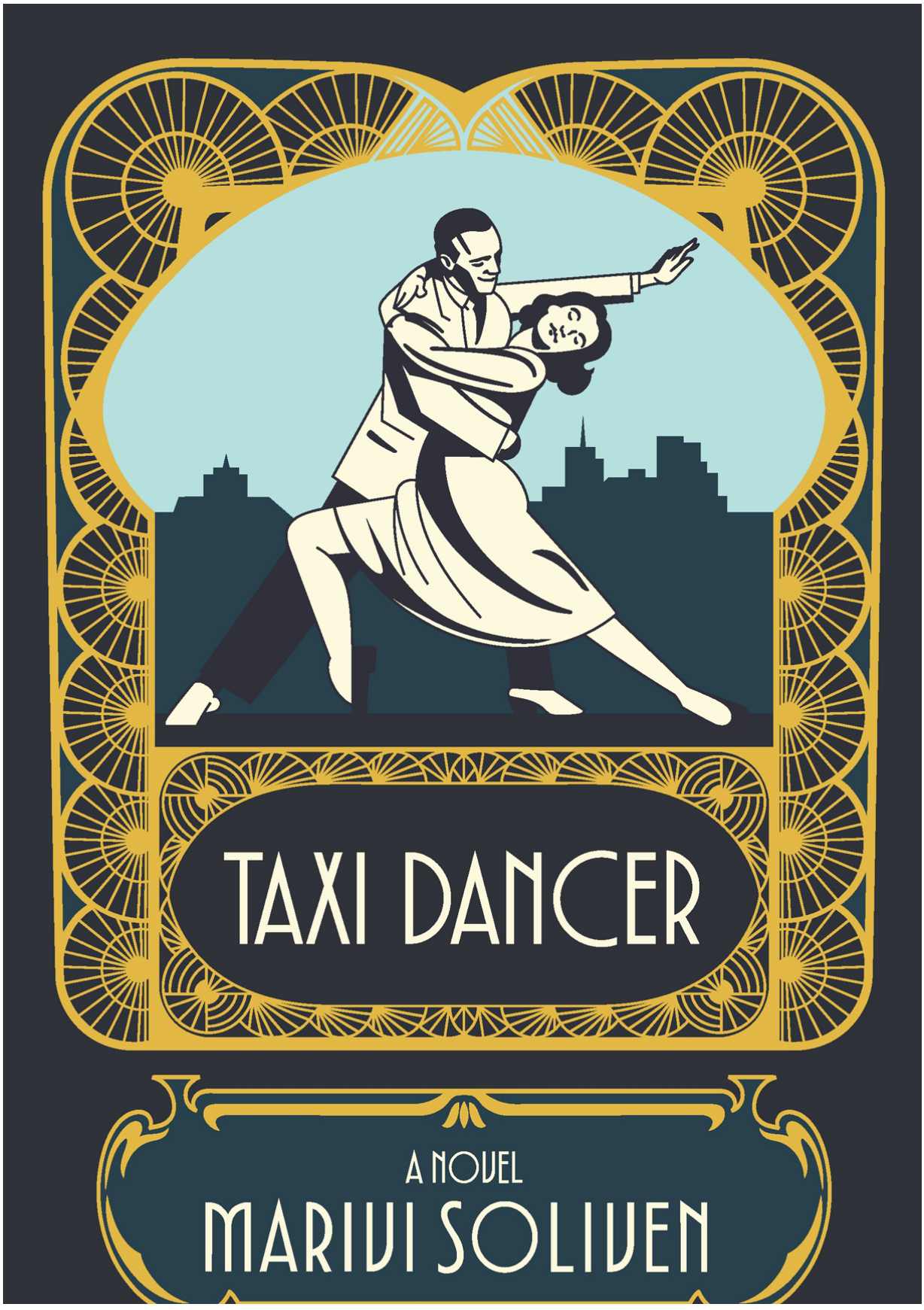


TAXI DANCER

A NOVEL

MARIVI SOLIVEN


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a novel

Marivi Soliven

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For John

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CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

PROLOGUE

ONE YEAR BEFORE
- CHAPTER 1
- CHAPTER 2
- CHAPTER 3
- CHAPTER 4
- CHAPTER 5
- CHAPTER 6
- CHAPTER 7
- CHAPTER 8

TEN MONTHS BEFORE
- CHAPTER 9
- CHAPTER 10

TWO MONTHS BEFORE
- CHAPTER 11
- CHAPTER 12
- CHAPTER 13

ONE MONTH BEFORE
- CHAPTER 14
- CHAPTER 15

CHAPTER 16
CHAPTER 17

ONE WEEK BEFORE
CHAPTER 18
CHAPTER 19
CHAPTER 20

AFTER
CHAPTER 21
CHAPTER 22
CHAPTER 23
CHAPTER 24
CHAPTER 25
CHAPTER 26
CHAPTER 27
CHAPTER 28
CHAPTER 29
CHAPTER 30
CHAPTER 31
CHAPTER 32
CHAPTER 33
CHAPTER 34
CHAPTER 35
CHAPTER 36
CHAPTER 37
CHAPTER 38
CHAPTER 39
CHAPTER 40
CHAPTER 41
CHAPTER 42

CHAPTER 43
CHAPTER 44
CHAPTER 45

THE TRIAL
CHAPTER 46
CHAPTER 47
CHAPTER 48
CHAPTER 49
CHAPTER 50
CHAPTER 51
CHAPTER 52
CHAPTER 53
CHAPTER 54
CHAPTER 55
CHAPTER 56
CHAPTER 57
CHAPTER 58
CHAPTER 59
CHAPTER 60
CHAPTER 61
CHAPTER 62
CHAPTER 63

EPILOGUE

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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"The taxi-dance hall is almost unknown to the general public. What little is reported in the press, by social workers, and by exploring visitors is colorful, but damning and shocking. Little wonder that crusades have been directed against the taxi-dance hall in several American cities, and that it has been outlawed in the city of its origin, San Francisco."

—Paul G. Cressey, Former Special Investigator, Juvenile Protective Association, 1932[1]

1 Paul Cressey, *The Taxi-Dance Hall* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1932), xi

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PROLOGUE

Saturday, September 22, 1934, Stingaree District, San Diego

The bullet struck Amado Barrios in the back, piercing flesh, bone, and lung and propelling him paunch first to the floor, arms splayed upon the scuffed wood. As he lay face down, wheezing blood with each breath, two thoughts registered in his fading consciousness: incredulity that he'd been shot in his own dance hall; and profound regret that he would never return to the islands to boast of his success in America.

In his final moments he savored the dance hall he'd built, inhaling its twin aromas of jasmine cologne and cigarette smoke, and feeling the music that thrummed through the floorboards and into his torn chest. He reached toward the closed double doors, but pain streaked through his arm like a second bullet. No matter. In his mind's eye he could see the ballroom that lay beyond, its mirrors reflecting his covey of lovelies, taxi dancers flitting like exotic birds under clouds of bunting and paper moons.

If only my family could see this place.

It is said a man's life flashes before his eyes as he lies dying, but in Amado's final moments, he thought not of what had come before, but of what would never come to pass. *As the ship docks in Manila, Nelly and I stand on the deck and wave to my family on the docks below.* Tignan mo yan *—his uncles exclaim—look at that fine suit, at his mestiza daughter. Amado struck gold and married a beauty! Our boy did us proud in America.*

Por Dios. Amado choked on the taste of rusty nails. *I should have gone home sooner.*

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San Diego Police Department

Case No: 1702 **Date: 9/23/1934**

Officer: N.E. Farley

Incident: DEATH

Details of the Event:

I arrived at Stingaree District shortly after midnight last night to investigate reports of gunshots heard in that neighborhood. I apprehended Oscarito Tumbok who was running along Market Street in a state of great agitation. He led me up to the Rizal Dance Hall on the second floor of 646 Market Street. Dance hall owner Amado Barrios lay face down in the lobby, dead from a gunshot wound to the back. Beside Barrios knelt a mulatto child, whom Tumbok identified as the victim's daughter, Nelly. Also in the lobby were ten American dancers and twenty Filipinos.

Nelly Barrios (Decedent's daughter), 6 years old: I didn't see it happen. I was sleeping. Can you call a doctor?

Dolores Knight (Taxi Dancer), 27 years old: The music was so loud, we didn't hear the gunshots, but as soon as the song ended, we heard Nelly scream. If I told Amado once, I told him a million times, a dance hall's no place for kids, what with all the riffraff that comes through here.

Celso Agustin (Customer), 29 years old: Who you calling riffraff? I pay good money to dance here. Look at this suit—do I look like some hoodlum? I got nothing to do with this.

Kiko Moran (Bandleader), 33 years old: Officer Farley, I take offense at that comment about these ladies. We do not employ floozies. Our ladies are dance instructors.

Benny Ferreira (Bouncer), 30 years old: Do I know who might've wanted to kill the boss? Maybe Eli Mata. He is sweet on Lucinda. Wanted her to quit dancing and go away with him, but Amado wouldn't hear of it.

Lucinda Lane (Taxi Dancer), 18 years old: Leave Eli out of this. He wasn't even here tonight.

Benny: Eli is one of the regulars. Ya gotta wonder why he didn't show up on the busiest night of the week.

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ONE YEAR BEFORE

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CHAPTER 1

The setting sun stretched Eli's shadow long as he stared at a modest sign above the door of a nondescript building on Market Street and Sixth: *Rizal Dance Hall*. It wasn't exactly the fancy dance hall he'd imagined, but the music twirling down like Maypole ribbons was nothing short of wondrous. Cab Calloway's "The Scat Song" blared from the second-floor windows with a rhythm so irresistible it quickened Eli's pulse and tickled his soles. Had a woman walked by just then, he would have whirled her into a swing dance right there on the sidewalk. He hoped Kiko led the band playing such heady tunes.

Eli wondered if the conductor would recognize him. He was just a child when Kiko left Manila a decade earlier. Back then he led the band and choir at Eli's elementary school, and worked alongside Eli's older sister Paloma, who taught English composition. Despite Kiko and Paloma's best efforts, Eli had never earned better than Bs and Cs at school.

When Eli announced that he too was leaving for America, Paloma made him promise to deliver her letter in person to Kiko. *You haven't seen Kiko since you were nine years old. Bring him my letter, it will remind him who you are,* Paloma insisted in her earnest teacher's voice. Eli knew the letter was merely an excuse to find the man his sister had loved for years from the other end of an ocean. He vowed to write her once he'd found Kiko.

Beyond completing this long-delayed errand for Paloma, Eli had a personal reason for coming to the Rizal. Every Sunday the other farmworkers would return to the bunkhouse brimming with stories about the Stingaree District's notorious dance hall. *They got blondes, brunettes,*

even a redhead, prettiest girls you've ever seen. Maniwala ka—*believe me—one night of dancing at the Rizal will make you forget a whole week of pulling up the goddamn asparagus. Get yourself a barbershop shave, put on your good suit, and you'll look swell enough to wow those hot tomatoes. Bro, if I had the money, I'd go every night.*

It took Eli months to save up for a suit and a barbershop shave. That Friday afternoon, he rode the bus into town with the other men, his new suit folded in a paper bag. Changed clothes at the home of a friend. Polished a pair of wingtips he'd bought for a song from someone who needed to pay off gambling debts. He couldn't afford a hat but didn't want to delay his big night on the town any longer. And anyway, who needed a fedora to dance?

Everyone looked up when Eli walked into Manolo Barbershop, spiffy in a double-breasted gray Macintosh suit and spit-polished shoes. Getting a shave or haircut was part of the weekend ritual, and customers smoked and traded gossip while waiting. When the others heard Eli planned to visit the Rizal Dance Hall for the first time, they jumped in with unsolicited advice.

"Flirt all you want, but don't fall in love," the manong in the barber's chair spoke to Eli's reflection in the mirror.

"That's right. The minute you fall for a taxi dancer, you might as well be dead—" Manolo mimed a throat slicing gesture with his scissors. "Two years ago, one of my best customers came in and asked for a haircut, shave, manicure, the works. Said he was planning to propose to his gringa girlfriend. Pocholo looked like a million bucks when he left. Too bad the girlfriend's brother caught them trying to elope. Beat Pocholo so bad, he lost three teeth. Toothless is better than dead, I said. Pocholo left as soon as he could catch a ride out of town. Last I heard, he was cleaning salmon in Alaska."

"Who's talking about getting married? I just turned 19." Eli laughed, but the story unnerved him. This wasn't the first beating he'd heard of. The apple picker lynched in Yakima. The dance hall torched by a mob in

Stockton. Just the same, he hadn't crossed an entire ocean to play it safe. As long he followed their advice and kept his heart above the fray, he'd be fine.

Surely it was no crime to take a pretty girl's hand and waltz her onto the dance floor? Maybe he'd find that girl tonight. Maybe he'd find several. But first he needed to find Kiko. Jittery with anticipation, he stepped through the door.

It opened unto a dim hallway that led him to a flight of stairs. He could still hear the music, but it was obscured now by raised voices. Full tirades, peppered with profanity. He crept up the stairs to find a scene of chaos: an upended wicker chair separated two unlikely opponents. On one side stood a middle-aged Filipino in his shirtsleeves, forehead glossed with sweat. On the other, the most beautiful girl Eli had ever seen: eyes blue as the twilight sky, hair bright as a copper penny, cheeks pink with indignation.

"Since when do you decide what I do after I get off work, Amado? I dance the whole goddamn night for you, with just one goddamn break, and when I'm done all I want—"

Eli cleared his throat.

She whipped a glare at him. "What?"

"Pardon me for interrupting, Manong Amado," Eli addressed the Filipino as a respected elder. "My name is Eli Mata. I hear Kiko Moran leads the band here and—" he faltered under the girl's baleful stare and pulled Paloma's letter from his coat pocket. "This is for Kiko."

Amado eyed the envelope. "If that's not stuffed with cash, we're not interested."

"Please manong, I promised my sister I'd deliver this in person to Kiko."

"This sister of yours, she wasn't married to Kiko, was she?" Amado raised an eyebrow.

"Oh no, it's not like that," Eli laughed nervously. "Kiko and my sister taught in the same school back in Manila. She wanted to make sure I'd have

one friend from home when I got here."

"Oh, what the hell." Amado opened the double doors to the ballroom. "Kiko—someone wants to see you. Says his name is Eli Mata."

The horns and piano died away but the drum kept on, keeping time to Eli's heart. Not wanting to further aggravate the bickering couple, Eli looked around the room and was pleasantly surprised. The simple sign above the nondescript door, Market Street, belied the generous proportions of the dance hall lobby. The door at the top of the stairs opened onto one corner of a vestibule, which spanned the length of the hallway he'd walked through downstairs. Several yards to his right stood a coat check counter furnished with a hat rack and hangers. A window in the shallow alcove beyond that looked out on Market Street. The near wall on Eli's left was painted blue as the sky on a sunny day, adorned with nothing more than a platter-sized copper wall clock, like those that hung in train stations. It was just past six. He cast a furtive glance at the two other people.

"We're not done here, Amado." The girl stood arms akimbo, a defiant tilt to her chin.

"Goddamnit, Lucinda, get off my back already. You cannot go to the Velvet Café after we close at midnight—I won't allow it. Those are the rules, take it or leave it."

"You don't own me, Amado." Lucinda narrowed her eyes. "After my shift is done, I can go wherever the hell I want. Even to the Velvet Café. *Especially* to the Velvet Café."

Eli was transfixed. Back home, a girl would be slapped for such arrogance. This one looked like she was winning the argument.

"Putangina," Amado swore under his breath. "You know you're my most popular dancer. My best customers line up to give you dance tickets. Don't you know those fellas would follow you like ducklings to the Velvet Café? Blow the rest of their money on Mamie's booze. Come Saturday night, they'd be too broke to buy more dance tickets."

“Fellas can spend their money wherever they want.”

“Look, the Velvet Café’s just a honky-tonk bar with girls, not a stand-up dance hall like this place is.” Amado sighed. “Hija, I worry about you, going there.”

“Don’t give me that. You’re worried about the money you’ll lose, not about me. So how about you shove that worry up your—”

“Well, well, well—is that you, Eli?” Kiko strolled through the double doors and into the lobby, a look of utter delight on his face. “My God, it’s been years.”

“Hello, Manong Kiko.” Eli gave Kiko’s hand a firm shake. But for a sprinkling of gray at his temples, the bandleader looked as trim and elegant as he had when he’d left Manila.

“Manong, pasensya na po, but I say my name different now. You mustn’t call me *EHH-li* because when I first got here, everyone laughed at me for having a girl’s name. So now I go by *EE-lye*. Like Elijah, but shorter.”

“I see you’ve succumbed to American sensibilities,” Kiko teased. “In that case, don’t call me Manong. I may be your elder, but in America, we don’t stand on protocol.”

Kiko clapped a hand on Eli’s shoulder and smiled like a proud uncle. “Amado, when I left Manila, this fellow was a skinny little kid in shorts. Now he’s taller than I am.”

“I turn twenty next year.” Eli could feel Lucinda’s eyes on him. He stood a little taller.

“And did you come as a pensionado scholar too, just like I did?”

“No. Remember what a bad student I was? An American recruiter in Manila hired me and a shipload of kabayan to do farm work. That was nearly two years ago. I started with the apple harvest up in Yakima Valley. Been working my way south ever since.”

“How did you know to look for me here?”

“I figured you’d be in a band.” Eli shrugged. “Every time I landed in a new town, I asked about dance halls. Everyone said the Rizal was the best one in San Diego.”

“Hear that, Lucinda?” Amado cocked an eyebrow. “This is the only place that matters.”

Lucinda cleared her throat. “You going to chat all night without introducing us, Kiko?”

“Where are my manners? Lucinda and Amado—may I present Eli Mata? His sister Paloma and I taught together at a school in Manila before coming here.”

“You mean *that* Paloma—?” Amado cocked an eyebrow.

“Yes, that one, Amado.” Kiko took off his spectacles and made a show of polishing them with his pocket kerchief. “But that was a lifetime ago. She must be happily married by now . . .”

“My sister never married. But she was promoted. Now she’s the principal at that school.” But for Kiko’s deep brown complexion, Eli could have sworn he was blushing.

“Before I forget—” Eli handed Kiko the creased envelope. “Paloma asked me to give you this in person. I’m sorry it took so long to get to you.”

“Better late than never, I always say.” Kiko tucked the letter into his breast pocket, patting it against his heart. “I’m glad you found me after all these years.”

“And *I’m* glad you found the Rizal dance hall. Pleased to meet you, Eli.” Lucinda held out a hand to shake his.

Without thinking, Eli bowed and pressed his lips to her pale fingers.

“Aren’t you the smooth operator.” Lucinda snatched her hand away. “You do that with all the girls?”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to be fresh.”

“Relax. I’ve seen worse happen on the dance floor.” She looked him over. “Now that you’ve delivered the mail, is there anything else you

need?”

The question stumped Eli. The Americans he’d met cared only about what he could do for them. “I’m itching to dance. When does that start?”

“As soon as we hit the dance floor.” A dimple appeared when Lucinda smiled. “How about you give me a whirl?”

“Not so fast. You need to buy dance tickets first.” Amado reached over the coat check counter, grunting softly as its edge pinched into his gut, and pulled out a thick roll of tickets. “We charge a dime for every dance. How many do you want?”

“Heck, I haven’t danced since I left Manila. I deserve one good night.” Eli dug into his pocket and pulled out seven singles. As Amado counted out seventy tickets, Eli felt lightheaded by his extravagance.

“Whoa, Kiko. You didn’t tell us your friend was a big spender.” Lucinda gave Eli a coy smile. “You’d better not step on my toes.”

Amado set the chair back upright. “You’re not the only girl he can dance with, Lucinda.”

“I sure as hell will be the first. Isn’t that right, honey?”

It was Eli’s turn to blush. He’d heard American women were straightforward, but he’d never met someone this cheeky. “I promise not to step on your toes. And with seventy tickets, I’ll get hours of practice, right?”

Amado threw his head back and laughed. “You really are fresh off the boat, aren’t you? Each song lasts about a minute, kid. You paid for seventy minutes of dancing. Space ’em out, or you’ll be broke before nine.”

Eli swallowed hard. He’d just spent nearly an entire week’s wages on little more than an hour of dancing. He hoped the barbershop men were right: that one night at the Rizal would make up for going hungry the next seven days.

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CHAPTER 2

"Come along then, hijo." Kiko nodded at the double doors. "We don't open for another hour, but you can watch the band warm up. At least you can listen for free."

"I never say no to free. Salamat," Eli thanked the conductor.

He followed Kiko through the double doors into a room unlike any he'd ever seen. From the center of the ceiling hung three white paper lanterns, large and pale as harvest moons. Strips of pale blue crepe paper billowed from these globes to the four corners of the ballroom. A mirrored wall to the left reflected the bank of tall windows to the right, their wide panes turned gold by the setting sun. Eli felt as though he'd stepped into a movie set, the sort of place Dick Powell might saunter into, a blonde starlet on his arm.

"Better shut that mouth before a bug flies in," a woman whispered.

"I wasn't—" Eli protested, but Lucinda had already passed him, trailing the scent of orange blossoms. She strolled to the far end of the ballroom through a door marked PRIVATE. Eli would have followed her had he not been struck by the musicians onstage.

Manila Musikeros declared the gilded sign in the center of the platform. Eli couldn't believe such men existed. The kabayan he worked alongside in the fields were perpetually caked in dust, bowed by sweat and disappointment. But these other Filipinos with brilliantined hair and snazzy black suits swaggered with the killer style of mobsters, brandishing instruments in place of tommy guns.

In the wind section, two trombonists chatted with a saxophonist who cradled his instrument like a small child, one hand cupped round its bell, its

neck upon his shoulder. Beside them, a solo trumpeter played a progression of notes over and over like a slow meditation. On the other side of the stage the pianist sat by his upright, smoking and nodding as the man beside him played the double bass, holding the outsized instrument like a lover to his chest.

“Break’s over, kabayan.” Kiko clapped his hands.

“Let’s run through those songs one more time before doors open.”

The drummer waved his sticks at Eli. “Who’s the new guy, Kiko? Is he replacing Filemon?”

“No, Eli’s an old friend of mine.” The conductor hopped onstage. “Eli, this is Oscarito. Best drummer south of LA.”

“Best drummer, period.” Oscarito twirled a drumstick. “Bro, do you play the clarinet?”

“No. Why do you ask?” Eli would gladly have played the clarinet or any other instrument to get onstage with this band.

“Our clarinetist quit on account of he got into trouble.” Oscarito smirked.

“What kind of trouble?”

“Woman trouble.” The pianist blew a plume of smoke at the ceiling. “Filemon had to leave town after his girl’s husband caught him pokin’ his horn in the wrong place.”

Ba dum tsh—the drummer rapped, drawing laughter all around.

“Very funny, Pepe.” Kiko wagged his baton at the pianist. “If we ever add comedy to this set, you and Oscarito could be our first act. Right now, how ’bout we show Eli your music is as good as your jokes?”

Kiko raised his baton and waited for musicians to get into position.

“Caballeros, let’s do ‘Puttin’ on the Ritz’ from the top.” He nodded at Oscarito. The drummer gave the count and the trumpeters launched into the opening.

Eli had heard the hit song on the radio countless times, and as the Manila Musikeros played it in a ballroom lit by three moons and the setting sun, it was impossible to stand still. Toe taps led to full steps, pivots swelled to spins, and before long he was skimming across the floor, eyes half closed, dancing to the movie in his mind.

As the final bars played, Eli spun round one last time and opened his eyes to see Lucinda by the side of the stage. How long had she been watching?

His heart was pounding, and he couldn't tell if that was from his exertion or because Lucinda was approaching.

"You're just full of surprises, aren't you? Did you learn how to dance back in the islands?"

"Santa Maria!" Oscarito whooped. "Kiko, you should've seen Eli's fancy moves. The kid can dance!"

"Is that right?" Kiko turned around. "You've come a long way, hijo. Back in the islands your fanciest move was skipping class to swim in Pasig River."

"That was more than ten years ago. I was just a kid."

"Not a kid now, are you, Eli?" Lucinda's voice was like a caress. "How about saving some dance tickets for me? Maybe you'll teach me some of your fancy moves."

"Hey Lucinda, maybe you'll teach *me* your fancy moves! *Ba dum tsh!*" Oscarito said.

"I charge double for wise guys, drummer boy." She turned to Eli. "Don't mind Oscarito. He's a big tease."

"Looks like you tease right back."

"Sass beats class in this crowd, honey."

Before Eli could reply, the double doors swung open with a loud creak.

"I came for the early bird that snuck in." A man solid as a water buffalo ambled toward them, fingers thick as the cigar he held, brown plaid suit

stretched tight around his barrel chest. “Kiko, is this kid really the brother of your girlfriend, or did he just say that to snag a free dance?”

“Lay off, Benny. You know I don’t dance for free.” Lucinda stuck a hand on her hip. “Eli, meet Benny our bouncer.”

“You mean the *enforcer*. See, I enforce the rules in this joint. The first one being—” Benny punched air with his cigar, “—one dance, one ticket. I make sure the fellas give our ladies a ticket before every dance. Keeps customers honest.”

“Amado hates customers who try to get free dances,” Kiko said. “That would be stealing from the store, wouldn’t it, Lucinda?”

“Don’t I know it.” Lucinda shrugged. “I gotta make a living too, don’t I?”

“Kumusta? Nice to meet you.” Benny grabbed Eli’s hand and shook it. “When you run out of tickets, you come to me.”

“Maybe next week? Can’t afford any more tonight.”

“Then you’d better spread ’em out,” Benny chuckled. “I’ve seen Lucinda clean a man out of a whole month’s pay in one night.”

“Can’t help being popular,” Lucinda said.

“Can’t help being broke,” Eli grinned.

“Story of our lives.” Benny chomped on his cigar. “Sorry, bro, you got to go wait in the lobby with everyone else until the doors open. Can’t let anyone think you’re getting special treatment just ’cos Kiko’s girlfriend is your sister.”

“Ay por Dios, Benny. How many times must I tell you and Amado, Paloma wasn’t my girlfriend?”

“Kiko and my sister were friends because they taught at the same school back home.” Eli saw no point in telling Kiko how Paloma had wept for days after he left for America.

Kiko rapped his baton on the music stand. “Kabayan, let’s run through the rhumba suite, one last time, shall we?”

“Come along now,” Benny said, clamping a heavy hand on Eli’s shoulders. “Dancing starts at seven. You got just enough time for a smoke.”

Eli left reluctantly. If Lucinda was as popular as everyone said she was, he was determined to be first in line for a dance. With her copper bob and sassy banter, she was the spitting image of Clara Bow, the Hollywood coquette he adored as a boy. Whenever a new film of the It Girl screened in Manila, he’d watch it as many times as he could afford to buy tickets.

Beyond that reflected silver screen glamor, Lucinda’s fiery temper intrigued Eli. He had never seen a girl argue with such ferocity. After watching one too many older Filipinos beaten down by ruthless foremen he had resolved never to accept such treatment. If he was to make a home in America, he would have to learn to stand up for himself. Who better to teach him than a spitfire like Lucinda?

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CHAPTER 3

The lobby that stood empty a half hour before was now packed with Filipinos chattering in Tagalog, Ilocano, and Ilonggo. It sounded just like the cramped bunkhouse on the farm, but these men were clean-shaven and reeked of Old Spice for their night out in the Stingaree. Even the scrawniest youths stood tall and broad in shoulder padded, double-breasted Macintosh suits, a platoon of brown stand-ins for matinee idol William Powell. Anticipation prickled like electricity and men cast frequent glances at the ballroom doors.

Failing to see a familiar face, Eli decided to stand by the door with Benny. He planned to be the first one into the ballroom when the dancing began.

“Hello, Uncle! Want to check your hat?” a little girl called out from the counter. She had strawberry blonde hair. Eli would have mistaken her for an American but for the tilt in her hazel eyes and her tawny skin. *Mestiza. Just like someone from de buena familia in Manila*.

Standing on a step stool, the child leaned her forearms on the counter. She took fedoras and bowlers with practiced ease, handed a ticket to its owner, then hopped down and twirled around to hang each hat on a rack. The line of men waiting to check their hats trailed down the stairs, but no one seemed to mind the delay. It was obvious they doted on the child.

“Isn’t she too young to be working at a dance hall?” Eli asked.

“That’s Amado’s daughter, Nelly.” Benny smiled. “She comes here every night. The Rizal is her second home.”

“I didn’t know Amado had an American wife.”

“He doesn’t.” Benny lowered his voice and leaned toward Eli. “Seven years ago, a kabayan knocked up one of our dancers. Delilah quit when she started to show. We thought that was the last we’d hear of her. Then one day, Amado found the baby on our doorstep. Couldn’t have been bigger’n a loaf of bread, wrapped up in a blanket. Delilah’s note said she didn’t want to raise some monkey’s bastard. So we took Nelly in.”

Eli was incredulous. Back home, this sort of disgrace led to a hasty wedding. “What about Nelly’s father? Didn’t you try to find him?”

“Look around, kid.” Benny waved his cigar at the men in the lobby. “Any one of them could have been the father. But do you think anyone would be dumb enough to own up to it? Hell no. If word got out that a kabayan knocked up a white girl, he’d be lynched.” The bouncer made a face. “You hear what happened in Watsonville a few years back?”

“The dance hall riots? It made the headlines in Manila. Paloma was so worried; she knew Kiko was in California.” He remembered how his sister had prayed countless novenas for Kiko’s safety, wondering aloud if he had been hurt in the five-day rampage. “She made me go with her to the docks when the ship came home with the body of that kabayan the Americans killed—remember him?”

