

Prologue



Hot Encounter Turned Hot Mess

Setting a plate of freshly baked chocolate chip oatmeal cookies and a pot of steaming hot tea beside her laptop, Vera sat on her favorite rattan wing chair and turned on her pocket *WiFi*. Segundo lang ang binilang niya bago makita sa screen na connected na siya. Nang isa-isang automatic na nag-log in ang *Facebook*, *Instagram* at *Twitter* accounts niya ay saka relaxed na sumandal sa kinauupuan, bago kumuha ng isang cookie at nagsalin ng raspberry tea sa tasa.

Alas cuatro ng hapon at patapos na naman ang isang araw sa kanyang buhay na ginugol niya sa bukid ang ilang oras sa umaga, at pagtapos ng ilang trabaho para sa isang Manila-based ad agency pagka-lunch. Ganitong oras talaga siya tumitingin sa social media accounts niya na tanging link niya sa mga naiwang kaibigan sa Manila.

Sa *Facebook* ay twenty-eight notifications agad ang sumalubong kay Vera, na mukhang lahat ay may kinalaman sa kung anong video na naka-post sa *StratWorx Bitchez*—ang private group nila ng mga kaibigan sa *StratWorx Unlimited*, ang ad agency kung

saan apat na taon siyang nagtrabaho bilang isa sa mga resident artists, before she decided to settle here in Cascara over three years ago. The ten other people in her *Facebook* group visits her twice a year since.

Nangunot ang noo ni Vera nang makitang bukod sa naka-tag siya sa video ay lampas dalawampung beses din siyang naka-tag sa mga comments. Na-curious tuloy siya at agad pumunta na sa group page, kung saan top post ang video na may caption na *'Rhys Mondragon, Please F*ck Me The Way You F*cked The Senator's Wife!'*

It was posted by her friend Benny, one of the three loud flaming gays in her group. Ang akala ng dalaga, video lang iyon ng kaibigan habang maarteng nag-e-emote tungkol sa guwapong may-ari ng labing-apat sa pinaka-dinarayong upscale dance clubs and party hot spots sa Pilipinas, Thailand, Hong Kong at Singapore—but when she clicked on the 'Play' button, she nearly fell of her seat.

The video featured Rhys Mondragon himself, walking backwards in what seemed like a hotel suite, as he hungrily kissed and groped a tall, voluptuous woman who indeed turned out to be the beautiful forty-something wife of a beloved senator.

Oh, my God! Naisubo tuloy ni Vera ang buong cookie at inubos ang laman ng tasa. *Should I be watching this?*

She clicked 'Pause' then scrolled down on the

comments. Mukhang inaasar pa siya ng mga sira-ulo niyang kaibigan, pero nalaman din niya roon ang ilang detalye tungkol sa video.

It appeared that Rhys and Dr. Marishka Sia-Inoturan—Senator Alfred Inoturan’s wife of seventeen years, had been having a purely sexual affair with Rhys, who really would f*ck anyone who showed interest. Hell, he even had an on-and-off thing with her father’s step daughter, Nadine! Anyway, the affair with Doc Marishka has been going on for several months and one of the senator’s loyal staff, who apparently was in love with the legislator, took it upon herself to investigate.

Ang staff na iyon daw ang nakipag-ugnayan sa dalawang hotel na madalas puntahan nina Rhys at Dr. Marishka. The hotel staff was bribed, the reservation info was given and four cameras were strategically installed in the room. Hence, the almost professional, movie-like quality of the video.

Kahapon daw ng umaga nagsimulang kumalat ang video na anonymous na ipinadala sa isang sikat na gossip blogger. Bandang hapon ay ipinaalis na iyon sa page ng nasabing blogger, pero huli na. Marami na ang nag-save at nag-edit ng apat na videos na lahat ay tumagal nang twenty-one minutes. Same scenes, different angles. And as of that morning, edited versions of the four videos were out, along with the news of their origin.

Pinagpipiyestahan tuloy ngayon ang video na ayon sa mga kaibigan ay na-pick up na rin ng ilang international news agencies. Noong isang linggo daw naganap ang pagtatagpo nina Rhys at Dr. Marishka at kaninang umaga ay nakita sa airport ang huli, papa-board sa isang *Cathay Pacific* flight patungong Paris. Kagabi raw ay hindi rin nakita si Rhys sa kahit alin sa pag-aari nitong club.

And why on earth was she even reading and mentally putting together all these facts about people she should not care about? Ito mismo ang iniwasan niya kaya rito sa isla na siya nanirahan halos apat na taon na ang nakakaraan. Halos kalahati ng kanyang buhay, laman siya ng chismis, subject ng panghuhusga at biktima ng mga maling akusasyon. She should be getting out of this page. Hindi naman magagalit ang mga kaibigan niya kung deadma siya sa comments ng mga ito. They knew her story.

Pero... nakagat ni Vera ang pang-ibabang labi. Nasimulan na niya, eh. Plus, she was also curious as to what would possess a woman with a good husband, to have an affair with a man who's not just thirteen years younger, but also an infamous womanizer?

Muli siyang nagsalin ng tsa, hinila palapit ang plato ng cookies at huminga nang malalim bago itinuloy ang video.

Halos hindi yata kumurap si Vera for the next twenty minutes. Twenty minutes of hot, intense,

passionate, sometimes rough, at times dirty, and obviously immensely satisfying sex between two people who clearly only wanted to consume and be consumed.

Muntik na siyang masamid nang magsimulang hubaran ng dalawa ang isa't isa habang halos hindi naglalayo ang mga labi. The next thing she saw, the devastatingly gorgeous Rhys Mondragon had pressed the doctor against the wall with his mouth on her neck, his left hand on her right breast and his other hand moving inside her panties. The look on the senator's wife's face and the sounds she made more than told her that Rhys was quite the expert.

Mahigpit na ang hawak niya sa tea cup na wala nang laman, at kagat ang labi nang tuluyang hubaran ng lalaki si Dr. Marishka at dalhin sa kama, where he quickly trailed kisses all over her arching, writhing body until he settled between her legs. He lifted one leg over his shoulder while he pressed the other sideways, flat on the mattress, then, he began f*cking her with his lips and tongue.

The camera angle made it impossible to see what he was doing exactly but... *Man, that must be so good.* Parang kinakapos na sa paghinga ang babae, at hindi alam kung paano igagalaw ang katawan.

Medyo namimilipit na rin si Vera sa kinauupuan. *Sh*t, ano ba!* Nagsalin uli siya ng tsaang habang halos hindi inaalis ang tingin sa screen. Just in time for her

to see that Rhys reached out to hold the woman's hand before his head moved furiously against the center of the woman's spread legs and in seconds, she was coming. Hard.

Napalunok siya bago napainom. Parang kakapusin din siya ng hininga. Pero hindi iyon natapos doon. The next scene had the woman lifting herself off the bed to go on all fours, as Rhys finally got rid of his boxers, freeing his long, thick, completely erect c*ck that he stroked from the base to the tip before he entered his partner from behind.

Oh, my Gooooood. Parang ewan na gusto niyang magtakip ng mga mata pero hindi niya maitaas ang isang kamay. Na-mesmerize yata siya sa bawat galaw ni Rhys. His thrusts were slow, leisurely and almost gentle at first, as he bent against the beautiful doctor's back and spanned his hands on her sides, before he gently massaged her breasts. Until his pace quickened and Marishka met his every move, and his hands pinched her nipple and stroked between her legs while he rained kisses on her back.

*Sh*t, multi-tasker lang?*

And then the woman was coming again, and so was Rhys, whose grunts and soft growls sent shivers through her. She had been hot and bothered since three minutes into the video, but this electricity that ran through her was something she had never experienced, all because of this man who looked and

sounded beautiful when he came.

Grabe, sobrang tigang at thirsty ko na ba? Napangiwi si Vera sa naisip. Maybe. Pathetic.

Speaking of thirsty, mukhang nauhaw din ang pareha sa video dahil tumayo mula sa kama si Rhys at balewalang naglakad nang hubad papunta sa ref kung saan kumuha ito ng dalawang bote ng tubig at isang chocolate bar. *And how come he's still erect? Damn it, bakit ba doon siya nakatingin?*

The scene was then cut to a shot of the pair kissing again, with Rhys' back against the headboard and the doctor slowly positioning herself on his lap. Then, they were at it again. But this time, they were kissing and touching each other while they f*cked. Until they switched positions and their bodies rocked and slapped against each other with abandon. Until they came again, almost at the same time.

Basically, Rhys just f*cked the senator's wife with his fingers, his lips and tongue, then, his c*ck. Passionately, amazingly, mind-blowingly, it seemed. She came thrice! In a span of twenty minutes!

Buti hindi ito nawalan ng malay? Dahil si Vera na nanonood lang, pakiramdam niya ay nakalimang lapses siya sa eight-kilometer beach stretch ng Cascara. Marahas at malalim ang paghinga niya, mabilis ang pulso at parang tinatambol ang dibdib. Medyo pawisan din ang kanyang noo at ilong kahit malamig at mahangin sa puwesto sa veranda ng

bahay niya.

*Oh, sh*t.* Buti na lang at hindi gaanong magkakalapit ang mga bahay doon. Otherwise, she would be known as the spinster who devours sex videos while drinking tea. *Yikes.*

Naiiling na nag-type si Vera ng comment. *Thanks for having fun at my expense, a*sholes. Napanood ko na. Pang-Olympics! ;)*

She clicked 'Send' then, left the page. Pumunta na siya sa ibang social media accounts, sa ibang websites, at inabala ang sarili sa panonood ng cooking at baking tutorials, pero hindi na nawala sa isip niya ang mukha ni Rhys, at ang boses nito.

What on earth? Marahas na umiling siya. *Pathetic, Vera! Stop it! Kill those thoughts!* Pero oras na ang lumipas ay naisip pa rin niya iyon. Parang taksong pabalik-balik. Matindi pa sa last song syndrome pero sana, gaya ng malupit na LSS ay mawala rin. Sana ngayon na. *One, two...*

Hindi puwedeng maapektuhan siya nang ganito. Hindi puwedeng guluhin ang kanyang isip ng taong hindi niya kilala at wala siyang balak kilalanin.



*Hi, my name is Rhys Mondragon and I am officially f*cked.*

He smiled ruefully at his laptop screen, at the list of seven new emails that contained everything he needed to know about the exclusive *Carasca Island*,

and the reason why he was being forced to stay there for four months, or until “...*your d*ck wilts and dries up, that it will never respond to stimuli again for at least two years, you disgusting piece of sh*t.*”

Iyon ang eksaktong sinabi ng kanyang Ate Mariana, na muntik na niyang iyakan dahil sa tatlo niyang kapatid, dito siya pinakamalapit. She was also a staunch feminist and a lawyer that specializes in Family Law, at siyang nanguna sa pakikipag-areglo sa mga Inoturan para hindi siya sampahan ng kaso o ipapatay sa ginawa niyang pagwasak sa pamilya ng mga ito.

