



KARMA'S DIGITAL 1

Dear gahd, nakailang filter na siya pero mukhang pa ring cheap, third-class at kasing-appealing ng hair-infested *Jaelyn Hill* lipstick ang mga pictures ng beach na iyon!

“I give up!” Humilata si Stacia Alodia Terron sa foldable sun chaise at inis na humalukipkip habang hawak ang *iPhone*. Tinapunan niya ng iritadong tingin ang babaeng nakaupo sa kanyang kaliwa.

She rolled her eyes. The girl needed a stylist. Or just plain ol’ common sense. Dana tried too hard to look chic and retro in that red high-waisted bikini bottom and black-and-white polka dot bikini top. Feeling Taylor Swift? Puh-lease. Sa lusog nito, the bikini looked more like a freaking diaper. And that heavy contour? Diosme, blend, blend, blend! And that double bun braided hairstyle was just too much.

“Dear Lord, Dana, when you said you wanted to surprise us, I never expected you to give us the worst beach experience of our lives.” Maarteng umayos si Stacia ng higa sa chaise at napaungol nang gumewang

ang plastic lounge. See? Even the freaking sun chaise was cheap. “What were you thinking? No amount of filter can save this god-forsaken beach. Nakita mo ba’ng hitsura ng lugar na ’to bago mo kami pinapunta rito?”

Bumungisngis ang lalaking nakasuot ng hot pink beach shorts at visor style sun hat sa kanyang kanan. “Well, she did surprise us,” gatong ni Reggie, ang kanyang hairstylist slash videographer at photographer minsan. “Nalurkey tayong lahat sa beach na ’to.”

“It’s not that bad.” Pilit ang ngiting inilibot ni Dana ang tingin sa paligid. “It’s quiet here. Walang masyadong tao, it’s very private.”

“Uh, yeah. Walang tao kasi walang gustong pumunta rito.” Winasiwas ni Stacia ang braso sa direksyon ng malumot na baybayin at tinadyakan ang itim at mabatong buhangin. “Girl, mag-gravel and sand business na lang ang ate mo, mas papatok ’yon.”

Humalakhak ang mga kasama nila.

Napatungo si Dana, pero nagtaas din ulit ng mukha at masiglang ngumiti. “But you can just take a selfie and not show the beach, right? Post it on IG, and just tell everyone the beach is great, and they can come here. P’wede na ’yun!”

Ay, si ateng talaga.

Stacia shook her head at the woman. In times like this, she wasn’t sure if Dana was being naïve or just

showing her true a*shole colors. Tingin niya ay iyong huli.

With her pretty face and sweet voice, people always thought Dana was all sugar-and-spice-and-everything-nice. But in reality, Stacia knew she was just another phony. Panggap. Iyong tipong nagpo-post ng *'I woke up like this'* samantalang nakapaghilamos na ito, nakapaglagay ng BB cream, brow gel at lip tint.

“You mean you want me to lie to my followers?” Pinapungay ni Stacia ang mga mata. “What, honeypot, like how you tell us your boobs are all natural and you didn’t have a boob job?”

Muling humalakhak ang mga kasama.

“T-that’s not true, my boobs are real—”

“Oh, come on, Dana, darling, no one believes your boobs are natural.” Malambing niyang tinapik-tapik ang braso ng babae saka maaliwalas na ngumiti. “Una, dear, kasing-flat ng runway ang dibdib mo n’ung eighteen tayo. Then after a month, boom! Instant 36-D! Kaloka ka, dear. Ano ’yun, magic? At girl, dapat sa Korea ka nagpa-boob job at hindi sa US. Mas magaling sila d’un. Mukhang ballistic gelatin na may formaldehyde ang boobs mo. Hindi gumagalaw, dear!”

Humagapak ulit ng tawa ang mga kaibigan, at talo pa ni Dana ang nabilad nang ilang oras sa araw sa pamumula ng balat nito.

Matamis siyang ngumiti.

What? Totoo ang sinabi ni Stacia. Mukha naman talagang petrified gelatin sa tigas ang boobs ng babae.

Yawning, she stretched her arms above her head, jutting out her 34-B cups. And yes, her ‘girls’ were *au naturale*. She had nothing against cosmetic surgeries, but b*tch, please stop the denial.

Muli siyang naghikab. Gahd, she’s so sleepy. She should have just stayed at home and slept all day.

Kadarating lang niya from Los Angeles noong isang araw at may jet lag pa siya. At sa daming pre-wedding activities sa darating na mga araw, sigurado siyang hindi siya magkakaroon ng oras para magpahinga. She shouldn’t have trusted Dana. The hussy was a freaking liar.

Siniko siya ni Reggie. “Girl, you’re so mean. Iiyak na ’yang si Dana—and oh! Oh! Oh! May cutie.” Maningning ang mga matang ikiniling ng lalaki ang ulo sa kanang direksyon, bahagyang itinabingi ang visor sun hat nito.

Nilingon ni Stacia ang itinuro ng kaibigan at namilog ang kanyang mga mata.

Well, well, well. Her lips curved into an impish smile as she watched the tall and totally ripped hottie walk past them.

Correction, mali si Reggie. Hindi cute ang lalaki. Cute was for puppies, for babies, for that flawless Korean K-Pop idol.

This guy was hawt. Like scorching, panty-melting, raw sex appeal hawt. Like, ohmygahd-you-should-be-an-IG-model-and-show-those-abs-and-you'll-have-three-million-subscribers-in-a-month hawt!

Namimilog pa rin ang mga mata at bahagyang nakaawang ang mga labi, napatitig lang si Stacia sa maskuladong likod ng lalaki.

Now, now, for the record, hindi ito ang unang beses na nakakita siya ng drop-dead gorgeous hunk. She had been living in Los Angeles for two years now, and L.A. is the home of *Hollywood* celebrities and celebrity wannabes, and most of them had faces and bodies that could launch a million *Facebook* likes. Her neighbor's dogwalker was a six-foot-five Adonis with an eight-pack abs and surfer blonde hair. Which was so fake, by the way. She saw him at the beach the other day, and the guy couldn't surf worth sh*t.

But this guy?

Malawak siyang ngumiti habang pinapadaan ang tingin sa malapad nitong mga balikat at maskuladong likod. The guy was raw sex appeal on steroids. The sun-kissed skin, fine dusting of dark hair across his rock-hard chest, brawny arms and muscular legs? She needed to fan herself. Perfect ten!

"He's a lifeguard here," putol ni Dana sa iniisip niya.

Maikling tumawa si Stacia. "No sh*t, sweetie pie.

What gave him away? 'Yung lifeguard na nakasulat sa pulang shorts niya o 'yung rescue buoy na bitbit niya?'

Muling namula ang babae at napatungo. She laughed prettily and crossed her shapely legs. The girl was so sensitive. Konting kibot lang, akala mo inapi na.

"Kilala mo siya?" usisa kay Dana ni Ate Jewel, ang kanyang personal assistant.

Her 46-year old PA had the confidence of Elizabeth Taylor and Marilyn Monroe multiplied by a power of ten. Kahit overweight, carry pa rin nitong magsuot ng black and blue two-piece. Nakalugay ang buhaghag at kulot nitong buhok na bumagay sa hugis puso nitong mukha at kayumangging kulay.

"No," mahinang sagot ni Dana. "First time kong makita siya rito."

"Go get his name, Stacia!" Tinusok ni Reggie ang baywang niya.

"Girls, he's on duty," saway ni Shannon habang nakatitig sa phone nito.

As always, Shannon looked classy in her simple black one-piece swimsuit. Unlike Dana, this woman knew how to use makeup to her best advantage.

At thirty-nine, Shannon Santillan looked dewy and fresh, her figure trim and toned. Hindi pa rin nalalayo ang hitsura nito ngayon kumpara noong nanalo itong third place sa *Miss Universe* halos dalawang dekada na ang nakakaraan. Malago at makintab ang nakalugay

nitong brown na buhok, at parang porselana ang kutis ng babae sa sobrang puti.

“You’re uploading a video?” untag ni Dana kay Shannon.

“No, just checking comments and emails.”

Beauty blogger din sa *YouTube* si Shannon gaya ni Stacia. In fact, Shannon was one of her earlier fashion icons. Dito galing ang unang pair niya ng high heels.

Bumuntong-hininga ang babae at sandaling hinilot ang noo.

“What’s wrong?” untag ni Stacia habang sinisipat ang sarili sa front camera ng phone.

She still looked perfect, her long wavy hair up in messy bun; her sun-kissed skin, dewy and clear. Since they were at the beach, she only had minimal makeup; just a flick of wing liner to accentuate her upturned eyes, some brow gel and a swipe of hot red lippie for a full sexy pout.

“There’s some problem in the factory. I need to go back in Manila tonight and settle some issues. With how things are going, I might even miss your brother’s wedding.”

“What?” Naibaba ni Stacia ang phone at napaharap sa babae. “You can’t! That’s not right!”

Matamlay na ngumiti si Shannon. “Things aren’t going well with *Shimmer*. Marc said I have to get celebrities and influencers to promote the supplements,

but I don't want to pay hundreds of thousands just to make them post a series of pictures when I can put that resources on research and development." Nahilot ng babae ang noo. "God, this is really stressing me out."

"Hindi mo ba talaga p'wedeng i-promote sa *IG* at *YouTube* channel mo 'yung vitamin supplements ni Shannon?" hirit ni Dana, maamo ang mga mata. "I'm sure it would help boost sales."

Stacia's smile was poisoned honey when she flicked her gaze at Dana. Painosente effect ang isang ito, gusto lang namang manggatong. Dana knew very well why she couldn't promote those freaking food supplements on her channel.

"You know why I can't," she purred, tossing her head back and curling her lips. "A large chunk of my followers are Americans and Europeans now. Hindi uso ang glutathione at pampaputi sa mga 'yon. And look at my skin. Mukha ba 'kong gumagamit ng skin lightening dietary supplements? Unlike you, Dana, my brand's already international."

Napababa ulit ng tingin ang kausap niya.

"Isip-isip kasi muna, Dana, bago mag-comment," sabat ni Lizzy, isa ring beauty blogger at classmate din nila ni Dana since elementary.

Gaya ni Stacia, nakataas din ang buhok ng babae at nakasuot din ng *Sonia Castillo* two-piece swimsuit. Puti ang suot nito habang kulay peach ang kanya. She

swore if she had a penis tattooed on her face, Lizzy would get one, too. The girl had been copying her since they were in diapers.

