



FSH-PH Publication

# A BOOK OF SHORT STORIES

- Ana Lee M. Panado -

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**A BOOK OF SHORT STORIES**

**BY:**

**ANA LEE M. PANADO**

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# A BOOK OF SHORT STORIES



**Author : Ana Lee M. Panado**

Beyond the classroom and institutional roles, my identity is deeply rooted in being a creative writer, a space where I am not bound by syllabi, institutional frameworks, or academic expectations, but instead guided

by imagination, memory, and the quiet urgencies of lived experience. Writing, for me, is both a refuge and a form of articulation: a way to make sense of the complexities of life that cannot always be explained through formal discourse.

My stories are often shaped by fragments of reality—moments observed, emotions felt but unspoken, and narratives that exist in the margins of everyday life. I am drawn to themes of resilience, identity, and the subtle struggles that define the human condition. These are not always grand or dramatic; often, they are found in the ordinary lives of people whose stories remain unheard. I write to give voice to these silences.

The motivation behind my work comes from a desire to preserve and reinterpret experiences—both personal and collective. Growing up and living in environments rich with cultural nuance, I have always been aware of the layered identities people carry. This awareness naturally seeps into my writing, where characters navigate tensions between tradition and change, duty and desire, silence and expression.

I am particularly inspired by the emotional truths that fiction can reveal. While academic writing demands clarity and evidence, creative writing allows me to explore ambiguity, contradiction, and vulnerability. It gives me the freedom to ask questions rather than provide answers, to dwell in uncertainty, and to trust the reader to find meaning within the spaces I leave open.

Ultimately, I write not just to tell stories, but to connect—to evoke recognition, to stir reflection, and to remind both myself and my readers that even the most private experiences can resonate universally.

## Preface

Rather than thinking of these stories as brief, self-contained narratives, I see them as pieces of a larger emotional and thematic tapestry—each one distinct, yet quietly in conversation with the others. What binds them together is not simply form or length, but a shared preoccupation with the inner lives of individuals navigating moments of quiet turning points.

Many of the stories dwell in spaces that are often overlooked: the pause before a decision is made, the weight of words left unsaid, the tension between who we are expected to be and who we quietly long to become. These narratives do not seek resolution in the traditional sense; instead, they linger in ambiguity, allowing readers to sit with discomfort, recognition, or even unanswered questions.

A recurring thread in the collection is the idea of invisibility—how certain struggles, sacrifices, and identities remain unseen or unacknowledged. Through my characters, I attempt to illuminate these hidden spaces, offering not dramatic revelations, but moments of subtle awakening. There is also a strong undercurrent of resilience—not the loud, triumphant kind, but the quiet endurance that defines everyday life.

I am particularly drawn to the intersection of memory and identity. Many of the stories explore how the past continues to shape the present, how personal histories—whether embraced or suppressed—inevitably resurface. In this way, the collection becomes not just a series of narratives, but an exploration of how people carry their stories within them.

What I hope readers will take away is not just an understanding of the characters, but a recognition of themselves within these pages. If a story lingers in the mind long after it is read, if it prompts a moment of reflection or a shift in perspective, then it has fulfilled its purpose. Ultimately, these stories are an invitation—to pause, to feel, and to look more closely at the quiet complexities of being human.

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## THE HEART OF THE MOTHER

By: *Ana Lee M. Panado*

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The kitchen smelled of garlic and butter.

Elanna stood by the stove, stirring a pot with one hand while wiping her hands on her apron.

Oil sizzled softly. Behind her, Angelo laughed at something on his phone, and Kate shook her head, smiling as she arranged plates on the table.

“Dinner’s ready!” Elanna called, glancing over her shoulder.

Ferwin ran in first, his small feet tapping quickly against the floor.

“Lola, I’m hungry!”

“I know, I know,” Elanna said, laughing as she ruffled his hair. “You’re always hungry.”

Ambie entered last, loosening his watch as he took his seat. He didn’t speak right away. He just watched—Elanna moving from stove to table, Angelo pulling out a chair for Kate, Ferwin climbing onto his seat.

The room felt full. Warm. Alive.

After dinner, they gathered in front of the television. Elanna returned from the kitchen carrying small bowls of dessert.

“Angelo,” she said, handing him one, “how’s your online selling?”

“Very well, Mommy.” He grinned. “Orders keep coming in.”

“And you, Kate?”

Kate exhaled, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear. “Busy... but okay.”

Elanna nodded, satisfied. “That’s good. Keep going.”

Ambie leaned back slightly, his dessert untouched. He watched Elanna as she spoke, her voice soft but steady, her eyes bright.

He smiled quietly to himself.

One afternoon, Elanna paused in the middle of folding laundry.

Her hand moved to her left arm.

She pressed it lightly, then harder.

The ache spread—down her arm, across her back. She stood still for a moment, waiting for it to pass.

It didn't.

“Ambie,” she called, her voice lower than usual.

He appeared in the doorway almost immediately. “What is it?”

She forced a small smile. “Let's go to another hospital.”

The emergency room was cold and bright.

A nurse guided Elanna onto a bed. Another wrapped a cuff around her arm. Machines beeped. Curtains swished closed.

Ambie and Angelo stood just outside, the smell of antiseptic sharp in the air.

Angelo paced.

Ambie sat, then stood again, then sat once more.

After a long while, a doctor stepped out, removing his gloves.

“You're her family?”

Ambie moved forward. “Yes. I'm her husband.”

The doctor met his eyes.

“She had a heart attack.”

The words landed heavily.

Angelo's movement stopped.

**“She needs to stay in the ICU,” the doctor continued. “We need to monitor her closely.”**

**Ambie nodded, but his hand had already gone to his chest, pressing there as if to steady something inside.**

**Days passed in quiet routines—hospital visits, whispered conversations, the steady hum of machines.**

**When Elanna was finally discharged, she moved more slowly, but she still smiled.**

**Two weeks later, she sat across from the doctor again.**

**“You’ll need an angiogram,” she said.**

**The hospital room was silent when the results came.**

**Ambie sat beside her. Angelo stood near the window.**

**The doctor folded his hands.**

**“One artery is completely blocked. Three others are severely narrowed.”**

**No one spoke.**

**“You need open-heart surgery.”**

**“Heart surgery?” Angelo’s voice cracked slightly.**

**The doctor nodded. “It’s necessary.”**

**Ambie looked down, his jaw tightening.**

**Elanna stared at her hands.**

**Then she inhaled slowly.**

**“We’ll get a second opinion,” she said.**

**At the Philippine Heart Center, the answer was the same.**

**The number—one million pesos—hung between them.**

**But so did something else.**

**Hope.**

**The hospital room before the surgery felt smaller than usual.**

**Elanna lay in bed, her hands resting lightly on the blanket. When Ambie and Angelo entered, she smiled, though it didn't quite reach her eyes.**

**“Why do you both look like that?” she teased softly.**

**Angelo crossed the room quickly and leaned down, hugging her carefully.**

**“Come back to us, Mommy.”**

**She closed her eyes briefly.**

**“I will.”**

**Ambie pulled his chair close and took her hand.**

**“We've been through worse,” he said.**

**Elanna let out a quiet breath. “Have we?”**

**He smiled faintly. “We had nothing before.”**

**She looked at him.**

**“And we were still happy.”**

**Their fingers tightened around each other.**

**The morning of the surgery came too fast.**

**The hallway lights were harsh. The air smelled too clean.**

**As the nurses wheeled her away, Elanna gripped the sides of the bed for a second—then relaxed.**

**“We love you,” Angelo said.**

**Ambie bent down and kissed her forehead.**

**“I'll see you soon,” she whispered.**

**The doors closed.**

**Time stretched.**

**The clock ticked.**

**2:11 PM.**

**2:26 PM.**

**2:43 PM.**

**Angelo stood facing the doors, arms crossed tightly.**

**“Why is it taking so long?”**

**Ambie placed a hand on his shoulder. “These things take time.”**

**But his fingers tapped restlessly against his arm.**

**Hours passed.**

**Then finally—**

**The doors opened.**

**The surgeon approached, removing his mask.**

**Ambie stood first. Angelo followed.**

**The doctor smiled.**

**“The surgery was successful.”**

**For a second, everything was still.**

**Then Angelo exhaled sharply, almost laughing, and pulled his father into an embrace.**

**Ambie closed his eyes, nodding again and again.**

**“Thank you,” he whispered.**

**Recovery was slow.**

**Elanna slept often. Spoke little. But each day, she sat a little longer. Walked a little farther.**

**One afternoon, Angelo handed her a piece of paper.**

**She unfolded it carefully.**

**A drawing.**

**Five figures holding hands beneath a large red heart.**

**“That’s us,” Angelo said.**

**Elanna traced the lines gently, her fingers lingering.**

**Her lips trembled into a smile.**

**“It’s perfect.”**

**When she finally returned home, the door opened to color.**

**Paper hearts hung on the walls.**

**“WELCOME HOME, MOMMY!” the sign read.**

**Elanna stopped at the doorway.**

**Her hand lifted slightly, pressing against the frame.**

**She looked around slowly—the sofa, the table, the kitchen beyond.**

**Then she stepped inside.**

**“I missed this,” she whispered.**

**They gathered around her.**

**This time, she held on longer.**

**Life didn’t go back to the way it was.**

**It changed.**

**“Elanna, sit,” Ambie said one evening, already at the sink.**

**“I’ll finish cooking,” Angelo added, taking the knife gently from her hand.**

**She hesitated.**

**Then she let go.**

**Kate placed a glass of water in front of her. Ferwin climbed beside her, resting his head on her arm.**

**Elanna looked at them—one by one.**

**Once, she had carried everything.**

**Now, she didn't have to.**

**She reached out.**

**And four hands reached back.**

**A family's strength does not come from one person alone.**

**It comes from everyone supporting each other, especially during the hardest times.**

**Although Elanna had undergone heart surgery, the experience showed them something beautiful.**

**Their family had more than one strong heart.**

**They have five. ❤️**

**The End**

## THE EMPTY CHAIR

By: *Ana Lee M. Panado*

---

The Casa café at Subic, Zambales, was small enough that people passed by without slowing down, the wooden sign above the door creaking softly each time the wind pushed against it. The windows were always slightly fogged, blurring the view inside—just enough to hide the quiet world within.

