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SEDUCTION CAMPAIGN

Darla

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Wallace Peter Murray vows to make Stacy Marion Watson his through a seduction campaign that he formulated himself. He is more than merely provoked and challenged when the half-Filipina and half-Scottish beauty captured his heart since he was fifteen.

Now, they are both older and are ready to face such consequences that adults have to face. He is damn good and ready no matter what she does to him just to evade his constant and persistent advances...

CHAPTER ONE

“WELL, well, well. If it isn't Stacy Marion Watson we got here. Good morning, gorgeous,” ang nang-aasar na puna pa ng binatang British na 32-year old, her archenemy and the enemy of the female race. Well, at least that was her opinion. Isa itong architect na nagtatrabaho para sa David Mitchell Architects Ltd. The company offered residential projects, house extensions, interior design, loft conversions, office design, home planning, planning applications and many others, which was located on York Road in London.

Kahit noong bata pa sila ay ipinakita na nito na may gusto ito sa dalaga. She was only 8 and he was 15 when he started to pester her. Siya ang paboritong asarin pero nalaman niyang gusto pala siya nito kahit noong nasa 12 anyos pa lang siya. O mas mainam na sabihing nadiskubre niya ito kinalaunan. Kung kaya't panay ang papansin nito sa kanya noon. Well, hanggang ngayon. Kalilipat lang nila noon ng kanyang pamilya sa London mula sa Scotland. At simula noon ay naging magkapit-bahay na sila sa Waterloo area. At hindi maiiwasang hindi sila nagkikita nang madalas dahil doon. Lalo na at malapit lang sa kanyang pinagtatrabahuan ang opisina nito, ang The Royal Marsden hospital sa may Fulham Road.

Kung bakit ba kasi tila nakakabit nang nakakabit ang kanyang kapalaran rito ay hindi niya alam. Inis na inis naman siya sa lalake. And currently, at around 6:30 in the morning, she was waiting for a taxi to take her to the hospital. Hindi siya nag-ba-bus dahil medyo maarte siya. Halu-halo kaya ang mga amoy ng mga British people. Ayaw niya ang ganoon. Kung hindi pa namatay nang sabay sa isang car crash ang kanilang mga magulang three years ago, mas maganda pa sana ang buhay nila ngayong magkakapatid. Ang dalawang nakababata niyang mga kapatid na sina Jake Maxwell at Jacy Annabelle ay nag-aaral sa first year high school at middle school, sa kanyang

sariling pagsisikap, dugo at pawis. At kung hindi sana namatay ang mga magulang nila, sana ay nakalipat na sila ng tahanan ayon sa kanyang gusto upang hindi na siya nabubuwisit sa kapit-bahay nilang si Wallace Peter Murray. Lagi na lang talagang kumukulo ang dugo niya kapag narinig ang boses o kaya'y nakita man lang ang anino nito.

She rolled her eyes. Hindi niya tinignan ang lalakeng lulan sa kotse nito. Kahit nakapikit siya ngayon ay alam na alam niya ang parating suot nito. Black suit, white shirt, necktie and slacks. Basta't sa opisina ito pupunta. At kapag casual naman, naka-jeans lang ito at t-shirt or polo shirt o kaya'y sweatshirt, depende rin naman sa season kung winter, spring, summer or fall. Sa ngayon, summer at papunta na sila sa autumn. Ito pa lang ang unang buwan mula nang makapagsimula ang klase. Mag-o-October pa lang.

“Why is there a foul smell so early in the morning?” Sabi pa niyang tinabunan ang kanyang maliit ngunit matangos na ilong nang pasimple lang.

Napatawa ang lalake. Naiiling ito. Saka bumusina ito sa kotse nito. Lumabas ng bahay nito ang nag-jo-jog na si Bradley Walter, ang nakababatang kapatid nito at sumunod namang lumabas ang kanyang kapatid na si Jake. Napakunot-noo siya nang kapwa sumakay ang dalawa sa kotse ni Wallace. Her hand shot right in front of her. Pilit niyang hinatak palabas si Jake.

“What do you think you're doing?” Tanong pa niya sa 15 anyos niyang kapatid na lalake. Halos hindi niya napunang lumabas na si Jacy at papalapit sa kanila saka kahit hindi lumabas ay pinagbuksan ni Wallace ang 13 anyos na batang dalaga. At dito naman napalingon ang dalaga. “Jacy? What are you doing?” Parehong tanong ang isinampa niya sa kanyang dalawang nakababatang mga kapatid.

“We’re going to get a ride to our school. It’s on his way to the office.” Ang sabay na sabi ng kanyang dalawang nakababatang mga kapatid.

Napamaang siya sa mga ito. Hinawi naman ni Jake ang kanyang kamay mula sa likuran ng kuwelyo nito. Natulala siya ng ilang segundo.

“Stacy, why don’t you come along? The hospital is also on my brother’s way to the office. Am I not correct?” Ang nakangising sabad naman ni Bradley mula sa loob ng kotse, sa backseat.

Napalunok ang dalaga. Inis na inis siya nang maisara ng kanyang mga kapatid ang kani-kanyang pinto. Hindi pa rin siya makapagsalita. Oo nga naman. Parehong direksyon ang pinapasukan nila ni Wallace pero ayaw na ayaw niyang magkaroon siya ng utang na loob sa lalake. At lalong ayaw niyang bigyan ito ng pagkakataong makalapit sa kanya.

“See you around, gorgeous!” Nakangising paalam pa ni Wallace at pinasibad na nito ang kotseng kulay black na BMW. Kaya pala hindi ginagamit nito ngayon ang blue nitong Bugatti Veyron o kaya’y ang silver Bentley Continental GT!

Inis na inis siya habang sinundan ng tingin ang papalayong kotse. At sakay doon ang mga kapatid niya! Nag-aalala siyang baka mabilis na mabilis si Wallace sa pagmamaneho nito. Natatakot siyang madisgrasya ito at madamay pa ang kanyang mga kapatid. Tila nagka-trauma na siya dahil sa aksidente ng kanyang mga magulang.

She stopped herself from thinking such a negative thought. She knew about the negative result kapag ito ang palaging iniisip niya. Dapat positibo lang siya at dapat umusal na lang siya ng dasal na sana’y palaging ligtas lang ang kanyang mga kapatid. Nang mapansin niya ang paparating

na taxi ay sinipulan na niya ito at huminto ito ng ilang metro mula sa kanyang kinatatayuan at nag-reverse ito upang makasakay siya sa backseat.

“The Royal Marsden,” ang sabi pa niya sa driver.

“Yes, ma’am!” Ang masiglang anito at sumibad na ang taxi.

Habang papunta ng ospital ay nasa kanyang mga kapatid at kay Wallace lang ang kanyang isipan.

“**ANO?** Nakita ng sarili mong mga mata na sumabay sa archenemy mo ang mga kapatid mo?” Napatawa pa si Liz na isang Pinay, kapwa nurse niya rito sa ospital at close friend na niya mula three years ago, since she joined The Royal Marsden. At mas matagal na itong nagtatrabaho sa kanya sa ospital dahil sa mas matanda ito sa kanya ng apat na taon.

Kasalukuyang nakatambay na sila ngayon sa nurse’s station pagkatapos nilang mag-round upang kunin ng vital signs at pagbigay ng mga gamot sa pasyente.

“Ibang klase talaga ‘yang si Papa Wallace. Bilib na talaga ako sa kanya.” Patuloy pa ni Liz.

“Tumigil ka nga sa kaka-admire do’n. Naiinis pa rin ako hanggang ngayon, ano? At naiinis pa rin ako sa kulugong iyon!”

“Hayy... kung malaki nga lang ang suweldo natin, disin sana ay mas mabibigyan mo ng maraming bagay ang mga kapatid mo. Paano ba ‘yan? Eh, nasa 36 thousand pounds yearly lang tayo rito. At kung iko-compare mo naman sa architect na ‘yon na kikita ng almost or more than 90

thousand pounds a year, eh... talagang talo ka, friend. Di ba?" Pag-po-point out pa ng kanyang kaibigan na nag-kuros ang mga braso sa ilalim ng dibdib nito.

Bumuntong-hininga ang dalaga. "Oo nga, eh. Aminado naman ako doon. Pero maano't passion ko naman ang pagiging nurse tulad ng nanay kong namayapa na? Di ba? Pero, 'yon nga lang. Dapat lang na scholar si Jake ngayon sa City of London School. At 'pag nakatapos na si Jacy sa Wetherby Preparatory School, maghahanap na naman ako sa pupuwede niyang pasukan na high school kung saan makakakuha din siya ng scholarship katulad ni Jake. Dapat na gano'n na nga rin ang gagawin ni Jacy dahil alam naman niyang naghihirap kami ngayon. At alam kong iyon din ang gugustuhin niyang mangyari. Mature na kaya ang isipan n'un?"

"Well, ito lang ang masasabi ko sa 'yo, friend, ha? Mabuti na 'yong nakikisabay na sila kay Wallace dahil tipid sa pamasahe iyon. That's practically speaking. At isa pa, friends naman sina Jake at Bradley, di ba? Kaya, dapat na wala kang ipag-aalala o ikababahala. Kung ako sa 'yo, makipagbati na ako kay Wallace. Nakakatulong kaya siya sa 'yo, ano? At isa pa, matatalino ang mga kapatid mo. So, you should trust them."

"Tsk! 'Yon nga ang problema, eh! Inis na inis ako sa taong iyon! Nanggigil ako sa kanya! Gusto kong pilipitin ang leeg niya! Well, kung kaya ko nga lang..."

"Bakit ba kasi? Di ba dapat flattered ka nga sana dahil matagal nang may gusto sa 'yo 'yong tao? Pa-hard-to-get pa-hard-to-get ka pa, eh! Malay mo, kayo pala talaga ang nakatadhana? Isipin mo nga. Hindi pa siya nag-aasawa hanggang ngayon. Ikaw lang ang hinihintay no'n – I'm sure." Tudyo pa ni Liz sa kanya.

"Hay! Ewan ko sa 'yo! May girlfriend siya dati na patay na patay siya, eh. O, ngayon. Masasabi mo bang kami ang nakatadhana? Naku! Isa ka pa, eh." Reklamo pa niya.

“O, eh, ikaw? Bakit wala kang boyfriend since birth?” Patuloy pa rin sa panunudyo ang kanyang kaibigan.

“Hay! Pag-uusapan ba na naman natin ‘yan?’”

“Kasi, may gusto ka do’n kay Wallace. In denial ka pa rin hanggang ngayon. Bakit hindi mo na kasi aminin iyon sa sarili mo at sa kanya? Wala namang masama do’n. Maganda pa nga ‘yong kayo ng dalawa ang magkakatuluyan, eh. Alam na alam n’yo na ang kalidad at personality ng isa’t isa. Kapit-bahay kaya kayo since nasa elementary ka pa?”

Alam na alam na nito ang istorya na iyon dahil naikuwento na iyon ng dalaga sa kaibigan.

Umirap si Stacy sa kaibigan. “Uh-uh. No way! Never, my friend! It’s not gonna damn happen,” sabi pa niya in American English accent.

Napabungisngis naman ang kanyang kaibigan nang dumating ang head nurse nilang si Mrs. Taylor na may kasamang isang doctor na babae na noon lang nila nakikita. Natahimik rin ang ibang mga kasamahan nila sa station nang makita ang head nurse.

“Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Let’s welcome Dr. Susan Reid. She’s our new neurologist substitute while Dr. Thomson is on an indefinite leave. Dr. Reid, these people here are at your disposal.” Nakangiting pakilala pa ni Mrs. Taylor.

Napatitig si Stacy sa babaeng doctor. Sa tantiya niya’y nasa mga early 30’s ito, medyo voluptuous ang katawan pero maganda ang mukha at bagay rito ang pulang buhok nito. Napaisip lang siya kung totoo iyon o peke dahil uso naman ang pagpapakulay ng mga buhok ngayon.

“I’ll leave you to introduce yourselves,” dagdag pa ni Mrs. Taylor bago pa ito umalis at iwanan sila.

“Yes, Mrs. Taylor,” ang sabay-sabay na tugon nila sa kanilang head nurse.

“I’m Jessica Patterson,” ang sabi ng British nurse na kasama nila na nakipagkamayan sa magandang doctor.

“I’m Damon Scott,” ang sabi ng isang half-Indian and half-British na kasamahan nila.

“I’m Manuel Rodriguez,” pakilala naman ng Peruvian-British na kasamahan nila.

“I’m Liza Torres,” ang pakilala naman ni Liz.

“And I’m Stacy Marion Watson.” Nakipagkamayan rin siya sa doctor.

“Pleasure to meet you all. Let’s work together harmoniously,” ang sabi pa ng red haired doctor. Her voice was husky.

Aminado si Stacy na sexy iyon. Parang gusto na niyang magkaroon tuloy ng boses na ganoon.

“Yes, let us, Dr. Reid,” halos sabay-sabay na tugon nila at nagpaalam na ang doctor.

Saka sabay-sabay na silang nagsasalita tungkol sa nag-li-leave na doctor nang nakita nilang bigla itong nag-preno at bumalik. Ngumiti ito nang deretso kay Stacy. And all of them quieted down.

“Sister Watson, right?” Formal na tawag pa sa kanya sa kanyang British title o tawag sa ‘nurse’ nang propesyonal.

“Yes, Dr. Reid.” She said with professionalism.

“Please come with me. I heard that you’re one of the best nurses around here. I heard about you from the head nurse, Mrs. Taylor. And I think I’m going to need your help. We have our first patient today. I heard it’s an 8-year old boy.” Tuloy-tuloy na sabi ng doktor.

Napasulyap ang dalaga sa kanyang mga kasamahan. Saka bumaling sa doctor na tumango. She gathered her BP apparatus, pad, ballpen, at iba pang kailangan niya sa check-up na nakalagay sa movable trolley. Sumunod na siya kaagad sa doctor na nauna na sa kanya upang ipaalam sa kanya kung saan ang kanilang batang pasyente – sa ER – as she observed the direction of the hospital hallway.

They went in. Isang nurse aid ang bumukas ng kurtina at bumulaga sa kanilang mga mata ang batang duguan sa ulo na nililinis ng isa pang nurse na naka-assign sa ER habang tinatahi ng doctor ang sugat nito. At nang mapatingin siya sa kasama ng bata na siyang humahawak sa kamay nito sa kabila habang ang isa’y isang babaeng nasa kanyang mid-thirties.

Naging linya ang mga labi ni Stacy. *Anong ginagawa ni Wallace rito? At bakit siya nakahawak sa kamay ng bata?* Napatingin na lang siya sa batang lalake na napapaimpit sa sakit.

“Hi, I’m Dr. Reid. Dr. Thomson’s substitute. I’m the current neurologist – Wallace?” Ang sabi pa ng doctor nang patitingin-tingin ito mula sa bata, sa babaeng nakahawak rito at sa lalake.

Wallace tore his gaze away from the kid’s bleeding head. Saka nakita ni Stacy ang pagkilala sa mga mata nito habang nakatitig ito sa neurologist. At napamaang pa ito nang makita siyang kasama nito. Saka bigla itong bumawi na ngumisi sa doktor na kararating lang. He thought that the world was indeed small. Kaya napatayo ang binata.

“Where are you going, Uncle Wallace? Do you want me to die alone?” Ang umuungol na sabi pa ng bata na parang OA.

“I’ll hurry up. Don’t worry. I’ll just give your doctor a hug and you’ll be fine soon.” Panata pa ng binata sa bata.

Nagyakapan nga ang dalawang, obviously, magkakilala. Stacy wondered what their relationship was – the same thing she did sa bata at sa isa pang babae dito sa closed curtain section ng ER.

“It’s so good to see you!” Ang narinig pa ng dalaga na sabi ng doctor kay Wallace.

Si Wallace naman ay nakangiti at kumindat pa kay Stacy na nasa likuran ng doctor nakatayo. Inirapan niya ang binata. Saka tumulong siya sa nurse at doctor na nauna sa kanila doon na nag-aasikaso sa bata. Kinausap niya nang mahina ang mga ito kung nakunan na ng vital signs ang bata. Umiling naman ang isang nurse dahil sa inuna nilang nilinis at tinahi ang ulo nito. So, she put a thermometer in his mouth.

“Talk to you later,” ang sabi pa ni Wallace nang maghiwalay sila ng yakap ni Susan.

“Alright.” Saka bumaling na ang babaeng doctor sa kapwa nito doctor na naka-assign sa ER. Nagkamayan ang dalawang doktor at sinabi ng huli ang kondisyon at sitwasyon ng bata in technical terms. Napatango-tango naman ang neurologist. Saka bumaling ito sa babaeng kasama ng bata na nakahawak pa rin sa kamay nito. Umalis naman na ang naunang doctor na naka-assign sa ER at sumunod ang nurse na kasama nito, leaving the five of them in the tiny secluded and closed area of the ER. “I’m Dr. Reid. How are you related to the patient?” Nakipagkamayan pa ito sa babaeng bumitaw sa bata habang kinuha naman ni Stacy ang thermometer at binasa ito saka ini-

record sa gamit nilang patient card sa ospital na ipinasa sa kanya kanina ng naunang nurse bago pa ito lumabas nang tuluyan.

“I’m Mrs. Townsend. His mother. His name’s Trevor.” Tugon naman ng mas matandang babae kaysa sa doktor.

“I’m going to recommend an MRI. It’ll be ready in... less than 30 minutes.” Anitong sinulyapan pa ang relong pambisig. “The nurse will take care of you for the time being. I’ll see you at the MRI room. Sister Watson, could you take care of them?”

“Yes, Dr. Reid. I will.” Ang tugon ng dalaga nang pormal ang ekspresyon sa mukha. Saka bumaling na siyang nakangiti sa bata nang umalis ang doktor. “I’ll just go ask for help from a nurse aid and hospital attendants. I’ll be with you in a moment.”

“Okay.” Sabi pa ng bata sa nurse.

“I never thought I get to see you work,” ang bara pa ni Wallace bago makalabas ang dalaga.

Siniko ito ng dalaga sa tagiliran at nag-martsa na palabas. Hindi naman iyon nakita ng mag-inang nag-uusap nang mahinahon. Napailing namang sapo ng binata ang kanyang tagiliran na sinundan ng tingin si Stacy. Hindi talaga ito nagbabago. Sadista pa rin ito sa kanya kahit kailan. Pero hindi naman siya nagagalit rito sa tuwing ginagawa iyon sa kanya.

