

CHAPTER *One*

Lincoln Montejano initially thought that the guest speaker he was supposed to meet at the parking lot was a dude. He was only given a name and a few information.

Kennedy Ballesteros. *Fieldston Academy* alumnus. Batch 2004. Presently working as a senior project analyst at what was infamously known as one of the most corrupt government agencies. Inasahang darating ito nang alas dos. Black and red *Honda Rebel* ang sasakyan at MC-70113 ang plaka.

Dapat ay pauwi na siya, pero pinakiusapan ng principal na kung maaari ay siya ang sumundo sa huling bisita para sa unang araw ng Career Week ng mga senior high school students. Ang taong

naka-assign dapat sa pag-assist sa mga paparating na speakers ay kinailangang umuwi kanina dahil nagkaroon ito ng isang family emergency.

Now he stood by the front steps of the main building, waiting with a huge black umbrella. Kanina pa kasi maulan.

Six minutes before two. Hindi niya inasahang darating agad ang hinihintay dahil ma-traffic tiyak sa daan, pero kaaalis pa lang ng kanyang tingin sa wristwatch ay nakita na niyang pinapapasok ng guard sa Gate 2 ang isang astig na customized motorcycle.

Hindi niya mabistahan ang driver sa suot nitong helmet, pero halatang eksperto sa pagpa-park dahil mabilis nitong nailagay sa reserved slot ang motor. Patakabong lumapit siya at inantabayanan ang pagbaba ni Mr. Ballesteros.

Inalis ng hindi katangkaran at payat na bisita ang helmet nito. “Good afternoon, Mist—” Nabitin ang sasabihin niya nang makita ang hanggang balikat na buhok, at na-realize na isang petite na babae ang umibis sa sasakyan. Cream button-down blouse tucked in a pair of slim coal grey slacks ang suot nito sa ilalim ng jacket na ibinaba agad nito ang zipper. Iitim na boots ang suot nito sa paa, na kapareho ng

kulay ng dala nitong backpack.

“Good afternoon. I’m Ken Ballesteros,” nakaangat ang isang kilay na bati nito, sabay abot ng kamay.

“L-Lincoln Montejano,” he croaked as he shook her warm hand, then cleared his throat. “This way, please.” Magaang na hinawakan niya ang isang braso nito para maalalayan habang paakyat sila ng building.

Matipid na ngumiti ang babae. “Nice to meet you, Mr. Montejano.” Bumaba ang tingin ni Ken sa kamay niyang muntik na niyang alisin sa braso nito. A corner of her lips quirked into a more appreciative smile. Then she mouthed, “Thanks!” before she looked straight ahead.

Sa ilang minutong paghahanda ni Lincoln mula kaninang pakiusapang sunduin ang bisita ay naikondisyon na niya ang sariling lalaki ang sasamahan. He would make small talk, ask about his time at *Fieldston Academy*, the traffic or weather going here. He knew he could handle it.

He just didn’t expect he’d be meeting and would have to take care of Miss Kennedy Ballesteros, and now he’s in a complete loss—for words, of his faculties even.

“So, what do you do here, Mr. Montejano?”

Napasinghap siya nang marinig ang boses ng kasabay na papunta sa holding room para sa speakers. “I’m... I’m with the Art Department. I t-teach Art History and Visual Arts,” his voice cracked. *Shit!* “Sa senior high school.”

“Cool.” Mukhang impressed si Kennedy nang bumaling sa kanya. “I loved Art back in high school. Art and Math.”

“Me, too. I loved Math but I thought Trigonometry was useless,” he heard himself say. He didn’t know why he’s nervous. Parang may dumadagundong sa dibdib niya. Hindi naman sobrang nakakamangha ang ganda ni Kennedy.

Mas bagay rito ang salitang ‘cute’ o ‘pretty’. Bilugan ang mga mata, bahagya lang ang tangos ng ilong, makipot ang mapupulang labi. Her complexion was a few shades lighter than medium, her body was athletic and slender. Hanggang balik at nito ang tuwid na buhok na may fringes at side bangs. He wouldn’t exactly give her a double-take but she’d definitely catch his eyes.

“Oh, God.” she groaned. “I don’t get that shit either. Pagka-graduate ko, kinalimutan ko na ang pesteng subject na iyon.”

Napakurap ang binata at napangiti habang

itinutulak pabukas ang pinto ng holding room na konektado sa isang maliit na hallway papunta sa stage ng auditorium.

“Oh, hey, this is nice. Walang ganito noong panahon ko. Mukha itong bodega.” Iginala nito ang tingin sa malawak na silid. May dalawang L-shaped couches doon, tatlong pang-apatang dining sets at maliit na kusina. “Okay naman ’yung bodega dati. Malinis at maayos kahit madilim.” Sinimulan nitong alisin ang malaking backpack na dala, na hindi naman ganoon kabigat. “Oh, thanks.”

He stood so close to her side and he thought his heart stopped when she turned, eyes sparkling. “Uh, you’re welcome.” Umatras siya dala ang backpack ni Kennedy at ipinatong iyon sa isang silya. Pagbaling muli sa babae ay hinuhubad naman nito ang jacket.

She slithered out of the garment so gracefully he couldn’t tear his eyes from her. Nakayuko ang babae habang ginagawa iyon kaya malaya niyang napagmasdan. Ipinatong nito ang jacket sa upuang pinaglagyan ng backpack bago tumingin sa kanya. “You okay? Kailangan mo na bang umalis?”

“Uhm... no. I’m good. I’m supposed to keep you company until it’s your turn on the podium.” Steady naman ang boses niya, thank God! Pero nanuyo

yata bigla ang lalamunan ni Lincoln nang dumako ang mga kamay ng babae sa mga butones mg long-sleeved dress shirt nito at sinimulamg alisin iyon. *Wha...?* “There’s... there’s a washroom over there,” turo niya sa isang pinto, na sinundan ng tingin ng babae. “J-just in case.”

“Just in case what?” Two buttons were loosened and her fingers still worked on another one. Gusto na niyang pigilan ang mga kamay nito. What was this woman doing to him?

“Just in case gusto mong mag-ayos?”

“Magulo ba itsura ko? Amoy kalye?” Nangunot ang noo ni Kennedy bago napatingin sa isang mesa kung saan may trays ng finger food at pastries.

Shit, I forgot about the food! “Kain ka muna pala.” Natatarantang ipinaghila niya ito ng upuan. “I’m sorry. You look good. Hindi magulo. Hindi ko intensyong mang-insulto.”

Natawa ito. “Hindi ako nainsulto, Lincoln. Relax.” Tinapik nito ang braso niya. “Join me, please?”

Tahimik na naupo siya sa bandang kaliwa at inabutan ito ng paper plate at plastic utensils. “Drinks? Iced tea? Juice? Water?” He reached for a nearby cooler.

“Iced tea,” nakangiting sagot ng dalaga habang pinupuno ng pagkain ang plato. “Thank you, Lincoln.”

Napangiwi siya. “Linc is fine. Lincoln sounds a bit silly.” Siya na rin ang nagbukas ng bote ng iced tea. Kumalma na ang tibok ng kanyang puso at nawala na ang bahagyang pangininginig niya. Medyo nailang lang siya dahil derecho sa mata ang tingin ni Kennedy kapag nakikipag-usap. Tila naaalih rin ito sa kanya, at kaunti na lang ay matatawa na.

Understandable because he’s been fumbling his way around since he met her at the parking lot.

Hindi talaga torpe o mahiyain si Lincoln. Kulang lang sa practice. For the past five years, he spent his life nearly like a recluse. Trabaho at bahay lang ang routine niya, at personal choice niya iyon.

