

PROLOGUE

UNLOVE ME

W*hen you try your best, but you don't succeed*
When you get what you want, but not
what you need
When you feel so tired, but you can't sleep
Stuck in reverse...

That was the song playing on the radio that day as I was waiting for the man I love at our favorite park, at our favorite spot.

I called him up this morning, asked him to come over to *our* park. Yes, we called this place ours because this place is where our dreams and hopes were conceived .

I don't know if I should be excited about this meeting of ours. Unlike our other dates, this won't be like those happy bonding times. Today, I am going to break up with my boyfriend. Of course, he doesn't know it yet, and I know that he will hate me for it, but I just can't do this anymore.

It's not that I don't love him anymore. I love him with all my heart. We've been together



since I was seventeen and he's eighteen. Now, I am twenty-four at nandoon na kami sa stage na gusto na naming lumagay sa tahimik. Gusto na naming magpakasal. Everything's perfect.

We're going to get married next year. He said he's gonna surprise me with a memorable proposal, that I will cry tons of happy tears. Sabagay, sa pitong taon naming dalawa, kahit minsan ay hindi niya ako pinaiyak—nag-aaway naman kaming dalawa pero hindi rin nagtatagal. Before the day ends, we make sure that everything is okay. Iyon ang isang bagay na gustung-gusto ko sa relasyon namin.

*And the tears come streaming down your face
When you lose something you can't replace
When you love someone, but it goes to waste
Could it be worse?*

I could still hear the song playing in the background. I didn't mean for us to come to this. It's just that even if I am so much in love with my boyfriend, and even if I know we can be happy together, hindi ko siya kayang ikulong sa isang sitwasyon na isang araw ay sigurado akong pagsisisihan niya.

My boyfriend is a good man and he deserves everything—all the happiness that I could give him. He deserves the world, he deserves all the

good things, a beautiful family, a perfect wife, countless children...

I can be his wife, but I am not sure about the family part and the countless children.

I took a deep breath. Bigla akong napangiti nang may mga kamay na tumakip sa mga mata ko. Then, I heard his voice.

“Guess who...” He even giggled.

Hinawakan ko ang mga kamay niya pagkatapos ay ngumiti.

“Hello, Luisito. You are late.” I tried sounding happy but how can I do that if at the end of this day, mawawala na ang pinakamagandang nangyari sa akin?

“Sorry, Monica.” Tumabi siya sa akin at hinalikan ako sa pisngi. “Ang traffic papunta dito. Dapat nagpasundo ka na lang sa bahay ninyo, hindi pa kami nagkikita ni Mommy mula nang bumalik siya galing Australia.”

“Ang busy kasi niya doon sa high school reunion nila. Hayaan mo na si Mommy,” I told him.

He took my hand and kissed my palm. He, then looked at me.

“Tara.” He even winked.

“Luisito, s’abi ko mag-uusap tayo, ano na nama’ng naisip mo?”



“Eh di kama,” pilyong sabi niya. “One week kitang hindi nakita, I miss you na...”

I giggled. Binatukan ko siya. Napapalatak ang siraulo.

“Pero ano ba kasi’ng pag-uusapan natin? May pupuntahan tayo.”

“Saan naman?” I asked him. Na-curious na kasi ako.

“Sige, pupunta tayo doon, doon natin pag-usapan ang gusto mo. Tapos mamaya, iyong gusto ko namang gawin, Monica, ha? Okay?”

I stared at him. I am so in love with him. But life is unfair, life won’t let you have your cake and eat it, too.

I nodded at him. Sumama ako kay Luis papunta sa kotse niya. We drove away from our favorite park, naisip kong okay na rin na wala kami roon para hindi madungisan ng masakit na alaala ang park kung saan kami nagkakilala noon.

Napansin kong papunta na kami sa bandang Antipolo. Later, Luis parked in front of a vacant lot. Nagtatakang napatingin ako sa kanya.

“Do you like it?” he asked.

“Ang alin?”

“The lot. I bought this for us. Dito tayo bubuo ng pamilya. Dito tatakbo si Little Luis at si Little Monica. Pero sana, babe, babae ang panganay

natin. Alam mo naman na walang babae sa pamilya ko.” Tumawa siya at inakbayan ako. “Do you see that lot on the far right? That’s Paolo’s. Wala eh, magkapitbahay pa rin tayo in the near future. Saka sinabi ko sa kanya na dahil pinsan ko siya at best friend mo siya, siya ang magiging ninong ng lahat ng anak natin.”

My whole body was shaking while listening to him. I couldn’t move, or say, or think about anything at all. I stood there feeling so dumb while listening to all his plans.

“I was thinking of building a four-storey house. The first level will be our living room, you know, the usual.” Tapos, second floor for the rooms, third floor will be another living area, rooms and all. Then, ’yong fourth floor, rooftop. Malalagay ako ng green house, tapos every afternoon, we’ll have tea there, babe. At kapag nakaipon ulit ako, bibilhin ko iyong katabing lupa. We’ll build your office there para hindi ka na bibiyahe pa-Manila. Nandito na ang office mo. Everything is perfect, babe, just like you.”

He cupped my face. Noon lang yata niya napansin na iyak ako nang iyak. He was smiling while wiping away my tears.

“Monica... why are you crying? Hindi mo ba gusto iyong plans ko?” he asked.



What can I say? His plans are so perfect. Everything is perfect but I don't deserve any of it.

"I love your plans, Luis," sagot ko sa kanya. "I love every part of it. I can imagine ourselves having tea on the rooftop every afternoon of our life together."

"Yes, that's the vision. Bakit ka umiiyak? Sobrang na-touch ka ba?" Panay ang pahid niya sa luha ko.

I shook my head. God knows how much I want this. God knows how much I want to keep him but I don't want to be selfish, hindi ko siya puwedeng ikulong sa isang buhay na kahit kailan ay hindi niya naisip na magiging kanya.

"Monica, why are you crying?" Naging seryoso ang boses ni Luis. "What's wrong?"

"Do you know why I asked you to meet me today?" I started. Napapahikbi na ako.

"Because you missed me. It's been a week."

"Yes. I distanced myself, Luis, because I needed to think."

Lumayo siya sa akin. Kunot na kunot ang noo.

"About what?" Tumigas ang boses niya.

"About us."

"What about us?" There was restrain in his voice. "What about us, Monica? What about us?"

Hindi ako nakapagsalita. Is there any way that I can make this easier for him? Can I not break his heart?

“Luis...” I called him. “I need you to unlove me.” That was all that I could say to him.

Napaawang ang mga labi niya. And then, he laughed. Ako naman ay hindi maampat ang luha. Napapalunok ako. Nanginginig ang buong katawan ko dahil hindi ko alam kung paano mababawasan ang sakit na ito.

Napakasakit. I need to break up with him because I cannot give him any children. Baog ako. I have an inhospitable uterus. It is irreparable.

Luis have always wanted kids and I cannot change his view about having them. Lahat ng pangarap niya, may kasamang bata. I am thankful for him, I love him, but I cannot imprison him in this.

“How can I do that?” he asked me. “What is happening, Monica? Hindi mo na ba ako mahal?!”

“Mahal kita.” Nanginginig ang tinig ko. “I love you. With all my heart, with all my soul. With all of me.” I told him. “That will never change, maybe I’d die loving you and maybe I’d die regretting this, but believe me, this is for the best, Luis. Years from now, you will thank me for letting you go.”

“That is bullsh*t!” he hissed.

“This isn’t.” I wiped my tears. “You deserve to be happy, Luis.”

