

Chapter

One

Sinabi na nga ba ni Helga at hindi na siya dapat pumunta sa lugar na ito. She and parties were like tuyo and ice cream; bagoong and milk; Angelina Jolie and Jennifer Anniston. *Mix them together and you'll get a stomachache.*

Sinimsim ni Helga ang kanyang mai tai at tinanguan ang dumaang high school classmate sa kanyang puwesto sa may bar. Her former classmate smiled a little, then continued walking toward the group of girls surrounding a pool table. The girls laughed and danced; the evening ocean breeze sifting through their hairs and colorful sarongs.

She should probably walk over to them, smile a little, chat a little, ask how things were going on in

their lives.

Yeah, dapat niyang gawin iyon. They would smile at her, too. Pero hindi ito pelikula at hindi mahaderang b*tchosa ang mga babae sa mundo niya. They were pretty decent, actually. They would try to chat up with her, too. Tell her they liked her purple summer dress, her short, wavy brown hair, her cute pearl earrings.

Then, someone would inadvertently mention their family, their depressed mothers who never got over their fathers cheating on them. Pagkatapos, lahat ng mga mata ay mapapatingin kay Helga.

Titigil ang pag-uusap, mamayani ang mabigat na katahimikan sa loob ng ilang saglit. Awkwardness galore. Conversation would resume in fits and starts, but the bad air hovering around them would remain like the scent of a two-week-old dead rat. With maggots.

Yeah, thanks, but no thanks.

Muling sumimsim si Helga sa kanyang cocktail drink at humalukipkip.

Damn Trish. Bakit ba kasi ngayon pa naisipang magbakasyon ng babaeng iyon?

Kung hindi ito nagpunta sa Japan kasama ng boyfriend nito, sana kahit papaano ay may nahila siya papunta rito sa pre-wedding party ni Miss Lorenzo. Then, she wouldn't have to look like a pathetic loser in

this party.

Iginala niya ang tingin sa paligid at dumapo iyon sa kanyang fourth grade teacher na nakaupo malapit sa pool. Katabi ni Miss Lorenzo sa chaise ang groom-to-be nito, magkalapit ang mga ulo, nakangiti habang nag-uusap.

Well, hayun ang dahilan kung bakit narito si Helga. For all her bullshits, she couldn't possibly miss Miss Lorenzo's bridal shower.

Nagtaas ng tingin ang kanyang dating guro, ngumiti at iminuwestra ang kamay para palapitin siya.

Nah uh, Teach.

She ain't gonna look like some wimpy kid hiding behind her teacher's skirt, yo. She's all grown up and strong and fabulous.

Hah, as if.

Ngumiti si Helga sa guro at itinaas niya ang kanyang kopita bilang pagsaludo, pagkatapos ay tumalikod rito at bumaling sa bartender.

“Isa pang cocktail, Miss?” untag ng bartender.

“Meron ka ba d'yang puwedeng mag-cause ng temporary amnesia?” balik niya.

Kumurap ang maskuladong bartender. “Huh?”

“You know, something strong and hard para makalimutan sandali ng mga tao dito ang sordid history na nagngangalang Helena San Jose.”

Umiling ang bartender at nagsalin ng alak sa isang baso. “Lasing ka na ’ata, Miss.”

“Nah. You’re new in this town so you don’t know the cluster f*ck that is my mother. Pero siguro bigyan mo na lang ako ng drinks na puwedeng mag-cause ng personality makeover. I wanna be like *Mary Jane Watson*, or *Haruhi Fujioka*. I wanna be cool and fab and kick-ass.”

“*MJ* is hardly a kickass. You should be *Princess Diana of Themyscira*.”

Parang kinurot si Helga sa singit nang marinig ang baritonong boses sa kanyang likuran. Muntikan na siyang malaglag sa bar stool sa bilis ng paglingon niya.

