

I

He was the kind of man mothers warned their daughters about. The kind who could get a woman's panties wet just with a look, the kind who would ride a woman hard and fast, make her cum around his c*ck until she screamed and begged, then toss her away, sweaty and still panting, along with the used condom, even before her cum had dried on her thighs.

Yes, Vera Eidel Braganza thought as she stared at Declan 'The Bull' Rinaldo through the sharp lights flashing throughout the dimly lit club. The man was every good father's nightmare, but every good girl's dirty little fantasy.

Some females—obviously—lived those fantasies. Just like the woman on Declan's right who's rubbing her large breasts against his muscular chest, at iyong isa pang babae sa kabilang gilid ng binata.

Yes, dalawa ang babae, isa sa kanan at isa sa kaliwa. Her friend Arthur would probably call it 'hot babe sandwich.' At sa nakikita niyang mainit na pagtitig

ng ilang babae sa dance floor sa booth ng tatlo, baka madagdagan pa iyon.

Declan fisted the right-woman's curly hair, fusing her mouth with his in a torrid kiss. Hindi patatalo ang babaeng nakaupo sa kaliwa. Nakalapat ang isang kamay nito sa pagitan ng mga hita ng binata, pinipisil at minamasahe iyon, habang ang bibig nito ay nakadikit sa gilid ng leeg ng lalaki. Declan was no slouch himself. One of his brawny arms was curled around the waist of the woman pressed against his left side, his hand shoved up inside her short skirt from behind, moving and thrusting between her parted thighs.

Malalim na huminga si Vera habang nakatitig sa tatlo. Hindi ito private club o ano pa man. This should be considered public indecency. But alas, no one was complaining. Declan owned the club, after all.

She strode to the group in her four-inch *Manolo Blahnik* nude patent leather pumps.

Dumagundong ang tugtugin sa kanyang mga tainga, pumipintig sa kanyang mga kalamnan. Ilang ulit siyang bahagyang umilag sa mga taong pauli-uli sa kahabaan ng club. Ramdam niya ang pagtulo ng pawis sa likod niya sa ilalim ng kanyang silk halter dress, at parang ang gaspang ng madulas na tela sa kanyang balat.

Her long, pin-straight black hair was down, and she belatedly thought she should have worn it in a

bun. It had been too long since she had last been inside a club, and she had forgotten how crowded and hot it could be.

Ganoon ang *Inferno*, ang bar and club na pagmamay-ari ni Declan sa sentro ng Poblacion, Alaminos, Pangasinan. Dalawang palapag ang bar and club at may live band sa entablado. Siksikan ang mga tao hanggang sa stainless steel staircase.

A few feet away from the group, she saw Declan's head move slightly to change the angle of the kiss. But his gaze caught something. His head jerked back, and he tore his mouth away from the woman.

Marahas na bumaling sa direksyon niya ang mukha nito, at nagtama ang kanilang mga mata.

Even from where she stood, the intensity of his stare was a shot to the gut. It burned in her lower abdomen, scorched down deep between her thighs where it stirred a pulsing heat inside her sex.

Huminga si Vera nang malalim at pinatatag ang mga kalamnan. Hindi ito ang oras para ma-distract.

Patuloy siya sa paglakad habang nakatitig sa kanya ang binata.

He had hazel eyes that could look golden or dark depending on lighting and his mood, Vera was sure. Ganoon ang mga mata ni Anaya. Stormy gold when happy or furious, dark and muddy when she's gloomy and sad. Vera wondered if Anaya had inherited other traits from Declan, too. Like his height and bone structure.

Pinaglandas niya ang titig sa maskuladong bulto ng lalaki. Even while sitting at the booth a few meters away from her, Declan Rinaldo's powerful frame commanded attention. Six feet and four inches, according to the dossier given to her by her PI. Over two hundred pounds, broad muscular shoulders, powerful thighs, a scar on his right eyebrow, and a mean left hook that knocked more than a dozen big men out cold.

Hindi niya kailangan ng PI para makuha ang mga personal data na iyon ni Declan. A quick *Google* search and a visit to his *Wikipedia* page could generate the same results.

Declan 'The Bull' Rinaldo, former heavy weight boxer who had numerous world titles under his belt, about one-half Filipino, one-fourth Irish and one-fourth Italian with ties to New York mafia, and not too long ago, a convicted murderer.

Yes. He was definitely every good father's worst nightmare and the man mothers warned their daughters to stay away from.

And she was walking straight to him with the most precious thing in her life.

Huminto siya sa tapat ng mesa ng grupo.

"Declan, baby," ungol ng babae sa kaliwa ng binata habang patuloy ang pagmasahe sa pagitan ng mga hita ng lalaki. "I want your c*ck now. I'm so wet."

Hindi ito pinansin ni Declan. Naniningkit ang mga mata ng binata habang nakatitig sa kanya.

“What’s wrong, baby?” ungol ng babae sa kanan at inangat ang titig.

The woman looked familiar. Isa itong modelo at artista kung hindi siya nagkakamali. Big wavy hair, huge hips and breasts, a bombshell. Ganoon din ang babae sa kaliwa ni Declan. Clarissa Versoza had the same built and presence. Obviously, may specific type ang lalaki.

Vera was no prude herself, pero kumpara sa maiksi at masikip na suot ng dalawa, mukhang conservative ang suot niyang cranberry halter dress.

Sinulyapan siya ng babae sa kaliwa. “You can’t join us, sweetie,” maarteng sambit nito habang patuloy sa pagmasahe sa pagkalalaki ng binata. “He’s ours tonight.”

“I’m afraid you have to postpone it.” Napakarupok ng kanyang tinig sa malakas na dagundong ng musika.

Ramdam ni Vera ang titig sa kanila ng ilang tao. Sigurado siyang may mga kakilala siya sa loob ng club. Tumiim-labi siya. She didn’t want to approach him in such a crowded place. But it’s either here or at his grandmother’s house.

Derecho niyang sinalubong ang titig ni Declan. “We need to talk privately.”

“Do we now?” His rough gravely voice sent a rush of heat rippling across her skin.

Images of sweaty bodies, loud moans and groans burned through her mind. Arthur would probably

have a term for that, too. Sex voice or something.

Umiling siya sa sarili. *Focus, Vera.*

“Yes, it’s important,” balik niya sa binata.

Nakakalokong tumaas ang sulok ng mga labi ni Declan at prenteng sumandal lalo sa likod ng upuan. Ihinalukipkip nito ang mga maskuladong braso, lalong ginawang prominente ang matitigas na kalamnan sa malalapad nitong balikat at braso. Nanatiling matalas ang titig ng lalaki, nanatiling mapanuri at mapagmatyag.

“I’m afraid what I’m doing right now is just as important, babe,” he drawled.

She ignored the flush spreading across her skin as he drawled the word ‘babe,’ and just lifted her chin. “Very well,” aniya. “I’ve been calling your office to ask for an appointment, but your assistant continuously refused to give me one. So if you could be so kind as to carve out an hour in your schedule for a meeting with me, I assure you, we would both be glad for it.”

Or so she would like to believe.

Tumalas lalo ang titig ng lalaki at bahagya ring tumuwid ang likod nito. “You’ve been calling my office?”

Tumango si Vera. “For over a week now.”

Nagsalubong ang mga kilay nito, pero ibinaling na niya ang atensyon sa kanyang purse. Binuksan niya ang kanyang *Chanel* bag at kinuha sa harapang bulsa noon ang isang calling card. Ibinalik niya ang titig sa lalaki at inabot ang card.

“Oh, she’s good!” Humalakhak ang babae sa kanan. Ipinulupot nito ang mga braso sa leeg ni Declan at ikiniskis lalo ang malulusog na dibdib sa bulto ng binata. “In fairness, nag-effort siya. Let her join us tonight, baby. She can ride your face while I ride your d*ck!”

“Hmp!” ismid ng babae sa kaliwa at akmang aabutin ang card niya pero iniwas niya iyon.

Looking him dead in the eye, she stretched her arm and offered the card to him. She had to make sure Declan got her card directly. She owed this to Anaya and even to Declan. “Please,” saad niya.

Lalong naningkit ang mga mata ng lalaki habang nakatitig sa kanya. “Care to tell me what the f*ck this is about?”

“It’s private,” aniya.

“And I should give a sh*t because?”

Her muscles clenched. She couldn’t say more. Not here. Not with her baby’s well-being on the line. “This is important,” matigas niyang sambit.

Nanatiling singkit ang mga matang nakatitig sa kanya.

“Fine!” komento ng babae sa kaliwa. “We can—hey!” bulalas nito nang biglang tumayo si Declan.

Kumabog ang kanyang dibdib at muntikan siyang mapaurong. Intimidating na ang lalaki kapag nakaupo, pero kapag nakatayo?

Five feet at seven inches si Vera at naka-heels pa. But his large muscular frame dwarfed everything in

sight. Even in the dim light, she could make out the taut lines of muscles underneath his gray shirt. His shoulders were so broad and chiseled he seemed to cast shadows over everyone else. His brawny arms were chiseled to perfection, like God Himself took extra time to carve out his muscles. It's easy to see how he could knock out large men in just one punch. And those jeans, they were made for men like him. The washed-out denim hugged his powerful thighs, outlining the heavy arousal between them.

Despite herself, she felt her nipples tighten as heat bled into her veins. Tumiim ulit ang mga labi niya. For god's sake, this was not the time to get horny.

Pilit niyang ibinalik ang titig sa mukha ng lalaki, pero sa matamang pagtitig nito sa kanya, alam niyang nahuli nito ang mabilis niyang pagpasada ng tingin sa matipuno nitong bulto.

Uminit lalo ang kanyang balat, pero nanatiling nakataas ang noo.

Tumaas sa isang mapang-uyam na ngiti ang dulo ng mga labi ng binata, at hinablot nito ang kanyang card. "This better be good. Follow me," he barked then pushed his way out of the booth.

Paos na tumawa ang babae sa kanan, tumayo at inabot si Declan. "Okay, baby—"

"Stay here," mabigat na utos ng binata.

Napuno ng gulat ang mukha ng babae. "What?"

"Stay here. I'll be back."

“Come on, baby, that’s not fair—”

“Don’t follow us, Samantha,” he ordered in a steel arctic tone that seemed to make the air icy. “Wait here.”

Umawang ang mga labi ni Samantha pero walang nagawa kundi mapatitig lang sa malapad na likod ng lalaking tuluyan nang naglakad palayo.

Steeling her nerves, she followed him.

Ramdam ni Vera ang pagtitig sa kanila ng iba, pero muli ay hindi niya pinansin. Tumungo sila sa isang pasilyo sa gilid ng bar.

His long powerful legs ate up the length of the dimly lit hallway, and she had to stride faster to catch up. Hindi iyon madali sa suot niyang heels.

Binuksan ng lalaki ang isang pinto sa dulo ng pasilyo. He hit a switch and white light flooded the small room. Mukhang opisina ang kuwarto, may mahabang desk sa isang gilid, may mga cabinet files at may isang mahabang couch at coffee table malapit sa bintana. May pinto sa gilid nito na marahil ay patungo sa banyo.

Pagkapasok nila sa loob, sinara ng lalaki ang pinto, kinukulong sila sa katahimikan. Nakakabingi iyon matapos ang dagundong ng tunog sa labas. Pero higit doon, tila lalong lumiit ang silid sa presensya ng binata.

Hinarap siya ni Declan. “You’ve been calling my assistant?”

The brusque tone of his voice matched the tight

expression on his face. In the unforgiving light of the office, the rigid angles seemed rougher, sharper. Five o'clock shadow darkened his rugged jaw, and his eyes were the color of hammered gold. His short dark hair was slightly tousled, his mouth tight and unforgiving.

Ignoring the way her skin felt hot and tight against her flesh, she nodded. "I've been calling your office for over a week now, asking for an appointment. I've asked your assistant to tell you I'm requesting for a meeting, but she told me she wouldn't unless I tell her why I wanted to meet with you."

"And you didn't tell her?" he shot back.

Nakataas ang kanyang noo. "I didn't."

Nanatiling matalas ang titig ng lalaki. "Cut to the chase, what the f*ck do you want?"

Pinigil ni Vera ang pagnanais na punahin ito sa pananalita nito. "Let me introduce myself first—"

"I know who you are. Vera Braganza. Your family owns chain of malls in Northern Luzon and here in Central Luzon. What do you want?"

"I—" Her fingers curled into fists. In her mind, she saw her daughter's smiling face, heard her sweet tinkling laughter.

"Stop wasting my time." Declan's rough voice cut through her thoughts. "What the f*ck do you want?"

Marahan siyang tumango. She had to do this. Hindi na siya maaaring umatras ngayon. "Declan, you have a daughter. I have her."

Sa loob ng ilang sandali, tila hindi huminga ang lalaki. Kahit ang ingay sa labas ay parang huminto panandali. Marahil ay huminto rin sa pagtibok nang isang segundo ang puso ng kaharap.

Pinilit ni Vera ang sarili para kumalma.

“You have a daughter,” marupok niyang patuloy. “Her name is Anaya, she’s three and a half years old—”

“Anaya,” pakli ng binata, matalim ang titig. “*Your* daughter.”

Tumango siya. Her family was well-known in the region. Hindi na siya nagulat na alam nito na may anak siya. “Yes, my daughter—”

“I think I would’ve remembered if I’ve f*cked you.”

“You’ve never f*cked me.” Her voice remained calm and even.

Tumaas sa isang mapang-uyam na ngiti ang dulo ng mga labi ng kausap. “Damn right I didn’t.”

“Anaya, she’s...” Huminga siya nang malalim. “I’m not her biological mother. Her biological mother is Clarissa Versoza.”

Hinintay niyang mamutawi ang pagkakilala sa mukha ng lalaki. But he remained stone-faced.

Gusto niyang pumikit at umiling. “You don’t remember her.”

“I never said that,” pakli nito.

He didn’t remember Clarissa. Very well. “She was here for about three months around four and a half

years ago,” aniya. “She was seen with you in this club numerous times in those months. It was not exclusive according to my PI—”

“PI?”

The softness of his voice made the hair on the back of her neck stand on ends. Para iyon iyong marahang paghakbang ng isang leon o tigre habang nakamasid sa biktima nito.

“Yes,” maingat niyang sagot. “Private investigator. I needed to find out who Anaya’s father is.”

“Careful, Vera,” he murmured. “You don’t want to f*ck with me.”

Of course, he was pissed that someone investigated him, she would be, too. Pero nagpatuloy siya, “I adopted Anaya around three and a half years ago. Dinala siya ni Nanay Elma, yaya ko siya pagkabata pa. Pinaampon daw ng kaibigan niya. Tinanong ko kung sinong kaibigan niya, pero sinabi niyang hindi ko raw kilala. Now my daughter’s three and a half years old and asking for her daddy. I didn’t know what to tell her, because I didn’t know the truth myself. Nanay Elma eventually told me Anaya was given to her by her friend Teresita. Yaya si Teresita ni Clarissa Versoza. Si Clarissa ang biological mother ni Anaya.”

