

WHIMSICAL E-BOOK CATALOG, JUNE 2022



Whimsical E-book Catalog

June 2022

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Tita Mia!
(Why Can't I Resist You?)
by Rose Tan

[E-book](#) and [paperback](#) available

Tita Mia!
(Why Can't I Resist You?)
By Rose Tan

Trinity is my name. Call me Topsy. I'm a "tita."

I'm also out of sorts and out of shape.

I'm soon-to-be jobless. I got no husband prospect and no savings.

Saan ka pa?

Pero, at least, humihinga pa ako. Unlike a friend of mine who was murdered. I think.

Biglang nangisay. Nilason.

Anong klaseng friend ako kung hindi ko hahanapin ang salarin? Pero mahal ang P.I., wala akong anda, kaya ako na lang ang magpapaka-Sherlock.

Kailangan ko ang tulong ni Juan Patricio “Ty” Simon, my ex-boyfriend. At nauto ko naman siya na tulungan ako sa aking adhikain dahil... ganda ko. Take note, ako raw ang ex na mahirap kalimutan kaya hindi na lang niya ako kinalimutan.

O, `di ba? May asim pa ang himatlugin n'yong tita.

CHAPTER ONE

Sa dinami-dami ng mga kasalang napuntahan ko, wala pa akong narinig na sumigaw ng “Mabuhay ang bagong kasal!” pagkatapos ng seremonya. Pero hindi ko matanggal sa kamalayan ko na isinisigaw iyon ng mga saksi kahit hindi naman talaga.

Mandela Effect? Simpleng maling akala ng nakararami kaya pinaniwalaang totoo? Or totoong may mga parallel universe at walang maling akala, just a glimpse of those other realities?

A glitch in the matrix.

At wish ko lang, mabuslot na ako sa

wormhole at ma-transport sa reception. Nagpapanting na ang mga tainga ko sa gutom. Mabaho na ang hininga ko sa gutom.

Ilang pictures pa ang kailangan?

Nandito ako sa Our Lady of... something church sa Tagaytay. Nakatambay sa may pinto, katabi ng anghel na dawdawan ng kamay. Kasal ni Kurdapya.

Sa wakas.

Sana ol.

Ka-age ko ang bride, si Maybeline Balicbic nee Torres—from Torres to Balicbic, that couldn't be right, right? Pero bagay naman sa kanya ang Balicbic bilang siya ay Kurdapyang tunay na tunay. Wala nang umaasa na lalagay pa siya sa tahimik.

Sa edad nga naman namin.

Parang kailan lang, ako daw ay matalas na, nakakatusok. Beinte-nuebe.

Parang kailan lang, ako ay natanggal sa kalendaryo. Treinta'y dos.

Parang kailan lang, natanggal na din ako sa jueteng.

Aba, pasok pa ako sa lotto, saka at least, nalampasan ko na ang petsa de peligro ng mga kababaihan. Hindi naman bumuka ang lupa no'ng tumuntong akong kuwarenta. At three years later, heto na ako, hindi naiinggit sa ikinasal at hindi na atat maikasal.

Gutom lang. Puchang picture taking, baka makunat na ang mga lumpia. Mas matagal pa sa misa mismo ang piktyuran.

“Dapat kaunti lang ang picture, ih,” maktol ko once again, with dabog of my cowboy boots.

“Aba, bakit?” si Ty, as in “Tie” my shoe. Patricio ang buong pangalan, Patricio Simon. Ex ko. Forty-five going on forty-six. Naka-justi na barong, feel na feel ang pagkaninong sa kasal.

“Para kakaunti ang iiyakang alaala `pag naghiwalay,” `kako. Bitter ako, so? Sobrang bitter na ng bibig ko sa gutom.

“Ang sama *neto*. Dapat masaya ka. Kung si Kurdapya, nakatisod, aba'y makakatisod ka din.”

“Kurdapya ako, gano’n?”

Umatras siya ng isang hakbang palayo, humalukipkip, tumungo. “Ba’t ka naka-boots hindi naman sa rancho ang kasalan?”

“Gusto ko, eh.” Naka-peasant dress naman ako na may purple flowers bilang purple ang motif.

“Hindi ka nag-ahit ng legs,” konklusyon ni Mr. Simon.

“Yon din,” amin ko. Napalinga ako sa altar at. “Yes!” Bumababa na mula sa altar ang bagong kasal. I crossed my fingers. “Wag na kayong mag-stop over, utang-na-loob.” Hinanap ko ang kasama ko, iyong sinamahan ko sa kasalang ito. Nasa may unahang pew pa, nagtse-check ng cell phone.

“Corazon! Huy!” tawag ko.

“Sshh. Naglalaba si Father,” saway ni Ty sa akin.

Nilinga naman ako ng unang aswang, kumaway ng “wait lang.”

“Bilisan mo!” Sabay kaway at smile ako sa bride and groom.

“Hello! Hello!” Bineso ako ni Kurdapya, pinakilala ako sa nabingwit niya. “Mahal, si Tipsy. Friend ko, pinsan ni Cory.”

I held out my hand. “Pleased to meet you, Mahal. Congrats.”

Tumawa sila, oblivious sa sarcasm ko.

“Conrad,” sabi ni Mahal, nag-shake hands kami. “Tara na para makakain na tayo.”

“Yan talaga ang iniintay ko, taralet’s, Mahal.” Umasta akong sasabit sa braso nito, hinaltak ako ni Ty.

“Humanap ka ng sa iyo,” sabi.

Lumapit na din sa amin ang unang aswang. “Puwede na ba kami umuna?” tanong sa photographer na kabuntot ng lahat. “Hindi na pipiktyuran?”

“Okay na po. Sina Sir Conrad na lang.”

Pagkarinig ko niyon, hinaltak ko na si Corazon palabas, kinaladkad ko sa aking nineteen-forgotten na Corolla. 1997 model. Nabili ko noong 2005, bininyagan ko ng pangalang Bitoy. In good condition si Bitoy, original pa ang parts pati kulay, maroon.

Hindi magkandabitbit ng purple gown si Corazon. “Wait lang, madadapa ako.” Maliit lang siya, mga 5’1”, may katabaan. Hindi ko alam paano siya nailagay sa corset type bodice. Tinulungan ko nang isalpak ang magarbong skirt sa kotse pagkaupo niya, sabay tulak ng pinto pasara.

May bumusina pagkaupo ko sa manibela. Si Ty, nasa kanyang Navarra pickup, palabas na ng parking. Sinagot ko ang busina at pinaatras ko na din si Bitoy.

“Ang guwapo ni Ty, mukhang respetado ng barangay, ih,” comment ni Corazon.

“Magkano kaya pakimkim no’n?” tanong ko. Hindi na ako naninibago kay Ty na naka-barong dahil lagi naman iyon naka-barong. Sa bangko nagtatrabaho, bossing ng marketing *chenes*.

