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THEN
SUDDENLY,
You

BELLE FELIZ

Chapter One

Abby was happy and excited. Kinakabahan din siya. Alam niya na wala siyang dapat na ipag-alala o ikatakot, pero parang hindi rin talaga niya maiwasan. Today was the happiest day of her life. The day she had been waiting and planning for. The day all her dreams were coming true.

Napahigpit ang pagkakahawak niya sa kamay ng kanyang mga magulang. Hinagkan ni Papa Anton ang gilid ng kanyang ulo, ingat na ingat para hindi masira ang pagkakalagay ng veil niya. Siniguro ng mama niya na maayos ang suot niyang gown. It was perfect.

She was in her wedding gown and standing outside the church.

May nag-abot sa kanya ng wedding bouquet, pagkatapos ay bumukas ang mga pinto ng simbahan. Pumailanlang ang traditional wedding march song. Nagsitayuan ang mga guest.

“Don’t let me fall,” pabulong niyang sabi sa mga magulang nang ibigay sa kanya ang senyas na lumakad.

She was getting married.

NGINITIAN NANG matamis ni Abby si Kuya Pippo pagkalulan niya ng sasakyan. “Thank you talaga, Kuya. You are the very best.” Niyakap niya ito nang mahigpit pagkatapos. “Na-miss kita nang sobra. Walang katulad mo sa States.”

Marahan na natawa si Kuya Pippo. “Walang anuman. And I missed you, too. I am so happy to have you back. Hindi ko lang maintindihan kung bakit kailangan mong sorpresahin ang lahat sa pag-uwi mo. Put your seat belt on.”

Hinintay nitong mailagay niya nang

maayos ang seat belt bago nito pinaandar ang sasakyan. May mga bagay na hindi nagbabago. Kahit na noon pa man ay ganoon na ang lalaking itinuturing na niyang nakatatandang kapatid talaga.

Nagpakakomportable siya ng upo. Hindi nabubura ang malawak at matamis na ngiti sa kanyang mga labi. Pagod siya sa mahabang biyahe pero masigla pa rin. She was very excited and happy to finally be home. Sabik na siyang makita ang kanyang pamilya at matatalik na kaibigan.

Halos pitong taon na rin mula nang umalis siya sa Pilipinas para magtrabaho bilang isang nurse sa America. Masaya at excited naman siya noong umalis. May halong takot pero mas nanaig ang saya at excitement dahil pinangarap niya iyon noon, bago pa man siya makapasok sa nursing school. Ginusto niyang talaga. Pinagsumikapan niyang tuparin na makaalis siya ng Pilipinas at makapagtrabaho sa ibang bansa. Oo, isa siya sa mga taong nag-Nursing

dahil ginustong mangibang-bansa. Hindi naman niya iyon kailanman ikinahiya.

Hindi madali ang naging buhay ni Abby sa ibang bansa. Hindi madali ang malayo sa pamilya at nakasanayang buhay. Hindi madaling makisama at magsilbi sa ibang lahi. Maraming pagkakataon na mahirap intindihin ang kultura at pag-iisip ng ibang lahi. Pero madalas niyang sabihin sa sarili na ginusto niya iyon. Kaya naman kailangan niyang paghusayan ang anumang kailangang gawin.

Ngayon ay tapos na ang lahat ng pagtitiis niya. Nakauwi na siya.

Nakangiting nilingon niya si Kuya Pippo. "I'm gonna propose."

Marahas na napalingon sa kanya ang matalik na kaibigan. Mabilis din naman nitong ibinalik ang paningin sa kalsada. "You're what?"

"Proposing. I'm proposing. Marriage proposal."

"No," anito, nasa tinig ang labis na

pagtutol. “You can’t do that.”

Marahan siyang natawa. Inasahan naman na niya ang ganoong reaksiyon mula sa kaibigan. “Bakit? Dahil babae ako?”

“Yes.”

“Iba na ang panahon ngayon, Kuya. Kaya nang gawin ng babae ang kahit na anong gusto niya. Wala namang masama sa plano kong gawin. Magwawalong taon na kami ni Danny.”

Napabuntong-hininga si Kuya Pippo. “Hindi ko naman sinasabi na masama na ikaw ang mag-propose. Of course, women can do everything they want to do. Pero kasi... Tama ka rin naman na matagal na kayo. Pero nga kasi... Bakit hindi mo na lang hintayin na mag-propose siya sa `yo? I’m very sure na nasa plano na niya iyon talaga.”

Hindi niya mapigilan na maaliw. Parang hindi talaga nito matanggap na siya ang magpo-propose sa lalaki.

“You know he already asked me to marry him. Three years ago. And I said no. Inintindi

niya ako at patuloy na hinintay. Ngayong narito na ako, I think hindi ko na siya dapat na paghintayin pa. It's time we get married. I think it's my turn. I should ask the question."

Noong tanggihan niya ang alok ni Danny na magpakasal na, ipinangako niya sa sarili na babawi siya sa boyfriend niya. Darating ang araw na magiging sigurado siya at handa, at siya mismo ang magpo-propose.

Hindi umimik si Kuya Pippo. Alam niya na kahit na hindi niya masyadong ipaliwanag ay naunawaan naman siya nito. Ang matalik na kaibigan ang talagang nakakaalam ng mga saloobin niya, ang talagang tumatakbo sa kanyang isipan. Parang dito lang kasi siya kampante talaga. Kay Kuya Pippo lang niya nasasabi ang lahat ng walang alinlangan o pag-aalala.

Siguro kasi, pinatunayan at palagi nitong ipinaparamdam sa kanya na kakampi niya ito nasa tama man siya o mali. Hindi nagbabago ang tingin nito sa kanya anuman ang mangyari at anuman ang maging desisyon

niya.

Nagalit at nagtampo nang husto noon ang kanyang pamilya sa kanya. Hindi talaga maunawaan ng mga ito kung bakit hindi siya pumayag na magpakasal kay Danny. Her mother, her stepdad and her stepsister thought she was stupid and she was making the biggest mistake of her life. Sinubukan niyang magpaliwanag, sinubukan niyang sabihin ang talagang nararamdaman at mga rason, pero ni ayaw siyang pakinggan ng mga ito.

Sa simula ay nainis siya dahil siya ang pamilya ng mga ito. Pilit siya dapat na inuunawa sa naging desisyon niya. Dapat ay may tiwala ang mga ito sa kanya. Pero naunawaan din niya ang pinanggalingan ng mga ito. At this point, Danny was also a family. Hindi na iba. Hindi lang basta boyfriend niya kundi parte na rin ng kanilang pamilya. Mas nakakasama nga ng mga ito si Danny kaysa sa kanya. Physically present ang lalaki sa lahat ng mahahalagang okasyon ng

pamilya.

“Matutuwa ang pamilya ko,” nakangiti niyang sabi. “Uwi muna ako at sasabihin ko kaagad ang plano. Tutulungan ako ni Kryz na isakatuparan ang plano. I’m thinking of reserving a restaurant. Kryz would know the perfect place.”

Kryz was her stepsister. Tatlong taon ang tanda niya rito. Nagkakilala sila noong magnobyong pa lang ang mga magulang nila. Siniguro nina Anton at Carmen na magkakasundo muna ang kanya-kanyang mga anak bago palawigin ang relasyon. Noong mga panahong iyon ay sila ni Kryz ang pinakamahalaga sa buhay ng kani-kanilang mga magulang. Kaagad naman silang nagkasundo at naging magkaibigan. They had always wanted to have a family. They had always wanted their parents to find happiness.

“Iimbitahin ni Kryz si Danny,” patuloy ni Abby sa pagbabahagi ng kanyang plano. “Isama ang parents. Magugulat na lang sila na nakauwi na ako. Then sa dinner na iyon ako

magpo-propose. I also want you and the others to be there. Nag-resign na sa work last week si Kryz, ang alam ko. Hindi ko alam kung bakit pero malalaman ko rin. May work si Danny sa clinic ngayong araw pero libre naman palagi ang mga gabi niya.”

Isang medtech si Danny sa isang malaki at modernong diagnostic clinic na halos eksklusibo na sa mga taong nakakaangat sa lipunan. Madalas niyang ayain ang boyfriend na sa ibang bansa na magtrabaho pero ayaw talaga nito. Maayos naman daw ang kita nito sa Pilipinas. Medyo nakakaluwag-luwag din kasi ang pamilyang pinanggalingan nito. Hindi nito kailanman pinangarap ang pagtatrabaho sa ibang bansa. Isa pa, hindi nito maiwan ang mga magulang.

“Lily has a dayshift and she’s free tonight. Matatapos this morning ang isang surgery ni Henri. I am hoping we can call Dev and Nora and they’ll drop their plans for me.” Niligon niya si Kuya Pippo. “And of course you’d be there, right? Hindi mo kailangang bumalik sa

probinsya mamayang gabi? You can spend the night.”

Sandali itong lumingon at nginitian siya. “Of course. And I’m sure everyone will drop everything for you. They missed you, Abby. We all missed you.”

“I’m so grateful I have you, guys.” Bahagyang namasa ang kanyang mga mata.

Ang mga taong binanggit niya ay mga matatalik niyang kaibigan mula pa kolehiyo. Naging magkakagrupo sila sa unang related learning experience nila at hindi na naghiwalay buong kolehiyo. Siniguro nila na sila palagi ang magkakagrupo hanggang sa magtapos sila. Magkakasama pa rin sila hanggang sa review center. Si Kuya Pippo lang ang lalaki at mas matanda ng apat na taon sa kanilang limang babae. Isa ang lalaki sa mga tinatawag noon na second coursers. Mga nagtapos na pero nag-nurse uli dahil in-demand masyado sa abroad.

Madalas nito noong sabihin na sasama sa ibang grupo, iyong hindi lang ito ang lalaki,

pero ang ending ay sa kanila pa rin ito nagugrupo. He would say he was tired of them but he was very fond of them. He was very protective. He was the kuya they all needed.

Life took them in all directions after college. Hindi lahat ay katulad niya na natupad ang goal noong pasukin ang nursing. The goal to work abroad.

Si Devney ay naging YouTuber dahil na-bully at na-trauma nang husto sa unang trabaho bilang nurse. Isa ang kaibigan niya sa mga pinakakilalang YouTuber sa bansa.

Leonora was a mother of two and was pregnant with her third child. She married a billionaire.

Si Henrietta ay nagpatuloy sa Medisina at isa nang cosmetic surgeon.

Si Illiana ay isang scrub nurse sa isa sa mga pinakamalaki at pinakamodernong tertiary hospital sa bansa.

Si Kuya Pippo ay chief admin ng isang klinika sa maliit na bayan sa probinsya.

Kahit na magkakaiba ang naging buhay, patuloy pa rin silang naging matalik na magkakaibigan. Hindi nawala ang bond. Kahit na gaano sila kaabala sa buhay, nanatili ang komunikasyon. Kahit na malayo sila sa isa't isa, mas nagtibay ang pagmamahalan. Alam ni Abby na bihira iyong mangyari kaya labis niyang pinahahalagahan ang mga kaibigan.

Hindi lang ang pamilya niya ang na-miss niya nang husto habang nagtatrabaho siya sa malayo, maging ang mga matatalik niyang kaibigan.

“Kung sigurado ka na talaga sa plano mo, alam mo naman na palagi kaming nakasuporta sa `yo. Gusto namin na maging masaya ka,” ani Kuya Pippo.

Mas gumanda at mas tumamis ang ngiti sa kanyang mga labi. “I will be happy. Napanaginipan ko.”

Natawa si Kuya Pippo. “Hayan ka na naman sa mga panaginip mo na `yan.”

“O hindi ba nagkatotoo naman ang lahat

ng mga napanaginipan ko?”

“Because you manifested it. You worked hard to make those dreams come true. Hindi ka lang basta naghintay.”

Nakangiting tumango si Abby. That was very true and she also knew that. But there was something about her dreams. They came true.

Hindi naman lahat pero mas madalas. Hindi niya sigurado kung normal pero bihira siyang managinip. Mabilis siyang makatulog. Mahiga lang siya at ipikit ang mga mata ay kaagad siyang tatangayin sa la-la land. Siguro ay hindi lang niya maalala ang karamihan sa mga panaginip niya.

Pero kapag nanaginip siya, o kung naaalala niya ang panaginip, parang masyado iyong vivid. Minsan ay hindi niya sigurado kung nasa panaginip siya o realidad. Parang heightened masyado ang senses niya. She could feel so much. Parang totoong-totoo ang mga nararamdaman niya.

Parang totoong-totoo na nararanasan niya.

Na kapag gumising siya ay parang labis siyang dismayado dahil panaginip lamang ang lahat at hindi talaga nangyayari. Pero maganda pa rin naman talaga sa pakiramdam dahil parang bigla ay may comfort na hatid sa kanya ang magagandang panaginip. Parang may nagsasabi na magiging maayos ang lahat. Magiging masaya siya. Hindi assurance, pero parang mas may lakas ng loob at determinasyon siya na gawin ang lahat para maisakatuparan ang mga panaginip na iyon.

Her mother had been a single mom the first eight years of her life. Nabuntis si Carmen bago matapos sa kolehiyo at tinakbuhan. Itinakwil ang ina niya ng mga magulang nito. Kahit na bata ay nakita niya ang hrap at pagsusumikap nito na mabuhay sila. Hanggang sa dumating sa buhay nila si Papa Anton.

Napanaginipan ni Abby si Papa Anton. Sa panaginip niya, nakita niyang masaya ang mama niya at sa wakas ay naranasan niya kung paano magkaroon ng buong pamilya.

Masaya silang pamilya sa panaginip na iyon. Sinabi niya iyon sa kanyang ina at sinabing gusto niya niyon. Gusto niyang magkaroon ng ama at kapatid. Gusto niyang maging masaya sila.

Hindi nagtagal ay ipinakilala ng mama niya sa kanya si Papa Anton. Kasama nito si Kryz. They all got along so well. They were happy. Naging totoong pamilya sila.

Hindi naman palaging masaya ang pamilya nila. Hindi naman sila palaging nagkakasundo. But they undoubtedly loved each other.

Noong high school si Abby ay hindi niya alam kung ano ang gagawin sa buhay. Hindi niya alam kung ano ang gusto niyang maging. Nanaginip siya at nakita niya na nakasuot siya ng nurses' cap. Nakita niya ang sarili na nakangiti at masaya. Kaya naman kahit na alam niyang medyo may kamahalan ang nursing school, nagpursige siya. Dahil naniwala siya na iyon ang tamang propesyon para sa kanya.

Isa pa, magandang ruta iyon. In demand masyado ang nurses abroad. Malaki ang kita. Gusto niyang bigyan ng magandang buhay ang pamilya niya. Para makatapos siya sa nursing school ay nagkautang-utang ang mga magulang niya. Hindi biro ang hrap na pinagdaanan ng mga ito mapagtapos lang siya ng pag-aaral. Kaya naman talagang ipinangako niya na gagawin niya ang lahat para makabawi. Ibibigay niya ang isang magandang buhay.

Naging masaya si Abby sa nursing school. Marami ang nagsabi na natural siya sa pagiging nurse. Hindi madali ang pag-aaral para maging nurse pero may mga pagkakataon na parang mas madali para sa kanya ang ilang bagay-bagay. It was as if she truly belonged in that profession. She was destined to be a nurse.

Napanaginipan din niya ang pagpasa niya sa board exam. Pagkatapos ay pag-alis naman niya ng bansa. Sa pitong taon niyang pagtatrabaho sa Amerika, medyo natupad

naman niya ang mga pangako niya sa sarili na babawi sa pamilya. Nabayaran nila ang mga utang nila. Hindi pa siya nakapagpagawa ng magandang bahay, pero naipaayos naman na nang husto ang bahay na nabili ni Papa Anton. It was home.

“Dapat ay bahay mo lang ang ipagawa mo. Para sa `yo talaga. Para makita mo ang katas ng mga pinaghirapan mo.”

Iyon ang sinabi sa kanya ni Papa Anton. Kailangan daw niyang mas magtabi para sa sarili niya. Kailangan niyang mas isipin ang kinabukasan niya. Ginawa naman niya. Nakapag-ipon naman na siya. Para na rin sa paghahanda para sa future nila ni Danny.

Napanaginipan niyang ikinakasal siya. Iyon ang huling panaginip na talagang vivid na vivid. Ramdam na ramdam niya ang umaapaw na kaligayahan kahit na ilang araw na ang lumipas. Kaya naman minadali na niya ang pag-uwi. Parang hindi na siya makapaghintay na isakatuparan ang panaginip na iyon. Parang gusto na niyang

magpakasal kaagad.

This was the right time. She felt certain about that. Mahal niya si Danny. Alam naman iyon ng lahat. Wala namang duda. Dati ay alam talaga niya na hindi iyon ang right time. May kung ano sa timing. Marami pa siyang plano noon. Marami pa siyang gustong gawin.

Hindi pa siya handa.

Ngayon ay makakabawi na siya kay Danny. She would devote her focus and attention to being a wife. She was going to be the best wife.

Sa wakas ay nakarating din sila sa kanilang bahay. Ipinarada ni Kuya Pippo ang sasakyan sa harap ng gate ng bahay nila. Mababa lang naman ang gate kaya tanaw na tanaw ang kanilang bahay at munting bakuran. Napangiti siya nang makita na mas maayos iyon kaysa sa huling litrato na ipinadala sa kanya. Mukhang bagong pintura at mas marami ang mga halamang namumulaklak.

Nagmamadali niyang hinubad ang seat

belt at bumaba. “Ma! Papa!” tawag niya pagbaba. Sinubukan niyang buksan ang gate pero naka-lock iyon. Nagsalubong ang kanyang mga kilay. Masyadong tahimik ang bahay. Wala yatang tao.

“Ito ang napala ko sa kagustuhan kong sorpresahin sila,” sabi niya nang maramdaman na nakababa na rin si Kuya Pippo. “Wala yatang tao. Lumabas siguro sila.”

Nadismaya siya pero naisip na maaari naman niyang tawagan ang isa sa pamilya. Maaari siyang sumunod sa kung saanman naroon ang mga ito.

Inilabas niya ang phone sa bag at sinubukang tawagan si Kryz. Nakapatay yata ang phone nito dahil hindi rin ito online. Halos palaging online ang stepsister niya. Sinubukan niyang tawagan ang ina at stepfather pero hindi siya sinasagot ng mga ito.

Nagsalubong ang kanyang mga kilay. Susubukan sana niya uling tumawag pero

may lumapit sa kanila.

“Abby? Ikaw ba `yan, Abby?”

Nilingon niya ang taong nagsalita. Kaagad niyang nakilala ang papalapit na ginang. Ngumiti siya. “Aling Sally,” bati niya. “Opo, ako nga po.”

Matagal na nilang kapitbahay si Aling Sally. Mabait ang ginang sa kanila. Masasabing malapit na kaibigan na ng kanilang pamilya.

“Ay!” masaya nitong bulalas. “Dumating ka! Ang sabi ay hindi ka makakauwi. Hindi mo rin talaga matiis ang kapatid mo, ano? Mahal n’yo ang isa’t isa. Iyon ang mahalaga. Hindi mahalaga ang ibang bagay. Siyempre ay gugustuhin mong maging masaya ang dalawang tao na mahal mo.”

Hindi niya maintindihan ang ngiti na ibinigay nito sa kanya. Parang may lungkot at awa. Nilapitan siya nito at hinaplos ang kanyang pisngi. Hindi rin niya naintindihan ang mga sinabi nito.

“Hindi na ako sumama, sina Jenny na

lang. Walang maiiwan sa bahay.”

Salubong na salubong na ang mga kilay ni Abby. Hindi talaga niya maunawaan ang sinasabi ng kapitbahay. Binundol ng kaba ang kanyang dibdib. May pakiramdam siya na hindi niya magugustuhan ang mga sunod na mangyayari.

“A-ano p-po ang s-sinasabi ninyo? Nasaan po sina Mama at Papa? Si Kryz?”

Alam niya bago pa man magbago ang ekspresyon ng mukha ni Aling Sally na hindi niya magugustuhan ang sunod na maririnig o malalaman. Almost blindly, she reached for Kuya Pippo. Kaagad naman na nakaalalay sa kanya ang matalik na kaibigan.

