



Fagalog Online Pocketbook
The leading source of online pinoy stories

Meeting the
Virgin Bachelor
Darla

Unang Pag-Imprenta, 2014

Karapatang Pag-aari © 2008-2014, Tagalog Online Pocketbook

Lahat ng karapatan ay reserbado. Walang bahagi ng publikasyong ito ang maaaring kopyahin, sa anumang anyo o paraan ng walang pahintulot sa pamamagitan ng pagpapadala ng liham sa amin.

Ang ebook na ito ay obra ng mga manunulat na nagsulat nito. Ang Tagalog Online Pocketbook ay hindi ginarantiya ang kawastuhan ng mga bawat nakasulat dito at hindi tumatanggap ng anumang panagutan para sa anumang resulta ng paggamit nito.

Kung may pagkakahalintulad man sa pangalan, lugar, bagay, pangyayari o anuman sa tunay na buhay ay pahindi ito sinasadya dahil ang mga ito ay pawang kathang isip lamang.

Para sa karagdagang impormasyon, alamin ang mga sumusunod na detalye sa ibaba.

- Website <http://www.tagalogonlinepocketbook.com>
- Email support@tagalogonlinepocketbook.com
- Facebook <http://facebook.com/tagalogonlinepocketbook>
- Join Us <http://facebook.com/groups/tagalogonlinepocketbook>
- Like Us <http://facebook.com/topreader>
- Follow Us <http://twitter.com/topocketbook>

From the coffee shop to the wedding of Carina “Carrie” Danvers’ friend, Jessica, is it fate that designs her meeting the virgin bachelor na si Mac Denley Burrows? Pero komplikado kahit saang anggulo tingnan dahil sa mayroon naman itong Gemma Anderson at siya naman ay may mga masusugid na manliligaw na isang half-Korean and half-American na si Jung-II at isang Peruvian na si Fernando. But well, not to mention a rich Hindi man named Khalem.

Will she ever choose the right one for her? And will she be the one for the man she will choose in the end?

Chapter 1

“Oh... my... God...!” Jenna dramatically exclaimed habang nakatitig sa entry way ng coffee shop na kanilang kinaroroonan, that Friday afternoon sa downtown ng Trenton City. “He’s... so frothy!”

Napalingon ang dalagang 26-year old na si Carina Danvers sa direksyong tinitignan ng kanyang tila dreamy eyed friend. Napadaku ang kayang tingin sa isang matangkad na puting Amerikanong may malakas ang dating. He was wearing a pair of fitting jeans at saka sweatshirt. Kahit tignan lang ang katawan nito, he was truly a hunk, sexy and hot man! His dark brown hair was cut short like any military man, matipuno, magandang-maganda ang build ng katawan na obviously pinangangalagaan sa gym at exercise, his face looked serious like no one could mess around him, his face was clean shaven, matangos ang ilong, deep-set na green eyes, dark brown eyebrows, magagandang mga labi... she tore her gaze from there at napunta sa biceps nito that were muscled, his thighs were also muscled dahil sa jeans nito humapit doon and well... she refused to look at the center of his body – pero sadyang mapaglaro ang kanyang mga mata dahil she could see the bulk there... she blushed tuloy nang makita niyang napatingin sa kanyang mukha – nang deretso – ang lalakeng kapapasok lang. And her heart thumped strongly against her chest.

There was nothing in his eyes but a sparkle of momentary mischief. She looked away nang may hinahanap ang mga mata nito. And she didn’t see where he was going. Bumaling na naman kase siya sa dalawang kaibigang kasama niya doon na kapwa mga half-Filipina and half-Americans, since high school. Sina Jenna and Jessica.

“Oyy... ikaw ‘ata ang type ni Mr. Expressionless Hunk,” tudyo pa ni Jessica, ang ikakasal na friend nila kinabukasan na.

“Hah!” Napasabi niyang may hilaw na tawa.

“Oy, type ko siya,” lumabi pa si Jenna na napatingin kung saan nagtungong table ang lalake.

He was just across to where they were, isang grupo ng mga lalakeng nangangape sa spring day na iyon. Madalas silang nagpupunta sa coffee shop na ito dahil sa suki na nila ito't may-ari naman doon ang isang manliligaw ni Carrie na Peruvian, si Fernando. And speaking of the devil, papalapit itong ngiting-ngiti sa dalaga. May dala itong isang rosas sa isang kamay at isang frothy coffee na di naman niya in-order na may heart pang disenyo.

Napataas siya ng kilay pero napangiti naman. Fernando was a very handsome man. Matikas ito at sweet.

“Wow! Sana ako na lang ang nililigawan ni Fernando,” ang may pagseselos na pasaring ni Jenna kina Carrie at Jessica.

Napatawa sina Carrie at Jessica sa kaibigan nila. Inilapag naman ng Peruvian ang dala nitong tasa ng coffee sa mesa, sa harap ni Carrie at tinanggap ng dalaga ang pulang rosas na bigay nito sa kanya.

“*Muchas gracias, Fernando,*” thank you very much, ang pasalamat pa ng dalaga sa lalake.

“*De nada, dulce mia,*” you're welcome, my sweet, ang anito at hinalikan sa pisngi ang dalaga bago ito bumaling kay Jessica, “So, I heard the news. Because I was always out of town, and tomorrow, unfortunately, I'm going to be out of town, too for business' sake, I cannot attend your wedding, sweet Jessica,” ang nailling na despensa ng guwapong lalake.

“Oh, that's too bad, Fernando!” Sumimangot na sabi naman ni Jessica. “But then, I'll tell Luis that you can't make it because of your engagement. I'm sure he'll understand.”

Luis and Fernando were both Peruvian at magkklase sa university noon kung kaya't medyo close nga sila at dito rin sa coffee shop na ito nagkakilala sina Jessica at Luis noon – 5 years ago. At naging magkasintahan ang mga ito ng 3 years at heto na nga't magpapakasal na sila kinabukasan na dalawa.

“Sure, I know the man – your man,” ngumiti nang napaka-charming si Fernando kay Jessica. He was always sweet to anyone – but he was sweeter to Carrie dahil nanliligaw na itong

35-year old sa kanya for more than 4 years na. Pero hanggang ngayon ay di pa rin ito masagot-sagot ng dalaga. Kung si Jenna nga lang sana ang masusunod, matagal na itong pinasagot ng kaibigan. Ngunit wala talagang nangyari.

“And I do understand, Fernando. But thank you for the coffee tomorrow,” ngumising sabi pa ng babae. “It’d be great for our friends here and the guests.”

“Oh, no problem! I just thought I could give you that as a very tiny gift in lieu of my poor absence.” He was grinning widely with the gestures of his hands in the air.

Napatawa sila dahil doon. Nasabi na kase nito kanina na magpapadala ito ng crew sa wedding party para sa pagbibigay ng show ng pagmi-mix ng coffee at pagbigay ng iba’t ibang uri ng kape sa mga bisita ng bride and groom kinabukasan.

Hindi naman mawari ni Carrie at napatingin siya nang may na-fi-feel siyang mga matang nakatingin siya across the room. Her eyes were held captive by those green eyes she saw a short while ago. Napalunok pa siya. She blinked and forced herself to tear away her gaze from those beautiful pair of eyes. Ang ginawa na lang niya’y kunin ang tasa ng kapeng dala ni Fernando para sa kanya at pinigilan niyang huwag magnginginig dahil sadyang nakakahiya kapag titilapon ang kape dahil lang sa nakipag-eye-to-eye siya sa estrangherong iyon.

32-year old Mac Denley Burrows got into the coffee shop after he checked his cellphone. Ito ‘yong address na iti-next ng kanyang kaibigang si David. Kasama na nito si Harry at si Luke. They decided to meet up here to talk about something while he and David were on vacation from their job as navy pilots sa Iran.

Just when he came in, his eyes surveyed the room and his eyes rested on a pair of dark brown eyes, smooth and creamy face, beautiful pair of eyebrows, cute nose and gorgeous lips. Her hair was dark brown, straight and long, just passed her breasts. She was quite sexy and she had charming aura that any man would give a second long look in her direction. She was wearing a pair of ankle boots, skinny jeans and thin lady sweatshirt.

He felt something in the way she was looking at him. Even though he was used to be stared at by women, this one little thing here was quite expressive on the way she was watching him below the belt. It gave him a different feeling and he could see her blushing from where he stood. It amused him. And when he saw David waved his hand, he purposely went to his friends' table.

"Hey!" He shook hands with his three friends. Luke and Harris were college friends whom he introduced to Harry a few years back kung kaya't solid four friends sila.

"How ya doin', man? I haven't seen you for two years!" Nakangising sabi pa ni Luke at tumayo ito upang yakapin siya't bigyan ng friendly clap sa likod.

"Same here, man," ang sabi din ni Harris na tumayo't gano'n din ang welcome na bigay nito sa kanya. "Just heard from David that you both came back from your living in the middle east last night. He called me up right away. How was it?"

"Right, man. I was so damn tired last night I couldn't even glance at the clock!" He said truthfully.

Napangisi naman ang tatlong mga kaibigan niya. Pumuwesto talaga siya kung saan niya nakikita ang babaeng naka-eye-to-eye kani-kanina lang. There was something about her that wanted to be looked at... And then, he saw a handsome man who brought her a flower and a cup of coffee. He wondered who he was to her. And he felt something out of ordinary nang makitang hinalikan sa pisngi ang lalake with those kind of adoring pair of eyes. Saka inilagay ng isang waitress ang kape na in-order ng kanyang kaibigan para sa kanya.

He wondered why his friends were in this kind of place when they normally meet up somewhere like a bar kung saan sila puwedeng uminom ng beer or kaya'y liquor.

"So, who's idea that we have to come up here? And is there something that's going to happen?" Ngumising bumaling siya sa kanyang tatlong kaibigan.

"Oh, just that Harris here, his Peruvian cousin is going to get married tomorrow. And he's inviting us over. He doesn't want to go and attend it alone." Ang paliwanag pa ni Luke.

“Oh, Peruvian?” Napangisi pa ang binata.

Luke was married and had a 2-year old kid now. Isang lalake. Nanganak ang asawa nitong si Michelle nang ma-assign siya at si David sa Iran. Samantalang going stronger naman si Harris sa girlfriend nitong si Jada, isang half-Hispanic and half-Afro-American.

“That’s right, man.” Ang pag-confirm pa ni Harris. Oo nga’t na-mention na nito noon sa college na ang tiyahin nito’y nakapag-asawa ng Peruvian na co-owner ng isang blueberry plantation dito sa New Jersey state, which was nicknamed as the Garden State. Ang produktong ito ay isa sa mga pinakamalalaking produksiyon sa state na ito.

“And what about the bride?” Ang tanong naman ni Mac Denley at napasulyap sa babaeng napasulyap din sa kanya and he held her gaze for a little while longer and he watched her took the cup in front of her and drank from it. Buti pa ang baso, alam na nito kung gaano kalambot ang mga labi nito, this thought crossed his mind. Napangisi naman siya dahil ngayon lang ganito kalikot ang kanyang isipan dahil sa iisang babae at sa isa pang estranghero.

“I heard she’s half-Asian and half-American. Her family’s been in the states for two generations now. But I’ve never met her once. It’ll be my first time to see the bride tomorrow,” ang sagot naman ni Harris at saka umiinom naman ito ng kape.

Gano’n na rin ang ginawa ng magkakaibigan nang mapuna ni David ang direksyon na tinignan ni Mac Denley. Sinunod nito iyon ng isa pang binata.

“Hey, look what we have here.” Ang tudyo pa ni David.

Napatingin pa ang dalawang kaibigan doon. Napababa naman ng tingin si Mac Denley at pasimpleng nagpatuloy sa pag-inom ng kape niya.

“Ain’t it gettin’ hot in here, eh?” Ang nakangising sabi pa ni Luke.

Napailing-iling ang binatang subject ng tuksuhan. Saka napainom siya ulit ng kape. He didn’t want to make any comment or else, mapapasuong siyang lalo sa mga ito. At malay ba niya kung ano pang susunod na mangyayari kapag gano’n? Dahil kapag makapag-umpisa ang

mga ito, there was no stopping them. Talagang gagawin ang kalokohan kapag nagkasundo ang mga ito.

“Honestly, *ma* man. Why don’t you go get yo’self a girlfriend now?” Suhestiyon pa ni Harris.

Ngumisi pa siya. “Why am I the subject here? I didn’t come here to be talkin’ about.” Protesta naman niya.

“It’s just right that you’re the subject here. We’ve got our women already, man. How about you? You don’t have any plans to get involve with anyone? It’s high time you’ll do that. Besides, I heard your mom’s pushin’ you to date, man.” Ang sabi pa ni David.

“With my job, I don’t think so,” nakailing na nakangiting protesta ng binata.

“You can be single but not alone, man,” ang nakatawang anang David na kung sinu-sino na lang ang ka-date nito. Kinakatalo pa nga nito ang mga kasamahan nilang mga babae sa Iran.

“I can understand why your mom’s gettin’ hot for you to date. You’re her only son. I think she wanna see your little self in your son,” ang nakangising pag-a-analyze pa ni Harris.

“I don’t really think about it that way, man. Just that-” He paused. His friends were waiting whatever it was he wanted to say. “Well, you see... there’s this thing about women... that I don’t understand.” Napahalakhak ang kanyang mga kaibigang kapwa mga puting Amerikano dahil doon. “I guess you don’t get my drift.” Nailing na aniya sa mga ito. And then, he glanced at the woman who took his attention since he came into the coffee shop.

“Sure, we do, man,” ang sabi naman ni Luke. “I’ve been married for 4 years now. I sometimes do feel that way with Michelle. But it’s not what matters, man. It’s how you feel for each other and how you feel your future with her would be like.”

Seryosong usapan na ito. Sumeryoso na rin ang dalawa pang sina Harris at David.

“Honestly, I’ve never thought about that with anyone – yet,” ang sabi pa ni Mac Denley.

“Macden, my man, you’d feel the right thing with the right woman,” ang sabi pa ni Harris na tinatawag siya sa kanyang nickname, like anyone else sa kanilang grupo. “It’ll all comes down to that. The feeling-”

“Is that how you feel with Jada?” Ang nakangising tanong niya sa kaibigan, testily.

“Right, man,” he nodded as he thought of his girlfriend.

Nakita naman iyon ng tatlo. Para itong high schooler kung in love sa ipinapakita nito ngayon sa kanila. Binatukan ito ni Luke.

“I should say he’s right. That’s the way I feel for Michelle, man. I must admit it.”
Napailing na sabi pa ni Luke na seryosong-seryoso ang mukha saka uminom ito ng kape nito.

“But I’ve got an idea.” Biglang nagniningning ang mga mata ni David.

Napatingin rito ang tatlo.

“What is it, man?” Tanong pa ni Harris.

Ngumisi naman ito habang sinasabi ang plano nito. Parang hindi makapaniwala ang mga kaibigan ng binata. They were going to have a bet. Mac Denley was so against it pero parang pinagkaisahan siya ng kanyang mga kaibigan sa mga oras na ito. Naililing naman siya. Saka napasulyap na naman siya sa iisang babaeng kanyang pinakatitignan sa coffee shop.

Chapter 2

Garden wedding sa bahay nina Luis sa Newark, sa malaking patio kung saan may heater. The backyard was adorned with spring flowers na riots ng colors of reds, whites, blues and lavenders. Kulay lavender naman ang motif ng kasal nina Jessica at Luis.

Dumating sina Jenna at Carrie na kasabay ang mga magulang ng dalaga sa isang kotse at sumunod sa kanila ang nakakatandang kapatid ni Jenna na babae, si Jasmine. Lahat sila'y magkakilala na – mapa-bride o mapa-groom dahil sa nagkaka-bonding na sila lahat paminsan-minsan sa tuwing may mga okasyon tulad ng Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year o kaya'y birthdays. Pero dahil sa wala nang mga magulang sina Jenna at Jasmine ay sila lang dalawa ang magkakaramay sa buhay at ang mga kaibigan. Sometimes, isinasama ni Jasmine ang close friend nitong pure Pinay na si Lara pero dahil sa may conference itong in-atendehan bilang isang doctor ay hindi ito nakasama rito ngayon.

