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June 2008...

“Bye, munchkin,” sabi ni Rob, ang best friend niya. He hugged her tight. “Mag-ingat ka doon. Baka naman makahanap ka ng Italian lover at hindi ka na bumalik rito,” dagdag nito, habang nakayukyok ang ulo niya sa dibdib nito.

“Sira!” balik niya. “That would never happen. Ever.”

Alam ni Leonore o ‘Lee’ na hinding-hindi iyon mangyayari dahil si Robert Guerrero lamang ang laman ng puso niya. He had been there since she was fourteen. Kababata niya ito, magkapitbahay sila sa isang exclusive subdivision sa Cebu. Dahil pareho silang only child, lumaki silang magkasama. Mas matanda sa kanya si Rob ng tatlo at kalahating taon.

Ngunit para sa kanya, nagbago ang lahat nang magkaroon ng nobya si Rob; nasa fourth year high school pa lang ito noon sa isang exclusive boys school. Doon niya na-realize na nagseselos siya. Ang ginawa niya noon, lumayo siya. Alam niya kasing wala siyang pag-asa.

Rob was popular, charming, and smart. Samantalang siya, mahiyain at may pagka-insecure. Palibhasa kasi, maagang namatay ang kanyang ina, pati mga lola niya. Si Yaya Tasing ang lagi niyang kasa-kasama; mabait itong ina-inahan sa kanya. Hindi man lang ito tapos ng high school.

When she was thirteen, nag-asawa muli ang papa niya, pero hindi sila close ni Tita Daisy. Sa tingin niya, may pagka-alooft ito. Tuwing nagkakasama sila, she felt as if it was a very awkward situation. Hindi naman sila magkagalit, but they weren't as close as she hoped they would be.

At dahil doon, wala siyang self-confidence para magtapat kay Robert. Kaya minabuti niyang mag-concentrate muna sa pag-aaral at sa mga babaeng kaibigan sa pinapasukang all-girls school, dahil parang tino-torture siya tuwing nakikitang kasama nito ang girlfriend.

Pero dahil clueless talaga ang binata, hindi siya nito tinatantanan at lagi pa ring nagpupunta sa bahay nila. Ang masakit, kinukuwentuhan pa siya nito ukol sa love life nito. Pinakinggan na lamang niya ito, like a real good friend would.

Ayaw rin niyang magbago ang friendship nila. She could always count on him to help her with Math and

her other projects in school. Isa pa, natatakot siyang magtapat sapagkat sa umpisa pa lamang ay vocal na si Rob sa pagsasabing para siyang nakababatang kapatid nito.

As she matured, she realized she'd rather be in his life as a friend than be nothing at all.

Ang bukod-tanging pag-asa na lamang ni Lee ay kung ituloy ng mga magulang nito at ng papa niya ang pagpaparinig sa kanila na sila ang bagay na makasal sa isa't isa. Of course, Rob would always laugh at the notion. And she, she would turn red in embarrassment.

Now at twenty-three, she secretly hoped that *that* would happen.

Iyon na lang yata ang paraan upang hindi siya maging old maid. After all these years, wala pa siyang nagiging boyfriend. At wala rin siyang balak na mag-boyfriend kung hindi iyon si Robert Jimeno Guerrero.

Alam ni Leonore na hindi siya pangit. Ngunit alam din niya na wala siya sa ka-level ng mga babaeng idini-date ni Rob, who were all tall, sexy, and ultra-confident. Bukod pa roon, wala siyang ibang nakikilala. Hindi kasi siya pinapayagang gumimik at hindi rin siya mahilig maglalabas. Napapayagan lang

siya kung kasama si Rob.

Ang sabi ng mabuti niyang kaibigan na si Shelly, noong high school sila, natatakot ang mga lalaki sa anino ni Robert. And when Leonore went to college, she herself didn't entertain anyone dahil nga alam niyang si Rob ang nasa puso niya. May magtatangka pa lamang manligaw sa kanya, derecho basted na.

“Tama na!” awat ni Shelly, na nagbalik sa kanya sa kasalukuyan. “Tama na ang dramang ‘yan, Lee. Male-late ka na sa flight mo.”

Naghiwalay sila ni Rob, much to Leonore's chagrin. Mami-miss niya ito, kahit six months lang siya sa Florence, Italy.

“Hindi ba talaga maghahatid si Tito Greg?” tanong ng binata.

Umiling siya. “It's his strong statement against my going away. To quote—*Kabaliwan ang gusto mo. Ano'ng mahihita mo sa pagpipinta? Mabuti kung dumito ka na lang at tulongan mo ako.*”

Nagpursigi siyang pumunta sa Italy dahil gusto niyang mag-aral ng pagpipinta. Pakiwari niya, it's her turn to do what she wanted. Aba, nang magkolehiyo siya ay sinunod na niya ang gusto nitong mag-enroll siya sa Business Administration. Ayon dito, siya raw

ang mamamahala sa lahat ng negosyo dahil siya lamang ang kaisa-isa nitong anak.

But what she really wanted to pursue was Visual Communications or Fine Arts. Pero hindi siya suportado ng ama. The difference now, when she turned twenty-one, nakuha niya ang ipinamana sa kanya ng nasirang lola at ina. They were well to-do and had kept a trust fund for her, which was turned over to her on her twenty-first birthday.

Parte ng manang iyon ang siyang gagamitin niya sa Florence para sa short course na kukunin niya. It was something that she really wanted to do. Kung wala siyang kumpiyansa sa sarili sa ibang bagay, hindi sa pagpipinta. She was in her element when she was holding an easel and a paintbrush.

Naramdaman niya ang kamay ni Rob sa kanyang balikat, comforting her. “Don’t worry,” sabi nito. “Knowing your dad, hindi ka niya matitiis.”

Leonore hoped her friend was right. Pero simula nang banggitin niya ang tungkol sa Florence, hindi nagbago ang pananaw ng kanyang papa. And when she had actually gone on and applied for a visa for herself, which was a first for her because she was used to having someone do everything for her, he stopped talking to her.

“Look, I see your car,” narinig niyang sabi ni Shelly. At itinuturo nito ang azul na *Mercedes-Benz* ng kanyang ama sa di-kalayuan.

Parang nabunutan si Lee ng tinik sa dibdib. Tahimik silang nakatayo sa sidewalk ng *Mactan International Airport* hanggang sa huminto ang sasakyan sa kanilang tapat. Bumukas ang pinto at bumaba roon ang pamilyar na stiletto heels ni Tita Daisy.