CHAPTER TWO

“**WHY** are you here, anyway?” Paasik na tanong ng dalaga kay Wallace nang papunta na sila ng MRI room, may dalawang attendants na Iranian at Indian na siyang nagtutulak ng kama ng bata habang nakahawak sa kamay ng bata ang ina nito at sumunod lang sa mga ito ang dalawang magkakapit-bahay.

“They’re my friend’s family. And he happens to be my colleague at work and he has to check the site he’s working on – today in Bristol - so he’s unable to come with them. The kid fell down the stairs head first, so I was told. My buddy asked me to come along just in case. So, that’s the reason I’m here. It’s just a coincidence, trust me.”

Umismid ang dalaga. Ayaw niyang aminin na matulungin talaga ang lalakeng ito sa mga nangangailangan at madali itong lapitan. Just that, she wanted to be blind of it.

Pumasok na sila sa maaliwalas na MRI room. Agad na pinahiga ang batang naka-hospital gown na ngayon sa patient table. Lumabas na ang mga attendants. Tapos nang ma-i-check ni Stacy na walang anumang gadgets o metal sa katawan ang bata. At hinalikan muna ng ina ang anak nito bago pumunta silang tatlong adults sa observation/control room. Naroon na ang operator ng MRI machine at ang neurologist.

“Just lie still, Trevor. This won’t hurt,” ang mahinahong sabi pa ni Stacy sa pamamagitan ng mikropono.

Ipinasok na ang bata sa MRI scanner at naka-record na automatically ang resulta nito sa computer in slices (o dozens of single images of the head). Nang lumabas na ang patient table ay bumalik na doon si Stacy upang samahan ang bata habang tinignan ng doctor, ng ina at ni Wallace

ang mga resulta. Ini-scan agad iyon i-tsinek ng doctor nang maigi through automatic print outs na inilabas ng printer sa tabi ng computer monitor. She was known for her impromptu na skill on just taking a glance of the MRI results. Kung kaya't siya ang kinuha dahil sa siya ang pinakamagaling na puwedeng mag-substitute kay Dr. Thomson.

“I don't see any abnormality here. It's just a superficial wound. Congratulations, Mrs. Townsend.” Nakangiting sabi pa ng neurologist. Saka nakipag-shake hands ito sa ina ng bata.

“You heard that? You're going to be fine soon,” ang bulong pa ni Stacy sa bata.

Ngumiti nang matamlay ang bata at ipinikit nito ang mga mata. She knew that the drug was already having the effect. Mabuti na rin iyon dahil baka sasakit na ang sugat nitong tinahi kanina. In a few hours pa naman ito mabibigyan ng gamot na pain reliever.

Hindi niya napansin ang makahulugang tinging ipinukol sa kanya ni Wallace habang nakikipag-usap sa doctor ito at ang ina ng bata. Tinawag na lang ng dalaga ang dalawang attendants upang maipasok sa private room nito ang bata at nang hindi maistorbo ang pagtulog nito. Sa gayon ay makapagpahinga naman ito nang maigi at nang hindi masyadong mahihirapan ang ina pag-aalo nito.

Sumunod sa kanya sina Mrs. Townsend at Wallace at ang substitute doctor ay bumalik sa clinic ni Dr. Thomson na siyang tinutuluyan nito sa ngayon, nang pansamantala.

“I'll just come back for his medication in a few hours, Mrs. Townsend,” ang paalam pa ng dalaga sa ina ng bata.

“Yes, please. Thank you very much. I appreciate what you did for Trevor at the MRI room.”
The older woman shook her hand.

“And I appreciate your assistance, gorgeous,” ang bulong pa ng binata nang nilampasan na ito ng dalaga.

Inirapan ito ng dalaga bago lumabas nang kuwarto nang tuluyan. Ngumisi lang si Wallace nang napasunod ng tingin sa dalaga. Saka napabaling siya ng tingin kay Mrs. Townsend.

“What’s that look for, Julia?” Ang tanong pa ng nakangising binata.

“You know her?” Her eyes weren’t of surprise but of curiosity.

“Well, it’s Stacy.” He smiled nang makahulugan with a gentle shrug of his shoulder.

“Oh! That Stacy you were talking about all the time! How come I didn’t realize it?” Lumiwanag pa ang mukha nito. Alam na alam ng mag-asawa ang kuwento ng tungkol sa kanya at ni Stacy. After all, matagal nang magkaibigan sina Wallace at Trent. Since high school pa hanggang ngayon, magkasama pa sila sa trabaho.

“Of course you didn’t. You’re just so worried about your son.” Bara pa ng binata.

“Well, you understand the situation. Why don’t I invite her over for dinner some time?” Biglang naisip nito. “Of course, when Trevor is out of this place and Trent is not overly busy at the office – both of you. You’re very much welcome to join, naturally.”

“If she knows that I’m coming, I don’t think she’ll come to dinner. She’ll look for an excuse not to come over.” He made a face.

“That’s absurd! I think she’s a very nice young woman. I don’t think she’s going to refuse if I invited her over for dinner.”

“You don’t know her at all.”

“Hah! Really? Let’s see, Wallace. Let’s see.”

“We’ll see.” Ngumisi pa ang binata. Saka napatingin sa relos nito. “I think I got to go. And I’ll call Trent and tell him the good news of the MRI. Bye for now. You take good care of Trevor.” He kissed her cheek.

“Thank you for coming along!” Pahabol pa ni Mrs. Townsend.

“No sweat!” Umalis na ang binata. Saka itinanong pa niya sa isang attendant na nakasalubong kung saang station niya puwedeng makita si Stacy. Itinuro naman nito ang third floor. He thanked the attendant and ran up the short stairs at hinanap ang nurse’s station.

NAPANGANGA naman sandali si Stacy nang makita ang binatang papalapit sa kanilang station. Natigilan ang mga kababaihang naroon at pati na ang mga lalakeng nurses na nasa kanilang station. Saka pilit niyang i-ignore ang lalake sa pamamagitan ng pag-encode ng data sa computer para ma-i-compile na rin niya ang findings kay Trevor.

“Gorgeous. I’m going back to the office now. Julia’s truly grateful for what you’ve done for Trevor. I’ll see you around - soon!” Tinapik pa nito ang counter table sa nurse’s station. Kumindat pa ito sa dalaga nang tignan niya ito para sagutin ito ng isang rude remark.

“It’d be better if you didn’t show up, Wallace. I don’t care whether you’re going back to your office or not. I don’t need to know.” She said with a raised eyebrow.

Napanganga naman si Liz sa sinabi ng kaibigan.

Ito si Wallace? Well, well, well. So, narito pala sa ospital ang taong ito at hindi man lang sinabi sa 'kin ng bruhanang ito? Mamaya ka.

“How impolite of you...” Maktol pa ng lalake, kunwari.

“I am not polite to someone like you.” Ang tugon ng dalaga na nagpapatuloy na sa kanyang ginagawa. Obviously, to dismiss him right away.

“Anyway, I’ll be back.” He grinned and stole a peck on her cheek. Saka mabilis itong umalis nang naiwang nakanganga si Stacy.

“That rake!” She gasped.

Nagkatawanan naman ang kanyang mga kasamahan sa station. Saka dumating ang kanilang head nurse at pinagalitan sila.

“What’s this commotion about?”

“Ummm... nothing, Mrs. Taylor. Really! Just that there’s love in the air,” ang tugon pa ni Jessica.

“Love?” Biglang naging interesado ang head nurse at nagtatanong ang tingin kung sino ang tinutukoy nito.

“Uh-uh. Not me,” Stacy murmured nang mapadaku sa kanya ang tingin ng head nurse.

Napangisi na lang ito’t umalis na. Kinulit naman siya kaagad ni Liz.

This is just great! Stacy thought sarcastically.

Alam niyang hindi na siya tatantanan ng kanyang mga kasamahan sa station.

“Oy, ang guwapo-guwapo naman pala ng Wallace na ‘yon! Hindi ko akalain ha, friend?”

Sabi pa ni Liz na nakatukod pa ang mga siko sa computer table niya.

“Where did you meet that hunk?” Tanong pa ni Jessica. Saka si Liz na ang nagkuwento.

“Could you just get back to your work?” She snapped at them.

Ngunit lalo lang siyang tinutudyo ng mga ito buong maghapon. She’d never felt so tired in her life before. Kung bakit pa kasi siya pinuntahan ni Wallace sa station gayong puwede na itong deretsong bumaba mula sa second floor patungong ground floor para mag-exit na doon. Sinadya talaga ng kulugong na iyon na inisin siya.

PUMASOK na siya sa loob ng kanilang bahay. Nakahanda na ng dinner si Jacy para sa kanila. Tinawag nito kaagad ang kuyang nag-aaral sa loob ng kuwarto nito upang sabay na silang kumain. Pumuwesto na ang dalaga sa kanyang designated chair nang dumulog ang dalawa.

“How was school today?” She asked. “You may answer in Tagalog.” Ang dagdag pa niya bago makasagot ang alinman sa dalawang mga kapatid niya. Gusto niya kasing hindi makalimutan ng mga ito ang magsalita ng wikang Filipino upang hindi magiging ignorante ang mga ito kapag makipaghalubilo sa mga kapwa nila Pinoy sa London.

“Uh, well... okay lang naman, ate. Nag-ti-training pa rin ako ng track and field bago umuwi ng bahay.” Ang sagot ni Jake.

“Okay lang din sa ‘kin, ate. May test kami bukas kaya mag-aaral pa ako bago ako matulog mamaya.”

“Mabuti naman. Pagbutihin n’yo lang ang pag-aaral, okay? Alam kong magiging proud sa inyo sina Mommy at Daddy... kahit saan man sila ngayon.”

“That’s depressing,” ang reklamo pa ni Jake.

“I know. Pero alam mo naman na gustong-gusto nilang makapagtapos tayong lahat ng pag-aaral. Kaya lagi ko kayong pinaaalalahanan sa bagay na ito. Siyanga pala. Hindi n’yo pa nasabi sa akin kung anong gusto ninyong kukunin na kurso sa college at university.”

“We’ll get to that later, ate,” ang sabi pa ni Jake na sumubo ng pagkain.

“Really, Jake. I don’t know what’s your dream. Kailangang mayroon ka niyan. It’s the passion that’s going to drive you to be successful. At ikaw naman, Jacy. Baka alam mo na kung saan mo gustong mag-high school in two years’ time? It will save me time and effort at saka stress na rin. Baka naman puwede kang magtanong-tanong sa mga kaibigan mo sa school.”

“Ako na’ng bahala doon, ate. I’ll just let you know kung mayroon na akong mapag-desisyon. You just concentrate on your job. Don’t worry too much about me and Jake. We can handle our own things by ourselves. We’re not little kids anymore. Dapat na matanggap mo na ‘yon, ate.” Sagot naman ng kapatid na babae, who was acting more mature than Jake.

Pinisil pa ng dalaga sa pisngi ang kapatid na babae. She was lucky that Jacy had a personality and trait like these. Hindi sasakit ang ulo niya. Just that, kung ikokompara silang tatlo, siya ang parang pinakamahina. Hindi siya nakapasa ng scholarship when she was in high school or college at lalo na sa university. Parati na lang na shino-shoulder ng kanyang parents ang pag-aaral niya.

Pero kahit gano'n man ay proud sa kanya ang mga magulang nang makapagtapos siya ng nursing. Iyon nga lang, di na naabutan ng mga ito na pumasa siya sa national exam para maging registered nurse at makapasok kaagad sa isang ospital, sa The Royal Marsden. Kung makapag-timing nga naman ang tadhana sa kanya, wagas.

Maliit lang ang insurance na natanggap nila sa pagkamatay ng kanilang mga magulang. At iniipit lang iyon ng dalaga para sa pag-aaral ng kanyang mga kapatid sa college at university bilang pandagdag ng tuition kung saka-sakali. At habang maaga pa ngayon ay nag-iipon na rin din siya para ipang-dagdag doon at nang hindi na masyadong mahihirapan ang mga kapatid niya.

She knew too well na plano ng mga itong mag-part-time job kapag nasa college at university na ang mga ito. Pero idini-discourage niya dahil baka makaabala lang iyon sa kanilang pag-aaral at tuloy hindi makapagtapos. Ito ang kinatatakutan niya. She wanted them to succeed. Ayaw niyang balikan siya ng kanyang mga magulang kapag hindi niya nagawa nang tama ang kanyang responsibilidad bilang guardian ng kanyang dalawang nakababatang mga kapatid. And for that reason, too, wala na siyang panahon para sa kanyang sarili at sa love life. Kaya dapat na titigil-tigilan na siya ni Wallace bago pa man siya mahulog sa bitag nito...

She sighed. Napansin naman iyon ng kanyang dalawang kapatid. They looked at her with curiosity.

“Is there something wrong, ate?” Tanong pa ni Jake.

“Are you tired?” Alalang sunod na tanong naman ni Jacy.

“Wala. Okay lang naman ako. At okay lang naman ang trabaho ko.”

“Siyanga pala. Naikuwento sa akin kani-kanina lang na dinala daw ng kuya ni Bradley sa ospital ‘yong anak ng friend niya? Nagkita daw kayo doon ni Kuya Wallace?”

“Kuya Wallace?” Stacy echoed.

“Oo. Bakit? Di ba tanda iyon ng pag-respeto? Isa pa, mabait naman siya sa amin ni Jacy, ate. Bakit hanggang ngayon hindi pa rin maganda ang pakikitungo mo sa kanya?”

“Tsk! Huwag na nga nating pag-usapan ang archenemy kong iyon. Siya ang dahilan kung bakit sira ang araw ko ngayon, ano?” Tugon naman niya sa kapatid na iniirapan pa ito. Sumubo na naman siya ng kanyang pagkain pagkasalita.

“Huh? Bakit? May ginawa bang masama si Kuya Wallace sa ‘yo sa ospital?” Tanong naman ni Jacy. She won’t let go of the topic as she’d see fit.

“Sabi ko, huwag na nating pag-usapan iyon. Kumain na nga lang tayo.”

Nagkatinginan sina Jake at Jacy na magkatapat sa small square table. Kumibit na lang si Jacy at nagpatuloy na sila sa pagkain. Baka magagalit pa ang ate nila sa kanila.

CHAPTER THREE

“**HEY!** I didn’t know you’d come back. I was looking for you yesterday,” ang bungad pa ni Susan nang makita sa hallway ng ospital si Wallace nang mag-isa. “Come, let’s talk at my temporary clinic slash office.” Nakangiti pa ito. And she wound her arm in his.

Iyon ang nakitang eksena ni Stacy nang makalabas siya sa isang corner galing ng pag-ra-round upang kunan ng vital signs at painumin ng gamot ang mga pasyente. Agad siyang umatras at nabunggo pa niya ang isang kasamahan na attendant at nag-sorry siya rito kaagad.

“So, how are you?” Ang tanong ni Susan nang makapasok na sila sa office nito.

Napatingin sa paligid si Wallace. It was obvious that the owner of the clinic slash office was a male. An old male doctor.

“I’m good. As you can see.” Ang tugon pa niya without looking at her.

“So, after our short relationship, you were able to confess to the one you truly love?” She asked with curiosity. “That was the reason why we separated. Right? Because you didn’t want to continue pretending that you were infatuated with me.”

“You’re as straightforward as ever, Susan.”

Napatawa ang neurologist. “I’ll take it as a compliment. Not everybody can be as straightforward as me.”

“True,” he agreed. He put his hands in his side pockets and looked at her face. He wondered why in a certain point of his life was he infatuated with her. She was far from his type and far from his standard – kay Stacy. Stacy was sweet and charming if she chose to be. And she was also caring

and loving, he could see that by just the way she acted toward her brother and sister. And she was a strong willed woman and determined. She was able to shoulder the responsibilities of the parents they didn't have anymore. In short, he put Stacy on such a high pedestal that he himself couldn't even reach her – let alone other women.

“So, did she accept your love and heart, Wallace?” She sat down on the table as she asked him this question.

“I... I... truthfully, I have never told her yet – about my feelings. I don't want to be disappointed. I want to be sure of her when the right time has come.” He answered truthfully.

“I see. But I think you should tell me who she is. Maybe I can help.” She offered.

Tinatantiya ng binata ang doctor. “Are you jesting?”

“No, Wallace darling. Why should I joke about your feelings? For your information, I already found the man of my dreams. Yes, it's not you.” She giggled.

He smirked. “And how do you propose to help me with Stacy?”

Natigilan si Susan. “Stacy? You sure don't mean Stacy Marion Watson.” She blinked in surprise as he nodded smilingly. “Oh my, sweet Jesus! Are you serious?”

“Very serious, Susan.”

“Oh, well. That makes it more fun and easier.” Kampanteng sabi pa ng doctor. “I'll tell you what.”

Nakikinig nang maigi ang binata sa suhestiyon nito.

NAPAKAGAT-LABI si Stacy. Ang tagal naman yatang pumunta sa station nila si Wallace. Kung anu-ano nang mga imaheng naglalaro sa kanyang balintataw. Naiinis na siya sa bawat minutong lumilipas. Napansin naman iyon ni Liz.

“Friend, parang hindi ka mapakali diyan.”

Hindi siya sumagot.

“Oy, friend. May problema ka ba? Nag-aaway na naman ba kayo ni Papa Wallace mo? Inaasar ka na naman ba niya?”

Napatingin ang dalaga sa kanyang kaibigan. “Oo! Inaasar na niya ako ngayon! Hindi pa siya pumupunta rito!” Himutok pa niya.

Biglang napatawa si Liz. “Are you okay? Bakit? Sinabi ba ni Papa Wallace na pupuntahan ka niya ngayon dito? Oyy... ibang level na ‘to, friend, ha? Mukhang mapapaibig ka na nito ni Papa Wallace sa wakas!” Pumalakpak pa si Liz sa tuwa at nag-i-imagine na itong palaging magkasama ang kaibigan at ang guwapong British na iyon. “Grabe! Ang ganda-ganda na ng imahinasyon ko sa date n’yo... t-teka, ‘ayan na, o. Parating na siya!” Excited pa si Liz na inginuso ang paparating na lalake.

