

1



"Darn it!" wika ng kapatid niyang si Mach habang paulit-ulit na inginungudngod ang hinlalaki sa berdeng security scanner. The restricted area behind the massive steel door was home to their family's vast collection of private aircrafts. "I think Dad erased my palm print from the database."

"I wonder why," Ace said mockingly. Iniikot niya ang tingin sa paligid para siguruhing walang ibang tao roon. They were already in a big ball of mess after giving three hangar guards a roofie. Tulog na tulog ang mga ito dahil sa pineapple juice na may halong *Thorazine* na ibinigay ni Mach.

"Kuya, it's my birthday," paalala nito.

"Big deal," kibit-balikat niya. "I'll send you a card."

"Kuya naman!" reklamo nito. "I'll only turn twenty-three once. Don't be a buzz kill. Alam mo kung gaano ko kagustong pumasok dito."

Nakonsyensya siya dahil sa kanilang tatlong magkapatid ay si Ace lang ang pinahihintulutang pumasok doon. "Promise me you're only going to look," he said with a warning stare. "No touching."

He placed his palm on the green sensor and the door clicked open. Walang katumbas ang ngiting lumitaw sa

mukha ng kapatid niya habang nakataas ang tingin sa malawak na kisame. The lights went on one by one until his brother had a full view of one acre of aerial technology porn.

Sa kaliwa ay nakahanay ang iba't ibang modelo ng helicopter na kinolekta ng kanilang ama sa nagdaang mga taon. On the right side were fixed-wing aircrafts he acquired from different parts of the globe. Front and center were fighter jets that only private citizens like their father could *borrow*.

Ordinaryong tanawin na iyon para sa kanila ni Mach. The Yuchengcos knew men from high places and they enjoyed a few perks in exchange for their covert services to the Allied Nations. Malimit iyong pinagtatalunan ng mga magulang nila lalo na kapag hinihingi ng kanyang ama ang tulong ni Ace.

Ngumisi si Mach. "Maybe I'll touch a little."

Ace glowered at his kid brother. Kapag may nagalaw silang kahit na ano ay tiyak na mapapansin iyon ng kanilang ama. Capt. Jet Yuchengco was known for his pious attention to detail and he was going to kick him to hell and back for letting Mach go inside the facility. Hindi niya dapat ginagawa ito.

"In three years, we're going to build these planes in our own manufacturing facility, Kuya."

"Kapag natiklo tayo dito, tingnan ko lang kung mangyari pa iyon." Binatukan niya ang kapatid.

"Aray!" nakangiwing wika nito. "Kuya naman!"

Lakad-takbong nilapitan ni Mach ang control area. "Mach, huwag diyan. Halika na," saway niya. His brother pulled the red lever down before he could stop him.

The ground shook as the rafters moved up. Bumuka ang bubong sa mismong itaas nila.

“All right, this is not even funny. Let’s go,” aniya sa gitnang malakas na ugong ng bakal at turnilyo.

Nairita si Ace sa kanyang sarili. He sounded more like a nagging aunt than a superior. Kung hindi lang sana gawa sa bato ang ulo ng kapatid niya.

“So you can fly this and I can’t?” tanong ni Mach habang hinahaplos ang tagiliran ng higanteng *F4* fighter jet. Napalunok siya sa lungkot na nasalamin sa mga mata ng nakababatang kapatid. “Mas mahal ka ba ni Dad kaysa sa akin, Kuya?”

If there was anything that could shut him up, this would be it. Hindi iyon lantarang pinag-uusapan, pero alam ng lahat na si Ace ang inihahanda ng ama nila para sumunod dito. He was heir to a legendary path his father and grandfather had walked. Mach, on the other hand, was sent to a business school in Switzerland. His brother hated the fact like dirt.

“Even the international media thinks you’re a rock star after you landed that *Boeing 747* with a burning engine. Ginawa mo pa talagang runway ang kalsada.” He laughed. “Okay ka rin, ah.”

“Jerk! I only had three minutes to decide between the highway or a suburban housing. May mga bata pang naglalaro sa labas ng bahay nila,” katwiran niya.

“I heard the flight recordings, all right. You were calm as a boulder. Kanino bang kasalanan iyon?”

“The fuel pipe cracked because one side was a lot thinner than the other. Kumalat ang apoy sa makina, kaya napilitan

akong mag-emergency landing. The damned manufacturer has a lot of explaining to do.”

Mach smiled. “They sure did, pero pasalamat sila sa iyo. You saved all four hundred sixteen souls inside that plane.”

“Well, I’ll be damned if anybody got hurt under my watch,” Ace said, remembering the strength of will he had to conjure to keep all those people unscathed as the plane plummeted into the ground.

Captain Ace Yuchengco: Modern Day Merlin, said a *New York Times* headline after the incident. Nobody knew how f*cked up he felt that day. Pulos pagpaparangal ang bukambibig ng lahat.

The truth was, it took more than magic to fly those people to safety. Sinuwerte lamang siya. One slight miscalculation on his part and they would have all burned to ashes on that interstate highway.

May nakakuha ng atensyon ni Mach sa likuran ng hangar kaya sinundan niya ito. Nang makita ang hinahanap ay humiyaw ito na tila maliit na bata.

His brother’s eyes zeroed in on the newly acquired X3 *Hybrid Eurocopter*. “Two bad-ass *Rolls-Royce* turbo shaft engines with five-blade tractor propellers. Two hundred eighty knots, maximum speed. Fourteen thousand five hundred feet, service ceiling.” Huminga ito nang malalim. “I’m in love.” Umakyat ito sa loob ng helicopter bago pa ito masaway ni Ace. Damn it, they’re screwed!

Nakangising nagsuot ng helmet ang kapatid niya. “Let’s take it for a quick spin over the *Mactan Bridge*.” He looked so happy doing the pre-flight rituals, it was worth their father’s year-long lecture.

“Don’t even think about it, Mach. That bridge has poor visibility on a night like this.”

“You, on the other hand, can fly on an eight-meter crevice with this thing if you wanted to.” Lumitaw ang bahid ng inggit sa mga mata nito. “S’abi ni Dad, kahit butas ng karayom ay kaya mong lusutan.”

Ace let out an irritated cough. “Hanggang ngayon ba nakikipagpaligsahan ka pa rin sa akin? Ang baduy mo. Honestly, Mach, it’s getting old.”

“Like I really have to compete with you. Una, mas guwapo ako sa ’yo. Then I have a harem full—”

“Iyan ba ang inaatupag mo sa Switzerland?” Siniko niya ito sa tagiliran. “Mag-aral ka nga.”

“I’m just saying that my f*ck friends are way hotter than yours. Walang masama roon.”

“I can tell Mom about it then.”

“Hey!” Nagkamot ito ng ulo. “Don’t tell Mom.”

Napailing si Ace, isinantabi ang usapan.

“You know how many laws we’ve broken since five minutes ago?” Mach’s fingers scrambled through the electronic buttons as his meticulous gaze bounced from one flight instrument to the other. Alam ng kapatid niya ang ginagawa nito.

