

# Chapter *One*

A lot of things intimidated Claudia Luna. A problem set with more than two mathematical operations, Jennifer Aniston's rigorous diet and workout regimen, a phallic symbol rising toward the sky.

Wearily, she glanced up at the glass, stone and steel structure towering above her like some chiseled metallic god. Parang gusto niyang umatras sandali. The skyscraper seemed to taunt her, the silver and chrome accent glinting in the morning sun jeering her with its cold fire.

Bumuga siya ng hangin. Mag-drama ba?

Karma really was a bitch, and the bitch hated her.

Not that she could blame the bitch. She was at fault after all.

Umiling siya at pinatatag ang sikmurang kanina pa naninigas sa tensyon at nerbiyon.

“Well,” bulong niya sa sarili, “what goes around comes around, Claudia. Deal with your shit.”

Humugot ulit siya ng hangin at desididong dumerecho sa revolving glass doors ng gusali. She resisted the urge to check her dress for any crease. Maingat ang pagpili niya ng gamit nitong umaga. Well, maingat talaga siya sa pagpili ng damit kahit anong araw. Image meant a lot to her. Pero kanina, natagalan pa siya nang isang oras. Feminine but formal. Classy and businesslike. Channeling Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis’ classic high end look, she chose a form-fitting tweed dress in somber grey. The cut of the sleeveless dress was simple, the above the knee length demure. But the asymmetrical neckline kept it from sliding into boring. Her only jewelry was a silver watch and small pearl earrings, and she finished the look with nude suede pumps and a beige clutch bag.

Wala naman siyang lipstick stain sa ngipin, hindi ba? Gusto niyang dukutin ang compact mirror sa bag para sipatin iyon. She blew out another breath.

The whole darn place made her twitchy. Hindi

sa hindi siya sanay sa mga ganitong lugar. She had rich friends, too. As a makeup artist for well known celebrities, she had been to a few galas and parties in glamorous *I'm-f\*cking-filthy-rich* type of venues herself.

*Bah*, nasa Balesin siya para sa birthday party ng isang kaibigan niya noong isang linggo lang! Pero iba ang pakiramdam sa loob ng gusaling ito. Alangan niyang pinagmasdan ang mataas na kisame at makikintab na marmol na mga dingding ng gusali.

*Andrada Towers* felt formal, austere, snobbish. From the turret ceiling spilling warm golden lights across the cream walls and dark wood paneling to the Belgian grey marble floors, wealth and glamour pulsed like a living entity.

The building housed many prestigious corporations, both local and international, and the whole place reeked of class.

Tumiim-labi si Claudia at lumapit sa security habang nakatitig sa marangyang lobby. Men in sleek corporate suits and women in fashionable work dresses walked briskly across the lobby to the bank of elevators. Everybody looked so professional, smart and polished. Parang pati hinihingang hangin ng mga ito ay iba sa hanging hinihinga ng mga ordinaryong

taong katulad niya. Wealth was one thing, but coupled that with cum laudes and other Latin titles? It's a different breed altogether. Think Jaime Zobel de Ayala and Amal Clooney. Sigurado siyang iyong mga tao rito iyong tipo na may mga letrang kasunod ng mga pangalan, like Ph.D. or something. Intelligence, prestige, pure authority. Elitism at its finest. Pakiramdam niya ay inuuyam siya ng mga ito.

Even in her designer dress, she felt inadequate and dowdy. Fake, feelingera, social climber.

Feeling ni Claudia ay alam ng mga ito na bumagsak siya sa *Math 1* noong kolehiyo, o na second-hand lang ang *Toyota SUV* niya.

Gusto niyang iikot ang mga mata sa sarili. Paranoid much? Kailangan na niyang itigil ang pag-iinarte niya.

Her heels clicked on the marble floor, her long wavy brown hair swaying slightly as she made her way to the security. Binati niya ang guard, at pagkabigay niya ng information niya rito ay nag-print out ito ng temporary ID para sa kanya. Nagpasalamat siya at tinungo ang turnstiles saka dumerecho sa elevator.

Nasa pinakamataas na palapag ang opisina ng binata. Typical. When you own the building, you just had to have the highest floor. Ganoon talaga yata iyon.

Umurong si Claudia sa bandang likod ng elevator nang pumasok ang ilang babae at lalaki. Pinagmasdan niya ang repleksyon sa makintab na salaming dingding.