Hinintay niyang may lumabas na ibang tao mula sa sasakyan, ngunit ang madrasta lamang ang naroon. Leonore’s heart sank. She didn’t realize how hurt she was by her father’s being unsupportive until now.

Naramdaman niya ang biglang pagdagsa ng luha sa likod ng mga mata. She pressed her tongue to the roof of her mouth and willed them not to fall. Kaya niya ito. Kakayanin niya. *This* was her decision.

“Hija, I just wanted to say goodbye,” sabi ng matandang babae. Sa gulat niya, niyakap siya nito. “I’m really sorry about Greg. Pero isipin mo rin that he’s hurting too. You’re his only baby, and he thinks you’re leaving him.”

“But that’s not true!” aniya. “Babalik din naman

ako. I just want to follow my own dreams, even for a while.”

“That’s what I told him too.” Pinutol ng ginang ang yakap at tiningnan siya sa mga mata. “I’m really sorry. But you know how stubborn your dad is.”

Lee smiled bitterly.

“And you take after him in some way,” dagdag ni Daisy.

Nagulat siya. She had never been called stubborn by anyone before. In fact, sunod-sunuran siya. May it be to Rob or her dad, or even Yaya Tasing. She was happy to take someone else’s lead.

“You find that surprising?” magiliw na dagdag ng stepmother niya.

Tumango siya.

“Well, this is the perfect example,” sabi nito, at itinuro ang mga maleta niya na nakalagay sa baggage cart. “You’re actually doing this. You’re finally growing up. Alam mo naman na hindi ako biniyayaan ng sarili kong anak. You’re the only one I have. And I’m proud of you.”

May kinuha itong sobre sa bag at iniabot sa kanya. Hindi makapaniwala si Lee. She didn’t have

to ask but something told her it was money. Hindi siya makagalaw. Para siyang namatanda.

Tama si Tita Daisy. They had never been close. But as she was standing there looking at the older woman's somber face, she began to wonder if it was her own fault kaya naging ganoon ang sitwasyon. Hindi kaya nagtangka rin ang madrasta na mapalapit sa kanya, ngunit siya itong lumalayo rito?

Naramdaman niyang kinuha nito ang kamay niya at isinuksok doon ang sobre. "Please take it," sabi ng babae. "It's just a little something for you."

Bilang pasasalamat, niyakap niya ito nang mahigpit. She felt the surprise in her stepmother's body language. And after sometime, a sigh of relief escaped in the older woman's mouth. "Mag-iingat ka, Lee."

"I will." Nagpaalam siya muli sa lahat. She had to go inside the terminal on her own dahil siya lamang ang may ticket. She reminded everyone to keep in touch.

"Ingat, Lee," ani Shelly. "Don't forget my pasalubong."

"Remember what I said, munchkin," dagdag ni Rob. "Stay away from those stinky Italian boys."

Tumawa siya. Kung sana lang nagseselos ito. Kaso alam niyang may dalawa itong girlfriend na pinagsasabay sa ngayon. “No, Rob, it’s *you* who should stay away from the girls,” sita niya rito. “Baka mamaya niyan makamandag ka pala. Makabuo ka. And then you’ll end up marrying someone.”

“No way!” sigaw nito. And he gave her a look of horror, while strangling himself. “Kasal equals sakal.”

Nagtawanan silang mga babae.

“Alam mo namang takot ako sa commitment,” dagdag nito, amidst their fits of laughter. “Ikaw, ha, baka i-jinx mo ako niyan. You know very well that I’m not tired of playing the game.”

“I know, I know,” turan ni Lee. “You’re a player.”

That’s why I’m hoping mauntog ka na, dagdag niya sa isip. Stop playing around and just be with me.

Binigyan siya nito ng dalawang thumbs-up. “That’s right. Huwag mo ngang masabi-sabi ang salitang kasal.” He pretended to spit. “Itsapwera sa buhay ko ang babaeng maghangad niyan.”

Kaya nga ba hindi ko sinasabi sa ‘yo ang feelings ko, aniya sa binata sa isip. Takot ko lang na pagtawanan mo ako.

Love Me When You Can - Hannah Wabe

As she was waving goodbye to them, she thought to herself, that eventually, the right time would come. And when it does, that's when she would tell him everything.

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December 28, 2008...

“Bata ka, bakit hindi ka nagsabi kahit kanino na uuwi ka?” sabi ni Yaya Tasing sa kanya. Ito at ang driver ang nagsundo sa kanya sa airport. Nagpadala siya ng text message dito noong isang araw. “Akala namin, next month pa ang uwi mo. Alam mo bang nasa Hong Kong sila ngayon at may business meeting doon ang papa mo? Ni hindi ka man lang umabot sa araw ng Pasko.”

“That’s okay, Yaya,” sabi ni Lee. Napangiti siya at halos hindi na ito humihinga sa pagsasalita sa sobrang excitement. Ganoon din ang nadarama niya. Kahit six months lang siya sa Italy, na-miss niya ang kanyang tahanan.

Nagkabati na sila ng ama, na halos araw-araw rin siyang tinawagan habang naroon siya. He would have wanted her to return on Christmas too, but she didn’t expect to finish her final project so soon. When she did, doon siya nag-decide tumulak pauwi. But by then, booked na ang mga eroplano dahil sa Christmas rush.

“At least, I’m here for New Year’s Day,” dagdag niya. “At okay lang talaga na wala ang Papa. That will give me time to settle in and fix my things. Ayaw mo noon, masu-surprise silang lahat?” aniya.

Ang totoo, kaya siya nagmamadaling umuwi dahil sinabi ni Rob na may sorpresa raw ito sa kanya. Ilang beses na niya itong kinulit kung anuman iyon, pero hindi nito sinasabi kung ano.

Ang matalinghaga nitong sagot: “You’ll find out when you get home. And believe me, it is something you will not expect. It will be the biggest shock of your life. Mahuhulog ang panga mo sa lupa.”

Nang kulitin pa niya ito, he added: “This is the kind of news someone says in person. Hindi over text or telephone.”

Nang sabihin nito iyon, nahulog nga ang bibig niya sa lupa. She wondered, could he have finally realized that he loved her too? Could the distance between them the past months finally knocked some sense into him? What else could it be? Hindi ba ang pagtatapat ng pag-ibig ang siyang nararapat sabihin nang personal?

She really hoped that was it.

Tinanong niya si Shelly kung may nalalaman

itong ibang bagay ukol kay Robert, pero wala ang sagot nito. Kung sabagay, the two really didn't have anything in common other than having her for a friend. Iba ang sirkulong ginagalawan ng dalawa.

