

A PAPERKAT BOOKS ANTHOLOGY

Love in Style

VOLUME 2

KADI SERAFICA | R.J. CHESHIRE
ABIGAIL DELFIN GAJE | TASIA
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Love in Style Volume 2

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D E D I C A T I O N



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



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 hearts are scattered around the text, each inside a light gray speech bubble. One heart is to the right of 'Love', one is to the left of 'Style', and one is to the right of 'in'.

VOLUME 2

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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!*



Coming of Age

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The Fashion Dynasty

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Faith and Chances

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Project MKUkay!

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Little Black Dress

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“Lovely, isn’t it?” someone asked. He was pointing at the moon. It was larger than usual. The sky seemed starless, their small pinpricks of light consumed by the stark, hauntingly beautiful moon. Below, framed by the edge of the moon, atop a tricycle, ethereal and showered by moonlight, was Adonis, the kid from Manila that Mama mentioned just a while ago.

He had an aquiline nose like a Hollywood star. His fine, shoulder-length hair danced in the summer breeze. God must have paid special attention when He sculpted his jaw. Adonis capped it with a smile enhanced by a mouthful of braces.

I stepped back, a hand over my heart. *What is this feeling?*

He jumped like an action star landing in front of me. “You must be Mary Jane, Ella’s friend. I’m Adonis, her soon-to-be cousin—er—nephew,” he offered his hand.

He knows my name! He must be interested in me!

I took his hand greedily. “I know,” I answered and would have rolled on the ground if he wasn’t there.

Excerpt

Coming of Age

Kadi Serafica

LOVE IN STYLE



Coming of Age

By Kadi Serafica

March 30, 1990

Friday

My name is Mary Jane Mangahas. Eleven years old. And I will teach you all you need to know about love. This is the part where you say, “Hang on, that’s not enough time to understand something as profound as love.” Maybe for you, that was the case, but for me, in that summer peppered by brownouts, 11 years was a lifetime.

There are three things you need to know about love:

1. In the beginning, it feels weird.
2. It doesn’t always end in a happily ever after.
3. And when it does inevitably end, it is a pain you wouldn’t wish on your worst enemy.

I studied in a public school, where, a student with a pressed

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uniform, imported shoes, a three-layer pencil case, and a box of 64 colored crayons sits side by side with another who comes to class in his slippers.

I'm not the most beautiful girl in class (that's Mayumi) nor the most intelligent (that's also Mayumi). If you go through our class picture and arrange us by looks, I'd be the fifth. But boy, when I smile and my dimples make an appearance, I might as well be first.

Back then, love is alien to me. I knew the boys in my class since nursery. Little did we know that just around the corner is the great divider. Our bodies are developing and that invisible wall that separates the girls from the boys is about to fall where it will remain for the rest of our lives.

We begin my summer of romance on the last day of class. It was 3:45 in the afternoon. All eyes were on the wall clock, willing it to move faster. *Tick-tock-tick-tock*. Ms. Nadera, our adviser, could sense it too. She closed the book with a clap. Hurray! She brought out a tray with leftover orange juice inside a clear plastic bag, knotted tight, and plumped with equal amounts of air and juice. There were also steamed *saba* (a type of banana), *toge* (beansprouts), and *kamote* (cassava) with some pale-looking spaghetti on the side. We knew the drill.

“Who wants to go home early?” Ms. Nadera asked.

I stood up, handed her a one-peso coin, and took the last of the orange juice. I shook it, making some bubbles inside. Satisfied, I bit one corner of the plastic. Biting a small incision at one corner was a skill only a few can master. Pressing the plastic bag to make it ‘pee’ on your mouth was bliss.

I took my bag and waved goodbye. Jake and Ella were behind me,

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holding plastics of take-out spaghetti.

“Not gonna miss an episode of *Bio-man*,” squealed Ella.

“I’m Red One!” exclaimed Jake. He bit into the plastic and squeezed some spaghetti out.

“Then I’m Pink Five! It’s your turn to be Yellow Four, Ella,” I ran after taking my first step out of the classroom. Jake and Ella jogged by my side.

Ella nodded her head with the beat. We smiled at each other. By this time, the lyrics were carved into our hearts.

Manong guard saw us and the juice I was nursing. He nodded, the unlit cigarette in his mouth rolling to the other side. The school gate creaked as we sped past.

I was home in a minute. My shoes were just outside the *sala*. My bag and socks left a trail leading to the TV. When the *Bio-man* theme song started, I was on top of our *lamesita*, my fist a makeshift mic.

Mama entered the *sala*. I jumped down. “Young lady, you do know you’re the one who’ll be picking up all this litter, right?” she asked.

“Yes *po*, Mama. Will do it on commercial break.” It was the inevitable fight scene. Pink Five was using her Super Electron Beam Light to defeat an enemy. Mama just stood there, a basin filled with sun-dried socks, hankies, and undies resting on her hip.

She handed me a thick wad of magazine. “When you’re done here, bring this over to *Tito* Alex.”

When the closing credits rolled, I cleaned the *sala* as promised, then headed to my *tito*’s store. He owned a gown rental store in the market. Above, it said, “Gowns by Alex Mangahas”. I knocked and entered the store. The walls were eggshell white. Pictures of beauty

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pageant winners, mostly from nearby towns, adorned the walls. The reception area was a small room with a comfortable couch, a table, a pair of sewing mannequins, and a fashion magazine stack.

Tito Alex was very thin, almost skeletal, with a bowl cut past his ears. He always wore a denim apron with multiple pockets, one of which had a large pair of scissors. When I arrived at his shop, he was holding a measuring tape and watching a series of models parading on a runway on TV.

“Just add the fashion magazine on the stack,” he told me, almost absent-mindedly.

“Who’s that?” I asked, trying to annoy him.

“A new thing by *Vicky has a Secret*.”

A blonde model wearing a hot pink pair of fluffy undies, high heels, and angel wings was on the ramp. The crowd cheered. She was the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. “Is Victoria a...? A fashion...”

“Taking over the fashion industry. Makes quality products. I support anyone who stands against fast fashion.”

I squinted at *Tito* Alex. “Err, please explain.”

He was visibly shocked at my sudden interest and began, “Fashion follows trends. What’s in and what’s not. When you see a prevalence of color, cut, or fabric, chances are, that’s in right now.

“Since the trends are made by famous designers, they are expensive,” he continued. “So, companies try to fill the high demand at a low cost by using cheap materials that don’t last long. Makes a ton of pollution. That’s called fast fashion and it encourages people to keep on buying new clothes.”

That flew right over my head. I needed to use my secret weapon,

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a question I use when I don't know what to say. "So...what's wrong with that?"

Tito Alex arched his carefully shaped brow. "When you were little, we used to talk a lot about fashion and design. Don't know if you remember them. I miss this."

"I remember asking you to read me Cinderella, but we somehow always end up reading fashion magazines..."

Tito Alex smiled sheepishly and continued his explanation about this fast fashion bit. "Fast Fashion could kill small businesses like mine. Apart from the cheap materials and poor quality of the clothes, the low costs lure people to keep buying new ones. What anyone with any fashion sense will tell you is this, it's cheaper to buy a couple of quality clothes that will last you years than to buy new ones every season. The secret is mixing and matching what you have. Anyone can be chic."

"I need to go. Assignments!" I ran home.

"School just ended, Mary Jane!" he shouted, but I was too far away to hear him.

With my mission accomplished, I reported back to Mama. An ice-cold tetra pack of orange juice was waiting for me at home. I turned it upside down and punched the sturdy straw at the bottom. *This must be what an orange tastes like*, I thought and hugged Mama.

She elbowed me and yelled, "Do you want to get burned?! Stay back, this is dangerous!" She fanned at the smoking charcoal on a battered aluminum basin until it glowed red. "Bring the *plantsa de uling* here," she commanded.

I lumbered to the *narra* cabinet and picked up the heavy brown flat iron at the bottom. It was shiny from repeated applications of

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candle wax. Mama dropped the red hot coal inside the flat iron, locked the lid, and passed the heavy metal on a piece of paper multiple times. It left excess wax on its path.

“Ella’s older sister, Gemma, is getting married this coming Tuesday,” Mama said.

I took a sip of my orange juice, watching the liquid rise from the see-through straw. “Ella told me she’s their flower girl. Isn’t she too old for that?” I asked.

Mama expertly ironed the corners of my uniform. “I heard she’s not the only overaged child at the wedding. Simon has a nephew, Adonis. He’s the same age as you and Ella. He’s the ring bearer. They came all the way from Manila.”

“Kinda brave to name the kid Adonis. I’ve seen Simon, and he’s...” I flattened my nose. “*Pango at ban-sama ng pagmumukba!*”

“Don’t say that out loud! You know how touchy Gemma is. She dated the governor’s son. Even that kid who would go on and become a commercial model for *pancit canton!* There’s another one I can’t quite remem—”

I stopped listening by then. My full and undivided attention was on the flat iron as it smooths everything it passes with its red, glowing slits that resembled eyes.

Then the lights turned off.

“*Ayyy! Puki ng ina!*” screamed my mother. Simultaneous shouts and colorful swearwords erupted from our neighborhood. Mama lifted the flat iron and dropped it onto its cage at the extremity of the ironing board. I heard the sizzle of banana leaves. The smell of burnt banana followed.

I felt my mother’s palm on me. “Stay away from the flatiron! Go

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out and play with your friends.”

Outside our home, I passed by our *sari-sari* store manned by Papa. He was thin with a pencil-thin mustache and wide-set eyes. He was talking animatedly to *manong* guard from school, the eternally-present wooden cross on Papa’s chest moving with him. They had a lit candle between them. *Manong* guard opened a pack of peanuts with his teeth and spilled them on his hand. He took a swig from a bottle of beer.

It wasn’t as dark outside. I heard Ella and Jake talking and followed the sound. Rey and Marco sped past me.

“Lovely, isn’t it?” someone asked. He was pointing at the moon. It was larger than usual. The sky seemed starless, their small pinpricks of light consumed by the stark, hauntingly beautiful moon. Below, framed by the edge of the moon, atop a tricycle, ethereal and showered by moonlight, was Adonis, the kid from Manila that Mama mentioned just a while ago.

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He knows my name! He must be interested in me!

I took his hand greedily. “I know,” I answered and would have rolled on the ground if he wasn’t there.

Ella shouted, “Adonis, meet my classmates!”

Our hands unclasped, and I knew this right there and then: *this is*

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the man who will take me to the altar. We will have 10 children. All of them with long shiny hair, aquiline nose, dimples, and braces.

Gemma, the bride-to-be, had her arms around her younger sister Ella. She gathered us around and whispered, “We’re not supposed to tell you until you are old enough, but we have *dwendes* here. Who wants to see them?!” Six right hands shot up.

Simon, the groom-to-be, joined our group. “This looks interesting!” Their fingers laced as he stood beside Gemma. “We need a large basin.”

“I’ll get ours! But no one steps on it, my mom will spank me if it gets cracked again,” volunteered Rey.

“We also need charcoal. Can you get some, Marco?” asked Gemma. He nodded.

They left, leaving Adonis within arm’s reach. I scooted to better hear Gemma, who sat on the other side of Adonis. By some accident, our knees touched, our eyes met, and I melted from the inside.

We moved the search for the *dwende* in front of our *sari-sari* store. We turned on the faucet and used a gardening hose to fill the basin with water. The group gathered smooth rocks, slumped on the cemented storefront, and ground the charcoal into dust as Gemma instructed.

Papa hovered behind. “What are you kids up to?”

“We’re hunting for *dwendes*,” I answered.

He pulled up a chair, sat, and then said, “Haven’t seen one since Gemma was this tall.” Gemma grinned.

After painstakingly grinding a mountain of charcoal, Gemma asked us to sprinkle the basin with them. He chanted, “Mr. Moon, Mr. Moon, show us. Using your light, reveal the other side. Let us see *dwendes*!”

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A host of the elders were watching. They installed an ethanol-powered lamp in front of the *sari-sari* store.

“Close your eyes,” commanded Gemma. “Wash your face in the basin as I say the words again. Just keep on washing until I say ‘stop’, okay? Keep your eyes closed. If you open them a second earlier, we won’t see *dwendes*, and it will be your fault.”

We nodded solemnly and closed our eyes.

“Mr. Moon, Mr. Moon, show us. Using your light, reveal the other side. Let us see *dwendes*!” Gemma chanted. “Wash your faces! Jake, spread them on your cheeks. Ella, you’re missing your chin. Mr. Moon, Mr. Moon, show us. Using your light, reveal the other side. Let us see *dwendes*!”

I heard a commotion from the elderly. “You can stop now, but keep your eyes closed,” Gemma said. “When you open your eyes, I want you to look into the basin. You will see them staring back! Open them in three...two...one!”

I leaned for a better look. The image on the basin ripples and moves. Dark shapes except for the prominent whites in their eyes. The surrounding elders hooted, clapping. I concentrated, willing the water to freeze so I can see the images clearer.

I saw six heads. Dark, ugly faces.

“It’s us!” screamed Ella. She turned around, looking for her older sister.

Adonis burst into laughter. He pointed at Rey. I started pointing fingers too, laughing with the rest. Simon cupped the dark water and ran to Gemma, who tried desperately to get away. We caught her. We laughed as Simon smeared the dark water on her face and turned the bride-to-be into a *dwende* queen.

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The lights returned. Shouts and colorful swears erupted. We formed a line in front of a hose. Papa handed me a bar of soap.

“Let’s play again tomorrow,” said Adonis as I rubbed my face with soap. Even as a *dwende*, he looks really good.

I hopped back home that night.

* * *

Saturday

I want to see Adonis, but he can’t see me like this.

“I can help you with your boy problem...” said an unfamiliar voice. She was blonde and wore a pair of fluffy undies, high heels, and wings. All hot pink.

“You look familiar.”

“*S’yempre naman!* I’m the greatest fashion designer in the world. Call me Victoria!” she had what I imagine was a British accent.

I rolled off the bed and replied, “I didn’t know you can speak Tagalog?”

“As the Angel of Fashion, I can speak all languages! Let me look at you so we can get some bearing on what we are working with. Hmm, turn around. Great smile. Keep doing that when you see Adonis.”

My cheeks reddened for some reason. “Adonis? Who says I like him? He’s not my crush.”

Victoria rolled her eyes. She opened my closet and inspected my clothes. She pulled some items and threw them on the bed, “Uniform. *Pambabay*. A couple of dresses that don’t even flatter you. We need to

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get you some new clothes. Break that piggy bank. We will visit an *ukay-ukay*.”

And so, we went to the biggest *ukay-ukay* in our town, the one that Mama and *Tito* Alex frequent. Victoria dug into a mountain of kiddie clothes. I asked, “What’s wrong with the ones I have?”

“Those clothes are not you. Your mama picked them. She has good taste, but it isn’t you.” Victoria put a checkered blouse over my body. I looked in the mirror. “How does this make you feel?”

“Nothing.”

She returned it to the pile.

“So what clothing is me?”

“That’s what we need to find out. What you wear tells other people something about you. So, we need to come up with your style.” Victoria pulled out another light-colored shirt. “How about this?”

I smiled and took it. “I don’t have a lot of money.”

“Oh, don’t worry. You don’t need a lot. What we need are those we can mix and match.”

We went home with two bags of clothing and another bag of accessories that we looted from *Tito* Alex’s store. My wallet was empty, but my smile was ear to ear.

* * *

The power was out again at five in the afternoon. It made me giddy with anticipation. I slurped through our *pancit bibon* dinner, helped Mama with dishwashing, and got dressed.

“Colors have meaning. I suggest something bold, dramatic, and red! Tonight, they will meet a new Mary Jane!” advised Victoria.

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I picked a white Sunday dress, wrapped a red belt around my waist, and topped my head with a wide red headband. Victoria giggled when I twirled. She hugged me, her pink angel wings caressing my cheek. Then she pushed me out the door.

My smile soured when I arrived at our usual spot. I was the first one out, which was lame and lessened the impact I was going for. Marco arrived a couple of minutes later. He greeted me with, “Did you come from a party?”

“No, this is how I usually dress.”

He nodded and dunked a finger in his nose.

Adonis soon arrived with Ella. She winked at me.

“Wow, you look... different,” Adonis said.

“Different bad?” I pouted.

“Uh, you look nice,” he added and my face turned into a ripe tomato.

“Let’s play *tagu-tagan!*” announced Jake and started explaining the rules to Adonis. “We used to play this at school. We team up into three groups. Group members stay together except for the group that becomes the *‘taya’*. They can separate to make hunting easier. We hide anywhere on the school grounds and whoever the *taya* finds first is the next *taya*.”

Ella said, “Let’s limit the hiding places to the entire block. And no hiding inside homes or other places you can lock or close.”

“There are only six of us. It won’t work,” Marco complained.

“Then we group into pairs,” chimed Ella. God bless her soul.

Rey hurriedly said, “I’ll take Jake.” The two exchanged high fives.

Three people left to choose from, I thought. Not Marco. Down to two choices... Do I make the first move? I never expected how weird this could be.

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Any other time I would pick Ella in a heartbeat, but this time around, I kept my eyes away from her. We shifted stances awkwardly for what felt like minutes. Then, against all hope, Adonis put a hand on my shoulder and said, “We should team up.” *Success!*

We used good, old *bato-bato* pick to determine the *taya*. With Adonis watching me, there was no way I can lose to anyone. Rey and Jake ended up as the *taya*. They headed to the large acacia tree outside our home and started the game’s song.

I took Adonis by the hand and we ran. I was mostly grinning the whole way. He pointed to a mango tree with an L-shaped branch. We climbed and sat on the bough.

A few minutes later, Rey passed by. I tried to hold my breath, but Adonis giggled. I ended up giggling too. Thank God he didn’t notice us, nor the slippers we left at the foot of the tree.

I started, “Aren’t you too old to be a ring bearer?”

“Five years ago, Aunt Gemma thought Uncle Simon was going to propose to her. He was planning this big secret thing and was consulting with members of her family. She told Ella about it, and I think she made Aunt Gemma promise her that she will be her flower girl. Turns out, Uncle Simon was planning a big anniversary party. He finally proposed, and the two decided to honor the promise to Ella, who also thinks she’s too old for it now. But they thought it would be better if I also become a ring bearer. I’m a victim in all of these.”

I laughed, “Glad I’m not you guys.”

He looked at me and said, “I’m glad I am.”

I flashed my smile, willing my dimples to appear, and asked with all innocence, “Why?”

“There you are!” exclaimed Rey. He doubled back and saw my

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foot wagging. We jumped down the tree and played for another hour. Adonis never returned to the topic, and I never pushed.

When I got home, I rolled around in my bed as I recounted all that transpired to Victoria. She spent hours sketching styles.

* * *

Sunday

I woke up peppered by sweat. The power was out early.

After lunch, I found my playmates lounging in front of Ella's home. They have a *duyan* tied between a guava tree and *santol* tree. Ella was on the *duyan*, while the others lounged on metal chairs. A pair of joker cards were on the corner of the coffee table. Marco's nose was bright red from losing in *unggoy-ungguyan*. I dropped six pieces of *buko* ice candy from our *sari-sari* store.

I watched Adonis as he tasted the treat for the first time. His eyes bulged in delight! We spent the next two hours taking turns at the *duyan* and playing *unggoy-ungguyan*. By three o'clock, the others were called home, leaving me with Adonis.

"Want to visit the Children's Park?" I wore a floral Sunday dress and bangles for the occasion.

We walked barefoot in the Children's Park. The place was covered in carabao grass. I stopped Adonis when I saw a *makahiya*, a creeping plant with small, elongated leaves.

"Do you know what that is?" I asked and he shook his head. We dropped down. "Blow on it," I urged.

He did and the leaves folded. "I bet you one ice candy. You can't

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touch a leaf before it folds!” I said. Adonis tried and failed. I joined the fray and failed as well.

After forcing every *makabiya* we can find to fold, we picked up elongated seed capsules about two inches long from a plant with violet flowers. “Just get as much as you can. Don’t know what this one is called, but we named it the water bomb plant. If Marco was here, he’d put one in your palm and spit on it.”

“Eww. What would happen?”

“Just wait. We need to bring them to the *imburnal*.”

We climbed a three-foot cemented wall and sat on top. The canal was below us. There were algae at the bottom of the shallow canal. Dozens of millionfish or guppy, small semi-transparent fish that lives in the canal, darted below us. “Ever caught one of those?” asked Adonis.

“You can try, but they move really fast,” I replied. “I don’t think you can eat them, although they look like tiny *dalagang bukid*. Throw one of the water bomb seeds in the canal and count to five!”

Adonis did and counted, “One, two, three, four—” It exploded without any sound, scattering its seeds around. We started throwing seeds to create mini explosions in the *imburnal*. We spent the next hours just throwing the seeds.

I didn’t know how it happened. I just realized my palms were sweaty and my fingers were intertwined with his. So, I pulled my left hand away for a bit to wipe it on my dress. But when my hand returned, his wasn’t there.

“It’s getting dark,” he announced. With arms outstretched, we walked to the end of the wall.

The power was back when we returned.

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“See you tomorrow?” he asked.

“Can’t wait, good night!”

* * *

Monday

I was awake by 4:00 a.m. Victoria was slumped over an old notebook. She was snoring! I pulled the notebook filled with fashion sketches from under her. One stood out—a simple blouse tucked inside a denim jumper, a pair of sandals, and a bow on my hair.

Victoria was awake by the time I finished dressing up. She dipped a piece of *pandesal* in hot chocolate and asked, “Did you like how it looks?”

I nodded, “This getup says ‘girlie, but can play in the dirt’.”

She munched on another *pandesal* and said, “You were leaning too much on the lady side.”

I practiced my smile in the mirror, making sure the dimples show up.