“H-hindi m-mo a-alam... Diyos ko... hindi mo alam,” ani Aling Sally habang nanlalaki ang mga mata. Parang nahintakuhan. Akmang tatalikod ang ginang pero naging maagap si Abby. Mahigpit niyang hinawakan ang braso nito at siniguro na hindi ito makakawala sa pagkakahawak niya.

“Ano ho ang hindi ko alam?” tanong niya.

“Naku... naku...” Parang hindi nito alam kung ano ang gagawin. Ni hindi na ito makatingin sa kanya.

“Nasaan po ang pamilya ko?”

“N-nasa s-simbahan, hija.”

“Ano po ang ginagawa nila sa simbahan?”
Ano ang kailangan niyang malaman?

“Ikinakasal ang kapatid mo.”

“K-kanino?” Hindi niya gaanong mapaniwalaan na naiusal niya ang katanungan. At kahit yata hindi siya sinagot ni Aling Sally ay alam na niya.

“Danny,” usal ni Aling Sally.

Nabitiwan niya ang ginang. Sinamantala nito ang pagkakataon upang makawala at makalayo sa kanya. Hindi nagtagal ay wala na sa paningin niya si Aling Sally.

“Abby...”

Napatingin siya kay Kuya Pippo. Nanlalaki ang kanyang mga mata. Ibinuka niya ang bibig pero walang anumang salita o tunog na namutawi. Hindi niya alam kung ano ang iisipin o ang paniniwalaan. Hindi

niya alam ang gagawin.

No. The last part was not quite true. Alam niya kung ano ang gagawin.

“We need to go to the church,” aniya, halos sa sarili lang talaga.

“Abby,” tanging naiusal ni Kuya Pippo.

“I know where. Kung talagang ikinakasal si Kryz, alam ko kung saan.” Her stepsister had always talked about it. “Let’s go.”

“Sigurado ka ba, Abby?”

Binuksan niya ang pinto ng sasakyan. “I need to know, Kuya. I need to see.”

It was the only thing that was keeping her together. She needed to see for herself. She needed to know for sure. Kailangan niyang marinig ang katotohanan sa kanyang pamilya at boyfriend.

She could not wrap her head around it. There was no way. This had to be a prank. A counter surprise. O kaunting punishment. There must be an explanation. Because there was no way her sister and her boyfriend would do something this cruel to her.

Wala nang nagawa si Kuya Pippo kundi ang sumakay uli sa sasakyan nang makitang nakasakay na siya. Sinabi niya ang pangalan ng simbahan at kung saan iyon matatagpuan.

They went to the church. Pinigilan siya ni Kuya Pippo sa pagbaba pero mabilis siya sa pagkilos. Hindi siya nito kaagad na nasundan dahil kailangan nitong pumarada nang tama.

There was an ongoing wedding. She could see the decorations. Her heart was hammering hard against her chest. Her world was going to fall apart but she could not accept that. She would not be able to.

Hindi pa siya binabangungot. Siguro ay ito ang unang pagkakataon.

Kahit na nanginginig ang buong katawan niya at parang hindi niya kakayanin, humakbang siya papasok sa loob ng simbahan. Hindi siya tumigil hanggang hindi siya makarating sa bahaging makikita niyang talaga ang nangyayari.

At parang sa pelikula lang, perfect timing siya sa pagsasabi ng pari ng, "You are now

husband and wife. You may now kiss the bride.”

There they were. Kryz and Danny. They were the bride and the groom. Pinanood niya na nakangiting hinawi ni Danny ang bridal veil. Her sister was teary-eyed but she was also smiling. They looked like they were completely and utterly in love with each other. The perfect picture of happy ever after.

Halos hindi namalayan ni Abby na naglalakad na siya palapit. A sob escaped when Danny bent down and kissed her sister on the lips. Their first kiss as husband and wife.

Husband and wife. They got married. Her sister and her boyfriend. How could that happen?

Was she in some sort of a multiverse? Was she transported into another reality or dimension?

How could this happen?

Hindi pa siya nakikita ng dalawa, abala pa masyado sa isa't isa. Patuloy siya sa paglapit.

Hindi niya alam ang gagawin o sasabihin pero parang may sariling isip ang kanyang mga paa.

Why? How?

Napakaraming tanong ang gumugulo sa kanyang isipan sa kasalukuyan. Hindi rin niya alam kung paano pakikitunguhan ang pagsalakay ng mga masisidhing emosyon.

Bigla siyang natigil sa paglapit. Dahil tuon ang kanyang mga mata kina Kryz at Danny, hindi niya namalayan na may lumapit na sa kanya at hinawakan siya upang hindi makapagpatuloy sa paglapit. Bago pa man siya makapagtanong ay nahila na siya sa kung saan. Dahil nanghihina at wala talaga sa katinuan, hindi siya nakapalag. Ang sunod niyang namalayan ay wala na sa paningin niya ang kapatid at boyfriend. Nasa labas na uli siya ng simbahan.

Tumingin siya sa taong humila sa kanya. Hinarap siya ng kanyang mama, sinalubong ang kanyang tingin. Nasa tabi nito si Papa Anton.

They looked nice. Iyon ang unang naisip ni Abby. Her parents were dressed up and they looked really nice.

Ibinuka niya ang bibig pero muli, walang anumang namutawi. Ang dami niyang tanong sa isipan pero hindi talaga niya alam kung ano ang uunahin, kung saan magsisimula.

“Anak...” ani Papa Anton.

Nagsalita ang kanyang mama bago pa man makapagpatuloy si Papa Anton. “Alam ko na mahirap paniwalaan. Alam ko na kailangan naming magpaliwanag. Magpapaliwanag kami. Hihingi kami ng tawad. Tatanggapin namin ang lahat ng kaparusahan. Pero ako na ang makikiusap, Abby, huwag mong sirain ang araw na ito para kina Kryz at Danny.”

Hindi alam ni Abby ang mararamdaman. Parang hindi niya gustong paniwalaan ang mga narinig niya mula sa kanyang sariling ina. Hindi niya maintindihan kung bakit nakatingin ito sa kanya na para bang siya ang kontrabida, ang nakagawa ng malaking

kasalanan.

“Sa susunod na linggo pa dapat ang dating mo,” sabi uli ng kanyang mama. Mukhang labis nitong ikina-stress na mas maaga siyang umuwi kaysa sa sinabi niya.

Napatitig talaga siya sa babaeng nagluwal sa kanya. Did she look a little pissed at her? Was she even worried or concerned about her?

“So... pag-uwi ko pala... kung natuloy pala na next week pa ako uuwi... daratnan ko na lang silang kasal na. Wala na akong magagawa. Iyon po ba ang plano?”

Naramdaman ni Abby ang paglapit ni Kuya Pippo pero hindi niya inalis ang paningin sa mga magulang. Hindi niya kailangan ng kasagutan sa naging tanong, mababakas na sa mukha ng mga ito ang kailangan niyang malaman.

Nanikip ang dibdib niya. Nanakit ang kanyang lalamunan. Nahihirapan siyang huminga. Parang sasabog ang kanyang dibdib sa mga emosyon na umaapaw. Mga emosyon na hindi niya mapangalanan lahat at hindi

niya mapakitunguhan. Her brain was also on overdrive.

“Anak...” sabi ni Papa Anton sa banayad na tinig. Nasa tinig din nito ang pakiusap. Maging ang mga mata nito ay nakikiusap sa kanya.

“Buntis ang kapatid mo, Abby. Si Danny ang ama,” anang kanyang ina. “Nagmamahalan silang dalawa. Wala na tayong magagawa pa, anak.”

Bumuway si Abby sa narinig. Maigi na lang at maagap si Kuya Pippo sa pagsalo at pagsuporta sa kanya. Parang hindi na talaga niya kakayanin. Paanong sa ganito nauwi ang lahat?

Hindi pa ba siya magigising?

“Huwag mo nang hadlangan ang kaligayahan ng dalawang taong nagmamahalan,” dagdag pa ng kanyang ina.

“Are you fucking kidding?” ibinulalas ni Kuya Pippo ang kasalukuyang tumatakbo sa kanyang isipan. Para kasi talagang nahihirapan siyang magsalita. There was a lot

to take in and this treatment was not making it easy for her. She did not deserve something like this from her family.

Mababakas ang labis na galit sa tinig ni Kuya Pippo. He had always been kind, sweet and polite to her parents. Pinagkakatiwalaan ito ng kanyang pamilya kahit na noon pa. Panatag ang mag-asawa basta si Kuya Pippo ang kasama niya. Ngayon ay hindi nito magawang gumalang lalo at nasasaksihan nito ang treatment sa kanya.

“Wala na tayong magagawa, Abby,” sabi uli ng kanyang mama at parang hindi man lang gaanong naapektuhan sa galit ni Pippo. “Umalis ka na bago ka pa man nila makita. Ibigay mo na sa kanila ang araw na ito. Bukas... bukas o sa ibang araw ay haharapin ka nila. Magpapaliwanag sila. Hihingi ng tawad. Tatanggapin ang kaparusahan. Pero huwag mo nang sirain ang espesyal na araw na ito para sa kanila. Ibigay mo na ang araw na ito sa kanila. Please, anak.”

Hindi namalayan ni Abby ang pagbigay ng

mga luha niya. Malapit na siyang sumabog. Bubulalas na siya ng iyak anumang sandali.

Nakaalalay sa kanya si Kuya Pippo. Sa kabila ng mga pinagdadaanan niya, alam niya na hindi siya nito pababayaan.

“I’m so sorry, Abby,” ani Papa Anton.

Tumingin naman ang kanyang ina kay Kuya Pippo. “Ilayo mo na siya, Pippo. Ako na ang makikiusap. Ito ang mas makabubuti para sa kanya, para sa lahat.”

“Abby,” usal ni Kuya Pippo. “Ano ang gusto mong gawin? You can do anything you want. You’re allowed to react however you want. You don’t deserve to be treated this way. You don’t deserve this from your own family.”

Kahit na consumed siya ng emosyon, narinig at nakita pa rin niya ang galit ng matalik na kaibigan para sa kanya. Tiwala siya na kung guguluhin niya ang buong simbahan—kahit na pasabugin niya iyon—ay tutulungan siya nito at hindi siya pababayaan.

“Get me out of here,” bulong ni Abby. “Help me get away from here.”

Hindi siguro iyon ang tamang gawin. Hindi naman niya matatawag na duwag ang sarili. Sadyang parang hindi lang niya kakayanin. Noon lang niya naranasan ang ganoon. Noon lang siya na-overwhelm emotionally at mentally. Hindi niya maramdaman ang lakas niya.

Hindi na niya kailangang ulitin ang hiling kay Kuya Pippo. Hindi na rin nito tinanong kung sigurado siya. Inalalayan na lang siya nito patungo sa kung saan.

She couldn't feel her legs. Wala siyang lakas. Hindi siya bumagsak o bumigay. Bago mangyari iyon ay pinangko na siya ni Kuya Pippo at dinala sa sasakyan. Siniguro muna nito na maayos siya sa passenger's seat bago nagmamadaling sumakay na rin at pinasibad ang sasakyan palayo.

Sa loob ng ilang sandali ay tulala lang si Abby. Pilit niyang ipinoproceso ang nangyari. Hindi pa ba talaga siya magigising? Hindi ba talaga iyon matatapos? Hindi ba talaga panaginip lang ang lahat?

“Did that actually happen, Kuya? Talaga bang ikinasal lang ang kapatid ko sa boyfriend ko?” tanong niya habang hindi nililingon ang matalik na kaibigan.

Hindi sumagot si Kuya Pippo.

Napabulalas na lang siya ng iyak. Hindi na niya alam kung ano ang gagawin. Mas umatungal siya nang maalala kung paano siya pakitunguhan ng mga magulang. Hindi niya mapaniwalaan ang mga narinig niya mula sa mga ito, lalo na sa kanyang ina.

Paano nagawa sa kanya ng pamilya ang bagay na ito? Paano?

Chapter Two

Hindi pa man nabubuksan ni Pippo ang pinto ay naririnig na niya si Devney. Naririnig na niya ang malutong nitong pagmumura.

“Putangina mo, Danny. Sagutin mo ang telepono dahil makakatikim ka talaga sa akin. Tangina mong hayop ka.”

Binuksan niya ang pinto. Bumungad sa kanya ang galit na mukha ng kaibigan. Nakadikit sa tainga nito ang phone. Pagkakita sa kanya ay kaagad nitong isinuksok ang phone sa likurang bulsa ng suot na maong na pantalon.

“Hey,” bati niya.

Niyakap siya nito nang mahigpit. “Nasaan si Abby?”

“Nasa kuwarto ni Lily. She had been crying on and off,” ani Henri na abala rin sa sarili nitong phone. Nakaupo ang kaibigan niya sa sofa. Mababakas ang galit sa anyo nito.

Pippo was also still boiling in anger and he was frustrated because he couldn't do anything about that. He wanted to punch Danny but he could not leave Abby. He needed to be there for her. Mas mahalaga ang kaibigan niya kaysa ano pa mang bagay sa ngayon.

Hindi niya alam kung saan pupunta pagalis nila sa simbahan kanina. He was supposed to check into a hotel for the night. Hindi niya magawa habang hysterikal si Abby. Noon lang niya nakitang umiyak nang ganoon ang kaibigan. It broke his heart to see and hear her devastation.

Naalala ni Pippo na pauwi na mula sa ospital si Henri at naisip niya na mas magiging maayos si Abby kung mapapaligiran ng mga kaibigan, ng mga taong nagmamahal. Their friend needed the love and support

more than ever. Kaya naman nagpasya siyang magtungo sa condo unit nina Henri at Lily.

Tinawagan niya si Henri at nalaman na nasa daan pa ito. Sinabi niya ang nangyari at na patungo sila sa condo nito. Wala pa ang babae sa condo pagdating nila pero nasa approved visitor's list siya at inutusan ang kung sino na papasukin sila sa loob ng unit.

Parang naubusan na talaga ng lakas si Abby pagdating nila sa loob ng unit kaya dinala niya ito sa silid ni Lily at pinahiga. Hindi nagtagal ay naroon na si Henri. He told her everything that had happened. Together, they called their friends.

Si Devney ang unang dumating. Sinamahan ni Pippo si Henri sa sofa habang maingat naman na pumasok si Devney sa silid na kinaroroonan ni Abby.

Hindi nagtagal ay naririnig na naman nilang tumatangis si Abby. His own heart was broken for his friend. Parang paulit-ulit na nabubugbog sa tuwing naririnig niya ang pag-iyak nito.

“Son of a fucking bitch,” Henri muttered as she tried hard not to cry. She wanted to be angry. “How could something like this happen?”

Makailang beses na nila iyong naitanong. Napakahirap talagang paniwalaan na nangyari ang lahat. They had known Danny for a long time now. Nanliligaw pa lang ang lalaki kay Abby ay ipinakilala na sa kanilang magkakaibigan. Kinilatis nila ito nang husto. Nagustuhan nila itong lahat. He was decent and kind. He was responsible and a gentleman. He took care of Abby. He had supported Abby. They had always felt sorry for him in some way but they were all so grateful he had let Abby go to where she needed to be, to do what she wanted to do.

Danny was a friend.

Paanong hindi niya alam na may nangyayari na? Nasa malayo siya, pero paanong walang nakapansin sa kanila? Kahit na si Abby mismo.

How could a man impregnate and marry

his girlfriend's sister?

Lumabas ng silid si Devney. Namumula ang mga mata nito at hindi pa gaanong natutuyo ang mga luha. Alam niya na naiyak ito dahil sa pinaghalong awa para sa kaibigan nila at labis na galit kay Danny.

Naupo si Devney sa kanyang tabi at yumakap. "She said she wants to try to sleep," anito. "Parang umaasa pa rin talaga siya na bangungot lang ang lahat. Hindi totoo." Tumingin ito sa kanya. "Baka naman misunderstanding lang, Kuya."

Umiling si Pippo. Ang totoo ay umaasa rin siya na misunderstanding lang ang lahat. May paliwanag o maaayos pa. Pero naroon siya mismo, nakita niya mismo. Narinig niya ang sinabi ng mga magulang ni Abby. Hindi sila namali ng intindi.

Napabuntong-hininga siya at inilabas ang phone. Ipinakita niya ang isang larawan sa dalawang kaibigan. Larawan iyon sa loob ng venue kung saan ginanap ang reception ng kasal. Masasabing intimate lang ang okasyon.

Mukhang malalapit na kaibigan lang talaga ng dumalo.

“How did you get this?” tanong ni Henri. “It’s not on social media. I checked.”

“I called one of my aunts and asked for someone who can do a favor for me. Someone who can easily enter any place unnoticed.”

Tumango ang dalawa at patuloy na pinakatitigan ang larawan. Ipinakita rin niya ang video ng first dance ng mag-asawa. Halos magkapanabay na napamura ang dalawa nang makitang naghalikan sina Kryz at Danny.

“Ang kakapal,” ani Devney, gigil na gigil. “Hindi ko alam kung paano nila naatim ang ganito.”

“After everything Abby did for them,” dagdag ni Henri. “God, I feel like I can actually kill someone right now.”

“Calm down,” aniya kahit na medyo labag sa kalooban niya. Alam din niya na hindi madaling kumalma sa mga ganitong pagkakataon. Hindi lang niya maaaring kalimutan na iyon ang kailangan nilang

gawin. “We have to remind ourselves that taking care of Abby is the most important thing right now. Other things can wait. We can set aside our emotions and what’s really going on in our minds. Alam ko na hindi madaling gawin, pero kailangan muna talaga nating kalimutan ang mga gusto nating gawin. Kailangan nating ituon ang buong pansin natin kay Abby.”

Parehong tumango ang dalawa. Mukhang mas determinado na gawing priority si Abby kaysa ano pa mang bagay.

“Nora is on her way. She’s not bringing the kids,” aniya matapos mabasa ang bagong mensahe na dumating sa kanyang phone.

“Lily is still in the OR. Hindi pa niya nababasa ang messages sa phone niya. But she’d be here as soon as her shift ends,” ani Henri.

Tumingin si Pippo kay Devney. “Don’t you have a shoot today? A collab of some sort?”

“It’s just for YouTube. It’s not for a brand

or anything. It's not important. I can reschedule. Ang mahalaga ay si Abby. Bakit hindi mo sinabi sa akin na uuwi siya? Naayos sana namin ang schedule namin. Magkakasama sana natin siyang sinundo sa airport. Kasama rin sana niya kami sa simbahan."

"She wants to surprise everyone. And she also wants to be with her family first. Pakiramdam niya ay masyado nang neglected si Danny kaya parang gusto niyang i-prioritize for once."

"Madalas niyang sabihin na babawi siya kay Danny," ani Henri, napapabuntong-hininga. "I'm still having a hard time wrapping my head around this."

Bago pa man may makasagot sa kanila ay nakarinig uli sila ng katok. Tumayo si Devney at ito na ang nagbukas ng pinto. Nora came in.

"I'm gonna kill that bastard!" galit nitong deklara.

Niyakap ni Devney si Nora. "I know. I feel

the same way. Pero alalahanin mong buntis ka at baka hindi makabuti sa `yo ang mga ganyang thought.” Banayad nitong hinaplos ang tiyan ni Nora na bahagya pa lang nakaumbok.

Tumayo na rin si Pippo. “She is right.”

Yumakap sa kanya si Nora. “You all always baby me when I’m pregnant. I’m allowed to be upset.” Kumalas sa kanya ang kaibigan at sunod nitong niyakap at hinagkan si Henri.

“Yes, you are,” ani Henri matapos haggan sa pisngi si Nora. “But let’s make sure Abby’s going to be fine first and then we can carefully plot our revenge.”

Pare-parehong tumango ang mga babae. Kagaya ni Devney, pumasok sa silid si Nora para makita si Abby. Muli nilang narinig ang pag-iyak ng babae. Muli, parang binibiyak ang kanilang mga puso.

Pippo felt so helpless. He wished he could do something about this. Anything. Sinabi niya na mas kailangan nilang pagtuunan ng pansin si Abby pero hindi talaga niya alam

kung ano ang gagawin, kung paano makakatulong. He hated feeling like this. He hated having no control over things.