She had taken particular care with her makeup that morning, too. Neutral colors to enhance her olive skin tone—nothing too fancy or flashy, but every brushstroke was precise and carefully applied. Her skin looked flawless, her dark, big eyes accentuated by a sweep of deep taupe and a touch of metallic bronze. The flush of peach across her cheekbones gave her a natural blush, and the pale pink lipstick made her lips look soft and glossy. Put together but not overly done. Perfect.

Hindi sa conscious si Claudia na makikita niya si Joaquin Fernando Andrada matapos ang halos labing isang taon. Of course not. She just wanted to look professional without looking like she was trying too hard. She was not nervous about seeing him again. Pfft. As if. Siya pa?

F\*ck. Nagpapawis na ang mga kamay at likod niya.

Tumitig siya sa umiilaw na mga numero sa itaas ng mga pinto ng elevators. Isa-isang lumabas ang mga kasabay niya hanggang sa siya na lang ang natira. Tumuwid siya ng tayo sa gilid habang hinihintay na

umakyat ang elevator sa ika-limampung palapag ng gusali.

Two more floors to go, and it's bye-bye pride, hello humiliation. Yeah, karma was a vindictive bitch, and she was at the top of the bitch's hit list.

Bumukas ang pinto, at maingat siyang humakbang palabas ng elevator. She strode directly to the glass entrance emblazoned with *Andrada Corporation* that lead to the inner lobby. Pinagbuksan siya ng receptionist at dumerecho siya rito. She was ten minutes early, but that was just being professional, right? That wasn't over eagerness and anxiety, was it? God, she hoped no one could hear her heart thumping like crazy inside her chest.

Magalang siyang ngumiti sa babae. "Good morning. I'm Claudia Luna. I have a nine o'clock appointment with Mr. Joaquin Andrada."

Tumango ang receptionist at tumipa sa keyboard ng computer nito. "Yes, Miss Luna. Mr. Andrada is still in a meeting. Please take a seat. Would you like anything to drink?"

Ngumiti siya sa magandang receptionist at umiling. "No, thank you."

Umupo si Claudia sa waiting area at pinilit ang sariling kumalma. Pero halos hindi pa nag-iinit ang

puwitan niya sa leather couch ay may lumabas nang isang lalaki para dalhin siya sa opisina ni Joaquin. Kumuyom-palad siya at muling sinabihan ang sariling kumalma saka sinundan ang lalaki.

God, she could do this, right? It's been over ten years. Surely, he had forgiven her. Or hadn't he? They were barely adults back then, almost still teenagers.

*Okay, fine.* Inikot niya ang mga mata sa sarili. She had been twenty-one back then, but that was still very young. And young people make stupid mistakes. Dumb mistakes. Dumb mistakes hurt people, and she had hurt him. Lalong bumigat sa kaibuturan niya ang buhol na namuo sa sikmura niya noong isang araw pa.

Pinatatag ni Claudia ang loob at itinaas ang kanyang noo. Walang puwang para sa kahihyan ngayon. Beggars can't be choosers. Tatlo lang ang choices niya: hayaang makulong ang kapatid niya, umutang sa loan shark, o makiusap sa ex-boyfriend niya. The choice was obvious, right? Right.

Pick your poison ang drama niya.

Binuksan ng lalaki ang pinto ng opisina at pinilit niya ang mga paang humakbang papasok doon.

“Make sure you and your men are safe. Update me first thing on Monday.”

Muntikan na siyang madapa sa mababang boses

ng nasa loob. Akala niya ay malakas na ang tibok ng puso niya kanina, pero wala iyong sinabi sa pagtambol nito ngayon. Parang may Magnitude 9 earthquake sa loob ng ribs niya. She was sure the guy standing next to her had noticed her heart thumping wildly inside her chest, too.

“I don’t want to hear any accidents. Deal with the subcontractor, if they still don’t have the necessary permits by the weekend, cut them off. They’re not indispensable. Another violation of the contract and that’s it. Much better to cut losses while still early than to deal with their inefficiency. Yes, thank you.”

Tuluyan siyang pumasok sa silid at nakita ang lalaking nakaupo sa likod ng isang malaking salaming mesa. Nasilaw siya sandali sa tumatagos na liwanag mula sa salaming dingding na bintana sa likuran nito, at sandali siyang napatigil. Ibinaba ni Joaquin ang receiver sa cradle nito at nagtaas ng tingin sa kanya.

Darn it, she wanted to turn back and run for the hills.

