

# 1

“I enjoyed our date tonight, Elwin. Thanks,” ani Yasmin dela Serna. Ipinatong niya ang kamay sa seradura ng unit upang buksan ang pinto at makapasok na sa loob.

Mabait naman si Elwin Villanueva. Makuwento ito, magaling sumayaw at maginoo. Nagdala ito ng roses upang ibigay sa kanya nang sunduin siya nito para sa date nila nang gabing iyon. He brought her to a nice fine dining restaurant in the posh district of Sausalito in San Francisco, California.

Pero iyon nga lang, wala talagang spark sa pagitan nila. Iyon na ang pakiramdam niya nang una silang magkita sa *Barnes and Noble*, isang bookstore. Pareho silang tumitingin sa best seller selection, at kinausap siya nito out of the blue to ask for her opinion.

After purchasing the books of their choice, niyaya siya nitong magkape sa *Starbucks*, na naroon din mismo sa loob ng store. Hindi siya tumanggi dahil wala naman siyang gagawin. May pagkakengkoy ito kaya masayang kausap.

But even then she didn't feel attracted to him.

Pumayag lang siyang makipag-second date dito to give him a chance. She was hoping after tonight, kapag mas nakilala pa niya ito, she would feel something.

Pero wala.

“That’s it, Yasmin?” tanong nito, may kakaibang kislap sa mga mata. “You’re not even going to invite me in for a nightcap?”

Kumunot ang kanyang noo dahil parang naulinigan niya ang kung anong malisyosong tono sa boses nito. Alam niya kung ano ang ipinahihiwatig ni Elwin. Masyadong mabilis ang mga lalaki sa States. They don’t go all-out without expecting something in return.

At kahit mag-aanim na taon na siyang namamalagi roon, hindi pa rin niya nakasanayan ang ganoong kaugalian. May dugo pa rin ni Maria Clara ang nananalaytay sa kanyang mga ugat. She couldn’t do the horizontal bop with anyone just like that.

Hindi siya ganoon kadesperado para gawin ang bagay na iyon, most especially on the second date.

“I’m sorry, Elwin. But I’m tired. I have work tomorrow and I want to sleep,” payak niyang tugon.

Ipinatong nito ang kamay sa balikat niya. “Are you kidding? C’mon, Babe. Tomorrow’s a Saturday. Don’t tell me you have work then.”

Ikinibit niya ang kanyang balikat para mahulog ang kamay nito. Having him touch her suddenly felt gross. Kaninang nagsasayaw sila, she didn’t feel that way. Kasi kanina, akala niya old school Pinoy itong si Elwin. The way he spoke about his family and goals, mahihinuhang old-fashioned ito. Sampung taon na ito nang lumipat ang pamilya nito sa Amerika.

But now, he was showing his true colors. Masyado na pala itong Americanized. “I’m not lying,” giit niya. May appointment nga siya bukas, pero after lunch naman. Hindi na rin niya mapigilan ang paglabas ng iritasyon. “I do have work tomorrow. Sinabi ko naman sa iyo na demanding ang trabaho ko.”

“Oh, c’mon now!” bulalas nito, ayaw pa rin maniwala. Sa tonong nagbibiro, idinagdag nito, “Huwag mo sabihing pauwin mo ako nang luhaan.”

“Good night, Elwin!” pagtatapos niya, sabay bukas ng pinto.

Sa puntong iyon, parang gustong sumabog ng dibdib ni Yasmin sa kaba. What if he suddenly pushes her inside and does his way with her? Dapat kasi,

hindi siya nagpahatid sa kanyang pinto, which was her usual SOP o standard operating procedure.

Nakatira siya sa fourth floor ng isang mataas na apartment building, at usually, hanggang main lobby lang ang kanyang mga ka-date. But Elwin was so insistent on accompanying her to her door dahil napaka-ungentlemanly daw sa parte nito kung hindi man lang siya sasamahan. Hindi na tuloy siya nakatanggi sa gusto nito. And he did seem sincere. May kasabay rin naman sila sa elevator, ang dalawa niyang kapitbahay, kaya hindi na siya nabahala.

She felt his hand on her shoulder. “Just wait, please!” samo nito.

Hindi nagustuhan ng dalaga ang tono nito at dahil iyon sa udyok ng kanyang utak. Pero hindi niya magawang humakbang dahil mabigat ang kamay nitong nakahawak sa kanyang balikat. “Bitawan mo nga ako, Kupal,” naubusan ng pasensyang sabi niya. Alam niyang mali ang name-calling, pero hindi niya napigilan ang kanyang dila.

He caught her by surprise when he whirled her around to face him. Kita niya sa mukha nito, na naubusan na rin ito ng pasensya. “Don’t call me that! I don’t deserve it!” galit nitong hiyaw.

She pushed his hand away, her sharp nails digging into his skin. “Bitawan mo nga ako!” malakas niyang sabi. “Kung alam ko lang na ganyan ka, I wouldn’t have gone out with you. Akala ko kasi, disente kang tao.”

“I am a decent man!” sagot nito. “I’ll show you.”

And then he grabbed her forcefully this time, and planted a hard kiss on her mouth. Parang rubber ang bibig nito, na lasa pang bulok na itlog. Itinulak niya ito papalayo, pero masyado itong malakas. As his tongue forcibly probed inside her mouth, she could do nothing, dahil sa sobrang pagkagulat at takot.

Ngunit nang maramdaman niyang hinawakan ng isang kamay nito ang kanyang puwit, kaagad siyang natauhan. She could not allow him to treat her like that. And with all her might, kinagat niya ang dila nito saka tinulak ito palayo.

Kaagad itong napabitaw dahil sa sakit. Tumama ang likod nito sa pader. He was screaming in pain, holding his mouth with both hands.

“Buti nga sa ‘yo!” tili ni Yasmin. Dama pa rin niya ang lasa ng dugo sa kanyang bibig. Bigla siyang nakadama ng kaunting guilt. She hoped she didn’t bite him too hard at baka hindi na ito makapagsalita.

“You bitch!” sigaw nito, ang kamay ay nakahawak pa rin sa mga labi.

Kaagad naglaho ang kanyang guilt dahil sa sinabi nito. “You asshole!” galit niyang sumbat. Umatras siya patalikod, intent on getting inside the sanctuary of her apartment.

Pero bago siya makagalaw, bumukas ang pinto ng katabing apartment. Lumabas doon si Joe, ang kanyang mala-*Ken* doll neighbor, na nakasabay nila kanina lang sa elevator. His presence in the hallway was overwhelming. “Everything all right, Yasmin?”

Hindi kaagad nakasagot ang dalaga dahil pinoproseso niya sa utak ang mga pangyayari. She was in shock.

