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The first time Deborah saw Nicolò five months ago, she thought he was a cowboy who stepped out of some old *Hollywood* movie.

Not that he had worn a cowboy hat, long sleeve shirt, vest or anything. No, the guy had worn simple faded blue shirt and broken-in jeans that made women turn heads and stare at him in wonder. Because goddamn, that shirt and jeans were heaven's gift to women all over the world. But to be precise, it was probably those muscles that were God's gift to the human female specie.

Yep, Deborah decided as she stared at those broad shoulders, brawny arms and utterly mesmerizing pectorals slightly straining beneath his gray shirt. He had cowboy's muscles, alright. That and those muddy dark brown work boots and beat-up pick-up truck.

"This is becoming a habit," kaswal na bati ni Deborah sa binatang bumaba ng blue pickup truck.

As usual, mukhang galing sa *Survivor Challenge* ang truck. Maputik at maalikabok ang katawan at mga gulong niyon. And as usual, the guy was deliciously rugged, too. Hindi siya niloko ng isipan niya. Those muscles were as hypnotic as she remembered.

“You didn’t have to come. You shouldn’t let them make you fetch me every time.”

Kinuha ni Nicolò ang dalawang travel bag niya at binuksan ang likod ng sasakyan gamit ang kabilang kamay. She watched those corded muscles of his arms flex as he hauled her nondescript suitcases into the backseat.

Uh-huh. Mesmerizing muscles, indeed.

“It’s nothing.” Binagsak nito pasara ang pinto ng backseat at binuksan ang passenger door para sa kanya. “May ginagawa si Manong Berting at walang ibang susundo sa ’yo.”

Right. As if katanggap-tanggap na excuse iyon.

Napahinto ang dalawang babae malapit sa kanila at napatingin sa binata. Nothing new there. Aside from his drool-worthy muscles, the guy was the epitome of raw masculinity with his sun-kissed skin, sharp jaw line, hooded eyes, strong nose and full firm lips. He could probably earn millions selling insecticides or whatever by just flashing a smile. Good thing hindi ito palangiti.

“Was it an emergency?” She slid into the passenger seat, the dark brown leather cool and butter soft underneath her thighs. “Hindi surprise ang pag-uwi ko. Alam nilang kailangan akong sunduin ngayon sa airport.”

Inayos ni Deborah ang suot na khaki shorts at yellow blouse bago hinila ang seatbelt at ikinabit.

“Ask them yourself.” Isinara ng lalaki ang pinto at umikot papunta sa driver’s side.

Yes, isip niya sa sarili habang pinagmamasdan itong maglakad paikot sa sasakyan.

Pagkapasok ng binata sa sasakyan, parang lumiit ang maluwang na espasyo. But with a muscular and tall

guy like Nico, even a ballroom might feel crowded when sitting next to him.

He gunned the engine, the smooth purr of power vibrating through the floor, crawling up her legs, pulsating between her thighs.

Gusto niyang iikot ang mga mata. Starting an engine wasn't supposed to be sexual, for Pete's sake. But then again, Nico could probably make crocheting sexual.

"Kumusta ang parents mo?" untag niya para punan ang katahimikan.

Nanatiling nakatuon ang atensyon ng katabi sa daan, magaang na nakapulupot ang mga daliri sa manibela. "Mabuti."

"Laging kinukwento ni Mama ang mama mo sa 'kin, mukhang mag-best friend na sila ngayon."

Bahagyang tumiim-bagang ang binata at humigpit din ang hawak sa manibela. Maikli lang itong tumango.

"Relax," mabagal niyang saad. "They're playing matchmakers, I know. I'll be honest, I know things about you more than I care to admit, thanks to our mothers."

She knew what he looked like in his birthday suit when he was six, what he wore on his college, high school and elementary graduation, his favorite color, favorite food, favorite music genre. Hell, if his mother had known his favorite sex position, Deborah would have probably known that by now, too. Talk about TMI.

Isinuksok niya sa likod ng tainga ang ilang hibla ng hanggang balikat na buhok. "Hindi ikaw ang unang nireto ni Mama sa 'kin, hindi rin ikaw ang huli. But dating is not my priority right now." *Never had been.* "And I can see you're not interested in the idea, either. I've long realized

trying to stop Mama from playing matchmaker is futile. So I hope we can still be comfortable with each other and ignore our mothers' wet dreams. After all, business partner ka nina Lola."

Matamis siyang ngumiti sa lalaki, pero naningkit lang ang mga mata nito. The guy needed to lighten up.

"You don't know my mother," malamig nitong pakli. "But I agree, we need to get along with each other. Lalo na't ikaw na ang mamamahala ng mga negosyo ng lolo at lola mo."

"I wouldn't count on that."

Nag-angat ng isang kilay si Nicolò.

Pero nagkibit-balikat lang ang dalaga at itinuon din ang atensyon sa daan.

"Hindi ka papasok sa kompanya ng lolo at lola mo?" pantay nitong untag.

Aba, he actually asked her a question! First time yata iyon.

Tinapunan niya ito ng ngiti, pero nanatiling nakasimangot ang lalaki. *Tsk*. She shrugged. "Relocating here from Manila is already a lot. And we don't know anything about running Lola and Lolo's company. We already have our plates full as it is."

"You will eventually inherit it."

You don't really know that.

Yawning, she rubbed her eyes. Good thing she didn't wear any eye makeup that day, or she'd be smudging her eyeliner and end up with racoon eyes. But she probably looked hell with or without racoon eyes, anyway.

Marahan niyang minasahe ang kanyang leeg.

Halos ilang linggo na siyang hindi nakakatulog nang

maayos. Ang totoo, pakiramdam ni Deborah ay hindi pa siya tumitigil sa pagkilos mula nang matanggap ang tawag na iyon limang buwan na ang nakakaraan. She'd been moving and moving like she'd been spinning inside a drier for months and months. Seriously, she still had whiplash.

Umungol siya at diniinan ang masahe sa leeg habang inaantok na pinanood ang pagdaloy ng makukulay na pedicabs, multicabs, tricycle at jeeps sa kalsada. Maraming shops at fast food joints sa paligid, at pumipintig sa buhay ang maliit na bayan.

She had always liked small towns. Labingwalong taon pa lang siya ay ginagalugad na niya ang mga kalsada ng mga probinsya. Komportable siya sa malulubak at maaalikabok na daan gaya ng pagiging komportable niya sa makukulay na ilaw ng siyudad.

Lumihis sa main road ang sasakyan at binagtas ang isang mas makipot na daan na napapaligiran ng mayayabong na puno ng acacia. Sa dulo niyon ay ang gate ng isang subdivision.

The shift from the dusty colorful town to the quiet idyllic ambiance was palpable, as if the air itself became expensive.

Sumaludo ang lalaking naka-Barong Tagalog sa may guardhouse nang dumaan sila, at sumaludo rin si Nicolò. Bigla, na-imagine niya ang binata na nakasuot ng military o police uniform. Nakabukas ang harapan at nakalantad ang matigas na tiyan at—

Iniikot niya ang mga mata sa sarili. She had to stop listening to her mother and Tita Amelia. Nako-corrupt ang utak niya.

Dinukot ni Deborah ang phone sa bulsa at tinawagan ang ina. “Ma,” bati niya pagkasagot nito.

“O, malapit ka na?”

“Kakapasok lang namin sa subdivision.”

“Okay, we’ll have the gate open for you. Sabihin mo kay Nico dito na siya magtanghalian.”

Gusto niyang tumawa. *Good luck with that, Mother.*

“Okay. See you.”

Ibinaba niya ang phone at ipinasok sa kanyang circular rattan shoulder bag. “Sa bahay ka na raw magtanghalian.”

“May pupuntahan ako pagkatapos nito.”

See, mother dearest? Hindi niya napigil ang pangisi. They probably needed another emergency to make Nico stay for lunch.

Huminto ang sasakyan sa tapat ng isang mahabang wire-brushed narra gate, at pagkatapos ng ilang segundo ay bumukas iyon. Binagtas ng four-wheel drive ang maikling circular driveway at tumigil sa tapat ng batong hagdanan.

Hindi pa rin niya mapigilang mailang habang nakatitig sa maringal na bahay na bato. No one would look at those terracotta-tiled roof, white stone pillars, terraced veranda and arcaded portico and think that it was not an authentic ancestral house.

But it wasn’t. The original 1920s mansion was in San Andres, their hometown. Mini-version niyon ang bahay na ito sa Virac at noong early 1990s lamang itinayo. Yes, she called the ten-bedroom mansion with verandas and tall columns a mini. But compared that to the Beaux Art grandiosity in San Andres, the stone house in front of them would look positively quaint. Sinalubong sila ng

dalawang may-edad na lalaki.

“Wag ka nang bumaba.” Tinanggal ni Deborah ang seatbelt at inabot ang latch ng pinto. “Ikaw rin, baka abutan ka pa nina Mama at mapilit ka pang mag-lunch kasabay namin.”

Magkasalubong ang mga kilay na tinapunan siya ng tingin ng lalaki. *Tsk*. Forget about smiling. The guy could melt panties with that scowl.

“You know I’m right.” Itinulak ni Deborah pabukas ang pinto pagkatapos ay lumabas ng sasakyan. “Thank you for picking me up. See you around.” Isinara niya ang pinto at hinagip ang handle ng backseat para kunin ang mga bagahe.

Nakalabas na ng gate si Nicolò nang lumabas ng bahay ang kanyang mama para salubungin siya.

“O, ’asan na si Nico?”

“Natakot, umalis na.”

“Bakit?” Nalukot sa pagkadismaya ang magandang mukha nito.

At forty-nine, her mother looked lovely. With ivory skin, angelic face and dark brown hair, ito iyong classic Filipina mestiza beauty na sikat noong 1950s. She looked a lot like her mother, pero namana niya ang golden skin tone ng ama. And she leaned more on slim rather than curvy. Which was great. It meant she could eat a lot without worrying much about fat index, kumpara sa mama niya na sabi ay parang tumataba raw ito sa pag-inom lang ng juice. Deborah was sure that was bullsh*t, though.