“How can I be happy? Iiwanan mo ako! Ano’ng dahilan mo, ha?”

Galit siya. I was sobbing.

“Hindi kita mabibigyan ng anak, Luis.” Sinabi ko ang totoo. Napaawang ang mga labi niya. “You are a wonderful person, Luis. You deserve all the happiness in the world, hindi man sa akin, gusto kong maramdaman mo iyong pakiramdam na kumpleto ka. I don’t want you to blame me for something that I can’t give you.” I wiped my tears. “You may not understand my reasons, Luis, but one day, you will thank me. You will understand. I’m so sorry.”

Tumayo ako at tinalikuran na siya.

“Monica!” he called. “Molly! Molly!”

I walked away. I didn’t look back. Iyak ako nang iyak habang naglalakad palayo sa kanya. I broke his heart, I know, and maybe he won’t forgive me. But I know someday when he’s with the one he’d love, he’ll think about me and he’ll realized that I did the right thing, although it caused us so much pain.

I did the right thing.

CHAPTER I

IT'S A SHAME

Monica Elizabeth Soria's POV

Ten years later...

“Catherine Fe is my sunshine.”

I swallowed hard.

“She gave direction to my path. I was a lost boy when I met you... but you gave me light. You are like the lighthouse in the middle of a stormy sea. You guided me to the path I never thought I'd ever take again—the path of life, love, and family.”

I had to look up so the tears wouldn't fall. It was too painful to hear the love of my life say those words to the love of his life. I couldn't help thinking that it should be me on that altar, with him, holding hands, crying happily. It should be me that he's taking to the next level, not Catherine Fe. That should be us, together hand in hand, excited about our future.

But it's not me. That is the sad reality of my



life. I spent years living in Australia to finally forget about him and what we had. Ang sabi ko noon, mas mapapadali para sa aming dalawa kung magkahiwalay kami dahil iyon lang ang paraan para makalimutan namin ang isa't isa.

A week before I left for Australia, Luis came to my house with a bunch of folders labeled as 'OPTIONS.' He researched about my condition and the places where we can get help. I cried. I saw how determined he was, he was willing to spend all his money just for us to be together. Pero ayoko. Ayokong nakikita siyang nahihirapan, I held his hand and I told him to stop.

Because he had to stop. He was only making it harder for us. I want a child too, but not that way. Hindi ko siya pahihirapan, he can get happiness from someone else, he can have a child in the easiest way, hindi niya kailangang ma-stress out nang ganoon. Hindi niya kailangang isipin na hindi magiging sapat ang kaya niyang ibigay, dahil ako ang may pagkukulang.

I wanted to be fair to him.

Of course, he got so mad, so mad that he just vanished. He left, mas nauna pa siyang umalis kaysa sa akin.

I went to Australia, doon ako nagsimulang bumangon. I buried my love for him deep inside

my being. Hanggang sa nakaya ko na ulit ngitian ang sarili ko sa salamin.

Okay na ako. Nilibang ko ang sarili ko sa Australia, nakahanap ako ng trabaho sa events planning. Pinag-aralan ko iyong in's and out's of the business, and I realized that being a wedding planner is the most fitting for me. Bakit hindi? I can't and will never get married, hindi naman siguro masama na ibigay ko sa iba ang kasiyahang gusto kong maramdaman.

And truly, kapag nakikita ko kung gaano kasaya ang mga kasal na ako mismo ang nagsaayos, nasisiyahan ako. I sometimes imagine me as the bride. What would I want? What would make me happy...

So the wedding shop was born. I tried making a name in it in Australia, naging successful naman ako, that's why I thought of setting it up in the Philippines. Matagal na rin naman akong hindi umuwi ng Pilipinas. I missed this place—the food, the traffic, the heat, my parents, my friends—just about everything and everyone.

And I thought I was okay, that I can finally look at him and smile and feel nothing. It went on for a while.

I didn't check his social media accounts for years now. S'abi ko sa sarili ko, okay na ako. I



stopped stalking him the moment Paolo told me that my Luisito is in love with someone else now, and that he had moved on. And I was happy. Iyon naman ang gusto ko, ang makuha niya ang lahat ng bagay na hindi ko kayang ibigay.

But when I went to Paolo's place one morning, I saw Luis with his girl, and it struck me. It struck me so hard and realization came in. I realized that after all these years, after being apart from him for so long, I am still in love with him.

I felt like I was trapped in a very bad movie... iyong part ng movie na alam ko na kung sino ang makakatuluyan ng bida. Tapos, ako dati iyong bida but the tables have turned, ako na ngayon iyong second lead, and I am watching the man I love live the life I wanted for us...

And I know it's wrong but I couldn't help but hope.

That was all I have: hope.

Hope that Luis will be my Luisito again.

But right now, napakalabo nang mangyari niyon.

"I will love you forever, Catherine Fe. I will stay with you no matter what happens, even if you fell out of love, I will stay with you."

That made me lose my composure.

He is *that* in love with her! He is willing to stay

even when he isn't loved anymore. Napakasuwerte ni Catherine kay Luis. I can clearly see how in love they are. Kapag nasa isang kwarto kaming tatlo ay nararamdaman ko ang pagmamahalan nila—na para bang ipinapamukha sa akin ng tadhana kung ano ang pinakawalan ko... para bang ipinakikita kung ano ang dapat sana ay para sa akin...

“You may now kiss the bride...”

I had to look away. I couldn't stand seeing this, but I stayed. I need to be strong for him. This is all that I wanted for him. At nakuha iyon ni Luis at kahit sobrang sakit, masaya ako para sa kanya.

Pinalibutan ng lahat ang bride and groom. I just stood where I was, looking at Luis. Today, after all these years, I am letting him go again. I am letting him fly to be happy with the woman I believe will love him with all her heart.

I smiled at them. Catherine thanked me for being an excellent wedding planner for their wedding.

Luis...

He thanked me for letting him go, he told me that he now can understand what I meant ten years ago.

It should have given me relief, but again, it just broke my heart more...



“Yes, I am safe, Mom. I am walking down the hallway of my floor, approaching my door. No! You don’t have to call Paopao! So what if he didn’t pick me up? He isn’t my driver! Mom! My girlfriend iyong tao, naglililihi pa. I don’t need him, in fact, I don’t need any man.”

I stifled a laughter after hearing the horror in my mom’s voice. *Ayaw na ayaw niyang naririnig sa akin na hindi ko kailangan ng lalaki, kahit na iyon ang totoo.*

Hindi ko talaga kailangan ng lalaki para maging masaya. Tanggap na tanggap ko nang tatanda akong mag-isa, I will never get married dahil aayawan ko lang din iyon. I won’t marry someone para lang hindi ako mag-isa. If I am going to be miserable my whole life, then so be it. Mas mahirap iyong nagpakasal ako para lang may karamay ako sa kamiserablehan ng buhay ko.

I know that I will never love in the same way that I love Luis Arandia. Para sa akin, siya na talaga. He is the first and the last man in my life. Pagkatapos naming maghiwalay noon, wala na akong lalaking nakasama. Yes, I dated, I hung out with people, but after one date, wala na. Even if they called to ask me out again, hindi na ako sumasama.

I dedicated my life to my business, iyon lang ang matatawag kong 'baby.'

"Monica Elizabeth, 'wag kang nagsasalita nang ganyan!" my mother hissed. "You are young, independent and very irresistible. Many guys would want to be with you."

"Mom, guys who want to settle down nad want babies, we both know I can't give them that."

