

### 3. CREATIVE WORK

Melanie

Chapter 1

Melanie fixes the red bow on her head in front of her grimy, yellowed mirror.

The rays of sunlight pierce through her narrow windows right at her head. She can hear the rumbling sounds of engines, rapid footsteps and some occasional yelling here and there at the road in front of her house and family store.

Today's first period is English class by Mrs. Sri. This time, Melanie hasn't forgotten to recite her sentences in front of the mirror the night before so Mrs. Sri won't yell at her again for not enunciating her 'r's and 'th's, making the entire classroom laugh.

Melanie checks that all of her textbooks and notebooks are in her bag, so she wouldn't forget one of them and get punished by writing an essay like the last time she forgot her Biology textbook, as well as her poetry book. She walks out of her room to find her mother waiting for her.

"I'm going, Mom." she says. Her mother, Marta hugs her and kisses her on the cheek.

"Bye. Study hard, okay?" her mother says, with a noticeable accent inherited from when her parents first arrived in Indonesia. Melanie nods and walks out of her house into the bustling streets.

It is currently 5.30 in the morning. Her mother's store doesn't open until 6.00, while school starts at 6.30. Melanie has to leave for school one hour before it starts so that her mother can have ample time to prepare breakfast for her and open the store. The distance between her house and her school is quite far, and they are unable to afford a car yet, so Melanie has to walk for forty minutes between her house and the school.

There is a lot Melanie has to go through to get to her school. She has memorized all the roads, intersections, little landmarks, twists and turns on the busy streets. She passes by the old car repair shop guarded by a vicious guard dog chained too far back for it to scare her. She goes by an intersection where angry drivers so often go up against each other trying to find the blame on who had crashed onto their car first. Then, she walks on the side of the long, trash-filled river passing by the city corner her school was built on.

Melanie finally reaches the school gates. She sees all the other students passing through, but she does not follow them. She takes a moment to close her eyes and take a deep breath before walking in.

She keeps her gaze straightforward, never turning to see the reactions from the other students looking at her. But she doesn't need to. She has known that look all too well. Whether it is a look of repulsion, shock, contempt, fascination, condescending pity or a mix in-between, she has known and understood it since the day she and her parents stepped foot in this country eight years ago. It is the alienating look, identifying its recipient as an 'other'.

When she first received that look five years ago, Melanie was determined to change that look into the one the other kids use when talking to their own. She walked up to a table of them carrying her lunch. She asked them, "*Can I join you guys?*"

She can still remember how their eyes widened. "*No, you can't!*"

*"Why not?"*

*"Because you look different than us!"*

*Different.* Yes, how she still remembers that word. "*How am I different?*"

*"Your eyes are all small and slanted!"*

*"How can you even look around with them?"*

Then they used their fingers to pull up their eyes and imitate her accent. She still remembers, then, the burst of laughter that roared up and echoed through the cafeteria.

She cried all day, all the way back home.

*“Honey, what’s wrong?”* her mother asked her.

*“Mom, why do the other kids mock me? What’s wrong with my eyes?”*

*“Oh...”* her mother smiled and hugged her. *“There’s nothing wrong with our eyes. It’s just the way God makes us.”*

*“But why am I the only one who looks like that? Why can’t I go to a different school?”*

*“I’m...I’m sorry. But that’s the nearest school we can afford.”*

She continued to cry. *“I don’t want to go to school anymore.”*

*“But you still have to. It’s okay. Just ignore them, okay? They’re just words. They can’t hurt you.”*

Melanie has taken her mother’s advice since then.

From there on, Melanie decided the next-best method to deal with that look: ignoring them. So far it has worked perfectly, so she doesn’t see any reason to stop and try other methods now.

She walks down the hallway to the second classroom from the hall entrance, 1-B. The door is slightly open and Melanie takes a peek inside. The classroom is already half-full, looking from the bags placed on the desks, but nearly all of the students are not present for whatever reason. Darma is sleeping on his desk. Melanie takes a closer look, towards the empty seat in the corner. *It’s still there for me*, she thinks, *as always*. So she walks in and sits down on the corner seat.

Melanie looks at the clock mounted on the wall. 6.15. *There is still time before school*, she thinks, so she pulls out her poetry notebook. She flips through pages and pages of unorganized, unfinished scribbles and scrawls of whatever lines and verses pass through her head in a flash of inspiration. For some reason, she just has not had it as of late. Nothing

really clicks quite as much as she wants to. She looks out of the window and notices a bird tending to its nest of eggs.

Melanie writes down, slowly, tentatively. She has written enough about birds, yes. Maybe this one will not be all that exceptional, after all. Nevertheless, she writes down some lines. *How joyful is the bird, with its nest waiting patiently for its presence. No, that does not sound quite right.* She rewrites the same line, changing, swapping some words around. Yet nothing seems to stick quite correctly.

Melanie huffs and puts her pen down. As if by some miraculous coincidence, the school bell snaps through the overbearing silence of the empty classroom and nearly shocks Melanie's wits out of her. She hears, and then looks at the stream of students rushing into the classroom for the first period. Behind them, she sees, follows Mrs. Sri, always wearing her gray sweater over a long-sleeved dress and her thoroughly-grayed hair in a bun.

Mrs. Sri walks over to and lays her stack of books and files on the table before declaring in a booming voice no one would expect from who seemed like such a delicate old lady, "Alright, class, first period has already started. Take your seats."

Melanie turns her head around to see her classmates, one by one taking their seats. Lestari, Bambang, Fajar, Eka, and so on. After a few seconds everyone seems to be seated and everything seems to be in order.

However, there remains an empty seat at the utmost front, which automatically draws all attention to it in its singularity. In spite of that, not a single mind in that classroom is the least bit surprised at the absence of the person who has been *assigned* to that seat where the teacher could observe all of their activities without difficulties, nor was anyone particularly interested as to why - except, for the teacher, whose interest is mostly obligated from her job and not out of any genuine concern.

"Where is Roni Budianto?"

Everyone starts to turn their heads to each other, silently waiting for the other to reply with the same answer all of them are holding in their hearts, but are not willing to be the first person to say it. Murmurs slowly come about creeping between the uncomfortable silence, again, mostly disinterested rumors or speculations. Meanwhile, a flicker of hope slowly grows into relief inside Melanie's heart at the mere possibility that Roni Budianto might not be coming into class after all. She always carries that hope every day, and seldom it might be for it to come true, she always cherishes the day whenever it does.

The increasingly louder footsteps approaching the class instantly squashes that hope, with the loud creak of the roughly-opened door trampling on and spreading its remains over.

Much as she does not want to, Melanie brings her eyes over to the late visitor to the classroom, much as everyone else does. They fall upon the freshly-bruised, scarred face with only a fuzzy vaguely-brown patch on top of his head, whose eyes return the contempt and disgust underlined with pity concentrated on him from everyone else who has preceded him in that room.

"Do you know what time it is?" Mrs. Sri asks him. It is a simple question, yet seems to be one Roni takes time to answer, as if first considering whether it is even worth his time at all. He only returns a self-satisfied smirk with no less poison for everyone involved.

"Yes, I do," he says. "And I would *still* waste too much time being here."

"Have you gotten into a fight again?" Mrs. Sri asks again, seemingly deciding to ignore Roni's last answer. This time, Roni gave a snorting laugh.

"And I won." he replies, this time deciding to walk over to his seat, sitting with crossed legs.

"How long will you keep this up? Do you know how this will affect you?" Mrs. Sri has stood up now, walking over to Roni's seat. Most students would immediately shrink and cower in their seats at such a sight, but Roni maintained his near-apathetic composure.

“Soon as you stop getting into my business.”

All the other students hold their breaths in that moment, anticipating what Mrs. Sri will do. Roni has gotten suspended more times than anyone, even possibly including himself, could care to remember this year, and receiving another mere minutes into the start of a school day would be a new record. But Mrs. Sri only took a step back and returned to her desk, picking up a textbook.

“Open your textbook to page 61,” she says, voice clear and booming through the class, and the first period officially begins.

Melanie fidgets in her seat as her gaze goes back and forth between her textbook and Roni. She keeps trying to determine whether he has noticed her at all since the beginning of the day. Mrs. Sri’s voice is like a hollow echo entering her one ear and exiting the other...

“Last week we already learned the structure of the past participle...”

No, he probably has not. He has just arrived here! But, maybe he did have the time to scout out the classroom, and see where Melanie was sitting.

“Now, we will begin with some exercise...”

No, no, impossible. Melanie picked this seat so far in the back. But the classroom is pretty small anyway, it probably wasn’t difficult.

“Now, first question...Ayu...your answer...”

She can probably stay hidden from him for the rest of the day, yes, she can just do that. Just make sure to not make too much noise, and she’s good.

“Second questions...Lestari...”

But he can still walk over to her during break anyway, and *oh God*, the break time’s always the worst.

“The third question now...Melanie...”

No, she has to get away from him, no matter the cost. The last time he'd pulled her around by her hair and nearly dunked her head in the water.

"Melanie...question..."

She will run away from him. She will - she has to.

"Melanie Chu..."

She has - eh? Is that her name?

"MELANIE CHU!"

The yell of her name is the wake-up call needed to bring Melanie's attention, seeing everyone's sights on her.

"U-um..."

"I have already shouted your name twice. Is there something wrong with your ears?"

Melanie starts to hear mocking laughs and murmurs from her classmates, tucked her head down, cheeks burning from shame.

"I-I'm sorry, Ma'am." she says quietly. Mrs. Sri sighs, putting her hand on her forehead. She taps the table twice, shutting down the increasingly louder chatter in the class. She points her finger at Melanie.

"Come here. Move forward."

Melanie blinks in confusion. "What?"

"Move forward. Sit beside Roni in the front." Mrs. Sri says, emphasizing her words pointing at the empty seat.

Melanie feels her heart drop and her blood runs cold. Instead of standing up she just remains in her seat, trembling. Her gaze keeps darting from the seat, to Roni, to Mrs. Sri, and to her surroundings, looking, *hoping* for an escape. Meanwhile Mrs. Sri taps her foot impatiently as she waits.

"Well, come on! What's taking so long?"

“I...um...” Melanie ends with a gulp.

No. This can't be happening.

“C-can I sit somewhere else i-instead?”

She can't - she can't sit there. There's no way she can-

“Don't argue too much. Do as I say.” Mrs. Sri's voice is plain and cold.

Melanie nervously points to an empty seat two seats away from Roni. “I-I can go there instead, it's fine, I will pay attention-”

Mrs. Sri instead shakes her head. “I have told you to not argue. Either you do as I say or you will have to do all the exercises and submit it by tomorrow. How about it?”

Melanie stops and looks down, steadying herself by taking deep breaths. She has a choice. Either she does that 16-page exercise or sits beside Roni. In all honesty, *anything* would be a mercy to get her as far away from Roni as possible. But can she even complete it in a day? She still has to help out her mother, as usual, aside from studying- oh, and she still has Biology and Math homework to submit tomorrow, there's no way to complete the English homework if she chooses now - but what does that matter compared to Roni?! She doesn't care, if anything gets rid of him for good-

“Melanie! Why is it always taking so long?! So what is it gonna be?!”

Jolted by Mrs. Sri's voice, Melanie promptly finds herself awkwardly shuffling along to carry her bag all the way to the seat beside Roni. She gives a few nervous glances now and then, making sure that the thug's attention isn't on her.

*It's probably okay. I only have to endure this for one period,* she thinks. Yes. I only need to pay attention and study as usual, and everything will be alright.

So the lesson continues as usual. Melanie stays focused on Mrs. Sri's explanations and her notes. But it is impossible for her to just completely take her mind off of the presence on



Melanie takes a deep breath to calm herself, holding in a small laugh. Yes. Of course. She knows why he's doing this. Roni is intentionally trying to rile her up while making it seem like he is innocent. Okay, fine, it's not like she hasn't received these kinds of insults before throughout her entire life. She can win this game if she doesn't play. So Melanie stands up and walks up to Mrs. Sri.

"What is it?" Mrs. Sri asks, a bit impatiently.

"I want to throw this trash out." Melanie says, holding the crumpled paper in her hand. Mrs. Sri only gives her a dirty look.

"Fine. Don't take too long." she says before returning to the blackboard. So Melanie goes to throw the trash outside, and goes back in to finish the lesson.

She doesn't notice Roni's hateful gaze on her throughout.

It was finally the end for English. Aside from those two papers, Roni didn't get up to any antics throughout, which was more than what Melanie could ask for.

The next lesson was Mathematics. After Mrs. Sri left the class at the end of English, Melanie was able to use the brief period before the next period's teacher came to pack her things and quickly move back to her initial seat. No one noticed and even if they did, no one cared. The next lesson went pretty smoothly (except for when Roni argued a bit with the teacher and was punished by being forced to stand outside for the remainder of the lesson), and Melanie made sure to focus thoroughly on the lesson so as to not be forced to sit in the front again.

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The lesson was over. Then, there came recess.

The moment the bell rang, half of the class flooded out of the classroom. The other half stayed in the classroom, either to continue working on homework or to eat a meal prepared from home. Melanie almost never leaves the classroom, even after finishing her

meal, as there was basically nothing for her to do anyway. She would always much prefer staying in to prepare for the next lesson or scribbling some poetry.

Melanie takes out a lunchbox from her bag. Coming from a not-so-well-off family as she does, her mother makes sure to prepare every meal from home to save money. Today's meal is oyster sauce vegetable stew with chicken and rice. Melanie takes a spoonful and eats into it excitedly. She has been hungry since the start of the first lesson. Sometimes she wishes that she could buy food from the canteen like her classmates, but her mother's cooking is probably always better anyway.

After several minutes into recess, the classroom is almost empty barring Melanie and a handful of other students staying. Heavy silence completely fills the classroom. As she is chewing, her mind wanders onto other matters.

After school she will help her mother watch the store, as is the usual for her every day. She remembers her mother saying something about their profits going down for this month? Apparently, less people are patronizing Chinese-owned businesses than before. "*We'll have to work harder,*" she said also. "*We have to if we want you to continue going to school,*" she added. Seems like that's how it'll always be. Ever since they came to this country, things have always been hard for them, but never easier. Why can't things be easier for once? Maybe, one day, Melanie can make it so. She has a dream of opening a bakery one day. She will study how to make all kinds of bread and pastries. Many people will come to her bakery and buy her creations. She will get a lot of money, and then she can give it to her mother. They won't be poor anymore! But will she even make it that far, when they are still struggling now? *Ah, there is no point in thinking about the future,* her mother likes to say to her. *We need to think about the present first.* Yes, that's right, she needs to worry about the present first, which means she just needs to think about managing the shop after she comes home from school. She needs to do her best. But first, she needs to do her homework. There is the English

homework (which thankfully wasn't added more by Mrs. Sri as punishment), and math homework too. She hopes there won't be any additional homework, so she can finish them quickly and then watch the shop with mo-

*CRACK!!*

The thick silence which Melanie's thoughts freely floated on is cut through by an almost ear-splitting bang of the door against the wall. Melanie and Jono, the only other student present in the classroom turned their heads over to the source, which they were not the slightest bit surprised at finding out: Roni. The delinquent has fresh blue bruises and red cuts along his face, putting his hands in his pockets as he stomps inside the classroom.

"Fucking bastards think they can sweep me aside..." he continues to mutter indistinctly under his breath. Melanie quickly turns her attention back to her almost-empty lunchbox, driven by pure survival instinct to not draw Roni's attention. There's no point in trying to get out anyways, since it would guarantee problems arising. Best she can do is keep down until he goes out.

Anyways, where was she? Oh, right, she will need to - *is he gone yet?* - work hard to achieve her dreams. Her mother's store is struggling, - *I want to check but he will notice* - which isn't good. They don't have a lot of money, - *maybe I can just take a peek? No, no, too risky* - especially since they need money to.... - *why isn't he gone yet? Why is he just pacing around?* - fund Melanie's education. She wants to continue going to school, doesn't - *what is he even doing here? Get out!* - she? She has to continue school, it's the only way - *just get out! Get out!* - if she wants to continue her dreams of opening a bakery - *get out! Get out! Get out! GET OUT! GET OUT! GET OUT!*

At this point, Melanie realizes that her hand which is holding a spoon is trembling from holding the spoon too hard, and that she is holding her breath. She lets out her imprisoned breath, loosening her grip on the spoon. She still hears the loud, brash footsteps

pacing back and forth in front of the class. How long has it been since the start of recess? 15 minutes? Right, so that means there's only 10 minutes left until the next lesson. Good. If Roni isn't actually going away any time soon, she can probably endure that much.

Again, keep down. It's the best strategy she has at the moment. But what can she do to distract herself? She has already finished her food, so there's no point in fiddling with the leftover rice grains with the spoon. She can distract herself by thinking about the future - no, it's gotten pretty boring already. Poetry? Yes, she can do that! Just scribble away all sorts of nonsense and she can-

"HEY!"

In the midst of her thoughts, Melanie nearly falls out of her seat. She didn't even notice the loud footsteps coming her way. Her blood runs cold as she slowly raises her head up to see her visitor, the voice she could tell from anywhere.

"What the hell are you even doing here?" he asks. *I should be the one asking that,* Melanie thinks, but her self-preservation instincts prevent her.

"Eating." she says. Roni laughs and scoffs at her.

"What are you eating? A cat? A dog? That's what you people eat, right?"

"It's rice just like you."

Enraged, Roni sweeps Melanie's lunchbox off her desk, scattering remains of rice everywhere. The sound shocks even Jono, who up to this point has been unaware of what is happening.

"You think I have forgotten what you did?" Roni asks, seething.

"W-what?" Melanie answers in a small voice, trembling. Roni then grabs her hair.

"You think you can be cheeky like that to me and get away with it, huh?!"

"Ow! Let me go!"

Melanie punches and kicks Roni to try and get free, but fails. Roni punches her in the face, causing her nose to bleed. He then grabs her by her hair again.

“Apologize and I’ll let you go.”

“I-I-”

With Melanie taking too long to answer, Roni punches her again.

“Say sorry!”

“S-sorry! I-I’m sorry!”

Melanie starts crying. Roni, apparently satisfied, releases her.

“How much money do you have on you?”

“I-I don’t have any.”

Roni scoffs.

“Whatever. Tomorrow you bring me 100.000 rupiahs. If you don’t, I’ll sock you like this again. Understand?”

Melanie continues to look down, not answering, causing Roni to kick her on her leg.

“I said, you bring me 100.000 rupiahs tomorrow. Understand?!”

Melanie can only nod weakly.

Why is that the only thing she can ever do? Just kneel to Roni’s demands every time he torments her?

Why doesn’t she ever have the power to end it?

She knows the proper thing is to hope the authorities do something. But...if she ever has the power...the chance...to *get rid of* Roni for eternity...

**“DIE!!!!”**

Then, as if through some divine intervention, the bell finally rings. Roni quickly goes to his desk, pretending as if everything is alright as the other students and the civics teacher Mrs. Chandra enters. She immediately notices Melanie’s food scattered on the floor.

“Eh, what is that?” she asks, pointing at the mess. Melanie looks at Roni, then back on the floor.

*It’s probably not worth it, she thinks. Not now. Best to just get this over with.*

“I accidentally dropped my food, Ma’am.” Melanie says.

“Oh. Well, quickly call the janitor to clean it up.” Mrs. Chandra says. As Melanie goes out to do as ordered, she can hear the whispers and giggles of her classmates.

As always, all she can do is ignore.

Melanie returns with the janitor, who proceeds to do his job. As Melanie takes her seat, Mrs. Chandra looks at her.

“Melanie?”

“Yes?”

“What’s...what’s wrong with your face?” she asks, pointing to her cheek.

Melanie quickly swipes her own cheek, wincing a bit at the slight pain from the slowly-forming bruise. She shakes her head, shrugging it off.

“It’s alright, Ma’am.” she says, forcing a small smile. From the looks of it, it doesn’t seem like Mrs. Chandra herself believes Melanie’s flimsy deflection. Nevertheless, she leaves it at that, and starts the lesson like usual.

The civics lesson progressed like normal from start to finish. Mrs. Chandra assigned a group project, which meant the usual headache for Melanie in trying to find those who wanted to group with her. Well, she can probably think about that later.

Before Mrs. Chandra leaves the class as is usual at the end of the lesson, however, she approaches Melanie at her desk.

“If you’re able to, can you meet me after class?” she asks. Melanie looks at her stunned, and despite the million questions going through her head, only nods silently. Mrs. Chandra nods reassuringly before walking out.

In all fairness, Melanie shouldn't be that confused. She already knows what warrants Mrs. Chandra's attention. She feels grateful enough towards her for that, especially since Melanie wouldn't have sought help first.

But even so...can she even tell the truth? And would it even matter if she does? Either this will lead to something being done or being left alone. And if something is done it will probably make things worse.

*Well*, she thinks, either way, she probably just needs to try.

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School is finally over.

After the incident at the recess, Melanie didn't have any more incidents with Roni for the day, not even when they directly met each other face-to-face. Was he just bored, or finally satisfied? Either way, Melanie is glad. For now, at the very least.

She makes her way to the faculty office. Before entering, she takes a peek through the window to make sure Mrs. Chandra is inside. Melanie spots her sitting on the rightmost corner of the faculty office. Melanie knocks on the door, then enters. She makes her way through rows of tables of the other teachers before reaching Mrs. Chandra.

"Excuse me, Mrs. Chandra?" Melanie asks Mrs. Chandra, who has been quite engrossed in her work and is surprised upon hearing Melanie's voice.

"Oh, right! I have been expecting you."

Mrs. Chandra stands up, leading Melanie out of the faculty office.

"You do have the time, right? Is it okay for you to come home a bit later than usual?" she asks again.

"Oh, it's okay. As long as it's not too long." Melanie answers, to which Mrs. Chandra acknowledges with a nod. Melanie doesn't ask where they are going, even though she has no idea. Mrs. Chandra leads them to the counseling room, just a few rooms away from the

faculty office. They enter a small room where another teacher and student are talking in one corner. Mrs. Chandra sits down on a big couch on the other corner, gesturing to a smaller chair in front of her.

“Sit.” she says, which Melanie obliges, placing her bag down on her right. Melanie places her hands on her knees and looks down, as she usually does whenever she’s nervous.

“Melanie Chu, isn’t it?” Mrs. Chandra asks first. Melanie nods meekly.

“How are you feeling today?” Mrs. Chandra asks again. Melanie looks slightly up, noticing how intently Mrs. Chandra observes her and her reactions, and she puts her head down again.

“I-I’m fine.” she answers quietly. Mrs. Chandra takes a deep breath and smiles.

“Melanie, in a counseling room, you can tell the truth. You *have* to tell the truth.”

*Can* she, though? Once again, Melanie finds herself stuck. The words *are* there, lying heavy on her tongue, but her lips are frozen. Instead, she swallows a lump in her throat.

“Where did you get those bruises?” Mrs. Chandra asks. Now that they’re here, she doesn’t beat around the bush anymore like when they were in class. Melanie flinches. *God*, it seems like all she wants to do is just curl deeper into herself. Maybe then she will not exist, and doesn’t have to suffer anymore.

Melanie licks her lips. Oh well.

“Roni punched me.” she says, finally. Mrs. Chandra blinks her eyes, but otherwise keeps her expressions controlled.

“When did it happen?”

“During recess.”

Mrs. Chandra nods her head.

“How did it come to that? Did he do anything else, or maybe you did?”

“I didn’t do anything,” Melanie answers, voice suddenly indignant. “He just came over to me while I was eating. He then knocked my lunchbox off, said some things about me insulting him, then grabbed and punched me.”

“Did you fight back?”

“Well, initially.”

Mrs. Chandra nods again. “He probably punched you because you provoked him.”

“But he grabbed my hair!”

“Yes, but you know the kind of person Roni is. Always going picking fights with people and getting suspended multiple times. You should have known it was better to not provoke him.”

*Like he never intended to hurt me anyway,* Melanie thinks, though she keeps it to herself.

“What was I supposed to do, then?”

“You could tell him that you were going to report him. We should always consider peaceful means to diffuse violence instead of resorting to it.”

Melanie sighs. Mrs. Chandra asks again, “How long has this been going on?”

“Since I entered middle school.”

“And has he ever hurt you physically, as well?”

“Once or twice, but never as severe as this.”

“And you never reported once?”

“I mean...I didn’t think it was that serious.”

She never wanted to create any problems. She thought she could just endure it and it would wash over, like her mother always tells her.

“You should have told us the first time it happened. We would have done something.”

*Would you?* From the way Roni is still around at school despite all the fighting he's done proves otherwise. What would they have done for one girl like her?

"So? Are you going to do something?"

"We are going to consider an adequate punishment for him. If multiple detentions don't work, then we can consider expulsion."

Melanie's eyes slightly widened. The idea of Roni getting out of her school forever sounds like heaven. But just like heaven, it sounds too good to be true.

Mrs. Chandra stands up, putting her hand on Melanie's shoulder. "Alright, go home for now, okay? We will try to settle this matter the best we can. If possible, we may arrange a meeting between your parents and Roni's parents too."

Melanie's stomach churns at the thought. It's bad enough that she's involved with the teachers, but if her mother ever knows...

"Melanie? Do you understand?" Mrs. Chandra asks, snapping Melanie out of her thoughts.

Nevertheless, Melanie bows down to Mrs. Chandra. "Thank you, Ma'am." she says as she exits the room to walk back home.

It's been a long day. Melanie hopes it won't be longer.

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The activities in the streets reach their highest peak around this transitional period between afternoon and evening, when she walks back home after school. The streets are full with daily transactions between customers and sellers of food, services, and goods. The corner shops, food stalls, houses line the street, and overlooking them are the towering spires of company offices and malls. But everywhere you look, you shall always find billboards, put up as high as you can see, on them the warm, smiling face of the beloved president Soeharto. The workers visit the roadside stalls, laughing during the conversation over a cup of coffee to

unwind from work as speakers blast with the latest dangdut hit. On every corner, you can hear negotiations, of both parties attempting to get greater profit from the other, not intending to back down. When that fails, often you will see them turning to curses and insults, which too often than not turns into a full brawl that takes everyone else to rein in. Melanie sees this, once or twice a week, and steers herself clear to quietly pass by. Consider nothing, attract nothing.

The symphony of human activity becomes as loud as, if not louder than the noises of the traffic. The roaring engines who zip by each other, spewing blinding black puffs of smoke. Against the tightly-packed chaos of the city streets, Melanie is but one person. So, she keeps her gaze up, sharp and straight, looking left and right to check for any vehicle before crossing. As she stands among a crowd, waiting on one side of the pedestrian crossing, she keeps vigilance. Then, as the traffic light turns red, she walks straight. As she crosses the road, coughing from the trail of smoke, she doesn't stop, or slow down, if she doesn't want to get squashed by the crowd, and only when she reaches the other side does she have a chance to breathe again.

She goes back through the same route she takes from home. About a few minutes or so from walking, Melanie reaches her house.

It was almost unexpected. Melanie thought that the trip would be longer, but she reached her house without even expecting it. She has been dwelling in her thoughts and worries that she didn't pay attention.

Regardless, she's finally home. Away from hardships and troubles from school. The empty street in front of her house has now become a steady traffic of motorcycles, cars, and occasional trucks. Her mother intently keeps her gaze out, guarding the store, hoping and beckoning potential customers.

As she enters her house through their family shop in the front, she sees what seems to be an elementary schooler buying something.

“Oh! Melanie, you’re finally home.” her mother turns and notices her, running over. “You’re kind of later than usual.”

“Yeah. Some business with a teacher.”

“Oh, dear. You didn’t get in trouble, did you?”

“No, no. It’s okay.”

Her mother smiles. “Okay, just get in. There’s sour vegetable soup on the table.”

“Thanks, mom.” Melanie says as she enters the house. Her mother seemed to not have noticed her bruises, which is good. Not good in itself, but Melanie would rather have more time to get prepared to tell the truth. Well, that can come later.