“I could only imagine.” His brother chuckled, flipping the switch. “Tower CBU. Tower, tower.” Naghintay ito ng sagot. “CBU, this is Juliet Echo Yankee, requesting clearance for take-off. Please confirm.” Natagalan bago umimik ang kausap nito.

Siguradong tinatawagan na nito ang kanilang ama sa mga oras na iyon. Tiningnan siya ni Mach, hinintay na siya

ang magsalita. Nagpakawala siya ng malalim na hininga.

“Tower, this is Merlin - Alpha Charlie Echo, requesting for take-off.”

“Juliet Echo Yankee, departure from Hangar 1 will be at your own risk, you are cleared for take-off,” mula sa control tower ay sagot ni Dennis na bakas ang pagtutol sa boses. Matagal nang kanang-kamay ito ng kanilang ama.

“Roger that, Juliet Echo Yankee set, over and out.” Mach smoothly maneuvered the *Eurocopter* three feet above the ground. “Thank you,” he mouthed as he flew the aircraft with pleasure. Kinurot ang puso ni Ace ng awa para sa kanyang kapatid.

Nang makalipad sila ay awtomatikong sumara ang bubong ng hangar. “So that’s how it looks like from up here,” palatak ni Mach habang nakatingin sa ibaba. “Hanep, ang galing!”

“Eyes on the prize, Mach. Focus,” utos niya.

“Oops!” natatawang wika nito. “My apologies.” He took in the dimmed skyline like it was a moveable feast. He savored the ride with all his heart and soul. Sino siya para pigilan ang kaligayahang iyon?

“Save your apologies for later. Kapag pinapaluhod ka na ni Dad sa isang tasang asin.”

Malutong na tumawa si Mach dahil suki sila ng parusang iyon noong maliliit pa sila. Their father never spanked them as children. Kaya tila adobe sa tigas ang ulo nitong kapatid niya.

They flew at an altitude of one thousand feet toward the sea when Mach spotted a red *Ferrari* racing itself along the *Mactan Bridge*. Tiningnan siya nito na tila may kalokohang

naisip. “Tingnan mo ito, Kuya,” palalong anang kapatid. Ibinaba nito ang *Eurocopter* para takutin ang driver ng sasakyan.

Umiling si Ace. “Mach, don’t go too low.”

“You are no fun, Kuya,” natatawag sabi nito habang minamaniobra ang helicopter sa ibabaw ng pulang sasakyan. His brother was going dangerously low like he wanted to play chess with death. “Yeehaww! Gago, ang yabang mo kasi!”

The car sped away to a blind spot to evade them, but Mach maneuvered toward it like a predator hunting its prey.

“Mach, ire-report tayo ng driver na ’yan sa pulisya. Itigil mo na ’yan,” saway ni Ace.

Fear wasn’t in his vocabulary whenever he was in flight. Same went for panic. Ngunit sa pagkakataong iyon ay kinabog ng kaba ang dibdib niya. Something was going to go terribly wrong.

“Pagbigyan mo na ako, Kuya,” anitong nagkaroon muli ng lambong ang mga mata. “Ikaw naman ang palaging kasama ni Dad. You get all the adrenaline rush while I rot in that stupid school.”

“Well, this isn’t my idea of enjoyment, Mach,” aniya, pilit pinakalma ang boses. “Mom prepared a surprise birthday party for you and you’re gonna miss it. Bumalik na tayo sa hangar, halika na.”

“Yeah, after this,” anito sa gitna ng malakas na ugong ng elisi. Violent winds created by the propeller sent leaves circling around them. He bet if they could talk they’d be cursing at them right now.

“Mach, putsa, you’re operating on crazy!”

“You only live once, Merlin...” nakangising sagot nito.

He pushed the cyclic stick forward to get closer to his target. Ilang beses na bumusina ang driver ng pulang kotse, pero walang balak si Mach na lubayan iyon. “Might as well enjoy the chase! Yeehah!”

Bumilis ang takbo ng kotse para iwasan sila, pero sinundan pa rin iyon ng kanyang kapatid. He was priming the aircraft for maximum velocity.

“Mach, don’t get too close,” saway rito ni Ace. “Damn it, madidisgrasya tayo sa ginagawa mo—“Hindi niya natapos ang nais sabihin dahil huli na ang lahat.

A fireball of chaos broke loose. Umuga ang utak niya sa biglaang pangyayari.

“Kuya!” Mach blurted out with utter horror on his face. The roof on top of them got ripped out by iron rails supporting the bridge. They stared at each other.

“Mach, sonofabitch, brace for impact. Brace for impact!” Then, his brother disappeared.

The next few seconds unraveled in ungodly speed. Nagsirko ang helicopter nila nang dalawang beses bago iyon bumagsak sa semento. The sound of crashing metal threatening to cut them to pieces was the most disturbing sound Ace ever had to bear in his privileged life. His heart throbbed like mad.

Tinangka niyang hawakan si Mach, pero mas mabilis ang pagbulusok ng helicopter kaysa sa kamay niya. Sumakit ang ulo niya. Now he could imagine how his *F2* model plane looked like when he threw it from the top of *Yuchengco Towers*.

Time froze inside the *Eurocopter*. He had escaped death once and now it’s f*cking coming after him... taking his little

brother down as well.

Nakakabingi ang sumunod na mga sandali.

He heard a loud clanking when the aircraft crashed into the ground, katulad ng inaapakang lata. His head hit the ceiling as his body bounced on all four sides. Hinahanap pa rin ng mga mata niya ang kanyang kapatid.

He felt two of his ribs and his legs breaking. “Kuya...” anitong inilipat ang tingin mula sa nagbabagang instrument panel patungo sa kanya. Nanghihina siyang tumingin sa kapatid. “It’s leaking... halika na...” Mach used all his strength to carry him out of the flaming piece of metal.

Hindi niya alam kung saan ito kumuha ng lakas para akayin siya pero nagawa nito. It was a mixture of adrenaline and strength of will to keep him alive. Nanginig ang mga kamay nito habang hawak si Ace. Another major blast tore them apart.

“Iwan mo ako...” nanghihinang wika niya.

Tigas itong umiling. “No, hindi kita iiwan... hindi... tayo...” Gumapang ito palapit sa kanya. Tinangka niya itong itaboy ngunit hindi ito nakinig. The heat from the burning flames crept into his pores.

Mach inched his way upward his body, his face covered with black filth. “Kuya... sasabog... sasa... bog...” Itinaas nito ang kamay para itago ang ulo niya. Mach, who was only an inch shorter than him, ascended all his weight on top of him. “Kuya... I’m sorry... kasalanan ko...” Itinakip nito ng duguang mga kamay ang magkabilang tainga niya.

Ace heard a clock ticking inside his head as he felt his brother’s heart throbbing on top of him. He froze like ice. Hindi pa rin niya maigalaw ang kanyang mga kamay at mga

paa. “Mach... hindi...” The terror was so real he could barely spill the words out of his mouth.

He tried so hard to move his hand but he just couldn't. It was as if a huge boulder held it in place. Nagsilabasan ang ugat niya sa katawan. His body shook as he fought so hard to lift his feet. Pero nabigo pa rin siya. He had never felt so helpless.

