

# CHAPTER *One*

*F*rederiksberg, North of Copenhagen, Denmark  
Deep breaths, Blanche. You can do it!  
One... two...

Muling huminga nang malalim si Blanche. Muli din niyang minasa-masahe habang ine-exercise ang leeg na medyo ngalay na dahil sa maling posisyon niya nang makatulog sa hospital nitong nagdaang gabi.

Sa halip na dumerecho ng uwi para kumain, maligo, at magbihis, ay sa supermarket ng *Freriksberg Mall* muna siya nagpunta. Kailangan ng dagdag na stocks ng gatas, diapers, toiletries at makakain dahil ayaw na niyang palaging lumabas lalo pa at napaka-unpredictable ng panahon.

August at summer season daw pero madalas namang maulan at mahangin. Ayaw na niyang ikompromiso pa ang sariling kalusugan at lalo na ang pamangking may ilang taon nang pabalik-balik sa hospital dahil sa sakit nito sa dugo na kahit nasa remission stage na ay kailangan pa ring bantayan.

Tumingin si Blanche sa kaliwa at sa kanan. Kabubukas pa lang ng mall at wala pang gaanong tao. Wala din siyang mahagilap na tutulong dahil ngayon pa lang yata nagdadatingan ang karamihan sa staff ng supermarket. She was lucky to have gotten an assistant to pick out produce, seafood and meat for her. Babalikan niya iyon mamaya sa kabilang dulo ng supermarket. Meanwhile, she needed four packs of that diaper...

Bumuwelo siya, itinaas ang mga braso upang kumuha ng isang malaking pakete. Five-five lang ang height niya at kahit nadagdagan siguro iyon ng one inch sa suot na hiking boots ay hindi pa rin sapat para makuha niya nang maayos kahit isang pakete lang. *Oh wait, I can do this! I can pull it out like this... and.... Oh no!*

Isa lang ang pinupuntirya ng dalawang kamay niya pero halos lahat yata ng pakete sa shelf na iyon ay sumama pabagsak. Soon, she was covered with

soft, plastic covered packets that smelled of fresh baby powder. Napapikit si Blanche kahit hindi naman masakit ang mga tumama.

It seemed like things had been either crashing down or falling on her for most of her life.

Napapabuntong-hiningang inaayos niya ang mga nalaglag at isinalansan iyon sa isang tabi dahil hindi naman niya kayang abutin ang top shelf.

“I did not just jinx you, didn’t I?”

Napaigtad siya. Masyadong pamilyar ang boses, at lalong nagising ang diwa niya nang maramdaman ang pamilyar na pag-iinit ng kanyang leeg at pisngi sa nararamdamang paglapit ng nagsalita.

For all she knows, she might still be asleep, and this was a dream.

“It’s really you!” Magkahalo ang pagtataka at pagkatuwa sa boses ng nagsalita, na ngayon ay nasa harap na niya at hawak ang ilang pakete ng diapers na isinalansan sa pile na ginawa niya.

“Attorney... Agent Soler,” she breathed, before putting four packets of diapers in her cart.

“I’m not exactly on duty... yet,” nakangiting sagot nito. “So, Phoenix is fine, Doctor Allegria.”

“Blanche,” pagtatama niya.

Lalong lumawak ang ngiti nito. “You’re on

vacation here, Blanche?” Sumunod ito nang simulan niyang itulak muli ang cart papunta sa katabing aisle. Isang basket lang ang dala ni Phoenix, na nilagyan nito ng dalawang malaking pakete ng facial tissue habang tig-apat na pakete niyon at ng paper towels ang kinuha niya.

“Mahabang bakasyon.” Tumango si Blanche. “And family matters.” Hindi niya alam kung bakit hindi siya makatingin kay Phoenix. She saw him around the *UIN* office back in the Philippines at least once a week, and it didn’t bother her. Why couldn’t she look at him now?

“Oh, right. Your mom married someone from here, right?” Phoenix lightly tapped her arm, and that made her look up at him.

“Actually, taga-Norway sila Mama, and they’re back there now.” Napabuntong-hininga ang dalaga. “Agnethe, my half-sister was the one who married someone from here. Her house is just four blocks away.” Hindi na niya naitago ang lungkot sa boses, at alam niyang nag-register iyon sa mga mata niya kaya muli siyang nag-iwas ng tingin.

“Is everything okay?” nag-aalalang tanong ng lalaki.

Trust Phoenix to always know when something

was up, even after almost a decade, even after they're no longer together, and even if they found themselves working in the same organization for the past two years... even if they barely talked.

“She and her husband died ten weeks ago. Car accident after a business trip. Iyon din ang dahilan kung bakit nag-file ako ng leave for six months.” Muli niya itong minasdan. “I had to look after my niece. She’s almost four and currently on remission from an early stage of childhood leukemia.” Kumuha siya ng baby soap at tube ng shampoo, bago muling lumipat ng aisle. “What brought you here, Phoenix?”

“Work,” simpleng sagot nito. “Undercover. We’re monitoring this suspected terrorist group that supposedly set up their headquarters here, but is using a courier company as a front. The local Middle-Eastern community tipped us. I also started teaching at the law school. Two weeks pa lang ako dito.” This time he held onto her arm. “You don’t look too well, Blanche.”

“I don’t feel well.” She bit her tongue, willed herself to shut up and stop from telling this man anything about her life. Pero gaya ng dati, parang wala siyang kontrol. “Halos isang linggo nang sa hospital ako natulog, at wala pang limang oras kada

gabi, palagi pang napuputol.” Isinuklay niya ang mga daliri sa maikling buhok. “I am not complaining. Just... really tired, and worried and...” Nanginig na ang boses niya. “Sh\*t.”

Phoenix stepped closer, wrapped one arm around her shoulder and pulled her to him. Hindi na niya napigilang maluha. She was not the type who would sob or bawl when she cried, but her sniffles were enough to make him put another arm around her. “Sssh, it’s alright.”

“No, it’s not,” paos na kontra ni Blanche. “Kirsten is sick but I can’t even properly take care of her because I am not her mother. I am not Danish or a legal resident of this country. Kahit nakalista ako sa will ng stepsister ko na immediate relative, nire-require pa rin ng batas na sa isang children’s home care center siya manatili. I only get to visit her everyday, get to stay with her longer whenever she has to be in the hospital.”

Marahang hinaplos ng binata ang likod niya. “Walang ibang kaanak sa father side na puwedeng kumuha kay Kirsten?”

Inilayo niya ang sarili dito at umiling. “Frans, Agneth’s husband was Norwegian too, legal resident nga lang dito. His parents are dead and his siblings

have moved to the US.” Sinalubong niya ang tingin ni Phoenix. “I’m planning to adopt Kirsten.”

He blinked. “That would take a lot of work.”

“Kaya nga nag-file na ako ng leave.” Muli niyang itinulak ang cart. Mahigpit ang hawak niya sa handbars, na parang kaya niyong kalmahin ang pagtibok ng puso niyang nagtriple simula nang yakapin siya ni Phoenix.

God, she didn’t want to pull away. That felt so good she wished she could stay in his arms forever.

“Six months? Kulang pa iyon, Blanche. You are a foreigner, from a third world country, wanting to adopt a Dane who’s also sick. Alam mo naman siguro kung gaano kahigpit ang batas nila dito.”

“I know, kaya nga naumpisahan ko na ang proseso kahit papaano. I am constantly in contact with Kirsten’s adoption case worker from the children’s home. Nag-attend na rin ako ng seminar at nakipag-usap sa adoption board.”

“Do you have a lawyer?” tanong nito.

“I was hoping I wouldn’t need to get one.”

“You would if you’re a foreigner, single and wanted sole custody of the child.”

She knew that, but she was hopeful she could go through the proceedings without much hassle.

Malapit sa kanya ang bata na dalawang beses niyang nakita at nakasama noong magbakasyon ito at ang mga magulang sa Pilipinas. Kahit ang mga doktor at nurses sa hospital ay saksi kung gaano kalaki ang tiwala sa kanya ni Kirsten. The kid clearly wanted to be with her.

“I will try everything I can, Phoenix,” determinadong pahayag ni Blanche. “Technically, may trabaho pa rin ako kahit puro paperwork lang iyon for *UIN*. Kaya ko siyang buhayin pag nakauwi kami sa Pilipinas.”

Ilang segundong minasdan siya ni Phoenix, bago ito napabuntong- hininga. “I know people around here. I know a lawyer who can help you out. Hindi mo kailangang mag-alala sa gagastusin—”

“Phoenix, hindi na kailangan,” protesta niya.

“No, listen to me, Blanche.” Pinisil nito ang braso niya. “If you only have six months, then make the most of that. Six months lang din ang validity ng visa mo, tama?” Tumango siya. “We will talk to this lawyer...”

“We?” Umangat ang isang kilay niya.

“Yes. We.” His brow arched as well. “Hindi ganoon ka-hectic ang schedule ko. At mag-isa ka lang dito.”



“I managed since I got here.”

“Not for long with their strict legal system and procedures.”

Natahimik siya. Tama naman ito, at mas alam ni Phoenix ang sinasabi nito.

“Fine,” resigned na sabi niya habang palapit sila sa Produce at Meat section. Nakita niyang may inihihilera sa counter ang assistant na nakausap niya kanina, para marahil inspeksyunin muna niya ang pinili nito bago balutin. “Give me your number.” Kinuha ni Blanche ang cellphone sa bulsa at tiningnan ang katabi.

“Let’s have coffee, and brunch.” His eyes twinkled.

Ilang sandaling minasdan niya ito. This man who never gave her the time of day for the past two years, asking her to have coffee and brunch with him? “Phoenix, bakit mo ginagawa ito?”

Sa halip na sumagot ay marahang iginiya siya nito sa counter. Napilitan tuloy siyang tingnan muna ang mga gulay, isda, at karneng nakalatag doon at sabihin sa assistant na okay na ang lahat at wala siyang papalitan. Nakangiting sinimulan nang ibalot iyon ng nasa counter.

“Blanche, you look pale. Your eyes have dark

circles underneath. At kanina ko pa naririnig na nagpoprotesta ang tiyan mo,” he teased. She felt her cheeks burn. Nagpatuloy lang si Phoenix, “Let me guess, puro galing sa vending machine lang ang kinain mo simula kagabi? Nakakalimutan mo laging kumain sa tuwing masyado kang tutok sa isang bagay o stressed. I see that hasn’t changed.”

She sucked in her cheeks. “Fine. Brunch. Then, uuwi na ako. Kailangan kong bumawi ng tulog.”

“At ihahatid kita pauwi.” Tumingin ito sa cart na dala niya. “I have a car.”

Tumango na lang si Blanche. Wala na siyang gaanong lakas para tumanggi. Isa pa ay gusto rin niya ang nararamdaman ngayon, at ang nakikita kay Phoenix. He seemed to genuinely want to help her, and be with her. It was a far cry from the man who said he could not even imagine a life with her almost a decade ago.



“I want to make you a house, Blanche.”

Nakangiting ibinaba ni Blanche sa padded floor ng isa sa mga playrooms ng children’s home si Kirsten, na halos hindi siya binitawan habang lulan ng hospital service na naghatid sa kanila. Kinuha niya ang isang box ng malalaking *Lego* bricks at

binuksan iyon.

“Do you want a big house, Blanchey? I’ll make you a big house.” Sinimulang piliin ng bata ang mga *Lego pieces* na gagamitin nito.

“I want a big house so you can live in it, too.”

“You really *really* want me to live with you, Blanchey?” Palagi iyong itinatanong sa kanya ni Kirsten. There was hope and sadness in the little girl’s eyes, as if she didn’t completely believe it was possible, even if she wanted it, too.

“Of course, I really *really* want you to be with me, Kirsten.” She cupped the child’s face in her hands. “You’re my little best friend, my most favorite in the whole world. I want to be with you all the time.”

Kirsten smiled. “I want that, too.”

May sasabihin pa sana ang dalaga nang marinig ang marahang pagkatok sa nakabukas na pinto ng playroom. Nakatayo doon si Eva, ang adoption case worker ni Kirsten. Kumaway ito kay Kirsten at tinanguan siya.

“I think Eva wants to talk to me. You work on that house, okay?” paalam niya sa pamangkin.

“When you get back, you will have a *biiig* house.” She beamed at her.

She smiled back. Nilapitan niya si Eva para

lang magulat sa nakitang kasama nito na hindi niya napansin kanina.

It was Phoenix.

## CHAPTER *Two*

*I* work just a few blocks away and since you mentioned you'll be here at this hour, I thought I'd stop by." Tumingin si Phoenix sa gawi ni Kirsten na bahagyang nangungunot ang noo habang nakatingin sa kanila. "I want to meet her, too."

