

# Chapter One



“**T**umawag si Cathy kagabi,” balita ni Yvette sa kanyang best friend at kasamahan sa trabaho na si Lara nang magkasabay silang mag-lunch sa isang restaurant.

“Talaga? Is she going to sell her townhouse now? If so, ’yung offer ko sa ’yo na p’wede ka ritong tumira kasama ko ay open pa rin.”

Ang townhouse na kanyang tinitirhan ay pag-aari ng kanyang college friend na si Cathy Rowles na nakapangasawa ng isang Canadian. Nanirahan muna sa bansa ang mga ito nang dalawang taon bago nagpasya na roon na tumira sa bansa ng asawa nito. Inalok ng mga ito sa kanya ang townhouse na kaagad naman niyang tinanggap. They didn’t want her to pay any rent but she insisted. Though, small amount lang ang gusto ng kanyang kaibigan.

Noong nangungupahan pa si Yvette sa isang apartment ay nag-alok si Lara na tumira kasama niya ngunit tinanggihan niya. Simply because she wouldn’t accept any share for the dwelling. It would feel like she was abusing their friendship. And now, Lara was still reminding her that she’s still welcome if she chose to.

“Thanks for the kindest offer, pero wala pang balak na ibenta ni Cathy ang townhouse. Sinabi niya na maaaring bumalik sila sa bansa in the future,” paliwanag niya.

“Mag-asawa ka na rin kasi,” nakangising tukso nito.

She chuckled. “Yeah, sure. Bukas na bukas din.” Batid ng kanyang kaibigan na nakasarado pa rin ang kanyang puso, at wala pa siyang planong umibig muli.

“Isipin mo, we are not getting any younger.”

“Trying to lecture me now?” Tumaas ang isang kilay niya, trying to look irritated. But Lara knew her better kung kailan siya galit o hindi, kaya nginitian lamang siya nito.

“Sino pa ba ang magtutulungan kundi tayong magkaibigan?”

She smiled genuinely at her friend. “Alam ko iyan. So, what’s with you and your boyfriend, nagbati na ba kayo? Sometimes, you should learn to control your temper. It’s too much for your size,” sambit niya na may halong biro. She was teasing her beautiful, petite best friend.



Nagtatanghalian si Brett Oclarit kasama ang kanyang eighteen-year-old na pinsang si Antoinette Salcedo. Pero ang mga mata niya ay pasulyap-sulyap sa dalawang babaeng nag-uusap habang

kumakain, and the two were just a couple of tables away from them.

“Kilala ko sila,” bulong ng kanyang pinsan. Malamang ay napansin nito ang inaasal niya. Ayon dito ay high school teachers ang dalawang babae.

Parehong maganda ang mga ito. Pero mas interesado siya sa mas matangkad na babaeng may morenang kutis.

“The taller one ay si Miss Yvette Borrromeo, adviser ko in my final year of high school sa *Sinanglanan High School*. The other one is Miss Lara Cruz, naging teacher ko rin sa Mathematics,” paliwanag ni Antoinette.

He riveted his eyes on Miss Borrromeo. He was literally taken by her beauty. Sumagi sa isip niya kung ano kaya ang pakiramdaman na mahalikan ang nakabibighani nitong mga labi. He was daydreaming while looking at the woman. She was slim, with long shimmering black hair and luscious red lips. He imagined how sexy her body would be.

“Pinsan, tumutulo na ang laway mo,” sita ng kanyang kasama. Her father and his mother were siblings. “Hindi mo man lang narinig ang sinabi ko.”

“Sorry. Ano uli iyon?” Ngumiti siya rito.

“Mukhang nabighani ka kay Miss Borrromeo, ah.” She grinned at him. “Salamat for taking me out. You are nicer than my brother Robert. But of

course, parang kapatid na rin ang turing ko sa 'yo. I owe you," pahayag nito pagkatapos kumain.

Naunang umalis si Antoinette. Pinili ng binata na manatili muna habang mabagal na kumakain at panaka-nakang nakamasid sa babeng bumighani sa kanya.

He stared at Miss Borromeo from his table and watched her lips move each time she said something to her companion, although hindi niya naririnig ang pinag-uusapan ng dalawa. Her smile was as bright as the sunshine. He liked the way her mouth curved. He admitted to himself that his instant attraction to this teacher was like magnet. Napangiti siya sa sarili dahil ngayon lang siya na-attract nang ganito sa isang babae.

Nang makita niya itong tumindig mag-isa at mukhang aalis ay nagmamadali siyang tumawag ng waiter at hiningi ang kanyang bill.



Yvette felt sorry for Lara dahil hindi pa nga ito tapos kumain ay kailangan niya itong iwan. She had to leave right away because something urgent came up. Nakatanggap siya ng tawag galing sa kanyang male friend na si Donald Esteban, kinakailangan daw nito ang kanyang tulong. He sounded like he was in trouble, and she couldn't ignore him because like Lara, the guy was her good friend too.

Si Donald ang taong tumulong at nagdala sa kanya sa ospital nang siya ay mabiktima ng hit-and-run sa kalye. Doon nagsimula ang kanilang pagkakaibigan.

She rushed out the door of the restaurant and down the short steps, pero dahil sa pagmamadali ay bigla siyang natapilok. Alam niyang babagsak siya sa pavement, subalit naramdaman niya ang mainit na mga kamay na humawak sa kanyang baywang. Someone had saved her!

“You should be careful not to injure yourself,” pabulong na sabi nito sa kanyang tainga. She felt his warm breath and his voice made her shiver. She looked up and saw a handsome man. The lines of his face clearly defined and masculine. he had thick black hair and broad shoulders.

Napasinghap si Yvette dahil ilang inches lang ang distansya ng kanilang mga mukha. Nagkatitigan sila. Wordlessly, her gaze lowered to his mouth; he was smiling. *Oh wonderful, my savior is a sinfully charming man. Nananaginip yata ako.* Kumurap-kurap siya upang masigurong hindi siya namamalikmata.

“Are you okay?” tanong nito habang ang paningin ay nasa kanyang mga labi.

