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Inalalayan ni Dylan si Stacey hanggang sa makaupo ito, and then he proceeded to sit on his chair which was opposite hers.

“Ang gentleman mo talaga,” she purred, while batting her eyelashes.

Isang maliit na ngiti ang iginanti niya rito. Ito ang pangatlong date nila ni Stacey. And frankly, after tonight, he expected some sort of return on his investment with her. Malaki na rin ang nagagastos niya sa bulaklak, chocolates, dinner dates, gas sa paghahatid-sundo rito, etc. If she didn't invite him to her apartment tonight, he would move on to the next chase.

For him, women had expiration dates.

And sadly, bilang na ang oras ng chinitang nakaupo sa harapan niya. He didn't realize she was such a bore. Nang una silang magkita sa isang club, they talked and danced like there was no tomorrow. She even gyrated her body so close to his, and he felt her ample breasts touching his chest, when they were on the dance floor.

Nag-offer siyang ihatid ito sa bahay at nang bumaba ito, he was set to kiss her on the lips, pero inilihis nito ang ulo at tumama ang mga labi niya sa pisngi nito. That disappointed him, all right. Hindi niya alam kung bakit naging ala-*Maria Clara* bigla

ang effect nito. He would have had more respect for her kung nagpakatotoo ito sa sarili like she was on the dance floor.

Heck, he's just keeping it real.

When they started talking, it was all about having fun. Hindi naman siya nagsabi rito na naghahangad siya ng isang serious relationship. But the way Stacey was acting now, parang iyon ang gusto nito.

Sadly, madi-disappoint ang babae. At twenty-eight, Dylan had no desire to settle down. He wasn't tired yet of the dating scene. And he probably would never be tired of it. Serious relationships bored him. They were more trouble than they worth.

Kaya kahit anong parinig ng ina niya na handa na itong maging doting grandmother, hindi niya iyon pinakikinggan. He told her he was too busy running the family business. And her pleas fell on his deaf ears. Ayaw niya ng commitment, let alone his own child.

“Ano'ng gusto mong i-order?” tanong niya rito.

“Oh, you decide for me.”

Again, naisaloob niya. He had been choosing her food for the last three dates now. And he didn't like it. Malay ba niya kung ano ang gusto ng tastebuds nito. Ni hindi pa nga niya natitikman ang dila nito.

Gone was the assertive woman he met that night at the bar.

Napalitan iyon ng damsel in distress. And he hated those puny whips. In all his years of dating around, he had already formulated this theory. Akala ng mga babae, ang tipong pa-helpless ang hinahanap nilang mga lalaki. Sorry na lang, pero hindi niya planong magpaka-knight in shining armor kaninuman.

Bored na siya kay Stacey, but even if he was, he didn't let on. Dylan still went through the requisite date moves. He made her feel pretty by complimenting her on her dress. He made her feel important by asking about her day. And he made her feel special by giving her flowers.

He was an expert.

So he ordered for her a chicken Caesar salad. Pa-salad-salad naman ang gusto ng mga babae. Kasi pag um-order siya ng main course, pansin niyang hindi naman nila inuubos iyon. Sayang lang ang pera niya dahil kalimitan, kalahati ng pinggan ang natitira.

But, of course, he didn't say anything. He was all too happy to play along.

As they were waiting for their orders, pinag-usapan nila ang ukol sa current work project ng babae. While she talked, he quietly observed her body movements, facial expressions, and hand gestures.

Nope, hindi talaga, tahimik na assessment niya. Masyado kang maarte para sa akin. Kahit ang kamay mo ay maligalig. All we can have together with those hands is a little fun.

Engrossed sila sa kanilang usapan nang may tumabing na anino sa table nila. He and Stacey didn't bother to look up at the intruder. Inakala niya na ang waiter lamang iyon, kaya hindi niya iyon pinansin. He just waited for the food to be set down on their table.

Tumikhim ang anino.

Napapitlag si Dylan sa tunog na iyon. It wasn't the usual gruff sound a male exuded. It was high-pitched, dainty, and almost musical. And oddly enough, it seemed familiar.

Dahan-dahan niyang ibinaling ang ulo sa gawi niyon. And as his gaze met the figure that emitted the sound, his eyes widened.

