

*the Vixens*

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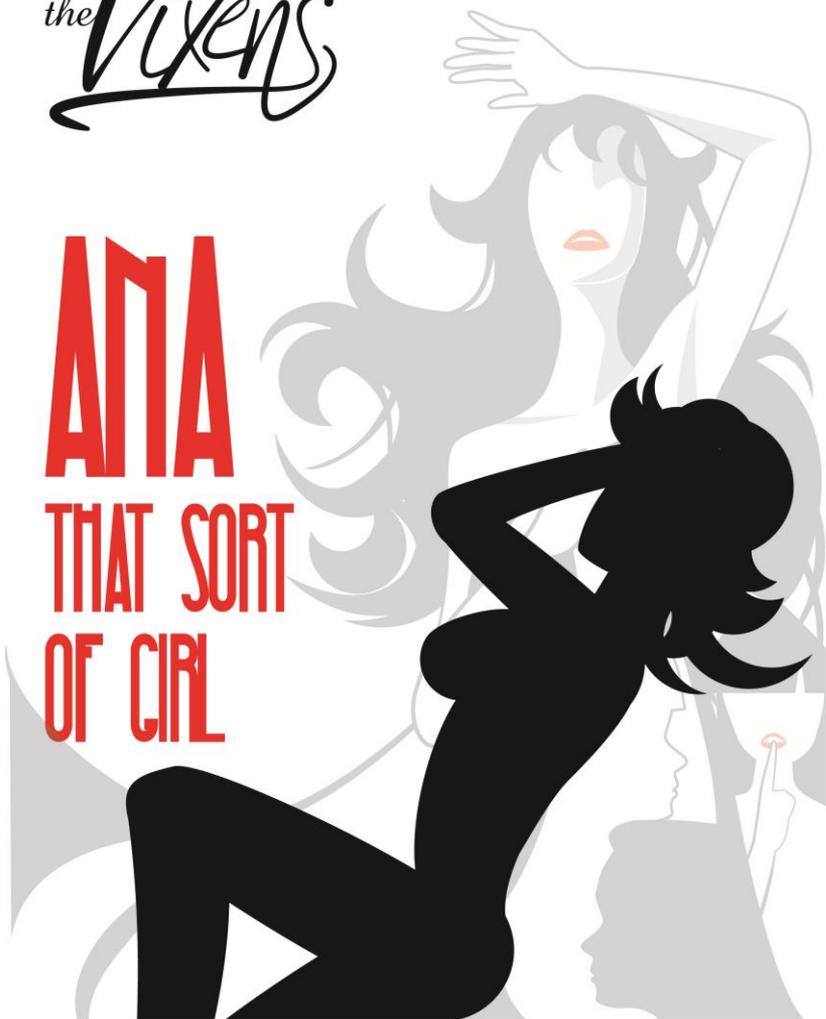
# **The Vixens**

by

**Issa Bacsa**

*the* Vixens

**ANA**  
**THAT SORT**  
**OF GIRL**



He pulled my straps down, exposing my chest, took off my strapless bra and started to savor my two round breasts.

"How lovely," I heard him say over and over.

I held his head as he sucked my nipple and pulled it with his mouth. Then he would say "lovely" before kissing my lips.

My hand searched for him, unzipped his pants and pulled them down. As a nurse, I'm adept at undressing other people. He was already stiff and neither of us wanted to go through the drudgery of undressing. I pulled my panties to the side and pushed my hips against him, immediately undulating like a cowgirl riding a horse on a rodeo.

He held my hips as I moved and besides our breathing we were quiet. We were panting, fucking the pain out of each other.

I grabbed his hair and told him not to come.

"I like you," he said after everything has subsided. Both of us were still locked in each other's arms. "But that doesn't mean..."

"...that we love each other," I said finishing his statement. "This is just one of those one-night stands."

"I agree. No emotions. No strings attached. I like that," he said and kissed me on the lips. "By the way, happy birthday, Ana."

This is a work of fiction. Characters, places, and events are products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, and business establishments is coincidental.

## **That Sort of Girl**

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# 1 . The Reunion

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I CHECKED MY WATCH. It was almost seven o'clock in the evening. The invitation stated that registration had already started at six o'clock. I was still in the cab, stuck in an awful traffic. *Why is it that every time it rains, traffic becomes horrible?* I've been asking that question whenever it rains in the streets of Marcelo, La Isla Colonia.

*But why should I care? I'm not driving, I don't drive, and I hated it.* I also hate being late. The rain and the taxi were making me grumpy, but I was adding to the mess with cruel thoughts and memories of my tumultuous senior year.

"Ana Maria," our principal, Sister Corazon had shrilled at me in her office twenty-five years ago.

Someone must have seen us or Neil's rocking car.

"It has come to my attention that someone saw you hanging out with boisterous boys. Is that true? It's un-ladylike of you drinking liquor until wee hours of the morning."

Sister Corazon was an old nun who maintained her antiquity by forcing old practices down our throats. I recoiled just thinking about her.

I still don't know why my parents insisted on sending me to an exclusive Catholic school for girls. It was one of the oldest schools in Marcelo, founded by Spanish Franciscan nuns back in the 15th century. My teachers were either devout Catholic mothers or old maids; and I thought at first that my parents would send me to the nunnery. To me, that was not cool. *Good old Convento de Santa Clara y el Colegio!*

"Sister, I just went out on a date with my boyfriend, that's all," I had said in a matter-of-fact manner as I straightened out my pleated skirt in front of her. *If there was something I hate at that moment, es que usted y su oficina, Sor Corazon.* I was such a brat back then.

"How old are you, Ana Maria?" she asked, her face stern and stolid.

"I am seventeen, going on eighteen, Sister." *And why do I get this feeling that I know what you're going to say next?*

"But still, you're too young to have relationships. You should know that. Do your parents know about this?"

*Will I answer the question or not?* Either way, Sister Corazon would still call my parents to discuss this matter. "You're behaving like you're not studying in this convent," Sister Corazon continued.

She wanted to use some stronger words just what kind of a lady she thought I was. I was always getting in trouble with boys and that hadn't changed one bit.

I bounced my knee in the taxi, glancing again at my watch. I thought of Sister Corazon's puckered face shouting at me for being tardy.

The rains had stopped and the gate of Convento de Santa Clara y el Colegio was just a few meters away. I decided to walk instead, so I paid the cab driver and dropped off.

I walked along the wet sidewalk, not minding the splatters my gray shoes received whenever I step. The new pair of shoes needs baptism after all. The cool wind freshened up my face as I walked towards the gate. I wore a gray, soft, woolen dress that flowed with the wind, and carried a gray leather shoulder bag over my shoulders. I entered the gate and walked towards the gymnasium, more excited to see my high school than worried.

People were still pouring in the gymnasium as I fell in line to register for our alumni homecoming

dinner. *Good*, I thought, *I'm not the only one who's late*. Women still crowded the registration table. I peeked to check if Sor Corazon was still lurking in the hallways with her wrinkled face and upturned nose. Then a hand landed on my shoulder.

"Good evening," I heard someone saying.

It was a young Chinese lady in her early twenties or much younger. She wore a t-shirt bearing our school logo; her long hair tied in a knot and secured with something that resembled a chopstick. She carried bottled water and a brown bag, looking tired like she had been there since the event started and just took a short break. Her smile washed away the tiredness on her face.

"Let me help me with your registration. What year did you graduate, ma'am?"

"Oh, thanks!" I said. "1987."

It's been a long time. I couldn't even remember when was the last time I've been in Convento de Santa Clara y el Colegio. I could have sent my two daughters to school here but for some reasons, I decided not to. One was the location. I have now moved to Buenvenida, a suburb about an hour ride outside Marcelo; not practical for the three of us.

She turned and looked for a folder among the pile on the table. She pulled a folder marked "1987" and opened it. She handed it to me together with a ball pen.

"Sign beside your name," she instructed.

I took the folder and looked for my name. I saw the maiden surnames arranged in alphabetical order. So I looked for mine under T. T for Torres. There are only two Torreses in our batch, Maria (*Yes, her name is Maria.*) and me. I found her name below mine and saw her married name as Salcedo. She has signed already, meaning she was already there at the venue. I saw my name: Torres as my maiden surname, Ana Maria, then a blank married last name. I signed my name beside it and returned the pen and folder to the young lady.

She smiled as she took it from me and checked my signature. "Aren't you going to update your last name?" I shook my head, "No. I'm a single mom and never married." *And I'm proud of it.*

"Oh," she said as if she had never heard of it. Or she might have thought that an alumna like me would end up like that. *Was it social discrimination?*

She handed me a set of colored cards and explained, "Here are your tickets. The blue one is for the dinner buffet. The red is for the complimentary drink. The yellow is for the raffle, and the green is for the souvenir items. You may drop your raffle ticket at the box located near the stage. The souvenir booth is on the right. Buffet dinner starts at eight. There are booths around that you can check out for other food and beverages as well as other products and services from our sponsors. Enjoy your evening!"

"Thank you!" I said. *Wow! She sounded like a winding toy.*

I left the table and entered the gym. It didn't look like a gymnasium the way I used to remember where we played volleyball and held cheering competitions. A creative hand must have transformed the gym into a grand ballroom. The soft lights and the background music from string quartet made the gym looked classy. The flowers, balloons, and candle arrangement on each table transformed the gym into something elegant. A big stage stood at the far end of the gym with a set of big, brown, shiny tiles that comprised the dance floor in front. The tables and chairs around the dance floor wore white and blue linen. The buffet table stood on the left and I saw waiters bustling to and fro bringing cocktails to guests.

I heard someone called my name. "Ana, over here!"

I turned to where it came from. I saw Maria, my seatmate back in high school. Her long, wavy, blonde-tinted hair flowed over her shoulders. It covered the straps of her velvet black cocktail dress that followed the contour of her slim body. *Oh my God! She looked much more glamorous in person than in magazines.* But then again, she's Maria Torres-Salcedo, the supermodel.

"Maria!" I said as I approached her with open arms. We kissed on each others' cheeks as I continued, "How are you?"

"I'm fine, been busy lately. I just returned from the U.S.," she said. She stepped back to look at me, "My God! You haven't changed a bit."

At the side of my vision, I saw other women staring at us. I turned my head and saw them. I recognized them all. So I approached each one of them, greeted them just like how I greeted Maria.

There was Chloe, the obstetrician-gynecologist, still chubby since the last time I saw her three years ago. She wore a long silk dress full of floral prints; she's still wearing her trademark --- minus the floral headband.

Then Camille, the widow, no longer wearing black as she used to during her mourning years and now sporting a short hairdo. *That's good. At last, she has finally moved on.*

Eva, the housewife, and I've heard became a widow recently. *Oh my God! What happened to her?* She used to be beautiful back in high school but her weight gain (and probably widowhood) masked her real beauty.

The last one was Irene, the executive, tall and slim in her brown blouse and skirt that matches her serious face. *Ugh! She still looks too corporate, and intimidating. No wonder...*

I promised myself to be more civil to Irene than to anyone else this evening. *This is not the time to lose friends, my dear.*

Back in high school we were best of friends, all six of us. We call ourselves The Vixens. Female foxes, sly bitches. But when we reached college, we drifted apart. During the past 25 years, two or more of us (we rarely meet all six) have met on a handful

of occasions. So now, everyone was catching up at our reunion.

Maria motioned her hand for us to sit. She seemed excited to have all six of us in one table. I took a vacant seat and I didn't notice that I sat beside Irene. *Why did I sit beside her? (Sigh) I would remind myself to behave this evening.* Next to Irene were Eva, then Camille, Maria and Chloe. There were four vacant chairs in all between some of us. But these women had put their bags and other things on them that prevented other people to take it. I think they decided to have this table with the ten chairs only for us six. *Just like the old times, huh, bitches?*

"How are you now, Ana?" they asked. "Are you married?" "How old are your kids?" "Where do you work?"

*Wow! They bombarded me with questions. Was it because I was the last one to arrive?*

"I'm doing fine as a manager of a clinic in Buenvenida. My kids now are ages 24 and 18. Single mom," I answered.

"I remember, you're the first one who got pregnant," said Eva.

"Will I be ever late for that?" I replied. "Back in high school, I already knew all about sex when all you guys were still curious about masturbation!"

They laughed.

There are words for women like me but few of them are complimentary. When I think about high school all my memories are about sex. Yes, I was that kind of girl back then. Okay, to be fair I still am that sort of girl. I had my first boyfriend when I just turned sixteen. I'd given up my virginity, but it wasn't until the end of 1986 that I ever made love and brought up lost memories of Neil Gallardo.

NEIL'S FRATERNITY GROUP sponsored a dance party at Zona Residencial. The Zona was an exclusive residential area in Marcelo. My outfit was so '80's. I didn't dance much but I enjoyed the new wave music.

By midnight, the party shifted to a drag race along the deserted road just outside the Zona. Neil and I watched a few races when he whispered that we have to go back into the car.

"Are we going home now?" I asked as I followed him through the crowd holding his hand.

He didn't answer. We reached his car parked on the other side of the street, a few meters away from the crowd. He opened the door to the backseat and let me in. He went inside after me and locked the door. He put his arms around my shoulders and faced me.

"Are you having fun?" he asked. "Yes," I answered and smiled.

I stared at his brown eyes. His thin lips parted into a smile, exposing his set of white teeth and deep dimples. *Oh, so cute, my handsome prince!* I felt nervous but at the back of my mind, I was also excited.

Neil put his trembling hand on my cheek when he moved closer to me. He pressed his lips on mine and I pried his mouth open with my tongue. He responded to my deeper kisses, unable to utter a word. "Shy Neil" started to unbutton his shirt with one hand while his other arm tightened around me. He leaned forward so that he made me lie down on the backseat.

He kissed me all over like someone who was ending his long fasting and abstinence. His aggressiveness made me fall into his rhythm, hungry and passionate. His hands crawled under my blouse, unhooked, unbuttoned everything and peeled clothes open. He stared at my chest, as many foolish boys had done before. But this memory stayed clear because Neil was not clumsy or awkward like the others. He bent down to kiss my skin, as though he were enjoying a good serving of dessert, licking and sucking my breasts. I wriggled free of my leggings, which made me naked inside his car. Then I unzipped his pants and pulled down everything, revealing an erection that embarrassed him but turned me on more.

"May I?" I asked.

He nodded, allowing my experience to take over. I stroked my middle finger along the shaft up until

the tip, and then held it with my hand. I heard his heavy breathing. His hands tightened its hold on me as I continued my hand job and I heard him moan as he became harder. Neil's hand touched my pubic area and his fingers searched for something. I became distracted --- none of the boys had done this before. I widened my thighs apart to give way for his hand. I continued jerking him harder but he couldn't take it anymore and he pushed me back to lie down. He put my legs up and apart and went down on me. By the time Neil came around I hadn't been a virgin for years, but that night I felt new.

His tongue searched and sucked something secret and small. The feeling felt good that my hands didn't know what to hold. My body tensed, my back arched, and my mouth uttered a moan of pleasure. He must have enjoyed what he was doing because he didn't stop. He made love to me. After a few moments, my body gave in to an uncontrollable motion and felt a sudden wetness. I muffled an ecstatic shout and held him tight. We were both panting afterwards. He got up and his eyes locked on mine, wild and bright. I grabbed his hard cock and guided it inside me, teaching him and taking his virginity. Neil shivered and I pulled him against me, more connected and aware of my lover than I'd ever been before. My breasts were shaking; my voice was shaking, too. He moved faster, shaking the car, unable to control his own climax.

"SO HOW OLD ARE YOUR KIDS?" I heard someone asked. I think it was Chloe.

I snapped out of my daydream.

"My first born turned 24 and my second turned 18 last month," I answered. *Were they not listening? I remembered saying that awhile ago.*

By that time, a waiter had been serving us cocktails. I gave him my red ticket and asked for a glass of iced tea.

"You don't look like you had kids," said Camille as she took her glass of vodka mixed with soda and cherry. "You're still slim and sexy."

I smiled and pointed out my abdominal area as I sipped with a straw the iced tea I ordered. "Had a tummy tuck," I said with seriousness. I wanted to see their reaction.

"Really?!" Eva exclaimed. "How much did you spend on that?"

*Oh, the ever gullible Eva!*

"Hey, I'm just joking!" I laughed.

We reminisced about high school life. I had so much fun, I felt young again, carefree and full of life. I've never felt so happy like this before because of what happened to me the past few years that led me to what I was that night.

"The last time I saw you," started Chloe as she put down her glass of white wine, "you were in a relationship with Matteo. How is he?"

I was about to answer the question when Irene interrupted. She pointed to me her hand holding a glass of red wine, "Oh, he was the one before Herbert, right?"

"Whoa!" said Maria, who was about to take a sip of her red wine. "Did I hear it right? You have two men?"

I knew Irene and Maria would react that way. I wouldn't blame them.

"Guys, let me explain," I started. "It has been almost three years ago when Matteo and I broke up. Matteo was the CALM before the STORM. Or should I say, calm AND the storm."

"What storm?" asked Maria as she put down her glass. "Tell us all about it. That would be something juicy."

I smiled and winked at Maria. Among the other five, she was closest to me. We shared secrets back then. But for the past 25 years, we had lost touch due to her modeling career.

"Well, at that time, I thought Matteo was Mr. Right. I almost gave up everything for him only to find out..."

I paused for a while as something entered my mind. *This may be painful for me to tell, but it's over*

*now. Think of it as a catharsis, Ana. No more brooding. I already went on with my life.*

"Find out what?" Chloe asked.

I sighed, "My eldest daughter had a boyfriend twice her age."

"Come on, don't change the subject!" said Camille after taking a sip of her drink.

The others agreed.

"Listen," I said. "I'm not changing the topic."

"Then what?" asked Eva. "You're keeping us in suspense!"

I took another sip of iced tea. Took a deep breath again and said, "How would you feel if you discovered that you and your daughter share the same man?"

## 2 - Matteo

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I SAW DROPPED JAWS, wide-opened eyes and frozen stares. They were speechless for a moment.

"What?" asked Irene.

"You're kidding," said Camille.

"No, I'm not," I said.

"I thought they only happen in soap operas," said Chloe and took another sip.

"I was clueless," I continued as I started playing with the straw in my glass. "His name is Matteo Benjamin, a real estate broker. I called him Matteo.

Susan, my eldest, called him Benjie. Susan never introduced him or showed any pictures of him. She kept the relationship from me because she knew I would disapprove of their May-December affair if I learn about it. But I haven't introduced Matteo to my daughters yet because we were both busy with our careers that time. Also, we don't have any photos to show my kids. You know me, I don't take pictures. Matteo always calls me either at the clinic or to my cell phone. And I haven't picked up a call from him for Susan. So how would I know?"

"Did this Matteo know that you and Susan are both related?" asked Chloe.

As usual, she seemed interested in strange happenings. I immediately remembered her set of *Ripley's Believe It or Not!* books I used to borrow from her.

"No," I said. "He had no idea. He was just damn too good at juggling two or three women at the same time, one of his best traits ever!"

I saw Maria's eyes widened.

"Wow!" she said. "I'd better ask him how he does THAT."

I PLACED THE BEEF LASAGNA inside the oven when I heard the phone rang. So I went out of the

kitchen to answer it. I saw my eldest daughter, Susan, running down the stairs.

"Don't answer it, Mom. That's mine," she said as she ran towards the ringing phone.

Her long limbs took her a few seconds to reach the telephone. She had changed to a sleeveless shirt and shorts after arriving from her on-job training in an accounting firm nearby. She was about to graduate from college and luckily, that firm promised her a job after graduation.

She lifted the receiver, "Hello? Oh, hi! I'm fine, how about you?"

I turned around and went back to my cooking. The smile on Susan's face made me assume that she was in a deep relationship after breaking up with her last college boyfriend. I trusted that she would not follow my footsteps --- being a single mother twice. So far, she was keeping her promise.

I've never met this new boyfriend yet. She still kept the relationship all to herself (*Promise, Mom, I'll tell you about it soon.*) and I didn't want to look too nosy. Anyway, she's grown up now. She knew what's right and wrong.

While having our dinner, I announced, "I'll not be coming home on Friday after work. Matteo invited me to his rest house by the beach in Puerto Montoya and he will just pick me up at the clinic. Can I trust you, ladies, to take care of the house until I get home Sunday evening?"

"Sure, Mom," said Susan as she finished her lasagna. "I'll be home the whole weekend anyway."

"You don't have a date with Benjie, huh?" said my youngest, Elaine, as she poured another round of iced tea to our glasses.

Elaine is much taller than Susan, and athletic. She's in her junior high school year and plays volleyball.

"Oh, so Benjie is his name," I said, smiling at Susan. "Sorry, I keep on forgetting."

"Yeah," answered Susan. "He said he'll be out of town with his relatives from abroad. They'll be on a road trip the whole weekend."

"He didn't invite you?" I asked.

"He did, Mom. But I declined. I hate hanging out with his relatives. I will just feel O.P."

"O.P.?" I asked.

"Out of place, Mom," Elaine explained. "You need to brush up your youth vocabulary," then she winked at me.

"Oh, that's it," I said. I turned to Susan and asked, "Why? Just be yourself and try to communicate with them. Look for something in common to talk about."

"Nah," Susan said as she waved her hand. "They're not the type of people who enjoy long

intellectual conversations. In fact, Benjie would get bored listening to them, I'm sure. He just agreed to drive them to those places because no one would be available to drive the car that weekend."

"So he's acting as the chauffeur," said Elaine laughing.

"Yup," answered Susan. "And I don't want to sit there as a wallflower or a maid-in-waiting, either."

"Okay," I laughed. "If that's the case, you'd better clean your own rooms and do your laundry this weekend. You'll be the maids in your own house."

"WOW!" I EXCLAIMED as I saw the place.

It was already seven o'clock in the evening when we arrived at Puerto Montoya, a beach front west of Marcelo. The bright moonlight shone over the beauty around me.

"It's beautiful!"

I was in awe while going down the carved stone steps. I went down a hill while staring at the white waves howl as it hurled itself to the shore. The scenery gave me the comfort I've been craving for.

"Do you like it?" Matteo asked.

His thick black hair matched his tan skin all over. His medium body build went with his 5'10" height. His square-face complimented the muscular body. He looked like he came out from a cover of a men's magazine.

I nodded. "Nice place you have here."

Upon landing, we walked to a wooden path that led us to a cottage.

"That's the rest house," he pointed to where we're going. He took my hand and led the way. Both of us were wearing white shorts and rubber slippers. He was wearing a printed polo and I was wearing a red halter topped with a loose white over-blouse. I carried my overnight bag with my other hand.

We stopped at the door and he opened it with his key. I looked around and saw a wooden stairs near the door going down the sand. A foot bath stands near the landing.

"Come in," I heard Matteo saying.

He turned on the lights as we entered the house.

"How nice," I said upon seeing the cozy living room with large windows, pieces of furniture made of different kinds of wood. "You must have saved a lot of money to buy this."

"It's worth the investment," he said as he put his arms around my waist. His chin rested on my

right shoulder. "Now, we're all alone," he whispered to my ear.

I placed my right hand on his right cheek and looked at him. "Thanks for this wonderful evening, Matteo."

"You don't have to thank me yet. We still have until Sunday to experience this place, my love."

He made me turn to face him and hugged me.

I hugged him back and savored the comfort of his arms. Then I saw the kitchen at the far end corner which reminded me, "We'd better prepare supper. We haven't eaten yet."

I pushed him to release myself from his embrace.

"Oh, yes," he remembered. "I'd better get the food and other groceries from the car. You may start checking out the kitchen."

Matteo decided to set the dinner table at the patio overlooking the beach. He turned on a gas lamp and placed it at the center of our table.

I prepared a simple vegetable salad, chicken consomme, tuna pasta, and toasted bread. It took me about an hour to prepare all those.

He popped the champagne bottle open upon starting dinner. We sat side by side, enjoying the food, the wine, and the ocean view and sound.

After dinner, we walked towards the beach. I carried my slippers and soaked my feet on the water as we walked on the shore. Matteo held my other hand as we walked together under the moonlight. The waves are getting stronger as the time for the high tide approaches in a few hours. I wished this moment would freeze in time.

SOMETHING INSIDE ME WANTED TO GET FREE. I closed my eyes as I took a shower. I touched my body, imagined that my hands were Matteo's. As the water flowed down my body, the feel of warmth made me long for something I haven't felt for some time. I stayed under the shower for a few more minutes gathering all the feelings I've kept inside.

After the shower, I slipped into my *malong*, a tubular piece of cloth worn by Muslims living in Cimitarra, south of Marcelo. I tied a knot in front just above my breasts to secure it. When I went out of the bathroom, I saw Matteo lying on bed, smiling at me. *Could he guess if I'm wearing something underneath?*

Soft background music filled the room with old love songs from his CD player. I took out a comb from my bag and sat at the side of the bed. I combed my hair waiting for something I was longing for. I felt Matteo's hand by my waist as he

tried to pull me to lie down beside him. So I placed the comb by the side table and turned off the lamp.

I lay down on bed, smiled at him and put my hands on his shoulders. He threw his leg over mine as his warm hand searched underneath the cloth I'm wearing. I continued to smile at him, trying to control myself.

He already knew I had nothing on underneath. So he undid the knot I tied with his other hand. He pulled it down to expose my pointed breasts that have been longing for his touch. His right hand held my left breast and sucked it, while his other hand stroked me down there.

I closed my eyes and opened my mouth to breathe, loving his multitasking. I let go of my limbs, submitted myself to his desires.

He pulled up the lower part of the *malong* and bent down to kiss me there. I opened up my legs apart for him. His hot lips searched and explored, his tongue probed and licked, his mouth sucked my world. I opened my mouth to breathe out soft moans of pleasure trying not to come too soon. He did not stop until I came. Then he took off his pajamas, put my legs apart and put it up on his shoulders as he thrust and inserted his manhood inside me. At first, he moved back and forth in slow motion, savoring each action. He bent over and sucked each of my breast one at a time then kissed me on the lips. I used my arms and legs to lock him inside me. Then he got up, put my legs on his shoulders, and moved faster, and faster, so fast

that I could hear the slapping of our bodies. My breathing followed his rhythm, and together we moaned in harmony until we reached heaven.

THE MOMENTS AFTER THAT were like an endless dream. We were in paradise. A particular '80's song became my last song syndrome that weekend, too. I didn't mind because I thought it was never wrong for me to stay in love with Matteo. But we have to return to reality.

We went back to our respective work Monday morning and not Sunday evening as planned. By late afternoon, I went home feeling tired and beaten. I entered the house and saw Susan on the phone.

"You were at the beach, really? I'd bet you're too tan by now..." I heard her say to her caller which I assumed was Benjie.

I didn't let myself get tanned that weekend. Matteo and I spent most of the time on bed fucking as if that was our last weekend on Earth. We even discussed about our relationship and the possibility of settling down.

He said, "Better ask your daughters first."

He has a point. I haven't introduced him yet to Susan and Elaine. So during dinner, I popped the question.

"It's alright with me," Elaine said. "You deserve to be happy. Also, we don't have a father figure ever since. It may be nice to have a stepfather like him."

"Elaine's right, you deserve it," Susan agreed. "You've been a good mother to us and you haven't given yourself time to find your true happiness."

"Thank you, my sweethearts," I told them as I held their hands with mine. "I'll introduce him to you soon."

So I called Matteo that night and told all about it. He was happy and excited. In fact, he invited me to have dinner in a five-star hotel of my choice. So we agreed to have dinner either at the Riviera or at Hotel Delujo that coming weekend.

I searched my closet for an appropriate dress but I couldn't find one that suited my desire. I had this feeling that he will propose marriage to me on that dinner date so I had to be beautiful. So I went out to shop the next day at the La Galleria, the biggest mall in Marcelo.

After buying a dress, a pair of shoes and a handbag that go with it, I dropped by the drugstore to buy some facial creams. I was about to run out of my day and night creams that I need to replenish them.

As I passed by an Italian restaurant, I saw Susan dining. She was with a man. It might have been Benjie. I went in to check Susan because I sensed something familiar with the man. Susan saw me approaching.

"Mom!" she said in surprise.

"Hi, sweetheart," I said. "I was shopping and I saw you here together with Benjie, I assume."

Before the man turned around, I've heard Susan saying, "Mom, I want you to meet my boyfriend, Benjie."

I froze when I saw him. It felt like cold water splashed to my face.

"Matteo, how can you do this to me?" I asked.

## 3 - Susan

---

"MATTEO?" SUSAN ASKED. "Mom, you mean..."  
I didn't let her finish the statement.

"Come on, Susan, let's go," I said as I grabbed her wrist and pulled her out of the seat.

I led her straight towards the door, shopping bags dangled on my other hand.

Susan was speechless as she followed my lead. I could imagine the shock on her face. I would have understood her denial. I knew it would take time to sink into her mind.

