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The Snake

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### Publication Date

2014

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
RIVERSIDE

The Snake

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Kimberly Villanueva Gomez-Fraser

June 2014

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The Thesis of Kimberly Villanueva Gomez-Fraser is approved:

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## Acknowledgements

My sincere gratitude to my professors and mentors in the UC Riverside Palm Desert MFA Low Residency creative writing program, especially my committee members, Mark Haskell Smith, Tod Goldberg, for their insightful guidance regarding this project. Many thanks to my professors: Mary Yukari Waters, David Ulin and Emily Rapp, and Agam Patel for all that you do. I am grateful for the many friends and community I have made in the program. Simona, Ely, Karen and Dorothy, I'm so lucky to count you as friends.

Thanks to Veronica for your support in so many ways. And to Kevin, and my parents, Vita and Barry for all that you do.

This story is about brothers and sisters, and couldn't have been written without the inspiration around me. Thanks to Gordy, Kenny and Maria, Randolph, Michelle and John, and my chosen sibs: Vickie, Jules, Tal, Alison, Shannette, Rudy J, Rochelle, among many dear friends, who make my world a wild and wondrous place. I want to thank my many aunts and uncles, cousins, nieces and nephews who enrich my life, and my father, Basilio; and my grandparents, John and Alejandra, who remain in my heart.

For Katy and Alek, your laughter and love are my greatest inspiration.

## Chapter 1

### The Snake

The pastor is screwing my pretty young wife. His scent lingers on her well after he is gone. I smell him when she kneels by my bedside at night to pray that I never awaken.

“Ariceli,” he says to her. “You are so devoted,” he says. “God loves a pious woman.” He lays a hand on her shoulder and draws her up to him. And she surrenders herself. Even as he praises her piety, he defiles what’s mine, right at my bedside. They feel safe doing this because I haven’t opened my eyes for a month.

But now I don’t just smell them, I have been watching them. I can see them because I am *kakambal*. I am separated from my body. Only I can’t go far. I am imprisoned, watching this going on over and around my shrunken body. And I hear them. They all talk about me as if I am already dead.

While Father Ezequiel sits at my table and eats my food, sweet reverent Ariceli fasts, and waits for him. And after having drunk my wine, and blessing my baby girl at bedtime, he comes to Ariceli here in our bedroom. Father Ezequiel lifts her modest dress, and takes her. She likes it by the open window, behind the sheer curtains. The onshore breeze sends shivers down her lithe limbs. It is an arousing sight, my beautiful wife with her expensive gigolo.

Father Ezequiel is only doing his duty. It is an inherited commission set forth centuries ago, since the Spaniards conquered our archipelago, all in the name of their God. Old Spanish friars seduced our maidens barely in their teens, giving birth to a new upper class of Mestizos. Before that, the Chinese traded here and intermarried with our women and diluted our blood. Then the Americans took over and stayed another century, racializing and exploiting our people. And then the Japanese. The Philippines hasn't belonged to itself for centuries.

I can smell Father Ezequiel even before I hear his footsteps. Expensive Japanese designer cologne. There is ginger, sandalwood, mandarin orange, lemongrass, anise, starched cassock, and asshole. He expects his scent to precede him, and to linger. Lately, his essence poisons my dreams.

"... Hail Mary mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death..." I hear his baritone leading among the prayer voices. I can't figure out if this is a special day. Maybe a dozen or more – more than usual – are gathered in my room, clicking their rosary beads, and murmuring sibilant responses in unison. My wife says a Novena every evening. A Novena is supposed to be prayer for nine days, but it's been three times that. And yet she is the one ordering the doctor to keep me in this coma. They are poisoning me with this drip line to my body. I have come close to leaving this world, only they won't let me, yet.

"As his wife, how am I not the sole benefactor of his estate?" Ariceli asks.

"According to his trust you get none of it," says her lawyer.



“Who then? Not his brother?” There is fear in Ariceli’s voice.

“No, Leonardo is not a beneficiary. It all goes to his children,” says the lawyer.

“Then my baby,” she says.

“His grown children are executors.”

“But they are American.”

“That is also disputable,” he hesitates. “Apparently, they are dual citizens.”

“Impossible,” says my brother-in-law, Georgie. Until he spoke, I didn’t even know he was here.

“Your claim to his estate is not sound. If he dies, when he dies, it is out of your hands,” said the lawyer.

“SUSMARYOSEP!” I hear her fall to her knees in all her drama. “Then we must wake him now, before it is too late, and make him change his will.”

“It is too risky,” says Georgie. “No. There is another way.”

Most days, the nurse leaves the radio on when no one is visiting. American rock music drifts in and fills the emptiness that is my life. I never liked Bob Dylan’s singing, but his words wring my heart.

*No, there’s nothin’ you can send me, my own true love...*

*Just carry yourself back to me unspoiled...*

I am not so old, but I am tired. The year of the snake has always been bad for me. Each cycle brought me children, but I've been unlucky. This time, when I needed strength, my heart gave out. But my last baby, Calyx, was born a snake and it is good. She has given me new life.

In the mornings, my baby girl visits me. They stay with me for a while every day. I don't think anyone else knows they come. Calyx lays her face on my chest and plays with the *anting anting* I still wear around my neck. It is a snake, my *naga*. It protects my treasures. Her *yaya*, Mari, she is not Catholic. She appeared when my baby girl was born and stayed. I suspect she was sent down from the Cordilleras by the *mumbaki*, my mentor, to look after both of us, my baby and me. Mari cleans my face and hands with pure water and oils. She burns joss stick and hums and chants. My baby, Calyx, she chants, too, with her sweet cheek pressed to mine.

The *yaya*'s powers are strong. She is the one who set my spirit free. She must have known that I was straining against the barriers. I wanted so much to see my Calyx that I rose up above us all. When I looked down, I saw myself holding her. My shriveled body was holding my baby. I was barely breathing for myself, but I was crying. The tears from my eyes sealed our faces together. My heart knows my treasure. My body guards it, even when my soul has separated. My purest love is to my children. I must honor and protect that above all else.

"Kiss your daddy," Mari says. I watch my baby girl kiss my cheek before they leave me. And I go back to my body and wait.

Saint Peter's young pastor comes every night to comfort Ariceli. He and his followers are praying for my full recovery, all while Ariceli directs the doctor to keep me sedated. Father Ezequiel neglects his parish for me, their prized benefactor. My family's blood was spilled erecting the stone for that church in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. My father imported the bell that sounds in the tower, from Italy. It rings every hour. Its reach connects our lands to the town and helps me keep time in this monotony. Saint Peter's is the oldest church in the Philippines. My family paid to rebuild it twice. After the church and convent were collapsed to rubble in WWII, my father returned to lead the reconstruction. And again after the earthquake in 1989, my father rebuilt it as reward for my safe return. Ariceli was another reward from the church. She was my only Catholic marriage.

The church, Father Ezequiel, my wife, and her brother, they all want what's here. My legacy isn't this home and these lands. There is very little in the provinces that matter to me. What's truly mine is scattered and protected, in the mountains, across the sea. I never wanted this for my children. I didn't want them surrounded by covetous vermin. I did what my family would never do for me. I set my oldest, Alejandra and Benicio Junior free. No ties, no demands. I am proud of them, and I would leave them be, but not now. Now, it is I, who needs them. I wonder where they are. I wonder how easy it would be to go to them.

All my energy is focused on keeping my *hininga* connected with my body, or my body will die. I have been stuck here, joined to my shriveled, broken body. But my soul

belongs to me. My daughter. My son. They will safeguard our family treasure. Our blood will not be wasted, again. They must come to me. Everybody has a price to pay.

## Chapter 2

### The Stud

Torchlight from D'mall dropped off somewhere before the tide began. The ambient glow reflected the shiny slick of blood on Beni J's own fingers visible from the corner of his eye. The one he could open, that is.

*Mr. Tantoco, How many fingers am I holding up?*

His dinner heaved up, involuntarily trickling out sideways next to his cheek. It was absorbed into the sand, except for what looked like a hefty hunk of seafood buffet he'd eaten that he could see without turning his head at all.

*Passageways are clear... You've been hurt, Please remain still...*

He wasn't sure he could turn his head, and wasn't ready to try. He advised himself to stay awake.

*Is the patient having difficulty concentrating?*

"Maybe," thought Beni J. "I'll have to keep that under observation."

Laughter and whispers rumbled into his consciousness. Bassy Disco music pounded low from a nearby club.

*Hearing is clear...*

Alternately, he heard someone spitting something out, and soft footfalls on the packed sand walkway that led to D'Mall.

*Is the patient experiencing any emotional symptoms?*

“I should be pissed off,” he thought. Tears gathered in his eyes. “But... I’ll have to get back to you on that.”

*Pain report on a scale of 0 to 10 with 10 being the greatest?*

“Zero. Nothing.”

He thought this was his most positive vital sign. Feeling nothing was new to Beni J. It came to him after he’d drifted to the island of Boracay. He was drawn to the Philippines to connect with family but as far as he knew, he didn’t have any in the southern islands who were *Visayan*. They were so different. In Manila, it was always “Yes sir!” just because they didn’t want to disappoint. Here, it’s ‘*bahala na*,’ leave it to fate. Only to Beni J, it seemed Visayans loved being depended upon only to return with a withering look that said, “maybe I will, maybe I won’t.” Bahala na. Like approaching a feral cat, Boracay locals challenged you with long held gazes. Leave it to fate, meant power.

It’s just as well he lay there alone while he was weak. Maybe someone would help him, maybe they wouldn’t. Bahala na.

Being dumped within earshot of D'Mall was some comfort. It was the hub of the island, everything happened here. The transactions that attracted world-class drifters took place in the palm shadows surrounding D'mall. Inside the concrete structure built to withstand typhoons were \$1 pints of rum, malaria pills, and the karaoke bars filled with old horny white guys – ex-military – that never got enough Asian. But up against the palm trees, with trunks worn smooth, were wet, cheap girls getting guys off for close to nothing. 200P – roughly five bucks and a promise to send for them when they got back home was enough. Weed? Ecstasy? No problem. Even the hotel maids sold it for commission. *Shabu*, the local recipe for crystal meth, had a clean high if you're open to a serious escape. Beni J had lost a few months on Shabu and by the end of his binge, Boracay, off the Sibuyan Sea, wherever that was, really was the last place on the planet for him. High on a cocktail of self-prescribed substances, his true essence was revealed. He was past the fear of rejection, past disappointment even. The over-bearing need of his inner soul gave way to nothing. And that was finally enough. Maybe you'll get what you want, maybe you won't. Bahala na.

The crunch of exoskeleton beneath his cheek released a waft of dead crab stench. The tide had receded rapidly in the hours he lay there. He could make out a rare stray dog with distended nipples licking down the soft innards of something dead with a grateful whimper. The persistent wet lapping sent a cold shiver through him. He drew his tongue back between his broken lips and tasted salt and grit. An easterly began to blow in a light horizontal rain. Beni J blinked the mist into his eyes and drifted off.

“Move!” the gravelly voice said. The patch of sunlight reflecting on the quartz and coral sand was blinding.

A line of barefoot hotel workers, in saggy yellow polo shirts and pants cut off just above the knees, were policing the resort. At double arm’s length apart, each was responsible for picking up any debris carried in by overnight winds or tide. The white beach didn’t stay pristine without cheap labor. Beni J shifted into a seated position.

Down the beach, he heard distant shouts of vendors carrying baskets of hot roasted chicken. "*Lechon manok!*"

He assessed his damage. No cuts so deep that they didn’t tentatively close over night. *Good thing*, because he hadn’t completed his mental triage, and not many around him would give a shit if he’d bled to death. The fishy smelling t-shirt he wore wasn’t his. They must have forced it over him along with the loose ragged swim shorts he had on. It probably would have looked too suspicious to carry him down the strand completely naked after they stole his clothes.

Beni J winced when he stuck his fingers in his mouth and ran them along the soft gums inside his pulpy cheek. He tasted a flush of fresh blood, but he seemed to still have all of his teeth. He gave a slight tug along his back molar line and out popped a gold stud earring. They couldn’t beat everything out of him. His ear still stung a little from when one of the thugs’ boot heels almost kicked his lobe off. It took a lot of effort, but he’d managed to slip the stud off his ear, suck it from his bloody fingers, and hide it under his tongue.



Beni J examined the slight curve of the stubby snake with a ruby eye before sticking it back through his ear piercing and securing the post with a tight turn.

*Can't lose this.* And then Beni J began weeping. He couldn't stop. Messy tears running with mucus from his nostrils. He hated himself for crying. The ear stud was the only thing he still had from his father. He felt pathetic that he clung to it. As it rattled and settled into his mouth last night, he had even felt his father was with him. And he was ashamed to think of his father seeing him that way. He just couldn't get far enough away. He should have been invisible, but on an eroding strand, where neighboring islands were only visible in low tide, he still felt his father's presence. It prodded at him, and judged him. This pissed him off. And he let anger and disgust push his need aside. It always did.

"Move, bastard!" Urged one of the beachcombers who were no longer willing to pick litter around him.

"That's right, I'm a bastard, and I'm moving!" Beni J grunted upright and, after a careful glance in either direction for the gangster fucks that put him there, staggered heavily out into the foamy low tide.

He sucked his breath in with a shudder at the sting of cool salt water to his wounds. Let the healing begin.

## Chapter 3

### The Jewel

*If I'm going to do this, it has to be flawless.* She was way too early. Too much time for her nerves to spiral. Aly thought about closing the door to the office, but it was a common space shared by all of the adjunct professors of the Anthropology/Archaeology Department. She had no idea how many there were like her. Visiting scholars, or contingent employees that taught a class or two here, and at any other college they could cobble together. There wasn't a desk, just a conference table with a Dixie cup and a bottle of Fiji water in the middle of it. And an envelope. The couple of chairs askew showed that the office had recently been occupied, but usually no belongings were left behind. Protocol was to leave the impersonal, drab, windowless room as you found it. There wasn't even a trashcan.

"Hey. Are you okay?" At first, Aly didn't hear the receptionist standing in the doorway. She was the pudgy one with a silver hoop pierced through her lip.

"Yes, thank you, just taking a minute," said Aly.

"I understand. I knew you were coming in so I left those for you." The receptionist nodded to the arrangement on the table. "Dr. Cohen said you might want that before the lecture."

“Thanks,” Aly nodded. She reached for the water. There was a Xanax tablet in the cup. Jacob Cohen was looking out for her. That’s what Jacob did. Jacob didn’t want Aly to embarrass herself in front of hundreds. He wanted her to succeed. That way they could collaborate on projects. Publish and research together. He even wanted her to join a fencing club together. *He wants to own me.*

She picked up the envelope addressed to “Dr. Alejandra Tantoco, Biology Professor.” The address was printed by hand. It was a letter. Lightweight. Red and blue angled hatch marks along the edges. Airmail. The kind she thought people stopped using about a million years ago. It was postmarked Philippines, but Aly found no return address. Was she not supposed to know who sent it? The Philippines postmark was foreboding enough. It even smelled musty, as if it had come a long way. She slid a finger under the flap and tore it open at the seam.

It was all legal sounding. Dry and inhuman. She had always thought her brother would come around. That there would be apologies and amends. But this seemed to be the opposite. It wasn’t personal, actually. This was, *Let’s just be honest that we won’t have anything to do with each other, and leave it at that.*

*Dear Alejandra Tantoco,*

*This letter requires you to relinquish legal responsibility for Benicio Tantoco. It has been determined by a court of competent jurisdiction that:*

*Alejandra Tantoco has no claim as executor or as trustee for Benicio Tantoco.*

*Alejandra Tantoco, is unfit to serve as executor or administrator...*

It went on. The letter relieved one of her curiosities. Her brother was in the Philippines. That should have been a comfort. And yet, opening it, she felt a renewed sense of obligation. *I still have a brother*, Aly thought. *At one time, I was his legal guardian, but that time has passed.* Aly assumed this was a notice that he was ready to move on.

She wished she hadn't opened it before her lecture. She needed to be focusing on herself. But then, her brother was never very thoughtful, even if he couldn't have known when and how she'd receive it. It threw off her balance. The letter was asking her to sign away responsibilities. Only, it wasn't indicating what, exactly, she was signing away, or what responsibilities she had.

Up until now there was always a possibility of reconciliation. Initially, she thought her brother might come back with his tail between his legs. And she'd still help him out, somehow. After a few years passed, she imagined that maybe he would come back on his terms, but with an understanding that they still had something. That they can still be there for each other if they needed to be. He was her only connection to her family.

Why ask her to sign over rights to any future when they essentially didn't have any connection left? At least that's how it had been for five years. What exactly had changed that they needed legal boundaries? That was the part Aly didn't get. He had his life and she, hers, and they have gotten along fine on their own. It felt too overboard not to be in reaction to something else. Or was he telling her that what he really needed was for her to let go? *If this is what he needs, then I am here.*

She laid the letter flat and took a picture with her iPhone to text it to Barry. He was her best friend and a lawyer. He practiced entertainment law, so it wasn't his area, but Barry had opinions about everything.

The receptionist looked in to see if the white pill was gone. She nodded toward the letter.

"That came interoffice mail. Apparently, it had been bouncing around Biology for a while before it got here," said the receptionist. *She is checking up on me, as I'm sure Jacob asked her to do.* Aly couldn't remember her name. She wasn't sure if she needed to, since she hadn't yet decided if she was sticking around.

"You have a few minutes before you should head down," said the receptionist.

"Thanks. But I'm ready," said Aly. *They are waiting for me.*

"Our past is written in the earth. Right beneath your feet if you really want to capture it. There are many archaeological sites in the world that have yet to be explored. Archaeology allows us to rediscover who we are, where we came from, and where we're going." Aly said to the crowd in Haines Hall. *So what am I doing here?*

For years Jacob had been trying to get Aly into the lecture hall. He accused her repeated refusals as a symptom of avoidance behavior. But Aly knew it wasn't that. It was avoidance, yes, but not out of fear or actually experiencing panic. Rather, she had been avoiding the truth between her and Jacob. She'd been ignoring the fact that his comfortable life in academia sickened her. He was out there now, somewhere in the

darkened lecture hall. Or perhaps he was standing behind her. Observing her with a proprietary air. Taking credit for her work by proxy, because he'd reeled her into the university.

When they'd met in Syria, he was a passionate 36-year old head of an archeological field team. Aly was a master's student with her own paintbrush and four-inch trowel. Jacob had a portable X-ray fluorescence spectrometer on his belt that said he was in charge. They were clawing at each other by the time the first campfire dimmed. They lacked discretion. They lacked restraint. It would have been considered inappropriate if her tent mate and pretty much everyone else on the dig hadn't been doing the same with each other at one time or another. It was what all the summer interns did. The combination of the heat and the hard desperation of limited time made each dig a self-contained escape from reality. Aly would remember the first sexual experience with Jacob for the smell of arid soil, Jacob's sweat, and her own unquenchable thirst.

That was 12 years ago. Jacob was ambitious and went on to lead some of the most distinguished archaeological teams in the world. But now his field experience was receding like his hairline. He eventually took the top position of UCLA's acclaimed Anthropology department. Within it, he was building a world-renown archaeology school.

Their long-distance relationship and admiration for each other's work had always kept a steady fire burning between them. Lately, the separation between personal and professional had been narrowing. She'd noticed the backhanded compliments and vague slights began the day she came to the university as a visiting scholar.

“I hate her,” He laughed in front of colleagues on a recent night out. And with mock envy he pointed out to others that with the political climate closing access in the Middle East, Aly had lucked into the history books and bested them all.

Now that she saw him on a daily basis, she noticed that he was getting soft around the middle and didn't move like he used to. It was as if he was standing still. The last time he'd been a principle on a dig was so long ago, they never even shortlisted him anymore. His attempts to control her research was making her feel protective of her intellectual property, something she had never expected to happen between them. And once she'd let those feelings creep in, they'd bloomed to a fecund distrust.

Aly chose transnationalism as the topic for her lecture. It had been her most profound discovery. She'd been leading her own expedition in ancient Mesopotamia when they unearthed clay tablets that were written in several languages. They turned out to be receipts, and some personal letters. Not the Gnostic Gospels, but they were evidence of sharing common religion and languages across political boundaries.

