

Chapter 4

THE REALITY OF THE SITUATION

Archer

I walked out of that room the moment my parents decided without blinking, without asking, without even looking at me properly that I would be Elise's father.

As if my word meant nothing. As if my entire twenty-something years of discipline, control, and protected sex life vanished into thin air.

They decided. Just like that. Like assigning me a horse or a new estate.

And I walked out because I know with my whole damn soul that child is *not* mine.

Not my blood.

Not my responsibility.

Not my problem.

Everyone else can lose their minds over her green eyes, but not me.

Call it whatever the hell you want. But I will not play father to a child who is not mine.

Alec caught up with me as I stalked down the hallway.

"Archer—"

"Not a word, Alec," banta ko. "You didn't even defend me."

"You don't need to be defended," sagot niya, calm but firm. "And kalaban mo lang ngayon ay ang DNA test na ikaw mismo ang umiiwas."

I stopped walking enough for the anger to rise in my throat like fire.

"A DNA test?" I scoffed. "That is an insult to my word."

"It's a confirmation of the truth," Alec shot back. "Your word says she's not yours. Her eyes say otherwise."

I clenched my jaw so hard my teeth ached. "Coincidence."

"Sure." He crossed his arms. "Kung ayaw mo talagang tanggapin, then stop running and prove it."

I glared. He didn't back down.

"You can walk out of the room, Archer," he added quietly, "but you can't walk out of responsibility. Not while that child is here. And

not while your parents are alive to murder you if you disappear."

"Putangina," bulong ko.

Alec smirked. "Exactly. Just do the DNA test."

Humingaa ko ng malalim at namaywang. Tumingin ako sa kisame at nagbilang ng lima bago ko tinanggap na sa sarili ko na hindi ako kakalma.

"I'm done," bulong ko at iniwan ko si Alec na mag-isa sa hallway

God, I don't know what to do. I don't know where to go.

I just... felt tired suddenly.

Can I go back to a week before this happened? Nasaan ba ako one week ago? Am I being punished and the universe is laughing at me now?

Is this karma?

"Archer," I heard someone called me.

I looked around and found Tim waving at me. I go to Tim to lessen this abandoned feeling.

"Ano ang nangyari?" Tim asked nang makalapit ako.

"My parents decided I am the father just because that girl has green eyes."

Sumipol si Tim. "That hard, huh?"

Tumango ako at sumabay kay Tim maglakad.

"Hard or paracetamol?" tanong muli ni Tim.

"Hard," I murmured.

"Tara sa apartment ko para safe tayo kung malasing man."

Nagpunta kami sa apartment ni Tim na nasa loob din ng palasyo and thankfully far away from my parents, my problems, and the green-eyed child I still refused to accept.

Tim's apartment was quiet, the kind of quiet that felt like judgment. Or maybe ako lang talaga ang paranoid.

Tim opened his cupboard and pulled out a bottle of whiskey na mukhang jug kaysa bote. May balak yata siyang i-cremate ang atay ko ngayong gabi.

"Drink," sabi niya.

"I don't drink cheap liquor," sagot ko.

"Good," sagot niya. "This one cost more than your pride."

I glared at him but took the glass anyway. Ibinaba ni Tim ang bote ng alak sa harapan ko. Tim sat across from me, elbows on his knees, watching like I was in exhibit titled *Deranged Royal in Denial*.

"So," simula niya. "How does it feel?"

"How does what feel?"

"To become a father."

I threw the nearest pillow at him. Mabilis na naiwasan ni Tim ang unan.

"She is NOT my kid," I said for what felt like the five-millionth time today.

"Pumayag ka na kasi sa DNA."

"Ayaw ko. I said she is not my kid and that's final."

I poured another drink. Good whiskey. Very good. And very fast.

Natahimik ako ngunit ang utak ako ay nagsusumigaw. I leaned back on the sofa and covered my face with one hand.

"My parents didn't even blink," I groaned. "They just looked at the kid and went: *'Oh look, green eyes! Must be Archer.'*"

"Well hind imo sila masisisi... look at your face."

"What about it?" I said boredly.

"You don't exactly scream *innocence*."

I glared at him. "I always use condoms."

Tim raised his glass. "To responsible whoring."

"Putangina mo."

Natatawang uminow si Tim habang ako ay nakatitig sa baso ng alak na wala ng laman.

I lowered my voice. "Narinig ko 'yong sinabi ng bata."

"What?"

"She said... *'he doesn't want me.'*"

Tim's teasing vanished. His face softened. Naging seryoso na muli ang usapan. I grabbed the bottle and took a long sip straight from it. To hell with Tim if he doesn't get drunk today.

"Archer," Tim said quietly. "Hindi ka masamang tao."

"I'm not her father."

"I know," he replied without hesitation. "But she's still a kid. Unawain mong iniwan siya bigla

ng nanay niya. She doesn't know you. Everything about you is new to her."

I scoffed, but it came out weaker than I liked.

"Tim... what if... just WHAT IF..."

He waited.

"What if I do the DNA test... and it says she's mine?"

Tim shrugged. "Then you deal with it."

"And if it says she's not?"

Tim smiled like the devil reincarnated. "Then you make Alina suffer legally, financially, and emotionally."

I swallowed. Hard.

"Then..." I asked softly. "What will happen to the kid?"

Tim's smile faded fast. Parang pinatay ng isang tanong ko ang buong humor sa kwarto.

He leaned forward, elbows on his knees. "That's the real question, Archer," he said quietly. "Hindi kung anak mo ba siya o hindi. Hindi kung tama ka ba o mali. And definitely not about Alina. She'll get what's coming for her."

He looked me straight in the eye. "It's the kid. It's always the kid." He exhaled heavily. "If the DNA says she's not yours, then technically... she's not your responsibility."

I know she's not mine.

"But" pagpapatuloy ni Tim. "she'll still be a ten-year-old girl na iniwan ng nanay niya at walang tatay na handang tumanggap sa kanya."

My chest tightened annoyingly, involuntarily.

Tim added, softer this time, "She'll have nowhere to go, Archer."

A long, crushing silence settled between us.

I hated it.

I hated how the weight of that truth settled on my shoulders like lead.

I hated how just this responsibility became solely mine. I hate how I never asked for it but now it is at my door.

I leaned back, closed my eyes, and let the burn of the whiskey spread through my body.

God, I hated that too — the burn felt honest.

"I didn't choose this," I muttered.

"No one did," sagot ni Tim. "Pero ikaw ang nandito ngayon. And she's ten, Archer. Ten."

The whole thing felt unreal — like a nightmare I couldn't wake up from.

"It's not fair," I whispered without meaning to.

Tim didn't deny it. He just said, "No. It isn't."