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I cannot believe I am doing this, the thirty-four-year-old Chief Executive Office of *Erde and Prieto Corps.* thought disgustedly to himself as he hungrily kissed the woman in his arms.

The woman moaned sweetly in his mouth, pressing her soft breasts eagerly against him, ripping a guttural growl of desire from his throat. He pulled her closer, kissed her harder as his hands roamed recklessly across her soft, supple body.

Hindi alam ni Richard Benedict Erde Prieto ang nangyari kung bakit sila humantong sa ganitong sitwasyon. Nag-uusap lang sila kanina rito sa teresa habang sa loob ng bulwagan ng marangyang bahay ng Conner municipal mayor, patuloy na nagkakasiyahan ang mga bisita.

It was the twenty-fourth anniversary of *Geneva Erde Foundation*, ang charity foundation na pinangalan sa kanilang yumaong ina dalawampu't apat na taon na ang nakakaraan. Narito siya sa maliit na bayan ng Conner, Apayao para sa okasyon na iyon.

The foundation had been sponsoring different charity organizations all through out the Philippines. They sponsored orphanages, out of school youth programs, housing projects and medical missions. Dito sa Conner, sinusuportahan ng foundation

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ang medical mission ng pinakabata niyang kapatid na si Gareth.

Ah yes, he thought drily as he remembered his youngest brother. Ngayon parang naalala na niya kung bakit siya napunta sa sitwasyong ito.

Habang uhaw na hinahalikan ang babae sa kanyang bisig, naalala ni Richard na ang beinte seis años na si Gareth nga pala ang dahilan kung bakit siya naroon sa maliit na bayan ng Conner. Pinakabata sa kanilang pitong magkakapatid na Prieto ang doctor na si Gareth, ito ang pinaka-gentle at pinakamabait na taong kilala niya. Ito rin ang eksaktong kabaligtaran niya, pamula sa hitsura hanggang sa personality. Where he was dark and rugged, Gareth was fair and gentle looking. Where he was a capitalist, his brother's a philanthropist, while he's a hardcore cynic, Gareth was a one hundred percent idealist. Gayunpaman, sa kabila ng mga pagkakaiba nila, Richard was very fond of his youngest brother. Ang totoo, gusto niyang manatiling ganoon ang kapatid. Heaven knew there were too many cynics in the Prieto family, they all needed a bright and optimistic spark like him.

Kaya, nang matanggap niya ang email ni Gareth noong isang araw at kinukuwento sa kanya ang tungkol sa napakabait at napakagandang volunteered nurse na kasama nito sa medical mission, umandar ang gold-digger detector niya. Nag-impake kaagad siya ng gamit para sa isang one-week vacation at sumakay ng private plane papunta sa Conner, Apayao.

Mabuti na lang at nagkataong anniversary ng foundation

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kaya nagamit niya iyong dahilan sa kapatid nang bigla siyang dumating nang walang pasabi sa tapat ng pinto ng tinutuluyan nitong bahay.

And about seven hours later, heto siya, kissing Chantal Carbajal like some starved animal. Ang dalaga ang tinutukoy na napakabait at napakagandang nurse ng kanyang kapatid. And yes, if he had to admit anything, he agreed with Gareth, Chantal was indeed beautiful.

Sa kabila ng napaka-prim na damit nito at napaka-tight na pagkakatali ng buhok, she was annoyingly beautiful.

Richard growled appreciatively when Chantal opened her lips wider for him, allowing him greater access to her intoxicating sweetness. Niyakap niya ito nang mas mahigpit at lalong pinalalim ang halik.

Kanina, nang una niya itong makita kasama ni Gareth sa salu-salo para sa anniversary ng foundation, tila ito isang Ice Queen na stiff na nakatayo sa tabi ng kapatid niya. She was wearing a very conservative blue dress, may manggas iyon at lagpas-tuhod ang haba. Her long black hair was carefully twisted in a severe French bun. It should have been a turn-off. Napaka-old fashioned ng damit nito at gayundin ang buhok, pero sa kanyang pagkairita, natagpuan ni Richard na nag-iinit ang kanyang katawan habang tinititigan ang aloof at conservative nitong postura. And when her cold, almond eyes met his, he felt his lower body reacting.

