



Love in the time of grades

First Semester

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Fresh out of high school, Junno Kinley dove into university life. That's when he collided with Professor JM - young, hot, and intriguing. A random text exchange fueled campus gossip: were they friends, foes, or something more?

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After a four-hour bus ride from the province to the city, I finally arrived at my destination.

The journey was tiring but enjoyable due to the scenic views and attractions along the way.

The mountains of Nueva Vizcaya, rivers of Bokod Benguet, and Ambuklao Dam were breathtaking.

The bus passed by these landmarks before reaching one of Baguio City's terminals.

Upon arrival, I rested for a while to relax my sore muscles.

I grabbed my bag filled with clothes and personal items and slung it over my shoulder.

After exiting the terminal, I hailed a taxi and instructed the driver, "Kuya, please drop me off at KM 5, La Trinidad." The taxi moved forward, thankfully encountering minimal traffic from Baguio to La Trinidad.

I arrived early at my destination due to the smooth journey.

I disembarked from the taxi, carrying my bag, and walked towards my new home - the apartment where I'd spend my college days. The 10-minute walk led me to the building housing my apartment, located on the second floor. I climb the stairs and walk along the hallway looking out for an apartment door labeled 2FA1 which means first apartment, second floor.

I stood outside the door, searching for the keys in the pockets of my bag.

You might wonder why I already had an apartment, but my mom had prepared everything before my arrival.

While I took the entrance exam at LTB State University, she was busy setting up my essentials.

Thanks, Mom!

You are the best.

I opened the door and entered my studio-type apartment, complete with a bed, small kitchen and bathroom.

My mom had thoughtfully provided necessities like a rice cooker, electric kettle, stove, a small microwave and stocked refrigerator.

Wow I don't have to get groceries! I can use the time to explore the campus. Thanks again, Mom!

I unpacked and organized my belongings in the wardrobe next to my bed.

With time to spare (it was only 2 pm), I decided to explore the campus and find my department so it would be easy for me tomorrow.

The campus was just a five-minute walk away.

I strolled through the open gate and began my campus tour.

Excitement got the better of me, and I accidentally collided with someone on the

sidewalk!

The impact sent me tumbling.

Surprisingly, the person seemed unfazed and didn't apologize. Perhaps due to their sturdy build. I have an average build but people still say that I'm skinny.

I was left sitting alone on the sidewalk.

Well, this is awkward.

"Why did you bump into me and not even apologize? You're lucky that I'm in a good mood or else." I thought to myself. I stood up, dusted myself off and muttered, "Time to head home."

Before returning to my apartment, I decided to grab dinner at a nearby fast-food chain, anticipating the big day ahead - my first day of college.

I woke up to the sound of my alarm clock at 5:30 a.m. It was early, but I had to get up and prepare for my first day of classes. I headed straight to the bathroom to start my morning routine. Afterward, I made myself a cup of coffee and cooked some rice - a staple food for Filipinos. Rice is life.

While sipping my coffee, I rummaged through the freezer for some breakfast options.

I found hotdogs, longganisa, and chicken nuggets.

But then, I spotted a Tupperware container with leftover "pinikpikan," a delicacy from the highlands made with native chicken usually paired with "etag" (dried salted pork), and "kiniing" (smoked pork).

It is referred to as "tinola of the Highlands".

It is one of my favorites.

My mom had left it for me. I heated it in the microwave and enjoyed it with my steaming cup of benguet blend and arabica coffee.

I finished breakfast by 6:30 a.m. and hurriedly prepared for school. I chose a blue denim pants, a classic white shirt, and a yellow long-sleeved polo shirt. I rolled up my sleeves, checked myself in the mirror, and felt confident. I put on a pair of white sneakers to go with my outfit.

I grabbed my things - phone, wallet, keys - and headed out the door.

The campus was just a five-minute walk away.

I arrived at the Strawberry Hall with time to spare.

The auditorium was filling up with freshmen like me.

I can see their anxious faces, first day jitters I guess.

Our adviser, Mrs.

B.

, began the orientation, covering the usual topics from the campus brochure.

It was a little boring since I've already read the contents of the brochure. Thank God it was over.

The introduction session followed.

One by one my fellow freshmen introduced themselves.

When it was my turn, I stood up, smiled, and said, "Hi everyone, I'm Junno Kinley from the beautiful province of Nueva Vizcaya. I'm excited to get to know you all." I said, making my introduction short.

The teacher smiled and nodded.

Later, Mrs. B. asked me to join her upfront.

"Class, notice Mr. Kinley's outfit - a simple casual look. And he's been smiling throughout the orientation, which is part of personality development. We shall get to that throughout our classes."

I felt nervous but kept smiling.

I guess the tips I read in a website worked pretty well.

Wearing bright colored clothing, so I choose a yellow polo shirt, a good choice I would say.

I also read that a smiling face gets noticed.

That worked pretty well too!

Of all the people in the auditorium, it was the teacher who noticed it.

What's even better is she made an example from it. Way to go Junno! I smiled to my self feeling a little proud. Then the teacher looked at me and asked a question.

When asked why I chose LTB, I replied, "It's one of the top universities in the region, and it feels like home." The class applauded, and I felt more confident. Mrs. B. Gestured for me to take my seat.

The rest of the day was uneventful, meaning it was spent on introduction of oneself to the different subject teachers. but I made it through smoothly. Despite feeling tired, I was happy with my first day.

Before going to bed that night, a thought suddenly came to mind.

I think I saw the guy who bumped into me while exploring the campus yesterday.

He was the one who didn't even bother to apologize or check on me. Although the collision wasn't entirely his fault, I was partly to blame too, being too preoccupied to watch where I was going.

Maybe he was distracted at the time and didn't notice me. Who knows?

I spotted him sitting at a table in the cafeteria during lunch, wearing a semi-formal outfit and black leather shoes - the kind teachers typically wear.

Wait a minute, could he be a teacher?

I doubt it; he looks too young.

Maybe he's an older student or pursuing his master's.

I have no idea.

I guess I'll find out another day. Maybe I'll run into him again.

I finished my thought and lay in bed, ready for a good night's sleep.

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The next morning, I woke up feeling refreshed.

It was only my second day at the university, but I already felt like I belonged here.

The cool breeze of La Trinidad added to the excitement of starting another chapter in my life.

I quickly went through my morning routine, eager to get to my first class of the day.

The schedule said "Introduction to Behavioral Sciences," located in Room 4B of the Social Sciences building. I double-checked my map before heading out-getting lost on campus was not on my agenda.

The Social Sciences building was buzzing with energy as students rushed to their classes. When I entered Room 4B, I picked a seat in the middle row, close enough to engage but not so close as to stand out.

As the clock struck 8:00 a.m., the door swung open, and in walked the man from yesterday-the one who bumped into me on the sidewalk.

My jaw dropped.

He strode into the room confidently, carrying a stack of papers and a leather-bound folder. His semi-formal outfit now made sense. He wasn't an older student or someone pursuing his master's degree-he was the professor.

The room fell silent as he placed his things on the desk and surveyed the class. His

piercing gaze seemed to linger on me for a split second before he addressed the room.

"Good morning, everyone. I'm Professor JM, and I'll be your instructor for this course. Let's start by discussing the syllabus."

His voice was calm yet commanding, and it was clear he had everyone's full attention. I, on the other hand, was struggling to process the fact that the person I had mentally chastised yesterday was now standing in front of me as my professor.

He distributed copies of the syllabus and began explaining the course objectives. As he spoke, I couldn't help but notice how passionate he seemed about the subject. He had this magnetic presence that made it impossible to look away.

About halfway through the lecture, Professor JM glanced in my direction.

"You," he said, pointing at me.

My heart skipped a beat. Was he about to call me out for something?

"What's your name?"

"Junno Kinley, sir," I replied, trying to keep my voice steady.

"Well, Junno, can you tell me why you think studying human behavior is important?"

I hesitated for a moment, but then I remembered something I had read online about the significance of behavioral sciences.

"It's important because understanding human behavior helps us navigate relationships, solve conflicts, and build a better society," I said.

Professor JM nodded, a faint smile playing on his lips. "A good answer. Behavioral science is indeed the key to understanding what makes people tick. Let's explore that further as we dive deeper into this course."

Relieved, I sank back into my seat, but I couldn't shake the feeling that he was observing me more closely than the other students.

When class ended, I packed my things quickly, eager to leave before I could embarrass myself further. As I reached the door, I heard his voice behind me.

"Junno, a word?"

I froze. Turning around, I saw him standing by the desk, motioning for me to come over.

"Yes, sir?" I said, approaching cautiously.

"You seem familiar," he said, narrowing his eyes as if trying to place me.

"Well, uh, we sort of... bumped into each other yesterday," I admitted, scratching the back of my head.

His eyes widened briefly before he chuckled. "Ah, yes. I remember now. My apologies for that-I was distracted."

"No worries, sir. It wasn't entirely your fault," I replied, feeling a mix of relief and awkwardness.

"Good. Well, I look forward to seeing what you bring to this class," he said, his tone friendly but enigmatic.

"Thank you, sir," I said, before quickly exiting the room.

As I walked across campus, I couldn't help but replay the conversation in my head. Was it just me, or did Professor JM seem more intriguing up close?

Little did I know, this was only the beginning of a connection that would reshape my entire university experience.

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The following days at the university were a whirlwind of lectures, assignments, and meeting new people.

However, no matter how busy I was, Professor JM lingered in the back of my mind.

Something about him was different-not just his confidence or his teaching style, but the way he seemed to hold the room in the palm of his hand.

It wasn't long before I began hearing whispers about him around campus.

"I heard he's the youngest professor here," someone said during lunch at the cafeteria.

"Yeah, but he's so strict! My friend had him last semester, and she said he doesn't tolerate late submissions."

"But have you noticed how everyone stares when he walks by?" another added, giggling.

I didn't say anything, but I couldn't deny the truth of their words. Professor JM was young, probably in his late twenties, and undeniably attractive. His sharp jawline, neatly styled hair, and tailored outfits made him stand out among the older, more traditional faculty members.

Despite his intimidating aura, I found myself looking forward to his classes. Every lecture felt like a challenge-a chance to prove myself in front of him.

A week later, I was seated in the library, working on a group project with some classmates from Professor JM's class. Our task was to analyze a case study on social behavior and present our findings the next day.

"Junno, you're really good at this," said Carla, one of my groupmates.

"Yeah, where'd you learn to break down concepts like that?" asked Mark, another group member.

"I just read a lot, I guess," I replied, feeling a little embarrassed by the attention.

As we wrapped up our discussion, Carla leaned in conspiratorially. "Hey, Junno, you've had a conversation with Professor JM, right?"

I blinked, caught off guard. "Yeah, why?"

"Is it true he's cold and distant? People say he doesn't really connect with students."

I thought about her question. Was Professor JM distant? He certainly had a formal demeanor, but there were moments-like when he smiled faintly after my answer in class-that suggested otherwise.

"I wouldn't say he's cold," I said finally. "He's just... professional."

Carla raised an eyebrow, smirking. "Professional, huh? Interesting choice of words."

Before I could respond, Mark chimed in. "There's a rumor that he doesn't date because of some messy breakup in the past. Apparently, that's why he throws himself into his work."

I frowned. "Where are you even hearing this stuff?"

"Campus gossip," Mark said with a shrug. "This place thrives on it."

The next day, I was one of the first to arrive for Professor JM's class. I sat at my usual spot in the middle row, going over my notes for the group presentation.

One by one, my classmates filtered in, and soon the room was buzzing with conversation.

As Professor JM entered, the chatter died down instantly. He walked to the front of the room, his usual confident stride on display.

"Good morning," he said, his voice cutting through the silence. "Let's start with your group presentations. Group 1, you're up."

My group was third to present. When our turn came, we stood at the front of the room, slightly nervous but prepared.

I was the last to speak, summarizing our findings and tying them back to the course objectives. As I finished, I glanced at Professor JM. He nodded approvingly, and I felt a small surge of pride.

"Good work," he said when we were done. "Your analysis was well-structured, and I appreciated the real-world examples you incorporated. Keep it up."

As we returned to our seats, Carla whispered, "Professional, huh? Looks like he has a soft spot for you."

I rolled my eyes, choosing to ignore her comment.

After class, I stayed behind to ask Professor JM a question about the next assignment.

"Sir, do you have any recommendations for sources on social group dynamics?"

He looked up from his desk, his expression thoughtful. "There's a book by Dr. Ramos-Foundations of Behavioral Science. It's in the library's reference section. You might find it useful."

"Thank you, sir," I said, turning to leave.

"Junno," he called out, stopping me in my tracks.

"Yes, sir?"

He hesitated for a moment before speaking. "I appreciate your effort in this class. It doesn't go unnoticed."

His words caught me off guard, and for a moment, I didn't know how to respond.

"Thank you, sir. That means a lot," I managed to say before walking out, my heart pounding.

As I made my way across campus, I couldn't help but wonder-was there more to Professor JM than the confident, enigmatic persona he projected? And why did I feel like I was just beginning to scratch the surface?

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The rest of the week passed in a blur of lectures and assignments. Despite my attempts to focus on my studies, my thoughts kept drifting back to Professor JM. His words from the other day replayed in my mind: “I appreciate your effort in this class. It doesn’t go unnoticed.”

I wasn’t sure why it mattered so much. Maybe it was the way he said it—calm but deliberate, like he meant every word. Or maybe it was because he’d taken the time to acknowledge me, something none of my other professors had done.

Whatever the reason, I found myself paying closer attention in his lectures, determined to live up to his expectations.

On Friday afternoon, after a particularly engaging discussion on social hierarchies, I stayed behind to ask Professor JM another question.

“Sir, could you elaborate on how cultural norms influence social stratification? I found the lecture fascinating but wanted to dive deeper.”

He raised an eyebrow, clearly intrigued by my question. “That’s a complex topic. Cultural norms often dictate the roles people play within a society, which in turn influences their position in the social hierarchy. It’s not always fair, but it’s how many systems have evolved.”

I nodded, absorbing his words. “Do you think it’s possible to challenge those norms effectively?”

A small smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. “Absolutely. Change begins with understanding. The more people question existing structures, the more likely they are to create new ones.”

For a moment, I forgot I was speaking to a professor. It felt like a genuine conversation, two people exchanging ideas.

Before I could thank him and leave, he surprised me with a question of his own.

“Junno, do you have any plans this evening?”

The question caught me off guard. “Uh... not really, sir. Why?”

“There’s a faculty-student mixer at the auditorium tonight. It’s an informal event to encourage interaction outside the classroom. I think you’d benefit from attending.”

I hesitated, unsure how to respond. “I’m not really sure if I’d fit in, sir.”

“Nonsense,” he said, his tone firm but kind. “You’ll do fine. Besides, it’s a good opportunity to network and meet people who share your interests.”

His encouragement was enough to sway me. “Alright, I’ll go,” I said, trying to sound confident.

“Good,” he replied. “I’ll see you there.”

That evening, I stood outside the auditorium, feeling slightly out of place. The thought of mingling with faculty and students was intimidating, but I reminded myself that this was a chance to grow.

Taking a deep breath, I walked inside.

The room was warm and inviting, decorated with string lights and filled with the hum of conversations. Tables were scattered around, laden with snacks and drinks. Groups of students and professors were engaged in animated discussions.