It was his way of healing, of recovering from having the rest of his life taken away from him over five years ago. Naka-move on na siya, pero nasanay na yata siya sa comfort at safe zone niya. He hadn’t even talked, or been this close and alone with a woman he didn’t know things about, for five years. Hindi siya handa.

Hindi siya handa sa nararamdaman simula nang makita si Kennedy. Para itong bagyong minuto lang

ang itinagal, pero ang tindi ng impact at pinsalang dala.

He was so devastatingly in awe of her that he asked just one question. *What was your life like in high school?*

She graciously indulged him, and gave an animated account of her high school days. Halatang na-enjoy nito iyon, at kahit mesmerized ay nagawa niyang ma-absorb ang mga pinagsasabi nito. She talked in between bites, and even with her mouth full. Her hand gestures and facial expressions, even the occasional voice impressions were fascinating. Bagay itong storyteller sa mga preschoolers na madaling ma-distract.

“Oh, good. May fifteen minutes pa,” nakangiting sabi nito nang makita ang oras sa wristwatch pagkatapos kumain. “I’ll just freshen up.” Tumayo ito at may kinuhang itim na pouch sa backpack. “Bibilisan ko, promise.”

“Take your time,” he told her as he tidied up the table. Ngiti lang ang sagot ni Kennedy bago pumasok sa washroom. Lincoln was normally never vain, but he just had to check his face in the mirror near the main door. He was surprised to see that he had a pinkish tinge on his cheeks, and that his eyes

somehow sparkled.

What the hell...! Sumulyap siya sa wristwatch; ten more minutes. Pag-angat ng tingin ay siya namang paglabas ni Kennedy ng banyo.

She had on some makeup, put her hair up in a high ponytail and smelled like minty citrus. She was so pretty he was sure his male students would have a hard time focusing on her lecture.

“Maayos na ’ko?” she grinned.

“Hindi ka naman magulo in the first place.”

Tumaas ang isang kilay nito bago ibinalik sa bag ang pouch at inilabas ang isang pares ng salamin sa mata na isinuot nito. It had thin black frames and looked good on her. Pagkatapos ay ang tablet naman ang kinuha nito sa backpack bago iyon isinara. “My lecture notes.” Tinapik nito ang braso niya. “Let’s go, Sir Linc.”

Kennedy Ballesteros was an engaging, naturally funny, insightful and very smart speaker. She was a hit with the students, and as predicted, the boys were as mesmerized as he was. Kalahati ng mga itinanong pagkatapos ng lecture ay panay personal na dahil ayon sa mga estudyante, na-cover na ng dalaga ang lahat sa lecture.

Kaya ngayon, alam na niyang kung hindi lang

hassle ay mas gusto ni Kennedy ang mag-commute; na paborito nitong TV series ang *Hannibal*, *Sherlock* at *Orphan Black*; na mahilig ito sa mga pagkaing putok-batok pero suki naman ng fun runs, mahilig kumanta at sumayaw kahit sintunado at matigas ang katawan.

“Miss Ken, we don’t see any ring on your fingers but do you have a boyfriend?”

Hinanap agad ng mga mata ni Lincoln ang nagtanong. It was their winger for the girls’ soccer team. Agad naghiyawan ang mga kaklase nito, at karamihan ay tumingin pa sa gawi niya sa gilid ng stage, katabi ang mga co-teachers na organizers ng event. Lihim siyang napamura. There’s going to be a follow-up question. He was sure of it. Napayuko siya, at hinintay ang sagot ni Kennedy.

“Nope. No boyfriend. As in zero, guys,” natatawang sagot nito. “May ipapakilala ba kayo?”

Oh, crap! Here it goes. Hindi siya nag-angat ng tingin kahit sinisiko na mga katabi.

“Nakilala mo na siya, Miss Ken!” sabi ng isa pa niyang estudyante, the school’s star debater. “What can you say about Sir Linc? Single pa siya!”

Damn! Puwede kayang maglaho muna siya ngayon?

“Hoy, Lincoln! Huwag ka ngang ganyan! Our lovely guest is looking at you. Head up, dear.”

Alanganing nag-angat siya ng tingin, mahinang humingi ng paumanhin sa assistant principal na nagsalita, at sinalubong ang mga mata ni Kennedy.

Makahulugan ang ngiti nito at minasdan siya mula ulo hanggang paa, dahilan para magkagulo ang mga estudyante niya.

“He is very good-looking,” umpisa ng dalaga. “Hmm... sakto. Type ko pa naman ang medyo moreno na matangkad, mukhang malakas...” she grinned. “Check out those arms, though.” And then she gave a wolf whistle.

Christ! Hindi na niya napigilan ang ngiti. Why the hell was he smiling?

“And that smile.” Ken looked smug as she faced the audience. “Puwedeng-puwede! Mabango pa,” she grinned wickedly. Hiyawan lalo ang mga estudyante, at pati ang mga kasama niya ay nakikitungso.

Lincoln never liked being put on the spot like this. But for some reason, he felt a part of him was freed the moment he had to meet Kennedy’s eyes again.



“I’m so sorry about the kids. Makukulit talaga

ang mga iyon kung minsan at walang sinasanto. Mababait naman sila at alam kong marami din silang natutunan sa iyo. Medyo pasaway lang.”

Napahinto si Kennedy sa pag-aayos ng mga regalong padala ng Career Week committee. An elegant glass and aluminum plaque that doubled as a mini desk organizer, a box set of organic bath products and a tin of miniature chocolates. Thankfully, everything fit in her trusty backpack.

“Wala ’yun, ano ka ba.” Dismissive na ikinumpas niya ang kamay bago kinuha ang jacket mula kay Lincoln at isinuot iyon. “Ikaw ang baka na-offend dahil ginatungan ko pa.”

Umiling ito. “No, I’m good. Sanay na ’ko sa mga ’yun. My students apparently find my personal life amusing.”

“Or fascinating.” Isinukbit niya ang backpack sa balikat. “Intriguing. ’Yang itsura mong ’yan, wala kang girlfriend?” Then a thought occurred to her. “Baka boyfriend pala ang hanap mo?” Shit, nakaka-depress kung sakaling beki ito! Lincoln Montejano was delicious in every sense of the word.

Ilang sandaling natigilan ang binata na parang hindi agad nakuha ang sinabi niya. “Oh... Oh shit, no,” he chuckled in his low, soothing, bedroom voice.

And she found his chuckle sexy. “Not like that. I mean, I don’t swing that way.” Napailing ito.

“Mabuti. Kasi nakakaiyak kung sakali. Sayang ang genes mo.” Kinuha niya ang helmet. “Well, I should go. Medyo malayo pa ang byahe ko pauwi. Baka abutan uli ako ng ulan.”

He blinked as if he wasn’t ready for her to go home yet. “Okay. Sasamahan na kita palabas.”

“Service de luxe talaga, Mr. Montejano?” tudyo niya sa katabi habang binabagtas ang hallway na dinaanan nila kanina. Hawak muli ni Lincoln ang isang braso niya habang iginigiya siya palabas ng building.

Kennedy couldn’t help admiring his profile—the strong jawline and killer bone structure. His Grecian nose and the luscious lips. His almond eyes and enviable long lashes. *Shit, guwapo talaga!* Pati hair, guwapo! Medyo kulot iyon at clean cut.

Hindi niya naisip kaninang papunta sa *Fieldston Academy* na magkakaroon siya ng ganitong eksena sa isang guwapong art teacher. Inasahan kasi niyang isa sa mga kakilala na niyang dating teacher ang makakasama. Three years ago pa ang huling dalaw niya rito, at marami nang nagbago—sa *Fieldston* at sa kanya mismo.