Sumunod doon ang tanong ni Paul, ang partner ni Joe, na lumabas na rin sa hallway. Kinuha nito ang kanyang atensyon. “Yasmin, Sweetie, is this man giving you problems?” tanong nito habang titig na titig kay Elwin.

Sa puntong iyon, parang gustong matawa ni Yasmin. Pansin niyang nawala bigla ang devil-may-care attitude ng maniac na ka-date. Tila isang batang paslit itong nangingisay ngayon, habang nakasandal sa pader at nakatingin sa dalawang malalaking puti.

He didn't know that the two muscular men were gay.

“Actually, he was just leaving,” sagot niya. Tinaasan niya ng kilay ang nanguluntoy na lalaki. “Di ba, paalis ka na?”

Hindi na ito nakaimik at tumangu-tango na lamang. Mabilis nitong tinungo ang elevator at pinihit ang ‘down arrow’ button. Ilang beses nitong pinindot iyon, na parang bang mapapadali niyon ang pagdating ng elevator. When he could no longer contain himself, pumunta ito sa emergency exit upang sa hagdanan na lamang dumaan para makababa sa lobby. Narinig pa nila ang mga yabag nitong mabilis sa pagpanaog.

Nagkatawanan silang magkakapitbahay. “Good God, Yasmin!” ani Joe. “What were you thinking dating a man like that?”

“I was just asking myself the same thing,” sagot niya. How could she have made a mistake judging Elwin like that? Usually, perceptive siya. Hindi kaya masyado siyang desperate kaya nabulagan siya?

“You got to be careful who you let up here, Girl,” segunda ni Paul. “That crazy lunatic now knows where you live.”

“Don't scare her, Honey,” baling ni Joe rito. “She's

obviously already shaken.”

Totoo ang sinabi nila. Takot na takot siya. Kung hindi pa lumabas ang dalawa, may masama na sanang nangyari sa kanya. She shuddered at the the thought.

“You should have him banned at the lobby,” dagdag ni Paul. “Or better yet, get a restraining order. Or file assault.”

“I don’t think I can do that,” aniya. “He just tried to kiss me, after our first official date. I don’t think the SF Police Department would take that seriously.”

“That’s true,” pagsang-ayon ni Joe. “Maybe he did get caught up in the moment. And I can’t blame him, Yasmin. You’re very pretty.”

“He’s right,” sabi ni Paul. “If only our circle of friends aren’t... you know what I mean,” and then he winked at her, “we would have already introduced you to someone.”

Isang ngiti ang gumuhit sa janyang mga labi dahil sa papuri. If gay men find her attractive, then why can’t she find a decent full-blooded male? O baka naman babaeng bakla ang tingin nila sa kanya kaya ganoon? Oh, that didn’t bode well.

“Thanks, Guys,” sagot na lang niya. She owed her two neighbors a lot. “Thanks for everything.”

“Are you sure you’re all right?” paniniyak ni Joe.

“Positive!” she beamed, kahit na medyo ninenerbyos pa rin siya dahil sa inasal ni Elwin. Aminado siyang foul ang pagkagat niya sa dila nito. But to her defense, she couldn’t think of doing anything else dahil pilit nitong inangkin ang bibig niya. Maybe he thought she was playing hard-to-get.

Tumango ang dalawa niyang kapitbahay, and bid her good night. Yasmin didn’t miss the adoring look written in their eyes, as their gazes fleetingly met each other, when they turned around to go back inside their apartment. Magkahawak-kamay pang pumasok sa loob ang mga ito.

Nakadama ng inggit ang dalaga. She longed to find someone who will look at her like that, and cuddle up with her on a cold day.

Matagal na siyang walang boyfriend. Ang huli niyang relasyon three years ago ay nauwi sa masalimuot na hiwalayan. Ipinagpalit siya ni Ramon sa isang Las Vegas showgirl nang dumalo ang lalaki sa convention doon. Nang magkita sila, hindi na ito nagpaka-plastic at nangumpisal kaagad na may bago

na itong karelasyon.

At napakalaking blow talaga niyon sa kanyang ego, because she and Ramon were already discussing marriage. But obviously, they were not meant to be together. The last time she heard about her former boyfriend, lumipat na ito sa Nevada at pinakasalan ang showgirl.

It took her a while to recover from that heartbreak. Nang nagkaroon siya ng lakas para magkaroon ng panibagong relasyon, hindi siya makahanap ng mapupusuan. Hindi naman siya hermit na nagkukulong sa bahay. In fact, she goes out a lot. And there are a lot of places to go in the city she now calls home, San Francisco.

Hindi lang talaga niya mahanap ang makakatuwang niya. Maraming lalaki ang nagkalat doon, iba-iba ang nationalities. She just couldn't find *the* man that made her heart skip a bit.

Marami ngang Filipinos sa San Francisco, pero karamihan ng nakakasalamuha niya ay doon na ipinanganak o lumaki at sobrang Americanized ang mga gawi at values. Gusto niya ng isang Pinoy na may traditional values pagdating sa pamilya at pananaw sa buhay.

*Was that too much to ask for?*

Bumuntong-hininga si Yasmin, at isinara ang pinto ng sarili niyang apartment. Dumerecho siya sa kusina, ipinatong ang bag sa bar counter, at kumuha ng malamig na tubig mula sa refrigerator.

Habang iniinom iyon, kumililing ang kanyang phone. Matapos ang ikatlong ring, nag-pick-up ang kanyang answering machine. Kapagkuwa'y lumutang ang boses ni Elwin.

Yasmin's hand froze in mid-air. For a split-second, she felt paralyzed. Hindi niya magalaw ang kahit anong muscle. He literally stunned her. Hindi niya inaasahan ang tawag nito. And so soon at that.

*"I didn't realize you're a bitch. Had I known, hindi sana kita pinag-aksayahan ng panahon," galit nitong simula. "And I still can't believe you bit me. Okay, maybe I deserved it for stealing a kiss from you. But I only did that 'cause I honestly thought you liked me. Pero mali pala ang pagkakabasa ko sa kilos mo. You're a player, Yasmin, sending mixed signals. You play games. And I don't want to play that kind of game. This is the last time you'll hear from me."*

Ibinaba nito ang phone, nakarinig siya ng dial tone at matapos ay naputol ang linya. Silence

enveloped her unit once again, with Elwin's words haunting her. *You're a player...*

Hindi yata niya kaya tanggapin ang akusasyong iyon. She never played around. Yes, she dated a few men. At friendly siya sa lahat ng tao. Hindi niya kasalanan kung nami-misinterpret ng iba ang friendliness niya. She certainly wasn't going to change her sunny demeanor nang dahil sa isang loko-loko.