“Baka raw mag-propose kayo ng kasal namin.”

Niyakap niya ang ina, noting the scent of expensive

perfume. Her mother barely used perfume when they were in the city. But it was different now. Hindi lang iyon ang nabago. The emerald earrings, bracelet, rings, the floral dark green midi dress and nude strappy shoes, those definitely cost about a down payment for a low-cost housing unit. Malayung-malayo iyon sa simpleng pananamit nito sa Manila.

“You and Tita Amelia need to stop annoying Nico, Mother.”

“You two would be good together,” pilit nito habang umaakyat sila ng hagdanan. “Rico, pakidala na lang sa kuwarta ni Deborah ’yang mga bagahe.”

“Salamat, Manong.” Tinanguan niya ang matanda. “No, we’re not,” balik niya sa ina. “He doesn’t like me. Mahiya kayo d’un sa tao.”

Binuksan nila ang pinto at pumasok sa loob. Pinanatili ang lumang estilo sa interior ng mansion. A round pedestal table stood at the center of the foyer. A burst of colorful lilies and roses in an antique Chinese porcelain graced the table, while a dripping crystal chandelier hung at the high ceiling.

Gawa sa hardwood planks ang sahig at molave wood panels ang dingding. A Fernando Amorsolo painting hung on one wall, and an antique oval mirror on another. She hoped to heavens insured ang mga iyon. Those items cost millions.

“Nasa veranda sa likod ang lola at lolo mo, magbihis ka na muna bago ka humarap sa kanila.”

“Do you want me to wear my couture *Givenchy* gown?”

“Wala kang couture *Givenchy* gown. You should

wear the *Versace* dress, kabibili lang 'yon ng lola mo. Nasa kuwarte mo na. Sige na, magbihis ka na bago tayo kumain."

She wished her mother was joking.

"I'm tired, Ma. Just let me eat. Si Papa?"

"Darating na din 'yon mayamaya, nasa restaurant lang at may inaayos."

"In other words, he's avoiding Lolo and Lola."

Kinurot siya ng nanay niya sa baywang. "Tumigil ka, ha. Wag kang aarte nang ganyan sa harap ng lolo at lola mo."

"But I can talk behind their backs, right? Never mind, mother dear. I'm joking."

"Deborah!"

Tumatawang binuksan niya ang kahoy na pinto bago tuluyang masermonan ng ina. At naroon ang grandparents niya, nakaupo sa rattan at abaca sofa malapit sa barandilya.

If anybody needed a stock photograph of a rich married couple in their early eighties from an old aristocratic family, they just had to look at her lolo and lola.

Puti na pareho ang buhok ng dalawa, pero nanatiling mukhang bata ang kabuuan. Good genes could do that, but a boatload money could deliver the same results. Her grandparents probably had the first one, but they sure had a heavy dose of the other.

Her grandmother wore a blue silk loose blouse and dark square pants. Kumikinang ang diamond earrings, wedding at engagement rings nito sa sikat ng araw. She was sure that long strand pearl necklace was older than

anybody in the house. Seriously, she needed sunglasses around here. Those diamonds and pearls were blinding.

Her grandpa looked more casual in his white polo shirt and black slacks. Ang tanging palamuti sa katawan nito ay ang wedding ring at vintage *Cartier* watch. Pero mas mahal pa rin iyon kaysa sa college education niya.

“Deborah!” Her grandmother’s voice chimed in the crisp morning air.

Tumayo ang kanyang lolo at sinalubong sila. Nang mainit siya nitong yakapin, bahagya siyang nanigas.

Pinanlakihan siya ng mga mata ng kanyang mama. Umiling siya rito. *So dramatic*. Gumanti siya ng yakap sa abuelo at nagmano pagkatapos.

“How’s the flight, hija?”

“Good and uneventful. You’re looking good, Lolo, Lola.”

Lumapit siya sa huli saka nagmano at yumakap din dito.

“*Tan hermosa.*” *So beautiful*. Sinapo ng matanda ang magkabila niyang pisngi. It felt cool and smooth against her cheeks. “You are so lovely, hija. You look just like my mother when she was your age. I will show you some pictures of her later.”

“That would be lovely.”

“I was just telling Fernando that I’m feeling very good already,” simula ng babae nang makaupo sila. “Hindi na natin kailangang tumira dito sa Virac, p’wede na tayong bumalik sa San Andres.”

Umiling ang lolo niya at umupo sa tabi ni Lola Leticia. “No. It’s only been five months since your bypass surgery. Mas kailangan nating mag-ingat sa edad natin.

Mas mabuting malapit tayo dito sa ospital mo.”

“Yes, Mama,” segunda ng kanyang ina. “Mas mabuti nang mag-ingat tayo.”

Bumuga ng hangin ang matanda, bumaling sa kanya at ginagap ang kamay niya. “You will stay tonight and tomorrow before you go to San Andres?”

Pinanlakihan ulit siya ng mata ng kanyang ina. Gusto niyang tumaltak dito. What’s with her mother? Kung umarte ito parang tatapunan niya ng orange juice ang kanyang grandparents sa unang tyansa na magkaroon siya.

“I will, Lola.”

“That is so wonderful! We missed so much of your lives. I wished we made that phone call much much earlier and not when I was practically fifty-fifty in a hospital bed.”

“Ay naku, Mama, tama na ’yan.”

“Yes, yes, but are you sure you don’t want us to hold a casual party to welcome you back? It would be helpful so you can meet—”

“No, Lola, please that’s not necessary.” The last thing she needed was more fanfare. Heck, all this fussing was already making her squirm. “S’abi n’yo may charity gala na darating next week? You said you could have your assistant accompany me. That should be enough to help me meet other people here.”

“Pero iba pa rin kung magkakaroon tayo ng formal welcome party para sa inyo,” pilit ng abuelo.

“Papa,” mahinahong pigil ng ina. “We’ve talked about this.”

Well, mother dear, thank you for backing me up! Akala

niya ay tuluyan na siyang iniwan nito sa ere.

Pasimple siyang kinurot ng kanyang mama na para bang narinig ang iniisip niya.

She grinned and hugged her mother back.

“Sige na, enough talk about that.” Masiglang bumaling ulit sa kanya ang matandang babae. “Deborah, talaga bang hindi ka pa nagkaka-boyfriend, hija?”

That took them long enough. Halos ten minutes din. She actually thought they would only last five. “I just didn’t have the time and it was never my priority, Lola.”

“You should at least try dating, *mi hija*. Nicolò is perfect.”

“Naku, apo,” singit ni Lolo Fernando. “Kung alam mo lang, ’yan ang topic ng dalawang ’yan kapag pinag-uusapan ka.”

She had no doubt about that. Ano nga ang sinabi ni Avril Lavigne? *She was a boy, she was a girl, can I make it anymore obvious?* Right.

“He is very outstanding,” sulsol ng kanyang grandmother. “Masuwerte tayo, hindi pa siya nag-aasawa at wala siyang seryosong karelasyon.”

“Talagang na-trauma kasi ’ata si Nico doon sa una niyang girlfriend,” tsismis ng nanay niya.

“Ewan ko ba kay Amelia kung ano’ng nakita niya kay Rossana. Unapalang, alamkong sakit ng ulo ang batang’yon.”

“Maganda kasi,” hirit ni Lolo Fernando.

“Maganda nga, bulok naman ang ugali! Mabuti nga’t natauhan si Nicolò at hiniwalayan ang babaeng ’yon bago pa sila ikasal. What do you think, hija?”

Oh, kasali pala siya sa conversation. Akala niya private fanclub meeting iyon

ni Nico at hindi siya nagbigyan ng memo.

Matabang siyang ngumiti sa abuela. “I really don’t have an opinion about it, Lola. But speaking of maganda, tingnan na po natin ’yung pictures ng mama n’yo. Kamukha ko po ba talaga siya?”

Nagningning ulit ang mga mata ng kanyang abuela. Thank heavens for that. She had enough of Nico’s biography. She could already write his *Wikipedia* page thanks to her mother and Tita Amelia. She didn’t need more.

“*Si, hija.* Pati pangangatawan, pareho kayo. Sige, tawagin natin si Berta para kunin ’yung album.”

Thankfully, they never talked about Nicolò and his sorry love life after that.

Good riddance. She wasn’t interested in his love life at all. Well, at least iyon ang press release niya.

2



Her mother was right that she rarely got out of her store and house other than to shop around the country for what she needed for *Sinag*. Malamang ay iyon din ang magiging kuwento ng buhay niya sa Catanduanes. She was not exactly an introvert; she was not awkward nor did she have any problem socializing with people or anything, she just tended not to.

Okay, fine. Maybe she was a bit awkward, lalo na noong kabataan niya. She blamed Tita Precie for that. The old bat had corrupted her pure little soul since she was five.

Pinindot ni Deborah ang number combination sa plate sa gilid ng pinto at inilapat ang daliri doon.

Malamig ang simoy hangin mula sa dagat, at bahagyang tinangay ang ilang pinong hibla ng buhok na nakawala sa kanyang Dutch braid. Rinig niya ang lagaslas ng alon sa dalampasigan at paghuni ng mga ibon, at amoy ang alat ng hanging-dagat at mga puno sa kapaligiran.

Tumaas ang sulok ng kanyang mga labi. She had always thought living near the beach was dope.

Red light blinked from the plate, and a beeping sound rang. The lock disengaged with a click, and she pushed the wooden door open.

Sinalubong si Deborah ng amoy ng kahoy at pintura, at kinapa niya ang switch ng ilaw sa gilid. Alas seis sinco pa lang ng umaga, at hindi nakakatagos ang malamyos na sinag ng araw sa mga nakatabing na papel sa mga salaming bintana.

Kumalat ang liwanag sa paligid.