“Kukunin mo ding ninong?”

“Ayoko.”

Bumungisngis ang unang aswang. “Bakit naman? Madaming pampakimkim `yon.”

“Kuripot `yon, tange.”

Insert Barbra S. *Memories*....

“*Wag ka papa-kidnap, ha. Sampung libo lang budget ko sa ransom.*”

Kalyo ko lang ang tutubusin ng hinayupak.

“Hindi pa din siya nag-aasawa. Hindi pa din siya nagpakasal do’n sa kapalit mo,” sabi ni Corazon.

“Dahil isinumpa ko siyang tumandang binata. `Wag ka nang humirit ng kung anu-ano d’yan.” Tapos na ang kabanata namin ni Ty. Sarado na ang aklat. At gaya ng mga aklat, bakit ko naman itatapon kung maganda naman ang kuwento? Siyempre ilalagay sa shelf. Friends kami. Not best friends, pero friends.

Friends na hindi lumalabas para gumimik. Friends na hindi naghihingahan ng problema. Nag-uusap lang kami kapag nagkikita, nagbibiruan, gano’n.

“Basta abay din ako `pag kinasal ka, ha. Kahit hindi kay Ty.”

Sinulyapan ko si Corazon, nag-uumalpas

ang boobs sa corset, may ugat-ugat na dahil apat na ang pinasuso. Lima, kung isasama ang asawa. Kung hindi nito pinsan si Kurdapya, malamang, ninang din ang papel nito sa kasalan.

Childhood friend ko si Corazon. As in, magkapitbahay kami sa birthplace ni Manuel L. Quezon. Buong grade school, magkaklase kami sa mababang paaralan. Pagdating sa mataas na paaralan, hindi na kami classmates, nagkaroon kami ng kanya-kanyang tropapips. Kapag bakasyon na lang kami nagkakatsikahan. Ganoon din noong college kami. Lumuwas ako ng Maynila at nag-aral ng Fine Arts. Si Corazon ay Educ ang kinuha, sa state U sa aming probinsiya. Hanggang ngayon, teacher siya ng grade five doon sa kung saan kami nag-elementary.

Nag-asawa siya sa edad na beinte-sais. Hindi ako abay. Apat na ang anak. Nag-abroad ang asawa noong 2011, hanggang ngayon, pabalik-balik sa Dubai.

Si Kurdapya, nakababatang pinsan ni

Corazon. Hindi namin masyadong nakakalaro noong kami ay hindi pa nireregla dahil taga-ibang barangay. Saka parang may sayad si Maybeline. Kaya nga namin tinawag na “Kurdapya.” Gusgusin. Kutuhin. Galisin. Nakakakita daw ng mga duwende at diwata. Hindi ko na siya namalayan sa aming pagdadalaga.

Nauso ang Facebook. Biglang may FR si Kurdapya, in-accept ko na, pamparami ng friends. Kaso mo, aba ay feeling close. Regularly akong tsina-chat. Panay ang like at comments sa posts ko. Natuwa naman ako. Naging totoong friends kami sa FB, lalo na at, hello, pareho pa kaming dalaga, kahit mas bata siya nang kaunti *at* thirty-nine.

Pero the same pa din ang sayad ni Kurdapya—nadagdagan pa. Bukod sa nakakakita ng mga lamanlupa, nanghihilot na din ang lola mo at nagrereseta ng lagundi.

Nasa abroad ang mga kapatid ni Kurdapya. Siya ang taga-alaga sa parents nila at mga pamangkin. Mayroon siyang sarisari

store doon sa amin. Iyon ang buhay niya.

Akalain mong nakatisod ng jowa?

Insert Rico J.

Mahiwaga ang buhay ng tao...

“Malabo,” sabi ko kay Corazon.

“Hindi mo masabi. Ba’t si Kurdapya? Jackpot pa, seaman ang nadekwat. Nagpahilot lang `yon.”

Natawa ako. “Baka kailangan ko din mag-aral manghilot.”

Hindi naman kalayuan sa simbahan ang Rossini’s Garden, resto and hotel. Sa likuran ang reception, may veranda na overlooking. Alas-sais na ng gabi.

Malumbay na ang mga bisitang naghihintay doon, kahit Uptown Funk ang music, *tomguts* na lahat. Dapat na talagang ipagbawal ang photographers sa mga kasalan.

Pumili ako ng mesa. Ako lang. Si Corazon, nasa special table para sa mga abay. Ganoon din si Ty, nasa unahan ang mesa ng mga may pakimkim.

Ang mga pandiwa na gaya ko at isang set

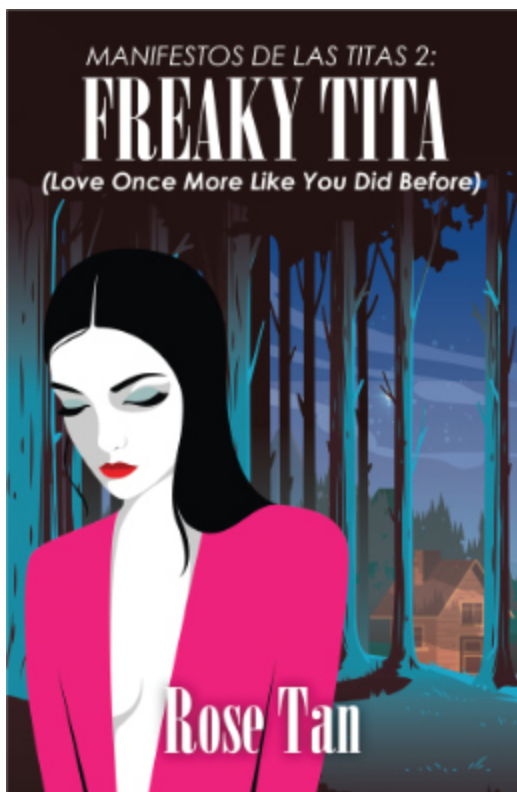
na baso lang ang gift, maki-table na lang kahit kanino. Mesang malapit sa buffet ang pinili ko dahil sa aking karanasan, iyon ang unang mesang tatawagin after ng mga sponsors at abay para kumuha ng lafang.

Biglang umugong ang feedback ng mic, nagsalita ang beking emcee. I-welcome daw namin ang newlyweds. Nagpalakpakan ang mga gutom.

Pumailanlang ang dance tune na hindi ko kilala bilang Zombie ang huling tugtog na aking sinayawan, it wasn't even a dance tune.

Sumasayaw na pumasok sa reception sina Kurdapya at Mahal. I was like, *kelan pa nauso ang ganire?* Kailangan mag-budots ang bagong kasal?!

Ayoko na talagang mag-asawa. *Lintik na 'yan.*



Freaky Tita
(Love Once More Like You Did Before)
by Rose Tan

[E-book](#) and [paperback](#) available

Freaky Tita
(Love Once More Like You Did Before)
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I'm a freak. I'm a creep.
I am a mirror,
broken into pieces.
In those pieces, I see him.
Young, beautiful, as broken as I am.
I can't put him back...

