

# 1

“Kinakabahan ka ba, sir? Don’t worry, walang magiging hassle. Nandiyan na ’yung string quartet. Working lahat ng cameras sa dinner set-up. The food is almost ready. Nakaabang na din ang camera crew sa pier para sa pagdating ni future Mrs. Vergara...”

Parang lalong natensyon si Ryland sa huling sinabi ni Constance. Napalunok ito bago muling huminga nang malalim. “I really hope this works out,” he mumbled nervously.

“It will work out. Everything works out here. I have twenty-four proposals to prove that. Eighteen d’un ikinasal na, at ’yung iba, busy na sa wedding preps.” Ibinaba muna ng dalaga sa couch sa lobby ang dalang backpack at inilabas ang kanyang cellphone. “She’s here.”

“Shit.” Napahawak sa braso niya ang pinakatenسیونado na yatang magpo-propose na nakilala niya. “Damn it, how do you even do this? Hindi ka ba kinabahan d’un sa nakaraang proposals na in-organize mo? All the photos and videos I saw in your website and *Facebook* page looked stunning and beautiful but have you ever felt like something might

go wrong at some point?” Napabuga ito ng hangin. “Sorry, sorry, I’m just—”

“Nervous, I know. Obvious at di rin kasi maiiwasan, sir. Pero—”

“No sir. Ryland na lang, Constance, please?” His eyes pleaded.

Napakurap siya. Ryland Vergara—the man who’s about to propose on this early February night—looked like he was about to have a nervous breakdown. What’s the male equivalent of a damsel in distress? That’s him right now. Yet, he still looked like a gallant prince, all six feet of exquisite male beauty. She hated comparing but Ryland was probably her hottest fiancé-to-be.

Pero ito rin ang pinakatensyonado. Kadalasan, ang mga kaibigan o kasamang kaibigan o kaanak ng magpo-propose ang nagbibigay ng pep talk, pero hindi kagaya ng mga naunang nag-propose dito sa isla ng Persida, mag-isa lang na dumating si Ryland. He said he wanted this to be intimate, just between him and the woman he wanted to marry. He also intended this to be a long weekend getaway. Naging masyadong busy daw kasi ito at ang girlfriend sa kani-kanilang trabaho simula nang magbagong taon at isang beses lang talagang nag-date nang maayos

kaya plano nitong sorpresahin.

“Okay, Ryland, listen,” nakataas ang isang kilay na sinalubong ni Constance ang tingin nito. “True, we’ve seen twenty-four proposals here over the past four years since the resort opened but I’ve only technically did work on sixteen of them. ’Yung naunang walo, may sariling team. I only started when a college friend hired me to cover his proposal then, several other friends and relatives soon followed. Doon pa lang nag-umpisa itong side business ko. Yes, kinabahan din ako at oo, may mga hassle. May dalawang beses pang binagyo kami. May tatlong beses na nawalan ng kuryente. Nakaka-stress at nakakatakot ’yon! But you know what, they all worked out in the end. Twenty-four times nang may nag-Yes dito and we will hear the twenty-fifth later. You,” tinapik niya ito sa dibdib, “will hear it.”

Hinuli ni Ryland ang kamay niya at dinala sa kaliwang dibdib nito. Napasinghap siya at mapatingin sa lalaki na nakatitig din sa kanya. Sumabay sa malakas at mabilis na tibok ng puso nito ang puso niya at hindi niya iyon maintindihan. Maybe she just didn’t expect this? Maybe she’s also nervous for him?

“I really hope she says Yes,” bulong nito.

“She will say Yes,” she assured him. Why was he

still holding her hand over his heart?

“I’ve only known her for two years, we’ve been together for fifteen months...”

“May mga nag-propose dito na iilang buwan pa lang magkakilala, merong dekada na. Lahat sila, bumabalik pa rin dito na masaya at excited.”

“She’s quite independent and loves her life and I don’t want her to feel I’m changing that by asking her to marry me...”

“Then, tell her, Ryland.”

Tumango ang binata. “I will, I will,” he smiled faintly. “I’ve never been this nervous.”

“Mawawala din ’yan.” Binawi ni Constance ang kamay. “Deep breaths, Ryland.” Lumayo siya at muling kinuha ang backpack, bago tiningnan muli ang cellphone. “Nagpi-freshen up lang daw sa ladies’ room ng *Luna Dia* si Tanya,” tukoy niya sa café restaurant ng resort na nasa kabilang building lang, at sa girlfriend ng kausap. “You ready?”

He swallowed. “Do I look ready?”

Nangingiting napailing siya. “A gorgeous, nervous wreck actually. Ryland!” She snapped a finger near his face. Kumurap ito. “Try to relax, okay? Nakahanda

na ang lahat. Masarap ang dinner. Maganda ang panahon.” Hinawakan niya ang kamay ng kanyang kliyente at pinisil iyon. “You’ll be fine. Everything will be fine.” Binitawan niya iyon bago humakbang paatras habang inaayos ang camcorder. “Let’s do it!” Lumingon siya sa labas. “Uy, tingnan mo, ang daming stars! See, the universe just gave you a sign. Stars as witnesses!”

