

A PAPERKAT BOOKS ANTHOLOGY

# Love in Style

VOLUME 1

ALLENE ALLANIGUE | ARA LAROSA  
ALFREDO FIGUEROA | RJ T. VARGAS  
VERGIE MANLIGAS | JEM MARI VILLAGRACIA  
ANNA LUSTRE

D E D I C A T I O N



To all underrated and promising  
authors who deserve to be published  
by **REAL** publishers.



## Love in Style Volume 1

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### Published by HS Grafik Print

Brgy. Dela Paz, Pasig City, Philippines 1611

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Website: [www.paperkatbooks.com](http://www.paperkatbooks.com)

### Published and Printed in the Philippines

Editing, Cover Design, Inside Pages Layout by Kath C. Eustaquio-Derla

Proofreading by Adece Caluag and Bea Dawal

Images from Pexels.com and Canva

Allanigue, Allene

Love in style : volume 1 / Allene Allanigue [and six others].

— Pasig City : HS Grafik Print, [2023], c2023.

pages ; cm. — (A paperkat books anthology)

ISBN 978-621-8232-86-0 (mobi/kindle);

ISBN 978-621-8232-87-7 (paperback);

ISBN 978-621-8232-88-4 (pdf read-only)

1. Romance fiction, Philippine (English) 2. Short stories, Philippines (English) I. Larosa, Ara. II. Figueroa, Alfredo. III. Vargas, RJ T. IV. Manligas, Vergie. V. Villagrancia, Jem Mari. VI. Lustre, Anna. I. Title. II. Series.



A PAPERKAT BOOKS ANTHOLOGY



Love  
in  
Style

The title 'Love in Style' is written in a large, bold, black brush script. The word 'Love' is on the top line, 'in' is in the middle, and 'Style' is on the bottom line. Three red heart icons are placed around the text: one to the right of 'Love', one to the left of 'Style', and one to the right of 'in'. Each heart is inside a light gray speech bubble shape.


VOLUME 1

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ANNA LUSTRE



# One-shot, rom-com stories with a heart!

Following the huge success of our #DystopiaManila and #DeckTheHalls books, we present **Love in Style**, a fashionable rom-com anthology book project!

It's a two-volume collection of one-shot, romantic-comedy (rom-com) stories that include the following requirements:

1. The story protagonist should be a fashion stylist.
2. The story must include a conversation about “fast fashion” and the global fashion industry having a high carbon footprint and, therefore, contributing to the worsening climate change crisis.
3. The story must have an interesting “milieu”, which is a fancy word for “setting”. For example, the story could take place in *lakas-maka-sosyal*/BGC; down-to-Earth-na-amoy-Earth (*lupa*) Cubao; *walwalan-ng-mga-nagpapaka-bagets* Poblacion, Makati; and more. The story must be set in the Philippines.
4. The story must include a conversation about how easy it is to “always be chic” if you master a handful of styling basics. This is best explained in the book *Always Be Chic by Miss Kaycee*.
5. It must be a rom-com story with a happy, satisfying ending.

*Congrats to the authors who  
hinted (pitched), wrote (worked), and signed  
(committed) their stories with PaperKat Books!*



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*Love is Rosy*

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*Frock and Pen*

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“Do you know, in Japan, there was this tradition that graduating male students give the second button of their uniforms to the girl who asks for it, especially when they like this girl?”

“Why the second button?”

“Because the second button is the one closest to the heart,” Char answered. “I’ll keep it forever.”

### **Excerpt**

*Very Peri*

By  $C_3H_4$



# Very Peri



By  $C_3H_4$

**A**bruptly woken at two in the morning, Char stretched her arm to reach for her ringing phone. *What devil on earth would call at this hour?* She squinted her eyes at the brightness of the screen, and it registered: *Lav is calling.*

“Lav?”

“Char.” A slight tremble in his voice as he spoke her name. *Shaar.*

“Did something happen?”

“I’m at the airport. Can you pick me up?”

“Pick you up,” Char repeated, rubbing her eyes with the back of her hand. Wakefulness has yet to settle in, she yawned as she asked, “What do you mean?”

“I’m back in Manila. Can you get me here?”

“Oh. Wait, you’re back?”

“Yes. Come pick me up, please.”

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Lav came back so unexpectedly. His arrivals were often unannounced that he'd just show up at the door of Char's condo unit with a bouquet of delicate, sweet-scented, fresh lavenders from South Korea.

"You can take a cab." It was the no-brainer option. Why wouldn't he?

"I can't," he spoke in labored, shaky breaths.

Apparently, he was on the brink of having another panic attack. Seated on the closed toilet lid in a cubicle, his body was growing cold and numb, and his chest tightened as if he was going to have a heart attack. He focused on taking deep breaths, and when it didn't seem to do the trick, he placed his palms on his knees and rubbed them relentlessly against the rough fabric of his jeans. The friction was somehow able to distract his brain from giving him another full-blown panic attack that he had been experiencing in the past two weeks.

His name was Lavender "Lav" Aguirre. His mother named him after the color lavender, thinking that she was going to have a baby girl. Char first met him nine years ago when she moved to Cebu in the middle of her second year in high school. Back then, her parents were too busy getting an annulment. Her parents first met at a bar, her mother was drinking this French herbal liqueur when her very soon-to-be father approached. She shared the liquor with him, and the rest was history. There had been various revisions of this history, blame the fake news peddler grandaunts. One version said that Char's mother was originally infertile until she drank that herbal liquor and poof! Infertile no more! The couple was forced to marry, and Char was soon born.

## LOVE IN STYLE

When Char figured out that she was a product of a one-night stand, she realized her parents didn't know how to use a condom, and she'd been worried about them since. She learned that she was named after that French liqueur Chartreuse, pronounced as *shaar · trooz*, so she'd stare out the window and engage in a soliloquy: *What's in a name? That which we call a liqueur by any other name...*

With the growing tension at home becoming more palpable, her maternal-side aunt volunteered to take Char in temporarily, and she moved to Cebu City.

On her first day in the new school, Char wasted no time and joined all the clubs that she could find. The female guidance counselor, who looked like Helena Bonham Carter's character, Mrs. Lovett from *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*, said that she had never seen a student as active and as driven as Char. The woman over-interpreted it, as if she was possessed by the evil spirit of Freud, and attributed Char's active school participation as her way to cope with her parents' separation, but Mrs. Lovett was wrong.

Char had always been focused on her goals since her diaper years—learned to read and write at three; learned to reproduce her parents' signature at five, an essential skill that she was later able to apply in real life. She always won poster- and slogan-making contests at school. She was also unparalleled, even in sports, that she could beat all the sweatiest and stinkiest pubescent boys in basketball.

The following academic year, Char became the president of the debate club and editor-in-chief of the school paper. These positions were usually reserved for seniors, but Char, only a junior then, had shown exceptional talents and carried authority that they yielded to her. The only area she didn't dare try was pageantry. It wasn't because

## LOVE IN STYLE

she wasn't pretty or anything, but because, according to her, it was a waste of time.

On the other hand, Lav thrived in pageants. He won the school's pageant title Mr. Cebu Science High School in his third year. In her senior year, Char ran for Student Council President. Lav became her rival and he became the president because he had more leverage from winning the recent pageant.

Char was seething in anger throughout the year. It was the very first time she ever lost to someone. She dealt with her anger and frustration using passive aggression. Lav wore a perfectly ironed, crisp white polo uniform every day as if he were running for congress. Char would make sure a week wouldn't pass without making efforts to stain his uniform with ink from the teacher's whiteboard marker, or her ball pen and highlighter.

Their batch was the last to graduate high school before K-12 was implemented. Most graduates of science high schools go to the best universities, taking pre-med or hardcore science or math degrees. Other science high schools would require reimbursement from students if they didn't pursue a science course in college. Fortunately, their high school was more lenient. Char moved back to Manila and enrolled in a Fine Arts program to major in Visual Communication. Even if it wasn't technically prohibited, it was frowned upon. So she went into hiding and never contacted any of her batchmates. Until the day of freshmen orientation, as she was walking along one of the hallways of the Fine Arts building, she bumped into her old nemesis from high school. Lav looked the same, only his hair was longer. He, too, enrolled in the Fine Arts program in Fashion Design. Her old enemy had resurfaced, shape-shifted into an ally, and eventually, a lover.

## LOVE IN STYLE

It was funny thinking about it seven years later, now that they were both 24-year-olds. Lav had been working in Seoul for the last three years. Fresh from college just three years ago, he started as an apprentice to a fashion stylist of the K-pop male idol group Hot7—quite a strange name for a 6-member group. He had always been hardworking and adapted well to the Korean working standards—working 25 hours a day, eight days a week, as they say. He was quick to pick up the specific styles of clothing each member liked, which colors and patterns would best suit their persona, and which brands of casual clothing they'd wear for Instagram. He worked his way up into becoming a core member of their styling team and was eventually allowed to design their music video and stage costumes.

Lav said it was just a mere coincidence that he ended up working for Hot7, but Char was inclined to think otherwise. She'd been a big fan of Hot7 since they debuted. She could name all the members, but her bias (her favorite member) was the group's main dancer and *maknae* (youngest member) named Doh Dongko. Once, while hanging out with Lav during college, she gushed about Dongko.

“*Dodong* who?” Lav asked because *dodong* is a generic term they use in Cebu to refer to a young man.

“Doh-Dong-Ko,” Char emphasized each syllable.

Lav snorted, “Your *dodong*?!”

Years later, Lav wasn't snorting anymore because he was now working for that *dodong*. In just a matter of three years, Lav was already at the height of his career. Now, there were two known *Lavs* from the Philippines. The internationally acclaimed filmmaker, Lav Diaz, and the K-Pop fashion stylist, Lav Aguirre.

\* \* \*

## LOVE IN STYLE

After reaching Char's condo, Lav lay in bed. Exhaustion from the flight was evident on his face but he was still so handsome. His face was smooth without visible pores. It must be the natural moisturizing effect of the smog in Seoul.

Char lay beside him and ran her fingers through his hair as she spoke, "It's weird that for someone to be considered successful, we need overseas validation."

"Recognition is different from validation."

"But there's something so problematic about colonial mentality. We should love our own, first and foremost. International recognition should just be secondary. If we don't correct this, what would become of our own cultural identity? The government should finance projects that will develop and sustain the variety of talents we have, the same way that K-Pop and K-Dramas have a 12.3 billion US dollars boost on South Korea's economy. Why is the government not doing anything?"

"You're taking it too far."

"No, listen. I'm just saying that for real change to happen, there needs to be a shift in perspective. And this—"

"Char, can you just, please," Lav interrupted. He adjusted his head on the pillow, as if telling her that he just wanted to sleep.

"I'm sorry."

"I'm just really tired," Lav gently pulled her close to cuddle. "Let's just stay like this, not talking. I missed you."

"I missed you too."

It didn't take a minute and Char began to speak again, "I want to start an NGO someday. Maybe something that would push initiatives for child protection—"

"Char, please."

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“Sorry.”

“Seven years,” he sighed. “And you’re still in college. You started with Fine Arts, shifted to Journalism, to Sociology, to—what’s that course again?”

Char abruptly pulled away and sat up.

“When do you plan to graduate?”

Stubbornly, she let out a frustrated grunt.

“Your head is always full of grand plans on how to make this world a better place, but you have to start with yourself. Finish a degree, then find a job. That’s how you can be the change you wish to see in the world.”

“Are you done?”

“All I’m saying is take a break from your volunteerism and activism activities. Stop going to rallies, and focus on your acad—”

“I never attend rallies,” she cut. “That’s not my brand of activism. You speak like I’m a bum. Are you ashamed of me? While you’re out there dressing your little K-Pop boys in Seoul, I am here pushing for change and progress in ways that I can for the people! For *our* people!”

“You’re throwing away your college years,” Lav reasoned. “Is it worth it?”

Char got out of bed, picked up her pillow, pulled her blanket, stormed out of the bedroom, and slammed the door shut. She pressed her back against the closed door and took a deep breath. As she exhaled, her body started to shake. Just like in a K-Drama scene, her knees felt weak and she slowly sank to the floor. A single tear fell from her eye, crawling down her cheek while Whee In’s *You, You* was playing in the background in her head. Her gaze panned around the walls of the living space full of Doh Dongko’s signed posters,

## LOVE IN STYLE

arranged from Hot7's debut to their latest comeback, a timeline of the past seven years of his life. A flashback to an important life memory would've faded in, but her life wasn't a movie.

She snapped back to reality, stood up, and wiped the tear from her cheek. This was her condo, if there was anyone who should be sleeping on the couch, it should be Lav. If he wanted to sleep in bed, then he should go back to his house in Cebu!

She opened the door. Lav was lying on his side, head on his hand. Propped up by his elbow, he was struggling to keep his tired, sleepy eyes open. He was just waiting for her to come back. She softened and crawled back into his arms.

"I'm sorry," he told her and kissed her cheek in apology.

Char should cut Lav some slack. The past two weeks had been difficult for him. It started three months ago, he called Char to say that Doh Dongko was going to have his solo debut. He was the last member to debut solo, and therefore, the most awaited. He was pressured by the agency to debut before the group's seven-year contract expiration, and, whether they liked it or not, their contracts would be renewed because they were the agency's most influential income-generating artists.

Dongko was a trendsetter. Everything he wore on his Instagram photos, from luxury brand pieces to cheap shopping street stores' shirts, would all be sold out the next day, officially endorsed or not. That was how crazy people were about him.

One time, Lav called, priding himself that he was the one curating Dongko's streetwear. "I give him three colors to wear at most, two neutral colors, and his color of choice. It's 2022 so we use lots of Very Peri hues."



## LOVE IN STYLE

“Yeah, people are raving about his fashion trend.”

“You don’t sound happy,” he observed.

“What’s there to be happy about? Tens and thousands of his fans are purchasing clothes. That’s thousands of clothes! Doesn’t matter whether the sizes fit them or not, they’d still buy like the good fans that they are!”

“What the heck is your problem?”

“Not only are they wasting money buying clothes they don’t even need, but they’re also generating textile waste that occupies 5% of all landfill space!”

“Char, if buying clothes similar to what their idols wear makes them happy, let them be.”

“Happiness has always been used to justify what’s excessive. Will you consider happiness at the expense of the environment’s real happiness?”

“You’re impossible,” he dropped the call bitterly.

Char had always something to say that, more often than not, people don’t like to hear. She got into fights online about a Hot7 comeback in which they used mental illness as a concept for an upbeat quirky song. They had costume designs that were patterned from straitjackets. The lyrics of their song were about an ex who was moody, taking it to the extreme calling her “bipolar” derogatorily. The choreography incorporated insensitive gestures that seemed to mimic and make fun of institutionalized mental patients. Char was so angry she video-called Lav out of frustration.

“I love Hot7 but I will boycott this comeback,” she said. “How can they do something so insensitive and offensive to a struggling, vulnerable population?”

## LOVE IN STYLE

“Char, it’s not supposed to be deep. It’s for the fans.”

“Of course, they will blindly support the comeback like the good fans that they are!”

“Look, I know the causes you fight for mean a lot to you—”

“It’s not enough that they mean a lot to me. They should mean something to other people too!”

“There are other artists out there that do a really good job reflecting the crucial times we live in—”

“Like who?” Char asked.

“Like Gloc-9.”

“Lyrics is the weapon he wields. I’m a visual artist.”

“Do you know Sisa Gani?” Lav asked.

Char went silent, narrowing her eyes as if she was trying to read Lav’s thoughts through the screen.

“Oh my god, Char. I can’t believe you don’t know her? You live in a condo and not in a cave.”

Char raised an eyebrow and asked, “What about her?”

“Nobody knows her identity, but she uses this interesting pseudonym taken from two characters of *Noli Me Tangere* and its sequel, *El Filibusterismo*: Sisa and Isagani. Her pseudonym itself already carries a message which reflects on her art.”

Char didn’t respond.

“You’re obsessed with Yayoi Kusama’s art, right?” He wanted to continue but someone called his name, he needed to hurry and say goodbye, “I’m coming home next week. Let’s visit Sisa Gani’s exhibition.”

\* \* \*

## LOVE IN STYLE

Sisa Gani's exhibition was similar to Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama's Infinity Mirror Rooms. But instead of a room of walls, floor, and ceiling made of solid mirrors that reflected objects to infinity, Sisa had the mirrors broken into thousands of little pieces and pieced them together like jigsaw puzzles on the walls, floor, and ceiling. The gaps between mirror pieces had fillings to keep them in permanent places. Each mirror piece was coated with transparent colors so that objects were reflected in various hues. In the middle of the room, there was always a prop centerpiece that changed every time to depict urgent social issues that would reflect on the pieces of mirrors, creating an illusion of hued fragmented infinity.

When Lav returned to Manila and they visited the exhibit room, he was in complete awe. He said he first read on the news about this art installation in a room full of broken mirrors that depicted an alleged sexual abuse of a woman wherein the perpetrator was a well-known and well-loved male celebrity. The woman filed a case in court, backed by enough evidence, but it was trial by publicity on social media, with people siding with the celebrity, and it started to affect the case proceedings. The woman was close to losing the case until this art exhibit went viral. The conversation online had a complete 360-degree turn, and the woman won her case in court.

Sisa Gani named this art exhibit room Reality and Infinite Fragmented Perceptions with a description: *Perception has a way of tricking us, claiming falsehood as truth. May we never forget that reality is truth, and truth is reality.*

When Lav went back to Seoul, he was still raving about that exhibit. His immersion in the world of art that Sisa created filled him with renewed energy, allowing him to approach the preparation in his

## LOVE IN STYLE

best state for Dongko's debut.

\* \* \*

Doh Dongko had dopey eyes, a tall nose, and luscious lips that arched to a charming smile. He was the richest-looking guy Char had laid eyes upon. He could wear a garbage bag and it would look like a fine tuxedo. His new hairstyle was dyed icy blue. He looked good in all his costumes in the music video.

*Good job, Lav!* Char thought. He gave it his all.

There was one exquisite costume that was so thrilling: a low-collared lacy black vest revealing a good amount of his shiny chest and corset-like high waist tight pants. Very tight indeed that it was practically filthy thoughts-inducing. It would be controversial in conservative South Korea.

Dongko, being Hot7's main dancer, raised the expectations for complex and intense choreography. In the music video, there was a scene where he jumped on one leg and flipped backward while up in the air. It reminded Char of the roll kicks she aced back when she used to play *sepak takraw* in elementary. She couldn't wait to see him do it on stage, he was going to nail it for sure.

Dongko wore that hot, exquisite outfit during his first stage performance. His moves were incredibly smooth and snappy; however, when Dongko did that one-leg flip jump, his tight pants ripped wide open in the crotch area while in the air, revealing a nude-colored thong stuffed with balled fabric inside. The live stream stopped and the screen went black. Char's jaw dropped. The shock was eventually replaced by the realization that the wardrobe accident

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would ruin Dongko's career.

Quickly, Char went to Twitter. Doh Dongko's name started trending right away. And shortly, she saw her boyfriend's name trending as well. She was horrified at the ugliness of what Dongko's fans were saying to Lav:

'FUCK YOU LAV AGUIRRE!'

'LAV AGUIRRE YOU RUINED DONGKO'S LIFE!!!'

'NEVER BEEN SO ASHAMED OF BEING A FILIPINO THAN THIS VERY MOMENT BECAUSE OF YOU LAV AGUIRRE!'

Thousands of tweets with Lav's name carried curses—calling him names and wishing him dead. A group of Dongko's fans found Lav's Seoul apartment building address and camped outside with threats. They even had a mini drone flying outside his 24th-floor apartment window. It worsened, following the agency's announcement that Dongko wouldn't be renewing his contract and would halt all idol activities after its expiration. It was an absolute nightmare. That was the onset of Lav's panic attacks. He felt the need to leave Seoul and fly back to Manila to regain a sense of safety and stability. The impacts of Dongko's wardrobe malfunction threw Lav off balance and he completely fell out of love with what he does.

\* \* \*

Lav lost motivation as days went by, and after a month with Char in Manila, he flew back to Cebu to stay at his parents' home. Another month had passed and there was still no sign of progress. He had fallen into a slump, a deep existential paralysis, and had become what

## LOVE IN STYLE

Char feared the most: a bum.

People like Lav and Char were born to create. If they didn't, they'd spend all their vacuous lives in search of something and never fill the void. Lav would drift aimlessly like a bird with a broken wing. He'd never reach his full potential, and in turn, he'd resent the world for not giving him what he thought he was entitled to. Char knew this well, so she faced a new task: re-ignite Lav's will to create.

One Saturday morning, she flew to Cebu to visit Lav. It was almost noon when she arrived, and Lav was still in his bed, asleep. She crawled next to him, waking him up with feathery kisses, arms under the blanket wrapping affectionately around his waist.

“Good morning.”

“Char?” He turned his head. “What are you doing here?”

“You don't wanna see me?”

“No, I was just surprised, that's all. What are you doing here?”

Char pulled away and sat up, placing a hand on her waist. “Do I look like I went here to buy vinegar?”

That managed to pull a chuckle out of Lav, his sleepy eyes smiled, and he reached for Char again to hug her. “I missed you.”

“I bought you take-out lunch on the way here.”

“What did you buy?”

“Steak.”

“Steak?” He kissed her, then he whispered to her ear with playful malice, “You shouldn't have bothered. Your thighs would be good for steak. Like rare steak. Dark red with some juice flowing. Soft and spongy with slight resistance—” He attempted to kiss her again but was interrupted by a knock on the door. He grunted and grudgingly released Char from his arms.

## LOVE IN STYLE

“Wow, your parents are strict.”

“My parents are really conservative.”

“Blame Spain for coming to Cebu and spreading Catholicism in 1521.”

\* \* \*

It was Char's first time returning to Cebu since high school, so she thought of visiting their school with Lav. It was Saturday. There were no other people, only the security guard who was sleeping on a bench with an empty gin bottle under the waiting shed. They managed to sneak in, and it was like a trip down memory lane. The place still looked the same after seven years.

They ran up and down the flights of stairs, and around the hallways, reminiscing the days when they were still students. Back when they didn't have a care in the world, when their only problem was how to pass an exam. They passed by the hallway of science laboratories and entered the biology lab, the place where Char stood her ground against her biology teacher Mr. Merino and strongly refused to take part in the frog dissection activity, calling it inhumane and heartless. She always had that rebellious streak ever since.

It was dusk when they entered the covered gymnasium. Two important events happened here: the school's pageant where Lav won the title and their prom night a.k.a. Char and Lav's One Big Fight. They were egged by their classmates to slow dance together when a string quartet version of Ed Sheeran's *Photograph* started playing. Lav had no problem with it. He was the star of the night, dashing in his lavender suit, and danced with all the girls who requested to dance

## LOVE IN STYLE

with him. Char was only tricked into doing it by making her believe she'd get plus 10 points in their physics exam. When the truth was revealed to her after they danced, she walked back to Lav and grabbed him by the collar of his polo with such force that the second button popped off.

"Wanna recreate our prom dance?" Lav asked. He took out his phone, played the *Photograph* song, and placed it inside his chest pocket. He turned to Char, offered his hand, and asked, "Can I have this dance?"

