

1

“**H** anggang kailan ka ganyan, Juan Miguel?”

Halos maumid ang dila ni Juan Miguel nang maintindihan ang tanong ng kanyang ina. He slowly turned his head to her and smiled. Alam naman niya kung ano’ng sinasabi nito. Ang sinasabi nito ay ang klase ng buhay na meron siya.

He was thirty years old and wasn’t planning on settling down anytime soon. Hindi naman kasi kahit kailan pumasok sa isip niya ang bagay na iyon. Ang katwiran niya, bakit siya pupulot ng bato para ipukpok sa ulo niya? He loved being him—single, happy, free and spontaneous. He loved being this person at hindi niya kahit kailan ipagpapalit ang nararamdaman niyang kalayaan sa kahit na ano sa mundo.

“Happy naman ako, Ma,” sagot niya. They were having breakfast that morning. Wala ang kapatid niyang si Edward. Bumalik na ito sa L.A. dahil sa mga naiwang responsibilidad nito roon. His other brother, Nathaniel Miguel—yes, he liked calling him that way—was at his home, with his wife. Siya na lang ang naiwan sa kanilang ina.

Kung tutuusin ay wala naman siya dapat dito. Siguro kung hindi siya umuwi, nasa isang lugar siya ngayon kung saan maraming adventure. He loved the adventure. He was actually a bit of a daredevil. Isa sa patunay niyan ay ang pagsubok niyang umakyat ng Mount Everest three years ago, attempt pa lang naman iyon. Sadly, hindi siya nagtagumpay, pero hindi naman ibig

sabihin niyon na hindi na niya muling susubukan.

He had been to the most dangerous parts of the world. He had been to Madagascar, Amsterdam, Iceland, Kauai, New Zealand and other places, taking on adventures one after another. He had lived the life of a wanderer for the past ten years. Matagal siyang hindi umuwi ng Pilipinas dahil na rin sa tampuhan nila ng kanyang ama.

His father was a good man, lahat naman halos ng gusto nitong ipagawa sa kanya noong bata pa siya ay sinusunod niya. Isang bagay lang talaga ang hindi niya maatim. Ayaw niyang maging doktor. He came from a family where everyone had a career in Medicine. Renowned brain surgeon si Nathaniel Miguel, habang si Edward naman, ang kanilang bunso, ay isang magaling na cardiologist. Sa tatlong magkakapatid, si Juan Miguel lang ang lumihis ng daan. Hindi kasi talaga niya maatim na magiging doktor siya. Iniisip niya pa lang, parang hindi na niya kinakaya.

It was not that he's not intelligent enough to become a doctor. The idea just bored the hell out of him. Hindi niya kaya na ma-stuck sa isang career buong buhay niya.

At dahil sa rasong iyon, sumama nang husto ang loob ng ama sa kanya. Sa totoo lang, nakamatayan na nga nito ang nangyari sa kanila. Ni hindi na siya nakahingi ng tawad dito and somehow, he thought that taking care of his mom would make up for his shortcomings.

But who was he kidding?

Hindi sapat iyon.

Sa dami ng pagkukulang niya sa kanyang mga kapatid, sa kanyang ina, sa kanyang pamilya, kahit kailan ay hindi niya

matatakpan ang mga iyon. Kulang ang alagaan lang niya ang kanyang mama.

“Ewan ko, Ma, basta masaya naman ako,” muling sagot niya.

His mother sighed. “I am worried about you. Si Nathan nagsisimula nang magpamilya. Si Edward... well, he’s a busy bee. He likes his career so much, pero kahit paano, I am sure na malapit na siyang mag-settle down. Ikaw? When are you going to settle down? It’s about time. Ikaw ang pinakamatanda—”

“I love you, Ma, but right now, I am not thinking about that.” He smiled at her. Tumayo siya at saka hinagkan ito sa labi.

“Bye, Ma! See you later.”

Matapos magpaalam ay dumiretso siya sa kanyang kotse. He drove away from the mansion. He sighed. Kailangan niyang huminga dahil kung hindi niya iiwan ang kanyang ina, sigurado siyang hindi siya nito titigilan.

Mabilis siyang nagmaneho at ilang sandali lang ay naramdaman na ni Juan Miguel ang kalayaan—isang bagay na kahit kailan ay hindi niya ipagpapalit sa kahit ano pa mang yaman sa mundo.

Madrid, Spain

“I don’t care how or where you’d get them, but I need those papers tomorrow morning on my table. If I don’t see it by then, I will FIRE you! Is that clear?”

Tinapos ni Reena ang tawag, napabuga siya ng hangin at saka tumayo at nagpalakad-lakad sa kanyang opisina. Her head was spinning again at dahil iyon sa incompetent staff niya. Ang dali-dali ng pinapagawa niya, pero hindi maibigay ng mga ito ang

kanyang demand. What the f*ck was wrong with those people?

She was the CEO of *Horizon Tech*, one of the leading IT companies in the world. She had been working her ass off since she was sixteen years old and thought that she truly deserved to be the head of this company now. Her father appointed her the position when she was only twenty-four years old. Alam na alam na niya noon ang mga dapat niyang gawin. She was the youngest CEO of the company and she was proud of it. Marami sa board ang pinagtaasan siya ng kilay nang maupo na siya sa pwestong iniwan ng kanyang ama. They said she was too young and inexperienced, but she managed to prove them all wrong when she closed a multi-million dollar account and beat their top competitor, *Grid*.

