

1

“Miss Claudette, ipinapatawag po kayo ng Mommy n’yo sa kuwarto niya.”

Nilingon ni Claudette ang katulong na si Marla bago sumubo ng ubas. Mataman niyang pinagmasdan ang suot nitong maid’s uniform. Napansin niyang napasunod ang tingin nito at napaigtad ang babae nang makitang may mga mantsa ang suot nitong uniporme. Muli siyang sumubo ng ubas saka tumayo, iniwan ang mesa na puno ng masasarap na pagkain para sa kanyang agahan. Tumigil siya sa tabi ni Marla bago bumulong.

“Please change your uniform, Marla,” tipid niyang saad at dumerecho na sa hagdanan ng malaki nilang mansion.

“O-opo, Miss Claudette!” narinig niya pang pahabol ng katulong na hindi na niya pinansin.

Hindi siya kumakatok bago pumasok sa kuwarto ng mga magulang. Naabutan niya ang ina na nasa harapan ng dresser at nagmi-makeup. Claudia, her mother, was wearing a red silk robe, at sa repleksyon nito sa salamin ay kitang-kita ang napakakinis pa rin nitong kutis. For a fifty-year old woman, her mother still looked dashing. She had

the classic French beauty na nakuha nito sa lolo nitong purong Pranses. Hindi rin pahuhuli ang kanyang ina sa ganda ng katawan. Claudia did yoga everyday and it kept her body toned and slim.

“What’s up, Mom?” aniya, naglakad palapit sa mahaba nitong dresser. Hinalikan niya ang ina sa noo at nagsimulang makialam sa mga mamahalin nitong makeup. “Where’s Dad?”

“He went golfing with his amigos. Hinintay ko lang talagang umalis siya before I show you this.”

Napakunot-noo siya at nilingon ang ina na ngayon ay nagmamadali nang tumayo at nagtungo sa walk-in closet nito sa di kalayuan.

Napasunod rito si Claudette. “Mommy,” kabado niyang tawag dito habang naghahalungkat ang ina sa isa mga drawers sa closet. “Did you...”

Kagat-labi at puno rin ng excitement ang mukha na tumango-tango ito habang inilalabas sa drawer ang isang malaking leather box na kulay pula, a kind of box that was way too familiar to her.

“Oh, I did, Sweetheart,” tumatango nitong sagot at tuluyang iniabot sa kanya ang malaking kahon.

Tuluyan na siyang napabulalas. “Oh, my God, Mommy! How did you get this new *Cartier* jewelry set?” aniyang mabilis na naupo sa malaking kama at nagkukumahog na binuksan ang kahon. “They said sa December pa ito lalabas sa market!” She was a *Cartier* girl. She loved every watch, every



piece of jewelry and every fragrance that the French company offered.

Nagkibit-balikat ang ina habang proud na nakatingin sa kanya. “You underestimate your mother, Hija. You know I can move mountains for my only girl.”

Napuno ng kasiyahan ang kanyang puso sa sinabi nito. Inilapag niya ang kahon sa kama at nilapitan ang ina bago ito mahigpit na niyakap.

“Thank you so much, Mom! I promise I won’t tell Dad.” Napangisi siya.

“Yeah, you’d better not. Ako na naman ang pagsasabihan n’un.”

Nagkatawanan sila. Her father was a hotel magnate. They owned more than fifty hotels all over the Philippines and they were starting to expand all over Asia. Ang kanyang ina naman ay kilalang socialite. Claudia Fontelar owned a clothing line in the Philippines. She designed dresses for famous people and celebrities.

So it was safe to say that they were very rich. Ni minsan sa buhay ni Claudette ay hindi siya nakaramdam ng kakulangan. Everything she needed was provided for her, kadalasan nga ay sobra pa. And she loved how her family was intact. Her mother and father’s relationship was strong and they loved her more than anything else in the world. Her life was perfect. Ang tanging rason

lang kung bakit nitong nakaraan ay itinatago nila sa kanyang ama ang mga spending activities nila ay dahil gusto na ng ama na magtrabaho siya. Mag-aapat na taon na mula nang mag-graduate siya mula sa *Enderun*, an expensive international school in the Philippines. She took up Bachelor of Science in Business Administration and graduated with flying colors. Pero ni minsan mula nang mag-graduate si Claudette ay wala pa siyang pinasukang trabaho. In her mind, alam naman niyang anytime na gustuhin niyang magtrabaho ay puwede siyang kunin ng ina o ng ama. She just didn't see the point of hurrying up and getting all responsible when everything was there for the taking. Sometimes she would help her mom design some dresses and she would get paid for more than what she worked for. But that was just it.

Kaya nagdesisyon ang kanyang ama na i-cut back ang kanyang monthly allowance. Naisip nitong kapag nakulangan na si Claudette ng pera ay nanaisin na niyang magtrabaho. She must admit, halos kalahati ng usual na natatanggap niya sa kanyang bank account buwan-buwan ang nabawas. But it was still more than enough for her to live comfortably. And whenever she needed to get something that was overly expensive, her mom always went to her rescue. Just like the *Cartier* jewelry set that probably cost nearly a million.



Napangiti siya. Bilang nag-iisang anak, sobrang spoiled siya sa kanyang ina. Her mom was her best friend. Claudia would fight tooth and nail to give Claudette everything she ever wished for. And it really wasn't helping her see the point of working.