“Who can forget?” Benny said. “Fermin Tobera’s only sin was dancing with a white girl. Hoodlums found him hiding in a closet. Shot him like a dog.”

“Paloma was beside herself when I told her I was coming to America.”

This was an understatement. Eli’s sister had raged at him for hours that night and through the rest of the week. He’d announced his impending departure after dinner one evening, while Paloma was grading a pile of essays in the kitchen.

Paloma looked up at him, incredulous. “Have you lost your mind? Susmaryosep, don’t you remember how that mob dragged Filipinos from their homes in Watsonville? Twenty-two men, beaten half to death. And I

can’t even remember how many more they threw off that bridge in San Pedro. It was all over the newspapers—we read those stories together! Americans don’t want us in America.”

“If that’s true, why do they keep hiring us to work on their farms?” Eli argued. “And if Filipinos are so unwelcome, why hasn’t Kiko come home?”

From the silence that followed, Eli realized he’d pierced his sister’s heart.

Who could have known the long-delayed errand would lead him this magical place? Eli leaned against the ballroom doors and vowed he’d spend all his weekends in the Stingaree. He’d become a regular at the Rizal Dance Hall, perhaps even Lucinda’s favorite partner. Getting on the bouncer’s good side was crucial to this plan.

“I worked the harvest in Watsonville last year but never visited the dance hall. Not once. I was saving up to buy this suit. The Rizal is my first.”

“Just as well, you haven’t picked up any bad habits from those other joints. We don’t want that kind of trouble.” Benny folded arms across his chest. “No boozing and absolutely no dating the dancers. Those are Amado’s rules.”

As though he’d heard Benny say his name from the other end of the lobby, Amado looked at the bouncer and pursed his lips at the wall clock.

“Seven o’clock, Benny. Time to get this party started.”

Benny opened the double doors with a flourish.

“Welcome, kabayan. Have your tickets ready and come on in!”

Eli turned to the ballroom but was immediately pushed aside by a stampede of men hell-bent on rushing in ahead of him.

And no wonder.

In front of the stage stood a glittering row of taxi dancers: Platinum blondes with shingled bobs, a smattering of Clara Bow brunettes, creamy shoulders and decolletage aglow in low-cut jewel-toned frocks. Their

charms were lost on Eli, who only had eyes for the redhead he'd already met.

He pushed through the throng but by the time he reached the line of dancers, he saw someone else had gotten to her ahead of him.

"Sorry, hon," Lucinda said. "Catch me on the next song?"

"No can do." The man's grin revealed a missing incisor. "I got enough tickets for a dozen dances with you."

"C'mon, Celso, give the kid a break. You see me every Friday. This is Eli's first night at the Rizal."

"Plenty other girls he can dance with. Tell you what: If you put in a good word for me with Clementine over there—" Celso pointed with his lips at a blonde in a red dress, "—I'll let the kid have the next dance."

"Deal." Lucinda ripped the ticket in half and passed one bit to Benny, who walked down the line of couples collecting stubs. Then in one smooth movement, she lifted her skirt and slid the other piece into her stocking. As she straightened up, she caught Eli's wide-eyed look of surprise. "What—you never seen a girl's knees? Go find another partner quick, or you'll have to sit out the first song."

Eli made his way up the line of dancers, but like a flock of synchronized flamingos, they performed the same bend-and-tuck motion with the ticket stubs before stepping into the arms of men who'd scrambled in before him. He'd nearly resigned himself to sitting out the first dance when a dancer walked out of the dressing room. He rushed up to her, waving a ticket.

"May I have this dance?"

"Dee-lighted." She tore Eli's ticket in half and reached over his shoulder, handing the stub to Benny as he walked by. "Name's Dolores."

"Call me Eli." Eli led her onto the dance floor.

As the band launched into the opening bars of "Happy Days Are Here Again," Eli eased into a foxtrot. He swung Dolores into a full turn, then led

her fluidly around the edges of the dance floor, where there was more space to maneuver.

“Looks like tonight’s my lucky night,” Dolores batted her lashes. “You’re the smoothest ride I’ve had in years. You must go to dance halls all the time.”

“I would if I had the money.” Eli spotted Lucinda and Celso on the other end of the dance floor. He’d have to get closer before the song ended if he wanted to claim her next dance. To his dismay, crossing the packed ballroom was as difficult as navigating a maze whose pathways kept shifting. Some couples moved in straight lines, others in loops. Another couple simply rocked in place as the man played the piano along his partner’s spine. Eli tacked across the floor, sliding into every open space.

Someone jabbed Dolores’s shoulder midway through her turn.

“Buddy, watch where you’re going, will ya?” Dolores said.

“You okay?” Eli asked, steering her away from the other couple.

“Sure. Happens all the time. The guys get so excited about coming here, they come tearing out the gate like racehorses on the first coupl’a dances.”

“Can’t blame them, considering what we do all week,” Eli scanned the room for Lucinda. To his dismay, she was even farther away now.

“Looking for someone?” Dolly followed his gaze.

“I’m sorry—”

“No need to apologize, everyone’s got a favorite girl.”

“She’s not my favorite, but—Lucinda’s the only other girl I know here, besides you.”

“Lucinda? Get in line, honey.” Dolores laughed. “She’s everyone’s favorite. Cute as a button and boy, can she dance. The girl could give Ginger Rogers a run for her money. The rest of us would hate her if she weren’t so damn nice. You’d be lucky if she gave you a second look.”

“No harm in dreaming.”

“Sure, hon.” Dolores squeezed his hand. “You Filipinos are dreamers, the lot of you.”

Only three couples stood between them and Lucinda, but Eli could tell the song was ending. Just then, the man in front of them pivoted his partner leftward; another lunged right to dip his girl low. Eli eased Dolores through the gap, only to be blocked by the third couple. The man’s face was obscured by his partner’s blonde bob, but his fingers spidered across her lower back, inching toward her butt. Apart from rocking side to side, the couple was immobile. The dance floor was packed; there was no room to get around this last barrier.

Eli had almost given up on getting past them when Dolores yanked his hand, shoving it into the blonde’s nape.

“What’s the idea—” the dancer pulled away from her partner’s tight embrace.

“Beg pardon, Alice,” Dolores said. “Eli here is such a whiz at the foxtrot, we couldn’t help running into you two. Couldn’t you tell this song’s too fast for dancing the slow drag?”

“It’s a free country. I dance the way I like,” Alice’s partner said. “Next time, watch where you’re going.”

Just then, Oscarito laid into the cymbals for the song’s finale. The blonde and her partner stepped apart to applaud. Eli spotted Lucinda just beyond them. She was close enough for him to take her hand.

Dolores nudged Eli. “She’s all yours. You can thank me later.”

Eli hurried to Lucinda and offered her a dance ticket. “I got here quick as I could.”

“And not a moment too soon.” Lucinda stepped around her first partner. “Deal’s a deal, Celso. See how I danced you closer to Clementine? Go hand her a ticket before someone else does.”

Lucinda ripped Eli’s ticket in half and tucked the stub down the front of her dress, instead of her stocking. “Let’s see how many dances you get with

me tonight."

"As many as you'll take." Eli took Lucinda in his arms as the trumpeter launched into the opening of "The Peanut Vendor." Almost simultaneously, they began swaying to a sinuous rhumba.

"I hope Benny wasn't too hard on you back there," Lucinda said. "Don't be fooled by the tough guy act, he's a real teddy bear."

"Not to me he wasn't."

"He's a good guy, as long as you don't get him riled."

"What happens then?"

"You don't want to find out. Before working at the Rizal, Benny was a professional boxer. Tells everyone who'll listen that he was training for the featherweight title, until someone busted his eardrum. He can barely hear in his left ear now."

"Sorry that happened."

"Don't be. Some nights Kiko's band plays so loud, I wish I were half deaf too."

"I could listen to the Manila Musikeros all night."

"Of course you could." Lucinda rolled her eyes. "They're paid to entertain you, same way I am."

"That's not how I see—"

"It's no big deal." Lucinda's tone softened. "Enough chitchat. Show me what you got. I've seen you dance solo, but can you keep up with me?" Lucinda pivoted, her foot tracing a wide arch behind her.

"Just watch."

They commenced an elliptical route around the dance floor, Eli orbiting Lucinda. "Have you been dancing here long?"

"Three years. I started when I was 15."

Eli's mouth fell open.

"Why so shocked? Do I look older than 18?"

“No, of course not. What did your parents think of you working so young?”

“Haven’t seen them since I left home.”

“You left your family?”

“Don’t give me that look. You left just like I did, and the Philippines is a heck of a lot farther away than Yuma. What did *your* folks think of that?”

Eli’s smile faded. “My parents died of the Spanish flu when I was five.”

Lucinda caught his hand. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be rude.”

“You didn’t know.”

“Did you and your sister have to go to an orphanage?”

“No. My mother’s older sister moved in when my parents fell ill. Just before Mama died, she made Tia Remedios promise to take care of us. Right after the funerals, Tia Remedios put Paloma back in school and persuaded the principal to let me start kindergarten a year early so she could get back to work at her dress shop.”

“Your aunt was a seamstress?”

“Dressmaker. The best in Manila. Paloma and I helped her after school every day. Tia Remedios’s customers were wives of American businessmen and señoras from the best families. The nice ones gave me candy.”

“I wish I’d grown up helping make fancy gowns, instead of feeding chickens on the damn farm.” Lucinda moved closer to Eli, her steps mirroring his.

“Is that why you ran away and became a dancer?”

“Wouldn’t you?”

Eli clasped Lucinda’s waist and swung her full circle. “I’d sneak away from the farm every night to dance with you.”

“Is that a promise?”

Eli touched his cheek to hers. “Yes.” He shut his eyes and imagined the music continuing to play, even after the band’s final flourish. They might

have remained that way till the next song began, but for the hand that pulled him away from Lucinda.

“First rule of the Rizal: no canoodling with the dancers, got it?” Benny released his shoulder.

“Who said we were canoodling?” Lucinda said. “I was just catching my breath.”

“He left you breathless, did he?” Benny narrowed his eyes at Eli. “Watch yourself, kid. Either give the girl another ticket or step aside for the next guy.”

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CHAPTER 4

Just as Benny predicted, Eli ran out of tickets midway through the evening. A less resourceful man would have caught the bus back to the farm, but Eli had spent weeks planning his first night in the Stingaree and left nothing to chance. Through the migrant-worker grapevine, Eli had reunited with Wilfredo Genoza, a childhood friend who'd come to live in San Diego.

Wilfredo had enlisted in the US Navy years before Eli answered the recruiter's call for farmworkers. Upon being discharged, he had nothing to show for his time at sea beyond a few dollars and the nickname "Wings," bequeathed by his American shipmates. Wings had moved from washing dishes in a ship's galley to washing dishes at the Sun Café on Market Street. Delighted to see an old friend from home, Wings had invited Eli to spend the night at his place. Eli simply had to kill a few hours until he got off work at midnight.

While it irked Eli to watch Lucinda dance with other men, it was better than standing on a cold street corner. He sidled up to two men smoking by the windows. "Mind if I join you?"

"Halika. Plenty of room here." One manong shifted his elbow on the windowsill, making just enough space for Eli to edge in sideways.

"Thanks. I'm Eli."

"Migo."

As Eli reached out to shake Migo's hand, he was startled to see half of Migo's index finger was gone. "What happened to your hand?"

“Cannery accident. Sharp knife, slippery salmon. Happens all the time.” Migo shrugged. “I didn’t want to lose another finger, so I quit Alaska. Got a bellboy job at the Hotel del Coronado. No one sees my hand when I’m hauling luggage. Anyone asks, I tell ’em the salmon took my tip.” He laughed at his own joke.

“This here’s Floro,” Migo waved his cigarette at the man on the other side of Eli. Floro was nearly a head shorter than Eli but compensated for his lack of height with exuberant style, his wide red tie flaring bright as a rooster’s comb against his gray pinstriped suit.

“We been watching you and that redhead, bro,” Floro said. “That’s some fancy footwork you got there. You a professional?”

“No, I just like to dance.”

“Heck, we *all* like to dance,” Migo snorted. “But you do it better than anyone else. Why’re you sitting this song out? You taking a break?”

“I’m done for the night.” Eli sighed. “I ran out of tickets. Cash, too.”

“Ayayay. Happens to all the first timers.” Migo blew a plume of cigarette smoke out the window. “You got to pace yourself. Sit out a few songs, then get back on the floor.”

“I didn’t want to give up dancing with Lucinda. Soon as a song ended, other guys tried to cut in, so I just kept giving her tickets until I ran out.”

“You gave all your tickets to one dame?” Floro shook his head. “Big mistake. Next time, play the field. Lots of pretty girls in this place. Some are good at dancing; others are good at . . .” he waggled his eyebrows suggestively.

Migo snickered. “Don’t listen to Floro. Maniwala ka, he’s not speaking from experience. I got better advice. If you’re sweet on that redhead, next time save a ticket and catch her on the last dance at midnight.”

“What happens at the last dance?”

“That’s when you sweet talk her into meeting you after she gets off work. Soon as Amado counts their tickets and pays them, the ladies can go

wherever they please." He waved at the couples on the floor. "See, romance is like dancing. You gotta have good timing. All night, kabayan are inviting them on dates, poor dames can't keep their names straight. But if you catch your girl on that last dance, odds are she'll say yes."

"The bouncer said taxi dancers aren't allowed to date us."

"What are you, Catholic?" Floro jabbed his cigar at Eli's face. "You don't come to America to follow rules. Heck, we're already breaking the rules, dancing with white girls. You know it's an actual crime for Filipinos to marry Americans, right?"

"Sure, I know gringos don't like us being around their women," Eli looked at the two older Filipinos with skepticism. "But what do you mean marriage is a crime?"

Floro spit out the window. "The damn anti-*miss-genation* law makes it a crime."

"Bro, say it right or you'll sound uneducated. It's the anti-mis-ce-genation law." Migo drew out each syllable with disgust.

"The hell I care how you pronounce it," Floro said, ears turning red. "The only thing you got to know is this law says it's a crime for different races to mix."

"Filipinos and Americans can't marry?" Eli asked.

"They don't even get that right. Goddamn Americans classify Filipinos as Mongolians, and the anti-miscegenation law says Mongolians cannot marry Americans." Migo sighed. "Pues. If we can't marry 'em, we might as well date 'em."

"But you gotta do it on the sly." Floro leaned forward. "It's easy. See, Benny only minds the front door at closing, but the girls leave through the stage door down the back stairway. The fellas who want a date wait for them out back."

"Even better," Migo added, "snag the redhead's last dance and tell her to meet you someplace. Floro and I, we go to the Velvet Café. It's a dance

hall with a bar."

Eli's eyes widened. This was what Lucinda and Amado had been arguing about that afternoon. "I wish I'd known this before I gave Lucinda my last ticket."

Migo patted his shoulder. "Cheer up, kabayan. You'll get it right next Friday."

"So, which one of those girls will get your last dance tickets?"

"That's the eternal question." Floro took a long wistful look at the taxi dancers flitting like dragonflies under the paper moons. "So many pretties to choose from."

"We only bought a dollar's worth of tickets this evening. Benny won't let you into the ballroom for less than that." Migo sucked on his cigar. "But we're saving the rest of our money for drinks at the Velvet Café. We're going there after midnight."

"The place Amado doesn't want his dancers to visit?"

"So you heard about that stupid rule," Floro said, making a face. "There's bad blood between Amado and Mamie. They think there's room for only one dance hall in this town."

"Mamie? A woman runs the other dance hall?"

"White woman. Mamie Savage. God's gift to men." Floro lifted both hands to his chest, fingers curved around imaginary melons. "Acts like it too."

"Amado wants us to choose his place over Mamie's." Migo added.

"What's the difference between the Rizal and the Velvet Café?"

"Amado's got better dancers and a better band. But Mamie's got booze." Floro ground his cigar out and tossed it out the window.

"Soon as Prohibition ended, Mamie put out the word: The Velvet Café had girls *and* hootch." Migo said. "She even hired a kabayan to tend bar. Sal's got a mean streak, but at least he's one of us. Now every weekend, we gotta decide: do we want to dance, or do we want to drink?"

“Why can’t you do both?”

Floro rubbed his thumb and forefinger together. “Because money doesn’t grow on trees, bro. Life in America is all about choices. You’ll see.”

“But tonight is different, because it’s my birthday.” Migo leaned an elbow on the windowsill. “You only turn 30 once, you know? I said to Floro, this weekend I want it all: drinking, dancing, girls, the works. So, we bought ten tickets. We got the dancing over with early, then snagged this spot. If you want to stay all night, a window spot is key. Gets stuffy in here with everyone smoking.”

“Soon as this place shuts down, we head over to the Velvet Café for Migo’s birthday drink,” Floro added. “Mamie’s place stays open till two.”

“But if you’re not waiting for dates, why don’t you go now?”

“Weren’t you listening?” Floro snorted. “We got to make our money last all night. It’s only half past ten. If we go now, we’ll be broke by eleven. See, even if you don’t dance at the Velvet Café, Mamie’s girls sweet talk you into buying them drinks, and lemme tell you, those women can drink a fella under the table. Smarter to kill time here. Costs nothing to watch girls dance.”

“Bottom line is, you got to learn to stretch your money, or you’ll go broke in these dance halls.” Migo ground his cigarette on the windowsill then flicked it outside. “Women are an expensive habit.”

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CHAPTER 5

Eli stepped out into the cool evening, having tired of watching Lucinda dance with a succession of men. All throughout, she wore the same detached expression, gazing over her partner's shoulder with a half-smile, as though she were watching a parade so far away she couldn't be bothered to cheer.

But hadn't she looked into his eyes when they were dancing? Hadn't she waved away the other men who'd tried to cut in? *Sorry, I'm already taken*, she'd sing, then turn back to him with a wink. Surely these were encouraging signs. He'd return next week to see if she really did prefer him to all the others. Next time he'd save a ticket for her last dance.

Eli's stomach growled. In all the excitement, he'd forgotten about dinner, but all was not lost. Wings had instructed him to take the back door to the Sun Café's kitchen; perhaps he could scrounge up some leftovers then.

Even at that late hour, Market Street was filled with Filipinos in smart suits, smoking and chatting outside pool halls and bars. The cool brisk breeze carried the aroma of cigar smoke, aftershave, and that vaguely floral odor of male anticipation, Brylcreem. If Eli closed his eyes, he could imagine he was at a fiesta back home in Manila, albeit one in which women were conspicuously absent.

Unable to get through the tangle of revelers on the sidewalk, Eli stepped out in the street. He was just about to cross Fifth Avenue when someone yanked him out of the path of a speeding Model T.

"Get outta the way, ya damn monkey," the driver yelled.

“Watch where you’re going, cabrón cracker,” yelled the man who’d grabbed Eli.

Eli shook the hand off his shoulder and turned to see a Filipino with heavy lidded eyes and an impeccably groomed moustache. *A Filipino Clark Gable,* he thought.

“You gonna thank me?” Clark Gable asked.

“What for?”

“For saving your life *and* your pride, bro. That gringo would have run over you like a chicken crossing the road.” He held out a hand. “Name’s Chino Serrano. What’s yours?”

“Eli Mata. Thanks for saving my life.”

“No big deal.” Chino shrugged. “You new to the Stingaree?”

“Why do you ask?” Eli had taken such care to buy the right suit, to get a barbershop shave. *Do I still look like a probinsyano, fresh off the boat*?

“It’s easy to spot the newcomers—you’re all starstruck and distracted.” Chino crooked a finger for Eli to follow him through the crowded sidewalk. “First time you see the neon lights, the bars and dance halls, you think, Santa banana, I’m at an American fiesta.”

Chino cast a sidelong glance at Eli. “But gringos don’t think us Pinoys should have any fun. The fact that we come to the Stingaree to drink and dance with their women drives ’em crazy, so they come too, looking to stir up trouble. If I hadn’t grabbed you in time, we’d be scraping that fancy suit off Market Street. Listo, kabayan. Be careful. We aren’t welcome here.”

“It can’t be that bad,” Eli waved at the well-dressed Filipinos around them. “We outnumber gringos.”

“Doesn’t matter how many we are.” Chino cocked his thumb and forefinger and pretended to take aim. “All it takes is one crazy gringo with a gun. Then it’s game over. Walk with me, will you? I need a drink.”

As they strolled along Market Street, Chino offered Eli a running commentary of his favorite haunts. Mrs. Obayashi made the best fried

noodles at the Sun Café; Consuelo at Parra's Kitchen served tamales just like those you ate in the islands; and old Mr. Manzano let kabayan watch billiard tournaments at the Luzon Pool Hall when they had no money to rent their own table. They made slow progress along Market Street, for every few steps, someone pulled Chino aside for a quick chat.

"Do you know everyone in this town?" Eli asked.

"If you lived here as long as I have, you'd know everyone too." Chino pulled out a pack of cigarettes and shook one out for Eli.

Eli watched Chino flip open a Zippo lighter, puff a cigarette to life, then hold the flame for Eli to light his own. Who would have thought that on his first night in the Stingaree he would reunite with his childhood music teacher, flirt with a dancer, and be saved from murderous gringos by the Filipino Clark Gable? He exhaled slowly, imitating the other man's worldly nonchalance.

"So. You work on the farms?" Eli asked.

"Not a chance, bro." Chino held up both hands: long fingers, pale mestizo skin, immaculate nails. "Look: do these hands look like they ever touch dirt? Nahh. I got the best job in town. I'm the doorman at El Cortez Hotel. It's close enough for me to walk over here, but far enough away from the Stingaree that white folk call it respectable. The Hotel del Coronado might be bigger, but if you ask me, El Cortez has the best location." Chino blew a jet of smoke across Market Street, looking smug as a king. "This is where all the action is."

"I wish *I* could get paid to stand in the shade at some fancy hotel, greeting all the swells." Eli looked at Chino with envy. "Instead, I make 10 cents an hour, pulling lettuce in the boonies. Heck, I could have done the same job back in the islands."

"But then you'd be stuck in the islands, wouldn't you?" Chino chuckled. "Take it from me. No one cares what you do from Monday to

Friday, so long as you make enough cash to spend it here on the weekend. Stick with me, kid. I know where all the best parties are."

"Are we going to one now?" Eli forgot about being hungry. Wings said he needed to clean the kitchen after the restaurant closed, to meet him there at 1 a.m. He still had over an hour to kill, and who better to do that with than this flashy new friend?

Chino took a left on Third Avenue. After the noise and neon signs on Market Street, this block seemed nearly deserted. The shuttered storefronts of Gim Wing Grocery and Shee Kooey Hom Cigar Shop would have been indiscernible had they not caught the neon glow of the marquee across the street. *Velvet Café* pulsed like scarlet fireflies in an otherworldly field.

"Will you look at that." Eli's breath caught in his throat.

On that dark street, the Velvet Café's bright window resembled a movie screen that framed a scene of sheer fantasy. Well-dressed Filipinos and American women mingled freely in what appeared to be a posh cocktail party where no one needed the pretext of dance to touch each other. Here was a kabayan, hand cupped round his date's hip; there, another one draped his arm across a lady's bare shoulders; further on, a manong whispered to his companion, lips grazing her pale ear. Such rampant flirtation made the Rizal's supervised dances look absurdly chaste. *If only Lucinda worked here instead.*

"Ano ba?" Chino nudged him. "You gonna stand out here all night or go in and join the party?"

Eli fingered the coins in his pants pocket. "Will they kick me out if I can't afford a drink? I spent nearly all my pay on dance tickets at the Rizal."

"Next time, plan ahead, bro." Chino made a face. "If you're not careful, Amado's girls will suck you dry."

"Haven't you ever met a girl worth going broke for?" Eli looked sheepish. "Not even once?"

“What the hell.” Chino pulled his fedora low over his head. “C’mon, kid. I’ll buy you a soda.”

The fantasy turned real the moment Eli stepped into the café. Aromatic clouds of cigar smoke hovered overhead, and swing music poured in through the open doors of the ballroom just beyond the bar. Chino slapped shoulders and shook hands as he led Eli through the crowd.

“Hoy Chino, what kept you?” the bartender called out. “It’s after midnight. You drinking somewhere else now?

“Nah, bro. Just took the scenic route.” Chino planted an elbow on the bar. “Had to show the new kid where everything was.”

“Saved the best for last, did you?” The bartender looked Eli over. “Nice suit. What’s your name, kid?

“Eli. And I’m not a kid.” Eli flushed.

“Don’t mind Sal,” Chino chuckled. “He likes to tease.”

“Yeah, I’m just a big joker right, Chino?” Sal nodded at Eli. “You better grow thicker skin if you want to survive in this town, kid. So what can I pour you gentlemen tonight?”

“I’ll have the usual,” Chino said. “What’s it going to be Eli—Pepsi or Coca Cola?”

“What’s the matter, kid? Too young to drink the good stuff?” Sal leaned across the bar. “I’ll let you in on a secret. Pepsi gives you more soda for a nickel, so . . .”

“I’m nineteen, okay? I drink all the time, it’s just—”

“He blew his cash at the Rizal,” Chino clucked his tongue.

“Didn’t you tell Eli we got babes *and* booze here?” Sal popped open a bottle of Pepsi and slid it across the bar. “Everyone knows this place is the best taxi dance hall in town. The Rizal is for amateurs.”

“Look, I’ve been here two years.” Eli was about to say more when he noticed the scar on Sal’s face. Thin as spiderweb silk, it began at the corner of Sal’s left nostril, traversed the hollow of his cheek and ended below his

earlobe. Who had Sal provoked to slice up his face? Eli didn't want to find out.

"Relax, Eli. You can come back next weekend." Chino watched Sal pour a finger of whiskey into his tumbler. "Salamat, kabayan," he thanked the bartender. "Put Eli's soda on my tab. I'm buying this round."

Eli saluted both men with his bottle, then turned away to hide his burning face. Excitement quickly overcame his chagrin for being the only one sipping soda at the bar. No wonder Lucinda wanted to come here. The bar was twice the size of the Rizal Dance Hall's lobby. While Benny emphatically separated patrons from dancers between every song, Sal turned a blind eye to the brazen flirtation happening all around them. Taxi dancers sauntered in from the ballroom arm in arm with their partners. *Was alcohol the price those customers paid for female attention?* Eli wondered.

"Have a look at our ballroom, kid," Sal said. "If you like what you see, come here next weekend, instead of wasting time at the Rizal. Come for the dance, stay for the drinks, isn't that right, Chino?"

"I don't play favorites, but the drinks are a definite plus." Chino sipped his bourbon. "Go on, Eli. It's free to watch."

If the Rizal Dance Hall's airy ballroom evoked the evening sky, the Velvet Café's windowless chamber promised earthly delights. A singer with magnolias in her hair crooned "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes" to couples swaying cheek to cheek under the amber glow of wall sconces. The time for flashy dance moves had passed, for the night was no longer young and the air was thick with yearning.

When the song ended, a ripple ran through the crowd as it parted, not for a burly ticket collector, but for a woman no less formidable. A platinum bouffant framed kohl-lined eyes; her lamé gown bared ivory shoulders and glimmered like mermaid scales with each rolling step. The woman collected tickets as though they were bonbons, squeezing shoulders and stroking arms, treating each man like an old lover.

The conductor waited till she reached the ballroom doors before launching his band into “Body and Soul.” The woman swayed languidly, scanning the dance floor until her gaze landed on Eli.

Eli froze as she approached, a half-smile on her face, green eyes fixed on him.

“Well, aren’t you the bee’s knees. This your first night here?” She squeezed his arm. “Why aren’t you dancing?”

“I can’t—” Eli sensed that admitting he was broke wouldn’t go over well. “I need to go meet a friend soon.”

“Who’s the lucky girl? My ladies don’t get off work till two.”

“It’s not a date. Wings gets off work in a few minutes.” Another sin of omission: She didn’t need to know Wings was a dishwasher.

“Wings? You boys have the most outlandish names. What’s yours, darling?”

“Eli. I came in with Chino. He said this place throws the best party in town.”

“Bless Chino’s heart, Sal gives him a free drink every time he brings in someone new. I’m Mamie Savage. This café’s my baby.” Mamie squeezed Eli’s forearm. “Now be a dear and tell Wings to meet you here next time, all right? I’ll make sure Sal pours you a stiff one if you do me that favor.”

“I will, Miss Savage.” Eli’s ears burned.

“Call me Mamie.”

“Yes, Ma’am, I mean, Mamie.”

Tugging on Eli’s lapel, Mamie pulled him forward, so close that the musky scent of her perfume tickled his nose. “Attaboy. Keep saying my name and soon it’ll just roll off your tongue.”

Eli’s face burned, but his hands were cold as he extricated himself from Mamie’s grasp. “I’ll see you next week, Mamie.”

Chino was still sipping his drink at the bar where Eli had left him. Only the slightest droop in his shoulders betrayed the lateness of the hour.

“Thanks for the soda, Chino.” Eli set it down.

“Leaving already? What’s the rush? You got a date or something?”

“Didn’t get lucky this time. I’m spending the night at a friend’s place. Wings should be finishing up right about now.”

“Sige, go ahead. Listen, why don’t you meet me at Manolo’s barbershop next Friday afternoon. I’m one of his regulars. Stick with me. I’ll make sure he gives you a better shave.”

Eli left the Velvet Café with a head filled to the brim with advice. *Space out your dances. Set aside money for drinks. Save the last song for Lucinda.* But get a better shave? *What’s wrong with this one?* Rubbing the stubble on his jaw, he turned the corner on Market Street and ran straight into someone headed the other way. He stumbled backward, inhaling the familiar scent of orange blossoms.

