

WHEN THE RAIN FALLS
A Novella by MAD Ligaya



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Chapter 1 – “In The Hut Of Passion”

The rain conjures memories, each drop a reminder of you, filling me with sorrow. Forgetting you seems as futile as controlling the weather; the rain will fall as it must. When it does, it floods my entire being and drowns me with sadness. If only I could banish the rain and keep the sun shining forever. Under an endless clear sky, I'd let the sun's intense rays scorch away every trace of you in my thoughts. Your memory, a stubborn thorn, digs deep, causing constant pain at my core.

Seeing a storm brewing in the sky mirrors the turmoil inside me. The wind's chilling howl heralds the coming rain, and I seek shelter, knowing the heavy downpour will bring a flood of memories, each tearing at my shattered heart. I have nowhere to hide. Your memory is a shadow that follows me, especially when it rains. My mind, like a leaky roof, offers no refuge. Your memory seeps through every crack, drenching me in relentless sadness and grief.

Why did I ignore the warnings? The beauty of Sagada was undeniable, with its mountains calling to be explored and captured through my lens. In my eagerness, did I miss a premonition? Was fate whispering through Elena, my fiancée, when she suggested I bring an umbrella, advice I dismissed with foolish bravado? Maybe our paths were destined to cross, written not in the stars but in the choices we make or neglect to make.

I don't believe in destiny or fate; a person's future is shaped by their decisions. As one philosopher famously said, "Life is a sum of all our choices." Despite Elena's advice to bring an umbrella because it looked like rain, I disregarded it. I thought my hoodie would suffice, and carrying an umbrella with my camera and gadgets would be cumbersome. She even suggested postponing my trek until the next day so she could join me, but my excitement for exploration and the need to create content for my YouTube travel vlog couldn't wait another day.

Despite my skepticism about destiny, a flicker of doubt crossed my mind. Had I been too hasty in dismissing Elena's warnings?

Feeling torn between guilt and excitement, I put on my backpack. Elena was peacefully asleep in her room as I left a message with her mother. The thrill of exploration conflicted with my unease and worry about potential regret. As I walked, curious glances followed me. I was a newcomer to this old-fashioned village, and only a few faces recognized me from disembarking the jeepney with Elena earlier. I returned their gazes with hesitant nods and shy smiles; the unfamiliar territory made me self-conscious. Soon, the village gave way to verdant landscapes—vegetable gardens bursting with color, rice fields stretching like a patchwork quilt, and a symphony of trees swaying in the gentle breeze.

The afternoon passed in a blissful haze. As I clicked away with my camera, I felt a growing sense of accomplishment documenting the beauty around me. Perhaps feeling too relaxed, I finished the three beers I had brought, and the sun and scenery amplified their effect. As usual, music streamed from my phone while I captured the world through my lens, and I even sang along to some Air Supply and Ed Sheeran songs. Though I had thought about live streaming my captures on Facebook, the stubborn signal remained weak.

As raindrops splattered on my lens, I looked up at the sky. The joy I felt moments ago dissipated as the sun hid behind the clouds, turning the sky gloomy gray. The air crackled with anticipation as the wind picked up, whipping fallen leaves into a frenzy. Elena's voice echoed hauntingly in my mind, reminding me of my reckless decision. The heavens unleashed their fury, transforming the dusty path into a muddy river. In the distance, a small hut crafted from nipa and bamboo materialized like a mirage. Its window, propped precariously with a stick, offered a sliver of hope. I bolted towards it with relief, praying for a reprieve from the downpour.

As I stood before the hut, I realized it was a symbol of my foolishness. A suffocating wave of regret washed over me. Instead of a sanctuary, it felt like a cage built from my poor choices. The concern in Elena's voice echoed in my head. I should have listened to her warnings and prioritized her company over my impulsive solo adventure. The sting of self-blame was far worse than the rain lashing down outside.

The small hut barely provided enough shelter for a few people. Through the open window, I saw a stepped rice field carved into the mountainside, offering a sliver of beauty amidst the downpour. Elena had mentioned a mini rice terrace, a hidden gem near their home. A pang of regret swept over me. This wasn't the time to appreciate the scenery; it was a stark reminder of the adventure I could have shared with Elena, an opportunity to see this wonder together, side by side.

This simple hut, possibly used by the rice field owner for resting provided an unexpected sense of security. Inside, a small bed suitable for a couple invited with the promise of rest. A plain bamboo table stood beside it, a practical piece in this utilitarian space. Although lacking amenities, the hut exuded a sense of practicality. However, I felt concerned. The silence was oppressive, interrupted only by the incessant drumming of the rain on the roof. Was I alone in this deserted shelter, or were other eyes watching from the surrounding woods?

I quickly entered the hut, seeking refuge from the pouring rain. My backpack made a thudding sound as I placed it on the wooden bed, and I hurriedly set my camera on the bamboo table. I took off my damp hoodie with relief, feeling the chill seep into my bones. I placed the hoodie on the table beside the camera, evidence of my hasty escape. The rain hammered on the roof, its relentless rhythm echoing the pounding in my chest.

The dim light from the window faded, giving way to encroaching darkness. Fortunately, I found a mini-rechargeable light in my backpack that we had used during our beach camping trip last week. With trembling fingers, I retrieved it and turned it on. The light beam illuminated the small hut, turning the oppressive darkness into a more bearable dimness. It wasn't much, but it felt like a beacon of hope at that moment.

The wind howled, rattling the flimsy walls of the hut. Instinctively, I reached for the stick propping open the window, the need to secure this meager shelter overriding any lingering unease. A sudden creak at the door sent a jolt through me. Before I could react, it swung open, revealing a figure silhouetted against the pouring rain. My breath hitched in my throat. This wasn't supposed to happen. I was alone, seeking solace from my own poor choices. But you, unexpected and unknown, stood there, forced by the downpour to seek temporary refuge, just like me.

I couldn't ignore the irony. Why did we both risk it and go out without umbrellas that day? We should have stayed inside our respective places like everyone else probably did. This unexpected meeting wouldn't have happened if I had listened to Elena. But there we were, huddled in this makeshift shelter, brought together by a simple decision – or maybe something more? Our paths had crossed, and it wasn't just the rain that took my breath away.

"I'll just take shelter here, sorry," you said.

"This hut isn't mine. I'm just taking shelter too."

Shivering and soaked to the bone, you met my gaze with a watery smile as you leaned against the flimsy wall of the hut. Your t-shirt clung to you, highlighting every curve. Heat flared in my cheeks as I struggled between concern and unwanted awareness. I quickly rubbed my itchy eye, trying to look away before you noticed. Then, I saw you holding a beer can, which you placed on the table beside my camera.

A violent tremor shook your body, escalating into uncontrollable shivers. The flimsy hut offered little protection from the relentless downpour, and your clothes clung to you, soaked with rainwater. Concern washed over me. Despite the chill, I removed my shirt, feeling its warmth starkly contrast the dampness around us. "Here," I said, extending it to you. You stared at the shirt, then back at me, with a mix of surprise and something else – a flicker of recognition, perhaps? A hesitant "thank you" escaped your lips. You started to unbutton your shirt but then paused, a look of internal struggle crossing your face. The heavy downpour roared outside, but a different kind of tension crackled inside the hut. With a silent nod, I turned slightly, granting you privacy in the cramped space.

Feeling a shift in the atmosphere, I cautiously turned back and saw you looking at my bare torso and face. Our eyes met briefly before you looked away, a hint of embarrassment coloring your cheeks. You then focused on my camera on the table, and the rhythmic rain clicked, the only sound breaking the sudden silence. Seizing the moment, I took a longer look at you. You were about Elena's height, and your undeniable beauty radiated even now. But comparisons felt insignificant. There was a raw vulnerability in your posture, a depth in your eyes that hinted at untold stories. Despite the awkwardness, a strange sense of connection hummed, a shared vulnerability blooming in the unexpected turn of events.

The rain pounded on the roof, filling the silence between us with a constant noise. Awkwardness lingered in the air from our unexpected meeting. We exchanged shy glances, each sparking curiosity. We shared timid smiles, trying to connect despite being strangers brought together by the rain. A question hung in the air: who was this beautiful soul seeking refuge with me in this rundown hut?

"The rain looks like it's going to last a while," I said.

"Yes, it does. By the way, I'm Camille."

"I'm Jeff."

I took your beer from the table and scrutinized it. "Ah... it looks like you've been drinking," I said.

"Yeah, I already had 4 cans of those before it rained."

But you didn't seem intoxicated. Or maybe you were, but it wasn't obvious. I couldn't even detect the distinct smell of beer on your breath. Then I noticed that your shivers took on a life of their own, escalating into a violent dance that contorted your body. It got me worried. That was not from intoxication. The symptoms mirrored those of hypothermia. The rain, a relentless thief, had likely stolen most of your body heat. The meager protection of the hut offered little solace against the pervasive chill. You huddled at the bed's edge, your form wracked with tremors, a whimper escaping your lips. Thinking fast, I scanned the room, my gaze landing on my backpack. Perhaps there was something I could use to help, a way to generate some warmth before it was too late. But there was none.

Panic gripped me. There was no time to hesitate. It wasn't a choice but a desperate move. With a deep breath, I reached out and pulled you close, wrapping my arms around you. At first, you stiffened, then relaxed against me. You held on tightly, seeking warmth and comfort. The touch sent a jolt through me, making me catch my breath, especially as our chests pressed together, your heartbeat racing. Pushing aside my own nerves, I focused on helping you. I gently laid you on your side and rubbed your back to warm you up. I wrapped a leg around yours, our bodies tangled in need. You buried your face in my chest, your ragged breaths a reminder of the moment's urgency.

Your body's trembling slowly eased, and you breathed a sigh of relief. I continued to rub, trying to generate warmth. As you relaxed, you lifted your face from my chest, a hint of gratitude in your expression. You leaned closer as if about to say something, but instead, you surprised me by pressing your cheek against mine, sending warmth through me.

As we enjoyed the unexpected closeness, you turned your head slightly, and our lips touched softly for a fleeting moment. The kiss was barely perceptible, more like a question than a statement. However, its impact was undeniable. I caught my breath, and a mix of confusion and something deeper flickered in your eyes. We simultaneously pulled away our heads, leaving a charged silence between us, filled with unspoken emotions and a new mystery. While the heavy rain outside continued, a different kind of storm brewed within the confines of the hut – a storm of emotions sparked by a single, accidental meeting of our lips.

Your eyes immediately opened wide, matching the surprise I felt. The unexpected contact of our lips had sparked a powerful connection between us. You pulled back quickly, a blush rising on your neck. However, in that brief instant, our eyes met. There was a flicker in your eyes - surprise, yes, but also something deeper, a hint of a desire I couldn't quite comprehend. I found myself caught between confusion and an undeniable attraction towards you. While the storm outside continued to rage, a real storm was brewing within me - a whirlwind of emotions stirred by the accidental brush of our lips.

"Oh, I am so sorry..." I said.

The sensation of the kiss lingered in the air, echoing the jolt that still resonated within me. I instinctively wanted to pull away, to create distance for safety. But then, your hand reached out and gently cupped my cheek, your touch a delicate caress that sent shivers down my spine. My breathing hitched, and I found myself captivated by your gaze. The initial surprise in your eyes softened, replaced by a warmth that sent a tremor through my core. It felt like a silent conversation, an unspoken understanding passing between us. Then, drawn by an invisible force, I leaned in again, the space between our lips shrinking with each passing moment. There was no physical pull, but an undeniable yearning that transcended logic. This wasn't about the storm or the unexpected turn of events; it was about something deeper, an emerging connection between us fueled by the shared vulnerability of the moment.

