

(1) “Fake Love” by Liane Clapis

They shouldn't put themselves in this mess. No one never thought of the idea they end up dragging themselves in this pretty dilemma, Tala was never someone who chickened out because of one silly risk she faced. It began around 9 AM, students flocked to their respective classes and Tala brought her makeup kit with her she needed to fix her face after the crazy set back at the gym tired her. She wasn't interested in sports; she got the body already.

Miss girl really worked out because her mom wanted the family to be healthy and fit, she didn't want to disappoint her. From breakfast, lunch, and dinner – it was only salad and lean meat with healthy and protein drinks to consumed then she was off to workout, it was a daily routine she did before going to school. Tala didn't consider anyone as her friends, sure there were people trying to approach her and she returned it with a judgmental look.

Obsessed with looks and occupied with friends satisfied her standards, only one could stand with her attitude and it was Cassiopeia. From another school, she was a student of Lyceum of the Philippines – Davao and Tala came from a different school, Ateneo de Davao University so how come they managed to become friends with mismatched routines and class schedules?

Take a good guess they were friends since grade seven, Tala transferred to another school a long time ago. As they aged, they clicked and somehow created friendship. A strong one even they both separated to their dream schools. She had the opportunity to meet Cassiopeia, their personalities balanced out each other. Sometimes, people could call Cassiopeia a saint because she was able to stabilize the bratty outlook of the other already.

“Alis.” Tala demanded, glowering at a random student profusely apologized and rubbed her side. She was no merciful when harming people, she liked to see inflicting pain on others.

She's that type of a person.

“Nandyan naman si Ms. Macapagal. Sungit naman,”

“Oo nga. Serioso masiyado sa klasi, nagtataka ako kung bakit wala sa kanila mapahiya siya..”

“Pustahan tayo na walang magkagusto sa kanya.”

She slammed her makeup kit to the counter, smiling sardonically at the frightened group of women. ‘‘Kung ako papahiya sa inyo, ha? Anong gagawin ninyo sa akin? Don’t tell me you’re afraid of me.’’ She took a step forward and raised her hand, ready to hurt them.

Tala goes through the motions, hearing them screamed in panicked. They realized she never intended to hurt them, her eyes bored and high while they bore into their souls. The fear struggled inside the women’s veins immediately caused them to leave the girl’s washroom.

Hands washed her face lightly, she patted her skin with the clean towel. She pulled out the wooden comb from her makeup kit and untangled the knots in her hair, her free hand pressed to the surface of the counter. ‘‘Ganda mo, Tala. Walang nakatalo ng kagandahan mo. Isa kang lawyer in the making, you’ll make your parents and siblings proud of you.’’ She chuckled in pride.

She took AB Political Science, she never liked numbers but still BS Accountancy was supposedly her first choice. Tala never ruined her beauty with sleeping so late, always had those perfect attendance and attained high GPA to please the entire family.

‘‘You don’t need a man. Waste of time yung pag-ibig, once you finished university. You’ll get a job as a lawyer and everyone will choose you as their lawyer, getting the money too.’’ Tala smirked proudly to herself.

So full of herself, everyone would agree with it if they heard the question.

Tala scoffed and finished her makeup, light and presentable enough in the class. She hummed in satisfaction before she left for her second period, her chin still up high and chest out. Nobody bothered to look at her way when she walked, she was way too prideful in herself now.

Though there were men ogled at her body, it disgusted her to think that they loved women for their bodies and tended to do the *smash or pass* game if they picked them as options only.

Maybe it was the reason why she wanted to become a lawyer soon.

She needed to give justice to women who had been silenced by powerful opposite sex, her last name was well known by the entire university. Even other departments knew her so much, she was never afraid of rumours because she knew her parents would ask and demanded who.

Tala didn't have problems when things get handled nicely in her way.

Her day went sour as a hard stone chest hit her face, her face scrunched up in anger. Her eyebrows furrowed madly, her lips downturned in furious, and her eyes followed the face of an artful look by a student who happened to be a male.

“Say sorry.” She started the conversation, her heel tapping against the floor.

“Ako pa talaga pinagsasabihan?” The other questioned with a displeased look. “Dapat ikaw nga. Kasalanan mo yan, sobrang tanga tanga mo. Are you that blind?”

Now the insult had gone too far for her.

“Ha?! What did you say?”

“Ano? Na sobrang tanga tanga mo? Totoo naman? Bakit? Natamaan ka? Baka totoo pala yan kaya you got triggered by it.” He shrugged, the words smirked in his tone. Her jaw slacked from his repetition, “T*ng*n* mo, sino ka ba?!” her fists shook.

Couldn't accept the cutthroat return.

“Ian Alcaraz, 3rd year under Engineering department. Future civil engineer.” He eyed her up and down, she misinterpreted it. “Ano? Nagkagusto ka sa akin? Hah! Di talaga kita type, sorry!” Tala laughed and clutched her stomach, but his comment startled her in shocked.

“Hindi. Di kita type eh, mapride ka kasi. Tsaka madaling magagalit.” Ian in his glory black and messy hair, skin fair, and he was taller than her.

Except his eyes stormed with hatred.

This probably happened to her, she flipped her hair and eyed him up and down as repay. He was decent, no, scratch that, he was an attractive man. He wasn't her type at all.

