

Chapter *One*

*M*etikulosong pinunasan ni Adam ang kitchen counter matapos hugasan ang pinagkainan ng agahan. Hindi maalis ang ngiti sa kanyang mga labi. It was a Saturday morning, but he could still feel the rush from the previous day.

Kahapon lamang ay ginawa na siyang junior partner sa law firm na limang taon din niyang pinagtrabahuhan. At thirty-two, he was the youngest junior partner at *Versales Associates*. He couldn't wait to see his office door plaque; *Adam Esquivel, Junior Partner*.

He had been working so hard these past five years, representing small clients against big people and

corporations and winning them all. Finally, nabayaran na rin ang kanyang pinaghirapan. Pero alam niyang hindi doon natatapos ang lahat. This time, he had to work harder for his next target; to become the law firm's senior partner.

Muli siyang napangiti pero napalis iyon nang mag-ring ang cellphone na nasa kitchen counter din. He looked at the caller. It was Mylene, his brother's ex.

"Hello?"

"Adam, I can't stand this anymore! Hindi ko ma-contact ang kapatid mo and I need to talk to him," she instantly lashed out.

"You do know my brother is in the States, so calling me won't get you to talk to him either," malumanay niyang pagpapaalala rito.

"I know that, pero since hindi ko siya ma-contact, I thought I'll talk to you instead. I just got promoted in work, and I need to transfer to Singapore next week. If I don't take it, I will have to wait another year for a chance of promotion. I need to take it, Adam."

"Then take it, what are you calling me for?"

"It's Jenny, ayaw niyang sumama..."

Napahugot siya ng malalim na hininga, his poor niece. Teenagers pa lang sina Carlo at Mylene nang mabuntis ang dalaga. Pero hindi pa man

ipinapanganak ang kanyang pamangkin ay nag-break na ang dalawa. The ex-couple agreed that they'd share all the baby's expenses.

Few years later, tumulak na papuntang States si Carlo where both of them grew up at nag-decide na roon na maghanap ng trabaho. Naiwan si Mylene, kasama ang anim na taong gulang na anak sa Pilipinas. She may not have directly said it, pero alam niyang may sama ito ng loob hindi lang sa kanyang kapatid kundi pati na rin sa kanila ng pamilya niya.

Mylene had expected them to push Carlo into marrying her. Gusto ng dalaga na mabuo ang pamilya nito. But Carlo had a mind of his own. And all Adam could do was give him advice, advice that his brother never took. At dahil doon ay inilayo ni Mylene ni Jenny sa kanila, na mas lumala pa nang umalis si Carlo.

It had been more than a year since he last saw Jenny. Iyon ay nang pakiusapan siya ng kapatid na puntahan ito sa school dahil ayaw na ni Mylene na ipakausap man lang ang bata sa ama nito. Carlo was worried and wanted to make sure that Jenny was all right. And she was.

Pero nang malaman ni Mylene na dinalaw niya ang pamangkin sa eskuwelahan nito ay halos

magdeklara ito ng world war, so Adam backed off. As much as he cared for Jenny, ayaw na niyang magulo pa ang dati nang komplikado nitong buhay.

“Well, if she’s not going, I don’t see any point of you taking that promotion. How old is Jenny now? Thirteen? Hindi pa niya kayang mag-isa,” solusyon ng binata.

“Why do I always have to make the sacrifices? After I got pregnant, ilang taon akong natigil sa pag-aaral while your jerk of a brother went on with his merry life. I worked hard para matapos sa pag-aaral at makuha ang promotion na ito. And you want me to give that up again?”

Napabuntong-hininga si Adam. Yeah, Mylene needed to talk to his brother. “I’ll try and contact Carlo today, and then I’ll call you.”

“That’s pointless!” mabilis nitong saad. “I’ve called his cellphone and landline countless times. He’s probably out somewhere with no coverage. And I cannot wait anymore, kailangan na ng boss ko ang desisyon ko ngayon. And I’m saying yes.”

Napakunot-noo siya. “And what are you gonna do with Jenny?”

“I’m bringing her to you today. Ikaw na muna ang bahala. She doesn’t want to come with me so she left

me with no choice.”

“What?” Pakiramdam ni Adam ay nakarinig siya ng balitang mayamaya lang ay magugunaw na ang mundo. Irritation instantly crept up his chest. “What the hell are you talking about? You can’t just abandon your child!”