Ninenerbyos na tumawa ang kausap. “You’re very good at this, Constance.” Huminga muli ito nang malalim. “I’m ready. Do I look ready?”

“You look every inch like a man worthy of a Yes.” Inayos niya ang settings ng camcorder. Itinaas niya iyon at sinilip sa maliit na screen ang lalaki na derecho ang tingin sa kanya. Medyo nanginig ang kamay niya. Huminga siya nang malalim.

“Really? Would you say Yes to me, then?”

Napahigpit ang hawak niya sa camcorder at hindi makapaniwalang tinitigan ang binata. Halatang nagulat din ito sa tanong. Inasahan niyang babawiin nito iyon, pero umangat lang ang isang kilay ni Ryland.

“Well?” he prompted.

*Why was he even asking me this?* Tinaasan din niya

ito ng kilay. “Well...” *Shit, bakit ako kinakabahan?* “Hindi kita kilala, Ryland. I don’t know much about you except the basics, and that you’re a nervous wreck would-be-fiancé. Pero kung ang basehan lang ng pagsagot sa proposal ay tikas, tindig, bango, kaguwapuhan at um...” She jokingly, nervously checked him out with a trembling smile, “Biceps. And abs...” Napangiti rin siya nang mapansing parang nawawala na ang tensyon sa ngiti ng kaharap. “Sure, Ryland. I’ll say *Yes*.”

For some reason, that seemed to be the reassurance he needed. Parang unti-unting naglaho ang pag-aalinlangan at takot nito. Itinaas muli ni Constance ang camcorder at isi-signal na sana na mag-uumpisa na sila pero nabitin iyon sa ere nang takbuhin ni Ryland ang distansya sa pagitan nila at ipalibot ang mga braso nito sa kanya.

Napako lang siya sa kinatatayuan hawak ang camcorder sa pagitan nila.

He didn’t seem to mind. “You’re amazing, Constance. Thank you,” bulong ng binata bago siya hinagkan sa pisngi. “The man you will say *Yes* to will be the luckiest.” He grinned as he pulled away. Sumaludo ito nang bumalik sa puwesto kanina. “Ready!”

## *The 25th Proposal - Sachi Bliss*

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Ilang segundo ang lumipas bago siya nakabawi sa pagkagulat at sinimulang i-record ang pangdalawampu't limang proposal na magaganap sa resort na apat na taon na niyang pinamamahalaan.

Parang si Constance naman ang natensyon dahil sa di-inaasahang ginawa ni Ryland, pero hindi nagtagal ay nawala rin iyon. Her client looked determined, ready and devastatingly goodlooking. His girlfriend was like a goddess. Ini-record ng team niya hanggang sa makarating ang mga ito sa candlelit path papunta sa kung saan naroon ang magandang dinner set-up. There were delicious food, wine, chocolates and fresh wildflowers. Four posts with lanterns surrounded the table. A string quartet started playing several meters away.

Cameras were placed on strategic places to capture the event. Lahat iyon ay naka-connect sa laptop niyang naka-set-up twenty meters from the table. Doon tumakbo si Constance matapos magtagpo nina Ryland at Tanya at magkahawak-kamay na naglakad papunta sa dinner set-up.

And from her laptop, she anxiously watched as she absently picked on her light dinner. May audio capture ang mga camera pero hindi muna niya pinakinggan. From her peripherals, she saw their staff

serve food to Tanya's companions. Assistant at driver daw ang mga iyon na iniwan ang sasakyan sa isang hotel sa mainland. Hindi siya sigurado kung alam ni Ryland na may kasama ang girlfriend nito.

Dinner seemed to have gone well. Both Ryland and Tanya were smiling. Mula sa puwesto, dinig ni Constance ang tugtog ng string quartet. Mostly songs by *The Beatles* and a few from the late 90s. Nakatulong yata iyon para maubos din niya ang kinakain. Everything seemed to be going as planned until she saw Tanya hold her beau's hand. May sinasabi ito. Hindi niya gaanong mabasa ang ekspresyon sa mukha ng babae pero kinabahan siya.

And then, she stood up. And ran. Inasahan niyang tatayo rin si Ryland at susundan ang kasintahan pero nanatili ito sa kinauupuan. Baka nag-CR lang ang dalaga? O kaya may tumawag?

Tumingin siya kay Tanya na mabilis ang mga hakbang. Sinalubong ito ng mga kasama na iginiya agad ito sa direksyon ng pier kung saan may naghihintay nang de-motor na bangka. Eksaktong alas nueve ang huling biyahe pabalik sa mainland na thirty minutes din ang itatagal.

*But why was she...? Oh, shit! Oh, no!*



Tulirong pinindot ng events planner ang power button ng laptop, bago halos magkandarapa papunta sa string quartet na huminto na sa pagtugtog. Halos magkabangaan sila ng team niya na hindi rin inasahan ang nangyari.

“What the hell?” She didn’t even know how to articulate her thoughts.

“Nag-break yata, Constance. Nakipag-break ’yung Tanya,” di-makapaniwalang sabi ng supervisor nila kapag gabi na si Kuya Arwin.