He tilted his head back as he regarded her with those cold hard eyes so similar to her baby’s. “You got an interesting story there, babe. Thank f*ck it got nothing to do with me. Never f*cked anyone without rubber. *Ever*. So quit your f*cking bullsh*t.”

“Condoms are not a hundred percent effective,” maanghang niyang balik. “Condoms can leak, condoms can break. I hired a PI to search for Anaya’s father. Nakatira dati dito sina Clara, pero lumipat ang pamilya niya sa Maynila bago pa siya mag-teenager. But she had friends here. The PI reported that she was here for three months about the time of Anaya’s conception. She hooked up with about eight men. Isa ka roon. I had a friend helped me get DNA samples—”

He leaned forward and she almost stepped back.

“You did what?” His muscles tightened and fury flared in his hazel eyes. It felt like looking at the eyes of a lion about to tear her apart. “You f*cking stole DNA samples from me?” The icy softness of his voice felt like steel blade against her throat.

Clenching her fists, she ignored the thundering pound of blood in her ears. “From you and seven other men. And I would do it all over again. The alternative was to ask the men directly. And that meant exposing my daughter to this mess. Walong lalaki, pero isa lang ang puwedeng tatay niya sa mga ’yon. It’s a small town, people talk. The more people I involve in this, the greater the chance it will blow up. I’m not risking that.”

Bago pa ulit makasabat ang binata, binuksan ni Vera ang bag at nilabas ang isang nakatuping papel at isang toothbrush sa loob ng isang zip lock.

“That’s your toothbrush. And no, we didn’t

break into your house. We had someone ask your housekeeper for trash for an imaginary school project. So do not blame Manang Letty,” tukoy niya sa housekeeper ng binata. “She’s innocent.”

Inilahad niya ang papel at toothbrush.

Malamig pa rin ang titig ni Declan, pero sigurado siyang sinasakal na siya nito sa isipan.

Hinablot ng lalaki ang papel mula sa kanya. Binuklat nito iyon at mabilis na pinasadahan ang laman.

“I understand if you do not believe the results,” sabi ni Vera sa kabila ng dagundong ng tibok ng puso. “After all, p’wedeng hindi iyo ang specimen na ginamit d’yan. I advise you take another test if you wish to confirm.”

Matalim na tumaas sa kanya ang titig ng binata. “Got this all figured out, don’t you?”

“This is my daughter we’re talking about. I wouldn’t get into this without trying to cover as much bases as I could.”

“Where the f*ck is the biological mother?”

Biological mother. Darating kaya ang araw na hindi na siya makakaramdam ng takot sa mga salitang iyon? Because even after all her rationalizing, even after all the evidence in her favor, Vera still knew that in the eyes of the law, biological mothers would always hold an edge over everybody else.

“The Correctional Institution for Women.”

Nanigas ang katawan ng lalaki sa loob ng ilang

segundo, at sa maliit na espasyo ng silid na iyon, kahit ang hangin ay tila kumapal at bumigat.

Marahas na tumawa si Declan. "Christ."

"Drug Trafficking," sambit niya. "Convicted about a year ago. Life imprisonment. She's up for appeal, but my PI said it does not look good."

Muling mapaklang tumawa ang kaharap. "Two convicted parents. Of course." He shot her a derisive leer. "Assuming you're not f*cking with me and feeding me this f*cking bullsh*t."

"You were acquitted."

The sneer hardened.

"And Anaya's happy and healthy. Many people love her."

Malalim siyang huminga. The worst had passed, she would like to believe. She could do this.

"I had my PI send someone to talk to Clarissa. We had someone pretend to be the adopted parent of Anaya. Clarissa did not know who the father is either. And she wanted nothing to do with Anaya."

A part of her was furious with Clarissa's reaction, but a part of her was also relieved. Utterly relieved.

"And I realized the father may not know about Anaya, either." Pinukol niya ng mabigat na titig ang lalaki. "The father deserves to know. Whatever the circumstances may be, I strongly believe the father deserves to know about his child."

Hindi nagsalita si Declan. Nakatitig ito sa kanya na para bang inukit sa bakal ang mukha at buong

bulto ng binata.

“And now, it’s up to you what you want to do with it,” patuloy ni Vera. “But fair warning, my family has strong political connections. We may not be the richest in the region or in the country, but make no mistake, we have strong political ties. I will not give up my child without a fight. She is adopted legally. I have a good family, a good background. It will not be easy to take my daughter from me.”

His golden eyes flashed with something she did not quite catch. And for a few heartbeats, they just stared at each other, the muted beat of the club outside was the only sound humming in the silence between them.

Then, in a low guttural voice, he spat, “I never said I’ll take her from you.”

“You might get ideas.” Isinukbit na ng dalaga ang strap ng bag sa balikat. “I understand this is a lot to take in. But if you have questions, if you want to talk, if you want that test done, contact me. I do hope we can find a common ground and find a way to make this work for Anaya. But if you want nothing to do with her, I understand.”

Tumalikod siya at hinagip ang seradura ng pinto.

“You’re not f*cking me with this.”

The ravaged hoarseness of his voice made her back stiffen. Nilingon niya ang binata.

He stood there under the bright harsh light in the center of the room—large, tall and strong, his jaw

tight, his muscles rigid, his strong hands clenched into fists. He looked like he'd just been hit by a truck.

She felt something in her chest squeeze.

“No,” usal ni Vera. “I’m not f*cking you with this, Declan. Anaya’s your daughter, and she’s asking for her daddy.”

His eyes darkened into deep amber but he did not reply.

Binuksan niya ang pinto at tuluyan na siyang lumabas ng opisina.

2

“M omma!”
Dumamba kay Vera ang bigat ng kanyang anak habang nakahiga siya sa malaking kama.

“It’s morning, Momma! Up! Up! Up!”

Narinig niya ang pagtahal ni Bamboo, tapos ay naramdaman din niya ang pagdamba nito sa kanyang puwitan. Napaungol siya sa ilalim ng malambot na kumot. Tingin yata ni Bamboo ay isa itong poodle imbes na isang German shepherd. The large muscular dog would sit on their laps and squeezed into small spaces with them whenever he could.

“Up, up, Momma!” Inuga-uga ni Anaya ang maliit nitong katawan sa ibabaw niya.

“Baby, it’s still early,” ungol ni Vera habang gumugulong para yakapin ang anak.

Humagikhik ang bata at pinulupot ang maliliit at mabibilog na braso sa kanyang leeg.

“Morning na, Momma, morning na!”

Ngumiti siya nang malawak at ibinaon ang mukha sa leeg ng paslit. God, her baby smelled so

good. Baby powder and milk. Heaven. She was sure heaven smelled like her baby.

Humagikhhik ulit ang anak. “Lola and Granpop-pops here, Momma!” Matunog siyang hinalikan sa pisngi ni Anaya. “We making panpan!”

Umungol ulit si Vera. Ang mama talaga niya... Hindi pa makapaghintay sa pagbisita nila ng anak bukas.

Nagmulat siya at ngumiti. Her baby’s curly hair was wild around her face, the reddish-brown strands shining in the morning sun streaming through the slits of the window curtains. Anaya’s rose bud mouth was stretched wide in a grin, her nose pert and perfect. Mamula-mula ang mabibilog at mapuputi nitong pisngi, at maningning ang kulay hazel nitong mga mata. Nakasuot pa rin ito ng pantulog. Pink sleeveless top na may ruffles at pink pajamas. Her beautiful baby.

“Don’t wanna get up yet.” Mahigpit niya itong niyakap at gumulong siya para ihiga ito sa kanyang tabi.

“Nooo, Momma!” Pero humagikhhik ang bata at yumakap din. “Up na, Momma, up! Wanna eat!”

“Later, baby—”

“Mommmaa!”

Tumahol-tahol ang German shepherd at inuga-uga rin ang katawan sa ibabaw nila.

Tumawa si Vera at hinalik-halikan ang pisngi ng

paslit habang hinihimas ang malaking katawan ng kanilang aso. Pero tumunog ang kanyang phone.

Muli siyang umungol. May pakiramdam siyang kilala niya kung sino ang tumatawag.

“Up, Momma!” Anaya wiggled beneath her. “Let’s eat!”

“Later, baby, let’s just stay here for a while.”

Hinila niya ang phone sa ilalim ng unan habang yakap ang anak.

Tama ang kanyang hinala. Si Arthur nga ang tumatawag. Sinagot niya iyon.

“He’s gorgeous in person, right, right?”

God, her friend’s chirpy voice so early in the morning made her head hurt. “Hello, Arthur, dear. How’s Julian?” tukoy niya sa partner ng kanyang kaibigan.

“Splendid, as always. He’s in the shower.”

“Uncle Arthur!” tili ni Anaya. Idinikit ng kanyang baby ang tainga sa kabilang bahagi ng phone. “Halooo, Uncle Arthur!”

Inilagay niya sa speaker ang tawag.

“Halooo, Munch-munch! How’s my pretty pretty baby?”

Her baby cackled with glee. “I’m not a baby!”

“Hmm? So you won’t drink milk anymore?”

Ngumuso ang bata. “Nooo. Want milk!”

“Then, you’re a baby!”

Humagikhhik ulit si Anaya. “Pebbles got a baby

brother, Uncle Arthur!”

“Oh, really?”

Kaibigan ng kanyang anak si Pebbles sa daycare.

“Want a baby sister, Momma!” Sumiksik sa kanya ang paslit at itinaas ang maliit na mukha sa kanya. “Get one, Momma? Hmm? Hmm?”

At almost four years old, her daughter still thought that babies could be bought in shopping centers. Or pet stores. “Hmm, we’ll see.”

“Baby sister, Momma, please? Please! Don’t like baby boys, ‘kay? ‘Kay?”

Grinning, she kissed Anaya’s chubby cheeks. “We’ll ask Uncle Arthur for sperm donation.”

Tumili ulit si Anaya at itinaas ang dalawang kamay nito. “Okay!”

Humalakhak si Arthur sa kabilang linya. “Girl, I wanna say you’re kidding, but I have a feeling you’re serious.”

“Why not?” balik ni Vera. “You’ve got good genes, and we’ve been friends for more than two decades.”

“Luka-loka ka, bakla. But you know, parang p’wede nga!”

Sumilip si Nanay Elma sa pinto ng kanyang kuwarto. Maputi na ang maikling buhok nito, pero hindi pa ganoon karami ang wrinkles ng kanyang yaya. Nakasuot na ito ng blue green blouse at black cotton pants.

“Anaya,” tawag nito sa anak niya. “Lika na,

magluluto na kami.”

“Kay!” Akmang tatalon ang anak pababa ng kama pero hinagip niya ito sa baywang.

“Kisses first, baby.”

Nakangiting bumaling sa kanya ang anak at hinalik-halikan siya sa pisngi. “Mwah, mwah, mwah! Later, Uncle Arthur!”

“Later, Munch-munch!”

Lumundag ang paslit pababa sa kama at kumaripas ng takbo papunta kay Nanay Elma. And of course, tumahul-tahol si Bamboo at agad sumunod sa paborito nitong tao.

“Careful!” habol ni Vera. “Don’t run!”

“Dalian mo na rin d’yan,” tawag sa kanya ni Nanay Elma. “Nagluluto na si Mama mo.”

“Okay, Nanay.”

Tuluyan nang sinara ng kanyang yaya ang pinto ng silid.

“So, how’s her daddy?”

Pinaikot niya ang mga mata sa pilyang tono ni Arthur. Nakikita na niya sa kanyang isipan ang pagtaas-taas ng perpektong mga kilay nito. “The meeting went well, all things considered.”

Tumayo na rin siya at ipinatong ang phone sa mahogany vanity. Sinimulan niyang ligpitin ang mga kumot sa kama. Her room, like most parts of the house, was simple and neutral. Mataas ang kisame nito at walang masyadong abubot. A queen-size bed

was at the center. She fluffed the large pillows, and folded the blankets and sheets in varying shades of cream and warm gray on top of it. Krema rin ang mga dingding maliban sa wooden accent wall sa ulunan ng kanyang kama. Gawa sa kahoy ang vanity at desk niya. May dalawang beige wingback chairs sa may bintana sa kanan, may flat screen TV sa dingding sa tapat ng kama.

“He’s super-duper yummy, yes, yes?” pang-iintriga ni Arthur.

“Dear, naririnig ka ba ni Julian?”

Humalakhak ang kaibigan. “I got first dibs on ‘The Bull,’ baby! Si Julian ang may dibs kay Henry Cavill at Chris Evans. I got dibs on Jason Momoa. We made a pact that if anyone of those turned gay, we’ll use kulam to get them! And after the first ten rounds, we’ll share!”

Napataltak siya sa kausap. “Your unconditional love is inspiring.”

“I know, right?” Parang sirang humagikhhik ang kaibigan. “All is fair in love and sex, baby!”

Pumasok siya sa en suite bathroom dala ang phone at inilapag iyon sa dove gray marble counter. Binuksan niya ang faucet para maghilamos. The warm gray and cream neutral scheme carried on to her bathroom. She already took a bath before going to bed last night, so she preferred to wash up just a bit in the morning.

“So, ano’ng reaksyon niya?” usisa ng kaibigan.

“He didn’t believe at first, understandably. But I think by the end, he understood that I wasn’t playing a sick game with him.”

Ikinuwento niya rito ang nangyari.

“So he will call you?” anito pagkaraan.

She patted her face dry with a fluffy towel. *Pat, don’t tug*, her mother had always reminded her. “I honestly don’t know.”

“Well, it’s his lost if he ever—”

May narinig siyang kaluskos sa kabilang linya.

“Julian’s done, darling,” balik sa kanya ni Arthur. “We’re going out to dinner.”

Kasalukuyang nasa New York ang kaibigan at kasintahan nito para sa Fashion Week. “Okay, enjoy. Kiss Julian for me.”

“I will, Julian says hi! Later, Vera, darling.”

At tinapos na nila ang tawag.

Pagkalabas ng banyo, isinuot niya ang outfit para sa araw na iyon. She already picked her clothes for that day about a week ago. Ganoon siya lagi. Every Sunday night before going to bed, she would plan her outfit for the whole week. It saved her time and energy.

Dahil Sabado iyon at nakalaan na family time with Anaya, her clothes were casual and comfy—cotton square pants in camel and sleeveless cotton top in adobe orange. She barely had makeup on as

well, just a swipe of peach gloss on her lips and a bit of color to her cheeks to avoid looking too pale.

Natural na maputi ang balat niya at madalas ay mukha siyang bampirang hindi nakainom ng dugo kapag walang makeup. She hardly ever tanned and got sunburned fast. Hindi iyon conducive sa negosyo niyang beach at farm resort.

Matapos suklayin ang mahabang buhok at isuot ang kanyang nude wedge sandals, lumabas na siya at tinungo ang kusina.