Ngumiti siya. She gotta give props to the construction team. Natapos nito ang renovation ng dating art studio sa loob lamang ng kulang-kulang tatlong buwan. At matapos ang halos isang buwan na paghihintay, dumating na noong isang araw ang Certificate of Occupancy, at maaari nang dalhin ang mga furniture at art pieces bukas.

Well, after they cleaned up some.

Sinipat ni Deborah ang mga kartong nakalatag sa sahig upang protektahan ang narra wood planks. Maalikabok na ang mga yakal wall panels at reddish-brown tanguile shelves sa isang pader, gayundin ang counter. They already had a post-construction cleaning a month ago, but she'd have another round today and maybe another one tomorrow before she set everything up.

She strode to the center of the spacious room and imagined what it would look like when the furniture and art pieces were put into place.

The shop was twice bigger now compared to the original art studio due to the additional space for the storage room, breakroom, and her office.

Mayroong maliit na apartment sa itaas, pero pintura

at konting adjustments lang ang ginawa roon ng construction team. Her grandparents wanted to increase the floor plan of the apartment as well, but she declined. She was okay with a small space, and she wanted to get herself settled in the apartment fast while the final touches to *Sinag* were being done.

Nag-ring ang kanyang phone, at dinukot niya iyon mula sa rattan bag.

“Sydney,” bati ng dalaga sa tumawag.

“Did you check your email this morning? Nag-email ako sa ’yo kagabi.”

Lumakad siya papunta ng counter para sipatin ang maluwag na storage room sa likod niyon. May mga kartong nakalatag para protektahan ang sahig. “Not yet. Why?”

“You should check your emails first thing in the morning, you know.”

“It’s 6:10 a.m., morning hasn’t started yet. And I prefer to take a bath, dress, eat, and commute to my office first before I power up my laptop and check emails.”

“You can do it on your phone.”

Napasinghap si Deborah. “Really?”

Bumungisngis ang kaibigan/assistant/store manager ng main branch ng *Sinag* sa Manila.

Tumaas ulit ang sulok ng kanyang mga labi. Branch, may branch na talaga ang *Sinag*.

“Check it now,” pilit ni Sydney. “It’s about a meeting for a magazine article. Kakilala ng kapatid ko ’yung writer. He saw the newspaper article about *Sinag* last week, and he wanted to feature us in their magazine. May iba pa siyang gusto sanang i-feature kasabay mo

d'yan sa Catanduanes. Do you know Nicolò Ferrante Luis Centenera Jaucian?" Bumungisngis ulit si Sydney. "Damn, ang haba ng pangalan. Pang-haciendero sa telenovela."

More like cowboy, she wanted to say, but kept her mouth shut. Her friend would never stop asking about it. "They wanted to feature Nicolò as well?"

Naglakad siya sa maikling pasilyo papunta sa kanyang opisina, breakroom at restroom.

"Yes. So you know him? He's into abaca industry and rainforestation farming. I figured since gumagawa ng abaca furniture at crafts ang grandparents mo, baka kilala nila."

Bahagyang nagsalubong ang kanyang mga kilay habang pinipihit ang seradura ng pinto.

Alam niya ang tungkol sa abaca farming business ng binata dahil supplier ito sa negosyo ng kanyang lolo at lola, at alam din niya na matagumpay ang resort, hotels at ibang real estate ventures nito sa San Andres, Virac, Caramoan, Baras, at Bato. Pero wala siyang narinig tungkol sa rainforestation farming ni Nico.

"Yes, I know him. Business partner sila nina Lolo."

"Can you help set up a meeting with him? Para lang mas mapadali tatal kakilala n'yo naman."

Pumasok si Deborah sa loob ng opisina at binuksan ang ilaw. "Sure. I'll see what I can do."

"So how's life in the beach? Saw some papalicious hunks already?"

"Saying a hunk is 'papalicious' is redundant, isn't it? 'Papalicious' basically means 'hunk.' At ano ba ang pinagkaiba ng 'papalicious' sa 'papable'?"

“This is why you don’t get dates, sweetie pie.”

“Hmm.” Ipinatong niya ang rattan bag sa maliit na mesa at umupo sa black monobloc chair.

Maalikabok din sa opisina, at bukas pa darating ang mga furniture. At dahil nakasimpleng graphic shirt at lumang pantalon lang siya, hindi na siya nag-abalang magpunas sa mesa at upuan. Maaalikabukan din siya mamaya. “And here I thought it was because I choose not to date. You know, free will and all?”

“You really need to socialize with more people, Debbie, dear. Kailangan nating i-exorcise ang itim na sisiw na pinakain sa ’yo ni Tita Precie!”

“You’re twenty-five years too late. Permanente na ang epekto ng itim na sisiw.” Binuksan niya ang bag at hinila mula roon ang laptop. She powered up her laptop and waited as it boot up. “Anything else I need to know?”

“Wala na. Business as usual sa shop. No, really, Deb, you need to start going out more. I’m worried about you, girl. Ngayong wala na ’ko d’yan sa tabi mo, wala nang manghahatak sa ’yo para lumabas man lang at mag-enjoy isang beses sa isang buwan.”

“Yes. It’s a miracle I survived twenty years of my life before I met you.”

Bumuntong-hininga ang kasama.

Nakikita na ni Deborah sa isipan si Sydney, iniikot ang bilugang mata sa kanya. Sigurado rin siya na perpekto na ang makeup, maikling buhok at damit ng kaibigan. She swore the girl would look chic even during a zombie outbreak.

“You’re not really hung up on that douchebag, are you?” untag ng kausap.

She logged into her email and *FB* accounts and clicked on Sydney's email and *FB* message from Tita Precie. "How could I forget, dear, when you mention him on a regular basis every time you set me up on a date?"

Mas regular pa iyon kaysa sa period niya.

Bumungisngis ulit si Sydney. "Fine. Sorry na. But really, I think you're letting what he did to you affect your dating life even now. Come on, gurl, alam mong hindi lahat ng lalaki ay as*hole. Your dad's awesome. My bf's awesome, my brother's awesome. Keanu Reeves is awesome."

"Yes, whenever I look at Keanu Reeves, my faith in humanity is restored."

Inilagay niya sa speaker phone ang tawag at inilapag ang cellphone sa mesa habang binubuksan ang email ni Sydney at message ni Tita Precie. "Nakita ko na ang email mo, pero uunahin ko munang basahin 'tong kay Tita Precie."

"Hmp. Bakit ako walang message from her?"

"She loves me best. Sa 'kin niya ipinamana ang itim na sisiw."

"Saw her pictures in the snow. Enjoy si Mudra."

"Yes, she loves Portland."

The message was basically just Tita Precie checking on her and her family. May ibinigay din itong contact information ng isang bagong sculptor na kakilala ng kaibigan nito sa Batanes. She typed a brief response and asked what time the older woman would be free so they could video call.

"Let's talk later, Syd. I want to finish these emails and some papers before Sara and the cleaning crew arrive."

“Okay, later. Ngayon din ii-install ang security gate, di ba?”

“Yes, lahat din ng alarm set up ilalagay na.”

“Padalhan mo ’ko ng pics at vids kapag malinis na, ha?”

“Yes, ’bye.”

Tinapos ni Deborah ang tawag at binuksan ang music library sa laptop. After a few clicks, she had *Buloy* by *Parokya ni Edgar* blasting through the speakers. Itinuon niya ang atensyon sa mga email.

Around seven forty-five, dumating si Sara, ang kinuha niyang store manager ng *Sinag* dito sa San Andres.

A few minutes later, the cleaning crew arrived. Pero imbis na tatlong crew na inaasahan nila, dalawa lang ang dumating. Nagka-emergency raw kasi iyong isa kaya hindi nakapunta. Minabuti nila ni Sara na tumulong na sa paglilinis para mapabilis sila.

Nang mag-alas doce ng tanghali, maalikabok at pawisan na rin sila. She wanted to rush up to her apartment and take a shower. At iyon dapat ang gagawin niya nang bumukas ang pinto ng shop.

“Deborah!” Parang pagsabog ng kulay ang babaeng pumasok sa loob ng tindahan.

The woman’s red heels clicked against the hardwood floor, her diamond earrings and bracelets winking in the sun. Walang ideya si Deborah kung paano nagawang maglakad ni Tita Amelia sa gravel driveway at mabuhanging sidewalk papunta sa shop niya.

That has got to be some superpower, she thought.

“Tita.” Tumayo siya mula sa pagkakaluhod sa harapan ng isang istante, at agad umatras nang akmang yayakapin

siya ng babae. “Wait, Tita, I’m dirty—”

Mahigpit siya nitong yinapos. The thick scent of lilac and jasmine drenched Deborah, making her almost sneeze.

“It’s alright, hija. Hindi ako mamamatay sa alikabok.”

“Yes, but your silk peach dress might. You’re gonna give it a tragic ending, Tita.”

Tumawa ang babae at nakangiting hinawakan siya sa pisngi. Malambot at malamig ang kamay nito sa kanyang mainit at pawisang balat.

Darn, she probably smelled like insecticide. She was sure she had dust bunnies in her hair, too.

Malaki ang hawig ni Nicolò sa nanay nito. Parehong aristokrato ang hulma ng mukha ng dalawa at pareho ring maitim at maalon ang buhok. Nakapusod ang buhok ng ginang, at mukha itong fresh at masigla. Pero mukhang sa tatay nakuha ng binata ang tangkad at kulay nito. Tita Amelia barely reached her temples even with the added three inches. Maputi rin ito at mahubog ang katawan.

“How have you been, hija? Are you enjoying the fresh air of San Andres?”

“Well, alikabok pa lang po ang nalalanghap ko sa ngayon. At insecticide kanina. May flying ipis na bumisita.”

With a bright smile curving her lips, Amelia Lucrecia Centenera Jaucian patted Deborah’s cheeks. Binitawan siya nito at inilibot ang tingin sa paligid. “This place is beautiful, hija, I love the color scheme and the wood paneling you used here. Very warm. Very *us*.”