Hindi niya sukat akalain na mangyayari sa kanya ang araw na iyon. He knew every trick, every damn routine in the aviator's manual. He knew the exact moment Mach should have throttled back.

Nakarimarim na tunog ang narinig ni Ace mula sa likuran ni Mach. The ground shook at the brutal force of the explosion. A cloud of smoke and fire permeated the air, a knife of chaos cutting through the peaceful night. Hindi siya makahinga dahil sa kapal ng usok. He heard loud screaming inside his head. Damn it, he was going to die! Right now.

Nagliparan ang mga bahagi ng helicopter, kaya mas hinigpitan ng kapatid ang pagyakap sa kanya. Mach's body quivered, pushing him further toward the ground. He felt a splinter through the flesh covering his heart. Ilang pulgada na lang at babaon na iyon sa kanyang dibdib.

“Mach... don't...”

Nag-ibayo ang kaba sa puso ni Ace. Maroon colored blood dripped out of his brother's mouth. “I'm... sorr... y...” anito bago lumungayngay ang ulo sa mukha niya. Ace panicked amid the flames. Nang kapain niya ang likod nito ay may nakatarak na bakal doon. He panicked. He refused to recognize what was happening. No, buhay pa si Mach. Buhay pa ang kapatid niya!

Lalong nag-init ang buong paligid. Fire crept hungrily toward them.

“Mach... wake up... we have to get out of here... wake up...” He was sure they were going to live through this. Both of them. Niyakap niya ang katawan ng kapatid habang tinutupok sila ng nagbabagang apoy.

The unforgiving flames tore through his skin like acid, consuming him inch by inch. Ang tanging hindi nito naabot ay ang bahaging tinakpan ng katawan ni Mach. He held his brother with quivering hands, pulling him as close as he could. “Mach... gising na... huwag kang matakot... nandito si Kuya...” he said, feeling like they were kids again.

Nakarinig siya ng malakas na ugong ng sirena mula sa dulo ng tulay. The reddish fire inched through him much quicker. He was being burned alive. Ngayon lamang siya nakaranas ng ganoong klase ng hapdi, kinakain pati ang buto niya, hindi na niya kaya.

“Mach...” Darkened tears fell from his eyes before he lost consciousness.



2



A *year and a half later...*

“Is that what I think it is, Lolo Rusty?” tukoy ni Gracie sa envelope na inihatid ng abuelo sa studio ng *Upper East Side* condominium na tinitirhan niya. She stood beside the old man. “Hurry, let’s open it!”

“What kind of place is this? Para kang hindi babae.” Tiningnan nito ang mga old school negatives at vintage cameras na kinolekta niya sa loob ng maraming taon. “This is not a house!”

“Nobody’s allowed to get inside except you, remember?” Umangkla siya sa braso nito. “Kaya nga pinauwi ko ang butler na ipinadala ninyo.”

“Kung bakit kasi kailangan mo pang lumipat rito. My house is big enough for ten people.”

She moved out of her grandfather’s Long Island mansion after having her third client. Nais niyang patunayan sa lahat na kaya na niyang magsarili. It had been a big deal to her.

She kissed the old man’s shoulder.

“Lo, remember, this is New York. Kaloka naman kung makikitira ako sa iyo habang-buhay. I’ve never been happier with my decision. Tekang lang, you haven’t answered my question. Is that...”

Her hardnosed eighty-year-old grandpa showed his trademark scowl. He had come a long way from being a thug in Hipodromo, Cebu to being a world-class realtor to marrying the loveliest belle in Philippine society. She was so proud of him.

Bumuntong-hininga si Lolo Rusty. “Ano pa nga ba?”

“As in?” She dropped her black *Hasselbad H4D-60 DSLR* camera to open the envelope. Mas exciting ang laman niyon kaysa sa mga buildings na kinukunan niya ng larawan mula sa bintana.

The first snowfall landed on her window. Malamig ang paligid ngunit hindi ang kanyang puso. Her excitement had mounted inside her chest.

“Hep! Hold your horses, young lady, that’s not a marriage contract. Sa susunod na buwan pa kami magpipirmahan ng kontrata ng ama niya.”

“You mean hindi pa nila nabibili ang lupa?”

“You said you wanted to marry the bastard. Syempre, hindi ko muna ibinenta sa kanila ang property. Dangle the bait to catch your prey.”

Napatili si Gracie, niyakap ang matanda. “Grabe talaga itong lolo ko. Ang galing! Kung nabubuhay lang si Mommy ay tiyak na bibilib siya sa iyo!”

“Kung nabubuhay ’ika mo siya ay pagagalitan ako. She will never let her daughter chase after a man, especially that insolent Yuchengco boy.”

“I’m not chasing him, Lo. I’m baiting him.” She stroked her trusty *DSLR* camera. “Hindi ba, Maverick? We are gonna see your daddy real soon.”

“Uuwi ka ng Cebu? What for, Hija? Baka uminom ka ulit

ng sandamakmak na tabletas kapag nakarinig ka ng walang katuturang panunukso.”

“You mean the Peretti twins?”

“I can’t stand those girls. They’re vicious. Dahil sa mga iyon ay muntik ka nang matigok,” nakaismid na turan nito.

“Lo naman,” she said, her face turning red. She did go through that dreadful time in her life. “Baka akalain ng makarinig, nag-suicide ako.”

“Aba’y ganoon na rin iyon. Pagkaganda-ganda mo na ay pilit mo pang pinapapayat ang sarili mo.”

Indeed. Dahil sa dalawang iyon ay lumaki siyang kaunting lang ang kaibigan. She had regretted ever listening to their groundless criticism of her.

“Hay, Lolo! Could anything be more ancient? Look at me now.” She twirled in front of him. “Achieve na achieve ko na ang ideal figure ko.”

“You’re beautiful as always, apo ko,” he said in an affectionate tone. “Punch that bigheaded excuse for a pilot if he tells you otherwise.”

“Ace would never insult me, Lolo. Hindi siya ganoon.” She smiled dreamily. “He’s a good catch.”

Nalukot ang mukha ng matanda.

“Nagkita na kami ng lalaking iyon. He looked more like a shark than a good catch. Pakiwari ko ay alumni ng kulungan sa dami ng pilat sa mukha at kamay.”

“Si Ace ba talaga ang tinutukoy n’yo? Eh, ang kinis nga ng lalaking iyon. Spanish-Chinese kasi. Then he has those gorgeous brown eyes—”

“Gorgeous brown eyes na muntik ko nang kalikutin. Kung makasagot, napakawalang-modo,” putol nito.

“Lo, he’s not different from most men. Hindi ba nga s’abi mo rascal ka din noong kabataan mo? Aminin! Magbabago din siya kapag kami na.”

“Don’t you ever marry a man to change him, Hija,” he said pointedly. “Puputi lang ang uwak, pero hindi magbabago iyon kapag hindi kusang-loob.”

“Lolo, I love him the way I love my craft. Pure and unconditional. Maghahanap na lang ako ng paraan para ma-in love siya sa akin nang todo.”

