

# CHAPTER One

“Clear na ang L4, Sir. Paakyat na ’ko sa L5. Tatapusin ko lang ’to then mag-a-out na ’ko.”

“Hay, dapat lang, Mabini. Sige na para makauwi ka na din.” Parang nakikita na ni Joey ang pag-iling ng Head Of House Security ng *Asia-Pacific Development Fund* complex na si Kuya Amado. Masuwerte siyang mababait at maalaga ang mga kasama sa trabaho na parang kapatid o anak kung ituring siya. She’s been in the clerical pool of the *APDF*’s executive offices for fifteen months, while she’s been doing work as a part-time house security officer for the past eight months. Nine to five ang office work niya. Six to twelve ng hatinggabi naman ang trabaho niya bilang roving guard kasama ang K9

unit na si Wolverine.

“Let’s go, Wolvie! Last na ’to.” Marahang hinila niya ang leash ng kasamang aso na excited na sumabay sa pag-akyat niya sa fifth floor. The place was almost deserted except for a few cars probably owned by the organization’s more hardworking employees who either had to stay overnight to finish work or had early meetings or flights the next day.

Pulos nasa dulo ang mga natitirang sasakyan, at mula sa posisyon malapit sa hagdanan at elevator ay hindi agad niya napansing may kakaiba. Still, she walked toward the vehicles to check if everything’s okay. Nakahawak sa leash ang isang kamay ni Joey habang ang isa pa ay kinakapa sa holster ang kanyang handgun. May ilang metro na lang sila sa mga sasakyan nang umangil si Wolverine, parang may naaamoy o nararamdamang hindi gusto, hanggang sa maging malakas na tahol na iyon nang mas makalapit pa sila.

Four or five meters away, against the hood of a sedan beside a *Nissan Prado*, was a couple rocking against each other, tangled in a messy embrace, their clothes and hair in disarray. Halos sabay pang napamura ang dalawa nang mapatingin sa gawinila. Lalong lumakas ang tahol ni Wolverine habang

napako sa kinatatayuan si Joey, hindi alam kung ano ang gagawin o sasabihin.

Bumitaw sa baril ang isang kamay niya habang mabilis na inaalala ang handbook nila. *Oh my God, na-orient ba 'ko sa ganito? Bakit di ko maalala? Shit!*

Humigpit ang hawak niya sa leash ni Wolverine na ngayon ay siya na ang tinatahulan. It was like her big macho Belgian Malinois companion was telling her to do something already.

“Shh... Wolvie! Stay,” she hissed. Parang masama ang loob na umungol ang aso bago bantulot na sumunod. The dog was still agitated even if he just stood in his place now beside her.

Who wouldn't be bothered, though? The parking area now reeked of sex. Actually, wala siyang idea kung ano ang amoy at pakiramdam ng pheromones sa hangin pero base sa reaksyon ni Wolverine, the hotter air and the bleachy smell must be it. Huminga siya nang malalim at dumerecho uli ang tingin sa eksena sa harap nila. Naghiwalay na ang pareha, at napasinghap siya nang makita kung sino ang babae. It was Atty. Abigail Almendraz, one of APDF's lawyers, at asawa ng director sa departamento ng pareho ring organisasyon kung saan siya nagtatrabaho.

Attorney Abby, who's in her early forties, was

still gorgeous and had a trim, fit body, just like her husband Sir Jim. Lalo tuloy siyang nalito sa gagawin ngayon. Nagtama ang mga mata nila ng babae, na halatang nakilala rin siya. Tumaas lang ang isang kilay nito bago sinuklay ng mga daliri ang buhok, pagkatapos ay tumalikod para buksan ang pinto ng sasakyan nito—the same sedan where the man she’s with f\*cked her earlier.

Dumako naman ang tingin niya sa kasama nitong lalaki. A much younger one, definitely not Sir Jim. Must be in his late twenties or early thirties. Tall, lean, with just enough muscle definition based on how tightly his button-down shirt and pants fit him in the right places.

And he was looking at her now with a slight smirk and a glint in his eyes. Napalunok ang dalaga. Pinagtatawanan ba siya nito? Base sa nararamdamang pag-iinit ng leeg at pisngi, alam niyang namumula siya. So what? Nakakailang kaya ang eksenang dinatnan niya!

She schooled her features to look more formal. “Hihintayin ko lang pong makaalis kayong pareho para ma-report ko nang clear itong area, Sir,” pormal na sabi niya.

“Ows? Hindi ka magsusumbong?” Sumandal

ito sa *Prado* habang inaayos ang butones ng damit. Nakasampay sa balikat nito ang kurbata.

“Ang totoo, ngayon lang po ako may na-encounter na ganito at hindi ko talaga alam kung ano ang gagawin. But since it’s the first, I’ll just warn you not to do it again here. Puwede naman po siguro sa office o rest rooms dito, huwag lang po kayong tatapat sa CCTV—” Napahinto si Joey. Ano ba ang pinagsasabi niya?

“So, you’re now encouraging sex in the esteemed *APDF* premises?” He looked amused, his piercing eyes sparkled with mischief, his brows waggled a bit. The man was dangerously good-looking and he obviously knew it.

“Kung hindi po mapipigilan, pero ingat naman po.” Napatingin siya sa papalapit na *BMW* sedan ni Atty. Almendraz at umiwas sila ni Wolverine. The man good-naturedly slapped one of the car’s windows before he turned to get in the *Prado*.

Habang sumenyas naman ang asawa ng boss niya na sumunod siya. Huminto ito nang ilang metro ang layo sa exit, ibinaba ang semi-tinted window, at iniabot sa kanya ang limang one-thousand peso bills.

Napakurap siya. “Ma’am?”

Tumaas uli ang kilay ng babae. “For your silence.

Huwag mong tanggihan dahil alam kong kailangan mo, Josephine. Otherwise, you wouldn't be working two jobs here," she sighed. Inabot na nito ang kamay niya at inilagay roon ang pera.

"I shouldn't explain myself to anyone, but that one's not serious. Never will be. I love my husband, but he's too busy for my needs." Napailing ito bago matamang minasdan siya. "If that gorgeous guy in the *Prado* gives you money, too, take it. He's loaded in more ways than one..." Ngumisi ang babae bago kumaway bilang paalam at itinaas na muli ang bintana.

Naiwang hindi makapaniwala si Joey bago tiningnan ang hawak na pera. Right, she needed money. Ang dami niyang bayarin at responsibilidad, pero hindi naman ganoon kadesperado.

"I hope you're not considering returning the money."

Napaigtad siya, hindi namalayan ang paghinto ng *Prado* sa harap niya. The man, a.k.a. Attorney Abby's lover, still had that slightly irritating smug smile on his pinkish lips.

*Ano ba, bakit ko pa napapansin 'yon?* sita niya sa sarili.

"No," napabuga siya ng hangin. "It would help. Kailangan ko lang itago itong nalaman ko ngayon."

“Do you need more? I only have one, two... five grand here—oh, wait... seven! Here.” He handed her the money. “I don’t think you’d tell but just to be sure.”