But near the window, there was a small round table.

Three chairs.

At exactly six o'clock, Angelo sat in the same seat facing the street.

His coffee cooled untouched beside him. A notebook lay open, filled with lines written in careful strokes.

*You laugh like the world has never hurt you—  
and I pretend I don't want to be part of that world.*

He paused, pen hovering.

The bell above the door rang.

Angelo didn't look up right away.

He already knew.

“Early again,” Almira said, slipping into the chair beside him. Her hair was tied back, a few strands falling loose around her face. She set a small paper bag on the table.

“You're late,” Angelo replied, closing his notebook.

“By two minutes.”

“Still late.”

She smirked and pulled out two pastries, placing them between them.

**“One for you, one for Kate.”**

**“And you?”**

**“I’m generous today.”**

**“You’re always generous.”**

**“That’s the problem.”**

**They shared a brief smile.**

**No explanation needed.**

**At 6:15, the bell rang again.**

**“Did you start without me?” Kate’s voice filled the room before she even reached the table.**

**She dropped into the third chair, brushing rain from her sleeve though the sky outside was still clear.**

**“You’re fifteen minutes late,” Almira said.**

**Kate flipped her hair lightly. “Fashionably.”**

**Angelo pushed the pastry toward her. “Your share.”**

**Kate grinned. “See? This is why I keep coming back.”**

**They stayed for hours.**

**Almira talked with her hands, describing the chaos at work—papers, deadlines, people who never listened.**

**Kate leaned back in her chair, eyes bright as she spoke about places she wanted to see.**

**“Oceans,” she said, tracing invisible lines on the table. “Real ones. Not just pictures.”**

**“And mountains,” she added. “The kind that make you feel small.”**

**Angelo watched her.**

**Not directly—never directly.**

**But in the pauses.**

**In the seconds between her laughter and her next sentence.**

**Sometimes, his pen moved quietly across the page.**

***If I say your name,***

***will everything change?***

**He never wrote it.**

**Almira noticed.**

**She noticed the way Angelo's gaze lingered just a second too long.**

**The way his voice softened without him realizing.**

**The way he listened to Kate—as if every word mattered more than it should.**

**Almira stirred her coffee slowly.**

**She didn't interrupt.**

**Didn't ask.**

**Didn't need to.**

**Some things didn't require confirmation.**

**Days slipped into weeks.**

**Summer heat softened into rain.**

**Water traced slow paths down the café windows, blurring the street outside into streaks of gray and gold.**

**Still—**

**Six o'clock.**

**Three chairs.**

**Until one afternoon—**

**Kate didn't come as usual.**

**6:15 passed.**

**6:30.**

**The pastry in front of her remained untouched.**

**At 7:02, the bell rang.**

**Kate stepped inside, her usual brightness dimmed, like a light turned lower but not off.**

**"Sorry," she said, sitting down carefully.**

**"You're more than late," Almira said, trying to sound light.**

**Kate didn't smile right away.**

**"I got an offer."**

**Angelo's fingers stilled on his cup. "What kind of offer?"**

**"A job," she said. "Abroad."**

**The word lingered.**

**Abroad.**

**Angelo nodded once. "That's... good."**

**Kate looked at him. "It is."**

**A pause.**

**"It's far."**

**The rain outside picked up, tapping softly against the glass.**

**"When?" Angelo asked.**

**Kate inhaled. "Two weeks."**

**No one reached for the pastries.**

**After that, time felt different.**

**Conversations filled the space, but something underneath them shifted.**

**Kate checked the clock more often.**

**Almira spoke a little less.**

**Angelo wrote more—but never finished anything.**

***Stay*, one page read.**

**Nothing followed it.**

**On Kate's last day, the rain didn't stop.**

**It poured hard enough to blur the entire street into silver.**

**Angelo arrived early.**

**Almira was already there.**

**Neither mentioned it.**

**The third chair stayed empty.**

**Five minutes.**

**Ten.**

**Thirty.**

**The bell rang.**

**Kate stood at the entrance, rain clinging to her sleeves, her hair damp.**

**For a moment, she didn't move.**

**Then she walked toward them.**

**"I almost didn't come," she said, sitting down.**

**Angelo looked at her. "Why?"**

**She exhaled slowly. "Because it would be easier to leave... without saying goodbye."**

**The rain pressed harder against the windows.**

No one spoke.

Kate looked at them—first Angelo, then Almira.

“I’m going to miss this,” she said.

Her voice softened.

“I’m going to miss you.”

Almira lowered her gaze.

Angelo swallowed.

There were words he had practiced—lines he had rewritten a hundred times.

They stayed in his throat.

Instead—

“I want to ask you to stay,” he said quietly. “But I don’t think that would be fair.”

Kate let out a small, uneven laugh. “Fair?”

She shook her head slightly.

“You both knew, didn’t you?”

Silence.

Angelo nodded.

Almira followed, slower.

Kate’s eyes flickered.

“I loved you,” she said.

The words landed gently.

But they stayed.

Angelo’s grip tightened on his cup.

“I loved you too.”

**Not loud.**

**Not dramatic.**

**Just true.**

**Almira turned slightly, her hand rising to her face too late.**

**The rain filled the silence no one could.**

**Three chairs.**

**Three truths.**

**Spoken too late—**

**But finally spoken.**

**A year passed.**

**The café didn't change.**

**Same table.**

**Same window.**

**Same quiet hum of conversations.**

**Angelo sat across from Almira.**

**Two cups of coffee.**

**One empty chair.**

**He glanced at it briefly, then back at her.**

**“Almira...”**

**She looked up.**

**Something in his voice made her still.**

**“For a long time,” he said, “I thought I understood what I felt.”**

**He paused.**

**“I didn’t.”**

**Almira said nothing.**

**“I thought silence would keep things the same.”**

**A faint smile crossed his face. “It didn’t.”**

**She traced the edge of her cup.**

**“I noticed,” she said softly.**

**Angelo looked at her. “You did?”**

**“The way you looked at her,” she said. “It wasn’t hard to see.”**

**He leaned back slightly, exhaling.**

**“I don’t want to do that again.”**

**She met his eyes now. “Do what?”**

**“Wait too long.”**

**The space between them felt smaller.**

**“After she left...” he began, then stopped.**

**He chose his words carefully.**

**“I started seeing what was already here.”**

**Almira’s fingers stilled.**

**“These feelings,” he said, quieter now, “they didn’t appear suddenly.”**

**A pause.**

**“They grew.”**

**Her breath caught.**

**“Into something I don’t want to ignore anymore.”**

**Silence.**

Then—

“You mean...” she said slowly, “you love me?”

Angelo leaned forward slightly.

“I do.”

No hesitation.

“And I don’t want to lose the chance to say it.”

The café noise faded into the background.

“I love you,” he said. “And I want a future with you... if you want that too.”

Almira looked down.

Then back at him.

A small smile formed—careful, but certain.

This time—

She didn’t look away.

Another year passed, Angelo and Almira got married. Kate went home and attended their wedding.

One rainy afternoon, they went to the Casa Café.

Rain tapped gently against the windows again.

Three chairs.

This time—all filled.

Kate sat between them, laughing at something Almira had just said.

Angelo watched the two of them, a quiet smile settling on his face.

No tension.

No unfinished words.

**Just presence.**

**Outside, the world moved on.**

**Inside, nothing needed to.**

**And for the first time in years—**

**None of the chairs were empty. ❤️**

**The End**

## **OUR WORLD COLLIDES INTO THE SEA**

*By: Ana Lee M. Panado*

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### *The Beginning*

The bell rang sharply across the parade ground.

“Fall in!”

Rows of cadets snapped into formation, white uniforms stiff under the heat of the sun. Boots struck the pavement in unison.

Angelo Leongson stood in line, shoulders squared, eyes forward. Beside him, in a different column, Juancho Alver wiped sweat from his brow with the back of his hand before quickly returning to position.

They didn’t speak.

Not yet.

But later—after drills, after inspections, after the shouting of commands faded into the evening—they found themselves sitting on the same concrete steps outside the barracks.

“You’re deck, right?” Juancho asked, offering a bottle of water.

Angelo nodded. “Engine?”

Juancho grinned. “Yeah.”

They sat there for a moment, catching their breath.

Then Angelo said, “Long four years ahead.”

Juancho chuckled. “Or longer... if we mess up.”

That was how it started.

Years passed in routines—marching, studying, sleepless nights, and the constant pressure to prove they belonged.

