

# PROLOGUE

## Hey, Jude

“Well, is she, Judas? It’s been twenty years. Is she really the love of your life?”

*Ate Arruba and I were having coffee that morning in my kitchen. The kids already left for school while Arielle was with one of our maids. Nagpunta sila sa grocery para mamili ng mga supplies namin para sa linggong iyon. Ate Arruba was just visiting; she now lived in New York with her husband and their three children. Dalawa lang kaming magkapatid kaya siguro palagi naming nami-miss ang isa’t isa kahit na may-edad na kami pareho.*

*I sipped my coffee and looked at her. Hindi naman ako sumagot. She asked me about Samuelle and Arielle and why I married the latter. Sinimulan niya ang pakikipag-usap sa akin sa pamamagitan ng pagsasabi na napanood daw niya iyong latest commercial ng isang sikat na fastfood chain. It was about a story of two best friends—a guy and a girl. The girl was in love with the guy while the guy was in love with another girl. Right after hearing it, I decided that it was cliché—too cliché for me.*

*“Jude, you are forgetting that I am a psychologist by profession. A mere silence has a million meanings for me.”*

*“Don’t be all psyche on me. You’re my sister, can you be that for a while?”*

*She shook her head and gave me that smile. Iyong ngiting ang ibig sabihin ay hindi talaga niya ako titigilan.*

*“Jude, I wanna know. I love your wife and I hate to see her get hurt.”*

*“Like what you said, we’ve been married for twenty-seven years, that must mean something.”*

*“Yes, it may mean that you settled for her because you didn’t want to end up alone and lonely with a hole in your heart left by your first love. I honestly don’t like the fact that you named your first child after your ex-girlfriend and for Arielle to agree, she must be really in love with you.”*

*Hindi ako nakasagot. I was not ready for this. I had no fixed thoughts on this.*

*“So, Jude, what is Arielle for you? Is she just a second choice? Did you just settle for her? Answer me...”*

# CHALLENGE #01



I built her a greenhouse. I built it with my own hands because she didn't like flowers. Naniniwala siyang hindi dapat pinipitas ang mga bulaklak na iyon because like human beings, flowers had their own lives to live. She hated it when she received flowers. She'd rather choose to have nonsense things like a recycled bottle, or whatever that she could keep than to be given flowers.

I remembered giving Samuelle chicharong bulaklak when she was still alive. She was too happy that her cheeks glowed. She was too grateful. Halos hindi niya nga makain iyon sa sobrang tuwa.

She seemed to be a weird person, but in truth she was easy to please and that's one of the many things that I admired about her.

I wanted to give her flowers everyday so I built her a greenhouse. I wanted her to know that I would always be here for her. My friends thought that I was crazy for doing this, for still loving her even if she's not with me. They all wanted me to move on. They all wanted me to face life again.

I couldn't blame them. For months, I stayed inside my room, in my house. I didn't want to move, I didn't want to live. I just wanted to follow her and be done with it for I missed her so damn much. I wanted to die so many times and I tried so hard to die, pero sa tuwing gagawin ko ay para bang may pwersa na nagiging dahilan kung bakit hindi iyon natutuloy.

But then, one night, I almost succeeded. Maybe, finally, the Fates had agreed with me—that I had to end this to finally be happy. I had my rope with me, I was going to hang myself. But even before I could do it, Mariella Jimena entered my room and she screamed right after realizing what I was trying to do.

Pinilit niya akong bumaba roon and when I finally gave up, I sat on the floor crying. Si Yella ay nakatayo sa harapan ko...

*"Just let me die, please! I wanna be with her! I wanna be with her!"*

*Yella just stood there. Pero nagulat ako nang bigla na lang niya akong pagsasampalin. Kinalmot niya ang leeg ko at noon ko siya narinig na humagulgol na para bang may parte sa kanya ang talagang napakasakit. I looked at her. Her eyes were swollen and her face were all red and painful.*

*"Kung gusto mong mamatay, mamatay ka doon sa malayo kung saan hindi ka makikita ng mga kapatid mo, iyong hindi ka mahahanap ni KD o ni Azul, iyong hindi mo masasaktan sina Ido, iyong sisiguraduhin mong kabit anong bakas mo ay hindi nila makikita because that*

would be so much easier to deal with than finding you here in this empty house, lifeless.

*“Mahal na mahal ka namin, Judas. Pero napapagod na kami kaya sige, kung ayaw mo na kaming makasama, kung ayaw mo nang mabuhay, then just die. Kill yourself, take away your own f\*cking life but make sure to not f\*cking hurt my husband and the people around you.”*

*After that, she left. Naiwan akong nakaupo sa sahig habang nakatingala sa taling nakasabit na sa kisame. Hindi ko inasahan na ganoon ang magiging reaksyon ni Yella. Ang buong akala ko ay hindi niya lang ako naintindihan, but she had a point. If I wanna die, then, I should just die. Iyong hindi ako makikita ng mga kapatid ko, iyong hindi iiyak ang mga pamangkin ko. Iyong hindi masasaktan si Ate Arruba.*

*Pero naisip kong baka dahil sa ginagawa ko sa sarili ko, nasaktan ko na sila.*

*Hindi pala baka. Nasaktan ko na talaga sila. Habang abala ako sa pananakit sa sarili ko at sa pagiging malungkot, nasasaktan ko na sila. My brothers let me deal with my pain alone, but that didn't mean they cared less. Ate Arruba wanted to be with me, but I always shut her out.*

