

# CHAPTER *One*

If she would take no for an answer easily, she wouldn't be Paloma Victoria Zaragoza anymore. Taas-noong umakyat si Paloma sa hagdanan ng *Villegas Tower*, ang condo building kung saan nakatira si Lorenzo Miguel Villegas.

The steel and glass structure speared the evening sky like an obsidian blade, the lights from the streets below glittering across its midnight black surface. Tall, dark and imposing, iyon ang building na iyon. And that sounded a lot like a person she knew.

Agad bumaba ang isang naka-Barong Tagalog uniform na security mula sa entrance ng building para tulungan siyang umakyat, pero umiling lang siya rito at ngumiti nang maliit. She was never

a damsel in distress. Nagsuot siya ng four-inch red strappy stilettos, at kaya niyang panindigan iyon. Hindi na siya bata, she could handle herself perfectly fine, thank you very much. At oras na para maintindihan iyon ni Lorenzo.

Inayos niya ang pagkakabuhol ng sinturon ng suot niyang black leather trench coat at binigyan din ng ngiti ang may-edad na lalaking nagbukas ng salaming pinto para sa kanya.

“Good evening, Ma’am.”

“Good evening, Kuya Bob,” matamis niyang balik.

Magalang na tumango ang maskuladong matanda, pero aninag ni Paloma ang bakas ng gulat sa mga mata nito sa dis-oras niyang pagbisita. Hindi bago sa mga staff ng condo building ang kanyang pagbisita. She and her family had been regular visitors in Lorenzo’s unit since he decided to take permanent residence in the building’s penthouse.

Pero ang bumisita si Paloma nang mag-isa sa hating gabi? Unang beses niyang ginawa iyon. Well, if Lorenzo hadn’t been a coward and ditched her twenty-first birthday party five days ago, she wouldn’t be here this late at night to take drastic measures.

Nag-init ang mga mata ng dalaga sa isiping iyon.

She still couldn't believe he would do such a thing. Her own birthday! She should kick him in the nut for that.

Swallowing her bitter emotions, she strengthened her voice and smiled at the security again. "And'yan po si Lorenzo?"

Alam niyang naroon ang binata, she had been tracking his cell phone through GPS since his private jet touched down at *Manila International Airport* twelve hours ago. Dumerecho ito sa condo at hindi na umalis ulit mula noon. Nakakatakot ba ang stalking tendencies niya? Well, he didn't give her many choices! If she didn't take matters into her own hands, the bastard would continue avoiding her until God knew how long.

"Ah, yes, Ma'm. Gusto n'yong itawag ko kayo—"

"Hindi na po kailangan. I'm here to surprise him. Later, Kuya Bob."

Nilagpasan niya ang security at dumerecho siya sa bank ng elevators.

Tatawagan ng mga ito si Lorenzo, sigurado siya. It didn't matter. Puwede nilang tawagan si Trump o si Hitler o kung sinuman. But Lorenzo Miguel Villegas would be facing her tonight come hell or high water.

She crossed the golden lobby, the rhythmic sound of her heels clicking against the ochre marble

floor soothing to her senses.

At 5'4" with 34 DD and buttocks that could make porn stars jealous, she was too short and curvy to grace the runway. Nevertheless, she had perfected her catwalk to a T. She never did things by halves, after all. If she was going to do something, she would be one of the best at it. Otherwise, what was the point of doing it at all?

Iyon ang hinaing ng kanyang modeling agency. Her catwalk's to die for, they said. Kung biniyayaan lang daw siya ng dagdag pa na apat na pulgadang height, sigurado raw na pasok na siya sa *Victoria's Secret Angels*. She had just laughed and shook her head at them.

Wala sa life plan niya ang maging *VS Angel*. She loved the experience and made sure she aced the whole thing, but it was the money she was truly after. Kailangan niya iyon para sa business na gusto niyang itayo noon pa.

As a kid who had always struggled with weight problems and high sugar level, she had always known she wanted to get into food and nutrition business when she grew up. At iyon nga ang kanyang ginawa. Sa tulong ng ipon niya mula sa modeling gigs at trust fund, nakapagtayo na si Paloma ng apat na restaurants na nakatuon sa pagbibigay ng mura at

masustansyang pagkain para sa nakararami. Lahat iyon nagawa niya sa edad lang na bente uno. All that because she was determined, focused, smart and f\*cking stubborn.

Wala iyong pinagkaiba ngayon.

She passed under a series of crystal and brass pendant chandeliers dripping down from the high ceiling, the diffused light casting a soft golden wash to the gilded furniture, walls and floors. The whole building exuded old elegance and classic grandeur, but eclectic pieces also livened up the area. Giant bright earthen pots overflowing with colorful blooms and foliage were scattered across the lobby, while humungous electric abstract paintings graced the walls. The flash of vibrant hues was a stark contrast to the otherwise subdued gilded elegance, giving the classic a touch of sharp edges.

Tumaas ang sulok ng kanyang mga labi. Iyon si Lorenzo, hindi ba? A classic with a bad boy twist.

Dumerecho si Paloma sa elevator para sa penthouse ng binata. Like all the members of her family, she knew his code for the penthouse. Pagkapasok sa loob, pinagmasdan niya ang sarili sa wall mirrors ng elevator.

Her dark wavy hair tumbled down her shoulders, her milky skin smooth and flawless underneath the

soft golden lights. She had little makeup on, just a touch of pink gloss, a dab of concealer underneath her eyes and a coat of mascara. A natural flush tinted her high cheekbones, her gray irises smoky beneath her thick lashes.

She licked her lips and felt her pulse racing a mile per minute. *Oh, Lorenzo, you don't know what's going to hit you.*

Lumawak ang kanyang ngiti at magaan siyang sumandal sa dingding ng elevator, sanhi para tamaan ng ilaw ang suot niyang diamanteng kuwintas na hantad sa suot niyang trench coat. Kumupas ang kanyang ngiti.