She goes the usual routine after coming home from school: taking a bath, changing clothes, and eating supper before helping her mother out at the shop. Her bruises hurt a little when she took a bath, but she figured it would probably fade eventually. She changed into her everyday home attire of a t-shirt and shorts. The sour vegetable soup is a little cold, but still delicious nonetheless.

When everything is done, Melanie goes out to help her mother. There, she sees that the girl from earlier is still sitting in front of the store.

“She’s still here?” Melanie mutters absentmindedly.

“Hm? Yes, she just bought a milk drink and sat there.” her mother answers. “Well, as long as she buys something, it’s not a problem.”

Melanie looks closer at the girl. She seems to be drawing on a sketchbook, though Melanie can’t see what. She decides to leave her alone.

“How was the store today?” she asks.

“Oh, it was so-so.” her mother waves her hand dismissively. “The number of customers seems to be going down these past few days. It’s awful!”

“Why is that?”

“I don’t know. It seems they avoid us just because we’re Chinese. Nothing new, right? Heh.” her mother paces back and forth. Melanie puts her elbows on the front counter, looking out to the streets in front of her. She sees the passing vehicles, people, old and young walking, carrying all sorts of things. The noise of traffic, of the loud whirring engines are supposed to disturb her. But it has become a part of her life, as crucial as the voice of her mother. Only every now and then whenever football hooligans race by, waving high their team flags, roaring alongside their engines does she wince and cover her ears, followed by her mother cursing.

Some children come running by, playing soccer. Some of them, she recognizes, as having come by to play in front of their store, but some of them she reckons are new. They laugh, screaming out excited insults and taunts as they try to reach and kick the ball. Her mother has to reprimand them for playing so close to the store, not less since they *have* knocked something off with their ball before.

“Hey, hey, hey! Don’t play here!”

The children turn around, looking incredulous. “What?!”

“I said, don’t play here!”

“Hah! What are you gonna do?!”

“You’ll knock something!”

The children instead laugh, some of them sticking their tongue out or pulling down their eyelids in mockery. “Bleeehhh! Loser! Loser! Ugly!”

“Hey, you little-!”

“Chinese! Chinese, Chinese, ugly! Ching-chong!” Then some of them have taken up on that tired but apparently still popular ‘joke’ pulling on their eyelids.

“Why you-”

Marta grabs a broom, only then finally able to drive the children away. But even then they don’t stop their jeering when they have run far enough from the store, even saying some more curse words as they continue running away.

Marta huffs in frustration. “Seriously! What’s with the children today?!”

“That’s enough, mom.”

“I mean really. How are their parents even raising them? With children like those, the future of this country looks bleak...”

Melanie can only chuckle. Still, some of the comments those children have made have stuck onto her mind. Comments that she has heard for more than one time today.

In fact, as she turns to look at the people out in the street. Some of them, as they pass by, look in her direction. Whether at the store, or at Melanie, her mother, all at once, she doesn’t know. But they all have that same look. The look Melanie is very familiar with, has learned to be familiar with both here and at her school.

She turns her attention back to the girl sitting in front of the shop. Looking closer at her sketchbook, Melanie sees a particularly impressive drawing of a mountainous landscape. Melanie can’t draw something more complex than a usual kindergartener’s drawing if she tried.

She decides to approach the girl. The elementary schooler acknowledges her approaching for the briefest moment before returning to her drawing.

“Are you finished from school?” Melanie asks.

“Yes.” the girl replies, without looking up from her sketchbook.

“It’s already quite late. Why aren’t you home yet?”

“It’s okay. I want to stay here.”

“Won’t your parents be worried?”

The girl shrugs. “They can wait.”

Melanie has a weird, sneaking suspicion regarding the girl’s answer. Still, she decides to not pry further.

“What’s your name?” she asks, changing the subject. This time, the girl turns her head around to face her.

“Putri Diah.” she answers before returning to her drawing.

“That’s a nice drawing.” Melanie says again. Putri smiles.

“Thanks.”

“What grade are you in?”

“I’m in fifth grade, but I’m advancing to sixth grade this year.”

Melanie nods, a little bit surprised. Putri looks so much younger than she is. Melanie would have thought she was around fourth grade or lower.

“What grade are you in?” Putri asks her in turn.

“I’m in seventh grade, or first grade in middle school.”

“Oh! That’s just like my brother, then.”

“Your brother?”

Putri nods. “He’s actually supposed to be in eighth grade, but got held back.”

“Huh. Why?”

Putri shrugs. “I don’t really know. He’s done a lot of bad stuff in school. My family doesn’t really like talking about it.”

“Oh...” Melanie nods. Putri’s answer unexpectedly brings back some...*unwanted* memories. She decides to change the topic. “Anyway, are you really sure you’re going to be alright? It’s going to be dark soon.”

“I told you it’s okay. I’ll go home at around five.”

With that, Melanie considers the matter done. She walks back to stand at the counter beside her mother.

As Melanie absentmindedly looks out, her mother lets out a big gasp.

“Melanie!” her mother turns Melanie’s face towards her. “Oh god, what happened to you?!”

“Ah...” Melanie’s eyes dart around as she anxiously tries to find a way out. “I, uh...I fell.”

“Nonsense! No kind of fall produces these kinds of bruises!” her mother yells. “Did someone hit you?”

“Mom, I- uh, it’s okay..”

“It’s not okay!” her mother runs to their house before coming back minutes later with a cotton pad and a bottle of Betadine. “Why didn’t you tell me?!” She admonishes Melanie again as she treats the wounds, with Melanie wincing several times.

“I didn’t think it was that big a deal.”

Her mother sighs. She puts her hand on Melanie’s shoulder. “Who was it?”

Melanie tries her best to avoid eye contact. Though, really, this has to come sooner or later, right? If she tries avoiding it, it will only make things more complicated.

“Hey,” her mother tries to gain her attention again. “Hey, I’m talking to you!”

“It was Roni.” Melanie finally answers. She sees her mother’s eyes widen, and then for her to just sigh.

“Him again?”

Melanie answers with a nod.

“Why does it keep happening with him? Why? What is it that you do with him?”

“I didn’t do anything!” Melanie snaps.

“He just approaches you and starts hitting you?”

“Well, he said some stuff beforehand...”

Her mother sighs deeply, putting her hands on her hips.

“How many times have I told you? You can’t provoke-”

“I didn’t provoke *anyone*! Didn’t you listen to me?”

“Watch your tone!” her mother raises her voice, making Melanie shrink. “I...I know you probably did not intend to do so. But still, it is best to avoid these kinds of situations-”

“Well, how am I supposed to avoid it if he’s the one who starts things?”

“Then you should do your best to not escalate things!”

Melanie can only sigh. It’s all just the same stuff all over again. Roni threatens and hits her, yet she’s the one at fault for trying to free herself?

Her mother, seemingly noticing the distress in Melanie’s eyes, sighs and puts her hands attentively on Melanie’s shoulders.

“Listen,” she says. “I know things are hard for us right now. You’re bullied at school, and our store is struggling because people don’t like who we are, or what they assume us to be. But we cannot stoop to their level. We have to remain calm and remember our principles. If we’re patient and keep our dignity, then God will reward and defend us from those who hurt us.”

Melanie can only listen. When the matter of God comes in, well, no one can argue against that, can’t they? Her mother smiles and pats Melanie reassuringly.

“Our time will come. Just wait.”

Melanie only nods.

“Did you tell the teachers about this?”

“Um...yeah.”

Her mother sighs again. “Well, let’s just hope they can make things right without complicating them.”

In the periphery of her vision, Melanie sees Putri stand up, apparently preparing to leave.

“Are you going home now?” she asks.

“Yeah. They’d yell at me if I went home later.” Putri answers as she walks in the right direction of the street.

“Well, safe journey home!” Marta says before Melanie herself can say it herself. Putri waves at them without looking back.

For the remainder of the evening, Melanie and her mother received perhaps five to six customers in their shop after Putri left. In total, for the day there were 19 customers. Not a bad number, though they certainly hoped for more.

After the closing time, Melanie goes to her room to do any homework she may have and to study for the next day while her mother prepares dinner.

Melanie completes her Biology and Math homework, and studies for Physics and Indonesian for tomorrow. Then she eats dinner, beef stew. After finishing, she goes back to studying.

“Don’t sleep too late into the night,” her mother always tells her before closing the door to Melanie’s room.

“Yes, mom.”

Melanie prepares her books for the next day. She makes sure that all homework and additional assignments are done for the day. She brushes her teeth, then goes to sleep.

Briefly, the fear of facing Roni once again tomorrow spikes in her heart, before she drifts peacefully into sleep.

## Chapter 2

Melanie walks along a riverbank.

It is dark, and she can't see anything - or can she? Everything is just so blurry. Is she outside her house? Or somewhere else?

She continues to walk, though she doesn't know why or where to. She just does. Then, suddenly, something jumps out at her.

It is small and bites at her wrists with sharp teeth. Melanie screams and with one swing from her hand, she knocks the creature down.

But wait, it isn't really a creature now, is it? It's a human. It has human legs, a human body, and...and the face...no, no it can't be, (*Roni?!*) there is no way-

It is either the bodily instinct or her brain's self-defense mechanism which violently launches Melanie's consciousness into full wakefulness.

It takes a while for Melanie to fully recognize her surroundings. The yellowed, cracked white walls, her desk, closet, bookshelf and the warm shine of the sunlight on them. Thus, she shakes off the remaining traces of fear left by the lingering images of her dreams.

Melanie shakes her head. Why did she dream of that? Even if it was involuntary (like all dreams are), what could that possibly say of her? She wants Roni gone, but...

She immediately gets out of her bed to go to the bathroom. Her mother is already awake, as usual, preparing breakfast.

"Morning, Melanie," she greets her, with Melanie replying 'morning' in return.

"What's for breakfast, mom?"

"It's fried egg with green beans."

Melanie only nods as breakfast is laid on the table. She sits down and eats it, brushes her teeth, takes a bath, changes into her uniform and prepares herself for school.

"Be careful, alright?" her mother says to her before Melanie sets off.

The trip to school is as uneventful as usual. She sees two cars nearly crashing, but that's only about it. She reaches her school gates and enters.

As she reaches her classroom, she sees only a handful of students already present. As usual, she sits at her usual seat near the window.

To pass the time, she pulls out her poetry book. She decides to continue what she wrote yesterday. She looks out of the window, at the tree where she noticed the bird's nest yesterday. The three eggs in the nest have become mere two chicks whom the mother bird attends to.

Struck with a sudden idea, she quickly scribbles down.

*“The mother bird laid three. One, two, they broke free. But one wriggled in its shell, helplessly. It fell, breaking on the ground, silently.”* Melanie mutters as she writes.

She is a bit stunned at what she has written. Her inspiration flows much easier than before! She excitedly continues to write again.

*“Her grief is instant as she looks at the empty spot in her nest. The bird's laments echoed through the forest. But who will come, at her behest? For who can differentiate a bird's grief and happiness?”*

As she finishes the verse, she is stumped again. She turns back to the birds, but can find nothing. Sighing in resignation, Melanie taps her pen mindlessly on the book.

*“But in her grief, she has blinded herself to her chicks who have survived.”* she writes again.

*“Alas! It has always been a folly to ignore those who live in favor of those who died.”*

Melanie taps her pen on the book some more, before continuing, *“For it is easier to grieve what has come to past, instead of preparing for-”*

RRRRRIIIIIINNNNGGGGG!!!!

The bell marks the start of the school day, and the end of Melanie's idleness. All of her classmates rush in, soon followed by the Physics teacher Mr. Susilo.

But, even now, Melanie still doesn't catch sight of *him*.

Not that she is worried, per se. But when someone who has made such an *impact* in your life, positive or not, doesn't appear, it does raise questions, even if it will sometimes lead to hope of things becoming better at last.

Melanie decides to put such things out of her mind. There are much more important matters to attend to.

---

It is finally recess.

Per usual, Melanie stays in the classroom to eat the meal her mother has prepared for her. For today, it is rice with sausages.

She finishes her meal, then suddenly feels an urge to go to the bathroom, which she does.

As she goes out of the classroom on her way to the bathroom across the courtyard outside, she passes by a loud group of delinquent students. The usual rabble group of troublemakers who smoke and raise hell by picking fights with students from other classes or schools. Some of them, she sees, are wearing biker costumes as well.

She suddenly hears Roni's voice.

Melanie stops dead in her tracks. Her attention is drawn to the students' conversations. She knows, for her own safety, that she should get away as soon as she can, but her morbid curiosity forces her to stay.

"...I'm telling you, Totong wants the money today."

"Of course I know that, idiot!" she hears Roni say.

"Hey, if he gets angry, we're not the ones who will deal with you."

“No need to fucking tell me! Shit...”

“Seriously, how hard is it to get 100.000 rupiahs?”

“If that’s so hard for you, you’ll never move above being a shrimp.”

“I already told you I understand! I’ll get it today from that Chinese bitch...”

Gulping, Melanie immediately dashes to the bathroom. She locks the door inside, stopping to catch her breath.

Roni was talking about her. There’s no other way.

She obviously doesn’t have the 100.000 rupiahs. She hasn’t told anyone, not even Mrs. Chandra or her mother about it. Why would she? She had thought that Mrs. Chandra would take care of it.

She doesn’t know why Roni wasn’t in the classroom earlier, but it’s probably the only reason he hasn’t gone after her yet. But if he decides to enter it later, then that will be it for her.

How will she get out of this this time?

Melanie decides to finish her ‘bathroom business’ first. But even then, she doesn’t get out immediately. She goes back to thinking.

Assuming she gets out and meets Roni. He will ask her about the money. What will she do?

- A. Tell him honestly that she doesn’t have the money,
- B. Ask him for more time, at least for her to think of a solution out,
- C. Threaten to report him to the teacher?

Anything short of giving him what he wants will warrant another beating, that much is sure. So she probably will just have to endure it. Fine enough. In that case she’ll just have to pick the most logical and righteous choice.

Report him to the teacher.

Which she *has* already done, albeit not out of her own intention, to Mrs. Chandra. She has promised to take care of it, *whatever* that entails. And all Melanie had to do was trust her.

But none of that matters when Roni himself is here and intent on getting that money out of Melanie.

Well, then again, pain is inevitable either way.

So, why should she even hesitate?

Melanie calmly opens the bathroom door and walks out. She keeps her gaze straight ahead as she walks to the classroom.

“HEY!”

And there is the sound she has been anticipating. Not waiting for, but expecting.

Melanie keeps her breathing steady. She hears the footsteps coming up behind her - but she doesn't turn her head.

“Hey, shithead! I'm talking to you!” Roni shouts. But even so, Melanie doesn't turn.

“What?” Melanie plainly answers, still not turning her head. Roni proceeds to force her so, grabbing her by her hair, causing Melanie to hiss in pain.

“I'm gonna kick your ass for that.” he says. With Melanie not saying anything, he asks again, “Where's my money?”

Melanie leers at him, trying to maintain eye contact. “I don't have it.” she says, plainly.

She catches a brief glimpse of Roni's furious glare before he throws her to the ground, Melanie just barely catching herself with her hands.

“Do you really like getting hurt that much, huh? Then I'll just give as much of it to you!”

Roni then attempts to kick and stomp on Melanie, though she manages to guard herself with her arms and scuttle away from his attacks.

“I said, where is my money?!” Roni shouts at her again. Melanie manages to quickly stand up, though Roni quickly catches her again. Meanwhile, there are shouts and murmurs from all the other students witnessing in the hallway.

“Oh, no!”

“What’s going on?”

“Someone call the teacher!”

“Don’t think you can get away from me forever.” he threatens her again.

“You won’t, either.” Melanie replies. With his eyes dilating in fury, Roni prepares a punch. Melanie closes her eyes, bracing for the attack.

“HEY! What is the meaning of this?!”

Stunned, Roni turns to the voice. It is a teacher, Melanie isn’t sure who, but likely one of the upper class-teachers. He quickly paces towards Roni and Melanie, roughly separating them.

“Have you become so shameless that you dare to fight in the school hallways?! What has come to you?!”

“He wanted to take my money!” Melanie says first, hoping that the teacher will take her side.

“Tch! What business is it of yours?!” Roni growls.

“That’s enough!” the teacher yells. He turns towards Roni first. “You’re Roni Budianto, right? You are already quite infamous enough. What are you thinking, beating up a girl? Are all the other punks too strong for you?”

Roni only glares silently at Melanie. The teacher grabs Roni’s arm and pushes Melanie away.

“I will let this slide once. But there won’t be another chance if I catch you two again. Understand?!”

Melanie nods, while Roni maintains his defiant stare even as the teacher drags him along.

“As for you, Roni Budianto...we need to talk about many, *many* other things.”

Roni continues to glare at Melanie for a while as the teacher brings him through the hallway. The students continue to look at Melanie and murmur.

Melanie only sighs and closes her eyes. At least it's over.

For now, anyway.

---

Roni continues to be absent for the rest of the school day.

Has he shown up since the beginning of the day? Or did he only come during the middle to carry out his 'business' with Melanie? And what did the teacher who dragged him do to him? Where is he now?

As much as she doesn't want to, Melanie couldn't help but think of these questions as she went through the rest of the school period. It certainly would help if he were to remain completely gone.

But, even if the teacher *did* do something...would that even matter to her? Would that even help her in the slightest metric that matters? They certainly wouldn't actually do it to *help* her, not directly. Why else would Roni be allowed to remain until now?

But, now that Roni is witnessed having connections to a biker gang, it became an incentive for the school authorities to take action; to protect their image, if nothing else. Maybe this will be the last straw for them to actually kick him out of the school.

And that certainly brings another matter to Melanie's mind. Is Roni really in a biker gang? From what she had accidentally overheard, they mentioned something about 'Totong' and Roni rising up the ranks. So was Roni only mugging her to impress the gang?

It might do her good to not think about it too much.

---

It is the end of the school day. It is time for Melanie to get home soon and rest, as soon as possible.

Melanie takes her usual route between school and her home.

Her trip home goes normally, though sometimes she can't shake off a feeling that someone is watching her. Especially when she stops to wait for the street clearing up, she sometimes hears some oddly familiar voices behind her.

She's probably just tired.

She walks until she reaches the raised pavement beside the river crossing her home. There is nary a sound but the soft whistling of wind and the sounds of her foot upon the pavement. The sun moves near the horizon as evening comes.

The shade of the evening quickly grows over her. She looks up at the dark, rolling puffs of gray and white. Better not to delay any longer if she doesn't want to get wet.

It is now, during the time where there is scarcely any person around when Melanie's feelings of being followed grow even stronger.

Perhaps someone really is following her, but she doesn't dare to find out. Besides, what if someone isn't even following her? Again, maybe she's just tired. Better to get home as soon as possible for the problem to go away. Hopefully.

"Hey."

Melanie stops dead in her tracks.

The voice, that fearful voice in her head materializes itself in reality.

"Are you even fucking listening to me?"

Cold sweat covers her entire body. She shakes in place. Her heart drops to her stomach. It feels like the entirety of her innards are about to spill out.

It feels too much like a nightmare. Yet, a nightmare has an end.

Finally, she dares to turn around.

And there he is. Roni Budianto, about a little more than a meter away from her, sporting an inscrutable expression on his face.

“What? Surprised to see me? I thought so. You bet you could get away just because school’s over?” he says, with a cruel laugh.

Melanie gulps, trying her best to control her shaky breathing. She looks at Roni’s slow steps, carefully approaching her.

Why would he do that? If he was trying to get at her - which is the only conceivable reason why he has followed her all the way - then why doesn’t he immediately take his chance?

“What do you want?”

It is the only thing she can say, the only way she can perhaps get to the bottom of all this, and get it resolved as quickly and easily as possible, however hopeful that may be. The smile on Roni soon fades with the question.

“Stop playing around, bitch.” he says, approaching faster. Melanie instinctively steps backward, but holds her ground. It will probably get worse if she does try to run away.

“W-what?”

“You think you can get away being cheeky like that to me, huh?” Roni says. “You are lucky when I told you to just get me some money. I don’t know how a Chinese like you can’t even get measly 100.000 rupiahs. I thought you were all supposed to be rich, stealing all the wealth and jobs from us?”

Melanie only stands there, petrified, as Roni comes closer. No, she should have ran back then. Roni might have chased and caught her anyway, but at least there would be people who could help. But now, with no one around...

Roni suddenly stops. He puts his hand in his jacket, and pulls out something so fast that it takes a while for Melanie to fully recognize it.

A knife.

Melanie freezes in place. She can only move her eyes, following the knife as Roni lifts it up and points it at her, less than a meter away.

“I should have taught you a better lesson. Perhaps you would have been smart then. But now...” Roni’s eyes widened in madness. “You’ve humiliated me for the last time.”

He swings the knife, aiming it at Melanie’s abdomen. She manages to avoid it just in time, catching Roni’s arm.

Bad decision.

Melanie tries her best to keep Roni’s hand in place, with the knife still so close to her. *I should have ran away*, Melanie thinks, since then she probably could have gotten away. Now both her and Roni are effectively trapped. If she lets go, then Roni could easily go for her again.

But still, evidently, Melanie can’t just hold forever. Slowly but surely, Roni pushes back.

“No one will ever know. No one will ever care!” Roni growls as he pushes and pushes further.

She has to act fast. She has to find a way to push him away and put as much distance between her and himself as possible in a short time, one that is enough to give her time to get away.

She doesn’t know what she will do next, but right now is what’s important.

So Melanie pushes first. She steps forward, and puts all of her strength into pushing Roni’s arm towards himself.

“Gh!”

It is hard, but Melanie manages it. But at this distance, still, Melanie can clearly see the glinting point of the knife, pointed towards her.

She has to turn it away from her before anything happens.

Taking a deep breath, Melanie unleashes all of her strength in pushing Roni's hand away from her. The knife turns into his direction.

“G-glkh!”

Roni pushes back, and is slowly winning out. At this rate, he might actually break free.

One move can spell her doom, or not.

One move.

Melanie keeps pushing on, slowly directing the knife towards Roni's stomach. Then Roni pushes back, nearly freeing himself from Melanie's grasp.

Then Melanie puts all of her strength into the next push.

*SHINK!*

The sound cuts through the silence, and the realization of both teenagers.

Roni stops moving. Melanie, realizing, slowly moves away, seeing the knife embedded in Roni's chest.

“G-gh...”

Roni chokes out as blood comes out of his mouth. Melanie, in a kind of reflexive absent-mindedness, takes slow steps backwards as Roni keels over, coughing and spraying blood all over.

“You...you...”

He still pushes himself to crawl along on the ground, hand reaching out to Melanie. He slows down and, eventually, comes to a stop, face facing up.

Melanie can only bring herself to take slow, shaky steps, despite all instincts telling her that she should get away. Still, she looks closer to see that Roni is no longer breathing.

Then, the weight of everything that has happened comes crashing down on her.

Roni is dead.

She caused the knife intended to kill her to kill Roni instead.

*She killed Roni.*

The sheer realization of everything, the plain *reality* that she lives in accumulates into one sick lump in her stomach which proceeds to violently hurl itself out of her.

After she's done throwing up, the entire world is spinning around her. It keeps going around and around and it is going to crash down on her, all of it, oh my God please make it stop- MAKE IT STOP-

She wildly turns her head around. Is she alone? She has to. If even only one person finds out she is completely done for.

No! Why is she worrying so much about it?! She has to act quickly. She has to- get rid of this-

The river besides the pavement gives her an idea.

Melanie brings herself to approach Roni's body. It gives her the feeling of throwing up again, but- she has to.

With her feet, she tries to push Roni's body rolling down the pavement and into the river below. He is too heavy - well, of course he is.

She can't waste too much time. If she tries too hard, someone - *someone* will see.

She gulps the giant lump in her throat, down to her nearly-exploding heart.

She has to push Roni's body down by hand.

But how could she do that? How could any - sane - person do that?

She's not - she's not a murderer. She can't do this.

But she is.

Melanie kneels down. She tries hard to avert her eyes - she wants to close them, but she still has to see where she is pushing Roni down to. One wrong move will spell the end for her.

She first lays her hands on Roni's chest. The dried, darkened blood stains his uniform. Melanie tries her best to not accidentally put her hands on it, or to look at Roni directly - or she'll throw up again.

With her full might she pushes Roni's body off to the side, teetering on the edge of the pavement. So close! Hyperventilating, Melanie gives one last hard push, sending it rolling down into the river. She sees the body getting swept up in the river's current, disappearing after some distance or so.

Melanie continues to stand there, completely motionless, ravaged by cold sweat and trying to stabilize her shaky breath. Then, the roaring thunder awakens once again the incentive in her to move quickly. She turns right, and continues on her journey home.

She walks straight ahead; never once turning her gaze to the side. She keeps her vision ahead on her way home and way home only.

When she finally reaches home, her mother greets her as usual.

"Welcome home, dear." she says warmly. It doesn't even seem like a long time has passed between...her *encounter* and now. The whole thing seems to have lasted only several minutes.

Melanie also notices Putri, coming to the store again after yesterday.

"You came home just in time. If you had come any later, you would have gotten drenched by the rain." Marta says. "Now take a bath and eat first before helping me, okay?" she continues, though Melanie remains silently staring off.

"Melanie?"

“Oh- uhm...what?” Melanie is startled out of her absent-mindedness.

“I said, take a bath and eat before you help me.”

Melanie just nods silently. Her mother, however, seems to notice something wrong.

“What’s the matter? Are you feeling okay?”

“I...I...I-I’m alright...”

“Really? You don’t look like-”

“I’m fine! I told you!”

Melanie realizes what she has said as she sees her mother’s eyes dilate in shock. It just churns her stomach worse.

“What did you just say?”

Melanie tries to not meet her mother’s eyes. Then the recollection of that event comes in quick flashes for her, replaying the remembrance of the sensations, the *sight*, the *smell*-

“Hey! I’m talking to you!”

“I...I feel sick.”

Marta scrunches her brows.

“Sick? What’s wrong? Is it something you eat?”

“I...I don’t know. I-I think I’m about to-”

“Hey, hey, don’t push yourself. Okay, just take a bath and lie down, okay? You don’t have to help me at the store today.”

Her mother guides Melanie inside. She takes a moment to turn back at Putri, who turns to face her before the door to her home closes.

She does as her mother says, though not before throwing up yet again in the bathroom. At this point, she might have expelled all of the lunch her mother packed for her at school. Even when her mother has prepared her favorite fried sausages, she can’t bring herself to eat

any of it. She just remains lying down on her bed for the remainder of the evening while her mother guards the store.

Alone, with nothing but her thoughts.

Her eyes wander to the ceiling above her. It's all cracked and yellowed, she observes. There are a lot of cracks there, where water usually drips out of.

*Like the blood coming out of Roni's wound.*

No.

*No.*

She has to think of something else.

She directs her mind to school matters. There is plenty of homeworks given out today. She has to do them, especially today, because then she'll have no time for it, and the teachers will kill her-

*Just like how she killed Roni.*

*What?! No, NO!*

Melanie hugs her knees and curls on herself, shaking. She tries to shake her head, pinch herself, even punch her own face, hoping, *desperately*, that this is all a dream..

Stop thinking about it. Stop thinking about it. *Stop thinking about it.*

*But how can you forget such a heinous crime?*

*You killed someone. That's a fact.*

She didn't!

*But that's not just all isn't it? In fact, you did something worse...*

*You deliberately covered it up. You thought no one would find out...*

No one will.

*Oh, but they will. They will know it was you.*

No one...

*And what do you think will happen, then? They will get you, surely...*

Stop...

*Oblivion will come for you...*

STOP IT!

*Just like it did for Roni.*

AAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!

.....

...

..

*Silence.*

Silence.

Melanie falls back down on the bed, and turns over.

Tightly closing her eyes, she sleeps, wishing for the warm embrace of oblivion heralded by the symphony of rain to comfort her.

But not even oblivion can't save her anymore.

Save her from...

*What she has done...*

...

..

.

