



"Calvin, can you please come over to my place? My faucet's leaking!"

Pigil-hiningang hinintay ni Lindsay ang sagot ng binata mula sa kabilang linya. It'd better work. She spent more than two hours preparing her hair, face and body for this. She even got waxed for this, damn it. Sayang ang oras at effort ni Lindsay kung hindi kakagatin ng lalaki ang kanyang kuwento. Brazilian wax hurt like a bitch.

"It's one fifteen in the morning, Lindsay."

She bit her lower lip at the sound of his low, deep voice. Just hearing that voice made her want to moan and arch her back. She loved that voice, had fantasized about it. Sometimes, she would lie in bed and touch herself while imagining his voice whispering dirty things in her ear.

Perverted much? Welcome to Lindsay's world.

"I know," she groaned, her voice laced with sexual frustration and annoyance, "but it's leaking. It's starting to flood in my bathroom. Wala na 'kong ibang matawagan. Isa pa, malapit lang ang bahay mo."

Hindi sumagot ang nasa kabilang linya, at halos nakikita na niya ang pagtiim-bagang ng binata. He was good at that. Just imagining his hard jaw and cool eyes made her want to spread her legs and offer her swollen sex to him.

I've been a bad girl, will you punish me?

Malamang ay singhalan siya ni Calvin kapag ginawa niya iyon. What's new?

Kumapal ang mabigat na katahimikan sa linya ng telepono at kumabog ang dibdib niya sa kaba.

Say yes, say yes, say yes. SAY YES!

Narinig ni Lindsay ang pagsara ng isang pinto.

"I'll be there in five."

YES! She wiggled her butt and forced herself not to squeal. "Thanks, Calvin! See yah!"

Pinatay niya ang cell phone bago pa magbago ang isip ng binata. Dali-dali siyang humarap sa full length mirror.

Darn, she looked yummy. Maarte siyang humagikhik at namaywang sa harapan ng salamin. The dark purple babydoll she wore was sheer, showing off her generous curves and milky white skin. The strategically sewn sequece and flower embroidery barely covered the tips of her heavy breasts, and the ribbon between her mounds was just begging to be tugged. If she were a guy, she'd totally do her.

Humagikhik ulit si Lindsay.

Ang ganda ng skin niya. Baby smooth and fair. Glowing! It'd better. Katatapos lang niyang magpamasaha at magpa-whole body diamond peel.

Her eyes flickered down to her black lace thong. The flimsy fabric covered her sex pretty well, and it looked innocent enough. But alas, alas, it was crotchless.

Too much? Too tacky?

Nag-pose siya sa harap ng salamin.

Well, duh?

Subtlety was an alien concept to Calvin David Mendoza. She had to be practically naked and panting for him so he could finally get the message.

She fluffed her long, wavy brown hair to make it messier.

Messy, sexy, bedroom hair. *Gorjaz*. She pouted and blew kisses on her reflection. Mwah, mwah, mwah!

Tingnan lang ng dalaga kung hindi pa bumigay sa alindog niya si Calvin.

Wala siyang masyadong makeup. She just applied a coat of pink gloss to make her lips look bigger, and smudged cream blush across her cheeks for a soft flush. She wanted to look fresh, effortless, and *au naturel*. Iyong tipong gumulong lang siya patayo ng kama at... *voila!* Maganda na siya.

Of course that's bullshit.

Kailangan ni Lindsay ng ilang oras sa salon at spa para magmukhang glowing goddess. That's the thing. Looking naturally beautiful was a freaking science. It took time, effort and indomitable skill. Sasabunutan niya ang babaeng maganda na pagkagising pa lang sa umaga.

Narinig niya ang pagbukas ng kanyang front door, at napatalon siya. That's Calvin for you, always early and dependable. Mas maaasahan pa ito kaysa sa pagsikat ng araw.

Halos madapa siya sa pagtakbo papunta sa kama, at malutong siyang nagmura nang mapasubsob sa kutson.

Ang lip gloss niya! And her hair, damn it. She spent an insane amount of time styling her thick hair!

Hindi siya magkandaugaga sa paggapang papunta sa gitna ng kutson. Shit. Shit. Shit. Sexy. Sexy. Sexy.

Pose, spread your thighs, bend one knee, curve your lips, lower your lashes, and jut those big breasts forward. Rock it, girl!

"Lindsay, I told you to lock your—"

Nanigas si Calvin sa bukana ng kanyang kuwarto nang makita siya.

She couldn't blame him. She knew how she looked.

Malalim ang kanyang paghinga dahil sa kanyang

pagtakbo, at alam niyang bahagya ring namumula ang kanyang mala-porselanang balat. Her thighs were spread, and she was sure he could see the lips of her sex through the slit of her lace underwear.

Marahas ang ilaw sa loob ng kanyang silid, pinapaliguan siya sa maputing liwanag. No romantic candle lights and soft music here. She wanted him to see her clearly. Vividly. Raw and dirty. From the top of her thick, shiny, brown hair, to her large full breast down to her exposed mound and blood red toenails.

