

1

Biyernes ng gabi. Marami na namang lalaking nagkukunwaring walang commitment at asawa ang mabibiktima ko.

I inwardly smiled as I walked out of the restroom in my long, black, daring dress to the five-star hotel bar to lure my victim for the night. All eyes turned to me as I relished at the familiar feeling of awe from the opposite sex.

Mga manyak! Nakakita lang ng laman, nalilibugan na.

I ordered a cocktail from the bar and immediately, my first victim took the bait. A man cleared his throat as he sat beside me. I glanced sideways and

saw a man in his late forties, eyeing my cleavage which I generously showed.

“Waiting for someone?” the man asked without looking at me this time.

“No,” I answered as I took a sip from my drink. *I’m waiting for you to make a fool of yourself.*

“Good,” the man said. *The victim is hooked*, I mused to myself. “I’m Robert, by the way.” He held out his hand for a handshake.

“Clarisse.” Nagpakilala ako sa pekeng pangalan at saka nakipagkamay sa kanya.

“Nice meeting you, Clarisse. Are you here for business, or for pleasure?” he asked, leading the conversation.

“I was hoping for both.” I pretended to give malice in my smile, making him excited.

“I have a room here with a great view. Would you like to see it?” he offered enthusiastically.

“I have a suite here too, but yeah, okay,” I casually agreed.

“Let’s go, then.”

We both got up. We walked to the elevator with the man’s hand dangerously low on my waist.

What a pig, I thought to myself as I secretly roll my eyes in disgust.

We were in the elevator when I noticed that his hand never left my waist and was moving towards the side of my breast.

Sige lang. Mamaya ka sa akin!

When we arrived at his room, I was astonished at the beautiful view from the glass walls of the suite.

‘Ganda talaga dito sa Shangri-La, but first things first. Clarisse, give him a show.

“Do you have wine here? I’m still thirsty,” sabi ko sa malanding boses na kahit sobrang nakakairita sa pandinig ko ay epektibo naman.

“Yes, yes,” aniya saka nagmamadaling kumuha ng binanggit ko. Inilibot ko ang mga mata ko at nakita ang wedding ring niya sa left bedside table. Hindi man lang itinago ng g*go.

He reappeared with just one glass of wine and I was pleased. I smiled at him seductively, and he was instantly aroused. Oh, men are so easy. I took the glass from him and grabbed my purse.

Lumapit ako at bumulong sa kanya. “Will you excuse me? I need to use the washroom first.”

“Sure,” nangingising sabi niya. Halatang hayok sa laman ang isang ito.

Dala ang wine at ang clutch bag, nag-lock ako sa banyo. Tinapon ko ang kalahati ng wine sa lababo

at maingat na naglagay ng lipstick sa mga labi ko.

I winked at the woman on the mirror.

Ilang minuto pa, lumabas ako at agad na sumalubong sa akin ang lalaki at hinalikan ako sa labi. *Ul*!!*

Hinayaan ko lang siyang humalik sa akin pero hindi ako tumugon. Kapag nalunok ng biktima ang mataas na doses ng Rohypnol mula sa lipstick ay mabilis na eepekto ito sa loob nang tatlong minuto.

“Come on, babe, open up,” the man said while licking my lips. *Babe mo mukha mo!* “Come on, Clarisse, open your mouth. I want to taste you.” I pushed him towards the bed and his lust grew. “Oh, you like to be in control. Okay,” he said, now lying on the bed submissively and undoing his tie.

I placed my purse on the side table and crawled on top of him. I moved closer, teasing him, as I completely remove his tie. Slowly, I unbuttoned his shirt while eyeing my dainty rosegold watch. Two more minutes. I removed his shirt and he let me. He watched me in satisfaction as his desire grew bigger. I moved to unbuckle his belt and swiftly unzipped his fly, revealing him in a teal-colored underwear. Ridiculous! Sana nag-rainbow-colored na lang ang kurang na 'to para mas nakakatawa!

Umeepekto na ang gamot dahil panay kurap na ang biktima. Isang minuto na lang.

I moved my hand from his thigh up to his groin. He writhed as I start to caress his humble sex. *Oh, the things I do for money*, I inwardly whined.

He closed his eyes in pleasure as I continued what I was doing with my hand.

Anytime now.

Tumigil ako nang mapansin kong hindi na siya tumutugon sa mga himas ko. Ni hindi siya gumalaw kahit sinampal ko pa siya.

Tumayo ako mula sa higaan at agad na pinahid ng tissue ang lipstick sa labi ko. Dumura ako sa toilet at tinapon doon ang pinangpunas kong tissue. Ayokong mag-iwan ng anumang bakas na maaaring makapagturo sa akin.

I took his watch, the gold ring on the side table, his *iPhone* and the money in his wallet. I changed his *iPhone* lock with my own thumbprint, disabled its security features, and took a picture of him. I wrote a note on his palm using my purple pen saying: *Call the police and I'll spread the dick pics. Please don't make me do that. Your small dick is humiliating. Anyway, thanks.*

I gracefully walked out of the hotel suite carrying

my prize.



“Hi! Kumain na ba kayo?” bati ko sa dalawa kong kapatid na sumalubong sa akin pagbukas ko ng pinto.

“Opo, Ate Marin,” sagot ni Anya, ang doce años kong kapatid na babae.

“Mabuti naman. Nag-toothbrush na ba kayo at naghilamos?” usisa ko pa habang hinuhubad ang five-inch stilettos ko. *Punyemas! Totoo ngang killer heels ito. Tiis ganda talaga.*

“Opo,” sabi ng dalawa.

“Very good! Sa Lunes, mag-e-enroll na kayo, pero bukas, bibili na tayo ng mga gamit n’yo sa school,” sabi ko habang nagtatanggal ng wig. Lumabas ang tunay kong buhok na ngayon ay hanggang leeg ko na mula sa kaninang pixie cut. “At kakain tayo sa labas!” dagdag ko.

“Yehey!” hiyaw ng dalawa na hindi magkamayaw sa tuwa. “*Jollibee!*” sigaw nila.

“Ikaw, Ate, mag-e-enroll ka rin ba?” tanong ni EJ, ang bunso kong kapatid.

“Oo, bukas, pagkatapos nating mamili ng mga gamit n’yo.”

“Ate, gusto ko ng superhero na bag ha!” hirit

pa ni EJ.

“Ako, Ate, ayaw ko na ng backpack. Gusto ko shoulder bag na, ah,” hirit naman ni Anya habang hinihimas ang nananakit kong paa.

“Bakit? Dahil dalaga ka na?” tukso ko sa kanya, at ngumiti lang siya. “Sige, basta matulog na kayo. Now na,” utos ko. Sumunod naman sila.

Nakahinga ako nang maluwag matapos kong hubarin ang dress at makapagpalit ng paboritong pajama.

“Sino ka nga?” tanong ko sa babae sa salamin. “Ay, oo, si Clarisse ka nga pala. O siya, buburahin na kita ha? Goodbye!”

Removing my makeup and all the evidence of my crime is my favorite part of the night, but I couldn't help being amazed at how makeup could make me look and feel like a different person. Kahit ako mismo, minsan hindi ko nakikilala ang sarili ko. Malayung-malayo iyon sa hitsurang binigay ng nanay ko. Makeup has been my loyal disguise these past five years that I've been in this dirty business. It never failed me.

Tinanggal ko ang fake eyelashes at ang eyelid tape na nagpasingkit sa akin. Si Clarisse kasi ay chinita pero si Marin ay may bilugan at mala-Indian

na mga mata. Kumuha ako ng makeup-removing wipes at binura ang obra maestra ko sa mukha ko, at saka naghilamos. Ayan, kamukha ko na ulit si Aling Maring.

'Nay, miss na kita!

Siguro nagpapapadyak sa galit ang nanay ko ngayon sa langit dahil sa mga pinaggagagawa ko. Nangyari lang na noong nagsimula ako sa trabahong ito ay nakaratay na siya at hindi na masyadong makagalaw, dahil kung hindi, siguradong hindi lang latay ng sinturon ang aabutin ko sa kanya. Ibang-iba kasi ang pananaw ng nanay ko. Para sa kanya, hindi bale nang maghirap kami huwag lang magnakaw. Ako naman, hindi ko sila matiis kaya kapit na kung kapit ako sa patalim.

Pero kung siguro nandito pa siya, baka hindi rin ako naligaw ng landas at mas masaya sana ang mga kapatid ko. Sana 'yung tatay ko na lang ang nauna. Hayop siya! He could even be dead for all I care!

Kinabukasan, maaga kong ibinenta sa kakilala kong dealer ng nakaw iyong *iPhone* at iba pang mga nakuha ko. Matagal ko nang kilala si Baldo. Maingat siyang magtrabaho dahil marami siyang sinu-supply-an ng mga nakaw. Si Jane naman na asawa niya ay dating pharmacist na nawalan ng lisensya

dahil nahuling nagdodroga sa trabaho. Ayun, sa galit nito dahil sa pagkakatanggal, ay naging tagatimpla na ito ng mga pinagbabawal na gamot, tagahalo ng mga gamot na ginagamit namin sa racket. Tiwala akong hindi sila magsusumbong dahil pare-pareho kami ng kababagsakan kapag nagkataon.

“Dami nito, ah. Gipit ba?” usisa ni Baldo.

“Pang-tuition ng mga bata,” sagot ko. “May nakaukit diyan sa singsing, paalala ko lang.”

“Oo. Ano ka ba, para kang baguhan. Kami na bahala. Tutunawin naman ’to agad.”

“Eh, siyempre. Mahirap na. Saka ’yung *iPhone*, check n’yo, at baka ma-trace pa rin,” dagdag ko.

“Oo na. Masyado ka namang sigurista. Kelan sunod mo?” Binilang na niya ng perang ibabayad sa akin.

“Ewan. ’Pag may oras ulit,” turan ko. “Nga pala, pakisabi kay Jane na malapit nang maubos ’yung makamandag na lipstick niya. Pagawa ako ng isa pa, daanan ko na lang, ha?”

Tumango lang si Baldo.

Hindi ako masaya sa trabahong ito. Sana hindi ko na ito kailangang gawin, pero may mga bagay na hindi madaling makuha. Hindi madaling kumita ng pera. Hindi madali ang buhay para sa mga katulad

namin. Kahit minsan nasusuka na ako sa ginagawa ko, iniisip ko na lang na para ito sa mga kapatid ko, at naipaghihiganti ko rin iyong mga babaeng pinagtataksilan ng mga jowa at asawa nila. Alam kong mali ito kahit ano pa ang dahilan ko, pero balang araw, ititigil din naman ako.

2

"Fourth year feels different," sabi ko kay Ralph na seatmate ko simula pa noong first year pa lang kami sa Law school. Sa sobrang tagal na naming magkatabi, naging close na kami at exception na siya sa general rule ko na 'men are pigs.'

"Ang bilis lang 'no? Malapit na tayong gumraduate!" hiyaw niya sabay high five sa akin. He too was excited but his mood suddenly changed. "Did you hear the rumors? S'abi, may foul play daw sa nangyari kay Atty. Aragon," bulong niya.

"No sh*t? Delikado na talaga'ng maging abogado ngayon," sagot ko.

"Sinabi mo pa. Shift na tayo sa College of

Medicine?” he jokingly suggested.

“Mauna ka. Wala akong planong mag-dissect ng patay.” Natawa siya sa sagot ko. “Sino kaya papalit kay Atty. Aragon, ’no? Bet ko pa naman siyang magturo.” Siya kasi sana ang magtuturo ng subject namin ngayon na Criminal Law Review, pero dahil nga sa nangyaring aksidente sa kanya ay nakaratay pa rin siya sa hospital.

“I heard si Atty. Valencia raw,” Ralph answered. “But I’m not sure.”

“Sino? ’Yung RTC judge na sobrang taray, o ’yung Court of Appeals justice?” I asked curiously.

“Their son,” he answered.

“Eh di, sila na ang family of lawyers!” I sarcastically said.

Suddenly, there was a hush as a man in suit entered the room.

“Good evening, class,” he greeted and we all responded to him. “I am Atty. John Louie Valencia. I will be teaching this class for this semester. Criminal Law Review, right?” He paused to check the paper in his hand.

May narinig akong nagbubulungan mula sa likod.

“Girl, pahinging rice. May ulam na tayo.”

“Ang guwapo niya, syet!”

“This subject is supposed to be handled by Atty. Aragon, but I think you already know what happened to him,” said the tall, mestizo, and serious-looking man who was standing in front of the class. He had his hands on his pockets as he addressed the class. He was wearing a light blue dress shirt under a navy blue blazer, black slack pants, and dark brown leather shoes. His hair was combed in place and he looked sharp as he speaks, reeking with confidence. In short, guwapo nga talaga, but he looked vain and boring.

“This is a two-hour subject. So why don’t we get to know each other first? Let’s start with you.” Tumingin siya sa kaklase namin na nasa dulo at unahan na upuan, na bahagya namang na-shock. Nagtawanan kami dahil sa naging expression ng mukha niya.