Transnationalism, or what people today called globalization, was first institutionalized in the earliest civilizations. Traders and scholars, bureaucrats, and soldiers, moved with remarkable ease over a large part of the world. And no matter how far migrants went, they all had to pay with their allegiance to the homeland.

She thought that the students could relate to feeling owned. And perhaps it was a personal message to Jacob that she, herself, owned her actions. It was her world and she wanted to continue on without him. Her expertise. She wasn't selling out.

Transnationalism created empires. But allegiance couldn't just be economic. There had to be something more. Aly was fascinated that someone, a host country, a lover, a family, could possess one so completely that they'd pledge their lives even when distanced by time and geography. The more she studied it, the more elusive the concept was to her.

She had a father. But he abandoned her, following his own transnationalism, she assumed. Then there was her little brother, Beni J. They hadn't gotten close until their father had taken off, actually. He had just left without an explanation. It was Beni J who told her when he was gone, and that he feared their father was gone for good.

She hadn't wanted Beni J to face what kind of man their father was, is. She was afraid that their father set a bad example for Beni J. He was a guy that couldn't follow the rules, not even for his kids.

Aly followed the rules. She was here, wasn't she? Lecturing. Even though she doubted whether it benefitted her at all. Aly heard the singsong patter in her own voice slow. Maybe it was the Xanax, but she felt herself take a few steps away from her body and she liked what she saw. From this removed perspective, she watched the awe illuminated in the students' faces. It was moving for Aly, too. The room fell silent as the slideshow played her most significant work before her eyes. She'd do anything to be back



there right now. The visuals brought the texture of excavation to her dry mouth. It made standing in front of the classroom feel small and irrelevant.

“From my last Christmas break. I was part of an archaeological team sent by the Pentagon to mark out precious spots. This was so that U.S. smart bombs don’t mistakenly hit archaeological treasure troves,” Aly said. She’d coveted the government contract. As long as there was government funding there was real archaeological work for her, not classrooms. But war hit home for her on this assignment. She was devastated.

“Most people don't understand how important Iraq is in world heritage. The whole country is in Ancient Mesopotamia. What we found was massive destruction of six or seven thousand-year-old treasures from our earliest civilizations.”

“The sacking of the Iraq Museum in Baghdad was also accompanied by looting of archaeological sites. Robbers dug the equivalent of 3,700 acres of holes across the region. Who knows what significant artifacts are now scattered?”

“Ancient history,” someone from the audience called out amid subdued laughter.

“Too true,” Aly said. The heckle, while good-natured, forced Aly to end on an off-key note.

The lights came up making Aly feel exposed. She looked the part of professor in a long cashmere cardigan and fitted black skirt. But self-consciousness was overpowering the Xanax. Any lack of connection to students was a personal failure in her eyes. Before her, she saw entitled students in flip-flops and shorts, pajamas even. She was no different

from them. She hadn't enough interest in sharing, when she was really just out for herself.

“Question, if I may address... Professor, Tantoco?” came a voice from the audience.

“Doctor Tantoco. Yes, go ahead.” The sound of notebooks reopening could be heard over the faint whine of the projector fan.

“Need we go so far back to see examples of such exported labor? Doesn't this transnationalism, as you describe it, exist in modern economies such as our native Philippines?”

Aly eyed the smoothed-skinned student, pausing a long moment while considering the question.

“You make strong presumptions, sir, about my origins,” said Aly. She smiled to soften her defensive tone.

“My apologies, Doctor Tantoco, if I am mistaken.”

“In fact, my family has a rich ancestry from many continents,” Aly took a long breath before directing a response to the rest of the class. “As an institution, the system I'm speaking of is what drove the spread of religion, multi-national political units, and long distance trade. Understand that transnationalism, translated to power.

“While it is true there are economies—the Philippines for one,” she nodded towards the student, “Vietnam and Bolivia are other examples—exported labor is a more

recent system to boost their economies and create a legitimate option for an unemployed workforce.”

She politely nodded to the questioner. “Oftentimes, migrants under these circumstances stay on permanently and eventually neglect allegiance to their country of origin. For most, transnationalism, beyond just a recognition of ancestry, is lost within a generation.”

## Chapter 4

Georgie approaches. The footsteps are lighter this time, no cologne, but sweat, and the bitter vapors of liquor expelling from his breath. He would never have dared come in my presence if I were awake. The safety of my unconsciousness has brought the vipers out of hiding.

“What if I unplug this?” He tugs at my tubes and taps the screen of my heart rate monitor. An alarm sounds. The hastened footsteps of the nurse attendant draw near.

“Don’t touch that,” says the nurse. The alarm quiets as the cables are reconnected. Georgie is an idiot bastard.

Ariceli’s prayers grow louder. She will not be deterred from completing her Rosary—her second today. Georgie paces, waiting for her to finish. He is never patient with Ariceli’s praying.

“You sent the documents to the daughter?” he asks.

“Yes, but no response,” Ariceli whispers. Her voice is still hushed, as if in prayer.

“No response is good,” he says. “She’s waiving her rights either way.”

“What about him, the son?” asks Ariceli.

“Ah, Junior. We found him.”

“But will his Uncle Leonardo protect him?”

“He isn’t with Leonardo anymore, or that *sipsip* Lucas,” he sucks through his teeth. “He is too easy. He will disappear, soon.”

“What should I do until then?”

“Keep the old man alive just a little while longer.”

I am running out of time. I can go to them, my children, but if I travel too far, too long, my body will die. My kakambal becomes a *kaluluwa*. A ghost. If they kill me while I spirit journey, then, I am kaluluwa, anyway. A soul without a body. Maybe that is better. My ghost will never rest until it has done my bidding.

I watch as my brother-in-law departs. His fancy Spanish boots, of Spanish leather, clack on the ceramic floor. I will surely kill him when I come back.

## Chapter 5

“Dr. Tantoco, if I may,” the Filipino student who had questioned Aly during her lecture was waiting outside. Aly wasn’t comfortable dealing with students even in the proper setting. She’d wanted to slip out unnoticed.

Aly suppressed a sigh. “I don’t have office hours this afternoon.”

“I’m sorry if I was presumptuous,” he said, following her up the center staircase in Haines Hall to the third floor Anthropology Department offices. The student fell in step with Aly’s longer strides.

“I may have found your comments to be overly general, but no apology is necessary,” said Aly.

She was unsure if his reverence was sincere. At least his question had regarded her material. She found the many students, who took up her time blathering on about their own experiences, disingenuous. Aly wondered whether he was a student. Not only did he appear older than he had in the lecture hall, but he was dressed in a buttoned down Oxford shirt— tucked in, no less—and pants that reached all the way to his loafers.

“But aren’t you one of the Tantoco Export family of the Philippines. I was sure your uncle is the *Taipan* Leonardo Tantoco.”

“*Taipan*. Like the snake?” she repeated, considering the word.

“Referring to successful rich businessmen of Chinese descent like your uncle.”

“My father was from the Philippines, this is true.” Aly said. “If Leonardo Tantoco is my uncle, we’ve never met.” Aly took the stairs two and a time, not bothering to slow down for him.

“There are two brothers, Leonardo and Benicio, that split the family businesses. Your father is Benicio, if I’m not mistaken.” Aly strode toward a doorway where “Anthropology Department,” was lettered on a drop box to the right. He wasn’t mistaken. Her father was that Benicio and she had an Uncle Leonardo in the Philippines. It unnerved her that this stranger knew her personal information. She hardly wanted to be the object of some creepy nationalist digging up her family history.

“I’m sorry,” Mr.?” Aly turned her attention back to the student. In the harsh fluorescent lighting of the hallway, his tweezed eyebrows formed a look of innocence that was incongruent with the guile in his eyes.

“Lucas Ongpin,” he said.

Aly couldn’t help noticing the subtle contouring at his cheekbones. *He’s wearing more makeup than me.*

“I’m really not sure. Perhaps, but as I said, I’m not in contact with family from Southeast Asia. A shame, I know,” she said. She turned toward the door.

“The Tantocos own multi-national companies. They are very influential not just in Southeast Asia. We should talk more.”

Aly narrowed her eyes, gripping the door handle. She had no intention of meeting with this man. But she defaulted to proper professor-to-student decorum.

“Here is where we part. I have office hours, yes, but only if you wish to discuss matters regarding my lecture subject, specifically. Good luck with your studies.”

Ongpin stepped closer and drew in the air around her with a satisfied smile. She shook his extended hand, finding his grip, delicate. He held her hand longer than she’d wanted.

“The ties of blood are both a burden and a blessing,” said Ongpin. “Your uncle is a very powerful man. Surely he has yet to appreciate the worthiness of his own niece.”

Aly was grateful to escape to the drab adjunct office-slash-meeting room. Hearing her father’s name was jarring. Between that unsettling little fellow and the letter about her brother, her world seemed to be swarming with family. She specifically preferred not to think of her father. It only dredged up feelings of disgust.

Aly wondered if her father knew that Beni J’s mother was terminally ill when he left. She would live only another 20 months, or so. And then Beni J was left with no one, but her. It wouldn’t surprise her if her father had made his selfish choices despite orphaning his son. He had done the same to her, after all. It was something her father had never acknowledged, nor apologized for. He just floated back into her periphery while she was in boarding school. There were calls, at first. He sent her a picture of Beni J, after he was born. Occasional visits, and seminal moments, but her father was not a legitimate



presence, really. He was like sand between her toes that constantly reminded her of where she stood. Since then, the memory of him ground into her skin. She didn't forgive her father for leaving her to carry the burden of her little brother.

*Take care of your brother*, were the last words her father had spoken to her. He'd taken her aside at her graduation. She'd expected congratulatory words. Something recognizing her achievement. But she should have braced herself for disappointment. She hadn't been up to creating a family. She'd never felt a part of one.

Beni J wasn't a burden, really. She did what her mother had done with her. She sent him away. He dug in and finished his studies, just like Aly expected of him. She knew he made it a point of always needing less than she offered. And she was grateful for that. Like her, he learned that to be successful you followed the rules. She gave Beni J just enough so that he didn't give up. He was a survivor. At times, she could sense his loneliness, but she looked the other way. Just as she ignored a part of her that wanted to run and take care of only herself. No one had been there for her through the years. It was all she could do to bury the impulse to leave Beni J.

Aly remembered waiting, just like him. It was as if she was always waiting to be noticed. She was fed, but always hungry. She wasn't cold, but she never felt fully sheltered. Her needs were met before she knew what to ask for. Her mother's side of the family had taken care of that. The family trust put her through school. By design, it was only enough to do something, but not enough to do nothing. The trust decided what she needed. But a trust is a cold nanny. It was enough to supply a means of support, but not nearly enough to help her feel safe. No one had ever held her. She'd stopped waiting.

Beni J got the same as she did, she made sure of it. If she hadn't been given warmth, than neither would he.

She found it touching when Beni J followed in her footsteps to Berkeley, but he was too immature to handle the load. She turned her back when he dropped out. Her brother had failed.

Once Beni J stopped following the rules, and started asking more from her, he shattered the veneer of their relationship. *Couldn't he just figure out that it was all she had to give, nothing more?* It was a system that had worked in her mother's family for generations, handed down at arm's length. Only Beni J and she shared a father, not a mother. She admired his independence, somewhat, but she wouldn't reward his dissidence. He would follow the rules or be on his own.

She was waiting now. In a way, she had been hoping for another chance with Beni J. She'd paid her dues those years watching after him. Maybe they could have been friends without the family obligation. She wouldn't interfere in Beni J's life even if she were still in contact with him. The letter to release her as trustee was a surprise, and then, not really. *Beni J was a grown man*, she told herself. *It was a just formality.*

Aly's phone was rattling on the table next to her. An old snapshot of Aly with Barry as undergrads lit up her iPhone screen. One of the reasons she was willing to come to Los Angeles at all was that he was in town.

"You're sure your brother is in the Philippines?" he asked.

"It makes sense." Aly pulled out her laptop and Googled: Benicio Tantoco. "He

needed time to figure things out.” If the letter satisfied some of her curiosity about him, the rest had always been there for her to look up at any time. But prying into her brother’s life, or her family without the invitation made her feel like an intruder, and ultimately more alone.

“Yeah, so the attorney, this J. Batugo in Manila, is also saying if he’s found incompetent to run his own life you don’t have any rights. You’re not a Filipino citizen, I presume. Or are you?”

“I am. My father was, and naturalized me when I was born.”

“Okay, I didn’t know that. So dual-citizenship. What else have you hidden from me through the years? Then there’s a potential you could be somehow responsible for something in the Philippines.”

“I’m thinking I should sign this. I don’t want responsibility over my brother’s affairs,” said Aly.

“Why would you sign that? If the lawyer is coming to you saying you need to sign away your brother, he could be representing someone else. Anyway, there should be a Quid pro quo, meaning there has to be some explanation for them to want you to relinquish responsibility.”

“Point taken,” said Aly.

“You don’t have contact with your brother and they – whoever J. Batugo represents – are taking the trust or estate or whatever it is you don’t know about,” he paused briefly. “And, presumably, they are taking responsibility of your brother, to that end. Whatever they do in the Philippines. It doesn’t make sense.”

Google found 7,840 hits on Benicio Tantoco, Philippines. Scrolling down the list, Aly only needed one. The website had animated sparkly triggerfish appearing through watery bubbles. “Boracay Diving School,” and “Aquaboy,” alternated in the banner at the top of the screen. Under the heading, “Aquaboy Instructors,” was a grinning browned-skin young man with one hand on his hip, and the other flexing a neon colored air tank on his shoulder. Impossibly blue water surrounded his wooden boat. The guy was wearing wraparound sunglasses. She hadn’t seen him for a few years, but it was her brother, Beni J.

“I don’t,” Aly started, “I don’t understand why the legalities. I was wondering if it was symbolic. Maybe he’s securing his assets.”

“Maybe. Or if your brother is in trouble and they need you to sign any possible rights so they can give him care or treatment, that’s a good thing. But that’s up to you. I get that. He’s what? 24, 25? He’s got his own thing going on. There are some options there. Then again, it’s practically a ransom note. Expats are kidnapped all the time in those islands. It’s a business. So you ought to see for yourself if it’s fraud.” As usual, Barry was bringing up more than she wanted to consider.

“Do you know what’s at stake?” he asked. “Because if they are asking you to sign over your rights it sounds like he’s an executor to a trust. And trusts have assets.”

There were a lot questions about the letter, but Aly hadn’t wanted to dig much deeper. What was at stake, she supposed, was the possibility of reconciling with her brother. But as far as any trust, just because the Tantocos had never given her anything didn’t mean she didn’t want anything.

“There are some things that belonged to my grandfather. Personal items,” said Aly. It was the one thing from the Tantoco family she felt was rightly hers. It was her grandfather’s World War II chest. Aly had never stopped hoping for it since her father talked about it when she was a little girl. Maybe now, through this letter, she could finally gain access to it. Lolo’s war chest would hold his journal, maps, and medals. It wasn’t just personal. As an anthropologist, an artifact like this was priceless.

“Those people saved your Lolo,” her father had whispered at bedtime. It was her favorite story. One that she asked her father to repeat, often, until she knew what he would say before he even said it. “He owed them his life. He loved them. Your Lolo knew the only way to keep them safe was to never tell anybody about them. He did keep in contact, but they didn’t need anything from him. He said, they were perfect people, like children. Everything they needed they had in their caves going far back into the mountains. Lolo said they were the first people in the Philippines. *Negrito*. Short, curly hair, like your dolls, only dark skin, like Africans. Like the Aborigines in Australia. I met

one. Your Lolo said he came from the mountains. But Lolo brought him back. I never saw him again.”

Aly hadn't thought about it for years. She was no longer certain of its existence. But even just her grandfather's journal was invaluable. It would chart his progress through Japanese-occupied territory during the war and document his contact with the remote tribe. She'd always wanted to retrace his steps. She believed it could lead to the discovery of an undisturbed civilization. It was the reason why she became an anthropologist in the first place.

“Yeah. Now's the time to consider all that. The window of opportunity closes when you sign this letter,” said Barry. “And there's a time limit stated here that's like, now. But you only just got it so there's some wrangling there—and even tougher to do from here.”

“Seriously? You think I'll need to go to the Philippines?”

“I'll call around for you. But you need someone working for you over there. Especially if there's something you want out of the deal.”

“Oh yes. I want it.” Lolo's war chest was worth fighting for.

“So... Jacob,” said Barry. “You done with that yet?”

“Don't be crude,” said Aly, but she was smiling.

“You know what they say, *archaeologists will date any old thing.*”

“Maybe, I don't know.” She wasn't ready to proclaim anything, just yet.

“Why don’t you take a walk on the wild side?”

“Like what? Feel like a trip to the Philippines?” Aly asked.

“Shit no. Think: industry Christmas parties. I’ve been shuffling my invitations. I think I can deal you a couple if you’d ever come out of your cave.”

## Chapter 6

Jacob kissed her neck, his hand slipping under her panties and stroking her, from her hips down her thigh.

Aly was recalling a time when they were together in the southern Kenya Great Rift Valley. Salty efflorescent grit clung to every surface of their bodies because they hadn't bathed in weeks. The residual heat radiated through the tent floor at night. She'd taken to spending nights in the pit just for the coolness of the clay loam.

She shouldn't be sleeping with Jacob tonight, but talking to each other would only unleash the inevitable. She turned to bare her back and the rest of her, teasing a slower pace out of him. Jacob gripped her waist and pulled her to him, slipping her bra over her breasts. She opened her eyes to see the gleam of the top of his head nuzzling her chest, his tongue searching out her nipples in the half-light.

Aly had always known what she wanted to do. But during that brutal stretch in the hundred-degree heat she felt she could walk away. She was working in the pit, waiting to tell Jacob that she was quitting. Then something caught her eye. It was a tiny bead made from an ostrich eggshell. Evidence of humanity's creative and cultural beginnings. This artifact, that hadn't been held in tens of thousands of years, dated back to man's early social awareness of how to attract one another.



Jacob's hands trailed over her skin. She shivered at his melting kisses moving past her navel and going down. "Mmn," she found the involuntary sounds escaping her, arousing.

"Turn over," he urged with a whisper. Rolling to her right, she glanced at the digital clock.

From that point, it had been a matter of personal excellence and dedication. *And a willingness to go it alone if she had to.* Aly still lived for moments like that bead. Not the lecture hall. It would never be that. She knew it more after he'd cornered her in his office.

"We'll get you doing tandem research with an American Archeological Institutes team in Iraq. Satellite hookup. You'll never have to leave Los Angeles. And you'll be paid through them—it avoids the conflict of interest thing—but has all the comforts of a tenured gig." Jacob wasn't helping her career as much as he liked to believe he was.

The grant offer, collaborating on projects. He wasn't expanding her boundaries, he was locking her down. And he was just arrogant enough to think she didn't know it.

"Take this off," Aly pulled at the waistband of Jacob's boxers. He unfolded the full length of his body alongside her.

She waited for him to command, *open your eyes*, which is what he always asked before he entered her. Even if she wasn't madly in love with Jacob, she'd always savored

his predictability. But he delayed so long, she realized, this time, he wouldn't. She felt his breath, millimeters from her skin. His touch seemed to be studying, memorizing. Maybe he wouldn't ask because he was afraid of what he might see reflected back. That right now, she felt more alone here than she could ever feel in a remote ancient ruin. She took him in with her eyes tightly shut. She'd remember the ceiling fan cooling the air around them. She tasted his tears.

Aly rolled away from a dozing Jacob. *He should be leaving soon.* She hadn't agreed for him to stay the night.

It was early afternoon in Manila. Aly left another message for the attorney, J. Batugo, but suspected it was only an answering service. She wasn't able to find anything more than a directory listing online.

Aly pulled up the Boracay Diving School website on her laptop, again, clicking on "Aquaboy Instructors" for another look. She scrolled down the page, clicked on the contact icon and sent an email. She made a call to one of the numbers and left a message. Calling the second number, she got someone.

"I'm trying to reach Beni J Tantoco."

"He's not here." Aly could hear a motor roaring in the background.

"Do you know where I can reach him?"

“Dunno. He’s hasn’t been in. Didn’t come yesterday. Didn’t come in today.” Aly heard his rising irritation. “Couple of days now. I haven’t seen him. You got a complaint, get in line.”

