Father's Son

THE MIRACLES OF QUIAPO (BOOK 1)

INGMING ABERIA

Contents

CHAPTER 1
From the dump

Long before the neighborhood knew his name, Sagasa had already begun to disappear.

In the heart of Quiapo, where the air shimmered with exhaust and the prayers of the devout mingled with the sharp cries of vendors, there was a street—small and crooked—folded into the clutter of the district like a secret. Calle Sagasa. You wouldn't find it on any tourist map. It was a street you stumbled upon, usually by accident, and by the time you noticed the sign, rusted and bolted to a crumbling post, you were already halfway through.

It was not a street of consequence. Or so people thought. But for generations, it bore the weight of small, invisible histories—of dying candle smoke, of half-heard confessions muttered under breath, of scrawled promises on wads of peseta, forgotten as quickly as they were made.

At its entrance stood the shell of what was once a thriving panciteria, its name—La Generala—still visible in flaking red paint on corrugated tin. Now it served as shelter to cats and gossip, its windows dressed in soot and yellowing calendars. Across from it, a stone arch led to the remnants of a convent garden, long overrun by wayward vines and mini envelopes made of Manila paper, the equivalent of today's plastic sachets. Sagasa was the sort of street where memory tangled with debris.

Calle Sagasa had been renamed several times, each time reflecting a change in the local administration's leadership. The latest—Watkasing Street—had undergone a series of facelifts that started at the turn of the century. Yet Sagasa was how ordinary folks wanted the street remembered. And it was here, among the rusted grills and moss-choked drains, that the infant was found. Wags volunteered to call him "Sagasa" too, partly to honor the place he surfaced from, and partly to ridicule his fate.

The child was barely breathing when they discovered him. Wrapped in a frayed red shawl, his skin was the color of old porcelain—delicate, cracked in places. A woman sweeping near dawn saw something stir by the foot of the broken lamppost, just beside a pile of spoiled kangkong and shattered glass. The woman approached, expecting a dying kitten. What she found instead was a baby, blinking slowly, as if awakening from a century of sleep.

No note. No name. Only the shawl, damp with dew, and the faint scent of ylang-ylang clinging to his hair.

Madam Sylvia, the woman who found her, lived in a cluttered apartment above an abandoned barbershop. Widowed by choice and long childless, she took the baby in without question. It was not an act of charity, nor even kindness, but something older. "The street gives," she told her neighbor, who eyed the child with suspicion. "Sometimes it takes back. But for now, it gives."

News of the foundling spread fast. Quiapo, for all its sprawl, never kept secrets for long. The vendors at Plaza Roma claimed she was a blessing from the Nazareno himself. The barbers by Carriedo swore he was an omen—a shadow-child, sent by the river to repay an old debt. The fortune tellers near Raon whispered that his birth had been written in the creases of their palms for years, but none had dared speak it aloud.

What the kibitzers could not agree on was his name. And so, they fabricated one: Sagasa.

WATKASING STREET WAS SHORT, but its memory was long. No more than eight hundred meters, the old road wound through the heart of Quiapo like a frayed artery, narrow even by colonial standards, but bursting with the weight of centuries. Here, in the shadows of Manila's oldest spires, wealth and infamy once shared walls. During the Spanish era, this stretch had housed the privileged mestizo traders and bureaucrats, men with half-Spanish blood and full appetites for land, legacy, and loopholes.

Sometime in the 1740s, a priest's bastard son—Octavio Benedicto—flexed his church ties and rechristened the old road from *Bukabuka* to Calle de Octavio. Few locals knew why the signs changed overnight, but gossip filled the gaps. "Octavio," they whispered, was born to the eighth mistress of Father Leo Benedicto. Illegitimate, yes—but sharp as sin and twice as ambitious. With a priest-father's blessing and a marriage into minor nobility from *Pequeña Venecia*, Octavio parlayed Church land into commercial might.

The renaming of Bukabuka was more than vanity. It was branding. A signal to natives that even a bastard with ambition could hang his name in stone—if he paid the right people.

A century and a half later, in 1928 or 1929, another name muscled its way onto the street signs: Cuanco Street.

The man behind it was Ko Wang Co, a shrewd Chinese migrant fleeing revolution. Before he even spoke broken Tagalog, he mastered Manila's oldest language: bribery. He morphed into Juan Dwayne Dee Cuanco, hoping his Western-sounding name would please the American rulers. He decked his restaurants with altars, even installed statues of the Black Nazarene and Sto. Niño, just to skirt old Spanish laws forbidding non-Catholic enterprises.

While Octavio's descendants squabbled themselves into obscurity, Cuanco bought block after block, steamrolling old rivalries. The Octavio clan, outmatched, retaliated in petty protest—enlisting public vendors to dump garbage nightly on Cuanco's doorstep. That stinking ritual would, ironically, become part of Quiapo's culture.

Then came independence, and with it, the *democratic* facade of post-colonial politics. Enter Adonis López de Romualdez—a mestizo golden boy dubbed "Cinderella of Philippine Politics" by the press. His marriage to beauty queen Aurora Singh came with one dowry condition: rename Cuanco Street after her father, Benito Watkasing, born Kawshat Singh, an Indian immigrant with political aspirations.

Adonis delivered. With patience, alliances, and a promise to support Benito's mayoral bid, Cuanco Street became Watkasing Street after the latter's reelection in 1961. The renaming sealed prestige not only for the family but for the Singh Family Clinic, run by Aurora's cousin, Dr. Shawkat Singh. It was here, beneath the shadow of Quiapo Church's sacred domes, that Parhana Watkasing nearly died giving birth to Aurora.

In time, the clinic was rechristened the Watkasing Family Clinic. A symbol of upward mobility. Of gratitude. Of a family branding its miracle in asphalt.

But the 1960s brought unrest. Protests swelled. The old elite fled to Makati, New Manila, or gated cities like Lanciano. Watkasing Street crumbled into disrepair, eclipsed by Escolta's elegance and Divisoria's chaos. The once-noble Octavio store, now barely clinging to its past, became a lodging house for secrets.

As Quiapo's streets grew louder, the clinic grew quieter, darker. No longer a place for miracles—but for secrets. Abortions, adoptions, disappearances. A syndicate known only as Xing Dynasty paid top peso for discretion. Babies born in secret, mothers vanishing into anonymity.

And in this city of vanishing names and rewritten streets, one miracle would defy them all.

EARLY MORNING, MARCH 25, 1985 — QUIAPO CHURCH. 3:00 A.M.

Father Andoy rose from his cot on the third floor of the convent. At twenty-nine, he was still the youngest among Quiapo Church's eleven priests. Thin, mild-mannered, and steady-eyed, he had served the 4:00 A.M. mass for three years now—always except Fridays.

Coffee first. Then a brief walk toward Plaza Roma, where the morning air mixed with trash smoke and prayer. The vendors were already stirring—did they ever sleep? Women told him they did. Two, maybe three hours. The men, they joked, had to drink just to get any rest at all.

In the distance, he could already hear Quiapo's pulse—part prayer, part survival. The Black Nazarene loomed in every corner: in car hoods, neck pendants, altar candles, and even vendors' tattoos. An icon from Mexico, carved from mesquite, smuggled through the galleon trade in 1606, and now entrenched in Manila's soul.

Every January 9, the Traslación procession drew millions. But every Friday, the devout still came. Athletes before big games. Addicts seeking freedom. Lovers on the brink. There were whispers—the statue healed, restored, forgave.

But this Monday morning felt off. At 3:25 A.M., as he turned to head back, he saw a small crowd gathering at the end of Watkasing Street. Nothing dramatic—no screams, no running. But the way people leaned in… something had happened.

He returned to the convent. In 45 minutes, he would preside over the daily miracle—bread and wine becoming body and blood.

LATER THAT MORNING — WATKASING STREET

Mass ended. He shed his cassock. Ate quickly. Curiosity led his feet back toward that strange crowd.

He noticed a few familiar faces: a media cameraman, two policemen, and a few hangers-on. Quiapo's news traveled fast. The police fed tips to the press. It was all transactional. All timed.

Then—*a boy*.

A son of one of his church confidantes had earlier coached him. "Father, quick. Someone needs you."

Three hundred meters south of the church, a woman waited, pacing in front of shuttered stores.

"Father Sir," she whispered, "the Social Welfare Office will take the baby." She pointed toward a cardboard box, hidden in a dim corner.

"Just take him for a few hours," she begged, "until I can convince them the parents came back."

Andoy hesitated. Smiled in disbelief. "You think I can just take a child?"

She nodded. “If they know a priest is taking care of him, they won’t ask questions. I’ll get him back once the noise dies down.”

She leaned in. “Father, I think… he has powers.”

His brows lifted. Her urgency turned to mysticism.

“I found him in the trash. The stray dogs… the cats… none of them touched the box. They just… stood there. Like guards.”

He nearly laughed, but something tugged at him. Father Revo, he remembered. Just last week, he’d warned of something like this. If it were not for Revo’s reputation as a leftist, which somehow put him above fake news and gossip, Father Andoy could have easily connected the dots.

Father Andoy exhaled. “Okay. Tell Social Welfare I’ll take the child. For now.”

THE NAMING OF ANDING

Hours later, Father Revo sat inside the cramped office of the Quiapo police chief, surrounded by a small committee assembled to decide the fate of the child. Father Andoy sat beside him, pensive. The mood was surprisingly lighthearted for such a consequential meeting—two social welfare officers from the city were exchanging small talk, the woman in her forties who had found the baby, Sylvia Monir, chatted affably with the police chief, and a few local staff lingered, amused by the buzz just outside the precinct.

Outside, a crowd had gathered—fifty, maybe sixty people. Among them were street vendors, vendors' children, churchgoers, and a television crew with microphones poised for a soundbite. Word had already begun to spread. People sensed something bigger than a simple custody transfer.

When the chatter inside the room finally quieted, Sylvia cleared her throat and offered to begin.

“Father Andoy here told me earlier that he was taking custody of the child,” she said evenly.

“We’ve discussed the matter thoroughly with the foster parent,” Father Revo chimed in quickly, slipping into the role of spokesman. “The child’s welfare will be in good hands.”

His tone had a formal crispness—measured, precise, almost rehearsed. Those in the room—social workers, officers, even the police chief—interpreted it as something more. In this country, when a priest made a declaration, people listened. Few asked follow-up questions.

One of the social workers leaned toward her colleague. “How do I fill this in on the case-management form?”

“Just copy the template from the other ones,” came the reply with a weary shrug, as though abandoned infants were paperwork more than tragedy.

And with that, the meeting ended as easily as it had begun. Smiles all around. Except Father Andoy, who looked as though he were still struggling to believe the role he was now expected to play.

The following morning, a tabloid headline screamed across the front page:

“ABANDONED CHILD FATHERED BY PRIEST?”

The sub-head had no question mark at the end: *Scandals continue to hound the Catholic Church*

The report quoted a bystander who claimed to have heard Father Andoy announce he was taking custody. Sylvia was interviewed too, mentioning that a social worker had said one of the "biological parents" would be stepping in. There was no direct mention of names—only insinuations, alongside a tantalizing image of "a young and debonair Quiapo priest."

By evening, all major networks had jumped on the story. One reporter ambushed the Quiapo parish office for comment.

"Is it true that Father Andoy is the father of the child?"

"I'm sorry—I really don't know. You'll have to ask Father Andoy himself."

Back in the rectory, panic was spreading like wildfire. The Rector called an emergency meeting of all eleven priests assigned to Quiapo. They agreed on one thing: a total media blackout. No interviews, no sermons, no loose talk.

But two days later, following what was reportedly a "strong suggestion" from the archbishop himself, Father Andoy reluctantly agreed to a short, televised interview. He denied fathering the child but confirmed that he was taking custody, believing it was "in the best interest of the child."

The damage, however, was done. A thousand protestors gathered in front of Quiapo Church days later, waving placards that read *"Down with liars and hypocrites!"* and *"Father Dámaso lives!"*

Eight days after Father Andoy assumed custody, the child was baptized. The name on record: Leandro Deo Renato Moscavida—the result of a compromise among quarreling clergy. There was unanimity in the nickname, though—Anding—which, essaying the art of naming in ways that only Filipinos could do, accorded the child a right of being known as the small version of Andoy.

The surname "Moscavida" was dredged from a tattered bracelet found with the child. It read something like "Moses Maternity Clinic." Father Andoy searched city records but found no such clinic. The closest match was a defunct outpatient facility called MMortal Maximilian Clinic.

Father Revo had favored the name "Martin Moscavida," invoking Saint Martin de Porres—a patron of the poor, born out of wedlock to a Black servant woman and a Spanish nobleman. The Rector, however, had final say.

"Deo Renato," said Monsignor Hoben Ubanon. "From the Latin *Deo Regnat*—God reigns." He explained further, as Rectors often do. "And 'ad regnum'—to the reign. May every hand help lead the flock back to the reign."

The baptism was a full show of ecclesiastical strength. Monsignor Ubanon presided, and every priest in Quiapo stood as a godfather. For a brief moment, Anding occupied a place of spiritual prestige few Filipinos—let alone foundlings—ever touch.

But that baptismal rite would also mark the start of Anding's personal calvary.

Within weeks, it became evident that Sylvia Monir, the self-styled savior, had little interest in nurturing the child. Unknown to Father Andoy, she had already begun quietly auctioning him off to the highest bidder.

She saw Anding as a golden ticket—her way out of the rut, her road to redemption.

Before working at the general merchandise store where she found Anding, Sylvia had tasted a much different life. She was once a rising star in the multi-level marketing world, peddling home grooming products and climbing the corporate ladder. At thirty-five, she became a millionaire. Her gift of gab, her charm—it was the stuff of office legend.

But success made her enemies. An internal audit revealed fraudulent transactions. Receipts pointed her way. She denied everything, but the verdict was swift: dismissal.

Stung, she fought back, filing a labor case against the company. She lost. The appeals drained her finances and broke her pride.

What followed was a slow unraveling. A breakup. Estranged friends. Missed meals. Meth. Street spirals. In just two years, Sylvia had gone from jet-setting executive to sidewalk vagrant.

It was her mother—frail, devout, unrelenting—who pulled her back from the brink. Sylvia wasn't allowed out of their neighborhood. No cigarettes. No alcohol. No drugs. Not even gossiping. Just chores and church.

After a year, she was permitted to walk the streets again. Surprisingly, the chaos of Quiapo suited her. She found strange comfort in its unpredictability. Some days, she looked deranged. Other days, she held court with sidewalk philosophers. She crossed herself in front of the basilica but also felt welcome among the Muslim traders.

One of them eventually married her. He had other wives. He said she was barren. They divorced. Still, she kept his last name.

Through his connections, she got the job at the store on Watkasing Street, near the footbridge. That's where she found Anding—bundled up, tucked into a plastic crate, just before sunrise. In that moment, her instincts kicked in: this child could be her way back up.

She had already planned to apply for work abroad—she needed seventy thousand pesos to pay off a recruitment agency owned by her ex-husband's cousin. Anding was her ticket.

Her first call was to Sir Dikomo, a name known well in Quiapo. Unknown to many, he was the new face of systemic rot, in uniform, with a press badge and press kit. No one served longer in the Quiapo precinct. He had survived three administrative convictions and had been reinstated each time, thanks to friends in high places.

No records mentioned it, but everyone in the force knew: Sir Dikomo once shot two gangsters dead after a fight involving his cousin. There were whispers of other bodies. Nothing stuck.

He worked quietly. Disciplined. Respectable. He kept order during church processions, escorted priests, and greeted vendors by name. But underneath the surface was something far darker—a shadow network known as OXD, or *Operation Xing Dynasty*. His skill set served his agenda well: ruthless, efficient, strategic, and media-savvy. Knew how to manage perception. In situations like the one presented by Sylvia, he needed to control the narrative and remove liabilities. A muted and concealed transaction favored his reputational goal. Relative to the OXD, he represented the clean-cut face of a criminal structure. Where others relied on dirt and fear, he relied on optics and power.

OXD had three tracks:

1. Subic Babies: orphans sent abroad, destined to become dual citizens, positioned to own land in the Philippines within twenty years.
2. Panatag Babies: raised to become military officers who would later, quietly, serve OXD's geopolitical interests.
3. The Rejects: children who failed to integrate—quietly turned into organ donors for Qina.

Sylvia didn't know all the details. She only knew Sir Dikomo dealt with "adoptions" and paid well.

She came to him.

"I have a child," she whispered, "No records. Untouched. Yours, if the price is right."

He nodded slowly. "Can you deliver the child quietly?"

"Like a shadow."

The deal was sealed. One hundred thousand pesos. Seventy-five for Sylvia. Twenty-five spread across brokers and handlers.

Before finalizing, Sylvia contacted two more prospective buyers—families desperate for adoption, even a childless couple who had recently offered Mass at Quiapo Church. One offered more. She turned them down. Her loyalty, surprisingly, remained with Sir Dikomo.

She learned more about the trade—how orphanages sourced children from maternity clinics, from street sweeps, from shelters. Some were polished in "bridge families" like showroom vehicles before resale. OXD mirrored this model but preferred invisibility: no documents, no IDs, no trails. Just the baby and the cash.

Sir Dikomo's final instruction was simple:

"Once you're paid… disappear into the night."

Sylvia smiled. She was already packed. Her papers were ready. All she needed now was the cash—and the chance to start over again.

THE VANISHING OF ANDING

The night before her scheduled departure, Sylvia Monir barely slept. She packed and repacked the same duffel bag three times, checked her passport every half hour, and murmured half-prayers that blurred with remembered sales pitches. She had made her choice—Anding would be her final transaction, her ticket to redemption, her last performance in a world that once cheered for her every word.

The child slept soundly in a crate lined with a used fleece jacket, unaware of the fate being engineered around him. Sylvia watched him with a strange mix of affection and calculation. She was certain: the boy would be better off with strangers, people who could afford to dream for him.

Before dusk, she brought Anding to the agreed drop-off point—an empty lot two blocks behind the Quiapo church, fenced with rusty galvanized sheets and camouflaged by a row of banana trees. A van waited with the engine running, two men inside wearing face masks, sunglasses, and unmarked uniforms.

She balked.

By the time Father Andoy arrived at the merchandise store looking for Sylvia and Anding, the neighbors could only shrug. She hadn't shown up for work. No one knew where she went.

The child—now baptized, named, and quasi-legitimized—had vanished without a trace.

Panic surged through Andoy. He went straight to Sir Dikomo's precinct, only to be met with a blank stare and a cold shrug.

“Have you tried checking with DSWD?” Sir Dikomo said flatly, eyes unreadable, referring to the Department of Social Welfare and Development. “Sometimes they take these children quietly, no warning.”

“But we had arrangements—she was the foster—”

“Then perhaps she changed her mind.”

Andoy stared at the man, sensing something beyond the officer’s casual dismissiveness. But how could he accuse? Of what? There were no laws binding Sylvia to anything but goodwill. And he was a priest—not a father, not by blood, not by right.

Outside, Andoy wandered the narrow streets of Quiapo like a man sleepwalking through a dream gone wrong. He returned to the footbridge. Searched the underpass. Asked vendors. One said they hadn’t seen the child in days. Another asked if he’d tried the shelter near Avenida. No luck.

By midnight, he was weeping in the sacristy, forehead pressed against the cold marble altar. The sound of city life outside—jeepneys, dogs, sirens—felt like a thousand knives carving silence into his chest.

Anding was gone.

And still, no one—not the priests, not the social workers, not even Father Revo—fully grasped what had happened. To most, the child had been an orphan given a name, a baptism, and a shadow of a future. That, in a place like Manila, was already a miracle. No one expected more.

But Andoy had. He had hoped, even against reason.

In the weeks that followed, he would launch his own investigation, quietly and in vain. He traced Sylvia’s last known contacts, questioned clerks at DSWD, whispered inquiries to street kids, and vendors. He spoke with maternity clinics, birth registry offices, and even shady foster home operators. Each clue dissolved like ash.

Father Revo, for his part, tried to comfort his brother priest. “We did what we could,” he said one night, when Andoy looked ready to give up his collar. “Anding was never ours to keep.”

But the words rang hollow. Because Andoy had believed. Perhaps not that Anding was his child by blood, but that he was his responsibility by Providence.

Sylvia’s story, meanwhile, disappeared into rumor. Some said she was spotted boarding a ferry to Mindoro. Others claimed she was in Hong Kong already, working as a caregiver. A few believed she’d been silenced by men who dealt in things you couldn't report.

Sir Dikomo said nothing.

He remained the dependable enforcer, the beloved patrolman. Yet beneath that façade, something grew colder. More calculating. He had overseen—almost—the successful onboarding of a prime candidate: male, unregistered, physically healthy, attractive. The kind of orphan that fetched the highest bid in the OXD black registry.

No one would track the child again.

The van that was supposed to take Anding—Leandro Deo Renato Moscavida—was never seen again in Quiapo.

But its trail did not end there.

Across seas and time, in fortified suburban compounds or distant foreign estates, boys like him—Subic Babies, Panatag seeds—were being raised. Their new lives polished the memory of their old. New names. New tongues. But somewhere deep inside, in dreams or instincts, something native remained.

Anding would carry with him a name that meant "God Reigns." But he would walk paths where no god was named. Paths shaped by secret alliances, imperial ambitions, and the unchecked hunger of a world that knew how to rebrand cruelty as opportunity.

But that was still to come.

For now, in Quiapo, all that remained was a question whispered in candlelight by a broken priest:

"Where is the child?"

And the silence that answered back, louder than a scream, suggested an unfolding saga: from the dump to the gates of hell.

CHAPTER 2
Qina connection

Sylvia didn't know how the night would end. Only that it had begun in Sta. Cruz.

It looked like a neon wound, this place. A blistered vein running with tricycles and late-night jeepneys, flickering signs and broken glass. Sta. Cruz wasn't Quiapo. It didn't pretend to offer salvation. It offered what people wanted when they were too tired to pretend they wanted salvation at all.

She stepped off the jeepney with Anding bundled close to her chest, half-asleep from the ride, maybe from hunger, maybe from something worse. The rain had stopped, but everything dripped. Her shoes squelched against the sidewalk. Her blouse was damp at the sleeves. People moved around her like shadows with somewhere better to be.

She was out of place here. Too pale, too stiff, too tired. She could feel it. The way some of the men on the corner looked at her. The way the woman selling cigarettes refused to meet her eye. Some were already watching her. The wrong kind.

She crossed the street anyway, headed toward the crumbling apartment complex the contact had mentioned. She didn't know his name. Just that he was "interested." Interested in what she was carrying. Interested in buying. The message had come through one of the girls from Tondo who owed her a favor. Sylvia didn't ask how the girl knew him. She didn't want to know.

She paused beneath the awning of a closed pharmacy. Lit a cigarette with shaking hands. Looked down at the child. He was warm. Still breathing. His eyelids fluttered but didn't open. He hadn't cried since morning.

"You'll be better off," she whispered, not sure if she meant it.

A van rolled past, slowing for just a second before speeding up again. She felt the eyes inside. Measuring. Calculating. Maybe it wasn't him. Maybe it was. Didn't matter. She was in it now.

She took one last drag and dropped the cigarette into a puddle. She did not like what her hunch told her. She diverted to Plan B—time to go.

She wasn't here for her soul. That ship had sailed years ago. But she still had one thread left—the kind you follow when you've stopped believing in God but still need something to believe in.

When everything was done, she felt the need for a place where she could sit comfortably and think clearly. She knew she would be playing every detail back, recollecting the events that happened in the last couple of hours.

SYLVIA'S RECOLLECTION: A CHILD WITH A PRICE TAG

Anding was on his way to a family that would adopt him fourteen days after he was baptized. He could have been handed over sooner, but Father Andoy's unexpected visits thwarted Sylvia's carefully laid plans. She didn't want to raise suspicions that she had other intentions for the baby.

During his first visit, the priest spoke about a modest compensation for Sylvia's care and shared that a family among the Hijos was ready to adopt the child. On his second visit, he assured

her that the adoption papers were being finalized with the Social Welfare Office and the parish lawyer.

Alarmed, Sylvia packed the baby in a towel and fled her living quarters minutes after the priest left. Something happened on her way to where she was supposed to meet the “buyer”.

She checked into a dingy Sta. Cruz motel, telling the skeptical front desk clerk that her husband would pay upon arrival.

Inside the musty room, Sylvia evaluated her dwindling options. Time was now a luxury she couldn’t afford. She feared the motel staff already suspected something odd. If anyone reported her, authorities would uncover the missing baby’s identity—and her own involvement in a possible kidnapping.

She couldn’t leave the baby alone. Nor could she sneak off to meet a buyer or contact Sir Dikomo without risking discovery. Admitting the baby was under the care of a Quiapo priest might have been the safest option legally, but she had left behind the tabloid featuring Father Andoy and the child.

She approached the front desk. "I wish to extend for another two hours," she said, then requested to use their phone.

She first called her employer, spinning a story about a family emergency and asking one of her co-workers to cover her shift. Then she rang Sir Dikomo’s office.

“May I speak to Lieutenant Colonel De Mozo?” she asked, deliberately emphasizing his title.

He wasn’t in. She left no callback number or address. “Tell him I’ll try again in thirty minutes.”

She contacted the two other prospective buyers on her list, but both failed to produce the money. Still, she disclosed her location—next door to the drugstore beside the motel—just in case.

An hour later, she called again. This time, Sir Dikomo picked up.

“Where have you been?” he asked, voice calm but scolding. “We’ve been trying to reach you.”

Sylvia hurried through her explanation. “Please send them to Perseverance Drug near My World Motel, Rizal Avenue. I can’t stay long.” Then she hung up.

She looked at the baby, now sleeping peacefully. In six hours of being fugitives, Anding had barely cried, except to ask for milk. Sylvia was beginning to believe her own myth—that the child had supernatural powers.

Thirty minutes passed. Sylvia bundled up the baby and waited by the motel entrance, making sure the staff could see her. A couple arrived—one of the buyers. The exchange took less than three minutes. Her hands trembled as she counted the bills. A hundred thousand pesos. Just like that.

She handed them the baby.

After paying her bill—and tipping the staff generously—she stepped outside into the brightness of freedom. But then a Toyota Corolla pulled up beside the drugstore. A man exited. In the passenger seat was an elderly woman.

“I’m sorry,” Sylvia said, half recognizing them. “The baby’s already been taken—just minutes ago.”

“How much?” the driver asked.

“Hundred thousand,” Sylvia replied.

“Tough luck,” he muttered. “Grandma here was ready with one twenty-five.”

Sylvia instinctively looked toward the drugstore—and there they were, the new parents, shopping for baby supplies. She seized the moment.

She approached them again. “Sorry to intrude, but someone is willing to offer twenty-five thousand more. No pressure—you decide.”

The woman looked alarmed. The man, puzzled.

“I’m not playing games,” Sylvia added. “He’s outside, you can talk to him if you like. Or just ignore him.”

She left, waving graciously to the man outside. “They may or may not agree, sir. Thanks for coming.”

When the couple stepped out, they saw the elderly woman—Vida—still in the car.

“We’ve decided to keep the baby,” the woman said.

Vida smiled. “Can I see him?”

The wife gently lifted the hood. The elderly woman gasped softly.