At hindi siya makapaniwala na si Elwin pa ang may ganang magalit sa kanya. He was the one who tried to kiss her. Kahit na ba nasungitan niya ito at natawag ng kung ano, he should not have resorted to that cruel, malicious and spiteful behavior. Kunsabagay, nakagat niya ito kaya siya ngayon ang may alas.

A part of her somewhat felt relieved dahil sinabi nitong hindi na siya gagambalain pa. Sana lang, totohanin nito iyon.

## 2

Habang naghihintay sa reception area ng *Mercado, Luna, Bautista and Associates*, hindi mapigilan ni Yasmin ang paglalakbay ng isip niya sa mga nakaraang pangyayari sa kanyang buhay.

She grew up the conservative way. Itinaga ng kanyang ina sa isip niya that sex is something she should do, only in the realms of a solid marriage. Anak kasi siya nito sa pagkadalaga. Iniwan sila ng kanyang walang-kuwentang ama dahil sa takot na mawalan ng mana.

Ayon sa isa nilang kawaksi sa bahay, nagmula sa mayamang pamilya ang kanyang ama. At hindi aprubado ang relasyon ng dalawa sa pamilya nito, dahil walang dugong Chinese si Meldy, ang kanyang ina. Bukod pa roon, ordinary middle-class lamang ang pamilya nila.

Sa kabila niyon, ipinagpatuloy pa rin ng dalawa ang pag-iibigan. Against all odds, wika nga. Pero nang dahil sa pagbabanta ng mga magulang nito sa hindi ito makakatanggap ni isang kusing sa pamana ng mag-asawa, mabilis na naglaho na parang bula ang tatay niya. And all her years of growing up, ni

hindi niya nakita ang anino nito.

Maliit pa lang si Yasmin, nakita na niya kung gaano kahirap para sa kanyang ina ang buhay ng isang single mother. Nararamdaman niya ang mga paghihirap nito habang lumalaki siya.

Hindi man siya salat sa pagkain, pero hindi niya maiwasang mainggit sa maraming bagong laruan at gamit ng mga kaklase, dahil tight ang budget nila. Habang pumapasok siya sa pre-school, tinatapos naman ng mama niya ang pag-aaral nito sa kolehiyo.

Nakaangat lang silang mag-ina nang mag-asawa si Meldy nang siya ay six years old. She was fortunate enough to have a good stepdad, kaya nagkaroon din siya ng isang matatag na pamilya. But even with, hindi niya makalimutan ang maitim na pakiramdam ng insecurity, kalituhan, selos, pati na rin poot, na nagmarka sa munti niyang isipan.

Kaya kahit anong gawing pangungumbinsi sa kanya ng mga naging boyfriends, she just couldn't jump into the sack like that. After her childhood experience, she just couldn't take sex lightly.

Actually, ang kanyang pagka-manang ang idinahilan ni Ramon kaya naghanap ito ng iba. The Las Vegas showgirl was obviously very much willing

to give him what she could not give. Ang buong akala kasi niya, pareho silang satisfied sa kanilang relasyon.

“Atty. Bautista is free to see you now, Miss Dela Serna,” anang sekretarya, na pumukaw sa kanyang pagmumuni-muni.

“Thanks,” aniya. Tumayo siya at naglakad patungo sa opisina ni Enrico Bautista, ang lawyer na umaasikaso ng kanyang immigration papers.

Hindi pa kasi siya green card holder or immigrant. Nang dumating siya sa Amerika, H1-B Visa o working visa lamang ang mayroon siya. Nakuha niya iyon nang i-sponsor siya ng *JP Morgan Chase*, bilang senior systems analyst. At pinalad naman siyang maging qualified dahil may degree siya ng Computer Engineering sa *UP*. Bukod pa roon, may entry-level experience din siya sa Hong Kong.

“Good morning, Sir,” bati niya. Sa totoo lang, ayaw niyang nagpupunta roon. Pudpod na ang daliri niya sa sangkatutak na forms na kanyang pinirmahan. Subalit kailangan niyang makipagkita sa abogado.

Tiningnan siya ni Enrico mula sa binabasang case files. “Magandang umaga din, Miss. Dela Serna. Ilang beses ko bang sasabihin sa ‘yo, drop the ‘Sir’. Mas lalo akong tumatanda niyan.”

“Okay, Enrico,” aniya. Ilang beses na nga nitong sinabi iyon. Pero tila naka-program na sa isip ang tawagin itong ‘Sir’, because he reminded her of her old high school principal. Strict, stuck-up, old, and rather boring.

And that was a sad assessment on her part, dahil alam niyang pitong taon lamang ang tanda nito sa kanya. Nakita niya iyon sa biodata, na ipinadala ng HRD ng opisina nila, nang ipinapipili siya kung sino ang gusto niyang mag-handle ng kanyang change-of-status bilang immigrant.

Nagmumukhang mature si Enrico sa paningin niya, dahil sa palagi itong nakaamerikana, na plantsadung-plantsado at walang anong bahid ng dumi. Even his preppy cut hair didn’t have a single strand out of place. Bukod pa roon, may permanent grim line sa mga labi nito. He was just too darn serious.

*Sayang talaga dahil ang guwapo pa naman ng mukha mo,* aniya sa isip. And it was the truth. If only he would smile, the harsh angles on his face would soften at lulutang ang kaguwapuhan nito. Sayang tuloy ang well-defined cheekbones nito at ang matangos na ilong.

*Teka, bakit mo ba iniisip ang mga iyan? dagdag*

niya sa utak.

She pushed those thoughts at the back of her mind. Umupo siya sa visitor's chair. Ngunit paglapit niya rito, roon lamang niya napansin na hindi ang usual coat and tie ang attire nito. Nakasuot ito ng puting polo shirt, na pinatungan ng isang moss green cashmere sweater.

*Milagro!* isip-isip niya.

“So what's the occasion?” narinig na lamang niyang lumabas sa bibig niya. She had this bad habit of saying the first thing that comes to her mind.

Napakunot ang noo nito, tila mas lumalim ang linya sa mukha nito. “What do you mean?”

“Uhm... eh, hindi ka kasi nakaamerikana ngayon.”

And to her surprise, he laughed. In the several months na nagpabalik-balik siya sa opisina nito, ngayon lang niya narinig na tumawa ito. Ni hindi nga ito ngumingiti. He was always business. Kaya naman bigla siyang nalito sa tawa nito. *Was he laughing at me?*

His laugh was a deep, intense, melodious one, that resonated from within him.

“It's a Saturday, Yasmin,” sagot nito. “Even I, take

two days off.”