*Look, Calvin. Take a f*cking look.*

And he did.

His gaze raked her from head to toe, straying on her breasts and exposed slit. His stormy eyes lingered on the creamy lips, until he forced himself to meet her eyes.

Nagtagis ang mga ngipin ng kaharap, at lalong nanigas ang bawat anggulo ng guwapo nitong mukha. "Lindsay, what is this?"

The rasp in his voice made her ache. What did she say about his hard, stern look? Yeah, she wanted to spread her thighs and beg him to f*ck her.

She licked her lips. "What do you think, Calvin?"

Lalong nagtagis ang bagang ng binata at ginatungan lamang noon ang init sa kanyang balat. His dark heated gaze pinned her, and his strong chiseled jaw tightened with anger.

"Cover yourself," he bit out.

Siyempre hindi siya nakinig sa lalaki. Sa halip ay ngumiti si Lindsay at pinaglandas ang mga mata sa kabuuan nito. His short, inky black hair was disheveled, as if he had run his fingers through his hair over and over on his way to her house. She wanted to sift her fingers through his hair, too. She wanted to pull at the strands and drag his mouth to hers

as she wrapped her legs around his strong hips.

Parang nabasa ng kaharap ang iniisip niya dahil lalong nanigas ang katawan nito.

Maikli siyang tumawa at inarko ang likod. Mababang nagmura ang lalaki, at bumaba sa kanyang dibdib ang mainit na titig nito.

“Calvin...” anas niya.

A harsh breath escaped his lips. “Goddamn it, Lindsay.”

His dark warning made her tremble. Heat bloomed across her skin, gathering at the tips of her breasts, pulsing down to the low fire throbbing between her thighs. Mabigat ang paghinga, dahan-dahan siyang bumangon mula sa kama.

Bumakas ang galit at pagnanasa sa guwapong mukha ng binata, at napapaso siya sa init ng titig nito.

Nakasuot ang lalaki ng puting kamiseta at hakab noon ang malalapad nitong balik at matipunong dibdib. Maigting ang mga kalamnan sa maskulado nitong mga braso, at maumbok ang mga ugat doon dahil sa pagkuyom-palad nito.

His butter soft jeans hugged his muscular thighs, and the imposing bulge tenting the front of his pants made her dizzy. What would it feel like to have him deep between her legs? To have him moving hard and rough inside her?

Hot cream trickled between the folds of her sex, soaking her thong. Her inner walls clenched and quivered, aching to be stretched and filled.

Lumapat ang kanyang mga paa sa karpetaadong sahig, saka malalim ang paghingang humakbang papunta kay Calvin. Nanatili itong tiim-bagang na nakatitig sa kanya.

“I want you,” she murmured, sidling up to him until the tips of her breasts brushed his hard pectorals.

He gritted his teeth, lust and anger burning in his eyes.

She pressed her palms against his hard stomach and lifted her face to his. The heat of his skin seeped through the fabric of his shirt, and she felt his muscles flex beneath her hands.

Matangkad ang lalaki, at halos hindi siya umabot sa baba nito.

Tumingkayad si Lindsay para idampi ang mga labi sa tainga ng binata. Nanuot sa kanya ang mainit at mabangong amoy ni Calvin. Earth, forest, leather and musk. Man. It was all man.

She licked his earlobe and he groaned an oath.

“And you want me, Calvin.”

Iniarko niya ang likod para lalong idikit ang malalambot na dibdib sa lalaki, at napasinghap siya nang pumulupot ang mga daliri nito sa kanyang mga braso.

YES! Success! She knew she could—

Marahas siyang itulak ng binata.

“The hell!” angil niya.

Hinila ulit siya nito at pinaglapit ang kanilang mga mukha. Undiluted anger flickered in his dark gaze, making her shut up.

“You think this is funny?” he grated, his strong fingers digging into her arms. The harsh light highlighted the hard planes and tight angles of his face, matching the violence in his dark eyes.

“You think it’s okay to lie to me and manipulate me just to get what you want? You spoiled conniving brat!”

Marahas siya nitong isinalya at tila nandidiring humakbang palayo sa kanya. Daig pa ng dalaga ang sinampal.

Inabot niya ito. “Calvin, no. It’s not—”

“Don’t touch me.”

Tinabig nito ang braso niya, at pakiramdam ni Lindsay ay may sumaksak na nagbabagang patalim sa kanyang tiyan.

He sneered at her. “You take advantage of my concern for you, shamelessly use a lifelong friendship just to get me do what you want me to do. You think that’s okay?”

“No! Calvin—”

“Shut up!”

Dinuro siya nito; puno ng muhi ang guwapong mukha. Her eyes burned and she felt a crushing weight on her chest.

“Don’t do this again, Lindsay. Don’t test my patience. I’m not your toy. Lying to me and manipulating me pisses me off. If you do this again, forget about our friendship. I will not tolerate your whims and caprices. F*cking grow up.”