The space between our lips had narrowed to a breathless whisper. The air crackled with unspoken tension, a potent mix of surprise and a burgeoning awareness. My mind, usually a whirlwind of logic and reason, seemed silent. All I could hear was the frantic thumping of my heart, a counterpoint to the rain's relentless assault on the roof. Your hand on my arm felt like a brand, searing through my confusion, grounding me in the present. At that moment, defying every voice of reason, I knew what to do. I closed the remaining distance, my lips meeting yours in a desperate, tender kiss. The world around us faded, the downpour a mere background hum to the symphony of emotions exploding within me, and perhaps within you as well. It was a kiss fueled by the urgency of the moment, a shared vulnerability that transcended logic. And for a fleeting moment, everything else ceased to exist, replaced by the intoxicating power of connection.

The intensity of the moment lingered, a palpable presence in the air. There was an unspoken question between us: why hadn't you let me pull away? And why, when our lips met, had your response been so fervent? It was more than just a kiss; it was a deepening, desperate search for comfort that surpassed words. The warmth I offered ignited a fire within you, and your response was a surge of reciprocated passion. Our bodies moved in a silent dance, a more ancient and primal language than words could ever express. The rhythm of the storm outside faded into the background, replaced by the intoxicating symphony of our entwined breaths and the soft moans that escaped your lips. Your soft moans became louder and louder as I thrust harder and faster into you. In the dim light of the hut, I caught a glimpse of raw emotion in your eyes, a vulnerability mirrored my own. At that moment, amidst the storm's chaos, we found a fragile haven, a beautiful collision of souls brought together by the most unexpected circumstances.

The rain drummed a relentless rhythm on the roof seemingly fueling the storm raging within us. Why couldn't its icy tendrils extinguish the flames that had erupted so unexpectedly? Perhaps it was the shared vulnerability of the situation, the helplessness that had thrown us together in this ramshackle hut. Or maybe it was the spark, a flicker of something deeper ignited by the touch of our skin, the warmth of our bodies seeking solace against the chill. Whatever the reason, the rainwater, instead of dousing the embers, seemed to nourish a seed of passion that had taken root in the fertile ground of our shared experience. The storm outside mirrored the turmoil within, a chaotic dance of emotions that terrified and exhilarated us.

The afterglow felt heavy with regret. "I wish we were cold and unfeeling as rocks," I whispered, the words catching in my throat. Your eyes, which were filled with passion after that accidental kiss, reflected my inner turmoil. A heavy silence descended, broken only by the relentless drumming of the rain on the roof. Shame, a bitter aftertaste, coated my tongue. I longed for the simplicity of being a saint, untainted by desire. But the truth was far harsher. I was all too human, a fragile creature tossed about by the tempestuous seas of emotion.

The rain, which had been relentless, finally stopped, leaving behind a world that was washed clean. The passion that had erupted between us had faded, but a warm feeling lingered, both comforting and unsettling. We were lying apart, with a quiet distance growing between us. Once filled with desire and regret, your eyes now seemed to express something new – perhaps a flicker of curiosity or a question yet to be asked. The change in dynamics was palpable. Despite the physical intimacy having ended, there was still a glow of attraction, silently promising something more... or perhaps reminding us of the delicate line we had crossed.

Chapter 2 – “Vanished”

You were finally asleep, breathing softly as the birds chirped outside. You looked vulnerable in my slightly oversized t-shirt, and I felt protective as I adjusted the fabric over you. Your face, once marked with passion and pain, was now peaceful. I gently reached for my camera, compelled to capture this serene moment. It wasn't about keeping secrets but about preserving this fragile peace. I planned to show you this picture when you woke up.

As I focused closer, I found something that both worried and intrigued me – dark bruises covered your arms, thighs, and neck, making me uneasy. The playful atmosphere disappeared as I realized the storm you escaped wasn't just outside; it was part of you, hidden beneath sleep. What demons were you running from? And were they still with you, even here?

The insistent chirping of birds announced the end of the heavy downpour. I squinted at my watch – nearly four in the afternoon. You were still fast asleep. Curiosity gnawed at me. Had you spoken of your past during the storm-tossed hours, or were the bruises the only clues to the battles you'd fought? Pushing those questions aside for now, I glanced out the window. A breathtaking rainbow stretched across the sky, a vibrant promise painted on the canvas of the newly washed world. This was a scene I couldn't miss. Regret flickered across my chest as I leaned down, kissing your cheek softly. It felt like a stolen moment, a fleeting glimpse into a life I was about to step away from, if only for a moment. Pulling on my damp hoodie, I ventured out into the cool afternoon air, the weight of unspoken questions pressing down on me. The heavy rain had stopped, leaving behind a rainbow and a stranger whose secrets lingered in the quiet of the hut.

The crisp afternoon breeze invigorated my senses as I wandered through the mini rice terraces, searching for the perfect vantage point to capture the rainbow's brilliance. Each step crunched on the damp earth. There it was! The perfect composition, the vibrant colors of the rainbow arcing majestically over the lush green fields. A surge of triumph filled me as I raised my camera, finger poised on the shutter button. But then, with agonizing slowness, the vibrant hues began to fade. The once-proud arch dissolved into wispy streaks of color, finally vanishing completely. Disappointment settled in my chest, a heavyweight mirroring the sudden emptiness in the sky. The rainbow, a fleeting symbol of hope and renewal, had disappeared as quickly as it had appeared, leaving behind a reminder of the impermanence of all things. Perhaps it was a metaphor for our burning passion, a beautiful moment suspended in time, forever etched in my memory, yet ultimately fragile and fleeting.

Returning to the hut felt like stepping back into a different reality. The place buzzing with a strange intimacy just moments ago was now a tomb of silence. You were gone. You vanished into thin air. My t-shirt, a symbol of our shared vulnerability, lay abandoned on the bed. A wave of sadness washed over me, sharper and more unexpected than the heavy downpour earlier. Just a moment. That's all it had been. Yet, you'd dissolve like the fleeting beauty of the rainbow I'd tried to capture. Pulling off the damp hoodie, I reached for the t-shirt. The faint scent of your body that lingered was the only tangible reminder of your presence. At that moment, I knew I had to find you.

Disappointment clawed at my throat as I raced out of the hut. My voice echoed unanswered across the rice fields, the vibrant green mocking my frantic calls for your name. No sign of you anywhere. The wooded area behind the hut loomed, a dense curtain of trees beckoning strangely. Without hesitation, I plunged into the cool shade, the silence thick and heavy. I circled the woods, my voice hoarse from calling your name, but only the rustle of unseen creatures answered. Panic gnawed at the edges of my reason. Had you vanished like the fleeting rainbow, leaving nothing but a memory and a growing sense of dread? Emerging from the trees, I stumbled onto the deserted road, heart hammering against my ribs. Still no sign of you.

The playful afternoon sun hid behind the clouds. I saw ominous storm clouds gathering on the horizon, their bellies a bruised purple. Fat drops splattered on my face, the first whispers of a coming downpour. Rain. Again. A knot of worry tightened in my gut.

The sky fractured, unleashing again a deluge that transformed the path into a muddy river. Raindrops stung my face, blurring my vision. Several houses materialized through the downpour, their windows glowing with a warm, inviting light. But I didn't flinch. Didn't even consider seeking shelter. The past, a relentless storm in itself, clawed at me, its icy fingers wrapping around my heart. Taking refuge wouldn't wash away the memories of the passionate moments we shared and the secrets behind the bruises I saw on your body. So I walked on, the rain a baptism of sorts, a cleansing that couldn't erase the darkness but perhaps offered a sliver of hope for redemption.

A flicker of movement in the distance snagged my attention. Through the sheets of rain, a solitary figure emerged – a woman, her form obscured by a large umbrella. My heart hammered against my ribs, a frantic drumbeat against the storm's symphony. As we drew closer, the pounding intensified. Could it be you? Had you managed to snag an umbrella, your earlier hesitation forgotten, and rushed back to the hut, fearing for me in the downpour? The thought ignited a spark of hope within me, a fragile flame that threatened to be extinguished by the relentless rain. I quickened my pace, my eyes fixed on the figure, willing them to move faster, to reveal themselves sooner. Every rustle of the wind, every flicker of movement beneath the umbrella, sent a jolt through me.

"Camille!" I shouted.

I quickened my pace, eager to see you again. But as I drew closer, I realized it wasn't you. It was Elena, my fiancée.

"Jeff! I've been looking for you. Oh... you're soaking wet. You're so stubborn, you didn't bring an umbrella."

"Sorry, mommy! I should have listened to you."

The memory of Camille's touch sent a tremor through me, a stark reminder of the connection we'd shared just moments ago. Elena, with her worried frown and rain-streaked face, seemed to belong to a different world altogether. How could I have forgotten her existence so completely? Was it the heavy rain, the isolation, or something sinister at play? The weight of the forgotten ring meant to secure my future with Elena felt heavy in my pocket. Was this a desperate escape, a temporary lapse in judgment, or a deeper yearning for something I hadn't acknowledged within myself? Elena's presence, a symbol of my planned life, only intensified the confusion within me. And then, another question surfaced, one that sent a shiver down my spine: where was the stranger, and what secrets did they hold that could so easily erase the love I thought I possessed?

"It sounded like you were calling someone earlier? ...mil or Hamil?"

"Huh? No... no...no... no... I said mommy."

"Is that so! The rain was so heavy I probably misheard."

That's when the series of lies I told Elena because of you began.

"Let's hurry. Take a shower as soon as we get home. I hope you don't catch a cold. My brother Daniel and his wife are coming. It's a shame my sister in Italy can't come home. Damn Covid."

Elena's warmth beside me felt like a comforting illusion. My arm, draped around her shoulder, felt heavy with a lie. My mind, a traitor to the moment, was a whirlwind of stolen glances and whispered conversations in a rain-soaked hut. With each step closer to her family's house, with each shared laugh and casual touch, the memory of you intensified. I kept searching, scanning the deserted streets, a desperate hope clinging to the edges of my despair. But there was nothing – no flicker of movement, no echo of your moans in the wind. A wave of crushing defeat washed over me. The shared joy, fleeting and intense like a summer storm, had vanished, leaving only the bittersweet ache of loss. But then, a flicker of defiance sparked within me. You might be gone, a ghost in the storm, but I had a tangible reminder – your photo, tucked securely on my camera's memory stick. It wouldn't bring you back, but it would serve as a constant echo of our shared connection, a silent promise to unravel the mystery of your disappearance.

The life I'd built with Elena, once a haven of comfort, now felt like a house of cards, teetering on the edge of collapse. Six months of partnership, years of friendship – how could I throw it all away for a stranger encountered in a drunken stupor? Yet, the memory of your touch excites me, a stark reminder of an undeniable connection. Maybe it was the alcohol, a lubricant for unspoken desires. But why did I feel so abandoned after you left, your departure starkly contrasting our shared intensity? The beer's haze may have lifted, but my mind was still foggy, clouded by unanswered questions. What was it about you that resonated so deeply? Why did you vanish without a trace? These questions, relentless and consuming, fueled a growing determination within me. I wouldn't rest until I found you until I understood the truth behind the intoxicating encounter that threatened to destroy the life I knew.

"Hey, Dad, you seem really serious? You haven't been paying attention to what I've been saying."

"Huh, I'm just tired."

"Tired? What did you do to get tired? Did somebody ride your flagpole?"

I knew Elena was joking, but I felt a pang when she said that. I thought of you and what we did.

"Hey... I asked if somebody rode your flagpole?"

"What are you talking about, Mommy?"

"Don't pretend... you know what I'm talking about."

"You're funny, Mommy... Who would do that here?"

"Who knows... maybe a forest fairy assumed a human form when she saw your handsomeness. Then..."

"Mommy, your imagination is really fertile. You're not even a writer."

"I'm just trying to make you laugh, Dad."

Yeah. Maybe you are a fairy. You're so mysterious. You appeared suddenly... then disappeared suddenly. And now I'm under your spell.

"But you didn't even laugh... you're still serious. It's like you're thinking deeply about something."

"Sorry, I just have a bit of a headache."

That's all I said so Elena wouldn't feel bad.

