

THE HAUNTED



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The Haunted

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Prologue

The first time I saw Baguio twenty years ago, I was a young and naive college student with nothing but high dreams for the future. I didn't know what my parents thought of it; after all, Bataan was closer to Manila than Baguio. Back then, travel was a journey of patience, stretching over twelve hours due to the aftermath of Mt. Pinatubo's eruption, which had left its mark on the roads connecting us to the rest of Region 3.

Baguio was my childhood dream—a place I longed to visit—but it was never my teenage dream to study here. Still, I accepted my parents' decision, seeing it as a challenge. No matter what, I would become a successful career woman in four years.

Little did I know that this single decision—to study in this pine-scented city—would leave an imprint on me, shaping the course of my life for the next two decades. Baguio, by all means, opened my soul, not just my heart.

Chapter 1: Life Begins at 40

The shrill sound of the alarm clock jolted me awake. I forgot to turn it off, of course. Today of all days, it had to be my 40th birthday. I groaned and squinted at the clock, the numbers glaring back at me like a cruel reminder. I was supposed to be off today. It was supposed to be my day, but here I was, already starting it off in frustration.

I scanned the room, half-expecting some sort of surprise from Jim, my husband, or Kate, our only child. But there was nothing. The room was as quiet as it always was in the morning, no gifts, no balloons, no laughter. Just silence.

I grabbed my phone, hoping to find some birthday wishes, maybe a small reminder from someone that I mattered today. But the screen showed nothing. Not a single message. I sighed and threw the phone back onto the bed, disappointed.

Just as I turned to get out of bed, a message popped up.

“Happy birthday!”

It was from an unknown number.

I stared at the screen for a moment, my heart skipping a beat. Curious, I tried to call the sender, but all I got was the endless ringing. No answer.

I dragged myself into the dining room, where Jim was already finishing his breakfast. He was busy scrolling through his phone, the soft clink of his spoon against the bowl the only sound filling the space between us. He barely glanced at me, lost in whatever he was reading.

I stood there for a moment, waiting for some kind of acknowledgment, but there was none. He didn’t even wish me a happy birthday. It wasn’t like I was expecting a grand gesture—just a smile, something. Anything. But it never came.

“Barbie’s asking if you’re on leave today,” Jim said, his voice distant, still focused on his screen.

“Why would she ask you? She can ask me anytime. The whole team knows I’m on leave. Why can’t she remember that?” I snapped, my frustration leaking through.

Jim just shrugged, too absorbed in whatever he was reading to care.

I turned and walked back to our bedroom, trying to calm the irritation rising within me. Barbie. My teammate. I didn’t know what it was about her, but she always seemed to get under my skin. She was in her late 20s, confident, pretty—everything I wasn’t. And after last year’s Christmas party, where Jim and Barbie had exchanged a few too many casual conversations, I couldn’t shake the nagging feeling that something more was going on. But what could I prove? Nothing, of course. A woman’s instinct, they say.

I heard the lock on the front door click, signaling that Jim was leaving. I couldn’t resist. I went to the window to check if he had already left, and there he was, leaning against the car, his back turned toward me. From this angle, I could see him texting someone. The pit in my stomach tightened.

I left the window and opened the closet, my hands trembling slightly as I searched for something to wear.

“It’s now or never,” I told myself. My breath caught in my throat.

The car engine rumbled to life outside. The sound reminded me of my father’s old car—the one that had taken me on a long drive to Baguio over twenty years ago.

I closed my eyes for a moment, letting the memory wash over me. The smell of the air in the mountains, the sound of the tires on the winding roads... everything about that trip felt so vivid, like it had happened just yesterday.

I shook myself out of the reverie. I hadn’t been back to Baguio in two decades. And now, I was going back.

I grabbed a bottle of pills from the medicine cabinet, the cool glass in my hand grounding me. I wasn’t sure what I was expecting to find there, but something about Baguio called to me. Life

begins at 40, they say. But for me, it felt like a second shot at life. A chance to put the pieces back together. Maybe Baguio held the answers.

I stepped into the shower, the hot water washing away the tension from my shoulders.

Twenty-three years ago, life had been simpler, yet so much more complicated. But today, on my 40th birthday, I was about to face the past, and maybe—just maybe—I could find something worth fighting for.

Chapter 2: The House on South Drive

The conductor tapped my shoulder gently. I blinked awake. Outside the bus windows, pine trees swayed in the morning breeze. A few passengers were already stepping off.

“Ma’am, we’re here,” he said.

I couldn’t believe it. Just three hours from Manila to Baguio. When I was younger, this trip took twelve hours, sometimes more.

I stepped out, the crisp, familiar air brushing against my skin like an old friend. A cluster of locals immediately approached me, handing out flyers and asking if I needed a place to stay. I shook my head politely.

“Here’s your luggage,” the conductor said, setting my bag down beside me.