Framed by the view of the city sprawling like a jungle of metal and glass behind him, Joaquin Fernando Andrada was a dark and imposing image. A fallen angel, a quintessential alpha male, a powerful and modern pagan god.

He had been drop dead gorgeous eleven years ago, but he was dangerously attractive now.

She stared at his masculine perfection. Clad in a black suit and black dress shirt that couldn't quite conceal the power in his hard body, he was one of nature's masterpieces. He wore power the way he wore his *Armani* suit and tie. Flawlessly. Effortlessly.

His dark eyes held hers for an infinite second, but his breathtaking face remained impassive.

“Claudia,” sambit nito, at parang kinuryente siya sa pagbigkas nito sa kanyang pangalan.

Deep, low and silky, his voice had always been like sex rolled in dark chocolate and honey. She felt the slow burn in her blood, and she wanted to kick herself for it.

He stood, his strong body unfolding with innate masculine grace. Her toes curled in her shoes as she watched him. Sunlight glinted off his thick, coal black hair and sun-kissed face, and she couldn't stop herself from imagining how they would feel underneath her fingers and palms. Hot skin over hard muscles, damp flesh sliding against damp flesh...

Gusto niyang tumawa. Pagpiyestahan ba ito at gawing main star ng kanyang R-rated fantasies? She needed to get her shit together.

Naglakad siya palapit dito. “Joaquin,” nagawa niyang sabihin. “Good morning.” She watched him watch her as she walked toward him, and she felt a rush of heat spread across her skin. She couldn’t stop her eyes from roving over every inch of him, too.

Broad shoulders, perfectly sculpted jaw and cheekbones, strong forehead, aquiline nose and a firm arrogant mouth—any trace of boyish softness was gone in the hard lines and angles of his ruggedly handsome face. Wala na ang lalaking naging nobyo ni Claudia halos labing isang taon na ang nakakaraan. Iba na ang lalaking ito na nasa harapan niya ngayon.

She could feel the tips of her breasts tightening against the cups of her bra as his eyes drifted down the generous curves of her body. Gusto niyang tumili. But he lifted his gaze, and his dark eyes locked on her face. She almost whimpered at the intensity of his stare, and wanted to curse out loud when she felt sharp heat pulsing deep between her thighs.

She wanted to pull at her hair.

“Hi,” parang tanga niyang sambit. She had to smile and be friendly, right?

After all, he had called her Claudia, not Miss Luna. Hindi ito nagpapanggap na hindi siya nito kilala o na wala itong personal na koneksyon sa kanya. But then

again, baka mas makabuting hindi na lang maalala ni Joaquin ang personal na koneksyon nito sa kanya. It had ended disastrously, after all.

Inilahad niya ang isang kamay dito at maaliwalas siyang ngumiti. Sinulyapan nito ang nakalahad niyang kamay, at sa loob ng ilang nakakatakot na segundo, akala niya ay hindi nito tatanggapin ang pakikipagkamay niya. Pero inabot nito ang kanyang palad.

His strong, warm hand engulfed hers, and heat shot up her arm and went straight to her head. She almost stepped back, but his grip tightened around her hand. His dark gaze flickered to her eyes, and his strong jaw worked as he nodded.

“Good morning,” he said in that low and deep voice that made her skin tingle. Binawi nito ang kamay mula sa kanya at iminuwestra ang upuan sa harapan ng mesa nito. Parang may dumadaloy na malagkit na init sa mga ugat ni Claudia, at tila bibigay ang mga tuhod niya.

“Have a seat,” saad nito.

*Yes, have a seat.* She needed to f\*cking sit. Umupo siya sa visitor’s chair at mahinahong pinagkrus ang kanyang mga binti.

Okay, so far so good, right? At least hindi na siya

nanganganib na madapa sa harapan nito. That would just be the icing on the freaking cake.

“How are you, Claudia?”

Oh, great. She was doing absolutely wonderful. Para lang namang may daan-daang higad at alupihan na gumagapang sa tiyan niya.

“Good,” sagot niya. “I’m good.”

He leaned back in his chair, his strong arms casually resting on top of his glass table. He looked like a predator at rest. His dark eyes were unreadable, his strong face a mask of sculpted perfection. “It’s been a long time. Almost eleven years, isn’t it? So what have you been doing? Where are you working now?”

*Uhm... next question, please?*

Darn it. She dreaded this part of their conversation.

