

## 15

## MEET THE PARENTS

"Finally, nakabalik din kayo!" Mahigpit na niyakap ni Reggie si Stacia pagkababa nila ng SUV.

"Yeah, we're in time for the wedding!"

Tumawa sila ng kaibigan.

"Ay, naker, mama at papa n'yo naman ang problema." Umiling si Ate Jewel. "Baka mamaya hindi pa 'yon makarating sa kasal."

"Knock on wood, Ate!" Kumatok si Stacia sa kahoy na pintuan ng hotel. "Makakarating 'yun bukas. Na-delay lang talaga ang flight nila sa Australia."

"Hello, Calian!" Pinapungay ni Reggie ang mga mata sa lalaki at malawak na ngumiti.

Tumango si Calian. "Hello."

Grinning, she reached for his big hand and entwined their fingers.

He had been in power suits almost every day when they were in Manila, and it had always made her want to rub her curves against him. And now, he wore a simple black shirt and dark jeans that couldn't hide

the chiseled built of his muscular body, and she still wanted to moan and press her curves all over him. It really didn't matter what he wore. He'd always be hot.

“Congratulations,” nakangiti bati ni Ate Jewel. “I'm happy for you and Stacia.”

Pormal na tumango ang binata.

“Sige, na.” Hinawakan ni Ate Jewel ang kabilang kamay niya. “Ayusin n'yo na ang mga gamit n'yo at sabay-sabay na tayong mag-dinner. Tinawagan mo na ba ulit sina Pricilla?”

“Yeah, they're still enjoying Cebu.”

Pagkaayos ng mga gamit, she changed from her yoga pants and shirt into a long flowy maxi dress with a halter neck and low-cut back. She paired the cranberry-colored dress with four-inch red *Manolo Blabnik* and simple pearl earrings. Itinaas din ni Stacia sa isang mahigpit na bun ang kanyang buhok para ilantad ang kanyang mga balikat.

Calian's gaze darkened as she sashayed toward him. Grinning, she pressed her curves to his hard frame and tipped her face up to offer her mouth.

He wound his brawny arm around her waist, his large palm possessively splaying across her naked back. The feel of his calloused palm against her smooth skin was electrifying.

Leaning down, he slanted his mouth over hers and suckled her lower lip. Napaungol siya at ibinuka

ang mga labi upang papasukin ang dila ng nobyo. She sucked on his tongue, and he groaned. He cupped the back of her head and angled her face, kissing her deeper.

Hinihigal at namimigat ang mga talukap na nagmulat si Stacia. “Like my dress?”

He brushed his mouth over hers. “I like you in any clothes. I like you without them, too.”

Tumawa siya at hinila ang lalaki papunta sa elevator.

Ang table ng kuya niya ang agad nilang pinuntahan pagdating sa mess hall.

“So you two are really together now?” gulat na tanong ng kanyang kapatid. “Akala ko, niloloko lang ako ni Stacia.”

Tumaas ang sulok ng mga labi ni Calian. “We are together.”

“You’d make Mama and Papa happy!” Tumawa ang kuya niya.

“Stacia!” Tumakbo si Lizzy palapit sa kanila at niyakap siya. “I’m really sorry about the video, but you gotta admit, Shannon’s really overdoing it!”

“Just don’t add fuel to the gossip fire, dear.”

“Hello, Calian.” Ngumiti ang kaibigan sa kanyang nobyo. “We’re so happy about you and Stacia!”

“Thank you,” sagot ng lalaki.

Napataas ang tingin ng nobyo, at naramdaman

ni Stacia ang bahagyang paninigas ng mga kalamnan nito.

Napasulyap siya sa mukha ni Calian at nakita ang tensyon sa guwapo nitong mukha. Kunot-noong lumingon siya para tingnan kung ano ang nakita nito.

Dana was walking toward them, a pained smile on her angelic face. “Hi, Stacia, Calian.”

Nanikip ang kanyang sikhura at napatingin ulit sa nobyo. Matigas pa rin sa tensyon ang linya ng mukha nito.

Ibinalik ni Stacia ang titig sa babae. The woman was in a simple off-white floral dress with a full skirt and wide belt. Matamis siyang ngumiti rito at isinilid ang isang braso payakap sa baywang ng katabi. “Hi, Dana. You’re all good now?”

Matamlay na tumango ang babae. “Yes.”

“Your colors are great and your hair, too. But that floral dress makes you look fat, dear.”

“Stacia,” pakli ni Calian.

Pinaikot niya ang mga mata. “It’s true. Dana’s a little overweight, and fat and short girls shouldn’t wear full skirt because it makes them look even fatter and—”

“Will you stop it?” sikmat ng katipan na kumalas sa kanya.

Tumiim ang kanyang mga labi at kumuyom ang palad.

Tumikhim ang Kuya Daniel niya. “Oo nga, Stacia. Dana looks great. Sige na, let’s have dinner. Calian, are you going to sit here with us? Dito ang table ni Nico. May kausap lang ’yon ngayon.”

Tiim-bagang na tumango ang nobyo. “Yes, I need to talk to my cousin about something.”

As if on cue, pumasok si Nico sa loob ng mess hall at agad lumapit sa kanila. The guy was in his usual shirt and jeans, his jaw roughened by stubbles.

“Calian, tamang-tama.” Tinapik ng lalaki ang balikat ng pinsan nito. “Katatawag lang sa ’kin ng isang local journalist dito. They want to feature you in an article—the man behind the project type of thing. They’d like to include your education, family, the reason why you want to pursue clean source of energy for communities, and even why you left your old job.”

Matigas na umiling ang kasintahan. “No. I’m not the focus of this project, the people and the environment should be the center.”

“But it could help,” sulsol ni Daniel. “It can draw people in and make them more interested.”

“My personal life is not for other people to consume. They should make this about the people, tell them to feature the families who need clean sources of energy. That should have more impact than featuring me.”

“Yes, yes.” Tumango si Nico. “I knew you wouldn’t

like that.”

Bumaling sa kanya ang nobyo at hinagkan siya sa noo. “Go to your table, Stacia. Let’s talk later.”

She smiled flippantly and shrugged her slender shoulder. “Sure, baby.”

Inangat niya ang mukha para hagkan ito. He leaned down and pressed his hard mouth perfunctorily over her pouty lips. Ibang-iba iyon sa mainit nitong halik kanina.

Pagkatapos, pormal itong bumaling kay Dana. “I’m glad you’re doing well now, Dana.”

Matamlay pa rin ang babae nang tumango. “Thank you.”

Naninikip ang tiyan, tumalikod si Stacia at tinungo ang mesa nila. Dana joined them and she ignored Dana all throughout dinner.

“Hey,” sambit ni Reggie habang naghihiwa ng lobster nito, “darating ’ata ang parents ni Calian sa wedding, alam mo ba?”

Napaigtad siya at napakurap. “What?”

“Hindi pa niya nasabi sa ’yo? Parang late notice yata talaga. Invited talaga sila, pero nagka-conflict sa schedule so hindi sila dapat pupunta. But now they’re going.”

“You’re going to meet the parents tomorrow, girl!” komento ni Lizzy.

Napatango lang si Stacia. Why hadn’t he told her

that?

Pagkatapos ng dinner, dumating si Gov. Erly at kinailangan itong kausapin ni Calian tungkol sa meeting ng mga ito na naantala noong nakaraan.

“I’m not sure what time we’ll finish,” sabi ng nobyo nang nasa labas na sila ng mess hall. “We need to go over some plans and logistics.”

Tumango siya at pinulupot ang mga braso sa baywang nito. “It’s okay. Reggie told me your parents are coming to the wedding? Why didn’t you tell me?”

He stiffened a little, and it made Stacia go rigid as well.

Pero marahang hinagod ng binata ang kanyang likod. “I just found out this morning myself.” Hinagkan ni Calian ang kanyang noo. “You’ll meet them tomorrow.”

“I hope they like me.”

“Just behave and be a good girl.”

Tumawa siya at ngumuso. “But you like me bad, Calian.”

Nagningas ang init sa mga mata ng nobyo. Pinisil ng magaspang nitong palad ang kanyang baywang. “Just don’t overdo it, Stacia.”

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“Calian! Oh god, Calian!”

Stacia screamed as Calian gripped her thighs with his large hands, pushing them higher against

her torso, burying his heavy c\*ck deeper into her sex.

“F\*ck,” he growled, gritting his teeth, pumping his hips faster between her thighs. His balls slapped her buttocks with every brutal thrust, his pelvis grinding onto her cl\*t.

