

PROLOGUE

She was the only reason why he stepped into that coffee shop even if he hated the coffee there. Staying there, hopefully longer if she would allow it, was what made him buy a large cup of some cold, tea-based drink topped with whipped cream and caramel syrup. Mukhang masarap iyong herbed bread at cheesecake na nakita niya sa glass display sa counter, kaya bumili na rin siya niyon. Bitbit ang tray at habang kinakalma ang sarili ay naglakad siya papunta sa pandalawahang mesa sa sulok.

He cleared his throat when he was a few steps away before he finally found his voice as he willed for her to look up. Nakayuko kasi ito sa kung anong binabasa sa screen ng netbook nito. “Is this seat taken?” he managed to say, grateful that his lightly scratchy baritone didn’t crack.

Ilang sandaling natigilan ang babae bago tila slow motion na nag-angat ng tingin. Ilang segundo pa itong nag-isip pagkatapos ay marahang umiling. “No. You may have it.” Bahagyang ngumiti ito.

He smiled as he lowered his tray on the table and sat opposite her. “Thanks, Marion.”

Umangat ang isang kilay nito, halatang hindi inasahan na tinawag niya sa pangalan sa halip na 'Miss Cuevas'. "You're welcome, Kaiden."

"Kai na lang," he grinned. The pretty Miss Marion Cuevas had been a teaching assistant for two of his senior year subjects for the past two terms. She almost always was just either observing, working the projector during presentations, occasionally participating in discussions or helping with consultations after class, but she was difficult to miss.

It must be those big almond eyes, her sexy lips, her slender built that was evident even through her slightly androgynous clothes, or that husky alto that often had him mesmerized. First day pa lang ng klase nila sa Income Taxation, at unang beses pa lang niyang narinig ang boses ng dalaga, alam niyang complete attendance na siya sa subject nito.

"Dapat 'yung inorder mo 'yung club sandwich o 'yung chicken pot pasta nila. Malaki ang serving." She nodded at his tray. "Gutom ka, 'no? I'm surprised you picked this place."

Hindi siya gutom. Wala pang isang oras mula nang maghiwalay sila ng mga kabarkada niya matapos ang masagana at masayang tanghalian sa isang buffet restaurant sa second floor ng mall na

iyon. It was to celebrate the last day of their final exams. Isang term na lang at ga-graduate na sila. Too bad, he wouldn't see her again next term because she wouldn't be assisting anymore to focus on her post-graduate thesis.

Unless... pambibitin ng isip niya.

"I picked this place because I saw you," he bravely said before sipping from his foamy drink. Ugh, he didn't like the taste.

Lalong tumaas ang isang kilay ng babae. "You... uh... may kailangan ka ba?" maingat na tanong nito.

Minasdan lang ito ni Kaiden bilang sagot. Marion had always been nice to him. Aminado siyang may kakulitan siya at hindi niya pinapalampas ang bawat meeting na hindi siya nagpapapansin dito. She was pretty tolerant, and very, very patient. She was smart and funny, too. Ang pinakagusto niya rito ay kung paanong tila wala itong pakialam kahit naririnig nito ang panlalalit ng mga kaklase niyang babae na tila inis dito.

Palagi lang itong nakangiti, hindi natitinag. If she could put up with shit like that, well... she was a keeper.

And he had always wanted her.

“Yes,” he absently said.

“Yes, what?” Nangunot ang noo ng kaharap niya.

“Yes, may...” Damn, paano ba niya sasabihin? Ngayon lang nangyari sa kanya ito. Hindi siya sanay. Most of his life was just Math and baseball. He had crushes on girls and had summer flings, but he never really actively pursued anyone. Things just happened, and ended. “May kailangan ako.” *Oh, man...*

Napaderecho ng upo si Marion. Gumalaw-galaw ang mga daliri nito sa ibabaw ng trackpad at keys ng netbook hanggang sa isara nito iyon bago siya matamang minasdan, all business now.

Lihim na napamura ang binata.

“Ano iyon? Nagkaproblema ka ba sa subject mo? Far as I know, you’re still a candidate for *magna cum laude*,” she said, a hint of admiration in her eyes.

That gave him hope, somehow. Narinig na niya kay Marion minsan na bilib ito sa mga estudyanteng kahit mayaman na ay pursigido pa rin sa pag-aaral dahil hindi sinasayang ang oportunidad na ipinagkaloob sa mga ito.

“Kaiden?” untag nito.

“Kai,” pagtatama niya.

“Kaiden,” she insisted. “Why are you here? I mean, what do you want to—”

“You,” he finally said. *Napabuga siya ng hangin.* “You are why I am here.”

Napakurap ito. “Excuse me?”

“I want to know more about you.” He boldly reached for her hand that lay on top of the netbook. “I really like you, Marion.”

Nanlaki na ang karaniwan ay parang inaantok lagi na mga mata nito. Her creamy skin also turned deep pink. Her mouth was slightly open, as if in shock.

Damn, don't do that, Marion.

“Are you serious?” sa wakas ay naitanong nito bago kinuha ang inumin at halos inisang lagok iyon.

“Since day one,” pagtatapat niya.

“Kaiden...” she sighed. Pero hindi nito binawi ang kamay mula sa pagkakahawak niya.

“Yes?” Heart-shaped na siguro ang mga mata niya habang nakatitig dito.

“No.” Umiling ito. “No, I am sorry.”

“No... no to what?” litong tanong niya.

“I am saying *No* to you,” prangkang pahayag nito.

He blinked. *No*? “B-but why?” Was that his voice or his heart that broke? Hindi niya alam. Ngayon lang niya ito naramdaman. He really wanted this woman.

She sighed. “I am twenty-three, Kaiden.”

“I am twenty and five months.” Pinisil niya ang kamay nito. “I am not exactly a minor. I don’t look twenty, either. While you... you look eighteen.”

Marion laughed shakily as her blush deepened. “Hindi pa rin mababago niyon na mas matanda ako. At estudyante kita.”

“Not anymore,” giit niya.

“My answer is still no, Kaiden,” ulit nito.

“You don’t have a boyfriend. You also said you’re not even into anyone right now.” Ayaw niyang sumuko. “We can just try going out, see each other regularly, Marion. No pressure. I just want this chance to be with you.”

Umiling itong muli. “I’m sorry. I’m really not interested to have anything with anyone right now.”

“Puwede akong maghintay,” halos pakiusap na niya.

Minasdan siya ni Marion. She looked conflicted as if she was torn between standing up to leave him and saying *Yes*. Pero iling muli ang ginawa nito. “Not going to change my mind, Kaiden.” Sa wakas ay binawi nito ang kamay. “I’m really sorry.” She bit her lip, then began putting her netbook into a nylon case then into her pink backpack.

“One day, Marion?” he pleaded for the last time.