"By the way, where is your brother Daniel coming from?"

"They live in the next village. They have a car, but they often just walk when they want to visit the house. There's a shortcut through the mini rice terraces to get here. By the way... did you go there earlier?"

Should I say yes? Should I say I went to that place? Should I admit that's where I came from?

"Huh... the terraced rice fields? I don't think I noticed anything like that. You said the actual rice terraces are still far from here, right?"

"It's still quite far, but some rice fields are already here. They are also terraced."

"Is that so?" I replied nonchalantly.

"You'll find it beautiful if you haven't seen it yet. That place is very scenic. Tomorrow, I'll take you there so you can take lots of pictures and videos for your travel vlog. You'll be amazed. And by the way... there's a small hut there."

"A hut?!"

"Yes, Dad... a hut... I'll pack food, and we'll eat there. I'll bring beer for you... so that... you'll see me as a goddess. And then... you know what happens next!"

I pulled Elena by the waist in response.

"My dad is really not in the mood."

Should I tell her that I also know there's a hut there, that I took shelter there when the first rain poured? Should I tell her we met there, and something happened between us unintentionally? Did we really not intend for that to happen? Didn't we want what happened there?

I forced a smile and pulled Elena closer, trying to shake off the unease gnawing at me. "Sounds like a perfect plan, Mommy. Let's do that."

Her laughter filled the air, momentarily easing the tension. But as we walked back to her house, my mind kept wandering back to you, to the mysterious encounter that left me questioning everything I thought I knew about myself and my life.

Chapter 3 – “The Plot Thickens”

As we reached the house of Elena’s family, the door swung open, revealing her mother waiting with a wave and a bright smile.

“Oh my, you’re soaked! Go to the bathroom and freshen up. I’ll make coffee for you and Elena.”

Elena’s mom was super welcoming. Needless to say, I felt incredibly welcome. But I felt another thing – guilt. The memory of what happened in the hut played repeatedly, starkly contrasting the unwavering kindness being showered upon me.

My hand trembled slightly as I reached for Elena’s mother’s right hand. Gently, I placed it on my forehead, a gesture of deep gratitude that transcended words. “Thank you,” I mumbled, the words barely a whisper against the rising tide of guilt.

“Mom, aren’t you lucky to have such a respectful future son-in-law?”

Elena’s mother just smiled as I let go of her hand.

“Shut up, Mommy,” I told Elena jokingly as I walked towards the bathroom.

Elena’s laughter erupted upon hearing me, followed by her mother’s in a delightful cascade that filled the room.

Before I could shut the bathroom door completely, the voices of Elena and her mom drifted through...

“Someone’s in your room.” When you asked who, your mother said “Camille.”

The name froze me in my tracks. A mix of surprise and excitement rushed through me. Unable to resist the pull of curiosity, I left the bathroom door slightly ajar, hoping to hear more from them.

“You both arrived almost at the same time. Oh, your sister-in-law didn’t bring an umbrella, so she was soaking wet when she arrived. I lent her some of your clothes. She probably had another fight with Daniel, so she came here first.”

“Yeah. Very likely that *kuya* Daniel hurt Camille again.” Elena responded with her voice echoing so much disappointment.

“Call Daniel and let him know Camille is here. He can come over, so finally you can introduce Jeff to them.”

The sound of your name echoed in my head as a desperate hope battled a rising tide of dread. I couldn’t figure out which feeling was stronger - was it the hope that I would soon see you again or the dread? Could it be? Could you be the Camille they were talking about? Are you Elena’s sister-in-law, the wife of my fiancé’s brother?

While lost in those thoughts, somebody pushed open the bathroom door. It was Elena. She handed me a pair of shorts and a tank top in the bathroom.

“Dad, after you take a shower, could you please go to the terrace first? I need to talk to Camille in our room.”

“Camille?” I asked, pretending to be puzzled.

“Yes, my sister-in-law. I don’t think you know her... or... did you meet someone earlier?”

“No, I only saw those people at the nearby store.” I responded trying not to sound defensive.

"Okay, daddy. Go ahead and do your thing. I need to talk to Camille now. She won't stop crying.

It seems like she has a serious problem, probably because of my brother. But something else happened on her way here, and she doesn't want to say it."

I could only manage a simple nod for Elena as dread tightened in my stomach. Seeing you was a desperate wish, but not under that roof. What if you, Camille, were the one they spoke of? The thought terrified me. Could facing you here be worse than our secret coming out? We could play strangers, a flimsy disguise for the secret we shared. But what if you shattered the pretense, confessing to your sister-in-law those forbidden moments we shared in the hut? The possibility suffocated me with guilt.

I sat on the terrace, overwhelmed by the possibilities ahead of me. I couldn't shake off the anxiety about the presence of Camille. My usual methods to calm my mind seemed ineffective, but I persisted, trying to regain my composure. Looking around, I noticed the rough planks that made up the terrace floor and the vividly colored potted plants on the ledge, a stark contrast to the darkness of the inner turmoil I was feeling. I had been so preoccupied with exploring Sagada and sharing my experiences on social media that I hadn't noticed these details earlier.

"Jeff, just stay here for a while."

That was Elena's mother. She placed a cup of coffee on a wooden side table before me.

"I'll go to Elena and Camille in the room. Daniel is also on his way. You can all talk later."

"Alright, mot...mot..."

"Son, don't hesitate to call me mother. Mama if you want to. It's okay. You and Elena are getting married. You are already a member of this family."

"Ha... uh... Yes... okay, mama. Thank you."

"I just hope you love my daughter, be faithful to her. Please don't hurt my youngest."

"I... I promise, Inay. I will love and take care of Elena."

Guilt ate at me as I tried to make a promise I was afraid I couldn't keep. Elena's mother's kindness highlighted my deceit. The rain pounding on the roof matched the chaos in my mind. Every regret hit me like a downpour—the forgotten umbrella, the postponed plans, and the encounter that now filled me with dread. I desperately wished to return and erase the meeting that started this turmoil in my heart. With my mind and heart, I was at peace. But no matter how much I regret it, what happened won't change. My decisions were wrong, and I had to face the consequences of those mistakes.

On the terrace, I held the forgotten coffee, now lukewarm. My future mother-in-law's kindness felt like a cruel joke as I paced. Are you really here? Unable to stand the uncertainty, I went back inside. Our room's door was partly open, inviting me in. A thin curtain hid the inside, muffling sounds. But I heard a sob, making me sick with worry.

I didn't want to wait any longer. It's killing me softly. I decided to go in. If you were really inside, I had to know.

Driven by that desperate need, I reached for the partly open door. But a car horn blared even before I could pull the door open. The interruption snapped me back, and I retreated a step. The insistent honking escalated, urging me into action. That could be Daniel. There's nobody else expected to come.

The honking escalated into a frantic barrage. So, I had to race outside and open the gate. A black car with its doors and bumpers splattered with mud glided into the driveway. I retreated to give its driver more space to maneuver.

After parking, the driver got out... it was Daniel. That was the first time I saw him in person.

"Jeff? Are you Jeff?"

I nodded at him as I said "yes" and offered a handshake. He towered over me slightly, his frame solid and athletic. Instead of taking my hand, he embraced me.

"I'm Daniel, Elena's brother. Damn... no wonder my sister fell in love with you. You're handsome, and you've got a great physique. Looks like you live at the gym."

"Not really, *kuya* Daniel. I usually work out at home. You have a great built yourself."

"Ah... just from hard work in the fields."

The terrace buzzed with the distant chirping of crickets as we finally met face-to-face. I had previously seen their family photo on Elena's Facebook cover page, taken when their father was still alive. It was the only picture Elena had with any of her family members. Daniel exuded a quiet intensity, starkly contrasting Elena's gentle nature. While I navigated the social media world for my vlog, Elena rarely ventured there. In fact, Miguel, according to her, was a digital ghost – no Facebook, no Instagram, just a phone for the bare necessities. "He's not a gadget person," Elena had said, a hint of amusement in her voice, "more of a... gun person." Her offhand remark left me with a lingering question – was that a playful exaggeration or a glimpse into a world I wasn't prepared for?

I inquired if Daniel wanted coffee.

"Coffee? Perfect! Although, wait a minute... I just remembered I grabbed a bottle of wine on my way over. Are you in for a switch? I'll grab it in a second!"

A cold dread settled in my gut as another of Elena's offhand comments echoed in my mind: her brother drank wine for breakfast. Oblivious to my growing unease, Daniel didn't waste a breath waiting for my reply. With a muttered excuse, he was already striding towards his car, the clink of glass promising a night far stronger than I'd bargained for. My stomach lurched – the thought of hard liquor sent a familiar tremor through me. I was a lightweight, unlike Daniel, whose casual gait suggested a seasoned tolerance. The prospect of a drinking session, especially with someone who might consider breakfast wine a tame indulgence, filled me with a potent mix of apprehension and a bizarre, desperate hope that maybe, just maybe, tonight wouldn't be as bad as I feared.

"Alright, put down the coffee. Shot glasses, check! I knew we might need them. Just got to find some nibbles, and then we can get started."

Daniel returned, a bottle of wine clutched triumphantly in one hand. The other held a black leather clutch bag. He plunked the wine down with a dull thud, but the bag was carefully placed beside it. From what I heard from Elena, I was almost certain it was a gun.

"Where's my mom and Elena? Is Camille here?"

"They're in the room, talking."

"Looks like I'm back in the doghouse. Thanks to Camille. Of course, they'll all believe the little angel. Guess I'm public enemy number one again."

I just listened to Daniel.

"That woman can be stubborn as that carabao I use on the farm. I told her to fly back to Italy in February of this year, but she did not. Then the lockdown hit in March, and now she's stuck here. Damn Covid. Our savings are dwindling, and who knows if she even has a job to return to."

"The situation is really tough right now, bro. Elena and I were told it might be two more months before we can return to our company. So we'll stay here for now."

"Is that so? That's good, so our mom will have company here. Our cousin, caring for her, eloped with her boyfriend just last week. And my other sister, who's also in Italy, won't be back until the end of the year. She'll definitely be here for your wedding with Elena."

"Oh, there you are, Daniel."

That was Elena's mother, who suddenly appeared behind us.

"Hello, Mom. I just arrived."

"Wine again, Daniel? Elena said Jeff isn't used to drinking."

"That's why I'm starting to train him now. By the time their two-month vacation is over, my brother-in-law will be used to hard drinks. How are you, Mom?" Daniel said as he kissed his mother's hand.

"May God bless you. And I hope He makes you a good person. Oh, Daniel."

"What did Camille tell you this time?"

"You, stupid good-for-nothing man. Explain it to me later."

"See, Jeff!" Daniel addressed me. "Nobody loves me here. Everybody hates me."

Elena's mother's gaze snagged on the black clutch bag nestled beside the bottle of wine. Curiosity flickered in her eyes. "What have we here, Daniel?" she inquired, her voice gentle but firm. "Why do you have your gun with you again?"

"Mom, it's for protection, not trouble. It's licensed. The neighbor beside my farm has been causing problems, accusing me of encroaching on his land. I can't let him push me around."

"I understand but..."

"I know you worry, Ma. But sometimes things get messy. I won't back down from what's rightfully mine. Nobody can steal what belongs to me. What's mine is mine."

After Daniel spoke, I felt uneasy and had a heavy sense of foreboding.

"Just be careful, son."

My soon-to-be mother-in-law went to the dining area after saying that. Daniel kept on talking. I couldn't focus on what he said because I was preoccupied with thoughts of you. I kept glancing at the door, waiting to see if the Camille, who was talking to Elena in the room, would already come out.

"Daniel... Jeff... come in. Dinner is ready." That was their mother calling.

"Let's go, Jeff... let's eat so we can start drinking."

My heart hammered against my ribs, echoing the rhythm of my steps on the wooden floorboards. I would finally find out if you were the "Camille" I met in the hut. The question reverberated in my mind like a relentless drumbeat. But what if you were?