Itinaas ni Paloma ang kamay, hinaplos ng mga daliri ang round brilliant cut diamond tennis necklace. Tumama rin ang ilaw sa suot niyang diamond, sapphire and pearl cuff bracelet. Her eyes flicked to her ears in the mirror and focused on the diamond ear wrap earrings glittering under the golden light.

Naramdaman niya ang pag-iinit ng ulo.

Commissioned pieces ang mga iyon mula sa *Cartier*. Lorenzo personally asked the prestigious jewelry brand to create those jewelries for her. Hindi lang iyon ang regalo sa kanya ng binata. He also donated a few million pesos to *Food for You*, the

non-profit organization she spearheaded, focusing on helping local farmers augment their income and productivity while maintaining sustainable development.

Any woman would be deliriously happy with his gifts and thoughtfulness, and a part of her was ecstatic as well. Pero kumukulo pa rin ang dugo niya.

Did Lorenzo really think sending her diamonds and a fat check donation would do the trick? That his absence on her birthday would be forgiven? Muntik na niyang ihagis ang box ng *Cartier* sa pader nang ibigay iyon sa kanya ng Kuya Giancarlo niya noong gabi ng party.

The coward. He didn't even call her! May importanteng business meeting daw ito sa Alaska kaya hindi makakarating sa kanyang party. As if surprise ang birthday niya at hindi nito alam na darating na iyon. He did that on purpose, the bastard. At sa Alaska talaga? It was as if he had to get as far away from her as possible on that night she turned twenty-one. Kung available na ang space travel ni Elon Musk sa Mars, sigurado siyang doon nagpunta si Lorenzo noong gabi ng kaarawan niya.

At alam niya kung bakit.

Tumiim-bagang si Paloma at naniningkit ang mga matang sinipat ulit ng tingin ang buong

katawan sa salamin. The expensive fabric of her coat couldn't hide the generous swell of her breasts and curvy hips, the bright glint of her gray eyes and full pouty lips the perfect picture of heated sensuality.

Her best friend Anton had always told her that she had the body and face custom-made for men's wet dreams. No one would look at her and accuse her of being a child. And she knew Lorenzo already noticed that a long time ago, too.

Squaring her shoulders, she ran her hands down the side of her body, smoothing the soft fabric across her curves.

Lorenzo could use their age difference as an excuse when she was sixteen, seventeen, and even eighteen. But now that she's twenty-one? Everyone knew that's bullshit. No one would bat a freaking eye over a nine-year age gap. Her mother and her stepfather were fifteen years apart, for Pete's sake. Kahit ang sarili niyang biological father ay sampung taon na mas matanda sa kanyang nanay. In fact, some of the women Lorenzo had been seen with were only three years older than her!

Muling nag-init ang kanyang mga mata sa isiping iyon. He never dated, she, at least, knew that much. Flings at one-night stands lang ang mga iyon. But it still hurt like a bitch.

Kagaya na lang nitong nakaraan. Nanggalit ang kanyang mga ngipin at kumuyom ang mga palad habang inaalala ang mga larawang nakita niya sa social media nitong nakaraang linggo. He had been partying with other women while on his 'business trip' in Alaska last week. Dancing, flirting, almost kissing!

She wanted to murder him. God, para na ba siyang desperada? Pumikit si Paloma at hinilot ang sentido. Dapat na ba niyang tigilan ang kanyang kabaliwan? Pabayaang ang lalaki kung ayaw nito sa kanya? But that would be bullshit, wouldn't it? Because Lorenzo wanted her, too. At hindi iyon wishful thinking.

Nagmulat siya at muling tumitig sa sarili sa salamin. The woman staring back at her was not someone who would settle for second best. Hindi ganoon si Paloma Victoria Zaragoza.

Nag-ding ang elevator at huminto sa floor ng penthouse. Lumalim ang paghinga ni Paloma at ramdam niya ang pag-iinit ng kanyang balat. Wala na itong urungan.

Bumukas ang bakal na pinto sa foyer ng penthouse. Inasahan niyang naroon na si Lorenzo, madilim ang guwapong mukha sa galit habang hinihintay ang kanyang pagdating. Sigurado siyang

tinawagan ito ng security para sabihin ang pagdating niya. Pero walang Lorenzo na bumungad sa kanya.

Nagkibit-balikat si Paloma at taas-noong pumasok sa foyer. Malamang ay tulog pa ang lalaki, naisip niya. Siguro pinatay nito ang ringer ng phone kaya hindi narinig ang pagtawag ng security sa ibaba. Well, that's just too bad. Ngayon ay magugulat na lang ito sa pagdating niya.

Unlike the sumptuous elegance of the lobby, Lorenzo's penthouse was minimalistic. Puti ang dingding ng foyer at tanging isang malaking mahogany pedestal table na may bronze sculpture ang disenyo sa bilugang pasukan.

A simple glass chandelier spiraled down from the center of the leaf dome, bathing the entryway in a soft glow. The foyer opened into the spacious living room, the large floor to ceiling banks of windows lining the wall offering a sweeping view of the glittering city lights below.

Her heels clicked on the limestone floor as she sauntered inside. She passed the comfortable black leather couches, glass coffee table and wall of entertainment system. Pero huminto siya sa tapat ng mahabang console table na may mga larawan ng pamilya niya at ni Lorenzo. Tumaas ang sulok ng kanyang mga labi nang makita ang isang larawan sa

gitna. Kuha iyon noong Pasko noong isang taon sa bahay nila. They looked so good together, him in a dark polo and jeans, and her in her red satin cami drape dress. Nakangiti sila sa isa't isa, nakapaikot ang mga braso niya sa baywang ng binata, sapo ng isang kamay nito ang panga niya. She would dare anyone to look at that picture and declare that Lorenzo felt nothing romantic toward her. And he even put the picture on display! The guy was freaking in love with her for crying out loud. He was just too stubborn to admit it.

Emboldened, she stepped away from the table and strode toward the direction of the rooms. Nadaanan niya ang landline phone sa isang side table at sandali niyang sinipat ang ilalim niyon. Just as she thought, naka-off ang ringer. He probably didn't want to be disturbed as he slept.

She smirked. Well, sorry na lang dahil iistorbohin niya ito. He would be surprised—

“F\*ck!”