“Bakit ba kasi nagpapakahangal ka diyan sa pilotong iyan?” panenermon ng kanyang abuelo. “Napakarami namang nanliligaw sa iyo, pero hindi mo pinapansin. Ian Rockefeller, for one. Noong isang taon pa niya hinihingi ang kamay mo sa akin. He’s also into real estate and he’s half-Filipino.”

“Kung yaman lang, Lo, hindi naman pahuhuli si Ace. His family is old money in the Philippines.”

“Graciella, ibibigay kita kahit sa magbabalut basta’t alam ko na iingat ka. Though it won’t hurt if you end up with Ian’s gleaming trust fund.”

“The problem is...” Niyakap niya ang braso ni Lolo Rusty. “Hindi ko ho siya kayang mahalín.”

“Anong mahal-mahal iyang sinasabi mong bata ka? Your Lola Stella and I had an arranged marriage. Pero tingnan mo kung gaano karami ang naging anak namin. Love is a matter of choice.”

“Yes, it is, and my choice is to love him forever. Siya lang ang lalaking para sa akin.”

“*Pastilan*,” anito sa makapal na tonong Bisaya. “Apo, I know a lot of men who can fly airplanes, too. Hahanapan

kita ng ibang piloto kung papayag ka.”

“But I’ve been in love with Ace since I was in grade school. Nahiya lang akong lumapit sa kanya dahil chubby pa ako nang mga panahong iyon.”

“I knew it! I should have bulldozed that school back and forth before it ruined your future!”

“Lolo, you’re being mean again.”

“Pabayaan mo ako dahil bibig ko naman ito. I will say everything I need to say just to put some sense into that foolish heart of yours.” Nailing ito.

Gracie turned on the waterwork. “Kaya nga *heart* ang tawag nila kasi hindi nag-iisip,” maluha-luhang sabi niya na ikinalaglag ng balikat ng matanda. His eyes turned into soft black jelly.

“Halika rito, Apo.” Pinagpag nito ang tuhod. She sat there like she did as a little girl. “We will always be the best of friends, right?” He looked at her. “Puwes, kung iyan talaga ang gusto mo...”

Her face lit up. “What do you mean?”

He stayed silent for a moment then spoke, “I will set up a private jet to take you back home.”

Pumalampak si Gracie. “Thank you so much, Lo!” aniyang hinalikan ang noo ng matanda. She also kissed him on left and right cheeks. “Mwah! You won’t regret this!”

“Of course I will,” wika nito. “Habang ipinapaayos ko ang bahay natin sa Sta. Clara ay doon ka muna titira sa mga Yuchengco, just in time for your upcoming exhibit. Your Tito Jet is a decent man like his father, Arnulfo. Pero iyang si Ace—”

She stared him down. “Hmm...”

Bumuntong-hininga si Lolo Rusty. “Basta’t sabihin mo sa lalaking kinababaliwan mo na siga ng Hipodromo itong lolo mo. Kaibigan ko si Dodong Hitman kaya huwag na huwag siyang magkakamaling paiyakin ka.”

“Here we go again...” she murmured.

“Matanda na si Dodong pero asintado pa rin iyon.” Muli itong bumuntong-hininga, pagkuwa’y tumingin sa kanya. “Hija, promise me he will take care of you. Iyon lamang ang gusto kong matiyak bago ako mawala sa mundong ito.”

Gracie smiled, tapping the old man’s chest. “Your doctor said that you have the heart of a boxer. Makikita mo pa ang mga apo mo sa akin.”

“Masamang damo nga pala itong lolo mo,” napahinuhod na sang-ayon nito. “Did I ever tell you local newspapers called me the boxing burglar?”

“Yes, you did. You told me that a thousand times, Lolo.”

The old man gave her a dotting smile. “Kaya lagi mong alalahanin ang itinuro ko sa iyo. Jab, jab, uppercut. Right hook, left hook, uppercut...”

Gracie listened to her Lolo Rusty’s tall tales until she snorted with laughter. She was surely going to miss him and his firecracker mouth after she left. But first, she had a shark—oops!—fish to catch.



“Ace, does the name Gracie Valerio ring a bell?” untag ng kanyang ama habang kumakain sila ng hapunan sa Yuchengco mansion. His mother Jenny and his sister Lia sat quietly as they ate Chef Mao’s latest gourmet treat, *Shark Fin Soup in Cream Chili*.

“Hmm...” he said vaguely. “Why?”

“Apo kasi siya ni Mr. Valerio,” anito habang naglalagay ng kanin sa plato ng mommy niya. “I heard she’s the apple of the old man’s eyes.”

The names his father mentioned made Ace cringe. Siguradong may ipapagawa na naman ito sa kanya na hindi niya kayang hindian. Not when their aircraft manufacturing facility project was involved.

“Grouchy old man Valerio rejected my offer to buy that property he owns here in Cebu. Bahala siya kung ayaw niya.” Jet chased green peas on his plate. “I’d rather fly to Iraq than ask him again.”

Sabay silang kumuha ng kanin, ngumuya at huminto para uminom ng tubig. Nangingiting nagkatinginan ang mommy niya at si Lia. He and his father often moved like they were the same person.

“Hindi mo na kailangang gawin iyon dahil pumayag na siyang ibenta ang lupa.” Tumango ang ama kanilang family chef. “Excellent as always, Chef Mao.” Nagpunas ito ng bibig gamit ang table napkin. “We can’t wait for your next entree.”

Naglagay ng red tea sa baso nila ang tatlo sa anim na unipormadong maids na nakatayo roon.

“Thank you, Chef,” Lia said sweetly. “Bukas ay Forbidden City Dumplings naman ang ihanda mo, please. Favorite ko talaga iyon. Super sarap!”

“Of course, Miss Lia.” Sumulyap ang matanda sa braso ni Ace na natatakpan ng naghilom na balat. He didn’t even attempt to hide his curiosity.

He growled at the pesky old man.

Nagkukumahog itong tumalikod pabalik sa kusina. It was a scene everybody was used to seeing. Maging ang

kanyang ina ay hindi na nagsalita pa.

Ibinalik ng ama ang atensyon sa kanya. “Pipirma na siya ng mga papeles sa susunod na buwan. It’s three hundred fifty hectares payable within the next three years. Not a bad deal if you ask me.”

“Pero nang nakipagkita ako sa kanya sa Boston ay muntik na niya akong ipa-salvage.”

“You deserve it for being grouchier than the grouch,” ani Jet na ikinatawa nang mahina ni Lia. “Bakit mo naman kasi pinagtaasan ng boses ang matanda nang sabihin niyang pag-iisipan pa niya?”

“Is that what he told you? Really?” Ace asked.

His father leaned on his seat, letting the sunlight touch a few strands of his silver gray hair. “Yes.”

“I guess he forgot to mention the fact that he forced me to marry his granddaughter.” Ibinaba niya ang tinidor dahil bigla siyang nawalan ng ganang kumain. “I merely told him the truth!”

“What do you mean *the truth*?”

“That I’d be happier poking my eyeballs with an ice pick than taking part in that stupid arrangement he calls marriage. Ginawa pa niya akong pabuya.”

“Ace, Anak...” Hinaplos ng kanyang ina ang pisngi niya, pero pasimple niya iyong iniwasan. “You talk about marriage as if you didn’t grow up in this home. Masarap magkaroon ng sarili mong pamilya.”