* * *

I found Jake and Marco in front of Ella’s home. Jake thought long and hard, then picked one of the two cards in Marco’s hand. Marco smiled triumphantly. “Wanna join us? It’s not fun when it’s only the two of us,” invited Marco.

“Where are the others?”

Jake shuffled the cards under the table. He presented the cards to

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Marco and answered, “Rey attended a reunion. Ella and Adonis are at the wedding rehearsal.”

Marco touched the middle card, watched Jake’s reaction, then picked a different card. Marco laughed victoriously and slammed the pair of kings on the table. Jake prepared his nose for a flick.

“Can’t join you guys. Mama asked me to help around the house. See you tonight.” I left with heavy footsteps.

It wasn’t Adonis’ fault that they must do rehearsals. He didn’t lie to me. Or did he? I felt betrayed just the same. I spent the entire day cleaning around the house. Mama was very happy.

Victoria kept me company, giving me valuable advice. “Don’t let him kiss you, you will get pregnant!”

By nightfall, I was ready to charm my future boyfriend. I wore a pair of checkered shorts and a loose shirt with long sleeves. Victoria made me wear a necklace with a large round pendant. The power went out, as if on cue.

“Good luck!” Victoria squealed as I marched outside.

Ella, Jake, and Marco were already waiting in front of our *sari-sari* store when I arrived. Adonis was leaning on the sidecar of a tricycle. *Target acquired!* I waddled through my friends, a hand on my hip.

I stepped quietly, hoping to surprise him. Turns out, I was the one being surprised. It felt like that scene in *Bioman* when Doctor Man, the evil scientist, invaded Earth. Just like Doctor Man, Mayumi arrived without an invitation to destroy my world.

Just then, Adonis laughed at one of Mayumi’s jokes. I scowled.

“I invited Mayumi since we lack one player,” explained Jake, the traitor.

Mayumi asked, “Are we playing *tagu-tagan*? I choose Adonis.”

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As my world darkened, I heard Marco—who was poking his nose—say, “You’re with me now.” He might have wiped a booger on my arm, but I was too stunned to feel anything.

The entire night felt like a waking nightmare. My team and Ella’s kept losing. We never found out where Adonis and that evil Mayumi hid. Or what they were doing!

The power returned earlier than usual. I headed home and went straight to the phone to call Ella’s home. It was Ella who picked up. *Is Adonis too busy talking to Mayumi to pick up the phone?! She passed the phone to Adonis.*

“Are you busy? You sound busy,” I started.

“Didn’t know wedding rehearsals were that tiring,” Adonis replied. “We kept doing the same thing over and over again. Uncle Simon could have married Aunt Gemma 10 times. All I did was walk with a pillow and they had me do it seven times...”

I went for the kill. “Do you like me?”

“I like spending time with you.”

“Spending time with me, *lang?*” I asked coquettishly. Victoria nodded her approval. She put her ear on the phone to eavesdrop.

Adonis started, “I mean, I...”

“I like you!”

There was silence on the other end. “Don’t you like me?” I asked, irritated.

“I’m not sure. I don’t know,” he answered defensively.

“Why wouldn’t you know?”

“I’m too young for that.”

My voice rose. “We are the same age and I know! Maybe you don’t like me and don’t want to say it.”

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“It’s not that!”

“Maybe that’s exactly what it is. Did you have fun hiding with Mayumi?”

“Why would you think that?!”

My temper rose even higher. “I think you kissed her! You’re a kisser! *Mwab-mwab* under the mango tree. Or *mwab-mwab* at the park by the canal!”

“We did not!” Adonis defended. “I hate you!”

“So now, you hate me?! I hate you, too!” I slammed the phone and hoped Adonis felt that. Victoria hugged me. Tears ran down our faces.

I returned to my room and cried. Nothing Victoria said could calm me down. By midnight, Papa knocked on my door. I wiped my face, took deep breaths, and asked him to come in. Papa brought a glass of orange juice and some crackers.

I played innocent. “I just woke up...”

“The walls are thin, Mary Jane. Your Mama and I are not mad.” He hugged me tightly. The wooden cross on his chest was comforting. “My daughter is growing up.”

Later that night, Mama came to my room. She sat at the corner of the bed and looked around. I pretended to be asleep, my head under a blanket. She took one of the fashion sketches that Victoria pasted on the wall. “I like this one,” she announced.

When I didn’t respond, she sat on my bed and began talking, “I was not supposed to marry your father. I was engaged to another man. His name was Luisito. He was kind, and he loved me dearly. We grew up around each other and there was this expectation that we will eventually marry. Luisito was hardworking and good-looking, too.

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We were happy together, but for some strange reason I was unhappy.”

I stopped pretending to be asleep and asked, “What happened?”

“Move over, I’ll sleep here tonight,” declared Mama.

I rested my head on her shoulder. And with her left arm wrapped around me, she continued her story. “I met your father. He was a brother in the church, a couple of months from ordination. It so happens that he heard my confession. We got to talking, and the entire afternoon flew by. Later, I realized I never had that much fun just talking with any other person. He felt the same.”

“Wait, you seduced a man of the cloth?”

“Technically, he was not yet one,” Mama replied sheepishly. “It wasn’t as easy for us to be together. We have responsibilities. But the heart wants what the heart wants. Our feelings for each other grew so much that I can’t imagine a future without him. I had ‘The Talk’ with Luisito. I knew it will crush the poor man, but I cannot, in good conscience, marry him while loving another. I turned myself into a pariah—”

“What’s a fa-ra-ya?”

“It refers to someone that the whole town dislikes and talks about. Everybody in town hated me. Called me all sorts of names. Then I found out that your father didn’t do his part of the plan. I was so angry at him. I destroyed my life for nothing. So, I did the only thing I can do, I left town. It felt, at that time, that my life was over. It was a pain I wouldn’t wish even on my worst enemy.”

“But you are together now—”

“I moved to this town, where no one knew me. I lived alone believing this is it, I will not love again. But you know what the funny thing is? When I calmed down from all that anger, I realized that if

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I was given the chance to go through all that again knowing I would end up alone in a town where no one knew me, I wouldn't change anything."

Victoria and I asked, "Why?"

"My handful of moments with your father were the highlights of my life. One day, he knocked on my door wearing regular clothes. And I knew I can love again."

I squeaked. I knew Mama was not just talking about Papa anymore. So, I asked, "Maybe one day he will come back?"

She shook her head. "Maybe, maybe not. You are young, Mary Jane. You will meet other people. You will fall in love with other people. Maybe this boy will be yours forever. Or maybe like Tito Alex, you will give up on finding love. But every person you will love and love you back will leave a mark in here, in your heart. Those moments will be with you forever."

I cried. "I think I love him, Mama."

She wiped the tears from my eyes, "I know, baby."

* * *

Tuesday

I was woken up by an alarm I didn't set. It was 10 a.m.

Victoria pointed to a paper tacked on my wall. Written in my mother's cursive, "You have a forever-moment waiting for you today." Behind is a gown sketched by *Tito Alex*. I ran to his store.

Mama, Papa, and *Tito Alex* were waiting for me inside. A white gown with sequins was on a mannequin. It was simple and elegant.

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When I wore it, I felt like the most beautiful girl in the world. I hugged them and sped back to Ella's house.

They erected a *damara* last night, a small enclosure with bamboo for beams and walls made of woven coconut leaves. Chairs and tables have been arranged. A disco ball hung in the middle of the *damara*'s roof, bathing the entire make-shift reception in square, varied-colored lights.

Ella pulled me from the crowd and put me on a plush chair beside her. Most have finished eating. Adonis was nowhere.

An emcee in a suit and tie, peppered with sweat, spoke in Ilocano, "The total amount we have collected is Php97,200. Why don't we call our newlyweds for one final dance? I'm pretty sure we can loosen our belts some more for this great-looking couple. Pins are available here at the table. Godparents, I'm talking to you!" The crowd laughed.

Ate Gemma swapped her wedding gown for a little red dress that accentuated her curves, and *Kuya* Simon wore a white polo with a red pocket. They bowed to a cheering crowd before dancing. Papa pinned a five-hundred-peso bill on the back of *Kuya* Simon's polo. Another godparent followed suit. The couple laughed as they twirled around the center of the *damara*—pointing and waving at people while a throng of godparents pinned money on an ever-lengthening money train behind *Kuya* Simon. And just like that, the music ended.

The emcee spoke again, "Godparents, don't leave yet! We need to count them first!" The crowd laughed. "Before we all call it a night, our DJ here will start accepting song requests. Oh, we already have one. Here is one of my favorite Elvis Presley songs, *Can't Help Falling in Love*."

Someone cleared his throat behind me and said, "You promised

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me a dance and I won't leave until I get one.”

It was Adonis, his long hair pulled back and secured by pomade. His smile was beaming. He offered his hand. “I don't remember—”

“Take iiiiiiit!” screamed Ella, grabbing my hand to meet Adonis'. My palms were sweaty and so was his, but somehow, it felt right.

I hugged him tightly. Tighter than anything I have ever held onto before. Then we swayed to the music. The song was two minutes and 59 seconds long, but we slow-danced for a lifetime. Our conversation, shy as it was, almost always ended with “uhm” and “yes”.

Soon, couples took to the dance floor, but it felt as if there was no one else on the dance floor that day. Just Adonis and me, swaying with every line of Elvis Presley's song.

And then, just like that, the song ended.

“Maybe we will see each other again,” he started shyly.

I smiled, my dimples coming out in all its glory.

By late afternoon, Adonis and his family were on their way back to Manila.

Mama was right. Love could end. Love could also be found again. But it lives in brief moments we share with someone.

And there, it will last forever.



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About The Author

Kadi Serafica has a growing collection of books on the supernatural, occult, anting-anting, and mythology. He created the “Alamat Character Archetype” in an attempt to organize all mythologies and connect them all while keeping the lens Filipino. His *Alamat* anthology is the culmination of his desire to promote Filipino myth, culture, and folklore.

He often replies to messages sent to his Facebook account “Kadi Serafica”.



The Fashion Dynasty

By R.J. Cheshire

“Welcome to Eliximore Corporation!” a chubby lady, who was wearing a stylish blue pantsuit accentuated with a pair of pearl earrings and a necklace, said. Her name was Angela, and she was standing in front of the room with a clicker in hand presenting the logo and the photo of the company’s building located in Bonifacio Global City, Taguig.

Jaslene sat alone in the meeting room during the hiring orientation. It has always been her dream to work in Eliximore Corporation since her mother opened a clothing store in Divisoria. She had plenty of experience working as a consultant in the clothing industry with her mother, but as time passed, she wanted to see more, do more, and experience more. She had always wanted to know what it is like to be in the big league.

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“So, a brief history of the company,” Angela continued. “Eliximore was founded by Mrs. Evaline Laokongxin, who started a clothing store back in 1961 that later became a growing business in Tondo, Manila. Her husband, Mr. Jericho Laokongxin, became the business head, while Mrs. Laokongxin focused on clothing design. Her work became so well-known she even joined the New York Fashion Week in the 1970s where her collection quickly grew to be one of the most popular clothing lines in the world. Recently, Mr. Jericho Laokongxin has resigned as CEO and passed the company down to his son, Luis Laokongxin.” The slide showed a picture of an elderly, strict-looking man, an adorable-looking grandma, and a son.

Suddenly there was a knock at the conference door. A tall and quite dashing man, who was probably 24 or 25 years old, entered the room. His hair was cut neatly and pulled back. He wore a pair of black-framed glasses, a well-fitting suit with a light grey tie, and an expensive-looking wristwatch.

“I’m sorry, am I interrupting someth—” he tripped and almost fell face-first onto the ground. “I’m okay. Sorry for the interruption, but I do need the report of the employee survey now. May I know if it’s done? There’s a meeting later with the CEO, so it is quite urgent.” He checked himself then fixed his glasses.

Angela looked shocked, like she forgot to cook the rice or defrost the food before her mother got home. “I’m so sorry! Right away, sir,” Angela quickly ran out of the room, leaving Jaslene with this guy.

“Is this your first day?” he casually sat beside her.

“Yes, sir. It is my first job,” she smiled.

Jaslene recently graduated college and just got her first official job in a corporation. Even if she worked at her mom’s shop for years,

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being here was nerve-wracking for her.

He laughed and replied, “I like your enthusiasm.”

He seems nice, Jaslene thought, though she couldn’t help but feel a little intimidated by him. Maybe it was his clothes or maybe because he was too chill.

“So I see, you’re still undergoing orientation?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then let me tell you some things about the company while we wait for Angela to come back,” the guy said. “The company creates events, seminars, and workshops to help raise awareness and educate the public about fast fashion and the proper way to recycle used clothes.”

“Oh yeah! I’ve attended some of them myself before,” Jaslene replied. “My mom owns a clothing store, so I’ve experienced fast fashion first-hand. There are many bad and cheap materials being sold, but don’t get processed properly, which later caused a lot of high carbon footprint due to the factory greenhouse gases.” She sounded like a nerd who’s showing off her knowledge after watching a documentary.

“Exactly, Eliximore Corporation has always prided itself on being forward-thinking and setting a good example for the future of the fashion industry,” the guy agreed. “After all, the planet’s problem should be everyone’s problem, don’t you think?”

She nodded in response.

“Do you know that I’m the one who suggested these programs to the company? It took many tries, but it was approved eventually,” he looked quite proud of himself.

She got the feeling that he didn’t have many people to talk to,

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which was why he was so chatty to strangers. “That’s cool! Though... why did they reject it at first?” she asked, finding it surprising.

“In the world of business, everything has a *quid pro quo*. Can’t get something out of nothing, you know.”

She nodded in agreement. It made sense... But now, she didn’t know what else to talk to him about.

“I can show you around the office if you want,” he scratched the back of his head, looking quite shy.

“That would be nice,” Jaslene smiled.

He chuckled, “You’re easy to talk to.”

Really? All we did was talk about the company, Jaslene thought.

“I’m Nathaniel Añonuevo,” he extended his hand.

“Jaslene Cordero *po*, sir,” Jaslene took his hand and shook it.

Just then, Angela ran back into the conference room and informed him that the file had been uploaded to the cloud and can be viewed now. Nathaniel tried to stand, but one of his feet got caught by the chair leg and he fell face-first onto the floor. To make things worse, the chair fell on top of his butt.

Jaslene quickly got out of her seat and helped him up.

“Thank you so much,” Nathaniel rubbed his forehead, which had a big red mark on it. “Oh! Here.” He handed her a business card. “Don’t hesitate to call me for a lunch or a tour, I’d be happy to show you around.” He waved goodbye and then bumped into the doorframe.

Is he always this clumsy? How is he not dead yet? she thought.

“Wow, I envy you to be able to be fast friends with the General Manager!” Angela remarked as soon as Nathaniel was gone.

“HE’S THE WHAT?” Jaslene took the business card and saw the

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title of General Manager.

* * *

After the hiring orientation was lunch. Jaslene waited by the elevator with the other employees. She took out her phone and began to text her friend Joshua, who also worked in the company. He was the one who recommended her to HR for the position of fashion stylist. He was also her senior while they were in college. They agreed to meet at the cafeteria after her orientation.

The elevator door opened, and everyone entered. Jaslene was still focused on her phone responding to Joshua. The door opened on the next floor, and everyone was shocked and quickly stepped out of the elevator. Jaslene continued to type on her phone and didn't notice that everyone had stepped out of the elevator, while a man stepped in.

She then took a photo of the business card and sent the message. She kept her phone in her pocket and was surprised to see that everyone was gone, leaving just her and this guy.

He looked familiar... Her brain was loading until it finally hit her, like one of her mother's slippers. It was Luis Laokongxin, the new CEO of the company.

SON OF A—

Before she could finish her thought, he noticed her staring at him. It sent a nervous shiver down her spine, and she quickly looked away.

“You are new here?” His voice was quite deep and stern. Luis was dressed in an all-navy blue suit, a purple tie with silver stripes, and a golden necktie clip. He had a bearded face and black hair with some grey mixed in. He looked pretty good for an older man.

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She followed his gaze to a folder that she was holding for the hiring orientation.

“Yes, *po!* Yes! I’m new here *po*, yes!” She felt like all her words were jumbling together and that her brain was lagging.

OMG! Shut up! she scolded herself.

“I see... Welcome to the company, miss...?” he smiled warmly.

“Jaslene. Jaslene Cordero, *po.*”

“Ah, Miss Jaslene Cordero...” There was a short pause. “May I ask you something quite personal?”

Shouldn’t you go to a therapist for that? she thought.

“Do you think that I’m a bad father since I don’t spend enough time with my children? I think they all hate me.” The man looked quite sad and troubled.

Who in their right mind would tell a CEO that he’s a bad father, she thought.

“I... I don’t think they hate you...” she started awkwardly.

“Oh, they do...” he sighed. “They told me, several times, in fact.” He continued to sigh like a child.

WHAT THE HELL DO I TELL HIM NOW! Jaslene stared blankly at the elevator doors as he looked at her waiting for an answer.

She thought for a bit and decided to just let her mouth have a mind of its own. “I...think...maybe they are just not used to being a family?” Then she thought of her own father and continued, “My father currently works in the US. My mom, brothers, and I don’t get to see him a lot, but he would always call us whenever he is free. He showed and told us since we were young that he will always be there for us. A bond like that just can’t be built overnight...unless one of you is dying.”

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Jaslene noticed that he was holding a paper bag from PlayHobby-Shop. Inside, there was a 2,000-piece puzzle box. She continued, “I think you are trying, but it might just take some time since these things require a lot of love, understanding, and compromise.”

She paused a bit and added, “Though...” she slightly pointed at the paper bag, “I think you are doing great.” She smiled warmly, remembering the times that she spent with her father, such as cooking together and helping her skip classes just to take her to an amusement park.

He looked at her, but his expression was hard to read.

“Oh! I mean—” she started to panic.

“Thank you... Really... I appreciate it,” he exhaled deeply. “Lord knows that I’ve made many mistakes in life... But one thing I want is to make amends to my children.”

The elevator finally reached the cafeteria floor.

Oh, thank the Lord and heaven above! She waited for him to step out of the elevator first.

“I don’t have a lot of people that I can talk to, especially in an elevator. Usually, everyone would get off on the same floor. It always happens and I don’t know why,” he looked confused.

That’s because you’re the freaking CEO! she thought.

“Please join me for lunch sometime. I find your insights very intriguing, young lady,” he handed her a business card.

Let’s not, she thought while receiving another business card awkwardly.

“Sorry, do people still use business cards? I’m old fashioned so I’m not good with social media, but I enjoyed our conversation,” he waved goodbye before walking away.

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Now she had two business cards in her hands that felt like bombs to her.

* * *

Angela assigned Jaslene's first official project as a fashion stylist after lunch. While riding the elevator, she thought of the gossip that Joshua told her during lunch.

The Laokongxin family has been here in the Philippines since the Spanish era, so they are old money rich and status. They keep the family members' identities a secret, except for the head of the household and their wives. Rumor has it that both Luis and his wife had an affair, but nobody knew for sure since they are quite a secretive family.

Boy... Rich people have such messed-up families, Jaslene thought. But then the thought about how her mother would passive-aggressively compare Jaslene and her brothers with her aunts' children came to mind. *Nevermind.*

She entered the studio with the number 1121 on the door. Inside there were only a few people, but two caught her attention. First was a girl with long black hair, who was holding a DSLR camera. She was wearing a blue off-shoulder blouse with buttons, flare pants with an intricate but unique design, and a pair of blue wedge heels. The other was a lady was talking into her earpiece. She was wearing a business attire—a pencil skirt and heels—with hair pulled back in a bun and a pair of classic white pearl earrings.

“Where is he, Arthur?” the lady on the phone asked while pacing back and forth in the room. She saw Jaslene come in and raised her

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hand, signaling her to wait. “No, he’s not here, Arthur! You told me you drove him here today, didn’t you? Yeah, I don’t need your sarcasm, Mr. Butler. Okay, fine. I’ll find him myself.” She hung up and looked at Jaslene. “You are...?”

“I’m the new fashion stylist, *po*.”

“Oh! Right! The new fashion stylist, come in! We’re still waiting for the rest of the crew, but just to give you a briefing, the pictorial today is a campaign shoot for our annual fashion ball, Grandeur Gambit.”

“What?!” Jaslene gasped and inhaled as if she had just eaten a fly.

“Oh, so you’ve heard of it. That’s great,” she kept glancing at her phone. “I am Ann Florence Dela Torre, the project manager for this event. This year’s theme is ‘Affordable but Fabulous’. This year’s fundraiser is for research on biodegradable clothing materials to lessen carbon footprints.”

Ann shook hands with Jaslene when her phone suddenly rang. “I’m so sorry, I have to take this,” she told Jaslene then hurriedly walked outside of the studio.

Grandeur Gambit is an annual event hosted by Eliximore Corporation to fundraise for the arts, fashion, lifestyle, and entertainment industries. It is sort of the equivalent of the Met Gala in the Philippines. Many celebrities, artists, models, fashion designers, and socialites are invited to this yearly “dress-to-impress” event. All the clothing pieces that will be worn on the red carpet will be live auctioned at the event, and all the proceeds will go to benefit the arts, fashion, and entertainment industries.

“You’re new here?” the girl with the camera asked and took a picture of Jaslene.

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“Oh, yeah! I’m Jaslene Cordero. It’s my first day,” Jaslene reached out her hand.

“Alex Divata...worked here for several years,” she smiled and shook Jaslene’s hand.

“Alex Divata... Wait, like *the* Alex Divata?!” Jaslene blinked several times, wanting to be sure that she didn’t hear it wrong.

“Oh! You know me? Yay!” Alex giggled.

