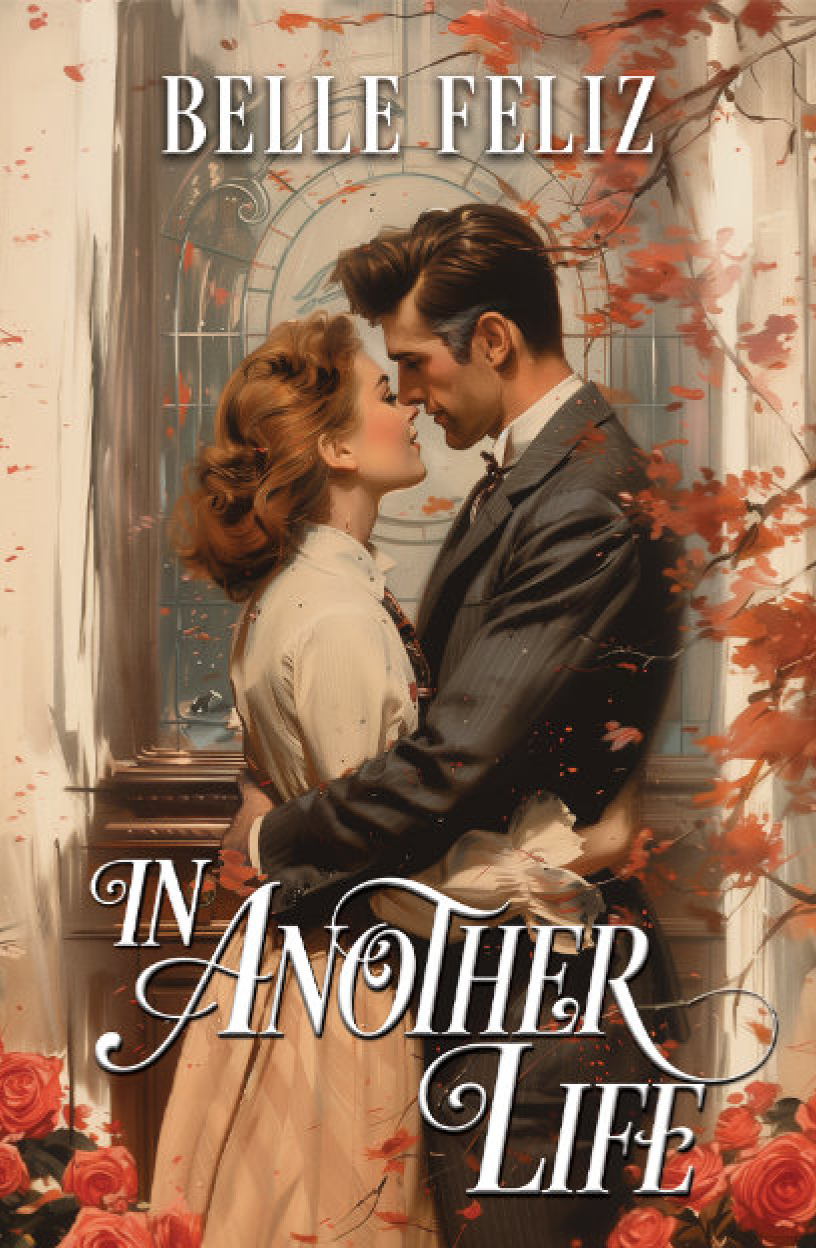
BELLE FELIZ
IN ANOTHER LIFE

BEFORE

KALALABAS lang ni Delphine ng comfort room nang maramdaman niyang may humawak sa braso niya. Kaagad siyang nagpumiglas. Nang malaman niya kung sino ang humawak sa kanya ay mas nagpumiglas siya, pero mas humigpit lang ang pagkakakapit nito sa kanya.

"Let go, Harry," utos niya. Hindi niya gustong matakot pero nakaramdam pa rin siya ng kaba, lalo at mukhang wala itong planong pakawalan siya. Mas humihigpit talaga ang kapit nito at nasasaktan na siya.

Marahas siya nitong hinila palapit imbes

na sundin ang utos niya. Nasubsob siya sa dibdib nito. Pumaikot sa kanya ang braso nito. Nanlaki ang kanyang mga mata nang isandal siya nito sa pader at mas idiniin nito ang katawan sa kanya. She was trapped. Harry was tall and a big guy.

Patuloy siya sa pagpupumiglas. Mas kabado na siya. Mukhang mas natutuwa pa si Harry sa pagpupumiglas niya dahil ngumisi ito. Inilapit nito ang mukha sa kanya. Pilit niyang inilayo ang mukha.

"Ang yabang mo, ah. Ang kapal ng mukha mong mag-walk out sa akin sa dance floor. Kilala ko ang mga uri mo, `uy. You're a gold digger. Just like your mother and sister."

Nakahanda na si Delphine na tuhurin si Harry dahil akmang ibabaon nito ang mukha sa leeg niya nang bigla na lang itong lumayo. Nawala ang bigat nitong nakadiin sa kanya. Sumigaw ang lalaki. Nabatid niya na may dumakma sa buhok nito at marahas itong hinila palayo sa kanya. Dahil siguro hindi nito inasahan ay nabitiwan siya nito. Hindi na

muna niya inalam kung sino ang tumulong sa kanya, itinuloy na muna niya ang planong pagtuhod sa lalaki. Muli itong napahiyaw. Sunod-sunod ang naging mura nito.

Ibinalya ng kung sino si Harry na nalugmok sa sahig.

"Stay down," utos ng tinig ng isang lalaki.

Noon na tumingin si Delphine sa tumulong sa kanya. Nahigit niya ang hininga. He was beautiful. Probably the most beautiful man her eyes laid on. Parang nakalimutan niyang bigla si Harry.

His handsome face unnerved her.

"`You okay?" tanong nito sa kanya.

Hindi siya kaagad nakasagot, napatitig lang siya. His voice…

"Miss?"

Pinilit ni Delphine ang sarili na mag-focus. "I'm fine," aniya bago niya sinipa si Harry na patayo na mula sa pagkakalugmok. Muli itong nalugmok.

Nang ibalik niya ang paningin sa lalaki ay nakita niya ang munting ngiti sa mga labi

nito.

"I could take care of him, but thank you," sabi niya.

"He's drunk."

"He's a horrible human kahit na sober." She was dancing on the dance floor with her girlfriends when he pulled her and decided he wanted to dance with her. Kaagad siyang nagpasya na hindi siya magiging polite. Itinulak niya ito palayo sa kanya at umalis siya ng dance floor. Hindi niya inasahan na aabangan siya nito sa labas ng comfort room.

Naglakad si Delphine palayo. Ayaw na niyang mapalapit pa kay Harry. Nakahinga siya nang maluwag nang maramdaman niyang sumunod sa kanya ang lalaking tumulong sa kanya. Gusto niya itong makilala. Gusto niyang malaman ang pangalan nito. Pero gusto rin niyang makalayo kay Harry.

She wanted to believe she could deal with Harry alone and that she didn't need help, but what if she couldn't? Paano kung walang

tumulong sa kanya? Kinilabutan siya nang dumaan sa isipan niya ang mga maaaring mangyari. This was why she didn't want to go out with friends tonight; parang palagi na lang may Harry. Madalang na madalang na maramdaman niya na safe siya sa mga ganoong lugar.

Nilingon niya ang lalaki na nakasunod pa rin sa kanya. He kept a respectable distance. Mukhang hindi nito sigurado ang gagawin. "What's your name?"

"Rafe."

Ngumiti siya. "Thank you, Rafe. I'm Delphine."

Ginantihan nito ang ngiti niya. "You're welcome, Delphine."

She felt safe with him. Hindi niya sigurado kung saan galing ang pakiramdam na iyon. Hindi lang siguro dahil tinulungan siya nito. Hindi lang siguro dahil maganda itong lalaki. Parang panatag lang talaga ang loob niya. He was not going to treat her the way Harry treated her.

"I LOVE YOU. I will always love you."

Delphine framed Rafe's beautiful face with her two hands. "Only you," usal niya. "It will always only be you."

She could not believe the depth of her love for this man. She was very grateful he felt the same for her. She was certain he felt the same. She could feel it every time he looked at her. Every time he kissed her.

Rafe was going to be the only one. She was quite certain her heart was no longer capable of loving anyone else.

He was only going to love her.

It was everything. This love for him. This love from him.

"THIS CAN'T be true," lumuluhang sabi ni Delphine habang hawak ang kapirasong papel na siyang dahilan ng pagkaguho ng mundo niya. Umiling-iling siya. "This can't be. It just can't be."

Tumingin siya kay Rafe na nakatingin na sa kanya. Noon lang niya nakitang tumingin

ang lalaki sa kanya nang ganoon—puno ng muhi at galit. Nakita rin niya ang hinagpis.

Sa kabila ng lahat, naunawaan niya ang ganoong reaksiyon. Hindi niya maintindihan ang mga nangyayari pero naintindihan niya ang ganoong reaksiyon. There was a piece of paper that told him she betrayed him in the worst possible way.

"Rafe… Rafe… makinig ka sa akin." Binitiwan niya ang papel at sinubukan niyang lumapit pero kaagad na lumayo sa kanya si Rafe. Parang hindi nito kakayanin kung hahawakan niya ito. Parang ayaw na nga siya nitong tingnan.

"I didn't… I didn't… Maniwala ka sa akin. Hindi ko alam kung bakit ganoon ang resulta pero hindi talaga… ikaw talaga…" Alam niya na hindi niya nasasabi nang maayos ang mga dapat niyang sabihin. Alam niya na kailangan niyang magpaliwanag pero hindi niya alam kung paano. Hindi niya alam kung paano mag-uumpisa. Hindi niya alam kung anong mga salita ang gagamitin niya.

Humahagulhol na siya. Naninikip ang dibdib niya. He had to believe her. Anuman ang sinasabi ng kapirasong papel, kailangan nitong mas paniwalaan siya. Dahil iyon ang katotohanan.

"How can you do this to me?" tanong nito, puno ng hinagpis sa tinig. Nabatid niya na maging si Rafe ay lumuluha na. His heartbreak was very evident. "I love you. I love you like there's no one else for me, Delphine. I was ready to do everything for you. I was ready to change my whole life for you. I made plans. And you did this to me? How can you do this to me?"

"Rafe, I swear... I fucking swear she's—"

"Ate's right. You targeted me. You're exactly like your mom and sister. A gold digger."

Nasampal na niya si Rafe bago pa man rumehistro sa isipan niya ang ginawa.

"Rafe—"

"I can never forgive you for this. Never."

CHAPTER ONE

NOW

NATANAW ni Delphine na nasa outdoor dining area na ang kanyang mother-in-law. Leticia Leyva, dubbed as the Woman of Steel, was probably the strongest woman she knew. The woman she looked up to. The woman she aspired to be. The woman who truly broke through the male-dominated world of construction. She founded Archion Construction and Development Corporation, one of the biggest construction and development companies in the country.

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It pained Delphine to see her in this state. Melancholic. Vulnerable. Nakatingin sa kawalan.