“And I have posted the vitamins on *FB* and on *IG Stories*.” Itinaas niya ulit ang phone at hinanap ang tamang liwanag para sa kanyang selfie. “I just can’t post it and promote it all the time.”

“But you know, girls, papable talaga si kuya lifeguard.” Bumuntong-hininga si Reggie habang nakatitig sa lalaking nasa lifeguard platform.

Pouting, she flicked her gaze back to the god of hotness.

Nakaupo ito kasama ang isa pang lifeguard sa lilim ng thatch roof ng lifeguard stand. Damn, ang tuwid nitong umupo, parang nasa military camp. Kahit ang crew cut nito ay parang pang-sundalo. His whole body looked tight and rigid as he sat and looked out to sea. But it just tickled her even more. There’s just something thrilling about luring cool and strait-laced guys into the dark side.

“You know, girl,” sulsol ni Lizzy, “I think that guy’s the perfect candidate for your cherry popper.”

She hissed and shot Lizzy a murderous glare.

“Sorry!” Nagtaas ito ng dalawang kamay. “I... I just thought you wanted to get rid of it before you return to L.A., right?”

At talagang sinabi pa iyon! Gusto yata nitong

malaman ng lahat na virgin pa siya! *Gagita!*

“Oy, tama na ’yan.” Pinanlakihan sila ni Ate Jewel ng mga mata. “Baka ako ang pagalitan ni Sir.”

She huffed and crossed her arms. “Ate Jewel, ako na ang nagpapasuweldo sa ’yo, sa akin na dapat ang loyalty mo.”

“Ay naker, tumigil ka na.”

“I’m almost twenty-one! Dad has no rights to stop me from doing anything I want!”

“Well, hindi ka pa twenty-one. Tama na ’yan bago ka pa isumbong ni Lory.”

Bumusangot si Stacia at sinulyapan ang maskuladong babae na nakaupo sa lounge chair malapit sa kanila.

Her bodyguard wore a nondescript black shorts and rash guard. Nakapusod ang mahaba nitong buhok at nakasuot ng dark sunglasses. May baril ito sa tagiliran.

Dear gahd, she loved Ate Lory, pero ito rin ang bane of existence niya. She couldn’t get guys alone for more than five minutes without Ate Lory putting the fear of god in them!

There was this one time when this gorgeous *VNY* model was dancing with her in a club and got a little touchy, then out of nowhere, Ate Lory had the guy in a choke hold. That was so embarrassing! Needless to say, the guy never spoke to her again. It’s a miracle she still had a social life.

“Uy, tingnan mo si Dana, o!” Humagikhhik si Lizzy. “Ang lagkit ng tingin kay yummy lifeguard!”

“W-what?” Namula lalo ang mga pisngi ng nabanggit na babae.

“Type mo, Dana dear?” sulsol ni Lizzy.

“Well...” Napasulyap ulit ang babae sa lifeguard stand, at muling namula ang mga pisngi nito.

Ooohhh.

Kumislap ang kanyang mga mata at tumaas ang sulok ng mga labi sa isang pilyang ngiti. “I’m going to ask his name.”

Napalipad sa kanya ang tingin ni Dana. “W-what?”

Maarte niyang ikiniling ang ulo. “Why? Gusto mong ikaw ang kumuha?”

“N-no, b-but why are you going to ask his name?”

She batted her thick lashes. “Why not?”

“Well...” Napakagat-labi si Dana at napatingin sa lap nito. “He’s not your type. He’s just a lifeguard here. He’s not someone famous.”

She threw her head back and laughed. Oh, pakunwari pa ang babaeng ito. Ayaw pang sabihin na natatakot itong magkagusto sa kanya iyong lalaki dahil may crush ito roon. What’s so difficult in admitting that?

“And so?” she quipped. “Just because I’m asking for his name doesn’t mean I want him to be my boyfriend, Dana dear.”

“But you know guys would get hung up on you if you approach them like that.”

There! Lumabas din.

Smirking, Stacia shrugged her shoulders again. “That’s not my problem.”

Taas-noo siyang tumayo at isinuot ang neck strap ng phone.

“Darling,” saway ni Shannon, “he’s on duty.”

Nagkibit-balikat siya. “So what? I’m a celebrity. I bet he’ll want to take pictures with me.”

Lizzy and Reggie cheered her on.

Yeah, yeah. She’s pretty bad. She wished she had some traumatic tear-jerking childhood story to explain her bitchy attitude. But nope. She grew up in a loving family, baby. Maldita lang talaga siya.

Grinning, she turned toward the direction of the lifeguard stand. At muntik siyang matapilok nang makitang nakatitig sa kanya ang binata.

Even from a distance, she could see the hard angles of his face and the stark intensity of his eyes. His dark brows were knitted, the corners of his lips turned down in a frown.

What? Narinig ba nito ang pinag-usapan nila? She doubted it. Malayo sila rito. Malamang narinig lang nito ang malakas nilang tawanan kaya napatingin sa kanilang direksyon.

Lumapad ang kanyang ngiti at humakbang siya

palapit dito. Whatever. Let him look.

Stacia had always been proud of her body. She didn't have massive boobs but her breasts were full and high, her waist tiny, her hips shapely. And her butt, oh, she loved her butt! Round and firm and juicy. Part of that was genes, but a big part was also diet and exercise.

Five feet and four inches siya, hindi sapat para maging ramp model. But that didn't matter. Marami sa mga famous at timeless sex symbols ay hindi katangkaran. Marilyn Monroe, Elizabeth Taylor, Clara Bow. She'd bet *Cleopatra*, *Delilah*, and *Salome* were petite girls, too.

Nakita niyang tumayo rin si Ate Lory para sundan siya, pero hindi na niya pinansin.

Strutting toward the platform, she let her hips sway gently, her back arching to push her full breasts forward.

The god of hotness clenched his jaw as his eyes drifted to the exposed swell of her creamy breasts. His gaze glided to her flat abdomen down to her curvy hips and toned legs.

Something hot and dark pulsed deep between her thighs. He liked what he saw, didn't he?

Guys always had that reaction toward her. They saw her, stared at her, and she knew they were imagining themselves between her thighs, pushing their heavy c*ck deep and hard into her sex.

Marahan siyang huminga at naramdaman ang pagbilis ng tibok ng kanyang puso.

She loved feeling this way. Loved the way people looked at her, loved the way they admired her, the way they were awed by her. It sent an exhilarating rush of adrenaline pumping through her head. It made her feel glorious.

Did that make her a slut? An attention whore? Someone with a Histrionic Personality Disorder? She didn't care.

Sex was a weapon. And it made her feel powerful.

Bumalik sa mukha ni Stacia ang tingin ng lalaki, at naningkit ang mga mata nito. Even from where she stood, she felt his gaze cooling.

Tiim-bagang nitong iniiwas ang tingin at ibinalik sa karagatan.

Napatigil si Stacia. What? 'Anyare?

Magkasalubong ang mga kilay, itinaas niya ang phone at sinipat ang sarili sa camera. Her red pouty lips were still perfect, her messy bun still sexy as f*ck. Ibinaba niya ang phone at nagpatuloy sa paglakad.

Huminto siya sa paanan ng hagdan paakyat sa platform at tiningala ang lalaki. Under the shadows of the thatched roof, the ridges of his muscles were sharper. He kept his face turned toward the sea, his rigid body a study of unyielding hardness.

Mother of highlighters, he was really hot.

Nilingon siya ng kasamang lifeguard ng binata, at napaawang ang mga labi nito at biglang napatayo.

“A-ah-ah! Hello, miss!”

Typical reaction. Men stutter and throw themselves at her feet all the time.

Matamis siyang ngumiti. “Hi.”

Maganda rin ang pangangatawan ng lalaki at may pagkachinito. Too bad he was sitting right next to the sex god.

“Uhm, ah, hi!” Halos madapa ang lalaki sa paglapit sa hagdan. “Uhm, Stacia Terron, right?”

She laughed prettily, and the guy’s face almost split from smiling too wide. Ano ba ang masasabi niya? Sikat siya.

“Yes, I’m Stacia. You are?”

“Ah, I’m—”

“Stop it, Mike.” The sex god’s voice cut through the air like steel ice. “We’re on duty, stop fooling around.”

Sa wakas, bumaling sa kanya ang tingin ng lalaki, pero kasing-lamig din ng yelo ang titig nito.

“Can we help you with anything?”

Well, that was not typical. Men were rarely cold toward her. Mildly curious at his unusual response, she tilted her head to one side and planted her hand on her hip in a casual flirty pose. She noted how he couldn’t seem to stop his eyes from drifting to the soft curves of her full breasts.

Pero malamig din nitong ibinalik ang tingin sa kanyang mukha.

She wanted to laugh. *Give it up, mon chéri. You want me, admit it.*

“I was just wondering,” aniya sa magaang na tinig. “Ganito ba lagi rito? Walang masyadong bisita. By the way, I’m Stacia Terron, you are?”

“I’m sorry, but we’re on duty, miss. If you have questions about the resort, please inquire at the front desk. We’re not here to answer questions about the beach.”

She let out a throaty laugh. “You’re too formal! I’m just asking. Are you new here?”

“Please don’t take this the wrong way, but we’re working. If you don’t have anything important to say, please do not disturb us.”

“You’re too serious, sweetie.” Dinagdagan ni Stacia ng tamis ang ngiti. “I just want to chat for a few seconds, and there’s practically no one here anyway. No one’s gonna drown if you take your eyes off the water for a few seconds.”

Her words seemed to have the opposite effect. Imbis na mag-relax, lalong umigting ang linya sa guwapo nitong mukha.

“I’m sorry, miss, but if taking a job seriously is a foreign concept to you, to me it isn’t.”

Tuluyan na nitong ibinaling ulit ang tingin sa

dagat.

“Ah-ah, ano! Sorry, Miss Stacia! Hindi niya sinasadya—” Akmang bababa si Mike ng hagdan pero hinagip ng kasama ang braso nito.

“Stay in your seat, Mike.”

“Calian!” Mike hissed. “Ano ka ba!”

“Stay in your seat, or I’ll report you to Sir Jerome.”

“Ano ka ba! Si Miss Stacia Terron ’yan! Hindi mo ba siya kilala?”

Yeah, Calian, dear, hindi mo ba ’ko kilala?

“Last warning, stay in your seat.”

“Sigel! Tawagin mo si Sir Jerome!”

“Yes, Calian, call Sir Jerome.”

Malamig na bumaling sa kanya ang tingin ng binata.

Tumamis ang kanyang ngiti. The guy was starting to piss her off. She was just being friendly, he didn’t have to be so uptight and cold!