**Then came the day they both waited for.**

**Their first ship.**

**The gangway creaked slightly as Angelo stepped aboard, duffel bag slung over his shoulder.**

**The smell hit him first—salt air mixed with metal and fuel.**

**He paused for a second, looking out at the endless stretch of ocean beyond the port.**

**“Cadet! Move!”**

**He snapped back to attention and hurried forward.**

**Somewhere below deck, Juancho was doing the same—stepping into a different world entirely.**

*Angelo*

**The deck tilted beneath Angelo’s feet.**

**Not much—just enough to throw him off balance.**

**He grabbed the nearest railing, steadying himself as the ship rolled gently.**

**“First time?” a voice called out.**

**Angelo turned.**

**The Bosun stood a few meters away, arms crossed, watching him with a knowing look.**

**“Yes, sir.”**

**The Bosun walked over and handed him a coil of rope.**

**“Let’s see what you know. Tie a bowline.”**

**Angelo nodded quickly.**

**His fingers moved—but the rope didn’t cooperate. The knot twisted wrong, slipping loose.**

**The Bosun shook his head.**

**“Out here, you don’t have time to think too long,” he said. “Your hands need to know before your mind does.”**

**Angelo swallowed. “Yes, sir.”**

**That night, long after his shift ended, Angelo sat alone on deck.**

**The wind was colder now. The sea stretched endlessly into darkness.**

**He wrapped the rope around his hands again.**

**Loop. Pull. Tighten.**

**It slipped.**

**He tried again.**

**And again.**

**Until finally—**

**The knot held.**

**He stared at it for a moment, then smiled slightly.**

**Midnight watch came harder.**

**On the bridge, the lights were dim. The radar screen glowed softly, sweeping in steady circles.**

**“Keep scanning,” the officer said without looking up.**

**Angelo lifted the binoculars.**

**Nothing.**

**Just darkness.**

**Minutes stretched.**

**The hum of the ship filled the silence.**

**“Don’t rush your eyes,” the officer added. “The sea shows things... but not to impatient people.”**

**Angelo lowered the binoculars slightly.**

**Waited.**

**Watched.**

**And slowly, shapes began to appear where there had been nothing.**

**Three weeks later—**

**The sky changed.**

**It started as a line on the horizon.**

**Dark.**

**Then the wind picked up.**

**“Secure everything!” the Bosun shouted.**

**Angelo tightened his grip on the rope, pulling it hard against the metal railing.**

**The ship lurched.**

**A wave slammed against the side, sending water crashing across the deck.**

**It hit him full force.**

**Cold. Heavy. Blinding.**

**He staggered but didn’t fall.**

**“Hold it!” the Bosun yelled.**

**Angelo pulled harder, fingers burning as the rope strained.**

**Thunder cracked above them.**

**Another wave rose—**

**and crashed.**

**“Welcome to the real ocean, Cadet!”**

**Angelo let out a breath he didn’t realize he’d been holding.**

**His heart pounded.**

**But his hands didn't stop moving.**

*Juancho*

**Heat.**

**That was the first thing Juancho noticed.**

**Not warmth—heat that clung to his skin, soaked through his uniform, and made every breath feel heavier.**

**The engine room roared around him.**

**Pipes. Valves. Steel. Motion everywhere.**

**“Stay close,” the Third Engineer said.**

**Juancho nodded, wiping sweat from his forehead.**

**In the control room, things were calmer.**

**Lights glowed softly over panels filled with gauges.**

**Juancho leaned over the logbook.**

**Temperature — normal.**

**Oil pressure — normal.**

**Fuel flow — normal.**

**The Third Engineer stretched slightly in his chair. “Quiet night.”**

**Juancho gave a small nod.**

**He had learned something already.**

**Quiet didn't always mean safe.**

**Then—**

**BEEEEEP! BEEEEEP! BEEEEEP!**

**Juancho jerked upright.**

**Red lights flashed across the panel.**

**“What—”**

**Before he could finish—**

**Everything went black.**

**The sound disappeared.**

**The engine—gone.**

**The silence pressed in, heavy and unnatural.**

**Juancho’s chest tightened.**

**“Sir...”**

**A click.**

**A flashlight beam cut through the darkness.**

**“Blackout,” the Third Engineer said, already moving. “Stay with me.”**

**Emergency lights flickered on, casting shadows along the walls.**

**The intercom crackled.**

**“Engine room, report!”**

**“Total blackout,” the Chief Engineer replied. “Responding.”**

**Boots thundered down the stairs as engineers rushed in.**

**“Check the generators!”**

**Juancho moved quickly beside the Third Engineer.**

**“Fuel pressure dropped!” someone shouted.**

**“Switch to standby!”**

**“Cadet!” the Third Engineer barked.**

**Juancho straightened. “Yes, sir!”**

**“Open the fuel valve. Slowly.”**

**His hand shook slightly as he reached for it.**

**He turned.**

**“Steady,” the engineer said.**

**Juancho adjusted.**

**Held it.**

**“Good.”**

**“Start it!”**

**A pause—**

**Then—**

**WHRRRRR...**

**Juancho held his breath.**

**BOOM!**

**The generator roared alive.**

**Lights snapped back on.**

**Panels lit up.**

**“Power restored!”**

**Juancho exhaled sharply.**

**But the Chief Engineer’s voice cut through—**

**“Restart main engine.”**

**The room held its breath again.**

**Then—**

**THUD.**

**THUD.**

**THUD.**

**The sound built.**

**Stronger.**

**Faster.**

**Until the ship vibrated beneath their feet once more.**

**Alive again.**

**Later, the Third Engineer leaned against the panel, a faint smile on his face.**

**“First blackout?”**

**Juancho nodded.**

**“Yes, sir.”**

**The engineer crossed his arms.**

**“Now you know,” he said. “When everything stops... we’re the ones who bring it back.”**

**Juancho looked around the engine room.**

**The pipes.**

**The machinery.**

**The massive engine beating like a heart.**

**He didn’t say anything.**

**But something settled inside him.**

***Breakfast***

**The next morning, sunlight filtered through the mess hall windows.**

**Trays clattered. Crew members talked quietly.**

**Angelo slid into the seat across from Juancho.**

**“You look like you didn’t sleep,” he said.**

**Juancho smirked. “Blackout.”**

**Angelo raised his brows. “Seriously?”**

**Juancho nodded, taking a sip of coffee.**

**“Everything just... stopped.”**

**Angelo leaned back slightly. “Storm last night.”**

**Juancho let out a short laugh. “Of course it was.”**

**They sat there for a moment.**

**Then Angelo said, “Still thinking about home?”**

**Juancho shook his head slowly.**

**“Not just home.”**

**He looked out the window at the open sea.**

**“I’m thinking about what’s next.”**

**Angelo followed his gaze.**

**A small smile formed.**

**“Yeah,” he said quietly. “Me too.”**

**Outside, the ocean stretched endlessly in every direction.**

**For the first time—**

**It didn’t feel unfamiliar.**

**It felt like something waiting.**

**“Somewhere out there are new countries, new oceans, and new challenges.”**

**Angelo smiled.**

**“Yes. There are many countries to visit and many oceans to sail. This is just the beginning of our dreams.”**

**For the first time in his life, the vast sea no longer felt intimidating.**

**It felt like home.**

**And this was only the beginning of their journey. ❤️**

**The End.**

## **THE BATTERED HUSBAND**

*By: Ana Lee M. Panado*

---

**He learned to listen for the silence.**

**Not the comfortable kind—the soft hush of early mornings or the stillness before rain—but the thin, brittle silence that settled over the house when Carla was angry.**

**In the early years of their marriage, Ernesto used to talk endlessly. While washing dishes, he would tell her stories from work. While lying awake at night, he would sketch dreams into the dark: a small house with blue curtains, a garden out back, maybe a sari-sari store when they were older.**

**Carla would laugh and press her cheek against his shoulder.**

**“You think too much,” she would tease, smiling.**

**Now, most evenings passed with only the clink of utensils and the hum of the electric fan.**

**It began quietly, almost gently. A plate placed too hard on the table. A sigh sharpened into irritation. Comments slipped into conversations like tiny cuts.**

**“You’re useless sometimes, you know that?”**

**The first time she said it, Ernesto forced a laugh and rubbed the back of his neck.**

**“Sorry,” he murmured, though he wasn’t sure what he was apologizing for.**

**Apologies became second nature after that.**

**When the pandemic layoffs took his job, the apartment changed. Unpaid bills piled beside the television. Carla came home exhausted, kicking off her shoes with tight, angry movements. She no longer looked at him when she spoke.**

**One evening, she stared at the overdue electric bill lying on the table.**

**“So what exactly did you do all day?” she asked.**

Ernesto opened his mouth, then closed it again. The rice on his plate had already gone cold.

The first time she hit him, the sound stunned him more than the pain.

A sharp crack across his cheek.

For a second, neither of them moved.

Carla's breathing turned uneven. Tears gathered in her eyes almost immediately.

"I didn't mean to," she whispered, reaching for him. "I'm just stressed."

Ernesto touched the burning skin on his face and nodded slowly, as if comforting *her*.

After that, he learned patterns the way sailors learn storms.

The way Carla dropped her bag onto the couch told him what kind of night it would be. If her jaw tightened during dinner, he kept his answers short. If cabinets started closing too loudly, he stayed out of the kitchen entirely.

Still, objects flew sometimes.

A spoon clattered against the wall beside his head.

A remote control struck his shoulder hard enough to leave a bruise shaped like its buttons.

Once, a drinking glass shattered near his feet, tiny shards skittering across the floor like ice.

And afterward always came the apologies.

"You make me so angry sometimes," Carla would say quietly, eyes red from crying.

As though anger were something he placed into her hands.

Ernesto stopped talking to friends. When his phone buzzed with invitations, he silenced it.

At family gatherings, Carla smiled easily, laughing with his relatives while her hand rested lightly on his arm.

Everyone loved her.

At night, Ernesto lay awake staring at the ceiling fan turning above him.

*My wife hits me.*

Even inside his own thoughts, the words sounded unreal.

So he stayed.

He woke early to cook breakfast before Carla left for work. He scrubbed stains from the bathroom tiles. Folded laundry carefully. Tried to take up less space inside the apartment.

He told himself love required patience.

But love shouldn't make your stomach tighten at the sound of keys turning in the door.

One night, the silence returned.

Carla stepped inside without speaking. No sigh. No slammed bag. No angry footsteps.

That frightened him more.

She stood in the doorway for a long moment before asking, "What did you do today?"

Ernesto looked down at his hands.

Too long.

The explosion came instantly.

"You can't even answer a simple question?" she snapped.

The insults blurred together. Then came the shove.

His back struck the edge of the table. Pain burst through his ribs, stealing the air from his lungs. He crumpled to the floor, gripping the side of the chair as Carla's voice echoed above him.

But beneath the pain, another feeling surfaced.

Not anger.

Not courage.

Something quieter.

He realized he had spent years waiting—for her apologies to become real, for the good days to return, for some invisible line to finally be crossed.

But no line had ever appeared.

Only he could draw it.

The next morning, sunlight spilled weakly through the curtains.

Ernesto moved quietly through the house, placing clothes into a small bag. Documents. A few folded shirts. His old wallet.

Then he found the photograph.

Both of them stood beside the sea, younger and laughing, wind tangling Carla's hair across her face while Ernesto grinned at the camera.

