

It's always the undefined
relationships that define us all.

Prequel to *Before I Do*

WHAT AM I TO YOU

KATH C. EUSTAQUIO-DERLA



“When you’re inexplicably in love with someone, not even the harshest truth can change your mind.”

Episode 21, What Am I To You

Kath C. Eustaquio-Derla

I have a choice. I can end the call and walk to back into the light. Quite literally, too. From where I stand, I can still see Tristan's back. He knows I stepped out for a while to take a call. I can see him looking over his shoulder every now and then, waiting for me to go back to the party.

I feel my feet inching towards the light, towards the warmth of the people, towards the good vibes, and towards the inspiration that I haven't really felt in a long, long while. But my heart keeps me in the darkness, in the cold Makati air. I feel exhausted from everything that keeps me in a standstill. In the end, I still choose the darkness.

"Hey," I say. "You know why they're pressuring you, right?"

"Because they're dicks?"

"No... because they feel like you have more to give. It's like, you haven't given it your all yet."

"What?" Matthew sounds irritated. "I've been up since five this morning and I haven't slept peacefully in, like, weeks and you think I haven't given it all yet?"

I exhale and choose my words carefully this time. "That's not what I mean, Matthew. They won't pressure you like that if they think you've reached your limit already. I think they still see that you're capable of doing more. That's why they're pushing you further, get it?"

And then, silence. Once again, silence. It's as if I haven't suffered enough silence from his end that the universe feels like I need to be pushed more. Did I just drink my own poison? Is he pushing me further because I haven't given it my all? Is he torturing me because he knows I have more to give?

But I told him the truth. I honestly feel that Matthew is capable of doing more. I know he is meant to do more. And I let my words sink in. I watch the cars again. This time, I hope he listened.

"I really like you, Kit," he says finally. "I don't know how you do it. You make me feel good about myself. Sometimes, I don't know what you keep seeing in me."

Just like that, he makes my heart skip a beat again. And just like that, his spell takes hold of me once more.

"Where are you?" Matthews asks. "Can we meet tonight?"

The prequel to *Before I Do*

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Kath C. Eustaquio-Derla

What Am I To You

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For the *girl* that I was
and the *woman* I have become.

They say memory is subjective.

But how come we remember so much of what we want to forget?

They say you'll fall madly in love only once or twice in a lifetime,
and the rest will be a blur.

I made the same stupid mistake in the same stupid fashion—time
after time, both times just as mad. I've fallen down the same rabbit hole
more than twice already.

What does that make me?

I don't know.

You tell me.



Part 1
MATTHEW



Chapter 1

UNREQUITED

Four years ago. College.

I hate this course. I wouldn't have taken it if it wasn't my major. I don't understand why we have to bring our own typewriters to class when the computer lab is just across the hall. This is Journalism 211 and it's boring as hell.

I hate this course. If not for the cute professor in very tight pants, I would have sat all the way at the back so I can sneak a quick snooze.

"Psst, Kit, wake up," my seatmate, Hazel, nudges me. "Sir Magic Pants is here."

I sit up straight, just in time for Sir Magic Pants to wipe the sweat off his forehead. Today, of all days, he's wearing a tight-fitting pair of khakis that hugs his crotch and buttocks a little too well. His face glistens with sweat but his dark blue, long-sleeved shirt remains free of sweat rings.

"Sorry I'm late," he says. "I came straight from a coverage in Malacañang."

He spends the next two minutes wiping his face with his white cotton handkerchief, probably monogrammed with CK, his initials, as we set up our personal typewriters. I wonder how some people can still look fresh after spending 30 minutes under the midday sun in Manila. Sir Magic Pants is obviously one of those lucky people immune to the nasty pollution of this third world country. It's not fair.

"Hazel," he says. "You're up."

The light goes out and Hazel begins her presentation on the inverted pyramid style of writing. Sir Magic Pants decides to stand on the podium directly in front of where I'm slouching. I spend the next ten minutes lusting after him because, well, what else can I do to pass the time?

I have obviously taken the wrong course the moment I realized there are only three kinds of guys you meet in a journalism class—the gays

(they're fabulous, I like them), the singles (they have every reason to be), and the straight men (most of whom are taken, sorry).

