

PROLOGUE

Hindi makapaniwala si Brandon sa narinig. Sigurado siyang matapos ang ilang buwang regular silang lumalabas ni Leica at sa obvious na pag-click ng mga personality nila at trip sa buhay ay magiging official na rin sila. He was so sure it was the reason she wanted to talk to him right away, even if they were both in the middle of reviewing for their final exams.

“I don’t get it, Leica. We were okay, right?” Hindi niya alam kung ano ang sasabihin. “May nagawa o nasabi ba akong naka-offend sa iyo? Something insensitive or politically incorrect?” Inabot niya ang kamay nito. “Please, just tell me.”

Leica shook her head. Binawi nito ang kamay. “No, Brandon. You have been the most sensitive, caring person I know. Wala kang nagawang nakasakit sa akin o kung ano. Pero...” She bit her lip then lowered her gaze. “Baka may dapat kang gawin para sa sarili mo.”

Napakurap siya. “A-ano’ng dapat kong gawin para sa sarili ko? Leica, I’m sure wala akong B.O. or halitosis.” In-stretch niya ang mahahabang daliri at ininspeksyon iyon. “Malinis ang mga kuko ko. I

always wash my hands.”

Her serious face lit up, then she broke into giggles. “Brandon... I swear.” Napailing itong muli. “It’s not about hygiene, trust me.”

“Wala akong idine-date na iba, promise.”

Leica sighed again. Ilang sandaling nakatingin ito sa kanya na parang pinag-iisipan kung ano ang susunod na sasabihin. “Brandon, ewan ko. Pero sa tingin ko, dapat mong pag-isipan kung ano, o sino talaga ang gusto mo.”

Parang sumakit bigla ang ulo niya sa narinig. “You’re the only one I want, Leica.” He was about to say something more when his phone beeped.

Text message iyon mula sa isa sa best friends niya na si Allistair. A reminder about their plans for the weekend, and an inside joke between him and his other friends. Hindi niya napigilang mapangiti habang nagre-reply. Nang mai-send niya ang message at mag-angat ng tingin ay nakamasid si Leica sa kanya na parang kanina pa siya nito pinapanood.

“What?” nagtatakang tanong niya.

She shook her head. “Wala.”

Brandon sighed, and was about to reach for

her hand again when his phone rang this time. Nag-excuse siya kay Leica bago iyon sinagot. It was Allistair, apologizing if he interrupted anything but wanted to tell him right away that he needed to see him later to talk. Alam na niya ang mga dahilan kung bakit gusto siyang makausap agad ng kaibigan kaya pumayag agad siya. Nang ibalik niya sa bulsa ang cellphone ay nahuli muli niyang nakatingin si Leica sa kanya.

“So, where were we? Leica, I—”

“You two are awfully close,” she commented.

Okay, nawi-weird-an na siya sa babaeng ito, but she’s still adorable. “Issue ba iyon sa iyo?” he softly asked. True, masyado silang malapit ni Allistair. Sa kanilang apat na magbabarkada ay ito ang pinakamalapit sa kanya. But there were reasons why, and even their friends knew about it.

“Not really, Brandon.” Matamang minasdan siya ni Leica. “If you will just tell me the truth, then it wouldn’t be an issue. We can even be good friends if you want. Alam kong mahirap na... na tanggapin ang isang bagay na hindi natin inaasahan o sa tingin natin, maaaring maging dahilan para layuan tayo ng iba. But, Brandon, sa tingin ko, maaga pa lang, dapat na—”

“Wait, hold on a second.” Itinaas niya ang isang kamay. “What are you trying to tell me, Leica?” May panic na sa boses niya.

“You and Allistair,” umpisa nito sa mas mahinang boses. “I’ve noticed it, too. Masyado kayong malapit— kapag nag-uusap, kapag magkasama hindi puwedeng hindi ninyo hinahawakan ang isa’t isa. You even hold hands when you two walk around here. Brandon, puwedeng hindi mo nare-realize ito pero nakikita ng lahat. You two are obviously in love with each other.” She bit her lip again as she held the strap of her tote bag tighter. “Brandon, mas dapat sigurong kilalanin mo ang sarili mo para alam mo kung anong klaseng relasyon ang dapat mong i-pursue. I don’t want to be with someone who’s in denial of who he really is.”

Kung kanina ay hindi pagkapaniwala ang nararamdaman ng binata, ngayon ay shock na. Did Leica just imply that he was gay? *Holy shit!*

“Leica, I’m not... I’m not gay!” deklara niya, huli na para ma-realize na napalakas ang pagkakasabi niya niyon. Nearly everyone else in the open air cafeteria at *Ackerton University’s* main park turned to look at their direction.

“There’s nothing wrong if you are, Brandon,” sympathetic na pahayag nito na tinapik pa ang braso

niya. “Mahirap tanggapin sa umpisa, pero kung kailangan mo ng kaibigan, you know my number.” Tumayo na ang babae. “I should go. May org meeting pa ako.”

“Sandali lang.” Hinagip niya ang braso nito. “What... who...” Napabuga siya ng hangin. “Where did this come from, Leica? Had people been talking? Please, wala akong alam.”

Ilang sandaling nag-alangan si Leica bago tumingin sa isang grupo ng estudyante two tables away. “They didn’t exactly spread the rumors, but kept asking me if I even noticed whatever the hell was going on between you and Allistair. Hindi ko talaga maiwasang magduda, Brandon. Madalas kitang nakakasama pero napapansin ko kung gaano ka kasaya sa tuwing magte-text o tatawag siya. Ayaw mo siyang pag-usapan masyado pero sa isang salita lang ni Allistair, willing kang i-postpone ang usapan nating magkita o lumabas.

“You really need to resolve this thing about yourself, Brandon. Kasi, hindi ko naiintindihan. Naisip kong kung importante talaga ako sa iyo, ise-share mo sa akin ang tungkol sa inyo kaso hindi, eh.” Hinila nito ang braso. “I’m sorry. I’ll see you around.”

Tulala lang si Brandon hanggang sa mawala sa

kanyang paningin si Leica. Nang mahimasmasan dahil may biglang nagsalita sa public address system na nag-aanunsyo ng isang upcoming school event ay saka siya napatingin sa mesa ng grupong itinuro ni Leica. Those were third year students, sa kapareho nilang college department. Halos lahat din ng mga iyon ay kabilang sa itinuturing na sikat sa campus maliban sa isa.

Naningkit ang mga mata ni Brandon habang nakatingin sa babaeng tila walang pag-aalinlangan ding sinalubong ang tingin niya. Annabeth Reyes, who sat beside that pesky junior who had a huge crush on Allistair.