“Thank you.” This time, nagawa niyang ngumiti. “Tungkol po sa mga lokal na talento ang *Sinag*, kaya

hangga't maaari, puro mga lokal na kahoy at kagamitan din ang gagamitin namin sa mismong shop." Marahan niyang pinadaan ang palad sa mamula-mulang kahoy na shelf. "Almost all materials used in this shop are from here."

"That is indeed lovely. We have so many wonderful local artists here in Catanduanes. But you will also feature some artists from other parts of the country, yes?"

Tumango ang dalaga. "Seventy percent po ay galing dito sa Catanduanes, at thirty percent ay sa mga iba't ibang parte ng bansa."

Maningning na ibinalik sa kanya ni Tita Amelia ang tingin. "You know of Evan Agnarsson? Would you be able to get some of his paintings here?"

She'd give a kidney and a lung to get one of Evan Agnarsson's paintings for *Sinag*. But as it was, those paintings were way out of her reach, a beautiful dream she could only dream, a blinding light she could only look from a far.

Bumuntong-hininga si Deborah. "Can't. Ibang level na po ang paintings ni Evan. Dinudumog sa *Sotheby's* New York."

"That is true, but I really love what you're doing here, going around the country looking for hidden gems." Bumuntong-hininga rin ang may-edad na babae. "My dear Nickie is a superb painter. Nagpipinta rin siya dati. Nasabi ko na ba sa 'yo?"

Only a thousand times.

Well, technically ang nanay niya ang nagsabi niyon sa kanya. Isa iyon sa unang mga sinabi sa kanya ng ina tungkol sa binata.

“He likes art!” pilit ng mama niya. *“You have something in common!”*

Deborah even knew what brand of brush cleaner Nico used to prefer. She had never seen any of his paintings, though. Her mother and Tita Amelia never managed to send her a picture.

“Pero huminto siya n’ung twenties niya,” patuloy ng ginang, nakaismid at nakahalukipkip. “Maybe seeing the wonderful art pieces here will ignite his passion for painting and make him pick up a brush again. Have I told you that Nicolò—”

May kumatok sa pinto ng shop. *“Jollibee delivery!”*

Yes! Gusto niyang mag-fist pump. Sumasakit na ang ulo niya sa tirada ni Tita Amelia sa awesomeness ng anak nito. Masama ba ang ugali niya? Probably. But come on. It would probably take a whole day if they let the woman talk about her son.

“Dito kayo magla-lunch?” usisa nito.

“Opo—”

“You should have lunch with me and get some air outside. Come!”

Nanlaki sa alarma ang kanyang mga mata. “What? Ano po—”

Hinagip nito ang kamay niya at hinila siya papunta sa pinto. Nagulat siya sa lakas ng babae. For a pint-size woman, Tita Amelia had Amazonian strength.

“Wait, Tita, I can’t—”

“They wouldn’t mind if I borrow you for lunch, would they? Yes, of course they won’t. Do not worry, dear. Ibabalik kita after lunch. I just want to chat more with you. Hindi ako nakadalaw kahapon at n’ung isang araw

dahil nasa Iloilo ako. But now I'm here and we need to catch up, my dear!"

"Wait, Tita—"

Pero nagawa na siyang kaladkarin ng ginang palabas ng shop.

3

Deborah suddenly had flashbacks. Bigla ay parang five-years old ulit siya at walang magawa kundi sumunod sa nakatatanda. Tita Precie was also like this. Kapag sinabi nitong upo, uupo lang siya. Kapag sinabi nitong makinig siya, wala siyang choice kundi ang makinig sa walang katapusang litanya ng matanda tungkol sa kagaguhan ng mga kalalakihan.

“Tita, I really have to—”

“Come on, dear, it’s just lunch. I’m not bothering you, am I?”

May pag-aalalang bumaling sa kanya ang matanda. Malalaki ang mga mata ng ginang at malungkot ang hulma ng bibig.

She groaned. How could she say no without being rude now? Yeah, yeah, there were a number of ways to politely but firmly say ‘no.’ But come on, the woman had been kind to her family, especially to her mother. Ano ba naman ang isang lunch?

“Our seafood dishes are the best here in Catanduanes.” Kumindat ang matanda sa kanya. “Alam kong may restaurant din kayo, pero mas masarap ang seafood namin.”

Humalakhak si Deborah. “Fair enough, Tita. We should love our own.”

“Right?” Ikinawit ng babae ang braso sa kanya.

Hindi na siya nag-abalang ipaalala sa kasama na mukha siyang gusgusin sa damit at pawis niya. Sigurado siyang hindi rin siya papansinin ni Tita Amelia. The woman was like a freaking tsunami. Tatangayin ka nito sa ayaw at gusto mo.

And she supposed it helped that Tita Amelia’s family owned the hotel.

Hindi kumurap ang doorman sa lobby ng hotel nang pagbuksan sila ng pinto. Magalang lang itong ngumiti at bumati.

“Lovely, isn’t it?” puri ng ginang habang iminumuwestra ang kamay sa paligid.

Mukhang malaking Spanish mansion ang *Magayon Hotel*. Soft ochre ang kulay ng gusali, habang puti ang mga columns sa portico at arched entrance. Napapalibutan ito ng matitingkad na pink and red bougainvilleas at gumamelas. Spanish colonial style ang mga sofa sa lobby, gayundin ang mga console table at wrought iron chandeliers.

May nadaanan silang Filipino at Thai restaurant, pero dumerecho sila sa *Sabroso*, isang Spanish restaurant.

“Here, sit,” nakangiting aya ng ginang at sabay silang naupo. “Do you like the place?”

Inilibot niya ang tingin.

The arched doorways opened to an arcaded patio with a fountain in the center. Gumagapang ang matitingkad na kulay rosas na bougainvillea sa mga pillars at nakalawit mula sa mga itaas na palapag. “Yes, it’s lovely.”

“Ito ang unang hotel ng pamilya,” kuwento ng kasama. “But my Nickie had certainly expanded our hotel and resort business.”

Yeah, kailangan na niyang ihanda ang mga tainga sa hindi matatawarang galing sa negosyo ng anak ng kausap. “Mukhang magaling na businessman po talaga si Nico.”

“He is!” Madamdaming tumango ang babae. “He’s like *Midas*, hija. Everything he touches turns to gold. Even that silly abaca farming business.”

First of all, Deborah never really understood why people used *Midas* as a positive reference. The dude killed his daughter by turning her into gold. That, and the poor bastard starved to death because even food he touched turned into gold. Which was stupid. He could have just asked people to feed him.

Napaismid ang matanda na para bang may naamoy na hindi maganda.

Hmm. And here she thought Tita Amelia thought dear Nickie was perfect.

“Hindi po kayo pabor sa abaca farming business niya?”

“Yes, no offense to your family’s abaca business, my dear.”

Lumapit ang isang babaeng staff sa kanila at ibinigay ang menu. The woman and all the other staff looked classy in their black dresses and low-heeled pumps.

“Try the seafood paella and bacalao pil pil,” suhestiyon ni Tita Amelia. “They’re marvelous. And let’s have sangria. Hindi ka naman magmamaneho, hindi ba? We have the freshest fruits here in *Magayon*.”

Ngumiti si Deborah. “I’ll also have a mango ensalada and crème caramel.”

Kinuha ng staff ang kanilang order at nagpasalamat sila rito.

Tinapik ng ginang ang kanyang kamay. "I have nothing against your grandparent's abaca business," patuloy nito sa usapan nila kanina. "So please don't get me wrong. Okay ang paggawa ng mga furniture sa abaca, pero ang mag-farm pa mismo n'on?" Hinilot ni Tita Amelia ang noo. "He did not have to do that. We could just go into Grading and Balling, but no, he had to go into the whole farming thing, too."

Hindi niya napigil ang pagkunot-noo. Kung makapagsalita ito tungkol sa abaca farming ay para bang human trafficking business iyon. "Pero hindi ba't malaking tulong po sa mga abaca farmers ang ginagawa ni Nico?"

Umismid ang ginang. "Whatever do you mean, Deborah dear?"

Nagkibit-balikat siya. "Madalas nasa Grading and Balling stage na po pumapasok ang malalaking korporasyon."

"Exactly! Kaya nga dapat doon na rin kami."

Umihip ang hangin mula sa acarded patio, at tinangay niyon ang ilang hibla ng kanyang buhok. Isinuksok niya iyon sa likod ng tainga niya.

"Well, I think malaking tulong po na sa mismong planting, harvesting, cleaning hanggang drying ay may katulong na malaking corporation ang mga magsasaka. With money to finance machineries and better disease control management, it becomes easier for the farmers."

"Pero ginagawa na'yon ng gobyerno," pilit ng ginang, umiiling-iling. "Bakit kailangang sumali pa siya? He

should leave farming to others. He should just focus on our hotel, resorts and other real estate ventures.”

“But, Tita, it doesn’t hurt to have someone with financial backing support the industry directly, too.”

“Stop trying to convince my mother, she wouldn’t listen to it.”

Napaigtad si Deborah nang marinig ang baritonong boses mula sa kanyang likuran.

Parang umahon ang araw sa mukha ni Tita Amelia sa maningning nitong pagngiti. Agad itong tumayo at sinalubong ang bagong dating. “Nickie, my son, it’s nice of you to join us!”

Nilingon niya ang lalaki. Well, the cowboy had transformed into a corporate tycoon. No scruffy jaw, shirts, worn jeans, and boots for Nicolò this time. Nakasuot ito ng black dress shirt at trousers. His jaw was neatly shaved, too, the strong angles in full display. He’s still hot, obviously.

Yes, she had no qualm admitting what a fine specie Nicolò was. She was an art enthusiast, after all. And this man’s face and body was a work of art.

“You’re the one who told me to come here, Mother.” May bahid ng pang-aakusa ang tono ng binata.

But he’s still got the cold and stoic aura intact, apparently, she mused.