There are no athletes, no gorgeous nerds, no jocks, and no superstars. How will I manage to find a boyfriend in this building filled with boys whose cat eyeliners are fiercer than mine?

Sir Magic Pants refused to sit through Hazel's entire presentation. He begins shifting his weight from one leg to another, giving the class a nice on-stage performance of *le bulge*.

The moment of bliss gets interrupted by the flash of light. When my eyes finally adjusted, I hear the faint collective gasp coming from the mouth of every single girl in class.

"Look who finally decides to join the class," Sir Magic Pants is saying now. "This is Matthew Rondillo, a transfer from Bio."

Of course, everyone knows him. He's not just a new transfer, but *the transfer* from Bio. He's not just a recent member of the Journalism Society, but he's the hot new editor of the university paper.

Matthew is also the president of the literary club whose membership is so elusive that you have to be ready to kill someone if you want to join. Not everyone manages to do so, but everyone gets to buy the ridiculously expensive collection of poems they publish every semester. Including me.

Everyone knows Matthew, but not everyone gets to see his beautiful face in person, especially not for two hours straight in one confined space.

"Take a seat," Sir Magic Pants says. "Hazel, continue."

The faint whispers continue as Matthew passes smoothly behind Hazel, causing her skirt to rustle a bit. With her mouth ajar, my BFF coughs out the last of her recently acquired bashfulness and proceeds with her presentation. To my horror, Matthew sits beside me, on Hazel's chair.

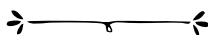
He extends a hand and says, "Hi, I'm Matthew."

"I'm Kit?" I reply, a little unsure if I sound like one of his fan girls.

His face lights up even in the semi-darkness.

"Hey, I know you," he says.

And for once, I feel the world shift.



The world shifted alright.

Somehow, it felt like the entire Journalism department shifted when Matthew decided to change courses. He went from being one of the third-generation doctors in his family to being the first editor of *The Literati* who actually looks and sounds good, not just on paper.

How I came to know Matthew was more of an accident rather than a result of a well thought-out scheme Hazel did.

A few months ago, my BFF brought homemade spaghetti to class. She asked me to go with her to *The Literati* headquarters on the ground floor of the university's main building. Her plan was simple: she'd deliver the box of homemade spaghetti to one of our batchmates who works there as a staffer. Then she'd introduce herself to Matthew and beg for a job.

Hazel's scheme worked out perfectly. Unfortunately, Matthew didn't go to class that day because of a family affair. How I knew this, I'll never tell.

I actually met Matthew Rondillo at the university chapel last semester. I was waiting for my high school best friend to fetch me one afternoon when I saw Matthew enter the chapel, alone. I was sitting in the last pew when our eyes met. He left the church a good fifteen minutes later.

He saw me again the following week. To be fair, I always met my high school best friend at the university chapel way before I knew Matthew went there from time to time. That week, Matthew came to the chapel with someone—a girl who's wearing the same uniform as mine. For a while, I thought maybe he shifted courses because of a girl.

I was sitting at the same spot and our eyes met again just as he left. Only this time, the look he gave me came with a quick, courteous nod.

I didn't go to the university chapel the following week but something was nagging me to go anyway. I wanted to see if Matthew really goes to church religiously. I sat on one of the benches facing the field, just right in front of the church. Twenty minutes later, Matthew arrived and left after fifteen minutes.

This went on for a few more days and it felt like a secret I had to keep from anyone who wants to stalk Matthew for a stint at *The Literati*. Including Hazel.

The class ends with another brief introduction. Matthew would be taking this course as a requirement. He's gunning for the top editorship of the official university paper.

The guys hate his guts, as expected, but I'm pretty sure this course just became more interesting to more than half of the women in class.

I gather my things and walk out of the frigid classroom, as if trying to avoid a conversation I sort of wish would happen.

"Hey," Matthew says when he catches up with me in the hallway. "I haven't seen you in church for a while."

I see several girls stop to look at us. I painfully stifle a giggle.

"I found a new place to hide," I hear myself speak.

"Who are you hiding from?" he asks.

"People," I say, quite unsure if he'll understand.