It felt good to be in the strong arms of this handsome man. The brushing of their skin ignited something within her. Naramdaman niyang

humigpit ang pagkakahawak nito sa kanyang baywang na siyang nagpabalik sa kanya sa realisasyon. Kaagad siyang kumawala mula rito at lumayo. She stared at him.

“I... thank you,” she stammered.

Nakapaskil pa rin ang ngiti ng lalaki. He looked amused. “My pleasure, Miss...?”

“Yvette Borromeo.” She politely offered her hand.

“Brett Oclarit. Nice meeting you.” He gave her a dashing smile.

“Nagmamadali kasi ako. Maraming salamat uli and nice meeting you. I have to go.”

“Of course,” he smiled and nodded.

Iniiwas niya ang kanyang mga mata at nagsimulang maglakad papunta sa nakaparada niyang kotse. It was a mesmerizing experience, tila kumakabog ang dibdib niya sa nangyari.

Ramdam ni Yvette na may nakasunod sa kanya, ngunit hindi siya nagtangkang lumingon. Nang tumigil siya sa tabi ng sasakyan niya habang hawak ang susi ay hindi pa muna niya binuksan ang pinto niyon. Sumulyap siya sa kanyang likuran at nakitang si Brett nga ang nakasunod sa kanya.

“Sinusundan mo ba ako?” kunot-noong tanong niya.

He smiled charmingly. “Oo. Paalis na rin ako at kotse ko ang katabi ng kotse mo.”

Napahiya siya. “Oh... Have a good day then, Mr. Oclarit.” At nagmamadaling binuksan niya ang pinto ng kotse at kaagad sumakay.



Kadalasan, buong umaga ay natutulog siya. From three in the afternoon until two in the morning ay nandoon siya sa bar na kanyang pag-aari, ang *Our Bar and Music* na binili niya sa isang kakilala. Galing siya sa isang mayamang pamilya sa Pampanga. Brett lost both his parents when he was twenty-one, after his graduation from college. As the only child, he inherited quite a fortune from his parents. He’s now thirty-two years old.

Tapos siya sa kursong Fine Arts at mahilig siya sa musika. He’s not really into business, pero sumubok siya.

Saturday night at the bar was the best night of all days dahil reputable bands ang ini-hire niyang tumugtog. His establishment was always crowded on weekends. Alas siete pa lamang ng gabi ay hindi na sila nagkandaugaga sa pagsi-serve sa mga parokyano. He managed the bar and would sometimes act as drink mixer and bartender if needed.

Kalalabas lamang niya mula sa kanyang maliit na opisina at intensyong tumulong sa bar counter nang mapansin niya ang parehang kararating lang. Nasorpresa siya nang makilala ang babae—si Miss

Borromeo at may kasama itong lalaki. They sat at the counter and was about to order their drinks. Na-disappoint siya sa isiping may nobyo na pala ito. Pero ang lalaking kausap nito ay parang pamilyar. He came closer and entertained the customers.

“Good evening,” he greeted them in a very friendly tone.

Napansin niya ang pagkasorpresa sa mga mata ng dalaga nang makita siya. He smiled at her and his gaze went to her companion. “Donald Esteban?” he asked the familiar guy.

“Brett Oclarit. Ano’ng ginagawa mo rito? Don’t tell me na nagkukunwari kang bartender to get ladies’ attention,” the guy blurted out.

“Seriously, dito ako nagtatrabaho. How are you, Don? Matagal na tayong hindi nagkita, ah.” Ang lalaki ay kapatid ng dati niyang nobya na si Deardee Esteban na pumanaw four years ago dahil sa sakit na leukemia.

“Great. My goodness, haven’t seen you in years. You look great.”

“Oo nga.” Nagkamay sila at tumingin siya sa kasama nito. Nginitian niya ang babae. “Miss Borromeo, good to see you again.” Napansin niya ang pag-blush nito, gayunpaman ay sinuklian ang kanyang ngiti. “How are you?” dagdag niya.

“I’m fine. Salamat,” she answered timidly.

“Magkakilala kayo?” Donald asked curiously.



“Oh... we met by accident,” Brett replied and waved his hand in the air.

“I see.”

He plastered a smile. “You have a beautiful girlfriend,” tila wala sa sarili na bulong niya pero narinig iyon ni Donald.

“Oh... yes, she is beautiful.” Lumapit ito sa kanya at bumulong, “Kaibigan ko lang siya... a very good friend, actually.”

His smile widened, his eyes sparkling. Ikinatutuwa niya na hindi nobya ni Donald ang guro. Hindi siya makapaniwala na kaibigan lamang ito ng lalaki. Mahilig ito sa magaganda.

Yvette eyed them suspiciously.

“Oh, we’re talking about male things,” sagot ni Donald na nakangisi. She just frowned.

“Ano’ng gusto mong inumin?” tanong niya sa babae.

“Wala. I wouldn’t stay long,” sagot nito na tila naiinis.

“For me, the best drink you have, but first tell me what are you up to?” usisa ni Donald.

“Dito ako nagtatrabaho. I’m the manager. I bought this bar from an acquaintance,” he explained.

“I see. Trying to be a businessman, huh.”

He shrugged his shoulders in an answer.

He gave Donald a drink and offered one to

Yvette kahit hindi ito um-order. “It’s ladies’ drink, just try it. It’s very good,” he encouraged her. He was glad when he saw her taking a sip.

“Hindi mahilig si Yvette mag-bar-hopping. Hindi rin siya sanay uminom. Nakiusap lang ako na samahan akong lumabas ngayong gabi,” paliwanag ni Donald sa mahinang boses at may malawak na ngiti.

“Just wait a bit. We hired good bands tonight. Surely, you’ll enjoy the music,” he said directly to Yvette.

Actually, ang nais niyang gawin buong gabi ay titigan ang babae. It’s hard to turn his gaze away from her. She was certainly a sight to behold.



# Chapter Two



Hindi inaasahan ni Yvette na magkikita pala sila ni Brett Oclarit nang gabing iyon. She had not forgotten his image. Nami-mesmerize pa rin siya sa physical effect ng lalaki sa kanya. Ngayong kaharap niya ito at kakilala pala ni Donald, she needed to resist his charms as much as possible.