Char felt butterflies in her stomach, trying her best to suppress a smile but consequently failed. She gladly took his hand. And they danced.

"You hated me so much back then," Lav told her.

"Yeah, we're not high school sweethearts. We're high school enemies."

"No, we're not," Lav said. "I didn't hate you."

"You didn't?"

"Remember that time when Mr. Merino was so angry because of his car's flat tire?"

Char gasped, her mouth hanging open, eyes wide.

"Yup, I deflated his tire. I thought it was unfair that he failed you."

"Aww," she said mockingly. "Thanks for that little act of kindness. Truly life-changing."

"You're not like most people, Char."

"What do you mean?"

"When I meet people, I look at their clothes and assess their character."

"What was your assessment of me?"



## LOVE IN STYLE

“In your school uniform... Um, there wasn’t a lot to think about that.”

“That hurts my pride,” Char pulled away.

Lav chuckled, pulling her again to dance.

“So, what did you think of me then?”

“You’re like one of those rare people who dress like they wear their hearts on their sleeve.”

“What does that even mean?”

“I think people’s hearts can shine their way through the clothes they wear,” Lav said, and added, “I have another confession to make.”

“Yes, please. Keep ‘em coming.”

“This one is serious though.”

“Please, no engagement proposals.”

Lav paused the music. They stopped dancing. He looked at Char and said, “Dongko hasn’t been doing well. He wanted to quit for so long, but he was bound by contract and his agency was making sure he would renew his. He came to me asking for help.”

“What do you mean?”

“Dongko’s wardrobe incident wasn’t an accident. The two of us planned it. A scandalous incident would destroy his career, the only option that would free him from the kind of life that he didn’t want anymore. And I agreed because I’ve witnessed how much suffering he was in.”

“Lav...”

“He’d rather people laugh at him for a while, they’d forget soon anyway, than to continue living a life that only revolved around pleasing everyone.” Lav’s hands were shaking when he held hers as he pleaded, “Char, I need you to tell me that I did the right thing.”

## LOVE IN STYLE

Char looked at him and asked, “Do you still remember your answer at the pageant’s Q&A that made you win the title? ‘The clothes we wear are the extension of ourselves.’ Dongko must’ve felt the opposite, the limelight has made him a mere extension of the fancy clothes he wears.”

Lav’s eyes were welling with tears, but he held them in.

“I don’t need to tell you anything.” Char brought Lav’s hand to his chest. “As long as it feels right here, you did the right thing.” She looked at his eyes, touched his cheek, tiptoed, and kissed him.

\* \* \*

“Lav, can you fly here to Manila?”

“Now?” He asked on the phone, looking at the wall clock, it was 6:00 a.m.

“Yes.”

“Um, why?”

“It’s just that, it would mean a lot to me if you’re the first person to see my final college school project.”

“Okay. I’ll get a flight ticket today.”

That put a huge smile on Char’s face. “I really *Lav* you.”

“I love you too.”

She fetched Lav from the airport and as soon as he was in the car, she had him blindfolded. Lav just went along, he was excited to see what was waiting for him. Char guided him when they reached the building until they were inside the room.

She made Lav stand in the middle of the room, then she turned off the main light in the room and switched on the tiny light bulbs.

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“You know how, in the dark, you can’t see. You can’t use your eyes, and so, you rely on something else other than your senses.”

“You rely on your gut feel.”

“Yes, and sometimes, this gut feeling, this urging feeling inside your chest, is clearer than what your eyes can see. You told me that our hearts can shine their way through the clothes we wear.”

“It’s funny how you remember these little things.”

Char removed his blindfold.

Lav gasped in surprise. He marveled at the sight of Char’s creation, and he felt so overwhelmed that it moved him to tears. What she created was utterly beautiful. Several clothes were hanging on wires from the ceiling. These clothes were gathered from special people in her life. Dongko’s merch t-shirt, her and Lav’s old high school uniforms, and her prom dress, among others. There was a light bulb inside each clothing item, giving the illusion of glowing hearts. It was the exhibit room with broken mirrors as walls, reflecting the objects in fragmented colorful infinities. Char was Sisa Gani all along.

“Remember when I grabbed your polo at prom?”

Lav couldn’t speak, he was still taking it all in, immersing himself in this creation of Char’s imagination.

“When I reached my aunt’s house, I found your button stuck in my hair.”

She led him to her prom dress in the middle of the room and pointed at the button—the second button from Lav’s prom polo—now sewn on the chest of the dress.

Lav smiled. “You kept my second button after all.”

“Do you know, in Japan, there was this tradition that graduating male students give the second button of their uniforms to the girl

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who asks for it, especially when they like this girl?”

“Why the second button?”

“Because the second button is the one closest to the heart,” Char answered. “I’ll keep it forever.”

Lav brushed his fingers against her cheek, leaning in for a sweet, gentle kiss. He pulled away smiling and he said, “And I’ll keep you forever, Char.”



## LOVE IN STYLE



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### About The Author

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C<sub>3</sub>H<sub>4</sub> conceals her identity behind the molecular formula of her name. Professionally working as a psychologist, psychometrician, and psychology instructor, she likes writing stories that attempt to bring light to human conditions. Having faith in the power of storytelling, she uses her background and knowledge to challenge people's preconceived notions and facilitate empathic understanding through writing.

In any genre she writes, she tackles psychological and existential concerns to encourage self-reflection toward healing and inspire change for a better society. She hopes that her stories can reach many people someday.

She is one of the authors of *Dystopia Manila* and *Deck The Halls* by PaperKat Books.

# Met You by the Bay



*By Ara Larosa*

“**T**his is unbelievable! I’m officially Julio’s stylist!”

Aretha Carbonel cheered loudly while facing the mirror. She kept fidgeting in the restroom because she couldn’t contain her excitement. She never thought that Julio Benzon, an international model and a fashion magazine writer, would accept the City Tourism’s invitation to join the Fashion Show for Sorsogon City’s Pili Festival. This year, it merged with the *Tiriladan sa Dalan* event, which means “cracking open pili nuts” on the streets. It is the highlight of the festival.

As her imagination got wilder, she remembered that she had to check the accessories for Julio’s outfit. She hurried towards the door, but she couldn’t open it. She was locked inside the restroom!

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“Help!” she shouted.

“Hey, what’s the matter?”

She heard a male voice coming from one of the cubicles.

“Who are you? This is a restroom for females,” she said nervously.

“Why did you lock the main door? You don’t own this restroom,” the male voice replied.

Aretha didn’t answer. She just listened intently to determine where the voice was coming from.

“Hey, I am asking you,” he continued.

When Aretha was already sure which cubicle the guy was in, she smiled and got her phone. *Let’s make your restroom-hopping memorable*, she thought, controlling her laughter. As the door burst open, she immediately took a photo of him.

“What the hell?!” the guy yelled, completely annoyed.

Aretha was startled when she learned who the guy was. Her phone slipped from her hands and dropped to the floor. She immediately picked it up, but her eyes were still on him. It was Julio!

It was the first time that she saw him personally and up close. He was much taller than her. And when he smiled at her, the huge dimples on both cheeks made him more attractive. She could not help but set her eyes on his denim outfit, which looked great with his rustic-looking loafers.

“So, you must be Aretha. How would you rate my fashion style?” he teased.

“Oh... I...” she stuttered and felt burning face. “Blue palette suits you.”

“Come on, you’re just saying that to please me. But just like what

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you said on a TV Show, dressing up is self-expression. This is the real me, Mr. Denim 2045,” he said as he turned around.

“That’s flattering, but I’m sorry. What’s that smell?” she bit her lower lip.

“Oops, excuse me,” Julio was embarrassed. He immediately placed his hand near the sensor and the toilet bowl flushed. She could not contain her laughter. It was like all her stress was flushed out as well.

“You’re so cute,” he muttered.

“What?” she asked when she finally stopped laughing.

“What I mean is, your eyes are so expressive,” he smiled and she felt like she was floating.

She let that sink in—an award-winning model just messed up in front of her, but it was such a turn-on.

“By the way, I’m Julio. I’m sorry about what happened,” he continued as he extended his hand.

“I hope you could first...” she blushed as she pointed to the faucet.

He chuckled and shook his head. “This is embarrassing,” he sighed as he went to the sink to wash his hands.

“By the way, I’m sorry that I’m in the female restroom. The male restroom was full a while ago and I just can’t contain my...you know,” he laughed a little.

“Okay, that’s a valid reason,” Aretha replied.

“This is such an unpleasant way of meeting each other,” he laughed.

“Don’t worry, I don’t believe that first impression lasts,” she grinned.

“Yes, because I surely flush the toilet after using,” he replied and



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they both laughed.

“By the way, why did you come here by yourself? There’s someone assigned to pick you up at the airport. Besides, you’re too early. We’re expecting you to arrive next week,” she said in confusion.

“It’s fine. I just drove all the way here from our house in Baguio. I just wanted to challenge myself,” he beamed.

“That’s impressive.”

“And besides, I don’t like VIP treatment, so I preferred not to inform you of the exact time of my arrival. By the way, can we just speak outside? This is a bit awkward,” he suggested.

“Oh, yes!” she chuckled, then suddenly, she remembered that she couldn’t open the door a while ago. She tried again, but it seemed that the doorknob was defective.

“I guess we could get out using that window,” he pointed it to her.

Luckily, the window was quite big and they could pass through it. But before she agreed, she still tried calling out for help, but no one came.

“You go first. Step on my shoulders,” he offered.

She nodded without hesitation. She removed her shoes first. But as he lifted her, they heard people talking by the door. He quickly put her down and helped her tie her spiked heels. She was a bit distracted by the way he gazed at her, especially since he let his hand linger on hers.

“It seems that the door is locked. Is anyone in there?” a female voice said loudly, followed by several knocks.

“Hey...” Aretha wanted to shout, but he covered her mouth, telling her to keep quiet.

“Let her discover that we’re here,” he said.

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“Excuse me? Do you know that girl? Are you familiar with her voice?” she wondered.

But before he could reply, the door burst open. They saw the janitor and a lady, who was about in her early twenties. The janitor excused himself immediately.

“Julio?!” she asked in surprise. “Why are you with Aretha?” There was a hint of anger in her voice.

“Why did you follow me, Kristel?” Julio asked, sighing.

Kristel had been stalking him for months. It started with just being an ordinary fan who would attend his shows, but eventually, Kristel became obsessed with him. She would send him messages and gifts often.

Aretha looked at Julio with questioning eyes. She didn’t know how to react.

“Aretha and I are dating,” Julio answered calmly. Aretha’s heart almost popped out of her chest, but she maintained her composure.

“I haven’t heard of that. I doubt if you could even kiss her. She’s not girlfriend material!” Kristel said, placing her arms across her chest.

Aretha was annoyed by what she heard. She wanted to respond, but she chose to take the high road and just stared at her intently.

“Well, I hope after this, you would stop being my stalker,” Julio told Kristel as he moved closer to Aretha and cupped her chin.

“Aretha, I’m sorry,” he whispered, their faces just inches apart. Aretha felt like her soul separated from her body as he pressed his lips on hers. Her eyes grew bigger and she felt like she was going to faint.

“I hate you, Julio!” Kristel screamed in tears and stormed away.

Julio sighed in relief, but as he turned to Aretha, his jaw dropped.

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She looked like an expressionless mannequin, stuck in a corner.

“Aretha, I apologize for what I did. I was so impulsive. I could not think of any way to get rid of her. She’s some creepy fan who would always bug me,” he explained with an apologetic smile.

“Yeah, you have to pay an additional talent fee. I’m not good at impromptu acting,” she rolled her eyes and walked past him, but her heart was about to explode with joy.

She ran towards her styling room and jumped up and down as if she just won the lottery.

\* \* \*

“Damn! That was such a sweet kiss!” she exclaimed as she collapsed on the couch like a crazy woman.

“Who kissed you?” someone interrupted.

She was startled when she saw Aislin Chavez, her boss, standing by the window. She is a fashion designer, as well as the owner and manager of Hotness Overload Fashion Studio. Its castle-like buildings are the ones that add sparkle to the long stretch of Sorsogon Bay or Rompeolas. Because of these buildings, the Rompeolas is not just famous as a favorite dating spot, but also as the newest fashion haven in the city.

Aislin was keenly observing Aretha. She pouted as Aretha couldn’t collect the right words to say.

“I just watched a *Koreanovel* last night. I couldn’t get over the kissing scene,” Aretha replied. She laughed to hide her nervousness.

“Yeah, that’s coming from someone who’s always heartbroken. You looked crazy a while ago. Anyway, what’s your final plan for the

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fashion show? You attended the City Tourism Meeting yesterday right?” she asked with her usual dominant smile.

Aretha just smiled and ignored her comment. Instead, she opened the sliding windows, revealing the wonderful view of the bay.

“See those lovers seated by the bay? We can create a concept out of them. Ever since this place became everyone’s favorite dating spot, I often recall my teacher teasing a classmate of mine after being caught dating here after school hours. Well, the *pamamasyal sa pier* joke never grows old,” Aretha smiled.

“Okay,” Aislin just sighed.

“Anyway, what I am saying is that the models will crack pili nuts in pairs and hit the runway afterward. Doing so will illustrate what this place is all about. This is popular among lovers and we have to show that while highlighting Sorsogon’s premier product—the pili nut.”

“Fine, but the clothes that I designed for the fashion show are not made in pairs. It will look a lot better if each pair of models will wear the same design of clothes. Well, I think we need the help of Unravel Garments. We will just purchase clothes that are similar to my designs and I will just make some alterations,” Aislin replied.

“Oh no! I mean, don’t worry about it. I have a solution. Just let me take care of that part,” Aretha smiled. Aislin trusts Unravel so much even though she’s aware that most of the clothes they produce are not high-quality ones. Of course, she’s the daughter of the owner.

“We have no choice, Aretha. Even just for this time, let’s rely on fast fashion. They sell affordable clothes. Anyway, it’s just for the fashion show and we can get rid of those clothes afterward,” Aislin said confidently.

“Aislin, please let me handle this,” Aretha said firmly.

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“Fine, I’ll let you do it,” Aislin sighed.

“I guarantee that there will be no issues about the clothes for the runway. Another thing, there will be a choreographer who will also teach them how to crack pili nuts in a classy way,” Aretha smiled, trying to focus on the highlight of the event itself.

“Are the pairs going to feed each other pili nuts too?” Aislin laughed a little.

“Well, why not? We will be having several models. We are also going to invite promising models from the city to join the show,” Aretha said excitedly.

“Hmm, quite good, but I think there should be an icing on the cake. You should join the show as well and be paired with someone!” Aislin suggested.

“Me? But I’m a fashion designer, not a model.”

“But it will have a powerful impact if you join the models. After all, you’re the stylist and people will say that the models wear great clothes and carry them with elegance because of you. On top of that, you will not just be paired with just an ordinary model. You deserve someone with an international modeling record,” Aislin winked.

“Aislin, I don’t like the way you’re thinking,” Aretha said, eyebrows rising with annoyance, but her face was heating up.

“Yes, I am referring to Julio!” Aislin said. “By the way, I heard he’s already here. Did you meet him?”

Just as she was about to answer, there were several knocks on the door.

“Come in!” Aislin said loudly. Aretha’s eyes widened, realizing that it was Julio.

“Oh my, we’re just talking about you!” Aislin said excitedly.

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Aretha glared at her but Aislin continued, “How was your trip? I hope you could join us for lunch.”

“Sure. I’m excited about that. Thanks,” Julio replied. “By the way, can I already check the clothes that I will wear for the runway?” he asked, followed by a grin. Then, he gazed at Aretha.

“Of course, I will show you. I was just discussing something with Aislin,” Aretha replied.

“Yes, I just told Aretha that I will pair you up with her on the runway. Is that fine with you?” Aislin asked quickly.

“Aislin...” Aretha pouted.

“It’s fine with me. I think that’s a great idea,” Julio answered, beaming. His eyes were glistening as well, like it was some good news. Aretha was surprised by his reaction.

“Wow, thanks. I can’t believe you’re not making this difficult for us,” Aislin said. “Being here a week early is truly advantageous. We appreciate you for doing this.”

“Aislin, you know that I always exert my best effort in my work. Besides, there’s a personal reason why I’m here,” he said and his eyes sparkled as he glanced at Aretha. “I hope I can see the wardrobe now,” he added and walked towards the door.

“Yes, I will show you,” Aretha said in excitement as she followed him, but Aislin pulled her hair.

“Is he the one who kissed you?” she whispered.

“What are you talking about?” Aretha whispered back.

“*Makaurag ka!* (You’re so annoying!)” Aislin raised an eyebrow.

“What’s *makaurag*?” Julio asked.

Both of them were startled. They never thought Julio heard it.

“It means beautiful!” Aislin quickly said.

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“All right,” he grinned, and then he finally went out of the room.

“I’ll go now,” Aretha winked at Aislin and walked as fast as she could.

\* \* \*

Aretha finally showed Julio their studio’s walk-in wardrobe room. He was quiet as his eyes wandered around the room. He browsed the accessories displayed in a wall-mounted cabinet. Then, he comfortably opened the drawers for more. He walked towards a rack of clothes and examined them.

“I love this room. It’s quite huge for a new fashion studio. And I’m impressed with your collection,” he finally said.

“Thanks! And I’ll show you more!” she said in a singsong voice and did a twirl in front of the mirror.

“What was that about?” he laughed a little.

“Oh, that’s how we greet our models upon entering this room. I just forgot to do it a while ago,” she reasoned. She quietly congratulated herself for that quick alibi. Who says a 30-year-old like her should stop fangirling?

“I see. I thought you were showing off the details of your dress,” he beamed.

“Well, maybe. I’m proud that I’m wearing Aislin’s creation,” she said as she led him to another clothes rack. “Now, it’s time to check your outfits for the fashion show. We have eight sets in all.”

Before trying them on, he checked every detail of the clothes. He began pulling and rubbing them. He even brought the clothes to the bright spotlight beside the shelf.

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“Sorry, just testing the durability. We always do this in Ecolandia Clothing,” he explained.

“I don’t mind. But wow, you’re working with Ecolandia?” her jaw dropped. It is one of the clothing brands that are members of Nature Swirls, a fashion organization in Asia that promotes sustainable clothing or slow fashion.

“I’m one of the owners. I just don’t tell everyone,” he revealed.

“Oh okay,” she trembled. She felt like he was also there to check whether the clothes he will use are from Unravel Garments. So she started talking about their fashion studio’s objective. “That’s great to know. Our fashion studio is promoting awareness about the disadvantages of fast fashion. We are also supporting sustainable clothing. We are helping out in campaigning against fast fashion because companies promoting such use harmful chemicals on clothes and they are fully dependent on synthetic fibers,” she said beaming, hiding her nervousness.

“I’m glad that you’re one of us. But is it okay with Aislin? Her parents own Unravel Garments Factory, right? I’ve heard they have been producing a lot of clothes, and most of them go to waste. You know how it contributes to climate change and affects one’s health, right?” he said. Aretha was alarmed by what she heard.

“Who told you that?” she asked, whispering. She recalled Unravel’s stock room. It had loads of unused clothes, and Aislin even told her that some of those were to be burned in remote areas.

“I have a reliable source,” he replied. “But don’t worry, I didn’t tell anyone about what I have learned. I just wish that Unravel will not turn out to be just like those folks who disposed of a huge amount of clothing. I guess you heard about the news where a factory dumped thousands of clothes in a desert.”



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“May I know who your source is? That may affect the launch of our fashion school,” she asked anxiously.

“No need. Knowing that your business is promoting awareness about fast fashion means that it’s on the right track. Anyway, Aislin is different from her parents,” he smiled.

“Honestly, they’re not on good terms these days. Her parents want Aislin to manage their business, but she has different beliefs. However, she doesn’t want to expose her parents. I hope you will not do so. Besides, I know that we could convince them to join our campaign soon,” Aretha said with begging eyes. He chuckled in response.

“I always keep my promises, Aretha. I’m already aware of her connection with Unravel even before, but I still chose to help you with your festival’s fashion event,” he revealed.

“Okay, I will hold you to your word,” she beamed.

“Yeah, and don’t worry, I don’t see anything wrong with the outfits you prepared for me. So, let’s proceed. I’ll try them on,” he beamed.

“Sure! Let’s go!” she said excitedly.

\* \* \*

Aretha maintained her good mood as she arrived at the fashion studio the following day. She was whistling and humming as she entered her office because that day, she was scheduled to attend another City Tourism Meeting with Julio. But as she glanced at her heart-shaped desk, there was a mail envelope. She immediately opened it. She was surprised that it came from her boyfriend, Fritz. As

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she continued reading, tears started streaming down her cheeks. In the letter, he broke up with her after two months of not seeing each other. She sat down, trying to fathom why he came up with such a decision. He didn't mention his reasons. While reading his letter again, her assistant, Meriam, came in and reminded her of their meeting. Aretha conditioned herself that she would not think about what happened for a while.

\* \* \*

That night, Hotness Overload Fashion Studio threw a welcome party for Julio. The elegantly decorated gazebos by the bay were filled with guests, including Julio's fellow models who will participate in the festival's fashion show. After speaking with the guests during dinner, Julio noticed that Aretha was all alone, seated by the bay. As he walked towards her, she could sense that she was lonely, as she was just staring at the horizon.

"Excuse me," Julio began. "May I join you?"

Aretha was a bit startled, but she smiled at him. She rubbed her eyes quickly with a handkerchief.

"Sure, you can sit beside me," she said, but she couldn't suppress the shake from her voice.

"Why are you crying?" he asked. "Don't tell me, you're touched by my speech a while ago?"

She chuckled. "I really wish that's the reason," she said. "I'm sorry but I just can't hide my loneliness. My boyfriend just broke up with me through a letter."

"Oh, that's improper. I'm sorry to hear that," he frowned.

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“Thanks. Anyway, the guests may be looking for you. Why don’t you go back to the party? I will be fine,” she said between sobs.

“They can wait. Besides, the night is still young. I want to listen to you,” he smiled.

“Really? Can’t believe you’re this kind. Anyway, I’m sure you’re just going to laugh at me,” she began.

“And why is that?”

“My boyfriend is gay. I knew about it from the start. I’ve always had a soft spot for gay guys since high school. I’m attracted to them and I would even woo them,” she confessed.

He was a bit shocked. His eyes grew bigger in disbelief, but he was controlling his reactions.

“See? I knew you would find me weird,” she pouted.

“It’s not weird. It’s just unusual,” he replied. “You mean you never dated a straight guy before?” he asked.

“Nope. I’ve been in a relationship twice. Both of them with gay guys. Well, I just didn’t give up courting them. Fritz said yes to me because I gave him a ticket to an international concert by a K-Pop boy band. Oh! I’m really stupid!” she said as she kicked a stone in front of her.

“You know, I admire you. Never regret that you have chosen to love that way. But I hope next time, you will allow yourself to be pursued because you’re worth it,” he grinned.

“I guess you’re right. Thanks, Julio,” Aretha said. She tapped his shoulder in return.

“No problem Aretha, always believe that *makaurag ka*,” he said with sincerity in his eyes.

Aretha couldn’t help but laugh. She couldn’t believe that Julio

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really thought that the word *makaaurag* means beautiful, just like what Aislin said. She punched his arm playfully while laughing continuously. Julio was staring at her with a quizzical look.

