

Silhouettes
of
MARCUS MORTELL

KHIARA LAUREA






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Cover Photo by **Mykie Ibarra, Mt. Telakawa. 2016.**

Content warnings: Mention of miscarriage and death of a loved one

For you.

*May you find the courage to face and
travel the world to find your purpose,
your passion, and your heart. And may you
always be true to who you are.*

FOREWORD

I was once asked which of my stories was rooted in my heart. Without thinking much about it, I said, “The story about this photographer who did not care about fame, but was so passionate about capturing the beauty of life and the world through his camera.”

This is that story.

I first conceptualized it with my best friend, *Mykie Ibarra*, almost nine years ago. We were at a coffee shop for work, drowning ourselves in caffeine. Back then, he was animatedly telling me about his best travels around the country and showing me his photos. I asked why he didn’t set up a blog to showcase his beautiful work; he said he didn’t want to be known for them—at least not yet. But he had always wanted to share them with the world.

I knew he needed to, so I wrote about him. Here’s an excerpt of my blog entry in 2014, where I also put up some of his photos as a tribute to how he had inspired me.

I always say that inspiration comes in many forms. Yet most of the time, I forget what it actually means.

As a writer, I force myself to look at the world differently. It is a gift, as many people say, but for someone who doesn’t have the luxury of time, or someone who has had too many experiences that contradict the saying ‘life is what you make it to be,’ it is a gift waiting to be unwrapped.

In the second half of 2013, a sudden and unexpected change happened in my life. I moved on to a new job while writing my novels, and met quite a few people who were expected to leave a mark. One of them was a man I never thought I would come to know as a great friend. And wouldn’t you know it... He shared an interest I had long buried in search for what I thought I needed—storytelling. Through him, I found myself inspired to write differently...and, of course, see the world in a new light.

Mykie Ibarra is not the typical artist, creative thinker, or director. Of the many things one could describe a person in love with the arts,



he is but the quiet type. Then again, you can never judge a person by what your eyes could see, let alone what your ears could hear; whenever you listen to them talk or joke around. I often think one would be happier to know Mykie more by what his photos reveal, and perhaps learn that the heart could feel just by perceiving.

I am not sure why he does not wish to set up a blog (Mykie, you are too modest), but I hope he won't hate me for putting up some of the photographs I think could win him his deserved recognition as a photographer.

[...]

I have always wanted to travel. It is something that I don't have that much resources for, but something I want to push for this year. Maybe I will start with Sagada. He once said to me that I have to travel alone and explore my own country, doing it for myself rather than for the goal of forgetting about this pain I am going through. I think I am going to do that...but with friends, for starters. Baby steps.

Perhaps then, I would see the world differently, feel my life differently, and treat others differently.

- *Eyes Behind Shutter: A Look at Mykie's View of the World (January 2014)*

The idea came to me at dawn, and I told him about it the next day at the same coffee shop. He helped me through the story. With a smirk, might I add, because he knew I based Marcus Mortell on him.

My Marcus Mortell had always been Mykie. We travelled together for work years ago, in search of people to feature in a coffee table book, and in all our journeys, he made me feel different. Introduced me to the world in a different light. Urged me to get out of my comfort zone. To travel. To search for my purpose and push for my passions—to write and to take photographs.

When we fell in love, I did all of that. With him. And our cameras.

Thank you, Mykie. This book is for you.



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The *Photographers' Club of Tarlac*, a club I highly respect. I joined without technical knowledge—just passion for capturing moments—and you took me in. To the members who became my friends until now—*CJ Melegrito, Bryan Briones, Kevin Tan, Spice Canlas, Cherry Canlas, and Angelo Alexis Barroga*—you helped me through my journey;

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Michella, my sister in many lifetimes. I will never get tired of saying this: thank you for pushing me to become the best version of myself, to be better each passing day. I love you for it, and for every birthing pain we share, all for the purpose of our dreams;

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My Scorpio Guide, you keep me going; and

The Lord Almighty, our Divine Source, who makes everything possible. Who keeps me going. Who stands by me no matter what. Thank You! All my successes are for You.



PROLOGUE

One look.

That was all it took to realize this was exactly what he came to this town for. A purple-orange sky that boasted the bright round sun, painfully making its way down the horizon for its final hours. Its faint golden glow, lining the gray clouds that scattered thinly overhead. And there was the sea, the waves inevitably crashed quietly onto shore.

At this time of the afternoon, when the world seemed to prepare for a warm evening's rest, no one would guess men still went out to fish. That was why he was here. He wanted to see them, out and aboard their traditional fishing boats, casting trawls in the hopes of a week's worth of catch. And then take a picture of them.

Almost an hour of gearing up and reading what little light might be left to accomplish his task, he punched exposure settings onto his camera. He couldn't have been more patient, waiting for that boat to cross his frame so it looked like a dark cast of two men—one seated and another holding the paddle while he stood—in the middle of the wide sea, just below the burning sun. At his subject's perfect angle, he released his shutter and breathed out, more than satisfied at the thought that he had once again captured a perfect moment for all the world to see.

Perfect.

Just perfect.

That was what they all thought of the photographs on his blog. Perfect landscapes. Perfect candid moments. Perfect shapes and colors. Each photo was as perfect as he had orchestrated. And he wanted people to feel that way. So they could revel in the beauty that was life. So they could see the world the way he saw it. Pure and untainted.

And how did they repay him for sharing the world with them? By wanting a piece of his life. By wanting to expose who he really was. By destroying the last bit of heaven he had built for himself—the freedom to live his days as he pleased, without having anyone connect his photos to the story of his life.

Let's put a face to the name, they begged. One after another, emails came, disrespecting the boundaries he had set, pushing him to leave traces instead of clues. For whom? Well, it sometimes made him wonder.



“Who is Marcus Mortell?”

Silence.

“Well? Who is he?”

Silence. Again.

“We should have answered that by now!”

“We’ve been searching for him for a couple of months now, Anthony!”

“Search harder, Stella!”

“I have a lead,” Stella said.

Anthony groaned. “I don’t need leads. I need Marcus Mortell!”

Stella turned away from Anthony and looked at me, breathing deeply.

Notwithstanding the pressure that came with this assignment, my stay with *Tints and Shades Magazine*—the only external magazine affiliated with Berkeley-Reagan University or BRU—still remained the best job I could think of. It had been my only job since my years of juggling between college life and my student assistant hours, right through graduation, but I knew nothing would compare.

Eight years of triple hard work as a writer and then as a Features Editor, I was now on my way to becoming the Senior Editor. Sort of. Hopefully. If only I could prove that I now deserved it. That I was ready. Again.

And this was my chance.

My immediate boss and college friend, Anthony Reyes, who sat across from me at the conference table with a familiar indignant look on his face, was the Executive Editor who called for this urgent editors’ meeting. Apparently, *Tints and Shades Press* owner and *TSM* Editor-in-Chief and founder Kaileen Dimaculangan-Castillo wasn’t happy about how my team handled the Mortell project.

On the outside, I was devastated. Pride stepped on, I was half-angry at Stella and Jojo. But deep inside, I was rejoicing. Again, this was my shot. If anybody asked me how that would give me the step I needed to get promoted, the answer was simple. I’d volunteer to do it myself, because everyone else had given up.

I couldn’t remember the last time this room had felt this dense, despite the many times our meetings extended to late hours for



agonizing brainstorming. Today in mid-September at 2 p.m., even with the air-conditioning unit at full blast, Anthony's mood took away the least speck of draft. Pressure was finally taking its toll, and no one could blame him. It was Kaileen and her husband Migz themselves who gave this assignment.

It was more of a challenge, really. On the magazine's tenth anniversary in December, the ultimate publishing duo wanted to exhibit a decade's worth of BRU stories. In it would be photos and videos that once captured the heart of the country. A throwback of the best feature stories that showed the world how BRU played a vital role in pushing the nation forward. And it wasn't just about economics and business. BRU was also high on culture, people, and the arts. Things the magazine was known for. People read *TSM* because of these. Stories of hope, struggles, and victories, stories of pain and joy. Stories of love and passion for life. Stories that were often seen in novels and in film, and yet so real when on *TSM*.

It would've been easy. If not for the dream highlight and new feature—Marcus Mortell.

Marcus Mortell.

God, I was beginning to hate the name, hearing it echoed around the office for months now. Even in my sleep, I dreamed of it and of the man who held a camera to a face no one knew. As I looked at Stella though, I reminded myself it wasn't me who was dead beat. While they had been scouring the corners of Metro Manila, I had been conveniently buried behind piles of paperwork.

"We can't lose sight of this. Other than the fact that it's our mandate to feature everything BRU-related around the country, it's what we're good at. We find BRU people. We feature success stories. We are not just some magazine; we are *Tints and Shades*!" Anthony threw photographs on the conference table. "Find him."

Stella let out a heavy sigh of annoyance and turned to me. "I've been away from my desk, Katalina. I can't let part of the section fall because of Mortell. I need to stay for at least a couple of weeks. I have other BRU people I need to track down and feature."

I nodded. Exactly the words I needed from her to open my window.

Clearing my throat, I shifted on my seat and picked up the closest Mortell photograph on the table. "We can't let this guy go. If other magazines find him first, we will break our promise to the people believing in BRU, and we'll lose our prestige."

Stella pressed her lips into a thin line.

I stared at the photograph on my hand—a wonderful nipa hut by a mango tree. Under it was a carabao and its owner. It was marvelous. A waste, if we didn't find this guy. "I'm sorry. But this is an important task."

"You find him then, Kat," Anthony said.

Bingo.



"You've always been the best at this. You're the editor. I think it's time you pick up a heavy load," he added. When I smiled, he understood me. "The rest of you can go back to your stations. Kat and I will talk." As everyone moved, he went to the office window and drew in the shades. "I know that you've caught wind of that promotion."

I rose from my seat. "I deserve it. You know that."

He sat down and let out a sigh. I could sense his lack of energy. Tired and restless, he brought his palms to his face. "I do know that. And Kaileen and Migz know that. But you pushed the opportunity away three times, Kat. Three times!"

"I won't push it away now. I'm ready. You're right. It's been offered three times in the past four years. That senior editor position is as good as mine." And it should be, now that Gina, the one who took the post for a couple of years, had resigned.

"So you're committed to this now?"

"Yes."

"And you'll do whatever it takes."

"Absolutely."

"You'll have a team."

"A team." I looked outside, scanning the tables that lined up, thinking who among my staff didn't have that much work to do. "I can—"

"You and Eric dela Rosa."

I jerked my head back. "Eric from the IT-Multimedia Department?"

"Yes. You're both from BRU so that might help. Also, he handles our digital archives and our website. I'm sure he's adept at research. And he can analyze photographs."

I scoffed, crossing my arms in front of me. "Is this a joke? A part of a test?"

"No."

"Then how the hell am I supposed to do this right if I don't have the right team backing me up?" I expected to be accompanied by Jojo and Mandy. Or perhaps the BRU students on internship here at the magazine and at the printing press division.

"Ask Kaileen and Migz."

"I don't understand."

"Neither do I. But what you need to understand is that if you find Marcus Mortell, you'll finally get promoted."

"But if I work on this for the sake of that promotion, I want to work—"

"See, that's where you're wrong again, Kat. Don't do this for the sake of getting promoted." He rose from his seat and heaved a sigh. "You do deserve this. Really. As a boss, I want it more for you. But Kat, please do it for the right reason."

I didn't answer.

"Do it for yourself. Do it...because you need to find yourself, as well."



* * * *

*Dear Diary,**I can still feel it.**In the morning, it never takes long to realize I'm alone. The apartment is empty, with just me and my things, me and the chores. Everything seems to have returned to how it used to be years ago, way back before Butch.**Only, life feels less of a life and the world feels less of a world.**What is there for us in life, anyway?**People say we have our own purposes, our own destinies, and that we write our own journeys. Each moment in our lives, a mark that makes our life the way it is. One chapter in life after another, book after book, until we reach the end.*

Kaileen was in her office the following day, staring at her computer. Migz was beside her, browsing through the month's issue. Probably getting bored, he reached for her hand, bringing the back of its palm to his lips. She smiled, savoring the moment, and then she kissed him. I knew, because I was sitting across the room from them, and they didn't seem to care.

"Katalina is here," Kaileen hissed.

They glanced at me with naughty grins, and I smiled, tearing away my gaze. I was about to excuse myself but Eric barged into the office and walked straight to the couple's table.

"Eric, our man!" Migz didn't appear the least bit annoyed. "The weekend seemed to have done you some good."

"Why does it have to be me?"

"Or not."

"You're doing it on purpose!" Eric accused.

There was a momentary silence in the room before Migz cleared his throat and nodded towards me. It was only then that Eric turned, realizing he was not alone with his old friends.

Turning red on his cheeks, he cleared his throat. "Hello, Miss Villegas."

"Join us, Katalina," Kaileen urged. She was the only one in the office who called me by my full name.

I approached the three and quietly sat down.

"We chose you both for this assignment," Kaileen began, shifting to her well-known pointed look. "Katalina has been wasting her time, rewriting other people's articles when she could be out there, searching for the mysterious Marcus Mortell and writing her own. While you, Eric, have been wasting your time and energy, handling our web page and its archive, when you could be helping her conquer mountains and seas again, scratching travel destinations off your bucket list."

"That's personal," Eric complained.

"No." Migz remained still, staring at his friend. "It's an assignment."

"I'm not in any post where you can give me such an assignment."

Migz shrugged. "On the contrary, you signed on your contract that you're ready to accept any assignment the company deems necessary to reach its goals."

"You know why I don't travel anymore," Eric whispered between gritted teeth.



Ignoring him, Kaileen continued. "It'll just be the two of you. We'll assign you an assistant, should you need one. I highly doubt it, though."

"What about Jojo?" I asked, seeing the opportunity to bring in someone from my team.

But before Kaileen could answer, Eric cut in. "I'm the only one who knows the ins and outs of the website and our archives. I can't leave my team!"

"You have trained Greg well," Kaileen told him, pride apparent in her voice.

"Why me?" Eric asked again, his hands balled into a fist. "I have that...*thing*." He paused and looked at me for a moment, before turning back to them. "And I don't want to leave the office again. Do you even remember the last time I took a long vacation and our system crashed?"

Migz laughed. "Took you months to repair everything."

Eric cocked his head to the side.

Migz shook his head. "That's not going to happen while you're gone. Trust me. But we need you in the assignment. No one knows strategic traveling like you do, Eric. Plus, you and Kat here are also from BRU. You'll know how to handle this assignment." He then turned his laptop to us. "He leaves clues as to where he's been."

Marcus Mortell captioned his travel photos as if he spoke personally to the one viewing it. I had been captivated by his work in more ways than one since I began viewing his site.

"He posts clues that are easily deciphered if people only searched the internet harder," Eric said.

"Which you do so well."

Okay. So they seemed sold more on Eric's ability to find Marcus than they were on mine. "So why do I need to go?"

Kaileen rose from her seat and smiled. "Because you're up for promotion. Albeit, for the fourth time. This is your final chance to prove you are meant to be Senior Editor."

Yep. Trust Kaileen to blurt things out just as easily.

"Oh, Jesus!" Eric threw his hands in the air. "So this is about her?"

Migz laughed. "No. It's about the two of you. You want to go back to your old ways, don't you?"

"That is personal," Eric growled.

Migz had one side of his lips curved, seemingly unaffected.

Eric eyed them disapprovingly. "You do this, and I'm quitting."

Kaileen placed her hand on Eric's shoulder. He pulled away and pressed his palms against his head, groaning.

"Please. We're doing this for a reason. You know that," Kaileen said.

Eric left his seat and paced about the room. "Fine. You know what, fine. I'll do this." He raised both his hands in surrender after a moment. "But let's make this clear. If Marcus doesn't reveal himself—if we can't even get as close to convincing him to show his true identity to the world—then it's over. This case is closed, no matter what your sister requests of us. Do we have a deal?"



Eric was referring to Kaileen's sister, Donabelle Dimaculangan-Reagan—wife of the famous Zion Reagan, one of the heirs to half of the BRU fortune.

Kaileed nodded with a victorious smile.

Eric cocked his head to the side and crossed his arms to his chest. "You seem pretty convinced, Kaileen. What's up?"

Kaileen giggled. "Nothing. I just know you can do it. The both of you."

Eric turned to me and let out what seemed to be a mocking smile. He then headed towards the door. "Let me prepare my team. We can start the day after tomorrow."

And the door banged behind him.

I definitely wasn't expecting that.

Kaileen walked back to her seat, and I inched closer to her table. "Honestly, I don't need anyone to help me but my own team. I mean, I can ask Jojo to go with me."

I couldn't have Eric in this project dragging me down.

Kaileen shook her head. "But that's the deal. It's either you do it with Eric or you don't do it at all. The project is over."

Window for promotion closed.

"Oh, it's okay. I can do it."

How hard could it be to work with Eric, right?

"I'm sure you can. It's like this job is made for you. You're smart. You're beautiful. You sure as hell would be able to convince Marcus Mortell to reveal himself to the world through *Tints and Shades Magazine*. And you're well-traveled—"

I coughed, hearing her words.

"Something wrong?" Migz asked.

"No, no." I cleared my throat. "I just got something down my throat. Anyways, okay. I'll do it." Apparently, there was no way around this. "But please, can you tell me why Eric?"

Kaileen and Migz looked at each other. Eventually, it was Migz, who replied. "Because he needs to feel alive once more."

As I left and closed the door behind me after our meeting, I wondered if they knew how much I needed to feel the same way, too.

* * * *

Dear Diary,

I have always wanted to travel. As I look at Mortell's photographs, I see the world I have been missing. I have kept myself away from what I can really do, much more from everything I want. What have I been doing with my life, lying to everyone about my travels, when in fact I had wasted years, boring myself to death with Butch?

That has always been my problem. When I share a life, I share a whole world. And I always end up giving everything. No, wait. That's wrong. I should say: I always end up having nothing left.



At lunchtime the following day, I tried looking for Eric at the cafeteria and the smoking area, where they said he usually went out to think, but he wasn't there. Trying my luck, I went to the IT-Multimedia department, a floor down from my office, but he had just gone out for coffee.

I asked Greg if he was busy, and the reply came simply as, "Very. Eric's attention has been divided, so I took most of his tasks." He sighed and went to Eric's desk, placing a pile of documents and envelopes beside Eric's baseball cap.

Taking the hint, I nodded and headed back to my office, where I resumed endorsements with Mandy, my assistant, until nearly six in the evening. Then I began with the mound of documents that needed my signature, hoping I would be done before 10 p.m., while munching on my takeout.

I heard footsteps from the staircase and then some clattering at the pantry moments later. Seeing no other lights on above any staff cubicle, my heart pounded. The rustling became louder, giving me the creeps since the lights were turned off. Worried that some random outsider had gone in, while I was alone on the floor, I slowly headed towards the doorway.

I can do this.

I wasn't even across the way when I heard a soft popping sound and felt something hit my cheek.

Of course, I screamed.

"What the hell!" a male voice said.

The lights turned on.

"Eric!"

"What the hell are you doing, scaring me like that?" He raked his hair and turned away from me, a bottle of soda in his hand.

"Scared you? You're the one who scared me! Why didn't you switch the lights on?" I let out heavy breaths as I found myself a seat. "God!"

"I didn't think you'd notice me here. I thought there was something I could grab from the fridge. Migz usually leaves some of his packed goods behind when he doesn't like them."

"I have food. You can join me," I said, then caught myself, surprised at how easily I had asked.

He looked over my shoulder, where my open office door displayed



my takeouts on my table. "Looks like a party to me."

Looking at everything I had ordered now, it did look like I ordered for four people. "No. It's just me."

"You always eat like that?"

"No," I replied immediately. "I was...hungry."

He didn't speak.

"If you're staying late like me, you might as well eat." I offered once more.

Clearing his throat, he nodded and followed me.

We ate in silence for a while, especially since he seemed to enjoy the sisig so much. But once in a while, I stole a glance at him to take a profile. For once, the rumors were true. Eric dela Rosa was indeed a handsome guy. He had long lashes that blanketed over his chocolate brown eyes. And his jaw could be listed as a dangerous weapon somewhere, sharp as it was.

His skin was almost olive. His nose bridged perfectly from between his round eyes and rested above his wide lips.

He downed the last of his soda and stood up. Perfect timing, too, since I was able to get a view of his toned arms.

"*That* was a good dinner. Which just made me crave for beer," he said. "I'll go for a few bottles later. You want to come?"

The last time I had been invited for beer, I turned down the guy outright, excusing myself for non-existent reasons. This time, I lagged.

"I still have to go back to my office and finish something. We can go in a couple of hours. You think you'll be ready by then?"

"Oh. Uh." I wanted to. But this was Eric. The guy they said didn't care about anyone or anything much at the office. Why would I go with him?

"We'll talk about work, don't worry."

So yeah, he was going to be my partner. But still. "Okay."

Satisfied, he left.

Deciding to go with him wasn't what bothered me, though. It was Stella's text message in the next instant: *My latest lead is a lawyer. Jared Salazar. You should check him out first. He might be our guy.*



I had been to Mor-tukam Bar once with Butch a few years ago, and boy, was that the worst date of my life. Butch saw some of his high school friends, and we joined them. It was only supposed to be for a few bottles, but Butch began talking with another guy about a certain Vera from their high school class. Apparently, she was Butch's ex, and he had forgotten that I was there when he started asking how she was doing.

I hadn't forgotten that night.

Shaking off memories, I followed Eric to a table by the bar. He was greeted by a staff member and the bartender, who even gave him a playful salute and asked if he'd have his usual.

"Yes," he replied. Then to me, he asked, "Beer? We could get a bucket."

"Sure." I hoped he wasn't the type of guy who pushed girls into drinking beyond their limits. I knew mine. Any more than three bottles would knock the sense out of me. "So. About Marcus Mortell."

As I watched him shift on his seat, I couldn't say any more to it. It was a task he didn't want for personal reasons. But while I didn't want to come off as too pushy about it, the task would get me ahead. We needed to plan.

"If we find him, we find him. If not, then maybe he's really not the type to want to be found," he said.

Apparently, I had to put more effort into finding the guy. Which was the exact plan Kaileen and Migz had for us. Eric would take me to where he thought Mortell would be, and I'd convince Mortell to attend our gala.

A waiter brought prawn chips to our table. "Compliments of Mor-tukam," he announced to my surprise, as he served our bucket of beer.

Reaching into the bucket, he popped open two bottles and gave one to me.

"Thanks," I said. "And tonight we're going for how many bottles?"

He clicked his bottle onto mine. "Tonight...I'm going to *drink*. I'm not so sure about you."

"I think two bottles are enough for me."

"Suit yourself." He raised his bottle again and downed his beer.

Silence.

"Okay, so where do we start tomorrow?"

"We can talk about that tomorrow," he replied.



I heaved a long sigh and cleared my throat, shifting on my seat. When he asked me to come here with him, he told me we would be talking about work. We *should* talk about work. “We should go back to BRU. I need to research about him.”

He nodded, eyes still on the band. And I saw it—how the music slowly took him away from me to some place I knew I wouldn’t be able to reach. He was within his personal space—somewhere a coworker like me wasn’t exactly invited.

“Shouldn’t Migz help with the search?”

“He has tried,” Eric said, matter-of-factly. His eyes now drifted from the band to the bottle on his hand. “He and Kaileen had set out to find him long before he was even this famous. They found out that he was from BRU. How that was, I wasn’t sure. They worked on it quietly to get a head start, not give anything away to mainstream media. I think Mortell once replied to one of Kaileen’s emails, but nothing after that.”

“Why did they stop?”

“Kaileen got pregnant with their second kid.”

I nodded. “Is that the work they’re talking about, where Kaileen almost had a miscarriage?”

Eric shot me a look.

I shrugged my shoulders. “People talk in the office.”

“People should mind their own business.”

“We’re in the business of knowing, Eric. And if you’re worried that I’d talk, I won’t. I’m not that kind of person.”

He had nothing to say to that. He simply looked at me, as if in deep thought, and then turned his gaze back to the band. “Yes. It’s *that* work.”

A moment of silence passed before I was able to get my next window for a work-related conversation. But he didn’t engage much.

Nonetheless, he seemed to enjoy the night, seeing the way he spoke with the many people who had stopped by our table intentionally just to greet him. He introduced me to each as his teammate, and I was immensely glad. Maybe he just didn’t want to talk about work right now.

So for the rest of the evening, I pushed aside the thoughts of work and focused on the fact that I was out with a guy I would be traveling with. And before I knew it, I was already on my fourth bottle of beer, loudly discussing music and movies with him.



I enjoyed last night. So I couldn't exactly blame Eric for my being late this morning. Or at least, I couldn't blame him to his face. I hadn't been this late for work for ages. The last time I was, was for the exact same reason. I was as drunk as hell from my brother's birthday, and that was back in college.

At five to ten, Eric barged into my office and laid down a piece of paper on my desk. On it was an address for a photography club and a name. *Jared Salazar, President.*

"Oh, you got it."

He shrugged and handed me another piece of paper. "I also called a friend last night to ask if he knew clubs outside of Metro Manila with BRU graduates. He gave me a list and this one," he began, pointing at a specific name, "is the club with the least number of members from BRU."

"Why the least number?" I narrowed my eyes.

"Because if he was someone who'd hide, he wouldn't go to one that'd stand out."

Great point. "Well, thank you for this. I fell asleep immediately after I got home."

"Someone got drunk last night," he said in a singsong voice.

"Okay, we promised not to talk about last night."

Chuckling, he raised his hands in surrender. "So what's our plan?"

Oh, he had no idea how relieved and glad I was that he'd let me take the lead on this one. It would be so much easier for the both of us. "I'd say we go to Jared first."

He narrowed his eyes. "You know, I was actually wondering last night who the guy is, so I checked his profile." He paused, as if waiting for me to say something. When I didn't, he continued. "I don't think he's our guy, Kat."

"And why is that?"

If he had valid reasons for saying such, I couldn't tell, because he outright changed the topic.

"So this is our itinerary." He reached for the paper in my hand and turned it over. On the other side of it was a detailed list of places we'll be visiting and the people we'll be speaking with around Luzon.

"This is for the next four weeks," I said, rather impressed.

"Yeah, so?"



I was definitely beginning to understand now why the couple wanted him on this assignment. "Did you make this last night, too?"

"This morning," he replied. "I woke up at 5 a.m. and drafted it. Then I came to the office at 7 a.m., because they said Miss Features Editor usually comes in *that* early. When she still wasn't here, well, I slept on my desk. And voilà!"

"Thank you," was all I could say.

Eric started heading for the door. "Well, that'll cost you lunch."

Ha! Lunch was nothing if he'd make the task this easy every day. I wouldn't have to spend much time out on the field like Stella did.

And I'd get promoted.

"Let's go see that Jared Salazar first. I'll call him right now," he finally said, before disappearing behind the closed door.



Eric and I took his pickup truck and headed straight to the address Jared gave him during their earlier call. It led us to a midrise building along the national highway, just a few blocks from the *TSM* office. I couldn't help but stare at it, my eyes drawn to the third floor, where the Vision State Photography Club signage was.

"Good luck," he said and turned off his engine.

"Wait, you're not coming with me?"

"Hey, I'm just the driver."

"You owe me," I snapped at him as I climbed out of his truck.

"Dinner it is," he said, triumph apparent in his voice.

I rolled my eyes at him and jogged to the building.

A man about Eric's age was at the receiving area when I entered the office. He looked up at me as I opened the door and narrowed his eyes. "Can I help you?"

"Hi. I'm looking for Jared Salazar."

He cocked his head to the side, as if gauging me. "Are you Kat Villegas?"

"Yes, I am."

He nodded and arranged a few documents behind the reception counter and then approached me with a hand held up for a shake. "I'm Jared. Someone called me about you."

"Yes, that was Eric, my work partner."

Jared's grip on my hand was firm. "Yes. He briefed me a bit."

"So you must already know why I'm here."

He led me to a coffee table in the corner of the room, where I could see Eric through the glass windows, standing by his truck across the street, watching the vehicles passing him by.

"Okay, so what about Marcus Mortell?"

"We have reason to believe that he belongs to your club," I said, wanting to blurt out the truth that we suspected it was him. Of course I hadn't done my research yet, but I trusted Stella. She was a great researcher-writer.

"And what reason is that?" Jared asked.

"Well, this is a prestigious club for photographers. I believe such a talent would spring from such a group."