“Can I leave a number if you see him?”

“No, Lady. You can leave a comment for our boss on the website.”

A few more days like this and she’d lose all leverage for her grandfather’s personal effects. She was feeling anxious. There was too much at stake. She’d wait to hear from Barry to see if he could find someone in the Philippines to extend the time constraints of the document, but she intended to secure Lolo’s war chest before she signed anything. Of course, she’d hold off relinquishing any rights until she was sure there wasn’t fraud, as Barry had urged. Then there was the possibility that Beni J wouldn’t want to talk to her.

*What are you up to, Beni J?*

## Chapter 7

Beni J floated and swam along the shoreline to where a few straggling lean-to bars gave way to high-walled private compounds. Out of the surf, he let the sun evaporate the droplets of seawater on his bare skin. By the time he made it to the paved road, to thumb a ride the rest of the way, he was almost dry.

The dive yesterday was costly. Pretty much as soon as they'd gotten out beyond the reef there was hella downpour, and they had to speed the divers back to shore. It had been dicey out there, and he couldn't see shit. His boat tipped. The other bangkas pulled in his customers, but he dumped a lot of gear. He figured Amo Boy would make him replace what he couldn't recover. It was like he would never get out of this hole. What seemed like a good gig had him barely making it. *So much for paying off debts to Uncle, or anyone else.*

It was bullshit they were out there to begin with, but those Australian diver fucks like to push people around. So he was hitting it pretty hard last night. Bahala na. Maybe it was time to move on.

He remembered some customers came into the bar later into the evening. Which was surprising since usually only local divers drank there. They'd acted like they knew him, but it wasn't until they jibed him that he recognized them from the failed dive trip earlier. He'd felt pretty hammered by then, and waved them off from buying him a drink.

He remembered the Australians surrounding him. It was like the whole place turned on him without him noticing. He didn't know a body in there. No locals. And they were fucked up pretty bad, knocking him and each other around. He swung a few punches to get them really going at each other before ducking under the bar, and sneaking out the kitchen entrance.

*That's when it got ugly,* remembered Beni J.

"Sssst," Beni J heard a low hiss from the darkness. Palms rustled on either side of him, but he couldn't see anyone.

"Ooy," Beni J responded into the shadows. The adrenaline rush from the bar brawl was cramping in his joints. He wanted to lean on something, but he was out in the open, and there was nothing but potted palms and hard packed sand. He shifted in his rubber slippers. Definitely more than one person was out there. A trickle of sweat ran down his neck. Four of them stepped forward in skinny jeans and black tees. They looked like a boy band from Manila.

"*Cumpadre*, you don't want to go in there," said Beni J. He tried to keep it low key while he weighed his options. He could break free through the hedges, but they'd catch him on the open beach.

"You don't go in there, *cumpadre*." The guys in the back crowded the front man. Beni J couldn't make out their faces in the shadows, but they weren't from Boracay. He'd know.

“I got a better place where the girls will take good care of you. My boss, Boy Igcasan, you know Amo Boy, yeh? He’ll set you up, good.”

Beni J cracked a smile and pulled his cigarettes from his shirt pocket. He shook one loose and clamped it between his lips. He offered the pack to the front man, who stepped forward into the torchlight. He was short, but his arms were ripped. And he probably didn’t smoke, Beni J guessed, based on his reaction. A forward kick knocked the cigarettes from Beni J’s hand. A roundhouse heel to the jaw knocked Beni J’s cigarette from his mouth. One of the others caught Beni J before he hit the ground. He held up Beni J’s tense body for the worst of it as they took turns. If Beni J had been sober, he would have been awake for most of the beating. He’d gratefully passed out.

Beni J waved down a tricycle driver he’d seen around the island a few times. He didn’t have any cash, but Puka beach, named for the abundance of the tiny white shells used to make jewelry, was a regular stop on the island, and he’d give him a lift.

Why was he alive? Beni J wondered. Those thugs weren’t from Boracay, and they weren’t Visayan, the accent was wrong. From their clothes they could have been from Manila, but up until now, no one had cared where he was. Maybe they wanted him dead. If so, they should have killed him first before dumping him. If they had been local, they might have known that the tides last night were pulling out, not in. Instead of drowning in the surf, they left him to sleep it off. Still, they didn’t kill him, which told Beni J they

either held back out of respect, or they were pussies that couldn't finish the job. He'd gotten lazy.

*Next time, I'll be ready.* Anyone from Manila would have to get the okay from his Uncle Leonardo to mess him up. That's just out of courtesy. And it makes sense that if they were sent by his uncle, they'd know not to kill him. They can't collect from the dead. He hadn't heard from anyone since he left Manila, but maybe his uncle was calling on his debt. If so, he was showing his impatience. He knew Uncle Leonardo would be pissed that he took off, but he was family.

Sometime after he'd stopped running from anyone that might have been looking for him, Beni J had marooned himself on Boracay's north end to live away from D'Mall and its vices. Here, he got away from the underside of paradise. Puka Beach was also the last remaining stand on Earth for the *Ati* tribe, Boracay's original inhabitants. Long before a film crew stumbled upon Boracay, *Negrito* people of the *Aklan* Province freely roamed the entire island, shifting from one beach shore to another, depending on the season and abundance of the natural resources. Resorts developed in the 1970's encircled the island and squeezed the natives to this one spot. Beni J took Puka Beach for himself.

He was all-in at the *Ati-Atihan* pagan festival. Beni J swigged San Miguel beer and White Castle whiskey, arm-in-arm with grimy, naked men. He blackened his face with soot and danced with old ladies in sarongs. Young *colegialas*, lay themselves before him, as their fathers in miniskirts and their mothers in elaborate headdresses shouted in approval. The tribe still practiced Animism, and openly worshipped their pagan *anito* gods. Spanish missionaries had all but crushed the deities from existence on the rest of

the Philippine islands, but only on the surface. He later learned there was a loyal following of ancient worship practices. Beni J didn't get into the voodoo-like *kulam*, but not being Christian, or even Buddhist like his mother was, he found himself neutral to religion and open to something epic. Something bigger than the life he'd been leading.

Beni J rented a cottage from Liwliwa, one of Puka Beach's prominent residents. The cottage had housed her elderly mother before she'd passed only weeks before. Liwliwa warned him to expect visitations as her mother's *kaluluwa* traveled between the living and the dead. He was cool with that, too, and even asked the deceased for her blessing every night under the stars. He figured he had divine guidance, because he eventually sobered up, and cut out the hard stuff. None of his crowd from D'Mall followed him out to Puka Beach, and after a while, he stopped hanging out as much. He gained the trust of the locals and they treated him like he was native.

He finally got to feeling like he belonged here. And up until last night, he thought that was good. But he knew he was still running. And now all who had trusted him—Liwliwa foremost on his mind—seemed at risk along with him. He felt cornered.

Liwliwa always had visitors from early in the morning into late at night. Beni J figured she probably didn't need it, but he watched out for her when he was around. And though he worked most of the day and came in at odd hours, he began sharing meals with her. He'd wanted her. He was enticed by her modesty and sensuality. He liked her scent,



and her lissome form wrapped in deep hued cloths. When she laughed, she tossed back her ropy ebony hair. The skin on her throat was like oiled acacia wood.

At least 20 years older than Beni J, she was flattered that he noticed her at all. Liwliwa was a *babaylan* as her negrito mother had been, part psychologist, part herbalist and healer—a shaman. She called him the young doctor. She was the only one on the island that had squeezed this personal information out of him. Now, he was her student in the *kapwa*, the Filipino self in the other.

“It begins with the souls and spirits from each human being,” she told him over a bottle of San Miguel in the early evening half-light. “It goes all the way to an entire world of spirits where every rock, tree, and animal, could potentially harm you, or bless you.”

“Yeah,” he said. He could wrap his head around that concept.

“This movement towards harmony can be called *pagbabalikloob*. It’s like a conversion, a change of heart, or returning to one’s heart-home. *Loob* itself means Filipino personhood, or inner self.”

Isn’t that why he was here, in a sense? This gorgeous medicine woman understood him. Of course, Liwliwa had become more than a spiritual leader, she’d used a powerful *anting-anting* to charm him into bed. It wouldn’t have taken dark magic. And for the better part of the following year they’d followed a ritual of their own making. They lay together folded into her batik bedding with burning joss stick permeating the air. She’d practiced what he’d think of as animism, all right, and he converted.

“*Landa*, is your path, *katuwiran*, how you conduct yourself.” Liwliwa cajoled him in a lazy whisper after a particularly aggressive exchange of lovemaking. “You’ll know when you find your *kapwa*, when you are still standing when others crumble, carrying on after everyone has fallen – this way leads to *liwanag*. *Katuwirang landa* is your journey to your light.”

Kneeling over his outstretched body, she traced her slender fingers along the contours of his torso and tasted him in the flickering candlelight.

“Your journey is only beginning.”

“To where?” He clenched his jaw at her touch, willing himself not to move.

“Ssss,” she hissed.

“What’s better than here, with you?” His teasing left her smoldering, only he didn’t know this until she sat back on her heels and brushed back her dampened hair from her face.

“No more. You’re getting soft.” Her words shamed him. He turned onto his stomach to avoid her gaze. She was so beautiful, but his body had gone limp realizing that he had crossed her Visayan spirit. Lately, she’d been acting kinda done with him.

She’d often alluded to being only one of his tributary paths—a concept that dismayed him. It was true he didn’t think he would grow old here. She wasn’t even his only lover, but he’d come to depend on her and her intoxicating spirituality. Bahala na. Her distance mocked him, sneered at him for being shortsighted. The tension made for restless sleep. He awakened with a jolt.

“Ssst,” Liwliwa soothed. She was at his side, her fingertips smoothing the cold sweat on his brow. He was embarrassed at his erection.

“I was dreaming,” he said.

“I know. It was your father, again, No?”

“It was,” he said. “I’m afraid he might be in trouble. In my dream, he wanted something from me, I think.”

“It was a visitation, not a dream,” she whispered. “A visitation is more than a dream.”

“Is he dead?” Beni J asked.

“If he’s dead, you would know.”

“That’s too easy. Please just tell me.”

“When a person passes on, they are no longer in pain. They do not care about your circumstances.”

Beni J rolled his eyes. Liwliwa reached for Beni J and turned his face back to her.

“Listen. I’m telling you. A spirit does not want. They don't want you to finish going to school. All of those issues are now on your side. The person in spirit doesn't care that they had a life-long feud with you. The spirit doesn't care that you betrayed them.”

“Why then?” Beni J was hurt. He felt that she was mocking him. She was using everything he had ever told her about his relationship with his father and throwing it all back in his face.

“He came to you in your dream because you are closer to him there. But your daddy wants something. He’s not just stopping by to say, *I love you*. He wants you to come to him.”

“And you know this because...?” Beni J asked.

“Your daddy has been visiting me. He found you through me.”

“Have you seen him?”

“He is surrounded by something very powerful,” Liwliwa whispered. “Very bad, very powerful. That’s what I can see. You must go to him.”

Beni J was more awake now. Thinking about the last time he saw his father. He had been pretty clear, then, that he didn’t want Beni J in his life.

“You’ve got to want to do it and then you have to stop with the yearning,” said Liwliwa.

“I’m not,” Beni J said. “I haven’t contacted him or needed him for years.”

Liwliwa gave him a withering look before lying beside him.

“So, you want something, too. Just like him. And wanting and wanting and wanting isn’t going to bring you to him. Wanting deeply and then surrendering completely the want is what will finally make it happen. You’ll see.”

As the tricycle slowed, Beni J saw Liwliwa talking to two uniformed police officers with very big guns. Although unarmed, Liwliwa appeared more powerful than the two cops as she stood before her home. From within the shaded protection of the

motorized tricycle, he could see the damage to his little-used cottage set behind Liwliwa's concrete bungalow. It looked as if most of his belongings were strewn on the pathway leading to his door, which itself had been half yanked off its hinges.

Liwliwa barely reacted as the tricycle approached, but a suggestion in her eyes, boring into Beni J's, motioned for him to continue past. He instinctually understood the path she was suggesting. It was time for him to go.

"Keep driving," Beni J tapped the driver's back.

## Chapter 8

“I’d like a connection to Boracay Island, please.”

When Aly landed in Manila, she’d intended to head directly to the attorney, J. Batugo’s office. She’d left messages to that effect. She also had a number to a lawyer in Manila to call—referred by Barry—to help represent her. But when she approached the ground transport counter, her ulterior plans surprised her. She hadn’t known how much she wanted to see Beni J. And she was finally close enough to make that happen.

There was little indication to Aly that she was actually in the Philippines. She couldn’t see outside. Most of the international terminal was being renovated, squeezing all arriving passengers through makeshift corridors. The temporary walls did little to contain the jackhammer dust and clamor, or the burnt welding smell in the air. Plastered on the construction panels were an endless string of advertisements for skin whitening creams. Models with blond highlights and slightly Asian eyes. From the White-American looking faces of their entertainers and pop idols, Aly could see the Philippines was alienated from its own identity. Western corporations capitalized on lingering feelings of inferiority.

This wasn’t the only country she’d visited with colonial mentality still in full force. How many times had she received deferential treatment as an American? She expected no less here. And Aly was a poster child for the Filipino mestizo ideal. Light

skin from her mom, light eyes, high and wide cheekbones. Colonial mentality maintained that white, and western was intrinsically superior. In fact, her work in archaeology and anthropology depended on it. Jacob, had taught her how best to exploit countries while ostensibly promoting their culture. Back then, Jacob was masterful. Bureaucrats were too willing to negotiate away their ancient treasures. He used to squirrel away priceless relics on the grounds that the local inhabitants were unfit to act as their curators. There were few luxurious circumstances in archaeology. Accumulating a few appurtenances and keepsakes—considered by some to be unethical—came with the territory. Aly revered Jacob's influence, and admired his self-indulgence mixing profit with discovery. It turned her on. The reminder of which gave her pause. If Jacob still had it in him, he would be an important asset in the acquisitions she hoped to make here.

The recent discovery of the Callao Man in the Philippines intensified her anticipation of something significant left to find. The Callao Man was one bone, a Homo sapiens bone, though that was still disputed. The discovery of the single foot bone pushed back the timeline of human settlement in the Philippines. They were able to determine that the Callao man arrived by raft or boat dating back almost 70,000 years.

Maybe she had romanticized the value of her grandfather's war chest. But there were undisturbed tribes throughout every continent. Take the pre-Neolithic Sentinelese who, somehow, survived the 2004 tsunami and recently, viciously, showered two fishermen with arrows, after they had accidentally drifted to their shores. And drone video has turned worldwide attention to the Peru-Brazil border where un-contacted

indigenous people live. With pressure to protect these lost civilizations, it promised no end to private and government funding alike.

She wasn't about to completely let go of Jacob but in the time it took to put an ocean between them, Aly felt power shifting to her. She listened to a message he'd left. One of the long-winded, one-sided conversations he tended to post to stay connected whenever she was away.

"I don't get your need to go there. This is just like you not to think things through and to put yourself at risk," said Jacob. And he didn't stop there. "I know this is less about undiscovered tribes, than your brother. I take it that's why you're so distracted. This is a bad call, Aly. Any number of fucked up things can happen digging into this." It may have been intended as thoughtful warnings of caution, but Aly heard his desperation more than anything else.

Getting on that plane to the Philippines was the first time that Aly had made a decision, and acted upon it, without first getting Jacob's approval. She'd have to remember to call him and cancel Christmas together.

The Ninoy Aquino International Airport in Manila, named after political martyr and once rival of Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos, was experiencing all reasons to have been named the world's worst airport. Of course it was the week of Christmas, with a million overseas workers coming home. They were returning as heroes with *balikbayan* boxes filled with American toilet paper, chocolates, Levis and canned meat. Vacationers, too, coming to take advantage of the favorable exchange rate, crush through the gates.



But there was a more urgent reason for the shutdown of airport shuttles stranding travelers from continuing their journeys. It happened that a Philippine mayor from a southern province, his wife, and baby grandson were gunned down somewhere in the airport earlier that day.

“Just like Ninoy!” Aly heard the marooned travelers murmuring as they slumped atop their cardboard boxes. They were noting the grisly crime’s shocking parallel to the demise of the airport’s namesake, Ninoy Aquino. Upon returning from exile in the U.S. decades before, Aquino was shot in the head just outside his aircraft. The chilling assassination had started the People’s Power crusade that thrust Aquino’s wife, Corazon, into power. While standing in line with other distraught travelers, Aly had time to Google that bit of history and even watch some of the news footage. By the time she’d found someone to talk to, being American, mestizo, or otherwise, gained her no preferential treatment.

“Well, if you're in a hurry, Ma’am, and can't wait for the shuttle bus, you can go down by elevator to the departure area and take a taxi to the domestic terminal like all the others waiting before you,” said the petite, snarky, domestic ticket counter clerk. She’d allowed Aly to ask twice how she was supposed to get to the domestic terminal, that happened to be miles away, without a shuttle. Before Aly could ask a third time, she’d already waved in the next customer.

Now that she had a ticket she was going to see her brother. There must have been hundreds in queue before her. But she didn’t have boxes weighing her down. Aly pushed and squeezed her way in front of the dazed horde into an idling taxi.

Traffic was bottlenecking around a black suburban limousine that stood on the roadway. The hazard lights were flashing and the car's doors were still open. The luggage stacked on carts, with a baby diaper bag on top, and more ubiquitous balikbayan boxes, remained at the curb. Yellow tape strung on luggage carts surrounded the area. It seemed the mayor and his family had been in the midst of getting into the car.

“Oh my God, it just happened?” Aly was astonished that they were allowed so close.

“Yah,” said the driver. “A couple hours ago.”

“Were you here?”

“I did not see anything. Maybe, inside job, you know. This was the third attempt on the politician's life.” The driver pointed three fingers into the air for emphasis.

“How could they get to them?” asked Aly.

“They dressed like the police. On motorbikes when they shot them. See, no cameras.” The driver pointed to the overhanging eaves above the crime scene. “And see. They were there, too. They are always there.”

He was gesturing to several military guards in drab olive green uniforms, different from the uniformed police investigators. There were up to a dozen of them, one by every column of the building, with automatic rifles slung on their shoulders. They were attentive now, looking into every vehicle that passed before waving them on.

“Holy shit,” said Aly.

“They tried to run after them, but couldn’t catch them,” he laughed. “You know, you can’t catch a motorbike. Why didn’t they shoot them, instead?” The line of taxis waited as an investigator took pictures from the roadway. “But a push cart boy took a video,” said the driver. “They’ll see. It’s an inside job.”

*Shrewd presumption*, she pondered. *And resilient*. This macabre procession asserted a powerful warning, but the driver didn’t seem alarmed in the least. He tapped the horn to get traffic moving again. They inched by yellow evidence cones on the pavement marking a handgun, and an emptied clip.

On the plane from Manila to the resort island of Boracay, Aly talked to no one. The crime scene left her wondering just how routine it was in this country for a man and his family to be gunned down in plain sight. *Life shouldn’t be so cheap*. To Aly, it all depended on who was setting the value.

Feelings of sisterly love didn’t come easily to Aly. The memory of ‘*Take care of your brother*,’ rankled her. How dare her father expect anything from her?

In turn, Beni J should have been watching out for her too. She knew it was probable that after she played tough love, her brother would seek out their father. Rather than making a grab for himself, however, he should have realized that she, too, deserved rewards. Instead, it was looking as if his intent was a selfish one.

Aly felt betrayed. Her brother owed her. Just because she'd refused to help Beni J, didn't mean that he should have held their relationship in balance. He was the one family member that meant something to her. She'd valued their connection over any other until he dropped out of her life. Money should not have broken their bond.

She had respected his wishes. She'd left him alone. She easily could have stayed in his life. Nagging him into finishing what he'd started. Insisting on his becoming something. But she hadn't. Because he'd told her not to.

Five years ago, Aly hadn't been returning Beni J's calls. That was her way. If she held out, he would be shamed into going back. But he was waiting for her. He stood as she got out of her car. It happened in front of Jacob's apartment building. She didn't want to ask him in. She didn't want to explain her relationship with Jacob. But Beni J didn't ask about her. In the time it took for him to wait for some cars to pass and for him to J-walk across Wilshire Blvd, everything they had to say to each other had been considered and dismissed.