Muntikang matapilok si Paloma nang marinig ang malakas na pag-ungol ng lalaki.

“F\*ck... yeah...”

Nanlaki ang kanyang mga mata, at pakiramdam niya ay binuhusan siya ng malamig na tubig.

“Yes, f\*ck!”

Boses iyon ni Lorenzo, hindi siya puwedeng magkamali. At galing iyon sa silid ng binata. Patuloy ang pag-ungol ng lalaki, at parang may matalim na punyal na sumasaksak sa kanyang dibdib sa bawat paghinga niya.

“God...”

She ran to his room, not caring if she might break her ankle or neck if she tripped in her four-inch needle heels. The son of a bitch was f\*cking someone in his room! She felt hot tears burning in her eyes. Akala ni Paloma ay magugulat niya ang binata sa kanyang pagdating, pero mukhang siya ang magugulat ngayong gabi!

“You bastard!” Hinagip niya ang seradura ng pinto at marahas iyong itinulak pabukas. “You, son of a bitch!”

Malakas na humampas ang pinto sa dingding, at marahas ding napabalikwas ang lalaki mula sa kama.

“What the f\*ck!” Lorenzo yanked a drawer open beside his bed and grabbed a handgun, but he jerked back when he saw her. “Paloma?” asik nito.

Nanginginig siya sa galit. He stood beside the bed stark naked, his muscles clenching underneath his dark golden skin. Her eyes raked over his muscular frame down to the throbbing hardness between his powerful thighs. He was fully aroused,

his c\*ck thick and long, the wide crown flushed and leaking precum.

*Sonofabitch!*

“Where is she?” she screamed, her gaze whipping to the empty bed, the twisted white sheets making her see red. Her eyes darted to the black leather couch and wide slipper chairs in the sitting area, to the glass desk in the work station, to the wall mounted bookshelves. “Where the hell is she?”

“What the f\*ck are you doing here?” bulyaw ng lalaki.

Through the haze of fury, she vaguely noted Lorenzo yanking on a pair of drawstring pants.

“Where is she?” sigaw niya ulit.

She heard a woman laughing from the TV but she ignored it. Tumakbo siya sa floor to ceiling windows at padaskol na binuksan ang mga asul na mga kurtina.

“What the f\*ck are you doing here?” bulyaw ulit ni Lorenzo.

Walang babae sa likod ng mga kurtina, kaya tuluyan niyang itinulak pabukas ang glass panel door. Lumabas siya sa balcony, at sinalubong siya ng malakas na panggabing hangin. Tinangay niyon ang kanyang maalong buhok at inis niyang hinawi iyon. Wala ring babae roon. She ran to the glass railing

and leaned over, her head whipping right and left, her wild gaze raking the side walls.

“What the f\*ck are you doing?” Pumulupot ang maskuladong mga braso ni Lorenzo sa kanyang baywang at hinatak siya palayo sa railing. “Have you gone completely insane? That’s f\*cking dangerous!”

“Let me go! Where is she?”

“What the hell are you talking about?” He dragged her back to his room, kicking and screaming.

“You bastard! God, I’m going to kill you! Babalatan kita nang buhay at ipapakain kita sa mga baboy ni Kuya Jomar! God, I hate you! I hate you!”

“Goddamn it, calm down! You’re hurting yourself!”

“You’re hurting me!”

Umiiyak na itinulak niya ang lalaki. Nanlabo ang kanyang paningin sa luha at parang dinudurog ang dibdib niya. Would it be possible to die from heartache? Because she just might.

“What the f\*ck, Paloma?”

Padaskol na pinahid ni Lorenzo ang kanyang luha, pero marahas din niyang tinampal ang kamay ng lalaki. She couldn’t bear him touching her, not after he just touched another woman.

“S’an mo siya itinago?” Umiiyak pa rin, muli niyang inilibot ang tingin sa paligid. “Where the

f\*ck did you—”

“Lorenzo!”

Napapitlag siya nang marinig ng boses ng isang babae, at napalipad ang tingin niya sa malaking screen ng TV.

Through her tears, she saw a woman with smoky gray eyes laughing at the person holding the camera, her wavy black hair fluttering in the wind. Nakaupo ang babae sa dalampasigan, hinahagkan ng tubig ang mga binti. Sunlight warmed the woman’s creamy skin, the light blue cotton dress she wore molding over her curves.

“*Stop filming me!*” The woman laughed and shook her head, her eyes glowing with happiness.

Umawang ang mga labi ni Paloma.

The image faded and another scene materialized. Siya ulit ang babae sa screen. Sa pagkakataong iyon, naglalakad siya sa kalsada ng Paris. She remembered that day five months ago. Kasama niyang namamasyal ang pamilya niya at si Lorenzo. But the camera only focused on her, on the way her curvy hips moved as she walked, the way she ran her fingers through her hair, the way her lips curved as she smiled...

Muling kumupas ang imahe at napalitan ng isa pa. Nakahiga siya sa kama, nakapikit ang mga

mata at—

Marahas na nagmura si Lorenzo at malalaki ang hakbang na lumapit sa LED TV. Hinaklit nito ang kurdon niyon at tuluyang naging itim na blangko ang screen.

Madilim ang mukha na hinarap siya ng lalaki. The ropey muscles of his shoulders were clenched taut, the line of his angular jaw harsh. His sculpted lips were pulled tight, his dark gaze livid. “What the f\*ck are you doing here?”

Bumuka ang kanyang bibig pero sumara rin. Naglipat ang kanyang tingin sa binata at sa screen. “What...”

“Get out.”

Akmang aabutin siya ni Lorenzo pero umatras siya.

Bumilis ang tibok ng kanyang puso, pero sa pagkakataong iyon ay hindi na dahil sa galit. Heat sluiced across her skin, rushing to the tips of her breasts, to the juncture between her thighs.