But alas, alas, her evil plan was thwarted when her phone rang. Sinipat niya iyon at nakitang mama niya ang tumatawag.

Inikot ni Stacia ang mga mata. What, sinasabihan ba siya ng kanyang guardian angel na mag-behave?

Malambing siyang ngumiti kay Mike. “Well, I gotta go. Nice meeting you. I hope I didn’t bother you too much. I just wanted to be friendly so I stopped by to chat a little.” Malambing din siyang bumaling

kay Calian. “But I guess some people are just a*sholes. Later, Mike!”

Maarte siyang nag-flying kiss bago tumalikod at rumampa papunta sa dalampasigan. She heard Mike sigh.

“Ang ganda niya, grabe.”

Damn right! May sayad lang ang Calian na iyon. Feeling super guwapo. Never mind if he really was! Echosero!

Sinagot ng dalaga ang tawag. “Ma.”

“Stacia?”

Natawa siya sa absentminded na boses ng ina. “Yes, Ma, your one and only daughter.”

Tumawa ito.

Dumampi ang bumubulang agos ng tubig sa kanyang paanan at nilingon niya ang mga kasama. Nakatingin ang mga ito sa direksyon niya, malamang nagtataka na hindi siya nagtagal sa may lifeguard stand at hindi bumalik sa kanilang puwesto.

Well, duh. Of course, she wouldn't. Magmumukha siyang loser kung bigla siyang bumalik sa mga kasama pagkatapos maechapuwera ng Calian na iyon.

“Oh, sorry, dear. Nagkamali lang ako ng tawag. Si Sally ang tatawagan ko,” tukoy ng ina sa assistant nito. “How are you? 'Andito ka pa ba sa Virac?”

She swore, sa sobrang busy ng ina, kung wala silang mga mapagkakatiwalaang nannies habang lumalaki ng

kuya niya, malamang na-misplace na sila ng kanilang nanay.

“No, Ma, kahapon pa ’ko umalis ng Virac. I’m here in Caramoran.”

“Ah, yes. Nauna ka na nga pala sa ’min ng Papa mo d’yan. See you tomorrow at the hotel, okay? Nasa Palumbanes ka na ba?”

“Yes and no. ’Andoon na ang gamit namin nina Ate Jewel, but we’re here down south of Caramoan in some stupid resort.”

“Okay, later, Stacia. Ingat d’yan, ha?”

“Okay, ingat din, Ma. ’Love you.”

“Love you, too, dear.”

Tinapos nila ang tawag.

Lumusong siya sa tubig at itinaas ang phone na nasa loob ng protective case.

Secretly, she pointed the camera to the direction of the lifeguard stand. Ngumuso siya habang nag-zo-zoom in para kuhanan ng larawan si Calian. She still hadn’t decided what she would do with it, but it’s always good to have some ammunition.

Grumpy Calian really was goodlooking; square jaw, chiseled cheekbones and strong nose.

Hmp.

“Miss Stacia!”

Napaigtad siya nang marinig ang matinis na tili.

“Ohmigad, ohmigad, ohmigad!” Tumatakbong

lumusong ang isang dalagita sa tubig papunta sa kanya.

“You’re Miss Stacia! Right? Right? Ohmygahd!”
Nagtatalon ito.

Hindi niya napigilang tumawa. Nakakahawa ang excitement nito. Siguro mga thirteen o fourteen ang batang babae. She was a little chubby, her hair pulled up in a high ponytail.

“My gahd, idol ko po kayo! P’wede pong magpa-picture? Please please please po!”

Muli siyang tumawa. Oh, to be loved and famous.
“Sure!”

Tumili ang bata at halos sunggaban si Stacia ng yakap. Pareho silang napabungisngis at nadala sa agos ng tubig. The girl was strong!

“Grabee! Kinikilig po ako! Ako po si Grace!”
Itinaas nito ang phone nito at kinuhaan sila ng litrato.

“Say beauty!” ani Stacia.

“Beauty!” Pinindot nito ang screen. “Isa pa po!”

“As many as you want!”

Tumili ulit ang bata at kumuha ng selfie.

Napaurong uli sila at natangay ng alon.

“Ang ganda-ganda n’yo po!”

Laughing, she raised her own phone and took pictures. “I know, right?”

Humagikhhik ulit silang dalawa.

“You’re beautiful, too, Gracie, dear! Oh, dali, smile ulit!”

Muli silang nagtawanan.

“Maloloka ang mga classmates ko kapag nakita po ito! P’wede pong kunan ko rin kayo ng video? Maikling hi lang—”

Pumailanlang ang pito sa hangin at napalingon sila ni Grace sa baybayin.

Calian stood on the shoreline holding a megaphone, the strong lines of his muscular build prominent even from their position.

“Don’t swim farther away!” sita nito gamit ang megaphone. “Turn back!”

She rolled her eyes. KJ pa more!

Matamis siyang ngumiti sa binata at mapang-asar na nag-blow ng kiss dito.

Hinawakan niya sa balikat si Grace. “Girl, we gotta go. Si grumpy lifeguard, baka kaladkarin tayo pabalik sa shore.”

Tumawa ang dalagita at kumapit sa kanyang braso. “Ang guwapo po n’ung lifeguard, Miss Stacia—ay!” Napasigaw ang kasama nang mabitawan nito ang aparato. “Yung phone ko!”

Bago pa niya ito mapigilan, sumisid na ang bata para sa telepono.

“Grace!” tumatawang tawag ni Stacia.

Humampas ang isang alon at hinigop sila nito pailalim sa dagat. Sumalpok sa mukha ni Stacia ang tubig at napaubo siya.

Okay, that got her a little serious. “Grace!”

Lumitaw ang ulo ng bata sa tubig. “Miss Stacia!”
Lumubog ulit ito.

Namilog ang mga mata niya. Okay, now she was really serious. “Grace!”

Sinunggaban niya ang tubig kung saan lumitaw kanina ang bata, pero dumulas ang mga paa niya sa buhangin at napailalim din siya. Mother of sh*t! Biglang lumalim!

Nahagilap niya ang braso ng dalagita at hinila ito pataas.

Humampas ulit ang isang alon at nadala sila ng tubig sa pag-urong nito pabalik. Napasukan ng tubig ang ilong at mata niya. *Oh my god!*

“Miss Stacia! Yung phone ko po!”

“Hayaan mo na! We’ll get—”

Muli silang sinalpok ng alon at nabitawan niya ang bata. *Oh, dear Lord, nasaan na yung batang yun?*

Bakit biglang lumakas ang alon? Ang payapa ng dagat kanina!

“Miss Stacia!” Lumubog ulit ang bata sa tubig.

Okay, Stacia, dear, don’t panic. Sinalpok ulit siya ng tubig sa mukha. *Oh my god! Ate Lory! Ate Jewel! Help!*

“Grace!” Sa wakas ay nahagip niya ang bata at pareho silang umuubong umibabaw sa tubig.

Umugong ang hangin sa dagundong ng kung anong makina, at naipaigkas ang leeg nila ng bata sa

direksyon noon.

And there was Calian in a red jet ski, cutting through the water to get to them.

Calian swerved the jet ski right next to them, his hand shooting out to grab her arm, pulling her toward the board attached to the back of the watercraft.

Agad siyang kumapit sa hawakan ng rescue board at malakas ding hinila si Grace para maabot din nito ang handles.

Sumampa sila ng bata sa yellow board at kumapit nang maigi habang mabilis na umaandar ang jet ski pabalik sa pampang.

Ang lakas ng tibok ng puso ni Stacia at ang lamig ng katawan niya. Patuloy ang paghampas ng tubig at hangin sa kanyang mukha. She had never been a strong swimmer. Kahit lumaki siya sa isla at madalas na nasa beach ay puro kaartehan lang ang ginagawa niya sa tubig. Pa-pose-pose at pa-picture-picture para sa *IG* at *FB*, ganern.

Nakarating sila sa pampang at narinig niya ang sigaw ng mga kaibigan.

“Stacia!” Naunang nakalapit sa kanya si Ate Lory at agad siyang tinulungang tumayo.

“Dear god, are you okay?” Kinapa-kapa ni Dana ang mukha at balikat niya. “Are you okay? May masakit ba? We were so scared!”

“I’m okay! I’m okay!” Hinihinal siyang humigop

ng hangin.

Akay-akay ni Calian si Grace at hinahagod ang likod nito.

“Grace!” Tumatakbong lumapit sa kanila ang isang may-edad na babae.

“Tita!”

Niyakap ng matandang babae ang bata.

“Are you having trouble breathing?” seryosong tanong ni Calian kay Grace habang tinutulungan itong umupo.

Mabilis umiling ang bata. “Hindi po, okay lang.”

Nanatiling nakatitig dito si Calian hanggang sa umayos ang paghinga ng dalagita.

“Okay na po,” paninigurado ni Grace.

“Pero nakainom ka pa rin ng tubig.”

“Opo, parang may pumasok din sa ilong ko.”

Hinarap siya ni Calian, matigas ang titig. “Nahihirapan ka bang huminga?”

“No, no, I’m okay.”

“Wala ka bang ibang masamang nararamdaman?”

“No, I’m good. Just a little weak and shaken.”

May naglagay ng malaking tuwalya sa balikat ni Stacia at maagap niyang ipinulupot iyon sa kanyang katawan. Her heart still thundered fast from the kick of adrenaline.

Ibinalot din ni Mike ng tuwalya si Grace.

Hinayaan silang magpahinga ni Calian nang ilang

minuto bago nagsalita ulit.

“How do you feel now?” untag ng lalaki.

“I feel okay,” sagot ni Stacia.

“Ako rin po.”

He nodded. “Pareho kayong nakainom at nakahinga ng tubig. If you develop breathing problems, coughing, confusion or other troubling symptoms, seek immediate medical attention.”

“Salamat po, salamat po.” Inabot ng tita ni Grace ang kamay ni Calian.

“Thank you po,” segunda ni Grace.

The rush of adrenaline made her feel lightheaded and a bit shaky. Smiling wobbly, she said, “Thank you, Calian.”

He turned to face her fully, his gaze far colder than the water slapping her face minutes ago. “Please let this be a lesson. When a lifeguard tells you to turn back, turn back. No amount of pretty pictures is worth risking a person’s life. Please stop obsessing over your phone when in the water. Your phone and your pictures are not the most important thing in the world.”

Gulat siyang napatitig lang sa binata habang napapitlag naman si Grace. Agad ding napatungo ang bata habang mahigpit na hawak sa dibdib ang phone nito.