"Ana, wait! Let me explain," I heard Matteo (*or Benjie, whatever*) say.

I didn't want to create a scene and I don't think people in the restaurant noticed it. My mind processed the whole thing at an instant. Hurt twice before, this one wouldn't be something new to me. So the surprise became anger; it might have skipped the denial stage. I assumed it was different for my daughter.

As soon as we went out of the mall, I hailed a cab, but I saw it has a passenger, so I called another. I tried not to look at Susan.

"Mom, I'm sorry," I heard Susan saying. "I didn't know..."

I turned to her. "Does he know?"

Tears were starting to well up in my eyes, controlling them not to fall.

She shook her head, "I have no idea..."

Her tears flowed down her cheeks.

A cab stopped in front of us and we immediately went in. I gave the driver our address and went off. I saw Matteo went out of the mall and tried to follow us. At that point, I said to myself, I will not see or talk to him again.

"OH, MY GOD!" said Irene and shook her head in disbelief. "I'm sorry, Ana, I didn't know that."

"I decided not to tell you that time," I said to them as I drank the remaining iced tea in my glass.

I saw a waiter walked by and I raised my hand to get his attention. He approached me and asked what drink I would want.

"Another glass of iced tea, please," I said.

"Iced tea?" asked Camille while holding her almost empty glass.

"I'm not in the mood to take in alcohol tonight," I said.

Chloe shook her head. "I've never imagined that it would end that way. I thought he was the right man for you. You two looked great back then."

"Well, at least, it was over," said Maria. She raised her refilled wine glass. "Here's to Matteo, wherever he is, he sucks."

We raised our glasses in agreement and sipped our respective drinks.

"So how did your daughter take it?" asked Eva.

THE DAYS THAT FOLLOWED were depressing. Matteo tried to call me up but I ignored him. I don't

want to hear his explanation. He kept on sending me an apology either via email or card with flowers. But after ignoring his attempts, he finally gave up and stopped. I don't know if he did apologize to Susan.

I felt sorry for my daughter. She was more silent than I was. She stayed inside her room most of the time. She didn't report to her OJT work for a day or two. When she returned, she would leave early and arrived late just to avoid me. Whenever we had meals together, she would eat less and would leave the table immediately. I just let her be. She needed space and time to process all these.

Elaine, who was clueless at first of what happened, tried to cheer us up.

"That jerk needs a lot of beating," Elaine said as we were drinking hot cocoa late one night at the dining table. "How could he do that, Mom? He didn't know that both of you are related?"

"I myself couldn't believe it, Elaine," I said holding her hand. "I thought all along that I already met my match."

"I don't know what to say, Mom," she said. "I feel sorry, too, for Susan."

"Me too, sweetheart," I said.

I gave Elaine a hug and kissed her forehead. "I should have been contented to have my daughters. Maybe I shouldn't fall in love again."

"Don't say that," she said. "We love you and we want you to be happy."

"I think it's time I'd better talk to her," I told Elaine.

So I went up to Susan's room and knocked at the door. "Susan?"

I tried to open the knob but it was locked. Then I heard a soft click and the door opened. Susan was standing there, her eyes were puffy.

"May I come in?" I asked.

She nodded and let me in. She returned to her bed and lay down.

I went inside and closed the door behind me. I went to her bed and sat at the side, her back facing me. I put my hand on her shoulder.

"Susan, can we talk now?"

She turned and looked at me. Her eyes were full of tears again. She got up and wiped her tears with a towel she was holding.

I went closer and gave her a tight hug. I kissed her head just like I used to when they were kids. Her soft sobs became cries. Tears began to flow from my eyes, too.

I couldn't imagine that Matteo might have had sex with Susan. Susan might have seen a father figure in him. We were motionless for many

minutes, crying until we couldn't shed tears anymore.

"I'm sorry, Mom," she said after she got herself together. "I didn't mean to hurt you. I just didn't have the strength to tell you that he's old enough to be my dad. I know you'll not like it. But I loved him. I did. I didn't even have the idea that he's your boyfriend. He was kind to me when I first met him. He took me out to dinner once and we started dating from then on. We had sex on our third date and I felt secure with him. He promised me that he will wait until I reach 25 so we could get married."

*How could that be when he's about to propose marriage to me? Or was I just assuming?*

"But after learning about your relationship with him," Susan continued. "...and how you tell us about him, I don't know... I'm too gullible... I trust men too easily..."

"If you could have trusted me, Susan," I said, stroking her back to comfort her, "this should not have happened. But, I also blame myself. Both of you grew up without a father."

Sometimes I wish Neil had been the father to one of my daughters, but we broke up shortly after our romp in his backseat. Neil had moved away and I didn't expect to ever see him again. It wasn't a bad break-up, just the sort of thing that happens in high school. Still, he was a better man than Joshua.

MY PARENTS THREW ME A GRAND PARTY to celebrate my graduation and eighteenth birthday. The party happened at the impressive ballroom of Hotel Delujo in Marcelo and I had invited all my classmates and friends. After the traditional dance and ceremonies, disco dancing and drinking took over. My parents left before midnight and had instructed the hotel manager to take care of our needs until the party was over.

It was already past two o'clock when I asked the cute boy named Joshua to assist me and bring my gifts up to my hotel room. I had a reputation and Joshua knew it. We quickly forgot about the presents. While kissing, Joshua's hand searched for my zipper and unzipped my gown, letting it drop down the floor. He removed everything I had on from top to bottom, including my shoes, caressing my skin every time he removed something. He stood up to kiss me once again, him clothed and me naked.

It was my turn to take off his coat, removed his tie, and everything he had on, just like what he did to me.

But when I knelt down, my eyes fixed at his penis. The alcohol I drank earlier had taken enough effect that I reached in and helped myself. I felt his hands on my head, assuming he liked what I was doing. I started with teasing little kisses. Then I opened my mouth to take him, sucking the tip little by little until I got used to taking him in whole. I

heard him moan, a sound I still live for. I continued to take him with my mouth, and felt his stiffness.

"Wait," he said.

He pulled me up. He carried me towards the bed and lay me down. He straddled over me, but I pushed him towards the side.

"You lie down," I said. "Let's play a game."

I was tipsy but laughing. I flung my legs over him put my hands on his shoulder.

"Don't move."

I held on to the bed board and moved up, positioning my cunt over his face.

"Now, catch!"

I placed my cunt over his lips and immediately lifted myself up, brushing his lips on my cunt for only a second. I repeated the maneuver and laughed.

He laughed, too. Unable to take my teasing, he grabbed my hips and pulled me down, he pressed his lips on my cunt and I gave a shout. He didn't remove his lips. He continued kissing and sucking me for so long that I tightened my grip on the bed board, my body tensed and my body arched as I gave another moan. I came until I was panting.

Then we laughed and rolled on the bed, fucking and shouting like the drunken teenagers we were. At the time, I thought it was hilarious.

A few weeks after our casual fling I told Joshua the bad news.

"Joshua, I think I'm pregnant," I said.

"How could you be so sure it's mine?" Joshua asked.

I slapped his face.

"So what do you expect me to do, to marry you?" he said. "Ana, you know I can't do that. My parents will stop sending me to school once they learn about this."

Exactly twenty-five years ago, after Joshua left me and all my friends went off to college, I went on with my pregnancy alone. My parents were mad at me. I couldn't bear their side comments whenever they saw me hanging around the house with a growing belly. I decided to leave them and looked for a place to stay.

I stayed with some of the Vixens, trying to look for a job even though I was pregnant. I gave birth in a public health center, a puericulture. I used my earnings, plus contributions from my good friends, to pay the bill.

My parents learned about my situation, and maybe with some pushing from my Vixen friends, they finally asked me to return home. They saw

baby Susan and they felt joy upon seeing her. We have forgiven each other and everything went well with my family after that.

But being a mother put a wedge between me and the Vixens who were all still just college girls. I couldn't relate to them on matters of motherhood. Only when Susan turned one and a half did my parents let me finish my college course.

After I passed the licensure examination for nurses, a private hospital hired me and assigned in the Intensive Care Unit. That was when a medical intern named Raffy took interest in me and we went out a few times. I doubted the Vixens knew about this.

His parents disapproved of our relationship so we decided to lie low and meet secretly. This went on for months with clandestine meetings and thrilling sex in a motel room, or in his car. I still love having sex at the backseat of a car.

One time, we were both in the night shift and I was all alone in the nurses' quarters taking a break when I felt someone behind me.

Raffy grabbed my waist, put his right hand on my mouth and whispered in my ears, "Don't move."

He took my right hand and put it on his erection. "I want you now," he said.

He pulled my scrub pants suit down including my underwear and asked me to bend over. His left hand searched for my breasts, touched and

squeezed it under the scrub suit blouse. I put my hands on the sides of the table to support myself as I felt him inside me. He started to thrust back and forth while his right hand stroked my clitoris. I opened my mouth and tried not to utter a sound. He continued to move faster until both of us climaxed into an orgasm. I panted as I freed my hand of its grip from the table. He panted, too, in exhaustion.

"I'm sorry, I wasn't able to withdraw," he had said.

At that time I didn't mind. I had never had sex at work before then and it was a new, exciting feeling. Only a few weeks ago, I shook the shocks right out of a gurney while fucking after our work shift. Some things never change, except this time I used protection.

Soon Raffy passed the licensure examination for doctors, and left for the US. When I found out that I was pregnant, it was too late and I felt like a fool. I'd heard from a common friend that he got married to someone his parents approved of. Hurt again, I didn't have the strength to tell my parents about this second mistake.

After the incident with Raffy, instead of being angry my parents had said, "Even if you fall many times, you're still our daughter, Ana."

So I gave birth to Elaine and promised myself to be a good mother to both of them. I worked hard to make ends meet for the three of us. It was

comforting to learn that my parents were there to support me. My hard work paid off when I became a clinic manager that gave me more benefits and higher salary. I was able to buy a house and lot in Buenvenida and send my daughters to a private school.

MY KNEE STOPPED JIGGLING and I grinned. Elaine wasn't a mistake and neither was Susan. They were surprises, yes, but good ones.

Elaine even met Raffy when she turned 12, though Susan hasn't been so lucky with Joshua. He doesn't want to see her, the asshole. But Elaine and her father are communicating now. Raffy is still in the U.S. He's divorced from the first wife and is now married to an American named Meredith. He promised Elaine that he will be here middle of next year.

The incident with Matteo made us three stronger. We became closer and open to each other now. Susan and Elaine were more than half-sisters, they became best of friends as well.

One night, they decided to sleep by my side. So we huddled up, the three of us, on my bed. Susan stayed on my left and Elaine on my right. We were having a pajama party, drinking hot cocoa, and watching old films in our DVD player. We watched two films and called it a night.

While lying down I heard Susan say, "You're still the best mother a child like me could ever have. I may not have met my father but I'm sure, he will be sorry."

"I'm proud of you, Susan," I said. "I'm also proud of you, Elaine. Remember, sweethearts, Mom is always here for you."

I kissed each one of them on the forehead.

"Don't worry," Elaine said. "I'll still pray that you'll find true happiness with the right man."

"I don't think that will happen. I promised myself not to fall in love again. I'm getting old for that."

"Don't say that, Mom," replied Susan. "You'll fall in love again, I'm sure. Remember the saying 'Life begins at 40?'"

## 4 . Herbert

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"HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO YOU...", they sang.

Jeanette, the nurse, lighted the two candles, shaped 4 and 0 on top of my favorite Triple Chocolate Cake. She lifted the cake and presented it to me as they continued singing, "...Happy birthday, Ana!"

Jeanette was the tallest among us. Her long, curly hair made her taller in her slim figure. She had to lower the cake to my level.

Esther and Antonio clapped their hands and cheered. Together they said, "Make a wish!"

I closed my eyes and wished... *I'm already contented with my two daughters so what else will I wish for? I wish to stay out of trouble.* I blew the candles.

Jeanette put the cake down on the table.

"How is it to be forty?" asked Esther, the bookkeeper.

Her long straight hair and chubbiness made her small height and frame deceiving. Not everyone noticed that she was already five months pregnant with her third child.

"It's just a number, my dear," I answered as I modeled my new summer dress and pair of shoes my daughters gave me for this occasion. "I'll age in grace and beauty, you will see."

There were no scheduled patients that time, so we used the time to have a small gathering for lunch. I brought them some pasta carbonara with toasted garlic bread and fried chicken strips. They bought the cake, ice cream and sodas.

Antonio, the messenger, distributed the paper plates and plastic forks. He was a fresh graduate when I hired him, the youngest of the staff.

The door opened and my boss, Dr. Manuel Santiago, came in with someone, a male patient or guest, more or less my age.

"Hi, Doc," we greeted.

Dr. Santiago is taller, fat, has thick, short hair. He looked like the jolly Santa Claus without the white beard.

"Happy birthday," Dr. Santiago greeted and kissed me on the cheek and gave me his gift. "I would like you to meet Herbert. Herbert, she's Ana, our clinic manager. She's a nurse by profession."

"Hi," I said as I offered my hand. "Nice meeting you."

We shook hands. I must admit I find Herbert attractive. His chinky eyes went with his fair skin that I assumed he was pure Chinese. He was tall but not that handsome by present standards. But he looked smart that I consider him even more handsome. There was something in his smile that I liked.

He must have noticed I've been staring at him as they went inside Dr. Santiago's office.

"Ana," the doctor called. "He's for consultation."

I knew the drill. I asked Jeanette to hand me a new patient's folder. I asked Herbert to fill out the first page, the information sheet. While he was filling up the form, I asked Antonio to bring some food and drinks inside Dr. Santiago's office.

"You'd better have these first before anything else, Doc," I said.

"Thank you," they said.

"Ana," called Dr. Santiago after a few minutes. "Herbert here will try our chelation therapy. Start him with BOS 1 and orient him with the sessions."

So I led Herbert to my office and explained to him the therapy sessions. I opened his folder and read his information sheet. His full name is Herbert Tan, will turn 43 next month, and he's single. He smokes; he drinks, and exercises not too often.

"I'm sure Dr. Santiago already mentioned to you some procedures. So, you'll have to undergo laboratory tests, ECG, and plethysmogram," I said.

He nodded. "Yes. He said that I need to schedule that." He was staring at me and I tried not to notice it.

"If you have a clinical laboratory where you can go to, I'll just give you the laboratory request," I said. "Or if you want, I can schedule you to our affiliate laboratory."

"That's okay. Would that be tomorrow?"

"Yes, as much as possible. So, nothing by mouth starting midnight tonight. Your blood extraction will be between 8am to 9am followed by the ECG. They will give us the results once done. We'll just inform you of the results on your next visit."

I wrote something in his chart and put a Post-It for Jeanette to read.

"What about the plet..."

"The plethysmogram," I continued the word for him. "We will do it today. The procedure will tell us how blood circulates in the extremities. The hands and feet are the parts of our body farthest from the heart. They're good indicators of good blood flow."

I asked Jeanette to perform the plethysmogram on Herbert. Also, I reminded her to call our affiliate clinical laboratory for Herbert's blood extraction and ECG. After the procedure, I went back to my office and talked to Herbert.

"BOS stands for Basic Optimum Solution," I explained. "On the first five sessions, the solution contains a small amount of each component to acclimatize the body. Starting on the sixth session, we will give a full dose of each component. You need to complete 30 to 40 sessions depending on the laboratory and plethysmogram results. Your first session today will take about one and a half to two hours."

He looked at his watch.

"I think I will just go back at around three or four this afternoon," Herbert said. "I have to fetch my twins at school."

"Oh, you have sons. I thought you're single."

"Recently divorced," he said smiling. "We have twins, boys, and age 12. My ex-wife called me earlier this morning and asked me to fetch the twins at one o'clock. What time do you usually close?"

"We stop receiving patients by 5:00 P.M. That would be no problem; we'll wait for you then."

HERBERT RETURNED PAST FOUR. "Am I too late?" he asked.

"No, Mr. Tan," said Jeanette. "Dr. Santiago is waiting for you to discuss the plethysmogram results."

Jeanette prepared the solution while Dr. Santiago explained to Herbert the results. After the discussion, Dr. Santiago left for another appointment. So we led Herbert to the therapy room and have him seated on a La-Z Boy recliner. Jeanette had hung the dextrose solution and was about to insert the IV line. She already prepared the cut micropore tapes and splinter. She took Herbert's hand and instructed him to make a fist. She tied a tourniquet on his wrist and swabbed a wet cotton to the preferred puncture site. As she was about to insert the needle, I heard Herbert say something.

"I hate needles," he said.

He looked apprehensive of the procedure after seeing the butterfly needle.

"You don't have to be afraid, Mr. Tan," I said as I took the needle from Jeanette. "This doesn't hurt.

Just think of it as a bite of an ant." I inserted the needle as quick I said it was. "See?"

"You're good," he said smiling, relieved that it was all over.

"Thank you," I replied as I put on the tape to secure the needle and IV line.

Jeanette, Esther, and Antonio went home at five o'clock. In cases of overtime, I was always left alone since I live nearby and I don't want my staff to stay late. So I was alone with Herbert, the patient.

He was reading a book about chelation therapy which he bought from us. I told him he can sleep while waiting; anyway our reclining chairs can stretch like a bed. I left him there, turned off the lights but turned on the overhead lamp.

After an hour, I heard him call me.

"Yes, Mr. Tan?" I asked.

"I don't think I can sleep. Are you busy?"

"No. I'm just waiting for the solution to go by 50ml so I can replenish it with the vitamin solution," I said.

I assumed he wanted some company so I sat on a chair across him, and started some trivial conversation.

"It feels itchy," he said after a few minutes.

"You might have been taking coffee and other acidic drinks before coming over," I explained.

"Yeah, I remember, the boys and I went to Starbucks awhile ago."

"The solution has 30ml of vitamin C which is acidic that's why it stings. Just rub your fingers along the vein, like this," I placed my fingers on his vein and stroked it with gentle motion. "It helps. Or would you prefer warm compress?"

"No, don't bother, I'll get used to it, I guess," he said.

"I've told you earlier about the initial reactions. Possible fever within 24 hours, different color and smell in urine..."

"Are you married?" he asked in the middle of my explanation.

"No," I answered. "I'm a single mom, I have two daughters."

That took me by surprise when he asked me something personal, although I didn't mind it at all.

"How old are they?"

"My eldest, Susan, is 21 and my youngest, Elaine, is 15. How about your twins? I thought they were with you," this time, I tried to turn the conversation around.

"They're with their mom right now," he said. "They only stay with me during weekends and vacations."

"How long have you been divorced?"

His face turned serious.

"About a month and a half ago. It was painful. I thought divorce was just a simple process, but no. It brought out the worst in us."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said. "I shouldn't have asked."

"It's okay," he said.

An awful silence came between us.

"How long have you been here?" I heard him ask.

"Ever since the clinic started," I answered. Then I started telling how the clinic came to be.

"Where are you working?" I asked about him again.

"I've set up a computer business," he replied. "I sell all kinds of computers, accessories and peripherals, and other electronic gadgets. I import them from other countries, like U.S. and Japan and sell it here. I used to work in a call center as a technical support representative where I met my ex-wife. After ten years, I decided to put up my own business. So far, I made the right decision."

As soon as the solution reached 50ml, I added the vitamin cocktail, as we called it. It replenished the washed out minerals during therapy. I told him to wait until for the whole solution to consume and we continued telling stories.

Seeing the solution consumed, I stood up and removed his IV connection. As soon as I removed the dextrose set from his arm he pulled me towards him. I could taste the desperation on his lips, it was so familiar. His tongue entered my mouth and his arms were so tight that I couldn't move. I didn't want to move. That's when I've realized that I haven't experienced this for months. So I welcomed Herbert with my arms, and my mouth, and straddled my legs on top of him.

He pulled my straps down, exposing my chest, took off my strapless bra and started to savor my two round breasts.

"How lovely," I heard him say over and over.

I held his head as he sucked my nipple and pulled it with his mouth. Then he would say "lovely" before kissing my lips. My hand searched for him, unzipped his pants and pulled them down. As a nurse, I'm adept at undressing other people. He was already stiff and neither of us wanted to go through the drudgery of undressing. I pulled my panties to the side and pushed my hips against him, immediately undulating like a cowgirl riding a horse on a rodeo.

He held my hips as I moved and besides our breathing we were quiet. We were panting, fucking the pain out of each other. I grabbed his hair and told him not to come.

"I like you," he said after everything has subsided. Both of us were still locked in each other's arms. "But that doesn't mean..."

"...that we love each other," I said finishing his statement. "This is just one of those one-night stands."

"I agree. No emotions. No strings attached. I like that," he said and kissed me on the lips. "By the way, happy birthday, Ana."

HERBERT AND I BECAME FRIENDS. He would often call me (*I like your voice over the phone, he said one time*). He would invite me for drinks at the bar, play billiards, or just hang out and tell stories. We had many things in common --- books, films, TV shows, music. There were times we discuss politics and religion just to challenge ourselves to a friendly debate. It was fun spending time with him. We bonded over our philandering.

"Why are you men like that?" I asked. "You keep on having two relationships at the same time."

"That's the challenge," he laughed. "You've had so many men, I can't believe you never had an overlap."

I hadn't told him about Matteo and he didn't realize how close he was striking home. I lashed out.

"But don't you realize the hurt that these women feel when they find out you're cheating?" I asked. "You don't care for your ex-wife's feelings, do you?"

"My wife's case was different," he said. "I didn't cheat on her. Not once. Why do you even care?"

I told him about Matteo. Herbert didn't say anything after that, he just got quiet and we both agreed not to pry into each other's wounds too much.

A FEW MONTHS HAD PASSED; someone asked me out for a date and I decided to tell Herbert about it.

"That's good," he said over the phone. "At least, you have moved on."

*Ouch, he wasn't hurt.*

"Well, let's see," I replied. "I'm not expecting sparks and fireworks, okay? In fact, I'm betting on it."

"What if I bet that you'll make it to the second date?"

"What kind of bet?" I asked, daring him to take a challenge.

"Loser buys lunch?" he said.

He sounded like a guy talking to one of his guy friends, not someone flirting with a woman he'd humped in a hospital clinic. I shrugged any thoughts of Herbert as a lover out of my mind. He's just a friend, I reminded myself.

"Sounds like a fair deal," I said.

So I went out on a date with a car salesman named Tony. I met him at a friend's party held recently at his house in Cimitarra. Tony's mestizo features reminded me of a late Hollywood actor, except for his 5'5" height and medium frame. After a few rounds of drinks, he asked me out for dinner.

The dinner date at Thai Nan in Marcelo was fine to begin with. The restaurant had a Southeast Asian ambience, good food, and good service. But as the night progressed, I realized that Tony was not as smart as Herbert. But in fairness, I admired Tony's aggressiveness. So I tested his aggressiveness to the next level. I thought it would compensate for his lack of intellectual interests.

It was already past midnight, and there were few cars on the road. His focus was on his driving on our way to my house. It will be an hour ride to Buvenvenida. I placed my hand on the V of his pants.

Surprised with my gesture, he looked at me. I smiled and licked my lips with seduction. I didn't remove my hand on his pants. I stroked my fingers as I outlined the protruding shape that I felt came alive. He looked at the rear view mirror and pulled the car over to a vacant parking lot.

As soon as the car stopped, I crawled to him and kissed his lips. It took him by surprise, unprepared for this. He fumbled and didn't know where to put his hands on. I continued kissing him until I managed to straddle on him, pulling up my dress up to my thighs.

"Just sit still," I said as I took off his shirt in a hurry.

"Okay," he said smiling. "You're the boss."

He immediately unzipped the back of my dress and pulled it down up to my waist. I assisted him in removing my underwear. I unzipped his pants and pulled it down. He was already erect as I was already wet in passion. As soon as he entered me, I started moving. I held his head as he buried his face on my chest between my breasts. He cupped my breasts with his hands and squeezed them hard while I continued moving fast. Both of us moaned

in pleasure inside the closed car. But he came too soon. *That's it?*

"I'm sorry," Tony said, panting still clinging to me. "I should have told you of my..."

"Premature ejaculation," I ended his sentence for him. I stared at the distance, panting, and whispered, "it's alright."

The next day, I called Herbert to tell him that he lost the wager.

"You'll have to treat me to a restaurant at the Riviera Hotel."

"Whoa!" he said on the other line. "Why? What happened with you and that Tony guy?"

"Well, I'm not interested to meet him anymore," I said sounding frustrated. "He's not my type."

"You sound disappointed," he said.

"I must admit, yeah," I replied. "I'm not going to tell you the details because I'm not the kiss and tell type."

"I understand," he said. "I guess, you'll just have to look around again."

"Nah, I give up," I said, "I don't know who I'm kidding. I don't even want love, I just want to fool around."

I heard him laugh.

"Yeah, I hear you. But I also remember hearing you say that over and over," he said. "But what if...," he continued. "What if you wake up one day and realize you love someone?"

"Then you wait for them to break your heart," I sighed into the phone. "I know you're more of a foodie than me so can you order for me, too, at the hotel?"

"Yeah, of course," Herbert said.

## 5 . Sparks & Fireworks

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THAT NIGHT, WE WENT TO THE RIVIERA HOTEL and dined in Jade Dragon, a Chinese restaurant located at the hotel's ground floor. I've read from the food reviews in magazines that the dishes there were good. I haven't tried other Chinese dishes and I was willing to try it with Herbert.

He loves dining out that he's familiar with the specialties of every restaurant in the island colony. He even suggested food entrees for me to try. He taught me how to use the chopsticks and how to use the other sauces. I had a good time.

After dinner, we decided to hang out at the hotel lounge where a female singer performed that night. She sang a love song, requested by a regular patron, which I haven't heard since Matteo and I broke up.

"Ugh!" I said and sipped my beer.

"Why?" Herbert asked.

"That song reminds me of Matteo."

"Oh, I'm sorry," he said. "Would you like us to leave?"

"No. I'm okay."

"Tell me, you haven't moved on, have you?"

I stopped to think of what to say.

"Yes and no," I answered holding my glass of beer. "Whenever I say that I'm contented, happy with my two daughters, happy with my career, I find myself asking why I feel some kind of a void. How about you, Herbert, would you say that you feel complete?"

"To be honest, no," he answered as he sipped his beer. "That's why I keep on dating women, trying to find someone for myself. Until now, I haven't found my match."

"So that means you wouldn't stop womanizing?"

"Right."

IN THE WEEKS THAT FOLLOWED, both of us became busy with our work. I lost track of Herbert in the fray but we keep in distant contact by phone.

One day, Herbert called up and invited me to a party of a friend. It was a dance party held at a club in the Zona. Herbert introduced me to Allan, an American who just came for a short vacation here in the island. I got the distinct feeling Herbert was trying to set me up again. I shot him a sly grin but it turned out Allan wasn't so bad.

I ended up staying with Allan for most of the time. I found him smart, witty, and cool. He didn't dance much which was fine by me so we decided to stay at the bar and talk. I saw Herbert enjoying himself with friends and dancing with some women. I smiled at Herbert as I took Allan's arm and suggested we go for a walk. I didn't look back.

Allan and I left the party and went to a motel for a short stay. We were already tipsy but Allan brought wine inside the room. He sat on the chair holding a glass of red wine and wearing a bathrobe provided in the room.

I was lying on the bed, still wearing my cotton dress with thin straps. I raised my hips as I took off my panties and threw them at him. He took them and placed them to his nose.

I smiled, he was kind of dirty. I opened my legs wider, showing my cunt as I placed my finger on it.

"Give me a hard drink," I said.

He took a sip of wine and moved to the bed, dripping wine on my cunt while licking it up.

"You are dirty!" I shouted in glee.

Allan got a kick out of seeing how many times I could rock and shiver under a new wave of orgasms. We cycled between cunnilingus, sixty-nine, missionary, and cowgirl position. He was insatiable and I was starting to feel bad that I couldn't get him to come.

"We'll peak together," he told me.

It was four a.m. and I was lying on the bed with my legs on his shoulders. He moved slow at first, drawing low groans and shudders out of me. After all our fucking I would come on a dime. As soon as he got used to the rhythm, he went faster and my body began to buck and writhe. The pleasure became torturous but I held on, knowing he was close behind me. We rocked and bounced and screamed on the motel bed. Allan gave a shout, warning me that he was bursting, and finally we collapsed together.

"SO DID ALLAN ASK YOU OUT?" asked Herbert when we saw each other at the clinic a few days after the party.

"No," I replied. "Why did you ask?"

"Well, I thought both of you had a good time last weekend and I was thinking it would lead to another date..."

"I know what you're thinking," I cut him off. "You'd think I'd fall for him? No."

"Why?"

"A good one-night stand isn't the same as a relationship, Herbert. Stop trying to set me up."

I saw him give me a funny smile.

"How about you," I asked, changing the subject. "Have you found your match at the party?"

He shook his head. "No. No sparks and fireworks."

