

Chapter

One

N gumunguya si Antoinette matapos kumagat sa sandwich habang hindi maalis sa computer tablet ang paningin.

“Ano ba’ng ginagawa mo?” tanong ni JP na puno rin ang bibig ng hotdog sandwich na pinabili niya rito mismo malapit sa site na pinagtatrabahuhan nila.

Muli siyang kumagat sa sandwich at nagsalita kahit puno pa ang bibig. “Naghahanap ng bagong apartment. Dumating na ’yung anak ng landlady ko at pinapalayas na ako sa tinitirhan ko...”

“Eh, di ba matagal mo na talagang gustong lumipat? Ang layo ng apartment mo sa main office,” anang kapwa niya architect na partner niya ngayon sa

commercial building na na-assign sa kanila.

“Oo nga, pero biglaan ’to. Hindi ko ini-expect na bibigyan ako ng ultimatum ni Mrs. Lee. Hanggang sa katapusan na lang ako dito.” Napabuntong-hininga siya saka sumipsip sa kanyang *Coke*.

“Dapat humingi ka ng mas mahabang panahon. Di ganoon kadalang maghanap ng apartment,” sagot ni JP.

Tinaasan niya ito ng kilay at inalis ang safety helmet na suot dahil ramdam na niyang pinagpapawisan na ang kanyang noo.

“Sa tingin mo di ako humirit? Last week pa nga sana ako gustong paalisin, eh.” Patamad siyang nag-tap sa tablet. Nandoon siya sa isang advertisement site, naghahanap ng malilipatan, pero so far ay wala pa siyang nagugustuhan. Kung hindi sobrang mahal ay sobrang layo naman sa main office nila sa Makati ang mga iyon. Marami sanang maliliit na studio type na nagkalat pero iritable siyang tao, ayaw niya ng masikip at nakakulong sa loob ng building.

Antoinette was actually looking for a proper house kahit magbayad siya ng medyo mas mataas sa kanyang budget. But everything she saw was expensive but small, she just couldn’t see herself living there. Lalo’t ang dami niya nang nabiling gamit sa lumang apartment. Living room and dining room set, kitchen

appliance at malaking kama. Huwag nang isali ang entertainment appliance niya, alam niyang kung studio type ang pipiliin ay wala na siyang malalakaran.

Banas niyang inilapag ang tablet sa lamesa kung saan mismo siya nakaupo at inubos ang pagkain.

“No luck?”

Umiling lang si Antoinette at hinayaang pakialaman ni JP ang kanyang tablet. Tahimik itong nagpipindot.

“How about this, duplex apartment? Marconi, Buendia, Makati. One spacious bedroom, two baths, wide living room and kitchen. Separate gate from the attached apartment and with own parking space.”

Napakunot-noo siya. “Ano ang floor area?”

“Seventy-five square meters, that’s pretty good. At ten thousand lang per month.”

Tuluyan nang nakuha ng kaibigan ang kanyang atensyon. “Let me see.” Mabilis niyang inagaw rito ang tablet at inusisa ang tinitingnan nito. May mga litrato rin iyon. Fully painted ang apartment at talagang malawak tingnan. May terrace din sa itaas niyon sa likod ng bahay kung saan nai-imagine na niya kaagad ang sariling nakahilata sa kanyang lounge chair habang nagpapaantok.

“This is good...” tumatango niyang saad, pero

muling napakunot-noo nang may mabasa.

We prefer a man to rent the apartment as the tenant in the attached unit is a man and the terrace upstairs is shared between the two tenants. For more information you may contact us at...

At nakalagay nga roon ang cellphone at landline number ng may-ari.

“Mas prefer daw nila na lalaki ang mag-rent ng unit,” frustrated niyang saad pagkuwan.

“Bakit?” tanong agad ni JP.

Sa halip na sagutin ay iniabot niya rito ang tablet at hinayaan ang lalaking basahin ang kanyang nabasa.

