? Going home with Phimmasa in this state?”

Pok let out a long sigh, clearly exasperated by my cluelessness. He removed his hands from my face, folded his arms, and tilted his head back at a 45degree angle, gazing dramatically at the sky as though channeling some higher power. Then, in a tone that sent shivers down my spine, he declared:

“How bad, you ask? You’ll find out soon enough, Ki. All the logic and reasoning you’re so proud of? It’s useless against Phim’s sulking. Useless.

Ho ho ho.”

And now, as I trailed behind her, I started to see the signs of what he’d meant.

I wouldn’t have minded if her speed-walking was actually heading in the right direction. But what was this?

“Where are you even going? It’s left, not right.”

Phimmasa froze mid-step at my overbearing tone, turning to glare daggers at me for interrupting her determined march. Still, she adjusted her course without a word, as though nothing had happened.

She was being so infuriatingly bratty. I couldn’t resist the sudden urge to tease her.

“Oh! I found money!”

Phimmasa flinched at my loud, exaggerated exclamation but didn’t turn around.

“Oh! Look at that—what a cute cat!”

This time, she didn’t even falter. No reaction whatsoever.

“Huh? Is that Cream over there?”

Bingo. Phimmasa whipped her head around instantly. Of course, there was no Cream. Only a pack of cream-filled Oreos in my hand. I grinned wide, holding up the snack like it was a trophy. “Want an Oreo, Phim?”

“No!”

The short-legged brat was not amused. She stomped off, her steps echoing with frustration. So much for “nice guys finish last, clowns get the prize.” Lies. All lies.

“Phim, wait up!”

When theatrics failed, I resorted to the simplest, most heartfelt method. I just called out to her.

But who cared? Not Phim.

“Phimmm. Phim baby…”

Bullseye. The braided girl came to an abrupt halt, turning back with doe eyes full of suspicion. Her lips remained in a pout, and her gaze was wary. She arched a brow and squinted, her expression oozing distrust.

“What?”

“Wait for me.”

“Then why don’t you walk faster? You used to keep up just fine.”

“Well, didn’t you say I should slow down? I’m just following orders.”

The little one seemed at a loss for words. She bit her lip, darting her eyes between the path ahead and anywhere else but my face. Her cheeks turned a vivid shade of red. Without a word, she shoved her schoolbag—completely unfiltered of all its heavy contents—at me.

“Phim, this is heavy…”

I grinned victoriously as I accepted the bag. Meanwhile, Phimmasa started walking again, this time at a much slower pace. I caught up to her in no time, falling into step beside her. She glanced at me out of the corner of her eye, her lips curving upward in a small, haughty smirk as if to say:

Don’t get too cocky. I’m still mad at you.

“What did you call me just now?” she asked suddenly.

“Hm? Phim, of course.”

“No, not that. The other one.”

I turned to look at the little girl, who was now avoiding my gaze. She stared at the ground like she was worried she’d step on something gross.

“Phim baby…”

There it was—the tiniest, faintest smile. I saw it, even if she tried to hide it by keeping her head down. That was the first smile I’d seen from Phim today.

So, “Baby" was the magic phrase to soothe the sulking princess, huh? Just like Pok said, some things couldn’t be explained with reason.

But… I wonder. Will it work every time?

# Chapter 8: ᴛʜᴇ ᴍᴀɢɴᴇᴛɪᴄ ꜰɪᴇʟᴅ

Will anyone else ever feel like us? To despise their birthday as much as we do? For us, it feels like a never-ending trial—a day filled with unexpected twists.

Take last year, for instance. That ridiculous bouquet Tai hauled to our classroom door, or the nerve-wracking need to dodge the Candy Crew and their ring leader, Cream, who parade around with balloons and confetti bombs. The gifts stacked like a fortress in my room? Leaving them behind isn’t an option—it’d hurt their feelings.

And let’s face it: no one escapes birthdays. The day rolls around whether you’re ready or not.

But this year, turning 16 feels different.

Since that science fair fiasco, even a fool could sense someone’s displeasure with our interactions with others. Normally, we wouldn’t care. But when that person happens to be Phim…

“You’re hauling all this around at sunrise? What’s up with you, Ki?”

Pok didn’t bother with a cheerful “Happy Birthday!” like the others. Instead, he grabbed some of my stuff and stuffed it into the oversized backpack I brought for the occasion.

“I ran into the 9th-grade gang loitering by the back gate. Usually, I use the front.”

“Oh, right! It’s your birthday today. Ayu Vanno Sukham Balanggg!”

“…Thanks, Pok.”

“By the way, tread carefully this year. Don’t go around charming people. Phim won’t let you off the hook.”

As he spoke, Pok nervously scanned his surroundings like Phim might pop out at any moment.

“Me? Charming? What are you even talking about?”

Pok tapped his forehead dramatically, clearly not deep in thought but giving an Oscar-worthy performance.

“Well… you don’t really do anything. But your face and aura? Even when you’re just standing there…”

“What? Should I act more flirtatious?”

“Listen, Ki.”

"........"

Pok grabbed my shoulders, spinning me to face him directly. His thick eyebrows furrowed, and his usual laid-back eyes sharpened with intent.

When a friend gets this serious, you pay attention.

“I don’t know.”

"...!!!!"

The First Trial

Lunch hour was a war zone. Pok and I planned a tactical retreat—grab food and hunker down in the library. When the bell rang, we bolted… but not fast enough.

A guitar strummed near the classroom door. Enter Mr. Pitiwat—aka Tai— with his entourage. This year, he stepped it up. One friend had a guitar, another carried a massive bouquet.

As they started rapping Happy Birthday to me in a surreal mash-up of rap and Thai lae, our classmates gawked, jaws hitting the floor.

“Yah, yah, I’m PT! It’s your day, it’s a blast, hey Ki, be rich and pretty fast. Happy Birthday, my baby, yeah yeah!”

Pok whispered, “Oh no.”

“Oh no,” I echoed.

Then Tai sauntered over, flashing a grin. “Happy birthday, my dear Ki.”

He extended the bouquet, his hand reaching to ruffle my hair. But not today! I dodged just in time, causing a roomful of squeals.

Help! My eyes screamed at Pok.

“Stop bothering Ki and keep your hands to yourself!” Pok snapped.

“Yeah, Tai. Leave her alone,” another voice chimed in.

Not ours.

Phim.

She stood at the classroom entrance, arms crossed, her glare slicing through the air like a knife.

“You’re causing a ruckus. I’m annoyed.”

Tai flinched, visibly pale. His friends nudged him, whispering for a hasty retreat.

“Okay, okay, Phim. I’m leaving,” he stammered.

Before leaving, Tai turned back with a dazzling smile. “See you around, Ki. Bye, Pok.”

Pok and I exhaled deeply, relieved to survive the first trial. But as we turned to face Phim’s murderous glare, a realization hit me.

Wait… am I really safe?

The Second Trial

We holed up in the serene library, our supposed safe haven. Pok lounged, reading scandalous tabloid columns. I doodled cartoons and listened to music.

All was peaceful… until Puay walked in.

The moment she approached, we realized our strategy had failed spectacularly.

"Ah, so it’s you two—Ki and Pok. Hiding out here in the library, huh?"

"Whoa, that’s a bit dramatic, don’t you think?" Pok replied with his trademark sarcasm. "We just wanted to gain some knowledge and expand our minds for once. Is that so bad?"

"Yeah, reason all you want," the friend rolled her eyes. "Pok, in all the years I’ve known you, I’ve never seen you set foot in a library. Why today of all days?"

"Because I wanted to. Got a problem with that?"

"Yeah, I do. Cream was downstairs looking for Kiran."

"What?!" Pok and I exclaimed in unison, our combined outburst earning glares from the nearby tables.

"And guess what? Instead of asking anyone else, she went and asked Phim if she’d seen you."

I felt a surge of panic, as though my blood pressure had shot through the roof. Pok, meanwhile, froze mid-breath, his thick eyebrows twitching as if short-circuiting.

"What did Phim say?" Pok finally managed to ask.

"What do you think? She completely obliterated Cream, politely, of course, until her face went pale, and she retreated back to her room."

"What did she say?"

"Well, I didn’t catch every word…"

"Just tell us!"

"She said something like, ‘Cream, darling, why don’t you spend your time reading a book instead of chasing after Kiran? It would be far more productive. If Kiran liked you, you wouldn’t have to exhaust yourself chasing her all the time.’"

I could only sit there, stunned, while Pok was already slumping dramatically over the table, looking like he might faint.

"Hey, Puay! Got any smelling salts for Pok?" I asked, trying to snap him out of it.

Level Three: The Walk Home

As expected, the walk home was awkward, to say the least. Phimmasa wasn’t storming ahead of me like usual, but she still had that quietly simmering irritation about her.

"Hey, Phim, let me carry your bag."

She barely glanced at me before replying, "You’re already carrying so much. You’ll just drop it all."

I couldn’t argue. With my oversized backpack, several paper bags, and a stuffed toy clamped under my arm, I probably did resemble a pack mule.

But then, I noticed something odd: Phim was carrying a large paper bag herself.

"Are you tired?" Phim asked suddenly.

"Tired of what?"

She didn’t look at me, her voice almost detached. "Of having so many people approach you all the time."

I understood her point. Despite how popular Phim herself was, people tended to admire her from afar, perhaps intimidated by her unapproachable demeanor.

"Honestly, it’s exhausting on special days like this. Everyone tries to make a grand gesture," I admitted.

"......."

"But on normal days? I don’t mind. I just stay true to myself."

"......."

"There are only a few people whose opinions really matter to me."

"That people must be nice," she muttered.

"Who?" I asked, curious.

"The people you care about."

"Well," I said with a grin, "that means you’re jealous of yourself."

Her cheeks flushed, and she bit her lip, glancing quickly at me as if searching for hidden meaning.

"Lean down for a second."

Confused, I bent forward.

Without a word, Phim slipped the paper bag she’d been holding around my neck.

"Happy birthday. I hope this is the great one."

When I got to my room, I wasted no time placing my mountain of gifts on the floor. Then, I opened Phim’s bag to see what she had given me.

Inside was a lumpy, pinkish stuffed animal that I couldn’t quite identify.

"Did you… make this?" I’d asked earlier, and her wide-eyed surprise at my guess had been priceless.

"How’d you know?" she’d asked, playfully swatting my arm.

"Let’s just say it has your… unique touch."

She scowled, clearly catching the subtext, and I’d quickly reassured her. "I love it. Seriously. It’s the best gift I’ve gotten today. Thank you, Phim." But now, in the privacy of my room, I inspected it more closely. Its mismatched button eyes, uneven stitching, and wobbly snout made it… well, let’s just call it “charmingly imperfect.”

She had said it was a lazy pig and that it was modeled after me, both in appearance and personality.

"Really, Phim?" I chuckled, lifting the odd little creature to eye level.

Its name came to me almost instantly: Moo Yong—a perfect fit for such a squishy, misshapen little pig.

Despite its flaws—or maybe because of it—I couldn’t stop smiling. Moo Yong wasn’t just a gift. It was Phim’s effort, her care, and perhaps even a little bit of her affection, all stitched together into something uniquely hers.

And that made it the best present in the world.

From that day forward, Moo Yong had a permanent spot on my bed. It replaced my old bolster pillow as my nightly cuddle buddy.

Who knew? Maybe birthdays weren’t so bad after all.

# Chapter 9: ᴛʜᴇ ᴠᴀᴄᴜᴜᴍ ꜱᴛᴀᴛᴇ

**2007 (11th grade, preparing for senior year)**

At a high school in the heart of Bangkok

This summer break felt entirely different from two years ago. Why? I sat on the same bench, under the fragrant blooming Indian cork trees. The same favorite chessboard lay before me.

But...

Something felt missing.

“Kiran, did someone summon your spirit to possess a medium or what? Tell me, huh?”

“What nonsense are you spouting, Pok?”

Pok, my chess opponent, suddenly blurted out this nonsense. I had no idea what he was on about.

“Look at you! You've lost every single round to me today. Usually, you never lose to me. Where's your mind gone? London?”

London? The mere mention of that name sent my heart plummeting like those fragrant blossoms falling from the trees. My thoughts wandered to someone now studying summer school over there. Was that it? Was it this single thought disrupting my peace?

This one thought that turned my whole summer upside down.

This year, Phimmasa was sent to London for summer school. It left my summer chess matches with Pok utterly dull. There was no petite figure to knock over the chessboard in mischief or bring us delicious snacks like before.

All I could do was secretly check <PeemmY» on Hi5, where Phim regularly updated her adventures each week—where she'd been, what she'd seen.

In the first few weeks, she seemed thrilled about everything. By the second week, complaints started about some foods and lessons being too hard. By the third week, her posts became subdued, as though she missed Thailand.

I never commented on her posts. Unlike Bom, that lamppost-faced guy, who commented on every single photo of hers.

"London, London, whatever. I lost on purpose so you could taste victory for once, friend," I said, feigning nonchalance.

“Oh, cut it out, Ki. Save your lies for someone else, not me.”

"......."

“I know you better than you know yourself.”

His words hit too close to home. I could only concede defeat.

“You two are here, huh? Kiran, Pok, hello!”

Pok and I flinched as the very person we’d been talking about suddenly appeared across the street, waving energetically.

Phimmasa was standing there beside a luxury Benz, with Uncle Lerm, her family’s driver, unloading numerous bags from the trunk before crossing the road. Meanwhile, Phimmasa half-ran, half-skipped toward us, her radiant smile lighting up the humid afternoon.

Pok and I bowed politely to Uncle Lerm, who grinned wide, revealing a missing tooth. Then we helped him carry the bags to our marble bench.

After receiving orders from Phim, Uncle Lerm left. “I’ll walk home,” she announced.

Phimmasa walking home? Seriously?

> ////<

"Pok, eat up! I bought all these snacks just for you guys!"

Phim started unpacking a variety of foreign treats for Pok and me. Her cheeks were rosier than usual, probably from the lack of sunlight in London. A strand of damp hair clung to her flushed face, glistening with sweat. I almost reached out to gently brush it away.

Why did the hot weather suddenly irritate me? Was it because it made her uncomfortable?

“I thought you were staying in London for two months? It’s only been one!” Pok asked with a mouth full of snacks, pretending to be polite or maybe just curious.

“I came back early. I couldn’t handle it anymore,” she replied.

“Why not?” Pok continued, still munching.

Phim turned her sparkling eyes toward me. Her gaze shimmered like a starry night sky.

“I missed...”

"...."

“I missed Thailand.”

With that simple sentence, three faces turned crimson—Phim’s, mine, and Pok’s. Pok, wide-eyed and agape, nearly dropped his snack. Then he hurriedly packed everything into a bag, stammering an excuse.

“Oh, um, I forgot! My grandma asked me to buy fish sauce!”

He scrambled to leave, leaning in to whisper to me, “Don’t make my heroic fish sauce run go to waste.”

I was stunned at his parting words. His grand fish sauce mission would not be in vain.

“You’ve lost weight, haven’t you? Look, your cheeks are so hollow now!” Phim tugged at my cheeks playfully.

I blinked at her, letting her tug away. Then, impulsively, I grabbed her hand, holding it tightly.

“…If you don’t want me to lose more weight, then don’t leave for so long again, okay?”

At that moment, the world seemed to stop spinning. I couldn’t hear anything except the loud thumping in my ears.

It felt like a vacuum, devoid of air to breathe.

Phimmasa stared at me, her face glowing red. Her expression wavered between a smile and tears. She squeezed my hand and softly whispered words I almost couldn’t hear.

“Why? Did you miss me?”

I bit my lip, my thoughts racing. I started this, so I had to see it through.

“I didn’t miss you... but Moo Yong did.”

Thwack!

That was Pok smacking the back of my head after I recounted the story to him later. I yelped in pain while Pok shook his head in dramatic disappointment.

“You made my fish sauce mission meaningless, Ki.”

“Friend, I’m sorry! But just holding her hand almost gave me a heart attack. If I said anything sweeter, I might’ve died right there!”

"Alright, alright, no need to make excuses. You’re probably born to excel only in academics, huh? But when it comes to the real world, you’re utterly clueless. Just you wait—someone might steal Phim away for real!"

I could only hold my head in my hands at my friend’s words. It’s true—I am clueless and a coward...

But I have my reasons.

The relationship between Phimmasa and me right now is perfect. Too perfect. Dangerously perfect. After all, we’re both girls.

It feels like I’m walking on a tightrope, unsure of what lies ahead.

All it would take is a little push or the slightest change, and I might fall to my doom.

Yes, everyone dies eventually, but is it so wrong that I’m not ready to die just yet?

Pok saw me sinking into a pit of silence after her remark. Without saying a word, she patted my shoulder gently, offering quiet comfort.

The library felt different today.

How could it not, when the person sitting across from me was Phimmasa herself?

She had left her usual group of friends to sit with me during the free period. Phimmasa absentmindedly flipped through a book but wasn’t actually reading it. Her distracted demeanor made me wonder if something was bothering her.

“This term, I have to take extra tutoring classes. I probably won’t be able to continue my khim lessons.”

She spoke while twirling a strand of hair near her cheek.

“Why are you studying so much?” I asked.

“I have to get into the top university in the country,” Phimmasa replied. “It’s part of a deal I made with my dad.”

“A deal about what?”

“If I don’t get accepted, I’ll have to study at a university in England.”

I froze, my pen dropping from my hand. I stared at Phimmasa, not even bothering to hide my feelings. I didn’t want her to leave.

“Are you really going to go?”

The petite girl pursed her lips and shook her head, her eyes welling up with tears.

“I don’t want to go. That one month I was there—I already know I can’t handle it.”

Phimmasa looked at me, her gaze unlike anything I’d seen before. It was filled with a sadness I couldn’t quite put into words. Then, she reached over to pinch my cheek, stretching it like she always did. But this time, she didn’t laugh or smile like usual.

“If I go, you’ll get even skinnier, won’t you?”

“......"

Why did such a simple sentence hurt so much?

“What about you?” Phimmasa asked. “Where do you want to study?”

I rested my chin on the edge of the table, staring at her thoughtfully but unable to find an answer.

“I haven’t decided yet... But I know I want to study engineering.” Her eyes sparkled with what looked like a glimmer of hope.

“Then let’s go to the same university. That way, I’ll have someone to motivate me.”

“Alright. I’ll get into the same university as you, Phim.”

“Promise?”

She extended her pinky, waiting for me to seal the deal. Still resting my chin on the table, I lifted my pinky to hook it with hers.

“I promise…”

And I meant it.

**Chapter 10: ᴍɪʀᴀɢᴇ: ᴛʜᴇ ʀᴇꜰʟᴇᴄᴛɪᴏɴ ᴘʜᴇɴᴏᴍᴇɴᴏɴ**

**Year 2008 (Grade 12, Semester 2)**

At a high school in the heart of Bangkok.

Time is a mischievous thing, especially during moments of happiness. It tends to fly by before you even realize it. Before we knew it, we were nearing the end of high school.

But as for us...

**Phimmasa and I still weren’t together.**

Despite being so close, so very close, it just hadn’t happened yet. Pok liked to compare our relationship to a saturated liquid—just a little more heat, and it would turn into vapor.

But, of course, it hadn’t evaporated.

"I’m curious, Ki. What's holding your tongue? Maybe Phimmasa’s just waiting for you to confess your love!"

“Do I really have to say it?”

Pok, lounging in the front garden and enjoying the plate of fruit my mom had prepared, spoke in his typical, abrupt style.

“If you don’t, how’s she ever going to figure it out, Miss Tight-Lips?”

“I’m not saying I won’t. I’m just waiting for the right moment.”

“And what moment is that? The cha-cha? Or maybe the rumba?”

“Don’t you mean samba?”

“Whatever! Look, I’ll set up the perfect moment for you. How about next week during the grad camp in Kanchanaburi? Sound good?”

A grad camp, huh? The atmosphere might just be perfect—confessing my feelings to Phimmasa under a starlit sky and all that.

Oh, just thinking about it gave me chills and made my stomach churn. But then, I agree.

When the grad camp finally arrived, I realized something: the **perfect moment** Pok had promised was easier said than done.

From the three-hour bus ride to the riverside camp, I didn’t get to speak to Phimmasa at all. She was surrounded by her circle of friends, who hovered around her like a mother cobra guarding her eggs.

I couldn’t blame them. The boys from Class 2, who boarded the bus with us, kept flirting with Phimmasa from the moment we left until we arrived.

And there I was, stuck with Pok in the back seat, merely watching from a distance.

Things didn’t improve when we got to the camp.

Phimmasa’s group stayed on a different raft house from ours, and while others were out enjoying activities like rafting, my nerves had me avoiding it all.

Instead, I found myself listening to a group of friends playing guitar and singing by the shore.

I wouldn’t have cared much—if the guitarist hadn’t been Bom, and the one singing hadn’t been Phim.

The two of them together felt... right. They were like pieces of a puzzle that fit perfectly, everything about them better than anything I could offer.

For the first time, I wondered if what I’d felt for Phimmasa all this time was nothing more than a mirage—a distorted reflection of something real.

That night, as the campfire activities unfolded, I couldn’t shake my feelings. Phimmasa kept sending me subtle smiles from across the fire, making my heart race more with each glance.

But I carried those feelings back to my room, unspoken and unresolved.

Later that night, while waiting for Pok to get out of the endlessly long bathroom queue, I noticed two figures near a tree, away from the others.

**It was Bom and Phim.**

My chest tightened. It felt like boiling oil had been poured over me. I bit my lip, closed my eyes, and tried not to look.

But curiosity won.

Hiding behind a cluster of canna flowers, I peered at them.

They seemed to be having an intense conversation. Phim was shaking her head, almost violently, before walking away quickly without looking back.

As I tried to piece together what had happened, Bom's two closest friends, Golf and Cheer, walked by. Bom trailed behind them.

“So, Bom, did she say yes to being your girlfriend?” Cheer teased.

Bom hesitated for a split second before forcing a grin.

“Of course. Who wouldn’t say yes to me?”

But then, he turned, and our eyes met.

In that moment, my gaze asked the question outright: **Was that really true?**

Bom’s face turned pale before he quickly walked away, leaving me with more questions than answers.

As I stood there in the shadows, Pok’s voice broke through my thoughts.

“Ki, why are you standing here like some discount Conan? Go to bed already.”

At last, the final day in the beloved walls of our high school has arrived. The place where all our memories reside, a haven of happiness and imagination during the golden years of our youth.

Today felt unlike any other day. In the afternoon, with no classes left to attend, the seniors stood proudly, receiving roses from their juniors. Naturally, the Candy Girls didn’t miss their chance to join in.

And of course, Phimmasa was among them.

This wasn’t a surprise, though. Pok had prepared meticulously to avoid any

"PhimBom" conflicts, employing an age-old strategy passed down through the ages.

The strategy of **being the lookout**.

Though Pok’s performance as a lookout was laughably suspicious and full of flaws, the mission was somehow a success.

At the very least, Bom didn’t run into Phimmasa while the latter, red-faced, handed me a rose. That alone was a blessing.

Everything seemed smooth until Bom approached me, his expression far from comforting.

“Kiran, do you have a moment? I need to talk to you.”

Pok, who had been raising his eyebrows in utter confusion, looked as if he were on the verge of forming a right angle with them. But I’d been wanting to talk to Bom anyway, so I agreed without hesitation.

“Sure, let’s head over to that secluded spot by the building. No one goes there.”

I led Bom to the little nook, notorious as the **secret corner** where many couples had whispered sweet nothings.

Facing him, I noticed Bomb seemed even more tense.

“What’s up, Bom?”

“You heard what I told Cheer at the graduation night, right?”

“Yeah, and...?”

Bom’s face turned pale. He looked at me with pleading eyes, but I still had no idea what he wanted.

“I’m begging you… please don’t tell Phim. If Phim finds out, she’ll be furious with me.”

I raised an eyebrow, smirking slightly as I tested him, “You lied to Cheer, didn’t you?”

Bom gulped and reluctantly nodded. “I told Cheer that Phim accepted my confession…”

A thousand curses flooded my mind, all directed at Bomb. But before I could unleash even one, a chilling voice interrupted.

“What are you two talking about... concerning me?”

The odds of Phimmasa being here—at this exact moment—should have been zero. Yet here she was, sending chills down my spine.

**Where was Pok, the so-called lookout?!**

Bom, already pale, now looked ghostly. Instead of sticking around, he clasped his hands together in a pleading gesture toward me, whispering,

“Good luck, Ki,” before dashing off, leaving me to face the storm alone.

“Phim, it’s not what it looks like…”

“Are you playing matchmaker now?”

"......."

Her trembling voice was enough to shatter me.

“Listen, Ki, no matter how much anyone shipped me and Bom…” she paused, her voice breaking, “...the one person I really wanted to be with me is only you.”

Tears rolled down her cheeks. She exhaled deeply, trying to steady herself.

I stepped closer, but Phimmasa pushed me away with surprising force.

“You knew, didn’t you? That Bom confessed to me at the graduation night?”

"......."

“And you were the one who put the rose on my desk on his behalf, weren’t you?”

By now, Phim couldn’t contain her emotions anymore. Her voice rose, her small fists landing on me repeatedly.

“Phim, listen to me—”

Unable to find any other way to calm her, I pulled her into a tight embrace. My right arm wrapped around her back, while my left hand gently guided her face to rest against my chest. My heart was pounding so loudly I was sure she could hear it.

But it worked. The petite figure in my arms finally stilled.

Or was she listening to my heartbeat...?

“Phim, please…”

"......."

Wait, what was I going to say?

**“I’d never let anyone take you away that easily, Phim.”**

Silence.

Wait—was she asleep?

I started to panic at her lack of response, but then she began rubbing her face against my chest. A second later, I let out a loud yelp as sharp pain pierced my chest.

She bit me!

Hard enough to leave teeth marks, too. When I glanced down at my uniform, the imprint of her bite was clear as day.

“You’re such a…”

I almost thought she was still upset until she stuck her tongue out at me cheekily before running away.

**Was it just me, or did the world suddenly feel unbearably hot?**

Later in the evening, before everyone went home, the ritual of writing farewell messages on uniforms began. Pok and I sat by the stone bench in front of the building. Phim and her friends were nearby. I stole glances at her from time to time and noted that she seemed back to her usual cheerful self.

“Pok, why didn’t you keep watch earlier?”

“Watch for what? Phim appeared out of nowhere asking for you!”

“And then?”

“Well, I panicked! You know I can’t handle pressure, and I’m scared of Phim! My finger just pointed to the nook. Sorry!”

Ah, so it was Pok’s fault after all. The farewell message I was writing for him, “To my dearest friend,” turned into “To my idiot traitor friend” instead.

“Ki, write on my shirt too!” Phim tugged at my sleeve, pestering me to write something.

The moment she did, I felt a sting at the spot where she’d bitten me earlier. Begrudgingly, I made a show of pouting before doodling a cartoon of the two of us and our dog, Moo Yong, on her shirt.

“You’re taking forever! Are you writing a farewell note or a love letter? It tickles!”

“You’ll see when you get home,” I replied with a sly grin.

Phim grabbed my marker and, with a mischievous smile, drew lips that resembled a kiss over the bite mark on my chest.

On the left side.

My face burned, but Phim wasn’t done. She climbed onto her tiptoes and began writing something across the back of my shirt, using up a significant amount of space.

“Bye-bye, Ki. See you at university!”

With a sweet smile, she waved and left.

“Ki, I don’t think you need to bother confessing to Phim anymore…”

“Why? Are you saying I don’t stand a chance?”

“Nope. I’m saying you don’t need to.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because she wrote it all over your back in giant letters.”

“What does it say?”

**“‘Claimed!’”**

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**ᴘᴀʀᴛ 1**

**ᴅᴇᴘᴇɴᴅᴇɴᴛ ᴠᴀʀɪᴀʙʟᴇ**

# Chapter 11: ꜱᴜʙsᴛᴀɴᴄᴇs ᴅᴏ ɴᴏᴛ ᴅɪsᴀᴘᴘᴇᴀʀ ꜰʀᴏᴍ ᴛʜᴇ ᴡᴏʀʟᴅ

**Year 2008**

**University, First Year**

“Row, row your boat again. Deep waters run silently; I think of the rower. Row, row your boat again. Deep waters run silently; I think of the rowerrrrr.”

I sat, elbow propped on my knee, chin resting on my palm, and looking utterly bored. Around me were fellow freshmen from various faculties gathered for the university’s initiation day.

I watched the seniors drumming and dancing enthusiastically to the repetitive chant, my mind wandering to trivial thoughts like, *Who wrote this song?* Two lines of lyrics, yet they could be sung on a loop for hours. Must be because the second line is… *libero* or something.

“Rowing to see the fog. Rowing to see the fog. Let’s call on dear Pok to row!”

At the end of the verse, my friend Pok, sitting beside me, sprang up with lightning speed. He automatically mimed rowing a boat, his face expressionless but his lips slightly pursed, while his hips swayed with flair like a *Brazilian samba* dancer. The performance drew cheers and laughter from everyone.

I was so entertained by Pok’s moves that I forgot the most dangerous part of this song: whoever rows must come up with a line to call the next person to row. And Pok wouldn’t let me off the hook easily.

“Row, row your boat again. Deep waters run silently; I think of the rower. Row, row your boat again. Deep waters run silently; I think of the rowerrrrr.”

My heart pounded as a strange sense of foreboding settled in.

“Rowing to take a...detour. Rowing to take a...detour. Let’s call on dear Kiran to row!”

There it was. And did he just say... detour? I stood up awkwardly, reluctantly miming a rowing motion, lamenting my fate.

*Oh, Mom! Why did I have to be named something that ends with a long vowel?*

The best part of moving to the next initiation station, no matter how messy it looked, was seeing Phimmasa right there—standing in front of me.

It felt like our year-long efforts hadn’t been wasted. Phim had gotten into the Economics faculty, while Pok and I made it to Engineering as we had planned. Everything seemed perfect.

Honestly, if Phim was like my breath, Pok was my... limbs, eyes, ears, nose, and mouth. Both were indispensable to my body and soul.

As for my relationship with Phimmasa, it had evolved from a saturated liquid state to…

**An ambiguous state.**

Well, that didn’t sound much better. We acted like a couple, but there were still significant gaps—chiefly the lack of a confession.

And if I don’t say it first, do you think Phim will?

“Hey, Ki... Doesn’t Phim look prettier?” Pok nudged me, gesturing toward Phimmasa.

I couldn’t help but follow his gaze. Gone was the twin-braided little girl I once knew. In her place stood a radiant young woman. Her glowing skin, sleek long hair tied in a simple ponytail, and lightly applied makeup emphasized her sharp features.

It wasn’t surprising that Phim had become the center of attention for the male seniors. During the face-painting activity, they barely dabbed paint on her cheeks, delicately drawing three lines on each side to make her look like an adorable kitten.

Meanwhile, Pok’s face was smeared with red and green handprints that trailed down to his shirt.

“Why is it always me who gets drenched in paint?” Pok grumbled.

“Isn’t it obvious by now?” I teased.

Pok turned to glare at me, his multicolored face resembling a misplaced traffic light.

“Ki, your words sting more than the paint. But yeah, while they turned me into a clown, the seniors just gave you a cute little puppy nose.”

“Puppy? I thought it was a deer!”

The activity began with the seniors instructing us to form lines evenly. Pok wasted no time dragging me to stand behind Phimmasa’s group. Phim waved excitedly at us from the front of the line.

“This station focuses on bonding and teamwork,” announced a senior. “The first game is called Journey to Heaven!”

Pok and I exchanged skeptical glances. The name sounded more like the title of an 18+ film than a game.

The rules were straightforward: we had to transfer ping-pong balls using only our mouths and a plastic spoon, passing them down the line until the last person dropped them into a jar.

Simple enough. Except...

**Using our mouths?**

My eyes darted to Phimmasa. She was positioned behind a petite, nerdy girl at the front. No problem there. But right behind Phim was a scrawny boy with a buzz cut wearing an old ROTC shirt. His expression screamed jackpot, as he stood in line to receive the ping-pong ball from Phim’s spoon.

I acted fast, grabbing Pok and shoving him into the boy’s spot. Pok played along, rearranging the line while I stood behind him, securing my place.

The scrawny guy turned to look at me, confused. I tapped him on the shoulder, flashing a polite yet firm smile.

“Excuse me, but this spot is mine.”

He hesitated but didn’t move. Annoyed, I grabbed the back of his ROTC shirt and pulled him backward. He turned, meeting my death glare—a technique honed from years of intimidation that once made a three-year-old abandon her pink tricycle in terror.

“You heard me, right? **This. Spot. Is. Mine**.”

That did the trick. He nodded frantically before scurrying off to another line altogether.

Satisfied, I smirked at Pok, who looked at me, wide-eyed and speechless. It wasn’t every day he saw my mafia side in action.

Of course, this angle is usually reserved for fawning over puppies and little kids in the neighborhood.

The petite figure in front of me turned quickly, laughing softly as if they had seen everything that had just happened. Phim reached out and tapped the tip of my nose with her finger.

“Such a clumsy puppy…”

I blinked at Phim, trying my best to look like anything but a startled deer, and mumbled stupidly, “Wait… not a deer?”

“Deer? More like a puppy!”

Well, if Phim said I was a puppy, then I must be one… no point arguing.

"The game is starting now, kids! Ready?" the senior leading the event called out.

At the sound of the whistle, the nerd at the front of our line slowly walked forward, balancing a ping-pong ball on a spoon. They dropped it into Phim's spoon with ease. Phim straightened up and turned toward me, clearly nervous. With the difference in our height, I had to crouch down until my knees were aching just to match her level.

Oddly, things weren’t as simple as they looked earlier. Maybe it was because, as Phim leaned closer, I got caught up staring into her warm brown eyes—so focused, so unwavering—and I forgot everything else.

It wasn’t my fault. We were this close.

Close enough to hear Phim’s steady breaths. Her thick, long lashes brushed faintly as she blinked, almost grazing my face. Her big, sharp eyes seemed to pull me into another universe altogether…

I focused on everything—everything except the ping-pong ball.

**Thunk!**

What else could that sound be but the ball hitting the ground? Amid the groans of disappointment from our teammates, I vaguely caught the teasing voice of Pok saying, “For a second there, I thought I was watching a slowmotion love scene…”

We had to start over, and everything was just as it was before. The first teammate’s ball drop was swift and flawless, but the moment it was my turn to catch Phim's ball?

Everything slowed down again, exactly as Pok had said.

This time, both Phim and I tried to concentrate on the ball—maybe too hard. But in the process of leaning in, the tip of Phim's sharp little nose bumped right into mine.

**Plop!**

“Another drop! Is this team even going to make it anywhere today?” the senior with the mic teased, earning laughs from the crowd. Meanwhile, the third row had successfully completed their round.

Pratee Pok grumbled loudly, and Phim and I turned beet red, both of us staring intently at the ground as though searching for loose coins.

“Geez, you two. Could you tone down the sweet moments? We’re losing because of you." Pok teased.

I'm confused.

“Wow! Ska! Reggae group one is already ahead of everyone else. Welcome to the **Eating Obstacle Course**!”

**Whoosh!**

Eating obstacle course, huh? How fitting for someone as dedicated as Pok.

The moment the whistle blew to start the game, Pok dove into the flour tray, found a coin in one go, and emerged covered in a fine layer of white powder. The burst of flour softened the garish green-and-red makeup he wore earlier into a more natural tone. But none of this mattered to Pok.

Pok quickly grabbed the coin with his mouth, dropped it onto the paper plate, and bolted at high speed toward the next station. He snatched a packet of traditional snack cakes, stuffed it in his mouth in one go, and simultaneously twisted the plastic cap off a Coke bottle with a crack!. Gulping down the Coke in quick succession, he completed the entire process in just 45 seconds.

"Burrrppp!!"

After finishing the bottle, Pok let out an earth-shaking burp before sprinting to the next task: inflating a balloon. Naturally, Pok popped the balloon in mere moments and raised his hand high in victory. Pok moved looked as though the prize was something as grand as a house and land.

“Wow! We have a winner from Group One! Everyone else is still searching for coins in the flour tray. Amazing work!”

I couldn’t help but marvel at the sheer dedication of my dear friend, who now strutted toward me with flour puffing off his body like he was walking through a dramatic entrance shrouded in dry ice.

“Group Three and Group One each have one point! Let’s move on to the third game. For this round, we’ll pair up within our group. The winning pair earns a point!”

The moment Pok heard this, he quickly paired me with Phimmasa while rushing off to partner with the most handsome guy from the group behind us.

“This game is called the Tarot Oh-hooo~!”

“Each pair will receive one piece of dried fish snack. One person holds one end in their mouth, while the other person bites the other end. Then, you eat from opposite sides. Hands must be clasped behind your back the entire time. The pair with the shortest remaining piece wins!”

Oh my goodness! What kind of game is this? It feels so... suggestive!

The moment Phimmasa and I held the fish snack between us, both of our faces turned beet red. When the game started, Phimmasa closed his eyes, his small lips moving slowly, savoring the snack with a mesmerizing grace. My heart pounded uncontrollably.

We kept eating, inching closer and closer until I could feel his warm breath against mine. The snack was almost gone, but neither of us stopped. Suddenly, someone let out a long scream as our soft lips brushed against each other.

That’s when Phimmasa bit the snack off and ended the game.

“Whoa! Pair Ping-Pong wins! I nearly had a heart attack! Is there even any of the snack left?”

I took what little was left in my mouth—a tiny fragment barely visible— and handed it over to the judge.

“Staff in the back! Bring out the calipers to measure this! Goodness gracious, is this a snack fragment or a lactobacillus culture? It’s practically microscopic! I’m awarding you the point because I doubt anyone can beat this.”

I froze, my face burning with embarrassment. Phimmasa fled the scene, hiding behind a pillar in shame. Meanwhile, Pok ran up to me, slapping my back and shoulders in celebration, leaving flour smudges all over my face.

“I’ve known you for so long, but I’ve never seen you this cool! How did you change so much, huh?”

“The fourth game is here! It’s the classic tug-of-war!”

Before I could say anything, Pok had already dashed off to grab the rope, ready to compete. His hunger for victory was insatiable, leaving no room for me to reply.

All I could do was mutter to myself, “I’ve grown up now, Pok. You haven’t seen anything yet. Just wait and see.”

# Chapter 12: ᴛʜᴇ ꜱʜᴇʟᴛᴇʀ

“Get down!”

A commanding voice roared out, short yet filled with authority. It was easy to understand—or so one would think. For us, me and Pok, who had just joined the freshmen initiation of the engineering faculty, it wasn’t that straightforward.

Get down? What the heck does that even mean? There wasn’t a spark of light or danger in sight. Why should we get down?

The answer became clear as we watched the other first-year engineering students rush to lie face-down on the ground, pressing their cheeks against the asphalt with synchronized precision.

What?!

Sure, we’d heard that engineering initiations were notorious for being tough and intense, but we didn’t think it’d be this. With a confused shrug, Pok and I found ourselves following suit, our faces now hugging the dusty road. We glanced at each other, mouths moving soundlessly as if we were trying to make sense of the absurdity.

Pok turned her head toward me, mouthing incredulously, “Is there a war or

something? Why are we ducking like we’re avoiding bombs?”

“Shh, Pok, keep it down before a bomb actually lands on your head.”

"Silence! Don’t you know how to keep quiet?"

That shut us up real quick. I pressed my lips into a thin line, barely daring to breathe as if I were already six feet under.

From this new, low-to-the-ground perspective, I could see my fellow freshmen lying flat like dried fish on a rack, their faces bearing varying shades of embarrassment.

A set of feet appeared in my peripheral vision—belonging to one of the upperclassmen, the very owners of the thunderous orders, now pacing menacingly between the rows of prone students.

For a brief, rebellious moment, a thought crossed my mind: *Why don’t you just step on my head while you’re at it, senior?*

Of course, it stayed firmly locked in my mind. Who’d dare say it out loud?

“You’re all late. Not just any late...” The pacing stopped abruptly. "You’re late by 35 seconds!”

I turned to meet Pok’s wide-eyed gaze. This is it, I thought. Her lips twitched into a barely-there grin as she rolled her eyes upward, letting out the softest sigh imaginable.

The look said it all: *If they’re going to scold us over 35 seconds, I’m pretty sure they could find a reason to scold us over the color of the sky, too.*

Not that I’d say he was wrong.

“As punishment…” the senior continued, dragging out the words for dramatic effect.

Oh no.

“Ten push-ups! Start now. Count out loud!”

Push-ups? What was this—engineering school or military boot camp?

“Louder!”

Before I knew it, I was doing push-ups along with everyone else, my voice weakly joining the half-hearted, mismatched chorus of counts. It was a cacophony that sounded oddly reminiscent of students groaning, *Gooood moooorning teaaacher,* during the morning roll call.

We weren’t even halfway through when the senior’s mood shifted again.

“Stop! Get back down!”

The sound of bodies hitting the ground was immediate.

“Some of you are slacking off, letting your friends carry the weight! Aren’t you ashamed?! Push-ups again! This time, shout together *'somebody’s cheating'* until I tell you to stop!”

...What?

Ah, public humiliation. What initiation would be complete without it? From then on, we alternated between push-ups and chanting **somebody’s cheating!** in a unified rhythm. Honestly, by the time we hit full exhaustion, I found myself silently praying for the senior to yell, **Get down!** once more —despite how much I’d hated it at the start.

“Enough!” Finally. “Boys, stay in push-up position. Girls, go into mosquito-net mode.”

Mosquito-net mode, as it turned out, involved lying on your back, arms and legs raised in the air. Sounds easy, right? It's a no for me!

Your neck had to remain lifted too, mimicking someone resting on an invisible pillow. The resulting strain was indescribable. Even Pok couldn’t resist mouthing a complaint.

"I’d rather die from dengue fever than lie like this any longer, Ki.” ***Translator:*** *I apologize for my confusion about Pok's gender. When translating from Thai to English, the pronouns "her" and "him" were unclear. I initially assumed Pok is a male based on how the novel described Pok. However, I later realized Pok is actually female when the boys and girls were separated during this activity. I'm so sorry if I have to edit the chapters that recently uploaded.*

“Do you know why you’re being punished for being just 35 seconds late?” The senior’s voice cut through our discomfort. “Because we want you to understand that, for engineers, every second matters.”

“For industrial and mechanical engineers, 35 seconds on a production line means an entire product.”

"........"

“For electrical engineers, when a short circuit occurs, your design needs to cut the power in less than 0.2 seconds.”

"........"

“This is just the beginning. If you want to be engineers, learn to value time. Remember it well.”

Suddenly, the 35 seconds we’d dismissed as a joke carried a weight we hadn’t expected. I’d always wanted to be an engineer, but I’d never realized how much responsibility the profession entailed—not just solving equations or acing exams, but ensuring that our work impacts the world positively and precisely.

By the time we’d survived the physical drills and life lessons, the seniors instructed us to line up for packed meals to take back to our dorms. It was already 9 PM, and hunting for food at this hour would’ve been a nightmare.

This was also the moment when the **tech siblings** came into play—seniors assigned to look after freshmen like mentors. They came bearing snacks, drinks, and sometimes even study guides.

Despite being dead tired, Pok and I craned our necks to spot our tech siblings.

“Are you Kiran?”

I turned to the voice. A senior stood there, medium build, neatly styled Korean-cut hair. He wasn’t strikingly handsome, but the faint smile playing on his lips made him oddly charming. His arms were loaded with bags of snacks.

“Yes, that’s me,” I replied tentatively.

“Hi, I’m Ken, your tech sibling. Here, these are from your senior mentor.”

“Thank you, Ken.” I smiled, feeling a spark of gratitude despite my exhaustion.

But as I turned to Pok, her face had fallen. “Ki… I think my tech sibling forgot me.”

Pok looked visibly disheartened, as it seemed like everyone else had already been paired with a **mentor** to take care of them. With only five minutes left before we were allowed to head back to the dorms, I tried to console Pok by offering to share all of my snacks. That made her smile, even if just a little.

When the seniors gave the signal to disperse, our friends had already walked far ahead, but Pok and I lagged behind, dragging our feet from sheer exhaustion. We hadn't even managed five steps when a loud, gruff voice called out from behind us.

"Hey! You there—are you Pok?"

We turned around to see three male seniors, all carrying bags of snacks, running toward us with wide-eyed urgency. Pok’s face lit up when she realized someone had indeed come looking for her.

"Sorry, sorry!" one of them panted. "Your mentor gave us a really tough challenge. They told us to buy a ton of snacks and fruits, just to make sure you wouldn’t go hungry!"

The chubby one hurriedly handed over the bags, while Pok raised her hands in a nervous wai, muttering her thanks.

"Thank you so much! I really thought I wouldn't have anyone to mentor me," she said shyly.

But when Pok glanced into the bags, her eyes bulged in disbelief. She let out a faint sigh, careful not to let the seniors hear.

"Um… thank you," she began hesitantly. "But can you tell my mentor something for me? The fruits you brought… there’s bananas, sugarcane, and cucumbers..."

"........"

"Could you also ask them to include an old CD next time? You know, just so the functionality is complete..."

The seniors burst out laughing, thoroughly amused. The tallest one, still chuckling, turned to Pok and said, "Your mentor isn’t your average person, huh?"

"...Are they crazy?" Pok asked innocently.

"Well... not exactly crazy," he replied, grinning. "But they are a bit of a troublemaker. Then again, you seem like you can keep up with them just fine."

"Please thank them for me," Pok said sweetly, before adding with a playful edge, "Bananas and sugarcane are great, but if they’re going to include cucumbers next time..."

"......."

"...could they also throw in some meatballs? You know, for balance."

The seniors erupted into another round of laughter, clearly delighted with Pok’s quick wit. As much as Pok and I were desperate to leave and grab a proper meal at the dorm, it seemed like escaping was easier said than done.

"Wait, wait! Don’t go just yet," one of them called out. "Hey, is the other one’s name Kiran?"

This time, the quiet, sharp-faced senior spoke up. Something about his sly gaze made him seem untrustworthy.

"Yes. It's me, why?"

"Everyone are jealous of your mentor, you know," he said with a smile. **"Because you're really cute."**

I frowned, immediately put off by his comment. Pok, ever the protective friend, was about to cut in, but it was too late.

"If you’re done with mentoring," an unfamiliar voice interjected coolly, "don’t you think you should let them go back to the dorms?"

I couldn’t believe my ears—or my eyes. Standing there, arms casually crossed, was Phimmasa. In her university uniform, she looked so poised and elegant, completely unlike the Phim I thought I knew. Her sharp gaze bore into the seniors, daring them to argue.

The seniors exchanged nervous glances before hurriedly waving us off and retreating toward the motorcycle parking lot. Pok and I watched in stunned silence until they had ridden off.

I wasn’t sure why Pok looked so dumbfounded, but as for me, I was speechless at the sheer beauty in front of me.

Was this really Phim? She didn’t look like the Phim I knew at all. Her soft curls, dyed a cola brown, framed her sharp, sweet features, while her fitted blouse and short skirt accentuated her fair skin. Even the heels she wore—a first—gave her petite frame an elegant boost.

**Wait… why was I swallowing nervously?**

"Phim, how did you get here? When did you arrive?" I finally managed to ask, firing off questions in rapid succession.

Phim smiled sweetly but kept her gaze on the ground as she answered softly, "I saw it was your first day of faculty activities, so I snuck over to see how engineering students do their welcoming activities."

"Did you see everything? Even the part where we were rolling on the ground?"

I gave her my best puppy-dog eyes, hoping to win some sympathy.

"You guys are pretty hardcore," she teased, laughing. "It was like watching survival training."

The three of us burst out laughing at her comment. But then, Phim turned her sharp eyes on me, as if inspecting something.

"By the way..." she began.

"......."