“Calian.” Ninenerbyos na tinapik ni Mike sa balikat ang binata. “Come on, things like this happen

sometimes. Wala namang may gusto nito.”

“It shouldn’t have happened. Do you know how many accidents are reported each year because people can’t stop taking pictures of themselves in dangerous and inappropriate places? The sooner they stop this dangerous and stupid behavior, the better.” His gaze remained arctic cold toward her. “What you did was dangerous and foolish. You put not just yourself in danger, but this kid’s life, too.”

Lalong napayuko si Grace.

Natawa si Stacia. Wow, in fairness, iba rin ang saltik ng isang ito. Ang judgmental!

Calian’s gaze hardened even more. “The ocean is a dangerous place, please don’t do anything stupid while in the water to avoid unnecessary danger.”

Her lips curled into a poisoned smile. “Wow, dear, thank you for your advice, but it sure feels good to feel superior and all mighty, doesn’t it? Tell me, dear, have you always been a judgmental a*shole?”

Something hot and dangerous flashed through his dark gaze, making her almost step back.

But his icy control smothered the spark of heat, hardening his chiseled features into impenetrable lines of steel. “I don’t feel superior at all. It’s common sense. The water is dangerous enough as it is without people like you putting yourself in unnecessary danger. You risked not just your safety but this kid’s safety as well. I

told you to turn back, but you ignored my warning and swam farther away. You should learn to follow rules because they're there for everyone's safety. Please don't be selfish and try to think of other people around you."

"Kuya, ako po—"

"Don't explain to him, Grace." Hinawakan ni Stacia ang kamay ng bata habang pumipintig ang mainit na inis sa kanyang lalamunan.

The a*shole technically called her stupid and selfish. Totoo naman ang huli, so she shouldn't really mind. But still, it wasn't the case in this situation, so f*ck him.

"Yung mga taong ganyan, feeling nila ang galing-galing nila. You don't even know exactly what happened but you already had us tried, judged and condemned. Ikaw na magaling. You are a stuck up, self-righteous, conceited prick, darling. Thank you for being an excellent a*shole! I'll make sure to tell your employer about this."

Hinila niya ang braso ni Grace at nagmartsa sila palayo roon.

"Miss Stacia, sorry po—"

"It's okay, sweetie. Okay lang ba ang phone mo?"

"Uh, opo."

"Stacia, let's go back to our room—"

"No." Umiling siya kay Ate Jewel. "Uuwi na 'ko. I'm leaving this god-forsaken sh*thole now."

Tinapunan niya ng masamang tingin si Dana na nagbaba lang ng tingin. “Sorry, I didn’t mean for this to happen. Ako na’ng bahala sa mga gamit natin,” anito.

“Ate Jewel, ikaw na’ng bahala kay Grace. Grace, dear, kapag sumama ang pakiramdam mo, tawagan mo si Ate Jewel, ha? Kung kailangang palitan ang phone mo, sabihin mo rin sa kanya. Ate Jewel, ikaw na ang bahala, ha?”

“O sige, sige.”

“Salamat, Miss Stacia. Sorry po ulit.”

Nakangiti siyang tumango sa bata at sa tita nito at dumerecho sa nakaparadang itim na SUV.

Niyakap siya ni Reggie. “Sasamahan ko na si Dana na mag-ayos ng gamit natin, ha?”

Tumango si Stacia.

“I’ll pack my things, too.” Hinagkan siya ni Shannon sa pisngi. “Don’t stress yourself over this. It’s not worth it.”

“Dana, ayusin mo na rin ang gamit ko, ha?” hirit ni Lizzy at inirapan ang babae. “Sasama na’ko kay Stacia. I don’t wanna stay another second in this sh*thole, either.”

Sumakay sila nina Lizzy at Ate Lory sa SUV.

Pagkasara ng pinto, tinanggal niya ang pagkasukbit ng strap ng phone sa leeg at pinindot ang screen. She’d show that a*shat.

“What are you doing?” namimilog ang mga

matang usisa ni Lizzy nang makitang ina-upload niya sa *Twitter* ang litrato ni Calian.

She smiled sweetly as she started typing. “Showing dear ol’ Calian that karma’s digital.”

Stacia Terron

@staciaterron

Assh*le alert! Had the worst beach experience because of this lifeguard. To all resorts out there, especially here in Catanduanes, never hire this guy ever. So arrogant and condescending. Definitely in running for the greatest ass*le of the year.

Nilagyan niya ng hashtag ang pangalan ng resort, ni Calian at ng kanilang isla.

“And post.”

Masigla siyang ngumiti at sumandal sa upuan. May benteng nag-like agad sa tweet niya. Sigurado siyang magiging viral iyon within an hour.

Humagikhhik si Lizzy. “That is so lit!”

She shrugged her slender shoulders and curved her red-hot lips in a pouty smile. “I know, right?”

Stretching her arms above her head, she arched her back like a cat.

Tingnan lang niya kung may makuha pang trabaho ang Calian na iyon pagkatapos nito.

*You messed with the wrong b*tch, sweetie.*

2

DIAMOND PLAY BUTTON

"Stacia, dear, your package's here!"
Umungol siya at tinakpan ng unan ang ulo. "Go away! I'm sleeping."
Humalakhak sina Reggie at Ate Jewel.

"Girl!" tawag ulit ni Reggie. "Tanghali na! You've got package from *YouTube!*"

Napabalikwas siya ng bangon at napaupo sa kama. "W-what?"

Nakatutok sa kanya ang lente ng dalang camera ni Reggie habang nasa tabi ng kaibigan si Ate Jewel.

Yakap-yakap nito ang isang itim na briefcase na may logo ng *YouTube*.

"Happy ten million subscribers!" tili nina Ate Jewel at Reggie.

Napatili rin si Stacia. "It's here!"

Sumampa ang dalawang kasama sa kanyang kama at agad niyang sinunggaban ang briefcase.

"You're diamond play button's here, beauty!" Nag-kissing noises si Reggie. "Congratulations, girl!"

Bumungisngis siya at binuksan ang mga clasps ng briefcase. Halos mapunit ang pisngi niya sa lapad ng

kanyang ngiti nang makita ang diamond play button na nakabalot sa clear plastic. Agad niyang kinuha iyon at tinanggal sa balot.

So shiny! And heavy! My preciouuuuss!

Muli siyang tumawa.

Smiling at the camera, she lifted the diamond play button and hugged it to her chest. “It’s so heavy! Hello, beauties! I know I look like a mess! I probably have drool on my face and eye gunk.” She laughed giddily. “But this is me, and you all have always accepted me for who I am—makeup, no makeup, eye gunk and all. And now we’re ten million strong! Thank you, thank you so much, everyone! See you later, my beauties! I’ll be uploading a video in a short while! Mwah!”

Nag-flying kiss siya sa camera at malawak na ngumiti.

“Congratulations, bakla!” Ibinaba ni Reggie ang camera at sinunggaban siya ng yakap.

“Thank you, thank you!”

“Dito mo pala pina-deliver ’yan,” komento ng kaibigan habang hinihimas-himas ang makintab na play button.

Humalakhak si Stacia at itinulak ang lalaki. “Bakla, ’wag mong molestiyahin ang diamond play button ko.”

“Shining shimmering splendid kasi!”

“It is! Buti nga dumating na, akala ko next week pa. They say it takes about two to three weeks for the package to arrive, minsan mas matagal pa raw, so I

figured I'll be here on that date."

"O, sige na, sige na." Tinapik-tapik ni Ate Jewel ang balikat niya. "Maligo ka na at i-upload mo na 'yang prerecorded vid mo at hinihintay ka nang mag-brunch ng mama at papa mo. Darating na 'yung mga bisita n'yo. Iwe-welcome n'yo na. Saan mo gustong ilagay muna 'yan? Dadalhin natin 'yan sa L.A., ano?"

"Yes, Ate. We'll bring it back with us. D'yan na lang muna sa desk, Ate Jewel." Hinagilap niya ang phone sa ilalim ng unan at naka-pout na kinunan ang sarili ng litrato habang hawak ang play button. "Palagay na lang, Ate Jewel. I need to update my *Twitter* and *IG* first."

"Uy, speaking of." Umayos ng upo si Reggie sa kama niya. "Nag-trending 'yung tweet mo tungkol sa lifeguard sa *Haven*."

Maarte siyang humalakhak. "Of course, it did."

"May manhunt na sa kanya, girl."

She smirked. "Serves him right."

She uploaded her pic on *IG* and started choosing a filter. Yes, she used filters on her photos. Everybody with a status like her did. And generally, it's not to edit the body and face and make it look like they had a gazillion cosmetic surgeries. It's mostly to keep the grid clean and keep it one tone.

Kapag may high-status celebrity na nagsabi na hindi sila gumagamit ng filter sa *IG*, b*tch, sinungaling iyon.

“Pero parang wala pang naka-identify sa kanya,” patuloy ni Reggie. “Wala pang name.”

Ngumuso si Stacia. Isa rin iyon sa ipinagtataka niya. By now her fans should have had his name, address, phone number and dick size. Pero mahigit twelve hours na ang nakakalagpas ay wala pa ring may alam ng mga iyon.

Of course, she could just get it from Dana’s sister, but why would she? Eh di, parang interesado pa siya! As if.

“Whatever.” She typed a heartfelt message to her eleven million followers on *IG* thanking them again for helping her reach her ten million on *YouTube*.

Mahigit tatlong linggo na niyang naabot ang ten million, actually, at halos twelve million na ang subscribers niya sa kasalukuyan. Pero dahil ngayon lang dumating ang diamond play button, nagpasalamat siya ulit sa kanyang mga followers.

Nag-tweet din siya sa *Twitter* pagkatapos ay in-upload na ang prerecorded video sa *YouTube* na ginawa niya para talaga sa pag-hit ng ten million.

It’s a time lapse video of her painting a picture of herself using makeups. At hindi lang basta picture iyon. It was the picture that started it all.

Around three years ago, she posted a picture of herself on *IG* dressed as the sultry *Salome*. That picture of herself as the seductress draped in gauzy sheets of lace jumpstarted her meteoric rise to global fame.

“Dalian mo na!” sita ni Ate Jewel. “Nagmamadali ang mama at papa mo at darating na ang mga bisita n’yo!”

“What’s new? Lagi naman silang nagmamadali!” Tumakbo siya papunta sa banyo.