Inasahan naman na niya. She was allowed to be sad during this time. They were all allowed to mourn for the loss. Kahit na gaano katagal na panahon pa ang lumipas, naroon pa rin ang kirot at lungkot. Ang panghihinayang.

Tinungo ni Delphine ang isang console table kung saan naroon ang mga nakakuwadrong larawan. Dinampot niya ang isang partikular na frame at pinagmasdan ang larawan na nakapaloob. Larawan iyon ni Arnault kasama ang kambal. Halos wala sa loob na nahaplos ng hintuturo niya ang mukha ni Arnault—ang nakangiting mukha nito. May kinang sa mga mata nito. Maaliwalas ang mukha. Iyon ang mukha na nais niyang nakatanim sa isipan ng mga anak nila. Gusto niya na kapag iisipin nina Bella at Mina ang kanilang ama, ang mukha nitong iyon ang sasagi sa isipan ng mga ito.

Hindi mababakas ang misery na parang constant na kay Arnault noong nabubuhay pa ang asawa.

"In another life, Delphine… In another life, I would be the best husband to you. I'd be the best father. But in this life… In this life… I just can't."

Napapabuntong-hininga na ibinaba niya ang larawan. The girls were too young when they lost their father. People would often say she was too young to be a widow. Her mother-in-law would never get over the loss of her only child.

Nilapitan ni Delphine ang babaeng itinuring na niyang totoong magulang. Ang babaeng sumagip sa kanya noong kailangan na kailangan niya ng taong sasagip at maniniwala sa kanya. Ang babaeng nagpakatatag sa mga nakalipas na dekada para sa kanilang pamilya. Her heart broke for her because she knew her mother-in-law was in so much pain right now.

Yumuko siya at hinagkan ang pisngi nito

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bago siya naupo sa kanang bahagi nito. Hindi nito naramdaman ang paglapit niya kaya bahagya itong napapitlag. Tumingin ito sa kanya at waring kinailangan ng ilang sandali bago rumehistro kung sino siya. Ginawaran siya nito ng munting ngiti pero nanatili ang lamlam sa mga mata nito.

Inabot ni Delphine ang kamay nito at pinisil. "Are you okay?" It was lame to ask her because she was obviously not.

"I'm fine," anito. Huminga ito nang malalim. "I'm fine," sabi nito uli, mas may kombiksyon at tatag sa tinig. "It's just the day. The day he was gone. Another year has passed since he's gone. Iniisip ko kung paano umusad ang panahon para sa akin na wala siya."

"I miss him," aniya sa munting tinig. Delphine couldn't even imagine how hard this must be for her, for a mother.

Tumango si Mama Leticia, nangislap ang mga mata nito sa luha. Sinubukan nitong magsalita pero mabilis din nitong itinikom

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ang bibig dahil pilit nitong pinipigilan ang paghulagpos ng mga emosyon. Mas hinigpitan niya ang pagkakahawak sa kamay nito.

Narinig nila ang kambal bago pa man nila nakita.

"Stop obsessing over my hair. It's fine," sabi ni Bella.

"It's not. You can't be bothered to comb, and blow-dry it? Ang ikli na nga," tugon ni Mina.

"Kaya nga maikli para hindi na ako gaanong nagsasayang ng panahon. It doesn't have to be perfect like yours."

"It can be if you put a little effort."

"Why are you obsessed with hair? You're going to be a doctor."

Ganap nang nakalapit sa kanila ang dalawa sa pagkakataon na iyon. Nakita niyang nabawasan ang pighati sa mukha ng mother-in-law niya. Pinagmasdan nito ang mga apo, may ngiti sa mga labi. Ngiti na kahit na paano ay umabot na sa mga mata nito. Siguro ay

nasagot na ang tanong nito kanina. Paano ito nakapagpapatuloy? Paano umuusad ang panahon nang wala si Arnault? Dahil sa kambal na apo. Dahil kina Bella at Mina.

Mabilis na yumuko at humalik sa pisngi ng matanda si Bella. "Good morning, Lola! I love you very much." Pinanggigilan nito ng yakap ang lola bago siya ang pinagtuunan ng pansin. Niyakap at hinagkan din siya nito.

Kasunod na yumakap sa lola nito si Mina. "I love you, too," anito bago humalik din sa pisngi.

Mas namasa ang mga mata ni Mama Leticia. "My loves," usal nito habang nakatingin sa dalawang apo. She lost her only son and that would always give her pain, but she had two lovely granddaughters.

Extra ang lambing ng kambal dahil hindi nakakalimutan ng mga ito ang araw na iyon. Alam ng mga ito na hindi madali para sa abuela na alalahanin ang pagkamatay ng kanilang ama. Hindi madali sa buong pamilya.

Pinagmasdan din ni Delphine ang mga anak. Maraming pagkakataon na naitatanong niya kung ano ang nangyari sa panahon. Parang hindi niya namalayan ang paglipas niyon. How come she had two adult daughters now? How were they twenty years old now? Parang kahapon lang ay karga-karga niya ang dalawa.

She made it. Delphine wanted to believe she had been a good mother to these beautiful girls. Hindi pa siya tapos sa pagiging ina at marami pang pagsubok ang darating, pero gusto pa rin niyang paniwalaan na she did a good job.

Siguro ay dahil na rin sa panahon, hindi niya maiwasang silipin ang nakaraan. Hindi na niya gustong gawin hanggang maaari, pero hindi siguro maiiwasan sa araw na iyon. Sa araw ng kamatayan ni Arnault, ang kanyang asawa.

She was too young to be a mom when she got pregnant. She was in love and there was hope for the "happy ever after", but nineteen

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was still very young. She was naive, idealistic, and optimistic. She believed love could conquer all. But she had also been terrified.

Everything went wrong when she gave birth. It started going wrong when she went into labor four weeks early. She was out of town and did not give birth in the hospital she was supposed to. Her doctors weren't there.

She could still remember what it had been like. Hindi niya kailanman makakalimutan hanggang nabubuhay siya. She was utterly convinced it was the end of the world. She thought she knew what it was like to be terrified, but she was completely wrong. What was the stronger word for "terrified?" Petrified?

She was utterly and completely petrified. She thought she was going to die. She believed her heart stopped beating. But it was not true, it was still beating. Broken hearts still beat. She wished it would stop, but it would not. It could not.

Tumingin si Delphine kay Mina at pagkatapos ay kay Bella. It felt as though her world stopped revolving then, but it didn't. It couldn't. She had children and she was a mother.

So, she had been wrong. Everything went right when she gave birth four weeks earlier in a hospital she was not supposed to give birth in.

Nahuli siya ni Bella na nakatingin. "I didn't do anything."

Siniko ito ni Mina. "We didn't do anything."

Bahagyang naningkit ang mga mata ni Delphine. "You two did something," pahayag niya.

Magkasabay na umiling-iling ang dalawa. Nakatingin ang mga ito sa kanya, tikom ang bibig at bahagyang nanlalaki ang mga mata. They definitely did something.

"Or you're about to," saad niya.

Patuloy na umiling-iling ang dalawa. Oh, there was trouble brewing. Hindi na lang niya

inusisa ang tungkol doon. Malalaki na ang mga anak niya. They were responsible young adults. They never really got into serious trouble. They would never cross a line they knew they would never uncross. Tiwala siya roon.

Bella and Mina were not perfect by any means, but she was blessed with good daughters. Labis ang pasasalamat niya na hindi talaga pinasakit ng kahit na isa sa mga ito ang ulo niya. They were kind and responsible. It seemed like they were happy.

Delphine didn't fuck them up. She didn't give them trauma. Walang inner child na kailangang i-heal. Iyon ang sinabi sa kanya minsan ni Mina na labis na ikinaligaya ng kanyang puso.

She didn't fail as a mother. Hindi pa siya tapos, muli niyang ipinaalala sa sarili. She hoped she would never completely fail. She was aware she was not a perfect mother. Marami siyang naging pagkukulang. Alam niya na maraming pagkakataon din niyang

nadismaya ang mga anak. Pero gusto rin niyang maniwala na hindi siya ang worst. She was good enough. She had given her best and she was still giving her best.

"Be good," bilin niya sa mga anak.

Magkasabay na tumango ang dalawa. Nginitian siya ng mga ito.

"How are things?" tanong ni Leticia sa mga apo.

"Great," magkasabay na sagot ng dalawa.

"I'm about to finish something and you're gonna love it," sabi ni Bella bago sumubo ng pagkain.

"My grades are good, I promise. I think I deserve a new bag."

Tumango-tango ang lola, pero walang anumang sinabi.

"`Pag nakapagbenta ako ng artwork, ibibili kita," sabi ni Bella sa kapatid. "Maliit lang pero—"

Sinubuan ni Mina si Bella ng sinangag. "Thank you very much."

"I'll find time for us to go shopping,"

pangako niya sa dalawa.

"Yes," nasisiyahang sabi ni Mina habang napaungol naman si Bella.

Tinapos na nila ang almusal nang makapaghanda na sila para sa araw na iyon. It was not going to be an easy day. Dinikitan nina Bella at Mina ang lola ng mga ito; dinadaldal at pilit na inaaliw ang matanda.

Tahimik lang si Delphine hanggang sa makarating sila sa memorial park kung saan nakalagak ang mga labí ng kanyang asawa. Ramdam niya ang paglukob ng lungkot sa kanyang buong pagkatao. Naramdaman niyang may humawak sa kamay niya. Nginitian niya si Mina at hinagkan ang sentido nito. Yes, she was very lucky to have her daughters. If she had to go through it all again, she would. Malugod niyang pagdadaanang muli ang mga pinagdaanan para sa dalawang anak niya.

"Hi, Daddy," masayang bati nina Bella at Mina pagdating nila sa puntod ni Arnault. "Hi, Mama Mia!"

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Inilapag ng mga ito ang mga dala nilang bulaklak at inayos bago sumalampak sa damuhan. Sinindihan ni Delphine ang mga kandila, pagkatapos ay inalalayan niyang maupo si Mama Leticia. May staff na naghanda bago pa man sila dumating. Bukod sa mga dala nilang mga bulaklak ay may iba nang nakalagay doon.

Bella and Mina chattered, parang ina-update ng mga ito ang ama at si Mama Mia tungkol sa mga nangyari sa buhay ng mga ito. Ibinahagi ni Bella ang pinagkakaabalahang art piece sa kasalukuyan.

"It's gonna be epic, Daddy."

"I think I'm ready for a new boyfriend," sabi ni Mina. "What do you think, Mama Mia?"

Parang may humaplos sa puso ni Delphine. When Bella and Mina were still children, they asked her why they had to call a dead lady named Mia "Mama Mia." She was Mom, why call another woman—a dead woman—"Mama"? Who was this woman?

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Hindi niya alam kung paano sasagot at magpapaliwanag.

"She is someone important, my loves. Someone that should always be remembered and loved. I will explain when you're both older, okay? I promise when the time is right, I will tell you all about her."

Hanggang ngayon ay hindi pa niya natutupad ang pangako na iyon. The girls stopped asking why. Hindi niya sigurado kung dahil hindi na curious ang mga ito o napagpasyahan nang hindi na gaanong mahalaga pa ang mga paliwanag.