“Oh, for cryin’ out loud, why don’t you watch where you’re—” the woman paused.“Well, if it isn’t Fred Astaire!”

Eli couldn’t believe his luck. “I guess I stepped on your foot after all, Lucinda. You going where I think you’re going?”

“Amado likes to make rules. I like to break ’em.”

Eli peered around the corner up Market Street, half-expecting to see Benny in hot pursuit. “You’re not afraid he’ll find out?”

“You gonna tell him?”

“Never. But what if someone else does?”

“Anyone who wanted to snitch on me would’ve done it long ago. I drink at the Velvet Café because Amado won’t sell booze at the Rizal. Best I can do is take a detour so none of his precious customers come with me. Mamie doesn’t mind me being there; I’m good for business. Soon’s I get there someone buys me a drink. Say . . .” Lucinda looked at him, a coy tilt to her head. “What if that someone was you?”

“I would, if I hadn’t spent all my money on dance tickets.”

“So I’m the reason you’re broke? That was money well spent.” Lucinda smiled. “Till next time, then.” Pivoting around Eli as she had when they danced, she strolled to the café.

Eli would have killed for an extra dollar just then. *Till next time*, she said. At least she’d given him that.

While revelry continued for two more hours at the Velvet Café, the fiesta along Market Street had already begun to fade. Kabayan emerged from pool halls, bars, and chop houses, stomachs full and wallets empty. Eli passed two men shuffling like sleepwalkers, arms slung round each other’s shoulders, limbs turned leaden by alcohol. Those too drunk to walk curled up in recessed doorways, stealing a few hours’ sleep before daylight or the shop owner roused them.

The Manila Café had closed hours earlier, but Wings had shown Eli the back door to its kitchen. The dark alley that led to it reeked of urine and mold, but as he walked through it, a door opened a few yards ahead and threw a bar of light across his path. A short wiry man emerged with a pail in one hand, a cigarette in the other.

“Wings! Kumusta?” Eli asked.

“Heto. Tired like always.” Wings dumped the pail’s contents into an open rubbish bin and flicked cigarette ash into it for good measure. He and Eli were about the same age, but Wings bore the round-shouldered stoop of a much older man. “You hungry? I saved you some food.”

“Salamat.” Eli followed Wings inside. “How did you know I’d be hungry?”

“The Stingaree makes everyone hungry. You come hungry for girls, hungry for booze; before you know it, hunger’s made a hole in your pocket. Then you remember you’re hungry for food. The boss never gives me a night off on the weekends, but at least he lets me keep the leftovers.” Wings handed Eli a plate. “It’s all yours. I already ate.”

Eli stared at the plate of rice studded with odd bits of meat, cabbage, and noodles. “You sure this won’t make me sick?”

“Trust me, it’s safe to eat. Fried it twice to kill the germs.”

Eli leaned against the sink and ate standing while Wings stacked pots, wiped down the stove, and swept the floor. After the dance hall’s frenetic excitement, this meal of odds and ends was deeply satisfying.

“So, you found your friend?” Wings shed the apron and grabbed his coat.

“Yes. Kiko leads the band at the Rizal Dance Hall. If I can afford it, I’ll be there every weekend. I met the prettiest girl there.”

“Everyone meets a girl. That’s why everyone goes hungry. Rinse your plate out in the sink.” Wings slung on his coat. “You can tell me all about her on the way home.”

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CHAPTER 6

Lucinda was thirsty. She knew the quickest way to snag a drink in a roomful of thirsty men was to smile and nod but never pause for chitchat. Attracting Sal's attention was the easy part, for the bartender kept an eye on the door and saw all who came or left.

"How's it going, Lucy?"

"It's Lucinda. And it's going."

"That kind of night, eh? So what can I get you?"

"A Bee's Knees."

"Double the honey, half the gin?"

"Don't mess with me, Sal. You know it's the other way around."

"Tough night at the Rizal?"

"No tougher than any other Friday night."

"So why don't you quit and work here instead?" Sal stirred the cocktail. "Just say the word. You could start tomorrow."

"I don't like to drink and dance. Bad enough I gotta dance with amateurs. Dancing with drunk amateurs would be murder."

Sal handed her the cocktail. "Remember what Mamie said. You could just hang out with me and chat up our customers, keep 'em thirsty for that second beer. Get them to buy you drinks. Pretty girl like you could do that in your sleep. Mamie would do it, if she didn't have to collect dance tickets. You'd get free liquor, plus a cut for every drink you sold. You'd make more money without ever having to dance."

"You forget I actually like dancing. I like drinking too, just not at the same time."

“Pareng Sal, Floro and I are ready for another round.” A man bellied up to the bar, two empty beer glasses in hand. His friend, a short man with a bright red tie, grinned at Lucinda.

“Hello, miss. My name is Floro.”

“So I heard.” Lucinda offered a polite I’m-not-working-for-tips smile.

“You don’t waste any time, do you, Migo?” Sal teased.

“Why should I? It’s my thirtieth birthday—or should I say, my *thirstiest* birthday.” Migo chuckled as he passed the empty glasses to the bartender. Lucinda choked on her drink when she saw he was missing the top half of his index finger. She coughed into her palm, irritated that all three men were watching.

“Don’t worry, miss, it’s not contagious.” He wagged the half-finger at her. “I lost the finger to an accident, not leprosy.”

Floro laughed, wobbling back on his heels. “Bro, you been telling that dumb joke for years, but it still cracks me up.” He wiped his eyes and peered at Lucinda.

“Say, don’t you dance at the Rizal?”

“Yeah. What’s it to you?” Lucinda bit the edge of her glass. Let the honeyed gin slide down slowly this time.

“Some guy back there couldn’t take his eyes off you.”

“Is that right? What did he look like?”

“Tall. Nice looking. Wha’d he say his name was, Migo?“

“Eli. His name’s Eli.”

Sal set the refilled glasses of beer on the bar, then nudged a man who’d been nursing his drink on the other side of Lucinda. “Hear that, Chino? Wasn’t Eli that new kid you brought in? The one too broke to buy himself a drink?”

“Sure was.” Chino gave Lucinda his best Clark Gable smile. “You must be the girl who bankrupted him on his first night at the Rizal.”

“Is that what he told you?” Lucinda had many admirers at the Rizal, but none who danced as well as this new guy. Didn’t hurt that he was easy on the eyes.

“Bet you another beer he’ll be back next Friday with a whole week’s pay to blow on dance tickets.” Floro raised his glass to Migo.

“Next time make sure he saves a buck to buy you a drink here after,” Sal said.

“I’ll make you a deal, Sal. I won’t tell a fella how to spend his money if you don’t tell me where to spend my time.”

“Looks like you got a spitfire on your hands, Sal,” Floro whooped.

“If you weren’t so damn cute, I’d smack you,” Sal smiled, but the look he gave Lucinda was deadly.

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"The motive toward exploitation is seen most clearly in the attitude toward "dating" and dancing with Orientals . . ."

"Orientals, and especially Filipino young men, prove to be such lucrative sources of income that many young women, under the spur of opportunism, lay aside whatever racial prejudices they may have and give themselves to a thorough and systematic exploitation of them."[2]

2 Paul Cressey, *The Taxi-Dance Hall (*Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1932), 42, 43.

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CHAPTER 7

“Lucinda, do I look like a movie star?” Nelly wrapped a feather boa round her neck. It trailed down her back like a cape. She looked over her shoulder, striking a coy Clara Bow pose in the mirror. The six-year-old loved playing dress up before the other taxi dancers arrived and doors opened at her father’s dance hall.

“Movie stars don’t have messy hair, silly goose.” Lucinda waved at the dressing room table where a mirrored tray was overflowing with jeweled pins. “How about we tidy it up with a pretty barrette?”

“I want a sparkly one.” Nelly picked through the clips while Lucinda teased out the tangles in the little girl’s hair.

Lucinda enjoyed these slow afternoons with Amado’s daughter because it eased her guilt over the little sister she’d left behind. Anna Sue was just three when Lucinda snuck off the farm that night; by now, she would be the same age as Nelly. Her little sister would be safe for a few more years until . . . Lucinda brushed away the vile memory.

“Look Lucy, this one’s got rhinestones, this one has pearls.” Nelly held up a mismatched pair.

“Ahh, the widowed barrettes. You wonder how they lost their pair,” Lucinda said as she parted the child’s pale hair and combed through the curls.

“Am I a widow too? Because I lost my mama?”

“No, honey. Losing your mama makes you—” Lucinda stopped short. Nelly was worse than an orphan. Her parents weren’t dead; they had abandoned her. But Amado never spoke of that. No one did.

“Makes me what?”

“It makes you an awfully lucky girl to have a papa and two uncles who love you to pieces. Best of all, I get to be your big sister.” Lucinda pressed her cheek to Nelly’s and wrapped her in a tight hug. They stayed like that for a long moment, breathing in the faint bouquet of perfume and Coty face powder left by dancers who primped in the lounge before their first shift started.

“Tell me the Mommy story.” Nelly wriggled free and slid off the stool.

“Sweet pea, you’ve heard it so many times you could tell it yourself.”

“I want *you* to tell it.”

Lucinda sat and pulled Nelly onto her lap. “You know I never met your mama, don’t you?”

“Please, Lucinda? Papa never talks about her. Uncle Benny and Uncle Kiko won’t say her name. They think it makes me sad. But my classmates talk about their mommies all the time and I can’t.”

Lucinda sighed. She knew all too well the ache that came from losing one’s mother. She nestled Nelly close and began telling the fairy tale they both wanted to believe in.

“Your mother was the prettiest dancer at the Rizal. She had golden hair and sea green eyes just like yours. Men lined up to dance with her, even though plenty other girls were selling tickets. She danced with all of them while she waited for her favorite partner. He always came late, just before midnight. When he walked through those double doors, she would go straight to him. Once they began dancing, no one else could cut in. Your mother and father danced so beautifully that everyone moved aside to watch them.”

“What was his name?”

“Nobody knows. He spoke only to your mother, no one else. She never told anyone who he was.”

“Did they run away and live happily ever after?”

“That’s what I heard.” This was only half a lie. Everyone knew Nelly’s mother had run off, but Lucinda knew this fairy tale had no happy ending; Benny had told her about the note that came with the infant. She gestured at the bowl of hair ornaments and smiled. “Time’s a-wasting, Nelly. Which pins did you want to wear today?”



Moments later, Nelly stood on a stool, her hair bound with jeweled barrettes, the feather boa wrapped around her shoulders like a shawl. She swiveled left to right and waved at imaginary crowds as Lucinda held the hairbrush up like a microphone and deepened her voice.

“Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in congratulating Miss America of 1933, the beautiful, the delightful, the one and only Miss Nelly—”

The dressing room’s back door burst open, and Alice walked in.

“Land sakes, Nelly, is that my feather boa? Didn’t I tell you not to play dress up with my clothes?”

“I just borrowed it.” Crestfallen, Nelly unwound the boa and handed it to Lucinda.

“For crying out loud, Alice, give the kid a break. We were just playing. We always put everything back afterward.” Lucinda bent down to Nelly’s level. “Go see if Uncle Benny and your Papa are back from their errands. They said you could have cookies before doors open.”

Lucinda shut the door behind Nelly and leaned against it, watching Alice preen in front of the full-length mirror. “I don’t know why you had to scold Nelly about your old boa when you have that fancy new coat. Is that real fur?”

“Looks real, doesn’t it?” Alice stroked the fur collar. “It’ll do for this season.”

“Who’d you get to buy it for you this time? Some new fish, or one of your regulars?”

“Same fish as always—Paquito. Remember him? Pale as a Chink, dimples. Comes every Saturday night.”

“Lousy dancer, reeks of Old Spice?” Lucinda wrinkled her nose. “You can have him. He damn near broke my toes the last time we did the Lindy Hop. You must’ve really wanted a new coat to put up with that clunker.”

“He wanted to buy it for me, so I let him.” Alice unbuttoned the coat to reveal an ivory dress that bared an unseemly amount of cleavage. She powdered her nose and forehead, careful to avoid the pencil thin arch of her kohl-darkened eyebrows. “He’s not the only one I’m fishing. If everything goes my way, I’ll soon have two other guys paying for rent and groceries.”

“These guys got names?” Lucinda pulled a navy frock with flutter sleeves from the clothes rack and unbuttoned her shirt dress.

“Gemino and Ruben. Not the usual Flips who work the harvest in the boonies. Gemino’s a chauffeur and Ruben’s a gardener. They both work for some rich family in Talmadge. I’ve been dating them on the sly all summer—one night Gemino takes me to dinner; another night Ruben buys me drinks.” Alice winked. “They don’t mind taking turns.”

“That’s real civilized of them. Mind zipping me up?”

“This dress is getting old.” Alice eased the zipper up and fastened the clasp at Lucinda’s nape. “Maybe you should go fishing, find a nice fella to buy you a new one.”

“I don’t fish like you do.” Lucinda reached into her bra and pulled each breast closer to center. “Go on, then. How do you get these fellows to pay your bills?”

Alice cast a sidelong glance at Lucinda then rouged her lips. “The other night Gemino insisted on tagging along when Ruben and I went out for a nightcap. The whole time both fellas kept ordering drinks, laying on the charm. The next time one of them asked me to be his girl, I acted all confused. Said I simply couldn’t decide which one to go steady with, they

were both so cute. That's when Gemino said he and Ruben were such good friends, they shared everything. Including me."

"You can't be serious."

"Why not?" Alice winked at Lucinda. "I like to give men what they want, don't you? Next time we get together, I'll tell Gemino he can come visit me every Monday. Ruben takes his turn on Wednesday. Tuesdays and Thursdays are my nights off. A girl needs her beauty sleep between gigs."

"You aim to date both of them?"

"They offered to split the rent and groceries. It's a fair trade."

"Don't you make enough money here to pay the rent yourself?"

"Don't be silly. I never make enough money for the things I want."

The clatter of heels and animated voices rising through the back stairwell signaled the arrival of more dancers. In moments, the dressing room filled with women who shrugged off coats and hats, and lined up at the long dressing room mirror to rouge their lips.

Lucinda glanced at the petite blonde beside her. "Clementine, your dress tag's sticking out, let me tuck it in."

"Thanks." Clementine finger-combed the golden Marcel waves that framed her face. "Say, why'd you pass Celso over to me last week? Didn't you like the way he danced?"

"Celso dances fine. Gets by on the standard two-step. But this new guy wanted to cut in, and Celso said he'd do it only if I got you to dance with him for the next song. I'd bet a dollar he's got a crush on you."

"And how," Clementine said coyly. "He kept asking me out on a date, but I said no, seeing as he's older. Thirty-five's way too old for me."

"All those Flips want younger girls," Dolores said, dabbing at kohl that had smeared beneath her eyes. "Enjoy the attention while it lasts. Once you get north of 25, most of these guys lose interest."

Someone rapped on the door and hollered. "Doors open in five, ladies."

Lucinda mulled over Dolores's advice as the other girls filed out of the dressing room. If one were to believe the older dancer, she had seven good years left in this job—plenty of time to fish for a good man. So far, no one she'd met had fit the bill, but at least that new fellow could dance. Lucinda put on her professional smile and sauntered out to the ballroom.

Eli was waiting by the stage with a ticket. "I guess I snagged your first dance this time."

"Just one dance?" Lucinda ripped the ticket in half. "I'm hurt."

Eli led her onto the dance floor as Kiko's trumpeters blared the opening notes of "It Had to Be You."

Lucinda took Eli's outstretched hand and felt his palm press gently into the small of her back as he guided her into a smooth foxtrot. "Could you stand to sit out a few songs?"

"It beats leaving early because I ran out of tickets."

Eli's breath was warm against her cheek. If Lucinda turned her head just so, their lips would meet. Instead, she pulled away and tilted to look him in the eye. "In that case, the next time you take a break from dancing, you'd better stay close, or you won't be able to cut in."

"Couldn't stay away if I tried." Eli surprised her with a twirl then leaned her backward in a dip.

Lucinda let out a delighted squeal. As he pulled her back upright, she tilted forward on tiptoe so that her lips grazed his earlobe. "What a scamp you are. Got any other tricks up your sleeve?"

"You'll have to wait till our next dance to find out," Eli said, winking.

They spent the rest of the evening never more than a few yards apart. Whenever Lucinda partnered with other men, she steered them along the edges of the dance floor, making it easier for Eli to claim his turn at the end of the song.

Before long, they'd arrived at the home stretch—the last few songs before midnight. As he handed Lucinda over to her next partner, Eli dipped

into his suit pocket and showed her a ticket. “I’m saving this for the last dance, if you’ll have me.”

“We’ll be dancing again in no time.” Lucinda flashed him a brilliant smile, which dimmed when she turned to greet the next man.

Lucinda’s smile hid her dismay. Ignacio was a dance hall regular who spent most of the night smoking and watching from the sidelines. She couldn’t tell if he was ogling girls or trying to learn better steps. He seemed to have learned little from all that watching, for he remained a clumsy, if enthusiastic, partner.

The Manila Musikeros struck up “We’re in the Money,” a breezy swing song Kiko wielded to revive the girls whose energy tended to flag in this fifth and final hour of dancing.

As Lucinda gamely kept up with Ignacio’s jogging steps, she noticed an irritating creak in her left heel. She shifted weight forward to the ball of her foot and made a mental note to bring it into Chito’s Shoe Repair shop the next afternoon.

“Ready for the big turn?” Ignacio unfurled his arm, quick as a whip. As Lucinda spun off, something gave way underfoot and she tumbled backward, landing hard on her rump.

“Lordy, Lucinda took a spill.” Dolores looked over her partner’s shoulder. Other couples pivoted abruptly to avoid trampling her.

More embarrassed than injured, Lucinda tried to get up, only to slip and fall again.

“Goddamnit,” she cussed. She rolled onto one hip, knees bent to take a closer look at her feet. Her left shoe’s heel had snapped off.

“That shoe’s a goner.” A hand cupped Lucinda’s elbow, another clasped her fingers, gently helping her to stand. “You okay?” Eli asked.

“Better already.” Lucinda smiled up at him.

“Hey, what’s the idea? *I* was dancing with her.” Ignacio clenched his fists and scowled at Eli.

“You call that dancing? You let her fall, tarantado ka.” Eli swore under his breath.

“It wasn’t his fault.” Lucinda wobbled on her right foot as she waved her ruined shoe at them. “My damn heel couldn’t handle all that fancy footwork.”

“Y’see? My dancing had nothing to do with it,” Ignacio sneered. He turned pleading eyes on Lucinda. “Promise you’ll dance with me next week?”

“I will if you’ll pay for—” Lucinda paused. *Do I really want this clodhopper to buy me shoes?* Ignacio was the last man she wanted to fish. She nodded with resignation. “Sure, we can dance again, Ignacio. I just need to buy new shoes.”

“Everything all right?” Benny walked up, clenching a roll of tickets. “Heard you fell. Which of these bozos should I bounce?”

“Neither.” Lucinda showed him her shoe. “But I’m done for the night.”

“So, you’re out a few dimes. We’re about to close anyway.” Benny looked at Ignacio and Eli. “Both of you better find another partner. We’re down to the last three songs.”

Ignacio walked away, muttering to himself.

“I don’t need to dance but—” Eli flashed his last ticket. “Mind if I stand around with her? I don’t mind watching.”

“Can you believe this guy?” Benny snorted. “Throws money around like he’s a goddamn Rockefeller.”

“Ah what’s the harm? If Eli wants to use that ticket, let him. I’d rather wait out here than in the dressing room anyway.” Lucinda ripped Eli’s ticket in half, secretly pleased. Any other man would have gone on to the next girl.

“Suit yourself,” Benny said. “Kid, do me a favor and help her over to the side of the stage. And remember: no hanky-panky.” He waved at Kiko. “Strike up the band. We’re in the home stretch.”

“May I?” Eli offered his elbow to Lucinda.

“Hold on. I’d rather walk in stocking feet than risk tripping again.” Lucinda slipped off her right shoe before taking Eli’s arm.

“That was some fall you took,” Eli said.

“How’d you get to me before Ignacio did?” She looked up at him, feeling suddenly small without her heeled pumps.

“I was watching from the sidelines. Maybe your heel wouldn’t have snapped off if that bozo wasn’t throwing you around like a bowling ball. You’re lucky you didn’t break an ankle.”

“I don’t break easy,” Lucinda said. “Just so you know, I wouldn’t have charged you one red penny just to stand around and chat but—”

“Benny wouldn’t like that. The rules are the rules. Aren’t we lucky he bent them just this once?”

Something jumped in Lucinda’s gut just then, just ticklish enough to make her laugh. For once, she didn’t feel as though she were working. For once, this job felt like play.

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CHAPTER 8

After collecting her wages, Lucinda went to the dressing room and put on the pair of old saddle shoes she kept there. It didn't matter that the shoes clashed with her cocktail dress, no one would see her walking home. By the time she stepped out the back door, all the other girls were long gone.

"Lucinda."

She turned.

Eli stood under the pool of light cast by a nearby gas lamp.

"Eli?" The darkness hid her eager smile as she watched him approach. "I didn't recognize you with that hat."

"I avoided buying one all summer, but it's turned chilly." Eli took off the fedora and carefully turned it this way and that, handling it like a piece of fine china. "If I hadn't spent my last buck on this, I could have taken you for a drink at the Velvet Café."

"I wouldn't have gone anyway, not in these crummy shoes. Maybe next week?" Lucinda took his hat and put it on. "How about you walk me home instead? A girl can't be too careful this late at night."

"Lead the way."

Intent on evading the late-night carousers on Market Street, Lucinda led him down quieter blocks lined with bakeries, notions stores, and markets that served the Stingaree's daytime residents. She didn't pull away when Eli took her hand. Her fingers felt at home in his warm palm. Scores of other men held her hand every night at the dance hall. They'd meant nothing

more to her than the dimes they paid for her time. How was it different with Eli?

“Do you ever miss home?” Lucinda asked.

Eli gazed up at the sickle moon and sighed. “I miss my sister, Paloma. But I had to try my luck in America.”

“The grass is always greener . . .”

“I thought they meant the *cash* is always greener on this side of the ocean.” Eli shook his head. “Who knew that was untrue.”

“Do you ever think of going back?”

“Not now. Not yet. Every one of those men on the farm talks about going home one day with a suitcase full of cash. I don’t know how they’d do that. Most of them spend their money in the Stingaree and send whatever’s left to their families every month.”

“And you? You got a wife back in the islands, waiting for your cash?”

Eli laughed. “Would I be here with you, if I were married?”

“Fellows do it all the time.”

“I’m not that kind of fellow.”

Lucinda looked at him for a long searching moment. “I guess not.”

Eli paused on the corner and gently took the hat from her head. They walked in silence the rest of the way, fingers entwined.

“Here we are.” Lucinda stopped in front of a cottage with a fence draped with jasmine vines, whose blooms perfumed the still night air.

Eli took a deep breath. “This smells just like the dama de noche back in Manila. They bloom only at night. What a pretty house you have.”

“It’s not mine, I just rent a room from the widow who owns it. Mrs. Moderow let me move in straightaway when I said I taught dance classes. She’s a big Busby Berkeley fan.”

“Did you tell her you dance with fellows like me?”

“Lord, no. She’d kick me out in a hot minute if she knew I danced with Orientals.”

Eli barely flinched at the word. He'd been called much worse.

Lucinda took one step up the stoop. "I'd invite you in for a nightcap, but Mrs. Moderow doesn't allow visitors."

"Especially not Oriental visitors?"

"Her words, not mine." Lucinda leaned over and gave Eli a quick kiss. The one that followed would have gone on much longer had it not been cut short by a loud snore.

Lucinda stifled a giggle and nodded at the second-floor window. "When she isn't snoring, she talks in her sleep. It sounds even louder from my bedroom."

"I guess I'll never know."

"Never say never." Lucinda stroked Eli's lapel. "Are you coming next Friday?"

"Yes. Even if I have to beat off everyone else who wants to dance with you."

"Haven't you learned anything yet? The first dance isn't worth fighting over, it's the last one that counts."

"So I'm told."

"It's true, though. Come at nine o'clock instead, when Kiko gives the band a ten-minute break. I bum cigarettes from Pepe, so he sets his ashtray on the floor next to his piano at break time. That's where you'll find me."

Eli grinned. "I can do that easy, but I can't afford three hours of dance tickets. Could you at least save the last dance for me?"

"If you take me out for a drink afterward, I will."

"I'll never have to buy another hat." Eli doffed his fedora. "See you next Friday, mahal."

"What did you just call me? *Mahal*?" Lucinda rolled the word around her mouth like a marble.

"It's an endearment. 'Mahal' means 'love' in Tagalog." Eli took her hand and squeezed. "It also means expensive."

“Can’t say anyone’s ever called me expensive.” Lucinda’s throat tightened. *Cheap*, *loose*, and its more vulgar cousins were the usual words hurled at her by the good old boys who cruised past the dance hall. Eli’s word was a gift.

“You’re a honey, Eli. I’ll see you next Friday.”

As Eli stepped away, he raised a hand to his heart, mouthing the word “mahal.”

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Interview notes, Jimmy Wheeler*, San Diego Evening Tribune* **Reporter**

Dolores: *I saw the sparks fly every time those two danced together. If a fella looked at me the way Eli looked at Lucinda, I'd go weak in the knees . . .*

Clementine: *You'd be weak in the head to fall for a Chinaman.*

Kiko: *If I've said it once, I've said it a million times: Filipinos are not from China.*

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TEN MONTHS BEFORE

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CHAPTER 9

It was the first Friday in December and Benny had shut the ballroom windows to keep out the winter chill. Nelly wore an elf cap and chirped "Merry Christmas!" to everyone who came up to the coat check counter. In the dressing room, girls chattered about holiday parties as they rouged their cheeks and straightened stocking seams.

The holiday cheer left Lucinda cold. Childhood Christmases in Yuma had been dismal affairs. As the eldest of five, Lucinda had moved from wrangling younger siblings to helping her mother make Christmas dinner while her father drank. Lucinda never understood why he swore they couldn't afford presents but somehow always found money for moonshine.

Over the years, she learned to be wary when he drank. On good nights, he passed out on the couch. On bad ones, he stayed awake, thirsting for more diversion. On those nights, he reached for her mother. Lucinda left home soon after he began reaching for her.

"Ladies, we'll be ready for you in five minutes," Oscarito called through the door.

Pushing aside her Christmas sorrows, Lucinda put on her workaday half-smile and followed the other dancers to the ballroom. Two hours to kill till nine o'clock.

Lucinda danced with too many men to keep track of their names but delighted each one by calling him "honey." As the ticket stubs in her stocking swelled to the size of a child's fist, Lucinda counted every dance completed. Amado had figured that the way to sell tickets most efficiently was to have Kiko arrange every song so that it lasted no more than two

minutes. This ensured the band completed at least 25 songs every hour. Lucinda calculated the band would take a break after the fiftieth song.

Lucinda had just taken her forty-seventh dance ticket when a scuffle broke out.

“Get away from her!”

Lucinda turned and saw Clementine, mouth agape as she stood between Celso and another man. Celso raised a fist.

Where the hell was Benny?

“Like I said, Teo, I got five more dances left with my girl,” Celso said.

“Who says she’s your girl? I’ve been waiting for an hour. You can’t hog all her dances.”

“You calling me a pig? ‘Tangina mo,” Celso swore, threw a punch, and missed.

Teo reached into his pocket. A flick of his wrist released a fan knife, whose slender blade glinted under the paper moons. Teo sliced air as he advanced on Celso, who reeled back into the retreating crowd.

Clementine screamed.

Teo lunged at Celso, but a well-placed kick sent his knife flying. A powerful uppercut to the jaw lifted him off his feet and flung him back on the floor with a resounding thud.

“Goddamnit,” Benny cussed, rubbing his knuckles. “I coulda broken my hand on your ugly mug.” He pulled Teo to his feet. “C’mon, tough guy. No more dancing for you.”

“What about the tickets I still got?” Teo rubbed his jaw.

“They don’t get you squat, bro. Start a fight and you lose the rest of the night.” Keeping a firm grip on Teo’s collar, Benny looked at the other men. “Hear that? No knives, no guns, no fighting over girls at the Rizal. No refunds for hooligans.”

The knife had skittered to Lucinda’s feet. She picked it up and held it gingerly by the tip of its handle. “What do we do with this?”

Benny called over his shoulder toward the stage. “Oscarito, take the balisong. We’ll deal with it later.”

“But that’s my—”

“Shut up.” Benny smacked the back of Teo’s head. “Get outta here before I call the cops.”

As Benny hustled Teo out of the ballroom, Kiko rapped the podium with his baton. “Kabayan, I apologize for this unfortunate interruption. I believe the ladies need a moment to regain their composure, and it’s about time my band takes their break. Please relax, have a smoke, buy a soda in the lobby. Dancing will resume in 15 minutes. Pasensya na, thank you for your patience.”

The women gathered around Clementine in a protective huddle.

“Darling, you’re shaking like a leaf!“

“Did you see the size of that knife?”

“Benny scared the bejeezus out of that bum.”

Waves of agitated voices eddied around Lucinda as the girls retreated to the dressing room. Men wandered off to the windows to catch a quick smoke. Lucinda was as unnerved as everyone else, but she remained in the ballroom waiting for Eli.

Ten minutes past nine, Lucinda lost patience and walked out to the lobby. Nothing could have surprised her more than the sight of Eli, sitting with Amado and smoking what looked like one of his prized Cuban cigars.