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He narrowed his eyes at her then; he was sure alam nito ang epekto nito sa mga lalaki. Iyon ba ang ginagawa nito para paikutin ang mga lalaki sa palad nito? She used her cold, aloof and conservative image to turn men on?

He had to admit, that was kinda refreshing. Ang madalas kasing tactic ng mga babaeng katulad nito ay either pa-innocent slash pa-sweet effect, o kaya ay iyong hot sex kitten style. This was the first time he encountered the prim and proper, ice-queen-like femme fatale. At aaminin niya, with the way she was turning him on like some horny teenager, she was really doing a great job at it.

He groaned in her mouth as one of his hands glided up her waist to her ribcage, then he dragged his hand to her right breast and molded it in his palm. Napaungol ito roon at bahagya siyang itinulak.

“W-wait...” she whispered shakily.

Umungol lang siya at patuloy itong hinalikan. His hand continued kneading her breast through the fabric of her dress. Umungol din ito sa ginawa niya.

“Wait...”

“Shut up.” He groaned in her mouth and kissed her harder. She whimpered when his other hand pulled her behind and rotated it against his hips.

“Wait... Wait... Wait!” Malakas siya nitong tinulak palayo,

nanlalaki ang mga matang tinitigan siya nito.

Gaya niya, marahas ang paghinga ng dalaga. His eyes drifted to her lips, they were red and swollen from his kisses and he found his lower body reacting even more painfully.

“What are you doing?” he heard Chantal hiss.

Itinaas niya muli ang paningin sa mga mata nito. Puno ang accusation ang mga iyon. *Ah, the I’m-the-victim-effect*, he thought drily.

“You mean what are *we* doing?” Malamig ang boses niya.

“You... y-you kissed me!”

Ikiniling niya ang ulo. “Did I? Hindi ba ikaw ang humalik sa ‘kin?”

“I did not!” Puno ng indignance ang boses at mukha ng dalaga. He smiled graciously, he had to admit, she really knew how to act. “Andito lang ako sa terrace para magpahangin and... and the next thing I knew, you were here, too and... and we we’re talking about your brother—”

Lumamig ang mga mata niya.

“Oh, God, I can’t believe this! You—you’re awful! Hindi ko akalaing ang mabait na kapatid na kinukuwento lagi ni Gareth ay... ay—ay!” Napatalon ito sa gulat nang mag-ring ang cellphone nito.

Nanginginig at nagpa-panic na dinukot nito iyon sa bulsa nito.

“Oh, God! Oh, God!” sambit pa nito.

“Gareth...” Pinilit nitong gawing pormal ang tinig nang sagutin ang phone. He stiffened when he heard her call his brother’s name. “Asan ako, ah... ano, ’andito ako s—”

Hinalbot niya mula sa kamay nito ang phone, tinanggal ang battery niyon at sinuksok sa bulsa ng kanyang pantalon.

“What are you doing? Give it back!” angal nito.

“Stay away from my brother.”

She glared ice daggers at him. “Ano ba’ng problema mo? You’ve been hostile to me since we met! Ano ba’ng ginawa ko sa ’yo? You look at me as if I’m the lowest life form on earth! Give me back my phone—”

“Did you use that on Gareth, too?” malamig na untag niya. “Acting all righteous and tragic like some innocent virgin after kissing him like a sex-crazed slut—”

Isang malakas na sampal ang tumama sa panga niya.

“How dare you,” hinihinal na asik nito.

Malamig niyang tinitigan ang estranghera. Malalim ang paghinga nito at mariing nakakuyom-palad.

“You have no right to insult me like that.”

He smiled coolly. “Oh, really? Iyan din ba ang sinabi mo sa mga police noong mahuli ka ng mga ito na gumagamit ng illegal drugs kasama ang mga boyfriends mo?”

Nanlaki ang mga mata ng kaharap.

He cocked an arrogant brow. “Nakagat mo’ng dila mo?”

“What... how did you...?”

“It’s not really that hard to dig people’s dirt if you have the right money and connections, Chantal.”

Sumandal siya sa barandilya ng teresa at mataman itong tiningnan. Tila namutla ito sa mga sinabi niya. Hindi niya napigilan ang nanunuyang ngiti.

“Sino ang mag-aakala na ang napakarespetadong nurse na si Chantal Carbajal ay minsang nakasuhan ng drug abuse at drug trafficking?”

“That’s not true!”