“So what are you up to today, Mom?” tanong niya sa inang nakabalik na sa harapan ng dresser nito at ipinagpapatuloy na ang pagmi-makeup. Inusisa naman niya ang di-mabilang na diyamante sa kuwintas na kasali sa jewelry set na katatanggap lang niya.

“I'm meeting with Mr. Espinosa,” tukoy nito sa isang batikang movie director. “Ibibigay nila 'yung feedback sa ginawa kong design for their latest movie. It shouldn't be long, thank God. His secretary's big glasses and checkered tops give me headaches.” Napailing ito.

She smiled. Pareho sila ng kanyang ina. Pareho silang hindi makatagal makatingin sa mga taong hindi marunong mag-ayos sa sarili.

She rolled her eyes. “Maybe you could give her some of your sample dresses,” sagot niya at ibinalik na sa kahon ang mga alahas.

“I did, but I never saw her wear them.” Nagkibit-balikat ito. “Pupunta ka ba kina Anya?” tukoy ng ina sa kanyang best friend.

“As usual. Her Uncle Brett opened this new gym, so pupuntahan namin 'yun. I might cancel

my membership with my old gym. And if it's good, I might drag my gym buddies there, too. It'll help Brett's business."

Nilingon siya ng ina at mapagmahal na ngumiti. "I love how you're so close to Anya, Sweetheart. She's a very nice girl."

She flicked her hair. "We both are!" Hinalikan na niya ang ina. "See you later, Mommy. And thanks again!" tukoy niya sa bitbit na kahon.

"My pleasure, Darling."

Pagkalabas niya ng pinto ay agad niyang namataan ang mayordoma nilang si Roberta na may bitbit na tray ng pagkain. Agad siyang tumalima at nagmamadaling tinungo ang kanyang kuwarto pero bago pa man niya naisara ang pinto ay naiharang na ng kasambahay ang katawan nito doon.

"What?" taas-kilay niyang tanong at tumuloy na sa pagpasok, hinayaang sumunod ang matanda.

"Ni hindi mo ginalaw ang hinanda kong agahan. Tingnan mo nga 'yang katawan mo. Ang payat-payat mo na pero panay pa rin ang pagdadiet mo." Maliit pa si Claudette ay nagtatrabaho na sa kanila ang matanda kaya hindi ito nagdadalawang-isip na pagsabihan siya.

"I'm not on a diet. Alam n'yo na dapat na hindi talaga ako kumakain ng agahan," sagot niya at nagtungo rin sa sariling walk-in closet para pumili



ng isusuot para sa araw na iyon.

Lumapit sa kanya ang matanda, bitbit ang tray na may lamang bagel, strawberry jam, ilang piraso ng ubas at mango juice. “Nagsimula lang ang hindi mo pagkain nang maayos nang magdalaga ka. At simula din noon ay naging sakitin ka na.”

Umiikot ang mga matang napabuntong-hininga siya nang lalo pang ilapit ng katulong ang tray ng pagkain sa kanyang mukha. Napipilitan, inabot niya ang bagel at kumagat doon. Sinadya niyang ipakita sa katulong ang pagnguya sa tinapay bago kinalahati ang mango juice. “I’m done, Roberta. Take that out of here,” taas-kilay ulit niyang utos dito. She hated how she couldn’t afford to totally dismiss the old lady.

Hindi man niya inubos ang tinapay ay ngingisngisi na itong tumalikod at tuluyan siyang iniwan.



“Tatawagan na lang kita kung magpapasundo na ako. We’ll be using Anya’s car to go to the gym anyway,” ani Claudette sa kanyang driver. Marunong siyang magmaneho. She had a driver’s license, but having her own driver was just part of the perks of being a rich kid.

“Yes, Ma’am,” anito bago niya tuluyang isinara ang pinto.

Tuluy-tuloy na si Claudette sa bahay ng matalik na kaibigan. Naabutan niya itong nagbabasa ng

magazine sa living room.

“You ready?” bungad niya rito matapos tanggalin ang suot na sunglasses.

Nilingon siya ng kaibigan at napakunot-noo ito habang pinagmamasdan ang kanyang suot. “We’re going to the gym, not shopping.”

Claudette was wearing a pair of skinny jeans and midriff top.

Napangiti siya. “Hindi ako magwo-workout. I’m just going with you to check out the gym. I will decide then if I’ll switch. At kung mangyari man iyon, I’ll start tomorrow and not today.”

“Oh, you would love it there,” anitong tumayo na.

Tumaas ang kilay niya at sumabay sa paglakad nito patungo sa pinto. “Why is that?”

“You’ll see Jesse there everyday.”

Malapad siyang ngumiti pero hindi ipinahalata sa kaibigan ang pagbilis ng pintig ng kanyang puso.

Jesse... the nasty, yet very endearing Jesse.

“This should be fun!”



Naibaba ni Jesse ang hawak na dumbbell nang malingunan ang dalawang babaeng kapapasok lang sa gym. Ang mga mata niya ay natuon sa babaeng naka-hanging top, naka-ponytail at nakasuot ng malalaking sunglasses. The very classy Claudette Fontelar, Anya’s best friend.



Isa si Jesse sa apat na kabataang lumaki sa bakuran ng lolo ni Anya na si Luiz Jones, a retired American soldier. Nasa US Military rin si Jesse pero pinili niyang iwan ang trabaho mula nang mamatay si Luiz upang masiguro ang kaligtasan ni Anya na siyang pinakamahalagang kayamanan ng taong itinuring niyang ama.