Lumabas ang lalaki ng kanyang silid at binalibag ang pinto.



2



That certainly didn't turn out the way she had expected. Lindsay fumed as she stomped over to her best friend's front door. "Kai! Kai!"

Kinalampag niya ang pinto ng kaibigan habang patuloy sa mahinang pagmumura. Parang bangungot na paulit-ulit niyang nakikita sa isipan ang disastrous *Seduce Calvin Project* niya, at gusto niyang magtitili at magpapadyak sa kabiguan at inis.

"Kai! Kai! Ano ba? Buksan mo—"

Marahas na bumukas ang pinto at humantad sa kanya ang pumupungas-pungas na si Kai. Magulo ang maikli nitong buhok, at gusot-gusot ang suot nitong malaking t-shirt. Naka-four-inch stiletto siya, pero kailangan pa rin niyang tumingala sa kaibigan. Damn Kai's height and model-like figure. Pareho ito ng mga kapatid nito, mga kapre!

"The f*ck, Linds, alas seis pa lang ng umaga," reklamo nito.

"It's nine o'clock," she snapped.

"Your point is? It's freaking Saturday!"

Matamis siyang ngumiti. "I know, right? The world is so f*cking unfair."

Nagmartsa si Lindsay papasok sa apartment.

As usual, magulo ang loob ng bahay ni Kai. Messy, but not dirty. Iyon ang gustong paniwalaan ng kaibigan niya.

At underwear ba iyong nakikita niya sa likod ng sofa? Her friend really needed to redecorate. Out of style na ang mink sofa nito. And tab-top curtains? Gah. So yesterday! And the white walls were just boring. Her friend needed a splash of color.

“Don’t even think about it,” babala ni Kai na para bang nabasa ang kanyang iniisip.

Muli, matamis siyang ngumiti. “Really, Kai, dearest, you need color. Puro puti at gray, o!”

“I like them that way. It’s cool in the eyes.”

“They’re catatonic.”

Lumabas ang isang matangkad na lalaki mula sa silid ng kaibigan niya, at naningkit ang kanyang mga mata.

Rugged jaw, strong nose, soft brown eyes and sun-kissed skin—nagkatawang-tao ba ang isang airbrushed model mula sa isang fashion magazine? And that body? Lumabas ba ito mula sa mga pahina ng *Erotic Romance* pocketbook?

“Hi, Lindsay.” Maliit na ngumiti sa kanya ang binata.

Naningkit lalo ang mga mata niya.

“I’m happy for you Kai, really,” pakli niya habang hinahagod ng tingin ang hunky at nerdy boyfriend ng kanyang kaibigan. Mas mukha itong porn star kaysa Math instructor.

Move away, James Deen. Eric Julian Ramos is here.

“But I don’t get it,” sambit ni Lindsay sabay pamaywang sa inis. “Ba’t ikaw may hunky boyfriend na at ako wala pa?”

Namula ang mga pisngi ni Eric dahil sa pag-describe niya rito, na lalo lamang nagpaguwapo sa lalaki.

Ugh! He’s so adorable it’s not funny!

“Linds, stop that,” saway ni Kai. “You’re scaring Eric. Don’t look at him like that.”

“Like what?” inis niyang balik.

“Na parang hinuhubaran mo siya para i-disect ang pectorals niya.”

“He really has great pectorals, you know,” komento niya. “And there’s his washboard abs. I haven’t seen his butt yet, but I bet it’s impressive, too.”

“It is!” Pumalampak ang kaibigan. “It’s so firm! I like biting and grabbing it! Last night, I dug my nails in—”

“God, tell me I’m not hearing this,” ungol ni Eric.

See that? Nag-init ang kanyang bumbunan. See how unfair the world is? The guy was hot even when embarrassed. And the thing was, he didn’t even know it. Which only made him hotter.

Tinapunan ni Lindsay ng masamang tingin ang best friend. Lucky b*tch.

Bumungisngis si Kai at nilapitan ang nobyo nito. Landian ensued. Nilingkis nito ng yakap ang lalaki at matunog na hinagkan sa pisngi. Eric’s frown faded, and a warm smile lit up his gorgeous face. He wrapped his arms tightly around his girlfriend as if he just couldn’t help it.

Third wheel, anyone? Yeah, that’s her.

Bitter much? *I hear ya.* Siya rin ’yun.

“I’m still here!” angil niya sa pareha.

Bumungisngis si Kai, at pinatakan ulit ng halik ang nobyo nito bago bumalik sa couch. “Ano nga ulit ’yung pinaguusapan natin?” untag ng kanyang best friend.

“Bakit ikaw may hunky boyfriend na at ako ay wala pa?”

“That’s easy, Linds. Buntot ka pa rin kasi nang buntot kay Calvin.”

“Exactly!” Inis siyang sumalampak sa tabi ni Kai.

“Buntot na nga ako nang buntot pero wala pa rin! Palay na ang lumalapit sa manok, pero kung umasta siya, parang allergic siya sa palay! Your brother’s an asshole!”