“Well, if you’re interested with the unit, it won’t hurt to call them. Baka worried lang sila na conservative ’yung maka-rent at ayaw nila ng problema.”

Kumibit-balikat si Antoinette. “I don’t care about that. God, I work with boys all the time that I sometimes forget that I’m a girl.”

Natawa si JP. “I know. I mean, look at you... mas baggy pa ang jeans mo sa ’kin. And you do know that our company gives out t-shirt in small sizes, nakiki-large ka rin, eh.”

“Eh, sa mas komportable ako sa ganitong size, bakit ba?” medyo na-offend na niyang balik.

“I’m just saying,” nakatawa pa rin nitong sagot. “Kaya I don’t see any problem about you renting the apartment, you’ll be okay...”

“Fine, tatawagan ko mamayang gabi pag-uwi ko ang may-ari. If everything goes well, I might start moving as early as this weekend. Tutulungan mo naman ako, di ba?” aniyang malawak itong nginitian, nagpapa-cute.

Ngumiwi si JP. “Para namang may choice ako...”

Sa pagkakataong ito ay tumaas na ang kanyang kilay. “Buti alam mo. Ayaw mo naman sigurong gamitin ko ang alas ko laban sa ’yo...”

“Hey!” anito. “Oo na, tutulungan na kita, huwag ka nang magmaldita.”

Mas lalong lumawak kanyang ngiti ni Antoinette. “Thank you!”



Napadura si Nick Pajimola nang malasahan ang sariling dugo matapos suntukin ng isang lalaki.

“Hindi lang ’yan ang mapapala mo kapag nakita pa kitang lumapit sa girlfriend ko,” banta nito na nanggagalaiti sa galit.

Nananakit man ang panga ay balewala siyang napangisi. It always amused Nick how a man catching his girlfriend cheating would instantly turn to the

guy instead of dumping the girl straight away. Lalo at halata namang hindi lasing ang babae at walang mairarason sa pakikipaglampungan nito sa kanya.

“Ano’ng nginingisi-ngisi mo diyan?” Muli itong lumapit sa kanya at kinuwelyuhan siya. “Sa tingin mo nakakatawa ’to?”

Nahihirapan mang huminga ay umiling siya. “Let go of me, Bro. I’m sorry I nearly f*cked your girlfriend, but it’s hard to say no when she’s so eager...”

“Put*ngina mo!” Mas lalong nagliyab ang mga mata ng lalaki at muli sana siyang susuntukin, pero mabilis na niyang napitik ang mga daliri. Ilang segundo lang ay hawak-hawak na ito ng mga bouncer ng club.

“Get him out of here...” mapait niyang saad habang pinupunasan ang dumudugong bibig gamit ang manggas ng kanyang shirt.

“Nick, can I go with you?” habol ni Darla, ang kahalikan niya kanina at nobya ng lalaking ngayon ay hatak-hatak na ng mga bouncer palabas. “Ayoko na sa kanya, palagi na lang niya—”

“Get the f*ck out of my bar,” walang gana niyang saad, at bago pa man muling makapagsalita ang babae ay naawat na ito ng isa pang bouncer at maingat itong iginiya palabas.

“Show’s over, people, but the party goes on!” he declared.

And as if on cue, the music got louder and the people went on as if nothing happened.

Tuloy-tuloy na naglakad si Nick patungo sa kanyang private office na lagpas sa VIP rooms ng *The Lounge* at nabigla nang maabutan doon si Stacey, his big sister.

Awtomatikong umikot ang kanyang paningin. Ilang beses na niyang pinagsabihan ang kanyang staff na huwag papasukin ang kapatid sa bar, pero sa tuwina ay nakakalusot ito. It must be her intimidating eyes or her overpowering personality na palaging nagpapatiklop kahit sa pinaka-loyal niyang bouncer.