"Why is your face so dirty?"

Speaking so sweetly like that wasn't enough, Phimmasa gently took the handkerchief tucked into her brown belt and softly wiped my face. I froze in place, standing stiff as if under a spell.

Thud!

It wasn’t anything unusual—just the sound of Pok dropping a bag of bananas, sugarcane, and guava. She laughed awkwardly and quickly scrambled to pick up the fallen fruits, while Phimmasa, who seemed to have just realized Pok had been there all along, turned to make casual conversation with her, trying to break the tension.

"Pok, are you hungry? I can take you two to grab some food and then drop you off at your dorm."

"Hungry? Of course! That’s great. Honestly, the packed lunch they gave us wouldn’t be enough to keep me alive."

Pok, ever the opportunist, as though she had been a professional matchmaker in a previous life, nudged my leg with her foot, silently signaling me to walk alongside Phimmasa. Meanwhile, she carried all the fruits and quickly followed us to the parking lot, a stark contrast to her earlier exhausted dragging of her feet.

Phimmasa suggested we have her favorite braised chicken noodle soup at a shop near the dorm. While waiting for the noodles to be served, Pok scarfed down two lunch boxes in hunger.

"I didn’t know you could drive, Phim. You’re really good at it. Doesn’t that mean Uncle Cha-lerm’s out of a job now?"

"I made a deal with Dad. Since he wouldn’t let me stay at the dorm, I wouldn’t let Uncle Cha-lerm pick me up and drop me off anymore. It’s embarrassing in front of my friends."

I was both surprised and proud of Phimmasa—the little pigtail-wearing girl I had always thought was dependent on others turned out to be far more independent and mature than I’d imagined.

When the noodles arrived, I started eating quickly, driven by hunger. Pok, already somewhat full from the lunch boxes, was meticulously seasoning her noodles as if she were a contestant on Iron Chef.

"Your bangs are about to fall into the bowl." Phimmasa said suddenly.

Before I could respond, she reached over, gently turned my face toward her, and grabbed a pink hair tie from her wrist. She carefully tied my hair into a bun, her concentration so intense I almost choked on my noodles. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught Pok staring at us, wide-eyed, as her hand poured fish sauce into her bowl in rapid succession.

"Hey, Pok! Stop pouring! That’s enough, or the bowl will overflow!" Startled, Pok snapped back to reality and stopped her hand mid-motion.

"Don’t worry about me, Ki. My life… even if it doesn’t end with kidney failure from all this salt, I’ll probably just die of diabetes from all the sweetness anyway."

What?

After we finished eating, Phimmasa dropped Pok and me off at the dorm behind the university. She didn’t get out of the car but rolled down the window to chat with us for a moment.

"You guys live together? That’s nice."

"We’re in the same dorm but different rooms."

"I’d love to see your room. But it’s late today. Can I come by another time?"

At those words, my imagination started running wild. Phimmasa coming to my room? If that happens, all my secrets will be out in the open!

"Sure, anytime. Drive home safely tonight, Phim."

Phimmasa smiled, waved goodbye, and slowly drove off. I stood watching her car until it disappeared into the distance. Pok, now carrying the bags of fruit, nudged me with her foot.

"Stop standing there grinning like an idiot and help me with these bananas and sugarcane, Ki! They’re heavy!"

The next day, during the freshman orientation, the once serious and intense atmosphere created by the upperclassmen organizers was completely overturned. The jokers of the recreational team took over, bringing a chaotic energy that was absurd, cheeky, and borderline ridiculous.

Countless songs—hundreds of them—were sung, played, and danced to, each one more risqué than the last. And it wasn’t just the lyrics that were suggestive; the dance moves themselves were so outrageous that if any parents had been present, they might’ve clutched their chests and prayed for divine intervention.

Especially Pok, who had now become the favorite of the recreation team seniors. They kept pulling her up to dance to almost every song. If her grandmother were to see the bizarre and uninhibited moves she was performing, she might faint on the spot.

But just as Ayutthaya hasn’t run out of good people, there were still a few good songs amidst the chaos, though finding them felt like searching for a needle in a haystack. One particular song caught my attention—a cute song called Engineer. I remembered the lyrics perfectly:

*'I’d love to fall for an Engineer, so cute, oh my… But no one’s ever truly thought of me.*

*Engineer, so sweet… I dream of love, it’s all I need.*

*Living life alone each day, an Engineer’s loneliness leads astray. Engineer, so cute… why not fall in love? Don’t be afraid!*

*Someone who truly loves me… just one night, is that too much to say? I’d love to fall for someone’s heart, won’t you come my way?*

*Someone who understands… just one person, please, oh hey!'*

I sang along with a smile, imagining how it would be if, on Phimmasa’s birthday this year, I sang this song to her before asking her to be my girlfriend. Would that be a good idea?

'It’s a terrible idea. Don’t do it."

I flinched, startled. Day by day, Pok seemed to be growing more perceptive. I could tolerate that much, but now she could even hear my thoughts? That wasn’t normal!

"What the heck, Pok? How do you even know what I’m thinking?"

Pok smirked smugly, turning to squint at me with an air of superiority. Her thick eyebrows twitched in amusement.

"I don’t know what you’re thinking, but I know whatever it is—it’s definitely not a good idea."

"......"

"You don’t realize it, do you? You’re smiling right now, but it’s a downright evil grin."

Wait, really? I was just thinking about confessing my feelings to Phimmasa! I swear I wasn’t planning anything bad! I swear on Pok choking to death on a piece of sugarcane!

# Chapter 13: ᴅᴇᴍᴀɴᴅ ᴀɴᴅ ꜱᴜᴘᴘʟʏ

"Ready... three, four!"

I must admit I was utterly captivated by the unfamiliar yet thrilling atmosphere in front of me—the ambiance of a university cheerleading practice.

It wasn’t just the melodious, soothing cheer songs that stood in stark contrast to the brash, almost coughing-like chants of engineering cheers I had endured before nor was it solely the vibrant green of the grass, strikingly offset by the blue cushions of thousands of seats arranged along the oval curve of the indoor stadium.

Rather, it was that smile—a radiant, world-altering smile on the person right before me—that made everything around me fade into insignificance.

Phimmasa, dressed impeccably in a student uniform I found utterly irresistible, was energetically mirroring the senior cheerleaders' moves along with her peers. I watched her with a dreamy smile, utterly mesmerized.

To me, her face today—with its bright, infectious smile and her large, sparkling eyes—outshone everything else. The brilliance of her presence rendered the rest of the world a mere blur, melting away under the warm sun.

**At that moment, I saw no one else. Only Phim.**

I probably would’ve stayed entranced like that much longer if it weren’t for a peculiar sound that broke my reverie.

"Three, four… five, six, seven, eight… up and down, up and down!"

A low muttering drifted from behind, compelling me to turn around—and I nearly jumped out of my skin.

Though it was broad daylight, the sight before me sent chills down my spine.

There stood my best friend, Pok, clad in rugged jeans and an engineering shirt, mimicking dance moves with exaggerated flair and dramatic gestures, accompanied by her usual gang of mischief-makers.

"What on earth are you doing, Pok? Enough before something supernatural takes offense!"

“Why, Ki! Don’t you dare crush my dreams of stardom! I’m destined for greatness. One of the seniors is bound to notice me," Pok retorted, brimming with exaggerated confidence.

I felt a pang of pity for my delusional friend, walking over to pat her on the shoulder in mock consolation.

"Fine, fine. If you really want to be a cheerleader, start making regular merit offerings, okay?"

Before I could finish my sentence, Pok erupted in a fit of mock outrage, kicking at me with comical fury. Our laughter grew louder until Phim turned around, putting a finger to her lips in a shushing gesture.

She then gave me a playful look, her lips curling into an impish smile. It was enough to drive me to the brink of madness, tempting me to sweep her into my arms and cover her with kisses right then and there.

Of course, I’d never dare. It was just a silly thought.

Today, Phim had invited both Pok and me to watch her cheerleading practice before heading out for dinner together. Since we were free after our faculty's orientation, which had already wrapped up (and we'd even received our engineering badges), we quickly agreed. The only thing left was to decide whether to keep our badges… or maybe give them to someone special.

"Ki, I think I smell something odd…"

"What? Did I step in dog poop?" I asked, lifting my shoe instinctively. It wasn’t the first time I’d fallen victim to such a misstep.

But Pok, unfazed by my antics, narrowed her eyes, focusing on a group of male students seated across the field, their demeanor unusually giddy as they watched someone among the cheerleaders.

"I think one of those guys has his sights set on Phim."

Pok said, her tone conspiratorial. I followed her gaze and immediately agreed. The guy who stood out the most had flawless pale skin, thick eyebrows, and a sharp, handsome face. He was smiling slyly, his eyes never leaving Phim. His friends teased him openly, clearly enjoying the spectacle.

There was no mistaking it—that was the predatory look of a tiger eyeing its prey.

"I did some digging, Ki!"

"What?!"

Pok, who had mysteriously disappeared a moment ago, reappeared behind me with startling speed. Her knack for gathering gossip in record time was nearly supernatural.

Or maybe, in her past life, she earned merit by eavesdropping.

"His name is Boat. He’s in the same faculty as Phim. He’s been courting her for a while now. Rich, handsome, and swarmed by admirers."

Hearing this, I felt a growing unease. Unlike our high school days, this situation was on a whole new level. This Boat guy seemed leagues ahead of the buzz-cut boys like Bom and the others who used to follow Phim around in the past.

And Phim—beautiful, charismatic, and intriguing—was clearly a highdemand commodity in this campus.

If I could, I’d raise my metaphorical back leg and mark her as mine. But…

**Reason one**: I’m not a dog.

**Reason two, and far more important**: I’m not Phim’s owner.

"Pok, let’s go. I can’t take this anymore," I said, standing abruptly.

"What about dinner with Phim?"

"Later! I have something urgent to do."

The **urgent** matter turned was sitting with Pok under the faculty’s benches, brainstorming, planning, and thinking—a lot of thinking. Specifically, creating a flowchart about confessing love. It was high time to stop hesitating, to step off the tightrope I’d been standing on, and finally walk toward the other end. Even if falling meant facing disaster, it was worth it.

Pok and I got serious, drafting all the steps in my lecture notebook, all while trying to pick a secluded corner where no one would walk by. We rehearsed the lines according to the plan.

“Where’s the place you have in mind for this?” Pok asked.

“The beach… How about that?”

“Nah, it’s too far. You need to confess today or tomorrow, or else you’ll be stuck in a one-sided situation forever!”

I rubbed my temples. A location for confessing love that wasn’t the beach?

Nothing came to mind.

“Skip it for now!”

***Thwack!***

Pok smacked me on the forehead with the spine of her notebook.

“Skip your head, Ki! This isn’t a game show. Come up with something already!”

“How about the rooftop of our dorm? I’ve been there to stargaze. The view’s amazing.”

Pok stroked her chin thoughtfully, nodding in agreement.

“The dorm rooftop works—sets the mood. Who knows, you might even sweep Phim off her feet!”

***Wham!***

This time, I kicked Pok’s shin for crossing the line about Phimmasa, whom I deeply respected.

“You think about these things way too much, don’t you?”

Pok clutched her shin, grimacing, then glared at me like I owed her an apology.

“Don’t let me find out you’ve been thinking the same thing!”

“........."

“Alright, alright. Now, what are you planning to say? Go on, try it out on me!”

I took a deep breath and began rehearsing the lines I’d planned to say to Phim.

“I’m just an ordinary person, standing before you, begging you to love me

—”

“Notting Hill,” Pok interrupted, rolling her eyes.

Determined, I tried again.

“I love you, Phim, just the way you are—"

“Bridget Jones’s Diary.”

“For me, you’re perfect—”

“Love Actually.”

“Phimmasa, I love you!”

“You’ve been binge-watching movies, haven’t you, Ki?!”

“Didn’t I watch them with you, Pok?!”

I sighed heavily, frustrated that Pok caught on to every reference. Maybe I’d been spending too much time around her.

“Alright, Ki, let’s change it up. Say what you really feel for Phim, no script.”

“I’m not feeling it.”

“Fine. Look me in the eyes and say it to me—pretend I’m Phimmasa.”

That left me speechless, jaw slack in disbelief.

Pok equals Phim?

Pok = Phim?

Pok = Phimmasa?!

No way! That’s just… impossible!

***Thwack!***

Pok slapped me on the forehead again, snapping me out of my spiral.

“Stop zoning out! Practice now!”

I drew a deep breath, puffing out my chest, and reluctantly looked Pok in the eye as if she were Phim. Before I could start, she interrupted.

“Hold on! Let me touch up my face and lips. Might as well make myself look more like Phim!”

I nearly fell out of my chair when Pok pulled out a small pastel-colored makeup kit from her bag.

“Wait a minute! Where did you even get that?! Spill it!”

I eyed her suspiciously, like she’d smuggled contraband.

“My big sister gave it to me when we revealed our mentoring pairs. Came with a bottle of cologne too!”

Unbelievable!

After trying—and failing—every trick in the book to confess my feelings to a made-up version of Phim disguised as Pok in poorly applied makeup, we called it quits. We went back to our rooms, defeated.

Later that night, I lay on my bed, staring at the dorm ceiling. I fiddled with the pendant on my necklace, feeling utterly miserable. I was bold, sharp, and confident in everything—except love.

***Knock, knock, knock!***

Three firm knocks echoed at my door. It had to be Pok, still obsessing over my rehearsal. I tucked the pendant into my pocket and sluggishly shuffled to the door.

But when I opened it, standing there was Phimmasa herself, arms crossed, glaring with a sharp expression. I froze in shock.

Without thinking, I slammed the door shut, panicked by the overwhelming sight of her.

Unfortunately for me, she was quick enough to wedge her arm between the door and its frame, causing it to slam painfully into her forearm.

"Phim! Are you okay? I didn’t mean to."

I quickly helped Phim over to the couch at the foot of my bed. The small figure, already pouting, now looked even more upset, her bottom lip jutting out so much it nearly touched her nose.

I held Phim’s arm where the door had hit, blowing gently on it like she is a child, before rushing to grab a towel and some ice from the fridge.

Carefully, I applied the cold compress to the red mark on Phim’s fair skin. She just kept her head down, refusing to say a word.

"Are you mad at me?"

"Of course I am."

"....."

Phim took a deep breath, visibly trying to contain her frustration.

"I’m mad about a lot of things. Where should I start?"

My face fell, and my heart sank at their cold tone.

"First, you left early even though we planned to hang out. Second, you didn’t answer your phone. And lastly, you slammed the door in my face!"

Her voice was low, quick, and sharp, emphasizing just how upset she is. I didn’t look away from her piercing gaze, choosing instead to reply calmly. "About leaving early, I had an urgent matter to deal with. For the phone, I put it on silent and didn’t check it at all until now. And for the door... I was just startled. I didn’t expect you to come. I didn’t mean to shut it like that, but yeah... I’m sorry for everything."

Phim looked like she had plenty more to say, but her gaze landed on something by my bed: my last-day-of-school uniform shirt hanging prominently above the headboard. The neatly folded shirt displayed both the lipstick mark on the left chest and the bold handwriting across the back that read, Claimed.

On the bed lay a plush pig, sprawled comfortably as if it were the rightful owner of my room. Phim’s gaze lingered, and the anger in her eyes slowly softened, replaced by a faint sparkle. A hint of a smile almost broke through her pout.

"So, this is why, huh? That’s why you didn’t want me to come in?"

I didn’t respond, but the redness creeping across my face and ears probably gave away more than I wanted to.

"And why did you have to put the shirt on the headboard?"

"I just wanted to see it the moment I walked in... Is that wrong?"

This time, Phim’s face turned red. She avoided my gaze, pretending to look at random things in the room. Finally, she muttered softly, almost too quiet to hear.

"Fine... I’ll let you off the hook for everything earlier."

I continued pressing the cold compress against her arm, taking a deep breath to calm my nerves. And then, out of nowhere, I blurted out the question that had been eating at me all day—completely unrelated to our conversation.

**"Phim... are you dating anyone right now?"**

Phim snapped her head toward me, her eyes wide with surprise. There was a mischievous glint in her gaze, paired with a sly smile, as if they’d just found a new toy to tease.

"No, I’m not dating anyone. But..."

"......"

**"There is someone I’m... kind of keeping an eye on."**

My heart pounded wildly, my mind racing with questions. Who was she talking about? Was it me? Or someone else?

"That person haven’t said anything, and I haven’t either, but..."

Was it me? Was it me? My thoughts were spiraling. For the first time, I felt like life and death were separated by a single, fragile thread. No turning back Now.

"Phim, will you go out with me?"

The silence that followed was deafening. I could hear both our shallow breaths as we stared at each other. Phim’s eyes widened in disbelief, and I was screaming skip, skip, skip in my head. I had skipped every step I rehearsed earlier. There was no script, no perfect timing, no special place. Just... me saying what I wanted.

"Ki, did you forget something?"

"...?"

"Don’t you think you should tell me how you feel first?"

Phim reached for the hand I was using to hold the ice pack, intertwining her fingers with mine. She moved closer, looking straight into my eyes.

"I..."

I couldn’t speak. My face had gone pale, and my trembling gave me away. Phim gently squeezed my hand, as if to reassure me.

"You don’t have to say it now. I can wait. I’ve already waited this long."

Phim’s voice was soft, almost breaking. Her eyes shimmered with a mix of vulnerability and quiet longing. We stayed like that for what felt like an eternity, until Phim finally let go of my hand and stood up.

"I should get going."

She walked to the door, offering a faint, tired smile before turning to leave. As she pulled the door open, I made my move.

I threw my arms around her from behind, pulling her into a tight embrace. My left arm wrapped across her chest, while my right hand reached out to quietly close the door.

***Click!***

Phim stood frozen, unmoving, but at least she didn’t resist. I held her quietly, gauging her reaction.

After a moment, as her body relaxed, I rested my chin lightly on her small shoulder. My cheek brushed against the soft, rosy skin of Phimmasa's, while I leaned close enough to whisper softly into her ear.

**“I love you, Phim.”**

“......”

“Only you... and I’ve loved you for a long time.”

“......”

The carefully rehearsed words I’d practiced all day didn’t make it out.

Instead, the raw, unpolished truth spilled straight from my heart.

Surprisingly, after uttering what felt like the most difficult words of my life, the rest flowed out effortlessly.

“There aren’t many people in this world I care about... but you’re one of them, Phim.”

“......”

**“So, will you be mine?”**

I tightened my embrace, holding her closer. Phim’s body was still stiff, but her skin burned hot, as though she had a fever. Her face flushed a deep red, the color spreading to her ears. Slowly, she raised both hands, lightly gripping my arms around her waist. Then, she tilted her head slightly and pressed a soft kiss to the inside of my forearm.

That barely-there touch sent a jolt through me, my heart pounding wildly. *Was that... a yes? Or something else?*

For someone like me—straightforward to a fault—this wasn’t enough. I needed clarity. Releasing one arm, I reached into my pocket and pulled out my gear necklace, holding it out in front of Phim with trembling hands.

“How about this? If you accept, you can keep this necklace.”

“......”

“But if not, I’ll keep it myself and promise not to bother you again.”

I held my breath, the moment hanging precariously in the air. After what felt like an eternity, Phim reached out, fingers brushing against the necklace hesitantly.

She pouted adorably, her expression somewhere between irritation and shyness, before muttering so softly I barely caught it.

**“Take it back later, and you’ll be dead the day after tomorrow!”**

# Chapter 14: ɪᴍᴀɢɪɴᴀᴛɪᴏɴ ɪꜱ ᴍᴏʀᴇ ɪᴍᴘᴏʀᴛᴀɴᴛ ᴛʜᴀɴ ʀᴇᴀʟɪᴛʏ

If anyone in this world is more stubborn than I am, it has to be Phimmasa.

No one else could trick me into spilling my heart out entirely while saying nothing about how they feel in return. Last night, after grabbing the gear necklace from me, she just left, smug-faced, back home without a word.

Yet, beneath that silence, I could feel something—a certain energy I couldn’t quite explain.

“How’s it going, Ki? Exhausted from last night, huh?”

Pratee—Pok's first name—whispered teasingly as I stared blankly ahead in class. Narrowing my eyes at her suspiciously, I pieced things together quickly.

“So, you’re the one who told Phim where my dorm was?”

Pok chuckled darkly, shrugging in a way that reminded me of villains from classic Chinese dramas savoring their evil schemes.

“I knew it! But I was too shocked to ask Phim about it.”

Pratee scooted closer—so close that if she could possess me, she probably would. With a mischievous glint in her eye, she whispered again, her voice dripping with curiosity:

“So, what happened? Are you two official now? I practically handed Phim to you on a silver platter, and you’re telling me nothing came of it?”

Her question brought back every vivid detail from last night. I couldn’t help but relive it all, as if it were happening right before my eyes.

“You’re not letting go of me, are you?”

The small figure squirmed in my arms after snatching my gear necklace, clutching it tightly. But I wasn’t planning to let her go anytime soon. Instead, I held her even closer, almost teasingly.

“Nope. Still want to hold you a little longer.”

I whispered into her ear before stealing a quick kiss on her flushed cheek. That was when she did something I never expected.

“AHHH! Phim, why did you bite my arm?!”

That little troublemaker bit down right where she had just lightly kissed, leaving me no choice but to release her out of instinct. She laughed mischievously, darted toward the door, and stuck her tongue out at me.

Before leaving, she tossed a parting remark that had me grinning like an idiot.

**“Now that I’m your girlfriend, no more slacking, okay?”**

“Argh! Are you serious?! Am I finally going to hear the juicy details? You’ve been grinning so wide it’s painful to watch!”

“Fine, fine. We’re dating, okay?”

Pok screamed dramatically, drawing attention from the rest of the faculty building. She acted so overjoyed, she looked like a proud parent whose child had just gotten into a top kindergarten.

“Worth it…”

After exhausting herself with her theatrics, Pok followed me to our usual stone table hidden in a quiet corner of campus.

“Worth it? What are you even talking about now?”

“Last night, I made an offering to the spirit shrine outside your dorm.”

"What?"

Pok shrugged nonchalantly before pulling out a makeup pouch resembling a traditional chessboard bag. She rummaged through it, muttering to herself.

“If I hadn’t prayed for you, someone as tight-lipped as you would never have confessed.”

I stared at her, stunned. Pok, my ever-loyal partner in crime, had been there for me through thick and thin. A pang of guilt hit me—would she feel left out or lonely now that Phim would inevitably take up more of my time?

“Pratee…”

“What?! Why do you have to call me by my name?”

She glanced at me crossing her eyebrows, finally fishing out a compact powder case and expertly checking her reflection.

“You okay with Phim hanging out with us more often?”

Pok shrugged even harder this time, opening her compact and pretending to inspect her flawless face with exaggerated grace.

“I’m fine with it. After all...”

"....?"

“She’s just your secondary wife. I’m the main wife. No one knows you better than I do.”

From a lifetime of being single, I somehow ended up with two **wives** who got along surprisingly well. After Phim picked both of us up from campus, we were now seated at a trendy coffee shop near the university.

Phimmasa and Pok sat together on the couch, flipping through fashion magazines and giggling as if they’d been friends for ages.

And me?

I counted myself lucky to witness this miracle of compatibility.

“Ah, there you are! And this must be… um… Porm, right?”

Out of nowhere, Ken, my senior who often brought snacks for me instead of my assigned mentor, appeared from behind and plopped down next to me.

Without missing a beat, Phim’s cheerful smile from a moment ago vanished. Her relaxed posture shifted to one of icy authority as she crossed her arms and stared daggers at Ken.

“It’s Pok, not Porm. How could you forget someone as gorgeous as her?”

“Oh, right! Out of everyone in your batch, I only ever remember you…”

Ken chuckled, oblivious to the dangerous fire he had just ignited. Pok and I exchanged quick glances, united in silent understanding—we were now fellow survivors of an impending storm.

“And who’s this?” Ken gestured at Phim, still smiling. “Your friend? What faculty are you from? So cute—you can’t possibly be from Engineering!” Pok froze, darting a panicked look between me and Phim. Meanwhile, Phim’s piercing gaze at Ken made my hair stand on end.

**Ken, buddy… you have no idea what you’ve just walked into.**

"Ah, Phim, this is—"

“Pok, don’t bother introducing. I don’t care to know!"

Pok choked back the words mid-sentence, her wide eyes darting between me and Phimmasa. Meanwhile, Ken, the senior, stood there wide-eyed, nodding awkwardly before flashing a sheepish smile at everyone. He finally got up from his seat, though not without leaving a lingering comment.

“Well then, I’ll go sit with my friends. Oh, Kiran, don’t forget about the welcome party this Friday. Tar told you, right?”

“Yeah...”

Ken was referring to the initiation party hosted by Tar, my **mentor** from the seniors, at a bar near campus. Since it involved multiple groups, including Pok’s circle, neither of us planned to miss it.

As Ken returned to his table, his seat conveniently positioned for a clear view of us, he didn’t forget to wave enthusiastically. Both Pok and I let out synchronized sighs of relief.

Phimmasa, however, followed my gaze. Realizing Ken hadn’t moved far and was still throwing occasional glances our way, her demeanor shifted. The sweet smile disappeared, replaced by a frosty glare. She stood up abruptly, causing both Pok and me to flinch.

Fortunately, Phim didn’t head toward Ken but instead walked around the table and plopped down next to me. That should have been reassuring enough—except she leaned her head against my shoulder, so deliberately and slowly it felt like a scene in slow motion.

Her silky, cola-colored hair brushed against my neck, and the sweet scent of her shampoo filled the air. Not just her hair—her entire presence radiated a delicate floral fragrance that was intoxicating.

From the corner of my eye, I noticed Ken freeze mid-motion, his eyes widening comically as he immediately looked down and avoided further eye contact. I tried to focus on keeping still, though my heart raced faster with each passing second.

Phim shifted again, crossing her legs and gathering her hair over one shoulder. She tucked a few strands behind her ear with a practiced grace that made me gulp audibly. She glanced at me, smiled sweetly, and then... leaned her head back on my shoulder.

My mind short-circuited.

If this were a manga, I’d be spraying blood from my nose right now.

But I wasn’t the one experiencing blood loss.

“Pok! Your nose is bleeding! Wipe it!”

I hastily handed my handkerchief to Pok, who sat dazed with her jaw slack, eyes glazed, and blood streaming from her nostrils. Realizing the situation, Pok grabbed for her inhaler, muttering something under her breath that even Phim couldn’t help but laugh at.

"Good heavens, help my friend, my lord!"

After dropping Pok off at her dorm for recovery, Phim decided to hang out at my place. She wandered around, examining every corner like an art curator, seemingly pleased with the neatness.

Picking up my floppy stuffed pig, Moo Yong, from the bed, she hugged it tight and sat down on the sofa by the foot of my bed. I turned on some soft music, joining her on the sofa and leaning my head gently on her shoulder.

She didn’t push me away.

Feeling emboldened, my head slid further down until I ended up lying across her lap—a position I’d secretly dreamed of for ages.

From this angle, I could see Phim’s pout, her cheeks tinted with an adorable blush. She peered down at me, her large eyes brimming with emotions I couldn’t decipher. Slowly, her hand moved to my head, fingers combing gently through my hair.

“Are you sleepy?”

“No... just want to be pampered by my girlfriend. Is that okay?”

Her lips curved into a smile, though her ears turned visibly red. She held my gaze for a moment before— ***smack!***

Her once-gentle hand smacked my forehead hard enough to leave a mark.

“Don’t look at me like that, Ki! I... I can’t handle it!”

Before I could whine in protest, my phone’s ancient Nokia ringtone blared out, breaking the moment. A sense of foreboding crept over me as I picked it up.

“Who’s texting you now?”

“Uh...”

“Let me see.”

I hesitated but eventually handed over my phone with shaky hands. Phim grabbed it and opened the message, reading it aloud for maximum effect.

**Mom:** Goji, Grandma’s coming over this Sunday. Come home; you don’t want her throwing a fit again.

The tension melted away as Phim giggled at the message. I clutched my chest, silently thanking the heavens for sparing me this time.

“Your nickname is Goji? Short for Gaogi? That’s cute! Sounds so Chinese!”

"My grandma named me that. Only she and Mom call me by it because it’s kind of hard to pronounce.”

***Beep!***

**Ken:** Sweet dreams, little Kiran.

I had completely forgotten my phone was still in Phimmasa’s hands. When she read that message aloud, I shot up in panic, practically springing away from her. My mind raced: *Oh no... this is not good.*

“Oh, and here’s another one*—‘Missing you, little star. From Tar.’”*

Phim kept scrolling through old messages from both Ken and Tar, reading them out loud in her usual calm tone. Her face was unreadable, which only made me more nervous. Thankfully, when she checked the outbox, all she found were mundane texts to Pok, coordinating our classes and lunch plans.

For a moment, I felt relief. My luck seemed to hold up. But then, Phim’s curiosity shifted—she navigated to my photo gallery instead.

“And who’s this?”

She held up my phone, showing a picture of me cheek-to-cheek with Tar, my senior mentor. Tar had long, silky hair and delicate features—a classic *girl-next-door* look.

“Oh, that’s Tar, my mentor.”

“Your mentor is a woman?”

I nodded quickly. Phim’s frown deepened as she stared at the screen. It was hard to tell if she was annoyed by Tar being a woman or just annoyed in general. Though, judging by her mood, I had a feeling that if Tar were a guy, it wouldn’t have made things any better.p

“And who’s this auntie?”

I leaned over to see the picture and immediately bit my lip, trying not to laugh. With a tired sigh, I explained, “That’s Pok. She was trying out makeup for fun.”

Phim squinted at the screen, her brow furrowed as she muttered an apology under her breath, as though Pok could somehow hear her. When she found nothing else suspicious in my photos, she tossed the phone back onto the couch and picked up a random book from my coffee table. She flipped through it absentmindedly, but it was clear she wasn’t reading.

She was sulking.

“Ki, I’m thirsty.”

Her cold tone sent me scrambling to my feet. I rushed to the fridge, quickly pouring her a glass of ice-cold water. As I prepared the drink, her next question came, sharp and chilling:

“So, are you going to that initiation party this Friday?”

“I was planning to... You don’t mind, do you?”

***BANG!***

The book in her hands slammed onto the glass coffee table with a resounding thud. Phim crossed her legs and folded her arms, her sharp gaze locking onto me. Her commanding presence filled the room as she spoke in a low, deliberate voice—the kind she only used when she was truly angry.

“Don’t mind?”

“....”

**“Ki, I’m jealous. Jealous to the point of losing my mind, and you’re asking me if I mind?”**

My hands trembled as I carried the glass of water over to her, the ice clinking against the sides. Her words hung in the air, and I could only muster a quiet, shaky response.

“In that case... I won’t go.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“....”

“If you really want to go, then go.”

“....”

**“But I’m going with you.”**

# Chapter 15: ᴛʜᴇ ᴘʀɪᴄᴇ ᴏꜰ ᴋɴᴏᴡɪɴɢ ᴇᴀᴄʜ ᴏᴛʜᴇʀ

"Should I just change into all-black attire instead?"

"Why? What's wrong with what you're wearing now?"

I rested my chin on my hand, watching Pok twirl in front of the mirror, preparing for tonight's tech dinner party, responding to my friend's musings in confusion.

"This event feels like heading straight into the lion's den. All the seniors there have their eyes set on our group. By the end of the night, who knows, I might end up coming back in a body bag."

"Stop being dramatic, Pok!"

Unable to hold back, I kicked at the back of my friend's knee hard enough to make her lose balance momentarily. Pok groaned theatrically as always, overplaying the pain.

"Oh, poor Pratee, stuck in a life where the noblewoman is so besotted with her maid-wife that she forgets the first wife even exists. Guess the first wife has no choice but to taste the bitter kick of jealousy, huh?"

"You want more of my ‘*jealousy kicks*,’ Pok? I'll gladly oblige!"

I was filled with a wave of overwhelming annoyance and ended up chasing Pok around the room, delivering swift kicks as she scrambled for dear life.

Only when both of us were panting did we stop. Pok raised her hands in a mock gesture of surrender, yet her cheeky grin remained.

"Wife surrenders, dear husband! Please spare me!"

"Yeah, yeah, just hurry up and finish dressing. Phimmasa will be here to pick us up at 8. If we're late, I'll say it's because of you."

That was enough to get Pok moving. She swiftly began touching up her makeup and hair without any more antics. It seemed I wasn’t the only one who had a deep-seated fear of Phim. When Pok finally finished with her appearance, I couldn’t resist giving a slight compliment.

"All dolled up, you could almost pass for a model in a commercial."

Pok immediately spun around, eyes sparkling with excitement at the praise. "What kind of commercial?"

I smirked, unable to resist, and deliberately put on an exaggerated voice. "It's the *Car won’t start.*"

"Battery’s dead," Pok replied instinctively, then frowned, rolling her eyes as if trying to piece something together. "Wait, is that from the Daigeo ad?"

"Bingo."

"You little... This time, you're getting a taste of my kicks!"

This time, it was me who had to run, darting around the room like a child evading punishment. We might have continued our silly chase if the sound of Phimmasa's car horn hadn't interrupted us. Both Pok and I immediately froze, before rushing downstairs to meet Phim.

The restaurant we were heading to was called *Drink ‘Til You Puke Like a Dog*. Its name was long but undeniably clear about its purpose. It was a favorite among engineering students for its outdoor vibes, gritty and unpolished decor, cheap mixers, and most importantly, nightly live band performances featuring several acts.

When Phim, Pok, and I arrived, a large group of seniors and first-years were already gathered around tables pushed together to form a long row. I chose a seat directly across from Tar, the senior who often showed her affection by wrestling me into tight hugs. Luckily, tonight she had her girlfriend from another faculty with her, so she only greeted me with a wide smile, refraining from her usual antics.

I had a sneaking suspicion that Ken, another senior who’d seen me and Phim together at a café earlier, had already informed Tar. Tar and Ken were close friends, and I could tell from Tar’s occasional glances at Phim that she was piecing things together.

"Who's that pretty girl, Pok?"

The question came from Fai, Pok's mentor, breaking the flow of the drinking circle.

Pok’s mentor wasn’t your average senior. As the sophomore recreation president, his quirky demeanor was infamous. His appearance and style bore a striking resemblance to Paradox's lead singer, while his way of speaking reminded everyone of Pop from Calories Blah Blah.

"The only beautiful one here is me, of course! Your mentee, Pratee, Phi Frai!"

Fai immediately shook his head at the answer, his dismay apparent. Pok, after all, was the proud heir to the first-year recreation president title— the first and only woman to ever hold it. Her role? To preserve hundreds of bawdy, often nonsensical songs for future generations, ensuring their ridiculousness endured for centuries.

"Pok, how many times do I have to tell you? My name's Fai, not 'Frai.' No need to add an 'R' just for kicks. My parents didn’t name me 'Frai'!"

"Well, maybe your parents conceived you while playing cards, huh, Fai?" Fai groaned and flicked Pok’s forehead, unable to take her cheekiness. He wasn't the first to lose patience with her quick wit.

"So, Pok, will I get to know that girl's name tonight or not?"

"This is Phimmasa, an economics freshman and our high school friend, Phi Fai." Pok finally introduced with a grin.

"Thanks for not adding an 'R' this time. But one more thing— don't stress the 'Phi' in my name like that again, or you'll feel my wrath!"

Fai even lifted one knee onto his chair in an almost playful show of intimidation. Pok, startled, finally toned down her teasing, nodding meekly.

The rest of the night? Let’s just say the drinks kept flowing, and the chaos only grew from there.

"Excuse me, everyone. I would like to join you tonight. Please take care of me."

Phimmasa's sweet voice, paired with her radiant smile that could melt even the toughest heart, was shared generously with everyone at the table. It wasn’t surprising that the seniors nodded enthusiastically, charmed by her presence. After all, tonight Phim was dressed in dark, form-fitting jeans and a loose white sweater that made her look effortlessly gorgeous and irresistibly cute.

Even I couldn’t help but steal a glance.

"Oh, come on, Phim. You’re not imposing on us at all. Here’s what—I’ll assign someone to make sure your glass is never empty," declared Phi Fai with a grin before clapping his hands dramatically as if summoning someone.

"Mentee Pratee!"

Hearing her name, Pok, who had been quiet for a while, quickly chimed in, knowing full well how to follow Phi Fai’s cues.

"Yes, My Lord?"

"Pour her drink!"

"Right away, sire."

With mock formality, Pok grabbed a shot glass from the mixing station nearby and began her performance. She poured vodka halfway into the glass, expertly salted the rim, and handed the drink to Phim, who had been watching the process with wide, curious eyes. She accepted the glass hesitantly, unsure of what to do next.

Seeing her hesitation, Pok demonstrated by downing her own shot in one go, squeezing a lime wedge into her mouth immediately after, and slamming her glass onto the table with a dramatic flourish.

"Aaaahhh!" Pok exaggerated, clearly enjoying her theatrics.

Phim, still looking uncertain but encouraged by the *"Drink! Drink! Drink!"* chants from everyone, lifted her glass. She gulped it down, imitating Pok's lime-squeezing technique, but her face immediately contorted into a mix of shock and horror. The fiery burn of vodka had clearly taken her by surprise.

Her reaction was almost endearing—cheeks flushed, eyes tightly shut—as she instinctively reached out and grabbed at my waist for support, her small hands clutching a bit too tightly.

It was a sudden touch, unexpected and firm. And for some reason, it left me wishing it would happen again.

That one drink was more than enough for Phimmasa, who clearly didn’t take to alcohol well. She politely declined any further shots, leaving Pok free to serve the rest of the table.

By this time, Ken had arrived and found a seat far from mine, seemingly aware of his need to maintain distance. Tar was preoccupied with her girlfriend, thankfully leaving me in peace. Even my male classmates, who often teased me, seemed more interested in Phim tonight, though they dared not approach her too closely—her reserved demeanor had a certain intimidating air that kept them at bay.

And I liked that about Phim. It made me feel secure, knowing I didn’t need to worry about her or feel possessive.

Everything seemed to be going smoothly tonight—no drama, no misunderstandings. Phim was smiling and laughing at Fai and Pok’s banter, which had turned into a lively comedy routine, much to everyone’s delight.

“Hey, hey! Look at the new band on stage!” one of the guys suddenly exclaimed.

I followed their gaze to see a petite, honey-skinned woman with strikingly sharp features and large, expressive eyes framed by long lashes. Her slightly upturned nose and invitingly full lips made her the epitome of allure.

“Ah, that’s Sai, the star of the Communication Arts Faculty. Super sexy and an amazing singer,” someone explained.

Sai was seated on a tall stool, microphone in hand, while a guitarist prepared to play beside her. Then, the acoustic version of *"Ya Phit"* began to fill the room, her voice delicate yet powerful, captivating everyone instantly.

*"Simple words with profound meanings, words she always uses repeatedly..."*

Her sweet, melodious voice had a hypnotic quality, and her presence exuded confidence and charm. Even I found myself momentarily entranced.

“She’s got such pretty lips. What do they call that pouty look again?” Fai mused aloud.

“They call it kissable lips, don’t they, Phi Fai?” I blurted out without thinking, probably because of the alcohol buzzing through my veins.

But before I could finish my sentence, ***bam!***—Pok’s kick landed squarely on my shin. Simultaneously, Phim twisted her fingers into my waist with enough force to make me wince.

"Ouch! Ow!" I yelped.

"What’s wrong?" Fai asked, turning toward me in concern.

"Nothing, Phi Fai. Just a mosquito bite," I answered through gritted teeth, trying to sound nonchalant.

"Must’ve been a pretty big mosquito to hurt that much," he joked before turning his attention back to Sai’s performance.

Phim, meanwhile, was glaring daggers at me, her cheeks puffed out in mock anger. After delivering her revenge with a vicious pinch, she slammed an empty shot glass onto the table.

“Pratee, another round!” she demanded.

"Yes, my lady," Pok replied, jumping to serve her obediently.

I watched as Phim sat there, sipping her drink with a sulky pout, and I couldn’t help but feel both amused and nervous. What would tonight’s fallout look like once we were alone?

The lyrics of the song echoed in the background, as if mocking my earlier slip-up:

*"Words spoken without thought, they’re poison. They destroy the lives of those who believe."*

Truly, karma had come for this lord tonight.

At least Pok's efforts weren’t entirely in vain. By the end of the night,

Phimmasa was incredibly drunk—so much so that she couldn’t drive home.

Yet, she was sober enough to call her family and let them know she’d be staying over at a friend’s dorm.

So, I drove her car back to the dorm, with Pok sitting in the backseat, watching over Phim like a dutiful guardian.

Pok, being Pok, followed orders without a single word of complaint. It wasn’t surprising—she wouldn’t dare defy Phimmasa, not even a little.

Just like me.

When we arrived at the dorm, Pok and I worked together to help the small, tipsy Phim up to my room. It wasn’t easy, but luckily, Pok was big and strong enough to wrestle a wild boar barehanded if needed. Otherwise, it would’ve been a far tougher ordeal.

Once we got Phim safely to my room, we laid her on the bed next to Moo Yong, my plush pig toy. We propped her up with pillows to keep her from lying flat, just in case she threw up. Pok stayed to fix her disheveled clothes and hair while Phim mumbled incoherently like most drunk people.

When everything seemed in order, Pok turned to me, threw her arms around me dramatically, and said, “I’ve delivered her to your room safely. May you have a house full of kids and grandkids!”

“Get back to your room already. Stop talking nonsense!”

“Oh, look at you, rushing me off. Just don’t overdo it, okay?”

With that, Pok darted out the door to avoid the slipper I hurled at her, laughing as she went. I quickly locked the door behind her—not because I was up to anything suspicious, but because I didn’t want her barging back in and disturbing Phim.

Grabbing a towel, I soaked it in water and returned to clean Phim up. She was still sprawled on the bed, mumbling to herself. My nerves were all over the place as I awkwardly tried to wipe her face and arms. Her loose-knit sweater made things even trickier—it was an off-shoulder style, and every little movement revealed more of her pale, flawless skin.

If that weren’t enough, Phim, drunk as she was, was anything but cooperative.

“Roooaaa... hot... ugh... uncomfortable!” she groaned, tugging at her sweater and stretching it out of shape, nearly exposing herself entirely.

Panicking, I scrambled to lower the air conditioner’s temperature and set up a fan. Where’s the plug? Oh, there it is. Once everything was ready, I rushed back to her side.

But I was too late.

Phim had already stripped off—her jeans.

I froze, catching an unavoidable glimpse of her long, smooth legs crossed modestly at the knees. Snapping out of it, I quickly grabbed a blanket and threw it over her up to her waist. But the action left me unintentionally straddling her, my face hovering close to hers.

Phim seemed to calm down, finally still. I leaned closer to check on her, relieved that the worst seemed over.

But then she opened her eyes.

Her gaze was sharp yet hazy, her brown eyes carrying a strange intensity I’d never seen before. It was almost hypnotic, and it left me momentarily frozen. Before I could collect my thoughts, her small hands reached up, grabbed my collar, and pulled me closer.

**And she kissed me.**

Her warm lips pressed against mine in an instant, catching me completely off guard. The faint bitter-sweet tang of vodka lingered on her breath, and her grip on my shirt tightened. Her tongue brushed against mine, slow and deliberate, as if savoring every moment.

Time seemed to stretch on as the kiss deepened, soft yet unrelenting. Just as I thought it might never end, she finally pulled away—but not before playfully biting my lower lip.

Everything happened under the wild beating of my heart, as if it was about to burst at any moment. Her brown eyes, like a galaxy, stared straight into mine—sweet and lingering, yet tinged with a flicker of sadness.

“Next time... don’t go telling some other girl that her lips look kissable, okay?”

Her voice, husky and barely a whisper, escaped her pale pink lips, leaving my heart plummeting straight to my feet. I wanted to slap my own mouth a thousand times for my careless comment that had left her overthinking to this extent.

“If you do it again... I will punish you.”

She released her grip on my shirt with one hand and lightly patted my cheek in a soft slap-slap motion, like a bossy mafia figure intimidating an unarmed opponent.

“I won’t do it again.”

My face, as if drawn by some unseen force, inched closer to hers, caught in the spell of those captivating brown eyes. Closer, closer—until the entire world seemed to melt away, leaving only the two of us.

Her sweet voice lingered on my name, stretching the sound as though she was about to confess something meaningful. Was she about to say she loved me?

“Phim...”

“I think...

"....?"

"I think I’m gonna puke!”

What?!

Her sudden announcement made me leap off the bed as if fire had licked at my heels. I bolted toward the bathroom, frantically searching for a bag— any bag—but all of them had vanished into thin air. In the end, I grabbed the nearest thing I could find, a plastic basin meant for washing underwear, and raced back to hold it under her chin.

Just in time.

Phim was hunched over, retching, but fortunately, it was more of a dry heave than the real deal. Still, the sight of her teary-eyed and miserable left me with a throbbing headache.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught my reflection in the mirror by my bedside table. The image staring back at me was almost laughable: one hand holding a bright red basin with yellow floral patterns, ready to catch her vomit, while the other hand rubbed her back soothingly as she struggled through her nausea.

Suddenly, Pok’s parting words echoed in my mind.

*“I’ve delivered her to your room safely. May you have a house full of kids and grandkids!”*

Maybe I should’ve made an offering at the spirit shrine today after all.

Poor me.

# Chapter 16: ᴛʜᴇ ᴠᴀssᴀʟ

**PHIMMASA PERSPECTIVE**

I woke up with a pounding headache, unable to recall what had happened the night before. What, why, and how had led me to this situation? To make it worse, I found myself in an unfamiliar outfit—a green dinosaur-print pajama set with a collared shirt and shorts.

“Waaaaahhh!”

"What?!"

As soon as my yell of frustration echoed through the room, Kiran burst out of the bathroom within seconds. Both her hands were still covered in suds from laundry detergent, some foam even clinging to her hair, which made her look unexpectedly adorable.

Anyone accusing me of being obsessed with my girlfriend wouldn’t be wrong. Ever since we started dating, I’ve always admired the way her face lights up with determination when she focuses on something. That intense look was one of the reasons I’d fallen for her.

Right now, it seemed like she was wholly absorbed in doing the laundry.

"Why am I wearing this outfit?!"

I frowned, pointing at dinosaur-print pajamas, pinching the fabric between my thumb and forefinger as if trying to protest silently.

Kiran widened her usually small eyes as much as she could, raising one eyebrow with a cheeky smile.

“What’s wrong? Don’t you like dinosaurs?”

I could tell she was teasing.

“That’s not the point!” I snapped. “I don’t remember changing into this! And I definitely haven’t showered yet!”

I glared at her, my brows furrowed as I tried to piece together the gaps in my memory.

“Well,” she began with an innocent grin, “I helped you change.”

I froze. My face flushed instantly, growing hotter with every word she said. My mind betrayed me, conjuring up images of her changing my clothes.

“Does that mean… you saw everything?” I whispered, barely able to hear my own voice.

Kiran crossed her arms, ignoring the suds on her hands, and tilted her head as if pondering something deeply. Then, with a nonchalant expression, she said, “It’s fine. I’ll take responsibility.”

“Wha—?!”

What kind of nonsense was this? I grabbed a pillow and buried my face in it, letting out a muffled scream of frustration.

After a moment, I peeked down at myself to double-check. Thankfully, my underwear was untouched. That was a small relief, at least.

I was still too distracted inspecting myself to notice Kiran leaning casually against the wall, watching me with an amused expression. When I finally looked up, I met her almond-shaped brown eyes, which held a teasing glint. “What?”

“Nothing."

I studied her in return. Kiran’s disheveled, just-woke-up appearance had its own charm. She was wearing a white V-neck shirt and plaid red-and-black pajama pants that made her long legs look even longer. Her usually sharp face looked softer, and even though she wasn’t wearing a trace of makeup, her clear skin, straight nose, and naturally pink lips made her look like a high schooler.