## CHAPTER *Two*

**P**umalibot muli ang kanyang tingin sa paligid—sa kusot na kumot sa bakanteng kama, sa matipunong lalaking nakatayo sa harapan niya. His tight skin still glistened with sweat, his breathing harsh, his dark eyes wild. She let her eyes roam over the rigid planes of his chest, to the deep ridges and slabs of tense muscles of his sculpted abdomen. Her gaze drifted down between his muscular thighs. He was still hard, the outline of his c\*ck thick and heavy beneath the silky black drawstring pants.

“You’re masturbating,” she breathed, finally connecting all the dots, “while watching videos of me.”

Muli niyang itinaas ang titig sa binata, at kita niya ang pagningas ng galit at pagnanasa sa madidilim nitong mata.

Through clenched teeth, he snapped, “Get out, Paloma.”

She wanted to laugh giddily. *Oh, my God.* Could she just say ‘*I told you so?*’

Bumalik ang lakas ng loob ni Paloma, at hinayaang tumaas ang sulok ng kanyang mga labi. Pinaglandas niya ang mga palad sa gilid ng kanyang katawan at humakbang siya palapit sa binata.

God, she thought she would surprise him, pero siya talaga ang nasorpresa. And she ain’t complaining.

His eyes narrowed as her smile widened, tension tightening his muscular frame even more. Namigat ang talukap ng kanyang mga mata at bahagya niyang inarko ang likuran. The butter soft leather suddenly felt coarse against her heated skin. Damn, si Lorenzo lang ang kayang magbigay sa kanya ng ganitong extreme mood swings: from murderous to horny.

“Do you really want me to?” anas ng dalaga.

Pinaglaro niya ang mga daliri sa sinturon ng trench coat. She could feel the tips of her breasts stiffening against the soft material of her coat. Oras na para bumalik sa kanyang orihinal na plano.

Walang hitad na kailangan niyang iligpit sa silid ni Lorenzo, instead she found him jacking off to videos of her. She had to be stupid as f\*ck to waste such golden opportunity. An important business rule: take advantage of momentum.

“The real thing’s in front of you, Lorenzo. Why settle for videos when you can have this?” Dahan-dahan, kinalas niya ang buhol ng sinturon at hinila pabukas ang coat.

Malutong na nagmura ang binata nang tuluyang dumausdos pababa sa kanyang katawan ang malambot na tela. The cool air kissed her naked skin, the tips of her breasts beading tighter, the lips of her sex swelling under his gaze.

She didn’t bother with seductive lingerie. Ang tanging suot niya ay ang mga alahas na regalo mismo ng binata at ang kanyang four-inch red strappy stilettos. Too blunt? Well, subtlety is overrated.

She stepped toward him, watched his teeth gnash as his hot gaze followed the way her heavy breasts quivered with every step she took. His whole body seemed to vibrate with tension, his muscles bulging from strain.

“Why settle for imagination, Lorenzo?” she murmured, her voice throaty. She stopped an inch in front of him, the heat of his body drenching her

skin, the taut peaks of her breasts brushing the solid wall of his chest. The scent of musk, pines and male arousal steeped her senses, making her head spin. Breathing deeply, she pressed herself closer to his unyielding frame, flushing her ripe mounds tight against the chiseled hardness of his torso. Her stiff nipples scraped across his rigid muscles, the friction shooting fire throughout her nerve endings. A gasp shuddered out of her throat and her back arched, rubbing her breasts across his muscular chest.

Nagmura ang binata at pumulupot ang mga daliri nito sa kanyang braso. “Goddamn it—”

Lalo niyang idiniin ang malambot na katawan sa lalaki at inilapit ang bibig sa tainga nito. “Why settle for imagination when you can f\*ck me?”

With a moan, she slipped her hand between their hot bodies, dragging her small palm down the tight lacing of muscles across his abdomen. His muscles clenched underneath her hand, and vicious curses spewed out of his throat. He grabbed her wrist, but he didn’t pull her hand away.

Lalo niyong pinalakas ang loob ni Paloma. Dizzy with need, she glided her hand lower, her palm cupping his maleness through his pants, the heel of her hand massaging his heavy length.

“Goddamn it, Paloma,” he groaned, his hardness

jerking in her hand.

The heat of his throbbing c\*ck seeped through the thin material, scorching her flesh, making her sex clench.

“Why stop yourself?” anas niya. “Why deny this?”

Tuluyan niyang ipinasok ang kamay sa loob ng pantalon ng binata. She wanted to feel his skin on her skin, wanted to wrap her palm around—

“Stop!” Humigpit ang pulupot ng mga daliri ng lalaki sa kanyang pupulsuhan at hinatak iyon palayo sa pagitan ng mga hita nito. He shoved himself away from her, backing away so fast he almost stumbled.

Agad niyang inabot ang binata. “Lorenzo—”

“Stay away from me.”

Kung galit nitong isinigaw ang mga salitang iyon, baka nakaangal si Paloma. Pero hindi. His voice was low, strangled, the pain so raw she felt it in her bones. He said the words as if touching her would destroy everything he ever held dear. As if touching her would damn his soul for eternity.

Stunned, she stared at him.

Sapo ng malaking palad ni Lorenzo ang noo. Nakatiim-bagang ang binata, tila inukit sa bato ang matitigas nitong kalamnan sa katawan.

“Get out of the room, Paloma,” he ordered; his

voice hoarse and thick. “Wait for me in the living room. I’ll drive you home.”

Tumalikod ang lalaki at malalaki ang mga hakbang na tinungo ang walk-in closet.

Muli niyang naramdaman ang pag-iinit ng mga mata, ang paninikip ng dibdib sa mabibigat na emosyong nagpapahirap sa kanyang huminga. Ang lalaking ito lang ang kayang magbigay sa kanya ng ganoong mga emosyon. One second she was all giddy and happy, on the next she was drowning in a pool of misery.

“Why?” nanginginig niyang usal. “Why are you like this?”

The hard muscles of his back tensed, but he didn’t turn around to face her.