Didn't suited her standards too.

"Now we're even, Ian." Ian stared down at her and sneered. "Saying my name gives me shiver timbers already. Keep that out of your mouth, crazy girl."

"Excuse me?"

"You are excused," he tilted his head, looking at her still.

Tala felt intimidated by Ian for the first time, and she stood on her ground, she was shaking in anger already. She was close to pounce and attack him on the ground if it wasn't for the bell ringing.

"My name is Tala Macapagal. Under Social Studies department, a year older than you. You better respect me or else," she threatened, using the older card on him.

Keyword: *Tried*.

She *tried* it on him.

The bell alerted everyone who watched the interaction and headed to their classes, "Ayaw ko magrerespeto ng isang fourth year who does nothing but disrespects someone lower like me. Alis na ako."

Ian walked past by her with a soft snort, Tala frowned as she shouldn't let her thoughts get bothered by a 3rd year, it wouldn't ruin her academic performance, right?

She noticed some students busied themselves. Their eyes were looking at her in judgement, they might be possibly thinking Ian and her knew each other but pretended they didn't. Tala yelled at the top of her lungs, "ANONG PINAGTITIGAN NINYO DYAN? PUNTA NGA KAYO SA KLASI NINYO! MGA-!"

"Ms. Macapagal, go back to your class. What class are you supposed to be in?" A professor scolded, folding her arms over her chest. "Ma'am, may mga estudyante kasi!" Tala excused. "Asan? Ikaw lang estudyante dito. Punta ka nga, Ms. Macapagal."

"Yes po, ma'am." Tala muttered respectfully.

Attending International and Regional Organization class was one of her favourites, she was thankful and glad her subjects lessen. Throughout the years of AB Political Science gave a reason her to just lie down in bed and do nothing at all.

Her leg relaxed on another, and her chin pressed to the palm while she sat ladylike on a wooden and hard chair. It was an etiquette for the women in the family to be proper and fair, they weren't allowed to act sluggish in front of everyone's eyes.

In short, her family was a people's pleaser. On the other hand, she wasn't. She careless of what people's opinions about her and her idea matters only when it comes to intelligence and beauty alone.

"As we discovered regional organization took close to the problem for a prevention." Her professor discussed, an open book divided between his hand. His glasses glared slightly from the light, his eyes checked each student who was attentively paying attention.

Professor Alemania was a strict educator, she had no doubt no one could satisfy him, not even her. It frustrated her that he knew how to play his tactics and destroyed her grade with one snap of his fingers, her grade in his class was passing at least but it increased her hatred for her.

Her hand fiddled a little of her white skirt. From head to above the knees, she wore a white uniform to addressed purity of the university with a blue ribbon. Simple and elegant, she would mind if her uniform got ruined Tala told to herself that no one could dirty her clothes.

It was a rule she wanted everyone to know.

“So what are the scopes?” Professor Alemania asked the deafening silence in the room, he looked around and jutted his chin at Tala’s way. “Ms. Macapagal, kindly answer.”

They were on this one.

The extreme quietness discomfited everyone as she stood up with a bored look. “The mentioned scopes in the textbook were used to matter the subject itself. In International and Regional Organization, these were stated in three sections. Number one is its origin is based on multilateral international agreement. Now what does it means? It denoted the idea of participation by the treaties in between the large numbers, commonly by the world’s states.”

She ignored the impressed scoff. Her pride spiked up from that as she continued. “Second is the institution has a personality of its own, which is distinct from that of its individual members. Already a self-explanatory that they have their owns and rights to do their responsibilities as peers in the corporation. And lastly, it has permanent organs which carry out common aims.. this is devoted for the UNO or United Nations, this listed down by the Security Council, the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council, the Trusteeship Council and the Secretariat.”

Professor Alemania never always looked impressed, he cut her some slack on that. “You are correct, Ms. Macapagal.” He proceeded to discuss further, everyone could finally breathe correct air now because once again, Tala saved their sorry asses.

“Read page 245-249 and we will be having a quiz tomorrow. I want all of you to have an advance reading on it,” he fixed the textbooks in his hand, tapping the edges to the table and aligning it the moment class interrupted by the bell.

Again? Nakakatamad na pero teka, I still need to become a lawyer. Tala's thoughts ran as her two friends sided quickly, "Uy. Malapit na maglunch! Anong kunin mo na pagkain? Gutom na talaga ako." Faye quipped, she yawned softly while her hand covered her mouth.

"Oo nga. Naglipas na ang oras at di natin namalayan na malapit na pala lunch." Sophia laughed and embraced the arm of Tala. She was soft for the two friends, she was glad that they stayed despite her personality was too mean and prideful for anyone who would ever try to stay by her side.

"I'll go for tinola, nag-crecrave kasi ako dyan." Tala's voice opinionated, they walked side by side while the students who were moving to the cafeteria. It was spacious and there were hundreds of students who needed their lunch right now, "Tinola? Bulalo akin eh, yan yun ang pinakamasarap!" Cheered Faye who dragged the two girls to the room.

"Lakas ng tama ni Tala eh. Di siya takot kay professor kanina," Tala met the two girls because when they were freshmen, she was already self-conscious if she was able to meet anyone who could help her survive university. She did and they were there for her even at the lowest.