And there he was. Leopoldo Santiago Andrada. Dark hair, dark eyes, chiseled jaw, chiseled cheekbones, chiseled body, chiseled everywhere. San Dionisio’s golden boy. Crush ng lahat ng babae sa pagitan ng six months old (seryoso, babies couldn’t stop fawning over him whenever they saw him) at ninety. Sex on a stick. Isa sa maraming anak ng mga lalaking kinalantari ng nanay niya.

Life was so fun.

“*Wonder Woman*’s way out of my league,” sagot niya at binalingan muli ang kanyang cocktail. She downed the drink and winced when the alcohol burned her throat. “And I don’t like her costume.”

“Her costume is superb. And if you’re gonna dream, might as well dream big. Gin and vodka martini, dry, shaken, not stirred,” baling nito sa bartender.

Dumampot ng vodka at gin ang huli, at sinimulan ang paghalo ng inumin ni Leo.

“What?” matabang niyang untag sa binata. “You don’t want it with a twist, *Mr. Bond*?” tukoy niya sa hiningi nitong inumin.

Her grandpops was an *Agent 007* fan. And she knew how *James Bond* liked his martini; halos pareho ito ng kay Leo.

His lips curved into a devilish grin, and Helga viciously cursed inside. Damn his impeccable Spanish genes. Men like him should be forbidden to grin.

Smile, yes. But grin? No.

Grinning was sexy; grinning was cocky; grinning was panty-melting. And she did not just think of that.

“No. I like my drinks dirty actually. I prefer dirty in other aspects of my life, too. But I’d like to keep my martini simple tonight.”

“I bet,” bulong ng dalaga at nag-order ng chips and salsa sa dumaang server.

Sumandal si Leo sa bar counter, at ramdam niya ang inilalabas na init ng matipuno nitong katawan. The summer breeze wafted around them, bringing the

sultry taste of the ocean, and the cold woodsy scent of the forest nearby.

“I read somewhere that you shouldn’t mix spicy food and alcohol,” komento ng binata na tinanggap ang ibinabang martini ng bartender sa tapat nito. “It’s bad for the digestive system.”

“Everything you eat will cause a digestive hysteria when you mix it with alcohol. I read that somewhere, too.”

His low chuckle made her muscles tighten.

“That’s true,” turan nito.

Dumating ang kanyang chips at salsa, at agad siyang dumakot doon.

“How are you these days?”

Helga shot Leo a hard glance, her mouth full of chips and spicy sauce. “Why are you talking to me?”

There was that freaking grin again. “Excuse me?”

Tumungga siya ng kanyang mai tai. “What is this, Golden Boy? Trying to win Mister Congeniality award? Hindi na kailangan. San Dionisio already crowned you Mister Great At Everything last fiesta.”

“Ah, prickly as ever.”

“Go away. People are staring at us.”

At totoo iyon. Nakatingin na sa kanila ang halos ninety percent ng mga tao sa party. Si Golden Boy Leo Santiago Andrada, nakikipag-*chummy-chummy* sa

anak ng pambansang malanding p*ta!

He had always been like that. Habang ang lahat ay ilang kay Helga na para bang may bad breath siya, kusang lumalapit ang binata para makipag-chikahan sa kanya. Well, not really chikahan. But he had always been... nice, friendly even. She swore it was a whole different form of bullying.

Tumaltak ang binata at umiling. “Dear Helga, you need to stop being so defensive. Tear down your walls, breathe the fresh air, live a little. People aren’t always thinking of you. Siguro mga eighty-five percent of the time lang.”

“You’re so funny,” sarkastikong aniya.

He flashed her that infuriating grin again. “I know.”

“Leo, there you are.” Isang life-size *Barbie* doll ang pumulupot sa katawan ng binata.

Helga smelled of something like bubble gum and strawberry and the sickly-sweet scent maked her nauseated. Bees would probably swarm the woman any minute now. She hoped they eat her alive.