She could only sob and clutched the sheets beneath her as her body shook with his every savage thrust. The bed creaked under the force of their movements, and the wet sloppy sound of her vagina taking in the hard pounding of his c\*ck was loud and lurid amidst her moans and his groans.

Her body tightened and her back arched, her p\*ssy convulsing around his thick length.

He cursed and pressed his thumb over her throbbing cl\*t.

“Oh god!” Her hips jerked and her thighs trembled. Whitish liquid sprayed out of her sex.

“Yes,” he growled, drilling his thickness harder into her core, rubbing her engorged cl\*t ruthlessly with his thumb. “That’s it, Stacia.”

Hindi siya matigil sa panginginig. He wouldn’t stop f\*cking her, wouldn’t stop making her cum.

With a harsh groan, he shoved his iron hard shaft deep into her core and rotated his hips. He was so big and so deep her flesh felt so stretched.

Then he was cumming, flooding her sex with his heated semen. He pumped and pumped until his cum

leaked out of her c\*nt and dribbled down the cheeks of her buttocks. She moaned and rocked her hips with him. It felt so hot and dirty, him cumming so much inside her, his semen dripping down her a\*s.

Her throat felt hoarse with all her sobs and whimpers. Dumagaan sa kanya ang maskuladong bulto ni Calian at siniil siya nito ng halik.

He sucked on her lips and tongue as he moved his hips between her thighs, his throbbing c\*ck still pumping her full of cum.

“F\*ck, Stacia.” Gumulong ito at dinala siya sa matigas nitong dibdib.

Tumawa siya at hinagkan ito sa panga. Her sex still contracted sporadically around his thick length.

They’d been f\*cking almost all night. She snuck into his room last night while he was in a meeting with Gov. Erly and waited for him in his bed naked, wet and ready for him.

“Don’t you need to get up early?” paos na untag ng nobyo.

“Hmm, not really. I’m not part of the bridal entourage.”

“Why not?” brusko nitong tanong.

Naghikab ang dalaga at pinikit ang mga mata. She liked sleeping like this. Her on top of him with his big c\*ck still inside her. “No deep reason, don’t worry. Georgina wants to keep the entourage to a

minimum, and she already have enough friends to fill the roles. I'm okay with it."

He grunted and kissed the top of her head. "But you're the only sister of the groom."

"It's okay, really. At ayoko ng kulay nila, amethyst. God, it would wash me out and make my skin look grayish."

Tumawa ang binata at marahang pinadaan ang malaki at magaspang na palad sa kanyang likod. "You'd look good in any color, Stacia."

"Aw, thank you, sweetie. But that's not true. You need to find the right color for your skin tone, the right type of clothes and material for your body shape. There's no one size fits all, darling."

"You're really big on colors and shapes."

"Of course. I get paid to look good and fabulous."

Tumigil ang paghalos ng palad ni Calian sa kanyang likod, at hindi ito umimik sa loob ng ilang segundo.

Kumunot ang noo ng dalaga at itinaas ang inaantok na tingin sa katipan. "What?"

Bahagyang nakatiim-labi si Calian. Bumuga ng hangin ang nobyo. "But do you have to be so harsh on Dana about these things?"

Bahagya siyang nanigas. "I wasn't harsh on her," sambit niya. "I was just telling the truth."

"You were mean to her, Stacia, and you know it."

Itinulak niya ang sarili palayo sa binata at umupo siya. She hissed at the loss of his hardness inside her, and ignored the slight twinge of pain deep inside her sex. She always felt sore after he f\*cked her. But it was a delicious feeling. Something she wanted to feel again and again.

She squared her shoulders and didn't bother covering her ripe breasts. "What is it with you and Dana? Why are you always coming to her rescue?"

Tumiim ang bagang ng kausap at umayos din ng upo. He didn't bother covering his hard, naked torso either. "I'm not taking her side, I'm just pointing out that you're unnecessarily harsh to someone."

"Well, darling, I'm sorry to inform you, but I'm not exactly 'sugar and spice and everything nice.' I'm catty, too. Always has been."

"But you were never this callous with anyone else—"

"Oh, darling, you probably just haven't seen it yet. And have you forgotten? I was callous with you in the beginning, too. This is me, Calian, I'll never be super nice and super sweet."

"And I'm not asking you to, but you can't..."

Tumunog ang phone ng nobyo at napahinto ito.

Tiim ang labing dinampot ng lalaki ang gadget mula sa nightstand. "It's my assistant."

Tumango si Stacia. "Take it." Tuluyan na siyang

tumayo mula sa kama at hinagilap ang kanyang satin robe.

Pero hinagip ng binata ang kanyang braso at hinila siya sa kandungan nito. Sinagot ni Calian ang tawag habang nasa ganoon silang ayos.

“Dalton.” He kissed her temple and lightly squeezed her shoulder. “Yes, I already sent the files.”

Napabuntong-hininga siya at sumandal sa matipunong dibdib ng kasintahan.

“Now?” saad ng lalaki. “Fine, just give me a minute.” Tinapos nito ang tawag at hinagkan ulit ang kanyang sentido. “I have to make a conference call with Grandpa.”

“It’s only five-thirty,” she complained, wiggling on his lap, rubbing her creamy sex over the stone-hard muscles of his thigh.

Humigpit ang yakap ng lalaki sa kanyang balikat. Itinaas niya ang tingin sa nobyo.

Mainit ang titig ni Calian.

Pumihit siya paharap at tuluyang sumakay sa binata at ipinulupot ang mga braso sa matigas nitong balikat. “First,” she breathed, rolling her hips, grinding her sopping wet sex over his already hardened maleness. “I want another quickie.”

Sinapo ng binata ang kanyang batok at marahas siyang siniil ng halik.



The day was a whirlwind of makeup brushes, champagne and hot rollers.

She had her hair curled and pinned in a low messy bun with a few curls framing her face. Simple rin lang ang kanyang makeup—a bit of lightweight foundation, a sweep of rose gold across her lids, wing liner, a touch of blush and shimmer over her cheekbones and a swipe of plum-mauve-y lippie. And of course, her brows, lashes and setting spray. Lots and lots of setting spray.

“Ay, hindi ka nakapag-spa, ano?” hirit sa kanya ni Reggie habang tinutulungan siyang isuot ang kanyang orchid-colored gown.

Simple lang ang cut ng kanyang silk organza gown—plunging neckline, full skirt na may silk belt, at cascading silk organza flower detail sa isang balikat. Mababa ang plunging neckline at halos umabot sa kanyang pusod, pero mayroon iyong skin-tone tulle na cover kaya okay lang. Of course, it’s from her favorite Sonya Castillo.

“Yeah,” sagot ni Stacia sa kaibigan. “Didn’t have the time to go to one in Manila.”

“We had one here courtesy of Lavinia! Massage, facial, body scrub—”

“Wag mo na ’kong inggitin! Sampalin kita, eh!”

Humalakhak si Reggie. “Dear, ’wag sumimangot. Halos twenty-one ka na, you need to think of wrinkles

now!”

“Gaga!”

“Hmm, you seem a little bitchier than usual, dear. What’s up? Trouble in paradise agad?”

“Of course, not.” Maarte siyang umirap.

But of course, Reggie was right.

May tensyon pa rin sa sikmura ni Stacia dahil sa reaksyon ni Calian kay Dana. Was she just making a big deal out of nothing? Or maybe she was just being irrationally jealous? Maybe she just didn’t like him being nice to other girls.

Pinaikot niya ang mga mata saka uminom ng champagne.

“Stacia, let’s go downstairs na,” aya ni Ate Jewel. “Nasa ’baba na ang parents mo at si Calian.”

“What about his parents?” Isinuot niya ang four-inch purple *Manolo Blahnik* strappy sandals with crystal embellishments.

“I’m not sure, ’andoon na rin yata.”

“Wait!” awat ni Reggie. “Photos, girl!”

And of course, nag-pose muna siya sa may bintana. After fifteen minutes and ten thousand photos later, she grabbed her gold beaded bag and they got out of her suite.

Sabay-sabay silang bumaba nina Ate Jewel at Reggie. Her Ate Jewel was in a purple column gown with her hair in a neat bun, while Reggie was in a

black suit with a red dress shirt.

Pagbukas ng elevator sa lobby, hinanap ng mga mata niya ang mga magulang at ang nobyo. At nakita niya ang mga ito na nakaupo sa sitting area ng hotel.

Her mother was gorgeous in a sapphire gown with a Sabrina neckline. Eleganteng nakapusod ang buhok nito at may tatlong string na perlas na kuwintas. Her father was in white Barong Tagalog and dark trousers. And Calian...