She smelled pancakes and bacon even before she got out of the hallway. Open plan ang istilo ng bungalow, kaya tanaw niya agad ang ina na nakaharap sa stainless steel gas range pagkatapak niya sa living area. The wide windows let in the morning sun, brightening the pale cream walls and polished dark wood floor. May ilang mga laruan si Anaya na nakakalat sa mahabang beige couch, soft brown sectional at wooden coffee table. May mga sariwang camia at makukulay na Peruvian lilies at dahlias sa mga glass vases sa parihabang kahoy na dining table at granite kitchen counter, pinasisigla ang buong paligid.

Her father was sitting on the breakfast nook with the morning paper, the sun bathing him in its soft morning glow. Lumapit siya rito.

“Morning.” Nakangiti siyang humalik sa pisngi ng ama.

At almost seventy, Damian Lucas Braganza looked fit and healthy. Walang mag-aakala na dumanas ito ng stroke mahigit isang dekada na ang nakakaraan. He looked dashing in his light blue polo and khaki slacks, his dark hair barely touched by gray.

“Your mother dragged me here today.”

“I know, Papa.”

Nilingon sila ng ina, nakatiim ang mga labi. Her mother was lovely as ever. Nakatali ang itim na itim nitong buhok sa isang malinis na ponytail at nakasuot ito ng boat-neck soft gray blouse at black and white culottes. And pearl earrings, of course, her mother hardly ever left the house without her pearl earrings and nude low heels.

“Good morning, Mother.” Hinalikan din niya ito sa pisngi.

“Good morning,” bati rin ng ina.

Slim, tall and classy, iyan si Aurora Cassandra Braganza. Yet, komportable din ito sa suot na pink apron at hawak na spatula kagaya ng pagiging komportable nito sa isang formal state banquet.

“You didn’t bring Raviel?” tukoy niya sa nakababatang kapatid na lalaki.

“He’s busy today,” sagot ng ina habang binabaligtad ang pancake sa iron pan. “He’s in a meeting with your Tita Sanya. He’ll be with us on our lunch tomorrow as usual. How did it go?”

Hindi siya nagkunwaring hindi niya alam ang

tinukoy nito. “He was shocked, of course,” derecho niyang sagot. “But I think he handled it well. Where’s Anaya?”

“Outside, walking Bamboo with Nanay. Did he say anything about custody?” Medyo matalas ang tono ng kanyang mama.

“We didn’t get to discuss—”

Nag-vibrate ang kanyang phone sa balsa, at agad siyang napatigil. Kakaunti ang mga taong tatawag sa kanya nang ganito kaaga tuwing Sabado, at tumawag na ang isa roon sa kanya kanina habang kasama na niya ngayon ang dalawa pa.

Dinukot niya ang phone sa balsa at lalong lumakas ang kanyang kaba nang makita ang hindi kilalang numero sa screen.

Inilagay niya sa tainga ang phone at sinagot. “Hello?”

“It’s Declan.” His rough gravelly voice was just as potent through a phone line as it had been in person.

“Declan,” sambit ni Vera sa kabila ng pagdagundong sa dibdib. “Good morning.”

Tumalas ang titig ng kanyang mama, at pati ang ama ay ibinaba ang binabasang dyaryo at bumaling sa kanya.

“Do you have time today?” His tone was brisk. Determined. “We need to meet and talk.”

She told herself it was good news, and there was no need to panic. “I’m sorry. Today is family day. But

we can talk tomorrow.”

She would have to cancel her weekly visit to her parents’ house tomorrow.

“Tomorrow then,” bruskong sagot ng kausap. “Lunch good with you?”

“Lunch is okay.”

“I want to talk about this in private. Your place or mine?”

Good choice. Ayaw niya ring pag-usapan ang tungkol dito sa kung saang publikong lugar. “We have a private room here in our restaurant, I’ll reserve it.”

“Your place, then. Will you...” He seemed to struggle with words, and she heard him let out a ragged breath.

And that shot of uncertainty hit her in the chest. Kagaya niya at ng kanyang pamilya, hindi rin ito madali para sa binata. He was just as lost, and maybe just as scared, as her family.

And when he spoke again, his voice was hoarse as if he had hot sand poured down his throat. “Will you bring the kid with you?”

“I don’t think that’s wise,” mahinahon niyang hayag. “We should smooth everything out and determine first how we go from here before we bring Anaya into this.”

“I understand. Tomorrow—”

“Momma!”

The sliding door slammed opened, and Anaya streaked into the room shrieking and crying.

“Momma! Ningning’s missing!”

“Who’s that?” Declan sharp voice barked into her ear. “Is that... Is that the kid?”

“Yes, it’s Anaya—”

“Momma!” Sumalpok ang anak sa kanyang mga binti at yumakap sa mga hita niya. Namumula ang mukha ng bata at nangingilid ang luha sa mga mata. “Ningning! Can’t find Ningning!”

Humahangos na pumasok din si Sha-Sha, isa sa mga kasambahay nila. Nakalamukos din ang mukha nito sa pag-aalala. “Kasama ko lang kanina ’yun, Ma’am, eh. Tapos bigla na lang hindi ko na makita.”

Declan’s voice snapped into her ear again. “What the f*ck’s—”

“Give me a minute, Declan.” Dumukwang siya at kinarga ang anak saka bumaling kay Sha-Sha. “What happened?”

Agad yumakap si Anaya sa kanyang leeg at pinalupot ang mga binti sa baywang niya.

Lumapit na rin sa kanila ang kanyang mama at papa.

“Sumama sa ’kin papunta sa Green Kitchen si Ningning kanina, Ma’am, kukuha ako ng butter at honey kasi ubos na rito. Tapos n’ung pabalik na ’ko, wala na siya.”

Inayos niya ang karga sa anak. “Hinanap n’yo ba

siya dito sa bahay?”

“Opo, Ma’am. Hinanap ko na rin doon sa paligid ng Green Kitchen. Hinahanap na rin nina Ton-Ton sa farm at sa resort.”

“Momma!” Suminghot-singhot si Anya at sinapo ng maliliit nitong palad ang magkabila niyang pisngi. “Ningning, Momma, Ningning!”

Hinagod ng mama niya ang likod ng kanyang anak. “Shh... Baby.”

“What the hell’s happening?” asik ni Declan sa kanyang tainga.

“Her cat’s missing. I’ll call you later. We need—”

“A cat?” hindi makapaniwalang pakli ng lalaki. “Jesus Christ. Akala ko naputulan na ng paa ang kung sino!”

“You should really stop using the Lord’s name in vain,” hindi niya maiwasang puna. “It’s sacrilege.”

Sa kanyang pagkagulat, tumawa ang binata. At hindi iyon marahas at pangit kagaya kagabi. His laughter was rich, low and warm. And damn it, she felt her heart pounding heavily at the sound of his laughter.

“Sacrilege?” anito. “Big word, sunshine. Never heard that before. Not sure I understand what it means.”

“It means blasphemy.” Hindi niya maiwasan ang bahagyang talim ng boses. Hindi niya gusto ang pagkislot ng tiyan sa pagtawa nito, o ang pag-init ng

mga tainga sa pagtawag nito sa kanya ng ‘sunshine.’
“It means don’t do it. I’ll call you later.”

“Wait, is the kid okay?”

The raw concern in his voice made her heart squeeze again. At natagpuan ni Vera ang sarili na marahang pinipisil ang pang-upo ng anak na sapo ng kanyang kamay. “She’s in panic mode, but she’ll be okay. We’ll find Ningning. Later, Declan.”

“Call me. Call me as soon as you can.”

At pinutol na nito ang tawag.



They couldn’t find the cat anywhere.

Ito ang unang beses na nawala ng ganito si Ningning. Madalas ay lagi itong nakabuntot sa mga taong gusto nito. At mga limang tao lang iyon kasi choosy ang pusa nila.

Binalikan nila ang Green Kitchen at sinuyod ang paligid ng mahaba at dalawang palapag na gusali. Sa Green Kitchen nila ginagawa at niluluto ang ilan sa mga produkto ng farm. Homemade organic jams, alamang, chocolates, dried fruits, dairy products, cornbread at iba pa. Nasa may silangang bahagi iyon ng kanilang property, malapit sa farm area at may kalayuan sa mismong beach resort.

Tinawagan din nila si Makoy, ang delivery man nila na nandoon kanina sa Green Kitchen. Baka nakapasok sa van nito ang pusa nang hindi nito namamalayan. They also checked the CCTV

footages in the resort.

Maraming puwedeng pagtaguan ang pusa, at mahigit tatlumpu't limang ektarya ang property. Pero kung nakalabas ng *Anaya's Farm and Beach Resort* si Ningning, lalo silang mahihirapan.

Walang nakitang Ningning si Makoy sa van o sa kahit saan. Pasado alas doce na pero hindi pa nila nahahanap ang pusa sa kanilang property.

Kinuha ni Vera ang listahan ng delivery ni Makoy at ginamit na ang social media. She posted a picture of the fat bluish gray British shorthair on her personal *IG, FB* and *Twitter* as well on the social media accounts of the resort. Inilagay niya rin doon ang area ng mga restaurants at stores kung saan nag-deliver si Makoy sa pag-asang may makakita sa alaga nilang pusa.

Her baby was inconsolable. Nakasalampak ito sa carpet ng living room at patuloy sa paghikbi. Umuungol sa tabi nito si Bamboo at kinikiskis ang ilong sa binti ng paslit.

"Momma! Lunch, Momma, lunch! Ningning needs to eat!"

"Yes, baby, I know." Niyakap niya ang anak at hinagkan sa pisngi. "Let's go look for Ningning on the streets, baby."

"Outside?" sumisinghot-singhot nitong tanong.

"Yes, we'll look around the places where Kuya Makoy had deliveries."

“Do you have to bring her?” Nag-aalalang hinimas ng kanyang ina ang kulot na buhok ni Anaya. “Wouldn’t it be better if Anaya stays here?”

“She’ll stay in the car, and it might make her feel better to look around the streets than to stay here waiting for her cat.”

At kinarga ni Vera ang anak at dinala sa silid upang bihisan.

They got into the SUV, strapped Anaya in her purple car seat, loaded the stroller and cat carrier in the cargo area then hit the road. Nasa tabi siya ng anak habang nasa harapan si Nanay Elma sa tabi ng driver. Yakap-yakap ng anak ang paborito nitong blue rabbit stuffed toy.

Nagsimula sila sa mga katabing restaurants at resorts na hinatiran ng mga deliveries ni Makoy sa Pandan. Sunod nilang sinuyod ang paligid sa pension house sa Sabangan.

By two-thirty, they still had no sign of Ningning.

Hinagkan niya sa noo si Anaya habang pasinghot-singhot ito. Namimigat ang mga mata ng anak habang nakaupo sa car seat, pero pilit nilalabanan ang antok.

“Take a nap, baby.” Kinuha ni Vera sa diaper bag ang milk bottle na may tinimplang gatas at binigay sa paslit.

“Don’t wanna, Momma.” Pero kinuha nito ang bote at sinuso.

Tinapik-tapik niya ang matabang binti ng anak, at gaya ng inaasahan, nakatulog ito matapos ang ilang minuto.

Nagpatuloy sila sa paghahanap. About an hour or so later, nag-vibrate ang kanyang phone sa balsa.

It was an unknown number, but she answered it right away. "Yes?"

"I think I found your cat."

Tumalon ang puso niya nang marinig ang magaspang na boses ni Declan.

"What? Where?"

"I'll send you a picture and video, find out if it's your missing cat."

Tinapos nito ang tawag at natanggap niya ang larawan at video.

Nakabalot sa puting tuwalya ang isang mataba at blue-gray na pusa. Masama ang tingin nito sa camera na para bang gusto nitong i-massacre ang kumukuha ng larawan.

Surprised laughter burst out of her throat as she stared at the murderous face of their Ningning. Walang duda, ang bugnutin nilang pusa ang nasa larawan.

Pero nawala ang ngiti niya nang makita ang dugo sa kaliwang binti ng alaga.

Her phone vibrated again, and she quickly accepted the call.

"That your cat?" bungad ni Declan.

“Yes, I think so. Where did you find her?”

“Here in Bued.”

“Is she injured? Is that blood on her left front leg?”

“Yeah, the kids said she got hit by a bike.”

Oh, my God. “Does she have any other injuries?”

“Don’t think so, but better bring her to a vet. You want me to bring her to the vet now and just meet there?”

Magandang ideya iyon. “Yes, let’s do that.”
Ibinigay niya rito ang address ng beterinaryo nila.

Sinabi rin niya kay Manong Tonyo na sa vet clinic sa Poblacion na tumuloy.

“Nakita na si Ningning?” bulalas ni Nanay Elma.

“I think so, Nanay.”

“Momma?”

Napalingon siya sa anak. Namumungay ang mga mata nito at pilit siyang inaabot.

“Here, baby.” Hinimas niya ang ulo ni Anaya at tumungo para hagkan ito sa noo.

Declan’s voice was rougher than usual when he spoke again. “The kid okay?”

She felt that squeeze in her chest area again, and her voice was soft when she answered. “Yes, just gloomy. P’unta na kami sa clinic. How did you find Ningning?”

“Saw your posts. Know some people in the areas, asked them to look for the fat cat. Seriously, Vera,

put the bugger on diet. Thought I was lifting a sack of bricks.”

Natagpuan niya ang sariling tumatawa ulit. The image of Declan, all muscles and testosterone, lifting the large grumpy cat was hilarious. At least for her, it was. “British shorthairs are naturally stocky and robust, Declan. It’s their natural body structure.”

“The cat is fat, sunshine.”

Muli siyang tumawa. Well, he was not exactly wrong.

“Ningning, Momma?” Mulat na mulat na ang anak.

Nakangiti siyang tumango rito. “I think we found her, baby.”

Nagpilit itong tumayo. “Where, Momma? Where?”

“Near the Mangrove Park we visited with Tito Raviel. Do you remember? It has this tall gazebo where we viewed the hundred islands?”

Nanulis ang mapupulang labi ni Anaya. “With lotsa small trees, Momma?”

“Yes, there were many small mangroves.”

“We gonna go there, Momma?”

“No, baby, dadalhin na sa vet si Ningning. Doon na tayo dederecho.”

“Kay, Momma. Want milk, Momma.”

Malawak siyang ngumiti at kinuha ang milk bottle nito na hindi nito naubos kanina. Agad nitong

tinanggap iyon at dinede.

“You already on your way?” Declan asked gruffly.

“Yes, nasa labas na talaga kami at hinahanap si Ningning.”

“We can do *FaceTime*, let the kid see the cat until you come here.”

Naramdaman ni Vera ang muling paggapang ng ngiti sa kanyang mga labi. May mainit na pakiramdam din sa kanyang dibdib. “That’s a wonderful idea.”

At ginawa nga nila iyon.

Anaya squealed and grabbed the phone once the large cat came to the screen. “Ningning!”

Nakasimangot na nag-meow ang pusa sa video.