He was smiling, showing his even white teeth. Napasinghap pa si Stacy dahil ngayon lang niya napagmasdan nang ganito ang binata. His curly brown hair was carefully combed. His lashes were long and wavy, his eyes were so green, his long almost bushy eyebrows were like drawn perfectly by an artist, his long, big nose was just perfect that gave him the air of command, his cheekbones and strong yet slightly divided chin were chiseled and his lips were red and looked sensual.

“I can stay here all day just for you to stare at me like that.” He remarked slyly.

Napakurap-kurap ang dalaga. Umigham siya. Saka itinaas ang isang kilay. “I just wanted to see why those other ladies are so into you. I don’t see anything that I like – so far.” She retorted with a lie.

“That’s what I like about you. You’re so good at hiding your feelings and you’re such a ‘denial queen’. By the way, I got the phrase from your sister.” He winked and pinched her cute chin.

Bumungisngis naman sina Liz at Jessica sa background habang nakangising nakamasid sina Damon at Manuel. Parang nanonood ng eksena sa pelikula ang mga ito kung makatingin.

Binawi ng dalaga ang kanyang nguso. Lalo lang siyang nagpa-pout rito. Gusto niyang tanungin kung paano nito nakilala ang substitute doctor at anong ginawa ng mga ito sa opisina nito. But she reminded herself that she had no business with him for asking him those kind of questions.

“What do you want with me now?” She asked with boredom in her voice. “You already know Trevor’s room. There’s no need for you to drop by the nurse’s station. And as you can see, I’m at work and so does everybody here.” She gestured and glanced at her co-workers. She was disappointed to see that they were all just standing by and were just watching them. Obviously, ini-enjoy ng mga ito ang eksena nilang dalawa. “Oh, come on! Don’t you have a sense of loyalty?” Aniya pa sa mga kasamahan.

“Sure, we do.” Ang pilit na seryoso na mukha ni Damon na sumagot sa kanya.

“That’s a hundred per cent, Stacy,” ang dagdag naman ni Manuel.

NAPANGISI si Wallace at napakindat siya kina Jessica at Liz. Nakipag-high-five naman siya kina Damon at Manuel. Napanganga namang talunan si Stacy at nag-walk out ng station dahil sa inis. Napatingin siya sa mga kasamahan ng babae.

SINUNDAN naman siya kaagad ni Wallace. Hinawakan pa nito ang isa niyang braso upang pigilan siya sa paglalakad.

“Let go of me,” nagtitimping aniya upang huwag tumaas ang boses niya at maistorbo pa ang mga tao sa ospital, sa floor na yaon.

He did as he was asked. “Why are you in such a bad mood? Did I do something wrong? I know, I did the same thing this morning. I dropped your brother and sister to school. But Bradley also goes to the same school as your brother does. There’s no point of fighting with me over that issue. Besides, it’s better for them to be together than other people whom you do not know of or about. And you know me. I’m not a stranger to you.”

Napalunok ang dalaga. She couldn’t deny that fact. She hated it when he was right. And he was always right! That was her problem.

“I am not against your sending my brother and sister to school,” she said in the end, pagkatapos niyang huminga nang malalim.

“Then what’s wrong? What have I or have not done again, this time? If you’re not going to tell me, how can I even make you like me – I mean, as your neighbor or... or, neighbor...?”

Tinatantiya ito ng dalaga. Iyon lang ba? Did his ‘crush’ on her or ‘infatuation’ even already faded away? Hindi niya gustong isipin iyon. Ito naman talaga ang gusto niya noon pa. Pero bakit parang nasasaktan na siya ngayon? Bakit parang ayaw niyang tumingin pa sa ibang babae ang lalakeng ito? She didn’t like what she was thinking and feeling. Not anymore! Iniwasan niyang huwag masapo ang kanyang dibdib dahil sa malakas na emosyong namayani sa puso niya.

“I-is that all?” She asked. She wanted to be sure.

“Why? Is there something else you have in mind?” Pilit nitong itinatago ang ngiti. Buti na lang at umiwas ng tingin ang dalaga at hindi nito nakita ang tuwa sa kanyang mga mata.

Stacy looked away from his green gaze. Mukha na kasing natutunaw siya kapag lalo lang niyang titigan ito at parang lalo lang siyang nai-engganyo nito sa tuwing titigan na niya ito lately. And she didn’t like herself to feel this way. And it seemed to get worse and worse in such a short time. Naaalala pa niya tuloy ang sinabi sa kanya ni Liz. Na sila ang nakatadhana ni Wallace – bigla niyang ipinilig ang kanyang ulo.

“I got to go.”

“Alright. See you later,” ang tugon pa ng lalake as he chewed on his inner cheek and controlled himself not to grin or else, magagalit na naman sa kanya ang dalaga sa palagi niyang pang-aasar.

LUMIPAS ang ilang mga araw. Puwede nang makalabas ng ospital si Trevor. Minsan ay na-meet na ng dalaga ang ama nito na siyang close friend at katrabaho ni Wallace. Nagkataon kasing nagtungo siya sa kuwarto ng bata upang kunan ito ng vital signs.

“How’s his vital signs, Stacy?” Tanong pa ni Julia conversationally.

Narinig naman ng asawa nito ang pangalan ng nurse at napatitig sa kanya.

“So, you’re the famous Stacy.” Ngumiti ito sa dalaga.

“I know what you’re thinking. Yes. Wallace’s neighbor. That’s me.” Napangiti na rin lang ang dalaga na naiiling.

he wondered tuloy kung ano ang pinagsasabi ni Wallace sa kaibigan nito. This was her first time to meet him. Dahil di naman siya nakikialam sa mga kaibigan o kaya’y girlfriend ng lalake dahil sa may dahilan naman siyang ayaw niyang alamin o kilalanin ang mga ito. Hindi niya bet si Wallace since from the beginning of time.

“I’m still going to check his heartbeat and breathing.” Baling pa niya kay Julia at tumango ito.

“Wow! So, that’s why my wife’s been telling me a lot about you. Thank you for your help with our Trevor here. Did my son thank you already?” Ang sabi pa ng British na kaibigan ni Wallace.

“Yes, dad,” ang sabad pa ng bata na kinukunan ng BP.

And speaking of the devil, pumasok si Wallace sa private room ni Trevor na may dalang laruan na remote control na bapor at mga prutas. Napaismid pa ang dalaga nang pabiro nitong inalo ang ulo niyang may headdress ng nurse. Hinawi niya ang kamay nito mula sa kanyang ulo.

“Hello, gorgeous. You saved me the trouble of going upstairs. It’s good to see you here.”

“Wow, Uncle Wallace. Is that really for me?” Tanong pa ng excited na bata na halos lumundag na mula sa kama nito.

“Trevor, get back to bed. Gorgeous isn’t done with you yet,” ang mahinahong sabi pa ni Wallace sa bata na kinarga ito’t pinaupong muli sa kama.

Napangiti naman ang mag-asawa.

“Gorgeous? Why do you keep calling her that, Uncle Wallace? Her name’s Stacy!” He informed him steadily. “Don’t you know it? She has her nameplate on!”

Napatawa naman ang mga magulang nito ngunit hindi nag-comment o nag-remark man lang.

“I just call her that. There are a lot of you who’s calling her Stacy, anyway. I want it unique for me.” He said as he watched her face. She was currently concentrating on taking the child’s heartbeat and number of breaths per minute – the manual way. “Besides, I want her to remember that she always looks gorgeous to me. You know why?”

Napakunot ang noo ng binata. “No. Why?”

“Because ever since the first time I saw her, it was the first thought that crossed my mind.” He said as he looked at Stacy.

Stacy on the other hand tried to keep her breathing normal. Hindi kasi normal na ang pagpintig ng kanyang puso. Ang hinayupak, he affected her this way again. But in fairness, ngayon niya lang nalaman ang kuwento kung bakit palagi siyang tinatawag nitong gorgeous. Para namang sumasayaw ang puso niya sa galak. Kung bakit, ayaw niyang isipin iyon.

“And when was the first time you saw her? In the emergency room a few days ago?”

Tanong ng inosenteng bata.

Ginulo ni Wallace ang buhok ng bata. Hinawi naman nito ang kamay niya tulad noong ginawa ni Stacy.

“No. When she was eight and I was fifteen.” He said and he gazed at Stacy again.

“Wow! I guess, that was a long time ago, Uncle Wallace. I’m now eight, aren’t I?” napakurap-kurap ang bata at napatawa na naman ang mag-asawa.

“That’s right.” Sabi naman ng binata sa bata. “But you still have a long way to go until you turn 15 and find someone like my gorgeous here,” sabi pa ng binata inakbayan ang nurse.

Ngumiwi si Trevor. “Urgh! Adolescence is a pain, Uncle Wallace!”

Nagkatawanan tuloy ang mga adults at napatawa na rin lang si Stacy. Saka siniko niya sa tagiliran ang lalake upang mabitiwan siya nito mula sa pagkakaakbay nito. Feeling familiar pa rin ito kahit kailan at sa harap pa ng bata. Wala talaga itong pinipiling oras at lugar basta’t makapangulit ito sa kanya.

“Trevor is wiser than you were at fifteen.” Nakataas-kilay na komento pa ng dalaga.

“Why do you keep beating me up?” Ngunit bumaling ang dalaga kay Julia at sinabi niya ritong normal lang ang vital signs ng bata at saka nagpaalam na siyang lumabas upang makaiwas na sa tanong ng binata.

“You deserve it, mate!” Nakatawang sabad naman ni Trent as he playfully punched his friend in the chest.

Napangiti naman si Stacy dahil sa kanyang narinig bago niya maisara ang pinto sa private room ng bata.

CHAPTER FOUR

KALAUNAN ay napapayag na ang dalaga na sumabay na sa kanyang mga kapatid upang huwag namang magtampo ang mga ito sa kanya. Ikinatuwa naman iyon ni Wallace, kitang-kita niya iyon sa malapad na ngisi nito. Pinasakay pa siya nito sa tabi nito at ang tatlong teenagers ay nasa backseat.

Infatuation. This was it. This was all it. And she kept herself reminding her of this feeling everytime she saw Wallace. Nadadala lang siya dahil sa pangungulit nito. It was nothing serious, she had to believe it for her peace of mind. Or else, she'd just trouble herself. Nang wala namang katuturan.

“How about if we go on a date, gorgeous?” Biglang tanong pa ng binata habang pinasibad ang kotse nito patungo sa schools ng mga teenagers. Sadyang tinayming nitong magtanong habang nakikinig ang mga nakababatang kapatid nila.

“I'd rather hang myself than to go on a date with you.” Deretsahan namang tugon niya rito. Sinulyapan pa niya ito. Napangisi ang lalake habang nakatitig sa daan.

“Say that again.” He ordered.

“Hmm... Not happening.” She answered quietly and pouted. She looked straight ahead.

Pabaling naman ng tingin ang tatlo mula sa nagda-drive tungo sa katabi nito sa front seat. Saka nagkatinginan ang tatlo nang walang imik. The three knew their history. Kaya ayaw na munang makialam ng mga ito doon at nang hindi mabulyawan o pagdiskitahan. Mahirap na. Wala silang pambaon.

“Ah. So you’re not going to go on a date with me.” Sabi pa ng lalake na parang may hint ng warning o kaya’y threat.

“And why should I? You just met someone you can date. Remember Dr. Reid? Ring a bell?” She reminded him. And she winced. She sounded like a jealous lover.

Oh, crap! My mouth’s a curse!

Napamaang at napatikom ng bibig ang tatlong teenagers sa backseat. Pilit huwag mag-comment ni Jacy na nakaupo sa gitna ng dalawang lalake. At bigla nilang narinig na humahalakhak si Wallace. Sumulyap pa ang binatang nagmamaneho ng kotse sa katabing dalaga. He never enjoyed himself like this before, while talking to her.

Something rose within him – like hope – in his chest. And it was the first time that he hoped for more. And like he heard from what Susan had suggested, he had to start his Seduction Campaign to make Stacy his – officially his. And soon. He shouldn’t wait any longer. He only had to say the word and Susan would help him get this lady for the love of life.

“Dr. Reid? Oh, yes! We dated before. In fact, she is just my ex-gf. How long was that? Do you remember?” Nambibitag pa ito sa dalaga.

“I don’t know.” Halos ipagsigawan na niya ito. “Why don’t you remember? You were the one who dated her back then, as you just claimed a short while ago – and it wasn’t me who dated her then! Beats me!” Kumibit pa ang naiinis na dalaga at nakikita iyon ng binata.

Napatawa na naman ang binata. He enjoyed this more and more. They had to do this more often. Her brows were drawn together. Kulang na lang ay sapakin na siya nito. Buti at hindi iyon

ginagawa ng dalaga kapag nasa harapan sila ng mga teenagers. At baka mawalan pa ng respeto ang mga ito sa dalaga. Alam niya kasing sa kanya ang simpatiya ng mga ito.

“Ah, I remember. Just after my university years.” He said seriously but his laughter was still in his eyes. Hindi nga lang iyon nakita ng dalaga dahil sa napatingin lang siya straight ahead. “Her cousin contracted our company to extend her house. So, that was how we got to know each other.”

“Oh, please! Why don’t you save your story and reminisce it with her instead of telling me? I don’t really want to know. And mind you, I’ll never ask for it – ever - because for your information, I’m not in the least interested in your love story.”

Teka, may bitterness ba sa boses ko? She thought angrily. Kung bakit ko pa kasi nalamang may gusto siya sa akin mula noon pero nagkaroon naman ito ng girlfriend na iba! Wala naman pala itong sense of loyalty. Hus, nakakainis talaga ang lalakeng ito! At feeling infatuated pa ako sa kanya ngayon. Asar! Napakuyom ng kanyang mga palad ang dalaga.

Pilit huwag matawa ng tatlong teenagers na patuloy na nakikinig sa alitan ng dalawa.

“You’re not? Are you sure?” Lalo pang pang-aasar ng binata na nanunukat pa ang mga mata sa ekspresyon sa mukha ng dalaga. Mukhang inis na inis pa itong lalo ngayon. Judging by the way she curled her hands into fists.

“I’m sure! Could you stop pestering me? I didn’t come along with you just to be pestered by you like this.” Himutok pa ng dalaga na tinignan sa mukha ang binatang nagmamaneho.

He snorted. “Gorgeous, I’m not pestering you. In fact, I wanted to let you know of my past relationship so you won’t get envious and get insecure in the future.”

Aba, sumusobra na ito! Lalong nagtatagis ang mga bagang ng dalaga sa inis.

“Wow! I never knew there’s a cyclone in your head, Wallace. Keep it up and you’ll get suck by it.” She said cynically.

Nagbungisngisan na ngayon ang tatlong teenagers. Inis namang nilingon ng binata ang mga ito ng dalawang segundo at napatigil ang mga ito. Napakagat-labi naman si Stacy. Baka nasobrahan niya ang pang-iinsulto sa lalake. Pero bakit naman siya makukonsensiya? Kung siya ang inaasar nito, wala naman itong konsensiya. Umigham si Bradley.

“Wallace, you can just pull over here. I was thinking of having a brisk walk with Jake.” Nasabi pa ni Bradley.

“Are you sure? Your school is still two blocks away,” ang sabi naman ni Wallace na nag-pull over sa shoulder side ng daan.

“Yes, Wallace.” Saka bumaling ito sa kaibigan. “Let’s go, Jake.”

Bumaba ang dalawang lalakeng teenagers. Nag-uunahan ang dalawa sa paglalakad nang mabilis. Naiwan naman sa backseat si Jacy. At napatingin sina Stacy at Wallace sa dalagita.

“I’m not going to brisk walk.” Sabi pa nito. “Just ignore me like I don’t exist.”

Nagkatinginan tuloy sina Stacy at Wallace saka napabuntong-hininga sila.

“I’m sorry you have to hear us fight, Jacy,” hinging-despensa pa ni Wallace sa dalagita.

“I’m sorry, too, Jacy.” Hinging-despensa rin ni Stacy sa kapatid. She could sense na na-stress ito ngayon.

“You don’t have to say sorry.” Tumingin ang dalagita sa kanilang dalawa nang seryoso. “I do understand. It’s not new to me - to us. Just that, it’s getting more and more serious to the point of irrational. I don’t want that. Ate Stacy,” baling pa nito sa dalaga. “Kuya Wallace is a very nice person. In fact, he’s like the second big brother to me. And you know that. And you already know that Kuya Wallace likes you very much. Why don’t you give him a chance? Well, I wonder about it sometimes. I just want you two to get along well. Everyone does want it to happen.”

Ninakawan ng sulyap ng dalaga ang binata pero napatingin pala ito sa kanya kanina pa. Umigham siya. Saka iniwas niya ang mga mata at napatingin sa kapatid.

“I-I’ll try, Jacy. I promise.”

Nanggitian sina Jacy at Wallace. Hindi nakita iyon ni Stacy. Hindi na lang siya kumibo pa dahil doon na umayos na sa harap. Gumaya na rin si Wallace at nagpatuloy na sila sa paaralang pinapasukan ng teenager.

Hinalikan pa silang dalawa sa pisngi nang huminto sa babaan ng school ang dalagita. “Have a great day, you both! Thank you, Kuya Wallace!”

“Take care, Jacy!” Sabay na bilin pa ng dalawa nang umibis ng sasakyan ang dalagita.

“I will. You, too! Both of you.” Saka tumakbo na ito para ma-meet ang kaklase’t kaibigan na papasok ng gate.

Nagkatinginan ang dalawang naiwan sa loob ng kotse.

“Does she always,” she started and paused to clear her throat, “do that to you? Kiss you on the cheek, I mean.”

“Why do you ask?” He asked lazily. He was curious to know the reason why she asked.

Hindi agad nakasagot ang dalaga. Para kasing familiar na sa lalakeng ito ang kanyang kapatid. At tila hindi siya sanay na humahalik pa ng pasasalamat ito sa ibang tao gayong hindi naman ito humahalik o kahit si Jake sa kanya sa tuwing papasok sa school ang dalawa. In fact, nang mag-umpisang mag-middle school ang dalawa niyang kapatid ay hindi na nag-kiss ang mga ito sa kanya sa tuwing papasok ng school ang mga ito – kahit noong nabubuhay pa ang mga magulang nila. Paminsan-minsan na lang ginagawa ng mga ito ang bagay na iyon. Na tila ba kung naaalala lang? Tuloy, nagseselos siya ngayon kay Wallace dahil tila bumaling ang affection ng kanyang mga kapatid sa lalake. And worse, dahil sa siya man ay nag-umpisa nang infatuated rito.