*“You hurt a beloved senator, Chrysler. You know, one of the few good men in this country who works hard to serve the people? Sinaktan mo rin ang mga anak niya. At hindi namin maintindihan kung bakit nagawa mo ’yon, eh ang saya naman ng pamilya natin. May hinanakit ka ba sa ’min? Nagrerebelde ka ba at your f*cking age?”* That was his usually cool and calm Kuya Chester, whose hairline further receded when he learned about the video.

“Nanira ka ng pamilya at pangalan, Rhys. Now, you’re given a chance to do the opposite. Clear some people’s names, and find the truth about that other great man we lost some years ago. You’re going to find this Vera Soliven and you will not be allowed to have your old life back until you have all the information Senator Inoturan needs. Don’t even try to bribe anyone to get you

out of Carasca because we'll make sure to give a better offer." Ang Ate Margaery niya iyon, na pinakamataray pero pinaka-generous na kapatid. Right now, though, he was exempted from her generosity.

Napabuntong-hininga siya. Walang choice si Rhys. May hold departure order siya. Kulang na lang siguro ay ipaposas siya ng mga kapatid bukas kapag inihatid ng tatlong escort na reservist sa *Carasca*. Para namang lalaban siya.

But what the hell were those people thinking sending him on a 'fishing expedition' to squeeze the truth out of the recluse mistress of a man who committed suicide four years ago? It was just f*cking weird, especially because he used to be f*ck buddies with his daughter Nadine.

And this Vera Soliven... Ni hindi niya alam kung ano ang hitsura nito ngayon. Maganda ito noong bata pa, pero malamang nasa late fifties na ang edad nito ngayon. And no, he would not f*ck a woman as old as his mother just to get information.

Was she even in that island? For all he knows, his family and Senator Inoturan simply wanted to exile him until he dies from lack of regular mindblowing sex, which was probably more likely to happen than finding a dead man's old mistress.

He never believed in regrets, but right now, he was wishing he could turn back time and kept his dick in his pants.

1



Unbelievable

What do I do with my f*cking life now?

Malalim na bumuntong-hininga si Rhys, bago iginala ang tingin sa paligid habang muling ini-stretch ang mga braso at binti. Hindi puwedeng matulog at kumain na naman siya gaya ng ginawa simula nang dumating sa *Carasca* kahapon ng tanghali. Sumasakit na ang ulo niya kakatulog, at medyo mabigat pa rin ang tiyan dahil sa dami ng kinain.

The week following the release of that damn video had been a blur. He faced his family, the board of directors, their lawyers—none of them gave in to his charms and none even considered a less severe punishment. Yes, this was a punishment! Those guys stationed at the islands' three entry ports all look younger than him, but they look tougher and had bigger guns!

He was up at five earlier, after a whisky-induced sleep that lasted for almost ten hours. Nagkape lang siya bago isinuot ang trainers at tinakbo na ang walong kilometrong beach stretch ng *Carasca*. He

would've hiked up the cliffs that made up the other kilometer and a half of the island, but thought he needed to study it first.

Past six na nang pawisang bumalik si Rhys sa kuwarto sa third floor ng *Carasca Suites*, ang tutuluyan niya nang ilang araw bago siya palipatin sa isa sa mga villas ng *Carasca Beach Club* na nire-*renovate* pa.

Naligo siya, nagbihis ng puting shirt at cotton board shorts, bago dinampot ang kanyang tablet. Ni hindi niya gusto ang mga bagay na ito! He was pretty old school and prefers big laptops, but Ate Mariana bought him one. Ito na ang naglagay at nag-organize doon ng mga files na kakailanganin niya para mahanap si Vera Soliven, at makuha ang loob nito para pumayag sa isang documentary na kanyang gagawin.

Minasdan niya ang black and white pictures ng babae. May college graduation portrait, mayroong kuha na naka-skirt suit ito sa isang opisina, may isa sa harap ng *Louvre* sa Paris, at isa pa kung saan nakaterno ito. All photos looked old, at 1984 pa ang petsa ng pinakabago na medyo malinaw.

Ang huling picture sa file ay malabong kuha ng babae sa libing ni Senator Cesar Leveriza. Naka-dark glasses ito at nababalot ng scarf ang buhok. She wore frumpy, ill-fitting clothes and tried her best not to be noticed, but failed. Pero walang nakakuha ng plaka

ng itim na sedan nito, at wala ring may alam kung saan ito pumunta.

On record, nalaman nila na ikinasal ito sa isang engineer at nagkaroon ng limang anak. Namatay ang lalaki nineteen years ago, at ang malalaki na ngayong anak nito ay nakabase na sa North America at Europe. Nahanap nila ang apat sa mga anak ng mag-asawa at nang tanungin kung nasaan ang panglima, sinabi lang nila, “Gone.”

Hindi na-verify kung babae o lalaki ang bunso ng mga ito, at in-assume na lang nila na namatay na rin. Apparently, the affair between Vera and the senator started in 1984 and seemed to have continued, albeit discreetly, until his death. She disappeared and was never heard from since then.

And she ‘disappeared’ into this island. Siguradong gusto na lang makalimot, mag-move on, at manahimik ng Vera na iyon—na nakatakda niyang sirain ngayon.

Christ, what have I gotten myself into?

At paano isasagawa ni Rhys ang sa ngayon ay malabo pa niyang plano? Naisuklay niya nang mariin ang mga daliri sa buhok. Wala pang alas siete ng umaga ay sumasakit na ang kanyang ulo. He attributed it to the stress brought about by not getting laid for the past two weeks.

Damn, it’s been that long? Paano siya naka-survive?

Humugot siya ng malalim na hininga habang

nakatayo sa mini-garden na naghihiwalay sa infinity pool sa *Olympic*-sized pool. He slid his hand over the front of his shorts, lightly grazing his d*ck.

Sorry, buddy. I'm not sure if we'll get any action soon.

He groaned when it twitched in response. *Well, at least buhay ka pa naman.* And how pathetic was he, engaged in a mental telepathy with his d*ck?

*Again, what do I do now? Magha-house to house ba ako para tingnan kung saan nakatira ang Vera na iyon? Mag-aabang sa palengke, sa beach, sa town center, sa boardwalk, at magbakasakaling madadaan siya doon? How on earth do I approach her? Baka kung ano ang isipin at masampal ako! Sh*t, 't*ng inang buhay nam—*

A loud splash roused him from his thoughts. May ilang patak ng tubig pang tumama sa kanyang pisngi. Kasunod niyon ang sa umpisa ay maingay at marahas na tunog ng pag-paddle sa tubig, bago iyon humina. Galing ang tunog sa pool sa kanyang kaliwa, na napapaligiran ng mga bakanteng pares ng lounge chairs under an umbrella, save for one that had a pink and white striped tote bag in it, plus a thick blue towel and white crocheted cover-up draped on the arm rests.

Dumako ang tingin ni Rhys sa nasa pool, at agad ang reaksiyon ng kanyang katawan. Toned arms and legs kicked and paddled gracefully on the clear water,

and he also got glimpses of a flat tummy and small, yet pert breasts covered by a modestly cut white bikini top. Paired with colorful swim shorts, the graceful swimmer definitely wasn't trying to show off her gorgeous body. Overkill na siguro kung mas revealing na swimwear pa ang suot nito.

Nasanay siya sa mga babaeng halos maliliit na triangles na lang ang nakatakip sa katawan, kaya hindi niya inaasahan ang reaksiyon sa babaeng nasa pool ngayon. Lumapit pa si Rhys para mas mapagmasdan ito, at talagang pumuwesto sa kapares na lounge chair na pinag-iwanan nito ng mga gamit. He had to see more of her face...

The woman stretched her arms over her head and straightened her legs as she relaxed and floated over the water. Nakapikit ito at tila kinakalma ang paghinga habang marahil ay bumubuwelo muna bago muling ikutin ang pool. Napaderecho si Rhys sa kinauupuan. Her hair was dyed dark blonde maybe, shoulder length. Malalaki ang wide set na mata. Hindi katangusan ang ilong. Maganda ang hugis ng pinkish na labi. Hugis puso ang mukha na parang...

Parang familiar? Have I seen her before?

He leaned in to look closer, but the woman picked that exact moment to resume doing her lapses. Muli ay natalisikan siya ng tubig sa mukha. He didn't mind, not when she was giving him this wonderful view of her body... and that light golden skin. Oohh man, it

seemed to be the kind of skin that bruises easily. He would love to leave his marks on her...

“Uy, Kuya, Rhys! Aga mo, ah! Magkakilala kayo ni Ate Vera?”

He blinked, then looked up at Ronron—a tall, lanky, effeminate teen whom he had silently appointed to be his eyes and ears in the island. Working student ito at pumapasok sa university sa Lingayen three times a week. Med Tech ang kurso nito pero mukhang fascinated sa current events at pop culture.

Ronron also recognized him when the teen picked him up from the port to escort him to the hotel. Habang naglalakad sila ay kaswal na nagtanong ito: “Ipinadala ka ba nila dito dahil sa video, Kuya?” Pagkatapos ay tiningnan siya ng binatilyo.

Walang bahid ng panghuhusga o pang-iintriga, parang nakikisimpatiya pa ito. “Yeah,” sagot niya bago napailing.

“Okay naman dito, hindi ka mabu-bore. Kung active ka, puwede mong akyatin ’yung mga bundok at bato o mag-hike sa gubat.” He smiled, and Rhys had to marvel at his innocence.

Concerned lang ito sa remote na islang halatang mahal at ipinagmamalaki nito, at sa maaaring maging impresyon niya.

He decided then and there that the kid could be his ally.

At mukhang hindi siya nagkamali. Kilala ni Ronron ang babae! Inilagay nito sa mesa sa pagitan ng mga lounge chairs ang isang mason jar na may slices ng pipino at lemon sa gilid. It was filled with a semi-transparent light-colored liquid and had more small fruit slices inside.

“Ano ’yan?” tanong ni Rhys.

“Vitamin water, Kuya. Gusto mo? Cucumber, lemon, and mint. Favorite ’to ni Ate Vera. Ka-alternate ng carrot and apple juice niya.”

He stared at Ronron. “Vera?” Hininaan niya ang boses. “Vera ang pangalan niya?”