“This and that. I’m a makeup artist. Some of my regular clients are Ivana Escudero, Maria Aragon and Chantelle Lopez. I do a lot of makeup for fashion shows, and I have some contracts for movies as a makeup and hair stylist, too.”

Did she sound defensive or what? She knew name-dropping was a necessary evil sometimes, but she still felt defensive and pathetic. Maybe because she was.

“Ah.” His sculpted lips curved, but his eyes

remained impassive. “That’s good to hear. You went to fashion school?”

“No.” Narinig ni Claudia ang diin sa kanyang tinig, at pinilit niyang gawing malumanay ang pagsasalita. “But I took crash courses. And I’ve been in the industry for quite some time now. And makeup and me had always been friends, so it’s a matter of experience and exposure.”

“You didn’t finish your degree?”

Walang pang-iinsulto sa tono ni Joaquin. Pormal na tanong iyon. Distant, cold, impersonal. But suddenly, she became even more aware of how handsome he was, how opulent the dark gray carpet was beneath her feet, how the sleek interior of his office exuded sophistication and wealth. And she sat there all polished and dolled up, a part-time makeup artist who didn’t even finish her college degree.

Isang tanso na nagpapanggap na ginto. Yes, iyon siya. Feelingera, ipokrita, sosyalerang walang ibubuga. At pareho nilang alam iyon.

“No,” sagot niya. “I didn’t.”

Tumango ito, walang pagkagulat o pang-uuyam sa mga mata. At gusto niyang tumawa roon. Inaasahan na nito iyon sa kanya, ano? Could she say ‘Ouch?’

*Ouch.*

“I see,” malumanay na patuloy ni Joaquin. “I thought you wanted a career in modeling and acting.”

“It didn’t work out,” sambit niya, at pinanatili ang kalmadong ngiti sa mga labi. *Smile, Claudia, keep that smile.* “But I still accept modeling and acting gigs whenever I can.”

He nodded, and his eyes seemed to cool a fraction. “Good for you. What can I do for you today, Claudia?”

So tapos na ang small talk? It’s time for the main course then. Pinatibay niya ang sikmura at tumango siya sa lalaki.

“I’m not going to beat around the bush, Joaquin. I’m here to ask for a favor.”

“About your brother,” kaswal nitong sambit.

Yes, about her brother, as if hindi nila parehong alam na iyon talaga ang dahilan ng pagbisita niya.

“Yes,” sagot niya. “About my brother. I want to negotiate a mutually beneficial deal.”

And *The Feelingera and Panggap Award* goes to... Mutually beneficial deal her ass. As if may maiaalok siya kay Joaquin na magugustuhan nito.

“Look,” bulalas niya, at kumuyom ang kanyang mga palad. “You have every right to sue my brother for property damage. Ako rin gusto ko siyang idemanda sa ginawa niya. Walang excuse sa ginawa niyang

pagsira sa hotel room, o sa pagsira sa kotse mo. God, I wanted to strangle him myself. Like, seriously? Paano niya napagkalamang *Subaru BRZ* ang *Aston Martin DBS*? Gaganti na lang mali pa.”

Inis siyang umiling at hindi niya napigilang hilutin ang kanyang sentido. *Ang wrinkles, dear*. Kailangan niyang maging mahinahon.

“I’m really, really sorry about what happened. Alam kong hindi ‘yon ang kailangan mo. Kailangan naming bayaran ang sinira ng kapatid ko. But we really are sorry.”

Lumunok si Claudia at hinarap ang ex-boyfriend niya.

Nanatili lamang itong nakatitig sa kanya habang blangko ang ekspresyon ng guwapo nitong mukha. Cool dark eyes, strong and perfect bone structure, hard sensual mouth. *Ice King, much?* Yeah, art form iyon ng dating nobyo. No one could pull the cool handsome look better than Joaquin Fernando Andrada.

“At tungkol sa bayad, I’ll be honest, Joaquin, we can’t fully pay for the damages right now. We don’t have fifteen million pesos. Kahit ibenta namin lahat ng ari-arian namin, masuwerte na kung umabot ‘yun ng ten million. Five and a half million lang ang kaya

naming ibigay nang buo sa ngayon. The rest, we can only pay through installment. Pero kung hindi uubra, we'll liquidate our assets to give that ten million. Tapos 'yung matitira, unti-unti naming babayaran. Pero higit d'un, gusto naming makiusap na huwag mo nang idemanda si Francis. We'll pay down to the last cent along with the interest, but please don't file a lawsuit."

