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The things Alexandra would do for the love of her life, a.k.a. her Persian cat Dolly.

Masamang tinapunan niya ng tingin ang best friend niyang si Celine, at halos masilaw siya sa diamonds na suot ng babae.

Walang konsepto ng kontrol ang kaibigan niyang ito. The girl went all out with her outfit. Celine wore a skimpy purple dress that covered less skin than a freaking *Band Aid*. And those diamonds? Malamang tanaw sa outer space si Celine sa pagkinang ng mga iyon. And do not get her started on those shoes. By God, sa dami ng bato roon, maipambibili na iyon ng bahay at lupa sa Manila!

“Xandra, chill!” nakangising saway ni Celine nang makita ang kunsumisyon sa kanyang mukha. Inayos ng kaibigan ang suot nitong diamond-studded butterfly mask, at masiglang kumindat sa kanya. “Everything’s going to be okay, *yo prometo!*”

Naningkit ang kanyang mga mata. Hah! Easy for Celine to say! Hindi ito ang bumali ng mga sagradong batas ng *Valhalla*, ang exclusive BDSM club kung saan ay isa siya sa mga may-ari. Iniisip pa lang ni Xandra ang mga protocols

na sinuway niya ay tumatayo na ang kanyang mga balahibo.

The screening, the contracts, the non-disclosure gag...

Ah! Nanginginig na si Xandra sa anxiety attack.

Breathe in, breathe out, utos niya sa sarili. *Think of Dolly!*

Matalim niyang binalingan ang nakangiting kaibigan.

“Stop giggling!” she hissed.

Lalong bumungisngis ang babae at mahigpit siyang niyakap. “Relax, *amiga!* It’s okay! Calder won’t find out!”

Calder. Madiin siyang pumikit.

Dear God, if Calder would find out about this. Nakikita na ni Xandra ang pagdilim ng guwapong mukha ng binata.

Intense dark eyes glittering with fury. Tension stiffening his strong jaw and arrogant mouth. Jet black hair, corded muscles and sun-gilded skin. The guy was mouthwatering even when furious.

Speaking of mouthwatering...

Images from last night flared through her mind.

Hard chest damp from sweat sliding over the taut points of her breasts. Course hair of his muscular thighs abrading the soft skin of her legs. His hot mouth on her neck, his swollen c*ck sinking deep and long inside her tight, clenching sex. His rough groans, his feverish skin...

Kumuyom ang kanyang mga daliri at lumalim ang paghinga. Ramdam din ni Xandra ang pagpintig ng init sa pagitan ng kanyang mga hita. She was still sore down there, her sex bruised and achy from the long hours of hard f*cking.

Dapat ay isinuot na niya kanina pa ang sarili niyang maskara. Alam niyang namumula ang kanyang mga

pisngi. Salamat sa maputi niyang balat, mukha siyang kinukumbulsyon sa mataas na lagnat tuwing namumula siya.

Pero salamat sa Diyos at masyadong abala si Celine sa pagtingin sa paligid para mapansin ang pag-iinit ng kanyang mga pisngi.

Iniiwas niya ang paningin sa kanyang best friend at ibinaling sa mga paintings sa mga dingding.

Her dear Calder.

Bakit ganito pa rin ang reaksyon niya sa binata? One would think she would be a bit used to him by now. She had known him her entire life, and they had been engaged for around eight years now. But no. Just the mere mention of his name had her breasts swelling, the flesh between her thighs moistening.

Sandali siyang pumikit at pinuwersa ang sariling ituwid ang mga balikat habang naglalakad sila sa marangyang pasilyo ng *Valhalla*.

“This is so great, Xandra!” Celine chirped. “This is not what I expected. This place looks so elegant and classy.”

“This is not your cheap BDSM club, Celine,” sagot niya, wala sa sariling pinasadahan ng tingin ang mamahaling furniture sa pasilyo.

Victorian ang istraktura at mga kagamitan ng mansion. Gilded furniture, rich dark wood, intricate carvings, dripping crystal chandeliers, and original pre-Raphaelite paintings graced the halls and rooms of the mansion.

There was no cheap red lights and seedy bar in *Valhalla*. The BDSM club had been built for gods, also known as

the uppermost echelon of Philippine society. Mga politiko, corporate magnates at socialites ang miyembro ng kanilang BDSM club. They had made sure they gave their clients the best.

Pero hindi lang dami ng pera sa bank account ang requirement para makapasok sa *Valhalla*. Mas matindi ang screening na pinagdadaan ng mga gustong pumasok sa club kaysa sa mga tumatakbong presidente ng Pilipinas. Kung hindi lang niya kilala si Celine mula noong naka-diaper pa sila, hindi niya ito dadalhin sa loob ng club nang hindi dumadaan sa mga testing at background check.

But that was not the point.

The point was the brooding, ridiculously handsome, six feet three of pure compact muscles and raw masculine perfection named Calder Aric Fernando Rocha.

“God, Celine, if your brother finds out about this—”

“Shh... he won't! Don't worry about it. At kung malaman man niya, just tell him I kidnapped poor little Dolly and threatened to dye her fur pink if you didn't tell me about this place. At totoo naman 'yon. Kung hindi mo 'ko dinala dito, talagang magiging cat version ni Nicki Minaj ang fluffy white Persian cat mo.”

“Damn it.” Nahilot ni Xandra ang sentido. “I just wished you didn't overhear us talking about this place.”

“Oh, shush. Mabuti nga at narinig ko. Hurt pa rin ako, ha. Ba't di n'yo 'ko isinasali dito? You're excluding me from all the fun!”

Fun? Sakalin kaya niya ito?

Pero humagikhik lang ang kaibigan at mahigpit siyang

niyakap. Ayaw man ng dalaga, napaungol na lang siya at napailing. Mahirap manatiling inis kay Celine. The girl was like an overly excited puppy.

“God, Xandra, security ’yan ’no?” impit na bulalas nito.

Bahagyang nanlaki ang kanyang mga mata at napalipad ang tingin sa kaharap na pasilyo. Oh, for Christ’s sake. Just her freaking luck!

She groaned as she watched the head of *Valhalla’s* security team striding toward them.

At least it’s not Calder, sulsol ng isang boses sa kanyang isipan. *Count your goddamn blessings, sweetie.*

“Shh,” she hissed. “Act normal. Lalo tayong mabubuking.”

Itinaas ni Xandra ang noo at sinalubong nang derecho ang nakunot-noong matangkad at maskuladong lalaki.

Think of Dolly!

“Good evening, Ma’am,” magalang na bati ni Vito sa kanya. Kagaya ng lahat ng miyembro ng security ng club, imposing ang lalaki kahit na simpleng itim na dress shirt at slacks ang suot nito.

It’s those muscles, naisip niya.

“Good evening, Vito. Nagsimula na ba ang masquerade? Dederecho kami d’on.”

Isa rin iyon sa dahilan kaya pumayag siyang isama ang kaibigan ngayong gabi. May 1920s-themed masquerade ball sa *Valhalla*, at nakasuot ng maskara ang mga miyembro. Mahihirapan itong makilala ng mga naroon. Sa kabila ng pag-kidnap ng kaibigan sa kanyang pusa, she would trust Celine with her passwords and bank accounts. She knew her

friend would not gossip about the people in the club. But still, her loyalty to the members and her duty would not be quashed. Priority pa rin niya ang privacy ng mga miyembro ng *Valhalla*. It was not much, but the masquerade still provided a semblance of anonymity.

“Ma’am, ’yung kasama n’yo po—”

“Is with me. Okay na, Vito. She’s my guest, my responsibility. We’re good.”

“Pero, Ma’am—”

“What?” putol niya rito. “Are you questioning me, Vito?”

Naramdaman niyang naalarma ang lalaki at mabilis itong humakbang paatras. Her stomach knotted and clenched. God, she hated it. She hated people who used their position to intimidate others to get what they wanted, especially when it was unjustifiable. Pero heto siya at ginagawa iyon.

“No, Ma’am, of course not.”

Tumango si Xandra at pinatatag ang kanyang sikmura. “Thank you. Good evening, Vito.” Tiim-bagang siyang nagpatuloy sa paglakad sa kahabaan ng pasilyo.

“Girl, ang taray. Are you questioning me?” gaya ni Celine sa kanya. “Sabihin mo, dominatrix ka ba? Oh, God, does that make my brother a submissive?”