Except for the dark circles under her eyes.

“Why are your eyes so dark today?”

She shrugged again, forcing a dry chuckle. “Didn’t get much sleep.”

“Why?”

“Because someone wouldn’t stop bothering me all night,” she said, smirking as if savoring my impending embarrassment.

My face turned crimson in an instant. “Me?!”

“Yeah,” she confirmed casually. “You threw up, screamed, and when I tried to help you change into pajamas, you kicked me off the bed. It was a long night.”

What? Me? Phimmasa? No way. There’s no way I could have done something so disgraceful.

Actually, scratch that—there’s no way I would feel guilty about it, even if I had. Don’t get your hopes up, Kiran.

She still had a pending case against her, after all. I might not remember much from last night, but there’s no way I could forget the time my dear girlfriend had the audacity to tell a communications major that her lips were **kissable**.

“You’re the one who got me drunk in the first place!” I shouted, my anger flaring up all over again.

I could still feel the sting of humiliation as I recalled the night. If it weren’t for that meddlesome upperclassman—what was his name again? Phai? Fai? Whatever—I’d be sleeping soundly in my own bed right now.

“Hey, blame Pratee,” Kiran retorted smugly.

Oh, she wasn’t getting off that easily. Kiran had grown more cunning and cheeky since hanging out with Pok, and I wasn’t about to let her off the hook so easily.

But then again, I could never stay mad at her for long. Hurting her—even in my imagination—felt like too much.

It might sound ridiculous, but that’s just how I am with Kiran.

“Enough already! Why blame Pok?"

*Although I also blamed Pok earlier.*

"Anyway, I’m still upset—really upset!”"

This time, Kiran stopped leaning against the wall and walked over to sit on the bed beside me. Her panda-like eyes looked straight at me, full of exaggerated pleading.

“Don’t be mad at me, okay? I already got punished by you yesterday…”

Her rare, pleading tone immediately piqued my curiosity. What kind of punishment could I have given her?

**I genuinely couldn’t remember a thing!**

“What punishment?”

“You… uh… beat me up.”

Beat her up?!

I quickly grabbed Kiran’s chin and turned her face from side to side, inspecting for any bruises or injuries she might have been hiding. But there was nothing—her skin looked as smooth as ever.

“That’s not true! I don’t see anything wrong.”

“You wouldn’t see any marks...”

"........"

**“Because you hit me… with your lips.”**

“What?!” I let out a silent scream, pressing my face into a pillow to hide my embarrassment. Kiran's shamelessness was just too much to handle.

Without thinking, I swung the pillow at her repeatedly, stopping only when I heard her muffled, amused “Oof!”

“That’s impossible! There’s no way I’d do something like that.”

“Are you sure…?”

Still cheeky, she managed to pull the pillow away from her face to look at me, smirking like the infuriating tease she was. Before I could react, she shifted closer and rested her head on my lap. When did she get so affectionate? I hadn’t noticed any signs of this behavior before.

“Whatever! Today, you’ll have to do everything I say to make up for it.”

Kiran blinked up at me, as if processing my command. I accidentally brushed my hand across her sharp nose, only realizing what I’d done when her almond-shaped eyes, soft as melted caramel, gazed back at me. Flustered, I quickly pulled my hand away and hid it behind my back. If I could tie it down, I would.

“If I follow everything you say… will you stop being mad?”

“… Maybe.”

She frowned as if suspicious of my intentions. I shrugged playfully, letting her know she had no other choice.

“So… what should I start with? Want me to give you a massage?”

Before I could protest, she shot up from her spot and positioned herself behind me. Her long fingers began kneading my shoulders gently, clearly trying to win me over. But for some reason, her touch made my heartbeat erratic, my chest tightening like it couldn’t keep up with the sudden wave of emotions.

“Stop it! No massages. Just do everything I say, and we’ll be fine.”

“Okay, what do you want me to do first?”

She rested her chin on my shoulder, her face so close that her sharp nose nearly grazed my cheek. My already racing heart went into overdrive.

“First… get me some clothes. I need to shower.”

“The pants are over there. The shirt’s in the wash.”

“What? Why did you wash it? I could’ve worn it again.”

Instead of answering, Kiran mimed a gag, complete with dramatic retching sounds. She didn’t even need to explain—I knew she was referring to my shirt being covered in vomit. But her performance was so over-the-top that tears actually came to her eyes, which only made me angrier. I smacked her on the back with my pillow.

“Enough! Stop being dramatic. Just grab one of your shirts for me.”

She let out a mock sigh before dragging herself over to the closet, looking all the while like I’d burdened her with the weight of the world. Was I too harsh? Maybe I’d smacked her a little too hard...

“No green dinosaur prints!” I added sternly.

“Got it, got it…”

At that, she stopped mumbling and started rummaging through the closet quietly. After a moment, she pulled out a plain white V-neck, identical to the one she was already wearing, and handed it to me.

“How many of these do you own?!”

"Many."

“And… what about the underwear? You’re not planning in letting me wear the same ones, are you?”

“Want me to wash your underwear for you first?”

That was it!

I grabbed the nearest bolster pillow and whacked her without mercy. Why did she keep provoking me like this? Worse, she seemed to enjoy it— laughing uncontrollably even as she was being hit.

I don’t know if it’s too late to say this, but I hate her!

Still, I had my own way of getting back at her. I made her run downstairs to buy me shrimp porridge, slapped her arm for no reason, and ordered her around until I was thoroughly satisfied. When I was finally in a good mood, I decided to cut her some slack.

“I remember your Mom texting you to go home. Don’t you want me to go home with you, Kiran? I'll drive you home."

Now dressed in jeans, Kiran gave me a wary glance, like she was trying to figure out my angle.

“You’re not going to mess with me in front of them, right?”

I laughed, reaching out to pinch her cheek lightly. One day with me, and she was already traumatized.

“No more messing with you."

"But… there’s one condition.”

"... What is it?"

“Can I come to your house too?"

"......."

"I'm planning to propose to your parents.”

***Thwack!***

I tried. I really tried not to hit her this time, but she’s pushing her luck!

Kiran, ever so eager to please me, volunteered to drive while I relaxed in the passenger seat—partly because she was still nursing a hangover. However, as we neared the alley leading to their house, I had a sudden change of heart and asked her to park the car not far from their house instead. I wanted to relive the old days when we used to walk home together during high school.

After parking the car, we began walking toward their house in comfortable silence. Outside in the real world, Kiran was back to her quiet, composed self, holding onto her signature cool and aloof demeanor. It was such a stark contrast to her playful, clingy behavior when we were alone together.

But today, unlike back then, I wasn’t a pigtailed girl running after her longlegged friend in a PE uniform. Instead, the short one and the tall one walked side by side, hand in hand, along this familiar path.

How could I not smile, feeling this happy?

Still, time has a way of speeding up when you least want it to. Despite wanting to prolong the moment, we arrived at her place in less than ten minutes.

Kiran's home was a beautiful two-story loft-style house with exposed concrete walls and black-framed glass windows. It stood out in the neighborhood, perfectly reflecting her parents' creative professions—her dad being an architect and her mom an interior designer. The house was cozy, filled with personal touches and signs of each family member’s favorite corners.

It felt like a real home.

Unlike mine—a large, cold, empty shell, occupied only by the housekeeper and driver.

“Did you bring a friend today, darling? Oh my, she’s so beautiful! What’s your name, dear?”

“Phim,” I replied with a sweet smile, which her mother returned warmly. Her mother's smile, like Kiran’s, lit up both her eyes and her face.

“That’s lovely! Phim, dear, why don’t you stay for lunch?”

“Sure, I’d love to,” I replied, unable to resist her inviting tone.

“Did Pok not come with you, Kiran? If she did, I’d better run out and get more fruit.”

“Pok went home this morning, Mom. Miss her already?”

“Of course! I bought so many packs of noodles, two kilos of pork, and even a new wok, hoping to make fried noodles for her. She didn’t get enough last time.”

“Seems like you love Pok more than your own child...”

Her mom didn’t answer but smiled mischievously before pinching Kiran’s cheeks until they stretched. Poor Kiran. After being **punished** by me all day, now she was getting manhandled by her mom too.

Later, Kiran and I enjoyed the fried noodles her mom had prepared in their garden. I couldn’t help but marvel at how delicious they were—it made sense why Pok hadn’t gotten enough last time!

“Oh, who’s this?”

A deep voice called out before a tall figure emerged from behind a tree. It had to be Kha, Kiran’s older brother. Their resemblance was uncanny; if I didn’t know better, I’d have thought they were twins.

“Oh wow, she’s adorable! Is this Phim? My little sister-in-law?”

“Kha! Stop saying nonsense! Shut your mouth!”

The two siblings immediately broke into a chase across the lawn. If I thought Kiran was cheeky, Kha might be the superior tormentor in this family. Clearly, the mischief gene runs strong here.

After lunch, I started feeling tired and told Kiran’s mom I needed to head home. Kiran offered to walk me back.

We walked hand in hand again, quiet but comfortable, just as before. I couldn’t help but notice how Kiran seemed extra attentive, making sure each step I took was safe. It was such a stark difference from how she used to treat me before we were dating.

“My birthday is next week,” I mentioned as we approached the car. “Dad’s hosting a party at our beach house in Hua Din.”

"Okay."

“Come with me, okay? And bring Pok too.”

She only nodded and smiled. Why did she talk so little outside?

At the car door, I lingered, not wanting to say goodbye. When Kiran made a face that clearly said she didn’t want to part either, I couldn’t resist consoling her.

“Tomorrow evening, I’ll come to pick you up at your house. Then I’ll drop you off at your dorm, okay?”

Before she could respond, I quickly stood on my tiptoes and planted a kiss on her cheek, then bolted toward the car like a mischievous child.

As I closed the door, I glanced back to see her face red as a tomato, and I couldn’t help but smile to myself.

But wait—did I come on too strong? Was that inappropriate?

It wasn’t very ladylike of me, was it?

# Chapter 17: ᴏᴜʀ ᴡᴏʀʟᴅ

Hiding a leaf requires a forest. Perhaps that was why the trip to celebrate Phimmasa’s birthday at a seaside vacation home in Hua Hin didn’t just involve me and Phim, but a whole group of seven people—traveling together, resembling a small pilgrimage more than a birthday getaway.

The party included Phim—the birthday pretty girl. Me, her girlfriend. Pok, Phim’s personal attendant. Fon and Look Om, two of Phim’s college friends. These weren’t unexpected additions, so I wasn’t too surprised by them.

But the sixth member? That was my brother, Kha! I had no idea how he ended up tagging along until Pok called him, lamenting that the group and the luggage wouldn’t fit into Phim’s sleek sedan. Hearing Pok’s plight, Kha, ever the gallant gentleman ready to rescue any damsel in distress, offered to drive our family’s brand-new seven-seater SUV—barely used—to accommodate everyone.

“Honestly, I just want to get to know my future sister-in-law better.” Kha teased.

Hearing that, I immediately ran after him, kicking wildly. My dear brother, unbothered, just laughed heartily as he darted around the house to escape me.

“I thought you wanted to use this trip as an excuse to honeymoon with me, Phi Kha!” Pok quipped loudly, unbothered by the loss of her supposed modesty.

That made me halt my chase abruptly and glare at my unabashed friend, who was shamelessly flirting with my brother.

“Well, let’s get married first, then I’ll take you on that honeymoon, Pok.”

Kha replied sweetly, flashing a grin and ruffling Pok’s hair like he was a Kdrama oppa.

“Where to, Phi Khaaa?”

Pok's voice dripping with exaggerated sweetness.

I could swear I saw the hairs on the back of my neck bristle when she dragged out her *“Phi Khaaaa”* like that. It was so saccharine that even I, an observer, felt an inexplicable urge to gag.

“I have two places in mind."

“Where?”

“Either Rong Kluea Market… or the Deep South provinces.”

That made me burst into laughter. Pok, not missing a beat, pretended to throw a dramatic tantrum, accusing Kha of plotting to kill her for insurance money.

The playful banter delayed us until 8 AM. The realization came when Phim, who had been waiting at her home since 7 AM, called me in her stern voice.

**[I invited you to my birthday this year, not next year!]**

“Sure, sure, we’re leaving now. It’s Pok who’s been taking forever to get ready.”

Ahem… I might have left out the part about our antics being the actual cause of the delay. Survival instincts, you know.

Kha drove us to pick up Phim and her two friends, Fon and Look Om, from her family’s grand estate. Phim looked effortlessly chic in white shorts, sneakers, and a tank top with colorful graphics. It was a refreshing change from her usual style—if only the tank top weren’t a tad too revealing for my liking.

“What’s with the sulky face?” Phim asked, leaning closer as I helped her load her suitcase into the car.

“It’s your shirt."

“What about it?”

“I don’t like it. It’s too revealing.”

Phim raised an eyebrow, her lips curving into a teasing smile. “Are you jealous?”

“........"

“Not answering, huh? So you are jealous.”

“I’m not!”

“Really?”

“I just want to keep it for my eyes only,” I muttered, leaning in to whisper the words near her ear.

That earned her a blush so deep it spread across Phim’s cheeks. Serves her right for teasing me.

“Ki, you’ll sit in the back row with Phim. I’ll take the middle row with these two ladies to keep an eye on them,” Pok whispered conspiratorially, jerking her thumb at Fon and Look Om. “If I don’t, they might snatch your brother!”

I shrugged, more than happy to sit with Phim. But Fon and Look Om seemed confused as to why Pok joined them instead of Phim.

As for the front passenger seat, Kha reserved it for a seventh member we were about to pick up. He explained that he wanted a male companion and had invited an old high school friend.

When we pulled up to the grand house of this mysterious seventh member, I was startled to see someone I knew very well.

“Phi Fai?!"

The lively chaos began when we, Phim, and Pok discovered that Kha's childhood friend from high school turned out to be none other than Phi Fai —Pok’s quirky senior mentor.

“Wait, you guys know each other? This is Faisarn—my buddy from high school. We were close, but we went to different universities."

"She's our Senior in Engineering."

"Actually, now that I think about it, it’s not that surprising you know each other. Faisarn was in engineering at your university.”

“Faisarn? But Phi Fai told me his name was Patipan! No wonder I couldn’t find his name on the student roster!” Pok said, her tone as dramatic as ever.

“Oh, come on, Pok. Patipan is my middle name. It’s not on any official records—not even my mom remembers it!”

Still, Pok narrowed her eyes suspiciously, clearly not entirely satisfied with the explanation. She turned to Phi Kha and quipped, “How exactly did you two even become friends? You’re polar opposites! Kha, do you even filter your friends at all?”

Fai didn’t miss a beat. Without saying a word, he slipped off his oversized flip-flop, scratched his leg with it, and muttered under his breath,

“Criticizing me with those feet of yours?”

Pok clamped her mouth shut immediately, retreating into silence. While I felt a bit sorry for my friend, who’d now have to tread carefully around Fai for the rest of the trip, I couldn’t help but feel relieved that our group was finally complete.

Or so I thought.

The trip turned into an impromptu battle of the playlists. Fai wanted Carabao, Pok demanded Tai Orathai, and Phim’s friends, Fon and Look Om, insisted on Beyoncé.

Kha, ever the peacemaker, tried to satisfy everyone by shuffling through USBs, but no matter whose song he played, someone inevitably protested. To top it off, Kha started humming an absurd medley that combined all the songs.

“Oh, baby! Call me now!” he crooned, mimicking Tai Orathai. “Let’s break through Ayutthaya’s walls to conquer Chantaburi! Yeah, yeah!”

I buried my face in my hands. Whose brother is this?

But amid the chaos, Phim and I found our own world in the backseat. Relaxed by the knowledge that most of the group already knew we were together, Phim leaned against my shoulder, her delicate fingers tracing the lines on my palm as she chattered away.

“They say people with similar heart lines are destined to be soulmates,” she said, holding her palm up to mine. When she saw how our lines seemed to align perfectly, she grinned in satisfaction.

“And this little line here?” She tapped the edge of my hand with mock seriousness. “That’s the line of lovers… Why do you have three of them, Ki? Does this mean you’re destined to have multiple wives?”

Before I could reply, she huffed, tossing my hand aside and folding her arms in mock indignation. “Unbelievable!”

“Phim, are you seriously mad about my palm lines?” I leaned closer, nudging her with my shoulder. “I don’t even have one wife yet—let alone three!”

The corners of her mouth twitched as she tried to hold back a smile. Her blush gave her away, though. Just as I predicted, she punched my shoulder in retaliation, sending Kha and Pok into fits of laughter up front.

Finally, after a three-hour drive filled with bickering, singing, and laughter, we arrived at Phim’s beachfront villa. Nestled on a quiet, private stretch of sand, the two-story beige house with white-framed windows and breezy sea-blue curtains looked like something out of a postcard.

As we unloaded our bags, a woman in a flowing white dress emerged from the house, her features strikingly similar to Phim’s.

“Everyone, this is Phi Prae, my older sister,” Phim introduced with a warm smile.

“Welcome, everyone!”

We all greeted Phi Prae politely, our hands pressed together in a wai. Phimmasa’s famously sweet voice paled in comparison to Phi Prae’s melodic and delicate tone. Her speech was slow yet clear, sweet yet resonant.

I glanced at the two guys in our group and couldn’t help but notice their dreamy, faraway looks, mouths slightly agape. I was about to snap them out of it when a small, chirpy voice broke through the air.

“Mommyyyy! Auntie Phim’s hereee!”

A little boy, with rosy cheeks, bright white skin, and an adorably round face, came running from somewhere unseen. He crashed into Phimmasa with such enthusiasm that she nearly lost her balance. Steadying herself, she bent down and enveloped the child in a warm hug, showering his cheeks with kisses.

“Auntie Phim’s here now, my little Puk. Did you miss me?” she cooed.

“I missed you soooo much! Without Auntie Phim, I feel so looonely!”

*What a charming little rascal!*

His sweetness could put anyone in a good mood.

“By the way, Phi Prae, where’s Phi Ruj and dad?” Phimmasa asked, still holding little Puk.

“Dad will join us tonight,” Phi Prae explained with a gentle smile. “As for Ruj, well, he’s busy with work. He’ll be here tomorrow. By the way, have you all eaten? I’ve prepared some *kanom jeen nam ya poo* for lunch, and tonight, we’ll have a barbecue seafood party!”

Phi Prae gestured towards a long wooden table on the house’s spacious balcony, where her staff was diligently arranging the meal. We followed eagerly, our stomachs rumbling in anticipation.

The food was beautifully presented, with the rice noodles arranged in perfect portions and the crab curry brimming with thick, flavorful broth. Side dishes of boiled eggs, crispy fried chilies, and fresh vegetables added to the colorful spread. The sight alone had Pok wiping his mouth discreetly, trying to hide his excitement.

As everyone settled at the table, Kha tactically dodged the trio of girls vying for a seat beside him by taking the head of the table, flanked by Phi Fai on one side and me on the other.

Meanwhile, Phimmasa sat next to me with little Puk, who seemed determined to impress her by eating noodles on his own. More often than not, though, the noodles ended up decorating his cheeks rather than reaching his mouth.

“Phim,” Phi Prae called softly from the doorway. “Dad wants to talk to you for a moment.”

Phimmasa excused herself to take the call, leaving little Puk with us. Bereft of his auntie, the shy boy grew quiet and looked uncertain. Moments later, he squirmed and looked around before clutching his tummy.

“Auntie,” he whimpered, looking at Pok, “I need to go to the bathroom. Can you take me?”

Phi Fai burst out laughing so hard that his noodles nearly flew out of his mouth. Pok, on the other hand, scowled deeply, her brow twitching as if resisting the urge to scold the boy. Even I, a fully grown adult, felt an odd pang of fear under her glare. Poor Puk’s lips quivered, and his big eyes filled with tears before he finally broke into a loud wail.

“Waaaaahhh! Mommyyy!”

Hearing the commotion, Phi Prae started making her way back, concern etched on her face. Pok, panicking, quickly knelt before the child.

“Puk! Shh, don’t cry! If you stop crying, I’ll give you a piggyback ride and help you wash your hands. Deal?”

Miraculously, the little boy quieted down immediately. Taking advantage of the moment, Pok scooped him onto her shoulders and marched toward the bathroom, loudly humming a silly tune to maintain the façade of camaraderie.

“Hup-two-three-four! March, little soldier!”

“Wow, Puk really warmed up to you all quickly,” Phi Prae said, smiling as she returned to the table.

Phi Prae gaze lingered on me for a moment, soft and curious. I raised my brows in confusion, silently asking if something was wrong. She took her seat and leaned closer, her voice dropping to a quiet murmur meant only for me.

“You’re Kiran, aren’t you?”

I froze. “Uh, yes… But how do you know me, Phi Prae? We haven’t been introduced.”

She smiled knowingly, her eyes sparkling with amusement. “How could I not recognize you? I’ve seen your face so many times over the past four or five years.”

"Sorry?”

Phi Prae chuckled softly, leaning back.

“Phim has practically wallpapered her room with your pictures, Ki. If I didn’t recognize you by now, I’d probably need a memory check.”

# Chapter 18: ꜱᴜᴍᴍᴇʀ ꜱᴛᴏʀᴍ

A sudden summer storm came and went, but the sea remained the same-a place I've always loved.

Today, the sky is a striking shade of blue, lightly decorated with wisps of white clouds. If you don't look closely, it almost seems to merge seamlessly with the clear green sea. The water is so transparent that you can see the sandy floor beneath. The rhythm of waves crashing gently against the shore creates a perfect harmony with the foam curling along the sand. Everything feels perfectly balanced, a harmony that makes the scene unforgettable.

And yet, the beauty of this moment feels heightened, dreamlike, as Phim sits beside me, her smile soft and warm.

**Because Phim is someone I love.**

**Much more than I love the sea.**

Even though she's never said the word love aloud, what I heard from Phi Prae today meant so much more. I learned something that I'd barely dared to guess: **Phim has secretly liked me for a very long time.**

Four to five years? That would've been back in eighth grade. Sure, I had a hunch that she liked me just as I liked her, but I never imagined it had started so long ago.

"What are you smiling about?" Phim asked, her voice pulling me back to the present. "You've been grinning for ages. Feeling good, huh?"

Her happiness was written all over her face, her smile so genuine it shone through her eyes. We were sitting side by side on a large beach mat, both of us leaning back on outstretched arms. The only thing out of the ordinary was...

**Our hands. Mine was resting on hers.**

"I'm not telling," I replied with a playful grin, sticking my tongue out-a copy of something she'd once done during summer break before tenth grade.

Back then, I'd asked her what she thought I'd received without trying, and she gave me the same teasing answer. Would she even remember? She'd only shrugged back then, pouting slightly as if to say, *Don't ask if you don't want vague answers****.***

"Aren't you joining us in the water?" Pratee's voice jolted me from my thoughts.

I turned to see her, decked out in a swimsuit so far from sexy it felt like the distance between *Mae Hong Son* and *Yala*. It was a full-coverage two-piece in a dark, practical color, paired with snorkel gear hanging from her neck.

"Nong Pok." Phi Fai called loudly as he walked over with Phi Kha, dressed in a casual surf-style outfit. "Did you dress like that to go swimming or to dive for a lost submarine?"

Startled but not defeated, Pok retorted instantly, "If I were to dive for something, I'd rather fish out your corpse, Phi Fai."

Instead of reacting angrily, Pai surprisingly seemed to tone it down, almost as if Pratee intimidated him a little.

"Easy there, Pok. I was just saying you'd look nice in something less... combat-ready. It'd be refreshing."

Following his gaze, Pok and I turned to see Fon and Look Om in bright bikinis, their long legs and curves practically glowing against the sunlight.

And then... **darkness.**

Phim's arms wrapped around my neck, her soft hands covering my eyes completely. Her voice, low and cool, whispered near my ear, sending chills down my spine.

"Don't look, Kiran..."

"......"

"If you look, you'll get punished..."

"......"

Her tone was light, but the promise of a "punishment" made my heart race. My mind flashed back to a moment we shared that night-not fear but sweet anticipation filled me.

**"Punishing with your eyes gouged out."**

What!?

That escalated quickly! Phim was getting bolder by the day, but maybe it was time for me to push back a little.

"Please, don't punish me... I'm scared!" I said in mock terror.

Nearby, Pok was still chatting. "I'd love to wear something like that, Phi Fai. If only I weren't someone who values modesty so much."

For a moment, I thought she sounded genuine, but her next action proved otherwise. She squealed dramatically, grabbing Phi Kha's arm as she tried to drag him into the water.

"Eeeeek! The water's so clear! Come on, Phi Kha, let's go play in the sea!"

Oh, so much for being a **modest lady**.

Perhaps Phim was finally certain that the girls in bikinis were far enough away, frolicking in the water, well beyond our line of sight. She slowly released the hands she had placed over my eyes. But oddly enough, I wasn't ready to let her go just yet. Well, can you blame me? Her touch was warm, her scent absolutely captivating-it was a moment anyone would want to savor.

I grabbed her hands and placed them back over my eyes, just as before. Phim looked puzzled by my strange behavior.

"Why are you pulling my hands back? Do you like the dark or something?" "Not really."

"......."

"But if it means I get to stay close to you like this, I wouldn't mind you covering my eyes forever."

"Kii~! You're so cheesy."

She leaned forward, wrapping her arms around my neck from behind as if trying to vent her affection. Her sudden weight nearly knocked me over, but we both burst into laughter. Honestly, I couldn't even tell what we were laughing about anymore.

We didn't need a reason-happiness in that moment was enough.

**Later that evening.**

The beach barbecue party was in full swing.

We barely lifted a finger since Phi Prae's team of housekeepers had taken care of everything. The grills, fresh seafood, pre-skewered barbecue sticks, and even a designated grilling team were all set up under Phi Prae's meticulous supervision. All we had to do was sit back and enjoy the feast.

Well, *just eat* was easier said than done for some.

Phim waited until most people were busy tending the grill before sidling up to me with a playful pout.

"I don't feel like peeling shrimp or cracking crab shells. What should I do?"

"Then eat squid instead," I teased, sliding a plate of squid closer to her with a smirk.

What I didn't expect was her immediate reaction.

***Clang!***

The fork I had been holding clattered against the plate as I pretended to flinch. The sharp sound startled me-not out of fear of Phim, of course! This was just... an act. Definitely.

"Fine, I'll peel it for you. But first..." I grinned mischievously, reaching out to gently lift her left hand.

"What are you doing?"

"Testing something."

When I let go of her hand, it flopped down limply. I tried her right hand-it was the same, falling helplessly every time.

"Well, looks like you've come down with sudden '*noodle arms*' syndrome. Got it. Don't worry, Princess Phim-I'll handle this."

Hearing that, Phim's eyes sparkled with delight as she broke into a soft laugh.

Once I finished peeling the prawns and crabs for her, she didn't stop there. Whenever no one was looking, she'd open her mouth wide, waiting for me to feed her.

So now, apparently, I had to feed her too. Sighing, I obliged. Every time I placed a piece in her mouth, Phim was beaming with happiness, her cheeks puffed adorably with every bite.

That joy made all my efforts worthwhile-until Pok decided to chime in.

"Pok! Why are you sitting there with your mouth open?"

"Well, your second humble wife also wishes to be fed by my lord." Pok said dramatically.

I looked at Pok, trying my best not to laugh. Relenting, I stabbed a burnt piece of squid with my fork and shoved it into her mouth.

"Here. Eat it quickly and stop whining."

"Gentler, my lord!" Pok cried dramatically, feigning distress. "You've stabbed my poor cheek!"

After everyone was full, the party transitioned seamlessly into a round of drinks. There was something for everyone: juices, sodas, and an assortment of beers for the guys. But, apparently, that wasn't enough for Pratee, my ever-daring friend, who boldly asked Aunt Aun, the head housekeeper.

"Auntie, do you happen to have any *ya dong* (herbal liquor)? A dozen jars, maybe?"

To everyone's shock, Aunt Aun immediately bustled away, returning five minutes later with her arms full of glittering jars of red herbal liquor. The sight of the glowing red liquid made Pratee's and Phi Fai's eyes light up with excitement.

As if that wasn't enough, Aunt Aun casually asked Pok, "Would you like some tamarind to pair with it, Miss Pratee?"

Pradee stood there, her eyes brimming with tears. I couldn't help but ask, "What's wrong? Are you that touched by the tamarind offer?"

"No, you idiot! I'm just happy someone called me *Miss*."

The group split up after dinner. the formal dining table for Phi Prae, Nhu Puk, and the bikini girls, the rest of us-Phim, Pok, Phi Kha, Phi Fai, and Imoved to a large mat spread out nearby.

Pratee, as expected, was in her element. She sat cross-legged with one knee raised, a glass of herbal liquor in hand, and no trace of her *modest lady* persona left.

I turned to Phi Fai, hoping he might rein her in, but he was even worse. There he was, squatting like a monk, sipping liquor with one hand while munching tamarind with the other, his eyes shut tight as if savoring some divine experience.

Phim and Phi Kha were in tears from laughing at the two of them. I had to admit, there was a strange, inexplicable harmony between Pok and Phi Faia dynamic so ridiculous it was hard to describe.

Around 9PM.

All the lights suddenly went out. The soft strumming of Phi Kha's acoustic guitar filled the air, leading into the opening notes of *Happy Birthday*. Pratee, in her signature dramatic style, belted out the first line like an opera diva. Slowly, everyone joined in, clapping in rhythm and harmonizing together.

Even though Phim must have guessed what was happening, her bright smile and sparkling eyes betrayed how much the surprise touched her.

Phi Prae stepped forward, holding a cake glowing with candles. Phim clasped her hands over her chest, her eyes shimmering with tears as Phi Prae offered her a heartfelt wishes once the song ended.

"May this birthday be another wonderful year for you, Phim. Wishing you so much happiness. I love you."

"Thank you, Phi Prae," Phim replied with a slightly teary smile. Then, hesitating briefly, she added, "But... shouldn't we wait for Dad?"

"Dad called earlier," Phi Prae said softly. "He'll be a bit late, so we'll celebrate with him later. For now, let's blow out the candles, okay?"

Phim's smile faltered for just a second, but she nodded obediently and leaned down to blow out the candles.

Having lost her mother at a young age, Phim always cherished moments of love and warmth from her father, yet his demanding role as a prominent CEO often kept him away. It was an ache she'd learned to carry quietly.

As friends started taking turns wishing Phim a happy birthday and handing her their gifts, I couldn't help but notice how her smile grew quieter, her shoulders sinking slightly. I stood nearby, unsure of what to do.

When everyone had said their piece, Phim turned to me, a curious look in her eyes as if silently asking, *What about you?*

I had been standing frozen, nerves running high as my face and ears burned.

Taking a deep breath, I closed my eyes briefly, trying to summon courage. Then I snapped my fingers to set the rhythm and declared loudly:

"One, two, three!"

"By the honor of the Recreational Committee President of Engineering Batch 91!"

It was Phi Fai's booming voice that echoed across the beach, commanding attention like a general leading his troops. I knew everyone's hearts must've skipped a beat-but then he added, with utmost seriousness:

"I, representative of the moon, shall take charge of your happiness!"

And just like that, all credibility crumbled into dust.

Still, Phi Fai maintained his military-like posture, signaling dramatically to us.

"Engineers, ready?"

"Ready!" Pok and I shouted in unison, raising our arms straight out at a 45degree angle, mimicking a superhero's transformation pose. Meanwhile, Phi Kha strummed his guitar, fully prepared.

"Three, four!"

The song began, our voices blending in a playful, cheesy tune:

*"Wanna find true love, engineer cutie pie! But no one sighs for us... seriously, why?*

*Engineer cutie, longing for love that's real, Won't you just give me one night? A deal?*

*Ah, try loving an engineer like meNo need to hide, let's live carefree!*

*Find someone who knows me inside and out,*

*Just one person is all I'll shout!"*

Pok and I sang and danced enthusiastically, throwing in ridiculous movesmarching in place, forming heart shapes with our hands, and even wagging our hips like penguins. Though we were awkward and clumsy, we gave it our all.

But Pratee? She went all-out, whipping her hips and swinging her arms as if competing in a professional K-pop cover dance battle.

When the song ended, I clasped my hands together and sent a silent prayer of thanks to my theater-loving senior, who had no doubt inspired this overthe-top production.

As I turned to Phim, I saw her covering her mouth, laughing so hard she had tears in her eyes. I walked toward her, feeling a bit bashful but immensely proud of having made her smile.

"How did you even do that?" Phim asked, her laughter punctuated by gasps. "You're so shy-you'd never do something like this!"

"Well," I replied, my voice soft but steady, "I did it..."

"Why?"

**"...Because I wanted to see you smile."**

Reaching into my pocket, I pulled out a small, square gift box and handed it to her, locking eyes with a steady gaze.

"From now on, I'll do everything I can to make you smile every single day."

For a moment, there were no words. Then, as a warm, radiant smile spread across her face, I finished softly,

"Happy birthday."

# Chapter 19: ᴜɴᴅᴇʀʟʏɪɴɢ ᴄᴜʀʀᴇɴᴛs

Late at night, the group of merit-makers gathered in Phi Kha and Phi Fai’s room. The reasoning was simple: the guys had plenty of space since there were only two of them. Enough room to set up a card game!

Pok was the first to get started. She spread a thin blanket across the floor and smoothed it meticulously with both hands, ensuring no wrinkles remained. Not stopping there, she neatly creased the corners with such precision it seemed she had swapped hands for an iron. Once satisfied, she retrieved a deck of cards, split it in two, and expertly shuffled them back together with a flick of her palms. It was as if Pok had been raised next to a card table.

“Phi Fai, you should be the dealer! Your name practically screams **Fire**. No one’s more fitting than you.”

“Being the dealer isn’t about the name, Pok. It’s about status. Fortunately for you, I happen to be rich, so I guess I’ll do.”

“Of course, Phi. Only someone rich could afford to buy that fancy *Umami* set you gifted us. Those things cost thousands!”

“It’s *Onami*, Pok. Not *Umami*. That’s a seasoning Ajinomoto, not a brand!”

“Oh, really? Whatever. Anyway, let’s get started! Hand over your wallet, quick!”

Phi Fai, half-confused, handed his wallet to Pok, who had now fully embraced her inner gambler. She grabbed the wallet eagerly, inspecting its contents with a scrutiny that could rival customs officers.

“Twenty-five thousand baht? Okay, you’re definitely rich enough to be the dealer. I hereby declare you *His Serene Highness*.”

“Wow, even though you’re sure I’m rich, you still double-check?”

“By the way... why do you have a photo of your dad in here?”

Pok pulled out a photo from the wallet—a formal ID picture of a middleaged man with a stiff posture and a forced smile under a mustache.

“Pok, put that back. Now. That’s me!”

By the time Pok had narrowly avoided Phi Fai’s attempts to kick her for embarrassing him in front of everyone, the card game was finally set up. Pok sat smugly in the circle, entirely unharmed. After all, Phi Fai had never planned to actually hit her. As he thought that Pok is the kind of person you don’t waste energy on.

“Alright, everyone, put your money down!”

Phi Fai, now fully embracing his role as the dealer, started calling for bets.

Even Fon and Look-Om joined in, confidently betting 40 baht per round. They sat cross-legged beside Pok, showing surprising skill in both gameplay and the rules. Unlike Phim, who had no knowledge of this at all. The little person could only sit behind us, acting as both a whispering advisor and treasurer, clutching her own Rilakkuma-patterned wallet.

“Here, Ki, take this to start with,” Phim said, handing over two coins.

I took the two coins Phim handed to me with trembling hands and placed them on the blanket hesitantly.

“Two baht?!?”

“......”

“You might as well keep the coins to suck on! Don’t waste Phi Fai’s time with that!”

Though red-faced with embarrassment, I managed a counterargument. “Why can Phi Kha play, then? He’s only betting five baht!”

“Because mom didn’t give me much pocket money." Phi Kha interjected.

“Exactly!” Pok chimed in. “He has to save up. He’s got to pay my dowry, after all. Haven’t you heard? Save today, being rich tomorrow?"

Just when it seemed like I would lose the argument, a commanding voice that hadn’t been heard in a while rang out.

“Allow Kiran to bet two baht."

That shut Pok up instantly after hearing Phim. Her face froze in a grimace as fear flickered across her features. Without further protest, she obediently bowed her head, conceding to Phim’s authority.

Half an hour later...

The name **Fai** truly lived up to expectations. As the dealer, he raked in everyone’s money round after round, displaying skills that could rival legendary gamblers. The only one who came close to challenging him was Pok, who managed to hit blackjack after blackjack. As for us, despite the aching back and knees from sitting so long, our total winnings amounted to 20 baht only.

Well, with a two-baht limit per round, she wasn’t going to get rich anytime soon. Still, the young lady was over the moon with her tiny winnings, carefully placing them in her Rilakkuma wallet and snapping it open and shut repeatedly, as if guarding her treasure from *would-be thieves.*

“Hey, Kiran,” Pok called out. “Go grab the golden deck from my suitcase. Take Phim with you.”

“Why? Aren’t we already playing cards?”

“Those are just cheap paper cards, you fool. I want the real deal. Go!”

Pok, clearly up to something, gave me an exaggerated wink. But Fai, oblivious to Pok’s scheming, merely looked on, puzzled.

“Why are you blinking so much? You got something in your eye?”

“Ki, is that Moo Yong?”

Phim blurted out in surprise as she opened the door to our room and spotted Moo Yong, my pink and very battered stuffed pig, sprawled on the bed I shared with Pok. She bounded over, scooping it up with such force that the pillows tumbled to the floor.

“How did Moo Yong get here?”

“I packed it in my bag.”

I smirked, leaning against the headboard with my legs stretched out. Resting my chin on Moo Yong’s head, I let a sly smile creep onto my face as I crumpled the poor thing’s already worn surface.

“Wait… you’re attached to a stuffed animal? That’s so out of character!”

Phim sat down beside me, mirroring my posture. I shrugged slightly before replying nonchalantly, “Can’t help it. If I can’t hug Mom’s Moo Yong, I’ll just have to hug this one instead.”

That made her bury her face in Moo Yong’s head, her cheeks glowing red. Only a sliver of her expression peeked out from behind the faded pink plush, but it was enough to notice how flustered she looked.

“But her mom’s right here now, isn’t she? I don’t need to hold onto that anymore.”

**Cringe!**

It felt like a sugarcane truck had just overturned right in front of me. What had been a relaxed, easygoing moment seconds ago had turned into something else entirely—my heart racing, my face burning, and my body stiff as a board. Thankfully, I managed to recall Pok’s golden advice for moments like this:

*When in doubt, use humor to cover it up!*

"Alright then, come here! Let me give you a hug!"

I spread my arms wide, dramatically lunging toward the petite girl as if I were about to play a game of tag.

Phim let out a high-pitched shriek, laughing hysterically while scrambling to dodge me as though she were fleeing a zombie horde straight out of *The Walking Dead*. Her laughter filled the room as she darted around in a chaotic escape attempt. When she finally realized there was no way out, she did something completely unexpected.

“Don’t come any closer... or else Mr. Moo Yong will die!”

She grabbed the squishy, worn-out pink plushie and smacked it against the bed as if issuing a warning. But instead of being intimidated by her mock threat, I burst out laughing so hard that tears sprang to my eyes.

"Okay, okay! I surrender! Just don’t hurt my baby!"

Still chuckling, I backed away, throwing my hands up in mock defeat. Then I patted the bed beside me and grinned. "Come on, Phim. I promise I won’t tease you anymore. Let’s just sit down and open your gift, alright?"

Her eyes lit up at the mention of a gift, though she still moved cautiously, her steps hesitant as if she didn’t entirely trust me. Finally, she sat down, but only after leaving a good foot of space between us on the bed. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a small gift box, handing it to me with a bit of a pout.

“Do I really have to open it now? I was hoping to save it for later.”

Without addressing her complaint, I carefully unwrapped the box. Inside was a simple yet elegant white gold necklace with a delicate design that was both understated and beautiful.

“Aww this necklace is so cute” she said softly, smiling as she looked at me. “Thank you, Ki.”

She beamed, her cheeks dusted pink, before leaning in and pinching both my cheeks playfully. I laughed as she relented. I grabbed her left wrist that was hanging from the delicate gear necklace... and slowly untied it. The little one looked at me with a surprised expression and struggled as if I am a thief.

“Hey, no taking it back! You already gave it to me!”

“Relax. I’ve seen you wearing that a lot. Let me switch it to this necklace before the cord breaks.”

After a moment, she stopped fidgeting, allowing me to take the gear pendant from the cord and attach it to the new necklace. Moving closer, I gently gathered her hair to one side, carefully clasping the necklace around her neck. The process took longer than it should have, thanks to my fumbling fingers, but I finally managed it.

I don’t know if it was because our faces were too close… close enough for my noses to lightly brush against Phim’s soft cheek.

Or maybe it was the way her brown eyes gazed straight into mine, holding a kind of power that seemed impossible to resist.

Or perhaps it was the sight of her slightly parted, full pink lips… exuding an inexplicable allure, as though they were silently inviting exploration.

I can’t say for certain.

All I know is that, in this moment, our lips are now brushing lightly together, starting from her forehead and trailing down to meet her soft lips.

**Slowly, gently, the kiss deepens.**

My warm tongue teases her lips like one might playfully nudge a peanut, before softly pressing further. The sweetness of the kiss feels like a magnetic pull, dragging us into a boundless ocean with no surface in sight.

Phim’s hands find her way around my neck, her touch light but grounding. My heartbeat races uncontrollably, a rhythm that matches the shared cadence of our breaths. We remain lost in this trance, consumed by the moment, for what feels like an eternity…

Until—

***Knock! Knock! Knock!***

“Phim.”

The sound shattered the fragile spell. We sprang apart like we’d been hit by lightning. Her face turned crimson as she scrambled to fix her hair, her movements hurried and panicked.

“Phim, are you in there? Open the door for me.”

“Coming, Dad! Just a second!” she squeaked, her voice an octave higher than usual.

Phim darted to the door, her hands trembling as she fumbled with the lock. I watched her go, my own heart still pounding, wondering how I’d ever explain myself if her father noticed anything out of the ordinary.

The door creaked open.

“Dad…”

When the door swung open, standing there was a man of imposing stature, tall and broad-shouldered. His upright posture added to his commanding presence, unusual for someone his age. His face was unreadable—neither frowning nor smiling—yet the piercing black eyes that glanced at me exuded a quiet authority that made it difficult to hold his gaze.

This was Phim’s father.

He shifted his sharp gaze toward me, prompting me to quickly bring my hands together in a respectful wai. He held my gaze for a moment longer than I was comfortable with before nodding in acknowledgment. His expression remained cold as he turned to Phim, who was staring intently at her feet, fidgeting slightly.

“I heard some noise earlier,” he began, his tone steady and ice-cold.

“......”

“And then, silence.”

Phim straightened up slightly and replied hastily, “I was just looking for something with my friend, Dad. Then… um, they tripped, and we couldn’t stop laughing.”

Her father’s scrutinizing gaze lingered on her, but he said nothing. Instead, he reached out and gently adjusted her disheveled hair and slightly crumpled shirt.

“Are you staying here tonight?” he asked.

“No, Dad. I’m sleeping with Phi Prae in her room. This one’s just for my friends—four girls sharing.”

“That's good... so you don't have to squeeze together."

“Yes, Dad.”

Satisfied, he nodded and placed a large, calloused hand on her head, ruffling her hair lightly in what seemed to be a rare gesture of affection.

“Happy birthday, my dear.”

The next morning, the sky was bright and clear, and the calm ocean stretched out peacefully with barely a ripple. Everyone in the group was in high spirits, waking early to enjoy a lively walk along the beach. After an enthusiastic competition to ride the miniature ponies, we returned to Phim’s vacation home for breakfast.

But the atmosphere at the breakfast table today was completely different from the easygoing mood of the previous day.

Phim’s father sat at the head of the table, exuding his usual air of quiet authority. What caught my attention, however, was the presence of two new faces.

The first was a man of average build with fair skin and a kind face. He was clearly Phi Ruj, Puk's father, given how the little one clung to his arm like a baby koala. But the other…

Who was he?

He was a young man, probably around 25 or 26, with striking features that seemed to balance sharpness and gentleness. His light brown eyes sparkled with quiet confidence, and his slightly upturned brows gave him a pride, almost arrogant air. The faint, perpetual smile on his shapely pink lips only added to the impression of someone fully aware of his charm.

He was looking straight at me now, his gaze unwavering, his lips curling into a slight smirk. Then he gave me a small nod, as though expecting a response.

“Phim,” her father’s deep, authoritative voice broke the silence. “Don’t be rude.”

“........”

“Greet him.”

Phim’s expression hardened for a split second, her brows furrowing as she clenched her fists at her sides. She raised her head slightly, her voice tense as she muttered, “Hello, Phi Pun.”

# Chapter 20: ᴄʜᴏᴄᴏʟᴀᴛᴇ ʜɪɢʜ

Exams are an inevitable part of life. Back in high school, I never worried too much because I studied so diligently that some would say I was borderline obsessive.

But university life? That’s a whole different story.

Honestly, I’m not sure you could even call it studying when it involves staring at professors flipping through slides while mumbling in some alien dialect, completely absorbed in their own world.

And me? I was far too caught up in the sweet taste of newfound freedom, paying attention to everything around me—everything except my studies.

So, when exams loomed, we’d all gather under the faculty building, cramming from morning till night. Spending so much time together brought me and Pratee absurdly close—so close that one might think we were almost married.

“Tum, what are you doing?”

Pok, who had successfully diverted her attention from her own study notes, suddenly shifted her focus to Tum, a freshman hunched over a piece of paper, scribbling furiously. Startled, Tum looked up, offering a sheepish grin. But Pok wasted no time snatching the paper and examining it closely.

“Are you making a cheat sheet?!" Pok’s voice rang out.

Tum bowed his head, embarrassed, while Pratee clicked her tongue in disapproval and flicked Tum’s forehead with a sharp thwack.

“Who taught you to do this, huh?”

"......."

“You listen to me, and listen well—if you’re going to make a cheat sheet, you better make it detailed and organized. Otherwise, you’ll regret it when you can’t even read your own notes during the exam!”

Tum stared, dumbfounded, as if Pok had just delivered a speech of unparalleled wisdom.

**Phim:** 15:30 – Are you home yet?

**Kiran:** 15:35 – Still under the faculty building. Cramming for exams T-T

“Phim is texting again,” I muttered, barely catching up with the endless string of notifications.

**Phim:** 15:36 – With whom?

**Kiran:** 15:43 – Pok and the gang.

“Why is she asking so much today?” I sighed, trying to focus on my notes, but my mind kept drifting.

Phimmasa wasn’t usually like this—she rarely texted more than a simple “*goodnight*.” But lately, with exams taking over our lives, we hadn’t seen each other in weeks. Not since we got back from our trip to Hua Hin.

That trip ended awkwardly when Phim had to leave with her father and that guest of his—Phi Pun. Just thinking about him, with his smug, arrogant face, made me grit my teeth.

**Phim:** 15:44 – Don’t forget you have a girlfriend, you know.

I rolled my eyes. Before I could reply, Pok grabbed my phone.

“Let me see that!” Pok’s orangutan-like hands swiped my Nokia N73 effortlessly.

“Pok! What are you doing?!” I yelled, chasing after her as she ran around, laughing maniacally and typing something into my phone.

**Kiran:** 15:50 – Yes, I’m with Pok. But I miss you so much, my darling. <3 “Pok! You idiot! What did you send?!” I shouted, lunging for my phone.

“You absolute fool!” I yelled, diving into the undergrowth to retrieve it.

