



# Chapter One



## Fire

“John!” I heard her scream. I felt my heart jump to my throat. “John!” she cried out again and I started to tremble. Hindi ko maintindihan iyong takot at kaba ko. Dinaig ko pa ang nakaranas ng sabay-sabay na basketball championship, UPCAT at iyong panahong nasa ospital si Irina at nag-aagaw-buhay.

“Irina,” I whispered. Dali-dali akong tumayo para puntahan iyong pinanggagalingan ng mga sigaw at iyak niya. Kaya lang nagulat ako sa sunod na narinig ko.

“Wag na ‘wag kang magpapakita sa akin kung di papatayin kita!” I heard her shout as someone laughed.

“Mas malala pa pala si Irina sa mommy niya,” my father-in-law said with a shake of his head. “Umupo ka. Halatadong nanginginig ka,” Atty. Samonte remarked, smiling.

“John!” she called again and I took a swig from the bottled water that my father handed me. My hands were visibly trembling and I felt slightly dizzy as my heart thumped crazily.

“Okay ka lang?” Dad asked, patting my back. “Ganyan talaga. Welcome to the club.”

“Was Mommy like this?” I asked.

“Mas malala. Nasa tabi niya ako n’ung nanganak siya and she sat up to box my ears. Kaya medyo nabingi ako eh,” he said.

I stared at my father in alarm. Di ko alam kung nagbibiro ba si Dad o seryoso.

“Si Isabel naman sigaw rin nang sigaw at nagsusumbong d’un sa mother-in-law kong matagal nang pumanaw,” my father-

in-law said and I felt more nervous.

“John!” I heard my wife cry out again and I pushed to my feet.

“Papasok ako,” I said.

The doctor had asked earlier if I wanted to witness the birthing but Irina had flat-out refused, saying that she’d be uncomfortable screaming her guts out while I was in the room with her.

*Ayokong makita mong umiiyak ako sa sakit*, she had said.

I rubbed my sweaty palms against my denim jeans as I strengthened my resolve.

*Papasok ako sa loob*, I thought.

“Ang kabilin-bilinan niya ay hindi ka pwedeng pumasok,” my father-in-law said.

I sat down again, my frustration increasing.

“John!” she called my name for the fifth time.

I stood and walked towards the delivery room that also doubles as an operating room.

“Hindi ko kayang nandito lang ako. Kailangan kong pumasok,” I said as I walked back towards my seat to sit down. I stood again and walked towards the delivery room’s door.

“She’ll be fine, JFK,” my father-in-law said. “Her doctors repeatedly reassured us that everything will be well.”

“Pero baka po may—”

He cut me off. “Don’t think negative thoughts. Alam kong kabado ka. Ako rin. Pero Irina being in danger again is out of the question. Hindi pwede.” I noticed that he was jiggling his left foot—a mannerism that would come out whenever he was nervous. “She’ll be fine,” he murmured to himself.

Dumating kami sa ospital nang alas nueve ng umaga.

Irina was given an ultrasound to confirm the position of the twins. She was immediately given an IV. Wide, elastic electronic

disks were attached to her abdomen to monitor her contractions and the babies' heartbeats.

"Son, umupo ka nga at kinakabahan ako lalo sa 'yo," my dad whispered. "Matapang si Irina. Kayang-kaya niya 'yan."

I expelled a heavy breath. Every time she screamed, I felt a tearing in my gut that was hard to ignore. Hindi ako naninigarilyo but I badly wished for a cigarette that instant.

"She'll be fine," Atty. Samonte repeated. "My daughter will be fine."

"Nasaan sina Mommy, Dad?" I asked as my father nervously clenched and unclenched his fists.

"Ha?" he asked, distracted.

"Sina Mommy po nasaan?"

"Nasa chapel, nagno-novena kasama si Mommy Isabel mo at si Ingrid," sagot niya nang biglang bumukas ang pinto ng delivery room. Agad-agad kaming tumayong tatlo.

"Mr. Zamora?" a nurse asked.

Dad pushed me forward.

"Yes?" I said, wetting my parched lips.

"Mr. Zamora, hinahanap po kayo ng asawa ninyo, Sir." She smiled.

I nearly sighed with relief. *Finally, hinanap din ako. Hindi na ako isang walang-silbing maghihintay na lang sa labas ng delivery room*, I thought, relieved and worried at the same time. I followed the nurse towards the delivery room as she opened the first door.

"Pakisuot po." She handed me a flimsy-looking lab coat, a hair net and a mask. "Pakitapat po 'yung kamay ninyo sa nozzle," she directed before pressing a small plastic button.

I felt the cold, slimy texture of the alcogel and I quickly applied it to my hands.

"Dito po," she said as she pushed a second door open.

“Where the hell is my husband?!” I heard Irina scream and I nearly tripped in my haste to reach her. “John...” she cried out as soon as she saw me.

“Masakit?” I asked and she nodded. “Kaya mo ‘yan, Kitten.”

“Kitten mo mukha mo!” she yelled. “Last na ‘to! Ayoko na!”

I winced inwardly. “You’re doing great,” I said as I tried to smile, remembering what the coach told me in one of our pre-birthing classes. “Inhale, exhale.” I watched tears race down her face. Si Irina ang pinakamatapang na taong nakilala ko and she must be under a lot of pain if she was screaming her lungs out.

“Irina, you have to push harder this time,” one of the doctors said.

“Do not tell me to push harder because I am pushing the hardest push I can!” Irina snapped.

“Relax and let’s try again. Habang nagtatagal kasi ang labor, nagiging mas stressful sa mga babies.”

I felt a crushing pain as Irina gripped my hand. I was trembling so bad. And when she started screaming, I actually gripped the side of the bed for support. Hirap na hirap akong makita siyang umiiyak at sumisigaw dahil sa sakit at ang nakakainis, wala man lang akong magawa.

“That’s it. Kaunti na lang,” I heard the doctor say.

I was bathed in cold sweat. I did not even realize it but I was breathing through my mouth, imitating my wife.