“What are you laughing at?” he wondered.

“Julio, *makaaurag* means annoying. Aislin told me that the other day because I refused to answer her question,” she explained.

“Both of you tricked me,” he frowned. “Now I am going to think of a nasty *Ilocano* word as my clapback.”

Aretha immediately grabbed her phone waiting for his *Ilocano* word.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m ready with my Gigloom Quick Translator just in case!” She said smiling from ear to ear.

Then he laughed out loud. “That’s the same smile you gave me when I handed you a candy before,” he said, looking at her intently.

Her jaw dropped in confusion. “When was that?” she asked.

“You really can’t remember the first time we met? We met here, by the bay,” he said then she got something from his pocket. It was a folded pink art paper. He handed it to her. She was surprised when she saw the paper doll she made when she was 10 years old. Finally, the past events flashed in her mind again.

\* \* \*

*It was a sunny morning. Aretha ran towards the bay and sat on a bench. She was crying, then someone came near her.*

*“Why are you crying?” a boy asked her.*

*“My teacher sent me out for a while because I kept on doodling in class,” she told him.*

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*“Oh, I see. Here’s a candy. It will make you feel better,” he said as he handed it to her.*

*“Thanks. Let me give this to you in return,” she said, showing him a paper doll. She got her pencil from her satchel and wrote her name on the back of the paper doll.*

*“What am I going to do with this? I am a boy. I don’t play with paper dolls,” he flinched.*

*“Keep it as a remembrance. You made someone smile today. I hope you’ll find me someday and ask me to design your clothes,” she smiled.*

*“Oh, I don’t know. But sure, I’ll keep this,” he said scratching his head. Then, they waved goodbye to each other. She never asked for his name.*

\* \* \*

“Oh, my goodness gracious!” Aretha shouted as she remembered everything.

“Oops, calm down. I guess you recalled it now. I was just 12 back then,” he chuckled.

“Oh my God, this is so unbelievable! But wait, you’re from Baguio, right? So why were you here that time?” she asked.

“It was my uncle’s wedding that day in the Cathedral. It’s just near here, right? Well, I got bored that time, so I escaped for a while and went here. Then, I saw you,” he explained.

“Julio, I just can’t believe that you really kept my paper doll,” she beamed.

“Aretha, honestly, you’re one of the reasons why I am joining this event. I have seen you before on TV, some four years ago. Then, I found out about your fashion studio. I’ve been wishing to work with you because I’m really impressed that you achieved your goal. I have

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high regard for people who work hard for their dreams. I told myself that one day I am going to give back that paper doll to you. Then, when I received an invitation from the City Tourism Council, I guess this is how fate works,” he sighed.

She turned speechless and she could feel her face heating up.

“I’m really amazed that we’re in the same industry. Maybe that paper doll means something,” he continued. “Aretha, this may be too soon, but I want you to know that I can wait till your heart is no longer broken. I could also be gay if that’s what you want,” he said with a twinkle in his eyes.

“Oh, come on, let’s just get back to the party. You must be hungry again!” she replied as she walked ahead of him to hide her happy face.

\* \* \*

“Why is he giving you so much attention?” Aislin asked Aretha a day before the fashion event. She observed that Julio and Aretha were becoming close to each other. They would even spend more time together even after rehearsals.

“Is there something wrong?” Aretha asked. She was hesitant to tell Aislin that she was beginning to develop feelings for Julio.

“I hope that your connection will end after the fashion show tomorrow. I don’t want to burst your bubble, but Julio reported Unravel to Nature Swirls. The organization will investigate my parents,” Aislin said tearfully. She was shaking in anger.

Without hesitation, Aretha went to Julio’s dressing room and asked him about it.

“Aretha, I didn’t do it. I don’t break promises,” he said, shocked by the accusation.

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“Well, I think after the fashion show, we should not see each other again. If you’re just here to flirt with me so you could spy on our business, better get lost!” she said angrily and slammed the door.

\* \* \*

“Ouch!” Aretha screamed in pain. Her finger was pricked by the pin she was holding while making some adjustments to Maria’s evening gown later that day. She was still bothered by what happened.

“You’re thinking of Fritz again?” Maria raised an eyebrow as she went down from the circular platform. Maria is Aislin’s cousin and one of the models for the fashion show.

Aretha just grinned as she went near her again to check the blood stain on the hemline.

“He’s not the one I’m thinking of,” Aretha said with a forced smile. Maria laughed, not convinced of what she heard.

“Maria, by the way, what can you say about the dress I recreated for you the other day? Do you like it?” Aretha asked, changing the topic.

“I love it!” she began. “I love dresses and the one you made elevated my style. Honestly, when mom gave it to me, it was just a simple white gown with long sleeves, but you removed the sleeves and instead, placed a red fur scarf. It reflects my personality. You know, red is loud and passionate. Glad that you reinvented my dress instead of buying a new one for me,” Maria said.

“Of course, we just can’t buy a new dress for every event in our lives. We can still wear our old clothes and just give them a splash of creativity through accessorizing,” Aretha grinned.

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“Yes, I got some belts and ribbons for my loose shirts. Thanks to the Monthly Tips that you share with your clients through e-mails. Those tips make me always chic!” Maria smiled back. “Oh, and I wish that you’ll give Julio a chance.”

“Excuse me?”

“Well, since it’s not Fritz, it might be Julio,” she said laughing.

“I don’t know,” Aretha chuckled.

“Aretha, I know what’s bothering you. Aislin’s parents made it up. They found out that Julio is from Ecolandia and they’re threatened by it. I was there at their house when they told Aislin to inform you that Julio reported them. And if Aislin will not do so, they will not support the establishment of your fashion school,” Maria finally revealed.

Aretha became speechless. She left and quickly searched for Julio, but he was no longer in the studio. When she entered her office, she saw a letter on her desk. Tears filled her eyes when she learned that Julio will not participate in the fashion show anymore.

She tried calling him but he would just cancel her calls. She suddenly remembered their favorite bench by the bay. She rushed outside, hoping that her instinct was right. Her heart skipped when she saw him, but then she realized, that he was walking towards his car and it seemed that he was in a hurry.

“Julio!” she shouted as she ran towards him. But he just ignored her. He stepped inside his car quickly and drove away. She felt bad that he didn’t even hear her out. Disappointed, she broke into tears.

“Aretha!”

As she turned, she saw Aislin standing by the gate. She was smiling devilishly as she clapped her hands mockingly.

\* \* \*



## ONE YEAR LATER

After the festival, Aretha resigned from her job and searched for work abroad. After a year of making herself busy with fashion engagements outside of the Philippines, Aretha went back to her hometown as the owner of the fashion studio after Aislin gave it up.

As she entered her office, she noticed a male paper doll on her desk. She smiled and grabbed it. There was a note on the back of the doll.

*No need to find me. Just meet me by the bay... Love, Julio.*

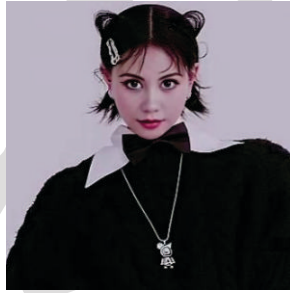
She hastily went outside to meet him. And there he was, waiting for her. Only his warm embrace could heal her emptiness and only his presence could make her happier.

“*Makaurag ka.* You kept me waiting,” she mumbled with a grin while wrapped in his embrace.

“*Makaurag ka man.* You left the country without telling me,” he chuckled. Then they both laughed.

“That’s our new term of endearment, then. But you still have a lot of explaining to do! In my office, now!” she jeered as he gave him a playful slap, but he grabbed her closer to him instead for a prolonged kiss.





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### About The Author

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Ara Despabiladeras-Larosa has been writing stories since she was 11 years old and from then on, she dreams of having her own published book. She is a registered author/writer with the National Book Development Board - Philippines. She is a co-author of PaperKat Books' *Quarantined Thoughts Volume 2*, *Pasko Na Naman (It's Christmastime Again)*, *Dystopia Manila*, and *Deck The Halls*. One of her short stories is included in *Meltdown India's* January 2021 issue. She is also one of the authors of *Swipe Right Volume IV Anthology*.

Ara loves joining writing contests. In fact, last July 2021, she won 7th place in a tragic love story-writing competition, making her winning piece a part of the anthology titled *The Fall of the Zodiac*. Just recently, she got 6th place in a writing contest sponsored by Writing Ethics & Stories Avenue (WESAPH). Because of this, her entry is included in their anthology book *The Colors of Love*.

# 28° and Rising



*By Alfred Figueroa*

**I**t's summer, it's hot, and it's sizzling hot.

“Lucky you, it's D-day for all testosterone-driven, living, and breathing creatures of the human form,” remarks the front desk staff of Cay Beach Resorts as he welcomes a bunch of rowdy young men checking in. His smile extends ear-to-ear.

“What did he say?” asks one of the guys.

“Must be an alien talking to us. Do you see any UFOs parked outside?”

“Whoa!” exclaims one of the guys as he realized what the front desk guy means. Everyone scrambles to dip their toes into the water.

“Wow...”

Outside, it's Wonder Woman and her minions in a face-off

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challenge against each other. Armand watches the girls clad in bikinis playing beach volleyball—sweat dripping down their necks and slipping through their cleavages, and eventually soaking into the small pieces of cloth strapped to their breasts. Their torsos look like pitchers of beer fresh from the refrigerator with all those beads of sweat.

“Hi, friend. I see you’re enjoying the view,” Mark says, tapping Armand from behind.

“No, actually, I was looking at the horizon, imagining where to position my camera to capture the sunset a few hours from now.”

“Heck, liar!”

“It’s true...”

“You see, there is a fine line between imagining and fantasizing. And the latter seems more obvious to me,” Mark says. “Now, do you still protest my observation, huh?”

“You and your dirty mind.”

“Haha! Guilty!”

And the two men slap palms for a high five, laughing.

It is Cay Beach Resort’s sponsored Annual Bikini Open and the contestants are vying for media exposure, which is a plus in the competition. Armand and Mark’s group are coincidentally billeted in the same resort for a break from their busy school life, a delightful turn of events.

“Hey dude, did you notice that chick?” Mark discreetly points with his protruded lips. “She’s been looking your way since you got here. I think she likes you.”

A short distance away, a woman in a red bikini with a see-through satin shawl is lathering lotion on her extremities. Her wide-brim hat

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hardly disguises her meaningful glances.

“Shit! She’s the one I hit with the camera tripod when it fell off the bus overhead compartment.”

“Wow! That must be destiny,” Mark jokes, laughing.

Even from a distance, Elmira intuitively knows she’s the one the two men are talking about. Annoyed by their hissing and high-fives, she stands up and walks towards them.

“Are you stalking me? You’ve been watching me all day!” she says. “Why? Do you have a crush on me?”

Stunned, Armand froze, unable to respond.

“Hi, miss. I’m Mark and this is my friend, Armand,” Mark intervenes, extending his arm for a handshake. “Actually, my friend here is bothered by his conscience about the incident earlier. You know, with you getting hit by his tripod? That’s the reason his gaze is locked on you. My apologies for his clumsiness, I hope I can make it up to you on his behalf. Can I at least offer you something, a drink perhaps?” Mark flashes a naughty grin to his peers nearby, as if to signal: *Hey guys, I have a prey here and am ready to devour, haha!*

“Sorry, Mark but I’m not interested in you,” Elmira fires back within hearing shot of everyone.

Mark feels as if cold water was splashed on his face. “Oh, I see,” he gently backs off as his ego crashes. He manages a fake smile to salvage whatever is left of his ruined reputation as the school’s gigolo.

“Good luck, buddy. She’s all yours,” Mark whispers to his friend before walking away.

Left alone, Armand feels uneasy to start a conversation. Still inexperienced and just about to turn 18, he has never courted girls seriously, much less date. His life revolves around his studies and now,

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suddenly, he is being accused of stalking.

Not far, his peers are watching, cheering.

“Come on, Armand, show us the stuff you’re made of!”

*No, I am not going to be a puppet that these people can play around with,* Armand tells himself. But they are waiting, betting, and expecting him to make the move, Elmira included. And she is getting impatient. *What am I going to do? What am I going to say?*

Elmira draws closer and says, “Hello... I’m asking you a question.” Gentle wind swipes her shawl, lifting and flopping.

*Gosh, but her body. Ohh la la.*

“Hello, anybody home?”

*And her face, her lips...*

“Knock! Knock!”

*Her skin, her hips...*

“FIRE!” Elmira fakes a shriek, grabbing people’s attention.

*Except her attitude. Oh gosh, I hope I’ll survive this conversation.*

“Come on! Are you just going to stare at me? Hellooo...”

Armand can hear his heartbeat, and it sounds like a train chugging. Not far, he knows his peers are giggling behind him; they are probably betting against each other for his next move. Somehow, they know he’s still inexperienced, action speaks louder than words. His knees start shaking.

“Look, miss, I’m really sorry about the incident earlier. I acknowledge my fault. I should have been more careful,” Armand recites without a blink. No pauses. No emotions. He sounds as if he is Siri, the AI voice behind the popular tech brand. And it comes as no surprise; Armand is an IT student at a top university in Manila, an accelerated student, a nerd trying to fit into the world of normal and

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more mature people. Ironically, he recently joined a fraternity led by Mark and he is here today for the initiation.

“Is that all you can say? Are you not even going to treat me to a drink? Coffee perhaps or something? Look, I can sue you for injury. I can choose to have an X-ray or an MRI in the hospital, and charge you for the cost. How’s that?”

*Gosh, is she for real?* For Armand, she is simply incomprehensible, operating outside the parameters of his world. She’s not binary, not a YES or NO, True or False. She’s like a quantum computer—everything is a possibility.

\* \* \*

By late afternoon, Armand is missing the sunset he had been waiting for. Instead, he and Elmira are now seated inside the resort’s only coffee shop that doubles as a bar at night, sipping coffee amidst the sweltering temperature.

“You’re something. Going against tradition, preferring hot coffee over iced juice in this simmering afternoon,” Armand tells her.

“Yeah, you can say that. I’m always against traditions.”

“Does it extend to all aspects?”

“Pretty much, I believe. I support gender equality, the LGBTQ community, and stuff.”

“That is not against tradition, but yes, if you belong to another culture.”

“Do you like music?” Elmira cuts him off as the live band starts to play their first set.

“Perhaps.”

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Elmira passes a quick note to the waiter.

“We have a song request here,” the lady vocalist announces. “It’s a song from the movie, *Fifty Shades of Grey*.”

And the band starts playing *Love Me Like You Do*, while the lead vocalist struts some sexy moves as she performs.

“You must like that movie, huh?” Armand coyly asks.

“Yeah, I like the characters.”

“I’m sure you like Dakota Johnson’s character, she’s super sexy in the movie.”

“No, actually, it’s Jamie Dorman that I like. I like to live his fantasy.”

Armand gulps and turns jittery.

“It’s a joke, of course! By the way, you haven’t asked for my name. I’m Elmira.”

Armand acknowledges with a forced smile, and reciprocates while adjusting his thick eyeglasses, “And I’m...”

“I know it’s Armand. I heard your friend call you that. Do you always wear those thick eyeglasses? You would look more ravishing without it,” Elmira reaches for Armand’s face and pulls off his eyeglasses.

“There you go. Perfect!”

*Mind your hormones, lady. I can smell it,* Armand’s brain retorts.

And as if Elmira can read his thoughts, she says, “You must understand, I have no filter and your eyeglasses seems like a barrier hiding your soul.” Next, Elmira draws her face closer to his. He can already smell her breath, startling something inside of him.

*Now, whose hormone are you talking about?* his conscious mind asks him. Armand gulps, his body temperature heating up.



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Elmira is still not done. She cups his face and stares at his eyes. “You see, I’m quick to pick up. I’m not your typical girl next door. I’m kind of the straightforward kind. I say exactly what I want to say and expect the other person to do the same. I will be honest, I like you.”

Armand almost falls off his chair, his face turns pale.

“What do you say to that?” Elmira asks.

Armand seeks an escape route. He sips his coffee fast, forgetting that it’s hot. “Shit!” he blurts out.

“All right, I take that for a no.”

“No-no-no, it’s not you. It’s the coffee—it’s hot.”

“So, it means it’s yes? You like me too?”

Armand is lost in the spontaneity of events. If he says no, his peers will think he’s a loser. *No man could ever reject a woman with a face and body like that*, he tells himself. And if his peers learn about it, he will never hear the end of it, Mark especially, since he is the biggest bully of all.

But Elmira seems weird.

“Y-yes, but let’s keep a low profile for a while until we are sure of our feelings,” Armand replies while really thinking of ghosting her once they’re back in Manila.

“That’s fine with me, babe,” Elmira replies, clutching his arms.

*Gosh, she now calls me babe when we only met hours ago.*

Elmira steals a kiss and smacks him on the lips.

Armand is shocked. *Gentle, gentle, dear, I’m still a virgin*, Armand’s nerd brain sends a non-verbal message to the ecstatic Elmira who doesn’t care about the world watching. *Gosh, her lips... So soft.* Armand is trying to calm his breathing. *I didn’t know it could feel like that.*

“Did you like it?” Elmira excitedly asks, nuzzling her face onto

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the tip of his nose. Her hand is smoothing up and down his back and landing on his butt.

Ticklish, Armand suddenly twists. “Two more café americano here,” he calls out in such a boisterous voice, not exactly in his character.

“Coming, sir,” the waiter replies.

“Haha! What’s the rush? I thought you go for iced-cold fruit drinks? Did I influence you? I think I owe you another kiss for the second cup.”

“Sorry, guys. Change my order to refillable, unlimited coffee, please,” he unwittingly utters.

Elmira laughs, “Smart move, I love it!” She kisses him for the second time, much longer this time.

Armand twists again, feeling the sensation that runs through his skin and down his belly.

“That was for the second cup, babe...” Elmira whispers.

“Oh, wow!” Armand murmurs after coming down from an incredible high.

She pulls his hand and places it on her leg. “Now this is down payment for our would-be coffee farm...” she adds, her voice soft and husky.

*Steady there, Armand,* Armand tells himself. He closes his eyes and waits for the moment. *Oh gosh. I never thought it could be this good.*

Suddenly, Elmira pulls back and says, “On second thought, I think I better reserve it after our wedding.”

“The wedding?” Armand freaks out. *Heck, not so fast, lady.* He has never thought about it. After all, he’s just about to turn 18.

\* \* \*

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*Haha, my scheme is working perfectly, Elmira congratulates herself. These chauvinistic pigs! They think all women are simply toys to play with. I will show them the world has changed, and the playing field is now equal. I will make you fall head over heels, and then I will dump you like shit.*

Elmira actually had Mark in mind, despising his arrogance and his conceited attempt to make her his trophy in a bet that she will fall for him easily with his outdated trick. But Mark seems like a virtuoso in the field, and Armand looks like their weakest link.

*Am I worth just a cup of coffee? An easy girl to pick up? Well, you're wrong! Watch me as I trample your ego, Mr. Airhead, and your gang of minuscule brains.*

\* \* \*

“Babe, can you unzip my dress, please?” Elmira says, showing off her Jennifer Lopez-inspired dress. Since their coffee date, Elmira would dress up scantily, revealing her body figure while basking in the sun, playfully flirting with Armand who, most of the time, is stoic. Enamored, Armand tails Elmira like a personal assistant of a famous movie star. He often looks embarrassed by the people staring. And every day, Mark and his male friends swoon over, ever envious of Armand’s luck, constantly chiding him for some progress with their imagined scorecard. “Come on, man! Strike while the iron is hot!” they would say.

Three days passed and finally, it is now time for them to leave when news broke that a landslide occurred nearby, blocking the only road accessing the resort.

“But it’s summer. How can there be landslides when there is no rain?” Armand asks.

“Some mining activities near the road going to the resort cause

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loosening of the soil. That's what causes the landslides," a resort staff explains.

"No, please, we must make it back to Manila on time," Armand pleads.

"Don't worry, babe, we will get to the city on time," Elmira comforts Armand.

But how could he take her word when he knows that, realistically, it is impossible for them to return to Manila with the situation on hand? She may have surprised him in some ways, such as turning out to be the head judge in the Annual Bikini Open competition when he expected her to be a contestant; or knowing much about the local culture, tradition, and social issues better than his professor in humanities or social sciences. She can also talk endlessly about fashion, the arts, and just about everything. But their current predicament is different. They need a bulldozer to free up the road from rocks and other debris from the landslide.

"Tomorrow is my mom's 50th birthday, and for the first time in 10 years, our family will be complete again," Armand explains. "My father just arrived from Saudi Arabia, and they're expecting me to be home for the occasion. I'm dead."

Something struck Elmira. *This guy is different*, she tells herself. She can't help but re-examine her scheme. *Am I being too harsh?*

Somehow, she felt a pinch of jealousy when Armand mentioned his mom. Unconsciously, she wants to become part of a family again; she wants to be loved.

She tries to reason with herself. *I'm not really being vindictive. I only want a fair play. If they can do it, I can do it too!*

Elmira had been a victim of sexual harassment. While she was

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still a working student, she attended a small party at their office for passing an audit check. Her drunk boss patted her butt. She was shocked, but the other ladies made no reactions and, instead, tried to influence her not to make it an issue.

“But it’s not just a pat! He grabbed me by the butt,” she reasoned.

“It’s just one of his funny tricks. He does that, especially to the newbies. There’s no malice. Just be careful next time. Don’t get close to him when he’s drunk,” one of her office mates said.

And she wants revenge since then; a pay-off to all his kind.

*No malice as you said, bub*, Elmira tells herself as she recalls her acts with Armand at the coffee shop cum resto-bar when she grabbed his butt. She didn’t expect Armand’s reaction that afternoon though. Armand seemed to enjoy her abuse instead. *What is the matter with men? They don’t seem to care about others touching their bodies?*

Besides the sexual harassment with her former boss, Elmira had three failed relationships, and felt she was taken advantage of because of her naïve looks.

“Men like it hot. They all have a fetish for voluptuous boobs and big butts. They usually forget their commitments once they see an object of desire. That’s why you should always keep yourself alluring if you want to keep your man,” a friend advised her once.

“Men are all the same,” she said then. And from then on, she learned to transform herself over time into a sophisticated and liberal-minded fashion icon. She made everyone drool with her fashion choices, preferring daring clothes—the Jennifer Lopez style—and making every venue her runway. It’s her way to assert her power and impress everyone with her confidence.

*Time to know who you’re dealing with...*

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And now is the time to make a change in this chauvinistic, male-dominated society. She would make them all fall for her, one at a time. She would seduce them to break their commitments with their partners, and then dump them. She would get their hearts broken, smashed into pieces, and their egos splattered all over the road.

And Armand is first on the list, an easy prey.

*But there is something about him. He's different,* she thinks now.

Elmira knows her weakness and knows how to avoid it. But she is now exposed to the dangers of her own making. Elmira naturally gravitates towards men who care and value their parents. It was her way to measure any serious relationship to go further. If a man couldn't show care to his parents, who is she to merit his affection when they are not even blood-related?

"I promise we'll make it home. You'll see," Elmira tells Armand. This time, there's an amount of sincerity to her word. *Shit, I am self-destructing...*

"No, you don't understand," Armand replies, sounding desperate.