Ngumiti siya. “Eh, kung day-off mo, bakit nandito ka?” She couldn’t resist teasing him. Pero hindi na niya hinintay pa ang sagot nito. “Sorry,” she said sheepishly. “I didn’t mean to pry.”

“That’s fine.” Tumayo si Enrico at may kinuha sa file cabinet nito. “Ikaw na ang last client ko, and then I’ll be going home, much to my secretary’s delight.”

Napansin niyang nakasuot ito ng khaki slacks at suede brown rubber shoes. Napaka-relax ng aura nito. He looked quite attractive, and appealing. Right now, he seemed like the type of person anyone would want to cuddle up with. Muli siyang natigilan. *Ano ba itong pumapasok sa isip ko?* Hindi naman siya boy crazy.

Maybe, Elwin was right. Nagiging player na ba siya?

Sa puntong iyon, pinili niyang mag-focus. She was here for a very important matter at iyon ang dapat maging laman ng kanyang isip. “Dumating na ba ‘yung labor certificate ko?”

Tumango ito. “You’d be happy to know na maganda ang progreso ng immigrant papers mo.”

Napakunot ang noo niya. “Pero mag-e-expire

na ang visa ko in four months. And we both know I can't renew it, dahil iyon ang maximum years ng isang working visa. What will happen to me if hindi pa dumadating ang green card by then?"

"Huwag kang mag-alala, okay," anito. "Since approved na, masasabing may pending immigrant petition ka na. At dahil doon, p'wede nang ma-renew ang visa mo yearly. Allowable iyon sa mga ganitong klaseng kaso. You don't have to worry about being deported."

Nakahinga nang maluwag si Yasmin. Tumingin siya sa itaas, nagkrus, at sinabing, "Salamat sa Diyos." Kapagkuwa'y hinarap niya ang abogado, "Salamat rin sa 'yo." It was then that she noticed the curious look in his eyes. But it was so fleeting, naisip niyang imahinasyon lang niya iyon.

"I'm just doing my job," anito. May iniabot itong mga papeles sa kanya. "Here, photocopy iyan ng mga documents na ini-submit ko on your behalf. 'Tapos in about a month, you can get your new H1-B visa, para maka-travel ka sa labas ng bansa. Makipag-appointment ka na lang sa secretary ko for that one. You might need to sign some more papers then."

Kinuha niya iyon. In doing so, bahagyang naglapat ang kanilang mga daliri. Mabilis na inalis

ni Yasmin ang kanyang kamay, dahil pakiwari niya, para siyang nakuryente. Naramdaman niyang tila huminto sa pagtibok ang kanyang puso, pagkuwan ay nag-somersault.

She looked at him, really confused. Habang tinitingnan ang binata, napansin niyang seryoso rin ang pagkakatingin nito sa kanya. Aside from that, he was absently massaging his fingers. The ones that brushed hers.

By the looks of it, he was stunned as well. Or should she say electrocuted? Nakakasiguro siya, na ganoon din ang nadama ni Enrico sa mga sandaling nagtama ang kanilang mga kamay.

“Uhm... salamat dito,” natatarantang sabi niya, sabay taas ng kamay na may hawak ng mga papeles.

She tried to act normal, para hindi nito mapansin ang pagkabalisa niya. But she knew that was futile, dahil garantisadong naramdaman iyon ng kausap, at nabasa rin nito ang kanyang pagkagulat.

“As I said, no worries,” kibit-balikat nitong tugon. Halata na isinasawalang-bahala nito ang saglit na iyon. It was inconsequential to him. “It’s all part of the job.”

Hindi mawari ng dalaga kung bakit na-disappoint

siya sa sagot nito. “Sige, magpapaalam na ‘ko,” mabilis niyang saad. Ayaw niyang lalo pang mapahiya sa harapan nito. Tumayo na siya at walang lingon-likod na lumabas ng silid. Gusto man niyang sabihin na hindi siya nagimbal, she found the incident truly unnerving.

Ano ang ibig sabihin ng current na iyon? Was it the kind of shock waves mentioned in romance books na napi-feel ng isang tao kapag natagpuan na nito ang true love? Iyon na ba ang spark na hinihintay niya? She hadn’t felt that *thing* before with anyone, *ever*.

Hindi naman niya kino-consider ang sarili na romantiko. She was more of a realist. But a realist who still believed in that art of sweetness and romance. And she most certainly, she didn’t believe in love at first sight... or in their case, first *touch*.

Oo, naghihintay siya ng sparks, but not *that* literal kind of spark. Ang hinahanap niya ay chemistry, na dumarating dahil nagme-mesh ang personalidad ng dalawang tao. The kind of spark that comes with mutual care, love, and respect.

Nakipag-appointment siya sa sekretarya para sa susunod niyang pagpunta sa law office, pagkatapos ay nilisan na niya ang lugar. Pagdating sa kalye, tumama sa kanyang mukha ang cold winter air. And it was

the wake-up call she needed.

Such earth-shattering-first-time-encounters happen only in romance books. Ang mga mapait niyang karanasan ay prueba niyon. What happened between her and Enrico, that was nothing. *Nothing*. Hindi siya apektado, pangungumbinsi niya sa sarili.

“Static lang iyon!” bulalas niya. Parang ayaw na niyang maniwala sa happily-ever-afters. Feeling niya, baka isa siya sa mga itinakda na tahakin ang buhay nang nag-iisa. She had kissed far too many frogs already, and yet still has not found her prince.

### 3

Pinanood ni Enrico ang papalayong pigura ni Yasmin habang tila wala sa sariling patuloy niyang minamasaha ang mga daliri ng kanang kamay. Frankly, he didn't know what hit him. It's as if his fingers were zapped.

And by the looks of it, hindi lang siya ang nakadama niyon. Yasmin had this strange shocked look on her face too. For the first time since he had met her, she was actually speechless. And that says quite a lot, because she always had a lot to say. In fact, ang pagka-opinionated nito, ang quality na siyang nagustuhan niya rito.

Everytime she came to consult with him, lagi itong may kuwento. Alam na nga niya nang pahapyaw ang kuwento kung paano ito napadpad sa Amerika. Anumang topic ay hindi nito pinapalampas. The only thing she never bothered with is prying with the details of his personal life.

And for that, he was thankful. Siguro, natunugan na ni Yasmin na hindi siya palakuwento tungkol sa bagay na iyon. Kung siya ang papipiliin, he'd rather stick with the topic at hand, which is her immigration

case.

Kaso, habang pini-fill out nito ang mahahabang forms, umaarangkada rin ang bibig nito. He had always marveled how she can talk and write without getting distracted. Kung siya iyon, mali-mali na ang maisusulat niya. He needed silence.

