

1

“Mom, where’s Dad?” tanong ng siyam na taong gulang na batang lalaki.

“R-Robbie, hindi ba dapat nasa school ka pa?” gulat na tanong ng ina.

Naglumikot ang mga mata ni Robbie.

“M-masakit daw ang ulo ni Miss Gellar. She sent us home early. Where’s Dad? He promised me we’ll go shopping for BB guns when I get back.”

“C-come here,” balisang tawag ng ina. Nang makalapit ay agad siya nitong niyakap. “Your dad is busy. Nasa study siya at may mga kausap.”

Nanlaki ang mga mata niya sa excitement.

“Ooh, is Andrew there?” tukoy niya sa best friend ng ama na madalas din niyang makasama.

“I...I’m not sure,” sagot ng ina.

“I’ll go check.” Mabilis siyang kumalasa mula sa yakap ng ina at patakabong lumabas ng kuwarto.

“Wait, Robbie, come back!”

Hindi na niya pinansin ang ina at tuloy-tuloy na sa study ng ama. Pero kapapasok pa lang niya ay mabilis na siyang natigilan. Ni hindi siya napansin ng pitong taong naruong nakatayo paikot sa study table ng ama.

“Did you really think we wouldn’t find out,

Andrew?” asked his father’s booming voice. Hindi pa niya ito nakitang ganito kagalit.

“I will give you the money you expected to get from my territory and that’s it!” Katulad ng sa kanyang ama, galit din ang boses ng lalaki.

“You should be giving me every penny that you’re getting, Andrew,” bigla ay halos pabulong na pahayag ng kanyang ama. “You’re the one who brought this on yourself.”

Nakita niya ang paggapang ng takot sa mukha ni Andrew, at bago pa man niya mapagtanto ang susunod na mangyayari ay nakita niya ang mabilis na pagbunot ni Andrew ng baril.

But his dad was faster. Before he knew it, a loud bang rang out. Parang slow motion niyang nakita ang pag-penetrating ng bala sa noo ni Andrew at ang pagtilamsik ng dugo sa mukha nito. And then he was lying flat on the floor.

Hindi siya makapaniwala. Halos maubusan ng dugo si Robbie sa mukha. Nilingon niya ang ama na gigil na gigil pa rin ang ekspresyon. Hindi pa natuwa, pabalya nitong ibinagsak sa lamesa ang baril. “Motherf*cker! No one points a gun at me!”

“Robbie!” sigaw ng ina mula sa kanyang likuran na ikinalingon ng lahat ng nasa silid.

But Robbie couldn’t move. Nakita niya ang gulat sa mukha ng ama nang makita siya sa bungad ng pinto.



“Son...” anito na tila binuhusan ng yelo.

“Oh, my God! Robbie, are you okay?” Mula sa likuran ay mabilis siyang niyakap ng ina.

“You’re a killer,” he whispered bago nilingon ang ina. “Dad’s a killer, Mom.”

“Robbie, come here,” tawag ng ama, pero hindi niya ito nilingon. “Son...”

Mabilis niyang tinabig ang kamay ng ginoo na dumapo sa kanyang balikat. Hinarap niya ito at marahas na itinulak. “You’re evil! You’re a criminal!” At sinimulan niya itong pagsusuntukin.

“Robbie!” saway ng ina.

Mabilis na nahuli ng ama ang magkabila niyang kamay. “Listen to me. I’m not a criminal. What you saw, it’s what I do. I need to take care of our business and Andrew was stealing money from us. So he had to go,” tangka nitong pagpapaliwanag.

But even at his young age, he knew that his father’s reasoning was sick. You couldn’t just go around killing people when they steal from you. And it wasn’t just *some* people. It was Andrew. Kilala na niya ang lalaki mula nang magkamuwang siya. Andrew was his father’s best friend.

“Listen to your father, Robbie,” mahinang saad ng ina.

Nilingon niya ito, di makapaniwala sa narinig. His dad might have brought him up to be someone who wasn’t scared of fistfights and violence, but

Robbie still knew what was right and what was wrong. At hindi niya inasahang kukunsintihin ng ina ang sa tingin niya ay napakalaking krimen na ginawa ng ama.

“B-but he killed Andrew...”

“It’s okay, Robbie. It’s okay. Your father did the right thing.” Pero sa pagkakataong iyon ay may nakita siyang kakaiba sa mga mata ng ina. It was as if there was something behind her words. Tila nagmamakaawa itong huwag nang kontrahin ang ama. And he didn’t know how he managed to nod.

“Go with your mother, Son. We’ll get your guns tomorrow, okay?” tila balewala nang saad ni Roberto at binalingan ang asawa. “Maricar, make sure your son is okay. I won’t be long.”



Narinig ni Robbie ang papalayong sasakyan ng ama. Hinatak na ni Maricar ang kanyang kamay.

“We need to go now.” Hindi maitatago ang urgency sa boses nito.

“Saan tayo pupunta, Mom?” lito niyang tanong.

“I can’t let you be like your father, Robbie. I am so sorry,” lumuluha nitong sagot. Nasa gate na sila ng kanilang malawak na mansion.

“Mommy?” Walang babalang tumulo na rin ang kanyang luha. He had a really bad feeling about this.

“You need to go. I’m sorry I can’t go with you.



I'm so sorry..."

"Saan ako pupunta? Ba't di ka sasama?"

Mahigpit siyang humawak sa bestida ng ina.

"I can't leave your father. Be good, okay, Baby?"

"No!" Nanlaki ang mga mata niya nang may makitang sasakyan na papalapit sa kanyang kinatatayuan.