Her breath hitched as she stared at him.

He was already staring at her even before her gaze found him. He wore the same Barong Tagalog as most of the guests, and the traditional attire fitted his wide shoulders and muscular torso perfectly. It seemed annoying how someone like him would just have to take a shower, shave, slather on some aftershave, maybe rub on some body moisturizer, put on their clothes and voila! Wet dream on steroids na agad.

As if hypnotized, she glided toward him.

He stood, uncurling that powerful body, giving her this image of a dark god rising from his seat.

He strode toward her, his gaze dark and intense. Pumulupot ang isang braso ng nobyo sa kanyang baywang at hinila siya sa katawan nito.

She fought back a shudder as her curves gently pressed against his muscular frame. He pressed his mouth to her temple.

“You’re late, Stacia.”

Paos siyang tumawa. “No, I’m not.”

“Come, let me introduce you to my parents.”

Pinagbuhol nito ang kanilang mga daliri at maingat siyang hinila papunta sa grupo ng kanyang mga magulang.

At doon lang niya napsin ang babae at lalaki na naroon din. Matangkad ang babae at nakasuot ng aubergine Filipiniana gown, hinahantad ang mala-Greek goddess na katawan nito. Maikli ang maitim nitong buhok at matapang ang maanggulo nitong panga. The short blunt hair really didn’t fit the woman’s square jaw, but her bone structure was so strong and perfect it didn’t really matter.

Alam agad ni Stacia na ito ang nanay ni Calian. The cheekbones and jawline were a dead giveaway.

Matangkad at matipuno rin ang katawan ng tatay ng binata. He looked a lot like Calian, too, pareho pa ng gupit. Nakasuot din ito ng puting Barong Tagalog.

Maaliwalas siyang ngumiti sa mga ito at binilisan ang paglakad.

Pero napahinto rin siya nang dumako ang tingin niya sa kanan ng nanay ng nobyo.

Dana stood beside Calian’s mother with her head slightly bowed. The woman wore a pink tulle gown with a sweetheart neckline. Nakalugay ang kulot nitong buhok at nakaladlad sa isang balikat nito.

“Stacia, dear,” nakangiting tawag sa kanya ng ina.

Her smile felt a little forced as she and Calian walked toward the group.

“So beautiful, my dear.” Dinampi ng ina ang pisngi sa kanya.

“This is our daughter, Stacia,” nakangiting pakilala sa kanya ng ama.

“Mother, Father,” saad ni Calian, “this is Stacia Terron, my girlfriend.”

Her stomach felt tight and hot as she smiled at Calian’s parents.

“Stacia, this is my mother, Eloise Jaucian. My father, Guillermo Jaucian.”

“It’s so great to meet you.” Humakbang siya palapit at inilahad ang kamay.

She wanted to lean over and kiss their cheeks French-style, but the formal stare of his parents stopped her cold. Pormal din ang pagtanggap ng mga ito sa kanyang kamay.

“You are indeed very beautiful, Stacia,” may halong lamig na sabi ni Eloise Jaucian. “Very stunning.”

“And very successful, too,” pagmamalaki ng kanyang ama. “My daughter here is barely twenty-one, but has already amassed a fortune and international fame.”

Tumaas sa isang marupok na ngiti ang mapupulang labi ng ina ng katipan. “That’s very impressive. But

sometimes, it's not always beneficial for children to achieve great success at such a young age." Mataman itong tumitig sa kanya. "It can make them too proud and reckless. Sometimes, you have to experience failure before succeeding so you can be grounded and mature."

"You don't have to experience failure yourself all the time, Mother." May bahagyang lamig din ang tono ni Calian. "People can learn and grow from other people's mistakes. You don't need to do drugs and get addicted to it to know it's not good for you."

"Excuse me, sir," singit ng assistant ng tatay niya.

She wanted to kiss Mrs. Salvacion right then and there. Hindi niya alam kung ano ang gustong ipunto eksakto ng nanay ni Calian, but it didn't feel good. Mabilis ang tibok ng kanyang puso, at hindi iyon magandang pakiramdam.

"We can leave now," sabi ng assistant ng ama.

Tumango ang tatay niya. "Stacia, you'll ride with your friends?"

Medyo pilit ang kanyang ngiti. "Yes, Pa."

"Eloise, Guillermo," aya ng kanyang ina. "Let's go."

Hinagkan ni Calian ang kanyang sentido. "I'll go with my parents."

Maikli lang siyang napatango.

Naglakad ang grupo palabas ng hotel.

“Dana,” tawag ni Reggie nang buksan nito ang pinto ng sleek black SUV, “p’asok na, nasa loob na si Lizzy.”

“She’s riding with us,” sagot ng ama ni Calian.

Gulat siyang napatitig sa mga ito.

Ngumiti ang ina ni Calian, pero walang init doon. “We know her family, and we have some catching up to do.”

Iyong mainit na buhol sa kanyang sikhmura ay naging kasing-lamig ng yelo.

Tumiim ang bagang si Calian at hinagkan uli siya sa sentido. “Later, Stacia.”

Napahawak siya sa braso ng nobyo, at hindi niya napigilan ang panlalaki ng mga mata habang nakatitig dito. Irrational fear gripped her throat.

*What’s happening?*

Pero maliit na umiling at lalaki. “Go, Stacia. We’ll talk later.”

Ayaw niya sanang sumunod, pero wala siyang magawa. Namamanhid ang katawan, pinilit ng dalaga ang sarili na gumalaw. Tinulungan siya ng nobyo paakyat sa sasakyan. She forced herself to relax despite the tight coldness in her stomach.

“Hey, Stacia!” Tumatakbo palapit sa kanila ang isang matangkad na lalaki.

Si Anton iyon, isa sa mga kaibigan ng kuya niya at ni Georgina, at pamangkin din ni Governor Erly.

“Can I ride with you? Naiwan na ’ko nina Nico.”

Maikli siyang ngumiti sa guwapong lalaki. “Sure.”

“Hey, Calian.” Magaang tinapik ng binata ang balikat ng kanyang nobyo.

Tiim-bagang na tumango lang ang katipan.

Umurong siya at umupo si Anton sa kanyang tabi. Calian’s gaze slightly hardened. Malamig din ang titig na ipinukol nito sa bagong dating.

“Later, Calian,” usal niya.

Tumango ang binata at sinara ang pinto ng sasakyan.

## 16

## BULLY 2

The church was gorgeous. Malapit iyon sa beach at tanaw ang malawak na dagat. Kagaya ng marami sa mga mamahaling beach destinations sa bansa, may wedding package offer ang pamilya ni Georgina, kaya talagang itinayo ang simbahan na iyon para sa ganitong okasyon. The guests could opt to use the large pavilion if they preferred instead of the church, too.

The carved doors, stained glass windows, and polished marble aisles were lined with roses, dahlias, orchids, peonies, and lilies in varying shades of purple, pink, lavender, deep orange and yellow.

Nakaupo sila ng kanyang mga magulang at lolo at lola sa unang pew sa kanan, mga lalaking principal sponsors sa pangalawa, groomsmen sa sumunod, tapos ay mga kamag-anak at kaibigan nila. The bride's family and friends were on the left.

Nico and his parents sat on the fifth pew at the right side behind them. At naroon din si Dana.

*Calm down, saway ni Stacia sa sarili. Stop stressing*

*yourself out!* She forced herself not to glance back at them too much.

Georgina was stunning in a simple mermaid-cut wedding gown with a sweetheart neckline. Her hair was braided and curled in a romantic low bun with purple and pink flowers threaded through the strands. She held a hand-tied bouquet of deep purple and white orchids, yellow and soft pink garden roses, bright orange dahlias, and generous sprigs of asters and wild foliage.

Her brother teared up as Georgina's father gave the bride's hand to him, and she found herself smiling at last.

Napalington si Stacia sa likod, at nakitang nakatitig din sa kanya si Calian. His intense dark gaze made her breath deepen, and she found the cold tension in her stomach finally loosening a fraction.

Pero napadako ang tingin niya kay Dana. The woman was actually seated beside Calian and his mother, and the icy knot tightened with a vengeance.

Iniwang niya ang tingin sa mga ito.

*What the hell is going on?*

Umiling si Stacia at pilit pinakalma ang sarili.

Natapos ang ceremony at lumipat sila sa malaking reception hall sa tabi ng simbahan. The reception was as lavish as the church with flowers, candles and crystals cascading across the length of the tables.

