

IT'S NOT JUST SEMANTICS

By Mayumi Cruz

CHAPTER 1

That did it.

Alex can take the squeaky creaks of the chairs. Or the moans. Even the slurps.

But when she glanced sharply sideways and caught a glimpse of the girl's wriggling *tongue*, she'd had enough.

She tapped her knuckles twice, heavily, on the girl's shoulder, hitting her shoulder blades.

"What the...?" The girl sputtered, turning her head to face her. Even in the shadows of the cinema's uppermost section, her flaming red hair and the simmering passion in her glassy eyes and parted lips were obvious. Behind her, the guy she was kissing released his hold on her and smirked nonchalantly, his face partially hidden in the dark. Totally unperturbed, he casually produced a handkerchief and wiped his lips.

The redhead hissed angrily. "What is the matter with you? Why are you disturbing us?"

Alex raised her brows at the words. Her temper flared. "Me? Disturbing you? Isn't it the other way around? First, you sat on my sweater which I intentionally put there because I don't want anybody sitting beside me, then, you spilled your popcorn all over me in your haste to start a kissing session with *him*," her finger pointing at the guy who looked as though he didn't have a single care in the world, "then, *you kiss so sloppily and moan so loudly that everyone here in the cinema can hear you!*"

The last phrase, spoken loudly, elicited sneers and giggles from the moviegoers below them. One of them even yelled, "Yeah, right!"

The girl gasped, undoubtedly humiliated. She turned to the guy beside her, whose gaze was now fixed on the movie screen. Tugging his arm, she purred, "Honey, it's getting to be stifling in here. Why don't we go to my place?"

"*Honey,*" the man drawled, giving her a sideways look, "I happen to like this movie. Why don't you go home and give yourself a cold shower?"

Despite her annoyance, Alex was aghast at the guy's cold-hearted attitude. "What a jerk!" she thought to herself. She pitied the poor redhead who stood up hastily, straightened her clothes and staggered down the stairs to make her hasty escape.

Thankful for the absence of the noises she'd endured for the last thirty minutes, she found herself alone with the jerk, an empty seat between them. She hoped he would go after the redhead. But the guy leaned back on his seat and silently watched the screen, looking every bit as relaxed and engrossed at watching the movie.

After ten minutes, she had to grudgingly accept that he was staying put. She allowed herself to relax. She'd been waiting for this movie for some time and she really loved Meryl Streep.

She was enjoying every minute of the movie when a shadow of another man loomed over her, querying if the seat beside her was taken. Absent-mindedly, she shook her head, eager to get back to the film.

The man slumped down, his heavy weight dropping to the seat. He reeked of cheap liquor. She tried to ignore the feeling of dread creeping into her stomach. It wasn't her usual practice to watch a movie alone. She came in with Susan, her best friend. But before the movie started, she received a call from her office, ordering her to submit an important

report. Her friend was worried at leaving her all alone there, but she insisted to stay. Now she was having second thoughts. Should she have left with her?

Suddenly, she felt a hand on her right thigh. Horrified, she turned at the man sitting beside her. Cold shivers of fear ran up her spine as the stranger sneered maliciously at her in the dark. His foul breath filled the air between them, almost making her gag.

Trying hard to think clearly, her left hand fumbled inside her bag, searching for her weapon. With clenched teeth, she whispered vehemently at the stranger, "Take your hand off me, you pervert."

"You heard the lady. Take your hand off of her," a male voice growled from the other side of the stranger.

It was the cold-hearted jerk.

The pervert didn't even give him a look. "Go away. I know what this girl wants."

"Yeah? Well, I want to be left alone. Pervert!" she screamed, "There's a pervert here!" before zapping him with her lipstick stun gun, delivering the full two thousand electrical volts of power to his neck.

The drunk pervert trembled violently. His quivering limbs twitched forcefully, hitting the chair in front of him and the person sitting on it, who immediately stood up, furious. An uproar ensued. People stood up, shouted, argued, and yelled at one another. The lights suddenly turned on. Two security guards came rushing up to the scene, pacifying people, telling them to calm down. One of them gestured to Alex to come with him. She found herself being ushered out of the cinema, into the hallway, and deposited in front of the waiting bald, portly manager.

"Are you okay, Miss?" he asked, anxiety written all over his pudgy face.

"The man," she exclaimed, "is a pervert! He's drunk and he's lewd. I'm okay, I'm fine.

Good thing I have my stun gun."

Another guard came out of the theater, holding the half-conscious drunk man by the collar, pushing him inside the manager's office.

"I'm glad you're okay, miss." With a disapproving frown, the manager added, "But a pretty girl like you shouldn't be watching a movie alone. Some guys, like that one, could really get ideas."

She raised her brow. "What, you mean it's my fault? Are you blaming me? Whatever happened to a woman's choice to..."

"She's with me."

A smooth, deep voice coming from behind her cut off her sentence.

She turned to see who it was. It was the jerk. Again.

His hand possessively took hold of her arm in a firm grip as he continued to speak in a low, calm voice, effectively diffusing the tension already brewing between her and the manager.

"We're together, it's just that we had an argument, and she transferred seats, and that man came, and, you know the rest," he explained by way of apology.

"Oh. Okay, sir. I thought the young lady was all alone. Does she want to press charges?"

She opened her mouth. "Of course I wa...", but was cut off a second time.