I won't even try...

CHAPTER ONE

Nakatayo siya sa labas ng bintana sa kusina. Nakamasid. Nakikinig. Hindi siya namamalayan ng dalawang babae dahil bahagya pa lamang umabot sa pasimano ang ulo niya. Kailangan pa niyang tumiyad para makita ang dalawa.

“Nasaan si Angelina?”

“M-Marina...”

“Nasaan? Sabihin mo sa akin ang totoo!”

“W-Wala na siya. Patay na si Angelina.”

Hindi! Nagsisinungaling sila! Buhay pa siya! Tiningnan niya ang mga kamay—gumagalaw, nakikita niya. Buhay siya. Ikinaway niya ang

mga kamay at naglulundag.

“Mama! Mama! Nandito ako!”

Nilinga ng dalawang babae ang bintana.

Itinuro ng isa ang kinaroroonan niya. “Si Angelina—”

Pero hindi sa kanya nakatingin. Hindi siya nakikita ng dalawa.

Kung ganoon...

Patay na ako.

Multo ako.

“Sara!”

The woman in the mirror was screaming at her.

“I want to live! Let me live!”

“Leave me alone!” she screamed back. She grabbed the heavy ashtray. “Go away!”

“MADAM?” BUMALIKWAS SI EMMET MULA SA SOFA. MAY NARINIG siyang nabasag. “Madam! Madam!” Kinalampag niya ang kuwarto ni Angie. “Shit.” Sa komedor naman siya tumakbo, kinuha ang set ng spare keys sa drawer ng china cabinet.

Sa pangatlong subok niya nabuksan ang pinto.

“Madam!” Nakatayo sa gitna ng mga bubog si Angie. Iyong salamin sa tokador ang nabasag—o binasag?

Parang walang naririnig ang babae. Bagkus ay pinulot ang isang piraso ng basag na salamin, idinikit sa leeg.

“I’m a ghost. I belong to the dead,” sabi nito sa reflection sa basag-basag na salamin. Basag-basag din ang reflection, parang maraming Angie pero lahat ay hati-hati, parang painting ni Picasso.

Sumugod na si Emmet bago pa mahiwa ni Angie ang sariling leeg. “Madam, gising! Gising!” Hindi niya alintana ang mga natapakang bubog. Hinagip niya ang kamay ni Angie, pinisil niya nang mahigpit sa pulso para mabitawan ang bubog.

Nabitawan naman. Sa kalansing yata niyon pagbagsak nagising ang babae. Napamulagat kay Emmet. Pagkatapos ay sa paligid.

“Oh, shit,” sabi.

“Awwwts!” Napaupo si Emmet sa kama, tsinek ang paa niya. May isang bubog na tumusok sa ilalim ng hinlalaki niya.

“Wha—oh, shit!” ulit ni Madam, nagtinikling sa mga bubog at pumasok sa banyo. Paglabas, may dalang iodine solution, bulak, at band-aid. Tinabihan si Emmet sa kama. “Here. Let me.” Kinuha ang paa niya, kinandong. Walang paki kahit nabahiran ng dugo ang pajama.

“Madam, lumalala na ang panaginip mo. Magpatingin ka na dapat,” aniya. Noong una, pasigaw-sigaw lang. Ngayon, nagbabasag na at gusto nang patayin ang sarili.

“I’m okay. It’s just a dream.” Pinadugo pa nito ang talampakan niya bago pinahiran ng iodine.

“Paulit-ulit naman ang panaginip mo. May alam ako, nanghihipnotismo. Malalaman mo bakit ka nananaginip ng mga multo.” Ang masaklap sa panaginip ni Madam Angie, ito daw ang multo.

“Hindi naman malalim,” sabi nito, tinapalan ng band-aid ang sugat ni Emmet. “There. Matulog ka na lang dito, you need rest.”

“Tabi tayo?” Napangisi siya. Hindi niya mapigilan. Kahit may sayad, napakaganda ni Madam. Mas matanda ito kay Topsy, si Mr. Big Shot Simon ang kaedad, pero parang hindi naman.

“Do’n na lang ako sa guest room. Besides, hindi pa ako makakatulog agad.” Hinagilap nito ang tsinelas na pambahay sa may ilalim ng kama, pagkatatapos ay binuksan ang drawer sa tokador, kinuha ang kaha ng yosi at lighter. “Try to sleep, Emmet. Take off your jeans para mas komportable ka. Ako na ang magliligpit mamaya.” At iniwan na siya sa kuwarto.

I LIT ANOTHER STICK. EMMET’S BEEN BUGGING ME ABOUT MY smoking since the day we met. What a day that was. I was in the window, watching that dark guy watching my house.

All of a sudden, there was this green, noisy Feroza. May something daw ang fan belt—his words.

Kinalampag ang gate. I hurried to open it. Inakbayan ako bigla, iginiya papasok sa bahay. “Pinapunta ako ni Mr. Simon.”

No’ng maituro ko kung nasaan ang lalaking maitim, Emmet simply walked to the guy, grabbed him, took him inside. He moved fast and precise. In my mind’s eye, the scene was graceful, like a dance.

I blew a smoke into the cold night air. The day I quit would be the day I die. What Emmet and the rest of the world didn’t realize was that smoking would not kill me.

Can’t kill what’s already dead.

Patay na si Angelina.

She was just a ghost.

Pinatay ko ang sigarilyo sa ash can, magliligpit pa ako ng basag na salamin. Lumapit ako sa sliding door, placed my palm on the glass.

Emmet said when he first learned of my

dreams, “*Kung talagang multo ka, ba’t hindi ka nakakalusot sa dingding?*”

He could be amusing.

I stared at my dark reflection on the glass door. Hindi naman daw talaga natin nakikita kung ano talaga ang hitsura natin. Reflections lang ang nakikita natin, likha ng mga salamin.

Pero gaano katotoo ang mga ipinapakita ng salamin?

I remembered the very first time I realized that mirrors do lie. I was five. We just came home from the doctor’s because I’ve been sick for days. My aunt took me to her bedroom, picked me up and planted me on the dresser stool. I shrieked at the sight of a pale, emaciated child with wild hair and snot-covered face on the mirror. The child was not me. She said she was Sara. I hit the mirror with my fists.

My aunt yelled at me to shut up and angrily wiped the snot from my face.

Nilagyan niya ako ng face mask.

Darating na daw si Mama, sinusundo na

siya sa airport. Maraming germs galing sa mga tao sa eroplano, kailangan kong mag-mask para hindi ako makasagap ng germs. Sakitin ako. Madaming allergies.