Jenna and Carrie were both bridesmaids. Nakasuot sila ng lavender na long bridesmaid gowns. Backless and heart shaped naman ang front neckline ang gown ni Jenna samantalang thin halter ang style ng gown ni Carrie na may high slit almost sa singit na umabot, sa walang hita niya. And both of them wore the same color ng high heels ngunit magkaiba naman ng disenyo.

Napiling si Jasmine ang maid of honor upang hindi magkaaway ang dalawang magkaibigan at para fair din sa kanila. Natutuwa naman si Jasmine dahil doon dahil sa katulad ito nina Jenna at Carrie na walang boyfriend but she was currently hunting for one sa edad na 31. Kahit attractive din ito'y wala pa itong boyfriend mula noong naghiwalay ito at ang ex nitong isang Pinoy 5 years ago dahil sa isang babae. Sabi pa nito'y hahanap na lang ito ng puti na Amerikano dahil baka better lover kaysa sa Pinoy. Well, pabirong sabi iyon ng mas nakakatandang dalaga. Pero parang tinotoo na nga yata ito ngayon dahil panay ang pa-cute nito sa mga bisitang mga puting Kano.

“Wow! Look who's here,” pabulong pang untag ni David kay Mac Denley.

The four of them na magkakaibigan, together with Jada, Michelle and the two-year old kid na si Pete ay iisa ang kumpol habang nag-uusap tungkol sa pamilya ng groom at bride. They were currently waiting in the garden, bago ang kasal in an hour. Hindi pa natatapos sa pagbibihis ang ikakasal na nasa loob pa ng malaking bahay ng Peruvian na pinsan ni Harris.

Napatingin sila sa direksyong tinignan ni Mac Denley. It was the same woman he saw at the coffee shop yesterday! She looked so amazingly beautiful today! Talagang exceptional ang beauty nito kaysa sa ibang bridesmaids na nakita na niya sa buhay niya – well, sa lahat ng mga babaeng nakita na niya, not to mention. His heart was drumming so hard against his chest. At nakita niya rin ang mga tingin ng ibang mga lalake sa babae. Nakita niya ang mga kasamahan nitong dumating at ang isang babaeng sumunod sa grupo nito. He wondered if she was with her family. And the more he wondered kung sino ang kakilala nito sa ikakasal. Bride or groom? Hindi naman niya matanong-tanong it okay Harris dahil nga sa hindi pa nito na-meet ang magiging asawa ng pinsan. He was always not at home whenever his cousin would bring his girlfriend over at their house ddahil sa busy ito sa trabaho nitong bilang isang abogado sa Trenton.

“She looks familiar,” ang nasabi pa ni Luke.

“Sure she does. She was the one from the coffee shop yesterday. Ring a bell?” Ang tugon naman ni David nang ngumising nakatingin kay Mac Denley.

Nagkangisihan naman sina Jada at Michelle na nagiging magkaibigan na rin sa dalas ng kanilang pagkikita.

“Oh, boy! Our young lover boy here is smokin’!” Ang tudyo pa ni Jada.

Napangiti nang may pagkapahiya naman si Mac Denley. Hinalikan ni Harris ang girlfriend nang nakangisi rin. Sa katunayan ay nakakaloko na ang mga ito sa panunudyo ng mga ito pero wala pa ring masabi si Mac Denley.

“Man, I guess my plan is going to be carried out today,” pasaring pa ni David sa mga kaibigan at naaalala nila ang kanilang napag-usapan kahapon.

“Hey, what plan?” Ang tanong pa ni Michelle. Curious na rin ito. Matagal-tagal na rin silang naghihintay na magka-girlfriend na ang binatang madulas pa sa hito at no-touch na tulad ng electric eel.

“Actually, it’s a plan where we bet on our man here.” Ang nakangising tugon ni Luke sa asawa.

“A plan? And a bet?” Ang echo pa ng asawa nitong nakahawak pa rin sa isang kamay sa anak nito. “Just what is it? And did Macden here ever agree to it?” Alam na alam nitong hindi tipong nakikipag-bet sa mga kaibigan ang bachelor.

“He has no choice. We’ve voted for it,” ang sabi pa ni David.

Napatawa naman ang mga lalakeng magkakaibigan.

“No. It was more like bullying,” ang protesta ng binata sa mga babae ng kanyang mga kaibigan.

“I’ll tell you later, honey,” ang nakangising kindat pa ni Luke sa asawa.

“But this has got nothing to do with Gemma Anderson, right?”

Nagkatinginan ang mga lalake. Napatiim naman ang ekspresyon sa mukha ni Mac Denley.

Umupo na ang mga bisita sa kani-kanyang puwesto, that afternoon. Ang pari at mga sacristan, saka ang mga magbabasa ng first and second readings ang naunang naglakad sa aisle na gawa-gawa lang in between sa dalawang group of chairs na may cover na tela na kulay lavender din na may disenyo ang pagkaka-cover. More or less, they only had two hundred guests na mga kapamilya, close friends and close work colleagues ng bride and groom.

Sumunod naman ang groom at sinundan pa ng mga kasama sa entourage pati na ang mga bridesmaids at maid of honor. At sa wakas, ang bride na gandang-ganda sa bridal gown, belo at bouquet nitong pink na kulay na bulaklak na rosas at tulips.

Ngunit nasa iisang babae lang nakatuon ang pansin ni Mac Denley. Their eyes met for a while habang naglalakad ito sa pasilyo na may mga carpet ng glittering butterflies na naka-cut at nakakalat doon. Carrie on the other hand, na-surprise siya nang makita ang lalakeng nakita niya kahapon sa coffee shop. She'd never imagined that she would meet him again and so soon, this soon! Abot-abot na naman ang kaba niya dahil sa tila natutunaw na siya katitig nito. She already felt uncomfortable at tila naiinis na siya rito dahil sa kanyang nararamdaman. Bakit parang di niya iyon mapigilan? Ni hindi pa nga sila nag-i-exchange ng mga salita at di pa sila nagkakakilala ay bakit ganito na lang ito makaapekto sa kanya?

She tore her gaze away from him at pumuwesto na sa bridesmaids na upuan. And she looked at her friend Jessica, who was so stunning in her bridal gown. Her makeup was just right and so was her hairdo. Looking at her friend, she could feel the envy that wasn't there until now. Bakit parang ang sarap magmahal? She tried not to think of that stranger from the coffee shop. At pinilit niyang iniisip si Fernando hanggang sa napadaku ang kanyang balintataw sa guwapo't masugid niya ring manliligaw na sina Jung-II at Khalem. Napasimangot naman siya dahil para namang di niya feel maging boyfriend ang mga ito kahit medyo matagal na niyang nakilala ang mga ito. Since college pa kaya niya nakilala ang mga ito dahil sa iisang university ang pinasukan nila noon.

She sighed. Her gaze seemed to be magnetized sa lalakeng hindi niya kilala. He was now listening to the beautiful dark woman was saying. Katabi naman nito ang isa pang lalake at 'yong katabi nitong lalake ay may katabing babae, saka lalake na bata at saka isa pang lalake. She sighed. Baka ang magandang dark woman na ito'y girlfriend nito? Pilit niyang paniwalaan iyon upang ma-turn off na siya rito.

She looked at her parents who waved at her. She smiled at them and blew them a kiss. Mahal na mahal ng Amerikanong daddy niya ang Pinay niyang mommy. She was so lucky that she had parents like them na mapagmahal sa isa't isa at mapagmahal sa kanya at napaka-

supportive pa. She was working for her father as an accountant. At kapag wala siyang tatrabahuin ay nagsa-sideline naman siya bilang accountant sa ibang mga industries tulad ng food processing, farms ng cranberries, asparagus, dairy products, horses at kahit sa iilang pamilya sa Trenton City kung saan sila nakatira. She was a popular CPA (certified public accountant) sa city na rin dahil sa ilang koneksyon ng kanyang ama at ng kanyang mga manliligaw. It was truly a blessing para sa kanya dahil hindi lahat ng mga may dugong Asians ay kaseng-suwerte niya. And she was happy and passionate about her work. At dahil dito'y nahahasa pang lalo ang kanyang talento at knowledge sa accounting.

The couple was blessed and they vowed to each other their love in front of God, their families, friends and colleagues by exchanging words and rings, being united in one veil and cord, and sealed their love with a loving and promising kiss in the end of the ceremony.

Hindi niya mawari't napatingin pa siya sa lalakeng kanina pa pala nakatingin sa kanya. She looked away fast at napatingin sa kanya ang kaibigang si Jenna upang may ibulong sa kanya.

"This is *it!*" Ang malanding sabi sa kanya.

"Loka ka talaga, Jenna. Buti't hindi ganyan kung mag-isip si Jessica. Naku!"

"Eh, friend naman. Siya kaya ang naunang mag-asawa sa 'ting tatlo? Don't you think di pa nila nagawa ang bagay na 'yon?"

"Eh, maano naman ngayon kung ginawa nga nila, aber? Dapat ba niyang sabihin sa 'yo at sa 'tin? Ikaw talaga!" She wrinkled her nose in disgust.

"Dapat lang! Friends niya tayo. At isa pa, ha? Di ba dapat lang din 'yon dahil mga virgin pa tayo?"

Napamaang ang dalaga. She didn't know kung gaano kalakas ang boses nito. She was afraid that it reached to 'that' guy. Paano na kung may iisipin itong iba dahil sa topic nilang iyon? Namumula tuloy siya sa hiya nang makita niyang pasulyap-sulyap ito at medyo malapit pa ito sa kinalalagyan nila upang i-congratulate ang bagong kasal.

'Ang hinayupak kong friend naman, o! Ang bunganga, daig pa ang kumikibot na puwit ng inahing manok!' Himutok pa ng isipan niya. Kinurot na lang niya sa tagiliran ang kaibigan. Napa-aray naman ito.

"Tama na nga 'yang kabalbalang sinasabi mo! Wala ka talagang hiya!"

"Well, wala din naman 'yan sa bokabularyo ng sister ko," ang nakangising butt in pa ni Jasmine sa usapan nila.

"Yon na nga, ate Jasmine. Wala tayong maitatagong sekreto nito dahil sa kanya!"

"Oh, eh, ano ngayon? Di ba't okey naman kapag walang sekreto?" Nanulis pa ang nguso ni Jenna.

"Opinyon mo lang 'yan," ang sabi naman ng kapatid nito.

Pabirong tinutulak pa ni Jenna ang kapatid at nadamay pa si Carrie at siya na ang halos natalisik sa kung sino.

"Sorry!" Mabilis na aniya at napatingin siya sa may-ari ng mga brasong naka-save sa kanyang huwag matumba. Napakurap-kurap siya nang mamukhaan ito.

She could feel his steady heartbeat and his strong grip on her two arms. Her face was close to his nang mapaangat siya ng tingin. She could smell his perfume. Ang sarap naman amuyin 'yon. She admitted that just by looking at him, mukha na itong mabango.

'Ano ba Carrie! You're not thinkin' straight!' She lectured herself. Nakakahiya kapag nakikita pa nito ang nararamdaman niya sa mga oras na iyon dahil sa ang lapit-lapit kaya nila?

"Oh! My! God! You're that man from yesterday!" Ang exclaim pa ni Jenna nang nakatingin sa lalake.

Nalintikan na. Napalunok si Carrie at dali-dali siyang lumayo sa lalake. Both of them looked at the woman who just spoke. He slightly nodded and acknowledged her friend. But in reality, he couldn't remember her face. Itong kaibigan lang nito lang kasi ang palagi niyang

tinignan kahapon at na-memorize na ng binata ang every feature sa mukha nito't katawan. And that he found it surprising dahil sa hindi siya nabo-bored dito. He was even surprised that the more he looked at her, she got more and more beautiful at walang kapintas-pintas na kanyang nakikita rito.

“So, where are we going next?” Ang tanong ng may edad na Amerikano mula sa likuran ni Jenna.

“By the swimming pool, dad,” ang tugon ng dalaga.

Napatingin si Mac Denley sa Amerikano at sa dalaga. Ah, so it was her dad. At nakita niyang may naka-abre siyete ritong Asian beauty. Her mom, he decided. He could see that the two women had the same eyes and lips.

“I see. And who's this man here, Carrie?” Ang tanong naman ng ina ng dalaga.

“A-ah... mommy...” Umpisa pa ng dalaga. How could she introduce them when they didn't know each other?

“I'm Mac Denley Burrows. I'm actually a friend of the groom's cousin,” ang pakilala tuloy ng binata sa mga magulang ng dalaga.

“Oh! I see,” nasabi pa ng Asian beauty na asawa ng Amerikano. “So, I presume you've met our daughter Carina Danvers, her friend Jenna and her friend's sister Jasmine? This is my husband Robert, by the way and I'm Carrie's mom, Clarissa.” She put her hand forward to shake the younger man's.

He took it gently.

“Glad to meet you, ma'am, ladies, sir, Carrie,” ang polite na wika pa ng binata. Hinanap ng mga mata niya ang kanyang ka-grupo. Ngunit di niya makita ang mga kaibigan niya. *'Damn! I think they're doing this on purpose!'* He thought.

“Are you with someone...?” Ang napuna pang tanong ni Clarissa sa binata.

“Oh, I think they just went ahead of us.” Ang paliwanag ng binata. “My friends with their girlfriend and wife and kid.” He added with a shrug.

“Oh! Sorry for keeping you,” ang nakangiting despensa naman ni Clarissa.

“No problem, ma’am. I can spot them right away.”

Ngumiti naman ang ina ni Carrie.

“Then, come with us, young man,” ang imbita naman ni Robert sa kapwa niya Amerikano.

“Thank you, sir.”

Chapter 3

Bigas, confetti at mga bulaklak ang nag-shower sa dalawang bagong kasal at tuwang-tuwa ang lahat dahil doon. The guests look at the bridegroom and bride to enter the ark adorned with flowers. May dalawang mga puting kalapati pa silang pinakawalan at lumipad ang mga iyon sa himpapawid. Saka nagkaroon ng speech ang mga kaibigan ng groom at saka ang bride.

Nakaupo sa iisang table na may pagkain at cake ang bagong kasal at pumupunta sa podium, sa harap at gilid nito ang mga speakers and well wishers. And now, it was Carrie's turn to give her speech. It was impromptu. Hindi man lang siya nakapaghanda. But her parents nodded and gave her a smile to encourage her. Napasulyap man siya sa lalakeng Mr. Expressionless Hunk ay nakita niyang may amusement sa mga mata nito at kahit ayaw niyang mainis ay naiinis siya kay Jenna na siyang nag-presinta para sa kanya upang magkaroon ito ng chance na masolo ang atensyon ng lalake – ni Mac Denley.

“Good evening, everyone. I'm Carrie, one of the closest friends of the bride. Jessica, I knew that... this day would come. I-I have witnessed the love between you two these past few years. I can't say that it's the lone reason that you two got married tonight. I know that between you two, there's trust, respect, friendship, loyalty and above more, harmony. Harmony in terms of your different personalities as individual and well, it's not easy to be decisive to... you know, live with someone and love someone for the rest of your life. To both of you, I celebrate and congratulate your love for each other. And I just wish that you'll keep on loving each other – more each day. Cheers!”

Nagsipalangkapan ang lahat ng mga guests at pati na ang bagong couple at uminom sila ng champagne sa wish ni Carrie para sa mga ito. Mac Denley on the other hand drank a mouthful as he stared at the lady who just delivered her speech. He could see that she was so spontaneous, brave, witty and smart. Some things that usually lack in beautiful and attractive women. But she sure was very different! He always admired this type of women. And he always met this type sa mga babaeng kasamahan niya sa trabaho who also risked their lives para sa kanilang bansang Amerika.

He looked at the people who gathered at the same table as he was. Nasa isa namang table sa di kalayauan ang kanyang mga friends na tuwang-tuwa sa kanya, he could almost taste the words that came from his friends' mouths, pati na kina Jada at Michelle. Siya ang laman ng usapan ng mga ito. He gave them a warning look ngunit parang hindi naman natatakot ang mga ito. Mamaya, bubugbugin niya si David. He had to remind himself to do it later. Ito kasi ang may pakanang iwanan siya when they got the chance, he was sure of it.

