

Chapter 5

FIRST DAY

Mandy

Wala akong idea kung paano maging yaya kaya magiging nurse na lang ako kay Elise. 'Yon lang ang alam kong role sa buhay ko na may sense.

Magsisimula kami ngayon. Ngayong kumakain kami at salad ang nginunguya niya samantalang ako ay kanin at nilagang baka.

Nagkatinginan kami ni Khristine. Khristine raised a brow. I raised my entire soul.

Elise looked at my plate judgmentally. Na para bang ang nilagang baka ay nakaka-offend sa kanya.

"Elise," tawag ko sa bata. Tumingin naman siya sa akin. Nakataas ang isang kilay. "Do you want to try this soup?"

"It's full of carbs," sagot nito.

Panginoon ko. Napasandal ako sa upuan in disbelief. Diet culture at ten? Sinong nanay ang nag-contribute dito? Oh right — that French demon.

"You are ten," I reminded her slowly, clearly, with the patience of a kindergarten teacher na ubos na ang sanity.

"You are not auditioning for Victoria's Secret model."

She blinked. "What is Victoria's secret?"

"Rice," sagot ko agad. "That is the secret."

Itinuro ko ang bowl ng kanin sa bata.

Elise frowned at me. "I don't eat carbs," she declared. "Mummy said carbs make you fat."

"Your mom is not here," I said, ngunit huli na nang maisip ko 'yon.

Elise froze. Then she glared sharply and precisely na parang kutsilyo na kahahasa.

Kinurot ang dibdib ko nang very slight sabay ginising ko sarili ko.

I swallowed and softened my voice, konti lang. "Elise... I didn't mean it like that," sabi ko. "What I mean is no one will tell her you eat rice and soup."

Her glare faltered, hairline crack, pero meron. "And," I added, nudging the bowl forward, "you will like it."

Khristine tried not to laugh. Elise looked back at the bowl as if it personally betrayed Cordonia.

Elise inhaled slowly... then reluctantly picked up her spoon.

Victory. Small, delicate, possibly temporary, but a victory.

Pinanood ko si Elise na kumuha ng kanin at sabay. She looked at us to see how we did it. Pinakita sa kanya ni Khristine kung paano kumain ng nilaga — one scoop of rice, a little broth, tapos konting beef.

Simple. Something the poor girl clearly never experienced.

We ate slowly habang Khristine and I secretly cheering na nakumbinsi namin si Elise na masarap ang nilaga.

Her first bite was tiny na parang cat lick. Then her eyes widened just a little. Konti lang. Pero sapat para mag-high five kami mentally ni Khristine.

We watched her lift another spoonful.

Then another.

Then... a slightly bigger bite.

Nagtinginan kami ulit ni Khristine. This time, with the kind of pride reserved for parents whose kid finally ate something with nutrients.

Pagkatapos naming kumain ay ipinakita na sa amin ni Khristine ang gagamitin naming kwarto ni Elise pansamantala habang nandito kami sa napakagandang palasyo ng Cordonia.

Magkatabi ang kwarto naming ni Elise at may connecting door para madali ko siyang mapuntahan.

Elise looked around with the poise of a lady. Mas pino pa siyang kumilos sa amin ni Khristine. Mas refine... pero mas icy cold. Parang may pader lag isa kanya. Calculated lagi ang bawat galaw.

"Where's my things?" tanong niya sa akin.

"Must be inside your drawers and cabinets," sagot ko, pointing towards the wardrobe.

Ang unang tinungo ni Elise ay ang vanity mirror. Napamaang ako nang binuksan niya ang mga drawers at tumambad ang mga mamahaling make-up.

Napatingin muli ako kay Khristine at si Khristine, mukha ring nawindang.

"Is that... all yours?" I asked in disbelief.

"Yes," maikling sagot ni Elise. Binilang niya ang mga bote ng foundation, primer at kung ano-ano pang high-end na mga make-up.