Salitan silang pumasok sa loob ng silid para siguruhin na maayos pa rin si Abby. May mga pagkakataon na nakikita nilang nakapikit ang kaibigan na para bang sinisikap talaga nitong matulog, umaasa na magbabago ang lahat paggising nito. Hindi nila ito iniistorbo kapag ganoon. Kapag naman nakikita nilang umiiyak ang kaibigan ay yayakapin nila ito. Gusto nilang sabihin na magiging maayos ang lahat pero kahit na sila ay hindi magawang ganap na paniwalaan ang bagay na iyon.

They took turns comforting Abby and making her feel she was not alone on this. Iyon lang ang tanging magagawa nila sa ngayon.

At some point the girls needed to go out to get some food and supplies for everyone. They needed to breathe and vent. Pagbalik ng mga ito ay sandamak na groceries at takeout ang

dala. Sinubukan nilang pakainin si Abby. She refused but the girls managed to coax her into hydrating.

Well, Devney and Nora did try coaxing her. Henri just didn't have the patience.

"You will hydrate and live or I swear to God, Abby, I will pour this juice down your throat. I will put an IV line or I will let Devney insert the needle."

Abby drank the juice. Henri had always made good on her threats.

Naging abala si Nora sa pagluluto ng mga pagkain. That was how she dealt with stress, she cooked. She used to be horrible at it but she was almost a pro now. She realized she liked feeding the people she loved. She was a little obsessed with feeding her children healthy food.

Devney and Henri had been busy on their phones and computers. They were cyberstalking Danny and Kryz.

Dumating si Lily. Mukhang labis nitong minadali ang pag-uwi. She was still in her

surgical scrubs and Crocs. Nakatali nang kung paano na lang ang buhok.

“Oh, my God,” bulalas ng babae. “Tell me this is just a prank.”

Walang umimik sa kanila. How they wished everything was just a prank.

“Oh, my God,” usal ni Lily na para bang labis na nanghina.

“She’s in your room,” ani Henri.

Wala nang sinabi pang anuman si Lily, tinungo na lang nito ang silid para silipin si Abby. Hindi nila narinig ang iyak ng kaibigan pero hindi ganap na napanatag ang kanilang kalooban.

They knew everything would still get worse.

Pumasok silang lahat sa loob ng silid pagkalipas ng ilang sandali. May dalang pagkain sina Nora at Devney. Natagpuan nilang tahimik na umiiyak si Abby habang yakap-yakap ni Lily.

Halos wala sa loob na nanatili si Pippo sa bungad ng pinto. He let the girls fuss over

Abby. Kailan ba ang huling pagkakataon na kompleto silang magkakasama? Noong bago umalis si Abby patungo ng ibang bansa.

Umalis itong puno ng sigla para sa isang magandang kinabukasan. Umalis ito para matupad ang mga pangarap. Sa loob ng maraming taon ay pinagsumikapan ng babaeng ibigay ang lahat para mga taong mahal. Paanong umuwi ito sa ganitong sitwasyon? It seemed like she lost everything.

Hindi rin inasahan ni Pippo na sa ganito sila hahantong. Noong sabihin ni Abby ang plano na maagang pag-uwi, he had been so excited. Siniguro niya na magiging maayos ang klinikang iiwan niya sa Maquiling, ang maliit na bayan na naging tahanan niya ilang taon na. Pinaghandaan talaga niya ang pagluwas ngayon. Excited siya dahil makakasama niya ang mga matatalik na kaibigan. Actually, the girls were more than his best friends, they were his sisters.

Masaya siya sa buhay niya sa probinsya. It was peaceful and tranquil. He loved his job.

He loved the people he worked with. He loved his neighbors. He loved the community. He was so thrilled to realize he was part of that community already.

But being with friends, it was also something else. He terribly missed the girls.

This was not how it was supposed to be. No one should be crying or being miserable. They should be laughing and being happy because finally they were all together again. Just like college.

This was not supposed to happen.

Napakahirap tanggapin na ganito ang nangyari. Ni hindi man lang siguro sumagi sa isipan ng kahit na isa sa kanila na maaaring mangyari ang ganitong bagay.

Pero alam din ni Pippo na kailangan nilang harapin. Alam niya na hindi magiging madali kay Abby ang mga bagay-bagay. Hindi magiging madali sa loob ng mahabang panahon. Betrayal was not very foreign to him and he knew how much it would hurt not just now but for a very long time. At ang

tanging magagawa niya ay damayan ang kaibigan.

Natigil si Pippo sa pagmumuni-muni nang lumapit sa kanya si Devney. Pasimple nitong ipinakita sa kanya ang hawak na phone. Hindi nito phone iyon, phone ni Abby. Nakailaw ang aparato. May tumatawag. Nagsalubong ang kanyang mga kilay nang mabasa ang pangalan ni Danny sa screen.

Halos wala sa loob na tumingin siya kay Abby. Umiiyak ang kaibigan at yakap-yakap ito ni Lily.

Kinuha niya ang phone mula kay Devney at ganap na lumabas sa silid. Sinagot niya ang tawag.

“I’m gonna kill you,” aniya bago pa man makapagsalita ang sinumang nasa kabilang linya.

“P-Pippo.” Bahagyang nangingig ang tinig ni Danny.

“I will kill you,” sabi uli ni Pippo, mas gigil. “Then the girls can have a turn. They will really fuck you up.” At hindi lang iyon

mga salita. The girls would shred the man to pieces.

"I need to talk to her," ani Danny, may nginig pa rin ang tinig pero sinikap nitong lakasan ang loob.

"You have some nerve," he hissed. "Ngayon ka magkakalakas ng loob na kausapin siya?"

"Magpapaliwanag ako, Pippo."

"Ano ang magiging silbi ng paliwanag?"

"Magpapaliwanag ako kay Abby. Hindi namin intensyon na malaman niya sa ganitong paraan. Kryz and I had a plan. Hindi namin gustong masaktan siya."

"Naririnig mo ba ang sarili mo? Alam mo ba kung ano ang sinasabi mo?"

Narinig niya ang pagbuntong-hininga nito sa kabilang linya. "I understand that you're also upset—"

"Oh, that's a very mild way of putting it."

"But it's not you who I need to talk to. Hindi ako sa `yo kailangang magpapaliwanag."

"Listen to me, you fucking son of a bitch,

I will fuck you up—”

“Kuya, give me the phone.”

Nilingon ni Pippo si Abby. Hindi niya namalayan na nasa likuran na niya ang kaibigan. She was still crying but there was strength and determination in her eyes. She held out her hand and waited for him to hand her the phone. Nag-alangan siya dahil gusto niyang protektahan ito. She would hurt so much more.

But he also knew Abby had to face this herself. She needed to fight this battle. She was not going to be alone. He tapped the icon for the loudspeaker before he gave her the phone.

Parang iisa ang naiisip, they all surrounded her. Sinubukan ni Abby na lumayo pero hindi sila pumayag.

“This is Abby,” sagot nito sa phone.

“I’m sorry, Abby. I’m sorry you had to know this way,” ani Danny sa kabilang linya. “Hindi sa ganitong paraan namin gustong malaman mo.”

Nalukot ang mukha ni Abby. She was about to burst into tears. Bumuway ang babae pero naging maagap si Pippo. Naging maagap din si Devney sa pagsalo ng phone na dumulas sa pagkakahawak ni Abby. Lily, Nora and Henri held her.

Alam niya ang pagtitimpi ng mga babae. Alam niya na napakaraming masasamang salita ang gustong isinghal ng mga ito kay Danny, pero hindi pinangunahan si Abby.

“H-how can you do this to me?” nagawang itanong ni Abby.

“We love each other.”

“And that makes it okay? Tangina, wala akong kamalay-malay! Aware ang mga magulang ko at ibang mga tao pero ako hindi. Kung mahal pala n’yo ang isa’t isa, putangina, ba’t n’yo pa pinaabot sa ganito? Sana sinabi n’yo kaagad. This is so fucked up. You and Kryz are so fucked up.”

“Please, I understand that you’re upset—”

“Upset? Upset, Danny? Upset does not even begin to—Fuck you!” Hindi na napigilan

ni Abby ang pagtangis. “My sister! My own sister. Fuck you!”

“Let’s talk some other time. Kapag kalmado ka na.”

“Hindi ako kailanman makakalma!” sigaw ni Abby. “I will never forgive you and Kryz for this. Never.”

“You and I, we’re no longer in love and you know that. We have this label but we’re never in a proper relationship. We stopped loving each other a long time ago and you know it. You made it hard to love you, Abby. You made it so hard. And you *know* that. You know how much I loved you. I have given everything, all the love I can give you. Hindi lang pagmamahal, lahat ng pag-intindi at suporta na kaya kong ibigay sa isang partner, itinodo ko. Sinunod ko ang lahat ng gusto mo. Nagtiis ako kahit na maraming beses mo `kong pinaasa at pinaghintay. Napagod ang puso ko. Napagod ako. Hindi mo `ko masisisi. At si Kryz... si Kryz ang palaging nasa tabi ko. Si Kryz ang palaging

nakakaintindi sa akin. Si Kryz ang nagmahal sa akin.”

Natulala si Abby. Hindi makapagsalita. Parang ni hindi makakurap. Sumiklab naman ang galit ni Pippo. Danny had the nerve to place the blame on her? Ganoong pagpapaliwanag talaga ang ginawa ng hayop na lalaki?

Nagkatinginan ang mga babae. Kapagkuwan ay tumingin kay Abby at naghintay sandali. Hindi pa rin umimik ang kanilang kaibigan, medyo tulala pa rin pero patuloy ang pagdaloy ng mga luha.

Sabay-sabay sumabog ang mga babae.

“Eh, tangina kang talaga!” si Devney.

“Ang kapal ng mukha!” si Nora.

“You fuck!” si Henri.

“Ibabaon kita nang buhay, hayop ka!” si Lily.

Patuloy sa pagsinghal ang mga babae pero putol na ang koneksyon. Kinuha ni Lily ang phone at akmang tatawag uli pero kinuha iyon ni Pippo. Magpoprotesta sana ito pero

tumingin siya kay Abby.

Niyakap ng mga babae si Abby. Hindi nagtagal ay talagang umiiyak na ito. Atungal. Iyong klase ng iyak ng tao na malinaw na malinaw na nasasaktan nang husto. Iyong iyak na parang hindi na magiging maayos ang lahat.

“Do something!” Abby screamed at some point. Parang nahihirapan nang huminga. “Give me something! Make it stop!”

Tumingin si Pippo kay Henri. “Can we give her something?” She was the doctor amongst them.

Hinagkan ni Henri ang ibabaw ng ulo ni Abby. “Yes, let’s give her a sedative.”

The girls helped Abby change into comfortable pajamas. They wiped her face as they helped her back into the bed. Nora lit scented candles. They made sure the room was dim and soothing.

Tumalab ang sedative at iniwan muna nila si Abby sa silid. Kahit na sedated ay parang miserable ang kanilang kaibigan.

“Let’s eat, okay?” suhestiyon ni Nora habang pinapahid ang mga luha.

Tumango silang lahat at tinungo ang maliit na dining area. Halos hindi nila malasahan ang pagkain pero tahimik silang kumain.

“I’m going out,” ani Devney kapagkuwan. “Susugurin ko sila. Hindi sila puwedeng maging masaya pagkatapos ng ginawa nila kay Abby. Hindi ako papayag.”

“Dev, no,” sabi ni Pippo sa mariing tinig pero alam niya na hindi rin siya pakikikingan ng kaibigan. Nasa mukha nito ang determinasyon. Alam niya ang klase ng ekspresyon ng mukha na iyon. Gagawin nito ang gustong gawin at walang sinuman ang makakapigil.

At mukhang suportado ng iba pa ang plano na iyon. Mukhang planong samahan si Devney sa panunugod.

Tumingin si Pippo sa taong sa palagay niya ay kaya niyang kumbinsihin na huwag ituloy ang gustong gawin, si Nora. “Your husband

will not be happy, Nor. He will kill me.” Her husband also happened to be his older cousin.

“He will understand,” tugon ni Nora.

“Kapag may nangyari sa `yo at sa dinadala mo—”

“She won’t lift a finger,” ani Henri. “She’ll be the getaway driver.”

“She’ll be fine,” ani Lily.

Bumuntong-hininga si Pippo, sumusuko na. “Hindi n’yo `ko isasali?”

“You have to be here,” tugon ni Devney. “Make sure Abby is fine.”

Wala na siyang nagawa pa. Hindi magpapapigil ang apat na babae.

“Kryz is pregnant, okay? Just try to keep that in mind,” bilin niya.

Tumango ang mga ito.

“Hala, kumain nang kumain para may lakas,” ani Lily bago isinubo ang kutsara na punong-puno ng pagkain.

Tumalima naman ang mga ito. Mukhang biglang ginanahan.

“If cops get involved, call Nora’s husband,”

bilin uli ni Pippo. “Mas mabilis siyang makakapagpadala ng abogado at makakapagpiyansa.”

“Let’s hope we don’t get to that,” ani Nora.

Hinayaan ni Pippo na umalis ang mga babae pero kaagad din niyang tinawagan ang asawa ni Nora. Hindi na nagulat ang pinsan niya sa kanyang mga sinabi, alam na nito ang sitwasyon at inasahan na ang gagawin ng magkakaibigan. Hindi raw pababayaang ng driver slash bodyguard ang mga babae. Kahit na paano ay napanatag ang kanyang kalooban.

Habang mag-isa sa unit ay mataman niyang pinag-isipan ang mga gagawin sa mga susunod na araw. Bumuo siya ng mga plano. Bumuo siya ng contingency plans para sa mga plano na iyon. Bumuo rin siya ng options para kay Abby.

Nakahinga siya nang maluwag nang makabalik ang mga babae sa unit. Mukhang medyo hupa na ang galit at emosyon. May dalang wine, tequila at sparkling grape juice

ang mga ito.

Nilapitan at niyakap siya ng mga ito. “We’ll get through this,” deklara ni Henri.

“We have each other,” dagdag ni Lily.

Hindi kailangang tanungin ni Pippo kung ano ang nangyari. Kailangan lamang niyang panoorin ang video na kinunan ni Nora. It was not as bad as he thought it would be. Pero nailabas ng mga babae ang mga dapat na mailabas. Abby would have her time. Masasabi nito ang lahat ng gusto nitong sabihin sa tamang panahon.

The journey would be rough and painful, but they would get through this because they did have each other.

“Iniisip kong isama si Abby sa pag-uwi sa Maquiling,” sabi ni Pippo nang magsimula na ang inuman ng mga babae.

Tumango si Lily. “I think that’s a good idea. It’s a perfect place for healing.”

Tumango rin si Pippo. “Yeah.”

“Tatawagan ko sina Tatay. Uuwi ako kapag may libreng weekend.”

Sa Maquiling ipinanganak at lumaki si Lily. Lumuwas ang dalaga sa Maynila para mag-aral ng kolehiyo. Ang una sa pamilya nito na nakapag-aral sa Maynila.

Si Lily ang dahilan kung bakit natagpuan ni Pippo ang Maquiling. Ang ama nitong si Tito Bong ang dahilan kung bakit nakakita at nakabili siya ng property. Paglaon ay natagpuan niya ang mga tao na naging daan para maging chief admin siya ng Healing Hearts Medical Clinic and Diagnostic Center.

The place healed him. It gave him peace and purpose. He had been happy there. Umaasa siya na mangyari kay Abby ang mga nangyari sa kanya.

Chapter Three

“Make sure you have everything you need. Your assignments. Your food,” bilin ni Eloy sa anak na si Mozzie habang pinapanood ang pag-aalmusal nito. Magana itong kumain as usual.

“Opo,” sagot nito habang puno ang bibig.

Sa loob ng ilang sandali ay pinagmasdan lang ni Eloy ang anak. She was so beautiful. She was the best thing that happened in his life. The moment he laid eyes on her, he knew he would do everything for her. Wala na siyang ibang mas mamahalin pa. Nangako siya na ibibigay ang lahat ng ikaliligaya nito. Ibibigay niya ang pinakamagandang buhay na kaya niyang ibigay.

Lahat ng pagsusumikap niya ay para sa anak. Lahat ng desisyon niya sa buhay ay isinaalang-alang muna niya ang kalagayan at kaligayahan nito.

Kay Mozzie umiikot ang buong mundo niya.

Tumingin sa kanya ang anak at nagsalubong ang mga kilay. “Bakit po kayo nakatingin sa akin nang ganyan?”

“Paanong ganyan?” tugon niya. Tumikhim siya at inayos ang upo. Inabot niya ang lata ng Coke.

“I don’t know,” ani Mozzie. “It’s just weird.”

Hindi niya napigilan ang matawa. “I’m your father, young lady.”

“Yes, but you can still be weird.” Nagkibit pa siya ng balikat.

“I can vaguely remember the time when you would not even dare to call me weird. You don’t even know the meaning of the word.”

“Well, I’m not a baby anymore.”

“That is true. You’re almost twelve.” Hindi

napigilan ni Eloy ang lungkot sa tinig. Time really flew. Pinagmasdan niyang muli si Mozzie. Parang kahapon lang noong kargahin niya ang anak sa unang pagkakataon. Parang kailan lang noong hindi niya alam ang gagawin at hindi sigurado kung magiging mabuti ba siyang ama. Naaalala niya hindi lang ang mga duda at takot na naranasan, maging ang napakaraming masasayang sandali kasama ang bata na naging buhay na niya.

“You are doing it again,” ani Mozzie.

“Sorry,” halos wala sa loob na nasabi niya.

“Do you wanna talk about it?”

“You’d be late.”

Nagsalubong ang mga kilay nito. “Bakit po may pakiramdam ako na umiiwas po kayo? You’re making that face.”

“What face?” Pinagsumikapan niyang maging neutral ang ekspresyon ng mukha.

“The face you use when you’re trying not to be completely honest with me because you don’t want me worried or scared and you’re

convinced you can deal with whatever it is on your own.”

Napatanga si Eloy sa anak. Hindi ito ang unang pagkakataon na narinig niyang magsalita nang ganoon si Mozzie, pero nagugulat pa rin siya sa tuwina. Lalo niyang nararamdaman ang mabilis na pagdaan ng panahon.

“You are growing up to be so smart,” sabi na lang niya.

Lumabi si Mozzie. “You don’t want to talk about it. You’re not even gonna tell me.”

“No, I’m not gonna tell you.” Maybe he had to at some point, but not now. He really didn’t want to tell her what was happening, but it was not just about him. Mas kailangan niyang isipin ang mas makabubuti sa anak niya. Gusto niya itong protektahan at huwag masaktan, pero alam din niya na hindi niya maaaring ipagkait ang ilang mga bagay dito.

“Okay,” ani Mozzie na naubos na ang lahat ng nasa pinggan. Inubos muna nito ang juice sa baso bago binitbit iyon at ang plato para

dalhin sa lababo. Alam niya na pagkatapos doon ay magtutungo na ang anak sa silid nito para magsepilyo at para ayusin ang lahat ng dadalhin nito sa school.

“Hindi ka pa rin nakakapagdesisyon?”

Tumingin si Eloy sa nag-iisang tao na kasama niya sa hapag, ang kanyang Lola Martha. Inakala niya na masyadong abala ang matanda sa pagbabasa ng anumang nasa iPad nito habang nag-aalmusal. Mozzie would like to do the same but the grandmother declared she was the only one who was allowed to use electronics while eating because she was old. Hindi naman nito talaga madalas na ginagawa.

She was just the kind of person who had this need to always do something. Parang hindi sanay na walang makabuluhang ginagawa.

Eloy was forty-two years old. Bibihira sa mga katulad niyang nasa ganoong edad ang pagkakaroon ng malakas pa na grandparent. Lola Martha was eighty-two years old. She

had his mother young; she was barely sixteen years old.

Lola Martha had been busy almost all her life. Hindi talaga sanay na walang ginagawa. Gusto nitong stimulated palagi. Ito pa rin talaga ang punong-abala sa kusina kahit na may kinuha na siyang mga tao.

She loved cooking and gardening. Ipinanganak ang lola niya sa pamilya ng mga magsasaka. Pagtatanim ang nakamulatan nitong buhay. She would always tell him then that it was hard work, but she had missed it especially when they were in the States.