Tumigil sa tapat nila ang isang asul na sasakyan.

"Tara na," anang babaeng nagmamaneho niyon na noon lamang niya nakita.

"Who is she, Mommy? Where am I going?"

"You're going back to the Philippines, sa lola mo. You're safer there."

"Come with me, Mommy, please. Or I'm not going," buo ang loob niyang saad, pilit pinapatapang ang boses. Inside, he was falling apart. He simply couldn't digest what was happening.

"Kailangan na naming umalis para umabot sa flight, Maricar," untag ng babaeng nasa sasakyan.

"Go!" Halos ipagtulakan na siya ng ina.

"No, I don't want to go!" Pilit niyang nilalabanan ang ina sa pagpapasok nito sa kanya sa kotse.

"I'm so sorry. Please, Baby... just go."

"Hindi ako aalis nang hindi ka kasama! Please, Mommy." Robbie had never cried so hard in his

entire life.

Biglang dumilim ang mukha ng ina sabay marahas na nagpahid ng luha. “We don’t need you here, Robbie! Pabigat ka lang dito! Just go. I don’t wanna see you again.”

Tila maging ang babaeng naghihintay ay natigilan sa pagpilit sa kanyang pumasok sa sasakyan.

“Your father and I don’t need you here, Robbie. Doon ka na sa lola mo. We don’t love you!”

Walang makakapantay sa sakit na nararamdaman niya sa kanyang dibdib nang mga oras na iyon. Walang-lakas na inalis niya ang pagkakahawak ng ina sa magkabila niyang braso. Sa huling pagkakataon ay tiningnan niya ang maamo nitong mukha.

Robbie took a deep breath before finally getting inside the woman’s car. He never looked back. He never would.

Ang babaeng nagmamaneho ay si Lily, dati umanong katrabaho ng ina sa isang ospital sa Brooklyn kung saan isa itong dating nurse. Filipino rin si Lily at ayon sa pahapyaw nitong kuwento na hindi na niya inungkat ay matagal nang plano ng ina ang pag-alis nilang iyon. Naghihintay lang ito ng tawag ni Maricar.

Why the setup was like that he didn’t know, and he didn’t bother to ask. He simply couldn’t care. Isa



lang ang alam niya. His mother didn't want him. She wanted to be alone with Roberto. Ang lalaking inidolo niya simula nang magkamuwang siya, ang parehong lalaki rin na nakita niyang pumatay sa sarili nitong matalik na kaibigan. Yeah, he didn't need them.

Nalaman na lang din niya pagdating nila sa airport na matagal nang nakahanda ang kanyang travel papers. Kumpleto sa consent ng kanyang ina sa paglipad na hindi ito kasama. All through the flight, he didn't ask Lily even one question hanggang sa makarating sila sa Pilipinas.

Lily hurriedly dropped him off at Margarita's, ang kanyang lola na noon lamang niya nakita at nakilala. She was leaving him alone in an old house in Quezon City. Margarita was warm and loving like his mother, but it wasn't warm enough to melt his now cold heart.



“He punched me first!”

“Sinuntok mo si Jesse dahil lang napatingin siya sa 'yo.”

Matiim na tiningnan ni Robbie ang maangas na si Brett Jones. Pareho silang nasa Principal's Office ngayon. Pero hindi na iyon bago sa kanya. Kasisimula pa lang ng pasukan ay pangatlong beses na niya itong pagbisita sa opisina ng punong guro.

“He was looking at me funny,” tangka niyang

pagpapaliwanag.

“He wanted to befriend you, you idiot!”

“Brett!”

Sabay silang napalingon sa kadarating lang na matandang lalaki. The principal called their guardians to settle the fight para umano hindi na iyon maulit. Usually ay naroon na kaagad ang kanyang lola pero hindi mabuti ang pakiramdam nito ngayon kaya hindi makakarating.

He looked at the old man again who was now looking at Brett. “You don’t talk like that in front of the Principal.”

Napangisi siya sa pagkakapahiya ni Brett.

“Thank God you’re here, Mr. Jones. Hindi ko alam ang gagawin sa mga barakong ito,” kunsumidong bulalas ng ginang.

“What happened, Ma’am?” Di hamak na mas matanda man sa ginang, magalang pa rin ang tono ni Mr. Jones.

“I’ll tell you what happened,” derechong saad ni Robbie. “I was walking down the hallway nang bigla na lang sumulpot si Brett at sinuntok ako sa panga. I was shocked so I punched him back. That’s it.”

Napailing si Brett. “You forgot to mention you punching Jesse kaninang umaga.”

Napapalatak ang matandang lalaki. “A lot of rage going on in here. Why don’t I invite you to

my house, Robbie? I imbitahan ko rin si Jesse. You can talk it off. Hindi lahat ng alitan ay naaayos ng suntukan.”

“Forget it, Mr. Jones,” mabilis niyang sabi at nilingon ang principal. “Tapos na ba tayo dito, Ma’am?”

“We certainly are not finished. I think maganda ang suggestion ni Mr. Jones, given na naroon siya para siguruhing walang gulong mangyayari. Spend some time with the boys, Robbie. Either that or next time you get into trouble, you’ll be expelled.”

Kumunot ang noo niya. As if he cared. “I’m not—”

“Lolo, are you done yet?”