"We are rich! We can do all those science stuff, or you can adopt."

I am actually thinking of adopting a baby. Siguro babae, I want to have a child kahit pa hindi siya nanggaling sa akin. I am thinking about that para hindi maging masyadong malungkot ang buhay ko.

"Ma, I will think about my options. But right now, I need a relaxing shower. I will call you again later. 'Love you."

I ended the call. Napapailing na lang ako kapag naalala ko ang mga sinabi ni Mommy.

She was mad at me for breaking up with Luis. Isang taon rin niya akong hindi kinausap dahil doon. Hindi naman daw kasi problema ang sitwasyon ko, may mga options naman kasi. Ang hindi nila naiintindihan ay iyong ayoko ng salitang 'options.' I don't want Luis to settle for just the options. I want him to settle for the best



and I believe that what he has now is the best.

I went straight to my unit. Ibinaba ko sa sahig ang pinamili ko para buksan ang unit ko. But before I could do that, I heard a small cry.

I looked around, worried that someone was hurt, o baka naman minumulto ako. Pero sabi naman ng co-tenants ko, walang multo dito sa *Skyline Vejar Towers*. They were telling me the other day na kung mayroon man daw ‘must see’ dito, iyon ay ang magkakapatid na may-ari ng building. They were ‘hot’ as the tenants would say.

The cry continued on. I kept on looking for the source of it. I stopped when I saw a little girl in her pajama’s. She was wiping her tears when I saw her.

“Hi...” I greeted.

She looked at me. Her eyes were the darkest pair that I had ever seen. She had full bangs, mahaba ang buhok niya. Siguro mga eleven or ten years old na siya. Or maybe matangkad lang siya para sa edad niya.

She just sobbed.

Napaupo ako. “Why are you crying, little girl?”

She sobbed again. “Cause my daddy is stupid.” Bigla siyang nagpalahaw ng iyak.

Napakunot ang noo ko.

“Uhm stop crying. Uhm... do you want some ice cream?” untag ko.

Umiiyak pa rin, tiningnan niya ako tapos ay tumango.

I smiled. I offered her my hand and we went inside my unit. I put the things on the table, and asked her to wait for me at the kitchen counter. When I came back to her, dala ko na ang pint ng ice cream. Hinayaan ko siyang kumain. I just looked at her.

Maganda ang bata. Nakakatuwa ang namumula niyang pisngi, siguro natural iyon, pero iyong ilong niya, sobrang pula na rin marahil sa kakaiyak.

“What’s your name?” she asked in a tiny voice. Pinahid niya ang gilid ng bibig niya.

“Molly. You?”

“Cassandra.”

“Nice to meet you. How do you find the ice cream so far?”

“T’was fine.”

Napatawa ako dahil sa accent niya.

“You aren’t from here,” I said.

She shook her head. “I’m from New Jersey. My mom brought us to live with Daddy, but he’s very stupid.”

“Why is he so stupid?” Na-curious ako.



Napalabi naman siya. “Cause he forgot to pick me up from school. I had to ride the school bus and when I got here, he’s not home. Yaya said he left. My little brother is asleep already, and I was bored, so I left the unit... and...” She trailed off.

“And what?” I asked.

“And I couldn’t go back because I forgot what floor we’re living in...” Napahikbi na naman siya.

Oh, she was just too cute!

“Well, we can do something about that. Finish your ice cream, then, I’ll take you to the admin office,” sabi ko.

She nodded and started digging in her ice cream again. Sarap na sarap siya pero namumula pa rin ang pisngi niya at ilong nang matapos siya.

Pinunasan ko ang bibig niya. Nagkalat kasi ang ice cream sa gilid niyon and I smiled at her and told her that we are going to the office.

Hawak ko ang kamay niya habang naglalakad kaming dalawa. I was looking at her and all I could think about was if I married and had a child with Luis, siguro kasing-edad na ito ngayon ni Cassandra.

We went to the elevator. The doors opened and inside, we saw a tall man and a kid with a curly hair. Sumigaw ang huli nang makita ang

kasama ko.

“Papa, si Cassandra Sungit oh!”

“Oh... you know them?” I asked the kid with me.

“Yes, I do. He’s my uncle and that’s my cousin.”

Napatingin ako sa lalaki. I realized who he was.

“Good evening, Mr. Achilles Vejar.” I smiled.

“Hindi siya si Daddy Kambal! Papa ko siya!” sigaw ng batang kulot.

“Oh...” I smiled again.

“Apollo Vejar,” pakilala ng lalaki. “I’m Achilles’s twin. Anyway, where did you find this one?”

“Near my unit, Mr. Vejar. Umiiyak siya, hindi daw kasi siya makabalik.”

Cassandra looked at me.

“Thank you, Molly, for the ice cream. You’re my friend now.”

“You’re welcome, Cassandra. See you around.” I waved.

Sumama na siya sa tiyuhin at sa pinsan niya.

I took a deep breath. It’s such a shame because I love kids so much and yet I couldn’t have any of my own.



CHAPTER 2

A*S

Monica Elizabeth Soria's POV

“Can you make adjustments? I need the itinerary next week, I have a destination wedding to plan.”

Sumasakit ang ulo ko habang kausap ko ang travel planner na ka-deal ko. Gusto ng couple na magpakasal sa Siargao. Underwater ceremony ito at kinukulit na ako ng pareha sa itinerary ng mga guests nila bago ang wedding. Hindi ko alam kung bakit pati ang pag-aayos ng ibang pupuntahan nila ay ako pa rin ang magpaplano. Parang hindi na lang wedding ang aayusin ko kundi ang buong bakasyon ng mga guests nila. But because I want to see them happy and contented, I am doing everything. Iniisip ko kasi na kung ako ang bride, I would want the best for my own wedding.

“Alright, thank you so much.” I ended the call after the travel agent said what she would try to do to resolve my situation.

Napatingin ako sa pinto ng office ko. I saw Lisa there, papasok na siya at dala na niya ang lunch ko.

“Ma’am, you still have an appointment at two pm with the Gallardo couple.”

I rolled my eyes upon hearing the name. Iyong couple na iyon ang pinakamakukulit na clients ko, pero I like them. I like their story, they remind me so much of Luis and I because they’re childhood friends... but it’s all just the memories that I have now, and I have to settle with that. Hindi naman ako gagawa ng ikasisira ng relasyon nilang mag-asawa, hindi ko ipipilit ang isang bagay na hindi puwede and I won’t hold him accountable for something that he can’t do.

It’s just fair. Ako ang may gusto nito, kailangan kong panindigan ang naging desisyon ko.

Dumating na nga ang Gallardo couple. I started talking to them and I found myself dreaming again, hoping... but I dismissed those thoughts. I took notes of everything they want in their wedding, I also considered their backgrounds, their love story, and from there, I will draw a sketch for their wedding.

I take my work seriously, I make sure that my clients will have a perfect wedding day that they can look back to when they’re old and wrinkly.



Nang matapos kami ay umalis na ako sa shop. I wanted to rest. Wala akong tulog kagabi. Hindi ko alam kung bakit pero may mga gabi na talagang gising lang ako magdamag.

Gising lang ako at iniiyakan ang mga bagay na kahit kailan ay hindi ko makukuha.

So that afternoon, after getting back to my unit, I went straight to bed. Naghubad lang ako ng heels and I climbed under the sheets. I closed my eyes. I slept the whole day, nagbawi ako ng pagod.