He smiled, revealing a dimple on his left cheek, and shook his head. "Miss Villegas, there is no need to kiss our butts. I assure you, we have



heard it all. And I can assure you that we are none of the bullshit praises they tell us when they try to squeeze information out of us." He leaned back against the chair. "The media has been pestering us, claiming they had sources who revealed he's one of us. And that we're hiding him."

"It's possible." So we weren't the only ones who thought it was him.

"You're right. It is. *But* he isn't part of this club. I wish he was, but no, he's not. I can assure you also that even if he is, we will never talk." Jared motioned to a younger girl, who had just entered the reception area. "Coffee, please?"

"Is there anyone else other than you that I could talk to?"

Let's see what you mean with 'we will never talk.'

"No one is authorized to speak with anyone about this but me."

"And your Public Relations Officer is...?"

"Not in the country at the moment." He smiled, as if finding the conversation amusing. "Miss Villegas, we're really wasting our time."

The young girl returned with two cups of coffee and placed a cup for each of us. "Thank you," I said, nodding at her, and she smiled at me.

"Can I have a list of your members?"

"We have a website, Miss Villegas—"

"Please," I cut in, giving him my best smile. I kind of expected this, so I brushed my teeth three times before Eric and I left. "Call me Kat."

"Kat. Is that short for Katherine?"

"Katalina."

"Katalina." My name sounded so melodic with his voice. So foreign. A version I hadn't heard of before. "Nice name."

"Thank you."

"It suits you." He was trying to draw me away from the subject. His dimple made sure of it.

I cleared my throat and looked outside the window, seeing Eric on his phone. "And your members' names. Are they *all* on your website?"

"Yes."

"Any possibility that one might have slipped out?"

"Not that I know of. And what are you doing, trying to find him? *Tints and Shades* is supposed to be all about BRU."

"Well, he is from BRU."

Jared chuckled and shook his head, as if in disbelief. "Yes, the media claims he is from BRU. I am from BRU, Kat, and I can tell right away that he isn't."

"Why would you say that?"

"You're from BRU."

"Proudly. So how do you know?"

"We just do. And I know you know what I mean. It's like we were raised in a very specific way that we can tell who is like us from a crowd of thousands."

On the contrary, we weren't. We were raised to be ourselves.

"Plus. I can tell you're BRU, just by seeing how incredibly charming



you are," he added.

I took a sip of my coffee and looked away. Jared seemed to be enjoying our little chitchat. As cocky as he was, though, there was something in the way he smiled and looked at me with those light brown eyes that told me I could trust him.

"Ah, well. Who am I to judge? Maybe he is from BRU. Maybe he isn't. Tell you what," he began, dropping both his hands on the chair's armrests. "I'm going to give you a list of all the names—just the names—of our members. Old and new. Search the net or look for them in person. I won't hold you back. But know that I'm only doing it because you're doing it for BRU. To help raise our alma mater's prestige even higher."

"Of course. Thank you."

Jared headed to a room behind the reception counter. True to his word, when he returned, he handed me a folder with a photocopied list of names.

"You will find my name on that," he said.

Jared Salazar. President and Co-Founder, Vision State Photography.

"Thank you so much" I reached for his hand and he took mine with both of his. "I'll...check your website."

"The club's site is listed there. I personally don't have one."

"But you're on Facebook."

"Yes."

"I'll check you out."

He chuckled, and I caught it way too late.

"I mean I'll check your account." *I better get going.* "It was nice meeting you, Mr. Salazar."

"You can call me Jared."

"Jared." I started heading for the door, wondering how easily distracted he got me to be. It was a diversion, and I could smell it even as I stepped out into the elevator, punching in the GF button. Holding on to the hand rails, I leaned back and blew out soft breaths. *That* experience was solid proof that I was getting rusty.

The elevator dinged, and I stepped out, rushing to get some warm outdoor air. But before I could even exit the building, Jared was running down the stairs, calling out my name.

When he reached me, he scratched the back of his head. "There's this parade of the Philippine League of International Schools a couple of weeks from now. Anniversary for the founding of the league. Maybe you can search for Marcus Mortell there. It's not going to be easy, though. A lot of photographers will be attending to take pictures."

"So Marcus will be there?"

Jared chuckled. "I didn't say that."

"Okay." I felt as if he was leading me somewhere.

"But you know, it's going to take a whole lot of work to find him."

I nodded. "I'm ready."

At that, he licked his lips and smiled. "I think you are."



“Where to?” Eric asked as soon as I climbed his truck.

The photo club’s office was the only destination we had on our itinerary today. Which was perfect, because we’ll have time to investigate the members’ social accounts and visit them in their homes, if necessary.

“Back to the office,” I said.

He raised an eyebrow and looked at me, while slowly resting his forearm on the wheel. “Didn’t you get anything we could work on?”

“I did. Jared gave me a list of their members.”

“And?”

“And we’ll be working around that.”

Eric brought his truck’s engine to life. “Let’s go to a coffee shop. I know a place.”

I hoped it was one of those that wouldn’t be crowded even at lunch time. We had twenty-seven people to research. The least we needed were distractions and people going about our business. My worst fear was to have the actual Marcus Mortell, sitting at a table beside us, watching us work and listening to our plan without us realizing it.

About twenty minutes off the city proper, where more conventional local establishments lined up the subdivision fronts, was the ten-year-old Espinosa’s Café, owned by Chris Espinosa, a member of the photography club we were researching on.

“Here?” I asked, getting off his truck and admiring the rustic feel of the facade.

He nodded. “Here.”

Eric chose the longest table at the farthest end of the cafe, setting his laptop immediately upon being seated by a waitress, who, as you would have guessed, knew him by first name. I saw a glint in her eyes as she greeted him.

“I suppose you’re a regular here, too,” I whispered.

He smiled at me, and then turned to order black coffee for himself. I asked for hazelnut cappuccino, which always drove me nuts into working tirelessly.

Setting my own laptop up, I admired the ornate wood-and-iron cafe. Everywhere I turned was a feature of time that had passed, and I felt satisfaction just staring at the decor.



Eric must have caught it as he looked at me, turned to where I was looking, and smiled.

I asked the waitress if the owner was likely to come in today. That should be more casual than having to go to his house.

"He usually comes in the late afternoon," Eric answered for her.

"And you know him?"

He nodded. "And he's Migz's friend."

Of course.

Migz was a photographer. Even without membership to any club, he knew a lot of the great ones out there. Which made me wonder what we were doing here. If he and Kaileen weren't able to find him, what were the chances that Eric and I would?

"I need you to check each of those member's websites and check Marcus's site. Compare the photographs and see if you can find resemblances in their styles, their shooting locations...anything you can find."

Eric lowered the screen of his laptop and leaned against the table towards me. "You might be forgetting that I still have the website and the company systems to check on remotely. I'm busy."

I sighed in disbelief. "And I can't do this alone."

"Sure you can. And you're not alone; you're with me."

"Ha. Ha. Get on it." I pushed the list of the club members closer to him. "Let's split the names. I'll start with Jared."

"Thought so." He smirked, which I completely ignored.

"Let's just get right on this and find that *guy* as fast as we could."

Eric stared at me for a moment, completely shutting his screen down, as if deep in thought.

"What?" I asked, conscious at the gaze.

"I'm just wondering why Kaileen believes so much that you could convince Marcus Mortell to meet you personally."

It was a gift Kaileen believed I had, albeit something I really never accounted for. Back when I was still dating Butch, Kaileen had been the first and only person to warn me of impending self-destruction that came with too much love. As any young adult would have done, I ignored her. Having been raised wonderfully by parents who loved me so, I knew I had control over the balance of my heart and mind. She smiled, respecting my confidence, and went on training me to be an editor.

While I was beyond grateful for what she was willing to do for me, I had little interest in climbing the company ladder that quickly. I was in no hurry, I told her often, and so I let most of the opportunities pass me by, ergo including three chances for a promotion. I wanted more freedom to live my life.

I wanted to savor what little time Butch and I had beyond our jobs, acting like a plain housewife as soon as I got home. It was what *he* needed, I told myself then, because he was an architect, and he



worked hard even at home. Had I known he'd use it against me, saying I didn't prepare for my future enough, I would have taken every trip and conference Kaileen set me up for. I would have scratched items off my bucket list.

Then again, perhaps this was how it should happen. For after Butch's elaborate scheme to breakup with me, I buried myself into my job. And here I was again. Up for promotion. Hoping to finally travel, the way I always lied to my family about.

"I'm going to pretend to not have heard that." I stared right back at Eric. He smiled and fired up his laptop again, right before pulling the list closer to him. "We need to go to BRU."

"You can just cross the road from our office to get there. You don't need me there."

"Of course I do. I need your photo archiving skills."

"What do you need that for?"

"I'm planning to check all the yearbooks and the BRU MAC materials for it for the past ten years."

He laughed. "You don't mean that."

"I do!"

"No. You don't." He leaned forward against the table and cleared his throat. "Kat, who he was years ago may not be who he is now."

"I'm taking my chances."

"Then check Yo!BRU. Decades worth of photos and student activities there."

He was right. Yo! BRU was Berkeley-Reagan University's very own social media platform for all its graduates. "We'll check. But nothing beats being there physically."

He shrugged and leaned back in his seat. "Suit yourself. But I'm not going with you."

"What? Why?"

"Because I don't want to go. It's as simple as that."

I cocked my head to the side. "Bad college experiences?"

"No. I had the best college experiences anyone could ask for. But, like any other college dude, I have memories I want to leave behind. So no."

I knew nothing of Eric from my BRU days. He graduated way ahead of me, with Migz. Kaileen was younger than them. I had heard from around the office that Eric was a well-traveled man, compelled by his broken dream of becoming a journalist. They said he was interested in cultures and people, and places no one had ever been to. That he stopped because his blogger girlfriend from college had died from a disease she got from one of their travels. But that one was just a rumor.

"I don't get it. He takes photographs of people and places as a hobby, puts them up on his site and accepts recognition, but hides under a pseudonym. Why would someone with such talent do that?"

Eric shrugged. "Maybe he really doesn't want to be known



personally. Artists do that. You know, allow their work to tell the world who they are. He seems to be that kind of person.”

Looking at Eric up close now, I began to understand more deeply why Migz wanted him on this assignment. There was definitely a lot more in him than he chose to be.



Jared Salazar's social media and Yo!BRU accounts—aptly bearing the name 'Atty. Jared Salazar'—showed no trace of his love for photography, nor any hint of his love for the arts. Anyone who didn't know he co-founded a prestigious photography club would mistake him for the serious corporate lawyer he projected himself to be online. A few pictures of him at the gym and in places his work took him to, and he was immediately a different man. But as I was certain he was the same man I spoke with at their office, I hit the Add Friend button, knowing he would accept.

"Jared is from BRU," I said. "Do you know him?"

"I remember him now. He's from Reagan. I was at Berkeley then. Same year," Eric replied.

"So Migz knows him?"

Eric shrugged. "Possibly. Since Jared's a lawyer, he must have been in the social science programs. Migz was in the arts."

Finishing what was left of my pasta, I pondered on the disparity between Jared's lives. The line drawn between seemed perceptibly thick enough to ensure the partition did its part, hiding the artist behind the corporate man.

In the next few hours, I worked on Jared's profile without telling Eric. I most definitely agreed with Stella that Jared was a great prime suspect, albeit with only his non-obscured double life as our basis. I was on his page, repeatedly searching for clues I believed I would find.

And somehow, I wished his family photos at home or anywhere with different people in his life would have framed photographs taken by Marcus Mortell in the background. That his laptop would be open somewhere, and I'd see Marcus Mortell's site being updated with amazing photographs. That Jared would open the door to his secret life for me through his pages.

"Chris!" Eric's voice threw me off, and I turned to where Eric was looking at.

A man who looked like he was in his late thirties entered the café, the afternoon sun seemingly giving him an orange glow. It looked like pride, for it was easy to set him apart from any regular customer who came in and left.

"Hey, Eric!" Chris Espinosa walked straight to us in his simple white shirt and jeans, a smile on his face. He was gripping a small, old-



looking camera on one hand and his car keys on the other. "About time you forgot about your busy life and had coffee."

Eric chuckled as they shook hands.

Chris towered over the edge of our long table and turned to me.

"This is Kat, my colleague."

"Hi." I extended my hand to him.

Chris took it gracefully. "I take it back. You didn't escape your busy work life. You brought it here. Traitor!"

Eric smiled and offered the seat next to him. "Have coffee with us. We need something from you."

"And what might that be?" Chris motioned for coffee from his staff and sat down.

"We're actually working on Marcus Mortell," Eric replied.

"Ha! That endless search for a guy that doesn't really exist." He placed his camera on top of the table and reached for the coffee that had just arrived.

I narrowed my eyes at Chris, who, if seated beside Jared somewhere, looked so much more like a photographer. His camera was one dead giveaway. The tattoo around his biceps of a roll of film, with images on it, was the next big clue. So as far as hiding was concerned, Chris made no effort whatsoever to conceal the fact that he was a photographer. He seemed proud of it.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"It could be a group of photographers, for all we know." And then, as if remembering something, he turned to Eric. "We could do that, you know?"

Startled, Eric turned to him with narrowed eyes. "Do what?"

"Travel again. You write about culture and people and whatever it is you always love to write about, and I'll shoot. I've been meaning to do that. It's not just for me personally, but for the business."

Eric slowly shook his head. "If not for this assignment, I wouldn't be traveling. You know that."

"Oh, come on. Just like how we used to."

Eric smiled. "If things turn out well with this project, we'll see."

"Great! I'm going to talk to Migz about it," Chris said finally.

"I'm sure he'll love it," Eric replied, as he marked a name on the list with an 'X.'



*D*ear Diary,

There have been times, most often when I'm alone, that I tempt myself with the idea of going to where anything can begin. I can forget about my life here in this city, find another place where I could start a new life, and build a new home. But I fear that in losing my career and this empty apartment, I lose my quiet life. And so I stay. Never moving forward.

* * * *

It was my mother who cried the loudest when I left home for college. Because she knew me. She knew that miles away in the country's capital, I would enjoy everything, and I wouldn't be homesick. That I would go where my new life would take me.

I was like my grandmother and my grandfather, who lived their lives traveling around the globe the moment they fell for each other. Like them, I wanted to see the world. And they knew I would.

For the years I was at BRU, majoring in communication arts, I joined as many student organizations, seminars and skills competitions as I could, just so I could travel. These initiatives had taken me around Asia. I wasn't the most outgoing person, but I loved being in places and meeting different people.

Until I met Butch. Who believed that traveling only drained us financially and took away the best of what we worked so hard for. Who believed that meeting people, who wouldn't so much help our future, didn't deserve a minute of our lives. Who believed that life was nothing if not taken too seriously.

And so I stopped, because I believed him for some time.

For the most part of my belief, I hated the way I felt. I started avoiding my grandparents whenever they went home, because then I would have to lie about my latest adventures or my next big plans. My travel diary, which once contained bus tickets, candy wrappers and restaurant napkins, now had about six years worth of lies.

I hated the fact that I stopped listening to my grandpa's stories of places only real travelers—as distinguished from tourists—knew about, and the people they met.



I hated how I started to forget. And I started to hate the fact that I stood aimlessly between the person I once was and the person I wanted to become.

For all this, I hated that I believed Butch. And I hated myself, because I had known he was wrong about such belief even before he was gone, and I had let it go on.

Now that I had forgiven myself, it was time I moved on.



It took about a hundred combined text messages and calls and online messages to convince Eric to go. Even with his short yes last night, I still had to call him in his office early in the morning just to remind him.

If there was one thing a returning BRU graduate loved about the campus, it was that almost nothing had changed over time, except the technology it housed. There was still the grandeur of the old British-American buildings and the wonderful gardens at World Park, which always invoked magical feelings. There was still the chaos of students, especially the ones actively promoting their advocacies wherever.

And, lucky me, there was still Dean George Whitman of the Office of Student Affairs. A little older from the years of service, but still kicking.

"About time you both showed up," he said, with his ever-gentle blue eyes behind thick glasses, as soon as we walked through his office doors.

"You were expecting *Tints and Shades*, Dean?" I asked, inhaling the familiar and-tobacco smell of his office, which had always given me a feeling of comfort and serenity.

Dean smiled. "I've been expecting *you* both."

I narrowed my eyes in confusion.

Dean nodded at the chairs in front of him. Eric and I sat opposite each other.

"How are you holding up?" Dean asked him.

Eric looked outside the window, sighed and swallowed hard. "I'm good."

Somehow, I understood what it was they were talking about. I heard from one of the many rumors about Eric that he and his girlfriend went to Dean Whitman once to ask him to be one of the godfathers in their wedding.

Of course, that didn't happen.

Dean Whitman nodded and shifted his attention to me. "Katalina. TSM staff had been coming in and out of my office in your place for years. I dreamed of the day you, yourself, would return for a project."

Since getting promoted from staff to Features Editor, I hadn't left my office. "I apologize, Dean. But here I am." *Up for promotion. Again.*

"And what do you have so far?"

Ashamed to admit that we had nothing, I cleared my throat. And then smiled.



Dean shifted his gaze from me to Eric. "Hmmm. I thought so." Taking a deep breath, he nodded. "Well, I can assure you he is from BRU."

"You know him?" I almost snapped my spine, sitting at attention.

Dean smiled. "I think I know him."

"Oh, great!" I sighed in relief. "Can you lead us to your prospect?"

"No."

Okay. I kind of expected that.

"What good would everything that Reagan had taught you do if you can't do this on your own?" Dean Whitman rested against the back of his chair and crossed his arms before him. "Or has the years taken away every value and wisdom your dear BRU has imparted in you?"

Yes. Trust Dean Whitman to always do what he's great at. Guidance. *Proper* guidance. No spoon-feeding and no bullshit.

The last time I was in this office as a student was during my senior year. Dean pulled me out of a class to inform me that I was needed for a coffee table book project. One which showcased different BRU Talents. He insisted that I handled the interview sessions and write-ups of the introverts. The ones who rarely went out of their dorm rooms, but had a lot to share with the university. I successfully accomplished the assignment, albeit scratched and beaten.

Eric rose from his seat. "You don't mind if we look around, do you, Dean?"

Dean shrugged, pointing at the plastic cards on our belly. "No, since you have your Visitor badges."

"Thanks, Dean. We'll give you updates."

"I'm sure you will. Good luck on your journey ahead," he said, and Eric nodded. He then turned to me. "You will be back. And you both will ask me something."

In the eyes of non-BRU students, Dean Whitman was a weird old man. He said things that almost always sounded like a riddle, and he did things differently. Extremely unconventionally. Some people said it was because he was old. But others said it was because he was too wise, that he knew almost everything. I believed the latter.

"We will," I replied, reaching out over the table for a shake.

As if ready for it, he clasped mine with both of his hands and nodded. "You are perfect for this job, Katalina."

"Thanks, Dean."

The magical thing about Dean Whitman's office was that the sweet smell of his tobacco and the wooden furniture slowly faded away when you left, replaced by a positive feeling instead. That positive feeling always happened to be what I needed at the moment. Like right now. I was certain that the job, indeed, was something only I could accomplish. And that I'd get promoted soon.

"So where to?" Eric asked as we stepped out of the Admin Building.

"The BRU MAC office."



"Of course."

The BRU Media Arts Club was known all over the country for its wide reach. BRU made sure it had high-tech radio-television satellites that catered not only its own students, staff, and their families through its internal channel, but also its partner communities, some non-government organizations, and the general public through its external channel. It was the best place on campus to start looking.

So first things first. A ride to get there.

BRU was so huge that it had e-jeeepneys, like small buses, going around the campus. I wanted to ride one. I had had my fair share of youthful and happy memories in it, which I wanted to relive. So I ran to the side of the road to catch the blue-violet-gray machine coming our way. But Eric didn't follow.

"Eric, come on!" I waved at him.

"I want to walk," he replied, shouting a bit because of our distance. "Don't you?"

"No."

"Live a little, Katalina," he said, as if knowing what I was up to. "I mean right now. In this moment. Walk with me."

"But—"

"Trust me?"

With eyes like his, I couldn't help but nod and let the e-jeeepney pass me by.



“What else do we have on our itinerary?” I asked Eric.

We’d just finished interviewing every single member of BRU MAC present in their office when we arrived more than an hour ago. Not one of them had given us a clue we could use. Most of them were annoyed. This, after all, wasn’t their first interview about Marcus. It wasn’t even their second. Some of them simply tried stirring the conversation to themselves. Eric literally cursed and dragged me out, realizing we were wasting our time.

“Why don’t we toss the itinerary for today? We can wing it,” he said, putting his hands inside his pockets. “Let’s go to Bayanihan Hall. I miss going there for coffee.”

“Time is of the essence, Eric. If we wing it, we might miss a lot of things. You should know that. You made the itinerary.”

He bobbed his head side-to-side. “I know, I know. But just for today. Besides, Dean Whitman has already confirmed that he’s BRU, and that he believes you can and will find him. I have a feeling that you’re closer to the goal than you think. So can we please chill?”

I didn’t have the strength to argue with him, with the heat of the morning sun grazing our skins. Nodding, I followed his lead.

Bayanihan Hall was the industrial-looking commercial building inside BRU. As it housed student and alumni businesses, it was the one place in the campus that changed a lot at least once a year, so there was always something new to see when we returned to school every August.

We went inside Vulgar Burgers. Eric said they had the best patties in town, and he knew because, according to him, he often asked Greg to buy him some. As *TSM* employees and former students, we were allowed to enter this hall without a Visitor’s badge through the roadside access gates.

“You’re not going to taste the burger?” Eric asked, when I ordered a salad.

“Cholesterol won’t do me good.” Just looking at how huge the patties were, my heart was already giving me imaginary pains.

Eric chuckled, paid the bill, and went to the east wall of the place. A wall that didn’t change no matter the business that occupied the space. We looked at the framed photographs there. I didn’t know most of them. Some, I only knew because they were the popular kids.



But there was a photo with two people in them that caught my attention the most. Eric and his girl. They did look great together.

"Do you miss her?" I asked, my voice soft.

He dismissed the conversation by turning away from me and choosing a table at the center of the place, where the students were noisy. Not the best place to talk about anything serious.

"Yeah, I shouldn't have asked," I said, as I took the seat across the table from him. "I'm sorry."

"I didn't say anything."

"I felt it."

He laughed. Not the reaction I was expecting, but I took it. "And you're an empath, I guess?"

Finding no offense whatsoever, I chuckled. "Yes. I am. And I feel like you're pretty hungry. And that you wish to be noticed, that's why you took a table in the center of this cafe."

Eric shook his head. "Na-ah-ah. I didn't want to be noticed. *That's* why I chose this place." His eyes scanned the area. "See, everyone who's anyone at BRU sits by the window."

I looked around. He was right, by the way the jocks, the cheerleaders, and the seemingly popular kids huddled by the glass windows.

I couldn't remember if it had always been like this. Come to think of it, I might have known it subconsciously, because back when I was in college, I did choose seats at the center of any place I stayed in.

"Can I ask you something?" Eric crossed his arms by his chest and rested his back against his chair. "Why did you turn down the promotion to senior editor three times?"

"And you know that because?"

"People talk in the office, Kat," he said, smirking, using my own words against me. "And we're in the business of knowing."

"I just..." Shifting on my seat, I laughed uneasily. "My ex-boyfriend didn't want me taking too much responsibility at work. He believes that will ruin our relationship."

"And did your little responsibility at work save your relationship?"

"Touché."

"Sounds like an asshole to me."

"I know that now."

Clearing his throat, he sat up and took a sheet of napkin on the table, coiling it with his fingers. "And so this promotion. You're up for it now because you want to prove something to him?"

"No. Not to prove something. I've dreamed of becoming a senior editor for *TSM* since meeting Kaileen. That didn't change, even with the many times I turned her down when she offered the post." I paused, taking a napkin for myself to play with. "I believe I wanted it even more then. So now that Butch is gone, I'm taking back what I have lost."

"Kaileen and Migz will promote you even without the Mortell project. You know that right?"



"I feel so."

"So why go through the trouble?"

Our orders arrived, giving me time to compose a more suitable reply. One which fell within the territory of the lies I had been telling everyone. But there was something about Eric that made me feel I could be honest to him. That he would understand.

"I want to travel."

He narrowed his forehead. "I don't understand. You can always travel. And you do travel." When I didn't speak, he cocked his head to the side. "You don't."

"I don't."

"Why? It's not like your boyfriend is still with you."

"Ex." I raised a finger at him. "And I just...haven't really found the courage to."

"So why again wasn't he into traveling?"

"He said it's useless. And that it drains us of everything *he* worked hard for."

Eric nodded. "I say he doesn't have his priorities right. People and travel, they charge us and change our lives. We work hard *for* such. They add meaning to who we are and what we're here on Earth for."

For a moment, I felt a sting poke my heart, and I wanted to reach out for his hand. I believed his words, and I felt like I had always known. It was refreshing to have someone echo the words to me, as if they'd been released from my own heart. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For making me realize that."

Raising a brow, Eric nodded and unwrapped his burger. "Don't mention it. Now, eat."

The aroma filled my nostrils that I immediately forgot what we were talking about.

"Oh, jeez. Is that—?"

He wriggled his brows at me. "Want a bite?"

"Yes!" I started to reach for his burger, but he pulled it away from me, laughing.

"Enjoy your salad."

Groaning, I took a piece of carrot and threw it to his face. He laughed, taking a huge bite of his burger, sighing exaggeratedly in satisfaction.

"You're an asshole," I said.

"Better you know it now than later."

Yeah. It was nice, seeing people as who they really were early on.

And Eric, he was no asshole. Not only because later that day, he sent Greg to buy me the same burger I wanted a bite of, delivered to my office hot and fresh, but also because he made sure that I had my fruit juice and salad for dinner as well.



After my morning shower on Sunday, I received an email from Jared. It contained a digital invitation to the Philippine League of International Schools Parade, or the PLIS Parade, on Tuesday.

Hovering my cursor over the reply button, I thought of something witty to say to him. There was no denial in the excitement I felt, as I couldn't remember the last time I had been invited to anything that didn't involve work. And while this was still about work, it felt a bit personal.

Good morning, Jared! I would like to thank you for extending your club's invitation to me and my team. The VIP passes will come very handy in completing our task. I will see you and your club members. Respectfully, Katalina.

Send.

Fixing myself a cup of coffee, my thoughts drifted to my sister Evelyn's upcoming 23rd birthday. I was home for the same occasion last year and remembered having so much fun I swore I wouldn't miss it this year. It wasn't only the party itself that caught my heart, but the fact that she held a short fashion show to pre-launch her and our younger sister Olivia's upcoming clothing brand. They had done so well under Mom's tailoring empire that the family business grew even outside the small, traditional town of Anao.

I fired up my laptop and browsed through Mortell's site, staring at each of his posted photographs with an unusual sense of longing. I wanted to go to each of the places he had been to.

I needed a distraction. And so far, my mind couldn't think of anything better to do than have coffee with Eric. I dialed his work number with the hope that he'd answer it on a Sunday morning.

"What's up?" He picked up, sparsely breathing onto the receiver.

"Is it a bad time?"

"No."

"Are you at the gym?"

"No." He smirked. "Do you imagine me to be the type?"

As a matter of fact, yes. Someone, whose skin tone was attractively olive and whose every body part boasted well-toned muscles, elicited images of sweaty exercises at the local gym.

"No." Of course, I didn't have to admit to that. "I'm just wondering why you seem to be breathing erratically."



"Erratically? I don't think I like the sound of that, Kat."

"Whatever, Eric." I rolled my eyes. And then bit my lip.

He chuckled, almost deeply that it sounded evil. "I'm loading cases of beer on the back of my truck."

"Oh. Going somewhere?" When he didn't answer immediately, I realized I was intruding. "Not that I care. I mean, you can do whatever—"

"It's Beer Day at Migz's house."

Oh, Beer Day!

"You want to come?"

"I'm not sure I'm invited."

Kaileen and Migz used to always call me whenever they were having a beer party on any given weekend. At least once in a month or so, they'd throw a party and invite whoever had been featured on the current *TSM* issue. It was their way of returning the love the magazine received from its wide readership.

For a time, I entertained the guests, myself. But then I stopped going. And we all know already why that was—Butch. So they stopped calling.

But barbecue and beer sounded so tempting right now.

"Of course, you're invited! You always are."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah."

I cleared my throat. "Well... Can we go together instead?"

A pause.

And then it was a casual, "Okay."



“Hey!” Kaileen shrieked as soon as I got off Eric’s truck, her eyes revealing a certain kind of delight. “Now, I wonder where you’ve been. You’re both late!”