### Chapter 3

*“Hey, Melanie, what are you doing?”*

It is the sound of her father’s. Maybe. It’s so far away, she can’t really hear it well. She’s sitting in her (old) living room, playing with an old rabbit doll as her mother is seemingly ranting away on the phone.

“Oh dammit, listen to this! They’re reducing gold’s prices again!” her mother tells her father.

Where is his face? He doesn’t have any. Not that that really bothers her, though.

*“Murder! Murder!”* the rabbit doll suddenly speaks.

Murder?

She is standing in front of a river now. Weird, where has everyone gone? It’s nothing but sand all around.

A fish suddenly leaps towards her, and she stabs it with a knife.

“GAH!”

It’s Roni’s voice.

The fish flops helplessly, drowning in its blood.

“Why...why...”

Why indeed? No, she is just defending herself!

“Krrgh...why you..why don’t you...finish the job?!”

No! This isn’t how it’s supposed to be!

She drops the knife. She wants to run as far away as possible, but she can’t! The currents will carry her off, she will-

She wakes up covered in her own sweat.

Her eyes frantically dart around the room, taking time to process the dividing lines between dream and reality, and reassuring herself that it is indeed reality.

It is still dark and not even morning yet. The rain drops in a soft *tip-tap* against her windows, probably the second or third rain that has occurred since yesterday. It is best for her to go back to sleep, so Melanie closes her eyes again.

But there, it pops up again, like a persistent ghost.

The lifeless, open-eyed stare in Roni's corpse.

Melanie nearly shrieks. She desperately tries to focus her mind on anything else to go back to sleep again, but it is no use. But not just that, *everywhere* she looks, only that face comes to mind.

From Roni's lifeless face, to blood still freshly-flowing from his wound put in by his knife, by Melanie's hand.

She can still feel it, even now. The weight she put in, as she pushed back, ending in pushing the knife right onto Roni's body. It all came so quickly, and, oh no, oh my god she can't *breathe*-

*"I'm gonna kill you!"*

No!

*"You think you can escape me, huh, fucker?"*

Stop!

*"You will die!"*

She will die, no, no, no, no, no, no-

She doesn't want to die!

What will she do? What will she do? *What will she do?!*

*Someone please save her!*

"Melanie?"

Silence.

There is finally a familiar, welcoming voice, amidst the oppressive silence that has been accompanying her.

“Mom?”

Her mother opens the door to her room.

“I heard some noise? What was that?”

“I...”

Melanie awkwardly shuffles in her bed.

Did she make any noise? Maybe she did move around a lot. Or did she just say that stuff out loud?

Hopefully not.

“It’s...nothing.”

“Really? This house is so weird. Every night you just hear some stuff. Oh well.”

Melanie just sits there in silence. She really didn’t want anyone to just barge in there. But, maybe her mother’s presence is all she needs to not lose her mind.

For the while, anyway.

But Marta wouldn’t be Melanie’s mother if she can’t somehow pick up on something *off* from her.

“Are you feeling okay?” she asks.

“I...”

“Well, why don’t you get out and get ready? You’ll be late, you know.”

“Oh...”

Oh. Right. School.

As if there aren’t enough problems in her life already.

One student can die, but school still goes on.

“Uh...”

“Hey! Again, what’s wrong with you?” her mother walks over to her. Melanie tries to avert her gaze, but it will probably worsen things.

“Uhm...” Melanie gulps. “I’m feeling sick.”

Well, it’s not a lie, technically. but it still feels like one.

“Really? From yesterday?” her mother asks, a bit incredulous. Melanie only nods weakly.

“Huh. So weird. What is it from? Is it something you ate?”

“I don’t know.”

She’s really doing it. She’s really lying this time.

She’s not a saint. She has lied before like every single other kid her age.

But...lying about something like this...

“But wait, you didn’t buy or get any food from outside, did you?”

“No.”

“So you only ate food from home....no, there’s no way my food made you sick, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know.”

Indeed, she doesn't. Not about anything.

Her mother, finally, only sighs and stands up.

“Oh well, this is no serious matter. You’ll only need to drink medicine and you’ll be good as new!”

Melanie again, only nods. Her mother then steps outside to get the medicine from the kitchen.

“Just lie down, okay? Don’t push yourself.”

“Yes, mom.”

Her mother closes the door, and Melanie is left alone with her thoughts, again.

She's still hoping for a change, no matter how useless it seems.

Even if she can't change what has happened, maybe she can at least forget about it.

Then again, it's an all too-fitting punishment for her.

Maybe, even if no one ever figures out it was her...would that finally bring peace to her, then?

No. Of course not. How could she deserve it?

Melanie isn't alone with her thoughts for long when her mother returns, bringing medicine and hot tea, which she places on Melanie's desk.

"Here, drink this."

Melanie does as she's told.

"I'm going to prepare soup for you, okay?"

Melanie almost makes a protest upon being left alone again, but there's not much she can do but wait.

Then, again, like a broken VHS tape, the same scene keeps playing over and over.

Later, her mother comes in again carrying a bowl of soup, giving a temporary distraction.

"Here. It's chicken soup."

"Oh."

Her mother tilts her head quizzically. "What's wrong? You like chicken soup, don't you?"

"Uh...uh, right."

Her mother smiles. "Well, just eat. You'll feel better."

Melanie only nods and silently does as she's told. It *is* her favorite chicken soup. Yet, with the memory of all that has happened...even her favorite food feels bitter in her tongue. Still, there's not much she can do.

Her mother, thankfully, stays by her side, watching her.

“Are you feeling better now?”

“Um...”

“Do you still feel sick, or nauseous?”

“I mean...I guess I still do.”

Her mother sighs. “Really. Why so suddenly? Are you *sure* you didn’t eat anything fishy?”

Melanie only shakes her head disinterestedly.

“Well, you don’t have to go to school today if you still feel sick. I’ll tell the teacher.”

Her mother goes to touch Melanie’s shoulder, but she instinctively jerks away from her.

“Hey! Why are you avoiding me?”

“Uh...”

She doesn’t mean to do that. She shouldn’t. And yet...

“Why are you avoiding your mother like that?”

Melanie finds herself unable to answer.

“W-well, so what?”

“What?”

“I mean...”

Marta frowns and knits her eyebrows.

“You’ve been acting really *weird*.”

Again, Melanie remains silent.

Well, it’s not like this is a one-time thing. There have been many times where Melanie finds herself avoiding her mother’s touch from discomfort, and her mother would then like to

follow it up with a lecture which Melanie just tuned out. So now, she's preparing herself for another one of that as well.

Her mother crosses her arms, a sure sign of a long reprimanding. "Something must have happened yesterday. What was it?"

"I..."

She gulps, and feels herself tremble.

"What was it?"

Is she really going to lie again?

The first time she lied about this, she felt a bitter taste in her tongue afterwards which lied down in her stomach. She couldn't believe that she would lie to her own mother like that. Yet she did it anyway. But can she bring herself to do it the second time?

"Did something happen at school?"

No. Maybe...maybe she can tell the truth this time. Maybe this is the chance God has presented to her to finally make things right. It wasn't her fault - it was an accident. She made a mistake she didn't mean to. Maybe if she told her mother they could make things right.

"Answer me, Melanie."

"I..."

She feels a bead of sweat trickling down the side of her head.

But - no! How can she say something like that to her own mother? No, she would - she couldn't handle it. Her poor mother, who has supported her all these years...

"Was there a problem at school yesterday?"

"..."

She couldn't reveal the truth outright. But, perhaps, to be a bit upfront about the root of the entire mess...yes, she could do that...it would be for the best...

"Mom, I..." Melanie takes a deep breath. "It was Roni."

She feels herself able to breathe a little easier again. The weight in her chest isn't fully gone, of course, but it does lighten a little. At the very least, this clears her mother's worries.

"Roni again?" her mother sighs. "What did he do to you?"

"He, well...he threw me around because I didn't bring him money."

"Dear God," her mother gasps. "He told you to bring money?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Just the day before."

"Why didn't you tell me?" her mother unexpectedly scolds her. "If you'd told me, I would have given you money so he would stop harassing you!"

"Would you give him your hard-earned money like that?"

"Rather than you getting hurt. Money is nothing."

"He would just continue bullying me anyway."

Her mother has no response to that. She asks, "Were you hurt?"

"Nothing too severe, honestly."

"He didn't do anything else to you? Be honest."

The last two words were like a large needle stabbing through her heart. She shouldn't be lying to her mother in the first place, but she keeps doing it anyway. It's too late. There's nothing she could do about it now, except to, well, keep up the appearances a little bit.

"He proceeded to threaten me several times."

Well, it wasn't a lie. It wasn't the whole truth either, but...her mother doesn't need to know the whole truth.

Her mother shakes her head. "Have you told the teachers about this?"

"Well...he did get called off to the office after he threw me."

Her mother nods. “At least it’s something. I don’t know why they hadn’t kicked him out at this point.”

Melanie only listens silently. Her mother proceeds to stand up.

“Well, you just eat your soup and rest. I’ll call your teacher to say you aren’t coming to school today.”

“Yes, mom.” Melanie answers, and her mother leaves her room.

Melanie does as she’s told, absentmindedly scooping soup to her mouth, not even registering the taste. She hears her mother’s faint voice speaking on the telephone from outside.

“Yes, this is Melanie’s mother....she’s sick today....I’m not really sure but she’s just suddenly nauseous...no, uh, sorry but we can’t afford it...yes...oh, really? Oh, I don’t know about that...sorry for not being able to help...yes, yes, understood, I will. Thank you.”

A little while later, Melanie’s mother enters Melanie’s room.

“I told Mr. Suryaatmadja that you won’t be coming today. Since we didn’t have a doctor’s letter, he’ll be counting you today as absent. I think it’s going to be okay though.”

Melanie nods. Her mother continues again. “Also....he said that Roni’s parents told the school authorities that Roni’s been missing since yesterday.”

Melanie nearly drops her spoonful of hot soup on her lap. She managed to save it at the last moment, though some drops still spilled anyway, causing her to shriek.

“Eeh! Are you okay?!” her mother asks her.

“I, I, uh...I’m okay.”

“You’ve gotta be careful with hot soup! Imagine if the entire bowl spilled all over you and the bed!” her mother reprimands her while wiping her dirty clothes with tissue.

“Yes, yes, I was just...”

She has thought that the matter about Roni would be over with his mother. No, it's not just her mother this time because, because...oh God.

It can't be true.

"Anyways...what did you just say?" Melanie asks.

"I said, I already told Mr. Suryaatmadja--"

"No, the last part."

Marta continues, "Roni's parents called the school authorities because, apparently, he never came home. His parents have repeatedly tried to contact him to no avail, and then they asked if the school authorities knew anything about it, which they didn't, so now they asked everyone if they knew anything about Roni's last whereabouts."

Melanie froze in her bed.

"Do *you* know anything about it?"

Melanie continues to freeze.

No.

This can't be happening.

Well, *obviously*, she *had* to know it was going to happen. What did she expect? Even if she managed to somehow cover up her crime...

Roni's parents were going to figure out that their son was missing.

They're going to look for him, and when they find out that he's dead...

No, no, they're just going to think it's an accident. It's not too far-fetched. He fell off and drowned in the river-

But. The wound. The knife. There's no way they could miss *those*. Even on the off-chance that the river's currents had carried the knife away- they're still going to figure out it was murder.

They would look for their son's killer.

They would look for *her*.

“Melanie?” her mother’s voice snaps her out.

“Y-yes?”

“...I will be preparing the store to open today. Finish the soup and rest.”

Melanie nods, and her mother walks out of the door.

There, alone again, she can only eat her soup mindlessly, like a machine. She tries hard not to think. If she thinks, she will probably throw up again.

Maybe it’s a bad idea not to go to school. That way, maybe her mother won’t worry so much about her. And she will have a lot of things to occupy her mind.

No, what the hell’s she thinking?! If she goes in, people...people will find out!

Melanie takes a deep breath. No, best not to think about this.

Everything will turn out okay. Everything will turn out okay. Everything will turn out okay.

She repeats it about a hundred times or so in her head. It might be a lie. It *is* a lie. But she has to make herself believe it is true.

Only because she has nothing else.

Melanie finishes the last drops of soup in the bowl and walks out to put it in the sink.

“Are you feeling better?” her mother asks her.

Melanie only nods. “Um,” she grunts in acknowledgement. What’s the harm? What’s the point? Not like it changes anything.

“Are you still feeling sick?”

“Um.”

“Well, just rest, okay?”

Melanie nods again and only returns to her room, sitting on her bed.

Her cage of solitude.

A place where she can always be alone, alone and safe, where no one can judge her.

But who can judge her harsher than herself? Who can punish her worse than what she had brought upon herself?

No! Is she mad?!

If someone else finds out, she'll be thrown to prison! She'll...no. No, no, is that what her fate is going to be? Doomed to a lifetime of imprisonment because of one, small mistake-

Small?! Is that what it is now, taking someone's life?! Small mistake?!

But why would anyone care about Roni anyway? A violent, petty, thug and bully! He has made her life worse just for existing! He had it coming!

But...how does any of that justify her taking his life? She already told her teachers. She should have trusted them. They would have brought things under control.

But what use has putting trust in authorities has given her?! All this time getting tormented, and none of them has done anything for her! And all because she's Chinese.

Roni was right. Who *would* care, indeed, for a Chinese girl like her if she turned up dead one day? Not like they did when she's still alive. They're all just the same, like *him*!

But...but...she didn't mean it. She didn't mean to kill him. She was - defending herself! He pulled the knife on her first!

Maybe...maybe it will all turn out all right for her. She didn't do anything wrong. If there is justice in this world, she'll be - she'll be free.

Oh God, please stop it! Please stop these thoughts!

She doesn't care...she doesn't even care if she's caught anymore!

She just wants to be free from her thoughts!

Anyone! PLEASE!

STOP IT!

...

Melanie wonders what's happening in school right now.

Today is Wednesday. The first period is PE. She's always hated PE. They're always told to just run laps, maybe playing some soccer if they're lucky.

There must be a lot of ruckus right now. One student, suddenly reported missing by his parents.

But why would anyone care? They'll probably shrug it off as Roni deciding to loiter off on his own, doing God knows what, or getting involved in shady business with his biker gang. And if he never comes back - well, good riddance. It'll only be a net positive for everyone, as much as anyone tries to pretend otherwise.

But - she's absent too. Now normally no one would care about *that* too, but coupled with Roni's disappearance, the suspicion can only fall on *her*.

Oh, *God*, no! It's coming back again! *There's no escaping for her!*

Okay, no! Stop! Take a deep breath. Breathe in, and out. Lay back, and relax.

No, perhaps she's not doomed yet.

For one, what reason do they have for suspecting her, immediately? Just because both she and Roni are absent from school? It's just a coincidence.

Yes. Sure. Everyone will just shrug it off. When - *if* anyone investigates further-

Well. She'll deal with that later.

Now. First things first.

Maybe she can help her mother around the house or the store.

Makes up for not being at school, and occupies her mind, keeping it from wandering around. Making her *think*.

She steps out of the room, seeing her mother sweep the floor.

"Can I help you with that, mom?"

Her mother seems almost jolted with shock at such a request.

“What? You’ve never helped sweeping around before. Why so suddenly?”

Melanie shrugs, trying to appear as casual as possible. “Well...it’s fine, right? Rather than not doing anything all day.”

Her mother looks at her again oddly, seemingly trying to parse the question. Finally she just hands the broom and the dustpan over to Melanie.

“Alright then,” she says. “But don’t be careless! Make sure to reach every spot and sweep it clean!”

“Okay, mom.”

Melanie starts sweeping as she’s told, and her mother leaves the house, likely to stand guard at the store.

She makes sure to reach all the smallest corners and crevices where dust usually accumulates. She seldom sweeps the house, but it’s relaxing work, just focusing all her mind in making sure everything is cleaned up.

*Like when she cleaned up Roni’s remains.*

Wait, what?

*It’s true, isn’t it? You had to make sure you cleaned everything up perfectly.*

Right. That’s all over now. It’s all in the past. Melanie continues sweeping again.

*But you didn’t make sure, did you? You just wanted to get the thing over as quickly as possible before anyone noticed.*

Stop it, stop it, stop it...

*But you probably did let one thing slip through.*

No! It didn’t happen!

*But you already know. One wrong move...*

I SAID STOP!

*...and they will catch you.*

Melanie stops her sweeping as she notices her trembling hands. No, no, no...it's happening again.

It's in the past. She has to put that behind now. No. No more thinking.

She does the old trick. Breathe in, and out. Again. In, and out. In and out, repeatedly, until she doesn't tremble anymore. Good.

Now. Maybe she needs to do something else. Something that requires more attention and brainpower that normally would be redirected to thinking about...well.

She decides to help out at the store. It'll be a nice change of scenery.

As Melanie steps out to the store, she is greeted by the wafting scent of rain against the grassy ground and wet asphalt. The rain has flooded the streets a bit, a couple of centimeters from the ground. The river, too, is coursing heavily. Maybe it is a good thing that she is ill, after all, since she doesn't have to wade through that to get to school.

*And maybe the rain has carried Roni away too-*

She is snapped into focus by a loud complaint, turning her attention to a scene of argument between her mother and a haggling customer.

"How can you seriously sell this at 20.000?!" the customer yells.

"That or 25.000. Take it or leave it."

"This is ridiculous! Do you Chinese have no dignity?!" the customer angrily slams the item he's holding down on the counter while preparing to leave.

"H-hey, wait! I'll take 17.000! How about that?" her mother tries for the last time to win the customer's favor, but to no avail.

"To hell with that! You Chinese and your greed to take all of our money!"

Marta can only watch dejectedly as the customer leaves without turning back. Meanwhile, Melanie stands motionlessly at the door to her house as she watches the entire scene.

It isn't an unfamiliar situation, by all means, throughout all the years she has lived helping out her mother at the store. And yet, after everything she has gone through...she feels a little more uneasy.

Her mother turns back and notices her daughter for the first time.

"Oh, Melanie! Have you finished sweeping the house?"

"I have, mom." Melanie walks towards her mother on the counter.

"Right. I'll check if it's truly clean like I've told you."

Melanie nods. Marta sighs.

"Customers have become truly entitled these days."

"That so?"

"Of course! I have already given them the fairest price I could, and they ask for even further lower! Do they want to drive me out of business?!" she ends with a sigh.

"Well, I'm sure this will be the last one." Melanie tries to comfort her mother, or herself.

"Eh, there have already been a couple, but the last one was the most egregious, calling me 'Chinese' and such..."

Melanie tries to gulp the uneasy feeling down. Seems like that's all she can do anyways.

"Anyways, are you feeling better now?" Marta asks Melanie.

"Well, a little bit."

"Are you sure? If you push yourself too hard, you will get worse, you know."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. I just want to help around."

Her mother gives her the same questioning, yet suspicious look she gave her when she had asked to help sweep the house.

"What's gotten into you all of a sudden?"

“Eh?”

“You’ve never asked me to help around before, yet suddenly you do it even when you’re sick!”

“Well, what's wrong with just wanting to help?!”

“Don’t use that ‘I just want to help’ spiel! You probably want something from me, right?”

“No! Why must you think that?!”

Well, this kind of questioning is way better than what she’s had before.

“Be honest! What is it? Do you want a bicycle? You’ve asked for that one before.”

“Mom, it’s not-”

“Or new clothes? Food? Or even a phone?”

“Mom! It’s not like...that...”

“Then what is it?”

“I...”

Damn it, why can’t just her mother accept help? She has complained about not having help before, yet when Melanie wants to help she gets suspicious!

Well...not like she doesn’t have a valid reason to in this case. But still.

“Why is it weird that I want to help without an ulterior motive?”

“It’s not the help itself that is weird. But to do it while you’re sick...”

“I’ve told you, I’m getting better!”

“But still not entirely, right? Are you still nauseous and throwing up?”

“Well...sometimes.”

If she can stop herself from thinking about *that*.

“Either way, you have been acting weirdly since yesterday.”

“What? What is it?!”

“Just suddenly getting sick while not knowing why, and now this.”

“What does getting sick have to do with this?”

“I mean...”

Marta turns around restlessly, sighing and putting her hand on her forehead.

“...I don’t know. But that’s because you refuse to tell me something.”

“What?”

“You didn’t tell me everything about what you did at school yesterday.”

“I have told you that I got into trouble with Roni.”

“That, but you also said that the teachers already dealt with him.”

“I mean...hopefully.”

“So what’s the problem, then?”

“I...”

Melanie sighs. Marta puts her hands on her hips, in her typical reprimanding fashion.

“Now, you have been avoiding all of my questions. Be honest with me. I won’t get angry, but I will be if you continue to lie.”

*Yeah*, like she always held on to that promise, like the time Melanie confessed to running around after sundown and ended up getting grounded as punishment. But *this* time, she supposes her mother has every right to do that and more. Maybe she won’t even complain if she gets disowned.

“He...”

“Who? Roni? What did he do to you?”

“He...”

Is she really going to say it?

No! Of course not! Who could ever admit to something like that? And to their own mother, no less?!

Oh, how she wishes she could crawl to a hole and remain there for the remainder of her pathetic life.

But right now, being questioned by her mother is probably the best option she has. If she was questioned by anyone else - like the teachers, Roni's parents, or the police - it would be it for her. But...being honest with her mother can probably still save her.

This is probably the last chance she has to make things right.

"I..."

"Yes?"

Melanie gulps, again. Everything starts to spin around her. Her legs are going weak, and - she can't breathe.

"Melanie?"

"I...Roni..."

No, she can't do this.

"What? What did he do?"

"Well...he..."

She takes another gulp again.

"...he attacked me. Again."

Her mother's face turned to a look of concern. "Oh no, again? What did he do?"

"He...he...pulled a knife on me."

"What?!" Marta runs and puts her hands on Melanie's shoulders. "Oh no, he didn't hurt you, did he?!"

"Well, almost. The knife came close sometimes."

"Then? What happened?"

"I..."

She can say it. She doesn't have to reveal the whole truth.

“I...I pushed him off.”

Marta gasps. “Did you?! And did you manage to get him off?”

“Erm...”

Again, she doesn't need to tell the whole truth. Well, the unnecessary part anyway. She only needs to answer the technicalities. It will be enough.

“...yes, I did.”

“Oh.” Marta's face turns into relief. “And he didn't try to do anything further to you?”

“He didn't.”

Her mother looks down and shakes her head. She then hugs Melanie.

“Oh, my poor child.” she whispers, rubbing Melanie's back. “You're safe now. Don't worry. It's okay.”

“I-I know.”

“Why didn't you tell me this earlier?”

“I...” Melanie gulps again. “I didn't want to worry you.”

“What? Nonsense! If you hadn't told me, and carried this burden with you all day, then what?”

Melanie looks down, unable to answer.

Marta asks again, “Did you tell teachers about it?”

“I...I couldn't. It happened after school.”

Marta shakes her head. “We should report this to the police.”

“No!”

“Huh? Why?”

“They...” Melanie nearly trips up. No, she cannot say it.

“Why? If someone has pulled a knife on you-”

“They wouldn't...they wouldn't care.”

“Why wouldn’t they?”

“We’re...we’re...we’re Chinese.”

Melanie feels the word to be bitter steel in her tongue. Yet, her mother Marta nods thoughtfully.

“Hrm. That might have been a problem for us for some time.” she says. “But we can’t give up. We are citizens of this country. We have rights.”

Melanie shakes her head. “I don’t want to make it worse.”

“How is reporting to the police going to make things worse?”

“It’s just going to bring attention. Too much attention. And if Roni finds out I’ve reported him to the police, then...then...”

Marta looks down and sighs again.

“I understand that, and yet...”

She stands up. “Well, let’s just hope for the best. I’m sure your teachers are at least working towards something.”

“I hope.”

They turn back to watch over the store, though it’s not like they’re exactly flooding with customers.

“Are you sure you feel alright now?” Marta asks.

“I’m- mostly fine.”

“Well, don’t push it too hard, okay?”

Melanie only nods, alerted as a customer approaches.

For hours they remain standing guards by the store, with only few people coming to visit and even less actually buying something. The water has also receded, bit by bit, though not much. And, just like what Marta went through, quite a few of them yell insults at them for being Chinese.

It is only later when Melanie meets a familiar face arriving.

“Putri? Is that you?”

“Oh, you remember me?” Putri answers. She is wearing casual home clothes, unlike the previous two times Melanie has seen her.

“Of course.” Melanie says. “Sorry if that sounds weird, but I do remember you.”

Putri shrugs. “I’m honored, then.”

“You have come all this way even with the flood?”

“Oh, it’s nothing, really. Not even the worst flood I had to deal with.”

Melanie laughs a little. “I’m truly honored.”

“Oh, Putri! It’s good to have you again!” Marta says cheerfully.

“Thank you, Ma’am.”

“What will you have today?”

Putri gazes at the fridge of beverages for quite a while. She takes out a chocolate milk drink and places it on the counter.

“That’ll be 7.500 rupiahs.” Marta answers. Putri takes out 10.000 rupiahs and waits as Melanie’s mother brings the change.

“Thank you,” Putri says as she sits down. Melanie decides to approach her.

“It’s unusual for you to visit us so early.”

Putri nods. “Well, I didn’t go to school today, so I thought why not.”

“Oh...” Melanie says, a bit surprised. She follows with an awkward chuckle. “Well, that makes both of us then.”

“You too?”

“Yep. Feeling a bit sick this morning.” Melanie answers, obviously underexaggerating. Putri nods in acknowledgement.

“I see.”

“What about you?”

Putri is silent. She takes more sips from her drink before answering, “Something happened in my house.”

“Oh. What is it, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“It’s my brother.” Putri says, turning to face Melanie fully. “He has been missing since yesterday. My parents have been doing all they can to find out where he’s been. So much so that they decided to ignore me, I guess.”

Melanie feels a sinking feeling in her stomach.

“Your...brother?”

Putri nods.

“Yes. I have told you before, right?”

No.

Melanie does remember when she met Putri for the first time, and was told about Putri’s brother.

Putri’s brother, who was supposed to be in eighth grade but got held back a year because of his bad deeds.

The brother who has apparently been missing since yesterday.

...no.

It can’t be. She just - refuses it to be true.

But she is just making assumptions now. It’s - it’s probably just her paranoia talking.

She can just resolve it by asking Putri directly about it. But-

She doesn’t want to face the *answer*.

“Putri?”

“Yes?”

Melanie takes quick, shaky breaths, trying to calm herself. "...why aren't you bringing your drawing book today?"

She needs to bring the conversation elsewhere. One to distract her mind from the *question*.

Putri shrugs. "Eh, I'm just not feeling it today."

"Oh." Melanie nods in understanding.

A period of silence passes between them. Putri finally finishes her drink and she stands up to throw it in the trash before returning to sit down again.

"Are you going to go home now?" Melanie asks.

"No. There's nothing to do in my home."

Melanie shrugs. "Not like there's much to do here, anyways, unless you want to buy something again."

Putri chuckles. "Maybe. But at least I can feel lonely on my own terms instead of getting ignored."

"Oh..." Melanie says, sitting down next to Putri. "I'm sorry about that."

Putri shrugs. "It's alright. I'm used to it. Mostly, anyway."

"Are your parents really busy? What do they do?"

"They're both office workers. They work from morning when they drop me at school and only come home at night."

"So you do everything alone, then? Preparing food, and all that?"

"No. I have two helpers in the house."

Melanie nods. "Your parents must be rich to be able to hire two helpers."

Putri shrugs. "Eh, not really that rich. It's mostly out of necessity to take care of two kids."

Melanie can only nod again. There comes *that* topic again.

“What do you do everyday? When you’re not studying, I mean.” Melanie asks.

“Well, just drawing. Maybe playing outside if I’m in the mood.”

“Do you have friends to play with?”

“Eh, not much. Maybe a couple of neighbor kids here and there.”

Melanie nods. “How about you?” Putri asks in turn.

“Oh, I don’t have much time to play. I have to help my mom stand by at the store all day before evening, then I study for tomorrow.”

Putri nods. “Do you have any siblings?”

“Me? No, I’m an only child. I did wish for a sibling when I was little, though.”

