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March.

“Are you out of your mind!” Napataas ang boses at nanlalaki ang mga mata ni Moira dahil hindi siya makapaniwala sa announcement ng kanyang best friend na si Annie. Ipinatong niya ang kanyang siko sa ibabaw ng mesa at inilapat sa magkabilang sentido ang mga daliri.

Kibit-balikat lamang ang naging sagot sa kanya ni Annie. “What can I say? I’m in love.”

Bumukas at sumara ang bibig niya ngunit walang namutawi na salita. Nanlalambot na napasandal siya sa backrest ng inuupuan niya. *Here we go again*, aniya sa sarili.

Iginala ni Moira ang paningin sa paligid ng *Chocolate Kiss Café* para maliwanagan ang isip. Tuwing Lunes ng hapon ay nagkikita sila ni Annie rito dahil bukod sa masasarap na cakes at kape ay ito na ang naging favorite tambayan nila sa loob ng *UP Diliman* campus simula pa noong kolehiyo sila. Besides, convenient meeting place ang *Chocolate Kiss* sa kanila dahil pareho silang nakatira pa rin sa loob

ng nabanggit na universidad.

They were dining al fresco and several people looked their way with a quizzical expression on their faces. Ilan sa mga ito ay estudyante at ang iba naman ay mga professors na kakilala niya. Nginitian niya nang alanganin ang mga ito at saka ibinalik ang atensyon kay Annie.

Pinagmasdan ni Moira ang mahinhing paghigop nito ng kape. Alam niya ang attraction ni Annie sa mga lalaki, bata man o matanda. Saksi siya sa dami ng mga lalaking dumaan sa buhay nito. Annie had always been the bombshell between the two of them. But beneath her breathtakingly beautiful face and body lurked an aggressive personality and an intelligent mind. Medyo tanga nga lang ito kapag nai-in love.

Kilalang-kilala niya si Annie. Elementary pa lamang siya ay magkakilala na sila. Parehong professor sa *UP* ang kanilang mga magulang kaya sa loob ng Area One ng campus sila nakatira.

Isa sa mga kinakainisan niyang ugali ni Annie ay habang may pumipigil dito ay lalo naman itong sumisige. Kaya most of the time ay hinahayaan na lamang niya ito sa mga kapritsuhan nito.

Mas mabuting tumahimik na lamang si Moira ngunit hindi niya mapigilan ang paghihimagsik ng damdamin niya.

“But you’re...” itinaas niya sa ere ang tigdalawang daliri sa mga kamay, “quote, unquote—in love with a twenty-year-old boy.” Pabagsak niyang ipinatong sa mesa ang palad. “Naging estudyante ko pa. Come on, Annie. Mag-isip ka naman. You’re thirty years old. Sampung taon ang agwat ninyo.”

Professor siya ng Humanities I, isang general education subject na required na kunin ng lahat ng freshman ng *UP*, bukod pa sa PolSci subjects na itinuturo niya kaya naman halos lahat ng estudyante ay dumaraan sa classroom niya. Natatandaan pa niya ang lalaking ikinukuwento sa kanya ni Annie.

“We all do foolish things when we’re in love. Not that I’m saying this is foolish but—”

“But how? Why? When?” patuloy niyang usisa rito.

She knew Annie was uncomfortable because she was fidgeting. Pilit nitong pinaplantsa ang gusot sa table napkin nito sa ibabaw ng mesa. Hindi rin ito makatingin nang derecho sa kanya. Hindi pa rin siya makapaniwala sa mga sinasabi nito. It was so

out of character for Annie. Alam niya ang klase ng mga lalaking idine-date nito—rich, powerful and handsome.

Nagpakawala ito ng buntong-hininga bago sumagot. “I was jogging around the academic oval. Ilang beses na rin kaming nagkakasalubong pero three weeks ago, Denver approached me, started talking to me and then poof! We started hanging out. Sabi niya ay matagal na daw niya akong gusto, pero nahihiya lamang lumapit sa akin. Noong una ay kinikilig lang ako. Imagine, a handsome younger man pursuing an older woman. Demi Moore at Ashton Kutcher ang dating ng lovelife ko, hindi ba? Pero ngayon, I think I have fallen in love with him. So, we’re officially dating now.”

Gusto na ni Moira na iuntog ang ulo ng kaibigan para magising ito. Oo nga at maganda ito at hindi kataka-taka na maraming ma-in love dito na lalaki pero hindi ba nito nari-realize na maaaring ginagamit lamang ito ni Denver?

“But this is beyond foolish! It’s... it’s almost illegal. Ano’ng mangyayari sa relasyon ninyo? Sa tingin mo ba ay may future kayong dalawa? At your age you should be thinking of something more—”

“More what? Permanent? Lasting? Somebody

older? Someone who'll marry me?" Nakikita niyang nagsisimula ng ma-agitate si Annie dahil ginagawa na nitong swan ang table napkin na hawak nito na parang sa origami.

Nabigla rin siya sa narinig mula kay Annie. Hindi niya na-realize na maaaring nakakasakit na ang mga salitang binibitawan niya. Prangka sila sa isa't isa. Kung ano ang nasa isip nila ay sinasabi nila ngunit ngayon lang talaga mukhang nasaktan ang kaibigan sa mga sinabi niya.

Siguro ay may halong inggit din ang panenermon niya kay Annie. While Annie's lovelife was always at a boiling point, ang sa kanya ay lukewarm lang palagi. Kung si Annie ay parang nagpapalit lang ng damit kung mag-boyfriend, siya naman ay masyadong pihikan.

At twenty-nine, she wished she could make her lovelife hot! As in burning hot! Dalawa pa lamang ang naging boyfriend niya—si Vinnie na kaklase niya noong third year college at si Dino, co-professor niya noong nagsisimula pa lamang siyang magturo. Isang taon ang itinagal ng relationship nila ni Vinnie. Tatlong taon naman kay Dino. Akala niya ay ito na ang mapapangasawa niya, pero ipinagpalit siya nito sa isang estudyante.

Labis siyang nasaktan sa ginawa nito kaya naman hanggang sa kasalukuyan ay wala pa rin siyang lakas ng loob na makipagrelasyon muli. May dalawang nanliligaw sa kanya, pero wala siyang makapa sa puso niya na handa na siyang makipagnobyong muli.

Although nasa marrying age na siya ay hindi siya makaramdam ng pagmamadali na mag-asawa. Masaya at kontento siya sa buhay niya. Ang ayaw nga lamang niya ay ang maging prunes ang tu-tut niya. Kahit seryoso ang dalawang past relationships niya ay hindi niya naramdaman na handa siyang isuko si *Maria* sa mga ito. They kissed and petted a little but she didn't come to a point where she was mindless with wanting them. Iyon ang requirement niya sa lalaking pagsusukuan niya ng Bataan niya. Dapat ay magawa nitong makalimutan niya ang lahat except what he was doing to her. So far, no applications approved yet.

“I'm sorry. Alam kong hindi maganda ang mga nasabi ko,” aniya.

“It's okay. We have always been honest with our opinions to each other. I knew you would react that way but I have to tell you. Tama ka naman. Lahat ng sinabi mo, totoo. Pareho din ng mga iniisip ko. But I can't help it. I fell in love with him.”

Pinilit niyang tanggalin ang pagtutol at mga agam-agam sa isip niya. She only wanted Annie to be happy and if Denver was making her happy, so be it. Huminga siya nang malalim at ngumiti sa kaibigan. She leaned over the table and held her best friend's hands.

“So, when do I meet him? I'll have to use my terror teacher tactics para hindi ka niya saktan. That boy is really hot and a lot of girls are hanging around him. So kailangan mong maging alerto palagi. Okay?”