Eric smiled, shaking his head, and said nothing of it. He hopped on the back of his truck and called a guy named Vincent to help him unload.

“I’m so glad to see you here, Katalina!” Kaileen hooked her arm on mine and led me to the garden, where her guests formed countless human circles, chatting and laughing, and then dissipating to form other circles with other people they had yet to meet. “It’s been a while.”

“I know. I’ve been—”

“Hiding,” Kaileen interrupted.

I would have chosen a more appropriate word, but yeah.

“Our guests are BRU mountaineers from our latest feature.” Her hand swept in the air before her, as if to show me her enormous kingdom.

The lavish Mondragon-Castillo mansion, rooted in the most expensive subdivision of the city, boasted of architecture not many probinsyanos like me were accustomed to. Migz had this thing about minimalism, while Kaileen had long admired the beauty of Greece. Nonetheless, with the eclectic feels of it all, theirs was a beautiful home.

“Vincent over there is Eric’s best friend from Reagan.”

With the way Vincent wore his ponytailed hair, high-cut boots, and tactical pants, I knew right away he was one of the mountaineers.

I had great respect for mountaineers. Not only because my grandfather, whom I called Tatay, was one, but also because back in our province, they were unsung heroes. Tarlac was landlocked, so one of the most improved aspects in terms of non-profit dealings in it that was led by hobbyists was that of the preservation and promotion of responsible mountaineering up in the Westerns.

“You should go and introduce yourself.” Kaileen gave me a light push in their direction.

As I couldn’t find the courage to speak with anyone, I slowly took steps to where Eric was now placing bottles of beer to freeze.

“Hey,” he said, handing me a bottle. “Vincent, Katalina. Katalina, Vincent.”

“So *you’re* Katalina!” Vincent pointed at me with the mouth of his



bottle. "I was beginning to wonder whether Eric's imagined an editor that ties him to his laptop just to escape beer nights."

I forced a chuckle, feeling a bit uneasy at the revelation.

"This Marcus Mortell bullshit is getting to him." Vincent led us to a garden set overlooking the swimming pool.

"He should. Migz tasked him with it."

Vincent nodded. "So I heard."

"It should be easy," I added. "Eric's been researching hard."

The fact that he had connected a lot of Mortell's photographs to the places he had been to hadn't escaped me.

"It pays to be a photo archivist."

At this, Eric leaned toward the table and propped his elbows to his knees. "I'm not a photo archivist. Far from it. I handle the company's digital files and store them properly. It's what I asked of Kaileen when I met her ten years ago."

"It's still an exciting job," I commented.

Vincent smirked in disbelief. "Eric is used to the open field, working under the sun and laboring on maps and compasses and GPS. I can bet you there is no way he'd last much longer." He paused. "He's a mountaineer."

Eric raised a brow, as if the revelation annoyed him.

"You know, Eric helped explore the Western trails of Tarlac. He helped us map out safe routes for mountaineers and bury emergency supplies in various locations." There was pride in Vincent's voice.

"You did?"

"We've been trying to get him to come with us again for years now."

"I will when I'm ready." Eric turned to me knowingly. "Because I'm busy right now. I'll be traveling with Kat here."

"Your are? I mean... Wait." Did he mean travel, like *travel*? "What do you mean?"

"We're going to all the places Marcus has been to," Eric replied.

Vincent almost choked on his beer.

"You mean it?"

Eric nodded. "But not right now."

"Eric! I mean, we have to! Our deadline is in seven weeks. Seven weeks!"

"Don't rush me."

"Ugh!"

"Trust Eric," Vincent cut in. "He knows what he's doing."

Although with the way he looked at his best friend, I wasn't sure even he was convinced. He sat there, jaw clenched and a vein at the side of his neck, tight.



I left the party earlier than Eric. I wanted to rest and research more on Mortell.

On my way to catch a cab, mansions of the subdivision sprawled aesthetically and magnanimously on either side of me, almost pinning me to my tracks in utter admiration. At one point, I stood, gazing upon the beauty of a Victorian castle-inspired house, barely noticing the truck behind me.

Until it honked its horn.

I shrieked.

"Hey!" Eric called, leaning over to the passenger's seat, obviously suppressing a laugh. "Need a ride?"

"You did that on purpose!"

"Get in."

I regarded the still-long stretch of mansions before the main road. Indeed, no mode of public transportation will find me here anytime soon.

"Get in," he said a second time and opened the passenger's door.

Fine. "Thank you for taking me home."

"I'm not taking you home yet."

"Where are we going?" I smiled, pinning my hopes up on seeing new places.

The past days with Eric had always seemed that way, and it had taken a part of me I never knew would exist so close to the surface.

Back when I was with Butch, I buried that exploratory girl in me into a depth I knew only a special adventure would be able to dig out again.

Eric curved his lips. "Somewhere. I have to get my laptop first." He turned his truck around the curb and stopped at a huge, modern black-white-and-gray house. "Give me a few minutes," he said, stepping out of the truck and running inside.

I sat motionless, realizing the house was either his parents' or his. It was beautiful. Its garden filled with hedges and colorful roses lured me out to peek through the iron fences.

"Oh, hija!"

From a nearby gazebo, a woman in a yellow floral dress and an oversized garden hat, a book in her hand, waved gracefully at me.

"What are you doing out in the sun like that? Are you with Enrico?"



"Enrico?" I narrowed my eyes.

"Yes! My Enrico."

Perhaps hearing the woman's voice, Eric stepped out of the upper balcony, a backpack slung over his shoulder. "Ma!"

"What are you doing, leaving your friend out in this sun?" she asked. When Eric disappeared back into the house, she turned to me. "Come inside, dear. It's hot outside."

"Oh, it's okay. I think we're leaving anyway."

"No, no. Have a drink. You obviously need it. Your skin is turning red."

I didn't want to intrude, but before I knew it, she was opening the gates for me.

"Please, hija, it's hot," she said.

"Thank you."

"Ma!" Right on cue, Eric walked out of the main door.

"You should be ashamed, Enrico! You left her—"

"I left her inside the truck," he interrupted, "where it's cold."

"I'm sorry. I saw your garden and thought to take a closer look."

Eric's mother smiled, obviously pleased. "Ah, yes. I have a fascination for hedges and mazes. It stretches to the backyard, where my collection of art sculptures is. Do you want to see?"

"Ma, we're about to leave."

"Oh, hush!" His mother waved a dismissive hand in front of him. She told a housekeeper to bring out two glasses of lemonade and led us back to the gazebo where she read. "I don't get many visitors, hija. A result of the work I cherish."

I smiled, conscious of Eric's impatience.

"I'm an arts curator, contracted by different museums here and around Asia. I don't get to stay much. Enrico's father is a journalist, who travels with me." When the lemonade was served, she handed me a glass. "I'm sorry, what's your name?"

"Katalina, Ma'am."

"She's our Features Editor." Eric finally gave in and sat opposite his mother.

"Oh! An editor for a famous magazine. I'm impressed! I would've thought she's your girlfriend, Enrico." Her mother giggled and then turned back to me. "You see, Enrico's really secretive. Or perhaps we're never home enough to know much about him anymore. At least he sends us those emails to inform us of his whereabouts."

"Ma, we're behind schedule for work."

"It's Sunday!" His mother deliberately widened her eyes at him, though there wasn't an angry tone in her voice. "I swear, you are just like your father. You capture moments to make them last, but forget about what's important."

"Like Sunday lemonades?" Eric's voice was gentle, as he spoke to his mother.



"Yes. And ancient books that come from friends all over the world." There was pride in his mother's voice as she picked up the book she was reading. It looked to be a picture book of famous artists and their work. "You must read this, hijo. It's very educational. It'll help you sort out those images and files on your website."

"I will, Ma. But for now, please let us leave." Eric stood. "We have photos to sort out now, actually. Kaileen and Migz are paying us well, so we can't slack off."

Honestly, I wanted to stay and chat with his mom. She'd be proud to learn how well he took care of the company's digital files, especially the photographs. Eric was sort of our curator and preserver, a job that resembled the one she loved.

But Eric eyed me in the most conniving manner.

"Ah, yes. And tell them to visit me soon. With Katalina here. I will be staying until the end of the year. I took some vacation."

"Good. You need it." Eric leaned in to kiss his mother's forehead lovingly.

We sat in silence inside Eric's truck for a moment after that. When I couldn't take it anymore, I breathed out. "So. Enrico?"

That was the only time he turned to me. And laughed.



“So, okay, we know our places?” I asked Greg and Eric, who were taking video cameras each from the trunk of Greg’s car. It was the day of the PLIS Parade.

“Aye, aye, Capitana!” Greg performed a stiff salute.

Eric chuckled, shaking his head.

Seeing him busy staring at the video camera on his hand, I wondered if it was a good idea that I didn’t take any real videographer with us.

“So just take videos of every photographer you see. Let’s compare their vantage point later when Mortell uploads his shots.”

“If he uploads,” Eric pointed out.

“Don’t be such a pessimist.” I took the strap of the video camera on his hand and slung it over his head to his shoulders. He smiled. “There. See? You look good with it. You’re made for this job.”

Eric stared at me for a while and smiled. Probably the first real one he ever gave since we began with the project. I smiled back, unable to ignore the tingling feeling that surged through my tummy.

As I turned away, he cleared his throat and turned his attention to the sea of Taguig residents and visitors around us.

“Greg, let’s roll,” he said, before turning to me. “Pun intended.” And with a wink, he began walking away.

Glued to the ground, I shook my head and laughed.

The parade was exactly the entertainment the city expected—floats of each PLIS school; jocks aboard theirs, with their mascots; cheering squads and street dancers, with the school flags; vans and motorcycles with banners of groups and organizations; school bands; and, of course, the line of beauties and hunks, which almost always encouraged enrollees.

It had been this way, year after year since the founding of PLIS, but to the people, the parade always seemed new. For the gimmicks and the songs, the themes and the colors, everything changed with the passing time.

To me, it felt different. I hadn’t been out like this for a long time, already forgetting how BRU and the world outside of it could get this fun and this crazy.

“Kat!” A man held my elbow and whirled me around.

Almost defensively, I shoved my arm free. “Hey!”



"Woah! Relax."

It took me a while to realize who it was. With eyes squinted from the sun, and his back to the light, I would have thought it to be a random guy.

"Jared! Hi." I chuckled in relief. "What are you doing here?"

Jared raised his camera on his other hand as an answer.

"Of course. Right, right." *Stupid question.*

"Are you alone?"

"No. They're...around. Eric and Greg are with me."

"Well, this is one crazy parade."

"I can see that."

"Sounds like you're not having fun."

San Lorenzo Academy's marching band passed by, so I had to yell my reply, "I'm here for a job. I don't think it matters whether I'm enjoying or not."

Jared shrugged his shoulders and brought his camera to his face once more. "That sucks. For all I know, you should enjoy your job. Otherwise it becomes nothing but." Pointing to an old man with his toddler son riding on his shoulder, Jared released the shutter and looked at the photo he took. For a moment, I thought I lost him to his world. But then he smiled contentedly and then turned to me. "Then again, what do I know? I'm just a photographer."

I smiled.

"So, you want to look around with me? I think your teammates aren't going to find you here anytime soon, anyway. Eric, is it?"

I agreed, hoping to understand how Stella chose him as her latest suspect.

"Great." He held out his hand to me.

It must have appeared awkward, how I refused to hold his hand. I just couldn't remember the last time I held a man's hand before. Though, I honestly wondered what it would feel like if I did again. I smiled and walked ahead.

He chuckled and ran after me. "So, did you find something that captured your curiosity?"

"Yeah. Your style. Why do you take pictures of the people who are not part of the parade?"

"People wouldn't be interested in the parade when they've already watched it."

"People who didn't would."

"I believe that is *your* job as a magazine editor."

"True. But isn't that your job, too, as a photographer?"

"This isn't a job for me, Kat. This is a hobby, and so I take pictures of whatever captures my attention," he replied, slinging his camera over his shoulder.

I stayed with him for the rest of the hour, feeling a bit woozy because of the heat. Noticing me, he retrieved a bottle of water from his



backpack. "Here. You can have this." When I didn't take it, he nodded. "Go ahead."

"Thanks." I finished the whole bottle in a go, but the feeling was still the same.

"You should call Eric. You don't look so well."

He started heading towards the city plazuela, and I followed, our pace more suitable for leisure than dodging parade fanatics.

"So you weren't really interested in the parade?" I asked.

"I was. Just not the way you think."

"Is that why you don't post parade photos on your account?"

Say, like your website?

He chuckled. "You are one smart woman. And it looks like you really... How did you put it again last time? 'Checked me out?'"

I smiled, feeling the heat of the sun on my cheeks. "I checked your account. And you're a weird man."

He laughed. "I'm not weird. I just don't share your interest. There is a big difference. Imagine a world where people like the same things. Where is the fun in that?"

Touché.

"So, if you don't find Marcus here, where do you plan on searching next?" Jared tried reaching for my hand to help me across the road, but I withdrew.

"Not sure yet."

"Here." We stopped in front of a white luxury car, which I would guess was his, based on what I had found on his social media accounts. He handed me a card. "In case you want someone to accompany you."

It was his calling card. "Thanks."

"I'm going to head back to our office. It's nice bumping into you here. And...give me a call should you wish to just hang out or go Marcus hunting." As expected, he rounded the hood of the car to get to the driver's side and opened the door.

"You interested?" I asked.

"In whom?" There was a glint of teasing in his eyes.

"In Marcus."

He playfully hit his forehead, as if remembering, and chuckled once more. "Oh, *that* photographer? Uh...yeah?" When I didn't reply, he added, "And in the journalist, too."

I felt my cheeks grow hotter. When was the last time someone actually flirted with me like this? I'd been so buried behind piles of paperwork that no one had noticed me the past year or so.

"I'll see you around, Katalina."

Nodding once at him, I backed away.

"Interesting guy, isn't he?"

I almost jumped at the sudden voice behind me. "How long have you been standing there?"

Eric was holding his video camera with one hand and shielding his



eyes from the sun with the other. "Long enough to hear he's interested."

"In Marcus," I tried to correct him.

Eric smiled. "Yeah. Keep telling yourself that."

* * * *

Dear Diary,

People say life is filled with little moments—wonders in themselves that we do not recognize. Sometimes, these moments are made up of what we do not expect to come, what we do not expect to remember for the rest of our lives. And sometimes, they are just moments. Nothing more, nothing less.



When I was younger, I was always excited for bedtime, which I blamed on the countless travel and picture books lined up along my bedroom wall. Tatay would read them to me. He would often leave me with things I should imagine before I slept. I'd think about them until they haunted me deliciously in my dreams. Growing up, the habit faded off-course and it all together vanished from my system when I moved out and lived with Butch.

And right now, at almost three in the morning, I felt a bit of that childhood. Opening Marcus's page was my hope for something to imagine before going to sleep.

"I have met over a hundred people just by being in different places. But I never thought I would be in the most perfect place at the most perfect time. Here's to unexpected encounters and more."

Marcus posted an update at two thirty in the morning. Along with that status were four photographs of people with different kinds of emotions, from different social statuses, and my guess, with different opinions of what they had just witnessed.

During the PLIS Parade.

Oh gosh.

Seeing those, however, did not urge me to sleep. Completely overwhelmed at what could have been a great leap towards our goal, I took my cell phone and dialed Eric's number.

No answer. I tried again.

On my second call, he answered sleepily. "What?"

"Marcus was at the parade! He was at the PLIS Parade!"

"It's three in the morning, Kat!"

"And he posted pictures of off-parade scenes. Just four pictures and he tells the story of the day. It's amazing!"

For the first time in such a long time, I felt purpose again, working for *TSM*. As if a new life had sprung out of me and that my only way to grab hold of it was to continue searching.

"It's like what Jared had said. People would be interested in what goes on outside of the actual parade! And look at the pictures. They're amazing!"

"I'll look at them later," he said, yawning.

"Marcus wrote, '*Here's to unexpected encounters!*' He met someone there."



Eric made a non-committal sound.

"Come on, Eric!"

"Kat, I'm really dizzy. Can we talk in a few hours? Really. I need my sleep."

I drew in a long, deep breath. "Fine. But you have to check your videos. I'm sure you were able to capture him in action."

There was a click.

'*Here's to unexpected encounters*,' I read the status once more and turned my attention to the calling card, resting on top of my wallet.

Could it really be that simple?



Eric turned out to be patient, as opposed to his personality in the office I was used to. He usually walked around any shop we went to, especially coffee shops, inspecting photographs that hung on the wall, as if they were personal photographs of anyone. They came with the picture frames, I once pointed out to him, but he paid me no mind. He looked at me, shrugged his shoulders, and then went back to examining each one. He also had the habit of tracing his fingers on the tables while we ate. If he had noticed me watching, he never said anything. He often just sat across from me in silence.

Eric had a habit of looking out the window, too. Sometimes, when Greg accompanied us in our search, Greg and I would share stories about what went on inside their department, and Eric would place his hand under his chin and his forefinger between his lips in deep thought. Since I often sat behind Greg as he drove, I could make out every expression Eric unknowingly gave away on the side mirror. When he caught me looking at him once from the side mirror, I made no effort to hide the fact that I had been observing him, though I flinched inside of me. He held my gaze a few seconds longer for my comfort and then smiled, before returning to his thoughts.

He continued being quiet until the weekend, when we worked at the office with Migz and Kaileen on what we had so far. I laid all my suspicions up front, complete with photos and profiles of each at the conference room, all excited to discuss what we had. Eric came in with nothing more than his laptop and a whiteboard marker.

Migz took Jared's photo from the bunch and smirked.

"I knew he'd be a suspect," he said, though I didn't know what to make of that.

When Eric began explaining what he had for us, he revealed what his silence during the first couple of weeks of our collaboration was for. His observations on the photographs that hung on every wall of each coffee shop we went to were discussed in minute detail, connecting them to how Marcus Mortell described each location he had ever been to. And it wasn't just the photographs. The tables, the chairs, the music, the lights, and even the air that singled out a café from the other, he knew right down to the core. He did his research and his job. He was tracking down one guy he knew wasn't from anyone we had met.

With all of that, I knew I had to step up my game. And I had to do



it now.

* * * *

I was munching on a salad when Tatay's email ruined my peace. The subject read "Rooster's Cove," and as much as I didn't want to read it when I had a lot to do, I was too darn curious as to where that was and how my grandparents were doing.

So I opened it, and the attached link led me to a folder filled with photographs on a drive.

Tatay's love for taking pictures of Nanay and her every memory was touching. He wasn't one you'd consider a photographer, but he knew what to capture about the woman in front of him.

In one photo of Nanay, she sat on the creamy sand in her oversized hat and maxi dress, enjoying her fresh buko juice. A touristy photograph that showcased Nanay's beauty and the cove that seemed to be bathing in it, instead of the other way around. In another picture, Tatay was riding a makeshift bamboo swing, which dangled a few inches above the sea from the branch of a tree that was rooted on a coral hill. The last picture was one of my favorites of all time. It was of Nanay, looking over the boat-infested sea at sunset. It was a picture that held all the emotions of their email.

Our dearest Katalina,

You wouldn't believe the miracle that rested before me this late afternoon. It wasn't just the beauty of your Nanay, but the beauty of a world that's yet to be explored by people in search of any missing piece of their lives.

As I stood there, breathing deeply, contentment engulfing me whole, I realized I had been everywhere with the woman I loved for many, many years, and that because of it, I had already found every piece of my soul. It is most fulfilling, I tell you, my apo. Your Nanay feels the same way. And with that, we have agreed that it is time to retire, push our traveling behind us and live our remaining days, just reminiscing and telling people of our greatest adventures. Maybe we could write a book about it. What do you say?

We'll be home for good, in time for your sister's birthday. We hope you'll come so we can give you our most treasured jewel—our travel journal. All our love.

The mention of their travel journal had made me guiltier and sadder than I had anticipated. I didn't even notice myself cry until a second tear lined down my cheek.

"Are you okay?"



It took me a while to react to Eric's presence. I was sure he had noticed me crying, since he was staring at me with his unusually darker eyes, but he didn't say anything. He just waited until I half-closed my laptop and breathed out.

Turning away, I wiped my tears, saying nothing to him still. He was supposed to be out until two for an extended lunch break. It wasn't even one thirty in the afternoon.

"You're back early," I said when I had gained composure and faced him.

He placed a brown bag on my desk. "I brought you some lunch."

"You didn't have to."

He flicked his eyebrows at me and opened the bag, filling the room with a familiar aroma of spice-filled meat.

"Wait. Is that...?" I rose from my seat and grabbed one side of the bag's opening to reveal a huge foiled burger.

"Bacon and mushroom quarter pounder. With extra cheese and pickles. From Vulgar Burgers. Your veggies and fruits won't do you any good, you know."

He peeled the foil off the burger. With the way it looked and smelled, I could admit readily that I hadn't eaten anything.

"That looks so good."

"So *good*," he echoed.

"Are you going to give it to me? Or are you going to keep on teasing me like that?" I held out my hand.

"Do you want me to tease you some more first?"

I snatched the burger before he had the chance to change his mind and eat the burger himself. Taking a bite, I raised my chin and moaned, wondering what I had been doing in my life to miss great things like these.

"Good, huh?"

Realizing he was watching, I took a seat and set aside the rest of my burger for later. He then stretched his legs and folded his arms so his hands supported his head. "So, what have you been up to while we were out?"

"Nothing."

"Didn't seem like nothing to me."

I glanced at Tatay's email, which still took up my screen, and



debated with myself if I should give at least a hint.

"It's just an email. From family."

"Bad news?"

"Not really."

"So why were you crying?"

Because I wanted to see my Tatay and Nanay so suddenly. Because I wanted to tell them the truth that I hadn't been traveling. Because I wanted to get my hands on their travel journal. Because now that it was going to be mine, I wondered if I deserved it, and I wanted to hear my Tatay say it.

"I...miss my grandparents."

Eric cocked his head to the side.

"They've been away," I added, just so he'd stop. "Now, they're back."

"So take a leave. Go and see them."

"I might. I mean, I want to. I guess it's time I faced them."

"You're thinking about that lie, aren't you?" When I didn't speak, he let out a heavy sigh. "Tell them the truth. It'll be easier."

I forced a soft laugh. "I will. Just not right now."

Breathing out ragged air, I pushed my laptop a bit further from the edge of the table.

He must have thought I was offering him a peek of my screen, because he leaned over my desk and looked. I almost shut the screen to his face, but he held it up. "That's nice. Is that in Rooster's Cove?"

"Yes."

"Wait, can I see?" He didn't even wait for me to agree. Turning my laptop to him, he narrowed his eyes and examined the photo of Tatay on the swing. Just like the photographs on the walls of the coffee shops, he stared at it in silence and then turned to the window, as if trying to recall something. When he seemed satisfied, he let out a sound. "Huh."

"Huh, what?"

Eric's eyes were darker as he looked at me, so I knew I still didn't have his full attention. He appeared to still be lingering on his thoughts, and with the way he glided his tongue over his bottom lips, I knew I would intrude if I asked more.

"I'm going to go check on something."

"For Mortell?"

He stopped, his back to me, and nodded. "Yeah. Exactly."

Eric was up to something. Exactly what I needed at the moment to take my mind off Tatay. The second best distraction was Jared's text message: *I'm here if you need me, Kat.*



*R*eturning and recreating my adventures in Central North.

"Central North?" I asked with narrowed eyes.

Eric sat in front of me the next day, helping me solve yet another one of Mortell's riddles. "The only central north I've seen in his previous photographs is Tarlac."

"Tarlac?" *What would Mortell want to do in Tarlac?*

"Yes. I mean, I had to check, because he said he's—"

"*Recreating*," I finished his thought for him.

"He's been there before," he agreed.

"So... Tarlac?" While I couldn't wait to find him, I wasn't ready to come home and face my grandparents. Sure, I still had to attend Evelyn's birthday, but it's different if they knew I'd be going around the province to actually travel.

"Yeah. Aren't you glad you're visiting?"

I forced a smile. "Of course, I'm glad! So when are we going? I can't wait to finish this job!"

He didn't buy it. Not one bit. "You're so easy to read. You know that?"

"Am I supposed to say that you're not?"

"I love to believe I'm hard to read."

He was, actually. "Well, you're easy to read, too."

He laughed. "Going back, we have a slight problem, though. It's going to be in Western Tarlac. That's mountains upon mountains. And he may do it differently this time. He won't take the same pictures he did before, and he most certainly won't allow people to follow him. So he'll take different routes." He paused. "Trails have changed over the past years."

He began pacing about the room in deep thought. For a moment, I took on the notion that he was talking to himself instead, planning and visualizing, almost enjoying sceneries in his head. It was satisfying to watch how excitement seemed to have caught him entirely. I wanted a piece of it, almost asking him what he meant and where we were going and if he was actually even taking me. But I caught my tongue and let the moment take him somewhere my mind would never reach. I watched him, and the glint in his eyes, and the way his lips curved as he spoke of trails. There was suddenly a spark in him I could never understand.



When he stopped, I grabbed my window to talk. "So let's go with them."

The way he snapped his head to my direction told me that he had snapped out of his thoughts, too, and remembered I was in the room with him. His mood shifted.

"I'm not sure if you're ready for a trek, Kat."

I shook my head. "I will have to be ready."



I could already imagine how Eric would react to this decision. He'd be mad at me. No, maybe he'd be furious. But if my theories about who Marcus Mortell was were right, Eric would thank me for this.

The chimes of the coffee shop announced an incoming customer, and I turned my head to its direction immediately. Having been seated at the farthest corner of the café, I was obligated to lean to my side just to see if Jared had already arrived.

It wasn't him.

He was late, and I was about to give in to the idea that he had stood me up when I sipped the last drop of my coffee and started for the door. I shouldn't have come.

Just then, the chimes announced another customer. Facing the bright light from outside the café, I squinted to recognize who he was.

"Leaving already?" Jared's scratchy voice was unmistakable.

"Yes," I replied, my hands automatically drawn to my waist.

Jared laughed and then wiped beads of sweat from his forehead. The temperature outside seemed unforgiving. "Sorry. I know I'm late. Some of the guys had to talk to me about something."

"Is it something I should know about for my story?"

Letting out a soft breath, he chuckled and shook his head. Then he tilted his head to his side. "Let's eat."

I wanted to keep our time at the café short. After all, I was still on official time, and Anthony didn't know I had left the building. I went straight to the point. "Eric and I will be heading to Western Tarlac. Some of the BRU mountaineers are going with us."

Jared took the menu nonchalantly and scanned it. "Why?"

"Mortell will be there."

"You sure?" He still wasn't looking at me.

"Yes."

"Sounds like fun."

I waited for more of what I thought he'd say, but he remained quiet, scanning the menu. "Have you been to Western Tarlac?"

"Yes. A number of times."

I shifted on my seat. He was making me ask. "I haven't gone there." Silence. I cleared my throat to distract him.

When he looked up at me, he asked, "Will you have pasta or rice?"

I wasn't supposed to stay long enough to eat. "I can't stay."



"Dessert then." He stood up and headed to the display shelves.

There was something unbearably attractive about the way Jared scanned the display of cakes, and it just wasn't me who noticed. A female barista left her station and approached him, offering more than just the selections for sale. She swept her hair on one of her shoulders and smiled at him, just before asking if he wanted a slice of yema roll. She was flirting, and I was staring at her, fighting the urge to act like I was someone of importance to any of them.

Just as I needed it, my phone vibrated through my bag and took my mind off Jared. Eric's number flashed. "Yes?"

"I watched the video of the photographers at the PLIS parade and checked each of their vantage points. I compared their possible angles with the photos Mortell posted on the blog."

"And?"

"As far as I could tell, Mortell wasn't in any of my shots."

I sighed impatiently and turned my attention back to Jared, who was now leaning against the counter, still chatting with the barista. "What about Jared?"

There was a long pause before he was able to say, "I'm not sure."

"Eric!"

"You should be able to tell. You were with the guy the whole time," he snapped.

"Well, at least tell me what you think."

"Does it matter?"

"Eric!"

"Fine! I don't think it's him." He let out a heavy sigh. "Whoever your prime suspect is would need to spend more time with you. So you can figure him out. You have to listen closely. Check the signs. He may be giving signals already, which you—"

"Well, he will. Jared's coming with us for our search."

"What?" I heard genuine surprise in his voice. "Wait, wait. And you think I'd agree to that?"

I thought so. "You have to. It's decided on."

"You don't get to decide, Kat."

"Oh, come on, Eric. He's not going to be a bother."

