

Prologue



Walang sparks nang unang makita ni Daniel Alexis Quintanar ang babaeng confident na naglalakad sa grand lobby ng *UIN-Manila* papunta sa reception counter. Hindi ito ang pinakamagandang babaeng nakita niya, pero labi lang ito sa iilang bagay na agad nakakuha ng kanyang atensyon.

In her sleek, navy blue pinstriped skirt suit and sensible black shoes that could probably kill with their pointy high heels—she walked with grace and quiet authority. She was obviously a take-charge woman, always a major turn-on for him.

Hindi niya inaalis ang tingin sa babae habang palapit ito. Umarko lang ang isang kilay nito nang mahuling nakatingin siya, at hindi man lang siya natinag. Dumerecho ito sa harap ng reception officer.

“Arevalo, Georgia Leigh, please.”

Her voice was deep, musical and well-modulated. Ang sarap pakinggan. Kasing-sarap pagmasdan ng magandang mukha nitong ngayon lang niya natingnan talaga. The angles of her face were a bit masculine but her big light brown eyes, aquiline nose and pouty lips softened her features. Mukha itong iyong mga babae sa cover ng mga classical novels, na may maikli at medyo kulot na buhok. Kung wala itong sapatos na siguro ay three or four inches ang heels, baka

nasa five-four o five-five ang height nito.

She had an athletic built with curves at the right places. She had great, almost perfect legs—almost dahil may maliit na pahabang pilat ito sa ibaba ng kanang tuhod, pero parang hindi iyon nakabawas sa ganda at confidence nito.

The man opened his mouth to speak, to introduce himself. Hindi niya alam kung bakit kinakabahan siya gayong seventeen pa lang ay sanay na siyang lumandi at makuha ang gusto mula sa mga babaeng nakikilala—from Manila to New York and the rest of the Northeast coast, and at least three Ivy League universities. He was a shameless, merciless slut.

Pero nang makita niyang kumuha ng brochure sa counter ang babae at iyon ang binasa sa halip na tingnan muli siya, naitikom na lang ni Dax ang bibig. *Fine.*

But at least I know your name.

And I know you smell wonderful.

And you are so beautiful that you'd have to forgive me if I can't tear my eyes off you.

And I swear on my late parents' graves, and my adoptive dad's farms and ranches and millions, and my Manhattan maisonette and Malibu house and all those conveniences I chose to stay away from to pursue a more fulfilling, enriching life serving here... it kind of seems impossible now given what I came here for, but I will know more of you.

Napangiti siya sa naisip, at noon din napatingin sa kanya ang babae, na nakaarko pa rin ang kilay.

“Your pass, Dr. Quintanar,” she smirked as she held up the blue visitor ID with a huge 2x2 photo taken right there at the counter. He was smiling like an idiot both in the photo and right that second, and that’s probably why Georgia was looking at him like that.

Kinuha ni Dax ang ID na may black lanyard, sinadyang magtama ang mga daliri nila, at hindi nawawala ang ngiting ikinuwintas iyon.

“Atty. Arevalo,” tawag ng receptionist nang iabot sa babae ang ID, na agad nitong isinuot.

Aha! Attorney and Doctor. Must be fate! He grinned.

Walang salitang nilampasan siya ng babae at pumunta sa elevators. Sumunod siya at nakitang iisa lang ang malapit nang maging available. Nang bumukas ang Elevator C, silang dalawa lang ang lumulan doon.

When Attorney Georgia pressed the *Close* button, he couldn’t help whistling as he sang the lyrics in his head:

I think we’re alone now...



The lanky guy leaning on the reception counter did not in any way resemble those assholes she fancied, and consistently broke her heart since she was seventeen. Mukha itong matino. Medyo angelic pa ang features—if angels look like gallant knights or suave superspies or hot professors with a rockstar appeal.

Georgia had been checking him out furtively as she approached the counter. Nakamasid din ito sa kanya. Hindi siya sanay na tinitingnan nang ganoon, iyong parang sa sobrang ganda niya ay nakakatulala na. She was confident, sure, but that didn’t entirely lie on her appearance.

There was a time when she was a pimply kid who was at least twenty pounds overweight, bullied, made fun of and constantly sought approval in school. Whatever and whoever she was now took years, and a lot of work. Minsan, kahit alam niyang malayo na ang itsura niya sa insecure at iyaking teenager dati, pakiramdam niya ay iyon pa rin ang nakikita ng mga tao sa tuwing titingnan siya nang higit sa

tatlong segundo.

And this man who now stood a couple of feet away and openly checked her out was no exception.

Still, Georgia couldn't help admiring the killer angles of his face. From the prominent jawline to the high cheekbones, the Roman nose to the sensual lips, the golden skin and the thick head of soft-looking hair and... his eyes! He had some mild case of heterochromia. Both eyes were hazel but one was predominantly green while the other was more brown. They were incredible.

And he looked so adorable and studious in those glasses with thin black frames.

Up close, mas matangkad ito. At least six feet siguro. He was long-limbed, lean and athletic. *And man, he smells good!* Parang ang linis at fresh na... masarap.

“Dr. Quintanar,” tawag ng receptionist, sabay taas ng bagong print at laminate na visitor pass. Hindi natitinag ang lalaki, na nakatingin lang sa kanya.

Naiiling na kinuha niya ang ID mula sa natatawang receptionist. *Damn, he is really a doctor? Shit, ilan sa mga naging pasyente kaya nito ang totoong maysakit?*

Kumatok siya sa counter bago itinaas ang lanyard at tinawag ito.

He blinked, then his smile turned into a grin, causing a slight dimple to appear on his right cheek. Hindi pa siya nakaka-recover sa dimple nito nang tila sadyain ng lalaki na magtama ang mga daliri nila nang kunin nito sa kanya ang ID.