“My son was a priest. I lost him to cancer. I hoped to raise a boy in his memory… maybe even help him become a priest.”

The baby kicked and flashed a radiant smile. The mood lightened. The couple now wavered.

Then, a young woman approached. “You must be Sylvia Monir?”

“No,” the wife replied. “Who are you?”

“We’re Metrocom,” a burly man interrupted. “You’re under arrest!”

Shocked, the wife turned to Vito, her husband. “I told you this was a scam!”

The driver intervened. “Can I see your badge?”

The man flashed handcuffs.

Vida intervened, eyes sharp. “We’re all going to the precinct. David, please drive us.”

The moment froze. Then the third agent pointed to a Lancer across the street. Just then, a real police patrol turned the corner—lights flashing.

“Let’s go,” the fake officer barked. “Forget Sylvia.”

They vanished. Vida and the couple were left stunned.

Two uniformed officers approached. “Everything okay, ma’am?”

“Yes,” Vida smiled. “God bless you. You remind me of my son.”

The police left. Inside the Corolla, silence. Then Vida spoke:

“My name is Maria Vida Corazon De Gracia. Call me Vida. David here is my nephew. Can we drop you off in Lanciano City?”

The husband hesitated. “We’d rather you keep the child. We’ll accept a refund.”

“Of course. You’re always welcome to visit,” Vida replied.

On the drive, they agreed to a one-month custodianship, with Vida reimbursing the couple and handling adoption papers herself.

Over refreshments at Vida’s home, they shared life stories. Vida spoke of her son Dante, a priest, and her military husband who died in service.

Trudie, the wife, shared her struggles with infertility. “We’ve tried everything. Even been to Obando and Baclaran.”

Vida laughed. “That’s how I heard of this child, too. A priest’s child, perhaps. That drew me in.”

They discussed the strange events at the drugstore.

“Do you think Sylvia knew those people?” Vida asked.

“No idea,” Trudie replied. “But we were terrified.”

“Maybe I’ll ask around,” Vida said. “But I understand if you want to leave the child now.”

“Yes,” said Vito. “He’s safer here.”

“You’re always welcome,” Vida assured them.

At the store, Father Andoy heard from the owner that Sylvia had taken the baby out before, claiming medical visits.

The next day, Sir Dikomo came by. Told she hadn’t returned, he searched her room. He found old tabloids and a crumpled sheet of paper covered in crossed-out names and numbers.

Back at his office, none of the numbers worked. Sylvia had vanished.

FOR THE NEXT FIVE YEARS, Anding became Franco. Vida had him baptized Francisco De Gracia. His papers were formalized, his birthday declared as March 14, 1985.

One night, Vida dreamed of monsters—part scorpion, part centipede, part octopus—leaping from the sea and snatching Franco away. Yet even in the grip of the creatures, Franco’s eyes told her: I’m okay.

THE HUNT CONTINUES: DE GRACIA LOSES FRANCO

Sir Dikomo tracked Hussein Tho Munir to the Scout League of the Philippines (SLP) dormitory in Manila, a well-known haven for transients from the Visayas and Mindesaba. The dormitory maintained a handful of “permanent” residents—executive officials or major benefactors of the SLP. Munir had been one of them for the past eight months.

Aside from its affordability, the dormitory's location was convenient for Mindesaba visitors, many of whom came to see Munir for help deploying contract workers to the Middle East. He also brokered partisan deals; his guests were often ambitious politicians from the South. With the 1992 general election coming up in a couple of years, the air was thick with scheming. Those who planned early stood to profit the most.

A policeman from Lanao del Sur, familiar with Munir, had recently contacted Sir Dikomo for election-related work. In passing, he mentioned Munir’s name and offered an unsolicited endorsement.

“He can help us build our election network—provincial down to municipal,” the policeman said.

“Where is he now?” Sir Dikomo asked.

The dormitory guests were caught off guard when four uniformed officers arrived looking for Munir. The receptionist led them to his room. Munir, though surprised, greeted Sir Dikomo with wary politeness. It had been two years since they last crossed paths in Quiapo. He offered coffee at Fricky’s.

“I didn’t know you were hiding here,” Sir Dikomo quipped. “Someone from my hometown tipped me off.”

“Let’s talk outside,” Munir said, glancing at the uniforms. “Someplace cooler.”

As they exited the dorm, Sir Dikomo cut to the chase. “It’s about Sylvia. Any news?”

“I’ll check with the agency tomorrow,” Munir replied, cautiously.

Outside, a police car idled along Natividad Street. Three officers lingered nearby. Sir Dikomo waved them off. “Be right back.”

They walked toward Fricky’s. Munir sensed that whatever information Sir Dikomo wanted, it was serious enough to warrant this meeting.

“That dorm—it’s tension-free,” Munir said. “Uniforms trigger too many alarms.”

“I get it,” Sir Dikomo replied. “Besides, it’s been a while since anyone treated me to lunch.”

“At eight-thirty in the morning?” Munir smirked. Sir Dikomo abruptly stopped walking.

“This is a short visit, Tho,” he said. “I just want to know if you know where Sylvia is.”

“Then we really should talk longer,” Munir insisted, angling for leverage.

Though Munir had been cleared of involvement in a separatist case in Mindesaba, Sir Dikomo still avoided being seen with him. Accepting this invitation wasn’t easy. But Munir had his reasons, too—being seen in public with uniformed officers, unshackled, helped bolster his image in prejudice-ridden Manila.

At Fricky’s, Munir made his conditions clear. He wanted assurance Sylvia wouldn’t be harmed. He knew she’d crossed Sir Dikomo once, but he also knew Dikomo was unaware of just how deep that betrayal ran.

“She’s in Hongcau,” Munir said. “Left three weeks ago, her third contract since 1985. Recruitment agency confirmed it.”

Sir Dikomo nodded. He didn’t tell Munir that he had OXD ties and that their Qina headquarters were in Hongcau. He was more than the “boss chief with the ninja moves”—and this job, small as it was, might lead to bigger things within the organization.

“I’m looking for the Panatag Baby,” he said. “If you know anything, Tho, you'd better not screw me over.”

Munir gave a slight nod. “Give me your contact number. I’ll let you know if anything comes up.”

Years earlier, Sylvia had left personal belongings with Munir, believing he could keep them safe in the Philippines. Among them: a tattered directory with names and telephone numbers. Three

names had transacted with her over the Panatag Baby—all looking for a baby to adopt. She traced the prospective buyers from the guest registry of nearby orphanages. She did this only because it took time for Sir Dikomo—who presumably granted her the right of first refusal—to respond. And she was in urgent need of cash.

Two days later, Munir called.

"I have something you might find useful," he said, triumphant.

"What is it?" Sir Dikomo asked.

"Names. Numbers. Maybe they'll lead you to the baby."

Dikomo jotted down five names. He and his team scoured the yellow pages for hours. Nothing. He tried calling the numbers himself.

"Good afternoon, may I speak to Ms. Vida Corazon De Gracia?"

"She's not here," a man answered. "Please call again later."

Another number:

"This is Eugene from Social Welfare. I understand you're interested in adoption?"

"That was long ago. We have our own child now. Goodbye."

The third call was abruptly cut off. Dead end.

Two hours later, he tried Vida's number again. She answered.

"This is DHL. We have a parcel, but the address was damaged. Could you confirm—?"

"How did you get our number if you don't have the address?" she shot back. "Anyway, I'm not expecting anything. Goodbye."

Dikomo almost dropped the whole thing. Maybe it wasn't worth it. But then he thought: what if it was? He met with his OXD contact and negotiated a better deal—2 million pesos for the boy. "You've saved five years' worth of babysitting," he reasoned.

He offered ₱125,000 each to the same three operatives who tried to snatch the boy back in 1985. Punzi, 35, a former Olympian and PE instructor. Benjo, a stocky man who once posed as Metrocom. Ivanho, the brute.

All three had police backgrounds, dismissed for various infractions. While at the Integrated National Police logistics command, Punzi and Benjo authorized a chopper flight that dropped a corpse stuffed in a concrete-filled drum into the sea. Unknown to them, that request had been orchestrated by none other than Sir Dikomo.

Now, they were part of OXD—still unaware he had caused their dismissals.

From Sylvia's list, they obtained two addresses. After days of surveillance, nothing matched. But the address of Vida Corazon De Gracia came up through phone company records. Her house was on the boundary of Lanciano City and Manila. They watched from Paquito's Chicken nearby.

After three weeks, they noted a pattern. Vida, David, and a boy—always together. Sunday church at Santo Domingo. Friday shopping in Cubao or Sau Paulo. Fiesta Carnival for the boy. Mondays to Thursdays, David left alone. Vida and Franco stayed home most days.

The OXD picked Friday the 13th of April 1990, to pounce. A weekday, busy, but not sacred like Sunday. The plan: snatch Franco and deliver him to Sir Dikomo's apartment in Quiapo. Odd, perhaps—but Dikomo said he'd secure traffic along Lanciano Boulevard.

But the OXD operatives had their own ideas. They believed Franco could fetch ₱3 million in ransom. They decided to double-cross Sir Dikomo if needed. Risky? Yes. But they had the talent and audacity to back it up.

After a botched operation in 1985, the OXD trio had lost professional currency and was now scrambling for leverage. They could not go on being brushed aside as lower-tier operators in the child trafficking underworld. After having felt betrayed by their handlers, they were now being ghosted.

But they remained gritty, resourceful, and undeniably desperate. They wanted their due and safety. Symbolically, they were the embodiment of how institutional corruption trickled down. They were the human residue of systemic failure—too dirty for redemption, too aware to remain pawns.

In a win-or-go-home game, could they hack it? Their resume suggested so. Punzi—the strategist—was smart, bitter, and sharp-tongued. She was the man with a plan. Used manipulation over violence. She was tired of being expendable. Benjo—the brawler—was muscle, instinctive, occasionally reckless, disguising insecurity with bravado. Ivanho was the chameleon: adaptive, observant, pragmatic. Could switch sides if necessary. He was the trio's emotional thermostat—when he flinched, it must be serious.

THAT FRIDAY: Vida, David, and Franco strolled through Senhora das Neves Shopping Center. Vida had been thinking of the boy's—whom she named in official papers as Franco—birthday. She picked March 14 as his "official" day.

Franco was cheerful, odd in delightful ways—watching spectators instead of the magician during a street show. Vida saw in him the makings of a priest. Despite hints of autism (which a doctor suggested might fade), she was determined to keep him, come what may.

In the parking lot, the OXD team spotted their red Corolla. The Lancer—repainted black—waited along the walkway. Benjo and Ivanho stood near a newsstand, pretending to browse tabloids. Punzi sat at the wheel.

As the trio approached, Benjo shoved Franco into the Lancer's back seat. Ivanho pushed David away. Both men drew their .45s and aimed at the stunned adults. Franco didn't resist. Benjo climbed in beside him. Ivanho jumped into the front.

The Lancer roared to life, doors still ajar. In twelve seconds, Franco was gone.

Vida grabbed David. "Phone booth!"

They ran to the far end of the mall. Vida called three high-ranking officers—all connected to her family or late husband. Then she called General Rosendo Dimas Uy, a retired general who owed his life to her husband. Of all her calls, she trusted only one to truly deliver.

"Ros," she said, barely composed. "They took Franco. About thirty minutes ago."

She gave him everything—plate number, car make, colors, suspect descriptions. Ros promised to mobilize his network. "Call me if you hear from them," he said.

As the Lancer reached the intersection of Magsaysay Boulevard and Victorino Mapa Street, blinking lights and police cars blocked their way—an improvised checkpoint.

Traffic slowed. Punzi spun the Lancer into a sharp 360.

Ahead, another patrol car loomed at a distance. They had seconds to decide.

“Go right,” Ivanho urged.

Punzi prepared to turn—then spotted a jam ahead.

“Back up,” Benjo snapped. “Turn left instead.”

SIR DIKOMO SEES FRANCO FOR THE FIRST TIME, ONLY TO LOSE HIM, AGAIN

Sir Dikomo had felt uneasy for the past half hour. He had expected a call from the OXD operatives. The silence meant only one thing: something had gone wrong. When instead he received word from the substation about troopers massing around Lanciano Boulevard, unease gave way to dread.

He mobilized five of his seven subordinates and hurried to the scene, just a short walk away. They crossed the congested street through the Aguinaldo Underpass and emerged into a chaotic Plaza Roma. Traffic was at a standstill. Patrol cars sealed off Legnica Street.

Pushing through the crowd, Sir Dikomo flashed his ID and asserted control.

"I’m Chief of Police for Quiapo. This is my jurisdiction," he said, voice sharp with the insult of being bypassed.

The officers briefed him: a hot pursuit operation was underway. Three suspects had kidnapped a young boy and fled into Mamiluk. No one had seen them emerge.

Sir Dikomo’s team stormed the restaurant. Ten officers were already inside: three descending the stairs, three others inspecting the restroom.

“It was locked from the inside,” one investigator reported. “We forced it open. No one was there.”

Frustrated, Sir Dikomo led his team toward Quiapo Church. He hoped the OXD trio had made it to their safe house.

But the streets were thick with onlookers and churchgoers now mixing with the patrols. Even the cops looked like dazed spectators. At Legnica, Sir Dikomo had ordered all exits blocked.

Then he spotted them.

Benjo and Ivanho emerged from the church. Two youths trailing them from Legnica shouted, “There! The kidnappers!”

The crowd turned. Patrolmen drew pistols and sprinted toward the suspects.

Benjo and Ivanho ducked back inside the church, weaving through the startled crowd. As they passed Punzi, they whispered, “Leave the stash. Get out now.”

Sir Dikomo, a master of the maze-like alleys of Quiapo, swept his gaze across Plaza Roma. The crowd here was thinner. His eyes locked onto a figure. Ivanho—disguised as a candle buyer—was blending into the street.

It hit Dikomo: they were using the crowd as cover. The army’s swift response, the ten patrol cars—this wasn’t just a kidnapping. And if someone made the connection between him and OXD, he’d be finished.

He considered sidling up to Ivanho, coaxing the child's location from him. But a single witness might be enough to destroy his career. He let the man go.

Benjo and Punzi were loitering nearby, feigning interest in sidewalk goods. No sign of the child. Sir Dikomo, puzzled, turned back toward Legnica.

Journalists had arrived.

"We heard you were close to apprehending the suspects," one asked.

"We tried," Dikomo replied. "The crowd got in the way. But we're extending the search. They may have fled toward Mediatrix or Sta. Cruz."

He radioed the Sta. Cruz police chief and ordered the blockade lifted. Traffic, halted for nearly an hour, surged back with honks and cheers.

Later, at Quiapo Church, Sir Dikomo met with Monsignor Hoben Ubanon in the rectory. The Monsignor, as always, greeted him with coffee and called him "General."

"There was a kidnapping, Monsi," Dikomo said. "I need your help. Ask your priests and Hijos if they hear or see anything unusual—especially anything involving a young boy."

THAT SAME NIGHT…

Hijos Boynas Diaz and Elodon Haropoy, known as "El Odon," were collecting the day's trash—mostly wilted sampaguita garlands from under the church statues.

At 9:00 p.m., the last mass had ended. The crowd thinned. Lights dimmed.

Inside one still-lit confessional, Father Revo sat reading *Towards a Theology of Liberation*. He hadn't had a penitent in an hour.

Then Boynas approached. "A lady asked me to open the back storeroom," he said. "Something's off."

When they returned, the woman was gone. El Odon, pushing his cart, emerged from the storeroom.

"What's in there?" Father Revo asked.

"Where? Where? Why? Why?" El Odon, in his trademark staccato talk, replied, confused as ever.

Boynas explained: he'd seen something odd inside that morning. They decided to check.

The storeroom was dark. On the floor lay what looked like a bulky sack. El Odon touched it—and recoiled.

It moved.

Security swarmed in. With cautious hands, they peeled off the layers of tape binding a small, limp boy.

It was Vida's Franco.

He was hogtied, mouth taped shut, wrists and ankles bound. A security guard sliced through the tape. Franco collapsed.

They rushed him to the parish clinic through the side door.

Outside, Benjo and Ivanho watched. From the church railings, they saw their secret unravel.

With no doctor in sight, Father Revo drove Franco to the hospital himself, Boynas at his side. They didn't notice the white Gemini—carrying the OXD trio—cruising just meters away.

At an intersection, their paths diverged. The Tamaraw that carried Father Revo's group turned right toward Singhua Doctor's Hospital. The Gemini turned left.

Two hours later, Father Revo returned. Franco, now fed and bathed in light, looked human again. He was given a bed in the rectory.

Monsignor Ubanon, long asleep, would hear about this in the morning.

MEANWHILE...

Vida waited for a ransom call. It never came. Three days had passed.

General Rosendo Uy had told her the child had been lost during a chase in Quiapo. She offered him a million pesos to find Franco. Still—nothing.

Sir Dikomo was uneasy. The OXD trio had failed, yet didn't report until the next day, through an emissary.

Three groups were now after Franco: OXD (now freelancing), Vida's private troops, and Dikomo's own unit—still funded by the government, but tempted by private rewards.

13 APRIL 1990 WAS A LONG DAY FOR EVERYONE.

Monsignor Ubanon called Sir Dikomo.

"There's a child here. Could be the one you're looking for."

Minutes later, Sir Dikomo saw Franco.

The boy didn't speak. No name. No address. No mother.

But his story—told by Hijos, guards, and Father Revo—was enough. Sir Dikomo arranged for Franco to be taken to Social Welfare.

Then came a call from General Makatigbas. Regidor "Reg" Makatigbas was a multi-awarded military hawk. Before rising to the top of his political career, he dabbled as an elite fixer with questionable loyalty. Disciplined, prideful, and selective in his betrayals, he preferred dealing with order, even when it was criminal. But he struggled with the hierarchy of values. He still believed in an ideal of national service warped by realpolitik. He was the old guard trying to make sense of a game whose rules had changed.

"That boy," Makatigbas said, "belongs to Judge De Gracia. He's her adopted child."

Silence.

It made sense now—the instant military response, the mysterious presence of officers.

"Uy told me," Makatigbas added.

Dikomo understood. This case was finished.

"I'll ask the judge to identify the child," he said. "Then I'll inform the press that the case is closed."

CHAPTER 3
Yago's burden

Father Revo sat across Monsignor Ubanon in a private chamber thick with the scent of beeswax and quiet apprehension.

"Doesn't it strike you as odd," he asked, "that Sir Dikomo took Franco away before a press briefing could be staged?"

The Monsignor, who had been running a thumb across the edge of a breviary, looked up. He gave a slow nod.

"It would've made for a spectacular headline, wouldn't it? Sir Dikomo presenting the rescued child himself—"

"Precisely," Revo interjected. "So why rob himself of the glory?"

Ubanon sighed. "We should've talked him out of it."

Revo leaned in. "We could still arrange for the boy to be kept at the Hospisyo until the parents are identified. The Social Welfare Office is… not ideal."

Ubanon shook his head gently. "There are politics in this, Revo. You know that."

He let a pause stretch between them before adding quietly, "I miss Father Andoy."

Revo smiled at the mention of the maverick priest, now reassigned to some far-off diocese after the scandal clung to him like incense smoke.

"He had a way of putting himself in the middle of things everyone else ran from."

They shared a chuckle, nostalgic and uneasy.

ACROSS TOWN, THREE MEMBERS OF THE OXD operation sat in the dim backroom of a closed billiard hall, their patience burning faster than their cigarettes.

Punzi tapped her foot. "Five hundred thousand, that's the least we should be getting. Surveillance for a month. That damned Lancer is practically scrap."

Ivanho smirked. "And what did General Makatigbas say again?"

Benjo replied, "Said to talk to Dikomo."

"But Dikomo might have ghosted us," Punzi said.

"That's why we told Reg to pass the word," Benjo said. "Let's see if loyalty means anything anymore."

They sketched two plans:

Plan A: Stay with OXD, provided payment arrived within 24 hours.

Plan B: Reclaim the child by force and demand a ransom from Judge De Gracia—three million, non-negotiable.

At 5:30 p.m., Punzi's burner phone buzzed. El Odon. He spoke like he always did—hesitant, like every sentence might be his last. She had earlier paid for any information he could share with her.

"The boy... boy's being moved... to Sir Dikomo's office... tonight. Press conference... eight p.m..."

Punzi grinned. "Underpass?"

"Aguinaldo. Likely."

They sprang into action. Benjo, dressed as a sidewalk vendor, took position at the Plaza Roma entrance of the underpass. Punzi and Ivanho are on opposite sides of Lanciano Boulevard.

But Sir Dikomo was ten steps ahead.

Plan A: Drive Franco to safety via Mediatrix Street.

Plan B: Cross the boulevard on foot via the Legnica Overpass.

Aguinaldo Underpass? Last resort.

Sir Dikomo made sure Judge Vida wouldn't know of Franco's rescue until the press conference. The less she knew, the fewer wolves sniffing around.

At street level, a whisper spread. The name "Bodabil" floated like smoke over a gathering of card players and dama-watchers.

"You looking for Bodabil?" one asked.

"He stabbed someone in Sta. Cruz, didn't he?" said another.

"Reward money on his head, I heard. Big-time syndicate."

Bodabil—more commonly known as Yago—was a legend in the back alleys. He'd once stolen a gold necklace from a police stash house. The officer in charge? Domingo "Madis-ogon" de Sabado, a relic of Manila's dirtiest days.

Yago knew the three rules of survival: steal with precision, stay useful to the right cops, and never bleed alone.

He had tried going solo, a freelancer preying on students and drunks. He once tricked a customer out of change with a flick of his wrist, hiding bills mid-count. But survival wasn't just about skill—it was about protection. After nearly dying thrice before twenty, he sold his soul to Madis-ogon.

From then on, Yago became the top earner for the gang.

His unit, "Bodabil," took its name from a vaudeville bar in Sta. Cruz. Behind the stage lights and sequins was a prostitution ring frequented by politicians. Yago's crew—Tirador, El Kupitan, and Kamao—served as both recruiters and enforcers.

Where once Yago stole to survive, now he stole for strategy.

He'd overheard enough drunken talk from corrupt contractors and puffed-up politicians to justify his trade. If they could steal with impunity, why couldn't he?

He wasn't a hero. But he knew the street better than anyone. And tonight, as the shadows thickened around the underpass, he was about to remind everyone that in Quiapo, saints and thieves shared the same pavement—and often, the same fate.

ROOTS OF THE WRETCHED: A FLASHBACK

His real name was Gerundio Justicador, but everyone called him Golek. He was five—almost six—when violence tore his family apart. Guns for hire erased his parents from the world and left behind only smoke, silence, and unanswered questions.

As he grew older, fragments of truth filtered through whispers and vague recollections: his father had once worked, out of a debt of gratitude, for a legendary politician in a backwater barrio in Nueva Vizcaya. This man was the type who made headlines for trading bullets with his rival's security detail. When political ambition made the legend dangerous, his enemies sent killers—not for him directly, but for the easy targets around him. Golek's father was one of the first to fall.

His mother's death unfolded like the third act of a doomed love story. That day, she was drying rice in the yard when a motorcycle stopped near their crumbling fence. Two masked men approached, firearms visible. She knew what they were. She also knew who they were looking for.

She screamed for her husband to run. She flung herself at the assassins. One of them shoved her aside with brutal ease; she landed ten feet away, crumpled and stunned.

Inside, Golek's father stirred from a nap. He heard the scream and bolted from the bed. The second he stepped into the doorway, gunfire exploded. He dropped back with a grunt, dying on the threshold—arms outstretched, as though to catch something he would never hold again.

The killers turned back to his wife. One raised his .45 to finish the job, but the other stopped him with a sharp wave of his hand. A rare mercy. But just as they turned to leave, Golek wandered into view—he had been playing with his three brothers at a neighbor's house. His mother, dazed but alive, screamed his name. Another gunshot rang out. The bullet struck her.

She lived long enough to be taken to a hospital. But sepsis stole the rest of her life.

The world that followed was one of separation and scattering. No relative could afford to keep all four boys together. Golek ended up with Uncle Porferio Justicador Denada, a struggling rice farmer with sickly land and worse luck. Life was bearable—until gambling debts and his wife's hospital bills forced Porferio to sell Golek, then just eight, to a rice trader in Manila.

He was trafficked like livestock, deposited like a crate at the Ty family compound in Cerrito, Manila.

The man who bought him, Leopoldo Ty, ran a successful rice and tobacco trade and lived in a sprawling, concrete house that took up a fourth of a city block. Golek wasn't given a bed or room—he was given a dog, a Doberdor (cross between Doberman and Labrador) named Survo, and a task: feed him twice a day. That was all.

His new palace was the dirty kitchen in the backyard. There, on a cot beside sacks of charcoal and discarded crates, Golek began his slow descent into an invisible kind of hell. The household—run with industrial efficiency by Madam Awie, Mr. Ty's wife—ignored him. House helpers were forbidden from speaking with him. His presence was reduced to utility.

He was allowed inside the main house only when fetching food for himself or the dog. He had no access to the gate. And even if he could escape, he had no map, no language for the world outside. The silence of his captivity pressed on him like the concrete walls themselves.

Still, he survived. Survo became his solace. The dog, barely older than he was in dog years, sensed something in Golek. Perhaps it was the sadness. Perhaps the shared neglect. Within months, Survo would respond to claps, whistles, and voice commands. Madam Awie softened—marginally—

allowing the two to play after feedings. These brief sessions of joy grounded Golek, reminded him he still existed.

But captivity wears the soul thin.

Then came Joey—Mr. Ty's eldest son, a cadet on break from the military academy. Impressed by the dog's health, he praised Golek's work. But when he tried to playfully wrestle the boy, Survo leapt to protect his only friend. The dog nearly bit Joey.

That near-attack changed everything.

Joey lobbied for Golek. His reward: meals inside the house, a real bed—an old servant's room reclaimed from a jealous helper named Nardong Sablay, who was never told why he had to share cramped quarters with three others now.

Though still unpaid and confined, Golek was no longer a ghost. He was now a pampered slave, envied by the old slaves. And Nardong Sablay never forgave him for it.

Then came the storm—not of rain, but of rage.

Mr. Ty returned home early from a trip to Macau, mid-fight with Madam Awie, who suspected yet another mistress funded by company money. He denied it. They screamed. Glass shattered. Expensive Qinaware, gifts from the Mayor of Manila, lay in pieces.

Fuming, Awie looked for someone—anyone—to punish. Nardong Sablay, cunning and opportunistic, sent Golek into the line of fire under the guise of helpfulness.

"You insect! Bad luck follows you like a shadow!" she spat. In her grief, she wanted Golek gone—not out of cruelty, but to wound her husband symbolically. She forgot about Joey. She forgot about justice.

She asked for volunteers to dispose of the boy. Nardong Sablay didn't hesitate.

They drove to Kalookan. At a busy intersection near a knot of vagrants and addicts, he told Golek to wait. "I'll be back soon," he lied. Golek looked at him with unblinking trust. Those eyes stayed with Nardong Sablay long after he left.

And just like that, Golek was gone—from the Ty household, from record, from memory.

He was eight. And now, he was alone.

No one looked for him. No one noticed.

But maybe someone—God, fate, whatever name you give the quiet hand behind chaos—did. Because five years later, a boy surfaced in Sta. Cruz, filthy and half-mad. Locals called him Yagit—the Tagalog slang for "the wretched." He didn't remember his name. He couldn't even remember where he came from.