“Pok, you’re dead meat!” I ranted while fishing my phone out, thankfully unharmed. I quickly opened the messages to check the damage.

**Phim:** 15:51 – This must be Pok, right?

**Phim:** 15:51 – Don’t tease me, Pok. Give the phone back now!

**Phim:** 15:51 – Right now!

Pok froze mid-stride, her face draining of all color. She stood there like a statue, her wide eyes fixed on the screen. Before I could grab my phone, her trembling hand hurled it into the nearby bushes.

I couldn’t help but laugh when I realized what had happened.

“Oh, Pok,” I said, patting her on the shoulder as she remained frozen, clearly traumatized.

When she finally spoke, her voice was shaky. “Your girlfriend… is she a person or some kind of divine being? I think she just cursed me.”

It took everything I had not to drop my phone laughing all over again.

After the exams, my body, worn out from all the effort, finally gave in. I felt so drained that even going home was out of the question. I figured that a good sleep would do the trick. Calling someone to pick me up? Not happening—I didn’t want to seem weak.

"Hey, Ki. I’m really sorry, but I have to head back. My grandma keeps calling, saying I need to perform at the neighbor’s ordination ceremony. Apparently, they can’t manage without me," Pratee said, her tone apologetic as she nudged me, still sprawled out on the dorm bed, with her foot.

I swatted her away half-heartedly, more to get her out of the room than anything else. I was desperate for uninterrupted rest.

“Will you be okay like this? I bought you some pork congee. Heat it up if you’re hungry, and don’t forget to take your medicine, okay?”

"I’m fine," I mumbled, barely able to keep my eyes open. “Just go already. If I sleep enough, I’ll be better in no time."

With that, I drifted off into unconsciousness.

*'Your love makes me want to open my heart. The taste of you is the sweetest in my life. I’m addicted to your chocolate…'*

The familiar tune of *Chocolate High*, my favorite song, echoed through the hazy space between my dreams and reality. It went on endlessly, looping the chorus as if it were my ringtone.

Wait.

It was my ringtone.

I bolted upright and grabbed my phone from the bedside table. Sure enough, it was Phim calling.

[Ki! Are you okay? Pok called and told me you’re not feeling well. I’ve been trying to reach you! I was so worried.]

Phimmasa said, rapid-fire, not even bothering with a hello.

“I’m fine,” I croaked, still groggy. “I was just asleep. Really, you don’t have to worry.”

[How can I not worry?]

"......."

[You’re my girlfriend, after all.]

"......."

[Now, open the door. I’m outside your room.]

It took me several seconds to process what she’d just said. By the time I fully understood, there was already a firm knock at the door. I stumbled out of bed and opened it to find Phim standing there, looking up at me with a mix of concern and mild annoyance.

She immediately placed the back of her hand against my forehead and cheeks, her worried expression deepening.

“You’re burning up. You need to see a doctor. Let’s go,” she said firmly.

I shook my head weakly and shuffled back to my bed. Phim followed, closing the door behind her. She sat down beside me, her small hand stroking my hair gently. Despite her soothing gesture, her voice took on a tone of mock menace.

“Keep being stubborn, and I’ll tie you up and drag you there myself,” she muttered.

What kind of threat is that? And why does it sound both ridiculous and intimidating?

“Have you eaten?” she askedagain.

I blinked up at her in response. She glanced at the bag of congee on my bedside table but hesitated.

“Who brought this for you?”

“Pok.”

Her face softened. If there was one name that could dispel any jealousy or suspicion, it was Pok. Satisfied, Phim got up, took the bag, and heated it in the microwave before bringing it back to me.

Being sick wasn’t so bad after all.

I propped myself up against the headboard, ready to be spoiled. Phim shot me a playful glare before pulling a small chair next to the bed and fixing my hair so it wouldn’t get in the way.

She scooped a spoonful of congee and blew on it to cool it down.

“Here, eat this.”

“It’s too hot.”

She sighed in exasperation but continued blowing on it.

“Better?”

I stared at her, unsure whether to laugh or cry. “Phim… that’s blowing, not spitting it out!”

She raised an eyebrow, unimpressed. “Same difference. Now, are you eating or not?”

Faced with her glare, I reluctantly took the bite. It was warm, comforting… and slightly overspiced with her impatience.

Even by evening, my fever hadn’t subsided, and Phim showed no signs of leaving. Instead, she looked far too cheerful preparing to **help** me recover.

“Should I wring the towel first? Or leave it damp? Wait, does it need soap? Should I add a bit of dish soap to make it smell fresh?” she asked while chatting on the phone with someone, presumably her older sister.

My eyes widened in horror after understanding what Phim want.

"Phim!"

She hung up the phone and turned to me, amused. “What? I’m just trying to help.”

"I’ll shower myself!"

“No, you won’t,” she said, placing a bucket of warm water and a towel at the edge of the bed. “You’re too weak. Let me take care of you."

Before I could protest, she added with a teasing smirk, “Now, where should we start? Should I take off your shirt first?”

I nearly fell off the bed trying to crawl away.

“Wait, wait, wait, Phim! Do you really have to take my clothes off?”

Phim raised an eyebrow, a mischievous smile creeping onto her lips. Her hands didn’t stop her determined attempt to unbutton my pajama top, while I weakly tried to bat it away with what little strength I had.

Eventually, I gave up—utterly defeated.

But as it turned out, the one who ended up blushing furiously wasn’t me but Phim. Her face was now a deep shade of red as her eyes nervously darted away from my less-than-dressed state.

I, on the other hand, was too exhausted to care. Let her blush, I thought. I was sick, after all.

“Well? Aren’t you going to start?” I teased, my voice laced with feigned annoyance. To drive my point, I even grabbed her hand and placed it on my chest without hesitation.

Phim instantly shut her eyes tightly as if bracing for impact. Then, she began wiping me down in a clumsy, awkward manner, clearly embarrassed, to the point that my feet started feeling icy from the water dripping off the towel.

“Phim, wait! You’re starting with my feet? You’re supposed to start with my face first!” I protested.

After what felt like an eternity of chaos, the ordeal was finally over. Now my skin was clean and smelled faintly of soap—or maybe dish detergent; who knows? My cheeks had also been powdered with some kind of face powder, which Phim had applied in streaks, making me resemble a traditional Burmese dancer.

“Well, well, is my girlfriend smell nice now?” Phim teased as she leaned in closer—closer and closer—until our faces were mere inches apart.

Acting quickly, I raised a finger and lightly tapped her forehead, pushing her back.

“Hold on, Phim. No coming too close. You’ll catch my cold,” I said with mock sternness.

Phim huffed in frustration but didn’t argue. Instead, she turned her attention to my stuffed toy, Yoyo, and squished its head, which bobbed precariously. Then she stomped over to my wardrobe.

“Wait, you’re not going home?”

“Nope. I’m staying over tonight,” she declared matter-of-factly.

“Not a good idea,” I countered, smirking. “You’ll catch my cold, and besides, I don’t have the strength to fight you off if you try anything.”

Phim rolled her eyes at my jab and ignored me, pulling out one of my pajama sets and heading into the bathroom.

“Don’t worry. I’ve got a way to avoid catching your germs,” she said before shutting the door.

That night was both chaotic and endearing. Phim busied herself with looking after me, ensuring I was comfortable and well-fed, even though I could see how nervous she was about getting sick. She went as far as wearing a beanie, a face mask, and wrapping Yoyo between us to serve as a makeshift barrier.

The next morning, I woke up feeling significantly better, my body finally on the mend. The first thing I noticed was Phim sleeping soundly beside me, dressed in the green pajama set she had adamantly claimed she didn’t like. She must have chosen it herself.

Despite her precautions, Phim had snuggled up close, with one arm draped over my waist and her fingers gently holding onto my index finger as though I were a newborn baby.

Adorable.

Unable to resist, I grabbed the remote for my speaker and played a soft tune. I turned to face her, resting my head on my hand while my other hand gently removed her face mask. Slowly, I let my fingers trace her features— her forehead, her nose, and finally her lips.

I couldn’t believe how peaceful and beautiful she looked in her sleep. Watching her, I realized there was nothing more satisfying than admiring the face of someone you love while they rested so innocently.

She was even smiling in her sleep, which made me smile too, almost instinctively.

And just like that, I found myself humming the words that had been stuck in my head since yesterday:

*'Because I need you, and I know you need me. Let’s stay close like we’re meant to be, and take pleasure in the sweetness we already have...'*

*I’m addicted to your chocolate high.'*

# Chapter 21: ᴛʜᴇ ɴᴜᴍʙᴇʀ ʏᴏᴜ ᴀʀᴇ ᴛʀʏɪɴɢ ᴛᴏ ʀᴇᴀᴄʜ ɪs ᴄᴜʀʀᴇɴᴛʟʏ ᴜɴᴀᴠᴀɪʟᴀʙʟᴇ

“The number you are trying to reach is currently unavailable. The... number... can... no... can... ner... ka... ni... ton... nep,” Pratee repeated, mimicking the odd pronunciation he heard from the automated message. Her exaggerated English accent was so bizarre that anyone hearing it might need a second—or third—listen to make sense of it. Or perhaps they might never understand it at all.

“Looks like she’s unavailable to you too, huh?”

I let out a long sigh, but even that did little to ease the storm of emotions swirling within me—worry, longing, frustration, confusion, and countless unanswered questions.

Where could Phim have gone?

It had been three days since I last heard from her. The last time we saw each other was when she dropped me off at home the morning after she stayed over to take care of me when I was sick.

That morning, I’d noticed something off about her. The moment she saw the 45 missed calls on her muted phone, her expression darkened. And then, as she was checking her phone, a call came through.

*“Yes... I’m sorry... I’ll head home as soon as possible." she said.*

After ending the call, Phim seemed tense—almost on edge. Still, she was more concerned about me than herself, insisting on driving me home. During the ride, she forced a smile and tried to keep the conversation light, but I could see the worry in her eyes.

And then, I didn’t hear from her again.

In the past three days, I’d only called her five times and sent six messages. That’s just the kind of person I am—not one to bomb anyone with calls or texts. Even though I knew this wasn’t the time to worry about such trivialities, my ingrained reluctance to bother others was hard to shake.

Still, despite my restraint, I couldn’t keep my anxiety at bay. I paced back and forth, restless and uneasy. With the long holiday break after exams, there was no chance of bumping into her at university.

That’s how I ended up here today—standing outside Phim’s massive family estate with Pratee, awkwardly peering around like kids up to no good.

“From this angle, I can see her car,” Pratee said, squinting toward the house. “So, she’s probably home.”

“Yeah, and I see her dad’s car too. He’s almost never home on a weekday like this."

Pratee scratched her head, clearly unsure of what to do next. I, on the other hand, stood there gazing at the roof of Phim’s house, feeling utterly lost and empty.

“From what you told me, it sounds like she’s grounded or something,” Pratee speculated.

“I think so too... When I first met her dad, I could already tell he—”

I trailed off.

“And then there’s that Phi Pun guy,” Pradee added. “Even a kid could tell what her dad’s trying to do.”

With a heavy sigh, I kicked a small rock at my feet, unsure how to deal with the hopelessness creeping into my chest.

That’s when I felt a familiar arm wrap around my shoulders, and a large, comforting hand gently patting my arm as if to console me.

“It’s okay, Ki. Family drama? It’s universal.”

“.......”

“You’ll see her eventually. If you’re serious about Phim, you’ve got to hang in there.”

“That’s true...”

“Exactly. Between her dad favoring that Phi Pun guy versus you—who Phim love dearly ? I bet on you. You'll win. If I’m wrong, may I never be a mother!"

Pratee dragged me away from the front of Phim’s house, successfully breaking my trance. We ended up at a Japanese-style café where she had a meeting with some seniors from our faculty. I wasn’t paying attention to the details—I didn’t care.

I sprawled on a chair, leaning back lazily with my head resting on the backrest, phone in hand. I stared at the screen for a long time without doing anything.

“What are you doing? Are you going to call Phim with your mind?"

“No...”

I flicked my phone onto the couch next to me with exaggerated indifference. Pratee just shook her head, clearly exasperated with my childish behavior.

“Why don’t you try emailing her? Or MSN?”

“She doesn’t use MSN. And I already emailed her.”

“What did you say in the email?”

Pratee leaned in, her curiosity evident as if she were about to uncover some deep, cosmic truth.

“Hello...”

“Are you kidding me?!” Pratee smacked her palm against her forehead.

“Let me finish!” I shot her a glare, annoyed at her premature judgment. She rubbed her own forehead sheepishly, like she was trying to make amends.

“Okay, okay, I’m sorry. Please, continue,” she said, mimicking a soothing tone like he was calming a toddler.

“I wrote... I *don’t know what’s going on, but I haven’t been able to reach you. I’m really worried about you, Phim. You mean so much to me. If you see this email*...”

“And?”

"Send it to seven more people, and you’ll find happiness and success. But if you don’t, may your shoulders feel stiff forever."

**Thunk!**

This time, Pok didn’t just use her hands. She actually slammed her big, hard head against mine with enough force to make a loud *thud* in the café. The impact left me stunned—so much so that, for a fleeting moment, I forgot all about being sad.

“Ki, are you physically incapable of saying anything sweet from start to finish like a normal person? Do you have to be this idiot to survive?”

I rubbed my temples, trying to ease the throbbing pain, before turning to my so-called best friend to demand some justice.

“Well, I was embarrassed! You told me yourself—if I get too nervous, just say something funny to cover it up.”

“Ki, Phim is still alive! That was advice, not a deathbed confession!”

Pok, ever the charmer, tried kicking at my shin in retaliation, just as the senior she was supposed to meet entered the café.

“Hey, Pok. Why are you beating up your friend like that?”

I turned toward the voice and saw a man of medium build with pale skin and a neatly trimmed goatee. He wore a plain white T-shirt and skinny black jeans that hugged his legs so tightly they were one stitch away from looking like leggings. His long, wavy hair was tied back, and the handmade accessories he wore screamed artist.

“Oh, hi, Beer. No big deal. My friend here had an itch, so I volunteered to scratch it. With my foot.”

“Really? With your foot, huh?”

Beer sat down next to Pok on the sofa, and a second figure entered—a young woman I immediately recognized.

“Sit down, Sai,” Pok said casually.

Sai. Of course. The same Sai—gorgeous, honey-skinned singer with large brown eyes and lips so naturally pouty that I’d once accidentally commented on how kissable they looked.

That comment had spiraled into a chaotic mess with Phimmasa. Just seeing Sai brought back the memory of that sweet punishment—and my first kiss with Phim.

And just like that, my longing for her multiplied.

“Oops!”

Sai’s high-pitched yelp snapped me out of my thoughts. She had sat down on the phone I’d tossed aside earlier. Picking it up gingerly, she held it out and asked, “Um, is this someone’s phone?”

“Yeah, it’s mine. Sorry about that,” I replied flatly, not in the mood to smile. But Sai, ever the charmer, gave me a wide grin and handed it back like she was returning a fragile treasure.

“Beer, this is Ki,” Pok said. “My friend. And who’s this you’ve brought along? Hmm?”

“This is Sai, a freshman in the communications department. I invited her to sing and star in the music video I’m working on for my project. Sai, meet Pok and Ki—both freshmen in engineering.”

Sai gave us both a bright smile, which Pok responded to with a reluctant smirk. As for me, I just raised an eyebrow, suspicious of this entire encounter. Why had Pok dragged me here, and what did I have to do with any of it?

“Wait, is this the friend you said is amazing at making props?”

Oh, no. Here we go.

“Yep!” Pok beamed. “Don’t let Kiran's *I-just-woke-up* look fool you. This guy’s a master at making props—total perfectionist. And not just props! Kiran also a genius editor. CGI, C-minor, *C-you-tomorrow*—she can do it all! I don’t like to brag, but my friend here is a pro.”

I sighed deeply as Beer laughed, clearly amused by Pok’s hard sell. He looked me over with curiosity, probably wondering how my current slouchy appearance matched Pok’s glowing review.

“So, can you help me with this project, Ki? I’ll pay well. Food, accommodation—everything’s on me.”

I blinked, caught off guard. Before I could respond, Pok clamped her hand over my mouth and leaned in to whisper, “Just say yes. The pay is great, and we get a free trip to Koh Samet!”

“Of course! Ki is totally on board.”

Pok answered for me before I could even process the offer.

Beer raised an eyebrow. “Really? Kiran looks like she's trying to say something.”

“Oh, she's just shaking from excitement,” Pok lied smoothly. “Don’t worry about it, Beer. Just trust me.”

I tried to squirm free from Pok’s grip, glaring at her. But then Sai chimed in, her soft voice cutting through the chaos.

“You two seem really close,” she said with a giggle.

"......."

“That’s so cute.”

By the time school started again, I was restless with anticipation. Pok and I had agreed to track down Phimmasa at the economics faculty today. It was the only way I could hope to see her.

Even if it was just for a moment.

*“I wanna fuck you, fuck you, you already know…”*

The ringtone of Akon’s I Wanna Fuck You blared, breaking the silence. I glanced at the screen and saw an unfamiliar number. Without hesitation, I answered quickly, a flicker of hope in my chest.

[Hello?]

My heart raced, pounding so hard it hurt as soon as I heard the soft, trembling voice on the other end.

It was Phimmasa.

The one I couldn’t stop thinking about.

[How are you, Ki?]

“I should be asking you that. Why couldn’t I reach you? Is something wrong, Phim?”

There was a long silence before her voice returned, shaky but trying to stay composed.

[I’ve just been dealing with some family stuff… Nothing to worry about.]

“.......”

[You don’t need to worry about me.]

“.......”

]And you… are you feeling better?]

The weight in my chest tightened. This time, it was me who struggled to contain the rush of emotions. I closed my eyes, trying to keep my voice steady.

“Phim…”

[Yes?]

**“I miss you.”**

She was quiet for a long time. Then, finally, she responded with a teasing tone, one that could only belong to her.

[Try not missing me, and I’ll come over and smack you.]

We both laughed, and for a moment, the tension lifted. This was Phim—the real Phim.

“Can I come see you at your faculty?”

[No, don’t.]

“.......”

[Just wait a couple of days, two or three at most. I promise everything will go back to normal. Can you wait for me?]

“........”

[I have to go now. I borrowed a friend’s phone to call you. I’ll reach out again soon, okay?]

“Take care of yourself, Phim. I’m worried about you.”

[You too, Ki. Take care.]

The call ended, but her words lingered. To wait for her. Two or three days? How was I supposed to get through that?

Whether it was stubbornness or something else, I couldn’t stop myself. Hearing her voice made me want to see her even more.

In the end, I dragged Pok along with me to sneak a glance at Phim at her faculty. If my memory of her schedule was right, she’d be coming out of the lecture hall in five minutes and heading to the parking lot to drive home.

“Are you sure about this? Maybe she has a reason for wanting you to wait.”

“I know. I just… I just want to see her, even for a second.”

“Fine. But I’m only helping because your panda eyes are pitiful. Maybe seeing her will let you sleep for once.”

I ignored Pok’s grumbling, my eyes scanning the crowd of students leaving the building. Then, I saw her—**Phimmasa.**

My heart skipped a beat and began pounding erratically. She looked different—tense, her brows furrowed, and her usually soft eyes were sharp.

I almost waved at her instinctively.

Almost.

Until someone else stepped close to her.

A tall figure, one I could never forget, moved into her space. His confident, smug face was softened by a faint, practiced smile.

**It was Phi Pun.**

He gently placed a hand on Phim’s elbow, guiding her as they walked together toward a luxury sports car parked nearby. He moved effortlessly, opening the door for her like it was second nature. Phim’s face remained troubled, but Phi Pun’s smile didn’t falter.

The car drove off, taking them with it.

And left me standing there.

My chest felt like it had been crushed. My heart shattered into pieces.

No.

This couldn’t be real.

It wasn’t supposed to be like this.

# Chapter 22: ᴍᴇʟᴛɪɴɢ ᴘᴏɪɴᴛ

*"*

*I wanna fuck you, fuck you, you already know… I wanna fuck you, fuck you, you already know…"*

The ringtone blared from my phone—a song I had set for all incoming calls. I stared at the unfamiliar number flashing on the screen, my face blank and unmoved.

The thought of who might be calling crossed my mind, someone I wasn’t ready to talk to. That was enough to spark a strong resistance in me, a rebellious urge to ignore it completely. If they expected me to answer? Dream on.

The phone rang again.

*"I wanna fuck you, fuck you, you already know… I wanna fuck you, fuck you, you already know…"*

A third time.

“Hey, Ki!”

“........”

“If you don’t answer this time, I’m telling you, two more calls like this and I’m going to start catching feelings."

“........”

“Who even sets this as their ringtone? I’m not made of stone, you know.”

I shot a glare at Pok, making it clear I wasn’t amused. She immediately retracted her head into her shoulders like a turtle but still couldn’t resist pouting dramatically.

“Fine, I’ll turn it off,” I muttered.

I grabbed my phone, powered it down, and tossed it into my backpack without a second thought. Then, I returned to cutting rubber sheets for the props we were making for Beer’s MV shoot. I worked methodically, my movements almost robotic, while Pok shook her head, exasperated. Suddenly, she started counting down.

“Five, four, three, two, one… Rak kon tor maaaa jang loeyyyy…”

The moment Pok hit **one**, his own phone started ringing with a Phi Saderd song. She smirked, proud of her impeccable timing, and motioned for me to look at her screen.

“See? Told you. The moment you turn your phone off, this person start calling me instead. So? What do you want me to do?”

I froze, my body suddenly overcome with confusion. Part of me still felt angry and unwilling to talk, but another part… Another part couldn’t deny how warm it felt, knowing she is so persistent.

But no. My pride was louder. It was the stronger voice.

“Don’t answer. Just let it go. Turn your phone off too.”

“Are you sure? I kinda feel bad for Phim…”

Pok stared at her phone, looking torn. Phi Saderd’s voice kept looping through the chorus, but I kept my eyes locked on her, waiting to see what she’d do.

A few seconds later, Pok broke the silence. “She sent a text, Ki.”

I acted indifferent, continuing to cut the rubber sheet like my life depended on it. But my heart raced with curiosity. What did it say?

Of course, Pok couldn’t resist reading it out loud.

“‘Dear customer, you have an overdue balance on your account…’”

“Pok!” I snapped, barely holding back my urge to throw something at her.

“Oops, wrong message! Hold on,” she said, laughing nervously before checking again.

I kept cutting, trying not to care, but my ears were practically twitching as I waited for him to continue.

“Okay, this is the right one. Ahem. *Pok, this is Phim. Is Ki okay? She hasn’t been answering my calls. Is she sick again? Please tell her to call me back when she can, or call me at this number*.”

“.......”

“She’s really worried about you. You’re still going to ignore her?”

“.......”

“Look, about Phi Pun… You’ve seen it yourself. Phim didn’t seem happy at all around him. Her face looked like she was in pain. That says everything, doesn’t it?”

I swallowed hard.

The memory of that day resurfaced, blurry yet vivid at the same time. My disappointment had clouded every detail, making it impossible to recall much beyond the overwhelming sense of betrayal.

“I’m not ready, Pok…” I said softly.

“Not ready to talk to her?”

“Not ready for any of it.”

“.......”

“You know me better than anyone, don’t you?”

The scissors in my hand were placed down at last. I turned to Pradee, my gaze firm and unyielding. “If I ever get into this rebellious mood, just let me be.”

“.......”

**“The more anyone pushes, the more I’ll run from it.”**

I didn’t know why the sea at Koh Samet wasn’t as beautiful as Hua Hin’s just days ago. The water here was clear, shimmering green, and the sand was a soft, pale white, smooth underfoot like walking on fine powder.

But still, it didn’t feel beautiful to me. Why was that?

I answered myself: perhaps it was the exhaustion from an entire week of relentless work, rushing to complete props for Beer’s MV shoot.

He was astounded by the speed at which I worked, ensuring everything was ready before today’s location shoot. Truthfully, it felt like Beer had planned this trip more as a break for the crew than as a production.

Having finished my tasks, I only needed to help with editing later. Pok, however, threw herself into everything. From lugging equipment, setting up lights, managing sound effects, and clapping the slate to even costume duties and playing housekeeper—she did it all. She found outfits, ironed clothes, styled hair, served water, bought lunch, and cleaned the studio.

Beer praised her endlessly, saying hiring us for this project was the best decision he’d made. But there were two roles even Pok, with all her eagerness, wasn’t allowed to take:

1. **Makeup artist.**
2. **MV lead actress.**

“If I ever make a murder mystery MV, I’ll be sure to call you, Pok.” Beer teased.

“If you’re going to say that, just bash my face with this slate and end me here!” Pok shot back, playing the role of a melodramatic victim.

Beer, initially unfazed by her blunt humor, softened at her theatrics, looking a little guilty.

“Okay, okay! What can I do to make it up to you?”

Pok crossed her arms, gesturing toward a vendor in a bright orange vest, skillfully slicing papaya. Beer, understanding her silent demand, pulled out his wallet and offered her a 100-baht bill.

Pok, shaking her head, tapped Beer's wallet and said gravely, “If you want to fix this, only the gray bills will do.”

Whether out of defeat or annoyance, Beer handed over a 1,000-baht note. Pok beamed, grabbed my arm, and half-dragged me to the papaya salad vendor.

“Two mango salads with fermented crab and fish sauce, three grilled chicken pieces, two sticky rice, and one plain rice noodle,” Pok ordered confidently.

“Wait… are we even going to finish all that?”

Her expression turned pained, as though I’d deeply offended her. "Have you never had papaya salad on Koh Samet before? It’s never enough, no matter how much you order.”

“Why’s that? Is it that good?”

“It’s small portions!” she exclaimed dramatically.

And she was right. No matter how much was served, it disappeared instantly. The team of five or six who had been waiting devoured the plates within minutes.

It was a phenomenon Pok had aptly described as *“place it, and it’s gone.”*

Maybe it was the rarity of eating papaya salad made by vendors who brought everything by boat to this island. Somehow, it tasted better than any ordinary salad on the mainland.

But what stung more than that was the grilled chicken. I’d stood by the vendor, watching as the golden, crispy skin sizzled over the coals, the aroma so tantalizing that it made my stomach growl.

The vendor, using the sharpest scissors in the world, cut the chicken into perfect, bite-sized pieces and handed me two plates. My hands trembled slightly as I carried them to the table. Yet, the moment I placed the plates down…

Gone.

The two plates of chicken I had cherished were gone in less than a minute.

It was devastating. If not for last week’s incident with Phimmasa, this would’ve been the most heartbreaking moment of my life.

I froze mid-squat, staring blankly at the empty plates now adorned only with traces of grease. I might’ve stayed that way if Pok hadn’t come to drag me away.

“Pratee… my chicken… hngh…” I whimpered softly.

“Calm down, friend, calm down. I didn’t get enough either,” she said, looking determined. “But don’t worry—I’ve got a plan.”

As expected, Pok led us to settle right in front of the old woman. He took care of everything to make sure we finished quickly, from grilling the chicken to peeling the mangoes. Once the old woman finished, the lesson was clear: **we should eat here, or we might not get the chance again!**

"Eat a lot, Kii... You won't get to eat like this often."

"Why? Is it because we’re on the island?"

"No, it’s because it’s expensive!"

Pok and I ground two mortarfuls of mango and had four pieces of chicken until we were satisfied. Then we took the leftovers to share with the crew. Not content, Pok even sneaked some chicken skin off the plate, leaving gaps in the pieces.

"Pok, why does the chicken look weird? The skin’s missing in places."

"Oh... it’s probably a diseased chicken, Beer. Just eat it, don’t overthink it!"

After gorging ourselves on Som Tum and grilled chicken, we practically wiped out the old woman’s stock. In the end, Beer had to pull out another bill. Then everyone scattered to do their own thing before we were scheduled to meet up again at three in the afternoon. Pok and I decided to relax by the soft sand, under a shade umbrella.

We were staying at *Ao Wong Duean*, a crescent-shaped beach. This beach was less crowded than *Sai Kaew Beach*, but still lively with groups of friends and couples, rather than families.

The accommodations and shops here were stylish, catering to the youth market. *Ao Wong Duean* also had boats that could dock right by the shore, or you could take a bumpy green truck from the pier.

If only I didn’t worry about my displaced uterus...!

As always, during any free time this week, my thoughts kept drifting to the little one. Yesterday, I noticed that Phim must have been able to use her phones again, judging by the dozens of missed calls and messages filled with questions that I hadn’t answered.

"Pok... Why do you seem so restless all of a sudden?"

The old woman jumped when I spoke up, probably thinking I hadn’t noticed her odd behavior as she kept craning her neck, trying to spot someone among the boats arriving. "No, there’s nothing! It’s just... bees!"

**Very suspicious!**

Once caught, Pok stopped craning her neck, but then she pressed her lips into a straight line and began glancing left and right, looking very unnatural. I kept my eye on her without him realizing.

When the tourist boat arrived, Pok suddenly stood up, her eyes wide with excitement, and I followed her gaze, unknowingly turning to see what she was looking at.

And there it was—the answer to my earlier question.

The sight of Phimmasa, carrying a bag and wearing white Converse shoes, stumbling off the boat and making her way toward us.

This was the answer to everything—and it hit me hard, like boiling oil being poured over me. I whipped my head around to look at Pok, my instincts kicking in.

"Kii... Don’t yell at me, okay? I feel bad for your wife. She called me last night and wanted to see you so badly... She had to come."

"Pok... Is this how you betray me?"

"Kiran."

Just as I was ready to kill Pok and bury her body under the shade tree, a familiar sweet voice interrupted.

My heart dropped to my feet. Slowly, I turned to look at Phim, my face still not ready for this. My brows furrowed, my gaze hardened, and my lips formed a straight line. The little one looked at me with the eyes of a lost puppy, swollen eyes and lips puffed out, as if she had been crying. The signs of it were clear. Seeing this only deepened the pain I already felt.

It hurt so much that I chose to walk away instead of facing it.

"Hey, wait! Don’t go yet!"

I didn’t listen to Pratee’s pleas. I lowered my head and walked away quickly, in the opposite direction of where Phim was standing. How could I face Phim now? How could I forget the sight of Pun and Phim standing together, looking perfect like they were meant to be from the start?

**No way. There was no way!**

I had to stop thinking about it. But my thoughts were interrupted by Pratee, who suddenly grabbed me. I didn’t know when she had caught up, but now her strong arm was around my neck, dragging me backward toward Phim.

I only just realized that Pok was carrying Phim’s bag in front of her. With surprising strength, she pulled me toward Phim until we finally reached her. Then, with her other hand, she grabbed both of our hands and walked us to the resort together. The three of us were walking in a line, me still dragged behind...

It was such an odd sight.

It was like a mother taking care of her children.

But in the end, Pok succeeded. She pulled, dragged, and guided us until we reached a luxurious resort at the far end of the beach. It wasn’t the place where Pok and I were staying. She left us standing awkwardly in front of the reception while she turned her attention to the welcome drinks arranged in a tray. I swear she must have drunk more than one glass.

"Phim, the suite we booked is for two nights."

I, still stiff, glanced at the little one for a moment. A suite for two nights? That’s when the old saying about Samet Island hit me hard.

*Going to Samet... You finish everything there.*

Why couldn’t I stop thinking about it? Damn it!

"Hey, I have to go now. Make sure you take care of Phim, Kiran. I have to go work. See you later in the evening."

Before I could say anything, Pok dashed off without a trace. I glanced down at my wristwatch, which displayed the current time in Thailand: 13:45. It was nearly three in the afternoon, and yet, Pok had made some mistake with the time, probably misjudging it from the shadow.

At that moment, the staff helped the little one to her room to gather her things, while I remained standing, hesitating in the same spot until... a small hand grabbed the hem of my shirt.

"i... I'm hungry."

In the end, I took the little one, who had now turned from a sharp-eyed girl into a petite, swollen-eyed girl, to eat a fried basil dish made with a special sauce. The price, however, was not as ordinary as the meal.

"Well... aren't you going to eat?"

I shook my head indifferently, not saying a word since meeting Phim. My lips pressed together firmly, and I switched from eating the large bites of food out of hunger to poking around my rice with my fork. Phim swallowed hard, her swollen eyes looked like they might tear up.

"Did I... do something to make you angry?"

"......."

"Please, I'm sorry."

This time, I swallowed hard, suppressing the emotions that were rising in my throat. I placed the money on the table, stood up, and walked out without turning back to look at her.

"Kii, wait!"

I heard Phim call out from behind, but I didn't slow my pace. I kept walking, head down, until...

"Ouch!"

I turned at the sound of her sharp cry and couldn't believe my eyes. Phim had tripped over a thick, brown dog lying in the way, which had been marked with permanent marker and spray paint. The poor dog, a Thai breed, was blocking the path and caused Phim to stumble and fall, rolling and crying out in pain.

"Phim, does it hurt a lot?"

I quickly rushed over to help her up. Phim grimaced in pain when I touched her ankle. It seemed like she had twisted it. I tried to help her stand, but she cried out as soon as she put weight on her left foot, so I let her sit back down.

"Then let me carry you on my back... I'll take you to your room."

Phim shook her head, stubborn as always, continuing her role as the commanding officer.

"No, I want to see the view. I haven't seen it yet."

I sat down beside her, still shaking my head at her persistence.

"Not like that... We can look at the view while I'm carrying you." Eventually, Phim agreed, smiling as she climbed onto my back. Her arms loosely wrapped around my neck while her chin rested on my shoulder. Her legs straddled my waist, and I supported her with my arms to prevent her from falling. I followed her directions, carrying her as she pointed here and there, as though we were on a mission.

It wasn't so tiring—after all, she was comfortably seated on my back.

"I want to eat roti... over there."

"......"

"Stop here."

Just as I thought, she tapped my hip gently, signaling me to stop. The vendor selling roti looked at us, clearly surprised to see someone carrying a girl on their back while ordering. I wasn't sure how unusual it was, but it certainly felt strange. Phim was already trying to eat the roti while still on my back, refusing to get off.

"Eat carefully. You've spilled condensed milk on my back."

"Later... let's play in the water, okay?"

"......."

"Please."

Phim's voice was soft, and though she seemed unbothered by the condensed milk dripping down my back, she went on to make plans for the evening. I didn't respond right away, and Phim seemed to grow frustrated. Then, out of nowhere, she nuzzled my ear gently, sending a chill down my spine.

She smiled and playfully stroked the back of my neck, making me shiver even more. Then, in a whisper, she teased, her voice light.

"Feeling good now... serves you right."

It seemed that Phim had finally realized that if I kept carrying her like this, I might collapse from exhaustion. So, she reluctantly allowed me to carry her back to the room. People at the hotel watched us as we walked by, seeing Phim clinging to my back like a little monkey. When I looked at them, they quickly averted their eyes.

But Phim didn't care. She kept her face buried in my back, as if the whole world was just the two of us. I walked us into the bungalow by the beach with a beautiful, private view of the sea. Once inside, I sat down on the bed with Phim still hanging onto my back.

In the quiet of the room, I suddenly felt unsure of what to do. A rush of emotions overwhelmed me, like a summer storm. I tried to pull her arms off my waist, planning to escape the awkwardness, but her small hands tightened around me, pulling me even closer.

Her face was still buried against me, and though her words were muffled, they were crystal clear in the way they made me feel.

"Don't be so cold with me, Ki... you're being like this for long now."

Phim tightened her embrace once more, her voice trembling as she spoke softly.

**"My heart feels like it's breaking."**

With those words, the walls I had built up around myself melted away completely, leaving nothing behind.

# Chapter 23: ᴘʟᴇᴀꜱᴇ ᴍᴇʟᴛ ᴍᴇ

Phim and I were still sitting in the same position as before: me on the floor, and her perched on my back like a baby monkey clinging to its mother. Her arms wrapped tightly around my waist, holding on so securely. I started to wonder if she tightened her grip just a little more, would I end up like a poor little dog crushed by a boa constrictor?

I gently stroked her hands resting on my stomach with my left hand, while my right awkwardly reached behind to pat her head in an attempt to comfort her.

Any frustration I’d felt before started to fade the moment I caught a glimpse of her somber expression, pressed quietly against my back. All the questions I’d once had about their status with Pun suddenly didn’t seem to matter anymore.

It was clear as day now who Phim had chosen.

And yet, despite the heavy atmosphere, Phim—who had been silent and unmoving—was now rubbing her forehead back and forth against my shoulder blade for reasons beyond my comprehension.

She wasn’t crying.

I wasn’t itchy.

“Ki…”

“Hm?”

“What are you sulking about?”

Phim thumped her forehead lightly against my back in a rhythm, making it clear she was throwing a silent tantrum.

I didn’t say anything else. Instead, I shifted slightly to examine her injured ankle, carefully lifting her left foot that was still hooked around my waist. Her ankle was now swollen and red. The moment my fingers brushed against the swollen area, her forehead knocked against my back again—this time harder.

“Does it hurt a lot, Phim?”

“......”

“I’ll grab some ice for you, okay? Just wait here for a bit.”

“And where are you going to get ice from?”

Finally, Phim lifted her face from my back, her worried voice breaking the silence. Her arms and legs, however, stayed firmly locked around me.

“From the fridge, of course,” I said, nodding toward the small refrigerator tucked into the corner of the room. I was hoping she’d let me go—just for five minutes. She gave a hesitant nod of approval, and for a moment, I thought I was in the clear.

Then, she spoke again. “I’m coming with you.”

Oh, dear.

Thus began a chaotic journey to fetch ice—a task that should have been simple, but instead became a comedy of errors.

Phim clung stubbornly to my back like a barnacle while I stumbled around the room, crouching and standing repeatedly in front of the fridge that was way too short for me. Every time I leaned forward, she squealed in panic, tightening her grip on me like her life depended on it. Her arms and legs were like a vice, holding on for dear life.

By the time I finally retrieved some ice, I was drenched in sweat and utterly exhausted. And yet, Phim refused to get off my back. I had no choice but to awkwardly ice her ankle in the same ridiculous position, which made everything infinitely more difficult.

I pressed the ice gently against her swollen ankle. If only we’d done this sooner, it might not have gotten this bad. But, of course, Phim insisted on her impromptu piggyback tour earlier.

“We’ll need to do this for about 30 minutes,” I said, adjusting the ice pack carefully.

“Okay…”

“And sitting like this can’t be good for your legs, you know. What if they get all bent out of shape? You’ll end up walking like an orangutan.”

**Smack!**

Her small fist landed squarely on my back in protest. But honestly, this wasn’t so bad—it felt warm and close, in a way.

“What if my legs really bend? Will you still love me?”

“Phim…”

“Do you love me?”

Her sweet, teasing voice made my heart flutter. She rested her cheek against my back, and I felt her grip loosen, her once boa-constrictor-like hug softening into something warm and gentle, like she was hugging a giant teddy bear.

“Of course…”

“What does that mean?”

Was this an essay question now? Why did I need to explain further?

“I love you,” I said simply.

“…?”

“Whether you’re an orangutan or a boa constrictor, I’ll love you all the same.”

That earned me a confused glance. Clearly, the boa constrictor analogy had thrown her off.

“If you love me, why do you keep running away? Why don’t you answer my calls?”

Ah, so we were getting to the heart of the matter now. I let out a long, quiet sigh, staring down at the ice pack in my hand. The silence stretched long enough that Phim pinched my side impatiently, demanding an answer.

“I ran away because I’m terrible at putting my feelings into words.”

“.......”

“And when my emotions aren’t in check, the words that come out of my mouth… they’re hard to control. Most of the time, they don’t even reflect what I’m really feeling. They’re just… things I say in the heat of the moment.”

“.......”

"Like when I told you I didn’t want to go home with you… even though, deep down, that wasn’t how I felt at all."

“.......”

"I’m just a person named Kiran. Stubborn, short-tempered… and weak sometimes."

"But..."

**"I’m trying—trying to be a better person for you, Phim."**

The words spilled out before I could stop them. If Pok were here, she’d probably laugh and tease me about lifting this line straight from her favorite movie.

"But changing who I am, isn’t easy," I continued. "So… can you give me a little more time?"

“Hmm… Okay. Just promise me you won’t talk about yourself like that anymore, calling yourself useless or weak.”

“.......”

“I don’t like to hear speaking badly about my girlfriend.”

Later that evening, Pratee and I were on the balcony of our room, facing the sea. Phim was inside, changing into her swimsuit.

“I swear I just saw a baby monkey clinging to your back,” Pratee said with a mischievous grin, breaking the silence.

“I think so, but it's Phim. I just gave her a piggyback ride."

“Oh, I see… so it’s what they call the *‘uncle carrying a melon’* position, huh?”

“Hey!” I couldn’t hold back and kicked her shin out of sheer irritation. “It’s not *‘uncle carrying a melon’!* It’s called *‘monkey carrying a melon’,* and that’s a totally different thing! Plus, the melon one’s supposed to face the other way!”

“Oh, is that so?” Pratee smirked, raising an eyebrow. “How do you know so much about this? Unlike me, you’re such an expert on these things, huh?”

“Ugh, I didn’t mean it like that! I wasn’t thinking about that at all! Phim’s leg is hurt, so I gave her a ride—that’s all! Stop looking at me like that! I mean it, stop!”

I stumbled over my words as Pratee’s knowing smirk grew wider. She loved teasing me whenever she could sniff out something she thought was suspicious.

“By the way,” she added casually, “don’t mess this up tonight. I’ve set the stage perfectly for you two. You’ve heard the saying about this place, right? *‘What happens in Samet stays in Samet’.”*

“You’re insane! What kind of person do you think I am?”

My face burned as her words echoed in my mind. My heart raced, and I felt a strange, fluttery warmth in my stomach as my imagination ran wild— much to my dismay.

“Don’t underestimate Samet,” Pratee said, peeling the shell off a roasted egg. “This place is magical—you just don’t know it yet.”

Just then, Phim poked her head out of the window behind Pratee.

“What are you two talking about? Your chatter sounds like a housewives’ gossip club.”

**Thud!**

The egg Pratee had been holding tumbled to the floor. She fumbled nervously, trying to pick it up, clearly flustered after being caught redhanded plotting nonsense about Phim.

“We were just deciding what to have for dinner!” she stammered, forcing a sheepish laugh.

“Is that so?” Phim’s sweet smile didn’t match the sharp glint in her eyes. “Not planning anything bad, I hope?”

“Of course not!” Pratee quickly stuffed the egg into her mouth, shell and all.

“Hey! You haven’t peeled that one yet!” I blurted. “You’re not seriously eating it with the shell, are you?”

Pratee turned slowly toward me, her face filled with mock dignity. Crunching loudly, she mumbled through a mouthful of egg, “It’s full of calcium. Very healthy.”

Later, as Phim and I strolled along the beach, her steps still uneven, she spotted an inflatable sea turtle at a rental stall.

“I want that turtle float!” she said excitedly, pointing at it.

“No problem, Phim. Wait here, I’ll get it for you.”

Pratee, clearly still trying to redeem herself after her earlier antics, raced ahead to rent the float. She dragged the large green turtle out into the water, carefully positioning it in a shallow, quiet area away from other beachgoers.

Phim hobbled along behind me, looking like a slow-moving turtle herself. I couldn’t take it anymore—I crouched down and hoisted her onto my back, running straight into the water before she could protest.

Her delighted screams and laughter filled the air as I carried her to the waiting float. She clambered onto the turtle and lay on her stomach, paddling her hands to move with the gentle waves, her face lighting up with pure joy.

Watching her smile like that—so full of happiness—made my heart swell.

At that moment, it felt like I had everything I could ever want in the world.

Love is such a strange, beautiful thing. Who would have thought that one person’s smile could have this much power over me?

“Pok, come on! Get up here with me!” Phim called, slapping the turtle’s shell to invite Pratee to join her.

Pratee awkwardly tried to climb onto the float, but as soon as her weight shifted, the turtle tipped over, sending both of them splashing into the water. **Splash!**

I quickly dove down to pull the little one, who wasn’t a strong swimmer, up from under the floating turtle. Once we surfaced, Phim only coughed a little water but looked completely flustered. Her face was beet red, and her body temperature felt unusually warm, even though we were still submerged in the sea.

She avoided my gaze, refusing to meet my eyes.

I wasn’t sure if it was because of the way I stared at her, worried and full of concern, or because of how close we were—our faces so near, our bodies pressed together, every inch seemingly touching—that she seemed so visibly shaken.

“Another round!”

Pok’s energetic voice snapped us out of the moment. We turned to see her wrestling with the inflatable turtle, trying desperately to climb onto it. From a distance, it almost looked like a scene from *Krai Thong*, with Pok as the hero battling *Chalawan*—except this was a turtle, not a crocodile. Pok had it in a headlock and everything.

Feeling a little sorry for her, I grabbed Phim’s arm, letting her drape it over my shoulders so we could float over together and steady the turtle for Pok. We managed to keep it still long enough for her to hoist herself on. Once perched on top, Pok looked as triumphant as if she’d won an award. But instead of sitting elegantly, like anyone else might, she decided to straddle it. The extra weight, all concentrated in one spot, led to the inevitable:

**Splash!**

This time, I grabbed Pok’s collar and hauled her up. Of course, there was nothing remotely close about our bodies—unlike when I saved Phim. Pok coughed and spluttered more than usual, making me momentarily panic.

“Are you okay?” I asked, worried that maybe this time was worse.

Coughing, she rasped, “Just swallowed some water. But hey… lucky me.”

“What do you mean lucky?”

“Because…” Pok smirked, brushing a hand across her soaked face. “The water here? Super sweet.”

By nightfall, Pok had gone off to dinner and a party with the crew from the shoot, leaving me and Phim with some rare time alone. Pok claimed she didn’t want to seem rude by ditching the group, but I knew the real reason —**she didn’t want to be in our way.**

Before leaving, she’d pulled me aside on the balcony, her expression serious, as though sending me off to war.

“You can do it, Ki…”

“Pok, you know I’m terrible at this. I can’t!” I protested, my voice low but panicked.

She gave my shoulder a couple of hearty slaps.

“Don’t worry. I’ve got your back.”

“...What do you mean?”

“While you guys were in the water earlier, I snuck off and made an offering to the mermaid statue here. Asked for a little divine intervention.”

“What?!”

“If you pull this off…” Pok grinned devilishly. “I’ll dance Beyoncé for you. Full performance. Your pick—*Crazy in Love* or *Love on Top*.”

Just as she made that outrageous promise, the bathroom door creaked open, and Phim stepped out, fresh from her shower. Pok jumped, slapped my shoulder one last time in a final gesture of encouragement, and bolted. She was in such a rush that her flip-flops kept flying off, forcing her to run back and retrieve them multiple times before finally disappearing.

**9:30 PM**

*Sitting here next to you, I feel so lucky to have you...*

The lyrics of a love song floated over from a beachside bar not far from our room. Phim and I had opted for a simple dinner at a beachfront restaurant before heading back. We dragged beanbags onto the balcony to enjoy the music and the sound of the waves.

I handed her a Smirnoff Ice and kept a beer for myself.

“Hmm... are you trying to get me drunk, Ki?”

Her soft, brown eyes sparkled in the moonlight, brighter than the stars scattered across the night sky. I felt my face heat up as she tugged gently at my cheek, stretching it like she always did when teasing me.

“You know you shouldn’t drink, Phim. You don’t handle it well.”

“And why’s that?”

“Because I’d be the one stuck cleaning up your mess if you get sick,” I said, only half-joking.

**Thump!**

Her small fist landed on my shoulder—not lightly, either.

“Hey!”

“What?” she retorted, trying to sound indignant but breaking into a smile anyway.

I popped open the Smirnoff and handed it to her. She sniffed at the bottle, wrinkling her nose like a curious puppy before taking a tiny sip. Her face scrunched up in an adorable grimace. Meanwhile, I took a swig of my beer, grimacing just the same at its bitterness.