“Ano’ng sasabihin ko sa mga bata?” tanong ng isa sa camera crew niya na si Ate Leni na ang tinutukoy ay ang mga musikero na tagaroon din sa Persida.

“Kunin mo sa bag ko ’yung envelope para sa kanila. Pabigyan mo din kay Kuya Tim ng food basket. Pakisabi kay Maya, iligpit at ihatid na lang sa bahay ko ’yung gamit ko. Salamat!” Bumaling siya supervisor at sinabihan itong tumawag ng magliligpit ng mesa.

Hindi makapaniwala si Constance sa nangyari. Hindi niya ito inaasahan. Bakit nagkaganito? Napatingin siya sa set-up kung saan naroon si... *Oh, shit! Ryland!*

He was still standing there. A bunch of flowers in his right hand and his left fist closed over something.

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He was facing away from her, looking out into the vast sea, at the boat that had his love in it slowly fading into the night.

*I'm sorry, Ryland. I don't know why, but I'm so sorry.*

## 2

*What the f\*ck happened? Or what the f\*ck didn't happen?*

Nanginginig ang kanyang kaliwang kamao na nakapalibot sa maliit na kahon nang ilagay niya iyon sa bulsa ng jacket. He thought about hurling it into the sea, but he remembered that it was painstakingly made by a dear family friend. Ibabalik na lang niya iyon. Ang refund, ibibigay ni Ryland sa shelter ng mga inabandonang matanda, bata, o maysakit.

What an advocacy. And how appropriate. He shook his head bitterly. He sighed when he heard footsteps coming.

Tumayo siya at lumingon sa mga paparating. Dalawa sa mga staff ng resort at si Constance, na parang nag-aalangan habang palapit pero sinalubong din ang kanyang tingin.

*You said everything's going to work out fine. You said she'll say 'Yes'. You said I'm worthy of it.*

Gusto niyang sumbatan ito na parang bata pero walang kasalanan ang babae. Sa kabila ng kanyang kaba kanina at kahit wala ang pep talk nito, umasa

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siyang magiging masaya ang kalalabasan ng gabing ito. Hindi man lang sumagi sa isip ni Ryland ang pagkabigo, at ang pagtatapos ng inakala niyang panghabambuhay na.

“Excuse us, sir. Puwede na po ba namin itong iligpit?” tanong ng isa sa dalawang staff na kasama ni Constance.

“Yes, sige lang. Salamat,” mahinang sagot niya. Pinanood niyang ilipat ng mga ito ang mga pinagkainan sa isang cart at itiklop ang mga silya at mesa.

Kinuha naman ni Constance ang kahon ng chocolates at bote ng wine sa ice bucket at iniabot sa kanya.

“Sayang ’tong mga dala mo. Iuwi mo na lang.” Tumango ito sa dalawang staff na paalis na, dala ang mga gamit.

He stared at her for a few seconds, then at the sea, then at the starry skies. *Stars as witnesses, my ass.*

*Look how they shine for you...*

He sighed. “Share tayo?”

She blinked, confused.

He pushed his hands into his jeans' pockets. "I don't think I want to be alone just yet inside that cabin I paid for." *A honeymoon cabin. A well stocked one. With flower petals and candles on the floor and around the jacuzzi. Shit.*

Bahagyang nangunot ang noo ni Constance. "So you want to stay... here?"

Tumango si Ryland. "Yes." Tumingin siya sa bahagi ng beach na nasa mismong tapat ng hotel sa di-kalayuan. "Puwede rin doon para mas maliwanag."

Parang nag-aalangan pa rin ang babae nang muling ibigay sa kanya ang kahon ng tsokolate at bucket na may wine.

"Okay, hawakan mo 'to at pumunta ka na doon. Sa may bonfire pit? Kukuha lang ako ng lighter sa loob. Okay lang sa 'yong maupo sa buhangin?"

He snorted. "I'm hurting but not that fragile, Constance. I'll sit my ass in the f\*cking fire if you tell me to."

"Alright. Three to five minutes!" Nakatakbo na pabalik sa hotel ang events planner bago pa siya nakasagot uli. Naililing na pumunta siya sa kung saan sila pupuwesto ni Constance. Ibinaba niya ang ice bucket at kahon ng tsokolate sa mapusyaw na

buhangin at inayos ang mga kahoy sa bonfire pit, bago naupo.

Tiningnan ni Ryland ang oras. Nine ten na ng gabi. Tumingala siya sa langit. Parang dumami lalo ang mga bituin.

He could hear faint laughter and singing. Sa restaurant siguro galing o sa isa sa mga veranda ng three-storey hotel... o puwede ring sa isa sa mga cabin. The quaint and beautiful *Costa Persida* resort was only supposedly just half-full on this cold early February weekend but at least, all the other guests had someone with them.

While he's here, unexpectedly alone and miserable.