Lumapit sandali si Carrie sa bagong mag-asawa at nakipag-usap ang mga ito't nakipagbiruan sa kanya nang itanong ni Luis ang lalakeng kasama sa table nila.

"I haven't seen him yet, but I think he looks familiar," sabi pa ni Luis.

Carrie shrugged with a smile. "I don't know. He claims that he's your cousin's friend."

"Ah, right! I remember now. He's a college buddy of Harris. He's over there," inginuso pa nito ang table ng cousin nito. At nakita nga ng dalaga na kasama sa table ng mga ito ang isa sa mga kapatid ni Luis, si Facundo. Mukhang nakikiupo lang ito upang masamahan naman nito ang pinsan na nakikita halos taon-taon din. "There are four of them, from what I know, who are very close. My cousin, him, and those other two over there."

"I see." Ang nasabi naman ng dalaga.

"Well, I think you know the hunk now, friend," ang biro pa ni Jessica.

Napatawa silang tatlo.

"Seriously. I heard he's a good man. But I heard that he never had serious relationships with women. He's perhaps... too uptight from what I understand."

"Is he gay?" Biro pa ng dalaga.

"Test him, if you wanna know, friend," biro pa ng nakatawang kaibigan niyang bride.

Nagkatawanan ulit sila at pinandilatan niya si Jessica.

“I don’t think his gender is questionable. There’s just men who are sort of – let’s just say – choosy.” Sabi naman ni Luis.

“OK. I got it. I got it.” Sabi pa niya.

Saka umalis na siya upang makabalik na sa kanilang table. Napaupo pa siya sa tabi ng lalake, at sa kabila naman ay ang daldal na daldal na si Jenna. Mayroong times na hinihipo niya ang arm ng lalake nang pasimple pero alam niyang sinasadya iyon ng kanyang kaibigan. Ang kalandian nga naman ng kanyang kaibigan, hindi niya masusukat at di niya kayang tumbasan.

“So, what do you, young man?” Robert asked the younger man conversationally.

At natigil rin si Jenna dahil doon.

“I’m a navy pilot, sir.” He politely answered.

“Wow!” Exclaim pa ni Jenna. Na-surpresa silang lahat dahil doon.

“Oh, so you’re on vacation?” Tanong naman ni Robert.

“Yes, sir. I’ll go back for work in Iran in perhaps 3 months or so. I asked to have a longer vacation this time because of my mother. I lost my father in the 90’s in Iraq. We have the same profession.”

“I see,” napatango-tango si Robert.

“So, what do you do there? Bomb innocent people?” Biglang naitanong pa ni Carrie before she could stop herself.

Napamaang ang kanyang parents at mga kaibigang naroon.

“No, we don’t. We just stay there to keep the peace-”

“I see.” She cut him off deliberately. “So that’s how you see it. You know, I have the opposite opinion about sending our troops in the middle east. You see, it’s their oil and it’s their country. I can’t see why the US is risking the asses of our troops there. There are innocent lives

that are taken everyday. I can feel the way those people who live in those countries in the middle east. I just don't understand why our government keeps on grabbing other countries' riches like the oil. Don't you think it's time to think what you're fighting for? In the middle east?"

"Carrie," may warning sa boses ng kanyang ama.

"Sorry, dad. I'm just voicing out my opinion. It doesn't matter anyway. I'm not the president of the United States of America. Besides, I'm not a pure American. I'm even Asian if we think about it - hard." Ngumiti nang napaka-charming ang dalaga sa ama.

Hinawakan na lamang ng kanyang ina ang kamay ng ama upang mapahinahon ito. Napangisi naman si Mac Denley dahil sa kanyang narinig mula sa babae. He had never met such stranger person in his life. At may bahid pang pagka-idealistic ang isipan nito.

"So, you're against about Americans shoving their asses in the middle east?" He prompted.

"I didn't say that. I was just-"

"Where do you get the idea that the US government is trying to steal what is theirs, Carrie? Because you give the impression that you read a lot-"

Her chin went up. "Yes, I do. I do read a lot." She smiled.

"I gathered that. So, with the problems raised in the middle east before we come in, do you think if the US government doesn't shove our troops' ass in there, the people's lives would get better? I'm curious to what you're going to say in this matter." He provoked her.

Napakurap-kurap ang dalaga. She couldn't look at him. And she couldn't look at her parents either. And then, she slowly raise her chin and look at Mac Denley, again.

"Poverty is everywhere, sir. But let me cite you an example. Before in the 1987 Romanian Civil war in Europe, while the country was still under the communists, the country didn't have any debt outside. Meaning, zero. Americans and other Europeans – all foreigners –

were not free to be there and even the Romanians were prohibited to go out of the country. My point is that, when Romanians were introduced to American civilization, let's say the freedom aspect, Romanians reacted, they also wanted freedom, freedom from the communists and be free to travel around the world – they weren't exposed to the reality that their geniuses like the engineers and other professionals were sent to the US, here, to study – but then, when war broke out and foreign so-called investments and the like came into their country, their country has gained outside debts. Now, tell me, is the so-called American dream an ideal dream for all people who are blinded by the US's tyranny? Of course, you will deny this fact-

“Sure, I do. I don't call it tyranny, Carrie. It's extending our hands to the needy ones.”

Napakurap-kurap na naman ang dalaga. She sure had a point, she believed it. But why did he make it sound like she lost and that her ideals were just a drawing in the air? True, the US was heralded as the most powerful nation in the world at ang ekonomiya nito ang pinagbabatayan sa buong mundo, in fact, but did she ever read between the lines? She knew about the great conspiracy and most other things than normal people do but she had never gone this far in making a debate with someone and that someone was someone who was working for the US government, God help her!

“Well, that's your opinion and what I've said is also my own opinion. There's no wrong or right in that – our own perspectives, that is – correct?”

“That's enough, Carrie,” ang mahinahong suway ng kanyang ama.

“No, it's okay, sir. I enjoy this topic and I enjoy hearing the opposite perspective about our troops sent into the middle east.” Nakangiting sabi pa ng binata sa ama ng dalaga.

“Well, she's kind of stubborn. Once she believes into something, there's no bending her to the other side.” Robert sighed.

“I guess it's admirable, sir. And you're lucky to have a daughter as intelligent as she is.”

Napangiti naman si Robert dahil doon. It made him proud indeed.

“Just that she can’t stop talking about her ideals once she’s started it.” He said.

“I think I do know what you mean, sir.”

“But don’t get the wrong idea with our daughter. She’s just an illusionist at times,” Clarissa wrinkled her nose prettily.

Carrie sighed.

Napatawa lang naman din si Mac Denley dahil sa sinabi ng mga magulang ng dalaga. Pagkatapos ng ilang saglit na katahimikan ay may umigham mula sa likuran ng binata. He looked up. It was David.

“Oh, this is my friend David Sanders. David, meet Mr. and Mrs. Robert Danvers, their daughter Carrie, her friends Jenna and Jasmine.” He stood up to introduce his friend.

“Glad to meet you, David,” ang sabi naman ng mga ipinakilala.

“Glad to meet all of you, sir, ladies,” tugon ng binata na nakipag-handshake sa lahat. “Uhm... would you mind if I borrow my friend for a short while?” He gestured as he asked.

“No. No! Go ahead,” halos naman na sabay-sabay ng mga nasa table.

Napatingin si Mac Denley sa kaibigan. Iba na ang ekspresyon sa mga mata nito at tila nakuha na niya ang ibig sabihin doon. But they were still at the party. At dapat na hindi mananalo ito at ang mga kaibigan niya against him. He decided to take Carrie’s hand.

“Excuse me. I think I have something to say to Carrie.” He said at dali-dali niyang hinila ang babaeng na-surpresa sa kanyang ginawa.

Napamaang si David. Wala siyang nagawa.

“Why don’t you sit down?” Ang nakangiting imbita pa ni Jenna sa lalake.

“Yes, please do so,” ang imbita naman ng mag-asawang parents ni Carrie.

Napilitan na lang si David na maupo sa binakanteng upuan ng kanyang kaibigan. Napakurap-kurap siya sa kagandahan ni Jenna. Why didn't he notice her before? Siguro ay dahil sa babaeng palaging tinitignan noon ng kanyang kaibigang si Macden. Saka napangisi siya sa sarili.

"Hey! What are you doing? And where are we going?" Ang usisa pa ng dalaga na nakatakbo na palabas ng lawn at sa gate ng Peruvian husband ng kanyang kaibigan. Nasa main road na sila ng malaki't mayamang sub-division na iyon ng Newark City.

They stopped.

"It's because of the bet. We're escaping from it." He said honestly and they stopped to look at each other while they talk.

"Bet? W-what do you mean by bet?" Her eyes were measuring him. She was near in panic but she was trying to control herself.

Ayaw naman ng lalake na magagalit sa kanya ang dalaga. It was better to be honest and it was better to tell her his friend's idea of a plan for him to get a girl that he liked very much.

"Let's see. How do I explain this?" He said to himself aloud.

"It's a bet. You said so!" She stomped her high heeled foot on the ground. Saka nakakurus ang mga braso niya sa ilalim ng kanyang magagandang dibdib. He tried not to be distracted by her beauty. He had to focus to explain to her about the bet.

"Right. Right. It's because of my crazy friends. They're up to bullying me-" Biglang napahinto sa pagsasalita ang lalake dahil sa tawa ng dalaga. He thought that she had that very attractive laugh. Tila nakakahawa. And he smiled.

"Your friends are bullying you?"

"Yes. That's right. Do I look like I'm lying?"

“I think I heard that you’re incredibly a dangerous man,” she lied.

“Really? And where did you ‘hear’ this piece of information?” He probed.

Their eyes locked. They were both out of breath in a second and their hearts stopped beating only to beat more and more faster than any normal heartbeat.

Chapter 4

"I-I have my connections." Carrie shrugged and she looked away.

Mac Denley laughed and looked up in the night sky. He knew that she was lying. But he didn't mind. Kung iba siguro ang nagsisinungaling ay nagagalit na siya. Pero hindi sa babaeng ito.

"It was a nice wedding." Pag-iiba pa ng lalake na nakapamulsa. He was still wearing his tuxedo and shirt beneath it with a bowtie.

He looked so handsome, she admitted. She felt like she was mesmerized by him.

"Yes, it was." She answered. "It was a kind of Filipino wedding." She informed him. "And what about the bet you're talking about?" Pilit niyang ibinalik ang topic nila.

"Well, my friends' bet is... my friends' bet is about... you..."

She tried to absorb it. She blinked and she couldn't look at him. Napatingin na siya ngayon sa kanyang slit na sobrang haba.

"Don't think that I agreed to it." Mabilis na pag-de-defend ng lalake sa sarili. "I didn't. I was not into bets and stuff like that, ever."

Napatango-tango naman siya. Somehow, she trusted him. "So, what was the bet about me?" She wanted to know. It was about her, after all.

"David got this idea while we were in the coffee shop yesterday. He said, if I was going to meet you again, then I should be brave enough to date you. And if I won't then, I have to forget about you and date someone else. It's really nonsense, you know..."

Napamaang ang dalaga. What did he mean by 'nonsense'? Siya? Ang pakikipag-date sa kanya o ang pakikipag-date nito sa iba? She was confused sa feelings niya ngayon. Para siyang galit, naiinis at nagseselos. But she decided that it was better to get angry with him.

“Of course! We don’t know each other. Why should we date each other? Besides, I’m sure that there’s already someone else that you want to date...”

“Yes, I have someone in mind,” he cut-in in mid-sentence. His eyes were probing into hers.

“Sure, you do,” mahinang sabi pa ng dalaga.

“And if I don’t do anything as date you or anyone, or even just ask you out, I have to pay for it. It’s the bet.”

“Of course you have to pay. It’s a bet,” she agreed. It was like an automatic reply. Napalunok pa siya at pilit na ilayo ang paningin muula sa green eyes na nakatitig din sa kanya.

“But if I’m going to ask you out, it shouldn’t mean about the bet. That I’m going to ask you out because I want us to date.” He said, breathless.

Napatingin siya ulit sa lalake.

“W-why do they bet on me? Why? What’s the reason? And why it has to be me?”

He blinked. Should he say it or not? He was battling himself with this reason.

“Aren’t you going to tell me?” Untag pa ng dalaga.

“Because I’m a virgin and they know about it,” he said, at last.

Akala pa man din ng dalaga na siya ‘yong nagsalita pero boses lalake. Ngunit hindi. Ang lalake mismo ang nagsabi niyon. He was a virgin! He claimed he was! Or did he? Napalunok tuloy ang dalaga. She couldn’t believe her ears. Saka napatawa siya. Grabe ang tawang ginawa niya. He was listless because of it. Did he just tell his secret to the wrong woman?

“You’re a virgin? Did you just tell me that? Are you serious?” Sunud-sunod na tanong pa ng dalagang hindi makapaniwala.

“Yes, I’m dead serious.” He sighed.

Napatawang muli ang dalaga nang malakas. Hinahawakan na niya ang kanyang tiyan sa katatawa. Isang lalakang virgin na kanyang na-meet kahapon ay sinasabi nito ngayon ang bagay na iyon? Hindi siya makapaniwala. And then, she looked at him. He was still so serious. Natigil na rin siya sa katatawa pero may ngiti pa rin sa kanyang mga labi.

“You’re really damn serious!”

“Yes, I am,” he gritted his teeth.

“Scuse me. Are you just telling me this because of your bet?”

“Were you listening to what I said?” Naiinis na ngayon ang lalake. “Besides, aren’t you a virgin, too?”

Ang dalaga na naman ngayon ang nasa spotlight. He grinned this time. Siya na naman ang hot topic ngayon.

“H-how did you...? Were you eavesdropping to my conversation? Besides, we were speaking in Tagalog... How did you...? Oh, God! You can understand Tagalog?!” She asked in disbelief. Saka hinampas niya ito sa dibdib.

Wrong move. Big time. Dahil sa na-feel niya ang muscled chest nito na parang bato. Hindi man lang ito natinag. At lalo naman siyang nainis dahil doon.

“I swear! I swear if you’re going to ask me out, I’m not going to agree with it! And I swear... if I see us on the same street, I swear, I’d-I’d... I’d kick your ass! Just go and kill yourself because of your damn bet! I have nothing to do with it! Bastard! Asshole!” She promised and she marched back to her friend’s husband’s premises.

He followed her by his eyes. He knew she was so angry that he learned about her and her friends being virgins. But what had gotten into her? They were just talking fine a short while ago. But then, he shouldn’t have mentioned that he understood the Filipino language that her Filipina nanny taught him when he was still a kid.

He regretted to ever mentioning this important thing to her. But then, it was just the same for him. He was honest about it. But did she believe what he said about his innocence? It was driving him nuts! He would never understand women! How would he ever date, then?

He followed her back to the party. He excused himself from their table and he went with his friends instead, just to give the woman the space she needed. He wasn't sure if he could control himself if he'd hang around her. Else, everything would turn out bad. And he didn't want it to happen.

Inis na inis pa rin ang dalaga sa binata. Hindi niya akalain na ang buong pag-uusap niya sa madaldal niyang kaibigan ay narinig at naintindihan pala iyon ng lalake. Malay ba naman niya't alam niya ang language nila? Sobrang inis na inis siya. Pero teka, bakit ba siya sa lalake naiinis? Di ba dapat sa kaibigan niya? Pero nang tignan niya si Jenna na masayang nakikipag-usap kay David, sa kaibigan ni Mac Denley ay para namang nawawala iyon. Pero bakit nga ba? Sa sinabi kaya ng lalake na virgin pa ito? Was it his way of making fun of her? Nanggigigil na tuloy siya ngayon. Napakuyom siya ng mga palad at napatingin sa mga bisitang nagsasayaw, pati na ang kanyang mga magulang. Masaya ang mga ito.

Napabuntong-hininga na lamang siya. Saka hindi niya naiwasang mapansin na nakipag-usap sina Harris at Mac Denley sa bagong kasal na nanonood sa kanilang mga bisita na nagsasayawan. She wondered what the four of them were talking about. Oh, well... kasal ito ngayon ng kanyang kaibigan. She was sure that the two were wishing the newlyweds the best and congratulated them for their wedding. It was that. It was it. It should be. Nothing else and nothing more.