Oh, the drama of her life. Parang naririnig pa niya ang theme song ng *Lovingly Yours* sa background. Pero mas mabuti nang magdrama siya sa ex niya kaysa sa loan sharks. Better the devil she knew. Not that Joaquin was bad or anything. On the contrary, her ex-boyfriend had always been nice.

She leaned closer, her eyes pleading. "Iyon talaga ang gusto naming ipakiusap. Alam kong sobra ang hinihingi namin, pero sana mapagbigyan mo. We will give you the title of our properties to serve as collateral, but please don't file a lawsuit."

His dark gaze remained unreadable. She remembered how he used to look at her back then when they were younger, how those dark eyes warmed. But she had shattered all that.

Nanikip ang kanyang dibdib at nag-init ang kanyang lalamunan. Gusto niyang kutusan ang sarili. Mag-moment ba?

“Joaquin—”

“Fine,” pakli nito.

Umiling siya. “Please, I swear, hindi ka namin tatakbuhan. Babayaran namin hanggang sa huling—”

“I said fine.”

“Promise, we won’t just disappear. We will pay you—”

“Claudia,” pakli nito, nakatiim-bagang at magkasalubong ang mga kilay. “I said fine.”

Napakurap siya rito. “What?”

He looked like he wanted to roll his eyes. “I won’t file a lawsuit. You can pay the fifteen million through installment. I’ll have my lawyer contact you tomorrow.”

Napatuwid ang likod ni Claudia at napakurap ulit siya sa lalaki.

*Replay. Ano’ng sinabi nito?*

“What?” parang sirang plaka na ulit niya.

Matigas ang bawat anggulo ng mukha ni Joaquin, at walang bahid ng ngiti sa sensual nitong mga labi. He was good with the irritated look, too.

“My lawyer will contact you about the terms and conditions of the contract. Clear?”

Napakurap lang siya ulit at napatitig dito nang ilang segundo. Pinoproseso pa ng utak niya ang mga

sinabi nito.

*My lawyer will contact you...*

Ibig sabihin ba noon ay... sinasabi ba nito na...

“Wait...” sambit niya, at pinigil ang kanyang paghinga. “What are you talking about? You mean, okay na? Payag ka? ‘Yon ba ang sinasabi mo?”

“That’s what I said. Anything else?”

Binigyan siya nito ng tingin na para bang may learning disability siya. Napatikom tuloy siya ng bibig. What? Legitimate ang tanong niya, hindi ba? Natural lang na magulat siya na pumayag agad ito. At the very least, she thought he would insult her or make fun of her. Snotty Claudia was begging her ex-boyfriend for help, har-har-har. At fifteen million pesos ang pinag-uusapan dito.

“Uhm...” aniya, “You mean... as in, okay na? Hindi ka na magdedemanda? Payag ka kahit five million lang muna ang ibayad namin? ‘Tapos installment na iyong iba? Iyon ba ang sinasabi mo?”

His jaw clenched, and irritation flickered in those dark eyes. “That’s what I just said. Want me to record it for you?”

Hindi niya pinansin ang sarcasm ni Joaquin, mataman lang niya itong tinitigan.

“Joaquin,” patuloy niya, “sigurado ka ba? Fifteen

million ang pinag-uusapan dito.”

“Mukha ba ‘kong hindi sigurado?”

“Pero—”

“Look, kung ayaw mo, puwede kong bawiin. I can always—”

“Wait! No! No!” Madamdamin siyang umiling at tumuwid ng upo. “Of course not!”

Goddamn it. Gusto niyang kurutin ang sarili.

Grasya na ay kinukuwestiyon pa niya? Shunga ba siya?

Tumango si Claudia at niluwagan ang pagkakakuyom ng kanyang mga palad. Darn, malamig pa rin ang mga kamay niya.

“Okay,” aniya. “Thank you. Huwag mong bawiin, please. Pasensya na, nagulat lang ako. So, uh... your lawyer will contact me?”

“Yes, Darwin will contact you tomorrow.”

“Darwin? Darwin Fontallan?”

Tumango si Joaquin, at sandali siyang na-distract sa pagtama ng liwanag sa itim na itim nitong buhok. “Yes. He has been my lawyer from the start.”

Tumango siya. Kaibigan ni Joaquin si Darwin mula pagkabata, at schoolmate din nila noon sa kolehiyo. Pero hindi niya alam na naging abogado na pala ito.