“Do you mind to answer me first?” Taas-kilay na aniya.

“Well, she does always kiss me like that whenever I send her to school.” He answered truthfully.

Nagsusukatan ang kanilang tingin sa isa’t isa. Saka bumuntong-hininga ang dalaga. Siguro nga. Mabuting tao si Wallace at nahuhulog ang loob ng kanyang kapatid rito. And she began to think that it was because of the way she treated Wallace – as her archenemy.

“I think it’s my fault. I’m not a good sister. Though I try my best, it seems not enough –” She stopped talking. Bigla siyang niyakap ng lalake. “W-what are you doing?” Nagpupumiglas siya mula sa pagkakayakap nito.

“Don’t ever think that you’re not a good sister to them, gorgeous. I know how well you raise them all by yourself. They’re very good kids, in fact. And I love that about you. You know

how to handle such two different personalities on your own. And even my parents know about this fact. They admire you for that, I must tell you that.” Mahinahong sabi pa nito.

Inaalo ba siya nito? Napakurap-kurap ang dalaga. Ramdam niya ang katotohanan sa mga salita nito. At ramdam pa niya ang nararamdaman nito. At, langhap na langhap pa niya ang kaaya-ayang pabango na gamit nito. Kahit nga parang familiar na ito sa kanya dahil niyayakap naman siya nito o kaya’y inaakbayan sa tuwing may pagkakataon ito, iba ang yakap nito ngayon at iba ang pakiramdam niya dahil sa naamoy niya. She felt comforted. At parang gumagaan ang kanyang pakiramdam dahil lang dito. Lalo lang siyang nalilito sa kanyang bagong nararamdaman para sa lalake. Or, was it really all new to her? Baka naman hindi. Ngunit ayaw na niyang pagtuunan pa ito ng pansin.

“I-I think we have to go. We’re going to be late,” pag-iiba pa niya. She didn’t want comfort from him. Pero nag-promise na siya kay Jacy na huwag awayin ang lalake. Sana’y magawa nga niya iyon – kahit mahirap.

He sighed. He always wanted to do this to her. In fact, most of the times, gusto niyang protektahan ang dalaga sa anumang puwedeng makasakit rito. And he wanted to show her that he admired her strength, her weakness and all of her. Nais niyang iparating iyon sa dalaga. If only she’d welcome him in her life, wala nang ibang mas makakapagpasaya pa sa kanya.

“Right. Let’s go.” He said quietly and he drove toward The Royal Marsden hospital.

The rest of the drive was quite. It wasn’t awkward anyway. Parang komportable lang iyon. She thanked him when he stopped the car.

“I’ll pick you up later.”

Hindi iyon tanong. She hesitated. Nag-presinta ito. Kaya dapat na ipakita niyang totohanan ang promise niya kay Jacy. Or else, kapag nalaman ito ng kanyang kapatid, siguradong lagot siya rito.

“Alright.” Nasabi na lang niya na may matipid na ngiti. Gusto niyang isiping napilitan lang siya sa pagkakataong ito at hindi niya ‘yon gusto.

“Good, then. I’ll call you later.” Saka pinasibad na nito ang kotse bago pa man makasagot ang dalaga. He was afraid that she’d turn him down with that last remark. He didn’t want to give her a chance to refuse at napangisi siya sa sarili.

Napamaang naman ang dalaga sa sinabi ng lalake. Call her later? Ibig bang sabihin may number ito ng cellphone niya? Oh, well... malapit ito kina Jake at Jacy. Nasa dalawa lang puwedeng itanong nito ang number niya. Hindi iyon mahirap kunin. Napabuntong-hininga siya. Wala siyang kawalang talaga.

“Teka, totoo ba iyong nakita ko?” Untag pa ni Liz na tumabi sa kanya sa paglalakad papasok ng ospital. Hindi niya ito napansin dahil sa kaiisip.

“H-ha? Ang alin?” Parang disoriented pa siya. Hindi niya ma-gets ang tanong nito.

“Oyy... bakit ba parang tulala ka, ha? Di ba... parang si Papa Wallace ‘yong naghatid sa ‘yo? Hayun, ‘yong kakaalis lang?”

“Ah! Oo. Siya na nga ‘yon.” Sabi niyang hindi nagbigay ng malisya o kahit anong emosyon.

“Nagkamabutihan na ba kayo?” Usisa pa nito. Mukhang na-i-excite ito.

“Napasubo lang,” umismid na siya sa kaibigan.

“Hus! Friend, sabihin mo na nga ang totoo. Mapagkatiwalaan mo naman ako, di ba?”

“Talaga lang, ha?” Biro pa niya rito.

Liz pouted her lips prettily. “Sa tagal-tagal ba namang pagsasama natin sa iisang ospital, ganito pa angtrato mo sa ‘kin?” Kunwari’y naghimutok pa ito sa kanya.

Sinundot niya ito. “Huwag ka na ngang maghimutok diyan. Hindi bagay sa ‘yo. Pumapangit ka pa! O sige, sasabihin ko na sa ‘yo. Napilitan akong makisakay sa bruhong iyon dahil sa mga kapatid ko. And then, while on our way here, nag-away pa kami. Well, alam mo naman kami -”

“Kayo? Hindi ba’t ikaw lang ang may problema sa kanya?” Liz butted in before she could finish the sentence. “Bitterness ka kasi, eh!”

“Ay! Ayaw ko na nga lang magkuwento!” Reklamo pa niya.

“O, siya, siya. Magpatuloy ka na sa pagkuwento. Dapat detailed, ha?”

“Huh! Ibang klase ka talaga.”

“Sige na. Ikuwento mo na habang hindi pa tayo dumating sa station natin.”

“O, siya. Minsan ko lang ‘to sasabihin. Huwag ka na kasing mag-butt-in.” At ikunuwento na nga niya ang nangyari sa kanila ni Wallace – leaving that part wherein he suddenly embraced her and it felt comfortable.

CHAPTER FIVE

TAYMING sa kanyang break ay ibinigay sa kanya ni Jessica ang telepono nang ito ang makasagot. Napakunot-noo naman siya.

“For you.” Itinulak nito malapit sa mukha niya ang telepono.

Napaatras naman siya at tinanggap iyon nang may pag-aalinlangan. Saka naalala niya ang sinabi sa kanya ni Wallace na tatawag ito sa kanya sa araw na ito. She thought sa cellphone pa niya ito tatawag pero dito pa pala sa telepono ng ospital. Nawala na nga iyon sa kanyang isipan dahil medyo busy sila sa paggawa ng monthly report nila.

“Thanks, Jess,” ang nasabi pa niya sa kasamahan at bumalik na ito sa trabaho nito. Trabaho muna ang inaatupag nila ngayon dahil dapat na tapusin nila ang report at baka ‘pag na-late sila’y pagagalitan sila mamaya ng kanilang head nurse. “Hello? This is Stacy -”

“Hello, gorgeous! I’m going to pick you up later, alright? I just want to tell you that I’m out of the office right now. Guess where I am?”

Nakakunot ang noo niya saka napaismid siya. “I can’t tell.”

“Come on. Just guess.”

“I’m not in the mood to have this guessing game with you, Wallace. In case you don’t know, we’re currently making our monthly report. So, I can’t talk for long.”

“Oh, I see. I’m sorry. I didn’t know. Anyway, I’ll tell you what. I’m here at the Butler’s Wharf Chop House in Southwark. I’m meeting a client who asks us to come join a conference to be held at Thornbury Castle in a few days. I’m thinking if you’re able to come with me then.”

Napatawa ang dalaga nang mapakla. “I have work, Wallace. Are you out of your mind?”

“I’ll take care of that. That’s all. Bye, gorgeous!”

Siyanga naman. Inignora lang nito ang sinasabi niya. Napatitig tuloy siya sa telepono nang maputol na ang kabilang linya. She snorted. Saka inilagay na iyon sa lalagyan. Pero hindi pa rin siya bumalik sa kanyang report. Napatitig pa siya doon sa teleponong nailapag na niya. At napuna naman iyon ni Liz na nasa kanyang tabi.

“Bakit napatawag si Papa Wallace?”

“Dahil sa isang walang kuwentang bagay.” Saka bumalik na siya sa kanyang report. Hinayaan niya lang na napataas ng kilay ang kanyang kaibigan in confusion. She was sure na kukulitin siya nito mamaya kapag tapos na ito sa report nito. Kaya dapat paspasan na niya ang paggawa ng report at siya pa ang mahuli.

“O, ano? Sabihin mo na sa ‘kin kung bakit siya tumawag kanina.” Kulit na ni Liz habang papalabas na silang ospital sa hapong iyon.

“Tsk! May sira ‘ata talaga siya sa ulo, eh. Isasama daw niya ako sa conference nila sa Thornbury Castle. May trabaho naman ako, eh. Di siya nag-iisip.” Nakasimangot na sabi pa niya.

“Ano? Talagang unique ‘yang si Wallace, ha? Wagas kung makapag-demand sa ‘yo. Pero, actually, gusto ko ‘yong mga moves niya para lang maakit ka niya.”

“Akit ka diyan! Babatukan na kita, eh.”

“Hus! O, tignan mo. May dala pang flowers ngayon, eh susunduin ka lang naman niya.”
Inginuso pa nito ang direksyon ng binata nang abot-tanaw na nila ito. “Sige, mauna na ako, ha?
Kuwento mo na lang bukas.” Saka bumaling pa ito sa lalake. “Bye, Wallace!”

WALLACE acknowledged Stacy’s friend who was getting a taxi. Nag-jog siyang lumapit sa dalagang napatayo lang na napatingin sa kanya. Saka ibinigay niya rito ang isang bouquet ng light pink na roses. Masama iyong tinignan ng dalaga nang hindi tinanggap.

“What’s that?” She asked.

“Pink roses, can’t you see?”

“Yes. I can see that they’re pink roses.” Ang tugon naman nito na nagtataray na naman.

“She doesn’t like fresh flowers because she has allergies,” ang chime in pa ni Jessica na nilampasan sila. Kinindatan pa nito si Wallace na sinamahan ng matamis na ngiti.

“Oh, right! Stupid of me.” Nasapo pa ni Wallace ang sariling noo. Ngayon niya lang naalalang ironic ang propesyon ng dalaga. May allergies ito ng mga bulaklak ngunit nurse ito dahil sigurado naman siyang maraming may nagreregalong bulaklak sa mga pasyente sa ospital na pinagtatrabahuan nito. Kung paano iyon nalulusutan ng dalaga ay ewan niya. Itatanong niya lang ito some other time kapag nagkaroon siya ng pagkakataon. “I have forgotten about it. It’s now yours, then,” napangisi pa si Wallace na ibinigay ang bouquet kay Jessica na ngiting-ngiti naman sa kanilang dalawa.

“Thanks! Bye! You two have a good time!”

Nakita niyang napataas ng kilay ng dalaga na napasunod ng tingin kay Jessica na natangay na ang bouquet ng flowers na para sana rito. Saka nagsimula na itong maglakad. Pinagbuksan naman niya kaagad ang dalaga ng pintuan ng kotse sa harap. Lumulan na ito nang di man lang nagpasalamat o ngumiti man lang sa kanya. Saka pumuwesto na siya sa driver seat.

SHE couldn't deny that he'd been treating her well. For example na lang sa flowers. At pinagbuksan pa siya nito ng pinto. Well, he was a perfect gentlemen if he so chooses.

The silence was getting awkward habang tumatakbo ang sasakyan. Parang hindi normal iyon para sa kanilang dalawa after all. Naisip pa ng dalaga na magsalita na lang. Ng kahit na ano.

“Don't you have something to tell me?” Umpisa pa niya nang maalala ang tawag nito kanina.

“Well, is it because we're quite? You think it's not like us? That it isn't normal?” Parang nababasa ng lalake ang nasaisip niya.

“I like what you're thinking. You can read my mind.”

He snorted. “Then tell me a joke.” He suggested.

“Why should I? Do I look like a stand up comedian to you? I am not. And I'm not for your entertainment, either.” She said, again, straightforwardly, as usual.

“Couldn't you make me happy even for once?” Himutok pa ng lalake na sumulyap sa kanya.

Tinignan niya ito. Bakit ba amoy na amoy pa rin niya ang pabango nito sa maghapon? At bakit parang ang fresh pa rin nitong tignan after sa out of office nitong activity? Inis na inis siya. Dapat pumapangit na ngayon ang lokong ito. Pero kahit na anong tingin niya'y palalo pa yata ang kagwapuhan nito. Talaga ngang infatuated siya rito. Inis na amin pa niya sa sarili.

“About Thornbury Castle. Why are you telling me to come with you? I’ve told you over the phone that I have work.”

“And I told you that I’ll take care of that.”

“How? Besides, I didn’t say that I’d come with you.”

“Why don’t you just come with me without asking why or what’s my reason behind it? Why do I have to explain everything to you?”

Because I want to make sure? Gustong sabihin pa ng dalaga. I want to make sure that it’s me you really want to be with this time around. And not that Dr. Reid. O kaya’y ayaw ko lang talagang maging panakip-butang na lang dahil sa wala ka ng girlfriend ngayon. Pero, may chance pa naman sigurong magkabalikan kayong dalawa ng doctor na iyon. At paano na ako pagkatapos? Isasantabi mo na naman lang ba tulad noong dati? You already gave me that impression that I can’t trust you. You already broke it once before. There’s no certainty that you won’t do the same thing. And I’m afraid to be hurt – again... Napakurap-kurap siya dahil sa isiping iyon. Dapat hindi man lang niya inamin iyon sa kanyang isipan!

“Fine. I’ll go with you. Besides, I don’t want to upset my sister any longer.” Ang paliwanag naman niya ngayon, more like to herself than to him dahil iba naman ang tanong nito.

“If you’re just forced to do that because of Jacy, maybe it’s better that you don’t come with me, after all. I don’t want to make you unhappy with your own decision.” He said defeatedly.

Ano ba talaga? Isasama mo ba ako o hindi?! Nililito mo na ako, Wallace! Inis na inis na ako sa ‘yo! Gusto niya itong isigaw rito. Pero pinilit niyang magtimi na lang.

“I’ll come with you. That’s final. Just tell me when and so I can get my head nurse’s approval just in time.” Giit pa niya ritong nagtatagis ang bagang.

“**I’LL** let you know then.” Sa loob-loob ng binata’y natutuwa naman siyang umepekto ang kanyang psycho war laban sa dalaga. Umpisa na kaya ito sa kanyang tagumpay?

THREE days ang convention, Monday to Wednesday. Pero hininging leave ng dalaga na may back-up pang kasamang recommendation at approval ni Dr. Reid ay isang buong linggo, na lingid naman sa kanya. Kunsabagay, medyo malayo-layo rin ang Thornbury Castle sa Waterloo. Kung kaya’t mainam nang may buffer siyang mga araw kung saka-sakaling mapapagod siya sa biyahe pa lamang.

“We heard that you have a vacation or some date with Kuya Wallace,” bungad pa ni Jacy na pumasok sa kuwarto niya habang nag-aayos siya ng kanyang dadalhin para sa biyahe nila ni Wallace, bukas ng Linggo. Mag-ti-train na lang sila upang hindi mapapagod sa pagmamaneho ang binata.

“That’s odd. What date? From what I can recall, I told him that I’d hang myself rather than to go on a date with him!” Naiinis na tugon niya sa kapatid. Saka naaalala niya ang kanyang

pangako rito at lumambot kaagad ang ekspresyon sa mukha niya. “Sorry, Jacy. The truth is that I’m going with him to Thornbury Castle for a conference. He invited me. At wala ka ng masasabi pa do’n. Correct?”

Ngumisi ang kanyang kapatid at hinalikan siya sa pisngi. “That’s my *ate*. Don’t worry about me and Jake. I can take care of him.”

Proud siyang tinignan ang 13-year old na kapatid. Niyakap niya ito at hinalikan sa noo. “I love you, Jacy. And Jake, as well, of course. You two take care of each other while I’m away. And I heard that Wallace’s father, Robert, is the one who’s going to send and pick you up from school while we’re away. I think that’s so sweet of him. Don’t forget to thank him for me when you see him, alright?”

“Even if you didn’t say so. I’ll tell him all the same but I can just text *Kuya* Wallace. I have his number,” Jacy winked at her. “And I love you, too, *Ate* Stacy.”

Naghiwalay na ang magkapatid nang hinagod ng tingin ni Jacy ang kanyang travelling bag. “You should bring that dress you have, that silver and black with open back and turtle neckline?” Suhestiyon pa nito.

“Oh, right! I think it’s a fabulous dress. How can I forget!” Nasapo pa niya ang noo at nagtungo na sa kanyang walk-in closet at hinanap ang evening gown na iyon. It was good for evening parties at kahit dinner. It would be perfect. Saka may naisip siyang bigla. Bakit nga ba hindi? Baka naman pwede niyang maakit si Wallace kahit sa pamamagitan lang ng dress na iyon? Natutuwa talaga siya at narito sa kuwarto niya ang kanyang stylist na kapatid.

“**DAD**, Jacy just texted me. Stacy says thank you in advance for your help in sending and picking up her siblings from school.” Sabi pa ni Wallace nang mabasa ang text ng teenager na nakatira lang sa next house of the Watsons.

“Tell her not to mention it. They’re already like family to us.” Ang tugon ng 60-year old na ama. Napangiti lang ang kanyang inang nakikinig sa kanila, na nasa 56 years na nito.

They were currently in the living room. Nasa kuwarto naman niya si Bradley at gumagawa ng project nito sa Science subject nila.

“I’ll relay your message, dad,” ang nakangiting sabi naman ng binata. His parents already knew his feelings for Stacy but no one dared to interfere with his relationship as they believed that the two of them could sort it out by themselves – in due time. As they, too, believed in destiny.

“You’re happy about this conference?” Ang may panunukso sa mga matang sabi pa ng ama niya.

“Dad, it’s not about the conference and you know that.”

“Your mom and I know of course. But you’re lucky that Stacy has decided to come with you even if it’s out of your relationship’s context.” Biro pa nito.

“You know Stacy for a long while now. That’s her favorite recipe. Out of context.” He grinned.