Minsan na siyang nadali sa pag-ibig at hindi siya handang masaktang muli. Brett had the looks that would break every woman's heart. Sapat nang pagpantasyahan niya ito sa kanyang imahinasyon, pero hanggang doon lang.

“Don, you're on your own. Uuwi na ako,” sabi niya. Hindi niya kasi matiis ang mapanuksong titig ni Brett sa kanya. He's handsome in all standing. Matangkad, matipuno ang pangangatawan, very charming and he possessed an irresistible smile. Delikado ang mahulog sa ganyang lalaki.

“Come on, enjoy yourself while we are here. Wala ka na kasing ibang ginagawa kundi ang magmukmok sa tirahan mo. Give time to enjoy yourself once in a while.” Nagpunta sa townhouse si Donald nang malaman nitong wala siyang balak lumabas nang gabing iyon. Pinilit siya ng kaibigang sumama rito.

“I like staying at home,” depensa niya sa sarili.

Donald winked and she couldn't help but chuckle. She liked her friendship with this man dahil madalas siya nitong napapatawa at kapag kailangan niya ng male friend ay naroon ito palagi. The guy was a successful businessman and eligible bachelor. Surprisingly, he didn't mind having just friendship with her.

Isang oras pa lang sila sa bar at nakukumahog na siyang umuwi. Mabuti na lamang at ihahatid siya ni Donald. Gusto niyang umiwas sa malalagkit nilang titigan ni Brett. The more kasi niyang natititigan ang lalaki ay mas lalong lumalalim ang attraction niya rito. She had fenced her heart pagkatapos niyang mabigo sa pag-ibig.

Leo Sandoval, the first man she loved, betrayed her and broke up with her a day before they were about to get married. Ang dahilan ay may nakilala itong magandang babae na may mayamang pamilya. It was a disgrace and total humiliation.

Pasulyap-sulyap sa kanya ang kaibigan habang nagmamaneho ito. He looked curious. “Paano kayo nagkakilala ni Brett?”

She explained the incident at the restaurant and blamed him for it. “Akala ko ay napaano ka, iyon pala ay nais mong i-rescue kita sa obsessed mong admirer.”

Napahapagalpak ito ng tawa.

She liked Donald very much but as a friend only. Ilang beses na rin siyang tinanong ni Lara kung bakit hanggang pagkakaibigan lang sila ng lalaki, they seemed to get along very well. Pero walang intense attraction sa pagitan nila. Friendship lang talaga ang nag-uugnay sa kanila, and they both had no problem with that.

Pero kay Brett, kakaiba ang dating ng lalaki sa kanya even on their first meeting. He brought her a different feeling and it astounded her kung paano nagre-react ang kanyang emosyon sa mga titig pa lang nito.



Pagod na pagod si Brett nang umuwi siya sa kanyang condo unit mula sa trabaho. Pagkatapos niyang mag-shower ay bagsak na kaagad ang katawan niya sa malambot na higaan at mabilis na nakatulog.

He woke up around noon. He remembered that he had a dream; ang kanyang kasal. The bride was walking along the aisle while he was waiting for her very excitedly at the altar, ngunit hindi niya alam kung sino ang babaeng iyon.

After the wedding ceremony, he removed the veil from her face to kiss her at bumulaga sa kanya ang mukha ni Yvette Borromeo. Nagising na siya pagkatapos.

Hindi niya maipaliwanag kung bakit ang

babae ang napanaginipan niya, and why the wedding? Siguro ay sa dahilan na madalas siyang ipinagtutulakan ng lolo at lola niya on his father side na dapat na siyang mag-asawa. Pero paano naman siya mag-aasawa, wala nga siyang constant girlfriend? His relationships with women mostly lasted only two months dahil madali siyang magsawa sa mga naging karelasyon.

Pero kay Yvette ay iba ang pakiramdam niya. She didn't look smitten by his charms, but if she did, she did a good job at hiding it. He found her very beautiful, interesting and fascinating. It thrilled him to know her more.

Nang mapagawi muli si Donald sa kanyang bar ay hindi na siya nakatiis. He asked about Yvette. Inamin niya sa lalaki na attracted siya sa kaibigan nito. That's why he needed to know her.

Napag-alaman niyang walang nobyo ang dalaga simula nang saktan ito ng huli nitong kasintahan. Ipinangako niya kay Donald na wala siyang masamang intensyon kay Yvette.



Si Yvette ay nasa bahay ng kanyang best friend. She was trying to convince Lara to attend Donald's birthday party later tonight.

“Donald invited you, it is not polite to refuse an invitation. Maaari mo namang dalhin ang nobyo mo,” pangungumbinsi niya.

“I already called Donald na hindi ako makakadalo. Isa pa, gusto kong makasama nang solo ang nobyo ko mamayang gabi. Kababati lang namin. Teka lang, bakit ba parang nag-aalangan kang pumuntang mag-isa?” Lara eyed her suspiciously.

She laughed. “It would be nice to go there na may kasama. Hindi ko kasi kilala ang ibang mga kaibigan ni Donald. Baka kasi ma-out of place ako,” she said a matter-of-factly. Ito ang unang pagkakataon na dadalo siya sa party ng kaibigan. Minsan lang kasi nagpapa-party ang lalaki. Lara could decline but she couldn’t. Sila kasi ni Donald ang magkaibigan.

“You worry too much. Nakalimutan mo yatang si Donald ang celebrant. I will guess na ikaw ang magiging belle of the night sa party. It’s time to associate with other male species and enjoy,” nakangising pahayag nito.

“Sira! You know very well I don’t entertain suitors. Wala akong panahon sa kanila.”

“One never knows, you might change your mind.”

“Yeah, right.”

Yvette went to the party by herself. Suot niya ang kanyang elegant lilac dress. Marami na ring bisita nang dumating siya sa venue. She scanned around looking for Donald. Ang unang nasilayan

at nakilala ng kanyang mga mata ay ang mukha ng lalaking madalas sumagi sa kanyang isipan. He stood on the other side of the room, looking at her. Brett nodded and smiled at her.

She gave him a faint smile. *Oh my, the temptation is here.*

Ibinaling niya kaagad ang paningin sa ibang direksyon. Nakita niya ang nakangiting si Donald na papalapit sa kanya. Magiliw na binati niya ito, sabay halik sa pisngi nito at ibinigay ang dalang regalo.