“Shut up,” she bit out. “Goddamn it, Celine. I can’t believe I’m doing this. Siguradong tatanungin ako ni Calder kung sino ’yung isinama ko dito.”

At lalo niyong pinabigat ang buhol sa kanyang tiyan. She could already see the dark suspicion in his eyes,

could already see the tension hardening the corners of his sculpted mouth. He had never fully trusted her again since that night four years ago. Never fully believed in her again.

Kumuyom ang kanyang mga palad at pinilig ni Xandra ang ulo. Tumabing ang ilang hibla ng buhok sa kanyang pisngi. Kalmado niyang isinuksok iyon sa likod ng kanyang tainga. Pero imbis na mahabang hibla ang mahaplos, ang maikling buhok ng wig ang kanyang nahawakan.

Napaismid siya. Gaya ni Celine, naka-costume din siya para sa masquerade ball. But it was nothing as remarkable as her friend's outfit. She had always believed that less was more. The simpler, the better. Boring? Maybe. But she preferred the term 'classy.'

The shimmery gold lamé dress skimmed her body but flowed over her curves whenever she moved, and the vintage headpiece of crystal, feathers, pearls, and silver lace were classic 1920s. Dahil uso ang maikling buhok noong panahong iyon, nagsuot si Xandra ng maikling wig para itago ang mahaba at maalong buhok.

"Management's extremely strict with who enters *Valhalla*," saad niya. "Everyone has to undergo interviews, rigorous psychological and medical tests, and thorough background checks before you can even set foot here."

"Shh, 'wag kang maingay. May security ulit. Alam mong gagawin ko lahat 'yan kung hindi lang ako naka-blacklist dito. I bet may security si Calder within 500-meter radius para siguruhing hindi ako makakalapit sa club na ito. Damn it, bakit kayo lang ang puwede dito? You're all unfair."

"Just don't do anything stupid. And whatever you do,

don't take that freaking mask off."

"I won't, promise. Dali na, Xandra, start the tour."

Umungol siya, at pinaalalahan ulit ang sarili kung bakit niya ito ginagawa. Inilibot niya si Celine sa ibabang bahagi ng club.

"*Valhalla* is divided into three floors," sambit ni Xandra. "This is the first floor, and it's mostly PG-13. Narito sa floor na 'to ang mga restaurants—"

"May restaurants dito?"

"We have three. Isa for Asian cuisine, isa for English and Mediterranean, at isa for Russian and Turkish. We also have two gyms here, an Olympic-size swimming pool, a spa, a game room. Mingling at socializing ang main purpose ng floor na 'to."

"Maglagay na rin kaya kayo ng mga sinehan at boutiques?"

She smirked. "We just might. Dito rin ang mga classrooms para sa mga instructional classes."

Nadaanan nila ang eleganteng sitting room, pagkatapos, itinuro ni Xandra ang kahoy na pinto sa isang malaking archway. "There's the bar and club." Dumaloy sa kanyang mga kalamnan ang pamilyar na tensyon sa tuwing nalalapit siya sa isang bar and club.

The sharp colorful lights, the scent of cigar and alcohol. A man's rich laughter. Calder's dark fury.

Umiling siya sa sarili. "Walang tao ngayon d'yan dahil nasa ballroom silang lahat. Some are on the second level."

"A club within a club?" Bumungisngis si Celine. "You have security staff everywhere all the time?"

May natanaw ulit silang staff.

Iniwas niya ang tingin at nagpatuloy sa paglakad. “In all public rooms, yes. No one would force you to do anything you don’t want to do here. A security personnel is always close by.”

Napatingin si Celine sa mga CCTV cameras sa hallway. “And you still have those security cameras everywhere.”

“We take the safety of our clients seriously.”

“Kahit sa mga private rooms, may camera?”

“Yes, at full disclosure ’yon. Alam ’yon ng mga members n’un pang sumali nila. We’re not taking any chances. We want to make sure everyone is safe within the premises of *Valhalla*. We want our members to feel safe as they freely enjoy and explore whatever kink they have. Importante ’yon sa ganitong klase ng pamumuhay. We’ve got a trusted team supervising the feeds ’round the clock. We also have a 24-hour clinic on the second floor for emergencies. Plus, we have a non-disclosure agreement for both members and employees. What happens in *Valhalla*, stays in *Valhalla*.”

May mapagmalaki siyang ngiti nang matapos magpaliwanag. She was proud of their work here in the club. Nang ilahad sa kanya ng fiancé ang tungkol doon tatlong taon na ang nakakaraan, nanlamig ang kanyang mga palad. Pero personal ang dahilan niyon kaya mabilis niyang tinapakan. They were talking about a promising business venture. Personal demons had no place in that cold, calculating world. That was the least she could do for Calder. And the hungry businesswoman in her had seen the possibilities, the avenues waiting to be explored, the market

waiting to be grabbed. And she had seized it with maniacal glee.

“Taray. Businesswoman talaga ang arrive.”

“F*cking A. Walang makakapasok na hindi member. Sa gate pa lang, hindi na papapasukin. Unless kagaya mo na may kasamang may-ari ng *Valhalla*. At bihira lang nangyayari ’yon. In fact, ngayon lang nangyari ’yon.”

Tinapunan niya ulit ng matalim na tingin si Celine.

“*Te quiero*, Xandra. I love you, really.” Humagikhhik ito at niyakap siya.

“Yeah, yeah.”

“I really missed you, friend.”

“Oh really? Is that why right after you came home from *Harvard*, you kidnapped my cat and blackmailed me. Not cool, Celine!”

“I’m sorry.”

Muli niyang nirendahan ang damdamin. “Come on.”

Dinala ni Xandra ang kaibigan sa sentro ng unang palapag, sa malaking bulwagang puno ng mga miyembro.

Napasinghap ang kasama habang nanlalaki ang mga matang nakatitig sa paligid. Malamang ay nagulat ito sa dami ng miyembro. There were at least two hundred men and women mingling in the ballroom, all dressed to the nines.

Parang bulwagan sa isang kaharian ang tanawin sa kanilang harapan. Thick, gilded pillars rose from the polished golden floors to the high ceiling painted with angels, nymphs, and gods. Dozens of crystal chandeliers dangled from high above, washing the ballroom in soft

golden lights. The scent of roses, lilies and orchids perfumed the air as strains of music and laughter echoed through the vast ballroom.

A proud smile curved her lips. Elegance and beauty. They did wonderful work here. Kailangan niyang bigyan ng bonus ang mga bumubuo ng staff sa magandang disensyo ng ballroom nang gabing iyon.

“Oh, Xandra.”

“Close your mouth,” she admonished. “Wag kang lalayo sa tabi ko. I’m serious, Celine.”

Nakihalubilo sila sa mga bisita, pero siniguro niyang hindi makikipag-usap ang kaibigan sa kahit na sino roon. Puwede itong makilala ng mga miyembro kapag nakipag-usap ito.

“Xandra,” usal ng kaibigan. “Are those collars?”

Pasimple nitong itinuro ang kwintas ng ilan sa mga babae. The collars looked mostly like chocker necklaces, nothing tacky. Some were made of diamonds, pearls, precious metals like gold, silver and platinum encrusted with expensive gemstones.

“Yes,” sagot niya. “You know what it means, right? You’ve read books, right?”

Wala sa sariling napahawak si Xandra sa kanyang leeg, sa bakanteng espasyo roon.

Collar. It meant different things to different people. To some, it could be used to show that someone was temporarily under someone’s protection. In other cases, it could mean they were a submissive and were looking for a dominant.

Confusing? Iyon din ang tingin niya.

Pero madalas, parang wedding ring o engagement ring ang ibig sabihin niyon. A symbol of commitment defined by the people involved in the relationship.

It was a special symbol, a deeply personal one.

Namuo ang emosyon sa kanyang lalamunan at kumuyom ang mga daliri sa bakanteng espasyo ng kanyang leeg. Calder never gave her one.

Bumaba ang tingin ni Xandra sa kanyang palasingsingan, sa emerald-cut diamond engagement ring niya. It was an heirloom ring from Calder's family, the humungous rock covering practically half of her ring finger.

Iniiwas niya ang tingin sa daliri at sumimsim ng champagne mula sa kopita na dinampot niya mula sa dumaang staff.

“Let's go to the second level,” yaya niya. “I know you're dying to see it.”