Isa pang dahilan ng desisyon niyang talikuran ang pagiging *SEAL* ay ang kanyang ina na simula't sapul ay hindi ginusto ang kanyang pinasok na trabaho.

His mother was a dancer and an escort in a Las Vegas casino. Doon nito nakilala ang kanyang Amerikanong ama, customer nito. Then one thing led to another. His mother fell in love and eventually got pregnant. Pero dahil sa linya ng trabaho nito ay hindi naniwala ang lalaki na ito ang ama ng ipinagbubuntis ng kanyang ina. His father disappeared without a trace. At nang malaman ng entertainment management ng casino na buntis ang kanyang ina ay walang pagdadalawang-isip na tinanggal sa trabaho si Jasmine, his mother.

Ang naipundar nitong maliit na bahay, mga alahas at sasakyan ay madaling naubos lalo na nang isilang siya. His mother went back to working at small time night clubs. Pero dahil may anak na ito at hindi na ganoon kaperpekto ang katawan ay hindi ito nagtagal sa mga pinasukang trabaho.

Later on, she decided to bring him home to the Philippines. He had been eleven then. Nakapagpatayo ang kanyang ina ng maliit na beauty salon sa Maynila at nagawa siyang ipasok sa maayos na paaralan.

It was how Jesse met Brett, Luiz's adoptive son, na kaedad din niya—sa school. Noon din niya nakilala sina Aston at Robbie. They were all part Filipinos with not-so-very-nice family backgrounds. Kaya hindi naging mahirap sa kanilang apat ang maka-develop ng samahan, a bond that later on grew stronger and stronger because of Luiz's presence in their lives.

Matapos niyang magtapos ng high school ay pinilit niya ang inang bumalik sila sa US. He wanted so badly to know his father. He adored Luiz pero sa tuwina ay ramdam niya ang kahungkagan sa kanyang dibdib dahil ni minsan ay hindi niya nasilayan ang tunay na ama. At naintindihan iyon ni Jasmine. So right after he graduated, they moved back to the US. They were both American citizens so it hadn't been difficult to move back.

Jasmine found a job at a convenience store. Pero hindi iyon naging sapat para pondohan ang pang-araw-araw nilang gastusin at ang paghahanap sa kanyang ama na pangalan lamang ang alam niya. A certain George Ward. Hindi nagkaroon ng bunga ang ginawa niyang paghahanap at di



nagtagal ay kinailangan na rin niyang maghanap ng trabaho. Luiz suggested that he enlist in the Navy so he did.

Jesse got accepted, and later on, tried out for the *SEAL* teams, and made it. Finally he had enough money to give his mother a life that, albeit not grand, was at least comfortable. Pero naging napakadalang ng pagkikita nila. He had his own place na madalas niyang uwian mula sa training upang paghilumin muna ang mga tama at sugat bago bibisita sa kanyang ina.

Her mother never approved of his profession. But he couldn't think of anything to do in the Philippines. Hanggang sa naging mahina ang kanyang ina.

Tingin niya ay lalong nahuhulog ang katawan nito habang tumatagal. And then the news came that Luiz was dead. Jesse thought then that it was time he went home. Mas sasaya ang ina sa Pilipinas dahil may mga kaibigan ito sa lugar, at masisiguro rin niya ang kaligtasan ni Anya.

Malaki ang natimbog nilang drug cartel—ang may kinalaman sa pagkamatay ng lolo nito.

Siya, si Robbie, at si Aston na British SAS ay nagpasyang magtayo ng security agency sa Pilipinas. They were all qualified for the permits dahil sa mga backgrounds nila at ang pinakamahalaga ay hindi nila tuluyang iiwan ang

trabahong minahal nila.

So here he was, sa gym na katatayo lang din ni Brett. He was supposed to be cooling down dahil patapos na siya sa kanyang workout. Oddly though, he felt warm once again, looking at Claudette, who was now proudly walking toward him. Mahihiya ang mga models sa paraan ng paglalakad nito. There was that confident and natural grace in the way she moved that everybody in the gym, literally, was looking at her now.

“Well, hello there, pretty boy,” she said sexily nang tumigil sa harapan niya, at inalis ang suot na sunglasses.

He inhaled sharply, pilit na inaalis ang paningin sa makinis nitong baywang na nakalantad sa lahat ng mga nasa gym. Nang tuluyang maalis ang paningin doon ay sinalubong naman siya ng malalaki at mabibilog nitong mata na may malalantik na pilik. And he didn't have to look down to her lips to know that they were kissable as hell.

“Hi there, Sexy. What are you doing here?” he asked, equally playful.

Nagkibit-balikat ito habang nililinga ang paligid. “I had to check out the new gym in town.”

“And why is that? I never took you for someone who went to the gym.”

Matalim siya nitong tinitigan. “Just so you know,

I go to the gym six times a week.” Tumaas ang kilay ni Jesse. “Do you?”

She looked back at him. “Yes, so from now, I’ll be in here six times a week.”

“What?” Biglang parang may tumadyak sa kanyang sikmura sa sinabi nito.

“You heard it right. I’m moving my membership here.”

“You’re kidding me,” mabilis niyang sambit.

“I’m serious. Sa nakikita ko, mas bago ang mga equipment dito. And knowing Brett, I know he must have hired good trainers. Not to mention that I always support my best friend.”