"Oh, Daniel... call Elena and Camille from the room. Tell them dinner is served."

"Okay, Mom."

Daniel went to the room. I didn't know if I felt scared or excited while waiting to see who would come out of the room.

"Hey... Jeff! Why are you staring at the room door so intently?"

"Huh? Oh, it's nothing, Mom."

"There's no ghost coming out of the room, so don't be scared."

"Sorry, mama. It's just that... it suddenly reminded me of the door in our apartment in Pasig. I'm wondering if I locked it or not."

That's another lie. I have already told so many of them since we met. I wondered how many more I would have to fabricate because of you.

"Just call the landlord and have them check it."

"Ah. I'll do that later, Mom."

I kept asking myself why the "Camille" inside hadn't come out of the room. I felt increasingly restless. The longer I wait, the worse it will become.

"Have a seat, Jeff. Just relax."

Embarrassment flooded my cheeks. I hadn't even realized I was still standing. "Yes, Mom," I mumbled, sinking into the chair.

Elena's mother beamed. "It's such a pleasure to finally meet you, Jeff. Having you and Daniel here with Elena makes this a truly special evening. I wish my daughter in Italy could be here too, and the whole family would be together."

"It won't be long before we're all under one roof, Mom," I assured her, forcing a smile.

Her smile faltered slightly. "Of course, of course."

Elena emerged from the room, a flicker of concern in her eyes.

"Oh, why only you?"

"Daniel's talking to Camille. They'll be out in a moment."

The anticipation dragged on, making me even more anxious.

"Alright, let's wait for them. Serve Jeff some mushroom soup; he might be hungry."

"Oh, Dad, it looks like you and Mom are getting close."

Elena's mother looked at me and smiled.

"What else did Camille tell you?"

Elena glanced at the room before speaking.

"Mom, Daniel wants Camille to return to Italy because he's dating someone."

Elena's mom widened. "Oh, dear heavens! Who is it?"

Elena lowered her voice. "Someone from their barangay, Mom. And... she's married. An OFW in Saudi."

"Dios mio! What was your brother thinking? Does he have no shame?"

Elena's voice trembled with a mix of anger and disappointment. Her words felt like needles piercing my conscience. I remembered my mother's frequent advice to think carefully about every decision to avoid future regrets. But it was too late; what's done is done.

Elena sighed. "The rumors have been swirling around their village for a while now, Mom."

"What a mess. Thank goodness Daniel can't have children. Otherwise, who knows what kind of trouble they'd be in."

"Mom, there's trouble with Daniel and Camille. Camille wants to leave him. I mean, they're not even married, so..."

"What!? Oh no, this is terrible!"

"According to Camille, that other woman might be why Daniel hesitates about marriage."

Elena's mother glanced at me.

"Oh Jeff, son, I apologize. We're burdening you with our family problems."

"Don't worry about me, Mom."

That was all I could say in response to the shocking revelations.

"Camille's heartbroken. Daniel has fertility issues that prevented him from impregnating her, yet that didn't stop Daniel from cheating on her."

As soon as Elena finished speaking, the room door creaked open, and Daniel emerged. The woman inside, named Camille, her head bowed demurely, slowly stepped out.

IT WAS YOU. My heart skipped a beat as I saw you. You were yet unaware of my presence. As you approached the dining table, I confirmed that you were the same Camille from the hut with whom I shared passionate moments. Now you're inside the house where I was about to share a meal with my future in-laws. I was torn between running out of the house for fear of whatever might happen should what transpired between us get known and running towards you so I could make you feel how much I missed you. Would we acknowledge each other or pretend nothing happened? The weight of our secret loomed large, threatening to unravel the fragile peace of this evening.

"Mom, here they come."

"Camille, dear, sit next to me. This is Jeff, Elena's future husband."

When our eyes met, you froze. I was over that feeling of surprise, having seen you already earlier. I could say that you felt like cold water was poured over you like I felt earlier. Your reaction did not escape Elena's keen eyes.

Our eyes met. A jolt passed through you. You appeared frozen. The surprise mirrored the one I felt moments ago when I saw you. The realization flickered across your face as quickly as it arrived, but it wasn't fast enough for Elena's watchful gaze.

"Hey, Camille... have you met Jeff before?"

I anxiously awaited your response. I was worried that you might disclose that we met in the hut. Not because of the chance of you revealing everything that happened there, but because I had told Elena that I hadn't been to that place or met anyone along the way.

"What?... No! This is the first time I've seen him.

You were a great actress. The flicker of surprise in your eyes vanished as quickly as it appeared. A cool smile settled on your lips as you offered a hand and a polite, "Pleasure to meet you." Confusion washed over me. Was this denial? A desperate attempt to protect our secret? I reached out, my flesh brushing against yours. But in a heartbeat, your hand retreated, a flicker of revulsion crossing your face. The gesture was so sudden, so inexplicable, it left me reeling.

Then, you sat directly across from me, acting like I wasn't there. You ignored me like people do with those they don't know. You were so cold, completely different from the Camille I met in the hut. There, you were incredibly warm, even scorching that you melted me.

It hurt a bit, but I understood your lie and pretense. Pretense? I hope it was. If I had spoken first, I would have said the same. Admitting we met at the hut by the small rice terraces, even without saying what happened between us, would reveal my lie to Elena since I had told her I hadn't seen that place yet.

"I was surprised by your reactions earlier. It seemed like you both were startled when you saw each other," Elena said.

"Oh, Elena, with Jeff's charisma, any woman seeing him for the first time would be startled. Especially now that he's in shorts and a tank top. And look at my wife; she has the face and body of a beauty queen. Jeff was probably shocked too, thinking you were the most beautiful woman on earth, only to find someone even more beautiful – your sister-in-law, Camille."

"Oh, there you go again, Daniel. Stop it." That was Elena's mom. "Maybe they have met before and just don't remember when and where, which is why they reacted that way. It happens."

You kept your head down while listening to that conversation. I noticed Elena looking at you and then glancing at me.

"Alright... alright... Let's eat," suggested Elena's mother.

"Yes, so Jeff and I can start drinking."

"Guys, perhaps we can, just this once, give thanks before we eat. Let's also thank God for finally Jeff is with us. Elena, please lead the prayer."

Chapter 4 – “Under The Table”

We all bowed our heads. I noticed you closed your eyes while I was the only one who didn't. Instead, I kept my head stubbornly raised, and my gaze drifted towards you. I saw you open your eyes. A flicker of movement caught my eye. You peeked open your eyes, seemingly to check on Elena, before gazing at me. Your eyes looked swollen. Your lips curved into a smile, a faint echo of the one you offered me in the hut – hesitant, yet holding a promise of understanding. Despite being forced, your smile lifted my spirits. I smiled back at you and nodded. You smiled at me one more time. You winked a playful spark in your tired eyes before closing them again.

I was happy and sad at the same time. I was pleased because I saw you again. I was sad because of the situation, because of the timing. I was still trying to figure out what would happen next. Amidst all the problems you're carrying, I felt compassion. And here I am, looking like I'm adding to your burden.

"Welcome to the family, Jeff." Daniel said after the prayer.

"Okay. Let's eat. I'm starving." That was Elena's Mom.

"Chicken *tinola*, pork *adobo*, fried *bangus*, and chop suey... wow! You're really good to Mom, Jeff. Four dishes. When I come here, Mom just fries eggs and opens sardines."

"Stop talking, Daniel, just eat," their mother said.

"Camille... what were you saying happened to you earlier on your way here?"

I looked at you when Elena asked that. You looked at me before looking away and back at Elena. I knew you wouldn't say anything about us. We both know that if the truth gets revealed, it will shatter our lives like a dropped glass.

"It was just in the hut earlier." You responded after taking a deep breath and a forced smile.

"What? What happened in the hut?"

"It's just... it's like someone was following me while I was walking. That's it."

"Maybe one of your admirers was really following you earlier?" Daniel said.

"Oh, come on... let's just enjoy dinner," their mother said.

While we were eating, you kept your head down. Very quiet. I tried not to keep my eyes on you because Elena might notice and get even more suspicious. I am almost sure that her jealousy is back. Elena knows the terrible things I did before we became a couple. Elena knows my weaknesses. She knows I'm not a saint, just human, not holy.

"Dad here..." Elena's voice intruded into my thoughts. You flinched slightly as she leaned across the table, offering a chicken drumstick. "Legs are your favorite, right? I know you like breasts too." Her seemingly innocent question felt loaded, a veiled challenge to you and me.

You looked at me while Elena fed me a chicken drumstick. It was just for a moment, and you immediately looked away. I don't know if you felt jealous.

"Camille," Daniel said, "they're so sweet. Maybe you could give me the other piece of chicken drumstick the way Elena did it to Jeff."

"Oh, Daniel, stop it. After you fight with your wife, you act like that. If I were Camille, I would shove the spoon and fork into your mouth instead of feeding you, so you'd behave." That was their mother's retort, which was laced with a hint of exasperation.

"Come on, Mom. Camille has forgiven me already. I've apologized. Isn't that right, darling?"

Is that all? If everything I heard from Elena about what your husband is doing is true, does he think a simple apology will be enough to forgive him?

You nodded in response. But it seemed forced. I could see how tears welled up in your eyes when your Elena's mother said that. I felt sorry for you. If only I could wipe away those tears or hold your hand to make me feel better.

I did what I could. I just tried. I took a chance to see if you would be okay with it. At that moment, defying the constraints of the situation, I reached out with a silent plea for connection. Under the table, I placed my foot on yours. I gently brushed my foot against yours. Surprise seemed to flicker through you, but you didn't pull away. Instead, you left your feet there, a small gesture that spoke volumes in the silence. You even moved them closer to me.

"Are you okay, sis?"

You seemed surprised when Elena asked you. I was surprised, too. You pulled your feet away quickly as you said, "Yeah... yeah. I am okay."

But then, just as quickly, your foot returned, seeking mine out with a newfound insistence. This time, it wasn't a hesitant touch but a bold claim, your foot resting possessively on top of mine. A memory flickered to life – the insistent pressure of your body on top of mine in the dimly lit hut, a memory that sent a forbidden thrill coursing through me. Was this a deliberate echo of that stolen moment, a silent plea for connection amidst the suffocating web of lies we were entangled in?

And then we rubbed our toes together. From our stolen glances, I noticed that your face seemed to brighten. Your sadness was gone, and you started eating with gusto. You had no idea how happy I was then.

We let Daniel, Elena, and their mother talk while we eat. We let the conversation flow around us, mere background noise to the silent symphony beneath the table. Our occasional murmurs were formalities, veiling the truth that consumed our attention. A surge of exhilaration, laced with a hint of apprehension, bubbled within me as I decided to take a bolder step. With a slow, calculated movement, I inched my foot up your shin, then to your thighs. A flicker of surprise crossed your features, quickly replaced by a silent acceptance. At that moment, I saw a subtle shift in your posture, a slight lean towards me that mirrored my unspoken desire. Emboldened, I continued my ascent, brushing our skins and sending a jolt through my senses. A satisfied sigh escaped your lips as I reached my destination, and I couldn't help but notice how your eyes fluttered shut, a silent surrender to the forbidden pleasure. We continued this delicate dance of touch, each movement measured and discreet, the thrill of defiance electrifying the stolen intimacy.

After we ate, your husband and I started drinking while you and Elena helped their mother clean the kitchen and wash the dishes.

Before we started drinking and chatting, Daniel, with a casualness that surprised me, reached into a clutch bag and withdrew a gleaming .45 caliber pistol. The metallic glint was almost eclipsed by the sight of small plastic sachets within the bag. They were probably drugs. Maybe shabu. I played dumb, pretending not to see it. Feigning nonchalance, I averted my gaze, and the metallic click of Daniel cleaning the gun was a jarring

counterpoint to the jovial chatter around us. He downed his drinks with alarming ease, a practiced routine that spoke of a man far too familiar with the bottom of a glass. Alcoholic wasn't quite the right word, but it danced on the edge of the definition. He offered me a drink, his gaze lingering for a beat too long, but there was no pressure. He let me have a shot whenever I wanted.