*These people loved me, and if I couldn't live life for myself because she died, maybe I could live life for the people around me who loved me more than I could ever imagine.*

*Because just like what she taught me, I deserved to be loved because I have a good bone in my body.*

*So, I stood up and I took the rope down. I lit all the lights in my house. I cleaned it all. I threw away the empty beer bottles, the whiskey bottles, everything, maski may laman pa iyon. I didn't want to live life like this. She sacrificed herself so I could live and it's not good to repay her by ruining what she saved.*

*I threw away my cigarettes. I even took out the weeds in my garden. I wanted a clean life—something that she could be proud of. Iyong kapag tiningnan niya ako mula roon, mapapangiti siya pagkatapos ay sasabihin niyang: Good job, Jude.*

*I cleaned my house, I cooked real food. I cleaned my refrigerator. Inabot nga ako nang alas seis ng umaga sa kakalinis and finally, after two years, I shaved myself. I looked in the mirror and I saw how broken of a man I was, and yet I had to deal with life because I didn't want to disappoint the person who made it for me.*

*Could I do this? I had my own doubts, but I knew that I needed to do this. I had to live so I could prove to her and to the people around me that I was indeed deserving of the love they were giving me.*

*I went out that day, for the first time in two years. I went to the mall and bought some food, donuts and cakes for the children and something good to eat for my brothers. I even brought flowers for their wives.*

*Could I do this?*

*Yes, I could. I had to.*

*I drove to Azul's house. Alam kong naroon silang lahat. Alam kong magugulat sila sa oras na pumasok ako*

sa loob ng bahay na iyon na ganito ang hitsura ko. They weren't used to seeing me like this anymore. Dalawang taon rin ang lumipas. Namuhay akong parang ermitanyo and I know, I'll get a lot from Thaddeus, but I just didn't care.

I entered the house and I saw that they were having lunch. Nakita kong lumabas si Leira mula sa kusina. I realized that she's pregnant again. Ang laki na ng tiyan niya. Siya ang tagaluto ng labat.

And then I saw Yella. She sat beside David and she was feeding her daughter, Timi. Mukhang ikinagulat niya ang pagdating ko.

"Jude," Bernice acknowledged my presence. Mangiyak-ngiyak pa siya nang tingnan ako. "Axel, si Judas."

Tumayo si KD. Si Ido naman ay nakatingin lang sa akin. "Ano iyang dala mo, Jude?" tanong ni 'panget'.

"Cake saka donuts for the kids," sagot ko.

"Ano pa'ng ginagawa mo diyan? Kumain na tayo," yakag ni Azul sa akin. Atubili pa ako nang lumakad papunta sa kanila. Inakbayan ako ni KD at tinapik sa balikat. I knew that he's just happy to see me. Napapangiti na rin ako. Inilapag ko ang mga dala pagkatapos ay isa-isa kong binigyan ng bulaklak ang mga babae.

"Nanliligaw pa yata itong si Judas kay Georginang masarap, eh," parang b'wisit na sabi ni Ido. "Tang-ina, mas malaki iyong bur ko diyan!"

"Ido, ha!" arwat ni Leira. "Kumakain tayo! Tutusukin ko ng tinidor iyan!" she even joked.

Tumawa si Azul. Si Yella man ay nakangiti sa akin.

*She sighed and reached for my hand.*

*“Welcome home, Judas,” she said. And that meant a lot to me.*

After that, it was pretty much back to normal. I started going out with them again. Binuksan kong muli ang tattoo shop ko. Pero kahit ganoon na may ginagawa na muli ako sa buhay ay hindi ko pa rin nakakalimutan ang sakit. I would always go to the beach, nagpapaanod ako ng chicharong bulaklak hanggang sa maisipan kong ipagtayo siya ng greenhouse.

I bought that lot at the beach. Malaki iyon at doon, malapit sa dagat ay itinayo ko ang greenhouse para sa kanya. My friends thought that I was crazy for doing this. They even questioned my decisions, but I didn't mind. I needed to have something that I could do para malipat roon ang pagka-miss ko sa kanya.

Paunti-unti ay naglalagay ako ng mga halaman roon, mga bulaklak ang itinanim ko at para bang sinusubok niya ako dahil tulad ng pagbalik niya noon, napakatagal mamulaklak ng mga buds na iyon.

But when they did, ang saya-saya ko.

I went to the greenhouse everyday for years. Kung minsan ay doon ako natutulog, kung minsan ay isang linggo bago ako muling umuwi. Sa lugar kasing iyon, para bang napakalapit ko kay Samuelle. Kung minsan ay tumutugtog ako ng gitara at kumakanta para sa kanya.

For years, sa ganoon lang umikot ang buhay ko.



It's the shop, the kids and the greenhouse. Iyong mga babae, they wanted me to date. They were always setting me up on dates. Nagpupunta ako pero pinapaalis ko kaagad ang mga babaeng iyon. Una, they found me boring. Pangalawa, hindi ako interesado sa kanila. Pangatlo, I could never see myself with another woman. Siya lang talaga. Si Samuelle lamang.

Hanggang sa isang araw, Azul told me to come with him and the others to the States. Kasal daw kasi ng kapatid ni Georgina at ng kapatid ni Bernice. It was an ordinary wedding for me. Of course, it depicted happy endings and new beginnings pero para sa akin, matagal nang tapos ang bagay na iyon. I hated seeing happy people; para bang ipinamumukha sa akin ang kung ano ang nawala noon.