“Hija, you’re pale as a ghost. Did that hoodlum and his knife frighten you?” Amado’s concern seemed almost fatherly. “I was just telling Eli about the scuffle he missed. Too bad I didn’t see Benny clobber him. He won’t be back any time soon.”

He motioned at the empty spot beside Eli on the settee. “Come have a seat. I’ve been meaning to have a chat with the two of you.”

“What about?” Lucinda perched on the edge of the sofa, her mind racing. *Did Amado know about her late-night dates with Eli? Who had*

snitched on them?

Nelly set two bottles of soda on the coffee table then stood by her father. Amado pulled the child onto his lap and nuzzled her cheek. “What would I do without my best little helper?”

“Tell them, Papa.”

Amado sucked deep on his cigar and blew a jet of smoke at the ceiling. It curled around the makeshift Christmas star he’d cobbled together with papel de japon and bamboo skewers. It was a humble replica of much more elaborate lamps that illuminated towns in the islands but good enough to cheer patrons who felt especially homesick during the holidays.

“I’ve been watching the two of you dance lately. You really are something else. You know that don’t you?”

Lucinda bit her lip, suddenly nervous. Amado had suspended another dancer for two weeks after Benny had caught her canoodling with a customer behind the bandstand.

“I lose half a month’s wages, just for kissing a fella?” Josephine had snatched her purse off the dressing room table. “Forget this dump, I’m better off dancing at the Velvet Café.” Lucinda hadn’t seen her since.

Now she wondered if she was about to suffer the same fate. She cast a furtive glance at Eli, but his gaze was fixed on a newspaper on the coffee table before them. “I don’t know what you mean, Amado . . .”

“Papa says you’re our best dancers,” Nelly burst out.

“That’s sweet, Nelly.” Lucinda smiled at the little girl, then cocked an eyebrow at Amado. “Want to tell me something I don’t already know?”

“I got to thinking the other day. Mamie Savage loves to brag about selling booze at the Velvet Café, but she doesn’t know squat about dancing. So, I say to myself—who cares about booze? I can show off what we got in this joint: beautiful dancers, a better band. That’s what a dance hall’s all about.”

“See this?” Amado picked up the newspaper. “This here’s the *Philippine Herald Tribune*. It’s published in Los Angeles. Pinoys read it, up and down the coast. I aim to put an advertisement for the Rizal Dance Hall right here, with my two best dancers in it. Whaddya think?”

“We’d get our picture in the papers?” Eli’s eyes widened.

“Like movie stars!” Nelly said.

Amado pinched his daughter’s cheek. “Ginger Rogers and the Filipino Fred Astaire. Stars of the Rizal Dance Hall.”

Lucinda fought the impulse to grab Eli’s hand in excitement.

“This ad would make you famous.” Amado leaned back, looking pleased.

“Famous doesn’t pay the bills,” Eli replied. “What do we get for helping you out?”

“How about I give you ten free dances with Lucinda every weekend for a month?”

“So you’d make me dance for free with Eli?” Lucinda hid her delight with a pout. “I’d lose 50 cents on the busiest nights of the week. How’s that fair?”

“Okay, fine. I’ll pay you the usual—a nickel for every dance. But remember, I’m doing you a favor: Eli isn’t just a good dancer, he’s probably our best-looking customer. I bet the other girls would give him free dances if he asked.”

“Then why don’t you ask one of them to pose for this ad?” Lucinda was bluffing, but she had to know how much Amado wanted this. *Don’t give men what they want, until they want it really bad,* Alice liked to say. That’s how she got two of them to pay her rent.

“Ay, Lucinda. Must you make me beg?” Amado groaned. “It’s got to be you and Eli. You’re perfectly matched.” He nodded at Eli. “What do you say, kabayan?”

“Ten free dances every weekend for just one month? Make it two months, and you got a deal.” Eli held out his hand.

“Deal.”

As men shook hands, Lucinda felt the first stirrings of Christmas cheer.

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CHAPTER 10

Why the hell did I say yes to this? Lucinda steamed as Amado conferred with the photographer. Her lamé dress glimmered like captured moonlight as she fidgeted impatiently. It was past one in the morning; the other dancers had claimed their wages and were long gone. Nelly was fast asleep in the lobby on Benny's lap; Lucinda suspected that even he had dozed off by now. She wished she could join them.

"Where do you want them to stand, Juanito?" Amado asked.

"Give me a minute." Juanito fiddled with the trellis strut of his camera. Repositioned the tripod. Peered into the lens.

The way he fusses over that camera, you'd think it's going to lay a goddamn egg. Lucinda paced back and forth alongside the stage. This would have been so much quicker if they'd done it in Juanito's studio, but Amado insisted on taking the photo in his ballroom. Since Eli's farm work meant he could come only on weekends, Amado had arranged for the photographer to come after the dance hall closed.

This is the worst time to break in new shoes. The starburst of thin silver straps that looked stylish in the shopwindow were now strangling her toes, swollen from five hours of dancing. What she would give to soak her aching feet in warm water and Epsom salts.

I just want to go home and ice this leg. In the last Lindy Hop before closing, Alice's partner flung her over his shoulder then accidentally let go. The somersault sent Alice hurtling through the air like a missile whose heels struck Lucinda's shin. Kiko played only slow songs after that, but by the end of the evening, Lucinda's mood was as dark as the bruise on her leg.

“It’s late, Amado. Can someone find Eli so we can get started?”

“Here I am.” Eli strolled out from behind the stage with Kiko. Despite the late hour, he looked freshly groomed in a charcoal gray Macintosh suit.

“Where’d you get the snazzy suit?” Lucinda asked. “You weren’t wearing that when you got here.”

“It’s mine.” Kiko brushed lint off Eli’s shoulders, smiling like a proud father. “I want him to look his best for the photos.”

“Great—now you’re prettier than I am. Can we get this over with? My feet are killing me.”

“Come, Eli,” Kiko said. “The lady’s patience is running short.”

Amado waved them over to the center of the dance floor. “Can we try a dip? Lucinda weighs almost nothing; it should be easy for you to hold the pose.”

“You ready for me?” Lucinda flashed a dangerous look at Eli.

Eli’s lips brushed against her earlobe as he whispered, “Been ready for months, Mahal.”

Moving so swiftly he caught her off guard, he wrapped an arm around Lucinda’s waist, and leaned forward. Lucinda’s pliant body curved back like the crescent moon, her gaze locked on his.

“Just what I wanted!” Amado applauded, bobbing on his heels with excitement.

“Looks good, bro. Can you hold the pose until I get this shot?” Juanito said.

“Wouldn’t move for the world.” Eli’s breath was warm on Lucinda’s cheek.

Suspended midair in Eli’s embrace, Lucinda let herself enjoy the sensation of weightlessness. He’d drawn her close so often during dances, but those moments had been fleeting. For once, she could savor intimacy without worrying about being seen. To have Amado encourage such a flagrantly seductive pose was a rare luxury. *A girl could get used to this.*

“I hope this looks as good as it feels.” She gazed up at Eli.

His eyes crinkled into a smile as he mouthed a soundless reply, “Mahal.”

“That’s right, look in each other’s eyes and smile,” Juanito said.

“Bro, take the picture quick before he drops her.”



Amado was still peppering Juanito with questions when Eli and Lucinda departed the dance hall from separate exits: he by the main entrance on Market Street, she by the stage door around the corner. He was waiting for her when she emerged in her street clothes and flat shoes.

“Do you get to wear Kiko’s suit all night? I thought he’d want it back sooner,” she teased.

“Wings can return it for me after I go back to the farm this Sunday.”

They strolled hand in hand along deserted streets. The only shop with its lights on at that late hour was Anchor Bakery, where the scent of yeast bore the promise of Sunday loaves.

“Amado says our photo will be in the papers by next Saturday, December 16,” Eli said.

“Back home, that’s a special day,”

“Why?”

“It’s the first day of Misa de Gallo, the mass of the roosters. It means we go to church at dawn every day until Christmas. When I was a kid, the only way my sister Paloma could get me up that early was by saying I could make a wish. She said if I came to all nine days of mass, the wish would be granted.”

“The only thing I’d wish for is a new pair of shoes. My toes are fit to fall off, they hurt so bad.”

“I could massage them if you like.”

“Massage my feet?” Lucinda wrinkled her nose. “You can’t be serious.”

“Of course I am. Tia Remedios taught me how to massage her feet when I was little. She said it helped ease the pain of her bunions. Paid me with candy for every massage.”

“Will you accept a kiss instead of candy?”

“Even better.”

By then, they had arrived at Mrs. Moderow’s cottage. Lucinda led him up to a small porch half obscured by an overgrown bougainvillea bush. Its thorny stems twined along the front railings, wrapped around the porch’s right post and clung to the eaves. The overhang of untrimmed vines created a scrim of leaves that hid them from passersby; it was unlikely anyone else would be walking around in the small hours of night.

Eli motioned her to sit on the lone porch chair, then knelt by her feet as he unbuckled her shoes.

Lucinda startled as he wrapped warm hands around one foot.

“Shh. I’m just holding you. Be still.”

Eli drew slow concentric circles with his thumbs, moving his hands from the base of her toes to the arch of her foot, kneading her sore heel then sliding up to stroke her ankle. Lucinda let out a soft moan of pleasure then clapped a hand to her mouth, embarrassed.

Eli chuckled. “Tia Remedios was a spinster, but she used to say she’d marry the first man who massaged her feet as well as I did.”

“Smart woman.” Lucinda leaned back in the chair, luxuriating in Eli’s caresses. Lascivious innuendos, wandering hands, the shock of a stolen kiss —those assaults Lucinda could manage. She had no defense against tenderness.

By the time Eli moved on to her left foot, Lucinda had sunk into a honey-like languor. “Bless your Aunt Remedios for teaching you how to do this. Who massages her feet, now that you’re here?”

“No one. Tia Remedios collapsed at her sewing machine when I was 13. Died of a heart attack. After the funeral, Paloma had to finish the dress

she'd been working on." Eli sat back on his heels. "I should leave before your landlady begins to snore."

"Not before I pay you."

They came together shyly, as though starting their first dance. Eli kissed her eyelids, earlobe, and cheek, then found her lips and lingered for a long, sweet moment. Eyes shut, Lucinda explored his face, her fingers skimming his cheekbones, tracing the shell curve of his ears. A warm flush rose through her core as Eli stroked her legs, his palms warm along her calves, her thighs, the bare skin above the rim of her stockings.

Lucinda sighed and slid forward, her skirt pushed up by her hips. Her very pores were on fire, and she longed to feel the rest of him. *Too many clothes between us.* She fumbled at loosening his necktie, fingers turned clumsy with desire.

"Jebediah. Mercy . . . Jebediah," shrilled a voice from the upstairs window.

Eli pulled away. "Does your landlady have company?"

Cursing silently, Lucinda pulled out his embrace. "That's my landlady's husband, dead fifteen years. She still talks to him in her sleep. You should go before the dream wakes her."

The widow's coughing fit obscured the creak as Eli stood up and stepped off the porch. He raised a hand to his chest for a moment, then turned and strode down the road.

A week later, Amado bought two copies of the *Philippine Herald Tribune* and showed off his new advertisement to everyone who came to the Rizal Dance Hall. The photograph was more glamorous than he could ever have hoped: Eli bent toward Lucinda, her body arched over his arm like a silver sickle, faces close enough to kiss.

Live the dream at Rizal Dance Hall, the caption promised.

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Interview Notes, Jimmy Wheeler, *San Diego Evening Tribune* Reporter

Clementine: *If you ask me, the trouble started with that advertisement Amado put in the papers. Fellas came from everywhere, first timers at the Rizal, all of them crazy to dance with Lucinda. That would've turned any girl's head.*

Dolores:*. You should be glad she passed those new men on to us. Only Eli had a beef with that. He didn't like having to compete with so many customers.*

Chino: *Sure, Amado's business doubled after that ad came out, but what good is all that cash to a dead man?*

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TWO MONTHS BEFORE

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CHAPTER 11

July 1934

There they go again. Kiko watched Lucinda and Eli chat as he waited for the band members to return from their break. Other kabayan leaned out the windows finishing up their smokes, while the rest of the dancers dallied in the dressing room till they were called back for the next set. But these two spent those precious ten minutes between the band's sets flirting brazenly by the stage. Right under his nose.

Have they become lovers?

Kiko wanted to knock some sense into the boy's head, but the surge of new business left him no time to do so. The newspaper ad had generated more publicity for the Rizal Dance Hall than even Amado could have anticipated. The day after it appeared in the *Philippine Herald Tribune,* men Kiko had never seen before showed up at the Rizal Dance Hall, all of them seeking the girl in the silver dress.

At first, Lucinda's indifference to her newfound fame puzzled Kiko. The attention would have turned anyone else into a prima donna—he'd seen it happen each time Amado hired a new dancer. Instead, when customers jostled for the chance to partner with her, Lucinda touted another girl. Now, Kiko wondered if her graciousness concealed another desire.

Easy enough to pass customers on to other girls, if she only wants to dance with Eli. Worry dug a trench between Kiko's brows. *What mischief has Eli gotten himself into this time? What would Paloma think if she found out I did nothing to stop it?*

“Oscarito,” Kiko said, waving the drummer over. He lowered his voice. “Do you know if Eli and Lucinda have been dating on the sly?”

“No. But I’d bet my last dollar something’s cooking.” Oscarito cast a sidelong glance at the couple. “I used to wonder why she never took a break like everyone else did. Then I noticed something funny: Eli always shows up at 9 o’clock and makes a beeline for her. If Amado charged a dime for every minute a customer chatted up a dancer, Eli would be halfway broke before we started playing again.”

“I should have known.”

“You gonna snitch on them?”

“Are you out of your mind? Eli and Lucinda are the reason business is booming. Their ad put the Rizal Dance Hall on the map. Not a word to Amado, understand? I think I can nip this in the bud.” Kiko spoke with more confidence than he felt. Eli had been a careless student who played hooky every chance he got. But for his innate intelligence and boundless charm, the boy would have been kicked out of school early on. *The kid’s broken rules and gotten away with it all his life. How the hell do I keep him in line now?*

Even Kiko couldn’t help but watch admiringly as Eli showed off the hip swiveling Carioca moves he’d learned from the latest Astaire musical. Lucinda giggled with delight.

Kiko waited for Eli to take a bow then waved him over. “Hijo, could I have a word?”

Eli hopped onstage and followed Kiko away from the other musicians. “Did you like my Carioca? It looks even better with a partner. Our foreheads have to touch through the entire dance, you know, just like Fred and Ginger in *Flying Down to Rio.* Could you play that song after the break?”

“No can do, it’s not on our set list. Look, I didn’t call you over to talk about dancing. This is more important.” Kiko folded his arms, looking like

the music teacher he once was. “Have you and Lucinda been dating?”

“Why would you think that? I walk her home from work sometimes, but . . .”

“You never take her anywhere else? Have you ever taken her to the Velvet Café?”

“Just that one time, I swear. “

“Don’t lie to me, hijo. If you went once, you’ve gone a dozen times. Between the booze and the girls, Mamie’s place is impossible to resist.” Kiko shook his head. “Listen to me: you’re not a kid in the islands anymore. This is America. People follow the rules here. If Amado heard you took Lucinda to the Velvet Café place, he’d fire her straightaway and ban you from the Rizal for good. Maybe that ad made you two our star attraction, but no one is indispensable.”

“Look, Kiko, it’s not what—”

“Musikeros! It’s fifteen past the hour,” Benny hollered as he approached the stage, trailed by eager customers. “Our kabayan are itching to dance. Strike up the band, Kiko.”

“Think well about what I said.” Kiko wagged his baton at Eli. “I promised your sister I’d keep you out of trouble, but there’s only so much I can do.”

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"Filipinos in the United States are also embarrassed by restrictions upon their freedom to marry and by uncertainties as to their racial classification. When considered a 'Mongolian,' the Filipino is deprived of the right to marry a white woman in California, Arizona, Idaho, Nevada, and Oregon."[3]

3 Paul Cressey, *The Taxi-Dance Hall (*Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1932),147.

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CHAPTER 12

“Thanks for feeding my Mad Money pot.” Lucinda tore Eli’s ticket and slipped half of it into her bra, keeping it separate from the other stubs in her stocking. Sudden fame had led to such a generous cash boost that even after covering food and rent, Lucinda found she had more money to spare. Now she put every nickel she made from dancing with Eli into a separate nest egg for treats. For now, her sole indulgence was a late night cocktail with Eli at the Velvet Café. Even with that modest luxury, her Mad Money fund continued to grow at a healthy pace.

“Say—why you were huddling back there with Kiko?”

Eli glanced over his shoulder. “He wanted to know if we’ve been going to the Velvet Café.”

“And?”

“I said we’d only been there once. He didn’t believe me.”

“Does that mean we can’t meet at the Velvet tonight?”

“Maybe we shouldn’t.” Eli took Lucinda in his arms as the band launched into the opening notes of a Samba. “Kiko said Amado would fire you if he found out.”

“But where else can we go?” Lucinda pouted as she mirrored his steps. “The only places on Market that let girls in after midnight are the Velvet Café and brothels.”

“We could visit Wings after the diner closes . . .”

“And watch him clean the kitchen? You aiming to woo me or lose me?” Lucinda took a quarter turn.

“You got a better idea? You know we can’t be seen outside together. Some gringo sucker-punched Paco last week. Accused my buddy of being fresh with a white girl. Poor fella was just holding hands with his girlfriend. What if that happened to me?”

“Darling, let’s not fight on our first dance.” Lucinda cupped Eli’s cheek. “How about we go back to my place? Mrs. Moderow went to Whittier yesterday to help her daughter with the new baby. She’ll be gone till the middle of August.“

“You have the house to yourself for the rest of July?”

“And then some. I haven’t got booze or a band, but I promise you my undivided attention.”

“I couldn’t ask for more.” Eli spun Lucinda around, caught her by the waist, and swept her into a floor-grazing dip that left her breathless.

“Look at those two. It’s just like that ad in the newspaper,” Clementine said, nudging her partner.

“I’d give anything to dance like that,” he replied.



Eli waited for Lucinda at the usual spot on Island Avenue and Eighth Street, two blocks down from the dance hall’s back door. Whenever Lucinda was free for one of their late-night assignations, she’d whisper, *I’ll see you on the Island,* while they danced to the last song. To avoid being seen with a date, Lucinda lingered at the Rizal until all the other girls and musicians had left.

Now Eli stood just beyond the pool of lamplight, wary of every car that rolled by. Brawls between gringos and kabayan on the main drag of Market Street were a regular weekend occurrence, but sometimes the ruffians wandered farther afield. Finally, she emerged from the back door. She looked up and down the street before running to meet him.

“I thought you’d never come.” Eli gave Lucinda a quick hug. “Did Amado hold you back again? Did he think you would sneak off to the Velvet Café?”

“Amado knows zilch.” Lucinda took his arm. “He wanted to talk shop—asked if I knew any girls he could hire, now that business is booming. Did you know he makes the newspaper reprint our ad on the first Sunday of every month? Swears it brings in new customers each time, all of them looking for me.”

“So many more men to beat off before I can dance with you.” Eli mocked despair.

“Don’t be silly. You know I don’t give a hoot who takes my first dance, as long as you get the last one.” Lucinda offered him a kiss. Common sense would have compelled them to continue walking, but after hours of furtive flirting at the dance hall, they were finally alone, and the small hours of night stretched ahead them. Eli kissed her again, blocking out the rest of the world so completely that he didn’t see the car that turned the corner, nor the headlights that caught their embrace, didn’t hear the slur hurled at him, didn’t duck when the bottle flew out of the window and smacked the back of his fedora.

“Go home, ya damn monkey!” the driver yelled over the screech of tires as the car sped off.

Eli fell against Lucinda, his head pulsing with pain so intense he could barely see straight. Something else convulsed in his chest and rose up his throat. It was rage.

“Putangina, tarantado ka!” He cursed at the receding headlights.

“God almighty, he could have killed you!” Lucinda pulled him back under the shadow of an awning. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, are you hurt?”

“You stepped on my foot, is all. I’ll live.” Lucinda’s heels crunched on broken glass. “Was that a bottle he threw at you? It’s all over the sidewalk.”

“Better the sidewalk than my scalp.” Eli’s fingers traced a lime-sized lump on his skull. At least he wasn’t bleeding. “Lucky I had my hat; if not, my head would’ve been split open. Wait—what happened to my fedora?—”

“Forget your hat, let’s go.” She tugged on his arm. “He might come back to finish you off.”

“I’m not leaving without my hat, damnit.” Eli scooped his fedora up from the gutter and shook it hard to release the broken glass. “Let’s get you home.”

They hurried along side streets and alleys, slumping into the shadow of awnings whenever they heard a car approach. When the shops and warehouses of downtown gave way to clapboard homes, Eli sped up, forging silently ahead of Lucinda, who couldn’t walk nearly as fast in her dancer’s heels. By the time they reached her gate, she was out of breath. He held the door open for her but made no move to follow.

“Aren’t you coming in? Let me tend to that nasty bump. I’ll make us some tea.”

“Thanks, but my head hurts so bad, I’d be lousy company. Maybe another night? I should go back to Wings’s place and get some rest. I can ride back to the farm with the other fellow who’s spending the night at his place.”

“But this is the one time we have the house to ourselves.” Lucinda turned petulant.

“It won’t be the last. Your landlady doesn’t get back till mid-August, doesn’t she? We’re in the middle of a big lettuce harvest. I can’t afford to slack off.”

“If only you hadn’t kissed me on the street . . .”

“So now it’s my fault we were attacked?” Eli asked. “Jesus Christ, it was just a kiss.”

“I know, but—”

“There’s no buts about this. First Kiko gets on my back, then this hooligan . . . what the hell’s wrong with us being together?”

“Nothing, nothing at all, darling, but you know it’s illegal in California . . .”

“What if we left California?”

“That bottle must’ve knocked a screw loose in your head because now you’re talking crazy.” Lucinda laughed nervously. “You want me to leave my job, leave Nelly, ditch all my friends? To go where?”

Eli caught her hand and raised it to his cheek. “Come north with me, Mahal. I heard things are better in Washington.”

“Washington State? I’ve never even been north of LA. I’d freeze to death.”

“Not with me to keep you warm, you wouldn’t. At least up there I wouldn’t get beat up for being with you.” Eli pulled her close. “One guy left the farm and married his girl in Seattle last month. Up there, it’s legal.”

“Is that what you want to do—get married?” Lucinda’s eyes widened.

“I can dream, can’t I? Tonight gave me one more reason to leave. At least think about it, okay?” Eli kissed her forehead and raised a hand to his heart, as he always did when they parted after dancing. He mouthed a silent “Mahal,” then turned and loped down the road.

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CHAPTER 13

“Hoy, gising na.” The gruff command interrupted Eli’s restless sleep. He rolled over on his back and winced as the pain from the bump on his head jolted him awake. “Tangina naman.” He kicked himself for being too stingy to buy another pillow. He’d had to burn the last one during last month’s lice outbreak. The cot next to his creaked as its occupant sat up. A match briefly illuminated Florencio’s sun-creased face as he lit his first cigarette. He liked to say it was never too early for a smoke, even at three in the morning. “Eli, you up? We leave in ten minutes.”

“Coming,” Eli pulled on threadbare dungarees, grabbed a hat and a jacket from his box under the iron cot. It was only Monday, but he was already counting down the days till the weekend.

The truck outside was half-filled with men from another bunkhouse. Eli squeezed into the nearest spot on the bench seat next to Vicente, an older farmworker who slept ten bunks down from him. The setting moon offered just enough light for Eli to notice Vicente was wearing a Macintosh suit, wide tie folded into the chest pocket. Fine attire for strutting in the Stingaree district, but terrible for laboring in dusty fields.

“Manong Vicente, why so fancy?” Eli nudged him. “We’re paid to harvest lettuce, not women.”

“Too early for jokes, kabayan.” Vicente’s burp stank of whiskey. “I just got back from the Stingaree. Didn’t have time to change.”

“Aren’t you worried you’ll ruin your suit?”

“Better to lose the suit than the job, no? Don’t worry, I’ll leave my jacket in the truck. The shoes I can clean tonight.” Vicente fell heavily against Eli as the truck lurched forward. Eli wrinkled his nose at the older man’s sour breath.

“It took me months to save up for my suit and my first pair of good shoes. I’d never risk damaging them.”

“Too late to worry about risk,” Vicente snorted. “The biggest risk you took was coming to America. After that, it’s all easy come, easy go. So what if I risked my job to go drinking last night? Man cannot live by bread alone. If you want to survive the week, you got to have fun on the weekend, no? This is as good as it gets for us, kabayan. As good as it will ever get.”

Perhaps for you, old man, but not for me. The truck hit a pothole and Eli flinched at the renewed throbbing from the bump on his head. Vicente wasn’t the only weekend casualty.

The morning progressed with the soul-killing boredom of what Eli called the “harvest dance.” The jig allowed no room for improvisation, no pretty girl to hold in his arms, just the crushingly dull sequence of stooping, hacking, and stacking countless heads of lettuce. It was all but impossible to set to music, but Eli hummed his favorite tunes anyway to help pass the time.

“Kabayan, what’re you doing in the fields?” Florencio teased. “I saw your picture in the papers last Sunday. I thought you’d be a movie star by now.”

“Nah.” Eli straightened up and rubbed his sore back. “I only posed for that ad as a favor for my friend.”

“You mean the pretty girl in the photo?”

“No, her boss, Amado. He owns the Rizal dance hall in that advertisement.”

“How much did he pay you to pose?”

“Not a cent.” Eli grinned. “But at least I got to hold a pretty girl for free.”

“Spoken like a true romantic,” Florencio declared.

“Or a true miser,” the man behind him laughed.

The hours crawled along, with a brief pause for lunch. By mid-afternoon, Eli had run out of tunes to hum. As he hacked and stacked his way up a new row of lettuce, he came upon Vicente, who appeared to be even worse off than he’d been before they began the harvest. The older man had dropped his knife and was hunched over, hands gripping his knees. Sweat had turned the white shirt gray; dirt had dulled his wingtips.

Eli felt sorry for the old man. Stoop labor under the hot sun was bad enough on regular days. Doing it hungover was murder. Eli knelt next to him. “You okay, bro? You look like you’re going to have a heart attack.”

“Maybe I will,” Vicente swabbed his sweaty brow with the back of his hand. “Do you have any toilet paper on you?”

“No, sorry.” Eli looked across the field at the other laborers. *Who remembered to pack toilet paper when they began working before dawn?* “Stomach giving you trouble?”

“Putangina,” Vicente swore between sighs. “My gut can’t take those beans we had for lunch.”

“If you gotta go, you gotta go.”

“Oh, I’m going,” Vicente grimaced. “Can’t hold it till we get home.”

“No need—that outhouse is filthy. Might as well shit out here. Plenty of leaves to clean up with.”

“Should have stuck with the rice,” Vicente groaned, as he pulled down his pants and squatted.

“Try to keep it off your shoes, bro. Ingat.” Eli picked up his knife and quickly moved away to give Vicente some privacy.



The sun hung a finger breadth above the horizon as Eli trudged back to the truck. A dense sludge of sweat and soil covered every inch of exposed skin. He hoped he could wash off the day's grime in the communal bath before too many men had soaked in it. That plan crumbled when he saw the other laborers gathered not on the truck, but in a circle next to it, pointing and laughing at something in their midst.

What fool holds a sabong on Monday? Eli wondered. Cockfights were an illegal but irresistible sport usually staged on Sundays in the shelter of trees, all the better to avoid detection by the county sheriff.

As Eli approached the crowd, he realized the fight was not between roosters but men—Vicente and a scrawny fellow he'd never seen before. The stranger looked to be about Eli's age and had what appeared to be a black fly perched above the left corner of his lip. As Eli came closer, he saw the fly was a large mole. It twitched whenever he pursed his lips mockingly at Vicente.

The stranger had stolen Vicente's prized Macintosh jacket from the truck and wore it unbuttoned. Custom fit for the heavier, older man, the suit hung loose as scarecrow's rags on the stranger's gaunt frame.

"Tarantado ka, Ponce," Vicente sputtered. "Who said you could take that? Give it back before you ruin it!"

"What'll you pay me to return your precious coat?" Ponce taunted.

"Putangina, I don't have to pay you anything. It's mine." Vicente swore and took a swing at his tormentor, who nimbly stepped away. Again and again, Vicente tried to grab Ponce, but each time his fingers grasped at air.

"What's going on?" Eli asked Florencio, who stood at the edge of the circle of men. "Why's that guy picking on Vicente?"

"For fun, looks like." Florencio shrugged. "Ponce's a new guy. He moved into the other bunkhouse last week. Word is, he got kicked off a crew in Lodi for picking fights."

“Doesn’t look like he learned anything in Lodi.” Eli felt sorry for Vicente, who’d endured a hangover and a bum stomach to put in an honest day’s work. *Why hasn’t anyone helped the old guy?*

“Tama na bro, you’ve had your fun,” Eli called out. “Give Vicente’s coat back so we can all go home.”

Ponce sneered at Eli. “And who’d you think you are? The clothes cop?”

“Don’t you know who this is, kabayan?” Florencio said. “He’s famous. Eli’s the guy in that dance hall advertisement in the Sunday paper. Don’t you read the *Tribune*?”

“Ahh. I thought I’d seen you somewhere before.” Ponce looked Eli up and down. “So, you’re the famous dancer, are you? How about you teach me some fancy footwork?”