“Mas lalo ka pang gumanda, Lee,” sabi ni Yaya Tasing, na umagaw sa kanyang atensyon.

“Salamat, Yaya,” aniya, sabay pisil sa braso ng matanda. “Noon pa man, number one fan na kita, eh.”

“Walang halong biro. Mas blooming ka ngayon,” sinserong hayag nito. “Parang ang saya-saya ng awra mo. Sabihin mo, may boyfriend ka na ba doon?”

Hindi lalaki ang nagpaasaya sa kanya. Kaya siya masaya kasi marami siyang natutunan ukol sa pagpipinta. Marami rin siyang natutunan ukol sa sarili. That she could be independent and outspoken. She just had to believe in herself. Most of all, she learned that her own happiness rested in her hands.

“Yaya naman!” magiliw na sita niya. “Siyempre, wala.”

Si Robert lang, dagdag niya sa isip.

Ang bukod-tanging nakakaalam ng sekreto niya ay si Shelly.

And pretty soon, I'll tell him myself, aniya sa sarili.

Isa pang bagay na nahanap niya sa Italy ay ang self-confidence.

“Mas bagay sa ‘yo ang buhok mo ngayon. Huwag ka nang magpapagupit na parang lalaki tulad noon.”

She chuckled softly. Kaya hindi siya nagpapagupit, dahil mahal ang magpa-parlor sa Europa. But she had to agree, mas feeling sexy nga siya sa buhok niya ngayon. She took a mental note to endure the heat and not get a bob cut.

Sa wakas ay narating nila ang bahay. Inutusan niya ang driver na iakyat ang kanyang mga gamit sa kuwarta. At nag-request siya kay Yaya Tasing na ipaghanda siya ng merienda sa dining room. Habang naghihintay, pinakialaman niya ang mga sobre sa estante.

That’s when she saw a formal-looking envelope addressed to her, her dad and Tita Daisy. Naka-calligraphy pa ang kanilang mga pangalan. “Looks like a wedding invitation,” aniya sa kalawakan. “Sino kaya ang ikakasal?”

Karaniwan, pag business associates ng ama niya, hindi siya kasali sa imbitasyon. So she was really curious kung kanino iyon dahil dawit pati pangalan niya. It must be somebody she knew.

She unceremoniously tore the side of the envelope to open it. Hindi na siya nagdalawang-isip na panghimasukan iyon dahil nakalagay ang pangalan niya. “Aha! I’m right,” bulalas niya sa kalawakan nang makita ang isang eleganteng card na nakatali pa ng lilac ribbon.

Ipinatong niya ang envelope sa estante upang alisin ang laso sa card. Sinumulan niyang basahin iyon...

One Love That Is Shared By Two...

Two Hearts That Beat As One...

Robert and Patricia

Cordially invite you to their wedding...

Pinaulit-ulit basahin ni Leonore ang imbitasyon. Hindi siya makapaniwala! Pakiwari niya, pinaglalaruan siya ng mga mata. It can’t be *her* Robert getting married! But there it was, his parents’ names on the invitation. *His* name on the invitation.

Robert was indeed getting married.

To someone else.

“Pero bakit?” naguguluhang tanong ni Lee. Hindi ba ang sinabi nito ay ang kasal ay parang sakal? Nang umalis siya ay wala itong seryosong nobya. At sa mga text nito, alam niyang wala itong seryosong ka-date.

And that’s when it dawned on her, na ang sorpresang sinasabi nito ay iyon. He had met someone and was going marry that someone else! That was his surprise. It wasn’t that he finally discovered he loved her in return.

Sinulyapan muli ni Lee ang date; December 28, 2008.

“That’s today!”

Tiningnan niya ang wristwatch; alas tres y diez ng hapon. Ayon sa invitation, alas tres ang kasal. May oras pa siya. She was willing to bet her ass on it that this was a typical Pinoy wedding—late na magsisimula ang kasal.

Nagmamadali niyang kinuha ang shoulder bag at lumabas ng bahay. Hindi na niya inabisuhan si Yaya Tasing o si Mang Dado. Kung anuman ang gagawin niya, hindi niya gustong makita ng mga ito.

She couldn’t let Rob marry that Patricia without him knowing of her love. Nagtatakbo siya palabas ng gate ng subdivision at pinara ang pinakaunang

taxi na nakita.

“Sa *Sto. Niño Church*,” sabi niya sa driver. “Dali, Manong. Ayokong ma-late.”

Ang gusto niyang mangyari, makarating ng simbahan ahora mismo. She was like a woman possessed. And she had one mission—to stop the wedding.

She could only hope they had not said their vows yet...

“He really is getting married,” mangiyak-ngiyak na bulong ni Lee sa sarili, habang nakatayo sa likuran ng simbahan, nakatitig sa altar. Nangilid ang luha sa kanyang mga mata, habang nakatitig kay Robert.

Too bad for her though, the groom wasn’t looking at her, but at the bride who was walking in the middle of the aisle. For a moment there, hindi niya alam ang gagawin. She was transformed back to the unsure shy young woman that had a huge crush on her best friend.

Magtitili ba siya over the bridal march? She really was dying to stop the wedding.

She just needed to collect her thoughts and

regain a bit of her strength, which had deserted her when she saw the back of the statuesque bride. Hindi niya ito kilala. Even the name was new to her.

“How could you marry someone you barely know?” bulong niya kay Robert, who looked as if he was about to cry when the bride’s father gave her to him.

Hindi talaga maintindihan ni Lee ang kaibigan. It was she who was in his shadow all her life and yet she had remained invisible to him in the way that she wanted to be seen by him. It just was not fair.

And it didn’t help that Rob looked so gorgeous in his barong Tagalog. His face was radiant with the big smile of his. He looked so dashing. He even cut his hair.

Tumiim ang kanyang mga bagang habang pinagmamasdan ito.

Part of his charm was his wavy hair that he usually let loose. It wasn’t unruly or anything, but it made him look a little bit like a renegade. Kahit kinukulit ito ng sariling ina, he had not cut it. And she loved that in him. Pero ngayon, pati iyon ay nagbago.

Sino ba ang Patricia na ito, para baguhin si Rob? galit na tanong niya sa isip.

Lee eyed the woman clinging onto him as if she had some sort of communicable disease. All his life, her best friend had worn his hair like that. And now, he was a changed man.

Damn you, Patricia!