Umangat lang ang isang kilay ng dalaga bago humarap muli sa receptionist para kunin ang ID niya. Matapos maisuot iyon ay naglakad na siya papunta sa elevator. Sumunod ang guwapong doktor, na nang pindutin niya

pasara ang lift ay mahinang nag-whistle. The tune was familiar.

She was relieved when she got off the third floor. Naiwan si Doc paakyat sa kung saan. Parang noon lang siya uli nakahinga nang maayos.

That man may not resemble any of those jerks who broke her heart but he looked like trouble nonetheless.



Four hours later, malalaman nilang magiging magkatrabaho pala sila. Share sa opisina, at forever seatmates at partners sa bawat byaheng magdadala sa malalayong lugar na tutulungan nila.

Four months later, memorized na nila ang CV, family background, personal history at kaya na sigurong isulat ang autobiography ng isa't isa.

Alam na ni Daniel Alexis a.k.a. Dax na may phobia sa pakikipagrelasyon si Georgia Leigh a.k.a. Gia, at hanggang ngayon ay inaatake pa rin ng insecurity paminsan-minsan. Kapag nangyayari iyon, uupo siya sa harap nito, mangangalumbaba at titingnan si Gia na parang ito na ang pinakamaganda sa buong mundo. It always worked, she would laugh and her blues would be gone. Eventually, the way he looked at her would no longer be just a way to make her smile, but because in his heart, she would always be the most beautiful.

By that time, alam na rin ni Gia na hanggang ngayon ay dinadalaw pa rin ng masamang panaginip si Dax, dala ng trahedyang dinanas nito sa murang edad. His Fil-Am father, a missionary doctor, was killed during an armed conflict in Mindanao when he was eleven. At fourteen, he witnessed the murder of his mother in the hands of a jilted suitor, who's a prominent businessman. Kahit kinuha at

inampon ito ng best friend ng ama at dinala sa America ay hindi niyon nagawang tuluyang palayain si Dax sa madilim na nakaraan nito. He tried to forget by focusing on school, and staying away from relationships yet enjoying its physical perks as much as he could. In ways, he was just like Gia, only he didn't get too involved because he never wanted to love so much, only to lose in the end.

Knowing all these, they both decided they did not just tolerate each other, but could be good friends as well.

Four years later, they would embark on a relationship neither was able to handle. The question of which to hold on to, and when to let go must be answered.



1



Office of Dr. A. Dela Serna
October 14, 10 a.m.

Ikalawang counseling session na ito ni Gia kay Dr. Angela Dela Serna, ang mentor ng resident psychiatrist ng UIN na si Dr. Blanche Alegria. She actually could just have Blanche help with her dilemma, but she preferred not to risk it.

Ayaw niyang bukod sa taong direktang involved ay taga-UIN din ang makakaalam ng sitwasyon nila. Under normal circumstances, she would have told Dax, but this situation was far from normal.

Nababaliw na yata siya.

She tried to relax in her seat, but being here with the knowledge that she would really have to talk about her ‘madness’ was more unnerving than being the head counsel for a high profile case.

Pero kailangan niya ito, dahil pakiramdam ng dalaga ay tuluyan na siyang mababaliw kapag hindi niya naihinga sa iba ang may ilang linggo nang gumugulo sa kanya.

“Hello, Gia.”

Dr. Dela Serna was a sprightly lady in her mid-sixties with short greying hair and a kind, beautiful face. May dala itong dalawang baso ng malamig na tubig na maingat na inilapag sa coffee table sa pagitan nila.

“Kung mas gusto mo ng tsaang meron din ako. Sabihin mo lang, ha?” nakangiting sabi nito bago inayos sa kandungan ang chart niya.

“Thank you, Tita Angela. But this is fine.” She took a sip from the glass. “Perfect, actually.”

Huminga siya nang malalim. Bago pumunta rito ay alam na niya kung ano ang sasabihin, pero hindi niya ngayon alam kung paano uumpisahan. Tita Angela had the most encouraging, soothing voice, which she had come to associate with the letting go of her burdens. Why was she so quiet now?

Iginala niya ang tingin sa kabuuan ng kuwartero, hanggang sa huminto iyon sa dingding kung saan naroon ang ilang framed diploma at certificates. One caught her eye. “You went to *Yale*?”

“Yes, I did my undergraduate work there.”

Hindi niya maalisa ang tingin sa diploma. “Dax was a graduate of *Yale School of Medicine*.”

“Impressive.” The doctor really did sound awed.

Marahang tumango siya.

“Gia, is there anything you wanted to tell me?”

Napapikit siya. “Yes.”

Sa unang session noong isang linggo ay nabanggit na rin niya si Dax bukod sa pamilya niyang nakabase na sa London; ang law school days niya at ang desisyong gamitin ang pinag-aralan sa public service sa halip na pasukin ang corporate world, at sa trabaho niya for the past four years.

Kabilang sila ni Dax sa tatlong team ng Community Service and Rehabilitation o CSR division ng *UIN* na nagpupunta sa mga remote na lugar sa mahihirap na bansa sa Southeast Asia. They conducted medical missions, legal clinics, skills training, and help rehabilitate communities that were devastated by calamities or armed conflict.

Their partnership earned service awards both from the UIN and various organizations that help fund their work.

Ang work partner niyang si Dr. Dax Quintanar din ang itinuturing niyang pinakamalapit na kaibigan sa nakalipas na mga taon at ganoon din siya para rito.

“Take your time, Gia.”

The understanding tone of the older woman’s voice encouraged her to say what she needed to say, if only she could find the words. The right words to make it sound more... acceptable. Less sordid.