I once read that sleeping is one of the signs of depression. Hindi ako depressed pero minsan, inaamin kong nalulungkot ako sa kinalabasan ng buhay ko. I know that I will never get married. Even if I meet another man who can make my heart flutter, I know that I will never be in that place again.

The thing is, kahit na ang daming paraan para magkaroon ng anak ang isang tulad ko, it will never be the same. Impossible man pero nangangarap ako na magkakaanak ako, iyong ako mismo ang magdadala sa kanya sa sinapupunan ko. I want to know how it will feel, and that is one thing that's been giving me sleepless nights.

I don't want to die alone...

I sighed.

It was after six o'clock nang magising ako. Hindi pa ako bumangon agad. I took my phone and checked my social media accounts. Matagal ko nang hindi ginagawa iyon, but I checked Luis's *Instagram* account.

I saw his latest post, they were in Bermuda with the twins for their honeymoon. Sa picture, magkatabi sina Luis at Cachi. Si Luis ay may hawak na malaking isda habang nasa likuran niya iyong isang kambal, at iyong isa ay karga ni Cachi na halata na ang baby bump. Alam kong buntis na siya bago pa sila ikasal, and I'm so glad. Mapagmahal si Luis, kahit na ano ang mangyari, alam kong mamahalin niya ang anak nila. Iyong kambal nga na hindi naman niya anak, sobrang mahal niya, lalo pa iyong galing sa kanya.

I sighed.

"I am so happy for you, my Luisito..."

Napabalikwas lang ako ng bangon nang makarinig ako ng mga katok sa pinto ng unit ko.

Napatakbo ako at agad iyong binuksan. Napaisip kasi ako na baka emergency iyon. But when I opened the door, I saw Cassandra in her unicorn jammies, with a little boy beside her.

I smiled at her. Nawala ang kaba ko. Noon ko rin na-realize na kaya ito kumatok at hindi nag-doorbell ay dahil hindi nito abot ang pindutan



niyon.

“Oh, it’s you.” I smiled at her.

“Yes, it’s me,” she replied.

“Is there something wrong, Cassandra? Gabina, ah. Bakit nandito kayo?” tanong ko.

Nakatingin lang ako sa kanila, pero mas matagal ang tingin ko sa batang lalaki. Kaunti na lang ay magkasing-tangkad na sila ni Cassandra.

“Cass, I’m so hungry,” the little boy said in a low voice.

“We need food, Molly,” sabi ng babae.

Bigla ay natunaw ang puso ko dahil sa hitsura ng dalawang bata. Hindi na ako nag-isip pa, pinapasok ko sila sa unit ko at pinaderecho sa dining area. I have cold pizza and spaghetti in my ref, ininit ko iyon at binalikan ang dalawa.

Cassandra was helping her brother to sit on the chair. Nang maka-settle sila ay tahimik lang silang naghintay.

“What happened? Wala ba kayong kasama?” tanong ko.

“Daddy left. You know, he went out on a date with my mom’s classmate. He also forgot to pick me up at school today... again. I thought that he was busy but I heard Yaya Lori said that Daddy went out with his girlfriend. I could only sigh. He stresses me out every time. We really need to get

back to New Jersey. There, Mommy would take care of us better. She loves us, I feel like Daddy doesn't."

Napabuntong-hininga ako. I met her dad last week.

Nagulat ako nang tumawag sa akin ang school niya last week, telling me that Cass was bullied by some kid. Naalala ko, ibinigay ko ang number ko kay Cass para kung maligaw siya uli o wala siyang magawa, puwede niya akong tawagan o i-text. Hindi ko naman inakala na ibibigay niya iyon sa teacher niya.

Hindi man ako ang nanay niya, agad ko siyang pinuntahan and I found her sitting in a corner while her father was inside the principal's office.

Kung hindi nga lang ako marespetong tao, nasigawan ko na ang lalaking iyon. He called me 'epal' for being with Cassandra. Binansagan ko naman siyang 'sanggano.'

Why?

Well, because he had tattoos, piercings, and was wearing a motorcycle jacket. May anak na siya, hindi na bagay na mukha siyang daredevil na naghahanap ng away.

"Cass, I'm so hungry," the little boy said again. Pinutol niyon ang daloy ng iniisip ko.



Napatawa ako. Kinuha ko ang pagkain mula microwave oven at inihain na iyon. They said thank you and then, they ate. Cassandra was very attentive to her brother, nakakatuwa iyong tingnan.

“His name is Castle. He’s such a baby. I need to take care of him more ’cause Daddy doesn’t. Uhm, Molly, can you help me report Daddy to the authorities? I searched for a child protection institute here in the Philippines and they have ‘*Bantay Bata 163*’. Can we report him there?”

“Oh no, Cassandra!” sabi ko habang tawa nang tawa. “I cannot report your dad, he has all the rights pagdating sa inyo.”

“But he doesn’t take care of us. If we’re in New Jersey, Mom will be there, so as our old friends,” paliwanag niya pa.

Ngumiti na lang ako at hinaplos ang mukha nilang magkapatid. Nang matapos kumain, hinayaan ko silang manood ng TV. Bandang nine o’clock ay binalikan ko sila at doon, nakita kong tulog na si Cassandra. Ginising ko sila para sabihing ihahatid ko sila sa unit nila but they insisted on sleeping with me.

Hindi na ako nakipagtalo sa kanila. I took them to my room.

“Molly, can you read me a bedtime story?”

Castle asked. “Mommy always reads me a bedtime story.”

“Okay!” I smiled. Naupo ako sa tabi nilang dalawa pagkatapos ay ipinakita ko sa kanila sa tablet ang nai-download kong digital na kopya ng *Jack and the Beanstalk* habang binabasa iyon. Hindi nagtagal, nakatulog na ang magkapatid, magkahawak pa sila ng kamay.

I sighed again. How can some people be so careless about their children? Ako nga na wala pang anak, at hindi magkakaanak ever, gustung-gusto kong magkaroon. Pero iyong ibang tao, ganoon-ganoon na lang kung itapon ang anak nila.

I kissed both of them on the forehead then lay down on the couch. Nagbabasa ako ng libro nang makarinig nang marahas na pagpindot ng doorbell ko. Agad akong tumayo para pagbuksan ang kung sinumang iyon na naghuhurumentado.

But when I opened the door, nagulat ako nang makita ko ang papa ni Cassandra.

He was half-naked, his washboard abs on display. He kind of reminded me of a sexy fictional character because of his V-line. Hindi lang iyon, nagsusumigaw ang tribal tattoo niya na nagmula sa braso papunta sa kaliwang dibdib niya.

Nanlaki ang mga mata ko.



“You! Ikaw iyong epal na nasa school ng anak ko, ah!” he hissed.

Nagpanting ang tainga ko.

“And you’re an a*shole!” I hissed back.

Bigla... bigla siyang ngumisi, iyong mabagal na ngisi tapos ay tumingin sa akin nang pailalim. Suddenly, I found it hard to breathe. Napalunok ako.

“I have been called the worse, but for you, it’s Dionysus Consunji.”

Napaawang ang labi ko. Pero nasundan iyon ng pagsinghap nang makita ko ang mga pulis na kasunod niya.

“Arrest her, officer. She took my children. She’s a kidnapper.”

“You’re an a*shole!” sigaw ko uli.

Dionysus Joaquin Consunji’s POV

“You cannot arrest me!”

“And why the hell not?!”

“Well, first, you don’t have an arrest warrant! The moment you step inside my unit, kakasuhan ko kayo ng trespassing!”