“You can do this, Kitten,” I whispered as she screamed, sending hundreds of daggers straight into my heart. *Tangna, papakapon na ako*, I thought as she closed her eyes to get ready for another push. I silently recited a disjointed assortment of prayers and promises as I helplessly watched her in pain.

I made worthless pledges, like promising that a glass of warm milk would always await her everyday when she’d eat breakfast, to really poignant ones like loving her forever and



showing her just how much I loved every second of it.

*Kung alam ko lang na ganito 'to kasakit para sa kanya, I would have avoided getting her pregnant like the plague.*

The doctor had offered painless birthing but Irina wanted to go through normal delivery. Sabi niya gusto niya raw ma-experience iyong naramdaman ng karamihan ng mga mummies while giving birth.

I was torn between pride and agony. *Ang tigas kasi ng ulo nitong asawa ko.*

“That’s one great push, Irina,” the doctor encouraged.

“Kaunti na lang, Kitten,” I said.

“One more push in three,” the doctor said. “One... two... push!” she commanded.

I felt like my bones were being crushed as Irina’s grip on my hand intensified. My eyes widened when I saw the head of the baby come out.

“Very good, kaunti na lang,” the doctor calmly stated as she methodically suctioned my child’s nose and mouth. “One more push.” She slowly pulled the baby out of Irina.

I felt like fainting as I watched the baby emerge. Hindi ko alam kung dahil sa kaba o dahil sa tuwa. I did not even realize that I took a step back until Irina called my name.

“John!” she yelled. “Don’t you dare faint on me. Sisipain talaga kita!”

A few seconds later, I heard the baby cry and I felt my eyes water. I averted my gaze as I hastily wiped my eyes with the back of my free hand.

“It’s a girl,” the doctor said as she put the baby on top of Irina’s womb and dried her up.

I gazed at my daughter for the first time and my heart just swelled with pride. They covered her with a warm blanket and put a cap on her head before the doctor clamped the umbilical

cord in two places.

“Wait for a few minutes before you cut the cord,” Irina mumbled weakly as I leaned forward to wipe her forehead with a large swab that one of the nurses handed to me.

We read over the Internet that delaying the cutting of the umbilical cord was good for the baby and I was surprised that despite the pain she must be feeling ay naalala pa rin niya iyon.

A nurse stepped forward to take my daughter off my wife’s abdomen and Irina frowned as she tried to sit up.

“Saan mo dadalhin ang anak ko?” she demanded, her voice firm.

“Irina, for the 5-minute Apgar score,” the doctor answered for her. “Don’t worry. Nothing bad will happen to your baby. D’yan lang natin siya sa tabi ichi-check. You can actually see her from here.”

Irina nodded and slumped back into the bed.

“You’re doing great,” I said. “I am extremely proud of you.”

She gave me a weak smile before she grimaced.

“Irina, may isa pa,” the doctor reminded us and my wife nodded. Lumapit ang doctor. “The baby’s head is near the cervix, very good. Contractions?” she asked. Irina winced before she nodded. “Ready na?”

“Yes,” Irina replied.

“On three...” Irina pushed again but the baby slid out of her on the first try. “Naku, nagmamadali itong isang ‘to,” the doctor laughingly said as she again cleaned the baby’s nose and mouth. I felt my insides quiver as I heard his first cry. “Say hello to your son, Mr. Zamora,” the doctor said as my vision started to blur.

“John!” I heard Irina’s voice in the background and I turned my head to look at her before I completely blacked out.



# Chapter Two



## Fire

I woke up dazed and confused. I gazed at the white ceiling above me. My hand automatically flew to my head as I felt a throbbing pain at the left side of my temple. I felt a bump and groaned, closing my eyes again.

“Have you seen this? Look at Twinkle yawn. Such a cutie!” I heard Mom say.

I felt disoriented.

“The babies have their mommy’s dimples!”

*Oh, shit. Babies. Nanganak nga pala misis ko!* I bolted upright and felt dizzy at the abruptness of my movement.

“The dad has finally woken up,” I heard my dad say and I looked up to smile at them as I cupped my head in my hand

“Are you okay, Son?” Mom asked.

I nodded. “Where’s Irina?” I asked as I staggered to my feet. “Mom, I need to see my wife.”

Being a father feels great but my priority would always be Irina. I realized early on that should I fail as a husband, I would probably fail as a father.

“You fainted,” Irina’s dad remarked before he started to laugh.

I felt my ears go hot with embarrassment. *Oo nga naman, spectator lang ako kanina pero ako ‘yung hinimatay. My father-in-law would probably harp about it until my ears fall off.*

I grimaced.

“Aba, parang ikaw ang umiri, ah,” he joked.

I winced.

“Hon! Stop teasing JFK!” Irina’s mom admonished him with a cluck of her tongue. “Okay lang ‘yan. Ang mga dads talaga ang mas kinakabahan. Even Irina’s dad wasn’t immune to that. In fact, naihi nga ‘yan noong ipinanganak ko ang asawa mo. At humagulgol ‘yan nang todo.”

All eyes swiveled towards Atty. Samonte.

“That’s nonsense,” he murmured as he averted his gaze. “No such thing happened.”

“The ignominies of being a first-time father,” Dad said, good-naturedly. “I’m just glad na meron na tayong bagong makakalaro ng golf, Kumpadre.” He patted my father-in-law’s shoulder and immediately, Atty. Samonte’s expression changed.

“That’s true.”

I excused myself and headed towards the door. “Saan ka pupunta?” Daddy Ireneo asked.

“To see Irina po, Dad.”

“Do you even know what room she’s in?” he inquired and I stopped walking as they all laughed.

“Parati n’yo na lang pinagtatawanan ang anak ko! Come here, Son. I’ll take you to your wife’s room.” Mom pulled me towards Irina’s room.



We quietly opened the door and the nurse stationed inside looked up and smiled politely at us before she left.

“She’s sleeping. Sobra kasing nakakapagod ang manganak. Siguro ilang oras pa bago siya magising,” Mom whispered.