Siguro naman ay may mga tanong pa rin sa likod ng isipan ng mga ito. Bukod sa sino ang babae, sino ito sa buhay ng ama? Bakit nakahimlay na magkasama sina Mia at Arnault? Bakit ang petsa ng kamatayan ni Mia ay kapareho ng petsa ng kapanganakan ng mga ito?

Alam ni Delphine na matatalino ang mga anak. Alam niya na kahit paano ay may mga nabuo nang teorya at konklusyon ang mga

ito. Siguro ay maituturing siyang duwag dahil hindi niya iniupo ang dalawa para kausapin at paliwanagan. Siguro ay hinihintay niyang magtanong ang kahit na isa sa mga ito. Siguro ay sadyang iniiwasan niya. Sa tuwina ay sinasabi niya sa sarili na gusto lang niyang protektahan ang mga anak, pero hindi rin siya ganap na makapagkaila.

Pinoprotektahan niya ang sarili.

"Sa palagay mo ba ay darating pa ang araw na kakailanganin mong sabihin sa kanila ang totoo?" tanong ni Mama Leticia habang nakatingin kina Bella at Mina na nasa di-kalayuan. They were saying their hellos to the other graves. Nakasanayan na ng dalawa ang ganoon sa tuwing bumibisita sila sa puntod ni Arnault. They wanted to greet their dad's neighbors, ang sabi ng mga ito noong mga bata pa. Sa palagay niya ay ginagawa ng mga ito ang bagay na iyon ngayon para bigyan sila ni Mama Leticia ng privacy kasama sina Arnault at Mia.

Hindi napigilan ni Delphine na

mapabuntong-hininga habang pinagmamasdan din ang mga anak. They were so beautiful and perfect; she felt a little ache on her chest.

"Darating kaya iyong araw na wala akong ibang choice kundi sabihin sa kanila ang totoo?" aniya imbes na sagutin nang direkta ang tanong ng kanyang biyenan. "May mga pagkakataon—lalo na sa nakaraan—na natakot ako na kailanganin kong ipaalam ang totoo. Medical emergency. Kailangan nila ng organ or something…" Napangiti siya. "Ipinagdarasal kong palagi na hindi umabot sa ganoon. Sana ay hindi kami malagay sa sitwasyon na wala akong ibang magiging choice kundi sabihin sa kanila ang totoo. Minsan ay hindi ako aware."

Tumango-tango si Mama Leticia. "They're fine. They're happy. Wala nang dahilan para guluhin ang payapang buhay nila—natin. Wala namang magbabago. It's just biology—genetics. Family is not just blood."

Inabot ni Delphine ang kamay ni Mama

Leticia at pinisil.

"Don't tell them. It's okay not to tell them."

"Unless I really have to," usal niya.

"Unless you have to." Pinagmasdan nito ang himlayan. "I miss him so much."

"I know, Mama. I know. I miss him, too."

"You never had the chance to meet him, the real him. In his best. You and the girls. And that always pains me, Delphine. He's a very wonderful man and I hope you met that wonderful man."

"I know he is, Mama. We know."

Umiling ito. "You really don't. You tried, and you tried really hard. You've given everything you have in you and then some. But he's just… He died with Mia. His soul died. His heart stopped beating. It took a while for his body to follow but he was never the same when he lost Mia."

Tumango si Delphine. Alam niya ang lahat ng bagay na iyon. Hindi niya mapigilang malungkot para sa asawa.

"Sa tuwing dumarating ang panahon na ito, madalas sumasagi sa isipan ko na handa na ako. Puwede na…"

"`Ma…"

"Matanda na ako, Delphine. Nadadalas na ang mga pagkakataon na ramdam na ramdam ko ang edad ko. Kapag ganitong pagkakataon ay naiisip ko na handa na akong samahan ang anak at asawa ko. You and the girls will be fine. Hindi n'yo na ako kailangan. Archion would be fine. It has prospered under your rule and I'm confident it will remain on top. The girls will be more than fine. You raised them well. Life would not be easy once in a while but they're tough. Hindi na ako kailangan."

"`Ma, kailangan ka pa namin."

Nginitian siya nito. "Gusto ko nang makasama ang mag-ama ko."

"`Ma…" Nanikip ang dibdib ni Delphine. Nauunawaan naman niya ang ganoong pakiramdam nito, pero sadya yatang makasarili siya. Si Leticia ang matatag na

pader na sinandalan niya noong mga panahon na hindi niya kayang tumindig sa sarili niyang mga paa. She wanted her to stay with them for a very long time.

"In another life, Arnault must be happy. He got everything he wanted. Everything went according to his plans." Naging makahulugan ang tingin nito sa kanya. "You must be just as happy. He's with the woman he's supposed to be with. You're with the man you were supposed to be with… But we have this life."

Tumango si Delphine. They didn't have that life. They had this life. Hindi mahalaga ang mga "what if" o "might've beens."

Tumingin si Mama Leticia sa mga apo. "It's not an easy life. It's full of heartache and loss. But we were also happy, hindi ba, Delphine?"

Naluluha na tumango si Delphine. Hindi siya makapagsalita dahil nananakit ang kanyang lalamunan sa pagpipigil na talagang mapabulalas ng iyak.

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"Sa tuwing naiisip kong gusto kong makasama na ang mag-ama ko, naiisip ko rin na gusto ko pa sanang makitang ikinakasal sina Bella at Mina. Gusto ko pang makasama ang mga apo ko. They truly give me life."

"Thank you, `Ma."

"For?"

"For everything."

"I should be the one who's thanking you. Kung hindi ka bigla na lang dumating isang araw…"

"At ginulo ko ang mundo n'yo."

Tumingin ito sa kanya at ngumiti. "You should date."

Hindi niya napigilang matawa sa kabila ng mga emosyon na nadarama sa kasalukuyan. "That came out of nowhere."

"You should."

Hindi iyon ang unang pagkakataon na narinig ni Delphine ang bagay na iyon mula sa kanyang biyenan; hindi madalas pero may mga pagkakataon. She had always been grateful she loved her enough to suggest

something like that, to encourage her to find love again. Hindi siya nito kailanman ikinulong sa alaala ng anak nito. Hindi mahalaga ang sasabihin ng iba. Leticia genuinely wanted her to be happy.

But being single all these years had been her choice. She never felt the need to be with someone. She had not met a man who would make her feel she would want to be in love again. Kahit na potential ay wala siyang na-encounter.

"I don't have time to date," aniya. "Also, I think I'm too old—"

"Don't say that, Delphine. You're not old. You're in your very early forties. You're very beautiful. You're a successful woman."

"I don't need a man. You didn't need a man."

"You have needs. I had needs. I loved my husband, but I had needs."

Namilog ang kanyang mga mata. "Mama!"

"Don't look so scandalized. It's true. Women have needs. And we're not talking

about mine, we're talking about yours. If you're not gonna be bothered by a relationship, at least find someone who could warm your bed from time to time."

"Mama!" bulalas na niya. Hindi niya gaanong mapaniwalaan ang pinatunguhan ng usapan nilang dalawa.

Pinisil nito ang kamay niya. "It's okay. Hindi ko alam kung nasabi ko na ito sa `yo, pero it's okay."

"I know it's okay, Mama. You never made me feel… otherwise. I know I'm free to love someone or s-sleep with someone—"

"Have you?"

"Have I what?"

She rolled her eyes. "Slept with someone."

Hindi siya makasagot. Nakatingin lang siya sa mother-in-law niya, nanlalaki ang mga mata.

Bumuntong-hininga ang matanda. Hindi niya masabi kung bahagya ba itong nadismaya sa kanya o ano. Hindi talaga siya sigurado sa mararamdaman at magiging

reaksiyon.

"I'm too old for something—"

"It's never too late, Delphine. Never too late. You lost your husband so young and all the might've beens died with him. You could have those might've beens with someone else."

"I'm fine," sabi na lang niya. "I'm happy and content with the way my life is right now." Nabatid niya na hindi rin siya gaanong nagsisinungaling sa pahayag na iyon.

Wala na siyang gaanong mahihiling pa sa buhay. She was on top of the world. She was the CEO of one of the biggest construction and development companies in the country. She had the best daughters. What could a man give her at this point?

Orgasms? Iyon ang tugon ng munting tinig sa kanyang isipin.

Ipinilig niya ang ulo. She was not going there. Because if she really needed it, she could also give that to herself.

"I heard Ramil had been asking you out."

"Ramil is a friend." He was also one of the

most respected architects in the country.

"It would not hurt to give him a shot. Subukan mo lang."

"Ramil is a really good friend." Hindi niya tuwiran na masabi na wala siyang maramdamang malisya o pagnanasa para sa lalaki. Mabuti silang magkaibigan. Nirerespeto nila nang husto ang isa't isa. He was married once but it did not work out. She heard that he was good friends with his ex-wife. He had a son na halos kaedad nina Bella at Mina.

He had asked her out multiple times, pero madalas ay pabiro lang kaya hindi rin niya maseryoso. Sa palagay niya ay wala rin namang pagnanasa sa kanya ang lalaki.

"Try," giit ni Mama Leticia.

Bumuntong-hininga siya. "Okay."

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BEFORE

"YOU GOT married? Is that true?"

Hindi na sana gustong pansinin ni Delphine si Rafe. Ang sabihin na labis siyang nagulat na makita ang lalaki ay kulang. Ilang linggo na rin silang hindi nagkikita o nagkakausap man lang. Ang alam niya ay nasa States na ito. Parang gumuho ang mundo niya nang malaman niya na nilisan nito ang bansa, na iniwan na talaga siya nito. Hindi lang siya ang iniwan at pinabayaan nito.

Mabilis na nanikip ang kanyang dibdib. Hindi siya makahinga.

She didn't think she would see him again. She didn't want to see him, especially right now. She needed to go.

Hindi lang niya napagtagumpayan ang paglayo dahil hinawakan ni Rafe ang braso niya. "You married someone else." Tiningnan nito ang kamay niya na may suot nang mga singsing. He looked as if someone shot him in

the chest.

Inakala niya na nakita na niya ang sukdulan ng galit at muhi ni Rafe noong lumabas ang resulta ng test, hindi pa pala. Hindi niya alam na may mas ilalala pa hanggang nang mga sandaling iyon.

Nakatingin sa kanya ang dating nobyo ngayon na parang wala na talagang kapatawaran para sa kanya.

Mabilis na namuo ang kanyang mga luha. "I did what I had to," aniya, pilit na pinatatag ang tinig. Dahil totoo ang naging pahayag niya. Ginawa niya ang kailangan niyang gawin. Hindi niya mapagsisihan. "You left me."

"Is he the one? Is he the guy you cheated on me with?"

"Hindi—" Itinikom ni Delphine ang bibig. Tumingin siya sa mukha ni Rafe. Hindi nito tatanggapin ang anumang sabihin o ipaliwanag niya. Makailang beses na ba niyang isinumpa na walang ibang lalaki? Makailang beses ba siyang nakiusap na

pakinggan at paniwalaan siya nito? Makailang beses ba niyang sinabi na may dahilan? May paliwanag. May nangyari.