Everything was perfect, except for the seating arrangement. She sat with her parents, Georgina's parents, their grandparents, her uncle, and Georgina's uncle and auntie.

Calian sat with his parents, Nico's family, Nico's girlfriend and her family, and freaking Dana.

Nasa kabilang table sina Lizzy, Reggie, Ate Jewel at iba pa nilang mga kaibigan.

Wala sa direktang linya ng paningin niya ang table ng binata, kaya kailangan pa niyang pasimpleng lumingon para makita ang grupo nito.

And every time she looked back, she would see Eloise Jaucian talking intimately with Dana. Lalong humigpit ang buhol sa kanyang sikhura.

At last, the dancing started and it was acceptable for her to stand and hop tables.

Dumerecho siya sa mesa nina Ate Jewel at kinalabit si Anton.

"Move, please."

Tumawa ang lalaki at magalang na tumayo para ibigay sa kanya ang upuan nito.

Umupo siya roon at bumaling agad kay Ate Jewel. "Do you know anything about Dana and Calian's parents?"

"I do!" sabat ni Lizzy.

Matalim siyang bumaling sa kaibigan. Pareho ang cut ng damit ng babae sa kanya, kulay plum nga lang

at walang flower detail ang kay Lizzy.

“I just found out from Dana that her grandpa actually knows Calian’s grandpa,” chismis nito. “Nouveau rich sila Dana, di ba? It turns out, her late grandpa actually used to work for Calian’s grandfather’s family. And the two men used to be close.”

Nagsikip lalo ang kanyang sikmura. “How come Dana never told us about this?” aniya. “She said she’d never seen Calian before that day in the beach.”

“It seems kailan din lang niya nalaman,” kuwento ni Lizzy. “Lumipat dito ang grandparents ni Dana at dito na lumago ang business nila, then his grandpa died real young and her parents didn’t really communicate much with Calian’s grandfather after that. Hindi pa naman kasi uso ang cellphones at social media noon.”

“Then, why now?”

“What do you mean why now?” kunot-noong tanong ng kaibigan.

“Why are Calian’s parents catching up with her now?”

“Oh.” Ngumuso ang babae. “I don’t know.”

Tumawa si Anton sa likuran niya at minasahe ang kanyang mga balikat. “Relax, Stacia, dear. You’re getting too worked up.”

Siniko niya ito at tumawa ang lalaki.

“Come on. Let’s dance. Post a pic with me on your

IG para dumami ang followers ko at baka magka-endorsements din ako.”

Pinaikot niya ang mga mata rito pero hinayaang hilahin siya nito patayo. Nilabas ng lalaki ang phone at itinaas para kuhaan sila ng larawan.

“Smile.”

She managed to curl her lips.

Nilingon niya ang mesa nina Calian, at nanigas lalo ang kanyang mga kalamnan nang makitang wala roon ang binata. Wala din si Dana.

Lumipad ang tingin niya sa paligid, hinahanap ang mga ito. *Where the hell are they?*

“Excuse me,” palaam niya sa mga kasama at malalaki ang hakbang na lumayo sa mga ito.

“Girl, s’an ka pupunta?” bulalas ni Reggie.

“Basta.” She strode to the glass double doors leading to the balcony.

She kept turning her head left and right, her frantic gaze searching for her boyfriend. God, was she acting like some crazy clingy girlfriend? Was she pathetic or what? She didn’t care!

Where the hell was he?

Maraming tumawag sa kanya, pero tipid lang siyang ngumiti sa mga ito at dere-derecho na sa malapad na salaming pinto.

Mahigpit sa tensyon ang sikmura, itinulak iyon ni Stacia pabukas at sinalubong siya ng malamig na

simoy ng hanging-dagat.

“Oh, god, I’m so sorry for crying like this, Calian.”

Her heart pounded and her head whipped to the direction of the female voice. And there they were, at the far-right end of the stone balcony.

Calian stood in front of Dana, his muscular built gripped with tension, one of his large hand placed gently on the woman’s shoulder. Kaunti ang ilaw sa balkonahe, pero tanaw niya ang panginginig ng mga balikat ng dalaga.

“It’s my fault, Dana.” His voice was rough with pain. “I shouldn’t have—” Nagtaas ng tingin ang binata, at lalong nanigas sa tensyon ang katawan nito nang makita siya. “Stacia.”

Napasinghap si Dana at napataas ang tingin.

Kita niya ang pamumula ng mga mata ng babae. Why, why, the girl looked like some sweet princess there with her tear-stained cheeks and silvery moonlight spilling across her face.

And Calian? Well, didn’t he look like some f\*cking white knight standing beside his princess?

Agad napaatras ang dalaga kay Calian.

Curling her shapely lips, she ignored the jagged blade of heat ripping through her stomach.

She strutted toward them in her four-inch heels.

“What’s this?” she drawled, her gaze lazily raking over Dana’s cowed form. “Dana, dear, your mascara’s

running.”

Napatungo ang babae at lalong napaatras sa kanyang nobyo.

Tumiim-bagang si Calian at humakbang sa harap ni Dana, tinatakpan ang babae mula sa paningin niya.

Umawas ang galit sa kanyang sikmura. He was shielding Dana from her! He’s protecting that b\*tch!

Nag-init ang balat ni Stacia at parang napuno ng dugo ang ulo niya. What? She’s the evil stepsister now ready to rip poor little *Cinderella* into pieces?

Oh, he was so f\*cking right.

Mapakla siyang tumawa. “Oh, darling, are you sure you want to get in the way?”

“Stop it, Stacia. There’s nothing here.”

Humakbang ito palapit sa kanya pero umiwas siya at taas-noong nilapitan si Dana.

“Stacia!” He grabbed her arm, but she slapped his hand away.

“What’s this, Dana? I knew you have a crush on Calian since the beginning but don’t you think this is too low even for you?”

“I said stop it.” Hinagip ng lalaki ang kanyang braso. “Dana, leave us.”

“Oh, not so fast, sweetie—”

“Goddamn it, Stacia—”

“Stay the hell away from my boyfriend, you pathetic b\*tch! Look at yourself in the f\*cking mirror.

You'll never measure up to me. You'll always be this trying hard wannabe who nobody cares about—”

“What the hell’s wrong with you, Stacia!”

Marahas na hinagip ng binata ang kanyang mga balikat at inalog siya. Nagniningas sa galit ang mga mata ng binata, at maigting ang bawat linya ng guwapo nitong mukha. “That’s enough!”

Umiiyak na tumakbo si Dana palabas ng balcony.

Malalim ang hininga at nagtatagis ang bagang na itinulak niya si Calian. “And you? What the f\*ck’s wrong with you? What the hell are you doing here getting all cozy with that b\*tch?”

“Stop calling her that, and we’ve done nothing wrong.”

“And now you’re protecting her again!”

“Because you’re attacking her for no goddamn reason!” Marahas siyang binitawan ng lalaki.

“No reason?” Nag-init lalo ang kanyang ulo. “I just saw you and her practically plastered to each other!”

“Are you serious? We were talking, and then you barged in and tried your f\*cking darnest to make her feel worthless. Why do you always do that to her? Why the hell are you—”

“Just talking?” She ignored the vicious throbbing pain in her stomach. “Then, what are you two talking about, Calian? Why was she crying? Why was she clinging on to you like you’re her freaking lifeline?”

And don't you dare tell me it's nothing."

Tumiim ang bagang ng binata at maikling tumango. Parang may sumaksak sa kanyang dibdib.

"You are correct, it's not nothing."

Humapdi ang kanyang sikmura. Inasahan niyang itatanggi ni Calian na may malalim na dahilan. Inaasahan niyang sasabihin nitong wala lang iyon. Pero kabaligtaran ang sinabi nito.

Napaatras siya at napahawak sa batong barandilya.

Nagmura si Calian at inabot siya.

"Don't," she bit out, hating the way her voice trembled, the way her body trembled. "Don't touch me."

"It's not what you think." Kuyom-palad na ibinaba ni Calian ang mga kamao. "Let's go back inside, Stacia. We'll talk about this once we get back to the hotel. Your parents are probably looking for you now. Let's not ruin your brother's wedding."

Oh, now he's all calm and rational after dropping that f\*cking bomb. While there she was—cold, clammy and dizzy. She could barely hear anything from the loud roaring of blood in her ears.

It's *not* nothing. And it's not something they could talk about here. And he wanted her to go back inside, smile and drink champagne and laugh like it was nothing. What the hell was she supposed to think?

"No, Calian." Her throat felt so tight and hot.

“You need to tell me *now*.”