May security rin sa tapat ng mga elevators, pero hindi sila inabala niyon matapos niyang tumango nang maikli.

“Don't you dare squeal and giggle,” asik niya kay Celine nang nasa loob na sila ng elevator.

“I'll try,” hingal na sagot nito.

Pinagmasdan ni Xandra ang repleksyon nila sa salaming dingding ng elevator, at hindi niya napigilan ang pagkagat ng pang-ibabang labi. Celine looked so small and delicate beside her, while she looked too... well, she looked too big. Tumiiim-labi siya. Tall and big boned, her breasts seemed a little too big, her hips a little too wide, her ass a little too fat.

No dainty and fragile imagery for her. Unlike Celine,

unlike other petite women who incited protective instincts in men, she looked like a bulky log.

Unlike Sorcha...

Kumuyom-palad ang dalaga nang kumislap sa isipan ang imahe ng isang babaeng may blonde na buhok at asul na mga mata. Sorcha. Petite and delicate Sorcha with her fine features, slim shoulders, and tiny waist. The half-Irish and half-Filipino scion of one of the Philippines' newest mining magnates was dainty beauty personified.

At kasalukuyang kasama ito ni Calder sa isang business dinner.

She scowled at her reflection.

Bumukas ang pinto at halos mahimatay sa pananabik ang kanyang kaibigan. Napailing siya rito. Baka magtitili si Celine kapag nakita ang ballroom sa dulo ng pasilyo.

The second floor was mostly dedicated to the private suites. It worked mostly like a hotel. Kailangang magpa-reserve ng kuwarto bago iyon gamitin.

“What’s inside the rooms, Xandra?” maningning na untag ni Celine.

“Different things. We cater to an extensive variety of tastes. But mostly, the members themselves personally bring the tools and equipment they need for whatever activities they want, although we could also provide if they request for it.”

Hinila niya ang kasama papunta sa dulo ng pasilyo, at nang tuluyang humantad sa babae ang eksena, halos malaglag ang panga nito.

She snickered. Alam ni Xandra ang naramdaman nito.

Halos ganito rin ang kanyang reaksyon nang una siyang makakita ng live orgy. And it was not just an average orgy, but a Bondage and Discipline, and Submission and Sadomasochism at that.

Pero nawala ang kanyang ngiti nang maalala ang reaksyon ni Calder nang gabing iyon na ipinakita nito sa kanya ang orgy at talakayin sa kanya ang business proposal nito tungkol sa BDSM club. The cold temper in his eyes, the arctic smile.

Walang emosyon niyang pinagmasdan ang tanawing kaharap. Everyone was in various stages of undress, but they all kept their masks in place. Nakatali ang ilan sa mga kadenang nakalawit mula sa kisame, habang ang iba ay sa paekis na kahoy at mga spanking benches. The sound of whips, moans, and groans filled the sultry air.

Threesomes, foursomes, whatever-somes. Name it, it was there in different shapes or forms.

“Too much?” malamig niyang untag.

Celine giggled and clasped her hands. “No, it’s awesome!”

“Let’s go to the third floor.”

“No! I want to stay here! I like this! Gusto ko pang manood—”

Maikli siyang umiling. “No. Tour. Iyon lang ang pinagkasunduan natin. You can’t stay here long.” Tumiim-labi siyang tumitig sa pasilyo. “Baka dumating si Calder. He’ll skin both of us. After showing you the third floor, you have to go.”

“But—”

“No. Halika na.”

Hinila ni Xandra ang best friend papunta sa elevator.

“This is not fair!” maktol ni Celine sa loob. “Bakit kayo nina Calder, p’wede? Bakit ako, hindi?”

Muntik na siyang ngumiti nang mapait. She wondered. Was she really a part of this?

“Sabihin mo ’yan sa kapatid mo.”

“It’s not fair. You guys are always leaving me behind. Lalo na ’yang sina Calder at Brant. Mula pagkabata, lagi na lang nila ’kong hindi sinasali. I’ll tell Mom and Dad about this!”

“Do what you want. Pero sabihin mo muna sa kapatid mo.” Mabigat niyang tinitigan ang ilaw sa panel ng elevator. “And don’t tell him I brought you here. Talk to him.”

“Maybe I would.”

“Good luck.”

“I hate you, bitch.”

Pagak siyang tumawa, pero mukhang hindi iyon napansin ni Celine. Mahigpit siya nitong niyakap at malakas na umungol.

“Gah, I’m going to talk to Calder about this,” sambit ng babae.

“Go.” She shot her friend a frigid glare. “But don’t tell him I brought you here, clear?”

“Yeah.”

Bumukas ang elevator at tumapak sila sa third floor. Ito ang level para sa mga may-ari ng *Valhalla*. Sumulyap si Xandra sa kanyang suite sa southwest na bahagi ng pasilyo at mapait na napasulyap sa northeast, sa suite ni Calder. He

chose the farthest room from hers.

“This level is for the elite members,” walang emosyon niyang saad.

“Yeah, yeah, alam ko na. Dito sina Calder, di ba? The founding members and owners? So dito rin sina Brant at Alec?”

Tumango ang dalaga.

“Ilang suites meron dito?”

“Nine private suites. They only allowed six more members here. Close friends. And no, I won’t tell you their names.”

“It’s okay. I think I can guess, anyway. Sa ’yo ang isa sa mga suites?”

Sumaksak ang sakit sa kanyang tiyan, at pinigilan ni Xandra ang mapait na ngiti. “Yes.”

“Why? Bakit hindi na lang kayo mag-share ng suite ni Calder?”

Yes, why indeed?

“May infinity pool dito sa rooftop,” sa halip ay sagot niya, “at accessible ’yon sa lahat ng elite members. Ito lang ang mga private rooms na walang surveillance cameras, pero meron pa rin dito sa hallway at sa mga public rooms. As members of the elite, your brother and his friends had sworn to each other never to do anything inside their private suites that would break the laws of *Valhalla*. Kaya talagang mga pinagkakatiwalaang kaibigan lang nina Calder, Brant at Alec ang pinayagan nila sa level na ito. May bar and club din sa level na ’to. May maliit na ballroom. Again, only for elite members and whoever they want to bring up here.”

“But no outsiders?”

Tumango si Xandra, at hinawi ang ilang hibla ng buhok ng tumabing sa pisngi. “Yes, no outsiders. Members rin lang ang puwede nilang dalhin dito sa itaas.”

Had Calder brought women in his room whenever she wasn't around? Did things to those women he wouldn't do to her?

Nausea rose up her throat as sharp images flashed through her mind. Calder tying a woman to his bed, f*cking her until her throat was hoarse from screaming his name. His submissive for the night. Or did he have a regular one?

What happens in *Valhalla*, stays in *Valhalla*. No one would have told her if he had.

Celine nodded. “Well, that's really—”

“Xandra.”

A jolt of electricity shot up her spine. She whirled around, her eyes wide, her heart pounding a deafening beat inside her chest.

And there he was. Her sweet dream and beautiful nightmare striding toward her.



2



The world seemed to fade away, the colors paling in his presence, the world tipping to center around him.

He strode toward them, his muscular legs eating up the distance, the black three-piece suit he wore molding over his muscular frame. And his eyes were on her. Dark and intense, his jet-black hair framing his chiseled face. No smile for her, he rarely smiled for her now. His sculpted mouth was a severe line, his broad cheekbones and square jaw harsh and rigid in the lambent golden light.

“Shit,” anas ni Xandra, “shit, shit.” Sandali siyang pumikit, at sa kabila ng lahat, ramdam niya ang pagdaloy ng init sa kanyang dugo at balat. “Magtago ka, and never take that freaking mask off. Wait until I call you.”

“But—”

“No buts.” Did her voice sound throaty? “Talk to him later about this place. But don’t tell him I brought you here. No buts, Celine. Stay in the library. Sa dulo ’yon nitong hallway. I’ll call you.”

She lifted her chin and strode down the hall to meet Calder.

His dark gaze felt hot against her skin, soaking her dress

and flesh. His gaze roved over her face, drifting to her lips, sliding down to her pale throat and to the soft swell of her breasts exposed by the low neckline of her dress. She could feel the peaks stiffening into tight points, could feel the melting heat of wetness softening her sex.

Eyes hooded, her toes curled as she walked over to him. Tumayo si Xander sa harapan ng nobyo, bahagyang malalim ang pahinga. “Calder.”