Napalingon siya sa pinto, may batang babaeng nakadungaw roon. Hindi nagkakalayo ang kanilang mga edad pero sigurado siyang mas bata ito sa kanila. She had the prettiest face he had ever seen. Mahaba ang kulot nitong buhok na nagkukulay ginto ang ilang hibla dahil sa sinag ng araw. And her eyes were round and sparkly. Robbie had never felt the gentleness he was feeling right now before. And it was crazy how his heart skipped a beat when the girl looked him straight in the eyes and gave him the sweetest smile.

“Wait for us outside, Anya!” tila iritadong baling dito ni Brett.

Mabilis niyang binawi ang paningin mula sa

babae, feeling unusually giddy.

“Yes, Apo, we won’t be long,” rinig niyang sabi ni Mr. Jones at muli siya nitong binalingan.

“So what do you say, Robbie? Wala namang mawawala sa ’yo kung susubukan mong makilala ang grupo nina Brett. They’re good boys. I’m sure that if you give them a chance—”

“Okay,” sabat niya para putulin ang paglilitanya ng matanda. Nilingon niya si Brett na kunot-noong nakatingin ngayon sa kanya. He scoffed. “I said I’ll go to your house and meet your friends. I don’t want to be expelled.”

“That’s settled then!” natutuwa nang pahayag ng principal. “Please let me know if there’s anything we can do to help, Mr. Jones.”

“It’s gonna be fine.” Nilingon siya ng matanda. “You’re gonna be okay, Robbie.”



2

“I am so sorry I wasn’t here, Anya. If I had known, kahit hindi ko na lang itinuloy ang laban.” Nasa mukha ni Brett ang pagsisisi habang nakatingin ito kay Anya.

“For the nth time, Brett. I’m fine. Ni hindi nila ako nahawakan,” napapabuntong-hininga niyang sagot.

Kadarating lang ng adoptive uncle niya mula sa States, dala-dala ang championship belt na napanalunan nito mula sa *UFC Middleweight title* fight. Mahigit isang buwan itong nawala para sa laban kaya wala ito nang may magtangkang dumukot sa kanya. Hindi nga iyon natuloy, pero ang best friend naman niyang si Claudette ang nakuha ng mga tauhan ni Gregor Cortes, ang lalaking pumatay sa kanyang abuelo na si Luiz Jones.

Dahil nagawang itimbog nina Brett, Aston, Jesse at Robbie ang sindikato ni Gregor ay naisipan nitong gumanti. Gusto ni Cortes na makuha si Anya upang magsama-sama ang apat sa pagligtas sa kanya sa gayon ay mas madali nitong maipapatay ang apat. Pero imbis na siya ay si Claudette ang nakuha ng mga kidnappers, leading Jesse into a

bloody rampage to rescue the other girl.

Si Robbie na ang tuluyang tumapos sa masasamang plano ng kalaban. That time, Aston was in Bohol with his girlfriend pero dumating din ang lalaki kinaumagahan at tumulong sa pagsigurong nakakulong na ang lahat ng mga alipores ni Gregor.

Alam ni Anya na kung naroon si Brett nang mga oras na iyon, ito ang mangunguna sa pagsigurong ligtas siya. Kaya naman ngayon ay hindi halos maipinta ang mukha nito sa kabila ng malaking panalo nito sa katatapos lang na laban.

“Thank God for that o hindi ko mapapatawad—”

Tuluyan nang umikot ang mga mata niya. “Can we please stop this conversation?” Pilit na pinasaya niya ang mukha. “Dapat ay nagsi-celebrate tayo. You just won a championship belt!”

“And you almost got kidnapped,” patuloy pa rin nito. “I’m never leaving again. Tama si Robbie. Dito na kami dapat mag-stay. We need to look after you—”

“I can look after myself, Brett. Hindi n’yo na kai—”

“All set!” putol ni Aston sa kanyang sasabihin. Naglalakad na ito patungo sa living room kung saan sila nag-uusap ng tiyuhin. “Na-install ko na ang security cameras sa front door pati na ang

bagong electric door lock. Mag-iingay ang buong bahay pag may sumubok na magbukas ng pinto na hindi alam ang security code,” patuloy nito na nakangisi. “God, I’m good.”

Napailing si Anya at nagpasya na lang na ibahin ang usapan. “Where are your respective girlfriends? I could use a bit of peace, you know?” Biro ang dating niyon sa mga lalaki pero totoo iyon sa loob ni Anya.

Simula nang mangyari ang pag-kidnap kay Claudette ay hindi pa siya napag-isa sa bahay o kahit na saan siya magpunta. Jesse and Claudette were always with her at kung hindi magawa ng dalawa na samahan siya ay si Aston naman ang chaperon niya.

And Robbie.

Robbie was sitting right in front of her in all his rugged glory, sipping his beer like he owned the world. It didn’t matter if Claudette and Jesse stayed the night in her house, Robbie was always there. Tila ginawa na nitong tahimik na panata ang gabigabing matulog sa naiwang bahay ni Luiz. Which was very hard for her.

“Violet’s working,” tukoy ni Aston sa kasintahan, “pero susunduin ko siya mamaya. For the celebration of this guy’s big win.” Itinaas nito ang hawak na beer habang nakatingin kay Brett.

“So instead of being a grumpy brat, why

don't you start preparing for the party tonight?" pangising saad ni Brett sa kanya.

Binelatan niya ito. "I've been ready since yesterday, pero sa tingin ko ay kailangan ko ulit mag-shopping. Isang oras pa lang kayong nagkakaharap dito ay halos maubos na ninyo ang beer na binili ko," kunwa ay reklamo niya.

"I'll get the drinks. Don't worry about it," sa wakas ay sali ni Robbie na mabilis nang tumayo at kinapa ang bulsa para sa susi ng sasakyan. "You prepare the food, Annie," anitong sinisipat ang wristwatch na suot. "It's almost six."