“I wanted to have lunch with you.” Tinapik-tapik ni Tita Amelia ang braso ng lalaki. “But I passed by Deborah’s shop here a while ago, and we thought it would be great to have lunch together.”

Gusto niyang itaas ang kamay at sabihing, ‘Objection your honor! Bah, that was so untrue!’ Just look at her.

Mukha ba siyang kusang kakain sa five-star restaurant sa dungis niya?

Sa halip, matabang siyang
ngumiti sa lalaki. “Hello, Nico.”

Payak na tumango ito bilang pagbati.

Hinila ng ginang ang braso ng anak para pilitin itong umupo. “Sit down now, and let’s have lunch together.”

Mukhang gusto ring mag-object ni Nico. But Tita Amelia was probably using witchcraft. Ang hirap nitong hindian. With a stoic look, Nico forced himself to sit down.

“Here.” Ibinigay ng nanay nito ang menu. “I was just telling Deborah about your successful real estate ventures. What do you think of a passenger transport business, Deborah? Hindi ba’t magandang ideya’yon lalo na at nasa hotel business na kami? We could offer travel fare as part of our vacation packages.”

“I’m not going into shipping business, Mother.” Matigas ang boses ni Nicolò. Nakatiim-bagang din ito at malamig ang titig.

Predictably, hindi tinablan niyon ang ginang. Hell, a battle tank probably wouldn’t scratch Tita Amelia. Withcraft, indeed.

Malambing na tinapik ng nakatatandang babae ang kamay ng binata. “Never say never, hijo. What do you say, hija? It’s a good idea, yes?”

Could she take a raincheck on this dreadful lunch? *Tita Amelia, can we reschedule this lunch to let’s say, uh, never?*

“Tita Amelia, I’m afraid I don’t have the necessary knowledge to make an informed—”

“Of course, you can, hija. You are such a bright girl! Speaking of shipping business, kilala mo ba ang mga Garchitorena, dear? They’re in the shipping business here. They’re hosting a charity event next week. You have to go. You need to get acquainted with the important people here in Catanduanes. It’s a perfect opportunity.” Binalingan nito ang anak. “You have to bring Deborah to the gala—”

“Tita Amelia, it’s okay, I can—”

Nag-ring ang isang telepono.

“Oh!” bulalas ng nanay ni Nico. “That’s mine. Excuse me.” Matamis itong ngumiti at dinukot ang phone sa bulsa. Tumayo ang ginang at tinanggap ang tawag. “Elizabeth, yes, how are you?”

Whew. Gusto niyang humilata sa upuan. Parang mas napagod pa siya nitong nakaraang labinlimang minuto kasama ang ginang kaysa sa apat na oras na paglilinis sa shop. This was supposed to be an easy day.

Tinapunan niya ng tingin ang lalaki. “I’m also a victim.”

Kumuyom-palad ito at nag-iwas ng tingin.

Bumalik ang ginang sa mesa at mapagpaumanhing ngumiti sa kanila. “I’m so sorry, Deborah, Nickie. But my friend Elizabeth called.” Tinapik ng matanda ang balikat ng anak. “Dumating daw si Tita Angelina mo, at one day lang siya rito sa San Andres.” Bumaling ito ulit sa kanya. “High school classmates ko sina Lizzy at Angie, hija. Schoolmate namin si Mama mo. Angie found out your mom’s back in town and she wanted to meet up. Dadaanan ko ang mama mo at sabay kaming makikipagkita kina Angie. I’m sorry, but I have to take a

raincheck on our lunch. So kayo na lang muna ni Nickie ang kumain, okay?” Bago pa sila makasagot, hinagkan na sila sa pisngi ni Tita Amelia. “Sige na, hija, we’ll have lunch some other time, yes? I’ve followed up on our order, darating na ’yun in five minutes. Enjoy the food, okay? Later, hijo, hija.” At nakangiting rumampa palabas ng restaurant ang babae.

Well, that was fast.

“You need to tell your mother to make it less obvious,” komento ni Deborah.

“She doesn’t care,” pakli ng binata.

Bumuga siya ng hangin. The last thing she needed was to get caught in a family drama. It’s just her luck that Tita Amelia was determined to slam her smack dab in the center of it.

“If it’s okay with you,” saad ng dalaga, “I’ll have my food wrapped up to bring back with me to *Sinag*. I at least want to get something out of this.”

Nico shot her an inscrutable stare, his mouth slightly frowning.

“What?” pantay niyang tanong. “Your mother dragged me here, I could at least get food.”

“Hindi mo dapat hinayaang dalhin ka niya rito kung ayaw mo.”

Pots and kettles, dude. “I could say the same to you.”

Lalong sumimangot ang lalaki.

Nakita niyang palapit sa kanila ang staff na may dala ng kanilang inumin. Ibinuka niya ang bibig para hilingin dito na i-take out ang order niya, pero inunahan siya ng binata.

“There’s no need for that,” he bit out. “We’re already

here, we might as well eat.”

Nakalapit ang staff at ngumiti sa kanila. “Your drinks, Ma’am, Sir.”

Ibinaba nito sa kanilang mesa ang pitsel ng sangria at lemon water, at dalawang baso. Well, to bail or not to bail?

Nilingon niya ang patio. Ang tingkad ng sinag ng araw. Iniisip pa lang niya ang paglakad sa mainit na buhanginan ay pinagpapawisan na siya. It felt good to just sit there for a while.

Bumuga ulit siya ng hangin.

Tumango siya sa babae at ngumiti. Iniwan sila ng server pagkatapos ibaba ang mga inumin.

Binalik niya ang tingin kay Nicolò. “We are going to be civil, aren’t we?”

His jaw worked as he poured water in his glass. “We are civil right now, aren’t we?”

“Good. At since ’andito na ako at kausap na kita, sasabihin ko na rin. An acquaintance will write a magazine article about *Sinag*. Pero gusto rin sana niyang i-feature ka at ang abaca business at rainforestation farming mo sa magazine nila. Are you open to it?”

A frown creased his brow; his jaw still rigid as he put the water pitcher down. “Anong magazine?”

“*Marilag Magazine*. It’s a lifestyle and business magazine based in Manila. I think they found out about you from a *DENR* article about reforestation.”

Maikling tumango ang binata. “Tell them to get in touch with my assistant.”

“I’ll give them the number, then.”

A woman rolled a cart laden with their orders toward

them. The wonderful smell wafting from the dishes made her almost sigh. Damn, she's hungry.

Matapos mailapag ng babae ang mga plato ng pagkain ati wansila, agad niyang itinuon ang lahat ng atensyon doon.

"These are my mother's favorite," sambit ng binata, may disgusto sa mga mata habang nakatitig sa seafood paella at bacalao pil pil. "Siya ang nag-order nito, ano?"

Nodding, she took a bite of the tender fish. The savory taste of olive oil and garlic flooded her taste buds, kicking up her appetite. "I ordered the salad and the cr me caramel."

"You shouldn't have let her order for you. She's going to roughshod you if you let her."

"I let her order two platters of dishes, Nico, not gave her my medical power of attorney. And oh, siya rin ang nag-order ng sangria."

Tumaas ang dulo ng mga labi ng kaharap sa isang mapang-uyam na ngiti. "That's where it all starts, Deborah. Small things here and there, and before you know it, she's trapped you into circumstances you couldn't get out of."

"Are you speaking from experience?"

His sardonic smile withered, his dark eyes narrowing.

Oooh. Touched a nerve, didn't she? Nagkibit-balikat siya. "You can't blame me for asking. But thank you for the warning." Sumubo siya ng hipon galing sa paella. "But I'm not that easy to manipulate, or so I hope. Isa pa, these are really good. I didn't have much opinion on what to order anyway, so why not try what she suggested? I don't want to oppose people just for the sake of opposing. I might end up missing a lot of good things, don't you

think so?”

Nakatiim-bagang pa rin ang binata habang nakatitig sa kanya.

“I know,” she drawled, “I said something insightful. It’s one of my many talents, fusing the mundane with the profound.”

Snorting, Nico picked up his fork and knife and started eating as well. He still looked like he swallowed a rat, though.

Napailing na lang si Deborah. The guy needed to lighten up. She poured sangria in her glass, the slices of lemon, apple and berries vivid against the dark red liquid. After taking a sip of her drink, she took another bite of her fish.

“This is cod, right?” Sumandok ulit siya ng paella. “Walang cod sa Pilipinas, di ba?”

He took a bite of his dish, chewed and swallowed before answering. “Mayroon, pero hindi ganoon karami, and not this particular type. There’s been a decrease in stock of demersal fish since the sixties.”

“So imported ito?”

Tumango ang lalaki. “Labahita can be used as substitute, but we prefer to import salted bacalao from Bilbao and San Sebastian.”

Sumipol siya. “So galing pang Spain ’to?” May bagong respeto na napatitig siya sa isda. “I didn’t see the price earlier, but this must be expensive.”

“We want to give our clients an authentic dining experience, and the dishes here are some of the most famous dishes from different parts of Spain. We want to use the original and authentic ingredients as much as

we can.”

Fair enough. “It did feel like I’m in an authentic Andalusian villa when I walked into the lobby.” Uminom siya ng sangria at inilibot ang tingin sa paligid.

Mabini ang tunog ng lumagalaslas na tubig sa fountain, at kumikinang iyon sa sinag ng araw. The terracotta tiles looked warm in the sun, the colorful blooming flowers bright and swaying in the soft wind. “But don’t you think you can mix it up a little bit?”

Kumunot-noo ang binata pero nagpatuloy sa paghiwa ng isda. “What do you mean?”

“I’m not talking about this specific restaurant. Since this is a Spanish restaurant, of course, it has to look, taste, feel, sound and smell like a Spanish restaurant. I’m talking about *Magayon Hotel* in general. It didn’t have to feel Spanish through and through, does it?”

Lumalim ang kunot-noo ng binata bago uminom ito ng lemon water. “It *is* a Spanish-style hotel. My great great great grandfather modeled this hotel after their villa in Seville, Andalusia. We had some additions to the building, but we kept the style uniform.”