His gaze flicked back to her face, the familiar coolness seeping through those dark depths. “Who is that?”

Sandali siyang pumikit, pinaglabanan ang lamig na dala ng matigas nitong boses.

“She’s a friend of one of your friends here.” Nagmulat siya at sinalubong ang matamang titig ng binata. “She’s cleared for this level, Calder.”

His eyes remained cool and stony.

“Do I know her?” Nilagpasan siya ng lalaki at malalaki ang hakbang na sinundan ang papalayong si Celine. “Miss,” he bit out.

Namuo ang kaba sa kanyang sikmura, at hinabol niya ang binata.

“Calder,” tawag ni Xandra, pilit kinakalma ang tinig. “Come on. I think she’s shy.”

“She doesn’t have to tell us her name.”

Shit. Nakilala ba nito ang kapatid?

Ignoring her, he lengthened his stride to reach Celine, making her heart thump like crazy.

“Miss!” pakli nito. “Stop right—”

Hinila niya ang braso ng nobyo at pilit itong hinarap.

“Calder, what are you doing? She’s cleared for this level. She obviously doesn’t want to be recognized, and that’s her right as a member.”

“A member?” he shot back at her. “Is she really?”

That was a slap to her face.

Oo, totoong hindi miyembro si Celine, at binali niya ang marami sa mga batas ng *Valhalla*. Pero ang derechahan siyang pagdudahan ni Calder? That flat certainty in his cold eyes was a sharp blade to her gut. He didn’t even give her the benefit of the doubt, he already proclaimed her guilty. Was that twisted logic on her part? After all, guilty talaga siya. But it still hurt like a bitch.

Marahil ay nakita nito ang pagdapo ng hapdi sa kanyang mukha, kaya tumiim-bagang ang lalaki at tumigil sa pagsunod kay Celine.

“Who is she?” pakli muli nito.

“Someone who is cleared for this level,” she answered hoarsely. “Sa tingin mo ba, magdadala ako rito ng kahit na sino na makakasama sa *Valhalla*?”

“You did not answer the question.”

“I already did. How was your business dinner?” Her fist clenched as she remembered who he was with tonight. Beautiful and soft-looking Sorcha with her blonde hair and blue eyes. Women like her awakened primitive masculine instincts in men, especially in men like Calder. Her throat constricted. “How was Sorcha?”

Parang may bumagsak na tabing sa mukha ng lalaki, at lalong nanikip ang kanyang sikmura. Emotions leeches out of his chiseled face, leaving his features harsh and deviously

cold. "It went well, thank you."

There was a mocking tightness to his voice, a frosty dismissal to her jagged emotions. But it only grated her insides, sharpened the edges of her fear and anger.

"I want to be present the next time you have business dinner with her."

"You will not."

The outright rejection burned her. "Why not?" singhal ni Xandra.

"Your question is so ridiculous it doesn't even merit an answer."

Did he just call her ridiculous? "I want--"

"My business with Sorcha is none of your concern. It's a business deal between the Salcedos and Rochas, you have no right butting into something that does not concern you."

Dapat ay sinampal na lang siya nito. It would have hurt less. He only gave her access to parts of his life he deemed should concern her. She had no permission to get involved unless he allowed her to.

Pero hindi napigil ng dalaga ang sarili. "What did you talk about?"

He turned his back on her, coldly dismissing her. "It does not concern you."

"I need to know--"

"Enough, Xandra. My business deal with Sorcha has nothing to do with you. Stop nagging, it's irritating."

Nagging. She was irritating him. She had no right to be upset when he was having cozy dinners with another woman.

“She wants you,” pakli niya, hindi mapigilan ang pait sa boses. “She’s using this business deal to get close to you.”

“Does she, now?”

“Stop acting innocent!” she screeched, and goddamn it, she never screeched. “You know it, and you’re still going along with it. You still go out with her to these lunch dates and dinners and social functions where she practically drools all over you! She wants you the very second she saw you and you know it, but you never once tried to dissuade her. And if we’re being perfectly honest here, you’re even encouraging her. Don’t you dare, Calder. If you think I would just stand back here while you cheat on me—”

Lumingon ang lalaki at humakbang palapit sa kanya; tila nililok sa yelo ang bawat anggulo at linya ng aristokratiko nitong mukha.

“You dare talk to me about cheating?”

It froze her on the spot, his wintry contempt chilling her.

“Wag kang mag-alala,” dugtong ng binata. “Masyadong mataas ang respeto ko sa sarili ko para gawin ’yon. I’m not you.”

The cold words hit the mark, and she stumbled backward. Her chest constricted from pain, crumbling under the force of his hatred.

Pero tumalikod na si Calder at malalaki ang mga hakbang na naglakad na papunta sa suite nito.

Madiin siyang pumikit.

She deserved that. She deserved this. If anything, she should be grateful Calder still stayed with her. He could

have discarded her, found someone more suitable for him. Instead, he saved her and became her anchor when she needed it most. Nagiging martyr ba si Xandra? Itakwil ba siya ng mga peminista sa kanyang inaasal? Hindi niya alam.

Ang alam lang ng dalaga ay kung may laban na karapat-dapat ipaglaban, ang relasyon niya kay Calder ang bagay na iyon. Utang niya iyon sa sarili niya.

“I want us to use my room tonight,” mababa niyang sambit.

Huminto ang lalaki pero hindi lumingon. Pagkatapos, bumuga ito ng hangin na para bang napapagod na sa kanilang usapan.

“I’m tired, Xandra. I have an early flight tomorrow. I don’t have time for this.”

Tama, aalis ito bukas para sa dalawang linggong business trip sa California... kung saan makakasama nito si Sorcha Salcedo.

She swallowed her pain and reached for the thin strap of her dress. “Please.”

Lumingon ang binata sakto sa paghila niya pababa sa strap ng kanyang bestida.

His eyes flashed with dark fury as her clingy dress slinked down her curves, pooling around her waist, exposing the ripe mounds of her breasts.

“What the f*ck are you doing?”

Nasa harapan na niya ang nobyo bago tuluyang dumausdos sa kanyang balakang ang damit. Nagtatagis ang mga ngipin na hinila nito ang bestida paakyat para muling takpan ang kanyang dibdib. Pero napunit iyon sa rahas ng

paghaklit ni Calder.

“Goddamn it. What the hell’s wrong with you?” He fisted his large hands around the delicate straps of her ruined dress, vainly trying to cover her heavy breasts.

Masamang tinapunan ng tingin ng binata ang CCTV camera sa itaas ng dingding at itinabing ang sarili sa kanya, tinatakan siya. Pagkatapos, muling ibinaling ng lalaki ang matalim na titig sa kanyang mukha.

“What the hell are you doing?”

“Trying to get a reaction from you,” anas ni Xandra, mabigat ang talukap ng mga mata.

It was sick, but his anger made her blood thrum in pleased triumph, his white-hot fury a blistering wash of heat after his cold contempt.

He stiffened, his muscles straining underneath the expensive fabric of his three-piece suit.

Humakbang siya nang mas malapit sa nobyo, idinikit ang tuktok ng mga dibdib sa matipuno nitong dibdib. Nagtagis ang bagang ng binata, at nakita niya ang pagdaloy ng init sa madidilim na mata.

“My room, Calder,” anas niya.

Inilapat ni Xandra ang palad sa tela ng sirang bestida sa kanyang didbib, pagkatapos ay itinulak ang lalaki. Kumuyom-palad ito na para bang pinigilan ang sariling haklitin siya muli.

Tumalikod siya at malalaki ang mga hakbang na tinungo ang kanyang suite sa kabilang dulo ng pasilyo.

She knew he was watching her, could feel the searing heat of his gaze on her back, on her hips, on the globes of

her ass hugged by the clingy fabric of her dress.

Pagkapasok sa silid, binitawan niya ang bestida. She stifled a moan as the silky fabric glided over her breasts, the soft material chafing her erect nipples. Hinayaan niyang dumausdos pababa ang tela sa kanyang balakang at mga hita.

Nakatalikod si Xandra sa pinto, pero alam niyang sinundan siya ng nobyo. At nang maramdaman niya ang pagpasok nito sa loob ng silid, pumintig ang init sa tuktok ng kanyang dibdib, dumaloy sa laman niya at namuo sa pagitan ng mga hita.

Nang marinig ng dalaga ang pagsara ng pinto, humarap siya kay Calder.

