



“Where are you?” Valeria’s steely voice could cut through metal.

Sigurado si Clarence na matalim din ang mga mata nito at puwede ring ipanghati ng diamond. He could already picture his girlfriend as she talked to him on the phone. Full red lips, wide dark eyes, lustrous brown hair and red painted nails—Valeria was a modern-day nymph ready to seduce or kill, whichever the situation demanded.

Unfortunately for him, mukhang to kill ang agenda nito ngayon.

Nahilot niya ang noo. “Sa bahay, I’m with Neil and George—”

“If you’re going to lie, at least make it good. I can hear the club noise, Clarence.”

Bumukas ang pinto ng club at lalong dinala sa kinatatayuan ang ingay sa loob. Bumusina ang isang sasakyan sa isang kanto at dinala ng hangin sa puwesto ng binata ang tawanan ng mga taong sakay niyon. The August air felt cool against his skin as he walked further away from the club.

“Patricia broke up with Neil, so we’re—”

“What?” Valeria’s tone changed from catty girlfriend to a concerned friend. “Why? Ano’ng nangyari? How is he?”

“Wasted. It’s a misunderstanding. Patricia saw Neil hugging

Diana in a club—”

“Hah! You call that a misunderstanding?” And just like that, catty girlfriend was back. “Yan ang sinasabi ko. Why was he still going out to clubs when he already had a girlfriend? I don’t get it! At ikaw! You’re better than this. Why did you bring him to a club again? You should get him to talk to Patricia to solve their problem. Why did you bring him to a club? To get wasted? To pick up some trashy slut and—”

“Calm down, Valeria. We tried to get them to talk, but she said she needed space—”

“So dinala n’yo si Neil sa club?”

He could already see her glaring at him, arms crossed, red hot lips pursed in a line.

“Ano’ng tingin n’yong mararamdaman ni Patricia kapag nalaman niya ’yan? Neil has to stop this—”

“He’s down, he just needs—”

“Alcohol? A one-night stand? At ikaw? Why are you with them? I told you I don’t want you hanging out with them at clubs! Did you hire a stripper to cheer him up? What? Are all of you having lap dances now? I bet you’re enjoying this. What are you doing, Clarence?”

He could all but feel the sharp bite of her voice clawing at his skin, and he felt his own temper rising. Sa di-kalayuan, muling bumukas ang entrance ng club, at muling dinala ng hangin ang ingay sa kanyang kinatatayuan. Bumuga siya ng hangin at tumiim-labi.

“You’re overreacting again. Patricia broke up with Neil, the

guy wants to get drunk, what the hell are we supposed to do?”

“Get him drunk in his house! But you guys had to choose a f*cking club and we all know why. Nas’an kayo? Anong club ’yan? I swear to God if you hire strippers—”

“We did not, goddamn it.” He clenched his teeth as raw edges of temper scraped at his gut. “I’m not doing anything wrong—”

“Oh, really? You’re not doing anything wrong? Well, it seems to me—”

“We’re not having this conversation again, Valeria. I’m not explaining anything more to you.”

“I want you to go home, Clarence. I’m serious, I don’t want you—”

“Stop it. Neil’s feeling like shit right now, and if he wants to get wasted for one night in a bar, there’s nothing wrong with that. Let it go, Valeria. I’ll call you when I get home.”

Tinapos niya ang tawag at isinuksok ang phone sa balsa. Malutong siyang nagmura at naisuklay ang mga daliri sa buhok.

Minsan, gusto niyang yugyugin ang nobya para matauhan ito. Ito ang dahilan kaya hindi niya sinabing kasama niya sina George sa club noong una pa lang. Mabanggit lang ang bar, club o beer, naghuhuramentado na si Valeria.

Tumiim-bagang siya at hinilot ang noo.

“I want you to go home, Clarence. I’m serious, I don’t want you—”

Iritado siyang naglakad pabalik sa club.

What the hell? Ano ba ang tingin nito sa kanya? Her

freaking pet? A freaking boy-toy she could order around?

And strippers? Lap dancers? Was she freaking serious?

Ramdam pa niya ang mapait na inis sa kanyang sikmura at pinilit niyang pahupain iyon. Kapag ganito sila, alam niyang walang magandang patutunguhan ang kanilang pag-uusap.

Binuksan ni Clarence ang pinto ng club at halos sakalin siya ng mausok na hangin. The smoky air swamped him, the stink of perfumes and cigarettes clinging to his nostrils. It's going to cling to his clothes, too, he was sure of it.