Kung ayaw kong bumalik sa doktor at maturukan na naman, huwag na huwag kong huhubarin ang face mask. She put it snugly on my face. I was relieved. Wala na si Sara sa salamin. May takip na ang mukha niya.

She was gone for good.

Until she wasn't.

She was back. That ugly, disgusting child in the mirror, except she was all grown up now. I could see her now in my shadowy reflection.

“What do you want?” I whispered.

“What do you want?” she whispered back.

“Leave me alone,” I hissed.

“I can't. I am you. Let me live, Angelina. Let me live.” She was crying. “Let me live.”

“Pa-psychiatrist na kasi,” sabi ni Emmet. I realized the door was open and Emmet was standing inside. “Split-type ka talaga.”

“Hindi ako baliw.” I walked back to where I was sitting minutes ago, sa lanai. I sat on a teak chair that faced the small koi pond, crossed my legs, lit another cigarette. “Mga psychiatrist mismo, duda na totoo ang multiple personality disorder. They don’t want to use the word multiple. They prefer ‘dissociative.’ Dissociative Identity Disorder. They think it’s just an offshoot of another psychiatric problem, like borderline personality disorder.”

Emmet joined me. Sa mesa siya naupo. “Basta kinakausap ang sarili, `tapos hindi pa kayo magkaintindihan, ang tawag ng mga lola ko do’n, baliw.” Inilayo niya sa tabi niya ang kaha ng sigarilyo at lighter. “Yosi pa nang yosi, kaya ka natutuluyan. Sabi ni Topsy, nakakaubos daw `yan ng estrogen lalo.”

“Who cares, Emmet? Lahat tayo mamamatay. What about you? You’re supposed to rest pero ayaw mo. Ayaw mong matulog. That would kill you, too, you know? Lack of sleep. Ano ang tinatakasan mong

panaginip?”

Hindi siya sumagot. Tunitig lang sa pond. It was lit by tiny lights the landscape designer placed there strategically.

I watched him. I still couldn't believe how easy our friendship has been. I liked and trusted him the moment I laid my eyes on him and it was now well over a month. Well, he was really good-looking, that probably helped. Bitter truth: appearance matters.

And I didn't think he wanted to discuss his own nightmares—or demons. I could understand that.

“Sara. Sara Cruz,” sabi ko na lang.

Napalinga siya sa akin. “Kara-krus?”

“Sara Cruz. That's her name. The woman in the mirror.”

“May apelyido pa talaga? Na-Google mo na?”

“Marami siyang kapangalan. Masyadong common ang Cruz, pero kahit inisa-isa ko na, hindi siya `yong mga nando'n.”

“Paano mo nalaman ang last name?”

“I...uh... I just know. I must have heard it before. Look, Emmet. She’s not just a product of my mind. She’s a real person. Alam ko. Hindi ako na-split at nag-produce ng ibang identity.”

“Sure ka? Hindi ka naman nagpapatingin?”

“I’m not comfortable talking to strangers about myself.” I shifted in my seat to face him. “I think, somehow, Sara is connected to me and... and she wants me to do things, and I let her. Nakatulong pa nga siya, `di ba? She knew that Aurora was bad news and Sara was right.”

“So, si Sara ang multo.”

Bumuga ako ng usok paiwas kay Emmet. “I know how crazy it sounds. Hindi rin ako naniniwala sa mga multo at ang idea ko sa mga multo, `yong mga nakikita sa TV at pelikula. Lumulutang, lumulusot sa mga dingding. But what if that’s not the case? What if ghosts simply mess with our minds and sometimes, they take over because they

need something done?

“Emmet, what if Sara’s a ghost and she just wants me to find out who she is or what happened to her? I think... she was killed.”

“Ha?”

“Lagi niyang sinasabi, pinatay ko siya at kailangan niyang mabuhay. What if—”

“Totoong pinatay mo siya?”

I nodded.

“At may amnesia ka pa pala? Pinakyaw mo na lahat ang sayad?”

“Hindi baliw ang may mga amnesia.”

“Kahit na. Ang ibig kong sabihin, hindi ka pa kontento sa split-type disorder.” He scratched his head. “Ang gulo n’yo. Sumasapi na siya sa `yo at lahat, hindi pa kayo magkaintindihan ng iniisip?”

“Teofila Ramos,” sabi ko.

“Sino naman `yon? Killer?”

“Hindi ko alam. Ang alam ko lang, bigla `yong pumasok sa isip ko. Hindi ko alam kung saan nanggaling.” Nagluto ako ng afritada kanina, in case Emmet decided to

show up, when the name just popped into my mind. “Then I realized, hindi na ako `yon. Si Sara. I refused to look in the mirror to confront her. Kaya siguro ako nanaginip ng gano’n kanina. Gumanti siya. Ayoko nang tumingin sa salamin.”

“Ah, Aegis.” Siya lang ang tumawa. Then. “Ang sakit mo sa bangs, Madam.” Kinuskos ni Emmet ng kamay ang mukha.

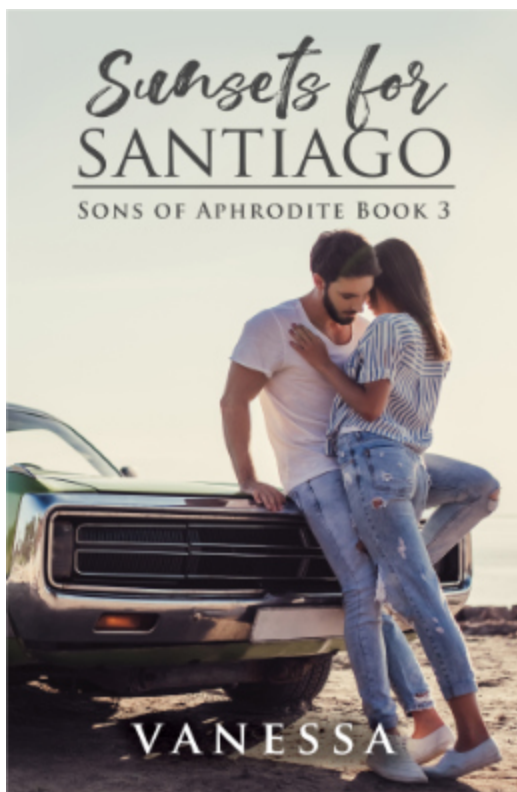
“I-Google mo si Teofila, I’ll get you something to eat.” I didn’t want to bother during the day, part of my refusal to acknowledge Sara. But now, mas maiging malaman ko kung sino si Sara. Para mawala na siya at magawa ko ang kailangan kong gawin.

“Pinatataba mo talaga ako.”

“Kailangan mong kumain nang maayos, hindi `yong kung ano lang makita sa tabi-tabi.”

Magkasunod kaming pumasok sa bahay. The backdoor was open also, nakahara pa doon ang dustpan at plastic na walis. Niligpit

na ni Emmet ang binasag kong salamin.
Ininit ko ang niluto kong afritada.