Nangunot ang noo ng binatilyo. “Akala ko, kilala mo kaya d’yan ka nakapuwesto.” He smiled knowingly. “Vera Soliven po. Everyday except Sunday, nakiki-swim siya dito pagkatapos niyang tumakbo sa beach. Supplier siya sa hotel ng mga herbs and spices, pati mangga at dragon fruit kapag in season.” He winked conspiratorially. “Ganda ba?”

He grinned, as wheels turned inside his head. The bigger head, he meant. “Nagkabuhay bigla ang umaga ko, Ron. Parang nagka-purpose na ang pagpapatapon sa ’kin dito.”

Natawa ang kausap. “Mailap nga lang siya, Kuya. Mabait pero hindi palakaibigan sa mga dayo. May mga sumubok na pero katropa niya ’yung mga bantay dito. Kamag-anak yata niya.”

Ooops. “Well, it doesn’t hurt to try.” He shrugged,

then, looked her way again. Sa pagtingin muling iyon ay sumabay ang pagbilis ng tibok ng kanyang puso.

*That's... That's really Vera Soliven? Maaann... Paanong—sh*t! She looks young!* Mas bata pa itong tingnan sa kanya. If she was like one of those vampire-like actresses who look forever in their late twenties like Alice Dixon, Dawn Zulueta, or Ina Raymundo, then this woman must have been taking care of herself well!

“Kuya, babalik na ’ko sa breakfast bar. May order ka ba? Pakibigay na lang ’to kay Ate Vera. Bahala ka nang dumiskarte.”

Tiningnan niya si Ronron. “Give me one of these, too.”

Tumango lang ito, bago nangingiting iniwan siya. Muli niyang pinanood si Vera na ngayon ay mas relaxed na ang paglangoy. Mukhang ilang sandali na lang ay paahon na ito at parang napansin na rin sa wakas ang kanyang presensya. Nangungunot ang noo nito habang tila naglalakad na lang papunta sa gawi ng lounge chairs nila. She gathered hair away from her face and squeezed the excess water, before she held onto the steel rails and swiftly lifted herself.

Halos hindi nito inaalís ang mga mata kay Rhys na para bang sa pamamagitan niyon ay maglalaho siya. Nasanay siguro itong solo ang pool sa umaga at hindi makapaniwalang may ibang tao roon nang sandaling iyon at tumabi pa talaga sa puwesto nito.

Sorry, baby. But I won't disappear even if you keep looking at me, silently willing for me to go away. You know what's more likely to happen? Me getting hard—

Oh sh*t, joke lang niya dapat 'yon, eh! Bakit sumikip ang board shorts niya? *F*ck.*

But how could one not react to the sight of this goddess? Her peaches-and-cream skin seemed to glow with hints of gold, the water dripping from her body seemed to slide slowly drop by drop.

He was enthralled. Hindi si Vera ang pinakamagandang babaeng nakita niya, pero isa ito sa mga pambihirang pagkakataong kahit hindi pa ito nagsasalita o hindi pa niya nahahawakan ay parang nanghihina na siya sa tindi ng pangangailangang nararamdaman niya.

“H-hi...? Hi.” He swallowed, as he handed her the mason jar. “This is yours.”

Tiningnan siya ni Vera nang ilang segundo, bago kinuha ang jar mula sa kanyang kamay. Her cold, damp skin against his that was hot and shaky. The contact was fleeting yet electrifying. What the hell! Erogenous zone na ba ang buo niyang katawan? Ganoon na siya katigang?

Umangat ang isang kilay ng babae habang umiinom, pero hindi huminto hangga't hindi napapangalahati ang laman ng lalagyan. Nang ibaba nito sa tray ang mason jar ay hindi nakaligtas sa kanya ang bahagyang panginginig ng kamay nito. *Huh?*

Pinasadahan niyang muli ng tingin ang kabuuan nito, na sinimulan na nitong tuyuing ng tuwalya.

“May kailangan ka ba?” mahinang tanong ng babae habang may kinukuha sa bag nito. Mababa, parang pabulong at nang-aakit ang boses nito.

Was fate playing tricks on him and was it having fun yet? Her goddamn voice was hitting straight to his groin!

“W-wala naman. I... I—” Paano ba niya uumpisahan 'to? He wasn't expecting Vera Soliven would be this hot! Mas handa siyang makipag-usap sa parang masungit na tita o terror na propesora at hindi sa isang magandang babaeng gusto niya ngayong halikan at sambahin ang buong katawan!

God, I know I've been bad, but do You hate me this much to subject me to this torture?

And then, he saw it... the blush that seemed to have started from the side of her neck up to the apples of her cheeks and the tip of her nose. How her body was turned towards her stuff in the lounge chair so he could only see her profile.

Muli itong uminom mula sa mason jar, at ngayon ay mas kita na niya ang effort nito, makaiwas lang na tingnan siya. Niyuko ni Rhys ang harapan ng suot na board shorts. He knew he's semi-erect already and it was protruding, but it was not that scandalously obvious yet. Napansin kaya iyon ng dalaga? Did seeing it make her uncomfortable? Did she feel

harrassed?

“I’m sorry, um...” Umatras siya para matakpan ng mesa sa pagitan nila ang hindi dapat nagpapakita.

“Sorry about what?” she softly asked, then bit her lip as she patted her body with the towel again. “Sh*t, kasi naman...” bulong nito sabay iling, pagkatapos ay napapadyak, parang inis na frustrated.

At dahil hindi niya inaalís ang tingin kay Vera, napansin at narinig niya iyon. Ilang segundo lang siyang nagtaka, bago agad luminaw sa kanya kung bakit ganoon ang reaksyon ng babae. *Damn it!*

But then, as quickly as that realization hit him, it was replaced by the thought that he probably could use it to his advantage.

Humugot siya ng malalim na hininga, saka nagtanong, “You saw that video, too, didn’t you?”

2



Unexpected

Mukha ba akong Nutella cake na may caramel filling topped with dark chocolate shavings na naiwan sa counter ng isang bukas na kusina, at ilang araw nang hindi kumakain si Rhys?

Iyon kasi ang nakikita ni Vera sa mga mata ng kaharap na kanina pa niya nararamdamang nagmamasid sa kanya. Muntik na siyang makainom ng ma-chlorine na tubig nang ma-realize kanina kung sino ang lalaking naupo talaga sa tabi ng puwesto ng mga gamit niya na parang may front row tickets ito para panoorin ang kanyang paglangoy.

And he looked hungry. Or at least, his eyes did. Medyo namumula ang lalaki at parang may pinipigilang kung anong emosyon o reaksyon dahil sa pagtiim ng mga bagang, pero sinusundan pa rin naman ang bawat galaw niya.

She was on her fifth lap when she noticed him. Sa umpisa ay balewala lang sana sa kanya na may ibang tao sa main pool ng *Carasca Beach Club*, na araw-araw niyang dinarayo tuwing umaga para makilangoy matapos ang morning run niya sa beach

stretch ng isla. Except for the few pesky guests in the past who tried to score a date as she towel-dried herself by the lounging chairs, nobody bothered her morning routine.

Kilala ni Vera ang manager at staff ng hotel. Malapit na kaibigan niya ang chef sa *C Café and Health Club* kung saan siya nagsu-supply ng mga spices at prutas. They were among those people who helped make her life peaceful since she ‘retired’ here in Carasca almost four years ago. Ang mga may puwesto sa palengke, katiwala, mga bantay sa isla at karamihan sa mga may-ari ng rest houses at resorts ay kilala rin niya at tila may unspoken agreement na alagaan ang kanyang privacy.

People in the island might had chosen to stop talking about it, but she knew they all knew who and what she is. She had accepted and embraced it a long time ago. She had managed to live with her truths as well, even if it wasn’t easy. She made the most of it, too—even if it had a tragic, heartbreaking end four years ago.

Bumuntong-hininga si Vera bago napailing. Pagkatapos ay sinalubong ang mga mata ni Rhys. What was his questions again? Ah, that video. Was she that obvious? What was he doing here, anyway?

“Anong video?” kunwa ay naiiritang nagtataka na tanong ng dalaga. Kinuha niya ang crocheted wrap at isinuot iyon.

Nangunot ang noo ng kaharap. Napakurap ito habang tila nag-isip sandali. “*That recent viral video?*”

Okay, good. Now, he looked uncertain.

“Yung sa *Instagram*? The one posted by this girl who caught her boyfriend f*cking someone else on his bed?” Noong isang araw lang kumalat ang naturang video na naka-post agad sa *Facebook* group nila ng mga kaibigan.

“What?” parang nalitong tanong ng lalaki. “I didn’t know about that. I don’t have a girlfriend either.”

She shrugged, “Oh, well. Sorry. ’Yun lang ang alam ko.” Isinukbit niya ang tote bag sa balikat. “Bye.” Naglakad na siya at nilampasan si Rhys, pero humarang agad ito sa kanyang daanan.

Napasinghap si Vera, halos bumangga kasi ang mukha niya sa balikat ng lalaki at kaunti na lang ay magdidikit na ang mga katawan nila. She was practically pressed to every hard plane of his long, lean body. He’s hot, even through the fabric of his clothes. Literal na nakakapaso.

“Sandali lang.” His eyes were still fixed on her face. Parang hindi rin ito makapaniwala na hindi mawari. “What’s your name?”

She stepped aside, as her pulse raced. Ang bango rin kasi ng lalaki, fresh na fresh. “None of your business.” Mabilis uli siyang naglakad.

“Nice meeting you, none-of-my-business.”

Sumunod ito. “Nag-breakfast ka na? Would you like to join me? I’m Rhys.”

Hindi siya sumagot. Dere-derecho lang ang babae sa footpath na papunta sa gym ng hotel. Doon siya magsa-shower bago umuwi. Nang makapasok sa side entrance ay wala na siyang naramdamang nakasunod kaya nilingon niya ang pinanggalingan para makasiguro. Nakita niyang kausap ni Rhys si Ronron na may iniabot ditong inumin.

Relieved na tumuloy na si Vera sa locker at shower area, kumakabog pa rin ang dibdib sa dahilang hindi niya matukoy. Bakit siya kinakabahan kay Rhys? First time nilang magkita at magkakilala, so ano ang dapat niyang ipag-alala?

Hindi rin niya maintindihan kung bakit hindi niya direktang maamin na napanood niya ang video scandal nito. Eh ano ba kung malaman ng lalaking iyon? Malamang pinadala iyon sa lugar na ito para magtago hanggang sa huminto ang mga tao sa pag-uusap tungkol sa iskandalo. Sanay na tiyak itong makakilala ng mga nakapanood ng video at wala dapat siyang pakialam sa mararamdaman ng binata.