Umiling siya. “I won’t tell, hindi na po. Okay na ’tong bigay ni Attorney.”

He snorted, “Come on, sayang ’to, Miss... Mabini?” anitong napatingin sa name tag niya. “Mabini. What does J stand for?”

“Joey,” sagot niya at napasinghap nang hagipin ng lalaki ang kamay niya para ilagay rin doon ang pera. He even closed her fist as if to make sure she’d really keep the money that way. “Uh, Sir—”

“Donuts? Kaninang hapon pa ’to but I think there’s still seven or eight left. Iyo na at makakalimutan ko din lang ’yan sa ref ko,” sabi nito sabay abot ng kahon.

Natutulalang tinanggap din niya iyon. Hindi nakaligtas sa kanya ang pangingslap ng mga mata ng lalaki. “What?”

Lumawak ang ngiti nito. “Nothing, you’re just both adorable and hot in that uniform, that’s all,” he leered playfully before he shook his head. “I’m going. Thanks, Joey.” He winked, then pulled the window up. Bago pa siya naka-react ay pinaandar na nito ang sasakyan.

What just happened? Kinapa niya ang bulsang

may pera, katumbas halos ng suweldo niya. Napatingin siya sa hawak na kahon ng donuts na maise-share mamaya lang sa nakababatang pinsan at kapitbahay nilang galing sa shift ng mga ito bilang interns sa *Veteran's Hospital*, na kasabay niyang uuwi sa Sampaloc.

Hindi niya sigurado kung blessing o sumpa ang mga hawak ngayon. Kung anuman, sana ay hindi na maulit ang ganitong pangyayari. Her life was messed up enough for anyone's dirty secrets.



Tumindi ang kaba ni Joey nang sumapit ang alas once y media ng umaga. Tumingin siya sa mga kasama sa malawak na open plan office ng Central Operations Department ng *APDF*. Karamihan ay tutok pa sa kani-kanyang trabaho. Alanganing tumayo siya mula sa kanyang cubicle, at napatingin sa pinto ng kanilang director. Saktong lumabas mula roon si Kuya Ronnie, ang executive assistant nito na nang makita siya ay ngumiti at sumenyas na pumasok na siya.

Huminga siya nang malalim bago mabagal na naglakad papunta roon. Tatlong araw ang lumipas magmula nang masaksihan niya ang eksena sa parking area at hindi pa rin siya mapakali, kahit



nabayaran na niya ang tuition ng mga pamangkin gamit ang perang nakuha mula kay Attorney Abby at sa lalaking kasama nito. Hindi niya alam kung napansin ng mga katrabaho ang pagkabalisa niya, but she knew it was just a matter of time before her boss called her into his office.

Huminga uli siya nang malalim bago marahang itinulak ang pinto, at maingat ang hakbang na pumasok sa opisina ng direktor.

“Lock the door, Josephine. May pag-uusapan tayo,” pormal na sabi ni Jaime Almendraz na hindi inaalís ang tingin sa hawak na mga papeles. ‘Sir Jim’ ang tawag nilang mga empleyado rito. May hawak itong pen sa isang kamay habang ang isa ay nasa track pad ng laptop nitong nakabukas din.

Parang bibitayin ang pakiramdam niya habang palapit sa mesa nito. Without looking up, the older man motioned for her to sit.

“H-hi, Sir,” aniya, pagkuwa’y napalunok.

Sa wakas ay nag-angat ng tingin ang lalaki. Bahagya itong ngumiti at tumango bago nangunot ang noo nang tingnan siya. “Are you okay, Josephine? Hindi ka na naman ba kumain?” Nagsalubong ang mga kilay nito. “May kape pa ’ko, gusto mo ba? Juice? Sandwich?”

Umiling siya. “Hindi, Sir. Kinakabahan lang ako. Ano po ba’ng sasabihin n’yo...S-Sir.”

Napakurap ito, parang nagtaka, bago mahinang natawa. “Did you think I’d fire you or something? No! Bakit ko gagawin ’yon?”

Nakagat niya ang labi. “Eh, ano pala, Sir?”  
Relieved na bumuntong-hininga siya.

Pinagsalikop ng director ang mga kamay sa ibabaw ng mesa. “Listen, I know about your other job, okay? Ayokong i-approve dati na may iba ka pang trabaho dito sa *APDF*, but who am I to deprive you of an opportunity to earn more?”

“Uhm...” Napangiwi siya. The last time she was here, the older man lectured her about stress and taking care of herself.

*“We value our people here, Josephine. We won’t let you abuse yourselves, but if you believe you’re healthy and ready enough for another job, then do it. Pero kapag nakita naming nakokompromiso ang kalusugan mo, kailangan mong i-give up ang isa.”*

“My wife,” tinapik nito ang mesa, “apparently saw you on Thursday night in the parking area after her meeting here. Is that true?”

Tumango siya. “Y-yes, Sir.”

“Well, she was shocked you’re working two jobs

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given how toxic our work here already is.”

Nakatingin lang siya rito. Lalong tumitindi ang kanyang kaba.

“Anyway, she told me a few things and gave a very good recommendation, and with that...”  
Iniabot nito ang isang folder. “Effective today, you’re officially relieved of your duties as one of my clerks and member of the house security personnel. Nand’yan lahat ng papeles mo, pati mga cheque ng huling suweldo mo.”

“S-Sir? Bakit—”

Itinaas ni Sir Jim ang isang kamay nito. “And starting today, you will also begin work as executive assistant of one of our new senior officers in the Sustainable Development and Climate Change Department. That’s a better work schedule, more opportunities for growth, and pay that’s more than the combined sum of what you get from your two jobs.” Tumayo ito at iniabot ang kamay. “Your colleagues unanimously recommended you for this job, too. Congratulations, Miss Mabini.”

Natutulalang tinanggap ni Joey ang pakikipagkamay nito. This one’s definitely a blessing, so why was she even more nervous now?

## CHAPTER *Two*

*L*utang pa rin ang pakiramdam ni Joey nang lumabas ng opisina ng kanyang boss, na niyaya pa siyang mag-lunch kasama ang asawa nito, pero tumanggi siya at nagdahilang mag-aayos pa ng gamit na ililipat sa bagong opisina. As much as she's grateful to Attorney Abby for this reassignment, she's also not sure if she could face her yet without thinking about the scene at the parking area. Nakakailang. Fresh pa sa diwa niya ang imahe, ayaw niya munang maalala.

Padadalhan na lang niya ito ng bulaklak o pagkain sa opisina nito sa kabilang building. She made a mental note to encash her cheques soon.

Dumaan si Sir Jim sa sariling exit ng opisina nito

habang siya ay bumalik sa administrative floor kung saan naroon ang cubicle niya. Madilim na roon at wala nang tao dahil lunch break, pero pati sa mesa niya ay madilim. Paglapit ay nakita niyang naka-unplug na ang computer at may malaking kahon sa desk niya. Her things were gone. Her backpack was beside the box that had a post-it note on top. Binasa niya iyon.