Gusto mang magprotesta ay hindi niya magawa dahil mukhang payag din si Eva na curious na nakatingin sa kanila. Napapabuntong-hiningang itinuro niya kay Phoenix ang suot nitong sapatos para hubarin bago pumasok sa playroom.

Magkasamang lumapit sila kay Kirsten.

"Kirsten, this is my... friend, Phoenix. He wants to meet you."

"*Hej*, Kirsten." Naupo sa harap ng bata si

Phoenix at iniabot ang kamay nito. “I want to be your friend, too. Is that okay?”

“*Hej*, Phoenix! Are you a good friend or a bad friend?”

“I am a good friend.” Sumulyap sa kanya si Phoenix. She rolled her eyes. *Riiight*.

“Then, you can live in the house, too,” deklarang bata. “I am making a big house for Blanchey. She said she wants me to live in it. But I will make a really big house and I don’t want Blanche to be sad when I am in the hospital so you have to live in it, too,” paliwanag ng bata na palipat-lipat ang tingin sa kanila.

Hindi niya alam kung ano ang sasabihin. Nagdesisyon siyang magpaalam na lang sa dalawa para kausapin si Eva at hingan ng update.

“I need to talk to Eva. Kirsten, is it okay to leave Phoenix here?”

Tumango ang bata. “Okay.”

Nag-aalangan pa siyang umalis pero naghihintay na si Eva sa may pinto. Muntik pa siyang madapa habang palabas nang marinig ang sinabi ni Kirsten kay Phoenix. “You are so handsome. More handsome than daddy.”

Hindi na niya narinig ang isinagot doon ni

Phoenix dahil na-distract din siya sa nakitang expression sa magandang mukha ni Eva. Kinabahan agad siya.

“I spoke with the council earlier. They have reviewed your credentials and did preliminary background check.” Marahang iginiya siya nito sa maliit na visitors’ area kung saan nakahanda na ang isang tea set. Ito na rin ang nagsalin at nag-abot sa kanya ng isang cup na agad niyang naubos.

“And?” The tea didn’t help soothe her.

“Positive feedback on your economic condition. They think you can provide for Kirsten once you move back to the Philippines,” umpisa nito, na kahit magandang balita ay hindi lubusang nagpakalma sa kanya. She knew there’s more.

“But they are worried that you are a single young woman working in a high risk environment, seeking custody for a sick child.” Eva sighed. “It’s going to be a lot of work.”

She blinked. Para na rin nitong sinabi na fifty-fifty ang chances nila na magtagumpay. “What do I have to do now?”

Matamang minasdan siya ni Eva. “Phoenix is a good friend of yours?” sa halip ay tanong nito.

Hindi niya alam kung paano iyon sasagutin kaya

tumango na lang siya.

“He said you’ve known each other since college... for a decade now,” pagkukumpirma nito.

“That’s right,” maingat na sagot ni Blanche. ‘*Knew*’ each other was more accurate, she thought.

“And that you work together in the UIN?”

“We’re both with UIN but we don’t really work together,” pagtatama niya.

Napangiti si Eva. “Yes, I know that. And he’s here now for an assignment. He told me that much. Said he’ll be around for at most a year.”

Muli lang siyang tumango. Iniisip pa lang niya ang sasabihin nang marinig ang mga tawanan sa playroom. Kirsten’s high-pitched giggles, along with Phoenix’ animated voice. Nagkatinginan sila ni Eva at sabay na tumayo para silipin ang dalawa.

It appeared as if Phoenix was telling a story using *Lego* pieces, and they were making Kirsten laugh so hard she was practically doubling over and rolling on the floor. Noon lang niya narinig na tumawa nang ganoon ang pamangkin simula nang mamatay ang mga magulang nito.

“Oh, *Pinks*, you are so crazy and funny like mommy and daddy!” the little girl said.

“I am not crazy, don’t laugh at me!” Phoenix said



in a mock-serious, squeaky voice that suspiciously sounded like some farm animal.

Lalo lang natawa si Kirsten. Hindi niya maalis ang tingin sa dalawa. Hindi siya makapaniwala sa nakikita. She never knew Phoenix was good with kids. She knew he could be hilarious but not with her sickly, toddler niece who doesn't easily trust people.

“It's so nice that he followed you here. He said he knew you wanted to adopt Kirsten and is willing to help you out.”

Tiningnan ni Blanche ang katabi. “Yeah. He said he knows this lawyer.”

“A lawyer?” Umarko ang isang kilay ng babae, bago napatango. “Yes, that could help with the procedures, but does he not want to co-adopt with you?”

Nanlaki ang mga mata ni Blanche sa sinabi ng kausap. “Oh no, we're not... it's not what you think.” Hindi niya alam kung anong salita ang nararapat. “We're not together. Not like a couple... no.”

Eva was skeptical. “Really? He had this look in his eyes. Like he was really fond of you and genuinely cared about you.”

Nakatitig lang siya sa babae. Parang gusto niyang matawa, pero baka mainsulto ito. “We're not a

couple, Eva,” ulit niya sa mahinang boses.

Napatango lang ang kausap. “Okay.” She then checked her wristwatch. “But it’s thirty minutes past the visiting hours, my dear. Come here earlier tomorrow so you have more time.” Marahang pinisil nito ang braso niya bago tumingin sa pinto ng playroom.

Malungkot na napangiti lang si Blanche bago muling pumasok sa kuwarto, kung saan naabutan niyang nakaayos sa ibabaw ng box ang natapos na *Lego* house ni Kirsten. It looked like a French villa, with red roof, yellow windows and blue walls. The door was bright orange. At kasalukuyang nagse-selfie sa tabi niyon sina Phoenix at Kirsten.

Her niece’s cheeks were flushed, her eyes twinkled and a huge, gap-toothed smile spread on her chubby face. Parang maiiyak siya sa nakikita.

“Is that my house, Kirsten? That is so beautiful!” sabi niya sabay upo sa tabi nito. Inilabas din niya ang cellphone at kinunan ng picture ang *Lego* house.

“We want to be in the picture, too!” Hinila ng bata ang lapel ng jacket ni Phoenix para makasama ang mga ito sa frame. Nangingiting kinunan din niya ng picture ang mga ito.

“You should be in the picture, too!” excited

na sabi ni Kirsten na ang scarf naman niya ang hinila. Sabay pa sila ni Phoenix na itinaas ang kani-kaniyang cellphone.

Noon naman humangos sa kanila ang natatawang si Eva. “You silly kids. Let me do it. Now, huddle together. Closer!” she motioned for her to sit closer to Kirsten and Phoenix. “Now, Phoenix, why don’t you have this little angel on your lap so you can sit closer to Blanche. Alright, perfect!”

“Smile, Blanchey,” Phoenix whispered as he pulled her closer with one arm.

Ngumiti naman siya, tikom ang bibig.

“Blanche, show your teeth when you smile. Come on,” giit ni Eva na pinanlakihan na siya ng mga mata.

Paano ngingiti na litaw ang ngipin na hindi siya mukhang napipilitan? She was nervous, and uncertain, and a little confused. How could one smile with those feelings driving her nuts?

Pero naramdaman niya ang tila pagda-drum ng mga daliri ni Phoenix mula sa ibaba ng kanyang likod papunta sa baywang. She gasped when his fingers spider walked up her ribs, where she was ticklish. Phoenix knew it.

And that had her letting out a giggle, as her

shoulders raised and shivers ran through her spine.

“That’s more like it. One, two, perfect!” nakangiting ibinalik ni Eva ang mga cellphone nila, bago nito hinarap si Kirsten. “Say your *hej hej*, sweetie. You will see them again tomorrow.”

Hinagkan siya ng bata sa magkabilang pisngi, bago nito niyakap nang mahigpit si Phoenix. Umangat ang isang kilay niya. *Close agad?*

“We will build a big boat tomorrow, okay?” The child looked hopeful.

“Baby, he has to go to work. He might not make it.” Nagbababalang tiningnan niya si Phoenix.

“I will be here after you had your nap after lunch, is that okay?” he said instead before he kissed the little girl on the top of her dark blonde head.

“Okay,” tumatangong sabi ng bata bago ito humawak sa kamay ni Eva. Kasunod nila ni Phoenix ang mga ito hanggang sa front steps ng villa. Nang makalabas ng compound ay saka niya kinompronta ang binata.

“What was that about, Phoenix? Why were you even here?” Hindi na niya maitago ang inis at frustration.

“I wanted to meet her. And see how you two really were. Kinausap ko rin si Eva para alam ko kahit

papaano ang sitwasyon. We will meet the lawyer I was talking about, over dinner at eight.”

Napabuntong-hininga si Blanche. “Fine. But you still didn’t have to promise Kirsten that you’ll see her tomorrow.”

“But I will really be here tomorrow. And the next days if it’s okay.” Inilabas nito ang susi ng sasakyan. “Get in, ihahatid na kita para mas marami kang oras na maghanda para sa meeting natin mamaya. We’re meeting at *Cafe Europa* at Amagertorv Square. Do you know where that is? I can pick you up if you want.”

Umiling ang dalaga. “No, I’ll manage. Kaya kong umuwing mag-isa at kaya ko ring pumunta ng Amagertorv mamaya.” Matamang minasdan niya ito. “Hindi ko alam kung paano ko sasabihin sa iyo ito, pero sa tingin ko mas makabubuti kung hindi ka nangangako kay Kirsten. You can’t always be around, Phoenix.”

Sinalubong nito ang tingin niya. “Well, I wanted to be there for her, for you, and I will make time, Blanche,” he softly said.

Napayuko siya. “Ayoko lang na masanay ang bata.” She sighed. “I should go. See you later, Phoenix.”

His eyes fixed on her for several seconds, before he nodded. Naglalakad na siya palayo ay ramdam pa rin niya ang tingin nito. Pinagsisisihan na niya ngayon kung bakit niya pa sinabi kay Phoenix ang sitwasyon. Ibig sabihin lang niyon ay madalas niya itong makikita.

So he wanted to help. And then what?

Naiiling na binilisan ni Blanche ang paglalakad. Ito mismo ang ipinag-aalala niya. Kahit hindi dapat at kahit ayaw niya, ay muli na naman siyang umaasa.

## CHAPTER *Three*

“You will be here again tomorrow, Pinks?”  
Blanche had to smile at Phoenix’s new nickname. Hindi masabi ng ayos ni Kirsten ang pangalan nito kaya ganoon ang tawag kay Phoenix.

“That depends if you still want to see me tomorrow,” he answered. Karga ni Phoenix si Kirsten at nakatayo ang mga ito sa tabi ng bintana.

“I want to see you tomorrow.”

“Then I will be here tomorrow, but promise me again you will have your nap first and you will take your vitamins and medicines?”

The little girl made a face, but she nodded after. “I will.” Tumingin ito sa gawi niya. “You tell Blanchey

to be a good girl too so she won't be sick. Look!" Itinuro pa siya ng bata, mukhang awang-awa. "She can't even play with us."

Niyuko ni Blanche ang hawak na mug ng mint tea at uminom. Kanina pa siya nakaupo lang malapit sa pinto at hindi gaanong lumalapit kay Kirsten. Lumapit man siya ay kailangan namang may suot na mask. Naulanan kasi siya nang nagdaang gabi habang pauwi matapos ang meeting kasama si Phoenix at ang abogadang si Mayi Larken, a beautiful woman in her forties who specializes in family laws.

Enlightening at informative ang naging pag-uusap nila, pero lalo lang din siyang nanlumo dahil tinapat siya ng abogada kung bakit mahihirapan siya nang husto at mas malaki ang posibilidad na ma-deny kesa magtagumpay ang pag-aampon kay Kirsten. Mayi assured her though, that she would do everything she could to help. Blanche must have registered worry in her face because the older woman immediately said that her services were going to be pro bono.

She wondered why. Everything was expensive in Denmark, especially the services of a partner from a top law firm like Mayi. Nang magpapaalam na sila ay saka niya nalamang tiyahin at ninang pala



ito ni Phoenix. The good lawyer was his mother's younger sister.

Hindi niya alam kung ano ang mararamdaman. Parang napapagkaisahan siya na di mawari, pero mukhang wala namang alam sa nakaraan nila si Miss Mayi. She seemed genuinely interested in her case and willing to help. Pero naiinis pa rin siyang hindi agad sinabi sa kanya ni Phoenix ang kaugnayan nito sa abogada.

But what did she really expect from the man who withheld from her his real intentions almost a decade ago? Kung sa tingin nito ay hindi niya deserve na malaman ang totoo, wala siyang magagawa.