Or maybe she cared about what he would think of her? *Argh, no! Why? Hindi, ah!*

Sa inis at frustration ay tumagal kaysa sa nakasanayang sampung minuto ang inilagi niya sa shower. Her skin gleamed after some furious scrubbing, and she left a delicious fresh peach and

vanilla scent in the shower area.

Nagbalik nga lang ang hindi maipaliwanag na dilemma niya nang kunin ang bag sa locker at ilabas ang pamalit na damit.

“Yuck, Vera! Ano ba ’yang shorts mo? Hinarbat mo ba ’yung isang kurtina ni Nana Ansen at tinahi using a *puruntong* pattern? Eww.”

Gulat na nilingon niya si Honey, ang chef ng *C Café* na isa sa pinakamalalapit niyang kaibigan. Tiyahin nito si Nana Ansen na nagmamay-ari ng kubong may makukulay at bulaklaking kurtina sa gitna ng poultry farm nito sa kabilang bahagi ng isla.

“No, binili ko ito sa tiangge sa bayan and FYI, maganda ang tela nito at komportable,” asar na sagot ni Vera bago isinuot ang shorts, kasunod ang light pink na kamiseta na ten years na sa kanya.

“Regalo ko pa ’yang t-shirt na ’yan n’ung graduation mo!” Nanlaki ang mga mata ni Honey na nagsimulang maghubad ng yoga pants nito. Mukhang katatapos lang din ng babae sa morning workout nito bago sumabak sa trabaho.

“So? Hindi pa naman sira at mukhang luma.” Kinuha niya ang isang hairdryer na naka-mount sa dingding at sinimulang tuyuin ang buhok.

Nangunot lang ang ilong ni Honey na sininghot-singhot siya. “At least, you smell nice. Bagong ligo ka pa. Bawing-bawi sa chaka mong outfit.”

“Kailan pa ’ko nagkaroon ng paki sa itsura ko?”

She snorted.

“Magkakar’on ka ng paki kapag nakita mo ’yung bagong guest namin. Mukhang magtatagal din siya dito. He’s set to move into one of the renovated villas by Monday, na four months rent na ang binayaran niya.”

Skeptic na tiningnan lang ni Vera ang kaibigan kahit kinakabahan.

“It’s Rhys Mondragon, baby. Him and his dragon d*ck—”

“Honey Mae Policarpio!” she hissed, then looked around. She just heard some giggling from the shower stalls.

“Teh, sabay pa naming pinanood ni Nap ’yung video ni Rhys. Ang sarap, no? No wonder Doc Marishka was tempted. S’abi ni Nap, ibang klase daw ’yung energy ni Rhys. Idol nga niya, eh. One of these days, ire-reenact namin ’yung—”

Binitawan ni Vera ang hairdryer at tinakpan ng mga kamay ang magkabilang tainga. “Stop! I don’t have to know that at wala akong paki!”

Humalakhak lang si Honey. “O siya, sige na at maliligo na ’ko. Wala kang paki? Wait ’til you see Rhys with the dragon d*ck. Ewan lang kung hindi mo gustuhing hubarin ’yang mga chaka mong suot at hilahin siya somewhere to do what he and Doc Marishka did.”

Nag-init ang kanyang mga pisngi sa imaheng

agad nag-flash sa utak. Kung alam lang ng kaibigan kung paanong halos hubad na rin siya kanina nang makita ni Rhys.

Naiiling na sinuklay ni Vera ang natuyong buhok, ipinusod iyon gamit ang parang telephone cord na orange ponytail holder saka iniligpit ang mga gamit. In less than a minute, she was on her way out of the gym and into a hallway. Papunta iyon sa isa sa mga daanan palabas ng hotel, derecho sa main road na lalakaran lang niya pauwi sa bahay niya three blocks away.

Pero sadya yatang hindi nakatakdang masunod ang routine niya nang umagang iyon, dahil tatlong hakbang na lang palabas ng hallway at padaan sa side lobby ng *Cascara Suites* ay namataan niya na na may solong naghihintay pala roon. Nakita siya nito at agad ngumiti.

She rolled her eyes. Ano ba ang gusto nito? Kapag nag-about face si Vera, siguradong hahabulin siya nito. Kaya dumerecho na lang siya ng lakad at derecho din sa labas ang tingin. Kunwari, wala siyang nakita.

“Oh come on, I knew you saw me and my flowers.” Tumawa ito habang lumalakad sa tabi niya. “Here, take them.”

Huminto siya at tiningnan ang mga iniaabot ng lalaki. It was a colorful bunch of blooms he obviously picked from the nearby garden. Walang ayos, basta pinagsama-sama lang sa isang bouquet na itinali ng

ipinilipit na dyaryo. Parang makulay na kangkong lang. But somehow, the chaotic arrangement and mix of colors looked artistic, and strangely pretty.

Itinaas niya ang tingin kay Rhys na ngayon ay wala na ang panunudyo sa ekspresyon ng mukha. Napalitan na iyon ng magkahalong pagtataka at pag-aalala. “Miss... None-of-your-business?”

She sighed, then smiled sadly. “It’s Vera.”

“Vera,” ulit ni Rhys, bago muling iniabot ang mga bulaklak. “These are for you.”

“Thank you,” Tinanggap niya iyon gamit ang dalawang kamay. Napalunok siya nang magtagpo ang kanilang mga daliri. His skin was still hot, almost feverish. Or was it just her natural reaction to him? “I shouldn’t accept dahil hindi ko alam kung bakit... pero hindi ko rin kayang tanggihan ang ganito kaganda.”

Matagal na panahon na rin simula nang may magbigay sa kanya ng bulaklak. Her ex-boyfriends only gave her some generic bouquets during special occasions. And the last time anyone ever gave her flowers, it wasn’t really intended for her but more to honor a memory.

Panagbenga Festival noon na natapat sa birthday ng kanyang mama, kaya niyaya ni Vera ang mga kaibigan sa ad agency na magpunta sa Baguio para alalahanin iyon. Her friends knew her story, and they also knew that Senator Nicolas Leveriza was her real

father. The old man was there too on official business, but he reserved a function room at a hotel for him to have dinner with her and her friends.

Dumating ito dala ang isang makulay at magulong bouquet, na ayon sa senador ay pinitas nito sa mga nakaparadang float na nadaanan.

“This almost looked like the first bunch of flowers I gave to your mom. 1984 at teaching fellow siya sa NYU. I was finishing my doctoral at Columbia. Patapos ang winter noong una kaming magkakilala sa isang conference, pero kalagitnaan ng Spring nang sa wakas ay pumayag siyang makipagkita na kami lang. I knew it wasn’t right, we were both married. I thought I’d just see her once, then maybe, I would know something that would make me stop and realize it wasn’t worth it.

“We agreed to meet at the reservoir in West Central Park. Na-late ako ng gising at wala nang oras para bumili ng bulaklak, kaya namitas na lang ako sa mga nadadaan ko sa park. Natawa agad siya nang makita niya akong palapit, alam na agad kung saan at paano ko nakuha ang mga dala ko. I went there with the purpose of shaking myself out of that craziness, but that huge smile, the laughter in her eyes got me hooked. I’m not justifying what we had. Mali kahit saan tingnan, pero iyon lang ang mali sa buhay ko na hindi ko pinagsisihan. Never, not even now..”

Halos lahat sila ay na-touch at naiyak sa kuwento ng ama. Pati ang mga kaibigan niya ay yumakap dito

bago ito umalis nang gabing iyon. None of them would ever forget the story of those stolen flowers arranged haphazardly. Hanggang ngayon ay nakatago pa rin sa isang maliit na kahon ang mga natuyong petals ng bouquet na iyon, kasama ng iba pang gamit na nagpapaalala sa kanya ng ina at tunay na ama. They were all she had left.

“Vera? Are you... Are you okay?”

A warm hand was on her left arm, while another carefully lifted strands of hair away from her face. Napahugot siya ng hangin, kasabay ang realisasyong kanina pa siguro siya nakatitig sa hawak na bouquet.

“Sorry.” Kagat niya ang labi nang iangat ang tingin kay Rhys. Napatingin tuloy ito roon. “Okay lang ako.” Humakbang siya paatras. “I should go.” Tumulikod na si Vera.

Sumunod uli ang binata. “Uwi ka agad? How about breakfast?”

“Sa bahay na lang ako magbe-breakfast.” Bahagyang ngumiti ang dalaga kahit umiling. “Salamat uli dito.” Kung buhay ang papa niya at nalaman nitong isang gaya ni Rhys ang nagbigay sa kanya ng bulaklak...

“Can I not join you for breakfast, then?” he sheepishly asked.

Umangat ang isang kilay ni Vera. Was this guy for real? Nagso-solicit talaga ng breakfast invitation? “Iyon ba ang kapalit ng mga bulaklak?”

Napakurap ito, bahagyang namula. “N-no, not really.”

Obviously, hindi sanay ang lalaki na basta tinatanggihan ng kahit sino. Under different circumstances, she might have encouraged him. Pero pinili na niya ang buhay sa Carasca, at nabibilang si Rhys sa mundong ayaw na niyang balikan pa. His family was in the same circle as her late father’s, and he even got involved with her step-sister. Siguradong hindi ito magtatagal sa isla. Pinapalamig lang tiyak ng lalaki ang issue.

He was also a very attractive and obviously virile man who’s probably being tortured right now at the prospect of being celibate for the next couple of months. Hindi siya assumera pero ano ba ang ibang dahilan kung bakit nakikipaglapit ito sa kanya?

“Well, then...” Sinalubong niya ang tingin nito. “I’ll see you around.” Naglakad na uli si Vera.

“Fine,” nagbuntong-hininga ito, “and you won’t say *No* next time?”

Nilingon niya ang lalaki. “I don’t even know the question yet.”

He chuckled. “Yeah, okay... Pero magkikita ba uli tayo?”

Nagkibit siya ng balikat. “Siguro.”

“Looking forward to that uncertainty then,” Sumabay pa rin sa kanyang paglalakad si Rhys. Paano ba niya ito paalisin?

“Okay, ’bye.” Binilisan ni Vera ang lakad.

Binilisan din ni Rhys ang pagsunod. “Isang tanong na lang, please.”

Napabuga siya ng hangin. “Isang tanong at pagkatapos, tatantanan mo na ’ko at hindi ka na susunod, okay?” Parang may idea na siya kung ano ang itatanong nito.

“Deal!” pagpayag agad ng kausap.