"No, I wanna go." Gusto muna niyang mapag-isa bago ang party. These guys were suffocating her.

"Come with me then," anito.

"Gusto kong lumakad mag-isa," mariin niyang sabi. "Hindi mo na ako kailangang samahan."

"Anya," mariin din nitong saad at nilingon siya. "We've been through this. Hindi ka puwedeng lumabas nang mag-isa."

"And who are you to tell me that?" Ramdam ni Anya ang mabilis na paggapang ng pagrerebelde sa kanyang dibdib. She was seriously getting sick of everyone's protectiveness, lalo na si Robbie.

Madilim ang mukhang sinalubong ng itim na itim nitong mga mata ang kanyang paningin. At katulad ng palaging nangyayari, his gaze enveloped her, causing her heart to beat faster. Robbie was

a tall, well-built man. And everyone knew that beyond his devastatingly handsome face was a man capable of violence.

And she hated how that aura instantly faded whenever he looked at her. Tila nagiging maamong tupa ito sa tuwing tinatawag niya ang pangalan nito. Napailing siya. This was Brett's moment and she didn't want to spoil it by acting like a brat.

"I'll stay," pagpapahinunod na lamang niya.

"Good. May dadaanan din kasi ako."

Natigilan siya at nagpasalamat nang itanong ni Brett ang muntik na niyang itanong dito.

"Ano'ng dadaanan mo?"

"Hindi *ano*, kundi *sino*," patawa nitong sagot. "It's Lara. Someone I met at the gym. Since ako lang ang walang date mamaya, I figured I should get one."

"Anya doesn't have a date!" walang prenong kontra ni Brett kaya sabay-sabay silang lumingon dito. Even Aston was shocked.

"What the hell is wrong with you, Brett?" asik dito ni Robbie.

"That is just sick," segunda ni Aston.

Pero ang mas dinamdam niya ay ang reaksiyon ni Robbie na tila ba napakalaking krimen ang sinabi ni Brett that they could be each other's date. Napatiiim-bagang siya. Brett was gonna say something pero inunahan na niya ito.

“Who even told you na wala akong date? I have a friend coming over in,” nilingon niya ang suot na wristwatch, “about two hours.”

“And who is this friend of yours?” Kung kanina ay madilim na ang mukha ni Robbie, ngayon ay tila dinaanan iyon ng nagngangalit na bagyo.

“It’s none of your business,” matalim niyang sagot. Wala itong karapatang magtanong ng kung anupaman sa kanya. Lalo na dahil sa ipinakita nitong reaksiyon kani-kanina lang.

“Oh, it’s damn well our business, Anya. Who is this guy?”

“Are you kidding me?” nanghihina niyang baling kay Brett na siyang nagsalita.

“Anya, hindi namin gustong bakuran ka sa lahat ng mga kaibigan mo but after what happened, dapat ay ikaw ang unang nakakaintindi kung bakit ganito kami ka-protective sa ’yo. We can’t afford anymore incidents like the last time.”

Nagbilang muna si Anya ng hanggang sampu sa kanyang isip bago humugot ng malalim na hininga at ngumiti. “It’s Martin.”

Kumunot ang noo ni Brett. “Martin, as in ang naiwang manager ni Luiz?”

“Yes,” derecho niyang sagot. “Well, technically, ako ang naiwang manager ni Lolo. But as you know, I know nothing about the actual car things and I’ve only been doing the clerical work,



so sa kanya ko ipinapaasikaso ang naiwang responsibilities ni Lolo. He's also thinking of buying the company and because of that, we've been seeing each other a lot lately. So we're close now."

Hindi na niya kailangang sabihin na hindi pa man nawawala si Luiz ay nagpapalipad-hangin na ito sa kanya, hindi lang niya pinapansin. All because he simply didn't interest her. Panalangin lang niya ay wala itong gagawin ngayong gabi at pumayag na pumunta sa celebration ni Brett.

"Nanliligaw ba siya?" untag pa rin ni Brett.

"Now, that is none of your business," reklamo na ni Anya. "Your only concern ay kung sino ang date ko mamaya. And since he's from Lolo's company, wala nang problema dahil na-check n'yo na ang background ng lahat ng mga empleyado natin. Now whatever is going on between us shouldn't be your concern anymore. If you'll excuse me, I have a party to prepare." Sabay talikod na niya sa mga lalaking pare-parehong kunot ang mga noo.

Napailing na lamang siya at mabilis na kinuha ang cell phone para tawagan si Martin.



"Hey! Kanina pa kita hinahanap, 'andito ka lang pala."

Nalingunan ni Robbie si Lara. Sandali niyang nakalimutan na kasama pala niya ang dalaga.

Kanina pa siyang abala sa pagmamasid kay Anya at sa kasama nitong lalaki. As expected from someone who was working at a car shop, Martin was a rugged man. Matangkad ito at matipuno ang pangangatawan. At hindi siya masosorpresa kung tuluyan itong magustuhan ni Anya. Despite Martin's rugged look, he had a pretty face. At kanina pa nito iyon ibinabalandra kay Anya na ngiting-ngiti habang kausap ito.

“Robbie, come on! Sali tayo sa mga kaibigan mo. Ba’t ka ba nag-iisa dito?” pangungulit ni Lara, bahagya nang nakakunot ang noo.

Napabuntong-hininga siya. Nakatayo siya sa veranda ng bahay habang ang karamihan ay nasa garden at nagkakatuwaan. He could see Jesse and Brett playing beer pong while their girlfriends and friends were cheering for them.