Ilang sandaling minasdan siya ng babae bago napailing habang isinusukbit ang backpack sa balikat nito. “I should go.” Tumayo na ito at nang daanan siya ay inilapat ang kamay sa kanyang balikat.

Kaiden caught her hand and kissed the back of her fingers, making her gasp and retrieve it quickly as if burned. Their eyes locked, and he immediately felt that pull, that invisible force that seemed to exist between them the first time they stood close a few weeks after their first meeting.

Alam niyang naramdaman din iyon ni Marion, at huli na para mag-iwas ito ng tingin. “Bye, Kaiden. Ingat.” Dere-derecho na ito sa pinto ng coffee shop. Hindi na niya ito hinabol. Sapat na sa kanya ang nakumpirma sa mga mata nito.

She should have said *Yes*.

1

“Kung hindi lang inconvenient sa pinapasukan ko, magbo-board ako sa iyo. Kahit sa sala ako matulog, basta may easy access lang sa maraming guwapo... at mayaman!” Krys giggled as she played with the remaining ice on her drink.

Marion felt too tired, and not really amused by her comment so she just raised her beer mug to her lips and drank all the remaining contents in one go. Kanina pa niya gustong umakyat sa bagong flat niya sa tenth floor, kaya lang ay nagyaya pang uminom ang dating roommate na si Krys na dumayo pa mula Pasig para usyosohin ang bagong condo unit niya.

“At in fairness, ang galing mong pumili!” Tumingin ito sa direksyon ng bar kung saan kausap ng may-ari ng lugar na iyon ang isang grupo ng guests. “That Bentley dude is so dreamy. Ang engot ng ex niya para ipagpalit siya sa isang chakang congressman. Eww!” tila diring-diri na sabi nito bago nangalumbaba. “But you go get him, girl! Baka destiny mo talaga siya since nanalo ka ng condo dito,” she grinned.

Napailing siya. She should be disgusted with Bentley McNamara who was known to bed nearly

every woman who smiled at him. Pero sa dalawang beses niya itong nakaengkuwentro ay nagbago ang tingin niya sa lalaki. Una ay nang tumayo ito mula sa kinauupuan at ibinigay sa kaibigan niyang seven months pregnant na sinamahan niyang magbayad sa *Meralco*, at pangalawa ay nang makita niyang sa halip na dumerecho sa sasakyan nitong naka-park sa gilid ng isang high-rise building sa Ortigas ay nilapitan muna nito ang mag-asawang matanda na mabagal maglakad at tinulungan ang mga iyon na makatawid.

The dude wasn't so bad, she thought. Familyar lang naman sa kanya si Bentley dahil boss ito ng isa sa mga kaibigan niya na si Armida. Pero kahit parang isang bacteria ang tingin dito ng babae ay tila lalo pang tumitindi ang curiosity niya. She wanted to know more about him, and moving into this mid-rise apartment complex where he owned a couple of businesses and a flat in one of the buildings provided a great opportunity.

“Hoy, nawala ka na!” Iwinagayway ni Krys ang mga daliri sa harap niya. “Kilala ka ba niya?”

Marion blinked. “Yeah, yeah. We've been introduced. Friend ko 'yung bartender at supervisor niya.”

“And how was it?” Nagningning ang mga mata

ng kasama niya. Dapat pala ay sinabi niyang hindi pa sila pormal na naipapakilala. She really wanted to go and get that rest.

“He was nice.” Very nice, in fact. Bentley’s hazel green eyes roamed over her and he smiled appreciatively. Hindi nawala ang ngiti ng lalaki hanggang kailangan nang magpaalam dahil nag-ring ang cellphone nito. They talked for about five minutes, with Armi beside them making faces. And that was it. That was two weeks ago, actually. She’d love another chance but not tonight.

“Nice lang? Come on, kuwento ka naman.” Napanguso si Krys.

Napailing ang dalaga. “He’s got a nice geeky, goofy smile. He has a sexy voice. His eyes twinkle, you know, like someone who seems to really enjoy and love life. He asked a lot of questions. Mukhang genuine naman ’yung interest niya. Kaso maingay kasi, hindi kami gaanong magkarinigan ’tapos may tumawag sa kanya so... ayun,” she shrugged. “Ikaw? Didn’t you have new people at the office this week? May prospect ka ba?”

Krys was always looking for a prospect. Hindi niya maintindihan kung bakit sa iginanda nito, diyosa level in fact, ay walang gaanong nagkakandarapang

lalaki rito. “Oh, my God...” Hinagip nito ang braso niya. “Buti ipinaalala mo. May bago akong crush! Shit, he’s so hot!”

Umangat ang isang kilay niya. It had been a week since she left Pasig. Three years din niyang nirentahan ang isa sa mga kuwarta sa three-bedroom condo unit ni Krys sa Valle Verde. Marion had never seen her look this excited over a man since she broke up with her last boyfriend more than a year ago. “Yes?”

“Wala pa akong gaanong alam. Except that he lives here pala.” Iginala nito ang tingin sa paligid. “Shit! No idea either kung saang building. Pero kapag may nakita kang matangkad, medyo moreno, guwapo, naka-glasses at sobrang yummy, siya na iyon!”

“Uh, Krys, parang gan’un din ang puwedeng description kay Bentley.”

Natawa ang babae. “Oo nga, ’no? Okay, try kong kunan siya ng picture next—Oh, shit, makikita ko pala siya bukas! May welcome luncheon event kami. OMG, I have to go!” dere-derechong sabi nito habang may kinukuha sa dalang purse.

“Krys, it’s okay. I’ll take care of everything.” Nakangiting tinapik niya ang braso nito bago

sumenyas kay Armi sa bar na ipadala sa kanila ang bill. Pagka-settle ng bayarin ay inihatid na niya sa labas si Krys na inisa-isang tingnan ang mga building at sinabing babalik daw ito para sila mismong dalawa ang maghanap kung saan nakatira ang crush nito. Tango lang nang tango si Marion kahit hindi sigurado kung gagawin ba niya iyon.

God, I am getting old! She groaned as she got into the empty elevator in her building. Three years lang naman ang tanda niya kay Krys, pero bakit parang hindi niya gaanong masakyan ang ibang trip nito? She even felt like she had become less enthusiastic about things lately, even about winning a one-bedroom flat in a posh residential address.

And a new job at her post-graduate alma mater, na walking distance mula rito sa bagong tirahan niya.

Napabuntung-hininga si Marion sa sandaling makatapak sa kanyang floor. Alas diez pa lang ng gabi pero inaantok na siya. The past several weeks had been toxic and exhausting. Ang dami niyang kinailangang gawin na pawang may kinalaman sa mga bagong bagay sa buhay niya.