“He’s not, and you know it. Baka napagkamalan mo siyang si Cole. Cole’s the asshole. I try to tell everyone, but nobody listens to me. He’s the evil twin, I tell you. He’s the reincarnation of that kid from *The Omen*. Kinain na naman niya ’yung chocolates ko kahapon!”

She nodded sympathetically. Alam ni Lindsay ang hinanakit ni Kai tungkol kay Cole at sa mga tsokolate. Sigurado siyang may bad blood sa pagitan ng dalawa noong past lives ng mga ito. They probably murdered each other in their past lives, at kapag nagpatuloy ang pagnanakaw ng lalaki sa chocolates ni Kai, baka maulit ang cycle.

“Want me to hire a transgender to f*ck him?” alok ni Lindsay. “I swear, mas mukha pang babae sa ’kin ’yung beki na ’yon. Pati boses niya pang-girl na rin. Walang ligtas si Cole d’on. He’d never suspect it. Cole would totally do him.”

Kai cackled like a lunatic. “Oooh, I like that! Sige!”

“Uhm...” Umubo si Eric.

He looked wary as he stood there, as if he wasn’t sure if they were serious or just joking.

For the record, they weren’t joking.

“Uh, you guys want coffee?” untag nito.

Maningning na ngumiti si Kai sa boyfriend nito. “Yep! Pero ’wag mong sunugin ang kitchen ko, ha?”

He smiled sheepishly and she almost said ‘awww.’ The guy was just freaking cute.

“Mas magaling na ’kong magluto sa ’yo,” anito. “And I’m not that clumsy anymore.”

Bumungisngis si Kai, at maikli ring tumawa si Eric.

Gah! Stop the lovey-dovey!

“Stop flirting in front of me!” angil ni Lindsay. “Lalo n’yong pinapasama ang mood ko!”

Mahina siyang tinadyakan ni Kai sa balakang. “Ang

drama mo. Ano'ng problema mo? Meron ka ba?"

"F*ck you."

"No thanks, I'm good. Ano ba'ng nangyari? Calvin turned you down? Hindi na bago 'yon."

"Oh, shut up."

Iniwang sila ni Eric sa sala at nagngingitngit niyang ikinuwento sa kaibigan ang epic seduction failure niya kaninang madaling araw.

"You did what?" Namimilog ang mga mata ni Kai. "Crotchless thong? May gan'on?"

"Sa haba ng kuwento ko, 'yun ang pinakanapansin mo?"

"Of course! May gan'on talaga? Paano 'yun? As in walang takip?"

"Reregaluhan kita sa birthday mo."

Tumawa ito at binalingan ang nobyo na lumabas mula sa kitchen. "Eric! Reregaluhan ako ng crotchless thong ni Lindsay sa birthday ko. Have you seen a crotchless thong?"

Muntik nang matisod ang lalaki. "W-what?" The guy was blushing again. Freaking adorable.

Sumimangot siya at binalingan ulit ang kanyang best friend. "Hindi ko maintindihan 'yang kapatid mo. Ano ba'ng problema niya? He obviously wants me, too. Ba't ba ayaw pa niyang aminin?"

"I know, I know." Tinapik-tapik siya sa kamay ng katabi. "Pero kilala mo si Calvin. Kung gaano kaharot 'yung kakambal niya, gan'un naman ka-reserve si Cal. Medyo uptight talaga 'yon."

"Then, what the hell am I supposed to do?"

"Ah..." Alanganing ngumiti sa kanila si Eric habang nilalapag ang tray ng kape. "Uhm... 'balik muna ako sa apartment ko. Mukhang kailangan n'yo ng privacy--"

"No. Stay." Iwinasiwas ni Lindsay ang isang kamay.

“Hindi secret ’tong pinag-uusapan namin. Alam ng lahat na naghahabol ako kay Calvin. I don’t mind.”

Ngumisi si Kai at kinindatan ang nobyo. “But Eric minds. Siya ang nahihiya para sa ’tin.”

Napaubo ang lalaki at lalong namula. “No, I mean—it’s not—”

“It’s okay, Babe,” nakangiting putol ni Kai. “Acquired taste si Lindsay. Para siyang bagoong. Masasanay ka rin sa kanya.”

Iniiikot niya ang bilog ng mga mata. Sabunutan niya kaya ang babaeng ito? Ikumpara ba siya sa bagoong? *Bruha*. “Thanks a lot, girlfriend. Hindi ako malansa, ’no.” Binalingan niya ang boyfriend nito. “It’s okay, Eric. I’m not offended. Sa dami ng rejections ko galing kay Calvin, kumapal na ang balat ko.”

“Oooh, good one!” sulsol ni Kai. “Parang line ni *Sansa Stark*. My skin has turned to porcelain, to ivory, to steel!”

She rolled her eyes again. Mahilig talaga itong mangolekta ng mga quotable quotes.