"I'm not going back," Beni J said. He didn't look her in the eye. In fact, he wasn't even talking to her, personally. He was stating a fact. He wasn't seeking approval for anything. "I'm not wasting your money anymore."

"Your decision is wasting my money," Aly said. "Your coming here to tell me is wasting my time." She had wanted more from him. A plan. Acknowledgement of all she'd done for him. A promise that he wouldn't let her down.

She wanted him to feel how wrong he was. But he gave her so much less.

“Don’t try to find me,” said Beni J. “We’re done.”

“Damn, look at that water,” the man sitting next to her with the stubbly beard leaned in. Aly flattened against her seat so he could get a better view out the window. She felt distinctly out of place. Her reasons for being here lacked the same enthusiasm among the tourists on a diving holiday. She wasn’t here for fun. Nor was she here to save her brother. She didn’t have illusions of some kind of rescue. If there remained anything to re-connect with her brother she’d see for herself.

The plane disembarked onto the tarmac at the Kalibo Airport. The air was an assault. Motionless. Vaporous.

“Unseasonably muggy,” she heard her fellow passengers muttering. She never functioned well in humidity and she avoided it whenever she could. Beni J looked happy enough as an Aquaboy. It wouldn’t surprise her if he felt more at home here than she did. He took more after his mother’s Chinese side. A lot less scientific and more philosophical than Aly preferred. It was no wonder that he had his ups and downs in med school.

Aly wedged her way to the front of the line to climb into the air-conditioned bus. Boisterous New Zealander divers, arguing with the bus driver about where to stow their gear bags, blocked her way.

“I need White Beach,” Aly called up to the driver. He nodded and motioned with his eyes down the aisle of the bus, as if the signal was meant only for her.

“Oh, thank you,” she said. Other passengers had begun to push past her to get on, but she managed to take a seat somewhere in the middle. She removed her limp cotton over shirt, and rolled it into a small cylinder before stuffing it into her shoulder bag. Her neutral sleeveless top and cargo-style skirt was all she’d need for the ride. She slid across the bench seat to the window to make room for more passengers. The airport was emptying out except for two young men in dark glasses that looked way too immature to be armed with M-60s. Barely out of their teens, they each wore a light blue shirt open at the collar, and dark pants with a gold stripe down the leg. The uniforms looked like they were made for men several inches taller and in a marching band. Since her ominous arrival in Manila, Aly was *en garde*. Particularly for corrupt cops, who might throw her into the back of a locked closet to ensure a fat ransom. *It’s a business*, Barry had said.

One officer was busy lighting a cigarette, using a disposable lighter with a four inch flame, while the other walked along each side of the bus intently peering in. It was unlikely that he could see well through the window tinting, but uneasiness grew in Aly’s mind. *There is nothing secure about these two*. She had a distinct feeling the officer was looking directly at her. He said something to the one with the cigarette, who perked up with a large exhale of smoke. *Was he gesturing with the barrel of his rifle right at me?* Aly looked toward the door, which remained wide open even though everyone from the plane had already boarded. She willed the driver to reach for the handle, draw the door closed, and grind the bus into gear. The airport guards were approaching after the departing bus. The driver watched in his rearview mirror as the guards waved their arms

for him to stop. And Aly assumed he would, but before he did, the guards gave up and turned back as the bus drew further away.

“Oy, I think they were after you, mate.” The fellow in front of Aly turned to tease the man sitting next to her, who laughed. Somewhat relieved, Aly sat back in her seat. The chill lingered.

Aly thought it wise to stick close to the other tourists on the wooden docks at the Cataclan port lest she be singled out as an easy victim. She actually didn’t stand out among the others. She’d never been to the Philippines, but she looked more at home than she ever had in Europe, or anywhere else in the world, really. Except her clothes stuck to her in uncomfortable places. And she was too aware of the odor of rotting things in the stagnant seawater near the docks. The company of perspiring people around her only added to the oppressive odors. With her fingertips, she dabbed the bridge of her nose and pushed her sunglasses back into place.

The string of four bangkas cut past low tide sandbars and skirted the shores of privately owned islands. Aly caught glimpses of stuccoed structures with ceramic rooftops and tall walls. They looked like generational homes she’d seen in the Greek Isles except for the rusting barbed wire protecting their heights. The crude defenses ended her pleasant memory.

A sapphire sky held wispy cumulous clouds. She was grateful for the breeze as the tapered vessel sliced through the calm waters protected by the reefs. She gasped at the beauty as they rounded the tip and approached the white sand beaches of Boracay.

Aly stowed her leather sandals—already swollen from humidity—into the outside pocket of her bag and shouldered it. Once the shallow keel brushed into the fine sandy bottom of the shore, the shipmates jumped into waist level waves to steady the boat before motioning the passengers to disembark into the shallows.

“Aquaboy Diving,” she said to a tricycle driver that pulled up next to her. He nodded and motioned with a tilt of his head for her to get on. He dropped her at the right address, which was painted on the wooden sign posted along the hard packed sand walkway, but she saw only leafy palms.

Aly waved down a polo-shirted beach hand for directions to Aquaboy Diving School. He pointed with his lips and an upward tilt of his jaw to directly behind her. *Why didn't anyone speak words around here?*

The non-verbal signals cut human interaction to a minimum and helped as little as possible. She tried not to read too much into their silence, but they seemed to enjoy her bewilderment.

“Wait. Wait. Wait. There's nothing there,” she said.

The man widened his eyes, making them larger, and moving his gaze directly behind her.

Aly nodded, “Oh.” She suppressed a punchy laugh after a full a day and night of non-stop travel, by every imaginable mode. *Why shouldn't I trudge through the jungle, too?*



“Here?” she asked the beach hand. “I go through here?”

He nodded and bounced his eyebrows in ascent. As with the others she’d encountered, she filed his subtle coding for future reference.

The thicket of palms was dense, but only a few steps to the open beach. Aly squinted into the intense sunlight. To her right, at the clearing, was a wooden shack with a bamboo façade. An eight-foot banner flapping in the breeze read *aquaboydiving.com*, in a bold red font over a seascape. A small and well-worn sign leaning against it indicated the crew was “Out Exploring.”

Aly examined the padlocked shack before turning back to scan the shoreline. About 20 yards south she could see lounge chairs arranged neatly in rows four deep. A few guests were scattered among the chairs but they appeared to be outnumbered by resort employees. Handsome young men and women dressed in pastel polo shirts and sarongs. They balanced sweating iced drinks on rattan trays. A Bon Jovi ballad played in the background while some beach goers were massaged right on their loungers.

Blue water lapped gently at the sand’s edge. Aly spotted about a half dozen dive boats anchored about a quarter mile out. She couldn’t see much from this far away, but she figured if the Aquaboys were out exploring, she’d keep them in sight. Aly wandered over to the nearest lounge chair she could find. She heard a food vendor in the distance, but exhaustion kept her from pursuing him. Maybe he’d make his way to her.

Lying back, the pendant around her neck slipped past her shoulder and into her hair. Her mother had given it to her, but it had become more important to Aly after her

father told her he'd made it for Aly's birth. It was gold. The mosaic looked like a tiny pie slice cut out of a stained glass window. Up close, though, its flaws were apparent. A lost wax cast with primitive carvings, and a hand polished finish. Aly used to feel it represented a physical closeness to her father. For years, she'd kept it in her luggage, tucked away in its original tattered cloth pouch, a constant for her everywhere she went. But any significance she'd assigned to it had faded over the years since she last saw her father. It hung around her neck out of habit.

From where Aly sat, it looked like the diving boats out in the harbor were taking on passengers and pulling up anchor. She hoped Beni J was out there with them. She supposed she had true concern for Beni J's welfare. Just by being here, there was an amount of self-sacrifice. It showed she was willing to make an effort. She'd held time since she saw him last. Nothing had changed with her. Five years of field digs, and assignments. No permanency. No legacy. She had wanted it to remain the same. Aly wondered what Beni J had done in those five years. She would have liked to see him graduate, if he graduated. She wondered if anyone was there for him. It wasn't fair that she would lose him. He couldn't leave her, too.

She'd wanted to die when her father left her the first time. She was four. There wasn't any explanation from her mother. Aly waited for him. But her father didn't come home and she knew this time it was different because her father hadn't said goodbye. Only her mother was in the apartment, shut behind her bedroom door. Her mother was talking on the phone. Mother was crying, or angry. In the kitchen there was her father's carving knife. It had a tarnished blade that widened toward a round tip like a mini bolo

knife. The only shiny part was a thin sharp edge where her father last honed it on the rectangle of whetstone. The bone handle was worn smooth from years of use. Brought over from the Philippines, her father had cherished it. It was the only knife he used. Aly had needed a kitchen chair to reach the drawer. It was long and heavy in her hand. She remembered jumping down with it and it being so heavy the tip clanged on the ceramic floor.

The blade was so long that to hold the knife with both hands, the point was already poking into her chest. It had to be to one side or the other and couldn't point straight in. So it took her a while to get it into position. Aly became frustrated and started to cry. Hot tears streamed down her face, cooling when they reached the point of tension at her chin. The tears felt significant and heavy. Every time she breathed, the blade poked through her shirt and nipped into her skin. She worked herself into sobs knowing how sorry they would be when they found her. How very sorry he would be for leaving. How sorry her mother would be that she made him go. The knife grew heavier. She already had a small hole in her shirt and a barely detectable indentation in the thin skin over her sternum, when she decided to take a rest. Strengthening her resolve, she lifted the knife and placed the point into the same small hole. Aly held it there not breathing, before finally releasing herself from the act of vengeance in a choked gasp. A long while passed. The kitchen clock ticked louder each second. She hurried to return the knife.

Staccato voices in a language she didn't understand pecked at her thoughts. The sun had moved behind some ominous clouds. Aly had no idea how long she had dozed,

but several loud bird screeches and a crackling of the palm fronds above jerked her upright. Several paces away, divers were peeling off gear and popping the caps off brown bottled San Miguel beer. She saw crewmembers stacking the empty tanks and equipment on a blue tarp, while another was taking inventory of returned gear with a clipboard. Aly watched a young man hose off the equipment with fresh water before packing it into blue mesh bags and carrying it back to the outrigger diving boats.

That crewman, shirtless, in loose-fitting white shorts, caught Aly's eye. He paused from his work to bid customers farewell and accept tips, slyly spreading the bills for a quick count before pocketing them. His broad-shouldered posture was familiar. She stumbled into her sandals in her rush to get to him.

## Chapter 9

*Wait for it.* Beni J liked to give his prey a minute to come to him. He gave a friendly nod in her direction. Female tourists were always looking for a local guide to show them around. He welcomed the company. *And the generous gratitude that comes with it.* Without making eye contact, he hefted two bags of gear to his shoulder, carried them to the back of his boat, and tossed them in. He then waded into the shallows. His close-shorn hair was clumped in spikey tufts glistening with seawater. He splashed his face in the surf, and ran his hands down his deeply tanned arms, to give her a good show.

He could feel her only a few paces away. He was ready to turn toward her with a *May I help you?* But a smack of unmasked annoyance burned his cheeks.

“It is you,” Aly said. “Why did you turn away from me?” He didn’t recognize the voice, but she sounded kinda pissed. Maybe he’d already had this one.

“Excuse me?” he said, using his most charming smile to buy some time. But there was nothing. *Absolutely no recognition, whatsoever.* Her big round designer glasses didn’t help. His mind reeled. If he’d ever been with her, it wasn’t recently, not that he could recall anyway. Maybe in Manila, because she didn’t look local.

“I’m not sure we are acquainted, Miss...”

“Barely, I’d say,” she said, taking off her glasses. By now, the other dive guides were looking their way, only trying not to appear so. “It’s me, Aly.”

He squinted a second, trying to take it all in. Here was this beautiful *mestiza*, but his silent advisor on this matter was shrinking quickly.

“Oh shit. Ale’! Damn, I thought you were some cougar or something.” Beni J said. “What the fuck’re you doing here?”

“This letter took me by surprise. It makes me think you’re augering me out of something,” said Aly. You never expected me to come all this way to confirm it, did you?”

*Damn.* His sister was a ragged spectacle. Wagging an airmail. He didn’t remember her looking so harsh.

“What’s your angle here, Beni J? You get me to sign away responsibility so you can have it all to yourself? Apparently, a little gratitude for looking after you all those years doesn’t occur to you?” Aly stopped for air. She squinted at the crewmembers closing in to encircle them.

“Yeah,” he said, moving in closer to lower his voice. “Can you keep your shit down?” He stepped between the crewmembers and Aly.

“Guys, this is my sister! Alejandra,” He forced a laugh and waited for them to disperse.

“I always wanted the best for you, Beni J. You probably never knew that.”

“You care about me?” said Beni J. “Really? And that’s why you’re here? That’s sounds a little desperate coming from you.” His lips tightened, holding back anything worse. *Did she really have to drag shit from the past all the way here?*

“*Sigue!*” The older crewmember shouted. He jumped on his boat and started the motor. His eyes gestured toward the storm clouds that were rolling in from the north.

“You coming?” asked Beni J. The others got out in front of him going north along White beach. Beni J barely waited for Aly to step onboard before he kicked it into gear.

“We dock the boats on the back side of the island,” he said.

Heading right into the winds put the foul smell of the oily motor exhaust behind them. The gurgling engine noise filled in for the lack of conversation. The temperature dropped as the moisture built up in the air. A quick drizzle gave way into a downpour. Even at this speed, the pelting drops felt soft and warm. Beni J grinned into the rain. Aly was alternating covering her face, and turning into the wind to let her glasses shield her vision. She looked miserable. Beni J thought it served her right. *She so doesn’t belong here.*

Beni J steered round the north end of Boracay Island. Keeping pace with the other three bangkas, he eased up on the throttle and followed the shoreline.

In all that time, moving to the Philippines, and landing here, he’d rarely thought of his sister. The one thing that came to mind when he did, though, was her judgment. He couldn’t take it then, and he certainly couldn’t now. She belonged deep in his past. He

wasn't proud of his actions back then—a regret that his sister's presence called to mind—but that was the Western way. Since then, he'd journeyed through bitterness, to shame, to what he was now. He was connected to his *Kapwa*, the shared self. Never alone. Liwliwa was teaching him. Knowing his *Kapwa* was to follow life the way it was intended to be.

*Fuck if this didn't change things up a bit.* He knew why Aly was here. He'd felt rock bottom the past few days. The barrier to the other world seemed so thin. Those visitations and dreams were constant now. It was like he saw everything at once but the meanings eluded him. All that had to be connected. Seriously, he hadn't thought about Aly until recently, and here she was. Beni J didn't think that he needed his sister to remind him of his past, though. He needed to control that shit more.

He'd finally felt he was out from under that oppressive force to succeed and to win. His past was the I-centered culture. Aly's way. She had wanted him to be competitive and he was. He competed. He thought only of himself and look what happened. But instead of being separate from others, *Kapwa* is the moral obligation to treat one another as equal fellow human beings. It was something like that.

“*Kapwa* is tolerating every consequence that comes your way,” Liwliwa had said, “as if it has been planned to happen all along.” Liwliwa was showing him how to gain strength and dignity from others, and to be one with humanity. He was living balance, modesty, and wise judgment. Not material success.

Seeing Aly now, he felt his Western mask erupting from his skin, separating and shielding him. Aly's overbearing presence was pulling him backwards. There was



something deliberate that she wanted out of him. She'd always calculated her movements, and she was here to win something. *She has an endgame and she's using you to get it.*

"So how're things?" Beni J said when the roar of the motor had lessened some.

"I'm well. Did you ever finish school?" Aly asked.

"I finished." Her question made him wince. He concentrated on driving the boat. He was going to let her come out with her reason for being here on her time. This was his home. His *katuwirang landas*. She was holding back, but he knew it would come. The rain ended as quickly as it had started, but the clouds remained.

"I was really surprised to hear from you. But, just as I suspected, it's not as bad as the letter made it out to be," Aly said.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," said Beni J. He motioned for her to hand him the black nylon backpack at her feet. Aly held it out for him, but instead of taking it from her, he unzipped the front pocket with his free hand and pulled out a pack of American Spirit cigarettes, offering her one first, knowing she wouldn't take it, before tapping one out and placing it between his lips.

"Where are we going?" Aly asked.

"We tie up at *Amo Boy's*," said Beni J. "He's got a private dock, sort of. It's an old hotel pier that his family still owns."

"Is *Amo Boy*, *Aquaboy*?" she asked. She didn't hide her amusement.

“Yep. ‘*amo*’ is boss,” he said. “Boy, is his name, or that’s what everyone calls him. You know, like ‘Junior.’”

“Or Beni J? J standing for Junior? What’s his real name?”

“Rolando Igcasan,” he said. He cupped a hand over his cigarette, taking swift draws. The small talk was becoming too much to bear.

“So, he’s rich,” Aly added. “Where’d their money come from besides unsuccessful hotels?”

“Hemp farming,” he said, taking one last drag before flicking it into the wind.

“Of course,” she said.

“No, not ‘of course’,” he mimicked her. “They made rope and supplies for the navy.” Her judgment pissed him off, but he tried to catch himself before sounding too defensive.

“You know Boy went to Berkeley, too?” He said, looking to see if this surprised her. “Yeah, he got some science degree in marine bio or something. That’s why we hit it off and he’s helped me along.”

“Schooling you on the finer points of slacking and wasting your education.” Aly held up her hand. “I know. It’s your life.”

She knew just how to get Beni J’s jaw grinding, but he had other things to attend. He cut the motor as the other *bangka* drivers had done and coasted toward the wooden pier that had appeared from out of the mist. It was a small wharf consisting of one main

dock with corresponding slips jutting out from either side. All but two were in use. A couple of cinderblock warehouses at the shoreline looked locked up tight, The razor wire atop the chain-linked fencing was almost new. No signage indicated ownership. Prominent red “Private” markers hung on all the locked gates.

Beni J steadied himself at the back of the boat to throw a rope to the first boatman docked. Jumping up to the bow, he yanked the wheel to come about directly parallel, with a soft bump to the weathered floaters. He hopped off with another rope in hand and tied up.

“Grab my backpack, would’ya?” he asked. He extended a hand to help Aly to the dock and tossed the remaining gear bags onto the pier. He hefted them on each shoulder to a small shack that straddled the two long slips.

“You coming?” Aly fell into step behind her brother as he brushed by her, backpack in hand along the narrow dock.

He stopped short at one of the out buildings just inside of the security gate. He retrieved a key from under the corrugated metal roof, and let himself in. The plywood door swung open behind him and Aly followed. Inside, the stooped shack was no longer than 12 feet and only half as wide. There were stacked plastic utility shelves with disorganized ocean tackle, flotation devices, and diving gear against the two long walls. At the far end was a cot and sleeping bag, set below a grubby window with security bars. A large flashlight was rigged above the cot pointing downward.

“You live here?” Aly asked. *More judgment.* Beni J felt his gut tighten. “No way, this place is too deprived, even for you. What’s going on?”

“I got a place. I just hang out here sometimes,” he said. Aly stood frozen waiting for more. He tried to be nonchalant when he shook the rain off his glasses. They’d been hiding a black eye and a superficial two-inch cut that was still healing. Beni J bit at the silence. “Let’s just say I’m cooling out here for a while. My place was broken into. Didn’t take anything, I don’t have much, but I figured it best not to show my face for a while.

“Because it looks like that?” She aimed to poke at his bruises. Beni J reflexively pulled back from her touch.

“Nah,” he shook his head. “Maybe.” What was he willing to tell her? That he was hiding out not knowing what could happen next? No way he’d go into the recent events with her.

“Treasure hunting Australians have no sense of humor,” he said. “They get a little pissed off at our unpredictable weather.”

“Looks a little overboard for a bad day of diving,” she said.

“Yeah well.” He’d waited long enough. “You come to Boracay to pick at my scabs?”

“Doesn’t look like your line of work is being good to you. Is that was this is all about? Trying to set yourself up as the sole trustee? I got this letter about signing over claims to a trust. Talk about desperate. If you wanted my attention you got it. Why now? What do you have to prove?”