“I’m having sex with him,” she blurted. *Oh God*, mas blunt iyon kaysa sa pinlano niya.

“I see.” Hindi nagbago ang ekspresyon ng doktor. Tita Angela looked at her with piercing concentration. “Is this a situation you want to change, Gia?”

“No!” Again, that was too quick, and too vehement. “Not exactly.” Huminga siya uli nang malalim. “I mean, I enjoy it. Pero parang lumampas na ako d’un sa napag-usapan namin na tingin ko’y makokompromiso dahil doon sa kung an’ng meron kami... Our work partnership... Our friendship.”

“How long since you started this sexual relationship?”

“Over two months ago.”

Tita Angela nodded. “Tama ba ang pagkaintindi ko na may kasunduan o usapan kayo ni Dax na may kinalaman dito sa sitwasyon n’yo?”

“Yes, may usapan. We set rules.”

Tita Angela looked a little perplexed.

“Our working relationship is... extremely important, to both of us. Naisip namin na mas mabuti kung may mga limitasyon kaming napagkasunduan... so that our situation won’t endanger our friendship.”

“Anong klaseng mga limitasyon ito?”

Dito na medyo nag-alangan ang dalaga, pero nang muling magtama ang mga tingin nila ni Tita Angela, naramdaman din agad niyang dapat na niyang pawalan ang mga alinlangan.

“Perhaps it would be best to start at the beginning,” the older woman suggested when Gia still did not speak. “So, you and your partner had harbored feelings for one another before this began—”

“Oh, no!” pagtatama agad niya. “Iyon mismo ang problema, Tita. There are no feelings involved whatsoever.”

The doctor looked skeptical. “None?”

“Well... not on his part,” mahinang sagot niya. Okay, eto na ang pag-aming matagal din niyang ipinagkait sa sarili. “But... on mine. And in that way, I’ve broken our most important rule.”

“So this was to be a purely physical relationship?”

“Yes.” Gia bit her lip. “No strings attached. Two adults relieving the tension of a highly stressful work environment—na actually, dahil sa trabaho namin, mahirap talaga na magsimula man lang ng kahit ano sa iba. Hindi nga namin magawang makipag-date. Kung hindi sobrang pagod, sobrang busy naman.”

“Well... on the surface, para ngang ideal at makatuwiran ’yang sitwasyon n’yo. But put into practice, it becomes a highly volatile situation.”

“I know,” she sighed.

“May mga inaasahan ka ba o gustong makuha mula dito sa sitwasyon ninyo? This... relationship?”

“It wasn’t supposed to be a real relationship at all!” protesta agad niya. “Kapag sinabing relationship, may... may feelings na involved, may commitment. What we have requires none of that.”

“But there are feelings involved. Yours.”

She shuddered. “Yes. He doesn’t know.”

“At hindi ka masaya na hindi niya alam? O hindi mo na gusto ang sitwasyon ninyo dahil sa nararamdaman mo para sa kanya?”

“I...” she hesitated. “Pareho. At sa tingin ko, wala din akong karapatan na maramdamang hindi na ako masaya dahil in the first place, we were both not supposed to be emotionally attached.”

“At iyong mga rules, na napagkasunduan n’yo, I take it they didn’t work as planned?”

Napailing siya. “Rules? They’ve all been broken.” She went on quickly, “At bago mo sabihin sa akin na dapat kong ipaalam sa kanya ang nararamdaman ko, ngayon pa lang gusto ko nang linawin na hindi puwede, Tita. I could never jeopardize our professional relationship for self-indulgent emotions on my part.”

“Gia, I wouldn’t advise any action that makes you uncomfortable.” Tita Angela smiled, and Gia told herself to relax. “May I ask you a question, Gia?”

Tumango siya kahit kinakabahan.

“Pumasok ka ba sa sitwasyong ito na naisip mo at naniniwala kang kaya ninyong panindigan ang napagkasunduan ninyo? Where did you see it going?”

“Honestly? Hindi ko alam. I truly believed that we could pull it off. His emotion, or lack of it, would help me maintain my own emotional distance. Iyon din sana ang purpose ng usapan, ng rules—to help keep personal and professional aspects separate.” She paused then continued, “Pero alam ko rin namang niloloko ko lang ang sarili ko. I had wanted to develop our relationship further.”

“But it hasn’t happened.”

“No.”

The physical might have moved to a different level, but

the emotional had not followed. Mahinang napamura ang dalaga nang mamasa ang kanyang mga mata.

I'm not going to cry.

“And now... I'm afraid that I've ruined the most important relationship in my life.”

At doon siya mas nalulungkot at nasasaktan... iyon ang talagang kinatatakutan niya.

“Paano ba ito nag-umpisa, Gia?” Tita Angela's voice was so kind, so ready to understand, that she could not refuse to answer.

“I won't lie. There was always—something—between us. Sa tingin ko parang nagparamdam 'yung kung anumang 'something' na iyon matapos ang isang napakahaba, matrabaho at frustrating na mission. We were overworked and tired. We were stressed out.”



Acacia Inn, Room 27

August 11, 3:05 p.m.

Gusto pa sanang magbabad ni Gia sa tub, pero forty minutes na siya roon at nangungulubot na ang dulo ng mga daliri niya. They rarely found accommodations in remote towns that were this nice. Family room ang nakuha nila ni Dax at inunahan agad niya ito sa master bedroom, kaya apat na araw na rin niyang ine-enjoy ang claw foot tub at ang bath gel na amoy melon.

Sobrang toxic ng nagdaang mga araw ng relief operations at medical mission na three hours ago lang natapos.

Kaaalis pa lang niya sa tub nang marinig ang pagbukas ng pinto ng kuwarto niya.

“Dax? Ikaw 'yan?” tawag niya.