“Mom, as much as I hate to say it out loud, but you and Dad... well...” He coughed to make way for something mushy. “...you love each other.”

“Darling, your father wasn’t sure if he really loved me

until he knew about you. Jet, umamin ka.”

“I’ve loved you hopelessly since we first met.” His father kissed her fingers. “Kids, your mother is fishing for a declaration of love from me again.”

“I take back what I said,” ani Ace sa gitna ng pag-uusap ng mga magulang. “Tumanda na ako’t lahat, pero iyan pa rin ang pinagtatalunan ninyo.”

His father smiled at her. “Ito kasing mommy ninyo, matampuhin pa rin hanggang ngayon.”

“Ikaw din.” His mother flocked on his chest like a love bird. “Bolero pa rin hanggang ngayon.”

God, he wished he didn’t hear that.

“Ikaw naman Kuya, twenty-nine years old ka na pero hindi ka pa nagkaka-girlfriend ulit,” singit ni Lia. Her face perked up now that his curst love life was open for harassment. “You act menopausal all the time. Naiimbyerna na tuloy ang lahat ng tao sa iyo.”

Ace rubbed the dark brown scar tissue on his neck. Kung bakit kasi umuwi pa siya ng mansion ngayong araw? He was fine living by his lonesome in that little room at the Yuchengco hangar where he had *Peace-of-Mind in Cream Chili* everyday.

“I’m fine living with my toys, thank you very much.” Lumagok siya ng alak, nagkibit-balikat. He directed his glance at his sister. “Hindi kasi sila madaldal at pakialamero kagaya ng iba rian.”

“You mean those bunch of wrecked aircrafts?” Inilipat nito ang tingin mula sa kanya patungo sa kanilang ama. “Dad, I think Kuya’s going loco!”

“They’re not wrecked aircrafts,” he corrected. “I study

how they're built and how their engines work so I could build a much better version."

"See what I mean, Dad? He's obsessed to bring all those broken aircrafts back to life."

Ace found comfort in putting back shattered pieces together. Hindi kagaya ng buhay niyang sirang-sira na. "They wouldn't look so broken after I've restored them all. Kumain ka na nga."

He knew what this was about. Natatakot ang kanyang mga magulang at ang kapatid na hindi siya makakita ng babaeng magtitiis sa kanya hanggang pagtanda. Like he gave an eff about a wife.

All he ever wanted for the past one year and a half was plummet somewhere and get amnesia. Para hindi na siya habulin ng masasamang alaala. How he wanted to live his life without guilt and pain.

"I heard Gracie's making a name for herself as a portrait photographer," pagkuwa'y wika ni Jet. "Ang s'abi ni Mr. Valerio ay mga Hollywood stars at foreign dignitaries ang nagiging kliyente niya."

"Wow, talaga? I can't wait to meet her," ani Lia.

"Me too, Darling," sagot ng daddy niya.

"That makes the three of us." Tumingin sa kanya ang ina. "Naghahanap kasi ako ng artist na gagawa ng anniversary portrait namin ng daddy mo at..."

Namayani ang katahimikan sa hapag-kainan, pero naramdaman ni Ace ang titig ng mga ito sa kanya. He looked up to meet three pairs of curious eyes. "And you're all looking at me because...?"

"I told Mr. Valerio that you hit your head in the cockpit

that day you rejected his offer.” Tumikhim ang kanyang ama. “Pinapatawad ka na raw niya kaya inihabilin niya sa akin—at sa iyo—ang paborito niyang apo. Her plane lands at 1400 hours.”

Ace unleashed a slew of curses inside his head. Alam na niya kung saan patungo ang usapang iyon. Tiningnan niya ang kanyang relo. “Which reminds me of a safety inspection I have to deal with—”

“Dennis is taking care of it as we speak,” he said simply. “Thanda mo ang sarili mo dahil tayo mismo ang susundo kay Gracie sa airport. You’re going to show her around while she’s here.”

Natagalan bago niya naintindihan ang ibig sabihin ng daddy niya. “Like... a tour guide?” aniya na unti-unting huminto sa pagnguya. All the flavor in Chef Mao’s cream chili sauce suddenly turned sour.

“Yes, like a tour guide. Exactly.”

“Dad, I didn’t work my ass off at *MIT* and three of the finest aviation schools in the world just to become Gracie Valerio’s lap dog. Ano ako, hilo?”

“Ah, so you do remember her?”

“Of course I remember her,” pag-amin niya. “Kaya nga kami nagkalabuan ni Mr. Valerio.” Ace twisted his fingers over the table. “I’ve been avoiding her like a two-hundred-pound stripper since we were kids.”

“Hindi ba siya ’yung umakyat sa stage para kumanta ng *Happy Birthday*, *Ace Yuchengco* sa harap ng buong school ninyo?” usisa ng mommy niya. “I think it was on your twelfth birthday.”

He breathed out. “The one and only.”

Tumingala ang ginang na tila may inaalala. "I still have that big red rose she gave you in the attic. Oh, I love that little girl. She's adorable!"

"You mean that cute-as-lechon-de-leche little girl who traumatized me for life? Hanggang ngayon napapanaginipan ko pa rin ang mukha niya."

That was the problem with having a pesky photographic memory. Ace remembered images and sounds with excellent precision. Minana niya iyon mula sa kanyang lolo sa tuhod na si Don Sergio Yuchengco. Kapag minalas nga naman...

"It seems like you're bound to dream of her more often, Son." Nagpahid ng table napkin sa bibig ang ama. "Ikaw ang magiging personal driver niya habang nandito siya. You're going to help her set up her solo art exhibit for next month."

"Dad, piloto ako hindi taxi driver."

"When was the last time you flew anything?"

He looked away. "That's not the point."

"Son, your mother and I would really want to meet her." Hinawakan nito ang kamay ng asawa. "Masyadong tahimik itong bahay kapag wala ka, kaya gusto naming magdagdag ng anak na babae."

"Di gumawa kayo ng sarili n'yong baby girl," inis na sagot niya. Malutong na tumawa si Lia.

"Seryoso itong usapan natin, Ace, kaya huwag mo kaming pinipilosopo ng mommy mo."

He snorted mockingly. "Yeah, 'cause I got this charming quality from somebody else."

"Yu-cheng-co," his father snapped.

"Aye, aye, Captain. You win."

"Hey, family, listen to this," ani Lia habang nakatingin sa

screen ng cellphone nito. “I Googled Gracie Valerio and guess who she listed as her ultimate dream guy on her high school profile.”

“I’ll take a wild guess. Mao Tse Tung?”

“Close but not quite. Ace Yuchengco...” Humagalpak ng tawa ang kapatid niya. “... because he’s tall, super duper smart, mysterious, uber handsome and filthy rich like my grandpa!”

God, what an airhead, lihim niyang naisip.

“Kailangan na nating magmadali,” bilin ni Jet habang tumatayo mula sa hapag. “Jennifer, Darling, let’s go. Lia, you go with your Kuya Ace.”

Tumalima ang dalawang babae. “I’ll bring the pink pompoms,” natatawang sabi ng kapatid niya.