I looked at Irina’s sleeping form. She looked pale and fragile. *And very young*, I thought, suddenly feeling guilty. *Para ko siyang ninakawan ng kabataan niya.*

“But she’s fine, right? No complications? Is there anything that I should be worried about?” I murmured as I gently held

my wife's hand.

"She's doing great. Sa awa ng Diyos, maayos naman ang lagay niya," Mom whispered back as I let Irina's hand go to pull the chair closer to her bed.

"Is she supposed to look this pale?" I asked.

Mom patted my shoulder. "She's fine. Don't worry. By the way, Irina's seventeenth birthday is in a week, right?"

I nodded. "Opo. May 26."

"All right. I'll leave you alone with her now." Mom left, closing the door behind her.

As a man, there were realizations that would haunt you and one of them was the fact that your wife needed to put her life on the line to make you happy. I was excited when I learned that she was pregnant and I could still feel the excitement that I felt back then. Pero ngayon, it was blended with fear.

"Kitten, huli na 'tong kambal. Ayoko na," I whispered as I lifted her hand to cup my right cheek. "Baka sa susunod, di na lang ako hihimatayin, baka atakehin na ako sa puso. Magpapakapon na ako para sa 'yo, Kitten."

"Loko, paano na tayo liligaya?" she whispered weakly, opening her eyes. "Ang drama mo."

"Thank God, you're awake," I said, overflowing with relief. "May kailangan ka ba? Tubig? Pagkain? Are you craving for anything?"

She laughed softly. "Mukhang sobra ang guilt mo sa pagse-seduce sa isang inosenteng dalagang tulad ko," she joked and I chuckled. She motioned for me to come closer. "Mag-helmet ka next time, ha. May bukol ka tuloy. Na-check up na ba 'to?"

"Oo. Nothing serious naman siguro. Nasa loob ako ng hospital room when I woke up. I'm sure our parents had this checked."

I suddenly felt overwhelmed with pride. Kahit ako ang daddy ng mga bata, feeling ko wala akong silbi. She carried them for nine months and gave birth to them samantalang ako, tagabili lang ng gusto niya at tagamasaha ng mga paa niya noong buntis siya.

“I love you,” I said as I moved to hug her to my chest, my eyes tearing up. “My respect for mothers and all women just skyrocketed after I witnessed what you went through for the twins.”

*Takte ka, Fire! Ikaw na nga ‘tong walang ginawa, ikaw pa ‘yung iyakin,* I chided myself as I tried to hide my tears from her. Pero knowing Irina, agad-agad niya iyong napansin.

“Umiiyak ka?”

“Hindi,” I lied. “Hindi ko sasabihin,” I rectified.

She laughed softly. “Ito naman. ‘Wag ka nang umiyak. Makakaulit ka pa naman sa akin, eh. Nakita mo na ba ang mga bata?”

I shook my head. “Kanina n’ung lumabas sila, pero ngayon hindi pa.”

“They let me carry them in my arms after they cleaned them up. Ang daya mo. Dimples ko lang ang nakuha nila. Anong klaseng genetic distribution ang nangyari? Akala ko ba 50/50? Bakit parang lugi yata ako sa hatian?” she teased.

“Ayaw mo bang kamukha ko sila?”

“Aayawan ko ba naman ‘yang gandang-lalaki mo?” balik niya.

We were both laughing as the door opened to reveal our parents.

“Princess, you’re awake!” Irina’s mom exclaimed and I stepped back so she could hug her daughter. “You did good, Princess. You did good.”



“Congratulations, Irina,” Mommy said as she came forward to embrace my wife. “I am so proud of you. The babies are beautiful. I am so proud to be their grandmother.” She kissed Irina on the cheek before she stepped to the side to allow my dad to hug my wife.

“You did great, Irina. Congrats.” He hugged her quickly before he stood beside Mom.

“Princess,” Atty. Samonte murmured as he moved forward to embrace his daughter. “Congratulations.”

“Thank you po, Dad,” she replied as she kept hugging him. “Huwag n’yo na pong tuksuhin si John dahil d’un sa pagkahimatay niya, ha, Dad? Promise me.”

Her dad laughed before he turned to grin at me. “Oo na, hindi na,” he acquiesced before he let her go and turned to Mommy Isabel. “Hon, nasaan si Ingrid?”

“Nasa nursery, binabantayan ang mga pamangkin niya. Kanina pa nga ‘yun doon. She’s been taking pictures and videos of the twins. Ipo-post niya daw sa FB niya. Teka lang at iti-text ko. Bilin niya kasi sabihan ko siya as soon as magising ang ate niya.” My mother-in-law took her phone out of her bag.

A few minutes later, Ingrid, hyper as ever, burst inside the room and shrieked. “Ate!” she called as she ran towards her sister. “Ate, akin na lang ‘yung mga babies mo, please! Kaya n’yo pa namang gumawa ng iba, eh! Sige na!”

We all laughed.

“Huwag gan’un, baby. Nakita mo na ba ‘yang bukol ng kuya mo? Ganyan kahirap gumawa ng bata,” Irina said, laughing.

“Ay, wait! I’ll ask if they can take the babies here kasi gising na si Ate!” Ingrid exclaimed before she ran out of the room again.

“Nakakatuwa talaga itong si Ingrid,” Mom said and Mommy

Isabel laughed.

“Naku, Madeline, may boyfriend na yata at nagpupuyat na sa kaka-chat. Dati nanonood lang ‘yan ng Korean drama, ngayon puro *Skype* na at *Facebook* ang inaatupag.”

“Masyado pang baby si Ingrid para magka-boyfriend,” Irina’s dad declared and my parents gave him knowing smiles. “Kakapanganak lang ng panganay ko. ‘Wag naman muna.”

Dad patted his shoulder consolingly. Minutes later, Ingrid walked into the room with two nurses in tow.

“Andito na sila!” Ingrid excitedly whispered as I felt my heart twitch at the sight of my children.

They let me hold my daughter first and I understood that instant why my father-in-law reacted the way he did when he learned about Irina and me. A father would never deem any boy worthy of his daughter. *Ever*.