Silang magkaibigang Jenna at Carrie, kasama si Jasmine ang huling nagpaalam sa mga newlyweds that dawn. Umalis na ang lahat maliban sa kanila para makapag-pa-picture naman sila't makapagkuwentuhan pa nang kaunti.

"Good night! Don't break a leg," ang biro pa ni Jenna sa dalawa.

“Loca!” Ang sabi pa ni Jessica at napatawa ang asawa nitong si Luis. Spanish din naman iyon.

“So, you go straight home?” Tanong pa ni Luis sa kanila. “Your mom and dad went home, right?” Baling nito kay Carrie.

“Yup. But we’re still go to the club,” ang sabi pa niya.

“Club?” He asked. “At this hour?” They knew that he was also protective of them, his wife’s friends.

“Don’t worry. It’s just us. No boys.” Assure pa ni Jenna na nakuha na ang number ni David.

“That’s the problem. There are no boys who are going to protect you, you beautiful ladies,” sumimangot na point out nito.

“Oh, well... I can call your cousin’s friend David...” suggest pa ni Jenna.

“Better my cousin *and* his friends. I’ll call him.”

“No!” Halos violent ang protesta pa ni Carrie. Napatingin naman sa kanya ang lahat.

“Why?” Luis stood his ground firmly.

“Carrie is not herself today. I guess, she meant ‘yes’,” ang nakakalokang sabi ni Jenna.

Nanggigigil na nang todo si Carrie sa kaibigan. Gusto na niya itong sabunutan.

“No buts and no ‘nos’. I’ll call my cousin. Tell me where you’re going. Which club?”

Si Jasmine naman ang sumagot.

“And don’t wear those,” ang babala pa ni Luis.

“Yes, sir,” ang nasabi na lang ng tatlo. Saka sumakay na sila sa kotse ni Jasmine.

“Enjoy your wedding night!” Sabi pa ni Jenna, di talaga paawat ang isang ito.

“Text us when you’re home!” Bilin pa ni Jessica.

“We’ll keep you posted, friend!” Ang kaway naman ni Carrie sa kaibigan habang pinapasibad na ni Jessica ang kotse.

Sa wakas ay sina Luis at Jessica na lang ang naiwan sa bahay ng binata, na sadyang pinatayo para sa kanilang dalawa at sa kanilang magiging mga anak. Kinabukasan ng hapon ay lilipad sa Peru ang dalawa upang doon makapag-spend ng kanilang honeymoon at mabisita din nila ang mga partidos ng lalakeng Peruvian.

Jasmine stopped at a gasoline station. The three of them got out and some men na nagpapa-gasolina’y napataghoy sa kanila. Dala-dala nila ang kanilang mga bags para makapagbihis na sila nang mas casual. Naka-mini-skirt silang tatlo at nakapagsuot ng sexy top at jacket nang lumabas ng restroom. Pumunta sila sa loob ng grocery upang makapagbili ng mga chichiria, candies at chewing gum na kanilang kakainin bago sila dumating ng club.

When they got into the club, naroon na ang grupo nila David. Nakapagbihis na rin ang mga ito kasama ang dalawang mga babae na nakilala nilang asawa ni Luke na si Michelle at girlfriend ni Harris na si Jada.

Hinahagod ng tingin ni Mac Denley si Carrie. He’d be damned! Talagang kahit anong isusuot nito’y walang mas makakalamang sa kagandahan ni Carrie. He was so into her. Ewan ba niya. Pero judging by the look at her face and actions, hindi siya nito pinapansin. Dahil na rin siguro sa may ibang kasama sila at hindi lang silang dalawa.

Cocktails ang iniinom nila ngunit isang bote lang ang iniinom ng mga lalake. Dahil na rin ay sila na ang magda-drive later kapag nalalaseng ang mga lasenggerang babaeng kanilang kasama. Pati nga sina Jada at Michelle ay nagsi-inuman na ring tulad nina Jenna, Jasmine at Carrie.

He wondered if they did this often and how was often times. Siguro naman ay hindi masyado ngunit puwede niyang itanong iyon kay Luis o kaya’y kay Jessica. Ibinigay nga ng mga

ito ang number ni Carrie at ang office niya. Ibang impormasyon pa kaya ay di maibigay ng mga ito? He was sure that Luis and Jessica liked him for their friend Carrie. Medyo marami-rami na rin ang alam niya tungkol sa dalaga dahil na rin lang sa tulong ni Harris na niyaya siyang kausapin ang pinsan nito at ipakilala siya nang pormal.

Nakita niyang may nagti-text kay David. At nakita niyang nagti-text din si Jenna. He thought it was odd na di man lang nag-uusap ang dalawa't baka sa text lamang. And then, he ordered some softdrinks for him and his buddies. Dahil nga sa alam nilang mag-iinuman ang mga babae kung kaya't isang baso o isang bote lang ang puwede nilang inumin para makapagmaneho.

He was stunned when Gemma walked in. She was wearing a very short skirt na halos labas na ang underwear nito. Her blonde hair was the same. Her eyes were smoky and blue. She looked like a Barbie. Just that, a slut one. He prayed that she'd never see her at the counter. Ngunit nang makita siya nito'y agad itong lumapit namulupot sa kanyang leeg na tila ahas.

"Hello, sweetheart! Long time no see," pa-sweet na anito. Saka hinalikan siya nito sa mga labi.

In the corner of his eye, he saw that Carrie was watching them. Wala siyang magawa kundi ang magpatianod sa eksena nila ni Gemma. Maybe this one was a blessing in disguise. Baka naman ay maaakit na niya si Carrie through Gemma. Nakita niya ang sarcastic smile sa mga labi nito nang ipakilala niya si Gemma.

"My long time lady friend, Gemma Anderson," ang pakilala pa niya kina Carrie, Jenna at Jasmine.

"Actually, he's just being modest. He and I are more than friends," ang maagap na sabi naman ni Gemma.

"Is that right?" Sarkastikang sabi pa ni Carrie sa kararating lang na babaeng blonde. Mac Denley could already feel the jealousy between the two women. Saka hindi na niya tinignan ang

mga nakilala sa kanilang dalawa ni Gemma nang lubos dahil ayaw niyang mabulilyaso pa itong naisip niyang paraan.

“That’s right – Carrie,” the other girl almost purred.

Pilit na huwag tumawa nina Jada at Michelle na nagtinginan.

“That’s right. It’s Carrie.” Nakataas-nguso namang tugon ng dalaga na hinagod ng tingin ang karibal kay Mac Denley mula ulo hanggang paa.

Chapter 5

So, this is the girl you're talkin' about? Ang text pa ni Jenna kay David.

Ngumisi naman si David nang mabasa iyon.

That's right, sweetheart. She's been interested with our man since we were in college. But our man is not really into her charms. He never fell for them. She just can't make our man a real man. You know what I mean, don't you? Sagot pa ni David kahit magkatabi lang silang nakaupo sa couch sa loob ng club.

It's a brilliant idea that you texted her. I'm sure, my friend's insides are already churning with disgust and jealousy. You can just see it in her face. Ha ha ha...

Napasulyap si David kay Carrie, saka sa kanyang kaibigan. He never met his eyes once when Gemma arrived. He seemed to read what was in his friend's mind. But why not let the man play his own damn game? This would be fun! He'd bet his life on this. His friend was going to fall in his trap. He just couldn't wait to see Macden crawl out of his trap and say that he surrendered. And so, he kept this thought on his own. He didn't even share it with Luke or Harris. But maybe they already saw the big picture out of this.

Naroon pa rin ang tension between Gemma and Carrie habang nag-iinuman sila. Isinayaw ng Barbie ang binata at nakisayaw din naman ito. Sumali naman si Carrie at tila nag-sho-showdown na ang dalawang babae dahil sa binata. And then, tumabi na ang binata upang tingnan lang ang dalawang nagsasayaw nang sexy. He couldn't believe that Carrie would be provoked simply because of a dance. Saka sexy na sexy itong sumasayaw palapit sa kanya.

He cursed to himself. She was damn so hot and sexy! Sigurado siyang dahil na rin sa alak iyon. At kung hindi pa dahil doon ay *nunca* itong magkaganito. Nakatuwaan namang ini-record ni Jenna ang talbugan ng dalawa at aliw na aliw ang mga lalakeng naroroon sa club. Nang may pumareha kay Gemma ay nakipagsayaw na rin lang ito sa mga lalake habang si Carrie naman ay patuloy na sini-seduce sa kanyang sayaw si Mac Denley – nang di niya alam dahil sa kalasingan.

Saka bigla na lang itong huminto at buti't naagapan pa ng binata bago ito makahandusay sa sahog. *God, she feels so soft*, he thought. At napakabango pa nito. Hanggang doon ay kinunan pa sila ni Jenna ng video sa phone nito at nag-stop na nang magyayaan na silang umuwi.

At ang Barbie? Naiwang nakikipagsayaw sa mga di-kilalang lalake.

Pangko ni Mac Denley ang wala nang malay na dalaga patungong kotse niya. Sina Jasmine at Jenna naman ay pasuray-suray habang akay-akay ni David habang si Luke ay busy naman sa lasing ng si Jada at si Luke ay sa asawang si Michelle. This was awkward. Ang mga babae pa ang lasing.

"Where are we going to take them?" Tanong pa ni Mac Denley sa mga kaibigan.

"Let's all go to your house. It's nearer around this area."

"Fine! At least mom is coming back tomorrow at lunch. I'll just tell her that we have visitors in the morning."

"Right! That's a good plan, man," nakangising sang-ayon pa ni Harris na alam na alam ang personality ng ina ng kaibigan.

"It'll be big trouble if these women are still drunk when mom comes back." Naiiling na aniyang inihiga ang babae sa back seat ng kanyang kotse. He strapped her in with a pair of seatbelts.

Kani-kanya namang ipinasok ng mga lalake ang kanilang kasamang mga babae sa kanilang kotse. Saka tila convoy silang nag-drive tungo sa kanyang bahay sa downtown ng Trenton.

Sa guest room na pang-isahan na natulog ang binata habang doon na sa kanyang kuwarto niya sina Carrie, Jenna at Jasmine. Ngunit bago pa siya makatalikod ay napatingin siya kay Carrie na nasa gitna ng kanyang bed inihiga. She woke up drowsily at para ito masusuka. He automatically came to the rescue at baka matutulog ito sa kama niyang may suka. Ngunit

sumuka ang dalaga in mid-way nang pabangon ito. Nasukahan nito ang damit nito. Jacket, top at skirt. Napasimangot ang binata. He had to take them off.

He sighed. He took a towel in the bathroom. He first took off her jacket without disturbing Jenna's sleep. Saka hinubad niya ang skirt ng dalaga. He fought his feelings with all his might. Tinabunan niya kaagad ang ibabang bahagi ng dalagang nakabalik na sa pagtulog. Saka hinubad na rin niya ang ang top ng dalaga nang di nakatingin. And then, he covered her with the large towel he took from his bathroom.

He sighed as he look at her clothes. Inilagay niya kaagad ito sa washing machine at nilabhan doon after niyang i-drain ang suka nito. He went to the shower before he decided to go to bed. Siguro, siya lang ang hindi pa nakakatulog ngayon. Sina Harris at Jada ay nag-o-occupy sa isang guest room. Ang mag-asawang Luke at Michelle nama'y ay sa isa pa at ang kaibigan niyang si David ay sa pang-isahang guest room na katabi ng kanyang inookupahan ngayon.

His mind was preoccupied with one of the women who was currently lying in his bed. He still couldn't believe that at this fast rate, narito na ang babae sa bahay niya at ipakilala pa niya ito bukas sa kanyang ina. He wondered what his mom's reaction would be. Or what Carrie's reaction would be... hanggang sa makatulog na siya...

Kinabukasan ay nagising si Carrie na masakit ang ulo. May hangover siya. It was so obvious. Ang bigat pa ng pakiramdam niya. Saka hindi niya nakilala ang kuwartong kanyang kinalalagyan ngayon. At lalong hindi niya kama ang kanyang kinaroroonan ngayon. It was obviously a man's room!

She gasped. Natutop niya ang kanyang bibig. Sino ang kasama niyang umuwi mula sa club? Napatingin siya sa ilalim ng kumot. She only wore her underwear! Natataranta na siya. Sino nga ba ang kasama niya mula sa club? Pilit niyang inaalaala iyon.

And then, she was relieved when she saw that Jenna and Jasmine were in the same room as she was. Bumaba siya ng kama upang kunin ang kanyang damit. Well, rather, hinahanap niya ang mga ito dahil di niya makita ang mga ito. Nang bumukas ang pinto ay napahablot siya ng kumot dahil si Mac Denley ang kanyang nakita.

“W-what are you doing here?” Paasik na tanong niya. But was it the right question?

Ngumiti ito nang nakakaloko. Napansin niyang naka-cargo shorts ito ngayon, at sleeveless top. Machong-macho ito at preskong-presko pa ito tignan. Naka-tsinelas lang din ito ng kulay blue na closed sa toes.

“I’m just right here in my room. And you have serious options to choose from. One is to come with me in the shower and two is to be discovered by mom that you have hangover. You’re free to choose.” He said simply and shrugged.

Napamaang siya. What were her choices again? Her mind went blank.

“My mom doesn’t particularly like drunk women.” He winked with conspiracy.

She blinked again. What was her first option again?

“I-I... what was the first option again?”

He laughed softly upang huwag magising sina Jenna at Jasmine na nasa sahig at tila nakahandusay. Hinablot niya ang bedcover at saka ikinubli ang mga kaibigan upang huwag makita ng lalake ang mga hita ng mga itong naka-expose nang over-over.

“You come with me in the shower. I’ll show you where.”

“Fine.” She gritted her teeth. She almost tripped on the floor because of the blanket she wound around herself.

“Why are you wearing my blanket anyway? I’ve seen you almost naked already.” He tormented her.

“What?! By any chance, did you take it off me?” Galit na tanong niya.

“I took the liberty of taking them off. You just had some puke on them.” He answered calmly.

She blushed angrily. Hiyang-hiya siya. At sa harapan pa ‘ata nito nangyari ang eskandalong kahiya-hiya at napaka-disgusting! She wanted to die and be swallowed whole in the ground. At napakuyom siya ng mga palad. Bakit narito sila? Bakit hindi sa bahay nila? She had to take care of this later. Sa ngayon, dapat nga niyang mag-shower at nang hindi naman siya kahiya-hiyang humarap sa ina nito. Minus ganda points kaya iyon?

“Where’s that damn shower?” She hissed.

He smiled. Nakakaloka na naman iyon. Bigla siya nitong hinapit sa baywang. Magkalapat ang katawan nila. His face was so close to hers. She couldn’t look away. And then, he smelled her cheek and the side of her neck.

“I really think you need that damn shower,” and he let her go.

Bigla siya napakagat ng labi dahil sa inis. Akma niya itong sasampalin ngunit mabilis naman nitong nahawakan ang kanyang kamay. He kissed it and let it go.

“There’s the shower. You want me to assist you?”

Di man lang niya napansing nabuksan na nito ang banyo at ipinasok na siya. She was too busy feeling – feeling him. And she hated herself for feeling this way. She felt so vulnerable ngunit para lang siya nitong pinaglalaruan. She would be damned if he was still a damn virgin bachelor!

“I suggest you shower quick and we’ll go shopping before my mom arrives.”

It was a puzzle to her. Wasn’t his mom in the house? Did she go out to buy some groceries knowing that there were visitors in their home? Ito ang mga iniisip niya habang nag-sha-shower, after she closed the bathroom door firmly. Buti na iyong safe na siya kaysa sa susugal siya’t baka pasukin siya ng mokong iyon. Hindi niya alam kung paano ang likaw ng bituka niyon.

Inabot niya ang tuwalya at nagpunas na. Saka isinuot na niya ang kanyang suot kagabi sa club na mukhang nalabhan na at pinlantsa pa. Saka nakita niya ang toothpaste. She decided na magfi-finger brush ng lang siya ng kanyang ipin. At least, hindi masyadong amoy alak ang bunganga niya. She smelled disgusting. Siguro naman 'yon ang dahil kung bakit pinapa-shower siya ng lalake.

“Grr! Nakakainis!” Maktol pa niya sa sarili nang malakas.