Ayaw siya nitong pakinggan. Ang tanging mahalaga ay may matibay na ebidensiya ng pagtataksil niya.

Hindi siya nito patatawarin. Iyon ang nabatid ni Delphine habang nakatingin sa mga mata ni Rafe. Walang dapat na ipagpatawad pero hindi rin nito tatanggapin ang bagay na iyon.

At kahit naman pakinggan siya nito ngayon, wala na ring saysay. Kasal na siya kay Arnault. Hindi na niya mababago ang sitwasyon. May parte rin sa kanya na ayaw na rin namang baguhin pa ang sitwasyon.

Hinila niya ang braso niya na hawak ni Rafe. Hindi siya nito pinakawalan. "Wala na tayong dapat pag-usapan pa, Rafe. Paniwalaan mo ang gusto mong paniwalaan. Anumang sabihin ko ngayon, hindi mo pakikinggan."

"How dare you," he said in cold fury.

"How dare you marry someone else."

"I had to. Because you left me." Pilit siyang nagpumiglas para makawala. Binitiwan nito ang braso niya, pero bago pa man siya makalayo ay hinawakan nito ang ulo niya at mariin na hinagkan ang kanyang mga labi.

Sandali lang siyang nagpumiglas. Bahagya siyang nakaramdam ng hiya nang buksan niya ang bibig at tinugon niya ang halik nito. She missed him. She could kiss him—for the last time.

Mariin at marahas ang halik. It was a kiss meant to punish. He wanted her to submit. She did. She kissed him with all the love and desperation in her. She kissed him goodbye.

Bumaba ang mga labi ni Rafe sa leeg niya. Alam niya na hindi na niya maaaring palawigin pa iyon. Itinulak niya palayo sa kanya ang lalaking pinakamamahal ng kanyang puso.

"No," she said. Hindi siya nito pinakinggan. "No, Rafe," naluluhang sabi niya habang itinutulak ito palayo. "No!"

Pinakawalan siya nito.

"How dare you," usal nito sa gumagaralgal na tinig.

It surprised Delphine to see misery in him. His eyes were red and teary. She thought she had already seen him broken before. She didn't know he could be worse.

"I did what I had to."

"You did—" Nilapitan siya nito.

"No," maagap niyang sabi habang paatras dahil alam niya ang plano nitong gawin. Hahagkan siya nitong muli at baka hindi na niya kayanin. Baka mawala na siya sa sarili niya. "I'm married now," aniya sa munting tinig.

"What? You can cheat on me, but you can't cheat with me?"

"Goodbye, Rafe."

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CHAPTER TWO

NOW

WHEN DELPHINE told her mother-in-law she was going to try, she didn't think she would actually try. When Ramil called and asked her out for drinks, "why the hell not?", she thought. Might as well say "yes" and actually try. That way ay masasabi niya sa biyenan at sa sarili na rin na sinubukan naman niyang talaga.

It was only drinks. It was not a proper dinner which she realized she was grateful for. Less pressure. Lower expectations.

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Bago siya umalis ay nagtungo siya sa silid ng mga anak. Ang alam niya ay paalis din ang dalawa. Magtutungo ang mga ito sa isang restaurant para katagpuin ang pinsan at ilang mga kaibigan, pagkatapos ay magka-club ang mga ito.

Pagpasok niya sa silid ay narinig niya ang mga anak na mukhang nasa dressing room ng mga ito. Delphine loved that Bella and Mina still shared space. When they were children, she thought they would want separate rooms. They wanted privacy, but they wanted to stay together. They ended up converting the two rooms into one so that they had plenty of space. Hindi naman kasi palaging magkasundo ang dalawa, minsan ay kailangan ng timeout sa isa't isa.

Pero hindi rin kayang lumayo nang husto sa isa't isa. It was as if they couldn't live without each other.

Pumasok si Delphine sa dressing room. Sa loob ng ilang sandali ay nanatili siya sa bungad at pinagmasdan ang dalawang anak

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na abala sa harap ng vanity kaya hindi siya kaagad na napansin. Bella was curling Mina's long hair.

Other people often saw their differences. It amazed them how different the twins were to each other. Hindi lang sa physical na anyo, maging sa personalidad.

"Of course we'd be different, we're fraternal twins," they would retort to these people.

Mina was the girly girl when it came to style and appearance. She had this long hair that was almost reaching her waist now. It cascaded like a silken waterfall. At this point, she was a pro at styling it. She and Bella perfected the way to curl it. It framed her small, beautiful face elegantly. Marami ang nagsasabi na sa kambal, si Mina ang mana sa kanya, ang kanyang kamukha.

Bella was the opposite of girly girl. She was the one who gave off the tomboy, athletic and adventurous girl vibes. A carefree spirit and poetry, Mina would say. Her hair was short. It had always been short because she had always

liked it that way. Bihira na umabot iyon sa balikat nito. Short hair complimented her face beautifully.

They also had very different personalities. Bella was very chill, and Mina was the anxious one. Mina was the planner and Bella was… not. Mina could be the indecisive one, Bella would almost always be certain about what she wanted in life. Mina would tend to overthink, and Bella would just do.

Bella was an artist. Mina was going to be a scientist.

Madalas na pagkakaiba ng dalawa ang nakikita ng ibang tao, pero mula't sapul ay mas nakikita ni Delphine ang pagkakapareho ng dalawa. It still amazed her how perfect they had been together. They were sisters, no one doubted that.

They were both beautiful. They might have different hair styles, but they had the same hair texture. Pareho ang tangos ng ilong. Pareho ang shape ng mga labi. Halos pareho ang ngiti. Magkaiba ang mukha pero may

mga pagkakahawig. Magkapatid. They even had the same body type and almost the same height.

They were both kind and sweet. Charming. They liked a lot of the same things, kahit na magkaiba talaga ang interes sa buhay. They liked the same kind of food and music. They had the same views and opinions on many different things.

Delphine had always been very grateful her girls had the best relationship. They were inseparable. They were a set. They embraced their differences, and the contrast just made them perfect.

Kaya napakahirap talaga para sa kanya na sabihin ang totoo. Madalas niyang kumbinsihin ang sarili na wala nang saysay pa ang katotohanan. Hindi na mahalaga lalo na ngayon. Hindi niya hahayaan na may makasira sa magandang relasyon ng magkapatid.

The truth was irrelevant.

Napatingin sa gawi niya si Bella at kaagad

na nagliwanag ang mukha nito nang makita siya.

"Mom!" masaya nitong bulalas. "You're ready for your date?"

"It's not a date," nakangiti niyang sabi habang pumapasok sa loob ng dressing room. Of course she told them about her going out for drinks with someone. Hindi naman na estranghero pa si Ramil sa dalawa.

"Is that what you're wearing?" tanong ni Mina habang pinagmamasdan ang kabuuan niya.

Halos wala sa loob na pinagmasdan niya ang sarili sa malapit na full-length mirror. She looked fine. "Yes," tugon niya. "What's wrong with it?" tanong niya nang makita ang concern sa mukha ng dalawang anak.

"You look like you're going to a meeting, Mom," sagot ni Bella. Tumango si Mina bilang pagsang-ayon sa kapatid.

"No, I do not," tanggi niya. She was wearing one of her basic black dresses. It was a little short. She had on a pair of her good

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heels. If she was going to a meeting, she would have worn a tailored dress or one of her suits, not something like this.

Magkasabay na umiling sina Bella at Mina.

Bumuntong-hininga siya. "This is appropriate."

"You can do better," sabi ni Mina na tinungo ang side nito sa closet at mukhang may hinahanap.

Noon napagmasdan ni Delphine ang suot ng anak. "Are you wearing that?" tanong niya. Mina was wearing this tiny silvery dress. It was too short, kaunting maling galaw ay makikita na ang mga hindi dapat makita. She looked good in it, but she couldn't help but be a mom.

Tumingin siya kay Bella na suot ang isang vintage white shirt na hindi niya sigurado kung sinadyang magmukhang frayed o frayed na iyong talaga sa dalas nitong gamitin, at pantalong maong.

"Obvs," tugon ni Mina.

"It's nice, anak, but—"

"Too booby?" Inalis ni Mina sa pagkaka-hanger ang isang silk floral dress. Tumingin ang anak sa dibdib. "But they look so nice on this dress right now."

It was true. Her boobs looked nice. "Can you at least wear tights? And bring a jacket or a cardigan? Just in case?" She had an elegantly sexy daughter. She didn't look scandalous. Mina was allowed to wear anything she wanted as long as she was comfortable with what she was showing. As long as she was happy with herself. Delphine had always allowed her girls to be themselves. She believed she managed to teach them how to love their bodies and not just see everything that was wrong with it.

"Yes po, Mommy," nakangiti nitong sabi sa kanya. "And you're wearing this." Ipinakita nito sa kanya ang silk dress na hawak nito.

Umiling-iling siya. "No—" Hindi pa man siya natatapos sa protesta niya ay naramdaman na niya ang paglapit sa kanya ni Bella. Bago pa man niya malaman ang

planong gawin ng anak ay naibaba na nito ang zipper ng dress niya. "Boundaries!" bulalas niya.

Hindi siya pinakinggan ng mga ito. Wala rin siyang laban. Hindi talaga siya makapagprotesta nang maayos. Natawa na lang siya at hinayaan ang mga anak. Hindi nagtagal ay suot na niya ang isang silk dress na mas mukhang pantulog kaysa dress. The shoulder straps were very thin, parang kaunting pull lang ay mapipigtal na. There was a delicate lace detail on the neckline. Thankfully, it was not that short. Mina had a thing for mini dresses.

"I love and hate that my dresses fit you, Mom," sabi ni Mina habang binibistahan ang kabuuan niya.

"And you look good in it," dagdag ni Bella habang hinihila siya patungo sa kung saan.

"Mga anak, hindi ko kailangan—"

Pinaupo siya ni Bella sa harap ng vanity. "Let's fix your hair."

"It is fixed. It is fine."

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Pero hindi siya nito pinakinggan. Napabuntong-hininga na lang siya habang nakapulupot ang isang maliit na section ng buhok niya sa curling iron.

"Let's add a little shine on your lips. They're too matte," sabi ni Mina.

Hinintay ni Delphine na matapos ang anak sa anumang ginagawa sa kanyang mukha.

She had to admit, she looked a lot better. She looked boring earlier. Very basic. But she didn't need to be extra, that fact still remained.

Tumingin siya sa mga anak. "Kailangan n'yo pa ba ng tatay, ha?" tanong niya sa mga ito.

Parehong tumawa sina Bella at Mina. "No," magkasabay na sagot ng dalawa.

"Then bakit parang mas excited pa kayo sa akin?" Kahit na noong sabihin niya ang pagpayag sa paglabas nang gabing iyon ay tuwang-tuwa ang dalawa.

"We want you to be with someone, I

guess," sabi ni Bella.

"We want you to be happy."

"I'm not lonely," aniya.