“This isn’t Anya’s business,” kontra niya.

“Technically, it is. Brett is her only legal relative. So if you don’t like seeing me around here, you’d better look for another gym.” And then she smiled that sweet mischievous smile of hers. “See you around, pretty boy.”

Napailing siya. It was bad enough that Anya and Claudette were inseparable. Nitong nakaraan ay madalas siya sa bahay ni Anya dahil sa pagtulong sa paglutas sa kaso ng pagpatay sa lolo nito.

Claudette being the overly protective and supportive friend that she was, was always there kaya halos araw-araw rin niya itong nakikita.

He loved seeing her. He was damn sure he

would love it more if he could get to touch her, too, which was what he had always wanted since they were teens. Pero bata pa lang sila ay alam na niyang walang patutunguhan ang anumang nararamdaman niya para rito. He knew it the moment Claudette's mother talked to him and asked him to never try anything with her precious daughter. Malinaw nitong sinabi ang maganda nitong plano para sa kinabukasan ng anak. And a dirtbag like him could never be a part of that future.



2

“So, will you be coming here everyday, too?”
Tanong ni Claudette kay Anya habang naglalakad sila patungo sa office ni Brett.

Anya had decided to show her the back office, too. Wala roon ngayon si Brett dahil kasalukuyan itong nagti-training para sa championship match nito sa *UFC* three weeks from now.

“Habang wala si Brett, I have to,” sagot ng kaibigan na sinususian ang opisina. “When he comes back, kailangan ko nang asikasuhin ang pag-manage sa naiwang mga car shops ni Lolo.”

Tahimik niya itong tiningnan. Magtatatlong buwan na mula nang mapatay ang lolo ni Anya. Although Claudette could see that her friend was slowly recovering, alam niyang deep inside ay nahihirapan pa rin ito. Lumaki ang kaibigan sa poder ng matanda. Nang mamatay ang ina nito na si Anabeth, si Luiz na lamang ang natira nitong pamilya.

They were so close at naiintindihan niyang hindi madali para rito ang maka-recover sa pagkamatay ng abuelo kahit pa nakakulong na ang may gawa niyon.

“You okay, Anya?” concerned niyang tanong

habang sumusunod dito.

“Yes, I’m fine.” Nginitian siya nito. “But I’ll be better.”

“I’m sure of that.” She smiled back at nakita niya kung paano nitong iniwas ang mukha sa kanya.

Isa lang ang ibig sabihin niyon. Ayaw ni Anya na makita niya ang kalungkutan sa mga mata nito. Anya knew Claudette would go over the top just to cheer her up.

She shrugged at hinawakan ang gilid ng desk sa harapan ng kaibigan. “It’s so manly in here.”

“Syempre. First of all, Brett is a manly man and this is a gym.”

Nagkibit-balikat siya at nag-isip. “Punta tayo sa salon. I don’t wanna stay here if that’s your plan. My hair could use a hot oil treatment. Yours, too.” Inalis niya ang pagkaka-ponytail ng buhok at sinuklay-suklay iyon gamit ang mga daliri.

Nang hindi siya sagutin ng kaibigan, nilingon niya ito. Her heart panicked when she saw Anya looking at a small portrait on the wall. She knew the man too well. It was Luiz during his early days as a soldier.

Tumikhim siya. “And maybe we could go to the spa. My treat, Anya. Then after that, we could go get food and then go shopping. Oh, did I tell you, Mom—”



“Stop, Claud,” putol nito sa kanya.

“What?” defensive niyang tanong.

“I’m fine, okay? You don’t need to bribe me so I’d feel better.”

Napabuntong-hininga si Claudette. Alam niyang nahuli kaagad siya ng kaibigan. It always killed her to see Anya sad kaya palagi na lang siyang desperado na gumagawa ng paraan para malibang ito. Anya was her only real friend. In fact, she adored her so much, that she was more than a friend to her. Anya was a sister.

“I just don’t want you sulking, y-you get ugly,” wala nang maisip na palusot niya.

Tuluyan na itong natawa. Nilapitan siya nito at mahigpit na niyakap. “Thank you so much for everything, Claud. You’re an amazing friend.”

Mahigpit din niya itong niyakap. “You were a friend to me first before I became a friend to you. And I adore you.”

Bumalik ang isip niya sa kung paano niya naging kaibigan si Anya.

Everybody said Claudette had an attitude problem. She was self-centered and downright mean. Kaya naman ngayon, sa kalagitnaan ng pasukan, ay first week niya uli sa paaralan. This was her third school transfer. Katulad ng naunang school ay tahimik siyang na-kick out dahil sa hindi

mabilang na offenses na nagawa niya. Hindi niya iyon maintindihan. She didn't mean to offend anyone when she said that their Math teacher needed to powder her face para naman mas maging presentable ito habang nagtuturo. She was just telling the truth.

Napailing siya at bored na nilingon ang paligid ng cafeteria. This was her fourth day in this private school at wala pa rin siyang kaibigan. She didn't want one anyway. They all looked so boring to her.

"Hi," bati ng tinig ng isang babae sa kanya.

Nilingon iyon ni Claudette at napataas ang kilay. She remembered that the girl was one of her classmates. How could she forget? Halos magmantika ang mukha nito nang dahil sa pimples. And her kinky hair didn't help her look less gross.

"Eew. What do you want?" derecho niyang tanong.