But that day, a person in that wedding changed the mood.

Her name was Arielle and she believed she used to be a mermaid. Of course, it reminded me of Samuelle. My heart beat because it reminded me of her and that's amazing. We talked, and somehow, that moment spent with Arielle reminded me of the woman I loved and lost. It was her that I saw that day, I felt like it was her that I had talked to that day.

It was her...

Pero hanggang doon na lang iyon. Matapos ang araw na iyon ay alam kong hindi ko na siya makikita. Arielle Cruise lived in another part of the world. We all came back to the Philippines after that day.

I went back to normal. Naisip kong masarap pala ang mabuhay muli. I felt alive and well while talking to Arielle because it was her that I could see. I still wanted her, I still loved her. I was in love with her although we are heaven and earth apart.

I would still wait for that day that we'd be together again. Matatagalan pero hindi naman imposible.

## CHALLENGE #02



Di itong taon nang namamayapa si Samuelle, pero sariwa pa rin ang sakit na naramdaman ko.

I remembered Reese, Axel John's daughter, calling me one of the saddest persons she knew. She was ten and she already knew so many things. Nakakaintindi na siya at kung minsan ay naikukuwento ko sa anak ni Axel John ang mga bagay tungkol sa babaeng minahal ko.

Si Reese ang nakakasama ko sa pagpunta sa greenhouse para dalawin si Samuelle. I was fine. Just fine.

My life was basically just about the tattoo shops and the kids—my godchildren and my nephews pati ang mga kaibigan ko na halos kapatid na rin naman kung itinuring ko. Sila ang bumubuo sa buhay ko ngayon.

Kung ako ang tatanungin, may hahanapin pa ako. Hindi naman kasi kompleto ang buhay ko, pero sinusubukan kong maging kontento sa kung ano'ng meron ako.

One rainy Tuesday night, I heard a knock on my

door. Agad kong binuksan iyon dahil naisip kong baka isa sa mga kaibigan ko o kaya ay si Ate Arruba. But I was surprised to see Callix. Medyo basa na siya dahil sa ulan kaya pinapasok ko siya.

“Can I get you a drink, Callix?” I asked him.

“Hindi na, Jude. Nandito lang ako dahil may gusto akong ibigay sa 'yo.” He handed me a box and I recognized the handwriting on it. Hindi ko alam kung kukunin ko iyon because it would only open the old wounds. But then, it was hers—that I was sure of—so I took it.

“Jude, I am letting her go. I want to be happy. It doesn't mean that letting her go ay kinalilimutan ko na siya. We all have to move on. Jude, I am getting married and I want you to promise me that you'll be take care of her memories. Also, you have to promise me that you'll let go when you know that you have to.”

How could I promise him that? How could I ever let go of the reason I was living? Hindi ko nga makalimutan ang kahit na ano tungkol kay Samuelle pagkatapos sasabihin sa akin ni Callix na kailangan kong gumalaw? Sa paanong paraan?

“Jude, they have forgiven you. I have forgiven you. Please, forgive yourself.”

And just like that, he was out of the door. Umuulan pero ayaw ni Callix na mag-stay hanggang sa tumila ang ulang iyon. Pinanood ko siya habang papunta siya sa kotse niya, at doon ay nakita ko ang kasama niyang babae. He seemed to be really happy with the fact that he had moved on. How did he do it?

I looked at the box I was holding. It was her handwriting. My heart was beating so fast because I had in my hand something that belonged to her. It was a moment that I thought would never happen again. It was almost unbelievable but real.

I sat on the couch and looked intently at the blue and purple box Callix had given me. After almost seven years, this happened. What should I do? Should I open this? What would I find inside the box? Would it heal me?

I swallowed hard until I finally found the courage to open the box.

Inside, I found her photographs. I saw her face again after all these years and it still hit a spot. Right there in the left part of my chest. My hands shook, my mind was blank. All I could do was look at her smiling face in one of those photos and I found myself closing the box. Hindi ko kaya. Ang sakit pa rin. Hindi ko pa rin matanggap.

Nakakatuwang isipin na sa itinanda kong ito, sa itinatapang kong ito, sa dami ng mga taong nasira at napatay ko, isang litrato lang pala ang magiging kahinaan ko. Hindi ko alam kung paano ipapaliwanag iyon sa sarili ko. Hindi ko alam kung paano at kung kailan tuluyang mawawala ang sakit.

Magdamag ay hawak ko lang ang kahon. Ilang beses kong sinubukang buksan iyon ay hindi ko talaga magawa. Hindi ko magawang kunin at busisiin isa-isa ang laman niyon. Hindi ko kayang tingnan. Hindi ko kayang hawakan. Hindi ko pa rin kaya hanggang

ngayon.

I decided to take the box to the greenhouse. Itinago ko iyon kasama ng mga tools na madalas na ginagamit ko sa mga bulaklak niya. Hindi ko kayang makita iyon. Basta, lahat ng may kinalaman sa kanya ay dapat narito lang. Dapat nandito kasi dito ang mundo kong abot-kamay pa siya.

Buwan ang lumipas, tinuruan ko ang sarili kong kalimutan ang kahong iyon. Ayokong maalala, ayokong buksan. Masaya na akong may something akong galing sa kanya. Na kapag handa na ako ay kakayanin ko nang buksan iyon at tingnan isa-isa.

Nang araw na iyon ay maaga akong gumising. I wore my best suit because today was Callix' wedding. Nakakatuwang isipin na para bang pinaglalaruan ng tadhana si Callix because he ended up marrying a woman who had the same name as Samuelle.