“This feels like a f*cking voodoo ritual and I’m the human sacrifice,” anang binata sa ama nang sila na lamang ang nakatayo sa grand foyer ng mansion.

“You’ll get over it, Son.” Tinapik nito ang balikat niya. “Kailangan mo lang maging mabait kay Gracie habang nakatira siya sa poder natin.”

“Ayokong maging atchoy ng babaeng iyon.”

The old man fought a sad smile. “Hindi kita pipilitin sa nais mong gawin.” Nagpatiuna ito ng lakad. “It’s your legacy at stake, not mine. Even your Grandpa Arnulfo would be proud of this project.”

Napailing na lang siya. Ace followed him to the garage where twelve luxury cars lined up, feeling the sting of guilt in his gut. Nakaatang sa balikat ng kanilang pamilya ang pagpapatayo ng unang aircraft manufacturing facility sa Pilipinas. It was encoded in his blood.

Maging ang presidente ng bansa ay nakiusap sa kanilang mag-ama na ituloy ang higanteng proyekto. He had given them his full cooperation.

The huge indoor space filled his chest with hollow air. Itinukod niya ang palad sa hood ng itim na *Bugatti Veyron* at binigyan ng ilang minuto ang sarili. He was never good at accepting defeat.

“That Gracie Valerio better be worth all this mess,” he said brusquely. “Kung hindi ay ako mismo ang magbabalik sa kanya sa lolo niya. And she’s gonna hate me so bad after I’m done.”

Lumington ang ama niya. “What changed your mind?”

He gave a noiseless growl. Siya ring pagpasok ng dalawang babae. “She’s going to dump me when she sees me, anyway,” aniyang kinuha sa dingding ang susi ng sasakyan. “Hop in, Lia, I’ll drive.”

“She’s not going to dump you, Kuya,” sambit ni Lia habang pumapasok sa sasakyan. She loved riding this kick-ass car as much as he did. “On your best day, you’re actually sweeter than Dad.”

Ngumiti si Jenny. “I agree,” anitong hinalikan siya bago sumakay sa *Porsche V8* ng asawa. His dad got older but his choice in cars had gotten better. Iyon na lang kasi ang natitirang bisyo nito.

Inilipat ni Ace ang tingin sa windshield at tinitigan ang pilat sa kanyang mukha. The tragic accident left a slash-like mark down the side of his cheek, narrowly missing his lips.

Kumuha siya ng rubber band sa compartment at itinali ang ilang hibla ng buhok sa likuran. He told himself that this wasn’t going to be an easy week.

“Future sis-in-law, here we come,” masiglang sambit ni Lia sa tabi niya. Napailing siya. His lovely little sister was in for a major disappointment.

Bumukas ang asul na tarangkahan para sa kanila. As always, a dozen paparazzis blocked the entrance to snap a photo of his face. F*ck them!

Maliban sa piling tao ay tanging pamilya ni Ace at ang mga tauhan sa hangar ang nakakakita sa kanya. He was a monster, scarred and burned down to his very soul. Tingnan lang niya kung hindi mag-back out ang babaeng iyon sa oras na makita siya.



3



Gracie kept squirming on her seat through the whole twenty-hour flight from New York to the Philippines. She took snapshots of the ground below to calm herself. Kulang na lang kasi ay mag-jumping jack ang puso niya sa excitement.

She was going to meet the man of her dreams for the first time after eight years and forty-five pounds of baby fat. “Oh, Acey,” aniya habang hinahalikan ang picture nila ng cute na batang lalaki. She giggled like a toddler. Lukot ang mukha nito habang siya ay masayang nakayakap dito.

She had been content looking at him in the cover of international magazines. A handsome young pilot with nerves of steel, they said. Pero nitong nakaraang mga taon ay nawala ito sa sirkulasyon.

Itinabi niya ang kanyang camera at nag-apply ng rose pink lipstick. She was all set. Even the lingerie girls at *Agent Provocateur* made sure she had a full arsenal before she went to war. Lagot siya kapag nakita ni Lolo Rusty ang mga iyon.

She heard a dingdong from the intercom. “Flight FP501 has landed. Please remain seated for final in-flight checks. The time is two o’clock in the afternoon with blue skies and

sunny weather at thirty-two degrees Celsius. Have a great day ahead, honey bunch. It's been a pleasure flying with you."

"Nice landing, Tres," aniya kahit na hindi siya naririnig ng piloto. Capt. Damian Greco Aragon III had been her close friend since she met him at her New York art exhibit two years ago. Hindi niya pinansin ang pagpapalipad-hangin ng playboy na piloto, kaya nauwi sila sa pagiging magkaibigan.

Gracie felt a thump when the plane touched the ground. Nag-alay siya ng munting panalangin. Sana ay ma-in love kaagad sa kanya si Ace para magkaroon na ng mga apo sa tuhod ang kanyang abuelo.

Four cutie little pilots would be her personal best. Pero kahit tatlong chikiting lang ay okay na sa kanya, as long as Ace was her baby daddy. The mere thought of it made her vibrate with *kilig*.

Kung alam lang nito kung ilang humba at frankfurters ang pinalampas niya para maging drop dead sexy—all for her life's mission to lure him, tease him, until he finally put a ring on her finger.

"Enjoy your stay, Miss Valerio," anang stewardess habang iniaabot ang kanyang tripod.

She grinned. "I sure will, Bridgitte." Huminga siya nang malalim. *My gosh, Graciella, this is it! Give him your cutest smile ever!*



Ace's insides did a back flip when they opened the hydraulic door. He expected to see an ugly blob eating ice cream on one hand and holding a donut on the other. Pero nakagat niya ang kanyang dila. Graciella Angeline Valerio

was one hell of a babe.

Her sheer white shirt fit her so perfectly, it looked like it was making love to her curvaceous waist. He tried to look away but her tattered denim shorts pinned his eyes to her creamy legs.

Those smokey eyes. That enchanting face. What a bombshell! Pinagpawisan siya, hindi mapakali. Her white tank top underneath her checkered bolero had been a great canvas to her golden brown hair and luscious cleavage.

Tinulungan ito ng stewardess na bitbitin ang dalang equipment. He frowned. She looked more like a *Sports Illustrated* model than an artist. And damn if his crotch didn't swell at the sight of her.

Her silver bangles clanked as she gripped her black *DSLR* camera. Kumutitap ang mga mata ng babae nang makita siya. Her small, glossy lips shone like candy under the sun. She had the sweetest—

Wait. Stop. No. F*cking. Way.

Ace put his brain into a screeching halt.

He stood on both feet like a rock-solid wall and reminded himself how much he hated people with cameras, no matter how f*ckable they looked.

Gracie strutted her chicky-boom figure toward him. “Hi, Acey,” she said before giving him a moist five-second kiss on the lips. Pinunasan nito ang gilid ng labi niyang namantsahan ng lipstick. “Miss me?”

“Yeah.” Tumulikod ang binata para tingnan ang mga magulang at kapatid. “Very much.” How he hated the fake innocent look on their faces, kahit na alam niyang nais nang

ngumiti ng mga ito sa nakita.