Nanatiling nakatiim-bagang ang binata. “This is not the place and time, Stacia—”

Bumukas ang pinto ng balcony. “Calian.” Si Nico iyon. “Kanina pa kita hinahanap. Governor Erly’s looking for you.”

Malamig ang balat at nahihilo, humakbang siya palayo sa binata.

“Stacia—” Inabot ng lalaki ang kanyang kamay pero pumiksi siya.

Nag-iinit ang mga mata, hindi niya ito nilingon at dere-derecho siyang lumabas ng balkonahe.

Parang naghahalo ang mga kulay at liwanag sa kanyang paningin. Everything suddenly became so loud, so hurtful to her ears.

Bumangga siya sa kung sino at hinawakan nito ang kanyang mga braso.

“Hey.” Si Anton iyon. “Wanna dance with me—Hey, what’s wrong?”

She closed her eyes and tried to breathe deep. Even the air was painful. Muli siyang humugot ng hangin. She couldn’t make a scene here. Calian was right; she couldn’t ruin her brother’s wedding.

“I’m okay.”

“Want to sit down? You look a little pale.”

She should sit down, but her friends would see how she looked like and they would ask her. She didn’t

want to talk. God, she didn't want to do anything.

Sa gilid ng kanyang mga mata, nakita niyang lumabas sina Calian at Nico sa balkonahe. Pumintig ang matigas na hapdi sa kanyang sikmura at hinagip niya ang kamay ni Anton.

Hinila niya ang lalaki papunta sa dancefloor.

“Okay...” Maingat nitong idinantay ang palad sa kanyang likod at marahan siyang iginiya sa isang mabagal na sayaw.

Pumikit siya at malalim na huminga.

“Want to talk abou—”

“No,” tugon ni Stacia.

Tumawa ang lalaki, tapos ay sumeryoso. “Sorry.”

Naramdaman niya ang isang mabigat na presensya sa kanyang likuran. Alam niyang si Calian iyon bago pa ito magsalita.

“Stacia.”

His rough baritone that used to make her warm all over felt like a hard blow on her shoulders now.

Nag-aalangang napaangat ang titig ni Anton sa lalaki. “Uhm...”

May tatlo siyang pagpipilian.

Option one, she could ignore Calian and keep dancing with Anton. But Calian could stand his ground, and that would make a scene. Would he make a scene? He was still standing there in stony silence right now, and people were already looking.

Option two, she could walk out. But then, Calian would just f\*cking follow her, and that could potentially create a scene, too.

Option three, she danced with him and stab his foot with her stiletto. It might make a scene, but it might just be worth it.

Kumalas siya kay Anton.

Parang nakahinga ito nang maluwag at nakangiting umatras. “Later, Stacia. Calian.”

Tuluyan na itong lumayo sa kanila.

Calian slid his strong arm around her waist and pulled her to his hard frame. The warmth and musky scent of his skin and the hardness of his body surrounded her, caging her in.

Nanginginig na kinuyom niya ang mga palad sa dibdib ng binata at mariing pumikit.

A ragged breath left his lips, and he pressed his mouth over her temple. “There’s nothing to worry about, Stacia.”

Kinagat niya ang pang-ibabang labi nang maramdaman ang pag-iinit ng mga mata. Oh, god, what’s wrong with her?

“F\*ck, baby.” He pressed his lips hard on her forehead and tightened his arm around her waist, crushing her soft curves to his muscular body. “I’m sorry.” His voice was hoarse and strained. “But there’s nothing to worry about. Don’t cry, please.”

Pilit niyang nilunok ang mainit na mga emosyong nakabara sa kanyang lalamunan. She was never a crybaby, but here she was, desperately trying to hold back tears like a freaking three-year-old.

“I... I want to go back to the hotel, Calian.”

“Okay.” He kissed her temple again. “Let’s go tell your parents and brother. We’ll tell them you’re not feeling well.”

Pinagbuhol ng binata ang kanilang mga daliri at maingat siyang hinila papunta sa direksyon ng mesa ng kanyang mga magulang.

“Oh, dear!” bulalas ng kung sino malapit sa kanila.

Napalingon sila roon. Eloise Jaucian was leaning over Dana who was bent over and holding her stomach.

Awtomatikong gumalaw ang binata papunta sa grupo na para bang iyon ang pinakanatural na bagay sa mundo. As if going to Dana’s side was an instinctive response.

Muli sumaksak ang kung anong hapdi sa kanyang sikhura. Humigpit ang hawak niya sa braso ng nobyo.

“Don’t.” Kinamuhian niya ang pagmamakaawa sa kanyang tinig.

Lumambot ang matitigas na linya sa mukha ng binata, pero umiling ito. “I just need to check on her, Stacia.”

“Why?” She hated how whiny she sounded, how

freaking weak. “Someone will help her, you don’t have to go.”

“Stacia—”

The flurry of movement behind them made him glance sharply again.

Inaalalayan ng tatay ni Calian at ni Justin si Dana na tumayo, at iginiya ng mga ito ang babae sa gilid ng hall papunta sa exit.

Malayo sila sa harapan at natatabingan na ng mga nagsasayaw ang mga mesa kaya hindi pansin ng iba ang nangyari.

Kumalas si Calian sa kanya at malalaki ang hakbang na sumunod sa tatay nito.

Parang piniga ang kanyang sikhmura. She found herself rushing after him, feeling pathetic and small.

Lumabas siya ng mess hall at natagpuan ang mga ito sa hallway. Kinarga na ni Justin si Dana.

“She thinks it’s her ulcer,” narinig niyang saad ng tatay ni Calian. “She’s nauseated and in severe pain. We need to get her to ER.”

Tumango si Calian at sumabay sa mga ito papunta sa dulo ng pasilyo.

“Calian!”

Napalington sa kanya ang mga lalaki.

Mariing nakapikit si Dana, hawak ng kamay nito ang tiyan at putlang-putla ito.

“Go ahead of me,” sabi ng binata sa mga kasama.

“I’ll follow shortly.”

Tumango ang tatay ng binata at sinulyapan siya. Malamig ang titig ni Guillermo Jaucian. Tumalikod ang mga ito at dumerecho sa dulo ng hallway.

Lumapit sa kanya si Calian. “Stacia—”

“Don’t go, Calian.”

Marahas na bumuga ng hangin ang lalaki. “We just need to make sure she’s okay.”

“Your father will make sure she’s okay!”

“Stacia, your uneasiness is misplaced.” Tumiim ang bagang ang katipan. “Come with me if you want.”

“No.” Humakbang si Stacia paatras. “You need to stop acting like this, Calian. You’re giving people a headtrip.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“She likes you, and you know it.”

Umigting ang linya ng guwapong mukha ng katipan, pero hindi ito umimik.

Maikli siyang tumawa. God, everything felt heavy. “Of course, you know it,” pakli niya. “Who wouldn’t? She has this stupid look in her eyes whenever she looks at you.”

“Enough!” Nagtagis ang bagang ng lalaki at pumintig ang galit sa mga mata. “Why the hell are you so cruel to her? Why the f\*ck are you so goddamn vicious to Dana, Stacia? I don’t f\*cking understand you.”

“And I don’t understand you, either. You knew she likes you, but you still keep doing these things. You pay so much attention to her—”

“I’ve never—”

“Oh, stuff it, Calian, you know you have! You’re always nice and kind to her.”

“When the f\*ck is being kind a crime?”

“When you know the other person likes you and you can’t return their feelings!” Nanginginig siyang huminga at pilit itinaas ang noo. “You have to stop being kind to her, Calian. Doing these things to her is just going to give her false hope. You’re feeding her delusion that there’s something there when there isn’t. Rushing to her side in the hospital? That’s going to make her think and feel she’s special to you. You need to rip out that illusion, root and stem!”

Mabigat na umiling ang lalaki at humakbang palayo, at bawat hakbang nito ay parang halukay sa kanyang dibdib at sikmura.

“I’m sorry, Stacia. But we both need to calm down right now.”

Lalong nanikip ang kanyang tiyan. “And what does that mean?”

“It means I’m going to the hospital, then, we’ll talk when I get back to the hotel when we’ve both cooled our f\*cking heads down.”

“If you leave and go to her now, it’ll be difficult to

mend this rift between us, Calian.”

Lumamig ang titig ng nobyo at tila naging inukit sa bato ang bawat linya at anggulo ng katawan at mukha nito. “Is this how it’s going to be?” he asked, his voice soft and icy cold. “It’s your way or nothing at all?”