“Naku, may naiiyak,” I heard my father-in-law say and I smiled. “Tingnan natin how JFK will fare kapag may aakyat na ng ligaw sa anak niya,” he added and the smile vanished from my face.

*Dadaan sa karayom na walang butas ang manliligaw sa ‘yo*, I thought, staring at my daughter’s face.

“Kuya! Ako! Ako kakarga!” Ingrid volunteered and Mommy Isabel taught her how to hold her niece while I took my son from the nurse.

“Blaze,” I said and he looked at me. Or maybe I just imagined that he did, but I felt my heart squeeze. Holding your newborn daughter was different, iyong protectiveness nagsu-surface agad-agad. Gusto mo siyang protektahan. Gusto mong gawing matino ang mundo para sa kanya. Pero sa anak mong lalaki, iba ang dating. Gusto mong maging isang mabuting tao para paglaki niya, gugustuhin niyang maging tulad mo. You’d



want to be your daughter's hero but you'd want your son to like you enough that he would want to be *Superman*... like you.

"JFK and his realizations," Dad teased after the nurses took the babies back to the nursery. "Are you okay, Son?"

I looked up and nodded. "Opo. Kamukhang-kamukha ko ang mga bata," I declared proudly and saw my wife frown.

"They have my dimples and my charm," she replied airily.

"Of course. They have their mother's formidable spirit and superior intellect, too," I added as I kissed her lightly on the lips.

"I know we agreed about naming your first daughter after your Mommy Isabel and me, pero let's rethink that decision," Mom said and we all looked at her. "Kambal kasi sila. I want them to have matching names. Hindi ba, Isabel?"

"Oo, I think they should have matching names, too. 'Yung susunod na anak na babae n'yo na lang ang ipangalan n'yo sa amin. Besides, nagtatampo ang mga daddy ninyo kung bakit kami lang daw ang nakapangalan sa mga apo namin," Mommy Isabel confided with a laugh.

"Hindi naman sa nagtatampo," Dad said.

"Nagtatampo ako," Irina's Dad announced. "Kahit sana unang letra man lang ng pangalan namin ni Julio makasama sa pangalan ng mga apo namin."

"Kaya nga. Para wala nang away, 'wag na nating ipangalan si Twinkle sa amin ni Madeline. Mag-isip na lang tayo ng bagong names," Irina's Mom said as the door opened.

"Good afternoon," Dr. Malbas said in greeting and we greeted her back. "How's the new mommy?"

"Just peachy. Para akong nakipag-wrestling at nakipag-boxing nang sabay," Irina answered.

Her doctor laughed as she took Irina's temperature and

blood pressure readings. “Ganyan talaga ‘yan,” she said as she wrote something down on Irina’s chart. “But don’t worry, you’re young so your body will recover quickly. Do you need meds for the pain or is it tolerable?”

“Ayoko ng gamot because I want to breastfeed,” she said.

The doctor nodded. “Congratulations ulit on the twins.”

Nang lumabas siya ng room ni Irina, everyone talked at the same time, suggesting names.

“Cool, Ate, kapag seasons like Winter and Summer.”

“I prefer historical figures,” my father-in-law said.

“Or inventors and scientists,” Dad piped in.

“I need my phone,” Irina suddenly said. I handed her phone to her and she started tapping away. “How about this? Ioann Ylli and Ioana Yllka?” she asked.

We all stared at her uncomprehendingly.

“Yo-ann Eli at Yowana Elka, Ate?” Ingrid asked, voicing everyone’s unspoken question. “How do you spell that?”

Irina spelled it out for her.

“Ah, okay. They’re unique and cute. Tsaka I at Y din ‘yung start ng names, parang sa amin ni Ate.” Ingrid nodded her head in approval.

“What do the names mean?” Mom asked.

“They mean John’s stars,” Irina replied.

That night as I watched her sleep, I realized one thing—I would never be worthy of Irina and I hoped that the day wouldn’t come when she’d realize it too.



# Chapter Three



## Fire

I glanced at my cell phone when I felt it vibrate and read a text message from Christian. Susunduin ko dapat sila sa lobby ng hospital. It had been two days since Irina gave birth and the visitors came in droves.

Earlier, some of our schoolmates from *St. Bernadette* visited. Ngayon naman ang mga kaibigan namin ni Irina ang naka-schedule na dadalaw. I dialed Christian's number and it took three rings before he answered my call.

"Teká, tumatawag si Fire," I heard him say.

"Tanga mo kasi, eh! Bakit mo hinulog 'yung box ng cupcakes! 'Yun na nga lang gagawin mo, di mo pa nagawa nang maayos! Alam mo bang alas cuatro nang madaling araw na ako nakatulog para i-bake lang ang mga 'yun?!"

"Fire," Christian said into the phone. "Teká lang, ha. Saglit lang. Pwedeng tumahimik ka nga muna kasi ang ingay-ingay mo? Kausap ko nga si Fire at 'di na kami magkarinigan! Hello, Fire."

"Okay lang kayo?" I asked, laughing.

He sighed. "Napakabungangera nitong babaeng 'to. Kanina pa 'to salita nang salita. Nagtataka nga ako at 'di pa siya namamaos!"

"Di bale na. Mahal mo naman 'yan kaya tiis-tiis din," I joked and he sighed again. "Nasaan na kayo? Malapit ako sa Vendo machines sa right side ng reception."

"Nasa kabila kami. Teká lang. 'Ayun! Nakita na kita."

I turned my head and saw him wave. I disconnected the call

and waved back before I walked towards them.

Madami silang bitbit. May hawak-hawak na pink at blue teddy bears at balloons si Yvette. Si Christian naman maraming dalang mga kahon.

“Bakit di na lang kayo dumerecho sa room ni Irina?” I asked, taking three of the boxes off his arms.

“Wala pa rin kasi sina Blessie. ‘Tsaka papatulong ako sa pagbitbit ng mga ‘to,’” he said sheepishly.