Suddenly, Phim’s thumb brushed against my upper lip, wiping away some foam from the beer. Her touch was light, lingering just long enough to send my heart racing.

“You make a mess when you drink,” she said softly.

“.......”

The music from the bar reached its chorus:

*Because having you by my side feels like a dream…*

“Is it really that good?” she asked, tilting her head toward my beer. “It doesn’t taste bitter to you?”

“Wanna try?”

She nodded hesitantly. I raised the bottle to my lips, took a mouthful of beer but didn’t swallow. Instead, I leaned forward and kissed her.

The bitter taste of the beer mingled with something else—something sweet and intoxicating. Her lips were soft, her warmth pulling me in. As the kiss deepened, her hands found their way around my neck, while mine rested lightly on her waist before drawing her closer.

The music swelled as the final verse played:

*Let me kiss you...*

I pulled away slowly, reluctantly, meeting her wide, startled eyes.

“So?”

“.......”

“Was it bitter… or sweet?”

# Chapter 24: ᴍᴇʟᴛ ᴍᴇ ᴀɴᴅ ᴅʀɪɴᴋ ᴡɪᴛʜ ᴍᴇ ᴀʟᴏɴᴇ

The night sky over Samet Beach was a canvas of pure black, adorned with glittering stars that sparkled like jewels. The rhythmic sound of waves crashing against the shore played like a soothing melody, while a cool breeze brushed against our faces, sending Phim's long, coke-colored hair fluttering.

I smirked mischievously, locking eyes with Phim's beautiful brown ones, waiting for her reaction to the beer I'd just offered her to taste.

*"Was it bitter... or sweet?"*

Phim didn't bother answering. Instead, she punched my shoulder hard enough to make me wince.

"I don't know!"

"Then… let me give you another taste," I said, grinning, already reaching for the bottle again.

"Ki!" she exclaimed, her small hands pushing against my face so forcefully I almost toppled backward. Swallowing the beer I was holding in my cheeks just in time, I couldn't help but laugh at her triumphant expression.

"You’re getting bolder every day," she said, voice sharp with mock authority. "Keep this up, Ki, and I’ll take you to the temple myself!" Feigning innocence, I moved closer, resting my head on her shoulder and gently stroking her hand. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her trying to suppress a smile, her eyes twinkling with a light that rivaled the stars above.

"You wouldn’t do that to me," I murmured.

"And what makes you so sure of that, hmm?"

Without missing a beat, I lifted her hand and kissed it softly, pouting dramatically. "Who takes a little deer to the temple, anyway?"

"A deer?" She snorted, rolling her eyes. "More like a cheeky puppy!"

Her playful insult was accompanied by a light pinch on my nose, and I laughed, letting myself sink into her lap. She leaned over me, her gaze warm and tender as her fingers combed through my hair. The quiet happiness of the moment enveloped us, filling my chest with a fullness I couldn’t explain.

We stayed like that until late into the night. When I noticed Phim's eyelids drooping, I offered to carry her back to her room. She didn’t argue, wrapping her arms around my neck as I hoisted her up with ease.

Once inside, I turned on only the dim, golden bedside light. It cast a soft glow around the room, reminiscent of fireflies. My intentions were pure— just wanting to let her rest without hurting her eyes. Really.

After gently placing her on the bed, I lingered for a moment, brushing her forehead lightly with my fingers before whispering, "Goodnight, Phim. See you tomorrow."

But as I turned to leave, she grabbed my shirt, tugging it until it stretched. Phim's expression turned pouty, her brown eyes wide and imploring.

"Don’t go, Ki," she pleaded softly.

"Phim…"

"Stay with me tonight," she said, her voice laced with sweetness that sent warmth flooding to my face. My heart raced, my words fumbling.

"Is that… okay?"

She tilted her head, her lips curling into a sly smile. "Why wouldn’t it be? We sleep together twice already. Nothing’s happened."

"Phim…"

"Don’t tell me you’re thinking weird things to me," she teased, her words landing like a playful jab.

Flustered, I resorted to tickling her sides, making her squeal with laughter as she squirmed away. Her giggles filled the room, and I couldn’t resist chasing after her, my hands finding all the spots that made her burst into laughter. Somewhere in our playful chaos, I found myself hovering over her, both of us breathless and tangled in each other's presence.

Time seemed to freeze. Her gaze locked onto mine, drawing me in like a gravitational pull. Before I knew it, my lips brushed against the shell of her ear, grazing it lightly. Her body shivered beneath me, her fingers gripping my back as if to steady herself.

My lips continued their slow journey, trailing down her warm, slender neck. I pressed a kiss at the base, lingering there as her arms tightened around me. Her hands shifted to the nape of my neck, pulling me closer, her touch both firm and tender.

I traced the curve of her cheek with my nose before capturing her lips in a deep, intoxicating kiss. Her sweet taste consumed me as we explored each other, our breaths mingling, the world outside forgotten.

I didn’t know why... but the moment Phim’s hand tightened around my wrist, my heart seemed to plummet to the ground, and it felt as if I was falling from a great height.

“I’m scared…”

Her soft, trembling voice and the conflicted look in her eyes made my heart ache. Scared? That was not something I expected to hear from her.

“I’m sorry…”

I apologized awkwardly, trying to pull away. But Phim grabbed me, pulling me down onto her again with surprising ease. I wasn’t sure if the sadness and disappointment in my eyes were too obvious, but her small hand gently stroked my cheek, as if to comfort me.

“Did I upset you, Ki?” she asked softly.

“I just thought… maybe you’re disgusted by me."

“No! That’s not it…”

“Then what is it?” I asked, my voice barely a whisper.

“I’m just… scared."

“Scared of what?”

“That… if I give you what you want… **you’ll leave me**.”

The tension I’d been feeling melted into an uncontrollable laugh that spilled from my lips. Phim’s face turned bright red, and she grabbed a pillow to hide herself, leaving only her expressive eyes visible, full of confusion and worry. Smiling, I leaned in to ruffle her hair fondly.

“You think I’m that kind of person?” I teased gently.

She shook her head vehemently, making me chuckle even more.

“Good. Because you’re stuck with me.”

My lips found hers again, the kiss deep and full of longing. My hands, however, weren’t as patient as before. I gently slid them beneath her shirt, slowly lifting it higher. My lips trailed down to the smooth, flawless skin of her stomach, and I could feel her hold her breath every time I kissed her.

Before long, her lace black bra was unhooked, revealing soft, pink-tinted skin that rose and fell quickly with her uneven breaths. I don’t even remember how I managed to remove her shirt entirely, but it lay discarded somewhere on the floor.

Phim, flustered and blushing furiously, hugged a pillow tightly to shield her exposed upper body. Her small protests were no match for me, though, as I seized the opportunity to tug off her shorts and matching black underwear, leaving her entirely bare.

When she realized her mistake, her hands flew to cover herself in panic. I swiftly pulled the pillow away, pinning her wrists gently against the bed. My left hand held her right wrist down, while my right arm wrapped around her slender waist, pulling her closer to me.

"Got you," I murmured, teasing her.

But then Phim surprised me by covering my eyes with her free hand, her voice trembling but still sweet as she whispered, “Ki… don’t look.”

“Why not?” I asked, smiling softly against her touch.

“Because… I’m… n-not wearing anything!”

Her embarrassed plea made me laugh affectionately. I reached over to turn off the bedside lamp, plunging the room into comforting darkness.

“There, no more lights. Now my Phim doesn't have to worry.”

That’s it—my ultimate weapon. Mom always said that whenever I called someone by their name, it meant I was leveling up my flirting game to the highest tier. And right now, that’s exactly what I intended to do.

“Phim…”

“…”

“Can I be yours?”

There was no verbal response, but the hand covering my eyes slowly moved to rest gently around the back of my neck.

The smooth, silky skin of the woman beneath me made my thoughts spiral out of control. I leaned down and kissed Phim passionately, letting my lips trail down her body to the soft pink curve of her chest. Unable to resist, I nipped at her skin, leaving faint marks as she squirmed beneath me, moaning my name softly.

I lingered, teasing her tenderly for what felt like forever, before moving lower, placing featherlight kisses along her toned stomach. Eventually, I reached the spot where her body felt warm and sweet, pressing my lips there with deliberate intensity.

Phim arched toward me, her petite body trembling in response to the sensation. Her small hands, which had been gently brushing the back of my neck earlier, now gripped tightly at my hair. She let out a low, breathy moan that I could barely understand, each sound driving me closer to the edge.

Then, in the midst of her breathless murmurs, one word reached my ears and sent me over the brink.

“Love…”

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This morning was unlike any other in my life.

When I opened my eyes, the first thing I saw was a pair of almond-shaped brown eyes, glinting with mischief as they stared back at me.

Kiran’s face lit up with a wide grin the moment she saw me awake. My heart fluttered at the rare sight of that smile. As memories of last night pieced themselves together, a rush of heat surged through me, making my entire body feel like it was on fire. Embarrassment threatened to swallow me whole as I became acutely aware of my current state—still completely bare under the thick blanket.

Panicking, I pulled the covers up to my chin.

And yet, there Ki was, beaming at me like she’d just won the entire world. The smug look on her face sent a wave of irritation through me, sparking a wild idea.

Should I silence her for good?

Acting on impulse, I reached out and pinched her cheek hard, pulling it until it stretched like soft dough. But Ki, blissfully unaware of the danger she was in, just smiled wider, her eyes crinkling at the corners. Against my better judgment, I found myself forgiving her—just this once.

Before I could react further, Ki closed the distance between us, wrapping her arms around my waist and pulling me close. She stole a kiss on my cheek, then another on the other side.

“This is mine,” she declared.

“.......”

“This too… and your whole body as well.”

Her finger poked at random spots on my body, claiming ownership of each one with a smugness that made my heart falter.

“Who said… it’s yours?” I mumbled.

“No one had to. I’ve already claimed it.”

Her audacious words brought an involuntary smile to my lips. I didn’t have the energy to argue with her and risk losing to my own racing heart. Instead, I leaned against her warm chest, letting myself bask in the comfort of her embrace. Somehow, the frustration I’d carried from her ignoring my calls last week—and up until yesterday—faded like a bad dream.

I trailed my fingers along her slender waist, absentmindedly playing a little game like *spider crawl*.

“So, what do you want to do today?” I asked softly.

“I want to do what we did last night—”

**Smack!**

The playful tapping of my fingers instantly turned into a punch. I swore I wasn’t aiming to hurt her, but this little rascal always knew how to push my buttons.

“Is that a no?”

Her teasing tone, combined with the rare sweetness of her words, made my defenses crumble like melting wax. And when her voice dipped into a low, sultry whisper in my ear, my breath hitched.

Ki didn’t stop there. Her lips began to playfully trace along my ear before finding their way to my neck, targeting the most sensitive spots with precision. The fists I had been halfheartedly using to hit her earlier were now clutching at her waist, unable to resist.

I bit down hard on her collarbone, not knowing how else to release the surge of emotions she had stirred in me.

If I kept feeling this way all morning…

**There was no way we’d be leaving this room today.**

# Chapter 25: ᴏʜ, ɴᴏ, ɴᴏ

The rascal had already fallen sound asleep, exhausted. Serves her right! Looks like you're out of power now, my dear.

I couldn’t help but smile as I lay there watching Kiran's face while she slept. Her expression looked so peaceful and innocent, completely opposite from her usual mischievous demeanor when awake. Her round cheeks, flawless skin, and those long, delicate eyelashes made her seem almost childlike.

I gently ran my finger along her perfectly shaped brow, trailing softly down her nose, and stopping at her delicate, pink lips. They were beautifully shaped, with a soft curve that was utterly mesmerizing. I couldn’t resist tracing them lightly with my finger, lost in admiration.

After a moment, I gave Kiran’s cheek a light pinch, then reached for the towel at the foot of the bed to wrap around my bare body and headed for the bathroom.

I thought I’d finish my shower before she woke up. But just as I was about to lock the door, a tall figure appeared out of nowhere, pushing it open.

What the—? I thought she's asleep!

I froze, wide-eyed and speechless, while the troublemaker stood there grinning, looking anything but groggy. She had been faking it, of course.

“Let’s shower together."

“Kiran! Are you crazy?” I yelled, trying to push her out.

But did she listen? Of course not. Instead, Kiran stripped herself completely bare, tossing her clothes aside in one swift motion. Her smooth, pale skin and flat stomach left me feeling flustered, my face burning hot.

She reached out, yanked the towel I was clutching around myself, and carelessly tossed it into the laundry basket. Then, with one hand firmly grasping mine, she led me under the shower.

I was furious—at her, and at myself for being too weak to resist. She turned on the water, the warm spray hitting us both as she grabbed the body wash. Her sly grin deepened as she lathered her hands with soap, starting to rub it across my skin with maddening gentleness. She started at my neck and worked her way down, stopping at my—

"Kiran! That’s not washing anymore!"

Her hands lingered where they shouldn’t, kneading and squeezing as though she’d just discovered her favorite toy. Her mischievous eyes sparkled with pure delight, making me weak in the knees. My hands, as if acting on their own, wrapped around her waist, pulling her closer.

I bit my lip, trying to suppress the whimper rising in my throat, but it was impossible. My body trembled under her touch as she moved slower, more deliberately. I gasped softly, calling her name over and over until I couldn’t hold back anymore—my body giving in completely.

By the time we were done, it wasn’t just a shower; it was a complete and utter mess. What should have been a quick rinse dragged on until nearly nine in the morning.

Later, as I sat at my vanity drying my hair, I caught Kiran's reflection in the mirror. She was lounging on the bed, resting her chin on her hand, smiling at me with a glint of mischief still in her eyes.

"Want me to dry your hair?" she offered.

Before I could answer, she had already come up behind me, grabbed the hairdryer, and started clumsily running her fingers through my hair. Watching her awkward attempts at adjusting the settings and untangling my hair made me laugh.

“Did your mom raise you on bananas or something? How are you this clumsy?”

But just as I thought she was focusing on drying my hair, I felt her warm breath on my neck. She leaned in, gently brushing her lips over the faint mark she had left earlier. My resolve faltered.

“Ki, stop it,” I warned, trying to sound stern.

But she didn’t stop.

**Thwack!**

The sound of the hairdryer smacking her head echoed through the room. Kiran yelped, rubbing her forehead.

“Enough already! It’s late, and I’m hungry!”

“Aws…” she pouted, giving me a look so pitiful it was almost funny.

“Don’t give me that look. Just sit over there, quietly, or we’ll never leave this room!”

Grumbling, Kiran sulked over to the corner sofa and sat—of all things—in a proper kneeling position like a scolded child.

Oh my god, should I just break up with her and raise her instead?

"Eat plenty tonight... You'll need the energy."

I was focused on finishing my salad when I glanced up, glaring at the owner of the teasing voice. Kiran, now wearing her glasses instead of her usual headband, sat across from me at the seaside table, smirking mischievously as she watched me eat. Like I'd let her get the upper hand. Without hesitation, I grabbed the plate of soft-boiled eggs and slid it over to her. "Tell that to yourself. Here, eat these. I'll get more if you finish."

Smiling slyly, I gave her a knowing look. It worked. This time, Kiran's face turned a light shade of red as she busied herself with adding soy sauce and pepper to the eggs—so much that they turned a shade of black.

Ah, that's Kiran. I know all her weak spots. She can’t even think about rebelling against me.

"Kiran, did you just get here? I didn't see you yesterday," came a sickly sweet voice that interrupted my train of thought.

I turned to see the speaker—a stunning girl from the media faculty, one Kiran had once drunkenly declared had *kissable lips* at a party. My foot lashed out under the table, kicking Ki's shin hard enough to make her lips press into a thin line to stifle the pain.

"Oh, I was with my girlfriend," Ki answered casually. "We stayed elsewhere."

Her words made my heart swell. Hearing her say that in front of this girl was even better. But I didn't miss the brief flicker of disappointment in the other woman's eyes, nor how her confident smile faltered just a little.

She thinks I didn’t notice.

"Phim, this is Sai. She was the lead in that music video shoot Pok and I helped with. Sai, this is Phim—my girlfriend."

I didn't say anything, just gave Sai a small smirk. She smiled weakly and greeted me politely.

Oh, I see right through her.

"Nice to meet you, Phim," Sai said sweetly.

"The pleasure is mine."

"Well, I should get back to the shoot. It was good seeing you, Ki."

"Yeah, take care."

Ki returned to her eggs as if nothing had happened, blissfully unaware of the tension that had hung in the air. Typical. She’s always oblivious to how others feel about her. It took me years—since we were in middle school—to even figure out that I liked her.

But Sai’s reaction earlier... I didn’t imagine it. She’s flustered. That sweet tone of hers only proves it.

"Her lips are really pretty, huh?" I said coldly, my voice sharp enough to cut through the air. "I wonder if they’re still *kissable* like you once thought." **Clang!**

Ki's spoon clattered onto her plate, her wide eyes darting up to meet mine. I leaned back in my seat, savoring the way her face turned crimson.

"They’re not! For me, only your lips are kissable, Phim."

I smirked, gently wiping a bit of egg from the corner of her mouth. My gaze darkened as I stared into her eyes, my tone icy.

"They better be. Don’t even think about testing me, Ki."

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The sea at Samet Island had never looked so beautiful. Crystal-clear green waves lapped against white sandy shores, and the sky, a perfect blue, stretched endlessly above us.

“Blue or yellow?”

“Huh?” I blinked, startled by the familiar voice drifting over the ocean breeze. Turning, I found Pok smirking knowingly at me.

“What’s blue or yellow?” I asked cautiously, avoiding her gaze by staring out at the water.

“Just wondering if the sky still looks blue to you... or if it’s yellow now.”

"What are you talking about? The sky is obviously blue," I muttered, looking anywhere but at her.

“Oh, Ki, don’t lie to me. I see the exhaustion written all over your face. You can barely muster enough energy to answer me properly."

Glancing around to make sure Phim was still on the phone with her dad, I sighed in relief. She was too far away to hear us, standing by a distant corner of the beach. I hadn’t dared to ask her how she managed to convince her parents to let her stay for two nights.

Honestly, I didn’t want to know.

“I’m not tired. You’re imagining things,” I shot back, folding my arms defensively.

“How many rounds, Ki?”

I groaned, burying my face in my hands. "Don’t be ridiculous, Pok! I’d never—”

"Yeah, right,” she interrupted, crossing her arms. "Your face says it all. You’ve been grinning like an idiot ever since we got here. Usually, you look like a grumpy cat that hasn’t been fed."

"I’m not!"

“Sure, Ki. Whatever you say," she teased, slapping me on the back.

I sighed again, knowing there was no point in arguing. Pok could see right through me, and I wasn’t about to admit how far things had gone between me and Phim during our stay.

“Second point... you borrowed my sarong to cover Phim’s legs.”

“That old thing? I’ll buy you a new one, okay? Why so possessive over it?”

“Hold on, Ki. It’s not just a sarong—it’s a Hawaiian wrap! Show some respect. And I’m not possessive of the sarong; I’m just noticing how unusually protective you’ve become of Phim.”

“Of course, I’m protective! Didn’t you see her outfit? Those shorts are way too short.”

“She wore the same shorts yesterday, Ki. You didn’t seem to mind then.”

My ears turned a shade of pink as I muttered, “That was yesterday…”

“Ah, classic symptoms of girlfriend jealousy.”

Ouch. Direct hit.

“And finally... the third point—your neck and shoulders are covered in red marks. What’s that about, huh?”

I instinctively reached up to rub my neck, wincing. There was no denying it anymore. Pok cackled like a villain in a martial arts movie, shoulders shaking with laughter.

“Alright, fine!” she exclaimed, still laughing. “If you don’t want to admit it outright, just answer this—do I have to dance in front of the Sea Butterfly statue to fulfill my promise?”

The thought of Pok’s vow made me shiver. The Sea Butterfly statue was no joke. Hesitating, I kicked at the sand awkwardly before mumbling, “Yeah… you do.”

“What’s that supposed to mean, Ki? Say it clearly!”

“Fine! Dance away! Go for it!”

“Oh, darling! I’m so proud of you!”

Pok cried dramatically, clasping her hands to her chest as if her child had just been ordained as a monk. She lunged forward, picking me up in a bear hug and shaking me as if I were a ceremonial offering.

“Ki! You’ve made me so proud! Amazing work, truly amazing!”

She finally set me down, patting my head affectionately. I glared at her, still sulking. “So when are you going to dance, and what song?”

Pok’s grin grew even wider, so much that I thought her face might get stuck that way.

“Dang Mo,” she said smugly.

“Pok!”

“What? You know it—*Dang Mo, Tang Mo, Ta Ang Mo, oh oh oh…”*

“That’s not a Beyoncé song!”

“Maybe it’s not. Guess you’ll just have to wait and see!”

That evening, Phim and I strolled hand-in-hand along the beach under the night sky, enjoying the serene atmosphere of Samet Island. We stumbled upon a crowd gathered around a fire-dancing performance, the performer twirling flaming batons to the beat of Fire by Buddha Bless.

Just as we began watching, the crowd’s attention shifted. One by one, people turned and headed in the direction of the Sea Butterfly statue. Curiosity piqued, we followed.

What we saw made my hair stand on end.

There, in front of the Sea Butterfly statue, was Pok. She was fully committed, wearing a tiny crop top and denim shorts so short they might as well not exist. With dramatic flair, she strutted to the music, flipping her hair and swinging her hips to the beat of a distant sound system blaring from the far side of the beach.

*“Oh no, oh no, oh no… Oh no, no!”*

By the time Pok reached the statue, she dropped into a low crouch, hands on the ground, and began swaying her hips in a move that resembled a dog digging for buried treasure. I facepalmed while Phim stood frozen, her mouth agape in utter disbelief.

“She’s insane,” I muttered.

*"Got me looking so crazy right now, your love. Got me looking so crazy right now (in love)."*

Pok didn’t stop there. She rose, crouching slightly while moving her fists back and forth at lightning speed, her belly jiggling with every motion. Her expression remained deadly serious—furrowed brows, pursed lips—as she executed the dance with the precision of someone channeling Beyoncé.

Or so she thought.

In reality, she looked more like an orangutan trying to signal for backup.

*"Looking so crazy in love's,*

*Got me looking, got me looking so crazy in love.*

*Uh oh, uh oh, uh oh, oh no no Uh oh, uh oh, uh oh, oh no no Uh oh, uh oh, uh oh, oh no no Uh oh, uh oh, uh oh, oh no no"*

The crowd’s reaction varied, but one little girl started crying.

“Mommy!” l

The mother quickly scooped her up, shielding her eyes before retreating from the scene.

Oh, Pok…

You’ve truly outdone yourself.

# Chapter 26: ʜɪᴅᴅᴇɴ ᴀɢᴇɴᴅᴀ

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I sat cross-legged, legs stretched out on the side seat of the boat as it slowly approached the shore of Ban Pho. My gaze drifted off to the vast expanse of sea and sky, unsure of what else to do with myself.

I hadn’t slept all night.

Blaming it on the strange, supernatural image I saw last evening wouldn’t make sense, though that sight still lingered vividly in my mind. No matter how hard I tried to shake it off, it remained—a moment etched so deeply into memory, it felt unforgettable.

**The image of Pratee passionately dancing a Beyoncé cover.**

Or blaming Ki wasn’t fair either. Sure, she teased and kept me up late, but in the end, she dozed off before I could, exhausted from the day. Not surprising, really. She used up every ounce of energy she had playing with me, making me wonder if the two soft-boiled eggs she had for breakfast had been spiked with ginseng.

The real culprit was probably myself.

Instead of forcing my eyes shut, I chose to lay on my side, propping my chin on my hand, and staring at Ki’s peaceful sleeping face. Two days had passed, and I had greedily soaked up every ounce of happiness, as if trying to store it up to brace against the uncertainty of what was to come.

Even though I knew it was a fool’s way of dealing with fear.

“Ki, how could you make me look this fat in a photo? Take it properly, or I’ll curse you to lose all your strength!”

“Pok, even if you don’t curse me, I’m ready to bite my tongue and die. Seriously, do you know how hard it is to make a hippo look like a razor clam? Should I climb to a higher point and try shooting from above?”

The familiar bickering voices pulled my attention from the sea ahead, making me glance toward the commotion at the bow.

Pratee stood there, wrapped in a thin floral scarf flapping in the breeze.

Arms spread wide, she was instructing Kiran—who wore her cap backward

—to capture her best *Rose from Titanic* pose. Pok, who appeared unimpressed, pouted in protest, making me stifle a grin.

Pok was the one woman in the world who could spend all her time with Ki without ever making me jealous.

The two of them were like two halves of a whole, complementing each other so naturally that the thought of separating them felt ridiculous. They were as inseparable as chopsticks, mangroves and mudskippers, or buffaloes and their egrets.

Once, I even imagined, in jest, what would happen if Kiran had to choose between me and Pratee. My gut told me without a doubt:

**Pratee would win, hands down.**

When I looked again, Pok was lying flat on the deck, arms raised lazily. Meanwhile, Kiran was fully dedicated to her photography role, lying prone in a sniper-like stance with her imaginary *camera rifle* aimed squarely at her subject.

Still, Kiran’s efforts seemed wasted.

“Ki!” Pratee yelled again. “How on earth did you make my armpit look so dark? You’re an engineering student, aren’t you? Why didn’t you calculate the light levels before taking the photo?”

Later that day, I waved goodbye to Kiran, who had driven me back home. I lingered by the car, reluctant to part ways.

For two days, we had been practically glued to each other. The thought of separating now left a hollow feeling in my chest. If it were up to me, I’d take Kiran home permanently.

If only she didn’t have the power to shorten my lifespan, either by dehydration or sheer exhaustion.

“Drive safe, Ki,” I called out as she headed off. “Watch out for cars.”

Ki pouted, her expression softening into one of mock sadness, like a puppy being abandoned. She reached out to ruffle my hair gently before murmuring sweetly, “Miss me, okay?”

I didn’t respond.

I didn’t need to.

Because the truth was, I already missed her. I’d been missing her the entire time she was standing right there in front of me.

Kiran gave me a knowing smile, waved briefly, and turned to leave. I watched her slender figure grow smaller and smaller in the distance until she disappeared entirely. Only then did I slide into the driver’s seat and drive reluctantly into the house.

Seeing the sleek car parked prominently in the garage made me sigh deeply. An uninvited guest. Again. With Dad away this week, there was no doubt his true target was me.

Clenching the steering wheel tightly, I sat motionless, unsure how to vent my frustration. Before I could dwell too long, the housemaids rushed out to unload my bags without being asked. Aunt Pa, the head housekeeper who had cared for me since I was young, lingered hesitantly by the car window. I rolled it down.

“Miss Phim,” Aunt Pa began cautiously, “Khun Pun has been waiting for you since noon.”

I checked my watch. It was already four in the afternoon.

Phi Pun had waited for four hours.

If that wasn’t a sign of obsession, I didn’t know what was.

“Welcome back, Phim.”

The familiar deep voice greeted me the moment I stepped inside.

Phi Pun’s sharp features and faint smile were as polished as ever. His soft words of welcome, though sweet, carried a strange contrast to his cold tone.

I frowned, as I always did when faced with Phi Pun. Yet he continued to smile faintly, his gaze never leaving me as I reluctantly slumped onto the sofa across from him.

"If you can see me standing here, it means I'm back, doesn't it? No need to ask."

Phi Pun shrugged, saying nothing more. That faint smile remained on his face, unwavering.

**I hated that smile!**

But not as much as the words that followed.

"I almost believed Uncle Phot when he said you went on a volunteer camp.

Almost—until I happened to meet Namfon, the friend you claimed went to the camp with you, at the mall."

My face went numb, and my legs felt like jelly. His tone was one of someone who thought they held all the cards. The dread of last week’s punishment—being grounded and having my phone confiscated—rushed back. It was my punishment for staying overnight at Kiran’s dorm without answering Dad’s calls.

Even though Dad is strict, he's never been this harsh with me before.

This time was different. That night, Phi Pun had been with Dad, conveniently suggesting methods to *raise me better* without anyone asking for his input.

Worse still, Dad had listened to him. Without a second thought, he'd followed every word of this man standing before me, showing no regard for my feelings.

I had tried so hard to bury that memory deep, like covering a grave with the heaviest stones I could find. Yet, Phi Pun had unearthed it with a careless nudge of his foot.

"What now?" I snapped. "Are you planning to run to Dad again? Is that why you waited so patiently, just to say all this?"

"Calm down, Phim. No need to get so worked up."

"......"

"So, where exactly was this *volunteer camp*? You look absolutely drained."

He smirked, pushing my irritation to its limit. I glared at him—my sharpest, most intimidating look, the one that always worked on others. But not him. He just smiled back, unbothered, until I spun away in frustration.

That was when things got worse.

"Don’t tell me... the repeated red marks on your neck are souvenirs from the camp too?"

The smirk vanished. His brows furrowed, and his gaze turned sharp. I gasped, instinctively raising my hand to cover my neck. Too late.

"That’s enough, Phi Pun!" I shouted, trembling with anger. "Stop doing this to me! I want to remember you as the kind older brother you used to be. But if you keep spying on me just to report to Dad every time, I swear, whatever respect I once had for you will turn into pure hatred. Hatred and nothing else!"

My voice cracked as I rushed through the words, leaving him visibly stunned. But only for a moment. That sneering smile returned almost immediately.

"You don’t have to worry, Phim," he said, his tone sharp. "This time, it’s too serious for Dad to handle."

"......"

**"This time... I’ll do something you’d never expect."**

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The skewer of grilled meat I loved so much tasted like ash in my mouth as I spotted someone in the dorm’s courtyard. There he was, legs spread and hands clasped, staring at Pok and me without blinking.

That smile again. The one that could mean anything. The one I couldn’t read.

But one thing was clear—he wasn’t smiling out of kindness.

I walked up to him, stopping a few feet away. He tilted his head back to look at me, wearing that faint smile once more. This time, I let myself assume it was the smile of someone holding a secret over me.

"If I’m not mistaken... your name’s Ki, right?"

"Pardon me," Pratee interrupted in her sharp voice, stepping between us. "If you’re mistaken, it’s not called remembering, is it? It’s called forgetting."

Her remark made Pun frown in confusion. I admired my friend’s ability to wipe that smug grin off his face so quickly.

"What business do you have with my friend?" Pratee continued. "Sitting here like some restless ghost no one invited?"

Pun shot up from his seat, clearly offended. Pratee flinched, but only for a moment. She straightened herself, standing tall and fearless, her chin high.

"Why don’t you head back the way you came?" she said coolly. "No one here welcomes you."

"Oh, I’ll leave," he said sharply. "But not before I have a private word with Ki."

He emphasized the word **private**, which made Pratee glare. Her thick brows twitched in defiance. I gave her a nudge, signaling for her to leave. She hesitated, glaring at Pun one last time, but eventually stomped off toward the dorm with a pout.

Once I was sure she was gone, I followed Pun to the small garden beside the building. Standing face to face with him, our heights almost matched. Avoiding eye contact was impossible, making it feel like a silent staring contest.

In the end, Pun looked away first, staring at his feet for a moment. Then, he struck back with words that hit harder than I expected, too harsh to start any conversation.

"The red marks on Phim’s neck... you’re the one who made them, aren’t you?"

"......"

A whirlwind of emotions crashed over me at Pun's simple question. My mind scrambled for answers to a barrage of questions. How did he know? Where did he see the marks? We’d only parted ways yesterday—when and how did he find out?

“What kind of answer do you want, Pun?” I asked, my voice steady, though my chest burned.

“The truth."

I tilted my chin up, locking eyes with him. My brows furrowed as I refused to show fear. “If you want the truth, here it is—it’s true.”

Pun clenched his fists, his face flushed red as though his patience was evaporating like paper in fire.

“Do you even realize how much her life has spiraled since she started dating you?”

I didn’t respond, unwilling to give him the satisfaction of a reaction. “She used to be a good kid, always obedient to Uncle. But not anymore.” His tone turned accusatory, each word dripping venom.

“Now, she's no better than a delinquent. She lie about everything—just to see you. And then, you have the nerve to make her look worse with those stupid marks!”

It felt like boiling water had been splashed onto my face. If his goal was to make me feel guilty, he’d succeeded.

“What do you want from me, Pun?”

Pun's lips twisted into a bitter smile. “I want you to understand what she’ve been going through!”

I stared silently as his voice grew harsher.

“Do you know what it’s like to be grounded? To have her phone taken away? All because she lied, just to see you?”

I stayed silent.

“She was supposed to go to university in England. Uncle had it all planned out—a top-tier school to secure her future. But she refused. Want to guess why?”

I clenched my fists, the pain of his words cutting deeper with every blow. I stood my ground, unwilling to walk away but unsure why I stayed.

“It’s been nearly a year. A year since she begged Uncle to let her stay. But she still haven’t given in.”

A year? I hadn’t known about this timeline. The promise we’d made in the school library—the one where Phim would stay here if she got into her desired university—hadn’t come with a deadline. Why hadn’t she told me?

“Do you have any idea how important it is to study abroad for someone who’s set to take over a company like ABCD? Profiles matter.”

Pun’s sarcastic laugh cut through the air, hid words growing colder. “And guess what?”

Before he could unleash another cutting remark, a sudden cascade of soapy water drenched him from above. Both of us froze, looking up in disbelief.

Standing on the second-floor balcony was Pratee, holding a large pink floral basin, a sly grin plastered on her face.

“Oh, I’m so sorry!” Pratee called down, feigning innocence. “I was washing my socks, and the balcony drain’s clogged. My bad!”

Pun angrily wiped the suds from his hair, pointing a trembling finger at Pratee as if to warn her. “You’ll regret this!”

Luckily, Pun seemed too embarrassed to escalate things further. He stomped off, soaking wet, and climbed into his luxury car without a word.

Once his car disappeared from view, Pratee leaned casually over the balcony, grinning like nothing had happened.

“You okay, Ki?” she asked. “What’s up with that guy? Handsome, but wow, what a venomous tongue.”

“I’m fine. But what were you doing up there? That’s not even your room!”

Pratee shrugged, completely unbothered. “I borrowed it for a bit. The owner’s cool—they didn’t mind.”

I peeked inside to see a bewildered, muscular man scratching his head, clearly unsure what had just occurred.

“You intentionally threw that water on him?” I asked, my voice lowering in disbelief.

Pratee smirked wickedly. “Relax, Ki. I didn’t throw anything dirty.” I almost felt relieved until she added with a grin.

“It was the water from soaking my underwear after a week at Samet.

Nothing too bad.”

# Chapter 27: ᴀs ɪꜰ ɪᴛ ɴᴇᴠᴇʀ ʀᴇᴀʟʟʏ ʜᴀᴘᴘᴇɴᴇᴅ

For the past few days, I’ve used every ounce of effort I could muster to keep myself composed. I answered calls, replied to messages, and acted as though everything was fine—just as I had promised Phim during our trip to Koh Samet: to work on myself, to stop running away every time life threw something unpleasant my way.

It wasn’t easy, not even a little bit.

But trying was better than not trying at all.

The one thing I still couldn’t bring myself to do, though, was face Phim and ask the questions swirling in my head.

I just couldn’t do it.

*There was something about your love. That made me want to open my heart. You are the sweetest thing I’ve ever known.*

*I’m addicted to your chocolate high.*

The ringtone I had set specifically for Phim started playing, jolting me from my thoughts. On the screen was the photo she’d chosen—a playful shot of her hugging my neck, squeezing my cheeks. I stared at it, torn between nervousness and joy, before finally answering.

“Hello?”

[Ki! Come downstairs and help me carry this stuff up. I bought so much!] Phim’s cheerful voice rang out, making me smile despite myself.

Since dropping her off at home the other day, we hadn’t seen each other.

Despite the stress from Pun words still weighing heavily on me, knowing Phim was waiting downstairs filled me with a happiness I couldn’t contain. In less than two minutes, I was at her car.

Almost all the worries that had been consuming me seemed to fade away the moment I saw her wide smile and those sparkling brown eyes brimming with joy.

“Ki! You look like a panda! What’s with those dark circles?”

As always, her small hands reached out to pinch my cheeks, stretching them playfully. Even after we’d hauled all her shopping bags upstairs, Phim didn’t let go of me. Instead, she looped her arm around mine, leaning her head against my shoulder with a soft sigh.

That wasn’t all—she gently squeezed my upper arm too, sending my heart racing.

With both hands full of bags, I couldn’t do much in return, so I tilted my head to touch hers lightly. To my surprise, she grinned and urged me to nudge her harder.

Is she... masochistic?

Still, how could I refuse her? I gave her a couple of playful headbutts, each one harder than the last. By the third, a loud **thunk** echoed through the hall, and Phim laughed so hard she nearly fell over.

At least we made it to the apartment before she caused any serious damage —to me or herself.

Could this behavior of hers... count as missing me?

Having been together for some time, I’d come to realize that Phim was a peculiar kind of person. On the surface, her feelings seemed so clear—the way she’d touch me gently, her sparkling eyes whenever she looked at me, her sweet tone and loving words that she’d sprinkle into conversations like they were candy. It all felt like she wanted me to know how much she cared.

Yet, there were two sentences she had never said to me.

Not even once.

*“I miss you.”* And *“I love you.”*

On that front, Phim beat me, a socially awkward robot, hands down.

But I wasn’t upset about it.

How could I be? Look at all the things she did for me.

It spoke louder than love ever could.

Once inside, Phim eagerly unpacked her groceries, chatting away while I sprawled lazily on the couch, pretending to be a good listener for once.

“These are peeled fruits—apples, guavas, pears. If I didn’t peel them for you, you’d never eat them.”

She was right about that.

“This is a big bottle of green yogurt. Your favorite, right? And here’s plain milk, the blue-capped one you like. Drink it! You need to grow taller.”

“Phim, I’m already 175 centimeters. Isn’t that enough?”

“And this,” she continued, ignoring my protest, “is spicy baloney. You love spicy food. And these breads—raisin-filled and stuffed with shredded pork from *Tha Phra Chan*. I made Uncle Lerm grab them for you.” I found myself missing Uncle Lerm, her driver, for a moment.

After arranging the groceries, Phim moved on to the bags by the wardrobe. She began pulling out white t-shirts—each one plain except for a small embroidered emblem on the chest.

“These are white V-necks. I bought every brand I could find at the mall. Did you know? Out of these ten shirts, the only difference is the tiny emblem. This one’s an eagle, this one’s a deer, this one’s a frog... and this one’s a poop emoji!” She burst out laughing.

What kind of brand even does that?

“Why are you so cute, Phim? Come here and let me hug you.”

I patted the spot beside me on the couch, but instead of sitting down, she plopped herself onto my lap. Wrapping her arms around my neck, she planted a loud kiss on my cheek, making me smile uncontrollably.

*If you miss me, just say it. Don’t make me pry it out of you with a crowbar.*

“You’re such a homemaker, Phim—”

Before I could finish the sentence, she flicked my ear hard enough to make me yelp.

“Not homemaker, Ki. Housewife. Get it right.”

Phim will always be Phim. A day without her picking on me wouldn’t feel complete.

“I see... So, if you're a housewife now, that means you already have a husband, right?”

I gave her a sly smile, teasing the petite figure in front of me. Her face turned as red as a ripe tomato as she quickly averted her gaze, refusing to meet my eyes. But judging by her clenched fists pounding against my shoulder without mercy, it was clear that Phim's fiery instincts weren’t going anywhere.

“Come on, tell me... do you have one yet?”

Maybe I was some kind of masochist, enjoying the way her tiny fists hammered into me. Wrapping an arm around her small waist, I pulled her closer onto my lap, swaying gently like I was cradling a child.

Whispering into her ear with a playful tone, I asked again, “So... do you have a husband yet?”

Phim didn’t answer. Instead, she dug her nails into my stomach, making me wince as if I were plunging on a rollercoaster drop. But even the sharp pain wasn’t enough to teach me a lesson.

“If you don’t have a husband, then I guess that means we're still single, huh?”

“Go ahead. Try telling someone else that you’re single."

“Ahh!”

Her fingers twisted mercilessly into my stomach, making me yelp. I could almost swear my belly button was about to pop out. It was enough to finally silence me. Seeing her handiwork, Phim lifted my shirt slightly, inspecting the red marks she left behind. Satisfied with the results, she laughed softly, her hands gently stroking the spot as if the light touch would magically ease the pain she’d caused.

“That’s what you get for provoking me."

“...You’re mean."

Phim tilted her head, noticing I had gone quiet. She leaned forward, resting her face against my chest, her tone softening. “How could I have a husband, Ki? You’ve never even asked me to be yours.”

Her simple words left my heart sinking. My brows furrowed as I considered the stark reality of what she’d just said. No matter how much I tried to imagine us ending up together, it was obvious that Phim’s future had already been set.

And that future...

**I had no place for me in it.**

“Ki, what’s wrong? Why do you look so serious all of a sudden? Are you feeling unwell?”

Phim shifted from sitting sideways on my lap to straddling me face-to-face, her small hands gently pressing against my forehead, cheeks, and neck in a flurry of concern.

I must have looked visibly troubled because my mind was overflowing with countless questions. I’d originally intended to keep them buried inside, but one slipped out in a soft, broken voice before I could stop it.

And once spoken, there was no way to take it back.

“Your Uncle... he came to see me a few days ago.”

“.......”

It felt like time froze between us. A crushing pain surged through me as though someone had dragged me out and beaten me relentlessly. But the damage wasn’t physical—it hit straight at my heart.

“Next year, you really have to go to London for school, don’t you?”

“.......”

“If it’s something you need to do...”

“.......”

“If it’s your future...”

“.......”

“I—”

“Please, Ki... don’t say anything more.”

Her soft plea stopped me mid-sentence. Seeing the overwhelming pain in her eyes made my heart ache fiercely. Phim gently cupped my face with both hands, her touch so tender yet steady. Her beautiful brown eyes, now brimming with unshed tears, locked onto mine.

“I don’t want to go... and I won’t go. Don’t push me away, Ki. Please, don’t.”

“Phim…”

“Please…”

Her voice was hoarse and strained, tears streaming down her face. It shattered my heart. I pulled her closer, holding her tight, feeling the raw intensity of her grief. The pain was so deep, so consuming, I couldn't even comprehend it.

"So stay here... don't go anywhere, Phim."

Phim, still sobbing, tightened her grip around me. I gently stroked her back, trying to soothe her. She cried for a while, then, as she began to calm down, she whispered in my ear, a sentence that, even in this moment of intense distress, was meant to make me feel better.

**"Kiran's mine, only mine..."**

"......"

"Only mine..."

The last words from the smaller woman were followed by a deep kiss planted behind my ear. Even in such a tense situation, when my mind shouldn’t wander, especially to that kind of thing, I couldn’t deny that her kiss sent my thoughts spiraling into chaos.

No wonder the old saying goes:

*Couples who fight often... end up having a lot of children.*

Her body pressed against mine, so close that our bodies felt fused together. The sweet, alluring scent of Phim filled my senses. Her kisses, hot and insistent, ignited the sensitive points of my skin.

Before I knew it, Phim's student uniform was unbuttoned, her delicate lace bra undone. My hands tightened around her slender waist, pulling her closer. I buried my face in her warm chest, sucking on her soft skin, my hands kneading her flesh, until her arms instinctively drew me closer.

I slid my other hand beneath Phim's skirt, slowly, gently tracing the dampness between her legs. My mouth continued to feast on her beautiful breasts, my tongue lapping at them like a thirsty man. Phim's muffled moans, barely audible, fueled the fire within me, urging me to move faster, harder, until her body convulsed in a wave of ecstasy.

Finally, her body tensed and shuddered. She bit down on my shoulder, her strength fading.

Phim said she belonged to me.

So, it’s only natural, isn’t it?

That I claim what’s mine... again and again.

**Knock! Knock! Knock!**

"Ki! Open the door! Quickly!"

My peaceful Saturday morning, spent swaying along to *If I Ain’t Got You by Alicia Keys*, was interrupted by the frantic voice of my best friend. A quick glance at my bedside clock showed it was 9 AM. I had planned to head home with Pok later at ten, so what could possibly have her in such a rush now?

“What’s up, Pok? Is there a fire?”

“A fire would be easier to deal with than this! Look at this, Ki!”

"......"

“I just went down to check the mail, and the dorm manager said someone left this for you last night.”

I didn’t hear the rest of what Pratee was saying. Her words faded as I focused on the brown envelope in her hands.

**P & P**

A terrible sense of foreboding crept over me, making my hands tremble. My chest felt tight as if I couldn’t breathe. I didn’t even dare to open the envelope. The fear of confirming what I already suspected paralyzed me.

*Some people live for fortune, some for fame, some for power.*

*But I lived for love, for her.*

The once comforting lyrics now felt like a cruel mockery. I clenched my teeth, biting my lower lip hard enough to almost draw blood.

Sensing my distress, Pok placed a hand on my shoulder, her worried gaze meeting mine.

*Some people live just to play the game, Some people think that the physical things*

Finally, I tore the envelope open, pulling out the card inside. The words blurred as tears pricked my eyes, my body growing weak. My mind struggled to process what I was reading.

My heart shattered.

## Phimmasa and Pisith

*We are engaged.*

*Friday, November 7, 2008, at 9:09 AM @ Tantiburana Home.*

The card said the ceremony was yesterday, Friday.

Phim had spent the entire day with me on Thursday, staying until late at night—less than 24 hours before she became someone else’s fiancée.

I felt a lump in my throat, swallowing hard to hold back the tears. Her tenderness that day, the way she had treated me with such care—was it because she felt guilty? Was it her way of saying goodbye?

What was I to her?

A cruel joke. That’s what this was.

*Some people want it all, but I don’t want anything if it’s not you baby.*

There was something else in the envelope. A Polaroid photo. My hand trembled as I picked it up. It showed Phim smiling faintly as Pisith slipped a ring onto her finger. He looked at her with so much love in his eyes, a stark contrast to her cold, expressionless face.

I stared at her exposed shoulder, searching desperately for the marks I had left behind just a day ago. There they were—faint and barely visible, like they had never existed.

*Some people want diamond rings, some just want everything, but everything means nothing, if I ain't got you, you, you*

The final lyrics hit me like a blow, and I crumpled to the floor, my strength failing me. Covering my face with trembling hands, I tried to swallow my pain.

“Ki, don’t cry, okay? Don’t cry!”

Pratee’s sobbing voice brought me back to reality. I removed my hands from my face and saw her kneeling in front of me, tears streaming down her cheeks. She threw her arms around me, clinging tightly.

I hated being so weak, so broken, in front of my friend.

“Ki, I’m here, okay? I’m here for you,” she choked out between sobs.

I stroked her back, forcing myself to hold back my tears, burying them deep in my chest.

“Ki, calm down."

"......."

"You'll be fine.”

"........"

“You’ll be okay.”

# Chapter 28: ᴛʜᴇ ᴄʏᴄʟᴇ ᴏꜰ ᴡᴀᴛᴇʀ

**Torture!**

That’s the only word I can think of to describe how I feel right now. I decided to go back home as planned, opting not to stay in my apartment— our apartment. The space is filled with memories of me and Phim.

The place where I confessed my love to her...

The bed where we shared our first kiss...

The room where she once took care of me—wiping my face, feeding me soup and water when I was sick.

The couch where I used to rest my head on her lap, feeling like I was hers and she was mine.

Even the school uniform pinned to the bedpost or the stuffed toy we named Moo Yong.

Everything tied to Phim now feels unbearable to look at.

"Ki, is something wrong?"

But coming back home hasn’t been easy either—not when I constantly have to hold back tears under the watchful eyes of my family, who’ve known me all my life.

"Why do you say that, Phi Kha?"