They used to live in a small and cramped apartment building. She hated not having a backyard. She was too busy to plant something in the pot. Things got better for them but she remained so busy with a lot of things.

Lola Martha would always tell him that she wanted to die in the Philippines. Hindi lang sa Pilipinas, sa barrio kung saan ito ipinanganak at lumaki. Gusto nitong umuwi

at dito magretiro. Gusto nitong magtanim-tanim na lang.

Eloy thought living in a small town would be good for him and his child. Tinupad niya ang pangarap ng abuela. He had never seen her so happy. Nahanap nila ang perpektong lugar sa Maquiling. Noong una ay labis siyang nagduda pero nanaig ang kagustuhan na pagbigyan ang matanda at ang kagustuhan niya na makalayo sa dating buhay.

Eloy honestly didn't think he could be a farmer. He was a musician. He sang. He played the piano and keyboards. He wrote songs. His hand didn't get dirty. He did not dig up dirt to plant something in it.

He did not do dirt.

But he found out that he loved dirt. Farming had been cathartic for him. He was a better musician because of it. He was a better person. Hindi niya inakala. Kung hindi dahil sa lola niya na kinumbinsi siyang bilhin ang lupa at inengganyo siyang subukan ang pagtanim, hindi siya magkakaroon ng

tahimik at magandang buhay sa kasalukuyan.

Masipag na magtanim ang lola niya pero dahil na rin sa may edad na, nahihirapan na rin ito ngayon. Natanggap na rin nito na hindi na gaanong kaya ng katawan nito.

“You’re looking at me weird,” ani Lola Martha na nagpanumbalik kay Eloy sa kasalukuyan. Nakalimutan na niya ang tanong ng matanda. “Hindi pa ako mamamatay.”

Bumuntong-hininga si Eloy. “Matagal pa po kayong mamamatay.”

“Hindi na gaanong matagal.”

“You’d reach a hundred. Don’t forget your meds and vitamins. Don’t forget your checkup.”

“Hintayin ko munang bumalik si Pippo.”

Ang Pippo na tinutukoy nito ay ang pinakamalapit nilang kapitbahay sa barrio. Parang nasa dulo na sila ng barrio at masasabi na medyo malayo sila sa mga kapitbahay. Masukal kasi masyado sa bahaging iyon. Mahirap ang daan.

Noong unang ipakita kay Eloy ang lupain, sinabi ng ilan na hindi yata fertile ang lupa. Hindi nakikinabang noon ang mga dating nagtatanim pero iginiit ng lola niya at naisip niya noon na hindi naman niya kailangang magtanim. At the time, he just needed a quiet and semi-isolated place for him, his grandma and kid.

Magli-limang taon na rin yata mula nang mabili ni Pippo ang katabing lupa. Naging mabuting kaibigan na niya ang lalaki. He was kind of drawn to him because he saw a part of himself in him. Nakita niya sa mga mata nito ang kaparehong lungkot na nakita niya sa sarili niyang mga mata mahigit sampung taon na ang nakalipas. He just knew that he needed a place where he could heal. Isang lugar kung saan payapang matututunan uli kung paano mahalin ang sarili.

Maquiling was not the perfect small town. Lola Martha hated and loved that town, that specific baranggay. But it was the place Eloy found his peace.

“He’s coming back tomorrow,” ani Eloy. “Nag-text siya sa akin at kinumusta ang mga aso niya.”

Habang wala si Pippo ay sila ang nagpapakain ng mga aso nito. Sanay naman na naiwan ang mga aso dahil halos maghaponng wala si Pippo dahil sa trabaho nito sa nag-iisang klinika sa bayan na iyon, pero nalulungkot din naman ang mga aso kapag hindi nakakakita ng tao. Kung hindi si Eloy ay isa kina Magnus o Georgie ang bumibisita at nagpapakain sa mga aso na naiwan ng lalaki.

“Okay. Ipagluluto ko siya ng paborito niyang pinakbet at lechon kawali.” Pippo was one of her grandmother’s favorite people in the world. Minsan ay mas paborito pa yata nito ang kaibigan niya kaysa sa kanya.

Tumango siya. “Okay.”

“Hindi mo sinagot ang tanong ko.”

“I can’t remember the question.”

“Nakapagdesisyon ka na ba? Bago ka pa man magmukhang weird na naman.”

“I’m not being weird. I’m just being... sentimental? I’m not very sure. Naaalala ko lang noong baby pa si Moz and noong unang beses kong nakita ang lugar na ito at nagdesisyon na dito na manirahan.”

“Hindi natin pinagsisisihan ang naging desisyon na iyon.”

“Hindi nga po. We’ve been happy here. This is the perfect place for you, for us.”

“Sa palagay ko ay ang lugar na ito ang dahilan kung bakit humahaba ang buhay ko.”

Hindi na kailangang sabihin ni Eloy na labis ang pasasalamat niya na kahit na may edad na ay maituturing na malakas pa rin ang lola niya. Walang malalang sakit. Nakakapaglakad pa. Nakakapagluto pa. Hindi pa ulyanin. Hindi lang siguro dahil sa hangin sa probinsya ang dahilan ng kalakasan ng katawan at isipan nito, maging ang kawalan ng alalahanin at stress. Tahimik ang buhay nila roon.

At sa totoo lang ay ayaw na niyang bigyan ng kahit na munting alalahanin ang kanyang

lola. Kahit naman kasi maganda at tahimik ang buhay nila roon, hindi rin naman ibig sabihin na wala nang dumarating na problema. Napakarami ring challenges.

But he still liked living there. Gusto niyang tumanda sa lugar na iyon.

He did not let his thoughts linger on other things. “Hindi ko po alam kung paano magdedesisyon,” amin niya.

“What do you feel? Hindi ka rin sigurado?”

“Sigurado naman po ako sa nararamdaman ko. I don’t want her near my daughter. She told me to tell our child she died of childbirth. She said it was for the best. She signed off her parental rights. Hindi naman daw niya nakakalimutan. Maiintindihan din daw niya kung hindi ako papayag. Nagbabakasakali lang daw po siya. Baka mapakiusapan ako. She said I didn’t have to tell Moz she’s her mother. She could just be a family friend.”

“Bakit hindi iyon ang gawin mo?”

“I’m not very comfortable lying to Mozzie that way.”

“You have been lying to her her whole life.”

Bumuntong-hininga si Eloy. Hindi niya iyon maikakaila. He had been lying to his daughter. Ang alam ni Mozzie ay namatay ang ina nito sa panganganak. The woman who gave birth to her was still alive. She was not the biological mother though. They had a surrogate.

Grace, his ex-wife, was a model. Her career took off while they were planning to have a family, just when she thought she was past her prime. She said she didn’t want to wait to have a child. She suggested surrogacy. She could still work and they would have a child. Hindi niya inakala na gugustuhin niya ang ganoon. Hindi man lang sumagi sa isipan niya noon na sa ganoong paraan siya magkakaanak.

But the option was there and they could afford it. Biological daughter pa rin naman nila ang bata, sa ibang katawan lang

mabubuo.

Everything was perfect. Everyone was happy and excited to finally have a baby. Eloy personally painted the nursery walls, assembled the crib and shopped for baby stuff. His wife went off to do shows. He took very good care of the surrogate. He wrote songs about the experience. They had a good plan.

He fell in love with the baby the first time he saw her. Sa sobrang pagkatuon ng atensyon niya sa anak ay hindi kaagad niya napansin na hindi sila pareho ng nararamdaman ng asawa niya.

Mozzie was barely two weeks old when Grace told him she was leaving them. She believed she was not going to be a good mother. She realized too late that she didn't want to be a mother.

"It doesn't feel like she's mine, El. I have tried my very best. God knows I did. But I can't bond with her. I can't look at her the way you do. Full of love and so much adoration. She's become your

world and I'm happy for you. That's me being honest. But I have to be honest with myself, too. I have to prioritize myself. I have to really be able to feel what I feel and not feel too bad about it.

"This may make me a bad person but I have to be honest. I realized that I don't wanna be miserable. I can't be miserable being your wife and a mother. I can't continue like this. I can't be here, can't be her mother, and I can't love her the way a mother should. I don't love her. I can't. I'm not her mother. And the poor beautiful child does not deserve this. Mozzie doesn't deserve a mother like me. I should know. I had a mother who hated me and I don't want to be her.

"I've realized why I had this odd feeling whenever we failed to conceive, whenever I got my period. It was relief, El. I loved you so much that I wanted to give you everything you wanted. You wanted a child so much. But I didn't. I thought I did but I didn't. And I have to love myself more. I need to find the real me. I'm so sorry, I love you, but I need to do this for myself."

Tinanong ni Eloy kung ano ang sasabihin niya sa anak nila dahil hindi talaga niya alam.

"Tell her her mom died in childbirth."

"That's cruel. You are cruel."

"I'm so sorry. That's for the best, El."

At noon talaga nabatid ni Eloy na determinado na ang asawa na putulin ang lahat ng ugnayan nila. In order to love herself, she had to cut all the ties from them. She left them.

Wala siyang nagawa noon. Sinubukan niya ang lahat. Umisip siya ng paraan. He suggested family therapy but she was adamant it was not going to work. Nagalit siya noon pero alam niya na senyales na iyon na talagang hindi na uubra ang mga bagay-bagay dahil ayaw na talaga nito. She was not willing to work on it. She was not willing to compromise. She was never going to change her mind.

Eloy was lucky to have good support at the time. Hindi kasi niya alam ang gagawin. It felt like the world was falling apart but it could

not fall apart because he had a newborn daughter to take care of. He had to be strong. He had to be a good father. Siya na lang ang mayroon ang anak niya.

Mozzie wasn't even one when the news came that his ex-wife had remarried. That broke his heart. It didn't help that she was happy with the man she chose to be with. And the man had a son.

That was when he decided to go home to the Philippines. Kinumbinsi niya noon ang sarili na para sa proteksyon ni Mozzie iyon. Hindi niya gustong masaktan ang anak niya. Hindi niya gustong magkaroon ng mommy issues. Hindi niya gustong kuwestiyunin nito ang worth nito, o kung bakit hindi ito magawang mahalín ng sariling ina.

Pero ang totoo ay mas para sa sarili niya ang naging paglayo.

Sa loob ng mahabang panahon ay napakitunguhan na niya ang lahat. Natanggap na niya na ganoon talaga. Hindi gaanong naghahanap si Mozzie ng ina. She

seemed to be a happy and content kid. She was smart, funny, kind and sweet. May mga pagkakataon pa nga na naaawa siya kay Grace dahil hindi nito naranasan kung paano ang mahalin ni Mozzie.

Payapa ang buhay nila roon at hindi na niya gaanong iniisip ang dating asawa at mga nangyari sa kanila. Pero noong isang linggo ay nakatanggap siya ng e-mail mula kay Grace. It was a long e-mail that basically asked for forgiveness. Nagpaligoy-ligoy man, tinumbok pa rin nito ang gusto. She suddenly wanted to meet Mozzie.

Hindi raw kailangang malaman ng bata na ito ang ina, gusto lang nitong makita ang anak nila. Hindi gaanong naipaliwanag kung bakit bigla na lang nitong naisipan, o bakit bigla na lang nagbago ang gusto nito.

Maaaring magtanong si Eloy pero hindi niya magawang tumugon. Natatakot siya sa magiging tugon, sa mga malalaman niya. Hindi niya gustong malaman ang mga bagay-bagay tungkol kay Grace. Ni hindi niya

gustong maging interesado. He and Mozzie meant nothing to her for a very long time.

Hindi niya gustong magbago ang sitwasyon. Gusto niyang maging sakim at sarilinin ang anak. He was not going to share her after everything that happened. He would not let anyone hurt his daughter.

“Okay lang na ipagkait mo ang anak mo, Eloy,” ani Lola Martha na nagpanumbalik muli sa kanya sa kasalukuyan. “Namili siya noon at ginawa mo kung ano ang makabubuti sa anak mo. Wala na siyang karapatan. Hindi malaking kasalanan kung hindi ka papayag.”

“I know that naman po. It’s just... I grew up without a father and I love you and Mom. I love our family. I appreciated everything you and Mom did for me. You worked so hard to give me the best life. You’ve supported me in everything. But I remember that sometimes, I just miss having a dad. Which was silly because he left us when I was five. What I really want is to experience having a dad. And

I was so afraid to say that to you and to Mom kasi alam ko masasaktan kayo. Ba't ko hinahanap ang lalaking nang-iwan sa atin at ni hindi man lang nag-abalang bumuo ng relasyon sa akin? Hindi pa ba kayo sapat? But the feeling is there and I know habang lumalaki si Moz ay maghahanap siya. Mararamdaman din niya ang longing."

"He's your dad, Eloy. Of course, you'd have feelings like that. Pag-isipan mo nang husto. Mahahanap mo rin ang sagot."

Tumango si Eloy. Narinig niya ang mga hakbang ni Mozzie palapit. Handang-handa na ang bata sa pagpasok sa school. Nilapitan muna nito si Lola Martha at hinagkan sa pisngi. Pagkatapos ay ang pisngi naman niya ang hinagkan nito.

Hindi niya napigilang yakapin nang mahigpit si Mozzie. He dreaded the day she'd stop kissing and hugging him.

"Okay, I have to go," anito habang pilit na kumakawala sa kanya. "Daddy, stop being weird," sabi nito nang hindi niya ito kaagad

pakawalan.

Napapabuntong-hininga na niluwangan niya ang yakap niya.

“Ready ka na, Moz?” tanong ni Magnus na pumasok mula sa back door.

“Opo, Kuya Magnus.”

“Nakuha mo na ba kay Georgie ang listahan ng mga kailangang bilhin sa agri store?” tanong ni Eloy kay Magnus.

“Opo, Kuya. Bibilhin ko po lahat pagkatapos kong ihatid si Moz.”

“Okay. Ingat sa pagmamaneho.”

Si Magnus ang nagsisilbing house manager nila. Kasama na niya ang lalaki noong nagbabanda pa siya. He was his assistant. He trusted him so much, dinala niya ito hanggang sa Amerika noong hindi na siya aktibo sa pagbabanda. Noong umuwi uli siya sa Pilipinas at nanirahan sa Maquiling ay sinundan din siya nito.

Magnus was not just a house manager, he also helped with business matters and the crops. Ito rin ang nagsisilbing right-hand man

ni Lola Martha.

Isang malayong kamag-anak si Georgie na nakatira na sa barrio na iyon. Si Lola Martha ang kumuha rito at dapat ay makakatulong sana niya sa pag-aalaga kay Mozzie. But she turned out to have the greenest thumb. She was a good farmer. Marami na itong alam sa pagtanim ng gulay sa probinsya. Ito ang nagturo sa kanya ng lahat ng kaalaman niya. Si Georgie talaga ang dahilan kung bakit maayos at sagana sa ani ang malaking taniman nila ng gulay.

Eloy was lucky to have found the best people. Hindi lang staff ang dalawa, pamilya na.

May mga pagkakataon na si Eloy ang nagmamaneho kay Mozzie papunta ng school na forty-five minutes ang layo, pero inutusan muna niya si Magnus dahil parang kailangan niyang mag-isip. Naka-enroll ang kanyang anak sa isang private school sa kabilang bayan. Para sulit ang biyahe, bibilhin na rin ni Magnus ang ilang mga kailangan nila sa bahay

at gulayan.

Inihatid ni Eloy hanggang sa sasakyan si Mozzie. Siya pa ang nagkabit ng seat belt nito. Mariin niyang hinagkan ang gilid ng ulo nito bago niya sinabihan ang sarili na huwag masyadong maging clingy. Mukhang nababaghan na rin ang anak niya sa kanya. Ayaw niyang masyado itong makahalata na may bumabagabag sa kanya. Gusto niya na maging masaya lang si Mozzie. It was her only job as far as he was concerned.

Pag-alis ng sasakyan ay nagtungo siya sa gulayan. Dating malawak na maisan ang lugar. Ayon sa huling may-ari, sa hindi nito malamang kadahilanan ay palagi raw hindi maganda ang ani. Ayon sa narinig niya mula sa mga magsasaka, halos wala raw lugi sa pagtanim ng mais, maliban na lang kung talagang nagkasakuna. May mga mataas na bahagi at hindi naman talaga binabaha pero dahil palakas nang palakas ang mga bagyo, mahirap kalaban ang hangin. Nagkataon daw na minalas-malas ang dating nagtanim.

Hanggang sa kinailangan na lang ibenta.

Noong mabili ni Eloy ang lupa, ilang seasons na rin na hindi iyon natatamnan. Naging masyadong masukal ang malawak na taniman. Inuna nilang linisin ang mga bahagi na pagtatayuan ng main residence at outbuildings na kailangan nila. Mas naging abala ang architect, engineers at iba pang mga propesyonal.

Nilinis lang ang isang maliit na bahagi para maging gulayan ni Lola Martha, katu-katulong si Georgie. Dahil nga may interes si Georgie sa pagtatanim, unti-unti na lumawak ang area na iyon.

Unang itinayo ang isang bungalow na naging temporary residence nila habang itinatayo ang main residence. Naging music studio iyon nang matapos ang malaking bungalow. Sumunod ang iba pang outbuildings. Unti-unting nabuo ang compound.

Naengganyo rin si Eloy magtanim nang hindi na siya abala sa construction ng

compound. Mas lumawak nang lumawak ang gulayan hanggang sa hindi na lang nila namalayan na nalinis na nila ang dating masukal na taniman. He had to employ more people to work on the land.

Dahil na rin siguro matagal na napahinga ang lupa, naging fertile uli iyon. Dumalo sila ni Georgie sa ilang seminars tungkol sa pagtatanim. Kinalap nila ang mga kaalaman na kailangan nila. The Internet helped but talking to experts and long-time experienced farmers also helped.

Isang araw, labis na lang nagulat si Eloy sa realisasyon na isa na sila sa mga malalaking producer ng gulay sa bahaging iyon. Sa kanila na kumukuha ang mga tindera sa bayan at hindi na kailangang bumiyahe sa ibang bayan upang umangkat. Dinadayo na rin sila ng mga trader at buyer mula sa iba't ibang bayan sa lalawigan.

Sa ngayon ay mga gulay na karaniwang nasa pinakbet ang mga gulay na mayroon sila. Talong, kalabasa, ampalaya, sitaw, okra,

kamote, kamatis, sili, upo, sigarilyas, patola at iba pa. Marami-rami rin ang kanilang calamansi, papaya at saging—lahat yata ng uri ng saging. May season din na nagtatanim sila ng pakwan at melon. Libo-libong kilo ang napipitas sa araw-araw.

Dahil nga lumawak na ang gulayan, hindi na nila kakayanin ni Georgie. May apat na full-time employee si Eloy sa gulayan bukod kay Georgie. Lahat ay taga-barrio rin lang. May dalawang binatilyo na regular part-timer.

Matrabaho ang paggugulay. The vegetables needed so much tending. Parang palaging nakabantay. Dapat ay constant at tama ang pag-aalaga. Kailangan ding pakisamahan ang panahon. Pero iba rin ang naibibigay niyon sa kanya. Hindi lang sa pinansyal na aspeto, kundi maging sa peace of mind niya. Parang napapayapa siya sa tuwing nagbubungkal siya ng lupa. Iba ang pakiramdam kapag nakikita niya ang pagsibol ng mga halaman. Naliligayahan siyang panooring ang paglaki ng sibol na iyon. Masarap din sa pakiramdam

ang pamimitas ng mga ani.

Kaya naman ngayong parang may bagyo sa kalooban ni Eloy, gusto niyang manatili sa mga gulay. Umaasa siya na makakalma ang ilang damdamin. Mapapayapa ang kanyang utak at makakabuo siya ng magandang desisyon para sa kanyang anak.

Panalangin talaga niya na makabuti kay Mozzie ang anumang pasya na mabubuo niya.

THE
WAY IT
Was

BELLE FELIZ

Chapter One

Now, New York

“It’s not too late for you, Marianne. You can still go back. There’s no shame.”

Dinala ko muna sa bibig ko ang inumin at sumimsim. Banayad kong nginitian si Dr. Jaimie Yang-Rathert-Zaldua, also known as Mom. My *Halmeoni*, mom’s mom, hyphenated her name and Mom did not want to lose all her surnames when she married Dad. It had been weird while growing up but I had come to accept that.