But he survived.

He scavenged, begged, and was beaten. Yet he smiled. He joked with the other homeless. He gave when he had something to give.

During a flood, church workers rescued fifty-four street dwellers. Only twenty-five could stay inside the elevated sanctuary of the parish. Golek—now Yagit—was one of them.

That's where he met Katalina, thirteen years old, a girl who lived under the Sta. Cruz bridge with her family. When they returned to their spot beneath the overpass, Golek went with them. There were no property lines under the bridge. Just tarps, scrap wood, and shared warmth.

Here, finally, he felt human.

One day, while they were sorting scrap metal and trash, he told his makeshift family, "People used to call me Golek."

"'Yago' suits you better," someone said—short for "Yagit na Golek."

"Yagit na, gago pa," another one quipped— "wretched and a fool, too." An eruption of laughter followed.

And so the street baptized him: Yago.

From scavenger to petty thief, Yago climbed the hierarchy of crime. At seventeen, he was a master pickpocket. By twenty, he'd been jailed three times. But since joining Madis-ogon's underworld crew, he'd learned to slip through the cracks of the system.

At the My Way nightclub, surrounded by politicians confessing their crimes over whiskey, Yago felt vindicated. He stole crumbs; they stole countries.

Still, he developed a conscience. He avoided students, old women, and fellow poor. He targeted only those who could afford to lose a wallet.

One night, he heard a priest's voice drifting out of Sta. Cruz church:

"When you think you are free, that's when you can do great things. A kiss stolen in the name of freedom may cost more than a man can afford. Freedom is a test—and many fail."

Yago listened, unseen in the shadows.

He and Katalina eventually paired. He was 22, she was 21. They rented a tiny room in Sta. Cruz. A year later, she gave birth to Junie. He quit crime. They pushed a cart to Divisoria every dawn, sold toys and utensils in Quiapo, and returned on foot, exhausted but proud. Their lives were hard—but theirs.

And remarkably, his old friends—Tirador, Kupitan, Kamao—followed him out of the shadows. They got jobs at My Way. They built homes. They built peace. The Bodabil men tried to be free.

From roots buried in grief, Yago had grown into something no one expected: a man. The wounded survivor was not a villain, hero, or martyr—he was *a product*. Orphaned by political violence, commodified by poverty, and abandoned by cruelty, he was shaped not by malice but by the indifference of others. His early years were marked by learned helplessness, but his heart never calcified. His evolution—from voiceless slave to self-determining father—was a slow reclamation of agency. He survived by *adapting*, not resisting. This made him seem docile at first, but later, we see that adaptation was his superpower.

BODABIL'S REFORM PATH MEETS BETRAYAL

Lee Tan took the call from a grimy public phone booth. The kidnappers were direct: the ransom must be split into two equal parts, all in 100-peso bills, sealed in black plastic bags. Half would go to KFRG and the Mindesaba operatives.

(Nobody knew what exactly the acronym KFRG stood for and who they were, although not a few thought it meant "kidnap for ransom group". Some speculated that a faction in the military organized it, composed of organized crime convicts and dismissed uniformed personnel, originally intending to support the coups mounted during the Aquino administration. The group later specialized in kidnapping and bank robberies. Part of its revenues funded campaign kitties of politicians, which could have explained why KFRG was almost "untouchable".)

The other half—less certain—likely belonged to Sir Dikomo's circle. Each group held a piece of the operation's puzzle, a fragment of intelligence no other faction possessed.

The exchange point was set: the north side of the open parking lot in front of the Morelos Grandstand at Santiago de Compostela Park, just a stone's throw from the old Borbon Hotel. Tan would deliver the money personally, aboard a passenger jeepney driven by a lone operator. That same jeepney would be used to retrieve Pearlie.

KFRG warned him three times: no police, no soldiers. Any hint of surveillance, and Pearlie would die.

"I'll send someone with the cash," Tan offered. "I'll be in a different car to pick up my daughter."

"You listen to me, Skunk," the voice snarled. "You don't get to rewrite the rules. Thirty minutes. Eleven sharp. Or your daughter dies."

Tan held back a bluff. He knew his voice would crack.

Despite his panic, he marveled darkly at their choice of location—only three viable escape routes. Uy had assured him that a battalion could be stationed in the distance. They could close the net if necessary. But Tan insisted on a clean trade. Pearlie's safety was non-negotiable. He even taunted Uy with a bitter jab: Wasn't it the government's job to catch criminals?

By eleven, Tan sat inside the jeepney, drenched in sweat from the searing heat and his own rising dread. Around him, the parking lot lay still, only a few cars parked along the grandstand's far end. He remembered jogging here in his younger years. Joggers were long gone by now. Only the heat remained.

Two public phone booths stood like silent sentries at either end of the grandstand. Their presence now made sense. Remote communication, no electronic trace. Low tech, high paranoia.

At 11:15, a white Ford Fiera rolled in. The windows were heavily tinted, the body branded like a delivery van. It eased up next to Tan's jeepney.

The window rolled down. Pearlie. Duct tape over her mouth, trembling. Alive.

Inside: four men. Two up front—KFRG. In the back, one Mindesaba operative, one KFRG escorting Pearlie.

The man riding shotgun—clearly the leader—spoke. "Move the bags. Now."

Tan staggered under the weight of the cash, hauling both bags from the jeepney to the van. Seeing Pearlie at close range seemed to infuse him with brief energy, rage eclipsed by relief.

Then came the accusation.

"There are snipers on the Borbon rooftop. Patrols at the embassy and the Cupertino intersection. And more troopers at Quiapo, Sta. Cruz, Binondo. You trying to get your daughter killed?"

Tan's jaw dropped. "What are you talking about?"

"You got coins?"

Still stunned, Tan nodded.

"Go. Use the phone. Call off your dogs."

As Tan stumbled toward the phone booth, the man barked into a walkie-talkie, calling in real-time updates.

"Are the bags clean?"

"No counterfeit," a voice confirmed. "Each weighs twenty-two kilos. Nineteen to twenty million, roughly."

Tan returned. "They've cleared the streets. Check for yourself."

Static burst through the walkie-talkie.

"K91, this is KP3. All clear."

"...KP1. R1 clear."

"...KP5. R5 clear."

"...KP2. R2 clear."

"...KP4. R4 clear."

Silence. Then finally:

"...R3 here. Two patrol cars just pulled out. Looks clean."

K91 looked at Tan and smiled coldly. "Now you see why only you could make this delivery. No one else could pull off that kind of street-clearing power."

Then came the bombshell.

"Your daughter," K91 said, "is wearing a custom explosive. It's rigged to detonate in ninety minutes. The timer started when we got here. Only I can disarm it."

Tan's face drained of color.

"If I'm hurt—or even suspect danger—it goes off in sixty-five minutes. It won't kill her. But it will destroy her womb. Understand?"

Tan clenched his fists. Rage. Helplessness. Shame.

"You listening?" K91 asked sharply.

"Yes," Tan whispered.

"We'll release her in three minutes. We're not monsters—we're professionals. We collect from the rich. We feed the poor. We keep our word. We carry weapons, sure. But only to get the job done."

The rear door slid open. Pearlie was released. She staggered toward Tan. He caught her, held her like a lifeline.

As the van pulled away, Tan rushed back to the phone booth. He rang Uy again.

"Let them go," he growled. "She's wired. A bomb."

He made one final promise: a reward matching the ransom would be handed over—for discipline, for obedience, for not getting his daughter killed.

A FEW METERS DOWN PERON AVENUE, the Ford Fiera made a left turn. At the same time, an identical Fiera van—same color, same markings, same plate number—turned in from Allende Boulevard.

Inside: four limp, drugged Bodabil operatives. At the wheel: Gidaben. Standing below five feet, he was almost unseen when seated. He carried a baggage of inflatable remorse in his heart, having tipped Madis-ogon on Bodabil's location, where his men could pick them up. Gidaben lived by the unspoken rule that kind protected kind, but he was at a corner, and the police were closing in. He needed to save his own skin. Madis-ogon, in collaboration with Sir Dikomo, and likely with tacit approval from Makatigbas, needed fall guys for the staged anti-kidnapping operation. Those who at one time or another had been part of the underworld suited their design, as public approval followed every fall of a criminal. But neither Gidaben nor Madis-ogon knew that Bodabil had already renounced their criminal ways.

Hours earlier, Madis-ogon's men had used Bodabil's hands to fire guns, framing them. Gidaben was briefed thoroughly. Drive the Fiera from the Guadalupe safehouse to the intersection. Stop. Park facing east. Exit fast.

He'd been given a codename and instructions. Retrieve a plastic bag. Drop the van. Walk away. Stay alive.

In the passenger seat beside him slumped Yago. Barely conscious. The others—worse.

This was Gidaben's ticket to freedom, Madis-ogon promised. His records wiped. His family fed. His conscience buried.

Twenty years ago, Gidaben had tried to buy one fish ball, stomach growling. A cop took pity, bought him four more. Gidaben, overwhelmed, gave the only thing he had—a novena booklet for the Black Nazarene. An aunt had gifted it to him before dying.

Now, two decades later, he'd seen the same booklet in Madis-ogon's safehouse. The officer from his past… was Madis-ogon's father.

EVERYTHING HAD GONE according to Sir Dikomo's script.

Pearlie was safe. The bags were filled. The van was in motion. Now came the performance.

He tipped off the media—pursuit was underway at the Borbon Hotel grounds.

K91 had chosen escape route R3. The others were unreliable. R1, though optimal, was too close to the police district headquarters.

As instructed, Gidaben turned the replica van around and parked just ahead of K91's van. K91 stepped out, handed over a black bag, and retrieved an empty one. Inside the van, his assistant quickly redistributed the cash to make the bags appear equal in heft.

"No weighing," K91 said. "Just make them look right."

Then to Gidaben: "When the light turns green, drive. When it turns red, you'll be at the intersection. Then run."

Gidaben nodded. No questions.

K91 radioed in:
“R7… this is K91… Get Exodus ready. Over and out.”

As Gidaben’s van moved toward the intersection, the media began arriving. Cameras, reporters, headlines waiting to happen.

Gunfire erupted.

From the nearby United States embassy, Madis-ogon’s men opened fire. Rifles and handguns tore through the van’s windows. The replica Fiera exploded in a storm of glass and blood.

The media rushed in. The cameras rolled. Sirens screamed. Madis-ogon was the first senior officer on scene. He approached the van, expecting four dead bodies. Instead, Yago was crawling, barely alive.

He considered shooting him then and there.

But the cameras were watching.

So he handcuffed Yago and dragged him toward a patrol car.

More units arrived. Reporters edged closer. Cameras flashed.

A police officer opened the rear door. Three dead men slumped inside, their faces obliterated.

THE HUNTERS LOSE FRANCO AGAIN, BUT TERESA FINDS HIM

Yago relished the Good Conduct Time Allowance privilege that would allow him to go out, escorted, of course, and render community service. It was an opportunity to see his family—Katalina and Junie—no matter how fortuitous. Today, being in Quiapo, was one of those days he had high hopes of seeing his family. Except that everything ended tragically for him.

He spotted them first—Gidaben’s men—shadows swelling at the far end of Plaza Roma, near Paterno Street. The way they clustered and whispered with urgency, Yago knew: they had come for him.

“There he is!” one of them bellowed, breaking the morning stillness. “Three million for the kidnapper!”

“Break his bones, but bring him in alive!” came the echo, drunk on the scent of bounty.

Yago froze. A vision slammed into him—the betrayal from two years ago, Gidaben’s finger singling him out, the arrests, the murders of three friends, and the hellish months in prison. It was a miracle he had survived, and yet, here he was, hunted again like a stray dog in a marketplace.

He turned, ran.

Unbeknownst to him, the two other prisoners assigned to city cleaning work also saw the danger. They bolted toward Mediatrix. The guards, confused and panicked, gave chase. One focused on the two fleeing inmates, while the other—a shotgun slung across his shoulder—zeroed in on Yago, who veered toward the bustling Shoe Mart near Padre Pio.

MEANWHILE, ON ANOTHER STREET NEARBY…

Franco, flanked by five armed escorts assigned by Sir Dikomo, stepped out of the rectory. Their destination: the police station, a brief ride away via Mediatrix. But when they spotted a

commotion gathering near the Aguinaldo Underpass, the escorts hesitated. A crowd surged. Faces blurred by tension and curiosity. Something wasn't right.

"Let's go around," one of them said. "Take Legnica."

They pivoted, walking briskly in the opposite direction. But three minutes later, a mob burst out from nowhere—half a block away, closing fast.

"Get the boy!" someone shouted. It was one of Sir Dikomo's lieutenants.

The lead escort scooped Franco into his arms like a football. "Cover us!" he barked.

They dove for the Underpass.

Two other cops, reluctant to flee blind, turned to face the crowd, weapons raised. "What the hell is happening?"

"Mission first!" another Sir Dikomo cop screamed. "We deliver the boy. That's the order."

Under pressure and confused, the pair relented and sprinted after the others, descending into the mouth of Aguinaldo Underpass.

EARLIER...

Yago's flight took on the shape of desperation. From Shoe Mart Carriedo, he darted toward Sales Street, then to Ronquillo, weaving through alleys like a ghost from the past. But the mob caught scent again—seven, maybe eight pursuers, fanned out and hungry. The prison guard, panting hard, joined the hunt.

At Legnica and Lanciano Boulevard, Yago faced a choice: jaywalk across high-speed traffic, cross the exposed footbridge, or vanish into the crowded veins of Aguinaldo Underpass. He chose camouflage. He plunged in.

Behind him, the mob roared. Some waved knives, others carried sticks. The prison guard fired warning shots into the air, more to disperse the mob than to stop Yago—but the noise had already traveled farther than the bullets.

Unseen, a third force stirred.

OXD: THE FREELANCERS

In a dark corner of the Underpass, three men waited. Benjo whispered into his radio:

"OX1 to OX2 and OX3. Subject nearing intercept. Ready?"

"Copy, OX1," came the replies.

The former OXD trio—Benjo, Punzi, and Ivanho—were off the leash, working freelance now. Their target: Franco.

COLLISION

Franco and his escorts, Yago, the prison guard, the mob, and the OXD trio all converged inside Aguinaldo Underpass.

The leader of the mob, thinking the prison guard a rival hunter, tried to trip him at the steps. The guard retaliated. The Underpass buzzed with bodies and tension. Yago pushed forward, slowed by foot traffic. The guard raised his shotgun.

And fired.

Yago crumpled.

Blood splashed against the marble floor. Three bystanders collapsed—collateral.

Chaos detonated. Screams. Stampede. Someone cut the power—darkness fell like a lid.

Outside, commuters jumped onto jeepneys like lifeboats. Inside, people climbed over each other in raw panic.

Yago lay on the cold floor, whispering two names— "Katalina… Junie…"—as medics lifted his broken body. The bullet had hit a major artery in his neck.

At the hospital, bureaucracy killed faster than the wound. He needed blood. None came. He died quietly, forgotten, not for his crimes but for his irrelevance.

AFTERMATH

Two bystanders survived. One with a glancing bullet to the head, another with a scratch on her leg. The guard who shot Yago faced possible homicide charges. His partner hoped the confusion would save them both.

Outside the Underpass, Gidaben's crew huddled in disbelief. They had lost the jackpot.

Across the boulevard, Sir Dikomo's men stood dazed. Franco was gone.

Dikomo suspected betrayal. Maybe OXD's rogue trio had engineered the mob to snatch the child. If so, he could deny everything. Let the heat fall on someone else—Reg Makatigbas, perhaps.

But for once, Sir Dikomo had no plan. And that terrified him.

Still, he smiled to himself: at least he never told Judge Vida they had Franco. That, he considered, was a tactical win.

AND YET… FRANCO WAS NOT GONE.

On a JD bus bound for Aparición, a woman named Teresa argued with the conductor.

"One fare only," she insisted, her three-year-old daughter Luzie limp in her arms.

The conductor gestured toward the quiet boy next to her. "How about him?"

Only then did Teresa see the child.

Franco.

He looked at her calmly, unbothered by the chaos they had just escaped.

"He's just a kid," Teresa said weakly.

The conductor let it slide.

Earlier that day, Teresa had left Aparición at dawn, Luzie cradled in her arms as always. The child had hydrocephalus—her oversized head fragile and inert. Teresa brought her to Quiapo Church every Friday and Sunday, praying for a miracle, accepting alms from pitying strangers. She believed the Nazarene gave her the strength to endure.

They left before the 8 p.m. mass, as always. But something felt off in the air.

Then, inside the Underpass, the darkness. The stampede. The howls. She turned and ran. Luzie clutched tight.

She didn't see it, but in the blur of bodies and fear, a burly man carrying Franco was tackled by a cop. Franco slipped free. He moved through the chaos instinctively.

The JD bus halted near the melee. Teresa waved frantically at the conductor, who rushed to help. In the panic, he assumed she had left her boy behind. He spotted Franco and tossed him into the bus.

Now, Franco sat beside her, silent. Unbothered. Watching.

Teresa asked him questions. He didn't speak. But he smiled sometimes, as if understanding her just fine.

As the city lights faded behind them and the dark countryside rolled in, Teresa held Luzie, not knowing she was now also holding someone else's miracle—or someone else's curse.

We were not led out of Egypt, only into the night. That's what Teresa thought as the bus huffed and puffed, determined to reach its destination.

Franco, light as a feather, lay asleep beside her. His breath made a small sound, like rustling leaves. Luzie kept her palm over his head—not touching, just hovering, like an uncertain benediction.

They said nothing.

Down in the underpass, a man had died shielding a child he barely knew. Teresa didn't know this. Not yet. But her ribs ached as if some unseen chain had broken loose.

She'd looked down at Franco earlier, then up—straight at no one—and whispered:

"Hindi ako banal. Pero kung ito ang tawag…"

She didn't finish the prayer. But prayers are rarely finished. They just begin.

LATER, IN APARICIÓN, the bus stop was empty. No signs. No names. Just a priest's bell from somewhere deep in the barrio.

Luzie looked at her mother like she asked: "You think they'll follow us here?"

Teresa didn't answer. She pressed her closer to her chest and gathered Franco with her other hand.

"No one follows ghosts," she said. "Only saints. And maybe, the desperate."

CHAPTER 4
Teresa's journey of pain—and hope

Before she became Teresa Biradayon, she was simply Teré. A girl who lived between sea and mountain, barefoot on the red soil of Bukāran—an unmarked village in Biringan, Samar Island, where maps refused to look. In that pocket of land wrapped in mist and myth, the old names still held power. Trees were kin. Spirits lived in the wind. And her people, the Karu-Sian, survived by silence, salt, and an ancient, stubborn harmony.

Teré grew under the wing of her Lolah Ibing, a stooped matriarch who recited riddles to the wind and taught Teré to dream with both eyes open. Each morning, Teré would help her father Paāg tend the kamote rows that climbed the hillside like offerings to an absent god. Paāg spoke rarely, but when he did, his voice carried weight like falling rain—gentle, persistent, cleansing. He was a fisherman once, until his boat disappeared in the same monsoon that took his brother. He had not returned to the shore since.

A maternal aunt left the island on a military banca one night and never came back. Teré remembered that evening: the way the fog swallowed her mother whole, the dull sound of paddles cutting through heartbreak.

Yet Bukāran endured. Until it didn't.

THE LOGGING MEN CAME IN BLUE

The outsiders came first as engineers—men in blue shirts with crooked smiles and clipboards. They promised water pumps and scholarships, introduced themselves with forced Visayan, and gave away radios. But the air shifted. Roads were paved where rituals once took place. Helicopters began to visit. Then, the blue men brought guns.

Soon, the sacred trees were marked with red paint. Teré watched in horror as the oldest apitong fell. Her Lolah cried. Her father's silence turned to stone.

One dusk, a fire burned near the chapel. Paāg, along with three other elders, stood before a backhoe and declared, *"This is not your land. It is still dreaming."*

Two days later, one of them was found in the ravine, hands bound. Another disappeared entirely. Paāg, representing a generation of indigenous elders who saw the land as sacred and refused to let it be monetized, began to sleep with a bolo beside his mat. His silence is ancestral, his exile prophetic.

Teré, now in her teens, understood something old was breaking.

THE NIGHT THE MOUNTAIN CRIED

It began with singing—drunken men shouting vulgar lyrics in Tagalog. Then came the rifle burst.

Teré's world folded into darkness.

She and two other girls were dragged from their homes, mouths gagged with torn skirts, wrists tied in plastic cords. The men who took them wore no insignias, only boots and sweat and the stink

of impunity. When the deed was done, the girls were dumped in a creek, naked, shaking, alive only by cruel design.

Her cousin Liling did not survive. Her body was found a day later, washed against a rock, eyes open.

The elders called it a "message." But Teré understood it was more than that. It was a dismantling. Of dignity. Of belief. Showing signs of maturity beyond her age, she grieved for a country within a country—one that was never mapped because it was never meant to survive capitalism and war.

The destruction of Bukāran was a microcosm of how modernization and militarization displaced indigenous life—not just physically, but spiritually and linguistically.

TERESA FINDS A WAY TO SURVIVE

Before dawn broke over the jungle, Teresa and her two younger siblings slipped quietly through the old trail toward Ilihan. Their father, Paāg, had insisted they go—everyone except himself and his guerrilla-trained eldest son. They would remain in Bukāran, ready for the ambush that would surely trigger retaliation. His wife, Minda, had refused to leave his side. So had the eldest son.

By sunrise the next day, Teresa and the children were on a creaking passenger motorboat bound for La Profesa City. There, among displaced relatives from the mother side who had themselves been driven to San Jose by typhoons in the 1950s, Teresa hoped to disappear in anonymity. But hope was thin along the muddy coastline. The relatives—shellfish gatherers scraping by on mangrove margins—could offer only one piece of advice: go farther. Go to Manila. Go where memory ends.

Desperation moved faster than caution. With borrowed money pooled from market friends on the promise of repayment, Teresa and her sister Waday purchased two tickets. Their youngest brother would stay behind in San Jose—for now.

On a day in October 1982, the Biradayon sisters boarded a Compañia Maritima vessel. By the time the ship docked in Manila at dawn two days later, the city loomed not as a haven, but as a labyrinth.

They searched for relatives—this time from their father's side—somewhere in the damp, crowded slums of Cerrito. By nightfall, they found the address. The household, already packed with balut vendors and stewed in the scent of duck eggs and boiled salt, welcomed them anyway. Blood recognized blood, even when hungry.

At twenty-four, Teresa knew they could not remain burdens. They needed income, and fast. A neighbor offered a way: work as attendants at a beer house. No salary, but high commissions—if you kept the liquor flowing. Customers paid in tips and longing.

The place was called *La Casta*, a favorite haunt of state employees working for one of over two hundred government corporations established by a regime addicted to patronage. One such corporation's offices lie only two hundred meters from the bar.

In less than a week, Teresa and Waday were making more money than Ilihan's entire fishing fleet in a year.

They were not stunning, but they were fresh, curvy, and inexperienced. The kind of inexperience that titillated and teased. The floor manager marketed them as "never been touched." In that economy of desire, innocence was currency.

Customers competed for their attention—none more so than Mr. Dayamante, an executive vice president who owed his position to nepotism and loyalty. On Mondays and Fridays, the Biradayon sisters were reserved—Teresa on Mondays, Waday on Fridays. The man tipped like a sultan and treated the sisters like property. They endured it—for the money, for the youngest brother, for the family now scattered and silent.

Eventually, he dated them separately, but simultaneously. Promised Waday an apartment if she got pregnant. Gave Teresa pills and silence.

On a Friday night, sometime in December 1982, the game came undone.

Mrs. Dayamante stormed into *La Casta*. She found Waday perched on her husband's lap. There was a scream. Then flying silverware. Shattered bottles. A chandelier gave up its ghost. The husband fled in shame, hijacking his own government-issued Toyota Land Cruiser, forgetting his driver, his guards, his obligations.

In a panic, he slammed the car into reverse. The vehicle crushed a scavenger's wooden cart—home to a family who lived off *La Casta's* trash. Inside, an infant slept. The cart splintered. The child died.

Mr. Dayamante stepped out. Brushed his suit. Ordered his aides to clean up. Then hailed a cab.

Mrs. Dayamante lingered, wielding her grief and connections like weapons. Her brother was a cabinet secretary. Her husband's shame was now a liability. She invented a story: Waday had tried to steal from him, caused the chaos, and caused the accident. The police believed her, or pretended to. Waday was arrested. Teresa, by some flicker of luck or divine indifference, was spared.

But the damage rippled.

The scavenger family wailed. *La Casta* paid for the burial. The janitors who knew the family wept in silence. In the eyes of the law, the powerful stayed clean, even when their tires dripped blood.

With her sister detained and threats circling like vultures, Teresa was forced to vanish once more. Her uncle in Cerrito arranged her move to Aparición, where another relative sold balut boiled in bulk and distributed them to foot vendors. Teresa had lost everything—her sister, her innocence, her job. But she still had her hands. She could work.

Mr. Dayamante, however, was not through with their lives.

Before the scandal, he had frequented Waday more than Teresa. The sisters never knew why. Perhaps because Waday had truly been untouched before him. Perhaps because Teresa had dated someone else on the side.

It was Teresa who became pregnant.

She wasn't sure who the father was. She was alone during childbirth—no sister, no mother. The pain nearly broke her. And when the child finally came, joy did not follow. Luzie, her daughter, had a grossly swollen head. Teresa stared at her newborn baby, not with delight but with dread—and then, with love.

Within three days, Teresa was back to scrubbing dishes at her uncle's cramped home. Her savings had dried up. Her new relatives offered no warmth. She had to show she was not a burden.

She remembered the balut vendors outside *La Casta*—stationary, not walking. And she learned the economics of survival: buy low, boil, sell high. Every egg cracked open was a night closer to freedom. Balut, after all, was the food and merch of migrants, of dreamers.

She claimed a spot near a cheap beer joint in Aparición. The customers here had less money, but more needs. She made enough, by poor man's standards. Enough for rice. Enough for Luzie's milk. Enough to dream.

And so, Teresa remained—selling duck eggs beside the flickering neon of forgettable bars for twenty-two years.

She did not pity herself. She had her child. She had a corner of the world that was hers. In a world that had stolen nearly everything from her, she carved out a place where Luzie could breathe, live, and grow.

In the quiet dark of Aparición's alleyways, under the broken streetlamps, Teresa found a way to survive.

FRANCO BECOMES BOY DEO

Seeing TV footage of the *Traslacion* encouraged Teresa to visit Quiapo, intermittently at first, but it became as frequent as twice a week, on Fridays and Sundays. She was in her second year of being a Nazareno devotee when the boy—whom she simply called "Boy"—joined mother and daughter in the latter's biweekly pilgrimage.

Teresa soon noticed something intangible was shifting. Although the boy had grown livelier in Aparición, in Quiapo, he became almost luminous—his eyes lit with some deep, unspoken memory, or maybe revelation.

One time inside the basilica, Teresa found her usual place beside the grand stone column, where the shadows mingled with incense smoke. Luzie lay across her lap, asleep, her breath slow and raspy. Boy sat beside her, fingers twitching, entranced by the surging tide of humanity that drifted in and out, kissing statues, wiping the feet of saints with worn towels.