“I’m sorry. Wala lang ako sa mood para sa party na ’to,” nasabi na lang niya at matamis na nginitian ang dalaga na nakapulupot na ang kamay sa kanyang braso.

“Well...” Naging pilya ang mga mata nito at humigpit ang pagkakahawak sa kanya. “We can always leave and go some place else, Rob.”

He exhaled sharply. He wouldn't mind that. Papayag na lamang siya nang makitang tumayo si Anya at nakangiting iniwan si Martin na ngiting-ngiti rin. Hindi nakaligtas sa kanyang paningin ang



malagkit nitong tingin sa makinis na mga hita ni Anya. Maikli kasi ang suot na shorts ng dalaga. Her wavy hair was in a loose, side ponytail that exposed more of her creamy skin.

Binalingan niya si Lara. “I’m sorry. I can’t leave this party. Mas mabuti pa sumali ka muna sa kanila,” tukoy niya sa mga kaibigan. “I’ll just sort something out and I’ll be right with you.”

Nakita niya ang disappointment sa mukha ni Lara pero sa huli ay ngumiti rin ito. “Okay then. Maybe we can go later.” Kumindat pa ito bago naglakad patungo sa maingay na grupo. Apparently, Brett was winning.

Hindi na siya nag-aksaya ng panahon at nagmamadali nang tinungo si Martin na ngayon ay nakangisi na pero hindi pa rin maalis ang tingin sa direksyong tinahak ni Anya. Naupo si Robbie sa upuang nilisan ng dalaga at kitang-kita niya ang pagkagulat ni Martin.

“H-hi...” nabigla nitong bati.

“Martin, right?” derecho niyang saad.

“Yes, Pare. Isa ka sa mga kababata ni Anya?” tanong nito, biglang nawala ang ngisi at naging pormal.

“Robbie,” aniya, hindi na nag-abalang makipagkamay. “Nililigawan mo ba si Anya?”

Napangiti ang lalaki. “Parang ganoon na nga.”

Kunot-noo niyang sinalubong ang tingin nito.

“Ano’ng ibig mong sabihin?”

Nagkibit-balikat ito, totally unaware of the hostility Robbie was feeling toward him right at that moment. “Well, dati ko pa siya sinusubukang ligawan. She just didn’t seem interested before. Pero nang mamatay si Sir Luiz, we started getting close. Especially tonight. I don’t think na kailangan ko pa siyang ligawan talaga para maging kami. She’s obviously attracted to me.”

“Is that so?” he breathed out. “You’re in love with her then?”

Napalingingon ito sa tanong niya na parang di makapaniwala. “I haven’t really thought of that. I just know we’re a perfect match.”

“Perfect match?” ulit niya.

“I’m attracted to her and I don’t mind spending my nights with her,” simula nito na hindi man lang napansin ang pagtiim ng kanyang bagang. He couldn’t believe this guy would actually say such things. “And, I love my job. I love the shop kaya nga gusto kong bilhin. But as I see it, I wouldn’t have to buy it if we end up together.”

“Hmm,” aniyang hinimas-himas ang baba.

“You know what I mean?” untag pa nito.

Mabilis siyang tumango-tango. “Yeah, I get you, Bro, totally.”

Mas nagliwanag ang mukha nito. “Kung ganoon, baka puwede mo akong i-back up kay

Anya?”

Malumanay siyang umiling. “Nope.”

Kumunot ang noo nito. “Ano’ng ibig mong sabihin?”

“You obviously have no idea who you’re talking to.”

Mas lalong nalito ang mukha ni Martin na napatuwid ng upo. “Isa ka sa mga kababata ni Anya.”

“You’re underestimating our attachment to her, Pare. Pero kung gusto mong ipagpatuloy ang panliligaw kay Anya, you go ahead with your plan. If you want to marry her and she says yes, go ahead. Let me just tell you one thing. Simula sa gabing ito, kung malaman ko o marinig ko na nasaktan si Anya nang dahil sa ’yo, emotional or physical, be it an accident at work, a white lie that upset her o kahit matapilok lang siya na ikaw ang kasama, you’re going to regret it, Martin. I will hunt you down like a mad man. Keep that in mind.”

Nangasim ang mukha nito. “Sino ka para sabihin sa akin ’yan?”

“I’m no one, Martin. Hindi ako sundalo katulad ng mga kasama ko. I’m not even a fighter of some sort. Pero kapag sinaktan mo si Anya, I’ll be the greatest bastard you’ll ever know.” He stood up then. “Enjoy the rest of the night.”

3

“Martin, tumawag ang Bicutan branch, tinatanong kung meron daw tayong available na hood for an *Aveo Chevrolet*. I don’t have time to check with Tony,” tukoy niya sa namamahala ng stocks ng *AJ Auto Parts*. “Super late na ako sa appointment namin ni Claudette.”

Hindi man lang siya nilingon ni Martin, mukhang may chini-check na files sa desk nito. “Anong model?”

“2008,” sagot ni Anya, medyo nagtataka na sa pakikitungo nito. Simula pa kagabi nang bumalik siya sa lamesa nila sa party ni Brett ay halos hindi na ito kumibo. At bigla na lang nitong sinabing may kailangan pa itong puntahan kaya maagang umalis. At ngayong umaga naman, pagdating niya sa shop, ay ni hindi man lang siya nito binati. It was very unlike him.

“Is everything okay, Martin?” hindi niya napigilang itanong. He was really acting weird. Sa tuwina ay palagi itong palakuwento at masaya sa tuwing nasa iisang silid sila. Pero ngayon ay tila balisa pa ito na kinakausap niya.