There was silence on the other end of the line. I was being honest with him, even about my suspicions of Jared being Mortell, and I believed that honesty was helping us with our assignment.

"Fine. Do it your way." And then there was a click.

Jared arrived with our coffee, cheerfully explaining how he ended up ordering three slices of cakes and two pasta bowls. I remained still, my hand on my forehead.

"Are you okay?" Jared asked, his eyes resting on my phone. "Work?"

"Yeah."

"Hmmm."

"You want to come with the group to look for Mortell?" I asked,



wasting no time.

“Sure.” Jared smiled. “I wanted you to ask me.”

I smiled back. I had to make this work. Eric had done most of the work on this assignment already, while I hadn’t done anything that relevant yet. But this was my way, and he had to let me do it.



Jared was easy to talk with, and because of it, the hour-and-a-half limit I had set for this meeting doubled without us noticing it. It didn't help that the pasta I ordered was too tasty, and I enjoyed it enough to order another batch, which Jared and I shared.

He was on his third cup of coffee. "I ordered you another cup. Mint this time."

"You love coffee," I commented.

"Is that a statement or a question?"

"It is both."

He took a sip. "Coffee is different in each of my travels. It makes my day lighter, knowing there is one thing I can look forward to."

"You travel a lot?"

"For work."

"And you take pictures?"

"For recreation."

"Since when?"

"Since I can remember." He leaned against his chair and crossed his arms to his chest. He let out a sigh of contentment and looked out the window. "I think I was ten years old when I took my first shot of something. My older sister had this film camera, which I stole to take pictures around our village. I took pictures of everything that fascinated me. Men drinking as early as eight in the morning, dogs watching their owners with so much love in their eyes. Silly stuff."

"Did she get mad at you?"

"Hell yeah!" He chuckled. "But she was impressed. So impressed that she got me my first camera for my eleventh birthday. She was in college then."

"So generous of her." My coffee had arrived and I held the cup with both hands to warm myself up.

He nodded. "My sister loves me very much."

"Do you still have those pictures?"

"Yes." He was tracing the mouth of his cup. "I have most of my best shots tucked on my bedroom wall."

"Must be an interesting wall."

"I can show you some time," he offered.

Bedroom wall. I had to tread lightly.

I shifted on my seat and cleared my throat. "Sure."

He smiled. "Aren't you going to try your coffee? Trust me. It's good."



Eric wasn't the only one who wasn't pleased at my idea of bringing Jared along. Anthony wasn't either, and he didn't keep that feeling to himself.

I would have to give him this one. It had been a while since we spoke about anything bordering on our personal lives. Actually, it had been years. Since Anthony and I worked together, we hadn't been friends. We'd forgotten about our usual Saturday beer nights with the rest of our college friends and settled for lunches and dinners over meetings. And while I was more than okay with that, a part of me still yearned for a throwback. I could feel him wanting for that, too.

Anthony came into my office a little while ago. I was busy, jotting down trails I researched over Google Maps, in case I got separated from Eric's group and stayed with Jared. The thought actually worried me for a moment, but I dismissed it immediately. I had to stick with my decision.

He sat in front of me and pushed my monitor away from me. Sighing, I pushed my chair back and left it. I walked straight towards the window and looked down at the busy highway and the traffic it was cradling on a gloomy morning. The scene was like a desaturated photograph in the weather. The only bright color I could see was the red umbrella of a woman, wearing a white dress.

"You invited someone who wasn't supposed to be on this assignment."

"Does it matter? Eric invited his mountaineering friends."

"They are BRU, and they're *his* friends. Jared isn't yours." Anthony raised his hand, holding out a piece of paper. He had found the teams list I wrote down with the map.

"You're separating yourself from Eric?"

"I think it would be best if we went on two different groups." I was, after all, tasked to convince Mortell to reveal himself to the world.

Anthony chuckled, shaking his head. "You and Jared together are not a *group*. You're dating. And you think trekking mountains works that way?"

"I'm going to ignore *dating*. But doesn't trekking work that way?"

"No. You get divided into smaller groups that team leaders and sweepers could handle. But you camp as a whole."

"Then it doesn't really matter if I get separated from Eric." I shut



the blinds and sat on top of the low wall cabinet, crossing my ankles together. "I mean, we would eventually meet somewhere."

"What I'm worried about is that you'll be with someone you've just met."

"Weren't you the one always pushing me to be spontaneous?"

"Spontaneous, Kat. Not stupid." He stood up and placed his hands inside his slacks pockets. "What do you even know about this Jared guy? He offered to help you find Marcus, and then suddenly you're best friends? It seems weird."

"It's not weird. Besides, I feel like I am closer to my goal because of Jared. I'm not sure, but a small part of me is saying that I know Mortell better with Jared around."

He shook his head, conceding.

My phone vibrated, and just like that, I was out of my head. An envelope was flashing at the top of my screen. It was a confirmation to my subscription for Mortell's website.



Dear Diary,

There are times when I feel like doing something spontaneous. It's been years since the last time I did. I used to think I could make small things become big adventures, small leaps become jumps between miles. Maybe this Mortell project is my chance to do it. My last chance.

* * * *

The last time I was in Anao was last Christmas. My grandparents were home from God knows where, and my siblings were all excited to receive gifts from them. I was bored. And jealous. For Tatay never once handed me souvenirs from their travels. He gave me money to travel by myself. And while he believed I had spent all the money he had given me on backpacking inns and exotic restaurants, my bank account just kept blowing up with savings.

Eric was right. This was the time to talk to Tatay and admit that I hadn't been traveling. I'd be home again in a few hours for Evelyn's birthday. Six, at most, if traffic was really bad. So I would have to settle for a merienda with the family, while the party was at lunch.

My phone rang, and Eric's name flashed on the screen.

"You got time?"

I looked at the wall clock that indicated 07:07 a.m. I should be on a bus in forty-five minutes. "I could spare a few."

"Have you seen the latest post?"

"Yeah. I got subscribed so I don't miss anything. What of it?"

"The photograph he posted was taken from a restaurant in Capas," he said, his voice still sleepy at the end of the line.

"Wait, as in Capas, Tarlac?"

I saw the post at dawn. It was a bowl of *goto*, taken on a table, the *carinderia* counter behind it. It could be anywhere, if you asked me.

The caption said:

*4 days and counting
for a sunrise that is masanting!*

"Yes."



"What's masanting?" I asked.

"Beautiful. Sunrise is great at Mt. Telakawa in Capas."

"Wait, I have heard of that."

"Yes. I know the place. Lots of lahar since it's at the foot of Mt. Pinatubo. But it's beautiful."

My excitement sent shivers down and up my spine, fueling my imagination. I could almost see it—the place many mountaineers hail as an underrated destination, because of the simplicity the mountain chose for a facade.

"But that's not in the westerns," I said. Mortell specifically said he would be recreating his adventure West. "What if he's misleading all of us?"

"I thought of that, too. I'm sure about Capas, but I'm also getting the feeling he's making it easier to find him. I'm not sure why." Eric's voice was trailing off.

"What, do you think he's tired of the chase?" I sat on the edge of my bed. Maybe Mortell had finally decided to show himself.

"Could be. Who knows? He's never left these many clues before. Either way, we have to choose," he said. "It's either Western Tarlac or Capas."

I cleared my throat. I wasn't sure how to deal with this right now. We were talking about Tarlac. Tarlac, where most of my travel issues were.

"I'm choosing Capas, because I am pretty sure I know that restaurant. I've been there." He chose for us. "I'm rallying the troop. We should be ready to leave in two days. How does Monday sound? Do you have outdoor stuff?"

I was just about to give my answers when he began talking again.

"Do you need help with anything? We can meet tomorrow. Buy stuff at the mall. I will just be meeting someone today out of town."

"I'm going home to Tarlac today, actually, for my sister's birthday. My grandparents will be home for the party," I said, feeling a bit sad.

I wanted to spend time with him. Going around to buy outdoor stuff for Monday did sound great. And cute.

And...well, fine. Spending time with Eric again sounded great. But I couldn't.

"Do you want to come?"

He was quiet for a moment. I could hear his TV on in a low volume. "Nah. It's too far. And like I said, I'm meeting someone for this Mortell thing. Call me if you need my help or anything."

"Okay."

"I'll see you on Monday? Don't come back here. Let's meet halfway in Tarlac City."

We'll meet halfway. My heart began pounding against my chest, and the butterflies that seemed to have taken a leave from my life suddenly fluttered in my tummy. Ignoring that and the mixed emotions I got from



being refused by him, I packed more clothes and stuff for our trip.

At the bus station, I tried calling Eric again to ask if he had changed his mind, but he wasn't picking up. So I called Jared, thinking he'd want to spend two extra days in Tarlac. After all, he was on this journey with us, too.



“You’ve been staring out that window for the past twenty minutes. Aren’t you going to talk to me?”

I didn’t realize I had been staring out the window, ignoring the man I had invited to accompany me. I was used to watching the long farm scene pass by my window each time I was bound home. I was always in search of anything new—shacks, houses, signboards, anything that could pass as development and change in pace.

“I’m sorry. I was just thinking.”

“I can see that. And you only do that when you’re alone, okay?”

I could feel his smile boring straight through me and into the fields outside his car, almost like sunshine. I was about to start a conversation to be polite, but my phone rang. With shaky hands, I scoured through my bag for it.

“Aaand she answers her phone,” he said in disbelief.

I looked at him apologetically. I had to answer Eric’s call no matter what.

“Hello?”

“I will also be going to Pampanga later to buy some stuff. Are you sure you don’t need anything?”

I imagined the clothes I packed and my closet back home. I was sure I didn’t have anything suited for the trip. “What should I bring?”

“I’ll buy some stuff for you. You can pay me tomorrow.”

“I can help you shop,” Jared offered.

“Who’s that?” Eric asked from the end of the line. I transferred my phone to my ear, away from Jared.

“Jared,” I almost whispered.

“Getting closer, are we?”

Rolling my eyes, I said, “Goodbye, Eric,” and then dropped the call.

As Jared kept shifting his attention from the road to me, I felt compelled to explain what Eric’s call was about. So I told him about Mortell’s post.

“You read Mortell’s blogs?”

“Yes.”

“What do you think of them?”

I shrugged.

“Come on. Your thoughts?”

“That it’s the only trail I have to him.”



He wasn't convinced. "Besides that."

I debated more on whether to tell him what I really thought about Mortell's posts. It was rather personal. But he was looking at me every few seconds, expecting an answer, so I thought maybe it wouldn't hurt to mention a few thoughts that weren't entirely *my* personal thing.

"I think he's leaving this trail for someone."

"Someone like?"

"A girl," I said.

"Makes sense. What do you think about that?"

"I think it's so sweet of him."

"Girls must be dreaming that it's them the trails are for," he said, and I didn't comment. "Don't you just dream of serendipity?"

"You mean things fortunately happening by chance, and it makes you happy?" I turned to him, giving him my full attention, although pretending not to.

"Exactly."

"I do." And I barely heard myself.

"Do you think this trip, this assignment, is yours?"

"Yes."

He looked at me and smiled. "Mine, too."



I wasn't expecting that much change in my hometown Anao in such a short time, so when I saw that one new coffee shop by the plazuela, I was ecstatic. And worried, at the same time. I didn't want my hometown to be buzzing like the cities I ran off to.

"Can I roll the window down?" I asked Jared.

He did it for me with the controls over his side. "Sure. Why?"

"I want to smell the ylang-ylangs." It wasn't really harvest season. The flowers were most fragrant in the summer, but the wind still carried its distinct scent for the rest of the year. And I missed that.

Anao was the only municipality in the province lined up with ylang-ylang trees, because the land was just too perfect to grow them. All the roads and the houses had them and Anaoños collected flowers to help the government harvest essential oil for export.

Just a few years ago, European countries had been ordering large volumes of the essential oil for expensive perfumes. The iconic Chanel No. 5 had ylang-ylang as one of its main ingredients. But because Anao was a small town, it could barely meet the demand. And so the government had been looking for ways to expand its resources.

"Smells good." Jared breathed in deep. "I like the smell. It reminds me of something."

"Of churches, perhaps."

He nodded. "Old ones. With the sampaguita vendors and old couples, holding hands, and kids, paying their respects to their parents."

Yes. Those visions of a life slowly fading away in huge cities.

He nodded again. "Yes, I think I'm going to love this smell."

To that, I said nothing.

* * * *

Jerome was arranging monobloc chairs when Jared parked his car. He straightened his back and placed his hands on his hips. Panting, he narrowed his eyes and took a few steps to our direction. I figured the tint was too dark for him to recognize me, so I got off right away.

"Ate," he said curiously, and then continued to where I was. "Whom are you with?"

Jared rounded his car and stretched his hand out to my brother. "Hi. Jared Salazar." He was smiling. I would love to have seen his eyes



as he said his name, because he sounded too lawyerly, but he covered them with his aviator shades.

"Who is this?" My brother ignored him, asking me in our native dialect, his finger pointed.

"Don't be rude," I hissed. "Jared is a friend, and I invited him to Evelyn's party."

"You're early. You said you'll miss lunch."

"Yes. We had a car." They knew the bus would take forever to get me here.

"Ate!" Evelyn yelled from the second-floor porch veranda of our ancestral home.

Ours was among the very, very few old Spanish houses from four hundred years ago that survived. It was a typical bahay na bato, which was all stone on the first floor, and all sawali, bamboo, and wood on the second floor, painted in white to make the decorative arches look more Hispanoamericano. It was also among the fewer ones that were preserved and maintained to its original look on the outside, but was filled with a little of everywhere in the Philippines on the inside. Courtesy of my grandparents, of course.

Evelyn was hugging me in mere seconds. I greeted her, while handing the paper bag that contained her requested set of drawing and sketching materials.

"Is this it?" she shrieked.

"Yes."

And I got another, but longer hug. "Thank you, thank you!"

Our ancestral house also boasted of a huge front yard. From the iron gates that bore my mom's family name, there were a good hundred meters of fruit-bearing trees and flowery bushes on either side. Pass through that and you'd see the house my ancestors built in the Spanish era, standing proudly at the center. Apart from the six still-Spanish looking bedrooms, the house was complete with the old Spanish rooms that we didn't find in modern houses anymore, like multiple receiving rooms and dining rooms, as well as the servants' corridor that was no longer used.

Fronting the house was a long and huge cobblestone pavement that began at the gates and led to the side of the house, where the more recently built garden and pavilion were. Further than that were my mom and my sisters' fashion factory and shop, sitting by the other side of the village road.

"God, you're rich!" Jared whispered, as we passed through the porch and the mahogany double doors.

We weren't. Or at least that was how we were brought up to think.

My mother was a typical Ilocana. She wouldn't spend a dime on lavish stuff. Stuff she knew she could get at its most basic. It was something she and my two sisters shared, a trait that set them on fire while building their fashion empire. My brother Jerome, well, he shared



Nanay and Tatay's love for anything local in different places.

"My ancestors were rich. I'm just an employee in Taguig," I whispered back.

I could smell the aroma of the beef they were roasting in the backyard. Which made me wonder what gives. We only had lechon baka when something really special was up.

Mom came out of the main kitchen, hands covered in knits, holding a rectangular dish with pinakbet, a dish of mixed vegetables cooked in fish sauce. She stopped a moment when she saw us and regarded the tall guy beside me. "You're early."

"Hi, Ma," I said, almost running to her, and pecked her cheeks. She smelled of onions and garlic. "Let me help you." I took the dish from her.

"Who's your friend?" she asked in Ilocano.

"Ma, this is Jared," I replied in Filipino, so Jared would understand. "We're working on something." Mom was used to me saying that, but because this was the only time I had brought a guy home since Butch and I separated, she was giving me the "look."

"Good morning, Ma'am." Jared removed his aviators and brought Mom's hand to his forehead as a sign of respect.

Mom simply nodded and smiled.

I led the way back out the pavilion, where three long tables for guests were set. A table for the family was separately decorated beside the buffet. Behind it was Tatay's 75-inch LED TV. I wondered if the lechon baka had something to do with this.

"Wow," Jared said, looking at the selection of dishes.

My mom was known in the village to be a great cook. During the time the tailoring shop almost went bankrupt, a lot of our neighbors offered to lend her money so she could start a catering business or a local restaurant. She refused, saying her cooking wouldn't taste as great if she wasn't cooking for the family. I doubted it.

"You should sample everything," I told Jared.

"I most certainly would!"

I wondered if Eric would be smiling the same way if it were him with me today.



It was windy, and clouds covered the entire sky. Somehow, it was perfect for lunch and entertaining family and friends, who began pouring in. By past 12, the long tables were already filled. Jared got to sit beside me and my siblings, my mom, and Nanay and Tatay, who grilled him with the usual questions.

"He's just going to accompany me to a field assignment," I said.

"Oh! That's my traveler apo!" Tatay announced, and I felt my heart pounding.

"What field assignment?" Mom asked, her voice tight.

"We're looking for this guy to interview."

"Oh, so you'll be traveling together?" Olivia, our vibrantly younger and more curious sister, asked. She had this certain signature smile on. Sort of an innocent, charming smile that was always meant to tease. I knew right away that she liked Jared. Olivia had always been a sucker for men in tight dress shirts and perfectly white teeth.

"Yes," Jared replied, flashing her a smile. "We're looking for a photographer."

"A photographer?" Tatay took a sip of his beer. "I meet photographers on our travels. There are a lot of them. I think I even remember you." He pointed at Jared with his fork, his eyes narrowed.

Jared jerked his head lightly. "Oh, yes, sir. I think we've crossed paths already in Cebu. My boss at the law firm is a friend of yours, I believe." There was pride in Jared's voice. "Attorney George Dimatulac."

Tatay was quiet for a moment, as if scouring his years' worth of travel memories. "Which one are you looking for?"

"We're looking for this Marcus Mortell guy," Jared answered.

It dawned on me that moment how I could have asked Tatay first for help. He knew a lot of photographers and mountaineers. I leaned over the table and waited for a reply, as he narrowed his forehead.

"Doesn't ring a bell," he finally said, and then continued with his lechon.

"Marcus Mortell isn't really his name, Tay," I said, hoping he'd think some more. "That's why we're looking for him. To reveal him to the world."

At this, Tatay turned to me, placing the base of his palm at the edge of the table. "Reveal? Why would you intrude into someone's life that way?"



"It's our job."

"No!" His voice was tight and shaky. "Your job is to make sure the world sees the beauty in everything. This...this Mortell guy...clearly sees the beauty in mystery."

"But it would be better for everyone if they knew who he was."

"For everyone? Would he see it as *better*, too? Stop with your nonsense!" he almost yelled.

Everyone turned to look at him.

I honestly didn't expect that. The last time he scolded me was way back in my elementary years, when I colored a map with crayons. He said I shouldn't have ruined a sacred document.

I felt a lump in my throat. Now, I was afraid of finding out how he'd react when I told him I'd been lying about my travels.

"I can't stop," I said, almost whispering. "Eric and I are assigned with it."

"Who's Eric?" Olivia asked.

"Another colleague."

Olivia smiled. She had been the only one in the family who didn't like Butch. She said he was too uptight, too serious to hang around any of us. She also said, and I quote, that Butch turned me "into a no-fun buzzkill, whom people at work most likely hated."

And she was right.

"So why do we have lechon baka?" I asked in my attempt to change the subject.

Mom smiled at Tatay. "Tatay invited a special guest. Some rock star."

"A rock star?" Evelyn beamed.

"No, no." Tatay had a ghost of a smile on his lips, almost wistful, that his mood immediately shifted. You know the smile one makes when remembering something so blissful? That smile. "He just looks like one."

"Well, where is he?" Mom asked.

"Suddenly, he couldn't make it." Tatay sounded confused. "I was certain he made sure he would come, but canceled on me all of a sudden."

"Maybe he's busy?" Nanay offered, caressing Tatay's back.

He shrugged.

At three in the afternoon, most of the guests had left. I was a bit exhausted from telling my relatives who Jared was over and over. So I sat on a lounge chair at the second-floor veranda, with a glass of orange juice, and closed my eyes. Jared was still at the pavilion, discussing politics with Jerome. I didn't want that for now. Not here, where I knew I could run off to when I felt tired of the city. So I dozed off.

Tatay woke me up just before sleep could snatch me away entirely. I sat up and turned to him. He was holding what looked like an album box in his hand. I already knew what it was.



"I want you to have this," he began. He wasn't holding it out to me yet. "It's our treasure."

"Tatay." I rose from my seat. This was the time.

"You will find it useful. For your travels."

I didn't speak.

"Katalina, apo, I know you will be able to relate to most of the photographs there." He laughed wistfully. "And where's yours? I thought we're exchanging notes?"

"I'm sorry, Tay. I forgot to bring mine. I was in a hurry." My heart pounded loudly against my chest, knowing full well that the look of disappointment he was giving me would turn into pain. "But I will check this later."

I took the box from him and placed it on my lap. It was heavy, as expected.

"Good. It has a lot of photographs, survival tips and maps, and everything else you might need in order to have fun out there." When I didn't move, he continued, "Actually, I can't push you to open it now. Something as big as this, like your assignment at work, takes time to digest. Sometimes, it even takes time to really understand." He wrapped his arm over my shoulder and pressed my arm. "But soon, you will."

"Why do people say they find themselves when they travel?" I changed the subject.

He thought for a moment and tapped his forefinger twice at the box on my lap, as if reminding me of it. "They don't."

Read. That was what his eyes told me when he looked at me once more and started heading back into the house. Right before disappearing through the double-doors, Tatay turned to me again. "Why did you stop traveling?"

I shifted on my seat, wishing he wouldn't sense the uneasiness in my laugh. "Tay... What are you talking about?"

"I know, apo. I have always known."

"Tay..." I ran to him and threw my arms over his shoulders. "I'm so sorry."

"Ah, don't be. I just wished you didn't lie." He paused. "It's kind of funny, actually. When were you planning to tell me? A moment ago was the perfect time."

I chuckled, allowing my years worth of tears to fall down my cheeks.

"I pray each day that you do travel again, though."

When he had gone, I carefully opened my non-birthday gift and took a peek. Inside were a bunch of brown and white papers, held together by four ring binders. It was about three inches thick and it had edges of wrappers and tickets and photographs slipping through the sides of it.

On the cover page was *'My Life in Silhouettes.'*



Jared had to leave that late afternoon, saying a client called him up and asked that they meet. I was half-glad about it, somehow feeling I had more emotions within me to deal with than him. He was returning on Monday.

At 6:45 p.m., Jerome reminded me about dinner, which was always at seven. It was the best time to eat, Nanay said, because it still gave us a lot of time to do homework and shower before going to bed at nine. When Tatay had just come home from his travels, he would tell us about their escapades over dinner, and we would be in bed by midnight.

I missed that, and I was glad it was happening again now.

Tatay was telling us about his supposed special guest.

"I sent him an email about two weeks ago, inviting him over so he could meet the family. I thought he wasn't interested because it took him a few days to send his reply." That was just so Tatay. The closest he and his old friends could get to technology was email. No social media.

"I find it really cute that you call him Rock Star," Olivia told Tatay. "I imagine him with long curly hair and tattoos. Cute." Which was Olivia's way of saying she was having a hard time imagining an old man with the kind of look that usually drew her in.

"You'd like that," Jerome teased her.

Tatay laughed. "I wonder if I'd recognize him when I see him. We've only camped with him and his wife three times in the last eight years. I heard they retired long before we did."

"So why invite him? Sounds to me like you barely know him," I commented.

Tatay gave Nanay a meaningful look, right before throwing a deep sigh. "I'm not supposed to tell you this. But since I'm not going anywhere anymore, I guess there is no reason for you to worry or get mad."

Apparently, Tatay got really exhausted and had chest pains in one of their travels. He was lucky enough to have Rock Star and his wife there. Rock Star knew a lot about first responses to medical emergencies, and he took care of Tatay where there was too little access to medical support. He and his wife did not leave, bending their itinerary for him, until he felt better.

"Oh, I remember them. Rock Star and Elena were angels," Nanay said.

"Elena?" I asked.



"His wife. Beautiful woman."

Tatay finished with his stories before eleven over three kinds of desserts, served to us by our housekeeper. He still had a lot to tell us, we knew, but Mom said she was too tired to keep her eyes open, so we retired to bed.

At one in the morning, I was still awake, tossing and turning in bed, convinced that the light of the moon, passing through my open window, was indication that there were still things left to be done. I checked Mortell's site, but there wasn't any update. So I scoured the internet for any other blog that might feature him.

There were others out there, photographers and travelers like him, who searched for him, too. They were following his trails but never finding him. It seemed he had made fate his slave, and everything that went against his wishes for mystery didn't happen. He was a mystery to us. To me, most especially.

It crossed my mind how Rock Star could also possibly be Marcus Mortell. Looking at his photographs, I imagined him and Tatay, sitting on the white sand or looking over the vast farmlands in the horizon, just talking about the life they had already lived. The thought excited me, so I got off my bed and ran across the hall to my grandparent's closed door. I was about to knock, but I heard Tatay snoring like a bear, and I didn't want to wake him up for nothing.

Curious about how Eric was doing, I dialed his number on my way back to my room. He answered immediately.

"Were you able to buy everything you need?" I asked.

"It's past one in the morning. That's what you called to ask me?"

I laid on my bed and hugged my body pillow. "Yes."

Somehow, I seemed to have heard him shift in bed, too. "Yeah, I did."

"How old do you think Marcus is?" I asked, realizing I wanted to talk to someone about the man who saved my grandfather's life.

"I don't know. Why do you ask?"

"I think my grandfather knows him. I don't know. Just a feeling."

He sounded a noncommittal "hmmm" and said, "Ask him then. Might help us big time."

"I know. In the morning, I will." Silence grew deeper as I heard him breathe through the lines. I shifted in bed. "So what did you buy?"

"Stuff. I bought you a tent. You owe me seven thousand pesos."

"You're kidding!"

"Nope."

"It's *that* expensive?"

"It's not expensive. And it'll serve you well." I heard the rustling of his covers.

Cold breeze passed through my open window, and I pulled the covers to my chest, curling my body like a baby. "I'm going to try this new coffee shop in the morning."



"What's it called?"

"I didn't see."

"Tell me if the coffee is good."

"I will."

Another noncommittal "hmmm" from him, and then he asked me to describe my hometown the way I saw it. I did.

For the next half an hour, I babbled about how a lot of the farmlands had disappeared, replaced with local establishments. I was disappointed by the fact. I loved my hometown, even if I was mostly away. Wasn't that the idea of it? To have a place you can return to when things went bad about being an adult? That it would remain the same for our return?

"It depends."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"People have different ways of escaping the reality they create for themselves."

"How do you?"

"I work with photographs all day and all night long. I'm not sure if I have a specific reality," he replied. "Sometimes, I feel like they combine just to give me a sense of life."

"My grandparents have that kind of life, I suppose."

I moved to tell him about my grandfather and his escapades with Nanay. I had caught his attention, not expecting that he'd actually listen and ask questions. I tried to answer to the best of my knowledge, which proved to be too limited. The topic was not my expertise, and I was all to blame. I forced myself to care less and less about each passing email. But we went on talking about it. And when we were both too tired to even moan, the rooster was already calling and the sun was already making its appearance beyond the deep blue clouds of the morning.



I walked to the new coffee shop for brunch, my head still light from my 6-to-10 a.m. sleep. Tatay said he heard me speaking with someone at five, so he didn't bother knocking on my door for breakfast at seven. Mom being Mom, though, there was nothing on the table for me when I woke up. Hence, this coffee shop.

Kape Agape. That was the name etched on a wooden platform across the café's entryway. There was something so local, and yet so foreign about it, that thrilled me.

I entered the small café and estimated that it could hold only ten people comfortably because of the artworks and crafts they chose to showcase around. As someone who appreciated art like me, this was heaven. As someone who worked with arts on a daily basis, Eric would either love or love to hate this place.

The woman, whose name tag said 'Bella,' at the counter approached me. She offered and explained to me the menu, which, I must say, came as a surprise. Everything in it sounded local, and I felt more of home. That was the idea, she said. She wanted the people of Anao to have something to return to.

"What's this Pancit Anao?" I asked, surprised.

She smiled. "It's our special vegetable pancit. Would you like to try it?"

"Wow. Really? Thanks!" I smiled and went on choosing my coffee.

I sat in the farthest corner of the small coffee shop, contemplating as to whether I should put any on my coffee this time. I was a cream-and-sugar type of coffee drinker, but as Eric had suggested that I tasted coffee in its purest form, I decided against it.