“It's your secret lover, here to have his wicked way with you,” he answered, his voice muffled.

She snorted.

That would be the day.

Hindi siya dapat apektado sa sinabi nito dahil sa apat na taong magkatrabaho at magkaibigan sila ni Dax, sanay na siya sa kalandian nito. She knew he was never serious.

Nakakainis lang na sa idinalas ng birong paglalandi nito ay kinikilig pa rin siya. Every. Single. Time.

Nailing na mabilis siyang nagpahid ng lotion at nag-spray ng cologne bago nagbihis. An old loose shirt, a tiny cotton bikini and a plaid blue boxer shorts na hinarbat niya sa mga gamit ni Dax noong huling mission nila.

Ano kaya ang kailangan nito?

Inaasahan niyang maaabutang naghahalungkat sa gamit niya ang binata para mangharbat sa stock niya ng candies, pero sa halip na derechong lumabas ng banyo ay napakapit siya sa pinto.

Madilim na sa kuwarto niya. Pinatay marahil ni Dax ang ilaw at hinila pa pasara ang mga kurtina. Pero kita pa rin mula sa kinatatayuan niya ang ginagawa nito.

He was undressing. Nagkalat na sa sahig ang sapatos, medyas at belt nito.

“Ano’ng ginagawa mo, Dr. Quintanar?”

“Naghuhubad.”

“Uh...why?”

“Dahil pagod na ako at gusto ko nang matulog.” His tone was very matter-of-fact.

“Alas tres pa lang ng hapon.”

“I know. Sanay naman akong magbasa ng oras, Attorney. Thank you very much.”

God, she hated the bastard when he got sarcastic. “This is my room.”

Dax was now down to his t-shirt and boxers. Dumako ang mga kamay nito sa ibaba ng kamiseta at nanlaki ang

mga mata niya. *Don't you dare take that shirt off, Dax Quintanar!*

Dala siguro ng antok at pagod ay hindi nakuha sa tingin ang lalaki. Nahila na nito pataas ang kamiseta hanggang mahubad at sumama sa kalat sa sahig.

Hindi niya naiwasan ang mapasinghap. Dax had the most beautiful upper body: toned and smooth, with just the right sprinkling of chest hair and his skin always had a gorgeous, healthy glow...

Pinulot nito ang mga damit at basta isinampay na lang sa kalapit na silya, pagkatapos ay ibinagsak na nito ang sarili sa kama habang nanatili siyang nasa pinto ng banyo at hindi makapaniwalang nakatingin dito.

“Dax.” May pagbabanta na sa boses niya.

Naghikab lang ito. “You should probably get some sleep too, Gia. Ang haggard mo na.”

Wow, salamat, ha? You really know how to stroke a girl's ego. “What's wrong with your bed?”

His eyes were already half-closed. “It's in my room.”

“And what's wrong with your room?” napu-frustrate nang tanong niya. “Last Friday ka pa d'un at wala ka namang reklamo. Ano'ng mali sa kuwarto mo ngayon?”

“You're... not in it,” sagot ni Dax bago tuluyang pumikit at isinubsob ang mukha sa unan.

Maang na nakatingin lang siya rito. Dax usually found it difficult to sleep. He still had bad dreams, something he said he always had since witnessing a tragic event when he was young.

She rarely ever saw or heard about him enjoying a deep peaceful sleep but when he did, it was always beautiful.

Bumuntung-hininga si Gia. Tama naman ito, kailangan niya ng pahinga. Hindi lang niya inasahang makikihiga pa ito sa kama niya. Naisip din niyang pumunta sa kuwarto

nito para roon na lang matulog, kaya lang ay na-imagine din kaagad niya kung ano ang posibleng itsura niyon.

Most likely there were papers everywhere, and candy wrappers and pistachio shells since Dax had been addicted to the stuff. Ang pag-crack ng pistachio ang isa sa mga weird na stress buster nito.

Sighing, she crawled into bed beside her sleeping partner, pulled the covers over them both. There was no sense in wasting perfectly good body heat.

Gia lay on her side, facing away from Dax, their bodies not touching in any way. She took a deep breath as she closed her eyes.



Acacia Inn, Room 27

August 11, 5:13 p.m.

Nagising si Gia na nakaharap at halos nakasiksik na kay Dax dahil nakapaikot na ang isang braso nito sa kanya. Sapo na rin nito ang kanang dibdib niya. These often happened whenever they had to sleep in the same bed, and she's gotten used to it. She's even used to feeling his erection poking at her tummy, her hip or her thigh if it got wedged between his.

Nakakainis lamang dahil sa ganitong pagkakataon lang sila nagiging 'intimate' physically ni Dax—kapag tulog ito at malamang ay hindi alam masyado ang ginagawa.

But what woke her now was a new sensation, one she had not previously experienced... Dax's tongue inside her mouth. Her eyes popped open.

She made a sound and tried to glare at him, but his eyes were still closed.

At malay ba niya kung makukuha niya ito sa masamang tingin? Tiyak na kulang iyon sa conviction. Besides, the feeling of his warm lips on hers, their wet tongues sliding hotly together, made her want to close her eyes again.

But when he began to play with her breast more determinedly, then pinched her nipple, she knew she had to stop him now or she wouldn't at all.

Ubod-lakas na hinawakan niya ito sa balikat bago kumawala sa halik nito. He groaned in protest, and held her tighter.

Concentrating and trying to ignore the fact that he looked both hot and adorable with his ruffled hair and day-old stubble and those enviable long lashes, she used her hands to push against his chest—his naked chest.

Shit, wrong move!

Mas malambot at makinis pa yata ang balat nito kaysa sa kanya, kahit may chest hair. Ikinuyom niya ang isang kamao. “Dax!” Sinuntok niya ito sa balikat.