*"I kind of sensed what you're planning tonight and I just have to be honest. I'm sorry, Ryland. I should've found time over the past weeks to tell you. But..."* Hinawakan ni Tanya ang kaliwang kamay niya. *"Keep your ring. I don't need it, I don't even want to see it. Hindi ko alam kung bakit wala ka man lang nahahalata o clueless ka lang talaga."* Bumuntong-hininga ang nobya. *"I'm not ready for this, Ryland. Not now, and I'm not even sure if I want to marry you. Especially now."* Nagpapaunawa ang tingin nito.

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*“There’s someone, Ryland. I dare not refer to him as someone else because you know what? He’s the one I’ve always wanted. I’m sorry. Akala ko nakalimutan ko na, pero siya pa rin pala. Pasensya na.” Dumerecho ito ng upo at naghanda sa pag-alis. “That man, he’s with me now. He’s here. We’re going back to Manila. Kailangan ko lang itong gawin.” Tumayo na si Tanya. “I’m sorry.”*

*And then she ran, ran like she could not wait to get away from him... while he was left in his seat, too shocked for words. He heard everything, and it was like a vicious blow.*

“Ryland?” tawag ni Constance sabay tapik sa kanyang balikat. Lumuhod ito sa tapat ng bonfire pit at sinindihan iyon gamit ang dalang lighter gun. Nang steady na ang apoy ay naupo na ito sa kanyang tabi.

Tahimik na iniabot niya rito ang kahon ng tsokolate pagkatapos ay nagsalin siya ng wine sa mga baso at ibinigay rito ang isa. Nakatingin sa kanya si Constance nang buksan nito ang kahon.

Two trays of expensive assorted chocolate-covered everything. One bottle of pricey French red wine. His broken heart and shattered dreams. Perfect.

He popped a piece of chocolate-covered caramel

crunch into his mouth then, took a luxurious sip from his wine glass. Pathetic.

“I didn’t even get to ask her the question. I didn’t even get to try.” Bumuga siya ng hangin. “It’s over. Wala na. ’Tang ina, kasama pa pala niya dito kanina ’yung ipinalit niya sa ’kin. Wait, that’s wrong. Who am I kidding? I’ve always heard about her ultimate college crush. The perfect one. Her ideal. Some hotshot PR guy. The seemingly unreachable one. Not anymore, apparently.” Tiningnan ni Ryland ang katabi na nakamasid lang sa kanya habang hawak ang kopita na bahagya pa lang nabawasan ang laman. “Cheers!” He raised his glass.

She did the same. Pinagtama ang kanilang mga kopita. Sabay pa silang muling uminom, nakatingin sa isa’t isa. Pagkatapos ay halos sabay ring dumako ang mga kamay nila sa tray ng tsokolate. Napatingin siya roon, at hinawakan ang palad ni Constance na mahinang napasinghap.

Bahagyang itinaas niya ang kamay ng babae. Para sa isang naninirahan sa tabing dagat, masyadong mapusyaw ang balat nito. Not paper white but she was nowhere near tan. One could easily see the veins on the back of her hand that was far from being dainty. Medyo magaspang din iyon.



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Bumalik ang tingin niya sa magandang mukha nito.

Yes, she's beautiful. Strangely part-alluring, part-delicate with her big cat eyes and thin cupid's bow lips, and...

*What am I doing? Why can't I take my eyes off her now?*

# 3

Dapat ay nag-iwas na si Constance ng tingin o naglagay ng mas malaking distansya sa pagitan nila. Narito lang siya dahil pakiramdam niya, kahit wala siyang kontrol sa sitwasyon ay responsibilidad pa rin niya si Ryland.

Masyado siyang kumpiyansa. Naisip niya ang mga posibleng aberya pero hindi kasali roon ang paghihiwalay ng dapat ay magkakasundo sanang magsasama na habang-buhay.

“Uh, I’m sorry.” Binitawan ng binata ang kanyang kamay at nag-iwas ng tingin. “Let me pick something for you. Kabisado ko na laman nito, eh. Hmm.” Kinuha nito ang isang pirasong hugis-puso. “Here, honeycomb and hazelnut ito. You’re not allergic to nuts?”

She blinked. “Uhm, no.”

He hesitated a bit, then, raised the piece of chocolate to her slightly parted lips. “Open up.” Tinapik nito ng isang daliri ang kanyang baba.

*Oh, God, what’s happening?*

Nagtama ang kanilang mga tingin. Hinawakan ni Constance ang kamay ni Ryland na may hawak na chocolate at hinuli iyon ng kanyang labi. His fingers grazed her lips and she almost closed her eyes. She still lightly gripped his wrist as she slowly chewed, their eyes still locked.

“It’s... It’s really good, Ryland,” mahinang sambit niya, kasabay ng pagbaba at pagbitaw sa kamay nito. “Thanks.”

Kumurap ang lalaki pagkatapos ay niyuko ang kanilang mga kamay. There was quiet longing in his eyes as if he didn’t want to let go yet. Then, he took a deep breath. “Yeah, um, it’s made from this chocolate farm in Davao.” Umiling ito. “Anyway...” Muling uminom si Ryland ng wine at ipinako na ang tingin sa mahihinang alon ilang metro mula sa kinauupuan nila.