She shook her head as she walked down the hallway, looking at doors on either side of her. Apat na araw na simula nang lumipat siya rito at apat

na beses na ring mali ang pintong hinintuan niya. Inilabas niya ang magnetic card nang makita ang 125J, tumingin sa umiilaw na CCTV camera sa itaas ng pinto bago mabagal na tinipa ang eight-digit passcode niya sa panel.

She yawned as she slid the card to the slot by the door. Tumingin siya sa katabing mga pinto na alam niyang hindi pa okupadong lahat. Ayon sa building manager ay pito pa lang daw silang nakatira sa floor na iyon. She wondered if her neighbors were nice. She hadn't really been socializing much for the past years and she thought she'd like to meet more people as she started a new life.

Ikinandado niya nang tatlong beses ang pinto nang makapasok. Derecho agad siya sa kuwarto kung saan agad siyang naghubad at hinagip ang bathrobe. Namimigat na ang talukap ng mga mata niya nang buksan ang gripo sa sink para mag-toothbrush pero walang lumalabas na tubig. Ganoon din ang ginawa niya sa shower, pero wala rin. Pumunta siya sa maliit na kusina, wala rin.

Gigil na napamura siya.

Bumalik siya sa sink sa banyo, binuksan ang pinto ng tila cabinet sa ilalim niyon kung saan naroon ang mga tubo at kinapa kung may dapat bang galawin

doon o ano. May nadama siyang parang maaaring ikutin, iniikot naman niya, na dahilan para tila may bumigay at lumabas ang malakas na spray ng tubig, derecho sa mukha niya.

“Oh, my God!” singhap niya habang iniawas ang mukha at pilit kinakapa ang ginalaw niya kanina, pero walang nangyayari. Isinara niya ang cabinet pero patuloy sa pagkawala ang tubig at tumataas na ang baha sa banyo niya. Muntik na siyang madulas nang takbuhin ang drain sa shower area at inalis ang takip niyon para mas madaling mabawasan ang tubig, na patuloy ang pagtapon.

Naghalungkat si Marion sa mga cabinet ng maaaring magamit para maayos ang plumbing, at nakita ang isang toolbox na makakatulong sana kung alam lang niya kung paano iyon gamitin. Iniangat niya ang landline sa kusina, pero naalala niyang sa Lunes pa maa-activate ang linya niya. Kinuha niya ang cellphone at tinawagan si Armi para magpatulong kay Bentley kung sakali pero hindi nito sinasagot ang cellphone.

Desperada na ang dalaga at patuloy ang bagyo sa banyo niya. Humablot siya ng t-shirt at gym shorts sa closet at mabilisang isinuot iyon bago lumabas. Sana may gising pa siyang kapitbahay! Ang umiilaw

na security camera sa itaas ng 127J ang agad nahagip ng tingin niya. Hindi na siya nag-isip.

Pinindot na niya ang doorbell. Nang tatlong beses. *Emergency ito!* May delubyo sa unit niya! Her heart pounded as she waited. Sana hindi siya nakabulahaw. Ten thirty pa lang naman...

Kakalabugin na rin sana niya ang pinto nang marinig niya ang mahinang click, tanda na binubuksan iyon. Huminga siya nang malalim at inihanda ang speech sa paghingi ng tulong, pero nablanko ang utak niya at umurong ang dila sa nakita nang bumukas ang pinto.

A naked, just slightly hairy chest. Broad shoulders.

A lean, long body with strong-looking sinewy arms and long-fingered hands holding the door frame.

She was afraid to look further down because she just might have interrupted a couple having hot sex and the man might have left his bed, and his wife or girlfriend, whatever, in haste—so she started to lift her face.

“Yes?” the low, throaty baritone inquired.

Marion blinked. Her eyes were still on the slight cleft in the chin, and the killer jawline, the sensuous

lips she swore somehow looked familiar... do they taste familiar?

“Hello, Miss?” ulit ng kaharap niya.

Bakit parang pamilyar din ang boses? Iyong paraan ng pagkasabi nito ng ‘Miss’?

Umangat uli ang tingin niya, sa maliit na peklat na mukhang nag-fade na nunal sa kanang pisngi nito, sa dimple doon dahil napapangiti na ang lalaki dahil mukha siguro siyang ewan, sa...

“Marion?” he called, his tone both surprised and uncertain.

Noon na siya tuluyang nag-angat ng tingin. Kanina pa siya in denial sa nakikita kaya inuunti-unti niya, pero ngayong narinig na niya ang pangalan ay kailangang harapin na niya ito.

Shit, why does he have to look this good? And naked? Good Lord, did I just... “I’m sorry, baka nakaistorbo ako, pero...” Hinagip niya ng braso nito. “May baha.”

His right brow shot up. “What?” Pero may ginalaw itong kung ano sa gilid ng pinto bago humakbang palabas at isinara iyon.

“May sira ’yung tubo. May baha!” parang ewan

pa ring sabi niya bago tuluyang hinila ang lalaki papunta sa unit niya. Wala na siyang pakialam kung ito man ay si Kaiden Grofski.

Yep, *that* Kaiden.

And it turned out he knew a few things about plumbing. Only he needed help and he had to get assistance from Bentley McNamara, who happened to be his first cousin.

Kaya heto, may dalawang guwapo sa unit ni Marion na nakikipagbuno sa depektibong plumbing sa banyo. Ipinagtimpla niya ng iced tea, ipinagbukas ng isang bag ng cookies at iginawa ng sandwich ang mga ito dahil wala na siyang ibang maisip na maaaring ibigay na kapalit sa abalang ginawa niya.

She was pacing back and forth in her kitchen when she heard Bentley call out, telling her to check the faucet in her kitchen sink. Inumpisahan nito ang instruction sa pagtawag sa pangalan niya at tinapos sa malambing na 'babe'.

Binuksan niya ang gripo. Okay na. Pumunta siya sa banyo para tingnan kung ayos lang ang mga plumber niya. Wala na ang baha. Parehong nagpupunas na ng tuwalya ang mga ito.

“Thank you, thank you talaga! Grabe, hindi ko alam ang gagawin ko kanina.” Magkasalikop ang mga palad niya habang nakatingin sa dalawang lalaki. “I made sandwiches. Kain muna kayo.” Nauna na siyang naglakad pabalik sa kusina.

“You’re welcome, babe. And thank you.” Bentley grinned before biting on the hotdog sandwich.

“Marion,” Kaiden corrected, smirking. “Ikaw, pag hindi mo alam ang pangalan, bine-babe mo agad.”

“Actually, na-meet ko na siya before through a friend.” Ipinako niya ang tingin sa dating estudyante niya. “And thank you, really. Naistorbo pa kita. Pasensya na talaga.”

Kaiden smiled. “No worries. I was actually just reviewing a report. Hindi ka abala.”

Napabuga siya ng hangin. “Okay, cool. I thought earlier since you were naked and your hair is like that—”

“I’m not naked,” naaliw na sabi nito.