I smiled. “Hi, Yvette! ‘Wag nang mainit ang ulo. Ang ganda pa naman ng panahon. Dapat maganda rin ang mood mo,” I joked.

“Sino ba naman ang hindi iinit ang ulo, eh, hinulog nitong isang ‘to ang pinaghirapan kong i-bake na cupcakes para kay Ice? Kung saan-saan kasi nakatingin. Sarap tusukin ng karayom ang mga mata!” she vehemently declared.

I was surprised at her outburst. *That was harsh*, I thought.

“‘Wag gan’un.” I laughed to diffuse the tension. “Napakaliit na bagay lang, eh, hindi dapat pinag-aawayan. Sigurado akong hindi sinadya ni Christian ‘yung nangyari,” I tried to pacify her but she glanced at Christian angrily before she averted her gaze. “Salamat pala, Yvette, at nag-bake ka pa ng cupcakes para sa misis ko. I’m sure maa-appreciate ni Irina ‘yung effort mo kahit na natapon ‘yung cupcakes.” She smiled thinly at me. “Anu-ano pala ang laman ng mga boxes na ito?” I asked, directing the question at Christian who looked so miserable it was difficult not to take pity on him.

“Halu-halo laman niyan, Fire. May biko, halayang ube, leche flan at macaroons,” he answered quietly.

“Talagang pinaghandaan n’yo pagpunta dito, ah. Salamat.”

“Sina Celine dumating na ba, Fire?” Yvette asked.

I nodded. “Oo, kaninang bandang ala una. Nasa taas na,



kausap ni Irina.”

Ano kaya ang nangyari sa dalawang ‘to? Parang kailan lang hindi mo mapaghiwalay ‘tong mga ‘to n’ung nag-baby shower kami para sa kambal.

“Tekang, ako’y nalilito na sa inyo. Ano’ng meron at parang ‘di yata maayos ang pakikitungo ninyo sa isa’t isa? May tampuhan ba?”

“Wala, Fire. Kaunting di-pagkakaunawaan lang,” Christian remarked.

“Kaunting di-pagkakaunawaan?! Gago ka! Pauso ka, eh! Alam mo bang may text girlfriend ‘yan, Fire? Text girlfriend! Pakshet! Ngayon lang ako nakarinig ng gan’un. May girlfriend na nga sa totoong buhay, may girlfriend pa sa text! Ang kapal-kapal ng mukha!”

“Honeybabe—”

“Bwisit! ‘Wag mo akong matawag-tawag na Honeybabe at itutulak talaga kita mula sa 4th floor nitong ospital!” Yvette hissed.

Christian sighed.

*Kahit sino naman sigurong babae kapag nahuli kang may ibang girlfriend, mapa-text man ‘yan o sa kung saan, ay magagalit, I thought as I watched Christian’s woeful expression. Sa isyu nila, kay Yvette ako kampi pero hindi ko pa naririnig ang panig ni Christian kaya ayoko siyang husgahan. I patted his shoulder consolingly and he sighed again.*

“Yvette!” I heard someone exclaim and the three of us looked towards the direction of the voice.

“Blessie! Hope!” Yvette waved her hand at the twins who were all smiles. “Hi, Ken!”

“Hello sa inyong lahat!” Ken said as we patted each other’s backs in greeting. “Kumusta ang bagong daddy?” he asked and

I smiled. “Nakita ko sa *FB* ang mga babies ninyo at kamukhang-kamukha mo. Nadaya yata si Ice sa hatian.”

I laughed. “Yun nga rin sabi niya, eh.”

Ken turned towards the girls who started to talk excitedly. “Hoy, mahiya nga kayo, nasa ospital kayo at wala kayo sa mall, hinaan n’yo naman mga boses ninyo.”

They threw dirty looks at him.

“Chura mo, labhan mo muna ‘yang pantalon mo bago mo kami pagsabihan!” Blessie snapped and Hope nodded in agreement.

“Bagong laba ‘to, ano!” Kenneth answered. “Pinalabhan ko talaga ‘tong lucky pantalon ko para i-welcome ang babies nina Fire. Nakakahiya namang makita nila ang ninong nilang hindi bagong laba ang pantalon.”

Sabay-sabay kaming naglakad papuntang elevator at patuloy na nagkwentuhan ang mga babae samantalang kaming mga lalaki ay tahimik lang. We got off on the fourth floor and I led them to Irina’s room.

“Ice!” the girls exclaimed happily.

“My gosh! Hi, mga mare!” Blessie said as Celine, Elizabeth and Maia stood to greet them.

They exchanged hugs and began chattering animatedly. I put the boxes on top of the table near the foot of Irina’s bed before I went to the comfort room to wash my face and my hands.

“Kumusta ang Mommy?” I asked as I sat down beside her.

“Na-miss kita,” she murmured as I kissed her on the forehead.

“Grabe naman ‘tong dalawang ‘to. Masusundan yata agad ang mga inaanak natin,” Celine remarked and the rest turned towards us.

“Ay, wala talagang respeto sa mga single ‘tong dalawang

‘to!’ Blessie joked.

Irina and I laughed.

“Kumusta na kayo?” my wife asked. “Last nating kita sa baby shower pa, which was more than a month ago.”

“Walang bago sa amin, aside from the fact na may pinsan kaming dumating galing Australia.”

“Babae?” Kenneth asked immediately.

“Hindi. Koala bear,” pabalang na sagot ni Hope.

“Nakakahalata na ako sa ‘yo, Hope. May crush ka sa akin, ano?”

“Pahinging blade. Maglalaslas na lang ako pag nangyari ‘yun,” Hope answered.

“Wag laslas, Twin, masyadong madugo. Bigti na lang. May lubid na akong hinanda sa bahay,” Blessie interjected and we all laughed.

“Break na kami,” Yvette suddenly said and we stopped laughing.

“Ha?” Irina asked, looking at me.

“Bakit?” Celine inquired.

“Teka lang. Kailan pa?” Hope questioned.

“OA n’yo, ha. Tapos na ang April Fools’ Day, kabanas!” Blessie added, and Elizabeth and Maia stared questioningly at Christian.