“I’m sorry about...” *About what?* Dapat ba talaga siyang nag-apologize? “About earlier... about what didn’t happen.”

Malungkot na ngumiti ang kausap. “About what didn’t happen. Right.” Tumango ito. “Wala kang dapat ipag-sorry dahil wala kang kasalanan. Who would’ve thought, right?”

Mahina ang boses ni Ryland. Salat sa emosyon o sadyang naging manhid na lang siguro dala ng impact ng sakit na hindi nito inaasahan.

“I knew about that man, pero akala ko naikukuwento lang niya iyon dahil gusto niyang mas honest kami sa isa’t isa. I told her about my exes, too. How things were, why it didn’t work out. We were friends, you know. Or so I thought.”

Hindi na maalala ni Constance kung paano ang masaktan. Siguro naka-move on na lang talaga siya sa pagkabigo sa kanyang first love na ipinagpalit siya sa isang taong hinangaan at itinuring niyang kaibigan. That was five years ago. She could not imagine the pain anymore, but this must be how she looked like at first.

Ryland actually seemed as if he was still in shock. Maybe he was in denial, too. Biglaan kasi. Wala man lang babala.

“One moment I was so ready to spend the rest of my life with her and on the next, she’s gone. She chose someone. Hindi raw someone else ’yun kasi pinili niya. Mas gusto niya.” He poured wine into his glass again, then turned to her. Tahimik na itinatapat niya ang baso at pinasalanan iyon.

At muling nagkahinang ang kanilang mga mata. Kailangan ba talaga ito? Why did he have to watch her? Why did she have to look at him, too?

“Sounds like I’ve been living a lie, doesn’t it?” He picked up another chocolate and offered it to her. Walang salitang tinanggap iyon ni Constance saka kumuha rin ng isang piraso para ibigay rito.

He raised a brow, but took the morsel into his mouth anyway. Napalunok siya nang madaiti sa mga labi nito ang daliri niya. Hinila niya ang kamay at iniwas ang mga mata.

“I wouldn’t say that.” Bumuntong-hininga siya para kalmahin ang di-maipaliwanag na pagkabog ng dibdib. *Maybe it’s the night. Maybe it’s because it’s cold... because we’re alone here.*

She could not recall the last time she was alone with a man, and especially someone this beautiful.

“I mean, I don’t think you’ve lived a lie as far as what you had with Tanya is concerned,” patuloy niya. “Minahal ka naman niya, di ba? Nararamdaman mo iyon, naging masaya ka sa kanya. At dahil diyan, ginusto mo na siyang makasama habang-buhay.” Nanatiling nasa tanawin sa harap ang paningin ni Constance, sa maalong dagat at makislap na langit

na parang nagtatagpo sa dulo. Ramdam niyang nakamasid si Ryland. Hindi tuloy maalis ang kabang hindi niya maintindihan kung para saan.

Kaparehas iyon ng kaba kapag may pupuntahan o gagawin siya sa unang pagkakataon. Iyong may kahalong excitement.

*Pero ano ito? Nakaupo lang ako sa tabing dagat, sa harap ng bonfire, nakikipag-inuman ng wine na chocolates ang pulutan sa lalaking ilang linggo ko lang ka-chat sa Facebook at text para sa details ng proposal niya. Kanina ko lang siya nakita sa personal. Hindi pa nangyari ang inaasahan niya. Bakit nandito pa rin ako?*

“Anyway,” napabuga ng hangin ang dalaga bago muling uminom ng wine, “okay lang na masaknan, na malungkot, na magalit. Pero sana huwag mong sisihin ang sarili mo, o isipin na nagpaloko ka, naging tanga. You had no idea, Ryland. It’s not your fault you had so much faith and love in what you had.”

He was silent for a few seconds before she heard him sigh. “Yeah, but that faith and love? Apparently, those were not enough.”

Sa wakas ay muli niya itong tiningnan. Parang lalong lumungkot ang binata. Para ring pilit nito

iyong itinatago dahil bahagyang nakangiti pa rin. “Hey.” Hinawakan niya ito sa braso, hindi alam kung ano ang sasabihin. Kumuha uli siya ng chocolate. “Hindi ko alam kung ano ito pero mukhang masarap din.”

Hinawakan ng katabi ang kamay niyang may hawak na chocolate na hugis itlog at may diagonal stripes. “Dark chocolate with mint swirls and caramel filling,” anito. Pagkatapos, hinila nito ang kamay niya para maisubo nito ang tsokolate.

His warm lips grazed the tip of her finger again. “Sinabi ko bang sa iyo ’yan?” kunwa ay inis na tanong ni Constance.

Namilog ang mga mata ni Ryland, muntik pang masamid kaya napainom muli ng wine. Nang matawa siya ay sumeryoso ito kunwari. “Way to treat the broken hearted, Miss Constance.”

Ngumiti lang siya saka uminom ulit ng wine. Sa sulok ng mga mata ay nakita niyang kumuha muli ng chocolate si Ryland at inilapit iyon sa kanyang bibig. Kakagatin na sana niya iyon pero agad nitong inilayo at isinubo. “*Swowee ish mah veyvoreeh,*” he said with his mouth full.