Walang salitang tumayo siya at nilapitan ang kinauupuan nito. The girl just kept looking at him.

“Can we talk?” walang seremonyas na sabi niya.

“Ooohh, are you trying to engage me in a catfight?” She batted her lashes. Her friends at the table snickered.

“No, may pag-uusapan lang talaga tayo,” mahina pero mariing saad niya.

“Tungkol saan?” Inalog-alog nito ang hawak na cup ng pearl shake.

“About a misconception,” he hissed. “But not here.”

Umangat ang isang kilay ng babae. “I do not know you enough to make such,” painosenteng sagot nito.

“Exactly,” he sighed. “But obviously, you have been saying things that make people suspect something that wasn’t really there is going on. And I am telling you now, you’re wrong. Wala na akong pakialam kung ano ang motibo mo, pero gusto ko lang linawin sa iyo na—” *F*ck, did I really have to say it here?* “Let’s go somewhere to talk, please,” pakiusap niya.

“Bakit pa tayo aalis dito? Kung may gusto kang linawin, mas okay kung sasabihin mo na ngayon, na may ibang nakakarinig. Mas nakakaduda kung ako lang ang pagsasabihan mo, di ba?” smug na pahayag nito bago sumimsim sa inumin.

“What the hell is your problem?” hindi na napigilang sabi ni Brandon, sa kontrolado pa ring boses. Dama na niya ang pag-iinit ng kanyang mga pisngi. Hindi siya gaanong sanay sa komprontasyon, lalo sa harap ng maraming tao at sa hindi pa niya gaanong kilala.

“Wala akong problem, baka ikaw ang meron.” She pursed her lips.

“Wala akong problema, at lalong hindi ako ang klase ng tao na iniisip mo o gusto mong paniwalaan. So stop acting as if you know anything about me,” he fumed, his fists clenched on his sides.

“And Allistair,” she offered.

He gritted his teeth. “And Allistair.” *Damn it.* “Just stop it, Annabeth,” he sighed in frustration.

Marahang tumango ang babae. “Fine,” parang napipilitan lang na sabi nito. “So, hindi kayo in love sa isa’t isa? You’re not gay?”

“No,” matatag na sabi ni Brandon. He wanted to say more. He wanted to strangle her pretty little neck and then kiss her senseless... *Oh f*ck, what the hell?* Instead, he just quietly turned his back and walked away.

Narinig niyang nagkatawanan ang mga iniwan, at ang tunog ng pagha-high five ng mga ito. He may be one of those geeky types but he was not completely clueless. Ni hindi man lang nag-sorry si Annabeth, he shook his head. But even if she did, the damage has been done.

1

“Annabeth, you’re leaving already?”

Nilingon niya ang nagsalita, at napangiti nang makita ang isa sa mga officers ng homeowners association sa *Vista Heights* na si Mrs. Blesilda Tanaka. Katatapos lang ng ilang linggong training course nila para sa mga K9 units sa naturang village, kung saan karamihan ng nakatira ay mga politiko o business tycoons.

“Imi-meet ko po kasi ang friends ko, Ma’am—”

“Call me ‘Tita Bless’.” Humawak ito sa braso niya. “Friends? You’re not seeing a boyfriend?”

“Wala po akong boyfriend,” she winced.

“Oh, bulag ba ang mga lalaking nakakahalubilo mo?” takang tanong nito, pero nagliwanag ang mga mata. “You’re gorgeous, and you’re stunning when not in that horrid uniform you had on earlier.” Dinama pa nito ang tela ng loose, off-shoulder red and black blouse na kapartner ng coal grey shorts na suot niya.

“Uh, thank you po. Hindi naman po sa bulag, pero karamihan po kasi ng nakakahalubilo kong lalaki

ay may mga asawa na, o lalaki din ang gusto.”

Natawa ito. “Well, marami akong kakilala dito na may mga anak na binata. Ipipili kita ng guwapo, ha?” Pinisil pa nito ang braso niya.

Oh, God. Sa lahat ng ayaw niya ay iyong inirereto. Karamihan kasi ay sablay. But the old lady and the other homeowners had been nice to her and she didn’t have the heart to refuse. “Uhm... kayo po ang bahala.”

“Oh, this is going to be exciting. Teka, anong oras ba’ng usapan ninyo ng mga kaibigan mo? Magpapabalot muna ako ng mga pagkain para sa iyo. May request ka ba?”

Hindi na siya nag-isip. Masarap ang handa sa buffet early dinner na inihanda para sa team nila. “Yung barbecued pork belly strips po, ’yung potato wedges, at ’yung truffles po,” she sheepishly said.

“Great choices! O, siya, maghintay ka dito, ha?” Tinapik siya ng ginang sa kanyang braso bago ito bumalik sa loob ng clubhouse. Nasa gitna iyon ng village park kung saan din nila ginawa ang walong linggong training ng mga aso.

Nagpaalam na kanina sa mga kasama ang dalaga na mauuna dahil may usapan sila ng mga kaibigan na magkikita sa paborito nilang bar mamayang alas

nueve ng gabi.

Mag-a-alas siete pa lang, may oras pa para sumaglit sa bahay niya para iwan doon ang bag at mga pagkaing bibitbitin bago dumerecho sa *The Ardsley*, na walking distance lang naman sa apartment niya.

Inayos ni Annabeth ang dalang backpack bago yumuko at in-adjust ang strap ng tan wedge sandals niya nang may marinig siyang kaluskos, kasunod ang pamilyar na paghingal na parang malalagutan na ng hininga anytime at ang galit na ungol ng humahabol dito.

She was immediately on alert. She looked around as she walked toward the direction of the sounds until she saw about several meters from her a tall man being chased by a huge German Shepherd. *Shit!*

Tumakbo na rin siya kahit hirap sa suot na sapatos. Nawala ang dalawang nilalang sa paningin niya, pero patuloy siya sa pagtakbo at paghanap sa mga ito, hanggang sa makita niya ang lalaking nakadapa na sa madamong playground at tila naghahanap ng makakapitan o nagpipilit tumayo, habang ang aso ay kagat ito sa puwitan at tila gustong hilahin ang suot nito.

Parang gigil na gigil ang aso sa lalaki dahil halos

iwasiwas niyon ang ibabang bahagi ng katawan ng biktima na parang nanigas na sa puwesto nito.

Annabeth whistled a warning code they usually use for trained dogs. She cursed her three-inch wedges as she walked closer, her eyes fixed on the dog who now looked at her but still wouldn't let go of the man.