While my classmates were introducing themselves one by one, I played *Wordscapes* in my seat. I got so engrossed in the game kaya hindi ko namalayan na ako na pala ang susunod na magpapakilala until someone called my attention.

“You! The one using your phone!” Atty. Valencia called out.

I easily regained my composure and stood to introduce myself. “Good evening, sir.” I smiled sweetly at him but he just looked at me. “I am Marin Esguerra, twenty-six, single and available,” panimula ko dahil gusto kong magpatawa. Naghiyawan ang mga kaklase kong lalaki na matagal nang abangers sa akin. Natawa ako at nagpatuloy, pero wala man lang karea-reaksyon ang mukha ng prof namin.

“I am a freelance working student and a breadwinner to two siblings.” I smiled at him to see if I’d get a response, but he just looked at me blankly.

“Freelance what?” he asked.

*Freelance seducer slash photographer of my victims’ d*cks.*

“This and that. Nothing important,” I answered instead and took my seat. I spotted him arching a brow which infuriated me.

“I don’t want any of you using your phones while I’m here in front. It’s disrespectful and I won’t tolerate it!” He gave me a stern look as he addressed the class.

I secretly made a face. *Sus, para ’yun lang!*

My classmates were still introducing themselves while I was fuming in my seat. First time kong napagalitan sa classroom, at kahit kasalanan ko ay naiinis pa rin ako. Out of irritation, nakurot ko si

Ralph.

“Aray!” he hissed in protest but I didn’t care.

“That’s it for tonight,” Atty. Valencia declared after the last person finished introducing himself. “For next meeting, I expect you to recite some cases which I will e-mail to your class beadle. Ten cases lang naman. And re-read the whole of Book 1. Who is the class beadle?” Atty. Valencia asked but the class was silent. Halos lahat kasi sa section namin ay working students kaya ayaw umako ng dagdag na obligasyon. The room fell quiet for a while until someone blurted out.

“Miss Esguerra is the beadle, Sir!” Ralph volunteered me. Pinaghahampas ko siya ng codal ko at nagtawanan ang mga kaklase ko.

“Gagu!” I glared at my seatmate who was laughing at me.

“Okay,” the prof said, clearing his throat. “Give me your e-mail address and your phone number.” I obliged by writing on a notepad then, handed it to him.

Ayaw ko sana, kaya lang ayoko siyang kausapin para lang mag-explain kung bakit ayaw kong maging beadle niya. Inis pa rin ako sa kanya.

“Class is dismissed. See you on Wednesday,” Atty.

Valencia concluded and walked out of the room.

“A*shat! Bakit mo ’ko vinolunteer?” I asked Ralph.

“Ikaw kasi, bigla-bigla ka na lang nangungurot. Ang sakit kaya,” Ralph said, laughing. Kung hindi ko lang siya kaibigan, baka nasampal ko na siya nang limang beses.

Later that night, I received a text message from Atty. Valencia telling me to check my e-mail. I downloaded the files and posted them in our block’s group page.

Out of curiosity, naisipan kong i-stalk siya sa *Facebook* pero candid picture niya lang ang nakita ko. Naka-private yata ang settings niya. Pero in fairness, ang guwapo niya sa picture.

Pero sa taray niyang iyon, feeling ko, closeted gay siya. *Vaklang ’toh!*



“Hi, Marin! Looking good,” said one of my classmates who was seated behind me and obviously checking my a*s when I took my seat. Knowing that he’s married, mas lalo akong nagagalit na pinagnanasaan niya ako. Matagal ko na siyang gustong biktimahin kaya lang labag ito sa Rule No. 1 ko na bawal mambiktima ng kakilala.

“Where’s my beadle?” asked Atty. Valencia as soon as he entered the room.

I rolled my eyes. *My beadle? So, pag-aari mo na ako ngayon?*

“Here, Sir!” I said as I raised my hand. Siniko ko si Ralph dahil hindi ko pa rin siya mapatawad sa pag-volunteer niya sa akin. Panay pa rin ang pang-aasar niya at nagawa pang ngumisi.

“Have this photocopied for your classmates,” he said, glancing at me once.

“Okay, Sir,” I replied.

“Have it photocopied now,” he ordered as I was about to take my seat.

“Now na?” I asked in disbelief. Hindi ko na napigilan at napataas ako ng kilay.

“Yes.” He was not even looking at me.

Kinuha ko ang papel mula sa kanya na naglalaman ng study guide at pumunta sa copying center. Habang naglalakad ay mas lumala ang inis ko sa kanya. Bakit kailangang agad-agad itong ipa-photocopy? Puwede namang mamaya na at study guide lang naman ito. Baka mamaya niyan, nagdi-discuss na siya at may ma-miss ako sa klase. Ang layo pa naman ng photocopying center. Dapat hindi na lang ako pumayag na maging beadle niya! I did not

dress up in skirt and heels to be his personal julalay!

I was panting when I arrived at our classroom. Nagpapa-recite na nga talaga si Atty. Valencia. Ang masaklap pa niyan, nang tumingin siya sa class list niya ay ako pa ang sunod na tinawag.

“What about you, Miss Esguerra? Same question,” he said.

*Aba, g*go ‘to! Kitang kararating ko lang.*

“What’s the question, Sir? I just got here,” I said as I stood, stretching my patience and plastering a smile.

“Have you witnessed a crime, Miss Esguerra?” he asked.

“I’ve committed a crime, Sir. I once stole our neighbor’s cat,” I answered indifferently.

“Feeling proud?” He paced behind the desk.

“No. I returned it after it pooped on my shoe. It stinks so bad!” My classmates laughed but Atty. Valencia just looked at me, unamused.

Here is one man who I can’t get to like me and it infuriates me beyond words. Humihina na ba ang alindog ko, o talagang bakla siya?

“Miss Esguerra, this is not a comedy show.” He exhaled impatiently. Tumahimik ang klase at napahiya na naman ako. “What is the crime

committed if you sell the book that you stole from your classmate?"

"Fencing, Sir," I readily answered. Sus, so elementary!

"Or?" he asked lazily.

"Or violation of PD 1612." I snorted and I think he heard me.

"What is the presumption of fencing?" he asked again.

"Mere possession of an item or anything of value, which has been the subject of robbery or theft, is a prima facie evidence of theft."

"Too easy right?" He smirked.

"Yes," I answered in a cocky way. Pakialam ko kung uma-attitude na ako sa kanya? Nakakagigil siya sa inis!

"Yes? Okay. Next meeting, you will discuss the assigned cases. All of them. Tingnan natin." Everyone looked at me sympathetically as if he just gave me a death sentence.

"Okay," I sourly answered then, took my seat.

I hate him. I hate him. I hate him!

Hanggang sa matapos ang klase ay inis na inis ako kay Atty. Valencia. Seryoso ba siyang ako ang magre-recite ng lahat ng cases next week? Sampung

cases iyon! Bwisit talaga! Pero sige, challenge accepted.

“Beadle, where’s my copy of the study guide?” he asked as he was about to leave. F*ck off!

“Here,” I said, not even trying to hide the irritation in my voice.



I lost sleep reading all the assigned cases but I came to class on the next meeting, prepared and confident. Gisahin man niya ako ngayon ay kayangkaya kong sagutin ang mga itatanong niya. Palaban yata ito!

“Beadle?” he called as he entered the room, looking all stressed-out and was obviously in a bad mood. I stood up, ready to recite. I was even smiling, but that faded fast.

“Will you please have this photocopied?” he asked without looking at me. “Sixteen copies each.”

I looked at what he was holding. Mukhang lampas fifty pages iyon. Akala ko ba on-deck ako ngayon? Nakalimutan ba niya?

Hindi na ako nagreklamo at sumunod na lang. Pagdating ko sa photocopying center ay maraming nakapila kaya iniwan ko na lang sa attendant ang dokumento dahil siguradong matagal pa itong

matatapos. Nagmamadali akong bumalik sa klase para maabutan ang discussion, pero nang makita akong pumasok sa room ay sumimangot si Atty. Valencia.

“Did you just leave my documents unattended?” He looked annoyed.

Sinagot ko siya. “Yes, Sir. It might take a while, eh.”

“Those are sensitive documents! Go back there and wait for it to finish,” he ordered.

G*gong 'to! Sensitive pala, eh bakit magpapa-photocopy pa siya sa labas? Wala ba siyang sariling photocopier? At saka, bakit ako ang inuutusan niya? Secretary ba niya ako? Sumusobra na 'to ah! Pinagtitripan yata ako.

Tinitigan ko siya nang ilang segundo bago ako lumabas ng room. Hindi ako magpapatalo sa 'yo, John Louie, o kahit John Lloyd ka pa! Hinintay ko talagang matapos kopyahin lahat. Di bale nang may ma-miss akong lecture, ayoko na rin namang makinig sa pinagsasasabi niya. Leche siya! Paminta!

Binitbit ko ang documents niya na ngayon ay nasa box na sa sobrang dami. Nakakawalang-poise talaga itong pinagagawa sa akin ni Valencia!

Sa susunod nga, Marin, na may klase ka sa kanya,

'wag ka nang magtakong nang mataas, at ginagawa ka lang namang runner!

Hinintay ko hanggang sa malapit nang matapos ang oras niya sa klase bago ako pumasok. I carried the box with grace kahit pucha, gusto ko nang tumambling sa inis! He left the room and carried the box effortlessly without even thanking me. Antipatiko talaga porke rich kid!

“Uy, parang pinag-iinitan ka ni Atty. Valencia, ah,” puna ng isa kong kaklase.

“Hayaan mo na, imbyerna lang ’yun sa beauty ko.” Tumawa kami kahit sa loob-loob ay gusto kong manapak sa buwisit.

Makakaganti rin ako sa ’yo, makikita mo!

3

Maganda na sana ang takbo ng ikaapat na taon ko sa Law school kung hindi lang dumating ang g*go naming professor na si Atty. Valencia. I despise him, and I'm sure that the feeling is mutual. Lagi akong pinag-iinitan eh, lagi akong tinatawag kapag mahirap ang tanong, at lagi akong inuutusan.

Isang beses ay pinalabas pa ako ng room nang makipagtalo ako sa kanya tungkol sa isang topic. Ayaw kasing magpatalo, eh ayaw ko ring magpatalo lalo na kung may point naman ang sinasabi ko. Lakas ng bilib niya sa sarili! Guwapo nga, arogante naman. Sus! If I know, insecure lang talaga siya sa beauty ko. Hindi ko nga maintindihan kung bakit

masyadong nahuhumaling sa kanya ang mga kaklase kong babae at bakla. Lalo pa noong nalaman nila na single siya. *Duh? That's another reason to doubt his masculinity! Dyutay!*

Dagdag pa sa problema ko ang papalapit na Bar exam. Nag-aalala ako dahil kulang ang budget ko para sa review. To make the matters worse, there's a pending ejectment case against the informal settlers in our area, which unfortunately include us.

Alam ko naman na hindi talaga sa amin iyong bahay. Akala ko lang kasi magtatagal pa kami dito. Oh well, ganoon talaga. Sh*t happens. I just need to do another gig and this time, I should earn more, or we'd find ourselves homeless by the end of the year.

I browsed my closet for a sexy evening gown to use for the gig. There would be a business convention happening at *Sofitel*, which means mga big fish ang nandoon.

I wore an ash-blonde wig and added a fake mole on my cheek after doing my makeup. I did not change my facial features much this time since I already look different in this hair.

“Sino ka?” tanong ko sa babae sa salamin. “I’m Margaux. Nice to meet you.”

I was pleased. I walked into the bar and waited

for the hungry men to notice me. One by one, they started approaching me but I chose my victim well this time. He must be a filthy rich businessman because I need a lot of cash. Gipit talaga ako ngayon. Malapit nang matapos ang semester at mag-enrollment na naman. Hindi ko alam kung kailan ito mauulit.

I was being my seductive self at the bar counter when I spotted Atty. Valencia. He didn't see me but my heart began racing like crazy.

What the hell was he doing here? I secretly followed him with my gaze but a man suddenly appeared in front of me, blocking my view of the professor.

"Hi, I'm assuming you need some company." The man in his early forties gave me a megawatt smile.

"It depends on the company," I replied and pretended to be disinterested. He was goodlooking and smartly dressed in a grey suit. Mukha pa lang, halatang babaero na.

"I'm a great company," he offered.

"Really? Let's see," I said, glancing at Atty. Valencia's direction but he was no longer there. Buti naman at umalis na siya.

"What are you drinking?" he asked.

“I’d take anything hard but that would be so unladylike,” I insinuated and he snickered.

“One margarita for this beautiful lady, and a shot of whiskey for me please,” anang lalaki sa bartender.

I noticed his charisma when he smiled at me. Lady magnet, I see. But I was not impressed.

“Thank you. Are you from the convention?” Nagsimula na akong magkunwaring interesado.

“Yes. And you?” tanong niya.