My older brother and I had to use three hyphenated surnames, too, until we decided

to just use the initials. She let us because it became a bother in forms and such. I was Marianne YR Zaldua. Mas madaling gamitin lalo na at sa Pilipinas na ako nakapirmi talaga.

Tumingin ako kay Dad na tahimik lang. Nakita niyang nakatingin ako at banayad niya akong nginitian. Ginantihan ko ang ngiti niya.

“Henry, tell your daughter she needs to go back to med school.”

“Yani’s not coming back, honey,” sabi ni Dad. “It’s been ten years.”

Bumuntong-hininga si Mom.

Sa ibang panahon at pagkakataon, maiinis siguro ako. Pero matagal kong hindi nakita at nakasama nang personal ang mga magulang ko. I was not able to travel for three years. When the travel bans were lifted, I didn’t rush on traveling to see my family in New York. Kinailangan kong mas isipin ang lolo ko na kasama ko sa Pilipinas.

Lolo na isa ring doktor. The town doctor. He insisted on still working. When the virus

was killing medical professionals, he insisted on being on the front lines. He was given a choice not to because of his age, but he was very stubborn.

Kung ito man ang ikamamatay ko, wala akong magagawa, Yani. May sinumpaan akong tungkulin. Mamamatay akong doktor.

The old man hadn't gotten the virus. Maybe because we lived and he practiced in a small town. Maybe because the administration of the clinic did a very good job in maintaining health protocols. Maybe because our local government also did a very good job maintaining our bubble. Maybe all of the above.

Lolo Hank even joked it was embarrassing now that he had not gotten it yet. I had always been grateful we sailed through that rough time though. Hindi naging madali at sa loob ng mahabang panahon ay nabuhay ako sa takot. When news was littered with doctors, nurses, and frontliners dying of the virus, I had been so terrified I would lose the one

person who helped me fix all the broken pieces of me. I begged for him not to practice and everyone would understand because of his age, but he was stubborn as hell. Kahit na lumuha ako ng dugo ay walang saysay. I had been quite insufferable because of that.

Nag-alala rin naman ako nang husto sa mga magulang at kapatid ko na pareparehong mga doktor. Araw-araw ay nabuhay ako sa takot na baka isa sa aking pamilya ang mawala dahil sa virus. I had been so grateful they were all okay. I finally got to see them and spent time with them. Bahagya akong nalungkot na isang linggo lang ang kinaya.

“You should come home,” sabi ko sa mga magulang ko. “Lolo misses you.”

“We will,” tugon ni Mom. “Maybe early next year.” Tumingin siya sa kay Dad na kaagad na tumango.

“James would try to schedule a visit also,” imporma ko sa kanila. James was my older brother. We were not very close growing up but we had been talking a lot the last couple

of years. “I had lunch with him today and he gave me literature and research journals for Lolo.”

I came from a long line of doctors on both sides. Ako lang sa pamilya ko ang hindi isang doktor pero masasabing nagtatrabaho pa rin naman sa isang health care facility. I went to medical school and did not make it. Being a doctor was not for me.

Hanggang ngayon ay medyo hirap ang Mom na tanggapin ang bagay na iyon. For a very long time, I believed I was a huge disappointment to my parents. It was as though I failed them so bad in life. It took me years to be kinder to myself, to really believe I made the right decision in not being a doctor like the rest of my family. I found my passion and happiness. I loved myself more for it.

“I wish you don’t have to go tomorrow,” sabi ni Dad. “I missed you, baby.”

Ngumiti ako. May bahagi rin sa akin ang ayaw umalis dahil kulang na kulang ang panahon namin sa isa’t isa. They tried to make

time for me but everyone had a busy career. I loved the time I spent with them. I wished I had more. But at the same time, I missed Lolo Hank. Parang hindi ako mapakali kahit na mapagkakatiwalaan naman ang lahat ng mga tao na nagbabantay sa matanda. He would also argue he didn't need anyone to take care of him, he could very well take care of himself. That might be true but I still missed the old man.

"I can travel more often now," sabi ko sa mga magulang ko. "I love you so much."

Inabot ni Mom ang kamay ko at banayad na pinisil. She gave me a warm smile. We were not vocal about feelings. We weren't very close. We were never big on hugs and kisses, but we had always loved each other. Kahit na noong panahon na parang hindi ko pinaniniwalaan ang bagay na iyon, alam ko sa kaibuturan ko na mahal ako ng buong pamilya.

Life didn't turn out the way they expected for me, but I was happy. Mom and Dad knew

I was happy and content. Hindi lang talaga nila mapigilan ang sarili paminsan-minsan. Siguro hindi talaga mawala ang kaunting panghihinayang.

“We’ll see each other again soon,” pangako ko. “And we’ll always talk on the phone.” Iba pa rin talaga sa personal pero mas gumanda ang komunikasyon namin sa mga nagdaang taon. Mas gumanda ang relasyon namin.

Pagkatapos ng aming early dinner ay niyakap namin nang mahigpit ang isa’t isa. May dadaluhan pa silang intimate party. May invite rin ako bilang family friend ang host, pero may kaibigan pa akong kailangang puntahan.

Sumakay ako sa isang taxi at bumaba sa harap ng isang apartment building. Hindi ko kaagad pinindot ang buzzer. My heart was heavy knowing she would not be there to answer me. Parang bigla akong nilamon ng lungkot. It had been five years but the pain of losing my best friend was still there. The guilt was still there.

Humugot ako nang malalim na hininga. Ipinaalala ko sa sarili ko na kailangan kong tatagan ang dibdib ko. Ipinaalala ko sa sarili ko kung bakit ako naroon at iyon ang gusto ng kaibigan ko.

Pinindot ko ang buzzer ng apartment unit ni Richard.

“Pizza?”

Napangiti ako kahit na paano. “No. It’s Marianne.”

The door opened for me. Pumasok ako sa building at dumeretso sa elevator. Sa dating apartment pa rin nakatira ang asawa ng matalik kong kaibigan. It was the apartment they shared before and after they got married. They moved in there from Baltimore. It was a nice apartment in a nice neighborhood. Habang paakyat ang elevator ay naitanong ko kung plinano ba ni Richard na umalis doon o sadyang hindi niya kaya—hindi niya gusto.

Bago pa man ako makakatok sa pinto ng apartment ay bumukas na iyon. Isang nakangiting Richard ang tumambad sa akin.

Nakabukas na ang mga braso niya para sa akin.

Nakangiting niyakap ko siya at hinagkan ang pisngi. He looked good and that had given me some relief and joy. He was okay. Alam ko na hindi iyon madali, pero natutuwa pa rin akong makita ang ngiti niya na abot hanggang sa mga mata.

“I am not very surprised to see you here today, but I thought the checking up on me happened three days ago,” aniya habang pinapatuloy ako sa loob ng apartment.

Three days ago, I visited him at his bar during lunch hour. Hindi niya alam na nasa New York ako kaya naman labis ang tuwa at gulat niya.

“I just wanna see you again before I go,” sabi ko.

“I’m fine. Tomorrow’s gonna be hard but I’ll be fine. You look nice.”

“Had a nice early dinner with the parents. The restaurant’s a little fancy so I had to dress nice. I know you’ll be fine. I just wanna—”

Someone buzzed again.

“That’s the pizza,” sabi ni Richard. “Go on in.”

Tumuloy ako sa loob, diretso sa living area. Inaasahan ko na walang tao roon, na ako lang ang bisita ni Richard. Muntik na akong matapilok nang makita na may lalaking nakaupo sa mahabang sofa. Isang pamilyar na lalaki. Pamilyar na pamilyar siya sa akin kahit na matagal ko na rin siyang hindi nakikita sa personal. I’d know that face anywhere. Nanlambot ang mga binti ko nang magsalubong ang aming mga mata.

Pareho kaming hindi gaanong makapaniwala na magkaharap kaming muli. Malinaw na pareho kaming hindi handa sa pagkikitang muli na ito. Sa mga nakalipas na taon, napakaraming pagkakataon kong nailarawan sa aking isipan ang tagpong ito. Nakapag-practice na ako ng sasabihin at magiging gawi. Naipraktis ko na rin kung paano ako ngingiti.

How are you? I’m very proud of you. I missed

you so much.

Sa bawat rehearsal ay naroon ang mga pangungusap na iyon. Naalala ko naman pero hindi ko mabigkas. I was just not really ready for this. My heart was hammering so hard against my chest. Parang sasabog ang dibdib ko. Hindi ko na maramdaman ang mga binti ko. Had I collapsed? Or was I just about to?

Hindi man lang sumagi sa isipan ko na makikita ko siya sa pagbisita ko sa New York. As far as I knew, he was supposed to be on a tour. Hindi ko natingnan ang tour schedule ng The Sleepwalkers, ang sikat na banda na kinabibilangan niya, pero alam ko na dapat ay nasa road siya. He was supposed to be busy.

We were not supposed to meet each other today. Pero nakakagulat bang talaga na makita siya rito ngayon? He was Richard's best friend. Or they used to be best friends. Of course, he'd also be concerned. Of course he'd check up on Richard.

"Pizza's here!" masayang anunsyo ni Richard na sinamahan kami sa living area.

Napansin kaagad niya siyempre ang estado naming dalawa. Nagpalipat-lipat ang tingin niya sa amin. Kapagkuwan ay napangiti.

“Is this the first time in what... ten years?” He softly chuckled. “Marianne, you remember Roarke. R, Marianne, your ex-girlfriend.”

Sa ibang panahon at sa ibang pagkakataon ay maa-amuse rin ako siguro. Kapag masasabing handa ako sa pagkikita na iyon. Kapag mentally and emotionally ready ako na harapin ang lalaki na labis kong minahal. Ang lalaking pinili kong iwan. Ang lalaking hinayaan akong iwanan siya.

It had been ten years. It had been that long, yet why did I still get that familiar rush when I saw him? And the old ache of losing him?

I wanted to flee. I needed more time before—

“Sit down, Marianne,” sabi ni Richard. “It’s the perfect time to catch up.”

I was not sure I was ready to catch up with

Roarke, but my legs were about to give out. Tinungo ko ang pinakamalapit na one-seater couch at halos ibagsak ko ang sarili roon. Gusto kong iiwas ang paningin kay Roarke pero parang may sariling utak ang mga mata ko. Hindi ko mawalay ang paningin ko sa kanya. I was seeing him in the flesh. Hindi sa screen ng laptop o ng phone ko. He was physically with me. We were in the same room. I could reach and touch him. Hindi panaginip o guniguni lang. Hindi pantasya.

Roarke was also looking at me. Hindi ko na kayang basahin ang mukha niya. The face changed so much over the years but he was still the most gorgeous man alive. I used to be good at reading his moods. I could read his mind. But he had gotten good at masking what he was feeling, at what he was thinking. He mastered his perfect poker face.

I wished I could still tell if he was happy or not to see me again. Maybe I should entertain and accept the hard fact that he did not feel anything in seeing me right now. Not

happiness or anger. Not even nostalgia. Sino ba naman ako, hindi ba? Ex-girlfriend from a lifetime ago.

He might have used to love me way back when we were younger, but he had the world now. He had a wife. I did not matter anymore. The love was gone. Even the memories might also have faded and gone.

Masakit ang realisasyon na iyon, pero wala akong magagawa. I could not be in one of my fantasies right now. This was my reality.

Hindi ko gustong makita ni Roarke ang lungkot na parang lumukob sa buong pagkatao ko kaya naman pinilit ko ang sarili kong ngumiti.

“Hi,” I managed to rasp. It was good to see him again, I told myself. Hindi lahat ng tao ay nabibigyan ng pribilehiyo.

Nangunot ang noo ni Roarke. Hindi niya ibinalik ang pagbati. Patuloy lang niya akong pinagmasdan.

“If I knew you two were coming at the same time, I would’ve cooked,” ani Richard

na binalikan kami sa living area. Ibinaba niya ang malaking kahon ng pizza sa coffee table kasama ang tatlong pinggan at napkins. “Drinks? Beer?”

Halos sabay kaming umiling ni Roarke.

Sandaling natigilan si Richard. “Right. Sorry. I have soda.”

Halos magkapanabay kaming tumango.

Habang abala si Richard sa fridge niya ay napatingin uli ako kay Roarke. He was known for being a “clean .” He stopped doing drugs fairly early in his career. He also stopped smoking. He abstained from alcohol. He was married and claimed to have had no sexual affairs. He had no sexual allegations. He had never had run-ins with the law. He never trashed a hotel room. There were occasional reports of diva moments, but he was known for being nice and kind.

One of his band members previously stated in an interview that Roarke read in his hotel room after a show or performance. That, or he was working on his lyrics. That was how

he managed an adrenaline rush after shows. He did not party often. He liked his solitude.

Napansin ko na bahagyang nagsalubong ang mga kilay niya. “You don’t drink.”

Bumalik si Richard at inabot sa akin ang isang lata ng soda. Tinanggap ko iyon. “I do,” tugon ko kay Roarke habang iniwas ang paningin. Binuksan ko ang inumin at dinala sa bibig.

Pero alam ko kung ano ang talagang itinatanong niya. Alam ko ang ibig sabihin talaga. Halos wala sa loob na tumingin ako sa kanya. Nakatingin pa rin siya sa akin. Nasa mga mata niya ang guilt. Hindi ko napigilan ang mapabuntong-hininga sabay tingin sa lata ng soda na hawak niya.

Of course, I knew why he had abstained from alcohol. It was almost the same reason why I didn’t drink.

“You two look too awkward with each other,” sabi ni Richard. Mukhang naaaliw pa rin naman ang kaibigan namin pero bahagya na ring nag-aalala.

“Maybe,” sabi ko habang pilit na ngumingiti. “It’s been long.”

Naupo na rin si Richard. “This reminds me of how you guys met the first time. You didn’t want to be there.” Binalingan niya si Roarke, nakangisi. “You were quiet and uninterested.”

Nakangiti ako pero naramdaman ko rin ang paninikip ng aking dibdib. That was true. I met Roarke on a double date.

Marahan na natawa si Richard. “It was our first date, Tana and I.” His face turned soft and reminiscing. May bahid na ng lungkot. “We didn’t want the pressure of being on a real date so we brought our best friends with us. We said it would be informal. We didn’t have to talk about serious stuff. We just have to test the waters, make sure we’re compatible. We did not want to be in a serious relationship then. She was busy being in medical school. I was busy trying to make something out of my life. We didn’t want to be in a relationship because we wanna focus

on ourselves. But we met and... You can't just fight the feeling. I found the one and I could not let the opportunity pass. She was so out of my league."

"But she was so into you, Richard," sabi ko. Nag-init ang sulok ng aking mga mata. Malinaw kong naalala ang panahon na iyon. Tana had met this guy and she had never been so attracted to anyone. But she wanted to be smart. She was busy with school. She would have no time for a relationship. But she couldn't resist this wonderful man with a playful smile.

Pinaglabanan ni Tana ang nararamdaman dahil nga gusto niyang mas pagtuunan ng pansin ang pag-aaral. She really wanted to be a doctor. It had been her dream.

She just could not really resist Richard. She had to go on a date with him. Pinilit niya akong sumama dahil magdadala raw ng kaibigan si Richard. I needed to study and I also did not plan on meeting someone. I didn't need distraction. I was already having a

hard time with my focus.

Pero napilit pa rin ako. I met Roarke, Richard's friend and roommate. He was truly quiet and uninterested—or he looked that way.

Tumingin ako kay Roarke at natagpuan kong nakatingin siya sa akin. He was quiet now. Hindi ako sigurado kung ngingiti ako o ano. Finding him already looking at me gave my heart a jolt.

I could remember myself the first time I had a look at him. I wanted him. The attraction was instant. I felt the sparks. For a moment, I thought he felt the same because I saw the interest spark in those beautiful blue eyes. But then he was so quiet.

We went to an open mic and Richard made Roarke sing. He didn't want to but he caved in and he was brilliant. He had a very beautiful voice. I fell so hard.

I gave him my number. He didn't call for a week.

I remember being so disappointed and heartbroken. Pero kinumbinsi ko ang sarili ko

na mas makabubuti iyon. He would be bad for my focus. I needed to be a doctor. Iyon ang idinikdik ko sa sarili ko noon. Iyon ang sa palagay ko ang kailangan kong gawin, ang kailangan kong maging.

Then one day I was busy studying at a diner when he joined me and things rapidly changed between us. He wanted me just as much as I wanted him.

It had been intense, the relationship. Roarke was my first serious boyfriend. He was the one I always thought I'd end up with. The man I planned to marry, have children with, and grow old with.

He was my one great love.

Nagsimulang manikip ang dibdib ko. Naramdaman ko rin ang pag-iinit ng aking mga mata. Gusto kong magalit sa sarili ko sa pagiging emosyonal, pero talagang hindi ako handa sa pagkikitang ito ngayon. Hindi ko sigurado kung paano pakikitunguhan ang dagsa ng mga alaala.

Handa lang ako para sa mga alaala ni Tana.

Inihanda ko ang sarili ko sa salakay ng emosyon dahil hindi ko na makikita at makakasama uli ang matalik kong kaibigan. Hindi ako handang alalahanin ang nakaraan ko kasama si Roarke.

“Tana would be thrilled to see you both at the same time,” ani Richard. Hindi na niya maitago ang lungkot sa kanyang tinig. He was trying hard not to be emotional, but he couldn't stop himself. “She loved you both. She loved you together. You two belong to each other, she would always say. And she was really sad when...” Hindi niya maituloy ang anumang gusto pa sanang sabihin. He cleared his throat before standing up. “Excuse me for a sec.”

Pinanood ko ang pag-alis niya at pagpasok sa isang silid.

I knew it had to be hard for Richard, seeing us both now. It reminded him so much of his beloved wife who died very unexpectedly.

Bukas ang ikalimang taon ng pagkamatay

ni Tana. Her death was sudden and senseless. She was just walking home and there was a robbery a block away. The cops chased the robber who had a gun. Tana was hit by a stray bullet in the heart. She didn't make it to the hospital.

Sa loob ng mahabang panahon ay hindi ko iyon matanggap. Nahirapan akong pakitunguhan. She could not be gone just like that. Hanggang sa ngayon ay hindi ko pa rin matanggap na wala na si Tana sa mundo.

She was a good friend. Inintindi niya ako sa lahat ng desisyon ko. Intindi niya ako noong lumayo ako. Hindi siya nagtampo. Sinuportahan niya ako. Hindi siya nakalimot tumawag at mangumusta kahit na abala siya sa pagiging doktor.

She was the best doctor. She could do so much good in the world. She shouldn't have died.

“Are you okay?”

Tumingin ako kay Roarke. Nasa mga mata niya ang concern. Sinikap kong tumango. “I

will be.”

“I miss her.”

Tumango ako. “Me, too.”

Bumukas uli ang pinto at binalikan kami ni Richard. He was smiling. Nasa mga mata pa rin niya ang labis na lungkot pero may munting ngiti sa mga labi niya. He was also holding an old box. I remembered that box. Tana used to put photos and mementoes in there. She used to always carry a Polaroid camera. She loved having Polaroid pictures. My best friend was also the type who kept movie tickets and napkins with handwritten notes.

“Tana was sentimental,” sabi ni Richard habang nauupo uli. Binuksan niya ang kahon at kaagad na napangiti nang makita ang mga abubot sa loob. He had to rifle through her trinkets before finding a particular Polaroid picture. He held it out to show us.

“Our first picture. All four of us.”

Inabot ko iyon. It was our first picture together. Kinunan iyon pagkatapos namin sa

open mic. She also had pictures of Roarke on stage.

Inilabas nga ni Richard ang larawan na iyon mula sa kahon at ibinigay kay Roarke. “How much do you think I will get if I auction that photo now? It’s kind of rare. And historic, come to think of it.”

Sumilay ang ngiti sa mga labi ni Roarke. My heart almost melted with that smile. He was nostalgic. “Singing in that open mic completely changed my life.”

Tumango-tango si Richard. “True. You owe it all to me.” He softly chuckled. “It was my idea because I wanted to impress the girls. You didn’t want to sing, I registered your name against your will.”

Sa open mic na iyon nakilala ni Roarke si Storm, ang naging daan para maging frontman siya ng bandang The Sleepwalkers.