*Sons of Aphrodite 3:
Sunsets for Santiago
by Vanessa*

[E-book](#) and [paperback](#) available

*Sons of Aphrodite 3:
Sunsets for Santiago
By Vanessa*

Chloe couldn't believe that her father wants to marry Aphrodite Velasco, the woman who made her mother's life miserable. She plans to stop the wedding, but her father finds out. He cuts off her allowance and puts her in the hands of a "temporary guardian" to be "disciplined."

The guardian is Santiago, a fisherman.

She expects to be taken to an exotic location where she would get a tan, enjoy some fresh air, and have lobster dinners until her father realizes his mistake. Pero walang vacation feel ang beach dahil si Santiago ang "warden" niya. Hindi ito nadadaan sa pananakot, pakiusap, at hunger strike. She decides to change her strategy and charm the man instead.

As she does, she discovers a powerful attraction between them that explodes and sets their passion aflame. They become enemies by day and lovers by night. Be very careful, she tells herself as she lies beside him. For he's Aphrodite's nephew and if that woman can ruin her mother's life, she can do that to her, too, through Santiago.

CHAPTER THREE

“Are you ready, Maleficent?” tanong ni Chloe sa Persian cat ng kapit-condo. Hindi niya kailanman naisip na gugustuhin niyang magkaroon ng alaga, pero nang magpaikot-ikot ang pusa sa kanyang mga binti ay na-in love na siya rito.

Ang kapitbahay niya ay isang senior citizen na nagpapagaling bago lumipad patungong Amerika kung saan naroon na ang mga anak nito, maliban sa isang kasama nito sa condo. In fact, the old lady was selling her unit. Kung sana ay mayroon siyang access sa pera ay bakit hindi? Pero wala. Putol pa rin ang kanyang

allowance.

Nagmagandang-loob siyang alagaan si Maleficent dahil aalis ang mag-ina sa araw na iyon at hindi pupuwedeng isama ang pusa.

Chloe had to admit, having a cat felt like having a friend. At kailangan niya ng kakampi sa umagang iyon.

Maaga sa usapan siya dumating. Gusto niyang makahanap ng magandang puwesto sa isang restaurant ng country club. Pero nasobrahan siya sa aga. Brunch ang usapan pero eight o'clock pa lang. How can she possibly sit still in her condo knowing she was about to meet the bane of her mother's life?

Magkakaroon din naman daw sila ng dinner, ang sabi ng kanyang ama, para sa mas pormal na pagpapakilala kasama ang anak ni Aphrodite, pero sa ngayon ay brunch muna. Chloe almost scoffed at her own father because she can tell that he was nervous. Mas maganda nga naman sa pampublikong lugar para hindi siya gumawa ng eksena. As if. Kailan ba siya naging eskandalosa?

Pero hindi ang tipo ng kanyang ama ang magpapakilala sa isang brunch. It was another testament that Aphrodite was the one calling the shots. So baka hindi sa kanya ninenerbiyos ang ama, kundi kay Aphrodite. Anu't anuman, maaga siya para makahanap ng magandang puwesto. Being there first was going to deliver a subliminal message—that she was one step ahead. She hoped the woman understood that.

Nasa polo club siya, sa restaurant sa tabi ng pool. Mamaya pa siya lilipat sa isa pang restaurant kung saan gaganapin ang brunch. She will go there around half past nine. Gusto lang siguro niyang ma-relax bago ang meeting. Anyway, she enjoyed this place. It reminded her of the old days when their family was one. Doon sa lugar na iyon sila palagi nagpupunta noong bata siya.

She wondered if Aphrodite knew and wanted the memories of that gone, too.

Hinaplos niya si Maleficent. Tamad ang pusa at gusto lang na palaging karga niya.

Mahilig din itong kumain kaya medyo mataba. Kailangan na daw itong i-diet kaya limitado ang puwede niyang ipakain.

Umorder siya ng breakfast para sa kanilang dalawa. Wala siyang balak kumain ng brunch mamaya. Iniisip din niya kung ano ang tamang step. Would she let the woman know that she disliked her, or would she pretend that she was okay with her being the newest member of their family? Alin ba ang mas magiging epektibo? Malalaman niya mamaya, kapag nakaharap na ang babae.

Napatingin siya sa pool nang mayroong umahon doong lalaki.

The man took her breath away.

“Oh, God, Maleficent, that man...” sambit niya.

Maleficent seemed to have understood what she meant for she purred.

The man had a perfect body, perfect tan, gorgeous face. Was he a swimmer, she wondered. Siguro nga dahil sa katawan nito. His skin was caramel. And she wanted to

know if it tasted as sweet as it looked. And the bulge between his legs... The man was well-endowed.

Parang gusto niyang magreklamo nang abutin nito ang tuwalya at ipunas sa katawan dahil natakpan ang tinitingnan niyang kagandahan. Such male beauty was what ladies deserved.

It suddenly got hotter there. Buti na rin palang umalis na ang lalaki. But who the hell was he anyway? Noon lang niya ito nakita, sigurado siya. Active naman siya sa social media ng social circle niya at kahit kailan ay hindi pa niya nakita ang lalaking iyon.

Just why? Who was he?

Bigla ay gusto niyang malaman ang lahat ng tungkol ditto, pero paano? Ni hindi niya alam ang pangalan ng lalaki.

Dumating na ang kanyang inorder ay hindi pa rin maalis ang isip sa lalaki hanggang sa maalala niyang iba ang dahilan kung bakit siya naroon. She needed to plan. She needed to strategize. Madami na siyang naisip na

paraan para magawa ang plano. It wasn't easy to stop a wedding. But it was doable.

Dalawa lang naman ang paraan: ang pigilan ang kanyang ama, o ang pigilan si Aphrodite. She was willing to do it both ways if necessary. She was willing to do everything. Dahil kung magkakatuluyan ang mga ito ay malaking strain iyon sa relasyon nilang mag-ama. Higit sa lahat, ayaw niya itong makitang maging isang robot na kino-control ng babae.

She listed all the possibilities while Maleficent was on her lap. Gusto niyang maalala ang lahat ng aspeto ng kanyang mga plano. She wanted everything organized so it's easier. She was preparing for what might be a very long battle. Sino ba namang warrior ang walang solidong plano? She came to war to win it, not to turn her back and accept defeat.

“Maleficent!” tawag niya sa pusa nang bigla iyong lumundag mula sa kanya.

Takang-taka siyang tumayo para sundan ang pusang biglang tumakbo palayo. Hindi nito ginagawa ang ganoon. Tamad nga kasi

ito.

“Maleficent!” tawag niya uli pero lumingon lang sa kanya ang pusa, parang nagpaalam na ngumiyaw, saka tumalilis papasok sa establisimyento.