“What?” He laughed. When Aly didn’t join in, he laughed some more. “I don’t need shit from you.”

“This letter made me think you might need some help. Or can’t be trusted to take care of yourself. Although,” she said, picking up a glass beer bottle from the floor, “it doesn’t completely seem to be the case.”

*Kapwa, man.* Hiding out, isolated, he’d been meditating for a way off the island. Even though Aly was being such a bitch, she came for him. He wouldn’t have asked for her, but accepting the nature of things included realizing one’s limitations. Liwliwa had often said “Sometimes to accept is also giving,” Problem was, his Western self didn’t feel very generous, just then.

“Do what you want, but that letter’s not from me,” Beni J said, turning his open hands up in front of him for emphasis. Aly stared in disbelief.

“Seriously. Now you’re wasting my time. I don’t need anything from you. I got *cumpadres* closer than family watching my back,” he said. He waited to see if that had any special meaning to her. Her silence pissed him off even more. “Do I look like I want anything from you? I live in paradise.”

The uneasy tension sucked the air out of the shack. A knock at the door broke their silence. Two shaved-headed locals stood at the open doors. One, had a dark sheen to his skin and thin mustache. He wore rubber slippers and a blue “Aquaboy” t-shirt. The one behind him was dressed and looked almost identical. Beni J didn’t know these guys. They were young and new. *And huge.*

“Beni J, Amo Boy wants you to get your shit outta here.”

“What the fuck? What’d he say?”

“He wants you to go see him on your way out,” Aquaboy #1 shrugged. “We’re supposed to make sure you get there.” He nodded toward Aly with a long lingering look at her legs. Beni J glowered at him.

“He said to bring your sister,” the guy chuckled before ducking his head back out to stand with Aquaboy #2. Beni J turned away before Aly could meet his gaze.

“Shit,” he muttered under his breath. *What more did she bring down on him?*

“You want to tell me what this is about?” Beni J and Aly asked each other in unison.

## Chapter 10

Aly waited for him just outside the shack. The humid air wasn't any more refreshing but at least it smelled better. Aquaboy #1 and #2 were waiting for them next to a Honda sedan with tinted windows. It was parked at the edge of the jungle. Beni J came out carrying a dark green duffle slung over one shoulder. He reached for the padlock on the roof and latched it with one hand. He knew his sister couldn't read his expression through the dark glasses he wore. But he was alarmed.

"You coming?" he asked. He brushed by Aly a few steps ahead before she followed him without a word.

For as long as Beni J had been on Boracay, he'd been a friend of the *barkada*. Boy Igcasan's was the only operation on the island. Boy was one of the reasons Beni J cleaned up. He and his wife, Tessie, were the patriarch and matriarch of Boracay. Beni J had a strong gratitude toward Amo Boy, but he didn't owe Boy anything, he made sure of it.

Beni J knew enough about barkadas in Manila to avoid them. But he kind of admired the way Boy ran his island. Boy was into smuggling. He had a tight system. Built upon a solid tradition of brotherhood. Boy's Chinese grandfather, Isan Beng, came over as a peanut farmer, but Beng, with Boy's father Rolando, wisely converted their

cash crop to hemp during WWII. The family wealth grew undetected by the Japanese forces that used the shipping route. Using family members to pick and process rope quickly, they secretly supplied the U.S. war effort from their out-of-the-way port. Their inscrutable network established Igcasan's barkada in smuggling and gun running. The barkada was tied to Rolando Igcasan through blood and marriage. It was assumed to be the strongest throughout the thousand isles of Cebu and the southern Philippines. Boy's control of the islands along the Sulu Sea was like the entangled tentacles of a man 'o war.

Some said Boy was only a captain of the largest and most infamous gang based in Manila. Beni J came in contact with some of those untouchables working for his Uncle Leonardo in metro Manila. All operations, illegal drugs, trafficking, smuggling, weapons, extortion, loan sharking, prostitution, illegal gambling, protection rackets, were run by barkadas. He'd regularly seen high-powered bosses entertaining at his Uncle's club. Beni J was only the bartender. He saw everything, but kept out of that side of the business.

The gang members Beni J knew in Manila were cold and heartless, mainly because they grew up in it and they didn't know any other life. But Boy was discreet and had personal charisma. Boy kept it civilized. He exacted smooth dealings on his island. Boy had no tolerance for anything else.

That's how Beni J caught the attention of Boy. Escaping tremendous pressure from his Uncle, Beni J had given himself permission to be an asshole after arriving on Boracay. He turned up a little too often, a little too loud in several exchanges and fights around D'Mall. By then, Boy already knew who he was. Or at least whom Boy thought he was. Uncle Leonardo's name carried into the islands. And even though Beni J had



kept himself out of that part of his uncle's business, it didn't stop him from exaggerating his status so that Boy took a step back.

Boy gave Beni J a job and encouraged Beni J's inclusion to stay on hand if needed, but gave him his space. Beni J never felt pressured, as long as he showed the barkada proper deference. Boy seemed to like him around when another strong guy was needed for support. Boy bounced ideas off of him, one Cal Bear to another. He wanted Beni J to be more involved. Boy had plenty of family members that envied Beni J.

Beni J didn't like being summoned like this. It couldn't be good. He had a feeling he had overstayed his welcome. Maybe squatting in the boathouse, was a bad idea. His dealing with his Uncle Leonardo made him wary of people doing him any favors. He had to keep things in perspective. And keep it clean. For himself and now that his sister turned up.

The Igcasan compound was the oldest property on the island. Boy had bragged that there were enough resources within its walls to withstand typhoon and seige. It was a holdover precaution from the days of Boy's grandfather, who built the fortress during the war. Inside the compound were several cottages that housed extended family members. These were set on terraced foundations that stepped up to the original house. Boy's wife Tessie had planted vegetable gardens, but the rest of the grounds gave way to indigenous foliage where dozens of tropical bird species and monkeys thrived. Deer-like Balinese cows and their calves grazed among them. Gravel footpaths connecting the homes were thick with cover, interspersed with citrus *calamansi* trees and *camunggai* with edible leaves, ideal for fish-soup. It was no accident that most of what they were growing was

edible. Looking around, there was enough food to outlast a barricade for months. Besides the 10-foot walls topped with embedded broken glass, the other ostentatious feature about the residence were the *soldalo* armed with automatic rifles patrolling the perimeter of the compound.

Scores of family—most of whom worked for Boy’s many enterprises on the island—descended daily upon the Igcasan’s main house for early evening *merienda*. Boy and Tessie nurtured a sense of kinship among their people. Most, including Beni J, found their generosity hard to resist.

“*Dumating kumain!*” shouted a female voice from the kitchen.

Amo Boy sat forward in his armchair. He was casual, in khaki shorts, slippers, and a simple puka shell necklace above his open-collared white shirt. A fixed coolness, it was as if his core intensity were the electricity powering the room.

Bamboo fans stirred the air close to dark high-beamed ceilings. A waning light came through a series of small windows in the cavernous room. On a pair of rattan sofas closest to the entrance were several men and women, from teens to elders. Seated in various positions on the carpeted floor were a half-dozen young children filling in the gaps. All eyes were focused on the pre-match commentary on the enormous plasma TV.

“Beni J! Come in. *Sigue.*” Amo Boy stood with his arms open. “Pacquiao is going to fight the Mexican.” He explained the gathering with a sweep of his hand and jabbing the air with closed fists. He was only slightly shorter than Beni J, with a broad chest and narrow ankles. Amo Boy embraced him with hard slaps on his back. He was always this

physical. He squinted into Beni J's face using his fingertips to examine the injuries on Beni J's cheek. "Tch tch," he clicked his teeth.

"Beni J, did you eat? Dumating kumain," Ama Tessie poked her head out from the kitchen. She carried out dishes to the buffet table followed by a skinny young man and a petite woman with more platters. The room was so thick with cooking odors, Beni J's eyes watered.

"Ama Tessie, Amo Boy, this is my sister, Aly," said Beni J.

"There's plenty," said Tessie, giving a nod to Aly.

Beni J declined with an upheld hand, but he failed to keep Aly from edging in front of Aquaboy #1 and #2 as they headed for the buffet. The glistening whole grilled fish, butterflied prawns, meats and vegetables stewed in hues of annatto red and golden turmeric were tempting.

"You like *Kinilaw*? It's my specialty." Tessie said. She was smiling, but Beni J wasn't comfortable with her attentiveness toward Aly.

Ama Tessie heaped the finely chopped raw fish and shrimp marinated in vinegar, a local twist on Mexican ceviche, into a bowl, and offered it to Aly with a plastic fork.

"Thank you," said Aly. "Those meat skewers look amazing."

Beni J wanted her to cool it on the chow. Now wasn't the time to show weakness. She looked like a glutton next to the Aquaboys who were taking small servings of steamed rice.

“*Sa isang minuto,*” said Amo Boy. “Later.”

“Aly,” Beni J called her. She backed away from the buffet, but took her bowl with her.

“Welcome to Boracay.”” said Amo Boy.

“Thank you,” Aly gulped an avaricious mouthful.

“Come, let’s talk,” Amo Boy motioned for Beni J and Aly to lead the way down a corridor. “Beni. Junior, what you get into this time?” Amo Boy closed the door after Beni J and Aly entered.

He waved for them to take a seat on a rattan sofa backed by a Chinese lacquer credenza. Framed photos of Boy, Tessie, and their children lined up symmetrically on the surface. It was situated in the middle of the room, facing a simple writing desk that stood below an open window.

“Always the fighter, huh, Junior?” Beni J was nodding, listening to Boy, but making eye contact with Aly. He wanted her to let them talk.

“I don’t like all this violence. It’s not good,” said Boy.

Boy crossed the room and sat heavily behind the dark wooden desk, shaking his head loosely. It looked like careful posturing. Boy was taking his time. “That Goddamn Cebuano from Zamboanga got himself shot in Manila. At the Goddamn airport. You remember him? He wasn’t careful. Now I got a position to fill.”

“I remember when he came to Boracay, Amo. That’s shocking,” Beni J said.

Boy nodded. “The police are poking their fingers into everything,” Boy said.

Beni J thought about Liwliwa defending her home.

“I’m more concerned about you,” Boy said. “I got people asking about you. Some people came to the club. Scared my nephew, Florante’ pretty good. You know he’s a little shakey since he got back. I don’t know what to think.” If Boy was concerned, he was hiding it well.

“I don’t know what this is about, Amo, I swear.”

Boy went on. “And they were waiting for you at the dive shop. They said they had some questions for you, but they were asking about you, AND your sister.”

Boy regarded Aly for the first time. “Hi, how are you? *Maganda*, very beautiful.”

“Thank you,” Aly said. Boy was a player. Beni J thought it was a shitty thing to do to Tessie, but he’d seen a lot of men in power act worse. Boy was just a middle-aged man who thought every woman was for sale.

“I love your brother. Are you sure you don’t want to tell me why someone wants to pay me a lot of money to keep you? No?”

Aly looked from Amo Boy to Beni J.

“How’s your uncle? Boy asked Beni J. “My cousins on the force say the orders come from Manila.”

Boy was always asking about Uncle Leonardo. Leonardo Tantoco was principal owner of Grande Pearl International, which was made up of a lot of different handlings. From the way Boy often asked about him, Uncle Leonardo was a great concern of his. He never came out and said it, but he was protecting his interests. Boy was nervous that Leonardo wanted to do business in the Southern Philippines. If Boy wanted to see where Beni J's loyalties lay. It was Beni J's card to play.

"We are straight, Amo. Real good, now."

"We're going to see him in Manila," added Aly. "A big family Christmas. It's been a long time since we were all together." Beni J was impressed. It looked like his sister had a good read of the room. She added some credibility.

"It's good to see that my brother has been so well taken care of here. You obviously have a lot of affection for him. He's always needed a strong man to look up to," she said. And with a gracious dip to her chin, "I approve."

"Your brother is like a son," Boy said. He licked his lips.

Beni J had never seen Boy taken with someone so easily. Boy's broad smile showed only delight. Beni J was also mortified, concerned even, not knowing if his sister had even an inkling of what Boy was capable of. His sister had guts.

"I'm looking forward to seeing my uncle to tell him he has been in good hands."

*And she lays it on thick.*

"We've had to push back a little. I don't like threats. I watch out for my people, Beni J. You know that, hah?" Boy laughed. "You know I'm here to help..."

Beni J stood, peering intently at the aging patriarch. Help was not what Boy was offering.

“Amo Boy, you’ve done so much for me already. I can’t ask for more. I don’t want to bring you trouble. *Walang problema.*” Boy shrugged and seemed to consider Beni J’s words. He didn’t press further.

“I love your brother,” Boy said to Aly. His grin was warm, and genuine. “How are you getting over there? No need to keep your Uncle Leonardo waiting.”

“Yes, Amo, thank you,” said Beni J. “He is expecting us.”

“Nestor, my brother-in-law,” Boy took Aly’s hand and brought it to his lips. “He’s going to take you. Ciriaco will drive. I’ll miss you.” He embraced Beni J for a long moment. Beni J was the first to pull away.

“*Tandaan,*” Amo Boy’s intensity made Beni J and Aly stop in their tracks. “Don’t forget to text!” He smiled broadly and slapped a hand at the back of Beni J’s neck as he walked them out.

## Chapter 11

Something had shifted back there with Boy. Beni J couldn't be sure of all that had just taken place, but even Tessie and the Aquaboys were boxing him out. He wondered how deep it went. There was the beating. The ransacking of his house. The police poking around. Shit like that didn't happen on Boracay without Boy's knowing. No. Boy cut him loose at some point. Beni J knew that it was just a matter of time before shit caught up with him.

"What the hell is going on?" Aly whispered as they climbed into the back seat of the Honda. "Why is someone looking for us?"

"I got this." Beni J pulled on a white cotton shirt and sunglasses before he secured the closure of his duffle. His profile could easily be mistaken for Amo Boy's. Aqua Boy #1, whose name they now knew to be Ciriaco, slid into the driver's seat while Nestor rode shotgun and locked the doors.

"Why do we need to get to Manila?" asked Aly.

"To send you home, for starters," said Beni J.

A chain motor drew open the compound gate. As soon the gap was wide enough for one car to pass, Ciriaco sped through. Outside about a half dozen uniformed police



officers motioned with their automatic rifles for the car to slow down. Without a warning, Beni J swung around, pinning Aly to the back seat. He leaned in close to her ear.

“Be cool,” he whispered. Ciriaco lowered his window halfway for the officer.

“Where are you going?” asked the officer. The tip of his rifle pointed upward next to his cheek.

“Mr. Igcasan has an appointment at the police station,” Ciriaco tilted his head to block the view into the car.

“Mr. Igcasan?” said the officer. Clearing his throat, he lost conviction. From his view it must have look like things were getting steamy in the back seat.

“He’s busy, ya know. We’ll see you at the station.” Ciriaco raised the window and idled the car forward. The rest of the officers standing nearby jumped out of the way of the accelerating car.

Nestor held a broad smile and waved at the officers. “We’re going to have to sneak you out,” Nestor said.

Beni J felt his sister’s glare. But he didn’t have much to tell her at this point. He was rattled, craning his neck back toward the compound. He brushed the beads of sweat off his forehead.

“What do you need from me?” Aly asked. He shook his head and sighed. “Beni J?”

“You don’t really want to get into all that, do you?” he asked.

“I’m here, aren’t I?”

“Yeah, and that’s another thing. Why did you come here?” Beni J looked out the window.

“Give me break, would you please? That letter started it all. ”

“I didn’t send that letter,” Beni J’s voice rose sharply. He was shaken. “Let me see it.” Aly dug the envelope out from her bag and handed it to him.

“Somebody is playing you.” He scanned the printed letter. “The address here says Makati City. That’s Manila. Not me,” he shrugged. “So why’d you come here?” Refolding the letter, he examined the envelope before handing it back.

“It involved you so I needed to make sure you were okay. Before I finalized it,” she said. “I thought you might need me,”

“And what do you think now?” Beni J sat back, keeping an eye on Nestor and Ciriaco. “And what do you care about me or Dad?” Beni J asked. “Seriously.” He knew there was more. He just had to wait for it.

He figured she was feeling it. *Utang na loob*. Only for her, it was more like guilt. He knew more about debt bondage, the Filipino way. *Utang na loob* is a soul debt, it persists and endures, like, forever. It makes debtors damned uncomfortable. It’s pride. It’s humiliating, and doesn’t sit well with a Filipino’s sense of *amor propio*.

“It could have been from you. You know how things were left. And if it was talking about relinquishing responsibility I couldn’t do anything without checking with

you, first. That's the right thing to do. Something you seem to have a hard time grasping here in paradise.”

He'd taken a risk when he approached his sister years ago. He'd had nowhere else to go. But she'd burned him. Bad, really. She was one of the reasons he was in this mess. But taking from Uncle Leonardo put him in utang na loob. Uncle Leonardo was never benevolent. It was never a gift. Because his uncle was more than an uncle, he was a corporation dealing in debt bondage. Uncle Leonardo held it over all who worked for him. Those who owed him, feared him. Beni J wished he could give it all back and never owe anybody, anything.

“Well, it wasn't sent from Manila. The postmark looks like ‘Ba’ or ‘Bo,’ depending on the font. Could be one of the northern provinces. That's Dad. I know it is.”

Aly was quiet as she considered his words.

“I know nothing of the Tantocos, so I wouldn't miss being their trustee,” she said. “But I thought about Lolo's war chest. Dad promised it to me. It's significant to my work. It's significant to me. I mean, if this is it between us, I deserve to have that.”

Beni J watched Aly squirm a little. This was an extension of intimacy that he'd never seen from his sister. *Was she asking him for something?* He held his patience to milk full the prospects.

Everyone had a play to make. Amo Boy said he loved him like a son, but back there, in his office, Amo Boy showed he was more like his uncle. In fact, why would

Amo Boy let them go except to hold what he thought was utang na loob over Uncle Leonardo? Sending his brother-in-law, Nestor to deliver Beni J and Aly was a nice touch.

Boy had to have let those thugs onto this island. He probably had the damn police force shaking down the island looking for them. And now he was letting them go straight to Uncle's protective arms. And he was double-crossing whoever sent those thugs. Which could still be his Uncle, but Boy didn't know that.

And here was Aly, overcome with guilt or indebtedness or whatever. She ought to know that she didn't owe him anything. But she wanted something from him. It was so simple once you let Kapwa lead the way. He'd been so worried about getting off this island and seeing her to safety, he'd ignored that he was one step closer to his father. This was why she was here. He was positive. *As if it had always been planned.*

He whispered to Aly, so Ciriaco and Nestor couldn't listen in. They wouldn't care, but this was a confidence between brother and sister.

"I can get you Lolo's war chest," said Beni J. "It exists. All of it. And more."

"How much?" asked Aly.

"\$2 million pesos."

"What's that for?"

"That pays off your Uncle."

The car pulled off the main highway onto a gravel road before slowing to a stop. Motioning for Ciriaco to park closer against the trees, Nestor rattled off orders into his cell phone in *Tagalog*. Aly looked to her brother to translate.

“There’s a slow-down. A lot of confusion near the airport. There are police checkpoints searching cars,” Beni J said in a low voice to Aly. “He doesn’t think we’ll get through.” She watched Nestor gesticulating into the phone. He was intense.

“Jesus Christ. What now?” Aly asked. Beni J didn’t have an answer, but since Boy sent his own brother-in-law to get them out, he was less concerned.

“I saw Dad a few years ago.”

“Where?”

“He met me in Manila. After I left Berkeley, I drifted a bit. I was ready to start anew and I came to find him.”

Aly rolled her eyes.

“I figure he owed me one.”

“Where’d he live then?” asked Aly.

“I didn’t even have an address. I’d sent letters to our Aunt Mercedes—his sister was still living in Manila—saying when I’d be coming, but I never heard back. He just showed up right after I arrived. We hung out a couple of days. He took me to some girlie bars and drank with me.” Beni J held back on details. Partly because it still confused him.

“He had a way with the ladies.”

It was Beni J's first experience with just how harsh it was over here. It was disillusioning seeing his dad exploiting others. His father was playing a big man. Taking over VIP entertainment rooms and buying women to perform for them. High out of his skull, Beni J didn't protest, even though it freaked him out a little. He'd never paid for it before. It was like his dad was trying to shove the entire underside of the P.I. down Beni J's throat.