Nagmumog na siya saka muli siyang kumuha ng toothpaste at inilagay sa kanyang hintuturo at inulit na naman niya. Sa dila naman at sa loob ng kanyang pisngi ang kanyang nilinis. Nang mukhang hindi na siya amoy alak at iba pa, she combed her hair using the brush she could find. Pambabae 'yon. At least, he was thoughtful of providing it. Nag-brush siya habang nag-hi-hair dry.

She went out. Ibinigay pa sa kanya ng lalake ang kanyang shoulder bag kung saan naroon ang kanyang kikay kit. Pinasalamatan naman niya ito kahit papaano. She applied some light makeup and lipstick. Saka inaya na siya ng lalake na lumabas.

“Why are we going shopping again?” She asked while they were in his car, a white BMW.

“You and your friends need to change your clothes. My mom’s a bit unconventional. She’s conservative.”

“I see. So we’re going to buy some ‘decent’ clothes.”

“You’re so brilliant. That’s it!” He said with sarcasm.

Napairap ang dalaga. Saka biglang may pumapasok sa kanyang alaala sa nangyari kagabi sa club. Her cheeks flamed with embarrassment. Nakita naman ng lalake ang blush niya and he smirked.

“What’s the blush for?” He asked conversationally as if he was just asking about the weather.

Nagtatagis ang mga bagang ng dalaga dahil doon. Feeling niya'y pinaglalaruan siya nito.

"I can damn blush my cheeks whenever I want to. There's no reason for it!"

He just grinned and then he pulled over to stop in front of a branded name boutique. They both got out of the car. A saleslady gave them both a curious look. Dahil sa malakas naman ang dating nilang dalawa na kapwa may magagandang background ay ini-entertain sila nito nang malugod.

"Hello. May assist you both?"

"Sure! Thanks!"

"So, may I know what you specifically are looking for?" She asked thoughtfully.

Bago pa makasagot ang binata'y ang dalaga ang sumagot nang maagap.

"What about something in White Chicks? Something like 'I'm not a virgin anymore but I'm not a slut'?"

Napamaang ang saleslady. Gusto niyang ipahiya ang lalake ngunit nang tignan niya ito'y para namang siya ang napahiya. He was just grinning at her and he winked at the saleslady. Napairap na naman siya. Nakabawi naman ang saleslady na may short honey hair, fair skin, thin structure and fair height. She was taller than her 5'4". But of course, Mac Denley was taller than the saleslady na mayroong 6'0" height. Mas matangkad pa nga ito sa kanyang ama na may 5'10" na height.

She gave her a fitting pair of jeans at saka decent blouse na kulay puti na may magandang borda sa front.

"How about these?" She asked.

She eyed them carefully. And she smiled at the saleslady. She took them and thanked her. She went into the dressing room and changed. Lumabas na siya at nakita pa niya ang Barbie na kanyang na-meet sa club kagabi. Naaalala niya ito at ginawa nila kagabi kung kaya't

naiinis siya rito nang husto. Plus, mukhang nag-i-enjoy pa si Mac Denley sa presence nito. Talaga nga sigurong more than friends lang ang mga ito, ayon pa sa babae.

“Oh, so we meet again,” ang sabi pa ng babae nang makita siya.

Napatingin naman ang binata sa kanya. She could see that he admired her. But then, she always saw it in his eyes. Talaga bang accepted nito ang kagandahan niya at hindi lang ito nag-accept sa kanya dahil sa bet nito at sa mga kaibigan nito? And would she ever forget it and accept it in the end? Dapat kasing huwag na niyang isipin iyon dahil sa sinabi naman niya na sa lalake na ayaw niyang makipag-date rito. She couldn't afford a luxurious heart. It would only bring her pain, she knew it. And she was afraid to get hurt. Lalo na't mayroon na itong Gemma.

“Oh, yes. And you're here. By the way, you look good today! Did you just have a nose job?” She answered sarcastically.

Pinilit niyang huwag tignan si Mac Denley, let alone his expression. Ang saleslady naman ay napangiti dahil kilala nito si Gemma na sobrang arte. At halatang galit na galit itong nakatingin kay Carrie.

“Scuse me?!” Ang sabi pa nito na may pilit na ngiti.

“You didn't hear what I said. I'm sorry, I forgot what I just said. Would you excuse us? We still have business to do.” Itinulak pa niya ang babae at hinila pa niya ang binata upang mapilian naman niya ng maisusuot na desente sina Jenna at Jasmine, pati na sina Jada at Michelle. Bumaling siya sa saleslady na nag-excuse din sa blond lady. “I'll take these and we're looking for more for my friends. There are four of them.”

“Alright, ma'am.”

Nakapili na sila para sa apat na mga babae pa. And Mac Denley used his card to pay for all of them. He'd never done this before – ang bumili ng mga clothes para sa mga babae, at lalo na para kay Carrie. He was happy that he had this opportunity to feel this way. He had made up his mind.

Nang lumabas sila'y di na nila nakita si Gemma. Mukhang talo nga 'ata ang blond woman sa dark brown haired na mas preferred niya. He could not almost contain his happiness.

Ngunit nang maaalala niya ang lalakeng nagbigay ng rosas kay Carrie sa coffee shop, napadili-dili siya. Could he afford to have a luxurious heart? Could he gamble his heart? He wasn't guarding it all these years just to be hurt. But was he ready to get hurt, if ever?

Chapter 6

Nakapagbihis na silang lahat nang desente just before Mac Denley's mom arrived at lunch time. She was from Bergen County, the same state, to visit a sick relative. Sa katunayan nga'y wala ito sa bahay nang dumating ang binata noong two days ago. It was a sudden heart attack kung kaya't tumulak kaagad sa Bergen County ang may edad na babaeng nagngangalang Kerry.

"Hello! It's good to see you all of you. New and old faces," tuwang-tuwa itong nakipagbeso sa kanila. "I'm glad you were able to come and visit my boy while I was away." Saka bumaling ito sa anak at niyakap itong mahigpit. "I'm so sorry, son. I wasn't here to meet you. You know what happened."

"It's okay, mom. Don't worry. I'm not a little boy anymore," he grinned at his mom.

"Oh, don't be silly." Hinampas nito ang muscled bicep ng anak. Hindi maiwasan ni Carrie na maisip na ang sweet pala na mag-ina ang dalawang ito. "You'll always be my little boy. Oh, by the way, should I still cook for you and your friends?"

"Oh, we cooked for you instead, Mrs. Burrows," ang sabi pa ni Michelle.

"Oh, that's so sweet of you, dear. Thank you! I must admit. I'm so tired after the journey. I'm so, so happy that you're all here. By the way, who's this very beautiful missy again?" Ang tanong nito sa anak habang nakatuon naman ang paningin kay Carrie.

"She's Carina Danvers, mom. Her nickname's Carrie, though," napakamot sa kanyang batok ang binata.

His mom kissed Carrie in both cheeks and embraced her warmly and tightly. Napangiti na lang ang dalaga kahit alanganin dahil doon. She felt uncomfortable. Mukhang may ipanunudyo na naman ang mga kaibigan niya nito.

"Carrie. That's a beautiful name for a beautiful child. Come on. Let's all have lunch. Tell me about your parents, dear."

“Wow! Even your mom’s in love with her,” ang biro pa ni David.

Sinuntok ito ni Mac Denley nang pabiro sa mid-section nito. Napa-aw naman ito.

“Macden, dear. Don’t hurt your friend,” ang suway pa ng ina nang makita ang kulitan ng dalawa.

“Sorry, mom.”

Itinabi talaga ng ina ni Mac Denley si Carrie malapit sa dulo ng mesa. Katabi ng dalaga ang kaibigang si Jenna at ang sister nito si Jasmine saka sina Michelle at Jada. Across sa mesa naman sina Mac Denley, David, Luke at Harris.

Parang interview portion ang ginawa ng mommy ni Mac Denley habang tinatanong ganito at ganyan si Carrie. Napapahiya na siya dahil sa tudyo ng mga matang nakatingin sa kanya ngunit pormal at polite naman ang dalagang nakikitungo sa ina ng binata.

“It would be amazing if you could invite your parents over. Do you think they can do that in the weekend?” Ang sabi pa ni Kerry. “You know, I do sometimes have an uninvited guests but you all guys who are present here are always welcome in our home.” Pasaring pa ng ina. “I really love to receive guests in our home. Just those ones who are not rude, of course. I have been cooped up with this one lady that I thought she was too good for my son, but hey, I was in for a shock! I didn’t like the way she treated my son in our own home!”

“Mom,” ang warning pa ni Mac Denley.

“Don’t say a word, my boy. It’s true. That blond lady is just too much for you. I didn’t like her and still, I don’t like her. Good that she hasn’t shown her face after that incident a few years back.”

Blond lady? Meaning, si Gemma? Napaisip pa si Carrie at ang iba. At ano kaya’ng nangyari a few years back at ganito ka-nega ang ina ni Mac Denley sa babae? Hmm... mukhang interesting ‘to.

“Anyway, let me tell you about my son’s job if he hadn’t yet. Being a navy pilot, he’s either sent for a rescue mission or for something like, you know, aggressive one. He has to find, locate and recover people in the sea or close air support for marines on the ground using the helicopter or if he’s needed for back up for some missions, he does that sometimes, using the fighter planes. I don’t know the names. Anyway, sometimes, he’s either with the marines rescue team or with the navy. Depends on his mission specifics or operations. In shipwrecks, there are sometimes severe situations, which are out of context out there. But don’t you worry, he’s *trained the chaos*. Even though there are some dangers and some reasons for their missions to go the wrong way, my son is just so brave. My son’s one of the best there is. I’m so proud of him!”

“Mom, why did you just tell her that?”

Napatingin ang ina sa binata and then she ignored him. Bumaling itong muli sa dalaga.

“The navy is like my son’s extended family. And he’s such a nice guy to everyone. He’s got this friend, a navy petty officer - an aircrew survival trainer, a marine corp Cobra pilot and a marine corp captain as well as some low ranking officials and of course his direct colleagues and teams – and even heavy operations personnel like some coast guards and other navy crew. He’s friendly. No one can resist my boy.” Kerry said proudly. Everyone could trace the hint of it in her voice and words.

Biglang pinamulahan ang dalaga dahil sa mga huling salitang iyon ng may edad na babaeng medyo chubby. Napatingin sa dalaga ang lahat ng pares na mga mata. She smiled at the older woman at napatango rito.

“I guess so, too,” turan niya. She knew that the older lady was waiting for some kind of comments from her end. “And maybe he’s thinking of making a difference to save someone’s life out there.” She said when she remembered her little debate with him last night sa wedding ng kanyang kaibigan.

Napatitig naman si Mac Denley sa dalaga. He felt something in his heart when he heard it. And he didn't expect to hear those words from her own mouth. She kept on surprising him every time. It was truly intriguing. And his mouth quirked in one corner with amusement.

Mrs. Burrows excused herself a little after lunch to rest and went upstairs to her room. Hinayaan na nito silang magkuwentuhan sa living room na magkakaibigan.

"Weh! Ano ba 'yun? Tanggap na tanggap mo na ang trabaho ni Mac Denley?" Tudyong pa ni Jenna na siyang nagpasimuno.

"She's fine with our man's job here?" Ang pagkaklaro pa ni Luke.

"That's right! How could she say something like that in front of his mom?" Ang tugon naman ni Jasmine, nakikisawsaw na rin ito. "Surely she meant it like she said it. She just can't lie right in your face!"

Nagkatawanan sila habang nakamasid si Mac Denley sa mukha ng dalaga. He could read it all. Naiinis, napapahiya, nagtitimpi... It was quite enjoyable for him. He never thought that it was like this to watch the woman he liked kapag nag-chi-change ang mood and feeling.

And then, when she looked at him, he signaled that they should go out into the garden in the backyard. She rolled her eyes and stood up. He followed at lalong nangangantiyaw ang mga naiwan doon sa living room.

"Hey! Pipe down," ang suway pa ng binata na seryoso ang mukha.

Pilit naman sinunod iyon ng lahat. Pero bumungisngis rin ang mga ito nang makalabas na ang dalawang prospect na lovers.

"By the way, what happened a few years back with the blond lady?" Curious na tanong ni Jenna sa mga kaibigan ni Mac Denley.

"Well, it was this. I just don't know the real story but from what I understood a while back, his mom said that Gemma attempted to rape our man. Macden has never told us about it

in details. He's always evading us whenever we ask about it. Sure, we were so curious about it." Ang kuwento pa ni Harris na naililing.

Biglang nagkaroon ng tawanan dahil doon.

"Was that really the reason?" Tanong pa ni Jenna nang di-makapaniwala.

"What is it this time?" Taray pa ng dalaga nang nasa garden na sila and they were out of earshot. The two of them stood facing each other. Nakapamaywang pa ang dalaga habang nakahawak ng kopita ng white wine ang binata at ang isang kamay ay nasa bulsa ng slacks nito.

"You know, it's easier for me to be mentally fatigue during my missions because afterwards, I can just do weight lifting or something to chase away my stress. And it's far more easier for me to just click the switches to release the missiles. I like what I do – my job - and I love to be around it. I want to excel in it. I want my mom and my friends and even my dead father to be proud of me. I wanna be up in the air – everything that's about my job, I just love it. I'm so carefree." He paused and looked at her probingly. "And I feel free when I can do what I want to."

"Why are you telling me this?" She asked with confusion. If he wanted to pointed out this thing about his job, he didn't have to. She already knew it. It showed already when they had that debate last night at the wedding.

He looked away. Parang tinitimbang-timbang kung dapat na nga ba niyang sabihin ang gusto niya kay Carrie. He sighed and ground his teeth before he spoke and looked at her in the eyes.

"What's hard for me to do, Carrie is to use my heart because I treat it as a luxury that I can't afford. But now, it's like it has changed. I feel like I wish to use it – and offer it to you. Would you take my heart, Carrie? Would you even care for it?" Nagsusumamo ang mga mata nito. He reached out for her cheek and caress it gently with his free hand.

She blinked. She couldn't believe that he finally said it. In so a short time that they've known each other, not even a week, he was already talking about his heart! She didn't know how to respond. Her heart and mind seemed to shout 'yes, I will'!

Then, she shook her head as she thought of Jung-Il, Khalem and Fernando. Matagal na silang nanliligaw sa kanya. In fact, years na nga. Pero ito. Pero itong lalakeng itong isang navy pilot pa, bakit para siyang na-te-tempt na um-oo rito? Her heart did that kind of somersault. She felt happy dahil sa inihayag nito. Ngunit nangangamba siya. She thought of playing hard to get. Kung manliligaw man ito, siguro ay iko-consider niya ang proposal nito, na tanggapin niya ang puso nitong inialay sa kanya. But was offering his heart all he could do? Couldn't he say the right words to her? Well, hindi nga niya iyon narinig mula sa mga manliligaw niya. *Gusto* lang siya ng mga ito at hindi siya *mahal* ng mga ito. Just that, masusugid talaga ang mga ito.

"Are you disillusional? It doesn't occur to me to accept it, at all," ang napatawa nang pagak na dalaga. "Don't bother to bring it up again. It's better this way." Saka umalis na siya. Naiwan ang lalake.

He felt heavy. His heart was like crumpled and he could barely breathe because of her reply. He drank the rest of his wine. He threw the glass against the concrete fence. Napasapo siya sa kanyang mukha.

Napatigil ang dalaga nang marinig ang pagbasag ng glass. She tried to blink away the tears that welled in her eyes. Dapat maging malakas siya. Kung makakayanan ng lalake ang kanyang test rito'y siguro nga. Siguro ay ito na ang lalakeng hinihintay na niya nang napakatagal. Kahit siguro ay magkaiba ang pananaw nila tungkol sa pagpapadala ng mga troops sa middle east ng Amerika.

They all went home after dinner. Masaya ang ina ng binata dahil sa nag-stay pa sila hanggang dinner at nakipag-kuwentuhan pa itong muli kay Carrie. Kahit naramdaman ng lahat ang tension between him and her, parang pilit nilang i-ignore iyon.

David though, stayed for a little bit while. Nag-retire na sa kanyang kuwarto si Kerry at nakaalis na ang lahat. They were currently at the porch. He could see the emotion that was in his friend's eyes. In just a matter of days, his friend was in this state. Tinapik-tapik ni David sa balikat ang kaibigan.