I spotted Carla and Mark near the refreshments table and headed over to them.

“Junno! I didn’t think you’d show up,” Carla said, handing me a cup of punch.

“Yeah, neither did I,” I admitted. “Professor JM suggested I come.”

Mark smirked. “Figures. He seems to have taken a liking to you.”

Before I could respond, a familiar voice cut through the noise.

“Junno, glad you made it.”

I turned to see Professor JM standing a few feet away, holding a glass of what looked like iced tea. He had swapped his usual semi-formal attire for a more casual look—dark jeans and a fitted black shirt that somehow made him even more striking.

“Thank you for inviting me, sir,” I said, suddenly feeling self-conscious.

“I didn’t invite you,” he replied, a hint of amusement in his tone. “I encouraged you. There’s a difference.”

I chuckled nervously. “Right. Encouraged.”

“Have you met anyone interesting yet?” he asked, glancing around the room.

“Not yet,” I admitted. “But it’s nice to see a different side of the university.”

He nodded, his expression thoughtful. “That’s the point of events like this. To remind us that we’re part of a community, not just isolated roles.”

Before I could respond, a group of students approached, eager to speak with him.

“Enjoy the evening, Junno,” he said before turning his attention to them.

I spent the rest of the mixer mingling with other students and even a few professors. By the end of the night, I felt more connected to the university than ever before.

As I walked back to my apartment, I couldn’t shake the feeling that Professor JM’s encouragement had pushed me to step out of my comfort zone.

Little did I know, this was just the beginning of how he would continue to challenge and inspire me.

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The weekend flew by, and Monday arrived with its usual buzz of activity. The mixer had left me feeling more at ease on campus, but it also raised more questions about Professor JM. Why had he taken such an interest in me? Was it just because I was eager in class, or was there something more?

I brushed off the thought as I headed to his lecture on social psychology. Today's topic was "Group Influence and Individual Identity," a subject I was genuinely excited about.

The lecture was as engaging as ever, with Professor JM weaving in real-world examples to make the concepts come alive.

When the session ended, he announced, "Next week, we'll be having a discussion-based session. I'll assign groups, and you'll prepare a debate on the influence of societal norms on individuality."

The class groaned collectively at the mention of group work, but I didn't mind. It sounded like a fun challenge.

Later that evening, as I sat in my apartment reviewing my notes, my phone buzzed with a text message.

I didn't recognize the number, but the message caught my attention:

"Good evening, Junno. This is Professor JM. I wanted to let you know that I've

assigned you as the leader of your group for the debate next week. I believe you have the skills to guide your peers effectively. Let me know if you have any questions.”

I stared at the screen, my heart racing. I couldn’t decide if I was thrilled or terrified by the added responsibility.

After a moment, I replied:

“Thank you, sir. I appreciate the opportunity and will do my best.”

Almost immediately, another message came through:

“I have no doubt about that. Leadership suits you, Junno. Good luck.”

I set my phone down, staring at it as if it might explain what had just happened. Why was he texting me directly? It wasn’t completely inappropriate—he was just assigning a task—but it still felt... personal.

The next day, I met my assigned group in the library to start preparing for the debate. Carla and Mark were part of the group, along with three other classmates I didn’t know well yet.

“Looks like you’ve moved up in the world,” Carla teased when she found out I was the leader.

“Yeah, don’t let it get to your head,” Mark added with a grin.

I laughed, trying to hide my nervousness. “Don’t worry. I’m just here to make sure we’re ready for the debate.”

We spent the next hour brainstorming arguments and dividing up the workload. By the end of the session, I felt more confident about leading the group.

That evening, I received another text from Professor JM:

“How’s the preparation going?”

I hesitated before replying. Was it normal for a professor to check in like this? Then again, he was probably just trying to ensure the debate ran smoothly.

“It’s going well, sir. We’ve divided the tasks and started brainstorming our arguments.”

His response came quickly:

“Good to hear. Let me know if you encounter any challenges. I want this to be a learning experience for everyone.”

For a moment, I considered asking why he was so invested in my progress, but I decided against it. Instead, I typed a simple:

“Thank you, sir. I will.”

Over the next few days, I couldn’t help but notice that Professor JM seemed to pay more attention to me during class. When I spoke, his gaze lingered a little longer, and his feedback was more detailed than what others received.

Carla picked up on it too.

“Okay, spill. What’s going on between you and Professor JM?” she asked during a lunch break.

“Nothing!” I said quickly, feeling my face heat up. “He’s just... encouraging, I guess.”

“Encouraging?” she repeated, raising an eyebrow. “Junno, professors don’t text students unless there’s something more to it.”

“It’s professional,” I insisted, though even I wasn’t sure if I believed that.

Mark smirked. “If you say so. But if it were me, I’d be enjoying the attention.”

By the time the debate rolled around, I had managed to push Carla and Mark’s comments to the back of my mind. My focus was on leading my group and making sure we delivered a strong presentation.

The debate went better than I could have hoped. My group presented our arguments clearly, and the discussion was lively and engaging.

Afterward, as the class packed up to leave, Professor JM stopped me at the door.

“Well done, Junno,” he said, his voice low enough that only I could hear. “You have a natural talent for leadership.”

“Thank you, sir,” I said, trying not to let his words go to my head.

He gave me a small, almost private smile. “Keep it up.”

As I walked away, I couldn't shake the feeling that his words carried more weight than just professional encouragement. And for the first time, I wondered if Carla and Mark might be onto something after all.

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The debate had gone so well that it left me riding a small wave of confidence. Professor JM's praise lingered in my mind like a melody I couldn't stop humming. His words were kind, but the subtle, private way he delivered them left me questioning their true meaning.

As the week continued, I couldn't ignore the shift in how some of my classmates interacted with me.

Carla and Mark still teased me about my apparent "special treatment," but it wasn't just them anymore.

A few others had begun throwing curious glances my way, and I overheard someone mutter, "Is he the professor's favorite?"

The notion made me uncomfortable. I didn't want to be seen as someone who was benefiting unfairly.

It didn't help that I kept receiving texts from Professor JM, though they remained professional and focused on academics.

"Your group's argument structure was impressive. Have you considered incorporating real-world examples into your next project?"

Or:

“Remember, research isn’t just about finding the answer; it’s about asking the right questions.”

I always responded politely, trying to keep the exchanges brief. But despite my best efforts, I couldn’t shake the feeling that something about this dynamic was different.

By the middle of the week, a rumor began circulating on campus.

“I heard he’s tutoring one of the students after hours,” someone whispered during lunch.

“Who?” another voice asked eagerly.

“No idea, but apparently it’s one of his favorites.”

I froze. They weren’t naming names, but the implication hit too close to home. Was I the student they were talking about?

I thought back to the mixer, the texts, and the lingering glances in class. Had I been too visible? Too willing to engage with him?

“Junno?” Carla’s voice snapped me out of my thoughts.

“Yeah?”

“You okay? You’ve been staring at your food for like five minutes.”

“I’m fine,” I said quickly, forcing a smile. “Just thinking about our next project.”

She didn't look convinced but let it slide.

Later that day, after my last class, I decided to head to the library to clear my head. As I walked down the hall, I saw Professor JM talking to another faculty member near the staff lounge.

I hesitated, unsure if I should pass by or take another route. Before I could decide, he glanced up and saw me. His expression softened, and he gave me a small nod.

I returned the gesture and kept walking, my heart pounding.

That evening, I received another text from him:

“Junno, I wanted to check in. How are you finding the course so far?”

I stared at the message, unsure how to respond. This was different from his usual academic advice—it felt more personal.

After a long pause, I replied:

“I'm enjoying it, sir. The topics are challenging, but they've helped me grow.”

His reply came almost instantly:

“I'm glad to hear that. You're doing exceptionally well. Keep pushing yourself.”

I didn't know what to make of it. His encouragement was kind, but the timing—right

after those rumors—made me uneasy.

The next day, things came to a head.

As I walked into class, I noticed a group of students whispering near the back. When I passed by, one of them said loudly enough for me to hear, “Here comes the professor’s golden boy.”

Heat rose to my face, but I ignored them and took my seat.

Carla leaned over, her expression concerned. “What’s their problem?”

“Nothing,” I muttered, pretending to organize my notes.

But their whispers didn’t stop.

“Bet he doesn’t even have to study,” one of them said.

“Yeah, probably gets his grades handed to him.”

I clenched my fists, anger bubbling beneath the surface. I wanted to turn around and confront them, but before I could, the door opened, and Professor JM walked in.

The room fell silent instantly, and he began the lecture as if nothing had happened. But I couldn’t focus. The words of those students played on a loop in my head.

After class, I stayed behind, waiting until the other students had left.

“Junno,” Professor JM said, noticing me lingering by the door. “Is something on your mind?”

I hesitated, unsure how much to say. “It’s nothing, sir. Just... some things people have been saying.”

His brow furrowed. “About what?”

I looked away, feeling embarrassed. “About me. About us.”

For a moment, he said nothing. Then, his voice softened. “Junno, you can’t let rumors affect you. People will always talk, especially when they see someone excelling.”

“But it’s not just that,” I said, my frustration spilling out. “They think I’m getting special treatment because of you.”

His expression darkened slightly, and for the first time, I saw a flicker of something other than calm in his eyes.

“Let me make one thing clear,” he said firmly. “Your achievements are your own. I push you because I see potential, not because of favoritism.”

His words should have reassured me, but they only raised more questions. Why did he see potential in me? Why was he so invested?

“I understand, sir,” I said finally, though I wasn’t sure if I did.

He nodded, his gaze steady. “Focus on what matters, Junno. The rest is just noise.”

As I left the classroom, his words lingered in my mind. But so did the questions. And deep down, I knew this was far from over.

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The tension on campus didn't ease up over the next few days. Though I tried to ignore the whispers and sly looks, they became harder to brush off. Carla noticed my frustration and did her best to cheer me up, but the situation weighed on me.

The only solace I found was during lectures, where I could immerse myself in the material and forget everything else. That was, until the most embarrassing moment of my life decided to make an appearance.

It was a Wednesday afternoon, and I was running late for Professor JM's lecture on behavioral patterns.

I'd overslept after pulling a late-night study session, and in my rush to get ready, I spilled coffee all over my shirt.

With no time to change, I threw on a jacket to hide the stain and bolted out the door.

I arrived at the lecture hall, panting and disheveled, just as the class was settling in. Professor JM glanced up from his notes, his expression unreadable.

"Glad you could join us, Junno," he said, a hint of amusement in his voice.

"Sorry, sir," I muttered, hurrying to my seat.

The lecture began, and as usual, Professor JM commanded the room with his calm, confident demeanor. He introduced a case study on learned behaviors and posed a question to the class.

“Imagine you’re observing a child learning to tie their shoes. What factors might influence their success?” he asked.

A few students offered hesitant answers, but none seemed to satisfy him. He turned to me.

“Junno, what’s your take?”

Still flustered from my rushed arrival, I scrambled to gather my thoughts. “Uh... I think it would depend on the child’s environment and the kind of reinforcement they receive. Like, if their parent—”

I paused, struggling to articulate my point. “If their parent... uh... or teacher...” My mind blanked, and before I realized it, I blurted out, “Like if you were their dad!”

The room went silent.

For a split second, I thought I could play it off as a normal statement. But then I heard a muffled snort from Carla, followed by stifled giggles from the rest of the class.

I froze, my face heating up so fast I thought I might spontaneously combust.

Professor JM raised an eyebrow, his lips twitching as though he were fighting back a smile. “Well, that’s an... interesting perspective, Junno,” he said, his tone far too amused for my liking.

“I—I didn’t mean it like that!” I stammered, waving my hands as if that would erase

what I'd said. "I just—oh my God." I buried my face in my hands, wishing the ground would swallow me whole.

The class erupted into laughter, and even Professor JM let out a soft chuckle. "It's all right, Junno," he said, his voice laced with amusement. "You're not the first to mix up words under pressure."

The rest of the lecture was a blur. I barely managed to focus on anything, my mind replaying the moment over and over. As soon as class ended, I grabbed my things and bolted for the door, avoiding everyone's eyes.

"Junno, wait!" Carla called after me, catching up as I speed-walked down the hall. "Oh my God, that was hilarious!"

"I'm glad you enjoyed it," I muttered, keeping my gaze fixed on the floor.

"Come on, it wasn't that bad," she said, clearly trying to stifle another laugh. "Okay, maybe it was, but at least JM didn't get mad. He actually seemed to find it funny."

"Great," I groaned. "Now he thinks I'm a total idiot."

"Or," Carla said, nudging me playfully, "he thinks you're endearing."

I shot her a look. "Not helping."

That evening, as I sat in my apartment trying to recover from the humiliation, my phone buzzed with a text.

“Junno, I wanted to say thank you for the unexpected humor in class today. It was a good reminder that even in serious discussions, there’s room for a little levity. Don’t dwell on it too much.”

I stared at the message, unsure whether to laugh or cry. After a moment, I replied:

“I’m glad you found it funny, sir. I’ll try not to let it happen again.”

His response came almost immediately:

“No need to apologize. Moments like that make learning more memorable.”

I set my phone down, a reluctant smile creeping onto my face. Maybe Carla was right—maybe it wasn’t that bad.

Still, I made a mental note to think before I spoke in class from now on. One slip of the tongue was more than enough.

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It was another regular day in class until Professor JM announced an activity that would test our creativity and teamwork.

“We’re doing a roleplay today,” he said, setting his notebook on the table. “Each group will act out a family scenario. You’ll decide the roles and situations. The point is to demonstrate different dynamics and how individuals interact within a household.”

The class buzzed with excitement. It wasn’t every day we got to do something this interactive.

“Form groups of four or five,” he added. “You have ten minutes to plan before we begin.”

I ended up in a group with Carla, Mark, and another classmate, Jessa. Naturally, Carla immediately declared, “I’m the dad.”

“Fine by me,” I said with a shrug. “I’ll be the mom.”

Mark smirked. “So what does that make me? The rebellious teen?”

“Perfect,” Carla said, giving him a playful shove. “And Jessa can be our sweet, innocent child who brings balance to the chaos.”

We huddled together to brainstorm a scenario. Carla suggested something ridiculous:

a heated family argument at breakfast. I added the twist that the baby—played by a stuffed toy we borrowed from Jessa—would be the center of attention.

“Let’s make it funny,” Carla said. “The class loves humor, and you know JM will appreciate it.”

“Got it,” I said, already imagining how it would go down.

When it was our turn, we took our positions at the front of the room. Carla sat at the “head of the table,” puffing out her chest dramatically. “I’m the breadwinner, and I work hard to put food on this table!” she bellowed in an overly deep voice.

I stood next to her, hands on my hips. “And I’m the mom who does all the housework while you sit around watching basketball!”

The class chuckled at our exaggerated performances. Mark, playing the moody teen, rolled his eyes and groaned, “Ugh, why do you guys always fight? I just want to go to my room and play video games!”

Jessa sat quietly, hugging the stuffed toy to her chest, looking like the picture-perfect innocent child.

The real chaos began when Carla handed the “baby” to me mid-argument, saying, “Here, take care of your kid!”

Without thinking, I cradled the toy in my arms and blurted out, “Fine! I’ll just feed the baby since no one else cares!”