Temper and lust tightened the angles of his sculpted face. He stood inside her spacious suite, his fists clenched, his muscles taut.

Her eyes drifted down between his muscular thighs, and her sex throbbed when she saw the heavy arousal bulging inside his pants.

Dizzy, she stepped out of her dress and walked backward, stopping underneath a metal bar suspended above the high ceiling. May taling gawa sa velvet na nakalawit mula sa bakal ilang pulgada ang layo mula sa kanyang ulo. The compact metal contraption was a harsh contrast to her lush Victorian bedroom, the suspension bar and dangling rope a jolt of primal vulgarity amidst warm cream walls, opulent cushions and rich fabrics.

Icy fury darkened Calder's strong features, his corded muscles straining underneath the veneer of his masculine

sophistication. But his eyes were hot and dark, savage and raw.

“What are you doing?” untag ng lalaki.

Mainit ang kanyang balat at tila pumipintig ang kanyang mga ugat. Itinaas ni Xandra ang mukha at iniliyad ang namimigat na mga dibdib.

“I want you to tie me up and do everything you’ve always wanted to do to me.”

His eyes glittered with warning, and he gritted his teeth. “What the f*ck are you playing at, Xandra?”

“I’m not playing. I want this.”

“No, you do not.”

Hindi siya nagpatinag. “Why do you say so?”

“Because I know you. Get that f*cking thing out of this room.”

Dapat ay matagal na niyang ginawa ito. He needed this, craved this. Kita niya iyon sa pagtatagis ng bagang ng binata, sa pagdaloy ng nakapapasong init sa matigas nitong titig sa kanya. But she had been young and inexperienced. Hindi niya alam kung paano tibagin ang makapal na pader na ihinarang nito sa pagitan nila nang magsimula itong dumistansya sa kanya.

Pero iba na ngayon. Running her palms over luscious curves, she sauntered toward him. Her hands squeezed her breasts; hips swaying, heels sinking into the plush carpet.

Marahas na humugot ng hangin ang lalaki nang huminto siya sa tapat nito. She pressed her breasts against his chest, a soft moan sliding from her throat as her stiff nipples rubbed against the cool silk of his dress shirt.

“What the f*ck is this, Xandra?” he growled. The roughness of his voice sent a rush of heat throughout her flesh. “What has gotten into you?”

With a purr, she slid her hand down his abdomen and cupped his arousal in her palm, her swollen breasts still rubbing against his muscular chest. “I want you to do anything you want to me, Calder.”

“Enough! Stop this—”

“Do you really want to stop this?” She lifted her heavily lidded eyes to his hot gaze, her palm massaging the rigid length of his thickness.

His c*ck jerked in her hand and he hissed an oath. “Goddamn it. You want to f*ck? Fine. Get on the f*cking bed—”

“No,” anas ni Xandra. Pinadausdos ang malambot na katawan pababa sa maskuladong bulto ng binata. Ramdam niya ang pagkislót ng mga kalamnan ng lalaki sa pagkiskis ng kanyang katawan dito.

She knelt before him. Dressed in nothing but her lacy thong and four-inch heels, she kept her gaze on his face.

“I don’t want straight f*cking,” she murmured, opening her mouth and nuzzling her face against the bulky maleness inside his pants.

Napamura si Calder at napasabunot sa kanyang buhok.

“I want to play a bit, Calder,” ungol ng dalaga. “I want to please you.”

Gliding her hands over his powerful thighs, she parted her lips and took his zipper between her teeth. Harsh expletives tore from his throat as she pulled the zipper down

using her teeth. “Goddamn it, Xandra.”

She pushed his pants down, her blood roaring when she saw a wet circle staining his boxers. She felt a corresponding rush of cream flowing between the folds of her sex, soaking the lace pad of her thong, making the scrap of fabric cling to her slick folds. Instinctively, her thighs spread wider, her hips rolling and rocking.

“F*ck,” mura ulit ng nobyo.

“Shh,” anas niya. She lifted her eyes, gazing up at him beneath her thick lashes.

His jaw was clenched, his sculpted lips parted, the skin across his sharp cheekbones tight and flushed.

“I want to do this,” usal niya.

Mariing pumikit ang binata at tila may nagbabagang bakal ang nakadikit sa kalamnan nito. Galit, pagnanasa, pagtitimpi—naglalaban ang mga iyon sa guwapong mukha ng katipan. Pero nang muli itong nagmulat, tila nagliliyab sa itim na apoy ang mainit nitong titig.

Napasinghap si Xandra nang marahas nitong hinaklit ang kanyang mga braso at hinila siya patayo. Halos kaladkarin siya ni Calder sa sitting area ng kanyang silid. Mabigat itong umupo sa mahabang sofa at hinila siya paluhod sa pagitan ng maskulado nitong mga hita. He sat there, dark, powerful and commanding in his impeccable corporate suite, his muscular thighs spread wide, his striking face sculpted into unforgiving lines.

And she knelt before him, naked and panting, her skin flushed, her breasts heavy and swollen, her thong soaked from her leaking sex.

He leaned down, his hot breath heating her face. “You want to please me?” marahas nitong pakli, nagliliyab sa magkahalong galit at pagnanasa ang mga mata. “Then, do it,” he bit out harshly, his large hand clasping her nape as he straightened, forcing her mouth closer to the hefty bulge in his boxers. “Do it,” he ordered. “Let’s see what you can do.”

Her head spun at his commanding tone, her heart pounding in heavy drumbeats. Dizzy with need, she pushed his boxers down his narrow hips. Her heart hammered inside her chest as his large c*ck sprang out. He was so aroused and thick, veins bulging along the heavy length, streams of precum leaking from the broad head.

“Please me,” utos nito.

His terse command brought sharp pleasure streaking throughout her veins. He had always been in-command whenever they had sex, had always f*cked her hard and rough until she could feel his weighty c*ck buried deep inside her c*nt days later. But after that night four years ago, he had never ordered her this way, never commanded her with such brutal intensity she could only whimper and obey his demand.

With a soft purr, she parted her mouth and wrapped her lips around his stocky hardness.

A rough grunt broke from his chest and his hand clasped her nape tighter. She moaned around his c*ck, the salty taste of precum coating her tongue, igniting her sharp hunger.

Itinaas ni Xandra ang tingin sa mukha nito, nakitang nakabuka ang bibig ng kaniig, at ang pamumula ng

cheekbones nito.

Tama, dapat ay matagal na niyang ginawa ito. Hindi lang si Calder ang may kailangan ng ganito. She craved that look on his face, that primal hunger that burned away his rigid control and icy sophistication. She owned that look on him. Para lang sa kanya iyon. She would never let anyone have that. This was theirs and theirs alone.

Keeping her gaze locked on his face, she suckled the head tighter as she slid her lips down his hardened length, her tongue stroking the underside, tracing the raised veins along his thickness.

“F*ck,” mura ng nobyo, marahas ang paghinga at mainit ang titig sa kanya.

Moaning, she dragged her lips up and down his engorged shaft, leaving it wet and slippery. She couldn't stop her hips from rolling, his hard-throbbing length and sharp taste shooting savage blasts of heat throughout her flesh. She loved his taste, craved it, but her sex creamed and throbbed, aching for the long deep slide of his thick c*ck.

Hollowing her cheeks, she sucked him fast, drawing his length deep inside her wet mouth until her plump lips stretched taut around the wide base.

Sunud-sunod na napamura ulit si Calder at humigpit ang hawak nito sa kanyang batok.

She made sucking noises as she dragged her lips upward, her fingers curling tight around the base and pumping him hard, her tongue stroking the slit on the broad head.

“F*ck!” he yelled, his hand clutching her nape, his hips

thrusting, shoving his c*ck down her throat.

A dizzying buzz of heat flooded her at his roughness. She loved the way he lost control as he f*cked her mouth, his hunger fueling her own arousal.

With a deep suck, she released his c*ck with a pop. God, she was ravenous. She pressed her open mouth to the side of his thickness, the flat of her tongue massaging him from base to tip. Cupping his heavy balls in her palm, she wrapped her lips around him and suckled greedily.

His hips buckled and he let out another stream of curses. “You love that,” he gritted out, his voice gravely. “You love sucking my c*ck.”

“I do,” she moaned, her hips rolling as her tongue laved at the bulbous head. “But you rarely let me.”