And over three hours ago, handa na siyang gawin lang ang nararapat: small talk sa mga kakilalang teacher at staff, lecture at Q & A sa abot ng makakaya, pagkatapos ay uuwi na. Wala sa agenda niya ang i-encourage na maging at ease sa kanya ang isang guwapong lalaking mahiyain at nerbyoso, na mukhang inakala pang lalaki siya kanina. She couldn't blame him, really.

She planned to be civil, but Lincoln was just too damn adorable to resist. Her jaded no-nonsense self was forced to adjust, and she happened to enjoy it.

"I... uhm..." Namula ito, napatingin sa kanya. "Okay ka lang ba? I mean..." Parang nagulat ang lalaki na nakatingin din siya rito. "If I somehow offended your feminist sensibilities, then I apol—"

"Oh hell, no." Tinapik niya ito sa braso. "Linc, na-appreciate ko, okay? Huwag kang praning diyan."

Relieved na napabuntung-hininga ito. Nasa labas na sila ng building at papunta sa motor niya. "Oh, thank God those kids are gone."

Natawa siya. "Are you really that bothered? Okay lang ako, Linc." Huminto sila sa tabi ng sasakyan niya.

"Hindi naman. Hindi lang kasi ako sanay sa... uhm... well..." Napangiwi ito.

“Well, what?” Now she’s really curious. Anong klaseng buhay mayroon ang guwapo at matipunong nilalang na ito, na walang girlfriend, na teacher pero parang hindi sanay makisalamuha sa ibang tao?

“Uh, n-nothing. Uhm...” Napalunok ito. Parang may gustong sabihin pero hindi magawa.

“What is it, Linc?” she asked as she swung a leg over to straddle her bike. Isinuot niya ang helmet bago binuhay ang makina.

“Nothing,” he said over the roar of the engine. “It was nice to meet you.”

Minasdan niya ang lalaki. “Same here, Linc.” She reached in and squeezed a bicep. *Woohoo! Ang tigas!* “See you around.” Then she let go and placed her feet on the pedal. Lincoln gave a salute, then stepped back so she could maneuver her bike out of the slot.

Mula rearview mirror ay kita ng dalaga na inihahatid siya ng tingin ni Lincoln Montejano. Something was quite familiar with his stance, the way sadness seemed to radiate off him as she left the school grounds.

Kennedy knew she’d seen that in a picture somewhere...

Nakakaisang kilometro na marahil siya nang sa wakas ay luminaw kung bakit pamilyar ang lalaki.

Naalala niya ang malungkot na kuwento ng isang lalaking hindi sinipot ng bride sa mismong araw ng kasal na pinakahihintay nito para sana makasama habambuhay ang babaeng minahal nito sa loob ng anim na taon; at ang desisyon ng lalaking iyon na talikuran ang buhay na nakasanayan, makatakas lang sa alaala ng babaeng nang-iwan dito.

Mabuti na lang at red light nang matapakan niya ang preno dala ng impact ng mga detalyeng tila puzzle na nabuo sa isip niya... na konektado sa isa pang alaala, sa mga pangyayari at taong ilang taon na niyang pilit kinakalimutan

CHAPTER *Two*

“*K*en, sorry na, please. Hindi namin alam, eh. Wala kaming idea, promise. Ang alam namin, open mic night ngayon at excited pa kaming maghasik ng lagim on stage, pero naiba pala schedule nila.”

“Huwag ka nang magalit, please. Promise, kami ang magbabayad ng lahat ’tapos ililibre ka namin ng mani-pedi bukas. Sige na, please.”

Kennedy rolled her eyes, sighed exasperatedly, then furiously shoved a huge nacho dripping with salsa into her mouth. Ano pa ba ang magagawa niya? Minsan lang niyang mapagbigyan ang mga best friend na sina Chin-chin at Julius sa tuwing magyayayang lumabas ang mga ito, pagkatapos

mag-iinarte pa siya?

Pare-pareho kasi silang busy sa kani-kanyang trabaho. Mas flexible lang ang oras ng dalawa dahil may-ari ng negosyo ang mga ito habang siya ay inaabot minsan ng twelve hours sa opisina kada araw. Kapag walang pasok ay mas gusto niyang matulog o mag-marathon ng pelikula at TV series kaysa lumayas. Gusto lang siyang makasama ng mga kaibigan na mag-unwind kaya bakit hahayaan niyang masira ang gabi dahil lang sa isang dating kaibigan at nirerespetong tao na ginamit at niloko siya?

“Fine. Sige na, hindi ako galit. Ano pa’ng magagawa ko? Sayang ’tong pina-reserve n’yong mesa. Masarap pa ang food.”

Pinisil ni Chin-chin ang braso niya. “Sorry talaga. Ubusin lang natin ’tong food then we can leave.”

“I’ll ask around kung saan okay pumunta.” Inilabas ni Julius ang cellphone nito.

Naiiling na kinuha ni Kennedy ang isang baso ng mojito at inisang lagok iyon bago itinaktak ang mint leaves niyon sa tall glass ng lemon water at iyon naman ang ininom.

Her friends just watched her. They both knew

she had to keep herself busy and focused on something else or she might explode. It had been years, but the pain of betrayal and abuse remained. She tried to forget, but it wouldn't go away.

Dala kasi niyon ang insecurity at kawalan niya ng tiwala sa halaga niya bilang isang tao. Hindi yata niya maiintindihan ang logic ng panloloko. Naging bitter at tila galit siya sa mundo dahil doon. Heck, she even took a job in a corrupt government agency!

“Hi, guys. I'm Lynx. That's Ian on percussion, Pip on guitars. Glad you could join us.”

*F*ck!* Walang halong exaggeration, pero may pumitik talaga sa sentido niya at kumirot iyon. Kasabay ng cheers at palakpakan ng ibang customers sa café bar na iyon sa isang residential village sa Commonwealth ay ang pakiramdam na nasu-suffocate siya. Literal na masikip masyado ang mundo para sa kanilang dalawa ng dating kaibigan at hinahangaan niya.

“Ken, kung gusto mong lumabas, okay lang. Kami na ang uubos nito,” nakakaunawang suhestyon ni Julius.

“Fine, tatapusin ko lang ito.” Itinuro niya ang natitira pang nachos, pizza at sisig rolls sa plato. Ayaw niyang nag-aaksaya ng pagkain. Kailangan din

ninyang tanggapin na hindi niya palaging maiiwasang makita si Lynx. If she had her way, she could've easily confronted the woman so she could have her closure. Pero ito ang madulas at magaling umiwas. She eventually got tired and just tried to move on from her pain.

There's a little black spot on the sun today..

She used to adore Lynx' soothing, whispery alto. She used to think her covers were the best. Now her voice seemed to grate. Masakit na sa pandinig.

Kinuha niya ang baso ng lemon water na kasalin lang ni Chin-chin. Iginala niya ang tingin sa bar, sinusubukang i-distract ang sarili kahit malinaw sa pandinig ang boses ni Lynx. Muntik siyang masamid nang mahagip ng tingin ang lalaking nakaupo sa dulo ng bar, malapit sa pinto.

She gazed at that stunning profile just over a week ago.

Inubos niya ang inumin bago tumingin sa mga kaibigan, na parehong tumango lang.

“Teh, daan ka sa bar. Pakisabi i-serve na 'yung dessert platter sa table nine,” bilin ni Julius na sinagot niya ng thumbs-up.

Huminga siya nang malalim at nagsimulang maglakad derecho sa bar. May space sa tabi ng

lalaking tinitingnan niya kanina kaya pumuwesto siya roon at tinawag ang atensyon ng isang crew.

“Pa-serve na daw ng dessert sa table nine, please. Thank you,” nakangiting sabi niya bago lumayo sa counter, at sumulyap sa lalaking katabi. Long enough for him to see and recognize her. He blinked, and seemed to gasp. She smiled, then left the suffocating room in quick strides.