Hindi na niya halos marinig ang mga pinagsasabi ng pari. As the ceremony progressed, she felt as if a stake was being plunged into her heart. As they reached the part of the wedding vows, nakadama siya ng matinding panic.

Oh God, I can't let Rob do this! aniya. I can't let him make this mistake. Masasakal siya. This woman can't possibly love him like I do.

For many years, pinakatago-tago ni Lee ang feelings niya para kay Robert. Habang nasa Italya siya, nangako siya sa sarili na ipagtatapat dito ang tunay na damdamin pag-uwi niya. That time has come. It was now or never.

One thing she learned in her trip to Florence, it felt good to decide for oneself. There's nothing more gratifying than being able to do what you want and being responsible for your own actions.

This time, she knew she had to act.

She could never let Rob make this mistake.

At kahit mapahiya siya sa harap ng maraming tao, she would live with the consequences. Basta masabi lang niya rito ang tatlong mahiwagang salita.

Sa puntong iyon, narinig niyang sinabi ng pari. “If there is anyone in this room that deems this marriage as unsuitable, please speak now. Speak now or forever hold your peace...”

Sa puntong iyon, nagsimula siyang maglakad papunta ng altar. Handa na siyang ibuka ang bibig at sumigaw—“I object! Itigil ang kasal!”—nang may isang malaking kamay na tumakip sa kanyang bibig.

At bago pa siya makakilos, kung sinuman ang tumakip sa kanyang bibig mula sa likuran ay bumulong sa kanya, with his breath fanning her ear. “Shh! You wouldn’t want to make a spectacle of yourself now, would you?”

His voice was rich, dark, authoritative, and almost hypnotic. There was something in it that compelled Leonore to obey. So she shut up. Hindi na siya pumalag.

That second he covered her mouth was enough to jolt some sense into her. What the heck was she planning to do? She had no stake on Robert! He had

never treated her as anything more than a little sister. Kapag nag-eskandalo siya, ipapahiya lamang niya ito at ang kanyang sarili.

Hinayaan niyang buhatin siya ng estranghero. In some way, it was a relief that he had cut in. The way the mysterious man carried her with one arm, it was if she was as light as a feather. Inilabas siya nito sa simbahan at nang ilang metro na ang layo nila sa pinto, inilapag siya ng estranghero. Marahas siyang ibinaba nito nito kaya muntik na siyang mawalan ng balanse.

She whirled around, intent on screaming at him. Ano siya, basura para ibagsak nang ganoon? Even if a part of her was grateful to him for knocking some sense into her, naiinis pa rin siya rito.

But as glanced up, she met the most enigmatic pair of eyes she'd ever seen and was stunned into silence. His eyes were deep-set, round and framed by the thick lashes. Unfortunately, those eyes regarded her warily. Para bang ang tingin nito sa kanya ay may katok siya sa ulo.

Na totoo naman talaga, naisip ni Lee. Only an insane woman would stop a wedding of a man who was not or never even became her boyfriend. But of course, she would never admit out loud.

“What were you thinking?” he asked as his dark sharp eyes pierced through her, almost making her squirm.

Hindi makasagot si Leonore.

Hindi rin kasi niya alam kung ano ang pumasok sa isip niya. Hindi niya alam kung paano ipapaliwanag ang sarili nang hindi nagmumukhang tanga. Minabuti niyang huwag magsalita at tumitig lang sa lalaki.

“Go home!” utos nito. At ipinatong nito ang mga kamay sa magkabilang balikat ni Lee para igiya siya patungo sa linya ng mga taxis sa labas.

Hindi siya sadyang palaban. But somehow, the adrenaline coursing through her and the fire in his eyes snapped something within her. “Bakit ba masyado kang pakialamero?” iritadong usig niya. Inalis niya ang mga kamay nito sa kanyang mga balikat at hinarap ito.

To her surprise, he laughed.

“How dare you laugh at me!” Pinagbabayo niya ito sa dibdib bilang ganti. Ibinuhos niya ang lahat ng frustration sa estranghero.

Hinuli nito ang kanyang mga braso upang pigilan siya sa patuloy na pananakit dito. Sa kabiglaan niya,

Love Me When You Can - Hannah Wabe

ikinulong siya nito sa mga bisig nito. At bago pa siya makapagprotesta, inangkin nito ang kanyang mga labi.

3

Lee found herself reacting to his kiss. It wasn't torrid. It wasn't casual. It was a kiss that was somewhere in between the two. She was enjoying the feel of his surprisingly warm soft lips and probing tongue.

Sa sumunod na mga segundo, wala siyang ibang namalayan kundi ang init ng katawan ng lalaki na nakalapat sa kanya at ang apoy na nadarama ng kanyang mga labi dahil sa kakaibang elementong ipinalalapas nito.

Kapagkuwan ay dumagundong ang kampana ng simbahan, na siyang nagbagsak sa kanya sa masaklap na realidad. She was kissing a virtual stranger! At nagugustuhan niya ang mga halik nito.

The sound of the bell was the literal wake-up call she needed to snap back into her senses. Kaagad niya itong itinulak palayo sa abot-lakas na makakaya. With the back of her hand, she wiped her mouth and said, "Bastos!"

"Ikaw ang bastos," kaswal nitong balik. Parang aliw na aliw itong nakatingin sa kanya ngayon, watching her discomfort. "Stopping someone's

wedding, now that's bastos.”

Hindi siya nakaimik, kaya nagpatuloy ito, “I kissed you to shut you up. And hopefully shock you back into the right frame of mind.” He paused then added with a twinkle in his eyes, “Although, I might add, you do have very kissable lips.”

Inirapan ito ni Lee subalit lihim siyang sumangayon sa sinabi nito. Ngunit kailangan pa bang halikan siya nito? Tsansing na iyon! And did she hear him right—that she had kissable lips?

“You know, you're very easy to read,” sabi nito. “I swear hindi kita tsinansingan. I just really wanted to stop you from being hysterical. For you to shut up, so I thought of kissing you. You're not even really my type.”

Hindi mawari ng dalaga kung bakit, but she found the last line really offensive. Not that she wanted to be his type.

Inirapan niya itong muli at humalukipkip. “Next time, just cover my mouth,” asik niya. “You already did that inside the church, anyway.”

Tumawa ang lalaki.

Kung alam lang nito, sa ilalim ng kanyang galit,

samu't saring emosyon ang dumagsa sa dibdib ni Lee. And it didn't help that she was already an emotional wreck seeing Robert marrying a modelesque beauty. Kay sakit na dagok niyon sa kanyang very fragile ego.