"No, that won't be necessary, Mr. Manager," the guy swiftly answered for her. "We'll just go and spend our date somewhere else."

The manager nodded gratefully, already walking away to his office to deal with the pervert, failing to see her frown of disapproval.

Freed from the dark interiors of the cinema, Alex had a good look at the guy. He stood tall, almost a foot taller than her five feet four inches. His face was strikingly handsome

and oddly familiar. His crop of textured black hair was shorter on the back and sides and wavy on top. Brooding brown eyes were surrounded with thick lashes beneath dark, slightly unkempt brows which stared back at her impassively. A strong, aquiline nose graced the center of his clean-shaven face and a strong jaw. Wide, reddish lips with a faint smudge of pink lipstick on the edge smirked at her.

"You're staring," he drawled.

"I'm not staring," she countered. "I'm observing."

"Same thing."

"No, it isn't. *This* is staring." She looked pointedly at his left hand still grasping her arm. Casually, he dropped it. "Thank you. You didn't need to do what you did. I can take care of myself," she stated flatly.

"I know. But I needed an excuse to get out of the commotion you created, and you're blocking my way here in the corridor."

The sarcasm wasn't lost on her. But instead of getting angry, she smiled widely at him, making her deep dimples pop out. "Really? And here I thought you're a knight in shining armor. Why don't you just be honest and admit you wanted to help me?"

"I *was* being honest."

"That was not honesty. That was sarcasm."

This time, it was he who looked at her pointedly. "You call it sarcasm, I call it honesty. It's just semantics. Like staring and observing."

Unruffled, she raised her chin up, meeting his gaze steadily. "I disagree. And why would you so cold-heartedly let your girlfriend go home without you? You dismissed her like she's nothing to you."

"She *is* nothing to me. She's not my girlfriend. I don't even know her name."

"What?" She was dumbfounded.

He shrugged, clearly unconcerned. "I just met her here, before I went in to watch the movie. She literally wormed her way into the cinema with me."

She clucked her tongue in disapproval. "My, a real-life Casanova. And you just allowed her to throw herself at you and offer herself to you for the taking?"

He arched one brow at her. "I'm not a lowlife who'd take a girl inside a cinema."

"So you were just leading her on until she's practically begging for it, then flick her aside, without even a 'thank you' for the 'good times' you shared?"

"She knew what she was getting into. She's an adult. We both are. Proof: she knew when to quit, didn't she?"

"Didn't it occur to you that she may have a boyfriend? Or, worse, a husband? Don't you care at all?"

"Lady, it's not my problem, it's hers. She was just something to pass the time by while I wait for my sister," his impatient eyes scanned the mall area outside the cinema where people were walking to and fro, "who's still nowhere in sight."

"So you're saying you were bored?"

He answered, matter-of-factly, "Yes."

She shook her head in disgust. "You're not bored. You're lonely."

His eyes, which so far had been blank and emotionless, turned sharp as steel. "Excuse me?"

"I said, you're lonely, not bored."

He scoffed. "Lady, I can have all the girls I want. I'm not lonely."

"Sure you can. But you're still lonely."

He glanced at his watch with a disinterested expression. "Well, Miss know-it-all, I'll

humor you since my big sister isn't here yet. What *exactly* do you mean?"

She was only too glad to oblige him. "Girls may satisfy you physically, but deep inside, you're longing for someone else." She looked at him intently under her long lashes. "Someone who'd hurt you terribly, and the wound is still as fresh as it was the first time it cut you."

"What are you, a shrink? Is this a shotgun session where you charge me an exorbitant fee?" His face remained unreadable. But she noticed the tip of his ears turned red.

She lifted a shoulder. "I'm just good at reading people. And you're one very lonely man, mister."

"I think lonely is the word one would use to describe a girl who went to see a movie alone," he snorted.

"My friend was with me, but she had to go back to her office. I've been waiting for this movie the whole week, I couldn't pass it up," she explained smoothly.

"And it didn't cross your mind that you'd encounter a pervert in a place like this?"

She fished out her lipstick stun gun, proudly holding it up to his face. "I have a weapon. It's really useful, don't you think?"

At that moment, the pervert was ushered out of the manager's office, escorted by two security guards. Seeing Alex holding the lipstick, he cowered, hiding himself at the back of his escorts. When they passed by her, the pervert snarled, "You almost killed me, you wildcat!"

She wasn't offended at the very least. Eyes squinting, she menacingly stepped toward the drunkard, still holding the lipstick up. His eyes widened in total fear. He scampered away, out of the cinema lobby and into the mall area, leaving his escorts.

Minutes after he was out of sight, Alex was still laughing hard, clutching at her sides.

Catching the bemused look of the guy beside her, she chortled, “That was funny, wasn’t it?”

“Most girls I know would be scared of a pervert like that and wouldn’t find it funny,” he wryly observed.

“Well, I’m not ‘most girls you know.’ Sorry to disappoint,” she quipped, as she put her weapon back in her bag.

“Who’s disappointed?”

Before she can tell him off with a comeback, his phone rang. He took the call with a curt, “Yes, Gaia?” and turned his back at her. It was then that she noticed a crowd was starting to gather at the cinema lobby, their eyes curiously fixed on the man. She was sure that like her, they’d recognized him by now. Shrugging, she walked out of there without waiting for him to come back to her. It didn’t matter. She had a strong feeling she’ll be seeing him again.