Pero wala yata ang salitang iyon sa bokabularyo ni ng dalaga. But he actually enjoyed her time in his office. For one thing, she was easy on the eyes. Hugis-puso ang maamo nitong mukha, na lalong pinalutang ng medyo wavy at mahaba nitong buhok. And the most striking thing about her was her well-formed lips, na tila ba laging nakangiti.

Bukod pa roon, masarap kasi itong pakinggan. Sometimes, he actually had to stop himself from grinning or laughing. Ayaw kasi niyang mabansagang unprofessional. Law, after all, is such a serious, proper, and old school profession.

Pero kaninang magkomento ito tungkol sa damit niya, hindi niya napigilan ang matawa. He didn't think that Yasmin had been paying attention to what he was wearing.

And then that current he felt when their fingers touched. Gusto sana niyang tanungin si Yasmin

tungkol doon, pero hindi niya magawa. Dapat ba niyang itanong iyon?

He couldn't just shake the incident off his chest. It was really weird. Kasi simula kaninang umaga, he saw Yasmin as nothing more than a client. Pero ngayon, parang may kung anong boses sa kanyang dibdib ang nag-uudyok sa kanya na mas kilalanin ang dalaga.

And in all the months that he had known her, ngayon lang niya ito nakita sa ganitong klaseng anggulo. He had never even actually thought of her. Tinamaan ba siya kay Yasmin?

Oh, it was easy to fall for someone like her, with a pretty face and great personality. Her motor of a mouth was really appealing. Hindi nga ba ganoon din noon ang kanyang ex-fiancée, si Tacey? *Ex* being the operative word.

Hadn't a pretty face with a nice personality broke his heart?

At timing pa ang pakikipaghiwalay ni Tacey sa kanya, on the night before he was supposed to take his bar exams. He had wondered then how someone could be so selfish. Palaisipan sa kanya noon kung paano siya nakapasa sa eksamin, dahil sa sobrang

paghihinagpis niya. To say he was heartbroken was an understatement.

Sa totoo lang, hindi niya inaasahan na gagawin iyon ni Tacey. Ang buong akala niya, smooth-sailing ang kanilang relasyon. In fact, neck-deep na sila sa preparasyon para sa kanilang kasal. He didn't have an inkling na may ginagawa itong milagro. Who would've thought that she would have fallen in love with the wedding photographer they chose?

Tandang-tanda pa rin niya ang sabi nito sa kanya. *“I know my timing couldn't be worse, pero kailangan sabihin ko na ito sa 'yo. Rob pursued me after we interviewed him. He was persistent, and you were busy. He literally turned my world upside down. Ngayon alam ko na ang ibig sabihin nila when they say, when you meet the one, you just know. And I do know by just looking at him. I'm sorry.”*

It was hard for him to accept that Tacey had fallen for someone else while he was too busy studying. Kaya minabuti niyang isubsob ang sarili sa dahilan ng kanilang paghihiwalay, ang trabaho. And now, at the age of thirty-seven, he was still very much single.

And in retrospect, his single blessedness is a huge blessing. Dahil noong nagsisimula siya, napakaraming oras ang iginugugol niya sa trabaho. Minsan nga,

inaabot pa siya ng umaga pag matindi ang kanilang mga kaso. At dahil doon, maaga niyang nakamit ang posisyon bilang partner ng *Mercado, Luna, Bautista and Associates*.

Dagdag pa sa listahan niya ng pagpupursigi ay ang mga taong kanyang sinusupportahan. Nurse ang ina niya, at ito ang nagdala sa kanila roon noong siya ay labinlimang taon. Kayod-kalabaw ito, dahil mahal ang edukasyon sa Amerika. Bukod pa roon, sinusupportahan nito ang magulang at isang kapatid sa Pilipinas.

Ngunit bago siya mag-graduate ng Law, nagkasakit ng cancer ang kanyang ina. Tumigil ito sa pagtatrabaho dahil nahihirapan itong pagsabayin iyon at ang chemotherapy. Simula noon, siya na ang sumagot sa sustento ng mga naiwang kamag-anak sa Pilipinas, through his part-time job bilang judicial clerk.

Tila hinintay lang nitong maka-graduate siya sa Law, and then she passed away. Shortly after, sumunod ang kanyang ama. Atake sa puso ang naging dahilan ng pagpanaw nito. Pero sa tantya niya, his old man died of a broken heart.

Noon pa mang nagkasakit ang ina niya, ang paraan nito ng pag-cope sa depression ay sa alak. At

nang mamatay ang asawa, mas lalo pang lumakas ang pag-inom nito. Enrico hated to admit it, but he resented having to pick up the pieces and be man of the household. Pero wala siyang ibang choice.

Adding to his responsibilities, bago namatay ang kanyang ina, ipinapangako nitong papatapusin niya ng pag-aaral ang tatlong first cousins niya na naiwan sa Batangas. Inihabilin din nito sa kanya si Carlo, ang nakababatang kapatid.

Sampung taon ang agwat nila. And even when they were younger, palagi silang nagkakatalo, because Carlo was a brat who always wanted to get his way. High school ito nang maging ulila sila. And it took him tooth-and-nail to keep his brother from dropping out of school.

Wala talaga siyang panahon sa babae. He didn't even have the time to date. And if people said he was too somber, wala siyang magagawa. He had far too many things on his mind. Too many responsibilities.

Kaya nga ba parang hirap siyang ngumiti, hindi tulad ng iba.

Sa puntong iyon, sumagi sa isip niya si Yasmin. She had a permanent smile plastered on her face. Paano kaya nito nagagawa iyon, considering

pinoproblema nito ang visa status? Maybe she was one of the lucky ones who can always find sunshine, even when it's raining.

Napangiti siya sa pagpasok ng mukha nito sa kanyang isip. Hindi niya makalimutan ang ginawa nito kanina lang. She made the sign of the cross and praised God. Sa totoo lang, hindi niya inaakalang madasalin ito. She looked like a modern woman, na masyadong abala para sa Sunday obligation.

Napailing siya, para maiwaglit ito sa kanyang isip. Bakit nga ba niya pinag-aaksayahan ng panahon ang dalaga, even making all these judgements about her? For all he knew, may boyfriend na ito. Pinilit niyang ibalik ang atensyon sa trabaho. He took a deep breath to help him focus.

A sweet flowery scent bombarded his nasal passages. Natigilan siya sa nasamyo. He had long been wondering where this lingering scent is and why it was invading his office.

Ngayon lang niya napagtanto ang sagot. For a supposedly smart man who could put pieces of a hard case together, he was obtuse. At that point he knew he would have a hard time forgetting her. Yasmin was not only as beautiful as her namesake, but smelled as sweet too.