Putri smiles. “That’s what all only child say, but trust me, it’s far more worth it being alone.”

“Why is that?”

“Well, if you’re lucky enough to have a good one, then you can play with them or have them teach you. If you get a bad one, well...” Putri ends with a shrug.

Melanie nervously licks her lips. “Is...is your brother...”

“Bad? He most certainly is. Not just towards me, but towards even our parents too! He treats everyone badly!”

Melanie looks at Putri in shock as she finishes her outburst. It is most certainly unexpected, especially from someone commonly so quiet and reserved like Putri.

“I...I’m sorry about that.”

Putri sighs. “Well, it may be like that most of the time. But sometimes he can be really kind too.”

“Really?”

“There was this one time he bought me ice cream even though our parents forbade it. There was also the time he beat other kids for stealing my bicycle.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah. But I think the bad deeds outweigh the good. Those certainly don’t make up for all the times he’s pulled on my hair or insulted me or…” Putri shrugs. “I don’t know. Even with him being missing now, I don’t know whether I should be glad or worried.”

Melanie only listens to Putri pour her heart out regarding her brother. Yet remains still that creeping realization, suspicion of who Putri’s brother is.

She probably should not ask further. And yet, maybe curiosity still wins out.

“Does your brother go missing often? I mean, does he usually go out and not go home for a long time?”

“Hm? Yeah, a lot. I’ve heard something about him joining some biker gang. I don’t know.”

Melanie feels her blood freeze.

Well, what did she expect? She *has* suspected that she wouldn’t like whatever answer she would likely receive.

But she couldn’t remain calm with mere suspicion. She had to receive an answer, a resolution. And she has it now.

Roni is Putri’s brother.

Roni is Putri’s brother.

The phrase echoes in her head, over and over again. Then - the *images* of what she has done appears as well, as they have before.

*“Think you’re going to insult me and run away, bitch?”*

*No, no-*

*“I’ll kill you!”*

*“NO!”*

She can still see them, even now.

Roni's face as Melanie drove the knife into him, the life slowly leaving his body, the feeling of his corpse on Melanie's hands, again and again and - oh God, no, it's starting again, everything is spinning around her and she-

"Erm- I- uh, excuse me-"

Melanie quickly gets up, putting her hand on her mouth in case she vomits before reaching the bathroom.

"Melanie? What are you-"

Her mother asks her, but Melanie only barely hears it as she zips through the door.

As she reaches the bathroom, she retches into the toilet. Chunks of chicken soup she had eaten are violently pushed out of her. Repeatedly it happens until she has vomited out all of her breakfast. But it doesn't end there - it keeps happening, over and over until she lets out nothing but bitter liquid.

When she thinks it is finally over, Melanie dry heaves over the toilet. She holds herself up on one hand to keep herself from falling over. She can't bring herself to look up. It still feels like everything is spinning around her, falling into a spiral, bringing herself down with it.

She - she has murdered Roni. She has murdered someone. Someone's son - someone's brother. *Putri's* brother.

How can she ever face the sister of someone she's killed and continue to talk as if nothing has happened?

She doesn't know how much time has passed - a couple minutes, or maybe hours - before someone steps through the bathroom door.

"Melanie!"

Her mother kneels beside her and helps her straighten up. She manages to catch Melanie just as she is about to fall over.

“Melanie, what happened to you?” Marta asks, but Melanie is only able to produce her words in incoherent slurring. Not like she has any good answers, anyway. *What happened?*, indeed.

Marta shakes her head. “How can this happen? You were just fine and suddenly vomiting?”

Melanie can only shake her head. Her mother helps her to stand up and supports her on their way out of the bathroom.

“There’s no way it’s because of my food again, isn’t it?”

“I dunno, mom,” Melanie says softly. Her mother brings her to her room, where she lays Melanie down on the bed.

“Just rest for a while, okay? I’ll say goodbye to Putri for you.” she says, to which Melanie just nods. She doesn’t want to - *think*, any more, hopefully for the rest of the day. She thought doing something to distract herself from her thoughts might work...but then, it might lead to her getting confronted by them eventually.

Just like it did now.

“Don’t push yourself again if you don’t feel well!” her mother gives one last piece of advice before walking out of the door.

So, Melanie finds herself back, trapped in this cage again.

Maybe, in the end, there’s nothing she can do about it after all. Either she confesses or the memories will always remain as a justified reminder of her sins. Either way, she is punished enough. Maybe not even then.

She stands up, walking to her bag and picks up her poetry notebook.

Maybe she can distract herself by writing her thoughts down.

She opens to the last page she's written. Oh, yes, the poem about the birds. She's thinking she probably should change to another topic, and yet...she doesn't like leaving her work unfinished.

She grabs a pencil and goes to work.

*"For it is easier to grieve what has come past, instead of preparing for-? ..."*

She put the pencil in her mouth, a habit she does whenever she's thinking. And, as usual, Roni's last moments, *which she brought*, came creeping back on the edge of her vision. However, she calmly erases the second part of the verse. She writes the replacement, *"...putting the present, in the mind, last."*

She stops to think again. She thinks about all the directions she can take to expand this poem. Maybe she can develop it into a full-fledged narrative, weaving in themes of love, loss, hatred, and revenge. Or maybe she can just end it right there.

Picking up her pencil to write again, she puts in one last, concluding verse.

*"But how can we forget the past indeed, when the past is what makes us?"*

*"Our memories are what we'll carry to our end,"*

*"As we look back, at all the things that have come to pass,"*

*"Do we know the legacies, past our deaths, shall transcend."*

She takes one last look at the poem before closing the notebook, which she returns to her bag.

She returns to her bed and closes her eyes. She tries her best to not think of anything - but to just simply - *sleep*.

Seconds by seconds, turning into minutes, turning into hours, before Melanie is taken by sleep.

## Chapter 4

She is trapped in a whirlpool.

She can do nothing, but scream - or is she even screaming? Nothing's coming out, no matter how much she tries.

The whirlpool turns into blood. The smell, the feeling makes her sick, but she cannot puke. Why? Why is this all happening? For what purpose.

*"You did this to me."*

Who is that? Is that...Roni?

*"You took him away."*

Putri? No, no, this can't be-

*"You're not safe. They're coming for you."*

Melanie's eyes fly open in the darkness.

Her body is soaked in cold sweat. Her eyes dart around, reaffirming her return to reality.

She has already mostly forgotten her dream, maybe due to her brain's defense mechanism. However, she still remembers the sensation, the *essence* of the nightmare she was trapped in. Not like she has ever escaped the nightmare anyway, the biggest one she's currently living in.

She narrows her eyes as she tries to read the clock mounted on her wall. 8 o'clock?! She has napped for *that* long?! Why didn't her mother wake her up?!

It was probably to make sure Melanie could get as much rest as possible, but still...

She shakes her head. What should she do now? Should she get up or go back to sleep? Is her mother even still up now?

Melanie lays on her bed thinking about her choices when she feels a *certain* biological urge. Ugh, she really *hates* to do this. But what can you do? So she gets up to go to the bathroom, grumbling all the while.

She finishes her business in the bathroom and comes out when she stumbles into her mother. Both of them scream in surprise before realizing what has happened.

“Melanie! Oh, you scared me!”

“M-me too mom. Uhm...”

“You’re finally awake! In all honesty, I was surprised to see you taking a nap. You never do that.”

“Y-yeah.”

“And you slept for such a long time too! I made supper for you in case you woke up but I didn’t want to wake you up.”

“Oh, really?”

Marta points to the dining table. “There, I made fried chicken with oyster sauce. If you’re hungry you can eat it, though obviously it’s already cold.”

“...alright then.”

Melanie eats the chicken with some cold, leftover rice. It isn’t the most appetizing dish, but it’s fulfilling. As she’s eating, her mind wanders into the matter of tomorrow.

It’s probably best if she takes more days off to wait for the current storm over Roni’s disappearance to blow over. It would be way too risky to get people’s attention.

On the other hand, she can’t just skip school however long she wants.

She might end up getting caught.

But that’s probably long overdue anyway.

“Mom?”

Marta turns over to face Melanie. “Yes?”

“I’m going to school tomorrow.”

Her mother responds with a face of shock and concern. “What?! Are you serious?!”

“Yes, I’m serious. I missed too much just from today.”

“But you- but you’re still ill!”

“I’m feeling better now.”

Marta puts her hands on her hips. “That’s what you said earlier and you still threw up anyway!”

“I’m fine now, mom, I - I promise.”

Her mother continues to give her a skeptical look.

“Are you sure you won’t be throwing up during class, or something? It will be very difficult, you know, during school when I’m not around...”

“I’ll be fine. I can go to the infirmary.”

“Well...” Marta sighs. “...alright then. But don’t push yourself!”

Melanie nods. “I promise I’ll be fine.”

Melanie brushes her teeth and puts the books in for tomorrow, and returns to sleep.

Hopefully the nightmares don’t return this time.

---

Melanie opens her eyes to the rays of light of the rising sun through her windows.

She doesn’t remember dreaming anything. Either she truly didn’t dream anything, or it is her brain blocking them out. Maybe there were bits, horrible sensations of flesh and loud, screeching sounds. Either way, it’s nice not having to recall the horrific memories again.

Well, she still has to go to school today.

Melanie gets out of bed and does all of the typical morning routine to prepare for school. Breakfast, brushing teeth, taking a bath, and wearing uniforms. All the while the memories pop up yet again, but she’s gotten used to ignoring them.

As she puts on her shoes, her mother hugs her.

“Remember to not push yourself too hard, okay?” she says as she kisses her.

“I will, mom.” Melanie says, and sets out for school.

She reaches her school without any meaningful difficulties.

As she makes her way to her classroom, she sees several people who notice her presence, but without any real surprise either way. *None of them probably suspect anything, she thinks. Good.*

She enters the classroom, which is mostly empty except for a few bags on empty desks. She takes her favorite spot near the window. Hopefully she doesn't have to be ordered to change places again.

Even if there's no one to fear anymore.

She tries her best to not let gaze wander, to *that* particular seat in the front. The temptation, the pull of her mind grows stronger and stronger still. Even so, she remains focused.

No one can know.

She pulls out her poetry notebook. She doesn't have any particular idea or theme in mind, so she just scribbles away randomly anything that comes to her mind.

Anything to keep her from *thinking*.

Not long after, the bell rings, signifying the start of the school day. It feels a bit unexpected, whether because Melanie had entered class later than usual or time felt faster when she was engrossed in poetry.

She sees the flood of her classmates entering the class one by one and taking their seats., barring the...obvious absentee. The first period for today is Math, taught by her homeroom teacher, Mr. Suryaatmadja.

“Okay, class, sit and calm down. Let’s take attendance before starting, as usual...” he orders, taking out the attendance folder.

The attendance goes as usual. Lists of names spelled out, replied by the corresponding student raising their hand, which Melanie tends to ignore before it reaches her own name, anyway.

Still, as she usually does whenever she isn’t focused on something, her mind starts to wander. And in this case her gaze as well, towards the spot which she hasn’t dared to look upon since she came to her classroom.

*No. No. Stop it. Don’t push yourself. Remember what mom said.*

“...Melanie? Melanie?”

The call of her name breaks her out of her daze, and she quickly raises her hand.

“Present, sir!” she says, doubly making sure that the mistake with Mrs. Sri doesn’t happen again, though she still hears a small whisper of chuckles.

“Oh, okay, good. Are you feeling better now? You told me you were sick yesterday.”

“Ah, um...yes, I’m better now, sir.”

Mr. Suryaatmadja flashes a brief, noncommittal smile. “That’s good, then.” he says, before continuing the attendance. Melanie zones out into empty space again, and before she knows it, the attendance is finished.

And that’s when she notices the particular absence of a *certain* name. Just as quickly, she puts the thought away. No, again, remember, *don’t remember*.

“Okay, class, the attendance is finished. Most of you are present today...except for one.”

Of course, there’s no way she can avoid it for long. She notices now, even the small whispers and chatterings among the class to reduce into near-dead silence. Almost everyone’s eyes are brought to the empty seat in the front center.

“So...” Mr. Suryaatmadja takes a deep breath as he prepares to say his next sentence. “...we have received news from Roni’s parents that he is still missing. That makes it two days now, since Tuesday evening after school.”

The silence breaks into whispers again as students discuss and gossip. Melanie tries to look around if any attention is on her. She tries to not look too panicked or paranoid, and yet...what can she do?

If there's any way *the truth* comes out...

“...I know not many of you particularly like Roni, for fairly understandable reasons. But even so, he is still a part of our school, a member of our family, so to say. I, especially as the homeroom teacher, have a responsibility over all of you, including him. His parents are deathly worried about his safety every day. So please, if any of you knows about his whereabouts then do not hesitate to tell the school authorities.”

“Yes, sir.” the entire class replies in unison. Including Melanie. Knowingly swearing a false promise. Mr. Suryaatmadja smiles and nods as he prepares his books and grabs a whiteboard marker.

“Good, now let us begin. Today we will begin geometry.”

The math period goes as smoothly as usual. Melanie, for the most part, is able to keep her mind from remembering by focusing on the lessons. It was a good choice, after all, to come to school today. It gives her something to do, to occupy her mind.

As long as keeps her mind under control then everything should be fine.

---

The bell rings, signaling the end of the first period. Mr. Suryaatmadja packs up his stuff and says the usual parting words. Melanie is also putting her books in her bag, when a hand on her shoulder shocks her.

“O-oh! Mr. Suryaatmadja!” Melanie just barely keeps herself from screaming.

“Hi. Melanie, right?” Mr. Suryaatmadja asks with a small smile.

“Umm...yeah.”

“Can you meet me in the office? During break time, or after school.”

Melanie blinks. “M-meet you?”

Mr. Suryaatmadja nods. “Yes. We have something to talk about.”

No.

“E-ehm...about what, sir?”

She does *not* like where this is going.

Mr. Suryaatmadja waves his hand dismissively. “I’ll tell you later. Just meet me first, okay?”

She begins to feel a bead of sweat quickly forming on her forehead, which she hopes her homeroom teacher does not notice. Nor is her quivering lips out of which she can barely force out her words.

“Y-yes, s-sir. U-unders-tood, s-sir.”

Mr. Suryaatmadja smiles again. “Good! And don’t be so nervous! You’re not in trouble, I can tell you!”

“O-oh, really?”

*Really?*, indeed. No, no, *no, no*, this *can’t* be heading what she thinks it is...

“Yes, really! Well, I’ll be going now. I’ll be seeing you!”

Mr. Suryaatmadja walks out of the classroom. It is, then, when Melanie notices that she has been holding her breath, and releases it in short pants.

Okay, *okay*, stay calm, *stay calm*, he doesn’t know yet. He, realistically, doesn’t have any reason to suspect her either.

Melanie takes a deep breath. *Control yourself, and don't reveal anymore than what is necessary.* Yes, it'll be fine, she is sure. And she still has a lot more time to prepare herself before school is over.

She can do this.

---

It is finally the end of school.

Nothing much has occurred throughout, even with the...noticeable "absence" of a certain someone. Even when it's supposed to comfort her since she's not getting harassed anymore, all it does is remind her of her mistake.

And there might still be more of that yet.

Melanie goes to the faculty office. She remembers a couple of days ago when Mrs. Chandra called her here, to try to "help" her. She doesn't know what Mrs. Chandra was even planning to do with Roni. She suspects that if she hadn't killed Roni Mrs. Chandra wouldn't have done anything substantial anyway, and that Roni would have continued bullying her for days on end.

A very comforting thought.

Melanie knocks on the door and enters the office. Rows and rows of teachers engrossed in their tasks, with a couple of other students. She walks past them, looking for Mr. Suryaatmadja's desk. He is a little far back, near a corner. When he notices her, he nods and smiles.

"Melanie."

"What is it, sir?"

Mr. Suryaatmadja points to a chair in front of him. "Have a seat."

Melanie puts her bag down and sits. Still, Mr. Suryaatmadja does some more paperwork. Melanie continues looking down, fidgeting in her seat, fiddling and eventually picking on her fingers.

It's bad enough that she is called to face her doom. It's worse when she's made to wait for it.

She looks up when Mr. Suryaatmadja coughs.

"So, Melanie...how are you today?"

Melanie licks her dry lips. "F-fine, sir."

"Right...you were absent yesterday, because you were sick, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"What were you sick of?"

"I-I was feeling nauseous, sir."

What is it with all these questions?! If he wants to interrogate her, just go on with it!

"Why?"

Melanie gulps, feeling a trickle of sweat down her forehead. "I-I don't know, sir."

She hopes Mr. Suryaatmadja doesn't see her fidgeting. God, she's already gone through this with her mother, and now to do it with her own homeroom teacher...she thinks she has gotten used to this, but apparently not. Nor will she ever.

Mr. Suryaatmadja only nods in understanding. "I see. Well, that's not really important. What I do want to ask is...do you know anything about Roni's disappearance?"

Melanie stops fidgeting.

Well, this is it. She figures she doesn't need to change the answers she gave to her mother, but would someone outside her own family accept it? What if he finds something else to be suspicious of?

“I...” Melanie takes a deep breath, not too big so as to not be noticeable. “...I don’t know, sir.”

“Hmm,” Mr. Suryaatmadja nods. “Well, don’t take it as me accusing you of something or anything. It is just that it is critical that we get any and all information regarding Roni’s disappearance, and since you were absent yesterday this is the first time we can ask you about it.”

“Oh, I see...”

Melanie tries her best to suppress her nervous laugh, as well as her shaking as cold sweat covers her body.

“Yes. So...please take it easy. I know he wasn’t the most pleasant person to be around with, and I’ve received reports of how you were bullied often.”

“Y-yeah...”

If there’s a hole opening up in the ground Melanie would gladly jump into it right now. But she could never be that lucky.

Mr. Suryaatmadja nods. “So, again, all cooperation is useful so we can provide clarification to his parents. So, do you remember anything about where Roni’s been after school on Tuesday?”

Melanie sits still with her gaze fixed on the empty space before her.

What is she even looking at? She’s looking for an - an answer. But there’s no answer to be obtained. It is all just her, in the end.

Everything is going farther, shrinking - wait, no - no, no! It is happening again!

Everything is spinning in a downward spiral, dragging her down to oblivion - to - to hell! No, no, *no, no*, stop it, *stop it, stop it*, now, not *now*!

*“It is all your fault, you know.”*

*No, it can’t be!*

*“Think you can run away forever? You’ll have to face it one day!”*

*No, no, no! She...she refuses!*

*“You’ll face your oblivion here.”*

“Melanie?”

“A-aaahhh!”

She now notices how hard she is breathing, and her heart is beating to break free from her chest. She can’t look up now - everything is still spinning, no, keep it cool, *keep it cool-*

“Are you okay? Do you need to go to the infirmary?”

“I-I don’t know!”

“Huh?”

“I...I mean-” Melanie tries to control her breathing, and her look. “I-I mean, I don’t know about Roni!”

“Roni?”

“I-I don’t know where he’s been! I-I promise!”

Mr. Suryaatmadja continues to look at her with a look of bafflement. Melanie looks down again, hoping that he won’t notice her panic.

“You don’t know where Roni was when he disappeared?”

“Y-yes! I-I mean I haven’t seen him since school. I don’t know where he’s been afterwards. I-I swear!”

“Okay, okay, I heard you for the first time. You don’t need to swear anything.”

“Oh?”

Mr. Suryaatmadja only smiles again. “Well, it’s unfortunate that you don’t know anything. Roni’s parents have been calling us practically non-stop since yesterday, and any kind of info would help. Still, thank you for helping.”

He writes something down in his notebook, and smiles at Melanie again. “That is it for today. You may go now.”

“Oh...”

“...well? I said you’re free to go.”

“O-oh! Right. Sorry.”

Melanie hurriedly wears her bag. “T-thank you then, sir!”

“Thank you.”

Just as quickly, Melanie speeds out of the faculty office. She unconsciously runs all the way to the school yards, where she releases her imprisoned, wheezing breaths.

She has managed to lie her way out, again.

But what has she gotten out of, exactly? Even if her teacher hasn’t suspected yet, that doesn’t mean she’s free. God wouldn’t be that merciful to a sinner like her.

Then again, in trying to run away from her deserved punishment, she has pushed herself to another equally appropriate justice. Constantly running away, lest that downward spiral catches her. Dragging her to an endless hell.

A hell she is already trapped in.

...

..

.

...she needs to go home.

---

Melanie takes sluggish steps on her path home. She continues looking down on the ground. Why would she need to look up? She’s already familiar enough with the path she’s taking. There’s no point. No point at all.

She keeps walking, keeping her gaze on the rocks, occupying her mind with every detail crack on the ground, the scattered gravel, dust, and the occasional plants. They're all so varied and interesting. For a moment, she is awed by the wonder of the world she is living in. So radiant, bright, and full of life. Having so hopeful of a future, unlike her-

*BUMP!*

“Hey! Watch where you're going!”

“Huh?”

So engrossed in her thoughts that Melanie didn't notice when she bumped into somebody. She looks up and notices a middle-aged couple. The woman looks at her, fully offended while the man only has a slightly disapproving look.

“Do you not have eyes? Are your eyes really so small you can't see with them?” the woman insults her.

“W-what?”

The man shakes his head. “Really, kids these days don't even have enough sense to be careful when walking.”

“Especially the Chinese ones. Then again, what can you expect from them?”

“I-I'm sorry?”

The woman points at Melanie. “Yes, you'd better be sorry! Huh, not enough that we have to deal with those lying Chinese trying to rip us off, even their kids are a disrespectful bunch!”

Melanie can only stand there stunned. Maybe this really shouldn't set her off. Really, it is all supposed to be run-of-the-mill bigotry she has gotten used to. And yet, after everything she has gone through...

“Well, ma'am, maybe you were supposed to look where you were going too, if you could see with your eyes!”

The woman turns to look at her, eyes widened with rage.

“What did you just say?!” she snaps. Just as instantly, Melanie regrets what she has said. Thoughts chaotically bounces in her head, planning on her escape if things turn messy-

-which never happens, since presumably, the woman’s husband grabs her arm.

“That’s enough. Come on, let’s go to the faculty office. We don’t have all day.”

“But she-”

“A kid who doesn’t know directions. So what? She’s not worth our time. *Our son*, however, is.”

The woman glances back and forth between her husband and Melanie. In the end she goes with her husband, though not before glancing a poisonous look at Melanie’s direction.

Melanie, however, continues motionless in stunned silence. What *was* all that about?

She takes a deep breath. Again, maybe it’s just like what the man said. *It’s not worth my time*. It’s just another unpleasant interaction with someone who hates her for being Chinese. Nothing special. She and her mother already go through that everyday running their shop.

Still, another word that the man said caught her ear. *Our son*. So they were parents of a student here, probably getting called by a teacher for something that has something to do with their son.

Suddenly, the thought of Roni cuts through her again. What if they...?

*No*, Melanie thinks as she shakes her head, *no way they could be*. There are a lot of students here with their own problems, why would she assume they would be Roni’s parents. *Just put it out of your mind. Yeah*.

Just a coincidence.

---

Melanie's trip home is mostly just as uneventful as her way to school. At least, it's supposed to be.

She is supposed to understand fully well what is reality and what is not. Except, little by little, her understanding slips away as well.

Every so often, she has to suddenly stop in her tracks, looking all around her to make sure no one is there. She *knows* no one is there. But she can't help but think that *someone* is following her.

Like Roni did that day.

She must have looked insane. She probably is. What is the difference? What does it even matter anymore?

Sometimes, as she waits on the edge of the pedestrian for the cars to finish crossing, she wonders if she should take a step forward to the busy traffic.

Would it be quick? Maybe a particularly fast car will break every bone in her body instantly, puncturing her organs, bringing about a painless death. No, she doesn't deserve that. She probably would still have to lie in her blood, every second an excruciating agony as a crowd surrounds her, panicking or observing in distant horror. Maybe they would leave her there, leaving her to wait for her death in slow pain. Or maybe they would be generous enough to bring her to the hospital. Maybe she would still die on the way. Or she would survive, and would have to spend months bound to a bed. Maybe they would call her mother, who would rush in, weeping for her daughter.

Maybe she could just simply end it all here. Why not? It's all so easy.

Still, at the end, it is the thought of her mother that keeps her in place. Imagining her grief and weeping with the thought of burying her daughter and having to live with it. Perhaps, she wouldn't live for long anyway.

Yet, wouldn't it be worse if she has to involve her mother in this? Wouldn't it all be over if she keeps the secret with her to her grave?

Yet, Melanie waits for the cars, and crosses the road safely to the other side.

Maybe it's because she is still afraid of what would come after death, especially if she commits suicide. Maybe it is far more terrifying than what she is going through now. Or, maybe even yet, there is still a sliver of hope in her heart that she can get through this.

It is all she has to go on.

As she nears the road leading to her house, she begins to tremble with each taken step. The memories start to swarm again, filling her head, her visions, of blood and corpses and a misty barren road-

No, no, not again!

She runs off to the other way. No, she can't go there again. But where should she go now?

She looks off to the right. There is a shortcut leading off to the street passing by her home. She can take it, though it probably will add ten more minutes to her journey.

Still, at this point, anything is preferable to reliving *that* again.

So, Melanie takes the other route.

It is a bit complicated to navigate, and she almost gets lost a couple of times, but she does manage to reach her destination.

Her mother greets her with the usual warmth and instructs her to go inside.

Melanie looks at the empty store. Has Putri visited today?

She has never thought she'd be expecting Putri's visit, especially after the *realization*, yet she finds herself missing the one new friend she had made.

"Did Putri visit, mom?"

"Putri? Oh, no, not today."

“Oh.” Melanie looks a bit downcast. Her mother notices and pats her reassuringly on the back.

“Hey now, it’s okay. Maybe she will visit later. Even if she doesn’t, well, maybe she will visit tomorrow.”

“Yeah, I know, mom. I’m just wondering.”

Marta smiles. “I’m so proud that you have made a new friend, you know. You’re usually so shy all the time and don’t even have many friends in your own school.”

*Any* friends, she’d like to correct, but she keeps it to herself.

“T-that’s enough, mom.”

“Hey, don’t be so ashamed! You’re actually making progress!”

“Y-yeah, but- sorry, but I’m just really tired today.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah, so...later.”

Melanie hurriedly dashes inside the house, leaving Marta stunned.

Melanie takes a bath and changes her clothes.

However, instead of eating the meal her mother has prepared for her, Melanie goes straight to her bed. She throws herself into the bed and lays limp there.

Maybe she will just stay there for the rest of the day. What is there for her to even do?

Hell, why not stay there for eternity?

What *is* even there for her to do? What *is* the point?

Each time she looks upward, she can see nothing but darkness. The unending doom and oblivion, lined with the faint screaming and contorted face of Roni in pain.

She has accepted that there is nothing she could do to escape it. It shall follow her for all eternity for each second she spends in her waking life.

Maybe she can just let it all waste away like what she deserves.

“Melanie?”

It is her mother’s voice calling her from outside. However, she doesn’t feel the need to answer it.

“Melanie? What are you doing?”

No response, again.

A moment of silence later, and the door to her room opens.

“Why didn’t you answer me? Did you not hear me?”

Melanie doesn’t answer. Instead she gives out a lazy grunt.

“Hey, what *is* the matter with you?”

She doesn’t answer, again. From now on, maybe it’ll be better if she doesn’t try.

“Why didn’t you eat your food? I already prepared it for you.”

What excuse can she make?

Her mother will probably see through if she lies about being sick, again.

“I...I don’t feel like eating.”

“What? How can that be? Are you not hungry?”

She is, but Melanie doesn’t really care about that right now. Much like everything else.

Looking at her, Marta can only sigh in exasperation.

“Come on, you have to eat.” she says, dragging Melanie with her hand. She just follows along, even if she didn’t want to eat beforehand.

Then again, it’s not really a matter of wanting or not wanting, anyway. It’s really not about her. The things just are.

At the end, Melanie is just going to accept it without fighting back.