“Okay, I’ll wait for his call tomorrow.”

Alangan niyang pinagmasdang muli si Joaquin at

hindi pa rin niya mapigilan ang magduda. Iyon na ba talaga iyon? He wouldn't ask her to be his sex slave or anything like that in exchange for the favor?

Gusto niyang humalakhak. Sex slave talaga? Masyado na yata siyang maraming binabasang erotic romance.

“So, you're really sure?” maingat niyang pangungulit.

Bumuka ang bibig ni Joaquin para yata singhalan siya, pero nagtaas siya ng dalawang kamay at hindi niya napigilang bumungisngis.

“Sorry, sorry. Reflex lang. It just seemed too good to be true. Not that I'm saying you're not good or anything, I mean, masyado lang nakakagulat. It's just that—”

Itinikom ni Claudia ang bibig. Darn, nasaan ang composure kapag kailangan niya? “Sorry. Uhm...I blabber when I'm nervous.”

“Yes, I remember.”

Natigilan siya roon at nanlalaki ang mga matang napatitig siya dito. Natigilan din si Joaquin sa sinabi, at bumakas ang tensyon sa expression nito. Nag-iwas ito ng tingin sa kanya. Nag-iwas din siya ng tingin.

*“I remember.”*

Sandali siyang pumikit. *He remembers, huh?*

Ano pa ang naalala nito tungkol sa kanya? Ang pagkamaarte niya? Ang pagiging mukhang pera niya? Napatingin siya ulit kay Joaquin.

She really thought he would at least insult her to try to get back at her for what she did to him back then. And now that she had opened the door, she waited for him to do that. Pero nanatiling nakaiwas lang ang tingin nito. Stiff, irritated, and yes, maybe a bit angry. But he didn't lash out at her. He contained it, overpowered it.

Nagbaba ng tingin si Claudia. She supposed Joaquin was above something that shallow. Powerful and successful Joaquin Andrada had no time for petty emotions for someone like her.

Umiling siya at matabang na napangiti. "Okay," aniya. "Thank you."

Tama na ang pang-iistorbo niya rito. It was time to go. Tumayo siya, at kahit papaano, maluwag na ang buhol sa kanyang sikmura.

Inilahad niya ang kamay sa lalaki. "Thank you, Joaquin. We deeply appreciate this favor. You don't have to do this, but you still did. Thank you for your kindness. Tatanawin namin itong malaking utang na loob. Salamat. Hihintayin ko na lang ang tawag ng lawyer mo. Salamat talaga. At sorry ulit sa ginawa ng

kapatid ko.”

Sinulyapan nito ang nakalahad niyang kamay at muli, akala ni Claudia ay hindi nito tatanggapin iyon. Pero tumayo ito at tiim-bagang na tinanggap ang kanyang pakikipagkamay. Umarko ang kuryente sa kanyang ugat sa init ng malaki nitong palad, at nakita niyang pumintig ang kalamnan sa matigas na panga ng lalaki.

Did he feel that, too? Probably not.

“Thank you, Joaquin,” sambit ulit niya. “It’s nice seeing you again.”

Tumango lang ito at binitawan ang kamay niya. “Good day, Claudia.”

She smiled and nodded. Tumalikod siya at naglakad papunta sa pinto ng opisina nito. Magaan na ang mga hakbang niya, at parang natanggal na rin ang bigat sa kanyang dibdib. Hinagilap niya ang seradura at pinihit iyon pabukas. Pero huminto din siya.

Tumitig siya sa makintab na brass handle. “Joaquin?” Nanatili siyang nakatalikod sa binata. “For what I did back then, I’m sorry. There’s no excuse. My saying sorry may not mean anything to you. But I am.”

Nilingon niya ito, at nakitang matigas ang titig ng binata sa kanya. She let her eyes take in every perfect inch of him. He had triumphed over all the shit that

had been thrown his way when they were younger. He had triumphed over what she did to him back then, too. And yet, here he was, successful and powerful but still so fair, still so kind.

She had dreaded seeing him again, but now she was glad she did. She was happy she did. Tinapunan niya ito ng maliit na ngiti, at sa pagkakataong iyon, maaliwas na talaga iyon at maluwag. Masaya, walang halong kaba o pag-aalala.

“I’m happy for you.” Tuluyan niyang binuksan ang pinto at lumabas ng opisina ni Joaquin Andrada.