Hindi ko nga alam kung tamang magpunta ako roon. But I was already here. I watched as he and his bride exchanged vows. Nagkaiyakan ang lahat. They seemed to be very happy. Sa kabila ng lahat ng ito ay wala akong ginawa kundi ang tingnan ang paligid. Her family seemed fine now but not okay. I could still see sadness in their eyes, emptiness in their souls. They're sad but they were getting by. Lahat kami ay parang hirap pa ring tanggapin na wala na si Samuelle, pero higit yata ako dahil ako ang huling kasama niya.

The wedding ceremony ended and the picture-taking took place. Hindi ko alam na napansin pala ni Callix na paalis na ako. Kasama ang kanyang asawa ay

hinabol niya ako. I've met her twice before. Something in her reminded me of the other her... I smiled and greeted them.

“Congratulations, Callix.” I was very happy for them. He shook my hand.

“Ninong ka ng magiging panganay ko, Jude, ha? At kung hindi kalabisan, gusto ko na ipangako natin sa isa't isa na magiging magkaibigan rin ang mga anak natin. She would want that...” sabi pa ni Callix sa akin.

Natawa ako at saka tumango bilang pagpayag. Nagpaalam na rin ako sa kanila at umalis na. Kalabisan na kung pupunta pa ako sa reception. Hindi ako magiging masaya roon. I went home, not knowing what to do.

“Pagod na akong maging malungkot,” I whispered. “Pagod na pagod na ako, pero hindi ko naman magawang maging masaya dahil wala ka. Kailan ba ako pwedeng sumaya nang wala na akong mararamdamang masakit? Napapagod na ako... Sobrang pagod na...”

In my background, I could hear that song that always haunted me...

*How can a heart like yours  
Ever loved a heart like mine?  
How can I live before,  
How can I have been so blind?*



“Jude, Jude, bakit naman dito ka natulog sa sala? Hindi ka ba nilalamok?”

It was almost lunch when I woke up the next day.

It was already eleven thirty in the morning. How was I able to sleep on the couch for almost eighteen hours? Ang aga kong natulog at ngayong gising na ako, ang sakit naman ng ulo ko. I saw Leira standing before me.

“Akala ko madadatnan ko iyong maruming bahay mo saka bote ng alak pero wala. You don’t look like you have a hangover, so what the f\*ck happened to you? Naka-suit ka pa, akala ko patay ka na. Ano’ng nangyari? Saan ka ba galing?” usisa niya sa akin. Naghikab ako.

“I went to Callix’ wedding,” paliwanag ko.

“Akala namin nasa La Union ka,” aniya. “Anyway, magbihis ka, fifth birthday ng inaanak mo ngayon. Magpupunta tayo sa beach!”

May narinig akong pagbusina mula sa labas at doon ko na-realize na kanina pa siguro nila ako hinihintay kaya nagmadali talaga ako. I stood up and went to my room to change my clothes. Hindi na ako naligo. Hindi naman ako lasing at natulog lang ako kagabi.

“Jude, ang payat mo na. Hindi ka na sumasama kina Ido na mag-gym ’tapos hindi ka pa yata kumakain nang maayos. Mula ngayon ipagluluto na kita, sa bahay ka magpunta para kumain ng hapunan. We’d love to have you in our home every night. Mahal na mahal ka kaya nina Violet, Red at Blue.”

Sabay na kaming lumabas ni Leira ng bahay ko. I made sure that it’s locked at naka-on ang security system ko. Sumakay na ako ng bus at nanahimik sa likod. I could still feel the pain in my chest. Parang permanente na iyon doon. Hinintay ko na lang na kainin ako at nang matapos na ang lahat ng ito...



But then, I thought of the people close to me. Suddenly, I had the will to live again. Hindi nga lang ito magiging masaya, hindi rin ito magiging madali, but maybe it would be all worth it in the end.

Ganoon naman yata lahat iyon. She had taught me that there's always another way. And maybe this—living life was another way. Maybe I should just be patient and just wait and let everything unfold.

“Jude, we're here.” Natauhan ako nang tinapik ako ni Georgina nang pababa na sila ng bus. Karga ni Ido si Rocheta habang nakatingin siya sa akin. I nodded at them. Nagpahuli na ako ng pagbaba. Ang dagat ang bumungad sa akin pagkalabas ko ng coaster. It reminded me again of Samuelle.

Nakakapanibago na nakaramdam ako ng inis ngayon dahil sa naaalala ko siya. I should feel happy. Siguro nga dahil pagod na talaga ako.

We went inside the resort. Nakipag-usap si Azul sa mga tao roon hanggang sa lumapit sa amin ang mga bellboy para kuhanin ang mga gamit namin. We would be staying in a villa; malaki iyon at lahat kami ay doon matutulog. Magkakasama ang magpapamilya. As usual, I was left alone inside a four-walled room. Nag-aayos ako ng gamit nang bumukas bigla ang pinto at pumasok si Violet.

Dala iyong feeding bottle niya ay sumampa siya sa kama ko. Inilapag niya ang bote sa side table, pero kinuha niya iyon at itinaktak sa kama ko.

“Hey!” I exclaimed. She clapped happily then giggled.

“Basa Nongnong,” sabi pa niya. I laughed. Kinuha ko siya at hinalikan sa noo. Naisip kong ilabas siya para magpunta sa dagat. I was thinking of telling her about Samuelle. Lagi kong nakakalimutan pero sa palagay ko ay alam na niya. I always felt like she was really watching over me.