On top of that, she had to deal with being kissed by Mr. Tall, Dark and Sexy. Hindi niya ito kilala. Baka nga may-asawa na ito, ngunit nang mapasulyap siya sa kaliwang palasingsingan nito ay wala siyang nakitang wedding band.

Anyway, asar pa rin siya rito dahil naisahan siya nito. And to think her lips had never been kissed before! Pagkatapos ngayon, tumatawa ito as if it was the most harmless thing in the universe. So much for having a memorable first kiss with a man she fancied.

“What were you thinking by going in there, anyway?” kaswal nitong sabi nang hindi siya umimik. Iminuwestra nito ang gawi ng simbahan. “Standard line lang ng pari iyon—*speak now or forever hold your peace*. It's not meant to be taken seriously, you know, Miss...”

Hindi niya ibinigay rito ang pangalan na indirekta nitong hinihingi. Whoever he was, he was obviously powerful and he was used to getting his way. She could glean that from the way he talked and the way he carried himself.

Yet, she didn't like him one bit.

Alam niyang nakatitig siya sa lalaki, pero wala siyang pakialam. Everything about him indicated power, confidence and wealth. Ang barong Tagalog nito ay pinya. Ang pantalon nito ay halatang hindi ready-made kundi pinagawa dahil maganda ang tabas niyon at sukat na sukat sa mahahaba nitong binti. Even his patent wing tipped shoes looked expensive. Nope, she didn't like him at all.

And she was so glad to learn that she was not his type.

“Who are you and why are you doing this to me?” asik ni Lee.

“Shouldn't I be asking you that?” balik ng lalaki, na hindi ininda ang inis niya. Mas lalo tuloy siyang naiinis dito. “Who are you and why were you planning to ruin Patricia's wedding? I think that is the most important question.”

Sa pagbanggit nito ng pangalan ng bride, kaagad naglaho lahat ng inis niya. He was right. Why was she intent on ruining someone else's dream wedding? Dahil sa obsession niya kay Rob, nakaligtaan na niya ang bride. Shame on her! Hindi ba, naniniwala siya supposedly sa karma?

Dapat nga siguro, magpasalamat pa siya sa estranghero. Pakiramdam ni Lee, sakaling pinigilan niya si Robert ay hindi rin mapipigilan ang kasal. Maaantala lamang iyon. She could clearly remember his eyes as his bride was walking down the aisle.

Robert had not looked at anyone like that before.

Even her.

He was really, truly in love.

“Good point,” turan niya sa binata. *I wish makahanap din ako ng titingin sa akin nang ganoon...*

Bumuntong-hininga si Lee at umupo sa isang bangko na malapit sa kanila. Suddenly, all her strength deserted her. Sumunod sa kanya ang lalaki at naupo sa kanyang tabi.

“I am stupid,” aniya, habang nakatingin sa mga paa. “I came from abroad, saw my best friend’s wedding invitation, and the first thing that popped into my mind was to stop it. Because I have loved him for so long. But clearly, he doesn’t love me back. I waited so long to tell him what I feel, and now I lost that chance.”

Hindi niya alam kung bakit niya sinasabi ang lahat ng iyon sa binata, gayong hindi niya ito kilala.

But she must admit there was something cathartic about getting that off her chest. Alam kasi niyang hindi siya huhusgahan ng isang estranghero.

Hinarap niya ito. His face, with those perfectly chiseled cheekbones almost made her lose momentum. Having him so close to her was distracting, but she told herself it was only because he had witnessed her at her lowest point. Anyone in her place would feel embarrassed as well.

Akmang magbubuka ito ng bibig pero pinangunahan niya. She didn't want to hear his thoughts about her stupidity. "Eh, ikaw, ano'ng dahilan mo? Bakit mo ako pinigilan?" usig ni Lee.

"I was staring at the bride when I noticed you come in from the corner of my eye," kuwento nito. "There was something about the way you looked. You looked distraught. Talo mo pa ang binagsakan ng langit at lupa."

"I was," pag-amin ng dalaga. "But I have to hand it to you, magaling ang instincts mo. None of the other guests were able to notice me."

"It comes with owning a business," hayag nito. "I am trained to troubleshoot and pay close attention to details. So as the wedding progressed, I kept

a watchful eye on you. And I noticed you getting agitated, so I decided to intervene. I wanted to save you.”

“Save me?” gulat niyang tanong.

“Save you from embarrassing yourself, of course,” sagot ng kausap. “Would you want to be known as the psycho who ruined Patricia’s wedding?”

“Of course not!” mabilis niyang turan. She knew her face was tomato red again.

Ngumiti ito, flashing her the most perfect set of pearly whites. “As much as I don’t believe in the institution that is marriage, I don’t begrudge people who do want to go through with the experience.”

“Bakit hindi ka naniniwala sa kasal?”

Leonore was surprised that the words just easily slipped out of her mouth. Ni hindi nga niya alam ang pangalan ng binata and there she was asking him that personal question. In fact, she was more than asking. She was prying.

“Because marriage is just a piece of paper.”

“To you, maybe,” balik ni Lee. “For some, it is everything.”

“Ah, young people really are so idealistic.”

Somehow that irritated her. She wasn't *that* young. Pero alam din niyang hindi niya ito kaliga. He was much too serious and austere to be her age. “Bakit, ilang taon ka na ba, mama?”

He grinned cockily at her and then said, “The name is Aldrich Braganza, and I'm already thirty-four.”

Lee thought his name sounded familiar, but she couldn't place him in her memory. “You're just ten years older than me,” she replied matter-of-factly. “That's really not too old. Hindi ka pa naman uugod-ugod na nangangailangan ng baston. Someday, you'll find the girl who'll change your mind.”

Isang malakas na tawa ang isinagot ng estranghero gayong hindi siya nagpapatawa. “I highly doubt that,” amused nitong balik. “I'm not marriage material. I don't believe in love, forever, happily-ever-after, and all that crap. I only believe in loving who is with me at a particular moment.”

“So you're the type who believes love has an expiration date,” payak niyang hayag. Naisip ni Lee, ganoon din ang attitude si Robert noon. But now, he had obviously met his match in Patricia.

“You got that right!” bulalas nito, sabay halakhak. “Actually, I don’t even really believe in it. It’s just a word.”

“Pag dumating na sa buhay mo ang babaeng iyon, magbabago ang isip mo. And *I* will be having the last laugh,” ubod ng kaseryosohan na pahayag ni Lee. “Don’t forget to send me a wedding invitation so I can laugh in your face.”