*We knew since Friday. Congrats, Joey girl! Eto na 'yun, time mo na. You truly deserve it. Huwag mo kaming kakalimutan, ha. Punta ka agad sa cafeteria pagkahatid mo ng box sa new office mo, please. We love you. Xo Central Ops Admin :)*

*Oh, no...* Napasinghot siya at pinunasan ng kamay ang nalaglag na luha. Medyo mabigat ang kahon nang buhatin niya, na pinagtakhan niya, pero mamaya na lang niya titingnan. Dumaan siya sa hagdanan paakyat sa fourth floor, kung saan naroon ang lilipatang department. It was set up pretty much like her office, in a bullpen setting and with four offices on two sides.

Huminto siya sa 407, ang opisina ng nakalagay sa bagong mga papeles niya. Kagaya ng buong opisina ay madilim din iyon, pero may bukas na lamp sa bagong mesa niyang halos katapat ng inner office

ng kanyang bagong boss.

Everything looked new. May plastic pa ang couch at mga upuan. May glass polisher pa sa ibabaw ng mesa. May manual pang katabi ang computer niya. On her high-back swivel chair is a bouquet of sunflowers and white roses. There's a card attached to it that said, *Welcome to SDCC, Joey! We have a meeting at 4. Ice.*

Hindi niya alam kung bakit bigla siyang kinabahan. Ice must be her new boss. Icarus Corgan Evangelista. She knew nothing about the man except his credentials, courtesy of Sir Jim. Mukhang wala rin ito sa opisina nang mga sandaling iyon. Ilang saglit na iginalang niya ang tingin sa paligid bago nagayos sandali at pumunta na sa cafeteria sa first floor.

Her now former colleagues excitedly waved at her as soon as she stepped inside the spacious, skylit cafeteria in the *APDF* complex's courtyard. Okupado ng mga ito ang isang mahabang mesa na parang pang-fiesta ang nakahain. Talo pa ng cafeteria nila ang food court ng mga malls, pero sa halip na mga sikat na food chain ay maliliit na negosyanteng beneficiary ng ilang programa ng *APDF* ang naroon. The ingredients used for the food were also sourced from small farmers from nearby provinces. Ang

resulta ay masarap at healthy na mga pagkain.

The cafeteria was even divided into Filipino, Asian, Western and Dessert sections at base sa nakikita niya sa mesa nila ay pinakyaw ng kanyang mga kaibigan ang lahat ng klase ng pagkain doon.

“Upo na, Joey! Kain na!” Halos hilahin siya ng head ng researchers na si Ate Lora. “Treat ito ng bagong boss mo, huwag mong tatanggihan.”

“Yung new boss mo na ang guwapo, bes!” kinikilig na sabi ni Gladys, na isa sa mga secretary.

Bumalik ang kaba ni Joey sa narinig, ewan kung bakit. Pilit niyang kinalimutan ang mga kakaibang nararamdaman sa sumunod na halos isang oras ng masarap na kainan at masayang kuwentuhan.

“N’ung Friday pa namin alam. Nagpadala ng memo si Sir. Tinanong kami kung sa tingin namin kaya mo nang mag-transfer. Syempre, *Yes* ang sagot dahil overqualified ka naman talaga. Ang ganda ng grades mo kahit seven years mong kinarir ang college. Okay din ang work history mo.”

“Okay du’n sa *SDCC*, Joey. Mababait ang mga tao kahit toxic din ang trabaho. Wala pa daw two months si Sir Ice dito. Previously, naka-assign siya sa Tokyo at Sydney. Three years ang term niya dito. Siguro naman, sa three years na ’yun, kikita ka na nang

bongga at makakaipon ng pera din sa sarili mo.”

Kahit mami-miss ang mga katrabaho dati ay masaya silang naghiwalay. Pagdating sa bagong department ay mainit na sinalubong din siya ng mga bagong makakasama. Nilapitan siya ng isang nagpakilalang Ate Grace at sinabing pupuntahan siya ng one-thirty para sa briefing. Nakangiting nagpasalamat siya at dumerecho na sa bagong opisina.

She switched on the lights, then stared at the box for several seconds before opening it. Isang eco bag na mukhang galing sa mga dating kaopisina ang agad na nakita niya. Inilabas niya iyon at tiningnan ang mga laman. A commuter mug that contained three chocolate bars inside, a makeup set, a toiletry set, a pretty pair of nude-colored shoes with three-inch heels, gold ballet flats, a navy shirt dress, a dark gray pencil skirt and two blouses. By the time she finished putting everything back in the bag, she was sniffing and in tears.

Sa itaas ng mga totoong gamit niya ay may note na may pirma ng lahat ng dating kasama. Parang may babara na sa lalamunan niya dala ng pinipigil na luha. Her friends knew her story, how life had never been that easy for her and those who had



been kind to her. Bagong buhay na talaga ito at this time, hindi na niya kukuwestyunin kung biyaya ba o sumpa. This one was definitely a blessing and she intended to honor it by doing a good job.

“Hey, nagsisisi ka na ba agad sa bagong trabaho mo at naiiyak ka na?”

Nanigas ang likod ng dalaga sa narinig. That voice! That hidden laughter and mischief in his tone! Pamilyar iyon!

Huminga siya nang malalim at kinalma ang sarili kasabay ng pagpupunas ng luha bago hinarap ang nagsalita.

Her tongue immediately seized up when she finally saw him. *Dear Lord, ano po'ng nangyayari? Seryoso Kayo?*

“Hi, Joey.” The man handed her a cold drink topped with cream, syrup and chocolate chips. “I’m Ice.”

It was the man from the parking area, her former boss’ wife’s hot lover.

*Oh, no!*



Hindi maialis ni Ice ang tingin sa kaharap. He wasn’t prepared for the sight of her tear-stained cheeks, wet eyes and red nose. Akala niya kanina

ay sinisipon o may allergy lang ito. Nagbibiro lang talaga siya na umiiyak ito. Ngayon ay hindi niya alam ang gagawin. He really didn't do well with emotions, especially not ones accompanied by tears.

“What the hell is going on?” di-mapigilang tanong niya, sabay sara ng pinto.

Napakurap ang babae bago suminghot, pagkatapos ay humila ng tissue sa box at dinampian ang mga pisngi at mga mata. “Wala naman, Sir—”

“It's Ice. No calling me ‘Sir,’” he cut her off.

She nodded. “Ice,” then sighed. “M-masaya lang ako, at...” Tumingin siya sa kahon. “May nabasa lang kasi akong sulat ng mga dati kong katrabaho. Medyo touching lang. Ayun, napaiyak ako.” Napayuko ito.

“No, Joey. Look at me,” utos niya.

Agad itong nag-angat ng tingin, namumula na pati mga pisngi. “Sorry.”

“And that's the last time you'll say that.” Sinalubong ni Ice ang tingin nito. “If it's something beyond your control, there's no need to apologize. If it's something you knew you had control over but it still failed, then just own up to it and explain what happened. Sorry is useless, I want action, confidence, results. Are we clear?”