“Well, I must admit that your taste is never dull, my son. You took it after me.” At saka sinulyapan nito ang asawa.

“Robert! You should be ashamed! Our Wallace is unique.” Giit naman ni Wendy.

Naiiling si Wallace na iniwan ang nag-de-debateng mga magulang at pumasok na siya sa sariling kuwarta sa pangalawang palapag upang maayos na rin ang kanyang dalahin kinabukasan, para sa the next five or six days nilang bakasyon ni Stacy sa Thornbury Castle.

His office had already booked their rooms. Kasama niya ang isa sa mga colleagues niya ngunit hindi si Trent dahil sa nagkataong may problema na naman sa site nito at kailangan nitong asikasuhin iyon sa lalong madaling panahon upang huwag silang mahuli sa kanilang deadline.

THORNBURY Castle, now a hotel, which was located in Gloucestershire, was Edward Stafford's fortified manor. He was the third Duke of Buckingham. He received the royal license to build it in 1510. Some of his royal family members had stayed there after his execution in 1521 like King Henry VIII and his second wife Anne Boleyn and later, Queen Mary I.

This was Stacy's first time to visit the castle – so was Wallace's but he was able to get an old blueprint about the castle, which was given by a generous colleague in his field of work. He wanted to know in advance on where he could take Stacy for a walk or sightseeing so that she won't get bored during his conference at daytime.

May mga malalapit namang mga attractions na nasa castle grounds lang at sa karatig-bayang mga tourist spots katulad ng Berkeley Castle, Bristol Zoo Garden, Old Down Country Park, Cattle Country Adventure Park, Blue Reef Aquarium, Clifton Observatory, Windmill City Farm, WWT Slimbridge Centre, Tumpy Green Equestrian Centre, at iba pa.

Nang pumasok sila ng castle, they noticed readily the extraordinary style, grandeur and elegance of it. One outer side wall had vines against it and stuck itself beautifully; the manor-

palace grounds were huge and well-manicured; the interior of the hotel was truly amazing; there were high-backed chairs in the castle's library; there was a single stunning fireplace in the living room; a piece of standing full-body armor and other interesting decorations both modern and classic ones, which were owned and preserved in the hotel.

There were only actually 26 bedchambers, 2 private dining rooms, a sitting room, a Tudor hall and beautiful walled gardens outside the castle. At dahil sa fully booked din ito ay nag-shi-share na lang ng room sina Stacy at Wallace.

“This is *our* bedchamber?” Ulit pa ng dalaga nang maisara na ni Wallace ang heavy oak door.

“Sorry. It was fully booked when we checked but we were still lucky to catch two – for my colleague's family and for us - instead of staying farther from here.” Ang paliwanag pa ng binata.

Kinuha ng dalaga ang isang unan at binato ito sa lalake. He caught it easily. Inis na inis siya rito.

“You jerk!” Inis na aniya rito.

“It's not my fault!” Giit pa nitong nagkibit-balikat.

“Then why did you make me come in the first place? Huh?”

Ngumisi lang ang binata nang may kumatok sa pintuan ng kanilang malaking kuwarto. He was glad of the interruption and went over to open the door habang napasunod ng tingin ang dalaga.

CHAPTER SIX

IPINAKILALA ang dalaga sa colleague ni Wallace na nagngangalang Michael MacDonald. He went into their room together with his wife and twelve-year old kid, Janeth and Matilda.

Umupo sa living room ng kuwarto nila ang tatlong babae habang nag-uusap ang dalawang lalake malapit sa may pintuan at may ibinigay na folder kay Wallace ang mas nakakatandang colleague na nasa kanyang mga mid-forties. He was balding at his age pero vibrant ang expression ng mukha nito katulad ng sa asawa nito't anak. Pasulyap-sulyap lang ang dalaga kay Wallace habang nakikipag-usap ito nang masinsinan sa colleague nito at pangiti-ngiti ito paminsan-minsan.

“I heard that Wallace was going to bring his girlfriend over to this conference. I’m glad that he has already set his mind to settle down in the very near future,” ang sabi pa ng madaldal na si Janeth.

Napangiti ang dalaga. “Oh. Did he mention it?”

“Well, not in so many words. But I heard from my husband that he was going to bring along the love of his life. And I quoted it.” Her eyes went wide as she spoke.

“Really? I haven’t heard anything something about that from Wallace.” Her tongue slipped.

“What do you mean? You’re not Wallace’s girlfriend.”

“This is an awkward situation but we’re still getting –” She started to explain when Michael butted in. And she was more than happy to be interrupted at the right moment.

“Let’s go, Janeth, Matilda,” ang tawag pa sa mag-ina nito.

“We’ll continue our conversation over dinner, dear,” ang sabi pa ng middle aged woman na hinawakan pa ang kanyang kamay na nakapatong sa isang throw pillow. “I think we’re still going to unpack a few things in our own bedchamber. I find the place very wonderful. It’s my first time here.”

Tumango siyang ngumiti na lang na kumuway sa bata na sumunod sa inang mataba. Isinara naman na ni Wallace ang pinto at lumapit sa kanyang hawak-hawak pa rin nito ang folder.

“What’s that?” Kuryusong tanong pa ng dalaga.

“Oh. Just the program of the conference, which is going to start tomorrow at eight thirty. I have already arranged with Michael’s wife to keep you entertained while I’m busy. Don’t you worry. I’ll be yours in the evenings.” Kindat pa nito sa kanya.

She rolled her eyes. She tried to ignore the feeling na inihatid ng kindat na iyon.

Oh, God! I shouldn’t have come. He’s making me vulnerable right now. Saka bigla siyang tumayo at nag-uumpisa nang mag-unpack ng kanyang traveling bag.

SUMUNOD na rin sa kanyang ginagawa ang binata while he recalled the times that he provoked her when they were younger – just to get her attention.

Minsan ay binulabog niya ang paglalaro ng dalaga ng tea party nang mag-isa sa lawn nito habang naglalaro siya ng football at sinadya niyang matamaan ang maliit na mesa ng 8-year old na bata. Tumili pa ang batang babae at umiyak.

“You’re so mean!” Ang reklamo pa ni Stacy noon. Kuyom ang mga palad nito ay nilapitan siya at ang akala pa niya’y susuntukin siya nito kung kaya’t akma siyang dedepensa. Instead, tinadyakan ng maliit na paa nito ang kanyang shin. Saka ito tumakbo papasok ng bahay upang hindi siya makabawi while he hotly rubbed his hurting shin. Saka napangisi pa siya kahit papaano.

Minsan noong nasa freshman naman na ang dalagita sa high school at twenty-two na siya noon. Hapon iyon ng weekend. Nagbabasa ng romantic novel ang dalagita habang nakahiga sa lounging chair. He couldn’t resist the urge to get her attention. Talagang malakas na ang tama niya sa dalagita every passing day. Attracted siyang masyado sa inosente at gorgeous na babae. Ang ginawa niya noon ay umikot siya sa kanilang bahay upang huwag nitong mapansin at saka ninakawan niya ito ng halik sa labi. She was surprised. Ngunit mabilis itong nakabawi dahil sa pagtakbo niya’y nahuli pa rin siya sa hard-bound spine ng libro sa batok na ikinanganga niya.

“What are you smiling about?” Ang nakasimangot na puna ng dalaga habang nag-ha-hang silang dalawa nang sabay sa closet ng naka-hanger nilang mga suit, long sleeves at dresses.

They were so close with each other sa nag-iisang closet na may kalakihan rin. His eyes were still focused on the clothes he was hanging. He liked the way their clothes were crowding together inside the closet. It was like they were a new couple who just decided to live together. And he liked that thought.

“Should I tell you what’s on my mind?” Baling pa niya sa dalaga.

Mabilis na nagbawi ng tingin ang dalaga at nag-bi-busy-han sa iba pang mga gamit nito. *“Just forget the question, then.”*

“No. I’ll tell you what I was smiling about.” He disagreed.

“I’m sure it’s something that would bother me. You have always the right recipe to pull my patience to its boiling point.”

Tumawa ang lalake nang malakas. “Have I? Well, the thing is...” Sinadya pa nitong ibitin ang ibig sabihin. “I recalled our first kiss.”

Napamaang ang dalaga. She remembered it too well, he was sure of it. He could see the way her eyes and cheeks burned. She was furious to even recall it and at the same time, she was embarrassed.

First, I’ll make her miserable! I think, it’s a great plan. Tormenting her is always very effective on her, he thought decisively.

“Wallace Peter Murray! I’m warning you!”

“Alright. Alright. Don’t worry. No one knew about our first kiss – oh, wait! I think someone does. But I don’t remember to whom I talked about it.” Kumukurap-kurap pa ang mga mata ng binata na parang inaalaala kung sino ang taong iyon.

“Wallace!”

Ngumisi ang binata. “Oh, I remember now. But I’m not telling you, gorgeous.” Pang-aasar pa nito saka tumakbo palabas ng kanilang bedchamber ang binata upang hindi siya makatikim ng pagka-sadista ng dalaga.

NAIMBYERNA naman ang dalaga to the highest level – intensity 500 na - dahil sa sinabi nito. May pinagsabihan pa ito tungkol sa kanilang first kiss? At sino naman kaya ‘yon? Napakagat-labi siya at tumili sa inis.

She needed a shower. Iyon na nga at nang lumamig naman ang kanyang ulo. She took a deep breath. Bawal siyang ma-stress. Ayaw din naman niyang mapahiya kay Michael at sa asawa at anak nito. Dapat ay pakitaan niya ang mga ito sa kanyang good side. It was for her own sake at hindi para sa binata. And it was almost dinner pa naman.

SAMANTALANG nakikipag-halubilo muna ang binata sa mga kakilala niyang mga architects and engineers na kasali sa conference na naka-book sa Thornbury Castle hotel. They were talking about their current projects nang mag-walk in sa Tudor Hall ang dalagang nakabihis na. Her pink and light blue mini-dress that exposed her cleavage, gorgeous legs and attractiveness gave a contrast to the 16th century features of the place wherein mayroong mga suits ng armour, tapestries and exposed walls.

Well, at least she's easy to spot. He thought.

And she practically took his breath away at ganoon din ang naramdaman ng mga kalalaking napatingin sa dalaga. Napalunok ang binata. He was about to go near her para ipakitang siya ang kasama nito rito ngunit nakita niyang sumunod sa dalaga sina Janeth at Matilda.

“You know her?” Naitanong pa ng isang kainuman ng wine ng binata na siyang pumukaw sa kanyang pag-iisip.

Bumaling siya rito nang may misteryosong ngiti. Saka nagsalita siya nang mahinahon sa tatlong kasamahan. “My future bride.” Pang-aalaska pa niya.

“Wohh...” Nabiglang exclaim pa ng mga kasamahan niya habang napangisi na lang si Michael na umiinom ng white wine.

“Seriously, Wallace?” Di-makapaniwalang tanong ni Kent.

“She’s going to look this way and you’ll know that I’m telling you, guys the truth.” Ngumisi pa siya kay Michael na napailing-iling nang may ngiti sa mga labi. He was too confident that she’d look in his direction wherever he was. He just knew it. Kahit na iirapan lang siya nito.

“No way! That’s impossible,” at napamaang itong napatingin sa dalaga.

Binigyan naman ng dalaga ng isang sulyap ang binata nang mapuna siya nito. Papunta silang tatlong babae sa adjoining room na siyang ginawa sa kasalukuyan na bar. They were going to wait for Michael and Wallace na may kausap pang mga kasamahan sa conference na nag-get together pa.

“I can’t believe this,” ang nasabi tuloy ni Kent na uminom ng wine. Saka tinapik-tapik nito ang balikat ni Wallace.

NAPAANGAT ng tingin ang dalaga nang makitang nag-walk-in sa adjoining room, sa bar, si Wallace kasama si Michael. Kapwa nakabihis na ang mga ito. And she was sure that the two already took a shower dahil sa fresh looking ang dalawa. Ngunit walang ibang may mas preskong dating kundi si Wallace.

INALALAYAN pa ng binata sa siko ang dalaga at gano’n din ang ginawa ni Michael sa asawa’t anak nito habang iginiya sila patungong The Tower dining room. The room was hexagonal and unique with it huge arrow slit windows and magnificent fireplace. Ang maximum na puwedeng makaupo rito’y 30 lamang katao kung kaya’t medyo may privacy ang dating ng dining room. At mangilan-ngilan na’ng pumasok para mag-dine ngayon.

Nag-order na sila ng three-course dinner with red wine. Habang fresh juice lang para sa bata. They talked some new fashion trends and Matilda's school over dinner. At dahil sa kailangan ng batang matulog nang maaga dahil sa napagod ito sa biyahe ay nauna na ang tatlong bumalik sa kanilang bedchamber.

The two of them still lingered over dinner para tapusin ang bottle ng wine. Ang kalimitan sa mga guests ay umalis na upang magtungo sa bar at iilan na lang sa kanila ang naiwan. Ang iba'y patapos na sa kanilang dinner.

"You look ravishing tonight," Wallace started as he gave her a slow and promising smile.

"That reminds me of our unfinished conversation earlier," she ignored his remark and gave him a warning smile.

He finished the remaining wine in his wine glass. He placed it on the table. He poured some more into it as he spoke. "Which we can continue later. Not now, gorgeous. I must insist on it. You know very well where and how it's going to end."

NAIINIS ang dalaga sa pagka-kalma nitong magsalita. Habang tinignan niya ito nang galit ay iinom sana siya mula sa kanyang wine glass when the wine was deliberately spilled on her chest. She gasped. She could feel the liquid trickled down her breasts.

He laughed. And unceremoniously, he dipped over her and licked her chest. She was too surprised to move. His warm, delicious lips and tongue made a wild tingling sensation against her skin and her chest.

She felt her own body reacted to it on its own volition. Abot-abot ang kaba sa kanyang dibdib. Her face flushed as she looked around. Dahil sa napatingin sa kanila ang ibang guests ng hotel.

“Wallace!” Sinampal niya ito. At napatawa ang guests na nakakita.

“What? I just didn’t want to waste it,” pa-inosente effect pa ang binata.

Tumayo ang dalaga at nag-walk out. Ngumisi naman ang binata sa ibang mga guests. He raised his glass into a toast and the others did the same. Tumayo na ito upang sundan ang galit na babae.

“Great job, mate!” Susog pa ng isang kapwa-British na lalake.

“That was a brilliant move,” kumindat pa ang isang blond woman.

“I can make use of that move some time,” ang sabi ng isa pang brunette na lalakeng British din.

“Thank you for your support!” Ngumising nag-bow pa ang binata na pinalakpakan pa.

Nagpanting naman ang tainga ng dalaga. Kitang-kita niya ang ginagawa nito. Lalo siyang naiinis na nag-martsa pabalik sa kanilang bedchamber ng binata. She was far too embarrassed by what he’d done to her. Kuyom ang mga palad niya’y she vowed to make him pay.

“Wallace?” She turned around as he locked the bedchamber door when he got in.

“Yes, gorgeous?” He was unaffected by her current mood – nakikita niya iyon. Naroroon pa rin ang ngiting sumilay sa mga labi nito kani-kanina pa lang.

“I want to kill you right now, you crafty bastard!” Sabi ng dalaga na pinagtatapon ang mga throw pillows sa sofa.

HE didn't try to defend himself. Natamaan ito sa mukha, sa sikmura, sa dibdib. He didn't move. He didn't budge. He wanted her to let go of her anger. It wasn't time to make a move on her. Not yet. Her chest moved up and down dahil sa galit. He smiled as he recalled what he'd just done. God help him. He wanted to lick her chest again and do something more than licking. But for now, he had to pacify her. He walked toward her, slowly.

NAPAATRAS naman ang dalaga. She was afraid he'd do something to her. At baka hindi na naman maganda. Pero bakit na-i-excite siya ngayon sa maaari nitong gawin ngayon?

“I'm sorry, gorgeous if I embarrassed you back there.” He said quietly. Then, he embraced her gently.

But she knew better. Nagpupumiglas siya. But his embrace was tight at napapagod na siya kapipiglas and she surrendered. He smelled heavenly. It somehow soothed her tensed nerves and anger.

“What do you want with me, Wallace? My love? My heart?” She looked up at his face as she choked on those words.

“Such strong words, love and heart? To me, they're merely bonuses, gorgeous.”

She winced at his words. Why did she ask him, anyway? Itinulak niya ito. “I want to go to bed. I’m tired.” She sighed. “I’m tired of arguing and bickering with you all this time.”

“**GOODNIGHT** then, gorgeous.” He answered in a low voice. His gaze followed her. She went into the bathroom to change.

Wallace decided to change into his sleepwear, taking his time. Gusto niyang maabutan ng dalaga na nagbibihis. He wanted to see what her reaction would be after their argument. A little later, he heard the bathroom door open. His upper body was naked.

CHAPTER SEVEN

NATIGILAN pa si Stacy nang maratnan ang lalakeng nagbibihis ng pantulog nito. It was disturbing! Napahalukip siya sa kanyang bathrobe na suot. Sa ilalim niyon ay ang mahabang night shirt niya at pang-ibabang underwear.

His muscled back and biceps were indeed disturbing. Lalo na nang humarap pa ito at kita niya ang dibdib nitong medyo mabalahibo at maskulado pa. Well, it wasn't her first time to see him like that. Kapag nag-wo-work out ito noon ay ginagawa ito noon sa lawn at nakikita niya ito.

“Please turn off the lights when you're done.” Nasabi pa ng dalaga na hinuhubad ang bathrobe at inilagay ito sa isang silya na malapit sa isang night table. Saka umupo siya sa kama at nahiga na.

“Wait. We haven't talked about our sleeping arrangement yet.” Narinig pa niyang sabi ng binata.

Bumalikwas ang dalaga nang paupo sa kama. Lumapit sa kanya ang binatang hubad pa rin ang itass na bahagi ng katawan nito. She wanted to take away her eyes from his only shorts clad body. “You can sleep on the sofa. It's big enough for you.” She shrugged, looking at the sofa just to take her eyes away from him.

“No. No, gorgeous. You're not telling me to sleep on the sofa.” He shook his head. “I'll pretend that you never suggested it.”

“And what do you want me to do? I should sleep on the sofa?” She raised an eyebrow saka bumaba ng kama. “Fine! Anyway, you're the one who's paying the room!” Naaasar na aniya.