Nagpasalamat ito sa kanya at iginiya siya sa isang mesa kung saan nakaupo ang ilang female guests. Iniwan siya nito upang estimahin ang ibang bisita.

Hindi niya mapigil ang sarili na luminga upang tingnan kung may ibang kakilala ba siyang naroon. There he was, again looking at her direction. Napailing siya at binawi ang paningin. Bakit ba nahuhuli niya itong nakatingin sa kanya? Or was she imagining he was looking at her?

Sinubukan na lamang niyang makinig sa pinag-uusapan ng mga babaeng kasama niyang nakaupo on the long table nang mapansin niya na may tumabi sa kanya. She glanced sideways and her eyes locked with Brett's. And he was still smiling, and it affected her. She frowned to hide her amazement.



“Hi, Yvette,” bati nito. “As always, you look fetching.” He gave her a heart-stopping smile.

“Talaga bang palagi kang masaya?” sa halip ay tanong niya. “Hindi ba namamaga ang pisngi mo sa kakangiti?” It was a slight insult, pero nakangisi pa rin ito na ikinainis niya.

“Nakangiti ako kapag may nakikita akong nagpapangiti sa akin. Smiling doesn’t hurt.”

The ladies on their table were boldly staring at Brett with their ready smiles. Pero ang atensyon ng lalaki ay nasa kanya lang.

“So, how about I get you a drink?” he offered.

Hindi niya magawang bale-walain ang kausap gayong very friendly ang dating nito sa kanya. Wala rin naman siyang ibang kakilala roon. Abala pa rin si Donald sa mga kararating na bisita.

“Sure,” she acquiesced.

Pagbalik nito ay may dala na itong dalawang basong inumin. Yvette politely thanked him. Hindi niya inasahan na makikita niya rito si Brett, but she should have thought of the possible renewal of his friendship with Donald.

Uncomfortable ang kanyang pakiramdam na nasa tabi niya ang lalaki. Hindi niya gusto ang nararamdaman kapag magkalapit sila. Hindi siya mapakali, pero hindi niya tinangkang tumingin dito. Ayaw niyang matitigan ang mga mata ni Brett at ayaw rin niyang nakikita ang mga ngiti nito. He

was a temptation. She shouldn't have accepted the drink.

“Ayaw mo bang makipag-usap sa iba mong kakilala?” She was deliberately shooing him away.

Tila hindi ito affected sa tono ng kanyang pananalita. He wasn't smiling, but there was glint in his eyes. “I don't know most of these people. Do you?” balik-tanong nito.

“No.”

“See, pareho tayo. So, we may as well sit together.”

Gusto niyang singhalan ang kausap, pero pinili na lamang niyang itikom ang bibig. Ang ikinaiinis niya ay ang epekto ng presence nito sa kanya. And those eyes of his should not look at her with hot intensity.

Hindi na umalis ang lalaki sa kanyang tabi though from time to time Donald would come and join them. Buong gabi ay hindi siya iniwan ni Brett. Ilang kaibigang lalaki ni Donald ang lumapit upang makipagkilala sa kanya. But they all noticed Brett at her side with obvious displeasure on his face, they left after proper introduction. Napansin niya ang inaasal ng katabi. Inakala siguro ng mga lalaking iyon na nobyo niya si Brett. She became irritated at the thought.

“Why were you scowling at them?” usisa ni Yvette nang hindi siya makatiis.

“Kung hindi ko iyon ginawa, do you think they will leave you alone? Or would you rather enjoy their company?”

“Hindi ako nagpunta rito para makakuha ng male attention. It’s not my way of wasting time. Hindi ko gusto ang attitude mo. Ano na lang ang iisipin nila, na may ugnayan tayo?” Damn! He smiled at her again. Ang naramdaman niyang inis ay natutunaw sa mga ngiti nito.

“Hayaan mo na kung ano ang iisipin nila. But I can call them back if you want.” There was a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

“Don’t bother. I will be going home soon.”



Batid ni Brett na naging possessive siya kay Yvette nang makita niya ang eagerness ng mga kalalakihang guests na lapitan ito. He couldn’t stand and watch and let them enjoy her company. It was a surprised reaction from him. Batid niyang wala siyang karapatan sa dalaga, but he realized he was being ridiculously jealous. He felt silly at nais niyang tumawa.

“Is there something amusing?” he heard her say.

“Oh, I find myself funny at times,” sagot niya.

“Hmph! Bakit pa ba ako nagtanong?” She rolled her eyes.

He chuckled. Oh dear, he had fun tonight. Inexpect niya na dadalo si Yvette at hindi siya nabigo.

She was gorgeous tonight. Aware siya sa mga sideways glances ng mga lalaki sa party. Kung hindi dahil sa pagdikit niya rito, they must have been all over her. His height and size could intimidate other men and it did the trick.

After dinner, there was music and dancing. Nais sana niyang isayaw ang dalaga pero tumanggi ito. Nagkataon ding napagawi sa kanilang mesa ang celebrant. Nais din itong isayaw ng lalaki, ngunit mabilis din itong tumanggi. Sa halip ay nagpaalam ang babae kay Donald na mauna nang umalis.

“May trabaho ako bukas, you know that,” she reasoned out. Pakiramdam ni Brett ay nagdadahilan lamang ito. Either she didn’t enjoy the party or she didn’t enjoy his company.

Inihatid niya palabas ang dalaga hanggang sa kotse nito maski pa tumanggi itong samahan niya. He was stubborn and most of the time he got what he wanted.



Saturday afternoon. Galing si Yvette sa isang grocery store at pauwi na siya nang biglang tumirik ang kanyang kotse. Maigi na lang nagawa pa niya iyong itabi sa daan. It was an old car na binili niya sa isang kasamahan sa school. She thought it was worth buying dahil hindi siya maka-afford na bumili ng bago, but the car kept breaking down. She ended up spending money for constant repairs.

Napamura siya sa inis.

Tatawag na sana siya sa kanyang suking car repair shop nang may isang kotseng huminto sa kanyang harapan. Nang bumaba ang bintana niyon, nakilala niya na ang driver ay walang iba kundi si Brett.