Naiinis si Blanche na apektado pa rin siya ng katotohanang iyon. Sa inis ay para siyang nakikipagkarera kay Kamatayan sa bilis ng pagpedal niya nang mag-bike pauwi. Malas lang na kung kailan malapit na siya sa townhouse na pag-aari ng mga magulang ni Kirsten, ay saka naman siya naulanan.

Heto tuloy ang resulta. Halos hindi niya malapitan ang pamangkin na compromised pa ang immune system at madaling mahawa ng sakit.

At kahit nalulungkot para sa kanya ay tila hindi rin gaanong ininda ng bata na hindi sila

makakapaglaro dahil naroon naman si *Pinks*.

“Don’t worry, I’ll make sure she’d be a good girl,” narinig niyang sabi ni Phoenix na nagpaarko ng kilay niya. “Blanchey will do everything you said,” he said solemnly.

That made Kirsten giggle. “How will you do that?”

“Hmm...” Phoenix’s brows furrowed, as if in deep thought. Lalo namang naaliw si Kirsten. “Maybe I will promise to treat her to a huge *Æblekage*.” He glanced her way. He was referring to a Danish dessert that was like a cross between a sans rival and graham cake, topped with either whipped cream or jelly and served cold. “Or ice cream!”

Kirsten pursed her lips, then shook her head. “But *Æblekage* is sweet, and ice cream is cold. Mommy won’t let me have those when my nose is red.”

“Oh, too bad,” malungkot na sagot naman ni Phoenix, bago muling nag-isip. “Okay, let’s see. I will think of another way to make her a good girl.”

Kirsten giggled again. “Okay, let’s think again. Hmm...” Inilagay nito ang isang hintuturo sa sentido ni Phoenix, habang ang isa pa ay idinuro naman nito sa gitna ng sariling noo. The two looked adorable,

and under different circumstances, Blanche would have melted at the sight.

Tall, formidable, gorgeous Phoenix appearing to be in serious, deep thought with a child he held in his arms? That's an image worth a thousand words and beautiful memories. Maingat na kinuha niya ang cellphone at palihim na kinunan ng picture ang dalawa, bago muling kinuha ang mug ng tsa.

"I know what to do!" bulalas ni Kirsten, dahilan para kunwa ay magulat si Phoenix.

"What should we do!" panggagaya nito sa tono ng bata, na nagpatawa lalo sa huli.

"Oh, stop it, Pinks! Your face is too funny!"

"Okay, I am serious." He arranged his features into something that looked deadly serious indeed.

*Damn, he look so hot!* Napainom si Blanche ng mint tea.

"Okay, I think you should tell her you will kiss her or hug her if she is a good girl. Mommy does that when me and daddy were good."

Muntik na siyang masamid sa narinig. Hindi siya tumitingin sa gawi ng dalawa habang hinihintay kung ano ang isasagot ni Phoenix. Parang ang daming minuto muna ang dumaan bago niya muling narinig ang boses nito, na medyo parang nag-aalala

at pabulong pa kunwari pero dinig naman niya.

“You think that would work?” he asked.

“Yes! Me and Daddy likes it when mommy gives us a kiss, or hugs us *reaaaally* tight. She smells good, too. Like my sweet milk and her favorite lotion.”

“I’m not sure I smell good, though.”

Hindi maintindihan ni Blanche kung bakit nag-iinit ang pisngi niya, pero pinipigilan din naman niya ang sariling mapangiti habang mahigpit na hawak ang mug at nakayuko pa rin.

She then heard loud sniffing sounds, and Kirsten giggling, before the child declared, “Don’t worry. You smell good. Like sweet chocolate.”

“Really? That’s good?”

“Yes!” parang nawawalan na ng pasensyang sabi ng bata. “Blanchey loves chocolates. I think she will like it when you kiss her. Or hug her *reaaaally* tight. Like this.”

“Ow, that’s tight!” he complained in a mock pained voice. Natawa muli ang bata. “You really think so, huh?”

“Pinks! Do you want her to be a good girl or not?”

Hindi na niya napigilang matawa. Napaangat na din siya ng tingin sa dalawa. Nasa baywang ni Kirsten

ang isang kamay nito, at medyo nakasimangot na.

“Of course I want her to be a good girl. I don’t like seeing her sick.” Derecho ang tingin sa kanya ni Phoenix nang sabihin iyon.

“Then go tell her.” Tinapik ng bata ang balikat ng may karga dito para ibaba na ito. Maingat na inalalayan naman ito ng binata sa cushioned floor, para lang muling hilahin ng bata palapit sa direksyon niya. *Uh oh...* “Blanchey! Pinks wants to tell you something.”

*Right.* Para namang hindi pa niya narinig ang usapan ng mga ito kanina? “Yes?” Ubos na ang tsaang niya, kaya ibinalik na niya ang face mask.

Kirsten tugged at Phoenix’s hand. “Tell her, Pinks.”

He looked sheepish. Adorably sheepish. *Damn.*

“What is it?” Alam na niya kung ano ang maririnig, pero heto at nae-excite pa rin siya. O kinakabahan? Both? Bakit? Gusto niyang tumayo na at magpaalam na lang sa pamangkin. Mag-a-alas cinco na din naman at maiintindihan nito kung bakit kailangan na niyang umalis. But the little girl practically pulled the six feet tall, lean and muscular man so he would get on his knees and sit in front of her.

“Blanchey... Blanche,” he began after a deep breath. Parang kinakabahan din ang lalaki. *Phoenix Soler? Nervous?*

“We don’t like seeing your red nose. We don’t like it that you’re sick and can’t play with us. Kirsten misses you...” Sumulyap ito sa pamangkin niya.

The kid nodded. “He misses you, too.”

“Right. Yes.” Imagination lang ba niya o nag-blush talaga si Phoenix? “Anyway, you should rest. Eat a huge bowl of chicken soup with vegetables and fresh fruit salad. Then, you must take your vitamins and medicines, and drink lots of water. And rest, you have to sleep early, before 9 pm even if the sun is still up. You have to sleep...” he babbled.

“Oh-kay,” nasabi na lang niya.

“I’m serious, Blanche. You need to get well. You have to do everything I said and be a good girl.”

“*Ma-bait!*” Kirsten chimed in.

“Mabait na mabait dapat.” Phoenix smiled.

“And if you’re a good girl, Pinks will give you many many kisses and hugs!” excited na dagdag ng bata.

“Many... many kisses... and hugs?” ulit ni Blanche.

“Yes!” Kirsten almost shouted, then looked at

Phoenix. “Twenty kisses and twenty hugs? I will count!”

“Sure. I’d love that.” He grinned.

Blanche felt her cheeks burn. “Kirsten, I think I need to go home. It’s five...”

“Take Pinks home with you so he can check if you will be a good girl!” utos ng pamangkin niya.

She sighed. “Fine.”

“Say you’ll be a good girl first,” giit ni Kirsten.

*Good lord!* Two days pa lang na magkakilala pero nahawa na ito ng kakulitan kay Phoenix! “Yes, I promise.”

“Blanchey, you tell Pinks. Look at him. Mommy said it’s bad when you talk and you don’t look in the eyes.”

*Oh, my God.* Tumingin naman siya kay *Pinks*, na kunwa ay seryoso ang mukha pero nagniningning naman ang mga mata. *Damn those hazel eyes!* “Pinks...” she smirked. “I promise I will be a good girl.”



“Phoenix, hindi mo na talaga kailangang tapusin iyan. Wala ka bang ibang kailangang gawin o puntahan?”

Tiningnan siya ni Phoenix mula sa paglo-

load nito ng mga mangkok, baso at kubyertos sa dishwasher. “Blanche, alam mo ang schedule ko. My day starts at seven in the morning and ends by two in the afternoon. Hindi ito abala. At kailangan mo talaga ng dagdag na pahinga dahil bukod sa kulang ka sa tulog simula nang dumating ka dito ay halos hindi ka rin humihinto. For someone who’s on leave, you are very busy.”

“I have to be busy. I need to work on things.”

“Not every waking moment of your life, Blanche. This is a beautiful city, have you even explored it yet? Dinadaan mo man lang ba iyong mga scenic routes sa tuwing nagba-bike ka?”

Hindi siya kumibo. Sumandal lang siya sa counter at minasdan si Phoenix na bukod sa ipinaghuhugas siya ng pinggan ngayon ay ipinaghanda din siya ng chicken chowder with vegetables, baguette with garlic and butter, at fruit salad. Hindi rin nito inaalang ang tingin sa kanya hangga’t hindi niya isinubo ang dalawang soft gel capsules ng vitamin C kanina.

Parang balak pa nitong manatili sa bahay hanggang sa makainom siya ng gamot mamaya bago matulog.

“Saan kayo namamasyal ni Kirsten sa tuwing puwede siyang lumabas? Have you even taken her



to the castles? The botanical gardens inside the university? Museums?” muling tanong nito.

Umiling si Blanche. “I have only taken her to the nearby park, and the *Nationalmuseet*.”

“When her doctor says she’s okay to go out, and when you’re feeling much better, we will drive around and explore.”

“Phoenix, again, you don’t have to.”

“I want to.” giit nito, bago tumingin sa relo. “It’s almost eight. Go change into something o kung anuman ang ritual mo bago matulog. Dapat bago mag-alas nueve, patulog ka na.”

“Ang liwanag pa sa labas!” protesta ng dalaga. Kapag summer sa Denmark, sobrang haba ng mga araw. The sun rises at around 4:30 in the morning and sets at 10 in the evening.

“Close the drapes, then.” He raised a brow. “You promised to be a good girl.”

“I am not interested in your kisses or hugs,” sa inis ay nasabi niya, at wala siyang balak bawiin.

Natawa lang si Phoenix. “Fine. Then, let’s reverse that... reward.” He grinned, then stepped closer. “Kapag hindi ka nagpaka-good girl, I will—”

“I’ll go.” Itinaas ni Blanche ang isang kamay at naglakad paatras. Asar na nagmartsa siya papunta

sa bathroom sa kuwarto niya para mag-shower at magpalit ng pantulog. Baka sakaling kapag nakita ni Phoenix na naka-pajamas na siya ay umalis na ito.

Mag-e-eight thirty na nang matapos siya. Naisara na rin niya ang makapal na kurtina sa kuwarto para hindi makitang maliwanag pa sa labas. Nang bumalik siya sa kusina ay naghihintay at nakasandal sa counter si Phoenix at hinahalo ang isang baso ng gatas. *Oh God.*

“Very good, Dr. Allegria. Now here’s your milk. Nilagyan ko ’yan ng honey para mas madali kang makatulog.”

“Inumin ko ito, promise.” Kinuha niya ang baso. “Can you leave now? So I can rest?”

He blinked. “I want to tell you something first.” Bigla ay may pag-aalangan sa itsura nito.

Uminom siya ng gatas. “Ano ‘yon?” Masarap ang timpla nito. Sakto lang. Napangalahati tuloy agad niya.

“I’ve been thinking about what Tita Mayi told us... about the proceedings, about her assessment of the case so far. Nakausap ko din siya kanina at sinabi niya na nakipag-usap siya sa ilang taga-adoption board.”

Tumango ang dalaga. “Nag-text din siya sa akin.

---

I appreciate that she was honest that it won't be easy."

"It would be difficult, Blanche." He sighed, his eyes fixed on hers.

"Yeah, I know. Mukhang naiwan sa unang panahon ang paniniwala ng child adoption and protection services nila dito, na para namang may direktang epekto ang pagiging single ko sa kakayahan kong ampunin at alagaan ang pamangkin ko." Napailing siya. "I've proven that I can support her. Apparently, that wasn't enough."

Marahang napatango lang si Phoenix, hindi inaalís ang tingin sa kanya. Parang may malalim itong iniisip.

Nagpatuloy si Blanche. "I mean, it's the twenty-first century. And this is supposedly one of the more progressive countries, but—"

"We could get married."

## CHAPTER *Four*

*N*abitin sa ere ang anumang sasabihin niya sa narinig mula kay Phoenix. Nangyari ba talaga iyon? Did he really suggest they should get married? Nakatitig lang siya sa kaharap, naghihintay ng punchline kung mayroon man.

“You’re looking at me like it’s the craziest idea you’ve heard.” He looked and sounded serious.

Napakurap lang siya nang ilang beses. Wala siyang maisip na isasagot kahit isang syllable.

“Let’s just consider it objectively for a moment, Blanche,” giit nito. “Alam nating pareho na halos i-discriminate ka na nila laban sa pagiging potential adoptive parent dahil sa status mo. Que tama iyon o mali, mukhang ganoon talaga ang kalakaran

dito.” He paused. “Pero kaya din nating gawan ito ng paraan. If being married means you could get custody of your niece, then we should consider it.”