DR. SANTIAGO'S BIRTHDAY PARTY HAPPENED at his house in Zona Residencial a few weeks later. Herbert and I were both invited and the theme was '70's, '80's and '90's music so a lot of people were dancing. Herbert pulled me to the dance floor.

"I don't dance," I laughed.

"I know, but you can move, right?" he said as he held my hand while leading me to the dance floor.

He tried to teach me some steps as he held my hands. I tried to follow his instructions and whenever I committed a mistake, we laughed together.

"See I told you, I'm not good at dancing," I would say.

After a few rounds of dances, Herbert and I stayed near the bar and talked.

Dr. Santiago approached us, "Are you enjoying the party?"

"Yes, Doc," I answered.

"Great party, Manny," Herbert said.

"Good. Just make yourself at home. Enjoy the evening." Then he left us and proceeded to greet the other guests.

"How's your week so far?" I asked Herbert after Dr. Santiago left.

"Well," he started and took a sip from his glass of red wine. "I've met this woman and..."

"Found your match?" I finished his statement for him.

"Well, I hope so...", he answered, smiling at me. "She seems like a good candidate."

"What's her name, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Amy."

I smiled at the thought of him moving on and the prospect of his own happiness. Then he continued telling me how they met at his computer shop and how good she was with computers. But after few minutes of listening to Herbert about Amy, I became uncomfortable. I felt like I wanted to leave him there. By midnight, I told Herbert that I want to go home.

"It's too early to leave," he said. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," I said, pretending not to show my uneasiness. "I think I'm just tired. I enjoyed the party, though."

IN THE DAYS THAT FOLLOWED, I felt sad inside and didn't want to admit why. Once, Herbert called the clinic canceling a session because of a conflict of schedule. It was his fourth missed session and I began taking it personally. I sent him a text message asking how he was and how he was faring in his pursuit for happiness. He responded that he was fine, and said he was dating Amy.

As his friend, my first instinct was to be glad he was finally happy. At night, I would think of him. Yet, even if I tried to remove him from my mind, he

kept on returning, asking for my attention, asking me to think thoughts that I pushed away. *Why? I didn't like this feeling.* I would imagine Herbert making love with and a great sadness welled inside me.

*"What if you wake up one day and realized you love someone?"* I remembered him saying.

*No, it can't be! It can't be you!*

## 6 - Crossing The Thin Line

---

"MOM, ARE YOU OKAY?" I heard Susan asking while we're having breakfast.

She poured out some milk on her bowl of corn flakes mixed with sliced fruits.

"Yeah," I said as I tried to look normal but my hand kept on playing with the spoon.

"You look sick," said Elaine as she put her hand on my neck to check my temperature.

Elaine didn't have classes that day because of a special school holiday.

"Am I?" I asked. "I'll check my temperature later. I can just call the clinic and take a sick leave."

I felt feverish but my temperature was normal. I called the clinic and told them that I couldn't report to work. Then I stayed inside my room and read a book hoping to get rid of the awful feeling I had. I must have reached the midpoint of the novel by the time Herbert called on my cell phone.

"I've heard from Jeanette that you're sick," he said on the other line.

"I'm fine. It's just a slight fever. Coming down with the flu, I guess. Nothing to worry about," I said. *Oh God! I'm a terrible liar.*

"Are you sure?" he asked.

I don't know what's with this guy, but Herbert could always sense when I was lying.

"Yeah," I replied, trying to reassure him.

But he wouldn't believe me. Later I saw his car parked in front of our house and it surprised me as much as it upset me. I didn't want to see Herbert, I wished I was contagious with a real sickness. But, like a good hostess, I was downstairs when he arrived. Susan was out at work and would be back by lunch time and Elaine had gone out for some errands, so I opened the door.

He stood there holding a bunch of flowers and bags of packed food and canned sodas.

"I thought you might not be cooking so I brought some food," he said.

I couldn't help but smile. "What are those?"

I cooked some stir-fried vegetables, prepared macaroni salad, few pieces of fried chicken..."

I let him in and scolded his spoiling. "What are you trying to do, spoil me? I'm not that sick," I joked.

But when my daughters arrived and saw what Herbert brought they were ecstatic. They appreciated the gesture and invited him to have lunch with us. I didn't resist, but the fried food turned my stomach.

During lunch, Herbert rummaged through the pantry until he found a can of chicken soup for me. He opened the can and heated it in the microwave oven. Deep inside, the gesture touched me, but I tried not to show my feelings. I thought I was careful not to give a hint.

After lunch, Elaine volunteered to wash the dishes and Susan returned to her work downtown. So Herbert and I were alone in the living room.

"Thanks for the lunch," I said as we sat down beside each other on the couch.

"Ana Maria," he said facing me. "When I learned that you were sick I got worried. I'm not used to hearing something bad happening to a friend."

*A friend. Yeah, that's what we are, just friends.*

I smiled. "Thank you for the concern," I said. Then I kept silent.

"Is there something wrong, Ana?" he asked.

"Nothing," I replied. "I'm just thinking of something, some personal thoughts."

"Come on," he said. "Secrets will just keep you sick. You have to tell me. What's the problem?"

"Nothing."

"Ana, I know you. You're not a good liar. You're hiding something from me."

"Look, Herbert," I said. "It would be better if I'd keep it to myself. Okay?"

"Why?" he asked.

"I don't think this is the right time to talk about it..."

"What is it all about?"

"Nothing..."

"There you go again, saying 'nothing' when in fact, there's something inside here," he said. He placed his index finger on my forehead.

"I don't want to talk about it. Not with you," I said.

"Why?"

"Because I don't want you to know."

"Why?"

"Because if you knew, you may get mad at me."

"Why?"

"Because if you get mad at me, we'll lose our friendship."

"Why?"

I stopped. I shouldn't answer that question. I knew he was using the Five Whys in getting to the root cause. Instead, I said, "You'd better go now, Herbert. Thank you for coming."

He didn't move.

"I said, you may go now."

"I'm not leaving until you tell me the answer to my last why."

"Please... I'm begging you to leave..."

"No, I'm not going. All I need to know is your answer..."

"You don't need to know!"

"I need to know because somehow it concerns me. Am I right?"

"Do you think I want to feel this way?" I asked raising my voice a little. "Don't you realize why I'm acting like this? To tell you the truth, I don't like it... I hate this feeling!"

"Why can't you speak up?" he said, raising his voice, too. "That's the problem with you. You don't say what you feel..."

"I'm trying to say and show how I feel..." I interrupted him. "It is you who can't sense it. You're insensitive, Herbert!"

"Me? Insensitive?" Herbert asked. "Do you expect me to know all your feelings? You always kept everything to yourself. And when you're already full, you explode just like that!"

He stopped.

I didn't speak.

Then he continued, "I don't like guessing. Ever since we've been friends, I kept on guessing what's on your mind. I'm not a psychic. Why can't you tell me what is going on?"

"I just can't!" I insisted.

"Why?" he shouted.

"Because I'm afraid to lose you!" I shouted back.

He fell silent.

I stepped back, realized what I've said.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I shouldn't have said that."

"You can't keep me by lying, either," Herbert said. Then he stood up and left.

THAT NIGHT, I HEARD SUSAN KNOCKING. I opened the door and she was holding a tray.

"I brought your dinner," she said. "How are you feeling?"

I let her in. Elaine entered the room, too.

"I'm okay now, just sad."

I tried to eat the food they prepared --- canned chicken soup, instant macaroni and cheese, orange juice, and hot tea.

"Thanks for this," I said.

"What happened, Mom? What are you hiding?" Susan asked while I'm taking a bite.

"Did he not tell you?" I asked Elaine.

"He gave me the gist of what happened. But Susan and I want to hear your side," Elaine said.

My daughters sat beside me on the bed while I ate the macaroni.

"I feel foolish," I confessed. "Like some high school girl with a crush."

"You do love him, don't you?" asked Susan.

I shook my head. "It doesn't matter. I should have told him long ago. But now he has Amy and he's finally happy."

"I think, he loves you too," said Elaine. "The way he cared for you today... it was something."

"He loves me as a friend," I said, "he was just being kind."

"I'm not sure, Mom," answered Susan. "He doesn't look at you like you're just a friend."

"Why not patch things up?" asked Elaine. "You're still friends, right?"

"Just be honest, Mom," Susan said. "We both know what it's like to be lied to. I'm sure he'd appreciate your honesty right now."

"Since when did you girls get smarter than your mother?"

I smiled, swallowing hot coffee and pulling them into a hug.

"We had you beat years ago," Elaine laughed.

I WAS STILL IN BED WHEN I HEARD my cell phone ringing. I checked the screen to see what time it was and who the call was coming from. It was from Herbert and it was five in the morning. I picked it up and pressed the answer button.

"Hello?"

"How are you?" I heard him say.

"I'm fine," I answered.

My voice was dry and scratchy and there was silence between us. I was waiting for him to continue as I didn't want to speak. I don't know what to say. But I have not heard a word from him so I asked.

"Herbert?"

"We're both kind of stupid, you know that?" he asked I laughed.

"Kind of," I agreed.

"I've been up all night thinking about you and the way I left. I'm sorry."

"Are you still mad at me, Herbert?"

"No," he answered. "I'm not mad or angry at you. NEVER will I get angry at you."

I tried to hold back my tears.

"Are you crying?"

He might have heard my sniffles. "No," I lied. A tear fell on my cheek so I wiped it with my fingers.

"You're lying, I know," he said. "How many times do I have to tell you, Ana Maria, that you're not good at lying?"

I couldn't help it any longer so I cried.

"I'm sorry..." I said. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said those words..."

Again, there was silence.

Then I heard him say, "Hush now. Everything will be okay. We just need to talk and settle this matter ourselves. I think I've given you enough time to gather yourself together and prepare for our... for our meeting. I want to see you. It's my birthday, remember? Have breakfast with me, please."

"Now?" I asked, incredulous.

"I'm outside your house, waiting," he said.

I immediately got up from my bed and looked over the window. I saw him standing there beside his car, holding his cell phone and looking at my window.

"Is that okay?" he asked as he waved his hand.

"Let me get changed," I mumbled.

I sat up, and squinted at my reflection in the mirror across my bedroom. I looked like a woman

in her forties who had been crying all night. Not sexy.

I remembered it was his 45th birthday that day. He had been planning this long ago before we somehow “broke up”. He mentioned to me that he wanted his 45th birthday special, so special that he was planning something he didn't elaborate.

"Just throw something on. Come in your pajamas if you want, no one will care," he said on the phone.

*Be honest*, Susan had said.

I agreed and got out of bed. I brushed my hair back into a ponytail and threw on a sweatshirt before creeping out of the house. My face was puffy from crying and the quiet early morning felt unreal. Herbert was waiting just outside the house.

We drove back to his house, which was a relief. I wouldn't have to be in public without makeup. In the car I studied his face and he looked just as tired as me. We said nothing during the car ride.

He led me behind his apartment. The gate opened up to a flower garden leading to the patio where I saw a table with candle light in the pre-dawn gloom. Herbert held my hand as he led me to the table. I saw red, pink, and white roses everywhere. The sky was cloudy and breezy. He pulled out a chair for me to sit on and he sat across me. I heard music playing from the stereo inside his house Herbert handed me a mug of hot coffee. It was as good as champagne.

I took a sip and smiled at him "Thanks for coming," he said.

I smiled. "Why breakfast?"

"I couldn't sleep," he confessed, "I was out of place-"

"No," I interrupted him, "you were right. I shouldn't keep things from you."

Herbert looked like he wanted to say something but caught himself. Instead he motioned toward a covered tray. When I opened it I found a bowl of cereal and a small pitcher of milk.

"I thought about cooking something, but I didn't want you to take it as an act of aggression. I also didn't want to poison you," he said.

"Thank you," I smiled.

We ate from our little bowls of colorful cereal. I thought he had brought me here to talk but so far we had been silent.

"Herbert," I began.

"-Don't," he interrupted me. "I'm a hypocrite," he said. "I got angry with you for holding back from me when I've been lying to you for weeks. I've been stupid and immature. I made you sick with worry,"

"Lying?" I asked, dropping my spoon in the cereal.

Dawn was rising and Herbert's Chinese features looked both young and old in the meager light.

"There is no Amy," he said. "I made her up to make you jealous."

"What?!" I shouted. I was about to tell him off when he broke in.

"I tried to keep things casual. I was afraid I just liked you because I was so heartbroken, and you weren't interested in me," he explained. "But then... I don't know, I guess I started to think maybe you liked me back. But I was too scared to make the first move. I don't want to get hurt again, so I tried to make you jealous."

"That is the dumbest, most juvenile thing I have ever heard!" I began to say, "But it worked."

"What?" He asked, surprised.

"I said it worked," I was surprising myself, "It was dumb but it worked. I was jealous. Yes, I am jealous."

We heard a familiar love song played. Herbert stood up and asked me for a dance. We stood by the table as he put my right hand on his shoulder, and held my left hand with his right. He placed his left hand on my waist. We swayed to the rhythm of the music. He kept staring at me and I kept avoiding them. Then he put my left hand on his shoulder and placed his right hand on my waist. He came closer, placing his mouth near my ears as he whispered the song:

*I've found someone  
to share the rest of my life  
But how will I tell her  
that I want her to be my wife?  
I need someone like her  
in my lonely, solitary den.  
Been hurt before, now afraid  
to trust and love again  
But she's totally different  
from all the women I've known.  
I wish she stays with me,  
I will not be alone.*

I smiled. It was one of his favorite love songs. I liked the song, too. So I sang with him. As soon as the song faded, we were already embracing each other. Tears fell from my eyes.

He heard my sniffles.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

I nodded. I couldn't speak. I just bowed down my head, avoiding his eyes.

"You wouldn't believe this," he said. "I fell in love with you the moment I saw you on your 40th birthday."

I couldn't believe what he had said. I remembered that day. I remembered the moment I shook his hands. The stares we had on each other, the long conversation, and the casual sex we had after his first chelation therapy session.

He took my chin and lifted my head, "Look straight to my eyes, and say what you feel right now."

I tried to hold back some tears. I tried to look straight to his eyes.

"I'm sorry if I crossed the line..." and before I could say another word, I cried.

He embraced me tight, yet gentle. His arms were comforting.

"I waited for the moment that you would say you're ready to fall in love again," he said.

We stayed that way for a few minutes longer. Then, I heard him say, "I want you to have this."

He pulled an envelope from the table and gave it to me. I took the envelope and opened it. Pulled out a card, a hand-crafted card made of hand-crafted paper folded into four. It has Herbert's handwriting and drawing of me.

On the first page, he wrote: *I wrote this card and designed it just for you.* I opened the card and there was his letter decorated with small, pressed dried flowers. I've read it in silence. It tells of how he felt on the day that we've met and how he tried to move on with his life after his divorce. It tells why he kept on searching for Love and ended up reaching out for Miss Right. The whole spread of paper was full of his emotions that tears kept flowing while I was reading it. It continued to the next part so I opened up the paper, and saw a diamond ring taped at the

center. I thought it was a pressed, dried flower.  
Written with his own hand, Herbert said:

*Ana ---*

*It may be a small gift but what  
this ring symbolizes is my real gift to  
you. Will you marry me?*

*--- Herbert*

# 7 . All's Well That Ends Well

---

I WAS SPEECHLESS as I stared at the ring on the paper. Tears fell from my eyes and I immediately wiped them fearing that it will drop on the paper I was holding.

Herbert took the ring from the paper and knelt before me. He presented me the ring.

"I'm going to repeat the question. Ana Maria Torres, will you marry me?"

I smiled. "Since you proposed on your birthday, is it okay with you if I'll say, 'I do' on mine?"

He stared at me upon hearing those words. I was not even sure if he got my message right.

"Is it okay if that be on your birthday two years from now?" he asked as he stood up.

I smiled and nodded, "Is that okay with you?"

He didn't answer. Instead, he inserted the ring on my left ring finger and kissed my hand. He wrapped his arms around me and kissed me on the lips.

I responded to his kiss. I don't know how much longer we stayed that way. I was sure that I've heard the music playing that moment until it started to rain.

I CALLED MY DAUGHTERS that I wouldn't be coming home. Aside from the sudden, heavy rains, I also told them the good news.

"I'm happy for you, Mom," said Susan.

"So we're going to have twins as our young stepbrothers?" asked Elaine.

"Yes, sweetheart," I said. "You're going to meet them soon."

"Sounds cool. Do they play volleyball?"

I laughed at the sound of Elaine's curiosity and excitement. She never fails to make me laugh during tough times and serious situations.

"Enjoy the rest of the evening with Uncle Herbert," Susan said. "Give him our regards."

"Thanks, my sweethearts. Take care, you two," I said as I hung up the call from my cell phone.

Herbert pulled back my hair from my shoulders, exposing my nape. He kissed my ears, down to my nape, and down to my shoulders and murmured my name. In turn I unbuttoned his shirt. When I dropped my cell phone on the floor we both laughed and left it there. Herbert led me into the warmth of his room. We fumbled that morning as if it was our first time to get naked. We laughed at our clumsiness. We threw our clothes around, scattering them on the floor. At last, we lay together naked, locked in each other's arms kissing and admiring the feel of our bare skins against each other. I adjusted my hips and Herbert pulled my legs up and went inside me. The act was perfect and familiar, as though he had been my only lover. He went deeper into me and I felt something unlock, a comfort and safety that I hadn't felt with any of my other men. Our lovemaking was sweet. It seemed endless. The happiness, the ecstasy, the orgasms were incomparable and new. He entered me slow, his arms around my body. I rolled on top of him and moved myself up embracing him as we sat up together. We joined in a rocking motion that was tantric and sensual. We moaned, we panted, I tried not to lose grip of him inside me. I clung tight to his neck. He tightened his arms around me. We moved faster until we lost control of ourselves and came. We tightened each other's grip even more and panted, still locked in each other's arms.

After everything subsided, I gave him soft kisses all over his face, thanking him for everything that happened. I realized that the engagement ring he gave me was the only thing I had on.

Loving Herbert was different because he was my friend before he was my lover. Sex made us closer and steadied us, whereas it had only been a spicy addition to my previous relationships.

Even my daughters could tell the quality of our relationship was much different from my other lovers. For one, they already knew Herbert. He talked about combining our families and having me become a bigger part in the twins' lives. It was easy to talk about the future with Herbert.

"SO YOU'RE GETTING MARRIED NEXT YEAR on your birthday," said Chloe as she sipped the remaining drink from her glass.

"It falls on a Saturday," I said as I raised my glass of iced tea. "A perfect day for weddings."

"Will it be a morning or an afternoon wedding?" asked Eva.

"Late afternoon wedding at the Cristo Rey Church" I answered.

I heard their *oohhs* and *aahhs*. Cristo Rey is the oldest and the biggest cathedral in the city of

Marcelo. Celebrating weddings there was everyone's dream.

"Then reception at the Riviera, the hotel where we usually date. Herbert already made the reservations."

"How sweet," said Irene.

"If you still need other help, just give me a call," said Camille as she handed me her business card. "I can recommend you to my sources."

"Thanks, Camille," I said taking the card. "I'll tell Herbert. He said he has everything arranged but just the same, I'll suggest this to him. He doesn't want me to get stressed with all those details. He wants to surprise me on that day so he kept almost all the details to himself. But I want you all to be there to witness his birthday-wedding surprise."

"I'm so excited!" said Maria. "Mark that date, ladies. We must not miss THIS!"

"I'm happy for you, Ana," Irene said as she took my hand and squeezed it. "I wish for your true happiness, my friend."

She became teary-eyed.

So I gave her a hug. "Thank you," I whispered to her ear.

I was still hugging Irene when I heard Camille asked, "By the way, have you met Herbert's ex-wife?"

So I pulled myself away from Irene. "Yes," I said, still staring and smiling at her.

Something sparked in my memory that made me laugh a little before I turned to the others.

"It was a funny meeting, actually."

A FEW WEEKS AFTER OUR MORNING of confessions, Herbert participated in a trade fair. He invited me to the grand opening so he could introduce me to his friends and business associates. I took a day off just so I could join him.

Dr. Santiago and the staff understood and they didn't mind not having me around the clinic for a day. It almost felt as though I was married, and maybe, in a way, I was.

Herbert and I agreed to meet at the trade center of La Galleria that Friday morning. People already crowded the entrance, waiting for The 3rd Information & Computer Technology Expo to open. I searched for Herbert and saw him near the entrance, talking to someone. I squeezed myself to through the crowd to pass and managed to move towards him.

"Herbert!" I called.

He heard me and turned to my direction. He smiled and met me. He took my hand, flung his other arm around my shoulders and kissed me on the lips.

"Thanks for coming, sweetie."

"I'm excited to see the launch of your new set of products in this exhibit," I said, still clinging to him.

"I know," he said as he touched the tip of my nose with his finger.

He led me to the entrance and introduced me to some acquaintances. After a few minutes, the Vice-President arrived for the ribbon-cutting ceremony. The ribbon cutting opened the 3-day trade fair and exhibit. After some speeches and a short program, Herbert led me to his booth. There, he showcased the computer products and electronic gadgets his company carried. I realized that it was the first time I was taking an honest interest in my lover's work. I squeezed his hand, feeling proud of him.

As we were walking towards the booth, he said, "By the way, I finally told my ex-wife about you. She said she must meet you in person. And she wants to 'warn' you as well. She invited herself here, if you don't mind."

"Of course, I don't mind," I said. "She's still the mother of your twins."

"I think you will like her," he said. "Somehow, you remind me of her."

"Oh," I said wondering about what our similarities would be. "I hope our ending is a little happier," I added.

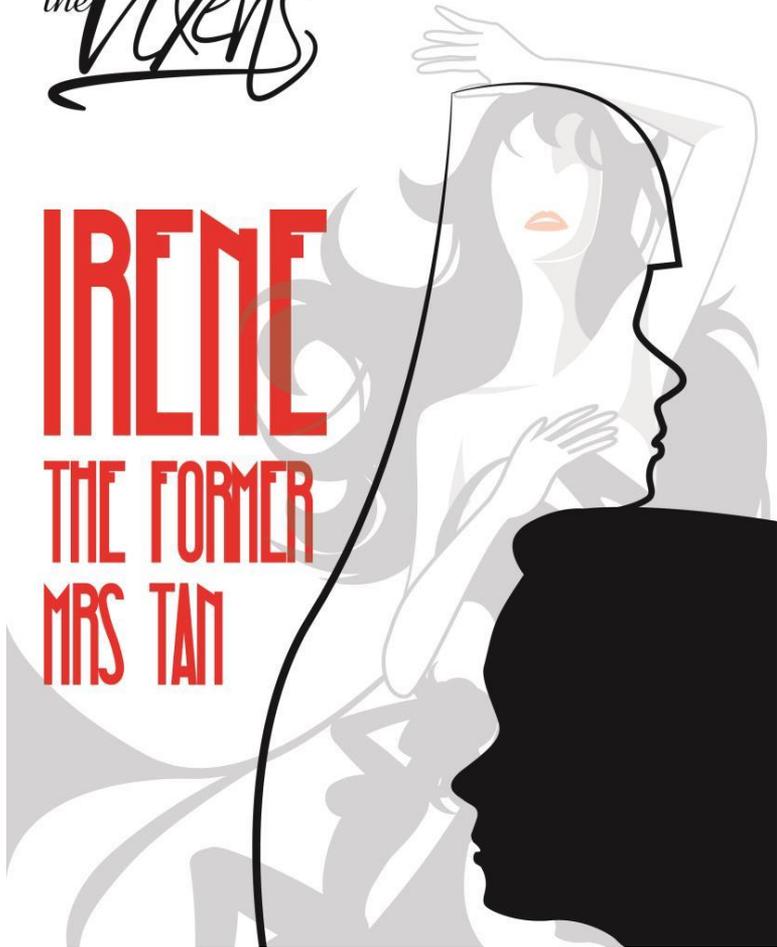
People were already moving around, checking the exhibits. Herbert and his staff gave brochures to interested visitors.

I grinned when I saw one of the Vixens in the crowd and I raised my hand to call out to her. But my hand and my heart plummeted when Herbert looked in the same direction and I heard him say, "Oh, there she is!"

\*\*\* THE END \*\*\*

*the* **Vixens**

**IRENE**  
**THE FORMER**  
**MRS TAN**



I looked at him. He was waiting for me to continue. "...I'm starting to feel better at the office rather than at home. Please, don't get me wrong, Billy. I love my family. I love the kids. They're sweet."

"How about Herbert? Do you still love him?"

I couldn't answer. I bowed my head to avoid his stare. He took my chin up using his other hand.

"Irene, if you really love him, you shouldn't be here," he said. "You're not being honest with your feelings."

He kissed me lightly on the lips. It felt so sweet and warm. I welcomed him with my hungry mouth; hungry for something sensual like this. My hands held his face and slid down to his shoulders. I felt his tongue entered my mouth and I realized I wanted to go farther with him. But I pushed away, breaking the kiss. He was surprised.

"I'm sorry, this is all wrong," I said and straightened out my blouse.

I immediately opened the car and went out. I ran to hail the first cab I could see and rode back to the office crying.

This is a work of fiction. Characters, places, and events are products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, and business establishments is coincidental.

## **The Former Mrs. Tan**

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# I . IRENE

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COMING FROM A TIRING NIGHT SHIFT, I should be going straight to my condominium to sleep; but no. I found myself driving my car to La Galleria, the biggest mall in Marcelo, which usually opens at ten o'clock. My adrenalin had given me another shot of energy to see my ex-husband and his new girlfriend. I left Contact Point, Inc. at nine o'clock that Friday morning right after my last conference call for the shift. Since the company's headquarters was in the United States, we have been following their time zone. So I came to the office by ten o'clock last night and haven't slept yet.

"Are you sure you really have to go, Irene?" asked Billy Regino as we packed up our own laptops right after the conference call that ended half an hour earlier. "You'd better take some sleep."

"Billy," I said as I held his hand that was holding his laptop and gave him a reassuring look. "It was Herbert who invited me to the Expo and I accepted it. I hope you don't mind that, do you?"

I said as I gave him a wink and fixed the triangle of his necktie. I loved the gray necktie that matched his pinkish white trubenized shirt. It brought out the glow on his ageless face that I admired when I first saw him. That was fourteen years ago when I was being interviewed for the position Team Supervisor and he was still a Senior Operations Manager.

My relationship with Billy only began to become closer and stronger three years later, not just because he was my mentor and then the Program Director much above me, but also because he was my boyfriend who helped me pick up the pieces of a broken heart.

"Herbert invited you, really?" he asked.

"Yes."

Honestly, I invited myself. That thought made me laugh to myself inside the car on a Friday morning traffic going to Marcelo's central business district. The stop light turned red just before I reached the intersection. *Wow, I just lied to Billy.* Actually, I felt a little bit of guilt over that. I've never lied to Billy ever since we've known each other. I bit my lower lip with my teeth at that change.

After a few minutes, the traffic light turned green, telling me to go. *Go to where your heart leads*

*you, Irene.* And I continued driving. This wouldn't happen if I didn't meet Herbert Tan a week ago. He told me of this girl he claimed to be his true love.

"I must meet her personally and warn her about you," I said laughing.

Herbert laughed and said, "That would be no problem, my dear. I'm sure, you'll like her."

It was not a laughing matter for me. The thought of meeting Herbert's new love was unthinkable at first. I couldn't believe someone would fall for meticulous, conservative, and philandering Mr. Tan. I found my married life with him too boring. *Or was it I who was boring?* Thinking about it now, we just don't share the same interests in the first place. But here I am, driving to meet him after leaving him years ago.

IT WAS A MONTH AND A HALF BEFORE my 35th birthday when I decided to leave Herbert and the twins, Brian and Brandon, who were both seven years old at that time.

"Herbert, I'm leaving," I remembered dropping the bomb at him after he told me of his good news that he got a pay increase as Level 2 Technical Support Representative.

Actually, I already knew that a week before he did. I have just been promoted to Operations

Manager earlier that year and have acquired friends from the other departments like Payroll, Finance, and Accounting. However, he didn't hear or understand what I've said.

"I said I'm leaving," I repeated. "I'm leaving you."

"Is this some kind of a joke?" he asked in surprise.

"Here are the car keys," I showed him the keys and placed them on the table.

My body was itching to leave the apartment that time. I felt my mental clock ticking and any minute longer would trigger my wholeness to explode.

"Here are the keys to all the doors and cabinets here. Here is the credit card under your name; I made you as my extension just in case you need it. I've already paid this month's rent and bills, so you don't need to worry about it at the moment."

"Look, Irene, I'm sorry if I've been screwing things up lately," Herbert said as he looked at those things I placed on the table. "I got myself an increase now... although I may not have the same salary as yours. Come on, can we just talk things over?"

I wasn't listening to him. I didn't intend to. I went to the door and picked up my suitcase and my shoulder bag that were waiting there then I opened the door.