"Babe, I'm getting irritated. You're belittling my ability." Actually, what she's saying in her head is this: *You're being too much of a mama's boy! Stop your tantrums and grow up, or I'll kick you back to your mother's uterus!*"

But the sound of his pleading is music to her ears. She imagines him clinging to her like a baby, and she loves the thought of it! She wants her man to show some vulnerability. For her, that's what makes humans, well, human.

*The next day*

"Babe, are you ready to go?"

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“What? Where?” Armand asks.

“Home, of course.”

Suddenly, loud engine noise can be heard approaching the resort and, soon, a private helicopter landed.

“Babe, do you have a fear of heights?”

Armand couldn’t believe it. He grabs his things and hops in any way without a second thought. It’s his chance to make it home on time.

*Who are you, really? Armand asks Elmira in his head. A scion of a wealthy family or perhaps someone like the female version of the character in your favorite movie, Fifty Shades of Grey?*

“Here, babe, place this over your eyes so you won’t get dizzy with the height,” Elmira says, passing him a blindfold as the chopper takes off.

Armand is taken aback. It reminds him of something, a scene in the movie. *No way... I think I have already seen this part. What could be next, a whip?*

“Come on, babe, that will help. You may want to secure your hand on the strap above your seat. It’ll make you comfortable once we experience some turbulence.”

The pilot grins.

*A handcuff version? Oh dear, I think this is it. Goodbye, innocence,* Armand tells himself.

\* \* \*

At nine o’clock in the morning, the chopper lands on the helipad of a high-rise condo building in Makati City. Armand gets off and

## LOVE IN STYLE

waves goodbye to Elmira.

\* \* \*

“Happy birthday, mom,” Armand greets wryly. “Sorry I just arrived. My friends and I were supposed to come home last night but something happened...”

“What happened, son? Are you all right? Are you sick?”

“I’m fine,” Armand responds. His knees are shaking, his hair is a mess, and his clothes are creased.

“What are those in your neck? Are they kiss marks?” his mother teases.

“Mom, please, it’s a long story,” Armand says. Actually, the reddish spots on his neck appear every time he gets excited or extremely afraid. It is something congenital, and his mother is aware of it. But this time, her mother seems to want her son to explain what pushed him to the extreme.

Armand checks his watch, it is now past 11 in the morning. He could have arrived earlier, but his sense of balance took some time to return. He has a phobia of heights, and the chopper experience made him feel like swirling and spinning out of control even after they have landed. Also, he just couldn’t leave Elmira behind without giving her his heartfelt gratitude. All throughout the chopper ride, she kept to herself. Armand was just being paranoid. Blame it on the movie!

“Thank Governor Bobby Fortuna for giving us a lift,” Elmira explained when they landed on the helipad. “He is the owner of the resort.”

“Whoa! He must be rich.”

“Yes. And he also owns this condo building.”



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“Is he here to welcome you?” Armand asked with a pinch of jealousy.

“No, we left him at the resort.”

“Oh, I didn’t notice, probably because I didn’t know him.”

“You’re right. It’s also because he’s very down-to-earth. He dresses very simply so you wouldn’t notice him.”

Her words made Armand shift focus and note the dress she was wearing. “Do you have a coat or something?”

“Why?”

Armand thought that Elmira’s dress was too revealing.

“Don’t look at me that way. I have to dress up for the occasion. What do you want me to wear? A Maria Clara-like dress in a Bikini Open competition? Besides, I am helping conserve nature by dressing scantily,” she explained.

Armand looked confused so she continued, “I am consuming less fabric. Less manpower. And that translates to less power consumption, less carbon emissions, and less plant consumption to make fabric.”

“What are you saying?”

“It’s my advocacy. Fashion to me is a form of self-expression. I’m a minimalist, I believe less is more.”

“But we’re in Makati, people here are all corporate-looking. Some people may interpret you and your dress differently.”

“Like what? That I’m an attention seeker? Maybe they’re right. Look, I got your attention.”

Armand didn’t want to argue further. Before going to his family’s condo unit, he accompanied her to her flat first to make sure she got home safe. Elmira lives solo.

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“Thank you, babe,” Elmira said. Feeling awkward now, she didn’t invite him inside.

*That’s it? Not even a peck on the cheek? Or a bonus if it lands on the lips?* Armand thought while remaining in his post, as if waiting for it to happen.

“Go now. You’ll be late for your mom’s birthday.”

Armand said goodbye and took the elevator to his family’s unit. He felt a little bit disappointed.

\* \* \*

“Good to have you back in time, son,” his mother says when he returns from his room. “Food is ready, but you missed something. A few minutes ago, a helicopter passed low and circled the building three times. It had a banner that said “Happy birthday to the world’s greatest mother-in-law, Bebang De la Cruz.”

His mother continues, “I wonder who that is? The neighbors thought I am planning to run for the local elections, and they all cheered. I was shocked. I suppose it’s for another Bebang De la Cruz living in the building.”

Unknown to Armand, Elmira converted some used tarpaulins from the just concluded competition into a birthday banner.

“Wow! That’s great, mom,” Armand says, acting surprised and not wanting to arouse suspicion.

Of course, he didn’t know about the banner until now. He saw the tarpaulin during their chopper ride home, but had no idea what was written on it. It was Elmira’s idea after learning the reason for his edginess to go home.

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“Must be a joyous moment for you, mom,” Armand adds.

“But I am sure it wasn’t for me. Perhaps it’s for another Bebang Dela Cruz, my namesake living in this same neighborhood.”

“Mom it must really be meant for you. You are an active civic worker and, perhaps, your contribution is noticed by somebody of power who wanted to surprise you. Except, perhaps, there must be some misunderstanding about some of the words printed in the tarpaulin...”

“I am beginning to suspect you know something about it,” his mother says. “First, you’re late to come home. Maybe you have a hand in planning all this? Second, those reddish spots on your neck... They don’t come out unless you’re under stress.”

His mother’s eyes pierce into his soul and Armand stutters, “But the mother-in-law thing, I don’t get it. I am an only child.”

“The banner isn’t even machine printed. It’s obviously handwritten. And to make that mistake, it’s totally unimaginable. It must really be intended.”

“Maybe because it’s a rushed job?”

“Really? Such a petty excuse. And how did you know it’s really meant for me?”

“Mom, you are overthinking,” Armand reasons. “It must be a simple mistake or a joke perhaps.”

“Don’t play games with me, son. Did you secretly get married while you’re away?”

“Mom this is getting to be ridiculous.”

“Ridiculous as it may be, you answer me...”

“Okay, mom. You’re right. Maybe there’s another Bebang De la Cruz in this neighborhood,” Armand says while secretly cussing

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Elmira. *I hate you, Elmira! I would like to kill you right now.*

*A week later at Armand's school*

“Good morning sweetie,” Armand says holding a bouquet of flowers.

Elmira turns and says, “No-no-no. It’s a mistake.”

“What is a mistake?”

“I didn’t know you’re a student here!”

“So? What if you’re a professor and I’m a student? We belong to different colleges anyway. You’re in Behavioural Science teaching psychology and I’m in Information Technology and Engineering.”

Noticeably absent are Armand’s eyeglasses as he now sports contact lenses. His hair is a clean, crew-cut dyed brown. His jeans, skin fit.

“But... You’re just 18!”

“Eighteen next month to be exact,” Armand replies. “It’s just a few days from now and you’re invited to my birthday party.”

“Oh gosh, this isn’t right. What have I done?”

“Well, that’s just my chronological age but I have a mental age of 30 according to my IQ score.” Actually, it’s higher, but Armand prefers 30 to bridge the gap.

“We have to end this stupidity! A teacher-student relationship is a no-no in all universities and learning institutions,” Elmira pleads.

“All right, but there is always life outside the university where we can be real,” insists Armand.

“Stop it already, please...”

Armand takes out a glossy fashion magazine and reads a passage

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out loud, “Doctor Elmira Monticello, PhD, renowned public speaker, professor of psychology, and a fashion icon, recognized as the Philippines next sex-guru after Margarita Holmes. At just 27, she sat as a judge in the recently concluded Cay Beach Resort-sponsored Annual Bikini Open.”

Elmira’s eyes widen when she sees her picture in the magazine with Armand in the background. “No! No! Keep that magazine away! We’re not supposed to be seen together.”

“But it’s just a coincidence.”

“I must admit, what happened at the resort, it’s not for real. It’s all part of my academic research for a book I am writing,” Elmira explains.

“Come on! Don’t give me that excuse. Where is the spirit? We love breaking traditions, don’t we? It’s time to walk the talk,” Armand breaks into a song and dance. “Love me like—”

Elmira covers her eyes and says, “Oh gosh, I can’t look at you. What have I done? What have you become? I’m totally embarrassed! Stop it!”

“But that’s your favorite song, right?”

“I lied.”

Armand pauses, “What else is a lie? Have I been played?”

“I’m sorry, babe. There can’t be an us...”

“Why?”

“It’s not you, it’s me. I mean, right now...” Elmira says, glancing at the girls passing by. “I like the song *The Prayer* by Placido Domingo better.”

“I don’t get it.”

“Look, we might be looking at a scandal... This is a case of

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corruption of a minor. I need all the prayers to get through this mess.”

“What are you talking about?” Armand asks softly.

“I am sorry, kid. I didn’t know you’re a minor.”

“No, I am not a kid,” protests Armand.

“But in the eyes of the law, your mental faculty doesn’t matter. You’re still a minor and I didn’t know that. With your body built and with your circle of friends, I was fooled by the circumstances and didn’t realize you’re a minor. I think I must have overstepped and gone a little wild that night.”

“But you love me, right? We can find ways to save our relationship. You know, we’re bright people. We can circumvent the rule and maintain our relationship, right? Besides nobody knows about our affair,” Armand insists, except he thinks, *Well, except for Mark and Bobby and Richard and Manny and Marcus and Mike and Miguel and Ronald...*”

“Shit!” Armand curses.

“It’s really all for the book I am writing.”

“But... But that’s not the way I feel. I feel there’s authenticity in our kiss, and I’m not ready to settle with your book excuse.”

“What do you want me to do? You want me to name you on the Acknowledgement page to validate that it is all for sake of academic studies?”

“Yes, I demand it. But due to the sensitivity of the topic that may violate my right to privacy. You need to secure my waiver. And since I’m still a minor, you’ll need to convince my mom. Until then, we are on status-quo, in other words, we’re still on.”

“Your mischievous mind!”

“Your mischievous lips! Where is your sense of accountability

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after what you have done?”

“Well, hello there, I am a professor and my job is to teach. I just taught you what life is about. Isn’t that good to learn?”

“Then teach me more about life.”

“I have already taught you the ABCs of life. It’s time now for you to make your own sentence, your statement.”

“Err... Okay. I LOVE YOU, TEACHER!”

And Elmira bursts into laughter.

\* \* \*

As the semester ends, Elmira makes a decision. She leaves teaching behind to concentrate on public speaking engagements and book writing. Her latest book, *The Sexual Sensitivity of the Filipino Male* becomes a best seller. Occasionally, she tries her hand at fashion reviews, all to keep their relationship with Armand going. Armand, on the other hand, breezes through his studies, inspired.





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## About The Author

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Alfredo Figueroa or Fred is a photo hobbyist by day and a storyteller by night who loves watching Korean telenovelas in between writing.

He is a self-published author of the books *Signal of Transcendence*, *The Snake Island Experience*, and one of the authors of three anthology books: *Journey to Eight Realms*, *Silent Nights and Happy Ever Afters*, and *They are Watching Vol. VI*. He is a member of Alpha Camera Club and a National Book Development Board registered author.

Fred is a graduate of Bachelor of Science in Commerce at Technological Institute of the Philippines (TIP), Manila, and a holder of a Diploma in Business Administration at De La Salle University-Dasmariñas.



# The Legend of Sam Sungit



By R.J. T. Vargas

“**L**arge cheesecake and pearl milk tea for Sam!”

“Thank you!” Sam rushes to grab her order.

“Sorry miss, but do you have Php40?” the barista asks. “So I can give you Php400 *po*.”

“Wait, I already gave you Php500. Why are you asking for another Php40?”

“Well, umm... Your order costs Php140. Your change is Php360. So if I give you Php400, you need to give me Php40,” he explains.

“Oh, okay. Sorry, I wasn’t myself for a moment...” Sam replies. “I hate Math more than the guy who made my trust issues worse, haha!” Both giggle awkwardly.

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Sam looks at her valuables and checks if she didn't leave anything back at her condo. A huge suitcase and a bulky backpack—check! Sam sighs, “*Hay*. I better get an assistant once I have the extra budget.”

Amid her busy schedule, she takes a bite of her take-out burger and a sip from her cheesecake and pearl milk tea. She had forgotten, in her panic this morning, that she needed to look her best for her first major event. But for now, Sam must make sure that she's full, getting her sugar fix from her favorite milk tea. It's all part of the ritual to help her focus on a crazy, hectic day.

From what she read in last week's email, she would be assigned to the country's next rising male model.

Sam examines her reflection in her handheld mirror. Her makeup is still on fleek. She fixes the tulip pendant on her gold necklace and makes sure her lunch didn't ruin her white blouse, dark brown pants, and dusty pink cardigan.

She sighs deeply and tells herself, “Let's fucking go, bitch! Today's the BIG day!”

It's her first big break in the fashion industry as a young stylist who's still building her portfolio. She just needs to ensure that everything goes smoothly today.

After leaving the milk tea shop on the fifth floor of Building A, she proceeds to the Trade Hall Event Center in Building B of a mall located somewhere between Metro Manila and Rizal.

“Excuse me, ma'am? Model *po ba kayo* ng product launch *dito*?” the guard asks Sam to show her ID pass.

“No... I—I'm the stylist,” Sam replies.

“Okay, ma'am. *Pasok na po kayo.*”

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The Trade Hall Event is jam-packed with hundreds of attendees. It's one of the anticipated launches for a female-designed scooter unit this year. The number of attendees isn't surprising. First, the government has already loosened the safety protocols for mass gatherings after a series of pandemic lockdown in the past years; and second, it's because of the strikingly hot and handsome Filipino-Canadian male model gracing the event.

Sam couldn't help but be impressed with the overall look of the event. The stage has an aesthetic production design. The shades and gradients of purple, pink, and blue used in the overall designs seem like it's inspired by a rainbow sherbet. The speakers surrounding the venue blasted pop songs from popular Western male and female artists.

The colorful lights and bubble machine add to the playful and flamboyant theme of the event. There are interactive booths like instant photos and virtual reality games from other sponsors. The food booths are offering delicious arrays of easy-to-grab meals like pizza, hotdogs, waffles, corndogs, donuts, milk teas, and more.

It's meant to capture the young female demographic of the brand's target market. Not to mention, the young Filipino-Canadian male model is a sure eye-candy treat for these ladies. Sam remembers that he came back home to the Philippines after his charming stunt in a reality dating show.

As she makes her way through the crowd, Sam notices the audience is a mix of female college students in their early 20s and professional ladies in corporate attire in their late 20s. The event will start in four hours, but a lot of these girls got here way too early.

It seems like they're either here for the special launch discount

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promotion of the scooter or to get a closer look at the male model. Of course, most of them are probably here for the latter.

At last, she arrives backstage.

“I’m looking for Mr. Xavier Clyde McLaren and his manager Mr. Kennedy Strahm,” she tells the tall, middle-aged man with a neat, long-sleeved black polo shirt and white tie approaching her. “I’m the fashion stylist assigned to him.”

“Oh, hello dear! Did you say you’re the fashion stylist? Nice to meet you! I’m Kennedy Strahm. Ken for short.”

“Hi, Sir Ken! Yes, I’m Samantha Alessandra Venecia, but please just call me Sam. I’ll do my best today!”

Ken smiles. “Hey, Xavier! Come here!” he alls Xavier over to introduce him to Sam. “Make him the most handsome guy for this event! I’m counting on you, Sam! Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to take an urgent call,” he mumbles, squeezing his shoulder. “Xavier, be nice to her.”

Sam finally meets the Filipino-Canadian model every girl in the event raves about. He’s way taller than her, considering she’s already 5’4”. She’s only at his shoulder level. His biceps and abs are prominently noticeable beneath his white muscle shirt. From where Sam stands, he’s even more handsome and charming. His face is as gentle as an angel’s, but he grins devilishly. It’s hard to read what’s on his mind because of how he looks.

He extends his hand to shake Sam’s. And when their hands touched, Xavier pulls her towards him to hug her. Sam blushes and steps back.

“Sorry, that’s just my way of greeting cute and pretty girls like you. I like your dark brown eyes, it’s very expressive. *Nagulat ba kita?*”

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“*Sir* Xavier, I’m here as your fashion stylist! Nothing more, nothing less.”

“Of all the pretty girls I greeted that way, you’re the only one who rejected me,” Xavier chuckles out loud. He leans in to look at her face. Sam looks away to avoid locking eyes with him.

“Wow, you’re even prettier up close,” Xavier adds. “With your looks, it’s impossible you’re not dating anyone.”

“Do you want to check the outfits I prepared for you? Where’s your dressing room?”

“Changing the topic, huh?” Xavier teases. “So, I assume you have a boyfriend...”

“Well, *Sir* Xavier, I’m single,” Sam replies irritably, making sure to emphasize the word ‘sir’. “But that’s none of your concern. Can we please focus and get to work now?”

“Woah! Chill! Can’t we have a little fun and relax? We have a few more hours before the event starts. And your beauty, is, well, legendary! Introducing...the legend of Sam *sungji!* Hahaha!”

Sam sighs and picks up her things. She asks Xavier to bring her to his dressing room. She wants to work professionally and not flirt with a guy who looks like he’s been breaking girls’ hearts with his charming and cocky words.

“So, here’s your gradient blue jacket, white polo shirt, black chino shorts, and sneakers. If you don’t like them, I prepared two more outfits for you.”

“I’m good with this. I trust a pretty girl’s choice of fashion. Can you help me dress up?”

“Excuse me? I’m a fashion stylist, not your personal assistant.”

Xavier laughs out loud as he can’t help but adore Sam’s

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personality. *This girl's not easily smitten*, he tells himself. He likes to be challenged and pursue a girl who seems not interested in him.

“Cheer for me later at the event, Sam *Sungi!* I'll wear this outfit with confidence! Thank you, babe!” He smiles brightly at her.

\* \* \*

She waits backstage from start to finish. As much as she wants to watch the show, she can't leave her valuable things behind. She doesn't have an assistant to look after them. After the event, Mr. Strahm calls for Sam and gives negative feedback on his talent's outfit. Disappointed, he still pays for her service, but insists he won't recommend her to anyone in his network.

Sam smiles, apologizes, and packs her things so she can immediately leave the venue. She gets annoyed and frustrated that she quickly picks up her phone to rant to someone she trusts.

She texts her best friend Crystal:

They're asking for a miracle!! Oh, c'mon! Does the manager want a more sophisticated look with a LIMITED BUDGET on a LIMITED TIMEFRAME? Do they want me to spend my own money or do some magic? It's so unfair! UGH!

Crystal responds with a voice message through their favorite chat app. “Sammie! I know you're irritated because you prepared so much for this event. But we can't change what happened. Just do your best next time! AAAHH! I know what will make you feel better! Let's go *tiangge* shopping in Taytay next weekend! G?”

\* \* \*

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Sam and Crystal are betting on how many items they can buy with the Php1,000 budget at the famous Taytay *tiangge*, a local bazaar where you can get Instagrammable but affordable OOTDs (outfit of the day) compared to malls or fashion boutiques.

Despite the scorching heat today, the best friends are excited about their so-called shopping therapy. Every stall has its own special offers like denim pants, walking shorts, cocktail dresses, men's shirts, mom and baby *terno* clothes, and so many more. Some sections of the *tiangge* have better ventilation, with huge ceiling fans, but others don't. Most stall owners are kind and accommodating, but others are not attentive at all.

For first-timers, it can be very confusing because the bazaar isn't really that organized. The stalls are not arranged based on what the buyers need, unlike in department stores where areas are labeled for men's, ladies', or kids' wear. So, good luck to *tiangge* buyers finding what they exactly need and if they want to go back to a previous stall they passed by.

Apart from the affordable clothes, there are also vendors selling eco-bags, bottles of mineral water, *turon*, rice cakes, and *carioca*. On the sidewalks, you can get your fill of other street food favorites such as fishball, fried calamari, barbecue, hotdog, *buko* juice, and more.

Those who are not used to navigating the famous Taytay *tiangge* might pass out because of the hot weather and crowded areas. But for some who have a tight budget, this place is a great getaway for OOTD shopaholics. The clothes are sold cheap, but the quality is good given the price range. In fact, Sam even heard stories of how some business owners pirate tailors and seamstresses from other business owners in Taytay because of their dedication to producing cheap but good

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quality clothing items.

While in the middle of shopping, Sam suddenly remembers last night's news report. "I think I'll just buy a few shorts," she tells Crystal. "I feel guilty buying a lot of new clothes."

"Don't worry about splurging for yourself. That's your hard-earned money," Crystal assures her best friend.

"More than 53 million tons of fiber are produced for the fashion industry every year and out of that number, 70% is totally wasted! Saw it in the news last night!"

"You mean straight to the landfill?"

"Yup! And a lot of them go straight to the ocean! In short, fast fashion creates a huge impact on the environment and climate change," Sam explains while staring pensively at the rows of *tiangge* items in front of her.

"Sammie, you've been decluttering and sending your clothes to charity. I don't think you're adding to the problem of fast fashion. I know you so well."

"But..."

"You're overthinking again," Crystal continues. "You know how to style and recycle your clothes. You rarely even buy for yourself unless I tell you to." Crystal pulls Sam to the next stall selling pastel-colored and neutral shades shorts. "I remember your chic tips, Sammie! I love all my white shirts and you said to just pair them with neutral shades like mocha, tan, or cream."

"Pastel-colored shorts will also match well, as long as there are no big, printed designs on the white shirt."

"I like adding accessories too, like rings, bracelets, chokers, and anklets," Crystal shares.



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“Right! Just avoid overdoing it,” Sam replies. “Crystal, you’re confidently chic, so your fashion style speaks for yourself. If you feel boyish on some days, mix your white shirt with jeans and a cap.”

“I feel so bad for getting free tips from the future, sought-after celebrity fashion stylist!”

“*Ganda*, three for Php200 *na lang o*. Go! Go! Go!” the stall owner interrupts their conversation and tries to hard-sell her items. “Please don’t make *tawad na*. No! No! No!”

Sam turns around to stop herself from laughing. She’s tempted to say the other iconic line of a Filipina comedienne the stall owner is impersonating. Crystal makes a face to tease her best friend to stop holding her laughter. Sam bursts out laughing, slaps Crystal’s arms, and shouts, “Stop it! I hate you!”

Crystal laughs harder and pulls her best friend’s hair. This makes them laugh even more and they end up buying the Php200-worth of items from the stall owner.

When they’re about to visit the next stall, Sam’s phone vibrates in her pocket. She checks it and sees a new email. Crystal tells her to open it because, who knows, it might be the next project her friend is waiting for. Sam opens the email and her face changes expression. From just laughing just a few seconds ago, she’s now visibly pissed.