Eli smiled, but his eyes were cold. “Why not? You’re already dressed to dance. I can teach you the move I used in the ad. It’s always a hit with the ladies.” He beckoned to Ponce. “I’ll do the man’s part first—show you how to dip the girl. Next time, you try. Give me your hand.”

“Fine.” Ponce swaggered toward Eli amid scattered applause. “Let’s show them how the pros do it.” He grinned at the crowd, as he stretched soil-stained fingers back to Eli.

Bravado was his downfall.

Eli grabbed Ponce’s hand and spun him in a sharp turn that ended with his arm twisted so tightly behind his back that he cried out in pain.

“Putangina, what is this?” Ponce swore. “That wasn’t in the photo.”

“That was another dance move.” Eli slid his harvest knife along his captive’s neck and paused at Ponce’s jaw. “I call this one ‘Give back the coat and keep your ear.’” He slipped the blade’s tip into the hollow of flesh just beneath Ponce’s earlobe and pressed hard enough to make him yelp.

“Okay, okay. He can have his damn coat.”

Eli kept the knife unsheathed until Ponce handed the jacket back to Vicente.

“Salamat kabayan,” Vicente thanked Eli. “Unlike this bugoy, you know how to respect your elders.”

“I was just having fun,” Ponce said.

“Have fun with your own suit.” Vicente folded the jacket over his arm, smoothing out the creases. “I bought this baby after I won big at the sabong last year. I wear it for luck whenever I go to town.”

“Next time leave it at home.” Florencio patted the old man’s shoulder.

Eli sheathed his knife and waited for Ponce to board the truck before hoisting himself up. The bump on his head throbbed, and he brooded on the herky-jerky ride back to the bunkhouse. *How did I get here?*

He’d arrived two years ago with so much hope, ready to make a home in the America portrayed in Hollywood talkies: a country of skyscrapers, sports cars, smartly dressed men and beautiful women speaking the language he’d taken such pains to perfect. Despite his best efforts, that America seemed beyond his reach. He stared at his grimy companions, squeezed shoulder to shoulder, elbows on knees, twelve hours of sweat and dirt thick as gravy on their foreheads.

Vicente can think what he wants, but this isn’t as good as it gets. He was even more determined now to seek a better life up north. But first he had to persuade Lucinda to join him.

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"The career of the taxi dancer ends in her late twenties. It is a source of income only for the interim between later adolescence and marriage."[4]

4 Paul Cressey, *The Taxi-Dance Hall (*Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1932), 84.

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ONE MONTH BEFORE

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CHAPTER 14

August 1934

Lucinda sat alone in the Rizal Dance Hall's dressing room, enjoying a rare moment of solitude. Dressing alone was a ritual that helped her prepare for the five hours of dancing, smiling, and flirting that her job demanded. Sheer delight when she partnered with Eli, a chore with everyone else. The muffled melodies from the band's rehearsal, the rack of frocks reflected in the dressing mirror, and a lingering bouquet of dancers' perfumes created a calming cocoon. Enjoying this rare solitude, Lucinda hummed along with the band as she dabbed pale blue shadow on her eyelids.

This was the last weekend she would have the house to herself before her landlady returned. Mrs. Moderow had written to say she would take the train back on Tuesday. *Maybe I can persuade Eli to spend the night*. He'd been in a foul mood lately over some other fellow who'd scuffled with him on the farm. Who could blame him? She'd fled her family's farm years ago but remembered all too well the slurry of sweat and dirt that clung to her skin, the relentless sun that scorched each dreary hour of chores. She'd accepted the daily tedium, but her father's drunken caresses were more than she could bear. Shaking her head, Lucinda shut the door on the loathsome memories and returned to happier musings.

If only Eli could find a job downtown.

"Oh, hello, Lucinda." Dolores walked into the dressing room and sat next to her on the bench. "I didn't expect you to be here so soon."

“I come early to get my makeup done. Easier than fighting for a spot by the mirror.”

“What’s the rush? Pretty face like yours needs but five minutes primping.” Dolores pulled a pencil from her purse and darkened her eyebrow. She caught Lucinda’s gaze and winked. “No need to gild the lily.”

She squinted at the thin line, wiped it off, and drew a sharper arch. “I plucked my eyebrows to death years ago. Wanted to make ’em look like Jean Harlow’s. Now I have to draw them in every goddamn night. Say, want to come to my place after work? I’m having a little party and got some good bourbon to share.”

“You celebrating something?”

“My twenty-seventh birthday.” Dolores smiled at her newly drawn brows in the mirror. Lucinda thought they made her look perpetually surprised.

“I thought you celebrated your twenty-seventh birthday last year,” Lucinda teased.

“And the year before that, too. But this is the last time, I promise.”

“What made you change your mind?”

“Not what, *who.* Felix asked me to marry him last week.”

Felix was one of the dance hall regulars, a broad-shouldered Filipino who came only on Sunday night. It occurred to Lucinda that she’d never seen Felix dance with anyone but Dolores. *I wish it was that way with Eli.*

“I know what you’re thinking.” Dolores wagged a tube of lipstick at Lucinda. “That I’ve turned into a nigger-lover.”

“I would never think that.” Lucinda flinched. “The fellas we dance with, the guys in the band, they’re from the islands, they’re not—”

“They’re not *white*, whatever you want to call ’em.” Dolores shrugged. “Haven’t you heard the other girls talk? Those bitches say they’re ‘staying white’ because they only date Okies or whatever white schmuck comes along.”

“Forget what they say. I’m happy for you.” Lucinda threw an arm around Dolores. “Isn’t Felix that bellboy from Hotel del Coronado?”

“That’s him. Don’t tell Amado, but we’ve been dating on the sly for over a year.” Dolores brushed pale green shadow across her eyelids. “He wants a family, and I want out of this job. When he popped the question, I said yes.”

“You’re quitting?”

“Retiring. Do you know any other thirty-year-old dancers? Most of the other fellas dance only with the younger girls. If you didn’t pass your extra partners to me those nights Felix wasn’t around, I’d be a lousy wallflower. And wallflowers don’t make rent.”

“Honey, no one knows how old you are.” Lucinda squeezed Dolores’ shoulder. “And even if they did, who cares? You’re still as light on your feet as everyone else.”

“Haven’t you learned anything?” Dolores patted loose powder under her eyes, trying to conceal the beginnings of crow’s feet. “In this job, it’s not about how you dance, it’s how you look. When you aren’t pretty enough to reel men in, you got to put out a little more. Let them get frisky so they come back with another dance ticket. Well, I’m tired of getting my butt pinched. Besides, my feet are killing me.”

Dolores slipped off a shoe, propped her foot on the dresser, and pointed at a bunion. It was the size of a small barnacle. “Thirteen years of dancing five hours a night, six nights a week, and *this* is all I got to show for it. Felix is my ticket out of here.”

Lucinda felt a pang of sadness. Dolores had taken her under her wing when she began working at the Rizal. While other dancers poked fun at the fifteen-year-old from Yuma, Dolores had shown her how to do makeup and lent her an old frock until she’d saved up enough money to buy her own. It was Dolores who helped her end the trouble with Amado . . . but there was no need to think of that now. “When are you leaving?”

“Maybe after Thanksgiving. I don’t want to miss out on the holiday tips. When those guys can’t have turkey, they console themselves with girls.” Dolores shrugged. “Felix and I plan to drive to Chicago in December. He knows someone who can get him a job at the Ambassador Chicago. I hear it’s Clark Gable’s favorite.”

“You’re moving to Illinois?”

“It’s the only way to get hitched. Felix would be arrested if he tried to marry me in this town. You know the law.”

“Goodness. You love that man enough to give up everything for him?”

“I like him okay. Felix treats me well.”

“But do you *love* him?”

“Honey, love is for folks who can afford it. The rest of us have to settle.” Dolores smacked her lips and carefully wiped off rouge that had smeared on her teeth. “Felix is *easy*. I can handle easy. If we’re lucky, our kids will take after me,” Dolores shrugged. “You know . . . pass for white.”

“You can’t be serious.” Lucinda turned to Dolores, indignant. “Nelly could pass for white, but she tells her classmates Amado’s her father. Would you really make your kids lie about—”

“Lord almighty, you’d best get off your high horse! I’ll cross that bridge when I get there.” Dolores dabbed perfume on her wrists and turned to Lucinda with her newly vivid face. “You coming to my birthday party or not?”

“I’ll let you know after the last dance.” Lucinda’s mind was racing. *If Dolores can leave this job for a man, why can’t I do that for Eli?*

The clatter of footsteps on the back stairwell cut her thoughts short. Clementine and Alice burst into the room.

“Did you hear about the scuffle last night? Alice and I were heading on home after midnight when we saw these hooligans chasing Manolo down Market Street.” Clementine took off her cloche and fluffed her rumpled curls.

“Filipinos?” Lucinda asked.

“You kidding?” Alice snorted. “Filipinos spend a hunk of cash to get all spiffy on Saturday night. You think they’d waste that on a fight? No, these Okies parked on Third Street. Manolo was heading for the Velvet Café when they jumped him.”

“Oh no.” Lucinda remembered Eli falling against her when the bottle struck his head, her fear the man would return to finish him off with a bullet. “How badly did they beat him?”

“One of them grabbed Manolo and ripped off his coat. Manolo fought back, but he was outnumbered. That’s when some other Filipinos ran up to help,” Clementine said. “Alice and I watched the scuffle from across the street. Someone called the cops, and they hauled Manolo and the other Flips away.”

“What about the bozos who started it?” Dolores asked.

Alice shrugged. “We didn’t stay long enough to find out. Soon as the cops broke up the fight, we went home to soak our feet.”

“Good for you.” Dolores gave Lucinda a knowing look. “When trouble starts up, you gotta save yourself.”

As other dancers trickled in, the conversation moved on to lighter topics. Nevertheless, the image of Manolo, coatless and handcuffed hovered in the back of Lucinda’s mind. Eli could well have suffered the same fate. Was he right, to want to leave?

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CHAPTER 15

As the evening progressed, Lucinda became increasingly distracted. She was sure Eli would double down on his efforts to persuade her to leave California as soon as he heard of Manolo's assault and Dolores's engagement to Felix. She and Eli only ever came together in the dead of night, spared the scorn of regular folk in the light of day. However hopeful Dolores had sounded, Lucinda didn't know if she herself could endure the condemnation marrying a colored man would provoke. She'd escaped her dismal childhood on a farm and built a life at the dance hall. It wasn't perfect, but it was familiar, and after three years, Nelly and the musicians were like family. Yet here was Eli, begging her to join him in an uncertain future. *Could I really leave this all behind?*

"Are you okay, Miss Lucinda?" Her partner clutched her waist to keep her from falling as she tripped over his foot.

"Sorry, I'm fine. I wasn't paying attention," Lucinda blushed. Most nights she could dance the foxtrot blindfolded. This wasn't one of those nights.

At the nine o'clock break, she retreated to her usual spot by the bandstand as the ballroom emptied out: dancers to the dressing room, men to the bank of windows for a smoke. Faking nonchalance, Lucinda propped an elbow on the edge of the stage and stared at the doors to the lobby as she waited for Eli to arrive.

Nine minutes later, the musicians had begun to pick up their instruments. Pepe pinched off the unsmoked half of his cigarette and set it

on the ashtray atop his piano. Some of the girls wandered back into the ballroom. Still no Eli.

What's keeping him? Lucinda fidgeted. When the double doors finally swung open, she shut her eyes in relief and said a quick prayer of thanks.

The man who came at her, slapping a wad of tickets against his thigh like a riding crop, was not Eli. His ill-fitting suit failed to hide his narrow frame. A mole, large as a watermelon seed, sat above the left corner of his mouth. He grinned at Lucinda, who couldn't muster a smile.

"You're even prettier than you looked in that ad." The mole bobbed as he spoke. "My name's Ponce, and I want this dance."

"Of course you do." She took the ticket with a tight smile as a fresh stream of men led by Eli flowed through the double doors. He made a beeline for Lucinda but froze when he saw the man beside her.

"Sorry, Eli, you'll have to wait. I already took the gentleman's ticket."

"I wouldn't call him a gentleman." Eli frowned.

"Where are your manners?" Ponce asked, smirking. "You can't spoil my first night at the Rizal. Even bought a suit for the occasion."

"You paid good money for that?" Eli gave Ponce a withering glance, then nodded at Lucinda. "Catch you on the next dance."

"In your dreams." Ponce slipped his arm around Lucinda's waist, looking smug. "I got enough tickets to keep her busy till closing. You tricked me out of a dance lesson back at the farm, so tonight she's going to teach me all her fancy moves. Isn't that right, sweetheart?"

"Depends how fast you learn." Lucinda kept her tone even, even though she was mad enough to kick. *Just my luck to get stuck with the punk who messed with Eli*. She couldn't turn Ponce away without causing a scene. Doing so would only heighten Kiko's suspicions that she and Eli were lovers, and if Kiko said as much to Amado, she'd be out of a job.

"Eli, how about taking Dolores for a whirl till I'm done?"

Dolores stood a few feet away, woefully un-partnered, a glassy smile on her face as she watched other men lead younger girls to the dance floor. Felix was probably working overtime that night.

Lucinda waved her over. “Someone needs a partner.”

“Aren’t you the cat’s meow, saving the best for last.” Dolores flashed a grateful smile at Lucinda and took a ticket from Eli. “Why aren’t you taking the first dance with her?”

“Someone beat me to it.” Eli scowled as he watched Ponce lead Lucinda to the center of the dancefloor. “But we always have a good time, don’t we?”

“I know *I* do.” Dolores lowered her voice. “Don’t worry. I’ll make sure the new guy doesn’t get fresh with your girl.”



Ponce got fresh as soon as the foxtrot began. Distracted by his inability to follow a simple step sequence, Lucinda didn’t notice Ponce’s hand begin a stealthy descent from her shoulder blades to her waist. She jerked back when his palm slid over her rump.

“What the hell?” She slapped his arm away. “Two things to remember: Your left hand holds mine, and your right hand stays flat on my back above my waist. You got that?”

“Sorry.” Ponce’s mole slid leftward as he smiled. “I was so busy following your footwork, I forgot about the hands.”

“Sure you did,” Lucinda snorted. *No wonder Eli hates this guy.*

Lucinda hoped each dance with Ponce would be the last, but he pulled out another ticket even before the next song began.

“Aren’t you tired of me yet?” She ripped the ticket in half and turned away to hide her décolletage as she bent to insert the stub into her stockings. “How many more tickets you got?”

“More than I can remember.”

“Lots of other girls to dance with.” Lucinda squared her shoulders and reluctantly offered her hand. “You should try them out.”

“Why bother, when I got the best one?” Ponce’s smile was oily as he took her back in his arms.

It was all but impossible to dance with anyone else, for Kiko’s band hardly paused between songs, leaving barely enough time to switch partners. In a cruel irony, Eli and Lucinda had fallen victims to their own success. The newspaper ad had drawn so many new customers that the dance floor was too crowded for Eli to slide in and reach Lucinda before the next song began.

As one dance turned into a dozen, Ponce’s furtive fondling escalated. Benny usually kept unruly patrons in line, but he stood on the opposite end of the band-stand, and Lucinda would have had to holler above the music to call his attention. *Is this what Dolores meant about “putting out a little more”?*

“Stop.” She slapped Ponce’s wandering hand away from her hips. “Do you want me to teach you this dance or not?”

“Sure I do.” Ponce’s breath was hot against her cheek. “I’m a fast learner.”

“You’re fast all right.” Lucinda leaned away from his hovering lips. “After this song, you’ll have to find someone else to teach you.”

“Is this how you talk to a paying customer?” Ponce pulled Lucinda close. Pinning her so tightly to his chest that she could hardly breath, he tilted his hips forward and pressed his rigid member against her pelvis. Lucinda froze. Suddenly she was thirteen again, whimpering as her father pressed up against her threadbare nightclothes. *I can’t let this happen again.*

Ponce mistook her silence for submission. “That’s more like it. Now, how ’bout you show me how you and Eli struck that pose in the advertisement.”

“Is that what you want?” Lucinda stared at him with dead eyes. “Let me teach you our secret move. First, you need to loosen your grip. Watch how I do it.” Lucinda softened into the unwanted hug and curved her torso into his, letting her head fell back languidly.

“Oh yeah.” Ponce stared at her chest. “Already I like this move.”

“Hold on tight to my waist, okay?” Lucinda locked eyes with Ponce. Balancing on her left foot, she bent her right knee, raising it high behind her as if to stab the paper moons above them with her stiletto heel.

“This next step is the showstopper. You ready?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be.” Ponce breathed on her throat.

“Good.” Lucinda clasped his face with both hands. “It’ll take your breath away.”

As Ponce leaned in to steal a kiss, Lucinda kneed him square in the groin then ground her heel into his toes.

“Aray!” Ponce released her and fell backward against the next couple.

“Ano ka ba?” The man shoved Ponce away.

“She attacked me!”

The swing song came to an abrupt halt as the Musikeros craned to see what caused the commotion . Other couples gaped at Ponce, doubled over in pain. “Bitch is crazy!”

Benny pushed through the crowd gathered around Ponce. Lucinda stood to one side, staring with disdain at the injured man. “Lucinda, what did you do to him?”

“Gave him what he had coming.” Lucinda glared at the bouncer. “He was feeling me up like Hellen Keller reading a goddamn book. I told him to stop, but he didn’t, so I kicked him in the nuts. You got a problem with that?” Her gaze traveled from one aghast onlooker to the next until it landed on Eli. “Does anyone have a problem with that?”

“Aren’t you going to call the cops?” Ponce asked.

“She shoulda kicked harder,” Dolores said. “I saw how he was pawin’ at her. We should call the cops on *him*.”

“No one’s calling the cops.” Benny turned to Ponce, fists clenched. “If they heard you pawed a white girl, they’d throw you in the clink. Or they’d tell some good old boys and get you lynched. We can’t have that kind of trouble here.”

“Buwisit,” Ponce swore. “It’s not like I fondled the Virgin Mary; she’s just a dime-a-dance floozy.”

“Gago ka ba?” Benny grabbed Ponce’s collar. “Lemme explain something. This here’s a stand-up joint with professional dancers. If you want floozies, go to the Velvet Café. How ’bout you head over there now. C’mon.”

Benny nodded at Kiko. “Strike up the band. The party doesn’t stop for this clown.”

As everyone else returned to their partners, Eli came up to Lucinda. “Are you okay?”

“Where the hell were you? I was waiting for you to cut in after the first song, but you just disappeared.” Lucinda kept her arms folded, refusing to take his hand.

“I’m sorry, Mahal. I stepped out to the lobby when I got down to my last three tickets. I couldn’t stand to watch Ponce dancing with you.”

“That fool did everything *but* dance.” Lucinda sighed. “Why didn’t you just buy more tickets?”

“You know I’m saving up to go to Washington. We’ll need every dollar for the move.”

“We?” Lucinda cocked an eyebrow.

“Just you and me. Haven’t you had enough time to think about it? What else can I do to persuade you?” Eli cradled her elbows and rocked gently side to side as the Manila Musikeros began playing “Let’s Fall in Love.”

“Give me that ticket; this is one of my favorite songs. We can talk while dancing.” Lucinda unraveled her arms and took his hand.

“Deal.” Humming along with the band, Eli led her into a gliding waltz, smooth as a sailboat on glassy water.

Lucinda felt her rage dissolve as they skimmed across the floor. Dancing with Eli was a joy, not a job. Being with him was easy as breathing. *Easy. Wasn’t that how Dolores described Felix?*

Out in the lobby, Ponce refused to leave, complaining so loudly that Amado took the rare step of refunding three dollars’ worth of unused tickets. Even then, Benny had to forcibly escort him down the stairs and out the door. Without the bouncer to enforce ticket collection, everyone danced for free until he returned.

“Tickets! Ladies, remember to collect those tickets.” Benny hollered upon his return.

“Here you go, Mahal. A ticket for one precious minute of your time,” Eli handed Lucinda a ticket.

“Gee, thanks, sweetheart.” Lucinda tucked the stub into her bra.

“So . . . what’s it going to be—will you go to Washington with me?”

“I’ll let you know after you give me another foot massage,” Lucinda teased. “My heel’s still sore from stomping on that bozo’s toes.”

“Anything you want, Mahal. Meet me at Island when you get off work?” Eli murmured as they began another slow waltz.

“I thought you’d never ask.” Lucinda wasn’t sorry to miss Dolores’s birthday cocktails. After this the evening’s altercation, what she needed was not celebration, but solace. Ponce’s assault had dragged her back to the many nights she’d suffered at her father’s hands. Try as she might to bury those memories, all it took was another lecher to bring them roaring back to life.

Dolores was right. *When trouble starts up, save yourself.*

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CHAPTER 16

Eli woke up to the uncommon sensation of warmth on his face. Sunlight. Too much of it. He looked around, disoriented. He wasn't in a dark, crowded bunk house on the farm. Not surrounded by men snoring or grinding their teeth in a room humid with the odor of sweat and dirty socks. Instead, he was on a bed with peony-patterned sheets, lying next to a girl who smelled of orange blossoms.

This was bad. Very bad.

He lifted a corner of the blanket and rolled off the bed, careful not to wake her. Luckily, Lucinda's landlady was still out of town. He needed to leave before any of the neighbors saw him. Needed to find a ride back to the farm, head straight to the fields and hope the foreman wouldn't spot him arriving late to the harvest. Needed to avoid getting fired until he'd saved up enough money to quit.

None of those things seemed possible. But he was determined to try.

Moving quietly to avoid waking Lucinda, he retrieved clothes tossed on the floor the night before, smiling at the trail of clothes that mapped each point of their lovemaking. His shirt and Lucinda's dress by the dresser*;* trousers and shoes by the bed; stocking, socks . . . everything dropped willy-nilly around the room, except for his Macintosh jacket. Amid their fevered race to undress, he'd somehow taken care to drape his jacket over a chair. He decided not to put it on, remembering how foolish Vicente had looked, riding to the fields in his Saturday suit. Resolving to find a safe hiding place for it, he tucked the jacket under his arm.

“You planning to leave without saying goodbye?” Lucinda leaned up on one elbow, yawning. With her hair in disarray and make-up smudged off, she looked years younger.

“I would never do that.” Eli bent to kiss her forehead. “But I overslept and have to go. We begin harvesting tomatoes before dawn, before it gets too hot. Sun’s up, and I gotta hope I can sneak into the field without getting caught by the foreman.”

“Dressed like that?” Lucinda nodded at his button-down shirt, tailored pants and polished wingtips.

“There’s no time to change into work clothes. I can leave my suit jacket with Wings and—oh, wait—why didn’t I think of that,” Eli slapped his forehead. “He’s got a car.” Suddenly the situation no longer seemed so dire. “If I paid for gas he could drive me—” A car’s loud honking interrupted Eli. He glanced out the window and saw a Buick screech to a halt as a dog scampered across the street, its owner in hot pursuit. Monday morning was well underway in Lucinda’s neighborhood. “I’d better go before one of your neighbors see me.”

“Take the back door.” Lucinda shrugged on a worn cotton robe, then led him down the stairs to a small kitchen at the rear of the house. She opened the door and looked up and down the alley before waving Eli through.

“See you Friday night?” Lucinda hugged her robe tight and leaned against the door frame.

“If I don’t get fired today, you will.” Eli raised a hand to his heart, then sprinted down the alley.



After some cajoling, Wings accepted Eli’s twenty cents to buy a gallon of gas in exchange for a ride to the farm.

“How do you know you won’t get fired anyway?” Wings gave Eli a sidelong glance as they sped down the highway. “It’s almost eight o’clock.

Don’t you think the boss would’ve noticed you weren’t in the truck when the crew left at three?”

“He’s barely awake that early in the morning.” Eli dangled his hand out the window and let the wind rush past his fingers. It was still pleasantly cool; by mid-morning, the fields would be hot as a furnace.

“I just need to sneak in without him seeing. He usually naps in the truck until lunch.”

“I hope you’re right.” Wings looked dubious. “Must’ve been some night with Lucinda.”

Eli looked out the window.

“You going to hold out on me, bro?” Wings nudged his friend.

“You know I tell you everything, but this is different. Every night at the Rizal I share Lucinda with other guys. But being alone with her last night . . .” Eli looked out the window, smiling at the memory. “That was something else. I want to keep that to myself.”

Wings let out a low whistle. “’Tangina, Eli. That’s some torch you’re carrying. I hope she’s worth it.”

“So do I.”



“Thanks, bro.” Eli said as he got out of Wings’s Chevy.

“You sure you don’t want me to take you closer?” Wings leaned across the bench seat to look at Eli through the window. “It’ll save you at least 10 minutes.”

“Too risky. If the foreman saw your car, I’d be busted. Hiro’s a mean son of a bitch.” Eli remembered how one of the older men collapsed from heat stroke one sweltering day in July. Hiro had ordered Eli and another man to carry him back to the truck, then directed the crew to get back to work. They had to comply, for Hiro packed a pistol and was only too eager to use it.

“Damn. Too bad you’re harvesting tomatoes and not apples. Would have been easier to sneak you into an orchard,” Wings said. “Tell you what—I’ll wait an hour or so in case you need a ride back to town. My shift doesn’t start till eleven.”

“Salamat. With any luck I won’t need a ride back.” Eli squinted at the men hunched over endless rows of tomato plants.The heat had already begun to rise that Monday morning, and the week stretched before him like a long and dusty road.

Eli rolled up his sleeves as he walked. He could wash sweat stains off the shirt and re-polish his shoes when they got back to the bunkhouse. He could endure all the jokes for working the fields in his weekend finery, the same ones he cracked every time someone else did it. But what would he do if he lost his job?

Damn. I don’t have a hoe. His tools sat in the bunkhouse over a mile away. It was a long shot, but maybe someone had brought a spare hoe. He crouched and ran to the nearest row of tomato plants where one of the men from his bunkhouse was working.

“Kumusta Mario,” Eli said. “How’s your morning coming along?”

“Where you been?” Mario straightened up and stretched his back. “You weren’t on the truck when we left, were you?” He nodded at Eli’s clothes. “Big night in the Stingaree?”

“You could say that. I didn’t have time to grab my hoe at the bunkhouse. Did you bring a spare I could borrow?”

“No. You can go up the line and ask the other guys, but no one I know brings a spare. Who can afford to buy an extra one these days?”

Mario’s prediction turned out to be right. Everyone had a joke about the Stingaree’s temptations, but not one had a hoe he could borrow. Eli was just about to trudge down his third row of plants when someone called out to him.

“You there. Stop! What do you think you’re doing?”

Eli froze at the sound of the tobacco-hoarsened voice. *Hiro*.

“Turn around. Look at me when I’m talking.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Hiro.” Eli turned around but lowered his gaze in deference to the foreman. “I need to borrow a hoe and get to work.”

“Work?” Hiro pointed at Eli’s wingtips. “What kind of fool wears his best shoes to harvest tomatoes?”

Eli could feel the other men staring at him. *Is Ponce among them?* “I got stuck in town so there was no time to change clothes, but I got here as fast as I could, and—”

“Stop.” Hiro raised his hand. “No excuses.”

“No excuses, I was explaining—

“Let *me* explain something.” Hiro waved his cigarette with irritation, showering ash on the soil. “If you come late, don’t come at all. What use are you without a goddamn hoe?”

“If I could just borrow a hoe, I’d work double quick and make up for coming late. I swear it won’t happen again.” Eli’s head throbbed.

“Damn right it won’t happen again. You’re fired. Get outta here.” Hiro scanned the rows of men who had stopped working to watch them. “What’re you looking at? This is none of your business. Get back to work, or I’ll fire the rest of you too.”

“Please, Mr. Hiro.” It killed Eli to beg, but he needed this job. “Give me another chance, I’ll make it up to you, I promise.”

“My mind is made up,” Hiro sneered. He pointed at Wings’s car at the other end of the field. “Is that how you got here? Think you’re too good to ride in the truck with my crew?”

“That’s my friend’s car. I got him to drive me here, since I missed the truck.”

Hiro’s laugh sounded like a bark. “Then he can drive you back. Go to the bunkhouse and take your stuff. Anything you leave will be thrown away.” Hiro put a hand on his holster.

Eli knew the foreman would pull a gun on him if he continued to argue. He'd seen Hiro do it before.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Hiro. I'll pack up my things now." Eli trudged back to the car, panicked thoughts swarming his mind like a cloud of mosquitos. *Should I look for another job, or leave now? Do I leave Lucinda, or would she go with me? How far north can we get before our money runs out?*

Wings looked unsurprised when Eli got back into the car. "You look like you need a smoke."

"Can't afford it, now that I'm out of a job. Could I stay at your place till I find more work?"

"Sure—but you'll have to buy your own food. The boss'll get suspicious if I take leftovers home every night."

"I got some money saved up. It'll tide me over until I find another job."

"And when that runs out, you could pawn your suit, the shoes, the hat."

"Putangina," Eli swore. "I heard other guys do that to pay off gambling debts. Didn't think I'd be one of them."

"Look on the bright side—maybe you'll get a job in town. You always hated farm work."

"Got that right." Eli took a last look at the rows of tomato plants. The men hunched between them with their short hoes reminded Eli of chickens scratching in the dirt. He vowed never to return to such soul-killing work. Maybe Chino could help him. Bussing tables or carrying luggage would be worlds better than this. *There's got to be better ways to make a living.*

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CHAPTER 17

Had Eli been more pragmatic, he would have joined the stream of migrant farmworkers that flowed north following the harvest season as soon as he'd been fired in August. But love prevailed over logic, and he chose to stay in San Diego. He moved into the ramshackle cottage Wings rented with two other men and spent fruitless days searching for work in the Stingaree. One night at the Rizal cost him several precious dollars, and by the second week, he'd burned through most his meager savings. Still hoping to find a job, he balked at pawning his dance hall finery.