“Yes, S—Ice.” She jerked her chin. Her lips

quivered. Ewan kung bakit napatingin doon ang binata. They're full, not too plump and had a nice shape... as did the rest of her. Joey's understated beauty was too damn obvious, even to his post-sex daze last week in the parking area where they first met. Her big, mono-lidded eyes held him then, even if he was still a bit dizzy with orgasmic high.

“Ano pa, Ice? Ano pa ang dapat kong tandaan?”  
pukaw ni Joey.

*Shit, what was I doing? Why did I let my mind wander?* At bakit iniisip pa niya ang babaeng nasa harap naman niya? “Just be on time in everything that we do. Everything else is in the handbook, I guess.” Lumapit na siya sa pinto ng sariling opisina. “Ate Grace will come in later for a quick briefing. I heard you're a speed reader and can grasp concepts easily, so there shouldn't be much problem learning enough background to prepare you for our meeting later.” Pinasadahan niya ng tingin ang kabuuan nito.

Joey's clothes looked old, but they're neat and tidy. Pin-striped white and pink long-sleeved button down top, dark slacks and what looked like boots, which also seemed old, but polished. Maikli ang maalon nitong buhok at maganda ang balat. There was no need for makeup, but she looked a bit pale

and haggard.

“After the briefing, maybe you should get some air in the fire exit first. O mag-ayos ka pa. Ayokong isipin ng mga taga-ibang department na slave driver ako at toxic magpatrabaho.”

Napaawang ang mga labi ng bagong assistant niya, parang hindi makapaniwala sa narinig at bahagyang nanginig ang baba sa pagpipigil na mapayuko. Hindi nito inalis ang tingin sa kanya.

He bit his tongue to keep from smiling. She’s learning already, not so much like the shocked, confused, obviously insecure girl from the parking area. Sanay siya sa mga babaeng alam at kayang ipahayag ang gusto nila, at kahinaan para sa kanya kapag nagpapakontrol ang isang tao sa emosyon.

“Yes, Ice. I’d be more presentable later.” Bahagyang naningkit ang mga mata nito. “Anything else?”

A corner of his lips turned up. “No more for now, Joey.” And then he stepped into his office before closing the door. His brows knotted as he approached the table. What the hell was that? Did he just low key flirted with his new employee?

A new employee that Ice had to take because he had to save his ass from getting fired by the organization. Walang istriktong rules ang *APDF*

sa personal involvement ng mga tauhan nito, pero maaari silang matanggal ni Abby sakaling may makaalam ng ugnayan nila sa isa't isa. He's a senior consultant, while Abby was the head of their legal department, also the wife of a director.

What they have—or had wasn't even serious. It was really just physical, and she officially ended it on Friday when she requested to see him for lunch at her office. He didn't mind, f\*ck buddies come and go. Anyway, he still had two he could always call for a good, quick f\*ck.

Still, Abby had to make sure their witness didn't either squeal or look too obvious that she knew something. Joey was qualified for the job, anyway. It was just weird having her here now. As weird as the seemingly innate instant fondness he had for her. Hindi iyon kagaya ng kung paano siya sa mga naging staff niya. Hindi niya matukoy eksakto kung bakit may kakaiba kay Joey, pero sigurado siyang ayaw niyang manatili iyon.

Ice hated being somewhat controlled by the unknown, and so he had to assert his authority and tried to intimidate her earlier to tell her he could not be moved by emotions nor did he have time for it. She's here to work, not be anything to him.

But man, she's hot! She's beautiful. He's sure she'd even look more exquisite without her clothes on. *Shit!* Marahas na napailing siya, at napapikit kasabay ang malalim na buntung-hininga. Mabuti na lang at narinig na niya ang maingay na pagpasok ni Ate Grace, at natuon na rin sa nabiting trabaho kanina ang atensyon niya.

Before he knew it, it was already ten minutes before their meeting. Lumabas din sa screen ng laptop niya ang isang message reminder mula kay Joey. Agad na inipon niya ang mga papeles at kinipkip ang laptop. Paglabas niya ay naghihintay na ito, and he had to let out a low whistle when he saw her.

He didn't know how or where she got, it but she had changed into a different blouse—white with tiny flowers in it. Parang ang lambot ng tela niyon na na-highlight ang magandang balik at nito. The blouse fit her perfectly that it almost hugged her torso to the part that was tucked in her slacks that he only realized also fit her in the right places.

*Damn.*

“Uh, Ice... it's probably not my job, pero medyo hindi siya ayos.” Nakatingin si Joey sa kurbata niya. Nakatitig siya sa mukha nitong wala nang bakas ng

pag-iyak kanina. She looked polished, and more than presentable.

Hinila niya ang kurbata, pero humigpit lang iyon. *F\*ck!* He loosened it, tried to fix it with his free hand.

“Ako na nga,” naiiling na sabi ng bagong executive assistant niya. Ibinaba niya ang kamay at pinanood ito sa ginagawa. It was just a tie but she looked so focused she might as well be solving a Math problem. Her fingers grazed his collarbone and the top of his chest through the fabric of his clothes, and his breathing became shallow somehow. She was too damn close. She also smelled good. And why the f\*ck was she biting her lip—

“Ayan, okay na.” Joey looked up at him, tapped his chest then stepped back. Parang kasama nitong lumayo ang kakayahan niyang huminga nang maayos.

*Damn it, I probably just needed to get laid.* “Let’s go.” Tinanguan niya ito at ipinagbukas ng pinto. He tried not to look at the natural slight sway of her hips as she walked past him, or her scent, or the swell of her butt. He bit his tongue as he schooled his features back into cold detachment.

Ice just got rid of trouble, he couldn’t be seeking another again in the form of the woman walking beside him.

## CHAPTER *Three*

*A*w, sorry, gorgeous. I already made plans with the boyfriend. Raincheck? Miss your hotness. Xoxo

*Sayang, babe. Sana you went with me here in Bora instead. I'm with the girls. When I get back?*

Halos magkasunod na dumating ang mga texts na iyon bago mag-alas-siete, kung kailan in-anticipate pa naman ni Ice na may makakasama ngayong gabi. Sina Garchi at Nicka na lang ang natitirang puwede niyang matawagan at mayaya for a 'party' lately. A party for two—in some club's rest room, his car or a hotel if they're near one. Light drinks, small talk and satisfying sex. That's how he rolled, and that's exactly how he liked it.



Natutugunan ang pangangailangan niya nang wala siyang iniintinding expectations o inaalalang damdamin. Ganoon na ang buhay niya sa nakalipas na halos isang dekada, at nasanay na siya sa buhay na ganito kalaya. It's just frustrating when he wanted to f\*ck someone so badly and nobody was available.

This meant a lonesome, slightly pathetic Friday night with pizza, beer and *Netflix* to cap off a rather hectic workweek. Napailing siya habang inililigpit ang mga gamit. Naisip niyang pumunta sa kahit anong party spots kung saan kadalasang may nakikilala siya, pero wala siya sa mood ngayon. Uuwi na lang talaga.

He switched off the lights in his office as he opened the door, and was greeted by the sight of his EA just about to do the same. "Bakit nandito ka pa?" kunot-noong tanong niya.