Tuluyang umapaw ang kanyang luha pero hindi na siya nag-abalang pahirin iyon. “Bakit? Bakit, Lorenzo? Bakit ba ganito ka? You love me, you want me, don’t you f\*cking deny it. Pero bakit ganito kagrabe ang pagtangga mo? What’s so f\*cking wrong with me—*with us*—that you can’t admit what you feel for me? That you’re so vehemently, *violently* against us? As if being with me would bring about the f\*cking apocalypse? And don’t you dare use our age difference because we both know that’s bullshit! Why—”

“You’re family.”

Lorenzo faced her, his features harsh with savage pain, his eyes dark and haunted.

Her own chest constricted, the visceral anguish etched so brutally across every inch of his face a crushing blow to her hope and spirit. She loved him, she really did. And seeing him like this, it cut her to the core.

“W-what?”

“You’re family, Paloma.” His voice was gravelly, strained. “Ikaw, si Uncle, ang kuya mo, ang mama mo, you’re family. The only family I’ve ever known. The only the family I have.”

Mabilis siyang umiling kahit patuloy ang pag-awas ng maiinit na luha mula sa kanyang mga mata. “I... I don’t understand. Ano’ng sinasabi mo? You can’t be with me because you think of me as family? Like a sister? We both know that’s bullshit. You don’t see me as a sister. You—”

“I don’t.”

Nag-angat siya ng tingin, muling itinitig ang luhaang mga mata sa binata.

His eyes had gone dim, his voice heavy. “I want you. I’ve wanted you longer than I care to admit. I’ve wanted you so violently I can’t f\*cking breathe sometimes. But I’m going to destroy you. I’m going

to ruin you. We'll be together and then, what? I'm going to f\*cking mess up. I will hurt you, I will lose you. I will lose you and your family. I will lose the only family I ever had."

"What are you talking about?"

Malalaking hakbang siyang lumapit sa lalaki pero mabilis itong umatras.

"Stay away, Paloma. If you ever truly care about me, stop doing this."

She wiped away her tears with the back of her hand and shook her head. God, ano ba ang sinasabi ng lalaking ito? He was not making sense!

"Bakit 'yan agad ang iniisip mo? Of course, you'll hurt me, and I'll hurt you, too. Normal 'yon sa isang relasyon. Pero bakit iniisip mo agad na hindi natin kakayanin? Na hindi ko kakayanin? I'm not a child, Lorenzo. You're not giving me enough credit, I'm stronger than—"

"I'm not cut out for a relationship, Paloma."

The steel hardness of his voice sliced through the air. The anguish in his eyes froze into icy coldness, his features tightening into severe lines.

Malalaki ang mga hakbang, nilapitan ng lalaki ang trench coat niya sa may sahig at padaskol na pinulot iyon. Inilahad nito iyon sa kanya, malamig pa rin ang mga mata habang determinadong

nakatitig sa mukha niya.

Gusto niyang sumigaw. A part of her wanted to taunt him with her body, make his mouth water with her flesh until he succumbed to their needs. But he had opened a line of discussion he hadn't exposed before—the possible crux of his repulsion toward a relationship with her. She believed sex was a great weapon, but she also knew it's not going to solve everything if she wanted them to succeed in the long term. And goddamn it, she's going to make sure they would succeed in the long term.

Hinablot ni Paloma ang coat at isinuot iyon. He wanted to be all cold and clinical now? Fine. She could be the queen bitch of clinical logic if she had to.

“Sa tingin mo, hindi ka cut out para sa isang relasyon?” pakli niya habang inaayos ang sinturon ng trench coat. “Why?”

He stood there under the soft light, his muscles coiled and stiff, his sharp features hard as granite. “Because I'm not.”

Maikli siyang umiling. “That's not going to cut it, Lorenzo. At least try to explain to me why you think that way. I deserve that. If you really want me to give up on you, on us, at least give me a goddamn good reason. Because I love you, and I can't, I *won't* give up on someone I love without a fight. I'm sorry if

that sounds so stubborn and selfish, but I just can't—"

"Goddamn it, Paloma!" Marahas nitong isinuklay ang mga daliri sa maikling buhok.

"What?" asik niya. "Ayaw mong marinig na mahal kita? Well, I'm sorry because I do. I've loved you since I was sixteen when you asked me to dance in the company's Christmas party. I've loved you since you made me laugh, since you spent the whole night trying to make me feel comfortable in a place I barely knew. I know you're just trying to be nice that night, you probably felt sorry for the awkward, fat, ugly girl—"

"For f\*ck's sake, you were never ugly and you weren't fat!"

Sa kabila ng lahat, tumaas ang sulok ng kanyang mga labi. She knew he meant that. He had never been shallow, never been one to judge people based on looks, financial status, or family connections. He had always been one of the best people she knew. Masisisi ba siya kung mahal niya ito?

"Thank you for that," usal niya. "I know you mean it, but I was fat and awkward and painfully shy and you were kind enough to stay by my side when you could have spent the night with all the women and men wanting your attention."

Maliwanag pa rin kay Paloma ang alaalang iyon.

Halos wala pa silang isang buwan ng kanyang ina mula sa California noon. Filipina ang lola niya sa side ng kanyang mama, at umuwi sila sa Pilipinas para asikasuhin ang ilang negosyo nito. Wala siyang kaibigan o kakilala sa Manila noon. Her mother had started dating Uncle Simeon, and they had been invited to the company Christmas party. Abala sa pag-e-entertain ng mga bisita ang kanyang ina, si Uncle Simeon at Giancarlo, at naiwan si Paloma sa company ng babae at lalaking kaedad niya. They had been nice and had tried to make her feel comfortable, but she had just been too awkward.

Then, Lorenzo sat beside her, handsome and strong like a Roman god, a shit-eating grin on his handsome face. Sinabi nito, *“Giancarlo said you’re a geek. Welcome to the club. But I have to verify, though. Giancarlo isn’t the most reliable source sometimes. When we were five, he told me he was a cat, so he jumped off a swing headfirst thinking he’d land on all fours like a cat. Of course, he didn’t, instead he broke an arm. So, back to you. Here’s my question. Why do programmers confuse Halloween with Christmas?”*

He had made her laugh all throughout the night. She knew he was just being nice, just trying to be friendly. He was a family friend of Uncle Simeon and he just wanted to welcome her. She thought he

was one of the greatest things on earth. She still felt that way after five years.