Alex Divata, a well-known fashion icon in Asia, has worked with several major fashion brands and has been to many elite fashion shows and featured in glossy magazines. *Of course, I know you*, Jaslene thought.

More people started arriving at the set around 1:30 p.m. The studio was huge. It had a buffet area, a beverage station, a dressing room, and a small office area to the right. To the left, there was another room that Jaslene thought would be the viewing and editing room. One floor up, there seemed to be a storage room.

Some of the folks who arrived went straight to the dressing room; some were adjusting the lighting and other equipment; and there were some who were simply talking, eating, and drinking—as if trying to maximize the time they have before the shoot starts.

“What about you?” Alex asked, breaking Jaslene’s thoughts.

“Oh, I’m the fashion stylist for the shoot,” Jaslene looked around. She felt out of place in this kind of place. Everyone was dressed so stylishly, which now made Jaslene feel underdressed. It looked and felt like a whole new world where she came from. So, Jaslene asked one of the biggest names in fashion who was right in front of her.

“Hey... Alex,” Jaslene asked. “I’m curious, as a fashion model yourself, do you have a secret to always being chic?”

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Alex put one finger under her chin and tilted her head. “Honestly, I think the most important thing is to understand who you are first. Knowing your likes and dislikes, what are you feeling, what are you trying to show, and what story you want to tell.

“For example,” Alex perked her lips a bit then continued, “Based on what you are wearing right now...a white business shirt but with sleeves rolled up, a black tie, navy blue skirt, knee-high socks, sneakers, but only wear a plain watch, hair not pulled back, but you have a hair tie with you.”

Alex examined Jaslene a little more then finally decided, “I think you are quite the casual person. But since this is your first day at work, you’re not sure what to wear, so you went with something safe, hence the business shirt. But you always want to be a little more casual, hence the skirt with knee socks. You wanted to be comfortable, so you wore sneakers. For the hair tie, since you’re not sure what you’ll be working on or with, you bring it with you just in case you need one. And the watch’s plain black strap is probably the safest accessory because it is easier to pair with everything.”

Jaslene was impressed and finally snapped out of her shock. “Are you a witch?”

“Thanks!” She smiled. “But doesn’t that accurately represent what you want people to know of you? Being chic isn’t always about following the trend or being ahead of the curb, but it is more of understanding yourself, and also being open to different things.”

“That is pretty cool,” Jaslene admitted.

Suddenly, Alex had a grin on her face. “You know, I forgot the charger and battery inside the storage room. Can you help get them please? And I need to use the bathroom,” she took off the camera

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strap around her and placed it around Jaslene. “The owner of the camera might be back any minute.”

“Umm...” Jaslene was hesitant since she didn’t understand why Alex couldn’t get it herself or the urgency. However, Alex looked at her with these puppy dog eyes.

Jaslene could only sigh and agree. Despite all the illogical reasoning in Alex’s statement, Jaslene decided to just go along with it since it is just her first day of work. When Jaslene entered the storage room one floor up, the door behind her suddenly slammed closed. She tried the door, but it seemed to be jammed. “Umm... Alex?” No answer.

Jaslene hated anything scary—pranks, horror movies, or someone hiding in the corner yelling. She hated all of it.

“Alex!” Jaslene turned the doorknob while knocking on the door. Suddenly, Jaslene heard something groaning behind her. At first, she just thought that it was her imagination, but the groaning became louder.

Jaslene screamed and knocked on the door furiously. “LET ME OUT!”

The storage room was big, with three tall metal shelves on each side of the wall. The lighting was bad, so she couldn’t see anything clearly, but the room was quiet enough for the groaning to echo. Jaslene just closed her eyes, facing the door and holding the doorknob. She didn’t dare turn around and face whatever was groaning.

It was silent for a moment, but then she heard the shelves move, as if someone or something was pushing them. Then, something landed on the floor, and a few things fell from the shelf making all sorts of noise.

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“Ugh... Will you shut up...” someone said.

Jaslene closed her eyes tighter and began to pray holy chants and anything else she could think of when, suddenly, she felt a strong hand on her shoulder.

“You done?” someone asked.

Jaslene screamed at the top of her lungs and began to swing her fists all over the place. “Stay back!” while continuing to chant.

“Wow...easy there, love,” the storage room ghost jumped back. It sounded like a guy with an English accent.

There are no British ghosts in the Philippines, right? Jaslene thought and slowly opened one of her eyes and saw a guy standing in front of her. “A-are you a ghost?” she asked.

“What?” he looked at her, confused.

She opened both her eyes and found him wearing a white shirt with a leather jacket, jeans, boots, and a dog tag necklace. He had quite messy hair, but it looked good on him. He had black hair, blue eyes, and a clean-cut scar on his left eyebrow.

“Y-you’re not a ghost that’s trying to kill me?” Jaslene asked.

“Geez, that’s dark,” he stretched his body, as if waking up his muscles.

“What are you doing in the storage room?” she demanded.

“I could have asked you the same thing, love,” he yawned.

“Alex told me she left her camera battery here, then the door just closed all of a sudden.” She crossed her arms thinking that it might have been Alex who locked the door, but why? “Now answer my question,” she demanded.

His demeanor looked uninterested in the whole thing. “I just wanted to have some peace and quiet before you started screaming

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and rampaging like a gorilla.” He was now done stretching. “And I’m hiding from a monster.”

“You’re the photographer!” Jaslene pointed at him in shock, as if she was going to expose him to the principal for doing something terrible. “You know, Ms. Ann is like that because it is her job and you are stressing her out.” She put her hands on her hips. “Wait, did you just call me a gorilla?”

“I meant Alex.” After stretching, he looked at her. “What’s your name, love?”

“Jaslene. And stop calling me ‘love,’” she crossed her arms. “What’s your name?”

“Waylen,” he responded. He reached out his hand like he was expecting something. Jaslene gave him her hand. He shook her hand and pointed at the camera. “You have something of mine.”

“Oh! Sorry!” She quickly took off the strap around her, but before she handed the camera back to him, she noticed something imprinted in the camera.

Dis. M. . . . she thought for a bit, then her eyes widened.

“Dis. M! As in *the* Dis. M? Like *the* ‘Distant Memory’ artist?!”

“The one and only,” he looked at her with an unhinged expression.

Dis. M or Distant Memory was quite the world-famous photographer. Apart from photography, he also dabbled in painting. He was known for his works selling for millions to collectors around the world. In fact, famous museums around the world boast of having his painting or photograph. Dis. M’s most famous work was titled *The Girl in the Purple Dress*.

This is the brilliant artist? Jaslene felt let down to see an angsty young

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adult who needed therapy. She was about to say something when Ms. Ann suddenly opened the door.

Jaslene yelped, jumped back startled, and accidentally dropped Waylen's camera on the floor. Jaslene stared at the camera in horror, feeling her heart stop.

"That was expensive too," Waylen said, sighing.

"There you are, Waylen! You little piece of crumb! Do you have any idea of the delay your little missing stunt caused?!" Ms. Ann almost looked like Medusa, with snakes moving in her hair in anger. She pinched both of Waylen's cheeks hard.

"Ann...you're hurting me," Waylen begged for mercy.

"Let's go already!" Ms. Ann shouted for everyone to gather and begin the photo shoot while dragging Waylen out by the ear.

* * *

Despite everything that happened a while ago, watching Waylen work was quite mesmerizing. Even with his monotone way of talking, he was rather gentle, passionate, and professional once behind the camera. Alex and Waylen were quite close. They talked casually while the rest had to watch their tone when talking to them, except for Ms. Ann. "That's a wrap!" Ms. Ann clapped, and everyone else followed.

Waylen and Jaslene waited at the elevator together while everyone else was still at the studio chatting.

"Don't you want to stay and chat with everyone?" he asked.

"Didn't know you can be nice," she grinned.

He chuckled, "I'm just lowering you into a false sense of security." They chuckled together.

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Strangely, now, she felt comfortable around him.

“Any dinner plans?” Waylen asked, making Jaslene blush.

“Well... I—” Before she could answer, the elevator door opened. She saw Luis Laokongxin and Nathaniel stepping out of the elevator.

“Waylen! Ann told me you’ll be here,” Luis said, and was surprised to see Jaslene and Waylen together. “Am I interrupting something?” the CEO smiled.

Jaslene saw Waylen’s expression changed instantly, while Nathaniel looked deadly.

“Oh, it’s you, Cordero,” Nathaniel looked at Jaslene, trying to smile, but couldn’t. He now had an uninteresting blank expression on his face.

On one hand, Jaslene wanted to leave because she didn’t want to be involved in whatever was happening right in front of her. But on the other hand, she wanted to stay because she was a natural “Marites”.

“What’s it to you?” Waylen’s response to the CEO was cold, but Luis didn’t seem to care.

“Don’t talk to father that way,” Nathaniel warned him.

“Enough!” Luis yelled.

Wait! Father? Nathaniel told Waylen ‘not to talk to father that way’. Nathaniel called him father. Which means...

Then it hit her, like her mother’s other slipper after the first one missed her, and her mother threw another one. Her eyes widened and she shouted in surprise, “WEEEEH!”

The three men looked at her. “What is your last name?” Jaslene looked at Waylen.

“I think it’s pretty clear at this point, don’t you think? My last

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name is Laokongxin.” Waylen replied casually.

Jaslene’s jaw dropped at this sudden discovery.

“Daddy!” Alex ran up to Luis and gave him a big hug.

“There’s my princess!” Luis gave Alex a gentle kiss on the forehead.

“Alex, I thought your last name is Divata,” Jaslene asked.

“Oh no, that is just a stage name. Dad insisted I have one so I can keep my work and private life separate,” Alex explained and looked at all of them. “Did something happen? Jaslene looks like she just saw a ghost.”

“You’re not that far off,” Waylen walked towards the elevator pressing the down button.

“Waylen, do you want to have dinner with us?” Luis put a hand on Waylen’s shoulder and smiled warmly. “You know, as a family.”

Waylen gently moved his father’s hand away. “No, thank you.”

“You should be grateful that despite father’s busy schedule, he wants to have dinner with us,” Nathaniel stepped closer to Waylen. “Not everything is about you, Waylen. You are part of this family, so act like it.”

“Not everything is about you too, Nathaniel. Don’t project your insecurity and all your problems towards me and belittle me.” Nathaniel and Waylen glared at each other.

“You think you’re better than everyone else because you get to do whatever you want, disregarding everyone’s feelings,” Nathaniel told Waylen. “You and your ridiculous and pathetic paintings and photographs are just pieces of paper!”

“Shut up!” Jaslene said.

Everyone looked at Jaslene.

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“Do you have something to say?” Nathaniel turned to Jaslene.

“I said shut up!” Jaslene said it louder this time.

Everyone was quite stunned, even Nathaniel was speechless.

“How can you say that? How can you say that Waylen’s work is pathetic? Do you know how much time and effort he put into his work? Have you ever been with him while he was working on his project? No! So how can you tell someone who had poured his heart and soul into his passion ‘pathetic’?!” she paused when suddenly the elevator door opened. She rushed inside the elevator and shouted towards Nathaniel, “You’re the pathetic one, STUPID!”

The elevator was about to close when Waylen suddenly jumped in and went down with her. They didn’t say anything, but suddenly Waylen laughed...hard.

“What!?” she demanded, blushing.

“It’s just, besides me, you’re the only person who has ever called him stupid,” he continued to laugh.

She just looked down. The only thought that came to her mind was that she would probably get fired by tomorrow. “I just don’t think it’s right...is all,” she mumbled to herself while crossing her arms tightly in front of her chest.

Waylen looked her in the eyes. “Thank you though...for all those things you said,” he smiled warmly, just like the smile in his most famous piece *The Girl in the Purple Dress*.

She blushed.

“One reason why Nathaniel hates me is because he is not allowed to inherit the family name,” Waylen explained.

“What?” her “Marites ears” were now on full alert.

“Do you want to play a game with me?” Waylen asked, a sly but

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amusing smile forming from the corners of his lips.

“What game?” she asked.

“It’s called, ‘How Well Do You Know Me’. Whoever can know more about the other person within one year starting today wins the game. Meaning, if I get to know more about you, like your habits, food preferences, birthday, et cetera, within one year, then I win.”

“And what makes you think I want to participate in this little game?”

“I have to stay here for one year until the Grandeur Gambit event is over,” Waylen leaned towards her slightly. “So, I will need some entertainment while I’m here,” he grinned, leaning closer that their lips almost touched. “Also, you broke my VERY expensive camera. Play this game with me and we’ll call it even,” he said in a seductive whisper.

She could feel her heart pounding and her ears could feel the vibration of the beat.

“Game on!” Jaslene said, trying to look confident, but she was blushing like a tomato already.

The elevator reached the ground floor and Waylen stepped out first. And just when Jaslene was about to step out, Waylen quickly blocked her path and leaned as close as possible.

“I’ll be waiting,” he was so close to her that it made her want to squirm.

He walked towards the entrance where a car was already waiting for him. A chauffeur opened the car door and Waylen got in. Just like that, he was gone.

What have I gotten myself into? Jaslene thought.

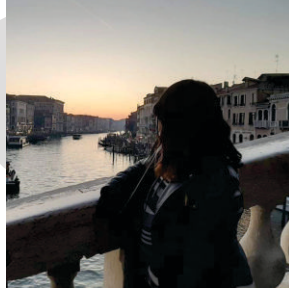
She felt confused, but also very excited. She felt so alive accepting

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an interesting challenge from a mysterious source.

Jaslene never dreamed—in a million years—that her first day at work would end this way. But it also made her crave for what tomorrow might bring next.





About The Author

R.J. Cheshire is an aspiring author who wrote the short story *The Evolution Project* in an anthology book titled *Dystopia Manila*. She loves fantasy, psychological, thriller, mystery, and adventure stories. She started writing in high school because she wanted to create a world that she had always dreamed of.

Her stories would often draw inspiration from movies, anime, or stories from other brilliant authors. Some of her favorite movies growing up include *Alice in Wonderland* (1951), *Coraline*, and *Mirror Mask*.



Faith and Chances

By Abigail Delfin Gaje

BIANCA

I can't believe I'm sitting next to the man who bullied me in high school. I had heard him call me "boobless" and "a girl with no humps" back then, and I hate to admit that he was right. In high school, I used to be a thin girl—one that you could compare to a piece of plywood.

I have little humps now, fortunately, but I still look flat. My girls are just as big as golf balls. So, to create an illusion that I'm not as flat as I am, I chose to wear this pink crop top with red cloth flowers woven on its front, and my shorts have back pockets to conceal my flat buttocks.

I find it ironic—and not funny at all—that this guy is watching me talk on my boss's vlog today as I discuss how easy it is to always be chic if you master a handful of styling basics. After all, part of my talk is

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about how easy it is to hide your flaws. I've mastered hiding, and it's such an injustice that my former-beauty queen-turned-politician's-wife boss has naturally large breasts.

Sitting in front of us, my boss, Monina Nacionales, introduced me. "With me now is my personal fashion stylist, Bianca Cawi."

I smiled and waved at the camera to greet the viewers. I made sure to look especially nice today. My hair was in a high bun, and I applied winged eyeliner to make my eyes—which look Chinese though I'm neither Chinese nor Chinese-Filipino—look dramatic.

The man and I didn't recognize each other when Monina introduced us earlier. I ignored his friend request on Facebook, the one that he sent me ages ago. For as long as I can remember, my Facebook profile photo had always been Snoopy, and his was a cartoon character as well. Therefore, neither of us knew how each looked in real life prior to this meeting.

He used to have thick hair parted on the side, but now, he's sporting a shaved head. One more thing I'd hate to admit? I had a crush on him back then. I know it's stupid to be attracted to a bully, but hey, the world is unfair. Most jerks are good-looking. He was handsome then, but he's arresting now. Darn those riveting, brown eyes that make me melt with just one look. He's half-American though his last name is Filipino, thus the eyes. He rarely smiled back then, but whenever he did, my heart skipped a beat. Today though, after seven long years, he is all smiles.

He's dressed simply, in only a pair of black slacks and a lavender, long-sleeved polo folded to reveal some part of his hairy forearms. Still, he's eye-catching. His complexion is milky, his face is flawless, and he's tall with an athletic build. But he should look ugly. He should

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look just as detestable as his attitude back then was.

Monina told her viewers what I'll talk about in the vlog, and now it's time for him to be introduced.

"Today, we also have environmental engineer Dominic Tercias who will tell us about fast fashion disadvantages. He'll also explain about the global fashion industry having a high carbon footprint, and, therefore, contributing to the worsening climate change crisis."

"Our choices in clothes have an impact on the planet. I hope everyone would care about what materials are used to make their clothes," he said to the camera.

I rolled my eyes. What a phony. He's not someone who'd give a damn about Mother Earth.

Monina brushed her long, brown hair with her fingers as she replied, "That's our goal."

My boss, Monina, is like a doll turned alive. Styling her is a breeze. I dressed her in a curve-hugging, sea foam green dress. She doesn't need many accessories for enhancement. Her porcelain skin is already a statement, but jewelry is always a must.

We're here to do the vlog in the ornate living room of her husband's house in Ayala Alabang Village, an exclusive place of residence for the elite in the south of Metro Manila.

"Let's start with Bianca." Monina looked at me and continued, "Tell us how easy it is to always be chic if we master a handful of styling basics."

"To be 'chic' means to show elegance through style," I began. "So, what's your style? You have to know yourself to know your style because it's you telling people who you are."

As per our briefing earlier, Dominic shouldn't say anything during

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this part of the vlog, but to my surprise, he turned to me and asked, “I don’t know myself, so how do I know my style?”

His eyes were fixed on me, a simple gesture that took my breath away but I pretended it didn’t. I raised a brow at him and replied sarcastically, “Oh, you poor thing. It’s a pity you don’t know yourself.”

“Can you help me know myself?” he grinned.

I was taken aback. As I’ve said, I wasn’t used to him smiling. The mystery in his aura vanishes whenever he smiles with his teeth showing. He rarely grinned before, but I’m guessing it’s his way to annoy me.

I momentarily lost my professionalism in front of the camera with my sarcasm, but now I have to get back it back. “You can start by being sure of your preferences, then, combine them with your personality,” I continued. “However, if you want to dig so deep into knowing yourself, I can’t help you with that.”

“No problem,” he replied with a smile.

Fudge. I’m getting annoyed and we just started. His little act brought me back to high school when he would ask nonsense questions and pester me during my presentations. Plus, he loved throwing crumpled papers at me while I was speaking in front. Our teachers would tell him to get out of the classroom and while he was outside, he’d keep looking at me, making me feel self-conscious. It was like he always had his eyes on me that, for some time, I thought maybe he liked me. What a dream.

I shifted my gaze to Monina and said, “For example, you have on a tee and a pair of jeans, but those two items alone can’t tell people who you are, right?”

“Right, right,” he said, and I shot him a glare. Again, he grinned.

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“So, accessorize. Accessorizing is a styling basic.”

“Got it,” Dominic went again.

I ignored him and went on as Monina asked, “Surely, accessories aren’t just jewelry? What are other examples?”

“There are a lot to choose from! Scarves, watches, and sunglasses to name some,” I answered.

“Noted,” Dominic said.

“People can try layering, another styling basic, by using scarves,” I told Monina, ignoring Dominic again. “If they’re into dresses or sleeveless tops, they can layer these items with scarves. They can wear cardigans too.”

“Keeping that in mind,” Dominic said.

I forced a smile at him, so he’d notice that I was not having it, but he only grinned at me. Again. I sighed and gave in, “Why do you keep grinning?”

“Because I’m happy to see you again. I missed you. Don’t you feel the same?” Dominic blurted out and followed it with another smile.

Sbit. That stunned me. My heart fluttered because of what he said, and I didn’t like it. He was looking straight at me now, and I didn’t like how it was making me feel. Or maybe, I didn’t like that I can’t hate him at all. Damn it!

Monina’s eyes widened when she asked, “Are you two old flames?” Then, she told the camera, “I was told they were classmates in high school.”

Dominic replied, “If being old flames means Bianca burning me all the time back then, then yes, we are. But it’s not that. She was really cute and smart. I wish she liked me too, but she dated a jock so I moved on.”

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What the F? Just what made him say that?!

I scowled at him. My fists clenched. I wanted to answer and remind him that he was the one who kept burning me. But I stopped myself because maybe he forgot that, though it was impossible, literally anyone can watch this video on YouTube and I would look crazy. So, I kept my mouth shut. Dominic continued and Monina indulged in his wild antics. Her smile was gleeful though.

“I wasn’t handsome, didn’t play sports, just got failing grades. Not her type,” Dominic continued. “I realized I won’t ever have a chance with her.”

All the time he was talking, I glared at him.

“But, maybe, this time it’ll be different?” asked Monina in a tentative tone. Then she asked me, “Why that attitude on him, dear?”

Dominic answered for me. “I had some faults too. I bullied her in high school. But everyone’s immature in high school, right? I guess she took it so seriously that she still seems mad at me.”

“Are you still mad at him?” Monina asked.

When it comes to my currently dead love life that needs resuscitation, Monina doesn’t act like a boss to me. Okay, so I didn’t mean to cry my heart out to her back then when my ex cheated on me. And that’s when she thought she has a right to pry on my personal life. I love Monina but, seriously?

Five months ago, my boyfriend of over seven years, Oliver, broke up with me. I loved him with my entire being. He was also my senior in high school. And Dominic knew him as well. When I started dating Oliver, Dominic stopped annoying me as if I no longer existed.

Oliver kept cheating on me through the years and Monina loathed him. My boss kept telling me she can introduce me to young

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politicians, but I chose to stay with Oliver because, well, you know that bullshit about staying with the man to whom you lost your virginity no matter what? I firmly believed that. But the last straw was when I caught Oliver banging another woman in bed.