"Tinapos ko lang 'yung outline at schedule ng mga gagawin ko next week," nakangiting sagot ni Joey, na halata ang pagod pero ayos pa rin ang mood. "Pauwi na rin ako." Tumango ito bago dumerecho sa nakabukas na pinto at ini-off ang ilaw. The dimly lit bullpen was empty when they stepped out. Nauna nang naglakad si Joey habang si Ice ay iniisip kung gagawin ang ideyang ewan kung bakit biglang

pumasok sa isip niya.

Si Joey na rin ang pumindot ng buttons sa elevator na solo lang nila. Magkatabi silang nakatayo sa loob. “Next time, iwasan mo nang magpagabi dito. Nine to six is hectic enough. Unless we have urgent things to finish, there’s no need to overexhaust yourself.”

“I’m not overexhausting myself. Interessante naman talaga ang trabaho natin.” Umangat ang isang kilay nito.

“Maybe, pero iniwasan lang natin ang burnout, ang pagkasawa sa routine.” He unconsciously placed his hand on her back as they stepped out of the elevator when they reached the ground floor. Nagtaka siya sa ginawa, pero hindi rin binawi ang kamay.

“Okay, Ice. Noted.” Joey looked at him, somewhat amused.

“What?” He pursed his lips. He hated it when people look at him as if they’re trying to read him.

His EA shrugged. “Wala, para lang kasing may iba kang gustong sabihin maliban sa work schedule ko.”

*Shit!* He tried to keep a poker face. “May curfew ka ba?”

Nagsalubong ang mga kilay ni Joey. Nasa labas na sila ng main entrance ng building, sa driveway. “I’m almost twenty-nine, Ice. Matagal nang lifted ang curfew ko.”

“So, you can go home later at say, ten?” tanong pa niya. “Eleven?”

“Puwede, bakit?”

“Let’s have dinner. My treat.”

Joey stared at him for several seconds. “Why?”

He shrugged. “Honestly? My supposed dates tonight can’t make it. Ayoko pang umuwi at mag-dinner na mag-isa.”

Parang pinag-isipan muna ng kausap ang isasagot bago ito tumango. “Okay.”

He heaved a sigh of relief. “Great! Let’s just pick a place near you or halfway. Banawe?”

“Bahala ka, Ice. Libre mo naman,” nakangiting sagot nito.

Alam ni Ice na walang magaganap sa kanila ni Joey ngayong gabi nang higit pa sa dinner, pero hindi pa rin niya mapigilan ang excitement habang papunta sa kanyang sasakyan, na suwerteng naipuwesto niya sa front parking nang araw na iyon.

His hand never left its gentle press on her back the whole time, and he loved feeling the slight dip

of her spine and her warm skin underneath the fabric of her oxford top. Ipinagbukas pa niya ng pinto ang babae na kita ang pagtataka sa ginawa niya pero tahimik lang. When he finally sat beside her and started the engine, he didn't know why he suddenly felt so alive. Parang hindi niya ma-contain ang excitement na hindi niya alam kung saan galing.

*But it's just dinner! We're really just going to eat!*

Then again, yes... It's just dinner. He didn't do dinners, not unless it's for work. Never with a new employee or any employee for that matter. Never with a woman he's somewhat attracted to. And never *this* excited.



Alam ni Ice na puwede namang manahimik na lang siya habang nagda-drive papunta sa kung saan man nila mapipiling mag-dinner ni Joey. Pero ewan kung bakit ilang minuto pa lang silang nakakalabas ng *APDF* ay hindi na niya kinaya ang katahimikan. He told Joey to choose the radio station they would listen to, and she picked something that had news and music. A good driving song from *Red Jumpsuit Apparatus* played and he still couldn't relax.

Para siyang nasa first date na hindi mapakali dahil hindi sigurado sa ginagawa. Panay ang sulyap

niya kay Joey na mukhang kampante sa tabi niya. Meanwhile, he's nervous and he didn't know why. Maybe because he hadn't done this in years? Shit, but this was *not* a date!

Still, only one woman had made him feel this nervous the last time. Come to think of it, that was also the last that he had anyone in his car without the clear intention of luring her to bed later.

“May preference ka ba na gustong kainin? Cravings? Please don't tell me you're on some hour-dependent diet. Are you vegetarian?” sa wakas ay nagawa niyang magsalita, and he just babbled his way through the questions!

Bahagyang natawa ang katabi niya. Hindi nakaligtas sa kanya na parang pilit at medyo sarcastic iyon. “Diet? Tingnan mo naman ang itsura ko, Ice.” Napailing ito. “I love vegetables but no, not vegetarian. Wala din akong craving o preference. Hindi ako mapili. Kahit sa carinderia tayo kumain o sa mga street carts, walang problema.” She tilted her head and looked at him. “Baka ikaw ang mapili, Boss?” she teased.

There's a certain glint in her eyes when she said that, it was somehow seductive and the thought went straight to his groin. *F\*ck!* “Hindi rin ako mapili.

Pinagdaanan din namin ni Papa at ng kapatid ko ang hirap noong bata pa 'ko. There were times na fishballs o isaw ang ulam namin nang ilang araw dahil iyon lang ang kaya at convenient. We didn't complain. Masarap din kasi," he smiled wistfully. "I was thinking of pizza earlier, but now I'm not so sure." He changed lanes as traffic became less congested when they turned on Quezon Avenue. "Mag-decide na lang tayo when we reach the strip."

Joey just nodded in response, and with that, the silence between them as they cruised through the evening rush hour seemed to be more comfortable. Lumiko sila sa Santo Domingo at binagalan niya ang pagpapatakbo para matingnan ang mga restaurant at café na nadadaanang nila.

Kahit tila tahimik ang mga nadadaanang kalye ay maliwanag doon at parang punuan ang mga kainan. Ang tiningnan na lang tuloy ni Ice ay kung saan madaling mag-park. He found a space in front of a bank beside a dining place that advertised good, healthy Asian fusion food on its chalkboard menu by the front steps. He looked at his companion, she just smiled and his heart started beating faster by the time he eased the car into a parking slot.

Agad siyang bumaba, at medyo na-disappoint

nang makitang bumaba na rin si Joey bago pa man niya ito maipagbukas ng pinto. Dumerecho sila sa restaurant at saktong may paalis kaya nag-order na sila habang hinihintay na malinis ang mesa.

It was a table for four in the corner, beside a low window with the view of a small Japanese garden. Noon din lang niya napansin ang intimate setting ng restaurant, kahit na mga pamilya o barkada ang ibang naroon. The lights were dimmer than usual and the muted colors of the interiors made the atmosphere cozier. Minasdan niya si Joey na pasimpleng inililibot din ang tingin sa paligid.

“Like it?” his voice faltered a bit.

“Ang ganda!” Nakangiting sinalubong nito ang tingin niya. “Hindi pa ’ko napupunta sa ganito. Thank you.”