The first sip was too bitter for me, a bit woody. It was something new, something I could get used to. Smiling to myself, I looked around the café and noticed the wooden furniture that complimented the colors around it so perfectly. Even the imperfect stains on each of them added that natural and realistic feel to it. The heart-shaped imperfection on my own table looked like it was spilled on recently. Anyone would feel at-home here.

I dialed Eric's number.

When he answered, I didn't bother with the greetings and went right away with the news, "You know, it's bitter and a bit woody. But you're right, it actually tastes good."



"Slurp it down." Eric yawned, knowing exactly what I meant, even without me detailing what I meant. "Like when you have bad table manners, and you slurp down soup. But do it with class and sophistication."

"Why?"

"Just do it!"

"Okay, okay, Mr. Grouchy in the Morning."

"You have this habit of either waking me up in ungodly hours or making me stay up all night. What the hell is wrong with you?" I could hear ceramic cups and cutlery in his background.

I did as he bade and noticed the flavor of coffee linger and burst on my tongue. It was something new again, something so much more ardent than the flavor of coffee itself. "Oh, gosh. That *is* good."

He smirked. "My job is done. Is there anything else I can help you with?"

"Yeah. You can pick me up, so I could get my tent, and you can help me pack. We can go to Tarlac City this early." I was kidding.

"How about you get back here in Taguig, and I give you your tent so *you* could start packing?"

How much more of the new things could I actually take? Joking was something, but having someone to joke with on a regular basis was an entirely different thing.

"See you tomorrow then," I said.

"Yeah. I'll see you soon."



“I have some things I need you to bring.”

Tatay’s disappointment about my assignment to reveal a certain man was actually replaced with ecstasy when he realized this would jumpstart my traveling.

He brought me to his and Nanay’s room, where their bags still remained unpacked from their previous travels. He emptied Nanay’s bag, handed it to me, and from his own, extracted a utility knife, head lamp and some other accessories.

“Please take care of those. Many of those are from the people I meet,” Tatay said. “I don’t want to lose them.”

“Are any of these from Rock Star?”

“Yes.” He took the utility knife from me. “*This* is from him. And it’s the expensive kind. So please don’t lose it. I almost lost it once at our campsite, and he gave it back to me. So I promised him I won’t lose it again.”

“Okay.” I placed it inside Nanay’s bag. I was a responsible adult. It would be unlikely for me to lose it, especially if I wouldn’t use it. “Tay, is Rock Star capable of climbing mountains still?”

I imagined a gray-haired man, traveling alone in the mountains, his cameras in tow.

“Of course he is. I’m not sure if he still travels as much in the mountains. Your Nanay and I stopped climbing mountains after that incident six years ago and went to beaches instead.”

I nodded. “He must be a really strong old man.”

Tatay flinched. “How old do you think he is?”

“About your age?”

“No, silly!” Tatay roared, laughing. “He might just be a decade older than you.”

Well, that was a development! “Tay, what’s his name? Please try to remember.”

“I don’t know. But he says he doesn’t use his full name, because it sounds old. I just know EJ.”

I was distracted by the phone vibrating through my jeans pocket. Seeing that it was a notification for an email, I dropped everything I was holding just to see what it was.

A link. To Mortell’s update.



I almost had a mild heart attack when I saw a photo of Kape Agape on his website and of an untouched cup of black coffee against the wooden table. Beside that cup is a spilled coffee, purposely shaped like a heart.

"Please, Tay. Try to remember. And text me." I ran out and dialed Eric's number.



Like the ones before it, my interview with Bella about the man who spilled coffee in a heart-shaped drop resulted in nothing. Not only couldn't she remember anything, she was apprehensive in divulging too much information about her customers. It was a trait I would admire in regular circumstances, but given the fact that we were running out of time, looking for a man who may or may not be anyone any of us knew, I was annoyed.

I was sitting on the gutter, my hands on my chin and my elbows propped to my knees, when a pick-up truck parked in front of me. "Hey!"

Knowing his voice anywhere, I jumped up. "Eric! What are you doing here?"

"Get in," he said. "I got excited, so I traveled earlier than the guys."

I hopped inside his truck, ready to hug him. I had never felt so glad to see him before, and the feeling was—again—entirely new. I smiled at him.

"Well?" He peered at me.

"No luck."

"I told you, didn't I?"

"Yeah, yeah."

"We're leaving early tomorrow for Capas. You should be resting."

I nodded. "Where are you staying?"

"I checked into a hotel in Tarlac already. Don't worry about me."

"I'm going to come with you. Let's go get my stuff at my grandparents' house."

He laughed. "You sure it's appropriate for you to bring home two guys in two days, Kat?"

I laughed. "You are my coworker. They won't think badly of you or me."

Tatay was calling me from just around the corner the next instant, and I could hardly think straight. He was walking with one of his dogs, wearing his hiking shorts and shoes.

"It's Tatay. I'm going to go see what he's up to," I told Eric and half-ran to Tatay. "Tay, where are you going?"

"Around. Just itching for a bit of sun. Whom are you with?" Tatay squinted to check on Eric more clearly. "Doesn't look like Jared."

"No. It's Eric. The one accompanying me to search for Mortell."

"Hmmm." Tatay nodded, almost appearing pleased. "Introduce him



to me.”

It was only right, I guess, that Tatay met Eric, too. I waved for Eric to come over. He slowly got off his truck and crossed the distance between us, with a bit of apprehension etched on his face. When he stood face to face with my grandpa, he removed his cap and brought the back of Tatay’s palm to his forehead.

“Tay, this is Eric,” I said.

Tatay regarded him carefully. As if scrutinizing a suitor or someone he didn’t like. “You’re accompanying my granddaughter?”

“Yes, sir,” was Eric’s short reply. “How are you?”

I didn’t hear what Tatay had to say because my phone rang and Jared’s name flashed on my screen. I walked away from the two and answered immediately. “Hello, Jared.”

“Hey! I’m packing my stuff for tomorrow. What time do you want me to pick you up?”

“No, it’s okay.” I turned to Eric and Tatay, and they were talking seriously. About how Eric needed to take care of me, I would have to guess. My family had that tendency—to talk to all my guy friends, as if they were Butch. “Eric’s here.”

“Oh.” There was a pause. “So are you guys still going to stay there with your family?”

“No, we’re on our way to Tarlac. He’s speaking with Tatay right now.”

Tatay was smiling. That was a good sign.

“I think I imagine what your grandpa’s saying,” Jared chuckled lightly. “I was under your family’s scrutiny yesterday.”

“Didn’t hurt, I suppose.”

“Not one bit. I did it for you,” Jared said.

Tatay was already chuckling with Eric, something I didn’t witness him do with Jared the day before. He also patted Eric’s shoulder.

There was confidence in the way Eric towered over my grandpa. He wasn’t that tall, but the way he placed his hands inside his pockets, stood straight against my hunched grandpa and laughed, told me that they were going to like each other. Eric had something any person would see and like immediately.

“So I will see you tomorrow then?”

“Okay. Take care.”

I slowly walked back to where the two were speaking, trying to eavesdrop. They had been laughing nonstop since Tatay’s smile.

“Ha! You would die before you saw her ever jump off a cliff or swim naked on the beach. Our little Katalina is as stiff as any dull person could be,” Tatay was saying.

Just my luck. “Excuse me?”

“Oh, you’re there.” Tatay exaggerated. “I didn’t see you!”

“Ha. Ha. Very funny. What were you telling my colleague? He’s not going to respect me anymore with that, Tay.”



"Respect is given in many ways, apo."

Eric chuckled. "Well, people at work respect your apo, sir. Don't worry." He paused. "They're too scared not to."

Tatay laughed. "Sounds like my granddaughter, alright."

"Shut up, Eric."

They laughed.

"Well, I know this assignment will do her good, sir. I will make sure of that, and you can count on me." Eric held out his hand, which my grandpa took with both of his. And that bugged me. Because Tatay only did that with people he respected.



On our way to Tarlac City, I asked Eric what he told Tatay to earn his trust and respect that quickly.

"Why do you have to ask?" Eric chuckled, almost pleased with himself.

"Because." I gestured with my hands, but failed to find the right words. "It doesn't happen very often. Tatay speaks highly of very—and I mean *very*—few people."

"I believe your grandpa and I haven't reached that part yet."

"But he shook your hand. With both of his," I noted with a raised finger.

"Well, I would want to hear him speak highly of me, too." He paused. "He is, after all, a known mountaineer in his days."

"The last time I heard him talk about someone our age was when he talked about Rock Star," I commented.

"What did he look like?"

Rock Star was an olive-skinned guy with long, curly hair and handsome features. I re-imagined him, and a little differently this time. Any man who would be in his late thirties, a traveler and seasoned photographer, would be a man sure of himself. He would be wearing his best outdoor clothes everywhere he went, albeit not expecting company, and he would be doing exactly the things he was great at. He wouldn't be searching for himself.

I looked out the window. The morning sun had already covered our little town with its golden light.

Mortell would then be in search of something else.

His next big project. His new photograph. Or perhaps something beyond what any of us would understand. Was that why he didn't want people knowing who he was? Because he had something he needed to find and see for himself first? That would be the very first question I'd hurl at him once I get to interview him. What motivated him to hide from everyone? What inspired him to take those photographs?

Where are you?

Though very unlikely, I brought my tablet out and checked Mortell's site for a new post, a new clue. There had to be something here that Eric and I were both missing. And I wanted to be the first one to find it. Call me competitive. I didn't want to be upstaged by the IT guy at the office.

I scanned through the site and at the bottom of it was a button that



caused a surge of goosebumps all over my arm and neck. If it had been there all along, I couldn't recall. What I did know was at the moment, I wanted to hit it so I could email Marcus Mortell.

"Eric!" I shrieked, and he hit the brakes, causing uproar from the cars behind us. He apologized to them, beyond the horns and the yelling, waving at them to pass us by.

"Are you out of your mind?" he hissed at me, when they had gone. "What is it?"

"There's this new button on his site. Email me."

"Holy shit, Katalina." My voice rolled off his tongue so fluidly, despite the annoyance I sensed in his mood, that I shifted on my seat. "Is that all?"

"Sorry." Although, I was obviously not sorry.

Eric eased his truck again. "Just write him an email. And be quiet!"

I nodded. After a while of thinking, I turned to him. "What do I tell him? I bet if he still doesn't want to be found, he will ignore everything I say."

"What part of 'be quiet' do you not understand?" He was trying to be angrier at me. If his voice was not as deep and gentle, I would have believed him.

"And he will most definitely dismiss me."

He let out an impatient sigh. "Then tell him what you wish to tell him if you are just a blog follower or an admirer. Don't tell him you're after him. That sounds crazy." He paused. "And here, Kaileen thought you'd be able to convince the guy."

"I can. And you'll see."

"Write and be quiet." He turned the radio on and music filled the air.

In normal circumstances, the music would soothe me. But as I hit the EMAIL ME button, I found no words.

"You can't write, can you?" he said flatly, eyes on the road ahead. "You keep shifting on your seat. It's annoying."

"I'm beginning to think my job isn't what I recall it to be," I told him honestly.

"Why is that?"

"I don't remember it being this hard."

"No. You don't remember it being this personal."

"What the hell do you mean?"

"You feel something whenever he posts."

I nodded.

"Like what?" he asked.

"Like I want to be that person he's talking to."

He swallowed hard and nodded. "And?"

"I don't know."

"And?" he insisted.

"And I kind of like him."



He laughed. "Well, I kind of expected that. And I'm starting to believe he'll like you, too. If you ever get to convince him to meet you."

"Why is that?"

"You invited someone you barely know and set out to group with him when you are tasked to go everywhere with me," he replied. "Admit it, Katalina. Not everyone in the right mind would go with a stranger in search of a *complete* stranger."

I raised a finger in the air to make a point, but went against it for a moment. As I couldn't calm down, I instead mumbled, "It sounds more stupid than it looks."

"You're not stupid. "

"Crazy?"

"Nope, not crazy." He paused. "Why is Jared your prime suspect, anyway?" He stopped at the traffic and looked out his side of the window.

"I'm not sure. He's a photographer. He knows things."

"You are a researcher. You know better."

He turned to me, and it was only then I saw how expressive his eyes could be. Right now, it appeared as if he was utterly disappointed and worried. And I didn't want that, so I avoided speaking or looking at him all the way to Tarlac City.



My room at the hotel was on a different floor from his, but Eric walked me to the door. I wasn't supposed to invite him in, but he had this notion that I needed help with packing, and so I gave in.

"You can wear these. And these." He said as he rummaged through my backpack, pointing at two pairs of my tights, my dry-fit and my rain jacket. "You need more stuff. I'll bring you some trekking pants and shoes tomorrow. I'm meeting some friends later. I can drop by the mall."

He inspected Nanay's bag and nodded in satisfaction. "This is a great brand. See, it's a little worn out, but it will serve you well." He stretched the bag across with his hands and shook off dust and dirt from it. Tatay's swiss knife fell off.

"Careful. That's not mine."

Even before I could reach down for it, the trusty knife was already in Eric's hand. He scrutinized it, brushing his thumb over the piece. "It's got an inscription."

"It does?" I moved closer, scolding myself for not having seen it myself. It was, after all, left in my care.

Eric handed me the knife, and like him, I brushed my thumb over the elegantly engraved inscription. Five letters and two numbers, the size of merely three centimeters, sat unknowingly on one of its edges. "MM-ESJ. 2012." I paused. "Marcus Mortell."

"ESJ?" Eric asked.

"Elena. I'm sure of it."

Eric looked at me, his eyes narrowly questioning me.

"You see, this knife was given to my grandfather by Rock Star. Rock Star has a wife named Elena." I paced about the room, excitement filling me in again. I was getting closer to something extremely important, and I felt it right there. "Tatay said he and his wife had retired from traveling, although he must have missed it so he's *recreating* everything again. It makes sense."

Eric was still staring at me.

"We should research more on this. We're getting closer."

Better yet, I should check on Tatay's diary.



There was something about my grandfather's diary that scared me. Although I knew in my heart I would find answers in his travel journal, I couldn't get myself to open it. It was personal. It was his and my grandmother's.

But I had to do it. Not going over the diary would only prolong the agony of searching. I told this myself over and over as the *thing* sat beside my laptop, mocking me.

What are you looking at? it seemed to tell me.

I stared at it as I climbed the bed.

"Oh, what the hell," I said and swiped it quickly so I couldn't change my mind.

The first page was a picture of Nanay and Tatay at their wedding forty-four years ago. They got married early, just like Mom.

Note to self: they will be celebrating their golden anniversary in six years.

The next few pages held photographs of their travels abroad from when I was young. In each page were notes, thoughts and feelings Tatay had at varied moments. And as I read each of them, I was besieged with the feeling that he was talking to me. He was showing me the kind of life I would be living now should I go back to traveling and how to live it.

October 15, 1998

You wouldn't believe waters bluer than the skies on the best day of your life exist in places like this. Unadulterated and unscathed, they brush against the sand, where no untraveled feet have yet gone. Here, should you rest your body, tired from the hassles of the growing cities beyond, a book or two about love would most suit you.

Books. Tatay was so fond of books everyone in the family was reading even before they went to school. I was fond of books. And I was fond of writing. Which reminded me to write Marcus Mortell an email, so I got up.

A few minutes of staring at my laptop screen, though, I gave up. I sounded too formal. The email should be a bit personal to make him feel comfortable, but I hadn't done *personal* for a long time.

I don't know how to do this, I texted Eric.

He replied, knowing exactly what I was talking about. *Just write it.*

I will bcc you.

Fine.



Okay, fine. Coffee first.

As soon as I returned to bed, I cleared my throat and straightened my back.

Dear Mr. Mortell,

Hi. I am a big fan of your site, and I look at it every single day. I am not a traveler, but I want to be. And I am to travel with a few people and a man I barely know in search of you, a complete stranger. I am trying to figure out how I got myself into it. But I want this. Because for once in such a long time, I feel free.

I do not know why I am writing you this when I should only be asking for a moment of your time. I'm hoping you'd say you want to give meeting me a try. Yet, I know the question remains...of all the emails you might probably be getting, how can I make this one catch your eye?

I clicked SEND. Satisfied, I opened another entry from Tatay's journal.

February 14, 1999, Mt. Arayat

Not many people will believe I am on top of the world, even for one time, my lovely wife beside me. I wish they would see how the roads look like tiny stick marks, tailing a man in the farthest journey of his life. And this man isn't tired. Not yet. I don't think anyone who sees wonders like this would ever get tired.

I brushed my hand against the photograph of Pampanga from the peak of Mt. Arayat and marveled at how far we had gone from that point in time. Everything was still as green and the roads really did look like tiny trail marks, instead of the expressways. I looked out my window and the moon shone against the dark blue skies.

My phone rang.

"Why are you still up?" Jared said as soon as I answered it.

I chuckled. "Hi, Jared."

"So what time do we leave tomorrow?"

"Six." And then I told him the details. Eric's friends hired a jeepney to take us to Sta. Juliana, where we would walk to get to the Aeta Community, and from there, the hike would begin.

"So how's your own search for Mortell?" he asked. "Have you done anything by yourself lately?"

It was rather convenient that Jared would ask this when just a few moments ago, I was indeed doing something on my own. It seemed the instance wanted to be discussed further.

I looked at my watch and saw it was already almost eleven in the evening. I didn't want to be late tomorrow. "It's getting late, Jared. Do you want me to tell you about it tomorrow? We have plenty of time."

Quiet filled the line between us for a few seconds. When he spoke again, he did it in such a serious manner that I began to wonder what it was he thought or felt about my assignment. "When you do finally meet Marcus Mortell. Would I, Jared, still have your attention?"

"Why would you ask that?"



He paused. "I just know a thing or two about finding someone."

The words rolled off his tongue like romantic lines. Although, of course, sometimes, that was all they could ever be.



“**W**hy did you leave me?” I demanded over the phone.

Just as I had expected, I woke up at six that morning. I already had twenty missed calls then from different people—Jared, most especially—and a bunch of messages saying they would leave me behind.

“God, woman, you chose this day to be a heavy sleeper! I knocked on your door endlessly,” Eric, who was obviously annoyed on the other end of the line, replied.

I kind of found that hard to believe. I was never a heavy sleeper! Nonetheless, I let it go and went on to get ready.

At 6:25 a.m., Jared was in the lobby.

“They left,” he said, rising from the lobby seat. “I will take us there.”

Without a word, I walked past him to get out of the hotel as fast as I could. We hailed a tricycle to get to Tarlac State University, where most of the Capas jeepneys waited for passengers. I hopped on the first one I saw and Jared followed, sitting beside me. He arranged our bags at the end of the aisle, between the seats, right behind the driver.

“You got a really nice bag,” he commented. “Is it yours?”

“No.” I shook my head, but didn’t offer any explanation.

He nodded, staring at it.

I was growing impatient as the jeepney waited for more passengers to fill it. We had been stuck here for ten minutes, and I imagined how each second brought Eric’s team farther and farther away from us. Sure, he sent me a message a minute ago, saying they would wait for us at Sta. Juliana, but it felt incredibly wrong that I wasn’t with them. Or at least, that Jared and I weren’t.

“Manong, aren’t we leaving?” I yelled at the driver, who was smoking with the other jeepney drivers at the palamig stall.

The driver smiled at me and motioned a few more seconds. I was annoyed, especially since receiving Eric’s second message: *Will grab a quick breakfast at Keka Ne Ngan. Will wait for you here.*

“Shit! We should have taken a tricycle and paid incredibly high.”

Jared chuckled. “What are you so worried about? It takes four hours to get to the peak of Mt. Telakawa from the Aeta Community. It’s not even 7 a.m., for crying out loud.”

And then it was already 7:05. And then 7:12. The jeepney still had



about seven seats available.

"Manong, I will pay for the other seats. We need to leave!" I yelled again, poking my head out the edge of the long jeepney window.

The driver nodded and ran to his seat, content. The other passengers breathed a sigh of relief and thanked me. Apparently, they were growing tired of waiting, too. It was most unlikely that jeepneys waited this long to get filled at this time of the morning. So I was beginning to wonder if luck had left my side on this assignment.

Katalina, we just left. Meet you in Sta. Juliana.

"Shit," I mumbled, grasping my phone tight.

"What's wrong?"

"They just left Keka Ne Ngan." I knew I sounded like I was whining, but I couldn't help it.

"It's okay. We can eat there if you want. So you'd see the place, since it's among Mortell's go-to restaurants." Jared's voice sounded calm and serene, on the contrary. "They serve the best breakfast meals. You haven't had breakfast, have you?"

As if on cue, my tummy growled, and I shook my head.

He nodded, satisfied. "I thought so. We should be there in a few minutes."

I didn't answer. My heart was racing against my chest, and I couldn't keep still. My poor judgment calls today had gotten me in this mess.

"Hey," he said softly. "I can take us there. I promise. We don't have to chase Eric and his team. They'll wait for us. I'm sure of it."

So sure was his voice that I conceded without hesitation and sat back, defeated. Maybe Eric would indeed wait for us no matter what. If there was any other underlying reason for that, I didn't know.

Eric, we're grabbing breakfast at Keka Ne Ngan, too. See you in a bit.



Keka Ne Ngan, the Kapampangan term for “everything is yours,” was a local restaurant that served fusion dishes from Kapampangan and Ilocano recipes, inspired by the fact that Tarlac was a province of mixed cultures.

But it was even more popular because the nipa-bamboo-sawali restaurant had a large buffet area on one side of it, an open kitchen and dining area at the middle, where Marcus Mortell supposedly took the goto photograph, and a set of dining rooms in varied sizes on the opposite side, overlooking the greens and the blues of the farmlands.

I chose to ask to be seated at Dining Room 7, because, as Eric had offered, it had the best view of Mt. Arayat and the other mountain ranges at a distance.

“I’m sorry, Ma’am. That room is already taken.”

There goes my luck.

“We’ll take the next best one then,” Jared said.

“We only have one more room available,” the hostess said, and we were led to Dining Room 12, which annoyingly had a view of the other rooms’ windows instead.

“This is fine. Thank you.”

I dropped my bag and crossed my arms, leaning them against the edge of the table as I sat. I had never been this irritated in my life. This was a disaster!

“What are you acting so crazy about?” Jared still managed to smile.

Crazy. Okay. Now that was uncalled for.

“Nothing.” I drew my phone out and told Eric the news. I didn’t get the room he suggested and was stuck at DR12, where I could see nothing but other people dining. As if to taunt me, those people were looking out the window, breathing fresh air, while having the best-smelling dried fish in the province.

Hahaha. Those fish taste great, too, said Eric in his text.

I’m going to have bangsilog instead, I replied. You couldn’t go wrong with milkfish, sunny-side-up egg, and fried rice.

Try their pinapaitan. A bit early for it, but you should, Eric texted.

I never really liked pinapaitan, even when Mom served the best and most authentic version of it back home. She used goat intestines, innards, bile, and pepper to make the stew bitterly delectable. Mom always urged me to have a bowl with my sisters and my brother who



loved it during the rainy season, but I seldom gave in. It was the thought of the bile that haunted my every spoonful. I always found a way to escape it.

I don't eat pinapaitan.

Just try it, Kat. Trust me. It's like nothing you've tasted before. People seek it out.

It sounds a bit too ordinary to seek out and try, don't you think?

Sometimes, the ordinary is great in itself.

"Are you guys ready to order?" a waitress went in and asked.

Jared nodded. "Give us a platter of sinangag, an order of bagnet and danggit, two eggs, and some ensalada." He looked at me and smiled.

"Could we add pinapaitan please?"

Hopefully, I'd be able to live up to this.

Needing some air while I thought of what I got myself into, I leaned over the window and looked at the scenery that was unobstructed by the nearby rooms' vantage point. From there, I saw a familiar scene—something I knew I had seen before. An old nipa hut stood beside a mango tree, with a carabao resting under it.

"Oh my god." I held my breath and looked at the rooms beside ours. Trying to recall how the scene unfolded in the picture, I estimated it was taken from the room at the farthest end, the only one with its windows slightly closed.

"What's up?" Jared asked. Although with the way he followed my gaze and smiled, I kind of thought he already knew.

"That nipa hut."

Jared surveyed the outside. "It is best viewed from DR7, actually. Too bad we didn't get the room."

When our orders were served, I asked the waitress about the dining room with the closed windows. She confirmed that it was DR7, and that it was occupied.

"By a man?" I asked, hoping she would say yes. But she shook her head and politely told me that two men were having coffee and a serious discussion inside it.

"Does a man frequent this restaurant? A man with cameras?" I continued.

"The photographer?"

"Yes! Do you know him?"

"No. But a lot of people are already looking for him. His name is Mark something."

Jared nodded. "Marcus Mortell."

"Yes. That's the one." She hugged the food tray to her chest. "Sorry. But I don't actually know him. And a lot of people come here so we can't really tell. But there is one guy who keeps asking to take DR7. His name is EJ. Not sure if that helps."

"EJ," I whispered to myself, swallowing hard to control my bursting feelings. "Yes, that does help. Thank you so much."



EJ. It's him.

"It's him, isn't it?" Jared's smile was unmistakable. He was happy.

"Yes. I do hope so."

EJ. I had my lead.

When she had gone, I took a photo of the distant nipa hut and the closed windows, wishing breakfast would be over so I could tell Eric all about this. We were closer and closer to our goal.

Going back to my seat, the first thing I tasted was the pinapaitan. It was good.

"I have to know what that pinapaitan has to make you smile like that."

"Huh?" I snapped out of my reverie. I couldn't help smiling. Nor could I believe that a dish made in a non-Ilocano municipality of our province could taste so much better than my mom's.

"You're smiling," Jared said once more.

"Oh, it's nothing. Just hopeful that we'll find Marcus."

"I wonder if that's the exact face you'll make once you meet him."

I nodded and chuckled. "I think I'll blush beet red and never stop smiling."

He smiled. "Good."

"You really think no one has found him yet?" I asked, sipping more of my stew.

"You really think someone who hides under a name like that wants to be found?" he replied with another question.

"I think everyone deserves to be recognized." Even the people who didn't want to be celebrated for their talents, gifts and humble beginnings.

Jared shook his head. "Not everyone wishes to be recognized."

Touché. "Would you want to be recognized if you were him?"

He thought for a moment, his eyes still on mine. When he had found his answer, he let out a sigh and resumed with his meal. "Maybe. It depends. I believe he has his reasons."

"Like what?"

"Like...maybe he wants the quiet life. Being well-known means not being able to do what you really want to do, because people see you as someone they look up to, someone they admire. So you are forced to do things the way they unconsciously dictate of you."

"I see your point," I said, moving on with my meal.

"And you know, we, photographers...well, we seldom really want people hanging around us when we take pictures." He sipped his cup of mocha chino. "It ruins the moment."

"You let me hang around you," I commented, putting my fork and spoon down.

"Then you should know by now that this is a different case." He paped. "It's personal for me, too."

Unconsciously, I turned to the windows of DR7.



I was out at the main entrance of Keka Ne Ngan when my phone rang. It was Eric, and so I answered it immediately. Jared was still inside, settling the bill and exchanging pleasantries with someone he knew and didn't bother introducing me to.

"We're already in Sta. Juliana," he said. "You took your time eating breakfast, I suppose."

Ignoring the tone of his voice when he said the latter statement, I told him about the nipa hut and the mango tree with a carabao under it. "It should be the perfect view from DR7. But it was occupied, so I didn't see it from there."

"What did you eat?"

I smiled, placing my free hand on my hip. "Pinapaitan."

"Ha!" He chuckled victoriously. "How was it?"

"Surprisingly delicious," I replied. "It's a little expensive, though."

"You should have put it on my tab."

I laughed with him and it felt like a momentary release.

"See? I make you laugh," he said.

"I never said you didn't."

Some office people regarded Eric as a mysterious guy, often hiding inside the archive room. It was how I would describe him when asked who Eric dela Rosa was. While there were others who would say he was quite fascinating to talk to, because he could turn boring conversations into lively ones with his jokes.

"You hurt me, Kat."

"And I'm going to hurt you more if we don't find Marcus Mortell."

"So get here already, geez!" he said. "You should be here in Sta. Juliana in less than an hour or so if you take a fast tricycle."

Jared came out with a satisfied look on his face, bringing with him both our travel bags. "Ready to go?"

"Yes," I answered him. "Eric, we'll be going."

"Okay then," Eric replied and cut the line.

"You don't need to call him every now and then. I can take us to places," Jared said nonchalantly.

I nodded and put my phone inside my pocket. "I know that. I just need to update him."