The priest's voice carried across the cavernous space:

"Saint Augustine was not born a saint."

Franco's attention snapped to the altar. Teresa listened, but it was not merely with ears—it was as though the priest had unlatched some hidden chamber in her.

"Augustine resisted grace. He clung to the pleasures of the flesh. He fathered a son, Adeodatus, out of wedlock. He once prayed, 'Grant me chastity and continence—but not yet.'"

The congregation chuckled lightly.

"Yet his mother, Saint Monica, never ceased praying for him. Her tears softened heaven. Her faith was tireless. And in time, Augustine repented. He gave up his possessions, took to prayer and scholarship, and became bishop at forty."

Teresa exhaled slowly. Monica. Yes. A woman who refused to give up on her child. Teresa glanced down at Luzie. Then she studied Boy.

He was not like Luzie. Not sickly, not withdrawn. But something in him remained veiled, unfinished. He was attentive, yes, even joyful—but not entirely here. Quiapo brought him to life in

ways that Aparición could not. She wondered what he saw in the rust-colored shadows of the basilica, or in the crackling fervor of the crowd. Some memory, perhaps, only his bones could recall.

That night in Aparición, she whispered, “If I call you Deo, would you like that?” The name of Augustine’s son nagged her.

Franco grinned. “I like Boy, too.”

“Then you shall be Boy Deo.”

And so he was.

THE MONTHS PASSED LIKE WHISPERS IN THE DARK. Boy Deo became a fixture of Quiapo. Teresa taught him the limits—stay within sight, no running off—but otherwise gave him leeway. The boy was no longer the silent, hesitant creature she had first found. Now, he talked. He joked. He recounted the world with the vocabulary of wonder.

He made friends. One Friday, he introduced Junie, a boy about his age, as his new companion. Before Teresa could protest, they were off again, vanishing into the crowd with the confidence of seasoned pilgrims.

By 1992, Boy Deo, by her reckoning, was seven or eight, more or less. Teresa let him stay overnight with Junie’s family in Sta. Cruz on weekends. She watched him blossom, watched him fade into a world that seemed to recognize him. That world was not hers.

She told herself it was all right.

IT WAS ONE OF THOSE HUMID FRIDAYS when Father Revo wandered out of the convent in casual clothes, his collar tucked away, his eyes tired. He found himself in Plaza Roma, watching a group of children selling sampaguita garlands. He noticed two of them had assistants, misting the flowers with water to keep them fresh. He watched them for a long time.

He approached the five children.

“You’ve worked enough. Come, let me treat you to lunch.”

They stared at him. Suspicious. Silent. He softened his voice.

“You can bring the flowers, if you want.”

Boy Deo stood first. The others followed.

They entered the newly opened Jollifoods. The smell of fried chicken and cola hit them like perfume. The kids froze under the air-conditioning. Ordering food took a while. Father Revo had to make the choices for them.

As they ate, he noticed Boy Deo—left hand holding chicken, right hand scooping rice. It struck a chord. That was how he used to eat. How his father had eaten. How his grandfather had described them both.

After the meal, Father Revo asked the children their names. When Boy Deo introduced himself, Revo leaned in.

“Where do you live?”

“Sometimes in Sta. Cruz, sometimes in Aparición.”

“And your mother?”

Junie answered for Boy Deo, pointing. “She’s at the church.”

Curious, Father Revo followed them back. And there she was: Teresa, cradling Luzie.

His words caught in his throat. He bent slightly.

“How are you?”

Teresa blinked. The priest from her dreams. “We’re okay. Thank you.”

He looked at Luzie. “How is she?”

“In pain,” she whispered.

He laid a hand on Luzie’s head, then Boy Deo’s.

“Go to the clinic,” he said. “See if someone can help.”

They did. At the clinic, Teresa answered the nurse’s routine questions until one pierced through like a blade:

“Did you take abortifacients during your pregnancy?”

Teresa said nothing. Her silence was armor.

Revo stepped in again, his voice gentle.

“We could reach out to a TV network. Maybe get support for Luzie. Public service segment.”

Teresa shook her head. “We tried that. Twice. All it brought was pity and shame.”

He nodded, changed tack.

“And Boy Deo?”

Her eyes met his. She smiled, faintly.

“He is doing fine, Father. Thank you.”

She wanted to say more. Wanted to tell him the boy lit up around him, that the child seemed to orbit something invisible and sacred. But Father Revo did not ask the right questions.

She would not force fate. If Boy Deo had another destiny, she would not stand in its way.

She loved him enough for that.

For Father Revo, clues have started to accumulate. The admin staff of the parish office once found him rifling through old files, possibly finding something that should have been destroyed. One felt his guilt and dread. His inner gut offered some advice: *"If you dig, Revo, dig carefully. You won’t like what you find beneath the altar."*

The second time Father Revo met Teresa, there was a quiet, painful conversation where she sensed he knew more than he let on. She said something she would not know why she said it anyway: “Don’t take him away just because he looks like you.”

She dreaded the day she would wake up in the middle of the night to find Boy Deo gone—kneeling at the gate of the basilica alone, whispering a name no one taught him.

Their roles negotiated a line, separate yet parallel. Teresa embodied grace, while Father Revo sought the truth.

CHAPTER 5
The bond Boy Deo and Junie built

Escolta, in a dream.

Katalina found herself wandering past shuttered shops and weathered signage, her footsteps echoing on the cobblestones of Escolta. A sudden shimmer of memory made her pause. Across the street stood Yago—still young, still whole. He raised a hand, beckoning her without words, as if asking her to cross, to join him on the other side.

Then the music began.

"I'll see you in September, when summer is gone..."

The old music shop was playing their song again. Back when they were still kids, Katalina and Yago would tap their heels in sync with the tune, laughing like the world owed them nothing but rhythm and the promise of another day.

It was the first of September.

Seven months had passed since Yago's death—"accidental," the police report read. He had been gunned down inside the Aguinaldo Underpass in Quiapo. A few days after the burial at La Loma, Katalina and her son Junie fled Manila's noise and smoke. They went north to Nueva Vizcaya, to the town where Yago—known there as Golek—was born.

They arrived with little more than a duffel bag and grief.

There, they met Porferio, Yago's elderly uncle. The old man's guilt was as visible as the lines on his face. He listened in silence as Katalina shared everything—from her first encounter with Golek outside Sta. Cruz Church to the bitter end under the concrete dark of the underpass.

"I've lived too long not to make amends," Porferio said, voice heavy with unspoken regret.

A property long contested by Golek's family—a house lot stalled in legal limbo—had remained unsold, waiting on signatures from scattered next of kin. With Katalina representing Junie as Golek's heir, the impasse broke. The lot was sold. From the Php 10,000 proceeds, Katalina and Junie received half. It was more than enough to restart.

Porferio suggested they return to Manila. "You'll bloom where he started," he said. She took the advice to heart.

Back in Sta. Cruz, Katalina rebuilt what remained of the Padre Pio stall. With grit and memory guiding her, the business revived. Five months later, she married Gumersendo "Guimo" Pamarote, one of the Hijos, in a quiet ceremony at Quiapo Church.

On the second day of September, she and Junie visited Yago's grave, wondering what her dream of him was about. Guimo stayed behind to tend to the stall. At La Loma, after finishing her rosary, Katalina bent to extinguish the candle and noticed a piece of paper slipped into a crack in the niche.

It was addressed to her.

The handwriting was shaky. The message, gutting.

It was from Gidaben. He asked forgiveness. He couldn't face her, too ashamed, too afraid she'd hand him to the police. But he wanted to help. "Let me ease the weight I carry," the note said. He offered money. "If you wish to reply, leave it where I left this."

The name triggered something. Gidaben—faint in memory, maybe one of the names Yago had muttered during sleepless nights. Katalina wasn't sure, but anger smoldered quietly. Still, she folded the note and tucked it into her bag.

Unknown to her, Gidaben was already dying—his liver failing, his lungs bruised by years of chain-smoking. It was the hospital that broke him open. The diagnosis—cirrhosis, likely lung cancer—forced a reckoning.

It was there, in a sterile ward in Sta. Ana, that a man named Rodo came to visit. A former street brother. He came with a story that pierced deeper than any diagnosis.

"Did you know," Rodo said, "that Yago had your name on top of a list?"

"What list?" Gidaben asked.

"The one for the reformation fund."

Yago, with the Bodabil, had started a quiet effort to support underworld strays—those who wanted to leave crime behind. They were rallying support from the Hijos and even the priests. Father Revo had asked for a formal proposal. And a list.

"You were first," Rodo repeated, barely whispering.

Gidaben wept.

AFTER LEAVING THE HOSPITAL, Gidaben sought out Madis-ogon. At one of the old man's safehouses, he spotted an altar and a worn devotional booklet. This was the booklet he gave a cop, who turned out to be Madis-ogon's father, as payment for the extra fish balls the benefactor offered him when he was dead hungry. On the title page of the booklet: "Para kan Abeto. Pirmi pag-ampo kan Nazareno para han imo kalamragan." Abeto was a nickname, Alberto being the first name.

It hit him hard.

He confessed everything. His guilt. His wish to change. His readiness to die. Madis-ogon, amused but moved, handed him twenty thousand pesos.

"Peace offering," he said. "Use it to start over."

Gidaben insisted he had nothing to rebuild. But he accepted the money.

ALL SAINTS' DAY

The family visited Yago's grave again. It was Guimo who told Katalina to respond. She wrote back, telling Gidaben to send whatever he wanted through the Quiapo convent.

A few days later, a woman appeared, handing Guimo a brown envelope.

"From Gidaben," she said. "Peace offering."

Inside: Php 5,000.

The money allowed them to rent a booth inside the underpass—an upgrade from their sidewalk days. They bought more stock. Business grew. They moved into a bigger place, still in Sta.

Cruz but closer to Quiapo. Junie transferred to the Quiapo Catholic School. With the Hijos' school discount and the school's sibling tuition rule, they enrolled Boy Deo, too.

Junie, always drawn to the older boy's quiet strength, spent hours with him inside the underpass. They played, shared food, and slept under the same sheet of cardboard when Teresa couldn't fetch Boy Deo on time. The bond grew.

Meanwhile, Teresa struggled.

Luzie, her daughter, had grown frailer. Pain owned her nights. She missed Quiapo often, tending to the child who could hardly breathe without moaning. When Luzie finally passed—a week after her eighth birthday—Teresa returned once more.

She sat beside Katalina in the booth and told her everything. Her voice was flat, her eyes hollowed.

"I'm going back to Biringan," she said. "Once I get Waday out. Could you… could you help Boy Deo find a guardian?"

Katalina promised to speak with Father Revo. Guimo already kept tabs. Teresa thanked them, refused the money Katalina tried to give, and walked off into the crowd.

BOY DEO AT ELEVEN SOMETHING was half-child, half-shadow.

He lived on the street by choice, not circumstance. He sold sampaguita flowers by day, lost the profits to street games by night—Cara y Cruz, Lucky 9. School attendance dwindled. He began cheating and got caught. Still, Katalina didn't scold. Guimo, guessing the boy no longer felt he belonged, told him to sleep at the booth when he missed curfew.

Sometimes, Boy Deo curled up next to other street kids on the cold pavements of Sta. Cruz. He made friends. He made rules. He learned how to survive.

One of the few people who paid him any attention was Remegio "Reming" Bojocan, the younger brother of Boynas Diaz. Reming collected flower wreaths left by devotees—tributes that ended in trash bins. Boy Deo followed him often, volunteering to help move the offerings from the storeroom to the street.

Eventually, Reming trusted him enough to hand over keys to the inner storage areas—both in the church and the rectory.

And so, one afternoon, just past the hour of vespers, Boy Deo slipped a key into the storeroom door and let himself in.

There, amid the scent of rotting petals and wax, he began to discover that what others discard… still carries life.

He sold the recycled flowers as fresh merch.

THE MUTE SONG OF THE LOST

Junie didn't speak much anymore, but he whistled.

Low, birdlike, tuneless fragments—barely audible above the noise of Quiapo, yet somehow, they reached Boy Deo wherever he was in the sprawl of their alley. It was a habit that began one quiet morning weeks after Teresa's departure. The boy had vanished for hours, and Katalina, panicked, called out for him again and again. But it was Junie who found him, curled beneath a rusted kariton,

arms wrapped tight around a damp satchel of stale pandesal. He whistled then, a soft tremolo, and the boy stirred like a pup in its sleep, crawling toward the sound as if drawn by some ancestral call.

Since then, the tune had never left them.

Katalina watched this bond unfold with an ache that was not quite jealousy, not quite regret. After all, wasn't this the dream she and Guimo had hoped for when they brought the boy into their home? For Junie to learn how to care again, and for Boy Deo to be cared for without fear?

But life, she knew, was never cleanly drawn. Joy shaded into doubt, then into fatigue.

Junie had grown stronger—he carried crates at dawn, laughed more often, and had even begun sketching again on the backs of old receipts. Yet a restlessness coiled beneath his skin. He watched the boy too closely, as if waiting for him to vanish. He'd wake in the middle of the night to check if Boy Deo was breathing. Sometimes, when Katalina opened the kitchen door just a crack, she'd see him kneeling by the boy's sleeping form, head bowed, lips moving in silent prayer or apology—she could never tell which.

And Boy Deo, for all his small triumphs—helping with the dishes, learning to say "Salamat po," even smiling without flinching—had begun to wander again.

First, it was just to the sidewalk, chasing shadows of dogs or tracing the outlines of saints on the church walls with his finger. Then it was further: a corner store where he'd press his face to the glass, staring not at the candies but at the flickering fluorescent light. Then to the banks of the estero, where he'd squat beside the water, unmoving, for long stretches.

Each time, Junie would find him. Each time, he'd whistle, and the boy would return.

But Katalina feared the day he wouldn't.

ONE SUNDAY, AFTER MASS, they joined him in a stroll around the fringes of Plaza Roma. Guimo had given him a clean shirt—too big, but decent—and a ten-peso coin to buy ice cream. The boy held the coin as if it might dissolve in his hand, turning it over and over while the chaos of the street surged around them: vendors screaming, jeepneys coughing smoke, drums beating in some distant alley.

Junie brought out a small sketchpad and sat cross-legged on the ground. "I'll draw you," he said, smiling.

Boy Deo blinked.

"Smile," Junie said, lifting his pencil.

The boy frowned.

Junie laughed, then began sketching anyway, tongue sticking out from the corner of his mouth like he used to as a child. He was halfway through the drawing when he realized the boy had wandered off again.

Panic didn't rise right away. He looked left, right—then stood, the sketchpad dropping to the concrete.

He whistled.

Nothing.

He tried again, louder.

Still no answer.

By the time Katalina saw the look on Junie's face, Boy Deo was already two blocks away, mesmerized by a blind accordionist who sat beneath the footbridge, swaying with each note as if caught in a slow typhoon. Boy Deo stood in front of him, coin clenched in his fist, eyes wide.

The man played a waltz that no one danced to anymore. The child listened like it was a story he'd once been told.

And for a moment, he didn't want to return.

THAT NIGHT, KATALINA FINDS JUNIE ON THE ROOF, staring out at the lights of Manila like they might spell out a truth he was missing.

"He's not ours," Junie whispered.

"He's with us," she answered. "That has to be enough."

Junie turned to her, eyes hollow. "I'm afraid I'll fail him. Like I failed—"

"Don't," she said. "Don't go there."

Silence stretched between them, then softened. The wind carried the distant sound of church bells.

Junie closed his eyes.

Downstairs, Boy Deo stirred in his sleep. Then, as if dreaming of a song he had yet to hear, he whistled back.

"THE EYES"

On the belief that Boy Deo did not need to be exposed to social ills that caused problems for adults, much less led them to conflicts with the law, Father Revo had advised Guimo to play the role of father to Boy Deo.

Days later, Boy Deo sought Father Revo on Guimo's advice. It seemed there was a meeting with the principal of the catholic school, and the priest needed the boy's commitment. Unknown to many, Guimo, other *Hijos,* and parish staff among them, Father Revo had just been admitted to Cardinal Santos Hospital for Stage 2 pancreatic cancer treatment.

Boy Deo went away feeling lost. He stepped inside the basilica. Nothing much was unusual today, he thought. It was noon break. The hourly mass would not resume until four p.m. Just the same, people came in and out of the church in steadily high numbers. Devotees walking with their knees at the aisles were there. Card readers, fortune-tellers, and faith healers, among other "technical experts," were at their usual workplaces, just a few steps away from the last pews at the back. Joining them were pay-for-play professionals on the lookout for done-for-you clients, waiting to be outsourced.

He searched for the spot that Teresa had claimed for four—maybe five or even more—years. It was just beside the storeroom where he collected gold from trash. He took the metal bar that Teresa used to perch on, the late Luzie on her lap. He clearly had a longing for family. For more than half an hour, he just sat there, staring at people wiping the wooden statues with their hankies or bandanas. They then massaged some parts of their bodies with those hankies. Then he saw that again: bald men wiping off dust from their bare cranium.

He had mental notes of people who needed relief, and which parts of their bodies were supposed to be having problems. After a few minutes more, he arose and walked toward the row of fortune-tellers. He sat on one of the vacant seats. Spotting a prospective client, Boy Deo stopped him with a greeting, then said, “Sir, I can see that you have arthritis.”

Astonished, the man replied, “How do you know?”

“My eyes can see what others can’t,” Boy Deo lied.

The next day, Boy Deo tried the trick again.

For one hour, he watched the devotees lining up for the wooden touch. Then he moved over to the row of “technical experts”, claiming another vacant seat.

“Sir, I can see that your back is bothering you.”

“Are you joking or are you serious?”

“My eyes can see what others can’t,” he lied again, with conviction.

A woman hovered over him, asking, “Son, do you know what my ailment is?”

“Ah, no, Ma’am, can’t see anything yet. But I can see that your companion needs a cure for her appendix or something.”

“Did he really say that?” the bewildered companion of the lady, also a lady, blurted.

Worried that he might not be able to say anything when the next prospective client came up to him, he hurriedly left. His Sampaguita flowers were waiting for him at the Aguinaldo Underpass.

For the next three months, he took a seat at the experts’ row every Friday. Fridays, he heard it often enough, were the day one was likely to be granted with God-given powers.

He developed a modus where he referred clients to Katalina’s store. The business had grown significantly; it now carried medical supply inventories and over-the-counter drugs, including Chinese herbal drugs, which were mostly smuggled by traders in Quiapo. She and Guimo were surprised to find out that sales for over-the-counter drugs had shot up in the past few days.

Encouraged by the results of his experiments, Boy Deo toyed with the idea of putting up multiple mirrors so he could see what went on while he stayed stationary in the experts’ row.

It came to pass that Boy Deo would sometimes find himself being mobbed by past and future clients, even when he was out selling Sampaguita in Plaza Roma. His flower business itself was booming; some people were convinced that his flowers emitted healing powers.

With every passing week, Boy Deo felt himself growing into the role, learning the rhythms of the faithful and the desperate. The boy who had once felt lost now possessed an uncanny sense of belonging — rooted in Quiapo’s bustling heart.

Katalina noticed the change first. The boy came home with more coins in his pockets, more hopeful stories to tell. The tiny drugstore began to hum with activity, a beacon for those seeking remedies that straddled the worlds of medicine and miracle. Guimo watched from the side, a faint

smile tugging at the corners of his mouth, as the boy spoke openly to strangers and drew shy patrons closer.

Soon, the boy was no longer just another child peddling flowers by the underpass. He had become a figure people sought out. They called him “The Eyes” — the boy with a knowing gaze that cut through the mist of doubt and despair. To some, he was a messenger; to others, a miracle worker in the making.

At fourteen, Boy Deo possessed a reputation that outpaced his years. Yet, despite the accolades and growing reverence, he remained quietly tethered to the hum of Quiapo — to the people who pressed in upon him, to the sacred spaces that molded him, and to the faint remembrance of belonging that always pulled at his heart.

CHAPTER 6
A wedding at the center, a radical mind on the margin

They called it *The Wedding of the Decade*, but for Lee Tan, it was far more than a spectacle. It was consolidation. The long-postponed union between his daughter, Pearlie, and Gibo "Lloyd" Sim—the heir to the country's wealthiest clan—finally took place on September 22, 1994, in the year of the dog, on the most auspicious date in the feng shui calendar.

The reception, held in a custom-built glass-and-marble hall at the Borbon Hotel, was less a celebration than a declaration: that despite political tremors and market instability, alliances could still be forged in gold, blood, and legacy.

Originally set for 1988—a Dragon Year, the wedding had been delayed twice. Once due to a suspicious car accident involving the groom, and again when the country's political climate turned venomous. Now, with both families weakened in different ways—Sim bleeding on the stock market, Tan bleeding public trust—they gambled on spectacle as currency.

Pearlie, radiant in a fusion gown of white and red silk, shimmered with the poise of a bride bred for dynasties. Lloyd, in a hand-embroidered piña barong, looked more groomed than in love. Between them, they bore the hopes of interlocking empires—money meeting machinery, commerce marrying access. Sim had the money, and Tan had political connections to whoever was in power.

In keeping with tradition, most of the guests were handpicked by the couple's parents. The result was a seating chart that read like a national security briefing.

At the presidential table sat:

- Vice President Luciano Mascardo, standing in for a president "occupied by state matters."
- Defense Secretary Dimas Uy, once a general denied his dream post by favoritism, now openly aligned with Tan's ambitions.
- Supreme Court Justices Delfino Abuyonador and Tomas De Yamat.
- Senator Ruben "The Gadfly" Quemas, ever the polemicist.
- General Sir Dikomo, now the nation's top cop, his dark suit a sheath for secrets.
- Vinnie Iglesia, the beloved superstar who played heroes on screen and whispered into real senators' ears off camera.
- Irene Pucot De Barizar, media tycoon and broker of perception.
- Manila's controversial Mayor Octavo "Bonggoy" Watkasing and his vice, the populist clown Pilandro "Polong" Cujaco, whose family feuds were as legendary as their corruption cases.

They laughed, posed, and toasted. But beneath the glitter and clinking glasses, the tectonic plates of power shifted. The president's absence was as loud as a gunshot.

Lee was a master tactician who used family, money, and tradition as tools for cementing alliances. His real intent was never sentiment—it was survival and legacy. Ever calculating, he ensured his bridges to the old regime remained intact. Former cronies and ex-ministers mingled quietly—remnants of a past too valuable to burn. Among them: Ben Benaobra, the old strongman's

favorite fixer and logging magnate of Mindesaba; his ever-present shadow, General Reg Makatigbas; and the political couple, Mr. and Mrs. Dayamante, whose names still caused low-level bureaucrats to shiver.

When Lee spotted Makatigbas, he called out with a wink, "When will I get invited to *your* wedding, General?"

The widower smiled thinly. The moment passed.

Real estate barons. Banking moguls. Tobacco kings. They all came. And to the dimmer fringes of the ballroom, out of the spotlight, sat the symbolic and the sacrificial. One table was reserved for church figures: Monsignor Ubanon, the enduring Rector of Quiapo Basilica, and ailing Father Revo Calasanz, whom Ubanon had brought along for cheer.

The church had no place on the presidential table anymore, unless it played the game. And even then, barely. Archbishop Calaveria, who had officiated the rites at the Manila Cathedral, had opted out of the reception entirely. He sent Ubanon, perhaps to reward the man who kept Caritas Manila's coffers full—or to guard Quiapo's golden parish from jealous hands.

The feast was abundant. Symbolic. There was fish for fortune. Turkey for peace. Suckling pig for purity. Lotus seed desserts for fertility. The buffet had less food than coded incantation.

Father Revo, unashamed of his appetite, helped himself to two saucers of the sweet lotus seeds. One he gave to Ubanon. The other he kept. He grinned.

"If this were the Spanish era, Monsi, some of these *ilustrados* would've been whipped for not seating a monsignor up front."

Ubanon, unamused, gave a slow reply. "Perhaps Gomburza is to blame for why we're forgotten now."

The air chilled. A quiet joke, laced with history and irony.

Later, as performers danced and more guests filtered out, Ubanon and Revo made to leave. But a wave from a familiar face stopped them—Retired Judge Maria Vida Corazon de Gracia, seated with legal staff from Sim's real estate projects. Her presence was no accident. She was leading the charge in the courts to evict urban poor families from a thousand-hectare reclaimed site at Manila Bay. A future entertainment and hotel complex lay in wait.

Father Revo approached her table.

"Nice to see you here, Father Calasanz—is that right?" Vida asked.

He nodded. "And I, you, Judge."

After some brief pleasantries, their talk turned to the evictions. Father Revo, whose former activist life still lingered in his gaze, asked if she had updates. He knew some of the displaced came from Quiapo's homeless enclaves.

She sighed. Bureaucracy slowed everything, even displacements.

Then, with sudden intimacy, she reached into her handbag. "I have something for you. A gift. To thank you for being Dante's classmate."

She handed him a silver ring. On its face: *Leo Benedicto III*. Inside: *Fraile Franciscano 1649*.

Father Revo stared. "This is… timeless."

“My son told me it’s passed from priest to priest in our family since 1649. I’ve found no one else to carry it forward—until now.”

Touched, Revo nodded. But inside, doubts stirred. Could this be gratitude—or subtle bribery, in anticipation of his future stance on the evictions?

They embraced as friends, or as people playing roles neither fully trusted. The former judge remained composed and elegant, even when meaning not to hide her grief for her son and husband. As a litigation lawyer, she was morally gray. Her gift to Father Revo could have been both a heartfelt gesture and a tactical maneuver. But her personal regard for Father Revo—by just being there, for being a priest just like her departed son—was genuine.

Like incense, Father Revo freed the air from its heavy scent of doubt, of regret or remorse, for whoever was navigating a fork in the road. Far removed from the activist days of his youth, he was still the conscience of the city, even when veiled in humor and politeness. His internal struggle—between activist instincts and ecclesial duty—was deepened by this kind of collision with power.

As the party dwindled, Ubanon and Revo prepared again to leave. Then Sir Dikomo appeared, gliding toward the restrooms, his black suit catching the chandelier lights like a snake’s back.

They waited. When he emerged, Ubanon seized the moment.

“General,” the Rector greeted. “Do you remember the toddler found in Quiapo, years ago? The one handed to the police?”

Dikomo furrowed his brow. “That was… 1990, yes? A riot at the underpass?”

“Yes,” Revo replied. “There was an inmate, shot by mistake.”

Dikomo nodded, recalling. “Our report said the child was lost in the chaos. As for the parents… I’m afraid that information is classified. For security reasons.”

Sir Dikomo was a symbol of institutional amnesia—guarded, composed, but hinting at darker knowledge. As ever, his allegiance remained murky.

He regurgitated the kind of bureaucratic stonewalling both priests were used to. Still, they thanked him politely and walked away.

Outside, under the hotel’s grand awning, Lee Tan huddled briefly with Benaobra, Makatigbas, and Dayamante. Justice Abuyonador and Leopoldo Ty loitered nearby. Deals were whispered. Hands were shaken.

Tomorrow’s headlines would show only the sheen: smiling guests, lavish tables, and happy unions. Stock prices would rise.