Phi Kha set his fork and spoon down and rested his chin on his hand, giving me a serious look. It was rare to see this kind of expression on my brother’s face—almost like he was trying to unravel a puzzle.

Thankfully, it was just the two of us at the dining table, enjoying one of Mom’s special afternoon meals. She often prepared snacks and extra treats to spoil her perpetually hungry kids, who had a habit of eating every three hours.

"You’re barely eating. This is your favorite—steamed rice noodle rolls! Normally, you’d finish the whole plate in just a few bites."

I glanced down at my plate. He was right. The rolls were spilling over the sides, barely touched.

"And your eyes are red. You keep pressing your lips together. You only act like this when you’re really upset. Like when Grandma passed away..."

I lowered my gaze, clenching my fists tightly. Holding back tears felt almost impossible under the scrutiny of someone who knew me better than I knew myself.

"Ki... what’s wrong?"

Before I could respond, Phi Kha reached out and gently ruffled my hair.

"It’s okay, Ki."

That simple gesture broke something inside me. A single tear slipped down my cheek, followed by another, and then a flood.

It must’ve been the quietest cry in the world—silent sobs, with no sound escaping my lips. Tears dripped onto my clenched fists, soaking my hands.

Phi Kha didn’t seem surprised. Calmly, he moved to sit beside me, grabbed a tissue from the table, and pulled me into a comforting hug. His warm hand rubbed my shoulder soothingly as if urging me to let go.

And I did. Everything I had been holding back crumbled in that moment.

"Ki, cry it out. Let it all out."

"....."

"They’re just tears."

"....."

"And like water, they’ll evaporate eventually."

The first rays of sunlight seeped through my bedroom curtains, signaling the end of a torturous night.

I survived it.

Barely.

I was still alive.

Even though I hadn’t slept at all, my mind felt strangely light. Yet, it was crowded with disjointed thoughts, looping endlessly like a broken record. Every time exhaustion seemed to pull me into a restless sleep, I’d wake up with a start, as if on cue, every five minutes.

Each time I woke up, realizing it wasn’t just a bad dream, a burning pain seared through my chest. It felt like someone had slashed me open with a knife and poured salt on the wounds. And every time that sharp ache surged through me, the tears followed, unstoppable and relentless.

The endless cycle repeated, over and over.

I was relieved when morning finally came.

The night had been too cruel.

The sound of the toilet flushing echoed in the bathroom as I bent over the sink, gagging violently. Tears streamed down my face as my stomach churned. Nothing came out except acidic bile, since I hadn’t eaten anything yesterday.

All I had consumed was the salty bitterness of my own tears.

After a long, arduous moment, I finally straightened up, bracing myself against the sink. My reflection stared back at me in the mirror—a mess of swollen, puffy eyes, cracked lips, and a tangle of unkempt hair.

Pathetic.

**Knock, knock, knock.**

"Ki, sweetheart, you’re up early today," Mom called from the other side of the door.

Her voice made my tears well up again. If I had known I’d end up so fragile, I might have just crawled into the ashes and buried myself alive. At least I wouldn’t be here now, breaking apart because of someone else.

"I just woke up, Mom. Thinking of going back to bed soon."

"Are you feeling okay, Ki? Yesterday, you didn’t eat anything. Are you sure you’re alright?"

"Just a headache, Mom. I’ll rest a bit more."

"Alright, sweetie. Do you want me to make you something? How about rice porridge?"

A tear slipped down my cheek, landing softly at my feet. On this earth, no one would ever love me as much as the woman standing on the other side of that door.

"Rice porridge sounds good."

"Okay, then. Come down whenever you’re ready to eat."

"Thanks, Mom."

It took me nearly thirty minutes to wash my face and brush my teeth. Most of the time was spent trying to disguise the signs of my breakdown. Eventually, I settled on wearing my oversized glasses to cover my puffy eyes.

But honestly, who was I fooling?

This was Mom. This was Dad.

They’d see through me in an instant. But sometimes, you just have to pretend you’re okay. Pretend they don’t notice.

When I left the bathroom, my eyes landed on the phone lying on my bedside table. It had been silent all night since I turned it off the moment I arrived home. A storm of emotions stirred inside me—part of me was desperate to see if Phim had tried to reach out. But the other part was terrified of finding nothing at all.

After sitting there for what felt like an eternity, I finally convinced myself to turn my phone back on. Pok might be worried if she couldn’t reach me. My hands acted before my thoughts finished forming, and the phone lit up as it powered on. My heart pounded erratically as I braced myself for whatever awaited.

Even though I knew deep down that no matter what I saw, it wouldn’t solve my problems.

The moment the phone booted up, a relentless series of notification chimes erupted, making my heart lurch painfully.

I had turned off my phone to avoid all this, hadn’t I? So why was I now sitting here, heart racing, desperate to know who those messages were from and what they said?

Ridiculous. Absolutely ridiculous.

I scrolled through the missed calls first.

84 missed calls from Phim.

7 missed calls from Pok.

Something inside me burned as I stared at the screen. 84 calls. She really was out of her mind. At least Pok still seemed like a functional human being.

I opened Pok’s messages first, knowing what to expect.

**Pok:** Did you turn off your phone again, you idiot? Let me know you’re alive. I’m worried.

I couldn’t help but smile at her bluntness before typing back:

**Kiran:** I’m fine, don’t worry. I’ll call you later.

The reply came almost instantly:

**Pok:** Good. Don’t take too long. Your wife misses you dearly, my lord.

Pok always knew how to make me laugh.

But then came Phim's messages. My hand trembled as I opened them, heart racing like it wanted to escape my chest.

Most of her texts were similar.

**Phim:** What’s wrong?

**Phim:** Why aren’t you answering?

**Phim:** Please, Ki, pick up.

**Phim:** I thought you promised not to do this again.

**Phim:** Are you sick? Are you okay?

Then, the last one:

**Phim:** I miss you so much.

I stared at that message, frozen. Those five words I had longed to hear felt unreal, like a cruel joke. They arrived at the worst possible moment, completely wrong in timing and place.

And yet, they pierced me to my core.

Was I supposed to feel happy? Devastated? I didn’t know. The confusion overwhelmed me, leaving me unable to process the flood of emotions surging through me.

I turned the phone off again. I didn’t want to deal with it. Not now.

Grabbing the remote, I turned on the stereo, letting *"911" by Wyclef Jean* play on repeat. The lyrics resonated too painfully with my state.

*"Someone call 911… Tell them I’ve just been shot…"*

Collapsing onto the floor, I curled up as tears spilled uncontrollably. It was as if every piece of me had shattered into unrecognizable fragments, leaving nothing but raw, unending pain.

***ᴘʜɪᴍ'***ꜱ ***ᴘᴇʀ***ꜱ***ᴘᴇᴄᴛɪᴠᴇ***

Kiran's mother greeted me with her usual kind smile when I arrived at their house.

“She’s upstairs,” she said. “Hasn’t come down since this morning. Said she wasn’t feeling well.”

Worry surged through me. Was she really unwell? How serious was it?

I waited under the fragrant canopy of the ylang-ylang trees in their garden, trying to calm my racing thoughts. Minutes stretched into what felt like hours.

Finally, Kiran appeared.

Her damp hair and fresh clothes suggested she’d just showered. But the sight that struck me the most was her face—red-rimmed eyes, partially hidden behind oversized glasses. She’d been crying.

Badly.

I tried to reach for her hand as she sat across from me, but she flinched away like my touch burned her. Her silence was suffocating, and the empty look in her eyes crushed me.

"Ki, what’s wrong? Have you been crying?"

She didn’t answer. Instead, she pulled a brown envelope from her bag and placed it on the table.

“I’m giving this back to you,” she said, her voice colder than I’d ever heard. “I couldn’t throw it away. There’s a picture of you inside. I couldn’t do it.”

My hands trembled as I picked up the envelope. The initials ***P&P*** were scrawled on it—just seeing them brought back memories I desperately wanted to forget.

"Why did you do it?"

Her tone was sharp, her words dripping with disappointment. I couldn’t bear to meet her eyes.

"I… I’m sorry."

“Did no one ever tell you? Apologies aren’t answers.”

Those words, spoken with such finality, left me utterly broken.

The cold, cutting words from Ki pierced the air, causing my eyes to burn with the threat of tears. I tried my hardest to hold them back, fearing I would be accused of trying to gain sympathy.

“If I'll gets engaged, I won’t need to go back to London. No matter what happens, I’ll stay.”

Ki clasped her hands tightly together and let out a long, exhausted sigh, her patience clearly worn thin.

I knew I was wrong—terribly wrong. But the way Ki was looking at me felt like it would tear me apart.

Did I deserve such harsh punishment?

“If you had to go back to London, I would have allow you to go because it’s your future, Phim. But I can’t accept you getting engaged to someone else."

Ki’s furious words cut through the air, and this time, it was me who stared back at her, my eyes filled with disappointment. Disappointed that Ki didn’t seem to care about the distance of almost half the world, or the years we would be apart.

“But it’s six years, Ki. Six years. Don’t you feel anything at all?”

My voice trembled, unable to control the emotion swelling inside me. But Kiran still didn’t soften, her resolve unwavering.

“I can wait for as long as it takes. I love you, Phim. Why wouldn’t I wait?”

I dug my nails into my palms until the skin reddened, but it didn’t hurt. The pain in my heart was far greater than anything physical.

“You can say that… you can wait… but I can’t. I can’t even bear a week without seeing you. Do you understand that?”

Ki closed her eyes, raising a hand to her forehead, her face filled with stress and frustration.

“So, you’re forcing this status on us? You think I don’t know what that means?”

"......."

“Have you thought about what it means? If you’re engaged, it leads to marriage.”

“I would never get married."

“If you could do that,” Ki said coldly, “then maybe I wouldn’t be hurting like this right now.”

Tears finally fell, despite my best efforts to stop them. The feeling of helplessness and heartbreak overwhelmed me as the emotional strain I had been holding back surged forward.

“So you don’t love me anymore?” I asked softly, my voice breaking.

“I love you.” Ki’s voice was quiet but firm. “I love you so much, Phim.”

My heart clung to those words, but then Ki’s tone hardened again. “But I need some time.”

My heart shattered as the reality of the situation hit me. My lips trembled as I asked, “What… what does that mean?”

“It means, don’t call me. Don’t come to see me. I need some time to think.”

In that moment, my world came crashing down. The look in Kiran’s eyes was unmistakable—there was no hint of jest or uncertainty.

**“Because right now… I can’t stand to see you for even one more second.”**

# Chapter 29: ꜱʏɴᴄʜʀᴏɴʏ

***ᴘʀᴀᴛᴇᴇ'***ꜱ ***ᴘᴇʀ***ꜱ***ᴘᴇᴄᴛɪᴠᴇ***

“Ki, how can you be so heartless?”

“Heartless, really? Do you even know what that means, Pok?”

Kiran, my dear friend, glanced at me with a sideways glare, her small eyes narrowing like pinpricks, before sighing dramatically as though the weight of the world were on her shoulders.

Poor Kiran—her life was a mess right now. She was embroiled in a complicated, heartbreaking drama with her wife, Phim. Phim had made mistakes, sure. Running off to get engaged while already married wasn’t exactly praiseworthy. But even so, she had done it all out of love.

Phim didn’t want to be apart from Kiran, not for a moment. Big or small, every worry, every ache, she kept it all bottled up, never letting Kiran shoulder any of it. She endured everything alone, like the resilient eighteenyear-old she was.

But for Kiran, oh no. To her, Phim’s actions were nothing short of a personal affront. It was as if Phim had invited an invader into their sanctuary, stomping all over their love with mud-caked boots.

Phim, oh sweet Phim, devoted to Kiran for so long yet still clueless about her wife’s true feelings.

And then there was the guy Phim got engaged to—if I’d known back then how vile he’d turn out to be, I wouldn’t have just splashed water on his pants. No, I’d have gone all out, dunked my feet in a bucket of dirty water, and poured it over his head.

"How could you not feel for Phim? She loves you so much, Ki. And now you’re asking for a break? Do you think Phim isn’t crying her eyes out, her tears practically turning to blood?"

"I don’t know, Pok," Ki said, her voice a flat monotone, devoid of spirit. "After I said it, I just walked into the house."

"Damn.. you’re heartless idiot!"

"I’m just... not ready. Not ready to act like nothing happened. I’m not like her."

Ki’s lifeless tone made me sigh heavily—too heavily, as it turned out. My chair scraped the floor, causing my foot to kick hers accidentally. Normally, she’d have dodged, but today? Nothing. She didn’t even flinch.

For a second, I thought she might’ve actually died.

“What are you two even doing? Bickering like kids,” came a voice from behind us, calm but firm. It was Kha, my darling. Sweet Kha, who had volunteered to drive Ki and me to this cozy little bar, named *Drunk Until You Puke Like A Dog.*

Things would’ve been fine—great, even—if it weren’t for the fact that Kha had brought along his best friend, Phi Fai.

“It's nothing new, Phi Kha. Pok’s always beating me up,” Ki drawled, sounding more tired than annoyed.

"Yeah? And why is that, Pok? Don’t you know violence is wrong?"

“It’s just how we communicate,” Phi Fai chimed in. “Pok doesn’t appreciate you enough, Ki. Honestly, I don’t know how you put up with her.”

Oh, heavens above. Why did the universe see fit to create Phi Fai alongside Phi Kha? Phi Kha, with his kind heart and good looks, and Phi Fai... well, Phi Fai is there, too.

“I suppose, then, that you appreciate Phi Kha as much as Ki appreciates me, huh?”

“What was that, Pok? Say it again, I dare you,” Phi Fai shot back, eyes narrowing in mock offense.

Oh, did he think I was scared? Not one bit!

I stretched my arms innocently, then reached out to give his shin a playful squeeze. "Come now, Phi Fai. Don’t get mad. Even if you stomped on me, I wouldn’t repent."

"You know what? For once, I agree. Pok doesn’t have a shred of remorse in her," Ki added. "Here, Pok, you’re on drink duty. Get us a round."

"As you wish, Your Highness," I said, rolling my eyes. “What’s your poison?”

"Straight,” Ki replied, her lips barely twitching into what might’ve been a smirk.

Oh, feisty today, are we? I grabbed a bottle of imported whiskey.

“What are you doing?”

“Uh, pouring you a straight drink?”

“I meant straight Coke, you idiot. Not whiskey.”

**Smack!**

My palm connected with Kiran’s head before I even registered the motion. I hadn’t meant to hit her, honest. But was it my fault she confused me? Right!

“Coke by itself doesn’t count as ‘*straight*,’ Ki!”

"Whatever. Just make me something with soda and coke."

“Fine, fine,” I grumbled, throwing together the concoction. "Happy now?"

"Why didn’t you add ice?"

"You didn’t say ice!"

“Fine, soda, coke, ice—and a glass,” Ki snapped, her deadpan tone bordering on amusement.

"Crystal clear instructions. Much better," I muttered, quickly whipping up the drink.

I handed her the glass, but not before taste-testing it with a dramatic slurp from my finger. Ki recoiled like I’d just handed her poison.

"No way am I drinking that!"

“Why not? I washed my hands this morning!”

"Pok, give that to someone else and make me a new one."

With a dramatic sigh, I turned to Phi Fai. "Here, Phi Fai. This one’s for you."

"Why, thank you, Pok," he said, accepting the drink with a suspicious glance.

As he chugged it down, I couldn’t help but smirk. "No one makes a drink quite like me, huh?"

Phi Fai grinned back, raising his glass. "None better, Pok. None better."

The soda-coke recipe was simple—16-16-16. I stirred the concoction with my finger and tasted it with an exaggerated **slurp**. A satisfied smack of my lips followed before I handed the glass over with an innocent smile.

But Ki, the so-called *queen of cleanliness*, shook her head vehemently like someone had handed her a glass of poison.

“I’m not drinking this,” Ki declared, her expression resembling someone inspecting garbage. “I’ll take a new glass, one that hasn’t been stirred with someone’s finger, thank you.”

What a delicate aristocrat, *Kiran the Perfect*. If she cared this much about hygiene, she might as well gargle with alcohol and be done with it. I glanced at the colorful drink in her hand. Throwing it away felt like a crime. My gaze shifted to Phi Kha and Phi Fai, who were lost in conversation across the table.

And so…

“Phi Kha, this one’s for you! Let’s set the mood!”

“Oh, how thoughtful of you, Pratee. You’re such a sweetheart.”

“If I didn’t love you, who else would I love, huh?”

Before Phi Kha could get the glass, Phi Fai grabbed it and downed the drink in one gulp, slamming the glass on the table triumphantly.

“No one mixes a drink like Nong Pratee!”

I was shocked but smile, it's so satisfying seeing I fooled the rascal.

**10:30 PM**

Clink! Clinkk!

*“All that’s left is this empty tune... It’s over now. My love... You’re no longer here by my side! There’s no yesterday to rewind. Here’s to myself... and the love that just faded away!”*

The drunken wails from our table didn’t seem enough for Phi Fai. He grabbed a spoon and started clanging it against his glass to the beat—or completely off it—like the scruffy drunks you’d find in the back alleys of our neighborhood.

By half-past ten, everyone at our table was properly drunk, especially me and Kiran. Thanks to Phi Kha, who kept pampering us with drink after drink, Kiran had been tattling about my so-called **unsanitary** and **salty** mixing skills all night.

**Traitor!**

Fueled by the heartbreak of *The Love That Just Ended*, Kiran got drunk faster than ever, yelling the lyrics without pause. Normally, she never let herself get this drunk, but **love, oh love, what a venomous curse it can be.**

The cheering for the next performer was deafening, mixed with squeals from the seniors at the engineering table up front. I didn’t need to turn around to know who had taken the stage.

It was **Sai**—queen of the crowd.

Sai strutted onto the stage, not prettier than me, of course, but undeniably glamorous. She flashed her signature charming smile at the audience like the magnetic performer she was. Nothing surprising there. But what was surprising was how her sugary gaze seemed to sweeten as it landed just over my head.

Something felt off.

I turned around, and there it was—Kiran, smiling tenderly at the girl on stage.

**Classic.**

When Kiran gets drunk, she smiles at everyone like a fool, no matter how many times I’ve warned her to stop spreading her irresistible grin around. If her wife Phim catches her doing this...

Just the thought made me shiver. My chest tightened, and I could swear my already flat bust shriveled a little more.

“Feel free to request songs! I will sing them just for you.”

Her voice was sweet as honey, earning thunderous cheers from the crowd. My eyes darted back to Kiran, only to find her now ignoring the stage entirely, focused on devouring fries like a starving ghost. I sighed in relief. At least me, her second wife wouldn’t have a heart attack tonight. “Table 5 requests... Pood Trong Trong *(Speak Honestly)* Coming right up!” Huh?

Who on earth requested that song? Right now, there's probably no other song that could hit Kiran harder than this one. And just as I thought that, my dear friend clapped her hands in excitement the moment she heard the name of her favorite song.

*“But whyyyy… I just don’t knooow my heaaart. The moment I see you with heeer, these teaaars just start falling without me knowing!”*

Both me and Kiran jump to the stage and decided to sing it with Sai. Amidst the screeching karaoke of me and Kiran, for some reason, the timing just didn’t sync like it usually did. Could it be Sai? She must’ve been singing offbeat!

*“I don’t know if I’m jealouuus... or just happyyy! These teeeears falling downnn, where are they even coming from? Am I saaad? Or am I just so, so patheeeetic!”*

Clink! Clink! Clink!

Not only was Sai singing out of rhythm, but now I had to endure the annoying tapping of Phi Fai hitting his glass like it was a percussion instrument.

What kind of place is this, really?

Kiran and I locked arms, belting out this heartbreak anthem amidst a cacophony of drunken voices—off-key, drawling, and ear-piercingly loud. Honestly, it was grating, but the more we yelled the lyrics, the more the tears started rolling down during that final chorus.

Both me and Kiran.

*“To see you with her… so in love like this… I should be happy for you, so happy for your filthy bliss, instead of feeling… like I wish I could take her place. Speak honestly.”*

**1:15 AM**

“Ughhh... bleghh!”

That’s it. I was done.

All the free booze, all the snacks and drinks Phi Kha treated me to—it all ended up at the base of a streetlight by the parking lot. My stomach emptied itself like it owed no one an explanation.

Looking over at the next pole, I saw Phi Khs rubbing Kiran’s back as she vomited too. Meanwhile, someone was patting my back.

Wait... who was it?

I froze, dread creeping up my spine. Slowly, I turned, bracing for the unexplainable.

**It was Phi Fai!**

But that wasn’t the scariest part. Just beyond her, a stray mutt approached, licking its chops as it eyed my mess.

Oh, no. Not happening.

No matter what, I wasn’t going to let this dog destroy my dignity. I waved my hands frantically to shoo it away, yelling, "Shoo! Shoo!"

Unfortunately, the dog misinterpreted my gesture as an invitation and trotted over eagerly, tail wagging.

Nooo!

I grabbed my head in despair, watching in horror as the mutt happily devoured my mess. What a disaster.

There was crab fried rice, crispy salad, pork with lime, French fries, seafood tom yum, cashews, salt-roasted chicken, fermented pork ribs, and fried chicken tendons.

Everything was going fine until—ugh, that dog! It seized the opportunity.

As for Phi Fai, he didn’t even make a move to shoo the dog only after the dog already eat my mess. That’s when he finally picked up a stick from somewhere and started shooing the dog away, yelling something in a language I’d never heard before.

“Seh!..."

Before I could even recover from the dog incident, things somehow got even worse. Out of nowhere, the restaurant staff came running and surrounded me while I was still squatting next to the pillar. It was like I’d just won some great achievement.

“The restaurant would like to congratulate you,” one of them announced.

“You’re the first person to receive a special promotion from us!” As soon as he finished, the other staff members clapped enthusiastically. “Huh? What’s going on?” I asked, completely confused.

“You see, you’re the first customer in three years—since we opened—to behave exactly like the name of our restaurant!”

Wait, what? The name of the restaurant? Slowly, I looked up from the pillar, scanning higher and higher until my eyes landed on the sign. And there it was. The Restaurant name—*Drunk Until You Puke Like a Dog* had smaller text written beneath it: *And the Dog Eats Your Puke*. It hit me so hard, I almost cried.

“To commemorate this occasion,” the waiter added, “we’d like to present you with a complimentary bottle of Sangsom!”

Oh, come on!

Here I was—drunk, puking my guts out, with a dog eating my vomit—and now they wanted to reward me with alcohol?

**Who even came up with this nonsense?!**

# Chapter 30: ʟᴇᴀᴠᴇ ɪᴛ ᴏɴ ᴛʜᴇ ʙᴀꜱɪꜱ ᴏꜰ ᴜɴᴅᴇʀsᴛᴀɴᴅɪɴɢ

ꜱ***ᴀɪ'***ꜱ ***ᴘᴇʀ***ꜱ***ᴘᴇᴄᴛɪᴠᴇ***

**I don’t know why I find Kiran so cute.**

I’m not sure if I should describe her as oddly charming or just someone strange who happens to look adorable.

The first time I saw her was during the university’s freshman orientation event. Her tall figure stood out as she awkwardly mimicked the rowing motion, her face twisted in a scowl. That image stuck with me—it’s something I’ll never forget.

Even though I watched dozens of people doing the same rowing gesture that day, the only one I remembered was Kiran.

Months later, Phi Beer, our senior, scheduled a work meeting with someone named Pratee at a coffee shop and invited me along. The first thing that caught my attention was Kiran, sprawled out so casually in her chair that she was nearly lying flat on the floor.

She turned the old saying, *“Make yourself at home,”* into reality with surprising ease.

Another thing that stood out was her small, sharp face framed by neatly shaped eyebrows and long, almond-shaped, light brown eyes—eyes that didn’t offer me the slightest hint of a smile.

Not even when I smiled at her so broadly my cheeks ached.

No one had ever resisted my smile before.

Yet there she was, her long legs kicking out as Pok covered her mouth to stop her from refusing Phi Beer's work proposal. It was enough to suggest she wasn’t arrogant, just...

**Someone extremely honest about her own feelings.**

If she didn’t feel like smiling, she wouldn’t even fake it for a second.

That encounter elevated her from someone I simply remembered to someone I was genuinely curious about.

My curiosity grew even more when we began working together. Seeing her repeatedly in the studio became a routine—Kiran tirelessly sketching and building props. She’d sit on the floor in a white V-neck shirt and black sweatpants, surrounded by an almost sacred circle of tools and materials she’d arranged meticulously around herself.

Within that one-meter radius, along with the scattered props, there was a constant aura of icy indifference. Apart from Pok, no one dared approach Kiran, let alone talk.

No one but me.

“Hey, are you tired?” I asked softly.

“Hm?”

Kiran glanced up from her sketches, her long, elegant eyebrows relaxing for the first time that night. She looked genuinely confused.

“I’ve been watching you work nonstop since this evening, so I wanted to ask if you’re okay.”

“No, I’m not tired,” she said simply before bending back over her work.

Her short reply made me grin awkwardly, unable to hide my disappointment.

“And you? Are you tired?” she asked unexpectedly.

“What?” I blinked in disbelief.

Her question, paired with her whiskey-colored almond eyes fixed intently on mine, sent a flutter through my chest.

Those eyes—they reminded me of whiskey, enticing and intoxicating.

“We noticed you’ve been rehearsing for hours. Are you okay?”

For once, I felt my confidence falter under her gaze. I turned my head away, a move unlike me, who usually made others look away out of shyness.

I realized then... **I’d lost to those beautiful eyes.**

“I’m not tired,” I admitted, laughing a little. “But I’m starving. I was thinking of grabbing a snack.”

“Now?”

“Yes, just somewhere nearby.”

“That sounds dangerous,” Kiran murmured, glancing around. I could tell she was searching for someone who might accompany me, but everyone seemed preoccupied. Even Pok was darting around, handling multiple tasks.

“I’ll go with you,” she offered.

I couldn’t help but be surprised. While I had already suspected that Kiran wasn’t as aloof as she appeared, I never imagined she’d be this considerate.

The tall figure walking beside me on the late-night trip to the minimart gave me an inexplicable sense of comfort. We didn’t talk much along the way— she seemed lost in thought, as if her mind was elsewhere. Yet her presence alone made me feel at ease.

For me, the minimart felt too close that night.

Once inside, I had fun piling snacks into the basket Kiran insisted on carrying. Phi Beer had given us 500 baht to stock up for the entire crew, so I wasn’t holding back.

“You eat more than I thought,” Kiran teased in her usual flat tone, making me blush.

Embarrassed, I quickly explained that the snacks were for everyone. She nodded knowingly, her expression unchanged, before reaching out to grab several cups of spicy tom yum-flavored instant noodles. I guessed they were for her and Pok.

Those two really were inseparable, like Siamese twins.

After finishing the payment, Ki snatched all the bags of snacks for herself.

"Why don’t you let me hold one?" I asked. "Why are you carrying them in your mouth like that?"

But the tall person only widened her eyes and shook her head, as her mouth was too full to respond. She was carrying the bags, stacked high in both hands, and even had one more bag hanging from her mouth, clearly not wanting me to hold any of them. On the way back, there wasn’t a single word exchanged between us.

Kiran’s cuteness slowly started to show, and I realized how much of a gentleman she was...

Even though she was a girl...

From someone I had simply noticed... **she quickly became someone I admired.**

And for this reason, it was no surprise that the stern face of the tall girl, who had no smile while we were on the boat to Samet, became the only thing I could not stop looking at during the 40 minutes on the boat.

My heart raced with an unusual rhythm.

But that was the only time I could look at her. After that, no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t find her again. The next time I saw her was the following morning, but I wasn’t alone...

She was having breakfast with Phimmasa, from the Economics faculty.

At the first sight, it wasn’t surprising that so many questions popped into my head, like the beats of drums before a song, but it was a song that never got to play. Everything seemed to fall silent after Kiran's clear explanation that the beautiful girl sitting next to her was her girlfriend.

The sharp glint in Kiran’s eyes made it clear that she had claimed the girl next to her. In that moment...

Kiran immediately went from someone I admired...

**To someone beyond my reach.**

Something quietly formed in my heart... I knew I had to stop it, but the reality wasn’t so simple.

Especially after meeting Kiran again two days ago at the bar where I sing. It was the first time I saw her smile at me so widely, her smile sparkling in both her eyes and mouth... it made my heart flutter.

But it still didn’t compare to how I felt now, as the person who seemed out of reach walked over and sat next to me at the thank-you party that Phi Beer organized for the team, to thank everyone for their hard work, especially Pok, who was sitting next to Phi Beer and the senior students from the Journalism faculty. Pok was practically the center of attention and the darling of the seniors.

"How long have you been here?" Ki asked.

The smile that had been on her face disappeared completely. The whiskeycolored eyes, so beautiful, were now filled with a sadness she couldn’t hide. What had happened to Ki?

"Not long... are you okay?"

"Yeah... I’m fine."

Her answer was quiet and unconvincing, and she turned her face away, not meeting my eyes. Her profile, with her sharp nose and high cheekbones, looked stubborn yet lonely... filled with pain.

**Pain that made me want to comfort her with a hug.**

"Are you free these days?"

Kiran stopped fiddling with the ice in her drink and looked directly at me. She didn’t answer but raised an eyebrow, silently questioning.

"I was wondering if you could help me, Ki. I want to make a wedding slideshow as a gift for my sister... You're good at editing, Phi Beer even complimented you. Could you teach me?"

"Hmm... Isn’t a Journalism student supposed to be better at this than I am?"

The excuse I had prepared fell apart immediately, with an answer I didn’t expect. I could only smile awkwardly and come up with a strange reason to cover it.

"I think... Journalism students are hard to talk to. I don’t really understand them."

Kiran took a sip of her drink, nodding, but her eyes widened as if trying to understand the illogical reason I gave. However, her next response made me smile sweetly at how well she seemed to know me.

"Okay... If you think it's easier to talk to an Engineering student like me than a Journalism student like them, I’ll help."

"Where do you ever see students just staring at their teachers? They’re supposed to focus on the screen. I’m the one teaching here."

I stuck my tongue out at Kiran, a small act of defiance. The program was so difficult and packed that I wanted to relax my eyes by resting my chin on my hand, watching her focus seriously while teaching.

Was I wrong?

We chose a nearby coffee shop near Kiran's house as the place to learn to make the wedding slideshow. I said it would be more convenient since she didn’t have to travel far.

"After Effects is harder than you thought... How did you learn it?" I asked.

"When I was in high school, I wanted to make a slideshow for a retired teacher. So, I just kept watching tutorials on YouTube."

Kiran looked up from her laptop to answer my question, then reached over to open the bottle of water I had been struggling with, handing it to me without me even asking.

**Aww, so cute.**

"You’re amazing. You learned just from YouTube and can do this... You must be someone who learns quickly and easily, right?"

Kiran gave me a strange smile, though her eyes didn’t smile at all, and she spoke in a slow, indifferent tone.

"Not entirely... No matter how complicated the program or the mathematics, in the end, the basics are always simple—one plus one equals two. But the human heart isn't like that."

"......."

"We have a problem with learning... the human heart."

Her soft voice didn't show the pain as much as her eyes did. There was something in her gaze that told me Kiran was about to cry, even though there were no tears to be seen.

The urge to comfort her grew stronger inside me... and before I knew it, my hand reached up to gently wipe under Kiran's eyes.

I was wiping away tears that couldn’t be seen with the naked eye...

Kiran’s shocked expression made me realize what I had just done. I quickly pulled my hand back. As usual, I smiled to cover up anything—whether it was loneliness, sorrow, disappointment, or even embarrassment.

I had always managed every feeling with a smile.

"I don't want to see you looking like this, Ki... that looks so sad, don't you think?"

"......."

"Please smile for me... okay?"

It didn’t work at all... Kiran remained still, like a statue. She grabbed her lemonade and took a large sip. I pushed the chocolate cake in front of her, trying to cheer her up.

"I’ll give you this piece of cake... Please smile for me."

"........"

Still no reaction...

"Or do you want me to feed it to you?"

"Cough...!"

Ki choked on the lemonade, coughing uncontrollably. I couldn’t help but laugh when I saw the way she glared at me as if blaming me.

"I won't tease you anymore... But please tell me..."

"......."

**"How do I make you smile?"**

Kiran tapped her finger to her temple, deep in thought. Her long, slender figure looked at me playfully, as if she were teasing me.

"Why don't you sing for me?"

"......"

"I really like it when you sing."

Once again, I lowered my head, avoiding her gaze, my face feeling hot. A sweet smile spread across my face for what felt like the hundredth time today. I replied in a soft voice, almost barely audible.

"Well then... If I get the chance, I’ll sing for you again."

I met Kiran at the activity building to hand over the wedding slide files that I had made to the teacher for review. I chose to meet there because today the senior students were gathering to discuss helping with media projects for various university promotions.

My topic was photographing models to campaign for wearing helmets while riding motorcycles on campus.

Kiran and Pok were already waiting when I stepped out of the activity building. Pok frowned as she looked at me, clearly not too pleased, but I smiled at her sweetly, and she seemed to soften a little.

"Have you been waiting long, Ki?"

"No, about 5 minutes."

"Could you please check this for me? Last night I almost threw my laptop out. It was so hard."

I handed Kiran the flash drive hesitantly, feeling like we were slowly letting go of each other’s grasp. Just as I did, Phim came out of the building.

Everything seemed to freeze in that moment...

Phim was looking at the two of us with an intense expression, her eyes sharp, as if she could kill me with just a glance.

I realized my mistake...

**I shouldn’t have met Kiran here, no matter the reason.**

But Phim had made an even bigger mistake. Just then, a tall, handsome guy with a strong build walked over. As soon as he made eye contact with Kiran, he wrapped his arm around Phim’s waist, and his lips lifted in a smile as if it were a reflex. All of this happened in a matter of seconds.

"Let go!"

Phim snapped at the guy, her eyes fierce, as if she were ready to tear him apart. The guy, looking shocked, reluctantly pulled his hand away.

I began to piece things together.

So this was the reason behind the sorrow in Kiran's eyes.

Kiran, who was now trembling, clenched both her fists tightly, as if holding back everything with all her strength. Her face was serious, her brows furrowed, her jaw clenched, and her brown eyes were filled with pain and rage.

Only Phim’s sharp, commanding gaze seemed to have the power to stand up to Kiran.

But in the end, it was Kiran who turned and walked away first, striding off without looking back. Pok quickly followed, running after Kiran, and after a brief staring contest with the guy, Pok did something no one expected...

She kicked him hard in the shin, causing him to stumble, and then she ran off with Kiran.

The guy raised his leg, gritting his teeth in frustration, clearly furious.

"That's going too far... you bitch!"

He hesitated for a moment, unsure whether he should run after Pok or not, but his patience seemed to snap when Pok turned around, sticking out her tongue and rolling her eyes while still running backward at full speed.

The young man immediately chased after her, not caring about anything, drawing the attention of many people around them.

Except for Phim.

Her cold, sharp eyes were now locked on me, as if she were about to approach. She walked straight toward me and spoke in a chilling tone.

"What are you doing meddling with Kiran?"

"......."

"What were you planning to do?"

I shrugged nonchalantly, not showing any fear. As I said before... I had always gotten through everything with a smile.

And this time was no different...

I gave Phim my sweetest smile before I looked back at the sweet-faced woman with a playful, teasing gaze.

"I won’t answer that... since I’m sure the team already knows."

"......"

"I’ll leave it at that, as I’m also sure you understand what I mean."

# Chapter 31: ʟᴏᴠᴇ ꜱᴏɴɢ

***ᴋɪʀᴀɴ'***ꜱ ***ᴘᴇʀ***ꜱ***ᴘᴇᴄᴛɪᴠᴇ***

It's too hard...

It's really too hard to keep my heart hardened... when I receive the same message, repeatedly, from the little one every night at 11 PM.

A short, simple message...

**Phim**: I'm sorry... Let's make up, okay?

The message isn’t long, and there’s nothing too difficult to interpret about it... But I still sit, hugging my plush pig, staring at the screen until I fall asleep every night.

Without ever replying.

But that message was different that day... The day we accidentally ran into each other at the activity building, with Phim, Ki, Pun, and Sai...

It seemed like Phim's patience finally broke, and she sent a barrage of messages, complaining nonstop...

While my heart just grew harder...

Seeing Pun use her right fully... standing by Phim’s side.

And what right do I have?

That one night... when Phim lost her composure and I gave no response, the message turned into...

**Phim**: I miss you so much, Ki.

And the messages came like that every week... until tonight.

Midnight, December 4th.

00:00

**Phim:** Happy birthday, my dear Ki... I wish you happiness every day, with everything in your life. But maybe it’s not too much to ask if, in your happiness... I could be a part of it. Happy birthday :)

I read that message over and over...

At first, every word was crystal clear...

But the second, third, and fourth time, until I lost count, those sentences began to blur...

Until, finally, I couldn’t see anything at all.

I lay down, hugging my plush pig until it was squished, breathing heavily, sobbing uncontrollably.

I cried until I could barely breathe...

It felt like I was dying.

It was the first time in my life... that I felt I made the wrong decision. I... failed.

But this was the only way out I could find right now.

I’ve already made my decision...

**And there’s no turning back.**

"Grandma..."

"Yes, dear... Why are you so clingy today?"

After going to do merit-making on my birthday with my family, I stayed glued to my grandmother, refusing to leave her side. She teased me that she’d probably be forgotten as I reclaimed my title as her clingy favorite granddaughter after being away so much since starting my first year... I almost forgot that the family member I always confided in wasn’t Mom or Dad... but Grandma.

"Grandma, if we keep making the one we love sad... over and over, do you still call that love?"

"Hm? What did you say, dear? Or is my hearing failing me, did I misunderstand?"

"When two people love each other a lot... and haven’t seen each other for a long time... When they finally meet again, can they still love each other?"

"Oh dear... This is one of those youth problems, huh? How about you ask me about Buddhism instead?"

"No thanks... I’m not into Buddhism."

Grandma chuckled, clearly entertained, as she lovingly stroked my hair, and I wrapped my arms around her soft waist.

"Ki... remember this, okay?"

"......"

"Anything that isn’t meant to be ours, no matter how much we struggle, it will never be ours."

"......"

"But anything that is meant for us... even if we’re torn apart..."

"....."

**"Eventually, it will come back to us."**

December 4, 2008

9:00 PM

So it finally happened...

I lifted my head to glance at the sign in front of the restaurant, feeling nauseous remembering the state I was in, drunk and vomiting all over the place.

When I looked to the right, the most horrifying image from that night flashed in my mind again...

That little dog happily eating the puke of my friend Pok!

I turned to look at the mastermind of all this, who kept saying how that night was so embarrassing, she’d never be able to face anyone in the family again and would never come back to this place.

But in the end, she promised to throw me a big birthday party here, with a generous bottle of liquor she got as a gift...

And the food and mixers? They said it would be on Phi Kha and Phi Fai's tab.

Our usual group team...

It seemed like they were trying to hide their identity from the staff, probably out of embarrassment. Tonight, Pok went all out, wearing heavy makeup, fake eyelashes, and bold red lipstick.

But it wasn’t just that. She wore a bright green dress that could be seen from two kilometers away and five-inch heels that made Phi Kha look short next to her.

Everything seemed to scream class...

If only she weren’t clutching a bottle of liquor under her armpit like that.

"We got the VIP table right in front of the stage..."

"How lucky are we? We usually have to book it."

"Sai reserved it..."

Sai... That name. Thinking of her, a heavy feeling hit me. It felt suffocating. If I wasn’t mistaken, it seemed that Sai had developed some feelings for me, whether they were big or small.

I noticed her constantly texting me, trying to find excuses to meet, even sending me birthday messages right after Phim’s.

It wasn’t the first time someone had been nice to me, but unlike with other people like Tee, Cream, or anyone else, I could turn them down easily without much thought.

But this time... I couldn’t shake the feeling.

**I don’t want Sai to be hurt.**

Because something makes me feel that Sai and I could be friends, but it doesn’t seem like it’s going to be easy at all…

10:00 PM

As usual, our table was getting quite drunk. I tried to avoid every way possible that Pratee would mix the drinks. The way she mixed them was like washing rice—salty, and I don’t like it. It’s not hygienic…

So, Phi Kha took it upon herself to serve the drinks around the table, as usual. After a while, Sai’s band went up on stage. As far as I remember, it seemed like Sai came earlier than usual tonight.

Her sweet and bright smile was scattered just like every time I saw her. She probably knew she had a beautiful smile. No matter who she smiled at, those people would often smile back at her...

Except for me... because tonight, I was in a bad mood.

But Sai was still Sai. I could never guess her feelings. She was still singing with full joy, her unique sweet voice filling the air. Sai’s charm made even Phi Fai and Pok look mesmerized. Everything seemed to be going well that night until...

“The next song... I’d like to dedicate it to someone who promised to smile at me if I sang a song they liked. I wonder if this song will make them smile, but anyway, happy birthday.”

Cheers and whistles erupted, some drunken people even howling in pain. Meanwhile, Pok, Phi Fai, and Phi Kha turned and looked at me as one. I felt my face turning bright red when I realized Sai was looking straight at me with a glimmer in her eyes. Her smile wasn’t the usual one, but one that seemed to have a hint of a plea.

And then, the intro started, making me shut my eyes tightly, feeling like my heart dropped to my feet.

*“You don’t know anything... You’ve never wondered about it, have you?”*

Even though it was Sai singing, for me, this song was about Phim.

*“You don’t know anything... Have you never been curious?”*

Sai’s sweet voice made me remember the day Phim came to my room just one day before the engagement.

At that time, we two were lying close together on the bed after a passionate love session. I hugged Phim from behind, with my arms tight around her chest. My nose and lips brushed against her fragrant neck, not far from her. For some reason, I whispered that question to her.

“Do you love me, Phim?”

She didn’t turn around, but I could feel her face burning with embarrassment. She buried her face into the pillow, but I couldn’t stop teasing her.

“Do you love me?”

Phim buried her face even deeper as if trying to hide her shyness. I pretended to let go of my hug and turned away, pretending to be hurt, since she never told me she loved me.

“You don’t love me, do you?”

It worked. Phim quickly turned to face me as though she’d fallen into my trap. Her small hand nudged my shoulder as if trying to apologize, her voice soft and hoarse.

“Not at all…”

But I still didn’t turn to face her. There was a pause, and then I felt the earbuds go into my ears, and the warmth of her hug followed. Then the song started playing.

The same song Sai was singing right now…

Phim's song...

*“No matter what, I still don’t know… I have a heart, so it’s burning. How should I tell you… How can I if you don’t know?”*

**Ding!**

The sound of a text message pulled me out of my trance. Not only that, the message felt like boiling oil was poured from head to toe.

**Phim:** Ki, come meet me. I’ll be waiting at the parking lot.

I turned quickly and instinctively to see Phim standing with her arms crossed, staring at me with a serious expression not far from our table. When she saw me looking, Phim turned around and walked towards the parking lot on the other side of the restaurant.

Who told Phim I was here? The first suspect was Pratee, who now had wide eyes and was waving her hands to deny it. But there was no need for an investigation, as I could already see Phi Kha making a gesture to apologize to me.

“I’m sorry, Ki… We didn’t know Phim would come this way. Phim texted asking where you were, and Phi Kha accidentally told her.”

I sighed heavily, irritated, and then looked at Sai, mouthing an apology without saying anything. I didn’t know if she would understand.

“Sorry.”

Then I quickly stood up and left the table to follow Phim.

My heart was racing as if it were about to burst.

*She didn’t know, didn’t see… didn’t feel who cared for her. Didn’t she ever feel warm inside?*

Even though I had walked far enough to the parking lot, I could still hear the song faintly...

Not loud, but clear.

Now, we were standing face-to-face, more than a meter apart, yet I could still see how Phim had lost weight. Dark circles under her eyes, looking like someone who hadn’t slept well… I felt like I was looking at my own reflection in a mirror.

We were no different…

We stood facing each other.

Phim crossed her arms tightly, holding something in her hand, staring at me with sharp eyes. Her eyebrows were furrowed, and her lips pressed into a straight line, just like when she was upset.

“Are you dating her?”

“.......”

I stood silent, not answering. I just clenched my fist and stared at her with a serious expression.

At that moment, it seemed like Phim couldn’t control everything anymore. She threw a velvet blue bag into my chest hard, but the feeling of being hit in the chest couldn’t compare to the pain crashing inside.

“Why are you silent… you’re thinking of being with Sai, aren’t you?”

“.......”

“Are you?”

**“Yes… Are you happy now?”**

It felt like the world stopped in that moment. I could only hear the buzzing sound in my head. When I saw the look in Phim's eyes, it was the look of someone who had lost everything.

She stepped back, like someone in a daze, her hoarse voice trembling, making me feel like my heart was breaking.

“What about me?”

“......”

**“What about me, Ki?”**

The last sentence was both distant and disconnected, and then Phim’s tears began to pour down uncontrollably. She stopped, lifting her hand to cover her mouth... She tilted her head back and shook it back and forth as if trying to hold her tears inside.

*How long will I carry this love? How long will I carry... this love?*

Seeing Phim like this... I walked toward the small figure, hoping to embrace her with a feeling of pain and suffering, as though I were being whipped. But Phim suddenly jerked away as soon as my arm touched her.

Phim backed away until she hit the wall... she sank to the ground. She hugged herself tightly and let out a scream, the sound raw and hoarse, like someone on the brink of death.

At this point, my own tears began to fall.

And there was no sign they would stop.

But I didn't know how to handle what was happening, especially since Phim wouldn't let me touch her at all. Every time I reached out, trying to touch her, she would scream even louder.

Phi Prae came running from the car parked not far away, her expression frantic. She looked at me with disapproval in her eyes as she knelt down to hug her younger sister, who had buried her face into Phi Prae’s chest. Phim’s entire body was shaking violently from sobs.

Phi Prae gently rubbed Phim’s back, holding her up carefully as if she were fragile glass, ready to break into pieces at any moment.

"Ki, don’t say anything to Phim right now... Please, I’m asking you."

Phi Prae said, turning to me with a serious expression. She then continued to support Phim, who was still sobbing uncontrollably, and walked her to the car. I stood there, my eyes filled with tears, watching them leave until the car disappeared from view.

*"Please... Don’t hurt each other anymore. Don’t hurt each other... Oh, my heart..."*

I walked back to pick up the velvet bag Phim had thrown aside. I untied the string and took the contents out. It was a necklace with a white gold pendant, designed like the gear necklace I had given Phim as a birthday gift.

The small figure must have intended for us to wear these as matching necklaces.

*"Please... Don’t hurt each other anymore. Don’t hurt each other... Oh, my heart..."*

I gripped the necklace tightly in my hand. My tears fell, soaking my hand, and I could only pray that this would be the last time Phim would cry because of someone like me.

*Oh, my heart...*

# Chapter 32: ʟᴏsᴛ ɪɴ ᴛʀᴀɴsʟᴀᴛɪᴏɴ

***ᴘʜɪᴍ'***ꜱ ***ᴘᴇʀ***ꜱ***ᴘᴇᴄᴛɪᴠᴇ***

It became me... the one who urged my father to arrange for me to study in England as quickly as possible. In the end, the travel schedule was moved up faster than the original plan he had set.

Even though, at first, I had boldly declared that no matter what, I would never live in England for six long years.

My father, despite having authority over everything in my life, still couldn’t force me. I even threatened that while he could send me there, I would refuse to study if I didn’t want to.

But everything turned out as it always has in my life... I have never received anything from my father without conditions...

But this time, the conditions were far too heavy...

My father probably thought I wouldn’t dare to defy him. He was usually never wrong in his predictions.

But not this time!

Because even though it meant being engaged to the person I despised most...

I accepted.

But the result... was failed.

The painful part was that what I had lost was what I had been yearning for all along...

The most precious thing I had ever had in my life...