She looked at him expectantly. Tiyak na *No* ang sagot niya sa kahit anong itatanong ni Rhys, na alin lang sa:

May boyfriend ka na? Are you married?

Are you free tomorrow night?

What do you think about one-night-stands?

Are you familiar with purely sexual relationships?

*No strings attached? F*ck buddies?*

“Kanina, n’ung tinitingnan mo ’yang mga bulaklak, you seem to be remembering something and you looked really sad.”

Huh? Takang napakurap ang dalaga. What?

“Puwede ko bang malaman kung ano ang naalala mo? I just want to be sure those flowers didn’t trigger a bad memory.” Mukha namang totoong worried ito.

Hindi makapaniwalang nakatitig lang siya rito. “N-no. Not a bad memory at all.” Nag-iwas siya ng tingin. “Naalala ko lang ’yung huling nakatanggap ako ng bulaklak, at ’yung kuwentong kasama niyon.”

“Really?” Halatang nagulat din si Rhys. “Kailan

pa 'yon?"

"Over four years ago." Binilisan uli niya ang lakad. Malapit na ang main road. "Rhys, that's two questions already."

"Who was it, then? I mean, 'yung nagbigay sa 'yo ng bulaklak?" pilit nito. "Please, last na talaga."

Tiningnan niya ang lalaki. "My father," mahinang sabi ni Vera. "At wala na siya, okay? That's why that was the last." Bahagyang nabasag ang kanyang boses sa huling sinabi. Inalis niya ang tingin kay Rhys at nagpatuloy na sa paglalakad pauwi.

Bakit niya ginawa iyon? She could always just say *No* or not answer! Why on earth did she just opened up to a stranger like that?



Rhys Mondragon stood next to a coconut tree, still processing the information. *Her father? Four years ago? That could only be Senator Leveriza!*

Bakit walang impormasyon na nagkaanak ito? And did she really share a name with her mother, or was that deliberate to mislead people, para walang makaalam na may anak ito sa labas? Nasaan na ang nakatatandang Vera Soliven ngayon?

Holy sh*t, his mission suddenly became more interesting.

3



Can't Stop, Won't Stop

"Fire your f*cking researchers, Ate! How the f*ck did they not find out that Senator Leveriza had a daughter when he had an affair? 'T*ng ina, halos mabaliw ako kakaisip kung paanong approach ang gagawin ko... Sh*t!" Muntik dumulas mula sa mga kamay ni Rhys ang cellphone nang itulak niya pabukas ang sliding door papunta sa veranda.

Halos tatlong oras na siyang sumusubok na ma-contact ang mga kapatid sa pagitan ng pagre-review ng impormasyong nasa kanya at pag-verify sa mga iyon online. He sent messages to Vera's older half-siblings to confirm. Hinanap din niya ito sa ilang social networking sites. May *Facebook*, *Twitter* at *Instagram* ito using the name 'V Soliven L'. All of them were set to private.

Kating-kati siyang magpadala ng follow at friend request kanina, pero hihintayin muna niyang magkita sila uli. At least, he should let her know he's interested.

Well sh*t, he *is* very interested. He could still smell her.

"I'll talk to them but I won't fire anyone, Chrysler,"

mahinahong sagot ni Ate Yana. “Hindi mo ba naisip na baka sinadyang walang impormasyong tungkol sa kanya? Senator Leveriza was a public official. Veronica Soliven was a respected college professor. Wait, did you know where the older Soliven was?”

“She apparently died almost thirteen years ago, in Boston.” He sighed. Sa pagre-research niya kanina lang niya nalaman iyon. Veronica Soliven succumbed to complications of non-Hodgkin Lymphoma, in Boston where she lived with her daughter for three years. Apat na taon bago ito pumanaw ay inatake sa puso ang asawa nito. Sa iniwang last will ay naglaan lang ng sapat na halaga para iwan ni Veronica ang bahay nila, at lumayo kasama ang anak nito sa ibang lalaki, na sa mismong pagbasa ng last will lang nalaman ng mga anak nila.”

Vera was thirteen then, and his heart went out to the young girl who lost not only the father she knew, but four siblings as well. Base sa naunang impormasyong mayroon si Rhys, mukhang itinuring na ring patay ng nakatatandang mga kapatid nito si Vera.

“You okay?” untag ng ate niya sa kabilang linya.

“I’m good.” Napailing siya. “So, itutuloy ko pa din ang pag-iimbestiga at paggawa ng ’t*ng inang documentary na ’to? Do I really need to film her, record her talking about her late parents? Hindi ba masyadong malupit ’yun, Ate? You’re a lawyer and

you're basically helping me commit fraud. You're a woman, and a mother—”

“Sa tingin mo ba hindi ko naisip ’yan, Rhys? I know fully well that I’m over stepping certain boundaries, but it is the only way to save your stupid a*s!” frustrated na sambit ng kapatid.

Napangiwi ang binata. “There must be another way...”

“I asked about another way but Senator Inoturan said *No*. Mukhang ilang taon na niyang planong gawin ito pero hindi puwede dahil nasa posisyon siya. We should be thankful he decided against a case, dear brother. Madali nang mag-imbento ng iba pang ikakaso sa ’yo dahil sa reputasyon mo. Or just have you killed.” His older sister sighed.

Napapikit si Rhys. “It won’t be easy.”

“Buti nga sa ’yo.” Mahinang natawa ang kausap.

“It’s not funny!” He pursed his lips.

“So you met her earlier at nakausap mo siya? At hindi lang basta usap dahil may nakuha ka agad na importanteng detalye...”

Ikinuwento niya in detail kung paanong nabanggit ni Vera ang ama nito sa usapan. Nang matapos siya ay tahimik na ang kapatid maliban sa mahinang pagsinghot nito.

“Damn, Rhys, ang lungkot naman n’un!”

“Yeah. Alam kong g*go ako, Ate. Pero hindi gan’un ka-g*go para gamitin siya.”

Ate Yana sighed again. “Walang choice, Rhys. Kalayaan mo ang nakasalalay dito. Nasa iyo na kung paano ang gagawin para makuha ang impormasyong kailangan ni Senator Inoturan, pero pakiusap, huwag na huwag mo siyang ibilang sa mga babae mo.”

Napalunok ang lalaki, “I... I don’t intend to do that.” Huli na para sa babala, lalo na kung iisipin kung saan at paano sila nagkakilala ni Vera.

Napabuntong-hininga si Rhys habang nakikinig sa iba pang bilin ng kapatid bago ito nagpaalam. Bumalik siya sa kuwarto at inubos na ang biniling pagkain bago muling bumalik sa kanyang research. Nakipag-chat din siya sa ilang staff sa opisina at nangumusta, bago niya naramdaman ang antok at hinayaan ang sariling makatulog na.



Pasado alas cuatro ng hapon nang magising si Rhys. Muli siyang nag-shower, nagbihis at inisip kung ano uli ang gagawin. *Nakakabaliw ang ganito!* Should he run again? Nah, he was not in the mood.

He would really rather have his siblings give him a huge pile of paperwork to do for three or six months straight. Or have him finish some Science course that would make his brain bleed. Maybe even send him to a military camp! Huwag lang ang ganito na kahit may goal siya ay hindi naman niya alam kung paano iyon makukuha.

He had only met Vera this morning but he liked

her already. She's hot and his d*ck approves, but something about her just made him want to know more. At hindi lang iyon dahil sa kanyang misyon. Na-in love na kaya ito? Nagka-boyfriend na? Virgin pa kaya? When was the last time anyone saw her naked?

Napabuga si Rhys ng hangin at mahinang napamura nang maramdaman ang paninikip sa kanyang shorts. His d*ck was too damn sensitive it was even responding to his thoughts!

Ampalaya burger, balunbalunan siopao, sisig na may ketchup, bulalong madaming vetsin, red ants on his sandwich... Lahat ng mga unpalatable na pagkain ay inisip na niya habang palakad-lakad sa kuwarto, hanggang sa wakas ay mawala ang pag-iinit ng kanyang katawan. Napalitan iyon ng gutom.

Literal na gutom. Alas onse pa ang huling kain niya. Dali-daling nilisan niya ang kuwarto at bumaba papunta sa *C Café*. Kumalam agad ang kanyang sikmura nang maamoy ang masasarap na pagkain. In minutes, he stuffed his plate with various types of cakes, kakanin and dumplings, washed down with cold sweet tea. Halos hindi siya naupo dahil puno ang café, kaya palakad-lakad siya habang hinihimas ang tiyan at hawak ang isang kamay ang mason jar na may iced tea.

What to do after this? Past five pa lang! Ayaw niyang magbuhay-baboy na kain at tulog lang

ang ginagawa habang binubuo ang plano para maisakatuparan ang misyon. *Wait, should there even be a plan?*

“Ang pathetic mo talaga, Vera! Past five pa lang, uwian na? You’re thirty, not seventy! Mag-enjoy ka naman minsan!”

“I’m enjoying my life, Honey Mae, thank you very much,” sarcastic na sagot ng boses na pamilyar na sa kanya.

Nakatayo siya sa nakabukas na double French doors na papunta sa garden, at pagsilip niya ay naglalakad na sa damuhan ang dalawang babae. Ang isa ay nakasuot ng chef’s uniform—magandang chinita na matangkad at chubby, na hawak at parang hinihila ang isang braso ni Vera.

Napalunok si Rhys. Mas balot ito kaysa nang makita niya kanina, pero mas matindi ang dating sa kanya. Distressed blue jeans that clung to her hips and legs, orange tank top that showcased her toned arms and the rest of her curves. Mataas na nakatali ang buhok nito, medyo pawisan at namumula ang mga pisngi. Mukhang nakipaghabulan kay Chef.

Napangiti siya bago sumimsim sa iced tea. He’s not a fan of eavesdropping but if it would help him know more about Vera, then he would park his a*s right here before approaching.

“Enjoy? Kasama ang mga pusa at aso mo? ’Yung laptop at *Netflix* account mo?” Nanlalaki ang mga

mata ni Chef.

“So? Ano’ng mali d’un? Nandyan naman kayo ni Nap. Nakakausap ko pa regularly’yung mga kaibigan ko from Manila. I’m okay.”

“Walang mali pero hindi rin tama na ganyan na lang lagi ang buhay mo, Vera! You know what, may in-organize na bonfire party bukas ang hotel for the guests. We have these Korean and Japanese corporate types, and some Dutch and English dudes. Maraming guwapo, girl! Irampa mo naman’yung ganda mo!”

Parang uminit ang ulo ni Rhys sa naisip na scenario. Vera with these foreign tourists? No way! Inubos lang niya ang iniinom, inilapag sa kalapit na mesa at humakbang palapit sa dalawa.