Hindi napigilan ni Xandra ang mapang-akusang titig sa katipan. But he could only grunt and grip her nape, forcing her mouth to take his shaft again.

Pero umiling ang dalaga at dumerecho ng luhod.

She thrust her swollen breasts and cupped her hands around the plump globes, her fingers pulling at the taut nipples.

Heat flooded his eyes, his nostrils flaring.

“Want to f*ck my breasts?” she purred.

Umigting sa bayolenteng pagnanasa ang bawat linya ng maanggulo nitong mukha.

With a moan, she squeezed her plump breasts around his c*ck, rubbing the thick rod between the soft mounds.

“Goddamn it,” marahas na pakli ng binata.

Napasandal si Calder sa likod ng upuan, nakakuyom-

palad sa kutson ng sofa.

“I’ve always wanted to do this,” anas ng dalaga. She pushed the mounds tighter together and leaned down, darting her tongue out to lick the drop of precum on the head. Eyes hooded, she asked him, “Do you like that?”

He gritted his teeth, and another stream of hot liquid leaked from the broad tip, running down his thick length and dripping over the creamy swells of her breast. Sapat na sagot na iyon sa kanya. She moaned as rivulets of warm fluid gushed over her pointed nipples. The image looked so hot and dirty. She felt her own juices drenching the folds of her sex, streaking down her trembling inner thighs.

Squeezing her lush breasts harder around his turgid c*ck, she dragged the globes up and down, up and down, his precum slicking their flesh, making it easier to glide his rigid shaft between her swollen breasts.

She licked the broad head again, and his sharp taste had her whimpering for more. Her mouth watered at the need to have his thick length deep inside her mouth again. Heady with the scent and feel of him, she opened her mouth wide and took him in.

“F*ck, f*ck, f*ck!” His hips buckled, his large maleness swelling even more inside her mouth.

She drew him deeper into her hot mouth.

“Stop!” he roared. “I’m going to cum. Not in your mouth... I can’t—f*ck!”

Hinaklit ni Calder ang kanyang batok at marahas siyang hinila palayo sa katawan nito. She whimpered in protest, desperate to take his cum down her throat.

Shots of semen lashed her breasts, her inflamed nipples, her parted lips. She panted and gasped, her blood humming as he painted her flushed skin with his release.

“F*ck, f*ck,” he growled, his large fist pumping his heavy arousal until the last blast of cum splattered on her heaving breasts.

Napaungol si Xandra at hindi niya napigilang lamasin ang kanyang basang mga dibdib. She rubbed his sticky cum over her swollen breasts, her tongue darting out to lick her lips clean.

“Godf*ckingdamn it.” Marahas siyang hinaklit ni Calder sa braso at isinalya sa upuan.

Napasinghap ang dalaga at napahawak sa sandalan. Her stiffened nipples rubbed against the soft cushion, making her whimper. Pushing his solid chest against her naked back, one rough hand gripped her hip as the other yanked her thong down, ripping the fabric.

She felt the head of his heavy c*ck pushing into the quivering rim of her sex and Xandra cried out, her core aching to be stretched and filled. God, he was still hot and hard even after cumming so much.

Pero tumigil sa paggalaw ang binata. “What the hell are you playing at, Xandra?” he hissed in her ear.

Umungol siya at pilit inindayog ang balakang, pero bumaon ang mga daliri ni Calder sa kanyang laman.

“What the f*ck are you up to?”

“Nothing,” daing niya. “Please... I just want to do this with you.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Why?” ungol niya, frustrated na.

“Because I know you don’t want this, you don’t–”

“Goddamn it, Calder, can we have this conversation later? I want to cum!”

He nipped at her earlobe, his rough hand sliding over her rib cage to cup the lower curve of her breast. “Not until you tell me what you’re up to.”

Napigtas ang kanyang pasensya. She was trembling with the need for release, her flesh throbbing in near pain, and he wanted to dissect their convoluted eight-year engagement in nauseating detail? *No, sir.*

“You know what?” she hissed. “F*ck you.”

Bago pa siya mapigilan ng binata, ibinaba niya ang isang kamay at sinapo ang pagkababae.

“No, you don’t!” he growled.

But she was already rubbing her enflamed cl*t with her fingers, kneading the overly sensitive nub in harsh, fast circles. Hinaklit ng nobyo ang kanyang pupulsihan pero huli na.

Her hips buckled as her sex quivered in long, violent spasms. She screamed his name, lightning heat ripping throughout her, her slick flesh clenching around his c*ckhead.

“F*ck!” he roared. “You witch!”

He gripped her hips as his large body surged forward. Another hoarse scream broke from her chest as his c*ck shoved into her quivering c*nt to the hilt.

“God, God, God...” she cried, her fingers clawing at the sofa, her hips buckling, her flesh rippling around his pulsing

shaft.

Marahas na lumabas ang malulutong na mura mula sa bibig ni Calder. He swiveled his hips, grinding his c*ck into her snug, trembling sex.

Halos mapugto ang hininga ng dalaga sa kanyang panginig. He squeezed her breasts; kneaded. His other hand gripped her jaw and forced her lips to meet his hot mouth.

He swallowed her cries in his kiss as he pounded into her aching sex. His tongue tangled with hers, pushed in and out of her mouth the way his c*ck drove in and out of her throbbing c*nt.

She never stopped cumming, her c*nt convulsing around his c*ck in earth-shattering intensity. Yet he kept f*cking, thrusting, and grinding until she was sobbing in his mouth, her body shivering in agonized heat.

“No more...” she begged as he pushed her head into the seat of the sofa, his muscular arm wrapping tight around her waist, hauling her ass upward to meet his punishing thrust.

“You wanted this,” he bit out, plunging into her using the full strength of his muscular body, forcing her sex to swallow that last rigid inch.

She creamed around him, her flesh giving way until the lips of her sex was stretched taut around the wide root.

Groaning, he leaned down over Xandra, his hot mouth hovering over her ear. “Do you remember your safe word?”

Halos hindi rumehistro sa kanya ang sinasabi nito. Pero huminto sa paggalaw ang katipan at malakas siyang napadaing.

“Calder...” She told him no more, but now her body screamed for him to pound into her sex again.

His rough groan heated her neck. “Your safeword,” he grated, “do you remember it?”

Hilo sa pagnanasa, pilit niyang inalala ang gabing iyon anim na taon na ang nakakaraan.

Beinte años siya at benite seis si Calder. He stood in the middle of a room not different from this one. Leather cuff bracelets dangled from a chain wrapped around the brass headboard of a king-size bed. Stark light spilled from the open door of a walk-in closet, revealing an array of sex toys.

Whips, paddles, dildos...

His dark eyes were on her, hot and savage.

“*Pick a safeword, Xandra,*” sambit nito noon.

The memory fizzled as Calder bit her shoulder from behind. “You don’t remember it?” ungol ng binata.

She licked her lips and pushed her hips against his groin, making him growl.

“Dallas,” anas ng babae. “Dallas.”

Eve Dallas from Nora Robert’s *In Death Series*. Kakaunti lang ang nakaaalam, pero noon pa ay hopeless romantic na siya. Strong, and self-made *Eve* was her ultimate girl-crush. She wanted to be *Eve* when she grew up. May malaking crush din siya sa asawa ng karakter na si *Roarke*, pero malamang hindi magugustuhan ni Calder na isigaw niya ang pangalan ng ibang lalaki para patigilin ito sa ginawa sa kama. Fictional or not, that was probably foul.

He petted her breasts, his fingers pulling and rolling her distended nipples. “Good. Use that if you want me to stop.”

Stop? Not on her damn—

He dragged his rigid c*ck out of her sex and she moaned, her slick folds clinging around his thick length. With a grunt, he shoved back inside.

“Calder!” Her back arched, her head thrashing.

“Who was that woman you brought here tonight?”
tanong nito sa kanyang tainga.

Hindi makapag-isip si Xandra. She needed him to move hard and deep inside her again. “Calder... please, please, please!”

He rolled his hips, stirring his c*ck inside her trembling sheath. God, she felt so full, so tight.

“Who’s that woman, Xandra?”

“I...”

His fingers dug into her hips as he slammed into her again. She gritted her teeth as his hips piston behind her, burying his enlarged flesh inside her sex again and again. The deep tremors pulsed deep inside her core, climbing and climbing until—

Huminto ang binata at malakas siyang dumaing.

“Calder!”