“Hi, Yvette, may problema sa kotse mo?”  
tanong ng lalaki.

Nag-alangan pa siyang sabihin ang totoo pero nagawa rin niyang ipagbigay-alam iyon. “Tumirik ang kotse ko,” sagot niya.

Itinabi nito ang sasakyan at lumabas. “Thatid na lang kita,” alok nito nang sila ay magkaharap na.

“Huwag na, makaabala pa ako. Salamat na lang. I am going to call someone to get my car and have it fixed. Magta-taxi na lamang ako.”  
She was trying to dismiss him, to leave her alone. She turned and pressed the button on her phone. Pagkatapos ng tawag ay napansin niyang hindi pa rin umalis ang lalaki. He was standing there, waiting.

He smiled when she looked at him. She frowned in return. “I still insist na ihatid na kita pauwi,” pahayag nito.

“If you remember, tumanggi ako. I can afford to pay a taxi.” Hindi niya dapat supladahan ang kausap, ngunit nainis siya sa pagiging insistent nito. She didn’t want to be in the same car with him. She

didn't want to see him. She wanted to forget him and the blasted attraction she felt for him.

"Pasensya na. I mean no harm," seryosong turan nito.

Her reaction softened. "I didn't mean to snap at you. Hindi lang maganda ang araw ko, at saka gusto kong mapag-isa."

"Naiintindihan ko. Take care." He turned and left.

She felt guilty. Brett was only trying to be nice. Ngunit natatakot siya na baka mahulog ang loob niya nang tuluyan sa lalaki kung sakali mang maging close sila. She couldn't afford another heartache.



Sunday afternoon, sumaglit muna siya sa isang coffee shop bago siya pumasok sa bar.

Nang pabalik na si Brett sa kanyang sasakyan, napatda siya nang makita ang babaeng makakasalubong niya. She was walking without looking ahead, parang may malalim na iniisip. Deliberately, hindi siya umiwas, and she almost bumped into him.

Napahinto ito. "I'm sorry," she uttered and looked up. Nagkatitigan sila and nakita niyang namula ito.

"Hi, Yvette. Good afternoon," he greeted smilingly.

“H-hi, Brett. Sorry, wala ako sarili habang naglalakad at kamuntik na tuloy kitang mabangga,” hingi nito ng paumanhin.

He shrugged his shoulders. “No harm done. Can I invite you to have coffee with me?” He pushed his luck kahit na kalalabas lamang niya mula sa coffee shop.

She stared at him with her big brown eyes and frowned. “Sorry, I can’t.”

“Takot ka ba sa akin, Miss Borrromeo?” tudyo niya.

Tumalim ang mga mata nito at nanlisik. “Ano naman ang ikakatakot ko sa ’yo?” tanong nito na nakataas ang isang kilay.

“I don’t know. Ang ma-in love, perhaps?” He was blunt.

He saw fury rising in her eyes and her face became red. “You’re an arrogant ass. Ako, mai-in love sa ’yo? Ang kapal talaga ng apog mo! I don’t even know you,” she snapped.

Nginitian niya lamang ang dalaga with unaffected expression. “If that’s so, have coffee with me. It’s not like I plan to ravish you, you know. Sinusubukan ko lang maging friendly sa ’yo dahil mabuting kaibigan ka ni Donald.” He anticipated that he would win this challenge. “Walang mawawala sa ’yo, I swear,” dagdag niya.

She closed her eyes not from being annoyed but

from anger. Nang magmulat ito ay isang winning smile ang nakabadya sa kanyang mukha. “Kung ayaw ko?” she asked holding her temper.

“I would assume na affected ka sa presence ko at iniwasan mo ako para huwag mahulog ang damdamin mo. If you accept my invitation, it means you’re not affected by my charms at all.” He sounded arrogantly confident of himself, pero iyon lang ang paraan upang mapapayag itong makipagkape sa kanya.

“Ang ibang babae ay malamang nadadala mo sa ngiti pero hindi ako. I know a playboy when I see one,” she countered.

“Oh, I’m hit,” he dramatically put one hand on his chest. “You hurt my pride, Miss Borromeo, I hope na tinatanggap mo na ang imbitasyon ko for consolation.”

Her face softened and her lips curved into a smile. “Fine. My date can wait.”

“Oh...” ang tangi niyang nasabi and he motioned her to the coffee shop in front of them.

Hinawakan ni Brett ang dalaga sa siko upang igiya sa isang vacant table. He felt the electric charge na tila ba nagkokonekta sa kanila. The heat went into his veins and shook his body. His reaction to her had not changed at all simula nang magkita sila. *Am I infatuated or is it just a lusty reaction?*

Yvette might have not noticed the effect she had



on him. It was unfamiliar even to him.

Siya ang um-order ng kanilang kape, and he also ordered a slice of chocolate cake. Nabanggit ni Donald na mahilig sa sweets ang babae.

He got a smile from her when he pushed the plate of cake toward her. “Salamat. I like cakes. Paano mo nalaman?”

“Majority of the women I know ay mahilig sa matamis. I assume na ikaw rin.” Hindi niya inaming tip iyon ni Donald.

“Lahat ng babaeng nahumaling sa ’yo ay na-bribe mo?”

He chuckled. “Sa mga pinsan kong babae at kamag-anak ko lang na-apply ang ganyang bribery.”

“Oh. How about your sister?” She seemed comfortable talking to him now.

He wanted to maintain the tone of the conversation, kaya sinagot niya ito. “Wala akong kapatid. I’m an only child.”

“Hmm... your parents must have spoiled you,” she commented.

“They did. Unfortunately, they left me behind.” It was an uncomfortable answer.

“Sorry.”

“Okay lang. Matagal na silang nawala. It was an accident that killed them both. It was hard for me, pero kailangang tanggapin na wala na sila. Although, I still miss them.”

Biglang lumungkot ang mukha ng babae. “Mas fortunate ka pa rin dahil may mga kamag-anak ka. And you know your roots. May ibang tao na hindi alam kung kanino sila nanggaling.” The pain was evident in her voice.

He looked at her seriously. “Are you one of them?”

She stared at him and said, “Yes.” At pareho silang natahimik.