After thirty minutes, she was ready to face the world. She had on a knee-length floral maxi dress with a fitted tube top and flowing skirt. Kulay old rose at dark pink iyon na tinernuhan niya ng nude wedge sandals. She just blow-dried her wavy black hair and let it fall down her back. Wala rin siyang masyadong makeup. Konting concealer lang, BB cream, pink lip tint with a hint of coral, brow gel at mascara. Sweet, fresh, and sultry ang peg niya.

Of course, nag-selfie si Stacia para sa kanyang OOTD.

“Shet, girl ang panget, isa pa!”

“Dito!” Itinuro ni Reggie ang couch sa bintana. “Maganda ang ilaw dito. Dali!”

Agad siyang nag-pose doon at nag-project para sa selfie.

“Nasa ’baba na rin ba sina Lizzy and Dana?” untag niya sa mga kasama pagkalabas ng suite.

“Ay, tulog pa,” sagot ni Ate Jewel. “Nagparty-party ang dalawang ’yon kagabi.”

“Naka-prepare na ang rooms nina Megan, Grayson at Pricilla?”

“Of course,” sagot ulit ni Ate Jewel. “Pati rooms ng

mga assistants nila, ayos na rin.”

Dumerecho sila sa elevator para bumaba sa mess hall ng hotel. Pagkarating doon, agad niyang nakita ang mesa ng kanyang pamilya.

“Ma!” bati niya nang makalapit sa mga ito.

Nagtaas ng tingin ang ina habang nakadikit sa tainga ang phone.

As usual, her mother wore a pant suit and black leather pumps. Iyon ang uniform ng nanay niya sa araw-araw, iba-iba lang ang kulay. Beige iyon sa araw na iyon, habang puti ang inner shirt nito. Elegante ang maikli nitong buhok gayundin ang suot na pearl necklace at earrings. Chinita ang mama niya at maputi. Dito nagmana ang Kuya Daniel niya.

“Good morning, dear.” Masuyo itong ngumiti at tinanggap ang kanyang halik sa pisngi.

Pero agad ding bumalik ang atensyon nito sa kausap sa phone.

“Pa.” Humalik din siya sa pisngi ng ama.

Her father, like her mother, believed in wearing the same style of clothes every darn day. Nakasuot ito ng light blue polo, dark pants at leather shoes.

At almost sixty, her parents still looked fit and youthful. Nakatulong siguro na parehong doctor ang mga ito.

“Good morning.” Tinapik siya ng ama sa balikat pagkahalik niya sa pisngi nito.

Kasama nila sa mesa ang kanyang Uncle Stefan na

kapatid ng kanyang mama.

“Uncle, is that you?” Pinanlakihan niya ito ng mga mata. “Isa ka bang aparisyon?”

Tumawa ang tiyuhin at tumaltak sa kanya. “I made a miracle to be here today.”

Kamukha ng mama niya ang kanyang tiyuhin. Matangkad, maputi at chinito rin.

“Hmp.” Umiling si Stacia. “You should have worked your magic, too, with Shannon. Eh di sana, part of the family na natin siya.”

“Nah, Shanon and I are better off as friends.”

Girlfriend ng uncle niya noon si Shannon at ito ang dahilan kaya nakilala niya ang beauty queen.

Sadly, like her parents, workaholic din ang kanyang abogadong tiyuhin at iyon ang naging dahilan ng paghihiwalay nito at ng dating kasintahan.

Nilibot ni Stacia ang tingin sa paligid at nakita ang mga grandparents niya sa kabilang mesa. Kasama ng mga ito ang ibang mga kaedad nito na kabilang din sa pinakamayayamang angkan sa kanilang isla. Lumapit sila roon at nakipagkumustahan din.

Nakita rin niyang lumilibot ang kapatid niya at ang fiancée nito sa mga tables para mangamusta sa mga guests.

Kumuha muna sila nina Ate Jewel at Reggie ng pagkain sa buffet table bago bumalik sa mesa.

Pagbalik nila ay naroon na ang kapatid niya, at ang fiancée nito.

“How’s the celebrity?” Masiglang tumayo si Georgina Escudero at hinalikan siya sa pisngi.

“Eh di diyosa pa rin!”

Humalakhak ang babae at sabay silang naupo.

“Love your hair,” bati niya sa maikli nitong buhok.

Her brother’s fiancée looked gorgeous and chic in a white tube top and flowing maxi skirt in pale blue. Katabi ng babae ang kanyang Kuya Daniel.

Her Kuya Daniel was a lot like their parents. Una, nasa medical field ito. Doktor nga lang ng mga hayop at hindi ng mga tao. Her brother could also live wearing the same style of clothes for the rest of his life. Gaya ngayon, nakasuot ito ng khaki cargo shorts at graphic shirt. Iyon na ang style nito mula pa noong high school. But she gotta admit, maganda talaga ang skin nilang dalawa. Glowing sa puti ang kuya niya.

“Ate Lory said you had some trouble yesterday.” Tumaltak sa kanya ang kapatid. “What did you do again?”

“Why do people assume na ako lagi ang nagsisimula, hmm?”

“Dahil ikaw talaga lagi ang nagsisimula?”

Tumawa ang kapatid at si Georgina.

Umirap siya. “Well, not this time.”

“Seriously, Stacia.” Umiling ang kanyang kuya. “Stop provoking people, one day that’s going to bite you in the a*s.”

“Good thing I have a firm tight a*s.”

Tumatawang umiling si Georgina.

Dumating ang mga magulang ng babae at nakipagbatian siya sa mga ito.

“So how does our hotel compare to other hotels you’ve visited around the world?” pilyang tanong sa kanya ni Mrs. Eugenia Escudero.

Like her mother, elegante rin ang babae. Bumagay ang teal sheath dress nito sa morenang kutis at maikling buhok.

“Oh, Tita, the view of course! Nothing beats home.”

Hindi siya sumisipsip lang. Bitaoag Beach is one of her favorite places in the world. Sa isla iyon ng Palumbanes o Parumpong, at napaka-virgin pa ng lugar. Kailan lang ito na-develop ng pamilya ni Georgina. Her soon-to-be sister-in-law’s family helped developed a port on the other side of the island, and built a world-class exclusive hotel in Bitaoag Beach.

Masayang ngumiti ang ginang at hinalikan siya sa pisngi bago umupo kasama ng asawa nito sa kabilang side ng kanyang mga magulang.

Binalingan niya ang tatay niya na nakikipag-usap sa kanyang Uncle Stefan tungkol sa negosyo.

“Pa,” singit niya sa pag-uusap ng dalawa. “I need to talk to you about Ate Lory.”

“Wait lang, hija.”

Nope, not a chance, father dear. Kapag hindi siya sumingit ngayon, baka sa kasal na niya ulit makausap ang mga ito sa sobrang busy ng mga ito. Ganoon na

ang mga magulang niya dati pa. “Pero, Pa—”

“Sandali lang, hija, fifteen minutes, okay?”

“Fifteen minutes, Pa, ha. Then, we really have to talk.”

She checked her phone and noted the time as she started eating.

She heard bits and pieces of her father’s conversation with her uncle and Georgina’s parents. Tungkol iyon sa pagbibigay ng mas maraming responsibilities kay Georgina bilang director ng kanilang ospital.

Sa pagpapakasal ng kapatid kay Georgina, nalutas ang suliranin ng pamilya tungkol sa kung sino ang magmamana at mamamahala ng mga ospital nila.

Her brother’s a veterinarian and had a small but successful clinic in Virac, but her dear Kuya Daniel was hopeless when it came to business management. Her parents had looked to her, then, but she flat out proclaimed that she had a different calling. She’s going to be a superstar, baby.

Thankfully, Georgina, the love of her Kuya Daniel’s life, graduated from a business school and had been managing her family’s hotels for years now. About six months ago, nagsimula na itong maging director ng pinakamalaki nilang hospital sa Virac.

“Pa,” singit niya ulit. “Fifteen minutes’ up, we need to talk.”

Her father smiled at her indulgently. “Alright dear, what is it?”

“You need to tell Ate Lory to stop scaring every guy who comes near me. Ang tanda ko na, Pa. It’s embarrassing!”

“Nonsense.”

“But, Pa—”

Tumunog ang phone ng kanyang uncle at mapagpaumanhin itong ngumiti. “I’m sorry, I have to take this. Anyway, kailangan ko na ring umalis.”

Mabilis itong nagpaalam sa mga kasama.

Binalingan niya ulit ang ama. “Pa, I’m almost twenty-one now. Hindi na dapat—”

“Oh, Calian’s here!”

Napapitlag si Stacia nang marinig iyon mula sa ina. Masigla itong nakangiti at nakatuon ang tingin sa may bukana ng restaurant.

Marahas na napabiling ang ulo niya sa direksyon ng entrance sabay sa pagtayo ng ama.

And there he was, her dear a*shole lifeguard, a vision in plain white shirt and dark jeans, standing at the arched entryway of the restaurant.

Ang unang naisip niya ay *‘What the hell was he doing here?’* Ang sumunod ay *‘My gahd, the assb*le’s harwt.’* Hindi epekto ng exposed washboard abs nito kahapon ang pagiging hot ng lalaki. Even in simple shirt and jeans, the guy was a walking sex god. Everyone around him turned and stared.

Nagtaas ng tingin ang lalaki na para bang naramdaman ang titig niya. Parang ilang boltahe

ng kuryente ang rumagasa sa kanyang gulugod sa pagtatama ng kanilang mga mata.

Bahagyang naningkit ito, obviously ay nakilala rin siya. Then slowly, the corners of his lips curled, the strong lines of his chiseled face hardening into an icy mask.

Muli siyang napapitlag nang tumayo rin ang kuya niya at ang ama ni Georgina at sumabay sa kanyang papa para salubungin ang lalaki.

What the f?

Ramdam ni Stacia ang gulat na titig nina Ate Jewel at Reggie, at napatingin siya sa mga ito. Nanlalaki ang mga mata ng dalawa sa magkahalong gulat at takot.

She knew why. Because mother of pearls, two of the richest and oldest families in Catanduanes just personally welcomed the *nobody*.

Which only meant one thing: He's *not* a nobody.

Okay, darling. First thing first. Damage control!

Agad niyang hinagilap ang phone at pinadulas ang daliri sa screen. Hindi na siya nagdalawang-isip. Nag-log-in siya sa *Twitter* at agad binura ang tweet tungkol sa binata.

But shoot! 52k likes at 1000+ retweets na ang tweet niya kay Calian. Gah, nagte-trending pa rin ito!

Thank God at hindi madalas sa social media ang pamilya niya at mga kaibigan nila. Mukhang wala pang alam ang mga ito. She had to keep them that way.