Natural na kailangan niya itong habulin. Hindi magsu-survive ang pusang bahay sa “wild.” Hindi rin sa kanya ang pusa at ipinagkatiwala lang sa kanya. Noon lang niya nalaman na napakabilis pala niyong kumilos, samantalang kapag nasa bahay sila ay akala mo sadyang nagpapataba lang sa buhay.

Nakita niya itong pumasok sa men’s locker room. Eksaktong may lumabas na janitor na ang sabi ay wala naman daw tao sa loob. Agad na siyang pumasok.

“You bad girl!” sambit niya nang makita ang pusang papasok pang lalo sa loob. Mabuti na lang at alanganing oras at araw. She knew that the locker would probably be occupied much later.

Patuloy siyang sumunod at napanganga nang pagtingin sa kanyang kanan ay nakita

ang isang lalaking nakahubad sa isang cubicle ng shower. Nagkatinginan sila. It was the gorgeous man from the pool!

Biglang bumaba ang kanyang tingin mula sa mukha patungo sa nasa pagitan ng hita nito. How can she not when it was calling her attention! God, he was huge.

“Kumusta?” sambit nito, tonong nakangiti kaya napatingin siyang muli sa mukha nito. The man was smiling. “Ayos ka lang?”

She gasped. How can she possibly stare at a man’s penis like that? At ano ngayon ang kanyang isasagot?!

“Cover yourself up!” sikmat niya para lang mabawasan ang pagkapahiya, saka naglakad patungo sa pusa na noon ay mayroong inaabot na pilit sa ilalim ng bench na nakadikit sa pader. It was probably a mouse. Wala na siyang pakialam. Kailangan na lang niyang makalayo roon. “Maleficent, get over here, you stupid cat!”

Pero hindi siya makalapit sa pusa dahil sumuot na iyon sa ilalim ng bench. Kung

tutuwad siya ay tataas ang maiksi niyang dress.

Napasinghap siya nang makita ang nakataping lalaki na nagtungo sa pusa at kinuha iyon. Ang taksil na Maleficent, biglang nalimutan ang kung anong pilit inaabot sa ilalim ng bench at parang nag-enjoy sa bisig ng estrangherong malaki ang sekreto sa pagitan ng mga hita.

God, why am I still thinking about his penis?!

“Give her to me,” aniya.

“Wala man lang ‘please?’” nakangiti pa ring tanong ng lalaki.

Hindi niya alam kung ano ang isasagot dahil defensive pa rin siya. Para ding hindi seryoso ang lalaki at hindi niya alam kung natatawa sa sitwasyon o natatawa sa kanya. Once again, her stupid self looked below his waist and saw that unmistakable bulge of his crotch.

Bigla siyang napahawak sa noo para takpan ang mga matang naliligaw ng landas.

Kailan pa siya naging ganito? It was almost as if she was a sex-starved person who simply couldn't stop looking at a man's penis. Ano na kaya ang iniisip ng lalaki tungkol sa kanya? At bakit ba kasi hindi ito magsuot ng damit?!

Dumbass. Of course, he can't wear anything here, he's just got out of the shower. Ikaw ang bigla na lang dumating at nanilip. Sukat naalala na naman niya ang hitsura ng bird nito.

“Give her to me, p-please,” sabi na lamang niya. Sa wakas, tumimo na sa kanyang isip na ang tanging paraan para makaalis ng sitwasyong iyon ay ang kunin na si Maleficent, ang traidor na pusa.

Ibinigay naman sa kanya ng lalaki ang salbaheng pusang bahagyang nabasa.

“Oh, my little pussy's wet,” she said.

It was too late before she realized the words that came out of her lips. Napatingin siyang bigla sa mukha ng lalaki at napansin ang pagkislap ng mata nito, hatalang hindi nakaligtas dito ang kanyang sinabi. Thank

God he was gentleman enough not to make a comment about her wet pussy.

She didn't trust herself to speak. Nilagpasan na lang niya ang lalaki at tuluy-tuloy sa labas. She didn't even finish her food. Sa pag-aalalang maabutan na naman doon ng lalaki ay sinabi na lang niya sa waiter na dalhin sa kabilang restaurant ang bill at doon na lang niya pipirmahan.

Pagdating sa kabilang restaurant ay nabigla siya nang makitang naroon na ang kanyang ama at si Aphrodite. The two were also early. Tuluyan na niyang nalimutan ang estrangherong hubadero. She silently labeled him "Big Penis Joe" though.

Ipinakilala na siya ng ama sa girlfriend nito. She was caught off-guard. She wanted to hate herself because she was not prepared. Hindi niya naitago ang resentment sa babae at alam niyang nadama nito iyon, lalo na ng kanyang ama, kahit pilit nitong itinago.

Wrong move, sa isip-isip niya. Because of BPJ, she lost her advantage. Pero maano ba ay

mababawi rin niya iyon. Or so she thought.

Because then her father said, “Chloe, hija, me and your Tita Aphrodite will get married in three months. It’s a simple wedding. You will be the maid of honor, of course.”

“No. Just no. This is insanity,” she said. “How can you do this to Mommy? Over my dead body, Daddy. You need to choose. Me or this horrible woman.” Itinaas niya ang mukha.



*Sons of Aphrodite 4:
A Home for Alexander
by Vanessa*

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A Home for Alexander
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Madaming naging pagkakamali sa nakaraan si Sylvia. Bitbit niya ang mga iyon habang tinatangang ituwid ang kanyang buhay. Nang makilala niya si Alexander ay naging handa siyang gawin ang lahat para lang magtagal sa trabahong alok nito na maganda ang pasahod.

Sa bawat araw kasama ang supladong lalaki ay parang gusto niyang makitang may ngiti ang mga labi nito, alamin kung bakit ito masungit at parang ermitanyo. Pero saradong libro ang lalaki na mahirap basahin, hanggang dumating ang isang bagyo at iligtas siya nito sa kapahamakan.

Alexander takes some time off work to find peace. His mother insists on sending him help, so he hires his own, Sylvia, a local girl.

But Sylvia has some attitude and disrupts the silence he enjoys. She needs to go. Even if she sparks a fire within him that he thought he's lost.

And then comes a typhoon.

As the storm ravages his land, Alexander finds it impossible to keep reminding himself that Sylvia is off-limits. Soon, they discover a passion that would consume them both. A passion that may just destroy what they have individually built from the pieces of their past.

CHAPTER ONE

“I’m very sorry, Mr. Velasco. It will never happen again.”

“I’m sure it won’t because you’re fired.”

Isang singhap ang narinig ni Alexander pero wala siyang pakialam. How many chances must he give this woman? Ang totoo ay naroon lang naman ito sa kompanya bilang pabor sa magulang nito na kakilala ng kanyang ina. Loyal employees. But this woman kept messing up.

“Please give me another chance, sir,” anito, biglang umiyak.