Monina's matchmaking efforts went on overdrive since then, thinking I'd like to go out with some of the celebrities she knows. There were several hot men, but I told her I want to breathe first. She said I already had five months of breathing, and it was enough. She had a point, but I'm still scared to date again. But I have to admit, I miss having a boyfriend.

Now it looked like she has a new prospect for me, and it's Dominic. Dominic, of all men. Ugh.

His eyes were still fixated on me like he was waiting for an answer. I was speechless, but I will give him what he deserves later. I'll punch him like I did one afternoon back in high school, when I blew a kiss to my friend and he appeared out of nowhere and acted like he caught it and blew me a kiss back. I didn't know if I should gush or curse him that time because he called me "skeleton" the morning of the same day. In high school, my thin frame was one of my biggest insecurities. I gained weight as I aged, but people still consider me thin.

"Are you still mad at me?" he asked, and we were still live on YouTube.

"You two should make up and take a chance on each other," Monina concluded.

I recovered and laughed as if I was told the funniest joke in the history of jokes. Shaking my head, I said, "I avoid mean people like they're COVID, and there are a billion other men in this world. So why him?" I told Monina and then glanced at Dominic.

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His smile faded. Monina was taken aback.

“Oh, right,” she said.

Good, she got that I’m not buying the crap that Dominic offered. And so, we moved forward. I told the viewers how to hide or flaunt their assets and flaws, such as a flat chest or a butt, or having the exact opposite.

“Flat doesn’t matter to me.”

There’s Dominic again, and I resisted the urge to slap his face.

“Oh, good for you,” Monina laughed.

“Very good,” I said, in a sarcastic tone. “Fantastic. One of a kind.”

“You’re one of a kind. It’s been seven years, but I’m still into you.”

What?? What’s he saying?

He’s looking at me seriously now, and I want to disappear. We’re on YouTube, for goodness’ sake! He’s embarrassing not just himself, but me as well. But...why does my darn heart like what he just said? *Gosh, this is trouble.*

“I’m not sure what you’re up to, but I don’t like it,” I replied sternly, and he went quiet. “Another styling basic is creating balance,” I said to Monina, trying my best to shift the interview back to its main focus. “If a petite girl likes baggy clothes, she can wear loose pants but a tight-fitting top.”

But Dominic won’t shut up. “I have a colleague who doesn’t know how badly the colors of his clothes don’t match. What to do?”

I sighed in annoyance but replied, “Print out a color wheel and stick it on his desk. Include a note saying he should check out my website for explanation.” I looked at the camera to address the viewers. “If you have colleagues with fashion sense you find very

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concerning, please share this vlog with them to save yourself from irritation. Go to my website too, www.abcbianca.com for other styling advice.” I smiled.

“I’ll check your website out immediately,” Dominic said to me, and he winked. I hate that my stomach did giddy flips.

“What would you say about fabric, Bianca?” Monina asked.

“Go for quality. A fabric’s quality is one more thing to consider.”

She nodded. “Speaking of quality, let’s hear Dominic talk about fast fashion.”

Just then, Monina’s seventeen-year-old stepdaughter, Jermaine, stood beside the cameraman with a mission to charm Dominic. She was all over him when they were introduced earlier. Now, she’s back wearing strong perfume. If she doesn’t go away, I might pass out before we could even wrap filming. I’m hypersensitive to strong scents that I get super dizzy whenever I smell one. I get so sick that I might not be able to drive home to BGC after this. Then again, my parents live here in the south. I can leave my car here and ask Daddy to get me.

DOMINIC

Thank goodness it’s my turn now.

I can’t wait to talk to Bianca privately. I wasn’t allowed to join her and Monina’s conversation, but I can’t just listen. I wanted her to at least look at me. I wanted to capture her attention, that’s why I said all those things. I have to admit though, my timing wasn’t right.

I don’t care about being on YouTube and telling her how I feel for

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the entire world to watch. Honestly, I liked the idea. I heard she's not with Oliver anymore and based on what Monina said earlier, I assume it's true.

Maybe we could tell each other how we feel now. I think she was into me too before, back in high school, but I was such a jerk to her. I thought, after all the time that passed, she was finally out of my system. But seeing her again told me I'm wrong. I want us to make up. I missed her.

I tried hard not to ogle her while she was talking, but maybe I failed. How did Bianca become this beautiful? She was really cute back then, but time did magic on her. She was simple, yes, but she was adorable. I just pretended I didn't like her because I was a popular kid in high school and she wasn't. Being popular meant a lot in high school. Stupid, but that's how it was.

I didn't make a move on Bianca back then because I thought I'd lose my "popular status" if I did. So, for me to stand out to her the most, I bullied her. I was stunned when Oliver, our high school jock, didn't mind being popular and dating her at the same time. I drowned in regret. I wished I had Oliver's bravery, risking his popularity for Bianca.

When they became an item, I didn't do anything anymore. I was hurt and angry. My friends asked why I stopped bullying her, and they figured that maybe I was jealous. So, I told them I never found her pretty. And being teenagers, of course, we found sex fascinating. So, I said she was just a "boobless" girl, and I won't ever be interested in her. We all laughed. I was disgusting.

"Fast fashion is trendy, that's why many gravitate toward it," I told Monina. "But it uses low-quality materials, like synthetics. Fast

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fashion clothes get ruined easily, so people throw them away just as fast.”

“Does that affect the environment?” Monina asked.

“Definitely,” I nodded.

“In what way, exactly?”

“Synthetics take approximately 200 years to decay. The global fashion industry is responsible for a big percentage of annual global carbon emissions. Carbon dioxide emissions in the manufacturing and transportation processes cause the industry to have a high carbon footprint. Therefore, it contributes to the worsening climate change crisis.”

“Unbelievable, but true,” Monina said. “So, what can people do about it?”

“Doing the styling basics beautiful Bianca here taught us can help,” I side-hugged Bianca, and her eyes widened with my unwelcome gesture.

I want to feel again that electrifying sensation I felt when she punched my arm in high school. She was the first girl who made me feel that. It’s one of the many reasons why she left a mark on me. And now, our faces were close enough for us to kiss. I wanted to press my lips to hers, but decided to continue talking instead.

“It’s for people to create more looks with their clothes, and avoid impulsive shopping online,” I added, while I released Bianca. “Clothes look more attractive on screen, so people are more likely to buy those that are made of synthetics without them knowing it.”

Bianca stood as soon as we were finished, not giving me a chance to talk to her. She walked to the restroom while massaging her temples with her fingers.

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Monina's daughter, Jermaine, walked towards me looking aggressive and her mother told her to go away. Then Monina sat beside me and told me about Bianca.

* * *

"Focus," Bianca commanded as she covered her bare thighs with her bag. It barely did the work as it's too small. "I can see where your eyes are."

How stupid of me to think she wouldn't notice. "Is it a sin to be attracted to you?" I reasoned.

I couldn't keep my eyes on the road. Bianca's too hot not to look at, wearing a pair of shorter-than-short shorts, exposing those flawless thighs and legs. What kind of man won't stare? Her navel was showing as her blouse lacked length, and her stomach was so flat it looked like I can eat peas off of it.

I hate to say it but I thank Jermaine for wearing that very strong perfume that made Bianca dizzy. It's the reason why I'm driving Bianca home now. Earlier this afternoon, she got out of the restroom needing medicine. She texted her dad to pick her up at Monina's house in Ayala Alabang, but he couldn't. So she ended up succumbing to Monina's request that I drive her home to BGC.

When Monina shared with me some information including Bianca's BGC address, I was convinced some force brought us back together. Heck, we live in the same condominium! She said Bianca went to live in BGC because she studied fashion design and styling at a college there. She's been in BGC for years while I just moved.

Monina told Bianca that she already shared some information

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about her with me. What else could she do? Her boss was sneaky. Monina reasoned that she just wants Bianca to be happy in love and that it was obvious to her that I wasn't lying when I said those things to Bianca during the vlog recording. And so, she urged me to get her. Where can someone find a boss like Monina? She's exceptional!

"I'm not into your bullshit, so stop it." Bianca snapped.

I sighed and mentally took note that I should gather patience if I want to have her. "I just think you look amazing," I replied. "More beautiful than before."

We're fine with not wearing face masks inside my car, just like we were fine with it when we were doing the vlog. Monina's staff required me to present a negative antigen test before the interview. I also had to show them my vaccination and booster cards. Bianca's vaccinated and boosted too. No masks allowed us to see each other's entire face and expressions.

"Excuse me?" her voice raised. "I remember you calling me 'not pretty' and that 'skin and bones girl' in high school. You know, the one you always teased that she might be carried away by the wind! The girl whose braids you loved to pull. The 'boobless' girl with no humps that you bullied nonstop in high school?"

My jaw dropped at the last line she said, but I closed my mouth fast. "You know all that?"

"I heard it all," she replied, and she shifted her gaze to the road.

There weren't many cars on this road, unlike on the other one where we passed earlier. I parked the car beside a tree, thinking about how I should apologize.

"What's the matter?" Bianca asked while she scowled. "Just don't talk to me all the way to BGC and we'll be fine."

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I shook my head. "I'm so sorry," I said sincerely, but she said nothing. "I was disgusting, but I've changed. I'm no longer the Dominic you used to know in high school."

No response.

"You've changed too," I said, but didn't look at her directly. "You're not the Bianca I knew in high school."

It took a long while for her to reply. When she did, that's when I turned my head to look at her.

"Is there a point in what you're saying?" she asked.

"My point is, maybe we can get to know each other again?" I gave her a tentative smile.

She replied with crossed arms and a raised brow. She doesn't know how cute she is when she does that. "Why is that worth my time?" she asked.

"Because, maybe, you have to give people chances to redeem themselves," I suggested.

"Isn't that surprising," she replied, her tone flat.

My brows furrowed. "What's surprising?"

"You finally said something that made sense."

I let out a small laugh. "So, does that mean you'll give me a chance?"

She took a deep breath. "Yeah, I'll give you a chance."

I couldn't help but smile wide. At least, we're quite cool now. "How about having lunch with me as my first step to making it up to you?" I tried. "My treat, of course."

She smiled wryly. "It should be! Because I won't spend money to spend time with you."

With that, my chest lightened and we made our way to Alabang

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Town Center a.k.a Town or ATC, as we *southies* call it. We're both from here. Our high school is also here in the south.

I'm happy because I finally got Bianca to be friendly with me. It wasn't that easy, but persistence begets success. We talked about random stuff over lunch and shared some laughs, and the smiles she gave me I won't forget. I didn't expect that we have the same taste in music and movies, and even the same dreams. She plans to have a store where she would sell vintage clothes that she redesigned. This made me happy since vintage clothes are mostly made from environment-friendly materials. She wants to promote sustainable fashion. I mentioned that I write about sustainability on my blog, hoping it would be practiced more here in the Philippines. I said I'll write about her store when it comes to fruition. She was delighted.

And, by the time we were back in my car, we were still talking.

* * *

Seeing no one in the condo's elevator, Bianca and I took off our masks and kept them in our pockets as we entered.

"I had a great time," I said to her and then smiled.

Though we had no one else with us as we drove to BGC and ate lunch, it felt different to be alone with her in a more enclosed space. I've always thought that the elevators in our condo complex are slow, and if I'm not with Bianca now, I would have been annoyed as usual. But I'm not. In fact, I'm trying to hide the glee on my face.

"Thanks for the ride and lunch," she smiled back.

Her aura was still as warm as it was earlier, but now she was giving off a vibe that I couldn't decipher. It made me want to kiss her. I stood

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closer to her and she didn't move away.

"My pleasure," I said, and I drew my face near hers. Her expression was welcoming. We looked into each other's eyes, and her gaze took my breath away. I cradled her face in my hands and pressed my lips to hers. She kissed me back and parted her lips, and I took it as a chance to deepen our kiss. Heat rushed to my chest.

Bianca wrapped her arms around my neck, pulling me close as we kissed passionately. She tasted so sweet, like the vanilla ice cream she ate for dessert. I couldn't get enough. All the desire in me had to be released.

The elevator's doing me a favor. It's still not opening. I can relish her lips much longer.

BIANCA

This is wrong. Why did I give in? What will he think of me? That I'm easy? Who knows if he's still a jerk who only wants to play. I seriously can't be with another jerk for pity's sake.

But why am I enjoying this? Why did I want him closer to me? Why did I lose control?

I pushed him away. "This can't be." I shook my head.

The elevator doors opened on the sixteenth floor and he should go, but he pressed the close button, so I'm stuck with him.

"Why?" he frowned. "I'm serious when I told you I'm attracted to you. I want you, Bianca."

I avoided his eyes and said nothing.

Then, the elevator doors opened again. We're on the eighteenth

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floor where my unit is. I left Dominic without a word.

DOMINIC

I'm sitting on my bed with a tightness in my chest. I thought that was the start for me and Bianca. I'm thinking of our kiss, the taste of her lips still on my tongue. Why did she want us to stop? Maybe she thought I moved too fast? If she wants to take things slow, then we will. I want us to go out again and date. I picked up my phone and texted her.

Bianca, this is Dominic. Monina gave me your number.
Please tell me if I did something wrong.

I waited for a reply until the day turned to evening. Heck, I didn't even sleep until midnight waiting for her to text me back.

But I got nothing.

BIANCA

"So, you're scared," Monina said while we were sitting on their kitchen bar stools and having coffee. I told her about yesterday. "It's been five months. How long will you wait to date again?" she asked.

"I like Dominic, but what if he's just the same as Oliver?" My question was more for myself than for her.

"Then dump him quick," Monina shrugged. "Problem solved."

"I don't want to be hurt again," I said.

"Dear, you can condition yourself to not be a hundred percent

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invested in a man. Take a chance. If Dominic turns out to be a good one, great. If he's scum, move on," Monina said. "Everyone's scared, but they go for what they want and take risks in uncertainties. Be like everyone."

Oh, I don't know.

DOMINIC

Bianca walked towards our table with a shy smile on her face. She wanted to meet at a café near the condo. On my way to this place, I could only think about what she'll tell me.

"Hi," she said, as she sat in front of me.

I echoed the greeting. I thought of what to say, but I was too nervous. She bit her lip.

"Thanks for all the flowers," she began.

"I'm glad you liked them," I replied.

I texted Bianca every day since our lunch and left her flower bouquets with little notes at the lady in the lobby for weeks. I lost a chance with her before, I can't lose another. I was stupid to let another man date her back then. I can't let that happen again. Now, it has to be me.

There was silence. I was the one who broke it. "I'm sorry if I was too fast. I got carried away," I said.

"I want you too, Dominic." Her response was quick, as she looked into my eyes. "But, can you wait?"

My smile was one of relief. I thought we didn't share the same feelings, but as it turned out, she just wanted some time.

"Of course," I said. "If that's what I should do for you to be mine,

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then yes, I will.”

She blushed. I love that she blushed. But I couldn't help myself as we walked home. I held her hand, and electricity shot through my arm. She looked up at me and didn't resist.

“Is this okay?” My smile was tentative.

She nodded, smiling shyly.

Her hands fit in mine exactly, like they were made for me. But I wasn't contented. I wanted to kiss her.

When can I own her sweet lips again?

BIANCA

Three months later

“Thinking about something?” Dominic asked.

We were taking a cloudy, afternoon walk along BGC's streets while holding hands. The humming of vehicles on the roads of this upscale area in Metro Manila was music to my ears. We loved taking in the beauty of the lush trees and high-rise buildings this place has, but we loved each other more.

We've been officially in a relationship for three months now, and Dominic was the sweetest. Why had I been so scared? With him, there are no uncertainties. I thank Monina for everything. I love her to bits.

“I think I'm lucky to be your girlfriend,” I said.

He stopped and smiled like he just won the lottery's jackpot. “No, I'm the luckiest,” he countered. “Because you're mine.”

He lifted my chin with his fingers and kissed me. No, we didn't

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care if we were outside in broad daylight, kissing. “I love you, Bianca,” he said.

We exchange those three little words every time we kiss. And we always kiss. I sometimes tease him and not say those words back, though.

“Same,” I smiled mischievously.

He frowned. “You know what I want to hear.”

“Fine.” I laughed and said, “I love you, too.”

“Good,” he said, and he held my waist to keep me closer to him as we walked back to the condo.

I’m his.



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About The Author

Abigail started writing poems about love at the age of 12. She has two unfinished novels which she aims to get done, so she can work on getting them published.

She was born in the south of Metro Manila, but moved with her family to a province when she was seven. She came back to the south for college and took up psychology.

She is a registered psychometrician who advocates for awareness on mental health issues. Though she loves this field of science, she considers herself to be more passionate in the arts of teaching and writing. She is currently a home-based online ESL teacher to Japanese students. She's a beginner at painting and pilates, but considers herself a high-beginner at speaking Japanese.

Abigail is fond of old songs and movies, and wants to study photography. She loves immersing herself in the beauty of nature, most especially, of beaches.

Moonflower



By Erica S. Richards

Terrie never knew he had a heart problem. He never said a word to her. Her dad, the most dependable, solid person she knew, had a heart attack. The phone slid out of her hand and she scrambled to catch it.

“Excuse me?” She couldn’t have heard that right, right? He was as healthy as a horse, he said so himself. So how did he, a supposedly healthy man in his early fifties, have a heart attack?

“Dr. Santos had an underlying heart problem we didn’t know about,” she didn’t recognize the voice on the other end, “I’m so sorry—”

“Wait, wait, is he okay?” People don’t always die after having a heart attack, right? “Is he, I mean, he’s a doctor. He’s at the hospital when it happened. There should be—” her voice rose an octave and she cleared her throat before saying in a quieter tone, “—people around.”

“I’m so sorry, Ms. Santos. We tried the best we can to revive—”

“No...” she sunk to her knees onto the carpeted floor of the house she grew up in. “That— That can’t...”

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Noodle, her terrier mix, nudged her knee, and she grasped his smooth coat in an effort to calm her racing heart.

“I’m on my way,” she stumbled out of the house and broke into a run towards the hospital.

* * *

Her mother, Tess, arrived in Cambria, California the day after the hospital had notified her of his death. Terrie had stayed in the hospital, numb, and unable to grasp the situation. Tess arrived disheveled, straight from the airport, and threw her arms around her daughter. Terrie started crying.

The nurses came to say their condolences, but Terrie couldn’t hear them over the sound of her tears.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, *anak*,” Tess’s voice shook.

Terrie’s parents were always a bit strange. She knew they loved each other, but they never lived together. And she never thought to ask why. Now, she didn’t think she could.

She couldn’t remember much of what happened after that, couldn’t remember them collecting her father’s things and clearing out his office before going home.

Noodle ran up to her as he always did. Happy and oblivious to what just happened.

* * *

“*Papi*,” Damian burst into Elias’s condo, “I got things.”

Elias chuckled, “What things? Did you buy out Goodwill again?”

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He was reviewing his notes for the upcoming photoshoot. He placed the notebook down when Damian came in.

“Plato’s Closet and no, of course not. Only the good vintage,” Damian answered. “Busy *ka?*”

Elias found it hard to say no to Damian, especially not when he was looking expectantly, excitedly, like this.

“I wanna open the *balikbayan* box,” Damian added. “Unboxing *ang peg?*”

Elias rolled his eyes and said, “Why don’t you just become an influencer or a model or something? I’m sure *Tita* Tess would love to have you.”

“No, I’m happy with what I’m doing now,” Damian answered. Then he grinned and added, “Why don’t *you* become a model? You look the part.” He nudged Elias’s arm.

“I’m happy with what I’m doing too,” Elias shrugged, and together, they walked the short length of the hall to Damian’s own condo.

Unlike his, Damian’s condo was a mess—truly an artist’s home, with bright artwork hanging on the dark walls and even more half-finished work littering every flat surface there was.

“Damn, how long have you been working?” Elias frowned at what looked like the face of a cat but made with flowers. “Does this already have an owner?” he asked.

“Why?” Damian crossed his arms and arched a brow, smiling a little smugly and asked, “Wanna have it done? You know I’d do you for free.”

Elias rolled his eyes and answered, “Thank you for the offer, but I don’t want a tattoo.” It didn’t fit his image, at least not the image he

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wanted to portray.

“Well, the offer is always on the table. Have you had dinner? Wanna order takeout?”

“Sure,” Elias wandered around, looking through Damian’s new drawings. “Jet-lagged?”

“To hell, yes,” Damian yawned to emphasize his point. “But I work best when I’m tired.” He brought two bottles of beer, handing one to Elias. “Pizza good?”

“Yeah, sure.” Elias held up a drawing of a different sort of flower. “You seem to be hung up on flowers now.” He took a sip from his bottle.

“Can’t help it, flowers are gorgeous. You sure you don’t want a tat? I can do a small one somewhere other people can’t see.”

“Maybe next time,” Elias replied. Tattoos had always been Damian’s thing.

“So, when’s *Tita* Tess coming back? Why’d she leave so suddenly anyway?”

“Ma said *Tita*’s husband died.”

“Oh shit. I’m sorry.”

Elias shrugged. He barely had any memory of Ray Santos, even less of his daughter Terrie. Just a few blissful summers, really, where everyone was happy and having fun. Did she even remember him?

* * *

Ray Santos wanted to be buried in the family plot just a few hours south of Manila. Tess arranged the funeral in record speed, flying them back to the Philippines before Terrie could even come to terms

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that her father was really gone. Seeing him coming out of the plane in a box after the 15-hour trip though, brought reality down around her.

He was really gone. There wouldn't be anyone who'd fix her car with her anymore; no one to thrift furniture with; or pick up stones at the beach with. Her mother certainly wouldn't, as she had her life and business in Manila.

Terrie didn't recognize the people who came to the funeral, each offering their condolences, but not much else. Did they even know her father? Or were they all her mother's contacts?