Ramdani ni Stacia ang pag-ahon ng kung anong mainit at masakit sa kanyang lalamunan, pero hindi niya pinansin. “I don’t care. You shouldn’t go to her.”

“We’ll talk later, Stacia.”

Tumalikod ang lalaki ang malalaking hakbang na tinungo ang dulo ng hallway.

Nanghina ang kanyang mga tuhod. Napahawak siya sa pader dahil parang matutumba siya.

Alam niyang hindi pinili ni Calian si Dana kaysa sa kanya. Alam niyang naging makatuwiran lamang ito. Hindi siya ganoon katanga para isipin na mas mahalaga sa binata si Dana kaysa sa kanya kaya hindi nito pinansin ang nais niya at pinuntahan ang dalaga. Alam niyang nagiging makasarili lang siya at nagiging isip-bata pero...

Pero parang may sumaksak pa rin na mainit at matalas na patalim sa kanyang baga at sikmura.

Natagpuan ni Stacia ang sariling humahakbang pasunod sa lalaki. Hindi siya seryoso. Hindi niya talaga gusto magbigay ng ganoong ultimatum. Gusto lang niya—

“Stacia,” mahinang tawag ng isang babae sa kanyang likuran.

Nahihilo siyang napalingon.

Naglalakad si Eloise Jaucian palapit sa kanya na parang isang diyosang gawa sa malamig na bato. At napakalaki ng hawig nito sa anak nang mga oras na iyon habang malamig at matigas na nakatitig sa kanya.

“I would like to speak to you for a few minutes.” Napakapormal ng ginang.

Nakaliko na si Calian sa kanto ng pasilyo, at malamang ay nagmamadali nang naglalakad sa lobby ngayon para makalabas ng gusali. Nagmamadali para makapunta kay Dana.

“Here would be fine.” Tiim-labing lumapit sa kanya ang babae. “I’m going to be direct, I don’t like you for my son.”

Hindi na siya dapat nagulat. Malamig at pormal na sa kanya ang ginang bago pa sila magpalitan ng unang mga salita. Pero ang marahas at direktang suntok nito ay nagparagasa pa rin ng dagundong ng sakit sa buo niyang katawan.

“M-Mrs. Jaucian—”

“I heard you arguing with my son just now.”

Mabigat siyang lumunok. “I-it’s just a misunderstanding, Mrs. Jaucian. We we’re just—”

“I guess your *Twitter* post about what an a\*shole lifeguard my son was was also a misunderstanding?”

*Oh, god.* Parang matutumba si Stacia.

Nanatiling pormal ang titig ng ginang. “You posted that lie to your five million followers, humiliating and slandering him. If he had been an ordinary lifeguard like you had mistakenly thought he was, he would have been fired from work and would have had difficulty finding another job. An ordinary person’s life would have been ruined with what you did.” Napuno ng lason ang titig ng babae at naging mapanghusga ang pagkurba ng mapupula nitong labi. “You knew that; it’s impossible for someone as smart as you not to have understood that, but you did it anyway. You like to play god, don’t you?”

“N-no, it’s not...” *It’s not like that?* Nanginginig na napayuko siya. Sino ba ang niloko ni Stacia? Iyon talaga ang gusto niya. Alam niyang iyon ang mangyayari nang *i-tweet* niya iyon.

“Mrs. Jaucian, I...”

“I don’t like the person that you are right now, Stacia.”

Pilit niyang itinaas ang mukha.

Tila gawa sa maskarang bakal ang mala-diyosang mukha ni Eloise Jaucian. “You know how powerful you are, and you wield that power without a thought how much you can hurt and destroy other people. You don’t care. I’ve met a lot of people like you in my life. People like you make other people suffer just because

they can. You're addicted to power; you love forcing people on their knees. You will only hurt my son."

"T-that's not true, Mrs. Jaucian. It was a mistake, and I didn't mean—"

"And you're also a liar, I see. You knew he had a girlfriend when he met you, didn't you?"

*No...*

Nanlalaki ang mga matang napatitig lang siya sa magandang mukha ng ginang.

Tumango ang babae. "You knew, he would have told you. But you wanted him, didn't you, Stacia? Here was a gorgeous man who was not willing to bend to your whims, and it infuriated you. You wanted him on his knees in front of you. You didn't care if he has a girlfriend."

"He didn't—"

"He didn't tell you he was in a relationship when you met him?"

Sinabi ni Calian. Sinabi nito. Pero hindi iyon totoo. At ang sabi ni Justin...

At hindi na ulit binanggit ni Calian ang tungkol doon. And Calian had willingly...

*"I told you I don't want this, but you keep coming on to me anyway. I'm not made of stone, Stacia. Even a goddamn saint would want to f\*ck you. How do you f\*cking expect me to resist when you throw yourself at me?"*

Natutop ni Stacia ang bibig. *Oh, god...*

“It was not a conventional relationship, true.”  
Payak na tumango ang ginang. “But he had a girlfriend when you met him.”

Marahas siyang umiling. “I... I don’t... Justin said—”

“Justin didn’t know about it. But he had a girlfriend. And how things had been going before, she would have been his fiancée. He would have been engaged to Dana.”

Masyado na siyang manhid para makakibo, Parang wala na siyang nararamdaman.

“It’s an agreement between our families, true. Dana’s family is in a financial crisis right now, and they needed help. But it would entail a significant amount of money and resources. Don Casimiro wants to help, but in end, he is still a businessman.”

Tumiim-bagang ang babae. “If Father is going to provide that huge amount of money, he has to make sure it will be handled correctly and he will still have a significant amount of control. A marriage from his family and Dana’s family was a good solution.”

Umiling si Stacia, hindi makapag-isip nang tama. Pilit niyang nilunok ang bikig sa lalamunan. “Then, it’s not real. It’s not...”

“It’s a business deal, but it’s real, Stacia. Calian accepted it. He already acknowledged Dana as his

girlfriend.”

“Well, he ended it!” Napakapaos ng kanyang tinig.

Akala niya ay hindi na siya makaramdam, pero masakit na ulit ang lahat.

Nagsumiksik ang mga isipin sa kanyang ulo. Kaya ba naroon si Calian sa beach na iyon noong araw na iyon? Magkikita ito at si Dana? How long had they been together? Had they already...?

The image of Calian kissing Dana hotly seared in her mind, and she bit back a whimper of pain.

Had they been doing it in his bed in the hotel? After that night with him in the private room where he almost f\*cked her, did he go straight to Dana? Did he f\*ck Dana the way he f\*cked her? Or was he... more gentle? More caring?

With her, it was always hot, hard and dirty. It was always overwhelming with lust. Was it all just lust?

*“Even a goddamn saint would want to f\*ck you. How do you f\*cking expect me to resist when you throw yourself at me?”*

Nanginginig na napahugot siya ng hangin.

Was it all just lust?

Naalala niya ang hitsura ng dalawa habang naglalakad sa beach. He had been smiling at Dana so *so* gently.

She bit her lip to stop a whimper. Everything seemed to make sense now. He had always taken

Dana's side, had always come to Dana's rescue. He had always been furious at her for being cruel to Dana. And now he was at Dana's side—

“Yes, he ended it.” Humiwa sa kanyang isipan ang matigas na boses ni Mrs. Jaucian.

Nag-iinit ang mga matang itinaas niya ang titig dito.

Naroon na ang galit sa magandang mukha ng nakatatandang babae. “You turned him into a cheater, Stacia. But in the end, he is more at fault than you. In the end, all blame should be on him for allowing himself to be influenced like this. And it pains me that he has become like this. This is not the type of person that he is. This is not the kind of person he wants to become. He does not want to hurt people like this. He disappointed and hurt so many people. He hurt his grandfather, humiliated Dana and her family, and put them in a more precarious situation. Calian is not like this.”

Humugot ng hininga ang ginang. Hindi na ito matigas at kasing-lamig ng yelo ngayon. Nanginginig ang mga labi ng babae at kumikinang ang mga mata sa sakit at galit. Hindi na ito isang diyosa na hindi kayang patumbahin ninuman. Isa na lamang itong ina.

“I don't like you as a person, and I don't want you for my son.” Itinaas ni Eloise Jaucian ang noo. “I fear

what you will turn him into. Even now, you already want him to ignore people in pain just to appease you. You want him to turn a blind eye on your cruelty. You want to make him as callous and selfish as you. And my son seems so crazy about you, you just might succeed. But one day, Stacia, I assure you, he will hate himself for what he has let himself turn into because of you.”

Nilagpasan siya ng babae at dumerecho sa dulo ng pasilyo.