And then, in a moment of sheer impulsive absurdity, I mimicked breastfeeding the stuffed toy.

For a second, the room was silent. Then it exploded.

The class erupted into uncontrollable laughter. Carla doubled over, slapping the table in hysterics, while Mark fell out of his chair, clutching his stomach. Even Jessa, who was supposed to stay in character, couldn't keep a straight face.

I glanced at Professor JM, who had one hand over his mouth, clearly trying to maintain his composure. His shoulders shook slightly as he fought back laughter.

"Oh my God, Junno!" Carla wheezed, tears streaming down her face. "You didn't—oh my God, you did!"

Realizing what I'd done, I buried my face in my hands. "It was a joke!" I shouted over the chaos. "You said to make it funny!"

"That was... something else," Professor JM finally said, his voice tinged with amusement. "I don't think I've ever seen a roleplay quite like that."

The laughter continued long after we returned to our seats. Every time someone glanced my way, they burst into fresh giggles. Even Carla couldn't stop poking fun at me.

"You really committed to the role," she teased during lunch.

“Yeah, yeah, laugh it up,” I said, trying to sound annoyed but failing miserably.

Still, I couldn’t help but smile. The activity had been a hit, even if it came at my expense.

That evening, I got a text from Professor JM:

“Junno, your group’s roleplay was... unforgettable. You managed to lighten the mood for everyone, which is a skill in itself. Well done.”

I stared at the message, a mix of pride and embarrassment swirling inside me.

“Thank you, sir,” I replied. “I’m glad the class enjoyed it. Hopefully, I didn’t overdo it.”

His response was quick:

“Not at all. Sometimes humor is the best way to connect. Keep being yourself.”

I set my phone down, a smile tugging at my lips. If nothing else, I’d definitely made an impression.

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The buzz from the roleplay incident lingered for days. Everywhere I went, people either gave me knowing smirks or burst into laughter the moment they saw me. Even students I didn't know would whisper, "That's the guy who breastfed the baby in class."

Carla, of course, wouldn't let me forget it. "You're basically a campus celebrity now," she teased as we walked to the cafeteria. "Honestly, you should start charging for autographs."

"I'm going to ignore that," I said, rolling my eyes. "But seriously, do you think Professor JM thinks I'm a total weirdo?"

Carla grinned. "Weirdo? Nah. Memorable? Definitely."

I sighed, unsure whether to feel relieved or mortified.

Later that afternoon, I had another class with Professor JM. I walked in, determined to keep a low profile. To my surprise, he greeted me with a nod and a faint smile.

"Junno," he said as I passed his desk, "you seem to have a knack for making class... lively."

"Uh, I hope that's a good thing, sir," I said, scratching the back of my neck.

"It is," he replied, his tone sincere. "Just make sure you balance it with focus. Humor

has its place, but so does discipline.”

“Yes, sir,” I said, feeling oddly encouraged by his words.

The lecture that day was about interpersonal communication, and as always, Professor JM’s delivery was captivating. He had a way of making even the most mundane topics feel engaging.

At one point, he posed a question about resolving conflicts within relationships. Several students raised their hands, but I hesitated. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to draw attention to myself after the roleplay fiasco.

“Junno,” he said, catching me off guard. “What’s your take?”

I blinked, my mind racing to form an answer. “Uh, I think... communication is key, but it’s also important to understand the other person’s perspective. Like, sometimes it’s not about being right—it’s about finding common ground.”

Professor JM nodded, a faint smile playing on his lips. “That’s a mature perspective. Well said.”

The class murmured in agreement, and for the first time that week, I felt like I was being recognized for something other than my antics.

After class, Carla nudged me as we walked out. “Look at you, impressing the professor. You might actually survive this semester.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” I said dryly, though I couldn’t help but smile.

As we headed to our next class, I couldn’t shake the feeling that something had shifted. Maybe it was the way Professor JM had looked at me—not with amusement, but with genuine respect.

Or maybe it was the realization that I wanted to be more than just the class clown.

Whatever it was, I decided it was time to step up my game.

That evening, as I sat at my desk reviewing notes, my phone buzzed with a notification. It was a message from Professor JM.

“Good insight today, Junno. Keep contributing like that, and you’ll do well in this course.”

I stared at the message, a mix of surprise and pride bubbling inside me.

“Thank you, sir,” I replied. “I’ll do my best.”

As I set my phone down, I couldn’t help but smile. For the first time since arriving at university, I felt like I was finally finding my place.

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The weather in La Trinidad was as unpredictable as ever. The day had started bright and sunny, but by mid-afternoon, dark clouds gathered ominously. I had just finished my last class and was heading toward the gate when the skies opened up, unleashing a torrential downpour.

I froze at the entrance, realizing two things: I didn't have an umbrella, and there was no way I could make it home without getting drenched.

Sighing, I found a bench under the covered walkway near the library and resigned myself to waiting. The rain showed no signs of stopping, and as the minutes turned into hours, I began to feel the chill seep through my clothes.

It was nearing 6 p.m. when I spotted a familiar figure walking briskly through the hallway. Professor JM, holding an umbrella, paused when he saw me.

"Junno?" he called, his voice cutting through the sound of the rain. "What are you still doing here?"

I gave him an embarrassed smile. "I, uh, forgot my umbrella. I was waiting for the rain to let up."

He frowned, glancing at the heavy rain. "You'll be waiting all night at this rate." He hesitated for a moment, then said, "Come on, I'll walk you home."

"What? No, sir, you don't have to—"

“I insist,” he interrupted, his tone firm but kind. “You’ll catch a cold if you stay here any longer.”

Before I could protest further, he stepped closer, holding the umbrella over us both.

The walk to my apartment was short, but with the rain pouring down, it felt like a journey. The umbrella wasn’t large enough to cover us entirely, so we ended up pressed close together.

The proximity made me acutely aware of everything—his calm demeanor, the faint scent of his cologne, the sound of the rain around us. I tried to focus on anything else, but my mind kept wandering.

“You should always check the weather before heading out,” he said, breaking the silence.

“I usually do,” I replied sheepishly. “Guess I wasn’t prepared today.”

He chuckled softly. “A lesson learned, then.”

We continued walking in comfortable silence until we reached my apartment building.

“This is me,” I said, gesturing toward the stairs. “Thank you, sir. I really appreciate it.”

He nodded, his expression soft. “Take care, Junno. And don’t forget your umbrella next time.”

I laughed nervously, feeling both grateful and awkward. “I won’t. Good night, sir.”

“Good night.”

The next morning, the whispers began.

“I saw Junno walking with Professor JM under one umbrella yesterday.”

“They looked so close!”

“Do you think they—”

I groaned as I overheard the gossip circulating around campus. Carla, ever the source of drama, was the first to corner me.

“So,” she said, wiggling her eyebrows. “Care to explain why you and the professor were sharing an umbrella last night?”

“It’s not what you think,” I said quickly, feeling my face heat up. “I forgot my umbrella, and he insisted on walking me home. That’s all.”

Carla smirked. “Sure, sure. But the way people are talking, it’s like the two of you were starring in some romantic drama.”

I buried my face in my hands. “I can’t deal with this.”

“Oh, come on,” she teased. “At least it’s a cute story. You’re living the campus gossip dream.”

“More like nightmare,” I muttered.

Later that day, I bumped into Professor JM in the hallway. He gave me a small smile and said, “I’ve heard there’s been some... talk about last night.”

I groaned. “I’m so sorry, sir. I didn’t mean for it to turn into a thing.”

He shook his head, his expression amused. “People will always talk, Junno. Let them. Just focus on your studies.”

His calm demeanor reassured me, and I nodded. “Thank you, sir. I’ll do my best.”

As he walked away, I couldn’t help but smile. Despite the chaos, there was something about that rainy evening that I wouldn’t forget anytime soon.

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The gossip about Professor JM and I quickly became the talk of the campus, and though I tried to ignore it, the whispers seemed to follow me wherever I went.

Some students gave me knowing smiles, others snickered behind my back, and I even overheard a conversation in the library where someone said, “I heard he’s always so kind to the freshmen. I wonder if there’s more to it with Junno.”

I did my best to stay focused on my studies, but the rumors made me feel self-conscious. The last thing I wanted was for people to think there was something more between me and Professor JM. It was just an innocent gesture—he was being kind.

One afternoon, as I sat in the campus courtyard, trying to finish an essay for my communications class, Carla plopped down next to me, a mischievous grin on her face.

“So, I heard Professor JM asked you about the ‘umbrella incident’ yesterday,” she teased.

I groaned, burying my face in my hands. “Can we please drop this? It was nothing, Carla.”

She raised an eyebrow, not buying it. “Sure, nothing. Except the whole campus is wondering why you two were sharing an umbrella. And it’s not like he’s just any professor.”

“I don’t care about the rumors,” I snapped, a little more sharply than I intended. I immediately regretted it. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to snap at you. It’s just... all of this is getting to me.”

Carla’s expression softened. “I get it, Junno. But I have to say, the way he looks out for you is kind of sweet.”

I felt my cheeks flush. “He looks out for everyone. He’s a nice person.”

“Yeah, but he’s really nice to you.” Carla leaned back in her chair, eyeing me with a knowing smile. “And hey, if you like him, it’s no big deal. Just go with it.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at the absurdity of it all. “I don’t like him like that. Seriously, Carla, it’s just... I don’t know. It’s awkward now. I can’t even look at him without wondering if people think there’s something going on.”

“Well, it’s not like you can control what people say,” she said, her tone surprisingly serious. “If you’re worried about what others think, that’s on them. Don’t let it mess with your head.”

Her words hit me harder than I expected. Maybe I was letting the rumors get to me more than I should. I had no reason to feel awkward around Professor JM, especially when he’d only been kind.

Later that week, I found myself in Professor JM’s office after class. I had a few questions about the upcoming exam and figured it would be easier to ask him directly.

“Come in, Junno,” he said when I knocked. “What can I help you with?”

I stepped inside, trying not to let the tension from the rumors affect me. “I just wanted to go over a few things for the exam. I’m not sure about some of the concepts in our last lesson.”

He nodded, gesturing to the chair across from him. “Sit down. Let’s go through it together.”

As he explained the material, I found myself relaxing. His teaching style was patient and clear, and for a moment, I forgot about everything else—the gossip, the rumors, the tension in the air.

After a while, I felt more confident about the material. “Thanks, sir. I really appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome, Junno. You’re doing well. Just stay focused.”

I smiled, feeling a sense of relief. For once, I wasn’t thinking about anything other than the lesson at hand.

But as I stood to leave, I noticed something in Professor JM’s eyes—a glimmer of something more than just professionalism. It wasn’t a flirtatious look, but there was a warmth in his gaze that made my heart beat a little faster.

I quickly pushed the thought aside. Maybe I was just overthinking things.

That night, I lay in bed, replaying the conversation in my mind.

What was it about Professor JM that made me so nervous?

He was just my teacher—kind, approachable, and professional.

But there was something about the way he looked at me sometimes, something that made me wonder if there was more to his kindness than I realized.

Maybe it was just the weight of the rumors, or maybe it was my own confusion, but I couldn't shake the feeling that something was shifting. But what that shift meant, I had no idea.

And I wasn't sure I was ready to find out.

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The days following my meeting with Professor JM were strangely quiet.

The rumors about our "umbrella incident" had started to fade, but I couldn't shake the feeling that there was still something between us—an unspoken tension that I couldn't ignore.

He continued to be friendly and professional, but there were moments when I caught him looking at me a little longer than necessary.

Then, one evening, as I sat in my apartment, my phone buzzed. It was a message from Professor JM.

“Junno, can we talk for a moment?”

I blinked at the message, feeling a strange flutter in my stomach. Was this about the rumors? I hesitated for a moment before replying.

“Of course, sir. What's up?”

“I wanted to thank you for being understanding. Things have been a bit difficult for me lately. I recently broke up with my girlfriend, and it's been hard to focus on work with everything going on.”

I read his message, my mind spinning. It wasn't the first time he had mentioned something personal, but this was different. I felt a strange sense of concern for him, even though I didn't know the details.

“I’m really sorry to hear that, sir. I hope you’re doing okay.”

“I’m managing. It’s just been tough. I don’t want to burden you with my problems, but it feels good to talk about it with someone.”

I was taken aback by his honesty. It felt a little strange, but in a way, it made me see him in a new light.

“You’re not burdening me, sir. I’m here if you need someone to talk to.”

“Thank you, Junno. It means a lot. I appreciate you more than you know.”

I stared at the screen, my fingers hovering over the keys. My thoughts were scattered. Was I overstepping? Was I being too kind?

“Of course, sir. I hope things get better for you soon.”

The conversation ended there, but the words stayed with me. I couldn’t help but feel a little closer to him, even though I knew that our relationship was strictly professional. Yet, it was hard not to feel a connection when he was so open with me.

The next day, I went to campus feeling oddly unsettled. I had received a few more messages from Professor JM, mostly casual check-ins, but nothing that seemed out of the ordinary. Everything seemed fine until I realized, as I was heading to class, that my phone was missing.

Panic surged through me. My phone was a relatively cheap keypad model, but it was still an essential part of my daily life—my lifeline to friends and family. I retraced my steps, searching the campus, but it was no use. The phone was gone.

After class, I went to the lost and found, hoping someone had turned it in. To my relief, the attendant handed me my phone. It had been found near the library. I sighed in relief as I unlocked it, ready to check my messages.

But as I scrolled through my recent texts, my heart stopped. The text exchange with Professor JM—our conversation about his breakup—was right there, visible for anyone to read.

I froze, horrified. I hadn't even realized it, but the messages were in plain sight. There were no privacy settings on my phone, and anyone could have seen them if they'd picked it up. My stomach sank as I realized the worst possible outcome.

The next day, the gossip machine was in full swing.

"I heard Junno got some juicy texts from Professor JM on his phone. Apparently, he's having relationship issues!"

"Did you see the messages? He's really open about his feelings. It's like he's confiding in Junno."

I felt the weight of the gossip crushing me.

It wasn't just about the umbrella incident anymore.

The text exchange, which had been personal and vulnerable, was now public fodder.

And though I knew I hadn't done anything wrong, I couldn't help but feel guilty for being the one who had inadvertently fueled the fire.

Carla found me sitting in the cafeteria, my head buried in my arms. “Okay, spill,” she said, sitting down next to me. “I can hear the whispers from a mile away. What did you do now?”

“I didn’t do anything!” I said, exasperated. “I lost my phone, and when it was returned, the texts from Professor JM were all out in the open. Now everyone’s talking about it.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Well, I mean, it’s a little juicy, don’t you think? You’ve got the professor confiding in you about his breakup. No wonder people are gossiping.”

“Carla, this is not what I wanted!” I groaned. “It wasn’t even like that. He was just venting about his breakup.”

“I know, I know,” Carla said, patting my back. “But that’s not what people will think. You might want to talk to him about it.”

I ran a hand through my hair, my frustration growing. “I don’t know what to say. I didn’t mean for any of this to happen.”

“You don’t have to apologize, Junno,” Carla said. “But you do need to clear the air, especially with Professor JM. If it keeps going like this, the gossip will just get worse.”

I sighed, feeling the weight of the situation pressing down on me. What started as an innocent conversation had turned into something I never intended. I knew I had to talk to Professor JM, but I wasn’t sure how to handle the fallout.