“I am not abandoning her! Iwan ko lang siya sa ’yo pansamantala. She’s also confused. I’m sure after a while na wala ako ay papayag na rin siyang pumunta ng Singapore. Maybe by that time ay nakapag-adjust na ako doon and then it will be easier for both of us,” dere-derecho nitong paliwanag, malinaw na pinaghandaan na ang lahat ng sasabihin.

“This is crazy!” he protested. “What do I know about kids? And in case you don’t know, I am very busy. I am not gonna have time with her.”

“You just got to figure that out, Adam. I’ll see you tonight, around seven o’clock. I’ll bring her over to your house, prepare dinner or something. It’s good na magkita muna kayo bago siya lumipat diyan.”

“Mylene, wait. You need to think—”

“Bye, Adam!”

“Damn it!” hindi na niya napigil ang mura nang putulin ng babae ang tawag. What the f*ck just happened? Hindi makapaniwalang tinitigan niya ang

screen ng telepono. Did that conversation just happen?

Hindi pa man nakakabawi ay tumunog na ang doorbell, kasunod niyon ay ang boses ng kanyang ina.

“Adam, Darling!”

Napabuga siya ng hangin bago padaskol na ibinulsa ang cellphone at binuksan ang pinto. Ang nakangiting mukha ng ina ang kanyang nabungaran. Wearing a red pencil-cut skirt paired with women’s suit, his mother still looked vibrant as ever.

Walang gana siyang yumuko upang mahalikan nito ang kanyang pisngi. “What are you doing here?” aniyang bumalik na uli sa kusina kasunod ang inang may bitbit na paper bag.

“Well, I’ve heard that you just got promoted yesterday, so I thought I’d drop by today para mag-celebrate.” Kasabay niyon ay ang paghugot nito ng mamahaling champagne sa bitbit na paper bag. “Congratulations!” anitong sinimulan nang buksan ang bote.

He rolled his eyes. “Mom, alas nueve pa lang ng umaga.”

Bigla itong natigilan. “Oh, right.” Itinigil nito ang ginagawa at inilapag ang bote sa island. “It’s too early to celebrate. Let’s save that for later. I’ll have some of your scotch instead...” anitong tumalikod at tinungo

ang kanyang mini-bar.

So, yeah, his mother was out of the picture. There was no way in hell he would let his niece live with her. As much as he loved his mother, there were just some things Amanda couldn't do. Like raising a kid properly. Napailing siya.

“Have you talked to your brother lately?” anitong naupo sa kitchen stool sa harap ng island.

Umiling si Adam. “Ni hindi ko na maalala kung kailan ko siya huling nakausap. But you would be interested to know, that I just talked to Mylene bago kayo dumating.”

Tumaas ang isang kilay ni Amanda, malinaw na nakuha niya ang atensyon nito. “Ano ang kailangan niya?”

Kumuha siya ng isang bote ng orange juice sa fridge bago naupo kaharap ng kanyang ina. “She got promoted as well, but her promotion means she needs to move to Singapore.”

Eksaheradong napahugot ito ng hininga. “And she's taking Lenny? Ano'ng karapatan niyang ilayo ang apo ko sa akin?”

“It's Jenny,” diin niya. “As in Jennifer. And since when did you care about Jen? Ni hindi mo pa siya nakasama nang kayong dalawa lang.”

Kumibit-balikat ang kausap. “Only because that stupid girl won’t let me,” defensive nitong sagot at sumimsim sa scotch glass.

Tumaas ang dalawang kilay niya habang titig na titig sa baso nito. “And we both know why...”

Amanda rolled her eyes. “Oh, please... I’ve been like this even before I conceived you, Adam, and you grew up just fine. You’re a respected and successful man. So is Carlo.”

“Yeah, it’s kinda hard not to be when all of my younger years were spent in various boys’ camps and boarding schools.” It was his mother’s way of getting rid of them para walang sagabal sa party life nito.

“Yeah, they were expensive...” walang anumang nitong sagot.

He tried not to roll his eyes again. “Anyway, she’s not taking Jenny to Singapore. Iwan niya sa akin ang bata dahil hindi niya ma-contact si Carlo. Not that it would make any difference, anyway. Nasa States si Carlo and I’m sure his decision would be the same.”