Sandali itong natigilan dahil sa pag-'eew' niya pero mayamaya ay sumagot din. "Napansin kasi naming mag-isa ka. Baka gusto mong lumipat sa table namin."

Nilingon niya ang nilingon nitong table at nakakaloko siyang napatawa. Why, the girls looked like a bunch of geeks who didn't have time to wash their faces. "Uhm, no, thank you. Please leave me alone." She flicked her hair at inilayo ang tingin dito. She tried hard not to comment on the girl's physical appearance dahil na-warning-an na siya ng ina.



Kailangan na niyang magpakabait dahil kung maki-kick out siya ulit ay maghihintay na siya hanggang sa susunod na pasukan para makapag-aral dahil wala nang ibang school na tatanggap sa kanya. And she couldn't allow that.

Aba, ayaw niyang mahuli ng isang taon. Siguradong pagtatawanan siya ng mga napagmalditahan niyang ka-batch. She didn't want that to happen. And she certainly didn't want her grand Paris vacation this coming school break to get cancelled katulad ng sinabi ng kanyang ama sakaling ma-kick out ulit siya.

Her great-grandfather was French at napakaganda ng mansion na iniwan nito sa kanyang ina. It was right at the center of their very own vineyard na ngayon ay pinamamahalaan ng mga native na taga-roon. Their Paris home was her heaven on earth.

She sipped her cranberry juice and checked her Cartier watch. Fifteen minutes pa bago matapos ang lunch break and she was really getting bored. She flicked her hair again at nadaanan ng tingin ang isa pang kaklase. This time, she remembered the girl not because of her pimples or oily face. She was actually very pretty. Katulad niya ay napakakinis din ng balat nito. And her aura would brighten more dahil palagi itong nakangiti. It irritated Claudette. She felt the girl was being too nice. It was just not normal for

anyone to smile at everyone.

And that was what Anya was doing. Kahit ilang beses na niya itong inirapan sa pagngiti at pagbati nito sa kanya ay hindi pa rin ito nagsasawa. Katulad ngayon, napagawi ang tingin nito sa kanya at tila nakita nito ang pinakapaborito nitong tao sa mundo. She waved and smiled at her na katulad ng ginawa niya nang mga nakaraang araw ay muli niya itong inignora.

“Plastic,” pabulong niyang sambit at nagulat nang biglang may malakas na kumalabit sa kanyang balikat. Marahas niya itong nilingon at nabigla nang makita ang limang babae sa kabilang table, kasama ang nag-aya sa kanya kanina, na nakatayo sa likuran niya. Napatayo siya upang harapin ang mga ito.

“I don’t want to sit with you, okay? God!” iritado niyang saad.

“Don’t you know who I am?” tanong ng pinakamatangkad sa mga ito.

Bored na iniikot niya ang paningin. “No, and I don’t intend to.”

“Ako lang naman ang anak ng director ng school na ’to. And I know why you transferred here in the middle of the school year. You were kicked out dahil sa masama mong ugali.”

Biglang nag-init ang mukha ni Claudette sa sinabi ng kaklase. “Hey, that’s supposed to be

confidential!”

“Not if you’re the director’s daughter,” sagot nito. “Sinabi ng dad ko sa ’kin ang lahat and he encouraged me to befriend you. Sinabi niyang kailangan mo ng bagong kaibigan, and it might help in keeping you out of trouble. Pero ano ang ginawa mo? You looked at us as if we’re the most disgusting students here.”

“Well, you are disgusting!” mabilis niyang sabat. “I don’t need disgusting friends. I’d rather be alone. So if you don’t mind, please get out of my face.”

Nanlaki ang mga mata ng mga ito sa tinuran niya. “Don’t you know that I can tell my dad everything that you just said? At kapag sinabi ko iyon ay malamang na ma-kick out ka ulit?”

“Are you threatening me?” matalim ang tingin na tanong niya rito.

“I’m just telling you what I’ll do kapag hindi mo binawi ang sinabi mo at hindi ka nag-sorry.”

“Hindi ko babawiin ang sinabi ko dahil totoo iyon. Have you girls ever heard of facial wash, facial cleansers and the like? No wonder you all stick together dahil pare-pareho kayo ng pagmumukha. And don’t you dare threaten me ’cos I can easily tell my parents to have this school shut down.”

She didn’t think that was possible, but she never responded well to threats. She had to bite right back. Pero mabilis ding parang nalunok niya ang sariling

dila nang mapagtanto ang kanyang sinabi. Lalo na nang makita niya ang pagrehistro ng pagkagulat at galit sa mukha ng kausap. For a moment there, she was sure she was gonna get kicked out again.

“Wow,” anang babae. “You can say goodbye to this school now, Claudette Fontelar. Dahil pagkasabi ko sa daddy ko ng mga sinabi mo, I doubt it if you could still enter this school.”

Sabay-sabay nang tumalikod ang mga ito. “H-hey,” tawag niya rito, mahigpit na nakakuyom ang mga palad. Buong buhay niya, hindi pa siya nag-sorry sa kahit na kanino. Kahit sa kanyang ama at ina. She had never begged, too. But she had to do it now o talagang matitigil siya sa pag-aaral. And her Paris vacation? Mariin siyang napapikit.

“Yes?” taas-kilay na tanong nito.

“I... I’m sorry.” There, she said it.

“I didn’t hear you. What was that?” Tuluyan nang bumalik sa harapan niya ang mga ito.