"Here's our secret, brother-in-law. Even Mom and Elena don't know this. I killed someone with this gun. It was probably two years ago. I did it cleanly."

My breath hit my throat as Daniel's words hung heavy. Killed someone? The casualness with which he said what he said sent a wave of nausea washing over me. Was it a twisted joke fueled by alcohol or a chilling confession? I just listened to your husband's story. It could be true, or it could just be a drunken story. My mind raced, searching for signs of truth or inebriated bravado. But admittedly, fear, cold and sharp, pricked at my skin.

He downed another drink, his gaze fixed on me so intensely that I could not reasonably determine if he was trying to intimidate me. I just didn't know if it was a brother's way of warning the soon-to-be husband of his sister to better be good or if he was warning me to stay away from you.

"You know why I killed that person?" His voice was a low rumble laced with a dangerous undercurrent. "Because," he continued, leaning closer until his breath tickled my ear, "I heard he really liked Camille. I saw him tailing my wife while she was here in the Philippines on vacation. So I looked for a chance to take him out. Before I shot him, I said something to him. Guess what it was."

My stomach lurched. The playful facade he'd maintained all evening had vanished, replaced by a predator sizing up its prey. "What did you say to him before you...?" My voice barely rose above a whisper.

"What belongs to Peter stays with Peter, and what belongs to John stays with John." The weight of his words settled upon me, a dark secret shared under the guise of drunken camaraderie. This seemingly innocent family gathering had taken a sinister turn, leaving me trapped in a web of lies, betrayal, and a chilling truth that threatened to shatter everything I thought I knew.

Your husband even told me the name of the man he killed and challenged me to check the records at the Sagada municipal hall to believe him. I said to myself, why do I need to do that? But Daniel's challenge hung in the air, a sickening dare that fueled my turmoil. Part of me yearned to believe it was a twisted joke, a cruel fabrication born from the depths of the bottle. But another, more terrifying part couldn't shake the chilling possibility of truth. The weight of his confession threatened to suffocate me, leaving me gasping for a semblance of normalcy. Yet, here I was, trapped in this twisted charade, clinging to Elena for reasons that seemed increasingly flimsy with every passing moment.

After about an hour, you, Elena, and their mother went to the terrace. As you joined us on the terrace, a wave of relief washed over me, a temporary reprieve from the suffocating tension that had seemingly settled between your husband and me.

"Daniel, let's talk for a while." Their mother said.

"Come on, *kuya*, put away the gun. It might go off." That was Elena.

"Okay...okay." Daniel replied as he put his gun in his clutch bag.

"Daniel, what's going on between you and Camille? Why are you still blaming her for not leaving for Italy?"

"Mom, if Camille wasn't such a fool, she would have returned there. I can't sell any of my vegetables because of the lockdown. I can't transport the vegetables out of Sagada. At least we would have a source of income if she returned to Italy."

"Why can't you understand that I'm afraid to return there because of COVID? I don't want to work there anymore. What if something happens to me?"

Your tears were falling when you said that. I felt so sorry for you and was really annoyed with Daniel. His selfishness grated on my nerves. Should I speak up? Should I defend you and challenge Daniel's callous behavior? But I can't, and I shouldn't. It's a discussion of family matters I didn't feel I was in a position to bat in yet... unless asked to. So, just as quickly as the urge arose, it receded, leaving me a silent observer in this storm of emotions.

"Then why is our elder sister Nancy still there and alive?"

"*Kuya*, you should not force Camille to return if she doesn't want to. And our sister's situation is different. Her boyfriend is there too, so she preferred to stay." That was Elena.

"Damn it! You're all ganging up on me."

"We have saved a lot of money. I told you to put the money I've been sending you every month for five years in the bank so we'd have something for a business. You're also earning from our farm."

"That's right, Daniel. Where is your money? How much have you saved in the bank?" their mother asked.

Your husband couldn't answer. You just kept crying and shaking your head.

"Daniel, son, tell me the truth. Is it true that you had an affair with the wife of an OFW there in your village? Is she the reason your savings are gone?"

There was a moment of silence. No one spoke. Then Daniel suddenly stood up and grabbed you by the hand.

"Come on, let's go home."

"Ouch... let go of me. I don't want to go with you."

"Daniel, let go of your wife. You're such a scoundrel."

"Mom... don't interfere with us... none of you interfere."

Daniel was holding the clutch bag containing the gun. He pointed it at us as he said that. I clearly saw how Daniel forcefully pushed you into the back of his car.

There was nothing I could do but feel sorry for you.

Before the car sped away, you looked back at us. It was as if you were asking for help. I wasn't sure if you were directly looking at me, Elena, or their mother. But I felt like you were pleading for someone to rescue you. But what could I do?

Chapter 5 – “The Second Time Around”

The next day, Elena and I couldn't leave the house. It rained all day – rain that reminded me of you, of whatever it is between us. It wasn't water quenching a fire, but rather like oil that ignited it. The relentless downpour lashed against the windows of the house of Elena's family, a steady drumming that echoed the disquiet in my heart. My mind is like the windows; what transpired in the house and what we did under the table while having dinner are as relentless as the downpour pounding my being.

I'm not sure what I'm feeling for you. Am I just pretending not to know? Is it purely physical attraction? Am I being controlled by lust? Could I be developing genuine feelings for you, or do I simply feel sorry for your situation? The distinction between desire and deeper emotions is unclear, and I find myself lost in a sea of confusing feelings.

A shard of guilt twisted in my gut. Whatever is there between us is entirely wrong. You and Daniel aren't married, and Elena and I aren't married yet either, so we can't be accused of committing adultery. We hadn't broken any vows, but the betrayal felt heavy nonetheless. Maybe you didn't feel guilty for betraying Daniel because perhaps your love for him has already faded for all the pain he caused you. But what about me? I love Elena. That's why I'm marrying her. But why is it like this? There's still a space in my heart, and it seems you filled it. And I need to find out how much space you have filled. It may be more than the space for Elena. It was like a path diverging, and I stood frozen at the crossroads, unsure which way to turn. Once reserved for her alone, the space in my heart now felt fractured, and the uncertainty clawed at me.

Elena is beside me, but you consume my thoughts. Why is it this way? When I kiss Elena and close my eyes, your face appears. It feels like I'm kissing you, not her. I went to Sagada because of Elena, not you. Yet, I can't find a way to get you out of my mind. You've disrupted my quiet, simple life.

"Sorry, Dad." Elena disrupted my thought processes. "We couldn't go out. Let's go tomorrow, okay."

I responded to Elena with a kiss on the cheek.

"Mom is so embarrassed because of what's happening. Why did it have to be now that we're here that the problems with my brother and his wife went this ugly?"

"Tell her not to worry about me. Camille's well-being is more important... uh... and your brother's."

I mentioned Elena's brother because she might think something else about the two of us.

"I've been trying to call them to check, but they're not answering. I also messaged Camille, but nothing. Maybe my brother has her phone. Mom is really worried. That's why she's feeling unwell."

I was feeling so anxious about you. The whole day passed without any word from you, leaving me unsettled. In an attempt to distract myself, I spent time editing photos and videos to upload to my travel vlog website. Then I remembered that I had taken a picture of you. I transferred it to my laptop and opened it, hoping it would make me feel better, but it only made me sadder. It made me long to see you even more.

The third day since I met you arrived.

I barely slept the previous night, and thoughts of you occupied every waking moment. Do you ever think of me as well? With all your worries, is there any room left in your mind for me? In your heart, do I have any space? I hope I do, even if it's just a tiny bit.

I was the first to wake up. Elena and her mother were still asleep when I got up. My fiancée slept in her mother's room. Her mother had a fever, so she needed to be taken care of.

I brewed some coffee and sat on the terrace. The sun rose, though it might not last long because it was the rainy season. I thought that Elena and I could finally go out so I could have photos and videos for my vlogs and distract myself from constantly thinking of you. I wished to forget you. But will that happen?

"Good morning, dad. You're up early."

Elena sat next to me and sipped my coffee.

"My brother called around midnight. He apologized to Mom. He said he and sister Camille are reconciled now."

"Ah... that's good to hear."

I didn't mean what I said. I did not want you to have a reconciliation with your husband. Is it impossible to resolve your deep-seated issues as a couple so easily? Nevertheless, I was glad to hear some news about you.

"Jeff, Mom has a fever, and I must take care of her. If you want to go out for pictures and videos for your vlog, I might not be able to accompany you. Is that okay?"

"It's okay, mommy. You need to take care of Mom."

"Go visit the mini rice terraces. Take some pictures. Bear with the small rice terraces for now. Eventually, you'll see the bigger ones."

"Alright, mommy. Don't worry about me."

"Also, take a picture of the hut. I haven't seen it in a long time. I'd like to see it even just in a photo."

"Sure. I'll leave around ten while the sun is still up. It might rain again this afternoon."

"Okay, Dad. Wait, I'll start cooking our breakfast. I'll also prepare something for you to take with you later. Loverboy... there's still beer in cans in the fridge if you want to bring some."

I observed Elena as she walked towards the kitchen. She is a wonderful person with many beautiful qualities. You have known her for a long time and are aware of this, too. There's nothing I can criticize about her, which is why my parents like her. That's why my conscience is bothering me because of what's happening.

After breakfast, I got my things ready. I was heading out again to capture more photos and videos.

The people I passed outside were already smiling at me, perhaps because they had already heard that I was Elena's fiancé. I waved at them and returned their smiles.

I found a spot where I could start taking pictures and videos. I opened my first can of beer, plugged my earphones in, and began singing along to songs by Air Supply and Ed Sheeran again. "Here I Am" by Air Supply now holds meaning for me because of you. The lines "those thoughts of you keep taunting me" resonated deeply.

That outing was definitely worth it. I took many photos. When I checked the time on my cell phone, I realized I had been walking for almost three hours. And then I saw the rice terraces carved into the side of the mountain again. They looked even more beautiful when hit by the sunlight.

I quickened my pace when I spotted the hut. It would be insincere to deny that I hoped to find you there. As I approached, I heard some movement inside, which made me almost sprint towards the hut, eager to see if you were there. I peeked through the open window, and all I could see were field mice on the table.

You weren't there, and I felt disappointed, but it was okay. Maybe you and your husband, my future brother-in-law, were already getting along. Did you get fooled into reconciling with your good-for-nothing husband again? I didn't want to say that I hoped you resolved your issues. I have to admit, I didn't want that to happen.

I was irritated that you were on my mind again; I should be thinking about Elena, not you. There's nothing between us because you're already committed to Daniel, even if you're just living together.

I moved a little away from the hut, and as Elena requested, I took a picture of the hut that had become the nest of our infidelity.

After that, I felt a cold breeze. The sun hid behind the clouds again, looking like it would rain. But this time, I had an umbrella with me. Elena insisted that I bring it in case it rained again.

It started to drizzle, so I went into the hut to retrieve the umbrella from my backpack. The rain intensified, but I could still venture outside if necessary. However, feeling tired and hungry, I chose to stay inside the hut for a bit. I planned to rest, have food, and then head home despite the rain.

I placed my belongings on the bed and unpacked my food. I had two more cans of beer. I only drank one and didn't feel intoxicated.

The wind picked up, so I closed the hut's window. Luckily, I had a mini-rechargeable light in my backpack, and I turned it on before reaching for the door to close it. To my surprise, you walked in. It was unbelievable to experience that moment again - encountering you inside the hut. The only difference this time was that you were not wet from the rain as you had an umbrella. I also had an umbrella. Both of us had umbrellas, so why didn't we decide to keep walking to avoid meeting there again?