For a moment, his chest tightened.

At the doorway, doubt crept in again.

*Maybe she'll change.*

*Maybe this is your fault.*

*Maybe leaving makes you selfish.*

His fingers trembled against the doorknob.

Still, he opened the door.

Cool morning air rushed toward him.

For the first time in years, silence did not feel like fear.

Behind him came hurried footsteps.

“Ernesto, where are you going?”

He turned slowly. Carla stood barefoot in the hallway, her voice smaller than he had ever heard it.

“Leaving,” he said. “I thought maybe you’d be happier without me.”

Her face crumpled.

“Don’t leave me.”

He said nothing.

Carla wrapped her arms around herself, eyes fixed on the floor.

“I know I haven’t been good to you,” she whispered. “I know I hurt you.”

Ernesto watched her carefully, waiting.

Then she placed a trembling hand against her stomach.

“I’m pregnant.”

The words landed heavily between them.

Ernesto blinked once, unable to speak.

Tears slid down Carla’s cheeks.

“Please,” she said softly. “Give me another chance. Give our baby a chance to have a complete family.”

Her voice broke on the last word.

“I’ll change. I promise.”

The morning breeze stirred through the open doorway behind him.

Ernesto looked at her for a long time—the woman he had loved, the woman he feared, the woman now standing before him with shaking hands and swollen eyes.

Slowly, uncertainly, he nodded.

Relief flooded Carla’s face so quickly it almost hurt to see.

**“I’ll make breakfast,” she said, wiping at her tears with the back of her hand. “Something nice.”**

**For a second, Ernesto remained still.**

**Then he stepped back inside and let her take his hand.**

**The door closed softly behind them. ❤️**

**The End.**

## THE SILENT BATTLE

By: *Ana Lee M. Panado*

---

Argentina learned early on that love could be loud. Not the kind of loud that came from laughter drifting out of open windows on a Sunday afternoon, but the kind that made neighbors fall silent mid-conversation before quickly pretending they had heard nothing at all. The kind that left the walls trembling long after the noise was gone.

But it hadn't started that way.

When she first met Carlo, he was gentle in ways that felt effortless. He remembered exactly how much sugar she liked in her coffee. When they crossed the street, he always walked closest to the traffic without thinking about it. If she mentioned a book she wanted to read or a pastry she liked from a tiny bakery downtown, he remembered weeks later.

With him, she felt noticed.

Everyone told her she was lucky.

Whenever she talked about him, her friends smiled knowingly. Her mother squeezed her hand across the dinner table and said, "That man adores you."

Argentina believed it.

Their first year together felt soft around the edges. Warm dinners eaten on the couch. Sleepy Sunday mornings tangled in blankets while rain tapped softly against the windows. Inside jokes that dissolved them into laughter before either could finish the punchline.

When Carlo proposed, her answer came before he even finished asking.

"Yes."

She didn't notice the change immediately.

It arrived quietly.

One evening, while she stood in front of the mirror fastening an earring, Carlo leaned against the doorway and checked his watch.

“Are you almost done?”

“Two minutes,” she said with a smile.

He exhaled sharply through his nose.

“You always take forever.”

The smile on her face faltered for only a second.

“I’m sorry.”

“You always say that too.”

He laughed afterward, light enough for her to laugh too, though something inside her tightened anyway.

Later came comments about her dresses being “too revealing,” about her friends being “dramatic,” about the way she spoke to other men.

Tiny things.

Small enough to swallow individually.

But over time they gathered inside her like stones.

“You’re seeing them again?” he asked one afternoon when she mentioned dinner with friends.

“They already made reservations.”

Carlo shrugged without looking up from his phone.

“I just think it’s weird how they only call you when they need something.”

Argentina hesitated.

“That’s not true.”

He finally looked at her then, his voice softer.

“I’m the one who’s always here for you.”

The guilt arrived before she even understood why.

An hour later, she texted her friends that she couldn’t make it.

The first time he yelled at her, she dropped a plate.

It shattered across the kitchen floor while Carlo stood rigid beside the counter, one hand pressed against his forehead.

“How hard is it to keep track of one bill?” he snapped.

The sound of his voice filled the room so suddenly that her chest seized.

“I—I thought I paid it.”

“You thought?” he barked.

Argentina stared at him silently while her pulse hammered in her ears.

A few minutes later, he sat beside her while she swept up the broken pieces.

“I’m stressed,” he murmured. “You know that, right?”

She nodded without lifting her eyes.

She always nodded.

The first time he hit her, the moment felt unreal, as though the world had briefly slipped sideways.

They were arguing about money again. Carlo paced the living room while Argentina stood near the dining table gripping the back of a chair.

“We can figure this out,” she said carefully.

“You keep saying that!”

“Because we can—”

**“Stop talking.”**

**His voice cracked through the room.**

**But the words kept tumbling from her mouth anyway, desperate and nervous and trying too hard to fix everything.**

**The slap came fast.**

**A sharp burst of heat exploded across her cheek.**

**For a moment, neither of them moved.**

**Argentina slowly lifted her fingers to her face.**

**Carlo stared at her, horrified.**

**“Oh my God,” he whispered.**

**His anger collapsed instantly. He reached for her, hands shaking.**

**“I didn’t mean to do that.”**

**Argentina looked at him standing there pale and frightened, and somehow she ended up comforting him instead.**

**“It’s okay,” she whispered.**

**Even while her cheek burned.**

**Afterward came flowers.**

**Apologies.**

**Promises breathed into her hair late at night.**

**“I swear it’ll never happen again.”**

**So she believed him.**

**Or maybe she simply wanted to.**

**But the second time came easier.**

**And the third came easier still.**

**Soon Argentina learned how to measure danger in tiny details: the stiffness in Carlo's shoulders when he walked through the door, the silence that stretched too long, the way cabinet doors slammed harder than necessary.**

**She adjusted herself around his moods like someone learning to survive bad weather.**

**She spoke softer.**

**Laughed quicker.**

**Apologized before arguments could fully form.**

**Still, bruises bloomed across her skin in dark shades of purple and yellow.**

**She wore long sleeves even in summer.**

**At family gatherings, she kept her makeup thick beneath her eyes.**

**“What happened to your arm?” someone asked once.**

**Argentina glanced down at the fading bruise near her wrist.**

**“Oh,” she said quickly. “I slipped in the bathroom.”**

**No one questioned her further.**

**Maybe they believed her.**

**Maybe they didn't.**

**Either way, the conversation moved on.**

**Her world became smaller after that.**

**Friends stopped calling when she kept canceling plans. Family members sounded more distant every time she said, “Sorry, we're busy.”**

**The house slowly transformed into a place that felt both protective and suffocating.**

**Carlo didn't like her leaving alone anymore.**

**“There are too many dangerous people out there,” he told her while locking the front door one evening.**

**The click of the lock echoed in her chest.**

**One night, Argentina paused in front of the bathroom mirror after brushing her teeth.**

**For several long seconds, she simply stared.**

**There were shadows beneath her eyes now. Her shoulders curved inward as though she were trying to make herself smaller.**

**She tried to remember when she had started looking afraid all the time.**

**She couldn't.**

**The breaking point arrived quietly.**

**Not with some dramatic revelation.**

**Just a rainy afternoon soaked in exhaustion.**

**Rain streaked the windows while gray light filled the house. Carlo had barely spoken all day.**

**Every movement he made felt sharp around the edges.**

**Argentina folded laundry carefully on the couch, listening to the storm and the silence between them.**

**Then his voice cut through the room.**

**“Argentina.”**

**Her stomach tightened instantly.**

**She walked into the living room.**

**Carlo held up his phone.**

**“Who is this?”**

**On the screen was a message from an old friend.**

**Hope you're doing okay. Miss you.**

**"That's all it is," she said quickly. "We haven't talked in months."**

**Carlo's jaw tightened.**

**"So now you're hiding things from me?"**

**"I'm not hiding anything."**

**"Don't lie to me!"**

**"I'm not lying."**

**The shove came suddenly.**

**Argentina stumbled backward, hitting the edge of the table hard enough to knock the breath from her lungs.**

**Before she could steady herself, another shove sent her crashing to the floor.**

**After that, everything blurred.**

**His voice.**

**Her heartbeat.**

**The dull thud of impact against skin.**

**At some point, she stopped trying to shield herself.**

**Not because she accepted it.**

**Because she was tired.**

**When the silence finally returned, rain tapped softly against the windows again, as though nothing had happened.**

**Carlo stood over her breathing hard.**

**Then came the familiar collapse.**

**The guilt.**

**The trembling hands.**

**“I’m sorry,” he whispered.**

**Argentina stared at the ceiling.**

**And for the first time, his apology sounded rehearsed.**

**Empty.**

**Something inside her loosened then—not her fear, not her pain, but the fragile hope she had been clutching for years.**

**This was not going to change.**

**Not tomorrow.**

**Not next month.**

**Not ever.**

**The realization settled quietly into her bones.**

**And strangely, once it arrived, she felt calm.**

**That night, Carlo hovered around her gently, bringing ice packs and whispering apologies against her hair.**

**Argentina barely responded.**

**Somewhere deep inside herself, she had already left.**

**The next morning sunlight spilled through the curtains in soft golden lines.**

**The storm had passed.**

**Argentina rose carefully from bed without waking him.**

**Pain flared through her ribs as she bent to unzip a small bag hidden beneath the dresser.**

**She packed quietly.**

**A few clothes.**

**Important documents.**

**The ultrasound photo tucked carefully between folded shirts.**

**Her hand lingered there for a moment.**

**Then she glanced toward the bedroom.**

**Carlo slept peacefully, one arm thrown across the mattress as though nothing had happened the night before.**

**Argentina looked away.**

**On the nightstand sat a framed photograph from their first year together. They were smiling at the camera, cheeks pressed together beneath bright summer sunlight.**