“I know, pero magulo kasi ang buhok mo, ’tapos ang tagal mong buksan ang pinto. So since wala kang t-shirt, akala ko hubad ka at baka kung ano ang naistorbo ko.”

“Like, sex?” sabad ni Bentley. “Trust me, if he was getting it on with someone when you knocked, he wouldn’t just leave his girl without—”

“Shut up.” Siniko ito ni Kaiden.

“What? We’re adults here. I wasn’t about to say anything disrespectful.” Pinamilog pa ni Bentley ang mga mata nito. Marion couldn’t help smiling. He winked when he looked her way. “Right, Marion babe?”

Natawa siya. “Baka nahihiya lang kasi estudyante ko siya dati.”

“Really?” Nagpalipat-lipat ang tingin ni Bentley sa kanila ni Kaiden.

“Teaching assistant, actually. Pero mas mukha pa siyang estudyante kesa sa halos kalahati ng klase namin.” Matamang nakatingin sa kanya si Kaiden.

Tinaasan niya ito ng kilay. “Well, hopefully, hindi na ngayon. I’m old.”

“Old enough to go out with me, I hope.” Bentley waggled his brows.

Natawa uli ang dalaga. “Well, guess what? I can do that. Para makabawi naman ako sa pang-aabala.”
Yes!

“Nice! I need a date at a friend’s book launch. Wednesday night. You free? “

“Wednesday is perfect, Bentley.”

“Ayo! Sunduin kita dito ng six?” Ibinigay nito sa kanya ang cellphone. “Key in your number.”

Oh God, this is happening!

Medyo nanginginig pa ang daliri niyang habang sine-save ang number sa *iPhone* ni Bentley.

“What about me?”

Napatingin siya kay Kaiden. Muntik na niyang malimutang naroon din nga pala ito, na una niyang inabala para tulungan siya.

“Will you go out with me, too? If I asked?” His tone was challenging, as if reminding her of what she said years ago. But his gaze was hopeful.

Ilang sandaling parang hindi alam ni Marion kung ano ang sasabihin. Napatingin siya kay Bentley, na amused na nakamasid lang, at kay Kaiden, na ewan kung bakit nagpapakaba sa kanya ngayon sa tuwing mapapatingin dito.

“Sure.” Napalunok siya. “I’d go out with you, too. If you asked.”

Savoring Kaiden - Sachi Bliss

A relieved smile slowly broke on his lips. “We have this company event in a couple of weeks. Will you be my date, then?”

This is not happening! But she found herself nodding, and heard herself saying: “Yes.”

2

Kaiden felt everything all at once—the rush of blood from the tiniest veins in his body going to his head and the giddy sensation it brought; the hammering of his heart against his ribcage like it would burst out anytime; the pinprickles in his skin and that familiar dread that he was not ready for what would happen—and it slowed his steps.

Matagal na panahon na simula nang huli niya iyong maramdaman, at sa parehong tao pa.

Kung kaninang pababa siya ng sasakyan ay excited pa siya, ngayon ay kabado na. Minasdan niya ang hawak na light blue envelop at brown paper bag na naglalaman ng ilang piraso ng chocolate candy bars. Parang bumigat ang mga iyon habang nararamdaman niya ang pagbubutil ng pawis sa noo. It had been seven years since he carried nearly the exact same things in his hand and gave them to Marion.

“Oh... Hi, Kaiden! What can I do for you? May problema ba sa exams mo?” nakangiting bati ni Marion nang lingunin siya mula sa pinagkakaabalahan sa computer nito sa isa sa mga cubicles na nakalaan para

sa mga teaching assistants sa faculty office.

Napalunok siya, at napatingin sa binti nitong pasimpleng hinila sa paanan ang isa pang swivel chair at iminuwestrang maupo siya. “Uhm.. no. I mean...” Shit, where was his tongue? His voice? Why couldn’t he form a coherent sentence now?

Umangat ang isang kilay nito. “Are you okay?”

He bit his lower lip to keep from smiling. Hindi niya alam kung bakit aliw na aliw siya tuwing tumataas ang kilay ng babae. Marion had perfectly arched brows. Pang-kontrabida raw, sinabi ng mga kaklase niyang babae. Hindi siya sang-ayon doon. For him, those brows only made her face more interesting.

“Kaiden?” untag nito kasabay ang mahinang pagda-drum ng mga daliri sa mesa. Doon naman siya napatingin. Her pale, bony hands, with nearly visible veins and long fingers. Musician hands.

“I have...” He took a deep breath. “Walang problema sa exam. It wasn’t easy but... uh, it was... challenging.”

Napatango ito habang hindi inaalís ang tingin sa kanya, naghihintay ng kasunod niyang sasabihin.

He had only known this woman for four months,

and yet it's like she already had the power to make and break him at the same time. Hindi pa niya naramdaman kahit kailan ang ganitong magkahalong kaba at excitement, at kagustuhang tingnan lang ito o pakinggan itong magsalita.

"I... uh, just came to give you this." Sa wakas ay iniabot niya ang hawak. Spa gift certificates for a day of relaxing treatmeants, and a bagful of different chocolate candies. "Please don't say no, wala akong ginastos d'yan, promise."

Napakurap ang babae bago tahimik na kinuha ang mga iniaabot niya. Binuksan nito ang envelop at nanlaki ang mga mata nito sa nakita. Napangiti naman ito nang makita ang laman ng paper bag. "Wow! Favorite ko lahat ito. Lalo na ito." Inilabas nito ang tig-isang bars ng Crunchie, Picnic at Butterfinger.

"Really? You like those?" relieved na sabi niya. He was worried she'd be on a diet or something and would hate sweets.

"Yes!" nakangiting sagot nito, pagkatapos ay hinawakan siya sa braso. Nahigit niya ang hininga. Aatakehin yata siya sa puso at the age of twenty and seven days.

"Uhm... I don't know why you even have to bother

giving me this, Kaiden, but thank you,” patuloy nito.

“Well... consider that a gift from the whole class because you have been perf—I mean, good. Awesome. Cool!” he stammered. “We honestly hated the subject and I know it shows, but you somehow made it easy for us. I mean, Sir Atienza was good but he was kinda boring,” he winced. “I mean... he’s... okay naman si Sir, kaso...”

Natawa si Marion. “It’s okay. Sir Atienza knows it, too. Minsan din daw nabo-bore siya sa subject at sa sarili niya, but he is one patient dude, isn’t he?”

Tumango siya. “Yes... uh, I actually handed him some sugar-free cupcakes on the way here. He was the one who let me in. Paalis na daw siya kasi may recital ang mga apo niya.”

Napatango lang itong muli. “Yeah... well...” Niyuko nito ang bag bago nag-angat uli ng tingin. “Thank you, Kaiden.”

Nakatulala lang siya kay Marion. Her pale cheeks were now tinged pink, and there was some sort of panic in her eyes. What was going on? “Uhm... sige, Mar—Miss Marion. Aalis na ako.”