With both our moods shifted, Jared hailed us a tricycle, which we rode to Sta. Juliana in silence.



* * * *

Chris was the only familiar face in the crew that waited for us in Sta. Juliana. There were about four more of them, one of which was a girl, and the rest were guys of varied ages. When I couldn't find Eric among the crowd, I hoped he was inside the red Capas Tourism Office or somewhere inside the ATV rental hut across the street.

Chris approached me as soon as we got off the tricycle, his face a different shade from when I first met him. It seemed he had been out in the sun. "Hey, Kat! Great to see you."

"Hi!" I reached for his extended hand.

"Hey, dude," Chris said, holding the same hand to Jared afterwards. Jared nodded at him and shook his hand.

"Have you been waiting long?" I asked.

"Not really. Just about an hour." He laughed and led us to the group. "Hey, guys! This is Kat, and this is Jared right here."

There was a collective sigh of relief in the air, and I felt my cheeks grow hotter.

"Where's Eric?" I asked Chris.

"Oh, he went ahead with Vincent and the rest of the mountaineers to the community." Chris took my bag and placed it on the 4x4 jeep that would take us to the drop-off point. "He asked me to give you these," he said, handing me a pair of mountain boots. "He said you should wear it—and I quote—on those pretty feet of yours." I rolled my eyes and Chris laughed, just before handing me a walking stick. "He doesn't know if you need this, but here you go."

"Thanks," I said softly, conscious of the fact that everyone observed the exchange.

I kept my head low during the registration activity up to our hike at the Crow Valley. I couldn't understand why Eric had given me the boots, which fitted me perfectly well, when everyone else was walking with their trekking sandals on the lahar-laiden desert. They were very pretty and new, and it was such a waste that they got dirty.

"Stop staring at those boots," Chris teased. "They're new so they can take the pressure. Besides, those boots are made for walking, baby!"

The rest of the troop laughed.

"I didn't know Eric had a girlfriend!" one of them announced.

"I'm not his girlfriend," I said defensively, although it only made the teasing worse. Hearing myself voice the fact out actually disappointed me a bit.

"Not yet, at least," one of them commented.

"Oh, you'll get there," another one joined in.

I took their teasing as directed towards their friend more than they actually were to me. Eric had been single, after all, if rumors had reached me correctly, since his girlfriend had died, and he had been away from any social activity since.



Jared turned to me. "Not if I get there first," he whispered with a smile, and I felt myself blush.

"They're just teasing, Jared," I whispered to him.

"I know. I'm not offended or anything," he assured me.

I embraced the silence that came after. Even the rest of the group fell into silence and that made me appreciate the passing scenes across the valley. It gave me enough time to think about Marcus Mortell and the email I had sent him. It was too personal, Eric remarked after reading it, but it was what I wanted to tell Mortell. *Weren't we trying to promote honesty with this assignment?*

"Just a few more steps and we're reaching our destination, ladies and gentlemen!" Chris announced. "Eric's waiting."

As everyone laughed at that remark innocently, I couldn't help but do the same.



Eric was playing soccer with a group of kids at the Aeta Community when we arrived. By the looks of it, they were about to get into the highlights. I must admit I hadn't seen the sport played this way yet—carefree, friendly, and purposed to ease negativity. And somehow, watching them, I felt like something lifted from me. Like I wanted to play with them, just go and kick the ball around without minding the people around, hoping I'd be able to laugh the way the kids did with Eric.

Eric turned to where I was seated, after assisting a kid deliver a goal. He yelled victoriously with each of them, as if they were all in one and the same team, and held his hands up towards the blue skies. He waved at me and pointed at the kid who just delivered the goal. I nodded and clapped.

"You're here!"

I shrugged, telling him I got here in time for lunch, and then got distracted as he moaned ruggedly at the kids jumping on his back and arms and legs. It was a scene so surreal that all the photographers around us—even Jared—captured it. I took one with my phone and smiled at how exciting it must be to be a photographer, to immortalize moments that might never happen again.

He laughed and motioned for the kids to go. They went running to the other mountaineers and photographers.

"I thought you'd back out."

"Of course, I won't!" I scooted over as he sat beside me, all sweaty, and his musky cologne filled my nostrils. "You smell," I teased.

"Do I?" He sniffed his armpits, and I laughed. "I kind of like it. Don't you?" He leaned over, making me smell his armpit.

I kind of liked it, too.

I pushed him away, shrieking. "That's disgusting!"

His laugh was carefree, the kind that I hadn't heard from him—or anyone else for that matter, in such a very long time.

"The pinapaitan certainly put you in a good mood."

"I've had better," I half-lied.

"You will always have things that are better, Kat. What matters is that you see each differently. As they are. And because of that, each will prove to be magnificent—no matter how simple or ordinary they may be."



I shook my head slowly. "I didn't think you could be that deep."

"I can be anything I want to be," he teased and elbowed me lightly.

I smiled.

At lunch, we were offered to join the Aeta guides and two of the community elders for a boodle fight. I sat beside Jared, who was speaking animatedly with almost everyone, while Eric, on the other end of the long bamboo table, was seriously speaking with his troop. When it was all over, I quietly sat down under the biggest tree and checked on Marcus's website. There was an update.

"I have never seen her this happy before. I like to think that it isn't just because of the people around her or the wind on her face as she ate or because of something else she might have experienced for the first time while I wasn't around her. I like to think that it is all because of me; that she was this happy all because of me.

But my life isn't tied to hers, and I guess our lives will remain apart. For I fear the inevitable—that as I reveal myself to her, she will start to look at me differently. And I will lose her even before I had the chance to have her."

"What the...?" I whispered. "He's not with his wife."

* * * *

I chose not to tell Eric or Jared what Marcus Mortell had put on his blog and went on with our hike with my mind filled. I was trying to put pieces of a puzzle together, which, at this point, didn't seem to fit. Rock Star's woman was his wife, and so the last entry invalidated my theories of Marcus being him.

Jared, on the other hand, was with me.

And sometimes, not with me, but still around me.

Huh.

There was a great view of the Crow Valley and the peak of Mt. Telakawa at the saddle of the mountain, where we stopped for our second breather. I was getting tired more quickly than I had anticipated, and it wasn't even that hot in the open field. I guessed my mind was flickering back and forth to countless thoughts so much that my body couldn't take the pressure of everything inside of me, working to the edge of their potential. At some point, I almost fell off a shallow cliff and slipped. Jared held me up and told me he'd noticed how distracted I was since the start of the trek. I told him about Marcus's post, to which he just looked away and said nothing.

We reached the peak of Mt. Telakawa with plenty of time to pitch our tents before sunset. Since I had no experience whatsoever in this kind of activity, Eric pitched it for me with so little effort and time that he was still able to help out the others.

Jared pitched his tent beside mine, our entryways in front of each other, and started bringing out some cooking items and food, which he



handed to Chris as his share. I sat on my tent's entryway, watching all of them move about.

"Change into your slippers already, Kat. It will help you relax," Chris told me.

Holy shit!

"I wasn't able to bring a pair." How stupid of me.

Jared chuckled. "I thought you had everything ready?"

"I'm new to this, Jared." I began removing my boots. "Boy, these are light, considering their size."

"They're expensive," Jared commented, as if impressed, himself.

Chris approached us and handed me a plastic bag. "Eric said he thought you might need this." Just like that, I had a pair of slippers. "It's so Eric to think of his companions."

I turned to Eric and watched as he scanned the valley below us, the sun giving him a faint golden glow as it set down into the horizon. His shoulders rose and fell in a steady rhythm, while his gaze, though fixed at the Crow Valley, seemed to be somewhere and everywhere else.

He stood that way for the next five minutes or so, and then turned to look at me for a second before heading to help his friends cook dinner. Having been caught, I turned away and went to the other edge of the clearing to look at the now-dimmed lands before me. For once, I had understood why my grandfather insisted on being in places like this.

In bed hours later, I caught a little mobile signal that allowed me to open Mortell's site. He had an update, which made me use up what little strength I had left.

"With a night as perfect as this starry sky above me, I never thought I'd wish I was the one giving you everything you needed."

Was it just me? Or were these last updates seemingly about me?

Sitting up, I peeked my head out of my tent. It was indeed a perfect night, with that star-laden sky. Where could Marcus be at this moment? Beyond the almost pitch-black environment, who could tell?

Maybe Jared could, since his phone was the only light I could see in the night, passing through his tent.



I woke up to buzzing outside my tent. It was still completely dark outside, and when I checked, it was barely 4 a.m. While I couldn't really keep my eyes open, I decided to take a few more minutes to my sleep and realized that almost an hour had passed when Eric called me on my phone.

"It's almost sunrise. Are you still inside?"

I groaned. "Yes."

"Get up. You'll miss it. Join the others."

I sat up, sleep immediately off my system. "Others?"

There was a pause. "I had to go back to Tarlac at dawn to find a stable internet connection. The company site crashed. I'm the only one who knows how to fix it."

"Wait. You left?" I might have sounded accusatory, but I was really mad about him leaving. He was supposed to be with me on this. We were supposed to wait for Marcus Mortell on the top of Mt. Telakawa together. Today!

"Yes. You have a whole team there with you." There was another pause. "You have Jared with you."

"That's unfair."

"Get up, Kat. You'll miss the sunrise. And don't try to describe it please. Just...just watch it."

Just watch it. "Okay. Fine. But you're coming back, right?"

"Keep your eyes on the valley. Mortell might show up anytime soon. The group will stay for one more night if he doesn't. I will see if I can return then."

"But Eric!" That was all I could say.

"Observe Jared."

"You think it's him?"

"Not sure." He paused. "Enjoy the moment, Kat. I'll be back. I promise."

It was my turn to hang up on him. This was ridiculous!

I went out to more buzzing and cluttered photography equipment. The cold wind swept past me, and I shivered. Holding my jacket against my body, I headed to where Jared was setting his camera up. He didn't turn to greet me as I stood beside him. The serious look on his face told me that he wasn't going to take this sunrise shoot lightly.

"You having fun?"



He looked at me and pinched my chin. "I am now."

If this was proof that he was Marcus Mortell, then I guess my job was almost done. So I was going to follow what Eric said. I was going to watch the sun rise.

Many of my grandfather's photographs in his journals contained no words at all. Pictures spoke for themselves, he told me when I asked him about them, and I didn't understand him then. Looking at the sunrise before me now, I breathed in deep and smiled.

There may have been words to describe what happened as the light of the morning sun spread across Capas, but yes, Eric was right. I shouldn't even try to. I just needed to watch.

* * * *

I felt my heart emptied of worries. Just staring out into the valley and the fields down and before me, I felt like I was somewhere no problems could reach. But just the same, I almost grew half-insane, expecting a man to show up anytime between the sunrise I watched so magnificently and the sunset that drew our wait to a close.

When nobody showed up anywhere, I half-expected Jared to just say it out loud. That he was Marcus. That he had been with me all along, just waiting for me to ask.

But he didn't. And I didn't have enough courage to bring it up.

I retreated to my tent on the second night utterly disappointed, beyond the fun and the games and the jokes of the group.

By the time we reached the Aeta Community for an early lunch on our way back, I was exhausted. Perhaps from the disappointment of not having met Mortell and from the sunrise on the second day that didn't look as magnificent as the first.

I sat under a nipa shade after eating and brought my tablet out. I should write Mortell another email. Something about how I felt, seeing the sunrise this morning. If he was Jared, I knew he would appreciate it.

"What are you doing there?" Jared was holding a bottle of beer on one hand and his camera on the other when he sat beside me. "Why don't you join the others? The elders offered beer for the road."

"I don't drink," I lied and went on with what I wanted to do. If Jared was Mortell, he would understand what I was about to do.

"Busy?"

"Yeah. Just a bit."

"Eric?"

"What?" I narrowed my eyes and turned to him. "No. Mortell."

"Hmmm." He nodded. "Aren't you going to focus on Marcus Mortell?"

"I'm going to meet him soon," I replied. And I wanted Eric to be here when that happened. He's my partner, after all.

Jared raised his beer to me. "Cheers to that."



Dear Mr. Mortell,

I stared at my tablet for a minute or two. No words came out. As I looked at Jared, who was howling at jokes thrown to the group, I wondered if it was him I should be writing to.

I rang Eric. He was out of reach.

Dear Eric.

How's the site?

I just want to let you know that I enjoyed breakfast at Keka Ne Ngan. You were right. That pinapaitan may not be the best one I have had, but it was magnificent just knowing that it was great in itself.

It's sort of like...coffee. You go to different places and you order the same flavor-brewed, caramel macchiato, or whatever. Yet you know you'll taste something different because you are in a different place, or perhaps because you are having it with someone. And it is amazing.

Jared said I'll meet Marcus soon enough. Now, I wonder if I really want to meet him. Marcus has become this person in my mind...this guy...this silhouette of a really interesting person, and by meeting him, I take everything away. What if he isn't exactly the kind of man I think him to be? What if he's boring, haha. But what if he turns out to be so much more? I think that would even be more terrifying.

But for all it's worth, Eric, about a lot of things about this trip, you are right.



We stopped by this small carinderia to buy refreshments. It was a warm day, and most of us wanted ice-cold sodas, before proceeding to our next destination.

The group had decided to go to Capas Shrine before heading home. Since the obelisk had never really appeared on Mortell's site, Vince had this feeling that the possibility of Mortell being there was actually very high. Jared agreed to it. But without Eric here, something felt so off.

I was about to tell Vince I wanted to push back Capas Shrine until Eric was with us, but my phone rang. It was Mandy telling me I had documents to sign.

"Oh, good," I said inadvertently. "You can just send them to the hotel. Eric's there now."

"He is? I thought he's with you on this project?"

I narrowed my eyes. "I thought he had to go back for a stable connection because the site crashed?"

Mandy laughed. "Oh, so that's why everyone's stirring about! Migz and Kaileen were speaking to Greg animatedly about something, telling him to call Eric immediately." She paused. "They seem happy about it, though."

"Happy?" Why would they be happy?

"Like they're celebrating."

What the hell was going on?

Pretending to not have any doubt on the matter, I swallowed hard and spoke as calmly as I could. "Okay, so I'll call Eric to wait for me at the hotel. Send the documents express."

Did Eric find Marcus and not tell me? No. There had to be an explanation. Eric wouldn't do this to me.

"Well, Greg is going to Tarlac. I can ask him to bring them."

"Okay."

Most in the group had gone when I finished the call. Besides Jared and I, Vince was the only one left behind. He was loading our bags onto a pick-up truck when I approached him.

"Hey. Ready to go?"

Eric wouldn't betray me. *Would he?*

"Kat. You okay?"

"Huh? Yeah, yeah." I cleared my throat. "I need to go back to Tarlac City. Something came up."



He looked confused and panicked. "Eric left you in my care. I can't let you take a public vehicle alone."

"I have to. We can continue the search tomorrow. I mean, Eric's not here—"

"And you have to have Eric always to find Marcus?" Jared cut in, striding to my direction. "If Marcus is on his way to Capas Shrine right now, he'll be there for an hour or so and leave. Then we'll have to wait for another couple of days—or worse, a week—before he updates again. I thought you're short on time?"

I didn't answer. He looked even more stressed out about this than I was.

"Do you even want to meet Marcus?" Jared's voice shifted, slightly shaking as he spoke. "Or would you rather be with Eric?"

"I have to sign some documents. They're urgent."

Vince placed his hands on his waist. "Can't Eric bring those to you instead? That'll force him to return to us. I mean, I agree. He has to be here."

"He hasn't been returning my calls. I assume he's still busy with the site." I swung my bag over my shoulders and onto my back. I needed to get out of here. Clear my head. This assignment was getting to me.

"But we're right here already, Kat. The opportunity is now presenting itself to you." Jared was obviously annoyed. He tucked his tablet away and walked with me and Vince as I crossed the road.

I turned to him when we got across the highway. "Why can't Mortell just reveal himself to me, you know? So we could wrap this up and *then* we could actually have some fun."

Jared pinched the bridge of his nose. Heaving a long breath, he placed his hands on his waist. "I just want you to enjoy this while you can. I can see how happy you are on the field and you have all the reasons to go around your own home province. So why stop now?"

Even Vince was looking at me curiously. Jared had a point, and I could see how much insistence I was going to get should I refuse to go with them to the shrine. And because of that, a part of me wanted to see where my refusal would lead, where Jared would take this.

"I'm sorry, guys." I took my phone out and pretended to urgently need to call Mandy. She was unreachable.

I watched as Jared headed back across the road without another word. He brought his tablet out and punched on it with no care in the world. Without another look at me. Somehow, a sting in my chest taunted me, while Vince stayed and told me he'd wait until I was on a bus or a jeepney back to Tarlac City before following the troop.

"You should call Eric. He needs to know where you are," Vince said.

"It's not about him," I insisted.

"So what is it about?"

I didn't answer. I hailed a bus that was on its way to Baguio and asked if they would let me off at the Tarlac City bus stop for minimum



fare. Just my luck, the conductor agreed. I was about to get on when Vince cleared his throat.

"I'm sorry, Kat. But you know, I agree with Jared. Whom are you really searching for? Is it Marcus Mortell? Or is it someone else?" he said finally, before heading back to the other side of the road.

The fact that someone I had just met a couple of weeks ago called me out meant I was getting off-track. Eric's right. Things were getting personal.

"Are you getting on or not?" the bus driver asked, irritated that I held them off.

I smiled and shook my head, getting off slowly. Across the road, Vince was busy speaking with someone on the phone, while Jared was still on his tablet, typing away.

Vince appeared relieved when he saw me crossing the road back to them and shut the call. He ran to me and grabbed my bag, smiling and nodding. I smiled in return, grateful that he didn't say another word about what happened. Honestly, I didn't want to talk about why I was back, and I was glad he understood.

When Jared saw me, he jerked his head back in surprise. "You're back."

I cleared my throat. "Let's find Mortell."

As if confused, he nodded and got on the truck.

I followed, sitting at the backseat when my phone notification went off. Knowing exactly what that meant, my heart raced. "Holy shit."

"What?" Vince asked as he got on the driver's seat.

"It's Mortell."

"What did he say?"

I read Mortell's post aloud. "I have always hated those roads. I call them bituka ng manok. Which is only fitting, because in a few hours, I will be on my way to that 'rooster' place I love."

"Goddamnit!" Vince hit the wheel of the truck and laughed. "He could have at least posted a more creative description of the place."

With a flat voice, Jared commented, "He's on his way to Rooster's Cove." His eyes weren't even on mine. He was looking out the window.

"I'm calling Eric," I said.

That was the only time Jared turned to me. "Can't you decide? I mean, who's calling the shots here anyway? Is it Eric? Because last I checked, it was supposed to be you."

"Yes. And right now, I'm saying we're heading back to the hotel to freshen up. We leave early in the morning."

Jared shook his head and sat back on his seat, covering his face with his sweater. "I'm going to sleep. Wake me up when it's time for the big reveal."

Vince simply shrugged. "We can go straight to Rooster's Cove. The three of us, you know. Eric can just follow."

Jared removed his sweater and faced me. "You know what. Fine.



That's fine."

"But—"

"No buts, Katalina! Let's just go!" Jared said.

Vince chuckled. "Let Eric go. He's going to come after us. Trust him." He began easing the truck onto the road. "Besides, where's your sense of adventure? You're with two strangers now, in search of another stranger. Have fun."

I called Eric to ask if he was okay with the plan. He was, and said that he's waiting for Greg, so they could follow us immediately.

"I'll be there. I promise," he said.

And that was all the assurance I needed.



Dear Mr. Mortell,

I'm not sure if you've read my first email. Given that you're traveling, I'm having second thoughts as to whether you even check your emails. I want you to know that I'm trying to find you. It may sound weird, but I'm very hopeful that as you read this, you'll think twice about giving meeting me a chance.

I have been following your blog the past few days. You capture the world like I haven't seen anyone do, and it gives me that feeling of hope, knowing that somehow, things do get better and things do change so you can see life differently. The way you are supposed to.

Life, for me, hasn't been easy, and so perhaps it isn't life at all. Each passing day, each passing moment of my life seems like an orchestrated photograph or a scene from a rundown movie. Passive. On a loop. And while I hide from the world, I realize it moves without delay, without pause. People walk in haste to get to places, and people run their own race. A marathon of dreams and destinies. While I remain where I am. I remain where I think I have cleverly chosen to be. And as I hide from the world, I realize I only hide from my own self.

I really don't know why I am telling you this. I guess I believe that someone would understand me, when there isn't really one who would. I have been pretending that you are actually listening and by trying to understand your need to be alone, by trying to view the world through your eyes, I will be able to free myself of pain and of everything that has been keeping me caged.

Through your photographs, the ones I view over and over and over again, I begin to live.

* * * *

I couldn't imagine how Vince was able to drive four hours straight to Rooster's Cove in Pangasinan, without needing to take a nap or at least a bathroom break. I was asleep the whole way and only woke up when he showed me the bituka-ng-manok road that Mortell described in his post. It spanned at least half an hour long and really did wound like chicken intestines. It was kind of sickening, given that I hadn't had good sleep and my energy was drained by the minute. It didn't help that



it was only just the three of us traveling, and we were all tired. There were no jokes, no teasing, and definitely no fun stories that could keep our spirits awake.

When we arrived at the Rooster's Cove, I got off immediately, in need of fresh air. Vince got off his truck and ran to the shore of the small cove.

Jared followed. He smiled and told me how I had been right about the place being beautiful, beyond words.

Eric was right, I corrected him quietly, eyeing the cove and the sea with so much admiration I thought I was going to cry.

To our disappointment, however, all three cottages at the coral hill by the shore had been booked. The old couple caretakers, who welcomed us, said so.

"They are among our regulars," the old lady, Manang Selia, said. "Oh, but you are new. I know you will love it here and come back as often as the rest of them."

Jared chuckled and then cleared his throat. "So a group has booked those cottages?"

"The two cottages were booked by a big group, yes." The old man, who introduced himself as Manong Tonyo, pointed to the direction of the twin cottage at the coral hill. "The other one was booked by Mr. M."

"Mr. M?" I could hear the exhilaration that coursed through my veins and into my voice as I spoke the name. Finally, we were reaching the end of our search. "He's here?"

"Not yet, I believe," Manang Selia replied. "He usually calls a few days early when booking his favorite cottage. We can't tell when he's coming, nor can we complain because he pays really well. Even when he leaves during his booked days and returns, he pays."

I turned to the lone cottage that sat closer to the edge of the coral hill. On the foot of its front porch began the giant roots that held a tree to its place, while it leaned over to the sea. Its biggest branch boasted the famous hanging swing, carried by the wind and dancing to the current.

"It's the swing." I took a few steps to it, almost in trance, and drank the sight which had become an object that symbolized our search.

"This place is famous for that swing. It's Mr. M's favorite place to think." Manong Tonyo scratched the back of his neck. "But we haven't really seen him up-close. He doesn't really socialize. Stays inside his cottage the whole day. Sits on the shore with a bottle of beer. Take pictures..."

It's him.

"Do you have rooms we could book?" Vince asked, putting the bags down.

"Sure! You are in luck." The old couple began to walk back, across the shore. "We have four cottages that were vacated this morning."

We were led to a thirty-step, seemingly natural flight of stairs to get to the top of the hill, where two cottages were a few steps higher than



the others. A set of comfort rooms was between them, which confirmed that it was meant to be for groups of people that knew each other well. Each cottage had double-decks that were meant for four people.

Since we weren't able to bring any groceries or food items, we asked the old couple if they could cook for us for a fee. They happily agreed, and we were served with ordinary house meals. No delicacy or specialty. Just plain old fried chicken and pork adobo, which we ate at the nipa hut by the shore.

After our last bite, Vince retreated to his cottage. He was dead beat, having driven that far after a hike. Jared and I stayed behind.

"You've been quiet." We sat opposite each other on the bamboo benches, watching the group of teenagers drink their hearts out in the waters.

"I'm tired." I had hoped we'd retire to bed early.

"I was hoping to spend more time with you tonight. I mean, we have been traveling together, and it is starting to feel like it's not going to be anything more than that."

I looked at him and the way he stared at me. "Why are you with me, Jared?"

"What do you mean?" He drank water nonchalantly.

"Why are you here? Why have you suddenly become so interested in finding Marcus?"

"I'm not interested in finding Marcus! I think I made that clear the day I gave you my number," he said, disbelief traced in his voice.

My chest tightened. I had expected that. But hearing him say it was an entirely different thing. "You don't know me."

"And you don't know me either, yet you chose to call me and seek my company. I'm here with you because you chose me to be with you." He paused. "And god! I have been dying to get to know you, Kat. The real you. Don't you want to get to know me? The real me?"

"But we're together. And we talk."

"No, we don't. We're together, yeah, but all you ever seem to do is write emails to Marcus and call Eric." When I didn't speak, he nodded. "You know what, you're tired. I will see you tomorrow, okay?"

"Yeah. I'm sorry. Good night," I said, but my eyes were at the only cottage on the coral hill, its lights switched on.



I didn't sleep.

Later that night, I walked down the shore of the cove, bathing in the light of the moon that covered the evening with its luminous, grayish glow. At a distance, I could see the twinkling of kerosene lamps from fishermen aboard their boats, wondering what it was that needed catching in the dark. I sat on the creamy sand and marveled at the sight of it all and the kind of quiet I found, staying out here alone, with no one to bother me. The teenagers were all drunk and sleeping. This kind of peace and serenity was too hard to come by, even in my hometown. I wanted to stay in it the longest I could, if not forever.

My grandfather said it was only in places like this where people get to think about their lives as honestly as they could. Perhaps that was the reason people claim to "find themselves." But as I sat there, waiting for thoughts about my past or my present to consume me, I got nothing. Nothing but the biting cold of the ocean breeze.

I must have sat there for at least an hour, my mind empty of anything, when my phone rang. I smiled, seeing Eric dela Rosa's name flash on my screen. "Hello."

"Greg and I will travel at dawn. We'll be there in the morning." His voice was deep, matching the evening's faint coloring.

"Great," was all I could say.

"How are things there?" he asked.

"Fine."

"Just fine?"

"Yeah."

"I can hear the waves."

"I'm at the shore."

"Where's Jared?"

I wasn't sure what brought about my sudden urge for honesty, but I told him almost everything that had happened with Jared earlier. He listened quietly and patiently, without a word.

When I asked him what he thought, he said, "Well, it's not rocket science. He's interested. He said it himself."

I didn't speak. I wasn't interested in Jared. Somehow, I was interested in...him. I liked Eric. And I kind of wished he liked me, too.

"Ugh!" I allowed my body to fall on the lounge chair, placing the



back of my free hand on my forehead. "What if he turns out to be Marcus?"

"Don't you want that? Our search is over."

"Like the song?"

He laughed. "No. Definitely not like the song."

"I'm not sure if I want Marcus Mortell to be him."

"You really suspect it to be him, don't you?"

I forced my eyes shut. "Yes."

"He's right, you know. You chose his company, and he came with you. The least you can do is show him you enjoy traveling with him and doing things with him." Eric paused. "You said it yourself in your email. You need to live."

I almost skipped a heartbeat. "You've read my emails."

"Well, I didn't have any choice, did I? You bcc me on your emails to Marcus."

I bit my lower lip and shifted to my side, chuckling as quietly as I could.

"Everything you said was way too personal, Kat."

"If Jared is Marcus, then I guess he'll find a way to understand why I act the way I do." I shrugged. "If not, then he won't know who I am." Silence. "I don't think I'm ever going to find him."

"I asked you once why this has become so personal to you and you didn't answer me."

"I want this, Eric. I want to travel. But I want it..."

"With someone?"

"Yeah. The way Marcus describes his travels with his wife or girlfriend. The way Tatay describes his travels with Nanay." If he heard how much I meant what I said by the way I sighed, I couldn't tell. I just wanted to say it out loud. "I want that."

There was silence between us the next moment. Though, it wasn't in the least bit uncomfortable. I stayed on the line, listening to Eric breathe, imagining how far away he was from me, and yet, he felt so near.

"Eric?"

"Yeah?"

"What do you think Marcus is thinking when he reads my emails?"

He laughed. "That you're weird."

I groaned.

"And that..." He paused. Which kind of caught my attention, because for the first time, I heard him let out a bit of what he felt. "I think you're the type he'd want to meet."

I smiled. "You think so?"

"Yes. But you're with Jared there now. The least you could do is enjoy yourself. You should stop thinking too much."

I smiled. "I do think a lot, don't I?"

"Just. Please. Listen."



"I'll remember that."

"Get some rest, Kat. I'll see you soon."