"We know," Mina said, almost rolling her eyes. "You're fine on your own. I guess that's okay. Nothing's wrong with that. But maybe, life would be a little bit better, you know." Nagkibit ng balikat ang anak bago pinagkaabalahan na naman ang mukha niya. Bahagya nitong pinatingkad ang blush niya.

"You're very beautiful, Mom," sabi ni Bella. "You may not need a man but maybe there's a man out there who needs you, some dude who you can make happy."

Natatawa na napapailing si Delphine. "That sounds like work and responsibility."

"Talaga bang hindi mo kayang palitan si Dad?" tanong ni Mina at napatingin ito sa kamay niyang nakasuot pa rin ng engagement at wedding rings. Napansin niya na wala sa loob na napahawak ito sa bracelet nito. Tumingin siya kay Bella, bumaba ang kanyang mga mata sa leeg nito. Natuon ang

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kanyang paningin sa suot nitong necklace.

Bumuntong-hininga siya. "Hindi naman," pagtatapat niya. "I know for a fact your dad wanted me to find love. He wanted me to be happy. Gusto niya na mahanap ko ang lahat ng mga bagay na pinaniwalaan niyang hindi niya naibigay sa akin. He told me I deserve everything good. And it's not like I don't want those things, I do. Of course may mga pagkakataon sa buhay ko na naiisip ko na parang gusto ko naman ng companion. Parang gusto ko naman ng mamahalin. I miss it sometimes. Being in love with someone… Having someone. Iyong may hahalik or yayakap na hindi mo anak." Marahan siyang tumawa.

"Your lola is right," patuloy niya. "I have needs. Women have needs. But it's just… life can get busy most of the time. Mas madalas na lumilipas ang anumang urge o inclination to find someone. Siguro may mga nagpakita ng interes sa nakaraan at masyado lang akong oblivious. Siguro ay sinadya ko ring huwag

pansinin. Maybe it had been an unconscious and conscious choice. Maybe I'm too happy and content kaya hindi talaga sumidhi ang urge and inclination to be with someone. A lot of factors. Bottom line, I'm happy. Not all the time, of course, but at this point, things are pretty great. I guess primarily because I have two wonderful daughters."

"Naks," nakangiting sabi ni Belle.

Niyakap siya ni Mina. "`Love you, Mommy."

"I love you, too."

Magkakasabay silang bumaba nang sabihin ng isang staff na naroon na si Ramil para sunduin siya. Mina wore sheer black tights. She also wore an oversized denim jacket. She would take that off at some point in the night, but at least she had a jacket when she needed it.

Hindi inakala ni Delphine na bahagya siyang masisiyahan sa pagkislap ng admirasyon sa mga mata ni Ramil nang makita siya. Pinagmasdan nito ang kabuuan

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niya. She still liked being appreciated. Hindi rin iyon nakaligtas kina Mina at Bella. Nginitian ng mga ito si Ramil.

"You take care of our mom, okay?" bilin ni Bella.

Nakangiting tumango si Ramil. "Of course. You don't need to worry. `Going out with friends?"

Tumango ang mga anak. "Dinner with our cousin and some friends and then we're dancing," sabi ni Mina.

"Be safe. Take care."

Tumango ang mga ito. Binalingan siya at hinagkan.

"Text me, okay?" aniya. Hindi na niya kailangan pang magbilin nang husto dahil magiging paulit-ulit na siya. They were responsible. Hindi mawawala ang worry sa kanya bilang isang ina pero may tiwala rin siya sa mga anak. She wanted them to experience things while they were young.

Muling tumango ang mga anak at nagpaalam na.

"Time flies so fast," sabi ni Ramil habang palabas na rin sila. "Parang kailan lang ay karay-karay lang natin sila."

Nakangiting tumango si Delphine. "Yes. They can't stay small forever no matter how hard we wish for that."

"You're beautiful."

Mas lumawak ang ngiti niya. "Thank you."

"No, thank you for saying yes. Finally."

"It's just drinks, Ramil."

"I'll make sure you have a good time tonight so that we can have a proper dinner date soon."

Tumango si Delphine. She would hope for good things tonight. Hindi niya isasara ang mga posibilidad. Wala naman sigurong masama. They were just going to see if something would spark.

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CHAPTER THREE

"DO YOU still wonder how it will be to have a stepfather?" tanong ni Mina sa kakambal habang patungo sila sa restaurant kung saan nila katatagpuin ang kanilang pinsan na si Dorian at ilan pang mga kaibigan.

Nilingon siya ni Bella. "Not really. Before, paminsan-minsan. Hindi maiwasan na mainggit sa ilang kaibigan na may tatay na present sa mga buhay nila. Pero hindi naman masyado kasi nga Mom and Lola are more than enough. They made sure we'd have a good childhood, that we'd be so happy. We both know how lucky we are, Mina."

Tumango si Mina. "We have the best mother and grandmother. Binusog nila tayo sa pagmamahal sa paraang hindi tayo maghahanap ng iba pa. I didn't really think about it much before. I was very fine not having a dad. I guess you can't really miss something you didn't have. I don't remember Dad, but you do. We were four when he left us but you have snippets of him. You told me all about it."

Si Bella naman ang tumango sa pagkakataon na iyon. "He was sad. I can't seem to forget his sad eyes."

Of course their mother and grandmother had always told them all the good things about Arnault Leyva. He was kind and charming. He was an exceptional architect. He was a good dad and he loved them very much. Mina was certain he was a good man. She would love him properly if he had lived long enough for them to get to know each other.

"Sometimes, I feel like Mom burned

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herself to keep us warm. It's not easy to be a mom and be the kind of woman she is now. I honestly don't know how she does it. She makes it look so easy sometimes. But we know it's not easy. Kahit na ngayon na malaki at semi-independent na tayong dalawa. We're still so needy and she'd always think of our happiness and well-being on top of all the big responsibilities as the leader of a huge company. I guess I just want someone to be there for her. Someone na hahalik at yayakap sa kanya na hindi niya anak. Iyong maibibigay ang lambing at pagmamahal na hindi natin kayang ibigay.

"`Cause she deserves it, you know. She was too young when she had us. She was also too young when Dad died. And if your memory is accurate, which it is, the short marriage was not exactly happy and we probably would never know the whole truth, iyong totoong sitwasyon ng marriage nila. She would never disrespect our father. He had to be perfect in our memories kahit na alam natin at the back

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of our heads na he's definitely not.

"Siguro naman nagkaroon ng mga pagkakataon na nakipag-date siya sa iba at hindi lang tayo aware, pero parang mas madalas na kinakalimutan niya ang sarili niya kasi kailangan mauna tayo. Kailangan ay kaligayahan at comfort muna natin bago ang ibang mga bagay. And that makes me so sad if I really think about it. I'm not very sure if Tito Ramil is the right man for her, if he can make her the happiest, but I guess we have to try hard to encourage her. Mom would often say na she doesn't need a man, and she's right. She thrived and flourished without a man. She's clearly fine without a man. Hindi naman kasi siya malungkot, hindi siya nagsisinungaling sa bagay na iyon. But I guess I'm romantic and naive? Because I want everything for our mother."

Pinagmasdan siya ni Bella. Nabatid niya na hindi na niya kailangang sabihin ang lahat ng mga sinabi niya dahil alam na nito ang lahat ng bagay na iyon. Tumatakbo rin sa

isipan nito. Ngayon lang talaga nila napag-usapan dahil nga lumabas ang kanilang ina kasama ang isang lalaki.

"Should we look for a man for her?" tanong niya.

Tumawa ang kakambal niya. "I knew doon ang punta ng mahabang lintanya mo."

"Hindi naman masama, hindi ba?"

"And where do you think we'd find a nice suitable forty-year-old man for our beloved mother? Do you know any good single men in their forties?"

Sandaling napaisip si Mina. Of course they knew people in their forties and older. Karamihan nga lang sa mga iyon ay mga magulang ng mga kaibigan nilang magkapatid. Bukod kay Tito Ramil, parang wala na silang kilala na single na nasa age range ng kanilang ina.

"What if I set up an account on those dating apps for Mom? I'm sure there's a kind for older people."

Tumango-tango si Bella. "She's gonna kill

you."

Tumango-tango rin siya. "You are absolutely right. I'll think of something. I'll keep an eye out." Siguro ay may mga propesor siyang single. O mga kaibigan o kaklase na may single dad. "You should have more luck," sabi niya sa kakambal.

"Why?"

"Because you have clients." Her sister was a great artist. She didn't pursue college, but she was very happy with what she was doing right now. Noong una ay hindi masaya ang mom at lola nila sa desisyon ni Bella na huwag na munang magkaroon ng proper college education. Hindi sa walang tiwala ang mga ito sa kakayahan at talento ng kapatid. Her greatness was undeniable. Pero ingrained na siguro sa mga old people ang kahalagahan ng isang college degree. They managed to convince Mom and Lola to let Bella do her thing for a while.

Teenager pa lang si Bella ay nabibili na ang mga art nito. Alam niya na may mga taong

nag-aagawan sa mga piece nito.

"You know I don't always personally deal with clients. The gallery displays my art. Aunt Delia deals with the sale. I just create."

"Maybe we can ask Aunt Delia." Aunt Delia was their mother's older sister. She managed her own art gallery that had a sterling reputation in the local art scene.

"I'm sure Aunt Delia had tried numerous times in the past."

"Alam mo, nakakahalata na ako. Ayaw mo yata, eh."

Tumawa si Bella. "We'll think of something, Mina. For now, let's focus on Dorian, okay?"

Hindi niya namalayan na papasok na sila sa restaurant kung saan nila katatagpuin ang kanilang pinsan na si Dorian at dalawang kaibigan na sina Sven at Kylie.

Pinasalamatan nila ang kanilang driver bago sila bumabang magkapatid. As expected, Dorian was already in the restaurant. Kaagad na ngumiti ang kanilang pinsan pagkakita sa

kanila.

Dorian was two years younger than they were, but they were in the same grade when they were in school. He was very smart, bordering on being gifted. Their aunt refused to send him to a special school. Nalaman nila na dahil nakita raw ni Aunt Delia na masaya ang pinsan nila na kasama sila ni Bella.

Dorian could be awkward, and it was not easy to make friends. They adored him and they were protective of him. He was their little brother.

Pinagmasdan ni Mina ang pinsan matapos niyang ibigay sa waitstaff ang kanyang drink order.

"I'm fine," sabi ni Dorian nang mapansin ang tingin niya.

"He's fine," sabi ni Bella na bahagya siyang pinanlakihan ng mga mata.

He was and he was not. Nasilip niya ang lungkot sa mga mata nito kahit na pinili nitong isuot ngayong gabi ang isa sa mga tinted glasses nito.

Some people would describe her cousin as a dork, but he was a cute and adorable dork. He was very sweet and kind. Walang masamang tinapay sa pinsan nila. He was always kind to everyone. Santo level na nga minsan ang kabaitan. Madalas ipag-alala ni Aunt Delia na mapagsamantalahan ng ibang tao ang anak nito. Kaya naman medyo napapanatag ang loob nito kapag kasama sila ni Dorian.

She and Bella didn't realize how much they protected him in elementary and high school. People never messed up with him because he had them. They would mess up anyone who messed up with their cousin.