Naibaba niya ang baso sa counter. “Phoenix, I...” Napailing siya. “Hindi puwedeng basta na lang... I mean, it would be...” She sighed.

“Brilliant.” A small chuckle escaped him, a hint of recklessness in his eyes. “It would be brilliant.”

Maang na minasdan lang niya si Phoenix. Nababaliw na ba ang lalaking ito?

“Ikaw ang pinakamalapit na relative ni Kirsten, Blanche. Ikaw lang ang nagpakita ng interes na kunin siya para alagaan at palakihin. You’re also a doctor and even if it is not your line of expertise, you can still manage her condition better than anyone.” He took a deep breath. “Kung may issue sila sa pagiging single mo, then the hell with them, we can fix that.”

“It’s not something you just fix,” nakikiusap ang mga matang sabi niya, hindi makapaniwalang may ganito silang usapan ngayon. “Marriage is a serious commitment, Phoenix. At hindi lang para sa iyo, o para sa akin, kundi kay Kirsten din. Hindi puwedeng gagawin lang natin iyon dahil convenient... a means to an end.”

*You can't even imagine yourself being with me, not even as a serious girlfriend. What the f\*ck got into you now, suggesting we get married?*

Umiling siya. "I'm sorry, Phoenix. I can't ask you to do that for me."

"Alam ko." May kung ano sa boses nito na hindi niya alam kung narinig na niya dati. "I know exactly what it would mean. But you're not the one who would have to ask, because I am the one who will." Inihawak nito ang isang kamay sa counter. "If you want me to do this properly and get down—"

"Oh sh\*t, Phoenix, ano ba!" Hinawakan niya ito sa braso, natarantang bigla. Seryoso ba ito? "Please, huwag mong gawin..." Nag-iinit na ang pisngi niya. Phoenix just looked at her. "You're serious."

"I am," he softly said.

"It's a very... generous offer," mahinang saad niya. "Pero pasensya na, hindi ko matatanggap."

Matagal na nakatingin lang sa kanya si Phoenix bago nito nagawang magsalita muli. "Okay," he whispered.

"Phoenix, hindi rin kasi tayo makakasiguro na kung mag-iiba... kung magpapakasal tayo ay maibibigay din sa akin ang custody kay Kirsten. Sa tingin ko lang kasi—"

“No, you’re right.” He nodded. “You’re absolutely right, Blanche.”

She blinked. “Talaga?”

“Oo naman,” mabilis na sagot nito. “It was just an idea, no big deal.” He fished for his cars keys in his jacket. “Well, I should go. Para makapagpahinga ka na.” He forced a smile. “Take the next couple of days to rest and recover, Blanche. Ako na ang bahala kay Kirsten.”

Wala siyang choice kundi pumayag. Ayaw din niyang ikompromiso ang kalagayan ng pamangkin. “I will. Thank you, Phoenix,” sabi niya nang sundan ito papunta sa main door.

“I’ll lock the gate when I get out.” He leaned in and kissed the top of her head. Parang pareho pa silang nagulat nang lumayo ito sa kanya. Binuksan nito ang pinto. “Take care, Blanche,” he said as he stepped out, then closed the door behind him.

Leaving her wondering how his smile could be warm, and yet appear as if something else was masked behind his eyes.



“Next time, Blanche, I will make a castle like this. But I don’t have *Lego* lions. I have a lion toy in the house, though. Can you bring the toy lion

tomorrow?” Kahit inaantok at nakasandig na ang ulo sa balikat ni Phoenix na may karga dito ay nagawa pang magbilin ni Kirsten, bago muling naghikab.

Hinawakan ni Blanche ang kamay nito. “Sure, my little princess.”

Kirsten smiled, then closed her eyes. Nasa *Kongens Have* o King’s Garden sila ng Rosenborg Palace, na itinayo ng isang naging hari ng Denmark na si Christian IV noong 1600s. Halos kahawig nito ang palasyo sa logo ng *Disney*, na may bantay pang mga estatwa ng leon sa entrance. It was a former summer residence of the monarchs, na ngayon ay isa nang museum at tourist attraction.

“And you’re the queen,” the little girl said.

“I thought you’re asleep!”

“And Pinks is king,” dagdag pa nito bago muling natahimik. Tatlong araw na hindi niya nakita ang pamangkin, at para i-celebrate ang paggaling niya ay nakakuha ng permiso mula sa children’s home si Phoenix para maipasyal nila ang bata. They went out to lunch before heading to the Rosenborg Palace.

Matapos ang paglilibot sa basement museum ng palasyo, pati na sa iba’t ibang kuwarto nito, at pagmamasid sa Baroque Marble Hall kung saan marami silang pictures, ay napagod din ang bata



na na-miss ang siesta nito. It was past three in the afternoon and she could have just told Phoenix that they should leave, but when he walked towards the exit to one of the most beautiful gardens she'd ever seen, she realized she didn't want to leave yet.

Hindi lang iyon dahil sa magandang tanawing nakikita niya, o dahil nais niyang i-enjoy ang magandang panahon. The sun was behind the clouds, the air was comfortably cool and smelled wonderful but beside her, this tall guy carried a sleeping little girl in his arms and for some reason, this was the best thing in this late afternoon stroll.

“I have to leave tonight for Berlin. I might stay there for a few days. I'm meeting Samarra who's going to hand me a few stuff from the Manila HQ,” mahinang sabi ni Phoenix, derecho ang tingin.

Napakurap siya. “Oh, um... she's being transferred to Berlin?” nagawa niyang itanong. Phoenix dated Agent Samarra Recio for a few months. Ang babae rin ang naging dahilan kung bakit napilitan silang mag-usap ni Phoenix sa park ng isang university isang beses, na naging awkward lang dahil parehong hindi sila komportable. It ended with her making up an excuse that she needed to go home. She felt pathetic.

“No, we’re just going to be there for a conference. Baka Tuesday or Wednesday na ako makabalik.” He then looked at her. “Don’t worry, I told her I won’t be around for a few days.” He smiled, referring to Kirsten.

“Okay.” Huminga siya nang malalim. “Nai-schedule na pala ni Tita Mayi ang hearing. Next Wednesday na.”

Huminto sa paglalakad si Phoenix, at tinapik ang likod ng batang karga nito. “I didn’t know that.”

“Kaninang umaga lang na-confirm.”

He nodded slowly. “That’s... that’s cool, Blanche. I’m glad the process is finally about to start. Ikaw lang naman ang nag-file ng petition para kay Kirsten. Advantage din iyon kahit papaano.”

Bahagyang napangiti lang ang dalaga. “Itatanong ko sana kung puwede kitang kuning character witness ko pero aalis ka pala...”

“I can come back sooner. Hanggang Monday lang naman ang conference. Magte-text ako agad pag pabalik na ako.”

“You said you’d stay there until Tuesday or Wednesday...”

“Only as a contingency in case the HQ needed me.”

She stared at him. "I'd appreciate it, Phoenix."

He smiled. "Anytime, Blanche."

Parang may naramdaman siyang *deja vu* sa ngiting iyon, na gusto agad niyang isantabi. Paano sila napunta sa ganitong sitwasyon gayong tinapos na ni Phoenix ang lahat sa pagitan nila dati pa? Ang dami pa niyang naiisip na tanong, na pinutol ng pagtunog ng cellphone niya.

It was Tita Mayi. Agad niya iyong sinagot.

At hindi magandang balita ang dahilan ng pagtawag nito.

## CHAPTER *Five*

**T**ila agad iyong nahalata ni Phoenix na marahang iginiya siya sa isang bench gamit ang isang kamay. Parang nanghihina siya nang mapaupo habang nakikinig sa tawag. Dama niya ang tingin ni Phoenix, kita niya ang pagpapalit ng ekspresyon sa mukha nito habang minamasdan siya.

Napayuko si Blanche. Namamasa ang mga mata at parang may bumabara sa kanyang lalamunan. “I understand, Tita,” she breathed. “I... I know... Do we have to meet now? Oh, okay.” Matapos makinig sa iba pang sinasabi ng kausap ay natapos din ang tawag.

Hawak lang niya ang cellphone at nakatitig sa screen niyon nang hawakan ni Phoenix ang kamay

niya.

“Who was it, Blanche? What happened?”

She bit her lip. “That was Tita Mayi. A representative of one of Frans’ siblings in the US contacted the adoption council. Nag-file din daw ng petition for custody kay Kirsten,” nanlulumong sagot niya.

Phoenix just looked at her. Wala nang kailangang sabihin pa sa pagitan nila para ipahayag kung ano ang magiging epekto niyon sa kaso niya. Panay pamilyado ang mga kapatid ni Frans. Tiyak na mas papaboran ng korte na mapunta ang bata sa ganoong klase ng environment kaysa sa kanya.

“My case was weak to begin with.”

“Blanche...” He pulled her gently so she could rest her head on his shoulder. Ramdam niyang may gustong sabihin si Phoenix pero wala itong mahagilap. Gusto niyang i-reassure ito na okay lang, sapat na ang presence nito, pero pakiramdam niya ay maiiyak lang siya kapag muling nagsalita.

“May iba pa ba tayong magagawa? Kakausapin ko siya mamaya bago ako umalis.”

“Ewan ko...” Napasinghot si Blanche. “Hindi naman ako basta susuko. I guess I will just have to pray for a miracle.”

Natahimik ito. Marahang tinatapik lang ang kanyang balikat habang hinahaplos din ang likod ng batang karga.

“Naaalala mo ‘yung sinabi ko a few days ago? Sa bahay mo?” mayamaya ay tanong ni Phoenix.

“Yes?” Paanong hindi niya iyon maaalala? Ilang beses na natutulala na lang siya nitong nagdaang mga araw at iniisip iyon!

“Alam kong... ayaw mo iyong tanggapin, at naiintindihan ko pero...” He sighed. She closed her eyes as his shoulder moved a bit, liking the feel of him this close. “Just think about it, Blanche. I know you think it’s crazy. Wala ding katiyakan na makukuha mo agad ang custody kay Kirsten pero mas malaki ang magiging tsansa mo.”

Marahang iniangat niya ang ulo at bahagyang lumayo kay Phoenix. Nagtama ang mga mata nila. Bumaba ang kamay nito para hulihin ang kamay niya. Nakikiusap ang tingin nito.

“We should do it, Blanche. People marry for a lot of reasons. Why should this one be any less meaningful? Malapit sa iyo si Kirsten, ikaw ang nakalista sa guardian niya at ikaw ang mas pinagkakatiwalaan ng mga magulang niya. Sa iyo siya dapat mapunta. If there is anything we can

do to make that happen, then I don't see why we shouldn't do it."

Nanatili lang siyang nakatitig kay Phoenix. Wala na siyang pakialam kung nangingilid na ang luha niya o namumula na siya.

"Hindi siguro ito ang ideal na scenario para sa iyo, na magiging dahilan para magpakasal ka." patuloy nito. "Wala ding guarantee na magtatagumpay tayo pero mas malaki ang tsansa kung sakaling gagawin natin ito. If this doesn't work, then we will appeal, and appeal again. Tita Mayi will ask the other lawyers and help us do that. Magpa-file tayo ng maraming appeal sa maraming korte dito at sa buong Scandinavia o EU member countries hanggang sa mapagod na sila at magmakaawang kunin na natin si Kirsten at umalis na tayo ng Denmark, tantanan lang natin sila."

Blanche finally released a half laugh at that, then shook her head, amazed at this man who looked so determined to help her win her case.

"Just think about it, Blanche. That's all I'm saying." He squeezed her hand. "The offer is on the table."

"Okay," bulong niya, hindi makapaniwalang nasabi nga niya iyon. "I will think about it."

Ilang sandaling nakatingin lang sa kanya si Phoenix, bago ito natawa.

“Ano’ng nakakatawa?” taas ang kilay na tanong ng dalaga.

“Can you imagine what everyone at *UIN* Manila would say? And Director Malvar?”

Napailing siya. Nai-imagine nga niya. Pareho silang may reputasyon ni Phoenix sa pagiging workaholic. “It would be the strangest thing ever.”

He smiled wistfully. “Yeah.” He then gently pulled her hand, as he stood up. “We should go. I am not even done packing yet; My flight is at ten later.”

Tahimik na naglakad sila papunta sa parking area. Siya na ang may may kalong kay Kirsten habang nagda-drive si Phoenix pabalik sa children’s home.

They never talked much on the way. Tutok si Phoenix sa pagmamaneho pero halatang may iniisip ito. Yet he also looked calm and content, even happy. It was like he was looking forward to something.

While her mind was swirling, thinking about one of the biggest decisions she’d ever have to make in her life.