My new-found peace rooted itself deeper within me as I ended the call with Eric. I walked back to my cottage, feeling lighter and more satisfied. While I didn't want to entertain the idea, something inside me was telling me how this search was indeed becoming something between vacation and work. I was also beginning to love the way Eric and I talked to each other, the way I had suddenly grown accustomed to him, making me more honest about my feelings than usual. It was an entirely new thing.

In bed an hour later, Marcus posted an update. One that made me go weak.

Miss K. Come find me.



I had just slept for a few hours when Jared knocked on my door. It was still dark out, but he urged me to walk with him to the hills at least twenty minutes away to watch the sun rise. He said he had seen it once before and wanted to see it again. I agreed to it, knowing a photographer like him knew all the picturesque views in the places he had already been to.

True to who he was outside the courtroom, Jared had a camera slung to his shoulder.

"Kat?" he finally spoke, as we stood side-by-side, waiting for the first light of the morning in the horizon.

"Yeah?"

"What's your favorite color?"

"What?"

"Your favorite color," he said.

"Purple."

"The color of true emotions. That's rich. Mine's red."

I nodded. "Suits you. The color of energy, love, and anger."

"Favorite movie?"

"What? No." Shaking my head, I refused to do this.

"Come on." He faced me and animatedly clasped his hands together, as if to beg.

I laughed and shook my head. "Are we going to do this the whole wait?"

"Yeah, why not?"

"Because it's silly! We sound like a bunch of teenagers."

"A good thing. We won't be anymore, so we can act like it." When I didn't answer, he cleared his throat and held my hand. "Whatever it is that's bothering you, you can tell me."

I turned to him and watched as he stared at me. Should I just ask him outright? *Are you Marcus Mortell?* "Jared, I believe at this point in our friendship we can already be honest with each other, right?"

He nodded with a sigh of relief. "Yes. And I'm so glad you said that. Because I've been wanting to tell you this."

"Yeah?" So this is it?

"I want you to be my girlfriend."

Now *that* was totally unexpected. "Wait. What?"

"Yeah. I mean, I think you are a very interesting person." He



laughed. "I'm not going to waste my time, helping you for any other reason than to be closer to you."

I kind of thought he was in it for the ride. Like Marcus Mortell, helping me catch Marcus Mortell. You know what I mean.

"But—"

"Why do you keep yourself away from the world?" he asked. "Or at least from the people around you?"

"Why do you?"

He jerked, surprised. "What do you mean?"

"You know exactly what I mean, Jared."

"I'm right here, Kat." He motioned his body with his hands, gesturing exaggeratedly. "What you see here, right here and right now, this is me. I'm right here. And you're not. Your mind is always somewhere else." He raked his hair with his hands and turned. "I have been trying to keep you away from Eric. I think that much is obvious."

I wasn't ready for any of this. When I first asked Jared to come with us for the search, all I wanted was to make sense of Stella's assumptions, and then later of my impressions. There was something about Jared that drew me in. But the more I spent time with him, the further he was to my image of Marcus. Was this the line he drew to separate Marcus from Jared? Or was this the truth?

Shaking my head, I tore off his gaze and walked away, picking up my pace so he'd know I didn't have time for this. But he seemed to not have the time for the chase either. In the next instant, he grabbed my hand and whirled me around, catching my waist with the other.

"What have you done on this trip that's actually for yourself, Kat?"

The sky was already tainted with a faint light blue glow and soon enough, the sky would bleed a golden tint.

"I want to meet Marcus and that's going to happen. That's more than enough for me," I replied, my voice tight.

"*Want?* What do you *want* with that guy? You don't know him!"

Jared freed his hands of me and threw them in the air in utter disbelief. I didn't speak.

"Why do your eyes light up whenever you mention him?" He paced about, here and there. "What if he's...?" And then calmer, he steadied himself and brought his closed fist to his forehead, before turning to me. "A man like that, Kat, is all a mask. Whatever you see on his blogs, it's what he wants the world to see."

"I can't disagree with you more. Whatever I see on that blog is actually the real him. The *him* that he's too afraid to show the world."

In a single stride, he closed the distance between us. "He isn't real," he whispered. "He's not who you think he is."

"Is there something you wish to tell me?" Now was the time. This moment wouldn't happen again. Ever. If there was something he wanted to say to me, he should do it now.

"I'm here. And I'm real."



'Miss K. Come find me.'

I hadn't been caught as off-guard as when he pulled me in his arms and brought his lips on mine. For a moment, I took him in, allowed myself to feel what he felt, to feel who he was. To see what made him so interested. I responded to his kiss, willing to take his advances to the next level. See if his body, standing as close to mine as this, would bring me warmth.

But I felt nothing.

And, in my mind, I saw no one but Eric.

So I pushed Jared away.

"I'm sorry," he said, raising his hands to his sides.

"I'm sorry. I can't do this." I held my chest as it tightened, constricting my breath. "We should go back."

He didn't move. "What if you don't find him?"

"I don't know. But whatever it takes, I will meet him."



“Eric!”

I had never felt this much relief in seeing anyone, and I knew Eric felt it. He narrowed his eyes as I approached him, looked behind me and glared at Jared. It was as if he knew right away why I was upset.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, whispering as he held my hand. Instinctively, I squeezed it.

“Nothing.”

“That’s not nothing, Kat. Where have you been?”

“For a walk. I’ll go get changed, and perhaps sleep for a little longer. I’m still tired,” I said, and then ran off to my cottage. But I couldn’t sleep.

So I sat on the bed and browsed through Tatay’s travel journal.

From where I left off a few nights ago, the next pages were mostly about his travels with Nanay in Visayas and Mindanao. I remembered Tatay saying he’d gained a lot of new friends there and that coincidentally, he spent a glorious day with a man he had met back in Luzon. He didn’t mention who it was back then, so I scoured through my email for it.

There it was. Zamboanga del Norte. 2014.

“I thought it to be fate, that after saving my life, I should meet him every now and then in some of our travels. He is a very nice man, someone I look up to no matter his youth. He had done something I have always dreamed of doing. He had conquered his life. That by knowing himself fully, by accepting his strengths and most especially what made him vulnerable, he could be anywhere.

Oh, you should meet him, Katalina. Maybe one day I will invite him to Anao.”

I concentrated on the photograph he had glued on his journal. It was of him and his friend Rock Star, playing Games of the General right outside a display showcase of a local sari-sari store. Tatay appeared to be very pleased with his move. He was looking at Rock Star with his mouth open for a full laugh. Rock Star was wearing a cap to manage his long, curly hair, looking back at him. But I couldn’t tell whether he was laughing or not, because he had two fingers stretched across his cheeks and the rest of his fingers were either under his chin or covering his lips.

Ugh! He must have known Nanay or his wife Elena was taking a



picture of him.

A wife. That was the piece of Rock Star's puzzle that didn't exactly fit anywhere with Marcus Mortell. Or perhaps it was the missing piece from Jared's. I didn't know which was which, and frankly, I was beginning to get confused.

"Then forget everything you know about Marcus Mortell or Rock Star. Just focus on looking for him, like he is really lost," Tatay suggested minutes earlier on the phone. "It seems to me you are quite distracted. You search for him everywhere else, but not where you are."

It was exactly what Jared complained about.

"I look for clues, Tay. And I have found most of them."

"What do you do with them?" Tatay asked, his voice sounding closer than he actually was.

"What I am supposed to do with them."

"Which is?"

"Analyze them. Look at them more closely."

Tatay chuckled. "The operational word there is closely, apo."

"I do! I do look at them up-close!" I said, my voice raised. It was as if I had come to a point where I needed to defend myself.

"Then you're almost there."

Perhaps. After all, Marcus did ask me to come find him.



I finished my call with Tatay when I heard Eric's voice right outside my door. Three knocks later, I swung the door open and let him in.

"I thought you were going to sleep?" he asked, sitting on the edge of the bed.

"I was checking for more clues," I replied, tossing my grandfather's journal his way.

He shook his head. "That's between you and your grandfather." He then stood up and headed to the window. "Besides, you already have a suspect, for all I know."

"Not enough evidence."

"Test him then. Ask him questions which you think only Marcus would know." He was staring at something out the window.

"I am definitely going to do that today."

I stood from the bed and took the spot beside him. Whatever it was he was looking at beyond the window was worth a second or two of my time. "If I find him first, you're going to get me something I really, really want."

The cottage on the hill was still closed.

He chuckled. "Oh, I hope it's not jewelry."

At the shore, Vince and Greg were setting up three tents. Jared was helping them out, and I could figure that they were joking around since they were all laughing.

"Why are you setting up tents?" I asked.

"I love tents."

I nodded.

"If I find him first you're doing whatever I want for two weeks."

"Deal," I said, confident that Marcus would reveal himself to *me*. Not to anyone else. "And we mean this deal, right?"

He feigned a gasp. "We do? No way!"

"God, when did you even start being this sarcastic to me?"

"I have always been this sarcastic. You are just always so damned preoccupied to notice. Tell me, do you even know the color of my eyes?"

"Most Filipinos have brown eyes."

"I have chocolate brown. Your eyes are hazel."

I felt my cheeks grow hot. I had always known my eyes were hazel. It was a known fact, too, since hazel eyes were too hard to miss. But there was something in the way he said them that made it sound so



special.

"So beautiful," he whispered, tucking a loose lock of my hair behind my ear.

"Eric." I caught my breath. While he caught himself. Clearing his throat, he looked back outside, and just like that, the moment was gone. "I wonder what Marcus's eye color is," I asked, shunning disappointment.

"Brown," he replied. "You said it yourself. Filipinos have brown eyes."

"What if he was a foreigner?"

"I doubt that. His words shout Filipino culture. Seriously, what do you see in this guy?"

"What do you mean?"

"You have a crush on him, even when you don't know what he looks like. For all you know, he can look like a sidekick from one of your favorite comedy shows on TV."

I laughed. "First of all, I don't watch sitcoms. Secondly, sidekicks can often be good-looking. You are such a snob. Lastly, I don't have a crush on Marcus."

"You do. Admit it. You feel something that you cannot explain each time you look at his pictures. Each time you talk about him, your voice becomes a pitch higher and your eyes light up. You feel like you know him, don't you?"

"I do. But, whatever." I raised both my hands in surrender. Eric wasn't the type to let this go. I might as well admit a bit. "He interests me."

"Like how?"

"Like how he knows stuff."

"Stuff like what?"

I took my phone out and showed him Mortell's site. "Like photos! And landscapes and people and events."

"Shallow stuff." He took my phone from me and browsed through Mortell's site.

"They're not shallow. When he reveals himself, you'll see."

"So it's 'when he reveals himself' now?" He made quotation marks in the air. "It's no longer 'when we find him?'"

"Yes. I believe that soon enough, he's going to walk up to us and say..."

"Hey, you guys, time for breakfast." Jared's voice echoed about the room. He was standing at the doorway, his hands on the jamb.

As if on cue, Eric and I looked at each other. And laughed.



Breakfast was more than bearable. Vince and Greg were so much willing to put up with all the assignment's bullshit that they were making everything so fun. Jokes were thrown everywhere and in the most inopportune moments. Add early-morning beer to that and chaos erupted pleasantly. When we learned from the old couple that Mr. M had arrived, there was an even louder and more pleasant chaos.

Over tuyo, scrambled eggs, and tasty bread, the guys planned on a manhunt. Scour the whole of Dasol and its beautiful places, because apparently, Mortell was sneaky. He could slip in and out of his cottage while everyone was either too busy or fast asleep.

We began at the nearby resort. Greg and Vince pretended to be tourists from another country, looking for a place to take their Filipina girlfriends on a staycation after a shopping spree. Drunk as they were, their acting was so believable that the resort owners even served us some juice. Eric and Jared, however, were too busy observing the guests.

"I think I have seen some shots of this view on Marcus's site. That is why I brought us here." Jared walked up to me at the shore.

"Well, the view really is something." In fact, it was an even better view compared to the tiny cove we were staying at. Here, it was all ocean and coral formations. The sky, though a little cloudy, had silver linings. "God, I never thought I'd enjoy nature like this."

"You're going to enjoy more in the next few days." He began to lead me across the length of the shore, walking slowly and carefully against the splashing waves on our feet.

"As tempting as that prolonged vacation sounds, I really need to find Marcus sooner," I replied.

Jared took the opportunity to be a photographer. Unlike at the parade, he ignored the people around us and took pictures of the ocean.

"Jared?"

He kept his eyes on the viewfinder. "Hmmm?"

"Do you think we'll find him?"

He turned to me. "Of course. It's only a matter of hours. I'm actually wondering why we're here, when we should be there, watching his cottage."

"Good point."

Eric joined us in the next minute with an annoyed look on his face. That was something I didn't see very often.



"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I think we're doing it wrong," he replied, shielding his eyes from the wind that suddenly blew past us.

"What do you mean?" Jared asked him.

"I think it is unlikely for a seasoned traveler to go to the same place over and over, especially if he wants to take more pictures."

"But he's here. He checked in this morning," I said.

"Well, he will return if he needs more shots of something. I do that. Like show changes in seasons. You know, it's a photographer's thing." Jared shrugged and returned to taking photographs.

I turned to Eric to see if he was offended with the way Jared explained his craft. He did sound like he was bragging. To my surprise, Eric looked back at me with a mischievous smile.

"I see," Eric said. He did ask me to test Jared. With the two of us on Jared's tail, there'd be no escape. "So these photographs of landscapes... the ones from Marcus's site... Were they taken during a different season?"

"Yup. They were taken during the cold season." Jared looked at his output on the camera's LCD. "Kat, come here. Look at this. Amazing, isn't it?"

As much as I didn't want to admit it, the shot was amazing.

"This is actually a technique when you take pictures of landscapes," he explained, raising his free hand and sweeping it across the scene before us, like it was something he could touch. "It's the rule of thirds. You divide your scene into 3, vertically and horizontally, then align your horizon on the lower part to show more of the sky."

"It's amazing. Eric, check this out," I offered.

Jared gave Eric his camera.

I couldn't tell what Eric was thinking as he scrutinized Jared's photograph. He had that same expression as he did back at the coffee shops we went to before these trips, and I was both happy and nervous about it.

"Isn't it too...straightforward?" Eric asked, as he handed the camera back. "You don't have a great-looking sky. Why do you have to put emphasis on it? Why use the rule of thirds when...?"

"I have been doing that for years. It's a perfect technique."

"Alright," Eric said, but he wasn't convinced. He had caught the defense in Jared's voice, as much as I did.



“What’s wrong?”

Eric began asking me what was wrong, instead of what was up or what was happening or what I was doing, ever since he and Tatay met. I could understand the existence of a man code or a bro code, but I would never understand why such made me happy.

I entered Eric’s tent at two in the afternoon, while everyone agreed to a nap. “I lost my charger. Can I use yours?”

He raised his power bank. “We can use this.”

I nodded and plugged in my phone. In the next instant, I was lying down beside him inside his tent, our phones between us, and staring out at the sky through the tent’s peep hole. It seemed like it would rain.

“What the hell did you do this morning?”

Knowing exactly what I was talking about, Eric shrugged. “You wanted to test him, right? I helped you. If you ask me, he’s really already ruled out of the list and you only needed to prove *that*.”

“He knows what he’s talking about,” I said.

“Really? I seriously didn’t have that impression.”

“Come on. He’s okay.”

“Whatever you say. It’s not like you would be swayed.”

I punched his arm. “I can be swayed.”

He turned to me. “Oh yeah? Give me one time—just one time on this trip—when you actually bent your conviction for me.”

Closing my eyes to try and remember, I smiled. He had no idea.

“I’m waiting...”

“Hang on!” I chuckled, counting the many times I did, but not wanting to admit. “Okay, okay. There’s this one time when we got lost, and you wanted to ask for directions and I said no. But then after a while, I said yes, and we did.”

There’s that time I ate pinapaitan, even when I didn’t like it.

“That is so shallow!” Eric groaned, lying on his back again.

You asked me to watch the sunrise with your friends one time. And I did, even when I was tired.

“The point is I listened to you.”

And I wore all those mountaineering clothes and shoes you gave me, even when it wasn’t my style.

“Yeah. And when we have indeed asked for directions, the old man



said the exact route to take as the one I said. You just didn't believe me."

"But I bent." I raised a finger, which he pushed away. "The hell?"

I playfully hit his hand, and in revenge, he did the same with mine. Since no one would want to get the last slap, we went on like that for a minute, laughing and hissing at each other so no one would hear us. Vince was snoring loudly at the tent beside us, but he could just be pretending. Who knew? When Vince coughed, Eric covered my mouth with his hand and laughed.

"Quiet," he hissed.

I slapped his hand away. "You be quiet."

But the quiet that lingered after the words left my tongue was the kind I had feared. I lay there on his tent, looking at him as he gazed down on me. He was on his side, his elbow supporting his weight as he inched closer to me. I wasn't claustrophobic, but the moment seemed to take away the air inside his tent, and I couldn't breathe.

The back of his fingers brushed my cheek, and I shivered. Cold ran down the length of my spine until it reached down between my legs, allowing me tingling sensations I hadn't felt in years. This wasn't supposed to happen. I was just supposed to borrow a phone charger and leave, go back to reading my grandfather's journal. And yet, there I was, wishing he'd inch closer, so I could smell more than his musk, so I'd feel more than his clothes on my skin.

Brushing his thumb on my lower lip, I gasped, taking longer, but sharper breaths. He drew his face closer to mine, and I held my breath. I was waiting for him to kiss me. I thought I wasn't ready for anything emotional yet, but I was wrong. With Eric, everything felt so right that I was willing to jump into the waters without testing it.

So I pulled him closer, and our lips met. No matter the rush, it still was the gentlest kiss I had ever gotten. I responded to him as gently, too afraid that the moment would soon fade. He tasted so different. Like mint and cigar, at the same time, melding into his warm breath.

His lips moved with mine, and soon enough, I felt his tongue, too. Shivers ran down my spine, and I arched my body towards him, just to ease the flutter in my tummy.

"Don't do that. You're going to drive me out of my mind," he whispered into my neck, as he savored my skin.

Oh, god, what had I gotten myself into? I couldn't push him away.

My heart began beating wildly against my chest. To still my shaking arms, I wound them around his neck. His hands were as busy, feeling my chest and my leg.

"We're in a tent," I reminded him.

"It's fine. We're just going to..." He paused, and I knew he wanted more. "Should we go to your room?"

"Yeah," I whispered back, but not making any move to leave.

He claimed my lips once more with his. And just as he was about to lift my skirt, an email notification went off from my phone. It was so



loud we jerked away from each other.

"Goddamnit!" he hissed, cupping his face with both his hands as he lay back down.

I laughed as he did.

"That almost gave me a heart attack." I reached for my phone, opened it, and sat up in surprise. "Oh, god! It's an email from Marcus!"

"What?"

"Wait, I'm shaking. I'm shaking! What do I do?"

"Calm down." He held my hand as he sat up and teasingly breathed with me. And then he laid another kiss. I hit his arm, easing up the tension. "Now, read the email."

Drawing strength, I breathed in deep, one last time, and then began to read.

"Hi, Miss K..."

"So that update really was for me!"

Eric smiled. "Go on. Read."

"This trip, I admit, is by far the worst one I have ever had. Although, it has one great thing about it.

I can't deny the fact that your email caught my attention. I am glad my photos inspired you. I'm glad you are interested in them more than you are interested in me.

But somehow, I wonder greatly what you see on my blog that makes you a little more interested than the rest of those who wish to meet me—enough to travel with a man you don't know, just to pursue me. I guess I'm flattered about it. Then again, I am worried at the same time.

You must know, Katalina, that Marcus isn't really my name, and I use that so I won't be found. I find peace in being alone, and I have my reasons for it. People, for instance, who email me usually say one thing in common—that the world is ready for someone like me...someone who sees it differently. But in revealing who I am, the world will change right in front of me and my camera, either on purpose or unwittingly. It will no longer be real, at least to me.

And so perhaps the one who isn't ready here is me. I'm not sure I'm ready for a world who will—from the moment it recognizes me—orient itself by how it wants to be seen each time I have my film or my cam. For right now, when I capture the world, I choose the moment. I like it that way because each moment I take a photo, I feel. I feel, because it becomes a part of me and who I want to be.

Then again, if you find me, I might just change my mind."

"I should run to him. He's in his room if he was able to send an email." I rushed out of Eric's tent, eyeing the cottage on the coral hill with so much desire I knew I'd fly to it if I had wings.

"Woah, woah!" Eric grabbed my wrist and whirled me around. "Calm down. Relax."

"But he's right there!" I pointed to Mortell's direction.

From afar, Jared was watching our exchange.



"Yes, and he'll leave right away if you barged in on him like that," Eric said, matter-of-factly. "You have to calm down. *Yes*, but not right away. There's a right time. Right time."

"Yeah, but..."

"Not buts." Eric squeezed my hand. "Trust me. Just trust me, okay? We're getting there."

My mind shifted from Mortell to wanting to kiss Eric. I had never seen him this intense. He stood before me, so confident and sincere, with the wind catching his wavy hair as drops of rain began to pour on us, and he looked more handsome than I first thought him to be.

"We're going to get him this time, Kat," he assured me, and I believed him.

"For the meantime, go to sleep!" Vince yelled from his tent.

And there was nothing we could do further but laugh quietly and hold each other's hand, as we retreated to his tent, where we fell asleep.



We never left the shore since that afternoon, because we could see Mortell's cottage from there. No movement yet, other than the lights, turning on and off. I had wanted to go there for hours now, but Eric told me not to. The guy was bound to leave his room, so we should wait.

We were already on our third bottle of beer and the night had deepened, and yet, no Marcus Mortell in sight.

"I really like Manang Selia and Manong Tonyo," I began. "I think it's really amazing how two people can stay in love with each other like that."

Eric sat back and placed his free hand on his head. "At their age? I think it's more of a friendship."

"I never really get what they mean by that idea."

"How couples should be friends as well to stay together?" he asked, subtly tracing my palm with his finger. I giggled, looking if the other guys would notice.

"Yes. I mean it's love. It's romance. It's the heat," I said, counting what I said with my fingers to emphasize my point even more.

"Love fades, Kat. Everyone knows it."

I didn't answer.

"Oh, man, they are talking about the mushy stuff!" Vince groaned, throwing his empty bottle on the sand. "Let's bail," he said to Greg, and they went off to see how Jared was doing.

Eric let out a quiet laugh.

Something happened somewhere between now and the very first time we sat in front of each other at Kaileen's office. Eric, who was once a guy in a baseball cap, smoking his cigar, while glued to the screen of his laptop with an annoyingly serious expression on his face, was now someone else, sitting beside me at the beach, carefree.

"As I was saying, I guess in order to stay within marriage or within any relationship, you simply have to decide whether you can stand to be with each other for long or not. Like, when you can't have sex anymore or when kisses become nothing but greetings. You start to talk about memories and books and movies. Or you travel to places you have never been to and you argue about the silliest things you know and you laugh after that..."

I cut in. "And you simply sit beside each other at the beach?"



He nodded, chuckling. "Just like this, yes."

All the hair at the back of my neck stood at attention. I could imagine it now. How it must feel to be with someone who would understand you and stand by you no matter what.

"This trip... It taught me that in order to really share, I must first learn what I do and don't have," I said.

"So instead of finding Marcus, I guess you found *someone* more important."

"Yes. I have Anthony to thank for that."

I had everyone to thank for that. For the past years, everyone I knew had been pushing me to go to places, to leave my apartment, to just pack up and go without thinking too much about the consequences. While I had resisted years too many, I guessed this was just the perfect time.

Eric cleared his throat and fixed the imaginary collar of his shirt.

I rolled my eyes and chuckled, on my fourth bottle of beer. "Alright, you helped."

We fell quiet as laughter erupted from the shore. Vince, Greg and Jared were obviously having fun with their night sky trails and with the empty bottles of beer they were piling up in one corner of the dining cottage.

"They seem to be having fun."

"Aren't you?" Eric asked, almost whispering as he shifted to face me fully.

"I am." I smiled, but then cleared my throat. "So are you going to tell me about *her*?"

It sounded as though my question silenced the whole beach. Eric shifted himself a couple of times, before settling in a position where he no longer felt at ease with me. Then he regarded me.

"She loved me. But she loved her best friend more."

I sat straighter, facing him. "I'm sorry. That wasn't—" It was never the kind of information I wanted to squeeze out of him.

"And she said it, right there. Right in front of him and me. She told him she loved him, and wanted to be with him instead because he was her best friend." He took a long, deep breath and closed his eyes. "And you know what's funny? He had told her a billion times that he didn't love her, but it was still him." He paused, looking blankly into the dark horizon. "She died in a car crash trying to chase after him."

I heard the pain in his voice, seeping through the back of his throat. He was trying to deny it, trying to hide it by the way he steadied his voice. But I could sense the ache in the way his chest rose and fell, and I knew it wasn't for the woman who was no longer with him. It was for the fact that he never stood a chance.

"I'm sorry."

"Not anyone's fault. Not even his." Eric shrugged. "Now, I protect what's mine. No matter the cost." He breathed in deep again and traced



my chin with his finger. "If there is one thing I have learned about love, it's this: Falling in love is like filling a glass with water. Anything poured into the glass is yours to keep and anything spilling out is for the man you choose to share your life with."

Silence filled the air around us. The wind howled with Vince's and Greg's laughter. I turned to them and Jared, who was looking at us, his eyes narrowed. I swallowed hard, unable to contain my emotions, all mixed up inside of me.

Shaking his head, he sat on the sand and began typing away on his tablet. After moments of silence, my phone's notification went off. Seeing Mortell's email, I shrieked.

"He responded again! I need to see him now."

Eric grabbed my wrist. "Kat, that email you sent to Marcus. What you said about—"

"So what did he say?" Jared was first to run to where we were, hearing that Marcus Mortell had written me back. He had his hands behind him, with his tablet on.

I wanted to grab the tablet from him, tell him I had been noticing him and his tablet recently. But I had to be sneaky here, too.

"She hasn't read it yet," Eric replied, his voice tight.

I knew Jared caught the annoyance in Eric's voice but didn't say anything. He looked at me and forced a smile, getting annoyed in turn. "Well, I'm sure he'll come right down soon."

"Jared, what are you doing?"

"Huh?"

All eyes turned to me.

"I mean, with your camera and tablet. What are you doing?" Giving Eric a meaningful look, I smiled. He wasn't amused.

"Taking photos of the moon."

"Yeah, but why?" I can trap him. Right here and right now.

"Marcus would want to take pictures of this moon if he saw another photographer here. He'll come right out." He took his camera and showed us his shot. "This is just so lovely. Better than the ones he took from La Union! I am so sure he took them last summer, around April, since the waves were great."

Eric chuckled in disbelief. "April?"

"Yeah. Haven't you seen the pictures?"

"I have. A million times. It's part of my job."

I held Eric's arm. I was beginning to have this feeling that this exchange would not end so well. His mood was tainted with the anger and pain of the story he shared.

"Then what's the problem?" Jared asked, straightening his back to face Eric.

"I can't actually say those pictures were taken last summer. It has to be after the rainy season—"

Jared shook his head. "I don't think so. Have you even done your



research?"

"Have you?"

"Yes."

"Then clearly, you should know that San Juan is best known for its waves from October to March." Eric was already raising his voice.

"Whatever." Jared turned his attention back to the scene in front of him, peeping through the viewfinder of his camera. He was completely ignoring Eric. "So those shots I just uploaded? Like I said... they're perfect shots of landscapes. I have always been great with those technical stuff. I get my camera, adjust the shutter speed, an aperture of ten and I am so good to go. You know—"

Eric snorted.

"What now?" Jared's voice was harsh.

"Nothing," Eric replied, turning away from us..

"What are you trying to prove?" Jared yelled, walking after him until they pressed against each other in obvious contempt.

"Hey, hey. That's enough." Vince held Jared back, while Greg had Eric.

"I don't have to prove anything," Eric said.

"Well, you certainly are trying to insinuate something."

"Calm down." I forced myself between the two, thinking Vince and Greg would only make things worse. It had to be me between them so no one would throw the first fist. "Eric isn't trying to prove anything," I told Jared. To Eric, I said, "You should stop."

"Why are you telling me to stop? Your boyfriend's the talkative one!" Eric replied.

"Boyfriend?" That did it. All those flirting and kisses, and he was giving me away? "What the hell, Eric?" I yelled at him. "And he's just saying what he knows. The least we could do is listen."

"Listen to him for all I care." Throwing his hands in the air, he turned on his heel and started for his tent. "I'm going to bed."