Dumerecho siya sa maliit na garden sa tabi ng café bar, sa ilalim ng isang punong mangga. Mula roon ay kita ang maliwanag na park kung saan may weekend food market.

She felt for her stash of cigarettes in the side pocket of her sling bag. Kumuha siya ng isang stick at lighter. In seconds, she was puffing away, blue circular smoke went up into the air and disappeared into the night sky.

Hindi niya alam kung dala ng frustration, disappointment, galit o sakit na napatunayan niyang hindi pa rin naaalís. The wheels inside her head had been turning almost nonstop since she saw the man at the bar. Perhaps it even started last week when they first met, when she realized, if she played her cards right—how much power she could have over him.

Pero hindi siya dapat pakasiguro. Ni hindi siya nakatitiyak kung talagang nakita siya ng lalaki kanina. He seemed to be always in a perpetual daze, lost in his own quiet, safe world.

It would be cruel to stir that world into chaos, but she had to.

Muli niyang inilagay ang stick ng sigarilyo sa pagitan ng mga labi. Weird na lunas ito pero nawawala ang pananakit ng ulo niya at ang tila pagkakapos ng hininga kanina. Hitit uli. Buga uli.

Hanggang sa may maramdaman siyang tao na papalapit sa kanya.

“If you’re taller, and beefier and hairier, you should be up there puffing away,” that soothing, bedroom baritone softly said. “Parang kapre, o tikbalang ba ’yun? That, o pinapausukan mo lang ang punong ito para mamunga agad.”

Napahinto siya sa paghitit-buga at napangiti. *Well, well... ganda mo, Kennedy!*



What the hell did he just say? Shit, ikinumpara talaga niya sa kapre o tikbalang? Ilang hakbang na lang ang layo ni Lincoln kay Kennedy pero gusto na niyang umatras, tumakbo at magtago. He was so rusty he didn’t even know how to approach a

woman anymore.

Huminga siya nang malalim at minasdan ang bahagi ng profile ni Kennedy na nakikita niya. Hindi ito lumingon, sa halip ay humitit-buga lang ulit. Hindi niya inasahang naninigarilyo ito. Not that he had any prejudice against those who indulge in the vice. He smoked for a couple of years since his senior year in college, too.

Lincoln smoked only occasionally, then completely stopped after a bout with pneumonia during his graduate school days. Simula noon ay naging allergic na siya sa sigarilyo at humina na ang baga pagdating sa usok.

Hindi pa rin siya nililingon ng dalaga. Bad timing ba siya? May iba kaya itong hinihintay? But he swore the way she caught his eye earlier at the bar was deliberate, almost like an invitation. Muntik na siyang malaglag sa upuan nang makita ito.

Hindi mawala sa isip niya si Kennedy simula nang una silang magkita sa *Fieldston Academy*. Pinlano niyang hingin ang number nito noon at yayaing mag-early dinner, pero naunahan siya ng hiya at takot.

Ngayon ay may tsansa uli siyang gawin iyon, at hindi niya ito dapat palampasin. Humakbang siya

hanggang sa magkatabi na sila ng babae. “Hi, Ken.”

Bahagyang umangat ang isang kilay nito bago nakangiting bumaling sa kanya. “Hi, Linc.” Muli nitong ipinako ang tingin sa park bago muling humitit at bumuga ng usok. “Nice one. Para nga namang pinapausukan ko ’tong puno.” She turned to him again with a grin. “Parang gusto ko ring maupo sa sanga at magpaka-kapre o tikbalang.” She flexed her lean but toned arm muscles. “Pasado na bang macho mythological creature?”

He laughed then, relieved. But Kennedy chose that moment to take another drag, and blew smoke as she turned her attention back to the brightly lit park. His irritated air passages couldn’t hold back. His chest heaved, then he began coughing.

Agad nitong tinapik at hinimas ang likod niya. “Oh, my God! I’m sorry, hindi ko alam na allergic ka.”

“I’m okay.” He took a deep breath which had a little wheezing sound. *Shit, nakakahiya!* “I actually used to smoke for a few years after college but I quit when I got sick.” Ngumiti siya sa katabi. Halos magdikit na ang mga braso nilang exposed dahil parehong collared shirt ang suot nila.

Kennedy withdrew her hand from his back.

“Okay, good. Hindi rin ako talagang nagyoyosi. Eto ngang stock ko, binili ko two months ago pa. Napapayosi lang ako kapag sobrang stressed.”

Nangunot ang noo niya. “Stressed ka ngayon? Are you okay?”

She sighed. “May nakita lang akong taong hindi ko sana gustong makita habang supposedly ay nag-a-unwind ako after a hectic week.”

Kinabahan siya. “And that person is here?”

Tumango ito. “Yeah...”

He swallowed. “Is... is it me?”

Nanlaki ang mga mata ng babae bago ito natawa. “Oh my God, no! Of course it’s not you, Linc. Bakit ko hindi gugustuhing makita ka? I’m glad to see you. Happy, even.” She smiled at him as she placed a hand on his arm. “Nakakatanggal ka ng stress, actually.” She rubbed then squeezed his bicep. “Oh, yes, indeed. Hmm...” she grinned

Okay, gusto niya ang pakiramdam ng ganito sila kalapit at hawak ni Kennedy ang braso niya, pero: “Uhm... Ken, are you drunk?”

Natawa muli ang babae. “Nakakalasing ba ang isang shot ng mojito at lemon water?” Napailing ito. “I’m sober, Linc. Unless... wait, do I look drunk?”

Umiling din siya. “Oh, no.” *You look perfect.*

She arched a brow. “I do? Whoa...”

Damn, did he say that out loud? What the hell, he’s a f*cking mess! “Uhm... yes. Yes, of course.” *Shit!* He needed to shut up. “I’m sorry.”

“Sorry saan? You didn’t mean what you said, is that it?” nangunot ang noo nitong tanong.

Oh, man! “No! I mean, I really do think you look perfect. I was sorry if I... might have sounded weird saying that,” he sighed.

“Hindi ka weird, Linc.” Tinapik nito ang braso niya. “Hindi lang ako sanay. I’m not even sure if anyone ever called me perfect, either. It’s kind of an alien concept. Karamihan kasi ng friends ko, ang tawag sa ’kin—”

“Bakla! Hoy!”

“Gaga ka, nandito ka lang pala!”

Sabay pa silang napalingon ni Kennedy sa mga nagsalita. Palapit ang isang magandang babaeng may afro hair at lalaking mukhang MMA fighter sa laki ng katawan pero pinong kumilos. Paghinto sa harap nila ay takang nagpalipat-lipat ang tingin ng mga ito sa kanila bago nag-settle sa dalaga.

“Sorry talaga, bakla. Hindi namin alam. Lipat na lang tayo.”

“Nag-text si Lauren. Nasa *Illuminate* daw sila ni

Karly. They can get us in.”

Kennedy brought a finger to her lips. “Shh... Okay na ’ko. Nabigla lang kanina.” Tumingin ito sa kanya. “Linc, these are my best friends, Chin-chin and Julius. As in since kindergarten, friends na kami.” Then to her friends, “Guys, this is Linc.”

The two looked at him curiously, eyes sparkling, as they took turns to shake his hand.

“Oh, wow! Nakakawala ka nga ng stress,” sabi ni Chin-chin na makahulugang sumulyap kay Kennedy, na natawa lang.

“Pupunta kami sa *Illuminate*. Sama ka!” imbita ni Julius kay Lincoln.

“Oh, uhm... I’d love to.” Really, he wanted ro go. “But I’m here with my sister and I’m her driver for the night. Nasa casa kasi ang auto niya.”