Napakagat-labi ang binata, tila hindi alam ang sasabihin. “Uhm...so...”

“Go, Babe,” Kai said, smiling. “Matagal na girl talk ’to.”

Eric nodded, smiled sheepishly at her, then scampered out of the apartment.

“He’s so cute. Parang gusto ko siyang kurutin,” aniya.

“You can’t. Ako lang ang puwedeng kumurot sa kanya. Let’s get back to Calvin.”

“Right. Your dear brother. He’s not gay, is he?”

“Pfft.”

“Right. I remember his exes, you know? Those sweet, little darlings.”

Kapag naaalala ni Lindsay ang ex-girlfriends ng binata,

gusto niyang hanapin ang mga ito sa *Facebook*. She had a hacker friend, at magaling itong gumawa ng virus. She could bribe him to infect those girls' computers.

"Hindi naman tumagal ang mga 'yon," konsuwelo sa kanya ng kanyang best friend. "Masuwerte na kung umabot ng six months."

"But all his girlfriends are like that; sugar, spice and all f*cking nice."

"Kabaligtaran mo."

Tinampal niya ang braso ni Kai. "Iniinsulto mo ba 'ko?"

"Man, ang lakas mong sumampal. I know you're frustrated, but you gotta calm down. Violence is not the answer. Unless, si Cole ang kaaway mo. And you gotta admit, totoo ang sinabi ko."

"I'm not changing for him. This is me, take it or leave it."

"Cool," turan ng kausap. "Kaya lang parang 'leave it' ang sagot ni Calvin."

Tumili si Lindsay at nagpapadyak sa carpet. Tumawa ang kaibigan at tinapik-tapik siya sa likod.

"You're not helping!" she screeched.

"Yeah, yeah. Maybe you should try Reverse Psychology? Iwasan mo muna siya para ma-miss ka niya? Like seriously, Linds, how can he miss you when you won't go away?"

"Haha," sarkastikong tawa niya. "Very funny. And that's bullshit. I don't like playing games."

"Eh, ano'ng tawag mo sa pang-aakit mo sa kanya?"

"Exactly that. Pang-aakit. Lantaran. Walang bolahan."

"Right. Right."

"He likes me, too, you know? At hindi 'to wishful thinking. I know he does. But for whatever reason, he's just holding back."

Tumayo siya at nagpabalik-balik sa maliit na sala ng

apartment. Nakikita pa rin niya ang galit na mukha ni Calvin sa kanyang isipan—nakatiim-bagang, matigas ang tingin, nakatitig sa kanya na parang nandidiri. Kanina pa mahapdi ang sikmura ni Lindsay dahil doon. Had she really gone too far this time?

Hinawakan niya ang kanyang mahapding tiyan. “He’s really angry, Kai. I’ve never seen him that angry before.”

“I’ve never really seen Cal angry, either. He’s pretty chill all the time. You must have really pissed him off.”

“I know. Kaya nga...”

Umungol siya at sumalampak ulit sa upuan. Isinubsob niya ang mukha sa mga kamay. She couldn’t get his furious face out of her mind. It haunted her like a nightmare. He looked at her as if she was everything he hated. And God, that hurt. Was he really angry with her? She didn’t know what she’d do if Calvin hated her.

“Linds, ’wag kang magagalit, ha?”

Umungol siya at lalong ibinaon ang mukha sa mga kamay. “D’yan pa lang nagagalit na ’ko.”

“I know. Ang gusto ko lang sabihin, well... Maybe Cal just doesn’t see you that way. At siguro kailangan mo na lang tanggapin ’yon?” Inakbayan siya ni Kai, at hinilig ang mukha sa kanyang ulo. “You say he wants you,” patuloy nito, “but what makes you say that? Because you turn him on? But come on, Linds, lahat ng lalaki, matutukso sa ginagawa mo. Just because he sexually responds doesn’t really mean anything, does it? Pero sabi mo nga, di ba, kung ayaw sa ’yo ng lalaki, it’s his loss. You’re awesome, Linds, *really*. Maraming lalaking patay na patay sa ’yo. Calvin’s awesome, too. But he’s not the only guy in Pagudpud. And maybe you should think about Calvin, too? Maybe you should just respect that he just doesn’t want you that way.”

Parang kumukulong putik na umahon sa kanyang tiyan ang lahat ng defense mechanisms niya. Nagpilit kumawala ang mga iyon para lunurin ang lahat ng sinabi ni Kai. Pero nakikita pa rin niya sa isipan ang matigas na anyo ni Calvin—his hard mouth, his clenched jaw, his furious gaze.

“You think it’s okay to lie to me and manipulate me just to get what you want? You spoiled conniving brat!”

His anger felt like a storm of fire, devouring all her heated excuses, razing them to ashes. Everything covered in front of his fury, and now all that was left was charred coldness.

She saw another image of Calvin in her mind. A twelve-year-old Calvin. Pasensyosong nakalahad ang isang kamay nito para tulungan siyang tumayo.