He lets out a quiet sigh, one that I notice only because I let one escape my lips from time to time. From where I stand, I can see how vulnerable and normal he seems, unlike the Palanca winner and hotshot editor everyone knows him to be.

And after a while, he asks, "Can I go with you?"



I recently heard a rumor about me.

I've always known that there will be people who will hate you because you don't need to belong to a group. Early on, I told myself to be ready for some major backstabbing when I get into college. But I never thought that at 18, I would still have the emotional quotient of a high school senior who got dumped by her best friend.

Whenever I feel troubled, I find solace in books. If not in it, I find peace around it. Matthew and I are on the fourth floor of the Humanities section of the university library, sitting on the floor, resting our backs on the top-to-ceiling shelves.

"So you broke up with your best friend in high school?" Matthew asks, taking a break from *Hamlet*.

"Dumped," I correct him. "That's why I stopped meeting her at church. She goes to a different university, by the way. It was our meeting place on our way home."

"And this is after you defended her from the cheating boyfriend?"

I nod, burying my face in my copy of *Romeo and Juliet*.

He shrugs, probably feeling awkward about wanting to ask more but not wanting to admit that he knows nothing about the complexities of female friendships.

"So you don't want revenge?" he asks a while later.

"I don't know yet," I answer, truthfully.

We spend a few minutes reaching for new books to check out. I choose an old copy of Shakespeare's sonnets.

"Romantic, huh?" he says.

"What?"

"Your choice of literature," he points out to the book on my lap. "You like romance."

I smile. "All the romance that's left in this world are in books. That's why I hide here."

"Do you have a boyfriend?"

And for a split second there, I thought he's hitting on me.

"No," I answer.

"I figure," he says, and that stings a bit. "I've seen you before in Collin's class."

"Collin? Our professor, Collin?"

"Yeah, he and I go way back."

"So that explains the very casual introduction."

"Yeah," Matthew laughs. "I've seen you before that first time at church. You're always with that girl with the pink headband."

"Hazel."

"Yeah, that girl," he continues. "If you're not with her, you're always alone."

"Are you stalking me?"

He laughs again. "No. Just by chance. I find it interesting that a girl like you is always on her own. It's haunting. It's sad. And it's beautiful."

"Not everyone who wishes to be left alone is sad, Matthew," I reply.

"Sometimes, it's the best way to make sure you won't get hurt," he says.

I've never met anyone who can make betrayal sound less bitter, beautiful even. And I've never met anyone who understands the need to be left alone but not alone.

From that day forward, Matthew and I would meet at the university library a few times a week to just talk. We would always choose the partly hidden area near Shakespeare's collection of sonnets and try our hand at writing prose no one would ever read.

The semester ends and Matthew gets the editor post he has always wanted. Professor Collin invites our class to the small celebration at *The Literati* headquarters one afternoon before the semestral break starts. I decide not to show up but I do get a text from Matthew asking me where I am and if we could meet after the party.

I don't reply and soon, the new semester rolls in. I tell myself that I will find a new place to hide during my junior year. I will give myself a fresh start and hide in my new secret place for the rest of my years in college.

But one afternoon after a grueling Taxation class in my senior year, I visit my old hiding place and sit there for a while, hoping to wash all the taxation crap in my head with pages of Shakespeare's sonnets.

And there I find it, a copy of *The Literati's* last issue under Matthew's wing, four semesters too late. A piece of paper is stuck in between the pages of the book I've read years ago. I open it at the earmarked page and the unwelcome sadness wash over me once more. Matthew's last work at *The Literati* is a poem about me.

I cry again. I never told anyone what happened between us all those semesters ago and no one will ever know.

No one.





Chapter 2

REUNION

Present.

Cold. That's how I've always described the night breeze in Makati. Even in the summer, when the city is bursting with life, Makati feels cold, distant. Maybe that's why people who live and work here can't survive without their caffeine and alcohol. Something to keep them warm enough to experience what the city has to offer, if they are brave enough to find it.

For the past four years, the city has been my life source. And by that, I mean my source of money as I jump from one agency to another, trying my best to forget that I have a journalism degree.

Four years out of college and I'm still not doing what I thought I would after breaking free from the four walls of the university. I haven't really figured it out yet. But in the meantime, I have the city.