“Ningning, Momma! Ningning!”

“Yes, baby, they found her.”

Her baby started blabbering to the cat, and she found herself smiling even more.

3

Nakarating sila sa clinic sa Poblacion at agad niyang kinalas ang pagka-strap ni Anaya sa car seat. Kinarga niya ang anak at bumaba sila ng SUV.

Binati sila ng isang staff at iginiya sa waiting room.

“Tinitingnan na po ni Doktora Ancheta si Ningning,” imporma ni Ate Gina, isa sa mga staff ng clinic. Gaya ng ibang staff, nakasuot din ito ng blue scrubs at nakatali ang mahabang buhok.

“Nasa waiting room na po si Sir Declan.” Hindi mapigilan ng babae ang malawak na ngiti.

That was nothing new. All women from ages one to one hundred seemed to react that way to Declan. She was sure even babies loved to sigh at Declan’s masculine features.

Pagpasok sa waiting room, nakita niyang nakaupo ang binata sa mahabang leather couch.

Tumayo ito, at narinig niya ang pagsinghap ni Nanay Elma sa kanyang tabi. Hindi niya ito masisi.

Seeing Declan in person for the first time was a revelation. He was just so... male. Tall, large and just so hard everywhere.

His white shirt stretched across the stone hard contours of his shoulders, his faded jeans encasing his long powerful legs. His muscles looked stiff, his expression tense, his eyes a deep shade of amber. Napansin din niyang medyo malalim ang mga mata nito na para bang hindi ito nakatulog kagabi. Mataman ang titig nito sa batang karga niya.

Humigpit ang yakap niya sa anak, at sinabihan niya ang sariling kumalma habang naglalakad palapit sa lalaki.

Sinapo ng maliliit na palad ng anak ang magkabila niyang pisngi. "Where's Ningning, Momma, where's Ningning?"

"She's with Dra. Ancheta, baby. Ningning's hurt, so Doc Ancheta has to check her injuries."

"Why Ningning hurt, Momma, why?"

"She's been hit by a bike, baby."

"Bike? Why, Momma?"

"It's an accident." Itinaas niya ang tingin kay Declan para kumpirmahin iyon.

Pero nakatuon ang tingin ng binata sa kanyang anak.

She felt a twinge in her chest at seeing that mixture of fear and shock on his face. "Declan?"

His head jerked back and his gaze shot to her. "What?" His voice sounded like he got something

stuck in his throat.

“The bike hit Ningning,” marahan niyang saad, “it’s an accident, right?”

Ilang segundo lang itong tumitig sa kanya na para bang pinoproseso pa ang kanyang sinabi. Maikli itong tumango. “Yeah.” Bumalik ang titig nito sa kanyang anak na para bang hindi ito sigurado kung ano bang specie ang bata. His voice remained hoarse when he spoke again. “The kids said they saw the cat running and got hit by a bike. The cat ran and hid in an alley.”

“The kids found Ningning?”

Maikling tumango ulit si Declan.

“Where are they? We want to thank them.”

“Later, let’s just wait for the results now.”

“Who’s he, Momma?” Nakasiksik ang mukha ni Anaya sa leeg niya habang nakatitig kay Declan.

Her heart hammered in her chest and she glanced up at Declan for help. But from the panic gripping his strained features, he didn’t know what to say either.

Oh, dear.

“Anaya, this is...”

How was she supposed to introduce Declan to her daughter?

“He’s... He found Ningning, baby,” ang tangi niyang nasabi.

Naramdaman ni Vera ang pagtango ng anak. “Kay.” Tapos ay nahihiya nitong itinaas ang mukha

kay Declan habang nakasiksik pa rin sa kanya. At sa maliit at matamis na boses, anito, “Thank you.”

Pain slashed across Declan’s features as if somebody pressed hot metal spikes to his chest. Muling nanikip ang kanyang dibdib sa mahapding anyo na iyon ng binata.

Bumukas ang pinto ng exam room.

“Vera,” tawag sa kanya ni Doktora Ancheta pagkalabas nito.

Agad silang lumapit dito.

Kinabahan siya sa pormal na mukha ng may edad na beterinarya. But then again, Doctor Ancheta had always looked a little grim. The doctor’s shoulder-length hair was always in a tight ponytail, her features always set in a stern expression. Resting bitch face, ika nga ni Arthur.

“Flesh wound at na-dislocate lang ang joint ni Ningning,” hayag ng beterinarya nang makalapit sila. “We transferred her to the kennel. You can go see her now.”

“We gonna see Ningning, Doctor?” usisa ng anak.

Malawak na ngumiti ang ginang at pinaamo niyon ang pormal nitong mukha. And when Doc Ancheta smiled, she looked like an angel in her white lab coat. “Yes, Anaya. We’ll go see Ningning.”

Ngumisi ang anak at pumalakpak. Ngumiti rin siya at pinauna ang doctor na maglakad sa kanila.

“Natutulog pa siya dahil sa anestisya,” paliwanag

ni Dr. Ancheta nang buksan nito ang pinto ng ward. “She didn’t need surgery, but we needed to bandage her left leg.”

May dalawang mahabang metal table sa kaliwa ng silid habang nasa kaliwa ang dalawang magkapatong na hilera ng mga kulungan. Nasa unang itaas na kulungan ang natutulog na si Ningning, habang nasa ilalim nito ang isa ring natutulog na aso. May ilan pang mga hayop sa mga kulungan doon.

“Ningning!” Pilit inabot ni Anaya ang pusa.

Gaya ng sabi ng doctor, may bendahe sa kaliwang front leg ang kanilang pusa.

“Shhh, baby, Ningning’s sleeping.”

“Why, Momma, why?”

“She’s sick, and she needs to get better, so she needs to sleep.”

“But... but...” Nanginig ang pang-ibabang labi ng anak.

“Let’s go talk in my office,” anang doctor.

Mabuti pa nga. The recuperating animals did not need to witness her baby’s mini-meltdown.

Kinuha ni Nanay Elma sa kanya si Anaya at dumerecho sila sa hallway sa tabi ng reception.

“Ninging’s doing okay,” simula ng beterinarya pagkapasok nila sa opisina nito.

Umupo ito sa likod ng desk at umupo siya sa kanang desk chair habang sa tapat ng upuan niya pumuwesto si Declan. Sa couch malapit sa pinto

umupo sina Nanay Elma at Anaya.

“Her X-ray results are good, but it’s better to leave her here for two days for observation.”

“So we’ll pick her up on Monday afternoon?”

“Even before lunch is fine. We have to limit her joint movement for now to let it heal, so we discourage play for now.”

May kumatok sa pinto.

“Come in,” saad ng beterinarya.

Pumasok si Ate Gina at mapaumanhing ngumiti sa kanila. “Sorry po. Kukunin ko lang po ’yung file ni Batman.”

Tumango si Doc Ancheta at dinampot ang isang folder sa mesa nito. “Here, Gina.” Nakangiting bumaling sa kanila ang doctor. “Batman’s the dog in the kennel.”

Tuluyang pumasok si Gina sa opisina at tinanggap ang folder.

“Ningning should stay here until Monday noon,” patuloy ng doktora, “then I’ll give you more instructions for her recovery.”

“Thank you, Doc, we’ll—”

“No, Momma, bring Ningning home today!”

Gulat siyang napalingon sa anak at nakitang nakatiim-labi ito at nakababa sa upuan. Nakalamukos ang mukha nito at nakakuyom-palad.

“Today, Momma. Please, please, please?”

“No, baby. She has to stay here—”

“No, Momma! Bring Ningning home today!”

Biglang tumakbo ang paslit palabas ng nakaawang na pinto.

“Anaya!” Agad siyang tumayo para habulin ito.

Napatayo rin si Nanay Elma. But Declan was faster. He shot out of the room like a bullet.

Tumakbo sila pasunod. Wala na ang mga ito sa pasilyo, at rinig niya ang sigaw ng anak.

“No! No! Noooo!” Anaya’s piercing screech tore through the air. “Bring Ningning home! Now! Now! NOW!”

Oh, my God. Her baby could really scream.

Humahangos siyang lumabas ng hallway papunta sa waiting room, at nabungaran ang nagwawalang si Anaya sa mga braso ni Declan.

And boy was her baby wild.

“Ningning home now! NOW! NOW!”

It’s shocking how someone so sweet and pure could turn into a little monster in just a heartbeat. And she meant that with all the love she had for her baby. Because her baby sure looked like a small hellcat in Declan’s muscular arms—her rounded face alarmingly red, her curly hair wild around her face, her chubby arms and legs flailing angrily.

Declan’s tight features were frozen in masculine shock as her baby screeched and thrashed in his arms.

“NINGNING HOME NOW! NOW!”

Nakalapit siya sa mga ito at ginagap niya ang braso ng anak. “Anaya!” Pinanlakihan niya ng mga

mata ang nagwawalang paslit. “Stop.”

“NO! NO! NOOO!” Lalo itong nagpumiglas.

Declan could only stand there, his large body locked in a mixture of panic and newfound fear.

“Anaya,” madiin niyang ulit.

Luhaang tumitig sa kanya ang bata, tapos ay lumamukos lalo ang maliit nitong mukha. Then, her baby burst into another bout of tears.

“Momma!” Humahagulgol siya nitong inabot.

Agad niya itong kinarga at hinagod ang nanginginig nitong likod. “There, there.”

“Momma! Ningning!” Mahigpit itong yumakap sa kanyang leeg.

Bumuntong-hininga siya patuloy na tinapik ang likod ng anak. “She needs to stay here, baby. She’s sick, and she needs the doctors here.”

“She’ll be sad here, Momma. Ningning’ll sad!”

“No, baby. Ate Gina will be here with her, they’ll take care of her—”

“No, Momma! NO! Bring Ningning home now! Now!” Patuloy ito sa paghagulgol na para bang katapusan na ng mundo. “Now, Momma, now! NOW!”

Bumuntong-hininga ulit si Vera.

God, her baby sure knew how to throw a fit.

“Baby, we can’t.” Dinukot niya ang panyo sa balsa at pinunasan ang luhaang mga pisngi ng anak. “We’ll visit Ningning tomorrow. You, I, Lola, Granpop-pops, Uncle Raviel, Lola Sanya, and

Nanay Elma will visit Ningning after church, then you can go and buy *Kiddie Meal* in *Jollibee*, you like that?”

Inilayo nito ang mukha sa kanyang leeg at sumisinghot na tumitig sa kanya. “*J-Jollibee?*”

Yes! Nakakita na siya ng liwanag sa dulo ng madilim na lagusan.

“Yes, baby. Then on Monday, you and Nanay Elma can pick up Ningning after school. Then, she’ll be home with us.”

“But, Momma! Now! Now!”

“We’ll buy *Kiddie Meal* tomorrow.”

Humahagulgol itong tumitig sa kanya.

“I think they have a new toy in their *Kiddie Meal*.”

“N-new toy?” Suminghot-singhot ang anak.

Yes, konti pa. “Yes, baby.”

“B-but... but...”

“We’ll visit Ningning tomorrow and buy *Kiddie Meal*. Then, you’ll bring Ningning home on Monday.”

“Now na lang, Momma!” Muli itong umatungal. “Please, please! PLEASE!”

Alam niyang importante ang bagay na ito sa anak niya, at hindi niya dapat maliitin ang damdamin nito kahit minsan ay natatawa na siya sa mga atungal ni Anaya. She read that somewhere in a parenting book. Pero madalas, gusto niyang i-video ang mga meltdown ng anak para ipakita ang mga iyon kapag

matanda na ito.

Remember when you were a baby? You were such a drama queen!

Ngumiti si Vera habang hinahagkan ang noo ng nagwawalang anak. “I told you, we can’t. She has to stay here so she can get better. The doctors and Ate Gina will take care of her.”

“But... but!”

“If you don’t stop crying now, we won’t buy *Kiddie Meal* tomorrow. Do you want that?”

Umiiyak na tumitig lang sa kanya ang anak, mukhang tinitimbang kung ano ang mas mahalaga, ang iwan nito ang pusa o ang *Jolly Kiddie Meal*.

Decisions, decisions.

“*Kiddie Meal*, Momma, with toy?”

Patiently, she bit back a smile. “Yes, there’s a toy for you, Anaya.”

“Two *Kiddie Meals*, Momma? Two toys?”

Pinigilan niya ang pagtawa. Her baby really knew how to drive a hard bargain. Nagmana ito sa kanya. She kissed her baby’s chubby cheek. “No, baby, just one *Kiddie Meal*. Just one toy.”

“But... but...”

“One *Kiddie Meal*, one toy, Anaya.”

Muling nalukot ang maliit nitong mukha, pero tumigil na ang pagdaloy ng luha. “Ningning can eat *Kiddie Meal*, Momma? *Chicken Joy*?”

“Hmm... we’ll ask Dra. Ancheta.”

“Ningning won’t be sad? Ningning stays here,

she won't be sad? She won't cry, Momma?"

Hindi siya agad nakasagot. Hindi niya kayang ipangako sa anak na hindi iiyak ang pusa. Pero kaya niyang ipangako na magiging mabuti ang alaga nila sa clinic. "She'll be okay, baby. They'll take care of her."

"*Jollibee?*" Suminok-sinok ang anak.

"Yes, baby, *Jollibee.*"

"*Jollibee* now, Momma?"

Maikli siyang tumawa. Sa tingin niya ay nakalagpas na sila sa critical stage. "You want to go to *Jollibee* now?"

"Yes, Momma. Now."

Napangiti siya at napailing. "Okay, sweetheart. We'll go to *Jollibee* now."

"Buy sundae, Momma?"

Dapat ba siyang humindi? Hindi ba tama ang pagdisiplina niya kung papayag siya?

Napakagat-labi si Vera. Alam niyang walang perpektong magulang. Pero gusto niyang maging mabuting ina sa anak. But sometimes... desperate times call for desperate measures.

"Okay, baby, we'll buy one sundae. But first, you need to do something."

Sinulyapan niya si Declan. Fear still tightened every line of his face as he stared at her and her child. Hindi niya ito masisi. Sa pagtili at pag-atungal ng anak, mato-trauma ang kahit na sinong hindi sanay sa isang maliit na bata.

“Declan,” usal niya.

His gaze shot to hers, those wide hazel eyes so similar to Anaya’s it made her chest hurt.

“Is it okay for Anaya to call you Uncle Declan?”

Mukhang nagulat ito sa tanong niya, tapos ay napatitig sa bata. Napalunok ito. Mukhang hindi rin nito alam kung ano ang isasagot.

“It’s okay if you don’t want—”

“It’s okay,” he answered gruffly, his dark gaze returning to hers. “It’s okay.”

Nakahinga siya nang maluwag. Binalingan niya ang anak. “What should you say to Uncle Declan, Anaya?”

Ngumuso ulit ang paslit at sumiksik sa kanyang leeg habang nakatitig sa lalaki. Namumula pa rin ang mukha at mga mata nito dahil sa kaiiyak. “S-sorry, U-Uncle Declan.” Suminok-sinok ito.