Ibinalik ni Stacia ang namimilog na mga mata sa

lalaki.

Mainit na nakikipagkamay dito ang papa niya na para bang matagal na nitong kilala ang binata. Iminuwestra naman ng papa ni Georgina ang kamay sa direksyon nila na para bang doon nito pinapapunta si Calian.

Nagsimulang tumusok ang mga kuko ng nerbiyos sa kanyang sikmura.

Huminto ang grupo sa isang table.

Nicolò Jaucian, her brother's best friend and one of the richest people in the region stood and hugged Calian.

She couldn't contain it anymore. "Who is he?" bulalas niya.

"Oh, Calian?" Magaang na ngumiti si Georgina. "Oh, yes, you haven't met him yet, have you?"

No, Georgina, dear... I have, actually. But that's neither here nor there!

"You know him?" matalas niyang untag.

Ano ang gagawin niya kapag pinagsabi ni Calian sa mga kasama ang nangyari kahapon?

Well, f*ck him. He was the one at fault there. Wala naman talaga siyang kasalanan!

"Not really. I think I've only met him twice," sagot ng fiancée ng kapatid. "We first met him in a private lunch with Nico's family last week. I think third cousin siya ni Nico? Taga-Albay ang pamilya niya. His family's one of the oldest and richest, if not the richest,

in Albay.”

Napaawang ang kanyang mga labi. Ano raw?

“No way!”

Tumawa si Georgina. “But they are. Apo siya ni Don Casimiro Jaucian, and they’re the biggest land owner in Albay. Eldest son ang tatay ni Calian.”

No, no, no. Gusto niyang umiling. “How come we’ve never met him before?”

Maliit ang mundo ng mga katulad nila. Everybody knew everybody. Imposibleng hindi nila ito nakita ni minsan sa mga events at mga family gatherings. And she would have remembered that face even if she just saw him in a picture.

“Well, his father’s a doctor and worked for *Doctors Without Borders* in his early thirties. Doon niya nakilala ang nanay ni Calian na teacher. I think she’s part-American Indian, part-Irish and part-French. They got married and lived in USA after that. Doon na pinanganak si Calian at ’yung kapatid niya. Minsan-minsan lang sila bumabalik dito sa Pilipinas kapag may mga private gathering ang pamilya nila. So that explains why we’ve never seen him before.”

*But that doesn’t explain why he was posing as some sh*tty lifeguard in some sh*tty resort!*

“What is he doing here? Why is he—” Agad niyang itinikom ang bibig nang makarating sa kanilang mesa ang grupo.

“Hello, dear!” Tumayo ang nanay ni Stacia at

magiliw na nakipagbeso kay Calian.

“You look gorgeous as ever, Mrs. Terron.”

The smooth sound of his voice sent a jolt of heat rushing to her head. His voice was warm and low. Friendly. Malayung-malayo sa malamig at matigas nitong boses kahapon.

“Oh, that’s too formal! Just call me Tita Mina.”

Tumango ang lalaki pagkatapos ay nakipagkamay at nakipagkumustahan sa nanay ni Georgina.

“Calian.” Nakangiting hinawakan ng ama ang braso ng binata. “I believe you haven’t met my daughter yet. Calian, this is our daughter, Stacia Alodia. Stacia, this is Calian Jaucian. Pinsan siya ni Nico, and his family’s from Albay.”

Bumaling sa kanya ang titig ng lalaki, at muli ay parang gusto niyang umatras. The a*shat was really goodlooking. The hooded eyes, the strong bone structure, the tall, muscular frame. He’d give David Gandy a run for his money.

Muli, gumapang ang lamig sa guwapo nitong mukha habang nakatitig sa kanya. Pero nag-panic ba siya? Of course not. Bish, she’s a pro.

Masigla at matamis siyang ngumiti sa binata.

“Actually, Pa, we already met yesterday.” Mahinhin siyang tumayo at malambing na idinantay ang palad sa kabilang braso ni Calian.

The muscles of his arm clenched beneath her palm making her almost jump herself. And f*ck it, the

heat of his skin seemed to ignite shocks of electricity through her palm, spreading across her skin in a flash, making her breath hitch for a second.

“We had a bit of misunderstanding,” she purred, ignoring the flush of heat across her skin. She slightly leaned against Calian, tipping her head back to showcase her best angle. “But it’s all good now. Right, Calian?”

Bahagyang naningkit ang mga mata ng binata, at sa loob ng ilang sandali, hinanda ni Stacia ang sarili sa pagbuking nito sa kanya.

But he merely nodded, his gaze shifting to her father. “Yes, we met yesterday in a resort in Caramoran.”

Ramdam niya ang pagluwag ng hininga nina Reggie at Ate Jewel kahit malayo siya sa mga ito.

“Oh, is that so?” Malawak ang ngiti ng ina. “That is wonderful. But oh, where are our manners? Go get yourself something to eat first, dear.”

Calian’s gaze slid back to her, his chiseled features back into those lines of steel.

Binitawan niya ang braso nito habang nakataas pa rin ang sulok ng mga labi sa isang mapang-akit na ngiti.

Tumiim-bagang ang binata.

Halos hindi makatingin nang maayos sina Ate Jewel at Reggie kay Calian nang makipagkamay ito sa dalawa.

May kasama pang isang lalaki si Calian. General

manager si Justin Gamboa ng mga hotels na pagmamay-ari ng lolo ni Calian. Matangkad din ang lalaki, maganda rin ang pangangatawan at guwapo. Nakipagkamay din ang binata sa kanila.

“My sister is a big fan of yours,” nakangiting saad ni Justin habang nakikipagkamay sa kanya. “Is it okay to take a picture with you later?”

Mahinhin siyang tumawa. “Sure.”

“Justin,” matigas ang boses na tawag ni Calian. “Let’s go.”

“It’s great meeting you, Stacia.” Nakangiting sumunod si Justin kay Calian.

Kaswal siyang umupo kahit mabilis pa rin ang tibok ng kanyang puso.

Siniko siya ng kapatid. “Was Calian involved in the trouble Ate Lory talked about?”

“Of course not, brother dear.” Inosente siyang gumuti sa kapatid. “You heard him, we’re all good.”

Naningkit ang mga mata ni Daniel pero inunahan na niya ito ng tanong. “So what’s Calian doing here now? Is he going to manage his grandpa’s business now?”

Nanatiling mapagduda ang titig ng kapatid. “Something like that.”

“He’s into renewable energy,” sabat ni Georgina. “I think around four years ago, he moved to Africa for charity work. Then, he came back here around three years ago for his renewable energy project. In the last

two years and a half, he's already built power plants in Antique and Iloilo. He's planning to build a hydro power plant here in Caramoan and San Miguel."

"And he's also interested in healthcare." Naghiwa ang kapatid ng lobster waffle nito. "Mama and Papa want a partnership with him for a project in Albay."

"And he graduated *summa cum laude* in *Columbia University*, too!" singit sa kanila ni Mrs. Escudero, maningning ang mga mata. "He has made a fortune as a hedge fund manager before going back here in the Philippines. Stacia, dear, you should nab him before somebody else does. Handsome, smart, and from old money, yet he made lots of his own money, too! And so young! He's barely thirty. He's the most eligible bachelor in the country now, darling."

Maarte siyang tumawa. Siguro sa Pilipinas, oo, but Stacia had already branched out a long time ago. She'd been enjoying cocktails with young self-made billionaires from Silicon Valley, had been partying with hot-shot supermodels and fifth generation millionaires across L.A. Maddox, the lead singer of *M3* who had helped shot her to stratospheric fame, had a face and body of a god, and a net worth of three hundred million dollars. At may mga sinusupportahan din itong charity.

In the grand scheme of things, Calian was a big fish in a pond, but she's already fishing in the ocean, baby.

“I’m not sure about that, Tita,” maarteng sagot ni Stacia. “I’ve seen my fair share of ultra-rich goodlooking men.”

Umiling ang nanay ni Georgina. “He was one of the early investors of *ClickMe*.”

Napatuwid siya ng upo nang marinig iyon. Sikat na multimedia messaging application ang *ClickMe* at isa sa kasalukuyang may pinakamataas na stock valuation.

“He made billions from that,” patuloy ng ginang. “I’m sure he made lots of connections from that, too. He would have been one of the richest men in the world below forty right now if he hadn’t suddenly decided to become the male version of Angelina Jolie.”

“What?” bulalas ni Stacia.

Tumawa ang ginang. “I’ve talked to his mother. His parents are all into giving back, saving mother earth and helping people. Shame, really. He would have been super rich and super famous right now if he had continued his career in finance. He even dated Stephanie Princeton!” tukoy nito sa isang sikat na hotel-heiress at socialite. “Hindi mo lang siguro narinig ang tungkol d’on dahil bata ka pa n’un. But don’t worry, puwede na ang age n’yo ngayon, dear!”

Sumimangot si Stacia at napasulyap sa mga magulang. As usual, busy sa pakikipag-usap sa phone ang dalawa. Alam ba ng mga ito ang tungkol kay Calian?

Probably, maasim niyang isip.

So hindi lang pang-Pilipinas ang kamandag ng lalaki, pang-international din? At pinagpalit pa nito ang katanyagan at pera para magkawang-gawa? And he's super-hot, too!

She snorted.

Fine, fine. Ito na ang pinagpala sa lalaking lahat!

Bumalik sina Calian at Justin sa kanilang mesa, at agad itinuon ng mga magulang niya ang atensyon sa lalaki. At dahil ang upuang iniwan ng kanyang Uncle Stefan ang tanging bakante malapit sa kanyang mga magulang, doon ito pinaupo ng papa niya. And yes, katabi iyon ng upuan niya.

She smiled brightly at Calian.

Tiim-bagang itong umupo at ibinaling agad ang atensyon sa kanyang mga magulang.

Muntikan siyang humalakhak. Pakipot talaga ang isang ito.

“How are your parents, Calian?” magiliw na usisa ng kanyang ina.

“They’re doing well, thank you. They’re in Quezon right now for an outreach program.”

“Oh, yes.” Tumango ang ama. “Ang lakas ng bagyo n’ung nakaraan doon.”

“Stacia, dear,” maningning na singit ni Mrs. Escudero. “You had a fundraising event for the victims of Typhoon Andeng just a few months ago, hadn’t you?”

Oooh, bini-build up talaga siya ni Tita Eugenia.

“Yes, Tita,” magaan niyang sagot. “My friends and I auctioned some of our clothes, shoes and bags, and donated the money to help the victims.”