He stopped her by grabbing in the arm. Bago pa man siya makalayo mula sa kama. “We’re sleeping in the same bed, gorgeous. No one’s going to sleep on the sofa, though. Not one. Not now, not ever. Understood?” Matigas na sabi ng binata at itinulak ang dalaga sa kama.

Napaupo siya at napaangat ng tingin sa lalakeng nakatayo na nakatunghay sa kanya. “Fine! But you’re not allowed to cross this line. Alright?” Sabi pa ng dalaga na hinilera pa ang unan sa gitna ng malaking kama.

He snorted. He went over to the sofa and the other parts of the living room to pick up the throw pillows at itinaon ang mga ito sa dalaga.

Natamaan pa ang dalaga sa ulo. Inis naman niyang pinukol ng tingin ang lalake. “You did it on purpose!” Reklamo pa niya.

“Yes, I did.” He agreed as he smiled at her wickedly.

Kinuha niya ang unan at ibinalik iyon sa kinalalagyan nito at ipinalit niya ang mga throw pillows sa helera na siyang kanilang boundary. Saka pinatay na ng binata ang lahat ng mga ilaw maliban sa isang lamp shade sa living room.

“Didn’t I tell you to turn off all the lights?”

“I can’t sleep when it’s too dark.” He answered as he went into the bathroom.

“Are you afraid of the dark? It didn’t and never crossed my mind, Wallace,” pangungutya pa ng dalaga na humihiga na sa kanyang side ng kama.

HE didn't bother to be provoked. He brushed his teeth at naghilamos na. After he used the bathroom, he went back to the four poster bed. He settled on his side of the bed, under the covers. He had his back on her.

How could he sleep with her just a touch away now? Gusto na niyang magsisi dahil sa kanyang pag-imbata sa dalaga rito. But then, he wasn't really regretful. Just that he wished that his relationship with her would improve by this short vacation they were together. He sighed.

SHE heard his sigh. Bumuntong-hininga na rin lang siya. Saka humarap sa nakatalikod na binata. In the dim light, she could see his naked back on her. His skin was so smooth. Her hand etched to touch it. But she pulled her hand back.

"I'm sorry if I upset you, Wallace," she said in a small voice.

"I'm not upset." Matipid na tugon nito.

"Then, I'll take back my words." She said and turned in the opposite direction. Nagtalikuran na silang dalawa.

HE looked over his shoulder. Napangiti naman ang binata.

He woke up early in the morning. Nasurpresa pa siya nang maramdaman at makitang nakasiksik sa kanyang katawan ang babaeng tulog na tulog pa. Nasa ibabaw na ito ng throw pillows na kanilang boundary.

He pushed himself up on one elbow to look at her sleeping face. He always wanted to do it but he never got the chance until now. His heart was beating so fast. She was more gorgeous to look at as she was asleep. Lalo pang tumitindi ang kanyang nag-uumapaw na damdamin para sa dalaga.

“You should know damn well than to ask that I not only want your heart and love. I want to have your soul, gorgeous. I want the very core of your being to be mine forever and ever – if we have to live over and over again. That’s what I want. That’s how greedy I am.” He whispered.

Then, he saw her stir in her sleep. He froze. Napalunok siya pagkatapos. Hindi pa rin ito nagising. He felt relieved. Saka dahan-dahan niyang hinahaplos ang makinis na mukha ng dalaga sa pamamagitan ng likod ng kanyang mga daliri. Then, he traced her eyebrows, her nose and her lips. He couldn’t fight the urge to kiss her lips. Dahan-dahan siyang yumuko nang biglang dumilat ang mga mata ng dalaga.

“Get off me, you maniac!” Ang galit na sabi pa ng dalaga.

“I was going to do that. You’re just slumped against me.” At itinulak pa niya ang dalaga.

She gasped. “Bastard!”

Mabilis na tumakbo ang binata sa banyo nang nakangisi. Saka mabilis na nag-shower siya. At suot lamang ang tuwalya ay lumabas siya ng banyo habang ang isang tuwalya’y pinapatuyo ang buhok. “I’m done, gorgeous. Your turn now.”

“Thank you! Good that you didn’t monopolize it for long.” Paangil na sabi pa ng dalaga sa kanya.

He chuckled. Kung ganito ba palagi ang umaga niya, wala na yata siyang ibang mahihiling pa kundi ang mga bagay lang na nasabi niya kani-kanina lang.

WHEN he and she walked into the dining room, nagsipalangkapan ang mga taong nakakita sa ginawa ng binata kagabi. Naalala sila ng mga ito. Pinamulahan tuloy ng mukha ang dalaga. Kumaway naman si Wallace sa mga ito and he pulled the chair for Stacy sa may isang bakanteng mesa. And he settled himself bago sila um-order ng kanilang breakfast.

“I’ll just have butter, green olives, French bread and coffee,” she said to the waiter.

“Yes, ma’am.” He smiled. “And you, sir?”

“I’ll have the same.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll be right back.” At tumalikod na ang waiter upang kunin ang kanilang order.

“I think he’s interested in you,” ang puna pa ng binata sa dalaga na ang tinutukoy ay ang blond waiter na nasa kanyang early twenties.

“So what?” Taas-kilay na aniya naman.

“I’m just proud to be the one with you right now, gorgeous. And I don’t think I can contain this kind of feeling of being so lucky and those around me are so unlucky to death.” Kindat pa ng lalake.

Napatingin ang dalaga sa paligid at baka nakatingin pa sa kanila ang ibang mga tao sa dining room. Buti na lang at busy ang mga ito sa pagkain at pagkukuwentuhan. “You’re damn lucky indeed that I can’t kick your butt right now in public.”

He controlled his laughter. “That’s right. Anyway, what are you going to do today, gorgeous? I’ll be busy for the rest of the day. I don’t even know if I can have lunch together with you today.”

“It’s fine. I can entertain myself very well. And it’s good that you’re going to be out of sight, believe me.” She smiled at him sweetly pero nangungutya naman.

“Don’t smile like that or you’ll regret it, gorgeous.”

Biglang nawala ang ngiti sa mga labi ng dalaga. Pumormal tuloy siya. Saka dumating na ang kanilang order. Nagpasalamat ang dalaga sa waiter at tinanguan ito ng binata bago ito umalis.

“I think I’ll go to the spa today with Janeth and Matilda. Janeth mentioned it to me last night,” ang sabi pa ng dalaga nang makabalik sila sa kanilang bedchamber.

Pumasok naman si Wallace sa banyo upang makapaghanda na sa conference. “That’s good then,” he said and closed the bathroom door.

Napaupo ang dalaga sa kama. It was already well made. Dahil sa maagang housekeeping service. She checked the closet para tignan kung anong maisusuot niya maya-maya nang lumabas na sa banyo ang lalake.

He looked so immaculate in his suit. However, she didn’t want to show her appreciation kung kaya ay ibinalik niya sa mga damit ang kanyang mga mata.

“You’ll miss me?” Ang nakangising tanong pa nito.

“Even if you don’t come back or I don’t see you for a few years - or better yet, many years - I won’t miss you!” She lied, of course. Her heart was beating so fast as she said it.

Naging erratic pa nga ang pagtibok nito. She couldn't imagine life without him. She was too used to have him around her. Na alam na alam niyang ma-mi-miss niya ito. Lalo na ngayong may damdamin siya para rito – which she wanted to suppress with all her might.

“Liar!” He said smilingly as he strode toward her. Saka niyakap siya nito mula sa likuran at hinalikan ang kanyang leeg.

Napasinghap siya dahil doon. Her body seemed to sparkle with the friction of their bodies. Napalunok siya. Her traitorous body wanted to be held by him. “Wallace...” Instead, her voice came into a whisper. Nang hindi niya sinasadya.

“Yes, gorgeous,” he whispered back at mariin pang hinalikan nito ang base ng side of her neck at pinaharap siya nito to kiss her properly. This time, sa kanyang mga labi.

Her eyes closed on their own.

HE smiled triumphantly and kissed her lips again while his hands cupped her face. Saka bumaba ang isa sa exposed shoulder nito, sa braso at huminto sa likod nito. He went hard as he kissed her more and his kisses went more and more demanding, which she responded eagerly. He just felt right, so right. It was like a dream come true for him.

Saka bigla niyang naaalala na it was almost time to go to the conference. He suddenly stopped and swore. “Damn it! If only I don't have that bloody conference!”

NAPATIKOM nang mariin ng kanyang mga labi ang dalagang napatingin sa lalake na pilit huwag tumawa. She knew that he wanted to make love to her so badly ngunit dahil sa conference ay hindi nito magawa iyon. He had to work after all.

He kissed her again and looked into her eyes. She wanted to see the love in his eyes. Pero of course, she didn't want to flatter herself. It would not happen. She had to remind herself. But then, just a while ago, she was more than willing to be possessed by him. She must be crazy! But then, her feelings made her so mad about him that she couldn't control herself. She caressed his lips to take out the trace of lipstick. He sucked her fingers and kissed her again.

“You're driving me crazy, gorgeous.” He whispered in her lips.

She didn't say a word. She just smiled. Kahit papaano ay parang kiniliti ang puso niya dahil sa mga salita nito. At least, she had that intense power to make him feel that way. And he kissed her again before he let her go and went out of the bedroom – hesitatingly.

Nang maisara na nito ang pinto'y napabuntong-hininga sa saya ang dalaga. Kahit parang malabo ang sitwasyon nila ni Wallace ay parang wala siyang pakialam na pagbigyan ito at ang sarili niyang nararamdaman.

SA spa naka-tambay silang tatlo maghapon. At saka nag-enjoy sila ng cream tea for a few hours hanggang sa matapos ang first day ng conference nila Michael at Wallace. Ipinakilala pa sila sa mga kasamahan ng binata sa university na medyo older ng binata because he was able to advance sa talino nito.

“So, you’re the famous Stacy that our lover boy is dying to have since then,” ang nakakalokong sabi pa ni Kent na nakipag-shake hands sa dalaga.

Ngumiti siya nang matamis sa lalake. “Hi! I didn’t know I was once a topic in your university days.” She looked at Wallace. Ito ba ang pinagsabihan nito tungkol sa kanilang first kiss? Ngunit kahit naintindihan iyon ng binata ay kumindat lang ito sa kanya.

“Not just once but most of the times, I tell you,” ang tugon naman nito.

“I’m flattered! Thank you!” Ang sweet namang tugon ng dalaga.

Tumaas nang bahagya naman ang kilay ni Wallace saka napatingin ito sa kamay ni Kent na nakahawak pa rin sa dalaga. Natural lang na hiniwalay niya ang mga iyon as he made a remark.

“Until now, you’re the one topic that I cannot stop myself from speaking about, gorgeous.” Saka mahigpit nitong hinawakan ang kamay ng dalaga na akman babawi pero hindi iyon binitawan ng lalake.

Tumawa naman sina Kent at ang dalawa pang mga kasamahan nito at pati na si Michael at ang pamilya nito.

“I couldn’t agree more,” ang tugon naman ng naiiling na si Kent at saka nagpaalam na ito at ang mga kasamahan nito. Sumunod naman sina Michael at ang pamilya nito.

Naiwan na ang dalawa sa mesa at umupo sa tabi ng dalaga ang binata. Inagaw pa nito ang cup of cream tea na nasa harap niya na nangangalahati pa. Tinungga iyon nito at saka hinila na siya papalabas ng tea room. Tuluyan na silang lumabas ng castle sa grounds. It was almost six in the evening but the sun was still shining brightly.

“**WHERE** are you taking me?” They stopped to where his rented car was parked. At pinapasok ang dalaga roon.

“Let’s go on a short date before dinner time.” He grinned.

He pulled over after a few minutes. Nasa WWT Slimbridge Centre sila ngayon. May mangilan-ngilang mga bisita na may kasamang mga kabataan na pinapakain ang mga endangered, exotic and rare ducks, geese, swans and flamingos. Napamaang ang dalaga dahil sa kagandahan ng anim na species ng mga flamingos sa Europe na ngayon niya lang nakita.

Bumili ng pagkain para sa mga ito ang binata na sandaling nawala habang tila nasa trance ang dalagang nakatingin sa mga ito. Smooth na nagsi-sail ng kani-kanyang katawan ang mga swans sa tubig. Palakad-lakad naman ang iba sa basang lupa.

NAPALINGON siya kay Wallace na kababalik lang at binigyan siya ng isang handful na pagkain at binigyan niya ng pagkain ang mga swan. Tuwang-tuwa siya kahit nababasa na ang kanyang sandals at mga paa. Kinunan naman siya ng pictures ng binata sa dala nitong camera at cellphone. She felt great! Para siyang batang binigyan ng kanyang paboritong laruan sa pagkakataong ito.

AND he admired her for that. He just couldn’t resist taking candid pictures of her na natutuwa sa kanyang ginagawa.

He just knew that she was so tired that night nang hindi man lang nito maalalang maglagay ng throw pillows para sa boundary nila ng binata. Napangiti naman ang huli na pinapanood na nakatulog ang dalaga. He moved closer to her at niyakap ito saka natulog na rin.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SA sumunod na araw, iginugol ng tatlong babae ang araw sa may Cattle Country Adventure Park, kung saan may mga maraming activities and equipment tulad ng two huge barn house giant slides, willow maze, Britain's biggest jumping pillow, 14-meter climbing net, giant castle, trampolines, rides sa mini train, mini trucks, splash pool, mini golf, boating lake, animals to see at marami pang iba.

Saka nagpunta sa Clifton Observatory sina Stacy at Wallace kasama sina Michael, Janeth at Matilda pagkatapos ng second-day conference. It was a natural cave that had viewing platforms over the local scenery. Michael took pictures for the both of them.

“You two really look a very charming couple,” Janeth teased. “It’s very good to be so young and in love.”

Nagkatinginan sina Wallace at Stacy. Ang dalaga’y hindi niya iyon sinadya pero para namang natural na iyon. Her face blushed. Niyakap naman siya ng binata upang itago ang blush niya sa mapanuring mga mata ni Janeth. At kinunan sila ng picture ni Michael nang nakangisi. Nag-thumbs up naman si Matilda sa ama nang ipinakita rito ang resulta.

On the third day, nagpunta sa Bristol Zoo Garden ang tatlong babae habang nag-konference sa huling araw nila ang mga lalake. It was a 12-acre animal kingdom with award-winning gardens and beautiful grounds. Mayroon pang wacky pictures sila ni Matilda at Stacy na kuha ni Janeth. They spent their whole day there – hanggang sa oras na ng pagtatapos ng conference nila Wallace at bumalik na sila sa Thornbury Castle hotel.

Napag-trip-an nina Wallace at Stacy na samahan si Matilda sa babysitting facility kung saan may nagkukuwento ng istorya ng mga prinsipe, mga prinsesa, mga knights, mga hari at mga reyna. Napangiti naman ang storyteller nang nakatingin sa adults na kasama ang 12-year old na si Matilda habang nag-di-date sina Michael at Janeth on their last day sa castle.

Pagkatapos ay nagpunta sila sa archery grounds at sumali pa sila doon. Tinuruan sina Stacy at Matilda ni Wallace kung paano iyon gagawin. Napatitig ang dalaga sa binata habang tinuturuan nito si Matilda. She couldn't believe that he knew archery. Kahit nga sa matagal na silang magkakapit-bahay ay hindi niya alam iyon. No wonder he looked sporty. Damn, he was that hot!

“A kiss for your thoughts?” Ang biro pa ng binata na malapit na malapit ang mukha sa kanya.

Nabigla siya't napaatras. “Don't give me a fright like that!”

Napatawa ito nang malakas saka ito napatingin kay Matilda na nagpa-practice. “You were spacing out. What was in your mind? I'm sure it was me. But what about me?”

Umirap ang dalaga rito. “I'm not obliged to tell you.”

He snorted and clapped his hands nang muntik nang matamaan ni Matilda ang bull's eye ng target nito. “Good job, Matilda! Come on, gorgeous. It's your turn again. Let's see what you've got!” Hamon pa nito nang lumapit sa kanila si Matilda na ngiting-ngiti.

Pumosisyon ang dalaga ayon sa itinuro sa kanya ng binata. She lost her concentration at hindi pa tumama sa target kundi sa side at bumagsak sa ground ang kanyang pana dahil sa nakaw na halik ng lalake sa kanyang pisngi. Bumunghalit naman sa tawa si Matilda lalo na't sinipa ng dalaga sa shin ang binata.

“Aw!” He rubbed his shin. Saka ngumisi ito sa bata.

“You rake!” Asar na sabi pa ng dalaga rito. Saka kumuha siya ng isa pang pana at nag-prepare na sa susunod niyang attempt. “You do it again and I swear. This arrow is going to have another target.” Banta pa niya sa lalake.

Medyo pumormal nga ang lalake at nanonood habang binitawan ng dalaga ang arrow. Naka-bull’s eye siya. Ngumisi naman ito nang tumingin rito ang dalaga na may animong nagwawaging ngiti sa mga labi.

“Alright. You’re a fast learner and strong, I must admit that. I didn’t do anything to you, right?” He said defensively with two hands in front of him.

“You should learn to fear me,” naniningkit ang mga mata ng dalaga pero nakangiti naman siya.

He chuckled. At pinanood na naman siyang kumuha pa ng isa pang pana at saka pinakawalan na ito. Another bull’s eye. She knew that he thought she was just amazing. “Are you sure you haven’t tried archery before?” Tanong pa nito sa kanya.

Humarap ang dalaga sa lalake nang nakapamaywang. “Are you calling me a liar now?” The words just came out of her lips. When she realized, the last time that the ‘liar’ word was mentioned ay hinalikan siya ng binata noong isang araw. She knew that their thoughts were on the same page kung kaya’t umiwas siya ng tingin ngayon.

“You’re blushing, Stacy,” puna pa ni Matilda na humahagikhik.

“There’s just something in her mind that she can’t forget, Matilda,” ang nakangising turan naman ng binata nang nakatingin sa napakagat-labi na dalaga.

“And you know it, Wallace?” Ang tanong ng bata.

Ngumisi ang binata at kumindat sa teenager saka siya na naman ang kumuha sa bow ng dalaga at sa arrow sa holder nito at tumira na.

It was almost nine nang dumating doon sina Michael at Janeth upang sunduin si Matilda. Nagpasalamat ang mga ito sa kanilang pagsama sa bata habang nagkaroon naman ng kanilang time ang mag-asawa.