“Sea!” ani Violet habang naglalakad kami. “Baba mo ako, Nongnong. Magtatakbo ako.”

Ibinaba ko nga siya at hinayaang tumakbo mula kung saan. I watched her. She seemed to be really happy. Birthday na niya bukas at lilipas na naman ang isang taon nang para bang walang nangyayari sa buhay ko.

Naupo ako sa buhanginan, sa tabi ni Violet. Naglaro kami ng buhangin. Tuwang-tuwa ang inaanak ko. Bigla ay natigil siya dahil may bolang gumulong sa paanan niya.

“Nongnong, bull.” Iyon yata talaga ang pronunciation niya ng ball—bull. Volleyball iyon at kinuha ko. Hindi nagtagal ay nakarinig ako ng mga yabag at ang sumunod ay boses. I looked up and I saw her—si Arielle Cruise.

She wore a sundress, may malaking bulaklak na nakaipit sa tainga niya. I could not forget her because she made my heart alive. Napatayo agad ako.

“Judas, right? Doon sa wedding na ni-gatecrash ko, almost two years ago?” Mukhang masaya siyang makita ako. I just smiled. Iniabot ko sa kanya ang bola. Nakatingin siya kay Violet.

“Anak mo?”

“Hindi, inaanak ko. Anak siya nina Azul at Leira.”

“Oh, he’s here? Nagbabakasyon lang din ako. I love the beach kaya nandito ako. Naisip ko rin ngayon lang, kung paanong hiningi mo iyong phone number ko but you never called me.” Tapos I added you on *Facebook* pero you never confirmed. Nakakatawa,” she giggled.

Hindi ko alam kung ano ang sasabihin ko sa kanya kung bakit hindi ko siya tinawagan. That’s because I didn’t want to be friends with her for the wrong reasons. Ayokong maging unfair sa kanya. Ayokong maging dahilan na naaalala ko sa kanya si Samuelle kaya nakipagkaibigan ako sa kanya.

“Oh, paano? I’ll take the ball. See you around, Jude.” She waved at me.

Naiwan akong nakatayo roon. That was the first time after so many years that I felt my whole body shivering with excitement. Mali man pero hindi ko maiwasang panoorin siya habang siya ay papalayo.

She reminded me of the woman I loved...

It’s so wrong but I felt alive... and that’s a good thing. How could something this good be so wrong?

## CHALLENGE #03



Gusto kong sabihin kay Azul na nandito si Arielle. Hindi ko basta makakalimutan iyong naging usapan namin years ago about Arielle, noong akala ni Azul na susubukan kong maging malapit dito pero hindi ko ginawa. I didn't think that it's the right thing to do.

Hindi naman ako ganoon kasama. Hindi ko susubukan ang isang bagay na alam kong sa huli ay makakasakit lang ako ng ibang tao. Mahirap maging kalaban ang isang alaala and I didn't want Arielle to be involved in any of this kahit pa may nararamdaman ako sa tuwing nakikita ko siya.

Para sa akin, ang mga pagkakataong nakasama at nakausap ko siya—gaano man iyon kakaunti ay ipinagpapasalamat ko—it was because she made me feel that rush of blood again, that feeling of breathing, of being warm and being happy, even for a moment. I should just be thankful, hindi ko na dapat iyon dalhin sa kung saan pa.

Minabuti kong wala na lamang akong sasabihin kay Azul.

That night, we had our usual bonding, bonfire, drinks at ang mga kuwento ni Ido. Hindi na ako nakisali sa inom. Halos maglilimang taon na akong hindi umiinom ng alak o kahit na ano. Ilang taon na rin akong hindi tumitira ng kahit anong gamot.

I left that all behind because I wanted her to see—wherever she’s now that I was okay and that all her sacrifices were worth it. Nakaupo lang ako roon at nakikinig sa kanila. Siyempre, bida na naman ang kagwapuhan ni Ido, isama pa ang mga anak niya. Sira-ulo kasi talaga siya.

“Ikaw ba, Jude, wala ka pang balak mag-asawa? Malapit ka nang mag-cuarenta! Uurong na iyang bur mo!” biro niya sa akin. Natawa naman ako kaya lang hindi na ako sumakay sa biro niya.

“After her, wala na. Hindi ko nakikita ang sarili ko sa kahit na kanino,” I honestly answered them. Lahat sila ay natahimik. Tumawa ako nang pagak. “How can you settle for second-best if you already have the best? I had the best, I just didn’t know it.”

“Look...” Nagsalita si Axel. “Sa kahit anong anggulo tingnan ay wala kang kasalanan sa nangyari sa kanya. It was her choice to save the girl and it was her choice to be your salvation. Sa tingin mo masaya siyang nakikita kang ganyan? If she had lived and if she had witnessed how you spent your life, magagalit siya sa ’yo, Judas. Tumatanda na tayong lahat dito—”

“Hindi ako tumatanda. Immortal ako kasi ang gwapo ko, sobra,” sabad ni Ido. Pabirong binato siya ni KD ng buhangin.

“Supot ka pa rin!”

“Tang-ina, Ido! May sinasabi ako!” sigaw ni AJ. Nagkatawanan kaming lahat.