Lumipat ito sa bakanteng upuan sa tabi niya at niyakap siya. “Thank you. You're really a good friend.”

“Drinking alone, pare? Hindi maganda 'yan.”

Napangiti si Raymond nang bahagya nang marinig ang boses ni Michael. Nasa bar siya ng *Cable Car* to unwind after a full day at the Congress. He did not want to go home. Because now, his home, which he considered his private sanctuary, had been invaded by a nightmare from his past.

He looked at his friends. They were with him even before things got rough. They were his brothers in Alpha Phi Beta Fraternity at UP Law. When they passed the bar, Michael continued on to practice

corporate law and was now working for *Ayala Land, Inc.* while he, Raymond Zamora III, went into politics to follow his father's footsteps. Dodge was not practicing law due to some personal issues with his father. He went on and became an *Ultimate Fighting Champion*.

Inakbayan siya ni Dodge at tinapik sa balikat. Naupo ang dalawa sa magkabilang bar stool sa tabi niya. Kaagad na lumapit ang bartender at hiningi ang order nila.

“Three scotch on the rocks, please,” order ni Dodge nang makita na paubos na ang kanyang iniinom.

“What are you doing here?” tanong ni Raymond. They were drinking buddies, pero nitong huli ay hindi na niya tinatawagan ang mga ito kapag gusto niyang uminom dahil palagi na lamang may inireretong babae sa kanya ang mga ito. Simula noong maghiwalay sila ng asawa niyang si Janine dalawang taon na ang nakakaraan ay hindi na siya tinantanan ng mga ito to move on and find a woman who would replace Janine's place in his life.

Raymond smiled bitterly. He still could not believe his foolishness over his soon-to-be ex-wife. He fell hard for Janine. He loved her from the very

first moment he saw her. She was beautiful, rich, educated and well-connected. She was the perfect wife for an up-and-coming politician.

He thought his dreams of having a wonderful home, a loving wife and several adorable children were finally coming true. Akala niya ay natagpuan na niya ang babaeng makakasama niya habang buhay.

Anim na buwan matapos silang ikasal ay unti-unti niyang nakilala ang tunay na pagkatao ni Janine. She did not want to really settle down. She continued her partying ways. He heard endless excuses why she did not want to get pregnant. Later, he heard rumors that she was having affairs left and right.

What frightened him the most was that for three miserable years, he tolerated it. Sinubukan niyang intindihin ito. He was the one who asked her to stay with him to make their marriage work. He even wanted to go to marriage counselling.

Raymond was the kind of man who valued honor and dignity. He had scruples but he threw it all away for her.

When she ran off with her personal trainer, he was devastated. Gusto niyang manikluhod dito para balikan siya, pero pinigilan siya ng kanyang pride.

Nag-file agad si Raymond ng annulment. Their separation and annulment caused a media uproar since they were both public personas. It had been more than a year since then and he was now eagerly awaiting for the final decision of the court.

After his experience with Janine, it left him with a bitter taste in his mouth for women. Hindi na niya magawang magtiwala muli sa mga babae. He had relationships since his marriage broke up but he did not let any woman use his vulnerability again. They were there to help him with his needs but that was all. But lately, nawala ang pagnanasa niya na may makasama. He just wanted to be alone.

Ngunit kagabi ay nagbalik si Janine sa buhay niya. Humihingi ng tawad at nais makipagbalikan sa kanya. In fact, she moved back in his house without any invitation from him. Pag-uwi niya kanina ay nadatnan na lamang niya ito sa bahay niya. She told him that she would make it up to him. She told him that she would make him love her again. At iyon ang higit na ikinakatakot niya.

After years of bitter quarrels in and out of the courtroom, she came back and begged for forgiveness. Halos kaladkarin niya ito palabas ng bahay para umalis ngunit nang sabihin nito sa kanyang mahal

pa rin daw siya nito ay hindi niya alam kung ano ang iisipin at gagawin. They were in the middle of a difficult annulment but there she was, begging him to let her stay and love her again. Ano ba ang mayroon ang babaeng ito na isang haplos lamang nito ay kaagad siyang napapaamo? May kakayahan pa rin itong guluhin ang mundo niya. For years, Janine had an almost physical hold on him which he could not get out of.

“Misery loves company, pare. Kaya heto kami, ang company ni Misery,” ani Michael.

“Pare, you have got to stop doing this. It’s been what? Two years? There are hot chicks around who’ll be more than happy to ease your misery. You’re practically single, remember?” dagdag naman ni Dodge.

Tiim-bagang na sinabi ni Raymond, “She’s back.”

Sabay na napatingin sa kanya ang dalawa. An incredulous expression was on their faces.

“Ano’ng ibig mong sabihin?” untag ni Dodge.

“She moved back in the house and wants us to start over again.”

“Good God, man! As your lawyer, I advise you

to tell her to leave. Baka maapektuhan nito ang desisyon ng annulment ninyo,” nahihintakutang saad ni Michael. “Kelan pa, pare? What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know, pare. I don’t know what to do and what to feel.” He turned around to stop their interrogation. Hindi pa siya handang sagutin ang tanong ng mga ito dahil kahit siya ay hindi niya alam ang gusto niyang mangyari. Isa lamang ang natitiyak niya: hindi puwedeng tumira sa bahay niya ang dating asawa. Sumandal siya sa bar at ipinatong ang mga siko. Iginala niya ang mga mata sa paligid. He saw a familiar face in a table nearby.

“Isn’t that Annie, pare?” basag ni Michael sa katahimikan na pareho rin niyang nagmamasid sa mga tao sa loob ng bar.

“I think so.” He looked at Annie again. May kasama itong lalaki na sa tingin niya ay nasa early twenties pa lamang ang edad. They were acting sweet towards each other. He did not know that Annie was into younger men but by the looks of it, she definitely was.

Hindi naman siya nakikialam sa personal life ng mga staff niya at wala siyang balak. But Annie was another matter. Annie was a trusted friend so he

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sometimes look out for her. They met in law school and became friends. She came to work for him as his Chief of Staff when he was elected in Congress. That was three years ago.

Nawala ang atensyon niya sa dalawa nang may lumapit sa mga ito na isang babae. At his distance, he could see the teasing glint in her eyes. Humalik ito sa pisngi ni Annie at saka humarap sa lalaki. Mukhang ipinakilala ni Annie ang dalawa. Nagkamayan ang mga ito saka naupo ang babae.

Simple ang kagandahan ng babae. She was wearing a white tank top, a floral skirt and ballerina shoes. Her shining black hair reached almost to her waist. She wore no jewelry except a big watch on her right wrist. There was really nothing unusual about her but there was something about the girl that grabbed and held his attention.

Maybe it was her smile. It seemed honest and warm.

At iyon ang kailangan niya ngayon sa buhay niya.

Honesty and warmth.

Napailing si Raymond sa iniisip. Hindi pa nga niya alam kung ano ang dapat gawin kay Janine pero nag-iisip na siya ng mga ganoong bagay. Aminado

siyang pinalala ng pagbalik ni Janine sa bahay niya ang sitwasyon. Hindi niya alam kung ano ang totoong motibo nito.

Janine was asking for alimony of two hundred thousand a month but he did not want to give her a single cent. Alam ni Janine ang pinansyal niyang kakayahan. Maybe she wanted to ruin the annulment case because she wanted his money. He came from a very old and rich landed family in Sorsogon. He was a third generation politician. His grandfather was the former governor of their town. His father became a senator. They have several lucrative businesses in Sorsogon and Manila.