"I think I already the reason. But don't you get down, man. If you really like, isn't it just right that you'll fight for her? Just like what Gemma is doing. She's fighting for you. I'm sorry if I have to mention her. I'm just trying to point out what I deem is-"

"I know," he sighed. "Thank you, man."

"So, are you going to court her?"

"You're damn right there, man. Will do that." At mapakla pa itong ngumisi.

"That's my man. Don't worry. Everyone likes you to be with her – well, if don't mention that 'one' your mom doesn't like." David grinned and made a face. "I'm sure everything will be alright, Macden. Just don't give up. We, your friends, even Carrie's friends, are here for you – we support you all the way, man. We just want you to be happy."

"Wait, did my mom talk to you guys about me?"

"You don't need to know. Trust me." He winked and turned on his heel and left him.

Napailing-iling si Mac Denley. He smiled. He sure had a lot to do – a lot of convincing to do. He had to strive hard. It would pay off in the end, he knew it – he was sure of it.

Chapter 7

Lunes. Balik trabaho ang dalaga. After Sabado, sa kasal ni Jessica, madami siyang gagawin na pag-po-post. She had to do the ones for her dad first bago ang para sa iba. She just checked her email dahil naka-attach lang naman doon ang kailangan niya tulad nga resibo at iba pa.

She was in her office at ang secretary niyang taga-tanggap ng mga calls na puwedeng may tanong para sa kanya o kaya'y mga problema. Upang hindi na siya deretsahan ang nakakatanggap at maistorbo kung masasagot lang naman ng kanyang sekretarya na nasa kanyang late 30's. Tila freelance na maituturing na ang kanyang pagiging CPA.

It was about lunch break when Christie's head appeared in between the doorway of her office. She didn't look up dahil magsasalita lang naman ito kapag may gusto itong sabihin sa kanya without getting in upang maka-save ito ng effort, as usual. She was a white, fat lady with a beaming face and personality. At hindi ito agad na na-o-offend kahit anuman ang sasabihin ng dalaga.

"Someone called up."

"I heard you. It was also ringing here, if you need to know. And it's your job to talk to the clients instead of doing it myself. Right?" She smiled kahit sa sarcasm na pagsasalita niya.

"Yes, I know that, dear. Just that – it isn't any of our clients who's calling."

Napaangat siya ng tingin. Napasulyap din siya sa wall clock ng kanyang office. It was past 12:30 in the afternoon.

"Okay. Someone's asking you for a date? You can go. It's your lunch break, Christie. Don't worry about me. I can just fix myself a sandwich and chocolate drink."

"Oh, no! It's not me he asked for a date, dear. It's you!" She beamed. Mukhang kilig na kilig pa ito.

“Who? Jung-II, Khalem or Fernando? But the latter is out of town,” she said. At kilala nito ang lahat ng mga manliligaw niya na paminsan-minsa’y pumupunta sa kanyang office sa tuwing free ang mga ito sa kani-kanilang engagement.

“That’s right. And neither of the names you mentioned called up. It’s a new one. Mac Den – something. Sorry. I didn’t get his name right.” Paumanhin pa nito na nag-ba-blush. Dahil palagi niya itong sinisinghalan kapag may palpak ito.

Napahugot ng malalim na hininga ang dalaga. Her heart kicked her chest wildly. She was reminded of their last encounter sa garden sa backyard ng bahay nito. She turned him down right there and then. At ngayon, tumawag pa ito rito sa opisina niya? Paano nito nalaman ang number niya rito. Oh, well, it was really a dumb question dahil puwede nitong magtanong lang kina Jenna.

“Squeeze me?” Taray pa niya sa kanyang sekretarya. “Mac Denley asked me out? That’s why he called?” Tumawa siya at napabitiw siya ng kanyang ballpen. Dahil nag-ko-compute siya nang manual kapag initial pa. Saka pagka-nag-re-review na siya ay gumagamit na siya ng computer o kaya’y calculator, whichever na mas madali. This way, she was not totally dependent sa technology at nahahasa ang isipan niya. She loved challenge.

“Yes, dear. I think you’re so passionate about him by the way you’re talking about him.” Bumungisngis pa ito.

Biglang natigilan ang dalaga. Napamaang din siya. Saka, she blushed. Ngumisi sa kanya ang sekretarya tuloy.

“Scuse me?”

“Oh, never mind. What shall I tell him? It’s a yes?”

“You’re a presumptuous person, Christie. Why is that? It can’t be helped! No! It’s a big ‘NO’! That’s upper case N and another upper case O. NO! Okay? Tell him that. And if you need to scream at him, do that, please, for me.” She smiled nang toothless.

“O-okay.” Tugon nito in a small voice na may matipid na ngiti. Saka isinara na nito ang pinto.

Nagtaas ng kilay ang dalaga at nagpatuloy sa kanyang ginagawa. Saka naalala niya ang ina nito. Napatigil na naman siya sa pagtatrabaho. She owed her a weekend dinner. Naka-oo na siya. Paano na ‘yun? Napakagat-labi siya. Hindi pa niya ito na-mention sa parents niya. Dapat na gawin niya iyon dahil sa baka may lakad ang mga ito sa weekend. The sooner she paid his mom a weekend dinner, the better.

She fixed herself lunch na sandwich. Mayonnaise na may chopped pickles, bell peppers, cabbage and lettuce. Saka naghiwa na rin siya ng tomatoes. She also made a warm chocolate drink. She ate it in her office at napasandal siya sa kanyang swivel chair. Nilaro-laro niya ang seat habang kumakain at nag-iisip ukol kay Mac Denley.

“Mac Denley, you’re driving me crazy! Get out of my mind!” Inis na aniya at nilamon ang pagkain at puno ang bunganga niya sa sandwich nang bumukas iyon pagkatapos ng dalawang knock.

Muntik pa siyang mabulunan at napaluwa ang mga mata niya nang makita ang lalake. Nag-ha-hallucinate ba siya? She blinked. Hindi ito nawawala. Naroroon ito sa may pintuan. Napainom siya ng kanyang chocolate drink. Inubos niya talaga iyon. Napaubo pa siya pagkatapos at mabilis siyang dumukot ng isang piece of tissue sa kahon na nakapatong sa kanyang mahogany table.

“Y-you! A-anong ginagawa mo rito?!” Napa-Tagalog pa siya.

“Since you don’t come out to have a date with me, then I come to you and have our date here in your office instead.” He answered at inilagay nito sa kanyang table ang isang plastic na may laman ng take away food. Saka napaupo ito sa chair na nasa harapan ng kanyang mesa at napatingin sa paligid ng opisina.

Her eyes were mere slits na napatitig sa lalake. Napalunok ang dalaga.

“Why? Didn’t I tell you that I’ll never go out with you on a date? And from what I can even remember, I think I told you to kill yourself once, didn’t I? And didn’t my secretary-”

“Stop! I know and I remember too well what you said to me. Telling me once is enough. I’m a wise person, you know?” Ngumising saad pa nito. Nasa ere naman ang mga kamay nito’t kumukumpas.

“Fine! Then, why are you here?”

“I already said that I come here to date you.”

“Hah! There you go again.” Pagtataray na naman niya.

“What’s the big deal? I just want to have lunch with you.” He countered.

“I already ate. There’s no reason for me to eat with you. You eat alone. I don’t care. But I don’t want you here in my office. Got it?”

Ngumisi ang lalakeng napatayo.

“You’re such a stubborn person. I don’t even know why I’m doing this for you.” Saka umalis na itong walang paalam.

Napalunok at napakurap-kurap naman ang dalaga. Napahalukipki siya. Did she just treated him cruelly? Did she hurt his feelings so badly kung kaya’t nag-walk out na ito? She took a deep breath. Maano ba? Dapat hindi na niya iisipin ang nararamdaman nito sa kanya. How would she know if he didn’t bet on her again? Naiinis na naman siya sa kanyang naaalala.

Napatingin siya sa pagkaing iniwan ng lalake. Hindi pa kaya ito kumain? Napalabi siya. She stood up and went over to the kitchen upang kumuha ng isang basong tubig. Pagkatapos ay nakita niyang pumasok si Christie galing ng break nito. It was almost 2 in the afternoon nang tignan niya ang relong pambisig.

“Have you had your lunch?” Tanong pa niya sa sekretarya.

“Yes, dear. Thank you.” Saka nag-re-retouch ito ng blush on at lipstick habang napatitig ang dalaga rito.

“Umm... did you... did you meet someone outside when you came in?”

Napaisip-isip pa ang sekretarya niya. Pagkatapos ay umiiling ito.

“No. No, dear. Why? Was there someone looking for me?” Nakangiting tanong pa nito. Her eyes rounded with curiosity.

“Ah, no. I was just asking.” She shrugged. Ayaw niyang mag-elaborate pa rito at baka kung ano pang iisipin. Napatitig naman sa kanya ang sekretarya nang maigi. She looked away. Napangiwi siya and she chewed on her lip.

“Are you worried about something... or someone?”

Napatingin siya rito. Saka umiiling nang mabilis na may alanganing ngiti. Nagi-guilty kasi siya. Baka kung ano na ang ginagawa nito ngayon. But well, hindi naman talaga siya takot sa anong gagawin nito dahil sure siyang wala itong masamang gagawin, she trusted him. Pero kung anong feelings nito ngayon... No, dapat huwag na niyang isipin iyon at huwag na siyang mag-abala pa. It would be better for her and her peace of mind.

“I’ll just go back to my office. If anyone is going to look for me – well, just say that I’m too busy. Okay?”

“Alright, dear.”

Mabilis siyang bumalik sa loob ng kanyang opisina. Napangiti naman si Christie. She was sure that there was something more than her employer wanted to admit.

“So, nothing happened?” Jenna asked. Magkasama silang tatlo nina David at Mac Denley. They were in the coffee shop that night, the same place where they first met.

“That’s right.”

“Your friend is so stubborn.”

“She has pride,” pag-ta-tama pa ni Jenna.

“It’s the same,” he said without thinking and he drank his cup of coffee. He didn’t know if he would be able to sleep that night. It was his fifth cup since they got here. Parang ang lakas niya yatang uminom ngayon ng kape. Pero kung alak pa iyon, di niya alam kung ilang bote na ang nauubos niya dahil sa pag-iisip nang malalim at pagtutunga now and then.

“Well, anyway, let’s not fight about that. You just have to be persistent – like the rest of her suitors.”

Napatitig siya sa babae.

“Like the rest of her suitors? What do you mean?” He was so curious. He didn’t hear about this information before.

“Right. There’s Jung-Il. He’s half-Korean and half-American. He’s just the lone heir of a chain of Korean restaurants around the Northeastern and Southern US. And then, there’s Khalem. He’s a Hindi. His family runs a number of real estate businesses and owns a few buildings around here in the city alone. Not to mention the ones in other cities. And plus, Fernando. The Peruvian owner of this coffee shop. He owns a lot more in and out of the city.”

Ang angas! Grabe naman pala ang mga suitors ng dalaga. Kunsabagay iba nga rin naman ang level ng league nito’t beauty. It was just right that these rich guys wanted to take her as a trophy. Napasimangot lalo ang binata dahil sa kanyang narinig.

“Oh, so you mean there’s someone she’s interested in those three guys?” Tanong pa ni David.

“Silly! I didn’t say something like that. I’m just trying to point out that those three have been courting her for years. Years! Whereas here, our guy, well... I don’t need to spell it out. You get my drift, I’m sure.” Tugon naman ni Jenna.

“Yes, we do get your drift. So, what does it solve? And where does it leave us?” David prompted and drank a cup of coffee.

“The thing is that I know my friend is interested in our guy here,” taray pa ni Jenna. “Just that, my friend is playin’ hard to get, as usual. She wants to test her Mr. Right. You *feel* me?” Jenna’s eyes were thrown at David and Mac Denley.

“Ooohh... I think, I *feel* you, baby!” Natutuwang sabi pa ni David na tumango-tango pa.

Napasimangot naman si Mac Denley habang nakikinig sa pag-uusap ng dalawang kasama niya. So, Carrie wanted to test him? But was it all? Didn’t it mean that she liked someone else and that someone else wasn’t him? He was confused. Kahit nag-claim pa si Jenna na interesado sa kanya ang kaibigan nito’y wala naman siyang nakikitang actions nito na gusto siya nito. He’d be damned if he could ever read what she wanted to do with him! It was getting frustrated everytime he’d think the ways she treated him.

“I can only advise that you shouldn’t give up, lover boy. No pain, no gain. No retreat, no surrender. Got it?” Ngumisi pa si Jenna.

Tinapik pa ni David ang balikat ng kaibigan para naman mabuhayan ito ng loob. He and Jenna knew that he was getting frustrated each passing day. All they could do now was to follow Jenna’s lead.

Kinabukasan ay tumawag na naman si Mac Denley sa dalaga at nagpadala pa ng bouquet of flowers. Kahit tinarayan niya lang ito ay tila namanhid naman ito. Kilig na kilig na si Christie na pumasok na dala ang mga bulaklak. Saka at lunch, may pagkain pang pina-deliver. At kinahapunan naman ay nagpadala na naman ito ng chocolates na hearts pa ang shapes. Napaka-corny na nga pero deep inside ay kinilig na ang dalaga. Pero pilit niya iyong itinago kahit sa harap pa ng kanyang sekretarya dahil baka lalo lang siyang tuksuhin nito.

“I’ve never known such a sweet guy, dear,” ang sabi pa nito nang mailapag na ang chocolates.

“My suitors do the same. What’s the difference?” She pointed out.

Mabilis na umiiling si Christie.

“Oh, no. No, dear. This new one is very, very different. He sends you more than your other suitors. Besides, I can hear from his voice that he’s such a good catch. If I were you, I’d make up my mind.”

She smirked at her secretary. “You just don’t know the man, Christie.”

Tumaas ang kilay nito. “I think you have a point there, dear. But mind you. This one is for real! I can feel it in my bones. And what I feel in my bones has never been wrong. Ever!” Kumumpas-kumpas pa ang matabang sekretarya.

“Maybe, this will be the first time that ‘what’ you feel in your bones is wrong!” She quirked her mouth. Nakita naman niyang naging thin line ang lips ng kanyang sekretarya at pinigilan niya ang sariling huwag tumawa at lalo itong painisin.

“It has never been wrong!” Giit pa nitong tumalikod at umalis sa kanyang opisina.

Umiiling pa ang dalagang napangisi dahil sa kanyang narinig mula sa sekretarya. Ang kulit din naman kasi nito.

Chapter 8

Naisipan ni Mac Denley na daanan ang dalaga sa opisina nito. He knew that her father would pick her up on their way home most of the days of the week. Ito ang nalaman niya mula kay Jenna, ang source niya ng information ukol sa dalaga. He was grateful for her help, at pati na rin ang tulong at suporta ng kanyang mga kaibigan.

Natigilan na lang siya nang paglabas ng dalaga sa building ay may dala itong bouquet of flowers na may kasama pa itong mukhang Koreano. Ang mapait pa'y ngiting-ngiti ito sa lalakeng kasama. He could only guess that it was one of her suitors, si Jung-II. Napakuyom siya ng kanyang mga palad habang nakatinging sumakay ang babae sa sports car ng lalake. God knew where they would go. Inis na inis siya dahil sa kaiisip kung saan puwedeng pumunta ang dalawa.

He then decided to go on his own way and he went to David's home. Gusto niyang ipalabas ang nasasaloob niya sa kanyang kaibigan. Wala siyang ibang maaasahan sa pagkakataong ito baka medyo busy pa sa trabaho sina Harris at Luke.

Hindi sadyang napasulyap ang dalaga sa pamilyar na kotseng mabilis na umalis from across the street. Pero baka nagkamali lang siyang kotse iyon ni Mac Denley.

"So, is it a good time to take you to dinner?" Ang tanong pa nito sa kanya bago nag-i-start ng sasakyan.

Napatingin siya rito. Ngumiti na naman siya at tumango.

"Sure! I have no previous engagements for tonight. Besides, it's been weeks since I last saw you."

"So, you miss me?" Ang nakangiting tanong pa ng Korean. His eyes closed because of it. Isa itong katangian nito that she found cute.