Seven thirty ng gabi pero maliwanag pa sa labas. Nakatayo malapit sa main gate ng isang villa si



Blanche, nakasandal sa hood ng sedan ni Phoenix. Inayos pa niya ang scarf sa leeg dahil mas lumalamig ang hangin sa parteng iyon ng siyudad dahil malapit sa dagat.

Gusto niyang tawagan si Phoenix para lumabas agad ito, pero kadarating pa lang din niya at nilakad lang niya mula sa train station kaya kailangan muna niyang mag-relax kahit kaunti. She was there for a reason after all, and she was about to say yes to a very important decision.

Bago pa man muling banggitin kanina ni Phoenix ang tungkol sa kasal ay ilang araw na niya iyong pinag-iisipan. She said *No* but the offer, the possibilities were stuck in her head. And the questions! God, she had so many. Like, what kind of arrangement does he have in mind? A real marriage?

Plano kaya ni Phoenix na maghiwalay din sila matapos ang ilang buwan, o taon? Paano nila gagawin iyon? No, sa tingin niya ay wala iyon sa plano ni Phoenix, not while Kirsten is still young.

Pareho pa silang bata, relatively. They're both still at their prime. Wala siyang dating o social life pero paano si Phoenix?

Hihilingin ba nitong payagan niya itong makipag-date sa iba? Would he sometimes go, "*Hey,*

*Blanche, we're almost out of milk and I have this hot date tonight so don't wait up. I won't be home early for dinner."*

Napangiwi si Blanche sa naisip. Pero paano nga kaya? Kailangan ba nilang mag-open ng joint bank account? Magbakasyon twice a year? Bibili kaya sila ng bahay?

Maghahati ba sila sa household chores, magkasama ba silang bibili ng furniture, o share sa pagbabayad ng utilities?

Would they split a laundry schedule, would they do each other's laundry?

Would they sleep together? In the same bed? Would they... make... *Oh. My. God.*

Marahas na napailing siya sa naisip. Not that she hadn't gone that far with Phoenix. He was the only man she'd ever been with, it shouldn't be anything new. She knew exactly what it's like, and it's... wonderful. He was a good lover.

Nag-init ang pisngi ni Blanche sa naisip. That was a long time ago but—bakit ba niya iniisip ang mga ito?

Napapabuntong-hiningang dumerecho siya ng tayo nang marinig ang mga papalapit na yabag. Ayon kay Phoenix ay sa furnished carriage house sa tabi

ng villa ng Tita Mayi nito ito nakatira. Ilang metro lang ang layo niyon sa gate at doon niya nakitang nagmula si Phoenix, dala ang isang gym bag at backpack.

Nagulat ito nang makita siyang naghihintay. “Blanche! What are you doing here?” Mabilis na binuksan at isinara nito ang gate nang makalabas. “Is everything alright?”

Huminga siya nang malalim. “Yes.”

He arched a brow, then went to the driver’s side. Inilagay muna nito ang mga bag sa loob bago siya binalikan. “What is it, Blanche?”

Nakatitig lang siya dito, hindi alam kung paano mag-uumpisa. “Uh... anong oras ka ba dapat nasa airport? Hindi ka ba male-late?”

“Wala pang thirty minutes ang biyahe papunta d’un, don’t worry.” He eyed her curiously.

Nag-iwas siya ng tingin. “I... I think it can wait.” Humakbang siya palayo. “Text ka na lang pag pabalik ka na. Next time na lang tayo—”

“Hey, wait...” Hinagip ng binata ang braso niya. “Are you alright? What’s going on? Puwede pa nating pag-usapan ngayon.” His eyes darkened with worry.

She met his gaze. Kinakabahan siya pero... *it’s now or never.* “Tungkol lang sa... sa sinabi mo na...”

Huminga siya nang malalim. "I've thought about it and... Yes." Halos ibulong lang niya ang huling salita.

Ilang segundo lang siguro ang lumipas, pero parang ang tagal nilang nakatayo ni Phoenix, magkaharap at magkahinang ang mga mata. Pareho silang hindi makapaniwala sa sinabi niya, hanggang sa ito na rin ang bumasag ng katahimikan.

"So, um..." Parang naglaho lahat ang confidence ng lalaki. Kung kailan Yes ang sagot niya ay saka nagmukhang mas kabado si Phoenix. "You said yes... you want to... um..."

Tumango si Blanche. "Yes," mas malakas nang sabi niya. "I will marry you."

Tumango din ito. "You're serious."

"I am." Her eyes were fixed on his. "You were serious when you asked, right?"

"Of course, I am serious," mabilis na tugon nito.

Alanganing napangiti siya. "You do realize this is crazy, Phoenix?"

"Sinasabi mo ba iyan para mag-back out pa ako?"

Umiling siya. "Naka-yes na ako."

He just stared at her for a few seconds before a smile formed on his lips. "Come here," he said with a contented sigh and pulled her close. He pressed

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his hand to the back of her head and her face in his chest. Her arms automatically wrapped around him.

It had been a long, long while. This felt like home.

# CHAPTER *Six*

*Some people fall in love... while others crash into it.*

*She met Phoenix during her shift as a library assistant when she was nineteen. Hilo din siya, wala pang laman ang tiyan kundi tubig at Milo, at puyat dahil nag-review para sa naka-schedule niyang exam kinahapunan.*

*Scholar siya sa seven-year Doctor of Medicine program ng Ackerton University, at para masigurong mababawasan pa ang kailangan niyang bayaran ay pinasok rin niya ang pagiging student assistant. Five days per week, four hours each day ang trabaho niya sa library ngayong semester, mula seven-thirty ng umaga hanggang eleven thirty ng tanghali.*

*Iginala niya ang tingin sa kabuuan ng malawak na silid. Their Periodicals Section has one of the biggest and most extensive collections in any South East Asian university. Isa din ito sa paboritong puntahan ng mga estudyante, pero ngayong araw ay mabibilang yata sa daliri ang bisita nila dahil exam week.*

*Sinabihan na siya ni Miss Belle, ang librarian na supervisor niya na magpahinga na lang, pero nasanay na ang katawan niya na palaging may ginagawa, kaya pagsapit ng alas diez, ay tumayo na siya para harapin ang pag-aayos ng mga bagong magazines.*

*Nangangalahati na siya sa ginagawa nang makaramdam ng pagkahilo, na inisip niyang dahil siguro sa puyat, gutom at ang kanina pa pagtingala para maabot ang matataas na bahagi ng mga estante.*

*“Ate, okay ka lang?” tanong ng isang estudyante, na hawak ang isang issue ng Vanity Fair.*

*“Okay lang. Thanks,” nakangiting sagot ni Blanche kahit nararamdaman na rin ang pagkalam ng sikmura. Marahang itnulak niya ang cart, at inihinto sa kasunod na estante. Nakatayo sa tapat niyon ang isang matangkad na lalaki, na hinintay muna niyang makuha kung anuman ang kailangan nito.*

*“Do you have the new issue of Psychologies yet?” baling nito sa kanya. “The one with the feature about*

*the brain functions of those with certain personality disorders?”*

*Kahit medyo nanlalabo na ang tingin ay hindi pa rin nakaligtas sa kanya ang itsura ng kaharap, at hindi niya mapigilan ang mapasinghap. The tall guy was, for lack of better words, very handsome, with incredible leaf-colored eyes magnified by his Harry Potter-ish glasses that rested on his Roman nose and an adorably geeky smile. Medyo sablay lang ang buhok nitong makapal, wavy at nangangailangan na ng gupit.*

*“Miss?” untag nito, bago inilapit ang mukha at binasa ang nakasulat sa nametag sa kaliwang dibdib niya. “Miss Blanche?”*

*She blinked. “Sorry.” Niyuko niya ang cart at mabilis na hinanap ang magazine na sinabi nito. “Here, kadarating lang kasi.” Iniabot niya ang kopya.*

*His smile widened, making his deep set eyes seem smaller. “Cool! Thank you, Blanche...” His gaze went to her ID. “College of Medicine.” He looked really impressed. “A genius just helped me out. Thank you.” Parang ayaw pa nitong umalis sa harap niya.*

*At parang ayaw pa din niya itong paalisin. “You’re welcome.” Pero kailangan niyang tapusin ang trabaho. Hindi rin naman niya alam kung ano pa ang*



*sasabihin sa kausap. Napayuko tuloy siya.*

*“Okay, I can take a hint. You need to work.” Paatras na naglakad palayo ang lalaki, sabay saludo sa kanya. Sa mahabang mesang katapat mismo ng magazine stand ito pumuwesto.*

*Napapabuntong-hiningang hinarap na niya ang gawain. Ito na lang ang dapat niyang tapusin para sa araw na iyon dahil ipinilit ni Miss Belle na mag-relax muna siya bago ang exam. Inalis niya ang mga lumang issues na ilalagay niya sa Archive, at ipinalit ang mga bago, simula sa bottom shelf.*

*Pahinto-hinto si Blanche kada may natatapos na shelf. Hinihilot muna niya ang sentido, ini-steady ang sarili at ipinipikit ang mga mata nang ilang segundo bago magpatuloy. Pero nang ang pinakataas na shelf na ang papalitan niya ay parang umiikot na ang paligid. Mahigpit na napakapit siya sa shelf, habang pilit pa ring inilalagay ang hawak na magazine sa pinakataas na bahagi nito.*

*Naramdaman niya ang bahagyang paggalaw niyon, na inakala niyang mapipigilan niya kapag mas hinigpitan pa niya ang hawak pero lalo lang iyong bumuway hanggang sa tila slow motion na nag-collapse iyon at bumagsak ang mga magazine sa kanya.*

*Oh no, nangyayari ba talaga ito? Alam niyang may bumagsak pero bakit parang walang ingay? She felt something fall but how come she somehow felt numb? Something heavy was against her and the cart but how come nothing hurts?*

*“Oh my God! Si Ateng SA!”*

*“Blanche! Ano ba naman iyan...”*

*“Sh\*t, Blanche, are you alright?”*

*She closed her eyes, then opened them again. Malabo pa din ang tingin niya, at nakakapit pa rin ang isang kamay niya sa shelf. Napaupo na siya sa sahig at may mahapding kung ano sa pisngi niya. There’s something moist. Blood? Sweat?*

*Then warm, strong arms pulled her gently, and the shelf slowly eased out of her.*

*“Damn, may papercut ka,” a low, throaty voice said. Parang ang lapit niyon. Parang iyon din ang nakayakap sa kanya ngayon. Nakayakap?*

*Napakurap siya, at sa nanlalabong tingin ay nakilala niya ang lalaking humiram ng magazine kanina lang.*

*“Hi,” namamanghang bati ni Blanche.*

*Ito naman ang napakurap, bago napangiti kasabay ang dagling pagkawala ng pag-aalala sa guwapong mukha nito. “Hi.”*

*“Blanche! Ano ba ang nangyari? Sinabi ko naman kasi sa iyong magpahinga ka na lang, di ba?”*

*Bumaling siya sa kanan. “Miss Belle...”*

*Iniabot nito ang isang pouch ng tissue. “May dugo ‘yang left cheek mo. Tayo na at linisin natin.” Napatingin ito sa lalaking nakapaikot ang braso sa kanya. Noon niya napansing halos nakaupo na pala siya sa kandungan ng lalaki, at nakalapat ang kanyang ulo sa dibdib nito.*

*At ang bango! “I’m sorry, Miss Belle,” nahihiyang sabi niya, disoriented pa.*

*“Hindi ka na naman nag-almusal, ’no?” namaywang ito. “Sa lahat ng magdodoktor, ikaw ang walang pakialam sa health mo.”*

*“I’ll take her to the clinic, Miss Belle,” sabad ng lalaking sinasandalan niya. “I’m Phoenix.” pakilala nito sabay pakita ng ID. “Dadalhin ko na rin siya sa cafeteria para makakain.”*

*Ni hindi man lang nag-alinlangan si Miss Belle. Tinulungan pa sila nitong makatayo. “Mabuti pa nga. Nasa cubicle ang bag niya. K’unin mo na rin at nang hindi na siya makatanggi pa.” She gently squeezed her arm.*

*Napapikit si Blanche. “Hindi pa ako tapos sa ginagawa ko, Miss Belle.”*

*The older woman shook her head. “Past ten pa lang naman. Make sure na nakapag-rest siya bago ang exam. Alas dos pa naman iyon.” Kay Phoenix ito nakatingin.*

*Was he for real? That was such a cool name! Imagine being named after a mythological creature! Phoenix sounds so poetic, so magical...*

*Hindi kaya myth lang din itong nangyayari sa kanya? Medyo naidlip si Blanche kanina sa harap ng computer, hindi kaya naroon pa rin siya sa cubicle niya at nananaginip?*