“Pero *Magayon* ang pangalan niya,” punto niya. “Lokal na salita ’yon. I supposed ’yon din ang original na pangalan ng hotel?”

Magkasalubong pa rin ang mga kilay, tumango ang lalaki. “It is.”

“Don’t you think it might mean your great great great grandfather wanted a local touch to the hotel, too?” Napangiwi siya sa sarili. Ang daming *great* noon. Humiwa siya ulit ng cod fish. “He probably wanted a memory from where he came from, but he probably also

wanted to fuse that with what he had here. Name is an important aspect of a business, after all.”

“Ano’ng sinasabi mo? Na kailangang haluan ng lokal na lasa ang hotel?”

“Why not?” Pinagulong niya ang piraso ng isda sa sauce at tinusok ng tinidor bago sumagot. “The structure could be Spanish-inspired, but the furniture and fixtures could be Filipino, particularly, dito sa Catanduanes. You’re supporting abaca farming, pero halos wala akong nakitang abaca furniture dito. Abaca furniture goes well with a rustic ambiance like this hotel. It could look beautiful. *Magayon*.” She pointed her fork at him. “‘Magayon’ means beautiful, doesn’t it?”

Nanatiling matamang nakatitig sa kanya ang binata, pagkatapos ay maikling tumango. “Yes.”

“So why not? At tingin ko, hindi magiging awkward ang dating kung paghahaluin mo ang dalawang styles. After all, ang kultura naman ng Pilipinas ay magkahalong Spanish, American, Asian at Pacific Islander. I don’t think it would look out of place to use local materials in a Spanish-style hotel. That’s just a reflection of who and what we are, isn’t it?”

Dinampot ni Nico ang baso ng tubig saka uminom habang nakatitig sa kanya. His gaze remained cool, assessing, calculating. Matapos ang tila napakahabang sandali, ibinaba nito ang baso bago sumandal sa high-back chair. “I supposed balak mong bentahan ako ng pieces of furniture at fixtures galing sa *Sinag*.”

Ngumisi siya at madamdaming hinawakan ang dibdib. “Of course, not. Why would I do that?”

As if he couldn’t help himself, the corners of his

mouth curved. Pero para bang natauhan, bigla uli itong sumimangot.

Tsk, she thought, *lighten up, dude!* Akala yata nito iisipin niyang may gusto ito sa kanya kapag ngumiti ito. Pssh. Feeling naman.

“Of course, balak kitang bentahan,” paglinaw ni Deborah, not that she thought he didn’t know that already. “But you have to admit I have a point.”

Nakasimangot ulit, ibinalik nito ang atensyon sa pagkain. “I’ll think about it.”

And that, she supposed, was as far as she could go with her soft selling today. Oh, well, it never hurt to try.

Hinarap na rin niya ang kanyang paella.

4

The next three days flashed by in a blur for Deborah. Between the cleaning of the shop, transferring the pieces she had stored in the San Andres mansion to *Sinag*, cataloguing, labeling, setting up the pieces of furniture, preparing press kits, finishing the press release and sending them out, talking to vendors and everything else, she was wiped out.

Mabuti na lang at naayos na niya ang mga gamit sa apartment sa itaas ng shop ilang linggo na ang nakakaraan. She'd go batshit crazy if she had to deal with that, too.

Nagpapasalamat din siya na ang lolo at lola na niya ang nakipag-usap sa ilang mga local politicians at celebrity para dumalo sa opening. They would have the governor, mayor, barangay captain and some TV personalities on the opening. Bah, sosyal ang opening niya.

At quarter to seven in the morning on the fourth day, as "*Mang Jose*" blared through the speakers mounted on the four wall corners of *Sinag*, two visitors walked into her office.

"Hey, good morning," bati ng isang matangkad na lalaki. The guy could blind people with his sunny smile.

Sara didn't seem to mind, though. Ang laki ng ngiti

nito sa likuran ng dalawang bagong dating. Not that she couldn't understand. With his horn-rimmed glasses, faded jeans and shirt, Stefan could pass for *Clark Kent* on a Sunday stroll.

The other guy looked just as cute. Hindi ito kasing-tangkad ni Stefan pero maganda rin ang pangangatawan. Moreno ito at tsinito. Nakasabit ang strap ng DSLR camera sa leeg nito, at nakasuot din ng shirt at jeans. She had the same type of outfit for the day—well, for the past days now due to work in *Sinag*.

Lumapit siya sa dalawa at inilahad ang kamay. “Good morning.”

“Thank you for having us.” Nakangiting ginagap ni Stefan ang kanyang palad.

“That’s my line. Thank you for letting me tag along with you to the farm.”

“Nah. Mabuti nga ’yon at may isa pa kaming local na kasamang pupunta. This is Jay Santos, ang photographer at videographer ko ngayon.”

Nakipagkamay din siya sa lalaki. “Hello, Jay. I’m Deborah Sanchez, owner of *Sinag*. You’ve met Sara Aguilar, our store manager.”

Nakangiting iminuwestra ni Sara ang kamay sa abaca at rattan sofa sa sitting area ng opisina niya. “Upo muna kayo. Ano’ng gusto n’yong inumin? May chocolate drink kami gawa sa cacao dito. Pero may orange and mango juice din, or softdrinks if you like. We also have freshly baked balisungsong.”

“Try namin ’yung chocolate drink,” nakangiting sagot ni Jay. “At ’yung balisungsong, kung anuman ’yon.”

Tumawa si Sara. “Cassava ’yun na may coconut.”

Lumabas ang store manager para ihanda ang inumin, pero pasimpleng kumindat sa kanya mula sa likuran ng dalawang bisita. Napailing siya. Sydney did not have to worry about her here in Catanduanes. With people like Sara, she's in good hands.

Umupo ang journalist at videographer sa sofa, pumwesto naman siya sa single chair sa gilid.

"Tamang-tama lang ang dating n'yo." Dinampot niya ang remote sa coffee table at hininaan ang volume ng musika sa opisina. "We still have some time before we go to the farm. I have to warn you, though, baka mataas ang expectation n'yo sa 'kin sa pagsama ko sa inyo. Bago lang ako rito. I won't be a good tour guide."

Tumawa ang lalaki. "Your presence is enough. Your connection with Nicolò's business is a great help."

"Ah, that's practically nil. Ang grandparents ko ang business partner nina Nicolò, as I've told you. My interest in looking at the farm is not related to my grandparent's abaca business. I just want to see personally the whole process of preparing abaca fibers since it's one of the leading products here in Catanduanes. Marami kaming abaca products na ilalagay dito sa shop."

"But you do know Nicolò Luis Jaucian personally?" usisa ng magazine journalist.

"Not really. But I've met him a lot of times already. At malapit din lang sa *Sinag*'yung isa sa hotels nila. But all in all, you probably know more about him than I do."

Well, that's not true. She knew a *lot* about Nico. Pero tingin niya, hindi ang uri ng impormasyon na alam niya ang kailangan nina Stefan para sa magazine article nito. Duda siya kung gustong malaman ng lalaki ang

underwear size ni Nicolò mula sixteen years old hanggang sa kasalukuyan.

“Mukhang handa na kayong magbukas ang *Sinag*, ah,” komento ni Jay habang inililibot ang tingin sa kanyang opisina.

She smiled as she looked around her office as well.

Nakasabit sa likod ng kanyang desk ang isang malaking hanging quilt na may disenyonang geometric patterns na nakahugis sa anyo ng Binurog point. On a console table near the desk, wood arts depicting various endemic animals such as Philippine brown deer and Catanduanes bleeding heart were on display.

Marami ring throw pillows na nakabalot sa handmade quilt sa inuupuan nilang abaca sofa sa tapat ng desk. She had capiz lamps on side tables and a three-tier chandelier made of sea shells dripping from the ceiling.

The coffee table and sidetables were made out of tree stumps, and her desk was a long irregular slab of wood with a twisted leg resembling a tree's trunk and roots.

An abaca sculpture of a naked woman stood on a corner pedestal table, its ivory strands glowing like moonlight in the morning sun streaming through the windows. She had a mask on her face, a slight curve on her full lips. *Haliya*, the masked moon goddess of precolonial Bicol.

Sa kabilang dako ng desk ay ang discussion area kung saan may mahabang kahoy na mesa at may mahabang bangko sa magkabilang bahagi niyon.

“More or less,” sagot niya. “Pero marami pa kaming pieces na hinihintay. We can do the interview here tomorrow, if you like.”

Tumango si Stefan. "Yes, your office is perfect."

Dumating si Sara dala-dala ang inumin at balisungsong.

A few minutes later, they were on their way to the abaca farm in the northern part of San Andres.

Sa passenger's seat, patuloy sa pagkuha ng video si Jay sa mga nadadaan nilang tanawin habang patuloy sa pakikipagkuwentuhan si Stefan sa tabi niya sa backseat ng four-wheel drive.

"So wala ka pa ring masyadong napupuntahan dito sa Catanduanes mula nang dumating ka?" untag ng lalaki.

Umuga ang sasakyan dahil sa lubak ng kalsada, at isinuksok ng dalaga sa likod ng tainga ang ilang hibla ng buhok na tumabing sa kanyang pisngi. "Strictly for vacation and sightseeing, no. But I've been to different areas here several times in the last ten years, meeting local artists. Then, I had more trips these last three months to get more pieces for *Sinag*. But I never got the chance to just look around and enjoy the place."

"Then, maybe you should come join us tomorrow and the day after that. Balak naming pumunta ng *Puraran Beach* at d'un sa *Green Lagoon*. Pupunta rin kami sa *Binurog Point*."

"We'll see. I still have a lot to do in *Sinag*. But we could have lunch tomorrow at my parents' restaurant after the interview. Hindi kayo p'wedeng umalis dito nang hindi nakakapunta d'on."

Tumawa ang lalaki. "Okay."