“Yes.” Kunwari ay uminom ako sa cocktail na inabot ng bartender.

“Really? I didn’t notice you.”

“I was seated at the back,” I lied.

“I see. What’s your name?” he asked again, flashing me his charming smile.

“Margaux,” simpleng sagot ko.

“Nice name. It suits your beautiful face,” he said and he leaned closer. “I’m John.”

“John?” I echoed him.

“Yes. Why? Do you have a boyfriend named John?” He grinned.

“No. It’s just a pretty common name,” I answered and he laughed.

John din talaga? Masamang pangitain yata ito.

“I promise you, this John is different,” he

whispered.

“I’ll be the judge of that.” I smiled provocatively.

After half an hour of small talk and more lies, the man eventually invited me to his room. I agreed, but as we were walking towards the elevator, I spotted Atty. Valencia, approaching us with a curious smile.

*Sh*t! Nandito pa pala siya! Syet, syet, syet!*

I tried to keep calm, but my heart was pounding like a madman in my chest. My victim John was smiling at the other John. I am doomed! Magkakakilala ba sila?

My instinct was telling me to abort the plan, but my mind was telling me to trust my disguise. Gusto ko nang tumakbo, kaya lang inisip kong baka mas lalo akong mahalata.

“Attorney!” my victim called out. “Sandali lang. He’s my lawyer,” John whispered to me and I forced a smile, nodding my head.

*Your lawyer? No sh*t!*

“Mr. Lee!” Atty. Valencia exclaimed as he held out his right hand to him for a handshake. My victim, John, hugged him instead.

Atty. Valencia glanced at me and he furrowed his brows. I stayed in character and remained unbothered.

“I haven’t seen you in so long, Attorney. Kumusta? Why are you here?” tanong ng biktima ko.

“I met with a client,” sagot ng prof ko na panay ang sulyap sa akin habang nag-uusap sila. Hindi na tuloy ako mapakali.

“Ah, akala ko may ka-date ka.” Ngumisi si Victim John at sumimangot ang isang John.

“No,” he curtly said. “If you’ll excuse me, I have to go.”

“Sige, Attorney.” They shook hands again and the lawyer gave me a lingering look before finally leaving.

Sh*t! Baka mabuking ako nito, magkakilala pa naman sila.

“He was my lawyer in an insurance claim, which I won.” He laughed in triumph as we board the elevator. He guided me like a proper gentleman would that I almost felt sorry for choosing him. But I really need this money.

Bahala na! I convinced myself.

We entered the room and he disappeared for a moment, only to reappear with two glasses of wine in his hands. I took the glass he offered but never really drank it. My Rule No. 2 is to never take a drink from a stranger. Ikaw ang mambibiktima, hindi ikaw

ang mabibiktima.

“May I use the restroom?” paalam ko.

“Yes, honey. It’s that way.” He pointed the direction as he sat on the couch overlooking the city.

Nagpalit ako ng lipstick at inipit palabas ang boobs ko. Todo na ’to! Performance level na! Nag-lava walk ako mula sa restroom at tumabi sa kanya sa couch.

“Nice view you have here,” I commented.
Lakompake!

“It’s even nicer sharing it with you,” he answered and I pretended to be timid. He placed the wineglass on the table next to him and put his arms around me. I eyed him as I place my hand on his lap and he reacted to it positively.

He guided my chin to face him and I could see lust in his eyes as he leaned in for a kiss. I did not resist but waited for him to close the gap between us. He tasted my lips and tried to invade my mouth with his tongue but I did not allow him.

Three minutes, starting now.

“Wait, are you married?” I asked and he shook his head violently. *Sinungaling!*

I moved my hand to his chest and found the buttons of his shirt and removed them carefully,

taking my time. He tried to take my dress off but I slapped his hand off.

“I will undress myself,” I said but instead I reached for his belt and unclasped it. I removed his pants and sat on top of him. I could feel his erected member inside the underwear he’s wearing. His eyes fluttered as he caressed my exposed breast and although I hated it, I did not protest. It’s part of the job.

I slowly slid my hand to reach for his member and he closed his eyes in pleasure. So predictable.

I pushed him on the bed and continued stroking him until I noticed he was no longer responding. I chuckled as I pinched his nipple. He didn’t move an inch. Victim no. 85.

Kinuha ko agad ang cellphone niya sa bulsa at pinalitan ang thumbprint password at dineactivate ang security features nito. Nag-browse ako sa gallery niya at nakakita ko ang sangkatutak na blackmail material. Napakababoy! Nasampal ko tuloy siya sa inis ko. Ipinasok ko ang cellphone niya pati ang suot niyang *Rolex* sa clutch bag ko. May naka-engrave sa relo niya pero kaya naman itong gawan ng paraan ni Baldo, kaya kinuha ko pa rin.

Tiningnan ko ang wallet niya at may laman

iyong lampas sampung libo. Hinalungkat ko rin ang duffel bag niya na nasa cabinet at nanlaki ang mga mata ko sa nakita ko. May tig-isang bundle ng one thousand at five hundred bills na sa tingin ko ay nagkakahalaga ng one hundred fifty thousand. Pagsinusuwerte ka nga naman! Tiningnan ko pa ang mga bulsa ng bag at nakita ko ang gold band wedding ring nito. I knew it! He's married!

I carefully wiped my lipstick off before I forget, then wrote a note on a piece of paper, and placed it on his bedside table.

Subukan mong magsumbong, tatawagan ko ang asawa mo at ikakalat ko ang mga sex video mo. Nakakadiri ka!

I went out of the hotel room with a wide grin on my face. Problem solved. *Waging-wagi ka ngayon, girl!* Pero kailangan ko munang mag-lie-low pagkatapos nito. Kailangan kong maging mas maingat.



Final examinations came. We were already seated one seat apart from each other but some were still panickly reviewing in their seats. Mahirap naman kasi magpa-exam itong si Atty. Valencia kaya kinakabahan sila. Personally, I don't see the point in

doing that. Wala ka nang maa-absorb pa dahil under pressure ka na. I'm confident dahil nag-aral ako for the whole sem, hindi lang tuwing may exam.

Ang kinakatakot ko ay ang makita siya. I was reminded of his suspecting stares that night at *Sofitel* and it still haunts me up to this day. Sana ipadala na lang ulit niya ang secretary niya tulad noong unang exams namin sa kanya.

But, like most of my prayers, it was an unanswered one, because he came in carrying his test questions. He looked casual this time, wearing a long-sleeved shirt and jeans, instead of his usual formal attire. Fresh! Medyo na-impress ako dahil kahit anong isuot niya ay bumabagay sa kanya.

Ay teka nga, Marin! 'Wag kang tingin nang tingin!

“Beadle, distribute these.” He glanced at me as he hand me the questionnaires, but I immediately looked away. “And the test booklets,” he added.

I obliged and once I was done, I took my seat and avoided his gaze at all cost.

“You may now start,” he declared. I flipped the pages of the questionnaire and discovered that it consists of ten essay questions, with two or three sub-questions each. Buwisit talaga! He's giving us hell in two hours!

I looked up to furtively cast a spell at him but he was oddly observing me. What? Yumuko na lang ako at binilisan ang pagsagot. Maaga akong natapos pero hinintay kong may makasabay akong mag-submit dahil nasa hallway si Atty. Valencia at ayoko siyang makaharap nang mag-isa.

Nang tumayo na ang isang kong kaklase ay sumunod ako sabay dampot ng bag ko dahil dederecho na ako ng uuwi. Paglabas namin ay nakasandal si Sir sa pader at nakatingin sa cellphone niya. Pinauna kong magpasa ang kaklase ko pero noong ako na ay binuklat ni Valencia ang test booklet ko. Umalis agad ako.

“Miss Esguerra.” Nagulat ako sa pagtawag niya.

Kinakabahang lumingon ako sa kanya. “Sir?” I asked cautiously. Nakatingin pa rin siya sa test booklet ko at tila binabasa ang sagot ko. Syet, may mali ba sa sagot ko?

“Nice.” He looked at me sideways, grinning. Then, he eyed me from head to toe with a dark smile which I find sensual yet unsettling.

“Ha?” I pretended to have not heard him.

“Never mind.” He grinned while shaking his head.

Sira-ulong 'to!

4

Makalipas ang isang linggo, nag-enroll ulit ako para sa last semester ko sa College of Law. Excited ako dahil ilang buwan na lang ay graduation na namin. I'm getting closer to my dream.

Pagdating ko sa bahay ay nag-check ako ng grades sa online portal ng school namin, kahit alam ko naman na pasado ako sa lahat ng subjects. Not to brag, pero consistent na matataas kasi ang marka ko simula pa first year. Getting excellent grades was my obsession. It's one of the very few things that made me feel good about myself.

“What the f*ck?!” Napabalikwas ako sa kinauupuan ko. Bakit tres lang ang grade ko

Criminal Law Review? Imposible naman!

“Put*ng-ina mong John Lloyd ka! Ipapakulam kita! Gagawin kong kulot ’yang bayag mo!” Nagsisigaw ako sa kuwarto ko habang nakatingin sa laptop. Nanginginig ang laman ko sa galit. Pati ba grade ko, pagdidiskitahan niya na rin? Hindi na ako nag-isip pa at agad-agad akong nagbihis para sugurin ang prof ko sa opisina niya.

“Nandiyan si Atty. Valencia?” masungit na tanong ko sa sekretaryang bumungad sa akin sa pinto.

“Opo. May appointment po ba kayo?” tanong ng babae na ngumiti sa akin.

“Wala, pero estudyante niya ako.”

Kahit mabait ang sekretarya, wala talaga ako sa mood na maging mabait din. Sumusobra na kasi talaga iyang Valencia na iyan! Isusumbong ko na siya kay Dean pagkatapos nito.

“Ah, sandali lang. Titingnan ko lang kung available siya,” sabi ng sekretarya.

Tumayo siya at pumasok sa isang kuwarto na malamang ay opisina ng buwisit kong propesor.

I waited impatiently. Pagkalipas ng ilang minuto, sinamahan na ako ng sekretarya papasok sa opisina ng kupal niyang boss. Maganda at moderno ang

loob ng opisina pero parang gusto ko iyong sunugin. Nagdidilim ang paningin ko at nanggagala ito pa rin ako sa galit.

Nadatnan ko si Valencia na nakaupo sa swivel chair at nakangiti sa akin na parang alam na niya kung sino ang papasok. Hindi ko na hinintay na maisara ng sekretarya ang pinto bago ako magsimulang tumalak na parang hindi kagalang-galang ang kaharap ko.

“Why did you give me that grade? Was there a mistake? I don’t deserve that!” I spat the words without bothering to sound respectful.

“Sit down, Miss Esguerra,” he said, leaning on his chair.

“No. I won’t,” pagmamatigas ko. *I will take no bullsh*t from you!*

“Sit down,” he calmly ordered me and this time, I obliged.

“Bakit mo ako binigyan ng tres? Don’t you know that I’m vying for an award!” asik ko at parang maiiyak na ako, iniisip ko pa lang na hindi ko makukuha ang award na iyon sa graduation ko.

“Why do you think?” tanong niya.

“Ewan ko. I almost perfected the exams in your subject. My recits are beyond good. I’ve never been

absent nor late in your subject!" My voice began to crack. Natigil lang ako dahil pinipigilan kong maiyak. "Hindi kita sinumbong kay Dean kahit na pinag-iinitan mo ako sa klase," sumbat ko.

"I know," he scoffed, which further irritated me.

"Then, why? Did I do you wrong?" I asked.

"No, not to me, but to someone I know," he said, leaning at his table and looking at me directly, making me uncomfortable.

"Sino?" I asked.

"You tell me." His eyes bore into me, sending me chills.

*Sh*t! Alam niya!*

"I don't know what you're talking about, Sir," I denied as I wiped the welling tears on my eyes before they could fall down my face.

"Really? I think you know why I gave you that grade. I should actually fail you, Miss Esguerra." Tumayo siya mula sa kinauupuan at inikutan ako.

Hindi ako agad nakapagsalita dahil sinusubukan kong huwag maiyak, pero talo talaga ako ng mga luha ko.

"Ano, Miss Esguerra, are you gonna confess?" he mocked. "You can tell me everything, this room is secure. It's just between you and me."

"I have nothing to confess," I said indignantly.

"Come on, Miss Esguerra. That night at *Sofitel*. Does that ring any bell?" he asked. "Or do I have to remind you?"

"Is this about sex? Do you want to have sex with me? 'Cause I can give it to you right now." I stood up and started unbuttoning my shirt.

"Whoa! What? And be your next victim? No way!" He scoffed. "I want you to confess." He sat again on his chair. He was looking at me attentively with a smirk on his face as if he has won over me.

"I told you, I have nothing to confess," I insisted.

"You know what? I was wrong. I should have just reported you. You have no remorse!" His last words dug deep.

Tiningnan ko siya at alam kong wala na akong lusot sa kanya. Bistado na niya ako. I have underestimated him that night when I trusted my disguise. I was so careless. There's no point in denying now, so I have to strategize. I would have to appeal to his mercy.