He cleared his throat. “Matagal na kayong magkaibigan ni Donald?”

“Three years. Nang mabiktima ako ng hit-and-run sa kalye, siya ang nagmagandang-loob at nagdala sa akin sa ospital. Hindi niya ako iniwan nang mawalan ako ng malay. That’s how we began our friendship.” She sipped her coffee and looked at him. “By the way, how did you know Donald? Hindi niya na-mention sa akin ang pangalan mo noon.”

“Oh, years ago, nobya ko ang kapatid niya.”

Nanlaki ang mga mata nito. “The one who died?”

Tumango siya. “Ang only sister ni Donald. She was my fiancée.”

“Oh...” Somehow, nakikita niya sa mga mata nito ang simpatya. In his understanding, marami ring pinagdaanan ang dalaga, and that somehow connected them.

“Unfortunate pero hindi natin hawak ang ating

buhay.”

“I lost the most important people in my life. Mahirap intindihin kung bakit,” he said in a matter-of-fact tone.

“I believe na may rason ang mga nangyayari. Pero sa kabila ng lahat, ang nais pa rin ng Diyos ang masusunod. We could only hope and pray that things would be better. Tama ka, may mga bagay-bagay na mahirap intindihin. When you search for an answer, you don’t even know where to start.”

Tumangu-tango lamang si Brett. He didn’t want to dwell more on the subject. “So, sino iyong naghihintay mong ka-date?” pag-iiba niya sa usapan.

She scowled at him. “That’s none of your business.”

“It is... dahil sa akin ay kailangan pa niyang maghintay.”

Hindi siya sinagot ng dalaga. Isang seryosong tingin lang ang ibinigay nito sa kanya. “Really, Brett, it’s personal. We are not even friends.”

He smiled. “After this, maaari na ba tayong maging kaibigan?”

“Hindi.”

“Bakit? Do I look so bad a person to you?” tanong niya.

“Hindi. Pero you can’t judge a person sa pamamagitan ng kanyang hitsura. There are some

people who look nice, but the attitudes are the real opposite.”

“Tama ka. You can’t judge the book by its cover,” he affirmed and smiled.

She looked intrigued. “I wonder kung ilang babae na ang nadali diyan sa matatamis mong ngiti.”

“Hindi ko masabi. But you don’t seem affected.”

She blushed. “Why are you so arrogant? Dahil ba sa tingin mo guwapo ka?”

“Is that a compliment? Na naguguwapuhan ka sa akin?” His eyes glowed.

“Wala akong sinabing ganyan. Goodness, you are very conceited.” Yvette narrowed her eyes.

He only shrugged his shoulders. He knew how he sounded but he liked baiting her in a conversation. He enjoyed her company.

“I have to go. Salamat for the coffee and the cake.” She smiled a little.

“Oh, yes. May appointment ka pang naghihintay. Thanks for your time with me. I hope it was bearable.”

Lumawak ang pagngiti ni Yvette. “The cake was a miracle,” she chuckled. “Bye.”

Nakangiti siya nang iniwan ng babae. Kahit papaano ay napatawa niya ito.

# Chapter Three



Nangingiti si Yvette habang nagmamaneho siya papunta sa bahay ni Lara. Walang klase ngayong araw dahil holiday, kaya may usapan sila ng kaibigan na magluluto ng spaghetti sa bahay nito. Late na nga siya sa usapan dahil sa kanyang unexpected meeting with Brett.

She was supposed to avoid the man, but she ended up having coffee with him. He challenged her and coaxed her to accept the invitation. He was really a conceited man. He knew how to maneuver women using his irresistible charm.

It was hard for her to pretend that she wasn't affected by his presence. But truthfully, her knees turned into jelly and her heart pounded each time he looked at her with an enigmatic smile on his lips. Maaaring nagkakamali siya, pero parang nabasa niya ang desire sa mga mata nito.

*But why would he desire me? I must be imagining things.*

She had actually enjoyed the time with him even the sparring with words. Pakiramdam niya ay may pagkakapareho sa kanilang buhay that led to understanding each other.

“You’re late,” sermon ni Lara sa kanya nang

dumating siya sa bahay nito.

“Sorry, heavy traffic kasi,” pagsisinungaling niya. She was not ready to tell her friend about her attraction toward Brett. Hindi pa nga niya nababanggit dito ang tungkol sa pagkakatagpo ng landas nila ng lalaki. Knowing Lara, she would push her to entertain hope to find love again.

“By the way, nabili mo na ba ’yong nagustuhan mong bracelet?” untag nito sa kanya.

“Oh, yes. Binili ko rin ’yung pinabili mong hikaw.” Saka lang niya naalala na nagkatagpo nga pala sila ng kanyang kapatid na si Gretchen sa jewelry store, ang dahilan kung bakit naging distracted siya sa paglalakad at kamuntik nang mabangga si Brett kanina.

“Bakit nalukot iyang mukha mo? Something happened?”

Inilahad niya ang tungkol sa pagkikita nila ni Gretchen after many years nang palayasin siya sa tahanan ng pamilyang umampon sa kanya. “Unfortunately, hindi pa rin siya nagbabago. She still has a sharp tongue.”

“So, what did she say to you?”

“She insulted me. I couldn’t defend myself in front of other people. So I left instead.” All these years, hindi pa rin niya nakalimutan ang mga pinagdaanan niya sa pamilyang kumupkop sa kanya. In spite of all, she never hate them.

“Mabuti ang ginawa mo. Hindi makakabuti ang pumatol sa babaeng iyon. Ang importante, matagal ka nang nakalaya from their clutches. And you have your own life to live. Let’s go to the kitchen now. Nagugutom na ako, eh.”

Ikinagalak niya ang pag-iiba ng usapan ni Lara.



Pumasok si Brett sa office niya sa bar na si Yvette ang laman ng isipan.

*What’s special about you that make me desire and want you?*

He knew she’s not the most beautiful woman in the world, pero kakaiba ang hatak nito sa kanya. He closed his eyes and imagined her. Her smile and laughter made his heart leap for joy, the flush of her cheeks made her cute. It was only an hour of conversation over coffee, but it felt right for him.