"*Anak*, this is your *Tita* Lisa. Do you remember her?" Tess asked.

"Hello, *Tita*," she said, taking the older woman's hand and pressing it against her forehead. Terrie only knew her by name since her parents often spoke about her. Terrie tried for a smile.

"*Grabe*, you're so big *na*." Lisa gave her a tight smile. "I haven't seen you since you were this tall," she gestured somewhere around her hip.

Funerals, Terrie found out, were more of a social gathering, a party almost, and not quite the quiet affair she thought it'd be.

"Your mom said you'll be working with us soon," Lisa added.

Terrie nodded, hoping her grimace passed off as a smile instead, "Yeah, mom wants me to learn about the company."

She didn't care much for local politics or actors or models, or whatever it is Lisa's and her mother's company actually does, but it wouldn't hurt to try. If anything, it would take her mind off of things and, maybe, she'd even get a little bit closer to her mother.

"She's going to need some help dressing up though," said Lisa. "Maybe Eli can help her before we have the Sponsors' Night."

Terrie frowned and looked down at her simple black dress and

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worn-out sneakers. What's wrong with what she was wearing? Then she looked at her mother and Lisa, looking perfectly coiffed and elegant in their tailored suit and dress, respectively. Was this what it meant to run a company? Looking pretty all the time?

"I'm sure Eli would be more than happy to help," Lisa said. Then she turned back to Terrie with another soft smile and added, "I'm not sure if you remember my little Eli, *'nak*, but you used to play together when you lived here."

That was almost 15 years ago. She barely even remembered moving to the States. Did she have a friend named *Ellie*? She had a very vague recollection of playing with a pretty, older girl with short hair who always came around with homemade cookies and wearing the prettiest vintage dresses she'd ever seen. In fact, she kinda looked like one of those porcelain dolls her mother gave her on her 10th birthday. It was still sitting on her bookshelf back in Cambria. Was *that* Ellie?

They looked so expectant that she couldn't say that she didn't quite remember her. "I think I do," she said anyway, and both her mother and Lisa beamed. She looked around, wondering if she'll meet this Ellie here as well.

"Oh, Eli's handling a photoshoot right now," Lisa said, reading her mind. Terrie flushed when Lisa added, "*Baka* tomorrow."

"It's okay," she said, "We'll meet eventually, right? She might be busy."

Terrie glanced towards the front, where her father's sleek white coffin was. She hasn't looked yet. She didn't want to look and remember him lying so still. She wanted to remember him as the cheerful man he was.

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Tess must've caught on to her daughter's mood and decided to change the subject, "*Umi ka ba ngayon?*" she asked Lisa who nodded. "It's getting late, so you should go. Thank you for coming."

"Of course, Ray's my friend too," Lisa said and gave Terrie another smile. "I'll give you my number, *anak*. If you need anything you can call or text me."

"Thanks, *Tita* Lisa," Terrie said, putting in the number Lisa dictated in her phone. "Stay safe on the drive home. *Ingat po kayo*."

"I'll tell Eli *rin* to help you settle in," Lisa gave her a peck on the cheek before saying goodbye.

* * *

In the end, Elias couldn't drop by the wake. The magazine's summer edition had tight deadlines, and he had to be there to make sure everything went according to plan.

"It looks like it's going to rain, so *bilisan na natin*," he said and frowned at his model. Something looked wrong. The bikini was there, the accessories, the bag, but there was still something missing. His phone rang and he rummaged through the bags of clothes he had.

"Hello?" Elias answered.

"*Anak*, are you busy?"

He paused, holding a faded denim jacket. He found it in Damian's *balikbayan* box and thought it'd be useful for something.

"Not so much, Ma," Elias replied. "What is it? Are you and *Tita* Tess okay?"

"We're okay. Are you still in Bicol?"

"Yeah, we got delayed a bit *sa* photoshoot, but we should be able

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to get back day after tomorrow,” he pulled out the jacket and handed it off to one of the assistants so his model can put it on. He gave them a thumbs-up.

“Oh good! You remember Terrie, right? Tess’s daughter?”

“Of course.” It wasn’t technically a lie. He *did* remember playing with her. They even had an embarrassing picture or two, with him wearing one of his mother’s old dresses. Lisa always wanted a daughter. Unfortunately, he was not.

“She’s going to start working with us. Well, I think your *Tita* Tess wants her to take over someday.”

It made sense. Terrie’s the only child and there’s no one else to take over once Tess retires. But what did that have to do with him? He waited for his mother to continue while thinking of the article that would go with the pictures of the shoot.

“She’s going to need help with styling,” his mother finally said.

He thought of Tess and how prim and professional she always looked. Obviously, Terrie wouldn’t be able to pull *that* off. After all, she is younger than him. Something young and fresh would probably work.

“Do we have a deadline?” he asked.

“Two months,” she said. “She needs to be ready in time for the Sponsors’ Night.”

“Why don’t we just dress her for the event itself?”

“Yes, but, of course, she’s going to need to look the part when she’s working with us. And we thought, since you’re closer in age, it would be better if you help her,” Lisa explained. “She’s a smart girl, but you know *naman* how they are. They’d judge her.”

“Ma, we’re earning them money and you said she’s smart so that

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should be enough.”

“I agree, *anak*. But you know who funds entertainment.”

He knew. Being in the entertainment business meant networking and making connections with snooty old businessmen so they could spend less, and earn more.

That didn’t mean he agreed with it though. He remembered the last time he met with their key sponsors. They were always so surprised to find out that he was in fact, a man, and even more so, that he’s straight. How would they react when they meet Tess’s prodigal daughter? Would they be happy to have someone from overseas or would they frown at her for being away for so long? Does she still speak Filipino?

“Elias!” The photographer waved him over.

“I gotta go, Ma. I’ll call you later.”

“*Pero* you’ll do it, right? Help style her for work and the Sponsors’ Night?”

He sighed quietly, “Of course, Ma.”

“Thank you, *anak*.”

He grimaced. He’d do anything to help his mother, even bearing those distasteful jabs that their sponsors passed off as simple teasing.

* * *

As Terrie sorted out all the clothes she brought, the bell rang. She was thankful that her mother gave her space, lending her the condo near the office that she apparently owned. Tess also gave her time to settle down and grieve on her own.

“Coming!” Terrie called out before telling Noodle to stay in the room.

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Her mother had warned her never to forget to lock the doors, and always look through the peephole to see who was there before opening. So that's exactly what she did. She peeked, and frowned at the sight of the tall man wearing a sweater that stretched over his broad shoulders, and a pair of well-fitted jeans

"Who is it?" her voice was muffled by the door.

"It's Elias," the guy said, and her frown turned even deeper.

Who the hell is Elias?

"Elias Sandoval? We're supposed to meet today," the guy outside rubbed the back of his neck. He cleared his throat and asked, "Terrie?"

She paused for a moment. *Elias?*

"*Ellie?*" she squeaked and she could see his expression brighten even through the peephole.

"Right! Ma and Tita Tess always called me *Eli.*"

She opened the door, just a little, with the chain lock still on, "Are you really...*Ellie?*"

"Yes?" He looked slightly amused but also befuddled, "I mean, I'm sure I am, the same way you're sure you're Terrie. I mean, you are Terrie Santos, right?"

"Yes, that's me," she closed the door to unchain it before opening it again. "I'm Terrie," she stuck her hand out and he gave her a smile as he took it. She blushed when she noticed his dimples.

"Hi, it's been a while," his grip with strong, "I, uh, brought cookies."

She didn't notice the bag he was holding. "They're probably not as good as my mom's but..." he shrugged.

"You remembered?"

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He barked out a laugh and added, “Sorta. I mean, it’s the only thing Ma knew how to bake.”

She let him in.

“I actually live two floors down,” he cleared his throat. “So I was pretty surprised when you said you were staying here. *Tita* Tess never used this place, so I’m not really sure why I didn’t expect it.” Elias cleared his throat and gave her a look over from her head to her bare feet. She flushed and shifted awkwardly.

“I, um, didn’t think you were this tall,” she said and immediately cursed herself. She wasn’t usually very awkward with new people, and he *was* new, at least new-ish in the sense that they haven’t seen each other in so long. Heck, she never even would’ve thought about her—*him*—had her mother not mentioned his name.

“You’re...” she bit her lip and he cocked his head sideways.

“I’m...?”

“You *are* a guy, right?”

“Excuse me?” His brows shot up.

“No! Wait, I mean, you’re male, right? Like, physically...?”

He gave her a look that told her he was starting to think she was weird.

“I don’t mean to offend you and I didn’t mean it in a weird way. It’s just...” she started gesturing with her hands. “I mean, I barely remember my time here, and I was thinking the *Ellie* I knew then would be a girl since...since...” She finally looked away and squirmed before saying quietly, “You...looked really pretty in those dresses.”

She squeezed her eyes shut. She really was *not* expecting *Ellie* to be a man, much less someone so tall, so big, and so ridiculously attractive. She always had a thing for big men, and one with dimples too.

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He snorted and then laughed, “Thanks?” His dimples flashed again as he tried to stop himself from laughing. “I mean, I really hoped you didn’t remember *that* but, uh, I guess you do.”

She grimaced, “Yeah... Not a very good reunion conversation,” she cleared her throat. “So, do you want some coffee? Tea? I think I might have some juice. Or do you wanna, uh, do whatever it is you’re supposed to?”

“Anything’s fine, sweetheart. I cleared all my schedule, so you have me for as long as you need today,” Elias replied.

Heat rose up to her cheeks and she turned quickly towards the small kitchen.

“Just make yourself at home,” she called out, unable to hear herself over the sound of her heartbeat in her ears.

* * *

She’s cute.

That was really the only description Elias could think of. A thick lump formed in his throat, and he swallowed it back forcefully. He was very rarely speechless, but the oversized t-shirt and silk sleep shorts, though mismatched, made her legs look ridiculously long. And he couldn’t help but stop and stare. He had to avert his eyes quickly before she realizes that he was looking way too long. He didn’t even know he had a thing for legs.

Terrie came back with a tray holding two mismatched mugs of coffee, a box of milk, and a little cup of sugar. He pulled out the container of cookies he brought over and started, “I heard about your dad, I’m so sorry for your loss.” He immediately wished he

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hadn't mentioned it after seeing how her expression fell.

"Thanks," she said quietly and tucked her legs under her as she sat on the armchair nearest to him. An awkward silence descended. He cleared his throat, but before he could say anything, a yellow ball of fur launched itself onto his lap.

"Noodle!" Terrie said sharply. "I told you to stay!"

"His name's Noodle?" He rubbed the dog behind the ears and said, "Hello, Noodle. I'm Elias." The dog barked once, and he laughed softly before letting him down. He trotted over to Terrie.

"Bad dog," she said without any real conviction.

"He's cute."

"He's spoiled." She rolled her eyes and he chuckled.

"How have you been?"

She looked surprised at his question. But getting to know his clients, including childhood friends he's lost touch with, was part of his job.

"Well, I mean, it's a bit of a shock. I didn't expect... coming here," Terrie replied.

"I see," he pursed his lips. "I didn't expect you either."

She arched a brow, "What does that mean?"

He cleared his throat, "Nothing, I mean, you expected me to be a girl and I expected you to be..." he grabbed a cookie and bit into it.

"Am I going to get angry at what you were going to say?" She put her feet down and crossed her legs.

"No, of course not. I just didn't expect that you'd grow up so..."

She started tapping her foot and the peach nail polish on her toes distracted him. "So...?"

"So?" His eyes snapped back to her face. "Pretty," he blurted and

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this time, both her eyebrows shot up. “I mean, I remember you as this kid who rolled around on the floor and always had scratched knees and elbows.”

“I mean, I still roll on the floor,” she crossed her arms and arched a brow again, looking like she was daring him to say something.

“I’m sorry, that was—” he cleared his throat. What is it with this girl that makes him feel so awkward, that makes him fumble around with his words like this? “I didn’t mean anything by it. I was just...surprised.”

“Just so we’re clear I like to fix cars, so I’m often under one,” she winked and he coughed to cover up his embarrassment. “And as we can see, I’m not a child anymore. And clearly, you’re not the pretty *ate* I thought you were.”

He glanced at her, wondering if she was angry, and was relieved to see her mouth twitching up despite her trying to hide her smile.

“Clearly,” he let out an embarrassed laugh. “I’m sorry, I’m not normally this awkward. Let’s start over. I’m Elias. I’m a fashion stylist by trade.”

She took his offered hand and he had to marvel at how small her hand was compared to his.

“And I like to cook in my spare time,” Elias added.

This time, she smiled widely, and he was stunned at the sheer brightness of it.

“Terrie,” she said. “I’m currently unemployed.” She didn’t let go of his hand and neither did he let go of hers. “And good for you. I like to eat in my spare time.”

He laughed. “Then I guess we’re going to get along great, huh?”

She grinned and he ignored the way his heart fluttered.

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* * *

The first time Elias invited Terrie over, it was so they could catch up. But soon, he kept finding more and more excuses to have her over. This time, it's to practice the aesthetic she's going for. She actually had pretty good pieces, mostly casual wear, but he made it work. They were a creative company, so all he had to do was get her some pants, a few sets of formal wear, some accessories, and she was set.

The door opened.

"Something smells good," Damian popped his head in the kitchenette. "Whatcha cooking, *papi?*"

"Nothing," Elias answered and looked at the clock. Terrie will be here soon. "I'm kinda busy right now."

"Oh? *May* date *ka no?*" Damian went around the counter and continued, "Who is it? How did you meet? When will we meet her?"

"It's not a date," Elias said. "It's someone I used to know. I'm styling her. Now please, go. I'll tell you about it tomorrow."

Damian grew quiet and Elias glanced at him. Damian had a speculative look on his face. "You like her, don't you?" Damian asked bluntly and Elias almost dropped the spoon he was using to stir the gravy.

"It's not like that. If you must know, she's *Tita* Tess's daughter. We knew each other a long time ago."

"That doesn't explain shit, *paps.*"

Elias rolled his eyes and elbowed Damian back.

"I can't believe this. *Kaya naman pala* you weren't interested in anyone *dati,*" Damian teased. Elias choosing not to date had nothing to do with Terrie.

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“Oh, was I interrupting something?”

Elias froze when he heard Terrie’s voice. “The door was open and you weren’t answering,” Terrie added, walking into the kitchenette.

“You must be Elias’s childhood sweetheart!” Damian bounced away from Elias, who whirled around quickly to see him shaking Terrie’s hand. “I’m Damian, I’m sure he’s never mentioned me.”

“Hi,” she looked confused. “I’m Terrie.” She glanced over to Elias who shut off the stove and scowled.

“Go home, Damian,” Elias said, pushing the man out of the kitchen. “I’m gonna take your key away if you don’t.”

“Aw, come on man. I was just curious why you’ve been so busy lately.”

Elias felt a little guilty shutting Damian out like this, but he knew his friend well. He’s going to try to set them up and he really didn’t want to get ahead of himself. He didn’t even know if she saw him the way he saw her.

“It was nice meeting you, Terrie!” Damian waved even as he was being pushed out.

Elias bolted the door shut and sighed.

“He seems...nice,” Terrie said, shifting awkwardly on the balls of her feet. The *terno* she wore accentuated her small waist and long legs.

“He is. He’s really...friendly.”

She blushed when she saw him eyeing her.

“You look cute,” Elias said.

“I’m supposed to be pretty,” she frowned, but it looked more like a pout to him. “I even tried wearing makeup the way you taught me.”

“And you did great,” he tucked the stray lock of hair behind her ear and didn’t miss the way she froze. They’d gotten closer the last

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couple of weeks. And since she didn't have a car, nor did she know the roads in Manila, he'd taken it upon himself to drive her around. They even went shopping together. "And you are pretty." Her brow twitched up. "Pretty cute," he winked and she scowled.

"Ugh, you're so cheesy."

"No, I'm not," he laughed, resisting the urge to lean down and drop a kiss on her forehead. Instead, he turned and made his way back to the kitchenette. "Dinner would be ready soon. Wanna tell me about what you're wearing? I don't think I've ever seen it before."

"I made it."

"Oh?" He glanced at her. "You did?"

"Yup," she leaned against the counter. "I found my mom's old sewing machine and, since I had a lot of time, I thought I could make something out of this big long-sleeved shirt I had."

"It's a good way to reuse your old clothes," he nodded. "Fast fashion's not good for the environment. That's why I always recommend buying good brands you can use for a long time. Most designers are good, but personally, I like to thrift."

"Me too," she said. "And if you're lucky you get name brands." She helped Elias prepare the food and sat at her usual seat in the small dining area. She looked right sitting there, like she belonged.

"Have you decided on what you're going to wear to the Sponsors' Night?" He had given her three choices based on how he knew her. It didn't make sense for her to look so formal when she's so laidback and friendly, but he could still be wrong.

She frowned, "I don't know, Eli. They don't *feel* like me. I'm not chic like mom or *Tita* Lisa. Or even you."

"What are you talking about, sweetheart? You're pretty chic. It's

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not that hard. You already have the pieces. You just gotta find something you're comfortable with. Like this outfit you're wearing right now."

She gave him a tight smile, "Thanks."

"You know what looks good on you. I'm sure you'll be fine. Besides, you have me to help."

"What if I always need help?"

His brows shot up

"Will you always be there?" she added.

"Of course, I would. I'll be around for as long as you need me," he swallowed back the nerves that came with the declaration. He didn't mean to confess in such a roundabout way, not that it was a confession per se.

"Is that a promise?" she stared at him intently.

"I promise," he said. "I promise, sweetheart."

She nodded once and turned back to her food.

* * *

She did great. Of course, she did. She always had it in her. *Tita* Tess and his mother took turns mentoring Terrie while he took care of her wardrobe. And now, at the annual Sponsors' Night, the biggest party of the year, she shone the brightest of them all, flitting from person to person to talk and laugh with them like it was the most natural thing in the world.

The little crystals on her gown sparkled under the dim lights, contrasting with the deep black leather jacket she stole from his closet.

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He didn't mind. It looked better on her than it ever did on him. He caught a glimpse of a tattoo on her wrist.

She also got along with Damian surprisingly well and had fallen in love with the floral design she saw on the coffee table. A moonflower, she told him as she got it done, means to bloom even in the darkest of nights.

And she *did* bloom, so beautifully and so sweetly that Elias's heart ached whenever he thought that his job was done, and they would go their separate ways. Sure, they were friends and would one day work together more closely, but did he have any hope of being more than just her stylist friend?

* * *

Terrie would never have had the confidence to meet all the company bigwigs had it not been for Elias's jacket. It sat heavily and warmly around her shoulders, reminding her of his rough hands reassuring her that everything would be all right. Her mother introduced her proudly and she put on her best customer service smile. *Use all your assets. Make them love you.* She could hear her father's advice from when she first started working as a teen, and it gave her courage to face this new world she was living in with the new people around her.

Terrie looked back at Elias who stood close to the walls, a glass of champagne in hand. He was watching her. The heat rose to her cheeks, and she smiled. She couldn't have done this without him.

"Hey, why are you all the way back here?" Terrie approached Elias a few minutes later.

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He gave her that dimpled smile that she loved. "I'm more of an on-the-side kinda person," he said.

"You said you'll be there for as long as I need you," she frowned at him, still needing to look up despite wearing the comfortable heels he chose for her.

"You don't need me anymore, sweetheart."

She placed her hands on her hips and scowled, "Who are you to decide when I need you or not?"

He let out a breathy laugh before saying, "You're doing great on your own and you look gorgeous."

She arched a brow, "Not cute?"

"You're always cute."

"Cute enough to ask out on a date?"

"What?" He blinked.

"A date. You, me, candles?"

"Are you serious?"

She arched a brow.

"I mean, yes," Elias added hastily. "No, I mean, I should ask you. I mean, I should ask you out."

"Yes," she nodded, looking at him expectantly. "Go on."

"A date. Let's...go on a date."

"There we go," she beamed. "That wasn't very hard, was it?" With her newfound confidence, she threw her arms around his shoulders, "This is the part where you kiss me."

He let out a breathless laugh and wrapped his arm around her waist.

"Yes ma'am," he murmured and leaned down to press his lips against hers.





About The Author

Erica S. Richards mostly writes romance and fan-fiction. She loves candles and doing research, and daydreaming. She is a *plantita* and a fur parent who adores her goofy, four-legged child.

When she's not writing, she's working in hospitality and construction. Her hobbies, apart from writing, include baking and cooking things from scratch, as well as making candles, building things, and creating decoden works for friends and family.

She sometimes does ghostwriting and editing works for marketing and fellow fan-fiction writers. She dreams of someday publishing a novel and living a simple life on a self-sustaining farm.

The Stylist's Touch

By Rory Aldueger

It was a bright and sunny day. A perfect day to have coffee and attend a meeting at Coffee Brewed located at Metro Business Park. The door chimed, which made people turn their heads to Jamira. One look and you'll know that she was *The One*. As per the typical standards of a man, Jamira has fair skin and is tall, slender, and gorgeous. With the paper bags in her arms, you'd think that she's a shopaholic. And she is, by the way.

Jamira walked into Coffee Brewed gracefully and went to the counter. "I'd like to have one caramel rock salt mocha," she ordered.

The cashier smiled from ear to ear. "What's your name, ma'am?"

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Jamira took off her sunglasses before giving her card, “Jamira.”

“One caramel rock salt mocha for Jamira,” the cashier said and wrote her name on the cup.

After that, she scanned the coffee shop, hoping to find a perfect spot where her clients can easily spot her. She chose to sit beside the window to have a full view of what was happening outside. It was her favorite spot, so it was a good choice to meet the clients here. It was a four-seater table so she put her things beside her.