The woman is getting into my nerves already, but of course she has a point. It’s illegal to arrest her dahil wala namang dalang kahit ano ang

mga pulis na ito. I called them to report that my children are missing.

Imagine my surprise when I got home to find an empty bed. Ginising ko agad ang maid ko and she told me that the kids were kidnapped and that the kidnapper drugged her to sleep.

Hindi naman ako tanga, alam kong may hindi totoo sa sinasabi niya, but that isn't the point. I needed to find my kids first. Dumerecho ako sa security room ng building and I told the staff to find my kids and I did. Nasa ninth floor sila sa unit 902. Pinapasok nga sila ng babaeng ito and they never went out kaya lalo akong nakaramdam ng inis.

What the hell is happening?!

“That’s true, missus,” sabi ko sa kanya. “But where the hell is my children! I saw them getting inside your unit sa CCTV! ‘Wag mong itangging nandito ang mga anak ko! Where the hell are they?”

“You don’t have to f*cking yell at me, Mr. Dionysus Consunji! And it’s *Miss Molly Soria* for you, jerk!” singhal na naman niya.

Napataas ang sulok ng bibig ko, nakipagtitigan ako sa kanya at sa inis ko, tinabig ko siya para makapasok ako sa unit niya. I don’t f*cking care if she sues me. I need to see my children.



“Hey! This is illegal!”

Dalawa lang ang kwarto sa unit niya at ang unang pintong binuksan ko ay ang silid yata niya. Inside, I saw Cassandra and Castle sleeping.

I sighed, what a relief!

Lumapit ako at kinuha si Castle. Kinarga ko siya sa kaliwang braso ko at ipinasa sa kasama kong pulis. Tapos, binalikan ko naman si Cassandra.

Pinanood lang ako noong epal na babae habang inilalabas namin ng unit niya ang mga anak ko. I will file a restraining order against her, sisiguruhin kong hindi na siya makalalapit pa sa mga anak ko. Sinamahan ako ng mga pulis na iuwi ang mga bata, tapos nagpaalam na sila.

I put the kids to bed. I kissed the both of them and left the room. Pinuntahan ko si Yaya Lori, I found her in the kitchen, crying.

“Sir Dio...”

I wanted to slap her.

“You are so f*cking fired! Ayokong makita ka dito! Get the f*ck out!” I roared.

Nanginginig ang buong katawan ko sa galit. The kids weren't kidnapped. Wala ni galos ang mga anak ko. She was lying to me. I don't need her in my kids' life.

Hinintay ko talaga siyang makaalis, then I locked the doors. Tinawagan ko na rin ang

supervisor ng building para ipatawag ang locksmith, kailangang mapalitan ang mga lock ng unit ko bukas na bukas din.

I settled on the couch while drinking scotch. Pilit kong pinakakalma ang sarili ko. I was so f*cking scared because I thought I lost the kids.

I cannot lose them again. Not now, not ever.



CHAPTER 3

HOT

Dionysus Joaquin Consunji's POV

“What happened? Tumawag si Achill noong isang gabi, nagwawala ka daw, Dio. Ano ba’ng nangyari?”

Bumungad sa akin si Callista nang umagang iyon. It was a Saturday and I texted her the other night and told her that I fired my maid. Iyon siguro ang dahilan kung bakit siya nandito ngayon. Callista is my only sister. I am older by three years pero madalas sabihin ni Mama na parang si Callista ang panganay sa aming dalawa. She was the one always looking after me.

“I thought the kids were kidnapped. Apparently, they weren’t. I kinda made a scene at that woman’s place. Achill found out and maybe that’s why he called you.”

“What were you thinking? Saan ka ba nanggaling na naman kagabi? Di ba nga I told you that if you cannot take care of the kids, bring

them over to Mama and Papa, or at least let them stay with me?”

“I cannot do that. Ano’ng sasabihin ni Papa sa akin? That I failed as his son and now I am failing as a father to my children?”

“Pero hindi ba iyon naman talaga ang nangyayari sa ’yo?” she asked back. “Hindi mo na sila dapat kinuha kung hindi mo naman pala sila kayang alagaan.”

I cannot believe I am having this argument with Callista yet again. Ilang beses na naming pinag-awayan ito, wala namang nanalo sa aming dalawa. I won’t let her win, hindi kasi niya ako naiintindihan. Walang ibang pagpipilian sa sitwasyon ko. Hindi ko pinagsisisihan na kinuha ko ang mga anak ko. Akin sila. I should be the one taking care of them. Mahirap, oo, pero kinakaya ko.

Naiintindihan ko rin na hindi ako basta matatanggap nina Cassandra at Castle. I was an absentee dad. Akala ko kasi basta binibigyan ko sila ng sustento ay okay na. Nitong huli ko na lang na-realize na hindi pala dapat ganoon, na kahit wala akong balak pakasalan si Nicole noon, dapat ay naging involved pa rin ako sa buhay nila.

I was too late when I realized that. Ang layo-layo na ng loob sa akin ni Cassandra. She cannot



even look at me. Kapag tinitingnan niya ako ay para bang sinusumbatan niya ako. Napakabata pa ni Cassandra but she makes me feel like I will never be enough for her and her brother.

“Kaysa makipagmatigasan ka kay Papa, aminin mo na lang na hindi mo kaya.”

“And then what? He’ll rub it to my face?” inis na tugon ko.

Kinuha ko ang hawak na tasa ni Callista at ininom ang laman niyon. I cannot let Papa see that I am a weakling. It’s bad enough na binawi niya sa akin ang presidency at ibinigay kay Callista dahil pakiramdam niya ay magagawa ng kapatid ko nang mas maayos ang trabahong iyon. Hindi ko aaminin na nahihirapan akong kuhanin ang loob ng mga anak ko.

“Tell them the truth then,” Callista suggested.

“And break their hearts?”

“Mas madaling ikaw ang mali sa mga mata ng mga anak mo, kaysa ikaw ang tama? Ano ba’ng masama kung malaman nila na kaya sila ibinigay ni Nicole sa ’yo ay dahil mag-aasawa na siya? That’s easier. Yes, she loved the kids but the moment her fiancé stepped in, she ditched them. What kind of mother would do that? Iyong ibang tao nakikipagpatayan magkaanak lang, tapos siya, nabigyan lang ng diamond ring, itinaon na ang

mga bata.”

“Lower your voice,” I hissed at her.

“Are you talking about Mommy?” Natigilan kaming dalawa ni Cali nang makita kong nakatayo na si Cassandra sa entrance ng kitchen.

I shook my head.

“No. We’re not, right Cali?”

“Oh, if you say so,” sabi ng kapatid ko. Ngumiti siya kay Cassandra tapos ay inalok itong kumain.

My daughter sat on the dining chair while waiting for Cali to prepare her food.

“You know, Mommy cooks really good pancakes,” she told me.

“I’m sure she does.” Tumawa na lang ako.

“I don’t like it here, Daddy. Can you just send us back to Mom?”

Napatitig ako sa kanya tapos ay umiling ako. Hindi ako makapagsalita. It’s better that I be the bad guy in their eyes. Alam ko kung gaano nila kamahal ang mommy nila. I can’t just tell them the truth, it would break them.

“I told you, dito na kayo muna sa akin,” I said.

“But I don’t like you. I like Mommy more because she takes care of us.”

“Then, let me take care of you.” I smiled again.

She just eyed me. Tapos, sinimangutan niya ako saka nag-make face.



“I really don’t like you.”

I just sighed. Binalingan ko ang kapatid ko. “Cali, I have to run. Ikaw na muna’ng bahala dito.”