His grip was strong, his eyes clear and steady. He wordlessly carried her on his back as they hiked in the forest. The sun felt warm against her skin, and the breeze fluttered around them. It was perfect. He was perfect. He wasn’t smiling, wasn’t talking. He didn’t have to. Because he was warm; everything about him had always been warm.

“Linds?”

Kumurap siya at nag-iwas ng tingin sa kaibigan. Her throat burned as if she just downed five shots of cheap tequila. “I don’t know, Kai... It’s just...”

Niyakap siya ng kaibigan at namigat lalo ang kanyang dibdib.

“It’s okay, Linds. I know you’ve liked him since we were kids. I know it’s not easy.”

Not easy? Gusto niyang tumawa. Understatement of the year. For her, loving Calvin was voluntarily drowning. And right now, she couldn’t breathe.

Pinisil niya ang braso ni Kai na nakayakap sa kanya saka

mabigat na bumuga ng hangin.

Liked him since they were kids? Another understatement.

She loved him. Stubbornly. Desperately. As if her heart was bound to love only him.

“You should just take it easy, Linds, ’wag masyadong aggressive.”

“Hindi ako ’yun kung hindi aggressive.”

Tumawa ito, at isinandal ang ulo sa kanyang balikat. The familiar comfort loosened the knot in her stomach, and she allowed herself to lean on her friend. Thank God for girlfriends.

Sumandal din si Lindsay sa ulo ng kaibigan. “Thanks, girlfriend. Kailan ka pa naging relationship expert? In our relationship, that’s supposed to be me.”

“I know, right? But, dude, don’t tell anyone. I have a reputation.”

Tumawa siya at niyakap din si Kai.



3



"Wala si Calvin sa *Kali Bar and Grill* ngayong gabi," sambit ni Kai habang tinatali ang rubber shoes nito.

She narrowed her eyes at her friend's worn rubber shoes. Mukhang patay na hayop na iyon.

"I know," sagot ni Lindsay. "I don't plan to see him tonight. Girl, maawa ka sa rubber shoes mo. Kailangan nang mag-retire niyan. Sobrang pahirap mo na d'yan."

Isinuklay niya ang mga daliri sa mahabang buhok at inayos ang laylayan ng palda ng kanyang yellow summer dress.

"Yeah, yeah," anito.

"Shift ni Cole ngayon, di ba?"

"Yup. Ano'ng plano mo ngayon tungkol kay Calvin?"

"I'm going to follow your advice. I'll take it easy. I need to apologize."

"Still not giving up?"

She snorted and flipped her voluminous hair. "Pssh. You're insulting me."

Tumawa na lang ito at umiling. Lumabas sila ng bahay ng kaibigan at kinandado na nito ang pinto.

Nilingon niya ang katabing apartment kung saan nangungupahan ang boyfriend ni Kai.

"Hindi sasama si Eric?" untag niya.

"He's grading papers."

Madamdamin siyang napahawak sa kanyang dibdib. “Like shit?” Humalakhak siya. “May papers ang Math?”

Tumawa rin si Kai. “I know, right? It’s like, f*ck, dude. Ang hirap-hirap na nga ng test ’tapos may papers pa? F*ck, man!”

“Ikaw, wala kang papers na kailangang i-grade?”

Tiningnan siya ng kanyang best friend na para bang may ipot siya ng ibon sa ulo. “Are you shitting me? Kaya nga ako nag-P.E. teacher para walang mga paper-papers! You can take my life, but you can’t take my freedom!”

Humalakhak ulit si Lindsay sa pag-quote nito sa *Brave Heart*, at magkasukbit ang mga braso na bumaba sila ni Kai ng hagdanan.

Malapit lang ang bar and restaurant na pagmamay-ari ng mga magulang nito kaya nilakad na lang nila hanggang doon.

Tag-ulan na, pero marami-rami pa ring turista sa mga resorts. Umahon na ang buwan sa langit, at kumikindat-kindat ang mga bituin. Wala pang masyadong polusyon sa lugar nila kaya malinaw pa rin ang mga ilaw sa himpapawid.

Soft lights, lulling waves and sultry sea breeze. She sighed dreamily. How romantic.

“Hindi ka ba nilalamig sa suot mo, Linds?” Mapanuring hinagod ni Kai ng tingin ang kanyang bestida. “Tell me you have underwear beneath that. Kapag hinangin ’yang palda mo, baka makita na namin lahat.”

Kinurot niya ito sa baywang at bumungisngis lang ang kaibigan.

“Pssh. Of course may underwear ako, ano’ng tingin mo sa ’kin? Malandi?”

Humagikhik si Kai at mapanuksong binunggo ang balakang niya. “Seryoso ba ’yang tanong mo? Gusto mong

sagutin ko 'yan?

Baklang 'to. “Shut up. I’m even wearing a chemise.”

“Chemise?” Her friend looked utterly clueless.

She smiled patronizingly and patted her friend’s hand. She loved her friend unconditionally, really. Pero mas may fashion sense pa rito ang Persian cat ng nanay niya.