Four years out of college and I haven't really mapped out my life yet. The only thing I've learned so far is that I can't seem to run away from the people I thought I'd never want to see or hear from again.

The first contact happened last month, during a very busy afternoon at work. I was rushing two poster studies for an up-and-coming lifestyle magazine when my phone vibrated.

"Is this Kit Castille?" read the message from an unidentified number.

"Yes. May I know who this is?" I replied.

"Hi, Kit. This is Matthew Rondillo."

I almost dropped my hot coffee on the keyboard.

At first, I thought it was Hazel playing a bad prank on April Fool's day, but my college BFF reassured me she had nothing to do with the text message.

"So, what did you say?" she asked.

I deleted the message right after I ended the call to Hazel that day. I had no idea what kind of twisted animal would play this card to haunt me as an April Fool's joke.

Two days later, the same number called. I answered the call because I wanted to know which prankster I needed to destroy.

“Hello?” the voice on the other line asked. “Is this Kit Castille?”

And just like that, a hundred summers washed all over me in one go. I really didn't need to ask. His voice was something I knew by heart.

“It's Matthew,” the person on the other line replied.

I had a “drop everything” deliverable that day. My career comes first this time, I figured. Job orders are orders. So I dropped the call.

The third time Matthew tried to contact me was a true test of how long I can stand to torment myself. My boss and I were waiting in the conference room for our client and his editorial team. I spent an infinite amount of time working on the deck that won us this client. The glass door opened and the president of the newcomer publishing empire and his young editor-in-chief entered.

It wasn't fate that made our paths collide once more. It was the winning pitch that gave him access to my mobile number and online portfolio. I would like to say that the rest is history, but as it turned out, it was only the beginning.

Weeks after the successful launch of the new lifestyle magazine, the client treated our small creatives team to a Thai-inspired dinner at Greenbelt 3. My excitement (or fear) to work with their EIC Matthew Rondillo was cut short, two weeks into the project.

No one really knew what happened. No one really asked. One afternoon, a new EIC was introduced and that was it.



So why, after all these years, am I waiting for Matthew again?

Some girls never really learn, do they? A lot has happened. But here I am, immobilized by my illogical fear of letting people know that I know Matthew.

Nobody really found out how close we were in college. At least for a brief period of time. No one knew, not even my bubbly college bud Hazel.

Four years after college and I still don't know why I am affected by the unexplained stigma that is him.

He's late, my inner bitch says. You should have left while you still have your dignity.

"Shut up," I say. "He's on his way."

That's what you said when you had dinner, alone. That's what you said when you ordered coffee twice.

"I know where you're going with this," I say. "I don't want to hear it."

He's not coming.

In an instant, it feels like college all over again. I really thought I would be healed by now. I honestly hoped I would be okay. But I'm not.

I walk around, trying my best to tune out the thoughts inside my head. I remind myself that it's different this time—that it was him who asked me out. I straighten my back. This time, it was him who kept asking me out until I finally agreed to a cup of coffee.

Coffee at 11 o'clock in the evening? My inner bitch is on a roll tonight. *That's a booty call and you know it.*

I shake my head vigorously, which is something I do to remind my inner devil that she's about to tread on very dangerous grounds.

Whatever, booty.

And just like that, she's gone.

I tell myself that I'm a grown woman. And that I'm no longer the whiny, emotionally unstable 18-year-old college student who crumbles at the sight of Matthew Rondillo.

But my inner devil is right. I should have left hours ago. Truth is, I don't even know why I said yes. Haven't I learned my lesson already? Have I not been burned enough?

As I wait for Matthew in the midst of a busy Friday night in Makati, I remember one of the great conversations we had during those good times that felt like an eternity ago.

Four years ago. College.

"I heard some of your classmates hate you," Matthew said. We were at our secret place at the university library with books on our laps.

"And you heard this from whom exactly?" I asked.

"Some girls."

I shrugged.

"So, you don't care what people think about you?" he asked.

I reached for a piece of Chips Ahoy I had in my bag. I nibbled nervously, half afraid to open my mouth and say the mean things stuck inside my chest. I wanted to lash out. I wanted him to bathe in hate with me. I wanted to share things.

"I know people say things about me," he said.

"What things?"