Now it formed her to become a bold and cocky woman, deep inside, the two friends knew Tala was still the same. It just covered by the image of the latter, "Anong kinakatakotan ko kay Professor Alemanian? Prof lang natin siya eh, feeling superior yun." Tala scoffed and carried the tray while following them behind.

Her expression soured once more when she looked over her shoulder and sported the guy behind her who was also carrying a tray for his food, "Ikaw ulit." Tala scowled and seized him up. "Bakit nandito ka?"

"Oh? Bakit nandito ako? Syempre, kukuha ng pagkain. Malamang." Ian rolled his eyes and scooped some rice on the plate. "Wow. Just wow, napakabastos mo, no? Di ka ba tinuturuan ng magulang mo paano igalang ang mas nakatanda sayo?"

"Kailangan ko ba malaman yan? Alam ko, no need to repeat it. I'm only saying this because you were so prideful earlier ago." The other sipped the straw inside the fortified milk carton.

“Napakabastos mo.” Tala repeated with an irked look and slid the tray smoothly on the line, getting a bowl of tinola. She ignored the sarcastic look on his face, “Thanks for letting me know that I am disrespectful.” Ian pointed out with a sass while rolling his eyes and placing beef kare-kare on his plate before pouring the sauce on top of the rice and adding two pieces of fried chicken next to it.

“Don’t tell me you’re following me here and pick a fight with me?”

Tala Macapagal, people.

She liked to accuse and threaten people, but this guy won’t back out anyway from the fight.

“Sige nga. Saan ang ebidensya na sinusundan kita dito? I’m not here for you, I’m here for my food. Ingay mo talaga.” He pulled the tray a bit up to the air and walked away from the fuming girl.

“Huy.. kilala mo si Ian Alcaraz? Girl, nag-uusap na pala kayo? Matalino masiyado yun from what I’ve heard and he’s the campus crush din. Pero di siya basketball player eh, isa siyang swimmer ng team.” Faye whispered, nudging her. “Ikaw ha, you’re choosing someone who is younger than you. Yan pala type mo?” She teased the embarrassed girl.

“Ano? Siya pala yun?” Tala’s face paled when she realized she was talking to one of the campus crushes especially him, “Di ko siya type. Ang layo ng standards ko, mas mataas pa kaysa kanya eh. Sino siya para magiging crush ko?”

“Wala naman akong sinabing na crush mo siya eh? Bakit? Crush mo ba talaga yun?” Sophia stared at the girl with an amusement, “Gagi kayo, hindi. Stop jumping into conclusions. Di yan totoo.”

“Mare, wag ka ganyan naman. Baka what if siya pala yung true love mo? Lagi ka nalang naging sad girl sa first and second year natin noon pa, tapos ngayon? Self-love is the key ang sabi mo sa amin.” They placed the trays at the empty table where they are near the entrance of the door.

“Impossible yan. Wala na akong time dyan eh, gusto ko maging lawyer paglaki ko and I will provide justice to women. Women empowerment, you know what I mean.” Tala promised, mixing the rice with soup and chewing it slowly.

“Alam na naming, girl. Basta walang revenge revenge, ha?” Faye poked her side.

“Opo, yes po, alam ko po.” She passively answered as they all shared a laugh with each other.

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This was not happening to her. She didn’t agree with this, Tala shifted in her seat and slid her phone inside the pocket. She raised her hand to raise the attention of her professor in Political Economy. “Ma’am, may I go to the washroom?” luckily, the elder was nice enough to let her and she hurried down the hallways to find the said washroom.

A hand roughly pushed the doorknob and slammed the door closed, her eyes widened in realization and mouth opened to see the same male having his hands inside his pockets. It seemed he was waiting for something

“Why are you here? This is a girl’s washroom!” she pointed her finger at him, though her lower part of body shifted in discomfort. He raised an eyebrow at her and pulled away from the wall to cross his arms. “At bakit lagi kita makita sa school? Kahit saan lang, nandoon ka. Anong klasing..” he muttered then deadpanned when he realized. “Napakatanga mo, di mo sana sirado ang pintuan.” He frowned.

“Anong ibig sabihin mo? Umalis ka! This is a girl’s washroom.”

“Edi umalis nga ako pero di ako magduda na sobrang tanga mo talaga, no?” he shrugged and fiddled the strips of his hoodie. “Hah?”

“Take a look around. Wag ka muna maging tanga.”

She did as she was told to, her eyes panicked when there were display of men’s toilet designs and at least there were cubicles. Tala was going to piss herself if she didn’t hurry now, “Hindi ako tanga. Ikaw ang tanga.” She clicked her tongue.

“Oo? At sino tanga nga? Diba ikaw? Kung kahit saan lang na washroom puntahan mo. I didn’t realize you were a pervert.” He guffawed, abruptly she ignored him and headed to one of the cubicles.

“Wag ka titingin! If you do, I will kill you.” She threatened, “Di ako ganyan, Macapa

gal. I never invade a woman’s privacy. Dalian mo, baka may dalang cellphone ka.”

Klasing lalaki to! Her mind screamed in anger.