Huminto sila sa entrance ng farm sa may paanan ng burol. Matapos i-check ang identification nila, dumerecho sila sa malapit na building kung saan naroon ang opisina

ni Arturo Manalastas, ang officer-in-charge sa farm.

Tingin ni Deborah, kasing-edad ng tatay niya ang lalaki. Maaliwalas at mainit din ang ngiti nito. Hindi ito katangkaran, kayumanggi ang balat at katamtaman ang pangangatawan. Nakasuot ito ng pantalon at pulang shirt na may logo ng farm.

“Welcome dito sa *Jaucian Farm*,” nakangiting bati sa kanila ng matanda pagkatapos ng pagpapakilala. “Mabuti at hindi umulan kahapon kaya hindi maputik sa daan. ‘Eto si Karding,” pakilala nito sa isang may-edad na lalaki na kasama nito. “Siya ang magde-demo sa inyo ng unang stages ng pagproseso ng abaca fiber.”

Nakasuot din ng uniform si Mang Karding, pero mahaba ang manggas niyon at gawa sa cotton ang itim nitong pantalon.

“P’unta na tayo?” aya ni Mang Arturo matapos nilang makipagkamay kay Mang Karding.

Tumango sila at sumunod sa lalaki palabas ng opisina. Sumakay ulit sila sa isang four-wheel drive para bagtasin ang malubak na daan.

“N’ung isang araw pa kami nagsimulang mag-ani ng abaca,” saad pa ni Mang Arturo. “Pero nagtira talaga kami ng mga anim para sa inyo,” nakangiti nitong dagdag.

Tumawa sila.

“Salamat, Sir,” saad ni Stefan.

“ ‘Mang Arturo’ na lang. Ang abaca, kapag unang itinanim ’yan, maghihintay ka muna ng mga labinwalong buwan hanggang dalawang taon bago mo p’wedeng anihin. Tapos, mga tatlo hanggang apat na buwan ulit bago mo tatagpasin. Mga labinlimang taon ang buhay ng isang puno ng abaca. O, dito na tayo.”

Bumaba sila sa malubak at madamong kalupaan sa bukana ng isang gubat. Matatayog ang iba't ibang puno sa paligid at malamig ang hangin.

“Gaano katagal na po kayo rito, Mang Arturo?”

“Simula n’ung binili ito ni Sir Nico. Pero bago pa ’yon, dito na talaga kami kumukuha ng abaca.”

“So abaca farm po talaga ito n’ung una pa?”

Tumango ang matanda at nagsimula silang maglakad papasok sa gubat. Nadaanan nila ang ilang putol na puno ng abaca kung saan ugat lang ang natira. Napansin niyang wala ring mga damo sa paligid.

“Yung mahigit one thousand hectares dito, sa pamilya talaga ni Sir n’ung una pa lang,” kuwento ni Mang Arturo. “Matagal nang kanila ’yon, sa mga ninuno pa nila. Yung five hundred ang kailan lang nabili, mga eleven years pa lang. Gubat ito noon at parte ng rainforest, pero hindi ganito kalago. Tapos, ginawa na lang agricultural land. Matumal din ang abaca farming noon dahil sa kakulangan ng kagamitan. N’ung nabili ’to ni Sir, sinimulan niya ang reforestation.” Huminto ang matanda sa tabi ng isang puno ng abaca. “O, eto, p’wede ’to.”

Gamit ang isang makurbang patalim na nakakabit sa mahabang kahoy, tinagpas ni Mang Karding ang mga dahon sa tuktok ng puno.

“Topping ang tawag dito,” paliwanag ng matanda. “Tatagpasin ’yang mga dahon gamit ang sungkit.”

Lumagaslas ang mga dahon pagbagsak sa lupa. Pagkatapos, ginamit ng matanda ang mahabang itak para tagain ang ibabang bahagi ng puno.

“Ito ang tinatawag na tumbling,” patuloy ni Mang Arturo. “Malalaman mong p’wede nang anihin ang abaca

kapag lumabas na 'yung flag leaf niya, o bago lumabas 'yung bud ng bulaklak kagaya nito. Puputulin mo itong abaca hanggang sa dulong bahagi, ititira mo lang 'yung ugat. Mga tatlong pulgada mula sa ibaba. Tutubo ulit 'yan pagkatapos ng mga tatlo hanggang walong buwan."

Bumagsak ang puno ng abaca sa lupa.

"Kapag anihan, siyempre maraming puno ang aanihin," patuloy ng OIC. "Pagsasama-samahin 'yon sa isang lugar, 'tapos doon sisimulang balatan, o 'yung tuxying."

Tinaga ni Manong Karding ang lima pang puno ng abaca na malapit sa kanila at pinagsama-sama iyon sa isang bakanteng bahagi ng lupa. Gamit ang isang kutsilyo, sinimulang balatan ng lalaki ang isang mahabang puno.

"Makikita n'yo 'yung outer part, brown ang kulay niyan. 'Yung gitna medyo light green o parang ube, 'yung pinakaloob ang puti." Malawak na ngumiti ang matanda sa kanila. "Kami ang may pinakamagandang grade ng abaca dito sa Catanduanes, hindi pagmamayabang."

"Ay, totoo 'yan," segunda ni Mang Karding.

Tumango si Mang Arturo. "Una, organic kami rito; hindi gumagamit ng mga pesticide, puro natural na paraaan lang sa pest at disease control management. Derecho rin kami sa grading at balling, kami ang may pinakamataas na klase ng abaca fiber hindi lang sa Catanduanes o Pilipinas, sa buong mundo pa. Dahil kay Sir, moderno na ang pag-extract namin ng fiber sa abaca, kaya mas mabilis, at mas maganda ang fiber na nakukuha."

"Sa 'tin kumukuha ng abaca 'yung kotse, di ba?" untag ni Mang Karding habang patuloy sa pagbabalat ng abaca.

"Ay, oo. Limang taon nang sa 'min kumukuha ng

abaca ang *Chrysler*. Ginagamit nila sa mga *Mercedes Benz* ang abaca ngayon para sa lining ng kotse. Kasing-tibay daw ng fiberglass ang abaca.”

“Kayo po ang supplier ng *Chrysler*?” manghang tanong ni Stefan.

“Ay, oo! Kasi nga, amin ang pinakamaganda.”

“Pero hindi po ba parang may masamang epekto rin ’yon sa ibang abaca farmers?” kunot-noong usisa ni Deborah.

Gulat na napatingin sa kanya ang matanda.

Napatigil din tuloy ang dalaga. *Shoot*. Gusto niyang tampalin ang noo. Why couldn’t she keep her mouth shut sometimes? In moments like this, she blamed Tita Precie. The old bat had obliterated her social filters. “Ibig kong sabihin, ano po...”

“Go ahead, Deborah, say what you want to say.”

Parang bumugso ang kuryente sa gulugod niya nang marinig ang mababang boses ni Nicolò sa kanyang likuran.

“Sir!” Lumiwanag ang mukha ni Mang Arturo at agad sinalubong ang binata. Ganoon din ang ginawa ng dalawang kasama.

Deborah clucked her tongue. They had to stop meeting like this.

“Mister Jaucian—”

“Nico’s fine,” putol ng lalaki sa journalist. “Stefan Cabrera?”

“Yes, and this is my videographer, Jay Santos.”

Humarap siya sa mga ito sakto para makitang nakikipagkamay si Nico sa dalawa.

The cowboy was back, or was it more appropriate to

call him farmer? Cowboys were for cattles and horses, the guy was all about forest and trees. Nakasuot muli ng lumang kamiseta, pantalon, at maputik na work boots ang binata. A day-old scruff roughened his angular jaw, his hair slightly tousled.

Nagtaas ng tingin ang binata at nagtama ang kanilang mga paningin. The smile on his sculpted mouth faded, a cool look taking over his face.

“Deborah,” magalang nitong bati.

Hello to you, too, tall, dark and icy. “Hello, Nico. Sumama lang ako kina Stefan para tingnan ang proseso ng pag-extract ng abaca fiber.”

Muling tumango ang binata at binalingan ang mga kasama niya. “My meeting got cancelled this morning, so I decided to come here early.”

Just her luck. Kaya lang siya sumama ay dahil alam niyang wala roon si Nico. Dapat ay mamaya pang hapon ang interview ng mga ito sa binata.

Malawak na ngumiti ang journalist. “That’s kind of you, we appreciate it.”

“We can do the formal interview in the office later, but you can ask me what you want now.” Itinaas ulit ni Nico ang tingin sa kanya. “What was your question a while ago, Deborah?”

Question? What question?

Inosente siyang ngumiti. “It’s nothing, don’t mind me.”

“You were asking about how what we’re doing here might have some negative effects to other abaca farmers.” Walang question mark sa dulo ng pangungusap ng binata.

Gusto niyang itirik ang mga mata. Siyempre hindi

nito hahayaang makalusot siya. Inasahan na niya dapat iyon.

She might as well take the plunge now. “It’s wonderful and admirable what you’re doing here,” matapat niyang saad. “You’re pouring money into the modernization of abaca processing here in the farm, and you’re doing your best to promote sustainable development to help both farmers and the land. Kayo ang nangunguna sa abaca industry dahil d’on. Marami kang taong nabigyan ng trabaho at natulungan dahil sa business na ’to.”

Napatitig siya sa malawak na kagubatan. Maraming klase ng hardwood trees doon. Iyon iyong tipo ng mga puno na aabutin ng dalawang dekada bago mapakinabangan. Still, it meant the farm had other sources of income aside from abaca.

“Pero hindi ba ibig sabihin din noon, mas profitable ang farm n’yo kaysa sa mga small-time farmers na walang sapat na tulong pinansyal?”

Ibinalik niya ang paningin sa binata. Mataman pa rin itong nakatitig sa kanya, pero hindi niya mabasa ang ekspresyon nito.

Again, nothing new there.