Sinalubong nito ang kanyang tingin. He looked apologetic. Lumapit siya rito at pumuwesto sa



upuan sa harapan ng mesa nito, bahagya nang kinakabahan.

“What’s wrong?” tanong niya.

“Last night....”



Marahang bumuntong-hininga si Robbie bago tuluyang bumaba sa sasakyan. It had been a long day. Hindi pa matagal mula nang magbukas ang *The Brotherhood*, ang security and detective agency na binuo nilang tatlo nina Jesse at Aston, pero madami na kaagad silang clients. Some had serious cases katulad ng hawak ngayon ni Aston na isang bigtime businessman na nakakatanggap ng death threat mula sa kalaban nitong kompanya na hawak ng isang pulitiko. Robbie, on the other hand, spent his whole day stalking a married man dahil nagdududa ang asawa nito na may kabit ang lalaki.

Napailing siya. He tried passing on the assignment to their new hires pero pinilit siya ni Jesse na tanggapin iyon. Jesse was just getting back at him dahil siya ang nagtulak dito na asikasuhin ang imaginary stalker ng isang sikat na celebrity.

“The bastard,” he murmured and got out of the car. He could use a shower, a couple of bottles of beer and then his bed. Nakayuko siya habang papasok sa kabahayan kaya hindi niya napansin si Anya na nakasandal sa isa sa mga poste ng veranda. Kung hindi pa ito nagsalita ay tuluyan na

siyang nakapasok.

“I need to talk to you,” malamig nitong simula.

Natitigilang tinapunan niya ito ng tingin. Halos magpang-abot ang kilay nito sa pagkakakunot-noo.

“Is everything okay?” Bigla ang paghilab ng kanyang tiyan. Seeing Anya in a mood always worried him. Tangkang hahawakan niya ito sa braso pero mabilis siya nitong itinulak.

“Who gave you the right to talk to Martin like that?”

Sandali niya itong tinitigan bago nakahinga nang maluwig. “Oh, that.” Akala niya ay kung ano na. So this was just about that spineless asshole. “Nagsumbong ba sa ’yo?”

Naningkit ang mga mata nito. “No. Ako ang nagtanong sa kanya kung ano ang problema. The poor guy won’t even look at me sa takot sa mga sinabi mo. What were you thinking? Martin is a good guy and he didn’t deserve your threats!”

He rolled his eyes. “Come on, Annie. We both know, he’s good for nothing. You deserve better than that guy.”

“Wala kang karapatang pangunahan ako kung sino ang nararapat sa akin. I am the only one who can decide for myself. Not Brett, not Jesse or Aston and certainly not you! I am so sick and tired of everyone meddling with my life! Lalo ka na! I still can’t believe you did that. That was crossing the



line, Robbie!”

She was really pissed off. Halos maluha ito sa kasisigaw. Namumula ang mga pisngi ni Anya at konti na lang ay madidikit na ang daliri nito sa kanyang mukha sa kaduduro sa kanya.

Napapormal ang mukha niya. “Do you like that guy?”

Lalo lang dumilim ang ekspresyon ng dalaga sa kanyang tanong. “You’re missing the point! Hindi mahalaga ang nararamdaman ko para sa kanya. The point is that wala kang karapatang pakialaman ang buhay ko!”

“Anya, are we back to this conversation again? We are here to protect you, hindi lang sa mga masasamang-loob na pumatay kay Luiz but from everything else that could hurt you. And what did I do anyway? Hindi ko sinabing tigilan niya ang panliligaw sa ’yo. I even encouraged him to pursue you and marry you if you’d let him. Nilinaw ko lang sa kanya na kapag sinaktan ka niya ay mananagot siya. I didn’t push him away. So it’s not my fault if he’s a coward and that he gave up just like that,” paliwanag niya. “That man’s a pussy!” hindi niya napigilang idagdag.

He could go on and tell Anya that Martin’s main reason for pursuing her was the car shop but he decided otherwise. Martin won’t even come close to owning the shop. Robbie was going to buy it

himself. He worked there during his early college days sa pagpipilit na rin noon ni Luiz, so somehow he had some ideas about running the shop.

Mapait na napailing si Anya habang inis na inis na nakatingin sa kanya. “You should understand that not everyone is as blood-thirsty as you, Robbie. Martin is a decent man and I forbid you from ever talking to him again.”

Hindi siya magkokomento sa sinabi ng dalaga dahil imposibleng hindi niya makausap muli ang binata. Not when he was going to be the bastard’s boss. “Have you had dinner?” sa halip ay tanong niya sa kausap. Walang punto para sakyan ang galit nito. He knew Anya, the more he answered her, the more the fight would drag on.

Tinititigan siya nitong muli, hindi makapaniwala. Her red lips were now pressed into a thin line, namumula ang mukha nito sa pagkainis and he wanted to pinch her cute, wrinkled nose. “Are you seriously asking me that? Are you really not taking me seriously?”

“I’m thinking pizza. How about *Yellow Cab*, Annie? I’ll let you pick the toppings,” he said at pa-cute na kumindat dito. That should work.

Sandaling natigilan ang dalaga. He could see that memories were flooding her mind. Ilang segundo ring tumagal ang paningin nito sa kanyang mukha. A few seconds more and he would have felt



uneasy, too, pero nakabawi na ito.

“Don’t change the subject, Robbie. I’m telling you, get off my back!” Iyon lang at iniwan na siya nito sa veranda.