“Come on, pare. Let’s go over there and meet Annie’s latest toyboy,” pukaw ni Michael sa kanya. Pagtingin niya rito, Michael had a sneer in his face. Ever since law school, Michael and Annie had rubbed each other the wrong way.

May nabalitaan siyang eskandalo na namagitan sa dalawa noong mga panahon na iyon. May reputasyon si Annie noon as the Ice Queen. Sa dami ng naging boyfriend nito, ni isa ay walang naka-home base dito. Michael took on the challenge of melting the Ice Queen. Bilang ebidensya ay may hidden camera sa kuwarto para mapatunayan na natunaw nga ni

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Michael ang babae. Hindi na niya alam ang mga sumunod na nangyari sa mga ito. Hindi rin naman niya nakita ang ebidensya. Ngayon, wala pang limang minuto sa isang kuwarto ang dalawa ay pareho nang nakaangil ang mga ito sa isa't isa.

Umiling na lamang si Raymond. "I have to get going. I need to kick Janine out of my house and I have an early session tomorrow." Tumayo na siya at nagbayad ng bill. Nagpaalam na siya kina Michael at Dodge. Tumingin siya sa direksyon nina Annie and saw her waive at him. Nagtatakang napatingin naman sa kanya ang kasama nitong babae. For a second, their eyes met. He felt a connection with her that he could not explain. But then he turned away and left.

2

April.

Sandali lang naman si Moira kaya pilit niyang isiniksik ang kanyang old but well-maintained yellow *Volkswagon* na si 'Pareng OCA' sa maliit na parking space between a black *Landcruiser* and a silver *BMW*. Alam niya na mahihirapang lumabas ang dalawang kotse sa magkabilang gilid niya, pero wala na siyang choice. Puno ang parking lot dahil kasalukuyang pinagdedebatehan ng kongreso ang kontrobersyal na divorce bill sa Plenary Hall.

Maingat niyang binuksan ang pinto ng kanyang kotse upang hindi tamaan ang *Landcruiser* saka nagmamadaling naglakad papunta sa north wing building ng House Of Representatives Complex, dating kilala na Batasang Pambansa Complex.

Maraming beses na rin siyang nakarating dito dahil sa mga research niya noong panahon na kumukuha pa siya ng Masteral Degree sa Political Science.

Alas dos na ng hapon at nakakapaso pa rin ang init ng araw kaya nagmamadali siyang pumasok

ng building. Si Annie ang pinaghiram niya ng mga research materials niya sa Legislative Library para puwede niyang maiuwi ang mga ito. Ipi-pick up na lang niya rito dahil mahigit isang linggo silang hindi magkikita dahil kasama ito ni Congressman sa pag-uwi nito sa Sorsogon.

When she reached door N-108, she softly knocked. Nobody answered so she tried to twist the doorknob. It was open. Sumilip siya. Annie was at her desk reading some papers.

Tuluyan na siyang pumasok. Iginala niya ang paningin. She saw Thelma, ang executive assistant ni Congressman, at the xerox machine. Diana, Annie's assistant, was hovering behind Annie. Nakaupo si Menchie, ang legislation officer, sa likod ng mesa nito at si Jerry, ang legal researcher ay nakaupo sa gilid ng mesa ni Menchie. Matagal nang naipakilala sa kanya ni Annie ang mga ito. Si Congressman na lang ang hindi niya nakikilala nang personal.

She had seen Congressman Raymond Zamora III once in person and too many times on TV and newspapers. She thought he was fascinating to watch and read about. He was vocal and eloquent in stating his views and opinions on certain issues. He was passionate about his causes. He exuded intelligence,

passion and authority. In her opinion, he was simply brilliant.

Dagdag pa na napakaguwapo nito—short cropped hair, round intelligent eyes, straight nose and sensual lips. His body was lean and taut. He spoke concisely and to the point but the way his eyes glimmer with intelligence definitely made her an avid supporter of him. Maybe it was his clean image and his mind that attracted her.

Sa tanda na niyang ito, she could honestly say na isa siya sa napakaraming babae na may crush sa guwapong politiko at hindi niya maintindihan ang sarili kung bakit.

Annie told her that Raymond had a wife before and that they were going through an annulment. His questionable status as a bachelor should have been enough to turn her off but she decided since it was just a crush, what harm could it do?

Nang makita niya ito sa *Cable Car* a month ago ay kaagad siyang nabighani rito ngunit umalis ito nang hindi man lang dumaan sa table nila. Kumaway lamang ito kay Annie bilang pamamaalam. She felt the intensity in his gaze when he looked at her before he left. Ever since that night ay madalas na niyang maalala ang mga mata nito. Pasimple niyang

tingnan ang bukas na pinto ng opisina nito ngunit hindi niya ito makita. Marahil ay nasa session hall ang lalaki. Nakaramdam siya ng disappointment. Akala niya ay makikilala na niya ito ngayon. Isa ito sa dahilan kung bakit excited na excited siyang pumunta rito ngayon.

“Moira, I’m so glad you’re here. You didn’t call kaya akala ko’y hindi na tayo magkikita,” ani Annie nang mapansin siya. Sinenyasan siya nito na lumapit sa mesa nito, na siya naman niyang ginawa.

Iniabot kaagad nito sa kanya ang mga hiniram mula sa library. “Ayan na. Kukunin ko na lang sa iyo kapag nakabalik na ako from Sorsogon. Paalis na rin kasi kami ni Raymond. I’m just waiting for him,” patuloy ni Annie.

“Thank you,” tanging nasabi niya.

Napalingon si Moises nang bumukas ang pinto at pumasok ang lalaking pinakahihintay niya.

Whoa. She forgot to breathe. She did not realize that this man would have this kind of effect on her up close.

Mabilis itong naglakad patungo sa opisina nito nang hindi man lang siya napansin na nakaharang sa daraanan nito. Ang mga mata nito ay nakatuon

sa papel na hawak nito. She sidestepped him but he did not even look up. He went straight to his office. Mayamaya pa ay narinig na niya ang pamilyar na tinig nito.

“Annie, can you come in here for just a minute?”

Napatikhim at napakurap siya nang matauhan. Si Annie naman ay agad na tumalima. Nang makapasok ito sa opisina ni Raymond ay narinig niya ang komento ni Diana.

“Mainit yata ang ulo ni Cong.” Alam niyang sa halip na ‘sir’ ay iyon ang nakasanayang tawag ng mga empleyado sa lalaki.

Mayamaya pa ay lumabas na si Annie kasunod si Raymond.

“Let’s meet at the airport. I just need to tie up some loose ends with Michael,” anang kongresista.

Bumalik sa mesa nito si Annie upang kuhanin ang mga papeles na hiningi ni Raymond. Patuloy ang last minute instructions ng lalaki habang pinapasadahan ng tingin ang mga papeles na hawak.

Pinagsawa ni Moira ang mga mata sa pagtitig sa guwapong mukha nito. Gusto niyang haplusin ang gatla sa pagitan ng mga kilay nito. She wanted to

run her fingers through his hair, trace his brows, feel the silkiness of his eyelashes, touch the bridge of his strong and confident nose. She wondered how soft his lips really were. She could see in his profile a low tolerance for fools and a passion for hard work that bordered on obsession.

Nalanghap niya ang mabining amoy ng pabango ni Raymond. Napangiti siya nang lihim. He even smelled sexy.

Muling tumigil ang paghinga niya nang bigla itong tumingin sa kanya. A jolt of awareness shot through her when their eyes met. Naikuyom niya ang mga palad. Nagtatanong ang mga mata nito. Nakataas ang isang kilay. Marahil ay narinig nito ang pagsinghot niya. Nais sana niyang lamunin na siya ng lupang kinatatayuan niya dahil sa pagkapahiya.