"I'm not doing this for myself alone. I'm doing this for my siblings," I answered, struggling to steady my voice.

"And you think that justifies it?" he retorted with

self-righteousness in his voice.

“Yes, it should!” I said indignantly.

“Then, you are very much misguided, Miss Esguerra.”

“Don’t lecture me. I’m not a child!” I retorted.

“Exactly!” he exclaimed. “You are not a child. Didn’t you learn anything from Law school? From me, at least? I thought you were smart! Did you ever realize that you’re breaking the same law that you are studying? Or are you only using it to your advantage, just so you know how you can get away with your crime? Kaya pala ang galing mo sa Criminal Law!” He spoke accusingly as I cried.

“Sayang ang ganda at talino mo, Miss Esguerra. Hindi mo ginagamit sa tama,” pangaral niya. “I’m telling you this because prison time here in the Philippines is the worst!”

I was silently crying as I gather all my wits and strength before I respond with something that I will probably regret.

“Bakit, akala mo ba masaya ako sa ginagawang kong ’to? Akala mo nag-e-enjoy akong ginagamit ang katawan ko? It’s disgusting! Kahit ako nandidiri sa sarili ko! Pero ginagawa ko ’to dahil may mga kapatid akong umaasa sa ’kin, at kailangan ko

silang buhayin. Sasabihin mo marami namang ibang paraan. Well okay, marami nga, pero ito ang nandiyan eh, ito ang madali. Ang daling magpaka-self-righteous dahil hindi mo alam ang pakiramdam ng nagtitiis ng gutom makakakain lang ang mga kapatid mo. Tanong ko sa 'yo, Sir, naranasan mo na bang mamalimos? Naranasan mo na bang gamitin ang katawan mo para lang magkapera? Sigurado akong hindi ang sagot mo dahil hindi ka naman pinanganak na mahirap! You're just someone with a silver spoon up you're a*s!" I spat the words and stormed out of his office.

5

*H*inanda ko ang sarili ko na anumang oras ay puwede akong hulihin bigla ng mga pulis. Hindi ako makatulog sa sobrang takot na makulong ako. Napapraning ako sa tuwing lalabas ako ng bahay. Kahit simpleng bagay ay pinaghihinalaan ko. I've never been this paranoid.

Nakampante lang ako nang dumaan ang mga araw at walang nangyari sa akin. Ito na nga yata ang oras para tumigil na ako. Siguro ay naawa sa akin si Atty. Valencia kaya hindi na nagsumbong. Salamat naman kung ganoon. Sana lang ay hindi ko na siya maging professor sa kahit anong subject namin. Ayoko na siyang makita.

I was at the corridor chatting with my classmates

while waiting for our professor in our review subject when I spotted Atty. Valencia walking down the hallway. Para akong tangang kumaripas papasok ng classroom. Don't tell me siya na naman ang prof namin dito?

Diyos kong mahabagin, please, huwag naman sana sa klaseng ito. Please, please. 'Wag dito. I silently prayed in my seat.

Makalipas ang ilang minutong hindi pa siya pumapasok ay humupa ang kaba ko. Siguro ay sa kabilang klase naman siya at hindi sa amin. Ang praning ko na talaga!

Kumakalma na sana ako pero laking gulat ko nang bumukas ang pinto sa unahan at siya ang pumasok.

"F*ck," I whispered to myself.

My classmates stood up to greet him but I stayed glued to my chair. I was not in the mood for courtesies. Kung puwede nga lang magtago ay nagtago na ako.

"Good afternoon. I will be teaching your Remedial Law Review this semester. This is a four-hour class but we will have breaks in between," he said and I heard some of my classmates respond.

"You all look familiar. I think I've handled this

class last sem so let's do away with the introductions.” He scanned the room with his eyes.

“F*ck, f*ck,” I mused with my head bent so low. Oo, four hours nga pala. Gusto ko nang umilalim sa upuan ko.

“Who’s going to be my beadle?” he asked no one in particular.

I didn’t even dare look at him. Buti na lang at absent pa si Ralph kundi baka i-volunteer na naman ako niyon. Narinig kong nagbubulungan ang mga kaklase ko pero wala pang nagvo-volunteer. Bakit ba kasi ang hilig nito sa beadle? Iyong ibang prof nga, walang beadle!

“No one wants to volunteer? Okay. Who was my previous beadle again?” he asked nonchalantly.

*T*ngna nito. Kunwari ka pang hindi alam. Jaju!*

Someone in front mentioned my name and I had the urge to smack someone.

*B*tch, how dare you!*

“Ah, Miss Esguerra? Are you still up for the job?” he asked, finally directing his eyes on me, but his expression remained unreadable.

“Yes, Sir,” I said, leaning on my chair and looking at him straight without smiling. Siya na ngayon ang unang bumaling ng tingin.

“Okay. Here’s the study guide.” Lumapit ako para kunin iyon. “Please distribute the copies to your classmates later.” He looked at me briefly.

Aba, may ‘please’ na ngayon at ‘later’. May himala!

“Yes, Sir.” I went back to my chair.

This was going to be the most excruciating four-hour lecture of my life.

I would catch him glancing at me from time to time but I tried to avoid his gaze. Ewan, baka feeling ko lang naman. Hindi na lang ako tumingin sa kanya at nagkunwaring nagsusulat ng notes kahit hindi talaga ako mahilig magsulat ng notes. He would ask questions at kahit alam ko ang sagot ay hindi na lang ako kumikibo.

I still feel the resentment over our past confrontation, and although thankful ako na hindi niya ako sinumbong, masama pa rin ang loob ko sa kanya. After all, I still deserve a better grade than what he gave me.

Hindi ako mapakali sa upuan ko. Iniisip kong mag-drop sa subject niya at lumipat ng ibang section kaya lang wala na akong bakanteng oras at magko-conflict na ang schedule ko. Mag-a-absent na lang ako palagi o kaya magpapa-late. Tatal wala na rin

naman akong aasahang award, okay na kahit bigyan niya ako ng mababang marka. Kinurot ko ang sarili ko dahil parang maiiyak ako sa tuwing naaalala kong hindi na ako magkaka-award.

Sa wakas ay natapos din ang pagtatalak ni Atty. Valencia at ang pagdurusa ko. Dali-dali akong lumabas papuntang banyo. Paglabas ko ng room ay nasalubong ko pa siya. I think I saw him smirk but I was not sure. Dere-derecho lang ako sa banyo pero habang nagna-number one ako ay ang lakas pa rin ng kabog ng dibdib ko.

Bakit, Lord? Bakit Mo ginagawa sa akin ito? Natigilan lang ako sa pag-iinarte nang maalala kong makasalanan nga pala ako at walang karapatang magreklamo.

Dalawang oras pa ng klase at makakauwi na ako sa wakas. Nag-text ako sa mga kapatid ko na hintayin ako at malapit na akong umuwi. Nangako kasi akong dadalhan ko sila ng pasalubong at ang ni-request nila ay *Jollibee*. What is it with kids and *Jollibee*?

Naglalakad ako palabas ng campus nang mapansin kong may sumusunod sa akin na itim na *Ford* pick-up. Kinabahan agad ako.

Jusko, isa ba ito sa mga nabiktima ko? Pulis ba ito? I scanned the area looking for something

unusual. Binilisan ko ang lakad ko. Marami pa namang tao. May makakakita naman siguro sa akin kapag sumigaw ako. Nanginginig na ako sa takot. Sisigaw na sana ako nang biglang may tumawag sa pangalan ko.

“Miss Esguerra!”

Lumington ako at nakita kong nakabukas ang bintana ng itim na sasakyan. Tumakbo na ako pero sumunod siya.

“Miss Esguerra!” tawag niya ulit sa akin.

That’s when I realized na boses iyon ni Atty. Valencia. Tiningnan ko siya at doon ko nakumpirma na siya nga iyon. Halos mahimatay na ako sa takot, siya lang pala!

“Get in. ’Hahatid na kita,” alok niya.

“Wag na po. May dadaanan pa ’ko,” sagot ko at patuloy akong naglakad kahit nanginginig pa rin ang tuhod ko.

“Come on, Miss Esguerra. Ihahatid na kita,” pilit niya.

“Bakit?” I retorted.

“My peace offering.” He got out of the car and opened the car door for me. Pumasok na ako kasi baka may makakakita pa sa amin. The last thing I want is a scandal of being involved with my

professor.

I was still shaking when I got inside his car and the freezing car temperature didn't help.

“Okay ka lang? Malamig ba?” he asked and quickly adjusted the AC. Hindi ako kumibo kasi alam kong pag nagsalita ako ay manginginig ang boses ko at ayokong marinig niya iyon.

“Are you okay?” he asked again with a sound of genuine concern.

Damn you! Do I look okay? I am shaking like a leaf!

“Yes,” pagsisinungaling ko.

“Why are you shaking?” tanong niya, saka pinatay ang aircon ng sasakyan. Hindi na ako kumibo.

“Hey.” He was about to touch me.

“Don’t,” I warned.

“Are you sick?” he asked.

“Hindi.”

“Bakit ka nanginginig?” Nag-aalala na siya.

“Natakot lang ako. Akala ko, may sumusunod sa akin na isa sa mga nabiktima ko o kaya pulis.”

Natawa siya. “Scared of your own ghosts?”

It was enough to raise my blood pressure.

“Bababa na ’ko.” Inabot ko ang pinto para buksan

pero pinigilan niya ako.

“Okay, I’m sorry. I’m sorry I scared you,” he said.

“Bababa na ako. May bibilhin pa ako,” I answered.

“Saan? Sasamahan na kita tapos ihahatid kita.”

“Bakit ba? Akala ko ba, Sir, criminal ako sa paningin mo, bakit ngayon nagbabait-baitan ka sa akin?” I didn’t care if I was being rude.

“I never said you’re a criminal,” he said in a low voice.

“Really? Because as far as I can remember, you told me that I was using law school to learn how I can get away with my crime,” I snapped back.

“I did say that. But...” He sighed, unable to finish his sentence. He was choosing his words carefully.

“I changed your grade,” he said, instead.

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?” I asked indignantly.

“Yes. Isn’t that what you want?” aniya at ako naman ang hindi nakasagot. “Hindi ko dapat pinakialaman ang grade mo. You deserve a better grade than that, you’re a good student. Besides, I think my client deserves what you did to him considering the... never mind.”

“So kinukunsinti mo na ako ngayon?”

“Hindi naman.” Bumuntong-hininga na naman siya. “God, you are exasperating, Miss Esguerra!” he declared.

“I know.” I scoffed and stifled a grin but he caught me so he smiled. The tension suddenly disappeared.

“Sasamahan na kita. Where to?” he asked.

“Dito na,” I said.

“Saan?”

“Ayan, o. *Jollibee*.” Nasa tapat na kasi kami ng fastfood.

Nag-drive thru kami at saka nag-take out ako ng bucket meal. Pagkatapos, itinuro ko sa kanya ang direksyon papunta sa bahay. Pareho kaming tahimik sa biyahe.

“Dito na lang, Sir. Maglalakad na lang ako. Salamat po.” Nandoon na kami sa kanto papasok sa iskinita ng bahay namin.

“Hatid na kita,” he offered coyly.

“Wag na, Sir. Malapit naman na,” I refused.

“It’s okay. Hatid na kita,” he insisted.

“Eh, squatter ’to. Saka maputik. Nakakahiya naman sa ’yo,” paliwanag ko.

“It’s okay.”

“Bahala ka, Sir.”

Binitbit niya ang mga pagkain at tahimik kaming naglakad. I glanced at him and I suddenly got a weird feeling. I felt giddy for the first time in my adult life.

Parang gumaan rin yata ang pakiramdam ko sa lalaking ito. Mabait pala siya. Akala ko kasi dati sobrang banidoso niya, iyong tipong ayaw madumihan, may tagapunas ng pawis at tagalagay ng polbo sa tuwing pagpapawisan siya. Looking at him now, I think I have misjudged him. Oo, ako na ang judgmental!

Nang tumapat na kami sa bahay ay kinuha ko na sa kanya ang bitbit niyang pagkain at hinintay ko siyang umalis.

“Hindi mo man lang ba ako iimbitahang kumain? Gutom na ko, eh.” He smiled shyly.

“Nakakahiya eh, ang panget ng bahay namin, Sir, saka mukhang hindi ka naman kumakain ng *Jollibee*,” turan ko at totoong nahiihiya akong magpapasok ng bisita sa bahay namin.

“Anong hindi? Saka ’wag mo na ako sini-sir. John na lang. Hindi naman nagkakalayo ang edad natin. I’m only twenty-nine.” He beamed at me.

Uy! First name basis na tayo?

“Sige tuloy, pasok ka,” sabi ko at may kung anong pumintig sa dibdib ko. “Baka mauntog ka. Mababa

kasi ang ceiling,” sabi ko at yumuko naman siya papasok.