“Don’t look so confused, dear. It’s not a scientific name. Chemise. Panloob din 'yun.”

“Ah, pandoble. Dapat 'yun na lang ang sinabi mo.”

“You are hopeless,” irap niya.

“Yeah, yeah. Ano’ng pinagkaiba ng putback at tip-in?

“A what?” Nagsalubong ang mga kilay ni Lindsay. Ano raw? Sexual terms ba iyon? ‘Pull out’ lang ang alam niya.

Yumabang ang ngisi ni Kai at siya naman ang tinapik-tapik sa kamay na para bang bata siya. “I know what you’re thinking. No, it’s not a sexual term. Basketball terms 'yon. See?”

She chuckled and shook her head. Kai got her there. Iyon siguro ang dahilan kaya ito ang best friend niya. Some found her too catty. And maybe they were right. Kai, on the other hand, would bitch-slap her while laughing if she got too much. *Quid pro quo.*

“Yeah, yeah.”

“How’s business going?” untag nito.

“It’s great. Malapit na ang fiesta at maraming bumibili ng damit. In demand ang gowns ngayon dahil sa mga pageants.”

“May bagong garments ka galing Hong Kong?”

Tumango si Lindsay at hinawi ang ilang hibla ng buhok na tumabing sa kanyang pisngi. “Yes, gusto mong tingnan? I have some loose-fitting chiffon blouses you’ll like. Sabihin mo sa 'kin kung kailan ka puwedeng dumaan sa store.”

“Sige. Kailan ka magdadagdag ng sapatos sa retail business mo?”

“I’m still thinking about it. Napalitan ko na ’yung perang ginamit ko sa trust fund ko. I have enough funds to expand, but I’m still gauging the market pulse.”

“Brr, Linds! Market pulse? Math ’yan! Stop it!”

Tumawa siya at binunggo ang balakang nito. “Allergic ka pa rin sa Math? Eh, paano ’yung bf mo na Math instructor, hmm?”

“We have a written rule. No Math talks. May rubber shoes ba sa mga ibebenta mong sapatos? Sa ’yo na ’ko bibili.”

She gave her friend an incredulous look. Iniinsulto ba siya nito? “Of course wala. Puro dresses, skirts, blouses, gowns and girly accessories ang binebenta ko. Ni wala nga akong binebentang t-shirt, ’tapos magbebenta ako ng rubber shoes? Sandals, stilettos and dressy flip flops lang, ’no.”

“Bah! That’s discrimination! Hindi ’yan tama.”

“Yes. At nagdi-discriminate din ang *Adidas* at *Nike* at iba pang sports brand. Hindi sila nagbebenta ng gowns.”

“*Touché*. But seriously, Linds. Parang pareho na kayo ni Kuya Jordan. Masyadong business-minded. Milyonarya ka na ba?”

Tumawa si Lindsay at umiling sa kaibigan. “Bru, three years ago pa.”

Puno ang *Kali Bar and Grill* pagdating nila. May live band na tumutugtog at marami ang sumasayaw sa dance floor. Dumadagundong ang musika sa hangin at sa sahig, pakiramdam niya ay umuugong din ang kanyang mga buto at dugo sa pintig ng tugtog. Halos kailangan niyang sumigaw para marinig ni Kai.

“Speaking of mayaman,” sambit ni Lindsay sa kabila ng tugtog. “Mayaman na ang Kuya Jordan mo. Laging puno

dito.”

“I know. Sabi ko nga, taasan na niya ang sahod namin. Inaabuso na niya kami!”

Nakipagsisikan sila papunta sa bar.

“Well, look who’s here! Ang prinsesa at ang palaka. Hey, Linds!”

Malawak na ngumisi sa kanya ang lalaking may kaparehong mukha ni Calvin. Same dark eyes and wavy black hair. Same strong nose, chiseled cheekbones and hard jaw; same golden bronze skin and muscular build. Mas mahaba lang ang buhok nito kay Calvin, at may maliit na peklat sa kanang kilay. But even without the scar and different hair length, no one would mistake Cole for Calvin.

Calvin had that quiet, brooding look; while Cole’s all fireworks. Laging may pilyong ngisi sa mga labi ng huli, laging may malokong liwanag sa mga mata. Calvin’s a glacier. Cole’s a lava. Calvin’s blue and black. Cole’s red and gold.

And yet, there has been quiet warmth about Calvin, too. It wasn’t loud and showy like Cole’s. He was quiet fire beneath all the calm and strength.

Sinuntok ni Kai sa braso ng kapatid. “Gago. Ikaw ang palaka. And you’ll never turn into a prince no matter how many girls you kiss.”

Tumawa si Cole at pinitik sa noo ang nakababatang kapatid nito. “Prince? Please. Alam mo kung nasaan siya? He’s with the Knight in Shining Armor, and they’re in love with each other. ‘Asaan na ‘yung nerd boylette mo? Nerdy pa rin?”