“What else?” hirit niya. “You could have hurt yourself, Anaya. You could have broken something in this clinic. But he caught you before any of that happened. What else should you say to Uncle Declan?”

Suminghot ang paslit at kinusot ng likod ng mga daliri ang namamagang mga mata. “T-thank you, Uncle Declan.”

He nodded, every muscle on his face and body stiff. “It’s alright,” he answered, his voice still gruff and raspy. “You’re welcome.”

Kinagat ni Anaya ang pang-ibabang labi, tapos

ay maliit na ngumiti. Her heart melted at the sight of her baby's sweet smile.

At nang sulyapan niya ang binata at makita ang pagdapo ng sakit sa guwapo nitong mukha, nakaramdam din si Vera ng hapdi sa dibdib. She couldn't begin to imagine how he felt right then.

Hinagkan niya ang ulo ng anak. "Now let's go apologize to Doc Ancheta and Ate Gina, okay?"

"Kay, Momma."

"You shouldn't run like that, Anaya, you might hurt yourself or somebody else."

"Kay. Won't do it again, Momma."

"Let's—"

"Momma?" Humigpit ang yakap ng mga braso ng anak sa kanyang leeg.

"Hmm?"

Isiniksik ng paslit ang mainit na mukha sa kanyang leeg. "S-sorry, M-Momma."

Her heart ached again at her baby's sweet apology. But this time, it was a good kind of hurt.

"Okay, baby." Hinagkan niya muli ang mabango nitong buhok. "Don't do it again, hmm?"

"Kay, Momma."

Sinulyapan niya si Declan. He looked pained as he stared at them, his eyes dark, the lines of his face tight in a mask of agony.

"Declan?" untag ni Vera.

He met her gaze, and the raw anguish in those depths made her own stomach cramp.

Maikli itong tumango. “Let’s go back,” he said in a brusque tone that spoke of a thousand feelings they both couldn’t say out loud.

Gumilid ito para paunahin silang maglakad.

Napabuntong-hininga ang dalaga, tinapik ang puwitan ng anak at humakbang na pabalik sa opisina ng beterinarya.



“She’s a good kid.”

Itinaas ni Vera ang tingin sa lalaking nakaupo sa tapat niya. Nakatuon ang titig nito sa may play area kung saan tumitili at humahagik hik si Anaya.

The booth seemed too small for Declan, his large frame filling more than half of the red seat. But then again, Declan had always seemed too large for everything.

Nakikipaglaro ang anak sa ilang mga bata sa play area, at kasama nito roon si Nanay Elma.

“You think so?” matabang niyang untag. “I was afraid you might think she’s a brat after her marvelous display of temper tantrum.”

Ibinaling ng lalaki ang mga mata sa kanya.

His irises were dark gold under the bright lights of the fast food chain. “She threw a tantrum,” anito, “all kids do. But she knew how to say sorry, how to say thank you. She knew she did wrong. That’s basic, but not all kids do that. Not even all adults know how to do that.”

Tumaas ang sulok ng kanyang mga labi, at

nakaramdam siya ng mainit na pakiramdam sa kanyang dibdib. “I think I disagree. Sa tingin ko, lahat ng bata mabuti. It’s just that, sometimes, when we grow older, we lose our way and become... not good.”

Siguro isa iyon sa kinatatakutan ng lahat ng mga magulang, ang maligaw ng landas ang anak at hindi nila iyon mapigilan. Hindi matulungan.

“She’ll never lose her way,” he said with a grim finality that surprised her. “Not when she has you.”

Gulat siyang napatitig dito nang ilang segundo. Gumapang din ang mainit na pakiramdam paakyat sa kanyang leeg. “That’s quite a lot of pressure,” nagawa niyang sabihin. “And praise. And I’m not sure I deserve it.”

Kumunot-noo ang binata, at matabang siyang ngumiti.

“Yung iba, sasabihin na hindi tama ang pagdisiplina ko kay Anaya sa clinic,” paliwanag niya. “I shouldn’t have resorted to bribery.”

Pagak na tumawa si Declan. “I would have offered her a thousand f*cking dollars to stop her from crying back there.”

Seryoso siyang umiling sa binata. “Don’t do that. Marunong na siyang magbilang hanggang one hundred, alam niyang malaki ang one thousand. She’ll buy lots of *Kiddie Meals* using that.”

Humor lightened his eyes, but just as fast, his gaze became shadowed, dark, as if someone dimmed

the vivid flames behind his gaze. “Is she... Is she really mine?”

Hindi iyon akusasyon. Wala iyong bahid ng galit. It was a questioned drowned in what she could only describe as pain, shock, and disbelief. As if he couldn't quite believe something so precious could come from him.

Her stomach tightened, clenched, and she felt thick emotions clogging her throat.

Nagawa niyang tumango. “She’s your daughter, Declan. She’s yours.”

His dark gaze focused on her child again, his face lined with torture.

“You should do a DNA test,” usal ni Vera. “I have her extra toothbrush here with me. Or you can use her straw.” Itinuro niya ang straw na nakasuot pa sa juice cup ni Anaya. “I have her hair brush with me, too. It has some of her hair. I’d rather we don’t do the swab thing with Anaya, and just take samples this way.”

Tumango ang lalaki. “I agree.”

Kumuha siya ng mga resealable plastic bags sa diaper bag at magkakahiwalay na ipinasok sa bawat bag ang mga binanggit niyang gamit ng anak. Straw, sippy cup, buhok na may root galing hair brush, and of course, the pink toothbrush. Pinasok niya lahat iyon sa isang paper bag.

Humarap siya kay Declan.

At nakita niyang maang na nakatitig sa kanya

ang lalaki na para bang may mga ulo na sumulpot sa kanyang balikat. “What the f*ck do you have in there? Your entire house?”

“Welcome to the life of a parent, Declan. Nappies, extra clothes, wet wipes, tissues, alcohol, hand sanitizers, plastic bags, toys, biscuits, milk, manzanilla, petroleum jelly, sunscreen, mosquito patches. They’ll be an everyday part of your life until she’s about eight.”

There was a hint of horror in his golden eyes as he stared at her.

Maikli siyang tumawa. And after the nerve-racking days she had recently, it felt good to laugh. “Why do you think we have such a big bag with us? It’s not a fashion statement, I assure you. Here.” Tinuro niya ang paper bag na naglalaman ng mga items para sa DNA test. “Take that.”

“I don’t even f*cking know half of the things you said,” he muttered as he took the bag.

Maliit siyang ngumiti, pero kumupas din agad iyon. “You will need my consent as Anaya’s parent if you want a legal paternity test.”

Itinaas ni Declan ang titig sa kanya.

Hindi niya iniwas ang titig dito. “But there’s something called peace of mind paternity test. You can use that without my consent, but the results are not admissible in court.”

Tumiim-bagang ang binata. He should know what she was talking about.

“You need my consent if you want to present the DNA test result as evidence in court.”

“Are you telling me you won’t give me your consent if I push for a legal paternity test?” mababang untag ng kaharap.

Ayaw niya itong awayin. Gusto niya itong maging bahagi ng buhay ni Anaya. Hindi niya ito lalapitan at isisiwalat dito ang totoo kung hindi. But if worse comes to worst, she would fight back with everything she had to keep her baby with her. Gusto lang niyang linawin iyon.

“No,” pantay niyang sagot. “I will give you my consent if you want that. But even if I refuse, you can petition for a court order for the test, and that will be admissible in court.”

“I don’t appreciate your threats, Vera.”

“I’m not—”

“Bullsh*t.” Bahagya itong dumukwang at inilapit ang galit na mukha sa kanya. The Declan from last night was back. Feral, icy, stone-hard. “You’re telling me I can push for legal action if I want to, but then you’ll also rub it in my face how you’ll use all your family’s resources and connection to stop me if I even f*cking try. Sinabi mo na ’yon kagabi. Heard it loud and clear the first time, babe. Now tell me that’s not a f*cking threat.”

“You’re wrong,” mahinahon niyang tanggi sa harap ng galit nito. “Hindi kita pipigilang kalabanin ako sa korte. You have all the rights to fight for

Anaya in court. Hindi kita pipigilang gawin 'yon. Pero pipigilan kitang manalo.”

Naningkit ang mga mata ng binata pero nagpatuloy siya.

“Siguro tama ka. Maybe it is a threat. But I just want to make it clear.”

Nagtagis ang bagang ng binata at umatras.

“Goddamn it, Vera. I’m not trying to take her from away you!”

“Lower your voice,” pakli niya.

Mabuti na lang at nasa dulong bahagi sila ng fast food at walang nakaupo malapit sa kanila. She made a mistake here, she shouldn’t have opened this line of discussion in public.

Matalim siyang pinukol ng tingin ng lalaki, pero binabaan din nito ang boses. “I’m not trying to take her away from you, goddamn you.”

Pinagsaklop ni Vera ang mga palad sa ilalim ng mesa at tumango. She had to control this. “I’m sorry, I came on too strongly. I want you and Anaya to have a good relationship, that means we should try to have a cordial relationship as well. I hope I did not ruin that chance.”

Naniningkit ang mga matang tumitig lang sa kanya si Declan nang ilang segundo. Tapos ay pagak itong tumawa. “Christ. You’re really something.”

Tumuwid ang kanyang likod. “Excuse me?”

Itinaas nito ang isang kamay, bahagyang nakataas ang isang sulok ng mga labi. But it wasn’t a derisive

sneer; the curl of his lips was a touch amused. She did not exactly like that, either.

“Hold your fire, sunshine. Didn’t mean it as an insult. You’re so goddamn logical and icy one moment, then you’re all fire and hell on the next. Still controlled, though. Always f*cking controlled. But fire is fire. Burns like a f*cker.”

“I presume you’ll get to the point any minute now?”

Ngumisi ang lalaki, and she did not like the fact that it made her blood hum with thrill.

“Yeah, all fire, sunshine,” he murmured in that low rough voice that made her skin prickle with heat.

“Your point?” pakli niya.

“Nothing, Vera. Just stating a fact.” Ibinaling ng binata ang titig kay Anaya. “I won’t push for legal paternity test. You don’t have to worry about that. And even if I would, it would only be to make sure Anaya would be legally protected and secured. She’s entitled to my assets and all other things from me. It will never be about custody. It will never be about taking her away from you.”

She would worry about it. That was her.

“I’ll find a clinic for the test and drive to Manila tonight,” saad ng lalaki. “I don’t want anyone else handling this.”

Nakaramdam siya ng pagluwag ng dibdib nang marinig iyon. Ang totoo, medyo nag-alala siya na

iuutos ni Declan sa assistant nito ang tungkol sa test. The less people who knew about their situation, the better.

“I appreciate that,” sagot niya.

Muling bumaling sa kanya ang lalaki, at may bahid ng desperasyon sa guwapo nitong mukha. “If I’m f*cking this up, Vera, you need to tell me. Straight up, say it to my face when you think I’m doing a motherf*cking mess.”

Nakaramdam siya ng kislote sa dibdib habang nakatitig kay Declan. This man... he really wanted to make this work. He’s just as afraid as she was. Just as uncertain. “I will.”

“Let’s talk again on Monday. I’ll bring my Lola and the twins to the resort.”

Ang twins na tinutukoy nito ay sina Kriselda at Leo Santos. Ayon sa file, magdi-diez y ocho ang dalawa sa nalalapit na buwan. Anak ang mga ito ng yumaong kaibigan ng binata. Kinupkop ni Declan ang mga ito halos labing isang taon na ang nakakaraan.

Hinayaan niya ang sariling ngumiti. His dark gaze dropped to her lips, and her heart started pounding again.

Ibinalik nito ang titig sa kanyang mga mata. “Let’s just make it look like we’re staying for a few days at the resort. Won’t look suspicious that way. You think that’s okay?”

“I think that’s okay,” nagawa niyang sabihin sa

kabila ng pagtambol ng puso. “Ano’ng oras kayo pupunta ng resort?”

“Around afternoon.”

“May iba ka na bang pinagsabihan tungkol dito?”

His gaze hardened. “Tinatanong mo ba kung sinabi ko sa lola ko?”

“Yes,” derecha niyang balik.

Bumuga ng hangin ang dating boksingero, at tiim-labi ulit nitong itinuon ang tingin sa bumubungisngis na si Anaya. “No. I want... I want Anaya to know first before I tell anyone else.”

That made her heart squeeze. She appreciated that, too. She appreciated that he was very careful about this. Appreciated that he’s putting Anaya first in his decisions.

At pinatibay niyon ang paniniwala niya na tama ang kanyang desisyon tungkol kay Declan.

Because all things considered, Declan had been proving that he wanted the best for Anaya, too. And that’s all she ever wanted. The best for her baby.

“Thank you,” usal niya.

Bumalik sa kanya ang titig ng lalaki. “That’s my line.”

Tumaas ang sulok ng mga labi niya, at muling bumaba roon ang tingin ni Declan. Something dark and hot flickered in his hazel eyes, and a corresponding heat flared at the tips of her breasts and scorched down to the flesh between her thighs.

Iniiwas niya ang tingin.

Tiim-bagang na iniiwas din ng lalaki ang titig.

She appreciated that, too.

Because the last thing she needed was a complication that could negatively affect her baby.

And *this* was not the best for her daughter.

And she would have none of it.

4

“Gonna get Ningning today, Momma, gonna get Ningning today?” Malawak ang ngiti ng anak habang nakayakap ang chubby nitong mga braso sa kanyang leeg.

She loved her baby in her pink day care uniform. Naka-French braid din ang kulot nitong buhok at mayroong pink na panali.

Ngumiti siya sa bata at hinagkan ang mabibilog nitong pisngi. “Yes, baby. You and Nanay Elma will pick Ningning up today.”

Tumili sa tuwa ang paslit at pinupog siya ng halik sa mukha. Tumawa rin siya at hinigpitan ang yakap dito.

“Anaya, ’lika na,” tawag dito ni Nanay Elma. Dala nito ang pink glittery backpack ng anak. “Alis na tayo.”

“Later, Momma! ’Love you, love you!”

“Love you, too, baby, take care.”

Tumahol si Bamboo sa kanilang paanan. Sumama ang aso sa paghatid niya kina Anaya at Nanay Elma

sa labas ng bahay hanggang sa makasakay ang mga ito sa SUV. Pinanood niya ang sasakyan habang binabagtas ang driveway palabas ng gate.

She checked her watch. Nine thirty. Alas diez ang pasok ng anak sa day care at alas diez din ang simula niya sa opisina sa resort. Nagsisimula talaga siya ng trabaho nang alas siete. She did it in her home office so she could stay at home and have breakfast with Anaya and help her baby get ready for school.

Hinawakan niya ang ulo ng German shepherd. "Time for me to go to work, buddy."

Tumahol ulit ang aso at kiniskis ang mukha sa kanyang balakang. Tumawa siya at masuyo itong itinulak.

"Don't cover me with dog hair, Bamboo."