Maybe then it will provide her peace.

Her mother drags her to the dining table, where her meal is laid on.

Today’s supper is fried tempe. Not one of her favorites. Again, not like it matters.

“What’s with you today? What happened at school?”

Melanie mindlessly scoops her food to her mouth, staring off into space.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing? Then why are you like this?”

“...I’m just, I’m kinda tired, that’s all.”

Marta sighs.

“Well, if you’re tired, that’s all the more reason for you to eat.”

Melanie nods silently.

Her mother stands up and grabs a TV remote. She turns the TV on. Melanie doesn’t look up to see but can hear that it’s on the news channel.

A bunch of talking about politics and economies she doesn’t understand nor care about.

“...and now, a seventh-grader from Surabaya has been reported missing. The parents of the student, Roni Budianto, said that he had disappeared after school on Tuesday.”

The mention of the name pierces through Melanie’s mind. Her apathy instantly turned into fear.

“Disappeared?” her mother continues intently watching the news, while Melanie can only sit there in shocked silence, seemingly frozen in place.

“...his parents have asked the police and Roni’s school authorities for any help, though the search hasn’t been fruitful so far. Roni has also been alleged to be involved in a biker gang...”

“Roni...Budianto? Hey, isn’t that the name of the kid who bullied you?” her mother turns to ask her.

“Eh...erm...”

Marta turns back to the TV and scoffs. “Well, if he gets involved in gangs and such then it’s only fair for him to get into some dangerous business. Kids these- Melanie?”

“I-I’m sorry, I...” Melanie stands up hurriedly, leaving her supper unfinished. “I’m done.”

“Huh? Why? You don’t like tempe?”

“I-it’s not that, I, uh...I’m just full, that’s all.”

Without wasting any time, Melanie dashes into her room. She closes the door, and presses her back into it, panting.

That was news about Roni Budianto.

Roni...has gotten into the news.

*They* haven’t known yet, but...

...but...

...they will.

As the realization fully seeps in, Melanie feels all strength go out of her knees, and slump against the door.

*They know! They know! They know!*

*No, no, no stop it! **STOP IT!***

*She can’t - she can’t - no, she can’t be - no, not like this!*

What is she going to do? *What is she going to do?!*

*What’s going to happen now?!*

“Own up to it.”

*No! Never!*

“If you confess now it will prevent things from becoming worse than they already are.”

*No! What will...what will happen to her?*

“You should have done it immediately after you did it, and it wouldn’t have turned out this way!”

*No! She would have been...*

“You still have this chance. Don’t squander it.”

*No, she can’t, how can she-*

“...or it will truly be too late.”

NO!

...

...no.

How many times does she have to go through this?

No, she has sworn to never reveal it. What will- what will happen to her? Her future?

What will happen to her mother?

Their life is hard enough already as it is. Why would one...*unfortunate* accident make it worse?

No, they don’t deserve it.

*She has killed a person* - but they won’t listen to her side of the story. Why it happened.

They will condemn her immediately as a murderer. Sent to jail, and...and possibly worse.

What will happen to her mother then?

She *could* have told her the truth the first time, but...no, *especially* not her mother.

She wouldn’t be able to handle it.

....

What will she do now?

Can she really just continue as everything is the same?

Even if she could attempt that...sooner or later...

No, no, no! She can't think that.

She can get through it. No one will know. No one *has* to know.

It is her only hope. She *has* to believe it.

It is *all* that she has. And without it...

...

...she still has to go to school tomorrow.

She stands up and walks over to her desk. She puts her textbooks and notebooks to do her homework and study for tomorrow.

A while later, her mother walks in.

"Melanie? Oh, are you studying?"

"Yes."

Marta nods. "Alright, great. I'm just checking in because you didn't leave the room for a long time."

"Oh, right."

"Well, I'm here to tell you that Putri didn't come today, if you'd like to know."

"Oh, really?"

"Yes. It's okay, she'll probably come tomorrow."

Melanie nods.

"By the way, are you feeling alright? You did say that you were tired. Are you still tired?"

Melanie turns to her mother and smiles.

"I'm alright, mom."

Her mother nods in understanding.

“Okay. Don’t forget to brush your teeth before bed.” she says as she exits. Melanie finishes the rest of her homework and studies, brushes her teeth and goes to bed.

## Chapter 5

The sun rises, heralding the start of a new day. Melanie opens her eyes, preparing herself for such.

She, once again, doesn't remember much of her dreams, only that it involved screaming and blood. She probably doesn't need any more reminders. Her mind already innately internalizes it, through and through.

In a way, she has become *comforted* despite the reality of the situation. No, *because* of the reality which she has accepted. No matter what will happen...*may* happen, she will just accept it all.

On the other hand, the sign that she is comfortable is a sign that something is wrong. But again, what more can she gain from fighting the inevitable any more? Nothing but more fear and anxiety.

In the end, that's more pain than if she had just confessed to it already. She has run away enough. What come may...

....well, she still has to go to school.

She eats, takes a bath, wears her uniform, eats her breakfast, brushes her teeth, and goes to school.

Before she even realizes it, she already arrives at school.

It barely even feels like time has passed at all. Has it always felt this fast? Or has she gotten used to this reality, which only felt like it phased in and out of her.

Maybe it's better that way now. Not like it matters much.

She enters the classroom and sits down. Again, like before, time felt like a quick flow before the school bell rings.

The day goes on as usual. Melanie, for the most part, zones out during most of the teachings. She can't find it in her to care anymore. So what if she fails? Not like things can be any worse.

She hears the occasional whispers about Roni from her classmates. They are speculating, making theories and guesses about what has happened to him. Some of them are worried, some of them are laughing. Overall, there doesn't seem to be many who are genuinely concerned about Roni coming back or not.

In the end, are all of her worries pointless? Will no one ever care if she has killed Roni? Maybe some of them will applaud her for getting rid of a violent delinquent who was a blight to those around him.

No, of course not. She is still a murderer. For as much as they dislike Roni and wish they could get rid of him, they will always hate a murderer more. Even if said murderer has done something they wish they could do.

At the end of the idea, they still have to uphold the laws that make them a civilized society, and there's nothing Melanie can do about it.

---

The day begins and ends like usual.

Melanie goes home. She is on alert all the time, bracing herself and being cautious of every little noise or movement around her. Every now and then she shifts and flinches thinking someone is following her, only to find nothing but wind but regular people who don't know she even exists.

Once again, she takes the alternate route, avoiding the spot where she has killed Roni and got rid of his body in the river. The knowledge has embedded deep inside of her consciousness. It has become a part of her reality.

Walking to the store, she sees Putri sitting out in the front.

“Putri!” Melanie calls her, to which Putri responds with a smile. Her mother Marta rushes out to greet her.

“Welcome home!” she says.

“Hi, mom.” Melanie answers. Her mother turns her to Putri’s direction.

“Here’s Putri. She has been here for about thirty minutes. She also asked me about you!”

“Oh, really?” Melanie asks, to which Putri replies with a bashful smile.

“I-I only asked...”

“Oh, oh no, it’s okay! It’s alright. I asked about you too.” Melanie answers. They both laugh.

“Well, I’ll take a bath and change my clothes first.” Melanie says, to which Putri nods. Melanie goes inside and does her usual routine before she gets out to the store again.

“I didn’t see you come to the store yesterday. I mean, not meaning to be kind of self-important or anything like that, but was there any business?” Melanie asks Putri as she sits down next to her.

Even when, deep down, Melanie already knows the answer. But maybe she can continue pretending like she doesn’t. Affirming her suspicions, Putri’s face instantly becomes cast down. She sighs deeply.

“Yeah.” she says in a little voice.

“What is it? If you don’t mind me asking.”

Putri gives out another little sigh and turns to Melanie. “My parents went out and I was told to stay with the servants.”

“For what?”

“They visited my brother’s school to ask more about what happened to him. They didn’t get any satisfactory answers, as usual.”

“Oh.”

Melanie’s mind was immediately brought to the middle-aged couple she bumped into at school.

She is supposed to already realize all of this from the start. Yet, every revelation only deepened the vortex of doom she was already entrenched in.

Yet, she keeps being driven on.

“Any ideas what might have happened to your brother?”

Putri shakes her head. “No concrete idea. And to be honest, I don’t really want to talk about it.”

“Oh, I see.”

Melanie remembers the news report yesterday. Has Putri seen it? Most likely yes. It might be why she doesn’t want to talk about it.

To have your family tragedies aired out to the open...she hopes she won’t ever have to experience that.

But what can hope do for her now?

“I’m sorry that all of this happened to you.”

Putri nods and smiles. “Thank you. I’m getting better, though.”

“Melanie!” Marta calls her.

“What is it mom?”

Melanie turns to face her mother, who looks worried.

“I just want to make sure...you were not being followed or anything at school, right?” she asks, half-whispering.

“Uhm, no?” *Not recently*, at least.

“Oh, good.”

“What is it, mom? Is there something-”

“Before Putri came, a couple of bikers came and harassed me.”

“B-bikers?”

Marta nods. “They called me names and threatened to sack the shop.”

No.

This can’t be.

“T-they didn’t hurt you or anything?”

“Nothing beyond insults I hadn’t heard a hundred times before anyway.”

Melanie gulps.

It’s finally happened.

Her sins are finally catching up to her.

Still, rather than just simply punishing her, her mother was made to bear her punishments, too.

Could it be...now, it couldn’t. It would just be too much of a coincidence.

But given what has happened so far, why would she discount *those*?

“Did you report to the police?” Melanie asks. Her mother shakes her head.

“No. Unless any visible, tangible damage is made they probably wouldn’t care.”

“But what if they come back?!”

Marta crosses her arms and sighs. “Well. I can probably try fending them off with a broom or something.” she ends with a laugh.

“Mom, this is serious!”

“I know this is serious more than you! But, well, what can you do? That’s just what we have to deal with living in this country.”

“Mom...”

“Look, we’ll deal with it when we deal with it. If we worry way too much now, what good will it bring in the future? Right now, we’ll just have to put faith in God that He’ll protect us. The rest is up to Him.”

There is more that Melanie wants to, but the reassuring smile her mother gives her is enough to dissuade her and put away all of her worries. Well, more like clamped up, because they are still there. Melanie just isn’t willing to voice them out.

How can her mother be so nonchalant about this? Biker gangs swarmed up to their shop, calling her names and threatening her, yet she felt no need to take any substantial action. She just treats it like it’s something normal.

Yet, isn’t that how they have been living for all of their lives in this country? Accepting discrimination as a reality of your life. It’s not good, you don’t like it, but what can you do except to face it head-on?

Then again, isn’t that exactly how Melanie is dealing with her own *issues*? No, that’s different! Her mother is innocent, but she...

Melanie sighs in resignation and goes to sit besides Putri.

“I hope you and your mother are okay.” she says, attempting to console Melanie. Melanie just nods in gratefulness.

“Thank you.”

A couple of minutes later, Putri prepares to leave. She says goodbye to Melanie and her mother and goes home. Melanie and her mother guard the store and serve a few customers before it closes.

As Melanie goes inside the home, her mother asks, “By the way, is everything okay at school?”

“Um, yes.”

“Was there any talk about...the news yesterday?”

“Well...some.”

Marta nods. “I see.”

Melanie does her routine as usual, studying a bit, brushing her teeth and going to bed.

## Chapter 6

“Mother?”

She is standing on a road. The entire sky is dark, red-tinted gray. Standing in the middle is her mother.

“Based on the calculations this month, we might not have enough money to...” she mutters incessantly about money, finances, economics, all stuff Melanie can never fully understand.

“Mom?”

Melanie runs up to her mother. But - she can't - her feet are like they're welded to the asphalt below. She tries and tries harder - but her mother becomes farther and farther away.

All of a sudden, shadowy figures jump out from the side, aiming at her mother.

“Mom! Look out!”

But it's too late. They're already beating her, but strangely there aren't any sounds. Melanie tries to turn, to run away - but she can't either. She is trapped, moving eternally in place, unable to turn away from where her mother - wait, where is her mother? She is gone and no, the road is shrinking too - no, no, no - she's falling down now!

“NO! I NEED TO GET OUT!”

She screams, but what is the use? There is no escape for her, falling eternally through the darkness, all the way to-

Melanie opens her eyes to the dark ceiling.

It has been a while since she's had a nightmare. A bit of a different fare than the ones she's had about Roni, but still.

She knows dreams aren't real, nor do they really tell the future. They're only there as manifestations of her fears. As a result, they also magnify fears.

Dreams or not, the danger her mother is in is very real. But what can she do?

Well...maybe she can just focus on the matter at hand. Like what her mother has told her.

Give the future up to God.

In her case...she'll just focus on going to school for now.

It is then exactly what she does. She prepares herself, walks to school, and sits down in her classroom.

She remains disinterested in all the lectures. She idly, nonchalantly plays with her scissors during a particularly boring one, about Biology.

She looks at the sharp tips of the scissors and wonders, for far too longer than what is necessary,

The sharp glint is almost tantalizing, inviting her in.

She nonchalantly places the scissors on her arms. Should she do it?

If nothing else, maybe she can feel something again. So, she does, pulling the scissors up along her arm. A small ribbon of blood forms.

She winces a bit. Of course it hurts, what did she expect? She has always been afraid of pain.

Yet, she feels...liberation. A little thrill inside of her which brings her to life.

She does it again, besides the first one. It is a bit longer this time. For a while, she merely stares at the crimson liquid flowing down her arm.

She takes out a piece of tissue and wipes the blood off. But for the remainder of the day, she remains mindlessly cutting her arm, transfixed at the flowing blood.

It hurts a lot. But maybe pain is what she needs now.

It is the end of the school day. Nothing too outstanding, except with few exam announcements. She can't really bring herself to care.

As Melanie walks out of the school building, she meets the sight of colorful rags-wearing thugs congregating in the right lane of the front yard. All of the other students make a conscious effort to avoid them, crowding the left lane.

Melanie gulps. She seems to vaguely remember some of those thugs to be the same bikers who Roni talked to *that* day. She is then also reminded of the bikers who harassed and threatened her mother.

She takes a deep breath and prepares herself to get away as fast as possible, avoiding their attention.

“Hey! You, Chinese!”

But she doesn’t deserve what she wants.

Melanie keeps her path straight, confident in the possibility that she’s not the *only* Chinese student in this entire school. However, the rough voice calls out again, “Hey, I’m talking to you! Chinese girl!”

Melanie stops, breathing heavily. She slowly turns her gaze to the one who has called her.

There, she sees a twenty-year-old-looking man, with almost completely-shaved head save for a tuft of dyed hair on the top. He is wearing a blue vest and ripped jeans. His face and body is adorned with scars of all kinds and sizes.

“Yes, you!” he calls out to her again.

Melanie trembles in place. However, her survival instinct tells her that it will probably get worse if she delays. So she gets on and approaches the man.

“Y-yes?”

Up close, Melanie can see the man holding a pocket knife in his right hand. The glint and the shape brings to her the memories of that day - and how hard she tries to suppress it.

“You...you are in the same class as Roni, aren’t you?”

Melanie gulps again. So that's what they're jumping on, isn't it?

"Y...yes?"

The man smiles, a kind of sneaky, predatory smile worn by all thugs indulging in their cruelty. "Yeah, it is you. You were the one he picked on all the time, weren't you?"

Now, it is obvious what they want. One of their members is dead and they want answers. Are they suspecting her, or are they just trying to find out information?

If she answers this the wrong way, she's dead.

"I...I don't know."

The man raises his eyebrow. "Don't know?"

"I, I'm sorry, I'm in the same class as Roni, but that's only about the most I know about him, sorry."

If she speeds this up, maybe she can get away sooner.

The man only looks at her with curiosity, and then says, "You know he's been missing for days, right?"

Melanie quickly nods.

"Do you know anything about it?"

"I-I swear I don't know anything."

And with that, Melanie runs off from the bikers. She doesn't know why she didn't do it sooner, but her instincts probably saved her once again.

Inside, she only hopes that'll be the last she'll ever see of them.

On her way home, the meeting with the bikers continuously plays in Melanie's mind.

Has she made a mistake? She had lied, of course, she *had* to. But she may have doomed herself by engaging with the thugs in the first place. Maybe she should have ran as soon as one of them called her.

They knew it was her whom Roni tried to squeeze money from the day he disappeared. They had suspected her. Or - even if they hadn't, they probably were trying to make up for their losses.

Her nightmare has become real, and enclosed in on her.

She arrives home. Once again, Putri is not there. But Melanie isn't as concerned with that now.

Her mother greets her, as usual.

“Welcome home, dear.”

“Y-yeah, mom.” Melanie says, hurrying inside.

“H-hey, what's wrong? Why are you in such a hurry-”

Melanie ignores her mother and goes straight inside. She takes a shower, changes clothes and goes straight into her room. Her mind is still tangled about the matter about the bikers.

They know who she is. And if they are the same who had come to their store to harass her mother...

No.

No.

It's just...it's just a coincidence.

Yeah. Why, is she now assuming that all of the thugs and bikers in her town are the same? No, of course not.

It's all fine. She just needs to take it out of her mind...

She is directed towards the scissors on her desk.

She grabs it, and remembers what she did at school.

She puts the sharp edge of the scissors on her forearms, and pulls back. A small, flowing ribbon of crimson follows the tip. The pain bites on her nerves with each fresh wound opened.

But she keeps doing it anyway. Over, and over, and over, patting the flowing blood dry and starting again, until her arm is covered in red.

It hurts. It hurts more than most she has experienced in her life. But she can't stop. The pain keeps her grounded.

It awakens her mind dulled from hopelessness, starting it anew with the *life* she has lost.

Melanie stops after decorating her arm with a few lacerations, some long, but mostly short. Maybe she'll stop for now. If her mother finds out...

No, she can't even bear thinking of it,

"Melanie? Honey?"

And that's the reason why.

She hastily stands up and walks up to her door, moments before it opens.

"Y-yes mom?"

"What were you doing in there for so long? Why didn't you eat? And why were you hurrying to your room anyway?"

"Uhm..."

Excuses, excuses! What excuse can she choose?

"I, uh...I'm not hungry."

Her mother tilts her head. "You aren't? Oh, nonsense. You *have* to eat after being in school for so long."

"I-I really am not mom-"

"No, you have to eat. No excuses."

“I told you I am not!” Melanie suddenly snaps.

Her mother wordlessly gasps at her, and Melanie just now realizes what she has said.

“What did you just say to me?!”

“I-I told you I am not hungry! Leave me alone!”

“Why, you-”

Marta goes ahead and grabs Melanie by the arm, dragging her to the dining table. Melanie herself only slumps a bit before wordlessly obeying her mother. Best not to have more arguments.

As she is eating fried milkfish, her mother asks her again, “So, why were you in such a hurry?”

“Uhm...”

Melanie silently continues her eating. When she isn’t getting an answer, her mother stands right in front of her. “Answer me.”

“Uh...”

“Come on, what is it? Why can’t you just tell your mother anything?”

No, she can’t do this. She can’t worry her mother, especially with her mother’s own problems. And if she has an idea that those two problems might be one and the same...

“I...” Melanie gulps. “...some thugs harassed me.”

“Thugs?”

“Y-yeah.”

“Thugs...where?”

“In my school.”

“You mean they were just in your school area, like that?”

“Yeah.”

Marta places her hand in front of her mouth. “What did they do?”

“Uhm...well...they asked some questions.”

“Questions? What kind of questions?”

“They asked about Roni, and...” Melanie gulps again. “I-I had to tell them I knew nothing before I ran away.”

“They didn’t chase you?”

“No, weirdly enough.”

Marta takes a deep breath. “Well...it’s good they just left you alone like that.”

“I-I know. But...what if they don’t? What if they come again?”

*What if they come to our house?*

Marta walks over and hugs Melanie. “It’s okay. There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

“But...”

“Remember, we must pray to God for protection. After that, we don’t need to worry about it. We’ll just add on to our burdens by worrying. If we need to, however, then we can defend ourselves.”

There’s that old encouragement again. Even if Melanie knows it’s in her mother’s best intentions, there’s little it could do to soothe her worries when she understands the *real* dangers. Granted, it’s the dangers she refuses to tell, but still.

And with that, perhaps it’s better for her to silently agree. So she just nods.

Her mother releases her and smiles. “I’ll go back to guarding the store. Don’t forget to clean up after you’re done.”

Melanie only grunts in acknowledgement as she watches her mother leave for the store. She does as she’s told, and goes back to her room.

She lays down on her bed, and once again, thinks.

What will happen now?

Many times she has asked that. But just the same, does it ever even matter? Perhaps things will turn out all the same anyway.

Maybe her just punishment will come all the same, and it's simply a matter of waiting, regardless of what she's done to stave it off.

She closes her eyes shut, trying to sleep. But many times she turns and rolls in her bed, and she can't yet find peace. Thus her eyes fly open as if held up by sticks, up to the cracked yellowed-white ceiling with the laborious rhythm of her heartbeat.

*She cannot do this!*

No, no, no, what is she thinking?! No, calm down, calm down...

*She will die! Her mother will die! It's over!*

No, stop it! STOP IT!

Melanie hurriedly jumps out of her bed, and grabs her trusty scissors.

She places it on her forearm and makes a few cuts. The pain calms her down, distracting her from her *thoughts*.

It's good. It's all good now. Nothing to worry about. She just has to keep *distracting* herself and...

"Melanie? Darling, are you there?"

Oh, no!

Melanie frantically puts the scissors on the table, and grabs a handful of tissue to wipe away the blood on her arms. When the door to her room opens, she just as clumsily tries to put away the tissue on her bed.

"Melanie, what are you doing?"

"I, uhm... I was studying. I mean, about to."

Melanie's eyes dart around, though she tries to not make it look too obvious. She hopes her mother will say whatever she wants to say and leave soon. If she finds out.

“Oh...I see. I’m just asking since you didn’t come out of the room for a long time.”

“D-did I?”

How long has passed since? Has it really been *that* long?

“Okay, well anyways, study well. Has there been any exam announcements?”

“U-uhm, yes. Two.”

“What are they?”

“Geography and Indonesian Language.”

“Well, make sure to study for those two, too. Don’t get remedial!”

“O-okay, mom.”

Her mother smiles, and prepares to close the door. Melanie sighs in relief, in the belief that the matter is finally over.

That is just as wads of tissues in Melanie’s bed catch Marta’s eyes.

“What is that?”

“W-what?”

“That.” she says, pointing to Melanie’s bed. “What are those tissues for?”

Melanie’s eyes widen, and her head snaps to the tissues in question in realization.

“O-oh, this-”

“Why would you need so many tissues anyway? Do you have any idea how many trees are cut down to make those? And you’re wasting it!”

“I-I- ehm, this is- ehm...”

Her tongue is scrambling for an excuse, *any* sufficient one, but can’t find anything. But that’s not the end to her problems, as her mother enters her room, and gets a *closer* look-

“Melanie, what...*what happened to your arms?*”

She is silent. She finds herself unable to do anything but to sit there, staring with a dumb look. Her mother, looking horrified, rushes to grab her arms.

“Oh, God...” she gasps, nearly sobbing. “W-what are these? What happened?!”

“I-I, uh-I-I-I-no, I-”

“You- did you-” Marta’s gaze goes back between the blood-soaked tissues, her daughter’s wounded arms, and the scissors on the table.

“Mom! Mom, please, this is not what you think-”

“It isn’t?! What is it then, what did you do?!”

“I...”

Once again, as she is seeking answers, none is coming out.

Well, maybe there really is no answering for this one, less than her own actions which she is now standing for.

While she is expecting a flurry of angry lectures from her mother, she, instead, finds her slowly starting to sob softly.

“M-mom?”

“Oh, why...why didn’t you tell me?”

“Mother, I...it’s not...”

“I...I thought that I have always tried to be the best mother I could be to you, Melanie. I thought I had always made myself the safest place you can be. Then, why...”

She reaches out to her mother. Though, in all frankness, she doesn’t know why. What, indeed, is she exactly trying to accomplish here? She, least of all, knows.

Though, once again she doesn’t need to make that decision herself, as her mother soon pulls her in a tight embrace, weeping into her head.

“Please, tell me...what did I do wrong?”

“Mom, it’s not...”

*It’s not you, it’s me.*

“Oh darling, please, *please* tell me everything. Why are you doing this? What hurts you so? Why didn’t you tell me beforehand?”

As her mother continues to weep, Melanie can only slowly move her arms to hug back.

This time, she *does* have the answer. And it’s not all excuses either. It’s indeed everything she should have said at the beginning, before everything went out of hand.

“I...I am afraid.”

“Of what?”

The roof of her mouth is dry; indeed, like every single cell in her body.

She still *cannot* say it.

“I’m afraid...of what *they* will do.”

“Who’s they?”

“Those thugs who harassed me and you.”

Her mother releases her hug, and looks deeply into her eyes.

“I will be here for you. And- and God will protect us too. As long as we have faith...we shouldn’t fear.”

Were it that easy to have *faith*. Especially since she knows that the merciful, just God she has believed in all her life would be punishing *her*.

“So, please....” her mother whispers to her. “...*don’t hurt yourself again.*”

Melanie can only nod. That night, too, her mother insists on her sleeping in the same room as her, something she hasn’t done since she was eight, to make sure she wouldn’t cut herself again. Melanie only goes along to make sure her mother wouldn’t worry anymore.

Tomorrow is Sunday. She will have a full day to relax. A full day to *think* more about what will come next.

Seconds into minutes, minutes into hours, and Melanie finds herself slowly drifting into sleep.

## Chapter 7

She is drifting in a body of water.

“Hello?”

She tries to call out, but the water silences her. Yet, submerged she may be, but she isn't drowning. All the same she remains idle, even though she is moving.

“Please! Please! Give it to me for just 15.000 rupiahs!”

Just a customer trying to haggle her way. She looks around, and finds herself in a river. She is going somewhere, but where?

“Look! Look at that! It's a...”

It's a what?

All the people are pointing, looking at her like she's dead.

No! She's not dead! But then how- no, no, no! It can't be!

It can't be *him*-

Melanie, once again, is awakened to consciousness on her bed.

Well, not *her* bed. Even then her mother is already awake, cooking something whose scent apparently awakened Melanie.

She slowly sits up on her bed. Her mother turns and walks over to her.

“Good morning.” she says, hugging Melanie.

“Morning, mom.”

Marta releases her. “Did you sleep well.”

“I did.”

Marta gives her two pats to the back. “Good, good. Breakfast is almost ready.”

Melanie gives a little grunt of acknowledgement.

She goes to the bathroom, washes her face, and walks to sit at the dinner table, where a plate of fried chicken rice is placed.

As she is eating it, her mother sits across from her, watching intently. It's a little bit odd, but she just lets her be.

"Do you like it?" she suddenly asks.

"Uhm...yes."

"That's good to hear."

Melanie gives her mother a look, and just continues.

"Remember...if you have *any* troubles...tell me."

"Y-yes mom."

For the remainder of breakfast her mother never keeps her eyes off of her.

Melanie understands *why* she does it, and it *is* for her own good...but sometimes it'd be good if she stops.

After breakfast, Melanie and her mother go outside to stand by the store. For the first few hours, business goes as usual. Nothing too out of ordinary within a typical business day, including the typical racist insults.

Yet, even so, deep in her heart she still has the creeping *dread* that something bad will happen. *Truly* bad.

A while later, and a bunch of unpleasant-looking people arrive at their store. *Familiar* unpleasant-looking people.

Melanie freezes up as she sees their supposed leader, the same man who had questioned her at her school. Her mother keeps her gaze straight on as well.

"...well, good afternoon." the man says, greeting with a fake-polite tone and smile.

"Good afternoon yourself," Marta replies, with a polite yet firm tone. She instinctively pulls Melanie and pushes her behind her. One by one, the man's fellow thugs came by, parking their bikes in front of the store.

It seems like the man hasn't recognized her, yet. Or if he *does*, but doesn't say anything about it...

The man looks around the store, waving his hands as if admiring.

"This is a very nice store, isn't it? Plenty of things."