“I’m sorry,” nakayuko niyang ulit, takot na baka pag nakita niyang muli ang mukha nito ay gumana na naman ang katarayan niya.

“Well, that’s very nice of you, but it’s too late now. I’m telling my dad anyway.”

Napanganga siya sa tinuran ng babae. “What?”

“I asked you to say sorry kanina, di ba? Pero iba ang lumabas diyan sa bibig mo. You really are a spoiled kid. Obviously, lahat ng gusto mo ay madali

mong nakukuha. That's why you're always up on your high horse, feeling superior to everyone."

"I... I can't get kicked out again. Please..." She was starting to feel desperate.

"You should have thought of that before insulting us."

"Maybe you shouldn't have approached her in the first place."

Sabay-sabay silang napalingson sa babaeng biglang sumingit. Napatiim-bagang si Claudette nang mapagsino ito. It was Anya.

Napakunot-noo ang ngayon ay kilala na niya bilang Charity, the school director's daughter. "Gusto lang namin siyang kaibiganin."

"And because she refused to be friends with you, you'll make her life miserable?" walang judgement nitong turan.

"Ininsulto niya kami. She even said 'eew' nang tingnan niya ako," sali ng unang nag-approach kay Claudette.

"Well, from what I heard, alam n'yo na na hindi siya mabait, so you should have expected something unpleasant to happen once you talk to her."

Madilim ang paningin na nilingon niya si Anya na kung magsalita ay parang hindi niya ito naririnig.

"You were lecturing her about how she was so mean and spoiled and everything else, and yet you

are acting just like her. And that is not expected from the school director's daughter. *Ipinagmamayabang mo na rin lang na anak ka ni Director Ramiso, you might as well live up to it. Back away from the fight and give your fellow students a chance to grow and be better.*"

Natahimik si Charity bago, "Ba't mo ba siya kinakampihan? Aren't we friends?"

"I'm friends with everyone, Charity. At wala akong kinakampihan. I'm just saying that it's not fair to tell your dad to kick Claudette out because of this petty fight. She already said she was sorry anyway..."

Matalim na bumuntong-hininga si Charity at muli siyang nilingon. "Try to be nicer, Claudette." Iyon lang at tuluyan nang nagmartsa ang mga ito palayo sa kanilang dalawa.

Claudette was speechless. She didn't expect those girls to have the guts to be mean to her. At lalong hindi niya inaasahang ipagtatanggol siya ni Anya, kahit na nga ba sinabi mismo nito na "hindi siya mabait."

Ilang beses na niyang inignora ang friendly gestures nito sa kanya. Weird, but she was feeling very small right now. Hindi pa siya nakaramdam ng ganoon sa tanang buhay niya.

It took her a while to look at Anya who was still standing in front of her.

"Are you okay?" Bumalik na ang masigla nitong



ngiti.

“I... I’m fine,” tanging naisagot niya.

“Good,” mabilis nitong balik. “I’ll see you around then!”

Napasunod ang tingin niya sa papalayo nitong pigura. Ilang segundo rin siyang natigilan bago nagmamadaling sumunod kay Anya. And from that day on, hindi na sila nagkahiwalay. She had found a friend for the first time.



Uminit kaagad ang ulo ni Claudette nang hindi makita ang sasakyan at ang kanyang driver. She was already feeling frustrated dahil hindi pumayag na sumama si Anya sa kanya. May tatapusin pa raw itong trabaho. Tinawagan na niya ang driver para magpasundo kaya inasahan niyang makikita niya ito pagkalabas ng gym. But she couldn’t see a velvet red *BMW* anywhere.

“Where are you headed?”

Bigla ay sumulpot sa harapan niya ang isang itim na *Honda City*. Lulan niyon si Jesse. And as usual, her heart skipped a bit. Lalo na nang mabungaran niya ang guwapo nitong mukha. Jesse had that boyishly playful smile on his face. His thick brown hair with blonde highlights all over was spikey as usual. His hazel eyes were looking at her mischievously at ang ngiti nito na hindi naman ganoon kalawak ay nag-e-emphasize sa

perpekto nitong panga. It made him so manly. She couldn't blame the girls if their knees went weak whenever they saw Jesse Ward smile. Pasimple siyang bumuga ng hangin upang alisin ang bara sa kanyang lalamunan. God, when was she gonna get over Jesse's handsome face?

"I'm waiting for my driver. I have a salon appointment," she said casually.

"I need a haircut, too. Hop in."

Kumunot ang noo niya. "You need an appointment to go to my salon."

Ngumisi ito. "I'm sure there's nothing you can't do with a snap of your little fingers." Kinindatan siya nito, and just like that, she nodded.

She hopped in. She was sure a few hours with him could do no harm.



3

“*W*here have you been?” agad na tanong ni Claudette nang sagutin niya ang nag-ring niyang cell phone. It was her driver. Nasa labas na raw ito ng gym. “Alam mong traffic, then hindi ka na sana nagpakalayo. You’re supposed to be there exactly when I need you.” Umikot ang mga mata niya. “I’m with a friend now. I’ll call you later. And stop strolling around!” inis niyang pagtatapos.

Nailing niyang ibinalik sa kanyang bag ang cell phone at di sinasadyang napatingin sa repleksyon ni Jesse sa salamin. He was sitting behind her at kasalukuyan nang ginugupitan habang ang stylist naman niya ay nag-a-apply na ng hot oil treatment sa kanyang buhok. Jesse was looking at her from his mirror, too. There was a knowing look on his face, tila sinasabi nitong wala pa rin siyang ipinagbago. Inirapan lang niya ang lalaki.