The sound of her pee echoed in the washroom, it sent waves of embarrassment that he could listen to doing her business. “Bakit ang tahimik mo? Hah?”

“Anong gusto mo gawin ko? Magrarap?” he sarcastically suggested while he waited outside the cubicle, his phone was left at the classroom. He forgot to keep it with him, he needed to reach out his friend soon. He probably got the hang of it since he’s been taking so long now.

“Edi mag-usap, obviously.”

“Anong pag-usapan natin, hm?”

“Kahit ano.”

“Kahit ano.”

She didn't look impressed with his sudden sarcastic side, she pulled her white skirt and undergarment up after flushing the toilet and washing her hands. “Heh. Hindi literal ibig sabihin ko, are you that so serious?” she snapped.

“Depends kung sino kausap ko. Pwede kitang bigyan ng samang loob, gusto mo ba?” he smiled slyly, his hand moved to gesture he could give one to her now she was done with her business.

Ian observed her steadily fuming look, he hid his amused smirk and knew how to tease the girl with his antics. “Ew, stay away from me.” She hissed. Like a feral cat? He thought as he stood still and waited. “So? May cellphone ka ba?” he ignored her look, he was painfully obvious for someone to open the door and let them out.

“Bakit? Are you going to destroy it?”

“G*go, hindi ako palasira ng gadgets. Keep that in mind, idiot.” He rolled his eyes. “And sira ang doorknob kaya di tayo makalabas.”

“Hah?! Ikaw nakasira, no?”

“Seriously? Are you living a life to accuse people? Grabe.” He threw his hands in annoyance, “Eh? Ikaw? You are living a life para nangbwebwesit ng mga tao?” Tala cracked her fingers behind her back. “Sabi ko nga depende eh.”

He jutted his chin at the door, “Gawin mo. Buksan mo ang pintuan, let's see who would complain next.” Tala hesitated since she didn't like him from the start, he was prideful too, probably her male version of her and Faye and Sophia probably get worried that for a couple of minutes she wasn't present in the class at all.

She jiggled the doorknob and tried to pull it. It didn't budge, she was getting tired and worked up over the door who wouldn't move, her patience running thin when she had to try everything even use the hairpin. "Bakit ayaw niya?!" she screamed, rattling the doorknob instead.

"Kasi sira nga. Paulit-ulit ko na sinabihan kita, tanga." He exclaimed, annoyed. "Edi ikaw masunod dito. Let us out."

"Paano kung ginawa ko na din pero ayaw gumana, ha?" Ian tilted his head with irked look, he removed his hoodie and patted his polo uniform. "What are you doing?!" Tala covered her eyes.

"Ano? I just removed my hoodie, ang init kasi. Anong pinagiisipan mo, hm? Dumit mo naman." He snorted, already knowing her thoughts despite she didn't tell him.

Her eyes blinked, she cleared her throat in embarrassment and grumbled under her breath with incoherent words. "Hm? Kala mo? Sabi ko nga sayo di kita type, assumingera ka." Ian scowled at her assumption.

Someone at the door plunged it opened and saw the two's position. They stared at the duo in shocked, Ian's hands occupied with his folded hoodie. His polo dismantled slightly, his forehead was sweaty from the heat in the room, and his hair messy. Neck covered with moist of the sweat while on the other hand, Tala suffered with sweat as well, she kept messing her hair most of the time because she was trying to fix it and the blue ribbon wasn't in place of her top.

"Are you guys.. secretly dating? Woah.. I got to tell.."

Because her panicking state, she randomly blurted out even shocked Ian in the process. "Oo, magjowa kami!" she slapped both of hands to shut her mouth. Girl, she never knew how dumb she could be.

Ian sighed, massaging his forehead as he first left the boy's washroom and dragged her by the arm. "Alright. Let's talk." He gave his friend a look over the shoulder. "Markell, not a word to others. Give me a second to talk with Ms. Lawyer over here."

Tala felt embarrassed. Now her what ifs might become true considering she spilled it without realizing what she was saying to his friend, Markell, who tried to process everything in his head.

“Napakatanga mo talaga. Di ako nagduda. Gawin natin anong dapat nating gawin.”

“At anong gawin natin?”

He crossed his arms and turned his head to look at her with a scoff, “Di mo ba ako naintindihan? We’re going to fake a date. Kunwari jowa tayo until they get the issue right then that’s the time magbrebreak up tayo.”

“What the?! With you?! No way, ayaw ko makipagdate sayo.”

“Sabi ko ng nga fake dating. Pakinggan mo mabuti boses ko.”

“What if ayoko?”

“Stubborn. Prideful. Stupid.” He exasperated sighed, running his hand through his hair. “Look.” The third year was ready to explode any time soon, his breathing soothed him as he managed to get his things all together. “We’re going to pretend we are going to date, and nobody will suspect a thing once they heard us ‘dating’ for a long time. Then we will break up because we get busy with focusing on our dreams.” He stared at her. “Deal?”

“Kung nalaman nila hindi totoo ang lahat edi libre moko ng pagkain for a month.”

“Ano?”

“You heard me, treat me food for a month. Oh, sino na ang bingi dito?”

“Would you shut up?”

“Ayoko.”