Nang makalapit ay saka niya nakumpirma ang identity ng aso. From the nearby lamp post, she saw his collar. Isa iyon sa mga miyembro ng security force ng village. "Loki, you bad boy. Stop that." Isinenyas niya ang mga kamay, dahilan para bitawan ng aso ang kagat niyon.

Na sinamantala naman agad ng lalaki. Kahit hirap ay bumangon ito, pero muling inatake ni Loki. Tumakbo ang pasaway ring biktima, na parang atat nang makalayo sa aso. Halatang natatakot ito.

"Don't run!" sigaw niya nang muli itong sumubok tumakbo.

"That f*cking dog is crazy!" he shouted back, and instead of running and perhaps thinking it was a good way to get rid of Loki, the man climbed the nearby mango tree.

Oh, my God! Nasamid siya sa pagpipigil ng tawa.

Lalo na nang makitang bago tuluyang nakaakyat ang lalaking hindi pa niya nabibistahan ang mukha dahil ni ayaw nitong lingunin ang aso ay nahila na ni Loki pahubad ang jersey shorts nito.

“F*ck! Damn it!” the man swore as his long legs kept climbing up even if he had to kick off his shorts and go up the tree in his grey boxer briefs.

Whoa, nice ass! She shamelessly ogled the man’s gorgeous backside and toned legs for a few seconds before turning her attention to Loki, who now stood in front of her, panting. Mukhang proud pa ang aso sa ginawa. “That wasn’t a nice thing to do, Loki.”

Binitwan lang ng aso ang kagat na shorts bago ito tumakbo. “Hey!” Hinabol niya ito pero sinalubong ang hayop ng dalawa sa mga roving guard. Sinabi niya sa mga ito na dalhin ang aso sa mga kasama niya sa clubhouse at ipa-check bago binalikan ang lalaki na noon ay nasa itaas pa rin ng puno.

“Hey, wala na si Loki. Puwede ka nang bumaba,” tawag niya.

Hindi ito nagsalita, pero ingat na bumaba naman ng puno. Agad niyang napansin ang panginginig ng mga binti nito habang maingat na bumababa. *Yikes, ang tindi siguro ng phobia nito sa aso!* His feet clad in

trainers were probably just a meter and a half from the ground when he slipped and fell. Butt first. *Shit, that ass!*

Huli na para saluhin niya ito, pero mabuti na lang din at damuhan ang kinabagsakan ng lalaki. Still, she knew that must hurt. Naupo siya sa tabi nito, na sapo ang likod at hindi pa makagalaw sa sakit.

“Hey, can you hear me?” She moved closer to check on the man’s face. Strong chin, prominent jawline, high cheekbones, straight nose, luscious lips, and eyes that were partly obscured by wire-rimmed glasses that miraculously didn’t break.

And that thick head of hair...

Oh, my God! Napatulala lang si Annabeth nang mas maayos na mapagmasdan ang mukha ng lalaking matindi ang takot sa aso. Everything about him now may look so strong and solid but as soon as he opened those eyes, something about those soulful baby browns just made him innocent forever.

Brandon Alfar. *You know, as in the supposedly gay Brandon Alfar?*

“Oh God, I’m dead, am I? And I am in hell, most likely?” he groaned as he closed his eyes again.

“Buhay ka pa.” Tinapik ni Annabeth ang braso nito nang maka-recover sa pagkagulat. “At paano mo naman nasabing nasa impyerno ka, if ever?”

Muli nitong idinilat ang mga mata. “Why? Because I’m seeing you right now, Annabeth. Saang lugar pa ba tayo puwedeng magkita?”

Oh-kay, I deserved that, she thought as she looked at the man still lying on the grass. Nakapikit ito habang inaayos ang salamin sa mata. Huminga siya nang malalim. “Okay, let me just reassure you that you are very much alive and much as I agree that I probably belong in hell—”

“Probably?” Tumaas ang isang kilay nito.

“Shut up! I just saved you, remember?”

“Loki was probably one of your minions.”

“Bagong miyembro po ng security force dito si Loki. At kung hinabol ka niya, malamang ay hindi ka kilala, at mukha kang kahina-hinala. O hindi gusto ang amoy mo.”

“Naligo ako bago mag-jog!” protesta nito.

Napangiti ang dalaga. Parang batang may

sumpong ang kausap niya. “Okay, fine. Mabango ka na, pero kate-train pa lang kasi sa grupo ni Loki at base sa nakita kong takot mo kanina—”

“Hindi ako takot.”

Tinampal niya ito sa dibdib. “Right, kaya pala wala kang pakialam kahit mahubaran makalayo ka lang sa kanya.”

Hindi kumibo si Brandon. Nagpatuloy siya, “Anyway, my conclusion is that he was just not familiar with you, at nakalingat siguro ’yung isa sa mga handler niyang guard kaya nahabol ka. Are you from here?”

Itinukod nito ang mga kamay sa lupa bago nagpilit bumangon. Napangiwi ito. “My parents live here, but I am in and out of the country for the past several years. I just got here a few days ago after being gone for almost two years, and I am not going to stay here for more than two weeks, anyway,” he rambled.

Hinawakan niya ito sa braso. “Come on.” Tinulungan niya itong makaupo man lang. Parang ayaw pa nitong magpahawak pero wala ring choice. “Napuruhan yata ang likod mo. Do you want me to call an ambulance? Kailangang ma-scan ka agad.”

“Ambulance?” he scoffed. Mukhang may sumpung talaga ang lalaking ito. “I can go to the hospital by myself.”

“FYI, likod mo ang naunang bumagsak. Before that, Loki practically feasted on your ass.” Umalalay siya kay Brandon nang ang pagtayo naman ang sinubukan nitong gawin. Namumutla na ito.

“My ass is fine, thank you very much,” he gasped as he tried to steady himself on his feet.

Napangisi siya. “Oh, yeah, your ass is fine, indeed.”

Napatingin ito sa kanya, naniningkit ang mga mata.

Wow, ang sungit! Natuluyan kaya ito sa pagkabeki? Pinasadahan niya ng tingin ang katawan ng kausap. He was trim and toned and his tummy was flat and she’s sure, his abs were as taut as his fine ass. “I got a good look.” Bababa sana nang tuluyan ang tingin ni Annabeth sa katawan nito, pero naalala niyang naka-boxers na lang si Brandon. Pinulot niya ang jersey shorts nitong punit na ang likod. “Ayan, isuot mo na, Winnie the Pooh,” she giggled. Pula kasi ang t-shirt nito.