“Just leave,” he said. Tears annoyed the hell

out of him. Imbes sana umiyak-iyak ang babae ay naging seryoso na lang sa ginagawa, wala sanang problema. Of course, crying was a weapon. In fact, it's a very powerful one. Manipulators loved using tears.

Ipinagpatuloy na niya ang trabaho nang lumabas ang babae. Mayamaya ay tumawag ang kanyang ina. Hindi pa man ay nahuhulaan na niya kung tungkol saan ang tawag. Hindi siya nagkamali.

“Why did you fire poor Jocelyn, anak? Alam mo naman na baguhan lang siya kaya ganoon. Please give her another chance. Her parents worked hard for the company. They devoted most of their life to us. We owe them.”

He sighed. “Mom, they're well-compensated for the job they did. Jocelyn obviously doesn't want this job. She's not interested to learn, has difficulty doing the simplest tasks. I've given her enough chances. I'm not going to ask her back as I have before. I'm very sorry, Mom.”

Bumuntong-hininga ito. “When has it become this easy to say no to your mother, Alexander?”

Here we go... Napabuga na lang siya habang nakikinig sa pagtatampo ng ina. His mother was an expert in guilt-tripping him. Not in a bad way though because she had always been there for him and cared about him. Nagkataon lang na nitong huli ay palagi niya itong hindi napagbibigyan sa mga paanyaya. There was even a time when she thought he did not care about her anymore because he didn't have any reaction when she said she was going to get married again.

Isa iyong malaking bagay dito pero walang dahilan para tumutol siya dahil kilala niya ang ina. Hindi ito susugal sa isang alanganing relasyon. Higit sa lahat, kilala niya ang gusto nitong pakasalan. The man was respectable. Hindi rin naman pipili ang kanyang ina ng hindi dahil napakasalan nito. Sa dami ng nanligaw dito sa tagal ng panahon ay hindi naman nag-asawa kasi nga ay mapili. She

loved his father with all of her heart and for her, he set the bar too high. Kaya bakit siya mag-aalala sa desisyon nito?

In fact, he was happy she had finally found a partner in life. Masyado na kasi itong nagiging tutok sa buhay niya at ng kanyang mga pinsan kaya mabuti na rin talaga. He wanted her to stop zeroing on him all the time.

Well, ever since his wife passed away.

“Mom, you know it’s not easy to say no to you but—”

“You do it anyway.”

Napabuga siya. “I’m sorry. I need put my foot down on this. I can’t stand her anymore.”

“Fine. But will you please have dinner with me tonight?”

“I can’t. I have a meeting that would go past dinner. Maybe some other time, Mom.”

“Fine. You take care now, my dear. I’ll talk to you soon.”

Lihim siyang nagpasalamat na hindi na naging mahirap pa ang diskusyon nilang mag-

ina dahil palaging nauuwi ang pag-aalala nito sa kalagayan niya. Of course, he can't blame her. He was her only child. Pero naging matindi ang pag-aalala nito mula nang mabiyudo siya.

Widower. At his age. And he can't move on as quickly as what was expected for someone so young. Ang mga lalaki raw na kaedad niya, iyong nasa thirties pa lang, ay madali nang makakita ng iba.

He had no plans on dating again, though he used to date a lot when he was younger. And then he met Laura, and his world changed. He was very much in love with her. And she was very much in love with him, too, that when his mother suggested a prenup, Laura said she wouldn't marry him without one anyway.

Of course, he was offended when his mother meddled like that because he had no plans to make Laura sign a prenup, thinking that they would never separate. But he was glad when she said she needed to prove her

love for him, and she signed the documents immediately.

They got married and it was a blissful year. Until she got very sick. And she withered away quickly. He took care of her. Nag-leave siya sa kompanya. Salamat sa mga pinsan niya na tumulong sa mga negosyo, maging sa kanyang ina. He made sure that Laura's last days were the best the world can offer.

Sa tagal ng pagkakasakit ng babae, dumating na sa puntong mas gusto niyang magpahinga na ito dahil sa matinding hirap. She said it herself, the pain was not worth the fight anymore. She was skin and bones. Ayaw na nitong magpa-revive. At iginalang niya iyon.

What his mother thought was his lack of acceptance for Laura's death was not true. Bago pa man pumanaw ang kanyang asawa ay tanggap na niya iyon dahil sa tagal ng pakikipaglaban nito. Dalawang taon na araw-araw niya itong nakikitang nahihirapan.

Isang buwan makaraang maihatid sa

huling hantungan ang babae ay nagbalik na siya sa trabaho. Unti-unti ay gumagaan ang kanyang pakiramdam. One day, he needed to take care of Laura's things. And that was when he discovered things about her that made him question their marriage.

He needed answers and they were easy enough to find.

Napatingin siya sa phone nang tumunog iyon. He pressed the speaker button and his secretary said, "Sir, Mr. Emperio is here."

"Send him in," aniya at hinintay pumasok ang isa sa mga manager.

Hindi niya inakala na iinit ang ulo niya sa lalaki dahil matagal na rin ito sa kanila pero malaki ang hinala niyang may ginagawa itong hindi tama. He asked someone to investigate and after two weeks, he fired him. Muli, tumawag ang kanyang ina.

"Why did you fire the man who has worked for us for three decades?! He's retiring in three months!"

"And retiring with stolen money, too,

Mom,” aniya.

“He claims it’s just a misunderstanding. I think it’s true. Bakit niya naman kukunin ang ganoon kaliit na pera kung kapalit ay ang retirement benefits na ilang ulit na mas malaki? Be more forgiving, anak.”

Halos hindi siya makapaniwala sa sinasabi ng ina. Oo at mahigit isang milyon lang naman ang nawawala pero ang nakaw ay nakaw. Kasalanan ba niyang may gambling addiction si Mr. Emperio?

“I’ll tell you what, Mom, I will conduct a full audit. I will not sue him if he pays us back.”

“And his retirement?”

“Gone. He’s a criminal. Would we allow him to get away with it?”

“He’s not going to work anymore, and he needs funds. It’s hard being old, son. You don’t know what it’s like.”

“Mom, please. How can we let these criminals go? Hindi na nga madedemanda, makukuha pa ang benefits?”

“Deducted ang nakuha niya. Like I said, it’s a misunderstanding.”

“All right. I’ll take money from his account, tell him it’s a misunderstanding, and then ask to be forgiven and not sued. Do you think he will show me the same mercy, Mom?”

“Alexander!” singhal ng babae. “When did you become so... so...”

Say it, Mom.

“So bitter?! What is wrong with you? I hate to bring this up again but ever since you lost her, you’ve become so spiteful. Hindi kasalanan ng mundo na maagang kinuha ang asawa mo kaya `wag mong sisihin ang lahat. You cannot live like this, Alexander. I won’t allow it. Take time off to find peace. Hindi ka nagluksa nang mawala si Laura.”

“I did—”

“A month is not enough. You’ve been working relentlessly ever since. It’s been three years, Alex.”