Tumaas ang kilay ni afro girl. “Sister? Nasaan siya? Isama din natin!”

Magsasalita sana ang binata pero mukhang sumama ang timpla ni Kennedy sa sinabi ng mga kaibigan. She glared at her friends into silence then took him by the wrist.

“Excuse us, guys. Saglit lang.” Marahang hinila siya nito may ilang metro ang layo sa mga bagong kakilala niya. Takang sumunod lang siya, medyo

nabibigla sa mga nangyayari. He'd been making an ass of himself since they met. How come she still somehow seemed interested?

“Hindi ka ba talaga makakasama, Linc? It will be fun!” Umakyat ang kamay nito sa braso niya.

Oh, man! He wanted to go. “I really want to, Ken. Pero kailangan ko talagang hintayin ang kapatid ko. She can drive, but she might not be sober enough and even if she is sober, I still don't trust her with my car.” Napangiwi siya. “I'm really sorry “

She rubbed his arm. “Okay lang, Linc. Naiintindihan ko, really.” Ngumiti ito.

Ilang sandaling nakatingin sila sa isa't isa. Nakangiti si Kennedy habang halos hindi kumukurap si Lincoln. He wished he could stay in this moment... Or he could grab another chance. “Uh, next time perhaps?”

Umarko ang kilay nito. “Are you asking me out?”

Napalunok siya. “Y-yes.”

“Are you sure?” Nangunot ang noo nito.

“I'm sure, Ken.” Hindi niya inaalis ang tingin dito. She had to know he really wanted to be with her again.

She shrugged. “Okay.” Kinuha nito ang cellphone sa bag at ibinigay sa kanya. “Save your number,

please.”

Nanginginig pa ang kamay niya nang kunin iyon, at tumatahip ang kanyang dibdib habang nagta-type. When he finished and handed the phone back, he was sure he was close to a heart attack.

Kennedy dialed his number. Nag-vibrate ang phone sa bulsa ng pantalon niya. Kinuha niya iyon then quickly saved her number. His breathing seemed to have evened out, his tense muscles seemed to relax.

“I have to go, Linc.” She let go of his arm.

He nodded. “Yeah. I’ll see you again? I’ll call you?”

Ngumiti ito bago sumenyas na lumapit siya. He leaned in because it seemed like she wanted to whisper something. She held onto his bicep as she spoke right in his ear, her hot breath sent shivers through him. “I’ll be waiting.” Her lips moved to lightly kiss his cheek before she let go, stepped away with a wave, then turned to go leave with her friends.

CHAPTER *Three*

L sang matangkad na lalaking moreno at chinito ang nagbukas ng pedestrian gate ilang segundo matapos pindutin ni Lincoln ang doorbell. Pasado alas siete ng gabi at sinusundo niya si Kennedy para sa unang date nila.

“Uh, good evening. I’m here for Ken,” bati niya, sabay abot ng kamay. “I’m Lincoln Montejano.”

“Kristoff. Kapatid ko si Ken.” The man shook his hand, then his brows furrowed as he let go. “Montejano? Kaanu-ano mo si—”

“Kuya! Akala ko ba male-late ka na?” sita ni Kennedy mula sa likuran ng kapatid nito. “Hey, gorgeous,” she grinned at Lincoln.

Kung kailan akala niya ay hindi na siya magiging

kabado at awkward ngayong nagawa na niyang mayayang lumabas ang dalaga ay saka niya naramdaman ang pag-aapoy ng mga pisngi. Kennedy wore a plain, but sparkly long-sleeved top paired with dark slim jeans. She looked radiant and like she's really happy to see him.

And she just called him 'gorgeous'. Pakiramdam niya ay may naburang alaala dahil sa pinagdaanan niya dati. Paano ba siya tumanggap ng compliment? Was he this embarrassing?

"Omigosh, ang cute mo! Nagba-blush ka! Nakakaloka!" Tinampal ni Kristoff ang balik niya. "O siya, mauna na 'ko at magbebenta pa 'ko ng laman. Charot!" Kumaway ito at nagpunta na sa nakaparadang sasakyan sa tapat ng gate.

"Head siya ng QA sa isang BPO company," paglilinaw ni Kennedy, sabay tapik sa braso niya. "Let's go?"

Namamanghang tumango lang si Lincoln, at ipagbubukas sana ng pinto ng sasakyan ang dalaga, pero nauna na itong sumampa roon. Napapakamot sa ulong pumuwesto siya sa driver seat, at ilang sandali lang ay nasa daan na sila. It was just a short drive to *Mr. Keating's*, a café, gallery and secondhand bookshop along P. Noval Street beside *UST*. Ilang

beses na siyang nagawi roon dahil kakilala niya ang mga may-ari bukod sa siya ang nagdisenyo ng dark, rustic, dungeon-like interiors niyon.

“Nice! Ang ganda pala talaga dito!” Kennedy looked around the homey, spacious café as he walked her to a corner table. “Dati ko pa gustong pumunta dito since it opened last year, pero sobrang toxic sa work at maaga pala silang nagsasara pag weekends.” Ito na ang humila ng upuan para sa sarili bago pa man niya naagapan.

Muli ay napakamot na lang siya sa batok. “I’m friends with the owners. Ipapakilala kita sa kanila later and we’ll make sure na anumang oras na maisipan mong pumunta dito, you’ll always have a table.”

“Aw, no, it’s okay, Linc. Nakakahiya naman.” Binuklat nito ang menu. “Ano ba’ng masarap dito?”

“I love their pies and pasta.” Tinawag niya ang isang staff para matanong ni Kennedy tungkol sa nasa menu. After several minutes, they decided to share the potato pie, spicy tuna pasta, crab cakes and coffee caramel cake that’s good for two.

“May gig ba dito ngayon?” tanong ng babae na nakatingin sa stage kung saan may tig-dalawang microphone na nasa stand at bar stools.

“Oh, no. Pag Thursday lang may tugtog dito. Friday is open mic, Wednesdays are for themed readings—poems, monologues, gan’un,” imporma niya bago ito ipinaghiwa ng potato pie at nagsalin ng crab cakes na kasisilbi pa lang.

“Themed? Anong theme ngayong gabi?” Pumiraso agad ito sa pie gamit ang tinidor.

“Beginnings, I think. At least, according to the *Facebook* page.” Ipinagsalin niya ito ng iced green tea.

“Linc, stop that.” Tinampal ni Kennedy ang kamay niya. “Kumain ka na.” Ipinaglagay rin siya nito ng pagkain sa plato. “These are really good, by the way. Thank you.”

Relieved na minasdan ni Lincoln ang babae. Malalaki ang subo nito at mabilis kumain. Medyo walang poise, pero nakakaaliw tingnan.

“What?” untag nito.

“Nothing. Uhm... Just glad you’re here.” Sinimulan na rin niyang kumain. “Sorry if I’m a bit fussy. Gusto ko lang masiguro na nasa ayos ang lahat at hindi ka nahihirapan.” Words tumbled out of his mouth. Ganito yata talaga kapag walang practice. Parang first time niyang makipag-date na gusto niya, perfect ang lahat.

Kennedy just stared at him.

And that made Lincoln even more nervous. “I... I hope I’m not being... too forward?”

“Forward?” She was incredulous. “Hell, no. You’re not being forward at all, Linc. If ever you are, walang kaso sa akin,” she smiled. “Parang hindi ka kasi madalas lumabas kaya tense at awkward ka. I actually find it adorable.” Tinapik nito ang kamay niyang nasa mesa. “Don’t worry. I’m fine. I am enjoying so far.”

He sighed. “Okay, okay. Sorry.”