**For a moment she studied the woman she used to be.**

**Then she placed the photo face down and walked away.**

**At the front door, her hand trembled against the knob.**

**Not because she wanted to stay.**

**Because leaving meant stepping into a future she could not yet see.**

**Fear rose inside her sharp and cold.**

**But beneath it was something else.**

**A tiny, flickering thing she had not felt in years.**

**Hope.**

**She opened the door.**

**Fresh morning air rushed against her skin.**

**And for the first time in a very long while, breathing did not hurt.**

**Outside, a taxi slowed near the curb.**

**Argentina raised her hand.**

**As the car pulled away, she rested both palms gently over her stomach.**

**“We’re okay now,” she whispered.**

**Inside the house, Carlo woke to silence.**

**At first he only frowned sleepily toward the empty side of the bed.**

**Then he saw the open drawer.**

**The missing bag.**

**The photograph turned facedown.**

**“Argentina?”**

**His voice echoed through the house.**

**Minutes later, he tore out of the driveway, tires screeching against pavement.**

**Rainwater still shimmered across the roads from yesterday’s storm.**

**He drove too fast.**

**Too recklessly.**

**At the intersection, he never saw the truck until it was already there.**

**The impact sounded like thunder.**

**Argentina was sitting in a small café when the police called.**

**She listened quietly.**

**Thanked them mechanically.**

**Then stared out the window for a long time after the call ended.**

**At the funeral, she stood beside the coffin in silence.**

**People cried around her.**

**Murmured prayers.**

**Pressed tissues against wet eyes.**

**Argentina simply looked at Carlo's still face.**

**She waited for grief to come.**

**For devastation.**

**For guilt.**

**Instead, her lungs filled slowly, deeply, completely.**

**The tightness that had lived inside her for years was gone.**

**Beneath her coat, her hand rested over the small life growing inside her.**

**And for the first time in a long time, she felt only peace.**

**Peace for herself.**

**Peace for her child.**

**Peace in knowing the cycle had finally ended. ❤️**

**The End**

## **THE LOVE THAT WAS MEANT TO BE**

**By: *Ana Lee M. Panado***

---

The classroom hummed with the soft tapping of rain against the windows. Damp air clung to the walls, and several students fought sleep with their heads resting on folded arms. At the front of the room, Ms. Alver moved between the rows of desks, her voice calm and warm enough to cut through the gray afternoon.

“Why do you think the character left?” she asked.

A few students avoided eye contact. Pages turned. Someone shrugged.

At the back, Angelo stared at the novel in front of him, thumb pressed tightly against the page. “Maybe...” He cleared his throat. “Maybe staying would hurt more than leaving.”

The room quieted.

Ms. Alver stopped walking. Her gaze lingered on him a second longer than usual, as though she had heard more than an answer to a literature question. A faint smile touched her lips.

“That’s a brave interpretation.”

Heat crept up Angelo’s neck. He looked down quickly, pretending to underline a sentence in his book.

After that afternoon, he found reasons to remain after class. Sometimes he asked about novels stacked on her desk; other times he lingered by the doorway while the sunset stretched across the empty room.

“Do you actually reread books?” he asked one evening, watching her organize papers.

Ms. Alver laughed softly. “Only the ones that still have something new to say.”

“And do people do that too?” he asked.

Her hand paused over the papers before continuing again. “Sometimes.”

**Their conversations drifted far beyond the syllabus. He spoke about uncertainty, about wanting to leave town someday. She listened with her arms loosely folded, leaning against the teacher's table, careful never to stand too close.**

**One evening, golden light spilled through the classroom windows, turning the dust in the air almost dreamlike.**

**Angelo sat on the edge of a desk, turning a pen between his fingers. "Do you ever feel like timing ruins things?"**

**Ms. Alver looked outside before answering. Students crossed the campus below them, laughing on their way home.**

**"Timing protects things too," she said quietly.**

**Angelo let out a small breath through his nose. "That sounds like something people say when they're afraid."**

**Her eyes met his then. Calm. Steady. "Or when they understand consequences."**

**The pen stopped moving in his hand.**

**Neither of them spoke after that. The silence stretched between them, thick with words both of them refused to say aloud.**

**Weeks later, on the final day of classes, students filled the hallways with laughter and goodbyes. Angelo approached her desk after everyone had left.**

**"I got you something," he said, placing a book carefully in front of her.**

**Inside the cover, written in uneven ink:**

***Maybe in another life, where timing isn't so strict.***

**Ms. Alver traced the words with her thumb.**

**By the time she looked up, Angelo was already near the door.**

**“Angelo.”**

**He turned.**

**“You’re going to meet people who won’t need ‘another life’ to choose you,” she said, her voice gentler than usual. “Don’t settle for less than that.”**

**His jaw tightened as he smiled. “I learned that from you.”**

**For a moment, she looked as though she might say nothing more. Then, almost in a whisper:**

**“One day, when things are not as complicated as now... maybe.”**

**Angelo stared at her, stunned. Before he could answer, he gave a small nod and walked away.**

**The classroom felt strangely empty after he left.**

**Seven years later, the parking lot outside Walter Mart Subic shimmered beneath the afternoon heat.**

**Ms. Alver hurried toward her car, balancing her bag and car keys, when she collided with someone hard enough to nearly drop everything.**

**“Oh—sorry!”**

**The man reached down at the same time she did to pick up the scattered papers.**

**Their hands froze inches apart.**

**Angelo looked up first.**

**For a second, neither of them spoke.**

**He was broader now, older somehow, dressed in a neatly pressed polo with rolled sleeves. But his eyes were the same.**

**“Hi, ma’am,” he said, almost laughing in disbelief.**

**Ms. Alver pressed a hand lightly against her chest. “Angelo?”**

**A smile slowly spread across his face. “It’s really you.”**

She studied him openly now. “Where did you finish college?”

“Baguio,” he answered. “Engineering.” A shy pride slipped into his voice. “I’m licensed now.”

Ms. Alver shook her head softly, smiling to herself. “So that’s why you disappeared for seven years.”

“I guess so.”

The silence that followed felt lighter than before—no tension, no hesitation, only surprise and familiarity returning all at once.

Angelo rubbed the back of his neck. “Would you maybe want to have dinner? There’s this place called Throwback Café.”

She looked at him for a moment before nodding. “Sure.”

At the café, conversations came easily, as though they had only paused yesterday instead of years ago. They laughed over old classroom memories. Angelo teased her about the novels she used to recommend. Ms. Alver noticed how confidently he carried himself now, though every now and then he still looked at her with the same quiet sincerity she remembered.

Halfway through dinner, Angelo traced the rim of his glass before speaking.

“Would it be okay if I visited you sometime?”

Ms. Alver smiled into her coffee before answering. “Of course.”

A year later, sunlight streamed through the church windows as guests rose from their seats.

At the altar, Angelo took Ms. Alver’s hands carefully, almost as if he still couldn’t believe they were real in his.

“I never thought I could become your husband,” he admitted, his voice uneven with emotion.

**Ms. Alver laughed softly through tears gathering in her eyes. “I told you before—when things were no longer complicated... maybe.”**

**Angelo smiled, his forehead resting briefly against hers. “And now it’s no longer a maybe.”**

**He kissed her forehead gently as the crowd around them burst into applause. ❤️**

**The End.**

## **THE LOVE SHE COULD NOT KEEP**

**By: *Ana Lee M. Panado***

---

**In Dubai, Rose did not notice when it began.**

**There was no thunder, no grand moment where the world tilted and announced that something had changed. It started quietly, the way dusk slips over the city skyline—soft, gradual, almost polite.**

**His name was Edward.**

**They met on a day that felt too ordinary to matter. The café was crowded, chairs scraping against marble floors, steam curling from untouched cups of coffee. Rose sat alone at the last small table near the window, scrolling absently through her phone when a shadow stopped beside her.**

**“Do you mind?” he asked, gesturing toward the empty chair.**

**She looked up. His smile was easy, unforced, the kind that settled nerves instead of demanding attention.**

**“Not at all,” she replied.**

**That should have been the end of it.**

**A shared table. A polite exchange. Two strangers moving on with their separate lives.**

**But when the waiter mixed up their orders and Edward laughed instead of complaining, Rose found herself laughing too. One comment became another. Minutes stretched unnoticed. Outside, the amber glow of evening crept across the glass while untouched coffee turned cold between them.**

**Edward’s laughter came freely, warm enough to make nearby strangers glance over and smile without meaning to. Rose noticed how easily he listened—not with distracted nods, but**

with steady eyes that held onto every word. She heard herself telling stories she usually kept buried beneath polite conversation: childhood memories, embarrassing mistakes, dreams she rarely admitted aloud.

Normally, revealing too much left her uneasy.

With him, it felt natural.

When they finally stepped outside, the night air was cooler than she expected. Rose walked toward the metro station with a strange lightness in her chest, replaying fragments of the conversation before she even realized she was smiling.

She told herself it was nothing.

Just coincidence.

Just conversation.

But then came the second meeting.

She spotted him at a bookstore café days later, his sleeves rolled up as he flipped through a novel near the counter. The surprise on his face looked genuine.

“Well,” he said with a grin, “either Dubai is smaller than I thought, or the universe is getting lazy.”

Rose laughed softly, lowering her gaze so he wouldn’t notice how pleased she was to see him.

By the third meeting, she caught herself choosing the same café at the same hour he usually arrived.

That was when the details began to settle into her.

The way he blinked slowly while thinking through an answer.

The way he tapped his thumb against ceramic mugs when he was nervous.

The way he remembered things she had forgotten ever mentioning.