"But after a couple of days I told him I wanted to stay and asked for some help and, uh," Beni J shook his head at the memory. His father's rage had come on so suddenly, Beni J had feared for his life.

"Well, it pissed him off. We fought. He was a lot smaller than me at the time. Maybe he shrunk. He was skinnier, you know, he didn't eat much in the heat. He drank a lot, though. Dad took some swings at me. And there were these drunk motherfuckers on the street. They figured I was beating on a smaller guy and they jumped me for fun. Like he didn't stop them or nothing." That, had cut the wind out of Beni J more than anything.

"When I came to, he was gone. My bill was paid at the hotel until the end of the week and he left me a return ticket to the states. That was it."

"What a bastard! Why would he do that?" Aly asked.

"He didn't want me," Beni J shrugged, his own words sinking in. "He didn't want me here. In the P.I."

"And you don't know where he lived?"

“No. I never tried to contact him again. But it was definitely on Luzon. Norte,” Beni J nodded. “He was living in one of the provinces north of Metro Manila.”

Ciriaco slowly eased the car up to the highway, looked both ways and drove onto the pavement.

“The airport is being guarded. There are security searches because of that assassination in Manila,” said Nestor. “The docks are the same. I’ll have to meet you elsewhere. The North end, Puka Beach, is clear for now.”

Ciriaco swung into a U-turn and slowed for Nestor to duck out of the car.

“Ciriaco will take you as far as he can,” said Nestor waving for them to continue on. His slim form folded into the thick jungle and he was gone.

“Why in Hell did you stay?” Aly said.

“Maybe it’s not your thing, but I like it here,” Beni J said.

“Can’t say much for it, that’s true,” Aly shot back. “Why did Boy ask about Uncle Leonardo?”

“I don’t... know,” Beni J hesitated enough to catch Aly’s attention.

“It’s about him, isn’t it? When did you see him?”

“Actually, Uncle Leonardo just appeared after Dad split. Uncle was right there. He is a powerful man. Got me into med school.”

“So now you owe him and he’s trying to collect?”

“No!” Beni J’s voice rose as if he couldn’t explain himself fast enough. “I tried to pay him back, but he wouldn’t take my money. He wanted me to work for him.”

“So...?”

“So I split,” Beni J leaned forward. “No one owns me.”

“So that’s probably who has been asking around about us?” Aly asked. He watched Aly trying to piece it together. And his sister’s confusion was never a good thing.

“Look, I’m going to straighten all that out. I got this.” It was true, he did need to get some breathing room from his Uncle. Those thugs the other night put on plenty of scare—he planned to make a deposit on his life.

“Maybe it’s time to cut your losses,” Aly said.

*Bahala Na.* “That’s not a bad idea, Sis.”

At Beni J’s instruction, Ciriaco stopped short of the private driveway to Liwliwa’s house. They’d passed no cars on the two-lane highway to Puka Beach. Beni J and Aly ran quickly down the gravel path out of sight of the road.

“Wait here,” Beni J left his sister in back of the house where mango trees had been cleared for a small yard and clotheslines.

As usual, Liwliwa’s front door was ajar and the scent of burning joss stick wafted from the parlor. Calm came over Beni J as he pushed in soundlessly, past the front room



and kitchen, toward the back of the bungalow. There, he found Liwliwa. She was watching Aly through the grass shades that covered her bedroom window.

“That’s my sister, Alejandra. I mean, Aly,” said Beni J.

“I know, I saw her in your dreams and sent for her,” Liwliwa said without turning toward him. Beni J didn’t question her claims. There were too many weird things happening at once to argue. Beni J came up behind her and inhaled the scent of coconut oil in her hair. He placed his hands on her hips pulling her closer. He was going to miss her. Liwliwa rested gently against him.

“Your sister wears your father’s anting anting. The same snake amulet he gave you.” She reached back with knowing fingers to twirl his ear stud. “There, the pendant with the ruby eye.”

Beni J looked up to see Aly’s necklace. He hadn’t noticed it on his sister’s neck until then. Amber rays from the setting sun highlighted the snake pendant, and Aly’s light hair. To him, she looked painfully out of place against the backdrop of the jungle.

“I don’t know if it’s an amulet. My father must have made one for her, too.”

“It protects you, no?”

“Maybe,” he said.

Liwliwa raised her arms and turned into his embrace. Beni J looked down into her eyes.

“I’m so sorry for the trouble I’ve caused.”

“My choice,” Liwliwa said. “You think I don’t know what you carry? I told you. Be prepared.” She reached her lips up for a tender last kiss.

“Take my anting anting, then. It will help you know what you don’t yet know. And find what you have lost.” She loosened a leather cord with a triangle pendant from around her neck and slipped it over his head.

“Liwliwa, I can’t. You always wear this.” He held the amulet between his fingertips.

“Pshh, I have many. They all have a purpose.” She waved him on and turned back to the window. “Go now, they are coming.”

“You feel them?” He asked. Incredulous.

“I hear the chopper.” She smiled. “*Pumunta ngayon.*”

Beni J backed out of the room until the light from the window cast her into silhouette and he couldn’t see her features anymore. He ran out the door.

Outside, the sinking sun swathed an orange glow over the ocean.

“You coming?” Aly fell into step, gripping Beni J’s hand. They picked their way down a man-made sandy path between the ancient mangroves toward the shoreline. The A-Star helicopter flew in low. Painted boldly in the Philippine national flag, with an eight-rayed sun over bands of royal blue and scarlet, it roared as it rounded the point. The shorebirds scattered as the chopper alighted on the deserted expanse of beach in low tide. Beni J and Aly waited in the cover of the trees until the small door on the chopper swung

open. When they saw Nestor in the pilot seat motioning for them to approach, they crouched a run for it.

As soon as they were buckled into the bench seat behind him, Nestor lifted off with a twist of the control stick. Nestor pointed to the line of police cars in the distance racing toward Puka Beach.

It would be a two-hour flight to the Manila Domestic Airport in Pasay City.

“What are we going to do when we get there?” Aly shouted into the headset microphone.

“We should see who sent that letter.”

“What about the war chest? Don’t you think we should start with Uncle Leonardo?”

“No problem. The address on your letter? It’s the Grande Pearl Hotel in Makati City. Uncle owns it.”

## Chapter 12

Lucas Ongpin was a grateful man. He grew up one of the 100,000 or so children who roamed the streets every day from the floating filth of the Pasig River to the high walled mansions of Makati City. Lucas counted himself among the lucky. He didn't get run over or hit by vehicles selling sweets at street corners. His communion was begging and hustling for food. Even exposed to filth and pollution, he didn't fall prey to diseases. And somehow, he never lost basic dignity.

He felt blessed. His 'family' was the other children he banded with for companionship and mutual protection—a baby barkada. From them, Lucas learned to prey on street kids less savvy than himself. He perfected that trait, *lamangan*, and *pagsisinungaling*. He was the best hiding and lying. He was their star athlete. And only he escaped death.

He was saved after social workers caught up to him. They cleaned him up and returned him to his mother. Of course, she then sold him back out to a crime syndicate who'd forced him to beg, pickpocket, and be a lookout for their purposes. He'd run away and tried to rejoin his baby barkada. Instead, he returned in time to witness his friends being rounded up and disappeared. Local officials openly endorsed the execution-style killings. Vigilante death squads were hired to take shortcuts to justice. Because the criminal justice system was corrupt and didn't work.

He'd watched it all happen while crouched inside the safety of half an oil barrel. The slaying of his street brothers was swift. Single bullets to the temples. No words of goodbye, rather, their youthful lips hardened into indignant pouts. The fear in their eyes lingered longer than their breath until they dropped. Lucas knew his brothers could see him, but they didn't give him up out of pure love. He crossed himself and said a prayer when their malnourished bodies were thrown into the black stinking waters of the Pasig River. *Was it selfish that he pitied himself for being left behind?*

Once the vigilante's motorbikes pulled away, Lucas was alone in the deserted alley with silence and a faded and chipped mural of *Generala* Agueda Kahabagan. As forgotten as her mural, she'd been the only female General in the Philippine Revolutionary Army.

The image was of her sitting back on her feet with one wrist relaxed, and a cross in the other. La Generala's long hair was flowing in the same breeze as the torn Filipino Flag while a daunting storm gathered in the background. Her lips were full, the arches of her brow gracefully defined. Her hair fell in layers accentuating high cheekbones and fair skin. A true heroine in Lucas' eyes, the image he saw that evening was beatific. La Generala delivered him from despair.

Lucas stayed there that night and many others to follow. He dreamt of Agueda Kahabagan, dressed in a gauzy blouse draped off her shoulders, her pencil skirt tight at the knees revealing the ivory skin on her feminine calf. The Tagalog Joan of Arc, armed with a rifle and bolo. Brave in bloody combat against the brutish Spanish and American forces. Her uplifted gaze was illuminated each night by the light that spilled from a

brothel's dingy back windows. It turned out she was looking at Lucas' future. Rather than be a wretched victim of circumstance, pre-pubescent Lucas found wellbeing as a receptacle for countless pedophiles. He was eternally grateful to La Generala for guiding him to the safety of that brothel, because that's how he first met Leonardo Tantoco.

Once he felt the grip of this cultured man, Lucas was transported. Leonardo was sweet, gentle. He used lubrication and he eased into Lucas with tenderness. He liked to kiss. Leonardo's smooth skin, his pale and hairless Chinese complexion was unlike the usual American brute Lucas entertained on the narrow back room cot. He ingratiated himself to Leonardo; molded to him, extended his pleasure. Lucas opened his eyes to Leonardo. Liquid eyes that ached with love. He learned to be exactly what Leonardo needed on return occasions.

His love was so strong that he followed Leonardo home. He risked being beaten if he ever returned to the brothel, but Lucas only had eyes for Leonardo. Lucas squatted in the shadows at Leonardo's gargantuan iron gates until he was invited within the walls. He was washed and schooled.

Lucas lived so that he may service Leonardo Tantoco. To say he would die for Leonardo never needed to be expressed. Most of the time, he saw himself only a white rat in the peripheral vision of the taipan. Each day, he warmed the slick scales of the cobra waiting for his destruction, grateful for a few more hours of breath. He became Leonardo's plaything, his muse, and his henchman. He'd found his life calling. His street instincts melded exquisitely with the business of human trafficking. Emulating La Generala, Lucas led the unfortunate out of the oppression of Manila's streets.

If Leonardo was papa to the other children he took off the street, Lucas was *cuya*. He was the respected older brother, who enticed only the best unmarried street children into their fold. Some of their minions became overnight girls and boys and were hired out to the most expensive hotel rooms. The elite worked in their clubs. Others, as was their wish, were employed overseas. Under Lucas' guidance, Tantoco Enterprises exported labor to the Middle East and near east. Lucas refined a system to create identification and family history. It was as if each child was born of Leonardo and Lucas.

As Tantoco Enterprises expanded into properties spilling into Makati City, Lucas micromanaged each development like disco choreography on a Mylar-curtained stage. He reinvented Leonardo Tantoco and cleaned up his public life. Grande Pearl International was born and their trade in drugs and human trafficking went underground. Lucas was Leonardo's partner in all senses. His ladyboy, his brother, his lover, his Generala. In successes mostly, that is, never failures.

Lucas knew he wouldn't share this failure. It ate at Lucas that he couldn't provide Leonardo a true heir. This was Lucas' cross to bear. It only became heavier as Leonardo aged. Lucas knew Leonardo worried about the inevitable. It pained Lucas as he calmed his benefactor's thrashing through nights of sweat-soaked sleep.

Now Lucas was secretly cultivating the ultimate grace. Who better than to shepherd Grande Pearl International into the future than Leonardo's own niece? A Tantoco—Dr. Alejandra Tantoco—educated in European schools and in the United States of America. Untouched by Philippine corruption. Lucas had been watching her accomplishments ever since her half-brother, Beni J, had proved to be ungrateful and

untrustworthy. Alejandra was a fervent mestiza. It had been Lucas' plan to bring her back on his shoulders. Lucas was impressed by her fiery attitude in Los Angeles, but her reticence had been inconvenient. Then, she just disappeared. Now he needed to track her down to make his offer. Lucas was getting desperate. He intended to make the proposition more enticing, stronger. One she couldn't refuse. The family business was at stake. Through Lucas' careful guidance Alejandra Tantoco would lead Grande Pearl International to preeminence. Leonardo will be jubilant.

The Grande Pearl Resort in Makati City was the beacon of world-class luxury. Lucas was particularly proud of their flagship hotel. Through considerable influence, and bribes, he'd had the surrounding city streets fashioned into a walking, shopping district à la Beverly Hills' Rodeo Drive. Only vehicles passing the first gate and inspection could drive up to the secluded breezeway where armed guards secured the entrance. Lucas had returned quietly. He felt he needed to prepare himself before seeing Leonardo again. On his mind was the necessity to reengage contact with Aly as soon as possible. The offer needn't be meager. The business had so many levels that even with the vice business left behind they would all be wildly rich.

It was while pondering this fact that Lucas' other concern—finding her—melted into his wide clean-shaven grin. His mascara threatened to run from the tears of joy in his eyes. Lucas was looking right at Aly Tantoco. It was her image anyway, on the video surveillance monitor of the Grande Pearl reception desk. *Bahala Na. Now it gets interesting.*



## Chapter 13

On their approach, Metro Manila emerged from the dark open sea like an unexpected rescue line. It looked like any other city at night. But closer in, it seemed to lack pattern or order. Wide glowing highways divided the districts into irregular geometric shapes. There were logical districts, with modern edifices awash with electric light. These towered beside dimly lit communities that flattened and trailed out to the edges of darkness. The chopper flew low above the Pasig River that snaked through the city. Its banks were dotted by flickering bon fires where thousands squatted a bare existence. Shelters strung together by fraying tarps and scrap metal swayed in the helicopter's downwash. The chopper's landing at the domestic airport was sudden.

It had been Beni J's idea to take separate cars to the Grande Pearl Hotel. It was just as well for Aly, who needed to sort her thoughts. They hadn't spoken much on the helicopter ride over. Beni J had become sullen – cagey, even – since coming out and asking for the money.

“It's about \$45,000 American. I'll get you Lolo's war chest. Don't worry, I'll pay you back.” Beni J had said into his headset.

Aly had offered to help, but now she knew the depth of his weakness. The memory of ‘*Take care of your brother,*’ came to mind. How dare her father expect anything from her?

She admired an anthropologist at Yale, who wrote that money was the way that promises could be precisely quantified and therefore passed around. But who gets to make such promises? Her father? Didn't he exact a promise from her without giving her the choice of saying yes, or no? Taking care of her brother became a debt that she'd felt compelled to pay.

That colleague at Yale also said that money was invented as a way to sever the ties by completing the transactions. Unlike in the ancient barter system that existed like a circulatory system in a body, where needs and goods ebbed and flowed, money makes us separate bodies. Maybe money was just the way for Aly to separate from her past. The best way to help Beni J was to be willing to let him go.

*Why not?* Instead of depending on trust, they had something far more tangible. It would establish their relationship that they are irretrievably separate. Debt paid in full. And she'd get what she really came for, Lolo's War chest.

Aly would have to use the grant money from Jacob, but it was worth it. She had no doubts of this project's viability. Jacob had said he wanted to collaborate. This was for them. It was for her, but it was for them. Jacob can ride her coattails on this one.

Aly welcomed the quiet as the Nissan taxi crept along. Exhaustion was setting in. She leaned back into her seat. Traffic was at a standstill on Makati Avenue. Pedestrians were left to step off uneven sidewalks blocked by street vendors to pick their way around the gridlock. A melee of begging children pressed up to car windows. Except for things you'd only see in the Philippines, like the Jeepneys made from left over WWII military

vehicles or the signage in Tagalog, Aly felt she could have been anywhere in the world. She'd seen throngs of impoverished children forced to beg on streets in practically every city, every country, she'd ever been to. Their poverty didn't bother her. Manila seemed unremarkable, unlovable, really. Aly found it galling to think her father and brother would choose here, a place choked with the invisible and forgotten. Her prickly judgment made her mouth dry. Something Beni J said, "He didn't want me here," rang true. Their father hadn't wanted either of them to be here. She'd always known this.

Aly probably would have avoided it anyway. She could blame it on her mother, who'd had no good things to say about the years she'd worked in Asia. Her mother preferred Aly blend in among the highbred whites of European boarding schools. But it was easier for Aly to never attract attention, and to be as plain as possible. She'd rather been invisible, there.

Aly had never put much thought into what Manila would be like, but she'd expected the diaspora. Aly took a long view of humanity. She knew from ancient world cultures that this city would peak and perish like any other. Eventually, every society reaches its limits. Assimilation and change rarely happened without capitulation of values. Aly had never researched the Philippines directly, but she knew it was an abysmal political creation of colonizers, Western and Asian. The Spanish, Chinese, Japanese and the U.S.— all of these nations infected the Filipino existence. One would have to go deep into the untouched regions of the islands to find an original untainted culture. As a child, Aly had believed this was possible. In fact, those early lingering questions led her to

archaeology. Aly had faith in discoveries yet to be made. She was closer now, more than ever to making them herself.

Aly's driver bleated his horn behind a Honda stretch limo stuck halfway into The Grande Pearl Driveway. A ripped guard in dark blue commando gear emerged from the security kiosk to direct the limo through the multiple point turn. The guard's assault rifle dangled loosely on his shoulder. The driver continued to bleat his horn until he caught a withering look from the guard. This made the driver laugh.

"You staying here?" he asked Aly. "It's nice. They have the breakfast buffet."

"I guess so. If they have a room." The taxi lurched forward as soon as the road was clear. The car was dwarfed by dozens of limousines at the entrance. He stopped next to a manicured palm sprouting right out of white marble.

"You want I wait?" He watched for Aly's reaction in his rear view mirror. She shook her head.

"Better not to wait, I think."

"I'm Tino. Text me if you need me to come back." He handed her his name card with her change. The uniformed valet held open her door.

Aly carried her own bag to the reception desk. Even at night, the air conditioning in the lobby was a relief from the clinging mugginess outside. Each step into The Grande Pearl lobby was transmuting. With a whoosh of air pressure, the heavy glass doors shut out the chaos of central Makati. This made Aly very happy. She needed a room and lots of cash. But if she'd been in a hurry for anything when she'd arrived, her anxiety

dissipated into the luxury. The grubbiness of the Manila streets couldn't be further from where she was standing. Her eyes adjusted to the cool, indirect lighting. The towering white marbled interior revealed itself. She'd entered a biosphere – a self-contained ecosystem of extravagance. She made eye contact with the bow-tied bartender who was shaking a cocktail. Lithe female servers stood by in cardinal silk shifts with frog enclosures. They floated like dancers between the patrons enjoying after dinner drinks.

The old world atmosphere would have put Aly at ease if she didn't feel limp from perspiring all day. Self-conscious of her wrinkled clothes, Aly did what she'd done all over the world. She tried not to call attention to herself.

She'd hated to be left standing in the marble alcove at the front desk, unsure of how long her bank withdrawal would take. But their accommodations were astounding. An impeccable light-skinned man in a business suit returned to give her his full attention.

“Ms. Tantoco. We've been able to secure a draft from your U.S. bank for \$45,000 American—your two million Philippine pesos. We will have the notes drawn up shortly. Who will be the recipient?”

“Cash,” said Aly.

“Very good.”

He didn't even flinch, Aly noticed. Apparently, The Grande Pearl staff was accustomed to large sums being requested in the middle of the night. His manner wasn't warm, but self-possessed. As long as they gave her what she needed, she could tolerate a little arrogance.

“It will be just a few minutes. Our vice president of human resources asks that he have a word with you in his office. At your convenience.”

“Of course. Is this standard procedure?”

“No.” he said holding his smile. “He promises it will be brief.”

How privileged her world to request a small fortune and receive it on demand. Of course it represented all she had. Cleared her bank account as a matter of fact. And Jacob had only just deposited most of it for a very specific purpose. It was enough to secure what she had coveted all of her life.