From outside, they looked like a couple arguing and one heard the snipping of the last words of their conversation. “Miss..? Jowa mo pala si kuya Ian?” their heads snapped to see the younger version of Ian. Alcaraz was a famous family, known for their brains and looks that compete with Macapagal.

“Hah?” Tala said, she whipped her head back and forth to check the identical faces of each sibling. “Magkapatid kayo?” she asked, forgetting the question already as Ian nodded his head and casually answered. “Oo, Vera. Magjowa kami ni Tala. You heard of her and her family, right?”

“How.. how did you two meet?”

Tala wanted to get run over under by a car now.

“I’ll tell you everything when kuya gets back home, okay?” he smiled softly and approached his younger sister who beamed in happiness. “Sige po, kuya! She seemed so nice to you.”

He glanced at Tala. “Eh? Di mo lang alam anong pinaggagawa ng girlfriend ko, bunso.” He sent a smug smirk at the angry Tala who cursed him while he escorted his younger sister on the way back home since it was time for them to leave school.

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Nakakainis. She frowned, she clutched her textbooks tightly in her arms and avoided the whispering surrounding her, she met Vera a few times and were good terms on her. Vera was too

kind and pretty, she didn't use the scale of beauty because she knew Alcaraz had amazing beauty that Tala thought they are the favourites of the Creator.

“Tala!” her friends called her and rushed to her side, Faye shook her shoulders with her eyes blown out in surprised. “Sabi mo di mo type?! Bakit nalaman lang naming na kayo pala secretly? Ikaw talaga, you are trying to be sly.” Faye laughed and slapping her shoulder.

“Oo nga, nakainggit. Gusto mo pala si Ian? Tsaka bagay din naman kayo, yieeee.” Sophia teased, elbowing Tala's side with a cheeky grin. “Kayo pala, ha? How did you guys meet? Date? Who said I love you first?”

Her heart dropped when the love topic happened, she was uncomfortable with it already. She tried to think ‘how did they meet each other’ in the first place, the half screamed that she argued with him and that's how they meet, and the other mentioned she should pretend they meet at a cute store and their eyes met.

That's not how romance worked, she groaned and pushed them away gently. “Wala, basta. Mamaya ko na sabi kailan kami nagkilala and so on.” Though her heart was pacing madly because there was something stirring inside her.

“Hi, love.”

Someone wrapped their arm around her waist and pulled her to them, her head hit the strong chest as she slowly looked up to see a smiling Ian. Her eyebrows furrowed at his act, she sputtered. “L-love?! Hah!”

“Ano? Jowa kita eh, syempre.” He laughed and planted a soft, chaste kiss on her cheek. “Good morning, love.” Ian greeted and brushed her hair, his actions already driving her crazy inside. “Good morning.. uh.. good morning, h-honey?”

And this time, Ian was startled by her endearment. Luckily, their reactions could only be seen by each other, not the friends of both him and Tala's. “I'll take you to your class, love.” After clearing his throat and guided her while a hand placed on her waist.

“Sige, Tala.. kita lang tayo mamaya..” Faye blinked her eyes and waved her hand at the girl as they watched the couple going to Tala’s respective class. “Gagi, mare. Sila na talaga pero bakit ang awkward nila tignan?” she asked Sophia who sipped her coffee that she bought from Starbucks before going to school.

“Ewan ko eh. Baka first time nila naging sila kaya ayun, alam mo na basta magjowa di nasanay sa isa’t isa kung naging sila at first day pa nila ata? Di tayo sure kaya tanungin talaga natin si gaga.”

With the actions of a lovey dovey boyfriend, Tala was blushing intensely and ignored the soft gestures he had given to her. She embraced her textbooks tightly, her ears painting pink so badly and now she barely talked to him.

“Calm down, pft. Kunwari nga eh.” Ian whispered. “Ang daming nakatingin sa atin pero okay lang yan, the more sila maniniwala, the better yung idea na sinabi ko a few days ago.”

That’s right.

The rumour basically started three days ago after she and Ian got trapped in the boy’s washroom, it even spread the gossip that they both kissed in that place and skipped classes to see each other. It embarrassed her, she was afraid that it might reached to her parents’ ears.

She wasn’t sure how her parents were going to react if they heard about the stupid rumour one made up, Vera kept her mouth shut and never said a word. Tala rolled her eyes and refrained her ground. “Whatever you say, keep your hands off me. Walang nakatingin sa atin.”

“Nahihiya ka ba sa akin?” he smirked at her fallen reaction, “Hindi. Bakit ako mahihiya sayo? Maganda ako at may confidence eh,”

Now the warning bells jiggled inside her head.

“Talaga? What if gawin ko sayo to?”

“Anong gagawin mo?”

Her jaw almost dropped at his slick move, he pressed his toned body against her and hand pressed next to her head. “Gawin ko to sayo?” Ian repeated slowly, his eyes never leaving her own as he eventually leaned in. “H-hindi pwede.” Tala choked on her spit, shutting her eyes to avoid the contact.

“Nakakatuwa ka!” A laugh escaped his lips when he pulled away. “Joke lang yun, bruha.” She stared at him, ready to murder someone like him and kicked his shin. “SHUT UP! JUST SHUT UP!” the tips of her ears darkened, she stomped away to her first period of class while she ignored the crazy thoughts and fast paced heart.