I thanked him, handed a small tip, and made my way to the taxi line. It didn’t take long before a cab pulled up.

“South Drive,” I said, settling into the back seat.

As the taxi rolled through the winding roads, I watched Baguio unfold like a memory partially rewritten. Twenty years had changed so much—the buildings, the traffic, the shops—but the air, the trees, the soft fog—they remained the same.

The cab stopped in front of a large house with a sloping lawn. It looked almost exactly how I remembered it. The house of my college years. My sanctuary once.

The driver helped with my luggage, and I stood there for a moment, frozen. The façade brought back images of late-night study sessions, shared laughter with housemates, and afternoons reading on the attic coffee table by the window.

I looked up. The attic's large window was still there. So was the coffee table, faded now, but unmistakable. I could almost see my younger self, legs curled up, flipping through an old magazine.

“Manang Leona?”

The voice snapped me out of my daydream.

I turned. A woman stood behind the grilled gate. Her face was familiar but changed—older, more guarded.

“Dina?” I asked.

She nodded and unlatched the gate. Without another word, she took my luggage and led the way inside.

“Where's Manang Linda?” I asked gently, referring to our old caretaker.

Dina paused mid-step. “Didn't Ma'am Yumi inform you I'm the new caretaker?” Her tone was clipped, defensive.

I let it pass. Maybe my sudden arrival had unsettled her. I didn't give Aunt Yumi much notice. She's my mother's second cousin, and this house is hers, though she never lived in it. She's based abroad. Anytime we needed it, we just had to inform her.

Dina busied herself in the kitchen.

“I'll prepare something light. Where are your husband and daughter?” she asked after a moment.

I hesitated. “They stayed behind. Change of plans.”

She nodded, though her lips tightened. Irritated again? I couldn't tell.

I checked my phone. Ten messages from Kate.

The first two were birthday greetings. The rest were questions—where was I? She had bought me a chocolate cake.

“I’m just on a little vacation,” I replied, then slipped the phone into my bag.

Dina returned with a cup of hot chocolate. I took it in silence, the warmth seeping into my fingers as I looked around the house that once felt like home.

Chapter 3: The Apparition

Dina effortlessly carried my luggage up the steep stairs. She was only five years younger than me, yet she had the strength and energy of someone much younger. She'd been coming to this house since she was a teenager—first as an occasional cleaner during our college days—so she knew every corner like the back of her hand.

My room was in the attic. It was spacious, with a separate area for a coffee table and a small storage nook. I used to share the room with Jane, who wasn't a relative of Aunt Yumi. During my college years, Aunt Yumi had started accepting boarders who weren't family. Aside from Jane, there were Sofie, Hazel, and Carly, who shared the large room on the second floor. The other two rooms on that floor were always locked. Manang Linda, our caretaker, stayed in a small room downstairs.

I climbed the wooden stairs and was surprised to find them still sturdy after all these years. It was already 11:00 a.m., but the house was dim and somber. I switched on the lights to find my way. As I passed the door to the girls' old room, I turned left and ascended the narrow staircase to the attic.

The familiar scent of pinewood hit me as I opened the door. My bed. Still here. Still carrying the smell of my youth. Dina excused herself and said she would prepare lunch.

I reached out to Jane's empty bed, touching it gently, half-expecting to see her sprawled there, flipping through a fashion magazine. I moved toward the second door—leading to the coffee table area and the storage room beyond. Sunlight poured through the large window, illuminating the dust in the air. This was always the brightest part of the house. I sat, absently flipping through old magazines, letting the stillness lull me.

Then something pulled my gaze outside.

A man stood by the gate, staring up at the window.

I blinked. His build... his posture... the way he held the metal bars.

Rupert?

My breath caught. I leaned forward, squinting for a better look, but in that fleeting moment, the figure was gone.

Startled, I rose to my tiptoes and tried to peer beyond the trees and hedges.

Dina appeared at the doorway. She caught me mid-motion.

“I think I saw someone standing at the gate,” I said, still trying to catch another glimpse.

She glanced out, unfazed. “Wala naman po,” she said flatly. Then, in her usual cool tone, “Lunch is ready.” Without waiting for a reply, she turned and left.

I wasn’t hungry. The hot chocolate had left me feeling heavy. I returned to the attic and lay on my bed, the pinewood scent oddly comforting.

Everything here looked just as it had two decades ago. The unchanged furniture. The creaking floorboards. The muted colors of the curtains. It felt like I had stepped into a paused memory.

But the man...

Could it really have been Rupert?

It couldn’t be. Rupert had his own life now. He must have moved on. So why was I still clinging to a ghost?

I closed my eyes, remembering the first time we met. It had been a chilly morning. The girls and I went jogging, and I tripped over an uneven path. The pain in my ankle was sharp, and I sat on a large rock, wincing.

“She tripped. Just a minor sprain,” Jane had said to a boy on a bicycle who had stopped beside us.