Kahit hindi natapos ni Axel John ang sinasabi niya ay nakuha ko ang gusto niyang sabihin. Hindi kasi madali ang gumalaw. Akala ba nila, gusto kong nandito lang ako? I wanna live again, I just didn’t know how. Mahirap kasing gumalaw ang isang tulad kong nawalan na lang basta. I didn’t know that it would be our last moment. Kinakain ako ng mga what ifs ko.

What if kung naging mas matapang ako? Kung hinarap ko ang mga magulang niya noon, kung mas maaga akong nagkaroon ng lakas ng loob para ipaglaban siya para mas matagal ang panahong nagkasama kami kaysa hinayaan ko siyang umalis noon at kalimutan ako? Ano ang sagot sa mga tanong kong ito? I badly wanted to know, but it’s too late because Samuelle was no longer around.

Wala na akong maririnig mula sa kanya. Hindi ko na siya makakasama. Iyon ang pinakamasakit. Mahal na mahal ko siya, pero kahit kailan ay hindi ko nasabi iyon sa kanya sa maayos na paraan.

I hurt her in so many ways. Habambuhay kong pagsisihan talaga iyon.

“Jude...” Tinawag ako ni Azul habang naglalakad na ako pabalik ng villa namin. “I miss you.”

Hindi ko alam kung ano ang magiging reaksyon ko. Azul was never showy of his feelings toward us. Kay Leira at sa mga anak niya, oo, pero sa aming mga kaibigan niya ay hindi—maliban na lang nang oras na

iyon.

“Baka magselos si Ido.” Tumawa ako. Napailing siya.

“Seryoso ako. I miss you. Bumalik ka na. Umuwi ka nga sa amin, pero parang ibang tao ka pa rin. Jude, matagal na siyang wala. Iyong mga tao sa paligid niya, iyong pamilya niya... lahat sila ay natanggap nang wala siya, ikaw na lang ang hindi. Mas nahihirapan siya nang nakikitang ganyan ka.”

“Ang daling sabihin ’yan, Simoun,” sabi ko habang napapailing. “Pero hindi ninyo ako naiintindihan. Pagod na rin akong maging malungkot. Gusto ko nang bumalik sa dati, gusto ko nang mabuhay pero napakahirap lalo na at habang tumatagal, para bang nagiging panaginip na lang siya. Sa balintataw ko na lang siya nagiging totoo and this pain, Azul, it’s the only thing I am holding on to. This is the only evidence that she had once became a part of my life dahil sa sobrang bilis ng pagdating at pagkawala niya ay para bang panaginip lang ang lahat. So don’t ask me something that can end my life.”

Wala na siyang nagawa. Umalis na rin ako pero hindi ako nagtuloy sa silid ko. Nagtungo ako sa dalampasigan kung saan naniniwala akong naroon siya at masayang nagmamasid sa akin. I dipped my feet in the water.

“I miss you...” I whispered.

Para bang nakikiayon sa akin ang dagat dahil biglang lumakas ang daluyong ng alon at tumama iyon sa mga paa ko. Maybe it was her way of telling me that

she missed me, too. I found myself smiling at the sea—imagining that she was in front of me. I imagined her holding my hand as if telling me that things would be fine, that waiting wouldn't be as hard as it looked.

It was all I could do, imagining her, because she was now only a memory.

The sun was almost up when I decided to return to the villa. Isa sa mga rason kung bakit ayokong bumalik ay dahil ang katabing kwarto ko ay ang silid nina Ido at Georgina. The kids were all sleeping in a quarter kaya alam kong may maririnig akong kung ano sa silid nila. Lalo na si Ido, I knew how loud he could be.

But I had to go back. I needed to rest. I never had a decent sleep ever since she left. And that was years already. Madalas ay napapanaginipan ko pa rin ang nangyari sa kanya. I would wake up bathed in sweat and I would feel like I was about to die.

While walking to the villa, I thought I saw something near the shore. I had a feeling that it was her. Pinaglalaruan ba ako ng imagination ko? I saw it, her built, her back... I knew it. I could recognize it from afar. Parang sira-ulong tumakbo ako papunta sa kanya. My heart was beating so fast. Sinusundo na ba niya ako? Would we finally be together?

Niyakap ko siya mula sa likuran and I felt relief. She's here!

But then, she was trying to escape. Itinulak niya ako pagkatapos ay tinitigan.

“Rapist ka!” she exclaimed.

Napanganga lang ako. Hindi siya.... Bakit ko ba



naisip na siya iyon? Alam ko ang realidad at hindi na siya babalik. Hindi ako nakahuma.

I found myself being arrested by the beach police and they took me to their office. The woman wanted to file a case against me. Hindi naman ako makapagsalita.

“Judas?” Napapitlag ako. Ang tinig na iyon... “Mahal, kanina pa kita hinahanap. Nandito ka lang pala.”

It’s Arielle. She wore a long flowy dress. May bulaklak pa rin siya sa tainga at papalapit siya sa akin. I could feel my heart beating fast. Hinawakan niya ako and it felt like I was in a trance. Nakatingin lang ako sa kanya.

“Miss, kilala mo ba itong lalaki?” tanong ng pulis.

Arielle gave me an assuring smile na para bang sinasabing huwag na akong magsalita.

“Yes. He’s my husband and he’s kind of... you know... he’s special...”

What?

“Anong special? He tried to rape me!” the woman said.