You closed the door, then stood before me. As our eyes locked, no words were needed. You embraced me, reigniting our undeniable longing as our bodies connected. You kissed me passionately like nobody ever had. Then you pulled away from my embrace.

You sat on the edge of the bed, and while looking at me, you took off your clothes... and underwear. I approached you. You removed my belt, unzipped my pants while I was taking off my shirt, and then knelt before me. The ecstasy brought by what you did afterward was not like anything that I felt before.

While the hut provided shelter from the rain, we still got wet... with the guilt of our betrayal.

Chapter 6 – “Torn Between Two Lovers”

As our intense encounter subsided, the rain's relentless drumming continued. It wasn't the rain that ended our passionate connection but our exhaustion from the frenzied attempt to consume each other. Like shipwrecked souls, our desperate thirst for connection left us drained and gasping for air in the harsh light of reality.

Sleep, a heavy, unwelcome blanket, enveloped you as always after our stolen moments of forbidden intimacy. The cycle had spun for what felt like an eternity, each encounter a desperate grasp at pleasure tainted with guilt. Once intoxicating, the thrill of the secret now felt like a flickering flame casting long, menacing shadows. We were moths drawn to its destructive warmth, unable to pull away.

As I got dressed, I saw you sleeping. You looked beautiful and captivating. It's unfortunate that you're with someone like Daniel. I felt a selfish urge to make a promise I couldn't keep – to take you away from your husband. But the weight of Elena's trust, a fragile thread already straining, held me back. Should I leave my fiancée to be with you?

The sound of thunder pulled you from sleep. By then, I was already clothed, a knot of guilt tightening in my gut as I sat perched on the edge of the bed near your feet. You stretched, a yawn escaping your lips, before reaching for your clothes. As you held them out to me, a silent question hung in the air. "Help me dress?" you asked, a flicker of something - trust? Dependence? - in your eyes. I willingly obliged.

As I finished helping you dress, I was overcome by a mixture of emotions. The urge to hold you close, to feel your warmth against mine, was a physical ache I couldn't ignore. My fingers brushed the bare skin of your nape. Then I leaned in and pressed a kiss to the sensitive flesh there. My lips lingered, the warmth of your skin searing a brand onto my conscience.

The embrace lingered, a silent plea hanging heavy in the air. With a reluctant sigh, you pushed yourself back, your eyes searching mine. A tremor ran through your hands as you cupped my face, your touch both hesitant and desperate. "Jeff," you whispered, voice thick with unshed tears, "I can't... I can't stay with Daniel anymore. I can't stay here in Sagada any longer. It's suffocating me." The words tumbled out, choked with emotion. "Please," you pleaded, your eyes glistening, "help me get out of here. You're my only hope."

A stunned silence fell between us. Your words, laced with a desperation I hadn't seen before, caught me completely off guard. My mind scrambled, unsure how to respond to such a sudden and dramatic plea.

"Jeff," you whispered, clinging to me, "take me anywhere. I'll go with you."

My breath hitched. "Do you mean... leave Elena?"

You pulled back, your eyes stormy. "What am I to you, Jeff? A fleeting pleasure?"

A pained silence stretched between them. Finally, I muttered, "Camille..."

"Is this your game?" you cut me off, voice sharp. "Seduce and discard?"

I flinched. "What about you, Camille? Am I just a substitute for Daniel's affection?"

"Love?" you scoffed. "Can you even love someone in a few days? Three days, Jeff. Three days, and you think you're in love?"

The challenge in your eyes sparked something in me. "What about you, Camille? Have you...grown to love me?"

A beat of silence, then a shaky nod. "Yes."

My heart pounded. "And what if I said the same? What if I told you, Camille, that I love you?"

A flicker of hope crossed your face, then hardened into resolve. "Then there's no problem, Jeff. The decision is yours. Do whatever you want. But I'm leaving Sagada. Come if you want. We meet tomorrow. Here, until two."

"But Camille..."

"No buts," you said, your voice firm despite the tremor in your hand. "Me or Elena. Choose."

You reached for the hut's door, flinging it open to reveal a relentless curtain of rain. The wind whipped it sideways, momentarily chilling you to the bone. Without a word, you turned back to me. Glistening with unshed tears or maybe rainwater, your eyes held mine for a beat too long. Then, with a swiftness that surprised me, you leaned in. Our lips met in a desperate kiss, a plea whispered on the storm's breath. It stretched on, a silent battle between what we wanted and what we knew. Just as my hand reached out to pull you closer, you broke away. A single tear escaped, tracing a glistening path down your cheek as you stepped back, a world of unspoken emotions swirling in your eyes.

"If you don't come tomorrow, that will be the last kiss you get from me."

The rain pounded on the roof, but you stepped into the downpour, refusing the shelter of your umbrella. The sight of you alone, soaked by the cold rain, stayed with me. Your unspoken words felt heavier than any storm. My thoughts mirrored the chaos outside, torn between you, Elena, my soon-to-be wife, and our life together. The choice between you both consumed me, an echo drowning out all reason.

I didn't wait for the rain to stop. I went home, and along the way, I kept thinking about what you said after you kissed me before you left the hut – that it would be the last kiss I'd get from you if I didn't go to the hut the next day. That was perhaps the sweetest kiss you've ever given me. It seemed like you purposely made that kiss intense as a reminder of what I would lose if I didn't choose you. The memory of your kiss seared itself onto my thoughts, a constant reminder of the impossible choice I faced – the sweetness of your lips versus the comfort of Elena's.

Upon reaching the house of my fiancée's family, I was met by the jarring sight of Elena's cheerful greeting on the terrace.

"Oh look, Dad, you didn't get wet this time because you brought an umbrella."

"Yes, Mommy," I replied as I plopped down on a chair on the terrace.

Elena also sat on a chair in front of me.

"My daddy looks very tired again. Did a fairy appear again and..."

"Alright... a fairy came to the hut, and I f---ed her. That's why I'm tired."

That was the first time I seemed to have scolded Elena. She was startled. She bowed her head, looking embarrassed.

I quickly thought of a way to make up for it. I suddenly laughed and laughed.

Elena looked at me in surprise.

"Mommy, I was just pranking you. I was just pretending to be angry." Elena was very puzzled.

"I thought you were really angry, Dad."

"So... sorry, Mommy. I guess I was just too tired." As I said that, I scooted my chair closer to her. I held her hand and gently kissed it.

Elena's next move caught me off guard. Rising from her chair, she closed the distance between us in a single, surprising step. Then, before I could fully react, she was on my lap, her lips meeting mine in a kiss that was anything but innocent. A playful nip at my lower lip sent a jolt through me, a mix of surprise and a strange, simmering arousal.

It was then that I realized the difference between your kisses – your kisses, a whirlwind of passionate intensity, had left me breathless. Hers, however, were like a soothing balm, filled with a tenderness that spoke of a love built over time. You were fire, a thrilling inferno. Elena, a warm hearth, a comforting refuge.

The decision of whether to meet you at the hut tomorrow wasn't simply a choice between passion and love; it was a tangled web of desires, obligations, and the potential consequences of each path.

Elena tilted her head, her brow furrowed in concern. "Are you feeling alright, Dad? You seem a little out of sorts today."

I offered a tired smile while squeezing her hand. "A bit of a long day, that's all," I responded.

"Maybe we should just head back to Pasig, then? I was thinking maybe all this trouble here is getting to you."

"The thought is sweet, Mommy, but we can handle a few bumps in the road. Sagada is beautiful, and we're not done yet with what we came to do, right?"

Elena's face brightened. "Right! Once Mom is feeling better, we can still see everything we talked about before! The hanging coffins, the falls, the caves – it'll be an adventure! We can even go to Banaue and see those amazing rice terraces everyone talks about!"

I chuckled. "Sounds like a plan. We'll make a whole vacation out of it."

"Proomise!!!... Now, Dad, what do you want – coffee, tea, or me?"

I played along with Elena's joke. "Coffee now and you later."

Another thing I loved about Elena was her sense of humor. You... had none. It was hard to read your true nature because we met when you were burdened with problems. So, I saw you as too serious and always troubled.

Why did it seem more likely that I would choose you? Elena, my wife, my rock. Her love was a steady lighthouse, guiding me through life's storms. Yet, you were a shooting star, a fleeting glimpse of something extraordinary. The passion, the danger, and the wrongness of it all ignited a fire within me. Perhaps the allure of the forbidden, the thrill of the unknown, or maybe a spark of something deeper I couldn't define made you the storm I was inexplicably drawn to.

The day loomed, a dark cloud on the horizon. The pull towards the hut, towards you, was undeniable. Yet, each step closer brought a fresh wave of doubt. A knot of guilt tightened in my gut, and the image of Elena's trusting smile constantly reminded me of the love I was jeopardizing. Leaving felt wrong, a betrayal of the vows whispered on a sun-drenched day. But then, your face would flash in my mind – the intensity of your gaze and your desperate plea. Was that reason enough? Reason, it seemed, had deserted me. Logic argued for safety, for the comfort of the familiar. But you were a storm brewing in my heart, a tempestuous force I couldn't ignore. Desperate for clarity, I found myself drawn to a quiet corner in the backyard of the house of Elena's family. That place is untouched by the day's turmoil. There, I surrendered the decision to a higher power with a whisper that felt more like a plea.

Chapter 7 – “The Decision”

The rooster's crow was a rusty blade scraping against my conscience. Sleep had been a stranger the entire night, replaced by a relentless loop of "Camille or Elena?" Shame burned in my throat as I glanced at the clock - almost nine. Elena, bless her heart, had taken the other room to care for her sick mother. Stepping onto the terrace, the cool mountain air slapped me awake. Elena and her mother were already there, their worried expressions deepening as they saw me.

"You had a good sleep, didn't you, son? It's almost nine o'clock," said Elena's mother.

"I walked quite a distance yesterday. They said I was almost at Marlboro Hills."

"Ah... so, Dad, did you see Marlboro Hills already?"

"Not really. I was running out of time, so I headed back to visit the mini rice terraces. Next time, I'll go there. I took pictures of the hut as you requested."

"Oh thanks. Let me take a look at it later. Dad, do you plan to go out today?"

"Huh? Uh... I'm not sure. We'll see later."

"Okay, wait for me before you leave. We're just going to the clinic in town with mom. We're leaving, just waiting for you to wake up."

"We'll leave you for now, Jeff."

"Alright, take care Mom... Elena."

"I'll buy some cooked dishes for our lunch later," Elena said before they left.

Alone in the house, I paced like a caged animal. The weight of my choice pressed down on me, a suffocating burden. Elena, a future filled with comfort and familiarity. Camille, a passionate whirlwind that threatened to upend everything. I set a deadline for myself – a decision by lunch.

It was almost noon when Elena and her mother returned. Fortunately, I had already cooked some rice. I helped Elena prepare the food on the table.

"Jeff, Elena has a surprise for you later."

"A surprise Mom? What is it?"

"It's a surprise, after all. Elena will tell you herself."

Elena just smiled when she looked at me. I thought maybe she bought something for me in town.

Once the table was set, we started eating. At that moment, I wondered if you were already at the hut. I thought about what would happen if I decided to go with you and leave Sagada. My thoughts were interrupted when Elena tried to feed me some food.

Then, her mother spoke.

"Elena, give Jeff your surprise now."

"Oh, right."

"What is it, Mommy?"

"Hold on... you're too excited."

Elena stood up and grabbed her shoulder bag. She took something out and handed it to me.

It's a pregnancy test kit.

The pregnancy test felt like a live grenade in my hand. Positive. Those two red lines burned into my retinas. Relief warred with terror in my chest as I saw Elena's radiant smile. Elena was pregnant. I couldn't speak right away.

"Oh, it looks like you're not excited, Dad."

Once I collected myself, I squeezed Elena's hand, a silent apology tangled with a burgeoning sense of responsibility. The turmoil within me remained a locked box, but for now, this child was my anchor. Maybe, I thought with a sliver of hope, the universe had intervened, a divine hand steering me away from a path of destruction.