She tapped his arm, then let go. He suddenly felt cold. Medyo magaspang ang palad nito, pero gusto niya

ang pakiramdam niyon sa balat niya.

“Alright, Kaiden. Salamat uli dito.” Itinaas nito ang paper bag at envelop.

He left the faculty office with her smile and twinkling eyes tattooed on his mind and felt like he was walking on air.

Paanong nangyaring halos seven years na nang mangyari iyon?

Tumingin sa relo si Kaiden. Several minutes before six, and Bentley was still nowhere in sight. Or have they left already? Nalaglag ang mga balikat niya sa naisip. Umaasa siyang makikita si Marion bago ito umalis.

Over the past few days, he thought about and attempted to press her doorbell to ask her out to eat or just check on her. Parang simula nang magkaroon ng problem sa plumbing nito ay hindi pa niya ito nakikita. Nagtatrabaho kaya ito sa malapit lang? Ano kaya ang ginagawa nito ngayon?

He sighed as he approached their doors. Huminto siya sa tapat ng 125J at nag-alangan pang pindutin ang button sa tabi ng panel. He was nervous.

Itinaas niya ang kanang kamay at inisip ang

sasabihin. May excuse naman siya. Ibibigay niya ang chocolates at ang imbitasyon para sa third year anniversary ng Philippine office ng hedge fund firm na pinagtatrabahuhan niya. And then he'd wish her a good night with Bentley even if it killed him and then...

Shit!

He accidentally pressed the button long before he felt ready and he could now hear footsteps rushing to the door. *F*ck, she is going to be disappointed. I am not her date! Pero makikita naman siguro niya sa monitor na ako ito. Sana huwag munang buksan... sana buksan niya... damn it.* He closed his eyes.

“Kaiden? Do you need anything?” takang tanong ni Marion. “Ayos ka lang?”

He blinked his eyes open. “Oh... uhm...” he sighed. “Wala. May...” Iniabot niya ang invitation card at ang brown bag. “Details for the... event next week. And... and I passed by the candy store at this mall and remembered you liked these stuff. You know, *Crunchie, Picnic...*”

Ilang sandaling nakatingin lang si Marion bago ito marahang tumango. “Oh, thanks.” Kinuha nito ang dala niya at inilagay iyon sa kung saan sa gilid

ng pinto sa loob. “Tingnan ko mamaya.” She then stepped out and closed the door behind her. “Bentley texted and he’s on the way,” she smiled.

Kaiden was mesmerized. He’d never seen Marion in a dress before, and she looked exquisite in the strapless knee-length floral dress she was wearing now. Relong may itim na strap at black pearl earrings lang ang accessories nito, at isang black and white clutch ang dala. Her chin-length hair was brushed away from her face. Whatever makeup she had on brought out her huge almond eyes.

His eyes now slowly memorized every detail of her.

“Hey, what are you doing there with my date?”

Tumalon yata ang puso ng binata sa gulat, sa pagsasalita ng pinsan na hindi niya namalayang palapit na pala. He stepped away awkwardly as he tried not to look at Marion more than he should.

Damn, she’s a freaking goddess.

“Kakadating ko din lang. Ibinigay ko lang sa kanya ’yung invite para sa event namin next week,” sagot niya bago nakipag-fist bump sa pinsan na matamang nakatingin. He never really told any of his friends about Marion then. He didn’t want to be

discouraged even if he knew he was doomed.

“It’s just Wednesday, bro. Your event is next Saturday,” Bentley said wryly.

“Well, I am busy. Baka mawala sa isip ko,” he lamely answered, looking straight at his cousin, willing for him to stop prying.

“Mawala sa isip mo? You remember everything.” Napailing si Bentley bago napatingin kay Marion. He obviously liked what he saw because his smile was appreciative. “I am one lucky bastard.” He held out his arm, and Marion linked her arm with his, smiling.

“Let’s go?” malambing na sabi nito, nakatingin kay Bentley na parang ang pinsan lang niya ang nag-e-exist na nilalang nang mga sandaling iyon.

Kaiden wanted to punch the wall. “Enjoy the night.”

Bentley looked at Marion, then at him. “We definitely will.”

Hindi niya alam kung nananadya ba ang una, pero wala naman itong alam sa kung ano ang mayroon siya para kay Marion. Pinanood lang niya habang naglalakad ang mga ito palayo hanggang sa makasakay na ng elevator.

He didn't even know he wanted her still, until last Friday night when he saw her again. Now it looked like he's about to lose her again.

On weeknights, Kaiden was usually in bed by eleven, reading or playing those no-brainer mobile games until he fell asleep. Pero dahil kanina pa siya hindi mapakali ay lumabas muna siya at nag-jog sa paligid ng *Ackerton*. Five lapses later, he was back in the *Ardsley* complex checking for signs that Bentley and Marion were back.

Pumunta talaga siya sa parking area at wala pa roon ang SUV ng pinsan niya. Pasado alas onse na. Nagpunta muna siya sa convenience store sa ibaba ng building niya at bumili ng isang litro ng *Gatorade* at dalawang cartons ng fruit juice. May pila sa counter kaya medyo natagalan siya at nang paakyat na sa floor nila ay eleven forty na.

How long did that book launch thing had to take, anyway? At weeknight pa! Wala bang pasok bukas sina Bentley at Marion?

Kaiden was still fidgeting as he got off the elevator and nearly cursed out loud with what he saw as he turned the corner. Napahinto siya at nagtago

muna, pero sa puwesto ay kita pa rin ang nagaganap sa tapat ng unit ni Marion.

They were standing so close together, talking as they looked into each other's eyes. His heart constricted at just the thought of what he might see next. Parang gusto niyang pumikit, pero nagpakatampang siya at nanatiling nakamasid lang. He was twenty-seven years old, for f*ck's sake!

Humigpit ang hawak niya sa dalang plastic bag nang makitang binubuksan na ni Marion ang pinto ng unit nito. Her hands were on her door while Bentley continued to talk right next to her ear.

Kailangan talagang ganoon kalapit? Would he ever be allowed to get close to her next week? Probably not.

His shoulders slumped as he kept his eyes on the pair several meters away. Bentley leaned closer. Marion turned to look at him. He felt as if life would be drained out of him the moment they kiss, but...

Hinawakan ni Bentley sa balikat at braso si Marion habang palapit ang mukha nito, hanggang sa magaan na hagkan nito ang babae sa noo bago bumaba ang labi nito sa...

What the...?

His cousin kissed the lady on the cheek, lingered a bit before he pulled away as he patted her arm and seemed to tell her to get in.

Si Bentley ba talaga iyon? A kiss on the cheek, really?

“I know you’re there.”

*F*ck!* Hindi siya natinag sa kinatatayuan.