“I’m fine, Mom.”

“You either take a long break or you will get fired.”

Natigilan siya. She can't be serious. He tried to laugh but it sounded forced, because it was.

“You know I'm not kidding. I also don't like how you speak to me now. I'm not going to tolerate it.”

Hindi siya nakaimik. Aminado siyang nabigla rin, nawalan ng preno. Pero hindi ba at justified naman? Ang gusto ng kanyang ina ay huwag papanagutin ang isang taong nagnakaw at malamang ay noon pa nagnanakaw. Sa laki ng negosyo ay hindi mabilis matukoy kung maliliit na halaga lang ang napa-funnel sa ibang department at natatabunan ang mga papeles, libro, at resibo. In fact, just yesterday he contacted an independent auditing firm to investigate. Pero tama ang napansin ng kanyang ina, hindi siya ganoon dito.

Hindi siya ganoong klaseng tao.

He was not a bitter person. He was not

spiteful.

Pero sino ba ang hindi nagbabago base sa nararanasan at nasa paligid nito?

“Alexander?” pukaw sa kanya ng ina.

“I will take a break, Mom.”

“Where will you go?”

“The ranch.”

“Oh, Alexander...” The old lady sounded frustrated. “You know that place is rundown. Hindi ko naaasikaso. Your grandmother is probably turning in her grave, I know, but I just couldn’t take care of it. Why not go to Europe or the Caribbean? Go hiking like you used to.”

“I would prefer to stay in the ranch. I spent my happiest days there,” aniya. Noong bata siya ay doon siya dinadala ng ina. Back in the day, the ranch was well-maintained. Pero nang kinailangang mag-concentrate ng kanyang ina sa mga negosyo sa Maynila ay ipinagkatiwala nito sa iba ang rancho. Hindi naging maganda ang resulta.

She wanted to revive it but every time she

would try, she surrendered even before the battle. Ang determinasyon nito ay palaging nauubos kapag nakikita ang scope ng dapat ayusin. She said it also broke her heart every time. Doon din nito naranasan ang masayang kabataan, noong panahong buo pa ang pamilya nito.

But Alexander's grandparents separated. Iniwan ng kanyang lolo ang kanyang lola na hindi iyon nagawang tanggapin at sa huli ay nagpatiwakal.

"I don't think this is a good idea, Alexander. I'm worried about you."

He sighed. "Mom, I don't have depression. I'm just..." God, how can he even tell her what he felt and what consumed his thoughts when he couldn't understand those things either? Isa lang ang alam niya, hindi siya clinically depressed. Galit sa mundo siguro.

"Just what, Alex?"

"I'm just not convinced that there's a reason behind everything that happens."

"I can't allow you to spend your days alone

in that ranch. You need help. You can't even fry an egg.”

“I can, Mom. I know how to cook. I basically just bake stuff. Pop them in the oven, and they're good to eat. You have nothing to worry about.”

“You need some help. Someone who will stay in the house. Manang Perla is very old,” tukoy nito sa katiwala.

“Fine. I will hire someone.”

Magkabilang kamay ang naihilamos niya sa mukha nang matapos ang tawag. A vacation when he disliked being alone with nothing to do. Hindi niya nagawang sabihin sa ina na ang dahilan kung bakit lalo siyang nagbababad sa trabaho nitong huli ay para makalimutan ang mga bagay na ayaw na niyang maalala pa.

Tama naman ang matanda, puwede siyang mag-Europe, mag-Africa. South America was also one of his favorites. But being outdoors did not appeal to him all that much. Being in a crowd with that emptiness inside of him

made it feel like he was walking with a huge space surrounding him and he can't reach others. And that made him feel like shit. It made him feel sadder, madder, left behind.

Tumayo na siya at inabot ang coat. Isinukbit niya iyon sa braso at lumabas na ng opisina. He headed straight home and looked for his luggage. Palaging may nakahanda siyang ganoon para sa biglaang pag-alis.

It was three in the afternoon. He will be in the ranch by eight or nine. So he left. Nagtaka ang driver niya kung bakit hindi na niya ito pinasama. He didn't need a driver where he will go.

He drove, just listening to the radio. Naisip niyang baka nga makaganda ang bakasyon dahil ngayon pa lang ay parang gumaan na kahit paano ang pakiramdam niya. However, he dreaded the peace, the silence. Ironic, because he can't stand the noise either. Saan nga ba dapat lumugar ang isang tulad niya?

And then it played, "At Last," the song that

Laura chose for their wedding's first dance. He thought it was a bit cheesy, but loved it since Laura did. She said it was the most romantic song she knew.

Sa isang banda, noong panahong iyon ay inisip niyang totoo nga sa kanila ang kanta. Sa wakas, dumating na ang babaeng mamahalin niya at tapos na ang malulungkot na araw. Because before Laura, he swore never to fall in love again. Gusto sana niya ay makipag-date na lang at huwag nang maging seryoso sa mga relasyon. He had his heart broke twice.

The first girl he fell in love with was his childhood sweetheart. Kaklase niya mula elementary hanggang high school. They were the prom king and queen. Hindi lang niya ito nasamahan sa college dahil sa England ito nag-aral, habang siya naman ay sa Amerika.

One day, he decided to surprise her, and he ended up being the one surprised when he saw her in bed with another man. He took that one hard. His first true love, gone.

After five years, he fell in love again. This

time with a model, Estelle. The woman was French, only twenty-one years old. They had so much fun together. Pareho sila nitong mahilig sa adventure. She was also very driven and would do anything to succeed. Mula pa sa simula ay sinabi na ng babae na una rito ang career.

Alam ni Alexander na malayo pa ang tatakbuhan ng karera nito at alam niya rin na maisasakripisyo ang kanilang relasyon sa maraming pagkakataon pero walang kaso sa kanya. He genuinely wanted her to reach the top. Hindi lang niya akalain na gagawin nito iyon sa pamamagitan ng pakikipagrelasyon sa isang creative director ng isang fashion house. All the while, he thought that asshole was gay. Apparently, the sixty-year-old man was bi. He confronted Estelle and she said that it meant nothing to her. By “it,” she meant the sexual relationship she had with the director.

“Alexander, s’il te plaît, it means rien, zero—nothing. Only physical. He is married, also he is having relation with other men. Only sex,

comprende? I only did for career, mon amour. Means nothing. Zero.”

He was disgusted. Parang lumalabas na dapat niyang palagpasin dahil pisikal lang ang relasyon at mayroong “mabigat” na dahilan. He ended the relationship. It didn't seem to bother her at all. It was almost as if he didn't mean a thing to her. She became successful though, and quite rich. The woman slept her way straight to the top and became a supermodel as planned.

Eartha Kitt kept singing “At Last.” Alexander remembered every step, Laura's scent, the sweet smile on her face as they swayed to the song.

Lies. All lies.

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