Marahas ang paghinga ng nobyo sa kanyang balikat.

“Who’s that woman, Xandra?”

Oh, God. He was going to stop her from cumming until she told him!

Whimpering, she shook her head. “Can’t... Can’t tell you...”

Mahigpit ang pulupot ng braso sa kanyang balakang, marahan nitong hinimas ng isang palad ang kanyang dibdib.

His fingers toyed with her nipples, pinching and pulling at the tender buds.

Impit siyang napadaing at pilit iginalaw ang balakang, pero matigas ang maskuladong braso ni Calder sa kanyang baywang.

“Who’s that woman?” he grated. “What are you hiding from me?”

“N-nothing important!”

Mahinang nagmura ang lalaki at pinadausdos sa pagitan ng kanyang mga hita ang magaspang nitong palad. The pads of his fingers stroked the edges of her puffy folds, firing the nerve endings embedded in her sensitive flesh.

“Oh, God... Oh, God...”

“Tell me,” marahas na pakli ng lalaki. “Don’t torture us both.”

She forced her lids open, her vision hazy as she stared up at him. Nagtatagis ang ngipin ni Calder, maigting ang mga linya sa guwapong mukha, nagbabaga ang init sa mga mata.

“Goddamn it, Xandra.” He pressed open-mouth kisses across the side of her neck, her shoulder. His hot lips seared her flesh, his tongue stroked her sweat-dampened skin.

Napapikit siya. “Calder...”

“I can do this all night,” he groaned.

And he did. He tortured both of them until they were boneless and replete.

3



Xandra woke up with a soft smile curving her lips. Gumulong siya sa malambot na higaan, iniunat ang braso para yakapin ang nobyo.

Pero malamig na espasyo lang ang kanyang nakapa. Napalipad pabukas ang mga mata niya. Nakababa ang mga kurtina at madilim pa rin sa paligid, pero alam niyang umaga na. She craned her neck to glance at the clock on the nightstand.

Ten minutes after six. Ibig sabihin ay halos dalawang oras lang silang nakatulog.

Her lids turned heavy as she felt the delicious soreness between her legs. It felt good. And even after their non-stop f*cking last night and this morning, her slicked c*nt wanted him deep inside her again.

Rubbing her thighs together, she stretched out, thrusting her heavy breasts in the air, the peaks still tender and swollen from Calder's lips and tongue. He was insatiable, f*cking her until past four this morning.

Pero napasinghap si Xandra nang maalalang alas ocho ang flight ng kasintahan.

Mabilis niyang inilibot ang tingin sa paligid, pero

walang Calder na nahagilap ang kanyang tingin. Even his clothes were gone.

Bumalikwas siya ng bangon at tumakbo sa banyo. Pero bago pa man niya buksan ang pinto ng marangyang *en suite* restroom, alam na niyang wala roon ang katipan.

Gumapang ang pag-aalangan sa kanyang tiyan. After their torrid, all-consuming night, his absence this morning left an acute pang in her chest.

Pero umiling ang dalaga sa sarili at humagilap ng mahabang roba sa kanyang closet.

Malamang ay ayaw lang siyang gisingin ng nobyo. Kailangan nitong bumalik sa suite nito para maghanda sa biyahe. Wala itong damit o kahit na anong gamit sa kanyang silid.

Mapait siyang napangiti habang itinatali ang roba.

Yes, that's right. Wala ito ni isang gamit sa kanyang suite. No shower gel in her bathroom, not even a freaking razor blade. Of course, he had to go back to his room to prepare for his flight.

Pinaglabanan ni Xandra ang pait sa dibdib at humangos papuntang pinto, pero tumunog ang kanyang cellphone sa night stand.

Si Celine iyon; itinatanong kung anong oras niya kukunin si Dolly sa bahay nito. Last night during a short interlude from sweaty sex, she read a text message from her friend saying she was safely on her way home. Mabuti na lang at nasa phone din si Calder noon at kausap ang staff sa ibaba para dalhan sila ng pagkain. Hindi nito masyadong napansin ang pagsagot niya sa mensahe ng kanyang best

friend.

Hindi alam ni Xandra kung paano nakalabas si Celine ng *Valhalla*, pero balak niya itong gisahin mamaya.

Bring Dolly to my house and wait for me, she typed.

Akmang lalabas na ulit siya ng silid pero may nahagip ulit ang mga mata niya. Maliit na kahon iyon ng plain Epsom salt. A smile formed across her lips. He always had a box for her after a long night of vigorous sex. Nakakatulong iyon sa pagbababad niya sa mainit na tubig sa tub.

Lumabas siya ng silid at walang alinlangan binagtas ang mahabang pasilyo papunta sa silid ng kasintahan.

She rapped sharply on his door, her smile fading as she stared at the hardwood. He never gave her a key to his suite.

Matapos ang ilang segundo ay bumukas iyon at humantad sa kanya ang katipan. Nanikip ang sikmura niya nang makita ang binata.

Would she ever get used to how infuriatingly handsome he was? Basa pa ang buhok ni Calder mula sa shower, at bahagyang kulot iyong parteng umabot sa batok nito. The simple light gray dress shirt he wore molded over his strong chest and broad shoulders, the slate gray slacks encasing his muscular thighs showcasing just how masculine he was. Amoy ni Xandra ang panglalaking samyo ng shower gel at aftershave ng nobyo, at hindi niya mapigilan ang pagkuyom ng mga daliri sa mga paa sa pagdaloy ng init sa kanyang mga ugat.

With her tangled hair and pillow creases on her cheek, she felt ruffled and bedraggled compared to him.

“Yes,” he said gruffly, his dark eyes on her. “We can

arrange that.”

Napakurap siya at napatitig sa cell phone na nakadikit sa tainga ng kaharap. Noon lang niya iyon napansin.

He turned his back on her and crossed to the bar inside his room, leaving the door open for her.

What was she expecting? A good morning smile?

Wake up, Xandra. Tahimik siyang pumasok saka isinara ang pinto.

Wala sa sariling pinadaan niya ang tingin sa paligid habang nakikipag-usap ang binata sa kung sino sa telepono.

Unlike her suite, Calder’s room was more modern. Gray, black at white ang dominanteng mga kulay. Sleek dark tables and long couches, king-size platform bed and dark blue curtains. No cushy colorful pillows, no plush rugs, no crystal and wrought iron chandeliers.

Masculine, austere, cold.

Maayos na ang kama nito, at alam niyang si Calder ang gumawa niyon at hindi staff. Ganoon ito sa paggising; inaayos agad ang higaan. He could be obsessive compulsive sometimes.

Wala rin siyang gamit sa silid ng katipan, walang senyales na may babaeng madalas magpalipas ng gabi sa kama nito. Whenever she left anything in his suite, even a goddamn hairpin, he would always have them sent back to her room pronto.

Humigpit ang hawak niya sa sedang sinturon ng kanyang roba sa isiping iyon.

“We can look at other beaches when we get there,” narinig niyang sambit ni Calder. “I’ll have Terrence schedule

it. See you in an hour.”

Her gaze whipped back to her fiancé.

Beaches? See you in an hour?

Calder ended the call and she pounced on him. “Who’s that?” untag niya.

He met her narrowed gaze with his cold calculating eyes. “Sorcha. We’re discussing the project in California.”

Nanikip ang kanyang tiyan.

Of course. Dear beautiful Sorcha and her freaking business deal with Calder. They were going to explore beaches in sunny Santa Monica, California. How fun. He was practically scheduling a date with the woman while she stood a mere few feet away from him.

“Bakit kayo magpupunta sa beach?” akusa ni Xandra.

“We’re building a resort in California, we wanted to survey other areas for the resort.”

How convenient. “Magkasabay kayo sa flight?” mapait niyang tanong.

“Yes.”

Umupo ang binata sa kama nito at isinuot ang medyas na nakapatong doon.

He was doing this on purpose. Acting calm and cool to infuriate her. Pero hindi pa rin niya mapigilan ang sarili.

“I don’t like her,” pakli ng dalaga.

Putting on his loafers, he lifted his face and pinned her with his dark gaze. “Hindi mahalaga kung gusto mo siya o hindi. I’m doing business with her family. Kailangan mo siyang pakitunguhan nang maganda.”

Tumayo ang binata at hinagip ang briefcase nito sa

isang mesita. Hindi siya makagalaw para sundan ito. Her insides twisted at his curt reproach. She suddenly felt small, immature, and petty. The catty, jealous girlfriend who ripped into every woman her boyfriend smiled at.