“Ate!” sigaw ng dalawa kong kapatid na sumalubong sa amin. Sa tono pa lang nila, alam ko nang kanina pa nila ako hinihintay.

“Upo ka muna, Sir.” Kumunot ang noo niya. “Ay sorry, hindi ka nga pala sir. Uhm, si EJ at Anya nga pala, mga kapatid ko.”

“Sino siya, Ate? Boyfriend mo?” Si Anya ang nagtanong kaya nag-init ang mga pisngi ko sa hiya. Tinakpan ko ang bibig niya.

“Hindi, siya si John. Saan mo naman natutunan ’yan?” pagalit ko. “Sorry.” I mouthed to him and he just smiled.

“Tara, k’ain na tayo.” Umupo na kami sa harap ng mesa.

Medyo hirap si John sa pag-upo lalo na at mababa ang mesa, halos naka-squat na nga siya. Hindi naman siya nagreklamo at nakangiti pa nga. Tuwang-tuwa naman ang dalawang bata habang kumakain.

“Huminga naman kayo,” sabi ko sa mga kapatid ko. Narinig kong tumawa si John at napatitig ako dahil ang sarap pakinggan ng tawa niya.

Hala, ano’ng drama mo, Marin?

“Ate, naka-100 ako sa quiz namin kanina sa English,” kuwento ni Anya nang tapos na siyang kumain.

“Ako rin, Ate. Pero 90 lang ako sa Science,” sabi naman ni EJ.

“Galing n’yo, ah. Nagmana nga kayo sa kin.” Tumawa silang dalawa. Tiningnan ko si John at ngumiwi siya.

“Wag ka nang kumontra.” Inirapan ko siya. Tahimik lang siyang nagmamasid habang kumakain at nakikitawa rin sa mga kuwentuhan namin ng mga kapatid ko.

“Ate, tapos na ako. P’wede na bang kainin ’yung sundae?” untag ni EJ.

“Ako rin, Ate,” sabat ni Anya.

Dumampot sila ng tig-isang sundae saka tumakbo sa harap ng TV. Kaya pala ang bilis nilang kumain dahil gusto na nilang kumain ng ice cream.

Naiwan kaming dalawa ni John sa mesa. Tapos na rin kaming kumain kaya itinabi ko na ang mga pinagkainan.

“I’m sorry for what I said and did,” he suddenly blurted out.

“Ako nga ang dapat mag-sorry. I’ve been disrespectful. Sorry,” I sincerely said. “Salamat din

kasi hindi mo ako sinumbong.” Tumango lang siya.

“Are you still doing it?” May alinlangan sa tanong niya.

“Hindi na, last na siguro ’yun.” I somehow meant it. “Nabuking mo ako, eh.”

“Buti naman,” he remarked. “I’d hate to see you in jail,” he added with a sincere smile.

“Sus. Kunwari ka pang may concern.”

“I’m serious. And this is serious. Masuwerte ka na takot ding magsumbong ’yung si Mr. Lee.”

“Yes, Sir. Tagal ko na rin gustong tumigil, medyo nagipit lang kasi,” I answered guiltily. “Pa’no mo pala nalaman na ako ’yun?” pabulong na tanong ko.

“I saw terror in your eyes that night you were with him. I wasn’t very sure that time. I just thought you looked like someone—your walk, your aura. I had inkling but that was it. Then, when my client came to my office asking for advice, he showed me a picture of the note you left. I asked him to send it to my e-mail, then I compared that to your handwriting in your test booklet. Even your behavior during the finals gave you away.” His tone was casual.

“Wow. Just wow.” Nag-slow clap pa ako. “Grabe, galing mo, Sir.”

“I know. I studied Criminal Psychology,” he

proudly retorted.

“Ouch,” I whispered. Masakit pa ring matawag na kriminal kahit totoo.

“No, I didn’t mean it that way.”

“Hindi. Okay lang. I know what you mean,” I said and he was silent. “Paano, Sir, gabi na. Ire-review ko pa ’tong mga kapatid ko.”

“Yeah, okay. Thank you for the dinner,” he replied.

“Thank you rin. Ihahatid na kita sa labas, baka mapagtripan ka diyan.”

“Wag na. I can manage. Mas delikado kung ikaw ang mapagtripan.”

“Sus, kilala ako dito. Siga kaya ako dito,” I kidded and laughed awkwardly.

“Kahit na,” giit niya. “Sige, aalis na ’ko.” Nagsimula na siyang maglakad palabas habang nakabulsa ang mga kamay. Lumingon pa siya at ngumiti sa akin. Ngumiti na rin ako. Mabait pala talaga siya.

Bago matulog, naalala kong i-check ang bagong grade ko sa subject ni John. Ano kaya ang ipinalit niya? Dali-dali akong nagbukas ng student account ko online.

“What the?” Halos mapunit ang bibig ko sa laki

ng ngiti ko. “No way!” I just might get that freaking award. Naisipan ko siyang i-text pero nagdalawang-isip ako dahil mag-aalas-onse na. Baka kung ano ang isipin niya. Kaya lang, ang saya ko talaga kaya hindi ko na napigilan. Wala naman sigurong masama kung magpasalamat ako, di ba?

Sir, thank you sa flat one, I texted him.

I wasn’t expecting him to reply but within seconds, I heard my phone beep.

You deserve it, after all, he replied.

I sent him a smiley because I didn’t know what to say.

Goodnight, Marin, he texted again.

Aba, first name basis na nga ba kami? At may goodnight pa? Huwat?

Good night, John, I replied.

And for the first time in my life, I felt lightheaded over a text message. My heart had been resurrected from the dead. Char!

6

I somehow managed to forget that strange feeling over the next few days. Buti na lang at sobrang busy ako this week at sa isang subject lang namin professor si Atty. Valencia. Kung hindi, baka hindi na ako naka-get-over. Siguro naninibago lang ako. Ngayon lang kasi nangyari iyon sa akin, iyong may pinayagan akong tao na makita ang totooang ako. Ewan! Sa ngayon, kalmado na ako. Patay na ulit ang puso ko.

Minsan ay nagkakasalubong kami ni John sa hallway, pero hindi kami nagpapansinan. It was fine with me. It's not like I expected him to be my friend after that one evening.

Hindi nga ba, Marin?

Pero pagdating ng Sabado ng hapon ay parang kinakabahan na naman akong makita siya. Ewan ko ba. Uupo na lang ako sa likod. That way, nakatago ako.

Teka, bakit nga ba ako nagtatago?

“Hoy, bakit d’yan ka nakaupo?” tawag ni Ralph sa akin nang mapansin niyang wala ako sa katabi niyang upuan.

“Basta,” sagot ko.

“Oo nga. Bumalik ka dito para natatakpan mo ako,” sabi naman ni Ram, isa pang kaklase namin.

“Wow ha, parang ang laki ko. Nagtatago nga rin ako.” Inirapan ko siya.

“Bakit? Tatakas ka ’no?” bintang ni Ralph.

“Hindi. Basta! Naglalaro kasi ako ng *Wordscapes*,” sabi ko na lang.

“Bahala ka. Mamaya niyan mapagalitan ka na naman.”

Magkakalahating oras na ang nakalipas ay wala pa rin si Atty. Valencia. Dati, nagagalit ako pag hindi pumapasok ang mga prof namin, pero ngayon mas matutuwa yata ako kung hindi siya pumasok sa klase namin. Parang nahihiya kasi ako.

“Hindi yata papasok,” deklara na ng mga kaklase ko. “Ano na, Marin? Nag-text na ba sa ’yo?” tanong

nila.

“Hindi pa,” tugon ko, sabay tingin sa phone ko. Medyo nalungkot ako na hindi ko siya makikita.

Hoy! Naguguluhan na ako sa 'yo, Marin! Hindi ka na nakakatuwa!

“Sandali na lang. Wala pa namang thirty minutes, baka dumating pa 'yon,” sabi ko sa kanila sabay silip sa labas.

Umupo na ako sa tabi ni Ralph dahil akala ko, hindi na darating si Atty. Valencia. Hindi naman kasi iyon nale-late.

Di nagtagal, biglang nagsipasok ang mga kaklase ko. Sumunod na pumasok si Atty. Valencia na halatang bagong ligo, naka-suit at naka-slacks na medyo hapit. *Syet, the puwet!*

“Next time, I don't want to see any of you waiting outside the corridor. Fourth year na kayo, all of your spare time should be spent reading,” sermon niya agad sa amin.

Hala, may mens?

Tumahimik ang klase. Nakakapanibago siya. Sumulyap ako sa kanya pero saglit lang at ayokong mahuli niya akong nakatingin sa kanya. Nagsimula siyang magtawag for recitation kaya kinabahan na ako. Nag-aral naman ako but I suddenly have the

feeling na dapat hindi ako mapahiya sa harap niya.

I began frantically checking the codal provisions. I was sweating despite the AC.

*Ano ba ang nangyayari sa 'yo, Marin? Get your sh*t together!*

Nagbabangayan kami ni Ralph sa mga sagot dahil pareho kaming nagpa-panic. Palihim kaming tumatawa sa tuwing may tinatawag dahil parang nagkaka-mini heart attack kami. Napansin yata kami ni Atty. Valencia na humahagikgik sa upuan namin.

“Will you stop that? You two, what’s funny?” He called our attention.

“Nothing, Sir,” sagot namin, sabay yuko.

“Del Castillo, you’re next,” tawag ng prof kay Ralph at nakita kong namutla siya.

*Does that mean I’m next? Sh*t! Sh*t!*

Sunud-sunod ang tanong niya kay Ralph kaya mas lalo akong kinabahan. Napagalitan pa si Ralph dahil hindi niya nagustuhan ang sagot kahit may point naman ito.

Bakit ba ang sungit na naman ni John?

Nang ako na ang tinawag ay sunud-sunod din ang tanong sa akin. Halatang ginigisa niya ako pero nasagot ko naman lahat ng tanong niya. Pero ni isang beses ay hindi niya ako tiningnan.

Grabe naman. Who is this person?

Hindi na kami nagkibuan ni Ralph hanggang sa matapos ang klase dahil ayaw na naming matawag, pero pasikreto pa rin kaming nagsisikuhan.

Nang palabas na si Atty. Valencia ay tinawag niya ako.

“Beadle, distribute this to the class,” he said briefly.

“Okay, Sir,” sagot ko.

Naguguluhan ako sa kanya pero hinayaan ko na lang. Why did I even expect him to treat me differently this time? I felt the same old resentment towards him.

Anyway, I got the grade that I want. There’s no point in trying to be nice to him. But I found myself feeling sad after he walked out of the room.

Sabay kaming lumabas ni Ralph ng campus pagkatapos ng klase. Mas maaga kami ngayon dahil maaga kaming dinismis ng professor namin sa last subject. Nag-aaya pa nga sana siya na kumain sa labas, kaya lang sinabi ko na hinihintay ako ng mga kapatid ko. Dumerecho na ako ulit papuntang *Jollibee*. Nag-request na naman kasi ang mga bata, siyempre hindi ko matanggihan.

Habang naglalakad, narinig kong may tumawag

sa akin. Hindi ko pinansin dahil nakilala ko na ang boses niya. Akala ko ba isnaban kami?

“Miss Esguerra,” tawag niya. “Ako ’to. ’Hatid na kita.”

“Wag na, Sir. Okay na ’ko.” Hindi ko siya tiningnan at patuloy na naglakad.

“Sakay na, gabi na oh. Baka mapano ka pa.”

“Wag na nga po, Sir,” giit ko.

Bigla siyang tumigil, bumaba sa sasakyan, at pinagbuksan ako ng pinto.

“What are you doing, Sir? Baka may makakakita sa atin.”

“Kaya nga sumakay ka na.” Tumigil na ako sa pagpapakipot at sumakay na. Suot niya pa rin ang suit niya kanina. Naghintay ba siya sa akin?

“*Jollibee?*” he asked and I simply nodded.

Pareho kaming tahimik sa biyahe habang nagmamaneho siya papunta sa bahay. Gusto kong tanungin kung bakit niya ito ginagawa, pero ayokong magmukhang assuming.

Shut up ka na lang, Marin.

“I’m sorry about awhile ago.” He finally broke his silence as we near my stop. Naguluhan ako kung alin doon ang hinihingi niya ng sorry. Dahil ba:

a.) sa pagiging masungit;

b.) sa panggigisa sa akin sa recit;

c.) yung pag-isnab sa akin nitong mga nakaraang araw;

d.) b and c; or

E.) all of the above?

Taray, sa Bar nga walang multiple choice, tapos ikaw meron!

“Okay,” sabi ko na lang.

“I can’t be too nice to you, otherwise people would notice. I’m trying to protect you,” he said as he was driving.

“From what?” I asked.

“From gossip.”

“Oh, okay.” Gets. Wala akong imik sa buong biyahe at ganoon din siya. Parehas yata kaming nagtatantyan ng isa’t isa. Hindi ako komportable sa katahimikan at ramdam kong binibilisan niya ang pagmamaneho.