“Aw, Gia, what'd you do that for?” he mumbled.

“Let go of me.”

“Ayoko nga.” His lips found hers again, nibbling this time, sliding his tongue between her lips and running it over her clenched teeth. “Feels so good.”

Okay, hindi siya makikipagtalo sa aspetong iyon. Masarap nga, di ba? Pero mali pa rin ito, at kung makakalayo lang siya kay Dax para tuluyang bumalik ang katinuan niya ay sasabihin niya rito kung bakit.

“Ano ba'ng nangyayari sa iyo?” sa wakas ay tanong niya nang magawang muling makabitaw sa halik nito.

His eyes opened at last, and she was mesmerized by the intent they held. “I'm doing something right for a change,” sagot ni Dax. “Sobrang pagod ko, Gia. Stressed pa, and all I want to do right now is kiss you. Because that makes me feel good. And I think it makes you feel good too.” Ngumiti ito. “So let's not play these stupid games anymore, Gia.”

Hindi siya makapaniwala sa pinagsasabi nito. Bakit at paanong nagkaroon si Dax ng ganitong desisyon?

“Hindi ako nakipaglaro kahit kailan, Dax. You’re the one playing games here.”

He looked affronted. “Hindi rin ako nakikipaglaro. Nagpapakatotoo lang ako. I’m tired of pretending that you don’t turn me on, Gia. You do. Every little thing you do makes me hard. Did you know that? You’ve turned me into a permanent hard-on.”

OMG! Di nga? Nag-init ang mga pisngi niya, at parang may kilig o kiliti siyang naramdaman. *Shit!*

“I know you find me attractive,” patuloy ni Dax. “I’ve seen you checking me out, kapag akala mo hindi ako nakatingin. At ’yung madalas mong pagtsi-check kung may gusot ang damit ko, kung ayos ’yung cuff, kuwelyo at kurbata ko? I know those are excuses to touch me.”

Gia was mortified. Gusto niyang sapakin ang kaharap at itanggi ang sinabi nito, pero agad nawala sa isip niya ang gusto sanang sabihin dahil sa sumunod na narinig mula kay Dax.

“I think we should f*ck.”

“What?” Wait, bakit parang na-excite siya at gustong mambugbog ng guwapong doktor at the same time?

“Iyon na ’yung perfect solution sa atin, Gia.”

“Solution saan?” May problema ba sila?

“Kapag magkasama tayo, madalas akong hindi maka-concentrate sa trabaho, Gia. I’m too aware of you.” Huminga ito nang malalim. “Everything you do, every move you make. You don’t realize it, Gia, but I notice everything about you... the way your ass moves under your skirt when you walk, those tight shirts you wear... your beautiful breasts looking like they’re gonna spill right out... At sa tingin ko, pareho lang tayo ng naramdaman,” patuloy nito. “Let’s be honest here, Gia. Don’t I distract you sometimes?”

If she told him *yes*, he would no doubt take it as

encouragement. But then again, she wasn't about to lie bald-faced to him either about something so inconsequential as finding him attractive. So what if she did?

Nadi-distract nga ba siya nito? Yes, he did. Much to her consternation, she lusted after him constantly.

"Sometimes," sa wakas ay pag-amin niya. Hindi iyon ang buong katotohanan, pero okay na iyon kaysa tahasan siyang magsinungaling.

"You see? Makakabuti sa atin 'to, Gia. We'd 'solve the mystery'. The attraction of the unexplored would no longer be there... By relieving the tension."

"Ano ngayon kung attracted ako sa iyo? That still does not mean that we should have sex."

Dax looked amused. "It does if it distracts you, which is what I asked, and you answered in the affirmative."

Napanganga siya. Sino ba ang abogado sa kanilang dalawa? Itatangi sana niya ang sinabi nito pero huli na, naamin na niya.

"Ayoko sanang tadyakan masyado 'yang dambuhalang ego mo, Dax, but you don't distract me that much," asar nang sabi niya. *Hay, sana totoo!*

He was apparently not swayed by her assertion. "What if I find you *that* distracting?"



2



Tumalon yata ang puso ni Gia. “Well... I guess you’ll just have to stop it.”

“May mas okay na solusyon d’yan. Since malinaw nang attracted tayo sa isa’t isa, I say we do something about it right now.”

“Okay, sige,” ngumiti siya. “Simulan natin sa pagtapos ng usapang ito at kalimutan ding may ganitong usapang naganap.” At kalimutan din na kanina pa hyper ang tibok ng puso niya.

“Hear me out, Gia,” he begged, nearly bouncing on the bed. The mattress shook with his enthusiasm.

Minasdan lang niya si Dax.

“Nadi-distract tayong pareho sa trabaho dahil sa mutual attraction natin sa isa’t isa, Gia, sa ayaw at sa gusto natin. Now, I don’t know about you, but I don’t think that’s a good thing at all.”

“I don’t think it’s a good thing,” sang-ayon niya.

Tumango ito. “Physical attraction isn’t something you can just will away. Do we at least agree on that?”

If it was, she wouldn’t be attracted to him. “True.”

Relieved na napangiti si Dax. “Once we’ve gotten this out of our system, we’ll concentrate better on our missions. Hindi sa may nagrereklamo sa kung paano tayo magtrabaho, but we can always do better. Tama?”

Ganito ba talaga ka-hypnotic ang boses ni Dax pag pagod, stressed at kulang pa sa tulog?

“We could work faster and more efficiently then,” sang-ayon niya muli, hindi inaalís ang tingin sa kausap.

“Right. I’m glad you’re being so reasonable about this, Gia.” He appeared to be very proud of her.

“I’m a reasonable person, Dax.”