Nilantakan ni Yasmin ang dungeness king crab na in-order niya sa isang stall sa *Fisherman's Wharf* nang gabing iyon. Isang tourist attraction ito kaya maraming tao sa paligid. Mag-isa siyang nakaupo sa isang munting table.

Sinusupsop niya ang isang crab leg nang masilyan niya ang pamilyar na balikat mula sa di-kalayuan. Kahit hindi pa niya nakikita ang mukha nito, she knew without a doubt that it was Enrico. He had the broadest shoulders she had ever seen.

Ibubuka sana niya ang bibig upang tawagin ito, pero naalala niya ang nangyari sa opisina nito kanina lang. How can she forget that? Kahit na pilit niya itong kinakalimutan while busying herself with household chores, their very brief sizzling touch somehow managed to creep inside her head.

Her face burned in embarrassment. Hindi niya tuloy alam ang dapat niyang gawin. Should she hide under the table? O sapat na kaya ang iyuko na lamang niya ang kanyang ulo? Or maybe she can slouch para hindi siya nito mapansin?

To her utter horror, he slowly turned to face her direction and he saw her staring at him. Bakit kasi ang

bagal niyang kumilos? She could do nothing but stare at him as he slowly made his way toward her table. Hindi niya magawang mailihis ang tingin, because there was something powerful that was drawing her to him.

*Damn! Bakit ba sa laki ng San Francisco, dito pa kami magkikita?*

“Hi, Yasmin,” bati nito.

“Hi,” she croaked. Alam niyang nasa labi pa rin niya ang binti ng alimango, pero wala siyang pakialam. Pakiwari niya, isa iyong sandata na puwedeng magsalba sa kanya. Isa pa, bahagya niyon itinatabing ang kanyang mukha.

For a second there, they did nothing but stare at each other in uncomfortable silence, para bang iyong mga saglit sa opisina nito kanina. Kapagkuwa’y nagsalita rin ang binata, “See you around. Enjoy the rest of the evening.”

It was then that she remembered her manners. Kita niya ang bitbit nitong platter ng shrimps, scallops and fries. Alam niyang kailangan nito ng table, at alam din niyang walang bakante dahil puno ang lugar. And even though she knew she might end up regretting it, she had to ask. “Do you want to share

my table?”

“Are you sure it’s all right with you?” gulat nitong sagot. “Baka magalit ang date mo niyan. I don’t want to intrude.”

Natawa siya. “The seat is free. Just as I’m as free as a bird,” aniya. At hindi niya mawari kung bakit idinagdag pa niya ang huling impormasyon. But it was too late to take the words back now. Minabuti niyang umarte nang normal. She’d treat him as she would treat anyone.

“C’mon, Attorney, sit down or you’ll never find an empty spot.” Kukunin sana niya ang mga gamit, pero naalala niyang madumi ang kanyang kamay. “Ikaw na lang ang mag-alis ng bag ko sa chair, puwede?” At iminuwestra niya ang mga palad. “You can just put that behind me.”

Ipinatong ng lalaki ang hawak na tray sa mesa, at sinunod ang sinabi niya. He was ever so careful setting down her purse behind her back. Yasmin could swear he was trying to avoid touching her. Not that they had to worry about skin-to-skin contact, dahil balot na balot sila ng mga winter coat.

“Thanks, Yasmin,” he said while sitting down.

She smiled at him. “No problem.” Napansin

niyang nagdasal muna ito bago nilantakan ang order. *Hmm... madasalin*, naisip niya. And she thought of what polite thing she could ask him or tell him, so they could make small talk. “Mahilig ka rin pala sa seafood.”

Lumunok muna ito bago sumagot, “Oh, yes.” Tumango pa ito. “Lumaki kasi ako malapit sa dagat.”

She wasn’t sure if he was referring to someplace in the Philippines. “I know dito ka nag-aral, kasi nakita ko sa diploma mo sa wall,” she said conversationally. “But I’m guessing na hindi ka dito lumaki. Wala ka kasing twang kapag nanagalog ka tulad ng ibang mga Fil-Am.”

“Tubong Lian, Batangas ako. We moved here when I was fifteen,” kuwento nito. “Hindi na batang paslit.”

“Pareho pala tayo,” aniya. And then she couldn’t resist teasing him, “Pero hindi ako promdi.” He indulged her with another hearty laugh, na ikinatuwa niya. Akala kasi niya mapipikon ito.

At doon nagsimula ang masaya nilang kuwentuhan. They talked about their sentiments of settling down in a foreign country. Pareho pala silang na-culture shock pagdating nila roon. Pinag-

usapan din nila ang mga general subjects tulad ng mga pelikula, musika at libro.

Yasmin was surprised to discover na marami silang pagkakapareho. He liked reading suspense novels of Stephen King too. Gusto rin nito ang musika ni Stevie Wonder, who happened to be her all-time favorite singer.

And they both dreamt of having a house in Lombard Street, the 'crooked-est' street in town. It is a steep hilly sharp zigzagging street paved in bricks, na pinalamutian ng maraming halaman. Isa iyong tourist attraction. But they both knew owning a mansion there was impossible dahil sa presyo.

Bukod pa roon, pareho silang matagal nang hindi nakakauwi sa Pilipinas. For him, it was ten years. At para sa kanya naman ay six years.

“I’m not raring to go, kasi wala naman akong babalikan doon,” anito. “I have no immediate family.”

“Well, I understand that,” aniya. “As for me, if I can get my visa in time, I might get a chance passenger ticket and surprise my family for the holidays. So thanks to you for making that happen.”

Hindi sumagot si Enrico at ngumiti lamang. Hindi mawari ng dalaga kung bakit bigla siyang naging

uncomfortable. She averted her gaze. Sinulyapan niya ang wristwatch at nagulat na mag-a-alas-nueve na ng gabi. Matagal na pala silang nag-uusap. She enjoyed his company so much, ni hindi man lang niya namalayan ang pag-usad ng oras, pati na rin ang lamig.

“Am I keeping you from something?” narinig niyang tanong ni Enrico.

Umiling siya. “Nagulat lang ako sa oras.” *Time does fly by so fast when you’re having fun*, biglang naisip niya. Tonight, she saw a different side of his personality. “Ikaw, am I keeping you from something?”

Ito naman ang umiling. “How about we move indoors for coffee?”

Even though she knew she should be careful, dahil sa nangyari lamang kanina sa opisina nito, hindi niya mapigilan ang sarili na pagbigyan ito.

“Great idea!” masayang tugon niya.

# 4

Enrico unlocked the door of his apartment, wearing a silly grin on his face. Never mind that his cheeks felt numb from the cold winter chill that assaulted them, as he rode the cable car while standing at the farthest section in the back, going up and down the hilly streets of the city, with Yasmin.