If it were up to her, she preferred to have a face-to-face meeting at the agency. But then, the clients suggested a more personal and casual meeting at a coffee shop. While waiting, Jamira decided to review the brochure containing pre-photoshoots of her client. Though she had reviewed them multiple times last week, it was still a shock to her when she heard who was going to be her client.

Jamira wanted more information about him, even though she knows him well. Very well, actually.

“Miss Matias, sorry we’re late.”

She stood up to meet Celine, her new client’s manager. It was her who suggested they meet here. But she was taken aback when she saw her client walking behind Celine. Of course, Jamira was expecting she would only meet his manager today. She didn’t expect that he would be here today.

“No problem,” Jamira smiled and pointed to the chairs in front of her. “Please have a seat.”

“So, before anything else...” Celine started. “Emil, I’d like you to meet Jamira Matias, your stylist.”

Emil took off his sunglasses and said to Jamira, “I told you, we’ll meet each other again.”

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Jamira was caught off guard, but remained professional and smiled. “It has been five years, right?”

“Oh! So you know each other?” asked Celine.

“Yup, we *knew* each other very well,” Emil answered, still smiling at her.

Jamira felt goosebumps because of the tone of his voice.

Celine nodded. “Well...that’s great! It will be easy for you to work with each other.”

“I think so,” Jamira shrugged. “It would be possible if he is tamed.”

Celine chuckled at her remark. “Your stylist knows you very much, Emil.”

“Told you, she’s the one,” Emil shrugged.

The three of them laughed.

“One caramel rock salt mocha for Jamira,” the barista announced.

Jamira paused. “I’m sorry, I will just get my coffee.”

She was about to stand up when Emil stopped her. “No need. I’ll get your coffee. Just talk to Celine about the contract.”

“So, you are a gentleman now?” Jamira teased him.

Emil only chuckled. “It is a normal thing.”

Jamira had no choice when Emil left her with Celine. Little did she know, Celine noticed her taking a peak at Emil’s actions.

“So, Jamira, I already have your contract. Please try to read the terms and conditions again, and tell me if you are willing to sign with us,” Celine gave her the contract.

It was a good thing that she was fast to pick up. She started reading the document. She was nodding at the terms and conditions

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and smiled at the clause that allowed her to style other people, which made her sigh in relief. It was the first time someone offered her a contract this big. And it was considerable, after all, Emil is an actor in the making.

“I like your style,” Celine praised. “Simple, but elegant.”

Jamira smiled, acknowledging what Celine said. Albeit, Jamira was only wearing a simple off-shoulder layered ruffled top. “Thank you! It’s a simple top, though. While dressing up, I felt like I was running out of clothes to wear.”

Celine chuckled. “For a stylist like you, I was thinking that it would be more fabulous.”

“Well...in my opinion, you should dress according to your vibe. To match the authenticity of your personality.”

Celine agreed. “Right. There are still clothes that you call your own.”

“And will make you feel like you’re a queen.”

The two women chuckled as Emil showed up with a tray of coffee and dessert. She wasn’t expecting it when he dropped a slice of black forest cake in front of her. He also got slices of cheesecake for him and Celine.

“It’s your favorite, right?” asked Emil, pointing to the black forest cake.

“Well, yeah,” Jamira answered. “Thank you for this. Did anyone bother you?”

“No sweat. My fans know their limits, especially in public places.”

Jamira nodded. “Looks like you raised your fans well.”

“Are you two best friends?” Celine asked. “I have a hunch that you are. Based on Emil’s statement, he knows your favorite.”

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Jamira sipped her coffee to avoid answering.

Emil laughed. “You could say that. So, what can you say about the contract? Are you going to work with me?”

“As much as I want to handle you, I found something odd in one of the clauses on page two. Are you sure about the 10-year contract?”

“Why? You can still style other people, right?”

Jamira sighed. “Yup. I know that. I read it. But then, I’m just concerned. This is a 10-year contract. It will mean that you could not find another stylist aside from me for 10 years.”

“Remember what I told you? That we’ll see each other again and we’ll have each other’s back? This is it.”

Jamira’s jaw dropped.

“You are making her uncomfortable, Emil,” Celine scolded him.

“I’m just fulfilling what I promised to her a long time ago,” he looked at her intently. “So?”

This wasn’t what she expected him to say. More so, she thought that he already forgot about what they promised each other five years ago. Jamira bit her lower lip and gave Celine a sideways glance. “Can I bring this home? I feel like I need to review this again.”

“Sure, sure! No problem!” Celine answered.

Jamira sighed in relief. Yes, she thought that everything would sail smoothly because her client was Emil and she loves her job. But the tables have turned and it triggered something in her.

“I hope you’ll let me do it. I don’t wanna break another promise, Jamira,” Emil added.

* * *

“Really? He told you that?” Niña chuckled.

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Jamira threw her head back on the sofa and let out another sigh. After the meeting, she went straight to her best friend's office. She felt like she was lost after that meeting at the coffee shop.

"He asked for my number because he wants to know about my decision as soon as possible," Jamira told Niña.

"Some things never change, huh?" Niña replied while sketching a gown for a client who will join Binibining Pilipinas.

"What should I do, Niña?" Jamira asked, confused.

Niña stood up from her desk and walked towards one of the mannequins before facing Jamira. "I thought you moved on?"

Jamira nodded. "Of course. It has been five years."

"Then, why don't you just enjoy the moment? Remember when you broke up with him? You insulted him about your dreams together when it was *your* fault?"

Jamira let out an exasperated sigh. She walked towards Niña and checked out the red long gown that her friend recently added to her collection. It was bound for Nevada. *Niña is really stepping up her game*, she thought.

"That's why I'm more uncomfortable now. It was my fault. I moved on. Then he showed up and started telling other people about our lost dream."

Niña shook her head and turned her back to her. "Then don't sign the contract."

"What? What kind of suggestion is that?" Jamira overreacted.

Niña pointed at her using a scissor. "You know what? You're the one who's making everything complicated. The answer was already waving at you. But you are taking a lot of detours. What do you want to happen, then?"

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“I don’t know.”

“There are only two things, Jamira. If you’re really uncomfortable about the idea, then don’t sign the contract. And if you want, you can easily tell him that everything is over between you two and you’re uncomfortable with the idea. It’s that easy, right?”

Niña has a point, she thought. And Jamira wasn’t referring to the scissors her friend pointed at her. Niña’s suggestions were practical and easy, but why did they sound difficult for her?

“Thank you for your suggestions. Maybe it would be better if I just told him directly.”

Niña smiled at her proudly. “Very well then. Just tell me about his response.”

This is much better, Jamira, she told herself. She hoped that after this, it wouldn’t happen again. “By the way, lunch? My treat,” she told Niña.

Niña clapped her hands. “Good decision. Let’s go.”

* * *

That night, Jamira slumped on her bed as soon as she reached her unit. It had been a long day for her. She had to shop for clothes for other events. She had been dreaming of sleep.

Then her phone beeped and when she checked it, it was a heartstopper. It was a message from Emil.

Emil: Nice seeing you a while ago.

She let out an exasperated sigh. It should be done. Jamira shouldn’t feel something when it was just a simple message from an

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ex. But she couldn't stop herself from feeling nervous.

Jamira: Same here.

Emil: I hope we can catch up soon.

She bit her lip and grabbed the folder beside her. She wasn't able to fix the designer clothes she bought earlier and just left them in her wardrobe. After doing so, she sat down in front of her computer. As promised, she reviewed the contract and put a note that it should just be five years, which is more reasonable. When she finished signing the document, Jamira felt like it's a ticking time bomb because of mixed emotions. She rolled her computer chair towards her bed and took out the brochure that was inside her bag. It contained Emil's Actor Profile. She started reading it, and, in the middle of absorbing every information, thousands of memories came crashing back.

* * *

Five years ago

"You weren't answering my calls," Emil said, the sadness was very evident in his voice.

Jamira felt guilty when she remembered not calling him today. "Emil... uhh..." Jamira pinched the bridge of her nose. "I'm sorry. I wasn't—"

"Do we have a problem, Jamira? Why does it feel like I'm not your priority anymore?"

Jamira closed her eyes. *Here we go again*, she thought. They already

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talked about this last month when Jamira started working to support herself.

“Emil, please...not today.”

“What do you mean not today?” Emil was irritated. “I don’t understand. Are we still together?”

Emil was making her feel guilty. This wasn’t her choice either. But what could she do? Everything was a mess. Including her. And all she wanted was emotional support from him. But instead, they end up fighting.

“Emil, we already talked about this. My dad is sick. Mom is gone. I need to finish my studies.”

“I know. This is why we chose to gamble, right? Because we promised to each other that we can handle this. Not that I’m pressuring you, Jamira. But why... Why does it feel that this relationship is already leading nowhere?”

Her heart stopped. This was what she was afraid of. That they might need to separate in order to grow on their own. “What do you want me to do?”

“Why don’t you ask yourself?” Emil sounded disappointed. “Because the truth is—”

“You are already tired?” She cut him off.

“You are already hurting me,” he ended.

Jamira wasn’t able to speak. Until the line ended, it was when she burst into tears.

* * *

Jamira closed the brochure and let out a sigh. *I need to fix*

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this, she thought before she fell asleep.

The next morning, Jamira decided to patch things up with Emil and went to SGV Entertainment, Emil's agency. She wore a matcha-colored puff sleeve top with a sweetheart neckline, plus a matching handbag. She was carrying the folder with the contract she just signed. Before she went here, she already called Celine last night to tell her about the things she wanted revised in the contract.

"Okay. So, is this all?" Celine asked after reviewing the changes.

"I just want to double check, is it really fine to quit whenever I want to?"

Celine nodded. "Yes, of course. To be honest, Emil's schedule is not really tight, unless he has a lot of offers. But now, he filed for a leave. We all know that he just finished a TV Series, right? So, you still have time to rest before you start."

"Thank you, Miss Celine."

When Jamira left the building, she took her phone out and called Emil. They have an appointment, and it was her who set things up so she can tell him personally what can and can't be done.

"I'm already here," said Emil.

"Okay. Wait for me."

She booked a car service and continuously reminded herself to stop feeling agitated throughout the ride. It was just her ex-boyfriend. Yes...the one she promised to marry back then. How ironic. It was also her who broke up with him. So, to make her at least feel at ease, she dialed Niña's number.

"Where are you?" Niña sounded a bit dramatic. "You need to know about this."

"What? Why? Is there something wrong?"

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“Didn’t you hear about the news? Amanda’s commercial clothing line had to stop their operation.”

Amanda is a fashion designer just like Niña. They have this close competition about being the most fashionable designer in Iloilo. Though they are both well-known, Amanda had been too greedy. A lot of designers in the industry were already speculating about her clothing line being on top. It wasn’t a problem, to be honest. But then, Amanda kept her actions discreet. Leaving no traces. She also wouldn’t address some issues linked to her name.

Jamira frowned, “What happened?”

“The fast-fashion industry is falling down after the child labor issue.”

The car parked in front of the restaurant inside Festive Walk, a place that people dubbed as the mini-BGC of Iloilo City. Jamira contemplated on going, she felt uncomfortable and comfortable at the same time.

“I’ll call you later. I just need to talk to someone,” Jamira dropped the call, got out of the car, and walked to the restaurant. Once inside, a waiter walked towards her and she told him about the reservation. She planned everything out before going here.

“Jamira...”

Jamira cleared her throat before sitting in front of Emil. The waiter took their orders and left. She was about to say something when Emil cut her off.

“I still love you...”

Her mouth dropped. “What?”

“I know it sounds stupid. But I realized that after all these years, it’s still you who I want to be with.”

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Jamira clenched her fist. “I’m a jerk, Emil. You shouldn’t be saying this to me.”

Emil nodded, accepting everything she had to say. “I know. But I don’t care and you know that. I’ll stay with you. I stopped caring when all I wanted was to be with you. I realized how wrong I was when I didn’t think of your pain. And only considered mine.”

Jamira looked away. No words could take away the pain she felt that night. Even if it was she who was at fault for letting him leave her, it still hurt.

“We can’t be together, Emil. You know that I can’t choose you over my career...”

Silence fell between them when she heard him cry.

“I love you, Jamira. I don’t care what you’ll say... You can’t change my mind,” he was shaking his head. “No. I won’t let you choose me. Instead, I’ll wait until you surrender yourself to me and choose to be with me. So, please...”

Jamira looked at him with pain in her eyes. At least this way, he would understand her reasons as to why she thinks they weren’t compatible with each other in the first place. She would let him see how weak she was and would make him leave because, after all these years, she is still selfish.

“The world is too big for you, Emil. And I couldn’t handle it. You also couldn’t handle the fact that I need to grow. And I still want more. Excluding you... You are not on my list,” Jamira tried keeping her cool. She couldn’t fathom the overflowing feelings that were showing in his eyes.

Emil made her realize something about pursuing love and reaching her dreams. Her decisions became futile, but it also made her

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thankful for becoming who she is now.

Emil did not answer. She took it as a sign that their conversation wasn't going anywhere. She stood up and was about to leave him when Jamira felt him hug her from the back.

"I'm sorry," Emil said. "I'm sorry... But, Jamira, I'm already here. I will never leave you. Never again. I don't care if I'm not at the top of your priorities. I will understand. Just please... I hate taking detours. It has been five years, and I wouldn't let the chance slip away again."

Jamira gritted her teeth and pulled away to face him. "Where did you have the guts to tell me that when you left me years ago?"

He shook his head. "I never left you, Jamira. In every step you take, I was behind your back. In every achievement you received, I wished for solutions on how to become a better person so that I could deserve you. You never saw me, but I was there. I will always be there for you, Jamira. So please... Hear me out..."

Jamira gulped and made no other sound. She listened to her own heartbeat. But he made it more complicated for her. Maybe because Emil knew that after all the heartbreaks, her heart would always echo his name. It was unfair.

"I love you," he whispered with utmost sincerity.

Jamira gasped but, instead of shouting in anger, she only felt dejected. Jamira shook her head as tears fell down like a river. "You're too late for me, Emil. I don't need you."

He shook his head. "But you will never be too late for me, Jamira."

She tried to turn her back on him, but Emil was fast to pull her for a back hug. "I love you, Jamira." He made her turn to him and shut down her tears with a kiss.

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Jamira pulled away and slapped him, but it only made her cry. *How could he do this to me?* she thought.

One mention of her name coming from his lips, Jamira knew that it was still him. *Yes... I love him. Still,* she thought.

“We’ll take it slow this time,” he whispered.

Jamira punched him on the chest, but he wouldn’t budge. It made her cry more when she felt him kiss her forehead.

“I love you,” she finally said.





About The Author

Aurora Anne Lucia Oso is a 19-year-old fiction author who writes stories under the pen name Rory Aldueger. She started reading stories when she was 9 years old. From then on, she started writing stories about her life in separate books, believing that writing can be her venting machine. As she goes on with life, she wants to see people get inspired by her stories.

In 2015, she was able to publish an article in their school paper under the sports column. In late 2020, her story *If You Could See Me Now*, which tackles pursuing one's dreams, was short-listed in the Wattys Awards.

Currently, Aurora is going to start her college journey pursuing Bachelor of Elementary Education at Northern Iloilo State University - Lemery Campus.

LOVE IN STYLE



Project MKUkay!

By Tasia

*MK101 Office
Penthouse, RGC Building
Four weeks away from Fashionably 2040*

“Get the hell out of here!” Miss K’s voice filled the entire penthouse of the RGC Building. “There is no room for incompetent people in my team!”

The employee started to cry as she hurriedly picked up all her designs on the carpeted floor. She went out of the office without looking back. On her way out, she bumped into Joaquin, Miss K’s Head Fashion Designer. He was wearing black and white floral-printed polo and white trousers, matched with black low-cut boots and a hat. His physique and height definitely matched those of male models on big air boards.

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Joaquin gave the employee a worried look. “Are you all right, Nina?” he asked.

Nina shook her head before she walked away while Joaquin went straight to Miss K’s office. He was welcomed by the scent of lavender and hibiscus tea. *Someone’s pressured and stressed*, he thought.

“Busy?” he asked as he entered the office.

Miss K’s expression relaxed. She took her pair of cat eye glasses off and put it on her table. Slowly, she massaged the temples of her head, causing her eyebrow makeup to smudge a bit. He walked towards her table and sat on one of the empty seats in front of it.

The whole room has an accent of burnt sienna that complements the crimson-colored furniture. On the left was a rack containing all the awards given to MK101. The right side has a door that leads to Miss K’s wardrobe.

Miss K opened her eyes and looked at Joaquin like a doe. There was no hint of the tiger-looking woman who shouted at her secretary just minutes ago.

“What should I do, J? This cheap MadGee brand is about to take over MK101’s highest sales per annum. Not to mention the RGC Gala Night and the upcoming Fashionably 2040. Gosh! Sometimes, I just wanna be a potato!” she exclaimed.

“Before you worry about that, I think you need to find another secretary. Friend, do not be too hard on yourself or your employees. Just take a deep breath. Inhale, exhale!” he gestured his hand upwards then slowly moved it downwards. “One step at a time, okay? You are doing good, honey! I am sure you’re gonna figure it out.”

“Thanks, J. You’re an angel. Okay. I have tons of things to do.” She wore her eyeglasses again as Joaquin left the room.

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“Xirxa, open holo-board and close the area!” she said.

“Opening holo-board and closing doors,” the voice recognition AI responded.

Miss K started scanning MK101’s collection for the upcoming Fashionably 2040 event. It is the most-awaited fashion week that showcases collections from several popular fashion companies.

For years, MK101 has been the annual recipient of the award. It was only this year that their reign was threatened by MadGee. It was a fashion company that is well-known for the production of trendy, fast fashion clothing. MadGee has, undoubtedly, copied numerous designs from their previous collections. Sadly, a controversial law, one that declared imitation of designs that were made public was legal, hindered them to file a lawsuit against MadGee. It was owned by Madam G, a well-known social climber who made her way up the social ladder by seducing a wealthy old man, who owned a shipping business.

“Xirxa, close the holo-board and open the door.”

Miss K stood and went straight to her wardrobe. The face recognition monitor scanned her face and the metal door opened, revealing a wide crimson wardrobe. She entered and walked towards the second aisle where she keeps her collection of coats. Each aisle inside is from a different collection of MK101. In the middle of the room is a large, round image of a Partridge resting on a tree. It was the Reyes Group of Companies’ logo. MK101 is a part of it. Although, it was well-known for its huge freight forwarding services.

Miss K picked a black coat and a small diamond purse to complement her outfit. When she was done, the AI closed the door leading to her wardrobe.

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She was ready to leave the office when a woman walked in. She was wearing a freaking excuse for an outfit. Miss K raised her eyebrows.

“Good day, ma’am. I am Veronica Rodriguez, applying as your secretary,” the Plain Jane said. Miss K looked at the applicant from head to toe.

“Xirxa, open her curriculum vitae.” Miss K scanned Veronica’s file through the holo-board. Then, she stood up and walked to the door.

“You’re hired,” she said without looking back.

The woman was stunned. “Ma’am, you-you mean it?”

“Did I stutter? And don’t call me ma’am. I am not an old maid. Call me Miss K. Report to the Head Fashion Designers Office. You’ll start working today.” And with that, she walked away.

The clacking of her stilettos could be heard in the hallway that leads to the employees’ offices. Everyone bowed down as she walked past them. No one dared to have even brief eye contact. A security officer opened the special elevator and he went inside with her.

“Forty-fifth floor,” she said.



Two weeks away from Fashionably 2040

It was 7:55 a.m. Veronica ran to reach for the elevator while holding a bag of coffee and a bagel. She was seconds away from the closing elevator door.

“Wait for me!” she shouted at the man inside. But the latter did

LOVE IN STYLE

not even move to prevent the door from closing. She did her best to reach for it and alas, the elevator door re-opened.

“Gee thanks! I almost spilled this coffee. Thanks to you, Mr. Gentleman!” she said sarcastically.

The man chuckled, “It’s not my fault that you are careless, miss. Not to mention, someone who might’ve overslept and ran her way out wearing slip-ons,” he looked at her feet, then winked at her.

Veronica’s eyes widened. She was, indeed, wearing slip-ons—a pair of thin slippers that you practically stick on your feet. How she hoped that the elevator floor would suck her out. She was so embarrassed. How can she forget to wear her shoes?

The elevator stopped on the 45th floor. The man got out and walked away. He turned to her before the elevator door closed.

“And also...remember to use the general elevator next time.” He winked at her. That’s when she realized that she used the special elevator instead of the general one. That explained why the man did not click the open button for her.

“Argh! Why are you so stupid, Veronica?” she told herself as the doors closed.

She never got his name.

* * *

A loud scream welcomed Veronica as she reached the penthouse. She went straight to Miss K’s office, only to find a huge mess. All of the things in Miss K’s dress were now on the floor. On the right side of the room were shards of the glass flower vase from her small table.

She found Miss K, her head was resting on the table and her

LOVE IN STYLE

shoulders were visibly shaking.

“Miss K, are you all right?” Veronica asked as she put the bag of coffee and bagel down on the coffee table, and slowly approached her boss.

Miss K raised her head and looked at her sharply. “*Tonta!* Do I look okay?” she almost screamed. Her hair was messy and her makeup was all smudged from crying. “Call Joaquin, now!”

Veronica hurriedly went out of the office and ran straight to her cubicle. She called Sir Joaquin and told him what happened. After three minutes, Joaquin arrived at Miss K’s office. He stayed there for almost an hour.

“Monica, do you know what happened?” Veronica asked one of her office mates who happened to pass by.

“You don’t know? Miss K’s previous secretary, Jennica Reyes, stole all the designs from our main collection for Fashionably 2040. Earlier, they uploaded everything on Cloud 99,” Monica explained. “Not just that, MadGee and other fast-fashion brands started production as soon as they got the stolen designs.”