Tiningnan lang siya nito nang masama bago

isinuot ang sirang shorts.

“Seriously, Brandon. Kailangan mong ipa-check ang likod mo,” wala na ang ngiting pahayag niya.

“I’ll manage.” Tinalikuran na siya nito na parang hindi makahintay na makalayo sa kanya. Hindi pa ito nakakasampung hakbang nang mapahinto, at nahawakan ang likod. Tahimik na kinuha ni Annabeth ang cellphone niya sa bulsa ng shorts at nag-dial ng number ng hospital.

“They will be here in ten minutes. Ihahatid kita sa harap nitong park dahil doon ko sinabing sunduin ka, then I will leave you alone. May lakad pa ako.” Hinawakan niya ito sa braso at inalalayang maglakad pababa sa main street. Tahimik lang si Brandon, na parang hindi pa rin gusto na kasama siya.

“You know, bahala ka kung hindi ka maka-move on sa ginawa ko dati. But I am not as bad as you think. This is not a way to prove that. Pero hindi ko rin basta iniiwan ang mga taong kailangan ng tulong ko, okay?”

He just snorted. She shook her head. And they silently walked into the early night as if nothing that happened ten years ago ever got between them.

2

“I’ll work on this at *The Lounge*. I’ll have them brought to you when I’m done.” Inilagay ni Brandon sa case ang laptop at kinuha ang ilang papeles na nasa malaking mesa sa home office ng kaibigang si Bentley. Naroon sina Kaiden at Allistair, na mga kasosyo rin sa café restaurant na secondhand book shop at gallery rin, na nagiging music bar pag gabi.

Dalawang taon pa lang na operational ang *The Lounge* ay isa na iyon sa itinuturing na ‘must visit’ places sa west area ng Quezon City.

Katatapos lang ng regular monthly meeting nila at naghati-hati na sa mga gagawing trabaho. Brandon was the public relations person of the group, managing their social media accounts and interacting with online inquiries.

Dahil malapit nang mag-September at mag-uumpisa na ang school year sa *Ackerton University* na college alma mater at number one source ng customers nila ay may mga promos sila at iyon ang gagawan niya ng ads ngayon. He was done brainstorming with his friends about what to do, now it’s time to work on the graphics. Hindi na siya magkakaoras dito

kapag weekdays dahil sa trabaho niya bilang isa sa mga bagong instructors at consultant ng Research Department ng *AU*. Those had been his real job in other *Ackerton* schools overseas for the past seven years.

“Bakit d’un pa? Puwede naman dito. Kung gusto mong mag-isa, you may have one of the rooms,” nangungunot ang noo na sabi ni Bentley.

Umiling siya. “I just need to take care of something there while working.”

“Something or someone?” Kaiden asked.

Brandon shook his head. “Something.” Wala siyang balak sabihin sa mga ito kung ano talaga ang dahilan. Tiyak na asar-talo siya. Mahina pa mandin siya sa asaran. He must have become too sensitive since that gay rumor fiasco back in college. That was hell.

None of the people who mattered in his life believed it, of course. But it became some sort of stigma. Ilang buwan na lang ang natitira bago siya mag-graduate sa *Ackerton* ay nabahiran pa ng intriga.

At naging dahilan din para kailanganin niyang isuko ang babaeng inakala niyang gusto niya talaga.

A Taste of Brandon - Sachi Bliss

Not worth it to be with someone who can't even trust what she know of him, or his words. There will always be something wedged between them if she allows herself to be bothered by mere speculations.

Those were his friends' words, which he took to heart.

Too bad, mukhang nakatakda yata siyang hindi makahanap ng *worth it*. Saanman siya magpunta nitong nakalipas na mga taon at sinuman ang makilala ay tiyak na may koneksyon somehow sa college days niya sa *Ackerton University*. Parang kahit walang komfirmasyon o kahit anong pagsasabi niya na walang katotohanan ang inaakala ng iba ay palagian na yatang mababahiran ng pagdududa ang pagkatao niya.

“Are you meeting someone, Brandon?” mataman ang tinging tanong ni Allistair.

Buntung-hininga lang ang sagot niya. He was nearly thirty-one, and yet he still felt like a naïve teenager whenever he was with his friends. Protective ang tatlo sa kanya, lalo na nang kumalat ang ispekulasyon tungkol sa kanila ni Allistair. It was actually more of a running joke on campus, but it still hurt his reputation.

“When did you meet her? Where? What’s her name?” sunud-sunod na tanong ni Bentley. Ito ang pinaka-babaero sa kanila, but much as he probably sleeps with anyone with a Y chromosome, his friend was still a good man. And as a friend, he would probably go to war to make sure he stays safe.

“Brandon...” untag nito.

*F*ck!* “I have to go.” May pagbabanta ang tingin niya sa mga kaibigan. “Walang susunod.” Pagkatapos ay muli siyang napailing. “It was... it was nothing, really. Just a favor for Tita Bless. You know how she is.”

“Holy shit! Blind date?” Namilog ang mga mata ni Kaiden.

“Damn, I can see why you can’t refuse. It’s Tita Bless,” natatawang sabi ni Bentley. Kilala ng tatlo ang makulit niyang tiyahin.

“Good luck, man.” Kahit ang usually ay seryosong si Allistair ay napangiti. First time na may isa sa kanila ang makikipag-blind date.

“Yeah, I’ll need it,” he winced. Kahit ayaw ay medyo kinakabahan siya. It’d been a year since he ever went out with anyone, and it didn’t turn out right, as it never did over the past years. Pakiramdam

niya, napakamalas niya pagdating sa babae.

“Kaya mo ’yan. Do you need back-up?” Bentley offered.

“Nah, ayos lang ako,” sabi niya kahit gusto nang sabihing Oo.

“Women are vicious, dangerous creatures. Sigurado kang ayaw mo kahit lookout? Promise, hindi kami magpapahalata,” Kaiden grinned

Natawa si Brandon. “Hindi, kakayanin ko ito.” *Damn it!* He was such a wimpy nerd. Why was he even worried? “You’ll probably hear about it later. If not from me, from the staff.” Nakangiting sumaludo siya sa mga kaibigan bago lumabas na. He felt a bit better. *It’s just a blind date!*

Pagbaba ng elevator sa ground floor ay dumaan siya sa side entrance ng *The Lounge*. Halos puno na ang café resto pero kaliligpit lang ng isang booth sa kanan na may maayos na view ng mga pumapasok sa main entrance. He wanted the corner booth but two girls were already there.