"Haven't you heard?"

"No," I lied. "I don't want to sound rude, Matthew, but I'm not really interested in every piece of gossip about you. I have my own problems."

"So you don't care what they say about you?"

I closed the book and tried to edit in my head what I was about to say. How far can I go without revealing how much of me is vulnerable?

"I feel like people are out to get me," I heard myself say.

And there it was, the fear I've always been scared to verbalize. I finished the rest of the cookie, half afraid to say more after realizing that it was the first time I had admitted this weakness to an actual human being.

"Are you scared?"

"Why do you think I hide here?"

"I get scared, too," he said. "Let's hide here for a while."

And it was the first time he held my hand.

Present.

It's been ages since college, but I still remember many of the run-ins I sometimes wish never happened. Four years is a long time and I hope that by now, I already learned something. But the bits and pieces that make up our untold story are still as sharp as my rage.

Matthew finally arrives, 45 minutes past midnight, two hours after our agreed meeting time. I am both relieved and livid. Relieved for not being stood up and livid for being made to wait this long without a quick phone call.

Well, he did send one text message that said, “Hey, I’ll be late” and nothing else after that. I believe he just assumed I’d still be here. And he was right.

I have always fantasized how I would look and what I would say when I finally meet him by accident. In my fantasies, I’m always wearing this classy, body-tight, little black dress. My long brown hair is curled perfectly with some of the little curls tangling with the chunky gold statement necklace that hangs elegantly on my neck. My red nails are polished to perfection and my classic black heels are as sharp as my hate.

In reality, I have forgotten how I planned it in my head. I’m wearing a white lace blouse, a pair of jeans and flats. My hair smells like cigarette smoke and a lone white gold necklace hangs on my neck.

But just like in my fantasies, the reunion is happening on a cold and rainy night at Greenbelt 3. What surprises me is how Matthew looks now.

He walks towards me in the same quick strides I remember from a lifetime ago. His eyes scan the crowd and finally, they settle on me once more. A quick recognition. A shy smile followed that, even years later, makes me feel unsure.

It’s the same shy smile from years ago, when he first sat beside me at Sir Magic Pants’ class. Only this time, the sparkle that was once so contagious doesn’t reach his eyes anymore.

The guy walking towards me now looks so far from the once dignified EIC with a solidly built frame and an ego the size of Russia. In his place is a guy with a pair of sad, weary eyes.

“Hi, Kit...” he starts, and from the tone of his voice, I can tell that he is searching his brain for some fake apology that can somehow make up for making me wait without even a decent heads up.

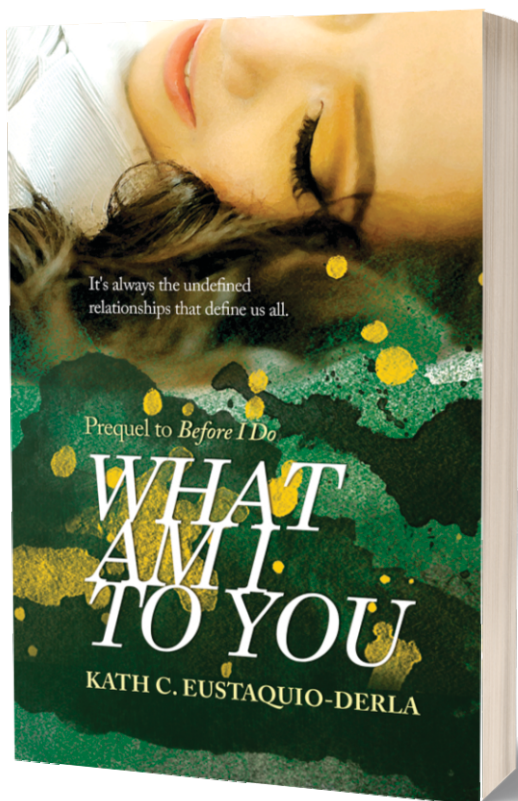
“Hey,” I say.

“Sorry, I’m late. I...”

“Never mind,” I catch myself saying. “Want to catch a movie?”

“Um, sure.”

I’m a grown woman, alright. But both the 18-year-old and 24-year-old



END OF TEASER

P A P E R K A T B O O K S . C O M