"You should just go back to Taguig," Jared said, much to my dismay.

"Jared!" I scolded him, shaking my head.

"Good luck finding Marcus without me then." Eric pulled his bag out of the tent and slung it over his back. "Pack up, boys. We're leaving."



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“What is wrong with you? What are you doing?”

The speed with which everything happened seemed like a blur. One moment Eric and I were seated together, listening to the sound of the wind that brought the subtle waves to shore, watching the rise of the full moon against the pitch black sea, and waiting for the great reveal of the man we had been searching for, and the next, he was leaving.

He had most of his stuff on his backpack when he hastened to his pick-up truck. I was behind him, wishing I could grab his bag before he could even hurl it. But I seemed to have my hands tied to my sides and my feet were shaking.

“Eric! You are not leaving!”

He opened the passenger’s seat of his truck, but then pushed it shut again. “You know what, Kat, stay if you want. I am not going to put up with Jared and all his excuses for great photography.”

“He’s good.”

“He is not! And you should know that by now.”

Vince was approaching the truck with some of their things. He didn’t even bother placing their tents in their proper sacks; he just hurled them at the great big bowl of mess behind Eric’s truck.

“Do you still even believe that he’s Marcus?” Eric took Vince’s stuff and threw them on the pile. “Well, I have news for you. He is not Marcus.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“How can you?”

I swallowed hard, knowing what I was about to say would sound stupid. “He’s always on his tablet, right when Marcus emails.”

Vince and Greg slowly crept away from us, back to the shore.

“He is not Marcus! Because if he was, he would have been humble enough to know that photographs speak for themselves. If he was Marcus, he would have had the decency to treat you and your teammates with a little more respect and give you credit to know what he’s talking about!”

“Well, I didn’t know what he’s talking about.”

“I did. An aperture of ten? My ass!” Eric was throwing his hands in the air, his voice raised and forced. I began to wonder about the depth of his anger towards Jared. Simply showing off to be good at something



would not solicit this intense of a response. "I do all your research for you, Kat. I know what he's talking about."

"What you read is different from the real thing."

"Exactly. And everything he knows is stuff he just reads out of books. He is clearly an amateur."

"And what made you an expert?"

"I never said I was an expert. I just know when a person is lying. And you have been lying to yourself."

A dark cloud loomed over me. Why did this become something about me?

"What do you mean?"

"You write emails to Marcus, baring him your soul and your heart. Why do you do that if you think Marcus is with you? If you really believe that Jared is Marcus, you wouldn't have ignored and avoided him. You would have tried your best to be close to him and get to know him."

"That is beside the point." I swallowed, almost silenced by how he had stripped me bare.

Eric faced me, his sudden shift of emotion apparent by the way he stared. "Admit it, Kat. You know deep down that Jared isn't Marcus. You feel it. That's why you still write those emails. That's why you don't open yourself too much to Jared. So tell me why you are still here. Why do you put up with him when he is slowing your research down?"

"He's helping me." I almost couldn't hear myself.

"He's misleading you!" he yelled. "You should have been going around and really looking! He's been talking about himself the whole of your trip. You feel that. Otherwise, you wouldn't be calling me or emailing me to guide you."

"I need you to guide me because you are my teammate! This isn't about the two of us!"

He shook his head. For a moment, I was convinced that he was begging me about something. He was looking at me with those eyes, and I realized he pitied me. "In your email to Marcus, you said no one understands you. I think it is you who don't understand yourself."

"No one understands me."

He moved in closer, holding both my hands. "I wonder how you can even bare your heart to that Marcus guy, but you can't do it to me or the people who had been with you inside that office for years and years."

"Mortell doesn't know me, Eric," I replied.

"You feel something for him. Admit it. You feel something you can't explain and you know deep down you're closer to him than you are to any of us."

"What's your point?"

"Have you ever thought that maybe you just don't listen hard enough to the people around you? That you listen too much to what you feel?" He raised his hand, as if he was about to touch my face, but he pulled himself away.



"What do you mean?"

He didn't reply.

"What do you mean, Eric?"

"I'll see you in Taguig, Kat."

"You are not leaving!" I shrieked, sounding like a child. "Eric!" I felt ashamed, running after him as he closed the door shut on me, and I stood, staring at the tail lights of his truck when it eased away minutes later.

In a moment of desperation, I ran to the coral hill, despite Jared's call that I stopped, and knocked on his door. No one answered, so I turned the knob.

"What are you doing?" Jared hissed. "Stop!"

When I opened the door completely, I was greeted by an empty room.



It had been two weeks since that night in Rooster's Cove. Two weeks since the last time I saw Eric and his tail lights. Two weeks since the last time I actually spoke with Jared. I had been avoiding his calls and insistence that we went out.

I had found brand new solace when I returned home, and I was intending to keep it for as long as I could. I didn't want to deal with Jared and my inkling that he was Mortell, nor did I want to deal with the fact that Eric had requested for a few weeks off to work on the site remotely from home. Of course, Kaileen and Migz granted his request, while I was left to work more than ten hours a day to pick up where we had left the assignment on.

I was hardly in the mood for anything. Anthony said I was even worse than when he first sent me on the assignment. He said I had shut the world out of my system entirely this time. What he couldn't figure out, though, was the reason behind it all.

I, however, didn't shut the world out. Nobody knew—not even Kaileen and Migz—that I had been in constant communication with the man I was supposed to bring to our anniversary party next weekend. I had eight days to convince Mortell to come.

And to tell him I was working for a magazine.

Sometimes, I missed seeking out Eric's encouragement and advice. He always knew what to say, what to show and how to make me realize anything. Like my grandfather and his journal, Eric's calls and emails then had become a beacon.

But he wouldn't talk to me now. He had shut himself out from the world, and with that, he had shut me out of his.

* * * *

"Dear Marcus,

I understand what you mean when you say things do get better in time. You're right. All hurdles appear to always be worth it when you see the end."

I stared at my reply email and re-read the one he had sent me before this. He detailed his trip to Batad from two days ago, where he had to trek about three hours to get to Tap-piya Falls. The photographs he attached of the amphitheater-like rice terraces from a certain



viewpoint in the mountains and the crystal, blue-green waters of the falls were beyond amazing. He hadn't posted these on his site, and since we had been emailing each other, he hadn't posted any update.

"If you are in Taguig, or anywhere near now, I will be at Café Espinosa at 4 p.m. later. Just in case you wish to meet me, you'll know where to find me.

Katalina."

Anthony knocked on my door just in time for me to hit send. He leaned against the door's jamb and crossed his arms over his chest. "Hey. You need coffee. And company."

Looking at Mortell's final words in his email, *You should always find the silver lining*, I nodded and went with Anthony to Vulgar Burgers at BRU.

"So." Anthony was putting creamer on his coffee. "Has Eric replied to your messages?"

I shook my head. No email, no text message.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Why wouldn't I be?" Not only was I played again for a fool, given the fact that I had let Eric in, almost had sex with him, and now he was gone, but I still hadn't convinced Mortell to go to the party.

"I don't know. You sound...sad."

It was high time I told him what I had been up to. "I didn't find Marcus. Though, I still have this ray of hope. We have been sending emails to each other. Now, he shows me photos that he doesn't post on his blogs. I feel special. In a way."

"Do you think you'll like him when you see him?" he asked, changing the subject.

I smiled weakly, feeling a bit awkward. Anthony had been a friend since I could remember, but there wasn't really a time when I had come undone in front of him. Rest assured, he didn't know who I was. "I'm not sure. But..."

"But you like Eric, don't you?"

Or at least I thought he didn't.



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At half past five, I gave up. Looking at my empty inboxes, I kinda got the message that Mortell wasn't coming. I dialed Jared's number instead and told him where I was. He came in mere twenty minutes.

"For how long have you been here?" he asked as soon as he took his spot in front of me.

"Not long. Didn't you get my earlier message?" I asked, my email to Mortell in mind.

"No. What earlier message?"

"Have you checked your emails recently?"

"Yes." He narrowed his eyes, chuckling. "What's going on?"

"I need to ask you something, Jared." I swallowed hard, curling the fingers of my hands against each other on the table. "What's your real name?"

"Javier Redentor," he replied, chuckling. "I hate it."

"Do you or do you not have a wife?" I asked, sounding like an investigator.

He sat back, leaning against the back of the chair, and then he frowned. "I do. But we got separated years ago."

Swallowing hard, I readied myself for the final question. "Are you or are you not Marcus Mortell?"

He let out a ridiculous smile and shook his head, cupping his face with his hands. "I knew this was about that guy." He propped his elbows on the table and rested his chin on his closed fists. "I'm not, Kat. I'm not Marcus Mortell." He reached for my hands across the table. "I never said I was."

Somehow, there was this feeling of satisfaction inside of me.

"I'm sorry," I said, pulling my hands away.

He sighed and smiled in defeat. "I never really understood you, Katalina. When you barged into our office and we met a week later at the parade, I thought that was fate. God, here was a woman so intense and headstrong." He let out a satisfied breath. "But of course, she wouldn't let me in."

I opened my mouth to speak, but there was nothing to say.

"You were so focused on finding Marcus and communicating with Eric that you failed to see me. You failed to see that I have been begging for your attention." He let out a deep sigh.

When silence once again filled our table, he tapped his jeans-clad



thighs and stood up. "You know where to find me, Kat. In case—just in case—you find it in your heart to choose me."

* * * *

"Dear Kat, I am so sorry I wasn't able to meet you. I'm not in Taguig. I'm in Davao, and I think I'll be here for the next two weeks. And I'm not sure if I will ever be ready to meet anyone right now. How can I make it up to you?"

* * * *

"Marcus. I think you just asked me the wrong question because I will be taking advantage of it.

This may come as a bit of a shock to you, but I am currently the Senior Editor of Tints and Shades Magazine. And I wish to feature your pictures in our next issue. Please don't think I lied about anything. Everything I said about what I feel whenever I see your pictures... It's all real."



“Yes. Please do. And those photographs are exclusively for the magazine. Alright. Bye.”

I placed the phone back on its receiver and went on sorting out the articles for the final issue of the year. We were closing the year with a bang, and I wanted that to be Marcus Mortell.

Anthony was ecstatic the moment he found out Mortell agreed to let us use his photos exclusively for the magazine. He called in three different people to curate the photographs, but then canceled entirely when he realized whatever it was Mortell would send, we would print out.

Greg knocked on my door and handed me a few printed photographs he wanted me to check out before filing them. I scanned each one and with a satisfied nod, looked up at him.

“Thanks, Ma’am Kat,” he said and turned.

I wanted to call for him back to ask him about Eric, but I sat still and kept my mouth shut. Whatever was bound to happen eventually would.

“How’s Eric?” someone from outside asked Greg. “I heard you were together last night.”

“Yeah. His despedida.”

“Where’s he going?”

“With his parents. Around Europe.”

“Nice! Tell him to drink with us before he leaves.”

“I will.”

I couldn’t begin to describe nor compare with anything the emptiness I felt as I learned that Eric was leaving. Busying myself to get over the fact that I hadn’t been seeing or talking to him at the office sufficed, but somehow, that was only because I was within my comfort zone. I was used to not having him around while at the office. But his leaving for Europe, which was too permanent, was unimaginable. I wouldn’t be seeing him at all anywhere.

So I did the only thing I could think of to get a hold of him.

“Eric, I know you are mad at me, and I’m sorry. I heard you are leaving the country. That’s great. I think opportunities knock once and so you have to grab on as much as you can. But if you would see me one last time, I really want to talk to you.”



* * * *

"I messed it up with Eric, didn't I?"

I came home to Anao, because I needed a place to think. And I couldn't do that in my apartment. The place felt more like a guarded castle than a home.

"Do you want an honest answer to that or an answer you only wish to hear?" Tatay was sitting in front of me, scanning the pages of his travel journal. He skipped to the last page and looked at me inquisitively.

"What?"

"You are supposed to fill the next pages with your travel," he replied, tossing the book in front of me. We were at the veranda of our ancestral home, taking refuge at the sound of the distant crickets and low-blowing horns.

"I didn't know what to put in it."

"You put in your heart. What else is there to put in it?" he asked rhetorically and stood from the lounge chair to gaze at the dimming horizon. From the second floor of our house, we could see the navy-dark farms nearby and the kerosene lamps from nipa huts of caretakers. "As to your question, you already know the answer to it."

"I don't. I really don't." One moment Eric was with me, and the next, he was leaving without a word.

"He's a good man."

"He's an asshole."

"Who taught you something very important?"

"And what is that?" I asked, following him.

Tatay looked at me with the gentleness of the father he had become to me and the grandfather he was. Touching the tip of my hair, he tucked a loose lock behind my ear. He smiled weakly.

"You haven't been listening to anyone, apo. You said a while ago you were once giving him copies of your emails to Marcus, where you kept telling him about your deepest and darkest thoughts. Has Eric ever replied to you?"

"No. Those emails are for Marcus. I bcc-ed him because..." I searched the sky for words. "Well, because I just wanted him to know what was going on with me."

"Then has it ever occurred to you that maybe he has things to share, too, but you haven't really given him that chance?"

I narrowed my eyes. "We had a chance back at the beach."

"I don't think he's going to open himself up to you when you have your eyes set on someone else," Tatay said.

"I like Eric." We kissed, for crying out loud!

"He doesn't know that." He moved back to his old rocking chair and closed his eyes, his leg raised on one armrest. "Yet."

"Are you saying I chase after him?"

"I didn't say that."



"You're thinking it."

Tatay laughed. "You thought of it. You said it."

Groaning, I stumped my feet and walked away. Clearly, I wasn't going to get anything but riddles from my grandfather.

* * * *

Dear Mister Mortell,

Tints and Shades Magazine will be celebrating its 10-year mark on December 18 at the World Park of Berkeley-Reagan University, Our Alma Mater, at 7 p.m. We would like to invite you to be our Guest of Honor.

If you would allow it, we wish to present you to our readers as the very talented man that the world sees you to be. We look forward to your positive response to this request.

Very truly yours, Katalina Villegas

Senior Editor

Tints and Shades Magazine



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*D*ear Miss Villegas,

I am honored to accept your invitation, and so I will be attending your anniversary party. You can count on that. I do, however, have two requests that I specifically wish you'd follow.

First is that the venue be divided into two. One half is given to me as an area for an exhibit. I have a new collection I wish to show the world. Like me, I wish it to be known. No one is to help me arrange it, and I ask specifically that no one is to peek until it is unveiled. Second of my requests is that you introduce the exhibit before me.

I look forward to meeting you.

Sincerely, Marcus Mortell

* * * *

The minute the word of Marcus Mortell's reveal was out, Kaileen and Migz called everyone they knew, especially their most valued suppliers, and arranged for the party to be grander.

Marcus Mortell was finally going to reveal himself, the couple said over and over, their eyes gleaming and their laughter more animated. But there was something in the way they said the words that made me wonder how much of it they had actually expected.

They called Eric, who apparently was coming, too.

"Well, you better come!" Migz was saying over the phone. I was planning the menu with Kaileen on her desk, so I could hear every word. "This is it, buddy!" Migz laughed. "Alright. Oh, Kat is here. Do you want to talk to her?" Migz laid his eyes on me. "Oh, okay. Take care then." As soon as Migz hung up, he said to me, "He's running late for something."

I nodded and smiled. I knew Eric wasn't running late. He was running away from me. But he was coming, and that was more than enough for me. So I asked my sisters to design me the most beautiful, most elegant cocktail dress they could think of.

"We got your back, big sister," Evelyn replied, and promised to deliver it the morning of the party. They were going to do my hair and makeup, which worried me, because sometimes, they could get too experimental.

The day of the party, I arranged for the venue to let a few guys



in from Mortell's team a lot earlier. The Anniversary Party was going to be in the early evening, so whoever it was Mortell sent to arrange the venue had plenty of time to strategize the big reveal. Mortell said they would handle everything. And I liked that. My only job would be to introduce him.

When my family arrived at my apartment that morning, my sisters presented me with a white halter top dress that overlapped at my waist. A gold band held the flaps together, but allowed a slit to show off my left thigh and leg.

"Such a good thing you have great legs, Ate! You'll look hot in this," Olivia said, as she held it up.

"So hot," Evelyn commented, as she whirled me around.

It was indeed a beauty, and every female member of my family confirmed it.

"We made this specifically for you." Olivia pulled me to sit in front of my vanity and began brushing my hair.

"So don't expect to find this in any magazine or mall catalog," Evelyn said. Then she sighed wistfully. "But it will be on *TSM*."

"That is so cool," Olivia said.

To which, Evelyn agreed, "So cool. And we're going to do this Egyptian-meets-Fairy-Princess look on you."

"Just don't overdo it!" I told them, eyeing my mother in the mirror. She was smiling, appearing pleased about the sister bonding that had long disappeared from my vocabulary. I hadn't been on one since my college days.

"I wonder why you're so bothered by this party." Evelyn's gentle hands began working wonders on my face.

"Well, your sister finally convinced Marcus Mortell to reveal himself to the world. That's something," Nanay said proudly as she sat on my bed, reading the latest issue of *Tints and Shades*.

That wasn't the only reason. Eric was going to be there, and since I planned on doing everything so he'd speak with me, I wanted him to be attracted to me.

I had rehearsed my lines dozens and dozens of times since my morning coffee. I was going to tell him that he had been right about everything on our assignment, except for one tiny detail. I may be too afraid to open myself up to the world, but a small part of me had wanted to open up to him. It was why I kept furnishing him copies of my emails to Mortell. It was why I kept calling him when he wasn't around. It was why I regretted my decision to be on a different team from him. I wanted him to know me. The real me. And if he would accept me, I would like to spend more time getting to know him.

Tatay said I never gave Eric the chance to say anything to me. This time, I wouldn't give him the chance to say no to me. I was going to ask him to date me.



“Great job, Kat! This issue has earned us a lot of kudos. Guests have been coming to me non-stop about it.” Anthony was holding up a copy of our Marcus Mortell special issue as he approached me at the party.

World Park was a huge space inside the BRU campus, but I admired how our caterers arranged everything. I was standing by the curtains that divided the buffet and the exhibit areas, wondering if Marcus Mortell had arrived. No one was approaching me to tell me anything and the program was supposed to start in seven minutes.

“That’s great!” My voice was higher than usual.

“What’s wrong?”

“What?”

“You’re fidgeting,” Anthony said flatly, pointing to my hands. “Stop that. Marcus Mortell has arrived. He’s backstage. Or so I heard.”

Relief stormed over me, but there was a certain someone still who hadn’t showed up.

“Whom are you looking for?” Anthony asked, although I’d bet he already knew the answer.

“Is he here?”

Anthony smiled. “Eric isn’t the type to back out on his word, you know.”

Stella walked up to us with a microphone and a program flow on her hand. “We need to start. I’ll let everyone settle down on their seats.”

Anthony agreed.

“Anthony, wait.” I held his arm and he turned back. “I never really thanked you. For giving me the assignment. I feel freer.”

He nodded and gave me a hug. “You deserve to be happy, Kat.”

“Ladies and gentlemen, I invite you all to settle down...”

I didn’t exactly hear the rest of what Stella was saying. I found a seat with my family a few rows in front of the makeshift stage and watched the videos presented on-screen. They were ten years’ worth of our sweat and hard work, and while pride filled me, I was becoming impatient, wanting to see Marcus and Eric sooner.

“Kat, it’s time,” Kaileen bent over from behind me and whispered. “Marcus is here.”

I nodded and took my place at the curtains, left of the makeshift stage. All the lights were on me that I couldn’t see anyone from the crowd.



From way, way back, I caught a glimpse of movement. A silhouette of a man from behind the audience was slowly heading towards me.

"Kat, let's go!" Kaileen hissed.

Pushing that image away, I began. "Ladies and gentlemen, for years now, we take pride in the fact that one BRU graduate has earned national and international recognition for exceptional and breathtaking photos of the Philippines. And for years now as well, we have been wondering about the face behind these photographs. I now proudly inform you that an exhibit is behind these curtains from that man himself. Join me in warm applause as we unveil...*Silhouettes*."

The curtain behind me fell to the floor just in time, forming soft and silky puddles at my feet. The crowd was in unison in their awe, and most of them stood and crossed the area for a closer view. I stood, glued to my feet, waiting on the man whose silhouette died down with the crowd when the lights turned on.

"Oh my God, Katalina!" someone yelled from the exhibit area.

I turned and widened my eyes, as shivers ran down my spine. In front of me were landscape photographs, where I mostly stood at the foreground. There were also portraits of me during my travels with Jared.

One was when I ate breakfast with Jared at Keka Ne Ngan, in which the view of the farm shared the window where I looked out from. Another was when I trekked the Crow Valley, laughing with the guys. The vantage point seemed to be from a far and high place that someone who had gone ahead of us would most likely had caught. Then there were hundreds of 5R photographs that showed different emotions, different angles, different body parts in black and white, but they were all mine. I could recognize each to be from a time when Eric was either away from me or entirely gone. And then there was the centerpiece, that giant, blown-up photograph of me, looking out into the sea and basking in the sun, while I rode the hanging swing at Rooster's Cove.

That was when it hit me.

"Eric," I whispered, allowing the sound of his name to take over my senses.

"Hello, Ms. Villegas," a deep yet gentle voice resonated in my ear.

I turned and saw him. Eric. Marcus Mortell. The guy I had spent the past weeks with, conversing and trying out life. He stood in front of me, now different but familiar just the same.

"Eric," was all I could say.

"I told you. You just have to listen."

My head was spinning and my mind was flashing different memories altogether. Moments captured, moments I thought had been lost between the distances that Eric had deliberately placed between us. He did everything on purpose.

"But...you..."

"Were always a step ahead or behind you?" Eric took the



microphone from me and handed it to Vince, who winked at me. "We never lost contact, did we?"

"My grandfather..."

"Was thrilled to know you are traveling with the man who once saved his life."

My grandfather was standing at the bar, smiling at us. He raised his glass of whisky, as if for a blessing, and then turned back to the mountaineers who were regaling at his stories.

"You have a wife," I accused him.

"Leina wasn't my wife." He paused. "And they didn't know she had died."

Nonetheless. "Those emails. They come even when you're with me."

Eric winked. "Know your technology, Kat. Automation?"

"At the cove, the cottage lights turned on and off."

"Chris was thrilled to know I was Mortell and that I needed his help. But he never stayed there."

"But they said you haven't been traveling."

Eric cupped my jaw and placed his thumb over my lips. Leaning his forehead against mine, he shushed me and then held me closer. "You have no idea how much I had wanted to tell you when you told me you were going home to Anao. I wanted to be there with you. With your family. To meet again the old man who taught me about love and life."

Oh, Tatay. You and your riddles.

"I don't know what to call you now," I whispered, feeling his warm breath on me.

"Enrico Sebastian Jacinto dela Rosa. But you can call me Eric."

I chuckled. "Finally, we meet."

He brushed his nose on mine, drawing me to near insanity. I held on to his wrists as his hands secured my head in place. "Finally."

"I feel like a part of me has always known."

"Well, I've been leaving traces. For you."

"Why?"

"Just because..." Eric chuckled lightly, pulling me closer.

"Hang on, you lovebirds." Vince pulled Eric by the elbow. "I believe the whole crowd would love to know that our man here is Marcus Mortell?"

I laughed. I had forgotten everything about the reveal.

But maybe that was it, the key to the biggest turning point in my life. I had to forget everything else that didn't matter much to what I wanted to accomplish, to happen in my life. And as I stood there, watching the man I was starting to fall in love with, take the stage and receive the recognition he deserved, I smiled. I was about to forget everything else. But I would never forget how this man and the way he saw the world had freed me.



EPILOGUE

One look.

That was all it took to convince himself that his life had finally changed. What used to be quiet, lone traveling, with no one but Greg, Vince, Kaileen and Migz, knowing his whereabouts, had suddenly become a couple thing, shared with the woman he never expected to fall in love with. And he was happy. Genuinely happy. As all this traveling with Katalina gave Eric a sense of hope and satisfaction, all at the same time. It felt different. *She* felt different.

Eric carefully snuck out of Katalina's hold and looked over the horizon. From the window of their Rooster's Cove cottage, he could see the sunset clearly. A purple-orange sky that boasted the bright round sun, painfully making its way down the horizon for its final hours. Its faint golden glow, lining the gray clouds that scattered thinly overhead. And the vastness of the sea, waves crashing quietly onto shore.

"Hey," she spoke softly.

He turned to her and saw her hugging the sheets against her naked body. They had spent the whole afternoon making love and talking about work and life and plans. She was so beautiful. So beautiful that he never stopped taking pictures of every inch of her from the very moment she became his.

"You slept long," he said, sitting on the edge of the bed, comfortable in his own nakedness.

"As did you," she replied. "Did you just wake up?"

"No. I've been watching you sleep."

"Oh." She pulled the covers to her lips, but he pulled it back. He loved watching her blush, the softness of her face naturally bathed with the color of beets. And it made him feel happy that he was the one to blame for it.

"It's a full moon tonight."

"Are we going to set up the tent?" Her eyes lit up.

"Yes." He chuckled and brought his lips to her. He loved kissing her. Every moment of his life, he would kiss her the way she deserved to be kissed. "I love you."

"I love you, Eric."

"I can't believe it's time to go back to Taguig tomorrow. I want to stay here."

"We have an appointment with Dean Whitman. Remember?"

"Yeah," she said. "I wonder what he meant when he said we're



returning to him for something.”

He smiled. He had a clue. He’d been dying to pop the question for days, but that would have to wait for a few more weeks. And yes, he was definitely considering Dean Whitman for a godfather.

When he let her go, he took her grandfather’s journal at the bedside table and handed it to her. Finally, they had an entry he wouldn’t be too afraid to show anyone. “Read it first.”

“Did you write?”

“While you were sleeping, yes.”

She sat up and opened the journal, while he watched as her face lit up with each word he poured out of his heart. He had Kaileen and Migz to thank for that. Their insistence that he revealed who Marcus Mortell was finally freed him of the aches of his past and the chains that kept him from feeling for anyone again.

“Wait, did Tatay know you were Marcus Mortell?”

Eric shook his head.

What are you doing with my granddaughter? He remembered Tatay asking that fateful afternoon. It was what he prayed for would not happen. But as if fate was playing with him, he was already there, walking his dog, right at the very moment Eric finished his prayer.

He wasn’t able to answer right away. *I’m helping her look for a guy.*

Marcus Mortell?

He’s me.

He would never forget the face Tatay made when he said that. It was as if he was accusing Eric of cheating, of lying, of trying to cause pain. *I thought so. Then why...?*

I need to know if I’m ready to be him. To be Marcus Mortell. To be the guy they all think him to be. The traveler, even without Leina. The photographer, who began holding a camera only at the moment he realized he didn’t have enough memories. And the man... Eric turned to Katalina, who was speaking with someone on the phone then. *“...who is starting to feel something for a woman that had been searching for him.”*

Eric looked at her again now as she lay before him. He was that guy now, and he was going to be for the rest of his life. *I love you so much, Katalina.* And he didn’t need to hide that from the world.

There is joy in being alone as there is love and there is peace. You feel it... all around you, and you take pride that it’s yours for the taking, yours for keeps. And yet there are times when there is joy in sharing it with the world, sharing it with someone you know will be there to talk to you about it for hours over a cup of coffee, argue with you about it right before you make love the whole of the night, or simply marvel in its presence, even without words to speak.

For there are times when you know you should love when there is love to be had, and you keep your friendship as your one true reason never to part. And as you conquer the world and see it through each other’s eyes, you know—you simply know—whatever you need to find, you find in each other’s silhouettes.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A businesswoman 24/7, Khiara spends what little free time she has listening to the voices inside her head. On days she successfully extracts these unusual mind conversations and arguments, she pours out every ounce of creative juice that she can and completes romance novels and screenplays.

She founded BRUMULTIVERSE to give authors and artists a safe haven, allowing for creativity, self-expression, self-realization, and healing to thrive and save the world.

Published works

- Zabrina's List (*Heirs of the Berkeley Reagan Halls Book#2, BRUMULTIVERSE*, 2021)

Anthology contributions

- "Of Love and Liberty" (*BRU LOVE: A Fair, A BRUMULTIVERSE Anthology*, 2022)
- "Purple Hearts" (*Off-Court with the Captain, A BRUMULTIVERSE Anthology*, 2021)
- "Northern Stars" (*12 Months of Romance, 24 Reasons to Love Anthology*, 2017)

Screenplay Dialogues Credit

- The Girl in the Orange Dress (Story Written and Directed by Jay Abello, 2018)

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