Nakipagsiksikan siya sa mga patrons para bumalik sa table nila. He didn't like clubs. Masyadong maingay, magulo, at mausok ang mga ito para sa kanya.

"Hey, handsome." May isang babaeng humawak sa braso niya at inilapat ang katawan sa kanyang tagiliran. "Want to dance with me?" The woman pressed her breasts against his arm and coyly smiled up at him.

Magalang siyang umiling. "No, thank you."

Magalang din niyang inalis ang hawak nito sa kanyang braso.

He had three more semi-indecent propositions before he reached their table.

Nakangising nagtaas ng beer sa kanya si George. "O, ano'ng sabi ng Your Highness?"

"Shut up." Hinagilap ni Clarence ang isang beer at tumungga rin.

Tinapik siya ng kaibigan at seryosong umiling. "Ano, kumusta ang conference niya? Hanggang bukas pa siya d'on, di

ba?”

“Yes.”

“Baka umuwi ’yon nang di oras para sugurin ka. Clarence, I’m telling you, you should break up with her before it’s too late.”

“That’s your sister, George.”

“I know!” Exaggerated na tumango ang kaibigan at hinawakan ang dibdib nito. “Kaya nga sinasabihan na kita. I’m her brother so I know her best. Ilang beses ko bang sasabihin sa ’yo? You don’t want to live with Her Royal Highness Queen Valeria, trust me.”

He wanted to roll his eyes. “It’s a little too late for that.”

“It’s never too late, Clarence. Takbo na hangga’t wala pang kasal!”

Umiling siya sa kaibigan at muling tinungga ang beer. He didn’t like beer much either. O siguro hindi lang siya sanay? Valeria was a health freak. If she found out he drank more than two bottles, she’d have a fit. He’d never hear the end of it.

Nagtaas sa kanya ng tingin si Neil. The poor bastard looked wasted as hell.

“Did she nag you for coming with us?” untag nito.

“You know she did.”

Itinuro siya ng lasing na si George. “See? That’s not right, Clarence. I love Valeria, you know we do. She’s the sister we’re forced to have. But that’s just not right!” Tumungga ulit ito ng beer at padabog iyong ibinaba sa table. “What’s wrong with going out to clubs and hanging out with the boys? Ikaw? You

never did that with us because of her!”

“Hindi ’yan totoo. I didn’t hang out with you guys at clubs because I never liked clubs,” pagtatama ni Clarence.

“Wrong!” singit ni George. “You never had the chance to find out if you like it. You never had the chance to find out if you like many things because of her! Fifteen ka pa lang, tinalian ka na sa leeg ni Valeria kaya hindi ka nagka-chance ma-experience ang ganitong lifestyle. She cheated you, man.”

“I was a nerd back in high school, I never liked your lifestyle even back then.”

“At sinamantala ’yon ni Valeria.” Madamdaming tumango ang kapatid ng kanyang girlfriend.

Natawa siya at napailing dito. Isa ito sa mga pastime ng mga kaibigan niya—ang kanyawan siya at ang relasyon niya sa kanyang nobya. George, especially. Pakiramdam ng lalaki ay moral obligation nito na iligtas siya mula sa red nails ng kapatid nito.

“I tell you, man, she took advantage of your nerd status to collar you fast,” madamdaming patuloy ng nakababatang kapatid ni Valeria. “Of course you were mesmerized when Her Royal Highness paid attention to you. We understand, man. Fifteen lang tayo noon, and Valeria’s two years older. Tapos all-boys school pa tayo since kinder. And there’s Her Highness, maganda, siyempre magkapatid kami kaya maganda siya, hot and popular. And you were nerdy back then. Siyempre maa-amaze ka kapag may kagaya ni Valeria na nagkainteres sa ’yo. At siyempre maraming maiinggit sa ’yo kaya nakaka-boost ng young male

ego. I tell you, man, it's a tactic! She knew you would grow up gorgeous and intelligent and—f*ck, did I just call you gorgeous?"

Tumawa ito at si Neil at umiling lang siya sa dalawa.

"You're drunk, George, stop embarrassing yourself," sita ni Clarence dito.

"Where was I? Ah, yes," patuloy nito na parang hindi siya narinig. "She knew you'd become filthy rich like your father so she grabbed on to you fast! She had it all planned out, trust me."

Muli, umiling siya sa mga ito at tumungga ulit ng beer.