“Alright. Ingat, Dio.”

I took one look at my daughter, mas mukhang comfortable pa siya sa tita niya kaysa sa akin. And that frustrates me more. Alam na alam kong may kasalanan ako sa nangyayaring ito pero ang hiling ko lang, sana bigyan ako ng pagkakataon ng anak ko.

Molly Soria’s POV

“How’s Clari?”

I was having breakfast with Paolo that morning. Kahapon, dinalaw ko si Clari sa ospital, they seemed to be really hitting it off. Ipinagbabalat pa nga ni Paolo ng prutas si Clari kaya natutuwa ako na nagkakasundo na sila. But I was a bit shocked this morning when I saw Paolo. He looks like sh*t.

“I’m planning to take her to the farm,” sagot niya. “Pero ayaw niya. Galit na galit siya. Hindi ko siya maintindihan. Inis na inis ako pero hindi ko siya masigawan dahil iniisip kong baka ma-stress siya at kung ano ang mangyari sa bata.

Ayoko nang ganoon. I want her to be relaxed, I want her to have a happy pregnancy para happy rin ang anak ko. But she's too angry."

"Baka naman nabigla lang siya, Paopao. Alam natin pareho na hindi ka naman sobrang daling pakisamahan. Even I was shocked seeing how you treated her yesterday, but I think it was a good thing. Just let it pass and try to understand her more. Hindi mo siya masisisi, kasi naman, Pao, matigas din ang ulo mo. Bagay nga kayo." Tumawa ako habang nagsasabi sa kanya.

Inirapan lang ako ni Paolo sabay agaw sa pie na kinakain ko.

I giggled. I love mornings like this. Hindi kasi ako nag-iisa.

"How are you?" It was his turn to ask me.

"Coping," sabi ko. "Ang mahalaga, masaya siya. Sana maging healthy ang baby nila ni Catherine."

"Wala ka bang what ifs?" he asked again.

"Sobrang dami, Pao, pero ang mahalaga ay masaya na siya. Kumusta ang what ifs mo?"

Paolo stayed quiet. Napatingin siya sa may bintana tapos ay napailing.

"Hindi ko na iniisip iyon. Ubusin mo na 'yan. Ihahatid na kita. Lalabas na si Clari sa ospital, kukunin ko siya doon."



“Pao, ha, ’wag mong ipagpilitan ang gusto mo,” paalala ko sa kanya.

“I won’t. Jeez, *mom*, you’re getting into my nerves.”

“F*ck you.” Hinampas ko siya sa braso.

Inubos ko na lang ang tsaang ko at umalis na kami. He brought his car today, susunduin nga kasi niya si Clarita. Inihatid niya muna ako sa building ko pagkatapos ay umalis na siya. I was reading my schedule for that day while walking at the lobby, approaching the elevators. Nakahinga ako nang maluwag nang makita kong wala akong masyadong gagawin ngayon. If ever, my staff can attend to whatever need may arise.

I pressed the elevator button and waited for it to open. Bumukas iyon at sumakay ako, but then someone else got in and my eyes widened upon realizing who it was.

Si Dionysus Consunji. Ang stupid na tatay ni Cassandra. Hindi lang iyon, he was wearing tight—very tight jogging shorts, pero nakasampay lang sa balikat ang shirt. Nakabalandra na naman ang V-line niya, nakalitaw ang very defined niyang six-pack abs and his chiseled chest.

My eyes widened. It looked as if he just got back from running. Pawis na pawis rin kasi siya.

I looked away. But damn it! Hindi ko kayang

hindi pansinin ang mga bagay na iyon.

T*ng ina! Nakakainis. Nawawala ang poise ko sa lalaking ito.

But then, why would that happen? I shouldn't mind him. Wala dapat akong pakialam sa kanya. Hindi ko naman siya kaanu-ano! Nakakairita lang kasi nakakabuwisit talaga siya.

"So..." I found myself speaking. "Palagi ka ba talagang nakahubad?" I couldn't help but ask.

But then, I realized how wrong it was. Bigla na lang kasi siyang humarap sa akin. Napatingin ako, nanlaki pa ang mga mata ko nang pagalawin niya iyong pecs niya.

Parang luluwa ang mga mata ko. Nakakaloka! Hindi ako dapat ganito!

"Why do you care so much?" he asked.

Hindi na ako sumagot. To my surprise, may pinindot siyang kung ano sa elevator kaya huminto iyon.

"Is my body somehow bothering you? Am I making you feel hot?"

Napanganga ako. He was asking me that in a very sensual tone. Lalo akong naloka.

"Am I in some ways arousing your sexual curiosity?" Lumapit siya sa akin.

Ako naman ay humahakbang palayo hanggang sa maramdaman ko ang likod ko na lumapat sa



pader. I gasped. He trapped me between the wall and his body. Seryoso ang ekspresyon sa mukha niya.

Kumakabog nang sobrang lakas ang dibdib ko. Kinakabahan ako. Naiinitan ako, hindi ako mapakali.

To my surprise, he licked my neck.

“Sh*t!” I gasped. He even nibbled my earlobe. Bigla ko siyang naitulak. “Ang bastos mo!”

Tumaas-baba ang dibdib ko dahil sa hingal.

He just grinned. He pressed the button again and the elevator moved. Agad akong lumabas nang bumukas ang pinto kahit hindi ko pa floor iyon.

Habang naglalakad papunta sa fire exit at ganoon na lang ang hingal ko.

“Jusmio! What the f*ck is that?!”

Ang bilis-bilis ng tibok ng puso ko.

CHAPTER 4

BIGLA LANG

Dionysus Joaquin Consunji's POV

“Why do we need to go to church every Sunday, Daddy?”

Castle started asking me questions the moment I told them that we are going to church that Sunday morning. He is in the backseat with Cassandra. He was holding a green squishy while talking to me. *Nararamdaman kong unti-unti na akong natatanggap ng bunso ko. Si Cassandra lang ang mahirap makuha, ramdam na ramdam niya kasi ang pagkawala ko noon.*

“Because it’s family day and God is the center of our family,” I simply told him.

“But you have a very big family, Daddy. I’m so excited to see Tita Cali, she’s always nice to us. She’s a great cook, too! Unlike your cooking that’s not delicious. But it’s okay, Daddy, you’re still my Daddy.”

I saw Cassandra looking at her brother.



Nakataas ang kilay niya. I wanted to laugh, tuwing nakikita ko siya ay naaalala ko si Callista. Parehong-pareho kasi ang expression ng mukha nila.

Mukhang may gusto siyang sabihin dahil sa reaction niyang iyon, pero hindi na niya itinuloy. She just sighed and muttered something. I have a feeling that it had something to do about how stupid I am. Hinayaan ko na lang. Ayokong masyadong kinagagalitan si Cass. Hindi na kami magkasundo sa ngayon, at kapag ginawa ko iyon, lalong lalaki ang posibilidad na hindi kami magkasundong dalawa.

I parked the car inside the church's lot. Inalalayan kong bumaba sina Castle at Cassandra, pagkatapos ay magkakahawak-kamay kaming pumasok sa simbahan.

It was a church inside the village where my parents live. Naroon na si Callista at ang boyfriend niya. Nakita kong katabi na siya ni Mama, si Papa naman ay naroon na rin. He was just sitting down, seryoso ang mukha niya pero nagbago iyon nang makita ang mga anak ko.

“Lolo!” sigaw ng panganay ko, but it was more of ‘low-low’ because of her slang. Kinandong kaagad siya ni Papa at saka hinalikan sa ulo.