Lucinda had warned him not to visit her at home, now that her landlady was back. To meet during the day carried the risk of being spotted by one of the Manila Musikeros, all of whom lived in the Stingaree. Ironically, dance halls were the only safe place for them to meet.

In a fit of pique, Eli put on his good suit one Saturday in September and persuaded Manolo to let him sweep the barbershop's floors in exchange for a shave.

As one half of Amado's star dancing couple, Eli was sure Benny would wave him into the ballroom without making him buy the minimum dollar packet of dance tickets. Watching Lucinda dance with other men was better than not seeing her at all.

Decked out in his Macintosh suit on a sunny afternoon, Eli swiveled the broom around the barbershop floor and daydreamed about his girl.

"I should get you to clean up every weekend, bro," Manolo glanced at Eli as he scraped a straight razor along his client's up-thrust jaw. "Never

had such a well-dressed janitor."

"Pay me and I'll do it every day." Eli struck a pose, holding the broom as though it were a partner.

"Sorry, bro, trading favors is all I can afford right now," Manolo said. "If Paquito here didn't pay for his weekly shave, I'd be in trouble."

"Keep dancing, Eli. I got to learn your best moves," Paquito said. "Maybe if I showed the girls at the Rizal some fancy footwork, they'd give me a free dance."

"Benny would kick you out if he caught you stealing a dance." Eli emptied the dustpan into the garbage bin. "He and Amado run a tight ship at the Rizal."

"Amado's always been a killjoy." The voice came from the doorway. Eli turned to find the Velvet Café's bartender.

"Why don't you come dance at the Velvet Café instead?" Sal asked. "Mamie gives a free dance to everyone who buys a drink."

"So I get a free dance if I bought a beer for 15 cents?" Eli chuckled, shaking his head. "I'd rather spend all my money on dime dances."

"Think of it as an investment, kid. My drinks turn every fella into a better dancer, guaranteed." Sal grinned.

"I wish they sold liquor licenses to barbershops," Manolo said, massaging aftershave on Paquito's jaw. "Then we could all drink here."

"Why don't you stick to cutting hair and let me handle the booze?" Sal fished a silver cigarette holder from his breast pocket, pushed a cigarette into it, and struck a match. "Eli, I haven't seen you around in a while. You been drinking someplace else these days?"

"I haven't been to a bar in weeks." Eli kept his tone nonchalant, but the question put him on edge. "Money's been tight since I lost my job. I've been looking for work ever since."

Sal took a long drag on his cigarette. "What kind of job are you looking for?"

“At this point, I’ll take anything. You got something in mind?”

“When you’re done here, come have a drink with me at the Velvet.” Sal retrieved a fedora from the hat rack and angled it low over his forehead. “I bet Mamie could find you something to do.”



Walking leisurely but puffing with conviction, one could say the Velvet Café on Third Street was a cigarette’s distance away from the Rizal Dance Hall. In every other respect, the two dance halls were worlds apart. Amado’s ballroom took up the second floor of a building at Sixth and Market on the eastern border of the Stingaree district. The newer Velvet Café occupied the first floor of the Mitchell Hotel three streets west on Third and Market, mere blocks from the docks under which swam the stingrays which had given the neighborhood its name.

Mamie Savage had opened her dance hall a month after Prohibition was repealed and cannily installed a bar in the front room. Once liquor had loosened both limbs and scruples, the Velvet Café’s patrons behaved with less decorum and spent more money than the men who danced sober at the Rizal.

Although Amado’s taxi dancers were more skilled than those at the Velvet Café, Sal himself proved a potent draw. In addition to Tagalog, Sal could banter in Ilocano and Cebuano, languages spoken in regions north and south of Manila. Nobody sold alcohol better than a bartender who could chat with customers after liquor rendered them incoherent in English.

It was too early for tipplers when Eli strolled into the Velvet Café to claim his free drink. He’d never been there during the day; now he marveled at the way the scarlet drapes softened the bright afternoon sunlight to a roseate glow. The lounge was decidedly more luxurious than the Rizal’s simple decor, but Eli remained unimpressed by Mamie’s dancers. None were as pretty and light on their feet as Lucinda.

“Welcome back.” Sal polished the bar in slow circles, as though he were stroking a woman’s bare back. “The place looks good, even during the day, huh? You should come by more often.”

“I would, if I could afford to.” Even with a steady job, Eli had given up cigarettes, beer, and movies to spend all his spare money on dance tickets at the Rizal. Lucinda was the one luxury he could not live without.

“How long’s it been since you last had a drink?”

“Too long to remember.” Eli put his hat on the bar and eased onto a stool.

“You could’ve bought a case of moonshine with what you paid for that fancy suit,” Sal snorted. “Who’d you think you are, Rockefeller?”

“I could always pawn it if money gets tight.” Eli stroked the fine dark wool of his lapel. “But a case of whiskey? My roommates would have finished it off in days.”

“Fair enough.” Sal plucked a bottle from the mirrored shelves behind him and pulled two glasses from under the counter. With great ceremony, he poured a generous shot of amber liquor into each glass. He slid one to Eli and raised the other. “Cheers.”

Eli let out a faint sigh as bourbon traced a molten path down his throat. A pleasant warmth washed over him, erasing the memory of these last hungry days. He sensed his luck was about to change. “So. You said you have a job for me.”

“I do.” Sal rested a forearm on the polished wood and locked eyes with Eli. “Question is, are you the right man for it?”

“I’ll take any job I can get—picking grapes, washing dishes, bussing tables . . . heck, I’ll even clean those mansions up in Kensington if I must. But I want to stay in San Diego. I need to be at the Rizal every Saturday night.”

“Is it really the dancing—” Sal raised an eyebrow. “Or one of Amado’s girls?”

Eli hesitated. He wasn’t sure he could trust this man.

“Look, kabayan. Men tell me their deepest secrets every night, over drinks. In one ear, out the other. If I tried to remember everything, my head would explode.”

Sal leaned closer. “To be honest, you don’t have to tell me anything. I already know who she is.”

“What’re you talking about?”

“Talking about a Sunday afternoon, not long ago. I needed some fresh air, so I took a stroll down to the docks. I’m walking past a stack of packing crates when I suddenly hear a woman laugh. So, I sneak around and what do you know: I spot you canoodling with Lucinda. She’s the reason you only dance at the Rizal—am I right?”

“Yes.” Eli looked down the row of empty bar stools. He wished Lucinda were sitting next to him in that rose-colored room. “Some nights we came here for a drink, remember? I can’t spare the cash for that anymore. Besides, if Amado heard that she came here, he’d fire her on the spot—even if she’s his star dancer.”

“So I’m told. Heard she’s the biggest draw at the Rizal.” A sly smile crept over Sal’s face as he poured another shot for Eli. “Does Amado suspect anything?”

“No.” Eli frowned at his reflection in the mirrored glass shelves behind Sal.

“So what if he fired her? Mamie would hire her the next day.” Sal grinned. “Then you could canoodle as much as you liked.”

“And pay ten cents for every minute?” Eli scoffed. “I’m tired of waiting turns to dance with my girl. We’re saving up to go someplace where it’s legal to marry. Moving costs money.”

“Love ain’t cheap, bro. Where’d you plan to go?”

“Seattle. I need to stay close to the ocean.”

“What for? Water’s too cold to swim up north.”

“Too cold down here, too.” Eli swallowed the last of his drink. “But I like to go out on the docks and watch the sunset. I think about how, on the other side of that ocean, those same waves break on our islands. Home.”

“Ay, Eli. Why so sentimental? No sense thinking about the islands if you don’t plan to go home.”

“Can’t help it. My sister Paloma teaches in Manila and writes me every month. She’s been begging me to go home since I left. She studied with Americans, you know, the Thomasites.” He remembered the American teacher in her starched linen shirtdress, her blue-veined hand cupping Paloma’s shoulder, proud as a parent that Paloma had been named valedictorian. “She was the Thomasites’ star pupil.”

“School didn’t suit me.” Sal made a face. “That’s why I joined the Navy.”

A low grumble in his belly reminded Eli he’d not eaten since breakfast. “Tell me about that job.”

Sal crooked his finger, beckoning Eli to lean in. His voice dropped to a whisper, even though they were alone. “You know how to use a gun?”

“Why do you ask?”.

“Easy, kabayan,” Sal’s voice turned molasses smooth. “Everything’s on the level here. All I’m asking is, can you shoot?”

If only Eli had walked out right then.

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ONE WEEK BEFORE

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CHAPTER 18

"What do you mean, you're quitting?" Amado glanced up from the newspaper.

"I'm tired of dancing. I want to do something else," Lucinda said. She'd timed this conversation for Tuesday afternoon, knowing that day it was Benny's turn to walk Nelly home from school and feed her dinner before taking her to the dance hall. Kiko was rehearsing a new set list with the Manila Musikeros onstage. She took care to shut the ballroom doors before she made the announcement. She wanted to be alone to handle Amado if he took the news badly. He did.

"Do you know how lucky you are to have this job? You make more money in one night than most of our regulars make in a week." Amado folded his paper and stood up.

"And I earn every goddamn penny." Lucinda's face grew hot. Amado was taller by a hair but he swelled into a more threatening figure when angered. She refused to be intimidated. "*You* try dancing in heels that pinch, five hours a night, six nights a week. See how you like getting your tits mashed, your ass pinched, your toes stomped, all the while smiling at the bozo who did it. I'm tired of this bullshit. At the end of this month, I'm done."

"Did someone put you up to this?" Amado began to pace, his voice rising. "Did Mamie Savage offer you a job?"

"Of course not. And if she did, I wouldn't take it. Besides, my landlady's been asking why I teach dance classes past midnight. She'd kick me out the minute she found out I worked at a dance hall."

“Then find another place to live,” Amado’s snarled.

“I’d rather find another place to *work*!” Lucinda was mad enough to spit. “Didn’t I bring you enough new customers with that newspaper ad? Find another girl to be your golden goose!”

The door to the ballroom swung open, cutting short the argument.

“Everything okay?” Kiko asked.

“Everything’s gone to hell.” Lucinda pushed past the conductor, heels clicking a rapid fire staccato as she strode to the dressing room.

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Interview notes, Jimmy Wheeler*, San Diego Evening Tribune* **Reporter**

***Kiko**: Some days before Amado was shot, Lucinda told him she planned to resign. I might have suspected Eli had something to do with that, but he hadn't come to the dance hall in weeks.*

***Chino**: I ran into Eli at the barber shop the weekend before Amado was shot. He asked me to help him find a job. Said he'd have to sell his suit if he didn't find work soon. Too bad. He looked real good in that Macintosh.*

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CHAPTER 19

Eli felt conspicuously underdressed when he arrived at the Velvet Café that Saturday night.

"Right on time." Sal slapped a shot glass on the bar. "Have a drink on me while you wait. Mamie will be here in a minute."

The whiskey scorched his throat and made him feel slightly queasy. He hadn't eaten anything that day. He watched Sal pace back and forth behind the bar, pouring beers and bantering with customers. Each time he reached Eli's end of the bar, he paused to take a drag on his cigarette, pinching its silver holder between thumb and forefinger as if it were a teacup handle, then setting it back on the ashtray with a flourish.

Eli stared at the ornate leaves carved into Sal's cigarette holder and hummed along to "Stormy Weather" blaring from the ballroom.

Sal's cigarette had nearly burned down to a stub when a familiar voice purred, "There you are. I love a man who comes on time."

Mamie cupped Eli's cheek. He inhaled an earthy scent that reminded him of dried roses, of prettiness past its prime. "You look pale. What's the matter—didn't Sal give you enough to drink?"

"Yes, ma'am, I mean, no." Eli pulled away from Mamie's palm. The caress only reminded him how badly he missed Lucinda. "Sal gave me plenty."

"Sal, darling, why don't you leave the bartending to me for now, and go have a chat with Eli," Mamie said. She leaned close, her lips brushing his ear as she spoke over the music. "It's too noisy down here to talk business. Go on upstairs with Sal. He can tell you about that job."

Sal came around the bar. “Shouldn’t take me more than an hour. Think you can keep these fellas happy till then?”

“I’ve been making men happy all my life. Make sure you give Eli what he needs to get the job done tonight, y’hear?”

“I got it covered, Mamie.” Sal draped an arm around her shoulder. “Trust me.”

Eli was startled by Sal’s easy intimacy with the gringa. Unless he’d paid for a dance, he and Lucinda never so much as held hands in public. “We’re just talking, aren’t we? What else would I need?”

“Tell you upstairs.” Sal pulled the cigarette stub off the ornate holder. “Follow me.”

Sal led Eli to the back of the saloon and up a narrow flight of stairs to a small bedroom above the dancefloor. It was just large enough to contain a cot, a nightstand, and a pine closet, long and narrow as an upright coffin. Music thrummed through the floorboards. Eli wished he were dancing with Lucinda at the Rizal, instead of sitting in this airless box with a man who made him nervous.

“Here, have one more for the road.” Sal took a bottle from his bedside table and poured two fingers of whisky into a glass.

“No thanks, I’m tight.”

“Drink up. It’s going to be a long night.” Sal pressed the tumbler into Eli’s hand. “Mamie wants me to go with you but you’ll do most of the talking.”

“I’ll do my best.” Eli sipped his drink and watched the edges begin to blur around his worn shoes, around the knots in the wood floor. Even the sound of Sal rummaging through the closet seemed muted.

When he looked up, Sal was holding a gun. “Whoa, kabayan. What for do you need the pistol?’

“Lemme explain.” Sal polished the gun with a handkerchief as Eli drained his glass with a nervous gulp. “Amado thinks he’s better than us, on

account of he doesn’t serve alcohol at the Rizal. You need to set him straight. This guarantees you get respect.”

“I’ve already got respect, after all the money I’ve spent at the Rizal.” Eli reached over to set his glass down and nearly missed the nightstand. Liquor had unhinged his knees.

“Nothing wrong with packing the gun, bro. Look, all you got to do is ask Amado—‘What’s wrong with your girls going on dates to the Velvet Café? They deserve to have fun on their own time.’”

“I can bring him around if I explain it right.” Eli offered a placating smile. “No need for a gun.”

“What’re you—stupid? If you want to get paid, you do it my way. If Amado gives you any lip, just flash the gun and shut him up, got that?” Sal held the pistol out. “Take it. We need to go now.”

The whiskey took the edge off Eli’s apprehension. *Just do as Sal says, get paid, and get out. Amado will never know.*



“Eli! Kumusta na? Long time no see.” Amado rose from his chair, arms spread wide in welcome. “Where you been?”

“Been busy looking for work.”

“I see you brought company.” Amado’s smile disappeared when he saw Sal. “How’d you know this fella? Kumusta na, Sal? Slow night at the Velvet?”

“Nope, the bar’s hopping.” Sal flashed a crocodile smile. “I just wanted to see if how it is over here.”

“Full house. Saturday night, you know.” Amado jerked a thumb toward the ballroom doors, which stayed shut to help Benny manage the ballroom crowd. “Go on in. You can catch a few dances before we close.”

“Thanks, but we got girls at our place too.” Sal nudged Eli. “Go on.”

“Manong Amado, we came ask you to lift your ban on dancers going to the Velvet Café after hours.”

“And why would I do that?”

“Because you got no business telling your girls what to do with their free time.” Sal turned a feral gaze on Amado. “Mamie keeps the Velvet Café open till two a.m., two hours after you shut down. Don’t your girls deserve a nightcap after work?”

“If you think I’d let my girls help you shill drinks for Mamie, you’re nuts.” Amado hitched sagging trousers back up over his paunch. “We close at midnight to let them rest up after dancing for five hours. Want to know why the best dancers in town work here? Because I treat ’em like ladies.”

“Baloney.” Sal took a step toward Amado, fists clenched as if tensing up to throw a punch. “Everyone knows taxi dancers are just low-rent skirts. Floozies selling dances for dimes.”

“Don’t you call my girls floozies.” Amado shoved Sal’s shoulder so hard he stumbled back against Eli.

“Take it easy, Manong, we’re just talking.”

“This bugoy just insulted my dancers—you call that talking?” Amado looked at Eli, incredulous. “Why’re you sticking up for this low life?”

“Because he agrees with me.” The scar on Sal’s cheek twitched.

“You’re lying.”

“Sal didn’t mean to offend you, Manong. No need to get upset.” Eli bit back the sour taste of bile rising in his throat. “I just thought you and Mamie could help each other out.”

“I don’t need that woman’s help.” Amado scowled at Eli. “I’m surprised at the company you keep, kid. See this?” Amado gestured at Sal. “This is what happens when a fella listens to a white broad.”

“What’re you saying?” A dangerous look came into Sal’s eyes.

“Mamie put you up to this, didn’t she? What did she promise you—a stake in the Velvet Café? You too stupid to see she’s using you? White folk

don’t share anything with guys like us. If they did, we’d be livin’ next to them in a swank Talmadge mansion, instead of in flophouses by the docks. Give ’em an inch and they’ll take your life. Mark my words, that gringa will suck you dry and spit you out like fish bones. Then she’ll find some other fresh-off-the-boat fool to do her dirty work.”

“Shut up,” Sal snarled.

“Nobody tells me what to do, least of all you. Tell Mamie I don’t do business with hoods or harlots. Now beat it.” Amado took a step back.

“It’s a free country, bro. We’re not going anywhere.”

“Suit yourself. I’ll have Benny kick you out.”

As Amado turned to the ballroom doors, Sal gestured at the gun tucked in Eli’s pocket. *Now,* he mouthed.

Eli pulled out the pistol, hand shaking, surprised by its cold heft. Guns had always spooked him, even after a manong in Stockton had taught him how to use one. *You got to protect yourself if you want to live in America,* the old-timer had insisted. Eli never thought he’d need a pistol, yet here he was holding Sal’s gun. How could he threaten Amado with it when the guy wasn’t even looking at him? *Turn around, Manong. Please.*

Eli waggled the gun, shrugging helplessly at Sal.

“Goddamnit—” Sal grabbed Eli’s shoulder and pulled him close. “You’re going to shoot Amado now and here’s why . . .” Sal’s lips grazed Eli’s ear as he whispered a venomous secret.

Eli looked at Sal, incredulous. *Was this why Lucinda was Amado’s favorite dancer?*

Rage seared Eli’s mind, streaked down his arm and exploded through his fingers. As Eli’s arm jerked back with the recoil, time suddenly slowed down. He watched the bullet slug Amado square in the back, splay his arms wide as wings and throw him face down on the floor in one horrifying moment. Then the moment ended.

The thundercrack of gunshot shattered Eli's daze, throwing the smallest detail into stark relief: the deafening drum solo vibrating through the shut ballroom doors, the sulfur stink of gunpowder, the twitch of Amado's hands, blood spreading like molasses on the floor. Eli reeled, panic jittering his limbs. *Where the hell is Sal?*

Eli bolted down the dimly lit stairwell, missed a few steps and crashed into a body at the foot of the stairs. Sal kicked Eli off with a muttered curse. Eli pulled himself up, but the bartender remained on hands and knees, groping for something on the floor.

"Putangina Sal," Eli cursed. "Shooting him wasn't part of the deal!"

"Are you so stupid I got to spell everything out? That was *always* part of the deal." Dim light from the upstairs lobby revealed Sal's face, electric with rage. Sal nodded at the pistol Eli still held hands. "Get rid of that, quick."

"Hell no. It's yours, you take it."

Sal stood up, flicking his wrist. In the next instant, Eli felt cold steel upon his neck. Sal slid the blade beneath the tender skin as though he were slicing butter.

"Do as I say, or I'll slit Lucinda's throat."

Eli felt the gun heavy in his palm, its barrel still warm from the kill.

Upstairs, a child screamed, her voice shrill and loud as a fire alarm.

Nelly sleeps behind the coat check counter.

"You'd better go." Sal wiped the bloodied knife off on Eli's collar and slipped out the door. Other voices drowned out Nelly's wails. Eli stuffed the pistol under his coat and fled.

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CHAPTER 20

First came Nelly's scream. A high-pitched wail that rose above Oscarito's drum finale and pierced the paper moons. Lucinda reached the ballroom's double doors before Benny did and pushed them open to find Nelly crouched by her father's side, wailing inconsolably in her bright red dress.

But Nelly didn't own a red dress.

Lucinda took the little girl into her arms. The sight of Amado bleeding on the floor rendered her unable to speak, much less breathe as others ran in, their shocked voices rising like a locust swarm above Amado, shot dead in his beloved dance hall.



A long shadow swung out from under the awning and grabbed Lucinda's arm.

"God almighty!" Lucinda jerked back, terrified. *This is how it always started, fingers groping in the dark.* She fled.

"Mahal, please don't run away. Stop."

Lucinda looked over her shoulder. The moon had set hours ago, but in the dim glow of guttering gas lamps, she could just make out the ebony hair, the lean frame. Relief brought her to tears. She turned and flung herself into Eli's arms, their bodies notching close and smooth as puzzle pieces.

“For God’s sake, Eli,” she murmured against his chest. “Why’d you sneak up on me like that? You scared me half to death.”

“Don’t be mad, mahal.” Eli nuzzled her hair. “I waited so long to see you.”

“You knew where I was. You could’ve just gone to the Rizal. Something happened—”

“Let’s not talk about the Rizal. Come.” Eli cupped her elbow the way he did before a dance, only this time he drew her into an alley. “We need to talk.”

There was an odd tension in Eli’s voice. As though he were afraid. *What could be more terrifying than murder?*

The police interrogation had been fruitless, for only Nelly had heard the gunshot. Oscarito’s deafening drum solo had drowned out the sound of Amado’s last moments.

“We’re getting nowhere with these people,” said an exasperated cop. “They’re just like those ‘see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil’ monkey statues I got for my kid.”

“Who you callin’ a monkey?” Benny growled.

The police had finally released everyone, but only after warning them not to leave town. Lucinda wanted nothing more than to shed her dress, which was smeared with Amado’s blood after she’d held his sobbing child. But now here was Eli, skittish as a rat in the goddamn alley. *How do I even begin to explain all this?*

“What’s wrong?” Unable to make out the expression on his face in the soft darkness, she caressed his cheek, her fingers gently tracing the line of his jaw and down his neck.

Eli flinched. “Nothing’s wrong.”

“Hold on—is that blood?” Lucinda rubbed her moist fingers. “What happened?”

“Cut myself shaving. I’m fine.”

“Is that why you didn’t come tonight? Because of a lousy shave?” She moved close for another hug, inhaling the damp wood smell of his sweat, wanting to forgive him. “If only you’d been at the Rizal tonight. Something dreadful happened to—”

“Look. I couldn’t see you earlier, okay?” Eli held back. “Something came up.”

“On tonight of all the nights, you were too busy to see me. Jesus Christ, Eli, you got the worst timing!” Lucinda threw up her hands, infuriated by his reticence. “If only you’d come to see me at the Rizal, Eli. There was a —” she stopped short, remembering Kiko’s plea. *Don’t talk about this until the cops find Amado’s killer. If word about the shooting gets out, they may shut down our dance hall.*

“Why are you skulking around like this? I thought Chino would have found you a job by now.”

“He didn’t.”

Something rustled in the dustbin down the alley. Eli looked over his shoulder and lowered his voice. “But I just finished one.”

“Bully for you. Look, I need to tell you something.” Lucinda stepped closer, offering him a second chance, willing him to take it. Amado’s death had shaken her to the core, and she yearned to return to the comforting routine: the long stroll home through a sleeping city, the fragrance of Anchor Bakery’s morning loaves sweetening the still air.

“Come home with me, would you? My landlady took the train up to her daughter’s place again. We’ll have the house to ourselves this weekend.”

“Not tonight. There’s no time—”

“No time for me, for *us*?” Lucinda had reached the end of her patience.

“Could you please calm down?” Eli reached for her, but she slapped his hand away.

“You got some nerve, telling me to calm down” Lucinda said. “You want to know what happened at the Rizal tonight? Somebody shot Amado.

Little Nelly watched her father bleed to death in the lobby and—”

“I don’t want to hear it.” Eli grabbed Lucinda’s shoulders and shook her. “Shut up, just *shut up* already.”

Lucinda stiffened. Eli had never laid a finger on her before. Not like this.

A car turned the corner, headlights sweeping the sidewalk, illuminating the alley for one terrifying second. Eli flung himself against Lucinda, pushing her so tightly against the wall that she could feel his heart beating upon hers. Then it dawned on her: *He’s afraid too.*

Only after the growl of the car’s motor had faded into the distance did he let her go.

“God almighty, Eli. What’s gotten into you?”

“Nothing.” Eli avoided her gaze. “I’m sorry, mahal. I didn’t mean to upset you, but I just wanted to say goodbye. As soon as I get paid for this job, I’m leaving town.” Giving her hand a final squeeze, he stepped away and began walking to the far end of the alley, which opened to another street.

“Leaving town? Without me?” Lucinda hurried after him. “Amado had a fit last week when I told him I was quitting. Benny and Kiko, the entire band—everyone heard us arguing. Everyone knows about us. Now you’re leaving me behind?”

She grabbed his arm. “I told Amado I’d stay till Christmas, just like you said I should. Can’t you wait three lousy months?” It had taken Eli so long to persuade her to join him, but once she’d said yes, she was all in. *The new year together, you and me in Seattle.* They’d murmured that promise to each other so many times in the last weeks, it felt like a prayer.

“You can’t come with me, Lucinda.” Eli peeled her fingers off his arm, squeezed her hand, then pushed it away. “Not like we planned. Not anymore.”

“So . . . are you leaving me?” Lucinda willed herself not to cry.

“I would never do that. But you’ll be safer if I leave.”

“How could I be ‘safer’ with you gone? Please, Eli, tell me what happened.”

Eli’s shoulders sagged. Unable to say more, he raised a hand to his heart and held her gaze for an eternal second. Then turned his back on her and ran.

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AFTER

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CHAPTER 21

Kiko stood in front of the manager's desk at Mt. Hope Cemetery, waiting to buy a burial plot. He'd worn his best black suit for the gloomy errand, a thick wad of cash folded behind his silk pocket square kerchief, and a mahogany walking stick he used on occasion. He held his fedora in his hands, concealing his dismay over the miasma of sweat, cigarette smoke, and coffee that hung over the office. Kiko longed to open the room's window, which offered a view of the wide sloping lawn where eucalyptus, palm, and pepper trees shaded neat rows of headstones. He imagined laying Amado to rest among those dignified dead, how he'd bring Nelly and Benny to visit him every year. *Would Amado want to be buried under a palm or pepper tree?* He cleared his throat again.

The cemetery manager ignored him as he riffled through an untidy stack of papers, but Kiko refused to leave. "I see you're busy, but if you could spare a few minutes, sir, I'll be quick."

The manager looked up, a slight frown on his broad pink face, working his jaw like a cow chewing cud, ruminating. Kiko imagined the unspoken question behind that stare. *Where'd the monkey get that suit?* In the Stingaree, men like this one yelled the same question at him at least once a week.

"Good morning, uh—" Kiko said.

"—Holden. *Mr.* Holden." the cemetery manager leaned back in his chair.

"Mr. Holden, I'm told you manage burial plots here. I'd like to buy one for a funeral tomorrow."

“We charge extra for rush jobs.”

“I can pay. We will retrieve the body of my friend Mr. Barrios from the county morgue tomorrow morning and plan to lay him to rest directly after that. Given the circumstances of his death, we decided not to have an extended wake.“

“He didn’t die of natural causes?”

“He was shot Saturday night.”

“By who?”

“We don’t know yet. The police are still searching for the killer. He was shot in the lobby of our dance hall.”

“A dance hall you say?” Mr. Holden’s chair creaked as he leaned forward, thick eyebrows rising.

“Amado owned the Rizal Dance Hall, in the Stingaree district.”

“Ahh, that one. I remember reading about that in the newspapers. ‘The Mayor of the Filipino colony,’ they called him. Must’ve been some gangster shootout.”

Kiko suppressed the urge to strike the man’s bald head with his walking stick. “I beg your pardon, but Amado Barrios was no gangster. He was an honest businessman. I led a full band at the Rizal, and—” Kiko stopped. *I don’t owe this idiot an explanation*. “Mr. Holden, I would like to purchase a plot on the west-facing slope. Amado liked to look out on the bay, and I know this would be his preference. The tombstone will follow, but he must be buried tomorrow. I am prepared to pay cash for expedited service. How much would that be?”

Mr. Holden’s chuckle grew into a cough that went on for several moments. With a final wheeze, he rocked back in his chair. “You got some nerve. The western slope’s the best section of Mt. Hope Cemetery. We reserve it for the fine citizens of San Diego. There are other areas we can put him, but that would depend on his particular situation.”

He held up his fist, raising a thick finger as he ticked off each category. “Was he a Jew? A Mason? An Oddfellow? Did he fight in the Grand Army of the Republic in the Civil War?”

“None of those.”

“That leaves the Chinese section. Now, Orientals dig the bones up every ten years and ship ’em back to China. Does he have family in China?”

“He was not Chinese. He’s Filipino, just like me.” Kiko kept his voice low, despite the indignation roiling his gut. *Get what you need, then get out.* He could yell profanity at the sky after Amado was laid to rest.

“That leaves you with Potter’s Field, where poor folk go. No tombstones allowed over there.”

“That’s ridiculous. Without a tombstone, how could we visit Amado’s grave?”