Nakarating kami sa kanto at nag-offer siyang ihatid ako. Hindi na ako tumanggi pa dahil bakit naman? Nang makarating kami sa tapat ng bahay ay ako na ang umalok sa kanya.

“Dinner?” pasimpleng tanong ko.

“Akala ko hindi ka man lang mang-aalok.” Napangiti siya. Nagsimula na namang mag-

malfunction ang puso ko. Parang nagwawala na naman bigla. Hindi ako sanay sa ganitong pakiramdam.

Pagdating sa bahay ay hinanda ko na ang pagkain at tinulungan niya ako pagkatapos niyang hubarin ang coat niya. Ang sexy pala nito.

Parang may invisible na kumikiliti sa puwet ko. Bakit gan'on? Baka may bulate na ako.

"Dahan-dahan sa pagkain, hindi naman tatakbo ang ice cream na 'yan," pangaral ko sa dalawa dahil nagmamadali na naman silang kumain.

Bumungisngis si Anya at halos mabilaukan na si EJ. Nag-uunahan silang dalawang kumain. Pagkatapos ay tumakbo na sila sa harap ng TV dala-dala ang ice cream nila.

"Ang cute ng mga kapatid mo," komento ni John at ngumiti lang ako. "Do you mind if I stay for awhile?" tanong niya at doon na ako nagkalakas ng loob na magtanong.

"Ano'ng trip mo, Sir?" I asked.

"Ha?" I caught him off-guard.

"Sabi ko, ano'ng trip mo? Bakit mo ginagawa 'to? Ba't ka nandito?" prangkang tanong ko at ngumiti siya.

"Hindi ko rin alam." Natawa na siya.

“Kanina lang halos mangain ka na sa classroom, tapos ngayon ganyan ka na. Ano’ng trip mo? Bored ka ba, Sir? Naghahanap ng libangan?” sunud-sunod na tanong ko at natawa siya.

“Wala lang.” He shrugged.

“Siguro nabo-bore ka na sa marangya mong buhay kaya trip mo mag-immersion, ’no?” biro ko.

Sumimangot siya. “Can’t I be friends with you?”

“Naubusan ka na ba ng kakaibiganin? Why on earth would you want to be friends with someone like me?” I probed.

“Why not?” He grinned.

“Bahala ka, Sir,” sabi ko dahil ayaw niya talagang bumigay at ayokong manira ng mood.

“So, can I stay?” he asked again. “And stop calling me sir.”

“Pinapaalis ba kita?” balik ko. “Tapos ka na ba? Ililigpit ko muna ’to. And since ayaw mong umalis, magkuwento ka.” Nilinisan ko na ang mesa.

“Well, for starters, I had a rough week at the office.” He crossed his legs and leaned on the wall. He seemed to relax this time.

“Ah, that explains it,” I said.

“Explains what?” he asked, confused.

“Your mood earlier in class.”

He chuckled while shaking his head. *Eargasmic!*

“I don’t know why you want to become a lawyer. It’s the most stressful job. Imagine, papasanin mo ang problema ng ibang tao. Kailangan mo silang ipagtanggol kahit kasalanan naman nila,” paliwanag niya.

“Bakit, hindi naman libre ang pagpasan mo ng problema nila, di ba? Per hour pa nga ang bayad sa ‘yo.”

Tumawa siya. It sounds so manly. “But still, it’s stressful.”

“Ano ba ‘yan, first world problem. May trabaho bang hindi stressful?”

“You have a point,” he answered then laughed.

“Coffee?” I asked.

“Ah yes, the nocturnals’ drink.” He sneered.

Nag-brew ako ng kape sa coffeemaker at naupo muna sa tapat niya habang hinihintay itong kumulo. *Why are you here?* I wanted to ask as I observe his pointed nose and moist lips.

“So, what’s your plan after graduation?” he asked.

I smiled. “Magre-review tapos magba-Bar. Sana makapasa.”

“I know you will.”

“Naks naman!” I made a face and he chuckled

again.

“What? Magaling ka. Bar will be too easy for you.” He gave me a reassuring smile.

Parang kinilig ako.

“You’re forgetting something.” Nilingon ko ang dalawa kong kapatid na busy sa panonood ng TV. Sa lakas ng volume, siguradong hindi nila naririnig ang pinag-uusapan namin ng prof ko.

“Ano ’yon?” untag ni John.

“Bagsak ako sa good moral character. It’s one of the requirements to become a lawyer.”

“Well...” Natawa siya at parang maingat niyang pinag-iisipan ang susunod na sasabihin.

“Oh, di ka makasagot, Sir. Hirap kasi ’no? Sige, mag-isip ka muna. Ito muna’ng sagutin mo, black or with cream?” tanong ko habang isinasalin ang kape sa dalawang mug.

“Black, please. No sugar,” he said.

I handed him his cup of coffee. Umupo ulit ako sa harap niya at nagkatitigan kami. It was awkward but I was quick to handle it.

“Ayoko rin ng sugar pero I can’t drink coffee without cream,” I mumbled. “Oh, ano na, Sir?” Hindi ko pa rin siya matawag na John.

Uminom muna siya ng kape bago sumagot.

“Here’s my stand on that. Hindi naman sa kinukunsinti kita, but there are so many unscrupulous lawyers out there, I even know some of them, who remained in the profession, unprosecuted, and who have done things worse than you did. Again, I am not trying to justify you, in fact, I am condemning your previous acts. But as long as you are willing to change, who am I to judge you, right?”

“Wow. Napaka-saintly naman ng sagot mo. Gusto kong maiyak.” And it’s true, pinipigilan ko lang ang sarili ko, at nakakahiya naman.

“I mean, we live in an imperfect world, why are we expecting perfection from people? I’m not saying we should totally disregard the requirements of the law. I’m just saying, we should give people a chance to redeem themselves.”

“But the law is unforgiving. Kaya nga blindfolded siya.” I like how the conversation was turning out.

“Andun na ako. You still committed crimes. Kung ang ipinupunto mo ay kung disqualified ka ba to become a lawyer at dapat ka bang makulong, in the eyes of the law, yes. But if you’re just asking me, whether I should turn you in, or do I give you a chance... d’un ako sa huli.”

Lalong gumaan ang pakiramdam ko sa kanya

kahit naiiyak na talaga ako.

“I think we just started a lawyer-client relationship. Ikaw na ang lawyer ko, Sir, ha?” biro ko. “You are now bound by the lawyer-client privilege,” dagdag ko at humagalpak siya ng tawa.

“I’m guessing it’s pro bono?”

“You guessed it right!” sagot ko at pareho kaming tumawa.

“Bumawi ka na lang when you become a lawyer. Nasa sa ’yo na ’yon kung sa paanong paraan,” sabi pa niya.

“Yes, Sir!”

“I know you’re a good person.”

Napayuko ako dahil naaantig ako sa mga pinagsasabi niya. “Wag ka munang mag-conclude, ang dami mo pang hindi alam tungkol sa akin.”

“Then, let me get to know you,” sagot niya at nabigla ako.

Get to know me? Lasing ba ’to?

“Teka nga. What’s your deal?” Medyo iritado na ang boses ko dahil baka pinagtitripan na naman ako nito.

“I am drawn to you, Miss Esguerra,” he said, shyly.

Hala siya! What does that mean? Is that the same

as ‘I like you?’

“Whaaaaat?” I dragged the word disbelief. “Why?”

“Why not? You’re beautiful, smart, and have an interesting personality,” turan niya.

Nawiwindang ako dahil parang umiiba na ang usapan. Ang pagkakaalam ko kasi, kape ang pinainom ko sa kanya at hindi kuwatro kantos.

“I agree with your description of me, pero nakalimutan mo yatang idagdag ’yung with a criminal past,” I reminded him with a hand gesture.

“Yes, past. Meaning: history, bygone,” he stated.

“But! History repeats itself,” I kidded, trying to redirect the conversation to a lighter one. He was about to protest, but I was quick to cut him. “Joke lang!”

Umakyat na ang dalawa kong kapatid pagkatapos nilang manood ng TV, kaya tumahimik lalo ang bahay. Malamang ay matutulog na sila.

“Okay, off to the getting-to-know part,” he started. “Paano ka naging gan’on?” maingat na tanong niya.

“I invoke my right against self-incrimination,” I joked.

“Nice try. You can’t.” He chuckled.

“Is this a trap? Mamaya niyan nire-record mo pala ang sinasabi ko, tapos ibibigay mo sa pulis.”

“Why are you so suspicious of everyone?”

“Guilty, eh,” I half-joked.

“Sige, para maniwala ka, kapkapan mo ako. Here’s my phone, check mo kung nagre-record,” he casually said.

“Ayoko ngang kapkapan ka,” sagot ko kahit gusto ko sana pagkatapos kong makita nang malapitan ang hubog ng katawan niya.

Hala, Marin, napa’no ka?

“Why not?” Patawa-tawa siya kahit alam niya naman kung bakit.

“Basta, ’wag na,” I dismissed him.

“It’s not like you’re taking advantage of me.” He glanced maliciously at me and grinned. “Now, tell me. Please? I wont tell a soul.”

“Okay, fine.” I rolled my eyes and folded my arms. “Office employee ako dati. I was a fresh grad back then, so guess what, rank-in-file, minimum-wage earner, with two siblings and an ailing mother to feed. In short, broke as f*ck. One night, lumabas kami ng mga katrabaho ko, nagkainuman. Noong pauwi na ako at naghihintay ng jeep, may lalaking nakakotse na tumigil sa harap ko, akala siguro

pokpok ako. Magkano raw. Eh lasing ako n'on, di ba, and I had nothing to lose so nagbiro ako, sabi ko 10k, one hour, at money-down muna. Eh kumagat, ayun! Pagtulog niya, ninakaw ko lahat ng gamit niya." Nagpakatotoo na ako. Kung ma-turn-off man siya, okay lang din.

"Pati kotse?" tanong ni John.

"Mukha ba 'kong carnapper?" *Ulung na 'to!*
Natawa kami pareho.

"Continue," he gestured with his hand and looked at me attentively.

"Curious ka talaga?" Hindi ako makapaniwala. Hindi man lang siya nandiri?

"Oo, dali na." Nangalumbaba pa siya at naghintay sa kuwento ko.

"Ayun, easy money. Parang naadik ako. Pero after that, nag-ingat na ako. Nag-isip na ako ng bagong modus. I made illegal connections. Sh*t, I was so stupid back then, even now. Buti wala akong nakuhang sakit sa lalaking 'yon." Pilit akong tumawa kahit nakaramdam ako ng hiya. "So, ano, nandidiri ka na ba sa akin? Aalis ka na ba?"

"Uh, one more thing, did you drug my client?"
He completely ignored my question.

"A bit." I giggled.

“How?” He asked.

“Tama na, that’s too much information already. Trade secret ko na ’yon,” bwelta ko at natawa si John.

“May lakad ka ba bukas?” tanong niya.

“Wala naman,” sagot ko kahit nagtatataka ako kung bakit siya nagtatanong.

“I have to meet someone in Batangas. Baka gusto n’yong sumama?” alok ng kausap ko.

“Seriously? After all that gore I just told you?” I asked in disbelief.

“Yes, and to answer your question, no, hindi ako nandidiri sa ’yo.”

“Talaga? ’Wag na. Baka makaistorbo lang kami sa ’yo.”

“No, it’s okay. I hate driving alone. At least may kausap ako.”

“Sure ka?”

“Oo naman. Okay kayo sa 8 am?” turan ni John.

“I guess?” I answered hesitantly.

Seryoso ba siya?

“Great!” He smiled. “Sige, aalis na rin ako so you can rest.”

“Yeah, okay,” I answered awkwardly.

Tumayo na siya at binitbit ang coat niya. Gusto ko sanang siguraduhin iyong alok niya, pero

ayokong magmukhang atat.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?” aniya noong palabas na siya ng pinto. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.” I casually waved at him and he smiled.

As soon as I closed the door, I was jumping up and down. I felt so weird and happy at the same time. It felt good to open up to someone. Wait. I couldn’t believe I opened up to someone!

My heart, kalma!

7

*K*inaumagahan, nag-text siya bandang alas syete ng umaga ng *Good morning. See you at 8am.* Halos tumambling ako sa tuwa. Akala ko kasi natauhan na siya at babawiin niya ang alok niya. Para akong high school na tuwang-tuwa sa text.

Ready na ang mga bata. Excited nga sila dahil hindi pa sila nakakapunta ng Batangas or anywhere outside of Manila. It's so nice of him to bring my siblings along, I thought as I make my face. I donned a simple look of a white V-necked shirt, blue jeans, and sandals.

"You look nice," he said as he opened the car door for the kids.

Nice? Nice talaga? Hindi pa nga ako nag-effort

nito!

“Thanks. You, too,” puri ko sa kanya. He looked laid back. Nakasuot din siya ng white polo shirt, jeans, and sneakers. Pero iyong shades niya talaga ang nagdala. I hated to admit na naguguwapuhan ako sa kanya pero syet, seeing this guy in a whole new perspective, pinagpapawisan na ako nang malagkit at marami akong nararamdaman na hindi ko dapat maramdaman!