Natahimik ang mga ito nang magawa iyon ni Reena. She became the most ruthless and powerful CEO that year and was even featured in a lot of business magazines and TV shows. Nakapag-publish pa nga siya ng isang self-help book at naging hit iyon.

Walang makakapagsabi na wala sa kanya ang lahat, dahil nasa kanya ang lahat. Designer shoes, bags, dresses, jewelry, expensive cars, and a successful career.

But then, she's not happy.

She felt like that there was something missing.

Tumaas ang kilay niya nang biglang bumukas ang pintuan ng kanyang opisina at iniluwa niyon ang kanyang ina.

“*Buenas tardes, Mama,*” she greeted. She even kissed her cheeks. She looked at her mother at hindi niya pwedeng ipagsawalang bahala ang kakaibang ngiti sa mukha nito. “*Por qué*

sonríes así?” She asked her mother about that mysterious smile. Kinakabahan siya sa tuwing ngingiti nang ganoon ang kanyang mama. Para bang pakiramdam niya ay may mangyayari na hindi niya magugustuhan. Hindi niya magawang kumalma.

“I’ve already talked to your father and he agreed on giving you a forced vacation. You will be going back to the Philippines first thing tomorrow and you’ll be staying with Robi while you’re there.”

Her eyes widened. “But, Ma, I have work! I can’t leave! Why are you doing this?! I am thirty-three years old. I am an adult and this is not proper!” she yelled at her mother.

“And yelling at me is the proper thing to do, Sereena?” tanong nito sa kanya.

She shook her head. “No. I’m not going, Mother. There is no way in hell I’m coming back to the Philippines! I will not stay with Robi! I hate it there! Mainit! Mausok! Mapolusyon! I will never go back there!”

“It’s your father’s order. Whether you like it or not, you will go back to the Philippines. Bukas ang alis mo, nakaimpake na ang mga gamit mo. Starting tomorrow, your father will be taking over *Horizon* again. And it’s final, Sereena.”

“But Mama!”

“I said it’s final!” Pinanlakihan siya nito ng mga mata. When her mother left her office, she just lost it. Pinagbabato niya ang lahat ng nahagip ng kanyang kamay. Why was her mother like that? She kept on asking that question. Alam niyang hindi siya ang paborito nitong anak, mas mahal talaga nito si Robi kaysa sa kanya. But was that enough reason para dalhin siya nito sa hell

hole na iyon? Ayaw niya sa Pilipinas, wala ang buhay niya doon, pero bakit ba pinipilit ng ina na iuwi siya doon?

Isa pa, hindi niya gusto ang asawa ng brother niya. Nang dahil sa babaeng iyon ay halos kamuntikan nang masira ang relasyon ng kanyang kapatid sa ama nila pero ang mama niya, mahal na mahal ang babaeng iyon. Minsan, gusto na niyang isipin na mas anak pa ang turing nito sa babaeng iyon kaysa sa kanya. She hated her more because of that.

“I hate this!” she said. She would rather go to North Korea right now than go back to the Philippines!

“AHHHH!” She felt so frustrated.

“Madam, are you okay?!” Natatarantang pumasok ang assistant niya.

Tiningnan niya ito. Dumampot siya ng kung anong mga papeles at saka ibinato iyon dito.

“Ay!” Sinubukang umilag ng assistant niya.

“Go to hell, Patrice!” sigaw niya. Nagmamadali itong lumabas. She’d never felt so frustrated before in her life. Bakit ngayon pa ito ginagawa sa kanya ng ina kung kailan nasa tamang edad na siya? She could even get married without their consent if she wanted to. Pero ngayon, pinakikialaman ng mga ito ang buhay niya at ayaw na ayaw niya iyon. Was she missing something here?

Sa pagkaalam ni Reena ay wala naman siyang ginawang masama sa mga ito. She tried to be the perfect daughter for them. She was at the top of her career now. What did she ever do to make them send her to Philippines fast?

Hindi siya papayag. Kahit anong mangyari ay hindi siya papayag. She grabbed her designer bag and stormed out of her

office. Pinagtututulak niya ang lahat ng taong nakakasalubong niya.

Agad siyang sumakay sa kotse at nag-drive pauwi sa kanilang mansion. She looked for her father and found him having tea in the library.

“Why are you doing this to me?” bungad agad niya pagkapasok sa library. “I am going to lose it, Papa! I hate you for agreeing with Mom! I don’t want to go to the Philippines!”

“But, hija, you’ve been working so hard. You need a break.”

“Dahil lang d’on, pabalikan n’yo na ‘ko sa Pilipinas kahit na ayoko?! What kind of logic is that?” Hindi niya mapigilan ang masagot nang ganoon ang ama.

Her father looked at her. “I am your father; I still call the shots here. You are going to the Philippines tomorrow morning. No more butts, this argument is over. Now rest, Sereena, you have an early flight tomorrow.”

Her mouth parted.

Wala na siyang magagawa kung ganoon?

“Agh!” Inis na inis na lumabas siya sa library at pumasok sa kanyang silid.

“I hate my parents right now!” frustrated na sabi niya.