“No one visits the dead in Potters Field. Most corpses that land there don’t even have names, so we stack ’em up in one plot and mark it with a number.”

“My friend has a name, and we intend to visit regularly.” Kiko strove to speak calmly.

“Then all you got to do is remember his plot number so you can find him every year. Easy-peasy.” Mr. Holden offered a bland smile. “Can’t break the rules on account of one dead Filipino now, can we?”

“Who made these rules?”

“Doesn’t matter who made ’em and it’s not up to me to change ’em.” Mr. Holden took off his glasses and wiped them with a kerchief. “Besides, your buddy was murdered. It wouldn’t be right to bury a murder victim beside the respectable dead.”

“That’s absurd.” Kiko’s knuckles turned white on the brim of his hat. “Amado was the *victim*.”

“You don’t say.” Mr. Holden took a copy of the *Union Tribune* from a side table and pointed at the front-page headline, “Dance Hall Owner

Slayed.”

“This says your friend ran a saloon in the Stingaree?”

Kiko’s heart sank. He had thrown that same paper away before Nelly could see it. “It wasn’t a saloon. We never sold alcohol on the premises; Amado wouldn’t allow it. The Rizal is a dance *academy*. Our ladies teach men how to dance.”

“You sure that’s all they do? Teach?” Mr. Holden propped his elbows on the table. “Listen here, boy: We don’t let your kind live in our neighborhoods, so what makes you think we’d let your dead lie next to ours? If you don’t like these rules, you can go down to Tijuana and bury him at the Panteon Puerta Blanca. Mexicans don’t give a rat’s ass who’s buried among them.”

Kiko frowned at his fedora, noticing that his tense grip had left nail prints on its brim. He considered his options, neither of them good. *Amado had worked so hard building a life in America; it would be wrong to exile him to Mexico in death.* “Very well. I’ll take the plot in Potters Field.”

“I’ll have the gravediggers get started this afternoon.” Mr. Holden leaned back in his chair, looking pleased. “That’ll be five dollars.”

Kiko counted out the bills and handed them over, livid at the irony. At the Rizal Dance Hall, five dollars bought less than an hour with a taxi dancer.

In Potter’s Field, it paid for eternity.

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CHAPTER 22

Three days after he was shot dead in his own dance hall, Amado Barrios was laid to rest in a field of paupers. Two dozen mourners gathered before the casket on the tract of naked dirt called Potter's Field. Kiko stood at the head of the coffin, squinting in the afternoon sun. A layer of dust had dulled the sheen of his newly polished shoes, and his suit felt uncomfortably heavy. He didn't usually wear it before sundown. Nelly stood between him and Benny, clutching a cloth doll to her chest. The little blonde girl stuck out like a shiny penny between the two somber Filipinos in black suits. With her father gone, Kiko and Benny were the only family she had left.

Kiko had not protested when Nelly insisted on wearing the blue pinafore Amado had bought for her sixth birthday a month earlier. She was too young to wear black, even to her father's funeral.

He nodded at the motley group of mourners. Those who worked on farms couldn't afford to skip the harvest, but bellboys, busboys, houseboys, and waiters took the afternoon off to pay their respects, all of them wearing their weekend finery. Kiko's musicians looked natty in their Manila Musikeros suits, but Amado's dancers hid their lissome figures in loose frocks and cloche hats. Not because the women thought this to be appropriate funeral attire but because Benny had told them to. Concerned that the sight of so many American women consorting with Filipino men in broad daylight might attract undue attention, Benny directed the women to dress like spinsters so plain, even gringos would disdain them.

The taxi dancers' appearance that afternoon startled Kiko. Free of kohl and rouge, most of them looked young enough to be schoolgirls. "Thank you for coming. Amado would have been shocked to see you ladies outside so early in the day."

"Amado loved the Rizal Dance Hall as much as he loved his daughter Nelly." Kiko squeezed her small hand. "You were all family to him, and he would never forsake his family in these hard times. Benny and I have decided to run the dance hall ourselves so that our musicians and dancers can keep their jobs."

"Mabuhay, Amado, long live Amado!" Oscarito whooped, amid a wave of murmurs and scattered applause.

"Allow us these next few days to grieve, but please come back when we reopen on Friday," Kiko said. "I hope to see you all on that night, kabayan, so we can dance in honor of Amado. The gringos want us to leave San Diego. But this is our home, and we are staying put."

Kiko tried to draw Nelly closer to the coffin, but she hung back, eyes fixed on her Mary Janes.

"Go on, sweet pea," Benny whispered.

At Kiko's nod, Fidel plucked out the opening chords to a familiar song.

Grief put the slightest tremor in Nelly's voice as she sang her father's favorite lullaby: "*Hush little baby, don't you cry . . .*"

Lucinda pressed a kerchief to her eyes, her face ashen with grief.

"You can cry later, honey. Here, take one for Amado." Clementine pressed a basket of flowers into Lucinda's hands.

As the flower basket made its way down the line of mourners, Kiko stooped to whisper into Nelly's ear. "Did you want to say anything, sweetie?"

Biting her lip, she looked at her father's friends.

"Papa called me Sunshine. He liked to sing that song . . ." Her voice caught on a sob. She looked up a Kiko. "Can I stop?"

Kiko stroked Nelly's hair and nodded.

Benny beckoned to the pair of gravediggers standing off to one side. As they began to lower the coffin into the ground, mourners tossed blooms upon the coffin. Nelly dropped her flowers and squeezed through the crowd, looking for Lucinda, who caught her up in a hug.

"Your father would be so proud of you," she cooed. The child didn't need to see this part. "Let's go sit in the shade, shall we? Your uncles will come get us when they're done."

Lucinda led Nelly past the row of cypresses that rimmed Potter's Field and headed for the generous shade of a pepper tree on the lawn beyond. She wondered why Kiko hadn't chosen a plot on this lawn. A road ran through the cemetery, separating the poor from the prosperous dead. Lucinda and Nelly had just crossed it when a man hopped out of a parked car.

"Beg pardon, Miss." The man doffed a porkpie hat and held it respectfully over his chest. "If you don't mind my asking, who's being laid into the ground over there?"

"Who wants to know?" Lucinda looked him over the way she did every man who asked for a dance. *No Filipino would be caught dead in that ill-fitting suit, those scruffy shoes. And that minefield of freckles. If this one asked for a dance, I'd charge double.*

But this was a cemetery, not a ballroom, and the stranger wanted something she was disinclined to give.

"I said, what's it to you?" Lucinda asked again.

"Just curious, is all. Folks laid to rest at Potter's Field don't usually have any friends." He lowered his voice. "Most don't even have names."

"Papa had a name: Amado Barrios." Nelly scowled. "And he had lots of friends."

"Hush, Nelly." Lucinda stroked the child's curls. "He knows nothing about your papa. Go sit under that tree over there. I'll find out what he wants."

Lucinda watched Nelly settle down under a pepper tree with her doll, then turned back to the stranger. “Normal folk don’t wait around a cemetery snooping on funerals.” Her eyes narrowed. “Are you a cop?”

“No, ma’am. Name’s Jimmy Wheeler. I write for the *Evening Tribune.”* He held out his hand to shake hers, but Lucinda ignored it.

“The *Evening Tribune?* You’re that fool who wrote about Amado?” The dance hall murder had made the headlines on the Sunday papers. The front-page photo of Amado lying in a pool of blood had so disgusted Lucinda that she’d thrown the paper in the trash. She couldn’t believe the man who’d written that repugnant article stood before her now.

“How could you write such lies? Amado was a decent man. He ran a respectable dance hall. I should know, I work there.”

“I’m sorry you didn’t like my first story, miss, but if I could talk with you and the victim’s friends, I promise to do a better job next time.”

Nothing but a vulture picking over our grief. Lucinda stared daggers at the reporter. “Do a better job, you say? After you called us taxi dancers floozies for working at the Rizal? None of us will talk to you, not today, not ever. Go away.”

“Please, ma’am. If you’ll just let me explain—”

“What’re you hiding under that lousy hat?” She reached for his hat. “A gun? A pen?”

“I’m so sorry—” Jimmy tried to step away, but Lucinda was relentless.

“It’s too late for sorry!” she cried, finally grabbing hold of his hat.

Hearing Lucinda’s cries, the mourners turned from watching the gravediggers work to see Lucinda attack a tall, skinny gringo.

“Lucinda.” Benny ran toward them. “Everything all right?”

“I got someone you’ll want to meet, Benny,” Lucinda said. “This is the bozo who wrote all those lies about Amado in the newspaper!’

Benny stopped just short of them. The bouncer regularly broke up brawls between Filipinos at the dance hall, but intervening in a scuffle

between white folk carried more risk than he was prepared to take. “Please, Lucinda. Give him back his hat.”

Lucinda released the hat so suddenly that the man stumbled back.

“Sorry about the hat, mister—” Benny sized up the gangly young man. “Lucinda’s got a temper. You got a name?”

“Jimmy Wheeler.” He put the hat back on and backed away from Lucinda.

“Go on, Jimmy.” Lucinda put a hand on her hip, a murderous glint in her eye. “Tell us why you wrote that cockeyed story about Amado in the paper.”

Jimmy looked at the bouncer. “All I did was write down what Inspector Moynihan told me after he finished his report.”

“Moynihan?” Benny snorted. “First time we met Moynihan was when he gave us the third degree the night Amado was shot. Before that night, he’d never stepped foot in the Rizal. Didn’t know the first thing about dance halls. Was he the one who told you the funeral was today?”

“Not exactly.” Under his hat, Jimmy’s ears turned pink. “I hung around the county coroner’s office till some clerk told me when the body would be released. I figured you’d bury him in Potter’s Field where all the—” He stopped and tried again. “—There weren’t any other open graves on the other side of the cemetery, so I thought . . .”

“Thought you’d look for a bunch of Filipinos with a coffin?” Benny shook his head. “You people wear me out.”

“Look, I’m sorry Moynihan got it wrong. Tell me your side, and I’ll write a follow-up piece. What do you say?”

“Don’t tell him anything, Benny,” Lucinda said. “I don’t trust this guy.”

Benny stared at the reporter for a long moment. “I’ll make a deal with you. Leave us alone today and I’ll ask Kiko. If he wants to talk, you can come by the Rizal later this week.”

“What about Friday?” Jimmy persisted.

“Give ’em an inch and they take a yard—isn’t that what you people say about us?” Benny laughed bitterly. “Come around five on Friday. Doors open at seven, but you’ll need to leave before then.”

“Can’t I stay till the dancing begins?”

“And scare our customers away? Hell no. Gringos at a dance hall almost always mean one of three things is about to happen: a fight, a fire, or a lynching. Sometimes all three.” Benny stuck a finger under his tie to loosen its knot. “Happened in Watsonville; it could happen here too.”

“Got it.” Jimmy put on his hat, smoothing its dented top. “I hope to see you on Friday, Mr.—”

“Benny. I’m the bouncer.”

Jimmy turned to Lucinda as he backed away. “I didn’t mean to upset you, honest to God. I’m just trying to do my job.”

As the reporter loped back to his Buick, Benny raised an eyebrow at Lucinda. “Bad enough his suit was so crummy, but did you have to go and ruin the hat?”

“So maybe he’ll get a better hat.”

As Benny ambled back to the other mourners, Lucinda hurried over to Nelly, who’d been watching all the while.

“Who was that?”

“Just some nosy fool.” She sat down and slung an arm around the little orphan. “Your uncles will deal with him.”

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CHAPTER 23

The morning after Amado's funeral, Kiko opened the door to find Lucinda on the stoop, a paper bag in her arms, eyes red and swollen.

"Oh dear, you look just as terrible as I feel." Kiko ushered her into the small house he shared with Benny, Nelly, and until his death, Amado. "Benny took Nelly to school this morning. I couldn't get out of bed. The band came back here after the funeral and stayed past midnight. We finished off two bottles of bourbon and played Amado's favorite songs. It was just like old times."

"I didn't know there'd be a party." Lucinda nodded a greeting to Benny, who sat at the kitchen table.

"Back home, wakes *are* parties." Benny shrugged. "Did you need anything?"

"Just company, is all. I thought you could use breakfast." Lucinda handed Kiko the warm paper bag. "Fresh out of Anchor Bakery's ovens."

"That's very kind, but next time save your money. We're facing lean days. After what happened to Amado—" Kiko paused; it pained him to speak. "The cops might have scared our customers away. We don't know if anyone will come back on Friday."

"Seeing Amado dead in the lobby spooked them more than the cops did." Benny scowled. "I bet Mamie Savage is hoping our regulars will switch over to the Velvet Café."

"Come now, I dislike that woman as much as you do, but even Mamie wouldn't rejoice in Amado's murder," Kiko chided. "We're competitors, not enemies."

“Tell that to Sal,” Benny snorted. “I hear he acts like a hoodlum to kabayan who get on his wrong side.”

“What do you expect? He tends bar and works as a bouncer. A drunk is harder to kick out than a fella who got fresh with the girls. This is precisely why Amado never sold alcohol at the Rizal.” Kiko wagged the loaf of bread at Benny.

“Come.” Kiko cupped Lucinda’s elbow. “Sit and have coffee with us.”

“I’m sorry,” she sniffled as she took a seat. “Eli always took my elbow that way. Every other guy walked ahead to the dance floor, like I was some cow they’d bought. Only Eli treated me special.”

“Everyone knew he was sweet on you,” Benny said.

“That’s why I didn’t mention Eli when I said I was quitting. Didn’t want Amado to think Eli had put me up to it.” Lucinda swiped her tears with the back of her hand. “I tried not to get worked up, but once he started yelling, I . . . well, none of that matters now, does it?”

“No, child. It doesn’t.” Kiko grabbed a knife and plate for the bread and joined them. “Too bad Eli missed the funeral. I suppose he and all the other farmhands couldn’t take the day off, it being the middle of the harvest season. When we reopen on Friday, maybe he could take you on the first dance in Amado’s honor. Remind folks of that lovely advertisement. Have you seen him around lately?”

“I ran into him the night Amado was shot.” Lucinda stirred sugar into her coffee, unsettled by Benny’s stare. “The cops kept us so long answering questions, it was almost morning when I headed home. Eli jumped out at me from an alley. Scared me half to death, he did.”

Benny’s eyebrows rose. “Why didn’t he just come to the Rizal?”

“I don’t know. He said he had to leave town.” She swallowed hard.

“Was he following the harvest crew up north?” Kiko passed Lucinda a thick slice of bread. “They pack men tight as sardines in those bunkhouses. It wouldn’t be safe for you to go with him.”

“He never mentioned the harvest. All he said was he’d gotten into a fix and had to skip town soon as he got paid.”

As she recounted that last fraught conversation, Lucinda picked at her slice of bread until it was reduced to a pile of crumbs on her plate. “I’d never seen Eli like that. He was jumpy. Scared, even.”

“Scared of what?” Kiko’s tone was even, but his smile had vanished.

“He didn’t say.”

“I can think of one reason why a fellow would have to leave town quick, and it’s got nothing to do with the harvest,” Benny said. “Did Eli say where he was before he saw you that night?”

“No, but it can’t have been some place fancy because he wasn’t wearing his Macintosh suit.” Lucinda warmed her fingers on the hot mug. “Got blood on his collar. Said he’d cut himself shaving.”

“Is that right?” Benny leaned forward. “That fix he said he was in—was it maybe something to do with Amado getting shot?”

“That’s crazy talk.” Lucinda glared at Benny. “Eli had no quarrel with Amado.”

“But he knew Amado didn’t let his dancers date the customers, didn’t he?” Benny persisted. “Isn’t that why you were seeing him on the sly?”

“So what if I was? Amado owned the dance hall, but he didn’t own *me*.” Lucinda lifted her chin. “What I do outside work is nobody’s business.”

“Maybe so, but it’s my business to find out who murdered Amado.” Benny glanced at Kiko.

“How could you think Eli shot Amado?” Lucinda turned pleading eyes on Kiko. “Help me out here, Kiko—you’ve known Eli since he was a kid. You don’t think he could kill anyone do you?”

“I don’t know what to think anymore.” Kiko took his glasses off and rubbed his eyes. “But I can’t help wondering . . . if Eli truly wanted to be with you, why did he abandon you that night? Where did he go?”

“I don’t know, and if I did, I wouldn’t tell you.” Lucinda stood up so quickly, her chair tipped over. “How dare you suspect Eli was the shooter? You make me sick, both of you.”

She swiped her purse off the table and stepped to the door. “I told Amado I was quitting and I meant it. If you’ll excuse me, I need to find a new job.”

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CHAPTER 24

Lucinda left Kiko and Benny furious and disillusioned. These last few days had shattered her world. Amado's murder by an unknown assassin, Benny's suspicion that Eli was somehow involved, Eli's sudden departure.

I was a fool to trust any of them. Lucinda strode past a row of dingy warehouses. Squeezing her purse in vexation, she realized it was plump with last week's wages. Given her current state of distress, she was liable to spend all fifteen dollars.

She slowed to a stroll when she reached Market Street. It looked completely different during the day. While the Stingaree's nightly carousers slept off hangovers or returned to their humdrum jobs, regular residents emerged to tend the vegetable markets, lunch counters, and coffee shops that kept the neighborhood humming through the daylight hours. Two women emerged from the greengrocer up ahead, jet black hair coiled into buns at the nape, baskets brimming with vegetables in hand. Lucinda nodded a greeting as they approached. The taller woman cast a disdainful glance at Lucinda and muttered something to her companion, who wrinkled her nose and giggled.

They're laughing at me. That stung. Most nights, Lucinda turned a deaf ear to the lewd insults white men yelled as they drove through the Stingaree. She knew they were spoiling for a fight with Filipinos. But the bright morning light somehow made her feel particularly vulnerable to the scorn of these women. Eli had vowed to take her away from her nocturnal dance hall life give her a fresh start in a new city, perhaps one day look as

respectable as these matrons with their neat hair and groceries. That escape had vanished along with Eli.

Lucinda's stomach growled. She wished she hadn't left the entire loaf of bread at Kiko's place. The seductive scent of fried rice beckoned from the Sun Café, but she was too upset to eat among the Stingaree's daytime residents. Intent on avoiding the bars and chophouses on Market Street, Lucinda walked up Fifth Avenue, whose stores sold nails and faucets, cupboards, and kettles—the banal necessities of everyday life. She walked by those modest displays but paused when she came to a wide window glittering with uncommon treasures.

Cloisonné butterflies, peacocks, and lilies gleamed on a tray in one corner. Opposite them, fans perched on small easels like exotic birds: a spray of snowy ostrich feathers, black silk painted with tea roses, sandalwood carved into lace. These luxurious charms were eclipsed by the large gold jewelry box at the center of the display. Three teak drawers, each one centered with a polished brass pull, stacked up to the open lid whose gilt-framed mirror invited passersby to take a closer look.

Lucinda peered into it and instantly jerked away, embarrassed. *No wonder those women laughed at me. I look horrible.* Her shingled hair was flat and mussed from scant hours of fitful sleep, eyes bloodshot from weeping, lips corpse-pale and chapped. She covered her face with her hands, feeling suddenly naked without make-up.

"Don't fret, honey. Morning sunlight is merciless."

Lucinda turned to find a blonde beside her. The woman looked vaguely familiar, but in her state of distraction, she could not remember where they had met. The woman was no taller than Lucinda, yet she seemed to occupy twice as much space. The low-cut, persimmon-colored frock molded snug to her generous bosom and extravagant hips, stopping short to reveal delicate ankles. The sort of dress one might wear to a speakeasy on Friday night. *It took guts to wear a dress like that on Wednesday morning.*

“Don’t worry, I don’t bite.” The woman extended her hand. “Name’s Mamie Savage. Delighted to make your acquaintance.”

“Lucinda Lane, ma’am.” Lucinda shook the small cold hand, remembering now where she’d seen the woman.

“Please don’t call me ‘ma’am,’ it makes me feel old. Call me Mamie, like everyone else does. If you don’t mind my asking, what brings a nice girl like you out to the Stingaree this fine morning?”

“I live nearby. I work—I *used* to work—at the Rizal Dance Hall,” Lucinda stammered. *Think quick, this is your chance,* a small voice whispered through her hesitation.

“Fancy that—I happen to run a dance hall.” Mamie beamed. “Ever heard of the Velvet Café on Third?”

“How could I not?” Lucinda blushed. “We—I—went there sometimes to get a drink after work. It’s quite the fancy joint.”

“It is, isn’t it?” Mamie put a hand on her hip. “How is it I never saw you when you stopped in?”

“I never stayed very long. Amado didn’t allow us to visit the other dance hall.” *Amado, lying on the floor in a pool of blood.* Lucinda looked at her saddle shoes, eyes welling up with tears. Her insides felt like broken glass. It hurt to draw a breath.

“Oh dear, have I said something to upset you?” Mamie touched cold fingers to Lucinda’s wrist.

All it took was the barest hint of sympathy to open the floodgates. Once Lucinda began speaking, she could not stop. “It wasn’t anything you said. Did you hear how Amado was shot at the Rizal the other night? It was in all the papers. We buried him yesterday, and a reporter came snooping to his funeral—his funeral for crying out loud! I was so mad, I didn’t sleep a wink last night. Then today, I had the worst argument with Kiko and Benny, so goddammit, I quit. Just like that. What was I thinking? I may never find

another job.” Lucinda paused to catch her breath, realizing too late that she’d poured her grief out to a stranger.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have run on like that. It’s just, I don’t know the first thing about finding another job. All I can do is dance . . .”

“Pretty little thing like you? Why, I’d hire you even if you had two left feet. How about you come work for me? We always need new girls.”

Lucinda took the briefest moment to consider the offer. With Amado dead, was it wrong to take a job with his fiercest rival?

“Thank you, Mamie.” She mustered a grateful smile. “I can start as soon as you want.”

“Marvelous! Come tonight.” Mamie’s voice was warm and firm. She nodded at the window. “Now why we don’t look around inside this here Oriental shop. I bet we can find a little trinket to make you smile again.”

“I was looking for a present for Amado’s little girl,” Lucinda said.

“Chinamen sell everything under the sun.” Mamie linked arms with her. “I bet we’ll find something for her in there too.”

The store delivered on the promise of its window display. Porcelain plates and tea sets lined the walls. Glass cases glimmered with strands of pearls, filigreed silver bracelets, and jade rings. A central table offered an array of hand-embroidered linens and napkins.

An unfamiliar spicy-sweet wet-soil scent pervaded the room. Lucinda wrinkled her nose and sneezed.

“God bless you.” A slight man in a wide-sleeved silk coat looked up from the brass vase he’d been polishing and smiled. “I apologize; patchouli does not always agree with the Western nose. How may I help you this morning?”

“We’d like to look at some fans,” Mamie said. “And this young lady needs to find a toy for her little girl.”

“She’s not mine,” Lucinda murmured. “I’m sort of an aunt.”

“My shop contains gifts to please girls of all ages.” The man stepped out from behind his counter. “Allow me to show you a few things.”

A half hour later, the women emerged, new fans in hand and a cloth doll for Nelly. Mamie fluttered a fan, whose ostrich feathers neatly matched her platinum updo. “Why don’t you come down to the Velvet Café with me and have a look around. I’ll have Sal fix us some sandwiches. Perhaps we can talk about your new job over lunch.”

“All right. Thank you kindly for the invitation.”

“Didn’t I promise I’d make you smile again? Come along then.”

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CHAPTER 25

"Was that really necessary?" Kiko asked Benny. He picked up the chair Lucinda had toppled.

"Maybe I was too hard on her. But haven't you wondered why Eli wasn't at the Rizal that night?"

"I was relieved Eli didn't show up." Kiko leaned against the sink and sipped coffee. "If he had, Amado would have told you to kick him out. Amado was no fool. He would have guessed Eli was part of the reason Lucinda wanted to quit."

"But then he left her anyway—"

"Por Dios, Benny, let it go already."

"No." Benny pounded the table. "I can't let this go. I owe Amado my life. If he hadn't given me a job, boxing would have killed me years ago. I'm going to track down his murderer if it's the last thing I do. I owe it to him. And if I find out Eli had a hand in it, neither you nor Lucinda will be able protect him."

"Haven't you been reading the papers?" Kiko's nostrils flared. "The cops set up a manhunt—LA, Santa Cruz, all the way to San Francisco. You can play Dick Tracy all you want, but I have a dance hall to run. It's the only thing keeping us off the breadlines. And remember, we must take care of Nelly now." Kiko took a last slug of coffee and set his mug down with a sharp clink. "I need some air. Don't pick any more fights till I get back."

Snatching his hat and walking stick, Kiko stalked out the door.

A mean Santa Ana wind swept through the streets. It flung dust into his eyes and hummed in Kiko's ears. He'd heard them called the "Devil

Winds," for the dry relentless heat that put people on edge, made them do crazy things. *Were the Devil Winds blowing the night Amado was shot?* He couldn't remember.

He walked with his head down so that the brim of his hat shielded him from the badgering breeze and mulled over Benny's accusation. Lucinda was right: He'd known Eli since he was a just a boy, vexing his older sister Paloma.

Ahh, Paloma. Her name alone made him smile. He remembered the graceful young woman whose manner was as serene as her namesake, who taught English in the classroom next to his. He and Paloma had been fellow protégés of the Thomasites, who praised their facility in English and inexhaustible love of books. Their American teachers had planned to leave the elementary school in Kiko and Paloma's capable hands, but she was the only one who stayed to fulfill that promise. Kiko's dreams of a career in classical music drew him to America.

But where had this ambition taken him? Instead of conducting a full orchestra in an opera house, he led a ragtag band at a dance hall. What would Paloma make of that? Regret pierced sharp as a fish bone in his throat.

He rubbed his eyes—was it dust or a tear that blurred them? No matter. He may have fallen short of his own aspirations, but he would at least keep Amado's dream alive.

And yet there remained the niggling doubt planted by Benny. *Did Eli have a hand in Amado's murder?*

On any other day, Kiko would have paused to pick over the pyramids of fruit at Kushi Seitaro's grocery or admire the latest posters of feather-clad showgirls at the Creole Palace, but he walked on along Market Street, enshrouded by memories, ruing roads not taken.

"Hoy Kiko, kumusta?" A man leaned out the window at Watanabe's Billiards.

“Any news?” Oscarito held a cue stick in one hand. “Come in for a minute.”

Kiko cocked an eyebrow at his drummer. “We buried Amado just yesterday, and already you’re playing pool? Is this how you mourn our friend?”

“Kiko naman. If Amado were alive, we’d be jamming at the Rizal tonight. Instead, we all went our separate ways,” Oscarito said. “I was so blue, I had to get out of the flophouse. Come in, sige na,” he cajoled, “keep me company. You don’t have to play.”

Weary of the hectoring Santa Ana winds, Kiko entered the billiard hall. Low pendant lamps lit two tables in the dim room. Languid men moved through a fog of smoke, bending over the scuffed green felt to saw cue sticks between fingers, the low buzz of conversation punctuated by the click of colliding balls.

“Have you read the papers lately? These lies they’ve been writing, such nonsense about Amado being in cahoots with gangsters . . .” Kiko took off his fedora.

“Didn’t need to. Mr. Watanabe read me the latest headlines.” Oscarito jerked his head toward the bar where the owner sat, his bald spot lit by a pendant lamp. “That gringo Lucinda smacked at the cemetery—wasn’t he a reporter? Tall, skinny, lousy suit? Maybe you should talk to him. Set the record straight.”

“What for? Americans made their minds up about us long ago. It’s already illegal to marry their women. Next thing you know, even dancing with them will be a crime.”

“Kalokohan. Easier to lynch us than pass a new law.” Oscarito smirked, but his tone was bitter.

“Aside from the cops, did you tell anyone else about Amado?” Kiko asked.

“You gotta be kidding. Remember what happened the last time I stuck my neck out for Amado?” Oscarito pulled back long bangs to show the purplish bruise above his left temple. “Look what I got for running out on Market Street to find the shooter. Cop clobbered me because he thought I’d done something wrong. Would have thrown me in jail if I didn’t talk him into going back to the dance hall. Meantime, the shooter got off scot-free. From now on, I’m steering clear of all those loco gringos.”

“Probably best you do,” Kiko said. “Either way, we can’t win.”

“Not in America we can’t,” Oscarito said. “How much you want to bet they’ll pin the murder on one of us? Just another reason to run us out of town. What do we do then?”

“Nothing, for now. That reporter’s going to need more fuel to keep Amado’s murder on the front pages. When he comes around for his next scoop, maybe I can get him to shift the story in our favor.” Kiko scanned the room. He wondered if any of the men smoking in the shadows had been at the Rizal on Saturday night, if one of them had seen Amado’s killer.

“Want to tell me what *her* story is?“ Oscarito pointed his cue stick at two women strolling arm in arm across the street. “Isn’t that the dame who owns Velvet Café?”

Kiko let out a low whistle at the sight of Mamie, in a bright orange dress. “That’s Mamie, all right. No one else dresses like that before the sunset.”

Mamie’s buxom figure would have completely obscured his view of Lucinda, but the younger woman’s copper hair was hard to miss.

“What’s Lucinda doing with her?” Oscarito frowned. “Amado’s not even cold in the ground and his star dancer’s already jumped ship?”

“Looks like it.” Kiko clapped Oscarito on the shoulder. “See you at the Rizal on Friday. As Amado liked to say, ‘The show must go on.’”

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CHAPTER 26

Chin up, a half-smile on her face, Lucinda strode quickly through the Velvet Café bar, intent on getting to the dance hall. Mamie had told her dancing began promptly at eight, and though taxi dancing had lost its allure, she needed the money. She'd seen the dead faces of out of work men and women lined up at soup kitchens.