"No comment. Just go." She smiled back at him and buckled up.

“You’re the boss!” Kindat pa nito’t pinasisibad na ang mamahalin nitong sports car na kulay itim.

“And you just left like that,” concluded pa ni David habang umiinom sila ng beer sa porch ng bahay nito. They were both seated on the steps at napatanaw sila sa well-manicured lawn, well-cut bushes and well-tended flowers. Mahilig kase sa tanim ang tiyahin nito na siyang nagpalaki nito since nag-divorce ang kanyang parents when he was still a little kid at mayroon ng kani-kanyang sariling pamilya ang mga ito.

“What was I supposed to do?” Himutok pa ng binata at tumungga ng malamig na beer mula sa bote na hawak.

“I gather that this is a very serious problem of the heart.” Ang sabi ng may edad na boses ng babae at napalingon sila sa matandang dalagang tiyahin ni David. She gave Mac Denley a sympathetic smile. She was a beautiful woman. Her almost silver hair was tightly secured into a bun.

“Aunt Carol. I didn’t know you’re home!” Tumayo ang binata at binigyan ng peck sa pisngi ang babae.

She embraced him tightly and patted his back gently.

“I was asleep. I feel so tired these past few weeks.” Ang nakaangat na tingin na sabi nito sa matangkad na lalake.

“Oh, I didn’t know that. David didn’t tell me. I’m so sorry...”

“It’s nothing, dear. Don’t you worry about it. Besides, I told him not to fuss over it. I just need rest.”

Napatango na lang ang binata.

“So, I see you’re drinking beer. Both of you. Are you in love, dear?” May panunukso ang mga mata nito ngunit seryoso naman ang mukhang nakatingin sa kanya. He didn’t know what to make of it. Kung mag-de-deny siya o hindi.

“Well... aunt Carol, he’s not really comfortable with it. You see...” Umpisa pang paliwanag ng pamangkin.

“Hush! I can give a word or two about it.” Napatingin nang seryoso ang dalawa sa may edad na babae. So, they waited for her to continue to speak. “If she’s in love with you, then you can ask her directly about that. So if she doesn’t tell you anything regarding her feelings for you so far, she’s just enjoying to torture you until she can convince herself that you’re truly meant for her – that you’re true to her. And yet, if she’s not in love with you, then she’ll tell you right in your face when you ask her. However, in my opinion, no girl wouldn’t fall in love with you, dear. You’re such a nice boy. You’re even nicer than my dear nephew.” And she winked at Mac Denley.

“Aunt Carol!” Protesta pa ni David.

“Not another word, nephew.” She warned.

“But, I don’t think what you told him helps him at all!” Dagdag pa ng binata na hindi nakinig sa tiyahin.

“So be it.” She raised her chin up and walked back in, leaving them both at the porch.

Nagkatinginan ang dalawang magkaibigan. They both sat down on the steps again, side by side. Saka umiinom ng beer. Kapwa naman napaisip-isip sa mga salitang binitiwang ng may edad na babae.

“And, oh! I think I forgot to tell you something important.” Carol stuck her head in the doorway.

Napalingon ang dalawang binata.

“What now, Aunt Carol?” Tanong pa ni David sa tiyahin.

“A kiss can determine the feelings of a woman. Well, that’s according to my... experience.” She said and cleared her throat. Saka mabilis na itong nawala.

Nagkatinginan na naman ang magkaibigan at may ngiting sumilay sa mga labi ni David habang nakatitig sa kaibigan.

“A kiss, man. A kiss!”

Ayaw mapangiti si Mac Denley. Instead, his brows furrowed.

“Man, you have to do it! I’ll cheer you on.”

Binatukan pa ito ng binata. Mukhang ginawa pa nitong biro ang bagay na iyon at heto siya, nalilito na kung ano’ng dapat na gawin at kung susundin nga ba niya ang payo ng tiyahin nito. It was one hell of a decision to make!

After dinner, hinatid na ni Jung-Il ang dalaga. They both stood by the closed doorway.

“So, you can just tell your parents I drop by.” Jung-Il said.

Tumango ang dalaga.

“I will tell them, of course. And thanks for the dinner. I enjoyed it a lot.” She smiled up to him. She noted that Jung-Il was also a good-looking guy, he was nice to her, he always treated her good as a woman and yet, she imagined that he was Mac Denley who was before her right at this moment. She blinked and the apparition disappeared.

“Me, too. Thank you for coming with me.” He said and caressed her cheek gently. “It means a lot to me.”

She smiled. He kissed her cheek and bade her goodbye. Napasunod ng tingin ang dalaga sa lalakeng lumulan ng kanyang kotse and she waved at him nang umalis na ito.

Before she could come into the house, she noticed a presence behind her. She gasped when she saw Mac Denley come into view, from the dark.

“What are you doing here?” She demanded. As she watched him come nearer, naaamoy naman niya ang beer na iniinom nito. “Are you drunk?” Usisa pa niya.

He stopped right in front of her, a mere few inches away. Napalunok ang dalaga. He was acting weird. Napatingin siya sa paligid. Hindi naman niya nakikita ang kotse nito sa compound nila. Nag-taxi lang kaya ito ngayon dahil sa nakainom ito?

Bigla tuloy siyang hinawakan nito sa magkabilang balikat. Napahawak siya nang mahigpit sa bouquet of flowers na nasa pagitan nilang dalawa.

“How do you feel about me, Carrie?” He whispered.

“You’re drunk, Mac-” Her words were silenced as he covered her lips with his. She was surprised. Her heart was racing. It was like it wanted to come out of her chest! His mouth was so gentle and yet, demanding. Her eyes closed on their own accord and her lips responded to his sweet kiss.

It was a few seconds before he let her go. Both of them were out of breath because of their hot kiss. Napatitig sila sa isa’t isa. She knew that her cheeks were so red pero tila wala siyang plano upang itago iyon.

“You’re mine, Carrie.” He said and left.

Napamaang ang dalaga.

“O, hinatid ka pala ni Mac Denley? Siya ‘yon, di ba?” Ang sabi pa ng kanyang ina na binuksan ang pinto.

Muntik pa siyang napalundag dahil doon.

“Ah, no – I mean, yes, mommy.” She blinked so hard.

“O, ano pang ginagawa mo riyan? Pasok ka na.”

She bit her lower lip. She could still feel his kiss and she couldn't imagine how sweet it was. At tumalima na siya sa sinabi ng kanyang ina. She went upstairs to her room. The kiss was still played over and over in her mind. At ang feeling na kanyang naramdaman, she could still remember it. What was she doing? Bakit niya hinayaang halikan at humalik sa lalakeng iyon? It was sort of insane! She didn't even asked for it! Basta na lang itong nagpakita at ginawan siya nang gano'n! Was he some kind of a psycho?! Inis na inis siya tuloy. He took away her first kiss nang gano'n na lang. She never imagined na gano'n iyon. 'Tsaka, lasing pa iyon nang kunin ang first kiss niya! That bastard virgin bachelor! She cursed.

Mac Denley smiled after he turned on his heel. The kiss was more than he expected as well as the response. After he drank a couple of bottle of beer, he fought with David kung puntahan pa niya at hintayin ang dalaga sa bahay nito. Ngunit napilit na rin siya ng kaibigan dahil sa inihatid siya nito just before dumating ang dalaga.

Tumawag kasi si Jenna sa bahay ng mga Danvers bago sila nagpunta rito. At kung kaya't timing ang pagdating nila't pagdating ng dalaga kasama ang Koreano. Nagtitimpi lang siya sa shadows habang hinalikan nito sa pisngi ang dalaga. Even though he changed his mind in the last minute at kausapin lang ang dalaga, he was pushed to go with his friend's plan – 'yong kiss nga.

"So, how was it?" Kuryusong tanong pa ni David nang lumulan siya sa kotse nito, which was parked a couple of blocks away from the Danvers'.

"Don't ask. Just go." He answered and he tried hard not to smile or else, his friend would get the whole idea and perhaps, he'd go insane.

"Ah! So, you're not telling me."

"There's nothing to tell, anyway." He countered as they passed by the Danvers' two-story house.

"Well, in that case, I can just imagine..."

Binatukan ito ng binata ngunit tawa lang nang tawa ang kaibigang nagmamaneho.

“I heard that Macden was at your house last night,” bungad pa ni Jenna na pumasok sa opisina niya nang hindi man lang kumatok.

“Macden? Ah, so you’re that close na, ha?” She teased her friend upang huwag siya ang pag-usapan nito.

“Bakit? Nagseselos ka?” Taas-kilay na tanong ng kaibigan as she leaned on the table to face her friend.

“Hah! Ako? Magseselos? Of course not!”

“Good.” Jenna pulled back and stood in front of her desk. “I wanted to know what happened between you two. Hinanap nga pala kita kahapon, hindi kita mahagilap.”

“Well, I was with Jung-II. We had dinner together.”

“Oh, so he’s back in town from Bergen?”

“Well, he’ll be here again to pick me up and have dinner tonight.”

“Ah, so nagkamabutihan na talaga kayo ni Jung-II? That’s weird. You’ve never been on two consecutive dinner sa iisang suitor mo. What do you want to show? Siya na ba? Nakapag-decide ka na bang siya na ang magiging boyfriend mo? Di mo man lang kami kinunsulta ni Jessica. Why?”

“Jenna, kung sasagutin ko man si Jung-II or hindi, it’s none of your business. Friends ko lang kayo. Besides, dapat na susuportahan n’yo akong dalawa sa kung anuman ang made-desisyon ko, hindi ba? Isa pa, si Jasmine ay wala namang sinasabing kahit na ano. I told her about Jung-II.”

“That?”

“About the dinner.”

“I see. So, kayo na ng ate ko ang close friends ngayon.” She rolled her eyes.

“It’s not like that. You know that. Why are you here, anyways?”

“Ah, nabalitaan ko lang na lumabas ka kagabi kaya heto ako ngayon. I just want to warn you about him and that Barbie named Gemma. I heard some rumors that she and Macden are going out.”

“Oh, eh, ano ngayon? We have nothing to do with each other.”

Tumawa si Jenna at kinuha ang kanyang cellphone mula sa bag. And she showed her the video at the club. Napamaang naman si Carrie sa kanyang nakita. She felt like she was a slut at time. Siya pa ang lumapit kay Mac Denley at sumayaw sa harapan nito at hinihipo-hipo niya pa ang lalake. Her face reddened. She remembered that she danced and she had some kind of a showdown with Gemma. Kaya lang, ang part na iyon ay tila naiwaglit na sa kanyang alaala. She was so mortified! Gusto na niyang kainin na siya ng lupa nang buhay!

“B-bakit mo ipinakita sa ‘kin to ngayon?” Napakurap-kurap na tanong pa niya kay Jenna.

“Well, I just wanted to point out that you were so *into* him that night. Ayaw mong patatalo. So, ngayon. Patatalo ka na ba sa retokadang Barbie na iyon?”

Nagngingitngit na napatingin ang dalaga sa kanyang kaibigan. She knew that her friend was only tormenting her at the moment. Malay ba niyang gagamitin lang siya nito upang her friend would win Mac Denley for herself? Kahit gano’n ay parang nawawala ang tiwala niya rito. And then, she checked herself. Jenna was her damn friend! Why was she feeling this way because of a particular man?

Chapter 9

Khalem visited her one day and invited her to a lunch date. She agreed. Para din naman fair para kay Jung-Il at baka mabalitaan pa iyon ng Korean-American. Ayaw niyang may masasabi ito at baka may gulong mangyayari sa tatlong lalake gaya noong two years ago. Nag-sapakan ang mga ito dahil sa kanya. Paano kasi, may mga planted spies ang mga ito sa isa't isa basta't ukol sa dalaga. Buti na lang at wala silang espiya para kay Mac Denley at kung magkagano'n, magkakaroon ng napakalaking gulo. And she thought that the latter was unpredictable. At ngayon ay naaalala niya tuloy ang kiss nila last week. At mula noon ay di pa ito nagpapakita sa kanya. Para pa itong 'kiss and run'. At doon siya naiinis.

Khalem was a perfect gentleman a woman could ask for. Kahit sa pagiging Hindi nito'y alam na alam nito kung paano i-ti-treat ang isang babae. Dahil na rin siguro sa paglaki nito sa Amerika. And she was happy because of that. Kunsabagay, isa iyon sa mga katangian ng isang lalake na hinahanap niya sa kanyang ideal man.

Just after dessert, nagtungo ang dalaga sa restroom upang makapag-retouch. She was alone when the other ladies got out. Ngunit may pumasok din at nakita niya sa salamin ang nakangiti nang nakakaloka. Her mind was scanning her brain nang mabilis like a facial recognition software. Sure, it was Gemma all right. She put back her lipstick sa kanyang purse and looked at the other woman sa salamin.

"Gemma, we're going," someone called out from the outside. Another woman. Perhaps a friend of hers or just some girl she treated nicely than she treated Carrie.

"I'll catch up. Go." Tugon pa ng babae na lumapit kay Carrie at nag-lipstick din ito.

"Okay!"

"I have something to tell you, Carrie. That's your name, right?"

Umismid pa ang dalaga rito. Her eyes roamed around the other woman's beautiful features.

“Right. Go on. What do you want to tell me?”

“About Macden.”

Her left eyebrow went out. She was wondering what this woman could say to her about her and Mac Denley.

“By the way, what business do you have with him? He doesn’t seem himself these days.”

“If you have nothing more to say, I have something more important to attend to, if you don’t mind.”

“Oh, it won’t take long. I promise.”

“Hmm... go ahead, shock me!”

“I just want to tell you that I’m pregnant with Mac Denley’s baby. And we’re going to talk about marriage in a few days. Are you shocked?”

Carrie pouted her lips prettily as she looked at the other woman who was tormenting her. She didn’t know what to believe. Baka nga’t na-rape na nito si Mac Denley. Nagtagumpay na ito. And he was about to have a baby with this woman!

“Oh, is that right?” Bumawing aniya.

“So, you’re shocked,” ngumisi pa ito at umalis na.

Nagtatagis ang mga bagang ng dalaga na napasunod ng tingin sa babaeng lumabas ng restroom. Of all the places, dito pa silang dalawa nagkita sa restorang ito! She hated her and she hated him! She hated them! Inis na inis siya. She took a deep breath and she decided to compose herself dahil may date pa siya with Khalem. She had to face him. It was time to go back. He had waited for her long enough.

“Carrie, Mac Denley called asking what time and when can you go to dinner?” Her mom asked one night.

She was at home. But until now, hindi pa rin nawawala sa kanyang isipan ang mga sinabi sa kanya ni Gemma. Pumasok ang kanyang ina na dala ang cordless phone.

“Tell him in a trillion – no – in a zillion years! I hate him! Why won’t he asked someone else – that fake Barbie?!” She told her mom. May gana pang tumawag ang kumag gayong nakabuntis na ito ng ibabang babae? He had the nerve!

“Oh, no.” Clarissa said.

“Oh, yes.” She told her mom. Nailing naman ito. “I don’t want to sound rude, mom but could you leave me alone?”

Clarissa sighed.

“Mac Denley, I think you heard what she said. I’m sorry. I’ll talk to you again later, okay? Alright. Good. Thank you.” Saka na-end na ang call na iyon.

Her mom look at her. She had concerned look emanating her, which was typically an automatic feeling coming from a mother.

“What’s going on here? I thought something good was going on between you and him.”

“Mommy? Why am I so stupid?” She asked instead.

“Well, that’s too bad,” her mom smiled unsympathetically.

“Mommy!”

“Sweetie, I think you should both talk. Whatever it is that’s kept inside you, you should let it out. I don’t know what happened but I do really think that he’s such a nice young man. So, I don’t see any reason why you and him can’t make it up. You just have to talk. Okay?”

Her mom left and she just moped in her room.

“What did you tell her?” Galit na usisa pa ni Mac Denley kay Gemma, nakita niya ito sa isa sa mga boutiques sa downtown. He was hunting her down after his call. There was no other ‘Barbie’ that Carrie was referring to kundi si Gemma lang. Kasama pa ng binata si David ngayon. Namilit talaga ito dahil baka may magawa siyang hindi maganda dahil sa kanyang temper.