"Hey, wait," he said as he tried to stop me going out of the door. He tried to pull the suitcase I was holding. "I may have done wrong, but please don't go..."

"It's not you, Herbert. It's me," I answered as I pulled the suitcase back from him and went out of the door, carrying it towards the gate. "It's my fault. I am a failure. You just married the wrong person. That's all."

And tears started to flow from my eyes.

My hands gripped the steering wheel tightly as I turned right to enter the La Galleria mall parking. I was the wrong person for him. I already accepted that fact years ago. I'd better make sure that she's the right person for Herbert. *Why?* I heard my logical mind asking. Because, I believe, he deserves more. That's the only way I could make up to him, for the genuine love he had given me.

My mind jolted back to reality as I wiped the tears from my eyes that were about to fall. Then I asked the person in the toll booth where should I park for the ICT Expo.

"Third level, right side," he said. "That would be fifty pesos for the first three hours and ten pesos per succeeding hour."

I thanked him and took the parking ticket. I'll pay for it when I get out of the mall.

THE EXHIBIT HAD STARTED when I got there. People swarmed around the booths checking on the latest computers and gadgets. I stood at the center of the trade hall looking for Herbert, or at least his exhibit booth of his computer sales company aptly called *Think Tan*.

For the first time after so many years, I felt proud of him now that his business was picking up. He was really into computers. I remembered when he told me that the first time I've met him.

It was our first day of a job at a new company called Contact Point, Inc. in the Marcelo-Cimitarra border. The old building was formerly occupied by a local bank. The facade still retained the old Spanish architectural art but once you enter the premises it transported you to the future. It was renovated into modern interiors, high-tech elevators, and the ambience of an American corporation. After signing my name at the lobby, I was instructed to proceed to Harvard. Funny, they named their training rooms after famous colleges and universities around the world.

So I entered Harvard training room and saw a few people seated and chatting to one another. I took the nearest vacant seat and sat down. I smiled at the Chinese-looking guy seated beside me.

"Is this the NEO training?" I asked just to make sure I was in the right place.

"Yup," he said and offered his hand for a handshake. "Welcome to the work force. I'm Herbert Tan. What's your name?"

"Irene Alejandrino," I said as we shook hands.

He looked cute; not handsome, just cute. He looked smart probably a geek because of his eyeglasses, but it looked cool on him. His thin lips parted into smile and his chinky eyes followed and glowed as if he just casted a charming spell.

We talked and exchanged information about ourselves as we sat beside each other during the course of the one-day New Employee Orientation. We even took our breaks together at the company's cafeteria. At the end of the day, I'd learned from him that this was his third job after he graduated with a Bachelor's degree in Math major in Computer Sciences.

Back then, there was a stronger focus in Information Technology and the Computer Sciences had not yet become a specific degree. His first job was manning a computer shop in La Galleria. Aside from assisting in the sales of computers, parts, peripherals, and accessories, he also assisted those people who rent computers by the hour or those who wanted to print their documents. Our country was newly adjusting to the demands of computer technology.

His second job was an indexer for more than three years. It sounded Greek or geek to me. He said he outlined abstracts or summaries he had

read and those outline numbers became some internet protocol addresses in search engines.

I, myself, was not new to the workforce. I've been into two jobs, too. My last job was Executive Secretary to the Vice-President of an advertising firm. The position was just a misnomer. The pay was just above the minimum wage required by the government. My parents had been disappointed.

"That's the end of you, Irene," I remembered my father told me.

So when I saw in an ad that a new American company was opening and was looking for employees who speak American English fluently, I applied. Thank God for the strict education at Convento de Santa Clara y el Colegio. We were trained to speak Spanish and English since grade school. It was not difficult for me to get the job.

After the NEO, we went on with our American English skills training. Our trainer flew all the way from the United States of America to conduct a ten-day training. Since Business Process Outsourcing that time was new not only in the island but around the world, we have to sound like Americans when we speak over the phone.

The ten-day training was fun. Herbert provided comic relief during dull moments and I kept on laughing at his antics. When we were done with the language skills training, Herbert and I went our separate ways. He went on with the Technical Support skills training for phone and internet

services while I went on with the Customer Service skills training for collections and billing. The training took us a month to get used to the computer systems, the product and the business itself. It also included a week of taking in calls to acclimatize us to the work before we officially started as call center agents.

But still, we met during breaks and went out after shifts. Since our trainers were Americans and we followed the US time zones, we were in the night shift. It was confusing at first, especially when you ask us about date and time.

"Do you mean local time or US time?" we would ask back.

It also changed the city life in Marcelo. 24-hour convenience stores, local coffee shops, bars and restaurants grew in popularity. We started going out for drinks at early morning, at the end of our shifts. Some found it weird, but that was our call center life. We were vampires with a thirst for beer just before sunlight.

There was something in Herbert that made me comfortable and free. I felt secure with him around and I admired his thoughtfulness. He once told me that he liked me. I told him I liked him, too. However, I might have misconstrued it into something like "I like you" equates to "I love you."

Sometimes, I would call home telling my parents that I would be sleeping over at the office or

in some friend's place. But honestly, I was with Herbert in some motel in Marcelo.

Both of us were tired from our respective shifts and we just bought some pizza and ordered some beer to unwind before going to bed. After a few bottles of beer and slices of pizza, I lay down on the bed. Herbert was still sitting on the chair looking at me.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" I asked.

"You're drunk," he said.

"No, I'm not," I said as I got up to go into the bathroom. "I think I just need a shower."

I was actually tipsy enough that I didn't mind Herbert sitting there, staring at me. I took off my clothes as I entered the bathroom, leaving my clothes on the floor by the door. I went straight to the shower and turned it on. The cool water sprinkled on me, a welcome respite from the heat. I wet myself all over and closed my eyes to shut out the spray. When I took the soap and started rubbing it on my body I heard the shower curtain rustle.

I turned around and saw Herbert standing there, naked. We stared at each other, speechless. He approached me until we were facing each other. With the soap still on my hand, I started rubbing it on his body starting from his shoulders down to his chest. He wrapped his arms around me and kissed me on the lips. Suddenly, I felt his warm hand cupped my cunt. Slowly, I felt his middle finger

stroked that perfect spot for stimulation. I widened my thighs to give way for his stroking hand while I responded to his kisses. My soapy hands went over his whole body, dropping the soap on the floor, as the water flowed down on us. He continued with his stroking and kissing. My hand slid down to hold him there.

He started to get erect when I held him softly, yet firmly, then stroked it gently with my hand until I heard his heavy breathing. Unable to stand the hand jobs we're doing, he asked me to turn around and to bend a little bit over. He entered me from behind and started thrusting his cock in me. The sound of the shower, the splashing of water, the slapping of our bodies, our moans and our heavy breathing filled the bathroom until both of us came.

Something in my vision made me snap back to reality. I saw Herbert pulled someone familiar and both of them approached me walking hand in hand. Never did I see Herbert like this. They looked perfect. I couldn't get wrong with that familiar fair face, that long hair, that slim, sexy body, and that aura that spelled H-A-P-P-Y.

I could see how Herbert would really fall for that sort of girl. She was nothing like me, who thrived on earth-colored but intimidating corporate attires, high ambitions, and fast-paced competitive life. Herbert was with Ana Maria Torres, my high school classmate and friend, a Vixen like me, and a single mom with two daughters. *But how could she have ended up with him?*

"Hi!" I greeted and smiled at them. "So, SHE'S the woman you're telling me."

Ana was dumbfounded when she saw me. "You?"

"Hi, Ana," I said smiling. "It's nice meeting you... again. I'm the former Mrs. Herbert Tan." I offered my hand for a handshake.

"Irene," she said as she took my hand and hugged me. "I... I don't know what to say."

"You know each other?" Herbert asked.

"Yes," I said as I put my other arm around Ana's shoulders, still holding her hand. "She's my classmate and friend, we were buddies back then."

"That's right," Ana said as she put her arms around my waist. "So how are you, Irene?"

"I'm doing good; how about you?"

"Happy, at last," Ana answered.

ANA INVITED ME FOR AN EARLY LUNCH to a nearby restaurant. We left Herbert and his staff at the exhibit. He said that he would join us closer to noon. The waiter left after taking our orders.

"Herbert said that you'd come to warn me," Ana said.

"I should have," I said. "But when I saw you with him earlier, I changed my mind. I saw that you were perfect together. I didn't believe him when the first time he told me about a new girlfriend. But now I've felt and seen it."

"Any regrets or any misgivings?" she asked.

"Probably none."

"He told me that the divorce was painful," Ana said as she bowed her head. "We promised ourselves not to pry open each other's wounds, though."

"I understand. Although my case with Billy was different. They knew each other back then at Contact Point."

Then, there was a long silence between us.

"So you are Herbert's ex-wife whose name can't be mentioned," Ana laughed.

"That's right," I answered and held Ana's hand. "Small world, isn't it?"

"But how come you separated?" Ana asked. "I thought you were happily married."

"That's what I thought at first."

## 2 . HERBERT TAN

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I TOLD ANA how Herbert and I met years ago at Contact Point and how many times we went out and had sex. Blame it to our hormones, we both were in heat; we were at the prime of our lives. Both of us hate condoms and contraceptives so we just have to be careful. But when I found out that I was pregnant, I became excited. I felt like I've made it to become a total woman.

"Herbert, I'm pregnant," I said as I showed the positive sign in the pregnancy strip. "We are going to have a baby."

"So, what do we do now?" he asked dryly. He looked serious and unprepared for the news.

"What do you mean?" I asked, pretending not to look disappointed.

"I'm sure, you want us to get married," he said in as a matter-of-fact tone. "Do your parents know?"

"Not yet," I said. At that point, reality shot into my head.

"Then, what are your plans?" he said, getting me to my senses.

"I want to keep the baby," I said. "How about you?"

"Well, there's nothing we can do about that now. We'll keep the baby. I just want to make sure that you want this."

With those words I felt Herbert's realistic concerns. He took my hands and squeezed them with his and then he kissed them. It reassured me that he still cared for me although I thought at first I thought that he will leave me just like what happened to Ana.

"Yes, Herbert, I am sure I want this," I said. I put my arms around him and kissed him on the cheek. "And I love you."

"I love you, too, Irene," he said and kissed me on the lips.

Herbert and I discussed how we would start a family. We planned to save money for our civil

wedding and reception. We couldn't afford a church wedding yet. Plus, we had to save for my childbirth and its prerequisites: laboratory, regular check-ups, ultrasound, vitamins, and more.

Herbert was raised conservatively to believe that women should be primarily housewives and mothers. However, I pointed out to him that his earnings would not suffice if we need to save a large amount of money for the wedding and childbirth. So he agreed that I should continue working and would file a maternity leave before my ninth month.

We got married while I was three months pregnant. My parents were not happy because they wanted a church wedding and they didn't like Herbert for me.

My in-laws have the same feelings towards me, too. They thought that my family was elitist that looked down on people like them.

But neither of us cared what our parents had to say. Herbert and I were proud that we spent our own money for our wedding and reception without our parents' financial assistance. So we decided to live in an apartment in Marcelo and promised to stick to each other through thick and thin.

I woke up at the hammering sound from outside our apartment. It was already past eight in the morning. I overslept as pregnant women apparently do. I peeked out the window and saw Herbert making a wooden piece of furniture. I went out to see it.

"What are you doing?" I asked as I closed the door behind me.

He stopped when he saw me. He put down the hammer and nail he was holding and approached me. He kissed me and put his arms around my shoulders.

"Look," he said pointing to what he was doing. "What do you think of my labor of love?"

"You're making a big crib for the babies?"

He nodded and went back to work. "I'll try to finish the structure by tomorrow," he said. "And probably paint it during my free time on weekdays. After that, you can buy mats and pillows, and make them sets of pillowcases and blankets."

I smiled at the thought of his "labor of love" as I touched my belly. *This is it. There's no turning back now, Irene.*

I could make pillowcases and blankets for the twins. I was thankful that we were taught how to sew back in high school.

It was only weeks ago when Herbert and I learned that we're having twins. For the first time, I saw a different excitement in Herbert's eyes. I just wished I could match that level of excitement.

"Is there something wrong, Irene?" Herbert asked.

"None," I said and gave him a reserved smile. "I was just imagining how powder blue, mint green, or white would look like in the crib."

JUST LIKE ANY OTHER RELATIONSHIPS, our married life was full of ups and downs. We'd go to the office together and go home together. We sometimes had breakfast in a 24-hour fast food joint before going home. However, Herbert pointed out that we had to save money and lessen unnecessary expenses, so we agreed to just prepare our snacks and lunch and bring it to the office. People at the office were happy to see us together; they always call us "Mr. & Mrs. Tan."

On the other hand, Herbert and I argued about who should fix the bed after waking up. Herbert wanted his bed in order right after, while I only fix the bed if I have the time or if I remember to do so. We argued on how to squeeze the toothpaste properly from a tube (he wanted it squeezed from the bottom, but I squeeze it from the center). We argued on what meal to prepare (he cooks very well, I just know how to).

He would be pissed seeing a mess inside the bathroom, toilet, or kitchen while I tolerate some mess from time to time.

"Do you really have to be this meticulous, Herbert?" I asked him one time.

"This should be a clean house, Irene," he said. "Twin babies are coming soon."

"Look, we don't have a maid," I pointed out. "We can't afford to hire one. So bear with me if I don't finish cleaning this apartment on time. I'd appreciate some help."

So he volunteered to clean the house and cook our food. But I told him that I'll not promise anything if ever I mess up. What I promised him was I'll be a good wife and mother despite my shortcomings.

Herbert was the only child, a favorite nephew in their clan, but he didn't grow up spoiled. His parents were Chinese immigrants living in the Marcelo-Cimitarra border south of the island, and when they met here they got married.

When Herbert was growing up, his parents owned a garment store near the Cimitarra public market which provided them comfortable living. Herbert knew the importance of money and was used to hard work, therefore doing chores comes out naturally to him.

My parents were the *nouveau riche* type. They made fortune in their previous employments and investments --- they were executives of traditional big companies, saved money wisely, invested on properties and retirement funds, and were now enjoying the fruits of their labor. Travel and leisure became their priorities now that their *Tres Marias* had grown up and married. My sisters and I grew

up in luxury, studied in highly respectable schools, had nannies, maids, and drivers at our beck and call. So I had a hard time adjusting to domestic life with Herbert. However, he was understanding and supportive of me.

Everyone on both sides of the family expected me to give birth to twin boys via normal delivery. *Are they crazy?* I understood that giving birth to twins (and boys at that) was a first in both sides of the family, but they should have also understood also the pain I would have to go through.

The doctor allowed Herbert inside the delivery room when I was about to deliver. I remember that he wore a scrub suit and mask just like what the doctor and nurses were wearing. He held my right hand as he coached me on my breathing.

"One, two, three, push!" he said.

"Fuck you!" I shouted in pain. *Why should I curse Herbert when I agreed to get pregnant in the first place anyway?*

JUST AFTER MY 27TH BIRTHDAY, my eldest sister, Angela, and her family arrived here for a two-week Asia-Pacific tour. My parents invited my other sister, Lisa, and her family to join us for lunch. Suddenly, we were hosting a reunion. Although getting together like this was fun, it

became stressful for me when my family started poking at my private life.

"You don't have a boyfriend yet?" asked Angela.

"I'm dating someone," I replied. "But I don't call Herbert my 'boyfriend'. I would rather say that he's my good friend who happens to be a boy," I continued, sounding a bit flippant.

"What do you really want from life?" asked Dad seriously.

"To be successful," I immediately answered.

I wanted to move on to the next topic or else I would find myself being grilled again.

"And what do you mean by successful?" he continued.

"You know, having money, which I have, having a good job, which I also have and I'm planning to climb on top, by the way."

"How about having your own family?" asked Mom.

"Mom, I'm not thinking about that. yet," I answered.

"Well, you should be," my mother said. "You're not getting any younger."

"And I cannot be successful by just being single, huh?" I asked them.

"Irene," Angela answered. "The true essence of a woman is becoming a mother."

"That's true, baby sister," Lisa, who was seated beside me, agreed as she tapped my hand.

WE WERE A GROUP WHEN WE ENTERED a local pub near our office. However, Herbert and I decided to sit on a separate table. The others must have thought we were a couple but I felt we were something more casual.

"Herbert," I started while drinking an ice-cold beer. "What do you think a woman should be?"

He turned to me with a puzzled look in his eyes as he put down his drink.

"I would like to know your honest opinion," I said pretending to ignore his puzzled look. "How do you define a woman?"

He smiled and looked afar, probably thinking of what or how to answer the question.

"For me, a woman should be a wife, a mother, a friend, and a mistress all in one," he said lifting his glass and smiled. "A wife who will be my partner; a mother who will take care of me and our children; a friend in times of need; and a mistress for a good fuck."

I smiled at his answer while I observed him take his drink. Thoughts on being a woman, success, and fulfillment whirled inside my mind as these thoughts circled around Herbert's answer. I felt the same way about men, and so far Herbert was both a good friend and a good fuck.

Suddenly, my loins and my heart (*Yes, I have to admit, it started with my loins first.*) longed for him. I also remembered my calculations; I was fertile within the next 48 hours. I could make my move now or wait for another menstrual cycle.

"Why did you ask?" I heard him ask which jolted me back to reality.

I shook my head and said, "Nothing. I'm not even sure if I could be that kind of woman. Sometimes, I think it is scary --- that being a wife and mother. But on the other hand, it feels inevitable."

Herbert took my hand and squeezed it. "You have nothing to worry about," he said. "It will just come naturally."

I smiled at him and stared at his eyes.

"What are you thinking?" he asked, staring back at me and still holding my hand.

I slightly bowed my head and moved nearer to him. I put my other hand on his shoulder.

"Herbert," I whispered to his ear. "I want to play mistress."

He gave me a sly grin and kissed me lightly on the lips.

"Come on, let's get out of here," he whispered.

NO DOUBT I WAS WET DOWN THERE, hot, and horny. My loins longed for him that I had to seduce him with my nakedness. So I got out of the bathroom, covered only with a towel wrapped around me. As soon as I reached the bed, I took off the towel and lay down. Herbert was sitting on the chair, a bottle of beer on his hand. He stared at me, he didn't speak. I opened my legs wide enough for him to see my cunt. I put my middle finger on my clitoris and started to stroke it gently.

I smiled at him, seducing him to come over and kiss me. He finished his beer and put the bottle on the side table. He got up and went near the bed, knelt down and kissed my cunt. He removed my hand, lifted my thighs and held my butt as he started to kiss my femininity. I gave a moan of pleasure and undulated my hips, pushing in surrender to him. He didn't stop until I shouted; my back arched, and gave in to the uncontrollable twitching. Then I felt more wetness. He got up, removed his clothes and was soon on top of me with his arms around me. I put my arms around his neck; I raised my legs higher and put them around his waist. He entered me perfectly. He made slow thrusts as he kissed my lips and breasts

alternately. We were breathing heavily, groaning words that reflected our mutual pleasure --- "Lovely!", "Yes!", "Harder!", "Fuck!", "Shit!", and even "God!" and we started moving faster and harder as our climaxes built. We clasped our hands, moaned and shouted together when we came.

WITHIN TWO MONTHS AFTER I GAVE BIRTH to Brian and Brandon, I got myself tangled with the responsibilities of a wife and mother. I kept on getting up in the middle of the night to breast feed the babies.

At first, I liked the idea of breastfeeding because that's what mammals like us should do. However, after a week or two, I realized that it was not for me so I switched to bottle feeding. There were times when I got impatient.

However, Herbert was patient enough with the twins. He, too, would get up in the middle of the night on weekends to feed the babies.

Herbert and his family expected me to be a wife and mother first and foremost. So most of the time, I was responsible with anything that concerns the household --- from menu planning to groceries, to medicines and personal care of the twins. I was forced to learn how to cook very well.

God bless rice cookers, oven toasters, blenders, and microwaves. I bought cookbooks and followed

them to the letter until my meals could pass Herbert's taste, at least. But he was not complaining. He understood my struggles.

However, my mother in-law would visit and criticize the way I carry Brian, my choice of house clothes for Brandon, and even my cooking. Sometimes, she would tell me to save money instead of buying new things. She said hand-me-downs and second hand items like strollers and walkers were good enough --- she had a point, but I still resented her criticism.

My parents would visit and put more things into my head: "Always check on Herbert's affairs," "Get yourself a house of your own, and make sure the title should be in your name," "Hire a nanny or a maid," "Look at your eldest sister, she's doing well in America," and "What is this? Why are you letting the twins use hand-me-down strollers?"

*Oh, my God! Where will I stand?*

## 3 . BILLY

---

"SO YOU FELT YOU WERE IN THE MIDDLE of two rocks about to squeeze you?" Ana asked as she was about to start her meal.

"I really didn't know where to stand at that time," I said as I sliced the meat on my plate. "I felt like, damned if I do, damned if I don't. I even reached the point that I was..."

"--- unsure of yourself?" she continued.

I nodded. Ana has a good perception that she knows how to finish our sentences. I've always found it one of her remarkable but sometimes annoying traits.

"I think that was the point I started feeling that our marriage was about to go downhill," I said after chewing a bite.

I WAS CALLED FOR A FINAL INTERVIEW with a Senior Operations Manager. My Team Supervisor recommended me to be promoted as Team Supervisor almost two years after being hired.

Since the company promotes an open door policy, managers' offices were in cubicles. I entered the cubicle and saw a tall, slim, handsome man about my age. He was typing something on his laptop so I assumed he was busy. I knocked on his cubicle.

"Hi, come in," he said as he heard my knock.

"Good morning," I greeted.

It was already five o'clock in the morning when I was called.

"Have a seat," he said. "You're Irene Tan, right?"

"Yes, sir," I answered.

"Don't call me Sir. We're in an American company and everyone calls each other by their first name here. Just call me Billy."

I smiled as I felt being welcomed and made myself comfortable on my seat.

"Let me just finish this email, will that be okay?" he asked.

I nodded and gave him a smile.

After a few minutes, he took a set of stapled sheets of paper from a pile on his right. I saw that it was my resume, evaluation sheets and recommendation from my Team Supervisor. As usual in an interview, the first question would be asking about me.

"I'm Irene Tan, married, with twins in their terrible twos," I started. "My husband also works here as TSR 1."

"Yeah, that name is familiar," Billy said.

The interview went on and Billy asked why I applied for the position.

"Well, I wanted to gain experience," I answered.

I was already processing the things I wanted to say in my mind and I felt like reciting a list of possible answers.

"I want to learn more about the business. I want to challenge myself to go the next level. I may be hypocrite if I say I don't like the title and pay increase that goes with it."

The need for money may have sprung from the fact that my sisters at my age that time were earning more. I was happy when I graduated in college. However, I felt my parents' pessimism because I graduated B.S. Commerce major in Business Administration. They preferred me to take Accountancy or Nursing, or Physical Therapy, or any sciences that will lead me to become a lawyer or doctor like most of them in the clan.

My eldest sister, Angela, graduated B.S. Nursing and is now in the US working in a hospital in New York City. She married an American doctor and they're well off living in the East Coast. She sends money and gifts to us every now and then and they spend vacations around the world.

My other sister, Lisa, graduated Doctor of Dental Medicine and her dental practice here in Marcelo was going strong. She, too, married well and travels a lot. So my parents expected me to do the same.

So I took Medical Technology after my high school graduation thinking that if ever I will not push through with my medical course, I can still be a medical technologist and probably would own a clinical laboratory.

However, my first semester was sort of a "disaster". It was my first time to be free from the bondage of the convent school and of my parents. So I took the opportunity to do the things I wanted, which were forbidden to me before --- going out late at night with friends, going to the movies with a

guy, having a boyfriend, making out inside the theater, and having sex. And after the semester, when I received low grades in natural sciences, I've realized that I didn't like that major anyway. So I shifted to commerce, hoping to become an accountant someday. However, I failed the qualifying exams to enter major in Accounting.

I knew my parents were disappointed but they let me go on with my commerce course. I looked for a job after graduation because I didn't want to become a burden on my family. Also, I didn't like being told what to do, so I took the first job offer that got my way just so I could have independence.

My interview with Billy went well. He shook my hand and assisted me out to his cubicle, offering me coffee at the cafeteria before taking a conference call with his boss.

After a few days, I received a notification that I passed the final interview and will start my Team Leadership 101 training Monday the next week.

As expected, my pay increased as well as my responsibilities. My parents were happy, too. Things began to look well.

"That's good," my father said. "At least, you're on the right track."

Herbert was proud of me when he heard the news. He was even encouraged by his Team Supervisor to follow suit. But as Herbert had said, he has no intention of getting promoted. Because of that, Herbert could afford to stay at home longer

with the twins (which he liked more than being promoted) .

My mother in-law once complained about my lack of time with the twins. On the other hand, my mom would say that I should hire a nanny.

"Mom, we can't afford a nanny," I told her. "My in-laws would not even entertain that idea."

"Then, if that's the case, try to make time with your twins," my mother advised. "Look at your sisters; they have time with their kids. Lisa is now in Hong Kong with her children. How about you? Have you filed passport applications for Brandon and Brian?"

On the domestic front, I must admit, I lost my appetite for sex during those times of struggle as a working mom. Herbert tried to seduce me but I was never in the mood. One night, I was lying on my side and felt Herbert's arms around me. He kissed my nape and put his legs over me. I felt his erection behind me. I turned to face him and gave in to his kisses. He moved quickly, and aggressively, he was hungry for me that he entered me immediately.

"I'm sorry if I bypassed the foreplay," he whispered. "I've miss you so much."

"Hmmm..." I moaned that sounded like a hum.

However, I felt so clinical, so technical. I wished he didn't notice I was faking it. He continued with his maneuver until he came and panted afterwards. I pretended to pant as well.

"Thank you," he whispered to my ears.

"I need to go to the bathroom," I said and got up.

ANOTHER NIGHT, I SAW HERBERT having a hard time zipping his pants.

"You've gained weight," I said while rubbing a towel on my hair to dry. "Your tummy is starting to bulge."

"Well, it goes with fatherhood, I guess," he said as he put on his belt.

I stared at the mirror and started combing my hair. I was looking at Herbert's reflection as he started putting on his socks and shoes. Fatherhood suited him well. After being married to him for three years, I don't find him sexy anymore. Abruptly I realized that I'm no longer turned-on with his half-naked body, and even less so when he's totally naked.

On the other hand, I couldn't imagine "letting myself go" due to motherhood. With my position at the office, I can't afford to look unattractive. So I tried my best to diet, exercise, and maintain my figure which Herbert, sad to say, wouldn't do.

Sometimes, he would whisper to my ear, inviting me to have sex with him. I was not sure if it

was wrong timing on his part, but I never seemed to be in the mood. So my response would range from "I'm sorry, I'm tired." or "I have my period." or "I don't want to get pregnant again."

I knew he was disappointed every time I turned him down. So his alternative would be to masturbate in the bathroom. Once, I caught him masturbating and pretended that I didn't notice. I felt guilty sometimes for turning him down so I decided to give in to his desires. I approached him, offering a quickie against the sink. Memories of our first wild fucking in the bathroom of that motel came to mind while we're doing it in our own bathroom. Unfortunately, I vividly remembered the act, but not the feeling.

RAISING UP TWIN BOYS WAS CHALLENGING, too. Sometimes, Herbert and I would fight on trivial matters. I was very tired when I came home from work. Without even changing clothes, I kicked my shoes off my feet and lay down on bed. Then I heard the babies cry.

"Can you check what they're crying about?" I heard Herbert from the bathroom. "I just started cleaning here."

"Herbert, I'm tired!" I raised my voice so he could hear me.

But then again, as Herbert would insist, it's still my duty to check on the kids. I had no choice but to get up and check the twins. I've checked their diapers, they were dry. I tried to put their feeding bottles in their mouth but they pushed them away. I've checked their temperatures with my hand, no signs of fever. I've checked their mouth, no signs of new tooth or swollen gums or inflamed tonsils. Still, they kept on crying. Out of frustration, I shouted.

"What's the matter with the two of you?!"

"Hey, don't shout at them," I heard Herbert shouting. "If you can't keep them silent, let's exchange places. Clean the bathroom here and I'll take care of them."

I carried Brian and stroked my palm on his back as I swayed and hummed a lullaby. At that time, between cleaning the bathroom and taking care of the kids, I would rather choose the latter.

Then I saw Herbert coming out of the bathroom, drying his hand with a towel and carried Brandon. Together, we hummed a familiar lullaby and swayed the kids. And as if on cue, both kids stopped crying and they fell asleep after a few minutes. I gave a sigh of relief when I lay down Brian back to his crib. Herbert lay down Brandon down as well. He tapped my shoulder and returned to his cleaning.

I went back to our bed, lay down, and fell asleep immediately with my office clothes still on.