“Don’t mention it. Anytime, Janeth, Michael,” ang sabi pa ni Stacy sa mga ito. “We had a great time.”

“Yeah, mum, dad! And Stacy was blushing many times!” Pagsasabi pa ni Matilda. Nagkatawanan tuloy ang mag-asawa at hinila na ang bata palayo. They bade their goodnight sa dalawang naiwan sa archery grounds kasama ang mangilan-ngilang mga bisita.

“Are we going to drink first before we go to our bedchamber?” Ang tanong pa ng binata na isinauli na ang bow and arrow sanaka-assign na staff. She was wearing the dress that Jacy suggested to her kaya parati’y patingin-tingin sa kanila ang mga tao pati na ang binata.

“I don’t think I can still stay out for another minute. I’m so tired. You can call for room service if you want.” Kumibit ang dalagang naglalakad na. Mabilis namang sumunod ang binata sa kanya.

“Okay. I’ll just call for room service then. What are we going to do tomorrow?”

Kumibit si Stacy. “I don’t know. You have something in mind?”

“I was thinking if you’d enjoy horseback riding. We can go to the Tumpy Green Equestrian Centre and then, to Berkeley Castle where there is a Butterfly Farm. It’ll be interesting. What do you think?”

“They sound interesting. We’ll do those then.” She agreed with a smile.

He smiled at her and took her hand. She wanted to take it back her hand pero tulad ng dati’y hinahawakan iyon ng binata nang mahigpit upang hindi siya makabitaw. She looked at their joined hands. Her heart kept beating faster and she dragged her eyes toward his face. He was looking ahead of them. His smile was contagious. Kaya napangiti na rin lang siya.

Parang gustong-gusto naman niya ang pagkakataong ito. Lately, parang ilang beses na kaya siya napasunod sa gusto ng lalake. Pero hindi niya naisip na mali iyon. Iyon nga lang, parang may isang bahagi ng kanyang isipan na gustong hilahin siya pabalik sa dati – at sa dati nilang relasyon ni Wallace.

He ordered room service nang dumating sila at nasa banyo ang dalaga upang makapaghanda nang matulog. Nang matapos na ang dalaga’y si Wallace naman ang pumasok sa banyo. She opened the door nang may kumatok at napamangha pa siya dahil sa may bouquet ng plastic flowers na dala ang hotel staff kasama ang isang bottle ng champagne. Binigyan niya ito ng tip at lumabas na ito.

Napangiti siya sa bouquet ng bulaklak na plastic.

Hmp! Tinandaan na niya ngayon na ayoko ng fresh flowers. And she found it sweet of him.

Pero in fairness, may romantic bones pala ang lalakeng ito na hindi ko alam noon.

She locked the door and went over to the living room nang naka-roba pa rin. Inilagay niya roon ang bouquet at ice bucket kung saan nakalubog sa ice ang bote ng champagne.

She caught her breath when he came out to the living room nang naka-roba lang at nang nakangiti. Nakita kasi siya nitong hinahaplos ang plastic na bouquet.

“You like it?”

Tumango siya nang marahan. “Thank you.” Mas mainam na ngang aminin na niya ang bagay na iyon.

“Let’s celebrate. The conference is over and successful.” He said as he reached out for the champagne bottle. He shook it and opened the cap. Muntik pang matamaan ang lamp shade at napatawa silang dalawa. He poured some in her wine glass at saka para sa sarili nito. The clinked glasses and drank.

Pagkatapos ay umupo ito sa tabi ng dalaga sa sofa. Ngunit hindi tumingin ang dalaga sa lalakeng nakatitig sa kanya, alam niya. “Stop staring.” Suway pa niya rito.

“I can’t help it.”

“You’re so corny.” Tumayo na siya nang maubos ang champagne sa baso niya at ipinatong ito sa center table. Ngunit hinawakan nito nang mabilis ang kanyang kamay at napaupo siyang muli. In fact, muntik na siyang mapasalampak sa ibabaw nito. “What now?”

“I want to kiss you so badly. I want you to know it.”

Hindi na alam ng dalaga kung anong isagot doon. Napatitig lang siya sa lalake na tila nahihipnotismo rito. Kinabig siya nito sa batok at hinalikan sa labi. Saka sinadya nitong ibuhos

nang dahan-dahan ang champagne sa gilid ng kanyang leeg at dinilaan iyon nito. Ipinatong nito ang wine glass sa center table pagkatapos.

She moaned softly. Was it her? She felt his smile and he continued to kiss and lick the side of her neck. And his mouth went up to claim hers. The kiss deepened. She felt that he slowly untied his own robe and hers. Saka pumasok na ang kamay nito sa loob. Itinaas pa nito ang laylayan ng kanyang night shirt mula sa hita pataas sa kanyang dibdib.

“Let me love you, gorgeous,” he whispered in between kisses. Almost begging her.

Napaungol ang dalaga. She didn't mean it pero wala siyang mga salitang maiporma o mahagilap man lang sa kanyang isipan dahil sa kanyang nararamdamang pinukaw ng lalake. At ito lang ang tanging nakapukaw doon. He truly had the talent to tug at her heart and her feelings in whatsoever he was doing. Ngayon niya lang iyon napagtanto.

He took off his robe at pati na ang sa kanya. She caught a glimpse of his almost naked body except for the only underwear he was wearing. Saka hinubad nito ang night shirt niya. She heard him gasp as he watched her naked chest. Kinalong siya nito at dinala sa kama at inilapag siya nang dahan-dahan.

She couldn't recall when she and he got naked. Ingat na ingat itong hinahalikan ang kanyang dibdib pababa. Hanggang sa tuluyan na siyang inaangkin nito.

HE seemed to go insane as he watched her face full of desire and pleasure. He took her lips with his own. And he whispered his love for her as he carefully and lovingly plunged into her softness.

He cuddled her. He was amazed by how their bodies were so good together. She was already asleep and he was listening to her soft breathing.

“I love you so much, Stacy – soul, heart, mind and body. Will you love me the same?” He whispered into her ear. Gusto niyang sabihin iyon sa susunod na pagkakataon nang harapan, nang gising ang dalaga at nang makikita niya ang ekspresyon sa magandang mukha’t mga mata nito.

“**GOOD** morning, gorgeous. I took the liberty of ordering room service for our breakfast. Care to join me?” Nakangiting sabi pa ng binata na may dalang tray ng pagkain. She caught the sight of omelette, bread, cream, cheese and fresh orange juice.

Umunat ang dalaga. She could feel the change in her body. Saka na-realize niyang wala pala siyang saplot sa katawan. At nag-blush na siya nang maalala ang nangyari kagabi.

“It’s so good to see you blush the moment you wake up,” ang tudyong pa ng lalake sa kanya. Saka hinalikan nito ang kanyang noo. “Okay, let’s eat. I don’t want to spoil the lovely atmosphere.” He grinned.

She took a glass of juice at sinubuan pa siya ni Wallace. Feel na feel niyang gigil na gigil ito sa kanya. Hinalikan na naman nito ang exposed niyang balikat. Inabot niya ang isang fork at sinubuan na rin niya lang ang lalake dahil hindi na ito nakakain sa kasusubo sa kanya.

“Wow! I never thought you’d do this for me, gorgeous.” He said before he ate what she gave him. He chewed on his food happily.

Napangiti naman ang dalaga dahil doon. Para itong bata kung umasta ngayon. Hinalikan nito batok niya at saka kumain na naman sa isinusubo niya.

They both drank their juice afterwards. Saka hinila siya ng lalake na magtungo sa banyo at sabay na silang nag-shower. Hinapit siya nito sa baywang at saka hinahalikan habang umaagos ang tubig.

Their minds told each other “I love you” for a hundred times. But their lips were sealed, afraid to admit what they felt for each other – afraid that the other would reject the other. They both promised to themselves that they would say the right words at the right time. For now, it seemed to be the wrong time and place. They just had to enjoy and love this moment and to treasure it – without spoiling it by saying “I love you”. But it actually never crossed her mind that she’d fall in love with him. It was like primal and instinct. Merely desire.

Nagbihis sila ng pantalon at t-shirt para sa pangangabayo. And they had lunch sa Berkeley Castle at pagkatapos ay nagtungo sila sa Butterfly Farm. Nakikita nila na masaya ang isa’t isang nag-explore doon. They finally had a perfect day together – for the first time in their lives. Sana’y wala na itong katapusan...

CHAPTER NINE

THEY were back in Waterloo on Saturday afternoon. Back to the real world. This was the reality, it seemed. Ang lugar na siyang magpapakita sa kanila ng katotohanang wala naman talaga silang relasyon na dalawa.

Ito ang naisip ng dalaga nang maghiwalay sila ni Wallace sa bakuran ng bahay niya. But it didn't stop Wallace for doing whatever he pleases. Ninakawan niya ng halik sa labi ang dalaga at nakita iyon nina Jacy at Jake na nagbukas ng pinto para sa kanilang ate.

Bago pa man mahampas ng dalaga ang lalake sa dibdib ay tumakbo na ito patungo sa bahay nito. Tinulungan na ang dalaga ng kanyang mga dalahan at pasalubong para sa mga kapatid nang nakangisi. Mukhang masaya ang mga itong nakita na tila nagle-level up na ang relasyon nilang dalawa ni Wallace.

“Ate, saan ka bumili ng pasalubong?” Tanong pa ni Jacy na sinisilip ang mga paper bags.

“Old Down Country Park. We went there yesterday. I even bought something for Bradley and for old folks. You give these to them, Jake,” sabi pa niyang ibinigay ang tatlong paper bags sa nakababatang kapatid na lalake.

“Opo, ate.” Ngumisi pa si Jake at lumabas na ng bahay nila. Pero may isa pang dahilan kung bakit excited itong magtungo sa bahay ng best friend. Makikibalita ito kay Wallace sa mga nangyari.

“**SO**, how was the pre-honeymoon?” Tudyong pa ni Liz sa kanya pagka-Lunes nang bumalik siya ng trabaho.

She blushed. “Pre-honeymoon ka diyan. Tatamaan ka sa ‘kin, eh.” Pairap na tugon niya rito.

“So, you were on honeymoon while you were on leave for a week? Is that it, Sister Watson?” Nakangiting sabad ni Dr. Reid na dumating sa station.

Biglang natahimik ang magkaibigang nurses. At binati ng ‘good morning’ ito nang maaalala nila ang kanilang manners. Stacy was uncomfortable as Dr. Reid tried to read her expression. Was the other woman jealous? Napalunok siya.

“Ah, no, Dr. Reid. It’s just a – jest.” Mabilis na sagot niya.

Napatango ang doctor na may matipid na ngiti at may panunukat ang mga paningin. “I’d like to invite you to dinner tonight if you’re not busy... and of course, if you have no other engagement.”

“I’m free tonight, Dr. Reid.” Nasabi naman ng dalaga.

Patingin-tingin sa kanilang dalawa si Liz. She could feel that there was a rivalry between them. Kaya nangulit ito sa kanya nang makaalis ang neurologist habang nakikinig naman sa kanilang pag-uusap ang iba kahit nagta-Tagalog sila dahil sa mixed na English words sa conversation nila.

“What? She was Papa Wallace’s ex-gf? Bakit hindi mo sinabi sa akin noon? Sinadya mo talaga ano?” Bulalas pa ni Liz.

“Shh!” Narinig na tuloy iyon ng mga kasamahan nila sa station. “Grabe naman ‘yang bunganga mo, friend.” Reklamo pa niya. “Grabe! Wala akong masabi.”

“So, ano? Talagang makipag-dinner ka sa ex ni Papa Wallace?” Kulit pa nito.

“Naka-oo na ako, eh. Bakit naman hindi? Isa pa...”

“If he’s trapped in his past, only you can save him. You sure can be his present, friend,” sabi pa ni Liz. “Tandaan mo ‘yan.”

“Ang far out mo.” Tumatawang sabi pa niya sa kaibigan.

DINALA siya ni Dr. Reid sa Butler’s Wharf Chop House in Southwark, a restaurant in London. The doctor ordered toffee pudding, steak and kidney pudding, traditional British [based on lamb, pork, chicken, fish, vege, potato, Cornish pasty, chips, pies, etc.], classic British [roast beef, fish pie, Shephard’s pie, bangers and mash, etc.], and white wine.

May maraming set menu na offer ang restoran at naisipan ng dalaga na dadalhin niya doon ang kanyang mga kapatid kapag may budget siya sa buwang ito. Matagal-tagal na ring hindi sila nakalabas na magkakapatid mula nang mamatay ang parents nila. Kawawa naman dahil sa makalabas rin ang mga ito sa tuwing isasama ang mga ito nina Bradley at Wallace noon tuwing weekends.

Kumakain sila nang tahimik ni Susan nang dumating si Wallace. She was surprised to see him here. At tila ito rin ay nabigla. Pero agad itong nakabawi. He sat in between the two ladies at the round table.

“I thought it was only us, Susan,” ang sabi ng binata kay Susan na nakatunghay naman sa nakayukong si Stacy. “How come Stacy’s here?”

“I invited her, of course, Wallace. What’s wrong with that?” Ang sagot naman ng neurologist nang nakangiti nang sulyapan ito ng dalaga.

Ang mga buwisit. Pinaglalaruan ba nila ako? She was furious sa kaloob-looban niya. Bumaling siya kay Wallace.

“Don’t worry. I’m not going to stay for long. You can enjoy the rest of the evening with Dr. Reid.” Saka tumayo ang dalaga kahit di pa siya tapos sa pagkain.

Napaangat ng tingin sa kanya ang dalawa. At nagmamadali na siyang tumalikod. Kuyom ang mga palad niyang umalis. She tried hard not to cry in public. She blinked hard. Dapat hindi siya mapapahiya dahil lang sa mga ito.

Sinisisi niya ang sarili kung bakit pa siya sumang-ayon sa imbitasyon ng doktora. Kung alam lang sana niya – at kung hindi ba naman siya tanga ay dapat na isiniksik niya sa kanyang kukute na ito nga pala ang first love ni Wallace. Ang babaeng siyang dahilan kung bakit gusto niyang ilayo ang sarili mula sa lalake.

Pero sa isang banda, bakit naman ang sarili niya lang ang kanyang sisihihin? Hindi naman nangyari ang lahat ng ito kung hindi pa dahil sa lalakeng iyon. He played dirty and he sure left her pride, her womanhood, her dignity, and her heart in ruins.

That man cannot be trusted ever! Damn that rake! I don’t care even if you both will go to hell! Inis na inis niyang naiisip ito habang nagmamartsa paalis ng restoran.

He took pleasure by playing at her heart – at her suffering! Now, she knew it.

Didn’t he know it? Damn! He just won’t stop!

“**WHAT** happened to her?” Akmang susundan ng binata ang dalagang umalis.

Susan stopped him by holding his hand.

“Let her be. Let’s just finish this and we can both go home.”

“Is this one of your schemes, Susan?” Nanantiya ang tingin niya sa babae. “Can’t you see she’s upset? You don’t know how she’s going to act toward me if I’ll just let her be, Susan. You’re blowing this off!” Reklamo pa ng binata.

“Everything will be alright. Don’t you see? I’m doing this for you, Wallace.” She smiled sweetly.

He thought for a while and took his seat back. They ate and drank while Susan suggested something that already formulated in his mind when he went along with her tonight.

Dinala ng binata sa kanilang bahay si Susan. He knew that Stacy had a habit of spending her evenings in her balcony. At katapat niyon ay isang hagdan patungo naman sa balcony ni Wallace. Pero puwede niya rin iyong ma-access through his own bedroom. Tonight, they would deliberately go through that stairway outside toward the balcony upang talagang makita sila ni Stacy.

Naaaninag pa ng binata ang dalagang nakamasid sa kalangitan. She found her relaxation by staring at the skies at night sa tuwing nagkaka-stress siya. O kaya’y mayroon siyang iniisip. Wallace had seen her like that time to time during the evenings kapag hindi pa ito natutulog.

“I thought you’re going to come in for a while and have a drink?” Parinig pa ni Wallace kay Stacy na kausap si Susan. He knew very well na maririnig lang sila nito kapag nilakasan niya ang boses.

OH, damn! I don't want to eavesdrop, naisip pa ng dalaga na tumayo na mula sa chair sa kanyang balkonahe.

Pumasok siya sa kanyang kuwarto at isinara ang pinto sa adjoining balcony. Naisip na lang ng dalaga na lumabas sa baba ng bahay, sa may hagdanan patungong entrance ng bahay nila upang doon makapuwesto at hindi niya makikita ang dalawang ewan na lang niya kung anong gagawin at gusto niyang huwag nang isipin.

She knew very well that Wallace's balcony, like hers, was adjoined to his bedroom. Napalunok siya. Ayaw niyang isipin ang nangyari sa kanila ni Wallace and she didn't want to think what was going to happen between him and that neurologist! Para siyang nilalamon ng kanyang pagseselos dahil sa kanyang pagmamahal para kay Wallace. And damn him for making her feel this way! Damn him for leaving her to feel that she was all alone and rejected – na parang isang basura.

Mga isang oras din siguro siyang naroon nang marinig niya ang mga hakbang, nang may bumaba sa hagdanan mula sa balcony ni Wallace. She didn't turn her head. She wanted to ignore them. Ngunit lumapit pala sa kanya ang mga ito, purposely. She just knew it. She wanted to scream and curse them. She got up to get in her house nang magsalita si Susan.

“Don't worry about him, Sister Watson. I can just take care and love him.” Saka bumaling na ang nakainom nang si Susan sa binata. “Darling, I'm just going to take a cab. You just go ahead and rest after all that energy we just spent tonight. See you tomorrow evening. Alright?”

Napalunok pa si Stacy na nakakuyom ang mga palad. Hindi man lang niya binigyan pa ng isang sulyap ang lalake.

NAKATINGIN naman sa likod ng dalaga si Wallace na nagtatagis ang mga bagang. If only Stacy would say that she loved him, then this would have been easier for the both of them. He won't even have to make her jealous katulad ng ginagawa ngayon ni Susan.

Susan kissed his cheek at umalis nang medyo pasuray-suray ang dalaga at nakasakay ito kaagad ng taxi bago pa man ito matulungan ni Wallace. Kumakaway pa si Susan sa kanila.