In a way, Lee felt sorry for him because he didn’t believe in love. She may have loved Rob and she had lost him to Patricia. But still, gaya ng kasabihan, it is better to have loved and lost, than to have not loved at all.

She didn’t realize that she had said that last line out loud until he replied, “Oh, to be really young and idealistic.” He chuckled a little.

“You say that like it’s a curse.”

Nagkibit-balikat si Aldrich. “At my age, I realized na ang mga naniniwala lang sa kasabihan na ‘yan ay ang mga katulad mo. So young and full of life. You still see life through rose-colored glasses.”

“Everything is a matter of perspective,” pakli ni Lee. “Kung gusto mo magpaka-jaded, Mr. Braganza, then so be it. But don’t you dare laugh at my choices!

Love Me When You Can - Hannah Wabe

At least, I believe in love. Hindi katulad mo—bato ang puso.” Tumayo siya. “Goodbye and thank you for saving me from myself,” mabilis niyang sabi saka iniwan na ito.

4

Hindi makapaniwala si Aldrich na sinabihan siya niyon ng isang batang babae. Okay, she wasn't really a kid. She was just younger than him. But *still*, he had allowed her to talk to him like that.

Ni ang mga sarili niyang empleyado ay hindi siya makausap ng ganoon nang hindi nangangatog ang mga tuhod. From the grapevine, alam niyang binansagan nila siyang 'Stone King', but he saw that as a compliment.

He needed to be tough and firm to be able to build and handle a business empire such as his. He couldn't afford a soft heart when he came and stepped over a failing company. Kung mayroon siyang malambot na puso, hindi niya siguro mapapalago ang kanyang negosyo.

So in a way, the woman was right. Bato nga siguro ang puso niya.

Ouch! sabi ng kung anong boses sa subconscious ni Aldrich.

To be referred in that way in business wasn't so bad. But when it comes to his personal life, parang

masakit ang tama. But to his defense, hindi siya naniniwala sa pagmamahal dahil hindi maganda ang role model niya. His parents were never there for him and were unable to show him what that four-letter word meant.

He watched the young woman's retreating back. It was then he realized, ni hindi niya alam ang pangalan nito. Ininsulto siya ng isang taong hindi niya kilala.

Subalit malayo na ang babae, mabilis pa ang paglalakad nito. At siya, para siyang estatwa na hindi makatayo mula sa kinauupuan dahil sa sobrang pagkagulat. No one had ever been that direct to him before.

Nang malapit na ang estranghera sa hilera ng mga taxis ay saka lamang siya tumayo. Hinabol niya ito. "Wait, wait..."

Hindi ito huminto at napilitan siyang bilisan ang paglalakad upang maabutan ito. There went his usual detachment. Had he not told himself that he would never ever run after a woman?

But there he was swallowing and choking on his own words as he chased after Miss Prim and Proper.

Pero ibang kaso ito, aniya sa sarili.

Earlier, tinanong siya nito kung bakit napansin niya ito pero hindi ng ibang mga bisita sa simbahan. Sa totoo lang, hindi rin niya mawari kung bakit. Kanina, nang makita niya sa gilid ng mata ang dalaga na pumasok sa pinto, he was just unexplicably drawn to her.

Mas takaw-pansin pa sa mga mata ni Aldrich ang pigura nito kaysa sa bride na naglalakad noon sa gitna ng aisle. He told himself then that it was pained expression on the young woman's face as she looked at the altar that got to him. She looked like a kid whose puppy just died on her. At bumulwak ang awa sa bato niyang puso para rito.

Idagdag na sa listahan ang maganda nitong mukha na hugis-puso. She had an ethereal kind of beauty with her long wavy hair. It was something about the way her eyes looked and the way her mouth pursed that he found alluring.

She was different, all right. Kanina lang, kahit masamang-masama na ang loob nito, hindi ito nagwala o nag-eskandalo. She just allowed him to grab her and bring her outside church. Someone else would have probably thrown a fit right then and there.

And when they were outside, she was still too

polite despite her misery. Miss Prim and Proper. At kahit na nasawi at nabigo na ng supposedly first love nito, pinaninindigan pa rin ng babae ang paniniwala sa konsepto ng pag-ibig at kasal.

He shook his head. Some people, he would just never understand...

“Wait up!” muli niyang sabi.

To his relief, she stopped. For someone who was about five feet three inches tall, kay bilis nitong maglakad. She reminded him of a little ball of energy. Small but terrible. She was feisty, all right.

Anyone who would have actually thought of stopping someone's wedding had to be feisty, naisip ni Aldrich. He just came along and foiled her plans. It was a good thing she was persuaded easily. Perhaps, she didn't love the groom as much as she thought, piping gagad niya sa utak.

Aldrich had a feeling that if she was truly, deeply and unequivocally in love with Robert, hindi ito magpapapigil sa kanya. She struck him as that type. He saw it in her eyes in the way she staunchly defended the concept of love and marriage.

“What?” nakaarko ang kilay na sabi nito nang makalapit siya.

“I wanted to know,” simula niya, “pupunta ka ba sa reception, Miss...?”

“Leonore Herrera,” she supplied at last. “But you can call me ‘Lee’. And no, hindi ako pupunta ng reception. I have no desire to torture myself any further. Hindi ako masokista.”

Tumango-tango si Aldrich. He liked her name. He thought it really suited her, kahit na hindi ito mukhang Chinese. It’s just that the name Lee made him think of something dainty and feminine, which was how she looked on the outside.

As for her insides, that was another matter all together. He knew she was feisty already. And that she was tough. Mukhang napakadali nitong makaka-bounce back sa naunsyami nitong first love. And he realized, he wanted to get to know her more. Naiintriga siya rito.

It was then that he thought of something. “I didn’t peg you as a coward,” he challenged her. “I guess I was wrong.”

“What?” nahulog ang panga na balik ni Lee. Nanliit ang mga mata nito, na para bang sinusuri siya. “Bakit mo naman nasabi ‘yan? Hindi mo ako kilala.”

“I just thought you were someone strong,” simula

ni Aldrich, “dahil sa gagawin mo kanina. I just didn’t think you were the type to sit-out on the reception of a friend. And you did say a while back that you were invited.”

Akmang magbubukas ito ng bibig, pero hindi niya ito binigyan tsansang makapagsalita.

“And by going to the reception, it would give you some sort of closure. Don’t you think?”

Nakita ni Aldrich sa mga mata ng dalaga ang puntong naintindihan nito ang sinasabi niyang closure. She jutted out her chin. “Of course, I’m not scared to go to the reception.” She paused and then added, “Uuwi lang ako ng bahay at magbibihis. I’m not dressed for a fancy wedding reception at *Shangri-La Mactan*, don’t you think?”