HERBERT TRIED TO STRENGTHEN our marriage. He made sure that we would go out as a family. We discussed plans. We decided to spend the twins' first Christmas with Herbert's family in his hometown.

Typical Chinese, the Tans were so clannish that most of them live together on the same block. Herbert had been the first to move away. I found the women in their family domesticated and nevertheless proud of themselves. They genuinely appeared happy and contented.

Herbert's female cousins showed me their handicrafts --- crocheted or knitted sweaters, fashion jewelry they made out of beads, pearls and shells, sewn dresses, curtains, pillowcases, and tablecloths.

"Have you finished the cross stitch project you were doing?" asked one of them who I remembered saw me doing a cross stitch while I was still pregnant.

"No, I haven't" I said as I shook my head. "I didn't have the time."

Not only I didn't have the time to finish it, but also I didn't have any more perseverance to go on. After sewing baby pillowcases and blankets, I tried to sew curtains for our windows, pillowcases for the throw pillows, table runners and tablecloth for the dining table. Tired of using the sewing machine, I shifted to cross stitch, thanks to the suggestion of a

co-worker. I was able to make two projects and had them framed and hung on the wall. I failed to finish the third, the one Herbert's cousin saw me doing.

I took one of those hand-crafted bracelets. "It's beautiful," I said as I touched the colorful crystals that were joined by thin wires.

"I sell that for one thousand two hundred pesos with matching earrings, ring, and necklace," she said. "It's a genuine crystal I'm selling. I also accept made-to-orders. If you know someone who is willing to buy or sell these, let me know."

I smiled at the thought that they're making money out of their hobbies. But the thought of me having a hobby in a domestic setting, and making a business out of it doesn't fit my persona. I don't think I could make more money doing just that.

"This is cute," I said as took a piece of knitted sweater. "Did you make this?"

"Yes," another cousin answered. "You should try sewing shirts for your twins," she continued. "It's much better than buying them from the stores."

I smiled at her but inside I groaned. *I couldn't imagine how boring their lives must be!*

BECAUSE OF MY DOMESTIC SITUATION, the office became a comfort zone for me. It was the

place where I was appreciated, honored, and respected. That was also the time when Billy took notice of me. He taught me the ins and outs of the business; he shared to me his report templates which I could use; he would coach me about leadership skills. He even said that I have a potential and I could go far.

All Team Supervisors, Senior Team Supervisors, and Operations Managers were required to attend a quarterly business review. The meeting was held inside the boardroom. Senior Operations Manager Billy Regino presided the meeting on behalf of our Program Director. As Billy was showing a Power Point presentation about the business' performance last quarter, I couldn't help compare him with Herbert.

Both of them have the same height and built. Herbert's looks are Chinese, but Billy has subtle Spanish features. Both of them look good with their eyeglasses on, but Billy looked more like Clark Kent. Both of them were eloquent speakers but Billy exuded more confidence. Billy was going somewhere, he was in charge and magnetic. As I continued comparing Herbert and Billy, it became apparent that I was having a secret crush on Billy Regino.

"I wouldn't be here without Billy's help. He was not just my mentor, he was my strength," I told Ana.

"So you spent more time in the office than at home," she said as we continued with our lunch.

I TOOK A LEAVE from the office that Friday evening because I received an invitation for a concert. Camille, one of my high school friends and a Vixen like me, called a week ago and offered me a free ticket. Since I got married, I haven't seen any of the Vixens and haven't had a legitimate ladies' night out with them.

Herbert knew that I'll be going out that night so we agreed to let his mother come to take care of the twins. I was already dressed up and putting on my make-up when Herbert entered the room. He was ready to go to the office for his shift.

"Mama called," he said as he went beside me.

He stared at the mirror looking at my reflection and held my shoulders.

"She can't make it tonight. Some issues came out at the store and she has to take care of that. Sorry, Irene, but you have to stay to take care of the kids."

He kissed my head and said, "I have to go now. Take care, okay?"

I was still holding the brush for my blush as my mind processed what I've just heard from him. I just stared at the mirror, saw Herbert leave the room. As soon as I heard the doorknob clicked, I

threw the brush in front of me and buried my face on my palms.

YEARS HAD PASSED and I was promoted to Senior Team Supervisor. I had under my supervision five to eight Team Supervisors that time. My father was proud of me when he heard the news. But I was not sure if Herbert was proud of me. It might have hurt him again that I went up the corporate ladder with a salary almost twice as he earned that time. But the most proud person was my mentor, Billy.

A buffet was served right after the short awarding program. I fell in line and didn't notice Billy in front of me. He turned around and saw me.

"Ladies first," he said as he put his hands on my shoulders and moved me to his place.

"Thank you," I said appreciating the way he touched me.

"So, how does it feel to be promoted to Senior Team Supervisor, Mrs. Tan?" he asked still holding my shoulders.

"Happy," I answered and gave him a smile. "I've heard from some friends in other departments that you pushed pencils to move that promotion."

"Oh? And what did they tell you?" he asked removing his hands and putting them in his pockets.

"They said that you strongly proposed a different pay scheme for my position," I answered.

"I saw the original pay scheme they were to offer you and it was too low. You deserved much better, so as your senior manager, I proposed to change that. I don't want my team leaving me because of pay issues."

"Well, thank you, Mr. Regino," I said as I started taking a serving of food from the buffet table.

After we have filled our plate with food, we sat on a vacant table at the farthest corner. We felt exclusive and protective of that privacy. We sat side by side, thinking that some managers might want to join us.

"How did Herbert take it?" he asked in a different tone. He sounded somber, and serious. "Is he okay?"

I took a bite of pasta and didn't answer his question. Not that I don't want to, I just remembered how Herbert received the news when I told him.

"I don't want to pry into your family life but as I see it, your husband has been contented being a senior agent until now," he said.

"He says he's okay," I said. "But honestly, I feel depressed. He's not appreciative of my successes lately. More often, they're coming between us."

"A friendly advice, Irene," he said. "You'd better accept that, he's not as motivated as you are. That's the problem, but it's also why you are so special. You are more ambitious and career-driven. You'd better straighten things out with him."

I nodded. "I will," I said and continued eating. "By the way, since we already shifted to something personal. I hope you don't mind asking why you're not married yet."

He gave a short laugh and said, "Well, I haven't found a woman who will accept me and my 'disability'."

"What do you mean disability?" I asked.

"Although I can still have sex, I can't have a child," he said as he took a bite of his food.

"I'm sorry," I said, surprised with his honesty.

"No, don't be," he smiled. He looked as if he were about to say something else, but stopped himself.

Even though I had expressed my sorrow, I was thinking what a nice disability he had.

IT WAS ALREADY PAST EIGHT in the morning when Billy passed by my workstation.

"Hey, you're still here," he said as he put his weight on the divider.

"I'm just finishing this report, Sir," I said as I continued typing and staring at my monitor.

"Cut that 'Sir'," he said. "Just call me Billy."

"Sorry," I said.

"Have you eaten breakfast?" he asked. "Come on, let's eat, my treat. I'm starving."

"I have to finish this first," I said.

"Come on, you can get back to it later," he said as he pulled my hands away from the keyboard.

He pressed some keys on the keyboard to lock my computer. I laughed at his persistence. He was the boss after all.

We could have eaten at some restaurant nearby but Billy drove his car farther down south. We stopped by a newly opened restaurant that prides itself on homemade meals. The restaurant was small; it looked like an old living room converted into a cozy diner. We had a hearty breakfast and a lively chat.

Back on the car, he was about to start the engine when he said, "I've been observing that you're going home later each night," he started. "I

asked Herbert awhile ago and he said that you're becoming dedicated with your work."

"Did he really say that?" I asked.

He nodded. "Is there a problem between the two of you?"

I shook my head.

He didn't start the engine. Instead, he put his right arm around my shoulders.

"Tell me," he said. "Are you overwhelmed by your work?"

"No," I answered. "It's just that..."

I looked at him. He was waiting for me to continue.

"...I'm starting to feel better at the office rather than at home. Please, don't get me wrong, Billy. I love my family. I love the kids. They're sweet."

"How about Herbert? Do you still love him?"

I couldn't answer. I bowed my head to avoid his stare.

He took my chin up using his other hand. "Irene, if you really love him, you shouldn't be here," he said. "You're not being honest with your feelings."

He kissed me lightly on the lips. It felt so sweet and warm. I welcomed him with my hungry mouth;

hungry for something sensual like this. My hands held his face and slid down to his shoulders. I felt his tongue entered my mouth and I realized I wanted to go farther with him. But I pushed away, breaking the kiss. He was surprised.

"I'm sorry, this is all wrong," I said and straightened out my blouse.

I immediately opened the car and went out. I ran to hail the first cab I could see and rode back to the office crying.

AFTER THAT INCIDENT, I tried to avoid Billy as much as I could. I tried to leave promptly at six in the morning and join Herbert for a ride home. Whenever I would bump into Billy along the corridors, I would turn back, pretended that I forgot something where I came from. I knew I looked silly. But I couldn't stand the thought that I've left him in the car just like that and me feeling sorry about it.

The next week, Ted Smith, our Vice-President for Operations, announced an incentive plan for the week. The program that would reach the highest sales and customer satisfaction rating would receive a budget for a pizza party. Everyone was excited.

Pizza party would mean an hour or two off the phones or extended breaks for the agents. We rallied our teams to reach the target and they

responded. At the end of the week Ted announced that Billy's program, our program, won.

So Billy sent an email to all Senior Team Supervisors down to the agents to come at the cafeteria at one o'clock in the morning for the party. I didn't receive an email and so I thought I was not invited. He might still be mad at me. I felt bad. I felt left out.

However, since Herbert's team was under Billy's program, too, he was able to attend the pizza party. When he saw me still working, he took two slices and brought it to me at my workstation.

"Here, eat some," he said. "You've been working too hard."

"Thanks, Herbert," I said. "I'll just finish these and I'll go home with you."

"Are you sure?" he asked. "You don't have any meeting or other activities?"

I shook my head.

"Is there something wrong, Irene? Are you sick or something?"

"No. I'm fine," I reassured him and kissed him on the lips. *How I wish I could tell Herbert how bad I felt right now.*

WHEN MY PARENTS LEARNED of my second promotion to Senior Team Supervisor, they gave me a car to use. Dad said it would my birthday gift from him.

At first, Herbert was reluctant to accept but when he thought of the convenience in going out with the twins, he agreed. He said that I should use it more often since I usually come home late or go out for a meeting outside the office.

One day, after shift, as I was walking to my car, Billy came out from behind me. My hurt at not being invited to the party had turned into anger. He couldn't take this out on me.

"Still avoiding me, huh?" he said.

I turned around and saw him opening the passenger's side of his car that was parked beside mine. I saw him take something from the dashboard. I scoffed in surprise.

"Excuse me, I'm not avoiding you. You're the one who's been leaving me out of company events."

"Oh yeah?"

I hated it when he says that.

"Yeah!" I shouted back, angrier than I should have been. "You invited the whole team to that party and you purposefully left me out!"

"You're right," he said, surprising me enough that it shut my mouth. "I was afraid to see you with

Herbert around. But I have something to make up for that, if you'll take it."

He handed me an envelope.

I opened it while he got into his car and I saw that it contained two gift certificates to a newly opened spa. One offered a complete aromatic body massage with sauna bath and the other offered a complete manicure and pedicure with spa treatments.

Billy caught my eye as he pulled out of the parking space. I was already in my car, trying to digest the implications of the invitation.

I drove automatically, my eyes flicking to the white envelope on my dashboard.

The traffic light turned red before I reached the intersection. While waiting for the light to turn green, an idea entered my mind as I saw the envelope lying on the dashboard. It made me grab my cell phone and dial a number.

"Herbert? Hi, I won't be coming home. I'm not yet done with my reports. If ever I finish past lunch time, I might sleep here at the office. I think I have an overnight bag in the car. Sure. Thanks."

I smiled after I made that call and turned left towards the spa, following Billy's car.

THE HANDS OF THE MASSEUSE on my body were comforting. The aroma of the massage oil and the scented candles that filled the room entered my lungs and brought relief. I tried not to sleep but my eyes kept on closing and my mind kept on shutting. I imagined Billy's smile as he handed me the envelope earlier. I smiled at the thought of that Post-it note attached inside it. Then suddenly I woke up when I heard the masseuse said that she's done.

I indulged myself with the second gift certificate has to offer. I was given a royal treatment ever since I entered the spa and I enjoyed every minute of it.

When asked what color of nail polish I would prefer, I chose bright red. A color I seldom use but worth trying out on my hands and feet.

While waiting for the polish to dry, I couldn't help but think about the little note attached to the gift certificates. It was Billy's hotel room number, I was sure of it. I saw him go in before me but the spa partitions off the two genders.

When my nails were dry and my body supple, I pressed the up button on the elevator and waited for the door to open. I held my breath on the elevator ride and walked slowly, intentionally down the carpeted hallway, looking for his room number. Then, with a brief pause to forget Herbert, to forget the twins, I knocked confidently on his door.

His smile confirmed that he had been expecting me. He took my hand and let me in as his other

hand closed the door behind us. I stood there silently waiting. Both of us were speechless, yet in our hearts we knew what we're supposed to do next. When I kissed him the spell broke, and when we reached his bed, we fell on top of it, stripping each other's clothes and starting what we should have done three weeks ago.

BILLY AND I WERE LOCKED in each other's arms and naked under the blanket we were sharing. He kept on kissing my forehead as I kept on stroking my fingers on his chest. We lay there silently, enjoying each other's warmth and company.

"A penny for your thoughts?" I heard him ask.

"I was just thinking, what if somebody knew? What if Herbert knew?"

"No one knew you came here. I'm sure you didn't even know until just a few hours ago."

"I'm just afraid, Billy," I said. "I don't want to get into another embarrassing situation once again."

For the first time, I've told someone my most embarrassing moment that happened many years ago during my first job after graduating college.

I told Billy how I started out as a receiving clerk for a trading company. It was a small starting up

company back then with two manager's office and two clerical desks. After a year, the company has expanded and hired a new manager to head the procurement side of the business. The owner of the company promoted me to be the secretary of that new manager.

The manager was Jake Garcia and he was ten years my senior. He looked young and respectable. I admitted I had an immediate crush on him but I tried not to show it. During one of our breaks, we were having coffee together when he told me that he liked me in a different sort of way. He started courting me secretly.

So as not to raise suspicion from other people around us, and as the company grew to more than twenty employees, Jake and I decided to have it as a clandestine affair. It was so thrilling to expect an intimate time with him after office hours without people knowing. We had devised a plan on how and where should we meet.

One day, a woman came to the office looking for Jake. She was dark and looked older. She was holding a brown document envelope. As his secretary, I stood up and introduced myself. I told her that Jake was in a middle of a call with a client.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" I asked. "By the way, may I know your name so I could tell him."

"I'm Carol Garcia, Jake's wife."

I was speechless when I heard her reply. I calmly pressed the intercom button and waited for Jake to answer it on the other end. He knew that I wouldn't disturb him during calls but he sounded concerned.

"What's the matter? Is there anything wrong?" he asked over the phone.

"Mrs. Carol Garcia is here, Sir."

He, too, was speechless at first. I heard him drew a deep breath and said, "Okay, let her in."

I stood up and led his wife to Jake's office. As soon as she entered the room, I immediately closed the door. I looked at the other employees; they seem not to know anything yet.

Fifteen minutes later, we heard shouting inside Jake's office. All employees went back to work but couldn't help but look at the locked door, wondering what was going on. The office is not sound-proof enough so some details were heard. His wife confronted him about his other woman which Jake vehemently denied. Then the door opened and his wife confronted me.

"You're his secretary, right?" she asked.

I nodded. I couldn't help but notice what she was holding. "Now, tell me," she said as she slapped down on top of my table the one I was looking at. "Is this you?"

I couldn't believe what I saw on my table: an 8"x10" colored photograph of Jake and me kissing inside his car.

"Answer me!" she shouted.

I was speechless and turned to Jake, who was also speechless standing at his door. I looked around and everyone was staring at me.

His wife took my silence as a yes and pulled my hair, slapped my face and pushed me towards Jake. Jake put his arms around me so I wouldn't fall.

"You'd better go to hell, both of you!" she shouted, then immediately left, crying.

"That's what I'm afraid of," I said to Billy still clinging to him on bed. "I'm afraid to see Herbert go mad once he finds out about us. I haven't seen him mad and I don't want to see that day."

"Why not file a divorce and say that you don't love him anymore?" Billy asked.

"Divorce is not an option," I answered. "What would my parents and sisters say? The twins are so young. It's unthinkable."

"So would you like to end this relationship?"

"No, Billy. I need this. I want you. I can't imagine myself without you."

"Then what are you planning to do?"

"It has to be top secret. No one can ever know."

## 4 . CLOSURE

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"OH, MY GOD! You DID that behind Herbert's back?" Ana exclaimed.

"Please, don't tell him that," I pleaded to her. "He doesn't know. Although I could sense that he knew a little bit of something."

"Okay, I'll promise," she said holding my hand. "So that's what you've meant of living a double life."

"Yes, domestic life with Herbert and corporate life with Billy. But to be honest, it was difficult for me. I was an overwhelmed housewife, confused daughter, and undecided Irene."

I WAS SURPRISED WHEN I OPENED THE DOOR.

"Mommy!" the twins, then six, greeted me. "Have you brought us our Happy Meal?"

Instantly, I remembered that I promised them last night before going to the office that I would bring each of them a Happy Meal when I arrive. However, I forgot all about it and the nearest McDonald's was out of the way in going home.

"Look what Mommy brought home," I excitedly showed the twins my new plaque of appreciation. "Mommy got an award at the office!"

The kids just stared at the plaque and still asked for their Happy Meal. I put the plaque on the shelf to display it.

"I'm sorry, Mommy forgot," I said. "Don't worry. I'll make it up to you guys, how about this weekend?"

"Aw, not again," they chorused and sadly they went back to their play.

I saw Herbert standing by the shelf, staring blankly at the plaque I just placed. He then turned to me and said, "See? I told you, they never forget a promise."

IT WAS LUNCH TIME WHEN I ARRIVED home. The aroma undoubtedly came from Herbert in the kitchen. I opened the door and went in. Herbert was at the dining table preparing something.

"Good timing," he said as he was busy putting on his finishing touches. "Come on, let's have lunch together. I've got ribs, in a sweet spicy sauce just the way you like, and mashed potatoes with bacon bits, ---"

"Oh, I'm sorry," I dismissed him hurriedly, kicking off my shoes and heading upstairs to lie down, "I should have called you earlier. Billy treated the team to a breakfast buffet for winning the Best Program again. I'm not hungry, I just want to go relax."

I left him with plates in his hands and a smile falling off his face.

"I'm really sorry, Herbert," I said and turned away. "I have to get some sleep now. I still have a shift later."

I'm not sure if I heard him right when he said "Happy Anniversary."

HERBERT TRIED HIS BEST to be a good husband and father at home and at the office. However, whenever I am with Herbert, I felt he was out of place. I couldn't even brag about him. I

usually talk with other supervisors, managers, and directors while he was a relatively unknown, an agent much known as the husband of Irene Tan, the Senior Team Supervisor, rather than Herbert Tan, the Senior Tech. Support Rep.

Sometimes, we would fight about this, too. Sometimes, he would give a hint of his jealousy which I totally denied. He might have sensed about my affair with Billy. But he didn't bring out the issue. Instead, I turned it on to his "alleged affairs" and eventually, his lesser pay.

I stared at the total amount of the bill I was holding. Then I remembered the day when Herbert and I were taking our one-hour break together at the cafeteria. He opened our lunch boxes which he just reheated from the microwave oven.

"Herbert," I started. "Is it okay if I applied for a Team Supervisor position?"

"Sure," he said. "I don't see any problem with that."

"How about you, aren't you going to apply? There's a job opening in your line of business."

"Nah," he said. "I like my position better. Work eight hours, go home, eat, sleep, that's simple. No need for the additional work associated with supervisory tasks."

"Don't you have any ambition?"

"I do," he said. "I want to have a business of our own and be our own supervisors some day. But that will take time, I know."

That was many years ago when he was still comfortable with the idea of me moving up the corporate ladder. That was the time he was still very proud of my achievements.

However, change goes with time. I gave a heavy sigh as I folded back the electric bill and approached Herbert who was playing an online game.

"Can we talk, Herbert?" I asked.

"Sure," he said while staring at the monitor and playing as a knight in a medieval times. "What is it all about?"

"Is it okay if you add at least three thousand pesos in your contribution here?" I said. "Bills keep on rising these days."

"I can only promise one thousand five hundred to two thousand," he said as he continued clicking the keyboard and mouse simultaneously for his moves. "You know that I don't earn as much as you do."

*There he goes again. How many times in our married life he said that statement to me?* Out of frustration, I turned his computer off.

"Hey!" he shouted. "What's the matter with you?"

"Listen," I said. "I am fed up seeing you so complacent when I am working hard here for the money. Don't you think I get tired, too? I felt like all of you are too dependent on me!"

"Why do you sound like I'm not working?"

"You're not working nearly as hard as I do!"

"Why should I? We're living comfortably. Can't you be happy with that?"

"No, I'm not!"

"Do you think that you're still in Zona Recidencial with your parents?" he raised his voice. "You already have a family of your own! It is US now!"

"Yes, I do have a family. But this is not the kind of life I expected it to be!" I shouted back.

Herbert stared at me. "Now that you've said it, who do you think wanted this in the first place?"

He left me standing there as his last statement punched me in the gut.

ONE TIME, one of the newly-promoted senior managers treated us to dinner in a French restaurant. I saw Herbert in one corner dining with a woman. I didn't approach him so as not to create

a scene. I made sure that I would arrive home first before he does.

So when he arrived home, I was already sitting on the dining table, waiting for him. I offered him brewed coffee and a slice of chocolate cake.

"No, thanks," he said as he approached and kissed me. "I'm full."

"Why? Have you eaten?" I asked putting down the cup of brewed coffee and his share of the chocolate cake in front of him.

"Yeah. I already had dinner," he said as he stared at them on the table.

"I see. Was the coffee and chocolate cake better eaten with someone beautiful and sexy like her?" I asked as I took a bite from my share of the cake.

Herbert might have sensed where I was coming from. He shook his head and explained.

"Okay, I admit, I was with a friend earlier," he said. "She was my high school classmate and we've talked about her husband who happened to be my bestfriend, too. There's nothing to be jealous about."

But I didn't buy that. I pointed out to him the possible reasons that he could be lying.

"And what do you want me to say?" he asked. "I went to bed with her? Fucked her all night? Is that what you want to hear?"

I stood up and faced him. Anger was welling up on my chest.

"Isn't it true? Just admit it, you sexually-starved brute!"

"Sure, I'm sexually deprived because of you! You wanted me to look like the philandering husband while you're the oh-so-good wife?"

"Am I not working for this family, huh, Herbert? Do I not deserve to be called the good wife here?"

Herbert nodded. "So if you want it that way, then I'll do it."

He went back to the door and opened it.

"Where are you going?" I asked. "We're not yet through!"

"To get laid for real this time!" he said and slammed the door.

THAT WAS THE SAME YEAR I LEFT HIM and the twins. The news spread like fire in the office. Most of them were sympathetic to Herbert. I felt scorn in their stares. They even pointed a finger to Billy as the reason of our separation. But what people don't know was Billy was my source of courage, strength, determination and inspiration.

After a few years, Herbert resigned from Contact Point and decided to set up a business using his back pay as his capital. However, his first attempt to business was a failure. I've heard it was an internet cafe. During that time, Brian was hospitalized because of dengue hemorrhagic fever. Herbert lacked money but were able to survive the challenge because I paid more than half of the hospital bill.

Herbert launched another business which I've heard was slowly picking up.

A year after that, I was promoted again to Senior Operations Manager earning six digits per month. That was the year that I filed a case to dissolve our marriage so I could go on living with Billy.

I didn't care of what my parents had to say. Herbert, too, was not reacting. However, when it came to the custody of the twins that was when the problem started. Herbert insisted that he must have the twins because it was him and his family who took care of them well. I insisted that the children be with me.

One morning, in the parking lot, Herbert approached me as I was about to open my car.

"What do you mean by this?" He asked showing me a folded document. "How dare you leave us and then request for custody of the twins!"

"I'm their mother, Herbert," I said. "I have all the right."

"Where in the books of law that says that fathers can't be parents to their children?" He said. "I've been with them ever since they were born."

"Just talk to my lawyer," I said as I entered my car. I pulled down the window and continued, "If you could afford a better lawyer, anyway."

He put his hands on the window, "What did Billy put in your head?"

"Don't drag Billy into this," I said. "It's my own decision. I can decide for myself!"

"Okay, we'll see that in court," he said. "Just pray that Brian and Brandon won't hate you for doing this."

He went away and I pulled up the window. I started the engine and held the steering wheel.

THE GREAT COURT BATTLE BROUGHT OUT the worst in us. Herbert was pictured the bad person --- a philanderer (because of those women linked to him in his casual relationships), complacent (because he stayed as an agent for many years), squanderer (because of his failed business), and irresponsible father (because of Brian's hospitalization).

Herbert couldn't believe on what he heard in those court hearings that happened. My lawyer

brought out those accusations against him just to prove that I was the complete opposite.

In the end, the court decided in my favor. At first I felt victory especially for my parents. Then I felt sad. I wanted to apologize to Herbert.

"Do you really love kids?" Billy asked as we were having breakfast.

I raised my head and thought of what to say to him. Knowing Billy, whatever I'll say would backfire at me.

"Yes. and no," I answered. "When I was pregnant, I felt the excitement of being a mother. When I was giving birth, I felt the pain. But then I felt satisfied seeing the twins. I am a mother! I kept saying that to myself."

"Is that the real reason why you filed custody of the twins?"

"What do you mean?"

"I just want you to think things over before making big decisions," Billy said. "Why don't you try joint custody as another option?"

I looked at Billy. Maybe, he's right.

IT WAS MONTHS WEEKS AFTER the court decided in my favor the custody of the twins and I should have picked up the boys at their school. However, due to some meetings here and there at the office, I sent a text message to Herbert to see if he could get them for me and agreed to meet somewhere.

I arrived late at Starbucks in La Galleria and saw Herbert and the twins having a good time sipping their Mocha Frappuccinos.

"Sorry, I'm late," I said as I kissed my boys. "Thanks, Herbert. That was a short notice, I'm really sorry."

"Not at all," he said and gave me a smack on the cheek. "So boys, see you next time, okay?"

"You're leaving soon?" I asked. "I haven't ordered my coffee yet. Are you avoiding me, Herbert?"

Herbert and I became too civil. Gone were the days when I used to laugh at his punch lines. *Or has he changed?* I wouldn't blame him. I could only blame myself.

"No, Irene. I'm not," he said and smiled. "I'll need to be back in Buenvenida. I still have a therapy session in Dr. Santiago's clinic."

"Why in Buenvenida?" I asked.

"First, Dr. Manny Santiago is a good friend," he answered. "And second, I've met a beautiful nurse over there."

"Oh..." I uttered.

"And when I thought of a nurse in Buenvenida, the first thing that came into my mind was you. And I didn't even realize that it was actually YOU," I said to Ana laughing on that memory.

"I remembered that, it was on my birthday," Ana said.

Then she continued her story regarding their relationship with Herbert. How she fell for him and crossed the thin line between friends and lovers. THAT was so sweet.

Then, there was silence between us. Now that my initial thoughts that I have entertained before about Herbert's new girlfriend were totally erased, I resolved that they both deserved each other.

"Ana, I'm happy for you. I'm happy for Herbert as well," I broke the silence. "He might have found something in you that he didn't find in me."

We hugged each other like sisters.

HERBERT CAME IN AT THE RESTAURANT past noon and was apologetic.

"I'm sorry if I came late. Too many inquiries at the exhibit," he said. "Are you done with your lunch?"

"Don't worry," I said. "Ana and I are still updating each other."

"Go ahead and order your lunch. We'll order our desserts," Ana said as she raised her hand to call a waiter.

After the waiter took our additional orders and left, Herbert noticed that Ana and I were not talking.

"Why so silent this time?" he asked Ana.

"Well, actually we're done talking about our pretty little secrets," Ana smiled and winked at me.

I smiled back.

"Oh, so you've been telling each other about Billy and me," he smiled at us. "And Irene, I don't need to know the details about your affair with Billy even you kept on denying it before. I've accepted that fact years ago. I see you now as happy and I'm happy for you."

I was speechless and looked at Ana. If Ana can finish sentences, Herbert can sense liars. They're both really are for each other. Now, there's no need for me to worry about that incident with Billy.

Ana had left after lunch. Herbert offered to take me back to my condominium.

"You're already sleepy. I'll drive you back to your condominium unit," he said. "Ana wouldn't mind, I'm sure."