The rumors had taken on a life of their own, and all I could do was try to ride out the storm.

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The days that followed were a blur.

The campus seemed to be buzzing with even more intensity than before, and the weight of the rumors about me and Professor JM only seemed to grow heavier.

It wasn't just that I had lost my phone—it was the fact that the texts had been shared without my permission.

My inbox was flooded with messages from people asking about the "juicy details." I couldn't walk down the hallway without hearing hushed conversations, and I could barely focus on my classes.

I couldn't take it anymore.

The gossip had reached a point where I knew I had to do something about it.

I couldn't just sit back and let my reputation be dragged through the mud.

But how could I clear things up without making the situation worse?

Talking to Professor JM seemed like the only way to start, but I had no idea how he would react.

One afternoon, after a particularly draining lecture, I decided to stop by his office. I had tried to avoid him, not because I wanted to, but because I didn't know what to

say. I knew we had to talk about the text exchange, but how could I approach it without making it sound worse?

I knocked on the door, and his familiar voice called out, "Come in, Junno."

I pushed the door open and found him sitting at his desk, looking over some papers. He looked up and smiled. "Hey, Junno. What's on your mind?"

I swallowed, feeling a mix of nerves and guilt. "Sir, we need to talk."

His expression shifted slightly, concern flickering in his eyes. "What's going on?"

I took a deep breath, trying to steady myself. "It's about the text messages."

He blinked, clearly not expecting me to bring it up. "Ah. You saw them... or rather, others saw them."

I nodded, feeling a lump form in my throat. "Yeah. I didn't mean for it to happen. When I lost my phone, I had no idea the messages would be read by someone else. And now it's all over campus. People are... talking."

Professor JM leaned back in his chair, his face softening. "I had a feeling this would happen. I should have been more careful. It wasn't your fault, Junno."

"But it feels like it is," I said, my voice shaky. "I never wanted this to blow up. I don't even know how to handle the gossip. People are making it sound like something it's not."

He was quiet for a moment, then sighed deeply. "I know. And I'm sorry. I never should have shared something so personal with you like that. It was a lapse in judgment. You didn't deserve to be dragged into this."

I shook my head, trying to reassure him. “No, you’re not the problem. It’s just that I’m stuck in the middle of all this now. And I don’t know how to make it stop.”

Professor JM looked at me for a long moment, his gaze intense yet filled with understanding. “We’ll figure this out together, Junno. You don’t have to handle this alone. Maybe we should address it publicly—clear the air, so to speak.”

I blinked in surprise. “Address it? How?”

He hesitated before speaking, his voice steady. “We could talk to the class about it, just explain that it was a private conversation and that there’s nothing more to it. I’ll take responsibility for my part in this. It’s the only way to get ahead of the rumors.”

I didn’t know if that was the best solution, but it was the only one that seemed like it might work. It would be awkward, but at least it might stop the whispers.

“Okay,” I said, more to myself than to him. “Let’s do it.”

The next day, during our regular class session, Professor JM took a moment to address the class. He cleared his throat and looked around at the students, who were eyeing him curiously.

“I’m sure many of you have heard about some personal messages that have been circulating,” he began, his tone calm but firm.

“I want to make something clear. Junno and I had a private conversation about some personal issues I was going through. It was never meant to be shared with anyone, and it’s nobody’s business but ours.”

The room fell silent. I felt my heart race as I sat there, wondering if this would be enough to end the rumors.

Professor JM continued, his eyes scanning the room. “There’s nothing more to it than that. I value my professional boundaries, and I hope you all understand that this situation was a misunderstanding. Junno had no part in the texts being leaked, and I take full responsibility for that.”

He paused, letting the words sink in. “I ask that you all respect our privacy and move on from this. We’re here to learn, not to dwell on things that don’t matter in the grand scheme of things.”

There was a brief, tense silence before a few students started to whisper among themselves. The atmosphere felt heavy, but I could feel a shift. It wasn’t perfect, but it was a start.

After class, I approached Professor JM, feeling a little more relieved but still anxious. “Thank you, sir. For clearing that up.”

He smiled faintly, though there was a hint of sadness in his eyes. “I didn’t want you to feel like you had to carry this alone, Junno. It’s my fault the situation got out of hand. I’m sorry you had to go through this.”

I shook my head. “It’s not your fault. I guess... I guess we both learned a lesson from this.”

He chuckled softly, a warm smile tugging at his lips. “Yeah. I suppose we did.”

The conversation ended there, but as I left his office, I couldn’t help but feel like

something had shifted between us.

The rumors may have been addressed, but the tension was still there, lingering in the air.

I wasn't sure where this would go—whether it was just a temporary blip or the beginning of something more—but I couldn't deny that I felt a strange connection to him now.

And whether I liked it or not, the whispers would probably continue. But at least I had done my part in trying to clear the air. The rest was out of my hands.

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After the talk in class, things seemed to settle down, but the whispers never fully went away.

The campus was small, and news traveled fast, no matter how much we tried to downplay it.

It was hard to ignore the sideways glances and occasional teasing from some of my classmates.

But as time passed, the rumors started to die down—mostly because there was nothing else to feed them.

And still, life moved forward.

I found myself getting more comfortable in my classes, even though the lingering tension between me and Professor JM was something I couldn't quite shake.

I could feel his eyes on me more often now, not in a disapproving way, but in a way that made my stomach flutter every time our paths crossed.

Our interactions had become a bit more.

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personal.

Not in any overt way, but there was a subtle shift in how we communicated.

Small talk, brief exchanges, and the occasional word of encouragement from him during class kept me wondering where this was going.

Was it just me, or did there seem to be something unspoken between us?

One day, as I sat in the campus cafe sipping my coffee and reading over my notes for an upcoming exam, I noticed Professor JM walking toward me. He looked as composed as ever, but there was a certain hesitation in his step that made me wonder what was going on in his mind.

He stopped in front of my table, a small smile on his face. “Mind if I sit?”

I blinked, taken aback. “Oh, no, of course not.” I quickly moved my bag to make space.

He sat down, the air between us a little tense, though I couldn’t tell if it was just me feeling that way. “How’s the studying going?” he asked casually.

“It’s going okay,” I replied, trying to stay calm despite the sudden rush of nerves. “Nervous about the exam coming up.”

He smiled. “You’ve been doing well so far. I’m sure you’ll do great.”

I smiled back, feeling a wave of relief at his encouraging words. But there was something else—an underlying current I couldn’t ignore. We weren’t talking about academics anymore. It felt like there was a weight to the conversation, a question unsaid, hanging between us.

There was a long pause before I finally spoke up. “Professor, can I ask you something?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Of course.”

I hesitated for a moment, unsure if I should ask the question that had been on my mind for days. But I figured now was as good a time as any. “Are you okay? After everything that happened... with the text exchange and the gossip, I mean.”

His smile faltered just slightly, and he leaned back in his chair. “I’m getting through it,” he said, though there was a hint of tiredness in his voice. “It’s been a little difficult, but nothing I can’t handle.”

I nodded, but my curiosity couldn’t be contained. “You know, I’ve been wondering... why me? Why did you share that stuff with me?”

Professor JM seemed to consider this for a moment, his gaze drifting out the window as if searching for an answer.

Finally, he turned back to me, his eyes meeting mine.

“I don’t know. I suppose, in some ways, you’re one of the few people I felt comfortable talking to. Sometimes it’s easier to confide in someone who isn’t too involved in your personal life, someone who isn’t going to judge you.”

I wasn’t sure how to respond to that. His words were honest, and though it made sense in a way, there was something about it that still felt too personal. I had become part of his inner world in a way I never expected.

“I appreciate that, sir,” I said quietly. “But I hope you know I’m not going to judge you. I just... I hope you’re doing better.”

He smiled again, but this time it was softer, more genuine. “Thanks, Junno. That means a lot.”

For a moment, there was an understanding between us. It was unspoken, but real. And in that moment, I could feel that perhaps things were shifting in a way I wasn’t sure I was ready for.

The weeks that followed were filled with the usual stress of university life.

Exams, assignments, and social events came and went.

But despite the chaos, I found myself looking forward to the moments when I could cross paths with Professor JM.

I didn’t know if it was the shared understanding between us or something deeper, but each interaction left me with a sense of anticipation, a curiosity about where this was all headed.

One evening, as I was leaving the library after a long study session, I ran into him near the campus gates. He was standing alone, looking at his phone. As I approached, he looked up and smiled.

“Late night studying?” he asked, his tone light but with a hint of concern.

“Yeah,” I replied, stifling a yawn. “I’m trying to get through all of this material, but it’s a lot.”

“I can imagine,” he said, glancing at my stack of books. “You’ve been putting in a lot of work. Don’t overdo it, though. You deserve some rest.”

I chuckled, grateful for his consideration. “I’ll try. It’s just that everything’s piling up.”

“Well, if you need a break, I’m around. You know where to find me,” he said, his voice softer than usual.

I nodded, a small smile forming on my face. “Thanks, sir. I appreciate that.”

As I walked away, I couldn’t help but feel like there was something more to our exchange than just casual small talk. It felt like he was giving me an opening, an invitation, but I wasn’t sure if I should take it.

The days began to blur as the exam week drew closer.

I was lost in a sea of textbooks and notes, but as I sat down to study one evening, my mind kept drifting back to Professor JM.

There were so many moments between us, so many subtle signs that made me wonder what this all meant.

Was it just the stress of university life playing tricks on my mind?

Or was there something deeper happening between us that neither of us was willing to acknowledge?

I didn’t have an answer, but for the first time since arriving in La Trinidad, I was uncertain of what the future held.

The campus was small, and our lives had become intertwined in ways I never

imagined.

And though I had tried to focus solely on my studies, there was no ignoring the fact that I was no longer just a student in his class.

The lines were becoming blurred, and I had no idea where they would lead.

But one thing was clear—I wasn't ready to let go of whatever this was, whatever it might become.

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It was a lazy Sunday morning, and the campus was unusually quiet.

Most students had gone home for the weekend or were busy catching up on assignments, but I needed a break from the overwhelming pressure of upcoming exams.

So, I decided to head to a nearby café to study.

It wasn't too far from my apartment, just a cozy spot with comfortable chairs and a warm atmosphere.

I ordered my usual—a cup of Benguet coffee and a pastry—before settling into a corner booth with my textbooks and notes.

As the hours passed, I found myself distracted more than I'd like to admit.

My mind kept wandering, not to the piles of assignments and upcoming deadlines, but to the odd connection I seemed to have with Professor JM.

I had tried to put it out of my mind, focusing on my studies, but no matter how hard I tried, the thought of him kept creeping in.

Just as I was sipping my coffee, trying to force myself back into studying, I heard a familiar voice.

"Junno? What are you doing here?"

I looked up to find Professor JM standing in the doorway of the café, his usual calm expression mixed with a hint of curiosity. He had on a black jacket, his hair tousled slightly as if he had just come from a jog or a walk.

I froze for a moment, unsure of how to react. After everything that had happened, I wasn't sure where we stood—still, seeing him there felt oddly comforting.

“Professor JM! I didn't expect to see you here,” I said, gesturing to the empty chair across from me. “Come sit down. I'm just... trying to get some studying done. But I'm not very focused, to be honest.”

He smiled, that familiar glint in his eyes, and walked over to my table. “I can relate. I'm not here for studying, though. I just wanted a break from all the work. A little coffee wouldn't hurt.”

He sat down across from me and flagged down a barista.

As the coffee was brought over, we exchanged a few pleasantries, the conversation flowing easily between us despite the lingering tension that still clung to the air.

It wasn't awkward, not exactly, but it was clear we were both still figuring out the new dynamic.

“I'm glad I ran into you today,” Professor JM said after a sip of his coffee, setting it down with a soft clink. “It's been a long week, and I could use some good company.”

I smiled, feeling the weight of the moment lift slightly. “I'm happy you stopped by. It's nice to get a break, even if I should probably be studying more.” I gestured at the textbooks scattered across the table. “But, honestly, it's been hard to focus today.”

He nodded in understanding. “I get it. Sometimes the best way to recharge is to step

away from all the stress, even if it's just for a little while.”

I thought about that for a second before an idea popped into my head.

“Hey,” I said, leaning forward a little, “if you’re looking for something a little more fun than coffee, I could show you around the area. There’s this spot near my apartment where they sell some of the best Filipino street food. It’s a pretty casual place, but it’s really popular. I go there sometimes when I need a break from cooking.”

Professor JM raised an eyebrow, intrigued. “Street food? That sounds interesting. I haven’t had much of that since moving here. I’ve heard about the food scene in the area, but I’ve never really explored it.”

“Well, it’s not fancy,” I chuckled. “But it’s definitely authentic. You can get everything from fish balls to kwek-kwek, which is boiled quail eggs dipped in batter and fried. If you’re up for it, I’ll show you.”

He leaned back in his chair, considering the offer. “You know what? That actually sounds like a great idea. I’m in. Lead the way.”

We finished our coffees, and after paying, we made our way to my apartment.

The weather was perfect, cool with a light breeze, and the walk was relaxing.

As we turned onto a quieter street, I led him to a small outdoor vendor selling a variety of Filipino street food.

The smell of frying food, soy sauce, and vinegar filled the air, making my stomach

growl.

The vendor, an older woman with a wide smile, greeted me as I approached. “Ah, Junno! Back again for your favorites?”

“Of course,” I said with a grin, then gestured to Professor JM. “This is Professor JM. He’s never tried street food around here, so I’m showing him the ropes.”

“Welcome, welcome!” she said cheerfully. “You must try everything, sir. It’s all delicious.”

I motioned for JM to pick whatever he wanted, but he seemed a little overwhelmed by the choices. “I don’t even know where to start.”

I chuckled. “It’s all good. I’ll help you out. How about fish balls, kwek-kwek, and maybe a few isaw?” I suggested, pointing to the skewers of grilled chicken intestines.

Professor JM’s expression shifted slightly at the mention of isaw, but he nodded. “Alright, I trust you. I’ll try anything once.”

I watched him carefully as the vendor prepared our order, and I couldn’t help but feel a little excited to share a part of my life with him.

Street food was such a big part of my childhood, and introducing someone new to it felt like a little personal victory.

When the food was ready, we sat at a nearby bench, chatting as we dug into the delicious spread.

I watched as Professor JM took a tentative bite of the kwek-kwek, his face scrunching for a second before he smiled. “Okay, I’ll admit it. This is pretty good.”

“I told you!” I grinned, feeling a little proud. “It’s like the perfect snack—crispy on the outside and soft on the inside.”

He laughed, clearly enjoying himself. “You were right about the fish balls, too. There’s something about the sweet and spicy sauce that makes it so addicting.”

The conversation flowed easily between us as we ate, and for the first time in a while, the tension I had felt seemed to vanish. It was just the two of us, sharing food and stories, with no pressure.

By the time we finished, the sun was setting, casting a golden hue over the city. We stood up, stretching after the long, relaxing break.

“Thanks for this, Junno. I needed it,” Professor JM said, his eyes reflecting the fading light of the evening. “I didn’t realize how much I needed a simple day out, just to enjoy the small things.”

I smiled, feeling a sense of accomplishment. “Anytime, sir. I’m glad you enjoyed it.”