*Pero habang nararamdaman niyang halos yakap pa rin siya ni Phoenix sa pag-alalay nito sa kanya habang nasa elevator sila, ay parang unti-unting nagiging totoo ang lahat.*

*“Are you for real...?” she was too dizzy to even make that a question.*

*He chuckled. “Yes.” Then, he gently lifted her chin so she could look at him. “Hi, Blanche.” He tilted his head. “I’m Phoenix.”*

*“Bakit nandito ka pa rin...”*

*“Kasi dadalhin kita sa clinic, pagkatapos kakain tayo.” He sounded amused.*

*“Hindi ka rin nag-almusal?”*

*“I had a big breakfast at six earlier. Pero alas*

*diez na ngayon at gutom uli ako. Bakit hindi ka nag-almusal?”*

*Hindi siya nakakibo. Hindi niya alam kung paano sasabihing may schedule ang pag-aalmusal niya para makatipid. Naisandal niya muli ang ulo sa dibdib nito. Phoenix smelled so good, the fabric of his shirt felt so soft, and he seemed so self-assured with the way he spoke. He was also very kind. “Wala kang klase? Exam?” sa halip ay tanong niya.*

*“Alas dos din. Law on Criminal Procedure.”*

*Muling umangat ang tingin ng dalaga. “Law student ka?”*

*He arched a brow, but kept the smile on his lips. Those luscious-looking, moist, pinkish lips... “Yeah. Second year. You don’t look too pleased to know that. Ayaw mo ba sa amin?”*

*“The ones I encountered weren’t exactly likable,” she muttered as she buried her face on his chest again.*

*“Well, let’s see if I am an exception,” he said, then gently pinched her chin.*

*Noon bumukas ang elevator, at marahan siyang inalalayan ni Phoenix palabas, papunta sa baggage counter kung saan kinuha din nito ang sariling bag, at hanggang tuluyan silang makalabas ng library. Nakapaikot ang braso nito sa kanya nang tumawid*

*sila sa Student Health Services Building. Kumuha ito ng wheelchair sa entrance at marahang itinulak siya paupo.*

*“No, no wheelchair,” protesta ni Blanche pero wala ding nagawa dahil groggy talaga ng pakiramdam niya. Miss Belle was right. Anong klaseng future doctor siya?*

*“Be good or I won’t treat you to brunch.” Sinimulang itulak ni Phoenix ang wheelchair.*

*“Ilibre mo ako? Bakit?” Nilingon niya ito. Nagtama ang mga paningin nila. This was all so strange. She was not used to this kind of attention. She had always been rather... anonymous.*

*Huminto sila sa entrance ng emergency area. Hinawakan ni Phoenix ang magkabilang balikat niya, bago inilapit ang mukha. “Para mas matagal pa tayong magkasama. Para may possibility na magkita pa tayong muli.”*

*Blanche just stared at him, while realizing, albeit slowly, that she wanted the same thing too.*



*They became friends, and were almost inseparable since then. Malaki ang pagkakaiba ng mga background nila. Phoenix was the son of a high profile government official and a former Miss Denmark, who was also an*

*accomplished film director. She was the daughter of a saleslady from a department store and she didn't even know who her father was, except her mother was sure it was one of the foreign customers she had when she used to work in a men's club.*

*Nakatira si Phoenix sa isang exclusive village sa Makati, habang nangungupahan sila sa Sampaloc, malapit sa riles. He had an active social life, habang hindi na niya maalala kung kailan siya huling pumasok ng sinehan at hindi pa siya napupunta sa kahit anong party.*

*He was the life of the party, samantalang pati yata mga nakalibing sa North Cemetery ay mabubore sa kanya.*

*But they both loved books, and music, and has a soft spot for stray animals. Hindi rin sila napapagod maglakad nang maglakad around campus habang nag-uusap. Pareho silang seryoso sa pag-aaral, pero alam kung paano mag-relax.*

*Nakilala niya ang daddy ni Phoenix pati na ang bagong pamilya nito, at ang mommy nito kapag dumadalaw sa bansa, at lahat ay mabait sa kanya. Gusto rin ng nanay niya si Phoenix kahit sa umpisa ay nahihiya ito dahil mayaman daw.*

*Wala siyang inaasahang iba, kuntento na siya na*

*magkaibigan sila, pero wala rin siyang nagawa nang isang araw ay magising na lang siyang sigurado sa nararamdaman: she was in love with her best friend. Cliche and pathetic, and definitely unwelcome. Mabuti na lang at magaling siyang magtago, kahit sa tuwing mag-isa lang ay halos gumulong siya sa kilig.*

*Phoenix was very sweet and caring, and unafraid to show it. No one could blame her for falling.*

*Pero hindi niya inaasahan ang nangyari isang hapon na sinundo siya nito sa PGH kung saan tinatapos niya ang required internship para sa isang subject. Bumabagyo at malayo sa compound ng hospital ito nag-park. Bumaligtad na ang malaking payong na dati ay maasahan nila, at maging si Phoenix na alaga ang katawan sa swimming, basketball at pagtakbo ay halos tangayin ng hangin.*

*They were both laughing nervously as they half-walked, half-ran to where he parked his car. May ilang pulis at MMDA na ang sumenyas sa kanilang huminto at sumilong muna sa isang tabi. Napaaga ng ilang oras ang landfall at tila may storm surge.*

*Nang huminto sila sa tabi ng pader na bumabakod sa isang property, noon niya napansin ang pag-aalala at takot sa mga mata ng kasama. The look on his eyes mirrored her own. She had never experienced*



*anything like this.*

*Napasigaw si Blanche, at napamura naman ito nang may mabigat at basang bumagsak sa kanila. It was a huge tarpaulin.*

*“Are you okay, Blanche?” Hinigpitan nito ang yakap sa kanya.*

*“I’m okay. Nagulat lang ako.” Nanginginig na siya. Kanina pa sila nababasa ng ulan na pa-slant ang bagsak.*

*“Damn it, we’re stuck here. Parang ang daming lumilipad.” then he smiled wryly. “Something fell again.” Marahang iniangat nito ang tarpaulin. Noon nila napansing may ibang nag-aangat din niyon. Nang tuluyan iyong maalis ay dalawang MMDA officers na nakakapote ang nakita niya, na agad silang tinulungang makatakbo sa loob ng UP Manila para sumilong muna sa isa sa mga building niyon. Delikado na rin daw kasing mag-drive sa ganitong lagay ng panahon.*

*Nang maiwan sila sa lobby ng isang building ay hindi pa rin siya binibitawan ni Phoenix. Mahigpit ang hawak nito sa mga kamay niya, at hindi inaalís ang tingin sa kanya. He looked at her with a mix of worry and fear, awe and wonder... and was that...*

*“I have to tell you something. I... I hope it’s okay.”*

*“What?” kinabahan agad siya.*

*A few seconds passed. Phoenix just kept looking at her, before he took a deep breath and said with pleading eyes. “I’m in love with you. I love you.” He swallowed.*

*Nakatulala lang siya. Hindi makapaniwala sa narinig.*

*“I want us to be together... for real. I mean, not just as friends,” patuloy nito. “I’m sorry I am telling you now. Call me paranoid but I am worried, and afraid, and who knows I may never—”*

*“Yes,” sabi ni Blanche, hindi inaalís ang tingin dito.*

*“Yes?” He looked confused.*

*“Yes, I love you too!” bulalas niya.*

*“Really?” hindi makapaniwalang tanong ng binata.*

*“Really...” she almost whispered.*

*Parang magic na unti-unting nawala ang takot at pag-aalinlangan sa mukha ng guwapong kaharap. His deep set chameleon eyes even seemed to glisten with unshed tears. Parang maiiyak din siya sa nakikita dahil hindi niya inakalang pareho sila ng nararamdaman, at kaya pala niyang pasayahin ito nang ganoon.*

*Hindi siya lumayo nang unti-unting lumapit ang*

*mukha nito. Humigpit din ang hawak niya dito. If others wanted a kiss in the rain, their first kiss was in the middle of a super typhoon. Their damp, cold lips touched, and were instantly warmed as they closed their eyes. His arms slid to her waist, as her palms lay flat on his chest, feeling his raging heartbeat.*

*It was her first kiss, but Phoenix was obviously an expert. She learned and kissed him back in no time, relished how good it felt, wished it didn't have to end.*

*Pero agad din silang naghiwalay, at halos mapatalon nang maglayo pagkarinig ng pagbagsak ng kung ano sa labas.*

*From where they stood inside the main lobby, they saw what it was. A tree.*

*Seemed like every milestone in their lives together were to be marked by something falling or crashing.*

## CHAPTER *Seven*

Once upon a time, Blanche thought of spending the rest of her life with someone. She was in love for the first time and didn't think she'd ever feel that way about anyone, not that she ever wanted to. Hindi niya kailanman naisip noon na magmahal pa siya ng iba, at ayaw din niya. He was the one, and she saw her future, and the rest of her life only loving him.

Hindi nga lang niya naisip noon ang tungkol sa mga detalye ng pagpapakasal. Naka-attend na siya ng ilang kasalan, pero dahil sa nangyari sa kanila ng taong gusto sana niyang makasama habambuhay, parang nawalan na rin siya ng gana sa konseptong iyon. Not the marriage itself, but the wedding.

Ngayong hindi niya malaman kung ano ang gagawin bilang paghahanda sa kasal na nakatakdang maganap in less than two hours, naisip niyang sana ay naging mas buhay at aktibo ang imagination niya dati.

Ni hindi siya ang nag-asikaso para sa kasal na ito. Matapos nilang mag-usap ni Phoenix noong Biyernes ay mabilis siya nitong niyaya sa bahay para mag-download ng Notice of Marriage form para i-print at pirmahan. Inilagay din nito ang mga dokumento at IDs na kailangan sa isang envelop, na mabuti na lang at mayroon din siya.

Iniwang nito ang mga iyon sa mesa nito kasama ang isang note para kay Tita Mayi. She brought her own documentary requirements the next day, and almost ran before the older woman quizzes him about the wedding. Tita Mayi had an amused, teasing look on her face and she's not sure she could deal with that.

Bago mag-alas cuatro kahapon, nakumpirma ang schedule ng pagpapakasal nila sa Registry Office, to be officiated by the Mayor of Frederiksberg.

She's officially about to marry the same man she wanted to spend the rest of her life with. How on earth did this happen?

Minasdan niya ang sarili sa salamin. Parang ang gulo ng pagkaka-set ng buhok niya. She ran her fingers through the curls, checked her light makeup, and smoothed the knee-length ivory summer dress she bought yesterday right before the mall closed. Nanginginig ang mga kamay niya nang kunin ang malaking clutch at ang sapatos na isusuot niya, bago isinara ang pinto ng kuwarto.

Huminga siya nang malalim, at maingat na sinimulang bumaba ng hagdan para magulat lang sa pagtunog ng doorbell at ma-miss ang isang baitang. She slid down the remaining three steps, her hands flailed as she let out a shriek and a couple of frustrated expletives.

Muling tumunog ang doorbell.

Hawak ang nananakit na kaliwang balakang na napaupo si Blanche at kinuha ang clutch at isinuot ang sapatos. Medyo mabuway ang hakbang niya nang maglakad papunta sa pinto. She still reeled from the impact, and her left side hurt. Pagtingin niya sa kanang braso ay may gasgas din iyon.

Napapabuntong-hiningang binuksan niya ang pinto. Parang maiiyak siya nang makita kung gaano katino ang ayos ni Phoenix gayong alam niyang katarating lang nito mula Berlin two hours ago.

Plantsado ang lahat ng suot nito, at makintab ang sapatos. Not a strand of his usually unruly wavy hair was astray, he was clean shaven and smelled good. Samantalang pakiramdam niya ay mukhang binagyo ang itsura niya.

“What happened?” He reached in to brush a few stray hair from her face. Agad nitong napansin na hawak niya ang balakang pati ang galos sa braso niya.

“Nahulog ako sa hagdan. Hindi naman masakit.” She stepped out and pulled the door close. “Tara na.”

“Nahulog ka sa hagdan? Blanche...”

“Fine. Naalog lang ako nang konti. Nagasgasan. Medyo masakit dito.” She pointed to her hip. “Pero buhay pa ako at nasa tamang pag-iisip, okay? Let’s go.”

“Something or someone’s still falling...” he muttered, amused.

Napakurap si Blanche, hindi inaasahang naaalala pa ni Phoenix ang kakaibang tendency sa pagitan nilang dalawa sa tuwing may bagong pangyayari sa buhay nila.

But that was ages ago. If she didn’t mean anything to him then, it’s not likely to have changed over the years. Perhaps, this was also a marriage of convenience on his part.