But then they went to college. Magkaiba ang mga unibersidad na pinuntahan nila. Dorian needed to be in business school and Mina needed to be in a university with a great biochemistry program. Both of them had plans to go abroad to study, but not now or in the near future. They planned to finish their undergraduate studies in the country.

Mina didn't actually want to think about leaving. Nasa bansa ang kanyang pamilya at mga kaibigan. Hindi niya gustong mawalay sa kakambal niya. But she also had to think of her future. She had to think of who she wanted to be.

Bella was secure in that aspect. She was certain about what she wanted to do in her life. She was certain of who she wanted to be, and she was on her way to being that person.

"Make her stop looking at me," hiling ni Dorian kay Bella.

Mina realized her mind wandered. Bahagya niyang ipinilig ang ulo. Dinampot niya ang inumin na hindi niya namalayang nasa harapan na niya.

"I will make her pay," pangako niya kay Dorian pagkatapos niyang sumipsip sa inumin.

Bumuntong-hininga si Dorian. "You don't have to do anything. It's not worth it. She's not worth it."

"True," sabi ni Bella. "Pero we're petty and

you know that. We will make her be so sorry."

Tumango si Mina. "No one—absolutely no one humiliates our dear Dorian."

"Oh, my God," usal ni Dorian.

Magkasabay na dumating sina Sven at Kylie. They were their closest friends from high school. Hanggang sa maaari ay regular silang nagkikita-kita para mapanatili ang magandang pagkakaibigan. Iba-iba kasi ang pinasukan nilang mga unibersidad. Nasa iisang unibersidad sina Kylie at Dorian pero nasa magkaibang department kaya hindi rin talaga gaanong nagkikita.

"Tell her to forget whatever her plan is," pakiusap ni Dorian sa mga bagong dating habang nakaturo sa kanya. "Tell her it's not a good idea. Whatever it is."

"Kahit na paano namin sabihin, walang makakapigil sa dalawang `yan. Lalo lang silang manggigigil kapag pinigilan mo at alam mo `yan," sabi ni Sven na kaagad na kinawayan ang waitstaff.

Bumuntong-hininga si Dorian. "No

blood."

"No way!" kunwari ay reklamo ni Bella. "I was planning to cut her throat."

Muling bumuntong-hininga si Dorian.

Tinapik-tapik ni Mina ang kamay ng pinsan. "She won't really do that. It's good you're ready to just let things go. Hindi na gaanong nakakagulat because you're you. You're amazing and kind kahit na ano'ng gawin mo. Hindi mo mapigilan ang magpatawad kahit na walang planong humingi ng tawad ang babaeng iyon. But we're your cousins and friends. We get to hold a grudge forever."

Alam niya na kahit na ni-let go na nito ang lahat, kahit na gusto na lang nitong mag-move on, hindi magbabago ang katotohanan na nasaktan si Dorian. Hindi pa rin madali.

They did not want to make this about them, but it was not easy to let things slide. May nanakit sa pinsan nila, may nanamantala sa kabaitan nito. Hindi niya matanggap na ganoon na lang, na hayaan na lang. She was

not that mature yet.

Dorian did not think he needed to get back at this woman, but she did. Aware siya na paladesisyon siya pero ganoon talaga. She couldn't let it go. Hindi siya matatahimik.

"Let's not think about it for now," suhestiyon ni Kylie habang nakatingin na sa menu. "Let's eat na muna."

Tumango sila at um-order na ng makakain. Mukhang relieved ang pinsan niya dahil hindi na nila pag-uusapan masyado ang tungkol sa nangyari rito. Hindi nila pag-uusapan pero hindi nila kalilimutan.

Tonight, she would start making that bitch Eloise pay.

"ARE YOU sure about this?"

Tumingin si Mina kay Kylie nang pabulong siya nitong tanungin. Nakapila sila sa labas ng isang club na hindi nila madalas puntahan dahil palaging maraming tao, pero

sinadya nila nang gabing iyon dahil may kailangan siyang gawin. Nasa unahan nila sina Bella, Sven at Dorian.

"Nandito na tayo," tugon niya. "And look at me."

Pinasadahan nga nito ng tingin ang kabuuan niya. "You look hot."

"Exactly."

"You're really gonna steal her man?"

"This Johann is not Eloise's man. Not yet. I'm just gonna make sure he's not going to be." Mina was not going to steal another woman's man. Medyo hindi siya gaanong komportable sa ganoon. Sa kabila ng lahat, ayaw niyang maging mang-aagaw. Kaya kinokonsola niya ang sarili sa paniniwala na wala pa siyang opisyal na relasyon na sinisira o sisirain.

"But I heard na Eloise's mom is close friends with this Johann's mom and they were going to make things happen."

"Nothing happened yet. And things could still happen. I'm not going to have a

relationship with the guy naman. I'll just make things uncomfortable for Eloise. Gusto ko siyang mainis at manggigil."

Hindi pa talaga buo ang mga plano niya. Hindi naman kasi niya alam kung paano paplanuhin talaga ang mga bagay-bagay. Usually, she liked to plan all the details. She wanted contingency plans for her contingency plans.

But this was unfamiliar territory. Ngayon lang niya gagawin ang ganitong bagay. Hindi siya gaanong makapagplano ng mga gagawin dahil hindi niya personal na kilala si Johann Feria-Soliveda. She had only seen his profile photo on his private social media.

She did not know much about the man except for the readily available information online about his family and some hearsay from people. He came from two very wealthy families.

The Ferias founded one of the largest financial institutions in the country. His uncle, Rafael Feria, was the current president

of Ferbank, the leading bank in the Philippines. According to her research, his mother was the head of Ferbank Foundation, the corporate social responsibility arm of the Ferbank Group. She read that his granduncle, Aurelius Feria, was the reason why the economy was not in complete shambles a decade ago. Mr. Feria was once a governor of Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas and was also the Finance Secretary. It was said that his Uncle Rafael was the reason Ferbank was in the lead among all the banks. The stability and innovations were credited to him.

The Solivedas founded the country's largest non-bank financial institutions. Johann's great grandfather started the jeweler and pawn broker business in the 1950s. The company specialized in quick cash loans, domestic and international money transfers, micro-insurance, and bills payment. They had branches all over the country and a few abroad.

Aurelius Johann Feria-Soliveda definitely

came from money.

Nalaman ni Kylie mula sa ilang mga tao na sa ibang bansa nag-aral si Johann. Sa kaparehong Ivy League na pinag-aralan ng Uncle Rafael nito. He had just finished his undergraduate studies and was set to go to graduate school. Bahagyang ipinagtataka ni Mina na nasa bansa ang binata at mukhang mananatili. She had the impression that he was being groomed to be like his uncle and or his granduncle.

Mina felt a little bad because the man didn't do anything to her or to Dorian. Minsan pakiramdam niya ay nai-invade na niya ang privacy nito sa pagkakalkal niya sa buhay nito at ng pamilya nito. She would not have known about him if not for Eloise. He just happened to be the man Eloise wanted very badly.

Si Eloise ang may kasalanan kay Dorian. Si Eloise ang gusto nilang gantihan on behalf of Dorian.

Mina was very aware it was not nice and

very petty, but who said she needed to be nice and a bigger person? Naniniwala siya na kailangang matuto ni Eloise. Kailangan nilang makaganti kahit na paano. They were not going crazy. They were not going to ruin her life.

She would just make sure she didn't get the man she wanted to have.

"Are you really confident you'd get his attention?" tanong ni Kylie. Malapit na sila sa entrance.

"I'm not very sure, but I'm gonna try my hardest," aniya. She could not say that she was very good at getting a man's attention. She was rusty when it came to flirting. It had been three years since she had a boyfriend. But she had to try.

Pinasadahan uli nito ng tingin ang kabuuan niya. "You're gonna get him. And I hope Eloise seethes in anger and jealousy."

Mina also hoped for the best. Halos wala sa loob na tumingin siya kay Dorian. Sa tuwing parang gusto niyang pagbigyan ang

pinsan sa sinasabi nitong pabayaan na niya, naaalala niya ang lungkot at kirot sa mga mata nito. Naaalala niya ang labis na dismaya sa mukha nito.

"I knew it. At the back of my head, I knew. But I convinced myself that it's true. Iyong ipinapakita niya sa akin, iyong mga sinasabi niya ay totoo. Genuine. But of course, it was just for a bet. Of course, she would not like someone like me."

Nakita nila ni Bella kung paano bumagsak ang self-confidence ng kanilang pinsan. Nakita nila kung paano nasaktan si Dorian kahit na pilit nitong itinatago. Kahit na madalas nitong sabihin na okay lang at hayaan na lang.

Eloise and Dorian were classmates on a few subjects this year. Ang alam niya ay magkakilala ang dalawa dahil magkaklase na mula pa first year pero hindi talaga nakakapag-usap. Eloise was the typical cool popular girl in school. Dorian was the smartest one in class. People were very quick

to label him as a dork or a geek. People saw him as a meek and weak guy who was younger than most of them. There were the typical douchebags who picked on him just because he was quiet and smart. Some people were simply assholes.

Base sa kuwento ng pinsan, ipinagtanggol ni Eloise si Dorian sa mga bully na ito. Doon nagsimula ang friendship. Si Eloise daw ang nag-initiate at ang siyang madalas na lumalapit. Sinamahan ng babae ang pinsan niya sa mga meals at coffee. Sumasama rin daw sa library hanggang sa magkaroon na ng library session ang dalawa. Dorian didn't say Eloise was stupid and she was probably not, but she was not very good at school either.

Hindi alam ni Mina ang tungkol sa mga study session dahil hindi iyon sinabi ni Dorian sa kanila ni Bella. Naging abala na rin siguro sila kaya madalang na silang makapagkuwentuhan. Madalang na nilang nakukumusta ang pinsan. Dorian hated that they baby him sometimes. He was not

someone they had to protect, he would say.

Pero kapag nalaman nila kaagad na may study session, napigilan sana nila. Wala namang masama magpatulong kung talagang gustong matuto ng isang tao. Basta aral lang, walang ulterior motive. But when the hot popular cool girl asked the help of a nerdy quiet guy for schoolwork, one would doubt her real intentions. Siguro hindi maganda na sa hindi maganda kaagad ang hinala nila. Hindi maganda na hindi kaagad nila paniniwalaan na maaaring mabighani ng pinsan nila ang isang katulad ni Eloise. Their cousin was a great person. Any woman was lucky to have him in her life.

But cliches were cliches because they were rooted from the truth. Dorian ended up doing all of Eloise's schoolwork. He did all her projects, and he wrote all her papers. Kahit na sa mga subject na hindi magkaklase ang mga ito. Recently na lang din nila nalaman na Dorian paid for all their meals and coffee. As he should, he said. Because he was the man. It

also turned out he paid for some of her out-of-town trips, without him. Hindi raw ito kasama dahil girls' time iyon. Then why was his credit card used to pay for the trip? Some schmucks would argue Dorian was stupid to give out his credit card details but that girl had no excuse to use someone else's money. She could easily pay for everything. Eloise's family was known to be the largest confectionery makers in the country. They founded a company that manufactured sugar and confectionary products.