She could feel herself melting under his intense gaze. Hindi niya mapigilan ang mapaatras nang kaunti kaya tumama siya sa silya sa unahan ng mesa ni Annie. She cursed her clumsiness.

“Si Moira Flores nga pala, kaibigan ko. Professor siya sa *UP*. May hiniram lang siya diyan sa library at napadaan lang dito,” dinig niyang pakilala ni Annie nang mapansin nitong nakatingin sa kanya si Cong. “Moira, si Congressman Zamora,” patuloy ni Annie.

Tumango ito sa kanya at saka bigla na lamang tumuloy palabas ng kuwarto.

Napakapit si Moira sa backrest ng silya dahil nanginginig ang mga tuhod niya. Naramdaman niya ang paggaan ng pakiramdam niya. Air was passing through her lungs again. Wala sa sariling nagpaalam na siya kay Annie at bumalik na kay 'Pareng OCA'.

Pilit niyang tinanggal sa isip si Raymond at ang epekto nito sa kanya dahil hindi tama. Hindi dapat. Bigla siyang napatigil sa paglalakad nang makita niya si 'Pareng OCA'. Beside her beloved pagong was a very angry congressman, a very angry Raymond. Kausap nito ang isang parking attendant. Alam na kaagad niya ang dahilan ng galit nito. Hindi ito makalabas dahil halos nakabalandra si 'Pareng OCA' sa daanan nito.

Nagmadali siyang lumapit dito. Hindi siya kaagad napansin nito dahil nakatalikod sa kanya. May ilang segundo rin siyang nasa likod nito, pero hindi pa rin siya napapansin. Patuloy ang mahinahong pakikipag-usap nito sa parking attendant ngunit bakas sa body language ng lalaki ang irritation at frustration. Kinalabit niya ito.

He suddenly whipped around to face her. He was a head taller than she was at dahil ilang pulgada

lamang ang layo nila ay napilitan siyang tumingala rito. Kumunot ang noo ni Raymond nang makita siya.

“Uhm, Cong, sorry. Ako ang may-ari kay ‘Pareng OCA’. If you can just move aside, I can be out of here in a few minutes,” aniya. Nginitian niya ito nang alanganin.

Lalong dumilim ang mukha nito ngunit hindi naman siya pinaraan. Naghintay siya nang ilang segundo habang pinakatitigan siya nito.

Ibinuka ni Moira ang bibig niya upang ulitin ang sinabi ngunit hindi na niya naituloy ang sasabihin.

Sinulyapan at saka itinuro nito ang sasakyan niya. “Pareng Oca? You mean that old car?” Umiling ito saka nagpatuloy. “What were you thinking? Hindi mo ba naisip na puwede kang makaabala ng ibang tao? Besides, parking this way is dangerous. Paano kung nagasgasan mo ang kotse ko or ‘yung *BMW*? May ipambabayad ka ba?” galit na sabi ni Raymond.

Sa sandaling iyon ay nakalimutan niyang crush niya ito. Nakalimutan niyang magpa-cute dito. He was insulting her kaya hindi na niya napigilan ang sariling mangatuwiran. Di bale nang congressman ito. Di bale nang ma-blacklist siya rito sa Batasan.

Namaywang siya. “Hoy, Mister! Hindi porque

congressman ka ay may karapatan ka nang mang-insulto ng ibang tao. Kaya ko lang naman isiniksik si 'Pareng OCA' diyan ay dahil sandali lang naman ako sa loob. At saka alam ko ang ginagawa ko, I'm a good driver. So, excuse me!" Tinabig na niya ito at dumerecho na kay 'Pareng OCA'.

She was fuming mad. Nang makaupo na siya sa driver's seat ay nanalangin siya na hindi umiral ang sakit ni 'Pareng OCA' na mahirap i-start. Dininig naman ng Diyos ang panalangin niya at walang karekla-reklamo si Pareng OCA na umandar. Nakahinga siya nang maluwag. Akala niya ay mapapahiya pa siya.

Binusinahan niya ito dahil nakaharang pa rin ito sa daraanan niya. Nakatitig pa rin ito sa kanya. Strange, but he looked amused. Agad din itong tumabi at ikinumpas ang kamay na parang sinasabing '*Ladies first*'. Sumaludo pa ito sa kanya. Inirapan na lamang niya ito at saka inabante si 'Pareng OCA'. Walang lingong lumabas na siya ng parking lot. Kahit sa rearview mirror ay hindi na niya ito tinapunan ng tingin.

"Buwisit! Ano ba namang nakita ko sa iyo? Ang suplado!" angil niya sa sarili habang nagmamaneho na pabalik ng *UP*.

3

August.

One minute, Moira was running hard down the stairs in order to get to her next class. The next, she got the wind knocked out of her. And on the third, nakasalampak na siya ng upo sa sahig.

“Aww!” bulalas niya. Napahawak siya sa gulugod niya dahil medyo malakas ang pagkakabagsak niya. Nakaramdam siya ng kirot sa likod. Hindi na niya napigilan ang mapahikbi. Hindi niya alam kung talagang mababa lang talaga ang tolerance level niya sa pain or dahil sa trauma na naranasan niya noong bata pa siya nang nalaglag siya sa puno at nabalian ng buto.

“Miss, are you okay?” untag ng lalaki na lumuhod sa tabi niya.

Nakangigiwi pa rin na tiningala niya ito at panandalian niyang nakalimutan ang sakit na nadarama. Namilog ang mga mata niya nang makilala ang lalaking tumutulong sa kanya. After four months ay ngayon lang sila muli nagkita ng crush niya.

Muli niyang naalala ang huli nilang pagkikita ni

Cong. Raymond Zamora. Namula ang pisngi niya. Matagal na niyang pinagsisihan ang pag-init ng ulo niya rito. She should not have said those things to him. After all, she really was the one at fault. Ilang linggo rin siyang kinabahan tuwing mag-uusap sila ni Annie. Ikinakatakot niyang baka ikinuwento ni Raymond ang naging sagutan nila. Ngunit ni minsan ay hindi iyon nabanggit sa kanya ng kaibigan kaya nakahinga siya nang maluwag.

“You’re Annie’s friend, right?” tanong nito sa kanya.

Hindi mawala-wala ang pamumula ng pisngi niya dahil sa ganito pang puwesto niya muling nakita ang crush niyang congressman. She tried to stop herself from checking her hair or if her face was oily. It would be too obvious, too vain. Tango lang ang isinagot niya sa tanong nito.

“I’m so sorry. Mang Johnny, my bodyguard, thought that you were some kind of threat to me. So, he pushed you away from me without thinking first. Medyo napalakas nga lang ang tulak niya sa iyo.”

Sa narinig ay saka lamang naging klaro ang lahat sa kanya. Patakbo siyang bumababa ng hagdanan nang mabangga niya si Raymond at saka naman siya hinablot ng bodyguard nito. Nawala ang hiya niya.

Ito pala ang salarin.

“Sorry po, Ma’am,” ani Mang Johnny.

Tiningnan niya mula ulo hanggang paa ang bodyguard. He was big, burly and too mean-looking. Based on her assessment, the bodyguard was too big for her to take on. Kaya sa halip na sa bodyguard mainis ay si Raymond ang hinarap niya. Tiningnan niya ito nang masama saka inirapan at nagtangkang tumayo. Every muscle in her body protested.

“What are you, paranoid or something? Sa tingin mo ba sa laki mong ’yan, I can do you harm?” inis na sabi niya.