“Bye, Sister Watson. Goodnight, my darling Wallace.” And the taxi sped down the road.

“Stacy.” Marahang tawag pa ng binata and took a step toward her.

“Don't even think about it. An uninvited guest is forbidden to enter my house.” She said and went in, binalibag ang pintuan.

He cursed. Isang litanya kaya iyon? Inis na inis siya. Paano na niya ngayon kakausapin ito nang matino? Mukhang hindi magiging epektibo ang kanyang seduction campaign sa dalaga.

Ilang mga araw pa ang lumipas at malamig pa rin ang pakikitungo sa kanya ng babae. Kahit na sinusundo niya ito sa ospital ay hindi siya nito pinapansin. Tanging si Liz lang ang kanyang kakampi.

Ayaw niyang magtatagal pa ito. Gustong-gusto na niyang kausapin ito nang matino. Pero ang problema ay kung paano. Inihatid-sundo pa rin niya ang mga kapatid nito sa eskwelahan. Wala pa rin hanggang sa may naisipan siya isang araw.

Napaunat siya at sumandal sa swivel chair, sa likod ng kanyang mesa sa opisina. Dapat na epektibo na ang naisipan niyang ito. Kung hindi, hindi na niya alam kung paano paamuin pa ang masungit na dalaga.

“**ANO?** Tumawag siya para papuntahin niya ako sa office nila?” Stacy repeated her friend Liz’s words. Kababalik niya lang mula sa kanyang pag-check sa mga pasyenteng naka-assign sa kanya that late afternoon.

“Yes, friend. Tungkol daw sa mga kapatid mo?”

She blinked. “What about them?” She asked her friend. Inaayos pa niya ang kanyang mga gamit.

Kumibit naman ng balikat si Liz. “I don’t know. Just go ahead. Ako na ang bahala rito.”

Stacy sighed. She decided to go to his office. Nag-ayos na siya upang makaalis. Almost labasan na rin naman nila. So, mag-a-under time na lang siya nang mga 30 minutes. Nagpaalam na siya kay Liz nang handa na siya.

This was her first time to come sa opisina nila ni Wallace. She wasn’t interested to come from the beginning. Kung hindi lang dahil sa may kailangan itong pagdi-diskusyunan nila tungkol sa kanyang mga kapatid, hindi siya pupunta rito. At ayaw niya itong harapin kahit kalian.

Pero wala siyang mahagilap na dahilan kung bakit gusto nitong mag-usap sila sa opisina pa nito. Hindi kaya gusto nitong sabihing titigil na ito sa kahahatid sa kanyang mga kapatid sa school? Hindi kaya nagustuhan iyon ng neurologist girlfriend nito ang bagay na iyon? Gusto niyang tumawa nang hysterical.

Well, wala naman siyang pakialam kung anu-ano ang gusto nito at ng lalakeng iyon. Dapat ay ito na nga ang huling pagkakataong magkaharapan sila. Kung dapat pa niyang bayaran ang oras at gasolinang naigugol at nagastos ng lalake para sa mga kapatid niya ay babayaran niya iyon kahit na mamumulubi pa siya sa ospital o kaya’y sa kalsada. Kung kailangan niyang ipagbili ang minana

niyang lupa't bahay nila na mahal na mahal niya ay gagawin niya rin. Wala siyang pakialam. Basta ay makalayo lang siya mula sa anino ng lalake.

Itinuro sa kanya nina Michael at Trent ang opisina ng binata na nakasalubong niya sa hallway. Magkasama pa ang dalawa at natigilan nang makita siya doon.

“This is a surprise.” Ang sabi pa ni Trent. He kissed her cheek at gano'n din ang ginawa ni Michael.

“Hi. I am here to talk to your friend. Where can I find him?”

“Just go ahead, straight down on your left.” Sabi pa ni Michael.

“Good luck.”

Natigil siya sa sinabi ni Trent. She looked at him.

“Why?” She asked with curiosity and innocence.

“He seems to be not himself lately. He's snapping at us even with our smallest mistakes. I don't know what's got into him.” Sumbong pa ni Trent.

“And mind you. I'm concerned of his mental state.” Dagdag pa ni Michael nang seryoso. It wasn't like him to tell a joke kung kaya't pinaniwalaan ito ng dalaga. Ito na kasi ang pagkakilala niya rito.

“I see. I'll keep those in mind when I talk to him. Maybe I can – be of help – or not, on second thought,” she murmured.

Ngumiti nang matipid ang dalawang lalake at nagpaalam na siya sa mga ito pagkatapos magpasalamat. Napatingin sa kanya mula sa kani-kanyang cubicle at opisina ang mga architects and engineers nang dumaan siya. May nagbubulong-bulungan ngunit di naman niya mawari kung ano ang mga iyon. May nakita siyang dalawang babae nag nag-uusap at natigil nang makita siya. Sinundan naman siya ng tingin ng mga ito lalo na't doon siya sa pinakadulo nagtungo at kinatok ang pinto sa opisina ni Wallace na isa sa mga hindi glass walls.

“Come in,” narinig pa niyang sabi nito at pumasok siya.

His eyes lit up nang makita siya. “Gorgeous! I thought you weren't coming.”

“It's about my sister and brother. What about them?” Deretsahang tanong pa niya sa lalake. Kunsabagay, ito ang itinawag nito sa kanya sa ospital.

“Oh. About them.” Parang noon pa iyon naalala ng binata. But she knew better.

“Could you stop beating around the bush?” Iritang sabi pa niya sa lalake.

“Why are you snapping at me? Did I do something wrong again?”

Hindi makapaniwala ang dalaga. “Are you really asking me now, Wallace? You don't really know a thing!” She turned on her heel nang maabutan siya nito in just a few strides and stood face to face – and glared at each other. “Oh, crap! I'm such an idiot!” She said instead and once again, she turned. He held her again.

“Explain yourself, Stacy.”

“I can't explain.”

“That just proves that you're an idiot,” ngumisi pa ito.

Matalim niya itong tinignan. Kung sana may daggers lang talagang lumabas mula sa kanyang mga mata ay matagal nang nalagutan ng hininga ang taong ito. “Do you really have something to talk to me about my brother and sister?” She asked him again.

Bumuntong-hininga ang lalake saka umiling. “No. I lied.” He watched her reaction.

Alam niyang nagagalit nang lalo si Stacy ngayon. Pero ito lang ang paraang nalalaman niyang puwede siyang kausapin nito.

“Come on, gorgeous. You don’t talk to me anymore. What’s wrong with you?”

“What’s wrong with me? Wallace, don’t you think you should ask that to yourself instead?”

Nangungutyang aniya rito.

“I heard that there’s something going on here,” ang biglang sabi ng sumulpot na si Susan sa opisina ni Wallace. Napatingin rito ang dalawang nag-aaway.

CHAPTER TEN

UMALIS na nang bigla si Stacy. Tinatawag ito ni Wallace ngunit hindi na nakinig pa ang dalaga.

“Susan, what’s the meaning of this?” Iritableng tanong ng binata.

“You’re pathetic. I can’t bear to watch you any longer,” nailing si Susan na umupo sa mesa ng binata.

“This thing would have been better if you didn’t come.” He sighed na inis na tinignan ang ex-girlfriend. Napahilamos sa kanyang mukha ang binata. He knew that she could see him so frustrated at the moment.

Napangisi si Susan. “You do really love that woman. I can see that. I didn’t see you react this way before. It was just right that we had to go on our separate ways, I realize that now, Wallace.”

“What’s your point? I don’t get you.” He snapped.

“What I’m saying is, I’ll talk to her... for your peace of mind. I’ll settle this relationship for you – to make you happy, Wallace. I think it’s because I can see that she has feelings for you, too. If she hadn’t she’d never react this way. Do you get me?”

“I can’t be too sure about that. You don’t know her.”

Napatawa nang malakas si Susan.

Iyon naman ang narinig pa ni Stacy sa labas nang paalis na siya. She tried to ignore it pati ang tingin ng ibang mga empleyado ng kompanyang iyon.

“Fine. It’ll be the last time you’re going to interfere with my seduction campaign, Susan.”

Sabi pa ng binata.

“**HOP IN,**” ang imbita pa ni Susan habang minamaneho ang kotse nito at naglalakad si Stacy habang nag-iisip.

“I’d rather walk, Dr. Reid. Thank you.” She politely declined. She won’t be able to think if she was next to her love rival.

Inihinto ni Susan ang kotseng naka-hazard ang mga lights at lumabas upang sundan at pakiusapan si Stacy. It would have to do kahit nasa sidewalk sila mag-uusap na dalawa.

“Hey. I know that you’re jealous of me.” Saka nakita niyang huminto ang nurse sa kalalakad upang tignan siya sa mukha. And she was encouraged to continue to talk. “Look. Don’t just jump in without reading the situation, Stacy.”

“What did I read wrong, Dr. Reid? Besides, you don’t have to talk to me about some things like this. I have nothing to do with you and your relationship with my neighbor. I’ve got nothing to do with it and I don’t care!”

“Is that the truth, Stacy?”

Stacy was speechless. Ngumisi naman ang doktora.

“I think, you have to talk to Wallace seriously. I know how he feels about you, Stacy. I can’t stop it and I don’t want to stop it and interfere any longer. I honestly don’t have any romantic feelings for Wallace. It’s true that I’m trying to stir your feelings for him and I now know that

you're in love with him. That's good enough for me. I always knew about it even though we were together for a few months. He told me all about you from the start. I was trying to even steal him away from you at the time without your knowing – I took advantage of his infatuation with me. But, it didn't work at all. He was always yours.”

Napalunok ang dalaga dahil sa kanyang narinig. Saka nakita ni Susan na paparating na ang kotse ni Wallace at itinabi iyon saka ito lumapit sa kanila. Hinila na nito si Stacy na tila napipipi na ngayon. Susan waved her goodbye as she looked on.

Nang lulan na silang dalawa sa kotse ni Wallace ay hindi makapagsalita ang dalaga.

“I'm sorry, Stacy. But can we talk somewhere?”

They stopped at the nearby park's parking space. Then, he turned to her. His eyes were so serious as he looked into hers.

“Is it true, Wallace?”

He reached out to stroke her face gently. God knew how much he loved her. She held his hand as she looked deep into his green eyes. Their hearts were beating so fast because of the love they felt for each other.

“I love you, Wallace. I didn't know it from the start but I think I just realized it lately.” She revealed.

Niyakap siya nito at hinalikan sa ilong at sa labi. “I love you, gorgeous! More than you know and feel.”

Napangiti ang dalaga. Sa wakas ay sinabi rin nitong mahal siya nito. She felt secure at this very moment. “You didn’t know how jealous I was of Susan. I thought you were just playing with my feelings – after... after what happened between us...”

“Oh, sweetheart. I’m so sorry. I was just so bent on having you and possessing your soul. I must admit it was driving me crazy! I had a hell lot of hard time because of you.”

“I’m sorry, Wallace. I was just too blinded with my own feelings that I refused to see and listen to yours.”

“That first night we were together, you didn’t know how happy I was. I had hope to hold on to. But when we got back from Thornbury Castle, everything changed and it even got worse. I was so frustrated. I didn’t know what to do. Susan made it worse instead of helping me out as she intended to do so. But I’m still grateful for her help. You should know that by now. She helps us to come together.”

Tumango naman ang dalaga. “Yes. She told me and I believe her.”

“Good, sweetheart,” he kissed her lips again. “And this time, I’ll not give you any reason to be angry, or jealous, or feel played by me. Believe me, I never intended to toy with your feelings after what happened between us in Thornbury Castle. All I ever wanted was to make you mine forever, gorgeous. And I have to pursue my seduction campaign just to have you then. It was my last card. After it, I didn’t have any idea what I’d do next.”

“But you should have known that I got so furious whenever I saw you with Dr. Reid.” Giit naman niya.

“Oh, I know. But I had to clearly read your reaction because you never told me about your feelings.”

“And to discover that you liked me since we were young and you got yourself a girlfriend, what did you think I felt? You were such a person who didn’t show your loyalty to me at all! You shouldn’t have gotten yourself a girlfriend at all! You should know that you’ve got lots and lots of loads of offences that you committed against me – that was what I felt like whenever I looked at you. Talk about loyalty and love, you rake!” She wrinkled her nose and pinched his nose.

He grinned. “I just thought I’d get your attention to anything I do. That was why I loved pestering and tormenting you. Don’t you know that by now?”

“Sure, I do.” Napangising aniya.

“Do you think Jacy and Jake will be happy to see us together?” He asked thoughtfully. His brows were knitted together.

“What do you think? You want to tell them tonight over dinner?”

“I think that’s a great idea.”

“But –”

“What now, sweetheart?” He asked as he kissed her cheek.

“Maybe dinner with your family and my siblings would be better. So we can just tell them all together. By that, I only have to speak once.”

“Is that right? You don’t want to repeat yourself. Really?! Are you playing games with me right now?”

Tumawa ang dalaga. “It’s not my intent. But I think that it’ll be a great idea to have dinner together to celebrate this day, don’t you think? Besides, we’ve never had dinner together since my parents died. My parents used to invite you all over dinner once in a while, right?”

“Right. And you hated me for that because I was never absent.” He gave her a quirk of his mouth as they both relished that memory.

“Right. But I couldn’t get away because my parents would get angry if I won’t face you or your family. So, I had to – even though I was so angry with you.”

“I know, sweetheart. Well, I should have been so loyal to you. But in my heart, I always was and always will. There’s no other woman right here in my soul and heart. You should believe me,” he said as he put her hand over his heart.

She could feel his steady beating heart. She closed her eyes and he took the chance to kiss her lips once again for a gentle and loving kiss. She responded with the feelings she had.

Later that evening, they had dinner together at the Watson’s residence. Wallace’s and Bradley’s parents were quite surprised of the impromptu invitation but Wallace explained that he and Stacy wanted to announce something. Although they had an idea already, they wanted to hear it out.

“So, what’s this announcement you’re going to make?” Tanong pa ni Mr. Murray sa kanilang dalawa.

Napatingin sa kanilang dalawa ang lahat ng pares ng mga mata. Waiting for the good news. They had always been waiting for it for such a long time now.

“Stacy and I are now dating. And I’m planning to propose to her as soon as possible.”

Napamaang silang lahat. It wasn't really a surprising news but they just acted surprised. Saka nagkatawanan sila.

“Well, that's good news, indeed! Quite an announcement, to boot!” Sabi pa ng nakatawang si Mrs. Murray.

“I'm so happy for both of you,” ang sabi pa ni Jacy sa dalawa. Her eyes were shining like never before.

“I know, darling,” ang sabi pa ni Stacy sa kapatid.

“We're happy for you, too. Aren't we, Jake?” Ang sabi din ni Bradley.

“Yes. This is going to be a brilliant idea. I can borrow Kuya Wallace's Bentley Continental GT from time to time, can't I?” Excited pang nagsasalita si Jake sa kaibigan.

Nagkatawanan ang magkaibigan at nag-high-five pa. Napataas naman ng kilay si Jacy sa kanyang Kuya Jake.

“Kuya Jake, don't you think that it's high time that Kuya Wallace is going to use it again this time? I think the BMW would do us good for the three of us. Don't you think, Bradley?”

Napatawa naman sina Mr. at Mrs. Murray.

“Jacy is an intelligent girl as ever,” puna pa ni Mrs. Murray sa dalawang lalakeng teenager.

“I'll teach you how to drive little boys and girl when I have the time. But in the meantime, I'll be too busy to spend my time with my gorgeous. I'm sure you'll not oppose to that.” Kumindat pa ang binata sa nobya.

Ngumiti naman nang matamis ang dalaga sa kanyang nobyong napaka-sweet sa kanyang mga kapatid. She felt so lucky to be loved and to love him – soul first and then, heart, mind and body.

“No, we will not.” Seryosong tugon naman nina Bradley at Jacy.

“Oh, give me a break!” Nakangising biro naman ni Jake. “You two, I think I just noticed something. Is there something going on between you two?”

Biglang nagkahiyaan sina Bradley at Jacy. Nag-blush naman kaagad ang dalagita.

“Kuya Jake!” Jacy warned through gritted teeth.

“Whoa! What’s this? Don’t tell me...” Bahagyang pinabitin talaga ni Wallace ang nais sasabihin habang tinitimbang-timbang niyang tinignan ang nakababatang kapatid niya at ang kapatid ng nobya.

“Wallace!” Reklamo pa ni Bradley.

“Kuya Wallace!” Sabay naman ni Jacy.

Nagkatawanan naman sina Mr. at Mrs. Murray.

“Mind you, young lad, young lass, you still have a long way to go like your brother and sister here. But don’t mind us. We just want you all to be happy together.” Sabi pa ni Mr. Murray na may panunudyong sa tinig nito.

The two young teenagers groaned but Bradley and Jacy didn’t look at each other in the eye from then on.

Lumabas ang magkasintahan pagkatapos ng dinner. Nagkukuwentuhan pa sa loo bang miyembro ng kani-kanilang pamilya at napaupo sila sa balcony ni Wallace. Napatingin sila sa langit.

“I love this feeling. I’m so contented right now.” He said as he held her hand in one of his and the other was embracing her waist at nakaupo sa kanyang kandungan ang dalaga at nakapulupot ang mga kamay nito sa leeg niya.

“Me, too.”

“That’s why I never left this house when I turned 18. I wanted to see you everyday.”

Napatawa ang dalaga. “Ah, so I was wondering about that part. And if you weren’t here, I doubt if you ever make me fall in love with you.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Really? Are you that confident?”

“Ah-huh. And we would be out of each other’s sight. That way, it would have been easier for me not to fall in love with you.”

“You’re wrong in that assumption, sweetheart. Remember that I’d do anything just to make you fall for me. And I have no doubt that I’d be successful in that aspect – one way or another.”

“Conceited Wallace. As always.” Taray pa niya.

Kinabig naman siya nito at hinalikan sa kanyang mga labi.

“When it comes to you, how can I not be? I just love you too much for my peace of mind and nights! Don’t you know that I always wanted to make love to you since you were eight?”

Napatawa ang dalaga at hinampas niya ang balikat nito. “Cradle snatcher! But I love you for that, Wallace.”

“Hmm... I love you more.” And he began to kiss her thoroughly as he carried her to his bedroom to demonstrate it to her.

-- Wakas --