“Yes, it’s not true. Kagaya ng hindi totoong hinalikan mo ’ko kanina, ganoon ba?”

Lalong napadiin ang kuyom-palad nito. He saw her jaw working and she looked as if she was fighting back her tears.

Women, he thought derisively.

“Spare me the tears, please. I’m not gonna fall for some cheap tears.”

“It wasn’t true... I didn’t do it...”

“Well, that’s not what the drug tests showed. Mabuti na lang at may pera pa ang pamilya mo noon at napagtakpan ang kaso kung hindi—”

“I didn’t do it!” pilit nito.

“Sure.”

“What do you want?” Tila kasig-lamig ng Antarctic ang boses ng babae. Malalim ang paghinga nito at mariing nakakuyom-palad pa rin. “Ano ba’ng gusto mo? Why are you doing this?” Her voice almost broke.

Mataman niya itong tiningnan. Pagkatapos, sa malamig ding boses ay nagsalita siya. “Stay away from my brother.”

Tila naguluhan ito kaya bahagyang naningkit ang mga mata niya.

“Still want to act innocent? Fine, let me state the facts more clearly. Tigilan mo ang pagdikit sa kapatid ko para makakuha ng pera sa kanya para tulungan ang bumabagsak na furniture business ng pamilya mo,” saad niya.

Tila lalo itong namutla. Tumigas ang anyo ng kanyang mukha.

“Wanna try to deny it?”

Nanginginig na nayakap nito ang sarili. “I... I was going to pay him back. Hindi ko ’yon tatakbuhan...”

“That’s good to hear, dahil sisiguraduhin ko talagang babayaran n’yo ’yon.”

Napalipad ang tingin nito sa kanya. “W-what do you mean?”

He cocked his head to one side. “I’ve talked to my lawyers, kailangan ng collateral para sa pinahiram na pera ng kapatid ko. Three million is three million, Chantal. Although pera niya iyon at dapat wala akong pakialam kung paano niya ’yon gagamitin, I still cannot let other people take advantage of his kindness. I want your parents to give my brother a collateral. Kapag di nila ginawa iyon, let’s just say I will make things hard for them, and trust me, when you’re the CEO of a multi-billion conglomerate, a near bankruptcy company like your parents’ doesn’t stand a chance.”

Kahit hindi nakikialam sa management, stockholder pa rin si Gareth sa *Erde and Prieto Corps.* kaya may dividends pa rin itong nakukuha mula sa kompanya. Dahil walang luho ang kapatid, halos maimbak lang ang pera nito sa bangko. His brother only used his money for charity purposes.

Her pretty eyes widened further; her lips trembled and for a moment he almost thought she would faint. Pero nanatili itong nakatayo sa kanyang harapan.

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“Don’t...” Napakahina niyon at muntikan na niyang hindi marinig. “Please don’t. May mana ako sa lolo ko... hihintayin ko lang ’yon.”

“That’s really nice to hear pero kailangan ko ng mas kongkretong panghahawakan. Isa pa, one million lang ang makukuha mo sa lolo mo, kulang pa rin iyon.”

“Please! Parang awa mo na. My parents... ang bahay na lang namin ang nasa pangalan namin... y-you can’t ask them to use it as collateral. Please don’t...”

“That’s not really my problem now, is it?”

Her lips trembled and she turned paler.

“Yes, of course...” Nanginginig na naisuklay nito ang mga daliri sa nakatali nitong buhok. “E-excuse me... I need to go...”

Nahalbot na niya ang braso nito bago pa ito makahakbang palayo.

“Let me make you an offer,” he said the words in a rush.

Mataman niyang tiningnan ang maganda nitong mukha. In the pale moonlight, her pretty face looked deceptively fragile and tragic. His gaze gravitated down to her lips again.

“Spend one week with me,” he found himself saying. “I need a female companion for my one-week vacation here in Apayao.”

Marahas nitong hinalbot pabalik ang braso, her eyes breathed

cold fire. Tila hindi nito kayang magsalita nang maaanghang na insulto sa sobrang galit.

He smiled condescendingly.

“Stop the act, please. You should actually be thankful, three million for a one-week escapade with me? I was actually giving it easy. And it’s not like you’re not gonna enjoy it—”

Marahas siyang sasampalin dapat ng dalaga ngunit sa pagkakataong ito, nahawakan niya ang kamay nito. He smiled coolly.