As we walked back toward my apartment, the evening sky turning shades of pink and purple, I realized that maybe this was the start of something new—a friendship, a bond, or something deeper.

Whatever it was, I was beginning to feel more at ease with the whole situation.

With Professor JM, everything seemed less complicated.

For the first time in a long while, I felt like I was exactly where I needed to be.

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As we walked back from the street food vendor, I noticed how the evening had settled into a comfortable silence between us.

The air was cool, with a gentle breeze rustling through the trees lining the street.

The bustling sounds of the city seemed to fade away, replaced by the quiet hum of our footsteps.

“Professor JM,” I began, breaking the silence, “since it’s already evening, would you be up for dinner? I could cook something for you, if you’re interested.”

He raised an eyebrow, intrigued. “Cook for me? I’m not sure what I did to deserve that, but I’m not going to turn down an offer like that.”

I grinned, feeling a little more confident than usual. “Well, it’s not fancy, but I can make pinikpikan—a traditional dish from my hometown. It’s one of my favorites, and I think you’ll like it.”

Professor JM looked impressed, though I wasn’t sure if he was just being polite. “Pinikpikan? I’ve heard of it, but I’ve never had the chance to try it. I’d love to see what your cooking is like.”

“Great,” I said, feeling a rush of excitement. “It’s not hard to make, but it takes a little time to prepare. It’s a comfort food, really.”

We arrived at my apartment, and I led Professor JM inside. The familiar scent of home greeted me—my place felt cozy, and I liked how it looked now that everything

was in order. I gestured for him to make himself comfortable on the couch.

“Please, take a seat. I’ll get started with the cooking,” I said, heading for the kitchen.

Professor JM nodded, looking around the space as he settled into a chair. “You really have a nice setup here, Junno. It’s simple, but it feels homey.”

“Thanks,” I replied with a smile. “I like it here. It's perfect for college life.”

I started pulling ingredients from the fridge—chicken, ginger, green onions, and the important part: etag (dried salted pork).

The key to making pinikpikan was in the preparation, specifically the technique used to tenderize the chicken by lightly beating it.

Though I had done it many times before, there was a certain satisfaction in doing it right.

“I didn’t realize cooking was one of your talents,” Professor JM said from the other room, his voice soft but curious. “It’s clear you know your way around the kitchen.”

I chuckled, feeling a bit self-conscious but also proud. “I guess it runs in the family. My mom taught me how to cook, and I’ve been practicing since I was young.”

“Very impressive,” he replied, sounding genuinely interested.

I chopped the ingredients, carefully preparing everything for the dish.

As the pinikpikan simmered on the stove, the aroma filled the room, rich with the scent of ginger and the smoky undertones of the dried pork.

I couldn't help but feel a sense of pride as I heard Professor JM inhale deeply from the other room.

"I can smell it from here. It smells amazing," he said, his voice tinged with anticipation.

I smiled, glancing at him. "It's almost ready. I just need to let it cook for a bit longer."

When everything was finally done, I placed the steaming bowl of pinikpikan on the dining table, along with a plate of rice. The golden-brown chicken, rich broth, and tender pork were a sight to behold. It was simple, but the warmth of the meal made everything feel more welcoming.

"Here you go," I said, setting the bowl down in front of him. "I hope it's to your liking."

Professor JM looked at the dish with wide eyes, impressed by the presentation. "I have to admit, I'm already excited. It smells incredible."

I sat down across from him, watching as he took his first bite. His expression softened with genuine surprise. "Wow, Junno. This is... amazing."

A rush of pride filled me at his compliment. "I'm glad you like it. It's a dish from my hometown, so I always feel a connection to it whenever I cook it."

Professor JM smiled, taking another bite. "I can taste the love and care you put into it. It's definitely something special."

We continued eating in companionable silence, the tension that had once lingered between us starting to dissipate.

It was just the two of us, sharing a meal, and in that moment, everything felt easy.

The way he looked at me as he ate, the quiet admiration in his eyes—it was enough to make my heart beat a little faster.

“So,” he said after a few more bites, setting down his spoon. “What’s it like being here? Living away from your family and all.”

I thought for a moment before replying, feeling the warmth of the meal settle comfortably in my stomach. “It’s different, but I like it. I’ve always been independent, so it’s not too hard for me. I miss my family, of course, but I think this is part of growing up.”

He nodded, his gaze softening. “It must be tough, though, adjusting to a new environment and being away from home.”

“It can be,” I said, meeting his eyes for a moment. “But you get used to it. And having moments like this, where I can share something with someone... it makes it all worth it.”

There was a pause between us, a quiet, almost unspoken understanding hanging in the air. The sound of the rain tapping softly against the windows outside filled the silence, adding to the cozy atmosphere.

I hadn’t expected it to happen, but as we sat there, the connection between us deepened.

There was a certain comfort in his presence, a warmth that made the moment feel special.

It wasn’t just the meal; it was the way we interacted, the way he looked at me with a

mixture of admiration and something else that I couldn't quite place.

"Thank you for this, Junno," Professor JM said, breaking the silence with a soft smile. "You've made this a memorable evening. I think I might need to ask for the recipe."

I laughed, feeling a bit shy but grateful. "I'll write it down for you sometime. But you'll have to come back to taste it again first."

He leaned back in his chair, his eyes holding mine for a moment longer than usual. "I think I'd like that."

It was a simple, quiet moment, but it was enough to spark something deeper between us.

As we finished our meal and the evening wore on, I couldn't shake the feeling that this—what we were beginning to share—was more than just friendship.

It felt like the start of something new, something neither of us had expected, but both of us were beginning to enjoy.

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The evening ended far too quickly.

After we finished dinner, I cleaned up the dishes while Professor JM sat on the couch, casually scrolling through his phone.

We'd talked about everything and nothing—college life, travel, food—but there was an unspoken tension between us, something I could sense but couldn't quite put into words.

It wasn't uncomfortable, though.

It was more like a spark, a quiet pull that neither of us was quite ready to acknowledge, but that lingered in the air nonetheless.

As I dried the last plate, I glanced over at him. "I'm glad you enjoyed the meal," I said, breaking the silence. "It's nice to have someone to share it with."

He looked up, his gaze softening. "It was really good, Junno. You've got a talent in the kitchen."

I felt a warmth spread through me, a mix of pride and something else—something deeper that I couldn't quite place. "Thanks, Professor. I'm glad you liked it."

He smiled, the kind of smile that reached his eyes and made my heart skip a beat. "Call me JM, please. No need for the formalities, especially after tonight."

I nodded, my chest tightening a little. "Alright, JM."

He stood up, walking toward the door. “Well, I should probably get going. It’s getting late, and I don’t want to keep you up too long.”

I walked him to the door, and as he reached for the handle, he paused. “Junno... I really enjoyed tonight. More than I expected, actually.”

I smiled, trying to ignore the way my heart was racing. “Me too. I’m glad you came over.”

For a moment, there was a silence, but it wasn’t awkward. It felt like there was something more we could say, something we both were thinking but neither of us dared to voice. The unspoken spark was still there, lingering between us, quiet but undeniable.

“Maybe we could do this again sometime?” he asked, his voice a little more hesitant now, as though he wasn’t sure if he should ask.

“Yeah, I’d like that,” I said, meeting his gaze. “Definitely.”

With a final smile, he opened the door, but before stepping out, he turned back to look at me. “Take care, Junno. I’ll see you at school tomorrow.”

“Goodnight, JM,” I said, feeling my heart flutter as I watched him walk away.

The door clicked shut behind me, and I stood there for a moment, letting the quiet of the apartment settle around me.

My mind was racing, a mix of excitement and confusion swirling inside me.

What was happening between us?

Was this just a passing connection, a fleeting moment between teacher and student?

Or was there something more?

I walked back to the couch and sat down, the room suddenly feeling much emptier without his presence.

The night had been perfect in a way I didn't know how to describe—comforting, fun, and filled with an undeniable connection.

But now, as I sat there alone, I realized how much I wanted to see him again.

The next day at school, things felt different.

I hadn't expected the connection from last night to affect me so much, but it did.

When I walked into the lecture hall, my eyes immediately found Professor JM, who was setting up at the front of the room.

He looked up and caught my gaze, giving me a small but knowing smile.

It made my stomach flutter. I quickly looked away, trying to focus on finding my seat, but my mind kept drifting back to the dinner we'd shared, the way he looked at me with that soft smile, the unspoken things that lingered in the air between us.

The class started, and I tried to pay attention, but my thoughts kept wandering. I wasn't sure what this was, what was happening between us, but I couldn't deny that I was drawn to him. I had never felt this way before, and it was both exciting and terrifying all at once.

At the end of the lecture, when everyone was packing up to leave, Professor JM walked toward me, his steps purposeful.

“Junno,” he said quietly, stopping in front of me. “I’ve been thinking about last night, and I just wanted to thank you again for the dinner. It was... really special.”

I felt a blush creeping up my neck, my heart racing at his words. “It was nothing, really. I’m just glad you liked it.”

He chuckled softly. “Well, you’ve definitely set the bar high for anyone else who might cook for me in the future.”

I couldn’t help but laugh, feeling a little embarrassed but also pleased by his words. “I’m sure there are plenty of people who cook better than me.”

“Maybe,” he said, his voice lowering slightly, “but none of them would’ve made me feel the way you did last night.”

The words hung in the air between us, charged with meaning. I looked up at him, meeting his gaze. There was no mistaking it now—there was something between us, something real, something we could no longer ignore.

“Professor... I mean, JM...” I started, unsure of how to continue.

He took a small step closer, his tone gentle. “Junno, I know this might be confusing. But I don’t want to ignore it anymore. There’s something between us, and I think we should talk about it.”

I nodded, feeling a rush of emotions—excitement, fear, and a strange sense of relief. It wasn’t just in my head. He felt it too.

“Maybe after class?” I suggested, my voice quiet. “We could talk?”

He smiled, the warmth in his eyes making my heart skip a beat. “I’d like that.”

As the room cleared out and I stood there, I felt like I was on the brink of something new. Something I wasn’t sure how to navigate, but something I was more than willing to explore.

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The rest of the day passed in a blur. I couldn't focus on my classes, my mind constantly drifting back to the conversation I was going to have with JM. My heart raced at the thought, and every time I thought about it, I felt a mix of excitement and nervousness.

After the final class of the day, I gathered my things and made my way to the campus café, where we'd agreed to meet.

I was a little early, so I took a seat by the window, watching as students passed by.

The sun was starting to set, casting a warm golden glow over the campus.

The café had a peaceful atmosphere, with only a few students lingering around, enjoying their afternoon coffee.

A few minutes later, I saw JM walk in, his eyes immediately finding mine. There was something different in the way he looked at me now—a sense of anticipation, as if we both knew something had shifted between us.

He walked over and took a seat across from me, his usual calm demeanor replaced by a certain intensity.

"Hey," he said, his voice soft, almost hesitant. "I've been thinking about last night. About... everything."

I nodded, feeling my stomach tighten. "Yeah, me too."

He leaned forward slightly, his gaze focused on me. "Junno, I don't want to make this weird, but I can't deny that there's something between us. I've been feeling it for a while now, but I didn't know how to handle it. You're a student, and I'm your professor, and that makes things complicated."

I swallowed hard, trying to steady my nerves. "I know. I've been thinking about it a lot too. And honestly, I don't know what it means either. But I can't ignore how I feel about you."

He smiled softly, though it was tinged with a hint of sadness. "I'm glad you feel that way. But I don't want to lead you into something that could make things difficult for you. You've got your whole life ahead of you, and I don't want to be the one who complicates it."

I shook my head, my heart racing. "But what if we just... took it one step at a time? We don't have to figure it all out right now, but I don't want to just pretend nothing's happening between us."

JM looked at me, his expression thoughtful, his eyes searching mine. "I don't want to ignore it either," he said finally. "But I also don't want to risk either of us getting hurt."

There was a moment of silence between us, filled with the weight of unspoken words. I could see the conflict in his eyes, the way he was torn between his feelings for me and the responsibility he had as a professor.

"I understand," I said quietly, trying to keep my voice steady. "But what if we just tried? What if we didn't have to label it right away? We could just... see where it goes."

JM seemed to consider this for a long moment, and for a second, I was worried he

was going to pull away. But then he sighed, leaning back in his chair.

"I think... I think that's the best we can do for now. But I need you to understand that I'm not taking this lightly. I care about you, Junno, and I don't want to hurt you."

I felt my heart skip a beat at his words. "I care about you too, JM. And I'm not going into this blindly. I just want us to figure it out together."

His expression softened, and for the first time that evening, I saw a glimpse of the warmth I'd felt during our dinner—the way he looked at me with something deeper than just admiration.

"Alright," he said, a small smile tugging at his lips. "We'll take it one step at a time."

We sat there for a while longer, just talking about everything and nothing, the weight of our conversation slowly lifting.

The tension between us hadn't disappeared completely, but it felt different now.

We had a sense of understanding, a quiet agreement that we would move forward—slowly, cautiously, but together.

As the café began to empty, JM stood up, and I followed suit.

"Thanks for this, Junno," he said softly, his eyes meeting mine. "I'm glad we talked."

"Me too," I replied, my voice a little more confident now. "We'll figure it out. Together."

He smiled, and for a brief moment, I forgot all about the world outside. All that mattered was this small step we'd just taken together.

"Goodnight, Junno," he said, his tone almost intimate. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Goodnight, JM," I replied, watching him walk away, my heart still pounding in my chest.

As I made my way back to my apartment that night, I couldn't help but replay our conversation over and over in my mind.

It wasn't a promise, not yet, but it was a step—a step toward something neither of us had expected.

And even though the road ahead was uncertain, I couldn't shake the feeling that this was just the beginning of something real.

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The next few days were a blur of classes, assignments, and the usual hustle of campus life, but in the quiet moments, my mind kept drifting back to JM.

The conversation we'd had at the café kept replaying in my head.

We had agreed to take things one step at a time, but I couldn't shake the feeling that something was shifting between us.

I had no idea where it would lead, but I couldn't ignore the connection that had sparked between us.

One evening, after finishing my assignments for the day, I found myself sitting in my small apartment, staring at my phone.

There was something I wanted to say to JM, something I couldn't quite get out of my head.

My thumb hovered over the screen, unsure of whether I should send the message.

But before I could decide, my phone buzzed with a text notification.

It was from him.

JM: Hey Junno, I know you've been busy, but I've been thinking about our conversation. I hope you're doing okay. Don't want you to feel like I'm putting any pressure on you, I just want to make sure you're good.

I stared at the message for a moment, feeling a rush of warmth spread through me. He'd been thinking about it too. I quickly typed out a response.

Junno: Hey JM, I'm doing fine, really. I've been thinking a lot too, and I just want to make sure we're both okay with how things are going. I don't want this to be something that complicates things for either of us, but I can't deny how much I enjoy talking to you.

There was a brief pause before his response came in, and my heart skipped a beat when I saw it.

JM: I enjoy talking to you too, more than I expected. Honestly, Junno, I've been trying to keep my distance, to avoid crossing any lines. But the more I get to know you, the more I realize how much I care about you.

My fingers trembled slightly as I read his words. I couldn't deny that I felt the same way, but hearing him say it out loud, in text, made my heart race. I quickly typed back.