“She’s probably getting ready to rest by now. Labas na d’yan at mag-usap tayo. Ano ba ’yang dala mo?”

Napabuntung-hininga si Kaiden bago umalis na sa pinagtataguan at binagtas ang hallway kung saan naghihintay si Bentley. Nauna itong maglakad papunta sa unit niya at doon siya hinintay. Hindi niya ito matignan, pero dama niyang pinagmamasdan siya ng kanyang pinsan habang abala sa panel at sa pagbubukas ng pinto.

Dere-derecho siya sa loob ng unit nang mabuksan iyon. Nakasunod si Bentley na siya na ring nagsara ng pinto.

“Beer?” his cousin asked as he headed toward the kitchen. Naiiling na inilagay niya sa refrigerator ang mga pinamili at kumuha ng dalawang lata ng

beer. Inihagis niya sa pinsan ang isa.

He's still not sure about this conversation.

“So, tell me your story.” Bentley leaned on the kitchen counter as he eyed Kaiden curiously.

“There is no story,” he quipped as he pulled the tab off the beer can.

“How about the one you never told us?” Parang wala itong balak na umalis hangga't hindi siya nagkukuwento. “The one involving Miss Marion Cuevas?”

He sighed. “Still no story there. She was a teaching assistant in two of my subjects back in college. She was finishing her post-grad then.”

“A very pretty teaching assistant.”

“Yeah,” sang-ayon niya bago uminom ng beer.

“Smart and funny, too,” dagdag ni Bentley.

“Yep.” Nakatingin siya sa hawak na lata ng beer.

“Nakakaaliw pakinggan 'yung tawa niya, buhay na buhay. 'Yung kahit di mo alam kung bakit siya natatawa, matatawa ka na din.”

Napabuga siya ng hangin. “Yeah.”

“Medyo corny, but she’s adorable.”

Tumango siya. “She always has been like that.”

“She smells good, too. And her skin—”

“What?” Napatingin siya sa pinsan niyang nakangisi sa kanya. *Shit! Busted!*

“Her skin feels amazing to touch. But don’t worry, apart from what you have seen, there is no way my hands are going or have gone anywhere.” Bentley eyed him pointedly. “Never.”

“Why not?” takang tanong niya.

“For somebody so smart and had a post-grad degree from f*cking Princeton, you’re quite dense, man.” His cousin shook his head.

“Well, for somebody who f*cks every woman who so much as looks his way, you were rather slow tonight, man,” he retorted.

“Would you rather I did that, Kaiden?” may paghahamon sa tono ni Bentley, pero nakakaunawa ang tingin nito. “Obvious namang gusto mo siya dati pa, at hanggang ngayon, tama?”

Nag-iwas siya ng tingin. “It doesn’t matter. Wala namang nagbago. Obvious din na hindi niya ako

gusto.”

“You don’t know that.”

Muli siyang napatingin dito. “Well, she told me. She said no.”

“Sinabi niya sa iyong hindi ka niya gusto?”

“She said no. When I asked her out, she said no.”

“Dahil estudyante ka niya at may faculty position siya noon. Dahil nasa iisang university kayo at alam mo ang nasa rulebook. Bawal iyon.”

“We were both about to graduate then.”

“You were twenty, Kaiden. And she was what, then? Twenty-two?”

“Twenty-three. Did she tell you what happened?”

Umiling si Bentley. “Just snippets of her life then. I teased her about most likely being this hot teacher every male student wanted. S’abi niya, iniawasan niyang ma-involve sa kahit kanino noon dahil gusto niyang mag-focus sa post-grad degree niya at mag-maintain ng grades dahil scholar siya. Did you know that?”

He blinked. He’s not sure.

“You remember everything, bro. Did she tell you she doesn’t like you?”

Umiling siya. “I can’t... No, wala siyang sinabing ganoon.”

Napangiti ito. “Then maybe there’s hope. You have another chance.”

“She likes you, bro. Don’t tell me hindi mo nahalata?”

He simply shrugged. “She’s sweet, and maybe she might like me a bit, but nah.” Umiling ito. “I know when someone is that into me, she clearly wasn’t. Sa tingin ko alam rin niya iyon.”

“That’s not what I saw earlier,” giit pa niya. Ayaw na niyang masyadong umasa.

“Fine,” Bentley sighed. “But don’t f*ck up this chance to be with her again, Kaiden. She said yes to seeing you and being with you next weekend, didn’t she?”

“Only because you were there.”

“No, damn it.” Inilapag nito ang wala nang lamang lata ng beer sa counter. “Don’t think that. Siguro naiilang siya. Puwedeng napilitan pero siguraduhin mo kapag magkasama kayo na worth it

ang pagpayag niya.”

Kaiden stared at his cousin. “You’re not asking her out again?”

Umiling si Bentley. “As much as I enjoyed her company tonight, I think it would be best not to.” Tinapik siya nito sa braso. “I wouldn’t want to get in the way.”

3

“Bakit kasi hindi mo i-follow up kung may next date kayo? Kesa mukha kang ewan diyan, umaasa.”

Tiningnan lang ni Marion si Serenity bago umiling. “Feeling ko kasi, wala naman akong karapatang mag-follow up. Ni wala kaming napag-usapan na magkikita uli. Wala nga n’ung ‘let’s do this again’ man lang,” himutok niya.

“And he kissed you on the cheek. Grabe, Marion! Hindi ko talaga maintindihan ’yon,” sabi naman ni Armi nang ilapag ang order nilang isang round ng mojitos.

“First date pa lang naman,” depensa niya.

“Gaga, we’re talking about Bentley McNamara. Walang first date-first date d’un. Dapat naka-second base going to third base man lang kayo until you remembered na kaka-start pala ng period mo o wala kang stock ng condoms.” Pinanlakihan siya ng mga mata ni Armi. Naging kapitbahay kasi nito dati si Bentley at naging witness sa kung gaano kalandi ang crush niya.

“OMG, maglulupasay ako kapag natapat na

meron ako kapag nag-date kami ni Bentley!” natatawang sabi ni Annabeth na agad ding sumeryoso nang makita ang itsura ni Marion.

It’s been nine days since their first date. They still text, pero casual na kumustahan lang at wala talaga itong hint na balak siyang yayain uling lumabas. Hindi naman siya sanay na mag-initiate ng move. Takot siyang ma-reject.

“Oy, huwag masyadong malungkot. Baka busy lang iyon. Kaka-start pa lang ng klase. Baka magulo pa ang schedule.” Tinapik ni Serenity ang kamay niya.

She pursed her lips. Pareho silang nagtuturo ni Bentley sa *Ackerton University* kahit sa magkabilang dulo ang mga building nila. P.E. ang subject niya habang academic coordinator at lecturer ito sa English Literature. Friday night at katatapos lang ng isang linggong ngaragan sa school, hindi kaya naisip ni Bentley na mag-unwind? Makipag-date?