So he drove my car, as careful as a disciplined driver should be, but slow for my fast-paced corporate taste.

"Can't you go any faster than that?" I asked.

"There you go again, Irene."

I laughed. Well, after our divorce, we haven't talked like we used to.

"How are Brandon and Brian?" he asked.

THAT QUESTION BROUGHT ME BACK in time again, back on that day I left them.

"How about Brandon and Brian?" Herbert asked when he saw me going out of the door.

"I'm not taking the twins with me," I said as I carried my things towards the gate. "I have no patience with kids, unlike you."

"Irene, please... Just let me know where you're going." "You don't need to know."

I did not go to my parents' house in the Zona. Instead, I went to a rented studio-type apartment Billy helped me find.

When I arrived I felt happy and relieved. I was happy to be free again. I welcomed the needed space. I called up Billy to tell him I already arrived.

"Want some help there?" he asked.

"Hmm. I don't know," I said as I looked around the newly painted surroundings, unpacked suitcase, and unmade bed. "I'm just relishing the relief I felt after making that big decision."

After we ended our call, I decided to take a shower before unpacking. I didn't care anymore if my parents and sister would know about me leaving Herbert and the twins. I already knew what to reason out.

I was already out of the shower and was drying my hair with a towel when I heard a knock on the door. When I opened the door, I saw Billy holding a grocery bag and bottles of wine and water.

"Brought you some food," he said.

"Come in," I said and turned towards the bed. "Just leave those at the counter." I was just wearing a bathrobe. Billy disappeared around the corner to put down the groceries.

When he turned around he saw me naked, my bathrobe lying on the floor. He approached me and I put my arms around his neck, pulling him into a damp kiss.

"I want you, Billy," I groaned into his ear. "I want you inside me, now!"

"I'm leaving the twins temporarily with you," I said to Herbert. "I'll be back to get them."

It took a lot of courage from me to leave my family behind. A few days after, Herbert approached me at my station and persuaded me to go back home and start all over.

"We don't share the same feelings, Herbert," I said in a corporate-like tone. "It doesn't seem fair to you."

"I admit, we've had bad times," he said when he sat down on a chair across my table. "But that's not a valid reason to go."

"I guess there's nothing much more I can do," I said while staring at my laptop monitor, avoiding his stares. "I know I've got to try and make it without you around."

"The twins, they can't live without you, they need you."

"The twins are better off without me. As for you, I don't love you anymore, Herbert. Can't you see that?"

"I still love you. Don't do this to me... to us."

"Please, Herbert," I said. "Try to understand my situation. It's just no good..."

"Okay, if there's no other way, I'll let you go," he said and stood up. "At least, you've seen me try."

He went away from my station and never looked back.

I felt my eyes were welling up with tears. I've realized that I've wronged the man who treated me so kind.

"THE TWINS ARE FINE. They're asking me if I'll allow them to join a sports clinic this summer," I said as I stared on the road.

"And what did you tell them?" he asked.

"I've realized that the twins are much closer to their father so I told them to ask you instead. The three of you share the same interests in sports."

Herbert laughed. "Okay, so I'll take that as a yes."

"See? I've told you, you've married the wrong woman," I said as we arrived at my condominium.

He carried my things up to my unit and I let him in.

"Better get some sleep. I'd suggest you call Billy and inform him that you'll be late tonight for your shift."

"I can't, I have a call at eleven," I said. "But thanks for bringing me here."

"No problem."

He turned towards the door but I called him back. "Herbert," I said.

He stopped and turned back to me.

"I'm happy for you," I said. "Ana is kind, gutsy, fun to be with, and a good friend. I know you'll be happy with her."

"Thanks, Irene."

"I would like to apologize...for all the wrongs that I've done... I wanted to move on with my life without carrying any emotional baggage... please forgive me..." I was already reciting what was in my mind that I've been preparing to tell him all these years.

"I've forgiven you, Irene," he said. "I'm also asking for your forgiveness."

We were already standing face to face. The silence between us meant that we have forgiven each other. It was felt in our hearts.

"Don't ever hurt Ana," I said. "Or else..."

"Do you think I will do that to her?"

I shook my head and smiled.

"Better warn Billy not to hurt you, too," he said. "Or else I'll get back at him."

"You're going to do that?"

"Sure, just for you," he answered as he put his index finger on my nose. "And don't worry; I have a set of twins plus two stepdaughters to-be to back me up."

We embraced and kissed this time just like close friends that have known each other for a long time.

## 5 . MOVING ON

---

THOSE KISS AND EMBRACE with Herbert that afternoon made me realize how important Billy was to me. I arrived at the office past ten o'clock that evening. Good thing that my first conference call was scheduled at eleven. I was already at my station, responding to some emails that flooded my inbox. I sensed that someone was standing by my cubicle's entrance. I knew it was Billy.

"How was your meeting with Herbert?" he asked holding two cups of coffee. He handed me the other one.

"Great," I answered. "Thanks for the coffee."

He might have misconstrued something. "What do you mean great?"

I smiled. I could sense some jealousy in him. "Why don't you sit down?" I said.

So I told Billy the whole story on what happened at the mall at the Expo that morning.

"Herbert's new girlfriend is one of my best friends in high school. We had a lot of storytelling this morning that Herbert drove me to my condo past three this afternoon. I'm still sleepy."

Billy was silent as he sat on the chair across me.

"The book about Herbert and Irene is now officially closed," I said, reassuring him. "I can go on now with my life... with you Mr. Billy Regino."

He smiled. He took my hand and kissed it.

"By the way, I have on my table your nomination and invitation for the Grand Anniversary party this year," he said. "You have to attend that event. That's an order."

"Yes, boss."

CONTACT POINT, INC. HELD ITS ANNIVERSARY party with a grand awarding ceremony. The company's President and CEO came all the way from Denver, Colorado to witness the event. He was excited to see how his first outsourcing venture here in Asia Pacific was doing.

The party took its Oscar Awards theme to the next level, a black and white formal event. So I bought myself a black Aphrodite gown from a known fashion designer in Marcelo.

Since the party was Saturday night, Billy asked me to go with him right after our shift, which was Saturday morning. He asked me to bring what I should wear on the awards night as I would not be coming home to get them. So I dropped off the twins at Herbert's house before going to the office that Friday evening.

"You don't have a date with Ana tonight, do you?" I asked Herbert after the boys had left the car and entered Herbert's gate.

It had been months after that meeting at the Expo and both of us were now comfortable talking to each other.

"None as of yet," Herbert said smiling. "And if ever I do, I'll make sure that my mom is here or the twins have to go to their grandparents in Cimitarra."

"Okay, sounds fair enough," I said. "I've got to go now." I started the car engine and was about to pull up the car window.

"Hey," he said and put my hand on my car window. "Congratulations!"

"Thanks."

"Say hi to Billy for me."

"Sure," I pulled my car window up and started driving.

I brought an overnight bag and the things I would wear for the awards night to the office. I was nominated for an award and thus, I was invited in this formal affair.

Billy went to my station and assisted me in carrying my things to his car the next day after shift. I thought we will be going to his condominium unit, but I was surprised to see that we're heading to Hotel Delujo, where the anniversary party will be held.

"It is too early for us to be here," I said.

"Surprised?" he asked. "I reserved a room for us so we'll not be caught in traffic tonight going here."

He really reserved a suite for us, as I entered the room; a meal has been prepared and served on the dining table.

"Let's have breakfast first before we sleep."

I had pancakes and hot cocoa for breakfast as Billy had bacon and egg with fried rice and a cup of brewed coffee. We enjoyed our breakfast as we sat beside each other like newlyweds.

I took a shower to freshen me up before going to bed. After I went out of the bathroom, it was Billy's turn to take a shower.

I dried my hair with a towel and put on my pajama. I was not sleepy yet so I decided to read a book. While reading, Billy sat beside me and peered over my shoulder, probably looking to what I was reading. I looked at him. He kissed me on the lips quickly and put his arms around my shoulder.

"You'd better sleep," he said. "You have to look beautiful tonight."

"I'm not yet sleepy," I said. "That's the reason why I'm reading a book here so it could lull me to sleep somehow."

He took the book from my hands and placed it on the side table.

"I'll wear you out faster than a book could," he said.

After placing the book on the table, he wrapped his arms around me and kissed me on the lips. We lay down the bed as he went on top of me, continued to kiss me on the lips. I started responding to his kiss and felt his hands moving on my body. He unbuttoned my top and peeled me off, pulled down my pajama pants, and took off his clothes as well. We were both naked and started fondling each other. I started to heat up as I became delighted on his sweet kisses and sucking of my breasts, his hands stroking my body. My hands explored his body. I enjoyed the warmth of his skin against mine. In a short while, he entered me to where he should be. It was the sweetest thing that happened on that day.

I woke up that afternoon with his kisses. He told me that I still have an appointment at the salon for my hair and make-up. When I was about to dress up, Billy came, and told me that he requested for a service instead of me going there. So we had another round of sex before the beautician arrived.

THE ELEVATOR OPENED to the basement where the function rooms were located. Our event was held at the grand ballroom at the center.

I wore a black Aphrodite inspired gown which was made of smooth and sleek knit fabric that slides over the body, sleeveless and flaunts a dramatic plunging neckline and sensual Y-back. Billy gave me a set of pearls for jewelry to match with the black gown as a gift. He was wearing a black coat and tie that night. I was holding his arm when we went out of the elevator and walked towards then grand ballroom.

Employees with their partners were already coming in. There were picture taking at the red carpet entrance right after the registration booth. After we signed our names and had our pictures taken, Billy and I sat at a table in the farthest corner. As usual, Billy stayed away from the limelight.

The awarding ceremonies were patterned from the Oscars and nominated employees were required

to attend. I received the nomination a few days ago with a formal invitation for this event but the announcement of winners will be done during the ceremonies.

"The nominees for Best Performance of a Senior Manager for Operations are:" the male presenter said.

"Michael Sevilla for Charter High Speed Internet," the female presenter said.

"Irene Alejandrino for Charter Billing." "And Edmund Garcia for US Airways."

"And the winner is... Irene Alejandrino for Charter Billing!"

Everybody clapped and employees from Charter Communications account cheered. Billy stood up and assisted me out of my seat. He gave me a kiss before I went up the stage to receive my award.

I ALREADY GOT BACK TO MY SEAT after my acceptance speech. I was playing with my almost empty wine glass, swirling it over and over while staring at the performers on stage. Billy might have sensed that I became bored with the long program.

"Would you like to leave now?" he whispered to my ear.

"Could we?" I asked back. "The program hasn't been finished yet."

He just tilted his head to indicate that we would just sneak out. Actually, I sensed that his loins must be longing for mine. I've noticed how he stared at my cleavage and how he looked at me while I recited my acceptance speech awhile ago.

So I stood up, took my trophy, and followed him. We were about to reach the door when Billy stopped.

"Ted Smith," he said as he shook the hand of an old man I recognized as his boss. "How are you doing, Sir?"

Theodore Smith was one of the Vice-Presidents of the company, an American who has been here in the country for the past fifteen years. It was known that he had married someone from Marcelo.

"Billy, nice to see you here," he greeted.

"I would like you to formally meet Irene Alejandrino, one of our Senior Managers."

We shook hands. "Nice meeting you, Ted."

"Now I can associate a face to that familiar name," he said.

We usually exchange email correspondences and talk via conference calls. But we were never introduced formally face to face. "By the way, congratulations, Irene."

"Thank you, Sir," I said.

"I was just waiting for my wife," Ted said. "She went to the ladies' room. Oh, here she is. Billy, Irene, I would like you to meet my wife."

I saw a familiar woman approaching us. A Vixen gal like me.

"Hi Irene," Eva said and kissed me on the cheek. "You look gorgeous."

"You know each other?" Ted asked her.

"Yes," Eva and I answered in chorus and laughed.

"What a small world," said Billy.

"One moment please," I said and pulled Eva away from the guys. "I didn't know you're Ted's wife until earlier," I whispered.

"Well, Ted and I decided to keep a low profile," she chuckled.

A FEW DAYS LATER, I was already at my office cubicle, checking on some emails that flooded my inbox. I sensed that someone was standing by my cubicle's entrance. As usual, I knew it was Billy, holding a covered cup of brewed coffee in each hand.

"By the way, your high school friend called earlier," he said as he gave me the other cup of coffee.

"Thanks," I said and put down the cup by my side and continued typing. "Who called?"

"You know, Ted's wife."

"Oh, Eva," I said. "Why did she call?"

"Ted's dead."

I stopped typing and looked at him.

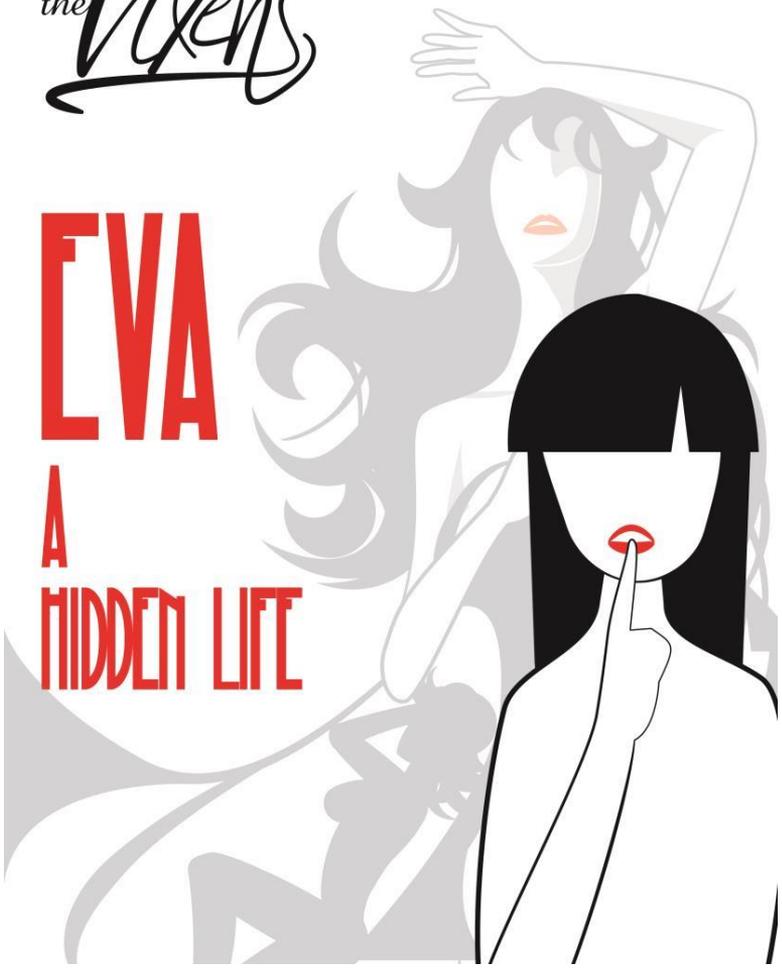
"Oh, no! I have to tell the Vixens."

\*\*\*THE END\*\*\*

the *Vixens*

**EVA**

**A  
HIDDEN LIFE**



My life has always been hidden from somebody else. I don't know why. Maybe Fate has made it for me to be. And once I'm found from my hiding, I became the ripple on a calm water disturbing Everyone. And Everyone blamed me when in fact, I didn't choose to be hidden and disturb them in the first place. Other people decided that for me. I knew that someday I'll be out of hiding once again. And I have to prepare myself for that moment because I don't know what would happen if Everyone finds out that I'm not legally Mrs. Theodore Smith.

This is a work of fiction. Characters, places, and events are products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, and business establishments is coincidental.

## **A Hidden Life**

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# 1 . EVA

---

I'M LIVING A COMFORTABLE LIFE now, much different from my life when I was growing up in Cimitarra. I'm the daughter of Imelda Guerrero and was born in the slums of Cimitarra. I haven't known my father but I was already using his last name when I started going to school.

I remembered, I was in the second grade then, I helped my mother fold the clothes that doesn't require ironing while she was pressing some clothes she washed for her regular laundry customers.

"Mother, how does my father looked like?" I asked.

My mother stopped ironing and put the flat iron down. She looked at me seriously.

"Eva, how many times do I have to tell you not to ask about him?" she said. "You'll get to know him when the right time comes."

"When would that be, mother?"

"Soon, my child," she said. "Please understand your mother. I know you want to know him, let's wait until you're old enough to understand."

So I tried to ask the same question to my other relatives. They said that my father's name was Enrico Villamayor, a rich man living in Zona Residencial in Marcelo. At that time, my mother was working as a housemaid in the Villamayor household and my father was attracted to her. They tried to keep their relationship a secret but when his family found out about it, they ordered my mother to leave and never bother their son again. My mother left the Villamayor household and went back to Cimitarra. It was already too late when my mother found out that she was pregnant with me. My father married the daughter of his father's business partner and had two sons. After a few months, I was born.

I understood then what my mother went through those times. My mother worked as a laundrywoman, and sometimes, sold food products just to make sure we have food on the table. She insisted that I go to school, so she sent me to a public school despite her low income. She kept on telling me to study and work hard for my future. When I was about to finish grade school, my mother got sick.

"Eva, my child," she said as she tried to get up from bed. "I have to tell you something."

"What is it, mother?" I asked as I sat down beside her.

She handed me a faded colored photograph of a man who had dominant Spanish features.

"Here is a picture of your father," she said. "His name is Enrico Villamayor and lives in Zona Recidencial. Go to him and introduce yourself as my daughter, but use Evangela Guerrero, not Villamayor. Here is his address."

She handed me a piece of paper with her handwritten address. I read it trying to memorize it.

"Once you get there, hand this envelope to him," my mother said as she gave me a sealed letter envelope. "Make sure that you only give this to Enrico and no one else."

"Yes, mother," I said.

So I found myself riding a bus to Marcelo that weekend and dropped off at the terminal. I asked around on how to go to the Zona and it took me a short cab ride going there. However, the guards at the gate prevented me from entering. So I told them that I was looking for Enrico Villamayor and showed them the address and the photograph my mother gave me. After some verification over the phone, one of the guards led me to his residence. It took me another ten minutes to enter his house. A

maid led me to a garden, near a pool, where I saw a man reading a newspaper.

"Sir Enrico, someone wants to see you," said the maid.

The man put down the newspaper and looked at us. He saw me and looked at the maid.

"You may leave us, Dolores," he said. "And as for you, young lady, come nearer and have a seat. Dolores, bring this visitor something to drink."

The maid left and I went to sit down on a chair across him. I couldn't help but look at the surroundings --- the big house, the pool, the garden --- quite the exact opposite of our place in Cimitarra. Then Dolores returned with a tray containing a glass of fruit juice and a plate of cookies. She left immediately after putting it down on the table.

"Have a drink first," said the man. "You looked like you traveled far."

I nodded and took the glass. I couldn't help but gulped it in one drinking. I put back the glass on the table.

"What's your name, *hija*?"

"My name is Evangelina Vi... Guerrero, I'm eleven years old, I'm in Grade Five."

I handed him the sealed envelope. He was about to take it when I remembered to make sure that he's Enrico.

"Are you really Enrico Villamayor?" I asked as I pulled back the envelope.

"Yes," he said, surprised that I pulled back the envelope from him.

"Just making sure, Sir," I said. "My mother said that I only give this to you."

I handed him the envelope. He observed the sealed envelope front and back. He brought it up and held against the light to see what could be inside. He tore the envelope open at the side and took out a paper. He read the letter silently and looked at me from time to time. I stared at him and somehow I felt the longing to embrace and kiss him, and call him father. After reading, he folded the letter back and returned it to the envelope.

"How is she?" he asked. "I mean, how is your mother?"

"She's okay, Sir. She just had flu," I answered. "She asked me to do this while she was sick a few days ago."

"You're a carbon copy of Imelda," he said as he touched my face.

He held my hand and then he pulled me out of my seat and embraced me.

I responded, embraced him with longing. We both cried. I don't know how many minutes had passed. But after our feelings of longing subsided, he asked me to sit down again.

"Evangela," he said.

"You can call me Eva, sir," I said.

"Okay, Eva," he said. "This is just between us. No one should know that you're my daughter. Introduce yourself as Eva Guerrero, not Villamayor, that's rule number one. You can call me Father only when the two of us are alone, that's rule number two. Temporarily, let me emphasize that, temporarily, pretend that you're a housemaid here. Is that understood? That's the only way for you to stay here with me and I'll find a way on how you could go to middle school."

I nodded. I don't know what was written in my mother's letter but somehow I sensed that it was what my father had talked about --- me living with him here in the Zona and continue my studies.

So I was given a housemaid's uniform to wear and my father introduced me to all of his household staff --- drivers, cook, maids, gardener, about ten of them, I think. I've noticed an old woman who kept staring at me, she was our head, according to my father. She was the oldest servant and had served his family since he was a kid. He claimed that she was his nanny. After he left, I was told that I'll be assigned in the kitchen and as much as possible stay there as my father ordered. The old woman,

I've heard my father called her Yaya Laura, approached me and whispered.

"May I have a word with you?" she asked.

I nodded and followed her into her room, in a servants' quarters separate from the house.

"Come in, and have a seat," she said.

I sat down on the nearest chair.

"You really looked like Imelda," she said as she locked the door and shut the window blinds.

I was surprised that she mentioned my mother's name. "Are you Imelda's daughter?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am," I nodded. "Do you know her?"

"Of course," she said. "I was here when your mother and Enrico..." She didn't finish her sentence. "How is she?" she asked.

"She's doing fine in Cimitarra, ma'am," I answered.

"Don't call me ma'am. Call me Yaya Laura, that's alright with me. That's how Imelda called me before as well."

"My father said that no one knows about me."

"Except me," she said. "He immediately called for me and gave me the letter your mother wrote. That's the reason why I will assign you inside the kitchen, and as much as possible stay there. I don't

want you being seen with the Villamayors. You will stay here inside my room, I'll set up another bed here for you. Tell everyone that you're my niece from Cimitarra. Don't worry, they don't know about your mother as most of them are new and haven't met her. You may tell Imelda that you're in good hands now."

"Thank you, you're so kind, Yaya Laura."

And that was how my hidden life started.

THE VILLAMAYORS, being close and kind to Yaya Laura, agreed when my father had enrolled me as Evangela Guerrero at Convento de Santa Clara y el Colegio, an exclusive school for girls run by Franciscan nuns. They said that it was one way of thanking Yaya Laura's loyal service --- sending her "niece" to school. I couldn't believe it at first. I took the admission test and interview and passed. What was important was I would have a comfortable life at the Zona and I'm going to a private school.

However, I didn't know that the term "temporarily" would extend until my high school years. When I became friends with the Vixens, they didn't know that I was pretending to be a maid in my father's household.

## 2 . THE VIXENS

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DURING OUR SENIOR HIGH SeHOOL DAYS, we were required to re-submit our birth and baptismal certificate. According to Sister Corazon, our principal, it was their way of verifying our legal name so as not to be a hassle when we go to college and start working professionally. One day, Sister Corazon called me at her office.

"Evangela," she said. "May I know your real name?"

"Evangela Guerrero, Sister," I answered.

"Then why is it that your birth certificate indicates Evangela Guerrero Villamayor?"

"My father..."

"Tell your father to come over here," she said.

So when my father came to speak with Sister Corazon, he admitted that I was his illegitimate daughter and we had to pretend that I was Yaya Laura's niece.

Sister Corazon looked at me with concern. After the meeting, she told me that she would change my record to Villamayor but I could still use Guerrero. She even told me that it would still remain a secret between the three of us.

DURING HIGH SCHOOL, Ana and Maria were known to have experiences with boys. Camille, Chloe and Irene admitted that they already had a sexual experience once. So I was the only virgin then. One Friday night, we decided to have a sleepover in Ana's house. I had to ask permission from my father. Ana's parents were out of the country and she decided to have us as her only guests. We kept on telling stories about boys. Then Maria showed us a pornographic movie she found in their home. I gasped while watching for I couldn't imagine myself doing that. But Ana told us to touch our bodies so we could appreciate how it feels to have sex. Together, we masturbated inside her room while watching a sex video.

Since then, I longed to touch my body, as if I was addicted to it. I wished that someday, a man would enter me like what I saw on that video.

One time, Maria organized a swimming party at their home in the Zona. She asked Ana to invite Neil (Ana's boyfriend) and some of his friends. So we were six couples then: Anna and Neil, Maria and Gary, Chloe and Richard, Camille and Mark, Irene and David, and Francis and me. The swimming party was fun and we were literally wet and wild. The night did not pass without getting drunk and having sex.

Francis and I remained in the pool after Richard and Chloe got out and went somewhere. I was in the corner taking a rest after swimming a lap. Francis came nearer and cornered me. I looked at him.

"What is it?" I asked.

He pushed himself against me until our bodies were too close. He wrapped his arm around me while his other hand was on my shoulder.

"Relax," he said. "Let's enjoy this evening."

The hand on my shoulder slid down to trace the contour of my body and stopped at my private part down there under water. I felt his fingers probed and moved my bathing suit to the side exposing the slit I've been keeping intact.

"Francis, don't," I said.

"Is it your first time?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Then let me teach you something," he whispered.

His middle finger outlined the slit and took some time to stroke something hidden on top of it. I felt a tingling sensation that I liked and started to crave for it. He told me to open my mouth and I followed but couldn't help to utter a moan.

"Liked it?" he asked.

I couldn't answer properly. All I uttered was "Hmm."

"Let's look for a better place, come on," he said as he started to go out of the pool.

I went out of the pool, took my towel and followed him. He led me to a small vacant room he found open and as we entered it, he locked the door. I was standing near the door, my back facing the wall. So he pushed me against it and continued what he had been doing in the pool. This time, while his hand is stroking my slit down there, his other hand managed to pull the strap of my bathing suit down, exposing my breasts. He cupped it with his hand and started sucking my nipple. I held on to his shoulders as I tried to breathe properly from my mouth.

Unable to take it any longer, he removed my bathing suit and carried me to the bed. As I lay

down, he asked me to open my legs wide. He kissed me down there and as I remembered the sex videos we watched before, I just have to lay still and enjoy the pleasure of being kissed. I could feel his tongue probing, licking, and trying to enter me. Then I felt his mouth suck my clitoris which made my body arch in pleasure. I held his head as if I was pleading for him not to stop.

What I couldn't take at first was the blow job. Although Francis understood that it was my first sexual intercourse, he was patient to teach me the procedure.

"Think of it as licking a lollipop," he said.

I followed what he said as he held my head. I heard him moan in pleasure as I prevent myself from gagging.

"Take it easy," he said. "You'll get used to it."

And as I held his cock, I tried to take note how a long, erect, circumcised penis looked like. And by the time we were both comfortable with our nakedness and foreplay, he asked me to put my legs up as he tried to enter his penis inside me.

"Ahh!" I shouted in pain.

"Shh," he whispered. "Don't moan too loud. We must not call their attention."

I nodded as I bore the pain and the sensual pleasure the act brought me. My moans sounded like cries of pain and pleasure combined. I saw

Francis smiling everytime I twitched or felt that uncontrollable sensation.

"You came," he said.

"What?" I asked.

"Have you felt something?" he asked.

"Yes," I said. "It felt good somehow."

He smiled as he continued fucking me until we both climaxed and came.

FRANCIS AND I AGREED that we would see each other again after that swimming party. I was with the Vixens waiting in front of a fastfood restaurant when Francis approached us.

"Eva," he said, "how could you lie to me?"

I was surprised to hear his question. "What do you mean?"

"Why didn't you tell us that you're a housemaid of the Villamayors?"

I looked at the Vixens and they too were surprised to hear that.

"And you, Vixens," he said facing them. "Why did you allow a social climber in your elite group?"

I turned away and ran, crying.

When I came late to school the next day, Camille approached me when she saw me at my locker.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

I nodded.

"What did you tell Sister Corazon?" she asked. It has been a rule that whoever comes late for class must proceed to her office to explain.

"She knows the truth ever since you did," I said. "I'm sorry, but I really have to keep it a secret. That's the only way for me to live inside my father's house."

"What do you mean?"

So I told Camille everything over a light snack while waiting for the next class. When the bell rang, the Vixens arrived at the cafeteria and saw us. They approached us and it was Camille who explained everything to them. Ana embraced me.

"You should have told us before," she said. "That way, we could have defended you, girl."

"I'm afraid you'll leave me," I said. "I don't like to lose friends like you."

"Of course not, we're not leaving you!" said Irene. "Actually, I've heard from my father about

that rumor, your father had an affair with a housemaid. Now I see that it was true after all."

"And I thought I only see those on movies and TV," said Chloe. "Your mom might be beautiful for your father to fall for her."

"She looks like her mother," Camille said. "Just look at this picture."

She took out the photographs inside my wallet -- mine, my mother's, and my father's.

"Aw, she's beautiful, and he's handsome... no wonder, you're too beautiful!" said Maria. "Would you believe that the boys would say that you're the most beautiful Vixen? I wouldn't believe it at first... but then again, seeing these photos... I concede."