“If I didn’t know you, I’d ask worriedly what happened to you. But because you’re known for your reckless decision-making when it comes to women, I’d say you’re bleeding because you made out with a girl who already has a boyfriend,” she said in her bubbly tone.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Thanks for asking,” sarkastiko balik ni Nick at tumuloy sa mini bar at nagsalin ng rum. “What are you doing here, anyway?” tanong niya kahit hindi naman talaga interesado sa kung anuman ang pakay ng kapatid.

“I’m here to tell you that the unit beside yours has a new tenant.”

“That’s good... “ matabang niyang sagot.

“It’s a girl.”

Napalington si Nick sa kausap, nakangisi. “A girl? Akala ko ba ay hindi ka na papayag na babae ang mag-rent sa unit mo?”

“That was the original plan. But it has been three months since I last had a tenant at alam mong ayokong matagal na nababakante ang unit ko. So I said yes to this girl who swore to not care about sharing a terrace with a guy.”

“A lesbian then?” aniyang tinungga ang alak sa baso, pilit na inignora ang kirot nang mapadaan iyon sa pumutok niyang labi.

“I doubt it, but she sounded desperate although she asked me to make sure that she will be left alone by her neighbor. It’s why I’m here...” ani Stacey.

Napailing si Nick. “Parang sinasabi mong kasalanan ko kung bakit nagsipag-alisan ang mga tenants mo dati.”

“It was your fault,” diin nito na napatuwid ng upo.

“Stace, they were the ones who flirted with me, so naturally, since they were all pretty, papatulan ko. But if they didn’t come on to me, hindi sana sila na-

frustrate na wala akong balak sa seryosong relasyon. Sobrang frustrated para umalis sa unit.”

“Hindi kailangang lahat ng babaeng lalandi sa ’yo ay papatulan mo.”

“Hey,” aniya, “I’m just a man... hindi ko kasalanan na ipagtulakan nila ang sarili nila sa ’kin.”

“But it’s your fault kung papatol ka sa kanila...”

“What is your problem, anyway?” nababanas na niyang tanong.

“My problem is, hindi tumatagal sa unit ang mga tenant ko dahil sa ’yo!” Tumaas na ang boses nito.

“I told you, I’ll pay for the rent every month. Hindi mo na kailangang maghanap ng tenant doon,” kontra ni Nick.

Napabuntong-hininga ang kanyang kapatid at nakita niya ang frustration sa mukha nito. At alam ni Nick kung para saan iyon. Ang bahay kung saan siya nakatira ngayon ay dating bahay ng kanilang pamilya. Pinag-ipunan iyon ng kanilang mga magulang. Their family was well-off kahit hindi ganoon kayaman. Their parents’ income was enough to make their lives comfortable. He was happy and so was Stacey. At sa tingin niya noon ay masaya rin ang kanilang mga magulang.

Hanggang sa malaman ng ama niya na may

kinakatagpong ibang lalaki ang kanyang ina. His father was twelve years older than his mother, at ang karelasyon ng ina noon ay sampung taon namang mas bata rito.

His father was an old-fashioned man at ayaw nitong ipaalam kahit kanino ang problema ng kanilang pamilya. Gusto ng kanyang ina na umalis sa bahay at isama silang magkapatid, pero hindi pumayag ang ama. Gusto nitong muling subukang ayusin ang relasyon sa asawa kahit malinaw na wala nang pagtingin dito ang kanyang ina.

Hanggang sa mapagdesisyon ni Marlene, ang kanyang ina, na palihim na hatiin ang kanilang bahay. Nang sa ganoon ay walang makaalam na hiwalay na ito at ang asawa at hindi magkasama sa iisang bahay. The whole house became a duplex house. Nick stayed on the other side with his dad and Stacey stayed with their mother. The terrace was shared para sa kanilang magkapatid na hindi na kailangang lumabas ng gate para lang magkasama.

Their parents stayed downstairs doing all they could to avoid each other. Hanggang sa maglaon ay atakihin sa puso ang kanyang ama. He was in the hospital for one whole month, undergoing various operations for his weak heart. Pero hindi rin nito

nakayanan. Nicholas Pajimola passed away because of heart failure, but Nick had a feeling that his father died because of a broken heart, literally.