“I’ve loved you for that kindness,” mababa niyang sambit. “I’ve loved you for so many things for so long. I can’t just give up on that. Please, Lorenzo. Help me understand, because I really love you.” Her voice broke and tears burned her eyes again. Well, so much for being cold and clinical.

Lorenzo rasped out a curse and stepped toward her. Akmang aabutin siya nito, pero kumuyom ang palad at muling umatras. Emotions raged in his eyes, and he clenched his jaw and shook his head, taking another step back.

Sinasabi ng iba, masasanay ang isang tao sa isang bagay kapag lagi iyong nangyayari. Kung ganoon, bakit parang hinihiwa pa rin ang kanyang buto sa tuwing lumalayo ang binata?

“I can’t do relationships, Paloma.”

“Why?” she croaked.

He lifted his head, his gaze stark and tortured. “I don’t know how. Nobody showed me.”

Lumunok siya at huminga nang malalim. Her chest felt so heavy and tight. “Is this about your parents?”

Inasahan niyang mapupuno ng galit ang mga mata ng kausap. His parents were never an easy topic

for him. Pero nasimulan na nilang pag-usapan ang puno't dulo ng problema nila, at kailangan na nilang harapin iyon kahit gaano pa kadumi at kasakit.

Gaya ng kanyang inaasahan, nagningas ang galit sa mga mata ng lalaki, pero tiim-bagang itong tumango. "Yes."

"You are not your parents."

"You think I don't know that?" Rage burned brighter in his eyes. "You think I haven't been telling myself that? That I'd be different, that I am different? That it's f\*cking irrational to be afraid that I'd turn out like them? That it's f\*cking hilarious? But whoever said fear is rational?"

Mabilis siyang umiling. "Lorenzo—"

"Mamaliitin mo ba ang takot ko?" Mapang-uyam na tumaas ang sulok ng mga labi ng lalaki. "Tell me it's stupid and senseless? That it's bullshit? Well, it's f\*cking real to me."

Tumalikod ang kausap at tinungo ang walk-in closet.

"So ano'ng ibig mong sabihin?" asik ni Paloma, hindi mapigilan ang pag-awas ng mga emosyon mula sa kanyang dibdib. She knew she had to pull back. The issue was too sensitive for him. But the implication of what he had revealed was just too strong. "In the end, your fear is greater than whatever

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feelings you have for me. Is that it?”

Lumabas ang binata sa closet at nakasuot na ng pantalon at puting kamiseta. His muscular frame remained tense, his features rigid and cold.

“No, Paloma.” He met her direct gaze, his eyes grim and resolute. “It’s quite the opposite. You, your family—you’re the most important thing to me. It’s the risk of losing you that I can’t handle. Don’t ask me to risk it. Don’t ask me to risk the only family I ever had. Because I won’t. You’re too f\*cking important to me.”

Dinampot nito ang car keys mula sa mesa at lumabas ng kuwarto nang hindi siya nililingon.

## CHAPTER *Three*

“Got rejected by Lorenzo again?”  
Paloma growled and stabbed Giancarlo with a glare.

Tumawa ang kanyang stepbrother, dumampot ng banana bread sa counter bago umupo sa tabi ng tatay nito sa may kitchen table.

Hindi maitatangging mag-ama ang dalawa. They had the same strong bone structure, the same lean build and towering height, the same fair complexion. They even had the same taste in clothes. Pastel-colored polo shirts and beige slacks.

“Don’t piss her,” saway rito ni Uncle Simeon habang naghihiwa ng beef cheese pie. “Baka hindi na tayo dalhan ng pies at cakes.”

Tumawa ulit ang lalaki at hiniwa sa gitna ang malaking loaf ng tinapay. “Okay, forget I said that. But seriously, little sister, I admire your spirit. Gusto mo, kulamin na natin si Lorenzo?” Giancarlo shoved a large chunk of bread into his mouth like he did not eat in a week.

Disgusted, she threw an orange table napkin at him. “You shouldn’t be around people. Your table manners are disgusting.”

Tumawa ang dalawa at muling sumubo ng pie at tinapay. Obviously, pareho rin ng taste sa pagkain ang mag-ama at pareho rin ang sense of humor. They love to laugh at the same things and people—*i.e.* siya.

“Why do you think he rejected me again?” tanong ni Paloma at sumubo ng kanyang bacon taco. The savory flavor of meat and cheese mixed with avocado melted on her taste buds, but she was too cranky to fully appreciate it.

Nakasimangot na tinapunan niya ng tingin ang bakanteng silya sa tabi ni Giancarlo. Sunday nang araw na iyon, at family day nila. It meant spending the whole day together. Pero bakit wala pa si Lorenzo? Tonight, they’re supposed to watch the latest recorded documentaries of the week. Tradisyon na nila iyon mula pa noong sixteen years old siya.

“Because nothing puts a grumpy look on your face first thing in the morning other than Lorenzo rejecting your advances. Why, ang sama ng tingin mo sa salsa, and food always makes you goofy. Remember, Pa, when she just turned seventeen? And she just lost like half of her baby fats and she—”

“Ugh! Shut up!” Hinampas niya sa balikang lalaki pero humalakhak lang ito.

She growled and contemplated putting laxative in Giancarlo's coffee. Hindi siya bayolenteng tao, but having a brother like this guy brought out her homicidal tendencies. Mabuti na lang at hindi niya ito kasamang lumaki. She could just imagine all the tortures and miseries he would have heaped on a helpless little girl. Headless *Barbies*, frogs and cockroaches on the bed, dying her hair blue. *Gah.*

“Children,” saway ng nanay niya, umiiling sa kanila habang dala-dala ang isang ceramic pot ng herbal tea at isang vase ng yellow, red, and pink roses.

Uncle Simeon's mouth stretched into a wide dopey grin as her mother sashayed into the bright kitchen, her long yellow dress making her skin glow. Hindi niya masisi ang stepfather. Lorena Ortega Santillan was a goddess. At hindi niya iyon sinasabi dahil lang nanay niya ang babae.