Pinagpagan niya ang gilid ng suot na DVF wrap dress. Iyon ang 'uniform' niya kadalasan. The style was comfy, classic and feminine. Tamang-tama sa pagharap sa mga bisita ng resorts at paghabol sa makulit niyang anak at sa mga alaga nito.

Ikat print iyon at kulay navy blue, black at white nang araw na iyon. Tinernuhan niya ang bestida ng brown leather ankle boots, her trusted hand-me-down *Louis Vuitton* handbag from her mother, her usual diamond stud earrings and her dainty rose gold *Tiffany* watch.

She left the house and started walking to the resort office. Nasa loob ng resort ang bahay nila sa tuktok ng isang maliit na burol, habang nasa

bandang harapan ang resort office. Mas gusto niyang maglakad doon kaysa sumabay sa anak palabas ng gate. She rarely had time to work out due to her schedule, so she used that short morning walk as part of her exercise.

“Good morning, Ma’am Vera,” bati ni Ate Fina habang nagwawalis ito sa may flagstone walkway. Napapaligiran iyon ng mayayabong na halaman at makukulay na bulaklak. Nakasuot ang babae ng green scrubs na may logo ng resort.

“Morning, Ate Fina.”

The resort office was a rustic two-storey cottage made of glass and wood. May wrap-around porch ito na napapaligiran din ng mga puno at namumulaklak na mga halaman.

Inakyat niya ang maikling kahoy na hagdan ng porch at dumerecho sa maluwag na lobby. Nginitian niya ang mga turistang nakaupo sa mga rattan couches. Halos salamin ang harap ng office, at pinapapasok niyon ang pang-umagang araw, pinatitingkad ang makintab at mamula-mulang limestone na sahig. Binati rin siya ng mga nakasalubong na staff sa reception area.

Pumasok siya sa hallway papunta sa kanyang opisina. Sa kanan noon ay ang kitchen, breakroom, at ang storage area. Sa ikalawang palapag ang mga silid para sa mga stay-in staff.

Nasa table na nito sa labas ng kanyang opisina ang assistant niyang si Paula. Her assistant was chic

in her camel slacks, flowy shell pink blouse and nude peep toe pumps.

“Morning, Ma’am Vera,” nakangiting bati ng dalaga.

“Morning, Paula. How’s your weekend?”

Hinawi ng assistant ang ilang hibla ng maikli nitong buhok na tumabing sa pisngi nito. “Humilata lang ako, Ma’am.”

Tumawa siya at sabay silang pumasok ng kanyang opisina para simulan ang trabaho.

Around twelve thirty, dumating na si Anaya kasama sina Nanay Elma at Ningning sa opisina niya.

Masaya silang kumain ng tanghalian sa office cafeteria.



“Ma’am! Ma’am Vera!” Marahas na bumukas ang pinto ng opisina at niluwa niyon ang hinihinal na si Paula.

“Goodness, Paula, what on earth—”

“May nagsusuntukan sa labas, Ma’am! Nag-aaway ang dalawang guest natin!”

“What?” Agad siyang napatayo. “Saan? Ano’ng nangyari?”

“Sa may side porch, Ma’am! Duguan ’yung isa!”

Oh, dear Lord. “Tumawag na ba kayo ng security?” Hinagip niya ang phone at nagmamadaling lumabas ng opisina kasama ang assistant. “Sino na’ng’andoon?”

“Sina Makoy at James,” tukoy nito sa dalawang

staff ng hotel. “At yes, Ma’am, tumawag na ng security.”

“Ano’ng nangyari?”

“Hindi ko rin alam, Ma’am, basta may dalawang nagsusuntukan!”

She checked her watch. Twenty minutes before five. Alas cinco ang schedule ng tour nina Declan sa farm at resort. Tumawag na ang binata kaninang mga four-fifteen at sinabing nakapag-check in na ang mga ito. She might have to tell him she couldn’t join them for the tour.

Pagkarating nila ng lobby ay nakita nila ang umpukan ng mga staff at bisita sa may kaliwang bahagi ng glass sliding doors papuntang porch.

Rinig nila ang sigaw ng isang lalaki. “Tarantado ka! Ibabalik kita sa kulungan!”

Tumakbo sila sa umpukan.

“Excuse me.” Magalang pero pilit niyang itinulak ang mga nakaharang. “Excuse me, please.”

“Hindi lahat madadala mo sa pera, g*go!” sigaw ng lalaking boses. “Dapat sa kulungan ka talaga! Mamatay-tao ka!”

Suminghap si Paula. “Goodness, Ma’am!”

“Excuse me, please!” Nilakasan niya ang tulak. Nakita niya si Joselito, isa rin sa staff ng resort, at hinagip ang braso nito. “Ano’ng ginagawa n’yo? Ba’t nakatayo lang kayo d’yan? Get the guests out of here!”

“Ah, sorry, Ma’am. Opo!” Agad itong bumaling sa mga bisita. “Ma’am, Sirs, alis na po tayong rito.”

Agad tumalima ang iba pang staff para paalisin ang mga nakikiusyoso.

Sa wakas ay nahawi ang mga nakaharang, at nasilayan nila ang eksena sa maluwag na porch.

At parang bumagsak ang kanyang tiyan sa kanyang mga paa.

Dahil isa sa mga lalaking naroon ay si Declan.

Nakatayo sa harap nito si James at nakataas ang dalawang kamay ng huli para awatin ang isa pang lalaki.

She could see why. Gustong sugurin ng lalaking iyon si Declan. Awat-awat ito nina Kuya Orly at ng isa pang unipormadong security personnel. Duguan ang noo gayundin ang bibig ng mestisuhing binata. May tulo rin ng dugo sa suot nitong yellow polo shirt.

Ibinalik niya ang titig sa dating boksingero at hinalughog ng tingin ang kabuuan nito. Wala siyang nakitang sugat o pasa sa balat nito, wala ring dugo sa suot nitong gray na kamiseta at dark jeans. Despite everything, she sent a short prayer of thanks above.

“Ano, ha?” sikmat ng mestisong lalaki. “P*tang ina mo! Call the police!”

Tumakbo siya palapit. “What’s going on here?”

Declan’s whole body tightened, but he did not turn his face toward her.

“You’re the manager?” asik ng duguang lalaki. “Call the f*cking police now! This sonofatb*tch assaulted me!”

Assault? Dear heavens.

Napalipad ang tingin niya kay Declan. Nanatiling nakatiim-bagang ang binata.

“Is that true?” bulalas niya.

“Of course, he’ll deny it!” Dinuro ng lalaki si Declan. “This a*shole slammed into me like he owns the f*cking place. Then, he got into my face and assaulted me! Call the police now!”

Gusto niyang kumbinsihin ang nag-aakusa na pag-usapan muna nila nang mahinahon ang problema bago tumawag ng pulis. Pero nangamba siyang personal masyado ang dahilan niya. She had to be fair and professional here.

Binalingan niya si Paula at tinanguan. Agad ding tumango ang assistant at kinuha ang phone sa balsa. Lumayo rin ito nang konti sa kanila.

“We’re calling the police now. But please come with me to my office to treat your injuries—”

“Didn’t you hear what I said?” the man roared. “This motherf*cker assaulted me!”

Helpless, her eyes shot back to Declan. “What happened? Totoo ba’ng sinabi niya?”

Hindi nito sinalubong ang titig niya. Nanatili ang madilim nitong tingin sa lalaki. “Yes.”

Parang hinalukay ang kanyang sikmura.

“But switch the attacker and the victim,” Declan bit out in a carefully controlled voice. “He was the one who rammed into my shoulder, then got into my face and started spouting bullsh*ts.”

Marahas na tumawa ang lalaki. “That what you

said on your murder trial, too?”

Declan’s already stony expression turned frighteningly steely.

“Your manager assaulted you?” uyam ng lalaki. “Let’s look at facts, moron. He’s the one who had a bullet in his head, I’m the one with injuries! Simple logic’s hard for you? Figures. Naalog na masyado utak mo eh, ’no? Di na gumagana nang tama! But then again, you’ve always been stupid! You didn’t even finish f*cking high school!” Mabangis itong bumaling sa kanila. “P*tang ina! ’Asan na’ng pulis?”

Dumating ang tatlo pang security personnel na nakasuot ng short sleeves polo-barong at lumapit sa dalawang lalaki.

“Sir,” aniya, “let’s treat your injuries first.” Binalingan niya si Nita na nasa kaliwa niya, isa rin sa mga staff ng resort. “Get the CCTV footages and review them. We’ll surrender them to the police once they get here.”

Napaigtad ang duguang binata. Agad ding naglikot ang mga mata nito sa itaas na bahagi ng porch. “Where’s the CCTV?” he snapped back.

Nagulat si Vera sa reaksiyon nito. Itinuro niya ang itaas ng sliding door. Nanlaki ang mga mata ng lalaki nang makita ang itim na camera doon.

“Don’t worry, Sir, we’ll review them—”

“I don’t need this bullsh*t!” Pilit ulit kumalas ang lalaki sa dalawang security.

“Sir—”

“Get off me!” sigaw nito. “I don’t have time for this f*cking bullsh*t!”

“Sir, the police are on their way—”

“I don’t need the f*cking police!” Ibinaling nito ang nagbabagang titig sa kanya. “I don’t want to stay another f*cking second in this f*cking resort!”

Doon na lumamig ang kanyang titig.

Gusto niyang maging patas kaya sinang-ayunan niya ang mga gusto ng lalaki kanina pa. Ayaw niyang maging biased dahil may ugnayan siya kay Declan. Pero ngayon...

“You don’t want to file charges anymore?” derecho niyang tanong.

“You want me to file charges?” singhal nito. “What about illegal detention? Order these bastards to get their hands off me! NOW!”

The guy could definitely rival her baby’s temper tantrum. Ang hilig nitong sumigaw.

Very well. Tumiim-labi si Vera at kalmadong binalingan si Declan. “You want to file charges?”

Sa wakas ay sinalubong ng lalaki ang kanyang titig. Maigting pa rin ang linya at anggulo sa mukha ng ama ni Anaya, pero nabawasan na ang tensyon doon. “He’s not worth my time.”

“Are you sure?” pilit ni Vera. “We’ll review the CCTV footages, and the police are already on their way.”

“Do you f*cking hear me?” sigaw ng mestisong lalaki. “Do you know who I am? Call the goddamn

owner of this f*cking resort! I'll have you fired!"

Mukhang nagpigtas na rin ang pasensya ni Declan. "You f*cking shut your mouth—"

"Sir, Sir, Sir!" Agad umawat ang security nang akmang susugod na rin ang binata.

Mahinahon siyang bumaling ulit sa duguang 'biktima' at iniunat ang braso para makipagkamay dito. "Vera Eidel Braganza, Sir, founder and CEO of *Anaya's Farm and Beach Resort*."

Natigilan ang lalaki, pero nanatili ang galit sa mukha. "Order your men to get their hands off me. I don't want to waste another minute in this goddamn resort."

Muli niyang binalingan si Declan. Nagtatagis ang bagang nito at mukhang gusto pa ring sugurin ang 'biktima.'

"You still don't want to file charges?"

"Let the f*cking bastard go, I don't have time for this bullsh*t."

She disagreed, but she had to respect his decision. Bumaling siya sa security para bitawan ng mga ito ang lalaki. Agad sumunod ang mga ito.

"F*ckers." Dumura ang lalaki sa sahi. "All of you! Goddamn motherf*ckers!" Tapos ay padabog itong pumasok ng lobby.

She would have to say, mas magaling pa rin magwala ang anak niya. For one, the guy needed to widen his vocabulary. Give her baby a few more years, and she was sure her baby would be more creative

with throwing insults.

“Sundan n’yo nang pasimple,” habilin ni Vera kina Kuya Orly. “Siguraduhin n’yo lang na hindi siya manggugulo, Kuya.”

“Okay, Ma’am.” Sumaludo ang mga ito at iniwan na sila.

Kumunot sa kanya si Paula. “Cancel ko, Ma’am, ’yung sa police?”

“Yes, tell them we’re sorry. Magpadala ka na rin ng pagkain para paghingi ng dispensa sa abala. I don’t think it’ll be called bribery since hindi naman mahal ang ibibigay nating pagkain.”

“Okay, Ma’am. Yung CCTV?”

“I still want them. Send them to my email.”

“Okay, Ma’am.”

Pasimple itong sumulyap kay Declan.

Hindi maitago ni Paula ang pagkamangha sa titig nito. She couldn’t blame her assistant. Coldly furious Declan was just as hypnotic as raging volcanoes and violent sea storms. There was just something seductive and stunning about something so dangerous and wild.

Cliché and a tad unhealthy, but there it was.

Napailing si Vera sa sarili. Hindi ito ang oras para pag-isipan ang pagiging dangerous at wild ng lalaki. “Yun lang, Paula,” aniya. “Sige na.”

“Ah.” Napangiwi ang babae at namula ang mga pisngi. “Ah, okay, sige po.”

Mabilis pumasok ng lobby si Paula at hinila

pasara ang glass sliding doors, iniiwan sila ni Declan sa porch.

Hinarap niya ang dating boksingero.

“Kilala mo ’yung lalaki?” mababa niyang tanong. “Parang ang dami niyang alam tungkol sa ’yo.”

Mapang-uyam na tumaas ang sulok ng mga labi ng binata at itinuon ang malamig na mga mata sa kanya. Frozen gold. “I’m famous, Vera. My murder trial and conviction were headline news both here and abroad.”

Naglakad siya palayo sa vicinity ng CCTV para hindi masagap ng audio nito ang usapan nila ng binata. “Iba ang level ng galit niya. May pinaghuhugutan.”

Maikling tumango si Declan at sumunod sa kanya. “I f*cked his wife.”

Her own steely control stopped her from jerking back. Ni hindi siya kumurap. “Are you going to elaborate?”

Bumuga ng hangin ang lalaki at tiim-bagang na nag-iwas ng tingin. And she thought he looked almost ashamed. “I didn’t know she was f*cking married then. Met her in bar in Manila some years ago. F*cked her a couple of times while I was there. Then, her husband showed at the same bar a few days later and confronted me.”

Bar in Manila. Married woman. Husband.

May nabasa siyang ganito sa report ng inupahan niyang PI. “Is this the guy who smashed your sidemirror?”

Inasahan niyang mamumuo ang galit sa guwapong mukha ni Declan dahil alam niya ang detalye sa kasong iyon, pero tipid lang itong tumango.

Nagpatuloy si Vera. “The police records said you provoked him.”

Lalong tumiim-bagang ang lalaki. “Can’t remember exactly what I said to him that night in the bar, but I’m sure it’s not pretty.”

She could already imagine how ‘unpretty’ it was. Watching some of his videos and interviews during his boxing heyday, ‘The Bull’ could teach a master class in the art of trash talk.

“He couldn’t take it,” pakli ng binata, “but instead of letting his anger out on me, the coward got out of the bar, broke the side mirror of my SUV. Dragged his a*s to court for that.”