Yet his eyes sparkled. For someone who just got

his heart crushed, that was a welcome sight.

Kumuha siya ng chocolate at isinubo iyon. “*Ish owfey.*” Then, she poured the remaining wine on their glasses, their last. Muling nagtagpo ang mga mata nila nang sabay na uminom.

Dapat ay wala iyong ibig sabihin, pero ewan kung bakit parang lalo siyang kinabahan.



# 4

He would not blame the wine, he doesn't feel the least bit drunk anyway. He was buzzed, but he was confident he could recite and write everything about this night in the morning.

Insulto rin kung hahanapan pa ni Ryland ng excuse kung bakit hindi niya maialis ang tingin kay Constance. Walang kinalaman dito ang gabi, ang lamig ng panahon o maging ang magandang tanawin sa paligid nila.

She was part of everything that was still beautiful about this night. No *ifs* or *buts*.

He knew and was sure about these things and yet, he still felt nervous, and uncertain, like he was about to thread on dangerous territory.

And then there was the matter of his broken heart. *Shit*.

Nararamdaman pa rin niya ang sakit, ang lungkot na parang pasyenteng pilit lumalaban habang nasa ambulansyang naipit sa traffic. At this point though, Constance was being his lifeline.

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If he didn't know he had her to turn to after the disaster that was his proposal—or really the past two years with Tanya—he's not sure what he would have done. Baka namaga na ang mga kamay niya kasusuntok sa mga puno o bato, o nagpakalunod na sa alak, o nakatulog sa beach at tinangay na ng alon.

Baka lahat na nagawa na ni Rynald, makalimutan lang ang sakit. Instead, this beautiful wisp of a woman came to his rescue like a gallant prince knight—in a pink jacket over a white shirt, torn jeans and red flip-flops, bare face and windblown hair.

“When was the last time you were like this?” he blurted out of curiosity and to break the silence. Gusto agad niyang bawiin ang tanong, masyado bang personal? Pero kanina pa personal ang usapan nila. “I mean, you know, like me?”

Tumaas ang isang kilay ng babae. “And what exactly are you right now, Ryland?”

He blinked, stared at her for a few seconds then, smiled. “Heartbroken, hurting, pathetic, sad, angry, bitter, full of questions, shocked, helpless, maybe hopeless...”

Napasipol ang babae. “Whoa, ang dami, ha. Buti buhay ka pa.”

*The 25th Proposal - Sachi Bliss*

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He snorted. “Yeah, hindi ko rin alam kung paano nangyari.” Ikiniling niya ang ulo at minasdan ito.

“Ako dati, sobrang masakit at galit na malungkot lang, pakiramdam ko mamamatay na ’ko.” Inubos ni Constance ang natitirang wine sa baso. “I found out that my boyfriend of two years had been f\*cking my superior at work, and that’d been going on for a year before I caught them in his apartment. Imagine that.” Nagsubo ito ng chocolate bago binuksan ang isa sa dalawang bote ng tubig sa bucket. “She was someone I admired and looked up to. He was my first love and I hoped would be my last.” She took a swig from her water bottle. “Kasal na sila. US based na. Took awhile for me to move on but I’m here now.” She smiled.

It was a genuine smile of someone who was being at peace. Yet he could still detect sadness in those big soulful eyes.

“Kaya huwag mong alisan ng karapatan ang sarili mo na makaramdam. Normal ’yan. Huwag ka lang maging bitter. Nakakapangit ’yun. Huwag mo ring iisipin na hindi ka na makakapagsimula uli dahil hello, buhay ka pa. At makakahanap ka pa ng bago. ’Yang itsura mong ’yan? Baka next month lang, meron na. Pero huwag mong madaliin. Malas ’yung

rebound.”

Natawa na si Ryland. “Yes, boss.” Sumaludo siya.

“Tatawa-tawa ka d’yan, parang di ka nasaktan kanina lang, ah.” Tiningnan nito ang oras sa wristwatch. “Alas diez pa lang, ang dali mo namang maka-recover.”

Constance talked in this low, sexy alto, pero parang tambay sa kanto ang tono. Na lasing.

“Are you drunk?” Inilapit niya ang mukha para amuyin ang dalaga.

Siniko siya nito. “OA! Pareho lang tayo ng iniinom, ha.” He pointed at the bucket. “Magtubig ka para mahimasmasan. Medyo nakakaantok ’yung wine mo.” Nangingkit ang mga mata nito. “Hindi ako lasing, mataas ang tolerance ko.”

He shrugged. “Okay, s’abi mo, eh.” He believed her, but for some reason, he just felt like teasing her. *She’s adorable when she’s...* Damn, siya yata ang tinamaan?

“Huwag mong gawin dahil lang sinabi ko. Gawin mo dahil gusto mo.” Itinaas ni Constance ang kahon ng tsokolate. “Ubusin lang natin ito then, ayawan na. Okay?”

Napahinto ang binata sa pagkuha sana uli ng chocolate. “Ayawan na? Inaantok ka na ba?”