“Excuse me? I heard about a party?” Ngumisi siya sa dalawang babae, na parehong nanlaki ang mga mata. “I’m Rhys, from Manila. Bored and lonely. Puwede rin ba’kong maki-party? Kailan at saan?”

Iniiwas ni Vera ang tingin habang ilang beses na napakurap ang kasama nito bago napangiti. “Oh, hello, gorgeous! I’m Honey.” She held out a hand.

“It’s Rhys, actually.” Kinamayan niya ito.

“Rhys. Gorgeous. Pareho lang’yun.” Bumaling ito kay Vera at hinagip muli ang braso nito. “This is my dear friend Vera. Single. Unattached. Like a virgin. She hasn’t had sex in... Ilang taon na? Tagal na.”

“Honey!” asik ni Vera. Pilit itong kumawala sa kaibigan pero mas malakas ang huli, na iniabot pa

ang kamay nito kay Rhys.

“Um, actually, magkakilala na kami.” Hindi nawawala ang ngiting inabot niya ang kamay ni Vera, marahang pinisil iyon bago binitawan. “This morning lang.” He winked at her and her eyes narrowed.

“Really? This morning? At ganyan ang ngiti mo?” Makahulugan na ang tingin ni Honey sa kanya, bago bumaling sa kaibigan. “Nagba-blush ka, bakla! Masarap? Malaki? Mahaba? How many rounds?” She turned to him again. “How many positions?”

Ilang segundong si Rhys naman ang namamanghang nakatingin sa babae, bago natawa. “You’re cool, man.”

“I’m hot, too. But only for my husband.” The lovely chef grinned. “So, sasagutin n’yo ba ang tanong ko o ano? Ten minutes na lang ang natitira sa break ko.” Hinimas nito ang braso ni Vera. “Ang init mo! Affected?”

Vera just glared at her friend.

“Uy, huwag kang ganyan, Honey. Nothing happened. We just met this morning. We talked a bit, iyon lang. Grabe ka, conservative kaya ako,” he declared, mock-seriously. Pero kumikislap ang mga mata niya nang lingunin ang babaeng parang gusto nang kumatay ng chef.

Napahalakhak si Honey. “Conservative? Tado mo po. Nakita ko ’yung video mo, hello! Ang sipag mo kaya! At ang energy, grabe! Ano’ng tinitira mo at

nang masabi ko sa asawa ko?”

Umiling si Rhys, natatawa pa rin. “I drink lots of milk and I exercise, ’yun lang.” Tumingin siya kay Vera. “You okay?”

Buntong-hininga lang ang isinagot ng babae. Muli nitong hinila ang braso kay Honey, na sa wakas ay bumitaw rin. May malabong pasa na iyon.

“Oh, sh*t! Does it hurt?” Siya naman ang magaan na humawak sa braso ng dalaga. He ran a finger through her skin.

Vera flinched, and stepped back. “I’m okay. Madali lang talagang magkapasa.”

“Yes, kaya ingatan mo ’yan, Rhys. Huwag masyadong excited!” Tinapik ni Honey ang bicep niya.

“Aalis na ’ko. Maiwan ko na kayo d’yan.” Naililing na tumalikod na si Vera, pero siya naman ang humagip sa kamay nito.

“Sandali lang. You’re going to this bonfire party tomorrow, right?”

Umiling ang babae. “No, I’m sorry. Hindi ako ma-party.”

Honey rolled her eyes. “Yeah, right.”

“Come on, Vera. It should be fun!” He pursed his lips and blinked slowly like a puppy.

“Sige na, Vera. Lumabas at maki-party ka naman...” Hinila ni Honey si Vera sa isang panig at may ibinulong dito na ikinalaki ng mga mata ng

dalaga dahil sa... panic? Hindi siya sigurado.

“Fine!” resigned na anito, sabay hila ng kamay mula sa kanya. “I’ll be here tomorrow.”

“I’ll pick you up at... seven? Eight?” he asked hopefully.

Umangat ang isang kilay ng babae. “Hindi mo alam kung saan ako nakatira.”

“Magha-house to house ako hanggang may maawa at magturo,” hindi natitinag na sagot niya. *Man, she’s so cute... and hot when annoyed!*

She pouted. “Whatever.” Tumingin ito kay Honey na nakangising pinapanood ang interaksyon nila. “Aalis na ’ko. Walang susunod! I swear hindi ako pupunta dito bukas pag nangulit pa kayo.”

Halos sabay pa silang umiling ni Honey at hinayaan nang lumayo si Vera na talagang tumakbo pa palabas. Ilang minuto lang ay narinig na nila ang mahinang tunog ng papalayong tricycle.

Malalim na napabuntong-hininga si Honey, bago napatingala sa langit. “Hay, thank You, Lord.”

“You’re kinda weird but you’re funny and I like you.” He chuckled.

Natawa rin uli ang babae. “Thanks, dude. You’re yummy but I’m married.” Napapitik ito sa hangin. “Sayang!”

Nangingiting napailing si Rhys. “Do you seriously want me to go with your friend tomorrow? I mean...”

Tumaas ang isang kilay nito. “What, your

reputation? Alam ko 'yon, nakita ko nga ang video mo, di ba?"

Napakurap siya. "Wala na pala 'kong maitatago sa 'yo."

Napangisi muli si Honey. "To me and to everyone else who's seen it. But don't worry, hindi ako judgmental. Trip n'yo 'yon, eh. Mali lang kasi may-asawa na ang nilandi mo, senador pa!" Napapalatak ito.

"Yeah." He sighed. "It's not even a serious thing. I'm really just her booty call."

"Puro ba gan'un ang sa lahat ng babae mo? Puro sex?"

"Not really. Minsan, I go out on dates din na hindi kailangan ng sex para mag-enjoy. Pero mahirap yata akong seryosohin. O hindi lang talaga sila para sa 'kin." He smiled sadly.

"Whoa, dude!" Honey raised a hand, then pointed a finger to his chest. "You mean you actually want to find the one?"

Hindi alam ni Rhys kung bakit bigla siyang kinabahan sa narinig. Ang totoo ay hindi pa niya iyon seryosong napag-iisipan. He was not averse to the concept of 'the one', and settling down eventually.

But why did it feel like he just came from a ten-mile run? His heart was practically thumping against his chest! *Sh*t.*

"Interesado ka ba talaga kay Vera?"

Napakurap siya, napatitig sa kausap. Seryoso na ang magandang mukha nito. Kinabahan siyang lalo. “Y-yeah?” Napalunok siya.

“Yeah? You’re not sure? Alam kong kanina mo lang siya nakilala, at oo, binabalahura ko siya sa harap mo, pero mahal ko ang babaeng ’yon at ayoko ng may nanggag*go sa kanya, okay?” Mataman siyang tiningnan ni Honey.

“W-wala akong balak na gaguhin siya, Honey. I may seem like a selfish d*ck but I never made promises that I can’t keep, nor did I ever pretend to be some saintly husband-to-be to any woman I’ve been with. Alam nilang lahat kung ano kami, kung ano sila sa buhay ko. And V-Vera... I know I just met her but she’s different from anyone I’ve known.” He took a deep breath. “She’s beautiful. She’s so hot and honestly? I got hard the first time I saw her in the pool and she noticed but was cool about it. And we talked and... Sh*t, Honey. Sana kaya kong mangako sa ’yo pero...”

Tinapik ng babae ang kanyang braso. “No, hindi ko kailangan ’yan. Vera is a big girl. But please, just always be honest with her. And try not to hurt her deliberately. That’s cruel.”

“I won’t... I can’t imagine...” Be honest? Damn it, bakit ba nandito pa siya? Kaya ba niyang gawin ito?

“I believe you. I shouldn’t but... ewan.” Nagkibit ito ng balikat.

“Thank you.” Relieved na napabuga si Rhys ng hangin. “Sige na, b’alik ka na sa work mo... wait!”

Huminto sa paghakbang ang sana ay palayo nang chef. “Yes?”

Alanganing napakamot siya sa batok. “Um, ano ’yung sinabi mo kay Vera? Bakit pumayag siyang maki-party bukas?”

“Oh, ’yun ba? Hmm...” Kunwa ay nag-isip ang babae. “Sinabi ko lang na kapag hindi siya pumayag, sasabihin ko sa iyo na...”

“Na ano?” na-excite bigla na tanong ni Rhys.

“Na napanood na niya ’yung video mo, as in the day after na maging viral ’yun. Sa kanya ko pa nga nakuha ’yung link... Oooppss! Oh, my God!” Tinakpan ni Honey ang bibig, pero hindi naman mukhang guilty. “Sige na! Bukas na lang! ’Bye!” Mabilis na itong naglakad papunta sa kusina.

Ilang sandaling nakatulala lang siya, bago natawa, dama ang pag-iinit ng mga pisngi at ng ibang bahagi ng katawan. *Holy sh*t, I knew it!*

Now, what would he do with that juicy piece of information? *Hmm...*

4



Can't Say No

I niisip pa ni Vera kung papalitan ang suot na light blue crepe mini-dress nang marinig ang sunud-sunod na malakas at tila galit na tahol ng aso niyang si *Draco*. That could only mean one thing, a stranger. That stranger could only be Rhys Mondragon.

She sighed in resignation, fixed the halter straps of her dress in place and slipped on her cream gladiator sandals.

Mabilis na lumabas na siya ng kuwarto at ini-lock ang pinto. Halos magkandarapa din siya sa pagpunta sa main door at muntik pa niyang masagi ang pusang si *Voldy* na galit na inangilan siya.

“Sorry, baby.” She scratched the white cat’s head apologetically and that’s when she noticed that her dog had stopped barking.

Takang binuksan niya ang pinto at lumabas. Habang inila-lock iyon ay kita niya five meters away na naka-squat sa labas ng gate si Rhys at parang presong nakahawak sa rehas niyon, habang ang isang kamay ay humihimas sa leeg ng traydor na aso niyang madali nitong napaamo.

“I’m a good guy, buddy, I promise. Magpa-party lang kami ni Vera, unless I get lucky and it turns out she wanted to do more? Hindi ako tatanggi... I mean.” Noon siya napansin ni Rhys. Agad nagliwanag ang mukha nito. “I mean, look at her. Kung gusto niya ’kong hubaran mamaya, maghuhubad ako. My body is ready!” Dahan-dahang tumayo ito at tinapik sa ulo si *Draco*, bago ipinagpag sa suot na cargo shorts ang mga kamay.