“How’s my favorite apo?” he even asked her.

“I’m good! Castle asked Daddy why we have to go to church today and Daddy answered fine. He also asked why he couldn’t cook good food. I also wanted to ask him why he always forgets to pick me up at school. But I didn’t ’cause he’d just lie about it.”

Kitang–kita kong dumilim ang mukha ni Papa habang nakatingin sa akin. I had to look away. Napansin ko namang hinawakan siya ni Mama sa braso para pakalmahin kahit saglit lang.

I just sighed. Naupo ako sa tabi ni Callista. Pinisil niya ang kamay ko na para bang sinasabi niyang magiging maayos din ang lahat kahit na alam kong malabong mangyari iyon.

Nagsimula na ang misa. Naupo ang mga anak ko sa tabi nina Mama at Papa. Hindi ako pinapansin ni Papa kahit na noong nagpalitan na ng ‘peace be with you.’ Matapos ang misa, tumuloy kami sa mansion.

“Dio,” Mama called me.

Lumapit ako sa kanya. Naupo kami sa isa sa mga couches sa living room habang si Papa, at si Callista at ang boyfriend niya, ay nakikipaglaro sa mga anak ko.

“Dio, what’s wrong?” my mother asked.

“Ma, wala.”

“Hindi p’wedeng wala. Dionysus, alam kong



mahal mo ang mga anak mo, but why do you keep forgetting to pick up Cassandra from school? Kaya lalong nagagalit ang papa mo sa 'yo, eh."

"Ma," Napangisi ako. "Matagal nang galit sa akin si Papa. Hindi kasi ako kasing-talino ni Orion o kasing-galing ni Heath, o kasing-tino ni Hunter o ni Yael o ng kahit na sinong pinsan ko. I am a big disappointment to him kaya hindi na bago sa akin ang galit siya. Kaya kong tanggapin ang lahat ng iyon because I know that I will never come close to what he expects of me. Hindi siya sinuwerte sa anak na lalaki pero bawi naman siya kay Calli, okay na rin iyon."

"Dionysus, ano ka ba!" Hinaplos pa ni Mama ang mukha ko. "Gusto lang ni Yllak na makitang maayos ka. Hindi iyong ganyan na hanggang ngayon, buhay-binata ka. He was happy when you decided to finally take your children. Hindi lang talaga siya natutuwa sa asta mo na ganyan pa rin. Nagagalit lang naman siya sa 'yo kasi..." Mama smiled knowingly, "magkaugali kayong dalawa." Kinindatan niya pa ako.

Napapalatak ako.

"Be good, Dio," she said, "for Cassie and Castle."

Nginitian ko na lang si Mama. Hindi ko alam kung paano ako magiging 'good.' Makakabawi pa

ba ako kay Papa? Nagsimula siyang magalit sa akin noong piliin kong 'wag ituloy ang masteral degree ko. Instead, I decided to pursue my dreams of being a *Formula One* driver. I really love the rush, the screams, and the adrenaline. I love it all so much that I was willing to give up everything, even my name.

Iba ako. Kung iyong mga pinsan ko, kukuha sila ng ibang career tapos ay babalik rin sa business, ako I took up business and I gave it all up because of my dreams.

Growing up, I was told that I should do what my heart desires. At iyon nga ang ginawa ko. I did what I love, it wasn't easy. It was a rocky road, pero kinaya ko ang lahat.

Noong nagsisimula na akong magkaroon ng pangalan sa racing, tuwang-tuwa ako. Nakasali ako sa Asian Cup, hanggang sa nakarating ako sa European Cup. I finished on the top five.

Doon ko nakilala si Nicole Lee. She's half-Korean half-Filipina. We dated, we had Cassie and then we broke up after two years. Pangarap ang inuna ko, but I provided for them.

Matapos ang tatlong taon, nagkita kami uli. Then, Castle was born. Wala namang kaso, nagkabalikan kaming dalawa. We were alright, but I was still racing. Pangarap pa rin, iyon muna



bago ang lahat.

Isang araw, tinanong niya ako kung saan ba kaming dalawa papunta, sinabi ko sa kanya ang totoo, na wala akong balak na pakasalan siya. Even then, I was willing to be involved in my children's lives, but I can never give her the marriage she was asking for.

Pinaalis niya ako at itinago niya sa akin ang mga bata. Then, I found them after two years, and she finally said that she was okay with us being friends. Ganoon na nga lang ang naging relasyon naming dalawa.

But then a few months ago, habang nasa Italy ako, I got a call. She said she wanted to see me. I went to the States two days later. Masayang-masaya siya nang makausap ko.

"I'm getting married," balita niya sa akin.

Napatango ako.

"Congrats. You know you could've just told me that over the phone."

"Hindi naman iyon ang main reason kung bakit kita pinapunta dito, Dio. I asked you to be here because I need you to take the kids."

Napakunot ang noo ko. "For how long are we talking about?"

"Forever, Dio."

Napaawang ang mga labi ko.

*“You don’t expect me to take care of your sh*t while I am starting my life with the man who gave me this diamond ring. You take them home to the Philippines and please ’wag ninyo na akong guluhin.”*

That same day, ibinigay niya sa akin ang mga bata. Wala akong ideya kung ano ang gagawin ko sa kanila. Dalawang araw pa kaming nag-stay sa States; si Cassandra ay walang ginawa kundi umiyak nang umiyak habang pinipilit akong iuwi sila sa mommy nila. Hindi ko masabi na iyong mommy mismo nila ang nagbigay sa kanila sa akin at wala akong magagawa kundi ang alagaan sila.

I also realized that I had been so wrong all my life. Dapat sila ang inuna ko kaysa sa mga pangarap ko.

Now I am stuck with them and I have no idea what I should do. I have no idea kung paano kuhanin ang loob ng panganay ko. Napakatigas ng ulo at ng puso niya. No wonder, Consunji nga siya. Lahat kasi kami ay ganoon.

Alas tres ng hapon nang magpasya akong iuwi na sila sa bahay ko. Papa told me na puwede kong iwanan ang mga bata sa bahay at dalhin ko na lang daw ang damit nila. Hindi. Ayokong lalong mapalayo ang loob ng mga bata sa akin. Hangga’t kaya ko, dito lang sila sa akin. Hindi ako susuko,



ngayon ako babawi at sisimulan ko iyon sa hindi paglimot sa pagsundo kay Cassandra.

Habang pauwi kami ay narinig ko siyang nagsalita.

“Daddy, the teacher told us last Friday that we’re gonna have a family day next Wednesday.”

“Really? I’ll be there,” sabi ko.

“No need to. I already told Lolo about it and he said he and Mamita will attend. You don’t have to go because I know you’ll only forget about it.”

Hindi ako nakasagot. I can’t believe I got roasted by an eleven-year-old.

Molly Soria’s POV

“Pupunta ikaw sa family day ko?”

Tinawanan ko ang pabulol na sinabi ni Meagan. Meagan is my seven-year-old niece. Anak siya ng kapatid ko at tuwang-tuwa talaga ako sa kanya. She’s the closest thing I can have for a daughter. I really love her.

“Of course, baby. I will cheer for you.”

“Ang dami ko pong cheerer. Si Mom saka si Dad, tapos ikaw, si Lola... si Tito Paopao, sabi niya pupunta rin siya.”

“We will all come for you, baby girl, ikaw pa ba?” Ginulo ko ang buhok niya pagkatapos ay

hinalikan siya sa noo.