**...Kiran's love.**

That one wrong decision of mine... took her love away. Even though I tried to fix things by enduring not calling or seeing her, as she had asked for nearly a month, even though doing so was physically and emotionally draining...

I cried every night, couldn’t eat, couldn’t sleep.

But in the end, she still chose to leave me. So why should I stay here anymore?

It’s true... I could probably live the rest of my life without ever seeing Kiran again. But what would be the point if I still had to face Sai?

Just like last week, when I saw... Sai's mocking smile on the face I hated so much. Even though I only saw it for a split second... it triggered every painful memory and tore my heart apart so easily.

I even heard my own scream that night.

The night of Ki's 18th birthday, a night I’ll never forget for the rest of my life. In the end, I chose to leave, perhaps the best option I had left.

Phi Prae, who had witnessed my suffering from the beginning... from the day I had to force myself to endure until tears soaked my cheeks at the engagement ceremony... to the time I lost control on the day I was rejected, even suggested that I should call off the engagement with Pun and start over fresh somewhere else.

But I didn’t do it...

Since that guy played with the most fragile parts of my heart... and went so far to make everything lead to this breaking point...

I will play with his feelings too.

I will use that ring to bind him... with his hopes that someday I might love him.

Even though that day... would never come.

Today is the last day I’ll be in Thailand. I finished packing everything days ago, and I was ready to leave right now.

What was left behind were only a few things...

The photographs of Kiran, from middle school up until now, hanging around my room.

I slowly reached out to take each of those memories down, one by one...

With a broken heart...

I gathered all the pictures into a big wooden box... along with the little things that reminded me of Kiran.

The birthday cards with funny cartoons she’d made for me since 10th grade, with short messages that were the same every year...

But reading them still brought a smile to my face...

*"This year’s birthday wish... I hope Phim grows taller."*

There were also notebooks with summaries of difficult subjects she’d put together to help me study, beyond my extra lessons over the three years of high school, because I often complained that I still didn’t understand, despite all the extra lessons.

Those notebooks were filled with neat, small handwriting, and here and there, little cartoon characters that Kiran had drawn...

The lazy girl who had outstanding grades, and who never once wasted her time on extra lessons, had spent so much of her after-school hours to summarize everything for me, every single day...

And in the box was the pink folded umbrella, decorated with cute flower patterns, which Kiran had gathered the courage to buy from the guard at the school’s back gate on a rainy afternoon. We had been stuck in the rain, not able to go home.

Every time Karan opened the umbrella for me... the left side of her shoulder and pants would get soaked because she always tried to cover me as much as she could, worried the rain would make me sick...

Every time we walked home together, she’d carry my bag and walk on the side of the road, protecting me from motorcycles and cars that zoomed by on the narrow street.

That’s it...

**The Kiran I once knew.**

The things she did for me were often small gestures...

But she did them every day...

Until I started to notice.

If it was for me, she would do anything, even things that went against her own nature.

But from now on, that won’t happen anymore...

I reached out and picked up the crumpled piece of paper lying at the top of the box. It was the letter I had originally intended to give Kiran on her birthday, along with the matching gear necklace I had made for us to wear together...

But that night took a terrible turn, and in the end, this letter stayed crumpled in my jeans pocket.

I unfolded the paper... and read the letter again, for the *I-don’t-know-howmany-th* time.

*December 4, 2008*

*My dearest Ki,*

*Happy birthday! I know I already texted you at midnight, but I still want to say happy birthday again... If I could, I would tell you a hundred times.*

*Today, besides being your birthday, it’s also the second birthday of Moo Yong. But I think Moo Yong isn’t too happy and might become a problematic child.*

*Because lately, Dad and Mom have been fighting...*

*I feel sorry for Moo Yong... and I believe you’ll feel sorry for her too, once you’ve read this letter.*

*Let’s make up, okay?*

*I miss you so much...*

*Now that you’re not here and you don’t call me to say good night like you used to, I can’t sleep, you know?*

*I’m sorry... I’m truly sorry.*

*I never meant to make you sad...*

When I reached this point, my tears fell onto the letter. I slowly wiped the ink-stained tears with my fingers, but the tears kept coming, and the paper was soaked with them.

*I never wanted to make you sad...*

*But you know... my life has never been easy.*

*I didn’t grow up like other kids. Everything I’ve gotten... I’ve had to sacrifice something in return.*

*And this time was no different.*

*I was wrong, wasn’t I?*

*I didn’t want to be apart from you... It’s not because I was afraid that distance and time would make one of us change our feelings.*

*But I didn’t want to be apart... because you’re the only happiness in my life.*

*Ki, please forgive me.*

*I love you.*

*I love you so much...*

*As much as a small girl can love a tall girl like you.*

*I’ve never told you that I love you, have I?*

*I’m sorry I didn’t say it sooner. I’m sorry I’m telling you this under these circumstances. But now, I know that I love you so much. Please... don’t be so cold toward me. I just want one more chance from you... just one.*

*Dad, be nice to Mom... (voice of Moo Yong)*

*Love...*

*Phim*

After reading the final line, I folded the soggy letter back to its original form, then placed it back in the same spot in the old box. I glanced around at everything in the box once more...

Before closing it and locking the latch tight.

This box... I will leave it here.

Leave it with all the memories I have...

And let it fade away with time.

I hope it will be that way.

# Chapter 33: [ᴛʜᴇ ʟᴀsᴛ ᴄʜᴀᴘᴛᴇʀ ᴏꜰ ᴘᴀʀᴛ 1] ɪɴᴠᴇsᴛᴍᴇɴᴛs ᴄᴀʀʀʏ ʀɪsᴋs

*November 14, 2008*

One week after Phimmasa engagement.

Kiran, dressed in her university uniform, stood hesitantly in front of the towering door. The dark wooden surface gleamed, its silver plaque engraved with the word **President** glinting prominently.

The secretary, seated at her desk just outside, made the process seem easy. She knocked on the door three times, each knock evenly spaced and precise, then carefully opened it with a polite deference. Guiding Kiran inside, the secretary directed her toward the guest sofa in the corner of the luxurious office. Everything about the room-the elegant decor, the spacious design-reflected the stature of its occupant.

**Poj Tantiburanakorn**

President of **ABCD**, a leading company specializing in the import and manufacture of electronic equipment for industrial factories. Poj, a middleaged man of imposing presence, had broad shoulders and a straight-backed posture that radiated authority. He was already seated on the opposite sofa, waiting for her.

He sat with arms crossed and one leg stretched out, his sharp, black eyes scanning her from head to toe. Those commanding eyes, filled with an undeniable aura of power, locked onto Kiran. He gave her a slight nod, acknowledging her polite bow.

"I didn't know you were Madam Gim Eng's granddaughter," he remarked, his tone neutral.

Ordinarily, it would be almost impossible for a first-year university student like Kiran to secure a personal meeting with the president of such a prestigious company. But the weight of her grandmother's influence was undeniable. Madam Gim Eng, a respected elder in the community where Poj had grown up, was someone his late father had deeply respected.

Without her, Kiran would never have had the chance to sit face-to-face with this man.

And by sheer coincidence, Kiran happened to be the very same girl currently disrupting Poj's carefully laid plans for his youngest daughter, Phimmasa.

"Yes," Kiran replied simply.

Her words were concise, her tone calm. Her almond-shaped brown eyes stared straight back at him without a hint of fear or hesitation.

It had been over a decade since anyone had dared meet his gaze like this.

"What brings you here?"

"I have a question I need to ask you," Kiran replied, her tone direct and purposeful.

Poj raised an eyebrow, intrigued. The way this freshman spoke was unusual-brief, clear, and filled with quiet determination. She was nothing like his daughter, Phimmasa, in that regard.

"Go ahead," he said

"What are your plans for Phim's future now that she's engaged? Especially since she's no longer pursuing her studies in England as originally planned."

Poj uncrossed his legs, leaning forward slightly. His previously relaxed demeanor shifted, his posture becoming more formal. He narrowed his eyes at her, taking a long pause before responding in a firm, decisive tone.

"Phim will get married as soon as she graduates. After that, Pun and Phim will take over running the company."

Kiran's sharp brown eyes flickered with unease. She couldn't mask her disappointment, her distress clearly evident.

"Why must she marry right away? What if Phim doesn't want to-"

"She has to," Poj interjected, cutting her off before she could finish. "If Phim only studies here, she won't be strong enough to take on the role of president. Her major is too broad; she'll need support. And that support should come from her husband. Pun has an excellent profile. He's the perfect match."

Kiran's eyebrows knitted together, her expression hardening. She didn't smile, her face mirroring the intensity of the man across from her.

"If you set aside your role as president and answer as a father, why are you forcing Phim into something she doesn't want?"

Poj clenched his jaw, the tension in his face evident. Kiran's question was bold-too bold. Not only did she hold his gaze, but her words cut straight to the point. It had been years since anyone had dared challenge him like this.

Even he had never asked himself this question.

What surprised him was his lack of anger. Instead, he felt a strange sense of enjoyment. This girl was rare-fearless and direct. And now, for the first time, he found himself curious about the person his daughter had fallen for so deeply, enough to defy his authority. "As her father. I'm concerned for her."

Kiran stayed silent, listening attentively.

"Taking on the role of president without a strong foundation will create endless problems for her. She won't be able to handle it. Without me, Phim won't survive."

Kiran's perspective of him shifted slightly. Perhaps Phim's father wasn't as heartless as she had feared.

"Is there no other way? Another solution that would make you change your mind?" "Yes."

"What?"

The glimmer of hope in Kiran's brown eyes caught Poj's attention, stirring something buried deep within him. That faint, nearly extinguished ember of possibility seemed to flicker back to life.

"All I want is for Phim to study abroad, where I've planned for her. The place will teach her everything she needs. Living alone there will toughen her up. That's all I ask. After that, she can marry whenever she wants."

The disappointment clouding Kiran's expression didn't go unnoticed, and Poj couldn't help but smirk. He was in control.

"But that's impossible. Phim refuses to go. Even if I managed to send her there, I couldn't force her to study."

Kiran lowered her gaze, nodding faintly. She understood that Mr. Poj would never change his mind.

"I can't do it. Phim can't do it. Do you know who can make her change her mind?"

Kiran's mind raced. It felt like a chill spread through her body, and she began to piece together the game the man in front of her was playing. Her eyes locked onto his, as if trying to read his every thought.

**"You."**

"......."

She had guessed it correctly.

"You are the reason Phim chose to stay. So, naturally, you're the only reason she might choose to leave."

Kiran shut her eyes tightly, fear creeping in. She was about to become a pawn on his chessboard, a bargaining chip like Phim had always been.

"Do you know what investment is?"

"I'm not sure," Ki replied hesitantly.

"What do you think investment means?"

**"It's about taking action to achieve the highest possible return... with the lowest possible cost."**

Poj's laughter echoed through the spacious room. "Not bad, not bad. Then tell me, Kiran-what do you think my current cost is?"

Kiran hesitated, swallowing hard. It was difficult to answer, but she forced herself to respond.

"If the cost is something you have to sacrifice to achieve results..."

"And?"

"Then... I think your cost is time-"

"......"

**"And the warmth of a family."**

The response struck Poj harder than he'd expected. It was as if a wave of cold water had washed over him. He should've been furious at the audacity of the girl in front of him, but instead, he found himself agreeing with her.

Still, his goals were set. No matter how much her words affected him, he knew how to steer things back in his favor.

"You seem to understand investment well," he said with a smirk. "So, are you interested in investing with me?"

"Invest in what, Mr. Poj?"

"All I ask is for Phim to study abroad. You're the only one who can convince her. If you do that, I'll grant you one request-anything you want."

"Anything?"

"Yes, whatever it is."

Ki hesitated, her heart heavy with the weight of the proposal. "Alright... I'll request to talk to Phim."

"No," Poj interrupted, his tone sharp. "If you tell her about this deal, it's over. She'll dig her heels in and never leave your side."

"Then what do you want me to do?"

Poj leaned forward, clasping his hands on the desk to emphasize his seriousness.

"An intelligent girl like you already knows what needs to be done. But if you insist, I'll spell it out."

"......"

**"If Phim stays because she loves you, then you have to make her leave by making her hate you."**

Kiran's heart sank. The room seemed to close in on her. This was his demand? To break Phim's heart?

"That's your cost. But there are rules."

"Rules?"

"First, you can't tell Phim about this agreement. Second, as long as she's studying abroad, you're forbidden from contacting her. If you break these rules, she'll lose her resolve and come running back."

"I'm sorry but I will refuse, Mr. Poj."

Poj's eyebrows lifted slightly in surprise, though the smirk never left his face.

"Very well. Then consider this conversation forgotten. But mark my wordsPhim will marry in three years, have a child by the fourth, and take over the company in the fifth."

**Checkmate!**

Kiran closed her eyes, her shoulders slumping in defeat. She couldn't bear to listen to him any longer. She knew this was a trap-a gaping pit she'd fall into willingly.

Even knowing it could destroy her, she couldn't stop herself from stepping forward.

"Fine, I'll do it."

Poj's laughter echoed again, cold and victorious. It pierced through Kiran like a blade, cutting deep into her heart.

For the first time, she truly understood what it felt like to stand in Phim's shoes-**trapped in a game she never chose to play.**

His strength lay in exploiting others' weaknesses.

"That's more like it... So, tell me-what result do you want? I'll grant you anything you ask for. I promise."

Kiran remained silent, her face etched with tension. Her lips were pressed into a thin line.

"Come on, Kiran."

"Just please... please stop forcing Phim to do things... no matter what. I want this to be the last time."

"......"

"You've promised now, haven't you?"

This time, it was Poj who found himself speechless. Once again, Kiran's response was outside the bounds of what he had anticipated. He had underestimated her.

"I thought you'd ask me to let Phim call off the engagement... or to stop interfering in your relationship after she returns."

"....."

"But now that I think about it... your request is clever. By asking me not to force Phim, you'll get all of those things anyway, won't you?"

This time, Kiran smiled faintly. For a fleeting moment, her eyes reflected a tinge of pity for the man before her. But only for a moment.

"If I asked for that... I'd be no different from you. You're always drawing lines for Phim, making her live by what you think is best."

"....."

"I don't think about things with strategies for every little detail, like you... I'm not that complicated."

"....."

**"I just want Phim... to finally have a life of her own."**

"....."

**"Whether she calls off the engagement or comes back to me..."**

"....."

**"I'll leave it for Phim to decide."**

It felt as though Kiran was flipping over the entire chessboard, leaving the game unresolved.

This young girl had just metaphorically slapped him in the face with her words. Poj narrowed his eyes, studying Kiran carefully once more. The girl before him resembled a reflection of his younger self.

Her way of thinking and speaking was far beyond her years-logical yet filled with conviction. A little more of that sharpness, and she might be seen as aggressive. Yet her perspective on love was anything but shallow, defying the presumptions he'd once held about her.

**Poj realized he would have to reevaluate Kiran entirely.**

"All right... I won't argue with you. Our agreement will stand as is."

"Okay."

"Is there anything else?"

"Yes."

"Go on."

Ki looked up, meeting his deep, dark eyes with a resolute gaze. There wasn't a trace of hesitation in her expression as she spoke.

**"Please have your secretary draft two copies of our agreement. You sign, and I'll sign. We each keep one for record."**

January 10, 2009 ***ᴋɪʀᴀɴ'***ꜱ ***ᴘᴇʀ***ꜱ***ᴘᴇᴄᴛɪᴠᴇ***

"Hey, Pok. Why are you waving at every single plane that flies by?"

I couldn't help but ask Pratee, who stood waving enthusiastically at each plane passing the grassy area near Suvarnabhumi Airport, where people often biked.

"Well, I don't know which one Phim is on, so I have to wave at all of them! *Come on, one of them has to be hers. Has to be the one in my dream..."*

Pok broke into an off-key hum of an old song, the kind that didn't need a reason to exist.

We had sneaked out to send Phim off to study abroad but didn't want her to know. So here we were, stuck outside the chain-link fence near the airstrip. The feeling of watching her leave was bittersweet-a sense of something slipping away, never to return.

But all we could do now was endure.

"Kiran, tell me the truth. Are you sure you're okay with this? Tricking Phim into hating you, just to make her leave? It's such a gamble."

I sighed deeply at Pok's question, the thought of the pain I'd caused Phim weighing heavily on me. I'd forced myself to act cold toward her so she would change her mind and go. In exchange, she would finally be free from her father's control.

**I believed my intentions were good... even if the method wasn't right.**

"No, Pok, I don't think I'm okay with it at all. But honestly, what Mr. Poj wants for Phim-it's probably better for her in the long run. This will be the last time Phim will have to sacrifice her own desires. And I trust that Mr. Poj will keep his word."

"I still don't get it. Why can't he just drop the whole marriage thing for 3-4 years? Wouldn't it be better to focus on the happiness she already has rather than pinning everything on some uncertain future? Better a bird in the hand than two in the bush, you know?"

"That'd be easier if I only planned to be with her for those 3-4 years. **But Phim... she's the only one I'll ever love**. I can't think that way. As we grow older, Phim will have responsibilities-her career, her family's expectations."

"....."

**"This world doesn't revolve around just me and her."**

"Fair point."

"And besides, I think Mr. Poj would find some new way to stir up trouble. You've seen him, right? He's like the villain in a soap opera."

"So what, you're saying you've thought this through, then?"

"No, Pok. I think I've already made a mistake. I shouldn't have lied to Phim about Sai."

"Yeah, you think? So how do you expect to have any hope, Ki? Even if you send Phim away with this kind of bitterness, how will it end well for you?"

My heart sank at Pok's blunt remark. I sighed again, unsure of what else to do.

"My grandma always told me, *'What's meant to be yours will come back to you*.'"

"Ki, I just don't see how that's possible."

"Well, we'll just have to wait and see. It'll all work out. It's like... **S.T.P**., you know?"

"S.T.P.? What's that supposed to mean? *Saai Ting Phang* (**Broken Bed**)?!"

I smacked my friend hard on the head, annoyed by her ridiculous interpretation of my abbreviation.

"No, Pok! It means *Suek Tong Pissuth*! (**Which Must Be Proven**). Did you even pay attention in math class?"

# Chapter ꜱᴘᴇᴄɪᴀʟ 1: ᴛʜᴇ ᴏʀɪɢɪɴ ᴏꜰ ᴛʜᴇ ᴘᴏᴋɪ ɢᴀɴɢ

If you ask when I decided to befriend Kiran, I'd love to tell you a story that dates back to the reign of King Borommatrailokkanat—just to make it more dramatic. But, unfortunately…

I wasn’t born yet!

So, let me rewind instead to 1996, an era when RS was thriving like a golden age of music.

Back then, I was a six-year-old first grade—a round, chubby little kid with a face as adorable as a pickle jar. My smooth, dark skin glistened like beach pebbles polished by waves. My curly brown hair twisted into coils like crispy potato snacks, and my large black eyes sparkled like glossy longan seeds. Add to that a thick row of crescent-shaped lashes, and I was a walking magnet for affectionate pinches on my chubby, grayish cheeks.

But, just because I looked lovable didn’t mean everyone adored me.

Oddly enough, my so-called charm seemed to have no effect on the group of mischievous boys sitting at the back of the classroom.

“Fat and dark! Fat and dark!”

There it was again, the same chant they used to tease me—sometimes with added tongue-waggling and goofy faces. And every time, more and more troublemakers joined their gang to torment me.

At that age, I didn’t know how to fight back. I could only scrunch up my face in a mix of pain and frustration, like I was trying to push out a stubborn stool. I held back tears as much as I could, but the teasing grew louder and louder until I finally broke down crying. My sobs only made them laugh harder.

Every evening, I trudged home with tear-streaked cheeks and a runny nose, the evidence of my misery etched on my face.

Being an orphan, I lived with my grandmother. It had been just the two of us for as long as I could remember. And although Grandma was old, she wasn’t blind to the sadness her beloved granddaughter carried home every day.

“Pok, my dear, has someone been pinching you? You’ve been coming home in tears almost every day, and look at your cheeks—bruised and greenish!”

As I sat massaging my grandmother's legs with tea oil in the dim light of the evening, under a waning moon, she suddenly asked me a question.

A well-to-do grocery store owner who had built her fortune by lending money to market vendors, she was now half-sitting, half-lying on the bed. Her attention seemed divided between my touch and the large triangular pillows beside her. She absentmindedly stroked the smooth teakwood frame of the bed as she spoke.

“No, Grandma. The greenish color is just my natural skin tone. Don’t you remember?”

I paused my kneading and looked up, feeling slightly annoyed. But Grandma only chuckled, her laugh low and throaty, before expertly spitting betel juice into a spittoon with the precision of a pro athlete.

“Still, you’re always crying when you get home. Who’s been bothering you? Tell me, my dear.”

That was all it took to bring the tears back to my eyes. The small hands that had been working so hard to massage her legs fell limp.

“Well…”

“Well, what?”

“It’s just…”

“Out with it, dear, or I’ll give you a swift kick!”

Her teasing threat made me instinctively scoot back, but I relented.

“Alright, alright! I’ll tell you. It’s because they’ve been teasing me,

Grandma—"

Before I could even finish my sentence, Grandma slapped her knee and spat more betel juice into the spittoon, this time with even greater enthusiasm.

“I knew it! Why don’t I ever get this lucky with lottery numbers? So, what are they teasing you about? Is it a bicycle wheel or a motorbike wheel?”

I blinked, struggling to believe that her question was serious. But the innocent look in her eyes made me wonder if she truly didn’t mean anything by it.

“No, Grandma. Not bicycle wheels or motorbike wheels. They’re just teasing me in general.”

“Teasing you in general? What are they saying?”

Grandma’s posture shifted to an alert position, her knee raised, as if ready to spring into action.

“They keep calling me ‘*fat and dark,’* Grandma." My voice trembled as I repeated the cruel words that had cut me to the core every day. “Am I not pretty, Grandma?”

“Who says you’re not pretty?” Grandma reached out, her calloused hand gently pulling me into a comforting hug. “You’re beautiful, my dear. Just like me.”

I glanced up at my dark-skinned, curvy grandmother, her curly brown hair framing her face, her thick eyebrows arched like perched leeches. There was no doubt we were related—the similarities were too uncanny to deny.

“But Grandma… my friends said I’m not pretty.”

Grandma motioned for me to come closer, and I obeyed without hesitation. She wrapped her arms around me, stroking my hair gently with her weathered hand, her touch filled with love.

“My dear, you are beautiful—in your own way. Who cares what people think? You don’t have to pay them any attention,” Grandma said softly. “At least, you’re the most beautiful girl in my eyes.”

I pursed my lips, almost pressing my lower lip to the tip of my nose, trying to hold back my tears after hearing Grandma’s comforting words. But I couldn’t help whispering in a hoarse voice to argue with her.

“In this whole world, Grandma, you’re probably the only one who thinks I’m beautiful.”

“There’s one more person who sees you as the most beautiful,” Grandma replied with a gentle smile.

“Who’s that, Grandma?”

“You, my dear.”

“Me?” I blinked, confused.

“Yes. Always remember this: If you believe you’re the most beautiful, then you will be. But if you think you’re not, then no one else will see you as beautiful either.”

Grandma tightened her embrace around me, looking down at me with warm, youthful eyes that sparkled despite her age. I nestled my face into her chest, reflecting on her words—words that ended up changing the way I saw myself forever.

“Fat and dark! Fat and dark! Fat and dark!”

Strangely enough, those repetitive taunts no longer hurt me the way they used to. All I felt now was mild annoyance, like an itch that wasn’t worth scratching. After all, Grandma said I was the most beautiful.

As I stood by the trash bins behind the classroom during lunch break, surrounded by a group of rowdy boys hurling their usual insults, I was about to yell in frustration when a soft but firm voice cut through the noise.

“Don’t you ever get tired of teasing her every single day?!”

Both the boys and I turned towards the source of the voice. There stood a petite girl with almond-shaped light brown eyes, smooth porcelain-like skin, and a short bob haircut that framed her face perfectly. She looked as delicate as a Japanese ceramic doll displayed in the teachers’ lounge.

On her uniform was a name embroidered in blue thread: **Kiran Phipityapongsa.**

“You’re all fat and dark too,” she said plainly. “So how do you even have the nerve to tease someone else?”

The boys exchanged uneasy glances, their leader, Ball, included. For some reason, none of them could meet her gaze. Ball, in particular, looked almost terrified when he quickly glanced at her before bolting out of the room. His friends, clearly confused, scurried after him like a herd of startled deer.

“What’s your name?”

Before I knew it, the doll-like girl had moved closer to me. Her flawless complexion and delicate features seemed even more striking up close. She smiled faintly, her soft pink lips moving as she spoke in an almost musical tone.

“Poh Lah Dee… right?”

Her elongated vowels made me frown a little. Determined to help her pronounce it correctly, I exaggerated the “R” sound to teach her properly.

“No, it’s Poh Rrrrah Dee. Like this!” I rolled my “R”s so much that I accidentally sprayed her face with spit.

“Isn’t that hard to say?” she asked, pulling out a cartoon-printed handkerchief to wipe her face with surprising grace. She didn’t scold me or show even a hint of annoyance.

Do people like this actually exist?

“Just call me Pok. What about you?”

Her almond eyes blinked at me, framed by thick, straight lashes that made her gaze even more captivating. Then, a small, playful smile appeared on her lips, making her pink cheeks look adorably chubby.

“I’m Ki. Ki—rrrrr—an,” she said, rolling her “R”s back at me, splattering a fine mist of spit onto my face.

I closed my eyes and smiled, using the collar of my uniform to clumsily wipe my face. Compared to her dainty handkerchief, my attempt couldn’t have been more undignified.

“Not bad. You’re getting better at pronouncing Kurrine."

“Wait, wait!” she said with a laugh. “It’s Kiran, not… urine!”

“Kiran,” I corrected myself, smiling. “Why did you help me with those boys? No one’s ever stood up for me before.”

Kiran’s playful smile faded into a thoughtful expression. She gazed at me with her light brown eyes, her brows furrowing slightly.

“Maybe I should be asking you that question,” she said softly.

"Why?"

"Why do you let them bully you every day, Pok? You're so much bigger than them. If you pushed them even once, they'd go flying."

Why, indeed?

That was a good question. Why hadn’t I thought about it before? Those boys were all short and skinny, barely up to my shoulders. If I pushed them, they’d really go flying like Kiran said.

"From now on, Pok, don’t let anyone bully you. Otherwise, you’ll be stuck being their target for the rest of your life."

Those softly spoken words echoed in my mind, looping over and over. Somehow, I found myself nodding to Kiran, whose sharp eyes were fixed on me like she’d cast a spell.

"Okay…"

Satisfied with my response, Kiran walked back to her desk and sat down, waiting for class to start. It was only then I realized that my first month at this school—spent friendless and feeling worthless—might not have been so meaningless after all.

For so long, I’d thought I’d be bullied into oblivion without anyone to care or stand up for me. But today, I discovered I had at least one person willing to fight for justice on my behalf. And that person wasn’t me—I’d never even tried to defend myself.

For days now, the boys hadn’t teased me. I didn’t know if it was because of Kiran's presence or because I’d started raising my large hand threateningly every time they approached. Either way, my school life had become much more peaceful—so peaceful that I finally dared to look around the classroom instead of just burying my head in my books in fear.

That’s when I noticed something surprising: Kiran didn’t have any friends either.

Her doll-like face, as delicate as fine porcelain, was always calm and unreadable. It made her seem older than her age, and no one dared to approach her. She didn’t seem to mind, though. She excelled in every subject, and teachers constantly praised her, making her stand out without uttering a single word. The boys—both the well-behaved and the troublemakers—often stole glances at her, blushing and smiling to themselves like boys do when they act older than they really are.

After watching her quietly for days, I made up my mind: I would become Kiran's best friend one day.

This odd girl with eyes like Japanese doll buttons.

That day came sooner than I expected.

One evening, while trudging home alone as usual, I spotted a familiar figure in the narrow alley leading to my house. It was Kiran.

I couldn’t hide my surprise. Her family always sent a car to pick her up after school. What was she doing here, walking alone?

From behind, she looked even smaller than usual. Her thin shoulders and upright posture made her seem more like a robot from a cartoon than a real person. I hesitated, unsure whether to call out to her. Just then, she stopped in her tracks.

She froze.

Curious, I leaned forward to see what was happening. That’s when I spotted it—a huge, menacing dog standing in her path, baring its teeth and growling. Kiran stood rigid, not moving a muscle.

I glanced between her and the dog, my heart pounding in panic. Before I could think, the dog lunged toward us.

"Ahhh!" I screamed, my voice piercing the air.

Without thinking, I grabbed Kiran around the waist and hoisted her up, cradling her in both arms as if she were a precious bomb about to explode. Then I ran.

I ran as fast as I could, faster than I’d ever run before. Fear pushed me forward, my legs moving like lightning. I zoomed past tuk-tuks, leaving a blur of startled drivers behind. After outrunning about seven of them, it hit me:

**She’s heavy!**

And as soon as I realized that, my arms felt like jelly. I stumbled to the side of the road and gently dropped Kiran onto a patch of grass with a loud thud. She didn’t complain, though. She just blinked up at me, scratching her head like she was more confused than anything.

"Thanks for saving me, Pok," she said at last. "If it weren’t for you, that dog might’ve eaten me alive."

"Heh… No problem. I think I just panicked."

"I can’t believe how strong you are—you carried me and ran like that!"

"Yeah… Once, my grandma yelled that there was a fire, and I panicked and carried a giant ceramic water jar all the way to the market."

I frowned, remembering that day. To this day, I still didn’t know why I’d carried the jar.

Why didn’t I carry Grandma instead?

"Oh, I get it. You’re just really good at that kind of thing."

Good at what?!

Before I could ask, she pointed to a nearby house.

"We’re almost at my place. Why don’t you come inside for some snacks?

My mom always makes something for me when I get home from school."

Snacks? I wasn’t sure what kind of snacks rich kids ate, but just the word made my mouth water. My stomach growled loudly in response.

"Pok… your drool is dripping onto your shirt."

I quickly wiped my chin and nodded. Without another word, Kiran motioned for me to follow her.

"Here we are," she said, gesturing toward a large, impressive house.

I glanced up at the tall wooden fence, its dark panels neatly lined up and towering over me. The house behind it was modern and beautiful, far more contemporary than my grandma's large but old-fashioned shophouse. Kiran pushed open the small gate seamlessly hidden within the larger one and gestured for me to follow her inside. The white house was warm and inviting, its interiors as stylishly decorated as the homes I'd seen in magazines.

“How was your first day walking home alone Gaoki? Did you enjoy it?”

A beautiful woman, probably in her mid-thirties and clearly Kiran's mom, came out from the kitchen. She hugged her small daughter affectionately while asking her the question.

“It was fine, Mom. Almost got eaten by a dog, though. Good thing Pok saved me.”

Gaoki? The name sounded so soft and innocent, perfectly fitting for her small frame and sharp eyes. It almost made me laugh.

“This is Pok?” Kiran's mom turned her attention to me with a bright smile.

“What an adorable little thing!”

Before I could respond, she reached out and pinched my cheek lightly, a typical adult gesture when meeting me for the first time. I bent my knees politely and brought my hands together in a wai, introducing myself cheerfully.

“My name is Pok, Auntie. I’m Gaoki’s classmate.”

Kiran shot me an unimpressed glare, likely because I used her full nickname, but I brushed it off. I was far more focused on her mom, who smiled at me warmly. Her kindness hit me harder than I expected—perhaps because I had grown up without a mother. The warmth in her eyes made me feel something I hadn’t felt in a long time.

When she learned I lived alone with my grandma, her kindness multiplied. She hugged me again, led me to a table in the garden under a fragrant flowering vine, and served snacks alongside Kiran.

“Thank you so much, Auntie,” I said, truly moved.

She stroked my curly hair softly and said something that warmed my heart in a way I’d never known before.

“From now on, Pok, you can call me Mom, too.”

I stared up at her, my wide eyes brimming with tears of disbelief, and saw her bright, genuine smile waiting for me. My voice shook as I responded.

“Yes… Mom.”

She pulled me into a tight hug before instructing Kiran to make me feel at home. Then, she disappeared back into the house, leaving me with an array of delicious snacks, a shy classmate, and a strange sense of happiness.

On the table were my favorites: sago dumplings filled with minced pork, crispy golden baskets stuffed with chicken, corn, peas, and carrots, and neatly sliced fruit—apples, guavas, and watermelon. There was even a large pitcher of pink syrup, not just any syrup but the iconic *Hale’s Blue Boy,* which I’d always dreamed of tasting.

It all reminded me of my grandma.

Would it be rude if I asked to take some home for her?

While these thoughts ran through my head, I nibbled on the sago dumplings, finishing them all too quickly. A sudden problem presented itself—I wasn’t full yet!

I glanced over at Kiran, who was swinging her legs and chewing a golden basket slowly. Her plate was still full, thanks to her snail-like eating speed. My gaze must have been intense because she flinched when she met my eyes. After glancing at her untouched plate, she seemed to understand my silent plea and pushed her sago dumplings toward me with a resigned sigh.

“You can have mine, Pok. I’m full.”

**This girl really was a saint.**

I followed my life motto: *Those who feed you are your benefactors*.

My hand moved faster than my mouth, and I was already reaching for a dumpling before managing to mumble, “Thank you.”

“Ki!” A boy’s voice called out suddenly, and I turned to see a tall boy who looked about fourth grade. He held a soccer ball and was soaked with sweat.

“And who’s this?” he asked, looking at me with a teasing smile. “I didn’t know you had friends, Gaoki.”

“Be quiet, Phi Kha. Why wouldn’t I have friends?”

I couldn’t help but grin. She admitted we were friends, even if she didn’t sound happy about it.

“This is Pok,” she said begrudgingly. “Pok, this is my brother, Phi Kha.”

Phim beamed at me, his wide smile so charming it made his eyes disappear into crescents.

“Nice to meet you, Pok. You’re cute—big eyes, curly hair. Perfect match for our family!”

I blinked, caught off guard by his compliment. Why are the cute ones always this smooth?

Then, without warning, he exclaimed, “Oh, this is perfect!” and rummaged through his backpack excitedly.

“Found it!” he declared triumphantly, holding up a small pink box and placing it in front of us.

“What’s this?” Kiran asked, frowning.

“A gift for the two of you,” Phi Kha announced proudly. “It suits your little gang perfectly.”

I glanced at the box—it was strawberry-flavored Pocky.

“How does it suit us? I prefer chocolate, anyway.”

Phi Kha pointed at me, then at Kiran, a smug grin on his face.

**“You’re Kiran, and she’s Pok. Together, you’re the Pok-Ki gang! So, of course, you should eat Pocky!”**

I gaped in astonishment at the *deep humor* of Kiran's brother, Phi Kha, who, after delivering her punchline, grabbed a piece of guava from the plate and darted back into the house, yelling joyfully along the way.

"Mom, I’m home! I missed you so much!"

I watched Phi Kha's back disappear into the house before turning to glance at Kiran. Her neutral, slightly dazed expression was a stark contrast to her brother’s endless grin. It took me a moment to adjust, and I did so by quickly finishing off the snacks in front of me. When the last piece of fruit was gone, my attention shifted to the unopened box of Pocky sitting on the table. My eyes sparkled with anticipation.

Kiran, as if she could read my mind once again, offered, "Do you want some? I’ll open it for you."

This girl... She really knows how to be a good friend.

“Can I... really be your friend?”

“Huh?” Kiran paused mid-motion, her small hand clutching the unopened Pocky box. She looked at me, confused.

“Will you really accept me as your friend?” I repeated, thinking she might have trouble hearing me, just as she’d once told me before.

“Of course,” Kiran replied earnestly. “You’re my first friend, actually. And you saved my life, so how could I not?”

Her words warmed my heart. Smiling brightly, I took the box from her hand and tore it open with a quick motion. I split the Pocky sticks into two portions, keeping half for myself and handing the other half to her. Kiran took it hesitantly, her brow furrowed in mild confusion.

“Let’s eat Pocky together and make a vow!” I declared.

“A vow?”

“Yes, a vow! Don’t you dare turn your back on me now—I saved your life, remember?!” I teased with a mischievous grin.

Kiran sighed in defeat, nodding reluctantly. “Fine. Let’s hear it then.”

Seizing the moment, I held my portion of Pocky sticks like a sword and touched them to hers. Then, in my most solemn voice, I declared, “We, as members of the PoKi Gang, hereby vow to be lifelong friends. We shall share joy and endure sorrow together, no matter what!”

Kiran's small eyes widened as much as they possibly could, which still wasn’t very much. For a moment, I thought she’d repeat the vow with the same level of gravity. Instead, she muttered something completely unexpected.

“Share joy, endure sorrow… uh, amen?”

What?!

To make things worse, she lifted her Pocky sticks to her forehead, as though paying reverence to them, and solemnly concluded with a loud, “Amen!”

I slapped my forehead in frustration. Without a word, I grabbed the Pocky sticks from her hands and shoved them into my mouth, crunching them aggressively as I glared at her.

Though our friendship had a chaotic beginning, that day marked the birth of the **PoKi Gang.** And, despite everything, Kiran and I have been inseparable ever since.

The end.

Finally.

And so it is.

# Chapter ꜱᴘᴇᴄɪᴀʟ 2 : ᴛʜᴇ ʟɪᴛᴍᴜꜱ ᴘᴀᴘᴇʀ’ꜱ ᴄʜᴀɴɢɪɴɢ ᴄᴏʟᴏʀꜱ

***ᴘʜɪᴍ'***ꜱ ***ᴘᴇʀ***ꜱ***ᴘᴇᴄᴛɪᴠᴇ***

*2003 (7th Grade)*

*At a middle school in the heart of Bangkok*

"Phim, you’re so cute. Do you even know that?"

"Phim, you’re like the girl of my dreams. If you ever give me a chance, I’d be so happy."

"I miss you, Phim. When will you open your heart to me?"

Over and over again—hundreds, maybe even thousands of times—I’d heard such sweet words since entering middle school. They came from countless boys, from both my class and others. Some even went out of their way to find creative methods to contact me, just to spout this kind of nonsense.

To me, these sugary words were completely meaningless, sometimes even annoying. They made me so frustrated that I couldn’t help but act cold and indifferent toward them. My chilly demeanor spread like wildfire, and soon enough, everyone knew me as someone hard to approach. By the end, only a few brave souls dared to persist.

One of them was Bom.

"Phim, try this! I bought it for you," Bom said, placing a large box of donuts in front of me.

I glanced at the box briefly before looking up at him, forcing a faint, polite smile. At least with Bom, I could never be outright rude. He’d been my best friend since kindergarten, and, unlike others, he never tried to corner me with pushy confessions. Bom always showed his care subtly—through small gestures of thoughtfulness. He knew how to maintain a comfortable boundary, so I never felt suffocated around him.

"Thanks, Bom," I replied.

"Mind if I share these with the others?"

"Of course not! Everyone should get to try them in their own. They’re delicious, I want it all."

Bomb’s rosy lips curved into a grin, his playful energy never waning. He didn’t sulk or insist that I keep the donuts for myself. It was this easy-going attitude of his that made me happy he was still around.

Still, no matter how great he was...

**I couldn’t feel anything for him beyond friendship.**

And honestly, that didn’t bother me. At my age, relationships were the last thing on my mind. I had no reason to stress about love—or so I thought, until someone came along and completely unraveled the fragile balance I’d taken for granted.

That someone now occupied nearly every corner of my thoughts, effortlessly.

She...

She, who I could only watch from afar.

And today was no exception.

Across the courtyard, I spotted her near the large lotus pond beside the elementary school building. Even though she stood far from the marble table where my friends and I sat reading, her figure seemed crystal clear to me. I could see everything—the way her slender eyes stared off into the distance, her delicate nose, and her soft pink lips. Her jet-black hair, falling just to her shoulders, framed her pale face in a way that captivated me every time.

I’d only ever seen her from a distance, but I could remember every detail of her face.

I found myself staring at her calm, detached expression again, recalling the first time we met. That day, my friends and I had gone to cheer for Bom at a basketball match in the school gym. Amidst the buzzing crowd, a voice rose near me, sharp and almost boyish.

"Hey, Kiran. I really want to tie my shoelaces in that pattern too!"

I turned to find the source—a tall, muscular girl with dark skin, wearing her PE uniform. Her sturdy appearance made it hard to believe she’d care about something as trivial as decorative shoelace patterns.

"Take your shoes off," her companion replied, her voice cool and steady. "I’ll teach you."

The second girl, Kiran, immediately captured my attention. She sat with her long legs stretched out on the gym floor, unbothered by the lack of a mat beneath her. Her relaxed posture set her apart from everyone else, but it wasn’t just that. It was her face—a calm, stoic face that seemed untouched by the chaos surrounding us.

While others shouted, laughed, or frowned with anticipation for the game to start, Kiran’s lack of emotion stood out to me. It made her... striking.

"No way. You know I’m terrible at stuff like this," the first girl whined.

"You do it for me, Ki."

Without waiting for a response, the taller girl yanked off her sneakers and shoved them toward Kiran’s face. Despite the pushiness, Kiran’s expression barely wavered. She let out a faint sigh before quietly taking the shoes and untying the laces, her delicate fingers moving with care and precision.

From that moment on, I couldn’t focus on anything else—not Bom, not the game, nothing. My attention was glued to Kiran’s profile as she worked on the laces, sunlight streaming through the gym doors and illuminating her features. I could see the tiny hairs on her cheeks and her long, goldenbrown lashes. Her face was serene, almost otherworldly, like a painting I couldn’t look away from.

I must have stared for too long because, eventually, she looked up and met my gaze.

*Thump, thump, thump.*

The moment our eyes met, my heart pounded so loudly I could hear it echoing in my ears. Then, as if under some spell, it slowed to a near stop. Her narrow, amber-colored eyes locked onto mine, freezing me in place. I didn’t know why or how, but in that instant, everything else faded away.

"Are you done yet? Stop dawdling already."

Luckily, a deep, husky voice interrupted the moment—just before my heart could stop beating for real.

Kiran shifted her attention away from me to tie the other shoelace, while her friend inspected the finished one with a satisfied expression.

I don’t know why, but I suddenly felt an urge to protect Kiran from the seemingly overbearing girl.

Yet, despite everything, I couldn’t stop watching Kiran’s shoelace-tying process from start to finish. It was unfortunate that, for just a moment, I turned to watch the field when a loud cheer erupted from the spectators. By the time I looked back, the two of them had disappeared.

It’s strange—before meeting her, it felt like Kiran didn’t even exist in this world. But after that one encounter, everything about her seemed to capture my attention. Suddenly, she became the first thing I’d search for everywhere. And as fate would have it, the seemingly ordinary Kiran wasn’t just someone who caught my eye.

“Who got the top score in our grade?” I asked Ploy, my best friend, as we stood in front of the bulletin board displaying the end-of-year rankings for our first year of middle school.

“Oh, it’s Kiran Phipityapongsa. Do you know her, Phim? She’s the tall, fairskinned one from Class 1. Looks kind of proud but really pretty, like a Japanese doll. You’d definitely recognize her if you saw her. She’s so noticeable. And her friend? Even more so.”

Hearing Ploy’s description of Kiran, my heart skipped a beat, followed by a warmth spreading across my cheeks. Then came her next words, which only made me feel hotter, as though I’d caught a fever.

“Kiran’s weirdly talented—great at studying, amazing at sports. She’s always in her gym uniform, though. Has just one close friend, Pok. But, wow, she’s super popular, with both boys and girls.”

**Both boys and girls?**

I couldn’t explain why that statement unsettled me so much. Mixed with my nervousness was a strange new feeling that became clearer with every second: **irritation**.

There was no logic to my frustration—no reason for it at all.

And yet, despite Kiran being the source of these odd emotions, I couldn’t help but keep looking for her. The more I searched, though, the less I saw her, leaving me to wonder if our worlds were destined to run parallel, never to overlap.

Then, just when I’d stopped searching, I saw her again.

The second time I encountered Kiran was during a school-wide math competition. The event was held in the auditorium, with participants seated onstage, and all the students gathered to watch. Naturally, Ploy and I wouldn’t miss it.

“Phim, there she is! Kiran’s the one sitting at the far right of the stage,” Ploy said, nudging me.

I turned immediately to look, unprepared for the wave of emotions that crashed over me.

Today, Kiran looked so different. She was in full uniform, her long hair— which she usually let fall loosely—neatly tied up, revealing her slender neck. The tiny stray strands around her nape gave her a softer, more delicate appearance than before.

Her small, composed face was just as emotionless as ever, but her brown eyes sparkled with a determined intensity I hadn’t noticed before. It would have been perfect if, even for a single second, I could’ve been reflected in those eyes.

For the first time, I understood how people who had silently admired me felt. For the first time, my heart silently cried out for Kiran to notice me.

The bittersweet sting of unspoken feelings...

“She’s just as good as I thought. With Kiran competing, no one else stands a chance,” Ploy murmured as Kiran began pulling ahead of the others.

I couldn’t help but smile with pride at her success. But the squeals and cheers from a group of girls in the front rows grated on me in ways I couldn’t explain.

That irritation only grew when the competition ended. Unsurprisingly, Kiran won, easily beating the older students with a massive score. Oddly, I felt proud of her, as though her victory were my own.

But that pride quickly faded when, as Kiran stepped off the stage, a senior boy walked up to her, grinning as he tousled her hair playfully.

My eyebrows knit together instinctively as annoyance bubbled to the surface. I was on the verge of outright anger when Kiran tilted her head away and pushed his arm aside with a displeased expression.

For the first time, I saw her display a hint of irritation, her small frown and narrowed eyes fixed on the senior. Meanwhile, he just laughed, clearly amused at having gotten a reaction from her.

But before I could feel any relief, a group of girls swarmed around Kiran, their excitement like magnets drawing them toward her. Kiran gave them a faint, neutral smile, but her furrowed brows betrayed her discomfort.

Within seconds, it was clear she couldn’t handle the crowd. She began craning her neck, looking for someone—anyone—to rescue her. And her savior came, faster than I’d expected.

Pok, her large, strong friend, strode confidently into the crowd, draping a protective arm around Kiran’s shoulders before dragging her away without a word, ignoring the disappointed whines of the other girls.

I couldn’t help but notice the faint smile on Kiran’s face as she allowed herself to be led away, and a thought crossed my mind:

Their relationship was like a mutual dependency, much like the symbiosis between termites and protozoa—neither could survive without the other. Pok seemed to do everything for Kiran, even tying her shoelaces, in exchange for Kiran’s trust and protection from others.

At that moment, I felt as though a towering wall stood between Kiran and me, one too high to climb. That wall left me with a strange mix of despair and quiet admiration, feelings I couldn’t shake off even to this day. “Phim? Are you okay? You’ve been daydreaming a lot lately.”

Kade’s voice, one of my closest friends in the group, snapped me out of my reverie. She was sitting next to me, flipping through a book at the stone table we shared. I jolted awake, realizing I’d been lost in thought.

My eyes instinctively darted to the tall figure that had been standing by the lotus pond just moments ago, only to see the retreating figure of Kiran. She walked alongside Pok, her petite frame a stark contrast to Pok’s broad shoulders. In one hand, Pok held a large bag of meatballs, while the other was busy popping one into her mouth with clear delight.

Though I only saw their backs, I couldn’t help but stare until they disappeared from view, my heart racing with an erratic rhythm that felt all too familiar whenever I saw her.

“Kade…”

“What is it, Phim? Why do you sound so defeated?”

“I think… I think I’m sick."