He was inordinately pleased. “Good! Ihahatid na kita.”

“I don’t let strangers bring me to my house.”

“Lee, alam ko na ang pangalan mo,” balik niya. “I even kissed you. Now, don’t you think I’ve passed the stranger stage?”

Namula ang pisngi ng babae sa kapangahasan niya. Nakita niyang ipinadyak nito ang mga paa, na

tila ba nagtitimpi. He was right. She was too polite even when she was already mad.

“I wouldn’t consider that a kiss,” asik nito. “For someone so old, I’m surprised that’s all you’re capable of, sir.”

Natawa si Aldrich sa sarkasmo sa boses nito. “You’re really quite something,” sinserong komento niya. “Someday, I hope mahanap mo ang lalaking para sa ‘yo. And clearly, that isn’t Robert.”

“Clearly!” mapait nitong sabi.

Kasalukuyan naiwang mag-isa si Lee sa mesa. Nagpaalam si Aldrich na may pupuntahan lang sandali. At dahil naiwan siya kasama ang mga old fuddy-duddies na hindi niya kilala, nagkaroon siya ng pagkakataon na balikan sa isip ang mga nangyari nang hapong iyon.

Hanggang ngayon, hindi niya alam kung ano ang dumapo sa kanya at nagpabuyo siya sa binata na sumama sa reception. Honestly, seeing Rob and his bride beaming at each other was the very last thing on her to-do list.

But when Aldrich was talking to her, he had

unknowingly pressed the right button. *Or was it knowingly?* naisip niya. Sinabi nito mismo na madali siyang mabasa. And that his instincts were honed because of his work.

When he had mentioned the words ‘courage’ and ‘reception’, she knew she was a lost cause. After her stint in Florence, she had now prided herself as the ‘new Lee’. Her old self was very dependent, indecisive, sheltered, and cowardly. But the new one, that one that she is now, was the exact opposite. Kaya nang sabihin nito iyon, hindi siya makatanggi.

What he said had made a lot of sense. She also wanted closure from that thing she had with Robert. Not that she could call it a ‘thing’ because it was only her that felt it and it was purely one-sided.

Naisip din niya, mas mabuting makita na niya ngayon ang kaibigan. After all, magkikita at magkikita sila nito dahil magkapitbahay sila. There was no use prolonging the inevitable.

As she stared at the happy couple, who were currently table-hopping to take pictures with their guests, naramdaman niya ang pangangasim ng sikmura. She so needed the moral support of her supposed date.

“Nas’an na ba ang lalaking ‘yon?” ngitngit niyang bulong. Where was her moral support when she needed him? “Na-flush na siguro sa banyo,” galit niyang sabi.

“Ano ‘ika mo, hija?” tanong ng matandang babae sa tabi niya.

“Ah... eh...” she stammered. “Ang sabi ko po ang ganda ni Patricia.” And that was not a lie. Ever since, maganda ang taste ni Rob. *Which is probably why hindi niya ako nagustuhan*, naisip niya.

There you go again, kontra ng boses doon. *Self-pity mode ka na naman*.

Wala na siyang panahon pa para mag-isip ng mga bagay-bagay dahil napansin niyang papalapit ang bagong mag-asawa sa kanilang mesa. Nagsitayuan ang mga tao roon para batiin ang dalawa. Ganoon din ang ginawa niya. Thankfully, she was the last one approached by the newlyweds

“Hi, Robert,” mahinang bati niya.

Nanlaki ang mga mata ng kaibigan. Ngayon lang siya nito nakita dahil nagtago siya sa likuran ng isang bilugang mama. He immediately engulfed her in a bear hug. “You’re back. When did you arrive, munchkin?”

Lee could feel the curious eyes of the other guests on her. If it was her imagination or what, hindi niya alam. Basta ang alam lang niya, it stung a little to have Rob close. The general feeling she had was that she was happy for her best friend who found the love of his life. “Ngayon lang, actually.”

The hug ended and Rob introduced her to Patricia, who had a lovely personality, just like how she looked. Nakadama siya ng inggit. Some women really have all the luck. “It’s nice meeting you,” taos-pusong sabi niya.

“Same here,” sagot ng bride. “I’ve heard many things about you.”

“Good, I hope?”

“Very,” sagot ni Rob. “Dapat sinabi mo na uuwi ka. I would have included you in the entourage as the best man, err... woman.”

Ipinaliwanag niya ang biglaang pag-uwi. “So I had a nonstop flight and flew in from Manila shortly after lunch,” pagtatapos niya.

“You must be tired,” sabi ni Patricia.

Nagkibit-balikat lang siya. “I wanted to see with my two eyes that he finally got hitched.”

The newlyweds laughed. Nakitawa na rin siya. When the laughter subsided, nagsalita si Rob. “Nasa Hong Kong sina Tito Greg. And since ours was a whirlwind everything, he couldn’t change the schedule of his meetings.”

“Alam ko. Nabanggit ni Yaya Tasing kanina.”

“You’re here alone, I suppose. You should have taken Shelly with you.”

It was then that Aldrich decided to reappear with two margarita drinks on his hands. Inilapag nito iyon sa mesa at sinabing, “No. We came together, actually.”

“Aldrich Braganza!” gulat na hayag ni Patricia. Nanlaki ang mga mata nito. “You came with her?”

Lee wondered kung bakit gulat na gulat ang bride. At mas lalo pa siyang nagtaka nang marinig ang sinabi ni Robert.

“Drich, my man, you really came with her?”

Tumangu-tango ang binata. There was a smile on his face na para bang natatawa ito sa sitwasyon.

Iyon ang sandali na pinili niyang sumabad. Bakit ba ganoon na lang ang reaksyon ng mga ito? Was she not worthy to be with someone like Aldrich?

“We’ll I’m not really with him *him*,” simula niya. “We just came to the wedding together. Actually, nagkakilala kami sa simbahan.”

Rob looked relieved. “Akala ko...” And then he put his two forefingers together.

“No!” mabilis niyang tanggi. “Hindi kami. Didn’t I say I just got back? Hello?” From the corner of her eye, nakita niyang nagdilim ang mga mata ni Aldrich. It was then that she added, “Besides, I’m not his type. He said so himself.”

To his surprise, natawa si Patricia. “That’s Aldrich, all right,” anito, habang tinatapik ang balikat ng binata. “He doesn’t mince words. Prangkang-prangka at walang preno ang dila.”