And dragged, he did. Luigi Suarez, kung hindi nagkakamali si Vera, ang pangalan ng lalaki. It happened about two years ago. Gustong makipag-areglo ni Suarez para hindi na umabot sa korte ang kaso, pero hindi pumayag si Declan. He pushed for the harshest possible punishment. Kung tutuusin, mas malaki pa ang nagastos ng binata sa abogado kaysa sa mismong nasirang sidemirror.

It wasn’t about the sidemirror or Luigi, Vera knew. Declan was making a point; no one messed with him and got to walk away unscathed.

“Why not file charges again now?” derecho niyang untag. “You have better evidence today. Hindi

lang witness statement ang mayroon tayo. Malinaw ang CCTV footage dito.”

“I don’t have time for his f*cking bullsh*t.” Ibinalik ng binata ang madilim na titig sa kanya. “I’m not wasting my time on him.”

“Tito Declan!” Biglang bumukas ang glass sliding door at pumasok doon ang isang balingkinitang dalagitang may mahaba at tuwid na tuwid na buhok. Kasama nito ang dalawang may-edad na babae.

Nakilala niya agad ang mga ito. Si Kriselda Santos ang dalagita na nakasuot ng capri shorts, blue graphic shirt, at brown tennis shoes.

Si Manang Andeng ang nakababata sa dalawang may-edad na babae. Nakapusod ang mahaba nitong buhok at nakasuot ito ng blue green blouse at itim na pantalon. Ito ang kasama sa bahay ni Mrs. Antonia Reyes.

At si Mrs. Reyes iyong isa pang may-edad na babae. Hindi niya mapigil ang bahagyang pagkislot sa dibdib nang makita ang babae.

Ito ang lola ni Declan. Maputi ang maikli nitong buhok, katamtaman ang tangkad, kayumanggi ang balat at nakasuot ng black square pants at aqua blue blouse na hanggang siko ang manggas.

Ito ang great grandmother ni Anaya.

“Sorry, natagalan kami, Tito. Ang ganda kasi ng garden dito. Lavender pala ang tawag d’un sa bulaklak. Ang bango. Gusto ni Nanay magtanim ng ganoon sa garden.” Napasulyap sa kanya si Kriselda,

at namilog ang mga mata nito. “Ah-ah, hello po!”

Bakit parang nahiya ito sa kanya?

Tumango siya at ngumiti sa dalagita. “Hello.”

Nahihiyang tumawa rin si Mrs. Reyes. “Ano na, wala pa rin si Leo?”

Maikling tumango si Declan. “Yeah, wala pa—”
“Momma!”

Declan’s rigid body jolted.

“Momma!”

Matuling tumatakbo si Anaya sa lobby papunta sa kanya. Tumatahol kasama nito si Bamboo. Kasunod nito si Nanay Elma na tulak-tulak ang pink wheeled cat carrier kung saan nakahiga ang nakasimangot na si Ningning. Kasama rin ng mga ito si Sha-Sha.

Nakasuot na ang anak ng yellow shirt, white and red cotton pants at purple hiking sandals.

She kneeled in time to accept her baby’s excited hug. Tumawa si Vera at hinagkan ito sa buhok. Her daughter’s sweet baby scent enveloped her, and she couldn’t help smiling big.

“Baby, you need to stop running like that.”

Bumungisngis ang bata at tinapik-tapik ng magkabila nitong kamay ang kanyang mga pisngi. “Kay, Momma. Let’s stroll around the farm, Momma. With Ningning and Bamboo!”

Tumahol ang German shepherd sa tabi nila.

“Oh.” Napatingin siya kay Declan.

Gaya ng inaasahan, maigting sa tensyon ang kabuuan ng binata.

“Uncle Declan!” tili ni Anaya.

Declan’s body jerked back again.

Kumalas sa kanya ang anak at tumakbo sa lalaki. Bago pa makagalaw ang binata ay kumapit na parang tuko si Anaya sa binti nito. “Uncle Declan, look! Look! We got Ningning! Look!”

Pilit nitong hinila ang lalaki.

And the image of her small baby trying to pull at Declan’s muscular leg pulled at her heartstrings. Declan looked so large and imposing, while her baby was so tiny and sweet. Mabuti pang hilahin ng anak ang isang bundok. Pero siyempre, nagpahila ang dating boksingero.

Huminto ang dalawa sa tapat ng carrier ni Ningning, at nang lumuhod ang lalaki para maging mas malapit sa kanyang anak, lumalim ang pagkislot sa dibdib niya.

“Ate Sha-Sha!” tawag ng paslit sa dalaga. “This is my Uncle Declan! He found Ningning! He saved her!”

Bago pa makasagot si Sha-Sha ay bumaling na ulit si Anaya sa ama nito. “See? See?” Tumangu-tango ito habang nakahawak sa carrier ng pusa. “Ningning still has bandage, she can’t move. So we gonna go around the farm so she won’t get sad. Wanna go with us, Uncle Declan, wanna go with us?”

His gaze shot to her, and the raw vulnerability in those golden depths made the tightening in her chest crawl up to her throat.

She stared back at them, Declan kneeling beside Anaya, so big and strong, her daughter gazing up at him, so small and sweet. They had the same hair, Vera realized. Even short, Declan's hair had unmistakable curl. And their eyes. One shining with joy and innocence, the other shadowed with anxiety and pain. So similar yet so different.

She almost couldn't breathe.

Pinilit niyang tumango.

"Join us, Declan," matatag niyang sagot. "It would make Anaya happy."

At sa patili at pagpalakpak ng anak, alam niyang tama ang kanyang sinabi.

5

“Wow, may grapes din kayo dito!” Namimilog ang mga matang napatitig si Kriselda sa lampas-taong mga balag na ginagapangan ng mga ubas.

Namumutiktik ang mga iyon sa matatabang kumpol na berdeng bunga.

Tumango si Vera at naglakad papunta sa ubasan, pero inabot siya ni Anaya.

“Up, Momma, up! Wanna look at the grapes.”

Nakangiting lumuhod siya para buhatin ang anak. Tumayo siya habang karga ang bata at naglakad papunta sa mga balag. “P’wede talaga sa klima natin ang mga ubas,” paliwanag niya. “Kailangan lang ganito kataas ang balag para mag-circulate ang hangin. We even harvest grapes three times a year. Yung mga bansa na may four seasons, isang beses lang tuwing summer sila nakakapag-harvest.”

Manghang napatango sina Kriselda at Mrs. Reyes.

Declan surveyed the vineyard as well, but his

gaze remained alert and a touch tense. Hindi rin ito pumasok sa ilalim ng mga balag kasi masyado itong matangkad.

“Kapag harvest season, p’wede kayong pumitas at iuwi sa inyo ’yung bunga,” aniya. “But of course, you have to pay per kilo,” nakangiti niyang dagdag.

Tumawa si Kriselda. “P’wede nga raw pong pumitas ng mga kakainin dito. As in, p’wedeng kami mismo ang mag-harvest ng mga gulay at prutas na gusto naming ipaluto at kainin.”

Tumango si Vera. “We have a variety of seafood fresh from our local fishermen, and we have our own poultry farm, too. You can choose from those as well. We can cook everything in front of you. We also have cows for milk, butter and other dairy products.”

“May coffee beans din po kayo, di ba?” usisa ni Leo.

Matangkad din at kayumanggi ang balat ng kakambal ni Kriselda. May kalakihan na ang katawan nito at halata iyon sa suot nitong puting kamiseta, maong pants, at black rubber shoes. Dumating ang binatilyo bago sila magtungo sa farm kanina. Nahuli ito dahil may dinaan daw na kaibigan.

“Yes, it’s between the rice fields and the second orchard.”

“Matagal na po ’tong farm and resort sa pamilya n’yo?” tanong pa ni Kriselda.

“Yung karamihan sa lupa, oo. Farm at ranch na ’to

noon, pero hindi masyadong naasikaso. I developed the land and bought the adjacent lands and turned them into a farm and beach resort about three and a half years ago.”

Naging mataman ang titig sa kanya ni Declan nang marinig iyon.

“Bakit po?” tanong ulit ni Kriselda. “Saan n’yo po nakuha ’yung ganitong idea?”

“Momma, down, Momma,” singit ni Anaya matapos himasin ang ilang grapes.

Ibinaba niya ito bago sinagot is Kriselda. “When I was a child, my family would spend summer and spring vacations in a farm in Northern Italy. I love spending days in that farm. Nagha-harvest kami doon ng pagkain at derecho naming niluluto. We also have chickens and cows. Naisip ko, gusto ko ring magkaroon ng gan’on. So here it is now.”

May ilang bisita ng resort na dumaan sa kinaroroonan nila. May dalang basket ang mga ito na may lamang mga prutas at gulay. May kasamang staff ang grupo at kasalukuyang ikinukuwento ng huli ang paraan ng pagpapalaki sa mga ubas.

Ngumiti sila sa mga ito.

“Sa Italy po kayo lumaki?” bulalas ni Kriselda.

Napatingin siya sa dalagita at nakitang namimilog ang mga mata ng huli. “Partly. My father served as a Philippine diplomat to many European countries throughout my childhood. So my brother and I

mostly grew up in many countries in Europe.”

Maang na napatango ang dalagita. “Ibang level kayo, Ma’am, sosyal.”

“Please call me Tita Vera, or Ate if you want.”

“Parang nakakahiya naman po, pero sige, Ate Vera na lang po.” Ang lawak ng ngiti ng dalagita.

Naglakad sila papunta sa mga fruit trees at taniman ng mga pineapples.

Tumatakbo na si Anaya kasama ang tumatahol na si Bamboo. Kasunod ng mga ito si Sha-Sha na may hawak sa leash ng aso habang si Nanay Elma ay tulak-tulak ang carrier ni Ningning.

“Kailan po kayo bumalik sa Pilipinas?” usisa ni Kriselda.

“N’ung eighteen ako. Nagkasakit si Papa at umuwi kami dito. He’s doing well now, and we decided to stay here for good.”

“Ah, so dito na po kayo nag-aral ng college?”

“Sa Manila, yes.”

“Mga Braganza po ang may-ari ng *Great Malls*, di po ba?”

Tumango ulit si Vera. She wondered, balak ba siyang gawan ng autobiography ni Kriselda? Ang dami nitong tanong. “Ang kapatid ni Papa ang namamahala ng mga malls, tinutulungan siya ng kapatid ko sa ngayon.”

“Kayo po, doon din po kayo nagtrabaho noon?”

“No, I set up an event planning company after I

graduated college. I was based in Manila until more or less four years ago.”

Tumango si Kriselda. “Ah.”

“Momma!” Nakangising tumakbo pabalik sa kanya ang anak. May hawak-hawak itong dalawang hinog na saging. “Banana, Momma! Kuya Henry gave me!”

Ngumiti siya at tinanggap ang isang saging na binigay ng anak. “Stop running, Anaya. Come now, get in your stroller.”

“Kay, Momma. Peel my banana, please.”

Humahangos na dumating si Sha-Sha kasunod ng anak at may dala itong isang piling ng hinog na saging. Si Bamboo ay tumatahol at tumatakbo paikot sa kanila.

“Tikman n’yo po, oh,” alok ni Sha-Sha sa mga kasama nila.

Nakangiting tinanggap iyon nina Kriselda.

Lumuhod si Vera sa harap ng anak at ipinasok ang kamay sa loob ng blouse nito para tingnan kung basa na ang sapin nito sa likod.

At siyempre, tama siya. Basa na nga.

“Basa na ang likod?” hirit ni Nanay Elma.

“Yes, Nanay.”

“Kung makatakbo ba naman, eh. Oh, ’eto.”

Binigay nito sa kanya ang tuyong face towel at ipinalit niya iyon sa basang sapin ni Anaya.

“Lotsa tomatoes now, Momma!”

“Yes, baby, we got lots of tomatoes.”

Binuhat niya ang anak at isinakay sa pink stroller nito, tapos ay naglabas siya ng hand sanitizer sa storage pocket sa likod niyon. Nilagyan niya ang kamay gayundin ang sa anak.

“Here.” Pinasa niya ang sanitizer kay Kriselda.

Tumawa ang dalagita. “Naku, Ate Vera, okay lang.”

Hindi niya pinilit ang mga ito.

Binalatan niya ang saging at ibinigay sa anak.

“Let’s give Uncle Arthur banana, too, Momma. Uncle Arthur loves bananas.”

Pinigil niya ang pagtawa. Obviously, walang malisya sa sinabi ng paslit. But obviously, may malisya ang iniisip niya sa pagkagusto ni Arthur sa ‘bananas.’

Sa pagbungisngis ni Kriselda, mukhang alam din nito iyon.

“Yes, baby, we’ll save some for him and give them to him when he returns from New York.”

“Si Arthur Samaniego po ba ’yun?” usisa ni Kriselda. “Kaibigan niya po kayo, di ba po?”

Ngumiti siya at tumango. “Yes, we’ve been friends since we were kids.”

“Nakikita ko po kayo lagi sa *IG* ni Sir Arthur.”

“Uncle Arthur will give me baby sisters!” Nakangising itinaas ni Anaya ang mga kamay. “Lotsa baby sisters! He’ll give Momma sperms! Lotsa, lotsa sperms!”

Nabilaukan si Kriselda sa paglunok ng saging. Tila naging rebulto naman si Declan at matalas na bumaling sa kanya ang titig.

Namayani ang nakakailang na katahimikan.

Gusto niyang pumikit at bumuntong-hininga. Minsan, gusto niyang takpan ang bibig ng kanyang anak.

Alanganin siyang tumawa, at masuyong isinuklay ang mga daliri sa kulot na buhok ni Anaya. “IVF,” paliwanag niya. “Arthur and I have been friends for more than two decades, and if I ever decide to give Anaya siblings, he’s definitely my first choice.”

Tumawa rin si Kriselda habang umuubo. “P’wede nga, Ate Vera. Guwapong-guwapo si Sir Arthur. Ang artistic pa. Ang guwapo rin po ni Sir Julian. Nakakaloka lang po, kasi ’yung mga guwapo, bakit sila ang nagkakatuluyan?”

“He’s gay?” bruskong untag ni Declan.

Nag-angat si Vera ng kilay. His whole muscular frame was combative as he stood there, his brawny arms folded across the rigid wall of his chest, his feet planted on the ground a shoulder-width apart.

“Yes.” Itinaas niya ang noo. “Do you have a problem with that?”

Lalong nagsalubong ang mga kilay nito. “I never said I have a problem with it.”

Then, what’s with your tone? gusto niyang isabat. Pero pinigilan niya, they had audience. Ngunit

kailangan niyang linawin iyon. Intolerance for people of different sexual orientation, race, and religion were something they would have to discuss carefully. Ayaw niyang lumaki ang anak na kinukutya ang iba dahil lang iba ang paniniwala ng mga ito, antas ng pinag-aralan, kakayahan sa buhay, kulay ng balat o sekswalidad.