Napansin din siya ng aso, na agad naging hyper. She scratched between the dog’s ears, told him to get back in his corner in the porch, and quietly unlocked the pedestrian gate. Noon niya napansin ang sasakyan sa likod ni Rhys: a golf cart.

“You look good enough to eat. Sakto, hindi pa ’ko nagdi-dinner.” He rubbed his palms together as his eyes roamed over her body.

Rhys Mondragon was deliberately acting and talking like a sleaze, at sigurado siyang nagbibiro lang ito. Pero humalo pa rin ang iritasyon sa kanyang amusement. “Thanks. Should we go?” Iniiwas niya ang tingin sa lalaki. Alam ni Vera na kung ano ang nasa mga mata nito—nararamdaman niya.

Para kasing laser beams ang mga mata nitong tila minamarkahan ng apoy ang bawat madaanang parte ng kanyang katawan.

“Get in, baby,” bulong nito na halos dumikit na ang mga labi sa kanyang tainga. Hindi niya agad

namalayan ang paglapit ng lalaki, naramdaman na lang niya ang mainit nitong palad sa kanyang likod na marahan siyang inaalalayan paupo sa golf cart. Parang ang ganda ng mood nito, nagha-hum pa ng *'Can't Feel My Face'* habang paupo sa kanyang tabi.

If it wasn't an open vehicle, it would feel cramped and she would probably be squished against Rhys. Dumerecho siya ng upo at inayos ang dalang sling bag sa kandungan.

"You okay?" He turned the key in the ignition.

"Yeah, sanay ka bang mag-drive nito?" nagdududang tanong niya. Parang tinatantya kasi ni Rhys ang bawat galaw.

"Course I know how to operate this thing." Humawak ito sa manibela. "I've been driving since I was fifteen. Parang sa karaniwang sasakyan din lang ang mechanism nito." He stepped on the gas, rather, slammed his foot on it, causing the vehicle to jerk them forward.

Napasinghap si Vera; muntik nang tumama ang kanyang mukha sa harap at may kung anong nasagi ang tuhod niya.

"F*ck! Damn it, what did I do?" nagtataka at nag-aalalang tanong ni Rhys.

"Dahan-dahan lang kasi ang tapak sa gas!" asik niya sabay himas sa tuhod.

"Sh*t, masakit ba?" Hinawakan ni Rhys ang kanyang kamay at inalis sa tuhod niya. "Damn, pasa

ba'to?" To her horror, he leaned down and kissed the bruised area. Thrice. Pagkatapos, hinaplos nito iyon gamit ang hinlalaki. "I'm sorry." Dumerecho ito ng upo pero nanatili sa hita niya ang isang kamay. "Saan pa masakit?"

Hindi makapaniwalang nakatingin lang siya rito. Dapat ay inginudngod na niya ito sa manibela. The audacity of this man to feel like he could just invade her personal space like that! Hindi pa ba obvious dito na umiiwas siya? Na pumayag lang siyang sumama ngayong gabi dahil sa kaibigan niyang chef? Ni wala siyang planong magtagal sa party, magpapakita lang siya kay Honey at sa ibang kakilala sa beach club, pagkatapos ay uuwi na. Pupuslit siya mamaya. Wala rin siyang planong manatili sa tabi ni Rhys ngayong gabi.

"I'm fine," mahinang sabi niya. "Tara na."

Ilang segundong nag-aalalang tiningnan muna siya ni Rhys bago nito muling pinaandar ang golf cart. Mas maayos na ang pag-operate nito at mas tutok sa daan. In five minutes, they were parking in the hotel grounds.

Dinig mula roon ang tugtog mula sa bahagi ng infinity pool kung saan nagsimula ang set-up ng beach party. Rhys practically bounced with nervous energy as he took her hand and led her to the beach. Yep, nervous. Mukhang nahimasmasan ito at hindi na muling sumubok na lumandi, sa halip ay parang ingat na ingat sa kanya ngayon.

“Hey, guys! Nice dress, Vera! Madaling hubarin!”

Napatingin siya sa dessert bar kung saan nakapuwesto si Honey at sinu-supervise ang apat na staff nito. Halos mag-hello ang 36C na dibdib ng kaibigan sa suot nitong V-neck crepe blouse. Ang ganda rin ng ayos ng buhok at makeup nito, na masasayang sa oras na magawa ni Vera na ihagis ito sa isa sa mga bonfire para ma-lechon ang gaga.

Kulang na lang ay lagyan siya ng price tag ni Honey. Kahapon pa siya nito ibinebenta. At kay Rhys Mondragon pa, of all people!

But why did she have this sudden image of him pulling the halter straps of her dress with his teeth while his hands roamed all over her body?

“Oo nga, ’no? Isang hilahan lang ba ’to?”

Bago pa siya nakaiwas ay dumako na ang kamay ni Rhys sa likod niya. Noon lang siya lumayo at mahigpit na hinawakan ang braso nito. “Don’t!”

Nanulis ang nguso nito. “Why not?”

“Why not? Tinanong mo pa? Dahil wala kang karapatan, Rhys! I’m not...” She blinked. Why was he leaning so close? “I’m not y-yours.”

Napaatras si Vera, bago nagpalinga-linga. Marami nang tao doon. Karamihan ay nag-uusap, sumasabay sa tugtog mula sa DJ’s booth o may hawak na plato ng pagkain.

“Then, I intend to make you mine tonight,” bulong ni Rhys sa gilid ng mukha niya. Ang lapit nito

ulit! Aatras sana siya pero hinagip siya ng lalaki sa baywang. Nagpumiglas siya pero humigpit lang ang hawak nito at inilayo siya. “Grill na ’yung maatasan mo. Kung gusto mo ng mainit, puwedeng ako na lang?”

Asar na itinulak ni Vera ang binata pero pinagmasdan din ito. Rhys Mondragon’s long lean body could very well be a heat conductor—from his broad shoulders to those strong arms and legs, and that hint of well-defined abdominal muscles from his snug-fitting light gray shirt. His ruffled hair complemented the light stubble in his jaw, his full lips curved into an enticing smile as his eyes both sparkled with mischief and looked at her as if he really wanted her for dinner.

The nerve! Kumuyom ang mga kamao ni Vera. Gusto niyang suntukin ang perfect Roman nose nito. Alam niyang may karapatan ito, pero sobrang feeling! “Vera?” He waved a hand in front of her face.

Hinampas niya iyon. “Yeah?”

Rhys smiled and his lips twitched as he formed words before he actually spoke. “If you keep looking at me like that, we won’t make it to a bed.”

Napakurap ang dalaga. Ano daw? Umisip siya ng isasagot, pero ewan kung bakit napako na lang ang tingin niya sa mga labi ng kaharap. She suddenly had an image of those lips touching every square inch of her body...*sh*t!* Napayuko siya at napalunok. Paano

niya matatakas agad ang lalaking ito?

“Uy, nahiya siya. Don’t be shy, baby. I love how you’re looking at me, really.”

Asar na nag-angat uli siya ng tingin. “And how am I looking at you?” tanong niya bago napatingin sa dessert bar kung saan may pila na sa malaking tiered chocolate fountain.

“Yung tingin na parang wala akong ipinagkaiba sa chocolate fountain na ’yan,” sagot ni Rhys, dahilan para mapatingin uli siya dito. Right at the moment, he ran a finger along the inside of his collar as though it was suddenly too tight.

Umiling siya at tinungo ang barbecue table. Kumuha siya ng plato at nagsimulang mag-assemble ng hamburger. Lettuce, mushrooms, barbecue sauce, patty, onions... More onions.

“More onions won’t stop me from wanting to kiss you, you know.”

Oh, God! Nag-init ang mga pisngi ni Vera pero hindi tiningnan ang lalaki. Nilagyan niya ng Japanese mayo at sliced pineapple ang kanyang burger bago inilapat ang kalahati ng bun. Kumuha siya ng isang dakot na potato chips, isang bote ng raspberry iced tea bago dumerecho sa malapit sa bonfire kung saan may nagkalat na lounge chairs at picnic mat.

Nagpasalamat siya sa staff na agad inilatag ang banig, bago naupo roon. Hindi siya tumingin nang tabihan ni Rhys, na may mas malaking burger, ilang

stick ng chicken kebabs, potato chips at onion rings sa plato. May dala rin itong plato ng samu't saring maliliit na slices ng cakes at prutas na inilubog sa chocolate.

“Share tayo,” sabi nito.

Hindi siya kumibo. Itinutok niya ang atensyon sa pagkain. Ganoon din ang ginawa ni Rhys. Pero nang magde-dessert na sila, nagsimula itong magsalita.

“I’m sorry.” Humugot ito ng malalim na hininga. “I was crass and disgusting. It seemed like I made assumptions about you, but the thing is, I was just trying to be funny and cute and I failed miserably... Obviously.” Napailing ito.

“You thought you were being funny and cute?” Hindi alam ni Vera kung matatawa o maiinis. Ang totoo, hindi siya offended. Hindi niya naramdamang na-violate siya o anupaman. Sanay siya sa biruan. Katropa niya ang mga tricycle drivers at kargador sa palengke at pier, at madalas siyang biruin ng mga ito, na kadalasan ay tila inaabangan lang kung paano siya magre-react. Nalaman o narinig na ng mga ito ang tungkol sa buhay niya, at gusto lang siyang makitang nakangiti.

Rhys Mondragon, meanwhile, was this pesky stranger no different from those sleazy tourists she had encountered but for some reason, he was getting through her. Doon siya naiinis. Nakuwentuhan pa niya ito ng isang personal na bagay tungkol sa buhay

niya, at hanggang ngayon ay nagsisisi si Vera. Now, the man won't stop.

To be honest, she was unnerved by his persistence. Kinakabahan din siya kapag tinitingnan ng lalaki. Literal na tumatalon ang kanyang puso kapag ngumingiti ito. Parang nag-iinit ang buong katawan niya sa tuwing mahahawakan ni Rhys. At ang pinakahindi niya matanggap sa lahat ay ang mga imaheng lumilitaw sa kanyang isip at the slightest provocation.

*Rhys Mondragon dipped in chocolate, his index and middle fingers curling in a 'Come here' gesture, inviting her to have a taste. Sh*t.*

“Well, I’m no master at small talk. Maybe I am more subtle in the boardroom. I can easily choose my words then, devise strategies, predict results and work around possibilities. Magdiskusyon na lang tayo sa business at economics pero ’yung kung paano ang magandang approach sa isang babae para at least ay tingnan at kausapin niya ’ko? Iba na ’yon. Sana itinuturo ’yon sa school kasi ’t*ng ina, singko talaga ang grade ko d’un.” Napabuga ito ng hangin. “I’m not justifying anything. I’m an a*shole, period. It’s what I’m used to. It’s what I do to get women to undress for me. Oh, wait—wala pala talaga akong nakukuhang babae. Lahat sila, puro panandalian lang. Isang gabi, or every weekend, o pag may oras, pag nakakatakas sila sa tunay na buhay nila. I’m a

temporary indulgence, a good f*ck..." He took a long, luxurious sip from his drink.

