

Chapter *One*

“Oh, it was definitely a mutual decision. Simona and I still care so much for each other. It’s just that our priorities have changed. But we’re still very good friends. I actually think that we are much closer now than we ever were...”

“Why do you say that, Jeffrey?”

Kumibit-balikat ang sikat na aktor, sabay ngiti. Hindi naitago ng reporter ang kilig sa ngiti ng binata.

“Masyadong malaki ang expectation n’yo sa isa’t isa when you’re in a relationship. And those expectations are usually the root of all your misunderstandings. Kaya simula nang mag-decide kami to be friends na lang, all the expectations were gone and we became closer because

of it.”

“I see. Pero hindi ba totooong kaya kayo nagkahiwalay ni Simona ay dahil sa bago mong karelasyon na si Antoinette Benitez?” tukoy ng reporter sa bagong papasikat na aktres.

“No, of course not. I started dating Antoinette long after Simona and I broke up. Walang kinalaman si Antoinette dito. In fact, Simona adores her.”

“Adore, my ass! You conceited cheat!” gigil na bulalas ni Simona, sabay patay sa flat screen TV sa kanyang living room. “Can you believe this guy?” baling niya kay Martha, ang kanyang best friend at partner sa tinayong beauty salon, ang *Bella Escape*. Isa na ito ngayon sa mga paboritong salon ng mga celebrities at socialites.

Napapailing na sumimsim si Martha ng *Pinot Grigio*, ang paborito nilang white wine. “Hindi ko pa rin malaman kung ano ang nakita mo sa lalaking ‘yun, Mona. Hindi siya guwapo, do you see that now?”

Pinigilan ni Simona ang iikot ang mga mata. Of course, Jeffrey Estoquia was handsome. Isa ito sa mga pinaka-in demand na endorser at leading man sa mga pelikula ngayon sa Pilipinas. Pero simula pa lang nang magpakita sa kanya ng interes si Jeff, bilang kliyente nila ito sa salon, ay hindi na ito nagustuhan ni Martha.

Ayon sa kaibigan ay mukha itong babae sa sobrang kinis ng kutis, at maliban pa roon ay mas maarte pa raw ito sa mga babae nilang kliyente sa salon. Mga bagay na hindi niya binigyan ng pansin. She was madly in love with him at anumang negative na naririnig niya tungkol sa ex ay hindi niya pinagtuunan ng pansin. Ang importante lang sa kanya noon ay kung paano niya nakikita ang lalaki.

For Simona, Jeffrey was the manliest man she'd ever met. The sweetest and the most thoughtful boyfriend any girl could ever dream of. But that was before she caught him making out with Antoinette Benitez. They were filming their upcoming movie in Batangas at nagdesisyon siyang sorpresahin ang nobyo sa set nito.

Needless to say, she was the one surprised when she found him in his car butt-naked, kasama ang pa-tweetums na baguhang aktres na kliyente rin nila sa salon. She groaned. If it wasn't for her expert hands in contouring and putting colors on people's faces, she doubted it very much kung mapapansin man lang ang dalaga ng mga talent scout na ginawa nang tambayan ang kanyang salon, naghahanap ng mga talent.

"Pustahan tayo, hindi naman talaga 'yan type ni Antoinette, nabulagan lang 'yung bata sa kasikatan ni Jeffrey. Sooner or later, mare-realize niyang mas maton

pa siya kesa sa nobyo niya ngayon,” patuloy pa ni Martha na muling nagsalin ng alak.

Naniningkit ang mga matang napasandal si Simona sa sofa. “Last month, I was the happiest girl in the world. Our business is booming, we’re already planning for the fourth branch, sa loob mismo ng compound ng *NTC*,” tukoy niya sa pinakasikat na TV network sa bansa, “and I have a boyfriend. Hindi lang basta-basta boyfriend, a very popular, unbelievably handsome—”

“Oh, shut the hell up!” iritadong putol nito. “If anything, you have a much better life now than last month. The business is still booming and you’re a free woman. You’re free from that bitchy man you called your boyfriend. Na mas makapal pang mag-concealer kesa sa ‘yo.” Martha pulled a grossed out face. “At sa totoo lang, hindi ko masikmura ang isipin man lang kung paano kayo naghahalikan, kung makapag-lip gloss si *koya* ay daig pa sina Beyonce at J. Lo. Buti na lang at di ka fan ng lip gloss, kasi kung nagkataon ay para kayong pinagsalpukang lechon.”

Seryoso niyang tiningnan ang kaibigan. “You’re not helping.”