Iyong mama niya ang tipo na puwedeng mag-

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selfie araw-araw pagkagising nito at i-post iyon sa *Instagram* para sa *I-woke-up-like-this* post. While she was short, fair and could sometimes look ashen, her mother was tall, golden tan and rosy. Maagang nag-asawa ang mama niya, bente-uno gaya ng edad ni Paloma ngayon, kaya madalas mapagkalaman silang magkapatid.

Her mother also ate everything she wanted and still remained slim, unlike her who had to watch her calorie intake or she'd get bloated in nanoseconds. Just this morning, she almost had a mini-heart attack when her blue dress wouldn't fit her hips. Salamat sa Diyos at na-stuck lang pala ang zipper. Akala niya ay lumapad na naman ang kanyang balakang.

But she supposed they had the same facial features. They both had upturned eyes, full lips and high cheekbones. But her mother's eyes were deep brown while she had her gray eyes from her father's.

Ngumiti ang kanyang ina kay Uncle Simeon at umupo sa bench sa tabi nito. Ipinatong nito ang vase ng bulaklak sa gitna ng mesa pagkatapos ay nagsalin ng tsa sa tasa nito. The morning sunlight bathed the pale-yellow kitchen walls, dark hardwood floor and round mahogany table, but the sun itself couldn't outshine her mother dearest.

“Inaasar n’yo na naman si Paloma,” sita nito sa

dalawang lalaki.

Ngumisi ang asawa nito at isinuksok sa likod ng tainga ng kanyang mama ang ilang hibla ng buhok na kumawala sa low chignon nito. “It’s Giancarlo, not me. You know I love Paloma to pieces, dear.”

Her stepbrother made a gagging sound, while she rolled her eyes and snorted. Nakakakilabot ang pagiging cheesy ng mama niya at ng asawa nito.

“Auntie,” depensa ni Giancarlo, “hindi ko siya inaasar. I’m offering her help. S’abi ko, kulamin na namin si Lorenzo para mapasagot na niya.”

Tinadyakan niya sa ilalim ng mesa ang binti ng lalaki pero muli ay malutong lang itong tumawa.

“Paloma,” sita ng nanay niya.

“It’s not funny!” she fumed, taking another bite of her taco.

Bumuntong-hininga ang ina at humigop ng tsaang nito. “I know how much you like Lorenzo, pero baka nakakaabala ka na sa kanya. Hindi maganda ’yon.”

Umungol siya. Pati ba naman ito? “Ma...”

“Paloma’s on the right track, honey,” kontra ni Uncle Simeon. “Lorenzo needs someone like her. She’s good for him. Don’t give up on him, Paloma. Keep it up.”

*Finally!* Gusto niyang pumalampak at pugpugin ng halik ang stepfather. *Someone who saw sense!*

Masigla siyang ngumiti rito. Nasabi na ba niyang mahal niya si Uncle Simeon? He's the best stepdad ever.

"I agree," segunda ni Giancarlo. "Marami lang hang-ups si Lorenzo, but anyone can see he likes you. Kaya go lang, little sister!"

Okay, mahal rin niya si Giancarlo. She beamed at her stepbrother and promised herself to bring more of his favorite cream cheese brownies next Sunday.

Yeah, yeah, mababaw ang kaligayahan niya. She had long ago accepted that she was cray-cray when it came to Lorenzo.

"Kahit sino'ng may magulang na kagaya ni Lorenzo magkakar'on talaga ng hang-ups." Umiling ang nakatatandang lalaki; bakas sa mukha ang pag-aalala para sa binatang itinuring na nitong anak. "I never liked his father, bless the bastard's soul. Babaero at laging wala sa bahay."

"His mother's no different." Giancarlo's warm easy humor hardened into disgust, his features tensing into rigid angles. "She neglected Lorenzo and drank herself to death. Those two were shitty parents."

Nawala ang saya sa dibdib ni Paloma, at naging lasang abo ang flavor ng taco sa kanyang dila. Napabuntong-hininga siya at ibinaba ang taco sa

kanyang plato. Emotional vampires talaga ang mga magulang ni Lorenzo. Even though they were long dead, they could still darken the days of people connected to them.

“But the two of you had been there for him.” Ginagap ni Lorena ang kamay ng asawa nito at marahang pinisil. “Kahit kapitbahay n’yo lang sila, you took him in and gave him a great family. You practically raised him. You don’t share the same blood, but you’re his family. He has you. He has us.”

The ashy taste in her mouth sharpened and spread down her throat. Lorenzo’s strangled voice echoed in her head. “*You’re family, Paloma.*”

Maliit na ngumiti ang kanyang Uncle Simeon, pero naroon pa rin ang pag-aalala sa makisig nitong mukha. “We are, and we always will be. But I still worry about him. He doesn’t let other people in easily. Tayo lang ang talagang mayroon siya. I want him to have more people in his life, more happiness. I think Paloma can give that to him.”

Malambing na ngumiti ito sa kanya, pero lalong umahon ang mapait na lasa sa tiyan niya paakyat sa lalamunan.

*“Tayo lang ang talagang mayroon siya.”*

Napatitig si Paloma sa bakanteng silya sa tabi ni Giancarlo. Lagpas alas ocho na, pero wala pa rin si

Lorenzo. He had never missed family day. Family day was sacred to him. He valued this family so much because they were all he ever had. Yet today...

“But dear, your coffee is really topnotch,” komento ni Uncle Simeon.

Iniiwas niya ang tingin sa upuan, at pilit itinuon sa amain. Maaliwalas na muli ang guwapo nitong mukha habang nakangiti sa asawa.

Uncle Simeon kissed the tip of her mother’s nose. “I never knew California coffee could be this good. Dapat pati sa Europe mag-export na rin kayo.”

At the shift of topic, her mother smiled, but Paloma thought she saw a hint of worry in Lorena’s brown eyes. “No. Baka ma-strain ang production at bumaba ang quality. We want to keep our coffee topnotch.”