Pag-upo ay inayos ni Brandon ang mga dalang gamit sa mesa. Abala siya sa pagyuko sa may kababaang outlet, kaya hindi agad niya nabistahan nang may pumasok. He only knew that whoever it

was, wasn't his date dahil binati ito ng dalawang babaeng nasa likuran niya.

“I hate you! Bakit masyado kang maganda ngayon?”

“Paikli nang paikli ang damit mo, buwisit ka. Come here, sasapakin kita.”

From his position fixing his laptop cords under the table, he saw a pair of long, toned legs pass by. He wondered if any woman would ever exert effort to look so beautiful when they knew they're about to see him. He sighed. Kahit walang tiwala sa konsepto ng blind dates ay umaasa pa rin siyang sana ay matino ang inirereto ni Tita Bless.

“Seems like one of us is going out with that hottie Bentley soon,” sabi ng isa sa mga babaeng nasa likuran niya.

“No way!” protesta ng isa pa, na parang pamilyar sa kanya. “Sino sa inyong dalawa ang tatadyakan ko?”

Nagkatawanan lang ang tatlo. “Ang bagong lipat,” saad muli ng naunang nagsalita. “Kung alam ko lang na sirang tubo lang pala ang solusyon, eh, di sana winasak ko din 'yung linya sa compound namin.”

And then another voice began detailing how

things happened. Hindi mapigilang mapangiti ni Brandon sa diskarte ni Bentley.

“And Kaiden? You’re also going out with him?”

Napaderecho siya ng upo. Whoa, involved din pala ang makulit na pinsan ni Bentley.

“Yeah,” resigned na sagot ng bagong date ni Bentley. “He asked, right in front of Bentley, at ayoko namang maging assuming o feeling. Besides, it is just a date. I am supposed to escort him to some company event. Hindi ko pa nga alam ang details,” she sighed. “Not that I care that much. But... my God! Bentley, though. You should have seen him with his wet shirt clinging to his skin.”

All three girls giggled. Brandon wasn’t sure he should be hearing these. Pero kahit hindi kalakasan ang boses ng tatlo ay matalas naman ang pandinig niya. Nasasagap niya ang lahat.

“Details after, okay?” sabi muli ng pamilyar na boses. “Like, everything. Para alam namin kung sakaling next na kami.”

“Right! As if makaka-next tayo.”

“Duh, first date pa lang naman ito. Sa isang book launch pa. Maraming tao. Paano mapagsasamantalahan

ni Marion si Bentley?”

Laughter again. Napapangiwi na si Brandon sa kinauupuan. Sure, he'd had locker room conversations with friends, but he never realized women could also be this... uhm... ano nga ba ang tawag dito? Naiilang siya na di mawari. Pinilit niyang itutok sa trabaho ang atensyon. Nag-text na siya kay Tita Bless tungkol sa date niya. Still thirty minutes to go before they're supposed to meet, anyway.

“Huy, di ko gagan'unin si Bentley sa book launch, 'no! Grabe kayo,” he heard. “Well, maybe I will pull him to a corner or a rest room and have my way there.”

Tawanan uli. Iginala niya ang tingin sa ibang mga naroon para i-check kung may ibang nakakarinig sa tatlong babaeng nasa likuran niya pero parang busy ang lahat. It felt weird to hear women talk about his friend like this.

“He's so hot I would probably do the same.”

“Yeah, me too. Grabe, bakit ba sabay-sabay tayong nagka-crush sa isang iyon?”

“The man is cool, why else? And hot at the same time. Rawrr.”

“Yeah, pero seryoso. Buti na lang break na sila n’ung gagang Jennidy na ’yun. Sumobra sa pagka-user ang gaga. Pinagseselos lang pala ang ka-love team para pansinin siya, ’kainis!” Gigil na humampas pa sa mesa ang may-ari ng pamilyar na boses.

“Maybe Bentley doesn’t really give a shit, but I feel bad someone had to use him like that.”

“Para pa namang medyo lie low na siya sa paglandi ngayon.”

“Do you think he was that serious about Jennidy?”

“Not serious. Pero baka naman nakapag-isip-isip siya. I mean, six months is six months.”

“Kahit naman siguro maloko gaya niya, syempre darating din sa point na gusto na niya ng permanence. I wouldn’t know how the dude must feel, pero nakakapagod na din sigurong maglaro.”

“Oh, my God, Marion! You lucky bitch! What if ikaw na ’yung ‘the one’ ni Bentley?” the woman with the familiar voice exclaimed. “Damn it! Ano kaya ang puwede kong wasakin dito sa *Ardsley* para makatisod ako ng gaya niya?”

“Gosh, Annabeth! Kahit wala kang wasakin, pinipilahan ka ng boys, ’no!”

Oh, shit! He knew it! Wala pang dalawang linggo simula noong engkuwentro nila ng siraulong babaeng pinagtripan ang reputasyon niya noong college, at umasa siyang sana ay hindi na iyon maulit. He didn't want to have anything to do with her anymore. He felt bad enough that she sort of saved his life.

Takot talaga sa aso si Brandon. Wala namang rabies ang mga nakakagat sa kanya noong bata siya, pero nakatatak na yata sa isip niya ang nakakatakot na itsura ng mga ito na parang balak talaga siyang lapain. Two weeks ago, he thought he'd die not because of a dog bite but most likely of a heart attack. He was that scared.

And that's why people assume you're not who you really are, idiot.

He sighed. There's no sense beating himself up over it. He's not completely weak. He wouldn't even call himself a coward. He's secure and confident about his sexuality, but his ego was bruised.

Umilaw ang cellphone niya, tanda na may bagong message. It was from Tita Bless telling him about his blind date.

She said she's wearing an off white button down shirt and black floral skirt. You'll recognize her easily,

sweetie. Curly hair, round sparkly eyes. Pouty lips. She's gorgeous. Bagay kayo. ;)

Ilang sandaling nakatitig siya sa screen ng phone at iniisip kung bakit pamilyar ang description na iyon.

“Wala pa ba ’yung sinasabi mong imi-meet mo ngayon?”

“Wait, I think our matchmaker just texted,” he heard Annabeth wryly said. “Ooh, listen girls. Paki-activate na ’yang bionic visions ninyo. Tita Bless says...”

*Damn it! There is no f*cking way she... how...?* Parang biglang sumakit ang ulo ni Brandon sa naririnig ngayon.