*I will keep it for you. It will be yours someday.* Her father had always assured her. Why wouldn't she feel her Grandfather's war chest was rightfully hers. *It's the reason I became an anthropologist.* Until recently, it was yet another of her father's betrayals. She was ashamed of him, but the stories of her grandfather's heroism made her proud. He'd joined the American Army when only 16—he'd had to lie about his age—to fight on his own soil. After surrendering in the Battle of Bataan, he'd become one of the 75,000 prisoners of war ordered to march to the capital. Fearing execution, her grandfather had managed to strip off his uniform and slip away, blending in with the civilian population. His subsequent capture by the Japanese Army enslaved him in a labor camp. He was forced to work in a crumbling mine in the mountain provinces. As far as she'd been told, her grandfather had fallen down with Malaria and was left to die. If he hadn't been taken in and cared for by an *Ifugao* tribe he would have. He remained hidden with the mountain people and lived with them a while before coming down from the mountains, alone, and

returning to duty. Through the years, Aly had pondered her grandfather survival in the mountains. His was the kind of life force that Aly admired most in her Filipino bloodline.

Her grandfather's things had been promised to her. Fulfilling this dream would go a long way toward healing some unclosed wounds. Being honest with herself, it was the true reason she'd come to the Philippines. People and relationships were exhausting, her grandfather's things—carrying his proud legacy—was her reward. She wouldn't go home empty handed.

Beni J sat at the far end of the restaurant bar. From there, he could see anyone who walked in. Aly came in and sat beside him. She placed a hotel key card on top of the unmarked envelope of bank notes.

“Thanks,” Beni J said. “You kicking it?” He asked, turning slightly toward her.

Aly nodded.

“I'll be back,” said Beni J.

Trust didn't come easily to Aly. *Just this last time.*

## Chapter 14

Lucas' office continued the simple the purity of the Grande Pearl's white marbled lobby, its walls following the gentle arc of the building's exterior. Deep mahogany and creamy white upholstered furnishings matched those in the lobby in an understated complement to the sculptural beauty of his favorite flower. Lucas' vanity was embodied in the vertical garden of orchids that arrayed floor to ceiling over two thirds of the semi-circular room. In fact, Lucas personally designed the display. He believed that the beauty and guile of orchids paralleled his own life's journey. He was particularly enchanted that in the ruthless search for rare specimens orchid hunters encountered unimaginable hardships. Jungle diseases. Poisonous snakes. Lucas love to tell of eight orchid hunters who set out in the Philippines in 1901. One of whom had been eaten by a tiger. Another was burned alive by a rival. And five others simply vanished. The man who survived collected 7,000 orchid specimens. In Lucas' own collection there were hundreds of the most rare, cultivated for display in his office and throughout the Grande Pearl.

Lucas lowered himself behind the mahogany desk. Exhaling slowly through his capped teeth, he leaned his elbows onto the immaculate surface before him, closed his eyes, and prayed. It was all before him now. His empire would be infused with new blood. The Tantoco legacy would carry on through this infant century, God willing. Lucas focused all thought on his intended purpose but was increasingly aware of a stink



in the room. He hadn't time to shower since his flight from Los Angeles, however, this was far worse than offensive body odor. His breathing became shallow. He sucked in air through parted lips rejecting the stench, until he found himself too distracted to meditate. He suspected it was a new orchid acquired by one of his collecting specialists and implemented into his garden while he was away. Lucas admired orchids' ingenuity to attract pollinators. Their beauty mimicked insects and butterflies, sweet scents attracted bees. But it seemed the loveliest orchids from the rain forest emitted the most rancid odors to lure flies. Right now, as the room's temperature increased from his body warmth, the redolence of fresh fecal matter and rotting carrion mounted the air.

Lucas reached for the ambience controls of the room to set the air circulation on high, and dim the lights. Through the one-way glass overlooking the lobby, the flagship of the Tantoco empire was before him. It was time to look to the future.

He watched as Aly Tantoco was led to a seating area just outside of his office and left to wait. *Let her take it all in.* The Grande Pearl, Manila, with its palatial marble and glass exterior topped the Conde Nast Traveller's Hot List for three of the last five years. Lucas had memorized the magazine's glowing review: "*East meets West with a lavish yin yang of polished wood furnishings and crystal chandeliers flooding the entire ground floor lobby.*" A cocktail waitress brought Aly bottled water and a glass of ice and, at Aly's gesture, set them in on the side table. Lucas wondered whether she was accustomed to luxury. Her clothes were quite wilted, her bag small and worn. Aly shifted in her seat and watched the server depart before pouring herself a glass and taking long sips.

His in-house phone buzzed two... six, then seven times. Still, Lucas made no move to answer until it ceased. *What am I waiting for?* He sighed. For two decades plus it had been only him and Leonardo. A partnership unequalled. Not even Benicio, Leonardo's own brother could come between them. Lucas had made sure of it. Benicio had never shown his younger brother the respect he deserved. Benicio mocked Leonardo's vanity, and threatened to topple all that Leonardo and Lucas had built together. It disgusted Lucas how much Leonardo had wanted his brother to be CEO, or CFO, or President of the Board, or Vice President of something. If Benicio loved the U.S. so much he should have stayed there. Leonardo was even willing to let his older brother build up the business there. Any aspect. His duties would take him back half the year – all of it if he wanted to be near his children. Leonardo's prodigal niece and nephew. But Benicio balked and undermined Lucas himself. He threatened to expose them as drug smugglers and human traffickers. It was Lucas' secretary, Maleah, who'd given him proof. Benicio had fallen in love with her. That was a mistake. Maleah was a nothing from the high country with a head for numbers. She and her sister had been near starvation, servicing pedophiles in Subic Bay when Lucas plucked them from oblivion and clothed and educated them. It was a miraculous transformation, and for their loyalty they were given high positions – Lucas' front line. Benicio had gone too far poisoning her head with claims of love and freedom. Maleah belonged to Lucas outright, he'd bought her and had no intention to sell. He even supported the girls' family in the mountain province. By the time Lucas had begun to force Benicio out of Manila it was too late. Benicio left willingly but took Maleah with him. Even though Leonardo had

been devastated when his brother deserted him once again, he had made Lucas promise to leave Benicio be. Lucas obliged out of loyalty, but in that same right, Maleah owed Lucas. And he brought his vengeance down upon Maleah's family to destroy anything she and Benicio hoped to have with each other. No, Maleah had been too important for Lucas to *leave be*.

A chime from his blazer pocket sounded, rousing Lucas from his thoughts. This, he answered.

“Yes. Show her in.”

Before she set eyes on him, Lucas could see Aly composed herself into a confident figure, so tall and graceful. She was *la profesora oficial*, but she reminded him of La Generala.

“It's you!” Aly said. Her outburst came as an accusation.

Lucas bent toward her from the waist, smiling and keeping his eyes on Aly. He knew bowing was a little overkill, but he liked the ancient Filipino gesture instead of a western handshake. It disarmed the people he did business with.

“Dr. Tantoco, a pleasure to see you again. You should have informed me of your plans to visit the islands. I may have eased your passage.” Lucas lightly took her elbow to lead her to an armchair. He sat opposite her in an identical chair.

“I work for your Uncle.”

“Leonardo,” finished Aly.

“Yes. He has long wished to meet you. He is, not well. Not ill, but aging.” Lucas laughed and sat back in his chair. “Let’s face it, he is getting old.” Before Aly could speak, he continued. “He was unaware that I went to Los Angeles on his behalf. I wanted to convince you to meet with him.”

“Then you must have something to do with this letter as well?” Lucas withheld reply as Aly pulled the envelope from her bag. “I know from my brother this didn’t originate from him. You realize that your terms here are unacceptable.”

Lucas took the paper offered and skimmed down the legal document with a Grande Pearl Resort post box return address. He was going to need to look into *what the fuck this was* as soon as possible. He stayed calm but he could feel the heat rising from his open shirt collar. The stink was reactivating in the room. Judging by the way Aly slyly checked her shoes, he thought she noticed it, too.

“Of course, terms are negotiable. I’m glad you are at least willing to enter into a conversation,” Lucas said. He was relieved that Aly didn’t detect his discomfort.

“Look, I wasn’t seeking to be a Tantoco trustee or administrator. Nor do I expect anything from Tantoco holdings, especially my father’s. I have only a personal request. For sentimental reasons.”

Lucas nodded. “To be clear, you’ve already met with your brother, Benicio Junior?”

“Yes. Although this was totally unnecessary, I’d be willing to settle this and return to Los Angeles right now. The sooner, the better. As long as my personal request is fulfilled.”

Lucas sat back. She was talking very quickly and he needed to stay in control of this meeting, this time, before she got away again.

“Which is?” He let her consider his words. “Dr. Tantoco, what is it that you do want? Everyone has a price.”

“I can sign away any responsibility or rightful claim,” she emphasized. “But my father had always promised that I would inherit his father’s – my grandfather’s – personal war chest.”

“How much is that worth?”

“It’s not the money. My grandfather was a war prisoner. He survived the Bataan death march only to be recaptured by the Japanese and forced into labor for the rest of the war.”

“That’s impressive. Yes, Leonardo speaks of his father often. The war hero liberated at General MacArthur’s return.”

“My grandfather wasn’t liberated by the surge. He escaped into the mountains for the duration. The Japanese didn’t keep prisoners by that point in the war.”

“I can see this means a lot to you,” said Lucas. He was sensing an opportunity. “Personal possessions aside, perhaps we can compensate you in other ways. Leonardo Tantoco has multiple resources that may make up for...” Aly cut him off.

“Excuse me. Again, it’s not the money. I know it still exists. My father always told me my Grandfather guarded it with secrecy. You understand how valuable this would be to me. His war chest would hold his journal and maps, and medals. These are deeply held treasures.”

“Treasures?”

“Yes.” Aly sat back in her chair. A look from Lucas signaled the petite servant, who had been invisible at her station by the door, to pour a glass of water for his guest.

“Well if that is what you wish, I’m sure your Uncle Leonardo would be happy to ensure it stays in the family.”

Lucas maxed the volume controls on a Black-Eyed Peas track. He felt like dancing after Aly left for her suite. It was late. She agreed to meet with her Uncle Leonardo tomorrow. Lucas planned for it to be at their estate. There, in a perfectly orchestrated setting, he would continue his courtship. Maybe it wasn’t the money, but Aly was in for luxury that he was sure she had never before seen. Surely she’d appreciate the kind of sophistication and comforts the Philippines could offer. Lucas wanted her to experience it first, before he was to offer her the keys to the kingdom. It will be a homecoming for La Doña. And there would be oysters.

Now, looking over a copy of Aly's letter, he sent an email to resort security for the post box to be emptied and the contents brought to him. He tried the number to listen to the answering service. He'd have his assistant look into it in the morning. He wasn't sure that good-for-nothing, Beni J, didn't have something to do with it, actually. No matter. It was a curious little shake down, but it wouldn't go far.

Going over their conversation, Aly had distinctly used the word 'treasures,' when she spoke of her grandfather's journal, and his discovery of mountain tribes. He figured there were still probably thousands of people in Northern Luzon—Ilocos Norte—that have never been civilized. The thought made him shudder. The worst part of Filipino was being considered only a hair's breadth from cave dwelling *igorots*. This belief truly hindered international commerce in his eyes. Filipinos always had to work harder for respect.

*Treasures*, could it be? On his laptop Lucas Googled "gold," and "Yamashita." *Yamashita's Treasure*, was named for the Japanese general, known as 'The Tiger of Malaya.' It was World War II loot stolen in Southeast Asia by Japanese forces still believed to be hidden in caves, tunnels, and underground complexes in the Philippines. Most damning was a 1988 lawsuit filed against former president Marcos for theft and human rights abuses. It seems a treasure hunter came upon boxes of gold bullion among Japanese skeletal remains. But he claimed to have been tortured and thrown in jail by Marcos and all of his findings had been confiscated. Treasure hunters from around the world are still being lured by accounts that *Yamashita's Treasure* is still out there.

Aly said *treasures*. Lucas had heard that.

## Chapter 15

Outside the Grande Pearl, Beni J parted a hedge and J-walked to the Starbucks across the street. His awareness of anyone in close proximity was heightened, he knew who was a possible threat and who was a likely victim. He climbed into a taxi idling out front. Even at 11pm, the aircon in the car was on full blast to counter the humidity. Traffic was heavy. P. Burgos Street was less than two kilometers by foot up Makati Avenue, but that was a long way to carry cash in Metro Manila.

The streetlights glowed amber in the smog. Beni J's lungs struggled to reject the belching exhaust of the Jeepneys. He felt like he'd never left. Beni J considered Manila home. He'd dug in for over three years, tending bar at his Uncle's club at night. He persevered at med school until he graduated. By the time he finished wasn't even sure where that goal had even originated. His father probably wanted him to do it and it stuck. He earned it. He figured all that hard-earned knowledge fused with his evolving connection between the spiritual and physical world. He didn't plan on wasting it in the family business. Beni J thought he'd made that clear up front. Uncle Leonardo helped and eased his acceptance, but he did the work and remained his own man.

Beni J looked up to his uncle Leonardo for his passion to build something big. The Tantoco Export business, started by their grandfather, was built on *barangay* fisheries and local labor. Beni J's father was supposed to take over but, instead, left for



the United States. That's where Aly and Beni J were born. Leonardo stepped up in his older brother's place. But the beachy barangay could never be enough. The family business expanded as Leonardo's tastes for international luxury, Western business suits and European culture grew.

Leonardo's official biography from the Grande Pearl corporate website talked about his entrepreneurial accomplishments. It listed his presence on the boards of philanthropic organizations. And on Sundays, he was a lector at the very modern San Angelo's Cathedral in Makati. But Beni J's uncle was no choirboy. Beni J hadn't been let in on how his uncle got where he was, at least not officially, but he'd heard that Leonardo had a sexual appetite that only Manila could satisfy. He had frequented the seedier side of Metro Manila. His bio could have highlighted Leonardo's gifts as an organizer, of sorts. He created an underground network. He clothed and trained pliable youths willing to allow any invasion of their bodies for a place off the streets. His corral, that could please a client equally in the beery clubs or in the high rises of Makati itself, boosted his international trade and influence. By the time Beni J met his uncle, Leonardo was only a silent partner in the sex trade.

Even when Beni J worked the club, he insisted his responsibilities remained below line. He thought his uncle like it that way, but he had been wrong. Beni J was merely put on hold. It wasn't the money to the old man. Which made utang na loob even harder to square off with Uncle. Still, he had to think Uncle had a stronger bond with him. They were blood. That ought to count for something. If it weren't for that ladyboy Lucas, he could have just chilled. But that guy always had it in for him.

“Let me out in the next block.” Traffic was beginning to crawl again as they approached P. Burgos Street. Beni J always wondered how a street that was named after a martyred priest, who’d fought for the Philippines’ independence, had become Makati’s Red light district.

Beni J tucked the thick envelope of bank drafts in the front of his jeans and fell into step behind a couple of dwarves in black. He recognized the one wearing a doo rag and a gold earring. He was a midget boxer over at the *Ringside* that went by the name of Sulu the Pirate. Sulu still walked with a full swagger befitting his reputation. He bumped fists with Al, the moneychanger, who was always conveniently standing by to convert the foreign cash of impulsive perverts to pesos.

Ravenous sex-crazed guys slick with sweat gathered at the neon doorway of the popular *Ivory* for a free peek at *The Jungle* inside. Foot traffic was thick with tourists in town for the holidays. A glut of street carts pushing sizzling foodstuffs, counterfeit electronics and Christmas ornaments, forced oglers to walk onto the potholed street. *Mixed Nuts* was new, and decidedly gay. Five ladyboys posed in a line like Las Vegas showgirls along the neon lit front entrance. Beni J knew to be wary of toothy smiles like theirs. The better establishments like the *Bellagio* or *The Villa*, had armed guards on either side of the doorway. Beni J pushed his way through to the club where he spent most of his nights while living in Manila. *White Sands*, still owned by his uncle in some way or another, was one of the oldest on the strip.

A tight knot of guys in their 20’s were belligerent trying to talk their way in without a cover, despite the guards in blue commando uniforms right in front. Beni J

could see the bouncer's yellow-sleeved arms pushing the guys back. In a roar, a t-shirted drunk fell out of the throng but rolled back onto his feet. Before he could leap back in, Beni J placed his hands on the guy's shoulders. The guy reacted just as Beni J thought he would, spinning around with his elbows high and attempting a wide swing for Beni J's face. Beni J ducked the punch, and stayed on guard for another.

“You Australian?” Beni J asked.

“Yeah.”

“That's all I wanted to know,” said Beni J. He hefted all his might into the Aussie's gut and locked a chokehold around his neck before the guy could double over.

“You should show some respect around here,” Beni J whispered into his ear. He pushed the guy toward the street. The bouncer, who wasn't very tall or muscular but didn't need to be since he was backed by armed guards, came up from behind. He shoved the Aussie's companions after him.

“What was that for?” asked the bouncer.

“*Bastos, Ka!* Man,” said Beni J., pumped from the action. “That guy had no manners.” The bouncer nodded, but eyeballed Beni J, trying to figure him out. He waved down the armed guards and let Beni J into the lounge.

The showroom intensified Beni J's senses—it was just as he remembered it. The mirror-backed bar. The cobalt halogen spots illuminating the premium liquors. This had been his domain. The stage took up most of the low-ceilinged room. Pretty girls, mostly seven's or eight's, with the occasional nine, were evenly spaced on the stage. They were

all dressed alike in white spandex pants with beaded detail and low-cut spaghetti-strap tops. They swished their long straightened hair around their bare shoulders to the house music. The girls had a controlled look about them. According to management's wish, all the girls angled and thrust their hips, front knees cocked, toward the patrons closest to them. The pulsing colored lights seemed to work the guys nearest to the stage into a trancelike state. The lucky patrons in the booths were getting worked up in the shadows.

“Yeah,” nodded Beni J. *No other place like this in the world.* He ordered a San Miguel in the bottle and waited for the girls to swarm.

“Buy me a drink,” a girl in spandex cooed into his ear. Her hand ran up his thigh, settling onto his crotch. He placed his hand over hers, stopping it from going further.

“Sure.”

“You so big. I know what you carry.” At first, he was startled by her words. Liwliwa had said the same thing to him back on Boracay. Then he remembered the envelope of cash. Beni J took her hand and helped her down from her stool.

“I'll buy you two drinks, if you get me your Mamasan.”

Beni J was wondering why he'd been kept waiting so long. He was on his second beer, enjoying the spectacle of an obvious virgin to the go-go club scene being wrought into a frenzy, by two very pretty girls. The guy couldn't have been more than 20, clean cut in an open collared shirt. They danced nasty with him, cupping his hard-on through his jeans. It was unfortunate for him, that his goading friends were no better at watching

their own wallets. Beni J had mixed feelings for the guy being led by the two girls up the back stairs. They'd give him a good time, but he'd never be able to recall where all his money went. Beni J was still watching them when two imposing figures stepped in and blocked Beni J's view. The security guys wore dark polo shirts with "White Sands" embroidered on their pockets. Beni J downed the rest of his beer before he slipped off his stool and led the way around the stage. He could feel the two crowding him, bumping into him from time to time.

"Guys, I know my way," Beni J said over his shoulder. But they didn't back off. When one of them gripped Beni J's arm, he shrugged him off.

"Jesus, I came in, remember?" Apparently, these guys didn't know who he was. Or they did, and that wasn't a good thing. Beni J stood his ground a moment longer before he walked on up a flight of stairs toward the end of a hallway. Most of the club noise cut out as the fire door slammed shut. Even the dank sour smell was left behind.

"Go ahead," the bigger security guy said, gesturing to the door in front of them. Beni J let himself in.

The Mamasan's personal quarters smelled earthy. Not unpleasantly so, just from candles and joss stick burning sandalwood for hours. A *banig* sleeping mat of tightly woven grasses covered most of the floor with long body pillows stacked at one end. A multi-tiered water fountain gently flowed from the center of a low table. Mamasan, wrapped in the folds of a silk sarong, sat crossed legged on the floor.

“Beni J, I never believed you’d show your face here again,” Mamasan said. There was disappointment behind her soft accent.