Pinalis ni Moira ang kamay nitong nagnanais na alalayan siya ngunit napakapit pa rin siya sa braso nito nang muling kumirot ang likod niya. His other arm went around her.

Sliding his arms more firmly around her waist, he moved against her so that she was supported by his big body. She could not help but inhale his masculine scent when her face was pressed against his warm chest. Ang likod niya ang masakit pero ang puso niya ay nag-double time nang madikit siya sa katawan nito. Ang tuhod niya ay lalong nanlambot. Unti-unting nawala ang inis niya rito.

“Uhm, do you need to go to a hospital or something?” alanganing tanong nito na pilit inaaninag ang mukha niya.

“No! No hospital, please. I just need a minute. The pain is already going away.” She buried her face deeper in his chest, loving the warmth it offered her. Sa utak niya ay nagpe-play ang awit ng *Beatles*—*All we need is love. Love... Love... Love.*

“Maybe we should get you checked. I know somebody who had slipped disc and from what she told me, it was pretty painful,” putol ni Raymond sa kanta ng *Beatles*.

Nang hindi siya sumagot ay naramdaman niya na inalis nito ang isang braso at mayamaya pa ay nasa likod na ng mga tuhod niya ang mga iyon at pangko na siya nito. He started to move towards his car in the parking lot. “You’re not fainting on me, right? Let’s get you to a hospital. Just to be sure.”

Namula ang mga pisngi ni Moira ngunit laking pasalamat niya na hindi naman nito napansin iyon. “H-hindi na. I just closed my eyes for a second to manage the pain. Pawala na rin. You can put me down now.”

He stopped walking. Looked down at her. His eyes

were searching hers. “Kailangan nating makasiguro na hindi grabe ang nangyari sa iyo.”

“No. Really. I’m okay now.” Napalunok si Moira dahil napatuon ang mga mata niya sa mga labi nito.

Nagpatuloy ito sa paglakad patungo sa kotse nito. Nakasunod naman ang bodyguard sa kanila. Over his shoulders, he spoke to Mang Johnny. “Makakuha ba kayo ng ice pack sa faculty office?”

Tumango lamang ang mas matandang lalaki at tumungo na sa lugar na binanggit ng amo.

Naiupo siya nito kaagad sa passenger seat nang makarating sila sa black *Landcruiser* nito.

“May masakit pa bang iba sa iyo? I’d like to look at your back, if I may.” Tumango na lamang siya. He started to roam his arms around her arms and legs in an impersonal fashion. Without realizing how his hands were affecting her. Fortunately, mukhang hindi nito napansin ang naging reaksiyon niya.

“Yung pride ko lang naman. All those defense martial arts classes that I took were worth nothing against Mang Johnny.”

Umalpas ang isang malutong na halakhak mula sa mga labi nito. Dumating na si Mang Johnny at

iniabot kay Raymond ang ice pack. Pilyong tiningnan nito si Mang Johnny at saka ibinalik ang tingin sa kanya. Bumunghalit na naman ito ng tawa. Nahawa na rin siya sa pagtawa nito.

Moira studied him while he was pressing the ice pack on her sore back.

“Ano’ng ginagawa mo dito?” basag niya sa katahimikan.

“Bumisita ako sa dating professor ko. Ikaw...” His voice trailed off. Kumunot ang noo nito na parang may pilit inaalala.

“Hindi mo natatandaan ang pangalan ko, ano?” aniya.

“Sure, I do.” He looked as if he was searching his brains for her name.

Nagpasya siyang bigyan ito ng clues. “We’ve been introduced before.”

“Of course. Wait, don’t tell me. I’ve got a good memory for names.”

“At your office.”

“Yeah, I’m starting to remember.”

“My name starts with the letter M.” Pinagmasdan

niya itong mabuti. His expression remained blank.

“It’s Mickey,” she joked.

“Why are you telling me something I already know... Mickey?” nakangiting anito.

Tumaas ang isang kilay niya. She could not help but smirk at him. Raymond did not even know her name! There she was, still remembering the last time they met, ngunit ni hindi man lang nito maalala na nagsisimula sa letter M ang pangalan niya. She felt so stupid, having a crush on a man who did not even care to remember her name.

4

November.

“Mickey?” Tumaas ang mga balahibo ni Moira sa leeg nang marinig ang pangalan na iyon. Isang tao lang ang may pamilyar na tinig na iyon at ito lamang ang tatawag sa kanya niyon.

She turned around and Raymond, with a big grin on his face, was right behind her. She had told herself repeatedly to stop her foolish crush on the man. But, no. Her idiot heart skipped a beat when she laid eyes on him.

Moira never told Annie about her last encounter with Raymond. Na-conclude din niya na hindi rin ito naikuwento ng kongresista sa kaibigan niya dahil ‘Mickey’ pa rin ang pagkakilala nito sa kanya.

Pinigilan niya ang sarili na taasan ito ng kilay. Ni hindi niya ninais itama ang pangalan niya. Ipinaskil niya ang isang ngiti sa mukha niya. “Raymart. Oh, excuse me. I mean, Raymond.”

“Funny seeing you here. Trying to find a gift for your boyfriend?” nakangiting tanong nito.

Nasa counter siya ng men's perfume ng *Rustan's Department Store* sa *Ayala Center*. Naghahanap siya ng puwedeng iregalo sa dean ng PolSci Department. Nag-ambag silang lahat sa departamento nila upang mabilhan ng birthday gift ang dean nila.

Napangiti si Moira sa tanong nito. Umiling siya. "Uh-uh. It's funny seeing you here as well. I thought guys don't like to shop."

He just shrugged. "I was in *Shangri-La Hotel* for a meeting earlier and then I realized I needed a few things. So, here I am suffering. I don't know where to find the things I want."

Nagpakawala pa ito ng isang buntong-hininga. Raymond looked so helpless and adorable at hindi niya mapigilan ang sarili na mapangiti rito. She read between the lines and knew he was asking her for help.

"Alam mo, we girls, like to think of shopping as a fun therapy and as a form of exercise. And all you have to do is ask."

Lumawak ang ngiti ni Raymond sa mukha. "Talaga? You wouldn't mind?"

"Of course not. So, what's on your list?"

“I need to buy a few shirts and uhm... perfume. Shall we?”

With a big smile on his face, inalok nito ang braso sa kanya. Masaya naman niyang tinanggap. Kilig na kilig si Moira, feeling girlfriend.

“So, how’s your back?” usisa nito habang tinatanggap ang inaabot niyang isang apple green Lacoste polo shirt.

“Sinabi ko naman sa ’yo, mas na-hurt ang pride ko kaysa sa likod ko,” nakangiting turan niya.

“Uhm, that’s good.” Nakakunot ang noo ni Raymond.

“Why are you frowning? Hindi mo ba gusto ang suggestions ko?”

“Oh no. It’s not that. I like it, really. I was just trying to remember the name of your car. Natatandaan ko n’ung awayin mo ‘ko sa parking lot ng Batasan. You mentioned it. I just can’t remember. I found it so funny that you named that beat-up old junk.”

Napangiti si Moira. “Hey, huwag mong apihin si ‘Pareng OCA’. Sensitive iyon.”

Napahalakhak ito. “Oh yeah! Pareng OCA. That’s really cool but at the same time, it’s a little weird.”

Napahalakhak siya sa sinabi nito. She looked in his eyes and she could see the teasing glint there. Inabot niya ang isang pink na polo shirt dito.

“So, is there any story about you naming your car ‘Pareng OCA?’”