*“Ge-ng Gra-daeng! We’re the best! No one can outshine us—we’ll bounce back! Ge-ng Gra-daeng, Gra-daeng, Gra-daeng! We’re the best! Bounce back, back, back!”*

The lively chants filled the air, fueling the vibrant energy of the annual sports day. However, unlike the others, I felt none of the excitement. The cheerleader uniform I wore was bulky and suffocating, the heavy fabric trapping the heat and making every second unbearable. My hair was stiff from the copious amounts of hairspray, and sweat beaded down my forehead, itching to be wiped away. Unfortunately, the lace gloves I wore made even that impossible.

As if the heat and discomfort weren’t enough, the relentless cheering and smiling were taking their toll. My patience wore thin, but just as I felt it was about to break, my role finally ended.

With hurried steps, I joined the other cheerleaders, seeking refuge in the shade of a large rain tree by the side of the bleachers. Away from the crowd, we all exhaled in unison as the staff swarmed us, offering water and towels. This area was restricted to staff and athletes, providing a sense of privacy that the crowded bleachers couldn’t.

At least, that’s what I thought.

“Phim, you were so cute out there! Can I get a picture with you?”

My brief reprieve ended abruptly as a group of male track athletes surrounded me. Trapped, I had no choice but to smile and pose for their cameras. The jostling crowd made it worse; I was bumped and pushed as they tried to get closer.

When I finally stumbled back against someone, I turned instinctively to apologize.

“Oh! I’m so sorry—”

I froze mid-sentence, my words catching in my throat as my world seemed to stop spinning.

**Kiran.**

She stood there, towering over me, her face mere inches away. My cheeks burned hotter than the sun overhead, and my heart pounded as her soft, almond-shaped eyes met mine. I struggled to move, to speak, but every carefully rehearsed line I’d planned to say vanished from my mind.

“It’s okay,” she said softly, her voice gentle yet steady.

I nodded too quickly, fumbling to turn away, my movements filled with nervous energy. Though a lively obstacle-eating contest was happening in the field, drawing cheers from both the bleachers and the sidelines, my mind couldn’t focus. My vision blurred, and my heart thudded wildly, leaving me dazed.

Was it the oppressive heat? The suffocating crowd? Or maybe… maybe it was knowing that Kiran had been standing behind me the entire time. Whatever the reason, I felt faint.

Just then, a cool breeze brushed against my face, steady and refreshing. Confused, I turned to find its source and was startled by the sight before me.

Kiran, standing behind me with a small handheld fan. She waved it nonchalantly, her expression calm as if nothing was unusual. Even when I turned to look at her, puzzled, she simply raised a brow and spoke in her usual flat tone, still fanning me with quiet diligence.

“You looked flushed, and you’re sweating a lot,” she said matter-of-factly. “Do you want me to fan harder? I can—my wrist is strong.”

“N-no, this is fine,” I stammered, genuinely meaning it.

Just the fact that she noticed me—just knowing she cared enough to help— was already more than enough.

“Go, Pok! You’ve got this!”

Suddenly, a chorus of cheers erupted around us. Even Kiran joined in, her voice surprisingly loud as she cupped her hands to call out for her best friend. She smiled brightly, her usually reserved expression replaced by one full of pride and joy.

I couldn’t help but glance at her from the corner of my eye, captivated by this rare, radiant side of her. She stood there, her left hand still fanning me while her right waved enthusiastically at Pok, cheering her on with all her might.

Kiran’s smile was a rare sight. It was soft yet dazzling, filling the world around her with warmth and light. I wanted to capture this moment, to etch every detail into my memory.

Meanwhile, Pok was giving it her all in the contest, her face smudged with flour from one of the challenges. Her lips were stained a bright red from a round that required her to apply lipstick before downing a full liter of soda. Her hair was tied into several ponytails with rubber bands from an earlier stage, giving her a chaotic but endearing look.

Unsurprisingly, Pok managed to secure a victory in the end. Kiran’s cheerfulness was infectious as she waved both arms enthusiastically at her friend, her smile brighter than ever.

And yet, amidst all the noise and excitement, she never stopped fanning me, her actions as steady as ever.

"Ki! I got first place! Come take a photo for me!"

As much as I wanted time to stop right here and now, I couldn’t resist the orders of our Queen. Kiran, the tall girl who had been diligently fanning me, paused too, but to my surprise, she handed me the fan instead, her expression softening with concern.

“Are you feeling better? Here, keep this—you might need it later.”

I nodded, accepting the fan in confusion. Up until that moment, I’d never imagined that behind Kiran’s cool and distant exterior lay such genuine care, even for someone she barely knew, like me.

“Make sure to drink plenty of water too. Oh, here—this is unopened. I gotta go now!”

Before I could reply, Pok’s loud, impatient shout echoed again. “Kiran!

Hurry up! Are your legs stuck or what? You’re slower than a snail!”

Kiran fumbled to pull a water bottle from her pocket and shoved it into my hand, clearly in a rush. Then, with long strides, she dashed off to tend to her overly dramatic friend, Pok, who always demanded to be pampered.

I stood there, gripping the bottle tightly, my eyes following Kiran’s retreating figure until she disappeared from sight. Today had been full of unexpected surprises, leaving me with an overwhelming mix of emotions. But amidst all the chaos, one thought stood out clearly in my mind:

Kiran is adorable.

**And not just adorable—really adorable.**

“Happy birthday, Phim!”

The cheerful voice of my sister Phi Prae rang in my ears as she pulled me into a warm hug and kissed my cheek. I squirmed and giggled, unable to resist her playful affection. My laughter made her chuckle too.

“Where’s Dad?” I asked, looking up at her with hopeful eyes. “Didn’t he say he’d come to celebrate with me?”

“Dad got caught up with some urgent work, sweetie,” Phi Pae replied gently. “But he’ll be here soon, okay?”

A sigh escaped my lips before I could stop it. It wasn’t the first time Dad had promised to join me for my birthday, only to cancel at the last minute. I couldn’t help but feel disappointed, memories of past broken promises clouding my thoughts.

Noticing my crestfallen expression, Phi Prae tightened her hug and stroked my hair comfortingly. “Don’t pout, Phim. Let’s open your presents instead!”

Her radiant smile eased some of the weight in my chest as she handed me a neatly wrapped pink gift box. I bowed slightly in thanks before accepting it with both hands, forcing a small smile.

“Come on, give me a real smile, my little angel,” she teased, and this time, her words earned a genuine grin from me.

Satisfied, Phi Prae laughed and gestured for me to unwrap the box. I carefully peeled back the paper, trying not to tear it too much. Inside was a sleek navy-blue box with a lid. I glanced at Phi Prae one more time before slowly lifting the lid, as if afraid that rushing might make the contents vanish.

“Phi… Oh my gosh…!”

I gasped in delight when I saw what was inside—a brand-new digital camera, the exact model I’d been secretly wishing for.

“I saw you staring at it in the store window last week,” Phi Prae explained with a smile. “I figured you must have wanted it.”

“Yes, I did! I wanted it so much! Thank you, Phi!”

I threw my arms around her, hugging her tightly before turning my attention back to the camera. It was stunning, with a glossy pink finish that gleamed under the light. My heart raced as I picked it up, running my fingers over its smooth surface.

But as much as I adored the camera, it wasn’t the object itself that made my heart flutter.

It was the thought of capturing someone’s smile with it.

**Her smile—bright and unguarded—lit up my world every time I saw it.**

I wanted to preserve every detail of that smile, imprint it onto my memory, and hold onto the feelings it stirred within me.

Now, with this camera, I could do just that.

But as for the emotions behind those captured moments, I’d entrust those to my heart.

# Chapter ꜱᴘᴇᴄɪᴀʟ 3 : ᴛɪᴍᴇ ᴛʜᴀᴛ ᴄʀᴀᴡʟꜱ ꜱʟᴏᴡᴇʀ ᴛʜᴀɴ ᴀ ꜱɴᴀɪʟ

***ᴋɪʀᴀɴ'***ꜱ ***ᴘᴇʀ***ꜱ***ᴘᴇᴄᴛɪᴠᴇ***

Even though it feels futile, I still can’t help but do the same thing over and over again: writing letters to Phim.

Letters that I’ll never send. Not even one.

Yet, every single day, I sit down at my desk, open my notebook, and stare at the blank page for a moment before pouring my thoughts onto it. It’s as if writing these letters soothes the ache of missing someone so much it feels unbearable.

***December 4, 2009***

*365 days since we parted.*

*Dear Phim,*

*Hi Phim, it’s me.*

*I believe you still remember what today is.*

*Before, I’m sure you’d recall this as my birthday. But after that night— tonight, one year ago—when I hurt you so badly, I can no longer be certain.*

*Do you still remember it the same way?*

*I’m sorry.*

*Sorry for choosing a path so difficult for both of us, without even asking for your thoughts. I did it because I believed—believed in our love.*

***Believed in your love.***

*It might seem foolish, but nothing can shake my faith that one day… you’ll come back. And one day, we’ll be by each other’s side again.*

***I’ll wait for you, Phim.***

*It must be so cold in London right now. Are you keeping warm? Wearing thick clothes? Using a blanket? I’m worried, knowing how stubborn you are —how you hate bundling up and sleep without a blanket.*

*Here in Thailand, winter is just as confusing as ever. The chill only shows up briefly—early mornings or late nights—and disappears so fast that even Pok can’t help but make fun of it.*

*“This winter’s like a child’s, um, shortcomings—over before it even starts,” Pok said.*

*I couldn’t help but laugh and think about a conversation I had earlier with Pratee.*

*“Man, it’s like it’s cold in the morning, but as soon as I grab a jacket, sweat’s pouring down before I even get my arms through the sleeves! Makes me miss London."*

*“You? London? Since when? And why didn’t I know?”*

*“Well, you know me…” she shrugged with mock grandeur. “Can’t afford it. But I can imagine it. And boy, I’m rich in imagination.”*

*I laughed then and am laughing now, but how did this random thought end up in my letter to you? It’s such a ridiculous intrusion. I’m sorry, Phim.*

*Let’s get back on track.*

*I haven’t told you yet, have I? Pok and I moved to a new apartment recently. We couldn’t stay in the old place anymore—too many memories of you. It hurt too much, seeing bits and pieces of you everywhere, memories that only grew sharper with time.*

*Pok, as usual, claimed she had no choice. “Where the shark goes, the remora follows,” she said, dramatically packing her things.*

*Our new place? Famous for all the wrong reasons—not the decor or service, but the rumors of ghosts. I’ll tell you all about it next Halloween.*

*Ghost stories from* ***“Chicken Rice Ghost”*** *to the infamous* ***“Pok, the Creaking Ghost.”***

*Sorry, I got carried away again. Spending so much time with Pok has turned me into someone who rambles. Even today, when I want to write the most heartfelt letter to you, I can’t help but sneak in some humor.*

*If I keep joking around, will you still love me, Phim?*

*Or if I’m consumed by sadness, crying day after day, will you still love me then?*

*No matter what you feel now, I love you, Phim.*

***And I miss you, so much.***

*Kiran*

Tears blurred my vision as I stared at the notebook filled with scattered emotions. I was startled when my phone, carelessly tossed by the bed, screeched for attention. Dragging myself sluggishly, I answered, prompting an exaggerated complaint from the other side.

[Were you crawling to the phone, Kiran? Took you forever—I was about to die of brain cancer from holding the phone too long!]

“You’re overreacting, Pratee,” I muttered. “You done dolling yourself up? I’ve been waiting forever.”

[I just finished my foundation. It took a while—I’ve got a lot of ground to cover. Two minutes, nineteen seconds, and I’ll be downstairs. Be ready, or you’ll regret making me knock.]

**Click.**

And with that, Pratee hung up like the bossy tyrant she always was.

Pok and I had plans tonight—to get through this awful night together at a karaoke bar near our apartment.

Maybe tonight, with music and alcohol, I can forget.

I hope I can make it through.

***October 16, 2010***

*651 days since our separation*

*Dear Phim,*

***Happy 20th birthday!***

*This year, just like the others, I don’t have anything to give you. It’s not because we’re far apart or because I have nothing to offer, but rather because of a promise.*

*The promise I made to your father feels like an invisible rope binding me, preventing any movement. Yet, I hold onto it tightly because of fear.*

*I’m afraid that if I break my promise, your father might take that as an excuse to break his as well.*

*My greatest wish is for you to live a life you choose for yourself, free from your father’s control.*

*I don’t know if you’ll understand, Phim.*

*But even if you don’t, I would still make the same decision. It’s the only way I can support you right now.*

*Is it autumn in London now? I can’t help but wonder if you feel lonely. I wonder if you ever think of me the way I think of you whenever I see the petals of the dok piip falling to the ground.*

***I miss you, Phim.***

*I miss the days when we’d sit and chat on the brown bench under the dok piip tree during summer break before high school started. Did I ever tell you I often dream of that day?*

*The image of that carefree girl swinging her legs so happily never fades from my heart.*

***I miss you.***

***I miss us.***

*Study hard, Phim, so you can come back soon.*

*Happy birthday again.*

*With love,*

*Kiran*

***April 16, 2012***

*1,228 days since our separation*

*Dear Phim,*

*Phim,*

*I’ve got a job! Are you happy for me?*

*And guess where I’ll be working? At ABCD Company—your father’s company. Of course, it wasn’t a coincidence; I was determined. So determined, in fact, that I decided if I couldn’t get a job there, I wouldn’t work anywhere else.*

*No matter how many times I had to apply, I was going to get in.*

*It’s known for being incredibly difficult to join. I had to go through several rounds of written exams and interviews before reaching the final stage. Out of the many applicants, only five were chosen for the final interview.*

*Luckily, I was one of those five—thanks to scoring the highest on the written test.*

*But my luck seemed to run out when I realized my final interview would be a special one.*

*Your father, Mr. Poj Tanburanakorn, decided to personally interview me for the position of factory engineer. It was the first time he’d ever done such a thing.*

*This was the second time we’d spoken alone since the day we made that promise almost four years ago.*

*I can’t help but recall a specific part of our conversation during the interview:*

*“Honestly, I didn’t expect you’d dare to apply here, Kiran."*

*“Joining this company has been one of my main goals in life, Mr. Poj."*

*He narrowed his eyes, studying me cautiously. “You’re still as bold and straightforward as ever. I thought three years might have changed you.”*

*“For me, time is just an external factor,” I said calmly. “It doesn’t have enough power to change my thoughts or feelings.”*

*Mr. Poj sat up straighter, leaning forward with a more serious demeanor.*

*“Alright. Let’s start the interview.”*

*His sharp gaze locked on mine.*

*“I only have one question,” he said. “Why do you want to work at this company?”*

*It was a seemingly simple question but also a challenging one. Instead of crafting a polished answer, I chose honesty.*

*“To me, working here is the only chance I’ll have to see Phim again when she returns."*

*For a brief moment, I thought I saw his eyes widen slightly, but it was gone in an instant, replaced by his usual calculating expression.*

*“That’s hardly a reason to hire you. But in honor of my aunt, I’ll give you another chance to answer.”*

*My heart sank. His words felt like an indirect rejection, but even in that moment of despair, I held firm.*

*“I stand by my answer. It’s the only reason I want to work here.”*

*Mr. Poj tapped his fingers on the desk rhythmically, deep in thought. His face betrayed no emotion as he finally spoke.*

*“Fine. I’ll hire you.”*

*Then, his voice grew sharper. “But we’ll see how Phim handles meeting someone who broke her heart so badly.”*

*“Thank you, and I hope you’ll let Phim decide for herself.”*

*“... As long as you keep the promise you made to me.”*

*“I will.”*

*I felt a wave of stress the moment I thought about the recent interview. A small sigh escaped me as I considered the challenges ahead, but I decided to write only about the positive parts. I didn’t want Phim to worry or feel burdened by my thoughts—especially since this is a letter I’ll never send, and Phim will never read.*

*Phim’s father was so kind. He gave me the opportunity to work as a production engineer. I was so overjoyed I couldn’t contain myself, calling everyone I knew to share the news. And Phim, when your grandmother found out, she took it to the next level! She had the family driver announce over a loudspeaker that the entire street would be closed for a grand celebration dinner. I was so embarrassed.*

*And you, Phim—how are things going with your studies? If my calculations are right, since you started a year after me, you should be graduating next year, correct? I’m rooting for you as always. Come back soon, so we can finally work together.*

*With love,*

*Kiran*

***Production Engineer, ABCD Company***

***July 19, 2012***

*1,322 Days Apart*

*To Phim,*

*Today is a special day—my graduation day. I can’t help but feel a little sad that we’re not standing together in this moment, just as we had dreamed back when we were kids.*

*But it’s okay. Pok has taken your place. She’s practically glued to me in every single photo, popping up in the background like a mischievous ghost.*

*Have I told you yet that Pok has quit her engineering job? She said she wants to shine brightly like a star in the sky. She told me she couldn’t suppress the creative spirit of her communication arts background, which runs in her veins like the blue ink of her faculty’s emblem.*

*I admire her courage, leaving a secure, stable career to start over with Phi Beer. She’s taken on every task imaginable—setting up lights, coordinating actors, managing costumes, and even doing makeup (I feel truly sorry for the actors in this case).*

*At least Pok knows what she wants and didn’t hesitate to take a step back to pursue it. I really respect her for that.*

*As for me?*

*Being an engineer is far tougher than I imagined. It’s not just a job that uses the brain, as I had once thought. It demands both mental and physical strength. On days when the factory staff enjoy their well-earned breaks, I find myself working tirelessly to install new machinery from morning until late at night.*

*But it’s worth it, Phim. Every drop of sweat feels rewarding. I feel proud whenever I see the improvements in the factory that come from my work. Watching the production line’s efficiency increase and knowing our preparations can handle a new product—it’s incredibly satisfying.*

*I love my job, Phim.*

***But I’ll always love you more.***

***Come back soon. I miss you so much.***

*With love,*

*Kiran*

***January 13, 2016***

*2,595 Days Apart*

*To Phim,*

*Tomorrow, this long wait will finally come to an end.*

*We’ll see each other again.*

*Am I excited? The truth is, I’m feeling so much that I can’t put it into words.*

*Over 2,500 days have passed since you’ve been gone. Life without you… it hasn’t been easy, Phim. That’s why I’m overwhelmed with joy to know this wait is finally over.*

*But there’s also fear.*

*I don’t know if I’m ready to face the anger you might still hold toward me— the resentment that’s likely been building for years. Or worse, the indifference.*

*To me, indifference is far more terrifying than hatred.*

*It’s been seven years since we last saw each other. In all that time, my feelings for you have stayed the same. If anything, my longing for you has only grown stronger. But for you? All you know is that I ended things because I* ***found someone else****. I can’t even imagine how you got through that pain without hating me.*

*Still, my happiness at the thought of seeing you outweighs my fear. If I could choose, I’d meet you this very second, not wait until tomorrow.*

*I want to see you, Phim.*

*I need to see you.*

*See you tomorrow.*

*With love,*

*Kiran*

# Chapter ꜱᴘᴇᴄɪᴀʟ 4 : ᴜɴᴀʙʟᴇ ᴛᴏ ʙᴇᴀʀ ᴛʜᴇ ᴘᴀɪɴ

***ᴛʜᴀɴ'***ꜱ ***ᴘᴇʀ***ꜱ***ᴘᴇᴄᴛɪᴠᴇ***

**December 4, 2009**

*London, England*

The 4th of December should have been an ordinary Friday. Yet, I couldn't figure out what had changed with Phim. She seemed different—vacillating between melancholy and inexplicable rage. Her swollen, bloodshot eyes caught my attention, and I couldn’t help but ask her what was wrong. But her reply was cold, distant—enough to make my chest tighten with an unnameable disappointment.

"You don’t need to know everything about me, Than."

"....."

"Does it really matter if I tell you what’s going on with me every day?"

"I’m sorry..."

I guess I’ve gotten used to Phim’s sharp, cutting words. For others, it might be hard to endure being hurt like this over and over again. But for me, it wasn’t. I’d chosen this path willingly from the beginning—fully aware of what it might entail.

It couldn’t be helped. I’d fallen for her at first sight. Even after nearly a year, the memory of that moment was vivid. She stood beneath a maple tree whose deep brown trunk contrasted with the white snow dusting its bare branches.

Her long brown hair danced in the sharp winter wind as she tightened her black coat around herself and exhaled puffs of white breath into the icy air. When she turned and our eyes met for the first time, my heart felt like it no longer belonged to me.

Fate, it seemed, had smiled on me. Not only were we at the same university, but my older sister Phi Toy happened to be close friends with Phim’s sister, Phi Prae, who had moved to London to take care of her. Weekend visits between our families became routine.

One day, my curiosity got the better of me, and I asked my sister about it.

"Phi, why did Phi Phrae move here just to look after Phim? She’s old enough to take care of herself, isn’t she?"

Phi Toy, ever the picture of sophistication, shrugged indifferently. "Why do you care so much about other people’s lives? I’m here looking after you, aren’t I? And you’re old enough to take care of yourself too."

I pouted without meaning to, leaning on my hand for a moment before nudging her arm for more attention.

"It’s not the same, Phi. Our family already lives here, so you're just tagging along. But Phim came here first, and then Phi Prae followed. Isn’t that strange? Phi Prae’s husband is still in Thailand, after all."

This time, Phi Toy set down the nail file she’d been using and looked at me with mild irritation.

"If you’d seen how Phim was when she first got here, you’d understand.

She couldn’t eat, couldn’t sleep, and wouldn’t talk to anyone. Of course,

Prae was worried. She’s practically raised Phim like her own daughter." "What happened to Phim, Phi? Why couldn’t she eat or sleep?"

"Than..." Phi Toy sighed. "Can you let it go for once?"

"Ah... Fine."

"Good."

"But I’ll find out someday."

"Ugh! You’re so annoying sometimes!"

That was all I knew about Phim. She’d been unwell—so much so that it had affected her entire life. But the reason behind it? That remained a mystery. Even after a year of knowing her, she hadn’t improved much. She lived her university life like a ghost, doing what was necessary without forming any connections.

Phim was alone.

Still, she never let her grades slip, as if she were forcing herself to keep everything in order without truly caring about any of it.

"Than..."

Her soft, weary voice pulled me out of my thoughts. Phim glanced at me with those hollow eyes, but I quickly smiled back at her, hoping to ease her mood.

"What is it, Phim?"

"Phi Phrae asked me to invite you for dinner tonight."

I couldn’t help the small smile that formed on my lips. It wasn’t much, but at least she’d thought to pass on the message. "Sure! Let’s head home together after class."

She only nodded listlessly before walking toward her department, her steps slow and aimless like always. I stood there, watching her disappear into the distance, my mind crowded with unanswered questions.

What had happened to her?

What could have hurt her so deeply?

"Phim… Would you like to eat a little more? Your plate is still almost untouched," I said gently, my voice soft as I addressed the small gathering at the dinner table.

The table was occupied by Phi Prae, little Nuk, and Phim—who sat silently across from me. Phim, the petite and fragile-looking woman, barely responded, casting only a fleeting glance in my direction with her light brown eyes. Those eyes, usually somber, now seemed even more clouded with sadness.

"......"

"Please, Phim, just a little more. Just a bite," I tried again, my tone coaxing.

This time, Phim's delicate eyebrows drew together in a frown, and her sorrowful eyes hardened, brimming with a sharpness that made me look away instinctively. Her gaze bore into me for a moment before she finally spoke, her voice laced with irritation.

"Than, stop pushing me. If I want to eat, I'll eat."

I nodded, casting her a pleading look, unsure of how else to respond.

However, my expression seemed to irritate her further. Her face grew even darker with frustration.

"Don’t look at me like that, Than…"

"......"

"Why do you always make me feel guilty?"

Today, Phim seemed markedly different. Normally quiet, she was now even more withdrawn, almost on the verge of tears at any moment. Her distant demeanor had worsened, as though she was lost in her own world. It was hard not to worry, but I had to constantly remind myself that my concern for her could only be expressed from a distance—quietly and without intrusion.

Yet, despite my efforts to restrain myself, seeing her barely touch her dinner made me speak up, which turned out to be my second mistake of the day.

"I'm going to my room," Phim said abruptly, her voice cold and detached.

She rose quickly, not sparing anyone a glance. Phi Prae and Nuk watched her retreating figure in silence as she disappeared into her bedroom, leaving behind an air of unanswered questions.

"What's wrong with Phim today, Phi Prae?" I asked, my voice laced with concern. "She seems even more upset than usual."

Phi Prae, whose elegant features bore a striking resemblance to her younger sister, looked at me with an expression difficult to read. She sighed deeply before answering in a weary tone.

"Today marks one year since… something significant happened in Phim's life," she explained.

"......"

"But unfortunately, it’s something she wishes she could forget."

"......"

"Don’t take it personally, Than. She’ll get through it… eventually," Phi Prae added, though her words sounded more like an attempt to reassure herself than to comfort me.

I nodded, suppressing a sigh of my own.

After finishing my meal, I helped Phi Prae clear the dishes and load them into the dishwasher. Once Phi Prae had taken Nuk to brush her teeth and prepare for bed, she returned to help me dry the plates and put them away. Her movements seemed sluggish, as if she were weighed down by exhaustion.

"You seem tired, Phi Prae. Are you feeling unwell?" I asked, glancing at her with concern.

"No, I’m fine, Than," she replied with a wide smile that didn’t reach her eyes. Strangely, the forced cheerfulness only made her seem more fatigued. Unable to bear seeing her like this, I looked away.

"If there’s anything I can do to help with Phim, please let me know," I offered earnestly.

"Thank you, Than, but…"

"......"

The silence between us lingered for a moment, growing heavy until I could hear my own breathing.

"Phim is doing much better these days," Phi Prae eventually continued, her voice quieter now. "But today… it’s like we’re back to when she first moved here. Back then, she locked herself in her room all day, barely spoke to anyone, wouldn’t even look at me…"

For the first time, Phi Prae’s voice wavered. Her eyes glistened with unshed tears as she pressed her lips together, trying to keep her emotions in check.

She struggled to continue.

"I started to feel hopeful, you know? But now I’m scared… scared that after today, everything will have to start all over again."

**Crash!**

The sound of something falling from Phim’s room interrupted us, making Phi Prae and I turn toward her door simultaneously. The sight of the closed door made Phi Prae panic. She rushed to it, her small hands pounding on the wood as she called out, her voice trembling with fear.

**"Phim! Open the door, Phim!"**

There was no response, only faint, heart-wrenching sobs coming from the other side. Phi Prae’s panic only grew, and I quickly grabbed her wrist before she could hurt herself by banging on the door again.

"Wait, Phi Prae! Do you have a spare key to her room?"

Her tear-filled eyes lit up with a glimmer of hope as she looked at me. Her lips trembled as she spoke, her voice barely audible.

"Okay… I’ll get it from the master bedroom. Wait here and keep an eye on the door."

I watched her rush off, worry etched deeply into her face. Turning back to the door, I swallowed hard, dread creeping into my chest as I imagined the worst.

"I found the key, Than…"

Before she could even finish her sentence, Phi Prae dashed to the door, her hands trembling as she tried to unlock it. Her shaky fingers made the task far more difficult than it should have been.

“Let me do it, Phi Prae,” I offered gently.

She handed me the key without hesitation, and I managed to unlock the door in mere seconds.

**Click.**

But fear gripped me, and my hands froze. I couldn’t bring myself to open the door all the way. Phi Prae, noticing my hesitation, called my name sharply to push me into action. Swallowing hard, I finally stepped inside.

The scene before me sent a cold shiver through my entire body. My heart sank, leaving me paralyzed. It was Phi Prae who managed to collect herself first. She rushed to Phim, who was curled up on the floor, hugging her knees and sobbing uncontrollably. Her hair was a mess, matching the chaos of the room, where belongings lay scattered everywhere.

But nothing was as alarming as the vivid red blood staining Phim’s delicate, pale hands.

Her hands were as ghostly white as Phi Prae’s face—and mine.

"Phim, are you hurt badly? Let me clean your wound. Don’t move—there’s glass everywhere,” Phi Prae said softly, her voice cracking with emotion. “I didn’t mean to, Phi Prae,” Phim sobbed. “I’m sorry… I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay, Phim. Don’t cry. Just stay still,” Phi Prae murmured, gently stroking Phim’s arm as tears streamed down her own cheeks. Her trembling voice, full of sorrow and desperation, hit me like a blow to the chest.

“Than,” Phi Prae said, turning to me. “Could you get the first aid kit from the living room, please?”

I nodded and ran to fetch it, my movements frantic. On my way back, I accidentally stepped on something hard on the floor.

“Ow!” I exclaimed, startled by the sharp pain.

Curious, I bent down to pick up the object. It was a thin white gold necklace with a small gear-shaped pendant engraved with the emblem of a prestigious university. It must’ve been Phim’s from her time studying in Thailand.

Before I could examine it further, a piercing scream cut through the air.

**“Don’t touch that! Put it down, now!”**

Phim’s shrill voice startled me, and I turned to look at her. Her tear-streaked face was filled with anger, her bloodshot eyes glaring at me with unrestrained fury. Stunned, I froze, clutching the necklace tightly in my hand. Her words rang out again, sharp and unforgiving, as she staggered toward me and began pounding her small fists against my chest.

**“Tan, I said put it down! Are you deaf?!”**

Her words stung, and my throat tightened. I could feel tears welling up, but I bit them back. The blood from her hands stained my white shirt, her frustration pouring out in the form of sobs and shouts. Phi Prae wept silently as well, unable to control the storm raging around her.

“Phim, don’t hurt Than like that… please,” Phi Prae pleaded, her voice trembling. “And Than, please put the necklace down. I’m begging you.”

Without a word, I placed the necklace back where I had found it and handed the first aid kit to Phi Prae. My movements were cautious, aware of Phim’s lingering, angry gaze.

Phi Prae pulled Phim into her arms as the younger girl collapsed into a fit of uncontrollable sobbing. Despite her own tears, Phi Prae inspected the wounds on Phim’s hands with deep concern.

“Phim, doing this will only make the wound worse. Stay still, okay? Let me take care of it.”

“I’m sorry, Phi Prae… I’m so sorry…” Phim whimpered, her voice cracking with anguish.

I stood there, watching the two sisters, my heart heavy with a mix of emotions I couldn’t untangle. But one question burned in my mind, louder than all the others:

**Who was the owner of that necklace?**

Could it be the same person who left such deep scars in Phim’s heart, the scars that had driven her into this sorrowful state?

**Who was it?**

**Who could it possibly be?**

# Chapter ꜱᴘᴇᴄɪᴀʟ 5 : ᴛʜᴇ ᴡᴏᴇꜱ ᴏꜰ ᴀ ᴡɪꜰᴇ'ꜱ ʜᴇᴀʀᴛ

***ᴘᴏᴋ'***ꜱ ***ᴘᴇʀ***ꜱ***ᴘᴇᴄᴛɪᴠᴇ***

***December 4, 2010***

*9:30 PM*

**The Laab Restaurant Behind Campus**

It had been two years since Kiran and her wife were separated.

*"How long must I wait for you? I can’t remembaaahhh!"*

I couldn’t help but stare at Kiran, who was belting out a song with a voice as melodic as a tin can being dragged across concrete. Her dedication, however, was admirable. There she was, crouched in front of the coinoperated karaoke machine, head tilted back at a precise 45-degree angle, her tiny, bead-like eyes squinting at the screen. It wasn’t clear if she could even read the lyrics.

*"But I will live my life waiting for you... until the very laaaahhhst day!"*

I was torn between feeling secondhand embarrassment and genuine amusement at her passion. Despite her awkward crouch, Kiran swayed back and forth with great effort, making everyone around hold their breath in case she toppled over. I nearly stretched my leg out to steady her, but refrained, not wanting to seem uncouth in public. Miraculously, she made it through the song without falling.

*"Is it wrong to have only you in my heaaaahhhrt? No matter what, I’ll love you so much!"*

**Amen.**

The torture was finally over.

To my astonishment, the whole restaurant erupted in applause. It was as if Kiran had accomplished a noble feat for the nation. But just as she shakily stood up to choose another song, the restaurant staff dashed to the karaoke machine and slapped a hastily written sign on it:

“SORRY. MACHINE OUT OF ORDER.”

Kiran, oblivious to the commotion, fished around in her pocket for a fivebaht coin, only to stop when she noticed the sign. Her confused expression —eyebrows raised like a puppy trying to understand human speech—was almost too much to bear.

“Pok...” she muttered.

“What now?” I sighed.

“What’s a Machine OUT OF ORDER supposed to mean? Do I have to lick the machine instead of inserting coins?”

I stifled a laugh, glancing back at the sign. The scribbled ‘OUT OF ORDER’ had been sloppily written, and the letters were barely legible.

“No, Kiran! It says out of order. The machine’s broken. Are you drunk enough to mix up your letters?”

“Oh... but if it’s broken, why is that uncle still singing?”

“Same tribe, I guess. One look and they just understand each other.”

Even in her drunken haze, Kiran managed to glare at the uncle wearing a green shirt, who was enthusiastically belting out a Phai Phongsathon classic and dancing like he owned the place. Her tiny eyes narrowed with jealousy, and I began to worry she might throw a chair at him. Before that could happen, I waved the waiter over, paid the bill, and started dragging her out of the restaurant.

“Why are you dragging me away?! I wasn’t done singing!” Kiran protested, struggling like a fish caught in a net.

Luckily, my arm strength was no joke. Even with all her wriggling, she couldn’t escape my firm grasp.

“Kiran, if you want to sing, fine! Shout your heart out on the way home. I’ll beatbox for you!"

That shut her up for a moment. She stumbled back a step, squinting at me with disbelief.

“You? Beatbox? Are you sure you won’t end up chanting instead?”

Her sass was unrelenting, even when she could barely stand. It was infuriating yet strangely endearing.

“Watch your mouth, Kiran! You sing, I’ll beatbox. You might even cry from the sheer beauty of it.”

“Cry? From what? Are you going to beatbox and smack me at the same time?”

“No, you idiot! Cry because of how amazing it sounds!”

She smirked, her drunken eyes gleaming with mischief. “Fine. Prove it. Let me test you.”

“Bring it on,” I challenged, already cupping my hands over my mouth in preparation.

After glaring at me for a long moment, Kiran began swaying again. I braced myself for her to start a difficult, fast-paced rap song. Knowing her, it’d be something impossible for me to keep up with.

“All right, ready?” she asked, steadying herself.

“Ready.”

“One, two, three! *Little Malie has a kitten, meow meow, the little kitten meows, meow meow meow*.”

"......."

**Pruuuuuuuu!**

I couldn't help but spit out a large amount of saliva after hearing Malie's version of the opera remix by Kiran, which was followed by me almost swallowing the spicy beat that Wanabi had prepared earlier without even realizing it.

“I knew it... I knew you wouldn’t be able to do the beat. It’s because the songs you like aren't the beat kind.”

“Well... and yet, this song is clearly a beat, isn’t it, Ki? You're singing it now, ‘*Little Malie*’... what else do you want me to do?”

“You can’t choose the song just like you can’t ask a monk what he’ll eat before you offer him food.”

Oh, oh, oh, what kind of philosophy is that?

“Don’t believe me? Try singing any song, and I’ll provide the beat.”

I gave my friend a smug look, thinking she was all talk. She could hardly stand up straight, let alone challenge me. But seeing the determined look in her eyes, I gave in and started singing with all my might, my voice sounding like a tin can, with no comparison to a professional singer.

***“Go, both of you…”***

“Push… Push…”

“***Go, to the gates of heaven…”***

“Push… Push…”

***“Water of the sacred bowl shall fall…”***

“Pishia… Pishia…”

***“By the hand of my brother, it shall fall…”***

“Pishia… Pishia…”

I started swaying my shoulders to the beat of my friend’s rhythm. It was surprising how well she did with the beat. But I was too overconfident, and at the moment I stopped to hit a high note with a serious, opera-like pose, I ended up pushing her into following me with a high-pitched beat.

That was the fatal mistake that led to my defeat!

***“Go, to the bridal chamber…*** Ohh,-bwaarhh!”

Aaahhh!

Ladies and gentlemen, my friend just threw up all over me.

What could I do? I couldn’t escape. She had a tight grip on my leg. All I could do was stand there, eyes closed, muttering prayers for the spirits as I endured the ordeal.

After what felt like an eternity, I finally managed to lift my face and shoot out a sarcastic line that almost made me want to wipe the puke off my face with my foot.

“Pok… why are the electric poles around here so big, round, and black? Not like the others, that are small and square?”

Sigh…

"Well, I guess that’s my leg you’re referring to, you little crab."

***December 4, 2011*** *21:45*

**A karaoke room near the university.**

It had been three years since this couple had been separated.

*“It might be my fault that it’s like this, that I still love you with all my heart… Even though I know there’s no way, I just can’t let you go, like someone who doesn’t realize…”*

Yes, that’s right, my friend was still channeling the spirit of the famous singer Toon Bodyslam. She was holding the mic in her right hand, left hand behind her, bending forward as if she were going to collapse, looking like a drunk person searching for spare change on the street to catch the bus.

Sigh

Since Phim left to study abroad, my dear friend, Kiran, has been living like a walking zombie, still trying to live her life despite everything. Even though she’s been through a lot, she’s not a total mess. She still focuses on her studies and can always be there for me.

But on her birthdays and special occasions, she turns into a mess, getting drunk from the evening onward. Her reasoning was always: **if she didn’t get drunk, she wouldn’t make it through the night.**

*“I might be the one who was wrong... but love makes you blind, doesn’t it? It makes you not see the truth, that I’m the one hurting, yet I still love you…”*

I couldn’t help but feel tears well up in my eyes at the sound of her singing, but not because I was moved by the lyrics.

**I was crying because it was terrible!!**

*“But ahhhhhhh…”*

By the end of the song, she dragged the high notes so badly that even the microphone couldn’t handle it, but that screeching sound didn’t faze me. I remained unfazed, sitting with my arms crossed, eyes fixed on my friend like it was another day. Until…

“It’s done... What do you want to hear next? I’ll sing for you.”

When Kiran finished, I jumped out of my seat in a panic and quickly waved my hands in refusal, but she didn’t even seem to notice. Without a second thought, she walked back, threw herself on the sofa, and grabbed the songbook to look for the next song.

“Wait, wait, Kiran, wait…”

**Thwack!**

Before I could stop her, I knocked the songbook out of her hand, sending it flying through the air. Instinctively, I dove for it and managed to catch it before it landed in the trash bin, just in time.

“Isn’t this place great, Pok? The songbook flies and lands perfectly in the trash. What feature do they use for that?”

I sighed with relief, glad Kiran didn’t suspect anything, but fate was still cruel because now she was looking for the microphone like it was a life-ordeath matter. I slowly reached for the mic behind her and shoved it into my bag, having no other choice.

“Hey… let’s talk instead, we don’t have to sing anymore, right?”

Kiran narrowed her eyes slightly at me, considering. Then, she took a sip from the glass in front of her.

“Talk about what? Don’t tell me…”

“Yeah… the same thing. Sai still calls you every day. It’s been three years, and she’s so persistent. Is she really not change her mind?"

She leaned back, exhausted, and glanced at me, her eyes empty and meaningless.

“Ki—”

“I only wait for Phim… I’ll wait for her.”

“......”

**“I don’t know if she’ll come back, but I’ll wait.”**

Unexpectedly… tears streamed down her face, soaking her cheeks completely.

“Ugh… Ki, come here!”

I rushed to hug Kiran, feeling sympathy for my friend. Her little face was pressed against my thick scarf, her expression dazed and sleepy to the extreme.

“Pok, in this world… you’re probably the only one who understands me the most. I really appreciate you, my friend.”

By this point, tears started to well up in my eyes from the overwhelming emotion. No matter how strong I was, I couldn’t resist the power of such a deep friendship. The first tear almost fell just as I began to gently comfort her...

“Ki, my friend...”

“Ughhhhhhhhhh...” Oh no, not again...

You’re going to throw up on me again, aren’t you?!

“Ugh... You terrible friend!”

*December 4, 2012 22:13*

Kiran's Condo.

It’s been four years since these two separated.

*“I still keep that love… in my heart. Will you ever know? I still wander around, thinking of you every time I close my eyes, always seeing only you. I still miss you, never forgetting.”*

This year, I considered myself lucky. It felt like some divine blessing from making a firm decision: this year, I wasn’t going to karaoke and endure Kiran's sad songs anymore.

The plan was to enjoy a quiet night with some drinks, listening to Toon Bodyslam’s songs on a high-quality sound system in a luxurious condo.

I closed my eyes, gently resting my hands on my chest as I listened to the music, savoring every note... But as I thought about the many painful birthdays spent with my dear friend, my tears overflowed.

“Pok…”

Kiran's voice cut through the emotional moment, making me open my eyes and glare at her in frustration.

“What is it?”

“Why are you wearing a raincoat… you’re indoors!”

Ah, you probably don’t know what I’ve been through in these past years. You’ve thrown up on me so many times that I’ve almost lost count.

“It’s a fashion thing... People like me don’t care about that kind of stuff.”

Kiran glanced at me skeptically, without any belief in what I said. I just shrugged, closed my eyes again, and continued to enjoy the music.

“Aren’t you hot? Want a fan?”

Whoosh, whoosh, whoosh, flutter, flutter.

Without waiting for an answer, Kiran turned the fan to blow in my direction, doing it out of good intentions that no one asked for. I sighed heavily, glancing up as the fan blew the plastic raincoat, making a noise that drowned out Toon’s high notes.

“Do whatever you want… I’m going to the bathroom.”

I watched Kiran, who seemed so refined this year compared to past birthdays. She wasn’t drunk, and her behavior was far more dignified, as if the days of vomiting on me had never happened.

Then, the notification sound from Kiran's iPhone 4S went off repeatedly. I grew curious and grabbed her phone to read the messages.

**Nong Lanoy**: Happy birthday, Phi Kiran. :)

**Nong Lanoy**: When you have time, let me treat you to a meal sometime.

Oh, it’s those girls again. I read the messages with a smirk, chuckling as I typed a quick reply to preserve Kiran's reputation as her one true love.

**KleZillaaazZ**: Sure… but I’m the one treating you.

**Nong Lanoy**: Yay, I’m so happy! I’ve been texting you every day, and this is the first time you replied!

**Nong Lanoy**: By the way, what do you like to eat?

**KleZillaaazZ**: Poop.

**Nong Lanoy**: What?!!

**KleZillaaazZ**: I like eating poop.

“Pok… What are you doing?!”

I jumped, startled to the point that my muscles twitched, and I accidentally knocked Kiran’s phone across the room. Luckily, it landed perfectly on her soft bed. I avoided her wrath this time, but Kiran didn’t seem to care about her phone at all. She walked past me and flopped down next to me, grabbing the Dharma book from beside her drink.

What?!

**A dharma book!!!???**

I turned quickly to check the cover of the book with intense curiosity. When I saw the dark cover adorned with golden letters, I sighed in relief. It was titled *Where Do I Go When I’m Embarrassed?* Thank goodness, Kiran wasn’t reading some deep philosophical book while still sipping alcohol.

“Something feels off this year… Ki.”

“Off how?”

Kiran raised an eyebrow, her eyes still lowered at the book in a lounging position that matched her charming, laid-back personality.

“Why aren’t you drinking much this year? You seem more... conscious. It’s not like you.”

Kiran shrugged and took a small sip of her drink, still focused on her book without even looking at me.

“Why drink so much? You know alcohol isn’t good for your health.”

She finished speaking and sipped her drink, while I couldn’t help but feel annoyed by the contradiction in her words and actions.

“Well, you’re not drunk yet, huh?”

“Not drunk… But why are you still wearing that raincoat? I thought it was a fashion statement.”

“Stop bothering me! I’m hot!!!”

***December 4, 2015***

*22:34*

**Trendy Bar near Thonglor**

It’s been seven years since these two separated.

“What’s the name of this place, Pok? It’s so weird.”

Kiran looked up, confused, as she read the sign in front of the trendy bar with a puzzled expression.

"Why does it have a name so similar to the shop next door? That one has millions of customers, but this place is as quiet as a graveyard..."

Kiran turned to look at the neighboring shop named *HALEM GU NA* and then back at the sign in front of them, puzzled, like a fish out of water. I let out a long sigh and reluctantly explained to my dear friend, not wanting to waste time with someone so slow-witted.

"What's so hard to read? That place is *HALEM GU NA*, and this one is *LEM HE GU NI*."

"What? What did you say? Say it again."

"Ugh... Are you deaf? I said, *LEM HE GU NI.*" "Ah... Is that a statement or a response?" sigh

Is this woman really that clueless?

"It's a response, duh... I wouldn't dare order like that."

"Oh, I get it. No wonder no one dares to come in... Is this a beauty salon?" "A beauty salon for your aunt, sure... This is a bar."

After that, I quickly dragged Kiran inside the oddly named bar, which was practically empty, to avoid further questioning.

*"On the day my heart was broken... on the day love made me fall, that day I thought my life had lost all meaning..."*

Ah, great. Even here, in a fancy bar in the middle of the city, I couldn't escape the heartbreak song by Toon Bodyslam. It felt like he was my constant companion, never leaving my side.

After finding a table in the corner with a clear view of the stage, Kiran and I ordered some sweet, colorful cocktails, trying to act like people of means... though we were far from it.

"Ki... You have to treat me, okay? My money hasn’t come in yet."

She shrugged nonchalantly, clearly not seeing it as a big deal. Well, of course, she’s an engineer with a high salary, while I’m just a freelancer making next to nothing.

"No problem. Order whatever you want, I got you. Even if I have to save enough for water bills, I’ll take care of it."

"You're so mean..."

"What was that?"

"I said you’re generous."

"Oh, right. And then what?"

Kiran shrugged again before elegantly lifting her sweet cocktail and taking a sip in a way that made me feel awkward and envious.

"May I sit here too...?"

A deep voice suddenly interrupted, and when I looked up, I saw a man with a round face and a too-smug smile standing next to us, his eyes never leaving Kiran.

"If you don't mind, you can't sit."

And yes, the man immediately moved his chair and sat beside Kiran, clearly ignoring my rejection.

"Thank you... for inviting me to sit."

"Uhm..."

"What's your name, beautiful? You're so cute."

Kiran clicked her tongue before turning her face away in annoyance, and I quickly answered in her place, since no one else was. "Her name's Kiran. She’s already taken."

"What? What did you say? Taken? Who’s she with?"

"The drummer on the stage, of course. He's her boyfriend."

I casually pointed to the burly drummer, who just happened to be glaring at the man beside me as if he knew exactly what was going on.

"Oh, I see. Well, I’ll leave then... I suddenly have to go to the bathroom."

I couldn't help but laugh quietly, watching the man scurry off towards the back of the bar like a rat. Meanwhile, Kiran didn’t even glance at what had just happened.

"May I sit here?"

And then, another woman appeared—small, with a figure that was a bit too revealing for my taste, standing far too close to me.

"Not possible," I replied sharply.

"Thank you for letting me sit with you."

As soon as I made my rejection clear, she still tried to pull up a chair and sit next to Kiran, staring at her in a way that made me uneasy.

"What's your name? You look so cool."

Kiran just glanced at the woman but chose to ignore her, instead signaling me like she always did when she wanted me to handle things.

"Uhm... I’m..."

"Excuse me... I wasn’t talking to you."

That did it. I snapped at her, raising my voice loud enough for everyone to hear.

"She’s taken, has a boyfriend, and kids too, okay? Stop asking."

"Oh... I just wanted to let you know, the special fried chicken feet you ordered, it’s all gone. Would you like some fried peanuts instead?"

Well...

Was I embarrassed? No, not at all.

Kiran didn’t even care, and now everyone thought she was taken with a family.

Ki... I'm sorry.

As for her wife:

*Phim hurry back and help deal with all these pests that keep swarming around with your husband! Please have some pity for her first wife!*

Damn it.

***THE END FOR PART I***

**Somewhere, Somehow**

## Love, Stubborn II