Ordinarily, hindi talaga siya tumatayo lalo na kung may bakanteng silya sa tram. He preferred sitting down on the wooden chairs. Pero inengganyo siya ng dalaga na tumayo sila sa likuran, dahil mas masaya raw iyon.

“The ride home would not be as boring,” she said.

And he had to agree with her. Masasabi niyang he has never ridden the cable car in such style before. Or maybe he had just never rode it like that, with a woman who made his heart go on overdrive.

Hinatid niya ang dalaga sa bahay nito, na malapit lang pala sa lugar niya. Dalawang bus stops lamang ang layo niyon. Ang ginamit kasi nitong mailing address sa lahat ng kanilang komunikasyon at dokumento ay ang opisina nito.

Mula roon, naglakad na lang siya papunta sa sariling pad. It was a good ten-minute brisk walk.

Pagbukas niya ng pinto ng unit, binulaga siya ng mukha ng kababatang kapatid. Nakasalampak ito sa sofa, nakapatong ang mga paa sa armrest, at may hawak na sigarilyo sa isang kamay.

“What are you doing here, Cao?” iritadong usisa ni Enrico. ‘Cao’ ang palayaw ni Carlo. “And how many times do I have to tell you not to smoke in here? Ayaw kong mangamoy ashtray. Konting respeto naman.”

Kaagad itong umupo. Ang mukha nito ay gulat na gulat, na para bang isang magnanakaw na nahuli sa akto. “Sorry about this,” anito, sabay taas ng sigarilyo. Pinatay nito iyon sa pamamagitan ng pagturok sa isang basyong baso. Wala kasi siyang ashtray. “I got tired waiting for you. Kaya tuloy ay hindi ko mapigilan ang manigarilyo.”

“Well, sorry, Your Highness,” sarkastikong sabi niya. “Hindi ko naman alam na pupunta ka dito. How did you get in?”

“I talked to Manang Rosella.”

“You mean you *tricked* her,” sita niya. And he took a mental note of talking to his cleaning lady again. Dapat hindi na ito magpadala sa charms ng kapatid

niya. “What do you want?” walang-ganang tanong niya habang tinatangal ang makapal na parka.

“Hey! That’s no way to welcome your only brother.”

Ipinasok niya ang parka sa loob ng coat closet malapit sa sofa. “Let’s cut to the chase, Carlo Jose Bautista,” aniya. “Alam natin pareho na pumupunta ka lang dito pag may kailangan ka.” And then he looked at his brother squarely in the eye, “So what is it this time?”

“C’mon, Big Bro!” anito, sabay kibit ng balikat. “Can’t I just come here ‘cause I miss you? Give me the benefit of a doubt here.”

Enrico knew his brother like the back of his hand. Noong maliit pa sila, siya ang naatasang mag-babysit dito kapag may pasok ang magulang niya. Siguro iyon ang dahilan kung bakit lumaki silang magkaiba ang disposisyon. Sa Pilipinas, lola niya ang nagbantay sa kanya, kasama ng isang yaya.

Tinitigan niya si Carlo, para iparating dito na hindi siya nito kayang utuin. It was a look so sharp his brother almost flinched. And staring at him was sometimes his only choice, dahil hindi naman ito nakikinig sa mga sermon niya. Minsan nga, iniisip

niyang may selective deafness ito. Iyon bang pinipili lamang ang mga nais pakinggan.

“Fine, fine,” anito habang pinaparaan ang kamay sa ulo. Bumuntong-hininga ito bago muling nagsalita, “I’m in a bind. I need three hundred dollars to tide me over, kasi hindi pa dumarating ang paycheck ko,” anito sa baluktot na Tagalog. “I need to pay some bills. Sinisingil na ‘ko ng roommate ko.” And then he paused, before adding dramatically, “Not unless you want me to live with you...”

*No way in hell!* naisip niya.

But of course, he refrained from saying that, kahit na sobrang tempted siya. Kung puwede lang, bibigyan niya ito ng isang malakas na pagbatok, para sana matauhan ito. Pero ayaw niyang pagsisihan ang bagay na iyon. He was the type who thinks before he opens his mouth. And besides, he wasn’t Carlo’s dad.

How many times had he bailed his brother out? Mahirap yata kapag masyadong na-spoil. Carlo was babied for so long. “You know that’s not an option. Mag-homeless shelter ka na lang,” iritadong sabi niya. “Baka naman kasi inuna mo ang lakwatsa?” dagdag niyang angal.

“No!” deny nito. “After last time’s incident, nadala

na ako. The HR girl from my part-time job got sick, so hindi naayos ang payroll.”

Last time, inuna nito ang party at nakalimutang bayaran ang huling installment ng tuition fee para makakuha ng final exams. Muntik na itong ibinagsak ng professor sa 3-D Graphic Design. Buti na lang, nadaan ang matanda sa pakiusap. They only had to pay a penalty for late payment. Carlo got a tongue-lashing from him then, with a threat na iwi-withdraw niya ang suporta.

Sumalampak si Enrico sa armchair sa tabi ng sofa. Siya naman ang bumuntong-hininga. “Hindi ako ATM,” aniya, purgang-purga na. At binigyan niya ulit ito ng lecture kung paano dapat i-handle ang pera.

*God, I must sound like a broken record,* naisip niya habang sinesermonan ito. Kung hindi lang siya nakapangako sa magulang, Carlo and his irresponsible ass was on his own.

But he had no other choice but to reach into his pocket to get his wallet. Habang binibilang niya ang pera, he said, “This is hard-earned money, Cao. This is the same hard-earned money I use to pay your tuition. Use it wisely.” And even though he disliked it, he handed over the dollar bills to his brother.

Tumayo ito para kunin iyon. “Thanks, Bro, you’re the best,” anito, sabay tapik sa braso niya, gamit ang libreng kamay, para ipakita ang affection. Matapos, derechong inilagay nito ang pera sa bulsa.

May naalala itong itanong. “What took you so long today? It’s not like you to come home this late. I called your office, but you didn’t answer so I knew wala ka na roon.”

Hindi siya umimik. Maski siya ay nagulat sa kanyang ginawa. It wasn’t like him to deviate from his well-coordinated schedule. But there really was something about Yasmin that has him hooked.

“Hot date?” tanong nito na pumukaw sa kanyang nagliliwaliw na utak.

“Hell, no!” bulalas niya. And he knew he was partly lying. Five hours with a person can qualify as a date. And his banter with Yasmin was sizzling. But it wasn’t enough to qualify as hot. There was no touching nor kissing. The only thing that was definitely hot was the coffee they had after dinner.

And he doubted that she would even see it as a date. It was more a spur of the moment type thing. But even then, aminado siyang may nadama nga siyang kakaiba. It confirmed what he felt that morning in

his office when their fingers touched briefly.