"You are wearing make-up?" tanong ko, hindi maitago ang pagkagulat.

"Yes," she replied. "Depends on the occasion and the people I will meet."

I blinked. Hard. "At ten?" I asked with a little bit of judgment, na hindi ko napigilan.

"What's wrong with that?" she asked back, obviously offended.

Ay putang—

Nag-iwas ako ng tingin sandali bago bumalik ang boses ko.

"Elise," I said slowly. "There is nothing wrong with make-up, but..."

She crossed her arms, waiting to be proven wrong.

"You don't need a lot of it. It will just expire, and you will not use all of it. Right?"

She blinked. Parang hindi niya alam kung maa-offend ba siya o maiintriga.

Khristine looked away to hide a smile.

"You are ten. When I was your age, I was playing on the streets," I added.

Without missing a beat, Elise replied, "You must be poor," na parang hindi niya hinamak ang buong pagkatao ko.

The audacity.

The nerve.

"Sampalin ko kaya," bulong ko kay Khristine, whose shoulders were already shaking from holding in her laughter.

"I was," I agreed to Elise. She smirked like she won the battle. "I was happy. Are you?" I asked back.

Bumalik ang panlilisik ng mata ng bata. Hinampas ako ng mahina ni Khristine.

"Huwag mong patulan," bulong nito.

"Delulu ampota," I whispered back.

Natigilan si Khristine at napakurap, trying so hard not to laugh in front of a literal ten-year-old royal brat.

Elise crossed her arms again in defensive, purely offended, pero... may kaunting tumama. Sana lang may konting realization na mahulog sa utak niya mula sa langit.

"Sometimes, Elise," sabi ko, "the happiest people are the simple."

She blinked.

Not the offended blink. Not the 'how dare you speak to me' blink. Ito 'yong blink ng batang naguguluhan.

She opened her mouth. Then closed it. Then she looked away.

Khristine watched her quietly.

"You don't have to be perfect all the time," dagdag ko. "Especially in front of me."

"You are not special, Mandy," she replied sharply.

"Exactly," I replied, trying my best not to slap this brat. "That's why you don't need to be perfect with me. You just need to be a kid."

Elise froze. She looked away quickly — too quickly — pretending to examine her makeup drawer again.

Khristine caught my eye and mouthed, 'Mandy, you're doing great.'

I had to fight the urge to whisper back, Girl, may red horse ba dito?

Unang araw pa lang pero pagod na pagod agada ko kay Elise. Mas nakakapagod ang magtimpi na huwag lagyan ng vicks ang mga mata ng bata dahil ang talim tumitig.

Gusto kong painumin ng holy water dahil dalahirang sumagot. Every. Single. Time.

Khristine tried to look serious, pero halatang nanginginig ang labi niya sa pagpigil ng tawa.

"Breathe," bulong ni Khristine.

"I am," bulong ko balik.

"Okay, Elise, starting tomorrow, act like ten, not thirty years old," I said, to which Elise rolled her eyes.

She looked at me, tilted her head, and said, "Mandy, you are paid to be my nanny, not my mum."

Tumingin ako kay Khristine habang kagat-kagat ang dila ko. "Relax," bulong ni Tin.

I exhaled slowly. "I'm paid to teach you manners," sagot ko, bagsak ang filter ko, "which your mum failed to do."

Elise's eyes snapped to mine sharply.

"I don't need another mother," sabi niya.

Napahinto kami ni Khristine ng may lumabas na isang mahinang hikbi mula kay Elise. She composed herself once again and glared at me.

I crouched down a little, enough to level our eyes without intimidating her.

"No one is replacing your mother," I said gently for the first time since I met her. "But you deserve someone who actually shows up."

She looked away again, chin trembling for half a second before she swallowed it down like a trained adult.

Like a kid who wasn't allowed to be a kid.

Suddenly, I wasn't mad at Elise. I am heartbroken for her.