“Oh. Well, I might have told her a lot of things. Just that I don’t remember them,” she batted her eyelashes beautifully like she always practiced in the mirror, which was thought to be cute by men.

Patingin-tingin nang kuryuso naman ang kaibigang kasama ng babae sa dalawang binata.

“Macden, I wanna be your girl! You know that!” Gemma touched his arm. “And you’ve known it long before that woman came into our lives and mess our relationship!”

Hindi makapaniwala si Mac Denley sa kanyang narinig.

“There’s nothing between us for heaven’s sake, Gemma! You know it very well.” Tiim-bagang na turan ng binata.

Saka tinalikuran na niya ang babae.

“I have to advise you to stop before you’ll get yourself hurt. I mean it, Gemma,” ang warning pa ni David at sumunod na sa kanyang kaibigan.

Napamaang si Gemma. She just realized what she’d done. This was serious!

David and Mac Denley ended up at his private shooting range, which was just in the outskirts of the city. His family owned the land and he’d turn it into his practice shooting range at paminsan-minsan, ito ang klase ng kanyang pag-deal ng stress. Ngayon, na-i-stress siya dahil kay Gemma, which resulted to his stress sa pakikitungo sa kanya ni Carrie. He didn’t like it one bit.

“Wow! You’re so passionate about this.” Attempt pang pabirong sabi ni David habang binabaril ni Mac Denley ang target niya na nasa standard distance nito. Kapwa may takip ang kanilang mga tainga upang ma-protektahan ang mga ito sa malalakas na putok.

Sumunod naman si David sa pag-ta-target practice. Inubos nito ang isang round. Saka nagkatinginan silang magkaibigan.

“How do you proceed now?” David asked.

“I can’t just let her go. I have to tell her that I love her. In just a short time that we’ve known each other, I can’t hide it from her any longer.”

David gave his friend a slow smile. Saka tinapik niya ang isang balikat nito.

“I like that, my man. I like that!”

“I’m busy in case you don’t see it.” Giit pa ng dalaga habang sumusunod sa kanyang parang tuta si Mac Denley kinabukasan.

“Come on. Just give me a minute!”

“Don’t dare to order me around, mister! I don’t want to talk to you! Is that so hard to follow?”

“Who are you?” Ang tanong pa ni Fernando nang mapasukan niyang nag-aaway sa loob ng opisina ng dalaga ang dalawa.

They both looked at the Peruvian man. *Not again!* Naisip pa ni Mac Denley. Inis na inis siyang maraming asungot sa tuwing gusto siyang mapalapit kay Carrie. Kung hindi ‘yong Koreano, ‘yon namang Hindi. At ngayon, ang Peruvian na may-ari ng coffee shop na palagi nilang pinupuntahan. He had enough!

“Man, this is none of your business...” He said.

“Fernando, this is not the right time for you to be here. Please, leave us.” Pakiusap pa ng dalaga.

Laylay ang balikat ng Peruvian at tumango sa dalaga.

“Alright. If you need anything – my help... just give me a holler.” He said to at least make Carrie feel at ease.

“Thank you, Fernando. It’s so nice of you.”

Umalis na ang binatang Peruvian na tumango. Isinara na nito ang pinto. Muling nagharap ang dalawang nag-aaway. They waited for a moment to formulate what to say to each other. Nawala kasi iyon dahil sa pag-walk in ni Fernando.

“Listen, Carrie. I know Gemma told you something.”

“Mr. Burrows, whether she told me something or nothing at all is none of your damn business! And I don’t care whatsoever it is between you and her! I don’t care!”

“You’re lying!”

“I don’t care!” Ulit pa ng dalaga.

“Carrie, won’t you just listen to what I have to say?”

“I don’t have any reason why I even have this kind of ‘conversation’ with you, Mr. Burrows. As far as I’m concerned, there shouldn’t be any!” Humihingal sa galit ang dalaga.

Despite of it, he still thought that she was too damn beautiful at anytime he laid eyes on her. He even wanted to kiss her beautiful lips now – just to make her shut up and make her listen to him afterwards. He knew that she’d be speechless if he’d do it. But on second thought, it wasn’t time to kiss her. Baka lalo lang lalala ang kanilang away at lalo lang na lalayo sa kanya ang dalaga. No, his kiss shouldn’t be made a weapon at this time. Not right now.

“For now, I want to ask you something important.”

She didn't speak.

"Do you trust me? Carrie?"

She didn't speak, still. Their eyes just stared at each other.

"Damn it, Carrie! If there's no trust between us, from either you or me, then there's no future for us. I guess, I was just too stupid to think that there was something special between us after – after that kiss... I guess I was wrong, after all." Tumalikod na ang binata pagkatapos magsalita. Iniwan na siya nito. Like she wanted him to do. Sinunod na nga nito ang gusto niya. Pero bakit ngayon, parang hungkag ang kanyang nararamdaman?

Napabagsak ng upo ang dalaga sa visitor's chair na nasa harapan ng kanyang desk. Her tears fell down cheeks without her noticing it. Pagkapasok ni Christie ay naratnan siya sa ganoong ayos. Nag-aalala tuloy itong lumapit sa kanya.

"Oh, dear..." She said helplessly at inaalo ang dalaga.

"He's gone, Christie. He's gone!" Humahagulgol na sumbong pa niya sa sekretarya.

"I know, dear. I saw him."

"He's not coming back, Christie. He's not!" Sumbong pa niya ulit rito.

"Well, that... that, we don't know for sure, dear. Maybe he'll come back sooner or later – before we know it." Ang tugon naman nitong hinahagod pa rin ang kanyang likod. The fat lady knew that she was currently in turmoil. She didn't know the whole story but now, her employer was telling her everything. "Tsk, tsk, tsk." Nailling pang anito. "I know I should not add to what you feel right now. But you should've just listened to his explanation or to what he had to say. Who knows? Perhaps you'd understand once you heard his side of the story. Everything in this world has its cause and effect – reasons that things do happen and why they don't happen, that is. So, if and when he comes back, you have to face him and whatever it is that he wants to tell you. You have to. You might think and be anxious that it might not be good. But for the sake of hearing both sides and judging for yourself which of them told the truth, you have to trust your

heart. Your heart, dear. In the end, it's where our happiness comes from. From the depths of our hearts."

Napalunok si Carrie. Pinahiran niya ang kanyang mga luha. But she hadn't had the heart or the will to come after Mac Denley. Besides, he thought she didn't trust him anyway, so why would he stay and try to clear himself in front of her kung gano'n din naman ang mapapala nito? She understood that his trait won't let him stay and be hurt more than he already was. She knew she hurt him. But she was hurt, too! At ano ba ang ginawa nito para sa kanya? Oh, well... he wanted to explain himself but she didn't just give him the chance. Ang masisisi ay tanging sarili lamang niya.

Chapter 10

Bumuntong-hininga si Jenna. They were in Carrie's room. Hinayaan sila ng mga magulang ng dalaga na makapag-usap nang sarilinan dahil batid ng mga ito ang problema ng dalaga after sa sinabing lahat ni Jenna sa mga ito ang dahilan. They were also sad about what had gone wrong between Mac Denley and their daughter. It was such a pity. But they were hopeful that everything would be fixed in no time.

"Stupid! 'Yon. Iyon ang gusto kong sabihin sa 'yo. You don't know how Macden is feeling right now. Hayun. Kasa-kasama si David at ang lahat niyang mga kaibigan niya. Dinadamayan siya. Para siyang namatayan, alam mo ba? At bakit gano'n? You may ask. Dahil sa 'yo 'yon, Carrie. Bakit ka ba nakikinig sa sinasabi sa 'yo ng karibal mo? May pruwera ba siyang ibinigay sa 'yo? Naku! CPA ka, ang tali-talino mo. Pero ang bobo mo pala sa ganitong aspeto!"

"Oo nga. Ako na ang masama at ako na ang may kasalanan!" Sinuntok pa ng dalaga ang unan niya, she was seated on her bed nang inuupuan ang isang paa. "Dagdagan mo pa nga! Ako na 'yong walang tiwala, walang damdamin, walang konsensiya at kung anu-ano pa!"

"Iyon na nga. Lahat ng mga iyon, ikaw na. Congrats!" Sarkastikang tugon naman ng kaibigan. "Huh! Sige na nga! Tatawagan ko na si David. Sasabihin kong dadalhin na kita sa bahay nila ni Macden. At siya nga pala. Nakalimutan mo 'yong utang mong dinner ng family mo together with his mom. Palagi niyang sinisingil ang kawawang tao no'n. Dapat pumunta na tayo doon na dalawa at nang ma-i-set na natin ang date ng families n'yo."

"T-teka. Pupunta tayo sa kanila?"

"Don't you worry. Bukas pa darating ang mom ni Macden kasi namatay 'yong relative nila sa Bergen County. Kaya, hayun. Puwedeng emote nang emote ang kawawang frothy guy."

Napangiwi siya. She hesitated.

"O, ano? Ayaw mong samahan akong pumunta doon?"

She looked at her friend. Takot siyang harapin ngayon ang binata. Oo nga't gusto na niyang pakinggan ang anumang sasabihin nito pero parang takot siyang kausapin ngayon ang lalake.

“Carrie, when are you going to gather your courage? Tomorrow, sa makalawa? In a few days, weeks, months, o kaya’y years? My God! Friend, you two don’t have time long enough to do that! Babalik na in a month si Macden sa Iran – o kaya’y bukas, kung kailangan na siya doon sa trabaho niya. And what will you do? Hihintayin mo siyang babalik? Eh, delikado nga ang trabaho niya, paano na kung... of course, I don’t want to think about negative things. Pero malay natin? Pagsisisihan mo rin ‘yon pagdating ng araw. Gusto mo ba ‘yon? Ha? Eh, kung ‘yes’ ang sagot mo. Well, then, wala na akong magagawa pa. Ginawa ko na ang lahat ng makakaya ko. Sige, maiwan na kitang magmumukmok rito. Byeness!”

Mabilis na hinawakan ng dalaga ang kamay ng kaibigan.

“T-teka lang.” She took a deep breath. “Teka lang sabi, eh!”

“O, ano na ngayon? May sasabihin ka pang iba? Sinasayang mo lang ang oras, eh.”

Napalunok ang dalaga. She held her hands together and twisted them round and round. “M-magbibihis lang ako.”

Napasapo ng kanyang noo si Jenna. “Fine! Bilisan mo na! Please!”

Dali-daling binuksan ng dalaga ang kanyang walk-in cabinet at pumili ng damit na isusuot.

“Oo. Piliin mo talaga ‘yong pinakamaganda’t sexy mong damit. At baka magbago pa ang isipan ni Macden. Gaga ka talaga!”

Pagkatapos ng mga 30 minutes ay nasa harapan na silang magkaibigan sa bahay ng mga Burrows. She was wearing a white mini-skirt and black spaghetti strapped top na pinaresan ng wedges na kulay puti. May manipis pa siyang makeup na gawa ni Jenna.

“O, ano? Hindi ka naman bababa ngayon? Carrie, ano ka ba? Iniinis mo na ako, eh! Nanggigigil na talaga ako sa ‘yo. Alam mo ‘yon? Nakikita mo na bang lumalabas na ang usok sa ilong ko? Grr...! Kainis talaga! Bakit ba kasi ako nagkaroon ng siraulong kaibigang tulad mo?” Naiinip na ang kaibigan niyang nasa passenger seat, nakatingin sa kanya nang matalim na nasa driver seat.

“T-teka lang. Iniipon ko pa’ng lakas ng loob ko. Huwag mo naman akong madaliin. Total naman, ‘andito na tayo.”

“Iyon na nga ang point ko, eh. Nandito na nga tayo. More than five minutes naman na tayong nakaupo rito sa loob.”

“S-sige na nga. Pasok na tayo.” Binuksan na ng dalaga ang pinto ng kotse ng kanyang ama na gamit nila sa gabing ito.

“Finally!” Jenna was relieved at umibis na rin ng sasakyan.

Ito na rin ang kumatok at si Jada ang siyang bumukas. She smiled in relief when she saw them.

“Guys? Come on out!”

Kumukumpas na sumesenyas ang dalaga na huwag pero dumating na ang lahat maliban kay Mac Denley. Kompleto ang mga ito doon na sina Luke, Michelle, Harris, Jada at David.

“Oh, it’s good that you’re here. We do think that you have to get in and look for yourself.” Sabi pa ni Luke na nailing.

“T-thank you and I’m sorry,” maliit na boses na aniya sa mga ito.

“Just go in,” ang pampalakas-loob na sabi ni Michelle at itinulak na siya sa loob nang makalabas na ang lahat sa pintuan. “We’ll just be outside. We do hope that it’s going to be alright now. Just listen to him, okay?”

Napatango siya. Isinara na nito ang pinto. She heard it close at wala nang balikan pa. Humugot siya nang malalim na hininga at hinanap na niya ang lalake. She knew na nasa loob lang talaga ito. Kung ano naman ang ginagawa nito ay di nga niya lang alam.

But she had to do this once and for all. Hindi na rin niya kasi matitiis ang lalake at pati na ang sarili.

Nakita niya sa kusina ang lalake. And to her surprise, naroon din si Gemma. At mukhang masinsinan ang usapan ng mga ito. Bago pa siya makatalikod at makaalis ay nakita na siya ni Gemma at napatingin rin sa kanya si Mac Denley. He was surprised. And he was worried. Dahil nakita niyang magkasama ang mga ito.

“Carrie!” Tawag pa sa kanya ni Gemma.

Huminto siya habang nakatalikod sa mga ito. Lumapit ito sa kanya and she touched her shoulder.

“I’m sorry. I made a mistake by making something up. It’s not true that something happened between me and Macden. I just liked him so much that I wanted him all for myself. And it was like I couldn’t give him up to you. I didn’t want to lose to you, you know? And when I realized that he did really care and love you so much, I realized that I did something wrong. And – and I felt bad and I still do. It’s good that you’re here. And I can apologize.”

Napabasa ang dalaga sa mga mata ng blond woman. She was serious and she felt that she told her the truth.

“Well, I don’t expect for you to forgive me right away. At least I have asked you now. So... I think I must go now for you think about it. Besides, I know that Macden wants to tell you something.” She smiled toothlessly.

Tumango siya sa babae at umeksit na ito sa back door sa kusina pagkatapos magpaalam sa binata. He just nodded. He then stood up from where he was seated. He put his hands inside his pockets. He watched Carrie turn around to face him slowly.

“I-I don’t want us to go to our different paths and lead different lives. I... have always loved you from the beginning – until now, of course...” She said slowly as she watched him walk towards her.

“I now know what she has told you but – the truth is... is is that I love you and...” He embraced her lightly and kissed her gently. “I didn’t know it was difficult for you but you’re in my heart since forever. I’ve been unable to forget you since the first time I saw you at the coffee shop of your Peruvian suitor. Do you know that?”

She shook her head. “I just thought about the bet over and over. I couldn’t believe anything you say. That’s why-” Umpisang paliwanag niya ngunit he silenced her by one finger.

“Do you trust me now?”

She nodded as their eyes locked. He smiled. He smiled that unresisting smile he had whenever he wanted to. Her heart seemed to melt away. And she smiled back at him. She felt what he felt at the same time.

“You’re unforgettable, remember that always. And remember always that I love you and it won’t ever waver. You don’t have to be in turmoil. I’m here for you. I love you... so much... Carrie.”

“I love you, too, Macden.”

“That’s better,” he said with satisfaction.

She smiled at him shyly.

“So, dinner at 8 on Saturday? With your parents here?” he asked as he tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear.

“Eight sounds good. I’ll tell them. I’m sure they’re going to be thrilled.”

He snorted and embraced her tightly.

“I so love you, Miss Virgin Bridesmaid,” he teased.

“I love you, too, Mr. Virgin Bachelor.” Ang bawi naman niya na yumakap din nang mahigpit rito.

“Well, well, well. More than reconciled, aren’t we?” Ang tudyo pa ni David na pumasok mula sa likuran ng kusina.

Nagkatawanan ang dalawa at sumenyas si Mac Denley na palabasin ito uli upang mabigyan pa sila ng privacy na dalawa ni Carrie. He wanted to kiss her again so badly...

-- Wakas --