Napahikbi si Arielle. “I am very sorry... for that... he’s suffering from a mental disease. He doesn’t have any recollection of his actions. I am sorry if you are harmed or hurt. But he didn’t mean it. I assure you, he’s innocent. He’s... sick...” Sinabayan niya iyon ng paghikbi. Nakatingin lang ako sa kanya. Napansin kong nag-usap ang mga pulis. Nakatalikod sila. Humarap sa akin si Arielle.

“Act stupid,” she whispered.

“What?”

“Just f\*cking act stupid!”

Napanganga ako. Hindi ko alam ang gagawin ko but then, I had to do it or else we wouldn't pull this off, so I started singing and clapping at the same time.

*Twinkle, twinkle little star, how... ako budoy!*

Pinagsiklop ko pa ang mga kamay ko na para bang may pandikit ako sa palad. Napahagulgol si Arielle habang nakatingin sa akin. I wanted to laugh at myself, but then I didn't because it would blow up our cover.

Not a moment later, pinayagan na kaming umalis ng mga pulis. Nang masiguro naming nakalayo na kami ay tumawa ako nang napakalakas. Si Arielle ay huminto rin sa paglakad at tumawa na rin. I shook my head.

“Thank you, Arielle,” I told her. She smiled back.

“You're welcome, Jude.”

I looked at her and then all of a sudden, an unexpected invitation came out of my mouth.

“Do you want to have coffee with me?”

“Tea would do, Jude. See you later.”

And just like that, I decided that I'd have tea, too, instead of coffee.

## CHALLENGE #04



“What is wrong with you, Judas?”

Nag-angat ako ng tingin nang marinig ko ang boses ni Bernice. Nasa harapan ako ng salamin sa loob ng villa na tinutuluyan namin. I was looking at the shirt I was wearing. I was thinking if it suited me or should I just change it. I didn't know.

F\*ck, it's just a simple tea gathering. It's not a date and I promised myself that I would ever think of her while I was with Arielle. Yes, Arielle reminded me of Samuelle, but that didn't mean that I asked her to have tea with me because of that reason alone. She helped me, iniligtas niya ako sa sitwasyong iyon and having this tea would mean a lot for me.

Nakangiti si Bernice sa akin. Kasama niya ang dalawang Gabrielle niya, sina Reese at Aelise. They were getting ready for the party. Ako naman ay hindi pa rin mapakali.

“Uhm... I have no idea.” Napakamot na lang ako ng ulo.

“Are you going out on a date?”

Napatitig lang ako sa kanya. I was still standing

in front of the mirror and Bernice was looking at my reflection. Natatawa yata siya sa akin. Hindi ko naman alam kung ano ang isasagot ko sa kanya, plus this wasn't a date. It's just a casual gathering. I smiled again.

"Jude is going on a date," ulit niya. Hindi ko napansin na naroon na pala sina Yella at Leira. They surrounded me. Para akong tae at sila iyong langaw na pinaligiran ako at kung ano-ano ang tinatanong. I couldn't answer them.

"Oh, my God! Who's the girl?!" Yella asked. "Are you gonna have sex with her?!"

"Tang-ina!" ani Leira. "Sex agad? Hindi ba pwedeng kakain lang sila?"

"Sino iyong babae!" tanong ni Bernice. Hindi pa rin ako nagsalita.

"This is not a date. Sige, aalis na ako. 'Bye."

"Jude!" Sabay-sabay nila akong tinawag, pero hindi na ako lumingon. I saw my friends fooling around with their children. Tumakas ako dahil ayoko nang matanong at mag-isip ng isasagot. Basta hindi ito date at hindi ito makakaapekto sa kahit na anong nagaganap sa buhay ko.

I went to the only café in the resort. Papasok pa lang ako ay nakita ko na kaagad si Arielle. She wore a yellow sundress. Floral ang design niyon, at may bulaklak siya sa ulo. Talagang napakaganda niya. I wondered if she would look like this if we went to a beach. Would she enjoy it?

I shook my head. Hindi ko siya kailangang isipin sa ngayon. Hindi ko siya iisipin.

“Hello.” I sat in front of her. Nakangiti kaagad si Arielle sa akin. She looked amused.

“Siguro nagmamadali kang magpunta dito, ’no, Jude?” komento niya. Nagtaka ako. “Baliktad kasi iyang t-shirt mo.”

Noon ko lang napansin na baliktad nga ang suot ko. No wonder nagtatanong si Bernice sa akin kung ano ang problema ko. Napakamot ako ng ulo. Wala akong nagawa kundi ang tumawa.

“Hindi naman.” Napakamot ulit ako ng ulo. “Excuse me.” Tumayo ako at gumilid. Buti na lang nasa labas kami ng café, malapit sa beach kaya hindi awkward kung maghuhubad ako. I took my shirt off. Inayos ko muna iyon saka muli kong isinuot, pagkuwa’y naupo agad ako at saka ngumiti. “Take two. Hello...”

Tumawa si Arielle habang nakahalukipkip.

“You crack me up, Jude. Hi.” She even waved.

Napalunok ako. What comes after hi and hello? I didn’t know.

“Let’s order na. Nahihiya ka ba sa akin? Sana ’wag kasi wala namang nakakahiya,” paliwanag niya.

“Alright. I’m sorry but I am really thankful for what you have done for me. Kung hindi ka siguro dumating, nakulong ako roon.”

“Hindi naman siguro. The cops may free you if you give them something.... If you know what I mean...” Kumindat pa siya.

“Like suhol?”

“Hindi, ’no! Siguro donuts! Ganoon kasi sa States, donuts ang gusto ng mga cops.”