Paano kung may iba pala itong ka-date? Pasado alas diez na ng gabi at hindi pa niya ito nakikita sa *The Lounge* gayong ito ang may-ari at expected na tambay roon.

“Psst, inom na muna para kumalma ka. Huwag mong masyadong isipin iyon, ano ba.” Annabeth

handed her a glass of their drink.

Napapabuntung-hiningang tinanggap iyon ni Marion. Pampakalma ba ang mojitos? Her friends knew she could be a little crazy when tipsy! Still, she took a few sips as she willed herself not to overthink.

May tendency rin kasi siyang makaramdam ng lungkot at insecurity sa pakikipag-date. She felt she was old, ugly and not that interesting that men just didn't push for more from her.

Bago si Bentley, halos isang taon na rin simula nang huli siyang makipag-date, at sablay pa dahil may-asawa pala iyong ipinakilala sa kanya ni Krys dati at balak pa siyang gawing kabit. Mabuti na lang at tatlong beses pa lang silang lumalabas ng buwisit na lalaking iyon. Prior to that, all her attempts at dating were either disastrous or simply boring.

Nagka-boyfriend na siya, twice, at parehong long term pero parehong nauwi sa wala. Since last year, she really wanted to be in a relationship again. Gusto na niyang mag-settle down, magkapamilya. She wanted to get pregnant before thirty, but she was going to hit her third decade in five months' time na wala pa ring nagkakainteres sa kanya.

“Marion, we can hear you thinking.” Serenity

waved a hand in front of her. Kabisado na siya ng mga kaibigan. Alam ng mga ito ang mga ipinag-aalala niya. Sa kanilang apat, siya iyong tipong gusto na talagang magkaroon ng sariling pamilya.

“I’m sorry, I couldn’t help it,” she sighed.

“Hindi ka naman siguro sumusuko na agad nang lagay na iyan?” Siniko siya ni Annabeth.

“I’ll give it a few more weeks.” Bahagyang ngumiti siya. “Kung hindi siya para sa akin, baka para sa isa sa inyo pala si Bentley.”

Napailing lang ang dalawa. Armi, meanwhile, who had no interest of any kind on Bentley McNamara, simply rolled her eyes.

“Yabang mo, Armi. Porque nakita mo na ang lahat kay Mr. McNamara,” sita dito ni Serenity.

“Excuse me, not all. Almost. I only saw his erection,” sagot nito habang panay ang sulyap sa counter. Kumuha ito ng isang malaking onion ring na isinawsaw sa garlic mayo dip bago iyon isinubo. “And even if it was impressive, I am still not interested.” She shuddered for effect, then stood up with her tray.

Natawa si Marion. “Ang gaga mo. Na-imagine ko tuloy.”

“Yung walang towel sana ang na-imagine mo para sumaya ka naman.” Tinapik ni Armi ang pisngi niya. “Cheer up!” Iyon lang at nagpaalam na ito sa kanila para bumalik sa pagba-bartender nito.

“Ano, na-imagine mo nga?” untag ni Serenity.

“My imagination is not that fertile, too bad,” naiiling na sabi niya.

“Uh-oh, speak of the dick... este, the devil and he shall appear.” Annabeth grabbed both her and Serenity’s arms. “Ooohh la la... and who is with him? Brother niya? May brother ba si Bentley?” she squinted. “He’s so hot!”

“Guwapo overload, man!” Serenity let out a soft whistle.

Tumingin si Marion sa direksyon ni Bentley at ng kung sinumang kasama nito at muntik nang masamid sa kauubos pa lang na mojito. Napakuha tuloy siya ng isa pang baso.

It was Kaiden, at kausap na ng mga ito si Armi.

“Bilib din ako sa composure niyang si Armida. Kung hindi lang ako aware sa itinatagong landi ng isang iyan, iisipin kong babae din ang trip ng gaga, eh,” Serenity said in between bites of a huge nacho.

“Kahit naman marami na akong nakilalang guwapo, hindi ko pa rin kinakaya kapag si Bentley na ang kaharap ko. Nagra-rumble talaga ang internal organs ko. ”Tapos may kapatid pa pala?” dagdag ni Annabeth na potato wedge naman ang kinuha sa pica platter nila.

Marion bit her lip and focused on choosing what to get from the platter. Hawak din niya ang ikalawang baso ng mojito at kahit napapangalahati pa lang niya iyon ay parang may tama na siya.

“Hey, ladies,” a familiar voice said, then a plate of bite-sized cakes appeared on their table. Ang nakangiting mukha ni Bentley ang bumati sa kanya nang mag-angat ng tingin. He looked so fine, in a crisp navy button-down shirt and jeans, and his healthy head of hair brushed up away from his near perfect face.

God, the angles! kinilig na sabi niya sa isip. “Hey, Bentley! What’s up?” kaswal na tanong niya.

“Just bringing you our new dessert sample. On the house, since you ordered a round and a platter. Let any of the staff know what you think. These are red velvet, choco truffle, Nutella sansrival and granola s’mores,” he grinned.

“Wow, thanks, Bentley! Parang ang sarap!” Excited na namili agad si Annabeth ng kakainin nito.

“Masarap talaga iyan,” proud na sabi nito.

“Bentley, sino iyong masarap... este, ’yung hot na kasama mo?” tanong ni Serenity bago dumerecho sa bibig nito ang isang piraso ng granola s’mores.

Ang lakas ng tawa ng crush nila sa sinabi ng kaibigan niya. “Masarap, huh? You mean the dude I came in with?”

Serenity gave a thumbs-up sign. “Masarap din itong s’mores,” she said with her mouth full.

“Kaiden ang pangalan n’ung sinasabi mong ‘masarap’ na kasama ko. He’s my cousin. And if you ever want to know kung masarap ba talaga siya.” Sumulyap sa kanya si Bentley. “You might want to—”

“Who decided on this new additions, Bentley? Gusto ko ’tong truffle. Tama lang, hindi masyadong matamis,” agaw agad ni Marion sa kung anumang sasabihin nito. She was sure may kinalaman iyon kay Kaiden.

“Nagbotohan ang mga chef at mga staff.” Bentley arched a brow at her, then looked at her friends who were both watching them. “Glad you liked them,

Marion,” he smiled sweetly before patting her arm and then excusing himself. May hinihintay raw itong tawag mula sa Vancouver.

“He gazed at you and then sa iyo pa nagpaalam.”

“At ano ang ibig sabihin n’ung tiningnan ka niya kanina? Parang may something.”

Minasdan niya ang dalawang kaibigan. “I honestly don’t know.”

“Girl, you got it bad for that man, don’t you?” Hinagip ni Serenity ang braso niya.

“Parang nakaka-guilty naman na type din namin si Bentley.” Annabeth pursed her lips.