Pagkatapos niyon ay hindi nagsayang ng oras si Marlene, she went to the States with her boyfriend. He was in college then and Stacey was already working. She wanted to take both of them, pero tumanggi siya. So his sister decided to stay behind as well to look after him.

Lahat ng naipundar ng pamilya ay nahati sa kanilang dalawa, ganoon din ang bahay. But none of them wanted to sell their share in that house.

They had different reasons for it, though. Stacey's reason was that she wanted a place for their mother to stay kapag napagdesisyunan nitong bumalik sa Pilipinas. Nick's reason was very different. He wanted to make sure that his father's share in that house remained unstained of their mother's infidelity.

Ayaw niyang ibenta ang kanyang hati sa bahay na iyon dahil sigurado siyang kapag nangyari iyon ay ipapagiba ni Stacey ang pader na nakapagitan sa bahay at hahayaan nito ang kanyang ina at ang lalaki nito na maghari-harian sa bahay na tinuring ng kanyang ama na ugat ng kanilang pamilya.

Just the thought of his mother with her boytoy in

that house disgusted him. Kaya naman kahit kayangkaya niyang bumili ng sariling bahay ay naroon pa rin siya. He was always on guard of what Stacey and his mother were planning to do. And he was ready to do everything he could para lang hindi maangkin ng lalaking sumira sa kanyang pamilya, lalong-lalo na ng kanyang ina, ang bahay na iyon.

It was why he tried to shoo away all of Stacey's tenants, para mabanas ito, mapagod, at mapagdesisyunang ibenta na lamang sa kanya ang parte nito sa bahay na iyon. He was a womanizer, all right. And he wouldn't deny the fact that he enjoyed making out with all of Stacey's beautiful tenants. But more than anything else, he did it to make them go away.

At alam ni Nick na pinaparenta iyon ng kapatid para mainis din siya at i-give up na lang din ang bahay. But he knew better. He would never give up his father's last bit of legacy. Matira ang matibay. And he knew he was winning.

"Why don't I just get you a house, much nearer to your business? Just leave the duplex, for God's sake!" untag ni Stacey.

Patamad na sinalubong ng binata ang paningin nito. "You know me better than that, Stace. I won't let

you and Mom—”

“Let us what?” putol nito. “Reconnect? Ganyan ba talaga katigas ang puso mo? Dad had been dead for so long now, kahit ang galit niya ay malamang na nawala na, and yet here you are, still sulking about our broken family. Grow up, Nick! People change, Mom’s feeling changed!

“Don’t get me wrong,” dagdag nitong biglang naging malumanay ang boses. “Mahal ko si Dad, and no one could ever replace him. But just because Mom unintentionally hurt him doesn’t mean that I would forget about her and spend my life feeling sorry for dad. Life goes on, Nick. Learn to forgive and forget...”

Tiim-bagang niyang pinag-aralan ang mukha ng kapatid. It was clear that Stacey just wanted a closure. To peacefully reconnect with their estranged mother. To go on with life. Alam niyang mahal nito ang kanilang ama, there was no question about that. Stacey loved their parents, and he did, too. The only difference was that his sister was soft and desperate. She was willing to look past everything that their mother had done just to have her back in their life. But not him.

Pero wala rin sa mood si Nick para ipaliwanag iyon sa kausap. They had been into so many

conversations like this, at hindi pa nangyaring nagkasundo sila. So now he found it pointless to even go on.

“You do what you want to do with your share, Stace. Hindi kita pinipigilan. So let me do what I want to do as well. I’m not leaving and I sure as hell won’t change who I am para lang tumagal ang sinumang titira sa bahay.”

Pigil ang galit na tumayo ang babae mula sa kanyang swivel chair bago walang-imik na lumabas sa kanyang opisina.

Napapabuntong-hiningang muli siyang nagsalin ng alak bago pasalampak na umupo sa iniwang upuan ng kapatid.

Nick felt achier then.