We were in the living room, pinapanood ko siya habang nagkukulay siya ng kung ano. Habang tinitingnan ko si Meagan ay may kung anong bumibikig sa lalamunan ko. Hinaplos ko nang hinaplos ang noo niya pagkatapos ay ngumiti. If I could have one daughter, iyon na siguro iyong pinakamalaking himalang mangyayari sa buhay ko.

“Bakit ikaw nakatingin? Pangit ba ako?” tanong ni Meagan sa akin. Natawa ako bigla.

“Hindi. Ang cute mo nga. Ang galing mo nang mag-color. I’m so proud of you. I love you, Meagan.”

“Naku, naku, nagbobolahan na naman ang magtita,” narinig kong sabi ng kapatid ko.

I looked and I saw Monica Claire. Kararating lang niya at ng asawa niya galing kung saan. I stood up to kiss her tapos ay ganoon rin sa brother-in-law ko.

“Mukhang nauto na naman ni Meg si Tita Molly,” sabi ni Gerry habang nakatingin sa mga coloring materials na binili ko para sa bata. “Ang dami nito, Ate. Mawawala lang ni Meg ’to.”

“Hindi naman siguro. S’abi niya big girl na siya kaya kailangan niyang maging responsible,” sagot ko pa sabay kindat kay Meg.



The latter was all smiles. Natawa ang mag-asawa.

“Ate, susunduin ka na lang namin bukas para sa family day ni Meg, ah. Wear yellow, Yellow Team kasi tayo.”

“Alright. I’m so excited.”

Iyon nga ang nangyari kinabukasan. They picked me up. Naghandanda ako ng sandwiches and juice para kung sakali mang may magutom, may maibibigay akong pagkain.

We arrived at the school at nine am. Napakaraming tao. Mukhang masaya ang family day nila. Si Meg ay nakahawak sa daddy niya, kaming magkapatid naman ay nagtulong sa pagdadala ng mga sandwiches and juices. We settled on the Yellow Team’s part of the bleachers. Mayamaya daw ay magsisimula na ang program. Buti nga at hindi gaanong mainit ngayon kaya mas nakakagalaw ang mga bata.

“Tita, Tita, Tita!” Si Meg ay kinukulit ako nang husto, tawa naman ako nang tawa. Nililingkisan niya kasi ako na para bang unggoy siya at puno ako. Hindi ako mapakali kaya tawa ako nang tawa.

“Meg, mamaya ka na makipaglaro, baka malaglag ka diyan,” saway ni Monica Claire sa amin.

Meg just giggled. Pinugpog niya ako ng halik. Napalakas ang tawa ko. Binawalan ako ni Claire tapos ay napatingin ako sa paligid.

“Shhh...” awat ko sa pamangkin ko. Ginaya niya lang ako tapos ay naupo na sa tabi ko. Very behave na si Meagan sa tabi ko.

Habang nagsasalita iyong president ng school nila ay nagpaalam akong pupunta lang sa banyo. Mabilis akong bumaba sa mga bleachers. I went straight to the restroom and did my business. Palabas na ako nang makarinig ako ng maliliit na boses.

“You have to go here! You told me you’re doing number two, but I cannot wash your butt ‘cause it’s yucky.”

“Cassandra?” I was a bit surprised upon seeing her and Castle here. I didn’t know she’s here. Naka-yellow shirt rin siya.

“Hi, Miss Molly! How are you?” Castle was jumping around while greeting me.

“Hey, don’t jump! Your poopoo might fall!” Cassandra said.

Napatingin ako sa kanya.

“Nag-poopoo siya?”

“Yes po, and I cannot wash him because hindi ako marunong.”

“I will wash him.”



“Ay! Nahihiya ako! Makikita niya iyong puwet-puwet ko.”

Namula ang mukha ni Castle pero inalalayan ko na siya hanggang sa makapasok siya sa loob ng cubicle. I washed him, mukhang nahihiya talaga siya kasi nakatakip pa ang mukha niya habang ginagawa ko iyon. Nang matapos kami ay ibinigay kaagad sa akin ni Cassandra iyong pamalit na damit ng kapatid niya.

“Ayan, done na kayo,” sabi ko.

“Thank you,” sambit ni Cassandra.

I smiled at her. Medyo magulo ang buhok niya. Naghugas muna ako ng kamay bago ko sila inayang lumabas na.

“What are you doing here, Molly?” she asked me.

“My niece goes to this school, too,” paliwanag ko habang naglalakad kaming tatlo. Si Castle ay patalun-talon habang nakikinig sa usapan namin.

“Ay, anong grade na siya?” Cassandra asked again.

“Grade one. Sino’ng kasama ninyo?”

“Our Lolo is here and our Mamita. Plus, stupid Daddy is here, too.” She giggled.

“I see. Naku, ibabalik ko na kayo kung saan man kayo nanggaling, baka magalit na naman ang daddy ninyo.”

“Nagpaalam kami kay Mamita na magpupunta sa restroom. Daddy said he wants to come but Lolo told him not to kasi magkakamali lang siya.”

“Ay ganoon?” Napatawa ako. Hindi ko alam kung ano’ng magiging reaksyon ko.

“There’s Stupid Daddy.”

“Stop calling Daddy stupid, Cassandra. He’s good,” nakalabing saad ni Castle.

Pag-angat ko ng mata, namataan ko ang tatay ng dalawang bata. Kitang-kita ang kunot ng noo ni Dionysus Consunji habang papalapit sa amin.

Binitawan ko agad si Castle at tinatagan ang loob ko. Sobrang saya ko dahil may balot siya ngayon. Nakadamit si Bes, kaya lang hakab na hakab iyon at kahit nakatakip na, parang nakikita ko pa rin ang katawan niya, nakakaloka!

Kung malalaman ni Paolo itong iniisip ko, siguradong tatawanan ako noon.

Paolo calls me ‘Elsa,’ sing-lamig ko daw kasi ang yelo.

“Daddy!” Castle called him. Tumakbo siya palapit sa ama. Si Cassandra naman ay nanatili sa tabi ko.

“Ikaw na naman...” bati niya sa akin.

“Miss Molly helped me wash my puwet-puwet,” Castle disclosed.



Natawa si Cassandra. Napatingin naman si Dionysus sa anak niya.

“Really? Did you say ‘thank you?’”

“I did, Daddy.”

“He’s a polite boy,” hirit ko. “Unlike sa iba, hindi man lang marunong mag-apologize.”

Tiningnan ko siya nang makahulugan. Napangisi lang siya.

“Lolo!” Cassandra yelled.

I saw a man approaching. May-edad na iyong lalaki pero parang fit na fit pa rin at alagang gym ang katawan. Magkamukha sila ni Dionysus kaya sigurado akong magtatay sila.

Cassandra ran to meet the old man.

“Who is this woman, Dio?”

“Lolo, that’s Molly! She’s a friend of ours. She’s kind and she helped me wash Castle’s puwet-puwet. He’s Daddy’s girlfriend too! You see, Lolo, he has a girlfriend so we need to go back to Mommy na!”

Nanlaki ang mga mata ko. Si Dionysus rin ay nakatingin lang sa batang babae.

“Pa, it’s not...”

“What’s your name again, hija?”

“Molly Soria po, Sir.”

“Okay. You stay and have lunch with us. Bawal ang tumanggi,” sabi pa niya sa akin.

Napatingin ako kay Dionysus Consunji.
Hindi kami close, tapos magla-lunch kami
kasama ng tatay niya? What just happened?