“Stacia here is a *YouTuber*,” proud na sambit ng ama kay Calian. “I’m sure you’re familiar with that. Ako n’ung una, hindi ko maintindihan kung ano ’yon at kung paano siya kikita doon. But here she is now, with all these international and local endorsements. Makeup, food, jewelry, clothing, even furniture! She even has her own makeup line, too!”

“It’s a collaboration with *Hot Colors*,” paglilinaw ni Stacia sa sinabi ng ama.

Baka akalain ni Calian ay may sarili siyang makeup company. Someday, when she had the right experience, she would. But right now ay wala pa.

“We released an eyeshadow palette last year. *Hot Colors*’ a drug store makeup brand, but the quality’s top notch, and they’re cruelty-free and paraben-free, too,” paliwanag ni Stacia.

Tumawa si Georgina. “Yan, ganyan ang mag-market.”

The corners of Calian’s lips curved, but his gaze remained a touch cold.

“And she knows how to handle her money, too,” segunda ng ina. “At first, I was worried about her and her future. But my daughter here is one smart cookie.”

The warm smile her mother gave her made Stacia’s heart flutter.

Hindi siya *cum laude* sa kung saang *Ivy League* school, but her parents were mighty proud of her just the same.

“She got herself a financial advisor all by herself,” patuloy ng ina. “She invested her money wisely and now I’m telling you, with her trajectory, give her a couple more years, and she’ll be the richest here in Bicol. Then a few more, and she’d be one of the top fifty richest in the whole country.”

Maningning siyang ngumiti kay Calian. *Impressed now, Calian dear? I’m not some selfish stupid b*tch who’s all beauty and no brains, sweetie.*

Magalang lang na tumango ang lalaki at nagpatuloy sa pagkain.

Lumapit si Ate Lory sa kanila at bigla siyang napatuwid ng upo. *Shet!* Namukhaan ba nito si Calian? Isusumbong ba siya nito sa tatay niya?

Pero imbis na sa tatay niya lumapit, sa mama niya huminto ang kanyang bodyguard. May ibinulong ang nakatatandang babae sa kanyang ina.

“Okay, salamat, Lory.”

Tumango ang bodyguard at naglakad palayo.

Mapaumanhing ngumiti sa kanila ang ina. “Pasensya na, pero may kailangan lang akong kausapin galing sa Municipal Health Office.”

“Andito na sila?” usisa ng ama.

Her parents had always been active in community health improvement. Actually, pati ang angkan nila.

Her paternal grandfather was Secretary of Health in the '60s. Naging congressman naman ang maternal grandmother niya noong '80s.

Bukod sa pagiging neurosurgeon, may Masters in Public Health ang tatay niya. Parehong matagal nang miyembro ang mga magulang niya ng provincial health board. Currently, her father was nominated as undersecretary by the current Secretary of Health and was waiting confirmation.

“Yes, sa lobby ng hotel.” Bumaling ulit sa kanila ang ina. “May outbreak kasi ng dengue sa ilang barangay dito kaya medyo busy kami. Enjoy your food, okay?”

Matapos silang magpaalam sa ina, bumaling sa kanya ang ama. “You were saying something about Lory a moment ago, Stacia?”

Oh, right. Iyong tungkol sa pagiging walking chastity belt ng bodyguard niya.

Napasulyap siya kay Calian. She didn't want to talk about this in front of him.

Nag-ring ang phone ng kanyang papa, at sinipat nito iyon.

Nag-panic si Stacia. “Pa,” bulalas niya sa takot na tumayo ito at sumunod sa kanyang mama. Hindi siya puwedeng maging choosy, she needed to talk about this now. “You need to tell Ate Lory to stop being so strict with boys around me.”

“Your Ate Lory is just doing her job.”

“Pa, it's too much. I can't be alone with boys for

more than five minutes. I'm almost twenty-one, I'm an adult now."

"No, Stacia, you are still our responsibility."

"But, Pa, I'm old enough to vote, to drive. I'm not a kid anymore."

Umiling ang ginoo. "This is your deal with us, Stacia. When you were barely eighteen and you wanted to study abroad, we let you. And that's only because you agreed to have Lory as your bodyguard."

"I'm not asking to have Ate Lory removed from my security detail," himutok niya. "I'm just asking for more privacy. Hindi 'yung lahat ng lalaking kumakausap sa 'kin, ang sama ng tingin niya."

"No, Stacia. You're not yet twenty-one, you still have two months. This is our deal. Your Ate Lory will do her job as we see fit, and she will continue reporting to me."

"But, Pa..." Gahd, she couldn't lose this argument. She couldn't go back to L.A. still a virgin! "Those two months are just numbers. You know I'm already mature, I can make my own decisions. I grew up way faster than most people my age. You know I'm already responsible. I've never messed up while living abroad away from you, have I? You know you can trust me."

"Hindi sa hindi kami nagtitiwala sa 'yo, anak. Sa mga tao sa paligid mo kami hindi nagtitiwala. Lalo na sa Amerika, sa L.A.!" Tumaltak ang ama. "Los Angeles may be full of glitter and glamour, but let's be honest

with each other, Stacia, you know how insidious it can be underneath all that. Buti sana kung kagaya ng kuya mo o ni Calian ang nasa paligid mo, then, we wouldn't worry. Hahayaan ka namin kahit walang bodyguard.”

Gabbbddd!

Pigil ang gigil na itinaas niya ang tingin sa lalaking tinukoy ng ama.

Nakatitig din sa kanya si Calian; magkasalubong ang maiitim na kilay. There was a touch of surprise in his dark gaze.

Lalong nag-init ang kanyang ulo. What, surprised that she's still a virgin? She couldn't believe she let him find out about that!

Fine, hindi nila direktang sinabi na virgin pa siya, but it was freaking implied.

Inis na tinadtad ni Stacia ang lamb pastrami sa kanyang plato.

He was judging her, wasn't he? He probably thought she was a spineless wimp for not standing up to her parents. *Ugh.*

“But don't worry, hija,” dagdag ng ama. “Ngayong 'andito ka kasama namin, I'll tell Lory not to be so strict. Hindi ka na niya masyadong susundan. We know everyone here, so it's okay.”

Napatuwid si Stacia. Ate Lory wouldn't follow her around here? Meaning p'wede siyang maghimala dahil hindi na siya nito bubuntutan? Oh, she could finally pick a guy who can—

Bumagsak ulit ang kanyang mga balikat.

Never mind. Puro kakilala nila ang mga bisita rito. She grew up with them. They were practically relatives. She needed to get out of this island to broaden her choices. Ugh.

Muling nag-ring ang phone ng ama, at sa pagkakataong iyon ay mapagpaumanhin na itong bumaling sa kanila. “It’s your mother calling. Baka kailangan na ako sa meeting. Sige na, d’yan na muna kayo, ha?”

Mabilis itong tumayo at iniwan sila. And there went her chance to further argue.

“Give it up, Stacia.” Tinapik siya ng kanyang Kuya Daniel sa balikat.

Inis na iniwas niya ang balikat at malutong na tumawa ang kapatid.

3

NO STRINGS ATTACHED

Stacia cornered Calian after brunch. Why? Because duh! She had to make sure he didn't rat her out to her parents about yesterday. Not that she did anything wrong. But it was best to smooth things out.

Dumerecho ang lalaki sa suite nito sa parehong floor ng kanyang kuwarto pagkatapos ng brunch. Of course, sumunod siya rito.

And when she noticed Ate Lory wasn't following her, she almost felt heady with giddiness. At least she wouldn't have her bodyguard shadowing her for the next weeks!

Hell. Hindi na siguro siya dapat mamili sa cherry picker niya. Beggars can't be choosers. Maybe she could even—

Huminto siya sa tapat ng pinto ng silid ni Calian, at namilog ang kanyang mga mata.

Oh, my Lord, that was it. Bakit hindi niya agad naisip iyon?

Marahas na bumukas ang pinto at napaigtad si

Stacia. Tumambad sa kanya ang nakatiim-bagang na binata, at namimilog ang mga matang napatitig lang siya nang ilang segundo sa lalaki.

He stood there with a dark expression on his chiseled face, every line of his muscular frame gripped with tension.

“Mabuti sana kung kagaya ni Calian ang nasa paligid mo, hindi kami mag-aalala.”

“Hindi magiging strict si Ate Lory habang ’andito ka dahil kilala natin lahat ng narito.”

“What do you want?” Calian’s harsh tone ripped through her thoughts.

What do I want? Maikli siyang tumawa. What a loaded question!

Agad siyang lumusot sa ilalim ng maskuladong braso ng binata para makapasok sa silid nito.

“What the hell?” Galit na humarap sa kanya si Calian.

Laughing, she strutted toward his bed before he could yank her arm and kick her out of his room.

“Relax, Calian,” she taunted. “No need to get so worked up.”

Matamis ang ngiti na ibinagsak ni Stacia ang sarili paupo sa kama ng lalaki.

Tumiim-bagang ito at kumuyom ang mga palad. Hindi rin nito sinara ang pinto.

She pouted. Pa-hard to get talaga ang isang ito.

But she didn't mind a challenge.

Curving her pouty lips in a flirty smile, she placed her arms behind her, laying her palms flat on the firm mattress. She slightly arched her back, subtly pushing her full breasts forward as she leaned back against her arms. Slowly, purposely, she crossed her toned legs. Lumilis pataas ang malambot na tela ng kanyang palda, hinahantad ang mas malaking bahagi ng kanyang mga hita.

Lalong umigting ang mga linya sa guwapong mukha ng binata.

"I just want to thank you," anas ni Stacia, ninanamnam ang pagdaloy ng init sa kanyang balat, "for not telling my parents about our misunderstanding yesterday."

"Is that all?" malamig nitong saad. "Leave."

"Why didn't you tell them about it?"

Niluwangan ng lalaki ang bukas ng pinto. "Get out, Stacia."

It was silly how the way he said her name in that cold derisive tone made heat throb between her thighs.

"What were you doing there anyway?" anas ng dalaga na parang hindi narinig ang utos ng kaharap. "Why were you posing as a lifeguard?"

"Get out now, or I'll call your parents."

She laughed, her shoulders slightly shaking. "Are you afraid of me, Calian?"

Naningkit ang mga mata ng lalaki.

Her lips curved and she tilted her head. “You’re attracted to me, aren’t you?”

Dinukot ng lalaki ang phone sa bulsa nito at pinindot ang screen.

Namilog ang mga mata niya at napatayo siya. “Hey! Hey! Wait!”

Sinunggaban niya ang binata bago pa nito matawagan ang mga magulang niya.