Beni J thought she still looked good but her make up looked heavy in the lamplight. The eyeliner was drawn on thick with an upturned tail filling in for non-existent eyelashes. She’d probably applied in this style since she started as a go-go girl some years earlier. Now, it caked in her deepened creases, but it couldn’t completely cover the keloid scar that bisected her cheek from the bridge of her nose out toward her right ear.

“I came to get my bike,” he said.

“So why now?” She chose her words carefully. Beni J pulled out the envelope and offered it to her. Mamasan made no moves to take it.

“I want you to give this to my Uncle,” Beni J said. He set the envelope on the table. “There’s enough to pay him back. Everything I took. In full.”

“He’s not going to like that,” she said. She smiled, pausing to light a cigarette. She pointed for him to sit on the floor next to her. “He wants you, not your money. That’s how he gets you. He makes you. Then owns you. No one gets away.”

“I was never going to work for him.” Beni J got the feeling she was talking more about herself, than him, though.

“It hasn’t been easy since you took off. You broke his heart, I think.” Mamasan’s eyes were black. He couldn’t tell if her pupils were dilated, but Beni J knew she was high from the way she spoke. She sounded almost sympathetic. Something he’d rarely seen

while working for her. Beni J saw an opening to something that had always gnawed at him.

“Like my father did?” His words shifted the energy in their exchange.

“Everybody has a price to pay.”

“But my father did. He got away.” She waved her hand before her, blocking his insistence. He noticed a pattern on her arms that he’d never seen before.

“Everybody has a price to pay,” Mamasan repeated. “Utang na loob.”

“Did you know my father?”

“He was my brother-in-law.” She chuckled as he held back his surprise. A sardonic smile broke across her face. “I know you didn’t know that.” The smoke from Mamasan’s cigarette curled into the still air.

“Benicio took my sister.” Mamasan’s eyes dropped to the floor. She shuddered. “But when your Uncle Leonardo and Lucas found out, someone had to pay.” She pursed her lips into an uneven smile.

“You know what is *makaganti*?” she whispered.

“Revenge?”

Beni J knelt in front of her. Taking her hands in his, he lifted her arms in front of her face. Her wide sleeves fell back to her elbows. He could see the scars here were deeper, as if the original cuts probably hit bone in the wild slashing. The dimensionality of the welts glinted in the light like wide blades of grass blowing in one direction. She

watched him shadowed by her thin arms. Beni J could see that one long cut extended inline with the scar on her tearstained face.

“Where’ve you been?” Aly sat up in bed.

“Out there.” Beni J crossed the room to the floor-to-ceiling window to take in the panorama. A pink dawn looked as though it was being weighted down with yellowish smog.

“Sis, they are doing you up right. Just like they did me.” Beni J lowered himself across the foot of her king-sized bed. He smiled through exhaustion. Aly got up and headed for the bathroom.

“Isn’t ladyboy Lucas something?” he mumbled. “He acts like your uncle’s wife.”

“Ew, no, I didn’t know that,” said Aly, poking out of the bathroom door with her toothbrush. “I thought he was pleasant. A little creepy I guess.”

“Mind if I crash?”

“Do what you want,” she said, pulling on some shorts. “I’m going for a run.”

“Not safe.”

“I’ll use the gym then.” Aly yanked the tags off the running shoes she’d picked up in the lobby boutique. “I’m considering heading back to Los Angeles.”

“When?” Beni J coughed, but lay still with his arm draped across his forehead.

“As soon as I can. I can probably still make it to my boyfriend’s Christmas.”



“Boyfriend. I should have asked. That’s cool.” Beni J said.

“I’ll be meeting with Uncle Leonardo before I go. I’m waiting to hear what’s being arranged.”

“I can get you over there,” he said, curious to know what Lucas was up to. Beni J rolled over to look at her when she didn’t respond. “Don’t worry, I’m not trying to tag along. Anyway, I’m straight with Uncle. Or will be soon enough.” He stretched out face down and closed his eyes.

Beni J knew Aly was waiting for him to say more, but he didn’t have anything left.

## Chapter 16

It was Christmas Eve, and the childhood wish she'd whispered a lifetime ago to Santa was finally being fulfilled. Lolo's war chest would be hers. She'd heard from Lucas and would be meeting with him and Uncle Leonardo at their home. Lucas had assured her everything was ready. She planned to get on a plane to Los Angeles later that day. Getting back in time for Christmas was an apt reward for Jacob coming through for her so readily. She would return triumphant, laden with treasures.

She'd so overspent on gifts for Jacob, his niece, and sister, that she'd needed an extra bag to bring it all back to Los Angeles. Her keepsake would be her grandfather's World War II relics. But the leather *Coach* knockoff she was transferring her personal items into was an impulsive purchase.

"They won't even know it's a fake." The salesclerk had said. With her hair pulled back and understated makeup, she exuded modesty, except from her eyes, which seemed to challenge Aly.

Aly was against counterfeit goods. And the obsession with American brands was an unfortunate by-product of colonial mentality. But she was practically shamed into buying it by the self-possessed salesclerk. Aly had a hard time getting used to the

withering looks from Filipinas. None of them liked her much. Instead of the deferential treatment she'd expected, she was experiencing scorn.

She was disappointed that the hotel room was empty when she returned from shopping. Beni J was gone and so were his things. She was still hoping that he would show up. She'd wanted to tell Beni J in person about her arrangements with Lucas and Uncle Leonardo. Her brother would have to strike his own deal. Aly had to wonder if his disappearance indicated that he already had.

She gathered her few items remaining in the hotel room. Her toiletries, tooth guard to keep from clenching her jaw at night, and make up. Her few clothing items had been laundered and returned, pressed and hanging. Those, she rolled up in the plastic and stacked in layers on top of her sneakers in her new "Coach" backpack. At least she didn't have to feel embarrassed on her stopover with her uncle. She was sure Lucas would notice, he'd turned his nose up at the worn canvas bag she'd carried yesterday.

Rather than take the car offered by Lucas, Aly called Tino, the driver from the night before, to pick her up. Something told her to arrive on her own terms. There was some negotiating involved, after all.

She thought she saw Beni J watching her through the lobby windows. Or maybe not, there were more than a few guys like him hanging around. She climbed into Tino's Nissan and looked for him through the taxi's blackened windows as they pulled away, but didn't see him. What had she been expecting? That Beni J would give her a hug and walk her out? It was she who refused his escort to their Uncle Leonardo's. No need to

antagonize him or Lucas, especially if they have a history with Beni J.

Tino tapped his horn and nudged down the driveway to part the sea of limos that were idling end to end. Once on the street, traffic halted completely.

“Why aren’t we moving?”

“A blockade for Father Suarez. Police escort. He’s back from a healing mission in Canada.” Tino was looking for recognition in her face through the rear view mirror. “You know Father Suarez?”

“A priest?” Aly asked.

“Yes, a priest,” Tino smiled. “A healer. Very powerful. He’s doing the Christmas Eve *Misa de Gallo* tonight at the Cathedral. My auntie goes every year. She is a saint.”

Aly checked her watch.

“Don’t worry, you won’t be late,” he said. He adjusted his mirror so that they couldn’t see each other.

Aly sighed. She doubted this was true. She only had a few hours to meet with her Uncle Leonardo and Lucas. Considering traffic, it now felt silly that they couldn’t just meet at the Grande Pearl so she wouldn’t miss her flight. She was looking ahead at the line of cars, when a motorcycle came to a stop next to her window. The rider tapped the glass. It took a moment to register that it was Beni J. She lowered her window.

“You coming?”

“I don’t think so.”

“You didn’t say goodbye.”

“How long was I supposed to wait?”

“I thought I was taking you. I was gassing up the Yamaha.” Beni J revved the motor with a twist of his wrist. The exhaust blasted out in a wave of heat.

“I wanted to show you around.”

“You seriously want me to get on that thing?” Aly said. “I have baggage.”

Beni J looked in at the empty seat next to her.

“I have gifts in the trunk.”

“No problem,” Beni J said. He walked his bike forward with a foot on either side until he was even with Tino’s open window. “*Cumpadre*. You can meet us with her bag, no?”

“Yes sir,” Tino said to Beni J, checking for Aly’s approval in his rear view mirror. She nodded.

“He’s my brother.”

“How long will you take?” Asked Beni J. Tino cracked his neck and gestured at the traffic that strung on as far as they could see.

“Half hour, maybe more.”

“Perfect. I’m thinking you’d be better off doubling back and going the other direction from the Grande Pearl.”

“Yes sir, as soon as I can,” said Tino, accepting Beni J’s fistful of pesos. He started to open his car door but Aly let herself out.

“It’s okay, we got it,” said Beni J. He straightened out the bike, and switched his pack from his back to front. He handed her a helmet. With a hand on his shoulder, Aly climbed on and locked her arms around his middle. “Nice bag. Is that Coach?”

“Yes.”

The pavement sweltered beneath them. Aly was grateful for the breeze once they got moving. Beni J drove tentatively at first, rolling between the idling cars, then accelerated in the lane closest to the median. Her brother was a confident driver. She loved being free from the confinement of the taxi. Out in the open, she could see the disparate influences to the architecture from occupying countries. Spanish colonial, of course. Chinese statuary marking entrances to urban ruins. Unembellished American boxes erected post-war were dwarfed by new millennium concrete and glass skyscrapers. She saw some newer mixing and matching styles as hopeful signs of the nation striving for its own identity.

A few blocks up they saw the barricade. Uniformed officers in safety florescent green vests were elbow to elbow at the cross walk. Beni J rolled up even with the halted cars. The cross traffic was crawling. A crowd gathered in the street to watch and wave at the passing cars.

“Jesus, this is bad.” Beni J said over his shoulder.

“Tino said it was for a Father Suarez.”

“Father Suarez. Cool. The healer. I’ve never seen him.”

“You’d think it was the Pope,” Aly said.

“Nah, better. He’s Filipino.”

“You a believer?” She said, half-joking. “You’re a doctor.”

“Of course. I’m a believer because I’m a doctor,” he said. Aly waited for him to reveal the irony, but he didn’t. She never got into religious arguments. *Collective ignorance*, is what she heard and easily dismissed.

Beni J switched off the motor and let the string of limousines pass. Most of the crowd was focusing on white Lincoln Town Car. From their position they could see a black-sleeved arm extended out and waving. Men lifted children to their shoulders so they could see over the gathering. Beni J and Aly remained on the motorcycle, but Beni J walked them to the front as the crowd crushed forward. They could see him now, leaning as far out from his window as he could.

“Father Suarez!” The excitement rose as the man with a dazzling smile coasted past the crowd. His premature grey hair was a glowing crown in stark contrast to his caramel skin. He scanned the people, setting his eyes on everyone. When they passed over Aly and Beni J, she felt he looked right at her, and beamed. Aly turned to those around them, and was touched by their tears. Their outstretched hands pulled the air toward their hearts as if to accept his blessing. For a brief moment, she felt a part of the collective spirit. It was an assuredness from within that brought a smile to her lips.

Beni J revved his bike as a warning before he coasted through the crowd that was still a little dazed by Father Suarez's presence. He cruised behind the police escort for a minute before he weaved between the cars and slipped off the boulevard between two buildings. Not an alley, exactly, but a gap wide enough for other cycles and pedestrians to have established it as an oft-used cut-through. He deftly ambled in and accelerated. The space narrowed and enlarged as they passed buildings of varying heights and construction. The echo from the motorbike amplified off the hard surfaces. The pavement was uneven, mostly concrete extending from the adjacent foundations. And the hard-packed soil in between became increasingly softer and muddier as they progressed closer to a Pasig River squatters' colony. Aly could smell an earthiness, then a stench, like open sewage.

"Jesus," Aly shouted.

"Sorry sis. It's bad here, but I know where I'm going."

The low-lying buildings lacked uniformity. People had made homes in lean-tos. Each hovel sprouted from each other like playing cards of rusted metal sheeting, recycled plastic tarps, and cardboard roofs. Aly looked straight into windows without glass, entryways without doors. Human eyes of those sheltering from the harsh midday stared back. Their proximity unnerved Aly, but the people inside showed no reaction, apathetic to those moving in and out of their environs. Not even the children sought protections from their mothers nearby.



“Lovely tour. Where are you taking me?” Aly joked, but she felt like an intruder who hadn’t the decency to call before dropping in. The stink was overpowering. They had to slow where some of the settlers crowded the passageway. Shirtless and intoxicated young men attempted to touch Aly as they rode by. They sauntered aside as Beni J sped up.

“The oldest part of town. I can’t take the expressway with you along. It gets better.”

As promised, Beni J found a paved residential road. Street side, the buildings looked run down, but livable. No one was out in the heat, walking or otherwise, and there were few cars. For a while as they headed west, the air smelled slightly better than the usual oily car exhaust that hung over the city.

The road became more evenly paved for the increasing number of cars, tricycles, buses, and Jeepneys that appeared in the more developed neighborhoods. It looked like it had recently rained within the few square blocks. The heat was soupier, but Aly welcomed the sun tucking behind the sparse clouds.

“Where are we now??”

“Malaté. There are some good clubs here. Food too.”

“Are we near the water?” Aly thought she could hear seagulls.

“Getting there.” Beni J made a right to drive the waterfront along Roxas Boulevard.

The main shipping port spread out in the distance. Facing north, cargo ships and cranes dotted the glaring reflection of Manila Bay that fed into the South China Sea. The thoroughfare reminded Aly of Barcelona. An open market place spanned the parkway of green space. Pop up bistros from carts, street performers, and souvenir booths attracted a horde of shoppers. Aly greedily breathed in the port's fresh air.

"That's Luneta Park. Now it's named after José Rizal, the martyr." Beni J said of the monument as they cruised by.

"Nice."

"They held public executions there."

"Ugh."

"We don't really have a lot of time. Wanna see Malacañang Palace? The President still lives there." As they drew further away from the seaside, the traffic increased. The mention of time compressed upon Aly.

"No. Let's stop somewhere, though."

"Intramuros. The Walled City of the Spaniards."

"I believe it was Islamic first. In the late 1400's."

"You surprise me, Sis. I didn't think you knew anything of Philippines' History."

"Terrible," Aly said. She groaned as they neared the ancient defensive walls that were heavily damaged in World War II.

“Japanese Imperial Army bombing,” Beni J said. He pulled into a motorcycle parking spot behind some taxis.

“No, the restoration is terrible—not exactly seamless work. I think we saw better construction at the river.”

Aly slid off the back of the bike and walked toward the entrance. Beni J took off his helmet and set the kickstand. He caught up to her reading a permanent site map.

“Look at that building. Cement block painted white. It says here it used to be marble.”

“You want to go in?”

“No, let’s just walk around.”

They avoided the crush of tour groups buying souvenirs from sidewalk vendors. Street beggars reached out to anyone who would make eye contact. They came across entire families living on dilapidated wooden carts. Aly and Beni J walked the perimeter a while in the shadows of the 16<sup>th</sup> century fortified walls. They attracted an entourage of young beggars. A grimy hand was touching Aly’s thigh but she didn’t look down.

“I’m sure there have always been people living outside the walls, even as the city built up around them,” said Beni J. “Lots of things don’t get done around here like they should. You know. It’s corrupt.”

Beni J crossed over to a street cart. “Ah yes, *Halo Halo*. My treat.”

“That’s generous of you since my purse is lighter,” said Aly.

Beni J chuckled. He held up two fingers to the vendor. “The works.”

She noticed her brother wasn’t nearly as cagey as he had been in Boracay. He was obviously in his element.

The squat older man in a straw hat nodded and set out two clear plastic cups. Into each, he spooned in a syrupy coco jam, shreds of caramelized bananas, sweet red and white beans, purple ube mash, and gelatinous grated coconut. He scraped a wedged steel box with a razor blade over a block of ice, and dumped it full into each of the cups. Topping each cup with canned evaporated milk, he dropped in straws and long spoons. It only took a minute.

“Filipino Ice Cream,” Beni J handed Aly hers, and paid the man. They headed back in the direction of the parked motorcycle.

“My meeting with Uncle Leonardo is to get Lolo’s war chest,” Aly didn’t know how else to start. Beni J took long slurps of the shaved ice.

“I know you were trying to work something out with him. But I thought it would be easier to deal with him directly, if he was willing. I don’t know where this leaves you, but I’ll need the money back. It needs to be officially accounted for. You can wire it.”

“No problem.”

“What are you going to do with yourself?” Aly asked. She had resisted wanting to know specifics about her brother’s life until then.

“I’ll wire it. It’ll be waiting for you when you get to Los Angeles.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“I know.” Beni J walked on. He looked like a kid with his cup upside down and scooping the sweet fruits from the bottom. “I’m going to find Dad. It’s something I’ve been thinking about.”

“You sure he’s going to want to see you?”

“Dunno. I know more now than the last time I saw him. I think he was protecting me, in a way.” He sucked a sweet chunk up his straw. “I think he’s been visiting me in my dreams or something. He needs me. That’s all I can tell you.”

“Hmnn.” Aly hated when people talked about their dreams.

“It’s cool. I’m gonna reconnect.”

The beggar children surrounded them again as they got closer to the Intramuros main entrance, and followed them all the way back to Beni J’s bike.

“We’d better get going,” Beni J said, tossing his cup into an overflowing wastebasket before climbing onto the motorcycle.

They didn’t talk on the ride to their Uncle’s. Small doses worked for Aly. She really liked Beni J when he wasn’t a problem. Maybe they would keep in touch. Off the main boulevard, the street lanes widened and the palm trees lined the sidewalks on either side. No pedestrians, just unscalable walls and hedges. Beni J slowed to a stop in the shade of a Jacaranda tree. The chatter of birds and insects, and an over-powering sweet smell of nectar filled the air.

“That’s Uncle Leonardo’s right there.” He jutted his chin toward the middle of the block where a stone and brick estate wall was bisected by an ornate, two-lane width, iron gate.

“Looks like Graceland,” said Aly with a smile. “Not really. I’ve never been there. I don’t know why I said that.”

Beni J laughed. He dug into his backpack and pulled out a crumpled paper sack.

“Thanks for coming out,” said Beni J. “I didn’t know I needed you. But you came at a good time.” He handed her a pearl necklace. “We’ve never had Christmas together. It’s not much, but it’s a gold clasp. And real.”

Aly’s emotions caught in her throat. *Needing* wasn’t something she was prone to ever say.

“Thanks, I actually got something for you, too.” She took out a flat rectangular package wrapped in brown paper. “I found it in the university store at the mall.”

He unwrapped a textbook with an antique map on the front. The cover read, *Transnationalism and Ancient Cultural Connectivity*, by Dr. Alejandra Tantoco, University of California Press.

“Outstanding, Sis. Here, sign it.”

“It’s out of date. There’s supposed to be a new edition.”

“I had no idea. I think Dad would be proud. Like he always was.”

“Yeah, right,” she said.

“You’re a hard act to follow.”

The screech of cicadas cut through the still, midday air. The narrow width of shade over Aly and Beni J was diminishing, and the heat was beginning to bear down.

“Where is that guy?” Beni J asked.

“I was wondering the same thing.” It felt to Aly that there wasn’t much more to say. A taxi turned onto the street and proceeded slowly toward them.

“That’s him,” said Aly. She shouldered her bag and stepped up to give her brother a hug. “Don’t be a stranger.”

“Take care, Sis. Thanks for everything.” Aly was touched by his sincerity. She caught that he was holding back his emotions. She was, too. This goodbye felt so different than the last time. When they’d last parted, it had felt like all that was left was an expanse too deep, too far. And with little possibility to cross. Now there was hope. She’d see him again. Maybe a lot. If things went well, she’d be back soon with an expedition. Perhaps he could work on her team as a medic. She’d like that.

She left him sitting on his motorcycle and approached the taxi as it neared Uncle Leonardo’s gate. She’d only gotten half way when two black sedans came speeding from the opposite direction to overtake Tino’s taxi on either side. There was a swirl of skinny jeans and black tees as four guys, moving with dancers’ precision, jumped out of the cars and tried to open the cab’s back doors. They peered into the darkened windows of the back seat while pulling Tino out of the car.

Aly froze. There was shouting to her left and she looked to see armed guards gathered inside Uncle Leonardo's front gate. They fired shots into the air as they waited for the gates to swing slowly inward.

Aly was out in the open street. And no one had yet seen her.