Junno: I care about you too, JM. And I don't want to overthink it, but I also don't want to pretend nothing's happening. I feel something between us, something real.

The reply came faster this time, and when I read it, I felt a mixture of excitement and vulnerability.

JM: I don't want to overthink it either. But maybe we should take a chance. We don't have to make any big decisions right now, but I can't help but want to see where this goes.

I stared at the screen for a long moment. My heart was pounding in my chest, and I felt a nervous excitement build within me. This wasn't just a fleeting connection.

This was real, and it was happening.

Junno: I want that too, JM. I really do.

There was a long pause after that, and I began to second-guess myself. Had I said too much? Should I have been more cautious? But just as doubt started to creep in, his next message appeared.

JM: Then let's just keep it between us for now. I'm not ready to make any big announcements, but I want you to know that I'm serious about this. About us. So if you're in, I'm all in.

I felt a wave of relief wash over me. It was like a weight had been lifted, and I realized I had been holding my breath for this moment. I smiled to myself as I typed my reply.

Junno: I'm in, JM. Let's take it slow and see where it leads. Together.

The message sent, and for a moment, I just sat there, letting the silence fill the room. I couldn't believe what had just happened. We had crossed a line, but in the best way possible. Something had shifted, and I knew things would never be the same between us again.

JM: I'm glad to hear that, Junno. You've made my day.

I laughed softly, feeling a warmth spread through me. We were both in this, and for the first time in a while, I felt like everything was aligning.

The next day, I couldn't stop thinking about the text exchange. Every time I looked at

my phone, I found myself checking for new messages from him. He was on my mind constantly, and I was more than okay with it.

We spent the next few days texting back and forth, sometimes about nothing, sometimes about everything. He would check in to see how I was doing, and I'd share little details of my day. It was like we were building something, slowly but surely, one message at a time.

One night, I texted him after class, feeling a little braver.

Junno: Hey JM, I was thinking... maybe we could hang out again this weekend? Just the two of us. No pressure, just coffee or something. What do you think?

His reply came almost immediately.

JM: I'd love that. I've been thinking about you, and I think it's time we do something more than just text.

My heart skipped a beat. It was happening. We were moving forward, and I couldn't wait to see where it would lead.

As I closed my phone and put it on the desk, I felt an overwhelming sense of anticipation. Things were changing, and no matter where this would go, I knew one thing for sure: I was ready to take the next step with JM.

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The weekend couldn't come soon enough.

After our exchange of texts, I was excited but also a little nervous.

We had decided to meet for coffee, something simple, just to hang out and get to know each other better without the distractions of campus life.

But there was something different in the air now.

The unspoken connection between JM and me had deepened, and I couldn't shake the feeling that this coffee date would mark another significant step in whatever it was we were building.

Saturday morning arrived, and I spent the day cleaning my apartment, making sure everything was in order, and giving myself the pep talk I needed.

I couldn't believe I was actually going to meet with JM outside of class—outside of the professor-student dynamic that had been the foundation of our relationship until now.

What would happen when we were just two people?

Would things feel different?

Around 4 p.m., I got a message from him.

JM: Hey, I'm at the café already. Where are you?

I quickly typed a reply.

Junno: I'm on my way. Be there in 10 minutes.

I checked my reflection in the mirror, made sure my outfit was casual but presentable—blue jeans, a simple black shirt, and my favorite sneakers. Nothing too fancy, but enough to feel like I'd put some thought into it.

When I arrived, I spotted JM right away.

He was sitting by the window, a cup of coffee in front of him, scrolling through his phone.

He looked relaxed, but there was an edge of nervousness in his posture, like he was just as unsure about this as I was.

I walked over to his table, trying to suppress the butterflies in my stomach.

"Hey," I said with a small smile, trying to keep it casual.

JM looked up, and his face lit up when he saw me. He immediately stood up, pushing his chair back, and gestured for me to sit.

"Hey, Junno," he said, his voice warmer than I'd ever heard it before. "Glad you could make it."

I sat down, my heart still racing. "Of course. Wouldn't miss it." I smiled, feeling the tension between us shift just a little.

We ordered coffee—me, a cappuccino, and him, a simple black coffee.

The conversation started slowly at first.

We talked about the usual things: how our week had been, the classes we were taking, what we were working on.

But slowly, as we continued to talk, the conversation became more personal.

It was as if we were both testing the waters, finding the right balance between professor and student, and two people trying to navigate something new.

I found myself laughing more than I had in a while, enjoying JM's sense of humor and how easy it was to talk to him. His smile was genuine, and I could feel the connection between us growing stronger with each passing minute.

"So, how's everything going with your studies?" he asked, leaning back in his chair, his eyes studying me in a way that made me feel like he was paying attention to every word I said.

I shrugged, trying to keep it light. "It's going alright. Some days are better than others. But I'm managing. And you? How's being a professor treating you?"

He chuckled, shaking his head. "It's... different. I've been teaching for a few years, but I still get nervous before every class. There's a lot of responsibility. But it's rewarding, in its own way."

I smiled, appreciating his honesty. "I get that. It must be tough balancing everything. I mean, you're a professor, but you're also still human, you know?"

JM raised an eyebrow, his lips curling into a teasing smile. "You think I'm human?"

I laughed, feeling a little more at ease. "You have to be. No one can be perfect all the

time.”

We shared a moment of comfortable silence, sipping our drinks.

I found myself watching him more closely than I probably should have, noticing the way his eyes seemed to soften when he looked at me, the way he seemed completely in tune with our conversation.

There was something about him that was magnetic—something I couldn’t quite put my finger on.

“You know,” he said, breaking the silence, “I’m glad we’re doing this. It feels good to just... be ourselves, outside of school. No expectations, no pressure.” He paused, his voice softer now. “I’m really glad we decided to take that step.”

I nodded, feeling my chest tighten slightly. “Me too. It’s... it’s nice, actually, to not have to worry about anything else. Just us.”

His gaze softened even more, and he leaned in a little closer. “I’ve been thinking about it a lot, Junno. About us. And I’m not going to lie—I’m excited. Nervous, but excited.”

I couldn’t help but smile. “Same here. But... are we allowed to be excited? Is that okay?” I asked, half-joking, but there was an undertone of seriousness to my question.

JM’s eyes locked onto mine, and for a moment, everything else faded away. “Yeah, Junno. It’s okay. Whatever this is, it’s real. And I’m not afraid to see where it goes.”

The air between us shifted, and I felt a new layer of trust open up. We weren’t just playing it safe anymore. We were acknowledging what was happening, and for the

first time, it felt like we were both on the same page.

After finishing our coffee, I hesitated for a moment, then asked, “Hey, I know this is kind of random, but would you want to grab some street food with me after this?”

JM chuckled, his eyes sparkling. “I’m in. That sounds perfect.”

We left the café together, and as we walked to my apartment, our conversation continued to flow naturally.

There was a sense of ease now, no longer clouded by uncertainty.

By the time we reached the street food stall near my apartment, the night had fully settled in, and the world around us seemed to fade into the background.

As we ate, the street lights flickered above us, and I couldn’t help but smile. This moment, simple as it was, felt like the beginning of something new—something real.

Later that night, after JM had left and I was sitting alone in my apartment, I found myself thinking about everything that had happened. It was a new chapter, one that had started with a simple cup of coffee, and now felt like it was leading somewhere deeper.

I couldn’t predict the future, but for the first time, I was okay with that. Whatever came next, I knew that I was ready to face it with JM by my side.

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The days after that evening seemed to blur together.

Classes, assignments, and late-night study sessions filled the hours, but my thoughts often wandered back to JM.

What we had started felt different from anything I had experienced before, and the more time I spent with him, the more I realized how deeply my feelings for him had grown.

But I was also learning that navigating this relationship wasn't going to be as simple as I had hoped.

It was Wednesday evening when I received a text from JM, just as I was about to head out to grab dinner.

JM: Hey Junno, can I ask you something?

I raised an eyebrow. It was unusual for him to text me out of the blue like this, and it felt like a significant moment. I quickly typed back.

Junno: Of course, what's up?

A few seconds passed before he replied.

JM: Do you ever think about what this... what we're doing means?

My heart skipped a beat. It was the kind of question I had been avoiding asking

myself, but now that it was out there, I couldn't ignore it. What did this mean? Were we crossing a line, or was this something real?

I took a deep breath and typed carefully.

Junno: I've been thinking about it a lot, honestly. It's hard not to. I think... I think we're getting into something complicated. But I don't want to stop, either. I want to see where this goes.

The text bubble seemed to take forever to fill on the other end. My pulse quickened, and I found myself holding my breath as I waited for him to reply. Finally, the message came through.

JM: I don't want to complicate things for you, Junno. You're just starting your college life, and I'm... well, I'm not exactly in the same place. I care about you, a lot, but I don't want to put you in a position where you feel like you have to choose between us and your future.

I stared at the screen, unsure how to respond.

I understood what he was saying.

He was trying to protect me, trying to keep me from making a decision that might affect my future.

But at the same time, I didn't want to run away from what we had.

My emotions were tangled, caught between the excitement of something new and the fear of what it might mean for both of us.

Junno: I'm not in a rush to make any decisions either. But I can't deny how I feel. I

think about you all the time, and I'm willing to face whatever comes next—together.

The reply came almost immediately.

JM: That's a lot to ask, Junno. I don't want you to feel pressured. But if we're really going to do this, we need to be honest with each other. No games, no pretending.

I let his words sink in. He was right. Honesty was the key. We had both been tiptoeing around the truth, avoiding what lay beneath our conversations. But now it was time to face it.

I sent one last message before putting my phone down.

Junno: I'm in. No games. Just... us.

The weight in my chest lifted slightly as I hit send. It felt like we were on the same page now, like we were both ready to face whatever came next. But there was a lingering sense of uncertainty, and I knew we'd have to take this one day at a time.

The next few days were a whirlwind. I felt a constant tug in my chest when I thought about JM, and the small moments we shared in between classes seemed to be the highlight of my day. But there was a tension now, an unspoken awareness that we were venturing into deeper waters.

One afternoon, I found myself in the library, nose buried in my textbook, when I felt a tap on my shoulder. I looked up to see JM standing there, his usual calm smile replaced with something a little more intense.

"Hey," he said, his voice low. "Got a minute?"

I nodded, my heart racing. "Of course. What's up?"

He glanced around the library, ensuring no one was watching, then leaned in a little closer. "Can we talk? Not here. Somewhere more private."

My stomach fluttered. I couldn't ignore the tension in the air as I followed him out of the library and toward the courtyard. It was quieter outside, and I could feel my nerves building with every step.

Once we were seated on a bench, away from the crowds, JM turned to me, his expression serious. "Junno, I don't want to hide anymore. I'm done pretending this isn't happening between us."

I could barely breathe as he spoke. My pulse quickened, but I knew I couldn't run from this.

"Neither do I," I replied, voice barely above a whisper. "But we need to be careful, JM. This isn't just between us. People are starting to talk."

He nodded, his brow furrowing in thought. "I know. I've heard the rumors. It's hard to ignore them, but I'm not going to let them dictate what we have."

I took a deep breath, my mind racing. "What if they're right? What if we're making a mistake?"

JM reached out, his hand brushing against mine, a gentle reassurance. "We're not making a mistake, Junno. I've never been more sure of anything in my life. But I'm not blind to the risks, either. I just... I want to be with you. I don't care about the rumors. I don't care what anyone else thinks."

His words hung in the air, and for a moment, I didn't know what to say. My mind

was a whirlwind of emotions—fear, excitement, and something else I couldn't quite put into words. But as I looked into his eyes, I realized that whatever this was, I didn't want to let it go. Not yet.

"I want to be with you too," I said, my voice steadier now. "But we need to be careful. We have to take things one step at a time."

JM gave me a small, relieved smile. "I can do that. We'll take it slow, Junno. But I won't let go."

The conversation that afternoon didn't answer all the questions, but it gave me a sense of peace I hadn't felt in days. We weren't rushing into anything. We were just being honest, facing what was happening between us with the same vulnerability and trust we had built so far.

We walked back to the campus together, the tension from earlier replaced with a quiet understanding. Whatever came next, we were ready to face it—together.

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It was Saturday afternoon when I sent the message. I had been thinking about it all week, unsure of how to approach it. But I was finally ready.

Junno: Hey, JM. How about dinner tonight? We can cook together, if you're up for it.

The response came almost immediately.

JM: I'd love that. What are we making?

I smiled to myself, a surge of excitement rushing through me. It had been a while since I had cooked something from scratch, and the idea of cooking with JM made it even more exciting.

Junno: How about a little Pinikpikan?

JM: I'm counting on you, Junno! See you tonight.

As the day went on, I found myself cleaning up my small apartment, preparing for his arrival.

It wasn't anything extravagant—just a cozy dinner for two, but it felt special.

I set the table by the window, lit a couple of candles, and played some soft music in the background.

The evening already felt different.

When the doorbell rang, my heart skipped a beat. I opened the door, and there he was—JM, standing there with a small bag of ingredients in his hand. He smiled, his eyes lighting up as he took in the setup.

"This looks nice," he said, stepping inside. "You really know how to make things feel... special."

I blushed, trying to ignore the way my stomach fluttered at his compliment. "Well, I'm glad you like it. Ready to cook?"

He grinned, a playful glint in his eyes. "Absolutely. Let's see if I can keep up."

We moved to the kitchen, both of us excited but slightly nervous. Cooking together felt like a small but meaningful step for us, and I could tell that JM was just as eager as I was.

We laughed and talked as we worked, prepping the chicken and chopping the vegetables.

As we shared small moments, the conversation turned more casual, less guarded.

JM helped me stir the pot while I was adding spices, and every so often, he would reach over to adjust the heat or give me a quick glance, as if testing the waters between us.

Dinner was ready before we knew it—pinikpikan, perfectly cooked. We sat down at the table, enjoying the food we had made together, but there was an undeniable tension in the air. With every glance we exchanged, every laugh, it became harder to ignore the pull between us.

As we finished up, JM stood and moved toward the sink without a word. I watched

him for a moment, his focus on the dishes, the way his hands moved with ease. It was simple—just a normal part of life—but everything felt magnified in this quiet moment.

I joined him at the sink, standing beside him as we washed the plates.

The closeness between us was electric, and I could feel my heart racing.

It was like the room was getting smaller, the air thicker.

We were standing side by side, neither of us speaking, but the silence felt charged, alive with unspoken words.

I turned to him, my breath catching in my throat. "You know, I didn't expect this to be... this easy," I said, my voice barely a whisper.

JM paused, his hand frozen in the soapy water. He slowly turned to face me, his eyes darkened with something I couldn't quite place. "Yeah," he murmured, his voice low and almost breathless. "I didn't expect it either."

There was a moment of silence as we both stood there, the only sound the faint hum of the refrigerator and the water running in the sink. Then, almost instinctively, I reached out, gently touching his arm.

"Junno," he whispered, and I could feel the weight of his gaze on me.

Before I knew it, he was stepping closer, his hand moving to rest on my waist. My heart pounded in my chest, and I felt the space between us shrink. It was like everything else in the world faded away, and all I could focus on was him—his touch, the heat of his body against mine.

I didn't know who moved first, but in the next instant, his lips were on mine.

The kiss was soft at first, tentative, as if we were both testing the waters.