“.. exactly six feet tall. A bit lanky, wears glasses, and very very handsome. He’s wearing a grey shirt and jeans. He always has a few curls falling on his forehead. He’s so cute.” Annabeth giggled. “Hmm... hindi naman siguro ako lolokohin ni Tita Bless. Sabi niya, pamangkin daw niya ito and judging from how she looks—she is beautiful, by the way—siguro naman hindi siya nag-e-exaggerate.”

Napahinga nang malalim ang binata. So, that crazy Annabeth Reyes was really his date? Paano at bakit siya pinarurusahan nang ganito? Wala siyang

maalalang kasalanan kay Tita Bless maliban na lang noong ma-late siya ng dating sa birthday nito five years ago!

Ini-off niya ang laptop. Wala na ang focus niya sa ginagawa.

“So, where is he?” tanong ng isa sa mga kaibigan ni Annabeth.

“Baka parating pa lang, pero...” she paused. “Aba, ten minutes after four na pala. Late na siya!”

Shit, I hate being late! But... he sighed. Hindi siya sigurado kung magpapakita ba sa ‘date’ niya. What would she think? Her reaction? Did he care? But his date was Annabeth Reyes! Kulot na salot extraordinaire and literally. *Damn...*

“Sana alam ng lalaking iyon na diyosa ang pinaghihintay niya,” dagdag ng isa pang kasama ni Annabeth. “Nag-effort ka pa, Teh! Late naman. O baka walang balak sumipot.”

“Okay lang, nandito naman kayo. I couldn’t blame him, though. Blind dates are risky. Pumayag lang naman ako kay Tita Bless because she is very nice and sweet. Siya’yung gumawa n’ung dala kong food from the party sa clubhouse pagkatapos ng training sa village nila.”

“Oh, my God, those are so good! Kung sabay man itong date mo, at least, may nakilala kang kasing-sarap magluto ni Tita Bless.”

“Oh, yeah...” Annabeth sighed. “Four fifteen. Wala na siguro iyon.”

“Men! Kung sino man ang lalaking iyon, hindi mo deserve ang gan’un kaduwag. I know these things are dubious but he could have at least shown his face, or sent a message to Tita Bless that he can’t make it.”

“Hayaan n’yo na, gan’un talaga.”

Brandon felt like squirming in his seat. Hindi naman sa ayaw niya o duwag siya pero... this was Annabeth Reyes! Hindi niya alam kung ano ang nararamdaman. Pagdating sa babaeng gumulo sa reputasyon niya, parang wala na lang siyang pakialam. Paano niya ito haharapin? It just didn’t feel right.

Ini-off na lang muna niya ang cellphone. Parang hindi niya kayang sagutin kung kukulitin siya ngayon ni Tita Bless tungkol sa date niya. Muli niyang binuksan ang laptop at nakipagtitigan sa gagawing trabaho habang inuubos ang strawberry iced tea.

“Sir! Sir Brandon!” narinig niyang tawag sa kanya. Napalingon siya sa counter, on his one o’clock.

It was their manager Armi, na bukod sa inaalalayang trainee sa cash register ay may inaayos ding tray habang hawak nito ang landline phone na naka-attach sa dingding.

*F*ck it!* He had no choice. Kailangan niyang tumayo, at maglakad papunta sa counter and in doing so, he'd risk being seen by the ladies in the next booth. Habang patayo ay napansin na niya ang pananahimik ng tatlo, at marahil ng buong café habang naglalakad siya.

He felt pinprickles on his nape, that unmistakable feeling of being watched. He took a deep breath, and nearly choked when he heard someone—Annabeth say: “That ass is so fine.”

Bumilis tuloy ang lakad niya, at sa isang iglap ay nasa counter na at hawak ang phone, kausap si Bentley na may kinlaro lang tungkol sa ilang naging problema sa official website nila. Wala pang limang minuto ang usapan nila, pero nang ibaba niya ang phone, pakiramdam niya ay nag-shift ang panahon at taon na ang nagdaan.

Parang robot si Brandon habang naglalakad pabalik sa booth. Tila blurred ang mga imahe sa utak niya, at hindi niya alam kung ano ang nangyayari. Why was he so nervous, and so out of it, anyway?

He absently rubbed his temple as he went back to his seat, and noticed that the girls occupying the next booth were gone. Lumington siya sa counter at nakitang naroon ang dalawa sa mga ito. Annabeth must have left... or not.

He stopped in his tracks as his eyes locked with the woman sitting prettily in his booth. She played with the straw of her drink in a tall glass as a playful smile tugged at her lips.

“Tita Bless wasn’t lying,” medyo malakas na sabi nito na sinundan pa ng wolf whistle, dahilan para magsilong ang ibang naroon.

Nanlalaki ang mga matang inisang hakbang na niya papunta sa booth at naupo sa tapat nito. “Do you really have this evil compulsion to put people on the spot?” he said between gritted teeth.

Napakurap ito bago inilapit ang mukha sa kanya at bumulong. “Oh, sorry,” she grinned, then she held out her hand. “Hi, I’m Annabeth.” Pinapungay pa nito ang mga mata. “Guess you’re my *very handsome* date?”

3

What was I thinking in college when I actually thought Brandon Alfar was into his best friend? Wala nang pakialam si Annabeth kung mahalata man ni Brandon ngayon kung gaano siyang namamangha rito. Hindi puwedeng hindi ito tingnan ng kahit na sinong may pusong babae.

Saglit siyang tumingin sa dalawang kaibigang nasa counter na parehong nakatingin sa gawi nila. Sabay pang nag-thumbs-up ang mga ito. She winked, then turned to Brandon who now looked at her sulkily.

“Are we done shaking hands now?” iritadong tanong nito.

Noon niya napansing hawak pa rin pala niya ang kamay nito. “We’re probabaly done, but you’re not exactly pulling away, either,” she smirked.

He blushed. Gusto na niyang dumukwang sa mesa at hagkan ito. His sexy lips pursed as he pulled his hand but she didn’t let go. “Annabeth,” he sighed.

“Yes, Brandon?” malanding sagot niya.

Nagsalubong ang mga kilay nito. “My hand.”

Kumurap siya bago kunwa ay noon lang napansin na hawak pa rin niya ang kamay nito. “Oh, sorry.” Alinlangang bumitaw siya, pero hindi inalis ang tingin sa binata.

Yung mga beki, nararamdaman ko, eh. Naaamoy kahit Jo Malone ang perfume nila. Nakikita kahit gaano kaastig ang porma. Brandon, though, wore this too simple, rather generic outfit and yet he still managed to tell the entire freaking world that he’s got an inner caveman lurking within. He’s not afraid to show emotions on his face and yet his eyes alone show strength and masculinity. How is that possible? How could I be so stupid?