Her hands snaked around his arm. “Acey, hindi mo ba ako ipapakilala sa kanila?” tukoy nito sa tatlo niyang kasama. One look at all of them and he knew it was a shipwreck waiting to happen.

“Will you stop calling me with that friggin’ name?” he murmured back.

“What name?”

“Acey—” He burst into flames, lalo na nang makitang humagikgik ito. *Acey* sounded more ridiculous when he was the one who said it.

“What did you want to say, Acey, Acey?”

“Forget I said anything,” aniyang tiningnan ang mga kasama. “Mom, Dad, Lia, this is... her.”

Gracie smiled at them like sunshine.

Inilagak nito ang dalang bag sa mga braso niya para yakapin ang kanyang ina. “A pleasure to meet you, Tita. Thank you for those lovely letters.”

What letters? Mayroon ba siyang hindi nalalaman? He listened as they exchanged pleasantries. It all went downhill from there.

“Are you here now to marry my son?” tanong ng mommy niya. “Please say yes, Hija.”

He winced. *Betrayal, thou art in the form of a mother.*

“Yes, Tita,” she said gladly, turning his family into giddy fools. Nakipagbeso ito sa kapatid niya. “Hello, Lia. You’re so pretty like your name.”

“Thanks. Actually, my full name’s Amelia.”

Namilog ang mga mata ni Gracie. “So you were named

after that pilot girlie who got lost in the *Pacific Ocean*?”

Naihilot ni Ace ang mga daliri sa kanyang sentido. This was going to be the worst month of his life. Himbing na himbing siguro ang babaeng ito nang magsabog ng IQ ang Diyos sa mundo.

“Yes, we named her after Amelia Earhart,” his father said, almost choking in his own spit.

“Hi, Tito Jet,” she said cheerfully. “I’ve heard legendary things about you from Lolo Rusty.”

“Is that so, Hija?” Nag-blush ang daddy niya na sa pagkakaalam ni Ace ay hindi malimit mangyari.

A vintage black *Mercedes-Benz* pulled over in front of them. *And the hits just keep on coming...* naisip niya nang makita ang kanyang Grandma Divina.

Binistahan ng bagong dating si Gracie.

“Siya na ba ang babaeng mapapangasawa ng apo ko? Look at her. She looks just like her mother, Nigella. Mamamatay na akong nakangiti.”

“You’re not going to die, Grandma. I forbid it.”

“Oh, you silly boy.” Binistahan ng matanda si Gracie. “Her pelvic bones are ideal for childbearing. P’wede kayong magkaroon kahit sampung anak.”

Tumawa ang dalaga. Like she was not freaked out by that possibility at all. “Parang rabbits lang, ’no?”

Both women burst into a conniving laugh, na para bang matagal nang magkakilala ang mga ito.

“Kuya, I love her style,” bulong ng kanyang kapatid. “She’s pretty and curvy. Boto ako sa kanya.”

Nalukot ang mukha ni Ace. He was taken back to that

time when he still had smooth skin, a naughty smile and an arrogant little pilot's gait. Gracie had forever been the president of his kiddie fans' club.

"Ano pa ba ang hinihintay mo, Apo?" said the eighty-one-year-old matriarch of the Yuchengco clan.

Grandma handed Gracie a thick black book.

Tiningnan ng dalaga ang cover. "*My Secret Garden.*"

"It's been with the family for generations, Hija. You should read it from cover to cover."

"What's this about?" Namilog ang mga mata nito at dagling itiniklop ang libro. "Oh!"

"Thank me later." Kumindat ang matanda. "Diyang ako kumukuha ng ideya tuwing may di-pagkakaunawaan kami ng nasira kong asawa."

"My Lolo Rusty met you once and you're as gracious as he described." She sighed. "I'm so lucky. Babasahin ko talaga ito, Grandma. Promise!"

Napanguyngoy sa iyak ang kanyang abuela habang saklot ang butones ng blusa nito. "Did you hear that, Ace, Darling? She called me 'Grandma'..."

Magkakapanabay na sumigaw ang lahat nang himatayin ang ginang sa harapan nila. She landed right into his arms.

"Lia, get your Grandma's smelling salts," alistong utos ng mommy niya. "Go!" Nagsitakbuhan maging ang tatlong bodyguards ng matanda.

Ace stared at Gracie who looked awfully worried for Grandma Divina. Inilipat niya ang tingin sa kanyang nagkagulong pamilya at napabuntong-hininga.



Ace wondered what made him go back to his old room that Tuesday afternoon. Wala siyang dahilan para bumalik doon. He had properties in and out of the country in case he needed some place to rest.

Hindi niya maintindihan ang kanyang sarili. He suddenly got excited to lie in his old bed and look at his miniature aircraft collection until he fell asleep. A smile tugged at his lips when nobody was looking.

Dagling nalusaw iyon nang sapitin niya ang tuktok ng hagdanan. Standing in front of him was his old mahogany door in all its fuschia pink glory.

“What the...? Mom!” aniya habang nakatingin sa pinto ng kanyang silid. “Mom, bakit may pangalang *Gracie* na nakasabit dito? Pink? You’re kidding me, right? Kailan pa ako naging babae?”

“Ace, kumain ka na? How was your day?”

“My day would have been fine if I didn’t know someone was squatting on my private property.”

“You mean *Gracie*?”

“Yes, I mean her. Nasaan ang babaeng iyon?”

There was something about that woman that jolted his damned heart to a frenzy. Kahit pa noong una niya itong nakita.

“What?” he said when he saw a gleam in his mother’s eyes, tila nagtagumpay sa binabalak.

“Hindi ko na kasi matandaan kung kailan ka huling pumunta dito,” himig panunuksong anang ginang. “Na-miss mo na kaagad si *Gracie*?”

“I will not dignify that question with a response,”

depensa niya. “Ngayon lang ako nagkaroon ng oras na umakyat dito sa itaas.”

Makahulugang ngiti lamang ang isinagot nito.

“Oh, please, Mother. Give me a break.”

“We all agreed to let Gracie stay here because of the big space and the view. Nasa loob na ang lahat ng mga gamit niya katabi ng mga gamit mo.”

He breathed out, pointing at the door. “Twenty-nine years of my life is inside that room. Hindi kayo dapat nagpapasok ng ibang tao dito sa silid ko.”

He glanced at pictures of him and Mach when they were kids. Drums. Soccer. Treehouses. Prom. Those images didn’t make any sense to him now.

“Hindi naman ibang tao si Gracie,” mahinahong turan ni Jenny.

“Still, you locked me out of my own room.”

“It’s not locked. See?”

The things he wanted to say to that New Yorker for invading his whole life. “Is she in there?”

“She’s by the indoor pool bonding with everyone. Aliw na aliw sa kanya pati si Mama. Gracie has brought back joy into this house.”

He heard rushing footsteps nearby.

“Hi, Tita Jen,” said his darling intruder from the hallway. She wore a skimpy white bikini that revved up his imagination. Nagmano ito sa kanyang ina. “The kitchen smells so good. What’s cooking?”

“Cyanide and a pound of nails,” he groaned, trying to take a peek inside his room. He missed it now after it had

been taken away from him.