“Are you okay?” Crystal asks.

“They want to work with me again.”

“Who? The unappreciative manager and the arrogant model?!” Crystal exclaims. “Say NO! THANK YOU! *Ganun!*”

“The email’s from Xavier, the model. He said he’s sorry for his manager’s attitude and offered to pay me double my previous rate.”

“You’ll get better clients. Let that go. *Sakit lang sa ulo ‘yan.*”

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“I want to... But Crystal, my bills are piling up,” Sam reasons. “I’m still adjusting to living independently from my parents. I hate asking for money from them. What should I do?”

\* \* \*

Sam enters a 1,000-capacity auditorium of an all-girls school located in Katipunan, Quezon City. Xavier’s next project is a TV commercial. She finds it weird why his client’s next project is an ad for a sanitary napkin. It’s common for female celebrities to star in TV ads for several brands.

The state-of-the-art equipment inside the auditorium is either all-new or well-maintained, including the AC units. Sam begins to shiver and doesn’t notice someone standing behind her until this person puts an oversized jacket on her shoulders.

“You’re too early for your call time,” a deep, caring voice mutters.

Sam turns around and sees Xavier. She’s about to take off the jacket when the Filipino-Canadian model touches her chin, holds her head higher, leans in closer to her ear, and whispers, “Let me be nicer to you this time, Sam. Please don’t make it so hard for me or else...”

“OR ELSE WHAT, XAVIER?!” She slaps his hand away from her face. Her blood starts to boil. She doesn’t like to be treated like a damsel in distress and being carried away by his charm, good looks, sweet antics, and flowery words.

He whistles, brushes his hair with his right hand, and smiles lovingly at Sam. In a matter of days, Xavier goes from acting so smug to working her up with his expressive, pleading eyes. Now, it’s even harder to read his real intentions. “Or else I’ll fall in love with you,” the model adds.

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An awkward silence falls between them. But at the back of Sam's mind, she wants to slap him so hard that he'll wake up from the illusion of his arrogance. She's not like other girls who can be smitten that easily. It's an insult for her to be treated this way.

"That attitude of yours... I love the challenges you're giving me, Samantha Alessandra Venecia. Return my jacket and I'll kiss you. I'm serious."

She blushes, turns around, and collects herself. "I'll prepare your outfit, *sir*."

"Xavier *na lang nga*," he smiles, pinching her cheeks because of her cuteness.

Sam feels that this is going to be one of the longest events in her young career that she must endure. She doesn't want to be here anymore, but she's already committed to this event. As she is preparing his outfits for the TV ad, Xavier comes closer and offers her a can of soda and a packed lunch.

"Hey, Sam! I got you lunch. It's raining heavily outside, so spare the food riders from this weather."

"It's nice that you care for the riders, but don't you care about how you're making me uncomfortable?"

"I'm sorry for acting that way earlier, okay? You're just so adorable I can't help but admire and compliment you up close," Xavier retorts. "Oh! And I'm sorry too, about how my manager treated you last time."

She becomes puzzled by the sudden change of tone. He sounds genuine with his apologies this time, but she will not budge and give in to his advances.

He tries to make the conversation lighter, "I don't know why I was

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chosen as the endorser for this sanitary napkin brand. What I know is the brand hired an agency popular for their eccentric and out-of-the-box concepts and marketing executions.”

She feels bad seeing him trying to make it up for his smug attitude a while ago. *Maybe, he has a gentle and respectful side after all?* she starts to wonder. “Is that the same agency behind the weird commercials of other brands that become viral?” she asks.

“Yup! That’s them! They’re experimenting if it’s better to hire a male model to help in sales versus competitors with female celebrity endorsers. So, Sam, let’s do our best, all right? I believe in you! I know you’ll make me the hottest and most charming model in the Philippines!”

That conversation breaks the ice and tension between Sam and Xavier. They start to exchange jokes and laugh louder. Now that they have an open communication, she enjoys working with him better this time around.

After the TV ad shoot, he asks for her contact details. She isn’t yet comfortable giving away her social media link with her friend connections and personal posts. What she hands over to him is her username for a chat app with encrypted messaging.

“Thank you, Sam. You made my day,” Xavier says. “You’re prettier when you’re not angry or annoyed with me.”

“I’ll hate you if you make me uncomfortable again.”

“See you in my next project!”

“Wow! You’re not even going to consult with your manager?”

“I decide what I want to do! And it’s you that I want!”

\* \* \*

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For over five months, Sam and Xavier continue to talk via an app that allows encrypted messaging. She's slowly learning to trust him. She thinks his smugness is influenced by how he projects himself on the reality dating show. For her, Xavier is an intellectual conversationalist and empathetic listener. She likes his sense of humor too!

Apart from Xavier continuously hiring her as a stylist for his modeling projects, she also appreciates whenever he refers new clients from his network. As a result, Sam was able to build a strong online presence and a good reputation as a stylist. Sam's work ethic and excellence make her a top choice for her clients. She just prioritizes Xavier as her VIP client in her busy schedule because of all the help he extends to her. It's a give-and-take relationship—Xavier gets the favor and trust of the showbiz elites whom he refers to Sam being the underrated but exceptional fashion stylist. And it works wonders for their business relationship. They claim to be just good friends, even though others see they have good chemistry as a couple.

Despite their constant communication, Sam still doesn't share any of her personal problems with him, but he notices the sudden change in her tone whenever they chat or talk over the phone. He tries to offer good and sound advice, but isn't pushing her to follow them. That's when Sam realized Xavier can be a good friend if she chooses to look at his better side.

*Is he really just a friend?* Sam shakes the thought away. She can't be in a relationship now that her career is slowly thriving. Falling in love is the least of her concerns. And what if Xavier is just treating her nicely because of their professional connection?

Sam washes her face and lets go of irrelevant thoughts. She wants to enjoy her me-time this late evening. It's been weeks since she gave herself a good rest.

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Around 11:00 p.m., her phone rang—it's Xavier calling.

“Hello?”

“S—Saaaam, I need help. My manager left because he's busy with an appointment tomorrow. I don't want to book a ride home alone. I'm wasted. Can you pick me—fro—from the bar?”

“WHERE ARE YOU??!” Sam yells, a bit irritated. “Why the heck did you drink so hard if you know your manager can't drive you home?”

“I'm at a bar here in Poblacion, Makati. I forgot the name but I sent it to you this afternoon.”

Sam quickly changes, reads through their conversation, looks for the bar, and books a ride going there. Upon reaching the bar, the guard asks if she has reservations because they're closing in two hours. She explains that she'll just fetch a drunk friend who's alone.

“Ah, that guy? Yeah, he's at the lounge area on the second floor and he already threw up twice. Everyone's getting worried about him. Thank goodness his girlfriend is here.”

Sam ignores the comment and enters the bar with purpose. The place is a sophisticated bistro bar with a cool alchemic theme, highlighted by the neon, bluish-purple lights and intricate interior design. Based on her research, the bar has an array of expensive wine and brewed beer from around the world. They offer different “potions”—as they call their alcohol beverage mixtures—while a live band with a jazz singer serenades the audience.

She starts to panic, recalling what the guard said about Xavier's current state. She rushes to the lounge area on the second floor and sees him drunk and wasted.

“Sa—Saaam... I know you'll come for me. Don't wooorry

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I paid the bill! Just bring me hooome,” he passes out, smiling.

She doesn't say a word. She's worried, annoyed, and tired at the same time. She'll just confront him next time when he's sober. *So, now what?* she asks herself. Where will she bring him now that he's unconscious? Of course, not to her condo. That's her safe place.

Left with no choice, she books a ride going to the nearest 3-star hotel in the area. It's just a 5-minute ride via cab. Her plan is to just pay for the hotel room, leave him there, and go back home.

She wakes him up when the cab she booked arrived at the bar. Xavier seems to be embarrassed having a girl fetch him so he doesn't try to annoy her even more. She helps him up and carefully supports him as they walk down the stairs, step outside the bar, and into a cab. The check-in at the hotel is a breeze. And when they get to the room, she makes sure to place him gently on the bed.

“*Hay... sa wakas!*” Sam says. “Time to rest. It's getting lat—hey!”

He pulls her closer to him on the bed and hugs her tightly, “Just stay here. Please, Sam.”

“Xavier! *Anong ginagawa mo?!*”

“Why is it so hard for you to love me back? Don't you see I'm crazy about you?”

Her heart is beating so loud she feels that it's about to explode out of her chest. Being this close to him, she can feel her heart pounding. Sam needs to get away or she'll be carried away with what she feels.

“Let me go, Xavier, please...”

Her gentle pleading softens him and he lets her go. He tries to stand up, bows his head, and apologizes to her, “I'm so sorry, Sam.” Then, he carelessly walks towards the door and opens it.

“Thanks for taking care of me tonight,” Xavier says.

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In his most vulnerable moment (never mind his messy hair and alcoholic smell), this is the most handsome and gentle side of Xavier that Sam never imagines she'll see for herself—the guy who supports her career, asks how her day went, cracks silly jokes, and compliments her when she gets insecure. She feels herself giving in. And so, without rationally thinking anymore, she hugs and kisses him on the cheeks. Then she grabs the door handle, steps out, and closes the door with a loud bang.

A bit shocked by what she did, she sprints towards the elevator and catches her breath. Her heart pounds stronger this time. It is just starting to dawn on her what she just did, but she cannot lie to herself anymore. She wants to go home as fast as she can. Her confusion is not doing her any good. It's important to calm down and collect herself first before doing anything impulsively again.

As soon she gets to her condo, she kneels on the side of her bed and prays for a sign. “Lord, thank you for all the blessings You gave me since birth. Thank you for making me pretty, kind, and super cute that Xavier can't resist me. *Charot!* Haha!

Thank you for blessing my career as a fashion stylist. Thank you for making me strong and helping me live independently away from my parents. I don't want to sound ungrateful, Lord, but You know I cannot hide anything from You... I'm getting confused about my feelings.”

Sam breathes deeply and continues, “Honestly, I want to be with Xavier... You know, as his girlfriend, officially, but... I'm not sure if I'm ready. What if I hurt him because I'm too stubborn? What if we fight every day because I'm still immature? What if he ends up regretting having me as his girlfriend? What if...” she stops herself from



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overthinking and surrenders it all.

“Can You give me a sign, Lord? You know, my favorite flower. Once Xavier gives me that, I’ll open my mind and heart to say ‘yes’ when he asks me to date him in the future.”

\* \* \*

“AND CUT!” the director says. “Good take, Xavier! What a powerful closing statement!”

Xavier thanks the staff, freelancers, creatives, directors, and everyone who helps him conceptualize and execute his first advocacy campaign shoot.

“It’s such a wonderful campaign from a rising Filipino-Canadian artist and model to talk against fast fashion in the industry,” the director adds. “You will influence your audience and followers for sure!”

“Thank you, *direk*! It’s a pleasure to work with you. But, I’m sorry, I have to go now. Take care, okay?”

Xavier looks around the 33-hectare-wide eco-park while a gentle hush of the breeze touches his cheeks. Amidst the lush green picturesque scenery, he looks for his favorite view of the place.

Near the lagoon where he parked his metallic royal blue, sleek SUV, he looks at her in the passenger’s seat—his top choice fashion stylist who keeps making him handsome for all his events. Apart from her stellar work, he loves her company.

Before the shoot, he asked her if she wanted to watch or wait in the car. She chose the latter. He walks towards Sam and can’t help but adore her timeless beauty. Even if she’s just wearing a casual, plain

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white shirt, brown painter's beret hat, and teal balloon skirt, she is beautiful. Sam likes to keep it low-profile even if she's a skilled fashion stylist.

"Front view, side view... You're stunning, Sam," Xavier says as soon as he opens the car door. "You're my favorite view in La Mesa Eco Park."

"Playing the handsome heartthrob again. Stop messing around, Xavier," Sam tries her best to stop feeling all the butterflies in her stomach.

"Come with me. I want to show you something."

He holds Sam's hand and helps her out of the car. Together, they open the car trunk. Inside, he picks up a bouquet of blue and pink tulips and gives the flowers to Sam.

Upon seeing the pink and blue tulips, Sam's eyes fill with tears.

"Are you crying?" he asks worriedly.

"How did you know these are my favorite?"

"Uh, remember when we first met? The scooter event? You wore a tulip necklace pendant."

"How did you know my favorite colors?"

"I just assumed you like pink because of your Instagram feed. And well, I like blue," he explains. "So... *Ayun nga*, why are you crying?"

"*Wala*. Don't mind me. *Napuwing lang ako*."

"You're so unfair. You're confusing me, Sam. I just want to get to know you better, but you always say no when I ask you out."

"I—I'm sorry. I was just waiting for a sign."

"I've been very vocal with my intentions and feelings for you since the night you took care of me in Poblacion. Do you hate me? Do

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you care about me? Or you're not sure at all? What do you really wa—”

Sam kisses him on the lips—a short, surreal kiss just to stop Xavier from talking.

“Is that a clear answer?” she asks.

Xavier is too surprised to speak.

“Is that a clear answer, Xavier?” she repeats. It's now Sam's turn to smirk, annoy, and catch him off guard.

Still in disbelief, he touches his lips with the tip of his fingers, smiles happily, and nods to her.

“Yes, ma'am! Super clear! Now... Can I get a longer kiss?” he giggles and hugs Sam.

“Let's date for real! Thank you for waiting for me, Xavier. Your bouquet of tulips is the sign I prayed for.”

“Front view... Side view... In every view, you'll always be my favorite. I love you, Sam.”





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## About The Author

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Rosella Jane “RJ” T. Vargas is a freelance direct response copywriter, self-published author, PaperKat Books mentee, storyteller, and Christian believer.

In 2020, she was included in Marketing in Asia’s *Rising 70 Filipinos to Follow on LinkedIn*. In 2021, she was recognized as one of the *Top 100 Influential Filipino Women on LinkedIn* by Connected Women. In 2021, she also self-published her first book titled *Behind The Stories | The Life(Story) Of A Copywriter*.

In her early 30s, she finally achieved her definition of success and happiness. She’s on her way to fulfilling more dreams and this time, it includes supporting other people’s dreams too. She lives by the mantra “What’s meant for you will never pass you.” That’s why she isn’t pressured with her own life journey. It’s better to attract joy and luck than chase them, after all.

To say that writing is her passion is an understatement. It’s her bread and butter and her God-given gift. Writing and storytelling are her zones of genius.

# Afternoon



By Vergie Manligas

**L** *exi, please come to my office.*

This is the message I read in a chatbox with my current boss.

I work in a boutique as an assistant stylist. It has been my dream to become a ‘somebody’ in the industry. And even though I did not graduate with a related course, I worked my way to get this position.

*What does she want now?* I am already having a bad day from soiling my pants with period stain as I did not know I would have it today.

I get up from my chair and walk towards her office. I hesitate for a moment before I open the door to reveal a lady sporting curly blonde hair, wearing a black dress suit, and reading a piece of paper in her hand.

Miranda has been my manager for almost six months since I joined the company in the city where all fashionistas and even celebrities come together—Business Global Center or BGC. Even with her big glasses on, she still squints her eyes to look at the words

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written on the page.

I knock once to get her attention. She raises her head to check who it is.

“Excuse me, ma’am,” I say in the softest voice possible.

“Ah, Alexis. Come in, come in,” she invites.

I gingerly take steps toward her, unsure whether I should sit or stand up.

“Sit down, sit down,” she says.

“It seemed important. What is it, ma’am?” I ask.

“Well, I don’t want to beat around the bush, so I will tell you straight. The company is in bad shape with the ongoing crisis, and—”

I can only see her mouth move but cannot hear the following words she says, or perhaps my brain doesn’t want to accept it. As I listened to the news for weeks, I knew it was coming, but I didn’t expect this to happen in a successful company.

“Are you there?”

I snap back to reality as soon as I hear her question. “Sorry, I... I didn’t understand what you just said”

“I’m so sorry, Alexis. I know you are one of the best stylists, but we must let you go.”

I want to scream. I want to tell her all the bad words that I know, but I won’t. Instead, I take a deep breath, nod, and stand to leave without saying a word.

“You know what, I have a friend who is looking for someone to hire,” Miranda says and hands me a card with a name and phone number on it:

**Amy Milan**

*Head Secretary*

*Atelier Son*

+639113467206 W Tower, BGC

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I stare at the card and tuck it in my pocket as if some precious gem. I thank her for the help, and I leave her office. As soon as I reach my desk, I fish out the calling card in my pocket and dial the phone number.

The phone rings.

“Hello, Atalier Son. How may I help you?”

I jump as the lady on the other line answers. “H-hi! I am Alexis from Boutique Monique, and I am calling because I heard from...” I pause and contemplate whether I should say my boss’s name or not. “—a friend,” I said instead. “You are looking for someone to hire?”

“Ah! Yes. Did you hear it from Miranda?” the lady asks.

“Yes, she is my boss,” I hesitate but answer anyway.

“Oh! Perfect! Can you come tomorrow mor—?”

“Yes.” I cannot hide the excitement in my voice as I answer without waiting for her to finish the sentence. I know the company, and I know how huge this opportunity is. They are the company that not even a crisis can take down.

I go home excited for tomorrow. As I step inside our house, I walk straight to my cabinet to search for the interview clothes my grandfather made for me as a graduation gift. A white chiffon blouse with red floral embroidery on the shoulder, which I know is my grandmother’s doing. I pair it with black high-waisted wool pants that are perfect for my thin legs.

I set my alarm and wait for sleep to take me to dreamland. With a smile on my face and hope in my heart, I let it.

\* \* \*

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### *First Encounter*

“Oh no! Oh no! I’m late! Why didn’t I hear the alarm?” I scold myself as I grab the clothes I prepared the night before. I quickly dress and brush my teeth at the same time.

“What are you doing?” my grandmother asks as she sees me running around the house.

“I am late for an interview,” I babble, trying to hold in my toothbrush and the foam from the toothpaste.

“Don’t speak while brushing your teeth, or you will drip toothpaste on your blouse,” my grandmother scolds as she strolls towards our kitchen.

I leave our house without eating breakfast to make it to my interview. I try to hail a cab and, thankfully, I find one in just a few minutes. The enormous building where Atelier Son is located is just a few minutes’ drive from our house. I am familiar with this place, as I always pass by the building whenever I go to the office, but not once in my dreams did I think of stepping inside. I go straight to the information desk and show the receptionist the Atelier Son business card Miranda gave to me. The lady lets me fill up a form and gestures for the elevator. Upon entering the office, I walk towards a glass door that needs an access card to enter, but thankfully, there is another receptionist in the area who lets me inside.

“May I know what your agenda is?” the lady receptionist asks.

“I am here for an interview with Amy Milan,” I show her the calling card, which makes her eyes wide. She tells me to fill out another form and asks me to wait for her in the reception area. She comes back with another lady beside her who looks like she came out



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of a fashion magazine herself. Gold specs on her glasses that make her almond eyes stand out, red lipstick, subtle blush, and a tiny hint of highlight on her cheeks, which I think she doesn't need since her natural glow could illuminate the room.

I stand up to greet them.

"Are you Alexis?" the new lady asks.

"Yes, ma'am. Alexis Hope."

"Great! I am Amy, the one who spoke to you on the phone yesterday," she replies. "Come follow me."

I do as she says. I stride beside her while carrying a brown envelope containing all my documents, if needed. As soon as we enter what seems to be her office, she goes to a corner of the room where her desk is. She orders me to sit on the chair in front of the table. She asks for my resume, which I carefully fish out from the brown envelope I am holding and hand to her.

"Oh! So, you graduated *cum laude*? But not from a fashion school or anything related to it," Amy comments and gives a sad tone in the last part of her statement, which concerns me as I may not get the job.

"Yes, ma'am, since the school available for me didn't offer the course that I wanted and the school that offers, we couldn't afford. So, I settled for what was available. But I assure you, I live for fashion ever since I was a child," I tell her with as much enthusiasm as I can muster.

"Okay. I can work with that. And I suppose you are a fast learner?" she asks.

"Yes, ma'am!" I answer without hesitation.

"Okay then, I think that is all I need from you. When can you start?"

"Does this mean I am hired, ma'am? I can start right away,"

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I answer with a giddy voice, but I try my best to hide all of it with a smile, even though I am screaming inside.

“Well, that depends on the head stylist, as you will be his assistant.”

I nod at her while staring at Amy’s golden blonde hair draping luxuriously on top of her white jacket with a black hem.

*Wish all can afford signature clothes, but, here I am, relying primarily on secondhand items since they are cheap but still of good quality. That is, of course, if you know where to look, I think. Plus, I help the environment by not letting them reach the ground to rot and be a danger to the air.*

“Okay, I think that’s all for now. Come back tomorrow...” she trails off as her phone rings, and she answers it.

“WHAT?! HE’S HERE?” Amy screams on the phone. “Why this early? Where is he exactly?” she asks the person on the phone. “IN THE ELEVATOR?! OH MY GOD! Hurry!”

“He’s here,” she tells me as soon as she ends the call.

I look at her dumbfounded and asks, “Who’s here?”

But she does not answer as she is busy fixing her hair in front of the mirror. Then she quickly ducks under her desk. I hear a click-clack as she taps her feet. *Is she changing her shoes?* I ask myself. She sits back up and smears lip gloss on her perfectly shaped lips.

*What is happening? Why is she dolling herself up?*

“Okay, I need you to stay here while I go outside and meet him,” she stands up and walks towards the door.

I am still sitting on the chair where Amy left me when the door suddenly opens. I turn around to see a tall guy wearing a white polo with a blue coat and a pair of blue pants. His long black hair is styled in a modern slick back, giving him a clean look. He has sultry lips, a nose

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bridge that is higher than my dreams, and eyes that can melt anyone's heart. And those same eyes are looking at me.

*Who is this guy? And why am I intimidated by his stare?*

"Who are you?" he asks in his low register tone, almost a whisper really. "Who is this?" He looks at Amy for an answer.

"She's... She's your new assistant," she answers.

"An assistant? Who told you I need an assistant?"

*Wow! What an arrogant man.*

"You need her," Amy fires back. Then she winks at me while she hands him my resume.

"I don't need anyone. I have you," the guy says, but Amy is giving him a look that only the two of them can seem to understand.

"Fine! You! You're fired. You can go now," he points to me and then to the door as if I am nothing.

At that moment, I feel my pride being stepped on. Knowing I must do something, I storm towards him when I see him walking to his enormous desk.

He turns around as if sensing my presence. "Why are you still here? Why is she still here?" he turns to Amy.

"Listen, I graduated *cum laude*. And I am a fast learner. You didn't even look at my resume that long for you to fire me," I tell him in one breath. *If we are on the bragging side, better tell him that.*

He smirks at me, which makes me take a step back. *Woah! His smirk.*

"Are you aware that you are applying in a fashion company? It says in your resume that you graduated *cum laude*, but not from a fashion school. And your previous employment was not even six months long. And you think I should hire you?" His statement

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insults my whole being.

I march towards him and grab my resume from his desk. “Sure, I didn’t graduate from a fashion school and I may not be the best at what I do, but I do it anyway. And I make sure that I do my best.” I turn around with my hurt pride and try to hold in the tears that are about to betray me.