Nagulat siya sa sinabi nito, pero hindi na siya nagkomento. Nang isa-isang isilbi ang mga pagkain, pareho lang silang nakatingin doon. Higit na malaki sa inaasahan nilang “for sharing” na sinabi ng receptionist.

“Man, I love food and these all looks good, pero hindi ko yata kayang ubusin kahit kalahati.” Ipinagsalin niya ng salad sa plato nito ang kaharap. “Okay na ’to?” Nang mapansin niyang takang

nakatingin si Joey ay saka niya na-realize ang ginagawa. “Oh, shit! Sorry, sorry!”

Natawa ang babae, “Okay lang! Ako din...” Siya naman ang sinalinan nito ng crab cakes sa plato.

Tinitigan lang ni Ice ang babae, namamangha sa pagbabago rito. Noong Lunes lang ay para itong damsel-in-distress na nasindak, pero nitong nakalipas na mga araw ay kaya nang makipagtitigan sa kanya. Wala siyang reklamo roon, gusto niya ang nakikita. He was just somehow... amazed.

“Kain na, Ice! Ang sarap ng salad, pati nito.” And then she placed a slice of crab cake in her mouth then chewed. Then she raised a brow at him and pointed at his food with her fork.

Napakurap ang binata bago hinarap na rin ang pagkain. Tama ito, masarap nga ang mga appetizer ng restaurant pero masarap ding tingnan ang kaharap niyang nakakaaliw panoorin. Medyo wala itong finesse, halos sunud-sunod ang subo at muntik pang masamid isang beses. Napangalahati ni Joey ang isang baso ng tubig bago itinuloy ang pagkain with the same vigor.

Halos hindi niya inaalís ang tingin sa kaharap kahit busy rin siya sa pag-ubos ng pagkain na nasa plato. She was so adorable, and he hadn't called



anyone that. Usually, a woman was hot, sexy, seductive, inviting, but never adorable. He couldn't believe he's actually watching someone eat and not really thinking how he'd undress her later.

*Shit! Goddammit, can I not think about sex for a minute?*

Dumerecho uli siya ng upo at uminom ng tubig. Ang mga dimsum at sushi naman ang sinunod nilang kainin. This time, they began talking about their week, some about work and the people they interacted with. Lalo niyang napatunayan na madaling naka-adjust si Joey sa trabaho nito at nakuha ang mga sinabi niya noong una silang magkita. Joey felt and sounded more like an equal now and he had never felt this kind of pride.

Hindi nila maubos ang mga order nila. Lahat ay marami pang tira kaya ipinabalot na lang niya iyon habang hinihintay ang dessert. "You're bringing those home, okay? Mas may silbi sa 'yo kesa sa 'kin."

Ngumiti ang dalaga. "Salamat." Halatang nahihiya na medyo naiilang ito. When their dessert arrived, a bowl of green tea ice cream which Joey agreed to share, he felt like he had to ease her worries, whatever they were.

"I had plans tonight, Joey. Hindi seryoso. Tipong

inaasahan ko lang sana pero hindi natuloy. Naisip kong mag-pizza at mag-marathon na lang ng mga series sa *Netflix* pero n'ung makita kong hindi ka pa umuwi, naisip kong mas okay siguro kung i-celebrate ko na lang 'yung nakalipas na isang linggo na mas gumaan at medyo dumali ang trabaho ko dahil sa wakas ay may efficient at effective na akong EA." He smiled, then took a spoonful of ice cream from the bowl. "Okay?"

She blinked. "I... I... uh," she sighed. "Sorry, ang totoo, kinakabahan ako at naisip na paraan mo lang ito para sabihing walang kuwenta ang trabaho ko at ibabalik mo na 'ko sa Central Ops, which is okay, really. Uhm..." She smiled uncertainly. "I'm glad I've been doing a good job naman pala. Medyo nalulunod lang ako minsan sa dami ng impormasyon pero... pero promise, nae-enjoy ko. Ang dami kong natututunan. Salamat." Her fingers nervously traced the patterns on the handle of her spoon.

Si Ice naman ang napakurap sa narinig mula rito. "Are you f\*cking serious?" he whispered, then grabbed her hand to squeeze it. Suddenly he caught himself. *Shit, what now?* Pero hindi niya iyon binitawan, nanatili lang siyang nakatingin kay Joey na ngayon ay namumula. Under the dim lighting,

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she looked ethereal. Her big eyes, her slightly pursed lips, the way she kept her gaze on him—there was just something sacred about it. Sacred was a word nobody would ever associate with him, but at that moment, it felt like he somehow earned the right.

*Who are you, Joey? Why are you doing this to me?*

## CHAPTER *Four*

“*H*ay, buti naman at isinuot mo uli ’yan, at ginamit pati ’yang bag. Ganyan dapat lagi, Joey. Bagay sa iyo at lalo kang gumanda. Lalo ka ding bumagay sa boss mong pogi.”

Napatingin si Joey kay Tito Raul, na naging parang tatay na niya at itinuring siyang anak sa loob ng nakalipas na labing-apat na taon. Kontento at parang ang saya ng ngiti nito habang papalabas sila ng España para sa unang biyahe nito nang araw na iyon.

Pag-aari na nito ang jeep na minamaneho, at siya lagi ang nag-iisang katabi nito sa una at huling biyahe kada araw maliban na lang kung lumalabas sila ni Ice para kumain, na nitong nakalipas na

buwan simula nang lumipat siya sa *SDCC* ay regular na nangyayari tuwing Biyernes ng gabi.

“Tito talaga, pati si Ice, gusto mong ireto sa ’kin.” Napailing siya. Dalawang beses nang nagkita ang tiyuhin niya at si Ice nang nagkataong nagkasabay ang paghatid nito sa kanya sa *APDF* at pagpasok ng sasakyan ni Ice. Her boss even got out of his car to shake hands with her uncle the first time they met, and on the second time, Ice gave him a shirt from one of his trips.

Malaking bagay iyon sa tiyuhin niya, na palagi siyang sinasabihan na huwag niyang obligahin ang sarili na tulungan ito. He’s in his late fifties, married to her Tita Lydia who’s been undergoing therapy after surviving a stroke two years ago. Ang panganay ng mga ito na si Ate Trish ay may dalawang anak sa magkaibang lalaki at hindi gaanong maasahan kahit malaki ang kita bilang isa sa mga managers ng isang BPO company, kaya si Joey na halos ang nagpapaaral sa mga anak nito. Tumutulong din siya sa working student na nakababatang pinsan na si Benjie, na gaya ni Tito Raul ay naging napakabuti sa kanya.

It didn’t matter anymore that her aunt and older cousin didn’t really want to take her in after she was orphaned at fifteen when her parents died in a bus

accident. Her mother's older brother, Tito Raul, was more than enough to assure her she'd be okay. Hindi nga lamang naging madali ang maging okay siya.