Hindi ko mapigilang mapangiti habang pinagmamasdan ko ang larawan, ang mukha ng bawat isa sa amin. “We were babies,” halos wala sa loob kong nasabi.

Richard held up another photo. “Baby Marianne.” It was a photo of me sitting in my study chair. Sa palagay ko ay kuha iyon sa loob ng dorm namin ni Tana noong unang taon namin sa kolehiyo.

We had known each other since high school. Pareho kaming galing sa isang private school sa New York. We had different sets of close friends but we were friendly enough. Naging close talaga kami nang malaman namin na sa parehong university kami pupunta at parehong kukuha ng pre-med course. We made sure we’d be roommates.

After college, we went to the same medical school in Baltimore. We shared an apartment.

We were sisters.

Aabutin ko sana ang Polaroid pero naunahan na ako ni Roarke. He looked at the picture with the softest smile on his face.

Gustong-gusto kong hablutin ang Polaroid mula kay Roarke. I did not look my best in that picture. I looked tired from studying and my hair was wild and frizzy.

Aabutin ko na sana iyon pero narinig ko ang marahan na pagtawa ni Richard. He held up another photo. My eyes were immediately fixed on it.

It was a photo of me and Roarke. We were in bed and smooching. I remembered taking that photo of us. It was early in the morning and we were fooling around. We were pretty much crazy with each other that time. We were young and so in love.

That picture was mine. I had forgotten about it though. Hindi ako gaanong masinop sa mga gamit ko lalo na noong kabataan ko. Siguro ay naipit ang larawan sa isa sa mga libro ko. Gawain ko minsan iyon. Ginagawa kong bookmarks ang ilang larawan. I didn't bring my books with me when I left. I just left them all. Si Tana ang umasikaso ng mga iyon. Natagpuan siguro niya ang picture sa isa sa mga libro ko. Kaya siguro nasa box niya.

Pinagmasdan kami ni Richard. Pareho kaming nakatingin ni Roarke sa larawan na hawak niya. "This must be awkward. Let me

just put it back.” Ibinalik nga niya ang larawan sa kahon.

Hindi biro ang kinailangan kong pagpipigil. Gusto kong hablutin ang box at kunin ang larawan. It was mine. I was keeping that photo. Alam ko na wala nang saysay. Parte na iyon ng nakaraan. Hindi ko na maibabalik ang lahat sa dati. Pero gusto ko pa ring balikan ang mga alaala.

I could finally remember.

Isinara ni Richard ang kahon. “I guess that’s enough reminiscing. So how are you two? Good?”

Hindi ako gaanong makapag-focus dahil gusto ko talagang agawin ang box mula kay Richard. I really needed to get that photo. Wala yatang mas mahalaga pa sa buhay ko nang mga sandaling iyon.

“Marianne?”

“I’m good,” tugon ko. “Everything... uh...” Humugot ako nang malalim na hininga bago nagsalita uli. “Fine.” It was lame—I was lame and I knew I was being lame,

it was just really hard to focus.

Marahan na natawa si Richard. “How’s your grandpa?”

Pilit kong itinuon ang atensyon ko sa kaibigan ko. “He’s doing well.” Kahit na paano ay napangiti ako nang maalala ko si Lolo Hank. “I miss him. I can’t wait to get back to him.”

“You’re taking care of your grandpa?” tanong ni Roarke.

Nilingon ko si Roarke. Medyo salubong ang kanyang mga kilay. I had to remind myself that he knew absolutely nothing about my life anymore. “He’s taking care of me,” sagot ko at hindi naman ako nagsisinungaling.

Lahat ng tao ay ganoon ang impresyon sa relasyon naming maglolo. I was taking care of an old man. Pero ang totoo, Lolo Hank took care of me more than I took care of him.

“You work for him, right?” ani Richard. “He’s still working? Still seeing patients?”

Tumango ako. “Yes, I’m still working for

him. He's still seeing patients. It has been a challenge the last couple of years, but things are better now."

"He's healthy?" tanong uli ni Richard.

"Yes. He's been taking good care of himself."

"You're a doctor?" tanong ni Roarke.

Hindi ako kaagad nakasagot. Parang nahiya ako na hindi ko malaman. Nakita ko ang curiosity sa kanyang mga mata. Wala siyang ideya. Hindi siguro ako napag-uusapan ng magkaibigan.

Ipinaalala ko sa sarili ko na wala akong dapat na ikahiya. I loved what I had become. I was happy and content. I found my peace and quiet. I was where I was supposed to be. I was in a really good place.

"I'm not," sabi ko.

"You're not a doctor," he stated.

Hindi ako sigurado kung disappointed siya o ano. "I'm not a doctor. I'm an HR personnel slash administrator of a clinic." Hindi ko na binanggit na part-time lang

talaga ako sa klinika. I had another job. He didn't have to know that.

"You're not a doctor," sabi uli ni Roarke. Hindi ko talaga mabasa kung ano ang kasalukuyan niyang iniisip. Hindi ko alam kung paano i-interpret ang ganoong ekspresyon niya.

Was he disappointed or just confused? Did he feel as though I had betrayed him?

I did not want to care. I did what I had to do. It had been a very long and difficult journey for me. Finding my place and happiness. Finding my peace.

Hindi ko rin gustong mainis sa kanya dahil wala siyang alam sa naging buhay ko. Ang tanging alam niya ay ang mga sinabi ko sa kanya noong huling beses kaming nagkita maraming taon na ang nakakaraan. Ang tanging Marianne na kilala niya ay ang ten years younger na Marianne.

I was no longer that Marianne.

"She's happier."

Nilingon ko si Richard. Nakatingin siya

kay Roarke. “She’s happier not being a doctor, bud.” Binalingan niya ako at nginitian. “Tana was really happy because you were not suffering anymore. She cried one time after talking to you and she said you sounded so happy over the phone.”

Nag-init ang aking mga mata. I blinked the tears away. Sinikap kong ngumiti. Parang hindi ko kakayanin pero pinilit ko ang sarili ko na tumingin kay Roarke. He was already looking at me. There was something in his eyes. I was too afraid to name the emotion I saw in those beautiful eyes.

“H-how...” Tumikhim ako bago nagpatuloy. “How’s being a rock star? It is as you hoped it would be and more, right?” Ginawaran ko siya ng isang ngiti. I wanted him to know I was happy for him. I was happy he was what he wanted to be and so much more.

Nakita ko nga lang ang pagtamlay ng mga mata niya. He gave me a smile but it was a sad smile. Ibang-iba sa ngiti na nakita ko sa ilang

video performances.

Narinig namin ang marahas na pagbuntong-hininga ni Richard. “Tana would know how to deal with you two right now.”

Ibinaling ko ang tingin sa aming kaibigan. “How are you?”

“I miss her so much,” amin niya. “I tried dating. I signed up to one of those dating apps. People had been all over my ass about dating. Friends would tell me Tana would want me to find someone. She’d want me to be happy. And I know that but it’s hard, you know. Maybe I’m not trying hard enough?”

“Maybe you’re not ready to love someone else,” sabi ni Roarke sa kaibigan. “Maybe you’re never going to be ready. Don’t pressure yourself into something you don’t wanna do just because people are telling you what should be done.”

“But open your heart to possibilities,” hindi ko mapigilang sabihin. Tana would not want Richard to be alone forever. She would want him to be happy, to be with someone.

“You never know. Another love may find you.”

Tumingin sa akin si Roarke. “Are you with someone?”

Ikinagulat ko ang tanong na iyon mula sa kanya. Nakatingin siya na para bang naghihintay talaga ng sagot mula sa akin. “None of your business,” tugon ko.

I wasn't but he didn't have to know that.

And I was not going to ask him about his wife or how married life was treating him. Kahit na may malaking parte sa akin ang curious at gustong malaman kung sino ang pinakasalan niya. He was extremely protective of her. The media did not have her face or her name. All the people knew was he was married.

I wanted to know who she was, but perhaps it was best if I didn't. Labis akong masasaktan. Knowing her would actually shatter some fantasies. I didn't want her to have a face.

Pero hindi ko rin naman maaaring

kalimutan ang existence ng “the wife.”

“Why don’t the two of you eat?”
suhestiyon ni Richard. “The pizza is getting cold.”

Tumalima ako kahit na parang hindi tatanggap ng pagkain ang tiyan ko. To fill the silence, Richard talked about his bar. He tried catching us up on things about him. He assured us he was going to be okay tomorrow.

Tinanong din niya ang tungkol sa tour ng The Sleepwalkers. Tapos na ang show sa New York. Alam ko ang bagay na iyon kaya naging kampante ako. Roarke and the band had a week off before the next show. But he had a photo shoot for a single that was coming out next month. Hindi ako sigurado kung sinadya niyang sa New York ganapin ang shoot para mabisita at mabigyan niya ng panahon si Richard o nagkataon lang talaga.

Tahimik lang akong nakinig at in-absorb ang bawat impormasyon. I knew there was a single coming out next month. They had announced it last week. I was excited for the

new song. Hindi na kailangang malaman ni Roarke na sobrang updated ako sa professional life niya. He was now a notoriously private person but he was still a celebrity, one of the most known rock stars and frontmen. A piece of him was owned by the public.

Dinala ni Roarke sa bibig ang lata ng Coke at kaagad kong napansin ang singsing na suot niya. Napalunok-lunok ako nang mabatid na ito ang unang pagkakataon na nakita ko iyon na suot niya sa personal pagkatapos ng mahabang panahon. I knew for a fact he so rarely took that ring off. In every performance, concert, interview and music video, he wore that black ring. It was a black tungsten carbide ring. It was not very expensive but it was durable. Hindi gaanong makikita pero alam ko na nakaukit ang Celtic symbol for everlasting love. Alam ko rin kung ano ang naka-engrave sa loob ng singsing. He did not wear a wedding band, he wore that instead.

The ring I gave him.

I never understood why he still wore it. Was it some sort of talisman? A good luck charm? He was part Irish. Did he ever believe in that stuff? I wanted to snatch it off his finger, but I also wanted it to remain his. A part of me didn't want him to ever take it off.

You're mine. Iyon ang mga kataga na naka-engrave sa loob ng singsing.

If he was still wearing it, he was still mine. Or a part of him was.

But he was not really mine. Matagal na.

Roarke was telling us about where his next show would be when his phone interrupted him. Kunot ang noo na tiningnan niya kung sino ang tumatawag. Kapagkuwan ay bumuntong-hininga siya.

"I need to take this, sorry. It's Storm." He stood up and went to the kitchen.

Nakita ko ang pagkakataon. "I need to go," pabulong kong sabi kay Richard habang abala si Roarke sa kusina. "I'm sorry. Part of me wants to stay, but the wise thing to do

right now is to leave. While I still can. And I'm barely holding on." Pakiramdam ko ay kailangan kong maging tapat sa kaibigan ko. I was vulnerable and emotional.

Nakakaunawang tumango si Richard. Malungkot ang ngiti na ibinigay niya sa akin. Mas nalulungkot siguro siya sa kinahinatnan namin ni Roarke kaysa sa pangungulila sa asawa niya. He was one of the few people who really knew what it was like with us back then. He knew how intense it had been. But everything was all in the past now. Maybe we were just too young so it felt so intense.

"Give me the photo. It's mine."

Walang alinlangan niyang kinuha ang larawan mula sa kahon at ibinigay sa akin.

Tumayo ako, kinuha ko ang picture at hinagkan ang pisngi ni Richard. "You take good care of yourself, 'kay? Call me if you need anything."

Tumango si Richard. "Be happy, Marianne."

Nagawa kong makaalis nang hindi

gaanong lumilikha ng ingay. Natiyempuhan ko rin ang elevator kaya mabilis akong nakababa. Nagpakawala ako ng hininga nang makalabas ng apartment building.

Hindi ko masabing nakahinga ako nang maluwag dahil hindi. Parang naninikip ang dibdib ko at parang bibigay na rin ang mga luha ko. Masakit ang lalamunan ko sa pagpipigil na bumulalas ng iyak.

I didn't want to break down. I needed to keep it together.

Chapter Two

Now

Nagpasya akong maglakad-lakad na muna. I needed air. I needed space. I needed the noise from the city that I loved and missed so much.

Seeing Roarke again was something I was not ready for. Leaving and not knowing if we would ever see each other again broke my heart. Maybe this was it. This was the last time. This was the goodbye. We'd never see each other again.

And I snuck out. I didn't properly say goodbye.

Because I didn't want it to be goodbye.

But did I ever have a choice? He was no longer mine. Kailangan ay hindi ko makalimutan ang bagay na iyon. He had not been mine for a long time now.

I needed to stop lo—

Biglang may humablot sa braso ko. Kaagad akong nagpumiglas. Hinampas ko ng bag ko ang sinuman.

“Fuck, Yani, it's me. Stop!”

Natigilan ako nang marinig ang pamilyar na tinig ni Roarke. Bahagya siyang hinihinal pero hinawakan niya ang magkabila kong braso. Parang sinisiguro niya na hindi ako makakaalis.

“Roarke. Why... You're not supposed to come after me.” Hindi ako sigurado kung nagme-make sense ako sa kanya pero wala akong gaanong pakialam. Hindi siya dapat na lang lumilitaw. Kung kailan naman sinisimulan ko nang kumbinsihin ang sarili ko na nararapat lang na hindi na muling magkrus ang mga landas namin. “You're not

supposed to be here.”

“Give it back.”

Nagsalubong ang mga kilay ko sa pagtataka. Hindi ko gaanong naintindihan ang sinabi niya. “Give what back?”

“The photo. Give it back.”

Naningkit ang mga mata ko. Nasa mukha ni Roarke ang pinaghalong yamot at determinasyon.

“No,” sabi ko. Sinubukan kong kumawala at lumayo pero hindi niya ako hinayaan. My heart was hammering hard against my chest. I could feel him. I could smell him. He was touching me. I wanted to take him in my arms and really feel every inch of him. “It’s mine.”

“Just as it is mine.”

“You can’t have it. You’re not having it.” Determinado rin ako. Hindi ko maintindihan ang interes niya sa picture na iyon. It was a tiny piece of our past. The past that should not be important to him now. “I get to keep it.”

“Why?”

“Why?” Nasa tinig ko ang labis na pagkabaghan. “You have to ask me why? It should be very obvious.”

“Give it back.”

“No.” There was no way he was getting that photo of us kissing. “Let me go, Roarke.” Pilit akong nagpumiglas. Wala na siyang nagawa kundi ang pakawalan ako. Tumingin ako sa kanya. Ibinuka ko ang bibig ko at akmang may sasabihin pero walang tinig na namutawi. Sobra na akong nahihirapan sa pagbuo ng salita. I was so overwhelmed. I could not do this.

Tumalikod ako at nagsimulang lumakad palayo kahit na labis ang protesta ng kalooban ko. I did not want to leave him, but I had to. Bago ko talaga makalimutan ang lahat. I could not just really say goodbye. The words would not come out.

“Why do you have to have it?” tanong ni Roarke bago pa man talaga ako makalayo. “Why is it important that you keep it?”

Tumigil ako sa paghakbang. “Root beer float,” sabi ko nang hindi siya nililingon. “I can’t seem to remember the feeling of our first kiss. I remember when. I remember I initiated it. I can’t remember if you really tasted like potato chips in the morning. But I can seem to remember the last time we kissed. We probably kissed thousands of times, but all I can remember is the taste of beer and cigarettes. Beer and cigarettes. And I probably tasted the same. When I saw the picture, I can finally remember. The sweetness, the warmth, and the feeling. You tasted like root beer float the first time we kissed.”

Hahakbang na sana ako palayo pero naramdaman ko ang marahas na paghablot sa akin. Sumalpok ako kay Roarke.

“Milkshake. I tasted milkshake the first time *I* kissed you.”

Bago pa man talaga ako makahuma, naipihit na niya ako at habang sapo ng kamay niya ang mukha ko ay mariin niyang hinagkan ang mga labi ko.

I opened up for him instantly. The kiss was hard and frantic. He drove his tongue inside my mouth, tasting me. I felt him tilting and angling my face so he could have better access, so that he could taste more.

I lost my mind. Everything was inconsequential at the moment. I didn't care about anything. I didn't care where I was or that we shouldn't be kissing like this. I didn't know who I was. I didn't care about the time. Hindi mahalaga na lumipas ang mahabang panahon na hindi kami magkasama. Mukhang kabisado pa namin ang isa't isa.

We kissed each other in familiarity. We kissed each other frantically. I missed him so much. I longed for this for a long time. I didn't think I could kiss him again and my heart had been devastated every time I thought of it. I thought I had come to accept so many things when it came to Roarke, but I was so wrong.

And I thought I remembered. Akala ko ay malinaw na sa wakas ang memory ko sa ilang

bagay. I thought I finally remembered how it was like to kiss him, to be kissed by him.

He didn't taste like root beer float or potato chips. He definitely didn't taste like beer and cigarettes. He tasted... Roarke. His sweetness was unique to him. The sweetness that was enough to make me insane.

His arms went around me and pulled me closer to him. I gripped his nape and pressed myself harder against him. With each second that passed, the kiss grew hungrier and hotter. The fire ignited and would soon be out of control.

I could not get enough. I wanted more.

I wanted all of him.

But he was not mine to have. I tore my mouth away from him. He was not ready to let me go yet. Akmang hahagkan niya akong muli pero nagawa kong umiwas. Hindi ko nga lang magawang kumawala sa pagkakayakap niya. Parang hindi kakayanin ng mga binti ko. I couldn't get away. I didn't want to get away from him.

But he was not mine.

“R-Roarke—”

“Sir.”

May nagsalita mula sa kung saan at napatingin sa kung sinuman na iyon si Roarke. Pagkatapos ay hinawakan niya ang kamay ko at hinila ako patungo sa kung saan. Hindi ako makatanggi. Siguro ay masyado pa akong lulong sa halik. Siguro ay hindi pa ako handang matapos ang anumang pinagsasaluhan namin. Siguro ay talagang hindi ko siya matanggihan.

Hinayaan ko siyang hilahin ako sa kung saan man niya ako gustong dalhin.

Isang town car ang nakaparada sa malapit. Isang lalaki ang nasa tabi niyon at nakatingin kay Roarke. Iyon yata ang nagsalita. Nang makita kaming palapit ay mabilis niyang binuksan ang pinto ng backseat. Pinasakay ako ni Roarke at hindi pa rin ako makatanggi.

“Hotel,” sabi niya sa driver pagkasakay niya sa tabi ko.

“Roarke—”

Hindi ako nagkaroon ng pagkakataon na makabuo man lang ng thought dahil muli niyang ipininid ang mga labi sa aking mga labi. Naipikit ko na lang ang mga mata ko at tumugon.

Roarke claimed and possessed. He ate at my lips, devoured me.

Hinayaan ko siya sa lahat ng gusto niya. I wasn't passive, I kissed him back. I devoured him back. I didn't want this to ever end. I didn't know how I lived the last decade without kissing him.

Kissing him was not just physical. It didn't just feel erotic and carnal. Kissing him felt like coming home. It was like experiencing magic again.

Hindi ko naramdaman ang pagtigil ng sasakyan. Still dazed from the kiss, Roarke helped me get out of the car. Hawak niya ang kamay ko habang nakasakay kami sa elevator. I wished he had kissed me so that I didn't have to think. Kaya ko sanang kalimutan ang mga bagay-bagay, ang sitwasyon. May excuse sana

ako.

Hindi ko sana maririnig ang tinig sa utak ko na nagsasabing mali ang ginagawa ko.

I had never felt this conflicted. I wanted to be with him but I also wanted to do the right thing. I would hate myself afterward. Was I ready for that?

Could I live with the guilt?

Would this be worth it?

Napatingin ako kay Roarke. Would he be worth everything?

My heart said yes, but could I trust my heart at this moment?

Hindi ko mahanapan ng sagot ang napakaraming tanong. Bumukas ang elevator at hinila ako ni Roarke palabas.

“Roarke, we can’t...” nasabi ko. Hindi niya ako pinansin, tuloy lang siya sa paglalakad. Tuloy lang din siya sa paghila sa akin. Binuksan niya ang isang pinto at marahan akong itinulak papasok sa loob.