But behind the shimmer, under every jeweled cuff and silk lapel, power flowed like old wine—thick, intoxicating, and always a little poisoned.

The ground for the unexpected rise of two street kids to unthinkable heights in politics has been paved.

CHAPTER 7
From street kids to community workers

Boy Deo found himself confronted at the police precinct. Vendors jealous of Katalina's booming business implicated him in the sale of counterfeit drugs.

Madis-ogon tried the oldest trick in the precinct playbook: he accused Boy Deo of using drugs. It was a bluff, a psychological snare meant to scare the young into admitting to crimes they didn't commit, to pressure them into roles they hadn't yet imagined for themselves—runners, watchers, junkies. But Boy Deo didn't break. He didn't speak at all.

After that, both he and Junie began skipping school. At first, it was sporadic. Then it became a silence in the classroom too loud to ignore.

One dawn, Father Revo, substituting for the early morning Mass, stepped out to sniff the air as Father Andoy used to. Plaza Roma was quiet, the city still wrapped in mist. On a wooden bench, curled like a leaf fallen out of season, he saw Boy Deo—again. He was older now, but still used his hand as a pillow against the hardwood. The image struck Father Revo with quiet force. He had seen this before. Boy Deo was seven, maybe eight, the first time. What had changed? Perhaps nothing. Or perhaps everything.

IN ANOTHER PART OF THE STORY:

Joey Ty was in his senior year when he started exchanging letters with Olivia Paez, now the Executive Director of the Peace and Sustainable Progress Foundation, a Jesuit NGO. They first met at a public dialogue at Manila City Hall—Joey representing his father, a business tycoon who wanted the squatter settlements cleared; Olivia, the fiery community organizer defending the people who lived there.

She argued with facts, poetry, and papal encyclicals. "The poor are the lungs of the city," she had said. "And yet you suffocate them." She had a way of making the room still, like a bell that rings after it's struck. Joey remembered thinking: *This woman—she's different*.

Later, he would learn she came from wealth. Studied in exclusive schools. She could've had an easier life, but chose to live among the poor, to carry their burden as her own. That moved him. It also terrified him—because it showed him how small he was.

Joey's father, Leopoldo Ty, had tried to arrange a marriage for him. Only Joey's mother opposed the match—for a reason only she knew: the girl's father was also the father of her son. In a rare act of grace, Leopoldo gave up. "Let the boy choose," he said. And Joey chose Olivia.

They married after Joey graduated from the military academy. His first assignment as a police officer was leading an anti-gambling unit in Central Luzon. He arrested a jueteng lord—and got scolded for it. "You'll learn how things work," said his superior. Later, Joey was told to ask for donations for a birthday party. He expected three sacks of rice. A truckload arrived instead.

JOEY AT THE CROSSROADS

From a privileged heir to a disillusioned reformer, Joey's moral awakening found expression in a journey of cautious discovery, one that led him to recognize complicity. Though born into wealth,

he sought a nobler path through service and conscience. He kind of grew to redeem a morally dubious lineage from total degeneration by committing himself to investing in futures not his own.

He wielded the power of witnessing: his presence was often indirect—but pivotal. He proved to himself that he could move between classes, sectors, and ideologies—without losing himself. But for now, he needed to see his world from afar.

How much more was he willing to risk—his safety, wealth, marriage—to keep living his conscience?

He asked for a transfer.

He asked for Nueva Vizcaya—not because of the scenery, but to find Golek. The man who once humbled him when he was a freshman cadet. But by then, Golek was gone. Killed accidentally in Quiapo.

From Porferio, he learned that Golek had left behind a wife, Katalina, and a son, Junie. They were struggling. Half their goods lost in a raid, customers wary, barely making it through. Still, they had Guimo—a dependable presence. A quiet anchor. A new man in Katalina's life.

Joey offered them a unit in Iztapalapa—a wedding gift from his and Olivia's estate. A home. A fresh start. Eventually, they accepted. Though Junie remained at Quiapo Catholic School, Boy Deo, after passing the exams, enrolled at the Philippine Science High School. On weekdays, he stayed at the dorm. On weekends, he came home.

The distance gave them space to rebuild. Relearn discipline. Focus.

BOY DEO'S PUBLIC MINISTRY BEGINS

Teachers at Quiapo Catholic School often debated about Boy Deo. His intelligence was unassailable—he could devour numbers, see patterns, ask questions no one else would dare ask. But his decorum, his disappearances, pulled his grades down. Junie coped better, but leaned on Boy Deo's mind like a crutch—especially in math.

Before graduating from elementary school, both boys applied for a slot at the Philippine Science High School. Joey championed the idea. He dreamed of seeing Junie at the military academy one day. Promised to sponsor him if he got in.

After finishing high school, Boy Deo enrolled in the School of Social Work and Community Development. Junie, on Father Revo's advice, took up political science. Guimo, with the Rector's help, secured him a scholarship.

As part of his coursework, Boy Deo immersed himself in the slums of Cerrito. He didn't just take notes. He listened. He saw. He remembered.

There was an old community group—Kalakal Urban Poor Association, or KUPA. A relic of martial law resistance. Dormant, defeated, forgotten. Boy Deo helped breathe life back into it.

He organized meetings. Gathered names. Built trust. At one meeting, he arrived with a binder full of donor names, contact persons, and step-by-step procedures. The kind of help that made people sit straighter in plastic chairs. In this kind of event, he rarely spoke, but absorbed everything. He watched and made mental notes of systems at play—social, emotional, and physical.

KUPA made a plan. Assigned roles. Sought community-wide participation. Within the year, they had submitted their proposals.

Before graduation, Boy Deo received word: they had been approved.

Soon, KUPA members gained on-site housing through the Community Mortgage Program. Others were relocated to Dasmariñas or Bulacan. Grants came in. Politicians followed with donations. Other urban poor groups in Cerrito began copying the KUPA model.

Somewhere in Manila, posters went up. One face, barely smiling, quietly present: *Boy Deo*.

The orphan. The squatter. The street sleeper. The quiet genius.

The builder.

He showed how to change the world without needing the world to see him. He organized not from ego but from clarity. Leadership was a tool, not a desire.

The kid who survived abandonment without becoming embittered, Boy Deo represented the unclaimed moral consequence of a broken society. He was the "child left behind"—by OXD, by the Church, by the State—but also the one who grew to quietly rebuild what they've destroyed.

To an observer, there seemed to be a trace of divine mystery to him—perhaps a subconscious inheritance from Quiapo itself. His life offered a synthesis of contradictions: born from sin, raised in faith, matured through logic and compassion. His evolution mirrored the possibility of redemption through civic action, not just personal salvation.

As an infant, he was passed from traffickers to reluctant saviors. Protected by Judge De Gracia and watched by Father Revo, Guimo, and Katalina, his silence became a language. Teresa carried him through chaos, a formative bond forged through maternal devotion. With Junie, he learned to trust again, although he was too young to know what happened to Yago, Junie's father, that there was such a thing as the fragile safety of routine. With KUPA, he chose action over resentment. He began influencing structures, not just surviving them.

Slippery grounds loomed on the horizon, like it always did, but doors had been opened. Will he ever learn the truth of his origins? Would that strengthen or derail him? What exactly did he believe spiritually? His bond with Father Revo and Teresa suggested faith, but his methods were secular. Could he remain selfless if given political power? He walked the path toward leadership—could he resist its corruptions?

From what had been shown, he could serve the role of a connector, not just between people (Junie, Joey, Father Revo, Teresa), but between worlds: the worlds of affluence and want, of muted voices and the arrogance of power, of the fringes and the center.

THE PEOPLE'S CONGRESS

The alleys of Cerrito hummed with their usual chaos—laughter, gossip, the clinking of cheap glass tumblers passed around by idle hands. In the labyrinthine sprawl of Manila's inner city, life often spilled into the streets. It wasn't unusual to see neighbors perched on broken stools, feet dangling over canals, gossiping well past midnight, their debates occasionally veering into full-blown drunken philosophy, then dissolving into slurred laughter. What was remarkable was how rarely fists flew. Somehow, the poor had developed a knack for surviving each other's company.

But on this particular afternoon, the usual buzz fell into a hush.

Boy Deo, now a college student, circa 2005, was deep in his immersion work in Cerrito with a team of classmates. They had taken the long walk past the fishball vendors and sari-sari stores when

they stumbled on a crowd forming near a canal's edge. A group of men and women, slippers squelching on wet concrete, were staring down at something laid out on an old sheet of cardboard.

A baby.

Naked.

Lifeless.

A boy.

Freshly fished from the creek. His belly was swollen with the gases of death, and his limp limbs still glistened with blackish water and creek slime.

Boy Deo's stomach churned. He had seen this before.

FLASHBACK: QUIAPO, CIRCA 1998.

He was seven, maybe eight. A little girl, a newborn, had died on the sidewalk near Quiapo Church. Her family—mother, sister, part-time father, and a skeletal puppy—lived under a blanket of plastic bags shoved into a pushcart. They were always in motion, the way people are when they don't belong anywhere.

That day, Boy Deo and Junie were tagging along with Father Revo during one of his customary walks through the neighborhood. The priest wore his white cassock, his pace purposeful but gentle. He didn't walk like a man who ruled a parish. He walked like someone trying to memorize every bruise on the body of his city.

They had just passed Junie's family stall in the underpass when one of the Hijos delivered the news.

"A child died across the street, Father."

By the time they arrived, the baby girl had already been wrapped in a makeshift shroud—a sheet donated by a woman who lived above a bakery. The parents, numb with grief, were waiting for a tricycle to bring them to the city cemetery. A barangay officer stood off to the side, chewing his lip.

"She had diarrhea yesterday," the mother told Father Revo through tears. "This morning, her skin turned black. We didn't reach the clinic in time. The neighbors scolded us for waiting too long."

And then the question.

"Why did God take her, Father?"

There was a pause.

When Father Revo finally spoke, his voice barely rose above the street noise.

"Often, in this kind of situation, God has no hand in it. It's okay to cry and be sad, but let's be firm. Let's pray that we can have better control of our lives."

They brought the child to church for a brief send-off mass.

After the rites, Father Revo turned and noticed Boy Deo and Junie had followed him from beginning to end. He placed a hand on each boy's head, smiling softly.

But Boy Deo wasn't just there to observe. He had questions.

“Father,” he said, “If God can turn stones into his children, if He counts the hair on our heads, why did He miss this one? Why let her die?”

Revo didn’t answer then. He could only stare at nothing, wounded.

Years later, Boy Deo would pose another riddle.

“If God feeds the birds, why do stray cats go hungry and dirty?”

This time, Revo had an answer.

“Because God wants His people—the ones He could make from stone—to do the work for Him. Not just caring for animals, but for each other. Maybe someday, when you're grown, that work might be yours. Maybe through politics.”

Father Revo talked like the prophet of the possible, one who walked beside suffering, not above it. His quiet mentorship had the potential to help shape a generation that accepted the challenge of systemic change as the product of sacred work.

With hardly anyone noticing it, Father Revo had served as Boy Deo’s early moral compass, hammering the idea that faith without concrete care was useless. Revo raised the bar of worldly aspiration—that politics can be a spiritual vocation.

BACK TO CERRITO

Boy Deo became a fixture in Cerrito’s barangay halls. Unlike other student interns who showed up for photo ops and project reports, he listened. He facilitated dialogues with unusual candor.

“What keeps you poor?” he asked bluntly at one meeting.

Faces stiffened. Then softened.

“Why is that important?”

“What can we do about it?”

He made them feel like the answers already lived within them. That they only needed to remember.

To community members, he often delivered this refrain:

“If we own our issues, we take initiative. But if we don’t, we wait—for government, NGOs, saviors—to do it for us. And they rarely come.”

He had no title, no position. But his name echoed across barangay lines, carried in the whispers of mothers, tricycle drivers, and jobless teens. He wasn’t a preacher, but he was beginning to sound like one. Not of heaven, but of transformation.

By the time he graduated from college—with honors—his work had already caught the attention of major urban poor advocacy networks. A Jesuit NGO immediately recruited him.

But his real ambition, forged in sweat and street noise, was bolder.

HIS THESIS: A CITIZEN’S CONGRESS

To fulfill his college thesis, Boy Deo built something revolutionary. Here, he could be found emerging as a bridge between memory and movement. He nursed a burning protest from witnessing

infant deaths and community neglect. It was the fire that ignited the molding of a bold political vision. The preventable deaths, to him, represented the cost of neglect—both social and political. The first in Quiapo was a victim of systemic failure. The second in Cerrito was a grim echo. They framed Boy Deo's transformation and reminded those who cared to listen to him of the urgency of reform.

In keeping with Father Revo's teachings, Boy Deo preached the idea that justice work is a kind of sacred duty—one that God intentionally outsourced to humankind. In this light, political innovation became a moral imperative.

His academic excellence never separated him from the street—it sharpened his service to it. He refused the traditional route of elite policy work, instead reimagining governance from the bottom up.

He argued that the Philippine Congress—bloated, transactional, elitist—was obsolete.

"As it is now," he wrote, "Congress is an extension of presidential clout. A costly appendix whose usefulness science has yet to determine. A prop that democracy should be rid of."

Instead, he proposed a Citizens' Congress—a rolling, people-powered legislature where Filipinos, local and overseas, could propose and vote on laws directly through communications technology. Barangays would become the nerve centers. The people themselves would be the lawmakers.

His pilot plan suggested starting with ten barangays.

All legislative functions—drafting, debating, passing ordinances—would begin with the people.

Existing politicians, ironically, would stay on—but only as secretariats. Like judges in a jury system, they would moderate, not decide.

Radical, yes. But not chaotic. The proposal outlined structured facilitation: each councilor would steward a thematic committee (health, education, good governance, etc.) and filter ideas from the people for debate and refinement.

He even had a process for contested proposals: where support for them was less than two-thirds, decisions would require consensus, using the Delphi Method he had learned in public management class.

His final critique cut deep:

"For every peso spent through our existing political system, the return is mostly waste and corruption. Every new office created under the pretense of 'exigency of service' is just a mechanism for political reward. And when political power outpaces real need, public debt follows. We, the taxpayers, foot the bill for the machinery of patronage."

Boy Deo's concept of a "Citizens' Congress" challenged conventional politics and questioned the very legitimacy of representative democracy when it no longer represented the poor. The thesis exposed how real power was hoarded by the few under the guise of process, arguing that dysfunction in governance was intentional, benefiting a ruling class. The idea aimed to dismantle the structures of patronage by redesigning legislative power at the grassroots level.

Naïve as his vision sounded, Boy Deo was not just reacting—he was building. His audacity was not hubris; it was hope.

REPERCUSSIONS

He tried to push the idea everywhere—articles, rallies, conferences.

Most ignored him.

Some mocked him.

And a few tried to shut him down.

Boy Deo himself has asked the kill-joy question: Can anyone dismantle the master's house using the master's tools?

One article he wrote for the university's student paper—a biting piece titled *People and the Law*—drew fire from national legislators. Rumors swirled that state university officials were pressured to expel him or lose government funding.

The article said:

"When people own their issues, they own the law. But if the law comes from above, without participation, it serves strange interests."

"Why pass laws that no one wants to follow? Why fund multi-purpose buildings that no one needs, in municipalities that have never even seen the budget? The system isn't broken. It's designed this way."

Boy Deo wasn't expelled. But the message was clear: step carefully. It was a call to balance realism with idealism, to live with the notion that the best ideas in the world may never be accepted.

Still, he pressed forward. By dogged persistence, there was at least a symbolic gain of having lived the theme of divine labor delegated to man, of being "God's replacement" in a broken world.

JUNIE'S RISE TO THE TOP

After four years in community organizing—three of them as an NGO worker—he reached a decision: it was time to move from advocacy to governance.

Either he or Junie had to run.

The choice was clear. Boy Deo had the mind; Junie had the magnetism—and the training in politics. If they were to win, Junie would carry the banner.

With Joey's endorsement and financial backing from his father, Mr. Ty, Junie ran for Sangguniang Kabataan chair of Barangay Penoy in Tondo—and won.

He kept winning.

From the Sangguniang Kabataan Federation Chair, he moved into the Manila City Council. Three years later, he captured the Barangay Chairmanship, tightening his hold at the grassroots.

But Junie never stood alone.

Aside from Joey, he often said, Boy Deo was his indispensable ally—the strategist behind every move. Confidant, tutor, adviser—Boy Deo shaped the campaign from within. Among the urban poor, his credibility translated directly into votes.

With him, Junie believed no political battle was out of reach.

They went to work.

Junie became the face of a new idea. Boy Deo gave it voice.

Together, they operationalized the Citizens' Congress—a legislative model that placed lawmaking in the hands of the people. For the first time, a barangay allowed its residents to draft ordinances, set spending priorities, and shape development plans.

Governance became participatory.

Three years later, results followed.

The media took notice. Corruption declined. Public spending aligned with real needs. But the deeper change was harder to measure—people began to feel that the government belonged to them.

Across Manila, a joke spread: if you wanted real democracy, move to Barangay Penoy.

Junie's reputation grew.

At the City Council, he pushed practical reforms—accrediting sidewalk vendors to regulate without displacing them, and amending zoning rules to balance development with protection for the urban poor.

Election after election, he prevailed.

Three terms in the City Council. Then, in 2013, with Boy Deo still at his side, he won the Vice Mayoralty of Manila as an opposition candidate.

The political map shifted.

Sir Dikomo secured the mayoralty under the ruling party. Reg Makatigbas remained a dominant national figure. Power held at the top.

But something else was rising.

Analysts began to look beyond the usual names. Their attention turned quietly to Lee Tan—and to the possibility that he would back one of the established contenders in the next presidential race.

Yet beneath that calculus, another force was gathering.

Junie.

Still early in his ascent, but already impossible to ignore.

And behind him, steady and unseen—

Boy Deo.

GAMES PRINCIPALITIES PLAY

If Benaobra had groomed an understudy in Senator Reg Makatigbas, then Makatigbas, in turn, cultivated his own circle of proteges. Among them was Joey—a curious choice, considering his defiance of tradition.

Joey caught the senator's attention not for military brilliance, but for marrying a left-leaning beauty. No one from the academy had ever done such a thing. Makatigbas, once a rebel-hunter in the blood-drenched hinterlands of Samar and Ispratli, saw in Joey a kindred audacity. He stood as principal sponsor at their wedding, a symbolic gesture not lost on political observers.

The dust from the 2013 midterms had barely settled. But 2016 loomed—its shadow long and restless. The usual names floated like specters: Makatigbas, Sir Dikomo, and the return of the infamous Watkasing machine via Bonggoy. Yet these men didn't stir the pot directly. The fever came from below—from the legions of sycophants, bagmen, and loyalists, each hoping to convert proximity into plunder.

Appointments, contracts, access—these were the currencies of early allegiance. The principals? They often stayed aloof, appearing above the fray, while their camps did the trench work of sabotage, bribery, and whisper campaigns.

Makatigbas and Dikomo, both part of a coalition quietly bankrolled by Benaobra and Lee Tan, presented a façade of unity. But beneath, their supporters were locked in an undeclared cold war, reminiscent of the backroom bloodletting that had claimed Habemus Aquino in 1983 and Boboy Dacer in 2000.

To shore up his base, Makatigbas tapped Joey, who in turn turned to Olivia. Under these circumstances, Joey was a hinge between the underground world and the formal institutions. A "liminal" man—part witness, part enabler.

For her part, Olivia, serving as the ethical counterweight to the state, lent credibility to Makatigbas but was also manipulated by him. Savvy and idealistic, she might have been blind to the hidden power games being played by her allies. Her presence was a reminder that good intentions could be co-opted if not vigilantly guarded.

Olivia organized a "consultation workshop" under the Peace and Sustainable Progress Foundation's banner. They called it *One Nation Vision*, a rallying of civil society under the pretense of inclusivity. Among the attendees: survivors, rebels, bureaucrats, priests, and peacemakers.

Teresa Biradayon was there too.

She had returned to Biringan after Luzie's death, only to discover the stories had grown darker. Her cousins—Poklo and Jason—had been tied and dragged across gravel roads for breaking a lampshade inside a military camp. Elsewhere, a man had been skinned alive, his flesh pickled in vinegar, washed down with lukewarm Red Horse by uniformed monsters.

There were whispers of worse "punishments"—fingers severed, livers roasted, drum-bound bodies sunk off the coast. All this, they said, had awakened a generation of guerrillas.

Teresa had long renounced the violence. She joined church-based peace networks, organized dialogues, and walked in protest marches that condemned both the military's atrocities and the rebels' retaliations. In time, she reconnected with Tangdayan Foundation, a trailblazing community organizer that reached Bukāran in her teens, so remote that not even government extension workers could visit. The NGO hired her as an area coordinator. It was Tangdayan who sent her to the workshop in Manila—her name on the program as a representative from Mindesaba.

What she did not expect was to find *him* there.

She waited until the session break.

"Excuse me, Senator," she said, stepping into his path. "Do you remember anyone from Bukāran, Biringan?"

Makatigbas stopped mid-step. The name hit him like a stray bullet from decades past.

He remembered Bukāran. He remembered *her*. A woman—Osang—bright-eyed, reckless, tender. But this woman? This stranger?

“I’m Teresa Biradayon. I lived in Bukāran. Waday is my sister. Osang was our youngest. You visited often back then, Senator. You two… shared something. She fell in love. She got pregnant.”

The air drained from his lungs.

“She died in childbirth,” Teresa continued, voice steady. “The baby died too—or so we thought. Later, we learned the child had survived. My mother sent her to relatives in La Profesa, hoping to protect her from your men, from reprisals, from *you*. We called her Elodia—‘child orphaned by war.’ But the orphanage renamed her Katleya Ramos.”

Makatigbas went pale. His lips quivered, his throat dry with dust and disbelief.

“I don’t mean to accuse,” Teresa added. “But my family needs to know that you heard this. They need you to remember Osang. They’ve waited years for someone to tell you.”

After a long pause, the senator said, “I understand. That’s not easy to hear. I—please—allow me time.”

Teresa looked into his eyes, and for a moment, she saw a man dismantled—less by guilt than by the sudden weight of consequence.

“I told you because I believe you still have honor.”

Up to that point, Senator Regidor Macario Makatigbas, the bemedalled army general, had projected a public persona of being charismatic, erudite, and highly principled. He carried the air of a man burdened by destiny. A “clean” senator who was both feared and respected.

Now, he could not break free from coping with private struggles. He was disturbed by a buried past involving Teresa’s sister, Osang, and their lost daughter, Katleya. He needed to come to terms with a ghost figure whose absence could haunt him until his dying seconds. There was nothing much he could learn from Teresa’s disclosure, but already, the thought of Katleya’s potential survival or rediscovery could serve as a moral reckoning for him, or even for others whose links to this episode of his life he could not imagine—yet.

Beneath the surface lay guilt, shame, and a desperate desire to reconcile his past with his present power.

The motivation of self-preservation—Katleya in mind—redemption, and legacy, was as compelling as ever. He wanted to maintain his image while also reclaiming moral footing before it was too late.

Makatigbas embodied the tension between reformist rhetoric and compromised power; a bridge between revolutionary intent and institutional rot.

ELSEWHERE, THE KNIVES WERE BEING SHARPENED.

Sir Dikomo’s handlers had been watching Makatigbas closely. His growing rapport with civil society, with reformists, even ex-communists, was troubling. Lee Tan’s mysterious yearlong dinner series—six guests, one every two months, each a potential candidate—fueled their paranoia.

This was crunch time for Sir Dikomo, a critical point where the game was on the line, a hurdle in which he flourished the most. The manipulative state operative who thrived in the shadows, controlling narratives, people, and possibly history itself.

His personal qualities reinforced ambition: calculating, shrewd, and disdainful of sentiment. He viewed people like Makatigbas and even Boy Deo as pawns to manage or neutralize.

The playbook by which his ambition was framed looked like a copy of Machiavelli: power was not about morality or popularity—it was about endurance and control. He belonged to a generation of operators who serve the system without believing in it.

Makatigbas was Tan's first invitee. The venue? A secret island resort. Chartered flights only.

Sir Dikomo's men got the itinerary. They planted listening devices in key rooms. Nothing was caught on tape—but the next day, they learned something else.

A police chopper had been assigned to fetch Makatigbas. Quietly, discreetly, its flight controls were sabotaged—just enough to ensure failure without suspicion. The crash that followed injured one and killed another. Makatigbas, as fate would have it, never boarded.

In the media frenzy that followed, he admitted only that he was "on private time." The headlines did the rest: *SECRET MEETINGS. PRIVATE JETS. WHO'S BANKROLLING MAKATIGBAS?* Calls for his resignation intensified. His presidential stock plummeted.

Within his camp, revenge was considered.

Stories circulated about Sir Dikomo's past procurement deals: secondhand choppers, padded contracts. Older rumors surfaced—about bodies dropped from helicopters into the sea, cemented inside steel drums.

But Makatigbas said no.

Bringing down the uniformed establishment, he argued, would be suicide. "You don't kill the golden goose," he said, "even if the eggs rot from time to time."

Instead, they chose a different weapon.

THREE MONTHS LATER, ON THE SENATE FLOOR**,** Senator Oscar De Labuya—Makatigbas' attack dog—rose on a matter of personal and collective privilege.

"Mr. President, colleagues: I rise this afternoon to bring to your attention an orphanage where children—yes, children—are being preyed upon by sexual predators."

A gasp rippled across the chamber.

"There are over 1.9 million abandoned children in the Philippines today. Some find shelter with relatives. Others rot in the streets. But some—those we call *lucky*—find refuge in orphanages. Or so we thought."

He named the place: *Halosahos Children's Mission-Philippines (HCMP).*

"Licensed. Tax-exempt. Praised in press releases. But the truth? Most children there aren't even orphans. None has been put up for adoption. Why? Because the institution's purpose is not to care. It is exploitation."

Camera shutters clicked. Senators squirmed.

De Labuya leaned forward. "This, dear colleagues, is what happens when we allow principalities to play games while children rot in silence."

CHAPTER 8
A wayward Senate investigation

There are truths so inconvenient they are only revealed when no one's looking, thus the saying goes.

It began not as a siege but as a whisper.

Senator Makatigbas' allies were not out to draw blood—at least not openly. Their intent was far more serpentine: to lay landmines. The hearing on the now-defunct HCMP wasn't launched to unearth truth in one clean blow but to provoke it, slyly, through the mouths of those least prepared for the weight of memory.

The press called it *a show*, but to insiders, it was more like a hunt. No senator directly accused Sir Dikomo. Instead, they waited—waited for a witness, perhaps too old to filter her tongue or too jaded to care, to say the wrong name in the right tone. Both Makatigbas and Sir Dikomo understood that moral clarity was a liability in a world governed by plausible deniability and backroom deals.

Indeed, nobody could have imagined the political metaphor of orphanhood and abandonment. The orphanage scandal at HCMP was not just personal—it represented systemic child abandonment by the state. Children like Katleya, Boy Deo, and even Luzie were not only victims—they were the unspoken cost of empire-building, revolutions, and institutional betrayal.

At the initial hearings, the testimonies were sordid but familiar. Former wards and ex-staff recalled, in haunting fragments, the twisted liberties HCMP personnel took: kisses stolen, breasts groped, a silence cultivated by threat and shame. But nothing, yet, that went beyond what Senator Labuya had thundered from the rostrum weeks earlier.