“Ready? Nag-breakfast na kayo?” he asked once we’re all settled and buckled. He then started the car engine.

“Oo na. Ikaw?” tanong ko rin.

“Ang sweet naman,” sagot niya sabay tawa. Narinig ko ang dalawa sa likod na humahagikgik din.

“I was just returning the question.” I rolled my eyes at him.

“Sige, mag-argue ka pa. Hindi ’to recit.”

“Ewan ko sa ’yo, Sir.”

“Joke lang. Oo, kumain na ’ko.” He smiled. I smiled inwardly just because this is all new to me. “But we can order take-outs for the kids.”

“Wag na, okay na sila.”

“Gusto n’yo ba ng burger, fries, and drinks?”

tanong niya sa mga kapatid ko. Tumingin naman sa akin ang dalawa, nahihiya pa yata sila sa kanya.

“Wag na kasi,” giit ko.

“It’s okay. I insist. Baka ma-bore sila sa biyahe, eh. Mamaya pa naman pagkalabas natin ng Manila.”

“May tattoo ka pala.” Napansin ko kasing sumisilip sa dulo ng sleeve niya noong nag-change-gear siya.

“Ah, yeah.” He rolled his sleeve up and revealed his toned bicep with a rose tattooed on it. I swallowed uncomfortably. “It’s a tribute to my lola,” he said.

“Nice. Akala ko pangalan ng girlfriend mo. Uso yun, di ba? ’Yung John heart chuchu,” I blabbered awkwardly and he chuckled.

“Tinatanong mo ba kung may girlfriend ako? Wala akong girlfriend.” He grinned shrewdly.

“Hindi ko tinatanong ’no!” I answered defensively but he just laughed.

Putek! Nakikiliti ako!

“Where are your parents, Marin?” he asked, now with a serious tone.

“Wala na si Nanay. ’Yung tatay namin, ewan!” I frowned in irritation. I thought he understood that I didn’t want to talk about it.

“Any relative?” he asked.

“Ang dami sa probinsya pero wala silang pake

sa amin,” paliwanag ko. Hindi ako kumportable na ako ang pinag-uusapan.

“What’s with you and Del Castillo?” biglang tanong niya at nagimbal ako dahil sobrang off-topic niyon. Ano naman ang kinalaman ni Ralph dito?

“Wala. We’re friends and seatmates since first year.”

“Ahh...” He trailed.

Pero kinikilig na ako as I bit the insides of my cheek.

“Ang galing pala ng sikmura mo ’no?” I tried to change the topic.

“What do you mean?”

“Nasikmura mo ’yung sinabi ko kagabi.”

“I’ve heard much worse. At saka tapos na ’yun, right?” He glanced at me.

“Right.”

Dumating kami sa Batangas at pumasok kami sa isang exclusive na subdivision. It turned out na may bibilhin pala siyang property dito. Malapit ito sa beach kaya tumambay muna kami ng mga kapatid ko sa tabing-dagat habang kinakausap niya ang broker.

“Wag masyadong malapit sa tubig!” sigaw ko sa kanila. Tuwang-tuwa ang dalawa. It was the first

time they'd gone to the beach.

Tears started to well my eyes just by watching them. I didn't realize they have grown so much. Dati mga iyakin sila, ngayon napaka-understanding na nila. Natatakot ako na baka dumating ang araw na hindi na nila ako kailangan at iwan na nila ako.

Ang drama mo, Marin! Bakit ka umiiyak?

Pinahid ko agad ang luha ko bago pa man may makakita sa akin but it was too late because I felt a comforting hand on my back.

"Ano... Ahm, may buhangin yatang nakapasok sa mata ko," I said as John turned me to face him.

"Lumang excuse na 'yan." Tinitigan niya ako.

"Napuwing nga lang ako." I glanced at my siblings; they were still playing by the shore, making hills out of sand, and throwing rocks at the water.

"Akin na, hihipan ko para matanggal."

"Di, okay na," tanggi ko kasi nga wala naman talagang puwing.

"Hey, talk to me," he called.

"Masaya lang akong nakikita na masaya sila."

"You're doing a good job at making them happy."

"Really? By being a criminal?" Napikon na naman ako. "Don't patronize me. You know what I've done."

“Everyone deserves a second chance, and this is your second chance. Stop being so hard on yourself.”

“Teka nga, you’re confusing me. Ginagawa mo ba akong charity work? Ano ’to, nasa bucket list mo ba ang ‘to meet at troubled woman and heal her’? O baka may bumulong sa ’yong anghel, and *voila!* Naging mission mo nang baguhin ako?” Nag-iba ang tono ko.

“Marin, I just want to help,” he whispered.

“Why?” I asked.

“Anong why?” he teased, eventhough I know he gets me.

“Bakit nga? Bakit biglang ang bait mo? Samantalang last sem, lagi mo ’kong tinatawag para mag-recite, lagi mo akong inuutusan, tapos parang lagi kang galit sa akin. Pinalabas mo pa ako ng room!” sumbat ko sa kanya at tawang-tawa siya.

“Sorry. Was I too harsh? Honestly, I was trying not to like you, and doing those things was my idea of getting you out of my head,” he confessed shyly and I glared at him. “But the more I push you out, the more I was drawn to you.”

“Ha? That’s how you treat someone you like? Ibang klase!” I protested. “At bakit naman ayaw mo ’kong magustuhan, dahil criminal ako gan’on?”

“Because it’s inappropriate!” He exhaled in frustration for my constant b*tchiness. “I like you even before I came to know about your past.”

“Okay. Just to warn you, other than being inappropriate, there are a lot of complications in liking someone like me.”

“Noted.” Nagkibit-balikat lang si John as if wala lang ang mga iyon sa kanya.

Out of nowhere, natawa ako dahil naalala kong pinaghinalaan ko siya na bakla.

“Kanina umiiyak ka tapos ngayon, tumatawa ka naman. You are confusing me, woman!” aniya at natawa na nga ako nang tuluyan.

“May naalala kasi ako.” Tawa ako nang tawa.

“Ano?” tanong niya.

“Wag kang magagalit.”

“Ano nga?”

“Dati kasi tinatawag kitang ‘paminta.’ As in closeted gay. Ang sungit mo kasi sa ‘kin.” Tawang-tawa ako at sumeryoso ang kausap ko. “Don’t get me wrong, hindi ako homophobic,” dugtong ko.

“Well, yeah, I’m gay,” he said, frowning.

“Ha?!” I was so disappointed and confused, as I was beginning to like him, too.

“Bakit ano’ng masama kung bakla ako?” Lumapit

siya, tinitigan ako at saka ngumisi. Napaatras ako dahil sobrang lapit na niya.

“Wala naman. Baka gender fluid ka?” I teased because I was getting uncomfortable of our proximity.

“I’m perfectly straight and I can even prove it to you.” He smiled maliciously that it made me nervous.

Show me how? My mind started concocting crazy images of him in my head.

“No, thanks.” I laughed and ran towards the beach.



The days went by so fast. Our friendship started growing. Araw-araw kaming magkausap at magka-text, pero para kaming hindi magkakilala kapag nasa university kami. Sinabi ko kasi sa kanya na ayoko ng special treatment kapag nasa school kami, kaya mas mabuti pang 'wag na lang kaming magpansinan. Minsan nakakalimot siya, pero ako ang nagpapaalala sa kanya.

“Happy birthday, Marin!” sabay-sabay na sigaw ng mga kaklase ko habang ka-text ko si John sa upuan ko at naghihintay na magsimula ang unang subject. May dala silang balloons at cake na may sindi na ang kandila.

“Whaaaaaat! I knew it!” sigaw ko.

Kaya pala napansin kong kulang ng tao sa classroom. May paandar sila. Kumakanta na sila at halos mapunit na ang mukha ko sa sobrang ngiti. Sina Ralph na naman ang may pakana nito.

Nag-wish ako at hinipan ang mga kandila sa cake.

“At dahil diyan, ilabas n’yo na ang pang-finale,” sabi ni Earl pagkatapos nilang kumanta.

“Mga siraulo talaga kayo, jusko, baka mapahamak tayo nito.” Alam ko na kasi ang gagawin nila. May nag-lock na ng pinto. Pinalibutan nila ako at saka inilabas ni Earl ang isang mini *Jack Daniels*. Binuksan ito ni Earl bago iniabot sa akin. Bawal iyon sa school pero sadya talagang pasaway ang mga kaklase ko at tradition na ito sa klase namin.

“Drink it! Drink it! Drink it!” pabulong na cheer nila.

“What’s the rule? Ubusin or manglilibre,” mahinang sabi ni Ralph.

“Challenge accepted.” Dahan-dahan kong nilagok ang laman ng maliit na bote. Malapit ko na iyong mapangalahati nang may kumatok sa room. Nag-panic kami at saka dali-daling tinago ang bote sa bag ko.

Binuksan nila ang pinto at may guwardyang naghihintay roon.

“Marin Esguerra?” untag ng guwardya.

“Ha? Bakit po?” Napalunok ako sa kaba.

May nagsumbong ba? May aaresto ba sa akin? Nagtinginan ang mga kaklase ko at natahimik sila. May tinawag ang guwardya.

“Ma’am, delivery po,” anang lalaking tinawag ng guwardya. Inilabas niya ang isang box at paperbag mula sa kanyang delivery bag.

“Ayon naman pala!” ani Ralph. Pare-pareho kaming nakahinga nang maluwag. Wala akong ideya kung kanino iyon galing, pero nagpasalamat na lang ako sa delivery boy.

“Taray, *Flora Vida* by Marian Rivera!” komento ni Charles, ang bading kong kaklase.

“Patingin!” sigaw ng mga babae.

Binuksan ko ang box ng bulaklak at nagtilian ang mga usyosera. Ang ganda kasi ng pagkaka-arrange ng preserved flowers.

“Sinetch?” tanong ng isa sa kanila.

May note sa loob ng box at dinampot ko agad iyon at saka palihim na binuksan.

Attraversiamo.

- JLV

Shocks! Galing ito kay John. Gusto kong manabunot sa kilig pero hindi ako nagpahalata at nilagay lang ang note sa bulsa ng bag bago pa may makakita niyon.

“Kanino galing?” tanong ni Julie.

“Hindi ko alam. Initials lang ang nakalagay,” sagot ko.

“Di nga?” Puno ng pagdududa ang boses ni Ralph. “Patingin nga?”

“Swear!” Ngumiti pa ’ko.

“O, may *Olivia Burton* watch ka pa!” May nakialam na sa isa pang paperbag. “Girl, pagupit ka na. Ang haba na ng buhok mo, sarap mong sabunutan!” anang bakla na inirapan ako.

Natawa na lang ako.

Mabuti at dumating na ang prof namin dahil naiwan ko palang nakabukas ang bag ko at nandoon ang note ni John.

“What does *attraversiamo* mean? At sino si Jiv?” pangiti-ngiting tanong ni Ralph.

Ayon na, nangialam na nga. Mabuti at Jiv ang pagkakabasa niya. Pinigilan ko lang na tumawa.

“Di ko kilala. I-*Google* mo dali,” patay-malisyang sabi ko.

Sumunod naman siya at palihim na tumipa sa kanyang cellphone habang nagsasalita ang prof namin. Ilang saglit pa ay pinakita na niya sa akin ang cellphone niya.

Attraversiamo. In English, let's cross over. Napangiti ako at kinilig nang todo. Nang tiningnan ko naman si Ralph ay tila nag-iisip siya. Pinipilit niyang ipagtugma ang salita kay ‘Jiv.’ Nakakatawa!

Later that evening, lumabas ako para magbanyo at nakasalubong ko si John sa hallway. Pasimple siyang ngumiti sa akin at ganoon din ako.

“Dinner later, birthday girl,” aniya sa mahinang boses nang magkalapit na kami, sabay kindat sa akin.

Ang harot mo talaga, Sir!



Classes were more fun now that I could watch him talk for hours every Saturday. I know it sounds creepy but I enjoy watching him. He's such a sight for sore eyes. Pasikretong sumali na ako grupo ng mga kaklase ko na may crush sa kanya. Ang advantage ko lang, may direct access ako sa kanya. Taray!

The end of my classes was what I look forward to the most. He would wait for me outside the campus

and we would have dinner at home. Nasasanay na rin sa kanya ang mga kapatid ko. Mas close na nga sila kaysa sa akin. Hindi naman ako nagseselos. Nakikita ko na totoo ang pagmamalasakit niya sa mga kapatid ko at iyon ang importante.

Hindi ko alam kung nililigawan ba niya ako, kasi hindi siya nagpaalam. At palagay ko, kapag nagpaalam siya, baka ma-turn-off ako sa kanya. I mean, uso pa ba 'yon? Like, '*Marin, p'wede ba kitang ligawan?*' Ang baduy kaya! Hindi bagay kay Attorney! Bet ko na 'tong secretly nilalandi niya ako at ako rin ay palihim siyang pinagpapantasyahan habang nakatayo siya sa unahan at nagpapakaulirang guro.