“Ano ba, don’t feel that way. May the best girl win nga, di ba? Emotera lang talaga ako,” nakangiting sabi ni Marion bago sumubo ng red velvet bite-size cake at sinundan iyon ng mojito.

Nakatingin lang sa kanya ang dalawa na parang sinisiguro pa kung okay siya. Hindi tuloy agad niya namalayan na may lumapit muli sa kanila at batiin siya.

“Hey, Marion.”

This time ay nasamid na talaga siya. Kandaubo

siya habang inaabot ang basong sinasalinan ni Annabeth ng tubig habang naramdaman niyang may humahagod at tumatapik sa likod niya. *Damn it!*

“I’m sorry,” nag-aalalang paghinggi ng paumanhin ni Kaiden na naupo na sa bakanteng silya sa tabi niya habang patuloy sa paghagod sa kanyang likod. Ito na rin ang nag-abot ng tubig.

Kinuha niya ang baso gamit ang dalawang kamay at bahagyang inilayo ang likod, pero patuloy lang ang binata sa ginagawa. Naubos niya ang tubig at ilang beses na huminga nang malalim pagkatapos.

“I’m sorry, Marion,” he repeated, guilt written all over his face. Then he turned to her friends. “Sorry, hindi ko alam na magugulatin pala siya.”

“Hindi rin namin alam na magugulatin siya.” Nagtatanong ang mga mata ni Annabeth nang tumingin sa kanya.

“Hindi rin namin alam na magkakilala pala kayo, eh, kanina ka lang namin nakitang kasama ni Bentley.” Serenity arched one perfectly shaped brow.

He blinked. “I didn’t really expect you to. Maybe... Uh, we’re actually, I know...” Tumingin ito sa kanya.

She met his eyes. Walang sinuman outside

Ackerton ang napagsabihan niya tungkol kay Kaiden. She told her friends about her teaching job then at the university but not the fact that one student sort of got close, and attempted to pursue her.

“We’re actually neighbors,” pagtatapos ng lalaki, nakatingin pa rin sa kanya at tila humihingi rin ng permiso.

“Oh, siya ’yung inakala mong naistorbo mong may ginagawang something!”

“Na nakahubad nang pagbuksan ka ng pinto!”

She kicked both of her friends under the table. “Yep, siya nga iyon.” Hindi na niya muling tiningnan ang katabi.

“I actually knew her way back also.”

Si Kaiden naman ang gusto niyang sipain, paalis sa kinauupuan nito at pahagis sa kalawakan kung puwede.

“Oh, really? Were you one of those dudes she dated na hindi namin nakilala dahil sablay ang resulta?” hindi maawat na tanong ni Annabeth.

He chuckled. “I wish... I mean, about the dating part. Pero sisiguraduhin kong hindi sasablay,” he smiled at her.

Marion bit the insides of her cheek to keep from saying something rude.

“But I actually met her during my senior year in college. Teaching assistant siya sa dalawa sa pinakamahirap na subjects,” patuloy ni Kaiden na panay ang sulyap sa kanya.

Bakit ka pa tingin nang tingin, eh, hindi ka naman mapigilan d’yan sa pinagsasabi mo? She was pissed now. She hadn’t planned on telling her friends about him. She simply wanted to get that date over with and move on. Plano niyang magpaka-busy para hindi na nito kulitin pagkatapos.

“Whoa, ilang taon ka na?” narinig niyang tanong ni Serenity.

“Twenty-seven this December,” he replied.

Nakayuko si Marion at nilalaro ang yelo sa ikatlong baso ng mojito, pero dama niyang sa kanya nakatingin si Kaiden.

“Hindi ka na pala baby. Puwede na.” Kahit hindi nakikita ay alam niyang nakangisi si Annabeth. “Did you like Teacher Marion then?”

Natawa ang katabi niya. “Of course.”

“How about now?”

“If I like her now? Or still? Yes,” walang gatol na sagot nito.

Shit! Gusto na niyang tumayo at mag-walk out. Wala siyang laban sa daldal at kawalan ng inhibitions ng mga kaibigang nakainom.

“Marion, do you like him, too?” untag ni Annabeth sa kanya.

Tiningnan lang niya ito nang masama.

“Stupid question. Of course you like him. Look at him.” Hinawakan pa ni Serenity ang mukha ni Kaiden at iniharap iyon sa kanya. “He looks a lot like Bentley... if Bentley was four years younger and innocent and not having sex with every woman in town or brandishing his erection in front of his bartender.”

Kaiden’s deep-set eyes widened, then he blushed.

Nawala tuloy ang inis ni Marion at naubo muli sa pagpipigil na matawa nang malakas.

Bumaba ang kamay ni Serenity sa balikat, pagkatapos ay sa braso ni Kaiden. “And he’s kinda buff, pero hindi’yung tipong batu-bato at parang frog ang katawan. Check out his biceps. Hmm.”

Nasapo niya ang noo. “Girls, you’re drunk. Gusto

n'yo na bang umakyat para makapag-rest?”

Umiling si Annabeth. “May tig-isa pa tayo, o!” turo nito sa tatlong baso ng mojito. “Don’t you want to get to know Kaiden more? Chance mo na ito, since hindi ka naman lumalabas ng bahay.”

“Girls, really. May tama na kayo. Baka—”

“Uh, it’s okay... uhm...” Nagpalipat-lipat ang tingin ng binata sa mga kaibigan niya, na natatawang magkasunod na nagpakilala.

“We’re not drunk. Right, Kaiden, baby?”

“We’re not even tipsy. Just buzzed.”

Natawa lang ang katabi niya. “Yep, you two are still okay.” He rose from his chair. “I have to go, though. May maaga pa akong video conference bukas. I should rest. Huwag kayong masyadong pakalasing, ha?” Tumingin ito sa kanya. “I’ll see you tomorrow?”

She sighed. “Yeah.”

“Be ready by six?”

Tumango siya. “Six is fine.”

He gently squeezed her shoulder. “Can’t wait,” he softly said, then waved at her friends before leaving their table.

“What the f*ck was that about?”

“You’re also going out with him?”

Wala na siyang choice kundi ipaliwanag kung bakit kailangan niyang lumabas kasama si Kaiden, at kung bakit hindi niya naikuwento sa dalawa ang tungkol dito. Matapos ang ilang minutong inulan siya ng tanong at paninita ng mga kausap ay kumalma rin ang mga ito.

“He seems like a nice guy, Marion.”

“And did you notice the way he looked at you? Man, what I wouldn’t give to have some hot dude look at me like that.”

Napailing lang si Marion. Ni hindi nga niya matingnan si Kaiden. She had no idea what that look was like, and she’s not sure she wanted to find out. His presence alone overwhelmed her, for reasons she’d rather not think about, either.

She didn’t want to know nor think about why on earth that Kaiden Grofski still made her nervous.