**“You hate coriander,” he said once as they ordered dinner.**

**Rose stared at him. “I told you that?”**

**“You made a ten-minute speech about it.”**

**She laughed despite herself. “I did not.”**

**“You absolutely did.”**

**And somehow, the fact that he remembered made warmth spread quietly through her chest.**

**Soon, she began searching for him automatically—through café windows, across crowded streets, inside rooms she entered without expectation. Sometimes disappointment flickered through her before she could stop it.**

**That unsettled her more than anything else.**

**Before Edward, her life had been careful. Structured. Predictable. Every decision measured, every responsibility neatly arranged like folded clothes inside a drawer.**

**But now there were moments when she sat awake at night staring at the glow of Dubai’s skyline outside her apartment window, hearing his voice replay in her mind long after conversations had ended.**

**“You’re quiet today,” Edward said one evening.**

**They sat outside their favorite café while traffic hummed softly below the terrace. He stirred his coffee absently but never took a sip.**

**“Just tired,” she replied.**

**Edward studied her for a moment. “You always tuck your hands into your sleeves when something’s bothering you.”**

**Rose looked down.**

**Her fingers had disappeared inside the cuffs of her cardigan.**

**“I do?”**

**“You’re doing it right now.”**

**A smile tugged at her lips, though it faded quickly.**

**“What is it?” he asked gently.**

**Rose opened her mouth, then stopped.**

**How could she explain the knot tightening inside her chest every time she looked at him too long?**

**How being near him felt dangerously comforting, like stepping deeper into water while pretending she could still touch the shore?**

**“It’s nothing,” she whispered.**

**Edward nodded once and let the silence remain.**

**That was another thing about him.**

**He knew when silence needed company instead of interruption.**

**Days slipped into weeks.**

**Their routines tangled together naturally. Morning messages. Shared dinners after work. Inside jokes whispered across crowded rooms. Conversations that drifted from nonsense to vulnerability without warning.**

**One rainy evening, Rose watched him from across the table as he spoke animatedly about a childhood memory. His hands moved while he talked, eyes bright with laughter.**

**And suddenly, without permission, the truth settled heavily inside her.**

**She loved him.**

**Not wildly.**

**Not recklessly.**

**It lived in smaller things.**

**In the comfort of hearing his footsteps approach.**

**In the way her body relaxed beside him without thinking.**

**In the ache she felt whenever he walked away.**

**The realization frightened her.**

**Because love changed things.**

**Love demanded honesty.**

**And honesty had the power to destroy everything.**

**So she hid.**

**Her smiles became careful. Her words measured. Whenever conversations drifted too close to feelings, she redirected them gently elsewhere.**

**But emotions have a way of leaking through the cracks.**

**One night, they walked beneath a sky blurred faintly by city lights. Cars moved below them in restless streams while warm wind tugged softly at Rose's hair.**

**Edward stopped walking.**

**“Can I ask you something?”**

**“Of course.”**

**He looked at her quietly, hands tucked into his pockets.**

**“What are we doing?”**

**Rose's heartbeat stumbled.**

**Around them, the city continued untouched—horns in the distance, footsteps passing, strangers laughing somewhere nearby.**

**But between them, everything had gone still.**

**“I don’t know,” she said finally.**

**Edward held her gaze.**

**“I think you do.”**

**She looked away first.**

**“I think you’re just afraid to admit it.”**

**There was no anger in his voice.**

**Only sadness.**

**And somehow, that hurt more.**

**“I don’t want to lose this,” she whispered.**

**Edward exhaled slowly, glancing toward the glittering skyline before looking back at her.**

**“You might lose it anyway.”**

**The words landed heavily between them.**

**“Or,” he added softly, “you might find something more.”**

**Rose felt tears sting unexpectedly behind her eyes.**

**For months, she had stood at the edge of this moment, pretending it wasn’t there.**

**The risk.**

**The change.**

**The unknown.**

**And suddenly she understood something terrifying:**

**Love could not survive inside half-truths.**

**Edward stepped closer, his voice almost unsteady now.**

**“I love you.”**

**The words wrapped around her like both comfort and consequence.**

Rose closed her eyes briefly.

When she opened them again, tears slipped silently down her cheeks.

“I felt it too,” she admitted shakily. “I think you’ve known for a long time.”

A small, hopeful smile appeared on Edward’s face.

“Then what’s the problem?”

Rose’s lips trembled.

The world around her blurred.

For a moment she could not breathe.

Then, finally, the truth broke free.

“I’m married,” she whispered.

Edward’s expression froze.

“My husband and daughter are in the Philippines.”

The sentence seemed to drain the warmth from the night itself.

Rose covered her mouth as tears spilled harder now.

“However much I wanted this...” Her voice cracked. “I’m not free to give it to you.”

Edward stared at her silently.

The pain in his eyes arrived slowly, like glass splintering beneath pressure.

“Why,” he asked hoarsely, “did you let me believe we had a future?”

Rose tried to answer.

But shame closed around her throat.

Instead, she turned and walked away quickly, one trembling hand pressed against her face as her footsteps disappeared into the noise of the city.

Edward remained where he stood.

**The wind shifted softly around him.**

**For one brief second, he almost ran after her.**

**But he didn't.**

**Because standing there beneath the indifferent stars, with heartbreak tightening painfully inside his chest, he understood something too:**

**Some loves are real.**

**And still, they must be left behind. ❤️**

**The End**

## THE HEARTBEATS OF SCARLET

By: *Ana Lee M. Panado*

---

The first time Jacob saw her, she was laughing.

Not the restrained chuckle he had heard in royal courts, hidden behind jeweled fans and sharpened lies. This laughter burst out of her freely, bright enough to cut through the noise of the city.

Jacob paused in the mouth of a narrow alley.

Cars hissed across rain-slick streets. Neon signs bled color onto the pavement. Somewhere nearby, music thumped through thin apartment walls. But all of it faded beneath the sound of her laughter.

Something old and carefully buried shifted inside him.

He should have walked away.

Instead, he followed her.

Her name was Scarlet.

He learned it when the tired waitress slid a paper cup across the counter.

“Caramel latte for Scarlet.”

Too much sugar. Smudged eyeliner. Fingers tapping restlessly against the lid while she waited. She looked exhausted, but alive in a way Jacob had almost forgotten people could be. Every night after work, she stopped beneath the same flickering streetlamp before walking home. She always lingered there for a few seconds, staring into the dark as though preparing herself for whatever waited beyond it.

Soon, Jacob began waiting there too.

At first, he remained hidden.

**Then one night, Scarlet looked directly toward the shadows.**

**“You know,” she said, tightening her coat against the cold, “I think you officially qualify as creepy now.”**

**Jacob stepped into the light before caution could stop him.**

**“So do you.”**

**The corner of her mouth twitched.**

**“Oh, good. At least we’re both weird.”**

**Her smile landed harder than it should have.**

**After that, conversations became routine.**

**They talked beneath the broken streetlamp while the city slept around them.**

**Scarlet spoke with her hands, words spilling out too fast whenever she got excited. Jacob mostly listened.**

**“What do you do?” she asked one night.**

**“A little of everything.”**

**“That sounds suspicious.”**

**“It should.”**

**She laughed again, and Jacob found himself memorizing the sound.**

**Another night, rain drizzled softly around them. Scarlet reached for his hand without thinking.**

**The instant her skin touched his, Jacob stiffened.**

**Warm.**

**Her fingers curled instinctively around his, heat spreading through flesh that hadn’t felt alive in centuries.**

**Scarlet frowned. “God, your hands are freezing.”**

**Jacob stared at their joined hands for half a second too long.**

**“I’m always cold.”**

**She didn’t let go.**

**And to his horror, he didn’t want her to.**

**Weeks slipped quietly into months.**

**Jacob fed less often now.**

**The hunger hollowed him out from the inside. Some nights his jaw ached from keeping his fangs hidden. The scent of blood from crowded sidewalks made his stomach twist painfully.**

**But every time he hunted, he saw Scarlet’s face.**

**So he endured it.**

**One evening, Scarlet leaned against the brick wall beneath their streetlamp, watching him carefully.**

**“I think I’m falling in love with you.”**

**Jacob forgot to breathe.**

**The city noise seemed to collapse inward until there was nothing except the soft hum of the dying light above them.**

**He looked away first.**

**“You shouldn’t.”**

**Scarlet’s smile faded. “Why?”**

**Jacob opened his mouth.**

**Because I’ll watch you grow old while I remain the same.**

**Because I’ve buried everyone I’ve ever cared about.**

**Because loving me is the cruelest thing that could happen to you.**

**Instead, his throat tightened around the truth.**

**The hunger came for him hard that same night.**

**Jacob stumbled through empty streets, every nerve screaming.**

**His heartbeatless body felt wrong, stretched thin with restraint. Hunger clawed up his spine like fire.**

**Then he caught her scent.**

**Scarlet.**

**She was walking toward him.**

**Alone.**

**Jacob spun away instantly, fists clenched so tightly his nails split skin.**

**“Jacob?”**

**Her footsteps quickened.**

**Too close.**

**He could hear her heartbeat now—steady and warm.**

**Human.**

**“Are you okay?” she asked softly.**

**Jacob backed away sharply. “Don’t come closer.”**

**Fear flickered across her face.**

**“You’re scaring me.”**

**Good.**

**Run.**

**Please run.**

**But instead, she stepped toward him again.**

**“I’m not leaving you alone like this.”**

**The hunger snapped.**

**One second she stood several feet away.**

**The next, Jacob had her pinned carefully against the wall.**

**Scarlet gasped.**

**His crimson eyes reflected in hers. His fangs hovered inches from her throat.**

**One bite.**

**That was all.**

**Jacob’s hands trembled violently against the brick beside her head.**

**“I could kill you,” he whispered.**

**Scarlet swallowed hard. He watched the movement with agonizing focus.**

**But she didn’t look away.**

**“Then why aren’t you?”**

**The question cracked something inside him.**

**Because I love you.**

**The realization hit with terrifying clarity.**

**Jacob jerked backward as if burned.**

**“I’m not human,” he said hoarsely.**

**Scarlet pressed herself against the wall, breathing unevenly.**

**“What are you?”**

**Jacob laughed once, bitter and exhausted.**

**“You already know.”**

**Her lips parted slightly.**

**“A vampire?”**

**The word sounded absurd spoken aloud.**

**Jacob nodded anyway.**

**Silence stretched between them.**

**Rainwater dripped from fire escapes overhead.**

**Finally, Jacob stepped back farther into the shadows.**

**“You should go.”**

**Scarlet stared at him.**

**“You lied to me.”**

**“Yes.”**

**“You could’ve hurt me.”**

**“Yes.”**

**His answers came without hesitation, sharp as broken glass.**

**But Scarlet noticed something else too.**

**He was shaking.**

**Not from hunger.**

**From fear.**

**“And you stopped yourself,” she said quietly.**

**Jacob looked away.**

**“That doesn’t make you safe.”**

**“No,” Scarlet admitted. “But it means you tried.”**

**She took a cautious step forward.**

**Jacob immediately tensed.**

**“Don’t.”**

**“Why?” she asked. “Because you’re dangerous?”**

**“Yes.”**

**“Or because you care about me?”**

**Jacob closed his eyes.**

**That silence answered her better than words ever could.**

**Scarlet exhaled slowly and rubbed trembling fingers against her sleeves.**

**“This is insane,” she muttered with a shaky laugh. “You’re immortal. You drink blood. You nearly bit me in an alley.”**

**“I told you to leave.”**

**“And I stayed.”**

**Jacob stared at her helplessly.**

**Scarlet’s voice softened.**

**“I know this could end badly.”**

**“It will.”**

**“Maybe.”**

**She stepped closer anyway.**

**“But I still love you.”**

**The words hit him harder than hunger ever had.**

**Jacob’s expression crumpled for just a moment—brief enough that a human might have missed it.**

Scarlet didn't.