A

YOU'RE NOT GETTING  
RID OF ME EASILY

"Where the f\*ck are you?" Marahas ang tono ni Calian kahit sa telepono.

Stacia shut her eyes tightly at the sound of his rough voice and tried her best to keep her breathing even.

He had been calling her non-stop for the past eight hours, and she had only answered him now. Because really, she had to stop being petty.

"I'm going back to L.A.," paos niyang sagot. "There's an emergency."

"You want me to believe that?" he bit out. "Try f\*cking harder."

"Well, it's the truth. I don't care what you think."

Pagkatapos siyang kausapin ng nanay ni Calian, she told her family there was an emergency in L.A. and she would have to go back asap. She went back to the hotel with Ate Jewel and Reggie, packed their bags and got out of Palumbanes, drove to San Andres and rented a ferry to take them to Albay. Doon ay sumakay siya ng private jet ng isang kaibigan palipad

ng Manila. At ngayon ay narito na siya sa kanyang hotel, naghihintay para sa flight niya papuntang U.S. mayamaya.

Was it cowardly, stupid, and petty? She didn't f\*cking care.

“Is this how it’s going to be?” Calian shot back in a harsh tone. “When you’re pissed off at me you’d walk out?”

Umahon ang kanyang galit. She had been playing pretty nicely despite how heavy she felt, but he just had to push it. “How dare you tell me that. You’re the one who walked out on me when I told you to stay!”

“Goddamn it, Stacia. Dana was sick! She’s—”

“You didn’t have to go to her!” She dashed away the tear that stupidly spilled down her cheek, hating how pathetic and petty she sounded. “Tell me, were you in a relationship with Dana when you met me?”

The other line went dead silent.

Nanginig ang kanyang mga labi at idinikit niya roon ang nakakuyom na kamao. Alam na niyang totoo iyon kasi walang dahilan para magsinungaling ang nanay ni Calian, pero parang sinaksak pa rin ang kanyang dibdib.

“Who told you?” pakli ng binata. “My mother?”

“Yes,” pakli rin ni Stacia. “So it is true.”

“Where are you now? Stay there, I’ll go to you. Stay where you are.”

“No need. We can end it here.”

Muling namayani ang malamig na katahimikan sa kabilang linya.

“You won’t even let me explain.” His voice was steely cold.

“What is there to explain?” nanginginig niyang tanong.

“It was never a real relationship. It was a request from my grandfather, and I saw how it was weighing on his mind. He wanted to help them, but the risk is still too great.”

“And he wanted to join your families together.” Pagak siyang tumawa. How f\*cking cliché.

“He’s old fashioned, he wanted a strong connection to Dana’s family if he was to lend that amount of money. And he likes Dana’s family. He said he and her grandfather had once dreamed of joining their families together. He thought it would be great to do this now.”

Nakatiim ang labing tunitig si Stacia sa madilim na langit sa labas ng bintana ng hotel. Lumunok siya para patatagin ang boses. “And you volunteered.”

“I said I’ll think about it. I told you my grandpa rarely asks for anything from anyone. This was the first thing he ever asked from his family.”

Marahas na bumuga ng hangin ang lalaki, at nakaramdam siya ng paninikip sa dibdib. Marahan

niyang hinawakan iyon.

“I have work in Catanduanes and decided to talk to Dana and her family about it. I’ve never met her before that day in the beach, Stacia. ’Andoon lang ako dahil kaibigan ko ‘yung manager ng resort, at kinulang sila ng lifeguard. I volunteered to help since I’ve had lifeguard training, and it’s only for half of that day.”

Tinutop ni Stacia ng palad ang nanginginig na mga labi sa alaalang iyon sa beach.

*“You posted that lie to your five million followers, humiliating and slandering him.”*

“Did you...” Muli siyang lumunok para pawiin ang bikig sa lalamunan. “Did you know about my *tweet* about you?”

“The one about me being an a\*shole lifeguard?” walang gatol na sagot ng lalaki na para bang balewala iyon. “Yes. A cousin sent me a link before you deleted it.”

Mariin siyang napapikit. So he did know.

“I’m sorry about that.” Her voice broke, and she swallowed hard again. “You were an a\*shole to me then, but I shouldn’t have—”

“It’s water under the bridge. I told you the kid came back and told me what really happened. I realized I was an a\*shole to you, so I probably deserved that *tweet*. I don’t care about that now.”

Nagmulat siya at tumitig muli sa madilim na

langit. No, he didn't deserve that. And yes, he should *still* care about it. Nobody deserved that. What she did was doxing. She broadcasted his name and place of work to her millions of followers with malicious intent. Pareho lang iyon sa ginawa nung babaeng kumuha ng viral video ng tatay niya.

No, what she did was worse. The woman blasted a powerful man, her father. She, on the other hand, blasted someone she thought was considerably weaker than her.

Tama ang nanay ni Calian. Kung ordinaryong tao ang binata at walang kapangyarihan, he would have been crushed by the gravity of her influence. People would have crucified him on social media. He would have been fired from work. Mahihirapan itong makakuha ng trabaho dahil sa ginawa niya. Her followers would have stalked him and hounded the social media accounts of every company who would dare to hire him.

She would have ruined his life.

Maingat siyang huminga at muling pumikit.

Naiintindihan ba iyon ni Calian? O hindi pa rin ba ito ganoon kapamilyar sa lakas ng social media para malaman kung gaano iyon kaseryoso? Kasama?

Or maybe he was just trying to understand her. He was trying to be compassionate. Alam ng binata na may ginawa rin itong mali kaya iniintindi nito ang

pagkakamali niya.

Pagak siyang tumawa at umiling sa sarili. God, she was so tired.

Nagmulat siya at tumitig ulit sa labas ng bintana. “No, Calian, you don’t deserve that. Nobody does, and you know it.”

“I told you I don’t care about that. Wait for me in Manila. I’ll be there this morning. Let’s talk.”

Umiling si Stacia at pilit pinatatag ang boses at dibdib. “If you weren’t upset about that *tweet*, and you knew it wasn’t my fault why the kid and me almost drowned, why were you so cold to me when we met the following day, Calian?”

“You were bullying Dana on the beach. And before you say I’m giving her special treatment, again, I’m not. I didn’t even know who she was at that point. I would have felt the same for anybody, Stacia. I heard you and your friends body-shaming her, she was in near tears. It was painful to hear even for a stranger like me, Stacia. What more to her?”

Of course, he would be upset about that. Kaya nitong patawarin agad ang mga pagkakamali ng iba sa sarili nito, pero mas mahihirapan itong palagpasin ang pananakit sa ibang tao. That was him.

Muli niyang kinagat ang nanginginig na pang-ibabang labi. He was right. It was never about Dana, was it? She could accept that now. He would have felt

and done the same for anybody else. Maybe she had always known that deep inside.

It had always been about her. The problem had always been her. It had always been because she was a bully.

She covered her mouth with her palm as a sob threatened to come out. His mother was right.

“Stacia,” he whispered, “wait for me.”

“No,” nanginginig niyang sagot. “No, Calian.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“It means we’re over. We got into this too fast and I don’t want—”

“No.” That one word was hard and final. “I remember warning you I can be a controlling son of a b\*tch, didn’t I? I remember telling you you’re not going to get rid of me easily.”

Sa kabila ng sarili, bumilis ang tibok ng kanyang puso. Of course, she remembered. He gave her that warning right before he took her virginity and f\*cked her roughly on the hotel’s dining table.

She squeezed her thighs tight together, ignoring the sudden heat pulsing inside her sex. They were always like this, weren’t they? They always had this burning hunger for each other. And maybe... maybe it was all they had.

“You know I’m right, Calian.”

“No,” he said softly. “I don’t think you’re right at

all. I'm afraid you're not getting rid of me that easily, Stacia."

Pinutol nito ang tawag.

Umiling siya at tiim ang mga labing ibinalik ang phone sa bag.

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They flew to L.A. that morning, and she tried her darnest to dive into work right away.

"Stacia, may jet lag ka pa," paalala ni Ate Jewel. "Magpahinga ka muna."

Maikli siyang umiling. "No. Nakapagbakasyon na tayo. It's time to edit these videos."

May editing room talaga sa loob ng kanyang condo, pero mas pinili niyang gawin ang trabaho sa kanyang silid. Nakaupo siya sa desk at nasa harapan niya ay ang malaking glass sliding door wall na may tanawin ng Malibu Beach.