“Kumusta nga pala ang farm?” untag ng kanyang stepbrother sa kanya. “Pumunta si Marcus sa coffee farm n’ung isang araw, di ba? Hindi naman sila naapektuhan ng bagyo? Grabe na rin talaga ang global warming ngayon. Pati U.S. binabagyo na. How was everyone?”

She managed a small smile, and forced herself to swallow the acrid taste in her mouth. “Everything’s good. Balik ni Marcus bukas.”

“It’s good to have someone like your friend in the

family business,” saad ni Uncle Simeon. “Kokonting tao ang p’wede mong pagkatiwalaan ngayon. ’Yung mga kamag-anak n’yo? Pasensya na, ha? But they’re going to run the coffee business into the ground if you let them take over.”

Tumango ang dalaga. “He loves the business as much as we do. He and I grew up together in that coffee farm, and he wants to keep working in the company.”

“That’s good. Pero matanong lang kita ulit, ha? You two are so close. Talaga bang hindi nanligaw sa ’yo si Marcus?”

Sa kabila ng lahat ay nagawa niyang tumawa. Isang malaking puzzle sa iba ang relasyon nila ni Marcus. Kahit si Lorenzo ay mukhang nagseselos sa kaibigan kung pagbabasehan niya ang malamig nitong pakikitungo sa lalaki. Siguro bihira na talaga ang mag-best friend na babae at lalaki sa panahon ngayon. But then again, romantic attraction was never a factor between her and Marcus.

“He’s like a brother to me.”

“Well, that’s good. Romantic relationship may complicate your business relationship, and he’s an invaluable asset to the company. Kahit hindi ikaw mismo ang mag-manage ng business n’yo, it’s in good hands. Malaking tulong si Marcus dahil

dito na naka-base sa Pilipinas ang mama mo. That coffee farm has been in your family for so many generations, it should be taken care of. It's been in your family since the 1700s, right dear?"

Maliit na ngumiti ang mama niya. "Yes."

Napakunot-noo si Paloma. Hindi siya namamalikmata, mukhang may inaalala ang kanyang nanay. "Bakit, Ma?"

"Hmm?" Humigop ulit ito ng tsa.

"You look worried."

Muli itong ngumiti at umiling. "Wala. Medyo kinakabag lang yata ako, alam mo naman tumatanda na. May mga problema na sa digestive system."

Lalo siyang kumunot noo. At forty-three, her mother was fit and healthy. Bihira itong magkasakit.

"You should take a break, honey." Hinagod ni Uncle Simeon ang likuran ni Lorena. "Nitong nakaraan pa parang hindi maganda ang pakiramdam. mo."

"What?" pakli ni Paloma. "Kailan pa? Why didn't I know about this?"

Damn it. Masyado na ba siyang nakatuon kay Lorenzo at hindi niya nabigyang pansin ang sariling ina?

"It's nothing." Iwinasiwas ng ginang ang kamay. "Sige na, kumain ka na. I'll drop by your place

tomorrow evening to bring the new set of bedsheets I ordered from your Tita Marge. Darating na 'yon bukas ng hapon.”

“Is work stressing you out?” she pressed on. “Wala namang problema sa farm.”

“I’m alright. Sige na, kumain ka na. Then, help me prepare lunch. Lorenzo will bring dessert, right?”

“Uh, actually...”

Napatingin sila kay Giancarlo, at lalong umapaw ang mapait na lasa sa kanyang lalamunan nang makita ang matamlay na ngiti sa mga labi ng kinakapatid.

“He called me before breakfast. Hindi raw siya makakapunta ngayon. Work.”

Humigpit ang hawak ni Paloma sa baso ng protein shake. *Work*. They all knew that was a lie. Lorenzo would never miss family day just because of work.

Marahang tinapik ng stepbrother ang kanyang balikat, marahil ay nakita ang pagtarak ng sakit sa mukha niya.

“Don’t think too much of it. Marami talaga siyang trabaho ngayon. He’s taking over a construction firm so he’s swamped with meetings. Don’t stress yourself out.”

Alam niyang pinagagaan lang nito ang

pakiramdam niya. So she just gave a small nod and took a gulp of strawberry and banana smoothie, the bile rising up her throat making her nauseated.

Nag-ring ang phone ng kanyang mama.

“It’s your Lola.” Tumayo ito at distracted na ngumiti sa kanila. “I’m sorry, but I need to take this. Mabilis lang ’to.” Lumabas na ito ng kitchen.

Ibinaba niya ang baso ng juice at napatingin sa kanyang amain. “Ano’ng problema?”

Pero gaya ni Giancarlo ay maliit itong ngumiti at tinapik ang kanyang balikat. “It’s nothing, don’t worry—”

“Uncle—”

“It’s nothing, Paloma.” Ginawa nitong mas masigla ang ngiti. “Let’s enjoy this day. Bihira lang tayong nagsasama-sama nang buong araw dahil sa busy schedules natin. Let’s not stress ourselves unnecessarily.”

“But...”

“Malapit na ang birthday ng mama mo. I’m thinking of buying her a rose farm in Baguio. You think she will like it?”

Tumiim-labi siya sa pag-iiba nito ng topic, pero maningning lang itong ngumiti sa kanya, halatang excited sa regalo sa asawa.

Napailing si Paloma at tumaas ang sulok ng mga

labi. Mahirap mairita sa isang taong nagmamahal nang sobra sa kanyang ina.

“This is not the end of this conversation, Uncle,” sambit niya. “And yes, she will love it.”

“You will love it, too. Come with us this Wednesday and we’ll show you.”

Tumango ang dalaga at ngumiti. Seeing the love for her mother on the man’s face always made her warm inside. She would always love him for that. Kaunti lang ang naaalala niya sa sariling ama, hindi lang dahil sa namatay agad ito noong eight years old siya. Her father had always been busy with work and had rarely spent time with them. She had no memories of him dotting on her mother the way Uncle Simeon did.

“Okay, aayusin ko lang ang schedule ko. I’ll send you a text message tomorrow before lunch.”

Ngumiti ang kausap at masayang bumaling ulit sa pagkain nito.