“We can’t,” sabi ko nang makulong kami sa loob ng isang suite. Nagtutubig ang aking

mga mata. Hindi ako gaanong lumayo sa pinto. I needed to get away. I knew what I had to do, but I could not seem to really walk away.

Nasapo ni Roarke ang ulo niya. He started pacing. Parang gusto niya akong abutin pero pilit lang pinipigilan ang sarili. Gusto ko rin naman siyang abutin pero alam ko na kailangan kong gawin ang tama.

“We can’t,” sabi ko uli sa gumagaralgal na tinig.

“Why the fuck not?” naiinis niyang sabi.

Hindi ko gaanong mapaniwalaan na kailangan niyang magtanong. Hindi pa ba malinaw kung bakit maling-mali? I didn’t want to think of it but I knew. Hindi kayang kalimutan ng isipan ko. Ibinuka ko ang bibig ko at akmang ipapaalala ko ang isang mahalagang bagay, pero tumingin siya sa akin at natigilan ako. He looked so tormented.

“I miss you, Yani,” aniya. Mababakas sa kanyang mga mata ang paghihirap ng kalooban. “I miss you so much I think I’m

going crazy.”

“You have no business missing me.”

“Fuck,” he muttered. “Fuck, fuck, *fuck*. Then go. You’re free to go. You know I won’t force you into anything. You can leave.” Tinalikuran niya ako. Marahas niyang hinagod ang kanyang buhok at marahas na nagpakawala ng buntong-hininga.

Nagtungo ako sa pinto. Leaving was the right thing to do, I told myself. I knew that. I needed to do what was right. Pero napakahirap. Nakahawak na ako sa door handle pero hindi ko magawang buksan ang pinto para ganap na akong makalabas.

I didn’t want to leave. I just wanted to stay there.

I missed him too. So very much.

And I remembered the last time—the time that we broke up. I was a complete mess. We were a complete mess. Madalas ko pa ring balikan ang tagpong iyon sa aking alaala. Madalas ko pa ring isipin kung ano sana ang sitwasyon namin ngayon kung iba ang naging

desisyon ko, o kung sa mas maigi-iging estado niya ako natagpuan noon.

Madalas kong sabihin na tama ang naging desisyon ko noon. Tama na inuna ko ang sarili ko kaysa sa anupamang bagay o sinupamang tao. I would not be who I was now if I didn't choose me, if I didn't decide to leave and put the broken pieces back together.

I was quite proud of what I had become. I might not be a doctor like I told him I would be, but I was truly happier and content. It was hard work being this person, being this strong and independent woman. The work I had to put in over the years... The combat I had with myself... The battle with depression, addiction, anxiety and self-doubt...

Hindi ko nakakalimutan ang lahat ng iyon.

Pero may mga pagkakataon din na labis akong iginugupo ng lungkot sa mga bagay at tao na nawala sa akin para maging sino ako sa kasalukuyan. May mga pagkakataon na para akong mababaliw dahil sa labis na

pangungulila kay Roarke. Maraming pagkakataon akong nagsisisi. Maraming sana at dapat.

I would always wish I had him back. I wished I could have him back. I wished I could still be with him. I still longed for him.

Losing him had always been my biggest regret. Did I really have to lose him to be who I was today?

It was crazy, the could've beens. But was he mine to have?

He could be mine tonight.

We would never be the way we were.

But we could be tonight. For one night.

“One night,” bulong ko.

Kahit na bulong lang, umabot pa rin iyon sa pandinig ni Roarke. Marahas siyang napalingon sa akin. Mukhang ikinagulat niya na naroon pa rin ako.

Sinalubong niya ang mga mata ko. “We can have one night.”

He didn't ask me if I was sure. He didn't ask me what that statement exactly meant. He

just walked up to me and took my mouth in his.

Nahulog sa sahig ang bag na bitbit ko. Nagmamadali kong hinubad ang suot niyang jacket. The kiss was frantic and restless. Hungry. Desperate.

The vice grip seemed to loosen on my lungs when I finally just let myself be selfish for one night. Kailangan kong pagbigyan ang sarili ko. I simply needed this. I needed to be with him.

I needed him for life, but I'd take what I could get.

Mali man o tama. I'd probably hate myself for this but I'd deal with everything after.

"Shut your brain," he said before he dipped his head to kiss my neck. "Don't think, babe. Let's just... Let's just be..."

Pumaloob ang mga daliri ko sa buhok niya at sumabunot. Mariin kong naipikit ang mga mata ko. I didn't have to think. I didn't have to torture myself.

"I need you now," I murmured.

He kissed my jaw as his hands searched for my dress' zipper. Hindi naman siya nahirapan. Mabilis niya iyong naibaba. I was in my underwear in seconds. Sandaling lumayo sa akin Roarke para mapagmasdan ang kabuuan ko. Kaagad akong na-conscious. I was in good shape, I knew that. I took good care of my body. But I was not as skinny as ten years ago. I did not have a perfect model body. I had lumps and bulges.

And it had been so long since a guy had seen me almost naked. Come to think of it, it had been ten years. Roarke was the last man who had seen me naked.

"You are so beautiful," he said. "Every part of you..."

Napalunok ako nang makita ang mga mata niya. There was so much heat. Those beautiful eyes were glazed with lust.

Hinila ko siya pabalik dahil parang hindi ko na kakayanin. Sinimulan kong itaas ang suot niyang shirt. Mabilis niya iyong hinubad. Ako naman ang nagmasid sa kanya.

His body had also changed. He was a man now. He wasn't exactly a boy when we were together but he was still a young man. He was still lean and lanky. He was not very muscly or bulgy now, but he was all muscles.

I needed time to really appreciate his chest and abs. His chest looked sturdy and dependable. The square muscles lining his abdomen were neat. I wanted time to touch them, play with them, lick him from his chest down to his...

His body was perfection.

"Fuck, Marianne. Don't look at me like that. I won't last."

I reached for the button of his jeans. "Hurry."

He gripped my neck as he let me unbutton and unzip his jeans. "We're taking our time later. I'm gonna take my fucking time with you."

"Yes," I breathed. He could do anything and everything he wanted with me. I reached for the snap of my bra and discarded it.

Roarke stared at my breasts.

He inhaled sharply. “Have to have you now,” he said. “We’re not making it to the room.”

“Yes.”

He wrenched the lacy underwear down my legs and tossed it aside. He sucked one stiff nipple and I threw my head back. He paid my breasts equal attention. He sucked, bit and licked one while the other was fondled, pinched and teased. And then he would alternate.

I was clawing his back and shoulders. The sensation was overwhelming. I could come this way.

“Please. Please, please...” I begged.

Grabbing the backs of my thighs, he lifted me. When he had the leverage he needed, he drove in. My head flew back hitting the door. My wall clamped around him

Sa loob ng ilang sandali ay hindi siya gumalaw. Ilang sandali na parang ninanamnam namin ang muling pag-iisa.

“Fuck, Yani,” he said against her neck. “I missed the feel of you. How did I... How could I... I miss you so much.”

I almost sobbed. I could not stop the tears. I was so emotional. Mariin kong nakagat ang ibabang labi ko at pinigilan ang sariling magsalita.

He pulled out and then slammed back in. He surged in and out. I went wild. I bucked and grinded against him.

It did not take long for the both of us. We came undone and it was still out of this world. It was still the best. I shattered into a million pieces.

He grunted as I milked every drop from him.

I didn't want to let go. I didn't want to go down from the high. I did not want this to end.

He set me down, his softening length slipped out of me. I immediately felt the loss.

“Roarke...”

“Let's go to bed.”

“Roarke...”

“You said one night.”

I PANTED. My lungs were on fire. I was struggling to pull in some air. Roarke collapsed on top of me. I loved the feel of his body against mine. Halos wala sa loob na naiyakap ko ang mga braso ko sa kanya. He was also panting and having difficulty breathing.

I was boneless but I was also in bliss. My body seemed to be overloaded with sensations. The orgasms were something I had never experienced before. Not before Roarke. Not during Roarke. Definitely not after Roarke. It was one explosion right after another, wave upon wave of unbearable ecstasy. I had lost count. We explored each other again. Parang pamilyar na parang hindi.

When his weight became too much, Roarke rolled off the bed. Narinig ko ang pagbubukas niya ng kung anong pinto. Hindi niya iyon isinara. Hindi nagtagal ay narinig

ko ang flush at gripo. I stared at the ceiling. I would have to use the bathroom after him. Sana lang ay kayanin ng mga binti ko.

Hindi ko muna hinayaan ang isipan ko na maging abala sa ilang mga bagay. I didn't want to ruin this night.

Naramdaman kong bumalik si Roarke. Napapitlag ako nang may maramdaman ako sa pagitan ng mga binti ko. It was a warm wet cloth.

"You don't have to... Let me..." Sinubukan kong kunin ang cloth mula sa kanya pero hindi niya ibinigay at ipinagpatuloy ang ginagawa. Hinayaan ko na lang siya kahit na parang labis akong nahihiya.

Tinakpan ko ang hubad kong katawan gamit ang kumot nang bumalik si Roarke sa banyo. Hindi naman siya gaanong nagtagal. He joined me back in bed. He held me in his arms and I let him. Hindi ko sinubukang kumawala. Gusto ko lang makulong sa mga bisig niya. Gusto ko ang pakiramdam na

nakabaon ang mukha niya sa leeg at batok ko.

For a long while, we stayed like that. Tahimik lang. Hindi ko muna sinubukang magsalita. Gusto ko lang namnamin ang pakiramdam. Alam ko na medyo niloloko ko ang sarili ko, pero gusto ko lang maging masaya ang puso ko kahit na ngayong gabi lang. I could hate myself as much as I wanted later. I could punish myself come morning.

For now, I wanted to just be with Roarke.

“Are you really happier?” tanong ni Roarke kapagkuwan. Halos bulong lang. Naramdaman ko ang mas paghigpit ng mga braso niya sa akin. “I need to know, babe. I need to know for sure. Please...”

“I am,” pabulong kong tugon. “It’s not how I thought it would be. It’s not what I told you I’d do or I’d be, but I found my peace, Roarke. I am healthy. I am... clean. It was hard work. A long journey. But I got to a place where I needed to be. I am happy.”

I knew I could be happier, but I had to stop being greedy. I had to learn how to be

happy and grateful for what I had. That made my life a lot easier. It was easier to be happy if I focused on the things and people I had rather than what I didn't have.

"Then I'm glad."

Gumalaw ako hanggang sa mapaharap ako sa kanya. I needed to see his face, his eyes. I knew he would be genuinely be happy for me. I knew he would want the best for me. Iyon ang gusto kong paniwalaan kahit na hindi na ako mahalagang parte ng buhay niya. He once loved me with all of his heart.

I looked into his eyes. They were soft and sincere. There was also pain and longing. My finger traced his nose and lips. He was so beautiful. So much that my heart ached with the thought and realization that I would never have this beautiful man again.

His face changed over the years. He had gotten rid of all his baby fat. His face was smaller, more chiseled. There were lines now. He used to have a baby face. There was no trace of that now.

But he was still the boy I fell so hard in love with.

Tumingin ako sa mga mata niya. These brilliantly blue eyes. Looking at them in person was not the same as looking at them on computer and phone screens. He used to look at me with so much love and adoration. He used to look at me as though I was the only woman in the world.

“Wala akong ibang hiling kundi ang maging masaya ka kahit na hindi na ako kasali sa buhay mo.” I gently rubbed my nose against his. Naipikit ko ang aking mga mata. I used to do that a lot when we were together.

When I opened my eyes again, I saw his eyes grew darker. Nag-alala ako na baka naintindihan niya ang sinabi ko. I deliberately spoke in Tagalog. He had Filipino blood. A maternal grandparent was part Filipino. Pero hindi na talaga na-expose sa kultura ng Pilipino. Hindi rin marunong mag-Tagalog.

“I’m tired, Yani,” ani Roarke kapagkuwan. “I am so tired.”

Parang may mariing pumisil sa puso ko sa narinig mula sa kanya. Mababakas sa tinig at mukha niya ang kapagalan. Labis na lungkot ang nababasa ko sa mga mata niya at gusto ko iyong pawiin pero wala akong ideya kung paano. Banayad kong hinaplos ang pisngi niya. I wished I could do something or just say something. I had none. Paano ko maipapangako ang kaligayahan? Ni hindi ako ang tamang babae para pumawi sa lahat ng lungkot at paghihirap niya.

“But I can’t stop because this is what I’m supposed to do. I can’t do anything else. I don’t know anything else. I have wanted this for a long time. I have devoted my life to this. But I am so tired. I’m so lonely. I just... I just...” Hindi niya maituloy ang sasabihin. Parang hindi niya alam kung paano.

“Life is not perfect,” patuloy niya kapagkuwan. “But this is the life that I chose. This is who I had wanted to be. I was happy, Yani. I have success. I have everything I had worked so hard for. I am still clean and sober.

But sometimes... I just don't know what to do."

Kaagad akong kinabahan. "You... you can't... Have you?" Hindi ko alam kung anong salita ang mga gagamitin ko. I was afraid I could trigger something. I was afraid I would say the wrong thing. I was afraid he had relapsed. I could only think of the word, I could not say it.

"No. I haven't. But I thought about it recently, like a lot."

"You've done a very good job, Roarke. You're at the top of your game. You can rest. You're on your last leg of the tour, right?"

He looked at me. "I just have to hold on."

Tumango ako. Hindi ko siya gustong mahirapan pero gusto ko ring maniwala na kaya niyang lampasan ang kahit na ano. He had done it before.

"You just have to hold on. Everything will be all right."

"Everything will be worth it?" Nasa mga mata niya ang uncertainty. Parang naroon din

ang pangangailangan niya na maibigay ko ang sagot sa tanong na iyon.

“Yes,” sabi ko kahit na hindi ako sigurado kung may karapatan akong ipangako ang ganoon. Gusto kong paniwalaan iyon. Gusto kong paniwalaan na magiging maayos siya. He had people for support. He had his wife and Storm. They would take care of him as they had over the years. He was going to be all right. He was going to be happy.

He had to.

I kissed him softly. He kissed me back. The kiss started loving and tender. Unhurried. We wanted to take our time. We savored each other. We had always been good at slow and sweet lovemaking. It was not always quick and rough then, but we were so young when we were together. We were almost always crazy for each other. We could not get enough, especially when he had to tour and I could not go with him.

But slow and tender was something we had always loved doing.

It was more intimate. I felt more vulnerable. My heart was so wide open. I was uninhibited because this was going to be the last time. I didn't say the words that I really wanted to tell him. I couldn't. But I tried to show. I tried to tell him through kisses and touches.

He was so gentle and loving. He made me feel so loved. Or maybe I made myself feel that. He could not love me the way I wanted him to, the way I did to him.

I could not stop the tears, I had to look away. But he grabbed my chin, forcing me to look at him as the release approached. I was so overwhelmed with sensations and emotions. Looking at those brilliantly blue eyes, I let myself believe he loved me. That he was mine.

We had the most amazing climax together. I could see how emotional it had been for him also.

He collapsed on top of me. I held him as we both slowly came down. I kissed the side of his head. His body pressed me deeper on

the bed.

I wanted us to stay like this. I wanted us to be together forever.

But as I watched him sleep at dawn, I knew what I had to do. He looked so peaceful in his sleep. Mukhang malalim ang tulog niya. Hinayaan ko ang sarili ko na pagmasdan siya hanggang sa maaari. Hindi ko hinayaan ang sarili ko na matulog kahit na saglit lang. Kailangan kong namnamin ang bawat segundo na natitira.

Nang hindi na talaga ako puwedeng lumabis, maingat akong bumaba sa kama. Lalabas na sana ako ng silid pero nag-alangan ako. Tumingin ako sa kamay niya, sa daliring suot ang singsing na galing sa akin.

Maingat ko iyong inabot at hinubad sa daliri niya. I looked at the indentation on his finger. His hand immediately looked different without the ring. It had always been there. It was a part of him.

Sa loob ng ilang sandali ay parang gusto kong ibalik ang singsing sa daliri niya. Pero

pilit kong ipinaalala sa sarili ko kung ano ang tama. Lumabis na ako. I had crossed the line and maybe I could no longer go back, but I still had to do the right thing.

Lumabas ako ng silid at kinalap ang lahat ng damit ko. Mabilis akong nagbihis. Pinulot ko ang bag sa sahig. I stopped at the door. I really didn't want to leave. I didn't want to say goodbye. Technically, I was still not saying goodbye.

But I had to.

Pinilit ko ang sarili kong buksan ang pinto para lumabas. Once again, I was out of Roarke's life.

Chapter Three

Then

I blindly reached for my phone to see the time, but all my hand felt were books on the table. Inalis ko ang mga mata ko sa nakabukas na libro at hinanap ang phone sa mesa. Magpa-panic na sana ako nang hindi ko iyon makita. It was the newest iPhone, I could not lose it. Hinahalungkat ko ang mga libro nang bigla kong maalala na sadya kong iniwan sa apartment ang phone para hindi ako ma-distract.

I was at my favorite diner that was open twenty-four hours. I looked up and searched

for the wall clock. It was almost three in the morning. I was there for almost two hours already.

Napapabuntong-hininga na ibinalik ko ang paningin sa mga libro na nakakalat sa mesa ko. May na-retain ba sa lahat ng binasa at pinag-aralan ko? Did I absorb anything at all?

“Milkshake or coffee?”

Bahagya akong napapitlag at napatingin sa nagsalita. Nginitian ako ni Delia, ang waitress ko. She came to me every thirty minutes to ask what I needed. She had been bringing me coffee, milkshakes, burgers, fries and pie. My books and flashcards had grease stains.

“You’re getting a milkshake, honey. You’ve had enough coffee. And this is the last one. You need to go home and sleep. This can’t be good for you.”

Nginitian ko si Delia. Hindi ko magawang mainis sa kanya dahil nakikita kong concerned lang talaga siya sa akin.

Pag-alis niya ay binalikan ko ang mga libro

sa harap ko. My brain was so tired. I didn't really want to read and study more. But I had to. Hindi rin naman ako makakatulog. I needed to work more. I failed my last exam and I had to make up for it big time. I knew med school would be tough but I wasn't prepared for this level of toughness.

"This is not a library."

Kamuntikan na akong mapatalon nang marinig ko ang tinig ng isang lalaki. Nasapo ko ang dibdib ko. "Geez!" bulalas ko habang nag-aangat ng paningin. Labis akong nagulat nang makita si Roarke na nakatayo sa gilid ng mesa. Hindi ko naramdaman ang paglapit niya. Siguro ay dahil na rin sa suot kong ball cap. It was to help myself focus on the books and not on anything else. Why was I in a diner if I wanted to focus? I was weird that way.

"Sorry," Roarke muttered as he slid in the booth. "I didn't mean to startle you."

I just gaped at him. My God, he was cute. It had been a week since our double date with

Richard and Tana. I gave him my number and he didn't call. I stopped waiting after the fourth day. I had accepted that he was not interested. It broke my heart a little, but I decided it was for the best. I didn't need the distraction. I needed to focus on my studies.

But I had thought of him a lot. I was so disappointed when he didn't call. I was in despair because he didn't like me the way I liked him.

What was he doing here now?

"Why are you studying here?" Kunot na kunot ang noo niya na parang hindi talaga niya naiintindihan ang ginagawa ko roon.

"Because I need to be a doctor," tugon ko sa tanong niya.

Mas nagsalubong ang mga kilay ni Roarke. Mas lalo niya akong hindi naintindihan. Was he interested? Then why didn't he call?

"What are you doing here?" tanong ko na lang imbes na ipaliwanag sa kanya ang dahilan ng pag-aaral ko sa isang diner at hindi sa isang library o kahit na sa apartment namin

ni Tana.

“Breakfast,” sagot niya.

Bumalik si Delia at inilapag ang milkshake ko sa mesa. Napatingin siya kay Roarke. Medyo may pagtataka pero ngumiti pa rin. “Hey, Roarke. What will it be? Chicken tenders with fries or grilled cheese sandwich?”

“Yes. And rootbeer float. Thank you, D.”

“I’ll be back.”

“You know Delia?” tanong ko kahit na obvious naman.

“I used to work here. Dishwasher and bus boy.”

“Oh.” It always felt weird for me. I knew people my age or even younger worked. Ako lang yata ang hindi pa nakakaranas. That was why it felt weird.