It was just fake dating.

Just fake dating.

No malicious intent going to happen between them.

Her hand brushed her hair carelessly, Faye and Sophia stared at the girl who panicked. Obviously distracting herself from simping over a plain fake dating with a guy who she picked up petty arguments with him most the time, Faye raised an eyebrow and asked Sophia. “Sa tingin mo? Halatang magkagusto si Tala kay pretty boy?” she grinned.

“Di ako magduda dyan.. pakunwari lang yan si Tala pero alam ko may heart eyes yan para kay Ian Alcaraz. Sino di magkagusto sa kanya?” Sophia snickered quietly, avoiding the yelling in the morning from Tala.

No one knew she was going to fall for him within three months.

Seconds became hours, hours turned days, days shifted to weeks, and weeks switched months. Everyone already witnessed from both sides that the two were so painfully clear they are starting to fall in love with each other, but the pinning was there, so obvious to see that they were too prideful to show how much they love each other.

Tala tapped her pencil against the surface of the table and chewed the top, which was the eraser, her knee shook in anxiety. A few papers crumbled next to the trashbin because of her careless behaviour, she was studying for her finals, yet the image of a certain guy entered her mind.

“Tala. Tama na. Please, tama na. Fake dating lang to.” She groaned and covered her face with her hands. “Anong fake dating, anak?” Tala froze at the womanly voice of a family member, she turned to look at her mother who was smiling sweetly.

“Mama! Wala ah..” she shook her head and sighed.

“Sabihin mo sa akin, anak. Remember? We always share what’s on our minds. Wala yung papa mo dito, mamaya pa siya uuwi.” Her mother reassured, kissing her forehead, and sitting next to her. “Ano nangyari sa magandang anakshie ko? May nangyari ba?”

“Ano kasi, mama...” it was now or never, she continued. “I met this guy.. he’s prideful and competitive.. parang ako nga.. ganun. Then one day, we ended up stuck in the washroom.” Noticing the horror look on her mother’s face, “Hindi, ma! Ano kasi, I went to the wrong washroom tapos ako napasira din dahil di ko alam sira pala ang doorknob ng boy’s washroom. Then his friend helped up.. so uh.. he thought we kissed.. pero hindi, we were waiting for someone to open the door and when we left. He thought the idea we should fake date so everyone would believe in us.”

She sighed and relaxed her cheek against her, “But ma.. di ko kaya siya i-let go.. I know he may be so blunt and rude to me but.. he’s becoming more sweet and loving to me.. like a caring boyfriend.” Tala looked up at her mother who smiled even more at her.

"Anak.." The elder placed a soft hand on hers, “You’re in love.” Tala snapped her thoughts and asked, “A-ano? I’m in love?! No way, ma. Impossible yun.” She shook her head. “Alam mo. The way you say it to me, you sounded you’re in love and you even said you can’t let go of this young man. You’re in love, anak.”

Tala laughed painfully, “Pero mama, di ko alam kung siya na talaga. Takot ako. Takot ako ulit mag-mahal ulit ng isang lalaki, what if he’s not the right one for me?” The elder stroked her hand and planted a sweet kiss on her temple, rocking her daughter in her arms like a baby.

“You’ll know it, there’s always this feeling it’s the right person for you. So wag ka mag-aalala, when your heart finally speaks and his own heart speaks too? You won’t be afraid, it’s okay to feel pain, it’s okay to get rejected, and it’s okay to fall in love again.” She reassured.

“If you say so, mama..” Tala whispered, noticing the ping of Ian. Her body language screamed he’s here, oh my goodness. I wanna talk to him! The elder smiled in amusement, “Kilig kiligan, anak? I leave you alone, okay?”

And with that, her mother left her room. She picked up the call and toned down her excited voice, “Hello?” there was a shifting noise on the other line and his deep voice spiked her heart already. “Hey, Tala.”

She wasn’t ready for this one.

Tala thought she couldn’t breathe after he called her using her name for the first time. It was usually the insults if they weren’t seen by others at school and sweet endearments when they were with people who might be or might not be in the same classes as them.

“What’s up? Do you need something?” she asked, twirling some of her hair strands as she laid down on her bed. “Mm.” her throat became dry and almost collapsed on her bed when the voice did a number on her, “You want to go out with me sometime? I’ll book a reservation for us and my family.” Ian suggested.

“Oh, uh. When’s that? I can get ready for it and.. and..” her voice trailed off, “Wait, what? What do you mean your family?” Tala panicked. “Well, you see. They wanted to meet you in person, I couldn’t say no to that.” He chuckled.

If he was here, she was already blushing when his chuckle echoed to her ear. “Do I have to wear properly? Kailan ba yan?”

“Mhm, on Saturday evening. If that’s okay with you?”

She checked her calendar, she had no plans on Saturday. Tala was saved by that, she smiled that her cheeks hurt from smiling so much. “Yeah! That’s okay with me, what about you?”

“Always okay with me, Tala.”

There’s her name again, she knew she was selfish but hearing him saying her name once more. She wanted him to say it all over again and just only him, she felt like she was in cloud nine whenever he said that, her eyes darted to the wall with a dreamy smile. “See you.” She whispered.