“At tantanan mo ako sa sorry mo, Linc. Hindi ka naman British.” Napangisi ito. “Besides, I wouldn’t be here if I’m not interested.”

“I-interested?” Nasamid yata siya.

“Yeah. I’d like to know more about you.”

“R-really?” Si Kennedy yata ang nagiging forward?

“Parang gulat na gulat ka?”

Huminga siya nang malalim. “Sorry, it’s been a while since... the last time... I went out with someone.” Nag-init muli ang mga pisngi niya.

“Talaga? As in kailan pa ’yung huli?”

“Five years ago,” mahinang sagot niya.

Nanlaki ang mga mata nito. “Seryoso? Bakit gan’un katagal?” Pagkatapos ay dismissive na

ikinumpas nito ang kamay. “Oh no, hindi mo dapat sagutin kung hindi ka komportableng pag-usapan. I’m curious but I won’t pressure you.” Ngumiti ito bago napapalampak nang isilbi ang umuusok pang spicy tuna pasta na nasa skillet.

“I don’t mind telling you why, though.” Unti-unting nag-evaporate ang tensyon niya.

“Another time, Linc. Feeling ko, madrama ang dahilan.”

Natawa siya. “Right.” He began spearing the pasta with his fork. “Okay ka na ba, Ken? I mean, after seeing that person that made you smoke last Friday?”

Sandaling natigilan ang kausap niya, at tila lumamig ang ekspresyon sa magandang mukha na parang hindi nagustuhan ang sinabi niya. Agad din itong nakabawi at nakangiti pang umiling.

“Ah, iyon? Wala na. Don’t worry. I’m doing something about it.”

Marahang tumango siya. “That’s good, then. Hindi mo dapat hinahayaang maapektuhan ka ng mga tao o bagay na hindi mo gusto.”

Tumaas ang isang kilay nito. “Oh, really?” Sumimsim ito sa inumin. “I beg to differ, Mr. Montejano, pero may mga tao, bagay o pangyayari

na kahit ayaw mo nang isipin at pilit mong binabalewala ay hindi mo basta matatakasan.” She sighed. “Sinubukan ko, believe me. Sino bang matinong tao ang gusto pang manatili ’yung sakit at hirap na dinanas niya dati? It wasn’t easy. But it doesn’t mean I’m not doing anything to move on.”

Napatitig lang siya sa kaharap

Habang nagsasalita ay bakas sa mukha ni Kennedy ang pagpipigil ng galit. Lincoln glimpsed a few moments of that closed off, cold expression he saw just minutes ago. He knew exactly what she meant. He’d been through something so harrowing it made him retreat from the rest of the world.

Pero iba pala kapag nakikita iyon sa ibang tao. Bahagyang namumula si Kennedy, may kakaibang kislap ang mga mata ngunit tila detached. She was still beautiful in her quiet, restrained fury, and it unnerved him.

“I’m sorry, Linc,” pukaw nito sa kanya.

“It’s alright. Alam ko ang pakiramdam,” he assured her, then patted her hand.

She smiled faintly. “Well, let’s not talk about it anymore. Kumusta ang pagiging Sir Lincoln?”

Gusto pa sana niyang subukang alamin ang tungkol sa mga sinabi nito kanina, pero sa ibang

araw na lang. He answered her question instead, and they talked about their respective work, their colleagues, their day.

The conversation was easy and comfortable as he loved hearing her talk. Kennedy was funny and he laughed at her ironic quips and biting comments several times. Naputol lang ang pag-uusap nila dahil sa feedback ng microphone sa stage at ang pag-akyat ng dalawang babae roon.

Lincoln straightened in his seat. “It’s about to start.”

“Oh, okay.” Kennedy smiled knowingly before she stood up to move her chair so that she was right beside him, and they’re both facing the stage.

And as they sat side by side watching, listening to the speakers, they took turns stealing glances at each other. Later on, as the last few people took the stage, they sat shoulder to shoulder, as they held hands.



“What are you doing, Ken?”

Nakataas ang kilay na bumaling si Kennedy kay Chin-chin mula sa panonood niya kay Lincoln na napapaligiran ng tatlong weekend staff na tinuturuan itong gumawa ng herbed bread. “You know exactly what I’m doing, Chin. And no, hindi

n'yo mababago ang isip ko.”

Linggo at isinama niya si Lincoln sa organic farm na pag-aari ng pamilya ni Chin-chin sa Plaridel, Bulacan. May café and restaurant din doon kung saan plano nilang mag-lunch mamaya.

“Tingnan mo siya, Ken. He’s like a big kid. Parang ang saya-saya niyang isinama mo siya dito. Mabait siya sa aming mga kaibigan mo. Actually, mabait siya kahit kanino.” Bumuntung-hininga ang kaibigan niya. “He’s not Lynx, Ken. Leave him out of it. Huwag mo naman siyang paasahin.”

“Hindi ko siya pinapaasa, Chin. At least, not consciously. Hindi ko siya pinapangakuan ng kung anu-ano. I like him, hindi ba obvious?”

“You like him, pero hindi iyon sapat para kalimutan mo na lang ’yang plano mo,” giit nito.

“Aw, Chin! Don’t worry, I’m sure he’ll get over it. He’s a guy. He got over being left in the altar. Ano ba naman ’yung paglaruan siya ng babaeng pineste ng kapatid niya?” Kinapa niya ang bulsa ng bag. Hinampas ng kaibigan ang kamay niya.

“Bawal magyosi!” she glared.

Natawa siya. “Fine.” Itinaas niya ang isang kamay. “Hayaan n’yo na ’ko please. I’ll treat him well. Gusto ko nga siya, di ba? He’s yummy. Check

out that butt, girl.” She bit her lip as she eyed Lincoln who bent in front of a stone oven several meters from where they sat facing the open kitchen.

His faded, snug fitting jeans clung to his long limbs perfectly. Namumula ang balat nito sa tama ng araw, at lalong bumagay rito ang suot na light green shirt.

“He is gorgeous. And you’re evil.” Napailing ang kaibigan niya.

“Chin, kaya niya ’yun.” Tinapik niya ito sa braso.

“Bakit hindi mo na lang subukang kausapin uli si Lynx? Baka hindi na siya umiwas pag nagpatulong ka kay Lincoln?”

“Are you serious?” Nanlaki ang mga mata niya. “We all know that bitch has no remorse. Parang proud pa sa kagagahan niya. People like her deserves to really experience, and realize what it’s like to be used and betrayed. Too bad I’m too busy to find a guy I could use to do that to her. At dahil close sila ng kuya niyang mala-anghel, then ito na lang.”

“Kawawa naman, Ken. Ngayon lang siya sumubok uli ’tapos iiwan mo lang.”

“Hindi niya alam na gan’un ang mangyayari, Chin. Hindi ko naman siya aapihin nang bongga.”

“Right. You call him ‘Honey’, Kennedy! Honey!”

Nasapo ng babae ang noo na parang mortal sin ang paggamit ng naturang endearment term. “Kailan ka pa natutong mag-*honey*? At bakit?”

“Kadiri ba?” Natawa siya sa itsura ng kaibigan.

“Nakakakilabot, ’teh! Nakita mo ba’ng itsura ni Julius nang marinig niyang tinawag mo ng gan’un si Linc n’ung kausap mo sa phone? Gustong maglaslas ng bakla!”

“OA n’yo! Bagay naman kay Linc ang honey dahil sweet siya,” depensa niya kahit sang-ayon sa kaibigan. She detested endearment terms.

“I’m sure hindi type ni Linc na hina-honey mo siya.”

“Exactly! ’Tapos nagugulat din siya pag nagmumura ako,” proud pang sabi niya.

“At allergic ’ika mo sa usok pero kung bugahan mo last time, wagas!”