So why did she do all that? Aside from gusto lang nitong manamantala, it was all for a bet.

Cliche it might be, she was dared to make the most awkward man in class fall for her. Talagang katuwaan lang. Eloise and her friends were just bored. Hindi nga high stakes. Isang limited edition bag lang ang nakataya. May hinala si Mina na gusto lang ni Eloise. Maybe it thrilled her to play with someone's feelings.

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The truth came because of a TikTok that went semi-viral. It would have blown up if it had not been taken off the Internet immediately. The video was of Eloise and her friends laughing about how stupid Dorian had been, doing all her schoolwork and giving her everything she asked for. Hindi raw makakahalata ang pinsan niya kahit na ano'ng gawin nito. Napag-usapan ng grupo kung gaano nila pinagtatawanan si Dorian. They did not feel bad about anything. Kumbinsido ang mga ito na walang ginagawang masama ang mga ito. They called him a lapdog. A stupid lapdog na naglalaway na nakasunod palagi kay Eloise.

It was obvious that she was not aware that someone had been taking a video. Mina later learned it happened some time ago pa. Siguro ay nainis ni Eloise at ang grupo nito ang kung sinumang kumuha ng video at inilabas iyon.

Before it was taken down, Mina and Bella saw it. They were furious, of course. No one deserved something like that, especially

Dorian. Hindi dapat napaglalaruan ang emosyon ng isang tao. Medyo pinagtakhan nila ang mabilis na clean up. It was an obvious professional clean up. Hindi gaanong kumalat ang video. Hindi gaanong naging big deal. Hindi na mahanap.

It was still heartbreaking for Dorian. Alam niya na lumapit si Eloise kay Dorian sa school. Alam nila na umasa ang pinsan na magbibigay ng paliwanag si Eloise. Itatanggi nito kahit na paano. Sasabihin nito na hindi ganoon ang totoong naramdaman nito, masyado lang na-pressure ng mga kaibigan. Umasa si Dorian na kahit na paano ay magpapahalaga ang babae sa naging samahan ng mga ito, sa pagkakaibigan.

"For a smart person like you, you're too dumb, Dorian. Inakala mo ba talaga na magkakagusto ang isang katulad ko sa isang katulad mo? No fucking way. Kadiri. Maigi na rin na nabunyag na ang lahat. Para hindi na ako magkunwari. It has been fun, but I have something—someone to focus my attention to."

Narinig iyon mismo ni Kylie. May mga estudyante na nakakita at nakarinig. Sa sobrang galit nito ay sinugod nito si Eloise at sinabunutan.

Hindi iyon sapat para kay Mina. Kahit na nasabunutan na ni Kylie ang babaeng iyon ay hindi pa rin sapat para sa kanya. Inalam niya kung sino ang someone na pag-uukulan na nito ng atensiyon. Nalaman niya na si Johann Feria-Soliveda iyon.

Eloise's mother and Johann's mother arranged a date between the two. Kylie heard that Eloise fell so hard with Johann. The moment she laid eyes on him. Bukambibig nito ang lalaki. Pinaplano na nga yata nito ang magiging mga pangalan ng mga anak nito. She had never wanted a man that much.

So, Mina planned on getting Johann's attention. Isasakatuparan niya ang plano na iyon ngayong gabi. Nalaman niya na nasa club ang dalawa ngayong gabi. She wanted to make sure Eloise would not get the man she wanted so badly.

Walang garantiya na magtatagumpay siya sa plano. Hindi niya alam ang nadarama ng Johann na ito para kay Eloise. Hindi niya kilala ang lalaki. Baka nga magkaugali ang dalawa at mutual ang attraction. Baka bagay lang ang dalawa sa isa't isa.

But Mina would cross the bridge when she got there. This was the first plan anyway. She could scrap everything if she didn't like where it was headed. She just wanted to get something Eloise truly wanted. Iyong mararamdaman nitong talaga ang loss. Iyong kapag nakita siya nito ay magiging napakalinaw ng intention niya.

Mina was aware she was going to do something bad. Aware siya na may madadamay. Hindi dapat paglaruan ang feelings ni Dorian. Hindi dapat pagsamantalahan ang pinsan niya. Pero parang gagawin din yata niya ang kaparehong bagay. Tao naman si Johann. May pakiramdam. Hindi dapat pinaglalaruan. Baka hindi rin dapat na madamay.

Humugot siya ng malalim na hininga. "I'd cross the bridge when I get there," she muttered to herself.

Nakapasok na sila sa loob ng club. The music was loud and there were a lot of people—young people. Naging abala muna sila sa pag-secure ng table para sa kanilang grupo. Hindi niya alam kung anong milagro ang ginawa ni Sven pero nakakuha sila ng booth sa second floor kung saan naroon ang VIP area. Mayroon pang third floor kung saan naroon ang VVIP area.

They ordered their drinks. Nagkatinginan sila ni Bella sa loob ng ilang sandali bago nila ibinaling ang tingin kay Dorian. He looked miserable. He didn't want to be there, but he also didn't want to be a spoilsport. Tinanguan siya ng kakambal bago nito hinawakan ang kamay ni Dorian at hinila patungo sa dance floor.

It was time to look for Johann and Eloise. Nakarating kay Mina na karaniwan na nasa VVIP area ang grupo ng binata. Si Sven ang

naghanap ng paraan para makaakyat sila sa third floor na may guard. He befriended someone who invited them up. Inikot nila ang third floor. Parang katulad lang sa second floor except may sariling bar area na mukhang top shelf ang lahat ng available na alak at mas malalaki ang mga booth.

Nakita nila si Eloise. Hindi sila nito pinansin. Hindi naman kasi sila nito kilala. Pero hindi nila nakita si Johann.

"Sure ka na wala roon `yong Johann?" tanong niya kay Sven habang pababa sila.

She saw some of his pictures that were available online but there were not much. His social media was very private. Bihira pa nitong ipakita ang sarili. Madalang na mag-post. Ang mga larawan na nakita niya ay ilang taon na. He looked so much younger. Kasama nito ang pamilya. Hindi siya gaanong pamilyar sa mukha nito sa kasalukuyan. Mas alam ni Sven ang hitsura nito dahil tinulungan siya nito sa "research."

Sven had seen him in another club before.

Ang sabi nito ay ganap nitong naunawaan kung bakit obsessed na si Eloise kay Johann. Hindi na nag-elaborate pa ang kaibigan dahil hindi raw nito kayang ipaliwanag. Hindi rin daw "capturable," whatever that meant. Kailangan daw makita ng mismong mga mata niya.

"Sure ako," tugon ni Sven. "Life changing kapag nakita mo siya."

Puno ng duda si Mina dahil mukhang ordinaryo naman ang lalaki base sa mga picture na nakita niya. Mukhang tipikal na anak mayaman.

Bumaba sila sa first floor. Kumuha sila ng maiinom bago nila hinanap ang mga kasama sa malawak na dance floor. Napangiti naman siya nang makita na parang nag-e-enjoy na kahit na paano si Dorian. Umiindak na ang katawan nito at nakangiti habang pinapanood ang todong pagsayaw nina Bella at Kylie.

Lalapit sana si Mina sa tatlo nang maramdaman niyang hinila siya ni Sven. Tumingin siya sa kaibigan na may itinuro.

Wala sa loob na sinundan niya ang itinuro nito. Nakita niya ang grupo ng ilang lalaki na kaswal na nakasandal sa pader habang hawak-hawak ang kani-kanilang mga inumin.

Kaagad na nalaman ni Mina kung sino sa mga ito si Johann. Naunawaan na niya ang mga naging pahayag ni Sven. Naunawaan na rin niya si Eloise. The young man stood out. He was not just handsome, he was beautiful. Ilang sandali na pinagmasdan niya si Johann.

He had a heart-shaped face, she realized. She didn't know that it could be so attractive to a man. He had a nice forehead and temples, narrow jawline and slightly pointed chin. His face shape was balanced and symmetrical.

When he moved, she saw he had an angular jawline that added definition and masculinity to that beautiful face. Patuloy sa paggalaw ang ulo nito hanggang sa maligaw ang mga paningin nito sa gawi niya. Their eyes met. The world silenced, or it felt like it. Parang tumigil sa paggalaw ang lahat at

naglaho. Parang walang ibang tao sa mundo kundi silang dalawa lang.

She was focused on those eyes. She could not discern his eye color, but they were almond-shaped, with a slight upward tilt at the outer corners. Those eyes gave him a distinctive and expressive look. His eyebrows were thick and arched, which were still attractive and masculine. They were well-groomed and follow the natural shape of his brow bone. Their thickness was ideal, as it matched his eye size and face shape.

Aware naman si Mina sa pag-aaral na ginagawa niya. Hindi niya kailangang pansinin ang bawat detalye ng mukha na iyon mula sa distansiya. Hindi niya kailangang ma-obsess sa kaliit-liitang detalye. She didn't have to analyze every feature. He was beautiful, simple. She just couldn't help herself. Parang gusto niyang memoryahin ang bawat detalye. Hindi niya maintindihan kung bakit parang kailangan. Gusto lang talaga niya.

His nose was straight and slender, with a

rounded tip and narrow nostrils. His nose bridge was low, it did not protrude much from his face. His nose tip was slightly upturned, which gave him a friendly and approachable look.

This is getting ridiculous, Mina.

That was true but her eyes moved down to his lips. They were full, with a well-defined cupid's bow. His lips were attractive and sensual, as they created a contrast with his angular jawline and added softness to his face. They looked well-hydrated and smooth. His lower lip is wider and fuller than his upper lip, which she knew was a common feature among males.

He was smiling, she realized. It was a closed-mouth smile, just a slight upturn of lips.

Ibinalik niya ang paningin sa mga mata nito. Nakatingin pa rin ito sa kanya. A polite smile. He was giving her a polite fake smile.

She winked at him. She gave him a playful, mischievous grin that invited challenge and

promised fun—or she hoped it would deliver like that.

His smile stayed polite and fake. In fact, parang mas naging polite at fake iyon.

She winked again.

Inalis nito ang mga mata sa kanya. Binalingan nito ang mga kaibigan at hindi na uli tumingin sa gawi niya.

Napakurap-kurap si Mina. Hindi niya gaanong mapaniwalaan. Awang ang bibig na tumingin siya kay Sven na mukhang pigil-pigil lang na mapabulalas ng tawa.

"I'm sorry, girl."

CHAPTER FOUR

DELPHINE WAS glad Ramil took her to this quiet and classy bar. They were given a table where they could enjoy their drink while taking in the beautiful view of the city.

"Maraming salamat talaga na pinaunlakan mo na sa wakas ang imbitasyon ko," sabi nito matapos mailapag sa harapan nila ang kanilang mga inumin.

Marahan na ngumiti si Delphine. "You're a good man, Ramil. I've known you for a long time."

Ngumiti rin si Ramil. Nangislap ang mga mata nito sa amusement. Hindi talaga niya

sigurado kung ano ang amusing pero kahit na siya ay parang amused na rin.

"We're good friends, Ramil," aniya.