“I was at work para masustentuhan ang mga kalokohan mo,” dagdag niya. “At kaya walang sumasagot kasi I locked myself up in the conference room to get some peace and quiet.”

“I could swear you have a different glimmer in your eyes, Kuya Enrico,” patuloy nitong pang-aalaska.

Iniling niya ang ulo. “You’re crazy,” aniya habang iminuwestrang paikut-ikot ang isang hintuturo sa tagiliran ng kanyang ulo. “Now shoo... Tsupi ka na diyan. I’m tired and I need to sleep. It was a long day.”

“I believe it was a hot da—”

“I said shoo,” ulit niya. “If you don’t leave me alone, I’m going to take my money back,” pagbabanta niya.

“I’m going, I’m going,” ani Carlo na ngingisi-ngisi habang papunta sa pinto. “Thanks again for bailing me out. I’m indebted to you for the rest of my life.” Then he opened the door and shut it behind him.

Bumuntong-hininga si Enrico at ipinatong ang ulo niya sa sandalan. His brother had this way about him. Hindi talaga niya matiis ang kapatid.

Looking up, he tried to imagine Yasmin’s face on

the white ceiling. *Now that's better*, naisip niya. Pero kaagad iyong nabura nang lumangitngit ang pinto. He immediately faced the direction of the sound.

Carlo's face unceremoniously peeked in, which grabbed his full attention. "See, I knew it!" matagumpay nitong sabi. "It's a girl."

Binato niya ito ng isang throw pillow. "Scram!" On instinct, mabilis nitong isinara ang pinto kaya tumama ang unan sa kahoy.

Sa labas, narinig niya ang tinig ng kapatid. "And it's about time too!" he said with a huge belly laugh.

Umasa siyang bubuksan nitong muli ang pinto, para alaskahin siya. Pero hindi nito ginawa iyon. Sa halip, narinig na lamang niyang pumipito-pito ito, habang naglalakad sa hallway.

Muling inihilig ni Enrico ang ulo sa backrest ng armchair. And despite himself, he couldn't help but break into a smile. As annoying as his brother can be, mahal pa rin niya ito. Magkadugo sila, and nothing would ever change that.

Ito lang ang bukod-tanging may guts na kausapin at asarin siya nang ganoon. None of their family friends or extended family in the Bay Area talked to him that way. Siempre on the surface, kailangan

*Catch Me If I Fall - Hannah Wabe*

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ipakita niyang nagagalit siya rito, para manatili ang respeto nito sa kanya. But deep inside, he liked Carlo's ways because it grounded him.

His brother was the only one who could read him well. At tama ang assessment nito sa kanya ngayon. It was a girl who made him all dewey-eyed and distracted. Pumasok sa isip niya si Yasmin, with her long feminine fingers, delicately peeling the crabmeat. To him, that showed patience.

*What if her long delicate fingers slowly peel off your... pants, pang-aalaska ng kung anong boses sa utak niya.*

Ipinilig niya ang ulo para mapuksa iyon. He felt his cheeks begin to burn. Spending a few hours with Yasmin sparked up all these feelings within him. Feelings he thought had long buried, when Tacey burned him and left him hanging high and dry.

Kaya naman nakakapanibago ang mga nadarama niyang iyon. It was a strange and somewhat new for him again, to be all giddy and excited like a hormonal school boy. Kaninang magkausap sila ng dalaga, parang isang daang paruparu ang nagliliparan sa kanyang tiyan. And he couldn't stop himself from smiling, kahit wala namang nakakatawa.

And the surprising part is that he liked it.

His feelings tonight were somewhat of a shock to him. Pati ang mga salitang lumabas sa bibig niya ay nakakagulat.

*“We should do this again,”* aniya nang maghiwalay sila sa main entrance ng condominium building na tinutuluyan ni Yasmin. It was some sort of admission on his part that he had enjoyed the evening.

*And she shocked him even more by answering, “Sure.”*

*At nagulat siyang muli nang pangunahan siya ng kanyang dila. “I’ll treat you to lunch tomorrow, if you’re not busy?”* What he said about doing it again, was supposed to be a harmless empty statement.

*And to his surprise again, but great delight, tumango ito.*

*“Gusto mo, daanan kita?”* sabi niya. It was the polite thing to offer, after she had already said yes.

*“I have some errands to do in the morning,”* anito. *“How about I meet you there, para hindi ka na mahirapan.”*

*“Okay,”* aniya. And then he gave the name of the restaurant.

*“That’s great,” anito. “It’s a date then.”*

A date.

*A date!*

Kinailangan niyang ulitin iyon sa isipan dahil hindi siya makapaniwala. Napakatagal na rin mula noong last official date niya sa isang babae. Oh, there were other times that he had gone out with women. Pero hindi niya kino-consider na date ang mga paglabas na iyon.

Some of the women he had dinner with, hanggang doon lang... dinner. He found them rather shallow and boring kaya hindi na nasundan ang mga iyon. Or some, he just didn’t have chemistry with kaya hindi na siya nagpursigi pa.

Pero hindi siya isang santo.

Aminado siyang ilang babae na ang kanyang naikama. Minsan kasi, nagpupunta siya sa bar para magpalipas ng oras. Nakakalungkot kasi tumira nang mag-isa. He craved for company, during those times that the silence in his pad seemed rather deafening.

But he was always lucid enough to use protection. And he was picky about whom he chooses to spend the night with. Bukod pa roon, he didn’t like the

head-splitting hangovers.

Aminado siyang tigang na tigang na siya sa departamento ng pag-ibig. But he knew it was his own doing. Kasalanan niya. Natatakot kasi siyang masaktan muli.

That's why he surprised himself when he asked Yasmin out. It completely caught him off guard. Sa totoo lang, simula nang pumasok ito sa opisina niya, captivated siya sa personality nito. At iyon na rin ang dahilan kung bakit siya natatameme. He clammed up because he was afraid of falling for her.

Pero kaninang magkasama sila, hindi na niya napigilan ang kanyang sarili. He talked about himself and about his life. It was as if he was caught up in some sort of magic, which she herself created.

Kaya nga ba pinipigilan niya ang sarili na dugtungan ang gabing ito. Because asking her out on a real date spelled t-r-o-u-b-l-e. A real date means he wanted to get to know her, and that he wanted more. And he could not commit to a *more*.

Maybe he should call Yasmin and cancel it.

“No!” bulalas niya. “No way!”

It would be impolite to bail out on anyone at the

*Catch Me If I Fall - Hannah Wabe*

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last minute. It was not because she made his heart skip or his stomach flutter. Not *those* reasons at all.