Pareho silang tahimik sa loob ng sampung minutong biyahe papunta sa town hall. Ang tanging maririnig lang sa loob ng sasakyan ay ang salitan nilang paghinga nang malalim. There was one time they did that in almost the same moment, so they looked at each other and giggled, therefore easing the tension as they neared their destination.

Pagdating sa Office of the Civil Registry na nasa isang magandang century-old Victorian building sa town square ay agad siyang inabutan ng secretary ng isang bouquet ng lilies, bago nito kinabitan ng corsage si Phoenix. May nauna pa sa kanila at halos sampung minuto din silang tahimik na naghintay.

Nang lumabas ang nauna sa kanila ay isang medium-size grocery basket at green eco bag naman ang ibinigay dito ng secretary, bago sila nito iginiya sa loob ng kuwarto kung saan naghihintay ang mayor at civil registrar. Sabay pa sila ni Phoenix nang abutin ang kamay ng isa't isa habang inihahanda ang mga papeles na pipirmahan nila sa mesa.

She never imagined how her wedding day would look like, and she didn't know now if she would have liked it this way: in a simple ivory summer dress she pulled at the sale rack which thankfully fit her perfectly, standing wobbly in her strappy shoes with



three-inch heels, beside a handsome, nervous guy who looked like he was about to pass out.

Mukhang gaya niya ay hindi rin gaanong nakatulog si Phoenix nang nagdaang gabi.

Nang matapos sa pagtsi-check ng mga ID, passport at visa nila ay hinarap na sila ng mayor.

He was an old man with kind eyes that looked at her sympathetically. “Miss Allegría, are you entering into this marriage freely, voluntarily and without coercion?”

“Yes, Your Honor.”

Kay Phoenix naman ito tumingin. “Mr. Soler, are you also entering into this marriage freely, voluntarily and without coercion?”

“I am, Your Honor,” he said, seemingly with absolute resolve.

Tumango ang mayor. “Very well, then. Do any of you have any vows or personal readings you wish to include in the ceremony?”

Nagkatinginan sila ni Phoenix. He looked stricken, as if he wished he had something and looked alternately at her and the mayor. Parang gusto nitong humingi ng time out para mag-compose muna ng vow, pero pinisil niya ang kamay nito at tahimik na ipinarating na huwag na, na okay lang

kahit wala.

She was relieved when he got her message.

“No, Sir,” halos sabay pa nilang sabi. “Just... uh, the standard deal... or um, whatever,” he mumbled.

“Then we’ll get started.” Inayos ng mayor ang salamin nito at binuksan ang isang maliit na itim na binder. “We are gathered here today for the purpose of uniting you, Phoenix and Blanche, in matrimony, which is an honorable state, not to be entered into lightly, but reverently and with a deep realization of its obligations and responsibilities.”

Ilang beses na niyang narinig ang mga salitang iyon, na hindi niya inakalang darating ang panahon na sa kanya iyon nakadirekta, kasama ang lalaking una at nag-iisa niyang minahal. She was not even sure if the feelings were completely gone, or if they ever went away. But right now, as they stood before the mayor who, in a few moments would ask her to pledge her life to the man standing next to her, she was a confusing, terrifying mix of emotions.

Pero wala siyang balak umatras, at tumakbo.

Muling hinawakan ni Phoenix ang kamay niya, at napahinga siya nang malalim. Nakakaunawa ang ngiti ng mayor nang muli siya nitong tanungin.

“Blanche Catherine Allegria, will you take this

man to be your husband, to live together in the covenant of marriage? Will you love him, comfort him, honor and keep him, in sickness and in health, and forsaking all others, will you be faithful to him for as long as you both shall live? If so, please say *'I will'*”

“I will,” she softly said.

Inulit ng mayor ang tanong kay Phoenix, na mas confident nitong sinagot. His ‘I will.’ sounded exactly like all the ‘Yes’ and ‘*I-love-You’s*’ she used to hear from him... if only he didn’t have to forfeit all of them when he left.

But now he’s here... they’re here...

“Do you have rings to exchange?” tanong ni Mayor.

Humigpit ang hawak ni Phoenix sa kanya. Namumutla ito nang tingnan niya, at parang gustong batukan ang sarili.

“Oh sh\*t...” he whispered, then quickly apologized. “I’m sorry, Your Honor. We don’t at the moment... it was... we were... uh...” he stuttered. “Is that going to be a problem?” Napalunok ito.

“Of course not.” Mukhang sanay na sa mga ganitong sitwasyon ang mayor. His smile was kind and understanding. “It is customary, but not

required. We will just skip over that part.” Binuklat nito ang hawak na folder.

Phoenix mouthed “I’m sorry” when their eyes met, his entire face apologetic. She smiled back and gently shook her head. “It’s okay,” she mouthed back, and then couldn’t take her eyes off his anymore.

Phoenix looked at her like he just won first prize at something and she simply couldn’t believe that he’s doing this for her... for Kirsten, too.

Namamasa na ang mga mata niya at parang may bumabara sa kanyang lalamunan. Ibinalik niya ang tingin kay Mayor.

“By the virtue of the authority vested in me by the city of Frederiskberg, State of Denmark, I pronounce you husband and wife and extend to you my best wishes for a successful and happy life together.”

Napakurap si Blanche. Totoo nga! Tapos na! She’s married, to Phoenix! They’re married! Ang bilis! Ni hindi pa niya nasasabi ito sa nanay at stepfather niya. Baka atakehin sa puso ang dalawa.

“You may kiss your wife, Mr. Soler.” the mayor said cheerfully.

Sabay pa silang muling napabaling ng tingin sa isa’t isa. Blanche knew her face must have registered panic, but Phoenix looked like he was almost afraid,

yet the want was undeniable.

Nakakita na kaya si Mayor ng mga ikinasal na parang hindi alam ang gagawin, kung hahalikan ba talaga ang pinakasalan nila? Nanatiling magkahinang ang mga mata nila, parehong tahimik na nagtatanungan kung okay lang ba.

Napalunok si Blanche, bago bahagyang napangiti. Relieved na napauntung-hininga si Phoenix bago ito humakbang para mawala na ang natitirang distansya sa pagitan nila.

He smiled nervously at her as he leaned in, and she almost didn't blink as she tipped onto her toes a little.

His one hand went to her hip while the other behind her back and she had no idea what to do with hers, so she rested both at his shoulders.

And as their faces slowly came closer, she felt like she was twenty again, cold and shaking and looking at this equally nervous guy who was about to kiss her, as tarpaulins and unsteady roof and small trees flew outside.

Her lips parted slightly, she tilted her head and closed her eyes, expectantly. Then he's there: his mouth on hers, just a tentative brush at first, followed by a solid kiss. Nice, soft, yet confident. It was a

good kiss.

Ilang segundo lang ang itinagal niyon, at higit pa roon ang nagawa na nila dati. Nag-init ang pisngi niya sa naalala. Dumiin nang bahagya ang kamay ni Phoenix sa likod niya bago ito na ang lumayo.

Gusto niya itong pigilan sana, kahit ang daming ipinapaalala sa kanya ng halik na iyon. It was quick and chaste, but a very pleasant one. Phoenix has always been a good kisser and the only reason she's gave this kiss a 9 was because it lasted for only five seconds.

“Well, then, Mr. And Mrs. Soler, if you will just stand there by the window, so we can take your picture.” Iminuwestra ng mayor ang kalapit na picture window.

Pareho pa silang hindi makapaniwala nang lumapit doon, pero automatic nang ipaikot nila ang braso sa kani-kaniyang baywang nang itaas ng isa sa staff ng mayor ang hawak na camera. Nag-request din silang makasama sa picture ang nagkasal sa kanila, na inabutan sila ng isang may kalakihang leather folder bago magkahawak ang kamay na lumabas na sila ng opisina.

“Our marriage certificate in five languages,” he breathed as he examined the contents. Pababa na sila

ng grand spiral staircase dala ang grocery basket at eco bag na iniabot ng secretary paglabas nila.

Dala din niya ang bouquet ng tulips na kasama din daw talaga sa mga ibinibigay sa mga ikinakasal. “Five languages?”

“English, Danish, German, French and Spanish.” he smiled, then tugged at the eco bag she slung on her left shoulder.

Natatawang inalis niya iyon at sinilip ang laman nang nasa lobby na sila. “Laundry detergent, dishwashing liquid, bars of soap, toothpaste, mouthwash... Ayos ito ah. May ganito din ba sa Pilipinas?”

“Baka pag malapit na ang eleksyon,” he said wryly. Nakahawak ang isang kamay nito sa likod niya habang papunta sila sa parking area.

“There are coupons...” Inilabas niya ang mga laman ng isang envelop. “Free dinner at some pizzeria, free cake at this cafe, free drinks at a pub... discount coupons to cafes and delis. Okay, ah.” At dahil mahal ang kumain sa labas ay wala siyang balak sayangin ang mga iyon.

“You look genuinely thrilled about the coupons,” he teased as they got into the car.

“I am thrilled,” pagtatama ni Blanche. “Sino ang

hindi matutuwa sa libre?” Itinago niya sa clutch ang coupons. “So... we’re married.”

Makahulugan ang ngiti ni Phoenix nang kunin nito ang kamay niya, habang ang isa ay abala sa pagmamaniobra ng sasakyan palabas ng parking slot. “Yeah, but without the ring.” He looked sheepish. “I will buy one soon.”

Wala itong komento sa ayos niya, kung maganda ba o ano. Wala din itong naihandang wedding vow. Sasama pa ba ang loob niya na nalimutan ni Phoenix ang singsing? “Hindi naman kailangan—”

“Kailangan.” He arched a brow at her. “Pasensya na talaga na nakalimutan ko at hindi ko rin naibilin kay Tita. I guess she also assumed I will take care of it. Pagagalitan din ako ni Mama kapag nakita niyang wala tayong singsing.”

“Sinabi mo sa mama mo?” hindi makapaniwalang tanong ni Blanche. Iniisip pa nga niya kung paano at kung kailan niya eksaktong sasabihin sa nanay niya. Tiyak na magugulat iyon.

“Just earlier today, and she was mad that she’s not invited. May dadaluhan siyang filmfest kaya hindi siya makakapunta agad pero dadalaw daw siya next week.”

Hindi niya alam kung ano ang sasabihin.



Masyadong mabilis ang mga pangyayari na ngayon ay hindi niya alam kung paano na ba ang lahat ngayong kasal na sila.

“Are you okay, Blanche?”

She blinked. “Yes... okay lang.” Huminga siya nang malalim. “Ang bilis lang kasi.” Mabuti na lang din at na-postpone sa susunod na Lunes ang hearing dahil sa pagpa-file ng petition ng kapatid ni Frans. Hindi niya alam kung paano siya haharap sa judge at sasagot ng maraming tanong ganitong hung-over pa siya sa madaliang kasal niya.

“You’re not regretting it, right?” he asked warily.

“Of course not, Phoenix,” sagot agad niya. Ang binata nga ang gusto niyang tanungin, pero dahil ito ang nagyaya ng kasal, at base sa nakikita niyang saya sa mga mata nito, alam na niya ang sagot. But why? How?

“Hey...” Bahagyang hinila nito muli ang kamay niya. “Natutulala ka na naman.” He leaned close. “Hi, Mrs. Soler.” He grinned.

Her cheeks must be burning now. “Hi,” she whispered, not exactly knowing what to say or what to do when he’s this close.

“Huwag kang mag-alala. Sisiguraduhin kong hindi mo pagsisisihan na pinakasalan mo ako.” He

smiled wistfully as he focused his eyes on the road.

Hindi siya sumagot. Hindi rin naman niya alam kung ano ang sasabihin. Nanatili lang siyang nakatingin sa lalaking hindi niya inakalang muli niyang makakasama, at ngayon ay kasal na sa kanya.

“By the way, is it okay if I crash at your place for a few nights? Ipinapaayos ko kasi yung isa pang kuwarto sa bahay para sa paglipat mo.”

“Lilipat ako?” hindi makapaniwalang tanong ni Blanche. *Of course, silly! May bagong kasal bang hiwalay ng bahay?*

“We will be investigated, Blanche. Mas makakatulong kung makikita nilang child-friendly din ang magiging bahay ni Kirsten dito kung sakali. Malaki naman ‘yung carriage house, enough for at least four people.”

“I understand.” Tumango si Blanche. Ngayon pa lang nasasagot ang mga concerns niya sa magiging arrangement nila. Masyado siyang na-overwhelm sa bilis, at bigat ng desisyong nagawa niya. “May guest room naman sa bahay, you can stay there.” Nakangiting hinawakan niya ang braso ng asawa.

Phoenix smiled at her as if she just told him he won a million euros in the lottery. “Okay! So, saan mo gustong kumain?”