Jesse knew her well. Simula nang maging magkaibigan sila ni Anya ay madalas na siya sa bahay ng huli. Madalas din doon ang grupo ng lalaki dahil barkada ito ng adoptive uncle ni Anya.

The boys were inseparable. Katulad nila ng kaibigan. And she must admit, parte ng rason kung bakit madalas siya sa bahay ng best friend ay

dahil alam niyang naroon din palagi si Jesse. She had been fifteen then and Jesse had been around sixteen. She had this huge crush on him and Jesse had always been playful around her. But things drastically changed after Anya's fifteenth birthday.

"Let's dance."

Napaangat ang tingin ni Claudette sa may-ari ng palad na nakalahad sa harapan niya. And when she saw Jesse, her eyes sparkled. Hindi ganoon kadami ang imbitado sa party ni Anya but it was enough to fill the living room na ginawang maliit na dance floor.

Jesse was wearing a white shirt and black jeans habang siya naman ay nakasuot ng pink tube top dress. Si Anya ngayon ay kasayaw ni Robbie habang siya ay kaliwa't kanan ang pagtangga sa mga nag-aaya sa kanyang sumayaw. She was waiting for one particular guy and he was standing right in front of her now.

Malapad siyang ngumiti at inabot ang palad nito.

Narinig niya itong nagpakawala ng hangin habang iginigiya siya sa gitna ng makeshift na dance floor.

"What?" taka niyang untag.

"Akala ko matutulad ako sa mga naunang nag-aya sa iyong tinanggihan mo," anito, at ipinaikot ang mga braso sa kanyang baywang.



Napahugot siya ng hininga. This was the first time she ever got this close to Jesse and the warmth that spread all over her body was overwhelming.

“Would I say no to you?” nagawa niyang sabihin.

Jesse’s hazel eyes bored into hers na tila hinahanap doon ang kasagutan sa kanyang tanong. “Would you, Claudette?”

Napangiti siya. “I would have kung nakasuot ka din ng pastel-colored shirt katulad ng mga naunang nag-aya sa akin.” Kunwa ay napailing si Claudette. “Some people are just hopeless.”

“You’re cute when you’re being mean,” nakangiti nitong saad, hindi inaalís ang paningin sa kanyang mukha.

“I’m always cute,” she said proudly, napaigtad nang bigla nitong pisilin ang kanyang tagiliran.

“Hey,” aniyang nakiliti.

Napatawa ito. “Yeah, you’re cute all right.”

Napakunot-noo siya. She was starting to get defensive. She knew she still had baby fats around her tummy but it was very minimal. She was a chocolate lover. “What do you mean?”

Nagkibit-balikat si Jesse at inikot siya. Pero nang makabalik sa mga braso nito ay nagpatuloy siya sa pag-uusisa. “What did you mean?”

“Nothing, you’re cute, that’s all,” sagot nito na tila pinipigil ang pagtawa.

“Are you making fun of me just ’cos my tummy is

fat?”

Napailing ito. “Don’t be silly. Your tummy is not fat. You’re perfect,” masuyo nitong saad at natigilan siya nang haplusin nito ang kanyang mukha.

“Everything about you is perfect. Your hair, your eyes, your nose, your lips...”

Tuluyan nang natameme si Claudette nang haplusin nito ang kanyang mga labi.

“One day, I’ll kiss these lips,” patuloy pa ni Jesse habang ang puso niya ay halos kumawala na sa kanyang dibdib.

“W-what made you think I’d let you?” namumula niyang saad.

“Cos you wouldn’t say no to me?” patanong nitong sagot.

And before she could react, Jesse planted a kiss on her forehead.

Hindi na niya alam kung gaano sila katagal sa dance floor, ni hindi niya napansin kung ano ang musikang tinutugtog. She just felt blissful being in Jesse’s arms. Natigil na lang sila nang magsimula nang magsipag-uwian ang mga bisita. Hindi pa sana siya bibitawan ni Jesse kung hindi nila namataan ang kanyang mommy na sinusundo na siya.

“I’ll see you,” ani Jesse na mataman pa ring nakatitig sa kanya.

Napatango siya. She couldn’t wait to see him again. Pagkatapos ng mahaba nilang sayaw ni Jesse



ay nakumpirma na niya ngayon na may gusto rin ito sa kanya. Excited na siyang ibalita iyon kay Anya. Ni hindi pa nito alam na may gusto siya kay Jesse. Gusto niyang sabihin sa kaibigan kapag naramdaman na niyang may pag-asang magustuhan rin siya ng binata. And this was the sign she was waiting for.

Tumakbo siya palapit sa ina at masaya itong niyakap.

“Did you have fun, Darling?” magiliw nitong tanong.

“Yes, Mommy. Wait lang. Magpapaalam lang ako kay Anya. She’s over there,” turo niya sa lamesa sa di-kalayuan kung saan kausap nito sina Brett at Aston.

“Okay, I’ll wait for you here.”

Mabilis na siyang tumakbo, puno pa rin ng excitement ang dibdib. Hindi na niya napansin ang paglapit ng ina kay Jesse na nakatingin pa rin sa kanya.