“Okay, this is very offensive. Bakit hindi ako ang tinawagan ni Mylene? I can take care of Jenny!”

“No, you can’t, Mother...” mabilis niyang kontra habang naniningkit ang mga matang nakatingin sa kaunting scotch na natapon sa island. “And please

don't insist on anything. But if you want to help, you can start by finding me a nanny for Jenny. I don't think na kailangan niya ng talagang mag-aalaga sa kanya. Just someone who could keep her company here at home while I'm at work." Tumayo siya at hinagilap ang basahan.

"Adam—"

"You can see her, take her shopping or whatever, but she's staying with me," mabilis na niyang putol habang pinupunasan ang bahaging natapunan ng inumin ng ina.

"Fine!" napipilitan nitong sang-ayon. "I'll start looking for nannies, I may know someone."

"Good..." sagot niya at inilagay sa washer ang basahan.

"I have a date tonight, but I can drop by here to see Jenny before I go..."

"If you must," sagot niya habang naglalagay ng liquid detergent sa washer.

"Aren't you even curious kung sino ang ka-date ng mommy mo?" patuloy pa rin ni Amanda.

Sometimes Adam wondered if his mother was really fifty-two. She didn't look her age and she certainly didn't act like it. Simula nang maghiwalay ito at ang kanyang ama noong bagong panganak pa lang

si Carlo ay madalas na itong mag-date. Few of them were introduced to him and Carlo. Karamihan sa mga iyon ay naging close nilang magkapatid, but the closeness would always go to nothing because the next thing they knew, iba na ulit ang dini-date ng kanilang ina. So he'd stopped caring about his mother's dates a long time ago.

"Nope," derecho niyang sagot.

"It's David Cuenca," bale-wala nitong patuloy na ikinalingon niya.

"What? Hindi pa ba siya natuto?" hindi niya napigilang bulalas. His mother had already dated the old man a long time ago. In love na in love ang lalaki sa kanyang ina, pero katulad ng nakagawian ni Amanda ay hiniwalayan din ito. Leaving the old man devastated and Adam very frustrated. He was a good man, at umasa siyang si David na ang makatuluyan ng kanyang ina. When Amanda broke up with him, doon na siya tumigil sa pakikialam sa nakatatandang babae.

"True love just doesn't die like that, Adam..." she said dramatically. It made him smirk.

"Good luck to him," mapait niyang saad.

"Oh, I have a feeling he will be very lucky tonight!" pilyang saad nito na halos ikabaligtad ng kanyang sikmura.

“Okay, you need to go,” pagtataboy na niya rito.

Ngingisi-ngising tumayo si Amanda. “Oh, yes, I need to be flawless tonight so I think a visit to the salon and waxing—”

“Okay, Mother, just please stop talking...”

desperado na niyang pagmamakaawa habang iginigiya ito sa pinto.

Napahalakhak ito. “Oh, my baby boy...” Hinimas nito ang kanyang pisngi. “You need to loosen up a little, you’re so tense!”

“Goodbye, Mom...”

“Bye, Hijo! I’ll see you tonight.”

Isinara na ni Adam ang pinto bago naihilamos ang palad sa kanyang mukha. Something was seriously wrong with his mother.

Bumalik ang isip niya kay David Cuenca, hindi lang dahil sa nagustuhan niya ito noon kaya mabilis niyang naalala ang lalaki. It was also because of Clarice, David’s scheming daughter. He was just a paralegal back then when he first met Clarice. Kapapasok lang nito noon sa isang car company working as a car agent. They were introduced when their parents invited them both for dinner.

Having such a distinct beautiful face, it was easy for Clarice to get his attention. She was sweet and

endearing, innocent even. She appeared very nervous about her new job, tila walang kumpiyansa.

So few days later, he was sporting a brand-new *BMW* which was so not part of his plan. It was later on when he found out that he wasn't the only one who bought a car because of Clarice's manipulation.

Apat silang lalaki na pinaikot nito para lang ma-impress ang manager nito. One of them, naabutan pa niyang halos yakapin na ni Clarice habang nagsa-sign ng deed of sale. So Adam just simply turned his back. Hindi siya interesado sa ganoong uri ng babae.