THE VIXENS LEARNED ABOUT IT FIRST than the Villamayors. I don't know how the news reached my half- brother, Arthur. One late afternoon, Yaya Laura went out and I was left alone in the room. One of the benefits of being a trusted servant was to have the good amenities. Yaya Laura's room has a toilet and bath inside so she and I don't have to use the common bathroom in the servants' quarters. I went into the toilet and bath to take a shower and I didn't remember locking the door but it was okay. Ever since I came, there was no need for me to lock our door since no one comes in to our room except us.

I spent almost half an hour taking a shower and it felt good. I realized that I forgot to bring a bathrobe so I went out of the bathroom wrapped in a towel. I was surprised to see Arthur at the door.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"I want to talk to you," he said.

I noticed that he was looking at me differently, starting from my head to foot. I felt uncomfortable.

"I need to get dressed," I said.

Instead, he approached me. "Eva."

"No, don't come nearer, or else I would shout," I warned him.

"And then what?" he asked. "Tell them what happened?"

"Do you think they would believe you?"

"Please, Arthur," I pleaded. "Get out or else."

"I would just like to check if Francis is telling the truth about you," he said as he smiled.

His smile was something different, it has lust. He continued to step forward towards me when I immediately said, "No, Arthur, we can't! We're siblings, I'm your half-sister."

## 3 . TRADE SECRETS

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ARTHUR COULDN'T BELIEVE WHAT I'VE SAID.

"How could that be?"

"I'm your father's daughter. My mother was once a housemaid here," I said. "She left when they found out their relationship but Father and our grandparents did not know that I was born. Then I came here and introduced myself to Father. He took me and we agreed that I would pretend to be a housemaid like my mother."

Arthur immediately left and before dinner time, I've heard that they're fighting over me. They called on Yaya Laura and me. I apologized to my father for revealing the secret to Arthur after telling them what happened earlier. Unfortunately, Arthur

denied about his presence in our room and I appeared to be the liar, the seducer, the whore.

So my stepmother, the Mrs. Enrico Villamayor, decided to let us, Yaya Laura and I, go. I apologized to Yaya Laura for what happened.

"No need to apologize, Eva," she said. "The truth has to come out anyway. I'm already old and I want to retire now."

I went back to Cimitarra and told my mother what happened. My father told me that he would still support my education. He was asking for our address in Cimitarra but I didn't give it to him. I was surprised when my half-brothers, Arthur and Henry, came for a visit.

"How did you know my place?" I said. "You don't have to be here in the slums."

"We asked around, we asked your friends, Camille told me how to get here," said Arthur.

It was Camille who knew my address. And I introduced Camille to Arthur a few weeks before.

"Papa asked us to find you," Henry said. "We will not return to Marcelo if we don't have any update on you."

"Tell Father I'm fine," I said. I also introduced them to my mother.

AFTER A FEW DAYS, they came back, this time with my father. My mother was surprised to see him. They talked and for the first time, we (Arthur, Henry and I) saw our parents cry together.

"They really must be in love with each other," Henry said.

"But what about our mother?" Arthur asked.

"You should be thankful, he was with you all your life," I said. "Unlike me that I grew up without him by my side."

SO I STAYED WITH MY MOTHER while my father would send me money for my education and other needs. Somehow, I became closer to Henry than to Arthur.

After graduation, I took up a business course. I admit, I'm not the intelligent type. I passed my college subjects satisfactorily. During my senior year, there was one male professor who took interest in me and told me that I could excel in sales and marketing. I took that as his professional advise, not knowing that he meant another thing.

One night, after my last examination, Mr. Diaz called me to his office. He showed me my test paper I took the other day. I got a failing grade of 74%,

only one mark less than the standard passing mark.

"If I fail, I may not be able to graduate this June," I said.

"If you do your work, you'll pass," Mr. Diaz said. "It seems that you didn't study."

"I did, Sir," I said. "It's just that I'm having challenges in Math."

"How much are you willing to pass the test?" he asked.

"Oh, I'm willing to take the examination again if you want, Mr. Diaz," I said. "Although it could be impossible since finals period is over."

"Oh, Miss Villamayor," he said. "You know that I want all my students to graduate. Stand up and sit here."

He smiled and asked me to sit down on the table. At that point, a memory from the sex video came into my mind. My cunt sent me a signal that my professor wanted something else. So I sat down on the table and put my hands at its edge. He stood up and went near me. He opened my thighs wider and wrapped his arms around me.

"Don't say anything," he whispered. "Not even a word. Let me handle this."

I nodded. He started unbuttoning my blouse and took it off. He unhooked my bra and took it off

as well. He stared at my breasts and touched them, squeezed them, kissed them, and sucked them. Instinctively, I held his head tight, trying to pull him away yet trying to push him to me. I felt the warmth of his tongue and mouth on my chest and I seemed to like it. He straightened up and kissed my lips, his tongue entered my mouth. I sucked his tongue in response. By then, my hands slid down to his belt, unfastened it and unzipped his pants. I went down the table and pulled his pants and underwear down. He held my head as I started holding his cock that was starting to get stiff. I sucked its tip like candy until I got used to it and took him as my mouth could take it. I heard him breathe heavily, moaned, and whispered something.

"That's it," he said. "Don't stop..."

Unable to support himself standing up, he pulled me up, and asked me to lie down on the table again, my butt at the edge of the table. He took off my skirt, underwear and shoes and kissed my cunt like a hungry wolf. His tongue probed, sucked, and tried to enter. I held his head tight again, this time I grabbed his hair as I uttered a moan of pleasure.

"Oh, my... Don't stop, please," I said.

He might have sensed that I've twitched so he stood up and inserted his cock in me. He gave slow thrusts at first while holding my legs up. After a few minutes, he moved a little faster, bending to suck my breasts and kiss my lips alternately. We were shaking on the table.

"I've been longing for this moment, Eva," he said. "You're a dream come true."

He continued his slow and fast entrance into mine. I couldn't help but moan. He kept on moaning too. I didn't notice the time passed by until we came together.

AFTER GRADUATING FROM COLLEGE, I started looking for a job. I bought a newspaper one Sunday morning and looked for job openings in the Classified Ads section. An advertisement called for management trainees and the location was just at a building nearby. I went there first thing Monday morning and when I entered the office, the name of the company was familiar. Markstrat, Inc., owned by a businessman turned politician named Mark Antonio. During the interview, I told them that I'm familiar with the company name and I knew their product: encyclopedias. The interviewer, a unit manager named Glenn Lejano, asked me if I'm still interested to continue with the interview and proceed with the training.

"Of course," I said.

"Are you sure?" he asked. "You'll be selling encyclopedias."

"Yes, I'm sure of that. This will be my first job and I would like to try it out."

"Okay. I'll be calling in one of our trainers so I could introduce you to him. You may start training today, but promise me one thing..."

"What is it?"

"The trainees inside the room don't know yet that they'll be selling encyclopedias until Wednesday afternoon."

"Oh," I said. "Is that the reason why the ad seems anonymous?"

He nodded. We stood up together and he led me to the training room, where the trainer was waiting for us at the hallway.

The week ended with a sort of a graduation party for all sales personnel. It was a tradition in that company that every Friday lunchtime that everyone gather and new sales trainees were introduced and everyone rally or pledge for sales. In short, after the program, we may proceed to hunt for our first sale. So I asked my father for some referrals after telling him that I got a job. He knew the company owner so he was confident that I would grow career-wise in sales. He gave me referrals, mostly living in the Zona. Surprisingly, out of 5 cold calls, I got 1 outright sale and 2 coming up.

By Monday the next week, I submitted my sales and filled up my commission form. I was excited when I received my 10% commission a few days later after the set of encyclopedia were delivered to my first customer. Glenn was happy for me.

"I think you're the person who can sell anything to anyone," he said.

"Oh yeah?" I said. "Why did you say that? I haven't sold anything yet except books."

"With that face, they can never go wrong," he said.

That statement led to an invitation to dine out and stay in his condo.

"Can you promise me one thing?" he asked.

"What is it?"

"That you will be mine alone," he said as he gripped my cunt with his hand.

"Yes," I moaned as I felt his finger stroked me down there.

HOWEVER, AS YEARS GO BY, in the computer and digital age, the need for encyclopedia started to wane. A former colleague encouraged me to shift to real estate properties. That time real estate business was at its peak. And it was time to break up with Glenn.

I started selling house and lots in newly-developed subdivisions but I discovered that selling condominiums was much better, because I could

sell them to foreigners. Not only foreigners cannot own a house and lot here in our country, commissions are much better in selling condos. Most of my clients were foreigners, and yuppies (young urban professionals) who also think of investing in properties at a young age.

If there was a local version of the Millionaire's Club in sales, I would be included because I always landed on the top sales agents by the end of the year, bringing in millions of pesos in sales. However, during the Asia Pacific currency crisis, real estate went down as well. But I don't want to shift career. I loved sales, I loved selling condominiums. So I hanged on tight, trying my best to close every sales deal I present.

ONE CLIENT PROVED TO BE A CHALLENGE because I had the hardest time in closing the sale. I remembered I was wearing a white blouse and skirt with black accents with a pair of black high-heeled shoes. And I've noticed that he was staring at me. I looked at my body and I've noticed that my cleavage was showing and that was probably what he was looking at. I took that as a cue and crossed my leg over, making the hem of my skirt go higher as I continued explaining to him the terms he could choose from. I saw him took his handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his forehead.

"Feeling hot, Mr. Marquez?" I asked.

"Yes," he said.

He stood up and went to his door. I heard it clicked. At the side of my vision, he went to the air conditioning unit and adjusted the thermostat. I smiled to myself as I looked at him returning to the table. He sat at the chair across mine. I pushed the contract and my pen, showing him where to put his signature. He held my hand and looked at me.

"Just sign here," I said. "After that, you'll receive a sign-in bonus."

I smiled when he signed the contract and put down my pen. I took the pen and the contract, put it inside my portfolio and closed it. I stood up holding the portfolio.

"Hey," he said as he grabbed my wrist.

I turned to him and smiled. I took off his hand and went to the couch across the table. I put down the portfolio and started unbuttoning my blouse slowly in front of him. He smiled, enjoying my strip tease. He sat down on the couch, still staring at me. I continued undressing until I only have my bra and underwear on. I straddled on him, grabbed his necktie and loosened it. I started to unbutton his shirt, unfastened his belt, unzipped his pants. He was already breathing heavily. Unable to control himself, he wrapped his arms around me, pulled me closer to him and kissed my lips with hunger. I tried not to be distracted with his kisses, my hands continued undressing him until I got to touch his cock. I held it and started stroking it.

He stopped kissing me. I went down on him, licked and sucked him there. He enjoyed it as much as I did. When I felt that he was already stiff for me, I wiped my mouth, took off my underwear and straddled on him again. I guided him to where he should enter and I started moving. He held the straps of my bra and pulled it down, he unhooked it for me and started enjoying my pointed breasts. Mr. Marquez was insatiable, just like any other men. The moment seemed endless, but the truth was I spent more than two hours for a sales presentation and contract signing.

## 4 . TED

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MR. MARQUEZ PROVED TO BE A GOOD CLIENT. After I received my commission from the sales I got from him, I received calls from his referrals. Evidently, they too turned out to be good paying clients, and some of them were with one-night stands.

I WAS TALKING TO THE ACCOUNT MANAGER of a bank when someone came into the manager's office. The account manager signaled him to take a seat first while she finishes my transaction. I turned to look who the account manager was talking to. I saw a tall, slim foreigner, probably an

American with the way he spoke English. I went back to my filling up of some forms the account manager required me. Then I gave the forms to her.

"This is okay for now, Miss Villamayor," she said as she stapled the forms. "I'll give you a call within 3 business days."

"Thanks," I said as I stood up and turned towards the door.

At the side of my vision, I saw the American stood up and heard the account manager greeted him.

"Good morning, Sir," she said. "How may I help you?"

I was already out of the account manager's office so I was not sure if I heard it right what the American said. "I think I'll just return tomorrow. I'm sorry."

I thought that it was either he was weird or he had changed his mind. But if I made him change his mind to follow me, that would be something. I smiled at that thought as I continued my steps and went out of the bank. I was about to hail a cab back to my apartment cum office.

"Excuse me," I heard someone say.

I turned around and saw the American who I saw at the bank.

"Yes?" I smiled. Probably a prospective client.

"I saw you at the bank, and I can't help to follow you here. I'm Ted Smith," he said and offered his hand.

I shook his hand. "I'm Eva Villamayor."

"Hi Eva," he said. "Can I offer you coffee? There maybe a Starbucks here somewhere."

I laughed. "It's pretty obvious that you're just new here in the island, aren't you?"

"Yes," he said. "Just arrived last night and will be here for five years or more I guess."

"Well, there's only one Starbucks here in the island and it is located in La Galleria mall, which is about fifteen to thirty minutes away from here. Foreign coffee brands are very limited here because we promote our own breed of Liberica, Arabica, and Robusta coffee beans."

"So that explains it!" he said laughing. "I've been looking for a Starbucks cafe and haven't seen one since I arrived."

"If you've been craving for coffee, come on, I know a place."

"HMM, THIS TASTES GOOD," Ted said after his first sip of a hot brewed coffee.

We were sitting outside a local cafe that serves light meals to go with their coffee.

"See? I told you," I said smiling as I put my cup of coffee on the table.

"Well, this city has a point in limiting foreign coffee brands," he said. "By the way, are you working, Eva?"

"I'm a full-time property sales agent," I said and I gave him my business card. "Just in case you would be needing a condominium unit. That's what I'm selling these days."

"Just my luck," he said. "I've told you earlier that I'll be staying here for the next five years or so. I would be needing a condo unit to stay. Although my company would take care of that, I may not like what they'll choose for me."

It seems I found a new client. "And what exactly do you need?" I asked.

"Nothing fancy," he said. "Probably a two-bedroom unit would do. One would be my bedroom and the other would be my study."

"Would you be buying one or just leasing it?"

"The company will pay for the lease. That's what we've agreed upon. I'll be staying at the hotel for a maximum of one month and then transfer. So I'd better find one within a month."

"Where in the island would you prefer? Near your office, near the airport, or ---"

I haven't finished my statement when he said, "-- something far from the office, not necessarily near the airport, but much nearer to places I would like to hang around."

"And when you say place to hang around you mean pubs, bars, lounges, resorts,..."

"Yup --- place to unwind from time to time. With the work I'm in, I need those."

I smiled at him. "Where do you work here?"

"Contact Point, Inc. and their office is somewhere here..." waving his finger around.

"I know that place, down south towards Cimitarra, far from the city's busiest district up north. What's your work there?"

"Vice-President for Operations."

I whistled. "Big time."

"Not really. I've got a load of work down here."

"Okay, here's what I can do to help you," I said. "I'll go back to my office and look for possible condo units for you to choose from. I'll call you back tomorrow if not late this afternoon."

"Sounds good," he said.

We exchanged phone numbers and we went separate ways.

I WAS SURPRISED to receive a call from Ted that evening.

"I told you that I'll call you back until tomorrow," I said. "Why have you called, is there anything wrong?"

"I miss you, would that be a good reason?" he answered back.

I laughed.

He laughed, too. "Have you any update regarding the condo?"

"Oh, yes. I already have six possible sites. When are you free to check those places out?"

So we agreed to meet at Hotel Delujo the next day. I dropped off the cab exactly at seven thirty that morning. He was already waiting for me at the lobby. We shook hands and I asked if he's ready to go.

"Yes, and I need your opinion as well," he said. "I have a car, and here's Bert, our driver. The company provided me a car since I arrived here."

I shook Bert's hand in acknowledgement and turned back to Ted. "You said you need my opinion, why?"

"Trust me," he said and winked at me as we went out of the lobby to wait for Bert and the car.

I PRESENTED SIX CONDOMINIUM UNITS to Ted, three semi-furnished and three fully-furnished. I kept asking him for his preferences and I gave him my thoughts on the advantages and disadvantages on each unit. Two of them were located in Marcelo's business district, at the heart of the capital. These were very accessible to the airport, business and government establishments, and the night life might suit Ted's taste. The other two were located near his office, although these were thirty minutes away from Marcelo. One is located near Puerto Montoya, overlooking the sea. The last one I showed was located in Cimitarra, the southern suburban area after Marcelo where I was born. It was a ten to fifteen minutes drive to his office and with a few business establishments around although the condominium was the newest among the others. After checking the condo units, we went back to the hotel and had late lunch.

During the site tours, I've decided that I was going to have Ted Smith. Calculation of sales commission and incentives did not enter into my decision; it came directly from my heart and my

cunt. I wanted him, no matter how almost unthinkable it was, I was going to get him and get him now, before anything happened to change the opportunity the situation had given me.

We were sitting side by side in a restaurant. I was focused on my dessert when I asked him how old he was.

"Just turned forty five," he said. "How about you?"

"I'm twenty seven," I answered.

"My eldest daughter is twenty four," he said.

"Will your family be staying here with you?" I asked immediately.

"Oh, no," he laughed and shook his head. "I am already divorced from my two wives."

"Oh," I said as I went back to my dessert thinking of what could possibly go wrong if I pursued Ted Smith.

I felt Ted's hand on my knee. I looked at him and we stared at each other. Then I felt my skirt lifted and his hand slid into my inner thigh. He tried to touch whatever is beneath my underwear. I felt the tip of his finger stroked my tender slit down there and I widened up my thighs for him. But when I felt his finger getting inside me, I put my thighs together, trapping his hand. He looked surprised. I smiled because I knew what he wanted. I'm willing to give it to him.

"Please, not here," I hissed. "This is not the proper place."

He looked at his watch. Then he tipped his head to the other side.

"Come on, let's go," he said. He stood up and left his payment on the table.

I followed his lead. We went to his hotel suite. It was quiet. He drew me into the room, locked the door behind us. Then he led me by the hand into his bed, the curtains had been drawn against the sunlight. He then took me in his arms without a word. Suddenly, we fell on the bed, ripping off the clothes we wore, consumed with a lust we knew no barriers, no hesitations, no age, no limits.

"SO, HAVE YOU CHOSEN A CONDO?" I asked as he handed me a glass of cocktail drink he prepared for us. I was still sitting on his bed, naked under the blanket.

"Hmm... yeah, but I would only decide after you decide..." he said, he already wore his bathrobe to cover his naked body.

"What? I don't know what you mean..."

He sat beside me.

"Eva, the moment I saw you in that bank, I knew I found the one I want to spend the rest of my life with."

I couldn't believe of what I've heard. I was speechless.

"Well?" he asked.

"I don't know what to say, Ted..."

He took my hand, and kissed it. "Eva, let's stay together. We don't need to get married, if you're not comfortable with the idea..."

I admit, I admired his guts, his sense of humor, his wit. I agreed with his arrangement. He chose the condo near Puerto Montoya, near the beach front, within a resort-type community, a few minutes away from his office, overlooking the sea, but far from nosy and noisy people. And we stayed there as a couple.

# 5 . MY LIFE WITH TED

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SO TED AND I started living together in the condo his office provided him. After a few months, he asked me stop working and he promised me to fund a business, something I would be able to provide myself and my future children.

Before I gave birth, Ted bought a condo unit in Puerto Montoya (the one we're living today), plus we opened a cafe nearby for tourists.

BEFORE MY FATHER DIED, he requested my presence so I went to the hospital and kissed my father for the last time and my half brothers made peace with me. My stepmother admitted the truth that her husband, my father, loved my mother all these years. I got a call from my half-brother Henry.

"How did you know my number?" I asked.

"I asked the manager at the restaurant," he said on the other line. "You have to come here at Centro Medical de Marcelo, Papa wants to see you."

So I went to Centro Medical and instructed Bert to come back for me after my call. I asked the information counter where Mr. Enrico Villamayor was confined. The receptionist told me that he's at the third floor, room 315. I went up and knocked at the door. It was Henry who opened the door and let me in. I saw my father lying there, tired and old. I saw my stepmother.

"Come in, Eva," Henry said.

They gave way for me to get closer to my father. I held his hand and put it on my forehead as my respect.

"How are you?" he asked.

"I'm fine, Papa," I answered. "Ted and I are okay. Michael is growing up to be a good boy."

"Have you forgiven Papa?"

I nodded. "Papa, never in my life I was mad at you for what happened to me. I love you, Papa."

I kissed my father then he closed his eyes to sleep. My brothers insisted that I stay longer. After we had dinner, we went back to the hospital. Our father was still asleep when we arrived. However, at around nine o'clock in the evening, when I was about to leave, my father had a cardiac arrest that led to his demise. It turned out that I was the last person who kissed him.

We became busy with the necessary arrangement for my father's wake and funeral. My stepmother asked for my forgiveness. She even asked for my mother to come at the wake. So I called my mother and we attended the wake and funeral.

It turned out that my father left something for me and for my mother (a property in Cimitarra and enough cash for my mother to start a small business.) I became more closer to my mother, stepmother, and half- brothers after that.

I WAS ALREADY PUTTING ON my diamond earrings when Ted came in the room. He saw me sitting in front of my dresser, wearing a white gown I chose for that evening. It was an elegant one shoulder, Grecian goddess inspired gown designed by a famous local fashion designer. The gown merges at the center just beneath my breasts with a

small shiny rose made of black and white Swarovski crystals. The folds were studded with tiny black and white Swarovski crystals that made it look like lines from afar.

"Eva, honey, I prefer that you wear the one I bought you from the States," Ted Smith said in his usual American-Irish accent as he put on his tuxedo.

His hair started to thin, but it still suited his tall, medium built. Yet, I'm not complaining. The eighteen years gap between us didn't make any difference in our fifteen-year relationship.

"But, Hon, that's maroon," I said as I asked him to help me put on my necklace with a diamond pendant. "The invitation called for a black and white formal motif."

"Hon, you look sexier in that dress. Besides, no one would ever complain," he said as he put down the necklace on top of the dresser and pressed his hands on my shoulders as he stared at my reflection in the mirror. "I'm the company's Executive Vice-President and Chief Operations Officer and you're my partner tonight so you're the exception to the rule. I want you to look more beautiful than anyone else there."

I smiled at our reflection on the mirror and turned to him. "Okay, you're the boss."

So I stood up and took the maroon taffeta evening dress he was referring to. I took off my white gown and placed it on the bed as I put on the

maroon evening dress. He might have seen me just wearing thongs when he was about to leave the room.

"I'll be waiting downstairs," I heard him say.

The dress was off-shouldered with pleated bodice that follows the contour of the body and its length was a few inches above my knees. It made me look thinner and sexier which I thought was one of the reasons why he preferred it more than the white gown. I smiled to myself as I looked for my maroon pair of high-heeled shoes and handbag that went with the dress. I changed my set of jewelry pieces to pearls, put on a floral perfume Ted liked very much and was set to go.

"YOU LOOK GORGEOUS," Ted whispered when we went inside the car.

"You look handsome," I whispered back and smiled at him.

We headed north to Marcelo, the capital city where the party would be held. We were caught by the Friday night traffic and we haven't gone far. Hotel Delujo should only be twenty minutes away.

"How much time this traffic will take us, Bert?" Ted asked his driver.

"Maybe about an hour, sir," Bert replied.

He has been Ted's driver for fifteen years. The company provided him a car, a driver and the condominium unit we lived in.

Ted turned to me and said, "You look beautiful and sexy just like how I saw you fifteen years ago."

I smiled at him. As I expected, his right hand crawled on my body, starting at my back. His left hand started from my knee. He kissed me at the back of my ear, down to my neck and shoulder. I knew what he wanted. This was the main reason why he wanted me to wear this dress instead of a gown. His right hand had reached the side of my left breast while his left hand had reached my inner thighs, reaching for my cunt. I looked at him and smiled seductively. I already got used to his advances ever since we started dating. He wanted me to play with his games and I had played my part so well. I always make sure that I'm available for him. That's what we kept us together. I placed my handbag on my left side and raised the hem of my dress exposing my thighs. He was already squeezing my left breast and stroking my cunt but I couldn't moan. Instead, I kissed his lips and used my tongue to pry his mouth open while holding his head tightly. At the side of my vision, I caught Bert looking at us via the rear view mirror but he immediately turned away and focused on his driving. He just have to ignore us. He, too, has been used seeing Ted and I doing this inside the car.

THE CAR STOPPED in front of Hotel Delujo lobby. A concierge opened the door for us. Ted, in turn, offered his hand for me to hold as I went out the car. We looked perfectly dressed as if nothing happened inside the car a few minutes earlier.

Ted thanked the concierge and took my hand and put it on his right arm. We went inside the hotel and straight to the grand ballroom where the anniversary party would be held.

As we approached the grand ballroom, everyone was staring at us. First, because I was with the handsome Theodore Smith who heads Contact Point, Inc. on this part of the world. Second, because I was the only one wearing a maroon dress in a black and white formal event. One of the events organizer signaled us to stay put as he took our photograph at the red carpet entrance. Ted greeted and smiled at those employees we've met and I smiled with him too. For the past fifteen years, Ted rarely showed me off to people. So he took advantage of these kind of occasions in presenting me as his wife. People couldn't believe their eyes when they saw a 42- year old woman like me, walking with their 60-year old boss.

"Good evening, Ted" I heard someone greeted us. "You look beautiful, Mrs. Smith."

I turned my head to Ted and smiled. Seldom do I hear someone address me as Mrs. Smith. I'll always be Eva Villamayor. But I knew Ted didn't

mind and he might be even proud of me being his third Mrs. Smith.

Somewhere towards the middle of the program and awarding ceremonies, the hosts declared Ted and I as the "Couple of the Night". People cheered as we went up the stage. I felt we were a showbiz couple who looked perfect on magazine covers and in everybody's eyes. I felt the perfection, too.

"Thank you for such an award," Ted said as the applause died down. "But actually, I don't need this prize."

He held up the letter envelope that probably contained a gift certificate or voucher from one of the company's sponsors. He handed it back to one of the hosts.

"I already have the prizes I really wanted fifteen years ago," he continued as he put up his three fingers. "One, being with Tim Kirkpatrick's Contact Point..."

The people applauded and a spotlight shone on the party's guest of honor, Tim Kirkpatrick, the company's President and CEO who flew a long way from Denver, Colorado to grace this occasion.

"Two, being here in your beautiful tropical country," Ted continued.

The people cheered again. It felt proud to hear that foreigners like him admired their stay here in the island colony of La Isla Colonia.

"And three, being with Eva," he ended his speech as he put his arms around my waist.

The people cheered as I smiled at Ted. He kissed me lightly on the lips and I kissed him back. The people cheered even more.

"Go ahead and raffle that prize off to the luckiest employee in attendance," Ted ordered the hosts.

"Woohoo!" the audience cheered. Each of them hoped to receive the prize that should have been ours.

WE ALREADY HAD OUR BUFFET DINNER and the program was halfway through when I saw Ted yawned.

"Are you getting bored, Hon?" I asked.

He shouldn't be sleepy. He had a good eight-hour sleep earlier.

"Not really, Hon," he said. "Probably I just yawned for no reason at all."

He gave me a sheepish grin. That grin and his sweet American-Irish accent made me fall for him years ago. "Would you like to go home now?" I asked.

He looked at me and smiled. He didn't say a word.

"Or would you like me to get you some coffee?" I asked as I pointed the buffet table.

He placed his hand on mine. "We're going home, Eva," he said. He moved his face closer to me and whispered, "Let's sleep together."

I knew what he meant by that statement: a good night sleep after a good round of sex, his natural sleeping pill. We stood up and he bid goodbye to Tim Kirkpatrick and other officials. He also told one of the employees who organized the event that we're leaving. We went out of the door, leaving the employees of Contact Point, Inc. with their awarding ceremonies and anniversary party behind.

For many years, he had been working at nights following US Mountain Time Zone and he only sleep normally on weekends. But I was not complaining. Ted has been very kind and generous to me.

"Can I go to the ladies' room first?" I asked him when we stepped out of the door.

"Sure, I'll wait for you here," he said as he stood in front of the elevator.

I went inside the ladies' room. There was no one there when I got in. After using the toilet, I washed my hands and stared at the mirror, observing my reflection, reflecting the almost hidden life I've had. Ted rarely introduced me to his friends, and if

needed to, he would introduce me as his wife even though it was not true. We were not married. He has a wife back in the States, but their divorce was still pending in court since he's here in the country working and his wife refused to sign the divorce papers. But anyway, I liked our present status. Lilianne Smith was not interfering with us. After putting on perfume, I went out of the door.

"Oh, here she is," I heard Ted said. "Billy, Irene, I would like you to meet my wife."

I always hear Billy Regino's name from Ted. He was one of the Executive Directors and Ted had been proud of him ever since. I've learned from Ted that he was grooming Billy to become a Vice-President soon. However, it was not Billy that I was interested at, it was the woman beside him. She looked familiar, and I couldn't be wrong. She was one of the Vixens, my high school friend and classmate, Irene Alejandrino.