I hadn’t looked up. I only heard his voice.

“I can take you home. You can ride up front, if you want.”

I hesitated. But the pain made the decision for me.

“Where do you live?” he asked.

“Just the house with a grilled gate.”

He laughed lightly. “That’s just a few steps from our place.”

So I climbed onto the bicycle, awkwardly balancing myself in front of him. The girls followed on foot. We arrived ahead, and he stayed with me while I settled down.

“You’re new here?” he asked.

“Barely a month.”

“I’m Rupert,” he said, extending his hand.

I took it. That was when I saw his face for the first time. My heart skipped. I hadn’t expected him to be that handsome—messy hair, intelligent eyes, a smile that somehow disarmed me.

From that moment on, Rupert became a constant presence in my college life.

And now, decades later, I was wondering if he had returned, or if I was simply conjuring him from memory—my mind playing tricks on me in this house of shadows.

Chapter 4: The Neighbor's House

It was already past 5:00 PM when I woke up. I must have dozed off—the cold air made the attic surprisingly comfortable.

At the far end of the storage area, there was a small bathroom. I walked past racks of neatly labeled boxes, turned right, and pushed the door open.

The faucet let out a sputter of air before finally releasing water. The first burst came out rusty, likely from disuse. I let it run while I turned on the heater. I wasn't in the mood for a full shower, so I just washed my face and brushed my teeth.

Back through the storage area, I passed the coffee table and stood in front of the large glass window. Outside, Dina was sweeping the cemented port. Almost instinctively, she looked up and met my gaze before returning to her chore.

I smelled faintly of the air freshener from the bus ride—sharp, synthetic. I figured I'd shower later.

Then, out of nowhere, a thought struck me. A reckless, absurd idea.

I grabbed my green jacket, slipped on my white rubber shoes, and left the room. Dina was still in the garden when I passed by.

"I'll just take a walk," I said.

"Do you need company?" Dina's voice was pleasant, but something in her eyes unsettled me. She smiled—but it felt like she was daring me, testing me.

“No, thanks,” I replied quickly, pulling the gate open and waiting.

She paused, just standing there, as if unsure whether to close the gate or leave it open. When I saw her finally moving toward it, I turned and started walking.

The air outside was crisp and pine-scented. I followed the road until I reached a familiar property just 300 meters away from the college house. A four-foot fence, lined with cypress shrubs, gave the place some privacy. The lawn was covered in neatly trimmed blue grass.

In front of the weathered brown gate, I hesitated. The old lock was still there, hidden beneath overgrown ivy. My fingers trembled as I brushed the leaves aside and entered the code: 8040.

It was a long shot—two decades had passed, after all. But then... tick. A soft vibration. The lock gave way.

My heart skipped.

The gate creaked open, revealing the property in full: rows of pine trees on the left, the blue grass lawn on the right, shrubs lining the far edge. I stepped cautiously onto the path, scanning the space ahead.

Then—

Thud... thud...

A steady, dull sound. Chopping wood? I frowned. Who still chopped wood in this day and age?

A large pinecone fell in front of me, startling me. As I walked closer to the sound, I saw a figure—broad shoulders, tan skin, muscles rippling under the afternoon light. No shirt.

My breath caught.

“Rupert?” I whispered, almost to myself.

It couldn’t be. It shouldn’t be. But that stance, that motion—I knew it was him.

I took a step forward and stumbled over a piece of firewood.

“Ouch!” I yelped, grabbing my ankle.

The man stopped. Slowly, he turned.

Time stilled.

It was Rupert. Older, but somehow untouched by time. Still him.

“Leona?” he said, eyes narrowing. His voice was sharper than I remembered.

He stepped toward me, and I froze—heart thudding, legs uncertain.

Without hesitation, he reached down and offered his hand. I took it.

“You either sprained your ankle or tripped,” he said, the corners of his lips curving into a smirk.

And just like that, my cheeks flushed.

He remembered.

All those years ago—it had started the same way. And now, here we were again. A second beginning. Or maybe a ghost from the past I hadn’t yet put to rest.

Want to read the full story?

The rest of the chapters can be read for a minimal fee to support my creative pursuits.

You can access it in two ways:

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Why keep reading?

Leona's journey in *The Haunted* is just beginning. What seems like a quiet return to Baguio unravels into a gripping tale of love lost, memories blurred, and secrets long buried. Each chapter peels back the layers of her past—revealing twists you won't see coming. If you've ever questioned your choices, been haunted by regrets, or sought closure, this story will speak to your soul.

Finish the chapters to uncover the truth—and maybe, a part of yourself along the way.

The Haunted is perfect for anyone who has lost love, is in love, or is trying to understand it. Leona's story is an emotional journey through memory, regret, and healing. Each chapter brings you closer to the heart of what it truly means to love—and to let go. If you've ever been haunted by the past or longed for closure, this story will resonate deeply.