“Alam ko,” mahinahong sabi nito. “And sex is a great way to relieve tension... and not just the sexual kind. We’re both in highly stressful job, Gia.”

“Tama, pero... It will never work, Dax.” How could it? The very idea was ludicrous. Tempting, but insane.

“Bakit hindi?”

“Alam mo kung bakit,” frustrated na sagot niya.

“I don’t know,” he stated. “You agreed that physical attraction can’t be simply willed away. The only way I see it dissolving is if we give in to it. Otherwise, we’ll always see each other as the person we can never have—making us even more attractive to one another.”

“Tama. Kaya lang...”

“Kilala na natin ang isa’t isa, Gia. And we trust each other. We’d never have to worry about disease or... or...”

Gia knew what he meant. Pregnancy. Alam ni Dax ang medical history niya dahil simula nang maging malapit sila ay ito na ang naging doktor niya. He knew that an acute disease she had as a teenager gave her a near zero chance of bearing children.

“No strings attached, Gia. No messy emotions to get in the way. We love each other, the way two best friends love each other, at mas matibay ang ugnayang iyon kaysa sa kahit anong koneksyong mayroon ako sa kahit sino. Our friendship is the most important thing in the world to me.”

“Sex would ruin that, Dax.”

“No, no,” he asserted. “Walang kinalaman ang pagkakaibigan natin dito, Gia. Just a man and a woman, relieving stress and tension together.”

When his hand started that soft stroking gesture against her spine, she shivered.

“Sex is an animal instinct, like eating or sleeping. Its deprivation naturally causes the deprived—you and me—to supplement it in some way.”

Okay! Nahaluan na ng Science ang usapan, pero bakit ganoon pa rin ang dating ng boses ni Dax?

“Kapag napabayaan na hindi natutugunan, this need becomes a priority, like any other animal need, and that would be when our work could be disrupted. I think we both agree that that would be a bad thing.

“Puwede rin namang ibang tao ang pumuno sa pangangailangang iyon,” parang masama sa loob na pag-concede nito. “Pero dahil attracted nga tayo sa isa’t isa bukod sa tiwala at ilang taon na tayong nagkakilala, why let that go to waste? Besides, what we do isn’t exactly conducive to meeting people.”

He appealed to her with earnest eyes. “Hindi ako gagawa ng kahit anong puwedeng makasira sa pagkakaibigan natin. You believe that, don’t you, Gia?”

“So you want us to... have sex? This once?” Parang mamimilipit na siya sa excitement maisip pa lang iyon.

“Whenever we feel like it,” he breathed. “Puwedeng pagkatapos ng isang beses, hindi na natin gustuhing gawin uli. Maybe it’ll be enough. But we won’t limit ourselves. Ano sa palagay mo?”

Halatang pinag-isipan talaga iyon ni Dax, at doon pa lang, parang kinakabahang nae-excite na siya lalo.

“We are both mature, responsible adults, Gia,” patuloy nito. “More than capable of separating sex and friendship,

don't you think?"

Noon niya naalala ang isang lumang pelikulang napanood dati. "Sablay naman ang set-up na 'yan kina *Harry* at *Sally*."

Bahagyang nangunot ang ni Dax. "First of all, those were fictional characters," anitong mahinang pinitik ang braso niya. "Second, once she slept with *Harry*, *Sally* didn't want to separate the two. Hindi saktong kapareho ng pinag-uusapan natin, kaya hindi rin natin alam kung magwo-work sa kanila o hindi."

Okay, huling argumento na niya sina *Harry* at *Sally*. Effective at convincing pa ang naging sagot ni Dax. Oras na ba para bumigay siya?

Wait, no! Mali pa rin! Hindi dapat! She had to use the strength of her mind to overcome the weakness of her flesh.

Unfortunately, that's where he attacked—her mind—at sa sandaling may nabubuo nang argumento sa utak niya ay may panlaban na agad si Dax. Mukhang handa at armado pa ito ng defense arguments at sa totoo lang, wala na siyang bala.

"I suppose that's right," she pursed her lips.

"So what's stopping us?" He traced a finger down her cheek. Shivers. Tingles. All over.

She swore silently, *Damn!*

His hand then dropped from her face to the aroused peak of one breast. She vaguely realized that this was his first blatantly sexual move aside from their earlier kiss, and that she ought to be more outraged by his boldness. But his fingers began playing delicately with her nipple, distracting her.

It wasn't as if she could truthfully say she didn't want to have sex with him. She'd wanted him for a long time. And he was right, it was indeed strange that they'd been right under

each other's noses, yet had never taken advantage of their mutual attraction.

"You feel so good," he whispered, eyes glazing over with a kind of primal need. He rolled her on her back while she was still contemplating. He lifted her shirt up over her breasts so that they were bared to his view. He licked his lips. "May I taste you?"

His hot breath was now on her newly-exposed skin.

This felt so incredibly right—and yet, so very wrong.

Alam ni Gia na dapat at puwede pa nila itong ihinto, pero hindi ba at kanina pa nila nalampasan ang anumang invisible line na mayroon? Since nalampasan na, hindi ba mas tamang mag-all the way na lang?

She stared once more into his beautiful hazel eyes, wide with hope and lust, and knew they mirrored her own. Nawala na nang tuluyan ang mga pag-aalinlangan niya. Ang nasa isip na lang ngayon ay kung gaano niya talaga kagusto ang nakatakdang mangyari.

She hesitated only for a moment, then nodded, sealing her fate.



As Dax's soft, firm and warm mouth tasted every inch of her skin—alternately kissing, licking, nipping and biting—she found the little noises he made were almost as exciting as the act itself. She felt like the most desirable woman in the world; he couldn't seem to get enough of her.