“Wait!”

I am unsure if I am hearing things because I am too hurt or desperate, but I continue walking until a hand grabs my wrist. I turn around and see him too close to me. I stare at his adorable eyes and almost forget about my anger for a second.

“What?” I ask, almost shouting to his face.

“Please stay,” Amy whispers. I look at her to find some explanation, but I get nothing.

“What did you say?” he asks, which confuses me.

*What did I say?* “What? I don’t know what I said,” I tell him.

“The one about you may not be the best in what you do,” he repeats, looking me straight in the eye.

“Oh, that. What about it?” I ask, more confused than ever.

“Nothing. When can you start?” His question now puts my head in a state of limbo.

“You just fired me. Can you make up your mind?”

“You’re re-hired. Go home for now. And here,” he hands me a stack of books. “Read this and come back next week.” I stare at his nonexistent expression as he turns to his desk and buries his face in a pile of documents.

I storm out of his office carrying the books. With the anger building up in my chest, I want to punch a wall or someone. I walk

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towards the elevator when I hit someone or something.

“Ow!” *Did I hit a wall?* I look up to see a tall, skinny guy with a smooth and handsome face, shiny black hair, and a neat look.

“Are you okay?” he asks while I pick up the book and my envelope on the floor.

“Ah. Yes! Sorry!”

“Don’t worry about it. So, you work here?” he asks.

“Yes,” I answer, and the elevator opens.

“Great! I guess I’ll see you around then,” he says and leaves.

*Hmm. Not exactly a bad day.*

\* \* \*

### *Right side of the fabric*

I walk into the office with newfound confidence after I read the book Felip gave me last week. I learned his name from Amy, who gave me all the details after I settled for the day. Felip is the head stylist of the company who worked his way up and, as others call it, has an eye for fashion that no one has ever seen. He is also the company’s CEO, which blew my mind and worsened my anxiety because I will assist him with all his needs. Conversely, I am more determined than before to be just like him.

My first task as the assistant is to go with him wherever he goes, and he goes everywhere in the building to check on the models, the fabrics, and the schedule as if no one is working for him. He is hands-on with everything and being in high heels is not a good idea.

A rack full of clothes is wheeled towards Felip for him to select

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items for an upcoming show. He browses through the racks of clothes as he checks each fabric and style and every little detail he can see.

“Leave this, this, and this. The rest can go,” he says to the lady, who nods at each instruction.

“What will happen to the other clothes that were not selected?” I ask the burning question in my chest since I started assisting him with his work. I see many in the room, but only a few come out of the shop or during shows.

“They either get altered or thrown away somewhere,” Felip answers, again in his stoic manner, as if it is something unimportant.

“Thrown away? Why would you throw away a perfectly good dress?” I ask again, and he looks up at me as if annoyed with my questions.

“What are you getting at?”

“I mean, you can still re-use the fabric of those clothes instead of throwing them away. Or donate them somewhere where people can use them.”

*Like me*, I want to say, but dare not. “Did you know that fashion production makes up 10% of humanity’s carbon emissions? It also dries up water sources and pollutes rivers and streams?” I tell him in my passionate environmentalist self. My heart thumps. It’s probably the first long sentence I had ever said to him since the first time we met.

He looks at me, shrugs, and says, “Okay, I’ll let our sustainability department know.” His statement made me proud of myself for standing up for what I believe in.

Later in the day, I walk to the cafeteria to rest my dying feet. After I grab my food, I sit down and massage my feet.

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“Are you okay?” a sweet voice makes me look up to see the man I bumped into by the elevator on my first day.

“Oh! It’s you! Hi!” I say with a smile, and he returns it with his handsome, sweet, gummy smile that makes me forget about my aching feet.

“Justin,” he says and offers his hand for a handshake. I take it, feeling his soft palm.

“Alexis, but you can call me Lexi for short,” I say to him.

“Lexi. I like it.”

*I like you, too*, I almost say, but I stop myself. Instead, I give him my sweetest smile until Mr. Arrogant comes into view, walks towards us, and places a hand on my shoulder, which makes me stiffen in the process.

“Alexis. Let’s go,” he says and eyes Justin with his judging look.

*Why is he looking at Justin like he is some jealous boyfriend?*

“I’d better go,” I say to Justin, giving him an apologetic look.

“See you around,” Justin says and waves goodbye at me.

\* \* \*

The next day, I arrive at the office to see Amy leaving Felip’s desk with a big book cradled on her arm.

“Hi, Amy. You’re here early?”

“Ah, yes. Felip called me last night and mentioned that he might not be able to come today. He asked me to get something from his office,” she sighs.

“Is that his design book?” I ask out of curiosity.

Amy looks at the book and hesitates for a second before she

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answers. “Ah. Yes. I have to give this to him. He needs this to check and approve the design for the show, and I am the only one he trusts to go inside his house,” she starts and hesitates again, as if she wants to tell more.

“I feel like you want to tell me something. What is it?” I ask.

“You see, I am supposed to be meeting someone today, right at this hour, but because of this errand, I think I have to cancel,” she looks at me with pleading eyes.

“Do you want me to do it?” I ask out of politeness but without any intention of doing it.

“Really? You will?” Her face lights up as if she’s a child presented with a platter of candies.

“Will it be okay?” I ask, hoping the answer is no.

“Oh! Of course. Don’t worry about it,” she says as she hands me the spare keycard to his house with clear instructions to not go to the second floor, and just leave the book on the table by the hallway. I nod as I repeat the instructions before I head out, my arms around the bulky book with a white cover and a picture of different clothes on the front.

Soon, I arrive at Felip’s building. The elevator opens, revealing a black door. I step out and stand in front of the door, contemplating if I should knock or tap the keycard to let myself in. I do the latter and hope Felip isn’t home so I can just do the task and leave. As soon as I open the door, a cool breeze welcomes me with a scent of lavender air freshener. I look around, the décor is black and white everything. It makes the space look so manly.

*Wow!* It is all I can say to describe the place. With the book secured in my arm, I walk into the house, forgetting about the instructions



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Amy gave me a while ago. My eyes scan each of the furniture and painting in the room. The heavy book in my arms reminds me why I am inside such a majestic house, so I hurry to leave the living area and back to the hallway when a black cat blocks my way.

“Meow,” it says. The cat’s eyes are golden, the only color on its body.

“How cute! Are you the owner of this house?” I say out loud as I bend to rub the cat’s head. It purrs and pats its head on my palm. I hear a snicker, followed by a very obvious throat-clearing sound. I turn around, and my eyes widen when I see Felip standing and leaning by the wall with his black hoodie and joggers.

“I-I’m sorry. I know I shouldn’t be in this part of your house. I...” I reason out, but I no longer know what to say. So, I stop in the middle of my sentence and I look into his eyes.

“Sit down,” he says in his deep voice, which makes my heart skip a beat.

I hesitate, but do as he says and sit on the end of the black couch, far away from him as if I have something contagious and I don’t want him to get it. He grabs the cat from the floor and cradles it like a delicate baby.

“Do you like cats?” he asks.

“Yes! I love them. I have one at home,” I say way too loud and too excitedly for my own good. It’s the first time I have seen what seems to be his soft side. His image at the office is always the intimidating CEO. But looking at him now with his cat, he seems like a caring and loving dad. I didn’t realize I was staring at him too intently until he looks at me, and I try to divert my stare by admiring his interior.

“It’s the first time Kuro allowed someone other than me to touch

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him. He must like you,” he says while looking at me, making my breathing stop.

“Well, I cannot blame him. I am likable,” I joke, but I don’t see any reaction from Filip. So, I take it back, “It’s a joke.” *Why am I explaining? I should go.*

“Hmm... Your first statement might be true,” he says, which confuses me as I don’t understand what he just said. I really should go before I say anything embarrassing. I stand, hoping to leave, but my curiosity lingers.

“Can I ask you something?” I start. He doesn’t respond, so I fire away. “Why suddenly have you become nicer to me? From making me do errands as if I am a nobody, to defending me in front of a stylist who humiliated me? Or from asking me to get your coffee, to helping me give everyone their coffee? That, by the way, almost gave everyone at the office a heart attack. Don’t do that again.” I fire one question after another, almost in one breath.

“Done with your questions, Ms. Alexis Hope?” he asks with a smile on his face.

It’s the first time I’ve seen him smile, which makes my heart thump a little harder. If he keeps doing this, my heart will jump out of my chest.

I nod without saying a word.

“Well, let’s just say you have proven yourself worthy,” he says as he looks at me straight in the eyes. I think I forgot how to breathe.

“Is that all?” I compose myself as I take in a lot of air.

“Yes.”

“Why the change of mind?” I ask.

“More of a change of heart,” he says, and the butterflies in my

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stomach begin to fly away, leaving me breathless and frozen, like a statue in the middle of his living area.

I don't know how I got out of his house, but the next thing I know, I am inside my room, sitting on my bed.

\* \* \*

### *Altered*

I wake up to my grandfather's tap on my shoulder. My mind is not yet fully awake when he tells me something my mind and body don't want to process. But when I hear the words coming out of my grandfather's mouth, my body becomes cold as my mind becomes fully alert.

I quickly stand up and run towards my grandparents' room. I grab my phone to call for help when I see her lying on her back with her eyes closed and not waking up.

The ambulance arrives after a few minutes, and we take her to the nearest hospital.

It all happens in a blur, without my mind fully processing what is happening. After a few hours at the hospital, and with all the medicines and machines getting pumped and being attached to my grandmother's body, she is still not waking up. Finally, the doctors tell us the news that there is nothing more they can do.

My heart breaks at those words. The person who cheers me up when I am down from all the heartaches I get, or when nothing is going right, is leaving me. I cannot accept it. I look at my grandfather, who sits by her bed, as if saying his last goodbye to his other half,

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around whom his life revolves.

I sit outside with my back to the wall when my phone rings. I do not answer. A few seconds later, it pings with a text message.

**Amy:** Hey Lexi, Sir Felip is looking for you. Are you coming in today?

A text from Amy says. Right! I forgot to tell her I cannot go to the office today.

**Lexi:** Hi Amy! So sorry I couldn't tell you earlier, but I had to take care of a personal matter at home. It's my grandmother. We're at the hospital now. I think I might need to resign.

**Amy:** Resign? Don't leave me here. You can take a few days off, but don't leave.

**Lexi:** This might take a little longer than a few days. I will explain later.

I put down my phone and walk back to my grandmother lying on the hospital bed, with my grandfather sitting beside her.

*What should I do?* I think as I rub my grandfather's back.

*How will we survive?* I sigh deeply.

*I will find a way.* I look up, as if an answer will fall from the sky and into my face.

\* \* \*

After a few days, we buried my grandmother. I did not tell anyone at the office what happened, except for Amy, who came rushing to my grandmother's funeral. To my surprise, she is with someone I am familiar with.

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“W-what are you doing here? How did you know?” I ask, but his expression answers my questions. I look at Amy, who just shrugs as if there is nothing she could do.

I introduce them to my grandfather. Felip requests to talk to me alone, so I lead him outside our house, and we sit on the bench. We talk, and I find out he, too, grew up with his grandparents. He says I am still lucky to have one of them in my life. He wishes he still had them now that his life is more comfortable. He understands my situation and offers to pay for my grandmother’s hospital bill.

“No,” I say softly, “I cannot accept your money. You worked hard for it, maybe harder than anyone we know. And I do not have the heart to take it from you.”

“Think of it as an investment,” he says and I furrow my brow at his statement.

“Investment?” I ask, and he looks at me as if touching the soul of my being.

“Remember the first time we met?” he asks.

“Oh! I would be foolish if I say I forgot about that, and don’t remind me, or I might kick you out of this place,” I say as I laugh at the memory.

“I wasn’t that bad,” he says, with his eyes on me as if sucking all my energy. And I have little left in me before I give in to those stares.

“Not that bad? You tell me, mister,” I stand up, and he grabs my wrist, gesturing me to sit back down.

“It isn’t my point. What I am trying to say is that you said something that day that made me, let’s just say, not forget about you,” he starts. When I do not respond, he continues, “You said you might not be the best at what you do, but you do it anyway, and you do

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your best. Those are same words my grandmother told me when I was a child. I could never forget it because it was the day I came home crying from failing to win a contest at school.” His eyes begin to water. I figure it was a painful memory he just shared.

“Oh,” I say as I move closer to him, touching his hands. I don’t want to let go, but I remember other people might see us, so I move back.

“Sorry,” he says.

“No, it’s me,” I say, and we laugh.

“So, are you going to accept my investment for my future?” he asks.

“What are you saying?” as if the answer is there on his face. “Are you...?”

He nods and answers, “Yes, I am asking you to be my girlfriend and be my future wife if you are so willing.”

“Chill. Let’s start slow, girlfriend is fine,” I reply. “And we’ll see about the wife thing in the future.”

He laughs and hugs me as if he doesn’t want to let go.





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### *About The Author*

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Vergie is a writer, a software developer, and a mother. Her passion for writing started in her elementary days when her mother gave her a hardbound notebook that she turned into a daily journal. Since then, she never stopped writing.

Vergie is a member of Scribbly Writers Group, where she regularly conducts writing sessions and teaches different writing topics. She is also an active member of Toastmasters International under TOPS Toastmasters Club and Rise Up Toastmasters Club.

Vergie serves as a writer for the media ministry in The Feast Bay Area, where she offers her skills to write inspiring stories of people and their blessings. Vergie is a graduate of Computer Science majoring in Software Technology at Western Mindanao State University. You can email her at [vergie.mujemulta@gmail.com](mailto:vergie.mujemulta@gmail.com) or visit her blog, [www.mrsvergiem.com](http://www.mrsvergiem.com).



# Love is Rosy

*By Jem Mari Villagracia*

In front of the cheval mirror, her long hair blooms like a crown. The pink blouse, however, looks out of place with her pleated black pants and black canvas sneakers. It doesn't give her a rush. She puts her clothes back inside the closet when she has an epiphany.

Light on her feet, she swiftly enters her parents' room and opens their cabinet. It must be somewhere here, her mom's favorite blouse. She unstacks some clothes with extreme care and puts them on one side until she finds the blouse. Her sanguine heart rides the tides of euphoria, and she dresses again. She finishes her looks with her golden rose necklace and pearl earrings. *Fabulous*, she thinks. She presents herself as *rosy* as possible.

Fashion is her world, and she is a part of it professionally.

"Lily, Jared, I'm off," she says, bidding farewell to her siblings,



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who are busy in the living room.

“Isn’t that mom’s blouse?” Jared asks. Rosy nods, stopping for a while before walking out the door.

Lily adds, “Yes, and it’s mom’s favorite too. It’s the cream lace ruffle blouse she wore on her first date with dad. Mom says it’s lucky. A man will fall in love with you without a doubt if you’re wearing it. You know Rosy, she’s a hopeless romantic.”

Her sister’s comment leaves Rosy amused.

They say life becomes rosy when you finally meet *The One*. But, for fashion stylist and certified It Girl Roselia “Rosy” Cerafica, life becomes rosy when her clients are full of optimism and confidence. As a stylist, her golden touch transforms any piece of clothing into a work of art. Rosy’s delicate choices even give her clients “fortune” in their love lives or in their day-to-day lives. She is always content to see it. However, the question of “what is love?” sometimes hits her. And Rosy has been wearing the blouse for a couple of years now too, yet, in the past years, nothing came forth from the blouse’s charm. It looks exquisite, though. Everyone praises her lace blouse whenever she wears it.

“Thank you, guys, for the compliment, but there will be no *pasalubong* later.”

Her siblings scream in dismay. Rosy laughs in retaliation.

\* \* \*

The stressful commute tests Rosy’s fashion endurance. Her sweat trickles down while she’s sitting at the back of the UV Express. Then, a young couple finds themselves “busy” in the heavy traffic. Rosy too.

## LOVE IN STYLE

She observes that being aesthetically pleasing is popular nowadays. This makes her curious. How will she recreate this look for her clients in an affordable yet trendy manner?

Rosy only frowns at the sight of the lovey-dovey couple. Her smartphone pings, and she replies, "I'm on my way!" to an SMS from a client who is having a major fashion meltdown.

When Rosy arrives at Mrs. Monteverde's mansion, they exchange kisses on the cheeks. "I have nothing to wear, Rosy, darling!" her client whines.

They walk towards the luxurious walk-in closet. Mrs. Monteverde rants that her closet looks chaotic because of the messy clothes she has tried on since yesterday. She is looking forward to an intimate dinner with her husband later. "What if I'm not enough? I feel like I have nothing to wear despite all the clothes I have," she says.

"Your choices matter, madame," Rosy assures her. Rosy next assesses what Mrs. Monteverde wants.

The madame says she wants something laid-back, but something that also shows glamor and elegance. She jokes that she'll wear something erotic, but she's uncomfortable wearing it at her age.

Rosy surveys her client's glamorous wardrobe. Her eyes twinkle at all the different luxurious dresses, blouses, pants, bags, and accessories inside her closet. After inspecting and unstacking some clothes, Rosy suggests opting for a downtown chic style for casual events like dates. Then the madame tries on what Rosy gathers from the ocean of clothes in the changing room.

The madame, looking at herself in the fitting room, affirms, "I see now, chic is the new sexy."

"Shower yourself with confidence, Mrs. Monteverde. Being chic

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doesn't mean wearing extravagant outfits. It's how you carry yourself with grace," Rosy says.

"Yes, you're right," the madame says, agreeing with Rosy's remark.

Mrs. Monteverde shows Rosy what she tries on, and Rosy thinks they're dull and could use a little spice. So, she looks for different clothes and places them on the center table. She mixes and matches the items based on what style suits them best, and what the madame wants. She tries on what Rosy suggests, but is still dull. Then, she sees a gingham-patterned blouse beneath the stacked clothes. She pulls it out and hands it to her client.

"The influence of a style is in the way the person recognizes it, Mrs. Monteverde," Rosy explains. "So if you believe that everything you wear is chic, then people will believe it too."

Her client agrees, and after trying several more pieces that Rosy suggested, Mrs. Monteverde's outfits finally radiate elegance. Her client feels a dazzling energy emanate from her clothes. Rosy's eyes glisten at the sight of the black pants and two-inch heels her client is now wearing. The black gingham-patterned blouse with a Peter Pan collar matches well with a stunning red blazer. Its delicate motif makes someone look sophisticated. Rosy simply adores clothes with checkered pattern, as it creates a fascinating illusion when it meets the eye. Mrs. Monteverde admits she never noticed the existence of the blouse in her wardrobe.

"Mr. Monteverde will fall in love with you even more tonight!" Rosy teases.

The madame muffles the flattery, "I hate to say this, but he says he keeps falling in love with me every day, anyway. Thanks for your

styling help, darling.”

Rosy admires the love they have. She makes some final touches and gives a few more styling tips when Mrs. Monteverde confesses something to her.

“You know what, Rosy, I came across an article about fast fashion and sustainability,” her client starts. “I feel guilty having all these clothes... I’m sure they have a severe impact on the environment.”

Rosy feels sad about Mrs. Monteverde’s confession and observation. Truth be told, the fast fashion industry severely affects the planet. The fabrics imported from neighboring countries leave a significant carbon footprint. Its residuals have a tremendous impact on Earth’s resources, and Rosy had been conscious of that for quite some time now. As a fashion stylist, she needs to keep up with the trends, and Rosy does it with a heart for the environment. She tries her best to upcycle old clothes and make them more fashionable than before, or donate them to families in need.

*What goes around, comes around*, Rosy thinks before she replies, “The effects of fast fashion have a significant impact not only on the Philippines but also around the world. Fashion should be associated with sustainability.”

“Since then, I’ve admired your touch,” her client adds. “I suppose it’s okay to repeat clothes and make them more fashionable than ever, right?”

Rosy nods, “You can be chic in old clothes. As you can see, this lace blouse is from my mom. The lifespan of an item depends on how you take care of the clothes you wear.”

Mrs. Monteverde’s eyes shine. The lace blouse Rosy is wearing is refreshing to look at. Rosy has the touch to make simple clothes look

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spectacular. Rosy turns to the mirror, swaying as her hands touch the lace blouse. “As a fashion stylist, I am a creative individual. I can always come up with a better solution with clothes.”

Mrs. Monteverde admires the passion of her stylist. She tries to change the subject to one she’s been dying to ask, “How can this gorgeous rose not attract a handsome bee? When will you have a boyfriend, Rosy, darling?”

The sudden discussion of love causes Rosy to blush. “I’m a workaholic, Mrs. Monteverde,” she says, swaying her hand. “Fashion and family come first before love.”

“The world is your oyster,” Mrs. Monteverde says as she applies matte red lipstick in front of the mirror.

The mischievous stare of the madame haunts Rosy. *Maybe she means that literally?* she thinks. *Maybe it’s about having oysters to celebrate career success.* Or is her client saying that she’s almost 28, but love remains a mysterious concept?

She puts her family first, with Lily soon to graduate from college and Jared following suit with a degree. Her parents’ combined income isn’t enough for their daily lives. Though she does her part as the family’s firstborn, she hopes for a special someone—someone she could love in style.

*Am I not as rosy as I used to be?*

The madame smiles at the perplexed Rosy and says, after sensing her confusion, “It means you can do whatever you want in your life.”

Rosy churns in a smile as she gracefully rests on a seat in the changing room.

\* \* \*

## LOVE IN STYLE

After reading an online article yesterday on her way home, Rosy became intrigued about this buzzworthy cafe in Poblacion, Makati. They claim that the coffee they serve is “magical” because customers keep on saying that it’s worth a try and that people keep coming back for it.

Rosy has invited a few of her friends to personally check out the cafe. But her friends backed out one by one, claiming to be busy. She sighs and checks out the cafe anyway so she can have some “me time”.

*The world is my oyster*, she tells herself as she makes her way to the cafe. Rosy dedicates this day to herself. She walks down the street fearlessly, as if it’s her personal runway. She showcases her lace blouse and blue jeans to the world. Then, she parades her old-school platform boots in the streets.

Ack! Her heart bursts out of her chest at the sight of a stray, ferocious black cat fighting with other felines. She continues walking when they finally go away, but her charismatic entrance goes downhill as she approaches the cafe.

Upon entering, she shivers at the cool temperature of the cafe. Still, she’s hit by a powerful force she had never felt before. Her heart beats faster. The luscious coffee aroma lures people inside as if they are under a spell. Even though the cafe is already full, Rosy insists on going inside. At the counter, she asks the staff what their bestsellers are to try. When she can’t decide what to order, Rosy orders a latte with a cute coffee art on top and a grilled cheese pimiento *panini* to go with it. She smiles and pays for her food using her smartphone’s e-wallet app.

The staff serves her order and says, “Ms. Rosy, here’s your order. Hope you have a *rosy day* today.” Hearing the greeting, Rosy giggles.

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Then, luckily, as she searches for a vacant seat, a couple leaves. Rosy races down to secure the spot. And upon sitting down, an alluring view of the district captivates her. The coffee shop is like a hideout when someone wants to get away from reality, and many people are coming back and forth already.

“Woah,” she says after taking a sip of her coffee.

After all the exhausting tasks lately, she feels as if her depleted energy is slowly regenerating.