“Good evening,” nakangiting bati ni Lourizza.

Si Stacey ang sumagot. Her eyes were wary, as if wondering and judging who the newcomer was. “Good evening too.”

“Aren't you going to even greet me, Mr. Dylan Villafuerte?” tanong ng bagong dating. Her voice was confident and so was her stance.

Hindi pa rin mahanap ni Dylan ang boses niya. Pakiwari niya, umurong ang kanyang dila. He couldn't even move a muscle. Para siyang namatanda sa kinauupuan. He couldn't even blink.

“Mawalang-galang na lang,” maingat na sabi ni Stacey. But even then, a hint of irritation could be gleaned from her voice. She was threatened by the newcomer who obviously knew her

date. Mabuti sana kung pangit ang bagong dating. Pero maganda ang mukha nito, na korteng puso, at malakas ang dating. “Sino ka ba?”

Humalukipkip ang nakatayong babae at binigyan si Dylan ng isang matalim ng tingin bago nito hinarap ang kanyang date at ngumiti nang ubod-tamis.

“I’m Lourizza Villafuerte.”

“Oh, I’m Stacey,” pagpapakilala ng date niya, na naging sweet ang tinig.

Tanga! gustong isigaw ni Dylan, pero hindi pa rin siya makakibo. Akala siguro ng huli ay kapatid niya si Lourizza dahil magkaapelyido sila. Stacey’s guarded expression changed into one of pure delight.

And to his utter horror, tumayo ito, nag-abot ng kamay, at sinabing, “Why don’t we ask the waiter to bring an extra seat?”

“We don’t have to!” mariin niyang sabi habang nagkakamay ang dalawang babae. He almost cringed at the intensity of his voice. He had found it again, alright.

“But Dylan—” simula ni Stacey na pinutol niya.

“No buts. Lourizza is busy and she’s leaving.”

Binitawan ng bagong dating ang kamay ng dalaga. Hinarap siya nito at tinaasan ng isang kilay. Tantiya niya, parang pinipigilan

nitong mapangiti. She could clearly see through his discomfort and was enjoying it. She clearly was a changed woman now.

“I didn’t know I was busy,” patay-malisya nitong sabi. “Or maybe you are the busy one. Am I interrupting something?”

“You very well know what you’re doing,” matabang na sagot ni Dylan. How he managed to stay calm this time, hindi niya alam kung paano. There was a storm brewing inside his chest that wanted to unleash itself.

He had not seen this woman in the last eight years. And here she was, standing so close to him as if none of those years had ever come to pass. Gusto niya itong usigin kung ano ang kailangan nito, pero napigilan niya ang sarili. Now was not the time for a scene.

“And what exactly am I doing?” inosenteng tanong ni Lourizza. But her eyes betrayed her. Those very eyes he knew so well. Even her voice was playful and challenging at the same time.

“Oh, you know,” galit niyang sabi. “Don’t play all calm and innocent. Why don’t you just say whatever it is that you came for?”

“What makes you think I came here for something?”

“That’s the only reason you’ll be standing there, anyway,” turan niya. They hadn’t parted on a good note, kaya alam niyang may sadya ito.

Buntong-hininga ang isinagot ni Lourizza.

Nagpalipat-lipat ang tingin ni Stacey sa pagitan nila. She looked confused. “Dylan, what exactly is going on?”

“Yes, Dylan, what exactly is going on?” echo ng bagong dating, na para bang tinutuya siya.

Sinimangutan niya ito.

Hinarap nito si Stacey. And as if it was the most ordinary thing in the world, ngumiti ito at sinabing, “You must be his girlfriend.” Then she beamed and added, “He’s kinda rude, don’t you think? Not introducing us.”

The look of confusion on his date’s face was wiped out by the comment. Namula ito. “H-hindi pa kami, actually. Nanliligaw pa lang siya.”

“Oh, nanliligaw,” sabi ni Lourizza na para bang tuwang-tuwa sa salitang iyon. “How nice. How sweet.”

To his ears, Dylan knew she was being sarcastic. “Why don’t you just leave, Lou? Leave.”

Napakunot ang noo ni Stacey. “Don’t be rude to your sister, Dylan.”