“You’re really good at this, aren’t you, Chantal? But there’s no need to play coy with me. I like things in black and white. You need money? Fine. In turn, I want you to give me something I want. I want you in my bed, pure and simple. Who knows? Kung matutuwa ako sa ’yo, baka tulungan ko rin talaga ang pamilya mong makabawi. Maybe then you wouldn’t have to sell yourself and pretend like some goody two shoes in front of everybody. And also, think of the three million as my payment for you to stay away from my brother. I’ll pay it in your stead. Malaki na iyon, hindi ba?”

“You are one despicable bastard. I... can’t believe na kapatid ka ni Gareth!” Nanginginig ito sa galit.

Lumamig ang mga mata niya. “Well, yes, Gareth and I are the exact opposite. So stop the act around me, I’m not gonna buy it.

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Pinilit nitong hilahin pabalik ang kamay pero hindi niya iyon pinakawalan.

“So what’s your answer?” His voice was rough, staring at her and having her this close were doing annoying things to his senses. Her scent and warmth was making him heady, his heart was beating uncharacteristically fast and the parts of his skin that were touching hers were tingling.

Ah, the wonders of lust, he thought; irritated at himself for being this affected by her.

Nang makita niya ito kasama ni Gareth kanina, he knew he wanted her. And if giving her the three million was what it took to bed her and to make her stay away from his brother, then that was fine by him. Three million was a cheap price to pay for his kind brother’s well being, and if he could bed her while he was at it, well that would be the icing on the cake.

Gamit ang malayang kamay, dinukot niya ang cellphone mula sa bulsa.

“Decide fast, please. Should I call my lawyers now and make them draft the contract?” untag niya.

Her eyes remained cold and hostile pero kitang-kita niya ang desperation doon. For a moment, he almost felt guilty. But he knew that feeling sorry for people like Chantal was dangerous. Kapag hindi siya nag-ingat, kakainin siya ng buhay ng mga taong kagaya nito. Sa mundong ginagalawan niya, he learned that it

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was either eat or be eaten. He learned that from his own relatives.

“I hate you.” Her voice was shaking.

“That’s really beside the point,” aniya. “So what’s your decision, Chantal? Should I make the call now?”

Inangat niya ang kamay at nagpunta sa phone book ng telepono. Nanlaki ang mga mata nito at malalamig ang mga kamay na pinigilan siya.

“No. Please... don’t...” This time, may luha na sa mga mata nito.

Nanliit ang mga mata niya. “Is that a yes?”

Tuluyan nang bumagsak ang luha nito.

His eyes narrowed further.

“Y-yes...” she said brokenly; tuluy-tuloy ang pagbagsak ng luha nito. “Just please. Don’t bother my parents... please...”

Stilling himself from reaching out to her and wiping her tears away, ibinulsa niya muli ang cellphone.

“I want you to stay away from my brother.” Malamig ang boses niya.

Umiiyak pa ring tumango ito.

“Don’t try calling him, and don’t you dare try to get close to him.”

“I’m not trying to get close to him!” asik nito.

“That’s not the impression I got from reading his emails.”
Hindi niya naiwasan ang pagtalim ng boses.

Humugot ito ng malalalim na hininga at pinilit na patigilin ang pagdaloy ng luha.

“Fine, gusto mo bang mag-draft ng contract para siguruhing hindi ko gagawin ’yon?” Bumalik ang tila yelong lamig ng boses nito.

Mataman niya itong tiningnan; she looked tragically beautiful like that with her eyes shining with tears. He had to give it to her, she really knew how to pull the cold and indignant I’m-the-victim act.

Sa kabila ng lahat ng iyon, hindi niya napigilang dumako muli ang mga mata sa mga labi nito. Nakita niyang tila bumilis ang paghinga nito dahil doon. He supposed he affected her in the same way that she affected him. Kung may isang bagay na totoo marahil sa dalaga, iyon ay ang atraksyon din nito sa kanya. Reponses like that were just hard, if not impossible to fake. Unless of course, experienced actress talaga ang dalaga.

With that thought, hinaklit niya ito sa baywang at dinikit ang katawan sa kanya.

Breathing hard, he stared at her dark eyes.

“Let’s seal the deal with something more primitive.” Bumaba

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ang mga labi niya para siilin ulit ito ng mapusok na halik.