“So... uhm...” *And he has rendered me somehow speechless, too!* “So, your Tita Bless wants us to meet... date.”

He snorted. “Yeah, do you want to leave now?”

Umangat ang isang kilay niya. “Ngayon lang tayo nagkita.”

He eyed her intently. “We knew each other before, and from what I remember, you did not like me very much. Enough to speculate and spread false information about me.”

Touché. “Ang tagal na niyan, Brandon. I was young and stupid.”

Napailing ito bago dumerecho ng upo at walang kibong minasdan lang siya.

Hindi basta natitinag ang dalaga, pero kung tingnan siya ngayon ni Brandon ay parang gusto nitong pasunurin siya sa lahat ng gusto nito. “Fine.” Itinaas niya ang dalawang kamay. “Do you want me to apologize?”

He just kept staring at her.

“I’m sorry, okay? For the record, wala akong ipinagkalat na maling impormasyon tungkol sa iyo. I merely asked questions.”

“Questions that aroused suspicion, that shouldn’t even exist in the first place,” he pointed out. “Alam mo kung paano kumakalat ang chismis. Nag-uumpisa sa isang simple at inosenteng tanong, at nag-e-evolve sa isang kasinungalingang madalas ay mahirap nang patunayang mali pala.”

What had I done? “I’m sorry, Brandon.”

He sighed. “It won’t make any difference now, Annabeth.” He averted his gaze.

Hindi niya alam kung ano ang sasabihin, kung

ano ang kahulugan ng sinabi nito. Ganoon ba kalaki ang epekto ng ginawa niya noon? Nasira ba niya ang buhay nito? For someone who looked this... delicious, was he still really single now that his aunt had to set him up on a blind date?

Is he... Nasapo niya ang bibig. Is he really gay now, for real? OMG!

Pero imposible! Medyo pinong kumilos si Brandon pero lalaking-lalaki pa rin ito. Wala siyang makitang katiting na hint man lang na pareho sila ng gusto.

He even had scruff on his face now and he looked so damn sexy with it. Clean, close cropped hair and just enough shadow to make him look just a little bit dangerous.

And he had a scar on his left arm that he didn't seem to mind showing. Kanina nang hawak niya ang kamay nito, magaspang iyon. Maugat din ang mga braso nitong gusto niyang i-trace ng dulo ng kanyang mga daliri habang hindi niya inaalís ang tingin sa mukha nito.

God, Brandon! Tell me you're not into men, please.

“Uhm... what do you mean it won't make any difference now?” hindi nakatiis na tanong ng dalaga.

Hindi pa rin siya tiningnan ni Brandon. Sa halip ay kinuha nito ang malaking baso ng inumin na pulos yelo na lang ang laman, at sinimulang i-trace ng dulo ng kanang hintuturo nito ang rim niyon. Mabagal. Paulit-ulit. She was temporarily mesmerized by what he was doing that she barely heard what he said.

“... and people are beginning to get worried. My family, close friends...”

“What? Ano ’yung sinabi mo? Sorry.” She bit her lip.

A corner of his lips turned up. “Hindi ko na kasalanan kung hindi ka nakikinig, and anyway, it’s not like you can still change things.”

“Change things... what?” Now she’s confused.

“You’re not supposed to care, aren’t you? You never did back in *Ackerton*,” he said, ironically. Kinuha nito ang cellphone sa bulsa at may tiningnan doon.

Tumunog din ang message alert ng cellphone ni Annabeth. Napapabuntung- hiningang binasa muna niya iyon. Galing kay Tita Bless: *How are you and your handsome date?* It was sent five minutes ago. Magre-reply sana siya nang biglang may pumasok uling message galing pa rin sa ‘matchmaker’ nila. *Brandon just said you’re getting along really well. I*

guess we'll see you two on our anniversary party next weekend?

Napaangat siya ng tingin, derecho kay Brandon na abala pa rin sa cellphone nito.

“Nag-text si Tita Bless,” sabi niya.

“Yep, we’re invited to their anniversary party,” kaswal na sagot nito, na parang walang tensyong namagitan sa kanila kanina lang.

“You said we’re going? And I thought you didn’t even want to be here.”

He smiled knowingly. “That doesn’t mean I couldn’t take advantage of it.”

“Hindi pa ako pumapayag,” protesta niya, na parang hindi rin. *Gosh, Annabeth, get your shit together!*

“Wala ka na rin namang choice. Inaasahan na tayo ni Tita,” smug na pahayag nito.

“You have no right—” Natigilan siya nang makita ang pag-angat ng isang kilay ng kaharap.

“I should have said the same years ago,” mahinang sabi nito.

Napabuga siya ng hangin. “I saved your life

weeks ago, Brandon. Quits na tayong.”

“Oh, yes. Thank you for that but that was nothing compared to what you did before,” he sarcastically said, but there was a twinkle in his eyes.

Hindi na alam ni Annabeth kung ano ang kanyang sasabihin. “Hindi pa ako nagre-reply kay Tita Bless ng kahit na ano.”

“I already did that on your behalf,” he smugly said.

“I was not exactly obliged to do more than this date, right?”

“Now you are. You have to.” His face turned serious. “Please, I just... need you to help me so my family can leave me in peace for awhile. Ayoko lang madagdagan pa ang mga pagdududa nila.” Napayuko ito.

OMG, so is he... really? Now? Why?

Gusto niyang itanong iyon, pero insensitive naman at sa ikinikilos ngayon ni Brandon, parang hindi na kailangan. Again, why?

May boyfriend kaya ito? Sino? Si Allistair pa rin kaya? OMG!

“Fine,” sabi niya, sabay tapik sa braso nito. “I’ll go with you.”

Ilang segundong nakatitig lang sa kanya ang lalaki bago ito napatango.

“Pero may kapalit.”

He arched a brow again.

“Bentley. I really like him.”

He smirked. Parang gusto niya itong sabunutan. Medyo pang-asar ang tingin nito.

“Pag-iisipan ko pa kung ano talaga ang gusto kong mangyari. Pero ikaw...” Dinutdot niya ang braso nito. “You can’t keep doing this, man. You will have to... come clean sometime. Right?”

A mysterious smile spread across his face. “Right.”

“Ano’ng nangyayari sa iyo, Carlotta?” takang tanong ni Annabeth sa kanyang receptionist na hindi mapakali sa pinto ng grooming area kung saan abala siya sa bagong groom na Chow-chow. “Are you okay, Carlotta?” tanong uli niya habang nilalagyan ng harness ang aso na ibo-blow dry naman niya ang bagong trim at bagong kulay na balahibo.