“And well, hindi ba ang isang thrust ng government sa mga lugar na kagaya nito ay ang tulungan ang maliliit na magsasaka na umunlad? At marami sa kanila, sa abaca lang talaga umaasa.”

She remembered reading a report on abaca farming some years back about the government’s goal to give one hectare of land to one farmer as part of a poverty alleviation program.

“But of course,” matabang niyang patuloy, “the

government doesn't give sufficient financial and technical support to all the farmers for various reasons. Kaya kumpara sa farm na 'to na may sapat na technical expertise at machineries, dehado ang maliliit na magsasaka at hindi kayang makipagkumpetensya. Pero gets ko na mali ang pinagbubuntunan ko ng sisi. Hindi ko kayo dapat sisihin sa kakulangan ng gobyerno—"

"No, I get what you're saying." Tumango ang lalaki at inilibot din ang tingin sa gubat. "Dahil may sapat kaming pera, teknolohiya at kaalaman sa farm na 'to, kami ang nangunguna. At nadedehado ang maliliit na magsasaka—"

"Pero, Sir, hindi naman natin kasalanan—"

"Mang Arturo, Deborah has a point. Sa huli, isa pa ring pribadong korporasyon ang *Jaucian Farm*, at mayroon tayong resources na wala ang mga ordinaryong magsasaka kahit pa may tulong silang natatanggap galing sa gobyerno." Ibinalik ni Nicolò ang titig sa kanya, walang bahid ng ngiti ang mga labi. "I do accept that. This farm, despite all its environmental and socio-economic focus to help farmers, is still a business endeavor directed to gain profit. And in this competition, other small farmers are losing—"

"Pero, Sir," protesta ni Mang Arturo, "nagdo-donate din kayo sa mga universities dito at sa Los Baños! Ginagawa n'yo'yon para makahanap sila ng strain ng abaca na mataas ang yield at kayang labanan ang BBT virus. Kapag nagkagan'on, hindi lang tayo ang makikinabang kundi pati ibang mga magsasaka."

"Oo nga, Sir," segunda ni Mang Karding habang patuloy sa pagbabalat ng abaca at paghihiwalay ng mga leafsheat. "Nag-sponsor din kayo sa pagbibigay ng mga

bagong sucklers sa ibang magsasaka na napeste ng BBTB ang mga taniman. Ginagawa n'yo naman ang lahat para maging mas malakas ang industriya ng abaca. Pero siyempre, hindi ninyo kayang gawin lahat."

Great job, Deborah. Take a bow. Clap, clap, clap. That would teach her to shut up.

"I agree with you, Mang Karding, Mang Arturo," ani Deborah. "Pasensya na po, hindi ko napag-isipan ang tanong ko, at obviously, marami akong hindi alam na impormasyon—"

"Stop that," Nicolò barked, his eyes hard with warning. "Your question is valid, and I want that in the article." Bumaling ang titig nito kay Stefan. "Let's not romanticize this farm. This is still business. And there will be winners and losers. One day, we might be able to fully equalize the playing field for everyone in this industry, but for now, we are dominating because we have the resources at our disposal. We are winning, and small farmers are losing. That's a fact, and let's not sugarcoat it."

Walang gatol na tumango si Stefan. "We won't, and we will include that."

"It doesn't follow that you can't talk about the other good qualities of this farm. At marami itong magandang qualities."

Tumawa ang magazine journalist at umiling kay Nico. Kahit siya ay tumaas din ang sulok ng labi. Nakita niyang tuluyang gumaan ang tension sa mga balikat nina Manong Arturo at Mang Karding.

Nice save, Nico. Gusto niya itong tapikin sa balikat. Now, she should remember to keep her mouth shut.

Itinuon ulit ng binata ang tingin sa gubat. "Nasabi na

ba ni Mang Arturo na organic ang farm na 'to?"

Tumango si Stefan. "Natural daw ang lahat ng ginagawa n'yo para sa pest at disease control management."

"We encourage natural enemies of virus vectors and diligently implement rigorous inspections to ensure the health of the trees. Pati fertilizer na ginagamit namin ay organic. It's labor intensive, but it's worth it. Tingin ng iba hindi kailangang maging organic ang abaca dahil hindi naman kinakain. Pero ang daming produkto na ginagamitan ng abaca na may kinalaman sa pagkain o na maaaring maipasok sa katawan ng tao. Tea bags, mga cups, casing ng sausages, surgical masks, even skin care. Kung may nakakalasong insecticides o iba pang kemikal sa mga 'yon, napupunta rin 'yon sa katawan ng tao. We are truly organic. Kahit green label insecticide hindi kami gumagamit."

Napasipol si Stefan sa pagkamangha.

Kahit siya ay parang gusto ring pumalakpak. In fairness, barring his iciness, her granny might just be correct. Mukhang perfect ang binata. Beauty with a purpose ang arrive.

Natapos sa pagbabalat ng abaca si Mang Karding at pinagsama-sama ang magkakaparehong leafsheat at itinali. Agad na tumulong sina Mang Arturo at Nico. Lumapit sila para sana tumulong din, pero umiling ang una.

"Kaya na namin 'to," saad ni Mang Arturo.

Pinanood niya ang pagsampa ni Nico ng mga tuxies sa balikat nito, pinanood ang pagkislit ng matitigas nitong kalamnan sa braso sa pag-aayos ng leafsheats. He's practically carrying an equivalent to about three abaca

tree, and from the easy way he moved, he was used to it.

Kapwa nagsampa rin ng abaca tuxies sa balikat sina Mang Karding at Mang Arturo.

“Kapag maraming ani,” kuwento ng matanda, “mayroon kaming kabayo para dalhin sa mga truck ang mga tuxies sa bukana ng gubat.”

Nagsimula silang maglakad pabalik sa sasakyan.

“Malapit ba rito ang protected watershed forest reserve?” usisa ni Stefan habang naglalakad sila.

Tumango si Nicolò. “Sa tingin ko, alam n’yo na na ang Catanduanes ang may pinakamalawak na natitirang kagubatan sa rehiyon. Pero sa halos seventy thousand hectares na kagubatan, twenty-six thousand lang ang nakatalagang protected area ng *CWFR*. Unti-unti pang lumiliit dahil sa maling paggamit ng lupa.”

“Dapat nga raw gagawing subdivision ’to kung hindi mo nabili,” komento ng journalist.

“May maliit na abaca farm na talaga kami katabi nito, kaya naisip ko, bakit hindi pa namin palakihin? Ang maganda sa abaca, maaari itong gamiting crop para sa integration ng rainforestation farming system. Puwedeng itanim ang abaca sa pagitan ng matataas na puno dahil kailangan din niya ng pananggalang sa bagyo at araw. Nagkakar’on ng mapagkukunan ng kita ang mga magsasaka kahit sa mga kagubatan nang hindi pumuputol ng ibang puno.”

“Hindi raw ganito kalago noon ’yung mga puno rito n’ung binili mo ’yung lupa?”

“Makakalbo na halos. Agricultural land na ang classification nito noon, at balak pa nga nilang gawing commercial.”

“Mabuti nabili ni Sir bago naging commercial at naging subdivision,” hirit ni Mang Karding.

“Actually, hindi talaga binili ang lupa na ’to,” komento ni Nico. “Alienable land ito ng public domain at hindi p’wedeng bilhin ng isang korporasyon. P’wede lang i-lease nang hindi hihigit sa twenty-five years, at puwedeng i-renew nang hindi hihigit sa twenty-five years pa ulit.”

“Yung five hundred ang alienable land ng public domain, o pati ’yung one thousand hectares na sa pamilya n’yo, alienable ng public domain din?” paglinaw ni Stefan.

“Yung five hundred. Private property ng pamilya namin ’yung iba noon pa. It went all the way back to our Spanish ancestors.”

“So ’yung private property ninyo, taniman na rin ’yon ng abaca noon pa?”

“Around only twenty hectares, yes. Pero napabayaan na rin. N’ung ako na ang namamahala, doon kami nagtanim ulit. It’s mostly a timber farm, mga hardwood trees gaya ng narra at molave. We recognize the need for reforestation. Hangga’t maaari, ang mga itinanim namin ay ’yung talagang nabubuhay sa kagubatang ’to. Mas sustainable ang farming system kapag gan’on.”

Nakarating sila sa sasakyan at ibinaba nina Nico ang mga tuxies sa bed ng pickup truck.

Hinarap ng binata ang mga kasama saka tumaas ang sulok ng mga labi. He looked so comfortable as he stood there, a smudge of dirt staining the shoulder of his shirt, his jaw rugged, the sun and wind on his warm skin and hair.

“At talagang gusto kong palaguin ang industriya ng abaca rito sa ’min.” Magaang na tinapik ng binata ang

maputing tuxy ng abaca. “Isa ang Catanduanes sa laging hinahampas ng bagyo sa bansa, pero gusto kong isipin na para kaming abaca. Matitibay ang hibla namin at hindi basta-basta napapatid.”

Humalakhak si Mang Karding at hinampas sa balikat ang binata. “Bumabanat ka, Sir, ha!”

Ngumisi si Nicolò. “Isama n’yo rin ’yon sa article.”

“Ang dami mong demand, Sir, ha,” tumatawang hirit ni Jay.

Lumapad ang ngisi ng lalaki, pero napalingon ito sa kanya at nagtama ang kanilang mga mata. At para bang abaca na nabilad sa masidhing init ng araw, natuyot ang ngiti nito. Naging pormal ang ekspresyon ng binata at agad bumaling sa mga kasama.

Tsk. Dear Nickie. Couldn’t he be more obvious?

“Dalhin na natin ’to sa factory para makita n’yo ang ibang stages sa pagproseso ng fiber.” Humakbang ang binata sa truck nito na nakaparada sa likod ng pickup nila at sumakay doon.

If anybody noticed how Nico turned snow king when he looked at her, they did not say anything. *Props to them*, she thought. Obviously, hindi kagaya niya, may social filter ang mga ito.

Well, it’s not like Nico’s reaction was new to her, she thought wriily.