When he decided it was time to move on, he deliberately rubbed up against her, making his way leisurely back up her body, skin to skin, letting her feel the friction of his chest hair against her nipples. Her fingers felt boneless, falling from his head to his shoulders, reveling in the feel of his taut, smooth skin over the hard muscle beneath.

He then lowered his head and kissed her again, rubbing

his tongue possessively against hers, devouring her. Her hands traveled up and down the length of his arms. He was so hard and smooth everywhere.

At ngayon siya lubusang sumasang-ayon sa pinagsasabi nito kanina. Hindi nga naman tama iyong matagal na panahong ipinagkait nila ito sa isa't isa. That said, she was tired of being the submissive one.

Ipinaikot niya ang isang braso sa leeg nito, at ang isang kamay ay mariing inilapat niya sa balikat ni Dax. Sinamantala niya ang focus nito sa paghalik sa kanya at nagawang maitulak ito para mapagpalit ang posisyon nila.

She straddled him fully, her knees on either side of his hips, and bent to spear him with a fierce look.

Ilang sandaling hindi makapaniwalang nakatingin lang sa kanya si Dax bago napangiti. "Be gentle," he pleaded in mock seriousness.

She smiled back, somewhat ferally. Oh, she was going to enjoy herself. She hadn't done this since law school, six years ago. Now, she wished she wasn't so weak and insecure and stupid back in college, when she thought sex would make her more accepted and loved. Now she wished Dax was her first instead.

She trailed one finger down his cheek, exactly as he had done to her earlier.

"You know you don't really want me to be gentle," she breathed. He shivered, then yelped when she reached behind her to feel the strength of his resolve.

"Very impressive, Dr. Quintanar... I can't wait to get that in me." Napaungol ito sa sinabi niya.

Napahawak na lang siya kay Dax nang magawa nitong pagpalitin ang kanilang posisyon. No protest came out of her when he spread her legs wide apart as he asserted himself there, finding her entrance, pushing into her.

The stretching sensation was almost unbearable as she tried to relax her muscles to accommodate him more easily. For the first few moments the pain almost overwhelmed the pleasure.

“Gia,” he gasped. “Why is this hurting you?” He sounded genuinely alarmed.

“I haven’t done this in a l-long t-time,” she answered, concentrating on her breathing.

Her admission seemed to make him grow even a little bigger, and they both groaned, for different reasons.

But she wanted this, needed it as much as her next breath. Just underneath the pain was the wonderful, incomparable sensation of being completed.

When he was finally all the way in, buried so deep inside her, she let out a deep sigh of contentment. Now there was truly no going back.

“You feel f*cking amazing,” he groaned, shifting his hips a little. She winced but was pleased nonetheless.

“You do, too,” she answered truthfully. Yes, ‘f*cking amazing’ just about covered it.

Gia sucked in a breath when he slid nearly all the way out, then back in. No wait, she had spoken too soon. That felt f*cking amazing. He did it again, and again, each stroke more pleasurable than the last.

She could tell that he wanted to be gentle; Dax was holding himself back. But each thrust shred a little more of his control, until every stroke was hard, fast, unchecked.

She liked seeing him totally out of control like this, as he rode her hard and caused her to jerk against him. She liked knowing she was the one to make him so wild with lust and need. She especially enjoyed feeling him f*ck her as if she was the woman he wanted most in the world and this was his one and only chance with her.

She could feel the pleasure build until she felt like she was about to topple into the abyss of climax.

He jerked against her, ramming one last time into her, so hard that for a moment the pleasure and pain blurred. She felt him expand, growing impossibly bigger and harder.

“Oh my... Dax!” It was more than she could take, and her back arched, as her climax took her. It was so intense, that they both passed out for a few moments.



When she opened her eyes again, Dax had straightened the covers a bit and adjusted her limp body in a way that she lay plastered against him.

Looking up at him, she saw that he looked positively smug. Smug and sated. When he saw that she was looking, his expression immediately turned hopeful. He gave a tentative smile.

Inasahan siguro nito na magwawala siya, at muling ipipilit na mali ang ginawa nila. Baka nga inaasahan na ni Dax na sasaktan niya ito, pagkatapos niyang ideklarang hindi na sila friends.

Luckily for him, she felt too happy and content to go through any of that.

“I suppose we should draw up some rules about this.” Safe na sigurong i-assume niya na may part two or more pa, dahil matapos ang nangyari at base sa itsura ni Dax, alam niyang mauulit pa ito.

“Rules?” Halatang nadismaya ito.

“Yes. Bukod sa given na walang ibang dapat makaalam?” Naramdaman niyang tumango ito. “Kapag may napagkasunduan tayong rules, mas maiiwasan nating madala masyado nito, di ba?”

“Pero, Gia...” he whined. “We’re grown-ups. Hindi na natin kailangan ng rules to keep everything separate.”

“Hindi basta itong sinimulan natin, Dax. Emotions are very volatile. Lines should be drawn, at least in the beginning, and make sure that they don’t get blurred.”

“At the beginning?” he asked, hope in his voice.

“Well... yes. Kapag ipinagpatuloy natin ito, at nasanay na tayo na ihiwalay ito sa ibang aspeto ng buhay natin, eventually, hindi na kakailanganin ang ibang rules.”

“I see.” Ilang sandaling nag-isip si Dax. “Tama, naiintindihan ko na,” tumango ito. “You’re right, Gia.”

Medyo duda siya sa madali nitong pagpayag. “Of course, I’m right. You’re being surprisingly reasonable all of a sudden.”

“Surprisingly?” malakas na sabi nito, halatang nainsulto. “I can be just as reasonable as you.”

Tinaasan lang niya ito ng kilay.

“At para patunayan kung gaano ako ka-reasonable, ako ang magbibigay ng first rule,” he offered.