But soon, it deepened, a rush of passion building between us.

His hand slid to the back of my neck, pulling me closer, while my hands found their way to his shirt, gripping him tightly.

It was like an explosion of everything we had been holding back—the chemistry, the attraction, the emotions that had been simmering under the surface for so long.

I was lost in the kiss, in the way his lips moved against mine, in the way his touch made everything else in the world disappear.

I could feel the warmth of his body, the urgency in his movements.

There was no going back now, no pretending that this was just something casual.

We had crossed a line, and neither of us could ignore it.

When we finally pulled away, we both stood there for a moment, breathless, eyes locked. My heart was still racing, and I could feel the warmth of his lips lingering on mine.

"Wow," JM whispered, his voice hoarse.

"Yeah," I replied, still in a daze. "Wow."

He smiled, his fingers brushing against my cheek in a gentle caress. "I've wanted to do that for a long time," he admitted softly, his eyes searching mine.

I swallowed, my thoughts a whirlwind of emotions. "Me too," I confessed. "But I didn't want to rush things."

"We don't have to rush," he murmured, his voice full of reassurance. "We can take this slow. But I can't hide how I feel anymore, Junno. I want you. I want this."

I nodded, feeling a sense of relief wash over me. "I want it too," I said quietly, my voice barely above a whisper. "I want us."

We stood there for a moment, just looking at each other, letting the words settle between us. There was still a lot to figure out, still a lot of challenges ahead, but for the first time in weeks, I felt certain of one thing: whatever came next, we were ready to face it together.

As the evening wore on, we sat back down on the couch, side by side, talking and laughing as if nothing had changed. But in that quiet moment, I knew that everything had. And I wouldn't have it any other way.

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The days that followed our first kiss were a whirlwind.

Everything felt different, charged with the energy of our newfound closeness.

It was like we were walking on a fine line between what was familiar and something new, something deeper.

It wasn't awkward, though—if anything, it was the opposite.

There was a quiet understanding between us, unspoken but ever-present, that we had crossed into uncharted territory.

We didn't talk about the kiss immediately.

The first few days felt like we were giving each other space to figure out what it meant.

I wasn't in any rush to label it or push it forward.

It felt like a new chapter, and I wanted to savor it.

But it didn't stop the rest of campus from talking.

As much as we tried to keep things between us, the whispers only grew louder.

One afternoon, as I walked into the library, I overheard a group of students gossiping near the entrance.

"Did you hear about Professor JM and Junno?" one of them whispered. "They've been seen together a lot lately. I heard they're... more than just teacher and student."

I froze for a second, not out of surprise—after all, I knew the rumors were inevitable—but because the words made my heart race. I wasn't sure how to feel about the attention, but it was clear that people were watching us. It was all anyone seemed to talk about whenever we were in the same room.

But despite the gossip, something about it felt... freeing. I could still see JM's gentle smile when we exchanged glances in the hallway, the warmth in his voice when he asked how my day was going. The tension between us only seemed to grow, the distance between us narrowing with every passing day.

That evening, as the campus slowly quieted, I found myself at the same café where we had shared our first coffee. I'd just finished a study session when I received a message from JM.

JM: Meet me in the usual spot?

I couldn't help but smile at the message. I knew exactly where he meant—the quiet bench near the back of the campus where we had talked late into the night the first time we had really opened up to each other.

I grabbed my bag and made my way there, my heart pounding in anticipation. As I rounded the corner, I saw him waiting for me, leaning casually against the bench. His eyes lit up when he saw me, and my nerves immediately settled.

"Hey," I said softly, offering a smile.

"Hey, Junno." His voice was warm, inviting, and I felt a sense of peace settle over me just from hearing it.

We sat down together, the familiar silence between us no longer awkward. It was a comfortable silence, the kind shared between two people who had been through something significant. And we both knew that something had shifted—whether we wanted to say it out loud or not.

"You've been avoiding me in class," I teased, nudging him lightly.

He chuckled, looking down at the ground for a moment before meeting my gaze. "It's hard not to, with everyone watching us."

I nodded, understanding exactly what he meant. "Yeah, the gossip's getting out of hand," I admitted. "But I don't mind it. Not really."

JM raised an eyebrow, his lips curling into a faint smile. "You don't mind people talking about us?"

"Not as long as we know what it means," I replied quietly. "As long as we're... honest with each other."

There was a brief pause before JM spoke again, his voice softer than before.

"I don't want you to feel like you have to hide, Junno. I don't want us to be just a rumor. I want to be with you."

His words felt like a weight had been lifted off my chest. Hearing him say it out loud made everything real, and for the first time, the fear of what others thought didn't matter. What mattered was the truth between us—the truth that I couldn't deny.

"I want that too, JM," I said, my voice steady, my heart certain. "I want us."

His eyes softened, and he took my hand in his, holding it gently. "Then we'll make it

work. Together."

We sat there for a while, just holding hands, letting the world go on around us as we shared this quiet moment of clarity. No more pretending, no more hiding. The unspoken truth was out in the open now, and it felt like a new beginning.

As the evening wore on, the air cooled, and the campus slowly quieted around us. We didn't need to say much more. We both knew what we wanted, and that was enough for now.

For the first time, the future didn't seem so uncertain. Whatever challenges lay ahead, we would face them together.

When we finally stood up to leave, JM leaned in, brushing a soft kiss across my forehead. "I'll see you soon, Junno," he whispered.

I smiled, my heart full. "Yeah, I'll see you soon."

As I walked back to my apartment, I couldn't stop smiling. The world had changed, and with it, my place in it. And for the first time, I was ready to embrace whatever came next.

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The semester break had finally arrived, and with it came a welcome pause from the usual hustle of college life.

For the first time in months, I had nothing pressing on my schedule, and the freedom felt almost surreal.

But there was one thing I knew for certain: I wouldn't be spending this break alone.

It was a Thursday afternoon when I received a message from JM.

JM: Hey, Junno. How about a trip to Vigan? I thought it'd be nice to get away and relax for a few days. What do you think?

I couldn't help but grin at the message. Vigan—famous for its historical charm and beautiful landscapes—sounded like the perfect place to unwind. And more than that, the idea of spending time with JM, just the two of us, away from everything, felt like a dream come true.

Junno: That sounds amazing. Let's do it! When do we leave?

JM: How about tomorrow? I'll make the arrangements. Just pack light.

I quickly set aside my books and focused on getting everything ready. A trip to Vigan with JM—this was more than just a getaway. It was a chance for us to be ourselves without the weight of the world watching us, a chance to explore what was slowly growing between us.

The next morning, we met at the bus terminal. JM was already there, waiting by the entrance with a small duffel bag slung over his shoulder. He looked casual but undeniably handsome, wearing a simple white shirt and dark jeans. His smile when he saw me was enough to make my heart skip a beat.

"Ready for an adventure?" he asked, his eyes sparkling with excitement.

I nodded, a grin spreading across my face. "Absolutely. Let's go."

The journey to Vigan was long but scenic, the bus weaving through picturesque landscapes as we moved farther from the city.

We talked about everything—school, life, and even some things that were still unspoken.

The conversation flowed naturally, and it felt like time was moving slower, just for us.

When we arrived in Vigan, the town's old-world charm immediately swept us away.

The cobblestone streets, the Spanish-era architecture, and the quiet beauty of the place made it feel like we had stepped back in time.

We checked into a cozy guesthouse and spent the afternoon strolling through the town, visiting historical landmarks, and sampling local delicacies.

Later that evening, we found ourselves at a quiet café overlooking the picturesque streets of Vigan. The sun was setting, casting a golden hue over the town. It was peaceful, and I could feel the weight of the semester lift off my shoulders with every passing moment.

As we sat down with our drinks, JM leaned back in his chair, looking over at me. The air between us felt different now—gentler, warmer. His gaze was steady, and for a moment, neither of us spoke. The silence felt comfortable, like two people who had found a place to simply be together.

"Junno," JM began, his voice low, almost hesitant. "I've been thinking a lot about us. About how this has been... growing between us."

I felt my chest tighten at his words, but it wasn't from fear. It was something else. Something deeper. "I've been thinking about that too," I replied softly, looking into his eyes. "I don't want this to end."

A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "Neither do I. I never thought I'd feel like this again, not after everything. But with you... it feels different. Like I finally found something that makes sense."

I reached across the table, taking his hand in mine. The warmth of his touch sent a surge of emotion through me, and I squeezed his fingers gently. "I feel the same way. I didn't expect any of this, but I'm glad it happened. I don't think I've ever felt this way about anyone before."

His gaze softened, and I saw something vulnerable in his eyes that made my heart ache. "Junno, I don't want us to just be a secret anymore. I want to be with you. All of you. And I'm willing to take things slow if that's what you want, but I need you to know that I'm all in."

I smiled, my heart swelling with affection for him. "I want that too, JM. I want to see where this goes. I want us."

The weight of the moment lingered, and for the first time, I felt a sense of certainty that I had never known before. Whatever came next, we would face it together. And it

felt like the start of something beautiful.

As the evening wore on, we walked through the quiet streets of Vigan, enjoying each other's company in the calm of the night. The lights of the old town twinkled in the distance, and the cool breeze carried the scent of the sea, mixing with the sweet aroma of freshly made empanada.

We returned to our guesthouse just as the night sky stretched out above us. The dim lighting in the room created a peaceful atmosphere, and I could feel my exhaustion from the day's activities catching up with me. But I didn't want the night to end just yet.

As we stood in the doorway of our room, JM turned to face me, his expression serious yet tender. "Junno," he said softly, his voice barely above a whisper. "I don't want to rush anything, but I want to be close to you. I don't want to leave this moment."

I nodded, my heart racing. "I don't want to rush either, but I want to be close to you too."

Before I could say another word, JM closed the space between us, his lips capturing mine in a kiss that was soft and slow at first, but soon turned more intense.

It was like everything that had been building between us was finally released, and I let myself fall into the kiss, feeling the heat of his touch as he gently pulled me closer.

The kiss deepened, and I could feel the desire between us building, an unspoken need that neither of us could deny anymore. When we pulled away, breathless and flushed, I knew that this was no longer just about attraction. This was something deeper. Something real.

"Are you sure about this?" JM asked, his voice low, his forehead resting against mine.

I nodded, my fingers brushing against his jaw. "Yes. I'm sure."

That night, we shared something more than just a physical connection.

It was a moment of vulnerability, of trust, as we allowed ourselves to fully be with each other.

And in the quiet of the room, under the soft glow of the night, I knew that our feelings for each other had grown deeper, turning into something that felt like love.

The road ahead wouldn't always be easy. We both knew that. But in that moment, as we lay side by side, our hearts beating in sync, it felt like everything was finally falling into place.

And for the first time, I felt truly at home.

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The night in Vigan was unlike any other I had ever experienced.

The air was cool and carried the faint scent of the sea, the rustling of the trees outside our guesthouse offering a peaceful backdrop to the quiet stillness between us.

After our kiss, neither of us spoke for a while.

There was no need to.

The weight of the moment, of everything we had just shared, settled around us like a soft, comforting blanket.

JM led me to the bed, where we sat together, the space between us filled only by the quiet hum of the evening.

He reached out, gently brushing a stray lock of hair from my face, and his fingers lingered there, as if tracing the contours of my skin in a way that was both tender and reverent.

I closed my eyes, savoring the feeling of his touch—the warmth of it, the sincerity behind every small movement.

"I never thought I'd be here," JM whispered, his voice almost a breath. "I never thought I'd feel like this again."

I turned to face him, meeting his eyes.

The depth of emotion in them made my heart swell.

It wasn't just physical attraction between us anymore—it was something far more meaningful.

Something that grew deeper with every shared moment.

"I never expected this either, JM. But I'm glad it's with you. I feel... I feel like I can be myself with you, completely."

He smiled softly, his lips curling into that same gentle expression that had always made my heart race. "You don't have to hide anything from me, Junno. I see you. All of you."

The words hit me in a way I hadn't anticipated.

It wasn't just the physical closeness that mattered—it was the emotional vulnerability that we had slowly but surely built together.

I had never felt so seen, so understood, in my entire life.

It wasn't just a physical connection we were sharing; it was an emotional bond that felt stronger than anything I had ever known.

In that moment, we simply existed together. No barriers, no pretenses—just two people learning to be honest with themselves and each other.

We lay down next to each other, the room dimly lit by a soft bedside lamp. I could feel the steady rise and fall of his chest as we both relaxed into the comfort of the bed. Neither of us was in a rush. There was no urgency, no pressure. Just two hearts that had found their rhythm.

As the night stretched on, we shared stories—of our past, our dreams, our hopes for the future.

We talked about the things we hadn't dared to speak of before, the fears that had always lingered in the background, and the small things that made us who we were.

JM listened with an attentiveness that made me feel valued, and I did the same for him.

In that quiet space, we allowed ourselves to be vulnerable, to show the parts of ourselves that we had kept hidden from the world.

And when the conversation lulled, we found ourselves falling into a comfortable silence once more. Our hands found each other, fingers intertwining as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

"Junno," JM whispered, breaking the silence, his voice warm and soft. "I'm really glad we came here. This... this feels right."

I turned to face him, my heart racing in my chest. "Me too," I said, my voice barely audible. "It feels like everything's finally falling into place."

With that, we fell into a peaceful quiet once more, letting the intimacy of the moment wash over us. We didn't need to say anything more. The connection we had built over the past few months was more than enough.

In the stillness of that room, under the soft glow of the moonlight that filtered through the window, I realized that this was more than just a trip or a fleeting connection. This was the beginning of something deeper. Something lasting.

The night passed slowly, and as we both drifted into a peaceful sleep, I felt the

certainty of our bond—stronger than ever before. Whatever the future held, I knew one thing for sure: we would face it together.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:53 am

The morning after our quiet, intimate night together in Vigan, the town greeted us with soft rays of sunlight filtering through the window, casting a golden hue over everything. The air was fresh, the world outside still, as if holding its breath for the moment we had just shared.

I woke up to the gentle warmth of JM beside me.

His arm was draped across my waist, his breath steady and calm.

For a while, I simply lay there, feeling the weight of everything that had happened, everything we had become.

There was a sense of peace that enveloped me—a peace that had eluded me for so long, now found in his presence.

I gently shifted, trying not to disturb him. The movement caused his eyes to flutter open, and when he saw me, a soft smile spread across his face. It was the kind of smile that made my heart skip a beat, the kind that made me feel like the most important person in the world.

“Morning,” he whispered, his voice husky from sleep.

“Morning,” I replied, my voice just as soft, almost in awe of the moment we were sharing.

For a few minutes, we just stayed there, wrapped in the comfort of each other’s presence. The world outside was still, but inside the room, it felt as though time had

slowed, allowing us to savor the quiet intimacy between us. There were no words necessary; our eyes spoke volumes.

But then, with a hint of playfulness in his eyes, JM leaned in closer. “I never thought I’d wake up like this,” he murmured, his lips brushing against my forehead. “I never thought I’d feel this way again.”

I smiled, my heart full. “It feels like a dream, doesn’t it?”

He nodded, but there was something in his eyes that told me he wasn’t just talking about the moment. He was talking about us. About what we had built together.

“I’ve never felt more sure of anything in my life,” he said, his voice steady, his hand reaching out to gently tuck a lock of hair. “Junno, you make everything feel... right. You make me feel right.”