Kinabukasan ay binalak niyang sa gabi na lamang siya pumunta sa bar. He wanted to see his lawyer cousin dahil kailangan niya ang opinion nito sa papasukin niyang bagong investment. Sinadya niyang hindi tawagan si Robert Salcedo na dadaan siya sa law office nito. Nais niyang sorpresahin ang lalaki. Si Robert ay pinsan niya on his mother side at malapit na kaibigan din.

Naglalakad siya patungo roon nang biglang bumukas ang pinto ng *Salcedo Law Office* at lumabas ang isang babaeng umiiyak. Naalarma

siya nang makilala ito. She wasn't looking her way again dahil nakayuko ang ulo nito at nagpupunas sa mga mata. "Yvette?"

She stopped on her tracks and looked up. "Brett?" she asked and turned her head away, avoiding his gaze.

"Ano'ng nangyari? Bakit ka umiiyak?" He held her on one shoulder and while his other hand caressed her wet cheeks. Pero hindi ito sumagot. "Look at me. Please, tell me kung sino ang nagpaiyak sa 'yo at malalagot siya sa akin," he uttered seriously and with consternation in his voice.

She looked at him and met his eyes. "Thank you." Tears welled up in her eyes. Bago pa man siya makapagsalita ay napayakap ang babae sa kanya at umiyak sa kanyang dibdib. It almost broke his heart hearing her cries. He hugged her tightly.

He whispered in her ear, "Nandito lang ako." He soothed her back to calm her down. "Please, don't cry anymore. Sabihin mo lang kung sino ang dahilan at babasagin ko ang mukha niya," he said vehemently.

She suddenly stopped crying and she looked up at him. "You can't. They're my family. Masakit lang kasi dahil until now they still resented me."

He felt his heart being twisted. Pinahid niya ang luha ng babae, hinalikan sa noo, pagkuwa'y



niyakap ito nang mahigpit. “Come, I’ll drive you home.”

Hindi nagprotesta ang dalaga nang hawakan niya ito sa baywang at igiya palabas ng gusali. She really looked miserable.

“Where’s your car? Ipagmamaneho na kita pauwi sa bahay mo,” aniya nang nandoon na sila sa parking lot. Tumigil ito sa paglalakad at medyo nahihiya nang mag-angat ng tingin.

“Pero paano ang ipinunta mo rito? Surely, you didn’t come to rescue me.”

“Don’t worry about it. Babalik ako rito pagkatapos kitang maihatid.”

Yvette allowed him to drive. She had told him where she lived. Hindi na ito umiiyak pero malungkot ang mukha nito at namumugto ang mga mata. Interesado talaga siyang malaman kung ano ang dahilan ng pag-iyak ng dalaga. But it’s too personal.

Pareho silang tahimik habang nasa loob ng kotse. Mayamaya pa’y ang dalaga ang hindi nakatiis.

“Thanks for the concern. Nakakahiya talaga sa ’yo.”

“Walang problema,” sagot niya.

“Ilang taon na hindi ko nakikita ang foster family ko. Yesterday, I got a letter from a lawyer informing me that I need to appear in his office. It

had something to do with my foster father's will. Hindi ko inakala na naroon din pala ang foster mother and foster sister ko. When I was nineteen, they kicked me out of the house.

“Hindi ko akalaing galit sila sa akin hanggang ngayon. They insulted and humiliated me in front of the lawyer. I couldn't defend myself dahil ayaw nilang maniwala sa akin. After I signed the papers ay nagmamadali akong lumabas ng office. I couldn't help but cry. It hurts,” she said with pain in her eyes.

“Ano'ng papers ang pinirmahan mo? If you don't mind my asking.”

“Father left me some properties. Mother wanted to take it away from me. Sabi niya, I don't deserve it dahil hindi naman talaga nila ako kapamilya by blood. She made me sign na ibinenta ko ang properties sa kanya. The said amount ay bilang kabayaran sa utang-na-loob ko raw nang ampunin nila ako, kaya wala akong tatanggapin ni isang kusing.”

Kumuyom ang kamao niyang nasa manibela. “At ang lawyer ay hindi nagkomento?”

“In fairness, he was nice to me. He asked me few times kung papayag ba ako sa arrangement. I said yes over and over. I wanted to end my connection to the family at kung maaari lang sana ay magpapalit ako ng apelyido.”

“I suggest you get married,” he joked. Napatawa niya ito.

“First thing tomorrow,” she countered na may pilit na ngiti.

“Maaari na ba akong mag-propose ngayon na?”

Napabunghalit ng tawa ang babae sa biro niya. He loved hearing the sound of her laughter. It’s like music in his ears. “Well, Mrs. Yvette Oclarit... it doesn’t sound so bad, is it?” he added wistfully.

“You are really something. Thank you for making me feel better,” nakangiting pahayag ng dalaga.

“Anytime, my dear,” he replied sweetly.

“Malaki ang utang-na-loob ko sa ’yo. Paano kita mababayaran?”

Brett didn’t need anything from her aside from the fact na nais pa niya itong makilala nang husto. “Have dinner with me, perhaps? Since ayaw mong tanggapin ang apelyido ko?” He was teasing her.

“You’re a master talker. Paano ba ako makakatangi sa ’yo?”

“By saying ‘no’.” Hindi niya pipilitin ang dalaga kung ayaw talaga nitong lumabas kasama siya.

“Honestly, I’m beginning to enjoy your company. Sige, pumapayag na ako.”

“Hmm... ayaw mong pag-isipan muna?” He was trying to suppress a smile. “Ayokong napipilitan ka lang.”

“Yes, I’d like to have dinner with you.” She flashed a genuine smile.

“That’s great,” he said happily. “Basta hindi kita pinilit, ha.”

Yvette just laughed. He really wanted to see her laughing always. Kung magagawa lamang niyang alisin ang alaala na nagbibigay ng lungkot nito ay gagawin niya.



Hindi pa nalilimutan ni Yvette ang encounter nila ng kanyang foster mother and foster sister na nagpapalungkot sa kanya. Pero biglang sumingit sa kanyang isipan si Brett at napangiti siya. He made her forget the pain kapag naaalala niya ang mga ngiti nito at pagpapatawa. Nagawa siya nitong patawanin even in her sad times. He amazed her.