Lee wondered kung sino ang mahiwagang lalaki sa buhay ni Patricia. She was pretty sure he was not Robert’s friend. Karamihan ng mga kaibigan ni Rob, kilala rin niya. Besides, malaki ang tanda ni Aldrich sa kababata. They didn’t run around in the same circle. So she was certain ‘Mamang Bato Ang Puso’ was a guest on the bride’s side.

But it was also obvious to her that Rob and her instant date had met in the past. Ang ipinagtataka lang niya, kung bakit biglang nag-alala si Rob para

sa kanya.

Tinawag ang atensyon nila ng photographer and they all had to smile for the camera kaya naputol ang ganoong linya ng usapan. Kapagkuwan ay kinailangang lumipat ng table ang newlyweds. When they left, inusig niya ang binata.

“Bakit ba ganoon na lang ang reaction nila dahil magkasama tayo?”

He didn't reply. Instead, he drank some of his margarita and offered her a glass. She followed his lead.

“Huy, mamang bato! Sagutin mo naman ang tanong ko. Bakit ganoon na lang ang reaksyon nila? Ano ka ba sa buhay ni Patricia?”

Hinarap siya nito at ngumiti with that killer sexy smile of his. And he said matter-of-factly, “I was her ex-fiancé.”

Nahulog ang panga ni Leonore. Patricia, with her good looks, was perfect for him. In fact, they would make a stunning couple.

Napakunot ang noo niya. “Bakit hindi kayo nagkatuluyan?” She took another sip of her drink.

“Prangka ka rin pala,” komento ng binata.

“Not usually,” pagtatapat niya. “But after our explosive first meeting, I couldn’t possibly say or do anything that would embarrass me further in front of you.” Nang hindi ito umimik, idinagdag niya, “Dali na!” She didn’t care if it was a touchy topic. She was really curious what the answer was. Besides, dahil sa nangyari kanina, pakiwari niya they had already gone past the usual decorum between newly introduced individuals. “Bakit hindi kayo nagkatuluyan?”

“Makulit ka rin, ha.”

Tantya niyang magiliw ang tono nito so she proceeded to heckle him. “Bakit ba talaga? Bakit hindi kayo nagkatuluyan? What’s wrong with you?”

He laughed. “Why would you assume it was my fault?”

Nagkibit si Lee ng balikat. “Gut feel ko lang,” matapat niyang tugon. She knew instinctively he wouldn’t be offended with the way he laughed so eagerly. “Tama ba ako?”

Bumuntong-hininga ito at nilagok ang natitirang margarita bago sumagot, “Somehow, you and I, we’re the same. There’s no mincing words with you, too. Wala ring preno ang dila mo.”

Alam ni Lee na kanina pa niya ito tinatanong ng

mga personal questions. Considering they had just met, she knew it was invasive. But again, she didn't care. "I'm waiting for an answer," she said as she tapped her fingers on the table.

"Because I told you, I don't believe in marriage," sabi ni Aldrich. "Marriage is a death trap. And so is having children."

"Sobra ka naman."

"It's true," giit nito. "Kaya nga mataas ang divorce rate at kaso ng mga hiwalayan ngayon. Some things just don't last. And then children suffer. Kaya mabuti nang huwag na mag-anak."

"Why aren't you a ray of sunshine," sarcastic niyang sabi.

"Well, you asked."

"Point taken," kaagad niyang saad. She immediately felt guilty. Bakit nga ba niya huhusgahan ang choices nito? She didn't even know anything about him. And why did she suddenly feel disappointed he felt that way about children too?

Nanghihinayang ka lang sa genes niya, sabi ng boses sa isip niya.

"Go on with the story," aniya. "No more

comments, I promise.”

“Patty and I were in a relationship for three years,” patuloy ni Aldrich. “One year of that, engaged kami. Toward the end, she had been bugging me why I did not set a date after the proposal. Finally, she got tired of waiting and dumped me. That was five years ago.”

Buti nga sa ‘yo, kaagad niyang naisip. But she didn’t say it out loud. She had a feeling he would not appreciate it. Kasi naman, magpo-propose, hindi naman pala seryoso.

“Obviously, it was an amicable separation dahil narito ka, Aldrich,” pahayag niya.

“Natumbok mo, kid!”

Natawa si Lee. Next to him, she did feel like a kid. After all, his towering height dwarfed her. She took his evasive answer as a sign not to ask anymore questions. “Sige na, lolo. Hindi na po mangungulit.”

“Very good.”

“Sumayaw na lang tayo,” aniya. Normally, she would not be brazen enough to ask a guy to dance. But there was something about him that made her feel so at home kahit na ba kanina lang niya ito

nakilala. Dagdag na rin doon, naubos na niya ang baso ng margarita na dala nito. And for someone who doesn't drink, she could feel some of its effects.

“I have two left feet,” tanggi nito.

“And I have two right,” turan niya. “So we match perfectly.” She really wanted to let loose and have fun. It's not everyday that a girl gets a rude awakening. Ang akala niyang mahal niya ay hindi pala para sa kanya. What a silly girl she was!

“Sige na, lolo. Sayang naman ang banda na ini-hire nila. Let's rock and roll,” giit ni Lee. And so with a few more words of encouragement, she succeeded in bringing him to the dance floor.

“Ako ang lalaki, ako dapat ang nagli-lead,” anito, as they tried but failed to do a decent version of the waltz.

Napangisi si Leonore. She had already stepped on his foot countless times. “Don't be a male chauvinist pig, okay,” she said sweetly. “Hindi bagay sa ‘yo.’”

Tumawa ito.

Somehow, that laugh touched her very core. She laughed too. He was fun to be with. At biling-bili nito ang mga sinasabi niya, kahit hindi naman siya

nagpapatawa. She could never be branded as a good deliverer of jokes, but in his company she felt like she really had an awesome sense of humor.

As they danced the night away, she caught a glimpse of Robert and Patricia. Oddly enough, the sight of them being lovey-dovey didn't even sting. Perhaps, she wasn't really in love with her best friend. Could she have mistaken platonic affection for romantic love?

“A penny for your thoughts,” bulong ni Aldrich sa kanya. This time they were so close to each other because the band changed the groovy tune into something more sweet and mellow.

Itinaas ni Lee ang ulo upang tingnan ang mukha nito at nagtama ang mga mata nila. There was something so sensual in his eyes. And for the first time since she met him, she felt a different kind of awareness for him as a man. He, with his rock solid body cradling her closely, was all man.