“If you’re trying to insult him because he’s nerdy, don’t bother. He’s proud of it. It’s an elite circle, dumbass,” asik ng kaibigan niya.

“Hey, Cole.” Umupo si Lindsay sa stool sa gilid ng bar.

“Balita ko ninakaw mo na naman ’yung chocolates ni Kai.”

Umiling ito sa kapatid. “Lies, lies, all lies. Dear sister, hindi ka dapat nagbibintang nang walang ebidensya. It’s rude.”

Nalamukos ang ekspresyon ng kanyang best friend. “At ano’ng tawag mo sa chocolate sa gilid ng bibig mo at sa chocolate wrapper sa bulsa mo, ha? Ha?”

Madamdaming umiling si Cole. “Circumstantial evidence, dear sister. Everything’s circumstantial evidence.”

“Kai, ano pa’ng ginagawa mo d’yan?”

Napalingon sila kay Jordan. Nakatayo ito sa may hagdanan sa gilid ng bar, nakakunot-noo sa kanila. Malaki rin ang hawig nito sa kambal. Pare-pareho ang build ng mga ito. Big and muscular. Pero mas refined ang features ng isang ito. He had that classic muscular beauty reminiscent of Pre-Raphaelite paintings. Cole and Calvin looked more like wild gladiators.

“Shift mo na,” sambit ng pinakamatandang kapatid nina Kai.

Ngumisi si Cole. “Andyan na si Hitler, magtrabaho ka na raw.”

“Isusumbong kita sa kanya.” Nagmartsa si Kai papunta sa locker room.

“Uy! Joke lang ’yun!” pahabol ng kakambal ni Calvin.

Umakyat ulit si Jordan sa second floor at nakahinga nang maluwa ang binata.

“Takot ka rin kay Jordan, ano?” tukso niya.

“Of course not!”

Tumawa si Lindsay at nag-order ng *Mojito* kay Devlin, ang bartender ng *Kali Bar and Grill*.

Nag-ring ang phone ni Cole at dinukot nito iyon mula sa bulsa. “Hey!” sagot nito sa tawag.

Sa lawak ng ngiti ng binata, sigurado siyang babae ang kausap nito. “Now?” Lumawak ang ngisi ng katabi.

May dumaan na babae sa bar, at halos kita na ang crack ng puwet nito dahil sa backless dress na suot. And oooh, she liked the girl’s shoes! They were gold and sparkly!

Cole ogled and grinned. Sa puwet ng babae, of course; hindi sa sparkly golden shoes.

Mapang-akit ding ngumiti ang estranghera at kinindatan ito ng katabi niya.

Inikot ni Lindsay ang mga mata. Cole was a certified manwhore. She had nothing against that. That’s a lie, obviously. She didn’t like players.

“Sure, Babe, I’ll be there in fifteen,” nakangiti sagot ng kakambal ni Calvin sa kausap sa phone habang malagkit na nakatitig sa ibang babae. “I want you wet and naked when I arrive.”

Muntik na siyang sumuka sa kanyang baso.

“Language, Cole,” matabang niyang paalala. “Someone’s drinking here.”

Tumawa lang ito at may pinindot ulit sa phone. “Calvin!”

Muntik na siyang mabilaukan. Matalim niyang tinapunan ng tingin ang lalaki, pero abala ito sa pagtitig sa isa pang babae sa may bar.

“Yeah, brother. P’unta ka muna rito. I-relieve mo muna ako. May pupuntahan lang ako.”

Nakangiting lumapit kay Cole ang babaeng tinititigan nito, at inilapag ang isang papel na may numero sa bar. He grinned and accepted the piece of paper.

“Yeah, brother,” patuloy ng binata. “Alam kong lagi na lang kitang ginagawang reliever. Pero sige na, magkakaneyrism si Kuya Jordan kapag walang pumalit sa ’kin dito. Sige na, be here in ten minutes. You’re the best brother.

'Bye!" Tinapos nito ang tawag at ibinulsa ang phone at papel.

Mapanuri niyang tinitigan si Cole.

"What?" anito nang mapansin ang kanyang titig.

Hindi kaya sinabi rito ni Calvin ang nangyari kaninang madaling araw?

Umiling si Lindsay sa sarili. Of course, he didn't. Calvin was way too reserved to do that. He was *way* too decent. Hindi nito ikukuwento iyon kahit pa sa kakambal.

"What?" ulit ng lalaki.

"Inaabuso mo si Calvin," sita niya. "It's his day-off."

"I know. Mabuti na lang at maasahan ang kambal ko, kung hindi, paano na lang ang sex life ko?" Tumawa ito at binalingan ang server na humihingi ng bill ng isang mesa.

Umiling si Lindsay at sumimsim ulit ng kanyang inumin.

Dapat ba siyang umalis muna? She scowled at her drink.

She could do this. She was no coward.

She would face Calvin and apologize.

She's a big girl. She could do this.

Umungol siya at isinubsob ang mukha sa kanyang mga kamay.