"Not too terribly impressive, I admit."

The man laughs again, the kind of laugh that puts all of Melanie's hairs on an end.

"Well, that might be. But still...you do still make quite a fortune, no?"

"Perhaps not as much as we'd like." Marta replies. "We're lucky if we can barely even make a profit at the end of the day."

"Really? Well, being Chinese, I suppose you people can always sort that kind of thing out."

Melanie, already trembling in place, sees more and more thugs approaching their store. Her mother gives her a gentle nudge, a sign for her to go inside the house.

Melanie does as she's told and sprints inside the house. She is also supposed to lock the house, but...she can't leave her mother alone. She keeps the door ajar, enough for her to still witness what's happening in case something happens.

"Totong, are you sure about this?" one of the thugs talks with the leader - apparently named Totong, who shushes him up.

"See here, lady...we're here to keep order around this area here. A couple of punks try to stir up trouble, but we're here to teach them a lesson not to cause a ruckus. You understand? So, with that, it's fair to give us some...*compensation* for our services, no?"

The thugs begin to surround the store, enclosing around Marta. Yet she doesn't take a step back.

"I certainly don't remember asking you to *protect* us."

Totong laughs. It seems as if the other thugs are preparing for *some* action, but remain in their place.

“See, lady, it’s not a matter of ‘asking’ or not. It’s a matter of exchanging services. I’ll give you this; you give us 500.000 rupiahs a month, and we will uphold our protection. But if you don’t want to give that money...then we will withdraw it. Simple enough, yes?”

Marta keeps her stern gaze, and doesn’t answer. Still, apparently Totong has said all he has to say, since he signals for his underlings to go back to their bikes. He himself is setting out to go as well, when he turns back again to Marta.

“Do you have a husband?”

“Had.”

“Oh...well, then you must understand the severity of your situation. You, a single mother with a young daughter, running this store alone. People are quite unfriendly towards the Chinese like yourself. Surely, you’d want all the protection you could get, right?”

Marta takes a slow, deep breath. No doubt both she and Melanie are immediately brought back to *that* day, when everything changed for them.

That day, so long ago that it felt like a phantasm. *“Harry! What’s going on?!”*

*“I don’t know, but I’ll talk with them. Keep Melanie inside!”*

*“That’s him! The fucking lying Chinese!”*

*“Please! Listen to me! I can-”*

*“You think you can continue cheating us Indonesians out?!”*

*“HARRY! NO!”*

The angry yelling of the mob, and the ensuing panic pleading and pained screams of her father, followed by the wailing of her mother had settled deep in her being, shaped her for the next nine years of her life.

All her life, the dead have always haunted her.

With that, Totong and his gang proceed to ride out, blasting their motorcycles at full speed.

Melanie watches her mother place her hands on the table, apparently sighing deeply and rubbing her forehead. She then turns around and hurries inside the house, hugging Melanie tightly.

“Thank God you’re safe,” she whispers to Melanie’s head.

“D-did those guys do anything to you?”

“No. Just making some threats.”

“Threats? What threats?”

Marta releases her hug. “They said that I had to give them 500.000 a month for ‘protections’.”

“Protections?”

“If I don’t pay them, they’ll ‘withdraw’ the protections.”

Both of them only understand too well what *that* means.

“...what are we going to do?” Melanie asks. Her mother sighs.

“Nothing we can do at the moment.”

“What?! What do you mean?!”

“We can’t tell the police. It doesn’t mean anything to them if explicit threats aren’t uttered.”

“Then, are you just going to give them the money?”

“No. But, then...what happened to your father...”

Marta sighs deeply. She walks over to the dinner table and places her hands on it, deep in thought. She turns again to Melanie and smiles.

“Don’t worry about it too much, okay? We’ll find a way. I’m sure.”

“But...”

“Now, why don’t you just go study? You are having a couple of exams coming up, right?”

When it comes to the subject of studying, there’s nothing Melanie can do to argue. So she goes into her room.

She sits on her desk. Her mother seems to have made an effort in removing all scissors from her reach.

Her mother has told her to study, yet she doesn’t. What importance does school exams have compared to *this*?

This is a punishment that has been placed on her. There is no doubt of it - she has ran away from justice, and it has come to her.

No, it hasn’t come to just her. It has come - for her mother as well. One who doesn’t deserve *any* of this.

She has to do something. But what?!

Please, just *anything* for her to get out of this mess!

Is this truly it? Is there no escape for her?!

...

...maybe she really should just study.

So she does. She opens up several textbooks, and does nothing more than to skim over them.

The rest of the day goes as usual. She eats her food, and goes to bed.

## Chapter 8

The new week begins.

Begins anew the same old cycle that she has gone through. It is quite strange, how it feels like time has gone way too quickly and yet excruciatingly long at the same time.

Again, what is there for her to concern herself over it anymore? Whatever comes next, she will just face it without care. What can she do about it? What is in the future for her? Does she even *have* a future?

Well, either way...maybe she shouldn't *think* too much.

Monday comes and goes without anything out of ordinary. That is, if she still has the same 'ordinary' as the one she's had a week before.

Isn't that just a dear and curious thing? One week. One week ago it seemed like a completely different world, a different reality. She was able to go about her life and for her duties the way they were supposed to be done.

Roni was still there, harassing and attacking her every day. But she still felt like she could endure it. She would toughen up from every bit of his attacks, for every day until either her graduation or his expulsion or any other event which would separate him from her for good. She had faith in that, the *only* thing that she could place her faith in.

All of it changed in just one day.

No, not just one day, but one *second*. Imagine that.

Like building a large, beautiful sand castle, meticulously sculpting and carving every detail. And then, in one second, one instant, a rogue wave, a dog, or an unrepentant jerk could just come and crush it all down. Nothing you can do about it after that. Nothing other than mourning it, or starting from the beginning again.

But how do you 'start from the beginning' from *this*? How do you 'fix your mistake' from taking someone else's life?

She keeps repeating it over and over in her heart that *it was an accident*, which did have a kernel of truth. But was that really *all* it was?

It was true that she had been put into such a precarious position when Roni came at her first with a knife. But - during that struggle while the knife was pointed at her - is she going to pretend that there wasn't a brief flash of *willful intent* to kill Roni?

Why not? After all, him being gone would be the practical end for all her problems? And during the heat of the moment, it was no question that such an option would come up as logical in her mind.

So she went ahead and executed that option, and, and...and she succeeded.

It was only in the aftermath when she realized the consequences of her *wish*.

An instant, and her very reality changed. The very *light* which has guided her, no matter how seminal, has now been put out, letting her eternally wander in the now-darkened path of her life.

Even now, she can barely remember the details of what has happened. Only a vague series of events which led to it, but not any more. Roni's figure, curses and actions felt like dark, whistling phantoms which faded into the shade of the nights, just as quickly as they had formed. Her mind probably did her a favor, but she can't be sure whether it is a good thing or not.

It's all just so unfair, that everything can change in one second, yet she cannot change it all back in just one second as well. Why? Why has it been made so? Why does God make it so?

Even if she can't get all the answers, is it just too much to ask for *help*? Even a single bit?

Yet, perhaps 'help' has been presented to her. But not the one she is keen on *facing*.

And now, she still chooses to keep running away. Run, and run, and run...

*...until she falls.*

---

It is now Wednesday.

There are both a geography exam and physics homework due today. She has done her best - the best that she sees fit - to do both. As far as she is concerned, that is already enough.

Maybe she will succeed, or will get remedial. Maybe she will once again get her mother's ire. Who knows? Who cares? Not like she gets to decide. *It's all up to God now.* Who is she to tell Him what to do?

*Who is she to tell Him to stop punishing her?*

She is eating breakfast. Her mother has prepared her fried chicken in sweet soy sauce. The TV is playing, the usual news her mother watches which her brain mostly tunes out as noise.

"Ugh, when will these people do something..." she hears her mother mutter. Politics. Another stuff she hasn't even pretended to care nor know about, and she is willing to bet her mother is the same unless she happens to come across news about politics.

Melanie hears some more stuff about the people's hostile actions to the Chinese ethnic. Violence, looting. It is *supposed* to be a serious matter that should especially concern her, yet she remains unfazed. How her father died had already left its mark on her. As long as they remain just 'news' she occasionally listens to, what can they do to her?

*What can they do to ruin her more than what she has already done to herself?*

"Oh, dear..." she hears her mother mutter again. This time, perhaps she has a more valid reason to be genuinely concerned. If those bikers *do* actually keep to their promise...

...no, no, she can't think about *that* right now.

“...and now, in a shocking turn of events, a body has been discovered floating down a river near the XX area. From his uniform the body is identified to be belonging to a middle schooler.”

A body?

Melanie stops dead in her usually automatic, monotonous eating process. Her attention is forcibly fixed on the news. Her mother looks just as shocked, sitting in front of the TV.

“...even if there is speculation about the body belonging to the missing middle schooler Roni Budianto, further investigation still needs to be done before the police can come to a conclusion...” the news reporter continues in her usual professional, monotonous tone.

“Ro...Roni! He’s dead?!” her mother gasps, putting her hand over her mouth.

Meanwhile, Melanie trembles in her seat. She tries to look around, and- oh, everything’s, everything’s blurry- wait, where is she? What is she...

“No way...all this time he’s been missing...”

Marta turns over to see her daughter standing by the table, gazing off into the empty space. She appears to be wobbling with each new step she takes.

“Darling, are you alright?”

Marta approaches Melanie, who seems to be muttering under her breath.

“Melanie, what’s wrong with you?”

Melanie only proceeds to make incoherent sounds, stumbling around before finally falling into her mother’s arms.

“Melanie? Melanie!”

The darkness greets her.

Slowly too, her eyes open to the light. Just the formless, vague colored blobs around, which slowly become the form of her mother.

Her muscles tense and she realizes the bed she has been placed onto.

“M...muh...mom?”

“Oh, honey, are you alright?!”

Melanie wants to sit up, but can't. Her head still feels way too heavy for her.

“What...happened?”

“I should have been the one asking you that!” her mother says. “I mean...well, you just suddenly passed out!”

“P...passed out?”

“We were watching TV, the news, and then...you stood up, and suddenly just passed out like that?”

The news...oh.

*Now* she remembers.

Now that she remembers, it all comes crashing down on her again.

Roni. They found Roni.

They *found* him.

“R-roni...”

“Oh, yes...it is tragic what happened to him. What could have possibly cause-”

They found him. They truly did find him.

If they found him, then...she can't deny it anymore. It's only going to be a matter of time.

Sooner- or later...they will...*they will-*

*They will find her-*

“NO!”

Melanie clasps her hands on her head and a cry is ripped out of her throat.

“Melanie?! Hey, honey! What’s wrong?!”

Melanie’s body continues to be shaken, by this one long continuous cry which seems to be forced out of her. She falls upwards to the embrace of her mother, where she continues to shake back and forth.

“I, I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry mommy, please I’m sorry I’m sorry-” she cries in an incoherent babbling.

“What is it?! What are you sorry for? Hey! Hey!”

Marta grabs Melanie’s body and straightens her up, putting her gaze straight with hers.

“Look at me. Look at me!”

“I-I’m sorry. I’m sorry! I didn’t mean it, I didn’t...”

“What is it that you did not mean?”

“I...”

She starts calming down, thought not a whole lot by a measure. She tries to look away, only to have her mother still put her gaze back on straight.

“Melanie...what did you do?”

“I’m sorry mom, I truly am, I...I am just...”

“What? What is it?!”

“I...Roni...”

“What is it about Roni?”

What is it about Roni?

What is about that violent, rude, greedy, do-nothing delinquent who had tormented her for so long?!

He confronted her, asking for money, and beat her when she didn’t give it. And then, when he did it, he...he....

“No! No! I DIDN’T DO IT!”

“HEY!”

Marta grabs her daughter’s face.

“Calm down now. Calm! Down!”

“I never did it! I didn’t do anything! I’m innocent!”

“Look at me. Why would you say that?”

“I...”

“You are my daughter. I know you are a good person. So, please, explain to me why you said *any* of these.”

“No...”

“You have been worrying me these past few days, and I would like it if you explained to me what is wrong.”

“I...”

“What. Did you do?!”

Melanie looks down and gulps. She *never* thought it would come to this.

And yet she must have surely expected it, didn’t she? Now...what can she do about it?

Or rather, *how can she continue to run away?*

“I...I killed him.”

The words came out of her like a flowing river. So quickly and *easily*, she doesn’t even fully realize it at first.

And yet she has refused to do it all this time...until now.

Her mother squints her eyes, tilting her head in confusion.

“What?”

“I killed Roni, mom. I did it.” she says once again, in full confidence, affirming her decision.

Her mother unexpectedly laughs, laughing like it is forced out of her.

“Well, surely not!”

“I’m not joking, mom.”

“You...” Marta’s expression turns serious. “What did you say?”

“I’m not joking. I did kill him.”

Marta’s eyes turn dark, and her lips start to tremble as she says her words.

“You are lying.”

“I...I wish I was. I *have been* lying, sure. But not now.”

“You have been-”

Marta puts her hand in front of her mouth and starts to tremble herself.

“Oh...oh *God*, no, what-”

“He, he came at me with a knife first. Attacked me at that road leading to my house- he followed me! He went at me and I just wanted to push him away with all I had and I continued to do so and then the knife just-”

“YOU KILLED HIM?!” her mother screams through her sobs.

“I’m so sorry! I, I didn’t mean to, I was trying to save my life, and-”

Marta continues to sob louder.

“I’m so sorry I didn’t come clean about this sooner. That- that was my fault. I should have told you from the beginning, I’m sorry, I truly am-”

“His...his body was found in a river...did you...?”

“I...” Melanie gulps. “...I pushed his body into the river. I was so *afraid* mom, if anyone *ever* found out-”

“Oh, oh God.” her mother starts to heave more and more. “God *please have mercy* on us, no-”

Marta immediately sprints out of Melanie’s room, still sobbing loudly.

“MOM!”

Melanie calls out, but her mother doesn't heed her. As Marta runs off Melanie tries to chase after her. They reach Marta's own room, where she falls off to her knees and cries.

“Mom...please, I need yo-”

“STAY AWAY!”

Melanie nearly stumbles back from her mother's shout.

“No, no, no, no...oh God...how can...how can we...my own daughter...”

“Mom...”

Melanie tries to reach out for her mother again, but she doesn't respond, doesn't even act like her daughter is there. So Melanie withdraws and returns to her own room, where she curls into herself on her bed.

What has she done?

*What has she done?*

Thirty minutes pass as Melanie and her mother remain isolated in their rooms. It is already long past the time Melanie usually prepares to go to school.

Melanie once again tries to approach her mother. Yet, she finds the door to her room to be locked. She presses her ears to the door to listen and finds nothing but more sobbing. She gives up and retreats to her room again.

She has finally done what she ought to have done from the beginning. But she was afraid and ran away.

Now that she has finally done it...what has she accomplished? She is finally honest, but what good does that do for her?

At this point, she might have to prepare for her mother to disown her. And she would not lay a single blame on her for it.

At the end...is death the only way out for her?

She hears the door to her room open.

Melanie instantly tenses up as her mother slowly walks in. Her face is worn out, hair raggard. She sits on the chair beside Melanie's bed.

Melanie opens her mouth, but refrains from speaking.

Her mother takes a deep sigh, and speaks.

"So..." she says. "Tell me."

Melanie licks her dry lips.

"...tell you what?"

"How it happened. From the very beginning."

Melanie takes a deep breath. She *can't* make things worse. She has to have the chance to explain things to her mother...or else.

Yet as she racks up her brain for recollection, it can't do more than give Melanie vague beats of the events that led up to the incident, or indeed within the incident itself. It all came as vague sensations, visions, feelings.

"It...it happened a week ago."

"A week?"

"You- you remember when he hit me, and got called up by a teacher?"

Marta slowly nods. "Yes?"

"T-then...I don't know how or why, but he followed me home, on that road leading to our house, y-you know?"

"That road? Oh, yes. I understand."

"R-right. And...and then..."

It was all so close, yet so distant. Like it buried itself within her very being yet felt so transcendental, like a bad dream.

Oh how she wishes it only *remained* that.

“H-he pulled out a knife. A-and then I don’t know how it happened but I tried to push it off him, b-but the knife somehow got pushed into him and-”

Melanie trembles again as she bursts into tears. Still, her mother only silently watches.

“I-I’m so s-sorry...I, I truly did not mean it please I’m sorry...”

“And you pushed his body into the river?”

“What?”

“Did you push his body into the river?”

Melanie recalls the moment, the *heavy* feeling, the bloody sight and smell. She nods.

Marta sighs, wiping a few tears.

“...why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

“I-I’m so sorry mom, I did not...”

“If you had told me, if you had been *truly* honest...we could have worked something-”

“I’m so sorry! I’m sorry I’m sorry please forgive me...I-I was so *afraid*...afraid that you would reject me, and-and I was afraid anyone else would find out, and-and they now have...”

As Melanie cries harder, her mother finally pulls her into a tentative embrace.

“Please, mom...I, I don’t know what to do...”

Marta sighs. “I don’t either.”

Throughout all her life, she has never heard her mother say “I don’t know.”

Every time, she always had an answer for every problem they faced. Even if she didn’t, she could always give hope.

Yet, now, it seems that there is nothing for them.

The palpable silence is broken by the ringing of the telephone. Marta stays in her place and doesn’t answer right away. Then, she slowly stands up and walks over to answer.

“Hello? Yes, this is Melanie’s mother....yes, we are, uhh...in the middle of a family business today, sorry we didn’t tell you...yes, she can’t come today...”

She stops for a while to listen to whoever is speaking on the other side, probably Mr. Suryaatmadja.

“Oh...yes, yes, I see....I give my condolences. Yes...thank you, thank you.” she says before hanging up. She walks over to sit besides Melanie again.

“That was your homeroom teacher. He asked why you didn’t come, so I gave a ‘family business’ excuse...then he told me about Roni.”

“Roni?”

Marta nods. “Since Roni’s body has been found, the school declared a week-long period of mourning. Roni’s parents will have him buried soon. All school activities are suspended until next week.”

Well, Melanie supposes that excuse wouldn’t be necessary, after all.

“I gave my condolences to Roni’s parents.”

Melanie nods. “....I see.”

Marta sighs. A moment of silence passes between them, until she says, “...I don’t know how everything got to this point.”

Melanie is inclined to agree, but she thinks it better to not say anything.

“Until now...since your father’s death I have done everything I could to give you a better life. We have always faced troubles, but...nothing like...this.”

Melanie can do nothing but sigh as her mother continues.

“I...I believe that you truly did not have a choice. You only did it to defend yourself and-”

“Do you believe I could have actually *wanted* to kill someone?!” Melanie suddenly snaps.

“I didn’t say that! There...there was no other way you could have been driven to *kill* someone unless you had to defend yourself. You-you have the right to that.”

Melanie slumps. “Oh, I..I’m sorry, I didn’t mean that...”

“I know. I know. But...even so...you still killed someone. You killed a son of parents who are going to demand some answers.”

“I-I know that...”

“And, innocent or not...you know how the law works. And...you didn’t just kill Roni, but even disposed of his body as well. Perhaps we could have wriggled our way out if you had ran away, but with what you’ve done-”

“I, I didn’t know what else to do! If someone found out...”

“I know! I...I wouldn’t have known what to do either. Maybe I would have done the same.”

Melanie starts to cry again.

“Hey, hey, come here.”

Marta pulls Melanie into a hug, again, a bit tighter this time.

“I...I won’t abandon you. You are my daughter. That much I can say.”

“Please, mom...help me...”

“I’ll help you the best I can as a mother. But as to what will happen after this...perhaps only God can decide the best judgment.”

Marta releases her hug, and says to Melanie, “Mr. Suryaatmadja said that Roni’s classmates were invited to his funeral.”

“...when?”

“At 3 o’clock.”

Melanie only sits down on the couch in the living room without saying anything.

Marta sighs, wipes her forehead, and says, “We will go.”

Melanie looks up in shock. “What?”

“It is the best we can do to pay our respects to grieving parents.”

“H-how can you say that? I-”

“I know what you’re thinking. I understand, how...how absurd all of this is. But do you want to rouse suspicion by not going?”

“But...”

“I...I don’t know what we’re doing either. But this is the best we can do. Maybe...on the way we can find answers.”

Melanie finds herself unable to argue any further.

When the hour comes, Melanie and her mother wear their ‘formal’ dresses, worn out from many years of disuse. They had contemplated buying new ones, but never did since they had few opportunities to wear them, anyway. They have to save whenever they can.

They set out from home a full two hours before the event was to start, due to the distance. From where they started out in the bustling city streets, they had to catch multiple bemos to get to their location. Sitting cramped side-by-side with other people and only able to stay still until you reach your destination, enduring the sweltering heat and inhaling fumes coming in through the open windows from the streets.

Each time, they drop off into smaller, more exclusive areas. So on, and so forth until they reach a neighborhood guarded by a narrow gate, well-known as a residence for the wealthy. You would see rows and rows of big, brightly-painted two-story houses who look as if you could get lost in it. All around them are vast fields of yellow that stretch out to the horizon, where the light of the dusk change its color from yellow to red to purple as night falls, wind whistling softly through the swaying tall grass.

As they arrive, they try their best to put on polite faces, feeling at ease with their Surroundings. Yet, as the rest of the attendants cast weird, suspicious glances at the two

female, Chinese attendants, Melanie still can't help but to feel singled out. Still, they pay them no heed the best that they can.

Of course, their scorn is all too well-deserved, even if they aren't aware of it. Perhaps it is best if Melanie can cast herself down the grave as well.

Among the attendants, she can pick out several of her other classmates present. Melati, Eka, Jono, Rian, and some others. Probably doesn't even need both hands to count. *Well*, she thinks, *what respectable people would want to take their precious time out to attend the funeral of a thug*. Even with those who do come, perhaps they only do it out of formality or an obligation of some sorts, in the partaking of the simple humanity of sharing grief with your fellow man at a life taken far too soon. Solemnly going through the ceremony, sharing impersonal words of support and sending gifts all while whispering *good riddance*, or *thank God* that a burden on society has been lifted. Maybe one day it will happen to her too, when all of this is over. But nothing can really be 'over'.

She notices Putri present. They share a surprised look, but don't say anything.

Melanie and her mother still do their best to adhere to the funeral etiquette. They stand silent in solemnity while the imam leads the mourners in their prayers, and as Roni's body is laid to rest. They still participate in throwing the three handful of soils into the grave. They say only what needs to be said during this period of mourning.

As Melanie does so to Roni's parents, their faces twisted with grief, she forgets their spite and anger as she bumped into them that day. Hell, she suspects even they had forgotten too. It would be all the better if it stays as well.

If only everything could be that easy.

At the end of the service, Putri calls over to Melanie.

"So...I never expected to see you." she says. Melanie only smiles. She thinks about saying, "Me too," but she has grown tired of lying.

“I never knew you go to the same school as my brother.”

Melanie shrugs. “I mean...you never asked.” Putri responds with a stifled laughter.

“Yeah. What a small world we live in.”

Melanie nods. “My condolences.”

“Thank you. Though in all honesty, I never needed it. But don’t let my parents know.”

“Well...I hope you will be alright.”

“I will, don’t worry.”

Melanie and Putri say their goodbyes, and Melanie and her mother go home. They do nothing for the rest of the day out of exhaustion.

Well, what is there to do? All school activities have been suspended. And regarding what she has done...

Quite frankly, she must have been expecting things to get harder. Sure, a massive weight has been lifted off of her now that she has revealed the truth, but...what must she do now?

Instead, she still carries on with the farce, attending the funeral of her victim, all throughout wishing that she ought to be the one to be condemned and die.

She has thought that her mother might be able to help her, yet now even she has no answers.

Is it really all just up to God now? Will He be able to make things right?

But of course, she knows that the ‘justice’ God intends will punish her as she deserves. And yet, she isn’t ready yet. How can anyone be?

All the while, her mother keeps avoiding her. The past few days she has always stayed besides Melanie’s side, keeping an eye on her and making sure of her daily activities. Yet now she prefers to work alone in the kitchen or staying in her room.

She is no doubt just as lost as Melanie is. Questioning why things ought to be this way.

Maybe it *was* a mistake after all to tell the truth. Out of everything Melanie has *never* wanted her mother to be involved, at all.

Yet, what would have happened if she carried that burden longer? Things could have been worse. Yet they could have been better too.

Still, how long would they have remained until it all fell apart in the end, anyway?

She decided to put such questions out of her head. Maybe they aren't for her to decide. Like her mother said...it is all up to God. Up to Him whether she shall be set free or punished.

With such certainty (or lack thereof), Melanie ends the day.

## Chapter 9

She wakes up to the new day, greeted by the sun rays through the windows. From the intensity of the light Melanie figures that she has woken up later than she usually does.

She didn't dream last night, and her mind feels just as empty as it comes to consciousness.

It is not 'empty' in the sense that she doesn't think of anything, because *obviously*, she *still* does, about a lot of things...yet, it is more so about the fact that none of those things weigh on her as much as they used to anymore.

Normally, this would be a great sign for relief. But she understands what it really means, that she doesn't even care as much as she should.

She supposes she hasn't cared for a long time, anyway, since the day she has doomed herself by that killing act. But, in a strange way, she used to have *hope*.

What does she have now, even when she has done what her conscience has demanded of her, nagged at her and kept her at her every waking moment with guilt? What has it brought her other than grief for her mother, her poor mother who doesn't deserve any of this, unlike her?

Melanie sighs, and decides to get off the bed. She does her usual morning routine, meeting her mother along the way. Yet, they don't share greetings as usual.

It is only after about ten minutes when her mother asks her, "Are you hungry?"

"...yes."

Marta points to the covered plate on the table. "There's leftover chicken there."

Leftovers? Her mother never leaves leftovers. She always cooks new meals every day.

"I know what you're going to say. I'm sorry, but we have to save money on food from now on."

"Why?"

“I...I have been thinking about those bikers. They threatened to attack us if we don’t give them money, and I have thought about standing up to them, you know, they’re *criminals*, but then...”

Marta sighs. “But now...things are just way too delicate. It’s best to pacify the problem if we can help it.”

“B-but-”

“I know...we have always had money problems. But we will only worsen them if those bikers actually follow through with what they said.”

Melanie only accepts her mother’s decision in silence. This kind of pessimism is unlike her mother at all.

Yet, wouldn’t a revelation of her daughter’s crime change almost *anyone*? And regarding that matter, Melanie can’t help but to think of her mother’s choice of words. *Criminals*.

She is right. With her already dealing with one *violent* criminal, it’s best to not deal with many more.

So Melanie silently attends to her cold, leftover chicken. Better than nothing, she supposes. Especially when her mother’s doing this to save their lives.

A while into the morning and they attend to their shop. Business is going like usual, without much-hoped for improvement.

All the while, Melanie keeps anticipating the appearance of the bikers. It might seem like paranoia, and yet...anything can happen at this point.

At one point in the afternoon, from a distance, Melanie can see two policemen coming down the street. Normally, this isn’t something to be alarmed about, but cold sweat quickly breaks out on her forehead.

“M-mom, there’s policemen.” she says, pointing at the policemen’s direction.

“I know, dear, it’s normal procedure, they usually patrol around here anyway.”

Melanie’s unease subsides for about thirty seconds before said policemen approach their store.

“Good afternoon, ma’am.” one of them addresses Marta.

Melanie already goes to hide behind her mother.

“Oh, good afternoon sir.”

“Right, uh...so, this is the house of Melanie Chu, right?”

Marta hesitates a little before answering, “...yes?”

“And...you are Melanie Chu, right?” he points directly at Melanie.

“U-uhm! Y-yes?”

“Ah, good. We’re just here to ask a couple of questions, if that is alright.”

Melanie gulps, unable to answer. Her mother does it for her, saying, “Oh, by all means, we are willing to help.”

“Right. So...you know about Roni Budianto. He has been missing for a couple of days before turning up as a corpse floating down this river. It came as a shock to everyone, and...it is quite an unfortunate coincidence that the very same river runs beside your house, here.”