Veronica froze for a while. Now she understood why Miss K reacted like that. “Thanks, Monica,” she said.

After some time, a tired-looking Miss K went to her cubicle with Sir Joaquin.

“Veronica, work with Joaquin and set up a new team for Fashionably 2040. Then, let the stylists know that the Gala Night is at 8:00 p.m. tonight.”

Miss K then turned to Joaquin. “Also, tell the Design Department that I will fire all of them if they do not come up with fresh ideas for it.”

LOVE IN STYLE

Joaquin let out a big sigh.



Gala Night

16th floor, Onyx Hotel

Four weeks away from Fashionably 2040

Rich men and women in their dazzling gowns and suits flocked together in the magical Gala Night at Onyx Hotel. The area has royal blue and pearl-white accents. The gigantic chandelier is the center of attraction as you enter the event. In front of the venue was Mr. Dave Reyes, Chairman of Reyes Group of Companies.

“I thank everyone for gracing us with your presence at this event,” Mr. Reyes said. “Before I end my speech, I would like all of us to give a hand to one of the highest-earning companies in our group, the MK101!”

Miss K went up the stage. Everyone in the room applauded. Then, two gunshots were heard at the scene. People started running, some ducked under the tables. On the floor of the stage lies the unconscious body of Miss K.



MK101 Office

Penthouse, RGC Building

Twelve days away from Fashionably 2040

LOVE IN STYLE

“Here’s your coffee, sir,” Veronica put the cup of coffee down.

After the shooting incident at the Gala Night, Miss K’s brother, Francisco Reyes or Sir Kiko, took over MK101 while she was still recovering. The reason behind the shooting incident was not revealed as the police couldn’t find any lead.

Veronica was still embarrassed after what happened between them in the elevator. She had no choice but to be as professional as she can.

Sir Kiko did not even look at her. “Have you finalized the team for Fashionably 2040? Basically, we have 12 days to pull this off.”

“Yes, sir. Unfortunately, the creatives ran out of creative juices as they gave all their best ideas in the collection that was stolen,” she explained.

Kiko’s eyebrows furrowed. “So, are you saying that we would not have anything to present in Fashionably 2040? You do know how important that is for my sister, right? How could you be so incompetent! Do something about it!” he exclaimed.

You don’t have to be rude, she thought.

“What did you say?” a stunned Kiko looked at her sharply.

Veronica was shocked as well. She thought she was simply saying it in her head, but it ended up as a careless slip of the tongue. But, she could not take it anymore so she faced him and explained.

“You know, what... I don’t care if you are the CEO of RGC. I am so done with your attitude. You’ve been here for just two days, and you did nothing but make my life miserable.

“Okay, I get it. You might still be annoyed with what happened between us at the elevator, but for the record, you were a jerk back then as well,” Veronica continued. “Now, just to be clear, everyone

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here's working so hard for Fashionably 2040 and for Miss K. So, if you like this to be possible, please be considerate and please stop making my life miserable!" Then she stormed out of the office and went straight to her cubicle.

That afternoon, she expected a note that her contract was terminated or even a memo from HR, but both did not arrive. Instead, Sir Kiko summoned her to his office.

"Get me coffee," he said.

"Get me coffee!" she mimicked him sarcastically, imitating his facial expression as she went to the pantry.

"What did you say?" he frowned.

"Nothing, sir. I said I'm gonna make your coffee now," she replied.

He asked her to take a seat when she went back from the pantry. "By the way, K said that you worked closely with her in Fashionably 2040, so I am assigning you as the head of this project. Though you only have three days to come up with a plan to present to the board. Or else, MK101 will not join Fashionably 2040 this year," he explained.

"Wait. I don't understand. Why me? Why not Sir Joaquin?" she asked.

"Joaquin was the rodent who divulged our secret collection to the public. Apparently, he wanted to take the spotlight from K," he explained.

"Does that mean it was not Jennica who betrayed Miss K? How could he do that to his best friend? If that is the case then, I'll do my best."

"You see, sometimes, even family members could do nasty things

LOVE IN STYLE

when it comes to money, career, and love. But in this case, it was her best friend who did so.”

“Don’t worry. I actually have a plan.”

His eyes glistened.



Fashionably 2040

Broadway Plaza

Ramp Night

“You look good, Veronica,” Kiko can’t help but smile.

She was wearing a black halter-top gown with sparkling beads. Her hair was curled and her scent mesmerized him.

She smiled and said, “You, too, sir.”

He was wearing a black tuxedo. His hair was brushed up. *Gosh, he looks like a real-life prince*, she thought.

“Are you ready to win tonight?” he asked.

“I am certain that we will win tonight,” she replied.

It was funny how, after days of quarreling, she found that they have a lot of things in common.

He gave her his arm and gestured for her to hold onto it. Together, they walked the red carpet. Everyone in the event was looking at them. After the photo opportunity, they went to their reserved VIP seats beside the platform. In the opposite side were Madam G and Joaquin. The latter was smirking as their eyes met.

Kiko’s phone rang. He froze. “The courier that would bring the wardrobe was caught in an accident, 10 minutes away from here.”

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She was stunned for a moment. *This could not happen. All those sleepless nights could not go to waste*, she thought.

He held Kiko's hand and ran with him out of the venue and straight to the car. Paparazzi followed them as they left. Kiko drove for approximately eight minutes before they reached their destination. No one got hurt, but unfortunately, some of the clothes were thrown up and damaged. They got everything that they could save and then went back to the venue. Veronica did some alterations to the damaged costumes.

"Let's give it up for, Ms. Veronica Rodriguez, the representative of Mk101!" the emcee announced, and Veronica went up to the stage and started delivering her speech.

"When we say fashion, we usually think of something trendy or 'in' at the moment," she started. "We usually choose what's aesthetic versus what is needed, or what has great quality. It might be because we want to show others that we could conform to the norms of fashion and society. This leads to the loss of identity when it comes to fashion. We are not being ourselves.

"Also, in this fast-changing fashion industry, a lot of companies simply focus on production and profit, not minding whether this could affect the environment or not. In an article that was written by Christine Ro of BBC, fast fashion companies produce high carbon footprints due to the use of materials like polyester, which produces twice the amount of carbon footprints compared to using cotton. Since polyester is synthetic, it also pollutes the environment.

"Having said that, we at MK101 launched the Project: MKUkay! It was derived from the idea of *ukay-ukay*. In this collection, fabric from overruns or disposed clothes were sterilized, reworked, and

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reused,” Veronica said proudly.

The models wearing the collection emerged from backstage one by one. Everyone was amazed at the designs. They were definitely unique.

“To end this, I would like to leave this message with you. You don’t need to follow the trend just to be ‘in’ or fashionable,” Veronica said. “Let us not feed our hunger for trends at the expense of our environment. Also, fashion is not just about how many clothes you have or how trendy your clothes are. Your fashion statement must show who you truly are.”

The audience gave them a standing ovation. Kiko joined Veronica on stage. Overwhelmed with so much happiness, she hugged Kiko tightly.



Reyes Residence

Brooklyn Exclusive Subdivision

A month after Fashionably 2040

“Dang! Necro 1 was Mikael?!” Dave exclaimed. “What a plot twist. Sometimes, villains do come back.” The CEO was watching his favorite sci-fi series, *Beyond the Necropolis*. He got interested in sci-fi 20 years ago.

Margaux...

“Dad, I’m home.” It was Kiko.

“Hi! What’s up?”

“Dad, the man who shot Ikay has an owl tattoo, just like the man

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who killed mom,” Kiko told his father. “I still don’t know what this means, but I will find out soon.”

The CEO let out a sigh and turned off the holo-tv. “Do what you must,” he told his son.



Swan Lake Restaurant

Twin Lake Circle

A month after Fashionably 2040

“Thank you for trusting us at MK101, Mr. Mendrez,” Veronica smiled. It was the 15th deal MK101 closed after Fashionably 2040. Because of that, Miss K, who was still recovering from the gunshot wound, promoted Veronica to Senior Marketing Head of the company. She also handles Project MKUkay!

Veronica was preparing to leave when she saw a familiar figure at the other end of the restaurant where she met the client.

Was that Kiko?

She walked towards the figure and, indeed, it was Kiko. He was with a redheaded woman. Veronica saw Kiko smile at the woman and she felt a pinch in her heart.

I really thought we were starting to have something special between us, she thought.

She was about to leave when Kiko recognized her and called her. She pretended not to hear him, but he walked to her and held her hand.

“H-hi! I just finished talking to a client,” she explained. “I was

about to go home...”

“Wait. Let me drive you home,” Kiko replied.

“No, thanks. I don’t wanna ruin your date,” Veronica smiled bitterly.

“What date?” Kiko looked at the redhead and chuckled. “Are you jealous?”

Veronica cocked her head, hoping her facial expression wouldn’t betray her. “Huh? Why would I be jealous? We’re not even—”

She was not able to finish her sentence as Kiko kissed her on the lips.

“Come on, don’t be jealous,” he whispered. “That woman over there was the secret agent that I hired to find who shot K.”

He took her hand and led her to the table. Kiko introduced her to the redhead. She was undeniably beautiful and—familiar?

“This is Veronica, my soon-to-be-girlfriend,” he said. Veronica slapped Kiko lightly and he chuckled.

“Hi,” the redhead replied. “I’m Ana.”





About The Author

Born with a heart for literature, Sheryl Anne Sanchez Lugtu is a conjurer of literary magic. Her passion for writing flourished as she started exploring the works of 20th-century authors. Amongst her biggest influence are Franz Kafka, Albert Camus, Pirandello, and Michel Foucault.

At present, her works (mostly flash fiction and creative nonfiction) are greatly influenced by her writing mentor, Eros Atalia, and other great Filipino authors like Joel Pablo Salud, Che Sarigumba, Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo, Dean Francis Alfar, Ricky Lee, and Bob Ong.

She loves to inject “innocence and mystery” into most of her works. She graduated with a Bachelor of Secondary Education Major in English and is currently finishing her master’s degree in English Literature at the Philippine Normal University. She dedicated her heart to teaching Creative Writing, Nonfiction, and 21st Century Literature to Senior High School students.



Little Black Dress

By *Jonah Chipeco*

No to LDRs

Ramil: Hi Gorgeous! I like your style. 😊

Sheila: Thanks, Ramil! Uhm... what does a marine engineer do?

Ramil: Same as normal people - work all day and try to end it happy!

Sheila: Haha! I didn't say that yours was an abnormal job!

Ramil: What makes Sheila happy?

Sheila: Travel. Deep conversations.

Ramil: Really?? How deep can I go? 😊😊😊

Sheila: ???

Ramil: Aww... I thought you'd get it.

Sheila: Of course I knew. 😊

Ramil: Great! I think we can swim in each other's thoughts!

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Ramil: I'm here in Palawan, stranded while on vacation. But it's okay—I'm trapped in paradise anyway!

I met Ramil on a dating app soon after creating an account using a profile photo I'd never use in public: me in my lil' black dress with a plunging neckline showing some cleavage. The full-shot photo of myself sitting on a couch accentuates my full hips and long legs. My friend took this picture when I went to a bachelorette party a few months before the pandemic.

I only have one little black dress—that in the picture was a simplified replica of the gown I wore during my prom. Although, yes, other schools would use pink or blue or green. I don't know what went into the head of our principal, organizing a black-themed party. Maybe because she was an old maid and hardly found love.

As gothic as it appeared, prom night was when I felt most beautiful and sexy. So, wearing a black dress for me means tapping into its magic. I remember my dad and brothers staring at me as I went down the stairs wearing my gown. They teased how I didn't look like a witch in a black dress after all. Prom was also the last time my parents were still together. My dad left for Italy to work; soon, we found out he didn't want to return to the Philippines and remarried another woman. I was 16 years old.

On regular days, I'm a t-shirt and jeans kind of girl. I grew up as the youngest with two brothers—so I guess the influence of wearing rubber shoes is something I got from hanging out with them. Simon (Mon) was a pastor and married with two kids at 37. Samuel (Sam)

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became a thriving real estate agent at 34. He used to have several girlfriends at once, but was urged to get his act together when he met his current partner, Camille. And maybe since Mon preached to him about fidelity every now and then.

I recently turned 26, and the decision to return to Iloilo was followed by my breakup with my ex-boyfriend, Jason. We have been together for three years since I moved to Makati. We worked in the same office building, and we met at the elevator one lunch break. After that, everything was fireworks, until he moved to another work location a year later to build his startup venture. Things became busy for Jason when he started his business. He was so busy that his breakup message was sent via text.

Jason: Babe... I hate to say this, but we should end our relationship.

Jason: Times were good when we were together. It sucks when we're in LDR.

[Jason Missed Your Call]

Sheila: Why aren't you picking up my call? Let's talk, babe.

[Jason Missed Your Call]

[Jason Missed Your Call]

Sheila: Was someone sucking your dick while on business trips???

[Jason Missed Your Call]

[Jason Missed Your Call]

Sheila: Is it because you needed more lingerie pictures and I can't comply??

LOVE IN STYLE

“Times were good when we were together. It sucks when we’re in LDR.”

These were the last words I received from Jason while he was on a business trip in the US. I haven’t heard from him again afterward. This was my first breakup, so I can honestly say I didn’t handle it gracefully as I should have.

In the weeks that followed the breakup, I used traffic as an excuse for three days straight, coming late to the office. One time, I also slept overnight at the office and continued working without a shower the next day. I used up all the wet tissues I had to freshen up. On some weekend nights, I skipped going home to mom’s, after fainting at a bar somewhere with some co-workers.

My brother Simon, who moved to Los Angeles with his family years ago, often checked on me after learning about my situation. To ease up how I feel, he would joke that he already filed a police report to track Jason in Silicon Valley. My brother Sam, on the other hand, offered to let me monitor his property rental business in the province.

“Focus on yourself. You don’t deserve a guy who ends a relationship through text!” Sam once said in an angsty and concerned tone.

Mom agreed with Sam’s idea when she saw how heartbroken I was.

“It’s time that you learn to take care of yourself. You’re looking *losyang*¹! Stay in your brother’s condo in Iloilo,” she added.

I admit that living with mom made me skip doing the house chores even at my age. Why? Because she would often do them for me. Somehow, she was enabling my *pabebe*² mood caused by my

¹*Lousy and older than your age.*

²*An adult showing mannerisms of a child or acting like a kid.*

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breakup. So, I left my job as a graphic designer and secretly intended to start my freelance fashion stylist gig at the same time.

* * *

Instead of hoarding clothes to wear to the office, I would save up to eventually buy classic pieces and use them in my collection to start my fashion styling gig. I reminded myself of this goal whenever my former boss compared me to the fancily adorned females from the marketing department we used to work with.

I describe my style as minimalist: I often came to work wearing our company t-shirt, denim jeans, and my reliable pair of sneakers. On Fridays, I would be in a plaid skirt, sandals, and a white t-shirt which I top with a blazer. But underneath the laid-back vibe, I envisioned a more sophisticated Sheila-the-Fashion Stylist.

Staying in Iloilo was the perfect time to pursue my dream. And yes, somehow succeeding and showing a more daring side of me can be my revenge after Jason dropped the breakup bomb.

And so, I flew to the province in March 2020. Returning to the province was nostalgic, especially when my cab passed by the University of the Philippines Visayas. I finally felt like an adult when I opened the door of Sam's two-bedroom unit. I was alone and I had the unit all to myself—no stinky smell from my brothers; no clinking of dishes and pans from my mom's hourly obsession with cooking.

I was settling in and slurping my *pancit molo* when the news about the pandemic was broadcasted on TV. In a few days, the Philippines would be under quarantine and travel would be restricted. Soon after the announcement, my mom video-called to check if I can travel back

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to Manila with them. Sam convinced Mom that he would stay with her instead, insisting that he needed me in Iloilo to check on his long-term rental tenants and collect payments.

“Let’s stay connected via call or chat in the meantime,” Sam assured me that things will be fine.

“I’m not great at LDR, remember, *kuya*³? Get your butt here and visit me whenever you can!”

And so, the world went crazy week after week because of the rising COVID-19 cases in the country. My brother had around five units he was leasing to long-term tenants. Two units were for short-term stays, and were eventually offered to foreign tourists trapped in the province because of the lockdown. There was no space for “new businesses” for me, aka the fashion styling gig I was looking forward to starting. Who needs styling when people can’t even go out?

To console myself from the frustration, occasional boredom, and missing Jason, one of my former female office mates influenced me to create an account on Blender, an online dating app.

This is where we go back to the beginning of the story—my chat with Ramil.

* * *

The Exemption

Back to Ramil and the dating app.

I saw his profile around 11:00 p.m. and intently looked at his picture before swiping right. His tan complexion contrasting his light

³An elder brother

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gray fitted casual shirt showed off his semi-muscular build. I was drawn to the charming smile and dimples of this Indian guy leaning on a bar table. Though the beer bottle in his hand bothered me for a few seconds, I knew I preferred a non-drinker to avoid trouble. But my attention went back to his glistening eyes and catchy bio: “Brain is the biggest aphrodisiac. Witty and smart? Swipe right!”

Alas, we matched!

Usually, I would wait for the guys to message first and don't initiate conversation. Then, in the middle of swiping, Ramil said hi.

Sheila: Let's call the game "this or that". You choose between two options. I wanna see if we're compatible. 😊

Ramil: Game!

Sheila: Beach or mountain?

Ramil: Definitely beach.

Sheila: Living in the city or near the forest?

Ramil: Forest!

Sheila: Money or fame?

Ramil: Let's go for the money.

Sheila: Careerwoman or housewife?

Ramil: Career woman preferred.

Sheila: A woman in jeans or skirt?

Ramil: Haha! Doesn't matter as long as she has a flattering butt.

Sheila: Lace lingerie or silk for your lady?

Ramil: Lace. 😊

Ramil: Wait, did I pass???

Sheila: Looks good to me...

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After playing the word game, we found ourselves moving to another messaging platform and exchanged pictures. The atmosphere felt hot when he showed me a shirtless photo. I didn't know if it was his intention or mine. But everything felt organic! It's like I've known this person for a long time.

"You're good at this," Ramil messaged as we found ourselves engaging in our first sex chat. And yes, I'm getting good at it because of my relationship with Jason. Going back and forth abroad was tough for him as a tech app founder. To make up for the distance, he taught me to exchange dirty talks or encouraged photos of me in my sports bra.

I fell asleep really good that night and found myself chatting with Ramil almost every day that week.

Why am I attracted to guys like Ramil? I thought. It was only after my breakup with Jason that I realized I fancy men who travel around, have a carefree lifestyle, yet still earn good cash—traits that resemble my brother Sam's. Unlike my dad and my eldest brother Joseph, Sam is adventurous and challenges me to do things outside my comfort zone.

I was eight and he was twelve when I was in second grade. We came home from school one day when he noticed my wandering thoughts about our neighbor Patrick. He was my first-ever crush!

"Say hi to him and greet him with a smile one morning!" Sam advised while munching on a leftover donut from my lunch box.

The next day, I followed his advice and felt happy when Patrick smiled back. We ended up playing *piko* that weekend, a game enjoyed by most kids my age back in the Philippines.

Before the pandemic, Sam was my travel companion. Our last trip

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was to Panglao Beach in Bohol. Unlike Mon, his schedule was more flexible as a real estate agent. He also enjoys the long drive as much as I do. Eventually, I went to Makati and moved in with my mom when I decided to find jobs and ventured into graphic design. I admit my social life was limited because of my work—being stuck in cubicles during the day and heading home to help mom with house chores.

Occasionally, I joined some office mates on Thursday nights to play badminton or go to the movies. So, after my breakup with Jason, access to the app was also a playground for me. I felt that the years I skipped getting to know guys were at my fingertips. My estrogen peaks at the site of chests and chiseled abs that sometimes appear in my view when I swipe.

The same week I started chatting with Ramil, I also matched with three other guys I had chemistry with. Each of them ticked different boxes! One aroused my intellect; I had a deep emotional connection with another; and another looked like Tom Cruise.

Can all of them become my boyfriends at once? Virtually, yes, though online relationships do not have labels. Soon, I found myself waking up to sweet messages and calls, and the excitement was beyond what I had with my ex. A guy based in BGC called me ‘babe’; the Cebuano guy called me ‘amor’; and I was ‘queen’ to this gentleman from Baguio.

Maybe you would think of me as *malandi* or would probably judge me up to this point of the story because of the multiple guys I mentioned. However, I didn’t see it that way because my online persona somehow felt in contrast with my real-life personality.

“There’s nothing wrong with flirting. I am a modern woman, and this is how I’ll get to know guys these days,” I told myself.

LOVE IN STYLE

Despite the thrill of chatting with many guys, I've always been drawn to Ramil. One night, on our third week, my day went bad after arguing with one of my brother's tenants. So, I diverted my attention and returned to the drawing board for my freelance styling business. I got a call from Ramil.

Ramil: Hey, it's me. What are you up to?

Sheila: I'm brainstorming about my freelance stylist gig. I can hardly find clients lately.

Ramil: Interesting. We always talk about me but it's the first time I learned you are a stylist! Your bio in the app says you're a graphic designer.

Sheila: I recently left my graphic design job. I knew I'm a fashion stylist when I started drawing as a kid! I liked drawing women in different outfits. The only problem is I haven't practiced it in person!

Ramil: Hmm...so you love clothes? I'm not a fan. The clothing industry is a main contributor of climate change and pollution.

Sheila: Yes, I'm aware of that. Following the fashion trends can leave high-carbon footprint. I believe in slow fashion. Longevity of what we wear is key.

Ramil: When you're traveling or at sea, you can't really pack or bring a lot of those clothes. But it doesn't mean you can't look dapper, right?

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Sheila: You look neat and your built makes it easy for outfits to look good on you.