The words were simple, but they carried so much weight. In those few sentences, I heard everything I needed to know. His heart was open to me, just as mine was to him. And the connection between us, something that had started as a spark, was now a flame that neither of us wanted to extinguish.

“I feel the same way, JM,” I replied, my voice thick with emotion. “I don’t think I’ve ever felt like this. Like I can truly be myself. Like I’m not alone anymore.”

He smiled, his thumb gently brushing over the back of my hand as it rested on his chest. “You’re not alone anymore, Junno. I’ll always be here for you. Always.”

I closed my eyes for a moment, taking in the depth of what we were saying. This wasn’t just infatuation or a passing fling. This was something real. Something deep. Something that was growing stronger with each passing day.

“I love you, JM,” I said, the words flowing out of me before I could stop them. It wasn’t something I had planned to say, but it was the truth. I realized then, in that quiet moment, that I had fallen for him—completely and utterly.

His eyes softened as he looked at me, and I saw something in them that made my heart swell. There was no hesitation, no doubt in his expression. Only certainty.

“I love you too, Junno,” he whispered, his hand gently cupping my cheek. “I’ve never said those words so freely before. But with you... it feels like the only thing that makes sense.”

I felt a surge of emotion at his words, my heart racing in my chest. The simple yet profound truth of what we had was overwhelming in the best possible way.

The room seemed to hold its breath as we shared that moment. Our love was new, but it felt like it had always been there, quietly building, waiting for the right moment to bloom. And now, here it was—our love, raw and real, blossoming in a way neither of us had expected.

We spent the rest of the day exploring the beautiful streets of Vigan together, hand in hand.

The town, with its Spanish-era architecture and cobblestone streets, seemed to echo the timelessness of what we were building.

Every glance we exchanged, every laugh we shared, felt like a promise that we were in this together, no matter what the future held.

As the evening approached, we found a quiet spot near the river, the setting sun casting a soft, golden glow over the water. We sat together, our shoulders touching, the silence between us comfortable and filled with meaning.

“I love how we can just be together like this,” JM said, his voice low and thoughtful. “No pretenses, no worries. Just us.”

I nodded, my head resting against his shoulder. “It feels like we’ve known each other forever.”

“We’re just getting started,” he said with a smile, kissing the top of my head. “And I’m looking forward to every moment of it.”

As the night settled in, the stars above us began to shine brightly, their light reflecting in the quiet river below. And in that moment, I felt a sense of peace, a certainty that no matter where life took us, we would always have each other.

“I love you, Junno,” JM whispered once more, his voice full of emotion.

“I love you too, JM,” I replied, the words carrying more weight than I could have ever imagined.

And as we sat there together, under the starry sky, I knew that our love had grown deeper than either of us had ever expected. This was only the beginning of our journey, and I couldn’t wait to see where it would take us.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:53 am

The following days in Vigan felt like a dream.

We explored the town's historical sites, walked hand-in-hand through the picturesque streets, and spent quiet evenings under the stars, our conversations flowing easily as we shared more of our pasts, hopes, and fears.

The love that had been growing between us now felt solid, undeniable, like the very ground we walked on.

One afternoon, as we sat by a quaint café near the town square, sipping fresh fruit shakes and enjoying the warm breeze, I couldn't help but reflect on how much had changed in such a short time.

Only months ago, I had arrived in La trinidad as a fresh-faced student, uncertain of what awaited me.

I never could have imagined then that I would find someone like JM—someone who made me feel seen, understood, and, most importantly, loved.

“So,” JM said, breaking my reverie, “what’s next for us, Junno? When we get back to La Trinidad, I mean.”

I glanced at him, a playful smile tugging at my lips. “What do you mean, what’s next? I thought we’d just keep doing what we’ve been doing—being together.”

He chuckled, leaning back in his chair, his eyes twinkling with amusement. “Well, yeah, obviously. But I mean, are we going to keep this quiet, or are we going to tell

people? I don't know about you, but I think I'm getting kind of tired of pretending."

His words made me pause.

I had thought about it too—what it would be like when we went back to our normal lives, back to school, back to the campus where everyone had been so eager to gossip about us.

I'd never really been one to care about what people thought, but this was different.

This was JM.

And now that we had shared so much, I wasn't sure how I wanted to navigate the world outside of us.

"I don't want to hide this anymore, JM," I said, my voice steady and sure. "I don't want to be afraid of what people might think. We've already built something real, and that's all that matters."

He reached across the table, taking my hand in his. His thumb gently stroked the back of my hand, and his eyes softened. "I feel the same way. I don't want to hide us either."

The warmth of his words settled over me like a comforting blanket, and in that moment, I knew we were on the same page. We were ready to face whatever came next—together.

As the days passed, our trip to Vigan slowly came to an end. We packed our bags, ready to return to the reality of school, but I couldn't help but feel different. Stronger. More grounded in who I was and what I wanted.

On our last night in Vigan, we found a quiet spot by the river to watch the sunset, the sky turning a soft shade of pink as the sun dipped below the horizon. We sat in silence for a while, simply watching, letting the moment wash over us.

“I’m really glad we came here,” JM said, breaking the silence. His voice was low, full of emotion. “This has been the best time of my life.”

I smiled, squeezing his hand. “Me too. I’ve never felt more alive, more... myself. With you.”

JM turned to me, his gaze soft and intense. “Junno, I don’t want this to end. I want to keep building this. Whatever happens, I want us to be a part of each other’s lives. I want you in my future.”

I could feel my heart racing at his words, a swell of emotion rising in my chest. “You’re already in mine, JM. I’ve never been more sure of anything.”

The moment between us stretched on, filled with unspoken promises. As the last light of the day faded away, we stood up together, hands intertwined, ready to face whatever the future had in store for us—together.

When we returned to La Trinidad, we no longer felt the need to hide. We didn’t go out of our way to announce our relationship, but there was no longer any need to. The campus buzzed with the same gossip, but it didn’t bother us. We were stronger now, more certain of what we shared.

Over the following weeks, things between us only grew deeper.

We found new ways to support each other, to be there for each other in ways that were simple yet profound.

Whether it was helping each other with assignments, studying together in the library, or simply talking about our day, we knew we were no longer just two people passing through life—we were partners, building something lasting.

One evening, as we sat on the steps of the university building, looking out over the city lights, JM turned to me, his expression serious but full of warmth.

“I love you, Junno,” he said, his voice full of conviction.

“I love you too, JM,” I replied, my heart swelling with emotion. “And I always will.”

As we sat there, side by side, with the world bustling around us, I knew that whatever challenges lay ahead, we would face them together. Our love had already proven to be strong and resilient, and I knew it would continue to grow, no matter what.

The journey we had started in Vigan was just the beginning, and I couldn’t wait to see where it would take us next.

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Weeks passed, and though our relationship continued to deepen, life around us kept moving.

Classes were in full swing, and we balanced the demands of schoolwork with the joy of being together.

Yet, there was a newfound sense of ease between us—no more hiding, no more pretending.

It was as if the entire world knew what we were, and we no longer cared.

One afternoon, while we were sitting in the campus café, studying for our upcoming exams, I caught JM staring at me. His expression was soft, contemplative.

“What’s on your mind?” I asked, a smile tugging at the corner of my lips.

He shifted in his seat, his fingers tracing the rim of his coffee cup absentmindedly. “I’ve been thinking a lot about the future, Junno,” he said, his voice low and serious. “About us.”

My heart skipped a beat. I set my notebook down, giving him my full attention. “What about us?”

He met my gaze, his eyes steady, yet filled with something deeper—something I couldn’t quite name, but it made my chest tighten with emotion.

“I don’t want this to be something that fades away when college ends. I want to keep

building this—us. I want a future with you, Junno. Not just now, not just for the next few months. But for the long haul.”

His words hung in the air, and I felt a wave of emotion wash over me. The reality of what he was saying settled in, and for a moment, all I could do was look at him in awe.

“I want that too,” I said, my voice a little shaky but filled with certainty. “I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life. I want to build a future with you, JM. No matter where we end up, as long as it’s together.”

He reached across the table, taking my hand in his, his fingers gently squeezing mine. “You have no idea how happy that makes me, Junno. I’ve been scared to say it, but I can’t imagine my life without you. You’ve become my everything.”

My heart fluttered in my chest as I smiled at him. “I feel the same way. You’re everything to me, JM.”

For a moment, we just sat there, holding hands, the weight of our words settling comfortably between us. Our relationship wasn’t perfect—no relationship ever is—but it was real, and it was ours. And that was enough for me.

Later that evening, as we walked back to my apartment, the streets of La Trinidad bathed in the soft glow of the streetlights, JM turned to me, a thoughtful expression on his face.

“Junno,” he began, his voice tentative, “Have you ever thought about what comes after graduation? I mean, do you see yourself staying here, or...?”

I hadn’t really given it much thought. The idea of the future beyond school felt distant, like something I didn’t need to face just yet. But now, with JM asking, it

suddenly felt more real.

“I don’t know yet,” I admitted, squeezing his hand. “I love Baguio. I love being here with you. But there’s a lot to think about—job opportunities, where I might end up. I guess I haven’t thought that far ahead.”

JM nodded, his expression thoughtful. “I get it. But whatever happens, I want us to figure it out together. Whether it’s staying here, moving somewhere else... as long as we’re together, I know we can handle it.”

His words were a comfort, a promise. The uncertainty of the future seemed less daunting when I thought about facing it with him by my side.

“I think we can handle anything,” I said softly, looking up at him. “Together.”

We reached my apartment, and before we went inside, JM paused, turning to me with a soft smile. “I love you, Junno. No matter what happens, that’s not going to change.”

“I love you too,” I replied, my heart full, my words simple but sincere.

And in that moment, as we stood together in the quiet street, the world felt right. We didn’t have all the answers, but we had each other, and that was more than enough.

As the days passed, the reality of the future loomed closer, but we took each day as it came.

We studied together, spent time with our friends, and shared countless little moments that made our bond even stronger.

The world may have been uncertain, but with JM by my side, I knew that we could face anything.

And so, as the semester drew to a close and the pressure of exams built, we leaned on each other. Our love grew deeper with each passing day, and we knew that no matter where life took us, we would always have a home in each other's hearts.

The journey was just beginning. And as we stood on the edge of everything we had planned and everything we hadn't yet imagined, I felt ready. Ready for the next chapter. Ready for the future, with JM by my side.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:53 am

The semester had come to an end, and with it, the excitement and anxiety of final exams.

JM and I had spent weeks preparing, supporting each other through the late nights of studying, the endless cups of coffee, and the quiet moments of reassurance when the pressure seemed unbearable.

As we sat in the university library one last time before exams, the air between us felt charged with anticipation.

“I can’t believe it’s almost over,” I said, closing my textbook with a sigh. “A whole semester gone by just like that.”

JM smiled at me from across the table, his eyes filled with that familiar warmth. “Yeah, time really flies when you’re having fun.”

I grinned, leaning back in my chair. “I’m glad I got to spend it with you, JM.”

He reached across the table, taking my hand in his and squeezing it gently. “Same here, Junno. It feels like everything’s falling into place, doesn’t it?”

I nodded, my heart swelling with affection. “It does. I used to be so unsure about everything, but now, with you, it all feels right.”

The quiet hum of the library seemed to fade away as I looked into his eyes, and in that moment, I felt incredibly lucky. I had found someone who understood me, who shared my dreams and fears, and who made me feel seen, loved, and supported.

“We’ll get through this,” JM said, his voice filled with confidence. “And then, we can finally take a break. Maybe go on another trip, or just spend time together.”

I smiled, feeling the weight of his words. The idea of taking a break, of escaping the pressures of school and just being with him, was something I had been longing for. “That sounds perfect.”

Our conversation drifted back to the upcoming exams, but the underlying current of hope and certainty remained. I knew that no matter what happened in the future—whether we stayed in La Trinidad, moved somewhere else, or took time to figure out what we wanted—I would face it with JM. Together.

The days leading up to our exams passed in a blur of nervous energy and determination. We studied side by side, offering encouragement, breaking up the monotony with jokes and small moments of affection. And when the last exam finally came and went, we could both breathe a sigh of relief.

“Well, that’s it,” I said as we walked out of the exam hall, the weight of the semester lifting off my shoulders. “It’s over.”

JM chuckled, stretching his arms above his head. “And now, we can finally relax. No more exams, no more stress—just us.”

I turned to face him, my heart fluttering with excitement. “I think it’s time to celebrate.”

That evening, we found ourselves at a small café near the university, indulging in some much-needed comfort food. The mood was light, and we laughed easily, enjoying the simple pleasure of being together without the looming pressure of schoolwork.

“I’m really glad we made it through, Junno,” JM said, his voice softer now, a touch of seriousness underlying his words.

“Me too,” I replied, reaching across the table to squeeze his hand. “I couldn’t have done it without you.”

JM smiled, his gaze intense as he held my hand. “We’re a team, Junno. Always.”

There was a quiet moment between us, an unspoken understanding passing in the air. And in that moment, I knew—no matter what the future held, we would face it together. Our love had grown so much in such a short time, and it felt like we were just getting started.

The following weeks were a whirlwind of relaxation, family visits, and catching up with old friends.

Yet, despite the break, I couldn’t help but feel a sense of anticipation for what was to come.

JM and I continued to talk about the future, about our dreams and what we wanted to achieve, both together and individually.

One afternoon, as we sat together on my apartment balcony, enjoying the quiet peace of the city below, I felt a wave of gratitude wash over me. Life felt fuller now, richer, because of the love we shared.

“I’ve been thinking,” I began, breaking the silence, “about what we talked about the other day—about the future. And I think we need to make a plan. For both of us. Together.”

JM turned toward me, his expression serious but filled with the same warmth that always seemed to radiate from him. “What do you have in mind?”

I paused, gathering my thoughts. “Well, we’ve both got big goals, right? You with your career, me with my studies. But I think we need to start thinking about how we’re going to make it all work. How we’re going to balance everything and still have time for us.”

JM nodded thoughtfully, his fingers gently tracing the edge of my hand. “I agree. We can’t just live in the moment forever, no matter how much I love being with you. We need to think about what comes next.”

His words made me feel both nervous and excited.

I had always been someone who lived in the moment, taking life as it came.

But now, with JM, I could see a future that stretched beyond the present, beyond the confines of college life.

A future where we worked together, grew together, and shared everything life had to offer.

“I want us to be partners in everything, Junno,” JM said, his voice steady and firm. “Whatever happens, whatever comes our way—I want us to face it together.”

I smiled, my heart swelling with love for him. “I couldn’t imagine it any other way.”

And so, we began to make plans—tentative steps toward a future that was uncertain but full of promise.

The journey ahead was still unknown, but I knew one thing for sure: as long as JM and I were together, we could face anything.

We were more than just two people in love; we were a team, and together, we would navigate whatever life had in store for us.

As the sun set on that quiet afternoon, I leaned my head on JM's shoulder, feeling the warmth of his presence next to me. And for the first time, I felt truly at peace, knowing that no matter what came next, we would always have each other.

-End of Love in the time of Grades book one.

I hope you enjoyed reading this story as much as I enjoyed writing it!

Stay tuned for book two.

Yours truly, ArtyosWrites

Please check out love in the time of grades second semester.