"I was just surprised, Mommy. But you don't know how happy I am. I'm going to be a father."

"... and I'm finally going to be a grandmother. I want you to get married at the courthouse as soon as possible. Just a simple celebration. I don't want people here to see my daughter pregnant without knowing you got married."

"Yes, Mom. I'll call my parents later, and Elena and I will tell them our plans."

Elena was thrilled with what she heard. I caressed her cheek, and she kissed my hand.

"Oh... finish your meal quickly, Dad. Are you planning to go out?"

"Huh... I don't feel like going out anymore. I'd rather stay here by your side."

"Aww, my Dad suddenly became sweet. Just yesterday, you were so grumpy."

I still thought of you amid those conversations. You are the reason I could leave Elena, but now I've found a reason not to choose you – Elena's bearing my first child. I don't need to think any further, and maybe when you learn why I didn't meet you at our rendezvous, you'll understand.

Perhaps I can say that the Lord answered my prayer. Let's just say that the Lord foresaw the future and knew I would be in this situation, so He granted Elena a child to prevent me from doing something foolish.

This doesn't mean I now believe in fate... that destiny has wheels. The Lord gave us two gifts. The first is life, and the second is the freedom to make any decision we want. They call it free will. He doesn't interfere with which path we take. I know that the sadness and failures we experience are not punishments from Him. Those are the results of our wrong decisions.

However, sometimes the Lord does favor those He cherishes. I'm not saying He favored me, but Elena. My fiancée is a very good person. I'm not saying you're not a good person. I have no right to judge you because I am also not pleasing in the eyes of the Lord.

What's frightening is karma. I feared that Daniel might be punished for the wrongs he did to you. I also feared we might be punished for the infidelities we committed and the wrong we intended to do. I just hope that since we didn't go through with our plan, we won't face retribution.

That night, we were awakened by the continuous honking of a car. Elena and I came out of the room, as did her mother. We peered out the window.

"Mom, please open the gate?"

It was Daniel calling.

"Jeff, please open the gate," her mother said.

I opened the gate. Daniel drove the car in, quickly got out, and opened the back door. You stepped out, almost stumbling, so your husband decided to carry you inside the house.

You were soaking wet, and if I'm not mistaken, you seemed drunk.

Daniel laid you on the sofa in the living room. Their mother quickly went into the bedroom, got a pair of shorts and a t-shirt, and changed you out of your wet clothes. I turned away while they dressed you together.

"Why don't you ever carry an umbrella when you know it's the rainy season?" their mother said.

"What happened to Camille?" Elena asked.

"She left the house before noon, said she was going somewhere. She took her shoulder bag and a large plastic bag."

"Wait, let me wipe her face with lukewarm water," Elena said.

Daniel continued his story.

"When it got dark and she hadn't returned, I started looking for her. Someone mentioned that around three o'clock, she bought wine and beer at the store and seemed to head into the woods towards the mini rice terraces. I thought she might be at the hut, so I went there. That's where I found her."

I just listened to their conversation. There was nothing I could say. I felt so sorry for your condition. I wanted to blame myself. I hope you can forgive me, but I can't leave Elena, I can't abandon the child that soon we're going to have.

"Her plastic bag was full of clothes. I think Camille was planning to leave me."

We all fell silent for a moment.

"That's why, Daniel, you need to think things over. Treat Camille better. She told us she wants to separate from you."

"Yes, Mom. When I realized she was planning to leave me, I understood that I don't want to lose her. I'll try to save our marriage. I'll try to change, Mom."

As Elena wiped your face with a cloth soaked in warm water, you suddenly opened your eyes. Our gazes met.

"I thought you loved me. But you didn't. You just led me on."

I was shocked when you said that. Elena looked at me, confused.

"Weren't you satisfied with the way I f - ck you? Wasn't it good enough for you?"

Your words hung heavy in the air, a scathing indictment of my betrayal. Elena's gaze darted between us, the first crack appearing in the facade of her happiness. It was a confused look, but the seed of doubt was sown. I had to find a way out of that compromising situation.

"Ca... Camille... It's Jeff... I'm not Daniel."

"Ha!? Is that so?" you said.

Then you started laughing uncontrollably.

"So, you're Jeff... not Daniel. Well, sorry then."

"Oh, it looks like Camille is delirious," said Elena's mother.

"Yes, it seems so. She probably mistook Jeff for me," said your husband.

Relief washed over me as you drifted off to sleep, a temporary truce declared. But Elena's furrowed brow, a silent storm brewing, sent a fresh wave of unease crashing over me. The weight of my choices, for better or worse, had settled in. The consequences, like a gathering storm, loomed on the horizon.

Chapter 8 – “A Woman Scorned”

Sleep was a distant memory, replaced by the relentless echo of your name. Though I'd made my choice, tethering myself to Elena and our unborn child, the pull towards you remained a stubborn ember. My feelings for you, a complex tapestry woven with threads of longing and regret, refused to unravel. In a world without the weight of impending fatherhood, our paths would have diverged from Sagada, hand in hand.

A dull ache pulsed in my temples as I pushed myself out of bed. Elena was lost in slumber; her peaceful face contrasted with my turmoil. The kitchen offered a momentary respite, and a black coffee was the only solace I could find.

The terrace could offer a momentary respite to clear my head. But fate had other plans. There you were, a tableau of domestic bliss, your head nestled on Daniel's shoulder. A bitter bile rose in my throat as jealousy, a venomous serpent, slithered through my veins. I did not expect I would feel that way.

"Oh, you're up already," Daniel said.

"Yeah, I got up early. I have to prepare my things. I'm heading to Marlboro Hills later."

"It's beautiful there, Jeff. You'll enjoy taking pictures. Sorry for the trouble we caused last night."

"That's okay, Daniel."

"By the way, I'll go ahead. I need to tend to our vegetable garden."

"Oh, I see. Alright, take care. See you when I see you."

"I'm the only one going. Camille will stay here for now. I'll pick her up this afternoon."

Before Daniel left, you kissed him on the lips. While kissing him, why did you look at me? Your fleeting glance, a charged arrow, pierced through me. I lowered my head. What I felt was not difficult to figure out – jealousy.

I opened the gate for your husband. After he left, I went back to the terrace. As I got closer to where you were sitting, you stood up. Your sudden rise was a silent declaration of war. Your hands, once soft, connected with my face twice with a stinging force. The world tilted, and I was suspended in a bubble of disbelief for a brief, disorienting moment.

"Why?" I asked, glancing inside the house to ensure no one saw what you did.

"Why? You don't know why? You deserve more than those slaps for what you did to me."

I managed to block your next slap.

"Stop it, Camille... stop it. Please forgive me."

"Goddamn you, Jeff. Why did you do this to me? You pushed me deeper instead of pulling me out of the quicksand I fell into."

I shook my head.

"What's your answer to my question last night? Didn't you enjoy f - - cking me? It's you I'm asking, not Daniel. What's your answer?"

You started to cry. I gently guided you to sit down.

"Camille... let me explain."

"I don't need your explanation. It's you I need. We can still leave. Later today... or even tomorrow... whenever you want. Please Jeff! I beg you. This is not about leaving Daniel anymore, this is about me wanting to be with you."

"Sorry, Camille... we can't do that."

"Why not? Why?"

I shook my head as I looked at you. You kicked me in the leg.

"Get away from me."

I retreated to the far end of the terrace, your sobs a mournful symphony that echoed in the still morning air. The weight of your anger pressed down on me, a crushing burden. I wanted to explain, to unravel the tangled mess of our lives, but words seemed inadequate. Your pain was tangible, a physical presence between us.

After a few moments, Elena came out of the room. She saw us on the terrace.

"Good morning, Ate Camille."

You just smiled in response.

"Why do you look like you've been crying, Ate?"

"It's nothing, I just remembered what happened yesterday."

"Ah, I thought Jeff was making you cry," Elena laughed. I knew my fiancée was just joking. You looked at me before smiling at Elena in response to what she said.

Then, Elena came over to me and kissed me on the cheek. You bowed your head, just like I did when you kissed Daniel. It seemed like you didn't want to see Elena kiss me. Maybe it was jealousy, too.

"Your cheek looks red, Dad. What happened there?"

"Nothing... I just scratched it earlier. That's why it's red," I said, trying to divert your attention by asking, "Is your mom still asleep?"

"Let's just let her rest so she can get better soon."

Elena took a sip of my coffee. "Oh... by the way, Camille, I have good news for you."

"Ha!? What is it?"

"Dad, why don't you tell Ate Camille?"

"Oh. Why me?"

"Please, Dad... pleeeasssee!"

Reluctantly, I granted Elena's request. "Camille... El... Elena is pregnant. Six weeks now."

"Really?"

"Yes, Ate Camille."

"Wow... well, congratulations to both of you. You're going to be parents."

You smiled as you said that. Your forced smile was a mask concealing a tempest of emotions. I saw the flicker of defeat in your eyes, starkly contrasting the joy she was feigning. Your arm, once resting confidently on the chair, now hung limply, a silent confession of your despair. It was a tableau of pain, a silent plea for solace.

"Thank you. Of course, we'll ask you to be the godmother... right, Dad?"

I nodded.

"Ah... sure... sure. Why not."

When you said that, it seemed like you wanted to burst into tears, especially when Elena lifted her shirt like a child and placed my hand on her belly.

"Hold on, I'll go inside and lie down again. I have a headache."

"Oh... that's a hangover, Camille. Alright, rest well. I'll go cook breakfast now."

You and Elena went inside the house together. It was a silent exodus that left me alone with my thoughts. Elena disappeared into the kitchen while you collapsed onto the sofa, your back turned to me. You seemed to be a fortress of solitude, shielding your vulnerability from my probing gaze. I couldn't decipher the storm within you—sorrow, anger, or a mix of both.

After that day, you and Daniel only visited the house once a week, usually on a Sunday. It was obvious you were avoiding me whenever you were at the house. Those Sundays became a ritual of avoidance, a carefully choreographed dance around the elephant in the room. Not once did we have a conversation alone. But that's probably for the best because I didn't want to give Elena any more reason to doubt us—if she had any doubts at all.

I'm hurt by what's happening. You have no idea how I truly feel about you, feelings I'm trying hard to suppress for the sake of Elena and our future child. I love you, Camille, but I also love Elena. I have to admit that my love for you is stronger, but Elena and I will have a child. I can't neglect our future child. It's my dream to have a child. I think you understand why I didn't meet you at the hut then.

Aside from no families being broken, one positive outcome of my not showing up at our meeting that day is the changes I've seen in your husband. Your mother-in-law, who will also be my mother-in-law, says Daniel is completely different now. Once trapped in a shadowy world, Daniel now radiated a newfound sense of purpose. If what Elena's mother says is true, he hasn't touched alcohol since the day we were supposed to leave Elena and him. And maybe if what I saw in his clutch bag back then was drugs, perhaps he has quit that too.

The following month and a few days had good weather. There were no heavy rains, just occasional light drizzles that didn't last long. Because of this, Elena and I could visit the places I wanted to go to for the pictures and videos I needed. Taking care of Elena and my travel vlog kept me busy during those days.

We chose the following week as the schedule for our civil wedding because we would be returning to Pasig the week after that. Elena was three months pregnant by then. Only my father, mother, and one sibling would attend because it would just be a simple wedding. I promised Elena that the grand wedding would be after she gave birth.

Chapter 9 – “Bloody Rain”

It was another Sunday, and you and Daniel arrived at the house again. For the first time in a while, the sky wore a somber hue as a cold wind whispered through the trees. The news warned of an approaching typhoon, a tempest looming on the horizon.

Inside, Elena and her mother busied themselves with lunch preparations while Daniel practiced his shooting in the backyard. You found me on the terrace, an unexpected encounter that made my heart skip a beat. You glanced around cautiously before speaking, ensuring our conversation was private.