Sa likod niya ay ang king-size platform bed na nababalutan ng puting kobre kama at may malalaking unan. Even her walls were white, but it complemented the tan hardwood flooring. The only splash of color was the abstract painting hanging on the wall across her bed. And yes, the jeweled-tone throw pillows on her cream-colored couch, too. She liked to keep her room minimal and mostly white, which may surprise some people. But she already had so much popping colors in other parts of her life that she needed this

soothing space for herself.

It was a good day outside, the sun shone brightly over the crystal blue water, the swaying fronds of palm trees and the golden sandy shore.

She wished she could the same about how she felt.

Umiling siya at itinuon ang lahat ng atensyon sa pag-e-edit.

Most of the time, she let Reggie and Ate Jewel handle the editing of her videos. But there were times when she did it herself. But she always left the final touches to her friend like graphics, effects, subtitles and music.

“Nga pala,” dagdag ni Ate Jewel. “Natambakan na tayo ng PR boxes dito. I’ll go check them and make a list, okay? Then, go over them tonight.”

“Thanks, Ate.”

“And start getting rid of some of your makeups. Natambakan na naman ulit tayo. Ipa-giveaway mo na.”

“Let’s do it tomorrow.”

Nag-vibrate ang kanyang phone sa mahabang puting dining table na nagsisilbi niyang work desk. Walang interes na sinulyapan niya iyon.

At tumambol ang kanyang puso nang makita kung sino ang tumatawag: it was Calian.

Iniwas niya ang tingin at pinagpatuloy ang pag-

e-edit sa video.

“You’re not answering his calls?” usisa ni Ate Jewel.

“No,” payak niyang sagot.

“But—”

Marahas na bumukas ang pinto ng kanyang silid. “Oh my god, Stacia!” bulalas ni Reggie.

Umungol siya. Why couldn’t these people just leave her alone and let her edit her videos? Nakalimutan na ba ng mga ito na *YouTuber* siya?

“Reggie, for heaven’s sake—”

“Calian’s outside!”

Napaigtad siya at marahas na pinihit ang swivel chair paharap sa kaibigan. “What?”

“He’s outside!”

*What the hell?*

Napatalon siya patayo at napatakbo papunta sa living area ng condo. Ang bilis ng tibok ng kanyang puso at parang mabibingi siya.

Halos idikit niya ang katawan sa mahogany door sa pagsilip niya sa peephole.

And true enough, there was Calian—dark, ominous, and ruggedly handsome in a black shirt and jeans.

Lalong dumagundong ang tibok ng kanyang puso.

Matalim na tumitig ang binata sa peephole sa kabilang bahagi ng pinto. His jaw was rough with

stubbles, and his eyes were bloodshot like he hadn't had much sleep. It made him look dangerously hot.

Dinukot ng lalaki ang phone sa bulsa at idinikit sa tainga nito.

“Your phone!” Ate Jewel hissed.

Tumakbo ito pabalik sa silid niya para kunin ang kanyang telepono.

Nanlalaki ang mga mata na napatitig siya sa lalaki.

Hinihinala na bumalik sa kanila si Ate Jewel at isinalya sa kamay niya ang telepono.

Agad niyang sinagot ang tawag. “What the f\*ck are you doing here, Calian?”

“Open the door. Let's talk.” God, his rough voice made her knees weak.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

“I thought it was f\*cking obvious. Open the door, Stacia.”

That cold commanding tone made her breath hitch and her blood hum.

Mariin siyang pumikit. *Focus!*

“No,” tugon niya at napahawak sa nanginginig na sikmura. Parang pumipintig din ang puso niya roon. “I don't want to talk to you.”

“Fine, suit yourself.”

Napamulat siya sakto para makitang tumalikod ang lalaki at dinukot sa bulsa nito ang kung anong susi.

Sa loob ng kalahating segundo, akala niya ay may susi ito ng apartment niya. Pero sa halip na isaksak iyon sa seradura ng kanyang pinto, malalaking hakbang na tinungo ni Calian ang pinto sa tapat ng kanya. Isinaksak nito ang susi roon at pinihit ang seradura.

Napaawang ang kanyang mga labi. “W-what are you doing?”

“I rented the unit right across from you.”

Itinulak nito ang pinto at pumasok sa loob ng unit.

Nanatiling nakaawang ang kanyang mga labi. She could hardly hear anything through the pounding in her ears. “A-are you serious?”

“What do you think?”

“T-this is stalking, Calian! I can call the cops on you!”

He snorted. “What are you talking about? I have business here.”

“You liar!”

“Want to come with me to one of my business meetings tomorrow?”

“Y-y-you!”

He chuckled. “Good day, Stacia.”

At binabaan siya ng gago ng tawag.

Nakangangang napatitig lang siya kina Ate Jewel at Reggie.

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Joke's on him. Hindi ba alam ni Calian na halos hindi siya lumalabas ng kanyang apartment? Ah, the life of a *YouTuber*.

Just yesterday, she spent most of her time opening PR boxes, making a schedule and organizing her makeup room.

This morning she edited her videos again, and now she sat bare face in her burgundy cashmere robe inside her *Beauty Studio*.

"Hi, beauties!" bati niya sa camera na nakatapat sa kanya.

She felt like shit, but life had to go on. She normally talked about her drama on her channel, because people loved that sh\*t. But this was one drama she had no intention of telling her audience about.

"I hope you guys are doing great today. So I cheated a little with this video. I'll show you today how to get this fabulous romantic look, then we'll show you the behind the scene photoshoot of me rocking this whole look in the beach. But the thing is we've already filmed the beach photoshoot weeks ago, but we weren't able to film the whole hair and makeup tutorial that day because we were short on time. So I've decided to just film the tutorial later, and here we are now!"

Masigla siyang ngumiti at uminom ng kanyang favorite lemon drink.

“Let’s get down to business. So, beauties, you already know the drill. I’ve prepped my skin already. Clean face, moisturizer and all. I’ve already primed using my favorite *Girlpower* primer. If you haven’t tried it yet, beauties, you’re missing out.”

Sinimulan niya ang paglalagay ng foundation gamit ang beauty blender. Paminsan-minsan ay sinusulyapan niya ang sarili sa monitor sa harapan ng mahaba at puting filming desk. Sa likod niya ay ang white hanging backdrop roll na nagsisilbing background ng kanyang video, at sa harapan niya ay ang diffusing sheet kung saan direktang nakatutok ang malaking light panel para gawing malamyos ang matingkat na liwanag na tumatama sa kanya. It all created a bright, clean and aesthetic view on screen with her as the hot center.

Sa gilid niya kung saan hindi kita ng camera ay nakaupo si Reggie sa itim na couch suot ang headphones para siguraduhing okay ang audio ng kanyang video. Pinapanood din nito sa isang monitor ang video.

After about an hour and a half of filming her makeup and hair while talking nonstop, she was finally done.

Tumayo siya at nag-inat.

Damn, she was tired.

“Girl, you’ve got messages.” Ipinasa sa kanya ni Reggie ang phone.

Inuna niya ang message galing kay Clara West, isang sikat na popstar na nakilala niya dahil kay Maddox.

*Hey, girl, wanna go clubbing tonight? Me, Dione and Tatiana are going to this new club in Pacific Coast Highway. It's 18+ club so you're good!*

She chewed on her lower lip. She was tired and feeling sh\*tty, but this was Clara West, four times *Grammy* winner and a certified triple A-list celebrity. The girl had 20 *AMAs*, 15 *Billboard Music Awards*, one *Oscar* and a staple of *Met Gala*. Tatiana’s a Brazilian supermodel while Dione’s parents were movie stars. People would sell their kidneys to go clubbing with these people.

Napatingin si Stacia sa pinto ng studio. What was Calian doing right now?

Tiniim niya ang mga labi. She didn’t care.

Nag-inat ulit siya. “I’m going clubbing tonight, wanna go, Reg?”

Naghikab ang kaibigan. “Ikaw na lang muna, I’m a little beat.”

“Okay.”

“But don’t eat anything salty, dear! No gluten, too! You don’t wanna look like you overdid dermal fillers

on the biggest fashion event, darling!”

She whirled on her friend. “You’re one to talk! You’re the one who looks all swollen from eating too much dumplings!” She wagged her finger at him. “You need to hit the gym, Reggie, dear. You’re getting fat.”

Maarteng kumembot-kembot ito. “But I don’t have cameras pointed to my face 24/7, do I? Stop whining and don’t you dare eat tacos!”

Inirapan niya ang kaibigan at lumabas ng silid. Tinawagan niya si Clara. “Hey, Clara! Yeah, I wanna go with you, guys.”

Dumerecho siya sa silid para magbihis.