For the first time in centuries, hope hurt more than loneliness.

Slowly, carefully, Jacob reached for her hand again.

"You'll grow old," he said quietly. "And I won't."

Scarlet threaded her fingers through his.

"Then we don't waste the time we get."

His eyes burned unexpectedly.

He couldn't remember the last time he had cried.

"Loving me will hurt."

Scarlet smiled sadly.

"So will losing you."

Under the flickering streetlamp, surrounded by a world that would never understand them, they stood suspended between fear and desire, mortality and eternity.

And still—

Neither of them let go.

Weeks later, they sat together on the rooftop of Scarlet's apartment building.

Moonlight spilled silver across the city.

Scarlet rested her head against Jacob's shoulder, tracing idle circles against his sleeve before suddenly blurting:

"If we don't want to be separated forever... why don't you just turn me into a vampire?"

Jacob went completely still.

The wind stirred Scarlet's hair across her face, but he didn't move to brush it away. He simply stared at her.

**“Scarlet...”**

**“You said vampires live forever, right?” she pressed. “Then I could stay with you.”**

**Jacob rose abruptly and walked toward the edge of the roof.**

**Below them, traffic lights blinked red and gold like distant embers.**

**“You don’t understand what you’re asking.”**

**Scarlet stood slowly. “Then explain it to me.”**

**Jacob’s shoulders tightened.**

**“It isn’t romantic.” His voice came low and strained. “You lose things. Food tastes different.**

**Sunlight disappears. Hunger becomes part of you forever.” He swallowed hard. “And eventually... parts of you stop feeling human at all.”**

**Scarlet watched him carefully.**

**“But you still feel things.”**

**Jacob looked back at her then, centuries of loneliness flickering behind his eyes.**

**“Only because of you.”**

**Her expression softened instantly.**

**She crossed the rooftop and slipped her hand into his.**

**“I don’t care about forever,” she whispered. “I just want more time with you.”**

**Jacob stared down at their joined hands.**

**For a long moment, he said nothing.**

**Then, very gently, he lifted her hand and pressed it against his cold cheek.**

**“Maybe one day,” he whispered.**

**Scarlet smiled.**

**And for the first time in centuries, Jacob allowed himself to imagine a future. ❤️ The End**

## UNDER THE MOONLIGHT

By: *Ana Lee M. Panado*

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The first time Angela saw him, the forest went silent.

Not the soft hush that came with dusk, nor the stillness before rain. This silence pressed against her ears until even her own breathing sounded too loud. The cicadas stopped. The leaves overhead no longer rustled. Somewhere in the distance, a bird burst from the trees and vanished into the dark.

Angela tightened her grip on the basket hanging from her arm. The herbs inside trembled with her steps.

“You are imagining things,” she whispered, though the words came out thin.

A twig snapped behind her.

She spun around so quickly the basket nearly slipped from her fingers.

At first, she saw only shadows between the pines. Then moonlight slid across a tall figure standing unnaturally still beneath the trees. Silver flashed where his eyes should have been.

Not human eyes.

Cold rushed through her stomach.

Every story she had ever heard crowded into her mind at once—creatures that hunted after sunset, beasts that wore human skin, monsters drawn by fear. Her feet should have carried her away.

Instead, she stood frozen.

The figure stepped closer.

His body flickered strangely in the moonlight, shifting between man and something far less human. His shoulders looked too broad beneath his torn shirt. Dark claws curved from

trembling fingers. Each breath left him ragged, uneven, as though he was wrestling with something inside himself.

“Go,” he rasped.

The word sounded forced, dragged painfully from his throat.

“You shouldn’t be here.”

Angela blinked.

Monsters were not supposed to warn people.

“Are you... hurt?” she asked before she could stop herself.

The corner of his mouth twitched. A rough laugh escaped him, humorless and tired.

“You’re either very brave,” he muttered, “or very foolish.”

A nervous breath slipped past her lips. “Maybe both.”

For a moment neither of them moved.

Then he stepped backward into the shadows so quickly it almost seemed as if he feared the moonlight itself.

“You need to leave,” he said again, softer this time.

Angela hesitated. Beneath the roughness in his voice was something strained and painfully human.

But the forest had begun to stir again. Leaves rustled violently overhead. Somewhere deeper among the trees came a low growl that did not belong to him.

Instinct finally took hold.

She turned and hurried home.

She told no one.

At dinner, while villagers traded stories around the fire, Angela kept her eyes lowered to her bowl. When the elders warned once again about wandering too far into the woods after dark, her fingers tightened around her spoon until her knuckles whitened.

She said nothing.

Because she could still remember the way he had told her to run.

And monsters did not do that.

So she returned the next evening.

And the evening after that.

At first she only caught glimpses of him between the trees—a shadow watching from a distance, silver eyes reflecting moonlight before disappearing again.

But slowly, he began waiting for her.

Each night he looked more exhausted. Dark circles hollowed beneath his eyes. His hands shook when the moon climbed higher. Sometimes he spoke through clenched teeth as if every word cost him effort.

One evening she found him sitting on a fallen log, elbows braced against his knees, breathing hard.

“You shouldn’t keep coming back,” he said without looking at her.

Angela knelt to set her basket beside him. Bottles clinked softly together.

“One day,” he continued, voice low, “I won’t be able to stop myself.”

She studied him quietly. His claws had dug grooves into the wood beneath his hands. Sweat clung to his brow despite the cold night air.

“Then I’ll stop you,” she said.

A short laugh escaped him. He lifted his head just enough for her to see the disbelief in his eyes.

“You think you can fight me?”

“No,” Angela replied. “I think you can.”

Silence stretched between them.

Then, slowly, his shoulders loosened.

It was the first time she saw something other than fear in his expression.

Hope looked strange on him, like a thing he had forgotten how to carry.

His name was Juancho.

He told her weeks later while they sat beside the river at twilight.

The water reflected streaks of fading gold as Angela skimmed her fingers across the surface.

“My mother used to call me Juancho when I was in trouble,” he said suddenly.

Angela looked up. “So that’s your name?”

A faint smile touched his lips before vanishing again.

“I haven’t heard it in a long time.”

Their world slowly became the hours between sunset and moonrise.

Angela told him stories about the village while he listened quietly beside her. She described children chasing fireflies through fields, the smell of warm bread drifting from ovens at dawn, the sound of laughter spilling from crowded homes during festivals.

Sometimes Juancho closed his eyes while she spoke.

As if he could almost remember belonging somewhere.

And in return, he told her about the curse.

**“It starts small,” he whispered one evening. “A bad temper. Restlessness. Then the hunger comes.”**

**His jaw tightened.**

**“And after that... you stop recognizing your own thoughts.”**

**Angela reached for his hand carefully.**

**The moment her fingers touched his skin, his entire body stiffened.**

**But he did not pull away.**

**“You’re still yourself,” she said softly.**

**His eyes lifted to hers. Pain flickered there so quickly she almost missed it.**

**“For now.”**

**Angela tightened her hold around his trembling hand.**

**“Then we hold onto that.”**

**The night everything changed, the moon rose huge and white above the trees.**

**Angela felt it before she even entered the forest.**

**The air smelled sharp, wild. Branches creaked overhead though no wind blew. Every instinct warned her to turn back.**

**Still, she kept walking.**

**“Juancho?” she called.**

**No answer.**

**Then a growl rolled through the darkness.**

**Low.**

**Deep.**

**Close.**

**Angela froze.**

**Heavy footsteps circled her slowly through the trees. Leaves crushed beneath massive paws.**

**Then he emerged.**

**Her breath caught painfully in her throat.**

**The man she knew was gone.**

**A towering wolf-beast stood before her, black fur glistening beneath the moonlight. Its claws carved deep into the earth with every step. Golden eyes burned with hunger and fury.**

**But when those eyes landed on her—**

**The creature stopped moving.**

**Its chest heaved violently.**

**“Angela...”**

**Her name came out broken and distorted, barely recognizable.**

**Fear clawed at her ribs.**

**Still, she stepped forward.**

**“I’m here,” she whispered.**

**The beast snarled and staggered backward, claws tearing through dirt.**

**“No,” he growled. “Go. I can’t—”**

**“You can.”**

**His gaze snapped toward hers.**

**Angela’s pulse thundered in her ears as she forced herself closer.**

**One step.**

**Then another.**

**“If any part of you remembers me,” she said, her voice shaking, “fight.”**

**The beast lunged.**

**Angela squeezed her eyes shut.**

**Hot breath washed across her face.**

**But nothing came.**

**No claws.**

**No teeth.**

**Only trembling.**

**Slowly, she opened her eyes.**

**Juancho hovered inches away from her throat, his claws buried deep in the ground beside her feet. His entire body shook violently with restraint. A strained whimper escaped him, painfully human beneath the growls.**

**“Angela...” he whispered again.**

**This time his voice cracked.**

**Carefully, slowly, she lifted her hand and rested it against the side of his face.**

**Warm fur trembled beneath her fingertips.**

**“I’m not afraid of you,” she said.**

**His eyes squeezed shut.**

**And suddenly the creature before her looked less like a monster and more like a man losing a battle against himself.**

**The curse did not disappear.**

**Some nights Juancho locked himself deep inside the forest while Angela waited sleeplessly by her window, listening for distant howls.**

**Some mornings she found fresh claw marks carved into tree trunks.**

There were still moments fear crept between them.