"Wala akong nakukuha kundi kaunting oras, 'yung participation nila na hindi para sa akin kundi para sa sarili nila. I gave in all the time, because it felt good and easy. Nasanay na rin yata ako sa ganoon. I'm basically a manwhore." He laughed ruefully, then turned to her. "So I don't blame you, really."

Nakatingin lang siya kay Rhys, hindi inaasahan ang mga narinig. Tunog-frustrated nga ito at parang malungkot.

"Mahirap akong paniwalaan, di ba?" Napailing uli ito. "My life would seem ideal. But try being left, or leaving after you've just f*cked someone. It's... cold. Cruel even. I mean, for minutes you're taking each other in, then the next thing, you're rushing to get to whatever the f*ck you have to do? Mood killer 'yun. Minsan pakiramdam ko mali na nasarapan ako..." Derecho ang tingin ni Rhys sa karagatan na ilang metro na lang ang layo sa kanila. "Hindi ko alam eksakto kung ano ang ipinupunto ko. Siguro ayoko lang na magalit ka sa 'kin, o ma-offend kita. But I have to be honest."

Bumaling uli ito sa kanya. His gaze burned as it traveled slowly from her legs up to her face. "I really think you're beautiful. I couldn't stop thinking about you since yesterday. I keep hearing your voice in my head and couldn't help wondering what you'd sound

like when I taste your skin.

“I d-don’t...” Lumunok ito. “I don’t know how, or why that happened. I respect disinterest. I can move on if you don’t want me, but I couldn’t shake the image of you at the pool, your arms and legs gracefully wading through the waters... they’d feel wonderful clinging to me while I f*ck you hard and deep. Your arms over my back as your nails scratched my skin, your legs slamming against my sides as your heels dig into my a*s with each thrust and feeling you surrounding me inside and out.” His voice has dropped a few octaves lower, as his eyes smoldered and trapped her in fire.

Napadiin ang pagkakakuyom ng kanyang mga kamao, at hindi na alam ni Vera kung paano igagalaw ang mga binti. Nag-init ang kanyang leeg at mukha, ang pagitan ng mga hita. Oh, God, what’s happening? She was supposedly frigid. Iyon ang sabi ng mga exes niya.

“It’s like committing necrophilia. Or maybe you just don’t like men? Think about it, Vera. You don’t even moan unless I tell you to! And you’re obviously faking it. I’m sorry, but I can’t be with you anymore.”

*“My d*ck would probably freeze if you try to suck it, b*tch. Don’t even try to blame it on me. You’re frigid. Hindi ka tinatablan. ’T*ng ina, alam mo kung paano makainsulto ’yon?”*

“You’ll never make any man happy.”

“You won’t be happy.”

Marahas na napailing ang dalaga, bago napayuko. Dama niyang minamasdan siya ni Rhys. Gusto niya itong itulak palayo, sabihing gusto niyang mapag-isa. Pero ni hindi niya maigalaw ang mga kamao na nasa kandungan.

Her nails scratching his skin.

*Her heels digging into his a*s.*

*Him f*cking her hard and deep, thrusting over and over.*

It had been so long... Too long. She couldn’t remember how it felt like. She could only recall their words. Those two men who tried, she didn’t even get to be with them for the second time after both gave up during foreplay because of her lack of response.

But what was happening now? She was hot and bothered and could feel creamy wetness between her legs. *Oh, God.* Pinagdikit ni Vera ang mga hita.

“Don’t fight it,” bulong ni Rhys, halos lumapat na muli ang labi sa kanyang tainga.

“I... I’m not.” She gasped. *My God.*

Rhys just took her earlobe between his teeth as a finger traced the side of her neck, to her collarbone, to the space between her breasts. “Damn, Vera. Nothing here?”

Napalunok siya. Wala siyang suot na bra. The dress was made of crepe-like material that would not cling to the skin. Her breasts weren’t much

anyway. Hindi iyon pansinin. Nasanay na si Vera na walang bra kapag iyon ang suot niya. Hindi rin niya in-anticipate ang sandaling ito. Plano niya talagang pumuslit din agad para makauwi.

Pero na-underestimate niya ang kalibre ni Rhys. She couldn't even believe he found her beautiful or desirable. She could point to at least five other hotel guests that fit his type more.

But now he was nibbling on her earlobe and his fingers were teasing the inner sides of her breasts and she thought, *This must be how it feels like to burn. And melt.*

Nagiging marahas na ang kanyang paghinga dahil sa nakakapanibagong sensasyon na parang ngayon lang niya naramdaman. Rhys was being too careful, his touches were featherlight, and only the tip of his tongue and a brush of his lips traced an invisible path from her ear down to her neck. The way his hand pushed the straps of her dress was so agonizingly slow she let out a whimper.

“What’s that, Vera? Do you want me to stop?” bulong ng binata sa hugpungan ng kanyang leeg at balikat.

“R-Rhys...” Napapikit siya nang maramdaman ang tuluyang pagsakop ng isang kamay nito sa kanyang dibdib. His big hand closed over each breast, his palm rubbed over each turgid tip, as her legs straightened and parted. She felt so hot... and wet.

“Hmm, what is it, Vera?” He gently raised his head from her neck to meet her eyes again. Before she could speak, he lifted her chin and kissed her. Lips closed and chaste, but fingers climbing up the side of her face.

Chaste? She was nowhere near chaste right now! Mali ito, at dapat ay kanina pa niya ito itinulak. Dapat ay kanina pa siya lumayo. Pero kanina pa rin natunaw ang kanyang mga plano at resolba. This was pathetic; this was just her body and its reawakened needs taking over, and she could always snap out if it and leave.

Pero ayaw niyang umalis! Hindi na niya kaya, at gusto na niya ito. Kahit ngayong gabi lang. Wala siyang aasahan. Magiging gaya rin siya ng ibang babae sa buhay ni Rhys Mondragon. She didn't mind, nor care. *Oh, God. I want more.*

Kumapit ang kamay niya sa bicep nito, at hinila ang binata palapit. Sumilid ang kamay nito sa likod niya, nakahanap ng sapat na espasyo para makapasok sa ilalim ng suot niya. His fingers wrapped around to the front of her ribcage, squeezing a little moan out of her lungs and up her throat.

He took the noise as permission to nudge her mouth open. His tongue was cold and clean from the fruit tea he's been drinking. He explored the hem of the dress and then rippled a hand over the material clinging to her body, conquering its treacherous

surface. She flattened her palms into his grey shirt.

“You’re hot,” she mumbled through their kiss, through his soft lips and delicious tongue that teased and tasted her.

Bahagyang lumayo ang mukha ni Rhys, makahulugan ang tingin sa kanya habang nakaarko ang isang kilay.

Naningkit lang ang mga mata ni Vera, at hinila ang t-shirt ng binata para muli siya nitong hagkan.

He was leaning against her now, all six feet-something of fineness, and several notable inches of that fineness hard against her hip. She kissed him harder. This was not just some hot make-out session now. Rhys Mondragon very specifically wanted to f*ck her.

Dear Lord! Dito mismo? Sa beach, sa buhanginan?
Hindi alam ni Vera kung kinabahan o na-excite siya sa naisip. Actually, hindi na siya makapag-isip nang maayos. Masyado siyang distracted sa mga ginagawa ni Rhys ngayon. He nibbled on her lips and feasted on her tongue like the dessert he now abandoned near their feet. His hands felt her up and down, caressing and pinching like she was some freshly picked fruit. One hand now slipped under her dress, his fingers grazing her inner thighs, going up, up and...

I believe in miracles...

Where’re you from, you sexy thing?

*Sh*t!* Napaigtad si Vera at napabitaw sa bicep ng binata na kanina pa niya pinanggigigilan. Her phone

vibrated and her assigned ringtone for Honey was in full volume.

“S-sandali lang...” singhap niya kay Rhys na lumayo lang nang kaunti pero ang leeg naman niya ang pinapak. “H-hello?”

“Shet, ang landi ng boses mo, girl! Masarap?”

Damn, bakit ang lakas ng boses ng lukaret na ito? Pero hindi na niya pinag-aksayahang i-check, gusto na lang niyang matapos ang tawag. “Ano’ng m-meron, Honey Mae?”

Napahalakhak ang nasa kabilang linya. “Nakakaloka ka, Vera! Ang landi ng voice mo! Boses ng nadiligan! Tigang no more na ba, teh?”

Nag-aapoy na yata ang pisngi niya ngayon. Pagdako ng tingin kay Rhys na ang braso naman niya ang hinahagkan ay nangingislap ang mga mata nito. He pretended to bite her arm, then licked his lips.

“Bakit ka nga tumawag?” Binawi niya ang braso kay Rhys, na ang exposed na bahagi ng dibdib naman niya ang pinagpiyestahan.

“P’unta ka muna dito, dali! Mamaya n’yo na ituloy ’yan at huwag sa puwede kayong makunan ng video, utang na loob!”

Napangiwi ang dalaga. “Honey...” She gasped as Rhys’ mouth took one taut nipple while his eyes were fixed on hers.

“Vera, stop that muna! May kausap akong couple dito and I was telling them about your farm.

Magtatayo sila ng restaurant sa kabilang beach. Sunggab na the opportunity, bes! Mamaya na 'yang landi. Hindi aalis 'yang si Mondragon. Tigang din 'yan, eh."

"Hey!" protesta ni Rhys saka hinagkan uli ang tuktok ng dibdib niya.

"Five minutes, Vera!" giit ni Honey, sabay tapos ng tawag.

Marahang itinulak niya si Rhys at inayos ang damit, pati ang nagulong buhok.

"Ipagpapalit mo 'ko sa negosyo mo?" Lumabi ito, pero tinulungan din siyang iayos ang dress niya.

Hindi kumibo si Vera. Overwhelmed pa siya ng adrenaline rush, ng mga sensasyong binuhay ng lalaking hindi nawawala ang pagnanasa sa mga matang nakatingin sa kanya ngayon, sa kaba at pagkasabik na hindi niya alam kung saan nanggaling.

"I should go." Tumayo na si Vera, medyo nanginginig ang mga tuhod pero nagawang tumalikod. At tumakbo.

She wanted nothing more at that moment than to go back in his arms and see how else he would go about worshipping her body.