“It’s Italian night, Hija. We have tortellini, beef lasagna and seashell pasta in marinara sauce. Paborito namin ng Tito Jet mo ang mga iyon.”

Gracie giggled like an excited little girl.

Ace glanced at the inner curve of her thighs. Whew! Bigla siyang nainitan. He felt quite harassed.

“Wow, ang sarap naman! Tamang-tama dahil bumili ako ng ingredients para sa brick oven pizza namin ni Lia. Can we serve it by the pool, Tita?”

“Of course, Hija. That’s so nice of you.”

“Anything for my future hubby and his family, Tita Jen. Acey has such a lovely bunch.”

“I can’t wait for you to call me *Mom*.”

“Oh, gosh! Me too.”

“You can start by calling me ‘Mommy Jen’.”

“Really, Tita? I mean Mommy Jen?”

“I would really love that, Sweetheart.”

Gracie gave him a wistful smile. “Mommy Jen, it is,” she said as they hugged in front of him.

Ace knew it. The scheming little witch had been ingratiating herself toward his whole family to claim his hand in marriage. Sa katunayan, maging ang loob ni Chef Mao ay nakuha na nito.

“I really like you for my son,” his mother said as if he was not standing by the frigging door, listening to them. “This house is your house now, Gracie.”

“Except for this room. This is *my* room!” singit ng binata, sabay turo sa fuschia pink na pinto.

“Ayaw mong tumira sa silid na ito dahil sa mga masasamang alaala,” his mother said calmly. “I’m letting Gracie make new memories there for you.”

What memory? His memory was fine. In fact, it had a 99.2% accuracy in recollecting the smallest details. Especially her bodacious bikini bod that had been distracting him for the last five minutes.

He sniffed the air around him. By God, he was so sure Gracie was delicious. *Putsa, ang bango niya!* Her natural scent was an aphrodisiac to him.

“Thank you, Mommy Jen.” Gracie hugged his mother and kissed her on the forehead. How nice. Nagpa-practice na itong maging huwarang manugang.

She strutted her perky self in front of him. “Hello there, Acey... aww...” She pinched his chin. “Cranky na naman ang baby ko. Wanna hug?”

“My tools are here. My miniature airplanes are here. If I ever see one scratch on any of them...”

She clung to his arm. Drat... he refused to be affected. “Oh, Sweetie, you mean those cute little titanium thingies inside your display cabinet?”

“The price tag on those *cute little titanium thingies* can feed a small nation, Graciella. Kung saang panig ng mundo ko pa binili ang mga iyon.”

She grinned. “That’s good to hear.”

Kumunot ang noo niya. “What?”

Gracie let go of him and raised the tip of her nose. Sana ay naging pangit na lamang ito. It would have been easier for him to evade her.

"I'm holding them hostage, you know."

"What?" he stuttered.

"What I mean is, if you don't want me to drop them by accident, you have to come here three times a week for dinner. Kung gusto mo lang naman."

His mother put on a self-satisfied look on her face. Her eyes sparkled bingo. Si Gracie na nga ang babaeng hinahanap nito para sa kanya.

"Not on your life, Graciella."

"Okay, hindi naman kita pinipilit." She picked up her DSLR camera and started snapping pictures of his miniature collection. "The red one looks nice."

"That's a limited edition *WWI Fokker* triplane modeled from an ace fighter pilot's aircraft," pagmamayabang niya. "It's simply one of a kind."

Gracie nodded, snapping another shot.

"Really? How much do you think I'd get for this? I can't wait to post these pretty pictures online."

His hands went cold. "You have got to be—"

"Acey, Sweetie," she said in her playful little voice. "I'll sell them one by one on the Internet at ten bucks a piece, each time you miss dinner."

His nostrils flared. "Ten bucks!"

"Mura lang ba? Sige, gawin nating fifty."

"Don't you even think about it."

"Why won't I? They look so nice." Gracie took a miniature plane out of the glass cabinet. Muntik na iyong humulagpos sa kamay ng dalaga. "Oops, sorry!"

Ace exhaled, thinking about all the hours he spent on

those aircrafts. Ang mga iyon ang sumagip sa buhay niya.

“What do you want with me, Graciella?”

“Aside from our dinner engagements?”

He stood with an unreadable expression.

“A kiss,” she beamed as she moved her cheek close to his lips. Itinuro nito ang pisngi. “Dito, o.”

So the little bitch wanted to play games, huh? Hindi siya ang talo rito. He had a master’s degree in nailing chicks who wanted to play domino with him.

He planted a quick kiss on her cheek. It wasn’t as unpleasant as he expected it to be. “Now promise me you won’t touch any of my stuff.”

“Kiss mo muna ako sa nose.”

He did as instructed.

Itinuro nito ang gitna ng labi. “At saka dito...”

“Close your eyes, Mother.”

Natatawang tumalima ang kanyang ina.

Hinablot niya ang baywang ng dalaga. Napakurap ito. “Acey...”

He gave Gracie the kiss she wanted, with tongue and then some. His whole body screamed with wild feelings that damned him to hell. He let her go before his own actions betrayed his emotions.

This can’t be...! “Are we done now?” he asked.

“Hmm... that was...” she said with her eyes closed and lips half-opened. Did she feel it, too? “I won’t touch your airplanes today. Maybe next time.”

He had never met a woman so shameless... and endearing. He felt a connection to her he couldn’t explain.

Napayuko siya. Great, his traitor of a brain had now teamed up with his dick.

“Kids, maiwan ko na muna kayo.” Nakangiting tumalikod ang ginang.

“You need my help with the food, Mommy Jen?”

“Stay with my son, Hija. He needs you more.”

“I bet he does. Hindi ba, Acey?” anang dalaga habang nakatingin sa kanya.

He crossed his arms against his chest, eyes narrowed.

“So exactly when did Amelia Earhart disappear?”

“Year 1937 near the coast of—I mean... maybe...”

Naglikot ang mga mata ng dalaga. “It’s just a wild guess. Makakalimutin kasi ako.”

“Stop sassing me, Graciella.”

She pouted, her body shivering in guilt.

“*Tattler Magazine* said you liked bimbos.”

“And you get a kick from trying to be one.”

She looked at him with pleading eyes. God, those lovely eyes. “I’d do anything to have you, Acey.”

“Paano naman kung ayoko sa iyo?”

She stood there like a woman on a mission. “I’ll chase you down until you give up and marry me and take me to bed—whichever comes first.”

“Fine, I’ll let you keep your illusions.”

Unwelcome images of how he’d like to make her *come first* in bed had raced inside his mind.

The woman smiled mischievously. “We’ll see.”

“Gracie, you’re in love with the old me, not me. Wala na ang batang kinahuhumalingan mo noon.”

“I don’t see a difference at all.”

“I have a f*cking scar on my face.”

“That’s only physical.”

“I am not a good man.”

“You are, Acey. You just don’t know it yet.”

They held each other’s gaze for so long. Her face flickered with innocence paired with an iron will.

Realization struck him. Naisahan siya ng babaeng ito! She wasn’t the henwit she made him think she was. Ace had fully underestimated her. Tiningnan niya ang kabuuan ng dalaga at pigil na ngumiti.

Well played, Miss Valerio. Well played...