“Pareng OCA was my father’s old car. Noong bata pa ako, may obsession ako to name everything.” Tumingin siya rito. “Actually, until now. I still have a penchant for naming things and people.” *For example, you. You’re my very own McDreamy*, dugtong niya sa isip, referring to a very hot and sexy character in the TV series, *Grey’s Anatomy*.

“I was just starting to learn the alphabet then. Isang araw, I asked my father about the letters in the license plate. Sinabi naman niya. O-C-A. I insisted na puwede iyong basahin dahil it consisted of letters. Hindi ko tinantanan noon si Tatay hangga’t hindi niya sinasabi sa akin. Sa kakulitan ko, sinabi na lang niya ‘Oka’. And it stuck. The junk became ‘Pareng OCA,’ patuloy ni Moira.

Tawa ito nang tawa sa kuwento niya.

“I know. I know. I was pretty weird even as a child,” aniya.

Hinawakan ni Raymond ang pisngi niya at

kinurot. “No. It’s cute. You’re cute.”

Nag-init ang mga pisngi niya sa sinabi nito. Raymond was looking in her eyes with the same intensity when they first locked eyes. It was ‘the look’. Natakot siya. Sinabi na niya sa sarili na titigilan na niya ang walang kakuwenta-kuwentang crush niya rito ngunit heto na naman siya. Dreaming about *McDreamy* again. Parang walang natutunan. Jeez! Ngunit naalala niya na tinatawag nga pala siya nitong Mickey kaya pilit niyang binalewala ang moment na iyon. Hindi niya dapat binibigyan ng meaning ang mga actions nito. Umatras siya palayo rito. Nagpatuloy na siya sa pamimili ng mga shirts para rito.

Kung ano ang sabihin niyang bagay rito ay siya nitong pinipili. He even accepted her suggestion of the perfume *Burberry for Men*. After paying for all their purchases at the counter, her heart sank. She sensed that their time together was at an end. She had an awful feeling that he was not even going to ask for her phone number.

Kumulo ang tiyan ni Moira. Nakalimutan niyang kumain ng tanghalian. Out of the blue, desperation and hunger made her ask, “I don’t suppose you’d consider feeding me?” *Was that too obvious? Hunger*

really makes me weird.

Matagal na panahon na rin mula nang huling mag-enjoy si Raymond na panooring kumain ang isang babae. Mickey never held back her appreciation of each of the courses presented to her. An expression of pure bliss flitted across her face when she took in another bite of the Tiramisu she had ordered for dessert. The tip of her tongue picked up a dab of cream at the corner her lip. His eyes drifted along her graceful neck, the smooth collarbone and down to those breasts...

“What?” Her fork hung in mid-air, at nakakunot ang noo nito sa kanya.

He grinned, and right then it occurred to him that he had not enjoyed himself so much with a woman in a very long time. If only Mickey was the type he could get into bed without any attachments.

He was hit with a vision of her naked. Whoa. Mickey amused him but she did not turn him on. Not really. Maybe he had thought about her sexually a couple of times. But it was nothing serious. He was just messing around.

“Wala sa bokabularyo mo ang salitang diet, ano?”

Nagbibiro ang tinig ni Raymond upang hindi niya ito ma-offend. Alam niyang sensitive ang mga babae pagdating sa mga ganitong bagay.

Mickey just smiled at him. Tininidor nito ang isang piraso ng cake at saka sumubo muli. “Wala talaga. Besides, hindi naman ako tumataba, eh. Siguro dahil sa stress na rin sa mga delinkuwent kong estudyante. At kung matitikman mo ito, it tastes like heaven.”

Kape lang ang in-order niya kanina para sa dessert. Hindi talaga siya mahilig sa matamis. Kumuha uli ito ng kapisaso ng cake at inilapit sa bibig niya.

“Tikman mo.”

He just looked at her and then at the fork with the cake on it. Marahil ay medyo natagalan siya sa pagtitig sa cake kaya binawi na nito. Namumula ang pisngi ni Moira na tumungo. He felt so rotten. Hinila niya ang kamay nito at isinubo ang cake. Masarap nga. Hindi masyadong matamis. He looked at her again and smiled appreciatively. Tahimik itong nagpatuloy kumain.

Tinitigan niya ang dalaga. Wala itong kolorete sa mukha but her face still looked so fresh. Mahaba ang mga pilik nito sa mga mata at mapupula ang

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mga labi. Her long black hair was tied in a ponytail. Kanina pa niya gustong sabihin dito na tanggalin ang pagkakatali sa buhok nito. He remembered when he brushed his hands on her hair when she was sitting inside his car and he was pressing the icepack on her back. It felt so silky and smooth. He remembered the silkiness of the skin on her back. He also remembered that he had a hard-on then.

Nawala ang ngiti ni Raymond sa mukha nang maalala si Janine. Palagi siya nito ngayong tinatawagan upang magkita sila. Isang beses na rin niyang nadatnan ito sa kuwarto niya upang akitin siya sa pakikipagsiping dito ngunit alam na niya ang lason ni Janine at hinding-hindi na siya muling titikim ng lason. She was acting like nothing happened. Hinahayaan lamang niya ito sa mga ginagawa. Hindi pa niya alam kung ano ba talaga ang gusto niyang mangyari. Sa ngayon ay hinahayaan niyang umusad ang kaso ng annulment nila kahit na ipinipilit ni Janine na iurong iyon.

Pinalis niya sa isip ang asawa at tinitigan si Mickey. Marahil kaya siya nag-enjoy na kasama ito ay dahil wala itong arte sa katawan. She was wearing a simple pink t-shirt and distressed jeans. Unlike Janine, she did not talk about herself unless asked. Ngayon lang niya na-realize na masyadong self-

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absorbed ang kanyang pinakasalan. He did not hear a single word of complaint from Mickey the entire time that they were together. She did not ask him to buy her anything even if he was perfectly willing to do so. Ilang beses din niya itong inalok na bilhin ang mga bagay na napansin niyang mukhang nagustuhan nito ngunit matindi ang pagtangga ng babae.

She was just so fun to be with. He could relax with her. Hindi niya kailangang maging on-guard against Mickey. He instinctively knew that she would not take advantage of him. That she would not ask for anything that he was not willing to give.

Mickey was too good for him at iyon ang senyales na hindi niya maaaring ituloy ang kung ano mang namamagitan sa kanilang dalawa. Dagdag pa doon ang pagbabalik ni Janine sa buhay niya.

5

December.

Hindi mapakali si Moira. It was strange that she felt a fluttering in her stomach when she heard Raymond's car pulling up the driveway. She was actually nervous. No. Not nervous but excited.

Inimbitahan siya ni Annie na sumama sa Christmas party ng mga ito rito sa resthouse ni Raymond sa *Tagaytay Highlands*.

Kagabi ay bigla na lamang itong dumating sa bahay niya na umiiyak. Alam na niya kaagad ang dahilan. Annie found out that Denver was fooling around. Isang linggo na niyang alam na may ibang babae ito na cheerleader para sa *UP Fighting Maroons*. Moira saw them holding hands while eating dinner at *Rodic's*.

Hirap na hirap siyang mag-isip ng paraan at maghanap ng tamang panahon para sabihin kay Annie ang kalokohan ng boylet nito. She had an experience in high school when she told Annie that her boyfriend was cheating on her and her best friend never talked to her again. Natakot siyang mangyari

iyon muli.

Hinayaan niyang ilabas ni Annie ang sama ng loob nito. Noong una ay ayaw niya talagang makipagmabutihan ito kay Denver, pero nang makita niya kung gaano kasaya ang kaibigan ay natuwa na rin siya para rito. She felt that it was doomed from the start but she could not bring herself to tell Annie that. Awang-awa siya sa kaibigan.