“Nang ganito ang suot natin?” Nanlaki ang mga mata niya. “We look like—” Biglang nag-ring ang cellphone niya. Agad niya iyong kinuha sa clutch.

“Like we just got married!” Phoenix gleefully finished. “Malay mo makalibre tayo ng lunch. Or...” Napatingin ito sa kanya, bumahid agad ang pag-aalala sa mukha nang makitang mahigpit ang hawak niya sa cellphone. “Ayos ka lang ba?”

“Okay, Eva. We’re on our way,” pilit kinakalma ang sariling sabi niya sa kausap bago nanghihinang tinapos na ang tawag. Hinarap niya si Phoenix. “Can we postpone lunch? Dinala uli sa hospital si Kirsten.”

## CHAPTER *Eight*

**B**ahagya lang na idinilat ni Blanche ang mga mata, bago muli iyong ipinikit. Hindi niya alam kung anong oras na, o kung gaano katagal na siyang nakatulog. Iniisip rin niya kung nasaan siya at kung bakit masakit ang leeg at balikat niya. Saan ba siya nakaunan?

Muli siyang dumilat at pinakiramdaman ang paligid. Malamlam ang ilaw sa kinaroroonan niya, malamig ang temperatura. She could hear the low hum of machines, distant voices talking and the muffled sound of the intercoms. The smell of antiseptic and stale air.

The hospital. *Kirsten!*

Sinubukan niyang bumangon at bumaba sa

kinahihigaan niya pero hindi agad nagawa dahil may brasong nakapatong sa baywang niya. Phoenix was spooned up behind her on the small fold-out couch, and it turned out she used his other arm as a pillow.

Napangiwi siya nang maisip kung paanong mananakit tiyak ang braso nito mamaya. Pareho pa silang hindi pa nagpapalit ng damit. Ang coat nito ay nakakumot sa kanya, habang bahagya itong nanginginig sa suot na dress shirt, slacks, at medyas. Nakalaylay ang mga paa nito sa dulo ng higaan nila.

Tumingin siya sa kalapit na kama. Kirsten no longer had the tubes that were on her before they fell asleep last night. She bowed and said a quiet, grateful prayer, before she gently removed the arm on her waist and draped the suit jacket and small blanket on the shivering, sleeping form beside her.

Nilapitan niya si Kirsten na nang damhin niya ang leeg at noo ay balik na sa normal ang temperatura. Noon pumasok ang nurse, na napangiti nang makita siya. “Her fever is down since midnight and she’s been sleeping peacefully.” Inayos nito ang IV tube sa braso ng bata. “I didn’t want to wake you, you both looked like you needed to rest.” Iniabot nito ang isang kamay. “I’m Lea, by the way.”

Nakangiting tinanggap niya iyon. “Has Doctor

Mathiesen been here yet? She said she wanted to do another blood draw this morning to check her red count.” Napatingin si Blanche sa oras. Mag-aalas siete pa lang ng umaga.

“Not yet, but she will be here soon.” Nang matapos ang pagtsi-check nito sa pasyente ay nakangiting nagpalipat-lipat ang tingin ng nurse sa kanya at kay Phoenix, na hindi na muna niya ginising dahil bukas pa naman ang balik nito sa trabaho.

“She’s a beautiful little girl. She got both of your features.”

Ilang sandaling napakurap siya hindi inaasahan ang sinabi ng nurse. But she could see why. “Yes...” She smiled wistfully. “She looks like both her mom and dad.”



Nang bumaik si Blanche sa kuwarto ni Kirsten galing sa pakikipag-usap sa doctor ay nakaupo na sa kama ang bata. Her niece was playing cards with Phoenix who could definitely use a shave and a comb. She was still completely charmed by him, nonetheless.

“What *Rogue*? That’s not *Rogue*, that’s *Princess Jasmine!*” natatawang sabi ng bata habang tinitingnan

ang card na hawak ni Phoenix.

*Trust the man to mix up Marvel and Disney.* Napapailing na inilapag niya ang dalang tray sa katabing mesa ng kama.

“Oh, right!” Tinampal ni Phoenix ang noo. “*Det må du undskylde,*” he apologized in Danish. Lalong natawa si Kirsten. “But you’re not supposed to tell me yet which one it is, silly.”

“Your Danish is funny,” she teased.

“It is not!” Phoenix protested, then eyed the tray. “Oh, look. Lunch is here.”

More of late lunch. Mag-aala una na kasi. Pero matapos kunan ng dugo ay nakatulog uli si Kirsten at kani-kanina lang nagising. Nawala ang ngiti nito nang makita ang nasa tray.

“Come on,” he coaxed. “It’s yummy mac and cheese and you also get a fruit salad.” Binuksan nito ang plastic container. “Look, three cherries on top!”

Umiling ang bata. “I like chicken nuggets better.”

Noon bumukas ang pinto at pumasok si Eva, na hindi makapaniwalang naroon pa rin sila. Nagpunta ito sa hospital kahapon para tingnan si Kirsten pero hindi nagtagal. “Did you two stay here for the night?”

“We didn’t want her to wake up alone,” paliwanag niya.

Kumaway ang babae kina Phoenix at Kirsten, bago siya hinila sa labas. “So, I just figured out why you two looked like you went to the prom. Congratulations!” mukhang excited ito. “And you said you’re not together.”

Nag-init ang pisngi ni Blanche. “How did you find out?”

“From Marie. We talked earlier and she told me about the other petition, and how she’s now representing you and Phoenix.”

Tumango siya, bago huminga nang malalim. “The doctor said she could be released tomorrow if she doesn’t have another fever tonight. We want to bring her home then.”

“Blanche,” nagpapaunawang umpisa ni Eva, “you know we can’t do that.”

Magpoprotesta sana siya pero noon lumabas ng kuwarto si Phoenix. “I just need to get something.”

Hinawakan niya ito sa braso. “Why not go home to change and rest?”

“I’ll do that later.” He leaned in and planted a kiss on her cheek. “Thirty minutes! Kirsten finished her food, by the way.” He grinned before he waved at Eva and walked away.

“You guys are cute, and I’m sure you’d take good



care of Kirsten but we really can't just break rules here, Blanche." Hinawakan ng babae ang braso niya. "I'm sorry."

"But I'm a doctor, Eva. I can look after her better and monitor her recovery. You said yourself Kirsten looks better after she's been with me... or Phoenix."

"I'm sorry, Blanche." The look of regret on Eva's face said it all.

Naiintindihan naman niya iyon. Pero gusto lang niyang sumubok. "I know you are."

"Monday will be here soon before you know it," the other woman assured her. Isa kasi sa petition nila ay ang payagan din munang tumira pansamantala sa kanya si Kirsten habang ongoing ang procedure para mas maalagaan ito dahil sakitin.

"Alright." She sighed.

"You should go home and rest, Blanche. I can look after Kirsten until later tonight."

Tumango lang siya, at sinabing hintayin muna nila si Phoenix. He was back half an hour later, with a box of contraband Chicken McNuggets, two coloring books, crayons and a pink teddy bear.



Pagod at inaanok pa si Blanche nang tumunog ang cellphone niyang nasa nightstand. Napatingin

siya sa makapal na kurtinang tumatabing sa bintana bago tiningnan ang wristwatch niya. Mag-a-alas siete na ng gabi. Halos apat na oras na rin siyang tulog simula nang sapilitan siyang pauwiin ni Phoenix.

Nang kunin niya ang cellphone ay muntik pa niyang matabig ang blue velvet box na katabi niyon. Nangungunot ang noong binasa niya ang message mula kay Phoenix habang hawak ang maliit na kahon.

*Take a shower and get dressed. I'm taking you out to dinner. 8:30 reservation.*

Tumayo na si Blanche at narinig ang pagbukas ng pinto sa katapat niyang kuwarto. Binuksan niya ang kahon at muntik nang matumba sa nakitang laman niyon. There were two rings inside. One was a simple platinum band with intricately embossed detail around it, while another is a white gold ring that looked vintage. A square cut diamond rests at the center, surrounded by three smaller inset diamonds on each side.

Hindi makapaniwalang itinapat niya iyon sa ilaw. Phoenix had always been practical with his gifts. Alam din nitong hindi siya mahilig sa alahas kaya hindi niya alam kung bakit nag-iwan ito ng halatang mamahaling singsing sa nightstand niya.

She slipped the rings into her left middle and ring fingers. Both fit perfectly. Both looked and felt expensive. Alam niyang kaya naman iyong bilhin ni Phoenix pero...

Napapabuntong-hiningang ibinalik niya ang mga singsing sa box. Sinabihan sila sa text ni Tita Mayi kahapon na kailangan ay pareho silang may singsing pagharap sa judge sa Lunes... *pero hindi naman iyong mamahalin!* She made a mental note to confront him as she looked for something to wear before stepping into the shower.

Matapos ang thirty minutes ay bihis at nakaayos na si Blanche. Lumabas na siya para sa sala maghintay pero nakita niyang bukas ang katapat niyang kuwarto at hawak ni Phoenix ang laylayan ng shirt nito. He also wore jeans and flipflops.

“Sana sinabi mong casual lang pala para hindi na ako nag-dress!” asar na sabi ng babae at babalik sana sa sariling kuwarto para makapagpalit siya pero hinagip ni Phoenix ang braso niya.

His hair was still damp, probably from the shower, and he smelled fresh, too. Hindi yata siya humihinga habang halos mapadikit ang katawan niya dito.

“Hindi na kailangan, you look perfect. Come

on.” Binitawan ng asawa ang kamay niya bago itinuloy ang paghuhubad ng kamiseta na itiniklop nito bago ilagay sa dulo ng kama. Hindi na niya nagawang umiwas ng tingin. Para namang hindi pa niya ito nakitang hubad, o naranasang siya mismo ang maghubad dito.

Nanatili siya sa pinto at iginalala ang tingin sa kuwarto. Nahagip ng tingin niya ang naka-hanger na tila bagong plantsang slacks at dress shirt. Nakahinga siya nang maluwag. “Or I might be underdressed.” simpleng knee-length na itim na bestida lang ang suot niya.

“Blanche...” His eyes travelled over her as he began unbuttoning his jeans. “You look just right. Beautiful, in fact.”

Napasinghap siya at nagawang tumalikod nang makitang hinuhubad na nito ang pantalon. *Breathe in, breathe out, Blanche.*

“Nakatulog ka ba nang ayos?” tanong ni Phoenix.

“Okay naman. Nakabawi kahit papaano.” Narinig niya ang tunog ng zipper, at ng hanger na nalaglag. Safe na sigurong humarap. “Nakatulog ka ba?”

He was already putting on his dress shirt. “Saglit lang. I had to go out for a quick run, then check out

the charity match at the *have*,” tukoy nito sa park na malapit kung saan palaging may ginaganap na mga soccer o tennis match. “I bought you a shirt,” He grinned.

“And a ring.” Umangat ang isang kilay ni Blanche.

He nodded, his eyes still twinkled. “Yeah. Kasya ba? I was choosing between the diamonds, and a mod ring because I knew you weren’t that into jewelry. But then—”

“Hindi naman kailangang ganito kamahal.” Itinaas niya ang velvet box.

He pursed his lips. “Ayaw mo ba? Hindi mo gusto ang design?”

Napailing siya. “Phoenix, nagulat nga ako na okay pala ang taste mo sa alahas. These are gorgeous. But that is not the issue.”

Lumapit ito sa harap ng salamin, focused sa pag-aayos ng kurbata. “Ano pala ang issue?”

“Hindi ko lang ito inaasahan. Puwede namang ‘yung mura lang ang binili mo.”

Natahimik ang lalaki. Nakatutok lang ang atensyon sa ginagawa. Lumapit siya at huminto sa likod ni Phoenix, iniisip na baka na-offend niya ito. Nakita niya ang sariling repleksyon sa salamin at hinuli niya ang mga mata nito.

He smiled, then turned around and took the box from her. Tahimik na kinuha nito ang kaliwang kamay niya at muling isinuot sa kanya ang mga singsing. “I really wanted to give these to you,” he said gently, taking his time with every word. “And it would mean a lot to me if you would accept, okay?”

Hindi niya alam kung guni-guni lang ba niya iyon pero parang nakita niya ang mabilis na pagdaan ng lungkot at pakikiusap sa mga mata nito.

“Blanche?” untag ni Phoenix, hawak pa rin ang kamay niya. He looked hopeful.

“Okay,” bulong niya, bago huminga nang malalim. “Okay, I will have it.”

“Thank you,” he whispered back, his eyes actually looked misty. But then he blinked and all she saw was that unmistakable sparkle, like she just made him the happiest man in the world. “Now, let’s go?”