It was my turn to laugh. Hindi ganoon ang gusto ng mga pulis sa Pilipinas, pero hindi ko na lang sinabi sa kanya. She ordered green tea. Ako naman ay nakigaya lang. I never liked tea. I preferred coffee kaya ganoon na lang ang pagkagulat ko nang ininom ko iyon at hindi sinasadyang nailuwa ko. Arielle was shookt.

“I’m sorry...” hiyang-hiyang sabi ko.

“You’re not a tea drinker. It’s okay, Jude. Dapat sinabi mo para naman sa iba tayo nagpunta.” Sumenyas siya sa food server at hiningi ang aming bill. Kinapa ko ang bulsa para kunin ang pitaka ko... pero wala!

P\*tang-ina! Nalimutan ko pa ang wallet ko!”Tang-ina! Hindi ko alam kung ano ang gagawin ko. Hiyang-hiya ako.

“I don’t have my wallet with me...” I said in a low voice. Tumawa si Arielle.

“It’s okay, Jude. Siguro nagmamadali ka talaga.” Tumayo na siya.

“Saan ka pupunta?”

“Babalik na ako sa room ko. Mag-aayos na kasi ako ng gamit. I have a flight to catch. Good day, Jude. Thank you for trying.”

I watched her as she walked away. Hindi ako mapakali. I didn’t want her to leave just like that, pero wala naman akong magagawa. I screwed up big time.

Mabigat ang loob kong bumalik sa villa. The party was starting at tuwang-tuwa ang inaanak ko. Ako lang ang hindi masaya. Hindi kasi dapat ganito. Pakiramdam ko ay isa akong sundalong sumugod sa gyera pagkatapos wala palang dalang bala. Hindi

pwede ang ganito.

I sat on my bed thinking what I should do. Gusto kong bumawi. Gusto kong patunayan sa kanya na hindi naman ako ganoon. I was just overwhelmed by the fact na I was going out for tea. Huminga ako nang malalim at kinuha ang wallet ko. Lumabas muli ako ng villa at bumalik sa café, pero naisip kong wala na nga pala siya roon.

Nagtanong ako sa reception kung saan ang kwarto ni Arielle Jasmin Cruise, but they told me that she had checked out. Lalong hindi ako napakali. Hindi ako papayag na matatandaan niya ako sa ganitong paraan. I tried running at sakto namang nakita kong sumakay siya ng taxi. I looked around and saw a motorcycle. Itinulak ko iyong may-ari at saka hinabol ko iyong taxi na sinasakyan ni Arielle.

This would not end here.

## CHALLENGE #05



*“Can you take that frown off your face, Aurora? We’re bonding, you should be happy. You shouldn’t really be acting like that.”*

*My daughter Aurora looked at me like she’s having the worst time of her life. We were in the grocery. I picked her up from the university and dragged her all the way here so she could help me pick up the supplies for this week.*

*Nakasimangot lang siya, isang bagay na sigurado akong nakuha niya kay Judas Alonso. I shook my head.*

*“Anak, don’t you really wanna spend time with me? You’re growing up. Una, si Sam, she’s always with Bubut nowadays, ’tapos ikaw naman, palagi kang busy sa school. Anak, spend time naman with Mom.”*

*Aurora made a face. She’s the female version of Judas. Magkamukhang–magkamukha sila, para bang pinagbiyak na buko.*

*I smiled at my daughter.*

*“Mom, something is bothering me.”*

*Naging seryoso ang expression ng mukha ko. Kung may problema ang anak ko, kailangan kong makinig. I wanted her to tell me everything kabit na sa mismong*



grocery pa iyon. Pinalayo ko muna ang maid na kasama ko para mapakinggan kong maigi si Aurora.

“Yes, what is it, anak ko?”

“Mom, I’m sorry but in the years of my life I am always wondering why the f\*ck did you let Dad name your firstborn after his ex-girlfriend. Mom, I’m sorry, I love you but I don’t think Dad loves you. I think he only chose you because he didn’t want to end up alone unlike his friends who have their own families.

“It saddens me, Mom, because you deserve a marriage full of love and happiness. No one wants to be a second choice, and I think you were his second choice, Mommy. And I hate him for it. You’re a good person and you deserve the world but he didn’t give it to you. He gave you pieces of what’s left of him.”

Aurora looked as if she was about to cry and my heart throbbed with pain. Kahit kailan ay hindi ko ginustong makitang nasasaktan ang isa sa mga anak ko. I had a feeling that she’s trying her best to hide it, pero mukhang hindi na niya kinaya. She told me that in the middle of the fruits and vegetables section. Tumingala pa siya at saka sinubukang itago ang luhang kanina pa yata niya pinipigilan.

“It pains me to think that you were never his first choice and yet you loved him with all your heart. Doesn’t that make him unfair?”

“Oh, Aurora...” I held her hand and wiped her tears with my free hand. “Aurora, darling, you shouldn’t think that way...”

“Why? Do you think that he loved you the way you

*loved him? You deserve everything, Mom, but what did you get? Shattered pieces of what's left of him. It doesn't suit you.*

*"You shouldn't have settled for him. You should have settled for a man who is best. Iyong lalaking hindi ipapangalan ang ex-girlfriend niya sa anak niya."*

*I took a deep breath and hugged Aurora. I wanted to make her feel better and make her understand what really happened then.*

*I don't want her to think of her father that way because Judas is a good man.*

*He might be deceiving but his soul was redeemed.*

*"Stop, Aurora, just stop, my darling..."*