Oo nga naman. It was business. Ang engagement din nito sa kanya, business lang. Feelings were irrelevant. She should stop acting childish and bitchy.

Humarap si Calder at tinapunan siya ng tingin. Pero nanigas ang mga kalamnan nito nang makita ang ekspresyon ng kanyang mukha.

She must have looked as wounded as she felt if the tightness of his jaw was any indication.

Malutong itong nagmura at inabot siya. “Xandra...”

Pero natigilan ulit ito, natuon ang titig sa kanyang leeg.

“What?” paos niyang untag.

Tumiim-bagang ang binata at kumuyom ang mga palad. “You have bruises on your neck.”

Wala sa sariling napahawak siya roon. He did bite her last night, but she bit him, too. Umiling siya. “It’s okay—”

“It’s not,” malamig nitong putol. “I shouldn’t have done what I did last night.”

Tumitig siya rito. Shouldn’t have done what he did? He tortured them both last night, bringing her to the brink of release over and over until they were both trembling with need. She loved it, and she thought he enjoyed it, too. Last night was the one of best nights of her life, a tie with her eighteenth birthday when Calder took her hand and danced with her in their grand ballroom, asking her if he could formally court her.

“What?” marupok niyang untag. “It’s just a hickey, Calder. It’s not a big—”

Umiling ito at nilagpasan siya. “Rest assured last night will not happen again.”

Another blow. Hilo siyang napaikot para harapin ito. “What are you talking about?” Inabot niya ang braso ng binata at pilit itong pinaharap sa kanya.

There was a mocking iciness in his eyes, a derisive curl in his firm lips. “I don’t know what has gotten into you last night. But there is no need to go this far, Xandra. No need to turn yourself into something you’re not.”

A crushing sense of degradation slammed her gut. Nabitawan niya ang lalaki na para bang natuklaw siya ng ahas. Something she was not? Did he think she was just acting? After baring a visceral part of her self to him last night, he would call her fake?

He cocked his head, a lock of his dark hair falling over his forehead, adding a deceptive softness to his stunning, chiseled face. “Was it because of Sorcha?”

Ikinukumpara siya nito sa babaeng iyon? Bumaon ang kanyang mga daliri sa palad niya.

“Are you jealous of her?”

She ignored the serrated pain digging into her chest. “You know I am.”

“Are you afraid I’ll end our engagement and leave you for her?”

His icy tone goaded her, taunting her tattered emotions. Paanong naging ganito sila ngayon? Mahal siya ng nobyo noon. Masaya sila dati. But she supposed it was her who shot

all that to hell.

“Are you?” marupok niyang balik.

Lumamig ang mga mata ng binata at umigting ang panga. “Don’t worry, I won’t.”

“But do you want to?”

“It doesn’t matter what we want, does it? We are engaged. We will be married. You will be my wife. I keep my promises, Xandra. So stop this pointless bullshit. You don’t have to play games and exhaust yourself just to make sure I remain in my place. I abhor mind games, so enough of this. Wala kang kailangang ipag-alala. Walang papalit sa puwesto mo sa buhay ko. Nothing will affect our relationship. Our family and business ties will remain strong and intact. Walang makakasira n’on.”

She had never thought such a severe affirmation of her place in his life could be this harrowing.

Nanunuyo ang lalamunan ni Xandra nang magsalita siya. “I was not faking it last night.”

Marahas na bumuga ng hangin ang binata at umiling. “I don’t have time for this. I need to go.”

Sinapo ng malaki nitong palad ang kanyang batok at tiim-labing dinampian siya ng halik sa noo. Cold, perfunctory, impersonal.

But then he hesitated, his intense gaze flickering over her face with hot need. He brushed the back of his fingers across the curve of her jaw with aching softness it made her chest hurt. Pero kumuyom ang palad ito at humakbang palayo.

“Take care of yourself. Stop worrying.” Tumalikod ito at

malalaking hakbang na lumabas ng silid.



“I’m so sorry!” atungal ni Celine sabay sinunggaban siya ng yakap pagkababang-pagkababa niya sa kanyang SUV.

Nakumutan si Xandra ng mamahaling pabango ng babae, at tinapik niya ito sa balikat.

“Tell me hindi kayo nag-away ni Calder. *Lo siento*, Xandra. Really sorry!” Dahil sa pagkabalisa ay lalong tumingkad ang Spanish accent nito.

Half-Spanish ang ina nina Calder at Celine, pero mas halata ang pagiging Español sa babaeng Rocha. Ayon sa huli, dahil daw iyon sa maternal grandmother ng mga ito. Celine loved spending time with her grandma, picking up the Spanish woman’s language and accent.

Tinapik-tapik niya ang likod ng kanyang best friend. There was no need to make another person miserable.

“It’s okay, don’t worry about it. How did you get home?”

“I snuck out!” maningning nitong sagot.

Naningkit ang kanyang mga mata. Her bullshit meter just spiked up. “You don’t expect me to believe that, do you?”

“We’ll talk about that later, because I have a feeling you’d be busy these coming days, *amiga!*”

Kumunot-noo siya, pero bumungisngis lang ang kaibigan at hinila siya paakyat sa marble staircase ng mansion.

Unlike most women her age and economic status, she was still living with her mom and dad. Why not? The sprawling 24-bedroom mansion could accommodate a military battalion. It had a pool, a rose garden, a state of

the art gym Kim Kardashian would drool over, a theatre, a natural waterhole, and a sweeping, manicured lawn so vast it probably had its own climate.

Walang dahilan para gumastos pa si Xandra at kumuha ng ibang matitirahan. But then again, kung pagtitipid lang ang usapan, dapat siguro ay kumbinsihin niya ang mga magulang na sa mas praktikal na bahay na lang sila tumira. The art deco mansion was gorgeous, but it also ate a shit ton of money. Ilaw pa lang, masakit na sa bulsa. Call her a grumpy penny pincher, but she was never a fan of unnecessary spending. Pero doon siya lumaki, maging ang tatay niya, ang lolo, ang great grandfather, and so on... so it had sentimental value.

“I brought Dolly!” pabida ni Celine.

“You’d better.”

Pinagbuksan sila ng pinto ni Mrs. Trinidad, ang head ng household staff.

Narinig ni Xandra ang malambing na pag-meow ng kanyang Persian cat bago niya ito makita. A wide smile formed across her face as she knelt down to take the scurrying mass of white fur.

“Dolly!” she beamed, rubbing her face against the cat’s clean fur. Iniuntog ng pusa ang ulo sa ulo niya, at kiniskis ang mukha sa kanyang pisngi.

“Your cat is an anomaly, Xandra,” sabat ni Celine sa reunion nila ng alaga. “It’s too sweet! Cats are supposed to be grumpy and snobbish!”

Nakangising kinamot niya ang likod ng tainga ni Dolly. “She loves me.” Nakangiti niyang binalingan si Mrs.

Trinidad. “Good morning, Mrs. Trini—what’s wrong?”
 bulalas niya nang tuluyang makita ang mukha ng may-edad na babae.

The woman looked impeccable as always in her deep purple chiffon blouse and graphite skirt, her hair perfectly coiffed in a neat bun. Pero nakatiim-labi ito, may tension sa mga mata at balikat.

“Good morning, Xandra.”

“Ano’ng problema? Where’s Mom and Dad? Are they okay?”

“Relax,” alo ni Celine sa kanyang tabi. “Hindi ’yon ang problema. But I knew it. S’abi ko na nga ba at hindi mo pa alam. Hindi ka kasi nag-fe-Facebook at Instagram.”

Facebook? Instagram?

Kumabog ang kanyang dibdib sa isang mabigat na hinala. “Then, what’s the problem? Bakit—”

A shrill scream tore through the foyer. “Why are my studio curtains green? Who took down my *Missoni* purple curtains? Why is my goddamn soup cold? And my art supplies! Where are my art supplies! Bring them to my studio! Now!”

Xandra whirled around, her eyes wide as she raked the foyer for the owner of the shrilly voice.

Natagpuan niya iyon sa babaeng nagngingitngit na bumababa sa winding staircase, nakakuyom-palad at kumikislap ang galit sa mga mata.

Inilapit ni Celine ang bibig sa kanyang tainga. “There’s the problem, Xandra. Your dear sister Sabina.”