Ang ikinagulat niya kagabi ay sa kalagitnaan ng pag-e-emote nito ay nag-ring ang cellphone nito at nang sagutin nito ay parang hindi umiyak na binulyawan ang kausap. Nawala ang lungkot sa mga mata at parang hindi brokenhearted na nakipagbangayan kay Michael. Alam niyang si Michael iyon dahil sa lalaki lamang na iyon nagkakaroon ng kakaibang kislap sa mga mata ng best friend niya.

Napangiti si Moira at nawala ang agam-agam. Hindi naman pala ganoon katindi ang broken heart ni Annie. Marahil, ego at pride lamang nito ang nasaling.

Nang banggitin ni Annie ang tungkol sa Christmas party ng mga ito at kailangan nito ng kasama ay hindi na niya pinalampas ang pagkakataon. Kahit last minute ang imbitasyon nito at spare tire ang dating ng beauty niya ay pumayag pa rin siya.

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Chance na niya ito upang malaman kung ano ba talaga ang misteryo ng crush niya kay *McDreamy*. Maybe once and for all ay mawawala na rin ang crush niya rito if she could spend more time with him. Siguro ay ang appeal nito sa kanya ay iyon bang mahirap abutin. She was acting like an obsessed woman. She even forgave him for forgetting her name and calling her 'Mickey'.

Simula nang gabing maghiwalay sila ni Raymond ay makailang ulit na rin niyang binatukan ang sarili sa hindi paghingi ng number nito. Oo nga at madali niyang makukuha ang number nito kay Annie, but by asking him for a contact number, he would know that she was interested in him. Katuwiran niya sa sarili ay wala namang masama kung gawin niya iyon dahil liberated na ang mga babae ngayon.

Pero pinanghinaan pa rin siya ng loob. Habang magkasama sila ni Raymond ay napansin naman niyang nag-e-enjoy ito sa company niya at minsan ay nakikitaan niya ito ng attraction para sa kanya, pero sa tuwi-tuwina ay biglang mawawala iyon. He was sending her mixed signals. Kaya urong-sulong din ang plano niya na bigyan ng chance kung anuman ang mayroon silang dalawa.

Naghalukipkip si Moira dahil napakalamig ng

panahon sa Tagaytay. Ilang araw na lang ay Pasko na kaya naka-sweater na silang lahat. Gumawa rin ng apoy si Michael sa fireplace sa living room kaya nakaumpok sila sa malapit sa fireplace. Maganda ang disenyo ng resthouse ni Raymond dito sa *The Woodlands sa Tagaytay Highlands*. Mukha iyong inspired from traditional log cabins sa Amerika dahil yari sa malalaking kahoy. Inside, the atmosphere was very warm and cozy. Kulang na lang ay mag-snow sa labas. Sabi ni Annie sa kanya ay exclusive daw ang mga bahay roon sa mga miyembro ng *Tagaytay Highlands and Midlands Golf and Country Clubs*.

Si Annie ay nakaupo sa tabi niya sa mahabang leather couch. Nakasimangot ito dahil inaasar na naman ni Michael. Napangiti siya. Iba ang pakiramdam niya sa dalawang ito. Madalas na ikuwento ni Annie si Michael sa kanya. Kahit puro negative ang kuwento nito ay nahahalata niya na mas madalas pa itong magkuwento tungkol sa lawyer kaysa sa kahit na sino pang naging boyfriend nito.

Si Thelma, ang super preggy na executive assistant ni Raymond ay katabi rin ang asawa. Diana was on the other side of the room with her boyfriend. Si Menchie at si Jerry ay nakaumpok sa harap ng fireplace with their respective spouses. Si Raymond na lang ang kulang. Sa isang sulok ng kuwanto ay

isang dambuhalang Christmas tree. Ang mga regalo nila ay nasa ilalim na nito.

Sinabihan siya ni Annie na magdala ng regalo dahil may exchange gift daw. Binilhan na rin niya ng mga regalo ang iba pang kaopisina nito kanina nang mapadaan sila sa SM Bicutan. Kanina pa niya pasimpleng inuusisa sina Michael at Annie kung may kasamang date si Raymond. Wala naman siyang makuhang maliwanag na sagot mula sa mga ito.

Alam niyang hiwalay ito sa asawa at kasalukuyang dinidinig ang annulment case nito. Ang hindi lang niya alam ay kung may girlfriend na ito. Matagal na ring naikuwento ni Annie sa kanya na wala nang naging serious relationship si Raymond simula nang pagtaksilan ito ng asawa pero baka naman naka-get over na ito ngayon at nakikipag-date na. Sa ilang beses nilang pagkikita ni Raymond ay pinagsupladuhan siya noong una pero bumait na rin sa kanya nitong huli. Ang tanging hiling niya kay Santa Claus ay wala itong bitbit na date.

Pilit niyang kinalma ang sarili nang marinig ang pagbagsak ng pinto ng kotse ni Raymond. Any minute now, he would be coming in through the door.

Napalington siya nang bumukas ang pinto. Pumasok ang driver/bodyguard nitong si Mang

Johnny na may dala-dalang mga regalo. Dumating na rin ang kanilang panauhing pandangal: all six feet of *McDreamy*.

“Am I late, guys? Sorry. I got held up with some business in Manila,” nakangiting bungad nito sa kanila mula sa pinto.

Masayang bumati ang mga kasama niya ng “Merry Christmas!” sa boss nila.

She felt the full impact of his gaze when his eyes directly met her. Muntikan na siyang mapasinghap. Something sizzled in the air between them, something that felt heady and seductive, at least in her imagination.

“Mickey!” masayang ani Raymond. Eventhough she wanted to hit him in the head with a beer bottle because he was still calling her that name, she could not help but smile warmly at him. Naglakad ito palapit sa kanya.

Lahat ng atensyon ni Moira ay na kay Raymond ngunit nakaramdam siya ng kakaiba at napalingon siya sa mga tao sa paligid nila. Nagtataka ang mga mata ng mga ito. She prayed that everybody would just think it was some kind of a joke or a slip of the tongue.

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She groaned inwardly when Annie asked, “When did your name become Mickey?”

“Yeah. Five minutes ago, you were still Moira,” dagdag ni Michael.

She tentatively offered Raymond a shy smile. He folded his arms on his chest and waited for her answer.

“Ahm. Uhm. Kasi...” alanganing saad niya. Wala na siyang lusot. “We met a few months before. Raymond told me that he knew my name but couldn’t come up with anything. So, I told him my name was ‘Mickey’ and he happily agreed that he knew it all along. Ever since then, he’d been calling me ‘Mickey.’”

Nabalot ng katahimikan ang grupo. Lahat ay naghihintay ng reaksyon ni Raymond. She held her breath again, hoping she did not ruin his obviously happy mood.

Pumitik ito at ngumiti nang maluwanag. “I knew it! There was something not quite right with your name being ‘Mickey’! I guess that serves me right, huh?”

Nagkatawanan na silang lahat. Nakahinga na rin siya nang maluwanag.

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Ang matagal na niyang inaasam-asam na mangyari ay nangyayari na. He finally noticed that a certain Mickey, este Moira Flores pala, was also part of the human race. Nag-back flip ang puso niya. Hindi niya mapigilan ang mga mata na pagpiyestahan ang kabuuan ng lalaki. He was wearing the *Lacoste* shirt that they bought together. She wondered how he would smell if she could get close to him. Amoy *Safeguard* kaya? O baka naman amoy pabango? Baka naman amoy *Old Spice*. Napahagikgik siya nang lihim sa naisip.