Subpoenas were sent to past and present HCMP employees. Few showed up. Arrest warrants were issued but not enforced with much enthusiasm. Judges were summoned, as were DSWD officials. The shadows of bureaucracy kept their shape.

It wasn't until the third hearing day that the air shifted.

THE THIRD DAY

Ms. Ruby Damiana, 55, from the Manila Social Welfare Office, took the witness stand. She wore a faded lilac blouse, her Manila City Hall ID still clipped to her lanyard like an old shield. Senator Flora De Yamat—lawyer, feminist, and sister to Supreme Court Justice Tomas De Yamat—presided as chair of the Committee on Women, Children, and Family Relations. She gave the floor to Senator Sotomayor, the youthful and sharp-eyed head of the Committee on Youth.

"Your turn, Senator Sotomayor," De Yamat said, tapping her pen.

Sotomayor smiled slightly, like a man holding cards just shy of a winning hand. "Thank you, Madam Chair. Ms. Damiana—do you recall facilitating the adoption of an abandoned child in Quiapo, March of 1985?"

Damiana blinked. "I'm sorry, Senator. I've handled many cases. That date doesn't ring a bell."

Sotomayor raised a thin tabloid for the cameras. "Perhaps this will help."

He handed it to her. A photo—grainy, black-and-white—of a bundled infant outside a Quiapo store, the headline blaring *"Baby Found in the Dead of Night!"*

Damiana read slowly. A flicker crossed her face.

De Yamat noticed her hesitation. "Do you have legal counsel present, Ms. Damiana?"

“Yes, ma’am. Our office provided one. He advised me to check our official case files first before making specific statements."

“Then please return with those files at the next hearing,” De Yamat said. "This committee is not in the business of guesswork."

Sotomayor simply nodded. “Next Tuesday then, Madam Chair.”

The session adjourned. But the gallery was abuzz.

THE NEXT HEARING

She returned, clutching a brown envelope like it might shield her from memory. Sotomayor wasted no time.

“Tell us what happened that day.”

Damiana answered with an unsteady calm. “We were called by the Quiapo police about an abandoned child. I went with a colleague. The meeting point was outside a store near Plaza Roma.”

“Who arranged the meeting?” Sotomayor asked.

“The Quiapo Chief of Police at the time—Chief Inspector Decoroso De Mozo. He found the child, along with two priests from Quiapo Church. The inspector later became mayor. Locals knew him as Sir Dikomo.”

Murmurs erupted in the room. The name had been spoken.

Sotomayor leaned forward. “Who discovered the child?”

“A woman named Sylvia Monir.”

“And what happened then?”

Damiana hesitated. “A priest—Father Andoy—stepped forward as a custodian. He said he could take care of the child. We didn’t see a need to intervene further. He represented a trusted orphanage partner of the DSWD.”

“You didn’t verify his qualifications? If he was the biological parent?”

“I’m sorry, Senator,” she said, voice tighter now. “In our work, we rely on the presumption of qualification when dealing with long-time institutional partners. There was also an intention to follow up with Father Andoy.”

Sotomayor asked: “And did you?”

“Yes. But shortly after, we learned the child was… kidnapped.”

The word hung in the air. Gallery murmured again.

“Who investigated the kidnapping?”

“I don’t know. The police took over. We weren’t involved after that.”

“Do you recall the priest’s full name?”

Damiana flipped through her notes. “Father Fernando Sabitsana. I was hesitant to ask him to sign his full name in our report.”

The gallery chuckled. Even some senators did. But De Yamat quickly silenced the ripple of laughter. “Order. We do not ridicule anyone’s name or background in this hall.”

Sotomayor raised both hands. “Apologies, Madam Chair.”

The hearing was adjourned—pending the appearance of three summoned individuals: Mayor Decoroso De Mozo, Sylvia Monir, and Father Fernando “Andoy” Sabitsana.

THE FOURTH HEARING

The session hall overflowed. Students, nuns, retired police officers, and former HCMP employees packed the gallery. The tension was electric.

First to the stand: Sylvia Monir.

“Where do you live now?” De Yamat asked.

“Kabite, Madam Chair. I received your letter through my old boss in Quiapo.”

“Well then,” De Yamat said, “we appreciate your presence. Now, under oath, tell us how you found the child.”

Monir's voice was calm but guarded. “I was working at a sari-sari store. I opened it early, maybe 2 or 3 a.m. A box was pressed against the door. Inside—an infant, wrapped in a small cloth.”

“And you contacted Father Andoy?” Senator Boncaras asked next.

“Yes. I didn’t know what else to do. I feared being accused of kidnapping. He responded quickly, and then the police and social workers arrived.”

“Did you know what happened to the child afterward?”

“I tried to process legal adoption papers… but the child was taken by someone else before it was completed.”

Boncaras leaned forward. “You disappeared with the child, according to records. Is that true?”

Monir sighed. “After the incident, I left the country. I had an application for overseas work in Hongcau. It was approved just days after. I didn’t run. I… escaped.”

“And the name of the child?”

“Deo Renato Moscavida. That’s what I heard the priests called him.”

Father Andoy was called to confirm.

“We named him Leandro Deo Renato Moscavida. We called him Anding.”

“Did you take custody of the child?” Boncaras asked.

“No. Days after the baptism, the child and Ms. Monir vanished. We assumed it was adoption with kidnapping or kidnapping with adoption.”

Eyes turned back to Monir. “Which one?” Boncaras asked.

“There was an attempt… to have the child adopted. Legally.”

“Who tried to adopt the child?” Boncaras again.

She opened her mouth, but her voice cracked. “I—Your Honor, I’ve lost all my documents…”

Her hands trembled. The room leaned in, breath held.

Up to this point, there were indications that Damiana, Monir, and Father Andoy had all carried slivers of the truth. But bureaucracy and shame prevented a full narrative from emerging. What had been raised on the board was a landscape of *partial recollections*, echoing the state’s failure to maintain records or preserve dignity.

The hearing had partly developed into a performance being the equal of truth. Senators like Sotomayor operated with calculated ambiguity—setting traps rather than demanding answers—while witnesses stumbled between honesty and self-preservation. The structure mimics courtroom drama but is laced with political choreography.

For serious observers, it raised a national allegory in child disappearances. The missing child became emblematic of the state’s abandonment of its people, particularly the poor. The orphanage, the church, the police, the DSWD, even the Senate—each passed the child along like a hot coal, unwilling to accept full responsibility.

And then there was the burden of gender. Both Damiana and Monir carried the weight of state failure. Women—secretaries, nannies, welfare workers—had often been shown as the state’s front-facing defenders or scapegoats, while men (Sir Dikomo, even Father Andoy) float in abstraction or silence.

MORE WITNESSES

The Senate hearing resumed with a sharper edge, the air in the hall thick with implications. This time, the senators zeroed in on Judge Maria Vida Corazon De Gracia, probing her previous dealings with Sylvia Monir—especially the inconsistencies between their separate testimonies. Since Monir was seated just a few feet away, she had no choice but to nod and correct herself whenever Judge De Gracia’s recollections exposed contradictions in her own narrative.

One senator questioned the propriety of De Gracia’s intervention back in 1985, when she took custody of the child under questionable circumstances.

“You were a sitting judge at the time,” he said. “Did it not occur to you that your involvement in an extrajudicial matter might compromise your impartiality?”

Judge De Gracia, steady as ever, replied: “Your Honor, I had no luxury of time to parse the transaction. I was responding to an unfolding situation, not a courtroom brief. What mattered was ensuring the child’s welfare. I subsequently coordinated with the Social Welfare Office and ensured compliance with the legal adoption process. If there were defects in the extrajudicial nature of the act, I submit that these were cured through proper legal channels.”

Her voice did not tremble. She remained dignified, righteous, and unsparing in her composure.

For the next hearing, the committee chaired by Senator De Yamat summoned Mayor Decoroso “Dikomo” De Mozo and Father Andoy once more. Both men complied. But to the surprise of everyone present, Monsignor Ubanon—now retired from his post as Rector of Quiapo Church—appeared by Father Andoy’s side. With them came a shadow from the margins: Gidaben, once dismissed as a street eccentric, now reborn as a witness.

Senator Vlad Vasectomas, a neutral yet incisive presence in the room, opened the floor.

Vasectomas: “Monsignor Ubanon, can you walk us through what happened on April 13 or 14, 1990, when one of the Hijos discovered ‘that something’—a boy—at the back of Quiapo Church?”

Monsignor Ubanon: “We found him barely alive, bound in the storeroom. His pulse was the only sign he was still with us. When we untied him, he collapsed. We rushed him to the clinic at the rectory, then to the hospital. Hours later, he stabilized. He spent the night with us. The following day, we notified the Police Chief De Mozo. He instructed his officers to present the boy at a press conference. That conference never happened. The police lost the boy during a melee in the underpass. We never saw him again.”

Vasectomas: “Did it never occur to you that the boy might be the same one you baptized five years earlier?”

Ubanon: “No. Not at the time. Perhaps had we known what we know now, the connection would have been clear.”

Senator Sotomayor asked to be recognized.

Sotomayor: “Monsignor Ubanon, why would the Catholic Church baptize an infant who clearly had no understanding of the ritual being performed on him?”

De Yamat: “How is this relevant, Senator?”

Sotomayor: “Because that baptism gave the child a second name, one that did not correspond to his identity as a kidnapped infant. It’s part of why the child has remained untraceable all these years.”

De Yamat allowed the question.

Ubanon: “We believe in the rebirth of the soul through baptism. We Catholics baptize infants for the salvation of their souls. The practice connects us through the communion of saints and the story of original sin. In that sacred act, the child is united with God and with humanity.”

Sotomayor: “Thank you for the homily, Monsignor. That will be all.”

Senator Vasectomas resumed questioning.

Vasectomas: “Mayor De Mozo, what happened to the press conference? How did you lose the child?”

De Mozo: “First, allow me to extend my apology to Judge De Gracia. There was no intent to conceal anything. It was a failure of communication—a bureaucratic lapse of the worst kind.

“As for the press conference, my men were transporting the boy across Lanciano Boulevard. A mob, unrelated to the event, stormed the underpass, chasing a GCTA inmate performing community service at Plaza Roma. The inmate was shot. In the chaos, the boy was separated from the officers. We searched the area for hours. He was gone.”

The senators didn’t buy it. One after another, they took turns interrogating De Mozo. Their disbelief coalesced into accusation. Was it truly a coincidence that a mob disrupted a child’s transfer at the precise moment of a high-profile media event? Why hadn’t he investigated the boy’s origins more thoroughly, given the crime’s notoriety?

Their tone sharpened: was the mob attack staged?

De Mozo deflected, fell back on vague timelines and failed memory, and eventually invoked his right against self-incrimination.

Senator Makatigbas, seated like a spider in the center of his web, remained still—savoring the storm.

The following hearing brought the usual faces back: Monsignor Ubanon, Mayor De Mozo, Judge De Gracia, and Sylvia Monir. But this time, a new set of volunteers had come forward. Manila Vice Mayor Junie Justicador arrived, flanked by his childhood friend, Boy Deo—now a composed, articulate young man—and Gidaben, who did not get the chance to talk in the previous hearing. All three were street-smart certified, each hiding a vault of memory.

When the gavel struck wood, Senator Rodrigo Boloroton, an ally of Makatigbas, asked to be recognized.

De Yamat: “The gentleman from Benham Rise is recognized.”

Boloroton: “Thank you, Madam Chair. May I request the secretariat to display the image I submitted?”

On the screen appeared a photograph: a young De Mozo seated at a casino table, alongside three other individuals.

Boloroton: “Judge De Gracia, do you recognize anyone in this photo?”

De Gracia (without hesitation): “Yes. Those three, beside the young De Mozo—they were the same people who tried to arrest us in Sta. Cruz in 1985. And the ones who abducted Franco from us in São Paulo in 1990. I would estimate this photo was taken before the 1990 abduction, based on their appearances.”

Boloroton: “What makes you so certain?”

De Gracia: “The man to De Mozo’s right has a missing finger on his left hand. I remember that detail because he used that hand to point a gun at my nephew. The woman has a scar above her right eyebrow—the same as the one who led the 1985 arrest. The third man has had the same untrimmed moustache since the first time I saw him.”

De Gracia has emerged as a rare figure for being both institutional and insurgent. Her memory, precise and emotionally anchored, was shaping up to be the hearing’s moral foundation.

Boloroton: “For the record, the man with the missing finger was found dead in a motel in Olongapo in 1992. The other two have been missing since 1993. I offer no theory—just facts.”

De Yamat: “Mayor De Mozo, do you wish to comment?”

It was not patent at this point, but within the brief seconds that followed, his silence screamed guilt.

Then De Mozo found his voice: “They were former police officers. They had asked me to vouch for them during an administrative inquiry. This photo was taken during that meeting. That’s all I know.”

Pressed further, De Mozo again invoked his constitutional right to remain silent—his lawyer’s hand firm on his shoulder. The man who used to pull strings was now entangled in them. His repeated invocation of the right to remain silent functioned less as protection than confession.

The session devolved into a heated debate until Senator Boncaras moved to pivot.

Everyone needed a break to see how memory had become like a political terrain. Each witness, so far, revealed a different fragment of the past, filtered through belief, trauma, or self-preservation. The hearings exposed not just who remembered, but *why* and *how*.

From De Mozo's deflections to De Gracia's clarity, the spectacle of testimony became theater—revealing not just facts, but character. The nameless boy—baptized, lost, recovered, and now grown—was a specter haunting every institution. He represented the unresolved crimes, the forgotten poor, and the unspeakable violence brushed aside. Despite the damning photo, despite the memories, no arrests—much less charges—were made, all of which showed how truth, though momentarily glimpsed, remained fragile against the inertia of state machinery.

JUNIE AND GIDABEN EACH ISSUE A STATEMENT

The Senate hearing had dragged on for hours, but the weight in the room refused to lift. One by one, witnesses testified—not just with words, but with the tremble of fingers, the slight stammer in memory, the sweat drawn not by heat but consequence.

When it came to the point where Junie needed to testify—he was second in command at City Hall—all the stakes got unwrapped. It seemed every interested party was now forced to cross his or her Rubicon, like horses being led to the water.

The session resumed.

De Yamat (gaveling for order): "Ladies and gentlemen, to those watching on television... the rate at which this committee has uncovered buried memories, lost children, and fractured truths suggests we are only beginning to breach the surface of something far greater."

"Today we have two more of these volunteer witnesses, and I am privileged to introduce our next witnesses: Manila Vice Mayor Junie Justicador and another one—a surprise witness if you will—who shall introduce himself to you later.

"In the meantime, let's now call on the Honorable Vice Mayor."

Junie Justicador: "Thank you, Madam Chair, Honorable Senators who comprise the investigating committees."

He took out a prepared statement, which he jointly wrote with Boy Deo. "Ladies and gentlemen: I felt obliged to appear before the honorable senators when they asked witnesses, as they again ask our esteemed mayor today, about what happened at the Aguinaldo Underpass in 1990. As mentioned earlier, somebody was 'accidentally' killed in that melee."

Justicador appeared to gather himself; his voice cracked as he continued. "I will not beat about the bush, but rather I will tell you now that the man who was killed on that day was my father. I also will not attempt to add to your doubts by raising my own questions to Mayor De Mozo. I assure you, I have asked him the same questions you asked him in this investigation. I had found his forthrightness wanting, but, to his credit, his recollection of what happened has not changed.

"So instead of beating what, to me, in a figurative sense, is a dead horse, I wish to talk about my father. Hopefully, this will contribute to achieving the purpose of this investigation when it was launched about five or six months ago, which is to find ways by which the government can better address organizational dysfunctions and social inequities.

"My father was an orphan at five. His parents—my grandparents—were murdered at noontime on a day when the sky was clear. It was not hard for witnesses to come forward, but my family was not moneyed enough to be able to buy sympathy. What should have been a double-murder case did not reach the courts, and even if it did, the HCMP case tells us that poor victims hardly get a fair hearing from some—and let me emphasize 'some'—judges.

"My father was later adopted by his uncle, whose poverty constrained his capacity to assume an additional financial burden. For a pittance, his uncle shipped my father to a rice trader in Cerrito, Manila, three years later.

"At eight, my father worked and lived like a slave in his new Cerrito home. One day, he was accused and found guilty of bringing bad luck to his adoptive family. A house help brought him to a crowded street in Kalookan City and practically left him there alone, for dead.

"He made the streets his home, begging for food to survive, until he was old enough to steal. Throughout his teenage years, my father built a reputation for being a sleight-of-hand artist, earning tags such as 'Manila's top thief and 'Manila's finest ripper.' That reputation introduced him to the rogue elements of the police. He thrived as a leading member of criminal gangs covertly run by the police; he was into snatching, illegal gambling, and, later, into the more lucrative illegal drugs business.

"I was born a year after my parents got married in 1982. My father renounced his criminal ways and, together with my mother, rebuilt a life away from the underworld. They coped well initially as sidewalk vendors. But just as my father was on his way to a complete transformation, determined as he was to lead a fully reformed life, he was picked up along with former gangsters. They were drugged, tortured, and used as fodder in a staged shootout, supposedly in a police manhunt for kidnap-for-ransom groups. Miraculously, my father survived that massacre, although his three companions did not. The fifth one, designated as the driver of the vehicle that transported the condemned former members of police criminal gangs, is also alive. And he is here today to tell his story.

"The policemen involved in the manhunt operations detained my father without formal charges. Later, he was transferred to the Manila City Jail, still without charges. Two years later, he was sent out along with two other inmates to Plaza Roma for community service. He was mobbed at Plaza Roma, and the prison guard, thinking that my father was trying to escape, shot him.

"Like his parents, my father was murdered. My family had longed for justice. We have yet to get any.

"Thank you, Madam Chair and Honorable Senators."

De Yamat: "I know my colleagues have demonstrated their intention to interrogate Vice Mayor Justicador. But before we go to that, may I ask the surprise witness if his testimony is related to that of the vice mayor?"

Gidaben: "Yes, Your Honor."

De Yamat: “OK, so that my colleagues can minimize repeating the same questions for both witnesses, we shall hear your testimony first. You may proceed after taking the oath. Secretariat, please administer the oath now.”

Gidaben (reading a prepared statement he, Junie, and Boy Deo had jointly written): “My name is Foroylan Camuilagui. I am forty-seven years old. In the underworld, people called me ‘Gidaben.’ Later on, when shabu became more profitable than jueteng, the police who ran our operations called me ‘El Chapo.’

“The gangsters under the protection of the police in our area, which covered Tepeyac, Avenida, Sta. Cruz and Quiapo, consisted of several sub-groups. I belonged to one of the sub-groups, while Yago, the vice mayor’s father, belonged to another sub-group. As far as I can remember, Yago’s group had five members.

“In the 1980s, Yago and other members of his group alienated themselves to the police for being inactive in jueteng and shabu operations. As I now understand it, this was the time when Yago and his group had dropped their criminal ways and were on their way to conversion and transformation. The police thought, which was also the way I understood them then, that Yago and his group members were double-crossing them. The same group of rogue policemen was involved in a kidnap-for-ransom operation in March 1988. On the 23rd of that month, I was tasked, under duress, to find Yago and his friends. After I showed the police where they were, the police picked them up. They then tortured and drugged them. Turned out they were going to be used as fodder for a staged shootout.

“On that day, I was also tasked to drive a Ford Fiera from Guadalupe to the intersection of Allende Boulevard and Peron Avenue. On board the Ford Fiera were Yago and three of his friends. The only indication that they were alive was that they were breathing.

“Upon reaching the Allende Boulevard and Peron Avenue intersection, I leaped out from the driver’s seat, following the instructions given to me by my police protectors. In seconds, I heard gunfire. I looked back and saw uniformed men strafing the Ford Fiera. From the news, I later learned that Yago’s companions died on the spot.

“These rogue policemen themselves were involved in the kidnapping, and they made it appear that the murdered gangsters—who Vice Mayor Justicador had called reformed gangsters—were the kidnappers. The true kidnappers were gone before the police riddled the Ford Fiera with bullets.

“I had no idea how Yago came out of it alive. But exactly two years later, when news broke out that the one who resembled his identity was killed at the Aguinaldo Underpass, I had to believe that somehow Yago must have survived the 1988 massacre.

“I may have been the best among jueteng runners and shabu pushers, but I have no record of being a violent person. I weep hard when people die young due to violence.

“My conscience tortured me without let-up after I learned that Yago was murdered in 1990, and that I could have helped him alter his fate if I only knew he came out of the 1988 rubout alive. I searched for the family—his wife and his son, who is now the Vice Mayor of Manila—in Nueva

Vizcaya, in Cerrito, in Kalookan, in Sta. Cruz, and other places, in an effort to mitigate the irreparable damage that I inflicted on them. In fairness to the rogue cops, I got my share from the ransom booty in 1988. They made it clear that the money was also meant to buy my silence.

"But—I will not stop repeating this—my conscience bothered me. If only to repay a debt that was beyond redemption, I was willing to part with half of the amount I got from the surviving wife and the couple's only child. And I was and am willing to help the family in any way I can, so long as I had the means, and the request was reasonable. When Vice Mayor Junie asked me to testify today, saying yes to him was easy, even at the risk of my own security. My own life is not enough to compensate for the injustices that government and society have inflicted upon the vice mayor's father.

"Honorable Senators, that is all I have to say. Thank you."

De Yamat: "Thank you, Mr. Camuilagui. I understand my colleagues are again jockeying for their turn to ask questions, but the Senate in plenary session will convene in a few minutes. Shall we adjourn until tomorrow, same time? Hearing no objection, the session is hereby adjourned until tomorrow, 11 February 2012."

On the following day, the senators took turns asking questions.

Senator Ruben Quemas leaned forward into his microphone. "Mr. Camuilagui," he began, "you claim the Fiera vehicle used in the Allende-Peron shootout was a decoy. A mirror image of the one carrying the real perpetrators."

"Yes, Your Honor."

"And you were told to deliver the black bag—believed to be the ransom?"

"I saw it myself later on TV. It was the same bag. Same zipper."

"Why didn't you report it then?"

"Because I wanted to live."

Silence clung to the walls like a wet sheet.

"They gave me a cut," Camuilagui added. "Blood money, I guess. I kept it in a rice sack and buried it under my nephew's hut."

"Honor among thieves," Quemas mused. "So why break the pact now?"
Camuilagui paused, eyes distant.

"Because somewhere between surviving and living, there's a line. And I crossed it long ago. I'd like to go back."

The room sat with that.

Sitting between Boy Deo and Monsignor Ubanon, Gidaben cut an unexpected image of redemption.

Gidaben was like Lazarus. The man once dismissed as mad now testified to forgotten truths. He personified how the margins remembered what the centers erased.

SOMEWHERE IN NEW MANILA, Lee Tan watched the hearing from a velvet sofa, one hand draped across his ancient greyhound. When he heard Camuilagui mention the code word— "Exodus"—his eyes narrowed. He thought then it was careless for the kidnappers to expose themselves to the

dragnet laid out by Uy's men. He didn't realize there was an escape route from Manila Bay, like the parting of the sea in the story of Exodus.

Exodus. It wasn't just a mission. It was a narrative. A way to part seas, frame pharaohs, and walk free.

BOY DEO TAKES THE WITNESS STAND

Senator Dayamante had been silent until now. Then, as if sensing a lull in the pageant, he rose. He remained a Benaobra loyalist and, by extension, a Dikomo enabler. The latter, after all, was increasingly looking more like Benaobra's bet for president. The senator felt obliged to chop the one blocking Dikomo's projectile, who, as far as the investigation was unfolding, was Makatigbas. He believed he had the goods and the wit to expose the witness as a fraud. He envisioned the unraveling to be the final laugh that would close the curtains of the Makatigbas show.

"Madam Chair," he said, oozing charm, "a brief detour, if you please. A curiosity regarding the Vice Mayor's... assistant."

Junie flinched subtly. Boy Deo turned toward Dayamante with a look that was not confrontation, but recognition.

The Vice Mayor sat with a steady spine, his eyes flickering between the senators and the young man beside him—his assistant, his charge, his ward, his wonder.

The boy they once called "The Eyes" was now a man with no "titles", only a quiet gaze that unsettled even the most seasoned politicians.

Dayamante smiled the way actors smile when they already know their punchline will kill.

The clerk administered the oath.

Name: Deodatu Biradayon. Occupation: "Executive assistant." Formerly: "Boy Deo." If it were up to Senator Dayamante, he could have added "the miracle child of Quiapo."

Dayamante waved a glossy magazine like a talisman. The cover showed a much younger Boy Deo, eyes fierce under a tattered hoodie. The headline read: "From the Eyes to the Brain: The Rise of a Quiapo Seer."

"Do you remember this, Mr. Biradayon?"

Boy Deo gave the faintest nod. "Yes. They followed me around for two weeks. Asked if I had psychic powers. I told them I just had good timing."

Dayamante chuckled. "The people said you healed the sick. That you could see the dead."

"They said a lot of things. People always do, when they can't explain why you keep surviving."

"Fair enough," Dayamante said. "Let's indulge the mystique. Any visions today?"

There was a beat.

Boy Deo's gaze didn't waver.

"I'm told my Fridays are strongest."

"Too bad. It's Tuesday."

A hush. A pause. And then— "I do see something," Boy Deo said, voice flat. "December 1982—a second please, the exact date would be December 10, 1982. La Casta. Senator Dayamante,

you were drunk, driving a white Land Cruiser. You hit a cariton that served as a home for a family of scavengers. In that cart slept a baby. The baby died. You fled. Later, your wife's people bribed the local warden to arrest your girlfriend instead. As we speak, she's still languishing in jail for a crime she did not commit."

The Senate Hall inhaled.

A beat of disbelief. Then—

A blackberry phone arched through the air and crashed against the plexiglass divider, just inches from Boy Deo's temple.

"LIES!" Dayamante shouted, his face boiling red. "You can't accuse me without proof! You little sewer freak—"

The Chair banged her gavel.

"ORDER! ORDER!"

Boy Deo did not flinch. He closed his mouth. Folded his hands. And returned to silence.

It was as if his whole being had completed its only task.

Across the hall, the cameras zoomed in.

Behind every lens, the nation blinked. The boy no one saw coming had just rewritten the script. A show designed to shame Sir Dikomo ended up wrecking the political future of both him and Makatigbas.

It was a show that impacted viewers differently. For many, it entertained. For those who felt alluded to as culprits in any way, it was a partisan, politically motivated attack. For neutral observers, it offered clues of children "disappeared" not just by violence, but by paperwork, sealed files, and fake names. For Sir Dikomo, it was a time to brace for the slow resurrection of truth. Like buried corpses, personal truths surfaced after storms—never when convenient. If it was any consolation, he could come out wiser in the thought that the oppressed do not forget, and sometimes, memory alone is enough to shatter a system.

Dayamante's unraveling—in full public view—showed the fragility of political power when confronted by truth from the margins. His final outburst indicated a shattered control, a man destroyed not by law but by memory.

Dayamante's tactical maneuver to protect an ally and manipulate perception had traces of power plays where public forums were used not to seek truth, but to assert control. His defeat was poetic: brought down by a "nobody" armed with memory. The attempt to publicly humiliate Boy Deo in the defense of De Mozo backfired.