Kumibit-balikat lang ito. “Ba’t naman kita tutulungan? May homework ka ba? May sakit? O kailangan mo ng pera?”

“You know what I mean,” padarag niyang sagot.

“I’m broken-hearted, Martha. I’m really in pain. Ni wala pang isang buwan mula nang mahuli ko sila ay naglantad na sila sa publiko. Pinapalabas pang matagal na kaming break para lang di usisain ng publiko ang relasyon nila. And he did that without consulting me.”

“So what do you want to do?”

“Di ko alam. I want a closure.”

“Oh, my goodness! Ano pang closure ang kailangan mo? Ayan na’t in-announce na sa buong Pilipinas ang love story nila ni Antoinette, naghihintay ka pa rin ng closure ninyong dalawa? The door can’t get anymore shut than that, Mona. You just have to move on.”

She didn’t want to. Inabot niya ang sariling wine glass at inubos ang laman niyon bago sinalinang muli. “It’s easier said than done, Martha.” Muli siyang sumimsim sa baso. “He’s my first boyfriend, you know.”

“Only because you’re so picky. You had all types of men begging for your attention bago mo nakilala si Jeffrey at nawala ka sa katinuan. I thought you being picky will help you find the best, but apparently, I was wrong. Instead, nagpagoyo ka sa lalaking iyon na mukhang babae.”

“Martha!” Talagang napu-frustrate na si Simona sa kaibigan. She could use a little bit of support at the

moment. Kaya nga niya ito pinilit na papuntahin sa condo unit niya ngayong gabi, para kahit papaano ay hindi siya gaanong mag-self-pity. Pero heto at napaka-insensitive nito.

But then again, Martha wouldn't be Martha if she was sweet and caring. Despite her cold attitude na tila ipinanganak na kasabay nito, alam niyang kakampi niya ito anuman ang mangyari. But right now, Simona really wanted her to be a supportive friend.

Jeffrey was the man of her dreams. And waking up from a beautiful dream was never a good thing.

“Look, Mona, Jeffrey is a celebrity, a very popular one for that matter. And let's face it, if he really was in love with you, you wouldn't be feeling this way right now, 'cause he wouldn't have cheated on you in the first place. So unless you want a chaotic life, I suggest you just suck it up and move on. You're sexy, you're smart and girls would kill just to have your beautiful face. I'm sure somewhere along the way, you will meet the right one for you. Someone who would be so in love with you na kahit lunurin mo sa naggagandahan at mga sexy na babae ay hindi matutukso, simply because he's in love with you. Now will you please stop whining and actually 'wine' it,” pagtatapos nito at tinanguan ang hawak niyang baso.

“FYI, I was almost finishing the first bottle when you arrived. But, thank you...”

“For what?” walang anuman nitong tanong.

“Sa mga sinabi mo, it really made me feel better.”

Hindi man niya ma-imagine ang sariling muling ma-in love sa ibang lalaki ay na-appreciate niya ang pahapyaw na encouragement ng kaibigan.

“Well, don’t take it to heart. Alam kong ‘yun lang ang gusto mong marinig, pinagbigyan lang kita.”

Napangiti si Simona. Martha might appear as a cold-hearted bitch, but she knew that her friend cared deeply. Hindi lang nito iyon maayos na naipapakita.

“It’s unfair, though, isn’t it? Dahil lang sikat si Jeffrey ay nagagawa na niya ang gusto niya.” Muli niyang inubos ang laman ng wine glass at nagsalin.

“When is life ever fair, Mona?”

“Pero di ba tamang ipaalam sa lahat ang katotohanan?”

Nakita niya kaagad ang pagtutol sa mukha ng kaibigan nang muli siyang lingunin. “At ano ang katotohanang sinasabi mo?”

“Na si Jeffrey ay hindi kasing-gentleman katulad ng iniisip ng mga fans niya. Na hindi kami naging mas close at mas lalong hindi kami friends ngayon. I should tell them what exactly happened.” Napasinok siya. “Na

nahuli ko silang naglalampungan ni Antoinette, and that was why we broke up.”

Tumikhim ang kaibigan, hindi pa man ito nagsasalita ay nalalalahan na ni Simona ang sarkasmo sa ere. “So gusto mong ipagkalat sa buong bansa na hindi mutual ang desisyon sa break-up n’yo? Na talagang nagsawa lang sa ‘yo si Jeffrey kaya naghanap siya ng iba?”