I honestly don't care about labels. I love the thrill that I get when we would secretly glance at each other at school and act like lovers after. Nakakakilig kaya 'yung naghuhulihan kami ng tingin 'tapos pipigilin ang mga ngiti. We enjoy each other's company and I think it's safe to say na may hots kami para sa isa't isa, masyado lang siyang nagpapaka-gentleman.

Interesting development: He has become one of my exceptions.

8

My blockmates and I decided to attend the Christmas Ball. It was our last year so we all agreed to go. John was there too as the professors were all invited. We arrived separately at ayaw naman naming maging laman ng tsismis kinabukasan.

We were waiting for the event to start bilang lagi namang late magsimula ang mga events dito sa Pilipinas. Ewan ko ba, there's something wrong with our sense of time. Mabagal lang talaga sigurong gumalaw ang mga Pinoy.

Inalok ako ng isa kong kaklase at nagpa-picture kaming mga girls gamit ang usong-usong fingerhearts na hindi ako maka-relate kaya parang

pakyu ang nagawa ko. Ano ba kasi 'yun? Ang korni naman. Sinakyan ko na lang at ayokong mabansagang killjoy.

Nagpa-picture rin sila sa mga professors namin. Nakiki-join lang ako at hindi na ginamit ang phone ko dahil ayoko nang dumagdag sa bilang ng camera angles na kailangan kong ngitian. Nakakangalay kaya! Pare-parehas lang naman ang pose.

Saktong dumaan si John kaya tinawag siya ng kaklase ko para magpa-picture. Nagkatinginan kami pero siyempre, hindi kami puwedeng maglandian. But for some reason, noong hinila ako ng kaklase ko para magpa-picture ay nagkatabi kami ni John. Ang bango niya!

“Uy, 'eto rin.” Ibinigay nung isa iyong cellphone niya sa nagpi-picture. Naawa ako sa kukuha dahil sunud-sunod silang nagbigay ng cellphone sa kanya na para bang siya na ang official photographer.

“Closer!” sabi ng photographer, sabay muwestra ng kanyang kamay, at para kaming mga sardinas na nagdikit-dikit.

I felt a hand on my bare back and I jumped at the touch. I realized it was John's so I secretly glanced at him and he naughtily smiled without looking at me. Aba, dumadamoves ang ulupong na 'to in public!

Mapangahas!

Kinilig naman ako. Matagal rin kaming nakatayo at parang mga timang na nakangiti dahil sa dami ng cellphone na ginamit sa pag-picture. Pero okay lang dahil 'yung kamay ni John sa likod ko ay isang welcome touch. Hindi rin niya iyon inalis. Jusko, sana walang tao sa likod na makapansin.

“Thank you, Sir.”

Ngumiti siya. “You all look beautiful tonight,” he said before leaving me a meaningful look. Susmiyo, sana walang nakahalata sa panglalandi niya.

“Uy, ako ang sinasabihang beautiful ni Attorney!” ani Charles.

Napangiti lang ako.

“Ang guwapo ni Sir!” Tumili ang isa kong kaklase pagkaalis ni John, at sinabayan siya ng iba. Kulang na lang ay magtayo sila ng fans club na ang pangalan ay Johnatics at magpa-trending ng hashtag sa *Twitter*.

In fairness naman talaga kay Sir. Gusto ko na nga rin tuloy magsisisigaw sa kilig.

Yuck ha, Marin!

They awarded me as ‘Best Dressed’ of the night kaya napilitan akong rumampa in my royal blue fitted gown. Alam ko na kung sino ang nagpanalo sa akin, iyong mga lalaking kaklase ko na matagal

nang naglalaway sa akin.

John was awarded ‘Hottorney’ as well, which was a well-deserved award. It was an understatement, actually. Boy, he was a fine-looking man. He was wearing a tailored black suit that hugged his strong arms and chest. When he walks, his toned thighs and perfectly shaped butt tighten under his pants. He’s a sexy guy, I’ll give him that. I had never been so happy being wrong about thinking he was gay!

I know I said it already, but you really are so beautiful tonight. I wish I could dance with you, John texted me.

He was three tables away from me, slackly seated and massaging an invisible moustache.

The party was almost over and my friends were all on the dancefloor. Nagpaiwan ako dahil gusto kong makipaglandian kay John sa text.

Unfortunately, you can’t, I replied and used an evil emoji.

Yes, unfortunately. I can’t wait ’till you graduate. He texted back.

I was smiling from ear to ear. I secretly glanced at him, pretending to scan the crowd. He was looking at me and for a moment, we held each other’s gaze. Parang naghuhubaran na kami sa isip. Para kaming

mga tangang pangiti-ngiti sa kinauupuan namin.

“Marin, sayaw tayo!” alok ni Ralph sa akin. Lumingon ako sa kinauupuan ni John pero hindi na siya nakatingin. Kausap na niya ngayon ang frat brother niya at co-professor na si Atty. Roxas.

Wala naman yatang masama kaya tinanggap ko ang alok ni Ralph at kinuha ang kamay niya.

Nakipagsayaw kami sa mga kaklase namin habang kumakanta sa stage ang mga talentado naming ka-batch. Pagtingin ko sa direksyon ni John ay wala na siya.

Nasaan na 'yun?

Hindi ko na siya nakita for the rest of the night kaya akala ko lumabas siya kasama ang mga friends niya para uminom. Wala rin akong natanggap na text mula sa kanya kaya in-enjoy ko na lang ang gabi kasama ang mga kaibigan ko. Besides, last naman na namin 'to.

Noong alas doce na nang hatinggabi ay nagdesisyon na akong umuwi na at hindi na sumama sa after party. Nag-text na kasi si Anya at nagtatanong na kung nasaan na ako. Siguro ay hinihintay pa rin nila ako bago sila matulog.

Pagdating ko sa bahay, nagulat ako nang may naabutan akong lalaki na nakaupo sa labas.

Kinabahan ako pero nang makalapit ay natuwa akong makita na naghihintay sa akin si John.

Napangiti agad ako. Feel na feel ko 'yung may naghihintay sa akin.

“Oh, bakit nandiyan ka? Bigla kang nawala kanina,” I cheerfully asked as I was excited to see him after he pulled a vanishing act.

He was silent and just stared at me, glowering his eyes on me, as if I've done something bad.

“Uy.” I playfully poked him but he didn't flinch.

“Binantayan ko mga kapatid mo while you were flirting with your classmate.” He finally spoke, but his words were like daggers to my chest.

Nawindang ako.

“Excuse me?” Tumaas ang boses ko nang very light dahil nabigla ako sa sinabi ni John.

“You heard me.”

“Napa'no ka? Are you drunk?” tanong ko at sinusubukan ko pang magpasensya. Baka lasing kasi.

“No.”

“Ano'ng problema mo?” Tumaas na ang boses ko kasi naiirita na ako. Pagod ako at masakit na ang paa ko kaya ayoko sanang makipagtalo. Natuwa pa naman sana akong nandito siya.

“Ano ba ako sa 'yo?” he asked.

Hindi ako nakasagot agad dahil ngayon ko lang nakita si John na nagkakaganito. I was used to seeing him so composed.

“Do I mean anything to you, or do you like him more?” he asked. There was anger in his voice.

“What? Who?” I asked in return.

“You know who.” He snapped.

“Ano ka ba? Ba’t ka ganyan?” Naiinis na ako.

Galit ba siya dahil nakipagsayaw ako kay Ralph kanina? Wala namang malisya iyon dahil grupo naman kami. Alam niyang kaibigan ko si Ralph.

At saka teka nga, bakit ba kung umasta siya ay parang nagkasala ako sa kanya?

“Just because!” he said, raking his hair with his fingers in frustration. Nagulo ang dating ayos na ayos niyang buhok.

“Oh ba’t ka galit?” Galit na rin ako pero hininaan ko ang boses ko.

“Hindi ako galit. Nagseselos ako!” he countered.

“Bakit?” tanong ko dahil gusto ko na ring malaman kung ano nga ba kami. Nakakapagod rin palang maging colorum. Akala ko okay na ako sa walang label. Tama pala ’yung commercial, check the label.

“Basta!” singhal ng kausap ko.

“Ay naku, bahala ka nga. Bukas na lang tayo mag-usap, o kaya ’wag na kasi ayokong makipaglaro ng hula-hulaan sa ’yo.” Akmang papasok na ako ng bahay pero hinawakan ako ni John sa braso.

Naks! Feeling ko naman ako ’yung bida sa primetime teleserye.

“I’m in love with you!” he confessed and it was almost a shout.

“Ano ba, hindi ako bingi!” Napisigaw na rin ako.

“I’m in love with you!” he repeated.

“Oh, ano naman? In love din naman ako sa ’yo!” I yelled back.

Ang bilis ng pangyayari, kanina lang nagsisigawan kami, ngayon naman nag-aagawan na kami ng hininga. He held my face and gently pushed me against the wall as he claimed all of my mouth.

His kisses were so hot and intense; it felt like he had been holding it back for so long. I’ve never been so hungry for someone’s touch until now. It felt like his kisses won’t be enough. It was when I felt his hand on my exposed back that I was able to regain my senses.

“John,” bulong ko, bago ko pa makalimutang may hiya ako at nasa labas lang kami ng bahay. “It’s late.”

"I know. I know." He was breathing heavily.

"Go home," saad ko at napapikit siya, as if in pain.

"Can I stay?" he asked coyly.

"No," I said, almost teasing him though I felt bad for him. "Baka magising sila."

"Okay." He kissed me again. "I love you, okay?" I felt his hardness brush against me when he leaned closer and I now know why he's struggling to control himself. "I love you. I love you. I love you," he said in between kisses.

"I love you." I giggled like a schoolgirl.

"You're my girlfriend now."

"Yes. Go home." He gave me one last kiss before leaving. I'm on cloud nine! Wherever that is.

At ayun na nga. Kami na.



Magkakasama kami noong Pasko sa maliit naming bahay. Masaya ang mga bata na kasama si John, lalo na dahil sa mga regalang natanggap nila.

Gusto na nga niya akong ipakilala sa magulang niya pero tumanggi ako. Hindi pa ako handa at nirespeto naman niya ang desisyon ko.

John came to our class for the first time for the year, looking fresh as always. Napabalikwas ako sa

upuan ko nang maalala kong boyfriend ko na nga pala siya! *Syet, I'm dating my prof!*

Naisip ko iyong isang beses na pinapunta niya ako sa office niya under the guise of a school-related concern. Pagpasok ko pa lang sa opisina niya ay sinalubong na niya ako ng halik. Mala-teens with raging hormones ang dating dahil intense. Kung wala nga lang ang sekretarya niya ay ewan ko na lang. Well, sh*t. We're not model citizens.

Then I realized, it was me who is making him break all the rules. He's risking everything for me. I decided to ignore the guilt but it kept bothering me throughout the class.

He discussed for almost two hours then he called for a break. I immediately went out for air and received a text from him.

Is everything all right? he texted.

Yeah, just had something on my mind and the sight of you, in front, is not helping, I replied.

Haha. Smitten ka 'no? Do you want me to dismiss the class early? he asked.

Ayan na naman siya, effort na effort para sa akin.

No need. I'm fine. By the way, I know someone who's smitten by you. Si Ms. Oliver. I giggled after sending the text.

Haha. Silly. Don't mind her.

But she's like undressing you in her head, I texted.

I feel sorry for her but I'm undressing someone else in my head right now.

Sinadya kong hindi mag-reply. Malantod si Sir!

A few minutes later, we all entered the room and the class resumed. I glanced at him, holding back a grin. He cleared his throat and began calling for recitation and guess who he called next? That's right. Me. I am so going to be punished.

"Miss Esguerra, enlighten us with the difference between Rule 45 and Rule 65 of the Rules of Court. And I don't want the usual, boring distinction," he said, and I nearly rolled my eyes at him.

I talked non-stop until I was satisfied with my answer. Mukha namang na-impress siya. He was never easy on me in class. In fact, he liked testing me. He never, even once, told me what he would be discussing or what he's going to ask me during recitation. That's him being fair to everyone in the class, and I admire him for that.

Pag-upo ko ay sumulyap pa si John sa akin. Pagyuko niya ay halatang nagpipigil siyang ngumiti habang nakatingin sa class card. Kinilig ako kaya hindi ko na rin napigilang mapangiti. Nasiko tuloy

ako ni Ralph.

“Ehem.” Naningkit ang seatmate ko pero wala naman siyang ibang sinabi.

By the time I was finished with my classes, John was already waiting for me in his secret parking space, with food already bought. We headed home, talking about the rest of our days apart and making-out along the way.

“Someone should pass a law against kissing while driving,” I suggested and we both laughed.

“I love you,” he said, while holding my hand.

“I love you, Sir.” I giggled.