At this point, Melanie is feeling every urge in her nerves to *get away from there, quickly, run!* but she also knows it will just make things worse. She just tries her best to keep her composure as her mother continues to talk.

“Oh, yes I know about that. What a horrible thing that is.”

“It is. His body was found with a knife embedded in his chest. We have been visiting everyone he’s had a possible contact with to find out what happened, starting with his classmates like your daughter. So...we want to ask if you have any clue.”

Melanie is completely frozen within the cold sweat covering her body. How can she get out of this? It, it feels like everything is spinning again, *like that time, oh god no, please not now, everything would end now-*

“Uhm...” she says, licking her lips.

“Anything, anything at all.”

“I...uhm...I-I know nothing!”

The policeman raises an eyebrow. “Nothing?”

“E-ehm, no! I-I don’t know what happened! He, uh...he bullied me at school but that’s it!”

The policeman thoughtfully writes in his notebook, and asks again, “*Absolutely nothing?*”

At that point Marta takes over, “I-I think she has said everything she knows. This...is a very distressing subject matter for her, so...” she waves her hand. The policemen look at each other and say, “Very well then. Sorry for the inconvenience. Have a nice day.” and they leave.

Once the two policemen are out of their sight (and presumably out of their range of voices), Marta turns harshly to Melanie and says, “What do you think you were doing?!”

“W-what-”

“You acted way too suspiciously! Do you think they will not come back later?!”

“W-what was I supposed to say?!”

“You should have just let me do all the talking! I would have-”

Marta stops and takes a deep breath.

“...I, I’m sorry. I understand, you *are* in a lot of stress. Anyone would have panicked if they were asked, but...”

She shakes her head. “Nevermind. We...we are *all* stressed now.”

Melanie just silently accepts as they go about their business.

The shop closes and they go back into their house.

Melanie's mother has said that they will send food to Roni's grieving family, as is tradition. When Melanie objected to it being a burden on their finances, her mother replied that it is simply the best they can do.

Though, Melanie wonders if it's just an overcompensation to cover up *her* sins which her mother has taken up as well. Still, she thinks of Putri and is moved to help.

So ends another day. Another day, moving mindlessly towards something she doesn't even know exists.

She wishes for an end. She doesn't care *what* kind of end it is...as long as *all of this* is finally over.

Though perhaps that is still a long way ahead.

## Chapter 10

She finds herself startled awake in the morning, where the sunlight is still coming in softly through the windows.

She had a nightmare. She could only remember the details, oddly enough - sights, sensations, smells - but not the bigger picture. It was - hot - and there was fog everywhere and she could only see red. There was a lot of screaming, too, but none she could make out.

She gets off her bed and meets her mother.

“Morning, dear.”

“Morning, mom.”

For breakfast they are having fried tempe. Melanie is thankful that at the very least it’s not leftovers again, though she wouldn’t object much to the latter either. Not like she has any options.

“So, we’re going to deliver food to Roni’s family today.”

Melanie looks up in shock. “T-today?”

“Yes. Well...the earlier, the faster this business is finished.”

“Must it be so soon, though?”

“Again, we must use all the time we have.”

“Where did you gain Roni’s address from?”

“From your homeroom teacher, Mr. Suryaatmadja. We’ll do it later in the afternoon, so be sure to get ready.”

Melanie finishes her meal without much fuss.

It is afternoon, and Melanie sets out to follow her mother and deliver food to Roni’s parents. Just like when they were attending Roni’s funeral, they traveled by bus.

Melanie is nearly taken aback once they arrive. In front of them, behind the large golden gates is a huge, cream-colored house, almost like a mansion. It is certainly not a house expected from a violent delinquent to have once lived in.

Then again, now she at least understands why Roni was the way he was.

Marta rings the bell. A little while later, a servant comes out of the door and walks to the front.

“Who is it?” she asks. Melanie’s mother puts on her best polite smile and asks, “Yes, I am the mother of Roni’s classmate. We are here to deliver some food to...to the mourning parents.”

“Oh, okay. Come in.”

The servant opens the gates and welcomes Melanie and Marta in to the house. The inside is almost as impressive as the outside. They enter a huge hall with a huge staircase connecting with other rooms.

“Now just wait here, I’ll call the master and the mistress.”

The servant goes inside and, a couple of minutes later, returns escorting the grieving parents.

“G-good afternoon, Mr. and Mrs. Budianto. I am Marta. I am Melanie’s mother.”

“O-oh...Melanie, huh?” Melati Budianto asks. Melanie just politely bows.

“Yes. I...come here to bring you food. I understand it is never easy to lose one’s son.” she says, bringing forth the plastic bags of food.

Melati and Jono accept the bags silently, seemingly unenthusiastically.

“O-oh, yes...” Melati mutters.

“We thank you very much for your gesture.” Jono says.

Marta smiles and bows in gratitude. “It is...indeed very tragic what happened to him. We are here for you if you need anything.”

Melati starts to sob. “Y-yes...he was our son...regardless of what he might have done he was still...”

She starts crying loudly, with her husband Jono hugging and trying to comfort her.

“How? How could it have happened? What was our fault did we do? We might not have been the best but...we have always tried...”

“There, there, dear...not in front of the guests.”

Melati forcibly frees herself. “I have the right to cry all I want!”

“Melati, *please*-”

“Don’t you ‘Melati’ me! Oh, Roni, my son...my son! I have done all my best for you, yet how could you have fallen to that crowd? Those violent thugs, *thieves*, and..and...”

At that point, Melati’s grief-mad eyes make direct contact with Melanie, who is already anxious to leave the place while still knowing to follow her mother’s words.

Melati points her finger at Melanie, wailing, “You! You, you Chinese brat, think I forgot about you?!”

“W-wha-”

Jono rushes in to restrain his wife again. “Okay, that’s enough-”

“Don’t you see it! Oh, it’s your fault, I see it now! YOU! You were the one who dragged him into that kind of wretched life! You killed him!”

Marta already drags Melanie behind her as Melati continues her incoherent rant. Even then, they still remain in the Budiantos’ house.

“It’s always the same with you Chinese! You take everything away from us, the hardworking Indonesians!”

“I-I think you’d better leave now. My wife...well, both of us have been having a hard time. Excuse us.”

“I-I see. Thank you. Excuse us too.”

Jono then pushes Melati inside and signals his servant to guide Marta and Melanie back outside.

Suddenly, Melanie notices from the corner of her eye, just at the outskirts of Roni's house, a group of bikers and other thugs. Similar to the ones who had come and threatened her and her mother in their house.

She takes such thoughts off of her mind. No, she doesn't need this. It's probably just her feelings.

On their way home, what Roni's mother has said continuously replays in Melanie's mind.

She is just yet another bigot who discriminates against her kind purely for being Chinese. And yet...even out of grief, has she said anything wrong?

Melanie has killed Roni. Out of self-defense, yes, but she still killed him regardless. Cut short a life who still had much more to go.

Yet, for all that she assures herself that what she did was justified, when she walked up to a grieving mother of the person she has killed, pretending there was nothing wrong...wouldn't it be fair for her to die right then and there as well?

But maybe that isn't for her to decide.

## Chapter 11

She wakes up to another day.

Another meaningless cycle of time to be repeated after 24 hours of fruitless activity.

Dilly-dallying all around and doing nothing but to wallow in your inevitable doom.

Is this all that there is left to her? Just...painful, excruciating waiting?

Is there *any* reason why she should go through any of this any longer?

*Well*, another, smaller voice in her says, which tries to give her some hope to live, *maybe God has something planned for you.*

She *has* believed that for so long. She *has* held onto that since the beginning, and anxiously, patiently waiting for any change.

Yet, what has God given her other than endless fears over her well-deserved punishment? Maybe that's all she will be given, all that she has any right to have.

But she doesn't have to put up with it any longer.

She wakes up and walks out of her room. Her mother is nowhere to be seen. It is now later in the morning, so perhaps she is already guarding the store, probably also waiting for Melanie to wake up.

She walks into the kitchen. She sees one of the big kitchen knives, hanging on a hook. She takes it, almost surprised by how heavy it actually is.

Her mother may have discarded all scissors...but she probably hasn't thought of *this*.

The one thing that can give Melanie freedom once and for all.

But...can she do it? Will she truly follow through this time, unlike when she was contemplating jumping in front of the cars?

Can she finally bring certainty and finality into the vortex of despair of her existence?

She puts the tip of the knife just so gently pressing to her wrist, where the veins are. It just seems so easy. A slightest bit of pressure applied, and a swipe...and it's done.

Well, no, maybe not done. What if her mother comes in at this moment and catches her before, or during the act? If she manages to prevent her, things will become even more complicated yet again. But if Melanie has managed it, then maybe she will indeed die before her mother can do anything, or she will manage to save her yet again, maybe by bringing her to the hospital. Either way will add more financial problems.

Her mother will grieve, that's for sure. But Melanie is sure she will get over it quickly. After all, what has Melanie done to benefit her? She will be better off without her good-for-nothing, *murderer* daughter. Without her, her mother will be lifted of her burden.

And, well, that's what this is all about, isn't it? All the attempted lying, to prevent burdening her mother. Now that all *that* has failed...well, there is only one choice left, really.

She enters the bathroom. She doesn't want to make much of a mess in the kitchen. She also decides to take off her clothes. It'd be a waste to stain them with blood.

She stands beside the water basin. She puts her wrist in the water, pressing the knife against it.

She takes a deep breath, and finds herself trembling. Many times, in her heart, she makes her proclamation to slice her wrist, yet her hand holding the knife remains still.

Come on! What's wrong with her?! She has made her mind up, so why is it so difficult for her to just do it?!

She *has* to do it. She- she can't back out *now*. It is now, or she will have to live yet again her life in *despair and torment*-

"Melanie?"

Melanie drops the knife in the basin, nearly slipping herself.

"Melanie? Where are you, honey? Are you awake?"

*Shit!*

She turns to see the knife, still sunken at the bottom of the basin.

Okay. At this point, she can't possibly be fast enough to get the knife out and place it in the kitchen without her mother noticing.

"Are you hungry?" her mother's voice continues to echo through the hall.

Alright - maybe - she can just play it cool. Pretend everything is just going as usual-

"Mel- oh! There you are!"

Melanie nearly slips for the second time when she hears her mother, now right in front of her outside the bathroom.

"O-oh...mom! I...I was just about to take a bath!"

"A bath? Don't you usually eat before taking a bath?"

"O-oh, that's...i-it's just kind of hot today, so I'm really sweaty."

Marta raises an eyebrow, looking at and over Melanie and the bathroom. "And you forgot to take your towel too?"

Melanie feigns surprise to hide her nerves. "Oh, did I? Ha, ha, silly me!"

She attempts to walk to get the towel herself, but is stopped by her mother.

"Hey, hey, don't need to. I'll get the towel for you. You're naked already anyways."

"O-oh, right...thanks, mom!"

So Melanie continues to stand awkwardly while her mother goes to take her towel. Inside, her heart utters innumerable and unintelligible curses at herself.

Once again, she's a coward. A coward who is unable to face her life and yet also unable to take a way out.

Why couldn't she do it? She has made her resolve. Nothing would deter her...except for the voice of her mother.

Why should she continue burdening her with her worthless existence?

She doesn't understand why she's even playing dumb regarding all of this!

*Stop it! Stop it! Stop all of this farce!*

*Why can't she just say what she wants?!*

*Why can't she just do **something**?!*

She sees her mother returning with her towel.

“Thank you, mom.”

During the entire time she's taking her bath, Melanie keeps her mind on the knife. Sooner or later, her mother is going to notice.

Maybe she can take it and hide it inside her towel. Then, she can think about the best time to return it without suspicion.

So, as she finishes her bath, Melanie grabs the knife and hides her hand inside the towel. She just needs to speed through her mother and it will be alright. So she does.

After changing inside her room, Melanie decides to put the knife in her bag. Now she just needs to wait for the right time.

In the meantime, she goes to eat.

Today's breakfast is fried chicken with rice. Nothing too noteworthy. As she finishes, she intends to go back to her room when her mother calls her.

“What is it, mom?”

“You'll go with me to stand by the store.”

“Oh...” Melanie answers, with a tinge of disappointment which her mother notices.

“Something wrong?”

Melanie shakes her head, a bit frantically. “O-oh, no. It's alright. I'll go!”

So they go.

Several hours go by as they undergo their usual business. Nothing too remarkable, even including some of the racist insults hurled in their direction.

Melanie absentmindedly gazes off into the distance, and sees Putri's figure walking to their store. However, she doesn't greet her, and simply waits until Putri arrives.

“Welcome, Putri!” Marta greets her first. “Haven’t seen you in the store for a while.”

Putri smiles. “Yes. Quite a lot of...business happening recently.”

“Yes, I understand that. Come.”

Putri glances at Melanie and smiles, which she returns, though unenthusiastically.

Putri goes to buy orange juice and a potato chip snack. She goes to sit in front of the store.

After a while, Melanie decides to start a conversation, “So...how have you been? Since...well.”

Putri, still chewing her snack, nods and answers, “I...I have been good. Mostly.”

Melanie forces a smile. “Did you know that my mother and I came to your house?”

“Oh...yeah. To deliver us food.”

“Why didn’t I see you?”

Putri shakes her head. “I didn’t come out of my room. Sorry...I just didn’t feel like getting out of my room that day. Although I would have come out if I had known you were coming!”

Melanie chuckles. “Oh...I’m flattered.”

“Believe me, it was already maddening enough to deal with my parents’ mourning, that I didn’t feel like dealing with more of it. Sorry, but that’s just how it is.”

“How are they now?”

“Still the same, mostly. I decided to go here to get away from it all.”

Melanie nods. “So...what about you?”

“What?”

Melanie gulps. She doesn’t know if she can even ask this kind of question.

“I mean...are you grieving just like them?”

Putri shrugs. “Well...I already told you the kind of person my brother was, right?”

“So...now that he’s dead, do you feel....glad?”

Why is she doing this?

She is doing this just to find excuses. Justification. Anything to make what she has done right.

“Glad? ...I don’t know. He was a bad person, certainly. And...I suppose I do feel relief that he’s gone now. But well, I have only ever wanted him to be ‘gone’, in the meaning to not bother me anymore, you know? Not...actually dead.”

Putri takes another sip of her orange juice. “I suppose...he was still a big part of my life, you know? I couldn’t just ignore him. And now that he’s gone, well...that part is gone now, too. And while I do understand why my parents grieve him so...I do wish they could at least still have realized the kind of person he actually was.”

Putri shakes her head. “I-I don’t know. I really don’t want to talk about it.”

Melanie nods. “Alright.”

Putri takes another sip of her juice, and throws away the empty box. Melanie just stares at her, haunted by the one question she wishes she could have asked.

*“Who do you think your brother’s killer is?”*

She can ask that now, but she doesn’t want to strain Putri’s feelings. She is as exhausted and troubled as she can.

The sight of the bikers outside of Putri’s house that day replays in Melanie’s mind again.

“By the way...Putri?”

“Hm?”

Melanie gulps. “You...did you see anything...weird, outside your house yesterday?”

Putri looks at her with scrunched eyebrows. “What do you mean?”

Melanie sighs. “I...when I went home after delivering food to your parents, I saw...”

“Saw what?”

“...I saw bikers. Thugs, dressed in black like that.”

Putri’s look shifts to uneasiness and she purses her lips. She licks her lips. “They...”

“Did you see them?”

“Y...yes.”

Melanie takes shuddering breaths. She does *not* like the direction this is taking.

“Where did you see them?”

“I saw them through the window in my room. I-I did not see them directly.”

“Did they notice you?”

Putri is beginning to look anxious. “I-I don’t know. I hope they didn’t.”

“Why do you think they were there?”

Putri waves her hand. “I-I don’t know. I said I don’t want to talk about it.”

Melanie is once again silent. Putri can be terrified because those bikers are obviously dangerous. But...is there a deeper reason to it?

Does Putri know who those bikers are?

“Are you okay, Putri?”

“I-I’m fine. Uhm...” Putri stands up. “...I’m sorry. I’ll be going home now.”

Melanie only silently watches as Putri quickly walks home from the store. She has grown quite uneasy from Melanie’s questions.

Her answers have provided new distressing revelations for Melanie. What could Totong’s gang be doing?

What could they possibly want with the sister of their dead former member?

Melanie sighs and walks to her mother, who says to her, “So is that how it is?”

“What?”

“You are able to remain friends with the sister of someone you killed?”

“I-” Melanie is indignant, but is unable to say anything.

“I get it. You do at least want to provide support for her, but...”

“I...I know mom. But still...what else can I do?”

Her mother only sighs. “You...you know someday you will have to tell her the truth?”

Melanie doesn't answer. “When that day comes, I'll tell the truth to everyone.”

Marta nods. “I see.”

They conduct the business as usual and end the day.

## Chapter 12

When the next day comes, Marta once again brings Georgia to bring food to Roni's family.

"But why? You have seen how they reacted to us the first time!"

"I know, but aren't we taught to forgive and show kindness to those who hate us?"

"But..."

"It is alright. And considering what we have done...this is the least we can do."

And thinking of Putri as well, Melanie argues no more.

When they arrive at the Budianto residence, Melanie cautiously looks around to see if the bikers are around like two days before. She carefully scouts the area, and yet finds nothing.

The thought is starting to seep into her head that what she saw was just mere hallucination after all - but, no, she definitely did see them!

Are they truly gone for good now? Or are they yet still planning to appear another day?

Marta knocks on the door. Just like before, they are greeted by a servant.

"Oh, are you..."

"We are Marta and Melanie Chu, from two days ago..."

"Oh, right! I remember you."

"Ehm, so, yeah, we are here to deliver food again-"

"Oh right. Uhm, sorry but Mr. and Mrs. Budianto aren't seeing anyone right now."

"Oh...well, is there a way to-"

"You can give the food to me. I'll bring it inside."

"Oh, right. Thank you very much then-"

Then, a figure comes up from inside and talks to the servant, which turns out to be Putri.

“Ma’am? Who are-”

“Oh, young mistress! These are guests who-”

“Hey, Melanie! It’s you!”

“Oh, uhm, Putri!” Melanie greets with a smile.

“You know them?” the servant asks, to which Putri nods.

“Yes! She’s my friend! Well, come on inside, then!”

“Hey, wait! But your parents have said that they’re not receiving anyone inside!” the servant objects. Putri, for a moment casts a few glances from Melanie and Marta and back to the servant.

Marta tries to politely stand down. “Oh, uhm, well...in that case, we will just give our food and go home, we wouldn’t want to burden the owners of the house-”

“No, no! It’s okay! Just...just for a bit, okay? My parents won’t know.”

“Are you sure it is okay?” Melanie asks, and Putri nods again. Thus, with Putri’s invitation, Melanie and Marta enter the house.

“How are your parents doing, Putri?” Melanie asks.

“Oh, they’re still very deep in mourning, of course. Truth be told, I have barely seen them since morning.”

Melanie looks again around the house, and outside. Her mind calls back to the bikers - or, at least currently, the lack thereof. She asks Putri.

“About those bikers...have you seen them again?”

Putri turns to look out the window as well. “Uhm...no. At least not today.”

“Do you think they’re gone for good?”

“I...I don’t know.”

“Do your parents know about it?”

Putri shrugs. “If they do, they haven’t talked about it.”

That is about enough confirmation for Melanie that Putri’s parents haven’t yet known.

“Anyways, do you want a drink? Water? Tea? Coffee?”

“Water would be great.” Marta replies.

Putri nods and orders the servant to go prepare water and snacks. She also permits Marta and Melanie to sit down.

“So, uhm,” Melanie speaks. “Your house is...really impressive.”

Putri laughs. “Yeah, yeah, everyone says that. But in all honesty, it’s not really all that impressive.”

“But it’s huge!”

“Well, yeah. That’s just how my parents are. But they never consider how it just makes it so tiring to go into the kitchen and the bathroom! Look at that, there’s gotta be at least ten meters there!” and everyone laughs.

“What do your parents work for, Putri?” Marta asks.

“Oh, my father's a small company owner, and my mother also works in an independent business.”

“Doing what?”

Putri waves her hand. “It almost always changes at every moment. Cakes, catering, jewelry, you name it.”

“Why does she change so often?”

Putri shrugs. “I don’t know. I suppose every time they don’t make as much of a profit as my mother wishes, she just changes into a whole new lane entirely.”

“Isn’t that even more wasteful than if she were to stay.”

“Probably. But good luck telling my mother that.”

Putri takes a sip of water. “Lately, though, it’s just her complaining about other people ruining her business. People like...”

Putri stops, licking her lips in hesitation.

“...people like what?” Melanie asks.

“...uhm...forget it.”

It seems like they are about to change into a different topic when Melanie sees Mrs. Budianto, Putri’s mother, walking down the stairs.

“Putri? Who is that?” she asks. As she comes down closer her face turns into a look of indignant confusion. She points her finger at Melanie, or Marta - or maybe both.

“You...you!”

“Oh...Mrs. Budianto, we-”

“What are you doing here?! Haven’t I told you to never come here again?!”

Not that Melanie ever remembers her saying that.

“Mom! It’s my friend!”

“Friend?”

“Yeah! They own the shop I usually go to after school!”

Putri’s mother seems to take a moment to process new information. Still, she goes back to pointing her finger at Melanie. “You...you don’t understand! Befriending these...monstrous, greedy Chinese!”

“Mom! That’s enough!” Putri stands up in anger, while both Melanie and Marta are already itching for a chance to get out of the place.

“They take everything away from us! Why, they even go so far as to harm others!”

“You’re only saying that because your businesses fail!”

“Not just that! That girl!” she points at Melanie. “She has killed your brother!”

“What?!” Putri yells.

Marta suddenly tightly grabs Melanie's hand, as if bracing for what can happen next, or preparing them for an escape.

"This girl led your brother to his death! Getting him involved with all kind of unsavory people!"

"Mom, you're delusional!"

"You dare speak like that to your mother?!"

"How can you say something like that?! Do you just accuse everyone you meet?"

"But it is the truth! She goes to the same school your brother went to, and I saw her with him!"

Putri stops in silence, and turns to look at Melanie in shock.

"I...it's true."

"What?"

"I went to the same school as your brother."

"See! She admits it herself!"

"Is...that true? You knew my brother?"

"I did but he bullied me! I never did anything to him!"

"Liar! Always looking for excuses, you dirty Chinese! You were also the one who got him involved with that gang, didn't you?!"

"I-I have no idea what you're talking about-"

"THAT'S ENOUGH!" Putri shouts.

When her mother is still recovering from the shock, Putri quickly opens the door and signs for Melanie and Marta to get out.

"I-I'm so sorry, I didn't expect-"

"Putri, it's okay, it's probably my-"

"No. We...we'll talk about this later."

Putri closes the door, and Melanie and her mother take their way home.

Midway through their journey home, Marta suddenly says to Melanie, “...so it’s out now.”

“...no, not yet, at the very least.”

“Perhaps. But at this point...they *will* know.”

Melanie answers no further. Indeed, no further words are exchanged between them until the day ends.

## Chapter 13

Three days have passed. Nothing too noteworthy except for the usual crushing feeling of despair which Melanie has gotten used to, and gotten used to expecting. Putri didn't visit the store again for three days. And neither did Totong's biker gang. Even when nothing happens, Melanie still feels the oppressive air of the coming doom, like something is supposed to happen, yet doesn't.

It might as well be what happens now. She has had enough of waiting. Better to give her what ought to happen and let it be done with.

Regardless...it is again time for school.

She goes through her routine preparation just like usual. Her mother kisses her and hugs her a little bit longer than normal, and gives her one instruction.

*"Be safe."*

So Melanie walks to school. During the week-long period of mourning she was expected to do all of her assigned homework and prepare for her exams, but what does any of that matter now?

She just did what she could do. Whether she passes or no, she can't bring herself to care anymore.

Well, at least the first exam is tomorrow, so maybe she has more time to prepare. When it comes to the homework, she just plops down her notebooks as is on the teacher's table.

It's alright. It won't matter. Nothing is going to matter, anyways. Nothing can seemingly bring her to care.

She goes through her lessons mostly gazing off into space, retaining nothing given out in the boring monotonous lectures. Let it bring her doom. Let it all come to her.

The school period ends, and Melanie prepares to go back home.

When she walks out to the school gates, she is nearly taken aback by what she sees. Or rather, who.

It is Putri. Standing, as if waiting for someone?

Could...could it be she has been waiting for...

Melanie gulps and instinctively runs off to the side, trying to avoid Putri's eye.

No, she can't do it, she can't do it now-

"...oh, hey! Melanie!"

...but she still has to.

Melanie halts her steps. She then slowly turns around to look at Putri from a distance. She doesn't go straight away, but rather takes her time to make sure she is seeing what she is seeing.

After getting reassured that it is the reality and not her brain playing cruel tricks, she approaches Putri.

"...hi." she greets. Putri smiles and bows slightly.

Melanie talks again. "How...how did you get here?"

"I walked."

"Walked?"

"Yeah...it's not that far from my school. And...I used to walk here a couple of times to visit my brother."

So that's where this comes to.

Melanie takes a deep breath. "Oh...I see."

Before Melanie can get another word, Putri asks her, "So did you actually know my brother?"

"...brother?" she says, slightly using a dumb tone in a vain attempt to feign ignorance.

"My brother. Roni Budianto."

“...yes. He was in my class.”

“He...” Putri waves her hands, as if trying to articulate what she has difficulty saying.

“What...what did he do to you?”

Soon enough, images appear in front of Melanie’s eyes. Phantoms, memories of pain, yet nothing more. So real and so illusionary. She tries to control her shaky breathing.

“He...he bullied me. He tormented me every day, calling me names because I’m Chinese, and one day he beat me and demanded money from me.”

Putri sighs. “I...well...I’m not surprised. I did tell you that my brother was a bad person. He had always been a bully, but then he got involved with some pretty bad people, thugs...so, you know.”

“The bikers?”

“Yes, bikers.”

“The same ones that went to your house?”

Putri averts her gaze, as if avoiding the question as well. She turns again and changes the subject entirely.

“Did...did you know what happened to him?”

“What?”

“Did you know...did you know who killed my brother?”

Melanie steps forward, almost indignant.

“Why, I...”

“So?”

“I, I don’t know, I swear.”

“Really? You do?”

“Really! I mean...why would I-”

“No, no, I mean...my mother said all kinds of things...and she has always been hysterical like that so I have always ignored them...and yet...”

“Why...do you suspect me of causing your brother-”

“I said no such thing!”

“But your mother-”

“I know! Look, I’m not accusing you of anything, it’s just...I’m just trying to find out the truth. That...that is all.”

She is now lying yet again. But what can she do otherwise?

But the truth has to come out someday, she is still aware of that.

But how?

Why does she keep running away?

When will she learn the lesson she ought to have learned a long time ago?!

“I...”

“You never told me you went to the same school as my brother.”

“I didn’t know Roni was your brother.”

“Well, fair enough. But still...”

“Look...this matter is very complicated for...for all of us. That much I can tell you.”

Putri looks down, fiddling with her hands. “Are you telling the truth?”

“Of course I am? Why would I lie...to you, nonetheless?”

Putri sighs, looking away as if looking for an answer. That is the moment when Melanie spots Totong’s biker gang approaching the school premises.

She grabs Putri’s hand, dragging her away.

“H-hey! What is-”

“Shhh.”

Putri soon notices the same, and gets the message quickly. They both quickly evacuate from the school's premises, hoping that the bikers don't notice them along the way.

They pace quickly until they reach relatively far enough on a street.

"They...they..." Putri mutters.

"Don't think. Just walk."

"B-but, why did they-"

"They're here for us."

"For us? But...why..."

"Because your brother was one of them."

"I know that! But...for what reason?"

"I don't know. Let's...let's just escape for now."

"To where?"

To where indeed. What places does Melanie even *know*?

Her house?

No, no, is she insane?!

But there has to be someplace else.