“Ang tamis ng saging n’yo,” narinig niyang komento ni Manang Andeng.

“Ang lalaki pa,” dagdag ni Kriselda. “Magtanim din tayo ng saging sa bakuran natin para may sarili tayong saging, Nay.”

Tumawa ang ginang tapos ay tumango. “Sige, subukan natin.”

Ngumiti si Vera sa grupo. “We can give you suckers. P’ili kayo kung anong variety ang gusto n’yo. Or if you want them all, p’wede rin.”

“Ay wagi, Nay.”

“Nakakahiya naman—”

“Okay lang po,” magalang niyang putol. “Marami kaming suckers dito, pinamimigay talaga namin ’yung iba. Kung may gusto kayong ibang tanim na mayroon kami dito, sabihin n’yo lang po, bibigyan namin kayo.”

“Go tayo, Nay. Hanapan natin ng puwesto sa water garden.”

“Water garden?” nakangusong hirit ni Anaya.

Tumango si Kriselda. “Yes. Madaming karpa si

Nanay d'un."

Kumunot-noo si Anaya. "Karpa?"

Hinimas niya ang kulot na buhok ng paslit. "Isda 'yon, anak."

"Oh." Namilog ang mga mata nito. "Fish in garden, Momma?"

"Yes, baby."

"Like fish we eat?"

Maikli siyang tumawa. "No, baby, they're like pets."

"Pets!" Her baby squealed and clapped her little hands. "Let's have fish pets, Momma, let's have fish pets!"

Muli siyang tumawa. "I'm not sure about that, baby. Baka kainin lang sila ni Ningning."

"Oh." Ngumuso ulit ang paslit. "Want to see water garden, Momma." Nakangiti itong bumaling sa lola ni Declan. "Can I, Lola? Can I see your water garden, can I, can I? Karpa? Lotsa Karpa, Lola, please, please?"

Muli ay parang may kumirod sa dibdib niya sa pagtawag ni Anaya ng lola kay Mrs. Reyes. At nang napatingin siya kay Declan, nakita rin niya ang bakas ng hapdi sa titig nito.

"Ah..." Matamis ang ngiti ng matanda, pero nag-aalangan na napatingin ito sa kanya. "Okay lang ba? P'wede ba siyang pumunta sa 'min?"

"Baka makaabala po—"

“Wala ’yon.” Mabilis na umiling ang lola ni Declan, pagkatapos ay maluwang itong ngumiti kay Anaya. “P’unta kayo, sige.”

“Ayan!” kinikilig na banat ni Kriselda. “Pupunta si ganda sa ’min!”

Kinikilig din na humagikhik ang anak. “Ganda? Me? Ganda? Me? Me? Ganda? Ganda?”

“Yes! You! You! You’re so ganda!”

Sabay na bumungisngis ang dalawa.

Natagpuan ni Vera ang sarili na tumataas din ang sulok ng mga labi. Her daughter’s laughter was her favorite sound.

Napatingin ulit siya kay Declan, at nakitang nakaangat din ang dulo ng mga labi nito habang nakatitig kay Anaya.

Nagtaas ng tingin ang binata at nagtama ang kanilang mga paningin. His gaze softened, his irises the color of sky set afire by the blazing sun.

She felt her heart beating a little too fast, felt warmth pulsing at the center of her chest, spreading outward to every part of her body until she felt flushed all over.

And she realized, more than the dark seductive pull of his savage masculinity, Declan looked most mesmerizing when he was like this.

Warm, content, and dare she say, happy.

Pinilit niyang huwag iiwas ang tingin sa binata. Because for long frightening seconds, she wanted to

do just that.

Because she realized she felt more afraid looking at this version of Declan than when he was seething with fury.

Because this version of Declan was far more dangerous. Far more seductive.

And she did not like it. She did not like it at all.



Sumakay si Vera sa golf cart sa labas ng bahay nila. Beinte minutos iyon bago mag-alas onse ng gabi at katatapos lang niyang panoorin ang CCTV footage nina Declan at Luigi Suarez sa home office niya. And boy was Suarez an a*s.

It all started with Declan striding into the side porch with his phone pressed to his ear. Nasa may gilid ng porch si Suarez, at nang makita nito si Declan, sandali itong natigilan. Tapos ay lumapit ito sa binata. Binunggo ni Suarez si Declan sa may balikat, pero dahil di hamak na mas matangkad at mas maskulado ang huli, si Luigi ang napaurong.

Then, Luigi got into Declan's face and started shouting. "*Tarantado ka talaga, ah! Ano'ng gusto mo!*"

Kuhang-kuha ang sigaw nito sa audio ng CCTV. Hindi kuha ang mukha ni Declan, pero nakita niyang ibinaba ng lalaki ang phone.

"*What the f*ck are you doing here?*" sikmat ng dating boksingero.

"*Pakialam mo? P*tangina ka!*" At binigyan nito ng

suntok si Declan.

But the latter was too fast. He merely sidestepped, and the man went crashing into a nearby long wooden table. Tumama roon ang mukha nito.

Nangyari pa iyon nang ilang beses. Pilit sinuntok ni Suarez si Declan, pero magkaiba ang kalibre ng mga ito. Declan was a former professional heavy weight boxer with world titles under his belt, and it showed.

Declan never threw a punch, thank God. She was afraid Declan's massive fists could leave Suarez with permanent injuries.

Doon na dumating ang mga tao at security. Matapos ang ilang minuto ay dumating na rin sila ni Paula.

Napailing si Vera habang inaalala ang mga napanood sa footages kanina. Pagkatapos, tumango siya kay Kuya Badong nang buksan nito ang wooden driveway gate. Pinaandar niya ang cart papunta sa direksyon ng resort.

Pinatuloy nila sina Declan sa casitas sa malapit na burol. Malayo iyon sa ibang mga casitas at sinadya nila iyon. They wanted to avoid people from seeing her going to his room at such a late hour.

Natanaw ni Vera ang casita ng binata at nakitang nakabukas ang ilaw sa loob niyon. She guided the cart along the winding dirt road flanked by tall shrubs and flowering trees. She parked the cart behind large

blooming bougainvillea bushes, then got off. Tahimik niyang inakyat ang hagdanan sa casita ni Declan, at bumukas ang pinto niyon bago pa siya makakatok.

He was still in his gray shirt and jeans, but he was barefoot, his hair tousled, the lines of his face rigid. A phone was pressed to his ear.

Binuksan nito ang pinto para papasukin siya. “Yes, Honey, I know.”

Nanigas ang kanyang mga kalamnan nang marinig ang salitang iyon.

Walang imik na pumasok siya at hinintay na isara ng lalaki ang pinto.

“Yes, I’ll call you later.” Ibinaba nito ang phone, sinara ang pinto at humarap sa kanya. “I’m sorry about Suarez,” derechong bungad ng lalaki. “I don’t know what the f*ck he was doing there.”

She tried to forget about *Honey*. “It was not your fault.” Hindi rin siya nagpaliguy-ligoy. “I saw the CCTV records.”

“Doesn’t change the fact that it was my sh*t.”

“Hindi mo alam kung bakit ’andito siya kanina?”

Tumiim-bagang ang lalaki. “No f*cking idea. But I swear to you, I’ll find out. I’ll make sure this doesn’t blow back to you and Anaya.”

“I appreciate that—”

“Aren’t you afraid of this?” bulalas ni Declan, puno ng frustration ang boses at mukha.

“Sorry?”

Kumuyom ang palad ng lalaki, nagtatagis ang bagang. “This whole f*cking sh*t, Vera. You know my history, you know I’ve got tons of sh*ts. Hindi ko alam kung bakit gusto mong makilala ako ni Anaya. Kung ako sa ’yo, hindi ko palalapitin ang anak ko sa ’kin.”

“Are you implying I have ulterior motives?”
derecho niyang tanong.

Pagak na tumawa ang lalaki at sumandal sa likod ng pintuan. His gray shirt stretched over his wide shoulders, the rock-hard muscles straining against the fabric as he crossed his arms. “Yeah, thought about that. If I were you, I wouldn’t want someone like me to meet my daughter. She’s better off without someone like me.”

“Are you fishing for compliments?”

His chiseled features twisted into a snarl. “The f*ck?”

“You want me to tell you you’re not the horrible person you think you are?”

Muli ay marahas itong tumawa. “I never said I was horrible, babe, but that doesn’t change the fact that I’m no f*cking role model for a kid.”

“Role model or not, you’re still her father. You were acquitted, Declan.”

Tumiim-bagang ulit ang lalaki.

Hindi niya ito nilapitan, sa halip, nanatili siyang nakatayo ilang metro ang layo rito.

“You left the country when you were ten and lived in New York with your father. You were surrounded by drugs, crimes and violence, but you got out the moment you could. Went back to your Lola when you were eighteen. You made something of yourself.”

Nanatiling mataman ang titig sa kanya ng lalaki, hindi sinisiwalat ang kahit anong emosyon sa madilim nitong mga mata.

“You took care of your grandma and a lot of other people. While you’re inside of prison, you were even a model prisoner. Then, you were acquitted, came back here and rebuilt your life. Again. You made something of yourself, not just once, but twice. Anaya would be proud to call you her father.”

Pain slashed across his sculpted features, but Declan didn’t open his mouth. His jaw remained tight, his mouth unsmiling.

“In any case,” usal ni Vera, “it’s not my call to judge if anyone’s fit to be a parent or not. I have no right to judge you or anyone. But I have to consider what I feel is best for my child, too. Your mafia connections was a concern to me, but we cannot choose our family. You have your flaws, who doesn’t? None of them are a deal breaker. Not when it comes to a father’s rights to know about his child.”

Nanatiling derecho ang titig niya sa mga mata ng nakatiim-bagang na kausap. Hindi pa rin ito umimik.

“And you don’t have tattoos.”

Naging mas prominente ang pilat ni Declan sa kaliwang kilay sa pagsasalubong ng mga kilay nito. “What?”

Nagkibit-balikat si Vera. “I have nothing against tattoos. It’s just that sa propesyon mo at sa pagiging celebrity mo noon, bihira ang mga walang tattoos sa mga katulad mo. This is not written on the report, but I think it’s because you want to keep donating your blood since you’ve been regularly donating since eighteen.”

His scowl deepened.

“Am I correct?”

Hindi ito umimik.

“Walang dahilan para hindi ko sabihin sa ’yo ang tungkol kay Anaya. Kung tingin mo may iba akong balak, nasa sa ’yo ’yon. Pag-usapan natin ang gagawin natin. Are you sure about this? Are you sure you want to be a part of her life?”

“I’m sure,” sagot ng binata, mababa at paos ang boses. “I’ve never been so sure of anything in my life.”

Tumango si Vera, pero hindi pa rin tuluyang lumuwag ang kanyang pakiramdam. Siguro matatagalan pa bago iyon tuluyang maging maluwag. “How do you plan to spend more time with Anaya? Maybe tomorrow you and your—”

“I’m leaving for the U.S. tomorrow morning.”

“What?” bulalas niya.

Bumakas ang pait sa mukha ng binata. “Honey

called, asawa ni Felix.”

Honey? Oh. Pangalan ang Honey at hindi term of endearment? Naramdaman niya ang pag-iinit ng balat dahil sa pagkapahiya. Now, she vaguely recalled the name Felix and Honey Javier from the dossier her P.I. had given her.

“He was a warden in the correctional facility where I was imprisoned,” kumpirma ng binata sa kanyang inisip. “He’s in critical condition, Vera. He had a heart surgery earlier this year. This month, he had pneumonia. His wife told me just this afternoon that he had complications from surgery. The doctors told her it’s not looking good.”

“Oh.” She felt her heart ache for this man she did not know, but clearly meant a lot to Declan. “I’m sorry.”

His gaze was harsh but pleading. “I need to be there, Vera.”

“Of course.” Napahakbang siya palapit sa lalaki. “Is there anything I can do?”

“Aside from everything else you’ve already done for my kid, me, and even my grandmother?” Napailing ang kaharap at matabang na tumaas ang sulok ng mga labi. “If you do more than that, Vera, I might have to call you God.”

Nag-angat siya ng kilay. Hindi siya sigurado kung dapat ba siyang matuwa o mainsulto. “Is that sarcasm?”

His eyes had gone darker, the shade deeper than the setting sun. When he spoke again, his voice was rougher than usual. "I wouldn't dare. You already did more than anyone could possibly ask for."

Her heart thudded but she ignored it.

"You'll let Anaya visit my Lola's house," he murmured. "Thank you."

"It's for Anaya, too."

His lips curved, the affection warming his eyes, transforming his masculine features into something almost transcendent. "Anaya sure talks a lot, doesn't she?"

It's not fair for someone to have such a beautiful smile, she thought offhandedly. "She can talk a mile per minute. Hindi ko alam kung kanino siya nagmana. Baka sa 'yo, kasi hindi ako madaldal."

He threw his head back and laughed—warm, rich, low. She felt her skin flush, felt her cheeks turning hot. He had a great laugh, too.

Ang lawak ng ngisi ni Declan. "You sure about that?"

"I'm sure."

Chuckling, he shook his head. Then, he let out a harsh breath. "Damn, I needed that."

He did seem to need it. And now his body posture was relaxed, the lines of his face no longer stiff. Nagawa niyang tumango at sinipat niya ang relo. "I should go."

“I’ll send you back. Hindi kita dapat hinayaang pumuntang mag-isa—”

“It’s perfectly safe here, Declan.” Lumapit siya sa pinto at inabot ang seradura. “What time will you leave?”

“I’ll leave for Manila at eight tomorrow morning.”

“Safe trip. I hope your friend gets better.”

“I hope so, too.”

Hinila niya ang pinto pabukas.

“Vera?”

Nilingon niya ang lalaki. Nakatayo ito malapit sa kanya, at kailangan niyang iangat ang mukha para magtama ang kanilang mga paningin. He was so close all she could see was him. His stunning face, the wall of his chest, the muscles of his arms. Ramdam niya ang init na nagmumula sa matipuno nitong katawan. And his scent. Earth, wood and green, like the clean forest air after a storm.

“Thank you,” he murmured. “For telling me about Anaya. For giving me this chance.”

She told herself to breathe. Nagawa niyang tumango. “Good night, Declan.”

His gaze drifted to her lips. “Good night, Vera.”

Pinilit niya ang mga paa na gumalaw at humakbang palayo.

Hindi niya alam kung paano siya nakabalik sa cart nang hindi nadadapa. She had never been more grateful to the nuns who had drilled strong self-

control in her as a child.

Because just moments ago, all she wanted to do was press her curves to Declan's muscular frame, wrap her arms around his neck, and fuse their mouths to tangle her tongue with his.

Pagak siyang tumawa. Magpipiyesta si Arthur kapag nalaman ang iniisip niya sa mga oras na iyon.

Nakatiim-labi, binuhay niya ang makina ng golf cart at walang lingon-lingon na pinaandar iyon palayo sa casita ng binata.