“See you too soon, beautiful.” He smirked in his voice before the call ended. Teka?! What did he just call me?! Hah!?! Beautiful?! She screamed into her pillow and rolled around in her bed, “AYAW KO NAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA! IAN ALCARAZ, WHAT ARE YOU DOING TO ME!” Tala continued covering her red face behind the pillow, she kept moving and ended up finding herself on the floor.

“Aray ko... baliw to si Ian...” she touched her cherry red cheeks, the elder peeked a little and she was there the whole time. She had to hide to see how genuinely happy her daughter was when she was on the call with her ‘fake’ boyfriend.

There were times that fake dating can lead to something else, no?

Fast forward, Ian Alcaraz. A man who never hurt women, he was taught by his parents that hurting girls was a major offense and they could get emotionally issues that he didn’t want them to experience especially Vera. He was protective of his younger sister, he looked at his reflection and chuckled. “This could work.”

In his dark denim pants, white shirt, clock watch latched on his wrist, and pair of white shoes. He preferred to wear plain yet he could style it on his own, he wasn’t that stylish compared to Vera, everyone in the family knew how he styled his outfit.

When he met the hot-headed girl, he was already intrigued by her behaviour. She was prideful and competitive in his opinion, though both of their impressions were to be exact. No other thoughts to be said, he applied his perfume on him he was amused by her reactions.

Everything about her was so funny including when they got stuck in the washroom, it was no doubt she was only academically smart considering she focused on the books and learned. The more she gets riled up, the more he found himself enjoying her teasing her. The fake dating happened, they were first awkward at first his friends noticed the dynamic between each other, Tala and he outbalanced and couldn't maintained the match.

His friends even told him he should stop pretending to fake dating, he considered it and knew his feelings were nothing the same as her. Ian knew she was so full of herself, but people changed, right?

He even secretly bought a necklace shaped to an eclipse with a Tala attached in the center of the pendant, Vera would tease him, and he had to kick her out every time she tried to enter his room just to make fun of him.

He was waiting on the seat now with his family, his head moved a lot to look for the missing girl. Vera knew he was deeply and madly in love with the older girl, she talked about it to their mom who laughed and sported the idea that her son was so in love with the girl he kept mentioning when dinner happened after school.

“Sorry, am I late?” a soft voice apologized, Ian noticed the girl despite there were numerous people in the room. Dressed in pink, cotton A-line, summer dress and it hugged her body to show off her curves, she paired it with heels. She shyly smiled at everyone at the table.

“Anak. I didn't know you dated the daughter of Macapagal.” His mother chuckled, approving the date already. “You're never late, sweetie. Halika dito. Tabihan mo yung anak ko, kanina ka pa niya hinihintay. Alam mo ba? He was looking for you, akala niya di ka dadating.”

“Mom, please tama na.” Ian groaned, feeling embarrassed by how chatty his mom was in front of Tala who laughed and sat next to Ian. Ian could smell the sweet and fruity perfume from the girl, she smelled so nice.

“Talaga po, Mrs. Alcaraz?”

“Don’t call me that, sweetie. We’re a family now, aren’t we? Call me tita.”

“A-ah.. sige po, tita.” Tala shyly smiled again and looked around to see the meals were prepared on the table, “Bago mag-simula, may ibibigay yung anak ko sayo.” Mrs. Alcaraz gestured, “Epal mo, mom.” Ian sighed, his neck turning warm from the amount of embarrassment he was experiencing already.

“I’m just helping. Pasalamat ka sa kapatid mo din, tinutulungan ka ni Vera.” She scolded, Vera coyly grinned and nodded. “Oo nga, kuya. Bakit ang sungit mo sa akin?” she faked sob, ignoring the glare that Ian sent in her direction.

“Salamat.” Ian passively thanked his younger sister, he got up and looked at Tala who stared up at the taller guy. “I have something for you. It’s a necklace, I think it suits you and it.. kinda reminded me of you.” He whispered, opening the smooth, black box to reveal the said necklace.

“Ang ganda..” Tala awed.

The family watched the interaction sweet and lovely, Vera was grinning as she took a photo of her dumb brother’s reaction. It was obvious he had heart eyes for Tala, he picked the lace of the necklace. “May I?” he asked her permission with a chuckle.

“You may, Ian.” Tala nodded her head and slightly shuddered from the cold sensation against her neck. It was the first time someone like him gave a gift, it was always her who gave presents to her exes before, but it wasn’t enough for them, and they ended up leaving her.

Ian was a gift giving person when it comes to relationship, he did the nicest things to his exes. Though they remained friends, no intentions behind the interaction. It did make Tala felt jealous, however, she had no rights to act like a jealous girlfriend because everything was fake.

“There. Do you like it?” he asked, placing a hand to get her tiny one and planted a soft kiss on her palm, he chuckled softly at the blushing cheeks of Tala. “Oo, it’s so pretty.” Ian tilted his head with an amused smile, “Just like you?”

Her eyes softened and realized he was referring to her, “Just like me.” She admitted as Ian returned to his seat and everyone started to get their food. “So, how did you two meet?” Mrs. Alcaraz asked, mostly directly at Tala’s way.