Yeah, yeah, that’s really awful of her. But what could she do? She didn’t like the girl.

“Kanina pa kita hinahanap, babe.”

Babe? Ugh. How original. Nasaan na ang trash can? Mukhang gustong lumabas ng dinner at lunch

niya mula sa kanyang bibig.

“Karla, you were looking for me?”

“Yes. Kanina pa. Hinahanap ka na rin nina Phil. Come on, balik na tayo sa may pool,” anang babae.

“Mauna ka na. I want to stay here for a while.”
Walang anumang emosyon sa tono ng binata.

“Why?”

Alas, alas, the spider spotted the fly—er, tinapunan din siya ng masamang tingin ni Karla.

Matamis siyang ngumiti sa huli, at naningkit ang mga mata nito. *Oh, poor baby.*

Sinabi kanina ni Helga na hindi mahaderang b*tchosa ang mga babae sa mundo niya. Well, there would always be an exception to the rule. Sad, but true. Her name is Karla Louisa Mercado. And this was *Mean Girls* b*tch level. A.k.a. trying hard beauty queen, Accounting 1 failure (seriously, sino ang bumabagsak sa Accounting 1? Nyahahaha!) anorexic, bulimic, trying hard model, diyosa ng fake boobs, fake eyelashes at fake hair.

Seryoso, ninety percent yata sa babae ay gawa sa plastic. Lulutang ito kapag nagkaroon ng tsunami sa ka-plastic-an nito.

Halata bang bitter si Helga at may nakatanim siyang galit para sa babae? Oh, well.

“Oh, hi, Helga.” Mala-*Medusa* ang ngiti ni Karla sa

kanya.

Dinagdagan niya ng asukal ang kanyang ngiti. *Die of diabetes, die!* “Hi, Karla.”

“How’s it going? I heard from my lola that your mom’s in Italy these days. I heard she’s into teenagers now.”

“Oh, really?” Her smile turned bland, her posture bored. Some people were just so predictable. “Buti ka pa updated sa buhay ng nanay ko. Stalking her *Facebook* account again, sweetie? Did your mom ask you to keep tabs on her? Or was it your dad? Your mom and dad are still together, right?”

Tumigas ang ngiti ng kaharap, at mapagbantang humakbang palapit sa kanya.

Oh, well, she supposed masyadong malaking bagay ang hilinging walang magiging aberya sa pagdalo niya sa isang social gathering.

Pucker up, Helga.

“They are, and they always will be. My parents’ marriage is strong, hindi kagaya ng sa iba. Kahit na maraming malanding umaaligid sa daddy ko, matatag pa rin sila. Women like your mom who knew nothing but spread her legs for every man she met can never tear a good marriage apart.”

She resisted the urge to yawn. “Good for you. Pero sana rin hindi nagpatukso ang daddy mo, ano? I

wished your daddy thought of his *strong* marriage and just looked away when my mother spread her legs for him, instead of just diving right in. One plus one is two, dear.”

“You b*tch—”

Leo’s dark chuckle interrupted Karla’s furious tirade. He leaned back against the counter, the soft lights splaying over his hard features, his masculine form the epitome of cold indulgence and indifference.

“Now, now. I’d love to watch girl fights as much as the next guy. Pero ’wag nating sirain ang bridal shower ni Miss Lorenzo, yes? Let’s revisit this another day. Shall we, ladies?”

She scowled at him, the cold, amused glimmer in his coal-black eyes prickling her skin. Tinungga ni Helga ang natitirang laman ng kanyang baso saka taas-noong tumayo.

“Well, I’m busy. So maybe not. Let’s hope we don’t see each other around, Karla,” aniya.

Tumalikod siya sa mga ito at dumerecho sa puwesto ng kanyang fourth grade teacher.