“Who gives a shit?” bulalas niya at muling napasinek. Simona thought she may have had enough wine already. “I’m a no one, Martha. Ni hindi malalaman ng mga taong nabubuhay ako kung hindi dahil kay Jeffrey.”

“Masyado mong ina-underestimate ang sarili mo, Mona. And that’s not like you at all. Lasing ka na nga siguro. Celebrities are lining up just to be our client, Mona. Our names are known in showbiz industry. Last week lang ay inendorse tayo ni Camilla Jane sa interview niya, and we didn’t even pay her for that. She just felt we deserve to be mentioned because we are so good at what we do. At simula last week ay dumoble ang pila sa waiting list natin. So now tell me, are you a no one?”

“Okay. Maybe I’m not a no one. So mas pakikikingan ako ng mga tao kapag nagsalita ako. I wanna see the

look on Jeffrey and Antoinette's faces kapag nalaman ng mga tao ang nakita ko." Sa pagkakataong ito ay napadighay na siya.

Masusi siyang pinagmasdan ni Martha. Her blood-red lips were pursed.

"What do you think?" untag niya rito.

"Surely, they will listen to whatever you have to say, Mona. But whether or not they'll believe you is an entirely different story. Ngayon, gusto mo pang ipagsapalaran ang reputasyon mo para lang makaganti?"

"Walang rason para hindi nila ako paniwalaan," mabilis niyang depensa.

"Oh yes, there is. The first reason is, you're drunk. Second of all, fans are fanatics. Kapag may hindi sila nagustuhan sa sinabi tungkol sa idol nila, they'll turn on you, at lahat na ng sikreto mo ay mauungkat. In the end, you'll appear cheap and desperate, which you're not. Well, at least, I know you're not cheap, desperate—I'm not sure yet. So pipe down, Simona Chavez."

"So, hahayaan ko na lang si Jeffrey, gan'on?" Nararamdaman na niya ang pagiging unreasonable pero wala siyang pakialam.

"Well, my ultimate suggestion would've been to beat the crap out of that bastard the moment you caught him

in that car with Antoinette. Pero dahil pinalagpas mo ang chance na iyon, there's not much else you can do."

Napabuntong-hininga si Simona. The urge to hit Jeffrey that day was strong, pero umasa siyang pagkatapos niyang mag-walk out ay susundan siya nito, hihingi ng tawad at ipapangalandakang siya lang ang mahal nito at sandali lang itong nagpadala sa tukso. But that was the last time she'd seen Jeffrey in person. Isang text lang ang natanggap niya rito; nanghihingi ng sorry. He wished her good luck in her life and career, too. But nothing else. Nothing else at all.

Napatiim-bagang siya. Looking back made her feel that pain of betrayal again. Muli niyang inubos ang laman ng baso.

"Okay, Mona. I need to go now. Kailangan ko pang mag-drive. I'll see you at work tomorrow, okay?"

Hindi siya sumagot. She was thinking deeply.

"Mona!" untag ng kaibigan.

"Yeah, I'll see you tomorrow."

"Don't do anything stupid." Tumalikod na ito. Tahimik niyang pinagmasdan ang pinto hanggang sa tuluyan iyong naisara ng kaibigan.

Simona stood up and grabbed the bottle of wine. At dahil mag-isa na lang siya ay tinungga na niya ang laman ng bote, sabay pahid sa luhan tahimik na

dumaloy sa kanyang mga pisngi.

She wanted Jeffrey so much to be her husband. Her world revolved around him since she met him. She did everything to be the best girlfriend. She gave him her time, her affection, her everything. Pero binalewala iyong lahat ng lalaki. Until today ay umasa siyang magkakabalikan pa sila, until his announcement, na item na nga ito at si Antoinette. She felt as if her world fell down on her once again.

Wala siyang ginawang mali rito. She didn't deserve this. Malalim siyang napahigop ng hangin at napatingin sa cellphone na nakapatong sa coffee table. Hantaran niyang inignora ang mga basyong bote ng alak na patunay kung gaano kadami ang nainom niya. Hindi niya hahayaang masira ang determinasyong nararamdaman niya ngayon. She wasn't going to let Jeffrey get away that easy. Malinaw ang isip niya ngayon, there was no reason to be scared.

Inabot niya ang cellphone at hinanap ang number ni Lyza Katipunan, ang pinakasikat na talk show host sa *TNC* at columnist na madalas ding magpunta sa kanilang salon. Mayamaya lang ay hindi na niya maawat ang sarili sa pakikipag-usap kay Lyza.