“Hoy, Christian! Magsalita ka,” Maia prodded.

“Oo, friends. Break na kami kasi nahuli ko ‘yang nambabae. Ang kapal ng mukha! Nahiya ako sa tangkad niya, grabe!”

“Honeybabe—”

“Honeybabe ka pa d’yan!”

“Baka misunderstanding lang,” Kenneth butted in. “Alam ko kayang mahal na mahal ka nito.” He grinned, draping an arm around Christian’s shoulders. “Di ba, bro?”

Christian only nodded.

“Tekang lang. Naguguluhan ako. Paano pa nagkaroon ng time mambabae ‘yang jowa mo, eh, magkasama kayo araw-araw?’” tanong ni Elizabeth. “Di ba nga? Pag magka-text tayo, parati mong sinasabi na kasama mo si Christian?”

“Yun na nga masama d’un, eh! Magkasama na nga kami araw-araw nakuha pa akong lokohin ng gagong ‘to!” Yvette angrily took a handkerchief from her bag and started dabbing at her eyes. “Sorry, Ice. Sorry, Fire. Ang drama ko. Baka umasim ang breastmilk ni Ice dahil sa akin,” she murmured apologetically before she blew her nose.

No one said a word as a fresh batch of tears started spilling from Yvette’s eyes.

“Sorry,” she whispered before she ran out of the room.

All the girls followed her.

“Ian, ano’ng nangyari? Did you two-time her?” Irina asked.

Christian clutched his head with both his hands. “Sorry. Kahit naman anong paliwanag ko alam ko sa kanya ka kakampi,” he murmured.

Irina’s brows furrowed. “Hindi ko naman kailangan ng explanation, eh, but you owe one to Yvette. Isang tanong lang, talaga bang nagkaroon ka ng ibang girlfriend?”

“Loko-loko lang ‘yun. Nothing serious,” Christian answered.

Irina shook her head disbelievingly. “What the freak, Ian!” she yelled.

Christian apologized, excused himself and left.



Later that night, I lay down beside Irina and she snuggled closer to me. Mayroon pang isang kama kung saan pwedeng matulog ang bantay ng pasyente but she asked me to sleep beside her.



“Dito ka na matulog sa tabi ko. Baka bangungutin ka na naman. Ayokong wala ako sa tabi mo kapag nangyari ‘yun,” she said.

“Matagal naman na akong hindi binabangungot.”

“Oo, alam ko, pero baka ngayong stressed ka ay managinip ka naman ulit ng hindi maganda,” she insisted.

Pagkatapos ng insidente kasama si Cass ay halos araw-araw akong nananaginip na namatay si Irina – iba’t ibang paraan, iba’t ibang lugar at iba’t ibang sitwasyon kasama ang iba’t ibang tao. Pero, iisa lang ang hindi nagbabago sa mga bangungot na ‘yun – parati akong walang nagagawa.

“John?”

“Yes?”

“Ano’ng iniisip mo?” she whispered against my chest.

“Parang ang lalim ng buntong-hininga mo.”

“Kung anu-ano.”

“Sabihin mo sa akin kung ano ‘yang kung anu-ano na ‘yan.”

“‘Yung dati pa rin.”

“Nanaginip ka na naman ba? Matagal ka nang hindi nananaginip nang hindi maganda, ‘di ba? What happened, bakit bumalik ulit?”

“Hindi naman. I am just overthinking.” I sighed. “Grabe, ano? Napaka-unpredictable ng buhay. Hindi lang ako makapaniwalang naghiwalay sina Yvette at Christian. Parang kailan lang, ang saya-saya nila at inggit na inggit ako sa kanila sa Tagaytay noong nagpapaalaman sila sa elevator.”

“Gan’un talaga. Not everything lasts.”

“Except you and I,” I said.

She looked up from my chest and smiled. “Except you and I,” she repeated.

I hugged her tight. “Are you comfortable? Baka nahihirapan

ka na dito ako natutulog sa kama mo,” I asked.

She shook her head. “Hindi ako sanay na hindi kita katabi. Kaya nga gusto ko nang umuwi, eh, kasi I want to sleep in our bed wrapped in your arms. This bed is too small for you.”

“Uuwi naman na tayo bukas kaya malapit na ‘yung gusto mong *sleeping in our bed wrapped in my arms*,” I said.

She laughed softly before she burrowed her face deeper against my chest. “What’s bothering you, John? I can sense that something is troubling your mind and I want to know what it is.”

“Just realizations.”

“Like what?”

I held her face with my hand. “While you were in labor, I was so afraid of losing you. I was so afraid of seeing you in pain and I blamed myself for seducing you repeatedly.”

“I like that. Dapat nire-record natin ‘to. Sa wakas umamin ka na ding sineduce mo nga ako,” she teased.

I chuckled. “Aminado naman,” I said before I sighed. “Pakiramdam ko ay wala akong naitulong sa ‘yo even while you were pregnant. I remember you had a hard time every morning because you were experiencing heartburn. Your feet were so swollen that you had difficulty walking and you always had backaches. Alam kong marami kang idinadaing n’un pero ayaw mong sabihin sa akin kasi ayaw mo yatang maramdaman ko that I made your life difficult.”

“No,” she said. “I’m not going to deny the swollen feet, the bloated feeling na para kang kumain ng isang dosenang inflated balloons, the heartburn, the morning sickness, the mood swings, the backache and all the aches that one human being could possibly feel. Lahat ‘yun naramdaman ko, but the real reason why I endured it all was because I chose to. Pinili na kita.

Pinili kong magbuntis at pinili kong magsimula ng pamilya nang maaga kasama ka kasi mahal kita.”

“Kitten, ako yata ang nagpo-postpartum kasi naiiyak ako,” I mumbled, laughing as I wiped my eyes with the back of my hand.