Nakatuon din sa kanya ang titig ng guro, at may pag-aalala sa mga mata ng may-edad na babae. Apatnapu’t isa na si Miss Lorenzo, pero mukha lang itong nasa mid-thirties. Resulta iyon ng pag-aalaga sa sarili nito. At dahil na rin siguro wala itong boyfriend

o asawa na inaalala.

Men were just headaches in Helga's opinion. But she supposed she's just prejudiced. Isa pa, wives and girlfriends could be a pain in the ass, too. Case in point, her dear mother.

“Ma'am, uuwi na po ako.”

“What? Pero maaga pa.” Ginagap nito ang kanyang kamay at hinila siya paupo sa tabi nito.

“Well, you know I don't do parties. I'm anti-parties.”

“Wag mo na lang pansinin si Karla. Alam mo namang may Diva Syndrome 'yan. But she's not that bad.”

“Yeah, she's not that bad. Unless your name is Helga Antonia San Jose or Helena San Jose. Then, dear old Karla turns into a scaly monster with radioactive farts. Naamoy n'yo ba 'yung pabango niya? It's so freaking sweet. It smells like vaginal cleanser. It stinks.”

Napaubo ang fiancé ni Miss Lorenzo, at napahalakhak ang guro. Hinapulus-haplos ng may-edad na babae ang kanyang buhok. “No, it doesn't. Gusto ko nga 'yung pabango niya. Sweet but strong. It's very feminine.”

“You don't do sweet and feminine. You're supposed to be goth, Teach. Ano'ng ginawa mo sa teacher ko?” mabigat niyang baling sa fiancé ni Miss Lorenzo.

Tumawa si Mister Adrian Gamboa, at napailing sa kanila. Limang taong teacher pa lang ito sa *alma mater* niya, kaya hindi na niya ito naging guro. Pero madalas itong ikuwento ni Miss Lorenzo sa kanya kapag nagkakausap sila ng dating guro. Mas matanda ito nang ilang taon sa teacher niya, pero gaya ng huli, mukha itong mas bata kaysa sa tunay na edad nito. Tall and lanky, dark hair, and black thick-rimmed glasses. He was cute and charming in a nerdy kind of way.

“I’m goth, too,” sagot ni Sir Adrian. “I like black.”

“Sorry, Sir, you’re too *Peter Parker* to be considered goth.” Binalingan niya si Miss Lorenzo. “Akala ko talaga, Teach, tatandang dalaga ka na. Well, matandang dalaga ka naman nga kung tutuusin....”

Kinurot siya sa tagiliran ng kausap kaya natawa siya.

“Seryoso, are you sure you’re not pregnant?” pagpapalit niya ng paksa.

Akala ni Helga ay tatawa lang ang guro, pero sa halip ay namula ang mga pisngi nito. Namilog ang kanyang mga mata.

“No shit?” bulalas niya.

“Shhh. We just found out the other day. Ayaw pa naming sabihin sa iba.”

Malawak siyang ngumisi, at mahigpit na niyakap si Miss Lorenzo. Somehow, her dark mood lightened up

a few shades. “That’s really great.”

“Thank you. Don’t tell anyone yet.”

“Of course, I won’t.”

“Gusto naming matapos na’ng lahat ng ito nang mabilis at maikasal na kami. Kaya nga isang pre-wedding party na lang ang ginawa namin para kasama na lahat ng kaibigan namin dito sa bridal shower. Nakaka-stress pala ang ikasal,” paliwanag ng guro.

“I’ve always thought the wedding part was the easy part. After that, it’s like pulling out your wisdom tooth without anesthesia.”

Tumaltak ang babae at tinapik-tapik siya sa balikat. “Ganyan din ang tingin ko noon. Kaya ’ata ako umabot sa ganitong edad bago naisipang magpakasal. But with the right guy, pulling out your wisdom tooth without anesthesia is worth it.”

Napahawak si Helga sa kanyang pisnging katapat ng bagang at napaurong. “No thanks.”

Tumawa si Miss Lorenzo at inakbayan siya.