“At iniingatan ko lang itong mga regalo n’yo ni Benjie. Ayokong masira agad,” nakangiting sabi niya na ang tinutukoy ay ang suot na shift dress na asul na may maliliit na white floral print. Hanggang tuhod iyon, may V-neck at short sleeves, at maganda ang tela. It was from an international brand at siguradong at least isang libo ang halaga, gaya ng bag niyang galing naman sa isang sikat na local brand. Nitong magkasunod na taon ng birthday niya ay palihim na nag-iipon ang tiyuhin at pinsan para ibili siya ng regalo dahil sinabihan niya ang mga ito na huwag nang maghanda. She cried on both times she saw the gift in her small room, and promised herself that as long as she could, she'd be a blessing to both.

“Dagdagan mo ’yang mga ganyang gamit mo, Joey. Kailangan mo ’yan dahil mas maganda na ang posisyon mo at marami kang hinaharap na tao. Huwag mo kaming masyadong intindihin, ha? Alam kong iniisip mo na gusto mo lang gantihan ang ginawa naming pag-aalaga sa iyo, pero hindi ka naging pabigat kaya wala kang ibang dapat gawin kundi i-enjoy lang ang buhay mo.”

They often had this conversation, at times she would argue that she just wanted to take care of them too, and there were times that she'd just smile and stay quiet. Dala niya ang ngiting iyon hanggang makapasok sa grand lobby ng *APDF*, at makaakyat sa floor nila. Halos magkasunod lang silang dumating ni Ice, na pumasok na may kausap sa phone nito habang hinahawi niya ang blinds ng bintana sa likod ng kanyang desk at upuan.

“Shit!” he muttered as he stared at her, then quickly apologized to whoever was on the other line. “Yeah, I know you’re a piece of shit, bro, but that wasn’t for you. I just saw something I didn’t expect, that’s all,” he smirked before he ended the call.

“Good morning!” bati ng dalaga bago niyuko ang computer at nag-log-in sa *APDF* account niya.

“Good morning “ he slowly said as he gave her a once-over. Parang hindi makapaniwala si Ice sa itsura niya. Masyado bang OA for a Friday? “Going somewhere after work?”

Tumaas ang isang kilay niya. “Wala lang akong ibang maisuot. Wala akong pupuntahan mamaya.” *Unless you have plans*, she wanted to add but that would be presumptuous. Kahit walang palya nitong nakalipas na mga linggo ang Friday night dinners

nila ni Ice ay ayaw niyang umasang ganoon lagi.

He's probably just bored, or just didn't like being alone as he tried new restaurants. Walang ibig sabihin ang tingin nito sa kanya ngayon, o ang ilang beses na nahuhuli niyang tinitingnan siya ni Ice for that matter. What could it possibly mean, anyway?

Ilang segundong minasdan lang siya ng lalaki bago tumango. "Looks good on you, though," he nonchalantly said as he pushed open the door to his office.

Ngumiti siya. "Thank you. At least, hindi na 'ko alangang itabi sa iyo."

"Bakit at kailan ka nag-alangang tumabi sa 'kin?" Nangunot ang noo nito.

Natawa siya. "Seryoso ka, Boss?"

"Joey, if this had anything to do with me being your superior then I'm telling you—"

"No, it's not that, Ice." Naaaliw na siya sa reaksyon nito.

"Then what is it? You know I never liked anyone feeling inferior or that they're less worthy, Joey. Nilinaw ko 'yan sa umpisa pa lang," giit nito.

"Ice..." Nangingiting tumayo ang babae, at pinaglandas ang tingin sa kabuuan nito. His tall, lean frame, his muscles defined in all the right places. His



broad shoulders, his strong arms and the sinewy vein in his hands. His golden skin, his fine wavy hair with errant strands always falling over his proud forehead. Those piercing eyes, partly obscured by his glasses that rested comfortably on that Roman nose, those luscious lips that now pursed in concentration as he tried to figure out what she was talking about. The near perfect angles of his face.

“Sasabihin mo ba o titingnan mo lang ako gaya n’ung kung paano mo tingnan ’yung steak sa kinainan natin last week?”

Napakurap siya bago natawa nang malakas. Nagsalubong ang mga kilay ni Ice. “I’m sorry, hindi ko alam na ganyan ka ka-clueless. Pero dahil nabanggit na din lang ang steak, and much as it may sound inappropriate—yes, exactly, that’s it.” Pumitik siya sa hangin. “You’re a piece of tummy prime steak, Ice. Sakto ang pagka-marinate, almost perfect ang pagkaluto, pati na ng side dish.” Napangisi siya nang mapansin ang bahagyang pamumula ni Ice. “At ako? Adobong pork chop siguro. Generic, madaling iluto, nothing special,” she shrugged.

Muli ay minasdan siya ni Ice bago napailing. “Hindi pa rin dahilan ’yon para maalangan ka, at sana hindi mo na ulit maramdaman ang ganyan.” He

stepped inside his office. “I beg to differ, but there will always be something special about adobo,” he paused, “at favorite ko ang pork chop.”

She caught his smirk before he closed the door. She stared at it for several seconds before she sat again. Dama niya ang pag-iinit ng mga pisngi, ang di-maipaliwanag na pagbilis ng pulso sa sinabi nito.

She dared not think that meant anything.



Ilang beses nang napapahinto mula sa trabaho si Ice at naiisip ang palitan nila ni Joey kanina. Did he just tell her he like her? That he found her attractive? *Steak? Pork chop?*

Napailing siya. Hindi maikakailang maganda ang EA niya at lalo pang lumutang ang ganda nito dahil sa suot. Joey looked radiant in that dress, and he just knew she was indeed hiding some enticing curves underneath the button-down shirt and slacks she was often seen in. Shit, he couldn't get her out of his head now!

Kailan ba siya huling naging ganito kalapit sa isang babae na hindi niya ito nagawang imbitahin sa kama niya matapos lang ang ilang minuto ng pag-uusap? Hindi niya maalala! Ngayon ay lampas isang buwan nang nagtatrabaho sa kanya si Joey, maayos

ang relasyon nila—hell, he could even say they're friends! And they've been going out every Friday night, often without any intention on his part to try to seduce her.

Even if the way she ate was like a slow, subtle invitation. Even if she smelled so good all the time. Even if it was always easy for him to touch her—granted that it was just his palm on her lower back whenever they walked side by side, or him holding her hand on the drive home. Holding hands! Kailan ba niya huling ginawa iyon?

And were they really somehow flirting earlier?  
*Steak and pork chop, really?*

Ice straightened in his seat and sighed. Hindi puwede ang nararamdaman niyang ito. Kailangang putulin na niya habang maaga pa. Kaya naman niyang mag-dinner nang mag-isa kapag Biyernes ng gabi. Bakit niya hahayaan ang sariling maging miserable ang pakiramdam dahil mag-isa siya? He's been alone for almost a decade now!

When evening came and he heard Joey's now familiar knocking, he had to take a deep breath before answering.

"Mauna na 'ko, Ice," sabi nito, halatang distracted. Kinakabahan ba ito?

“Okay, ingat ka, Joey,” marahang sabi niya. Inaasahan niyang titingnan siya ni Joey nang may pagtataka o pagtatanong, pero tumango lang ito.

“Thanks, ikaw din.” At agad na itong tumalikod, mabilis ang lakad na parang nagmamadali. Hindi alam ng binata kung bakit parang nainis pa siya sa reaksyon nito.