Ramil: Guys are visual creatures. Of course, looks matter so ladies can wear those fancy clothes. At the end of the day, we'll take it off anyway!

Sheila: LOL!

Sheila: Hey? What if I give you some fashion and styling advice? It's easy to look chic or dapper as long as you master a handful of basics! Then let me know if you get more swipes in your profile with my outfit suggestions.

Ramil: Sure! Maybe you can do this with your other matches, too?

Sheila: We can give it a try! As long as you won't get jealous. XD

I didn't know what had gotten into me, but I was game to try out what Ramil suggested. So, I reached out to my Blender matches and told them I could help in their dating game by giving fashion advice. The BGC expat blocked my profile. He said he didn't chat to make a business deal. I never heard from the Cebuano guy again. I was "ghosted", they called it that. The guy from Baguio was excited about the idea! I showed him some outfits that suit his Korean looks. A few days later, he asked if I could deposit cash in his account or buy him pieces from online stores.

Good thing Ramil chatted me up when I was about to send the Baguio guy a bank transfer. He stopped me with a big NO; he said that

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asking for money is a red flag, regardless of the purpose. He was right. I requested a video call with Mr. Baguio to explain that I can work with whatever clothes he has and give advice on what suits him. But he didn't want to go on video. I eventually learned that when people don't want to answer video calls, they could be a "catfish," a poser, or even a scammer. Soon, the guy pestered me only because I didn't agree to give him cash.

In short, the "Makeover Project" for my Blender matches didn't work. But Ramil gave me another confidence boost to work on what I have: "Walk your talk, dear. If you're a stylist, you can start with yourself and what you have." Ramil appreciated my selfies and challenged me to think less of what others will say when I flaunt my style. So, I started dressing up at home, posing for pictures, and looking chic while lining up for groceries or walking my dog around the neighborhood.

I also had an idea to style up my one little black dress—creating different looks by accessorizing, throwing some cardigans or jackets with it, and pairing it with different shoes. I used part of my savings in the bank and invested in quality pieces online.

A few months passed, and I found myself starting to build my website and my portfolio. Again, the pandemic helped me focus, and the allowance I got from my brother for helping him with his leasing clients supported my day-to-day needs.

Emotionally, I hardly thought about Jason because of Ramil's companionship. I could be falling in love with a man I haven't met. It felt stupid, but it also felt real!

* * *

LOVE IN STYLE

Face to Face

Ramil and I kept chatting for nine months until the quarantine status in the Philippines was lifted. Optimistic that flights would open soon, I asked Ramil about the possibility of meeting in Manila before his flight to Singapore, where the ship for his next job contract embarks.

He didn't answer; instead, he told me that he would be busy for a few weeks and won't be able to respond. Unlike when Jason didn't communicate while he was away for business trips, I felt secure this time with Ramil. I knew he will contact me again soon.

So, I went on with my days, and in one of my trips to the grocery, I chanced upon a high school sweetheart, Ian. Remember the prom night when I was wearing a black dress? Ian was my escort then. I remember that skinny guy in his gel pomade and bow tie. I teased that he looked like my butler. But we danced until we were both wasted on the dance floor, and didn't care about the others.

To begin with, we weren't really close when he asked me to be his prom date. I enjoyed his company, but couldn't continue the friendship because of my family issues at that time. Ian and I parted ways after high school graduation.

Seeing him again after all these years, Ian looked as young, energetic, and bold as he was a decade ago. Thank goodness I let my hair down over my blue top, high-waisted shorts, and sneakers. Here's a tip: the best outfit is confidence, and I looked and felt chic enough that day to initiate a conversation.

"Hey, Ian!" I called out. "It's me. Sheila!"

Wearing his face mask, Ian opened his arms wide and almost gave

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me a hug until he realized he had to keep some distance between us. He was wearing a leather jacket on top of his plain black shirt. I noticed his dark-washed jeans and white rubber shoes, too. My eyes often see these details!

So, Ian asked to meet me at a local coffee shop during the weekend, and he brought my favorite local cookie. *Biscocho* is a crisp, butter cookie or biscuit served as a snack or dessert with coffee or tea. In Spanish, the word means “little cake.” Iloilo was one of the provinces in the Philippines deeply influenced by Spain when it colonized the Philippines. In fact, we received the title of “*La Muy Leal y Noble Ciudad*”, translated as The Most Loyal and Noble City. This was bestowed by the Queen Regent of Spain, Maria Cristina, because of our loyalty during the Philippine revolution.

I enjoyed my date with Ian and realized how the shift to dressing up for myself instead of pleasing a man made a big difference. I was comfortable in my skin, wearing the same black dress paired with white sneakers and a different attitude.

Nights before the date, I reviewed my journal and noted what I wanted in a relationship. It was part of the soul-searching I went through after my breakup. On top of my list are physical presence and proximity. I think a potential relationship with Ian could work out if I stay longer here in Iloilo with him. I was excited to imagine dancing the *bachata* with him when I saw videos on his Facebook profile that he was a dance instructor and now a TikTok star.

Ian was also quite sociable. One photo of him having a backyard barbecue with his family caught my eye, and made me remember why I may have started chatting with guys online: I want a husband. I want my own family someday.

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I remember the pressure of going to reunions, with my college friends asking where my date was or if I had plans to get married. My aunt and uncles from my mom's side kept asking when I would have a baby. Jason was my boyfriend then, but we never really talked about these things.

My chats with the app guys have opened my eyes to other vital factors I may have overlooked: physical intimacy. How come it seems sex matters a lot to men? And why is my body craving it only now after I have experienced Ramil and how he made me feel like a queen?

But all the thoughts of marriage seemed to be ruining my current disposition. Instead of enjoying the moment and thinking how I'll interact with Ian, I was thinking about the future. Even without a proposal on the table, my mind raced into thoughts of eloping.

Fast forward to our date, Ian sounded serious as hell when he asked if I could be his girlfriend.

"I know this is casual and not your ideal situation. But we'll only know each other when we are in a committed relationship," he said.

Ian's questions caught me off guard. I paused for a few seconds before uttering my thoughts. "Oh wow! Are you serious?"

I was surprised because when I learned about Ian being a *bachata* instructor, I honestly thought he was gay. That was partly why I felt comfortable partnering with him during prom. However, I wasn't sure about asking then. And I didn't think it was appropriate to ask now!

Ian responded, "I believe a woman like you should be taken seriously. We are adults. We are both single, and I like you. Do you like me?"

I previously thought I would like the fast route since I'm of age,

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and my past relationship with Jason was slower than expected. But now that I am faced with a guy who seemed 100% sure about me and way hotter than how he used to look in high school, there was still a disparity between my heart and mind. My mind saw this situation as practical to meet my needs. However, my heart didn't seem to be ready.

"I like you. But I don't like being in a commitment without knowing you more," I replied.

Ian paused for a moment with a slight frown. "That's fine with me. Take your time."

Ian and I parted ways in a manner I didn't expect. In my imagination, I was ready to hold onto his arms, with him guiding my waist and chin towards a kiss. But that was only my fantasy. Instead, he gave me a light hug with our face masks on, and I felt stiff as ice.

I went home that night a little frustrated. And while I wanted to tell Ramil what happened, I couldn't. Talking to my friends and brothers about Ian didn't seem like a good idea either.

I wasn't sure about how I acted with Ian. Did I lose an awesome guy? Did a chance for a real relationship slip by me? Returning home from my date, I was in bed when I received a message from Ramil.

Ramil: How are you?

Sheila: Hey... a little lonely.

Ramil: What happened?

Sheila: I don't want to talk right now.

Ramil: Okay. I hope that would only last for a while. If you want to feel better, imagine how it feels when you're in a ship for six months to a year away from people you love.

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Days before this conversation, Ramil opened up about his past relationship, which lasted for two years. Because of the distance, his woman left him for another man.

I could imagine Ramil's situation. And probably, his desire for intimacy was more intense than mine. I couldn't imagine how he managed to stretch his imagination when surrounded by the sea. No YouTube or Netflix. There's a limited internet connection and a couple of books to read. While I was already bored being locked up in a city, he had been dealing with this kind of isolation for years. He could have adapted quickly if he had been on land during the pandemic.

Sometimes it crossed my mind, will Ramil ever get married? Does he want to have a family? Will he ever leave his ship?

I continued chatting with Ramil, and he confessed about his visit to Palawan: it wasn't true that he was single. Instead, he was trying to reconcile and spend a vacation with his Filipina girlfriend. He apologized for not telling the truth and said he had decided to break up with her. Ramil added that he felt comfortable speaking to me about anything. He believed that both of us have more chemistry and compatibility.

Enticed by his words, I found my naked body wrapped in a white blanket while his words led me. He had a glimpse of my body for a few seconds, and I tilted my camera while he pleased himself. Then, while we both shared an orgasm, I let go of the thoughts of whether something serious would come out of this.

I felt satisfied ending the call with Ramil, but a subtle fear grew in my heart that night. My frustration with Ian and sympathy for Ramil made me give in to temptation. I cried that night about how I could

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have lost Ian and how Ramil had lied to me.

So, I affirmed myself before sleeping: “I’m a different woman now, and I will handle this situation better. I will take my time being single and enjoy my blessings.”

* * *

Restart

When I woke up the following day, I heard footsteps in the living room. I pulled down one of the wall frames in my bedroom, preparing myself to hit a potential burglar.

“Aaaah!”

Ready to hit, I stopped myself when a woman walking in red lingerie also screamed when she saw me. It was Camille, my brother Sam’s girlfriend.

I missed my brother’s calls last night, possibly contacting me about Camille’s visit. And yes, the lady had spare keys.

I looked at Camille’s tall frame at about 5’7, her wavy hair falling perfectly by her narrow waist. I can tell that I almost have the same appeal as her, except that she had a bigger cup size. I see and admire the ladies that my brother Sam dates—wearing sophisticated clothes, makeup, and heels. I knew in my mind that dressing up and styling women is something I can do. I haven’t attempted wearing more revealing clothes, even as sleepwear, since after high school. I remember my two brothers would often ask me to go back and change whenever I wore thigh-high denim shorts or a cropped halter top showing my belly button.

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“I’m here for a last-minute conference,” Camille explained. “So, I just threw in random clothes from my closet and packed them.” Camille’s luggage was open on the floor, and her dresses and shoes were all over the couch.

She’s a business coach scheduled to deliver a speech at a conference for a tourism opening. Luck seemed to be on my side this time despite my recent love life dilemmas. I brought out the classic pieces I recently collected from my online shopping. Then, I volunteered to be Camille’s stylist for the event. She agreed and loved my choices. And even offered me a fee!

I dressed Camille in a handwoven *patadyong* wrapped around her black dress and heels. The *patadyong* is an indigenous textile woven and worn as a tube or wrap-around skirt. It flaunts stripe or plaid patterns, often in bright red, yellow, blue, and green. The handcrafted bag made of *hablon*, a local handwoven fabric, matched the look and the theme of the event about tourism.

“Choices speak volumes about us, my dear,” Camille said. “People should care about what they wear and their image, just the same as how we value culture and the environment.”

Camille’s words inspired me and gave me confidence that somehow I was on the right track with my branding as a stylist.

I accompanied Camille to the five-star hotel here in Iloilo wearing a new asymmetric black cutout dress. Camille received compliments for her looks, and I was proud to see that moment when she went on stage. I had a ‘Eureka! moment’ and thought I may have found my niche market among women who must dress up to deliver speeches at conferences and events.

On my way out to get some fresh air during a break, I bumped

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into Ian again, who happened to be working as an assistant hotel manager of the venue. It turned out that the dance instructor job was a sideline that he equally enjoyed as his hospitality career.

Talking to Ian again after our last conversation made me feel comfortable. He apologized and said I was free to make a choice and didn't need to rush into making a decision. Besides, things were falling into place for my career.

I returned to the hall to meet Camille, and she introduced me to potential clients from her circle.

Going home from a busy day, I had a chance to slip a photo of me in my new black cutout dress for Ramil. I sent a chat message after.

Sheila: Hey, Ramil!

Ramil: Hi! Congratulations. I saw your message about your first client early this morning.

Sheila: Did you think about meeting in Manila?

Ramil: Yes. I'll meet you.

* * *

Choices

Ramil called that night and said he wanted to meet me, but not at the time I suggested. He asked if I could wait six months later during his next vacation. I had an option if I wanted to keep in touch until then or totally ditch the idea.

“I'm not good at long-distance relationships,” I replied.

He threw in a laughing emoji.

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Months later, the COVID-19 cases slowed down, and the country was almost back to normal. In between, Ramil and I would chat or do video calls. His sensual tones subsided and ours became a friendlier conversation because we were both busy with our jobs.

Sam flew back to Iloilo and invited Camille, now his fiancé, to live there. My brother Mon referred me to a remote US-based e-commerce job I can do while I continue to work on my career as a stylist. I flew back to Makati to rent a solo place near my mom.

At first, I didn't know if she was happy that I was moving near her place or if she was even looking forward to seeing me. Her food delivery business was doing well and she seemed happy without me.

“*Anak*, come visit me and stay overnight here. Have dinner with me,” she said. Mom invited me to spend time with her, and I decided to stay for a week instead of one night. I missed her and had a chance to have a heart-to-heart talk.

“Painful things happen in life, but things will work out when you learn from the experience.” She gave me this advice, and we recalled what we learned from the past, including my dad and Jason.

That night, before ending the conversation with my mom, I received a message from Ramil:

Ramil: Sheila, I'm joining a company training in the Philippines in three weeks. The hotel venue is near your place in Makati.

Sheila: That's awesome! You're not joking, right?

Ramil: Yes. We can finally meet. 😊

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Two weeks later, I found myself wearing a red silk, spaghetti-strapped dress to meet Ramil at a five-star hotel near my home. No, this look wasn't intended to kill someone with my sensual appeal. After spending some time with Camille and her circle, I got used to embracing my femininity and became more comfortable wearing outfits that I would recommend to my clients.

If there was a version 2.0 of oneself, I was probably in that stage at 28. And yes, I still have that touch of native handmade accessories—a rattan handbag and scarf made of *pinya* fabric.

At the hotel, I walked towards the lounge area and saw a guy with a tan complexion and muscular build, about 5'10. He was wearing black denim pants and black rubber shoes, and a blue coat over his gray shirt. Ramil pulled down his face mask to flash a smile and we hugged when I came closer.

Then he invited me to the hotel cafe while we walked and laughed. I also teased that the outfit he was now wearing was one of my suggestions during our chats.

Our conversation was light and like what we used to have: about travel, culture, fashion, and the environment. Then out of nowhere, while the waiter was serving dessert, he uttered, "I decided to stay in India and build a relationship with my childhood friend. I want to have a family, and it seems impossible to do that when you roam around the world on a ship."

Ramil's words pierced my heart a little. It took me a pause, about 10 seconds, before I reached out for his hand on the table and replied, "You have grown. Pursue what you think will make you happy."

While looking at each other's eyes, I felt how he made a sigh of relief.

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Just when the two of us ended our dinner and got up from our seats, Ian approached our tables to ask, “How was your meal?”

I introduced Ian to Ramil as my boyfriend. And he was. Ian moved to Manila the same time as I did when I returned to Makati. He accepted a promotion as the manager assigned to this hotel chain. Over the last months, I enjoyed Ian’s companionship while in Iloilo and learned about our similar values and direction in life. He asked me again to be his girlfriend, and I agreed.

I didn’t see the need to tell Ramil earlier, because he didn’t ask whether I was still single in our previous conversations. Besides, it was my way of making it even, since he didn’t disclose the truth about his relationship status earlier.

Don’t get me wrong. Ian knew about my date with Ramil, who he was, and what kind of relationship we had. I asked Ian to make sure he was around when we meet so I would feel safe.

“I know now why you’re not wearing the black dress,” Ramil smiled at me and reached out to Ian for a handshake.

The three of us walked together towards the bar and continued our light and fun conversation over beer and cocktails.





About The Author

Jonah has over a decade of experience in marketing, training, and communications. She has worked for international nonprofits such as World Vision and Habitat for Humanity, while freelancing as a content writer for global clients since 2011.

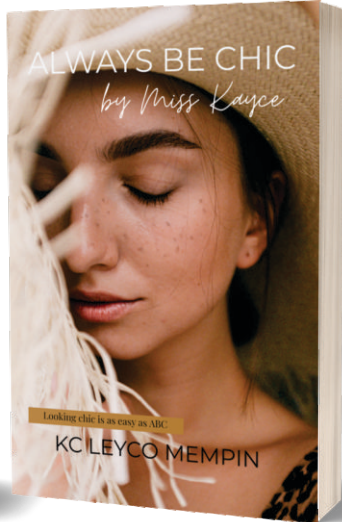
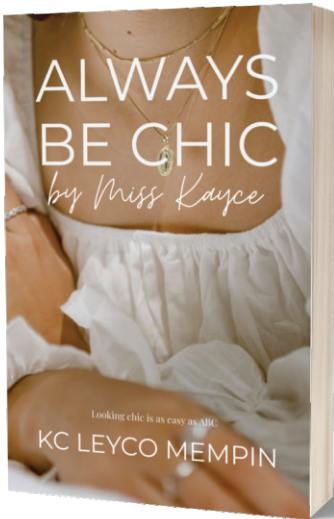
Eventually, she established her brand as a resource speaker at Writing Hacks Academy, where she has delivered more than 100 public seminars since 2016 among organizations, including the Presidential Communications Office.

In addition, media organizations such as Business Mirror, Inc. Southeast Asia, and Marketing in Asia featured her tips and published books. One of the recent she launched with PaperKat Books in 2021 is *Business Writing Bloopers*.

Jonah writes stories and blogs for WriterTravels.com as a personal hobby. Aside from writing, she enjoys painting, shopping for home decors, watching Netflix, or hosting meetups with friends.

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!

ABOUT THE BOOK INSPIRATION

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

*Time to go chic.
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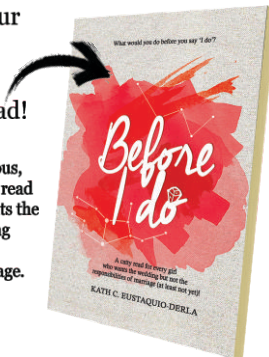
are you

-  Single
-  In a relationship
-  Engaged
-  Enraged
-  Married
-  In denial
-  In between
-  Friendzoned

Regardless of your relationship and Facebook status, this is a must-read!

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

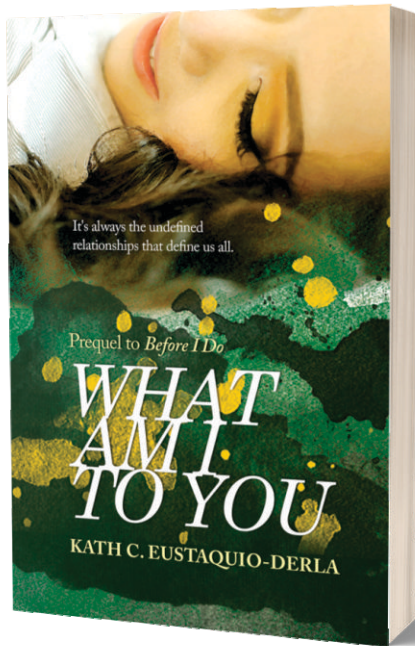


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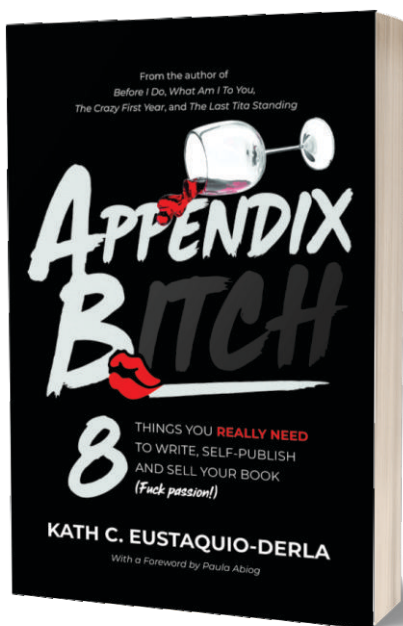
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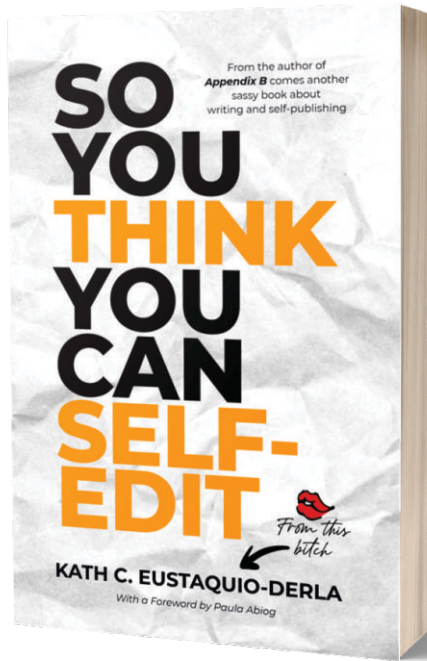
“I just finished reading *Appendix B* several hours ago. It was really a delight to be reading an ‘instructional tool’ full of honest information and tips culled from life experiences. Your realistic take on writing and publishing will help us mentees to modify our expectations and strengthen our desire to finish our project.”

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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.

It is headed by Kath C. Eustaquio-Derla, the Head of Publishing and a registered author, editor, layout artist, book designer, book printer, and book publisher with the **National Book Development Board – Philippines** (booksphilippines.gov.ph). We offer end-to-end self-publishing services to aspiring Filipino authors.

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About the Mentor



Kath believes that anyone can write a book.

But you need a plan.

Fuck passion.

Kath 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 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...

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