But there were mornings, too.

Mornings where sunlight spilled through the leaves while Juancho sat beside her near the river, barefoot and smiling faintly as she teased him for burning breakfast over the fire.

Mornings where laughter came easier than silence.

Where his hands no longer trembled when she touched them.

One evening they sat together beneath the moonlight, shoulder to shoulder.

Angela twisted the edge of her sleeve nervously between her fingers before speaking.

“Can I stay with you?”

Juancho turned sharply toward her.

“Can we get married?”

The words hung in the air between them.

“What?” His voice came out almost breathless.

Angela forced herself not to look away.

Juancho stood abruptly and dragged a hand through his hair.

“Do you understand what you’re asking?” he demanded. “Do you understand what could happen to you?”

Moonlight caught the fear in his expression—not anger. Fear.

Angela rose slowly and stepped closer.

“I know you’re afraid,” she said quietly. “But I also know what I feel when I’m with you.”

Juancho looked away, jaw tight.

“What about the full moons?” he asked. “What about the nights I lose control?”

His voice cracked on the last words.

**Angela reached for his hand.**

**At first his fingers stayed rigid in hers.**

**Then, slowly, they curled back around her own.**

**“We’ll face those nights together,” she whispered.**

**Juancho finally looked at her.**

**The hesitation was still there, flickering behind his eyes.**

**But so was something warmer.**

**Something that looked dangerously close to surrender.**

**And when Angela smiled, she watched the fear inside him soften—just a little—as though love had finally become stronger than the darkness chasing him.**

**“Juancho, we have great love, I know that we can surpass this curse you mentioned.” Angela replied.**

**“Our love is greater than the curse that you were afraid of.” She continued.**

**Juancho looked Angela in the eyes.**

**Angela saw the hesitation in the eyes of Juancho but she also saw that she was winning. ❤️**

**The End**

## WHERE FORTUNE FADES TO ASHES

By: *Ana Lee M. Panado*

---

Elanna was born into a world of crystal chandeliers and marble hallways that echoed with silence. Every morning, maids pulled open velvet curtains while her mother discussed charity galas over breakfast and her father buried himself behind newspapers and phone calls. Everything in the mansion gleamed—except her.

At dinner, servants filled her glass before she could reach for it.

“Next month, the Ayala family is visiting,” her mother said one evening, cutting neatly into her steak. “Their son just returned from London.”

Elanna stared at the untouched food on her plate. “Do I get a say in any part of my life?”

Her father lowered the newspaper just enough to look at her. “You already have more than most people dream of.”

That was exactly the problem.

Beyond the iron gates of her neighborhood, the city breathed differently.

Before sunrise each day, Edwin pushed wooden carts beside his father through crowded streets still wet from dawn rain. Vendors shouted prices across the market. Jeepneys rattled past. His sleeves were rolled to his elbows, his hands stained with soil from the farm, but laughter came easily to him—full and unashamed.

“Careful with the tomatoes,” his father warned.

“They survived the farm,” Edwin grinned. “They’ll survive the market.”

The old man shook his head, smiling despite himself.

The rain came suddenly that afternoon.

Elanna gripped the steering wheel as thunder cracked overhead. Her car sputtered once, twice, then died beside the crowded marketplace.

“Perfect,” she muttered, slamming her palm against the wheel.

Rain hammered against the windows. People rushed past carrying baskets and umbrellas while muddy water streamed along the road.

Then someone knocked gently on her window.

A young man stood outside holding a worn umbrella, rain soaking the sleeves of his faded shirt.

“You planning to drown in there?” he asked.

Elanna stepped out carefully, nearly slipping on the pavement.

“I am not used to this,” she snapped.

“The rain?”

“The... all of this.”

His mouth curved into a smile. “You look like you’ve never seen rain before.”

For a second, she almost rolled her eyes.

Then she saw his face—open, amused, completely unafraid of her.

And for the first time in a long while, she laughed.

“I guess I haven’t,” she admitted.

After that, she kept returning to the market.

At first, she brought excuses.

Your umbrella.

Then:

I wanted to buy vegetables.

Then eventually, no excuse at all.

She sat beside Edwin on overturned crates while the afternoon crowd thinned around them.

He handed her a slice of ripe mango.

“You eat fruit like it’s expensive jewelry,” he teased.

Elanna frowned at the sticky juice running down her fingers. “Because nobody told me fruit could attack people.”

Edwin burst into laughter so loud nearby vendors turned to stare.

She found herself laughing too.

Not the polite laugh she used at parties.

A real one.

One evening, as the market lights flickered on, Edwin asked quietly, “What’s it like living in that huge mansion?”

Elanna traced circles on the wooden crate between them.

“Cold,” she said after a moment.

He glanced at her. “Cold?”

“There are twenty rooms in our house.” She gave a small shrug. “But somehow I still eat dinner alone.”

Edwin looked down at his rough hands.

“We all eat together at home,” he said softly. “Even when there’s barely enough food.”

Elanna turned toward him slowly.

“You have everything,” he added.

A breeze stirred loose strands of her hair.

“No,” she whispered. “Not everything.”

**His eyes lifted to hers.**

**Neither of them looked away.**

**Love arrived quietly.**

**In the mornings, Elanna showed up wearing clothes she no longer cared about ruining.**

**Edwin laughed as she failed miserably at arranging vegetables.**

**“That’s not how you stack potatoes.”**

**“They’re potatoes, Edwin.”**

**“Exactly. Respect them.”**

**Sometimes they walked through the fields near his farm at sunset, shoulders brushing lightly.**

**Sometimes they said nothing at all.**

**But silence beside him never felt empty.**

**Then her parents found out.**

**“Elanna.” Her father’s voice thundered through the mansion. “Tell me this isn’t true.”**

**She stood in the center of the living room while her mother looked horrified.**

**“He’s kind,” Elanna said.**

**“He sells vegetables in the street.”**

**“And?”**

**“And he is not one of us.”**

**The words cracked through the room.**

**Elanna’s jaw tightened.**

**“Maybe that’s exactly why I love him.”**

**Her mother covered her mouth as though the sentence itself wounded her.**

**Edwin felt the distance too.**

**One night, beneath dim streetlights outside the market, he stepped back from her grasp.**

**“Your family hates me.”**

**“I don’t care.”**

**“But I do.” His voice shook. “Every time you come here, they look at you like you’re throwing your life away.”**

**Elanna reached for his hands.**

**“My life is here.”**

**Edwin closed his eyes briefly.**

**“You deserve comfort. Opportunity. A future.”**

**“And you think you’re not part of that?”**

**He couldn’t answer.**

**Because deep down, he already believed he would only ruin her life.**

**Then one night, he disappeared.**

**No goodbye.**

**No letter.**

**Just absence.**

**Elanna searched everywhere.**

**At the market, vendors shook their heads sympathetically.**

**At the farm, the fields stood empty beneath gray skies.**

**Weeks passed.**

**Then months.**

**The laughter she once waited for each morning became a memory she carried alone.**

**Years later, she found him again.**

**Under a large acacia tree at the edge of a small village, children sat cross-legged in the grass while Edwin wrote words onto a chalkboard balanced against the trunk.**

**The children repeated after him loudly, giggling whenever someone made a mistake.**

**Edwin laughed with them.**

**The sound hit her chest like sunlight after years of rain.**

**One child noticed her first.**

**“Teacher, someone’s here.”**

**Edwin turned.**

**Everything around them seemed to disappear.**

**“You left,” Elanna said, her voice trembling.**

**He swallowed hard. “I thought it was the only way to protect you.”**

**Her eyes filled instantly.**

**“Protect me?” She stepped closer. “You were the only thing that ever made me feel alive.”**

**Edwin looked at her as though he still couldn’t believe she was real.**

**“I never stopped loving you,” he whispered.**

**Elanna reached for his hand.**

**“This time,” she said softly, “you don’t get to walk away.”**

**So she chose him.**

**Not the mansion.**

**Not the wealth.**

**Him.**

**Their first home was small enough that rain leaked through the roof during storms. Some nights dinner was little more than rice and vegetables from Edwin’s farm.**

**But the house was filled with things Elanna never found in her old life:**

**Laughter echoing through tiny rooms.**

**Warm hands reaching for hers in the dark.**

**Children's footsteps racing across wooden floors.**

**Years passed.**

**Edwin worked tirelessly until he finally owned both a thriving farm and his own stall in the market. People respected him not because of money, but because he never forgot kindness.**

**Their son inherited Edwin's easy smile.**

**Their daughter inherited Elanna's fierce heart.**

**And together, they built a life that belonged entirely to them.**

**One quiet afternoon, a car stopped outside their home.**

**Elanna froze when she saw who stepped out.**

**Her mother stood near the gate twisting her handbag nervously while her father remained unusually silent beside her.**

**For a moment, nobody moved.**

**Then her mother spoke softly.**

**"We... wanted to meet our grandchildren."**

**Elanna pressed a trembling hand against her mouth.**

**Inside the house, children's laughter floated through the open windows.**

**She looked back at Edwin.**

**He gave her a small nod.**

**And just like that, the years of hurt cracked open.**

**Tears spilled down Elanna's cheeks as she turned toward the doorway.**

**“Kids!” she called, her voice breaking into laughter and sobs at once. “Come meet your grandparents!”**

**Tiny footsteps thundered across the floor.**

**Her mother began crying before the children even reached her.**

**And as Edwin slipped his hand into Elanna’s, she realized something no mansion, no wealth, no perfect life had ever taught her:**

**The richest love is the one that stays. ❤️**

**The End**