Dumerecho ito sa bakanteng espasyo sa tabi niya. She visibly inhaled. Nanuot sa ilong niya ang banayad nitong pabango. She was wrong on all accounts. He smelled clean, woodsy, spicy. And then she knew what cologne he used. It was *Burberry for Men!* Ang pinili niyang pabango para rito. *Oh my God! I could just eat him up.*

Napahiya si Moira sa sarili sa naisip. Hindi siya dapat nag-iisip ng ganito. Isa siyang respetadong propesora sa kagalang-galang na institusyon ng *Unibersidad ng Pilipinas* at ang pinagnanasaan niya ay isang kapita-pitagang kongresista ng bansa! Hindi niya dapat kalimutan na kahit hiwalay ang lalaking ito sa asawa ay may asawa pa rin itong tao.

She was startled when he held out his hands to her. He smiled gorgeously. She looked blankly at his outstretched hands. Narinig niya ang mahinang pagtawa nito.

“I’ve never had this effect on women before. It seems I’ve struck you speechless,” anito sa suwabeng tinig. She almost forgot his habit of speaking in perfect English, which she found so damned appealing.

Nang rumehistro sa utak ni Moira ang sinabi nito ay bigla siyang natauhan. Gusto niyang batukan ang sarili. She graduated magna cum laude and she could not find a damned thing to say. She tried to pick up the pieces of her scattered wits, inhaled sharply and looked directly into his eyes.

She saw the corner of his eyes crinkle with amusement and she could not help but smile back. She held out her hands to shake his. Nakaramdam siya ng banayad na kiliti nang maglapat ang dulo ng mga daliri nila. And then his big hand enveloped her smaller one.

“By the way, let me introduce myself again. I’m Raymond.”

“Moira,” simpleng tugon niya.

Wari ay tumigil ang mundo niya habang nakatitig

sa mga mata nito at ang kamay niya ay nababalutan ng kamay nito.

Napaliyad na lamang siyang nang may tumusok sa tagiliran niya. Bigla siyang napalingon kay Annie. Pinanlakihan siya nito ng mga mata. Napahiyang binawi niya ang kamay mula kay Raymond.

“Raymond, ano? Dinner muna and then over dessert na ang exchange gift, ha. Then afterwards, play some music, dance and drink. Is that all right with you?” tanong ni Annie.

“Sure,” nakangiting tugon ni Raymond.

Maybe it was in the air, the Christmas air. Hindi mapigilan ni Raymond na malungkot the past few days. He was feeling the chill of loneliness even if Janine wanted him back. He was always reluctant to go home these days. He still could not find it in himself to forgive his soon-to-be ex-wife.

And he found himself thinking about Moira the past few weeks. He enjoyed her company too much the last time they were together. He found her laugh very comforting. He found her intelligent and stimulating.

A Night of Fantasy - Pauline Pascual

If he were honest with himself, he would admit he was definitely attracted to her. Habang tinititigan niya ito ay lalo itong gumaganda sa paningin niya. He was finding her habit of nibbling on her bottom lip too arousing. He began to wonder how those lips would taste. Would she taste sweet? Would he be able to taste the beer on her tongue? Naiinggit na siya sa basong dumidikit sa labi nito, which was really ridiculous.

After a sumptuous dinner, they exchanged gifts. He received a necktie from Moira, which he did not expect. Wala siyang dalang regalo rito dahil hindi niya alam na kasama pala ito ni Annie.

Kinuha niya ang isang simpleng pair of pearl earrings mula sa kotse na dapat sana ay ireregalo niya sa kapatid niya. It was a beautiful and very expensive South Sea Pearl ngunit hindi niya pinagsisihan ang pagbibigay nito kay Moira dahil hindi mababayaran ang kasiyahan na nakita niya sa mukha nito. He found delight in her simple appreciation of his gift. He realized that she did not even know that the pearl was real. Getting a gift from him made her happy, knowing that it was as real as the expression on her face would have made her delirious. But he did not tell her.

A Night of Fantasy - Pauline Pascual

Michael slipped a CD on the player and an Usher song came on. Everybody grabbed their partners and started to dance. Natatawa siyang umiling nang hatakin siya ni Moira upang sumayaw. Lahat ng mga kasama nila ay nasa gitna na ng living room at nagsisipagsayawan. Even Mang Johnny was dancing. He could not resist her pouting lips so he got up and danced to the beat. When other songs came on, they danced with the others. Ngunit bumalik din sila sa isa't isa after cooling off with beers, stoking the fire, shedding their sweatshirts.

The beer and the music urged them on to continue dancing. Their bodies were touching; legs brushing against each other. His hands were on Moira's back and her hands were on his neck, playing with his hair. They were staring into each other's eyes.

Somewhere between Craig David's *Fill Me In* and Mariah Carey's *Shake It Off*, Raymond started to forget that Moira was off limits. As they took a walk outside, he blamed the night, the cold, the music, and too many beers. He blamed the impish smile on her face as she dared him to keep up with her. But most of all, he blamed his loneliness, which he now realized was way too strong... or he would be able to remember this was Moira, Annie's best friend.

Moira as a potential bed partner had no place in his life, and he needed to get a grip.

Tahimik sila pareho habang naglalakad. Nakikiramdam sa isa't isa. He stopped walking. Moira also halted after taking several more steps. They were in the middle of a very foggy road. Mabini ang ilaw na nagmumula sa mga poste.

She turned around and looked at him. “Bumalik na tayo sa bahay. Malamig masyado.” She nibbled on her bottom lip.

He could not look away from those rosy lips. “Not yet,” tutol niya. *I need somebody to touch 'cause it's been so damn long.*

“How sober are you?” prangkang tanong ni Moira.

“Almost.”

“Good. Because I'm not.”

His eyes lingered on her mouth. He wanted to taste her.

“And if I weren't almost sober?” he said.

“You are. Almost, sabi mo nga. Disiplinado kang tao.”

“Hmm. Discipline. Because one of us needs it, right?” Alanganing tumango si Moira. “To hell with discipline!”

They were both adults. They knew what they were doing, and so he took a step toward her.

Itinaas ni Moira ang mga kamay upang pigilan siya. “I’m drunk. Really, really drunk.”

“I know.” Nagpatuloy siyang lumapit dito.

She took a step backward. “I’m totally wasted.”

“Sure.” He stopped and waited. They were only a meter apart.

Humakbang ito palapit sa kanya. “Remind me never to drink again.”

“Tomorrow.” Hinaplos niya ang pisngi nito. She leaned into his hand. He rubbed his thumb over her bottom lip. “Could you be quiet now so I can kiss you?”

Kumurap ito. “Really?” Tumango si Raymond. “Because, if you do, I’ll kiss you back, so you need to remember that I’m—”

“Drunk. I’ll remember.” He slipped his hands into her hair.

She gazed up at him. “Basta ba nagkakaintindihan

tayo.”

“Yes,” he said softly. And then he kissed her.

They both forgot about the cold. The warmth from each other’s body was enough. She arched against him. She wound her arms around his neck, pressed her hips to his. Their tongues played an erotic game. He was hard, mindless. He needed more, and his hands started to explore her side until he found the sides of her breast. He moved his thumb just a little and found her nipple.

Narinig niya ang ungol mula rito. Sumunod ay naramdaman na niya ang mga palad nito sa kanyang dibdib. Itinutulak siya.

He drew back. “Moira?”

Tumingin ito sa mga mata niya. “I... I guess I have more self-discipline than I thought,” bulong nito.

“Damn!” ang tanging nasambit ni Raymond.