“John, I’m serious. Do not ever doubt how much you mean to me. Do not ever doubt what I can do because of my love for you. Do not ever doubt how brave I am. I will withstand everything basta alam ko na nand’yan ka. I don’t want you to undermine your worth. My pregnancy would have been hell if not for you. You made the experience beautiful for me,” she murmured and I kissed her on the cheek. “Gentleman, ah,” she teased.

I laughed. “Four to six weeks pa daw eh. Baka mapasubo tayo.”

She laughed. “Kaya mo namang tiisin, di ba?”

“Oo naman, Kitten. Para ‘yun lang. Napakaliit na bagay kumpara sa sacrifice na ginawa mo.”

“Ang sweet naman ng Puppy na ‘to.”

“I love you, Irina Ysobel Samonte-Zamora, and that will never change.”

“I love you, John Fitzgerald Kennedy Zamora, you are my one true constant,” she replied.

I pinched her cheek. “Matulog ka na. Anong oras na kaya, kailangan mo nang magpahinga.”

She closed her eyes as I pulled her closer against me and I knew that whatever life would throw at us, we would be okay.

# Chapter Four

## Fire

We moved into our new home inside a posh subdivision near *UP Diliman*. I'd admit I was unsure kung kaya naming dalawa na kami lang even with the battalion of house helps that our parents sent. I was not used to executing decisions and Irina was not used to running a household. Nakaka-disorient iyong bagong responsibilities, but our parents thought that we should live on our own dahil mayroon nang mga bata.

"Hindi kayo matututo kung nakasandal pa rin kayo sa amin," my father-in-law had said. "May pamilya na kayo. But don't worry, we have your backs."

Just hours after they drove us to our new home ay balak na nilang umalis to give us a feel of married life.

"Tsaka araw-araw kaming dadalaw dito to check how you're doing," Mommy Isabel assured us. And although she looked reluctant to leave her daughter behind, she managed to give us a cheerful smile.

"You're now the man of the house, Son, and you won't really know the weight of the responsibility unless you bear it on your shoulders," Dad added.

*Weight of the responsibility. Wow. Magagampanan ko kaya nang maayos 'to?* First time naming bumukod at natatakot ako na baka ma-realize namin na hindi namin kaya.

"We'll be fine," Irina declared in her usual confident manner and I instantly knew that we'd be okay.

"Yes, we'll manage," I seconded.



“Basta, if you need anything just call us, okay?” Mom said.

“Ate! Kuya! Makikitulog ako dito paminsan-minsan, ha?”

Ingrid enthusiastically requested.

Irina and I nodded.

We waved goodbye at them and watched their cars leave.

“So, it’s just you and me, Mrs. Zamora,” I said.

“And it will be you and me for a very long time,” she answered.

“Long time lang? Hindi ba indefinitely?” I asked.

She laughingly agreed before inviting me to look around.



Saka ko lang nalaman ang pagkakaiba ng lalaki at babae pagdating sa bahay. Kasi ako, ang una kong hinanap ay ang remote control ng TV samantalang si Irina ay naglista ng mga bagay na gusto niyang baguhin at i-redecorate.

“I don’t like the color of that cornice. I would prefer mahogany brown kesa sa kulay na ‘yan.”

I could only stare blankly at her.

“This room needs more color,” she continued, thoughtful. “Kasi parang napaka-monotonous. Or we could keep everything pero dapat may accent.”

I felt more lost than ever. Para sa akin, as long as may TV, kama at refrigerator, pwede na. “Um...”

“Hindi ba? Mas maganda ‘yung play of colors ng tiffany blue at Persian green. Malamig sa mata at nakakaganda ng ambiance.”

“Ha?” I asked stupidly. I learned na magkaiba ang colors ng mga babae sa lalaki. Kung lalaki ka, ang napa-process lang na kulay ng utak mo ay eight basic colors ng *Crayola*. Kaya kapag sinabi na ng asawa mong ecru, cyan, periwinkle, amber or fuchsia ay hindi na kayo magkakaintindihan. Not because ayaw mo siyang intindihin, kundi dahil hindi mo talaga kilala iyong

mga kulay. Ang blue ay blue para sa akin regardless kung light man iyan, dark or in-between.

She wasted no time in calling the interior designer of the house and for hours, they talked about shades, colors and accents.

Via and her team arrived on the second day and they immediately went to work.

“Now I need you to choose which color is better for Blaze’s side of the nursery, itong cerulean or Egyptian blue?” she asked.

I stared at her in confusion. *Cer—what? Teko, may sariling blue ang mga taga-Egypt?*

I stared dumbfounded at the fabrics that looked identical to me. She smiled expectantly at alam kong I had to pull it off.

“I think ‘yung nasa kaliwa,” I uttered lamely.

“I knew it! Egyptian blue looks better!” she exclaimed before she stood on tiptoe to give me a kiss.

*Okay, so what just happened?* I simply wrapped my arms around her waist.

Ako naman masaya na natutuwa siya sa bahay and that she wanted our home personalized pero my motto has always been: If it’s not broken, don’t fix it.

*Google* became my best friend when she asked me if we should use Venetian blinds or window blinds. Sa akin kasi blinds are blinds regardless of the size of the window, the location and the angle of the sun’s rays. But for Irina, it was like a matter of life and death.

“The *iPod* docks installed on every floor of the house are cute pero para saan ‘yan?” I made the mistake of asking, and she went into a tirade about music and child development, and the convenience of being able to play songs for the twins anytime we wanted. Pagkatapos n’un hindi na ako nagtanong, puro oo na lang ginawa ko.



In the two days na lumipat kami sa sarili naming bahay, I learned the basic rule in marriage that husbands everywhere in the world know—always agree with the wife.

“This is so much fun!” she would exclaim every time may natatapos na sa ipinapagawa niya.

Naisip ko, buti na lang tagatango lang ako at hindi ako mismo ang gumagawa roon sa mga changes na gusto niya.

She wanted the interior designer to be on-call 24/7 at kahit patulog na kami kapag may naisip siyang idea, Irina would text or call *her*. Dinaig pa ni Via, na Verbano Santos Jr. ang tunay na pangalan bago niya naisip na gusto niya palang maging babae, ang isang doktor sa sobrang demanding ni Irina.