*This must be what they were talking about, about the coffee being magical.* Rosy takes a lot of photos that she’ll post later on social media. Then, she continues sipping her coffee, and yes, it is exhilarating. She takes a bite of the *panini* and deems it delicious.

The location attracts people of all ages, including young, married, and elderly couples. Friends are having a great time. At the other table, a family is chatting about various topics. Even professionals visit this location for self-fulfilling productivity boosts. Almost everyone who visits this cafe shares on social media how many good things seem to come to them after visiting this cafe. Many of them are stories about serendipitous encounters. While there may be heartbreak for some, people feel they could start over again after leaving this cafe.

Suddenly, a splash of cold drink breaks Rosy’s daydreaming. The child, who seems to be in a state of shock after what happened, cries because the resident cat in the cafe is bugging him. The man, who tripped over the kid and whose coffee is now all over Rosy’s blouse, is furious after being confronted by the child’s parents.

“Shoot!” Rosy yells.

The man finally turns to Rosy and immediately feels sorry for what happened. He fixes his glasses and says, “My apologies!” He

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reaches out his handkerchief for Rosy to use. The gesture makes Rosy blush. Then again, her ruined blouse makes her red.

The man asks, “What’s your name?”

“Roselia,” she says, rolling her eyes while trying to wipe the coffee off her precious blouse. “Roselia Cerafica. You can call me Rosy.”

“Antonio Arguelles,” the man replies, and adds, “Please call me Anton.”

“See this?” Rosy says, pointing to her blouse. “I commute. But with this mess, I don’t want to be seen in public!”

A cafe staff approaches them because of the scene they are making. Anton tells the staff that everything is being handled, even if Rosy is still visibly fuming. He offers to give her a spare shirt he has in his car for Rosy to wear.

*Argh!* Rosy feels powerless. So, she accepts Anton’s offer, and the guy leaves to get the shirt. She tries to calm down, but with her blouse drenched in coffee, she feels that everyone’s eyes are looking at her.

After a short while, Anton comes back with a shirt and also a jacket. Rosy shakes her head. She snatches the clothes and goes to the comfort room to change. As soon as she gets changed and washed, she pouts as she looks in the mirror, “Unlucky, indeed.”

While outside the cafe and deciding how to get home, Rosy figures out that she will never come back here again.

“Where do you live?” Anton asks, walking up to her. “I could give you a ride home for the trouble I caused.”

“Okay, let’s go. I live in Taytay, Rizal,” she sighs.

\* \* \*



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In the car, the music from Anton's playlist makes Rosy a little curious about him. It's obvious that he is really sorry for the mess, offering to drive her home from Makati City to Taytay, Rizal. She starts to wonder that maybe he isn't as bad as she first thought.

"What industry are you in?" Rosy asks.

"IT, you?"

Rosy puts her hand on her chin and says, "Fashion."

Anton nods. He wants to say something but shrugs it off. When Rosy asks him what he was going to say, he refuses to continue.

Rosy pushes, "A man of few words, eh?"

"Yeah," Anton says as he bursts out laughing.

"Don't hold your smile, it's cute!" Rosy beams.

*Oops!*

It surprises Anton as well, as he tries to focus on the road again. Rosy grinds her teeth, realizing that she's being flirty. The derailing silence occupies them. Anton's strong perfume on the borrowed jacket she's wearing fills her senses. Rosy feels as if Anton's arms are wrapped around her. Just thinking about it makes Rosy's heart race. She coaxes her thoughts back to her ruined blouse, and the sadness and anger fill her head again. She must hit the showers as soon as she arrives home.

Rosy tells Anton that he could drop her off at a waiting shed near their village. Though her home is still far, Rosy thinks she could ponder things over as she walks home by herself. And so he does what she requested. Before she walks away, Anton pulls down the passenger window, and they bid farewell.

"Sorry again. The lid on my coffee wasn't tight enough," he says. "A kid bumped into me. And I was in a hurry, too."

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As she watches Anton's car leave, she pulls at his jacket.

As soon as she arrives home, she stomps her feet loudly in anger. Her siblings, who are watching Netflix in the living room, turn their attention to Rosy. Jared asks why she is wearing a man's jacket and a shirt when she left the house this morning in a blouse. Lily comments that it is not her usual classy style. She looks at them, upset. Her eyes widen afterward. She finally realizes that she left her ruined blouse in Anton's car!

Rosy forgot to get Anton's number. So, she quickly types Anton's name on a social media app, but there are zero matches.

\* \* \*

A month later, Rosy is still unable to return Anton's jacket and shirt. And she thinks about it a lot. She even tried to wait for Anton to appear at the cafe, hoping for another fateful encounter. She keeps his jacket and shirt in her work cubicle in case he pops out of nowhere by sheer coincidence, but life doesn't work that way.

Rosy starts to remember not just the clothes or her ruined blouse. She remembers how cute and attractive he looked with the fitted red shirt that revealed his muscular body frame. She also remembers the pair of beige pants that makes Rosy blush a bit. As a stylist, Rosy goes head over heels, sometimes, over a man with a good sense of fashion.

"You can tell this flower's mood by the way she dresses," Rosy's colleague comments while passing by her cubicle. Today, Rosy is wearing a black long-sleeved blouse. The comment makes her snap back to reality. "What's up, Rosy?" her colleague asks.

"A month ago, I went to the viral cafe in Makati," Rosy starts. "It's

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not as out-of-the-ordinary as it seems, but the blouse I was wearing got drenched because a kid bumped into a guy whose coffee cup lid was not tight enough.” She rolls her eyes. “But the guy lent me his jacket and spare shirt, and even offers a ride home.”

Another colleague asks, “Is the guy cute?”

Rosy couldn’t look them in the eye.

“Did you get his name?” another coworker inquires.

Although Rosy knows the answer to these questions, she lies and tells them that she only got his first name.

“Did you at least get his number?”

Rosy admits to them that she forgot to ask out of anger, and that the man doesn’t seem to exist on social media.

They all grunted. “What?! You can’t just ask the universe for another fateful encounter like that!” one of them says.

Rosy slumps her head on the table in disappointment.

Her colleague beside her dives in, “Tell me, is the man hot or not?”

“Hot. And yeah, I’m losing it,” she says as her brow furrows. Her colleagues tease the hell out of the hopeless romantic Rosy for the series of misfortunes she encounters.

\* \* \*

A few more days passed. Rosy busied herself with work, trying to forget that fateful encounter with Anton and her ruined blouse.

After a successful fashion event, her colleagues invite Rosy to go to a nightclub in Poblacion, Makati, and she accepts the invitation. After a quick cab ride, Rosy marvels at the transformation of this

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place in Makati. In the morning, it's a lively community, but at night, it gets even livelier with neon lights and more people.

Tonight, she is wearing Anton's jacket to cover her not-so-conservative top. Although she intends to return the jacket, she doesn't have his number, so she wears it from time to time. And there are days when she still thinks about him.

At the nightclub, as Rosy and her female colleagues are celebrating their successful project with drinks and laughter, several guys approach them.

"Hey, that's Anton's jacket!" a man yells over the loud music, pointing at Rosy. She turns around as she hears *his* name again. "Yeah, I was right. It has his initials on it," the guy adds.

Rosy couldn't believe it. Over a month passed, and finally the guy she had been looking for appears again.

"You're here," she says when a familiar face walks up to her from the group of guys. Rosy looks at him, a bit afraid that he might have forgotten her name or who she is.

"Rosy, right?" Anton asks.

It surprises Rosy's colleagues. So she tells them that Anton was the guy who spilled coffee on her by accident. *This must be fate*, they all think.

"Rosy has been thinking a lot about you," one of her colleagues screams over the loud music. "Every single day!"

She covers her colleague's mouth. Anton scratches his face. Then, the two groups decide to mingle and they pair Rosy and Anton for the night. Both of them stay at the table while the rest go dancing.

"We've got each other's company tonight," Rosy smiles, drinking her cocktail. Anton nods and drinks his beer.

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He doesn't like to dance, so the two of them just watch their colleagues dance, enjoying the night. The DJ keeps everyone jumping around, along with the glimmering lights. The songs being played are timeless classics. Looking at the dance floor, she knows that if she can dance on her own, she will not feel all these heavy thoughts.

Because of the loud music, Anton screams at Rosy. "Do you want to get out of here? We could go back to the cafe since it's open until midnight."

Her heart feels like it's on fire while they hold each other's hands upon getting out of the nightclub. Anton apologizes for holding her hand, but Rosy says she doesn't mind. Rosy loses her mind to the lights that burn like starlight during this youthful night. They wander around Poblacion, talking. He thinks Rosy is a partygoer, but he is wrong.

Rosy explains, "The cafe vibe is refreshing. I enjoy observing people's fashion, just alone with my thoughts in cafes, and everything in between."

"I see. I also like cafes," Anton shares. "Peaceful and relaxing."

Rosy nods and teases, "I see. Because you're one shy guy."

Anton chuckles.

As they walk towards the cafe that claims to serve magical coffee, Rosy trips. She feels like hitting the ground, so she closes her eyes. Upon opening her eyes, Anton manages to catch her back.

Rosy flinches at Anton's dreamy black eyes. His face is more tantalizing up close. The yellow light from the lamppost captures perfectly the mood of this sentimental night. This is the night that Rosy doesn't want to forget. She finally meets Anton again. And he is the only one she sees in the dim moonlight.

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She carefully stands up. Anton moves towards Rosy's untied sneakers and ties them for her. The gesture makes her wide awake, even after all that alcohol.

"Clumsy Rosy," Anton smirks. He is holding his laughter back, but he soon bursts like a balloon.

She pinches Anton's arms. It leaves her with a smile. "It was an accident. Good rhyme, though."

"Are you okay?"

She nods to the side and crosses her arms, but it leaves her cheeks burning and sweating, which Anton notices. Although she claims it is nothing, her heart beats incredibly fast.

When they reach the phenomenal cafe, it's still as vibrant as ever. Anton recommends their best-selling coffee because their secret coffee recipe is really something.

And after some time, it starts to rain. It makes Rosy frown; she doesn't have an umbrella. But the night is young and beautiful, so Rosy takes photos from the windows. Though the rain is pouring, the windows don't fog.

"Do you want me to take a photo of you?" Anton asks.

Rosy agrees and hands him her smartphone. She poses as Anton takes a few shots.

Anton gives back Rosy's smartphone. "The rain is beautiful to look at," he says. "It's ethereal, like you, Rosy."

"Uh, thank you..." Rosy fixes her hair. Then she tightens the grip on her smartphone and drinks the warm coffee.

"Do you have a boyfriend?" Anton asks after a while.

"No boyfriend since birth," she laughs. *And going strong*, she wants to add. Then she asks back, "Any girlfriend?"

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“Single, for five years and counting from my last relationship,” Anton winks at Rosy. “Ready to mingle,” he adds.

Rosy only smiles. She shares that she’s not entirely fortunate in love. “I suppose I only leave an impression on other people.”

“Why is that?” Anton asks Rosy.

Rosy glances at her reflection in the windows. “Roses are beautiful to look at, but people avoid picking them because of their thorns,” she explains, looking back at Anton. “Getting pricked hurts, right?”

“I understand,” Anton says, firmly holding his coffee this time. He tells Rosy she will definitely find the love she is looking for in her life.

Rosy gestures with her left index finger in the air, resembling a wand. “For now, my mission as a lovely rose is to leave my clients optimistic and confident after learning their fashion style. And, of course, a fashion warrior with a heart for the environment!”

Anton snickers, and she changes the subject by complimenting his fashion choices. He is wearing a white T-shirt with a blue denim jacket, a pair of khaki chinos, and white sneakers. It’s a classic look.

“Your jacket is great, by the way,” Rosy remarks.

Anton replies, “This denim jacket is from my dad. Most of my jackets are. Why buy new when you can still make old clothes look stylish?”

Anton’s ability to make hand-me-downs look enthralls Rosy. *Definitely boyfriend material*, she thinks.

The rain slows down just like the mellow music inside the cafe. Rosy’s fashion life is one of the topics Anton is curious about. She then talks about her best, worst, and most thrilling experiences with

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her clients. They talk more about their families, themselves, and some lame but funny stories to wrap up the night.

“Oh, I must return this jacket of yours too,” Rosy says as she takes it off.

“Keep it, it’s raining,” Anton shrugs. Then, he confesses to Rosy, “I keep thinking about you since we first met too, Rosy.”

Then Anton claims he was so taken with Rosy’s daydreaming at the cafe that he wanted to get to know her more. He admits that Rosy made an impression on him, one that he will never forget, even though an accident caused him to spill coffee on Rosy’s blouse.

It is rare for strangers like them to meet, especially through chance encounters. For the first time, Anton admits to Rosy that although he doesn’t believe in magic, it has convinced him to.

“Our meeting is significant,” Anton continues.

Rosy grins at Anton. “Our status as strangers has changed.”

After sipping his coffee, Anton replies, “Certainly.”

This time, they exchange phone numbers and cling to the mesmerizing force that draws them together.

\* \* \*

Anton and Rosy had been seeing each other for a few months now. One sunny day, Rosy wears her favorite lace blouse again—the one she always steal from her mom’s cabinet—paired with a black tennis skirt, white knee-high socks, and two-inch black heels. This time around, Anton fetches her from her home.

After seeing their sister’s outfit, Lily and Jared tease that Rosy is surely seeing someone. Then, a man wearing a blue gingham-



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patterned polo appears at the door. Anton greets them and looks at Rosy.

“You’re beautiful,” Anton tells her.

“Thanks,” Rosy says, swinging her bag. “You’re handsome.”

Before her siblings could say anything, Anton and Rosy wave goodbye.

“Don’t forget our *pasalubong!*” the Cerafica siblings yell.

Anton only laughs while Rosy apologizes for her sibling’s nuisances.

They visit the whimsical cafe in Poblacion, Makati again. The enigmatic feeling is still there. From the outside, it looks like a simple cafe, but enter its doors and it will transport the customers to a benevolent place. This time around, Rosy didn’t enter the door alone, but with Anton. They smile and laugh, remembering how they met. Then, Anton becomes serious for one second.

Rosy trembles as Anton holds her hands and says, “Rosy, I have something to say to you.”

She stares into Anton’s deep-set black eyes. Her heartbeat quickens in anticipation of his words.

“There’s a saying that goes, ‘Every rose has its thorns’, right? And it grows into my heart. I like you, Rosy. Will you be my girlfriend?”

Rosy’s eyes water at the heartfelt confession from Anton.

“Yes,” she replies.

While holding her hand, Anton presents her with a pair of couple bracelets adorned with a rose. He puts one on Rosy, and she puts the other one on Anton. She covers her mouth as the staff walks up to them carrying a bouquet of red roses. The baristas are clapping and cheering for them as a new couple.

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Rosy teeters and says, “This lace blouse has done her duty at last.” Anton looks at her, confused.

“This is my mom’s blouse. She wore it when she had her first date with my dad,” she explains.

Anton smiles and says, “According to my dad, this blue polo made my mom fall in love with him.”

Rosy giggles. She muses about how clothes last forever, just like eternal love. To her delight, her love for fashion gets her the love she desires. Oh, how fate and coincidence can be so amusing sometimes.

Love is rosy, after all.





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### About The Author

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Jem Mari Villagrancia hails from the town of Binangonan, Rizal. He graduated with a Bachelor's Degree in Psychology from the University of Santo Tomas. He loves to write contemporary stories with themes of coming-of-age, romance, tragedy, and drama. The works of Haruki Murakami, Kazuo Ishiguro, and Lang Leav are among his writing influences.

Under the pen name of Jurino Castellan, he is the author of the short story titled *Drawing the Sound of Christmas* that was published in PaperKat Books' Christmas-themed anthology ebook *Pasko Na Naman (It's Christmastime Again)*.

# Frock and Pen



*By Anna Lustre*

Cassie

“**P**our me another glass of that damn tequila!” I yelled as I sat on the couch, obviously drunk.

I was entirely engulfed at the moment—not just by the liquor I was drinking, but also by the blaring sounds inside the bar. It was where we found ourselves after work because I needed to vent out my resentment due to my unsuccessful project today.

I didn’t even care if one of my spaghetti straps slid down my shoulders. I was wearing a quite revealing black silk dress that had a slit on the right side of my round, yet fair thigh. I was also wearing a pair of two-inch sandals so I can still move comfortably while dancing. My messy bun earlier was now flowing freely and in disarray. Still, I knew

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that I looked gorgeous even if I was totally smashed.

“Cassandra!” I heard Camille shout. I was on the dance floor with my other friends.

“What?!” I furrowed, then Camille immediately rushed toward me.

“Brent is here!” she whispered to my ear, which made me even more vexed.

“See if I care!” I replied while dancing through the crowd and holding my goblet of liquor.

“He’s so damn handsome,” Camille said. And I smirked at my cousin when they did a quick glance at Brent’s direction.

Couldn’t blame them, really. Brent got that debonair look that made him so attractive. He stood 5’11” and got that “international model” look. Unfortunately, this guy was a certified playboy,; plus he was my #1 nemesis since Day One. So, his compelling charm wasn’t affecting me at all.

“Lovely to meet you here, Sandoval!” I heard him speak behind me. His mouth was almost too close to my ears, so I ran my fingers through my hair to fix it a bit before I decided to face him.

A phony smile was pursed on my lips when our eyes met. “Not now, Yupangco! I’m not in the mood!” I spoke.

“Not doing anything yet, bratty,” he chuckled as he gently poked my nose.

“Then abort whatever’s on your mind now. Stop bothering me, will you?”

“You hate me, don’t you?”

“I do. With all my heart, Yupangco!” I scornfully replied. I was shocked when he quickly grabbed my waist and drew his

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face closer to mine. I could smell his warm breath that seemed to seize my entire body. I felt as if he was casting a spell on me.

“Keep being sassy with me and I won’t hesitate to kiss you here,” his deep husky voice lingered, and it gave me the shivers. I looked him straight in the eyes. His scent was so enticing, beckoning me to tease him more.

“I won’t fall for your—”

Brent cut me off by pressing soft, sweet kisses on my lips. It was undeniably hot and captivating. His hands gently lifted my waist closer to him and I could feel his steamy body wanting more. I felt lost in the moment, amid the crowd.

“B-Brent!” I gasped.

“Guess we’ll be needing a room now,” he gave me a sly grin as he carried me out of that place.

\* \* \*

*The next day*

“Yupangco!!” I screeched when I finally realized that I was in his pad. My body was covered with his blanket. I was on his bed. I wasn’t naked, but I only had on an oversized white shirt that I think belonged to him.

Brent got out of the shower, which was inside his bedroom. He was half naked, and only a white towel was covering his manhood. I was suddenly rendered speechless upon seeing *that*.

*Oh, what a great morning to start, but I should be mad at him now! I must scold myself for the sudden admiration I feel at this time.*

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“Why am I here?!” I furiously asked while still sitting on the bed.

“Oh, you don’t remember anything?” Brent replied, drying his hair with another towel in his hand.

“Geez! Brent Mikael, I wouldn’t ask you if I know everything that happened last night!” I wanted to scream but continued calmly, “I just remember being drunk, and the next thing I know I’m lying here on your bed. These aren’t my clothes and—”

I stopped for a bit and then continued, “For Pete’s sake! Did something happen between us?! I won’t forgive myself—”

“Stop right there, bratty!” Brent moved closer to me, the towel still covering *that*. Water droplets were dripping down his oh-so-yummy abs that look like delicious buns to me. I admit I got distracted by his presence, especially when I smelled his natural scent fresh from a shower. *I must divert my attention now before it’s too late.*

“Enjoying the view, huh?” he impishly asked as he caught me admiring every inch of his sexy body.

“When pigs fly, Yupangco!” I rolled my eyes at him just to conceal my flushed cheeks. “Tell me honestly, Brent, please,” I continued. “Did we have sex last night?” I asked bluntly, placing my hands on my waist while trying not to look at his naked body.

“Nothing happened, bratty.”

“Seriously?” I prodded. “Then why am I wearing your clothes now?”

“You passed out last night,” he explained. “You even vomited, so I decided to change your dress. Other than that, nothing else happened.”

“So, you’ve seen me—”

“Not naked,” he cut. “But if you want *that* to happen, I wouldn’t

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object to the idea, Sandoval!” Brent stretched his lips into a playful smile that made me even more uncomfortable.

“You, perv!” I blurted then hastily went out of his room, while Brent was still chuckling at my annoyed reaction.

\* \* \*

### *That night at my condo*

“You’ll never know what’s wrong with your manuscript if you don’t talk to her. Cassie, you’re almost there, just keep pushing,” my cousin Camille told me. I invited her to come over because I need someone to talk to after the rejection I got from the Publishing House and my friend Sheila, the editor.

I gulped down a shot of tequila. Then I squeezed some lemon juice straight into my mouth, followed by a sprinkle of salt before answering her, “I’m owning a brand! And that’s exactly why I want to share it in my book. I want people to utilize it and know more about fashion, especially those who can’t afford to hire a stylist for themselves.

“Well, the book is about encouragement and gaining self-confidence, too,” I continued. “It’s not just about glamour and the latest fashion trends, you know, for Pete’s sake! This damage that fast fashion is causing the environment is worth publishing so people can be aware of it!

I prepared another shot of tequila then continued my rant, “I just don’t get it. Why did they suddenly reject my two manuscripts without giving me any reason or constructive criticism?”



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“Can I take a peek at your manuscript?” Camille asked.

“It’s in my laptop and—fuck! I think I left my laptop somewhere...” I stopped. “Argh! I hate that Yupangco, I swear!” I blurted out as I remembered what happened earlier.

“Oh, so you hate him after those hot kisses?” Camille teased.

“Stop reminding me, please!”

“Holy angels, Cassie! So, it’s true! That famous and—not to mention—gorgeous director Brent Yupangco kissed you last night!” my cousin squealed. “I envy you!”

I raised an eyebrow and replied, “Seriously? Since when did you become a fan of this architect-turned-director conceited man?”

“Oh, don’t tell me you didn’t enjoy what happened last night, Cassandra?” Camille pestered me while pouring another shot of tequila...for me.

“Stop that nonsense, Cams!”

\* \* \*

It had been a week since I received an email from one of my friends who worked in the City Tourism Council in Bulan, Sorsogon, offering me to become the Head Fashion Stylist for the upcoming *Padaraw Festival* in May. And I had been thinking about it for days now. It could be a new venture for me. Plus, working there would give me the chance to visit my family in the province.

Another month passed and I found myself at the mayor’s office, shaking his hands. “It’s a great honor to be part of this event, Mayor Gonzalez,” I said with a smile after signing the work contract.

“Welcome to the *Padaraw Festival* family, Miss Sandoval,” Mayor

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Gonzalez replied. His staff members were also present and they greeted me and my cousin Camille with their most genuine smiles.

*Padaraw Festival* in Bulan, Sorsogon is celebrated annually as a thanksgiving for the abundant blessings from the sea and lavish harvest from the agricultural lands. The word “*padaraw*” means “unity” in the local dialect.

“We are talking about the town’s livelihood here, and I have this great idea,” I started. “For this year’s costumes, why don’t we upcycle ‘fast fashion’? You know fast fashion’s effects on the environment, right? Well, supporting *ukay-ukay* helps a lot in lessening our carbon footprint, but let’s put a chic twist on it!