“Ate, guwapo overload.” Parang mahahati na ang mukha ni Carlotta sa ngiti nito. “Magpapa-member daw. Dalawa sila, ’Teh! Ang sasama nila, bakit sila nagsabay? Hindi ko tuloy alam kung sino ang titingnan ko,” kunwa ay maiiyak pang sabi nito.

“Gaga ka! S’abi ko na nga ba kalandian na naman ’yan! Doon ka na sa labas. Bigyan mo ng forms at welcome kit. Alis na at naliligalig sa iyo si Daenerys,” pagtataboy niya sa babae bago muling hinarap ang aso na masama ang tingin sa receptionist niya.

“Ate, kailangan ka sa labas. Kilala ka daw nila. Gusto kang makita,” namimilipit pa ring sabi ni Carlotta.

Nangunot ang noo niya. “What? Sure kang hindi holdupper ang mga iyon ha?”

“Ate naman, may holdupper bang naka-*Audi*?”

Holy shit! Bigatin! “Hindi kaya mga abogado ng *BIR* ’yan? Wala tayong problema sa taxes pero malay mo...”

“Annabeth, puwede bang labasin mo na lang sila at hindi talaga type ng mga aso ang ingay niyang kilig ni Carlotta!” hindi na nakatiis na sabi ng isa sa mga naggu-groom at partners niya sa pet training and grooming business nila, ang pinsang si Kurt,

na nagiging Courtney kapag sumasali sa beauty pageants.

Nakangusong ipinasa niya rito si Daenerys bago naghugas ng kamay at nag-spray ng cologne. Inaalis pa niya sa pagkakatali ang halos hanggang balik na kulot na buhok at nakayuko habang nakasunod kay Carlotta. As soon as she stepped into the reception area, she was greeted with the familiar slightly musky, a bit citrusy scent that she first got a whiff of a few weeks ago.

*Brandon Alfar and... Oh. My. God. Is that Allistair Sandoval standing in the middle of the room, looking like some f*cking royalty?* Brandon just looked like the geekier version of a prince but still... may dahilan para halos mabaliw ang receptionist niya.

Ang dalawang teenager at dalawang forty-something na nanay na naghihintay sa mga alaga ay nakatingin din sa dalawa. They all looked like they need to pick their jaws off the floor.

“Nirekomenda ito ni Doctor Tanya,” tukoy ni Brandon sa head vet ng isang animal shelter sa kabilang baranggay. “We really just wanted a new soap or shampoo for her. May problema na kasi sa dating ginagamit niya since she was a kitty.”

Kitty? Did he just say 'kitty'?

Noon napansin ni Annabeth na may hawak itong gray na pusa, na mukhang maliit na tigre. Panay ang kiskis nito ng mukha sa dibdib ni Brandon.

I feel you, Kitty. “She’s yours?” nagawa niyang itanong.

“Mine. Picked him up as a poor little stray outside the university, a year ago,” sagot ni Allistair. Parang gusto niyang maghanap ng makakapitan nang marinig ang boses nito. Malalim at buong-buo. Humahagod sa kalamnan. Parang narinig pa niya ang impit na tili ni Carlotta.

“Her name is Anastasia,” patuloy ni Allistair bago nito iniabot ang kamay sa kanya. “Allistair. Brandon told me about you.” Sumulyap ito sa kaibigan at tila may kung anong nagdaan sa pagitan ng mga ito. Annabeth fancied feeling that whatever that was, it’s somewhat electrifying.

“Annabeth,” she croaked as she shook his hand. Long fingers and sinewy arms. What was with these men and their arms? “I’m... uh...” Nagpalipat-lipat ang tingin niya sa dalawa na saglit muling nagkatinginan. She suddenly felt hot.

May something ba talaga sa dalawang ito? Bakit?

“He knows about... us,” mahinang sabi ni Brandon, nakangiti. “Don’t worry.”

Napakurap siya. “About... us?”

“*Der wath neber an uth!*” sabat ni Carlotta sa likuran niya, dahilan para matawa ang mga nanay at teenager na kanina pa rin sila pinapanood.

“Sorry.. uhm...” bumuntung-hininga siya. “Sorry, medyo... naninibago pa kasi ako.” Gosh, pero hindi naman sila ni Brandon! They would just have to pretend to be together for Tita Bless and his family! Tutulungan lang niya ito dahil alangan namang si Allistair ang dalhin nitong date sa anniversary party?

Napatingin muli siya kay Allistair. Napalunok siya. Bakit parang may pagbabanta na ewan sa tingin nito? Nagseselos kaya?

“Annabeth, boyfriend mo ’yan?” hindi na nakatiis na tanong ng isa sa mga nanay.

“Ate Annabeth, does he have a brother?” sabi naman ng isa sa mga teener.

“Ate, paanong nangyaring nagka-boyfriend ka nang hindi namin nalalaman? Puro aso lang ang kasama mo lagi. Saan mo siya nadampot?”

Nilingon niya si Carlotta at tinaasan ng kilay.

“FYI, dahil sa aso kaya kami nagkaroon ng something ni Brandon.” She turned to the man in question. “Right, babe?”

Nawala ang ngiti nito, pero agad ding bumawi nang hagipin siya sa braso at ipasa nito kay Allistair si Anastasia. He then pulled her closer, then lowered his face to hers. “Yes, babe,” he whispered right next to ear.

Annabeth shivered. Her heart did a somersault. Her throat went dry.

“Anyway...” Allistair cleared his throat as he looked at them with a slightly arched brow before turning his attention to Carlotta. “You were saying something about forms earlier? Do you need our IDs?”

Ilang segundong natulala muna ang receptionist niya bago nito binigyan ng forms si Allistair at in-assist ito sa pag-fill out habang hawak pa rin ang pusa.

Habang si Brandon naman ay hindi pa rin siya binibitawan, at matamang nakatingin sa kanya. “Are you worried, Annabeth?” he quietly asked, but there was challenge in his voice.

“N-no.” Was it just her or did he really lean

closer? Whatever happened to the geeky, timid guy back in college? “Fine, maybe a bit worried.”

He looked at her expectantly.

“About you,” mahinang sabi niya. Hindi na niya kailangan ng kumpirmasyon. The evidence was right under her nose. “Are you sure you and he...” she furtively looked at Allistair, “...are okay about this?”

Again, that mysterious smile, and a nod. “If I were you, Annabeth, I wouldn’t worry one bit.”