It turns out, without them realizing it, they have traversed a good several miles away from the school, now reaching the busy streets. They traverse through the streets vendors, side stalls, and the crowd until they reach the intersection Melanie usually passes when going home from school.

"Are they finally behind us?" Putri asks.

Melanie looks around, vigilantly watching every direction for any hint of the bikers going after them, tough as that may be, squished between the other people waiting for the traffic light to turn red. She finds none. But she knows better than to be overly confident, especially on the city streets. Any moment, *anyone* can slip through, as effortlessly and

noiselessly like a fox hunting in the night. Any moment, when neither Melanie nor Putri can notice. Any moment, before it's too late.

“...they might still be around.”

Putri sighs and releases her hand from Melanie's hold. “Well...in that case, I suppose here we should part ways.”

“What?”

“I...I thank you for your help in getting us away. But now, I think I can handle things on my own.”

“What if they get you?!”

“I...”

Melanie takes Putri's hand again. “It's still not safe here. We have to make sure we're completely away from them.”

“Then where should we go?!”

Melanie takes a deep breath.

“...we'll take left.”

“To where?!”

“We'll go to the empty field near my house. Maybe then...”

She isn't even sure what will happen, taking such a risky move. But risk is what she's been taking all her life.

Now, with another life at stake...she isn't about to back down.

She takes another deep breath to steady herself. “We'll find a way.”

The traffic light turns red, giving pedestrians the time to cross. Melanie and Putri quickly make their way, walking quickly and never once turning back. Even as they bump into other people, they don't slow down until they reach the road leading to Melanie's house.

The fateful road which changed Melanie's fate forever. Which it might do yet again if she is not careful.

God how she wants everything to change.

"Hey, isn't this leading to your house?" Putri asks.

"Yes, but we're not going there."

"What? Then why?"

Melanie restlessly looks to the front, back, and around her. It still remains just as empty as usual, with only the occasional vehicle passing by.

Perhaps they didn't follow them after all...or they just haven't arrived yet.

"Wait...are you planning to lure them here?!"

Melanie only slightly nods. Putri yanks her hand away.

"You are crazy!"

"It's the only place I can think of!"

"And what?! We just...wait for them here?!"

"Not wait for them to arrive, but to be gone."

Yet she still has to be prepared for the first.

"And...and what if they do come here?"

Melanie has no answer for that. Putri shakes her head, tussling her hair.

"This is ridiculous. I'm going home."

"No! You can't!"

"Why?!"

"They'll come for you!"

"But you just said they will be gone!"

"They will! We...we just need to wait a little longer..."

She can't let *that* happen. No, not again. Not while she's still here.

Putri walks off, wandering around in circles, before stopping to gaze off at the river beside the street.

“This river...”

Putri’s statement brought Melanie’s attention. “What?”

“This river...it’s the river my brother’s body was found in.”

Melanie drew in a shaky breath. “...yes, I remember.”

Why does Putri bring up the river? Is there a possibility...

No, no! It can’t be! Take it out of your head!

“It was so horrific how they found him. How he was bloated, bleeding and oozing everywhere...”

“Did...did you see him yourself?”

“Of course I did. I only took a glance, but...it was so clear, and embedded in my mind.”

Putri starts sobbing. “We...we were never close. Yet even I think that was too much. I don’t think he deserved it.”

Melanie only watches as Putri tries to compose herself. What else can she do?

What else can she say?

What *should* she say?

Melanie takes a deep breath. “Well...I agree. He didn’t deserve to be stabbed like that. Yet...I still hope you find peace.”

Putri nods and smiles. “Maybe. But my parents are still insistent on finding out who killed him.”

“Do you want to find out who killed him?”

Putri sighs. “Well, perhaps only for curiosity, if nothing else. But then...if I do, then I will only be tying myself more to this tragedy, to...to my brother.”

Melanie sighs. "I see."

Both Melanie and Putri stand for a long time, not saying anything.

Then, after a while, Putri suddenly breaks the silence. "...Melanie?"

"Yes?"

"How do you know my brother was stabbed?"

Melanie is silent.

It is as if the cogs working in her mind have suddenly stopped. She takes a while before even managing to think of how to form her sentence.

"What? Why, I...saw it on TV."

"The TV never said anything about him dying from a stabbing."

Putri slowly turns around to look Melanie fully in the eye.

"Melanie?"

"W-what?"

"Answer me."

"I...I..." Melanie is only able to produce uncontrolled sounds from her mouth.

"W-well, the police must have figured it out and told it, right?"

This can't be happening.

"No. They only found some sort of a wound, but couldn't tell whether that was a stabbing or not."

"They..."

"Melanie," Putri takes a step forward, gaze still upright. "Did you kill my brother?"

Melanie stumbles back. The sky starts spinning again, just like it used to. The world is falling apart on her feet and she is falling, falling, *falling*, and nothing she does can stop it, no no no no no no-

“No, no, no!” Melanie shakily points a finger. “I-I didn’t! H-how could you accuse me of such a thing?!”

“It’s all so clear to me now. Everything you said and did...”

“No!” Melanie clasps her head. “I didn’t do it. I didn’t kill him!”

“Really? Then how can you know of these things you normally wouldn’t have known if you didn’t?”

*No, no, no- she didn’t! She didn’t kill him!*

“I-I am serious! You, you wouldn’t believe your friend?!”

Putri starts to cry. “I really, really would like to. But you have to tell me the truth.”

*The truth?*

“I, I didn’t...”

*What is the truth?*

“No...there’s no way...I would, I would never-”

*But you do know it, do you?*

“I didn’t...”

*The truth is...*

“NO!!!!!!!!”

Melanie screams at the top of her lungs. “You, you don’t understand! He...he came at me first!”

“What?”

“He had been bullying me. Harassing me, insulting me, hitting me, demanding money from me! I, I didn’t do anything at first because I thought if I ignored him he’d just go away, but he didn’t!”

Melanie finds herself sobbing, stumbling back more and more with each step.

“I...I fought back. I told him that he’d never get any money from me. He hit me again, then the teacher called him to his office, then as I was walking home, he...he...”

She falls into the ground, sobbing louder.

“He...he followed me. Pulled a knife on me. I couldn’t run. He’d catch me eventually if I did. So I tried to throw him off. Held his knife hand, trying to get it away from me, and...and...”

All the while, Putri only stands and watches, expressionless.

“Is that true?”

“WHAT DO YOU WANT FROM ME?! I ALREADY TOLD YOU EVERYTHING, just...”

Melanie shakes her head, trying to calm herself once she finds the sorry state she is in, but fails regardless.

“I...I’d lied before, okay, I know! I...I thought everyone would call me a murderer! Especially...especially you! Please...I, I have told the truth now, so...”

“I...I never meant to...I didn’t...” She continues to sob. “Whatever it is you want...just...just do it, report me or whatever, just...free me from this...this...”

While Melanie is still crying, Putri sighs. She takes a step forward, approaching her.

“I believe you.”

“What?”

“I believe you did what you did because it was necessary. My brother was an awful person, yet still, you...”

“I know, I have heard it all before, I still killed someone. I...I still killed my own classmate. I killed someone’s son, someone’s brother, someone’s...friend. I know that.”

“Yes, I know. It is still unforgivable.”

“Well? So? What will you do about it?”

The scent of tension rises in the air, pungent, and putrid.

Melanie resigns herself to her fate. She is done running away now, awaiting judgment from whom she deserves it from the most.

Whatever will happen now, happens.

That is, before she hears the rumbling of motorcycle engines coming from afar.

Turning to see, Melanie once again has her worst fears affirmed.

She stands up to see Putri frozen in fear, gaze locked on the bikers and thugs arriving. Turning, she sees their leader, walking confidently in front.

“Oh...now this is unexpected.” he says, nonchalantly taking a drag from his cigarette.

“What...” Putri mumbles.

“Just when I have decided to give up from losing you two...you just show up here. What a coincidence!” he finishes with a laugh.

Melanie gulps. She doesn't know if he's telling the truth, but the fact that he and his goons are on their way here anyway means that they are probably planning to head further.

Heading to her house.

Her mother.

“Now, now. Let me make myself clear...we're not trying to cause any trouble here. We hate to hurt kids, you know. So if we can work things out smoothly...none of us will need to be hurt today.” Totong continues.

Melanie and Putri share glances. Brief ones, which nonetheless communicate their intentions.

“...what do you want?” Melanie finally asks.

“Now...you're the Chinese, right? The one we asked for money from?”

Melanie nods her shaky head. Totong smiles pleasedly. “Good. In that case...wouldn’t you bring us to your mother? Again, we won’t hurt her. We’d just like to collect what we’re owed.”

Totong and his gang don’t actually need Melanie’s guidance. They have already memorized Melanie’s address well enough to head towards her house anyways. The ‘request’ is but a pretense to assert a ‘promise’ to be used as an excuse should Melanie try to fight back.

Everyone knows damn well what *that* means, and entails. What can Melanie do now?

Does she refuse them to protect her mother, at the cost of herself and Putri? She might have a chance of fighting back or escaping, but...can she *really* count on those risks?

One moment. Two choices.

Like the hands of a clock wound back once again.

She takes a shaky breath. Putri looks at her with hopeful fear.

“...yes.”

“What?!”

Putri quickly turns around, attempting to call Melanie out, though Melanie immediately grabs her hand to stop her.

“Stop.”

“But they...”

“It’s...it’s okay. I’ll figure it out. If I don’t do what they say they will get you too.”

Putri turns between the gang and Melanie, and finally accepts.

---

While it has taken only mere twenty steps at most to reach her house, to Melanie it has seemed more like a drawn-out, torturous journey to hell, as a damned prisoner.

Then again, that might as well be the reality for her.

When she reaches her home, she almost hopes her mother is inside, where she can go inside and tell what has happened, then, hopefully, they will be able to figure out some sort of a plan together. But again, what will be stopping the bikers from possibly breaking in the house, anyway? Perhaps even *that* has already been planned out by Totong. Leaving no room for her to escape.

The reality is her seeing her mother managing the store who, upon seeing the thugs, nearly broke out into panic before noticing her (and possibly Putri).

“M-melanie?!”

Melanie almost quickly runs to her mother, before barely remembering to control herself. She instead takes slow, measured steps, making sure to not make any moves that might trigger the thugs to do...something. Her mother immediately hugs her tightly, and whispers to her, “What are you doing?!”

“Mom, please...I, I had no choice.”

“And Putri is here too?! What, what is-”

“They have come to collect our money.”

“Money?”

“Yes. The money they told you to pay them.”

Marta takes a quick glance at the thugs, and at Putri’s horrified face.

“Mom, please hear me. They ordered me to bring them here. If...if I didn’t...Putri...”

Still, without Melanie finishing her sentence, Marta already nods in understanding.

“I see. Go...go inside first.”

Melanie is hesitant. It will be safe for her, yes, but...how can she leave out not just her mother, but Putri as well out there, at the mercy of the thugs? If they are even willing to let her go in the first place?

If anything...*anything* happens to her mother...like...like her father...

“And you too, Putri. Go inside with Melanie.”

Putri likewise is hesitant, though she does quickly acquiesce and hold Melanie’s hand.

Like before, she carefully, slowly walks, while guiding Putri by hand. Thankfully, they manage to safely reach inside and close the door.

It is then when Melanie realizes how long she has been holding her breath, which she releases immediately, and quickly.

“Melanie, your mother...”

“I know, I know, we...I shouldn’t have left her.”

“What? Are you going to get out there?!”

“No! But...I can’t leave her alone either!”

Putri looks down at the floor, twiddling and biting her fingers. “What should we do?”

“I...I...” Melanie shakes her head, trying to focus her thoughts. “...I’m just going to check on her.”

She rushes to open the door, just so very slightly to be able to see and hear what is happening yet not too much that the bikers will notice her.

“...give us the money, and it will be all done.”

“...the money?”

“Yes, the money. The 500.000 rupiahs we told you. You surely didn’t forget that, did you?”

Melanie closes the door suddenly when she sees one of the bikers looking her way, as if noticing her. No, this *definitely* isn’t a good idea. But what should she do?

A bit more slowly she opens the door again.

“...maybe we can work out something here-” she hears her mother, relentlessly continuing to negotiate.

“We *have* already worked out something. Give us 500.000 rupiahs. That is the deal. Nothing less.”

Marta just continues to stand there, silently, not breaking eye contact with the thugs. From behind, Putri taps Melanie’s shoulder.

“What is going on?” she asks.

“My mom’s still trying to talk with them.”

“Are they even going to listen?”

“That’s...that’s what we’re hoping for.”

“But what if it doesn’t work?”

Melanie chews on her lip.

“Maybe...maybe we can call the police.” Putri says.

“The police? Do you know the number?”

“Yes. My father told me once.”

“Okay, but...but how long will they even get here?”

“That...” Putri gulps. “...that I don’t know.”

“Then it’s too risky to do it while my mother is still out there!”

“Well what do you think we should do?!”

Melanie sighs. She decides to rummage in her bag. Looking around in her house will take too much time. Something, *anything* can probably work at this point.

That’s when she finds the kitchen knife she put in her bag and subsequently forgot afterwards.

The knife she has used to try to kill herself.

She pulls the knife out, prompting a look of horror on Putri’s face, who screams and backs down.

“Hey, hey, no! This isn’t what you-”

“W-what?! Why do you have a knife in your-”

“I-it’s complicated! But, hey, look, I’m not going to hurt you!”

Putri slowly calms down. “Y-you aren’t?”

“Yes. Look, our chances are slim, but maybe...” Melanie says, looking to the door.

“You! You, are you seriously going to-”

“Yes...yes, I am.”

“Melanie, you’re crazy! What are you even going to try to do with that, two against many?!”

“I don’t know! But...I can’t just stay here!”

Putri gets closer to Melanie again. “Please, please don’t do this! What if something happens?!”

Melanie looks deep into Putri’s eyes. Funny thing, that, to have two of them immediately be so friendly again after Melanie reveals the truth about Putri’s brother. But there the question still remains.

What if something happens, indeed? She has asked that many times, before and after she killed Roni. She has run away many times in response to the question - or rather, the answer.

But she is now done running away.

Without her father, her mother is *all* she has left.

“I...well, I’m just gonna try my chances.”

“Again, what if something bad happens? To you, your mother, or your house?”

“I have no choice! It’s...it’s either now, or never.”

Melanie puts the knife in her skirt, concealing it until the time is right.

She very slowly opens the door, making sure to not alert either her mother or the thugs. She manages to sneak through, standing behind her mother.

“...I’m just going to give you a last warning, lady. Give us the money and this whole business will be over. If not...”

Totong points to his goons behind him, already pulling out their bats and sticks.

Marta, after a few measured seconds, takes a deep breath.

“...alright. Let me go inside and get my savings.”

Totong laughs.

“Don’t keep us waiting. We can get a bit...*bored*, around here.”

Once again, knowing fully well what *that* entails, Marta quickly turns around and is taken aback by the sight of Melanie.

“Melanie?! What are you-”

“I-I am just seeing if you-”

Marta grabs her tightly by her shoulders. “I told you to stay inside!”

“I...”

As Melanie is still formulating her response, Marta only rolls her eyes and says, “Nevermind. Get back inside!”

Marta pushes Melanie back inside, leaving her by the door as she speeds inside. She doesn’t even give a single glance to Putri.

“What is your mother doing?” Putri asks Melanie.

“I-I don’t know.”

“Is she really going to give them money?”

Melanie sighs. “Probably, but...”

“But then she could have ended this way before it got this bad! So what is she really planning?!”

Again, Melanie cannot answer. So there she and Putri remain, standing, while the oppressive shadow of *time* looms over them.

After an agonizing two or so minutes, Melanie's mother speeds her way out again. She is holding something in her hands which Melanie can't see due to her moving too fast.

She gets out and Melanie once again checks what is going on.

"Here...as you have asked."

She sees her mother handing over a wad of money, which Totong takes with a pleased look on his face.

"Good. See, if you had just handed this over from the beginning, things would have been so much simpler. Now, let's see..."

Totong starts counting the money, piece by piece. She sees, however, that his initially pleased face starts to sour as Totong finishes counting it.

"What is this?"

"W-what?"

Totong waves the money around in front of Marta. "This is 450.000. We asked for 500.000."

Marta blinks rapidly, as if trying to verify what she has heard. "O-oh, is that so?"

"Are you planning to trick us with this? Do you think we are dumb?!"

"T-there must have been some kind of mistake-"

Totong delivers a fully-swinging punch with his left hand, hitting Melanie's mother squarely in her cheek, knocking her backwards.

"MOM!"

"What fucking kind of mistakes?! I thought you Chinese would be good at counting all that money you stole from other people!"

With all other thoughts and concerns out of her, Melanie runs at full speed to her mother, ignoring even Putri's shouting.

"Mom! A-are you okay?!"

Melanie helps her mother stand up, who is still reeling from the pain.

“Look at your little brat. You better give us the money we asked for, or we’ll do the same to her too.”

“N-no! I-”

“Melanie, haven’t I told you to stay inside?!”

“B-but, they are hurting you!”

“Yes. And we will do more if you don’t do as I tell you.”

Totong’s goons all move forward, effectively barricading Melanie and Marta in.

“Now. Give me one more 50.000. Final warning.”

Marta looks up scornfully at the thugs, and stands up, brushing the dust off.

What is she going to do? What is Melanie going to do?

Is she just going to continue standing there and doing nothing?

She already has the knife. Really, it would be so simple (or would it?) to finish the entire thing right now.

Should she do it now? Should she wait? Should she just go inside? Does she have any choice in this matter?!

She can only watch as her mother stands up straight, then stands in silence for a while as if contemplating her choices.

“...alright. I am sorry. I will bring the money you asked for.”

Marta nudges Melanie to once again go inside. Melanie continues to watch anxiously as she makes her way back inside, and it is only for a split second when she sees her mother suddenly walk up and try to attack Totong with a metal bar she places beside the booth.

“MOM!”

“MELANIE! GO INSIDE AND LOCK THE DOOR!”

Even then, Melanie finds herself frozen in fear, only able to scream and curl up into herself in horror as Totong attacks back, knocking her mother to the floor. His goons rush into the store, swinging their bats and sticks and breaking everything.

“MOM! NO!”

“I SAID GET INSIDE-”

Marta can only lay on the floor as Totong repeatedly kicks her over and over.

Melanie immediately pulls the knife out. There’s no time anymore. She has to take this choice...or else.

She does nothing, and her mother - possibly alongside her and Putri as well - dies. She does this...and it will probably turn out the same as well. Or she will manage to get at Totong.

It is clear what she should do.

“HEY!”

She shouts, taking attention from Totong who stops kicking her mother. She is pointing the kitchen knife, too big for her small, trembling hand at him.

“G-get away from my mother.”

Marta turns to look at her. “Melanie?! What are you doing?!”

“Hey, so the brat is trying to look tough, huh?”

Melanie gulps, trying to swallow her fear with it too.

“I-I’m serious! Go away!”

But even she can’t be so sure of what she has said, heard with her own ears. The grip on the knife seems weaker and weaker by the second. Everything - from that day - seems to be flooding back too.

The weight of the knife she has pushed into Roni, and, and *Roni is standing right in front of her right now! no no no no no please no not now!*

“If you want to play that game, I’ll play along.”

*Everything is falling apart around her, everything spinning, so dizzy, no, no! She doesn't want to fall! She doesn't want to die!*

RUN!

Run? No, she can't run away-

RUN!

She is done running away!

**RUN!**

The voice rings aloud in her head, over and over like an alarm. You will die. You will die. Run. Run now. You will die. You have to live. Run. *Run if you have to live.* **Run.**

So she does.

She can't even see where she's running to, really. Nor what she is doing. She just hurls herself at Totong, swinging the knife around.

Totong lands a hit near her right eye. It hurts like nothing else in her life, but she remains standing up and going on. She has no choice.

At one point, she manages to hit Totong's arm - or at least, it looks like it. Her right eye is bleeding and she pretty much can't see anything.

"You little bitch, I'm gonna fucking kill you-"

Again, she just continues swinging blindly at Totong's direction. She at least tries to point it in his direction, though mostly through wishful thinking at this point.

Totong hits her back, again and again. But she has to go forward, again and again. She won't run away. She can't run away. Even if it brings her death...

"Why wouldn't you just *die*?!"

She has to keep going...

"MELANIE, STOP!"

For if she doesn't...

“Get away from me!”

SHINK!!!!

A scream of pain roars through the sky. For the moment, it is the only thing to stop Melanie from her frenzy.

She hears a loud thud. Multiple murmuring voices soon follow.

She wobbles forwards, blood nearly filling her vision.

But then, clear as day, she sees Totong lying on the ground.

Eyes wide open, holding the knife on his side. His blood slowly seeps out into the grimy, white marble floor.

“N...n...”

“...Melanie?” a voice like her mother calls, though she can’t be so sure.

Her body takes shaky steps backwards. Her breaths are forcefully pulled in and out of her, like a steam machine. Her vision splits into two, spinning and falling apart.

She hears another loud thud as her body slips.

“Melanie?! Oh dear God, no, Melanie! Someone help us! MELANIE!”

A loud screaming follows. Her vision swims, alongside the pounding on her head and her body. Then it starts to feel warm, so warm, so soft, like an invitation from the darkness. She closes her eyes, and then...

...the soothing oblivion claims her.

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## Chapter 14

The heavy darkness envelops her like a crushing weight.

The more she tries to move, the more it hurts. Even as she is aware of the darkness, the pain pounds relentlessly all over her body.

Thus she very slowly opens her eyes, letting in more and more of the light piercing through her eyes. She sees a vague blob of colors, before registering the sounds of stepping, machinery, and a fan.

She has only a brief second to absorb and process all of that before she is pulled into a crushing hug.

“O-oh, thank God, thank God, Melanie! You’re awake!”

Her mother sobs into her, though it takes quite a while for her to realize it, still in daze from unconsciousness. Off to the side she also sees Putri, looking relieved as well.

“...mother?”

“Oh, Melanie...you’re alive! I thought it’d take a while for you to wake up, but...thank God!”

She sees her mother wearing a few bandages on her head, along with several cuts and still fresh-looking purple bruises.

“How...how long have I been out?”

“It’s about two days. Three, at most.”

Melanie’s eyes widen, and she shoots her body to sit upright. “T-two days?!”

“Hey! Calm down. It’s okay.” Putri says.

“B-but two days?! W-what about-”

“Relax. You don’t need to think about school. It’s good enough that you’re alive.”

“Oh...” Melanie relaxes again. “B-but mom, what about you? T-they hit you pretty bad too-”

“Oh, I will be fine! These are nothing. I have had it way worse.” Marta laughs. “You’re more important, especially since you passed out. Who knows what would have happened if we hadn’t gotten you to the hospital sooner.”

“Oh...oh, is that so.”

Marta nods. “Here’s a glass of water.” she says, handing it over to Melanie.

“Thank you.” Melanie says as she downs the entire glass.

“Anyways...are you feeling alright now? Still dizzy, or what?” Putri asks.

“I-I’m okay. I think. Now, at the very least.”

“Good. Don’t push yourself too hard, okay?” her mother says, to which Melanie nods.

Melanie leans back into the giant pillow and exhales. The memories of what happened - two days ago - come back as well.

How everything had felt like a bad dream from which she has woken up now. But then again, if it hadn’t been real then there would be nothing for her to wake up from now, had it?

How *nice* if she can pretend that everything up to this point had been a bad dream. Yet, does she dare to ask about it? Trying to seek confirmation that she isn’t crazy?

“...mom?”

“Yes, dear?”

Melanie licks her lips and swallows. “What...what happened after...?”

“Oh...well, it was going pretty badly, but the police later came and took care of everything.”

“The police?”

“Yes. I called them.” Putri answers.

“You did?”

Putri nods. “I knew it was a gamble, but...I had to do everything.”

“Putri was incredible. I don’t know what would have happened if she had done nothing.”

Melanie nods. She asks again, “What...what about the store?”

Marta looks downcast and sighs. “...that will be taken care of. No worries.”

“B-but they had-”

“I know. But...it is nothing now to see you safe and alive. Everything else can come later.”

Melanie can’t find a rebuttal to that.

She turns to look at Putri, who looks slightly uncomfortable.

“Putri?”

“Yes?”

“Do your parents know?”

Putri sighs. “...yes.”

“Did they allow you? I mean, I-I almost-”

“The police told them everything, and they understood pretty quickly. Well, they’re still angry about some things, but they still allow me to visit you, at least.”

Melanie swallows. After what had happened...did Putri ever tell her parents? At this point, anything could happen.

Then again, what can she do about that now?

A while later, she hears the sound of knocking on the door. Her mother goes to open it and proceeds to talk with the visitors.

“Yes?”

“Has your daughter woken up yet?”

“Y...yes, she has, but-”

“Can we come in and ask questions?”

“Well, she has *just* woken up, and is probably not the best to do it so quickly.”

“We understand. It’s okay, this won’t take too long.”

“W-what kind of questions?”

“Just the same ones we asked you two days ago.”

“But I have already answered, there’s no need to ask her.”

“Well, we need to get answers from all witnesses, ma’am.”

“But...”

“We promise it won’t take too long.”

She doesn’t hear her mother argue any longer, and later sees two police officers approaching her. They look like the ones who had asked her about Roni’s death, but she isn’t so sure.

“Good morning, um...Melanie Chu, isn’t it?”

Melanie nods weakly. The police officer continues, “So, you have been unconscious for two days. To give you a brief rundown of what happened, we were called by your friend, Putri, to your house, where the store your mother manages had been wrecked by a biker gang. Their leader was found dead on the store floor, stabbed by a kitchen knife, and you were found unconscious and bloody yourself.”

“...yes.”

“Okay. So, your mother had given the explanation that the gang came to your house, apparently with you leading the way, is that correct?”

“Yes. They forced me to.”

The police officer writes down in his note. “And then, your mother told you and your friend to come inside your house while your mother tried to negotiate with the gang, who wanted to extort 500.000 rupiahs from her, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Then, when your mother did not give the amount that was asked, the leader of the gang, Totong, attacked her, and that was when you came out.”

“Yes.”

“Then, your mother tried to attack the leader, which prompted his goons to wreck the store. You, then, brought out a knife and managed to stab him. Correct?”

“I...” Melanie gulps. “I...I only wanted to drive him off, if he wouldn’t stop hurting my mother.”

The police officer nods. “...I see. We appreciate your help.”

“Yes. You see, it is quite peculiar since Totong and his gang are suspected to be connected with that dead middle schooler, Roni.”

“To have two of them dead within two weeks...it is quite something. Not that we are blaming you.”

“Oh, yeah.” Melanie just answers absently.

*Not yet*, is what she thinks the policeman wants to say. Maybe it is still a bit too early, but what’s to say he hasn’t had his suspicions? Still, Melanie tries to stay as calm as she can.

“It really is an ugly case. The sooner we can come to a conclusion, the better.”

Melanie releases the breath she didn’t realize she has been holding. The weight of what she just said, *did*, slowly sinks into her.

She really did just kill Totong. Not only that, she admitted that she killed him.

Yet, it doesn’t feel painful. It doesn’t feel like a part of her heart is ripped out of her. And yet, she feels as if a massive weight, like a rock of some sorts, has been lifted off of her.

By just that one simple word.

**Yes.** Yes, I did it.

It all turns out to be so simple, in the end. Maybe all of this wouldn’t have happened had she told the truth about Roni from the beginning.

Maybe it is already too late. But as long as she is still alive...she needs to use all the chances she has.

What will happen to her after this? Will they charge her in some way or another? Maybe. Maybe not. But will it really matter, in the grand scheme of things?

*“It is nothing now to see you safe and alive. Everything else can come later.”*

And as she has said before...she is done running away.

“Well, thank you for your cooperation.” The police officers greet her mother and Putri, before making their way out.

“Excuse me!” Melanie shouts, taking the attention of the police officers.

“Yes?” one of them asks, approaching her again. Melanie chews on her lips, and takes a deep breath.

“There...there is something else I need to tell you about.”