Alam niyang hindi magandang ideya ang makipaglapit dito, pero nagugustuhan niya ang presence ng lalaki and the way he cared for her. She felt safe in his arms. Naalala niya ang amoy at ang init ng yakap nito. He was a warm and caring man. Hindi man sila magkaibigan, handa itong ipagtanggol siya. She was more than glad na naroon si Brett sa panahong kailangan niya ng masasandalan.

Naikuwento niya kay Lara ang tungkol sa mga nangyari at maging kay Brett.

*“Brett might be the man worth taking chances,”*

naalala niyang sinabi ng kaibigan.

Napagkasunduan nila ng lalaki na lalabas sila nang Sunday night. Nagpilit ito na susunduin siya at pumayag siya.

Yvette dressed herself well. Wala siyang balak na ipahiya si Brett. She was excited at kabadong naghihintay sa pagsundo nito. Nang marinig niyang tumunog ang doorbell, biglang lumukso ang puso niya.

With a warm smile on her face, she opened the door. Natulalang nakatitig sa kanya ang lalaki na may hawak na bulaklak.

“A goddess in the flesh,” he muttered. “Bulaklak para sa pinakamagandang babaeng nakilala ko,” dugtong nito nang ibigay ang dala nitong flowers sa kanya.

She smiled widely. “You really have a flowery tongue, but I accept your compliment and the beautiful flowers. You look handsome tonight, Brett.”

Natawa ang kaharap. “Ngayong gabi lang? Akala ko inborn ang kaguwapuhan ko,” biro nito. “Anyway, a compliment from you is heartily accepted.” Nag-uumpisa pa lang ang gabi nila ay napatawa na siya nito.

Dinala siya ng binata sa isang fancy restaurant. Walang patid ang pagpapatawa ng kanyang kasama. Nakapaskil lagi ang ngiti sa kanyang mga

labi. She was happy being with him.

Masaya na sana ang buong gabi niya kung hindi lang niya nakita ang bagong dating na si Gretchen kasama ang isang lalaki. Hindi niya nagustuhan nang pinili nitong maupo sa mesang malapit lang sa kanila ni Brett. She didn't feel comfortable anymore.

"May nasabi ba akong offensive? You suddenly look grim," Brett said when he noticed her expression.

"Of course not. You did nothing but make me smile. May nakita lang ako na ayaw ko na sanang makita pa," mahinang pahayag ni Yvette.

"Ah... Kung gusto mong umalis na tayo, just say it."

"Tapos na rin naman tayong kumain. Maybe we should go." Nagustuhan niya ang pagiging understanding ng lalaki.

Pagkatapos nitong magbayad ay inaya na siyang umalis ng kasama. Hinawakan siya nito sa siko at iginiya palabas ng restaurant. She walked with self-esteem dahil si Brett ang nagbigay sa kanya ng courage. She had not glanced at Gretchen's direction.

Nang makalabas na sila ay pinakawalan niya ang isang malalim na hininga. "I'm sorry, Brett."

"No need. You looked uncomfortable and distracted inside," he said.

Tumango siya. “Dumating kasi si Gretchen. Siya ang foster sister ko. Her presence makes me uncomfortable. She despises me simula pa noong mga bata kami. She delights seeing me suffer and she made every possible way to make my life miserable noong nasa poder pa ako ng pamilya niya. I can’t stand seeing her again,” she explained.

“Naiintindihan ko. Siya ba iyong bagong dating na may kasamang lalaki at naupo malapit sa atin?” Napansin pala ni Brett ang pareha. “I saw your reaction when they arrived,” dugtong nito.

Muli ay tumango siya. He grabbed her hand and squeezed it. She smiled for the comfort he gave her. He then led her to his car. Ipinagbukas pa siya nito ng pinto at ang ito pa mismo ang nag-secure ng kanyang seat belt.

Bago paandar ang kotse ay binalingan siya nito. “I want to remind you na malaya ka na sa kanila. You have a life to be proud of. Sa kabila ng ginawa nila sa ’yo ay nagawa mo pa ring mabuhay at tumayo sa sarili mong paa. Gretchen would be happy kung makita ka niyang intimidated sa presence niya. You should show her that you are no longer affected and much better, ignore her totally,” payo nito.

“Tama ka. I’m no longer part of their family. Pinagserbisyuhan ko ang pagpapakain at pagpapaaral nila sa akin noon,” aniya sa malungkot

na tinig.

“Paano ka nila inampon gayong hindi ka naman pala nila gusto?”

“Inampon ako ng mag-asawang Borromeo when I was six years old. Wala silang anak noon. They were happy when I came into their lives, ngunit nang mabuntis si Mrs. Borromeo, d’un na nagsimula ang pagbabago ng pakikitungo nila.

“Nang ipanganak si Gretchen ay nagbago na ang lahat, naetsapuwersa na ako. Alam ni Gretchen na ampon lang ako kaya hindi niya ako matanggap, she made me suffer. Tiniis ko ang pangungutya at paghihirap na ginagawa ng mag-ina sa akin. They made me work at home at sa servants’ quarter ako natutulog.

“Mr. Borromeo was a bit nicer. Pinag-aral niya ako kahit na against ang kanyang mag-ina. I was in second year college nang palayasin nila ako.

“Tumira ako sa boarding house ng isang kaibigan, naghanap agad ako ng trabaho, nag-ipon para makabalik sa pag-aaral. I worked hard para lang makatapos ako. Kahit anong trabaho ay pinasok ko para may makain at maipangtustos sa pag-aaral at sa araw-araw na gastusin. My life wasn’t easy,” mahabang salaysay ng dalaga.

He took her hand and kissed her palm. “Pareho pala tayong survivor. But it doesn’t mean that we are less than others. Let’s be happy that we



managed to move on.”

In that instant, nagbukas ang pinto ng kanyang damdamin na nakasarado nang ilang taon. Tinitigan niya si Brett at nginitian nang pagkatamis-tamis. “I don’t feel sorry na nagkakilala tayo,” aniya.

“Salamat. That’s a big relief.” And he sighed dramatically. Napahalakhak siya at napuno ng tawa ang kotse ng lalaki.