Still, he resolved to try and keep his distance the next time he saw her. He thought it wouldn't be easy, given Joey's disposition. Pero hindi niya inasahan ang pagiging tahimik nito nang muli niyang makita. Para ring pagod ito at kulang sa tulog. Gusto niyang magtanong kung may problema ito sa bahay o kung ano pa, but that would mean breaking his resolve. He was keeping his distance, he shouldn't care anymore.

Anyway, he knew her story. He heard from her former colleagues. She's been through a lot, but she survived. Kung anuman ang pinagdadaanan ni Joey ay kaya nito iyon. Hindi siya nito kailangan.

Ilang araw ring ganoon si Joey, tutok ang atensyon sa trabaho pero parang may kung anong gumugulo rin dito.

“Here are the approval papers from Accounting. Nandiyan na din 'yung printout ng e-tickets, confirmation email at resibo para sa car service at

accommodation for our Laos mission.” Inilapag ni Joey sa mesa niya ang isang folder. In two weeks ay lilipad sila patungong Laos para sa apat na araw ng mission.

Mission ang tawag ng *APDF* sa mga advocacy campaigns, seminars at workshops at project turnovers na isinasagawa nila sa mga bayan o bansa na pinagkakalooban ng funding ng *APDF*. Unang overseas trip ni Ice simula nang ma-assign sa *APDF* Manila ang Laos, at unang out of the country trip din iyon ni Joey.

Nang sabihin niya sa EA ang tungkol doon last week ay na-excite ito. Now that all their papers were ready, it's like she didn't care anymore.

Ayaw man niya ay hindi niya maiwasang mag-alala. “You okay, Joey?”

“I'm good,” anitong pilit ang ngiti, sabay thumbs-up. “Balik na 'ko sa ipinapagawa mo, ha?” Tumulikod na ito para lumabas.

“Don't rush. Next week ko pa 'yan kailangan!” he called after her. She just waved a hand dismissively in response.

Lumipas ang maghapon na wala nang narinig ang binata mula kay Joey. In-assume niyang umuwi na ito bandang alas seis at hindi na nagawang

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magpaalam sa kanya.

Malapit nang mag-seven thirty nang sa wakas ay isara niya ang laptop at iligpit ang mga dokumento. Ilang saglit na hinilot niya ang sentido at minasahe ang leeg bago tumayo at kinuha ang backpack. He turned off the air-conditioning unit and the lights before he pulled open the door, and muttered an expletive at what he saw.

Joey was curled up in her chair, asleep. Mukhang kanina pa ito tulog dahil bahagyang nakaawang ang mga labi at steady na ang paghinga. Yakap nito ang sarili at ginawang kumot ang itim na cardigan. Nasa ibabaw ng mesa nito ang backpack at cellphone na umiilaw.

Tiningnan niya iyon. It was her alarm. She set it to go off at seven. Seven thirty-five na. Lumapit siya sa natutulog na babae at marahang tinapik ang braso nito.

“Joey...” mahinang tawag niya bago ang pisngi nito naman ang tinapik. “Hey, wake up. You can’t sleep here,” sabi niya bago maingat na hinawi ang buhok na tumabing sa isang mata nito. “Well, you can but not like this.” He sighed, then tapped her cheek again. “Joey...”

Her eyes fluttered, then she gasped when she

saw him hovering. Mahigpit na napahawak si Joey sa kamay niyang nasa pisngi nito bago dumerecho ng upo.

“Shit, sorry! Anong oras na?” paos na tanong nito bago binitawan ang kamay niya. “Sorry! Hindi ako nagising sa alarm. Dapat isang oras lang akong matutulog para hindi antukin sa biyahe. Hindi pa naman ako masusundo ni Tito Raul,” dere-derechong sabi nito habang inaayos ang sarili.

“Ano’ng nangyari sa tito mo?”

Napakurap ito. “Ah, maaga lang siyang gumagarahe para bantayan sa hospital ’yung pamangkin kong nagka-dengue. Last Friday siya dinala at ilang araw na kaming salitan ni Tito at ni Benjie sa pagbabantay kaya pasensya na kung lagi akong sabog lately.” Napangiwi ito.

Nagsalubong ang mga kilay ni Ice. “Wala bang nanay ang pamangkin mo? Bakit kayo ang nagbabantay? Puwedeng mag-leave ang pinsan mo as single parent.”

Isinukbit muna ni Joey sa balikat ang backpack at nauna nang lumabas kasabay ang pag-switch off ng ilaw sa opisina bago sumagot. “Ewan ko d’un. Mahirap asahan, eh.”

“Nasanay yatang nand’yan kayo lagi.”

Hindi ito kumibo, nakayuko lang habang palabas sila ng *SDCC*.

“Im sorry.” Hinawakan niya ito sa braso. “I’m just...” Damn it, now what? “I’m just... c-concerned because you didn’t look too well lately. Sinisiguro ko ngang hindi ka pinapag-overtime dahil toxic na as it is ang trabaho ’tapos hindi ka rin pala nakakapag-relax sa inyo.”

Sumulyap ito sa kanya. “Hindi naman madalas na ganito.”

Napailing siya. “Do you have to be at the hospital tonight? Mag-half day ka na lang bukas.”

“Ice...” she sighed wearily.

“Ayoko ng inaantok at hindi alertong EA, Joey,” paalala ng binata nang lumabas sila ng elevator sa ground floor. “At ihahatid kita, saang hospital?” Agad dumako ang kamay niya sa likod nito. There goes his resolve. There goes distance. There goes not caring.

“*UST Hospital...* Ice, hindi na kailangan. Kaya ko na, nakabawi na ’ko ng tulog.”

Iginiya lang niya ang kasama sa direksyon ng parking area. “We’ll get some dinner first, kahit takeout. Kumusta ang pamangkin mo? May update ba?”

Bahagyang ngumiti si Joey. “Stable na. Walang



komplikasyon o infection pagkatapos salinan ng dugo. Puwede nang lumabas by Friday or Saturday.”

“That’s good, then.” Ipinagbukas niya ito ng pinto ng sasakyan. “Hindi ka na gaanong mag-aalala. Makakapag-rest ka na kahit papaano.”

“Yeah,” mahinang sabi ng babae, na dama niyang pinapanood ang bawat galaw niya hanggang makaupo siya sa tabi nito.

Ice tried not to think about how strangely natural and comforting it all felt to do this, for her. Paanong nangyaring mula sa planong pag-iwas kay Joey ay nagkukumahog siya ngayong siguraduhing nasa ayos ito?

“Ice...” Hinuli ni Joey ang kamay niya. Napatingin siya rito. “Thank you. Hindi ko alam kung bakit ginagawa mo ito, pero thank you talaga...”

Ilang saglit na minasdan niya ang katabi bago pinisil ang kamay nito. “Just rest some more, Joey. Gigisingin kita kapag malapit na tayo.” Itinuon na niya ang atensyon sa pagmamaneho. *I don’t know why I’m doing this, either.*