“Okay lang naman sa kanya ’yun.”

“Paano kung maisipan niyang ipakilala ka sa parents nila?”

“Nasa California pa ang mom nila until July, after his sister gives birth. I doubt paabutin ko pa ng July ’to. Maybe until summer?”

Chin-chin shook her head, her voluminous curls bounced and swayed. “Sayang, bagay pa naman

kayo.”

She shrugged. “Gan’un talaga.” Tumingin siya sa direksyon ng binata. Inilalabas na nito ang isang batch ng bagong gawang tinapay na may herbs. Nang magtama ang mga tingin nila ay ngumiti agad ito.

Lincoln had slowly loosened up, and was less awkward since they started going out. Isa lang ang tila hindi maalis dito; ang tingin nito na parang laging namamangha. Parang lagi siyang may nasasabi o nagagawang kakaiba, o palaging first time siya nitong nakita.

“Grabe, Ken. Haba ng hair mo! Lincoln Montejano is so smitten! Ano ba ’yan...” Pabirong binunggo ng kaibigan ang braso niya. Palapit na kasi ang lalaki at halos hindi ito bumibitaw ng tingin sa kanya.

“Honey!” Nangingiting tumayo si Kennedy at sinalubong ito ng yakap. Hindi iyon inaasahan ng binata kaya napaatras ito at muntik silang matumba.

“I don’t wanna wrestle...” he chuckled as he held her by the arms.

“I was trying to hug you, honey,” she grinned.

“I know, but... why?” He pulled her close, tentatively.

She sniffed at his shirt, on his shoulder, the side

of his neck. Nakalapat ang isang palad niya sa dibdib nito kaya damang-dama niya ang pagkabog niyon. *Oh, boy...*

“Nothing...” She smiled up at him. “Ang yummy mo kasi. Ang guwapo na, ang sarap pa ng amoy...” She eyed him wickedly. “Parang freshly baked bread.”

“That’s because I actually just baked some bread?” Pinisil nito ang pisngi niya.

“Mixed with eau de Lincoln, though, it’s more... potent.” She sniffed his chest again as her hand wrapped around him then slowly slid to his butt which she gently tapped.

“Ken...” Nagulat, natawa, pagkatapos ay maingat na kumawala si Lincoln sa yakap niya, pero hindi binitawan ang kanyang mga kamay.

“What?” she asked innocently.

He blinked. “N-nothing.” There’s that look again, of fascination and awe, like he’s looking at a unicorn.

Too bad she’s far from a lovely mythical creature. She was a vicious monster, and she’s about to take his heart to break it mercilessly into bloody pieces.

CHAPTER *Four*

“Honey, over here!”
Lincoln’s first instinct was to wince. He was never into endearments, he found them tacky. Sa unang mga beses na narinig niya iyon mula kay Kennedy ay palaging ilang segundo siyang matitigilan at hindi alam kung paano magre-react.

Nakatingin lang siya sa dalaga, na ngiting-ngiti at nangingislap ang mga mata. It was obvious calling him ‘honey’ was either a game or a little joke for her, but she kept doing it. And he let her.

Kung nagagawa niyong mapanatili ang ngiti ni Kennedy at ang pilyang kislap sa mga mata nito ay titiisin niyang maging ‘honey’. Parang ang saya-saya nito kapag nakikita siya—her *honey*.

“Honey, you look gorgeous!” she said loudly, her hands cupped in front of her lips, further magnifying the sound, allowing her words to be heard through the thumping bass and pulsing beat.

He squinted to see better under the harsh moving lights. Matagal na panahon na simula nang huli siyang mapasok sa isang dance club. Maybe a decade or so ago, in some premiere after party in Beverly Hills.

And he f*cking hated it. He also couldn't dance to save his ass. Neither could Kennedy, who now danced her way toward him in a short red dress and strappy heels.

It was the night before Valentine's Day. Wala siyang pinlano para sa kanilang dalawa, pero nakatanggap siya ng text message four hours ago mula sa dalaga na niyaya siyang lumabas.

Meet me at Illuminate, honey. Nine onwards is good. My DJ friend Francey put us in the guest list.

At palalampasin ba niya ang pagkakataong makita itong muli sa linggong iyon? Syempre, hindi. They only met once that week, over early dinner at the Capitol Commons in Pasig where she had a work-related meeting that afternoon. The place was also near *Fieldston Academy* so it was more than

okay to see her.

That was last Tuesday. He was already missing her so much by Friday and wanted to see her, Valentine tackiness be damned. Pero kinakabahan siya, nag-aalalang ma-reject. Hindi niya sigurado kung kaya iyon ng puso niya. He was so f*cking weak. Na-trauma na yata sya sa salitang *No*.

But Kennedy texted at past five and her invitation was like a rocket that launched him straight into the bathroom to get ready, abandoning twenty-six Art History essays that he still had to grade.

Next week pa naman niya ibabalik sa third year class niya iyon. Puwede pang ipagpaliban.

So, he spent time in the shower like he was about to go on his first date. Then more time in front of his closet. He was thirty-three years old and at a loss on what to wear to a dance club!

At nine-thirty, he was ascending the steps to *Illuminate*, in the safest ensemble he was able to put together: in black and dark blue.

“Honey, come here, let’s dance!” Kennedy shouted again, yet she was the one pushing through the crowd to get to him. He was also getting a bit dizzy from the lights, but he walked faster to meet her.

“Don’t run!” Pero siya ang muntik nang matapilok. Malaking lugar ang *Illuminate*. Para iyong school gym minus the bleachers. Maraming tao nang gabig iyon at nasa dance floor yata ang lahat.

“Honey!” Kennedy loudly sing-songed as the gap between them narrowed. Medyo namamawis na ang ilong at hairline nito, at namumula ang mukha. Was she drunk? “Hey, gorgeous!” bati nito nang makalapit, sabay hawak ng isang kamay sa balikat niya habang ang isa ay kumapit sa kanyang braso.

“Hello, beautiful.” He pulled her closer then kissed her gently on the cheek. It was really just an excuse to see her face and smell her. No other sign that she’s inebriated, and she didn’t smell like alcohol, too. “Have you been drinking?” He had to be sure.

Itinaas ng babae ang index at middle finger nito. “Two margaritas.” Inilapit nito ang mukha sa kanya. “I missed you!”

“I missed you, too,” he said as he slowly pulled her to one side. Ayaw niyang may iba silang nababangga habang nagsasayaw. Or, si Ken lang pala.

“Oh, wow, I love this song!”

Napangiwi siya. Kennedy Ballesteros had the grace of uncooked spaghetti. Her moves were

awkward and dorky, but she was also goddamned cute and sexy.

Nakatingin ito sa kanya habang nagsasayaw, at paminsan-minsan ay inaangat ang mga braso o tinatapik ang dibdib niya para sumayaw siya.

“Come on, shake that booty, honey,” she coaxed as she circled him, then slapped his butt as she moved to his other side. Hindi niya alam kung matatawa o mailing. Sila siguro ang pinaka-mukhang ewan sa *Illuminate*.

“Oh, my God, you can’t dance! Ang pangit tingnan, Linc!” Natawa ito.

“Napansin mo?” he smirked, his eyes twinkling. “Ikaw din kaya.”

Lalong natawa si Kennedy. “Yeah, I know. At ’yan ang dahilan kung bakit nasa kabilang dulo nitong *Illuminate* sina Chin-chin at Julius. Wala daw silang kilalang praying mantis na lasing.”

“Oh, that’s harsh. I’ll stay with you then.” Hinapit niya ito sa baywang. Medyo bumagal na ang tugtog.

“Aw, honey. You don’t have to be so nice. Alam nating pareho na ang sagwa kong sumayaw. Kailangan yata pakuluan ako sa palayok ng twelve hours.” She pursed her lips.