Parang ayaw pa niyang matapos ang gabing ito. Puwedeng hindi sila mag-usap, basta dito lang muna sila. O kahit samahan lang siya ni Constance kahit saan.

*F\*ck, that’s so selfish.* Napailing si Ryland. “Sorry, I forgot you’re also managing this resort. You must be tired.” Isinubo niya ang isang piraso ng tsokolate at agad iyong sinundan ng tubig.

“Sino’ng may sabi na inaantok na ’ko? Ang sabi ko lang, ayawan na. Wala nang inuman.” Namili ito sa natitira pang piraso ng tsokolate sa kahon. “And I’m not tired. Hindi maaksyon ang trabaho ko, I have people who work under me.”

He watched as she popped a chocolate cube in her mouth. “Right. You’re the boss.”

“Yes, kaya huwag ka nang magdrama diyan. Hindi pa ’ko aalis.”

Minasdan niya si Constance, na derecho ang tingin sa nasa harap nila. Medyo namumula ang mga pisngi nito at namumungay ang mga mata dahil siguro sa wine, pero mukhang alerto pa rin. Ang isang kamay nito ay may hawak na stick at tinutusok-

tusok ang bonfire sa harap nila. Itinaas din nito ang kuwelyo ng jacket.

“You’re cold. Puwede ring sa lobby na lang tayo.” Another chocolate. Another sip of water. Another minute that he didn’t take his eyes off her.

Umiling ito. “Nah, I’m good.” Kinuha nito ang huling piraso ng tsokolate at isinubo iyon, sinundan ng inom ng tubig, at saka tumingin sa kanya. “Kumusta ang pakiramdam mo ngayon, Ryland? ‘Yung totoo?”

Napangiti siya. “Magsisinungaling pa ba ’ko sa ’yo, eh, nakita mo na’ng lahat?” Bumuntong-hininga siya. “Was it possible for the pain to be so deep that you’re almost numb? It feels heavy. I feel weak. My blood kind of feels cold. It’s strange.” Inalug-alog niya ang hawak na bote ng tubig. “But I’m alive.”

He kept his eyes on her as he talked, her gaze didn’t falter as well. He could feel his heart thump, heavier and louder than usual. He’s alive, indeed.

# 5

“Hmm...” Marahang tumango si Constance. Dama niya ang pagbilis pa rin ng tibok ng kanyang puso na hindi pa rin niya maintindihan. Why did they have to keep looking at each other like this, anyway? What was he saying again? Ah, iyong nararamdaman nito. “Familiar.” Tinapik niya ang braso ng kasama.

*Shit, what now? Usapang nakaraan na naman ba?*

“Baka wala na ’kong credibility na sabihin ito pero... wala namang ibang puwedeng sumunod na mangyari sa ’yo kundi ang maging okay, eventually.” Bahagya siyang ngumiti para maitago ang kakulangan ng conviction at focus sa sinabi. Hindi kasi halos inaalis ni Ryland ang tingin sa kanya. “Unless you choose to be miserable all your life. Or just die because you think your life ends here.”

Nakagat niya ang dila. Ano ba iyon? Parang nanakot pa siya! Hindi alam ng dalaga kung gugustuhin niyang marinig ang ganoon noong sobrang fresh pa ang ang broken heart niya!

Pero mukhang okay lang iyon sa katabi. “I shouldn’t trust your little pep talk given how things

turned out.” Napangisi ito nang magsalubong ang kanyang mga kilay. “But you’re here, Constance,” he softly said. “And even for a few hours, I didn’t feel so alone and miserable. I know I’ll be okay.”

Hindi siya makapaniwala sa narinig. He actually agreed with her? “Good, um...” Ilang sandaling nag-alangan siya bago napabuga ng hangin. Kailangan nang magpakatotoo, kanina pa siya giniginaw kahit may jacket siya. “Puwede bang lumipat na lang tayo? Ang ginaw na, eh. Wala nang silbi ’yan.” Sumulyap siya sa bonfire.

Natatawang tumango ang lalaki. “Sure.” Ibinuhos nito sa apoy ang nagtubig nang yelo sa bucket bago ibinalik doon ang mga baso at bote. Pagkatapos ay hinagip ni Ryland ang kamay niya at sabay na silang tumayo.

Hawak ni Constance ang kahon at ito ang may dala ng bucket pero hindi pa rin binitawan ng binata ang kamay niya habang papunta sila sa hotel. Iniisip pa niya kung babawiin iyon pero parang hinigpitan pa ng katabi ang hawak. Their fingers were tightly intertwined, as if he was making sure she would not pull away easily.

“Para kang mawawala.” Napailing ang babae habang paakyat sila sa footpath papunta sa side



entrance ng *Costa Persida Hotel*.

“Sinusulit ko lang.” Bahagya itong ngumiti, malungkot uli ang mga mata. “Up to the last second bago ko harapin mag-isa kung ano ba talaga ang nangyari ngayong gabi.”