My parents did not let me work even during the summer and school breaks.

“You’d have plenty of time to work after med school.” Mom and Dad would always say. They would always tell me to focus on studying. I didn’t have to work, they could

provide everything I needed.

Isa pa, hindi rin daw nila naranasan na magtrabaho sa murang edad kaya hindi rin nila ipaparanas sa amin ng kapatid ko.

“Do you always get breakfast this early?” tanong ko uli.

“I came from work.”

“Where?”

“A bar.”

“Okay.” Kailangan kong balikan ang mga libro ko pero paano? Mukhang walang planong umalis ni Roarke. Ayoko rin naman siyang umalis. Gusto ko siyang kausapin. Gusto kong malaman ang lahat ng mga bagay tungkol sa kanya.

Bumalik uli si Delia dala ang rootbeer float ni Roarke. “Enjoy.” Hindi namin siya gaanong pinansin, tuon ang atensyon naming dalawa sa isa’t isa. Mabilis naman niya kaming iniwan.

“You’re a bartender?” tanong ko nang hindi ko na talaga kaya ang katahimikan sa pagitan naming dalawa.

Tumango si Roarke.

“You look too young to be a bartender.”
He looked legal enough to drink but a bartender?

“I’m Irish. Well, not pure. Half? Quarter?”

“You’re not sure?” He was pale but he didn’t sound Irish.

“I’m not sure because my mom’s half Irish-Filipino American and half Norwegian American. My dad’s half Irish American and half Lithuanian American.”

Natawa ako. “You’re an American.”

Napangiti na rin siya. “Yeah. I’m an American.”

“I’m surprised you have Filipino blood. I am half-Filipino. My dad’s pure Filipino.”

“You don’t really look...”

“My dad may be pure Filipino but he is a Filipino of Spanish descent. He’s what they call mestizo—I think, I’m not really sure. He came from the motherland. He came to the States to study and then he met my mom in medical school. My mom is a Korean-

American. Her mom's a full Korean and her dad's full white. And yes, I do not have monolid eyes. My mom didn't either. Halmeoni always says she looks more white than Asian, but I think she's the perfect balance of Asianness and whiteness. My mom's beautiful.

"I mean really beautiful. Drop dead. She's beauty and brains. I got her eyes but that's it. My older brother looks a little more Asian than me. His eyes are more prominently Asian, I mean."

Nakagat ko ang aking ibabang labi nang mabatid na dumaldal na ako. Pinagmasdan ako ni Roarke na bahagya kong ikinailang. He had this gentle soft gaze but it felt so intense. Parang hindi ko kayang makipagtitigan nang matagal. Kinailangan kong ibaling sa ibang direksyon ang mga mata ko. Dahil lang ba sa asul ang mga mata niya? I heard it was really hard to make eye contact with them. I couldn't remember having this difficulty with other blue-eyed people before. I was fairly

certain Roarke was not the first blue-eyed man I had come in contact with.

But I was babbling and spewing unimportant stuff because his eyes felt like he was looking right into my soul.

“Do you really have to wear that ball cap?”

Nagsalubong ang mga kilay ko. Hindi ko naintindihan ang sinabi niya. Bahagyang dumukwang si Roarke. Bago pa man ako makakilos ay pinitik na niya ang suot kong ball cap na nakalimutan ko ring suot ko. Halos wala sa loob na hinubad ko iyon. Kaagad akong na-conscious. Did I have hat hair? Did my hair look greasy and limp? The last time I had my hair washed and styled was four days ago. My curls were defined and bouncy then. I cringed at what my hair looked like now.

“You are beautiful.”

Napatingin ako kay Roarke. “W-what?” Narinig ko naman talaga ang mga sinabi niya. Hindi ko lang gaanong mapaniwalaan. Natakot lang ako na baka mali ang dinig o

intindi ko.

“You are beautiful,” aniya habang hindi inaalís ang paningin sa akin. Walang hesitancy, deretso.

Parang mas hindi ko kakayanin kaya isinuot ko uli ang ball cap at nag-iwas ng tingin. Napangiti si Roarke at pinagtuunan niya ng pansin ang root beer float niya. Inabot ko rin ang milkshake ko.

Hindi nagtagal ay naroon uli si Delia para sa mga pagkain ni Roarke. Mabilis uli niya kaming iniwan.

Sa loob ng ilang sandali ay namayani ang katahimikan sa pagitan naming dalawa. Hindi ko alam ang gagawin. Gusto kong manahimik at pagtuunan ng pansin ang mga libro ko pero hindi rin naman ako mapakali. Hindi rin naman talaga ako makakapag-focus. Paano ko iyon gagawin kung aware na aware ako sa lalaking nasa harapan ko?

“Then why did you not call?” tanong ko.

Natigil si Roarke sa pagnguya at tumingin sa akin. Sa pagkakataon na iyon ay pilit kong

sinalubong ang tingin niya. I needed to know. He looked at me as though he was so interested in me and he truly found me beautiful.

“Why didn’t you call?” ulit ko nang bahagya na akong mainip sa paghihintay sa sagot niya. He needed to give me an answer.

“I wanted to call,” aniya sa banayad na tinig. “I was just not really sure when to call... When was too soon and when was too late? I’m not very good at this. I guess I was too late. And then you’re not the only one who gave me his number. This dude...”

“Oh,” bulalas ko. Nanlaki ang aking mga mata. I was appalled. Parang bigla akong nilamon ng kahihiyan. How brazen of me to think he was interested. “Oh! I’m so sorry.”

Nagsalubong ang mga kilay niya. “Why are you apologizing?”

“I didn’t know you’re gay.”

“What?” bulalas niya. “I’m not! I’m not... Where did you get that?”

Ako naman ang naguluhan. “You just said

a dude gave you his number... Oh!"

"What is it now?"

"You're into both. Boys and girls."

Napatanga sa akin si Roarke. Parang hindi niya mapaniwalaan ang mga narinig mula sa akin. Kapagkuwan ay napangiti siya. Nanginang ang kanyang mga mata sa labis na kaaliwan. "I'm not gay or bisexual."

"You said—"

"Do you know The Sleepwalkers?" tanong niya.

"The band?" I was still so confused. Hindi ko alam kung saan patungo ang usapan na iyon.

Tumango si Roarke. "The band. Are you familiar with their music?"

"Yeah. They have this one hit song that everyone heard and can sing along. I'm not really sure if I like them. They are okay, I guess."

"They broke up."

"Already? Didn't they just release one album?" Why are we talking about a band?

Ano ang kinalaman niyon sa sexual orientation niya?

Tumango si Roarke. “They have one successful album. They toured for two years and they were wildly successful. But they shocked the world when they announced that the band had broken up and Noah Deine is going solo.”

“Okay...” Hindi ko pa rin alam kung saan patungo ang usapan na ito pero parang may mga gusto pa siyang sabihin. I realized I liked hearing him talk. Kung hahayaan ko lang siya, baka maintindihan ko rin.

“The Sleepwalkers is a four-member band but it’s pretty well-known that it was started by Storm and Noah in high school. They are best friends. They wrote the songs together. They are very good and talented individually and phenomenal together. But they are often accused of being nepo babies, though technically, Storm is the only son of a rock royalty. He’s the son of Joseph Frederik.”

“The Black Knight. My dad and lo—

granddad are huge fans of the band.”

Tumango si Roarke. “My dad, too. So what I’m really saying is, The Sleepwalkers doesn’t have a vocalist and a frontman. Storm owns the copyright of the band name because his dad really thought of it and had the, let’s just say prudence, to ensure his son owned the name. Storm owns the melody and composition of their hit song but Noah owns the lyrics. I think there’s a legal battle going on.”

“Are you a fan?”

“Of the music, yes.”

“And we’re talking about this because...?”

“Storm was in the open mic.”

“Oh. You’ve seen him? You’ve met him? He gave you his number! He’s the dude who gave you his number. Why?”

“He’s looking for a new vocalist for the band, I think?”

Nanlaki ang mga mata ko. “Oh, my God!”

Parang nahiya bigla si Roarke. Maging ang ngiti niya ay parang nahihiya. Medyo namula

rin ang mukha niya.

“Oh, my God!” bulalas ko. “He wants you?”

“He wants me to audition,” paglilinaw ni Roarke.

“You’re going to be a rock star!” My mind was blown. Parang nakalimutan ko ang lahat. He had a very wonderful voice. Very unique and almost ethereal. I could totally see him being a rock star. He should be one.

“Slow down. I’m not going to be a rock star.”

“You are! You sounded so good. Why did you think I gave you my number? I found you cute but I needed more.”

Natawa siya. Medyo awkward and uncomfortable. “So I’m not gay. That’s what I’m trying to tell you.”

Tumango ako, inalis ang suot kong ball cap. “Yeah, okay.”

“And I was—am very interested. I was just so—”

I waved my hand dismissively. “That’s not

very important right now.”

“It’s not?”

“You’re offered an audition, Roarke! It’s a big deal. You shouldn’t think about calling me at all. Did you call the dude? When’s the audition?”

He looked at me. Parang hindi niya sigurado kung ano ang iisipin talaga sa akin. Bahagya na akong nailang.

“I think of you,” aniya habang hindi ako nilulubayan ng tingin. “I can’t stop thinking about you. I wanted to call... but I was afraid I waited too long. Then this opportunity came.”

I felt as though my heart was melting. Sa loob ng ilang sandali ay hindi ko alam ang sasabihin. Hindi ko rin talaga matagalan ang tingin niya kaya iniiwas ko ang mga mata ko. Maaaring sabihin na sinasabi lang niya iyon para magpalusot. Baka hindi naman gaanong totoo. Pero malakas ang pakiramdam ko na nagsasabi siya nang totoo. Parang gusto kong pagkatiwalaan ang mga salita niya.

“I also thought of you,” amin ko. I bit my lower lip. Maybe this was a bad idea. I should not be exposing myself like this. “I waited for your call. I was so disappointed.” Parang hindi ko mapigilan ang bibig ko. Parang kailangan kong sabihin. I didn’t like playing games. I had no time for games.

“I’m sorry.”

He sounded sincere. He sounded as though he really felt bad, guilty.

“You’re forgiven.”

“Just like that?”

Tumango ako. “You have a good reason.”

Banayad siyang natawa. “I could be lying, you know.”

Nagawa kong salubungin ang kanyang mga mata. “You’re not.”

“You believe the stuff I told you?”

“That someone in the audience was a rock star and he wants to recruit you as their vocalist? Yes.”

Napailing-iling siya.

“You have a beautiful voice, Roarke. That

cute face got me interested but that voice...”
made me want to fall in love. Bahagya kong
ikinagulat ang mga salitang gusto kong
sabihin. It was a little miracle I didn’t blurt
out the whole sentence. Tumikhim ako at pilit
na pinagpag ang kaba at pagkabaghan sa
aking dibdib. “It’s not hard to believe
someone really wants you to be in their band.
Is that something you want?”

Hindi siya sumagot. Nanahimik siya at
parang pinag-iisipan ang naging tanong ko.

Hindi ako nangulit, hinayaan ko lang siya.
Pinagkaabalahan ko ang milkshake, dumukot
din ng ilang fries niya. I still had half of my
cheeseburger but I already finished the fries.

Mukhang malalim ang iniisip ni Roarke
kaya binalikan ko ang mga libro ko. I was too
aware of him. I was waiting for him. But I still
attempted to read my books. I really needed
to study. I needed those words in the books to
be on my brain.

“You’re a med student,” ani Roarke
kapagkuwan.

Tumingin ako sa kanya. Hindi ko alam kung gaano katagal ang katahimikan pero naubos ko na ang fries niya at nakailang pahina naman ako. “Yes.”

“You’ve always wanted to be a doctor?”

Mabilis akong tumango. “I can’t remember wanting anything else. I come from a family of doctors. My parents are doctors. My brother is about to finish med school. My uncle is a doctor and my cousin will be one also. My granddads are doctors. It feels automatic, you know. Me being a doctor like the rest of my family. It’s something I have to become.” Parang may mali sa mga sinabi ko pero nagsasabi naman din ako nang totoo.

Tumango si Roarke. “I envy people like you.”

“People like me?”

“People who know for certain what they want to be. People who have very clear directions in their lives. You know where you wanna go, where your life is heading—or should be headed. You follow the path and

put in the effort to get where you want to go and be who you want to be. You have a very clear picture of the person you want to be.”

Natigilan ako. Parang bigla ay hindi ako komportable. Parang may kung ano sa dibdib ko na hindi ko mapangalanan.

“I have never had a clear picture of what I wanted to be before. It only took me two classes in college to be certain that I hated college and didn’t want to spend three to four years in a university. I toughed it out for a semester because what else could I have done? I also didn’t want to disappoint my parents. They were very supportive. When I decided not to continue my college education, I was prepared for disappointment and questions like ‘What are you gonna do with your life?’ I did get the question but it didn’t sound demanding or disappointed. They were a bit shocked but they said it’s okay. When I said I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life, they said I’d figure it out. I knew what I didn’t want. I should think of it as a process of

elimination. They were certain that I'd eventually know what I wanted to be. I knew Dad secretly hoped I'd eventually go back to college. He's a college professor. But they never put pressure. They just let me figure it all out.

"That's like four years ago. They are still confident I'd eventually find what I wanna do. Mom also told me passion and calling are sometimes overrated. She asked me if I was happy and I told her yes, even if I wasn't sure. She said it's the only thing that's important. I should just be happy. I shouldn't pressure myself into anything."

Bigla ang ahon ng inggit sa dibdib ko. Parang nahihirapan akong paniwalaan ang sinasabi niya. It seemed as if I had this belief that everyone should have a calling or a passion. Maybe it was because I was different from Roarke? I was in an Asian household where working doubly hard and overachievement were the norm.

I was not coerced into having dreams and

ambitions. My parents had always been supportive. Hindi nila ako diniktahan kung tutuusin. But what else would one person be if her whole family were doctors? It was the only thing that I knew from birth. It was kind of assumed I'd be a doctor, too.

And I wanted to be a doctor.

But I also wanted Roarke's situation.

Parang may pressure sa dibdib ko pero pilit kong hindi pinansin. Isa pa, hindi naman ito tungkol sa akin. Tungkol ito kay Roarke. I should just absorb all the information about him.

"My dad introduced me to reading very early, so I like reading. I do read for fun." Parang bahagya siyang nahiya sa pag-amin na iyon. His smile was completely adorable. "I thought Literature would be something I could do. I even thought maybe I could teach or maybe I can get paid reading books. But it's not for me. I tried. I did. But I just couldn't see myself..." Napailing-iling siya. "I just couldn't see myself doing anything. And it

frustrates me so much.”

“Music,” usal ko.

“I love music. We had a neighbor, Ted, who used to be a tour musician. When he decided he was too old to tour, he offered music lessons to kids. Mom thought it would be nice for me to learn how to play a musical instrument. Piano. I did learn but I am not really exceptional. It also got me interested in playing other instruments. I can play guitar, bass, cello and a little violin. I also got vocal lessons.”

“Wow.”

Parang mas nahiya siya. Namula ang kanyang mukha. “I’m not exceptional. I just know the basics. My high school had a good music and arts program. I am a decent musician, I can say. People would tell me to audition on American Idol or something. I never took that seriously. Richard would tease me so much. He’d make me sing on open mics and I have to admit, I enjoy them. I enjoy singing. I have heard stories from Ted,

about touring and performing onstage, but I never really thought of... becoming a singer or a performer, you know. I never thought that this could be something that I could do in my life. Music is something I enjoy, not a career or passion. It's not my calling.

"Until Storm approached me and gave me his number. Until I heard that I could audition to be their next vocalist. I..."
Tumingin siya sa akin. Parang hindi niya gustong magpatuloy. Nakita ko ang labis na pag-aalangan sa mga mata niya. Nakita ko rin na parang nahihiya siya. "It's like I saw... It's like the haze cleared. It suddenly came to me."

Napangiti ako kasabay ng bahagyang pamamasa ng aking mga mata. I could not believe I was being emotional. I was so happy for him. "You're gonna be a rock star," deklara ko. For some reason, I saw it too. Very vividly.

Him on a stage singing and performing. I saw him in front of thousands of people. I had only seen and heard him sing once but I just knew he was going to be awesome.

Umiling-iling si Roarke. “I’m not... I don’t think I...” Marahas siyang nagpakawala ng buntong-hininga. “No, I’m not a rock star.”

“You are,” sabi ko uli, umaapaw ang kumbiksiyon. “And you’d be one of the best.”

Tumingin siya sa akin. Parang hindi niya gaanong mapaniwalaan na naniniwala ako sa kanya. From the bottom of my heart, I truly believed what I told him. Parang malakas ang pakiramdam ko. O malakas ang pananampalataya ko.

Napailing-iling uli siya pero sa pagkakataon na ito ay gumuhit ang ngiti sa kanyang mga labi.

Roarke walked me to my apartment building. He carried my backpack filled with books. Sinabi ko sa kanya na hindi kailangan pero nagpumilit siya. Hindi na rin ako nagpumilit sa pagtangga dahil gusto ko naman talaga siyang makasama pa.

“You’re going to call Storm,” sabi ko nang malapit na kami sa building. “You’re gonna audition and knock their socks off with your

brilliance.”

Natatawa na napapailing na naman siya. Parang hindi talaga niya kayang paniwalaan na puwede. Hindi nagbabago ang paniniwala ko lalo at alam ko na sa kaibuturan niya ay gusto rin talaga niyang maniwala na puwede.

It was a little fascinating, what I was feeling at the moment. The certainty and the faith that I had. I did not know this man.

But it seemed as though my heart knew him.

It was ridiculous if I really thought about it. It was not smart. Kulang lang ba ako sa tulog? Magbabago ba ang pakiramdam na iyon after a good night's sleep?

I had a feeling that was not going to happen.

“You’re going to,” giit ko. Hindi ako sigurado kung may karapatan akong pangunahan siya sa mga desisyon niya sa buhay, pero pakiramdam ko talaga nang mga sandaling iyon ay tama ako. May pakiramdam ako na tamang itulak siya sa direksyon na

iyon.

Siguro kung nakikita ko na hindi talaga iyon ang gusto niya, hindi ako magpupumilit. But Roarke just needed a push. He needed someone to tell him he should do it and he could do it.

And he was going to make it.

Tumigil kami sa harap ng apartment building. Inabot ko ang backpack ko na bitbit niya.

“When will I see you again?” tanong niya.

“You have my number,” nakangiti kong sabi. “Have you lost it?”

“No,” nakangiti niyang tugon.

“Then call me later. We can have dinner or something. You’ll call, right?”

“I’ll call.”

“You promise?”

Ang ganda ng ngiti niya. “I promise.”

“Pinky swear?”

He locked his pinky with mine. “Pinky swear.”

Hindi ko pinakawalan ang pinky niya.

Hinila ko siya palapit at nagpatangay naman siya. I tipped my toes and pressed my lips on his. His lips were soft and they felt so right.

Ang ganda ng ngiti ko nang iwalay ang mga labi sa kanya. “You’re mine now.”

He didn’t say anything, he just looked at me. Parang gusto kong kabahan. Was I being too forward? Did I turn him off?

“This is not very smart,” sabi ko nang hindi ko na kayanin ang katahimikan kahit na hindi pa talaga natatagalan. “We’re both very busy and we’re figuring out the life ahead. We have so much to do. But—”

Hindi ko naituloy ang iba ko pang gustong sabihin dahil yumuko si Roarke at bumaba ang mga labi niya sa mga labi ko. He didn’t just press his lips on mine, he coaxed my lips to open for him. I did in a heartbeat. I also kissed him back.

Oh, he was sweet. He tasted so good. He felt so good. A moan escaped from my throat. The kiss was slow and exploratory. Gentle and sweet. He teased and tasted.

The kiss was the most... exquisite.

This was not my first kiss but it felt like this was my first real kiss.

It was new and unfamiliar, but it felt so right. It was mystery and excitement. It felt as though something good and sweet was promised to me. There was a relief and calm that I felt within me.

I found the one. He was meant to be mine.

Ang ganda ng ngiti ko nang maghiwalay ang aming mga labi. He nuzzled my nose. There was also a tender smile on his beautiful face.

“I’m yours,” he whispered. “Will always be yours.”