"Jeff... I am two weeks delayed. I've been dizzy and vomiting frequently these past few days."

Your words doused me like a bucket of icy water.

"Why are you telling me this, Camille?"

"Damn you Jeff. Aside from Daniel, you're the only one who F - - KED me. And I'm sure Elena already told you why her brother and I never had children despite being together for so long."

I knew your husband was sterile. I just didn't want to accept what you were saying because we were facing a monumental problem if it was true. I hoped you were fabricating a story to get my attention.

"Why don't you take a test to be sure?"

"Later, I have a pregnancy kit with me. Don't worry, Jeff. I know you're suffering from another kind of impotence. You have no spine. You're a boneless coward. You're only good at one thing... f - - king. If I'm pregnant, I won't chase you. I can face this problem alone."

"Camille..." I attempted to grab your arm.

"Don't touch me, you spineless coward." You stepped away, ensuring I wouldn't be able to touch you.

"It would be fun if I were pregnant, right? You'll have two children next year. Both firstborns. WOW!!! You're amazing."

You left me on the terrace with those biting words. The joy and peace I felt a few weeks ago vanished like a popped bubble. From the terrace, I watched as a light drizzle began, soon turning into a heavy downpour accompanied by strong winds.

"Dad... call Daniel. He's in the orchard at the back. Tell him lunch is ready."

I felt like I was floating as I walked to the back of the house to call Daniel.

"Daniel... it's time to eat."

"Okay, Jeff. Oh... by the way. Do you want to learn how to handle a gun? I'll teach you how to shoot."

I nodded absently, my mind reeling. What would happen if Camille was truly pregnant? What would Elena, Daniel, and their mother say if they found out I got Camille pregnant?

As we entered the house, Daniel placed his bullets and gun on the living room table. The rain had intensified, signaling the storm's arrival.

"Oh, Daniel... son... Be careful when using your gun, okay?"

"Yes, Mom. I took it out again because I'm planning to attend a shooting competition in Baguio next month."

"Alright, you can start now. Eat up, kids," their mother said.

"Wait, where's Camille?"

"She's in the bathroom, feeling unwell. She said we should go ahead and eat," Elena replied.

Daniel stood up and went to the bathroom. You probably forgot to lock the door as he pushed it open.

Though the conversation was muffled, we could hear your voices inside.

"It looks like they're having a serious conversation in there. It seems like they had another argument. Oh, Elena, what trouble has your brother caused this time?"

"Just let them be, Mom. Let's just eat," Elena responded.

Elena started eating, but I couldn't bring myself to take a bite. An inexplicable anxiety gnawed at me.

After a while, Daniel emerged from the bathroom. You were not with him. He approached Elena and angrily placed a pregnancy test on the table. It was positive. It's confirmed... you're pregnant.

I could only close my eyes, feeling the weight of the problem that had just surfaced, one I wasn't sure I could handle. Fate may not have wheels... but karma does, and I felt it was about to run me over. The boomerang I threw was coming back, and it seemed I couldn't catch it without getting hurt.

The rain pounded heavily on the tin roof like stones falling.

"No... it's not mine. I've known I'm pregnant for a while, so I don't need to use this."

Their mother closed her eyes, bowed her head, and shook it slowly.

"Maybe you... you know, you might not be..."

"Don't take me for a fool, Elena. Just last week, I had another check-up. I was still hoping to get Camille pregnant. But no... I'm still sterile... STERILE."

Before anyone could move, Daniel grabbed the gun from the side table. He stormed back to the bathroom, dragging you out by your hair. You struggled mightily to break free.

Elena and her mother was obviously shocked by the turn of events. They stayed glued to their seats not knowing what to do. They did not say anything. They just watched in horror the tragedy that was unfolding before us.

What about me? What did I do? Nothing. I should have defended you. You were right... I have no backbone. I'm a coward.

"Son, calm down... please calm down." That was Elena's mother.

"*Kuya... kuya...!!!*"

I stood there like a stump, doing nothing. I just waited for whatever retribution was due to me for all the foolish things I had done. I wanted to run out of the house, escape, and disappear into thin air.

Daniel dragged you to the room where I and Elena are staying. We followed, but he slammed the door shut. It didn't close properly, and Elena tried to enter.

"Nobody interferes!"

Elena's attempt to enter was halted, perhaps because her brother pointed the gun at her.

"Who is your man? WHO?"

The gun went off.

"Oh, merciful God," their mother said, attempting to enter the room, but Elena stopped her.

"Who is your man, I asked? You slut, who got you pregnant?"

We could do nothing outside the room. We just listened and waited. I just waited for you to say my name.

"How does it feel, Daniel? It hurts, right?"

That was you... raising your voice on your husband for the first time.

"That's how much it hurts when you once brought your woman to our house. Perhaps you thought I already left home for the market thus you left the door of our ajar. I saw you undressed each other. I saw how you F - - KED her. How many times did I see you enter her house? I followed you many times because I wanted to prove the rumors about you two were true."

"I left her, didn't I? I changed, didn't I? I promised to fix myself... our life, didn't I?"

"It was too late when you changed, Daniel. I had already dirtied myself before you decided to change. I had already fallen in love with someone else before you changed. I had already betrayed you before you decided to change. I was already F - - KED..."

And the gun went off again... once... twice... thrice.

Silence fell in the room. Silence fell in the house. The only sound was the rain hitting the roof.

Chapter 10 – “The Reckoning”

"Hello... hello... what's happening in there?" The voices outside grew louder, the banging on the gate more insistent.

Elena and her mother trembled in fear, clinging to each other as the sound of footsteps approached. My hand shook as I opened the gate, revealing several men, including the head of the village.

"Elena... we heard gunshots, so we came over," said one of the men, his voice rough with concern.

"Sir," Elena replied, her voice barely a whisper, "please go into the room."

I stood rooted to the spot, hoping it was all a dream, a nightmare I could wake up from. The reality of the scene pierced me deeply.

"Son, what have you done?"

His mother embraced Daniel, her voice breaking.

"Daniel, why?" Elena's voice was a fragile echo.

"Forgive me, Mom... Elena... It's so hard to accept. It hurts so much," Daniel sobbed.

One of the men said, "Camille is dead."

The weight of those words drove me to the bathroom. I locked myself inside, the rain outside mirroring my tears. Sadness and regret consumed me. How did it come to this? What kind of person am I?

What did I feel after everything that happened? Who did I blame? If only I had agreed to leave Sagada with her. Maybe she would still be alive. I chose to stay for Elena and our unborn child, but that choice led to death and tragedy. If I had chosen differently, it could have been avoided?

For me, saying what happened is God's will is the most foolish thing to do. God has nothing to do with what happened. Deep down, I knew the truth. All these happened because of the wrong decisions we made. It all started that day when both of us did not bring umbrellas. A decision that made us seek refuge in that hut. We decided to give in to the temptation when our lips accidentally touched when I needed to warm your body to save you from hypothermia. We decided to give in a second time to that temptation when again we met in that hut.

Daniel went quietly with the police officers who came over to investigate what happened. They consider it unnecessary to bring your body to the hospital for autopsy. They instead called people from a funeral service to take your corpse to a funeral home.

While all those things are happening, the heavy rain continued to pour, the wind howling, the storm refusing to pass.

By nightfall, the house was empty, except for Elena, her mother, and me. The silence was heavy, punctuated only by the occasional sob. I couldn't approach Elena. A wall of guilt and shame prevent me from doing so.

Should I confess to Elena and her mother what happened between Camille and me? Should I reveal that I was the father of her unborn child? The weight of my secret pressed down on me. I considered staying silent, letting you take the secret to her grave.

"Mom, we should inform Camille's parents and siblings in Pangasinan about what happened," Elena said, her voice breaking the silence.

"Yes, Elena. It would be worse if they found out from someone else. They will take Camille's body back to Pangasinan once they find out what really happened."

"Yes, you're right. I don't expect them to let Camille be buried here in Sagada."

"Alright, contact them. I'll speak to Camille's parents."

"Do you have any contact numbers of anybody from Camille's family?"

"I don't think so."

"Wait, one of Camille's cousins is actually my friend on Facebook. I'll message them and ask for a contact number."

Elena grabbed her cellphone from the top of the fridge.

"Oh no, my battery is low. Dad, can I borrow your laptop? I'll use it to log into Facebook."

I took my laptop from the room and handed it to Elena. Then, I stepped out onto the terrace, wrestling with my thoughts. Should I confess everything? The wrong decisions haunted me. Lives had been ruined because of me. Would Elena and her family forgive me if they knew my role in the tragedy? Will there be forgiveness for me? myself?

Then suddenly, I remembered the picture I took of you sleeping in the hut. Panic surged through me as I realized I hadn't deleted it. I rushed back to the living room. Elena was not there.

"Mom, where's Elena?" I asked, trying to keep the tremor out of my voice.

"She went to my room."

I found Elena sitting on the floor, staring blankly at your picture on my laptop's desktop. I was cornered with no place to hide.

"Mommy, let me explain," I began, but Elena's eyes, filled with shock and tears, cut through me.

I told her everything, from the rain that brought us together in the hut to the plan to leave Sagada. I left nothing out. Her face transformed from shock to anger as she listened, her tears drying up, replaced by a steely resolve.

"Are you done explaining?" she asked, her voice cold.

I nodded.

"Let's keep this quiet, Jeff. Only the two of us should know about what transpired between you and Camille."

For a moment, I felt a glimmer of hope. Maybe she would forgive me.

"I don't want to add more to the sorrows and disappointments of my mother. She might not be able to take it."

"Thank you, Mommy," I said, moving to hug her, but she pushed me away.

"Don't thank me. I'm not finished. I want you gone by the time Mom and I wake up tomorrow. I'll come up with a story about your disappearance. Maybe I'll say you were kidnapped by rebels. Or I'll say the police took you away because you're a drug addict. Addict? Yeah, you are."

"Mommy," I pleaded.

"Don't call me that anymore. I don't want to hear any kind of endearment from a f - cking moron like you. You're a monster. I am wondering how will you be able to sleep at night with what you have done."

I bowed my head in shame.

"Don't bow your head. Look at me when I'm talking to you."

I shook my head, unwilling to meet her gaze.

"I said look at me. Damn it, look at me..." she demanded.

I complied, meeting her fierce, tear-filled eyes.

"Take all your things with you, including the t-shirt you gave to that woman. Sleeping with the fairies is fun, right? Come on, answer her question now. Wasn't it good? Did you enjoy it? Who f - - ks better... me or Camille?"

"Elena... please..."

I tried to hug her again, but she slapped me, twice. The sting of her hand felt like a physical manifestation of my guilt and shame, piercing my soul.

From now on, everything is over between us. You will never see my child, and I will never introduce you as the father."

"Mommy... sorry... please forgive me."

"If your apology could change everything that happened, then I would forgive you. But it can't, can it? Will you be able to sleep at night? Do you know the extent of what you've done? You're worse than an animal. I wish you had died along with that damn woman."

I knelt before her, ready to beg, but she turned her back on me and left the room.

"Get out so my mom can rest."

I left Elena's house early in the morning, slipping out quietly. At the gate, I turned around, hoping Elena would call me back, but she didn't. The rain had stopped, but the wind still blew. The streetlights cast long shadows as I walked, carrying all my belongings. When I passed a trash bin, I threw away a bag of old clothes to lighten my load.

There was no vehicle I could take to leave the area, so I decided to walk until I reached the street leading to the mini rice terraces. There was a bit more light, so I took one last look at the terraced fields.

I walked until I saw the hut where it all began. I approached it and went inside. My body and mind were tired, so I decided to rest for a while.

As I was about to lie down, I heard the rain start to fall. I closed the window. As I was about to close the door, I remembered you.

I slowly closed the hut's door.

I waited, hoping you would push it open to come in and join me once more.

And then the heavy rain poured down.

~ E N D ~