Bumati sila sa nadaanang guard na kausap ng night manager. Parehong may kasamang malaking aso ang mga ito. Saka sila dumerecho sa isang pasilyo ng hotel. Mukhang hindi man lang napansin ng mga ito ang ayos ng mga kamay nila. Nasilip pa nila ang bahagi ng lobby kung saan may ilang guests na abala sa hawak na cellphone o tablet ng mga ito. Mas malakas kasi ang *Wi-Fi* roon.

“Dalhin lang natin sa kusina ang mga ito ’tapos, balik tayo sa lobby,” mahinang sabi ni Constance. “Do you need anything? Pang-midnight snack? Pizza? Burger?”

Umarko ang isang kilay ng kausap. “Are you trying to get rid of me by tempting me with food?”

She snorted. “I just thought broken-hearted people usually binge eat.” She pushed open the aluminum double doors to an airy, spacious, clean kitchen. “Kung ayaw mo, eh di huwag. Treat ko pa naman sana iyon sa ’yo.” Kinuha niya ang dala nitong

bucket at inilagay iyon sa isang counter. Ang kitchen staff na ang bahalang maghiwalay at mag-dispose doon nang maayos.

“How about ice cream?” tanong niya bago sumulyap sa mga kamay nila. Pag-angat uli ng kanyang tingin kay Ryland ay nasalubong niya ang titig nito.

Lalo siyang kinabahan. Iniiwas ni Constance ang tingin at binuksan ang isang freezer. “We have the usual flavors, plus pistachio, green tea, chocolate mint—yes?” Mahinang napasinghap siya nang medyo hilahin ni Ryland ang mga kamay nila.

Dapat ay tumingin siya rito pero natatakot siyang makita agad nitong pareho lang sila ng iniisip, ng gustong mangyari, na alam nila pareho na baka hindi dapat.

Napapikit siya nang bitawan ni Ryland ang kanyang kamay, at napahawak sa gilid ng nakabukas pa ring freezer nang maramdaman ang marahang paghagip sa baywang niya. Napalunok ang dalaga, pilit kinalma ang sarili nang salubungin ang tingin nito. “Ryland...”

He swallowed, as his hooded gaze dropped to her lips. “I... I want to...” His hand cupped the side of

her face, a finger shakily traced a line to one corner of her lips.

“Yes,” she breathed, as her pulse jumped.

He blinked, but it didn’t take long before he got what she just said yes to. He leaned in until his lips were just a breath away from hers. “Say it again.”

Dinaklot niya ang jacket ng kaharap. “Yes.” And then crossed the tiny distance. Napapikit siya nang magdikit ang mga labi nila. Her spine tingled when his fingers splayed over the side of her head, tangling with her hair.

And her heart got lost amidst the heat, the hunger and pleasure of a kiss she didn’t plan on ending anytime soon.

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Walang ibang nasa isip si Ryland kundi ang nangyayari ngayon, ang babaeng kasama niya, at kung paanong pakiramdam niya ay wala nang ibang dapat o tama ngayon kundi ito.

This kiss. This woman. This night.

Constance kissed him first, and it felt like a dream. He was just imagining it seconds before, longing for her lips that had been distracting him

since they were at the beach. He tried to ward off the thought, tried to look away or think of something else but he always ended up gazing at her... while she spoke, while she took sips from her wine glass, while she ate those damned chocolates.

And his heart pounded against his chest now, beating like a raging thunder in the middle of summer, as he tasted everything in this kiss.

He couldn't stop. He couldn't seem to get enough of her soft, hot, moist lips that tasted of chocolate, wine and the salt from the sea. He was even encouraged by the way she moved against him, her slender body pressed to his. Her one hand clutched his shoulder while the other raked through his hair. And those little sounds she made. *God...*

Bahagyang nanginig ang kamay niyang nakalapat sa baywang nito, na unti-unting naglandas pataas, pahaplos sa likod. Malamig sa kusina at dumagdag pa ang nakabukas na freezer pero ang init ng mga balat nila. Hindi na rin maitatanggi ng mga katawan nila ang pangangailangan sa isa't isa. Higit pa sa halik at sa gabing parang ayaw niyang tapusin.

"I can't stop kissing you," he breathed when they both came up for air. Nagsalita siya sa mismong tapat ng nakaawang nitong bibig. "I... I don't want to." His

hand slid down her back, lingered over the hem of her jacket.

“No one’s telling you to stop,” she murmured as she peered at him from beneath her lashes; her hooded gaze fixed on his lips, and her hand tugging at his jacket.

Napalunok si Ryland, lalong kinabahan na nanabik. “I want you,” he declared as his lips slid to her jaw, to her neck.

Mahigpit ang hawak ni Constance sa kanyang balikat. “N-not here,” singhap nito bago nanginginig na lumayo. Halos sabay pa nilang isinara ang freezer.

Hinagip agad niya ang kamay ng dalaga na parang natatakot na magbago ito ang isip.

“Ryland...” Huminga ito nang malalim, sapo ng isang kamay ang dibdib.

“Y-yeah?” Hinagkan niya ito sa sentido, sa buhok, sa tainga.

Constance turned to meet his eyes.” My house is just...” Napalunok ito. “Right outside that hallway.”