Tumango ang lalaki. "You're a beautiful woman. In my age range. Successful. Nasa parehong sektor kaya mas mauunawaan natin ang isa't isa. Mas madaling intindihin ang demands."

"We're perfect on paper," she concluded, pigil-pigil ang sarili na matawa. Alam niya na hindi siya dapat na matawa at hindi rin siya sigurado kung ano ang eksaktong nakakatawa. Parang natatawa lang talaga siya.

"We are perfect on paper," sang-ayon ni Ramil.

"I make sense to be with," dagdag ni Delphine.

"Yeah." Bahagya nang nagsalubong ang mga kilay nito habang nakatingin sa kanya.

"Wala kang pagnanasa sa akin, Ramil." Naging direkta na si Delphine. She could've chosen better wording, but it was what it was.

"That's not true," mabilis nitong tanggi.

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"You're a very beautiful woman."

"I know I'm a very beautiful woman. You just don't want me."

"That's not—" Natigil ang anumang gusto sana nitong sabihin sa kanya nang waring may makapukaw sa interes nito. Natuon ang mga mata nito roon.

Halos wala sa loob na sinundan ni Delphine ang tinitingnan nito. Maging siya ay natigilan. Nakatingin si Ramil sa isang couple na kararating lang. Patungo ang mga ito sa isang table na may kalayuan sa kanila pero matatanaw pa rin nila sa puwesto nila.

Tuon ang paningin ni Delphine sa lalaki na kaagad niyang nakilala. Kahit na saan at kahit na kailan ay mabilis niyang makikilala si Rafe. Kaagad niyang mararamdaman. Kahit na ilang taon na ang lumipas, kaya pa rin nitong buhayin ang ilang mga damdamin sa kanya.

Parang naramdaman ni Rafe na may mga matang nakatingin. Bago pa man niya maiiwas ang paningin ay nagawi na sa kanya

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ang atensiyon nito at mabilis na nagtama ang kanilang mga mata. Kumislap ang sorpresa sa mga mata nito. Kapagkuwan ay parang nabasa niya ang paghangad. Siguro ay medyo niloloko lang niya ang sarili na iyon ang kanyang nakita dahil sa isang iglap ay naglaho iyon.

Pero hindi nito inalis ang paningin sa kanya. Hindi rin kaagad niya maiiwas ang mga mata. His gaze bore into hers, a gravitational force that held her captive.

He was still the most beautiful man her eyes laid on. She wondered if he would always be. He was aging so gracefully and very elegantly. He was not just good to look at, he exuded an irresistible allure, a magnetic charm that had always drawn everyone in.

Something familiar rose on her chest. Forbidden longing. This was a man she could never have.

Neither one of them was looking away. The intensity of their gazes was deepening. She believed she saw the spark of attraction in

those lovely eyes.

Pilit na inutusan ni Delphine ang sarili na alisin ang tingin kay Rafe bago pa man siya ganap na makalimot. Hindi niya maaaring hayaan ang sarili na makalimot.

Ipinaalala niya sa sarili na naroon siya kasama ang isang lalaki. Naalala niya na kasasabi lamang niya na walang pagnanasa sa kanya si Ramil at naalala rin niyang akma niyang sasabihin na wala silang pagnanasa sa isa't isa. Hindi niya maalala ang importansiya niyon, pero ang mahalaga ay naalala niya na may kasama siya. Si Ramil. Hindi si Rafe.

Hindi na kailanman magiging si Rafe. Matagal na niya iyong alam. Matagal na niyang tanggap.

Itutuon niya ang paningin at buong atensiyon kay Ramil. Pero hindi nakatingin sa kanya si Ramil. Hindi rin ito nakatingin kay Rafe, kanyang nabatid. Nakatingin ang ka-date niya sa babaeng kasama ni Rafe.

Halos wala sa loob na tumingin siya sa babae. She was very stunning. Iniwasan

niyang tumingin kay Rafe pero hindi niya mapagtagumpayan lalo na sa puwesto ng table ng mga ito. They were quite a pair. They were beautiful together. They looked as though they could belong together.

Ayaw niyang gaanong pansinin ang waring kurot sa kanyang puso. It was such a ridiculous feeling. Hindi niya gustong tanggapin ang ganoong damdamin.

Itinuon na muna niya ang pansin sa babae. She was truly a stunner. And young. Not so young. She was in her mid-twenties, sa kanyang tantiya. Nakita niya ang pasimpleng pagtingin nito sa gawi nila. Parang titikwas ang kanyang kilay nang mabatid na si Ramil talaga ang tiningnan ng babae.

Ibinalik ni Delphine ang paningin sa ka-date niya. "`You know her?"

Bahagyang pumitlag si Ramil. Sa wakas ay inalisan nito ng tingin ang babae at ibinalik ang atensiyon sa kanya. Mukhang nabatid nito ang nagawa. Tumikhim ito. "Sorry."

"For what?"

Mukhang nahihirapan itong sagutin ang simpleng tanong na iyon.

Medyo kinukutuban na si Delphine. Tahimik niyang pinag-aralan ang mukha ni Ramil. Parang nasira ang lahat ng kapayapaan na mayroon ang lalaki. Biglang nagulo ang mundo nito. Parang biglang na-stress. Because of a woman.

And the woman was not her.

"What is she doing here with Feria?" he muttered. "What is she doing with Feria?" Nakita niya na sinubukan nitong pigilan ang sarili pero mabilis na nabigo. Ibinalik ni Ramil ang tingin sa table nina Rafe. Wala na sa mga ito ang nakatingin sa kanila. Mukhang abala na sa isa't isa.

"You know Rafe—Rafael?" tanong niya kay Ramil na hindi pa rin inaalisan ng tingin ang babae sa kabilang table.

"Who doesn't know Feria? Why him? He's too old for her. She's half his age."

"He is beautiful and I'm sure she is not half his age."

"She's too young for him."

"You know, kung naiba-iba akong babae, offended na ako ngayon, Ramil. Kanina pa siguro ako naiinis dahil nakatingin ka sa iba."

Mabilis na tumingin sa kanya si Ramil na ikinangiti niya kahit na paano. Namilog ang mga mata nito nang mabatid ang ginagawa. Mabilis na bumadya ang guilt sa buong mukha nito.

"I'm so sorry." Naihilamos nito ang kamay sa mukha. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't…" Marahas itong nagpakawala ng buntong-hininga at hindi maituloy ang sinasabi.

Inabot ni Delphine ang kanyang inumin at dinala sa bibig. "Is she over twenty-five?"

"Twenty-seven."

"Then her brain is fully developed. It has been for a couple of years now."

"She's young."

"Who is she? Who is she to you?"

"A friend's daughter."

Hindi sigurado ni Delphine ang sasabihin dahil sigurado siya na hindi fatherly concern

ang kasalukuyan niyang nakikita sa reaksiyon ni Ramil. Nakikita rin niya na pinaglalabanan nito ang anumang mga nadarama. As a mother with two daughters, she was not quite certain what to feel about this.

"I don't understand," he muttered. Sinaid nito ang laman ng baso nito at muling tumunghay sa babae na hindi siya.

"You don't understand why she is on a date with a forty-two-year-old man who isn't you?"

Marahas siyang nilingon ni Ramil.

"If she's going to be with a forty-something guy, it should be you."

Nagulat siya nang bigla na lang tumayo si Ramil at naglakad patungo sa kung saan. Kaagad din niyang nabatid kung ano ang nangyayari nang makita na sinundan nito ang babae na tumayo rin at baka magtutungo sa comfort room.

May pakiramdam si Delphine na hindi na siya babalikan ng ka-date niya. Naghintay siya ng kalahating oras bago siya nagpasya na magtungo na lang sa bar area.

Napagtagumpayan niyang ituon ang mga mata sa magandang view ng mailaw na siyudad sa buong durasyon ng kalahating oras na iyon, pero hindi niya sigurado kung hanggang kailan siya magtatagal.

She could feel him.

She could feel his eyes on her. Kahit na hindi siya tumitingin, alam niyang naroon pa rin si Rafe. Hindi naman niya iniisip na siya ang dahilan kung bakit naroon pa ito. He came there with someone. She came there with someone. They were both on a date with other people.

Mas iniisip niya kung hinihintay pa ba nito ang ka-date nito. Iniisip niya kung ano ang maaaring tumatakbo sa isipan nito. Nagtataka ba ito? Aalamin ba nito kung ano ang nangyari? Maging siya ay curious pero mas aware siya kay Rafe.

Umupo siya sa isa sa mga stool at humingi ng panibagong chardonnay sa bartender. May tinig na nagsasabi sa kanya na maaari naman siyang umalis na lang. Kung talagang ayaw na

niyang mag-aksaya ng panahon at emosyon kay Rafe, she should just walk away. Hindi niya kailangang manatili. Bakit siya nananatili?

Kalalapag lang ng bartender ng inumin niya nang maramdaman niya si Rafe. Alam niya na nasa malapit lang ito bago pa man ito naupo sa katabing stool. She swirled, sniffed, and sipped her wine as he asked for a drink.

Pigil-pigil niya ang sarili na lumingon. Ang bilis ng tibok ng kanyang puso. Everything in her was aware that he was close. Parang naging oversensitive ang senses niya. Bahagya siyang nahirapan na huminga. The tension was palpable.

How long had it been? The last time they were this close was seven years ago. The last time they loved each other was twenty years ago.

Muli niyang dinala ang wineglass sa kanyang bibig. She didn't want to remember that. Their past was long buried. It had been dealt with a long time ago. Matagal na niyang

natanggap na hindi na niya mababago ang mga nangyari. Hindi na mababago ang sitwasyon. Kaya hindi na dapat niya isipin. Hindi na dapat balikan.

But this man… He could still make her feel things. She could still feel him. She still wanted him. She still craved him.

Her heart was still desperate for him.

Kahit na dalawang dekada na ang lumipas. Kahit na yata gaano pa katagal na panahon pa ang lumipas.

They were silent. Tahimik silang uminom. Tahimik na nakikiramdam. He knew that she knew he was there. She should leave. She knew the smart thing to do was get up and just walk away. Never look back.

But she couldn't. Kahit na alam niyang masasaktan siya sa mga alaala at could've beens, hindi pa rin niya magawang umalis.

"Are you drunk enough?"

Hindi kailangang lumingon ni Delphine para malaman na siya ang kausap ni Rafe.

Sinaid ni Delphine ang laman ng kanyang

wineglass. Hindi siya nagkunwari na hindi niya naintindihan ang talagang sinasabi nito. "Are you?" balik niya.

"Another," sabi nito sa bartender habang nakamuwestra sa empty wineglass niya. Mabilis siyang nagkaroon ng panibagong inumin.

Hinayaan na niya ang sarili na tumingin kay Rafe. He was already looking at her. There was heat in those eyes. Oh, he wanted her. He wanted her just as desperately.

Napalunok-lunok siya. Ramdam niya ang pagtaas ng temperatura sa kanyang katawan.

"One night," usal niya. "Just tonight." Then they would get on with their lives like nothing happened. Just one night of being together. Just like before.

"One night."