The political fallout—De Mozo and Makatigbas' collapse—contrasted the rise of the principled poor. The street boy and orphaned child spoke truth to power and won.

CHAPTER 9
Rising from the depths of misery

From her modest home in the mist-veiled hills of Biringan, Teresa watched history unfold on her battered TV. Neighbors crammed into her living room, their eyes riveted to the Senate hearings. Teresa sat in the back, hands clenched in her lap.

She had told them she recognized Vice Mayor Junie Justicador—his name had jolted memories she thought long buried. Then came the mention of the Aguinaldo Underpass. Her heart began to race. And when the senators called Boy Deo to testify, she could no longer contain herself. She stood, staggered, staring at the screen. That face—older, sharper, braver—was unmistakable. Her Boy Deo.

She had caught a glimpse of him at the One Nation Workshop a few months earlier, but wasn't sure. Not until now.

And yet, nothing prepared her for the bombshell he dropped—about her sister Waday.

How could he have known? Teresa had only mentioned it in passing to Katalina, just before leaving Aparición after Luzie's death. She remembered that final visit to the Correctional. Waday was surviving, even smiling faintly beneath the weight of her unjust sentence. The crime had not been hers; Dayamante's wife had orchestrated a grotesque swap of guilt, buying off the baby's grieving parents, paying off witnesses, ensuring Waday became the scapegoat for a vehicular tragedy she didn't cause.

Twenty-six years. Each sunrise behind bars a blade to her dignity.

Teresa had vowed to revisit the case. But it was Boy Deo—her once-lost son—who thrust it into the national spotlight. The whole country was now watching. If she hadn't been facilitating a fisherfolk training that very week, she would have flown to Manila immediately. She had two missions: to see Junie and find her way back to the child she had let go.

CITY HALL PULSES WITH CELEBRATION. A cascade of banners flapped from its windows, catching the breeze from Manila Bay like triumphant sails. The quadrangle burst with music, color, and confetti. Caterers served buffet lines of celebratory food.

February 22, 2013—Junie Justicador's 29th birthday.

But today, he wasn't just a birthday celebrant—he was a symbol. A storm had passed, and he stood like a lighthouse.

Just eleven days prior, Junie, Boy Deo, and Gidaben had ignited the Senate floor with testimony that electrified the nation. Since then, every news broadcast, every headline, every political whisper echoed with their names.

City Hall overflowed with dignitaries—politicians, moguls, celebrities, scholars. Even diplomats broke protocol to greet the boy who had become a man of consequence.

Among them were Monsignor Ubanon and Father Andoy. They found Boy Deo at last, the former vinegar boy who might have been the infant once baptized as Leandro Deo Renato Moscavida. But when Junie identified him publicly as Deodatu Biradayon, the possibility slipped from their hands. Still, they rejoiced in his presence and his journey—from Quiapo street child to civic leader.

Around the City Hall perimeter, media vans clustered like moths around a flame. Headlines screamed from every front page:

- *Gidaben Dunks the Police into a Dustbin of Shame*
- *El Chapo's Confessions*
- *Senate Digs Up A 20-Year-Old Grave*
- *Vinegar Boy Deo: The Man Who Exposed a Fake Diamond*

The fallout was swift and merciless. Senator Dayamante faced new ethics investigations. The Justice Department publicly acknowledged grounds to reopen Waday Biradayon's case.

Mayor De Mozo dismissed it all as politics. In truth, he was cornered. Just a year ago, he and Makatigbas were frontrunners for the presidency. Now both men were damaged beyond repair: Makatigbas by a police helicopter crash; De Mozo by the Senate's surgical unraveling of his past.

Worse, whispers of his ties to the OXD were growing louder.

No spin could save him now.

TERESA'S REUNION WITH BOY DEO took place in Junie's office. No words could prepare either of them. She wept. He held her. For almost an hour, they spoke behind closed doors—about Luzie, about the years lost, about the miracle of survival.

Then Junie offered to take her home to Iztapalapa, where his mother, Katalina, waited.

Joey Ty had wanted to gift the property to Junie. Junie declined. He bought it, insisting on paying in installments. Now the home stood proud, renovated with a new garage and the energy of renewal.

There, five of them gathered: Teresa, Katalina, Guimo, Junie, his pregnant wife, Sarah, and Boy Deo.

They laughed. Reminisced. Guimo cracked jokes like nothing had changed.

"Isn't it a miracle?" Katalina said, beaming. "We can laugh now about the pain we thought would kill us."

Teresa nodded. "We're not just alive—which is a miracle every day—but we're thriving," glancing around at the relatively expansive yet modest house Junie and Sarah built.

She spoke of her new life—after Luzie, after Aparición. She'd returned to Biringan, buried herself in community work, and turned down love for vocation. Eventually, she'd taken vows as a Theresian Sister.

Then Guimo teased, "And how about you, Boy Deo? When do we hear your love story?"

Boy Deo laughed. "Only politicians like Junie are pressured to marry." Then, with a wink to Teresa, "Don't be shocked if I become a priest. Just like Mommy."

"Or a general," Junie added. "Joey still wants one of us in the military academy."

"Yes, sir!" Sarah gave a mock salute. "You can be the good cop."

Laughter rippled through the room.

Later, Katalina shared a childhood memory. Junie was four and had seen tears in her eyes as she dressed him.

“Are you sad, Mama?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Your Papa doesn’t love me.”

The boy had found Guimo that same day. “Papa, is it true you don’t love Mama?”

Guimo, caught off guard, had fumbled. “Of course I love her. Where did you hear that?”

“You tell her, then.”

The room went quiet. Then Teresa broke the silence again, this time softer, with a reverence born of memory.

She told them that while she was baptized in Biringan, it was at Quiapo Church where her faith had truly deepened. “The Black Nazarene’s power,” she said, “doesn’t come from wood or paint. It comes from the love of the people who gather around it.”

She placed her hand gently on Boy Deo’s shoulder.

“We barely survived. But by God’s grace—we’re still alive. Isn’t that a miracle?”

Teresa, still carrying deep scars from Aparición, Luzie’s death, and her sister’s imprisonment, looked hardened but hopeful, a woman of profound faith and fierce memory. Her reconnection with Boy Deo reaffirmed the quiet power of love and maternal endurance.

Katalina kept a matriarchal grace, grounded, wise. She anchored the emotional reunion and radiated maternal warmth. Both survivor and nurturer.

Junie had risen to become a national figure. Beneath the charisma was a boy who once asked his stepfather to love his mother. His ascent was both miraculous and symbolic: a child of trauma becoming an architect of justice.

Boy Deo, the street child, was now a political force and moral voice. Still humble, still searching, he became the unexpected liberator of Waday’s story. His reunion with Teresa completed a redemptive arc that began with abandonment and ends in chosen family.

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, Boy Deo took a leave of absence. He had the freedom to do so now. He wanted to show Teresa the new Manila.

As he drove, he glanced at her in the passenger seat. “It’s been almost twenty years. There’s so much you haven’t seen.”

She smiled. “Let’s go to Quiapo first. Before anything else. I need to say thank you.”

They longed to return to a place where both didn’t attribute miracles to magic, but to love, community, and survival—divine forces in human form.

He nodded, gently pressing the gas pedal. “To Mama Mary?”

“To her,” Teresa said, looking ahead, eyes misting, “and to Him. And to everyone who carried us through the storm.”

“It has been close to twenty years,” Boy Deo repeated himself, talking as he drove.

“Yes,” Teresa replied. “I have been in Manila a couple of times to attend workshops organized by the Peace and Sustainable Progress Foundation.” Then, with girlish gusto, she blurted out, “I think I saw you in that OneNation workshop! I was just too shy to find out if my hunch was correct.”

“Where was that hunch coming from, if you don’t mind?”

“The way you folded your hands behind your back was familiar to me,” Teresa replied.

Boy Deo sort of remembered Father Revo, who remarked that he used those hands as a pillow when he slept.

Caught in the morning rush hour, vehicles from Iztapalapa to Quiapo barely moved, so they had plenty of time for more probing. Teresa tried to mimic the senators. “Your Honor, how did you know about Waday? You may have heard me telling Katalina about Waday, but you were too young to comprehend anything, I guess. By the way, that should be our next stop after Quiapo.”

“At the One Nation workshop, I had a hunch that one of the participants was my mother! But I did not see her on the last day. I checked with the workshop secretariat the attendance sheets for the previous sessions, and I saw your name. Your provincial address took away any doubt I had that you might be somebody else. I was not sure about your Metro Manila address, though.

“So I looked it up, and I met your relatives in Cerrito. They told me you had already left for La Profesa before dawn that day. We chatted a little, and they mentioned that you visited Waday the day before you left for La Profesa. I think that explained why you were absent on the last day of the workshop.

“I went to the Correctional after that. I learned the complete details from Waday herself.” With a waggish smile, Boy Deo said, “End of story.”

The traffic parted before them like a blessing.

“THE EYES” ALSO RISES

The Minor Basilica of Quiapo breathed out its morning mass goers just as Teresa and Boy Deo arrived. A few stragglers crossed themselves at the gate while vendors swept the remnants of incense ash and dropped coins from the tiled steps. The basilica, like a weary pilgrim, looked newly anointed.

Teresa paused under the lintel, her gaze sweeping upward. “They’ve raised the ceiling,” she whispered. “And the aisle posts… they’re gone.”

Boy Deo followed her eyes, noting how the church's insides now felt like a lung inhaling light. They made their way to their old refuge—the rear left side—where the andas, the sacred carriage of the Nazarene, still rested. Bulkier now. Emptier pews surrounded it.

They didn’t speak. They sat on the steel brace of the carriage’s frame like it was muscle memory. Less than two meters away, the storeroom stood unchanged—the same dark alcove where the boy once known as Franco had been dumped like refuse by OXD operatives. The same room where he had, with tiny hands, gathered discarded Sampaguita garlands, revived them with care, and sold them as “fresh.”

They knew what Judge Vida De Gracia and Sylvia Monir had testified. After Waday, these two were next on their list.

They moved to the Adoration Chapel, just a few steps away. Inside, Teresa fell to her knees.

“My Lord and my God,” she murmured—the words of Thomas, the doubting apostle, who only believed after seeing the wounds of Christ.

“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,” she intoned.

“Amen,” Boy Deo answered.

They prayed the rosary. Then, silence. The kind that echoes louder than bells.

When they emerged, Plaza Roma was still waking. A few vendors. A tricycle revving. And then—two toddlers. Dirt-streaked, barefoot, palms open not just for alms, but for connection.

Boy Deo crouched before them. “Where is your mother?”

“She’s at home,” they said in chorus.

“Where is home?”

“At the pier, near Guadalupe. Sometimes Magallanes Drive,” the elder boy clarified.

“And your father?”

“In prison,” said the younger.

The elder added, “They caught him stealing scraps from a building.”

“Old building in Fort Santiago,” the younger said.

“No, it was in Guadalupe,” corrected the elder.

Boy Deo chuckled. “Fort Santiago’s still in Guadalupe.”

He scratched the younger’s head. “So you’re brothers?”

“Yes,” they nodded. “Three of us. Our baby brother is with our mom.”

Boy Deo saw it clearly now—these two were the breadwinners. He leaned closer to the elder child and whispered, “Take care of them. Work hard. You’re doing well.”

The boys beamed—not because they’d received anything, but because someone had *seen* them.

He walked on, assuming Teresa had gone ahead to Jollifoods. But when he got there, she wasn’t inside. Moments later, she arrived—quietly, without fanfare. While he’d been talking, she had slipped away to buy groceries and a few bills’ worth of kindness. She had given them to the boys without a word. And never told him.

Over hot coffee and burgers, they debated seeing the Rector of Quiapo first, before heading to the Correctional. The visit turned out to be providential.

After hearing Waday’s story, the Rector agreed: the matter must be brought before the Bishops’ Conference. A statement from the Catholic Church, even in a “secular” state, carried the weight of a court order.

At the Correctional, Waday greeted them with cautious hope. She said the Justice Department had come twice already, shown her a draft affidavit. She had asked for time to consult Teresa.

The affidavit was strong. Boy Deo said as much. Still, he insisted on seeing Judge Vida De Gracia.

Teresa hesitated. She had matters to return to in Biringan. But Boy Deo, sensing her concern, assured her: *I will see this through*.

She left Manila feeling accomplished. “I have no more need to speak to Father Andoy or the Judge,” she told him. “You’ve done more for my family than I ever could ask.”

“And you made me what I am,” Boy Deo replied.

He told her that Junie would run for Mayor of Manila. Election season was months away. Teresa promised to return.

Days later, Boy Deo found Judge Vida in her New Manila home. She was warm, welcoming—and sharp. Her legal days were behind her, but her eyes still pierced through pretenses. She read the affidavit.

“Perfectly done,” she said. “Now find witnesses. Anyone who saw what happened.”

Then, with a pause. A question: “Is Teresa your aunt?”

“Sort of.”

“What does that mean?”

“She found me. Five years old. A lost boy.”

Vida froze, then asked: “When?”

“The day of the Aguinaldo Underpass massacre. The same day the Senate said there was mayhem.”

Vida drew in a breath. Her words came slowly now.

“I lost a son. Five years old. Kidnapped the day before Aguinaldo. My friends in the military couldn’t find him. His name… was Francisco De Gracia.”

She studied him now with wonder. “When I saw you at the Senate hearing, the way you moved… reminded me of him.”

Boy Deo, stunned, deflected with a smile. “So diplomatic, Judge. When you said earlier, ‘I had to ask myself,’ I think you mean to ask me directly.”

Vida laughed softly. “Perhaps.”

She continued, “My Francisco barely spoke. He used facial expressions more than words. And you—your gift of language… It’s uncanny.”

She wanted to share more, to recall memories of her son, but Boy Deo grew restless.

“I understand,” she said. “But this—” she pointed to Waday’s case— “is more urgent. I’ll let you go.”

A short pause.

“Can I hug you?” It was followed by a glorious sight, a long-lost son found in the longing embrace of a mother.

Another pause.

“One more thing: even if Waday *had* done it… She’s already served time beyond what equity and the law demand.”

He nodded. He *had* to uncover the truth. The emotion Judge Vida shared with him sharpened his resolve. It was a reminder that the thorny past was still bleeding into the present.

With Junie’s help, he found the former La Casta floor manager. She confessed that Dayamante’s wife had bribed and threatened her into giving false testimony. She recanted and signed a new affidavit.

She also helped locate two other former employees and a balut vendor who had witnessed the killing. All three signed new affidavits.

Waday’s case was reopened.

Here, finally, was a weary soul poised to take a breather, like the skies cleared of low-hovering clouds. Waday was a tragic figure of injustice, still surviving behind bars. Her case was the moral core of Boy Deo’s Senate moment—a symbol of buried truths finally seeing light.

And then, miraculously—six months later—the court reversed its conviction. Dayamante and his wife were arrested. Tried for murder and perjury.

Even before Dayamante’s court indictment, Makatigbas and his allies in the Senate had already abandoned him. The Ethics Committee, long criticized for its glacial approach, acted with uncharacteristic speed and expelled him when witnesses recanted their statements that had led to Waday’s conviction.

Then came the election season. Against all odds, those vying for the presidency included Makatigbas, Mark Benaobra (the son of a former president), and Bonggoy Watkasing. Rumors circulated that Lee Tan had dropped both Makatigbas and Sir Dikomo at the last minute in favor of Benaobra, fearing the uncertainty posed by the ongoing Senate inquiry. Yet Makatigbas remained OXD’s Manchurian candidate, while Cujaco was surprisingly tapped as the vice-presidential bet.

Rumors surfaced that Lee Tan’s shift in allegiance came after learning about Madam Awie’s revelation. Awie had bragged to friends about providing information that ultimately led to the kidnapping of Lee Tan’s daughter in 1984. What she thought was an insignificant discovery—a scribbled note with phone numbers marked "Leads – Kidnappers”—was the very piece of evidence passed to Gidaben and Madis-ogon.

Meanwhile, Manila Mayor De Mozo, also known as Sir Dikomo, felt a strong pull to step aside. Not only had polling data placed him as the leading candidate for mayor, but a personal request came from Vida de Gracia herself. Confronted with evidence of his complicity in an earlier attempted abduction of young Franco, Sir Dikomo reluctantly withdrew, making room for Junie, the shooting star of Philippine politics. But the charismatic Ms. Vinnie Iglesia, meant to run as Sir Dikomo’s vice mayor, pressed on with her campaign.

The mayoralty race was packed with colorful candidates. Junie, despite looming threats, pressed forward against contenders like Robina Capablanca, Rod "Tax" Escapador, the veteran Huwan T. Burcio, Ruy Lopez Jr., and Madis-ogon, De Mozo’s trusted protégé. Yet tragedy struck one

evening in Sta. Mesa. A brutal ambush by armed riders left Junie and Nardong Sablay dead, a security aide gravely injured, and Boy Deo nearly paralyzed from a bullet to the spine.

Speculation surged that the attack targeted Boy Deo rather than Junie, with whispers naming Dayamante as the suspected mastermind. Ever since Boy Deo had published "People and the Law," both the military and the police had kept him under wary surveillance. An abduction attempt in Cerrito had almost succeeded, were it not for Boy Deo's sharp instincts. Another attempt in Quiapo was abandoned by the would-be assailants. Yet when Boy Deo humiliated Dayamante in a Senate hearing, the assassins came closer to achieving their goal. Even if it was not actually him, the eyes of public opinion would turn to him.

In the end, the assassins miscalculated. The intended target, Boy Deo, survived—thanks to the quick reflexes of the van's driver. Junie fell in the line of fire.

Sarah, holding her two-month-old son, John Patrick Justicador, grieved deeply, surrounded by Katalina and Teresa. They drew strength from one another, fearing the curse that had long plagued their family. Junie's father, Yago, and his grandfather both died at a relatively young age. Yet amid despair, John Patrick—babies being babies—became a source of joy and positivity.

Through an abbreviated semi-judicial process, Junie's party, Hakbang Ng Mapayapang Himagsikan, named Boy Deo as their candidate for mayor. Against a backdrop of turbulence and tragedy, "The Eyes" rose as the emblem of change. He was the answer to questions that blew in the wind—Who sees? Who speaks? Who remembers? —and provided the metaphor for those who were once rendered invisible, becoming a guiding light—not through spectacle, but through the quiet accumulation of truth.

The media swirled with revelations from the Senate, gripping accounts of the ambush, and the rising momentum of the boy with the uncanny gift.

The Manila mayoralty race ended in unprecedented celebrations when Boy Deo emerged victorious. Meanwhile, Mark Benaobra claimed the presidency, and Polong Cujaco became vice president, only for Benaobra to die under mysterious circumstances a mere two months later. In a twist of fate, Cujaco ascended to the highest office in the land, reshaping a nation forever.

Through heartbreak and heroism, betrayal and redemption, Boy Deo stood tall—a beacon for a new Manila, and a witness to a future yet to be defined.

CHAPTER 10
The search for Boy Deo's identity intensifies

Boy Deo's improbable ascent to the top of local politics sent shockwaves across the nation. He had long been a figure of quiet fascination—first as the nameless orphan, then the street-smart Quiapo boy with an uncanny resilience, and later, the urban poor organizer with a gift for galvanizing people into hope. After the Senate hearings and the ambush that killed Junie and his security detail, his public image transformed. He was no longer just a survivor—he was a phenomenon. A Cinderella story rewritten for the Philippine political arena.

His popularity surged in the final two weeks before election day. And when he won, many felt they had chosen not just a mayor, but a myth made real.

But myths, like all fables, crack when reality knocks too loudly.

Just days into his term, a newspaper blind item stirred unease. It hinted that a "popular new mayor" had no official birth records.

Suddenly, the euphoria collapsed into suspicion. Boy Deo's former political rivals pounced, filing charges of document falsification and questioning the legitimacy of his identity. Unless he could explain—convincingly and legally—who he was, he faced prison time. Worse, he risked the collapse of his public trust, his momentum, his movement. His entire career stood on the precipice of a secret he himself only partially understood.

The scandal over Mayor Biradayon's murky past ignited a media frenzy. Journalists scrambled for scoops. Bloggers and broadcasters raced to out-sensationalize each other. One headline quoted Father Andoy: *"Only one piece of the puzzle remains—his real parents."*

The next day, no less than eleven women—some calling from abroad—claimed to be the mother who abandoned a child in Quiapo.

For Boy Deo, the entire ordeal tilted from the tragic to the absurd. And maybe for his real parents, wherever they were, it did too. He himself attempted to investigate. He compared photos, dates, and orphanage names—suspecting he might be connected to the Katleya case.

Then, like a lioness defending her cub, Teresa sprang to action. She rushed to Judge Vida, who then reached out to Sylvia Monir. Together, with Father Andoy, the four people who had—at different times—sheltered Boy Deo beneath their wings, began stitching the fragments of his life into a coherent story.

Piece by piece, the truth emerged. Leandro Deo Renato "Anding" Moscavida. Francisco "Franco" De Gracia. Deodatu "Boy Deo" Biradayon. All one and the same.

But one detail remained beyond reach: the identities of his biological parents.

IN A QUIET HOSPITAL ROOM, Father Revo was watching the circus unfold. He had been following the reports, waiting, thinking. From his sickbed, he sent a message to Father Andoy:

"Please bring him to me. I need to see him before I go."

Father Andoy relayed the request.

"He's too sick to come to you," he told Boy Deo. "He wants to speak to you. Soon."

Boy Deo agreed. He owed that much at least. But on the drive to the hospital, his mind ran wild. What did the old priest want? Was it just to say goodbye? Or was there one final truth still tucked under that collar?

He chuckled to himself: *"Maybe he'll whisper some magic Latin into my ear before dying. Some holy secret to pass on."*

He thought about all his years in Quiapo. He'd been through fire—through crime, escape, miracles, and moments of madness. But Father Revo had never quite stood out in those years. Not dramatically, at least.

But now that he tried to remember harder, deeper—he could trace three occasions when Father Revo had saved him: once from street criminals, once from the police, and once from the seductive arrogance of being hailed a faith healer.

"Mayor, I am honored," Father Revo said as Boy Deo stepped into the room and gently closed the door. His voice was frail, but his eyes held clarity. "I don't know if this is mine to say. But you need to hear my story."

Boy Deo pulled a chair close to the bed and smirked. "I've got stories too. Like how I just found out the Catholic school was planning to expel me before I could finish Grade 6. Apparently, you stepped in. That true?"

Father Revo smiled but said nothing.

Boy Deo leaned back, relaxing. He thought maybe the priest just wanted closure, a friendly chat. He was wrong.

"I don't have much time," Father Revo began quietly. "I will die soon. That's why I asked to see you. First, I ask for your forgiveness. For my cowardice. And for the weight I've let you carry alone."

Then he paused.

"My theory," he said carefully, "is that you are my son."

Boy Deo didn't flinch. He had faced bullets and betrayals. But this was different. It didn't come from nowhere—he had *felt* something once, years ago. But why now? Why only now?

"How many people know about this theory of yours?" he asked calmly.

"Only three. I told Father Andoy yesterday."

"Did he know all along?"

"No. He only guessed. I never confirmed it. Not even to myself."

He described how Father Andoy suspected he had staged that first confession years ago. And whether Sylvia was in on it—well, Revo wasn't sure. Maybe she had played a part. Maybe not.

"Your mother," Revo said, "I knew her as Katilyn. I don't know if that was her real name."

"Why would she choose *you*?" Boy Deo asked.

"Why *me*?" Revo smirked. "You think I'm not the type?" He let out a dry laugh. "But let me ask you this: have you ever had girls fall for you?"

Boy Deo nodded, confused.

"And do you think they like you for your brain?"

Boy Deo grinned. “My charm, obviously. I’ve got the looks, too. You’re saying she chose you for that?”

Revo dodged the question with another smile. “Most of us priests hide from women, you know. We don’t all succeed.”

Then he launched into the story:

He met Katilyn at a protest rally. She had a partner—a woman, or a man, he couldn’t say for sure. That partner later migrated to the U.S. Years later, Katilyn was asked to follow, but their union needed the facade of a heterosexual marriage.

The couple returned briefly and came to Father Revo with a strange request: could he help them conceive a child—by donating his sperm?

They didn’t want an anonymous donor. They wanted someone they respected. Someone brave. “You faced armed men with only a rosary,” Katilyn had told him. “I want my child to inherit that courage.”

Father Revo was stunned. But something about their plea resonated with him. He didn’t say yes immediately. He asked for a year to reflect. But deep down, he already knew the answer.

When the story ended, he looked into Boy Deo’s eyes, searching for traces—perhaps of resemblance, or understanding, or even resentment.

There was a long silence. There was nothing. And yet—perhaps—everything.

Then, with visible strain, Father Revo sat up and placed a trembling hand on the mayor’s shoulder. They did not speak.

No need. The truth, whether fact or faith, had already landed.

In that moment, nothing more had to be said. Not yet.

THE IDENTITY CRISIS forced Boy Deo into a reckoning: with the ghosts of his past, the lies and myths built around him, and the possible truth of a secret parentage. His emotional intelligence glowed brightly—he received Father Revo’s confession not with rage or denial, but with composed introspection. He’s learned not to demand certainty from the world, only presence. His character now embodied a rare blend of street-hardened wisdom, political resolve, and spiritual maturity.

Father Revo’s quiet, profound presence was liberating. His revelation was less about biology than about moral reckoning. He represented the imperfect vessel of spiritual authority—flawed, afraid, slow to act—but ultimately courageous in his vulnerability. His story about Katilyn and the request for sperm donation had its complex dimensions: a priest caught between doctrine and human compassion. He became a tragic yet redemptive figure, not for his priesthood, but for his humanity.

Back in his office, Mayor Boy Deo listened quietly as his secretary reported: *three women had arrived, each claiming to be his mother.*

He didn’t blink. “Send them to the City Legal Officer,” he instructed calmly. “They can settle facts there—and if any of them turn out to be frauds, have them charged with misrepresentation.”

He added one more directive. “From now on, anyone with claims about my parentage goes through Legal first.”

A few minutes later, his next visitor stepped in: Senator Reg Makatigbas.

Though he had lost the presidential race, Makatigbas had simply reverted to his Senate seat, his power intact, if a little bruised. The campaign had created distance between him and his protégé, but now, the tension seemed to ease. Their political chess game—hawks circling but not striking—was giving way to something that looked like trust again.

More surprising was the news that Makatigbas and Sir Dikomo had reconciled. The old political foes had broken bread, and in one such moment, Dikomo mentioned a possible lead: a birthing clinic where Boy Deo might have been born. Even if most people believed Boy Deo was an innocent figurehead caught in someone else's mess, the mystery of his origins still cast shadows on his rising career.

The meeting with Makatigbas prompted Boy Deo to assemble a meeting—or a party, or sort of a victory ball—among the known figures from his tangled past. The venue would be his New Manila residence. Boy Deo envisioned it to be more than just a celebration. He felt it could also be a subtle rite of truth-seeking. The guest list was a mosaic: Makatigbas, Dikomo, General Dimas Uy, Joey Ty and Olivia, Father Andoy, Teresa, Katalina, and Guimo, among a few others. A crowd stitched together by buried secrets and surviving ideals.