Nakita niyang nagpipigil mapahalakhak si Lourizza. The bitch was clearly enjoying this. “She’s *not* my sister,” matipid niyang balik.

Mas lalong lumalim ang kunot sa noo nito. “Then what is

she?”

“I happen to be his wife,” masayang sagot ng babae as if it was the most natural thing in the world. “It was a real pleasure meeting you.”

Nahulog ang panga ng kanyang date, nagpabalik-balik ang tingin nito sa kanilang dalawa ni Lourizza na tila hindi makapaniwala sa narinig. Nakita niyang nangilid ang luha sa mga mata nito.

“I’m sorry, Stacey,” simula niya. “It’s just that—”

Naputol ang iba pang sasabihin ng lalaki nang maramdaman ang malamig na pag-agos ng tubig sa kanyang ulo, pababa sa kanyang mukha, hanggang sa mamahalin niyang long-sleeves polo shirt.

And then he heard something drop on the hard wood floor. It was the ice cubes. Napapikit siya.

He himself couldn’t believe that this was happening, in a restaurant full of people. Stacey had just unceremoniously dumped all the contents of his water goblet on his head. How embarrassing!

“It was a pleasure to meet you, Lourizza,” sabi ng date niya. “Under the circumstances, I guess you know why I did what I did to your dear husband. But I don’t feel sorry at all.”

“I think it was much deserved, Miss.”

Come to My Heart - Hannah Wabe

Hindi makapaniwala si Dylan na pinag-uusapan siya ng dalawang babae na para bang wala siya roon. And for the second time that night, napipi siya at hindi makagalaw. He was beginning to think Lourizza had cast a spell on him.

“I was really glad to have met you,” sabi ni Stacey. “Kung hindi pa kita nakilala, I would have gone on dating that scalawag.”

“Likewise,” balik nito. “It was a pleasure to meet you.”

To Dylan’s greater surprise, nagkamay pa ang dalawa at ngumiti sa isa’t isa, with some sort of silent understanding passing on between them. What were they so damn happy about? Women!

Nang makaalis si Stacey ay umupo si Lourizza sa harapan niya. Talo pa niya ang nakakita ng multo. But then again, she was a ghost of his past.

“What are you doing here?” asik niya nang mahanap muli ang tinig.

“Why, Dylan, that’s no way to greet your darling wife,” malambing nitong sabi.

It was at that point that the waiter came with the food.

“Mamaya na ’yan!” galit niyang sabi.

“By all means, put it down,” kontra ng babae na kinuha ang table napkin at ipinatong iyon sa kandungan.

Hindi alam ng waiter ang gagawin. Hindi ito tanga para

hindi mapansin na nagbago ang kasama niya. For a few seconds there, nakatulala lamang ito habang hawak ang mga pinggan.

“Just set it down,” malambing na sabi ni Lourizza. “Please.” And with her expressive, soulful eyes, hindi nakatanggi ang waiter.

“Pati ba naman waiter, kaya mong paikutin?” galit niyang sabi. “This happens to be my table.”

Kinuha nito ang knife and fork. “Yuck, salad!” she said with a disgusted face. “But since I’m hungry, this will have to do.”

Nagsimula itong kumain as if it was the normal thing to do. As if there was no under current between them. As if she didn’t crash his date. As if the last eight years of not seeing each other did not happen.

“What is it you want?” malakas na sabi ni Dylan. Napansin niyang pinagtinginan siya muli ng mga tao. He had raised his voice without realizing it. Kahit noon pa, napapataas ng asawa ang dugo niya. She had power over him.

He changed his tone to a less conspicuous one. “Tell me.”

Her reply was to toss a table napkin to his face. “Punasan mo muna ang mukha mo. Mukha kang basang sisiw! You distract me.”

Nagulat siya sa ikinilos nito. The Lourizza he knew back then would never have done that to him. Kung sa bagay, kahit ang hitsura nito ay hindi na ang Lou na kilala niya noon. She had transformed into a woman. Actually, the right term for it would

be 'blossomed'.

As he stared at the poised woman sitting in front of him, he realized, hindi na niya ito kilala. They had not seen each other in the last eight years. She may be his wife, but it was only on paper. Nothing more.