She wore a black Aphrodite inspired gown which was made of smooth and sleek knit fabric that slides over the body, sleeveless and flaunts a dramatic plunging neckline and sensual Y-back.

"Hi Irene," I said and kissed her on the cheek. "You look gorgeous."

"You know each other?" Ted asked me.

"Yes," Irene and I answered in chorus and laughed.

"What a small world," said Billy.

"One moment please," Irene said and pulled me away from the guys. "I didn't know you're Ted's wife until earlier," Irene whispered.

"Well, Ted and I decided to keep a low profile," I chuckled.

We promised each other that we would keep in touch within a few days. We felt an excitement of getting together after many years of being drifted apart with our careers. Surely, we had a lot to catch up.

TED AND I WERE SIPPING HOT, BREWED COFFEE, sitting side by side on the couch. Both of us just had a shower and were still wearing our bathrobes.

"That friend of yours, Irene, she's good," said Ted as he took a sip. "Billy really trained her well."

"I know she's good," I said as I took a sip as well. "Irene excelled in everything ever since I knew her back in high school. She and Chloe were competing for honors."

"You said you were six?"

"Yes," I said as I remembered the Vixens, the name we called our group. "Irene, the manager, and Chloe, the doctor, were the intelligent ones..."

"Okay," Ted nodded as he took another sip of coffee. "Ana, the single mom, and Maria, the model, were the popular and sexy ones..." I continued.

He tilted his head and pouted his lips. It might be his way of saying, "I've got to see about that."

"...and Camille, the widow, and I, the mistress, were the simple and silent ones."

"Well, I chose the most silent and the most beautiful of them all," Ted said as he put down his cup on the table.

He went closer to me and wrapped me with his arms.

"You bet," I said as I managed to put my cup on the table, too.

I kissed him on the lips and felt his warm tongue. I straddled on him and pulled the string of his robe. I took off his robe, exposed his nakedness, and put the robe down the floor as I continued kissing him on the lips. Then I stripped off my robe in front of him, showing off my whole body which he claimed as his own since we've been together. He was delighted to see my round, pointed breasts, and started sucking them like desserts. While he was having fun on my breasts, I played with his cock until it got stiff. I positioned myself so he could enter me and once inside I started moving, moaning, kissing him. We didn't stop until I came. Then we lay down sideways on the couch and he entered me again, I put my leg backward over his thigh so he could enter me better. He seemed

insatiable. When I came again, he let me lie down and went down on me. I felt his hunger, he didn't stop his cunnilingus until I shouted at the height of my pleasure. I let him sit down so I could do the same with him. I gave him a blow job that he wouldn't forget. He said he doesn't want to come yet so he asked me to lie down again. Then he went inside me and dug himself deeper, as I put my legs up higher. Our lovemaking was endless... as if it was the last night of the world.

WE WERE ABOUT TO SLEEP when I've noticed Ted silently stroking his chest, gasping for breath.

"Ted? Is there something wrong?" I asked.

He asked for a glass of water and I gave it to him. I also offered him his medications.

"Oh, now I remember, I forgot to take this earlier," he said as he took it from me and swallowed the pill.

"I think I need to call Dr. Chan," I said as I grabbed the bedside phone's receiver.

Ted took my hand, "Don't," he said. "It's already two in the morning."

"Ted," I said firmly. "I know what I'm doing. Don't be so stubborn. You look pale and I have to call Dr. Chan. I don't care if it's two o'clock."

"You worry too much," he said. "You've been treating me like a baby."

"Because you're still acting like a baby," I pointed out to him. "You just have to admit that you like being pampered."

He couldn't deny that fact. I've been pampering him ever since we've been together and he liked it. That was another reason that kept us together for fifteen long years.

I called Dr. Romeo Chan and apologized for waking him up at an inconvenient hour. The good doctor advised me to bring him to Centro Medical de Marcelo immediately and meet him there.

"Mr. Theodore Smith, you lied to me again," I said as I put down the phone. "You didn't tell me that you missed your appointment with your cardiologist!"

"Don't get angry now, Hon," he said. "I'm sorry. I love you very much."

He pouted his lips for a kiss and I kissed him. He knew that I don't have the strength to get mad at him. Not at that moment when I started to worry about his condition.

"Let's get dressed and we'll go to the hospital right now, Stubborn Ted."

## 6 . HOSPITAL

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MY LIFE HAS ALWAYS BEEN HIDDEN from somebody else. I don't know why. Maybe Fate has made it for me to be. And once I'm found from my hiding, I became the ripple on a calm water disturbing Everyone. And Everyone blamed me when in fact, I didn't choose to be hidden and disturb them in the first place. Other people decided that for me. I knew that someday I'll be out of hiding once again. And I have to prepare myself for that moment because I don't know what would happen if Everyone finds out that I'm not legally Mrs. Theodore Smith.

I just signed some documents for Ted to be admitted in Centro Medical de Marcelo. Dr. Chan, Ted's cardiologist, advised me that Ted needed to undergo some cardiology and laboratory tests in the morning. Those were the procedures that Ted should have done a week ago but missed. Ted was at the emergency room where the medical staff took the necessary procedures on him after I saw him pale and gasping for breath an hour earlier. Ted's company, Contact Point, Inc., provided him a medical and dental health card from a reputable HMO which also extended his benefits to us, our teenage son Michael and I, as his declared dependents.

The nurse and the orderlies just left the room after transferring Ted from the emergency room. Ted looked better now, with a needle inserted to his left hand and connected to a bottle of dextrose solution. He was still awake and I straightened out his blanket on him.

"Eva," I heard him call me.

His voice was soft now. I held his right hand and squeezed it. I kissed it and held it on my cheek.

"Yes, Hon?" I answered as I caressed his hand.

"I think I've overdone myself earlier on that couch," he said softly but was smiling.

"Sshh... stop that," I said.

I could have laughed at that thought as I started reminiscing the events that led us to this

hospital room. But his present situation was no laughing matter.

"Come on, get some sleep, you need to take a rest."

"How about you?"

"I'll be okay," I assured him. "I'm here beside you or I can sleep on the couch. I'll call Michael later for him to drop by and see you, okay?"

He nodded as he closed his eyes.

"I love you, Eva," he said and smiled while closing his eyes.

"I love you, Ted," I said as I kissed him on the lips.

After a few minutes, he fell asleep but he was still holding my hand. I put my other hand on his as I stared at him.

You really can't tell what will happen next. Just last night, Ted and I had the happiest time of our life.

I BENT MY HEAD ON THE BED, using my other forearm as my pillow and fell asleep without knowing. Then I woke up when I felt Ted's hand

tensed as he held my hand tightly. I put my head up to see what was happening.

"Oh my God, Ted!" I shouted.

Instinct told me to press the emergency button to summon a nurse. Ted just had a heart attack. The doctors were able to revive Ted but he was declared in comatose afterwards. He was transferred to the Intensive Care Unit for proper monitoring. I made the necessary transfer arrangements once again with the hospital staff and the HMO's liaison officer. Then I called Billy Regino using Ted's cell phone.

"Hi, Ted," I've heard Billy's voice when he picked up my call. "What's up, boss?"

"Billy, it's Eva," I answered. "I just used Ted's cell phone to call you."

"Oh," I heard him say on the other line.

"Did I wake you up?" I asked. "It's six fifteen and I was thinking..."

"No, it's okay," he said. "Is there something Ted wants me to know?"

"Actually, we're here in Centro Medical de Marcelo since two thirty," I said, "then Ted had a heart attack around five thirty this morning."

"Oh, no," I heard him say. "How is he?"

"He's inside the ICU right now, still in comatose," I said. "I called just to let you know. I know how he trusts you so much and I think that it's only right you should be the first person to know about this."

"Thanks, Eva," he said. "Are you okay?"

I couldn't answer his question. Tears started to well in my eyes.

"Would you like to talk to Irene?" I heard him say to cut the silence between us.

"Just inform those people at the office of Ted's condition, and let's pray for his recovery, okay?"

WITHIN LESS THAN AN HOUR, Billy and Irene arrived. I was sitting outside the Intensive Care Unit with our 14-year old son, Michael, beside me. Irene hugged me first and Billy stroked his hand on my back. We sat and I gave them the brief details of what happened since we parted last night at Hotel Delujo until to the events that led us to the hospital. Since Michael was with us, I deliberately skipped the sensual part of the story.

"Have you eaten?" asked Irene. "It looks like you haven't slept."

I shook my head. "Michael, already did before coming here."

"Go and eat breakfast, Mom," Michael said. "I'll stay here. I'll just send you a message if they need you."

So Irene and I went to the cafeteria to have breakfast leaving Billy and Michael behind.

I SLOWLY SLICED MY PANCAKE but I didn't have the appetite to eat. Irene, who was sitting across me, held my hand.

"You'd better eat, Eva," she said. "I understand in a situation like this, you tend to lose appetite but you need physical strength."

I took a bite and chewed slowly.

"I really couldn't believe when I saw you last night," she continued. "You were so beautiful in that maroon dress. You still are after almost 25 years since we left high school."

I tried to smile. I knew she wanted to cheer me up.

"Just see how life could be so drastic," I said. "Last night I was beautiful and happy. Today, I look weary and sad."

Irene held my hand and squeezed it.

"I already accepted the fact that Ted would go ahead of me, given our age gap," I continued. "But I never thought it would be this soon."

I started to cry.

IRENE AND I HAD RETURNED to the Intensive Care Unit and we all sat there outside the door waiting for signs of improvement from Ted. I let Michael in for a few minutes to see his father before sending him home. I didn't want him to see me like this further. So Billy, Irene and I were sitting there staring at the white wall.

"I was just wondering," Irene cut the silence. "How did you meet Ted?"

I smiled. Almost instantly, the memory of that fateful day came back to my mind and I told them the story.

BILLY WHISTLED. "Whirlwind romance Ted's way."

"But they're still together for fifteen years," Irene said. "That's true love at first sight."

I didn't mention to Billy and Irene the truth about Ted's marriage status with his wife Lilianne. I knew Ted had been telling everybody here that he

had been divorced twice and I was his third wife. Common law wife status has been accepted in an ever-changing society of La Isla Colonia.

AFTER BILLY AND IRENE LEFT, Tim Kirkpatrick dropped by before proceeding to the airport for his flight back to Denver. He told me that he will make sure that everything would be fine with us and he already contacted the corporate legal department for our needs.

"Ted told me that he has taken care of you and your son. I just want to make sure he really did that."

I nodded. "Thanks, Tim."

"I've always considered Ted as my best friend," he said. "That's the reason why I asked him to head Contact Point here. When I've learned about your relationship, I advised him to take care of you and make sure that you'll not be at the losing end when the time comes."

"So you knew it all along?"

He nodded. "Ted admitted it to me fifteen years ago. I don't know what's with Lilianne why she doesn't want to sign the divorce papers," he said. "Ted's personal lawyer, Allan Milton, couldn't do anything about it. You might want to give Allan and Lucille a call, by the way."

"I already called Lucille. I'm not sure if I'll call Allan Milton. Ted said he hired another lawyer, Atty. Janice Torrecampo, from the corporate law firm that handles your legal matters," I said. "She was the one I called."

"Oh, that's good," Mr. Kirkpatrick said. "Ted took my advice, then. I know Atty. Torrecampo personally. Now I'm relieved to know that you're already in good hands. Just give the office a call for any updates on Ted, okay?"

"I will. Thanks, Tim."

I WENT INSIDE THE ICU and the nurse allowed me to stay by his side for an hour. Ted looked different now, with those IV lines, mechanical respirator, and ECG monitor connected to him. Never did I thought that I would see him this way. I held his hand as I sat down on a chair beside his bed the nurse provided. They said that the last sense to fade was the sense of hearing, that was why they encouraged me to speak with Ted despite his comatose condition.

"Hi, Hon," I greeted him. "I'm here beside you."

Tears started to well in my eyes. Ted doesn't want to see me cry. He hated that. But I couldn't help it. A tear flowed down my cheek and I wiped it off.

"I never thought I would see you like this. Please, hang on, not just for yourself, but also for

me, for Michael, for the company. We all love you, Ted. You had visitors since this morning, Billy, Irene, Tim, and others from Contact Point. I also called Lucille, your eldest daughter, and told her about what happened. She said she'll be coming over to see you. She'll arrive Monday evening. So you'd better be okay by then. Everybody is praying for your speedy recovery. And once you're okay, I'll take care of you as usual. Much more than the usual, I guess. Isn't it that you like to be pampered, Hon?"

I've noticed that one of his finger twitched involuntarily but his heart beat remained the same.

I HEARD SUNDAY'S MASS at the hospital chapel the next morning with Michael. After giving his father a short visit, I sent him home. Bert came back to the hospital with the restaurant manager.

Valerie came to visit and at the same time gave me some important documents to sign.

"How's the cafe, Valerie?" I asked.

"Doing good, Miss Eva," she answered. "We had many customers until late at night because of the concert nearby."

"I see," I said as I signed the voucher, the check, and the payroll sheet.

After signing the documents, I gave them back to Valerie. "I may not be able to come over there for the next few days, Val," I said. "I have to be here with Ted."

"I understand, ma'am," she said and stood up. "I'd better be going. Don't worry about the cafe, I'll take care of it. Just give me a call if you need any help."

"Thanks, Val," I said.

Ted had been generous to me that he gave me enough money to start a small cafe for tourists who frequent Puerto Montoya. I've hired Valerie, a former restaurant manager and she proved to be a good asset. With her supervision, I could afford to stay at home with Ted and Michael.

ON THE THIRD DAY, the bills had piled up, yet Ted's condition remained the same. I stared at Ted's condition and I heaved a sigh. I sat down beside him and held his hand.

"Ted, I know you're suffering right now," I whispered. "For the past few days I kept on telling you to hold on, thinking that you could recover. I believe you could. I know you've been trying."

I couldn't help but shed tears. I wiped them off with my hand as I continued whispering to him.

"However, Ted, if you really can't make it, just tell us. I can let you go. Remember that song about letting go? Didn't it say it's another way of saying I love you?"

I cried as I reflected what I just have said. It was painful but I had to accept it. Some good things never last.

"I love you, Ted," I said. "Try to remember that. I love you very much."

I saw Ted's fingers moved. I saw from his face that he tried to smile despite the mouth piece of the mechanical respirator attached to him.

"Shh." I said. "You don't need to talk. I know what you want to say, Hon."

I kissed his hand and held it with my two hands. I didn't leave his side. After a few minutes, the monitors beeped. I looked at it and his heart beat was dropping. I immediately called the nurse's attention. When she came beside me, Ted's heart beat continued to fall. The nurse called an alarm. The doctors came in and the emergency cart was set up again. Another nurse inserted a medicine in his IV line as instructed.

Dr. Chan was with them and he shook his head.

"Eva, I need to talk to you," the doctor said.

When we went out of the ICU, he asked me of my opinion.

"If we're going to revive him, chances are he'll still be in comatose for the next few days," he said. "Chances of recovery is slim. The medicine that was injected to him should have taken effect within five minutes but you saw that there was no improvement."

I nodded.

"I'm just telling you the worst case scenario," Dr. Chan said.

"I'm ready to accept that, Doctor."

When we returned, Ted's condition remained the same, low heart beat, blood pressure going low, breathing lightly.

I held Ted's hand one last time and kissed his forehead. I whispered to his ear, "I love you. You may go. I can take care of myself and Michael. Don't worry about us." And then I kissed him on his lips.

With that, I heard the monitor's flat line signal and Ted's fingers loosen within my grip.

## **7 . LIFE AFTER TED**

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AFTER SETTling SOME MATTERS at the hospital, I immediately called Billy using Ted's cell phone. It was Tuesday before midnight. Billy might have been at the office.

"Eva?" he asked when he picked up the call. He knew that it was me. "What happened?"

I started crying. "Ted's gone," was all I said to him.

DURING THE WAKE, Irene and Chloe were there. Irene came with Billy. Chloe came with Dr. Chan and another doctor who I believed was Chloe's long-time boyfriend.

"I also called Ana, Camille, and Maria," Irene said. "They can't come but they sent their condolences."

"Ana called me earlier," I said. "She really can't come. She has to deal with some family problem, she said. I think it concerns with her daughter."

"Maria is in the States, and would be going to London after that I think," said Chloe.

"I understand," I said. "Camille, too, can't come, I know. She's busy with her business. Thanks for coming anyway."

I know I can depend on these friends.

GOOD THING, I HAD A CONSTANT COMMUNICATION with Ted's eldest daughter by first marriage. Lucille, now 39, first came here in the country ten years ago for a vacation. I called her about Ted's hospitalization and told me that she would be coming over. However, she came too late. Her flight was delayed so she wasn't able to see her father alive.

Ted was cremated that weekend. After a few days of wake and a Holy Mass before cremation, there was a small get together for the guests who attended.

The guests have left except for Billy, Irene, and Lucille. Bert, our loyal driver, came.

"Oh, here's Bert," I said. "Why don't you follow us at home?" I told Billy and Irene.

"Ma'am," Bert said. "I have to send you this. "

He handed me a long brown envelope and it was marked Urgent and Confidential. I opened the envelope and read the document. Lilianne Smith had asked the court to grant her, as Ted's legal wife, all my properties including my house and restaurant.

"What is it?" asked Lucille.

I handed the document for her to read.

"The nerve!" said Lucille in disgust. She gave the document to Billy for him to read as well.

"Don't worry, Eva," he said after scanning the documents. "I'll call our corporate lawyer about this."

I MADE AN APPOINTMENT with Atty. Janice Torrecampo the next day and told her the whole story and showed her all the documents I had in my possession.

"I was already given a heads up by Billy and Mr. Kirkpatrick," she said as she scanned the documents.

"That's good to know," I said. "Is there anything else that I should do?"

"Nothing as of this moment," she said. "But let me know immediately if you are harassed or anything about this matter, okay?"

I nodded.

ACCORDING TO ATTY. TORRECAMPO, Ted was able to invest on trust fund for Michael's education plus a property under Michael's name, a property for each of his daughters, Lucille, Jaimie and Jenna. The unit where we lived in, plus the restaurant were already in my name so technically it's mine. Since Lilianne was still Ted's wife, she could only inherit the house she was living in and the car he bought before he left her in 1995. It was even described in detail in Ted's last will and testament made a year ago in Denver the last time he was there.

Lucille left the next morning. She told me that she will follow it up with Atty. Torrecampo's counterparts in Denver. She even promised Michael to bring him to the States for a US tour.

"You and Dad may not be married," Lucille said. "But for me, you're the wife Dad had been longing for. Thank you for making my father happy until the last day of his life."

THE NEWS ABOUT LILIANNE'S CLAIM on my properties spread like fire in Contact Point. Now it was known that I was Ted's mistress, not his wife. To make matters worse, Lilianne, together with Ted's friend lawyer, Allan Milton, came to Contact Point first, looking for Ted's office. They told everyone that I shouldn't be acting on Ted's behalf. There was no divorce promulgated because Ted was here and Lilianne didn't sign the divorce papers in Denver. Although Lilianne and Ted separated in 1995, the couple's marriage has not been annulled, according to Allan Milton.

Tim Kirkpatrick knew already what Lilianne and Allan did. He was already made aware of the legal battle I would be facing because Billy called him right after I received the court petition on the day of Ted's cremation.

I received an email each from Jaimie and Jenna, saying their condolences and assuring me that I have their support. I haven't known them

personally, but it seemed to me that they knew how Ted and I were when he was still living. They also said that they were already estranged with their mother two years ago and they understood why their father left her. And even though they didn't grow up with their father, Ted was able to show how a good father he was whenever he goes to Denver. They also wished Michael well and invited us to the US.

But Lilianne and Allan insisted that the money was from Ted so Lilianne, as the legal wife, has the right to own Eva's house and restaurant business. Lilianne even wanted to contest Ted's last will and testament.

"Why am I losing everything?" I asked my mother.

"You didn't lose everything, not even close," she said comfortingly.

There were two court cases against me, one in Marcelo and one in Denver. Both were handled by the lawyers Contact Point hired from an internationally known law firm where Atty. Torrecampo was affiliated with. With their extensive research, it was found out that Lilianne Smith and Allan Milton were having an affair behind Ted's back. Forensic accounting investigation reported that Lilianne was a gambler and when she was in deep trouble, Ted helped her out of it. But it was the main reason why Ted filed for a divorce. Lilianne did not sign the papers because she knew

Ted was much more than the alimony she would receive from him.

Her daughters left her for the same reason: gambling. Lilianne became dependent upon Allan, Ted's friend and personal lawyer for support.

Surprisingly, Tim Kirkpatrick came to testify for Ted. He said that he, Ted, and Allan joined together to put up Contact Point. However, he started suspecting Allan and they had a fight over some transactions Allan made on their behalf which he didn't approve of. Allan left the company but maintained to be Ted's personal lawyer. He advised Ted to hire another lawyer because he suspected something in Allan, an advice which Ted followed. I didn't know this but Ted found out that it was Allan who advised Lilianne not to sign the divorce papers. He didn't fire Allan so as not to create a suspicion from them. Everyone was shocked to hear the details in court. Lilianne and Allan dropped their case out of shame. So the court decided to rule in my favor. Since then, there were no more news about Lilianne Smith and Allan Milton.

"MARIA!" I HEARD SOMEONE CALLED. When I turned to Maria, she was already kissing Ana. "How are you?"

"I'm fine, been busy lately. I just returned from the U.S.," Maria said. She stepped back to look at Ana, "My God! You haven't changed a bit."

It was our Silver Jubilee and alumnae homecoming and all six of us Vixens were present. There was Chloe, the obstetrician-gynecologist; Camille, the widow; Irene, the executive; Maria, the model; Ana, the nurse, and me. Seeing them all, I was the only one who gained weight after Ted's death.

"How are you now, Ana?" they asked.

"I'm doing fine as a manager of a clinic in Buenvenida. My kids now are ages 24 and 18. Single mom," I answered.

"I remember, you're the first one who got pregnant," I said.

"Will I be ever late for that?" I replied. "Back in high school, I already knew all about sex when all you guys were still curious about masturbation!"

We laughed. I remember how true it was. I remembered how I had no partner for the prom because Francis had left me after learning about my true identity. So I seduced Richard, Chloe's prospective partner, hurting her in the process. Then the Vixens learned about me being a maid, too. I explained to them that it was my father's way of hiding me from his legitimate family. I thought the Vixens would cast me out of their group but it turned out they were my friends forever.

A waiter was offering cocktails to our table.

"You don't look like you had kids," said Camille, running her fingers through her short coiffure as

she took her glass of vodka mixed with soda and cherry. "You're still slim and sexy."

Ana smiled and pointed out her abdominal area as she sipped with a straw the iced tea she ordered. "Had a tummy tuck," she said seriously.

"Really!" I exclaimed. "How much did you spend on that?"

"Hey, I'm just joking!" Ana laughed.

We reminisced about high school life. We had so much fun, we felt young again, carefree and full of life. I was thankful for having friends like them. I remembered, we were laughing at Ana's cowgirl statement when Irene's cell phone rang.

We heard Irene say, "Maybe later, I'm still here in the grand alumni homecoming."

"Who's that?" asked Camille.

"Billy, one of the Executive Directors," she said and stood up. "I have to leave. I still have a shift tonight. I'm sorry, ladies."

"You're leaving soon? We haven't caught up with each other yet," said Maria.

"Billy is waiting for me at the office."

"Oh..." I said knowing who Billy is at Contact Point. "Okay, then. See you when I see you," I continued and kissed Irene goodbye.

But after a few minutes, she returned to our table.

"Hey, you're back," said Maria.

"Billy told me that I can take tonight's off," Irene said smiling as she sat down on her seat she vacated awhile ago.

"See? They did allow you. Let us thank this Billy, who is the Executive Director and someone special, I believe..." I jokingly said.

"Okay, I admit, Billy is also a boyfriend," Irene said as she looked at me.

"Whoo-hoo!" the other Vixens shouted and raised their glasses.

"You have been so dedicated to your work that I'm sure they'll give you an award," I said as I winked at Irene.

"How about you, Eva," asked Camille. "How's life so far?"

Among the five, it was only Irene who knew about my life with Ted. So the other four knew I was once a housewife, not a kept mistress.

"I think I have to tell you the whole story," I said to them and I looked at Irene.

Irene held and squeezed my hand. "Don't worry, Eva," she said. "They will understand the way I understood it."

"Hmm." said Maria to Irene. "You know something, huh?"

"Sisters," Irene said. "We know her story back in high school, right? And if you're going to listen, Eva's story is not really that bad. Her life with Ted was I should say, wonderful."

"So tell us, Eva," Ana said. "How was life with you after high school?"

So I told them everything.

I WOKE UP EARLY on that Wednesday morning because it was Ted's first death anniversary. As a tradition, I was about to end my mourning.

I went to the kitchen and prepared Ted's favorite breakfast: buttered pancakes with bacon and brewed coffee. As soon as I was done with my cooking, Michael joined me for breakfast.

Michael knew what the occasion was so he volunteered to lead the prayer. I smiled at him. As soon as we finished our prayer, someone was knocking at the gate and the maid went out to open it. When she returned I saw three women with her. I couldn't believe my eyes, it was Lucille and probably the two others are Jaimie and Jenna.

"Oh, my God! You're here," I said in surprise. "When did you arrive? Why did you not tell me? I should have picked you up at the airport."

Lucille gave me a hug and laughed.

"No need," she said. "La Isla Colonia is small that I know my way around here. By the way, let me introduce to you Jaimie and Jenna."

Michael was at the door looking at us.

"And that's our kid brother, Mike," Lucille continued.

So we kissed and hugged each other and invited them for breakfast. Since I only cooked a few pieces, I prepared another batch for the newly arrived visitors.

"No, don't bother," Lucille said. "We could get our breakfast from the hotel, I think they have this breakfast buffet."

But I insisted. So they just sat down and waited for me to serve them their father's favorite breakfast treat.

"We just arrived around one o'clock your time," Jaimie said. "So it's just like ten or eleven in the morning back there."

"Were you able to receive my email?" I asked.

"Yes," Jenna said. "That's why we planned together to get here for this occasion. And also to

meet you and Michael in person. And wow, this is such a lovely tropical island."

So we had a happy breakfast together and I felt blessed as if Ted did not leave me a year ago.

While having breakfast, Jenna said something.

"I have a news for you, Eva," she said.

"Is it a good news or bad news?" I asked.

"It's up to you on how you'll take it," she said. "My mom and Allan were found dead in a hotel in Buenos Aires a month ago. But we were only informed last week about what really happened."

"Oh, I'm sorry. My condolences, Jaimie and Jenna," I said.

Jenna said, "We asked our grandmother where she could be buried and they gladly claimed her remains and buried her in Louisiana. We just took a short trip to attend the funeral and left immediately. They knew that we left our mother for good."

"What could have happened to them?" I asked.

"According to some stories, Allan might have caused it," Jaimie said. "You know Allan, he could be crooked and wicked with his transactions that he really could end up dead."

After hearing the news, I felt that Fate must have vindicated me.

AFTER BREAKFAST, I went out to the terrace to water the flowers Ted bought me last year months before he died. A black butterfly fluttered in the air and it landed on one of my favorite roses. I didn't mind it as I continued watering the other plants. Then I went inside and prepared myself for a shower before going to Mass.

We celebrated a Holy Mass in Ted's memory and I gave a small get together at the restaurant right after that. I invited Ted's friends from Contact Point and a few friends, including the Vixens, and my half-brothers, Henry and Arthur.

WHEN WE GOT BACK from the Holy Mass and get together, I entered the bedroom to get myself dressed. Something caught my eye. I've noticed a black butterfly on Ted's urn. I wondered how it got there. It probably flew in with me when I entered the room after watering the plants at the terrace. I went near the urn and held it.

"Thank you because you took care of me," I whispered to the butterfly. "I understood now why you decided to hide me." I stopped at the thought of that and then continued, "Actually, you did not hide me, you just turned me into a cocoon that

would become a butterfly someday. I love you, Theodore Smith, wherever you are."

After saying those words, the black butterfly flew away towards the window by the terrace. I opened the window to let the butterfly out in the air as the soft wind blew into my cheeks.

\*\*\*THE END\*\*\*

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

A work at home mom, freelance writer and novelist, Issa Uycoco-Bacsa resigned from practicing Medical Technology and Nursing in 1999 and shifted to creative writing. After attending writing workshops, she won Honorable Mention (Finalist) in Film Development Foundation of the Philippines' Screenwriting contest in 2000 that landed her a job at Star Cinema/ABS-eBN Films, Inc. A year and a half later, she started writing Filipino romance novels, comics, and a column for a Filipino tabloid. She now resides in Quezon City, Philippines with her husband and daughter. This is her second English novel.