Walang nagawa si Robbie kundi sundan ng tingin ang papalayong pigura ng dalaga. Her figure looked so different from the young girl who used to run around the house with her never fading smile. She wasn’t just a beautiful face now, she was a full-grown woman complete with alluring curves. And what was he now? Still a complete bastard, apparently. Napailing siya, feeling dirty for even acknowledging that Anya was a beautiful woman now.



Marahas na pinahid ni Anya ang maiinit na luhang dumaloy sa kanyang pisngi. “How dare that Robbie!” she grunted, walang pakialam kung mamula man nang husto ang mukha sa lakas ng pagpahid sa kanyang luha. She was furious. Pero iba na ang ikinagagalit niya ngayon. It wasn’t about Robbie’s conversation with Martin anymore, tungkol na iyon sa napakakaswal na pagpapaalala nito ng kanilang kabataan. The memory she had tried so hard to bury deep within her. Mga alaalang ayaw na sana niyang unghatin sa takot na maalalang muli ang sakit na dulot niyon.

Pero ngayon, kahit gaano man niya pigilan, ay

tuloy-tuloy ang pagdaloy niyon sa kanyang isip.

Nahugot ni Anya ang hininga nang mabungaran si Robbie na nakasandal sa sasakyan ng kanyang lolo sa labas ng pinapasukan kung saan siya first year college. He didn't even bother to change out of his greasy jumpsuit na may logo pa ng AJ Auto Parts. Iyon ang uniform sa car shop ng kanyang lolo. Part-timer doon si Robbie.

His unusually long hair was tied into a messy ponytail while his handsome face was stained with grease. His tall body was getting everyone's attention, the girls' especially. At alam niyang hindi lang iyon dahil sa tangkad nito. Robbie, despite his dirty clothes right now, was still ridiculously handsome.

"Lolo Luiz must be very busy again at si Robbie na naman ang sundo mo," untag ni Claudette na kasabay niyang naglalakad palabas ng gate.

"Yeah," she agreed. "Abala si Lolo sa pagbranch out ngayon." Pilit niyang itinatago ang kakaibang nararamdaman sa simpleng dahilan na naroon si Robbie. "Let's go," aya na niya sa kaibigan. Halos araw-araw itong sumasama sa kanya sa kanilang bahay at nagpapasundo na lang doon sa mga magulang nito.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Anya. Hindi ako sasama ngayon sa bahay ninyo. Mom is there," turo nito sa isang pulang BMW.



“Oh!” Nasa boses niya ang pagkadismaya. Hindi lang dahil hindi tatambay ang kaibigan sa kanilang bahay na nakasanayan na niya. Just the thought of being alone in the car with Robbie made her stomach tighten.

“Yeah, we’re going shopping and then dinner with Dad later on,” paliwanag nito. “And I don’t think I would want to get in your car with Robbie all greasy like that,” maarte pa nitong biro.

She pretended to laugh, although deep inside, she was feeling very uneasy. “Okay, I’ll see you Monday then.”

Hinintay muna niyang makapasok sa kotse ng ina nito si Claudette. After waving at them, she slowly walked toward Robbie who was still leaning against the car. This time, he was looking straight at her with that gentle smile he always used on her.

It had always amazed her how Robbie would look so cold and harsh pero sa oras na tingnan siya nito ay napapalitan iyon ng gentleness.

“You okay, Annie?” tanong nito, binubuksan ang passenger side para sa kanya.

“Yeah. Where’s Lolo?” tanong niya kahit alam na ang sagot.

“Nasa meeting with the building owner sa Bicutan. I think they’re close to making a deal.”

“Mabuti naman.”

Bago naisara ni Robbie ang pinto ay naamoy

pa niya ang panlalaki nitong pabango. She silently shook her head. How could Robbie still smell so nice despite being so dirty like that?

Ilang segundo lang ang nakalipas ay katabi na niya ito at nag-uumpisa nang magmaneho. “Jesse called today,” umpisa nito na bahagya siyang nilingon.

Magtatatlong buwan na mula nang umalis si Jesse patungo sa US. Nauna na rito sina Aston at Brett. They all decided to follow their dreams abroad at si Robbie lang ang naiwan. Ipinagtataka iyon ni Anya dahil magtatatlong taon na simula nang mamatay ang lola nito na tanging pamilya ng lalaki sa Pilipinas. At simula nang mamatay ang abuela nito ay niyakag na ito ni Brett at ng kanyang lolo na doon na manirahan sa kanilang bahay. Robbie had politely declined the offer bagaman madalas ay doon din ito nagpapalipas ng gabi.

“What’s up with him?” she wanted to know. Hindi niya madalas makausap ang mga kababata.

“He just got admitted into the army. Inaya niya akong pumunta na rin sa US since the last wave of recruitment is still on-going for this year.”

Marahas siyang napatingin dito, desperately searching his face for his answer. “Are you going?” Hindi alam ni Anya kung bakit parang may ninakaw na kung ano sa kanyang dibdib.

Sinulyapan siya ni Robbie. He seemed confused



for a while.

“Well?” untag niya. *She might sound a bit needy right now pero talagang gusto niyang malaman.*

Muli ay nilingon siya ni Robbie. This time, dahil naka-red light ay mas matagal ang tingin nito sa kanya. His dark eyes watched her as if he was searching for something.

“D-do you want me to go?” sa wakas ay sambit nito.

Did she? Of course not. She may have been working really hard to ignore whatever it was that she was feeling for him but thinking of Robbie going away, too, certainly wasn't something she could imagine.