The party was warm, crowded, and boozy. Red wine and San Miguel Pale flowed freely. Judge Vida, fragile but determined, made an appearance. Almost everyone here could recall that she, at one time, had a terse exchange with Sir Dikomo. They understood the almost imperceptible tension between the two even in this otherwise happy gathering.

When Sir Dikomo rose to offer his hand, she gave a tight nod: "I've forgiven you, and asked God's mercy—for my own peace of mind." Here and elsewhere, she undoubtedly served as a moral compass—stern but just. The offer of forgiveness was spiritual, not sentimental. She still held Sir Dikomo accountable.

Boy Deo lightened the mood with a soft confession. "I believe I've found out who my father is," he said, glass raised. "But I won't speak names—not until I'm sure. I still hope *my* mother can confirm what I suspect."

Silence. Then nods. No one pressed.

Makatigbas and Dikomo locked eyes. Whatever else might divide them, they agreed: finding the woman who gave birth to Boy Deo was now their common mission. The stakes had shifted. Their election losses no longer mattered as much as their roles in helping shape the future of a young man who might be the next national hope—or their unfinished penance.

Each had their reasons. For Makatigbas, it was Teresa—and the ghost of Osang. His discreet visit to the Biradayons of Biringan during the campaign had not gone unnoticed. There, he'd offered assistance—not as alms, but as reparation. For Sir Dikomo, it was Judge Vida's moral clarity that spurred him. For Joey, it was Junie. For all of them, Boy Deo was now the center of a new moral geometry.

Judge Vida quietly pledged her full legal support for whatever rectification Boy Deo's documents might need. But fatigue pulled her away early, followed by Father Andoy. The conversation, however, shifted into a looser, more dangerous register.

Boy Deo, feeling the buzz of drink and victory, mused aloud, "Those were the days when larger forces—things beyond our grasp—shifted the course of history."

His meaning was opaque. Makatigbas wondered if he was referencing Biringan and Osang. Dikomo suspected a veiled jab at his alleged involvement in child abductions.

General Dimas Uy joined the philosophical drift. “Back in Mindesaba, I always told my men the manual helps us through enemy lines—but it does nothing for the storms in our private lives. That’s where we stumble.”

He glanced toward Joey. “I see Reg’s old idealism in you, Lieutenant.”

Joey, emboldened, asked, “Sir, if you’re that respected, why not enter politics?”

The general chuckled. “We don’t need to. The military can seize power any time it wants. But why bother? Politicians already bow to us. A raised eyebrow gets more done than a coup ever could.”

Laughter—uneasy. Then Sir Dikomo volleyed: “If that’s true, why don’t Joey’s communist friends just join the military academy? Rise through the ranks. Stage the revolution from within?”

Boy Deo, offended, fired back. “We already have Trojans inside OXD—if you believe the gossip.”

A quiet fell. Just like at the Senate hearing, Boy Deo had landed a blow no one expected.

It was General Uy who defused the moment. “Dikomo’s idea was tried. Some succeeded. But revolutions need numbers—and conscience.”

He took a breath, his tone shifting.

“Armed violence isn’t about ideology anymore. It’s not even about money. It’s about revenge. Soldiers are still chasing rebels who killed their friends decades ago. Rebels are still hunting soldiers for the family they lost when they were children.

“And yet… even a soldier with a gun must answer to the whisper of his own conscience. That’s what ideology can’t conquer. That’s why no infiltration ever truly wins.”

He turned to Boy Deo. “This country needs a leader whose conscience is louder than his ego. I believe we’re looking at one.”

No one dared object.

BACK IN HIS APARTMENT, SIR DIKOMO had remembered a loose end. Tho Monir once told him he still had Sylvia’s old documents. That might be the last piece. Makatigbas’s former political antagonist has turned into an unlikely ally, dogged in his pursuit of truth, motivated by guilt, ambition, and a sense of unfinished duty.

The next day, he found Monir in a dingy Malate office. They exchanged a few words. A search led to a dusty top shelf—and a battered folder.

Inside was nothing of obvious use—except a quarter-sheet with scribbled notes: an address of a birthing clinic in San Miguel, Manila. Apparently, stacks of paper were shoved beneath the infant's back for a cushion. Sylvia just inserted every litter into the folder.

Sir Dikomo went to work immediately.

The clinic staff was startled but helpful. After nearly an hour, they found a record from March 17 to April 16, 1985. A woman named Katleya Ramos gave birth to a boy. Her address: a compound on Aguila Street near Mendiola.

Sir Dikomo followed the trail. The compound was gone—now a townhouse. But an elderly resident pointed him toward someone who remembered a tenant named Katleya, a known organizer of antigovernment rallies.

He learned she'd been arrested days after giving birth. A former comrade named Meldie De Masinloc, now living alone in Sagrario, confirmed the story. Her tone was calm, her memory sharp.

Sir Dikomo, with years of experience in crime investigation boosting his confidence, smelt something odd and inviting in the air. Could this informant unlock the mystery of Katleya Ramos?

It seemed the final corridor had opened in the labyrinth of Boy Deo's past.

CHAPTER 11
Son of an orphan

A month later, jubilation erupted across Manila. Deodatu Biradayon emerged from the city hall, flanked by cameras, flashing a triumphant grin. The mayor had legally changed his name.

"I go by Leandro Francisco Deodatu Ramos Calasanz now," he told the press. "But call me Deo."

The media feasted. His new name dovetailed into a rich, tangled lineage: Katleya. Father Revo. Sylvia Monir. Father Andoy. Judge Vida. Teresa. Katalina. Headlines bloomed across TV screens, airwaves, and broadsheets.

One front page showed him beside a frail but beaming Katleya, captioned with biting brilliance: "Basilio, Sisa's Pride."

Another image captured Deo between towering figures—Senator Reg Makatigbas and General Uy to his right, Sir Dikomo to his left. The caption read: "The Leader We Need, Says General Uy."

A primetime anchor called him the *New Moses*—not drawn from a river, but salvaged from the dump.

The most viral photo showed mother and son, Katleya clutching Deo's arm, her eyes hollow yet radiant. The caption: "Elodia, Orphan of War. Deo, Son of an Orphan."

A day later, Makatigbas—fresh from Singapore—confirmed the DNA results. The samples matched. Katleya was his daughter. Deo, his grandson.

A photo of Deo flashing a boyish grin beside Makatigbas made headlines again: "The General's Grandson."

From then on, Deo's remaining term as Mayor of Manila passed in relative peace. His critics faded to the shadows, their weapons dulled by truth. His administration, celebrated for its corruption-free record and bold innovations, was now hailed for its crown jewel: the *Citizens' Congress*.

International observers flocked. A renowned global theorist suggested that Deo's governance model could serve as a grassroots prototype for a reimagined United Nations.

OnePinoy evolved into *OneManila*. Data from the Commission on Elections, Bureau of Internal Revenue, City Social Welfare, and others flowed seamlessly through a digital portal. Residents could validate their legislative participation, monitor taxes, and access services—all backed by AI, satellite imagery, and real-time feedback.

Flood alerts, carbon monitoring, and traffic maps ran on live feeds. Property tax invoices were auto-generated, linked to real-time valuations scraped from the internet. Video tutorials walked every user through their obligations, down to how to appeal real estate assessments.

Manila's tax compliance rates soared. Revenues ballooned. Satisfaction indexes climbed. Foreign mayors flew in to study the miracle.

At home, progress came more quietly.

Katleya never returned to the psychiatric facility. Instead, two mental health specialists took turns caring for her. Deo, now flush with influence and resources, arranged for her weekly checkups at the military hospital. Her father, Senator Makatigbas, oversaw the logistics.

Deo also asked Meldie—Katleya's former partner—to serve as her live-in consultant. Meldie agreed but refused payment.

"I owe her," she told Deo quietly. "More than you'll ever know."

And so, through Meldie, fragments of Katleya's past began to surface—pieces long buried beneath delusions and electric shock.

Katleya had been seventeen when she left the La Profesa orphanage, where she was raised by the Theresiana Sisters. She had dreams—agricultural engineering, a future dedicated to helping the farmers of Biringan, where she believed her bloodline began.

She passed the state university scholarship exam before even finishing high school. The Sisters, recognizing her rare gift for teaching, let her stay longer than most—until graduation.

In Los Baños, Katleya struggled with city life. Lost in the chaos, she found refuge in Paloma, a dorm-mate and fellow idealist. They bonded over coastal cleanups and election watch groups. Their friendship deepened.

Then, everything shattered.

Paloma, visiting her hometown during semester break, was raped and murdered. The suspect: her town's mayor.

Katleya was devastated. She took to the streets. Placards. Speeches. Marches. National media took notice. Her voice rang out across Mendiola, Tepeyac, and Plaza Roma.

That was when she met Meldie.

Meldie came from a once-powerful political clan brought low by scandal. Their U.S. assets had been frozen. Her grandfather was a tax evasion target. Her parents are American citizens. Meldie herself—a queer woman untethered from familial obligations—roamed the city alone, shifting apartments, clinging to activism like a lifeline.

The attraction between her and Katleya was inevitable. One was the answer to the other's questions. Katleya depended on Meldie for her daily needs. Meldie, on the other hand, owed her life to Katleya; without the latter's timely help, she could have died from a drug overdose.

By sophomore year, Katleya's grades collapsed. By the start of her junior year, she dropped out, red-tagged by authorities. She feared for her life—tailed by unmarked vehicles, anonymous threats. Paloma's killers, she believed, were circling closer.

Meldie proposed a new life. A way out. They would fly to the United States, build a home, a family. But they needed proof of marriage. Meldie hesitated. Katleya insisted.

She proposed something stranger still.

"We need a child," she said.

They visited a priest in Quiapo. Katleya, after long confession, persuaded the man of the cloth to provide a semen sample—believing a baby would anchor them to something real, something holy.

She conceived.

But just days after giving birth, the police raided their apartment. They were looking for Katleya Ramos, an alleged member of a terrorist cell.

Panicked, drained, terrified, she handed the newborn to Meldie and fled—expecting never to see her child again. With no one to share parenting chores and equally rattled, Meldie hastily decided to dump the baby at Sagasa Street in Quiapo under the cover of darkness.

A common friend later tipped Meldie about the sorry state Katleya was in. When Meldie found Katleya again—in an "institution" just outside but near Metro Manila—the latter was no longer herself. The loss of her son and the way she threw him away must have caused her to snap. Meldie brought her to the mental hospital, but had not seen her since. Until that day.

NOW, DECADES LATER, DEO—grown and risen—saw his mother gradually rediscovering her senses.

He could feel it in the little things. The inside jokes between her and Meldie. The way her laugh cracked through the haze. The way she touched his face, as if checking it against memory.

Even Father Revo could sense the change. The old priest, recently discharged but quickly re-confined, welcomed visitors with the faint smile of a man trying to hold on.

That December, Senator Makatigbas visited him again—sweaty in jogging clothes, a faint perfume of morning golf clinging to him.

The nurse tried to stop Father Revo from standing, but the old priest waved her off and extended his hand.

"You are almost as lively as 31 years ago, Father Mel," Reg said, clasping the hand gently.

Both men had come full circle. They first met in Guinhikaptan, strangers on the edges of the war-torn Ispratli Islands.

Back then, Revo was still Melquiades Calasanz. Makatigbas, a fresh graduate of the military academy, was under orders to quell communist rebels. One of their first stops was the modest home of the parish priest—a chapel rectory on loan from a generous farmer.

When his troops knocked, the young priest welcomed them with open arms and hot coffee. Makatigbas introduced himself formally.

"Lieutenant Reg Makatigbas, Philippine Army."

The priest extended a hand. "Melquiades Calasanz. You may call me Mel. Or Revo, if you like."

Revo—the name stuck, coined that very day. Short for "revolution," Reg had joked.

Now, three decades later, both men bore that name.

One as legend.

The other as blood.

A FATHER'S SON

Senator Makatigbas had grown adept at quiet evasion. But some ghosts, especially those wearing the smile of an old lover or the gentle gaze of a child, possibly his, lingered in the corridors of memory like cigarette smoke on a velvet coat—persistent and faintly damning.

His mission to Ispratli had been, in truth, a self-imposed exile. The assignment was ideal: remote, respectable, and unreachable by the women he wished to forget. First, there had been that

girl from college whose poetry frightened him with its intensity. Then, the more recent entanglement with Osang—beautiful, disarming, and inconveniently fertile with implications. He insisted to himself that it had been nothing more than friendship with benefits. The kind of lie that only those with uniforms and unspoken regrets could tell themselves.

Senator Makatigbas' dilemma wasn't just about DNA—it was about legacy. What kind of man was he? What did Katleya's presence say about his capacity to love or repair?

Now Katleya was staring at him, and so was the ache of unfinished stories.

He played the role of doting grandfather to perfection, dispensing casual flattery and earnest-sounding questions about her suitor. Father Revo, it seemed, was a safe topic—one that softened her eyes.

"I would say he practices what he preaches," he said once, almost to himself. "In the two encounters I had with him—in Ispratly and Cerrito—I saw a man willing to risk life and limb for others. Especially the poor."

Katleya beamed at the mention. Encouraged, Makatigbas pushed forward.

"How did you and Father Revo meet?"

She told the story gently, without ado. She felt confident, rooted, but still appeared to be reaching for her rightful place in the world. The emotional bridge between past sins (her mother's abandonment and Makatigbas' denial) and present healing. The sum of her being was redemption made flesh. Her acceptance of Father Revo mirrored the theme of grace through relationship.

When she finished, it was her turn to ask.

"Do you accept him as your son-in-law?"

There was a long pause. A measured sip of coffee. Then, his reply: "It is because of him that I have total respect for men of the cloth."

AT THE HOSPITAL, THE PRIEST SLEPT. His face was pale, but the stillness of his form was serene, not lifeless. Father Revo, now revered by Deo as a spiritual anchor, had risen in their relationship from protector to silent martyr. Though wounded, his legacy had spoken through others. His quiet actions rippled through decades.

Deo stood near the foot of the bed, preparing to leave, when three visitors arrived: two men and a woman, all carrying boxes of Jollifoods fried chicken, rice, and soda. The aroma filled the sterile air with memories.

"Mayor Deo!" the woman smiled brightly. "We're so happy for you."

Their enthusiasm puzzled him. Sensing this, one of the men clarified with a sheepish grin, "We used to play and sell Sampaguita together at Plaza Roma. We were five or six years old."

Deo's laugh burst out suddenly, rich and involuntary. "Just as I thought!" He pulled them close, embracing the past in warm human form. The ruckus stirred Father Revo awake.

"Sorry to disturb your siesta, Father," they said in unison.

The priest blinked into clarity and smiled.

"We brought you something," said the woman, pointing to the boxes. "Your favorite."

"Thank you! If you know me, then I must know you," he teased.

The woman stepped forward. "It was the five of us—God bless Junie's soul—you treated to lunch at Jollifoods some twenty-five years ago. I'm Monina."

"I'm Freakie, Father."

"And I'm Leo," added the third. "We sold Sampaguita with Mayor Deo and Junie back in the day."

Their story spilled naturally, like water over stone. Monina spoke mostly, while the others nodded or added color.

They spoke of living under a bridge. How their father scavenged for scrap to feed them. Of how he volunteered as an *Hijo del Nazareno* after being moved by that small act of kindness from Father Revo. How service in the church led to a janitorial job at a maritime school, and how Leo rose through the ranks—first as an apprentice on a cruise ship, then as a second mate in four years.

Monina and Freakie, too, found their way. Public school, then the same cruise line. They saved. Bought a house in Kabite. Brought their parents out from under the bridge.

"All from that one meal," Monina said. "It may have been just a little good deed for you, Father. But for us, it changed everything."

They visited Quiapo twice a year, she added. Today, they had asked after him and were told he was confined here.

"We prayed for you, Father," said Freakie, wiping a tear. "For your healing, and for your cheerful heart."

Deo watched this with reverence. It reminded him of Gidaben's story—of that day when Madis-ogon's father, then a policeman, bought him a string of fish balls. A small act. A pivotal turning point.

Years later, Gidaben had repaid that debt by passing on his share of tainted money to Junie and Katalina. That, too, had come full circle. His appreciation of Yago's kindness had transformed him from living a life of transgression to a life of remorse and positive action.

LITTLE GOOD DEEDS

Father Revo's transformative impact on the poor shone through, as the story told by the trio at Jollifoods suggested. He marveled at how a seemingly insignificant encounter could uplift the poor not as passive victims, but as resilient architects of their own destinies—given the tiniest seed of hope.

For Deo, such little good deeds were what constituted the true miracles of Quiapo. Grace did not always come as divine thunderclap—it unfolded slowly, one act at a time. Father Revo's chicken meal decades ago becomes a spiritual investment with exponential returns. It was like the "five loaves" being shared—small lives multiplied by grace.

A month later, in January 2015, as the sun bled into the dawn sky, a throng of devotees packed the vast 58-hectare expanse of the Santiago de Compostela for *the Traslación*.

It was Cardinal Calaveria who led the Mass, and in his homily, he spoke of miracles.

"God can perform miracles by Himself," he said. "But more often, He chooses to work through our hands. He needed five loaves to feed the multitude. He needed jars of water to turn into wine. In

the Old Testament, even to escape the plague, the Israelites had to paint their doors with lamb's blood. God's power needs our willingness. His grace seeks our action."

After the Mass, an announcer spoke.

"We have with us this morning someone who once lived in the shadows of this church... someone who knows what it is to hunger."

A murmured groan rose from the crowd—no one wanted speeches before the Traslación—but when the name "Mayor Deo" rang out, it turned into rhythmic chants:

"Viva! Viva! Viva!"

From the stage, Deo took the microphone, the morning sun painting his face in gold. Below, an ocean of white hankies waved like petals in a storm.

"I lived in the shadow of this church for twenty-two years," he began. "Plaza Roma was my home. From five to fifteen, I lived off scraps, alms, and the rare kindness of strangers."

He paused, the weight of memory thick on his voice.

"Junie and I—my brother in all but blood—we scavenged and survived. His father, Yago, lived two years under the Sta. Cruz Bridge. That place—infested with ants, flies, and spiders—was our cradle.

"I heard priests say God is good, that He does not leave anyone hungry. But when all you've known is hunger, how do you believe that?"

He smiled, remembering.

"But even in our wretchedness, we had time to play with spiders. To marvel at their webs. We made pets out of them, even pitted them against each other. But there were moments I just watched one spin its web, and I saw then how beautiful it was—if we let it be."

He turned toward the sea of faces.

"God's grace in our lives is like that web. Intricate, fragile, patient. You cannot rush it. You cannot destroy it and expect beauty. You must let it form."

He looked skyward.

"And when it does, you realize—miracles do not always descend from heaven. Sometimes, they begin with a hand outstretched, a fish ball shared, or a priest's invitation to lunch. Miracles are found in good little deeds."

The crowd, silent and stirred, erupted once more.

"Viva! Viva! Viva!"

Dawn was breaking. Tentative rays of sunlight flickered from the east. A sea of devotees could be seen filling the entire open space of the Santiago de Compostela—all of its 58 hectares—and surrounding thoroughfares, frantically waving their white shawls and handkerchiefs in the air.

"Viva! Viva! Viva!"

From his hospital bed, Father Revo strained to keep his eyes on the TV. The mayor's speech was streaming live. The camera swept across the crowd, lingering here and there—until it caught Reg Makatigbas, Katleya at his side. This time, it stayed a beat longer than usual.

Father Andoy glanced at Father Revo. The priest's gaze had sharpened.

Sensing the unspoken cue, Father Revo muttered, almost to himself, "His kind... reminds people why men in uniform are worth respecting."

In his speech, Mayor Deo stayed close to Calaveria's theme—that is, about everyday miracles.

He continued:

"Yago—Junie's father—was left for dead when he was eight. Nobody knew how he survived the next five years of his life. What we know is that he managed to keep not only his body and soul together, but he also kept his sanity while experiencing the lowest ebb of his life. In fact, he managed, in the end, to raise a family from which a generational leader like Junie emerged.

"And I think the dramatic part of Junie's story evolved the way it did because of Nardong Sablay. The latter was the one who left the eight-year-old Yago on the sidewalk of a busy street in Kaloocan, alone and without any resources to help himself survive. Of course, Nardong Sablay acted on the orders of his lady boss and should be blameless. But he made it a point to make life harder for Yago than it already was.

"When Junie started to attract a following as chair of Sangguniang Kabataan, then as a member of Barangay Council, you can imagine Nardong's horror (who remained as one of the trusted hands in Mr. Ty's Cerrito household) when Joey (who by the way is now a colonel in the military), brought him to his parents' house in Cerrito. On learning from Joey that Junie was Yago's (a.k.a. Golek) son, Nardong Sablay (who was already sixty years old at the time), asked Junie, with Joey's permission, to hire him as an all-around errand boy.

"'I wanted to mend the irreparable damage I inflicted on his father,' Nardong Sablay pleaded. Joey acceded because he knew his own mother was also blameworthy for what happened to Yago.

"I can narrate the same story about Joey. He was remorseful for what his family did to Yago. To make amends, he helped Junie achieve what he tried to achieve in life.

"Stories go on and on. I can also mention with much fondness what happened to Meldie. Being apologetic for what happened to my mother, she helped Katleya rediscover her smile.

"The point I am trying to say is that there is always hope for redemption, regardless of how compromised one is, if only we allow God to complete his work for us. Who would have thought that it would take two generations—from Yago to Junie and myself—for us to see the beauty of a completed masterpiece, like a spider's web, which started, in the case of Nardong Sablay, in betrayal that was driven by envy and hate, but ended in redemption and reconciliation, or in the case of Gidaben, who had to risk his own life by sharing us his story, or in the case of wayward cops, whose reformation both surprises and inspires us.

"You would think that Nardong Sablay, after his role in dumping Junie's father, would be worthy of condemnation in the way we swat spiders away from our homes. But he redeemed himself by asking to be part of Junie's household; in the end, he even tried to heroically save Junie's life on that tragic night that we got ambushed on the campaign trail.

"Miracles are waiting to happen every day if we only do our part—with hard work, discipline, and God-centered purpose and dedication--and, as I said, allow him to complete his work for us. I played and sold Sampaguita flowers at Plaza Roma with fellow street kids who drew inspiration from acts of kindness shown to them—those little good deeds—and turned their lives around to become

one of our modern-day heroes, the Overseas Filipino Workers. They struggled for decades, but they did not give up. In the end, by doing what they could do best in their daily lives, by grinding it out under limiting circumstances, they succeeded. They justified God, from whose mercy all redemption comes.

"Also, let me share with you something which I don't think I have ever mentioned in public speeches before. As a kid, I followed the ants. I watched how they scavenge for crumbs and how they bring their food to their colonies, which I found to be hosted by trunks of trees or damaged concrete buildings. One time, there was a flood that either submerged or carried heaps of things away—push carts, scraps, trash, merchandise goods, construction debris, and even cars. There I saw the ants floating above the water. Whole colonies wrapped themselves up as one, like a ball. Floodwaters rushed toward the river, and the floating colony passed by the shed where my two or three of my friends, soaking wet, were waiting for the rain to stop.

"The ants looked like they were tied to each other through their limbs. The ants showed their commitment to each other, helping themselves to create air space that enabled the colony to float. Each one helped the other survive the flood that swept them from their homes.

"From the spiders that taught me to wait for the completion of God's creation, to the ants that taught me how one depended on the other to survive, I come here today with the message to suggest that there is beauty in an ugly world, that there is love for one another even if it seems envy and hate everywhere are pulling us down.

"Spiders can help change our views as individual persons. Ants can help us transform our views as a community.

"I remember the first time I experienced the Traslación. Maybe I was six or seven years old. I saw this boy, maybe even younger than I, who was crying because he had lost her mother. Then somebody told him to just stay where he was because his mother would look for him in the last place where the two of them stayed together. That good little deed of assuring him was a miracle; he stopped crying and, sure enough, his mother found her way back to him.

"The message of 'just staying where you are' has not left me as I grew older. Staying where you are, to me, means keeping the faith. As we struggle, God will come back to us, in the person of somebody whom we might not even know. In instances that I cannot count, I also experienced the Black Nazarene's miracles in my life. The miracles came in the form of food when I was dying of hunger, and of mothers—I had at least five of them—who found their way back to me.

"Katleya, from whose blood I got mine, came back to me in mysterious ways. She was orphaned by the whims of war. Most times, orphans of violence become violent themselves. But her path took a different turn. The web of God's creation has opened opportunities for us to see where we can best complement the fullness of that creation. I think that if we are only discerning enough, being at peace with ourselves, which requires us to seek the grace of forgiveness and humility, we would be able to understand how God prepares that path for us.

"Staying where you are means keeping alive the hope that life will turn for the better for as long as we put in the effort to make a living, with determination and dedication. It means doing little good deeds for our neighbor. It means helping to put the smile back on those who need our help. To be of service to others is the last place—' the communion of saints,' as we hear the preachers explain in their homilies and as we pray the Apostles' Creed—where we need to stay together. That is where God, I suppose, will come back to us. Cardinal Calaveria has reminded us of how the Holy Eucharist

works for us. It is an assurance that God will keep coming back to us, fulfilling his promise that he will not leave us alone.

"The Traslación is an occasion for the recollection of how our lives have experienced the outpouring of love from our brothers and sisters. The Black Nazarene performs his miracles through them. He heals the sick through our doctors and other medical professionals. He wipes the tears away from our eyes through our mothers. He brings laughter into our lives through our family members and friends. And he keeps us humble through our enemies.

"It is just fitting that we strip ourselves of our sandals or shoes because we are walking on holy ground. This ground is holy because it supports our bond with God and his creation. Our bare feet feeling the earth symbolize the acceptance of our responsibility for each other, including those generations that will come after us. We need to spare the ground from our trash. We do not need to step on somebody else's shoulder just to be able to touch the Nazarene."

FATHER REVO WAVES GOODBYE

Mayor Deo reflected a few times in his speech about a theology of participation: that even God waited for our willingness; that grace acted through the mundane—the fishball, the meal, the memory. He kept in awe of lived grace, of miracles made human.

The transformative power of Deo's words manifested itself an hour or two later.

While the estimated number of devotees had increased by more than a million, the Traslación that year was in many ways different from the previous years. This one was orderly; only a handful of devotees got injured. There was but little trash and litter on the streets. The procession was completed in twelve hours instead of the forty-eight hours that the Traslación took to complete in the previous year.

Mayor Deo's cellphone vibrated in his pocket. It was a call from Father Andoy.

"Father Revo watched the live coverage of the mass from his hospital bed. He said he felt proud—"

"Hearing my speech?" Boy Deo butted in, trying to be cheerful. Even with no one telling him, Deo could sense where Father Andoy's news was heading. They both knew Father Revo's time was up. Father Andoy only made it less of a suspense for him.

"Yes... and also for seeing you wear the Leo Benedicto ring," Father Andoy replied. "He closed his eyes right after your speech. An hour or so later, he breathed his last. My condolences, please."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hermilando "Ingming" Duque Aberia is a social development worker by training and a writer by the nudge of desperation. He writes a weekly column at The Manila Times, one of the world's older Spanish / English broadsheets. Paperback copies of this novel can be ordered at https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0B2HMLCN5