“Madam, mas bagay dito sa foyer itong painting na napili ko kesa sa picture ninyong mag-asawa. The paint is too light for a mostly-white photo kaya kailangang i-accentuate natin ‘yung paleness ng wall with the painting.”

“D’yan ‘yang picture na ‘yan,” Irina insisted.

“Pero, Madam—”

“Change the color of the wall para bumagay ang picture namin ng asawa ko. Not the whole wall. I need you to create a large frame-like effect para pag tiningnan nila ang wall, ‘yung wedding picture namin ni John ang una nilang mapapansin.”

“Change the color of the wall, Madam?”

“Oo. Magkano ba?” Irina asked and I had to hide my smile.

My wife had a vision about how the house should look like, mula sa mga roses sa garden, sa position ng mga lounge chairs sa pool hanggang sa hitsura ng kwarto namin kapag naka-on ang ceiling dim lights.

“I want everything done in three days.”

“Three days, Madam? Hindi ‘yan posible!”

“Nanonood ka ba ng TV? Buong bahay nga nare-renovate nila within one week ‘tapos ang minor lang ng changes, hindi

mo kaya nang tatlong araw? I thought you're the best in your field? Kasi kung hindi mo kaya I'll ask Roni—”

“Kaya ko, Madam,” Via replied with determination, helpless against the debating prowess of Irina Ysobel Samonte-Zamora.



“Are you okay, Kitten?” I asked on our third day at home. “Hindi mo naman kasi kailangang bantayan ang mga ‘yun. It’s all right to check their progress every once in a while. Pero hindi mo sila kailangang tutukan.”

“Kung hindi ko sila babantayan, hindi sila matatapos. Di ba dito nga natin isi-celebrate ang birthday ko? I want all renovations finished by then,” she said as I sat down beside her. She touched Blaze’s chubby cheek as she held our son in her arms. “Ang lakas niyang dumedede.”

“Ganyan daw kapag lalaki.”

I find breastfeeding poignant kasi matagal na siyang hindi nauuso. And considering that Irina was young, she could have opted not to breastfeed the children. However, she had been adamant about it and she had everything prepared mula sa meal plan niya everyday to maximize what the children would get from her hanggang sa vitamins na iniinom niya.

“You’re just turning seventeen,” I remarked and she glanced sideways at me.

“Yes. Now stop feeling as if you’ve taken something away from me. Masaya ako, John.”

“Sana patuloy kang maging masaya.”

“Ito naman. Eh, ilang weeks na lang naman pwede na tayo ulit kaya ‘wag ka na magdrama,” she joked and I laughed.

Irina took everything lightly at hindi ko alam kung bakit biglang naging sobrang seryoso ako sa buhay. Para akong tumanda nang thirty years.

“You should loosen up,” she told me. “Parang takot na takot

kang mag-fail. At some point we will fail as parents. I will fail you as a wife and you will fail me as a husband, pero the good thing is we're young and we can bounce back."

"Hindi option sa akin ang mag-fail."

"John, no one's perfect. I am not perfect and neither are you, but that doesn't mean that we'll mess up big time. Kahit nga parents natin nagkakamali pa rin. And there should always be room for improvement."

"No matter how badly I mess up, hindi ka naman aalis, di ba?"

"Hindi. Pero 'wag mong sadyain. Black belter ako."

We looked at each other and laughed.



It took four days bago na-satisfy si Irina sa hitsura ng bahay, sa arrangements ng appliances at muebles. I could understand why the interior designer nearly ran out of the house upon getting their payment. Mahirap nga naman, baka may ipabago pa.

"Happy?" I asked as she gazed around our home.

Irina looked at me and eagerly nodded. "I totally love it! When I first walked inside this house, I thought it was beautiful but it lacked personal touch. Pero ngayon... just perfect!"

She regarded the black and white framed photos of the twins that adorned the walls leading to the second floor.

"Ang cute ng mga anak ko!"

"Anak mo lang?" I joked and she smiled.

"Mga anak natin," pagtatama niya. "And I look fab."

"Oo naman," I agreed, enfolding her in a hug.

"I was talking about our Vegas wedding photo. But thanks," she said flippantly. "Anyway, nagustuhan mo ba ang bagong bahay?"

"Yes," I answered truthfully. "Good job, Kitten."

I kissed the top of her head. Iniiwasan kong maging intimate kami kasi baka hindi ako makapagpigil and knowing Irina, kahit ayaw niya, kung ramdam niyang gusto ko ay ipipilit niyang gawin namin.

“I’m so relieved that you like it. Akala ko n’ung una hindi mo magugustuhan ‘yung changes,” she enthused as she pulled me to sit on the plush sofa before she sat on my lap.

“Kailan ko naman hindi nagustuhan ang mga gusto mo?” I asked as I encircled her waist with my arms.

She draped her arms around my neck. “Puppy...”

“Yes?”

“Nagugutom ka? Gusto mo ng merienda?”

I smiled kasi isa lang ibig sabihin ng sinabi niya: Tumayo ka at ipagluto mo ako. “Ano’ng gusto mong kainin? What do you want me to cook for you?”

“Gusto ko ng baked ziti na may meatballs at white sauce.”

“Hmm...” *Matrabaho ‘to pero wala kang choice, Fire. Kaya tumayo ka na.* “Sige.”

“Let’s eat out na lang,” she suggested. “Although I find it sexy kapag naka-apron ka, hindi pa kita pwedeng i-molest.”

I instantly got a boner. *Ito na naman.* It’s been months since we were last intimate and I was *craving* for her. “Kitten, stop talking dirty,” I whispered. “The word *molest* sounds so promising coming out of your mouth.”

“Mahaba-haba pa ang titiisin mo.”

“Para saan ba ang mga kamay ko?” I asked and she laughed before she murmured something in my ear.

“Ayaw mong gamitin ang kamay ko?” she asked and my face must have registered shock because she laughed. She got up, pulled me to my feet and wordlessly, we headed towards the stairs to our bedroom.