“Ah.. tita.. ano.. we met.. um..” Tala’s knees shake, a hand slithered to gently stroked her thigh and remained gripping it gently. Tala looked at Ian who smiled reassuringly at her, “Wag ka matakot kay mom, di siya magagalit sayo, okay?” he kissed her forehead.

Help me. She screamed internally from the kiss and the thigh gripping.

It was reassuring and helping, Ian even told her that she should admit the truth since he didn’t want to twist the story because they both knew they have different side of the story. “We met at school po, tita.. I accidentally bumped to him.. tapos ayun nag-away kami minsan-minsan.” Vera almost choked on her mango shake, her shoulders quaked in amusement.

“Talaga ba? Ito talaga si Ian, ang kulit. Pasensya mo na anak ko, ha?” Mr. Alcaraz finally spoke and laughed. “Opo, tito.” She knew if calling his dad by Mr., she was going to told off by him to use tito instead of Mr. “Tapos anong nangyari? I remembered Vera told me something between you two. About fake dating?” Mrs. Alcaraz frowned and eyed the two.

They knew they couldn’t back out on this one, he exhaled and stood up. “Mom. I’m sorry if I lied the whole time about us dating. I’m sorry if that offended you that I was lying in front of you and dad’s faces, Vera wouldn’t shut her mouth up too. Sobrang ingay pa talaga niya.” Vera snapped, “Hah? Kasalanan ko pa talaga? Di ko maiwasan mag-chichika kay mom eh, madaldal yung kapatid mo at syempre, baka ikaw nga eh. You even spilled behind my back to our mom!” she dramatically threw her hands in the air.

He ignored her and sighed, “Yeah. I know it’s partially my fault and for everything. Though things kinda change..” he flinched by his mom’s glare as he cleared his throat, “I mean things changed when I met her.” Tala stopped her eating and looking up at the now serious man.

He wasn’t the usual rude and blunt man she knew everyday, she was seeing a serious and genuine guy who was holding her hand now. “Because of her, I knew how romance feels like.”

Bam, there's the blush going back to her face.

“And because of her, I knew how butterflies felt like inside my stomach. Because of her, I get jealous whenever the guys at school tried to approach her. I knew it wasn't my right to get jealous, but I know it was a realization of my feelings for her, I wanted to love, treasure, appreciate, value, and spoil her with my love. I wanted everything for her and her to be happy, I love how she smiles and laughs with me. It makes me happy that she always look at me with those pretty eyes, sure, she used to be prideful but she changed in a better way and so do I. I love her, I love her so much. I'm in love with her so much, mom and dad. Please give me a chance that this fake dating changed me and love someone. Tala gave my life a bright reason to continue.” He admitted while holding the hand of the girl.

Both elders awed at the soft confession, he turned to face the girl and kneel on one knee while at the side of the girl who was completely shocked by the boldness. They were in public, hello?!

“Tala, I know we both considered acting to break up after the rumours begun for us. We knew we were pressured by the eyes and mouths won't shut, we acted like a real couple inside of the school campus but the sense of letting you go hurts me.” Ian continued, longingly staring at her. “I couldn't let go of you, you were the only one who made me feel like this and I knew you felt the same way. If I asked you this.. do you want this silly fake dating to a real one?”

There was it, her heart paces madly at the question.

“I struggled with the fake dating, I knew my friends realized what was happening and teased me by purposely making me jealous when we hung out with them. Please.. be my girlfriend, Tala.” He pressed his lips to her palm, his eyes looking at her in desperation, adoration, and longing.

You'll know it, there's always this feeling it's the right person for you. So wag ka mag-aalala, when your heart finally speaks and his own heart speaks too? You won't be afraid, it's okay to feel pain, it's okay to get rejected, and it's okay to fall in love again.

Her mother's words repeated in her head, she knew this was love and she knew how Ian felt like as she was experiencing right now. Love was too painful for her back in her first and second years, Faye and Sophia already revealed the fact that she cried over a few guys who broke her heart and left her in satisfaction when they found someone better than her.

Yet, Ian stayed no matter what was happening to her. Even she got horrendous mood swings, he stayed for her. She pushed him away when things mentally breaking her apart, he was still there for her and waited for the girl to be okay. She caused an argument with her, but he didn't leave her and stop the fake dating.

In fact, he was a one true guy who knew how to love and waited for the girl to return to his open arms.

“Ian.. I am willing to be yours.” Tala’s eyes brimmed with tears. Happy tears exploded, she embraced him tightly as he stood up and cooed. “Why are you crying, my love?” he pulled out his handkerchief, wiping gently her tears. “Your tears will ruin your pretty face.”

“No, no. Just happy that you are always here for me.” She sniffled.

“I have no intention of leaving you. You caught my eye from the start and now you can’t get rid of me that easily, knowing that you are mine now truthfully, love.” Ian teased while he planted soft kisses on her face, laughing. She slapped his arm, grumbling. “Stop it, you jerk. Nakakainis ka.”

“But you still love me the way I do love you, Ms. Lawyer.”

The whole family laughed at the interaction and both Ian and Tala were happy to realize that the whole fake dating changed both and realized love wasn't fake at all.

There was always the right time to perfect it and the right person to choose out of the individuals to love them.

-FIN-