“Narinig ko, Miss Claudette, lumalabas daw kayo ngayon ng anak ni Senator Andeza. Totoo ba?”

Natigil ang paglililiwaliw ng isip ni Claudette sa tanong na iyon ni Lissy, ang kanyang stylist. She went to *Sei Salon* every two weeks kaya kahit papaano ay close na sila ng batikang hair stylist.

Napangiti siya. “Yup! That’s the reason why I’m here right now in the first place. May date kami mamaya,” proud niyang tugon. She was never one to hide what was really going on. Pero nang muling mapadpad ang tingin niya sa repleksyon ni Jesse ay parang gusto niyang pagsisihan ang sinabi. He was looking at her with a blank expression this time, pero natigilan pa rin siya. She was still hoping Jesse would end up liking her again, at hindi makakatulong na malaman nitong may mga dini-date siya.

Pigil na napatili ang stylist. “Ay, bagay na bagay kayo. Ang guwapu-guwapo ni Bobby. Kayo na ba?”

“No,” mabilis niyang sagot. “I... It’s really just a casual thing. Our parents are setting us up. That’s why we go out.” Totoo ang sinabi niya, pero alam niyang hindi iyon totoo para sa anak ng senador. Bobby definitely wanted her to be his girlfriend.

Yumukod sa kanya ang stylist para bumulong. “Sabagay, di hamak na mas guwapo ang kasama n’yo ngayon. Aba, hindi ’yan eestimahin ni Sandra nang walang appointment kung di ’yan ganyan kaguwapo.”

Napataas ang kilay ni Claudette at bumulong din. “Are you sure it’s not because I could get her sacked if she refused my request?”

Napalunok si Lissy. “S-siyempre po dahil sa inyo kaya inaasikaso ang kasama n’yo.”



She smiled sweetly. “I thought so.”



“So...” ani Jesse nang makalabas sila sa salon. “You’re dating the senator’s son, huh?” Bagaman walang judgement sa boses ng lalaki, hindi kakikitaan ng ngiti ang mukha nito.

“Yeah,” kunwa’y walang gana niyang sagot. “We were introduced at a party where my dad was invited.”

Tinitigan niya ito, naghihintay ng sagot. “Do you like him then?”

“He’s okay, but to be honest, wala ako sa mood lumabas kasama siya mamayang gabi. I’d rather you take me out.” She smiled sweetly and looked at him.

Sandali siyang tinitigan ng lalaki, muli ay tila inaarok ang kanyang sinabi. Mayamaya pa ay inilayo ni Jesse ang tingin sa kanya.

“Nah. I got things to do tonight.”

“Like what?” kunot-noo niyang tanong, hindi naitago sa kanyang boses ang pagkadismaya.

Kunot-noo ring bumalik sa kanya ang mga mata ng kausap na waring nagulat sa kanyang reaksyon. “Stuff.”

Napalunok siya, feeling her face getting hot. Hindi man derecho ay malinaw na ni-reject nito ang kanyang offer. And she had never been rejected before. “Stuff more interesting than me?”

“You’re being a kid,” sa halip ay sagot nito.

“Let’s get in the car.”

“Don’t you want to take me out on a date, Jesse?” Hindi na niya napigilan ang sarili.

“I’m busy, Claudette. Marami pang kailangang asikasuhin sa agency.”

“Fine!” tiim-bagang niyang sambit, tuluyan nang bumagsak ang mood. Inabot niya ang cell phone sa bag at nag-dial.

“What are you doing?” taka nitong tanong.

“I’m calling my driver. Ayoko nang sumabay sa ’yo,” derecho niyang sagot.

“Oh, come on. Ni hindi mo alam kung gaano katagal ka maghihintay sa driver mo. I could drive you home, or wherever you want to go.”

Inis niya itong nilingon. “You’re busy, remember? Ayaw na kitang abalihin. So get out of my face. Hello?” baling niya sa cell phone. “Nasa *Sei Salon* ako, pick me up now. Okay, good.” Nilingon niya si Jesse na nailing habang pinagmamasdan siya. “He’s just around the corner. You can go now.”

Malalim itong napabuntong-hininga bago tahimik na tumalikod. Napailing din siya, nag-iinit ang mukha. What was she thinking? Bakit siya umasang papayag si Jesse na ilabas siya? At bakit niya nga ba ito inaya? Dahil lang sinamahan siya nito sa salon ay parang timang nang naglamyerda

ang kanyang ilusyon. She should have known Jesse wouldn't want to take her out. Mahigit dalawang buwan na mula nang bumalik ito at kahit madalas silang magkita sa bahay ni Anya ay palaging *hi* and *hello* lang ang nakukuha niya mula rito. What made her think na dahil lamang ipinagmaneho at sinamahan siya nito ngayon ay bumalik na sa dati ang lahat? Na mararamdaman niya ulit ang naramdaman noong gabi ng party ni Anya, the last night Jesse ever talked to her properly? Dahil ang mga sumunod na araw ay halos hindi na siya nito kibuin o tingnan.

She exhaled sharply. Who did he think he was anyway? He was handsome and fit but that was it. Wala naman itong maipagmamalaki. And it wasn't like her parents would approve of him anyway. He was just trash, and maybe it was time to take the trash out where it belonged.

Di nagtagal ay nakita na niya ang kanyang kotse. Padarag siyang pumasok doon at sinabing dalhin siya sa pinakamalapit na spa. She needed to get pampered if only to make herself feel better.