“Tapos nakasalang ka sa kalan na gawa sa bato?”

Yep,” he chuckled when she punched him lightly on the back. “But that’s not reason enough for me to abandon you here.” He pressed a kiss to her temple

“You just want to slow dance with me, don’t you?” she murmured against his chest.

Napangiti si Lincoln. “Of course.”

“And hold me this close?” Idinikit pa nitong lalo ang katawan sa kanya.

Nahigit niya ang paghinga. “Hmm... maybe?”

“Close enough to kiss?” Nag-angat ito ng tingin, namumungay ang mga mata.

Napakurap siya. Ilang sentimetro na lang ang pagitan ng mga labi nila. “You know me too well.”

Umangat ang isang kilay nito. “Oh, really?” Something flashed in her sleepy gaze. Parang nakakita o nakarinig si Kennedy ng hindi nito nagustuhan. May isang segundong tumalim ang tingin nito bago iyon napalitan ng tila pang-aakit ng mga mata nito. “Close enough to make you want to get me out of here and f*ck me in a rest room stall?”

Nalito siyang bigla. “W-what?”

“You heard me, Linc. Huwag kang mag-alala, alam kong normal lang ang mga gan’ung reaksyon.” She rubbed her body against his. “Right?”

Parang nahihirapan nang huminga ang binata

ngayon. Kennedy was trying to taunt him, probably expecting a certain response which he'd love to give her but not under these circumstances. Hinagip niya ang mga braso nito at marahang inilayo. "That must be some margarita. Do you want to go out for coffee?"

Nangunot ang noo nito. "At bakit tayo aalis dito para magkape?" Pumaikot muli ang mga braso nito sa kanyang katawan. "Five weeks na tayong magkakilala. We've been seeing each other regularly since. I think you just earned f*cking-in-the-restroom privileges." Her hand slid to his butt, squeezed it then pulled him closer.

It was an exhausting exercise in self-control as Lincoln firmly held her arms and extricated himself from her. "I think you're lying about the two margaritas," he sternly stated, or at least tried to. "Ano talaga ang ininom mo, Ken?" Maingat na hinila niya ito palayo sa dance floor, papunta sa isang couch. Kinawayan niya ang isang staff at nag-request ng tubig.

"Two margaritas, a shot of whiskey and two mojitos," tila masama sa loob na sabi nito.

Ilang sandaling minasdan niya ito. "Bakit ang dami, Ken? Do your friends know?"

"Nope." Umiling ito. "Umo-order ako kapag nasa

dance floor sila. Isa pa, sinabi kong parating ka kaya hindi sila gaanong nag-aalala,” she smirked. “My friends like you and trust you so much I’m jealous sometimes.”

“Pero hindi iyon ang dahilan kung bakit ka umiinom, tama ba?”

“F*ck you, Lincoln!” she snapped. “Kailangan talagang may dahilan? Paano kung gusto ko lang?”

“Then we’ll drink together, Ken,” he gently said.

Her eyes narrowed. “Because I wanted to forget, okay?”

“You wanted to forget what? Ken, hindi ’yun nadadaan sa pag-inom. Hindi mo dapat pilitin, it will—”

“Three f*cking years, Linc! Gusto ko nang matahimik. Ayoko nang maalala. Pinagsisihan ko na. Pumunta ako ngayon dito, sa mismong date ng gabing gusto kong kalimutan dahil feeling ko, dedma na ’ko sa p*tang-inang katangahan na ’yun pero pagtapak ko dito, iyon agad ang naisip ko.” Nabasag ang boses nito.

Nakatitig lang siya kay Kennedy, hindi alam kung ano ang sasabihin pero alam niya ang posibleng nararamdaman nito. Forgetting was never easy. “I’m... I’m sorry.” Hindi niya alam kung bakit

siya nagso-sorry.

“Sorry para saan?” Napailing ito. “Sorry that some as*hole I thought was the one f*cked me in a rest room stall here three years ago? Sorry that he had like a bucket of beer on him and didn’t even ask if I’ve done it before? Okay, kasalanan ko din kasi hindi ko sinabi. ’Tapos pumayag din ako dahil akala ko magiging mas okay na kami. Hindi pala.” She laughed bitterly.

“Nagalit pa ang gago. Kasi nanginginig daw ako. Kasi hindi ko alam ang gagawin. What do I know about the logistics of f*cking against the bathroom stall? Ang lamig pa ng tiles. Kinakabahan pa ’kong may makahuli sa ginagawa namin. And he was cursing the fact that I was a virgin because he couldn’t properly put his dick in me. Duh, it wasn’t much. Not impressive. At all.”

Hindi alam ni Lincoln kung hindi na ba siya humihinga dahil sa sinasabi ni Kennedy, o sobrang marahas na ang pagtahip ng kanyang dibdib sa galit sa lalaking nakauna rito. It wasn’t envy that that obviously unworthy as*hole got to be her first, but more because he didn’t even make sure her first was good and memorable for her.

“And it was awkward, and it hurt,” she sighed.

“Tapos after a month, bago mismo ’yung birthday ko, malalaman kong hindi naman pala niya ’ko talaga minahal. Na ginamit lang niya ako, along with someone I thought was my friend. Para ’kong na-scam ng sampung milyon, ’tang-ina! F*ck!” Napasinok ito. Agad itong inabutan ni Lincoln ng tubig.

“I’m sorry,” mahinang sabi nito pagkainom. “Ang TMI ko ba? Sorry. At maiintindihan ko kung iiwasan mo na ako after this. “

“Iiwasan? Bakit ko gagawin ’yon?” Magaang na dinampian niya ng table napkin ang pisngi nitong mabasa ng luha.

“Oh, shit! I actually cried?” puno ng disgustong saad nito. “For the record, hindi ko iniyakan yung ’tang-inang ’yun. Mas naiyak ako sa katangahan ko. Feeling ko napakawalang-kuwenta kong tao. Shit!” Muli itong napainom ng tubig.

“No, huwag mong isipin ’yan.” Hinagod niya ang likod nito. “Lahat naman tayo ay nagkakamali, at nasasaktan dahil doon. Pero hindi natin kasalanan. Minsan, iyon lang talaga ang paraan para ipaalam kung para sa atin ba talaga ang isang bagay o hindi.

“Or it’s a lesson we needed to learn. An experience we had to go through so that when we

finally get that one thing or person that's meant for us and that we truly deserve, it will be so worth it," Ken wistfully said as he stroked her hair, as he watched her face and gazed into her eyes, hoping and praying silently for her tears to go away. She gazed back, almost unblinking.

"Been there, huh?" mahinang komento nito bago sumandal sa kanya. "Tell me about her, Linc."

Napalunok ang binata. Not for the prospect of retelling his story but more because Kennedy's soft, warm, fragrant body was practically sprawled against his, and her fingers alternately played with his shirt collar and stroked the base of his neck. "H-here?"

She looked up. "Yes, here." Hinagkan nito ang leeg niya. "What better way to talk about our sordid failed affairs than to have each word quickly drowned out by electronic dance music? Habang nagpa-party sila d'yan. Habang tinatamaan pa tayo ng nakaka-migraine na ilaw. 'Tapos, tubig na nasa wine goblets ang inumin." Tinapik nito ang dibdib niya.

"In short, we're surrounded by mood killers. Perfect for stories of people who shouldn't matter in our lives anymore," she smiled. "Come on, honey.

Tell me why you haven't been with anyone for five years."

Lincoln allowed himself to be lost in her half-lidded gaze before he smiled, too, then gently kissed her hair. "Her name is Karlene, and we met as interns at an ad agency thirteen years ago..."