“Chill, dude! No need to get so—”

Napatili siya nang sumabit sa carpet ang heels ng kanyang sandals.

“Goddamn it, Stacia.” Nahagip ng binata ang kanyang mga braso nang sumubsob siya sa maskuladong nitong dibdib.

“Sorry! I didn’t—”

“F*ck!” mura ng lalaki nang matapakan niya ang paa nito.

“Sorry! Sorry!” Agad niyang iniibas ang paa, pero tuluyan siyang nawalan ng balanse dahil doon.

Shrieking, she pulled Calian with her. Pareho silang napamura nang matumba sila sa malapit na couch.

Napaungol siya at pilit inayos ang sarili. Pero agad ding napatigil.

They lay on their side, her soft breasts flushed tight against the hard planes of his chest, her left leg hooked around his hip. His large calloused palm was inside

her skirt, clasping the lower curve of her a*s, pressing her lace covered sex snugly against the taut ridge of his jeans.

Nakaawang ang mga labing inangat ni Stacia ang tingin. Nakatiim-bagang si Calian at mataman din ang titig sa kanya.

He was aroused, the heavy bulge of his c*ck straining in his jeans, pushing against the softness of her folds.

Gusto niyang tumawa. This was so cliché. But damn, she loved it.

Maingat siyang huminga at maingat ding gumalaw. Pero napasinghap si Stacia nang mapadiin ang kanyang pagkababae sa magaspang na zipper ng pantalon nito. Napakapit siya lalo sa malapad na balikat ng lalaki.

Calian cursed, his palm grasping the cheek of her a*s tighter, his fingers digging into her flesh.

“Oh.” She tried to move again but gasped when her cl*t rasped against the harsh ridge of his zipper.

“Goddamn it,” Calian hissed. “Don’t f*cking move.”

Pero hindi mapigilan ng dalaga ang sarili. O siguro ayaw lang niya talagang pigilan ang sarili. The electrifying heat throbbing inside her sex felt so good.

Slowly, deliberately, she started rolling her hips. Shocks of heat sparked throughout her core and she moaned.

Malutong na napamura ulit ang binata at dumiin

ang hawak nito sa kanyang puwitan, pero hindi siya itinulak palayo.

Arching her back, she rubbed her fleshy c*nt against the weighty bulge in his jeans. Blood roared in her ears. Heated wetness gushed out, slicking the inner lips of her c*nt, dampening the lacy pad of her thong. She could feel the wet flimsy lace sticking to her engorged folds. The friction of rough jeans chafing against soaked lace and her soft aching sex made her whimper.

“Calian...” anas niya.

She rolled her hips faster, and he hissed a curse.

Mabibigat ang mga talukap na itinaas niya ang paningin sa binata. Flush heated the skin across his chiseled cheekbones. Marahas din ang paghinga nito at nagngangalit ang mga ngipin.

God, the ruthless look on his handsome face just made her wetter.

Pinagapang ni Stacia ang mga kamay sa leeg at ulo ng binata. Her fingers grasped the short strands of his inky hair as she pulled his head down to her.

They both groaned when their lips touched. Agad niyang binuka ang bibig at ipinasok ang dila sa pagitan ng mga labi ni Calian. She knew he would have cursed viciously again if their tongues weren't moving together.

Heavens, he tasted good. Mint, sex and lust. Naramdaman niyang pumulupot ang isang

maskuladong braso nito sa kanyang balikat at naramdaman ang pagsabunot ng isang kamay nito sa kanyang buhok. Fisting her hair in his hand, he angled her head, deepening the kiss, his lips sucking harshly on her tongue.

Her sex clenched and her hips buckled. Oh dear, she might just cum with him only sucking her tongue!

His large palm squeezed the rounded cheek of her a*s and ground his hardness over her fleshy mound. Shocks of heat rippled throughout her core. A whimper tore from her throat and her hips rolled, pressing her swollen sex tighter against his arousal. She was so wet and slippery she was sure she was soaking the front of his jeans.

“Calian, please.” Marahas niyang pinadausdos ang mga kamay sa pagitan ng kanilang mga katawan at hinagilap ang butones ng pantalon ng binata.

Nakabukas ang pinto at puwedeng may pumasok sa silid anumang oras, pero wala siyang pakialam. She was so needy and achy. She just wanted his c*ck deep inside her sex, f*cking her hard and fast.

A part of her was stunned and even afraid of her reaction to him. Sure, she had felt turned on before. But never this way. Never to the point where all she could think about was having his heavy c*ck buried deep between her thighs.

“Calian, hurry—”

Nagmura ang binata at hinuli ng dalawang mga kamay nito ang kanyang mga pupulsuhan.

Bago pa siya makapagprotesta, naisalya siya nito pahiga sa couch at agad itong tumayo.

Nahihilong inabot niya ang nakatalikod na lalaki. “Calian—”

“Stay the f*ck away from me,” he bit out, his voice guttural and ragged. Marahas ang paghinga nito at matigas sa tensyon ang linya ng mga kalamnan sa likod.

Malalim din ang paghinga ng dalaga at mabilis ang tibok ng kanyang puso.

“Calian...”

Nagmura ang lalaki.

Sandali siyang pumikit para kalmahin ang dibdib. Maingat siyang umupo.

She bit back a whimper when her sensitive sex rubbed against the leather fabric of the couch. Every inch of her skin felt sensitive and hot. Her breasts felt so heavy, her nipples tight and stiff.

“Get out, Stacia.”

Kumuyom ang kanyang mga palad. She was bitchy and catty on a normal day. When sexually frustrated and painfully aroused? Hah. *Sadako* would look cute.

“You need to make me cum!” sigaw niya.

He whirled to her, his sculpted face livid. “What did you say?”

“You need to make me cum, damn you!”

Rage and disbelief erupted on his face, as if he couldn't quite believe she had the nerve to demand that from him. Well, she had!

"Are you out of your goddamn mind?" pakli ng binata. "Get out, Stacia."

"You're hard, you want me. I'm wet and aching. F*ck me, Calian. Or at least make me f*cking cum!"

Nagtagis ang mga bagang ng lalaki at itinaas nito ang mukha sa kisame na para bang naghihingi ng pasensya sa nasa itaas. Umigting ang mga ugat at linya ng mga kalamnan nito sa leeg.

"Get out, Stacia, before I drag you out myself."

"Let's make a deal," sagot niya rin saka tiim-labing humalukipkip. She pressed her thighs together, and bit back a hiss when she felt the soaked flimsy fabric of her underwear rubbing against the flared lips of her c*nt. "Just sex, Calian. Nothing more and nothing less. Nothing wrong with that. We're both adults. You want me, and don't even deny it."

Malalaking hakbang na tinungo ng lalaki ang pinto. Nanlaki ang kanyang mga mata, agad siyang napatayo at inabot ang braso ng kaharap.

"Just hear me out—"

"Get the f*ck out—"

"I'm a virgin, okay?" bulalas ni Stacia.

He shot her a furious glare.

Matapang niyang sinalubong iyon. She'd be

freaking transparent about this. It'd be like a business transaction! "It's true! I can give you a freaking medical report if you want. I just need to get rid of my v-card, okay?"

"Get rid of it using somebody else," he bit out through gritted teeth.

"It's not that easy." Inis na itinulak niya pasara ang pinto.

Ang huling kailangan ni Stacia ay ang may makarinig sa kanilang pinagtatalunan.

Nagngingitngit na sumandal siya sa pinto at hinarap ang binata. Maigting pa rin ang bawat linya ng mukha at katawan nito dahil sa galit.

"Look, I need to get rid of my v-card before I return to L.A."

"I don't give a f*ck what you—"

"Just hear me out first!"

Calian exhaled a harsh breath and planted his fists on his hips. Tumungo rin ito nang ilang segundo na para bang nagbibilang.

Sinamantala ni Stacia ang pagtahimik nito. "I just need to get rid of my virginity before I return to L.A. in less than two months. I can finally have a real romantic relationship once Ate Lory stops scaring off every guy around me. That means sex, too. But I can't have anyone in L.A. finding out I'm still a virgin."

Inangat ni Calian ang mukha at tumaas ang sulok

ng mga labi nito sa isang mapang-uyam na ngiti. “Good luck to you. Get out.”

“So that means I have to get rid of my virginity here,” patuloy ng babae na parang hindi narinig ang sinabi ng binata. “Dito lang puwede habang kasama lahat ng mga kakilala namin, dahil dito lang maluwag sa akin si Ate Lory. And I want you to be my first.”

Nagtagis muli ang mga bagang ng binata. “I don’t give a sh*t what you want.”

“Why?” She resisted the urge to stomp her feet. “Why don’t you want to accept my offer? No strings attached, Calian. Just consider it as freaking charity.”

Mukhang gusto siya nitong sakalin sa namumuong galit sa guwapo nitong mukha. “Get somebody else.”

“I can’t—”

“There are dozens of men in this f*cking hotel who would want to f*ck you. Sa kanila ka—”

“I grew up with most of them! They’re practically my relatives!”

“Not,” he gritted out, “my f*cking problem.”

“I also need someone who wouldn’t brag about taking my v-card to the whole world. I have to be careful—”

“And you think I won’t?” Pagak na tumawa si Calian. “Sa tingin mo, hindi ko ipagsasabi sa iba na ako’ng nakauna sa ’yo? You just met me yesterday. Hindi mo ’ko kilala.”

“Oh, I know you won’t.”

She pressed her shoulders against the wooden door and arched her back provocatively.

Tension shot throughout his muscular frame, and his dark gaze narrowed into slits.

“You’re a nice guy, Calian,” she purred. “You gave up fame and money to help other people. Someone like you wouldn’t be interested in using f*cking someone as some sort of bragging rights. You don’t care about fame and all that.”

“Maybe a guy like me doesn’t want to f*ck someone like you,” he shot back.

Nagtaas ang dalaga ng kilay at ibinaba ang tingin sa harapan ng pantalon ng binata. His impressive hard-on still tented his jeans.

“Physical reaction, Stacia,” magaspang nitong saad, nangungutya. “Any girl who rubbed her c*nt against my c*ck would get the same reaction.”

“Is that supposed to insult me?” She pouted her soft pink lips. “Try harder, darling.”

Tumaas sa isang matalim na ngiti ang sulok ng mga labi ni Calian, at may kung ano sa ngiting iyon na nagpakupas sa sarili niyang ngiti.

“What about this?” he goaded, slightly leaning forward, the heat and scent of his skin radiating toward her, making her breath hitch. “I have a girlfriend, Stacia.”