Naging magaslaw ang tugtog sa loob ng bar at napuno ang dance floor ng mga nagsasayawang katawan.

"You never even had a chance to f*ck other women—"

Umungol siya para putulin ang rant ni George. "Can we not talk about my sex life?"

"See?" Itinuro siya ng kaibigan. "You can't even talk sex with us! You're missing half of your life, Clarence! She robbed you of that experience, man."

"Seriously, Clarence," sabat ni Neil, seryoso ang lasing na mga mata. "How do you do it?"

Alam niyang symbolic ang tanong ni Neil, at konektado sa sariling relationship dilemma nito kay Patricia ang himutok nito. It was not really directed at him personally. Pero gusto pa rin niyang umungol at itago ang ulo sa mga braso. Weren't they here to cheer up Neil? Bakit siya na naman ang topic ng conversation? He swore, his friends lived to mock him. "Do what?"

"Last that long with Valeria. Again, we all love her. But

Valeria can be so...”

Controlling, possessive, clingy?

Tell him about it.

Umiling siya sa sarili at lumagok ulit ng beer.

“Paano kayo nagtagal? Fifteen years na rin, ano?” Kumunot-noo si Neil at napailing. “How do you stay that long in a relationship? Women can be so...” Bumuga ito ng hangin at ibinagsak ang likod ng ulo sa sandalan.

The guy looked depressed and worn-out.

Pumalatak si George. “Yan ang s’abi ko sa ’yo eh,” sulsol nito kay Neil. “Relationships are a pain.”

Gusto niyang sabihin na hindi iyon totoo, pero magsisinungaling lang siya. Tumungga ulit siya ng beer.

Nag-vibrate ang phone ni Clarence at napatigil siya. Sighing, kinuha niya iyon sa bulsa.

Of course, it’s Valeria. Bumuga siya ng hangin at tumayo. A part of him was still annoyed with her for her earlier accusations, but he knew he would only make things worse if he didn’t answer her calls. Sigurado siya roon.

“I need to take this.”

“Boo!” pang-asar ni George. “Tell her to get lost. You shouldn’t let her do this to you, Clarence. Hindi na tama ’yan.”

Umiling siya at tumalikod sa mga ito.

“Ah!” singhap ng isang babae nang bumangga ito sa kanya.

Awtomatikong napahawak siya sa baywang nito para hindi ito mabuwal. Natapunan ng beer ang braso niya at napasinghap

siya. Suot niya ang regalong *Cartier* watch ni Valeria. Magdedemanda iyon kapag namantsahan ang leather strap ng relo.

“Careful,” aniya sa babae habang tinutulungan itong tumayo nang maayos.

Pero may bumunggo rin sa likod ng babae at lalong napasubsob sa kanya. The impact made him lose balance, and his fingers loosened around his phone.

“Ah, sorry—” Napaatras ang babae at nag-sway sa kanyang braso at—

Crack!

*F*ck.* He winced when the woman’s deadly heel stabbed his phone.

“Oh, sh*t, phone mo ba ’yon? I’m sorry!” Pinilit nitong abutin ang kanyang telepono.

Muntikan na itong matumba kaya hinawakan niya ulit ito sa baywang. Why did women insist on wearing that death trap called stiletto? Kapag nakikita niyang suot iyon ni Valeria ay kinakabahan siya.

“It’s okay.” Pinigilan ito ni Clarence na dumukwang para pulutin ang phone. Siya ang lumuhod para pulutin ang nasaksak na gadget.

Sa screen tumusok ang deadly stiletto ng babae. Napailing na lang siya. It’s as dead as *King Hamlet*, alright.

Rest in peace, Dear iPhone.

Hinawakan siya ng babae sa braso. “I’m so sorry, I’ll pay for it

and—”

Umiling siya at tumayo. Mukhang maiiyak na ang babae sa pagso-sorry sa kanya.

“It’s okay. It’s just a phone.”

“No, please, let me pay—”

“No need, this is an old model and I have another at home. There’s no need to—”

“But still! It wouldn’t feel right if I just—”

“You b*tch!”

Napasigaw ang kausap ni Clarence at marahas na napaatras mula sa kanya.

“You filthy slut!” somebody screeched.

May sumigaw pa sa paligid nila, at may natabig na mesa at nabasag na mga baso. A blur of motion ensued, and it took his brain three seconds to catch up.

Tight black dress, long lustrous brown hair, pale skin and wide dark eyes filled with rage—Valeria looked like a murderous goddess as she pulled the woman’s hair.