“We can create outfits for a trendy farmer, a stylish fisherman, and a chic fish and market vendor. We can have them wear what reflects their personalities,” I continued, excitement evident in my voice. “Something that they will be proud to wear. Something that can help them tell their stories. Let’s have mix-and-match outfits for them!

“And by the way, I think we’re not going to spend a lot,” I saved the best for last. Everyone in the room was keenly paying attention to my pitch.

“I agree with Miss Sandoval,” one of the staff members said, and almost everyone in the room seconded that idea. “She’s right, let’s invent something that would make this festival extraordinary!”

We have two months to prepare everything for the upcoming festival in town. Street dancers and exhibitionists are constantly busy with their back-to-back rehearsals. Some are preoccupied preparing their props since there will also be a competition among the dance troupes.

Indeed, Bicolanos are sociable. They also love throwing jokes that

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lighten the mood, especially during tense situations. In the past weeks, we had been feeling worn out because of the preparations, but we never felt too exhausted because everyone made sure that we were having fun and enjoying the process.

\* \* \*

“Enjoy the food, everyone!”

We were in Sorsogon. The provincial governor invited us to have a meeting over lunch with them. I, together with my team, was fetched this morning and driven to a restaurant. They served a variety of scrumptious Bicolano dishes, such as spicy *laing* (dried and shredded taro leaves cooked in coconut milk with seafood or meat), steamed crab, freshly grilled fish, spicy *ginataang baluko* (seashells cooked in coconut milk), and a lot more. We were discussing the details of the *Padaraw Festival* that will be held this May in Bulan. We talked about the program proper, the street dance competition, and also the documentary film. I wondered how many celebrities would be joining the festival.

“Everyone, please welcome our guests for the coming event,” Governor Echavez announced, and almost everyone turned their attention to the newcomer, including me. I was in shock upon seeing who it was.

“I guess I don’t need to introduce him to all of you anymore, since he’s quite famous in the movie industry, right?” the governor teased.

“Yes, who wouldn’t know Brent Yupangco, hon?” Mrs. Echavez agreed.

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“Oh, that’s too much, Ms. Helen,” Brent replied, chuckling.

Despite the arrogance, that was true. Who in this country wouldn’t know him? In many circles, he was even more popular than any politician. Add to that, Yupangco was rich and he had this unbelievable power because of his huge fandom as a film director.

“He will be in charge of filming the *Padaraw Festival*,” the governor explained. “And since Ms. Cassandra is here to make our festival one for the books, I’m sure they’ll get along well. Right, Ms. Cassandra?” Governor Echavez even extended his hand in my direction while I was holding a crab leg in my hand.

“Oh, y-yeah, sure, Gov Echavez. No problem with that,” I even smiled at him, assuring him that I’ll do my job well.

I noticed Brent was looking in my direction and then showed his playful smile at me. I couldn’t guess what was running through his mind right now, but I was certain that I would get pissed at him for the rest of the day.

\* \* \*

“How long will you stay here?” Brent asked me while concentrating on the road, driving. We were on our way to see my family in Bulan, Sorsogon.

I threw a glance at him and then answered, “Two months, I guess.”

“So, should I stay here, too?” he asked, smiling. He threw a quick glance in my direction.

“I’m at peace here, Yupangco. Could you stop bothering me?”

“I get bored when I don’t bother you.”

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“Brent!!” I exclaimed, then he laughed at my reaction.

“You’re still cute when you’re annoyed.” I was caught off guard when he said that.

*Why do I feel like my cheeks turned red upon hearing that? And why does it make me feel uneasy now?*

\* \* \*

“Hi, Ma!” I greeted Mama as soon as we arrived.

“Mikael?” my mother was surprised when she saw Yupangco with me at the door.

Brent smiled at my mom and then hugged her tight.

Mama knew him well, after all, Yupangco and I have known each other for years, even before we went to the same university in college. Mama used to work as Brent’s family’s secretary at their architectural firm. She used to be so close to Brent when he was growing up.

Later that day, a knock on my door woke me up. Still half asleep, I looked at my wall clock and realized it was half past seven in the evening.

“Cassandra, let’s have dinner. Mikael is waiting for you, downstairs,” Mama said.

I was stunned when I learned that Yupangco was still in our house. I thought he already left before I took a nap.

“Why is he still here, Ma?” I asked when I opened the door of my bedroom.

“Cassandra, your mouth! He’s our visitor, he might hear you!” Mama even reprimanded me. I just took a deep sigh then continued to walk downstairs with her.

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Mama insisted Brent stay with us as the preparation for the festival was still ongoing, an offer that I quickly disagreed with. However, I didn't have any choice but to follow Mama since it was her house, not mine. Brent's mother was already deceased due to a heart problem five years ago, so his father married another woman after three years. Mama resigned from the Yupangco architectural firm a week after Brent's mom's interment. She had been part of the company for almost 11 years, and so she became Mrs. Yupangco's best friend over the years.

\* \* \*

It had been a few days since Brent started staying at Mama's house. The preparation for the *Padaraw Festival* continued.

"Ouch!!" I screamed after accidentally pressing my ring finger onto a fabric that hid a big needle. Our team was busy preparing the outfits for the festival.

"Sandoval, are you okay?" Brent quickly ran to me and checked my hand, only to find out that my ring finger was bleeding hard. The huge needle was buried deep in my finger that I couldn't even look at it. "Relax, okay? I'll pull the needle out gently," he held my hand securely and gently pulled the needle out of my ring finger.

"Ouch!" I cried but was stunned when Brent started sucking the blood on my ring finger. Even my team was shocked seeing *that*.

"Brent, stop that! You don't have to do that!" I told him. Everyone in the room was staring at us.

"The bleeding won't stop if I don't do this," he explained, then put my ring finger again on his lips.

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“Since when did you become so concerned, Yupangco, huh?”

“Do you want my honest answer to that, hmm?” he asked, teasing me, and it made me shiver.

*Why on earth am I feeling this way towards him? Why do I feel a sudden strange feeling about him?*

Another month passed while we busied ourselves with the preparations, with Brent filming the behind-the-scenes of the *Padaraw Festival*. Brent was so strict when it comes to working; he didn't want to waste time and effort. He always made sure that the filming will run smoothly. I was well aware that, sometimes, I was too sassy. Most of the time, we ended up arguing since I was part of his film. I knew that I had given him many headaches in the past weeks.

“Can you show me your genuine smile, Sandoval?” Brent asked while checking my angle at the monitor.

“I'm smiling,” I replied while sitting on a couch. We were filming an interview.

“That's not your genuine smile, you're faking it.”

“How would you know if it's real or not?”

“Because, I guess, I'm a movie director. Is that the answer you want?” he shot back, arrogantly, one that made me raise my eyebrows at him. “Stop acting sassy, Sandoval! I can clearly see your facial expression on the monitor.”

After a quick scolding, I quickly changed my facial expression and gave my most fake grin to the camera.

“Cut!” Brent shouted. He stood up from the director's seat and walked towards me.

“What? Am I not doing it right?”

“Do you still remember when I slipped down the stairs just

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because you put something in my shoes?”

I burst out laughing at the sudden flashback. It was the time when I took revenge on him back in college. Brent took up architecture in college, but since arts had always been in his heart, he also pursued a master's degree in fine arts abroad.

“Hahaha! That's the most satisfying scene I've witnessed in my whole life!” I laughed at the memory.

“Roll the camera, now!” Brent commanded and immediately went back to his seat.

“Compose yourself and keep that smile, bratty!” Brent even snickered when he saw me still smiling at the distant memory.

\* \* \*

Later that night, the team decided to chill and dine at one of the known resto bars in Bulan, Sorsogon. The night was filled with laughter and fun as we're discussing the failed rehearsals from the past weeks.

“You're already drunk, bratty. That would be your last shot,” Brent warned me as I snatched another glass of tequila and gulped it down.

“I can manage, Yupangco,” I even smiled at him then took a lemon wedge and some salt, and pressed them on my lips. He was sitting in front of me and staring, as if I was doing a heinous crime.

I noticed one of the choreographers keep on eyeing Brent, or should I say, most of the people in that bar were staring at him. Well, I couldn't blame them since Brent was undeniably handsome. He was often mistaken for a model because of his looks and aura. And that



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made me feel like something was pinching my heart and it affected me. I poured down another shot of tequila so I can hide the emotions I was feeling now. *This can't be happening. Why do I feel like I'm jealous when Brent is talking to other girls?*

I was about to drink my next shot when suddenly, Brent grabbed my hand. Everyone was shocked when they saw that, even me.

“Told you to stop, didn't I?” he reprimanded me.

“Told you I can manage, didn't I?” I quickly replied, then I raised my eyebrows at him.

“Stop being a hard-headed one, bratty,” Brent stood up and then decided to sit down next to me. He gently lifted my face and then faced him. “If you won't stop drinking, then I won't hesitate to kiss you here,” Brent mumbled in my ear which made me quiver, even made my heart pound faster.

“No one can stop me, not even you, Yupang—” I was suddenly astounded when he quickly pressed his lips onto mine.

*Déjà vu.* This was the second time he did this to me. His lips were so tender and soft; I felt like I was kissing a marshmallow. Plus it tasted sweet because of the liquor. His right hand was cupping my face while the other one was curled around my waist. I could smell his sexy scent and feel the heat of his body invading mine. I was lost in his presence and in his gentle yet passionate kiss, until I heard applause from the people around us that abruptly brought me back to reality.

“Oh, shit!” I blurted as I pulled myself away from Brent. I noticed that almost everyone was smiling and staring at us. I felt my cheeks heat up, and it was too obvious.

“You want to get out of here?” Brent playfully asked, then I rolled my eyes at him and gave him a little punch on the chest.

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“You, rascal! Take me out of here!” I said, then he immediately held my hand so we can escape the crowded place. We bid goodbye to my cousin Camille and our team.

\* \* \*

It was finally the 30th of May, the day of the *Padaraw Festival* in Bulan, Sorsogon. We were all eager to flaunt our chic costumes for the event. I was wearing a white summer halter neck maxi dress, which was also backless. I paired it with my nude-colored flat sandals, aviator sunglasses, and a messy bun so I can move comfortably amidst the crowd later.

We were outside, in the sun. I had been eyeing Brent from afar. He was wearing his white collarless polo shirt and his black chino shorts paired with running shoes. He was way more appealing with his cat-eye sunglasses, and I was dumbfounded just by staring at him from a distance.

“You look so fab, Cassie!” I was suddenly interrupted when my cousin Camille approached me.

“I always am,” I answered her conceitedly then chuckled.

“How to be chic like you, please?”

“You just have to be you, Cams. Own your brand. Know your style and flaunt it.”

“Noted on that, Ms. Fashion Stylist!” Camille said giggling.

A lot had happened in the two months that I stayed here in Sorsogon—with myself, and especially my relationship with Brent. Work was also good. The *Padaraw Festival* this year was very successful. The festival was filled with laughter and put smiles on everyone’s

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faces. The joy they felt was discernible. It was such an overwhelming experience, indeed. Everyone was amazed at the outfits and costumes of our participants. We also got immense support from people who attended the festival. Our team also received a lot of praise and commendable feedback for the upcycled outfits we created for the farmers, fisherfolks, and market vendors.

The costumes of street dancers were all recycled pieces from fast fashion clothes. We were able to utilize and maximize the resources that we had without much cost. Some said it was unique since upcycling fast fashion items was new to them.

“Tired, hmm?” Brent asked as he put his arm on my waist.

“Knackered,” I said then snickered. “Do you need anything?” I asked him.

“Just you!” Brent said while giving me a sly smile, one that made my cheeks flush.

*What are we? I don't know.* I just like that he treats me this way, and I hope this won't end soon.

### **Brent**

“It won't happen, Sheila!” I answered from the other line.

“You don't get my point, Brent. I'm warning you!” Sheila replied.

“Warning what? What you did was not fair to Cassie! How could you be so selfish, just because something is not right in your field.”

“You know what's going to happen if you continue your plan.”

“I know, and whether you like it or not, you need to face your consequences,” I said and ended the call.

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\* \* \*

I was having a hard time finding the perfect opportunity to talk to Cassie about the issue. I knew she would get mad at me, too. But telling her the truth was the best thing that I can do for now.

“From Bulan Municipality, we would like to say *salamatunon tabi* (Thank you very much) for the successful *Padaraw Festival*. This year was undeniably incomparable as everyone witnessed its culture and fashion at the same time,” the emcee said. “Thank you, Ms. Cassandra Sandoval, our very own and proud Bicolana fashion stylist, and to her team who worked very hard to give us an extraordinary event this year.” Everyone applauded, signaling that the program was about to end.

“We would also like to thank Director Brent Mikael Yupangco and his team for the remarkable coverage of the whole event,” the emcee added. “On behalf of all Bulanons here, *salamat tabi, Dios mabalos saindo gabos!* (Thank you, and God bless you all!)”

### Cassie

*The next day*

“Good morning,” Brent greeted and gave me a cup of hot coffee and *binagom*, a Bicol delicacy made of coconut meat and root crops covered with rice flour. He also sat next to me, as we were having breakfast at Kapehan sa Bulod, a famous coffee shop placed on top of the hill, somewhere in Bulan.

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“Why do you look so gorgeous just sipping your coffee like that?” I asked bluntly, then Brent let out a snicker.

“I have to, since you’re next to me,” Brent replied, then gently pressed a kiss on my lips. He placed his coffee cup on the small table in front of us and reached for an envelope beside him. He handed it to me.

“What’s this?”

“Open it.”

My eyes widened when I opened the mail and read the letter from a renowned publishing house in Metro Manila. My manuscript for the Fashion Styling book had been approved. I couldn’t contain my happiness while reading the letter over and over again.

“Oh my gosh! Does this mean I’m a published author now?!” I screamed at the top of my lungs.

“You are, babe!” I immediately hugged Brent because of the sudden surge of happiness. But a few minutes later, I realized that something was not yet clear to me.

“H-how did you know about this?” I asked, confused. We were both standing now. “And why do you have this letter?”

Brent looked me straight in the eye and then held my hands gently. “I’m sorry about what happened with your failed manuscript a while back. I thought I had to do something about it.”

“What do you mean, Brent?” I asked, now more confused.

“I saw your email to Sheila a few months ago when your laptop was with me. I know what was in your book, and what it had to offer to everyone. So, I decided to send a copy of it to another publishing house that I know will cater to your great work.

“I know it’s not right for me to meddle in your career, but I think

## LOVE IN STYLE

it's my responsibility to do that since I know the reason why she rejected your manuscript twice," Brent continued.

"I-I don't know what to say Brent," I stuttered. "But, wait, how do you know Sheila?"

Brent just nodded and then showed me a wry smile. "She's my step-sister. Dad married her mom three years ago. She's also the part-owner of the rising fast fashion company back in Metro Manila. And that's the main reason why she keeps on rejecting your work.

"I know it's not fair, Cassie," Brent added. "You may want to sue her, and I won't stop you from doing it. But I just want to say sorry for what she did to you. And sorry for meddling in your personal decision."

I slowly pulled my hands from him and then stepped back. "So, you planned all of this?" I smirked at him, then shook my head in disbelief. "You let me trust you this much and be comfortable with you, just because of that—"

"I planned to send your manuscript to another prestigious publishing house. But getting closer to you and what we have now...they're all real."

"Real? So, what am I to you now? What do we have now, Brent? I'm afraid you're just doing this because it's also part of your plan."

"Cassie, I love you! I've been loving you for a long time. Those petty fights, enraging, sure, and you being so sassy with me... I love all of those. I just couldn't tell you since I know that you're aloof and always angry at me."

I was speechless. I didn't know how to find the words to say to him. Brent gently cupped my face and placed my hand on his chest.

"This is true! My feelings for you will always be true, Cassandra."

## LOVE IN STYLE

“H-how can I be so sure about—”

Once more, Brent suddenly pressed a kiss on my lips and then wrapped his arm around my waist. His lips felt as if he was urging me to kiss him back so badly.

“B-Brent...” I whispered as our lips parted.

“You want assurance, my bratty? I’ll give it to you then,” he mischievously smirked, then quickly carried me as if we were newlyweds.

“Let me go, Yupangco!”

“Excuse me? Who’s Yupangco? My name is ‘babe’, and letting you go now is prohibited. You’re stuck with me forever,” he said arrogantly.

I don’t have plans to sue Sheila even if Brent told me to do so. I believed it was the right thing to do. I admit that I got hurt when I was told the real reason behind those rejections. But Sheila was still my editor and friend. For now, I just needed to pacify my emotions towards her and spend ample time healing the wound that tore our friendship apart.

As for Yupangco, I know this was just the beginning, but I’m willing to wager my love life this time, just like how I did with my career a few years back.





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### About The Author

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Born in 1992, Anna Lustre is an NBDB registered author/writer, a bona fide ESL tutor, and an entrepreneur. She's half Bicolana and half Batangueña, and currently residing in Laguna, Philippines, with her awe-inspiring family.

She's one of the authors of *Pasko Na Naman (It's Christmastime Again) Volume 1*, PaperKat Books' Filipino Christmas-themed anthology book. She's also one of the authors of a romance anthology book titled *Magkasintahan Volume XXVI*.

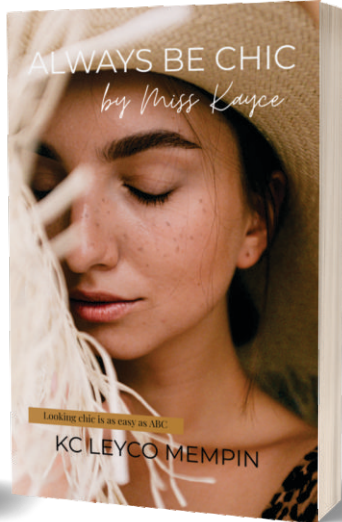
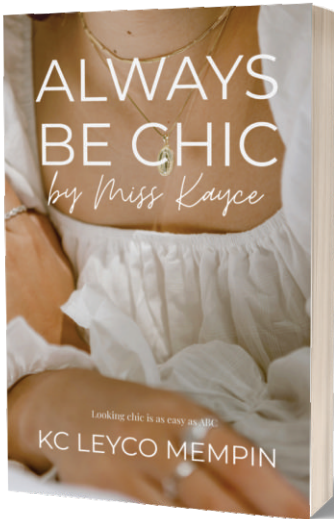
Singing, cooking, and baking are also her favorite hobbies apart from writing romance novels. She's also into teaching English to children and working professionals in South Korea.





# About the Book Inspiration

*Love in Style* is produced in collaboration with *Always Be Chic by Miss Kayce* by KC Leyco Mempin



**“What do I wear?”**

**“OMG, I have nothing to wear!”**

How many times have you encountered these situations?  
Despite having new clothes or even tons of options in your closet, you still can't decide on an outfit!

## LOVE IN STYLE

This surprisingly easy, fun, and awesome book by Miss Kayce makes dressing up effortless for anyone. This is your ultimate style map to help you navigate your wardrobe journey at any point in your life.

Whether you are off to university, a newly hired corporate employee, a work-from-home freelancer, a full-time mom, or a multi-hyphenate, *you got this!* Never feel lost again or think that you have nothing to wear as Miss Kayce breaks down her style philosophy so you can:

- ✓ Learn the art of chic, seasonless dressing
- ✓ Unlock your personal style and create a wardrobe that lasts
- ✓ ...while being mindful of yourself, lifestyle, budget, and environmental impact.

**After all, it isn't about the clothes.  
It's about you! And it's as easy as ABC.**

### *About the Author*



KC Leyco Mempin, also known as Miss Kayce, is a wardrobe and personal stylist with 15 years of experience under her belt. She has styled many sought-after celebrities, endorsers, and influencers and has worked for top brands and companies in the Philippines. She owns and manages MLCK Manila, a clothing brand known for its best-selling custom-tailored suits.

ABOUT THE BOOK INSPIRATION

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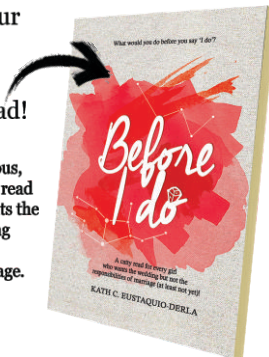
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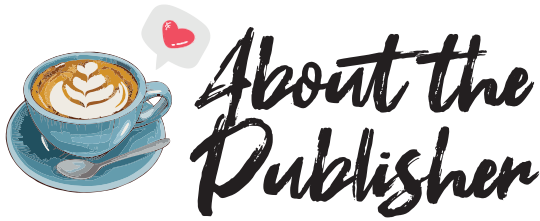
**Before I Do** is a hilarious, catty, and heart-breaking read for every Filipina who wants the whole wedding shebang but not the *\*gulp\** responsibilities of marriage.

Well, at least not yet.  
**#BeforeIDo**



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Currently, HS Grafik Print/PaperKat Books has published 30+ titles (paperbacks and ebooks) and has helped 200+ Filipino and non-Filipino authors publish their stories/books. Our printed books are currently being sold in Lazada ([bit.ly/PKBLazada](http://bit.ly/PKBLazada))

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# About the Mentor



Kath believes that anyone can write a book.

**But you need a plan.**

*Fuck passion.*


**K**ath C. Eustaquio-Derla is a registered author, editor, layout artist, book designer, book printer, and book publisher with the National Book Development Board - Philippines. She wears many hats but her favorite is being the COO (child of owner, #truestory) of her family's design-print-publish business **HS Grafik Print** with nearly 40 years of industry experience.

As a second-generation printer, Kath founded and heads **PaperKat Books**, the publishing arm that offers writing, mentoring, and publishing programs for aspiring book authors.

Kath is named Marketing in Asia's 70 Rising Personalities On LinkedIn Philippines, Writing Hacks Academy's Top 35 Filipino Coaches Aspiring Writers And Entrepreneurs Should Follow In 2021, and VB Consulting and Connected Women's 100 Most Influential Filipino Women on LinkedIn (2021).

Kath is the founder and editor-in-chief of **PaperKatalogue, The Magazine**, the first online and social media magazine for and by indie authors. She also founded and heads **Story Factory**, a long-term partnership project that allows non-industry writers to pitch their storylines and/or concepts to producers and directors for film and/or TV adaptations.





For your next Instagram-worthy OOTD,  
remember that you can still look chic  
while giving Mother Earth some TLC!

A Filipino stylist to the K-pop stars; a sexy-hot psychology professor; a love-magnet ruffle blouse; a devilishly sexy filmmaker; an 11-year-old girl discovering love for the first time; and more...

Following the huge success of our anthology projects ***Dystopia Manila*** and ***Deck The Halls***, we are so *kilig* to present ***Love in Style*** - a collection of one-shot, romantic-comedy (rom-com) stories about the art of always being chic while still caring for the environment.



Discover promising Filipino rom-com authors and a fashionable way of fighting climate change that you can start today by simply opening your closet! **Stay chic!**

## About The Publisher

**HS Grafik Print** was founded in 1983 as a design-and-print company. In 2020, we added publishing services and became a design-print-publish company. **PaperKat Books** (PKB) is the publishing arm of HS Grafik Print offering end-to-end publishing services.

  
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ISBN 978-621-8232-86-0



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