“No. I mean.” She choked a little. “I mean, malulungkot tiyak si Lolo kapag umalis ka. And he needs you in the shop lalo't nag-e-expand ngayon ang negosyo. And... and you're studying. You can't just leave college.”

Nakita niya ang sandaling pagrehistro ng pagkadismaya sa mukha ng lalaki. “I'm sure Luiz can handle the shop. 'Andiyan ka naman, and I don't really need any college qualification if I'm going to the army.”

Napatiim-bagang siya. So he was actually thinking of going. “Well, it's not like you're gonna get accepted in the army anyway.”

“What do you mean?”

“Basag-ulo ka, hot-headed. I don’t think you have the patience. So it’s better for you to just stay here.”

“So you don’t want me to leave then...” This time there was a glint of relief on his face. There was even a small grin playing on his lips. And like always, her heart panicked.

Nahahalata na ba nito ang nararamdaman niya? She couldn’t let that happen. One time, during her fifteenth birthday, Anya made a mistake of telling Robbie that he was handsome. The four boys made fun of her for a month. And she was sure mauulit iyon pag natunugan ni Robbie na hanggang ngayon ay hindi pa rin nagbabago ang nararamdaman niya.

Well technically, it had changed. She knew what she was feeling for Robbie wasn’t just a childish crush anymore. It wasn’t the giddy type of crush that little girls would squeal about. Ni hindi niya magawang magpakatotoo sa harapan nito. She couldn’t smile properly, she couldn’t even breathe properly for goodness’ sake.

“You do what you want, Rob,” she said curtly. She hated it so much when Robbie used that boyish grin. It would always send her emotions into a panic.

“What do you want?” balik nito.

“What does it matter?” She was really getting uneasy now. She knew Robbie adored her. Kahit pa nga ba hindi sa paraang gusto niya, pero ngayon lang ito nagpakita ng interes tungkol sa kung ano



talaga ang gusto niya.

“I feel responsible for you, Annie. Ako na lang ang natitira dito and I don’t want to leave if that’s not okay with you.”

There it was, that same adoration Anya resented. He cared for her like a little girl, the way the rest of the boys cared for her. “Wala kang responsibilidad sa akin, Robbie. Stay if you want but go if that will make you happier.” Labag man sa loob ay pakiramdam niya, iyon ang dapat niyang sabihin.

“I think I’m staying.”

“Why is that?” Bigla mang nakaramdam ng relief ay hindi niya iyon ipinahalata.

“Cos you obviously don’t want me to go,” sagot nito at kinindatan siya.

“What are you talking about?” defensive niyang bululas. Ito na nga ba ang sinasabi niya. Alam na yata nito ang damdamin niya. “Dream on, Rob. Kaya lang naman kita gustong mag-stay ay dahil kay Lolo, not because of anything else. Especially not because I still have a stupid crush on you!” Nanlaki ang mga mata niya pagkasabi ng mga katagang iyon. Slip of the tongue, they call it. And right now she was very close to cutting off her own tongue.

“So talaga ngang nagka-crush ka sa akin noon?” gulat pero puno ng amusement nitong tanong at saglit siyang nilingon.

“No!” Halos isigaw niya iyon. “You guys just

assumed that before, just because I said you looked handsome in that tuxedo you were wearing.”

Isinasayaw siya noon ni Robbie. Aston was close by, dancing with a girl, too, at narinig din nang sabihan niya si Robbie na napakaguwapo nito sa suot na tuxedo. Before she knew it, nasabi na iyon ni Aston kina Brett at Jesse.

That birthday party was a nightmare! Pahiyang-pahiya siya dahil sa pang-aasar ng mga kababata na mas pinalala pa nang makisali rin sa mga ito si Robbie who couldn't stop grinning all night looking like a proud jerk.

Napahalakhak si Robbie. He was clearly not taking her seriously. “Ang init naman ng ulo mo. You must be hungry. Wanna grab a bite before going home?”

“No, thank you!” she snapped, pikon na pikon pa rin. Kung hindi lang siya natatakot na aalis nga si Robbie kung sasabihin niyang pumunta na rin ito ng US ay kanina pa niya iyon ibinulalas. Pero siya rin ang masasaktan.

“Come on, let's drop by Yellow Cab,” tukoy nito sa paborito nitong pizza parlor na madadaanan nila. “My treat.”

“No,” mariin niyang sagot. Maliban pa sa talagang asar pa rin si Anya ay ayaw niya ng choice ng toppings nito. The boys always picked sausage and jalapeño which she found disgusting. At dahil apat

ang mga ito, ang mga ito ang nasusunod.

*“Are you sure? I’ll let you pick the toppings,”
pang-eengganyo pa nito.*

*Napalingson siya sa katabi. Images of double
mozzarella and pepperoni made her tummy grumble.
And then her frown broke into a smile. “Fine.”*

*Lumawak din ang pagkakangiti ni Robbie, and
before she knew it, he had already planted a quick
kiss on her temple.*

“I’ll tell you a secret, Anya...”

*Hindi pa man nakakabawi sa simpleng halik nito
ay kunot-noo na niya itong nilingon. “What is it?”*

*“I found you very pretty during your fifteenth
birthday, too.” And he winked once again, making
her whole body tremble and her heart beat even
faster.*

*She didn’t say a word. Pero nang makitang naka-
focus na sa pagmamaneho ang katabi ay dahan-
dahang gumuhit ang ngiti sa kanyang mga labi.
Bigla ay pakiramdam niya, parang may nabuhay na
kung ano sa kanyang dibdib, and she couldn’t wait to
find out what that was.*