“Okay... what is it?” Duda pa rin siya.

“We shouldn’t say each other’s names during the deed. Like the way you screamed my name just now? Not allowed.”

Pinagloloako ba siya ng lalaking ito?

“It makes sense, Gia,” patuloy ni Dax. “Kung plano nating ihiwalay ito sa kung ano o sino tayo—as friends and work partners, then we should distance ourselves from this, entirely.”

Nangunot ang noo niya. He sounded so cold, so impersonal.

Pero iyon nga mismo ang point, di ba? Nilinaw na ni Dax sa umpisa pa lang na hindi sila dapat maging emotionally involved.

It was probably just the unresolved attraction between them that was making her feel these strange love feelings for him. Now, that would stop. She ignored the pang of loss she

felt in the pit of her stomach.

“Okay...” tumango siya. “At hindi natin dapat gawin ito while in the middle of an assignment or mission. Dapat ganito rin na tapos na ang trabaho natin. The point is to keep from getting distracted from our work, not aid the distraction.”

“Tama,” he injected smoothly. “At para masigurong wala talaga tayong magiging personal involvement dito—we’re just using each other for sex, after all—I say that our apartments are off-limits, too.”

Did she detect hurt, or regret, in his voice? Minasdan niya si Dax. His geeky handsome features were almost blank. “Okay, that makes sense.” *Damn, but he’s got a nice big couch!* “No hanky panky in the office, either,” dagdag niya.

“Definitely!” sang-ayon agad nito. “Ano pa?”

Sarcastic ang pagkasabi roon ni Dax, pero hindi na niya pinansin. “We can see other people.” Her voice was deceptively calm. This was not the conversation she wanted to have at the moment, or ever.

Bago ito, parang may unspoken agreement na sila dati na kahit malaya silang makipag-date o ma-involve sa iba, tila naging personal choice na nilang maging ‘faithful’ sa isa’t isa.

Hindi nila iyon talagang napag-usapan, pero ngayon, para patunayang okay lang siya sa bagong set-up nila ay kailangan tuloy nilang harapin ang issue na ito.

What they were having at this point couldn’t be considered a romantic relationship. Their bodies were going to help them relieve stress and tension from time to time, but nothing significant has to change.

“Dax?” untag niya nang mapansing kanina pa ito tahimik.

“Damn it, Gia, kasisimula pa lang natin and you’re

already talking about seeing other people?” He was pissed.

“Sa tingin ko lang, dapat maging handa tayo sa mga posibleng mangyari,” maingat na paliwanag niya. Nahihirapan siya maisip man lang ang mga posibilidad na iyon, pero ayaw naman niyang masyadong umasa.

“Okay sige, sabi mo,” he snapped. “You can f*ck whoever you want to f*ck, and I’ll look the other way.”

Teka, bakit siya? Para kay Dax ang pesteng rule na ito! She would never want anyone else!

“Dax,” tinapik niya ang dibdib nito, “kailangan nating magkasundo dito. When and if, naging emotionally and physically involved tayo sa iba, then kailangan nating ipaalam sa isa’t isa. Dahil oras na iyon para tigilan na natin ito. For health reasons din.”

“Kailangan din bang magpa-blood test tayo bago natin gawin ito?” Even his scowl was attractive, she noted distractedly.

“No... I trust you. And I think you trust me, too. That’s why we’re doing this, right?” Huminga siya nang malalim. Para sa kanila rin naman ito.

Posibleng sa paglipas ng panahon at habang nasa ganitong set-up sila ay magkaroon ng problema, kaya kailangang malinaw nilang mapag-usapan ang mga limitasyon at dapat gawin.

She suddenly felt very frightened. What were they really doing? Wasn’t it completely insane to risk what they had for a few sexual encounters?

Perhaps not, but now that she had made love with Dax, she could never voluntarily go back to not being able to make love with him.

“Yes,” sa wakas ay nasabi ni Dax. “I trust you.” He sighed. “Okay, so we’re gonna tell each other anytime we do each score. Ano pa, Gia?”

“Well, along those same lines...” Nainis na siya sa sarili pero sige pa rin siya sa sasabihin. “Huwag sanang maging masyadong malaking factor ang kung ano’ng mayroon tayo sakaling magdesisyon tayong ma-involve sa iba. We shouldn’t hold each other back.

“I don’t want you to feel some misplaced sense of loyalty to me, or this. If you find someone, Dax, I’ll be thrilled for you, as your friend and your partner.” Kinabahan siya nang mapansing tila naiinis na rin ito.

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re really romantic?” he asked darkly.

“There’s no romance in this. None.” Napailing siya. Hindi niya maintindihan kung bakit condescending ito, pero wala ring alam si Dax sa totoong nararamdaman niya na mas dapat niyang ingatan ngayon.

“Fine... we’re f*ck buddies,” he snarled. “Agreed.”

“You sound upset.” Nangingkit ang mga mata ni Gia.

“I’m not... Hell, yes, I’m upset!”

“Hindi ko intensyong maramdaman mo iyan.” Tinapik niya ang dibdib nito bilang pang-aalo. “At iyon lang sa tingin ko ang dapat maging rules. Okay na, move on na tayo.”

“Okay,” he sighed finally, then, “Gutom na ako. Gutom ka na? Saan tayo magdi-dinner?”

Oh, now that’s romantic, she retorted silently. But she smiled, burying her face in his chest so that he couldn’t see it. “Kahit anong gusto mo.” Napangisi siya. Dahil sa katatapos lang na bagyo ay wala silang gaanong pagpipilian sa bayang iyon sa Cagayan De Oro. Pancit o barbecue lang.

She shivered as he slid down to plant a kiss, then growl into her ear, “Then I’ll have to ask that you stay right here.”