Eli's inexplicable abandonment had turned her into a cynic. The only man she loved had squandered her affection. Anyone else who sought her charms would have to pay for it, one dime at a time.

Lucinda had nearly reached the ballroom doors when a man stretched out his arm.

"Excuse me?" She glared on the man who'd blocked her.

"I don't think I've ever seen you here before." The man's exaggerated broad shoulder pads made him look like Groucho Marx. "You new to dance halls?

"Just to this one. I used to dance at the Rizal." She tried to step around him.

"Wasn't someone gunned down there last weekend?"

"What's it to you?"

"I was just wondering—"

"Stop wondering and read the newspapers. If you'll excuse me, I need get to work." Lucinda pushed his hand aside and moved on, fuming. If Eli had only made good on his promise, she'd never have to deal with saps like this one.

“Ah, here comes my newest star,” Mamie Savage exclaimed as Lucinda entered the ballroom. “Nice dress you got there.”

“It’s my lucky dress.” Lucinda smiled, remembering the first time Eli had seen her wear it.

“Tia Remedios called that shade of pink ashes of rose. It was her favorite color,” he’d said.

“That shade of pink suits you fine, but if you want to sell more dances, you need to show more skin.” Mamie reached over and shifted the wide straps of her dress so that they hung perilously close to the edge of Lucinda’s shoulders.

Lucinda yanked them back up. “The dress might fall right off while I’m dancing.”

“Nothing a safety pin can’t fix. I’ll get you one in a minute,” Mamie said. “Say, who was that fella chatting you up by the bar?”

“Just another drunk who wanted to flirt.” Lucinda frowned. “He wouldn’t get out of my way, so I told him to buzz off.”

“You did what?” Without warning, Mamie grabbed Lucinda’s chin and pulled her so close she saw the tracery of lines beneath the celadon eyes, smelled the bourbon on the woman’s breath. Mamie’s nails dug into the Lucinda’s cheek like little scythes.

“Listen here,” Mamie’s voice was a silken hiss. “That drunk you pushed away is my bread and butter. All these men are. The more they drink, the more dances they buy, the more dances they buy, the more money I make. If you want to work for me, you’ll treat them like kings, savvy?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Lucinda whispered, too frightened to draw breath.

“’Atta girl.” Mamie released her.

Lucinda staggered back, her cheek throbbing.

“Why don’t you go powder that pretty nose.” Mamie fluttered her fingers at Lucinda.“The band’s nearly done warming up.”



“You the new girl?” A slim brunette in a low-cut blue dress studied Lucinda in the dressing room mirror.

“Yup. Mamie hired me today.”

“I’m Sylvia. What’s your name?”

“Lucinda.” Lucinda dabbed powder on the tiny divots Mamie’s nails had left on her cheek. “Ooohh, that stings.”

“Crikey. How’d you get into a cat fight even before dances began?” Sylvia ran a comb through her shingled bob. “Powder’s not going to fix that.”

Lucinda smiled weakly. “Mamie was making a point.” She finger-brushed her hair so that the copper waves concealed the scratches. “She threw a fit when I brushed off some drunk. She said I had to treat them better or else.”

“If I had a penny for every time she said that . . . Take my advice: stay on her good side. She pours on the honey for even the worst dancers, but cross her once, and she’ll skin you alive.”

“No kidding.” Lucinda cocked an eyebrow. “What’s the worst she could do?”

Sylvia cast a wary glance over her shoulder and lowered her voice. “She could sic Sal on you. She did that when this girl Becky accused Mamie of counting her dance tickets wrong, so she was short a few bucks. It was the end of the night and Becky’d had a coupl’a drinks. Girl never could hold her liquor, and she shot her mouth off in front of all of us. Said Mamie cheated her out of half her wages. Mamie stayed cool as a cucumber—took her over to the bar, poured her another drink. Then she had Sal walk Becky home. I got a bad feeling about it, so I went by Becky’s place the next day. Poor thing was in such a state, she couldn’t get out of bed. And when she showed me what that bastard did . . .” Sylvia grimaced and made a grinding

motion. “Cigarette burns all over her thighs. So many, they looked like she’d caught the pox. With her clothes on, you’d never know she was hurt, but Becky couldn’t walk straight for days. And forget about dancing.”

“Why didn’t she call the cops?” Lucinda asked, shocked. “They’d have arrested him in a hot second.”

“Who’d you think you are? Eleanor Roosevelt?” Sylvia snorted. “Cops don’t care about girls like us. They think we’re trash for dancing with Chinamen.”

“They’re not Chinese, they—”

“Might as well be. All look the same to me, those Orientals.” Sylvia pulled the neckline of her dress an inch lower. “But I’ll hold my nose’n dance with ’em, as long as Mamie pays me.”

Lucinda bit back her retort. “Does Becky still work here?”

“Last I heard, she moved to Watsonville.”

Before Lucinda could ask another question, another girl poked her head around the dressing room door. “Mamie says to stop yapping and get out here. Band’s about to start the first set.”

The men Lucinda danced with that first night ranged from boring to precarious: from hoofers marching to the same box steps song after song to drunks taking a leering whirl between pints of beer. Now and then, Lucinda would break the monotony by raising her partner’s hand so she could twirl beneath it, but most of the time she might as well have been sleepwalking.

She’d long since surmised that dance partners fell into two types: Stompers, whose two left feet threatened to trample hers, and scumbags, who pinched her rump or groped her breasts. Eli was the only leading man she’d ever met.

“How about a dance?” The drunk who’d first accosted her at the bar held up a dance ticket, waving slightly as he winked at her.

Eyes bright with unshed tears, Lucinda nodded and tore the ticket in half.

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CHAPTER 27

"Uncle Kiko." Nelly poked a pencil at the conductor's elbow. "You promised to help with my homework."

"Sorry, dear. I've got a lot on my mind."

It was Friday, the night of the Rizal's reopening.

"I know." Nelly drew a flower on her notebook, pouting. "But is this how you spell 'cabbage'?"

"Almost, sweet pea." Kiko stroked her golden hair. "Add one more '*b*' and an '*e*' at the end."

Nelly had offered both solace and a sense of purpose for him and Benny. They could face the prospect of shutting down the dance hall if not enough customers returned, but failing Amado's child was not an option. "Now let's see how you did with those other big words."

The front door screeched open. Kiko made a mental note to grease its hinges.

Kiko tensed at the sound of heavy footsteps on the stairs. The band's rehearsal didn't start for another hour, and patrons began trickling in around seven. Since Amado's death, he'd been unnerved by unexpected visitors. "Nelly, call your Uncle Benny."

She pushed open the double doors and yelled into the ballroom. "Uncle Benny, come quick!"

The tall man who emerged at the top of the stairs looked relatively harmless: face dredged with freckles, an ill-fitting suit hung on a gangly frame. Kiko stood up, clutching his walking stick. Gringos at the dance hall almost always meant trouble.

“May I help you? We don’t open till seven o’clock.”

“Benny said I could come visit this afternoon.” The man took off his hat. “My name’s Jimmy Wheeler. I write for the *Evening Tribune*.”

“He was at Papa’s funeral. Didn’t Uncle Benny tell you to leave us alone?”

“Sure did. But if he talked to the cops, he should at least talk to us, too.” Benny stepped through the double doors just then. He pinned the reporter with the stare he reserved for rowdy customers. “So. You gonna get your story straight this time?”

“Hear me out, please. I’m working another angle for this shooting death. That girl I met at the cemetery, the feisty one. Is she here?”

“Lucinda quit,” Benny said. “She works at the Velvet Café now.”

“Oh, that’s unfortunate.” Jimmy fished a notepad out of his suit pocket. “I’d still like to take down some of your thoughts about the incident, if you don’t mind.”

“What could you possibly take that we haven’t already given away or lost?” Kiko asked. “I’ve read nothing but lies about Amado’s death in that rag you write for. Why should we help you at all?”

“I’m so sorry for your loss. Maybe I could—”

“Could what? We won’t talk unless you make it worth our time.” Benny jabbed the air with his forefinger. “You don’t give any, you don’t *get* any. That’s how it works.”

Jimmy looked from one to the other. “I got something to offer in exchange for you answering a few questions . . . Remember Inspector Moynihan, the cop who interrogated everyone the night it happened? Moynihan’s the lead detective on this case. He and I go back a long way. I went to see him at the station yesterday. He’s uncovered new information about the murder.”

“Is that right?” Kiko tapped Nelly’s shoulder. “Child, why don’t you go finish your schoolwork in the dressing room? I will meet you there when

we’re done with Mr. Wheeler.”

“Okay.” Pouting, Nelly gathered up her notebook and pencils and walked out.

Benny shut the doors behind her. “Spit it out.”

“Something big came up today. If you’ll answer a few questions, I’ll tell you what Moynihan found out. Deal?”

Kiko considered the offer. The quicker they got through the interview, the sooner he’d leave. The musicians would begin arriving in less than an hour, and he couldn’t afford to delay rehearsal on their comeback night.

“Very well. Have a seat.” He gestured at the chair at one end of the coffee table and took the one opposite. Amado always sat in this one, for it faced the entrance and allowed him to greet everyone who came up the stairs. Including the man who shot him.

Kiko pushed the thought out of his mind. “Go on, then. What do you know?”

“Moynihan says a hobo brought in a gun he found in the trash Saturday night. Said he was sleeping in the alley when this couple having a lover’s quarrel woke him up. Girl had short curly hair like that actress Clara Bow. It was too dark to see what her boyfriend looked like, but the guy said he sounded Filipino. After they left, he poked around the alley and found the gun.”

Kiko gripped the wicker arms of his chair, feeling ill.

“You’re lying,” Benny growled. “You made that up, just like you did with your first story.”

Jimmy set his pen down. “Moynihan showed me the gun.”

Kiko recovered his voice. “You said you had a question?”

“Did anyone by the name of Eli patronize this dance hall?”

Kiko smoothed his pants with long brown fingers. “Eli was a regular at the Rizal. I’d known him since he was a boy in Manila.”

“He was sweet on Lucinda,” Benny added. “They danced so well, Amado had them pose for a newspaper ad. It doubled our business, the first week it came out.

“You don’t say.” Jimmy looked at the bouncer. “Will Eli be here tonight?”

“Not with Lucinda gone.” Benny laughed bitterly.

“Why’d she quit?” Jimmy scribbled on his pad.

Benny looked at Kiko. “You tell him.”

“We had a little spat the day after the funeral. She quit and left in a huff. Eighteen-year-old girls are impulsive like that.” The lie slipped easily out of Kiko’s mouth. Lying to white folk was one of the first defensive tactics he’d learned when he arrived in America.

“What were you arguing about?” Jimmy asked.

“Eli. Lucinda said she’d run into him on her way home the night Amado was shot,” Benny said.

“He wasn’t here Saturday night?”

“No.” Kiko took of his glasses and wiped them clean with his kerchief. “We thought nothing of it. Many of our regulars work on farms. They come and go depending on where the jobs are. When he didn’t show up last weekend, we assumed he’d followed the harvest north.”

“But when Lucinda said she’d seen Eli after the shooting, I had to ask if maybe he had something to do with it,” Benny said.

“She wouldn’t have seen Eli if he didn’t go into the ballroom . . . but he could’ve come just to see Amado,” Jimmy mused. “Maybe he was packing a gun.”

“You think that was Eli’s gun the hobo found in the trash?” Fear rose like bile in Kiko’s throat.

“It wouldn’t be a stretch to think he did. All he knows for sure is that it was a Filipino fella arguing with a white girl.”

Kiko put his glasses back on, but his vision remained blurred. *Paloma trusted me to keep her younger brother out of trouble. How could I have failed?*

"If you don't mind my asking, is this where your friend was shot?" Jimmy asked.

Kiko tipped his head to the left. "Amado fell right there. The band was playing twice as loud for our midnight finale and with those doors kept shut, no one heard the shot."

"Except Nelly. She was napping over there." Benny nodded at the coat-check counter. "The bang woke her up. By the time she found Amado, the shooter was gone."

"Jeez." Jimmy let out a low whistle. "Poor kid. How's her mother taking it?"

"Nelly doesn't have a mother. We're the only family she has left." Kiko's voice thickened with emotion. He stood up and straightened his jacket, sorrow deepening the lines on his forehead. "You must think us callous for reopening so soon after the burial, but Amado wouldn't have wanted it any other way." With a sad smile, Kiko waved his baton at Amado's treasures: the simple hand-painted sign, the secondhand couch, the telephone by the wicker chair. "This was Amado's other child. He poured all his dreams into this dance hall."

"Are we done?" Benny asked. "The band members will be coming soon to rehearse."

"That's all I have, for now." Jimmy got up. "Thanks for taking the time."

"Be careful how you write about us in that next article." Kiko shook Jimmy's hand. "Amado liked to say we sold dreams with dances. That's not a crime, is it?" Without waiting for a reply, Kiko walked back to the ballroom.

“Hold on.” Benny shut the door behind Kiko. “I suppose you plan to look up Lucinda at the Velvet Café?”

“Absolutely.”

“Watch out for Sal, the bartender. Filipino, but pale skinned. Thinks he’s better’n the rest of us on account of his father was American. He’ll charm the pants right off you, but be careful.”

“What’re you saying?” Jimmy asked.

Benny cracked his knuckles, a habit left over from his boxing days. “Look, I throw an honest punch—that’s part of my job. Sal now, he doesn’t play by the rules. I’ve seen him pull a knife in a fistfight. He’s a goon in sheep’s clothing.”

“Don’t you mean a wolf in sheep’s clothing?”

“Don’t get smart with me. I know my English.” Benny took a pack of cigarettes from his coat pocket and shook out as stick. “All I’m saying is, watch your back.”

“Thanks for the warning.” Doffing his cap, Jimmy hurried down the stairs.

He was reaching for the doorknob when the door swung open on its own. Two sharply dressed Filipinos looked startled to see him, but stepped aside to let him pass.

Jorge and Jacobo were chauffeurs who worked for two families in Kensington. They’d taken the trolley down to the Stingaree early to chat with Benny before the other kabayan arrived.

“Who the hell was that?” Jacobo muttered.

“Someone with a lousy tailor. Did you see that crummy suit?” They laughed, happy to be in their favorite place, where dreams were sold for a dime.

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CHAPTER 28

By the time Jimmy stepped out into the street, the Stingaree district had come alive. Ebony-haired men in impeccable suits thronged the sidewalks on either side Market Street, filling the crisp fall air with a barber shop's rack of aftershave scents: lavender and lemon, Old Spice and Brylcreem. They bantered in multiple languages, none of which Jimmy understood, but for the random English words that peppered their speech.

Weaving through the pods of men, Jimmy walked three blocks down Market Street and took a left on Third. Unlike the Rizal Dance Hall's modest signage, the Velvet Café's red neon lights were impossible to ignore. Wide windows offered Jimmy a view of the gleaming mahogany bar, where a Filipino bartender polished glasses and chatted with a patron. *Sal. I can take that guy.*

Jimmy took off his newsboy cap and smoothed down a stubborn cowlick.

Both men fell silent when Jimmy walked in. It occurred to him that he was probably as unwelcome here as he had been at the Rizal Dance Hall.

"I hope I'm not interrupting anything." He smiled uncertainly and set his cap on the bar.

"Can I help you?" Sal asked. "Are you lost?"

"Not lost at all." Jimmy smiled, nodding at the scarlet walls and oxblood banquets, opulence that seemed to thumb its nose at Rizal Dance Hall's more spartan lobby. "Nice place you got here."

"Thanks. Call me Sal." He reached across the bar to shake Jimmy's hand. "This here's one of our regulars, Teroy."

“I’m Jimmy, pleased to meet you both.” Jimmy shook hands with Sal, then turned to Teroy, who ignored Jimmy’s outstretched hand.

“I drive for white folk all week, what for I got to deal with them on my night off?” he snorted.

Sal muttered something Jimmy couldn’t make out. Slapping air, Teroy grabbed his beer and cigarette and strolled to the far end of the bar.

“Don’t mind him.” Sal shrugged. “Most gringos only come here when they’re spoiling for a fight. You can stay as long as you like if you play nice. What can I get you to drink? ”

“Nothing right now. I was hoping to speak with one of your dancers. Is Lucinda here?”

Sal cut him a sharp look. “You can buy your dance tickets now, but the band doesn’t get going for another fifteen minutes. How about having a beer while you wait?”

“Wish I could, but I don’t drink on the job.”

“You a cop?”

“Nope, a reporter. I write for the *Evening Tribune* and was hoping to ask Lucinda about the shooting at the Rizal Dance Hall. I’m told she was there that Saturday night.”

Sal’s smile tightened. “Too bad about Amado. The Stingaree can be a dangerous place.”

“So I heard. Could I speak with her before the dancing begins?”

“I don’t know about that.”

Just then, Lucinda walked through the ballroom doors.

“Hey Sal, could I have a glass of water before—” Lucinda spotted Jimmy. “You again?”

“You know this guy?” Sal gave Jimmy a curt nod.

“And how. He came to Amado’s funeral looking to dig up dirt.” Lucinda glared daggers at the reporter. “You got some nerve coming here. What do you want now?”

“I’m sorry I barged in on the funeral.” Jimmy put a hand on his newsboy cap. “I don’t mean to be a pest, but the way I figure, writing articles about the murder will keep the pressure on the cops to find Amado’s killer.”

“Gotta love an amateur detective.” Sal smirked. “You gonna buy his act, Lucinda?”

Lucinda took so long to reply that Jimmy began to worry Sal would kick him out. When she spoke again, her tone was noticeably softer.

“I suppose you have a point. I sure would like to find Amado’s killer.” She gave him a wary look. “Sorry I messed up your hat.”

“Answer a few questions and we’ll call it even.”

“Talk doesn’t come cheap.” Sal waved a roll of tickets at Jimmy. “If you won’t drink, you gotta dance. Tickets are a dime apiece.”

Jimmy ran a finger under his collar and loosened his tie.

“You *do* know how to dance, don’t you?” Lucinda asked.

“Learned some, in middle school.” Jimmy was inexplicably nervous. In addition to being the tallest kid in class, he was also the clumsiest. He slapped three singles on the bar.

“You got half an hour.” Sal counted out thirty tickets and handed them to Jimmy. “Remember the deal, Lucy. No free dances.”

“It’s Lucinda. And don’t worry, I know the routine.” Crooking a finger at Jimmy, Lucinda strolled into the ballroom.

Two chandeliers lit the ceiling and dim wall scones glowed along the carmine walls. Directly opposite the doors, a bandleader flipped through his playbook while musicians warmed up on trumpets, drums, and clarinets. All the men wore bow ties and suits, black as their brilliantined hair.

Jimmy’s interest was piqued by the sight of the taxi dancers gathered to one side of the stage. Their eyes seemed larger, their rouged lips fuller, their dresses tighter than those of the average girl. It was as though an entire cast of extras had left a Busby Berkeley set and wandered into this ballroom.

“You done staring?” Lucinda raised an eyebrow. “What about those questions?”

“Uh, yeah.” Jimmy flushed. “Do you know someone named Eli?”

Lucinda stepped back, as though she’d been slapped. She smoothed her shingled bob and looked back up at Jimmy. “You don’t pull any punches, do you? Let’s talk where it’s less crowded.” She led Jimmy to one side of the dance floor. “Eli was a regular at the Rizal. What’s it to you?”

“How well did you know him?”

“Why’re you so interested in Eli?”

“Because he might have had something to do with Amado’s murder.”

“Why would you think that?” Lucinda’s eyes narrowed. “Eli had no beef with Amado.”

“I saw Inspector Moynihan at the police station today—you remember him, don’t you?”

“How could I forget? He kept us at the dance hall for hours that night, even after the coroner took Amado away. Gave everyone the third degree, even little Nelly.”

“I saw him today. He said some hobo had turned in a gun. The fella was sleeping in an alley the night of the murder. He woke up when he heard someone toss something in the trash. Didn’t think much of it, so he went back sleep but then woke up again. This time it was because of a couple quarreling in the alley. Too dark to make out their faces, but from their voices, he could tell the guy was Filipino and the girl was American.

“Hold on a minute—are you saying Moynihan believed some bum on skid row? Does he think Eli killed Amado? Eli doesn’t even own a gun.”

“How do you know that?”

“I know everything about Eli.” Lucinda looked beyond Jimmy to check if the other dancers were listening, then lowered her voice. “We were saving up to move north.”

“When were you planning to leave?”

“Doesn’t matter now, does it?” Lucinda bit her lip. “The part about us arguing? The bum got that right. Eli broke up with me that night.”

To Lucinda’s relief, a drum roll cut Jimmy off. A door beside the stage opened, and Mamie walked out in a scarlet dress.

“Welcome to the Velvet Café! Come in, come in!” she called out to the men streaming in from the bar. “Gentlemen, you know the drill. Hand over a ticket for every dance.”

Jimmy stared as Mamie sauntered through the ballroom, squeezing a shoulder here, chucking a chin there, flirting as she ensured every one of the customers handed over a dance ticket.

“Yowza.” He let out a low whistle. “That’s one hot tomato.”

“Show some respect. Mamie owns this joint.”

Jimmy took a step back as Mamie approached.

“Don’t worry, she doesn’t bite,” Lucinda whispered.

“Well, hello there.” Mamie flashed feline eyes at the lanky reporter. “What’s a nice fella like you doing in a place like this?”

“Just looking to have some fun is all,” Jimmy said.

“You’ve come to the right place.” Mamie winked. “Ticket?”

“Here’s all I got. Three dollars’ worth.” Jimmy held up the strip of 30 tickets.

“Good. Make sure Lucinda takes one for every dance.” Mamie stroked Jimmy’s arm. “What did you say your name was?”

“I didn’t. It’s Jimmy.”

“Pleasure to meet you, Jimmy. Maybe you should save a few tickets for me. Most nights I’m too busy running this joint to dance, but I’ll give it a whirl when a swell like you comes by. Think about it.” She cocked an eyebrow at Lucinda. “Lucy dear, be a doll and show this one the ropes. Big spenders need to pace themselves and the night is so very, very young.”

“Sure thing, Mamie.” Lucinda watched Mamie walk away, then plucked a ticket from Jimmy’s roll, tore it, and stuck half into the top of her

stocking. Jimmy looked about, eyes widening at the flash of pale legs as other girls performed the same skirt-raising pre-dance shimmy.

“Put your eyeballs back in their sockets, will you?” Lucinda hissed. “It itches if we stuff tickets down our bras.”

“Why keep them at all?”

Lucinda rolled her eyes. “How else would we know how much we earned? Mamie counts the stubs at the end of the night. Pays us a nickel for every dime dance we sell.”

The band struck up the opening bars of the first song, and Lucinda held her arms up at the ready. “If you want to get your money’s worth, you’d better get to it.”

Jimmy tentatively took Lucinda’s left hand in his right and rested his other hand on the small of her back.

Lucinda snorted at Jimmy’s hesitance. Planting a palm firmly between his shoulder blades, she pulled him closer until only a hair’s breadth separated their chests.

“I bet you flunked out of all your dance classes,” she teased. “Do you know the Balboa?”

“The park?”

Lucinda threw her head back and laughed. “No, you goof. Here, I’ll show you.” Counting softly, she prompted him through the quick-footed dance, their matched steps tracing tight squares back and forth on the floor. Jimmy envied other couples who swanned past them with more assurance.

“Never been led by a girl before,” he muttered.

“There’s a first time for everything,” Lucinda said.

“Can we get back to Eli?”

“What else do you need to know? I already told you he didn’t own a gun.”

“Maybe someone lent him one.”

Lucinda stopped so abruptly that Jimmy stepped on her toes. “God almighty!” Lucinda pushed him away.

“I’m sorry—”

“I’m done dancing with amateurs!”

Other couples turned and stared. A few men chuckled at the sight of a gringo being scolded by Mamie’s newest girl.

Leaning close so that only Jimmy could hear, Lucinda whispered, “If you think I’ll snitch on Eli, you’re wrong. He’s a *good* guy. Quit trying to pin the blame on him.”

“I’m just trying to find out what happened—”

A hand on Jimmy’s shoulder cut him short.

“Is there a problem?” Sal was nearly a head shorter than Jimmy, but he seemed perfectly capable of beating the gangly American. “Is he bothering you, Lucy?”

“It was nothing.” Lucinda shook her head. “He stepped on my toes is all.”

The music petered out as band members watched the confrontation. Fights were free entertainment. Everyone knew Sal would win this one.

“I said I was sorry.” Jimmy shook Sal’s hand off his shoulder. “I was nervous; I haven’t danced in years.” He turned pleading eyes on Lucinda. “I still have all these tickets left. Please, will you give me a chance to make it up?”

Lucinda glanced at the bartender and thought for a moment, biting her lip.

“Oh, what the hell.” Lucinda held up a warning finger. “Step on my toes one more time and you’re outta here. Right, Sal?”

“You said it.” Sal waved at the bandleader. “Start up the music.”

Sal returned to the bar, where Mamie perched on a stool, twirling an ivory cigarette holder.

“You think Eli told her?” Mamie looked at Sal through a scrim of cigarette smoke.

“If Lucinda knew something, she’d have left town with Eli.” Sal picked up his glass and drained it in one quick swallow. “I bet he kept it to himself, to keep her out of trouble in case he got caught.”

“Ahh, young love.” Mamie poured another shot of whiskey into Sal’s glass and raised it in a toast. She took a sip and glanced over her shoulder. “Keep an eye on her and that reporter, will you? No telling what he might find if he keeps digging through the muck.”

“Maybe you should talk to him. Throw him off the scent.”

“Why, darling, that’s a genius idea,” Mamie purred. “I may even give him a free drink while we’re at it.”

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CHAPTER 29

October 1934

Eli awoke with a start, alone in the back seat of a parked car. His bottom felt numb; his hips, knees, and ankles frozen into harsh angles from sitting through the long overnight drive from Los Angeles to San Francisco.

He rolled his stiff shoulders and peered through the dust-streaked windows. A man in loose black trousers trundled a cart laden with sacks of rice up Grant Avenue. Chinatown in San Francisco seemed more deserted than Eli remembered, but perhaps that was because it was so early in the morning.

On the curb to Eli's right, Gil, Abe, and Roy hunched over a small cloud of cigarette smoke, their faces creased as old leather from years of working in the fields. Eli had struck up a conversation with them over a billiards game the day before. They'd given him a ride in exchange for gas money.

Silver-haired Gil looked the oldest of the three, but he was by far the liveliest. He kept Roy awake on the all-night drive by singing everything from kundiman ballads to Cole Porter tunes. Eli had fallen asleep to his rich baritone, crooning "I Wonder Where My Girl Is Now."

Since fleeing San Diego, Eli had relied on the kindness of kabayan like them for shelter, meals, and rides on the journey north.

Moving like an arthritic codger, Eli stepped out of the car. A stiff October breeze sliced through his thin jacket and nipped at his earlobes and knuckles. He tugged the collar up around his neck and approached the men.

“Ah, there you are. We thought you would never wake up.” Abe smiled through a scruffy moustache.

“Take one.” He held a pack of cigarettes out to Eli. “It’ll keep you warm till your first coffee. But you should get a thicker coat soon.”

“Salamat.” Eli thanked him and pulled out a stick. He’d quit smoking months ago, to save more money for dance tickets; these days, a free cigarette was a rare pleasure. “Where can I get something to eat?”

“Walk up Grant to Kearny.” Gil pursed his lips at a street that rose steeply up a hill. “The Chinese bakeries should be open by now.”

“Let’s go then,” Eli said. “You must be as hungry as I am.”

“Nah. We’ll eat on the road.” Abe tossed his cigarette on the sidewalk and stepped on the glowing stub. “The walnut harvest just got going in Sacramento. We got to get there while they’re still hiring.”

“You need a job?” Gil said.

“Doesn’t look like this boy works in the fields much,” Roy said, nodding at Eli’s fingers. “See, here’s what you get after 20 years working the harvest.” Roy pushed up a sleeve to show off a tangle of veins and scars snaking over the mottled skin of his forearm. “Listen, if you give me one more dollar for gas, we’ll put in a good word for you when we reach the farm. You in?”

Eli considered the offer. He’d heard countless stories about the Watsonville riots, but something one manong had told him stuck: “Bad things happen in bunkhouses.” If cops searched farms in Sacramento, he’d be a sitting duck. *Easier to disappear in Chinatown.*

“Thanks, but I’ll try it out here for a few days.” Eli pulled his cap over his cold ears. “Maybe get a job washing dishes or waiting tables.”

“Yah, you look like an indoor kind of fella. Besides, you’re too tall for stoop labor, not like me and Abe, no?” Gil’s chuckle ended in a hacking cough.

“Just be careful, hijo. You might be okay in Chinatown, but don’t go gallivanting in Union Square,” Abe cautioned. “Head down, mouth shut. That’s how you stay out of trouble. Gringos don’t like when people like us get uppity.”

Eli had brushed off such advice in the past, but this time he took it to heart. “I promise to be careful, Manong Abe.”

“Ahh, this one knows how to speak to his elders.” Gil exhaled smoke over his shoulder. “Your mother raised you well, Eli.”

“My parents died when I was very young. My sister raised me.” Eli felt a sudden pang. *What would Paloma think of the trouble I’ve gotten into?* He shook off the thought and smiled at the three old-timers. “Salamat—I appreciate the ride.”

“Heck, we needed gas money.” Roy jiggled the car keys. “We got to get going.”

Eli waved goodbye, then began walking up the hill. He may have once envied Chino for being a doorman at the El Cortez, but now he didn’t dare seek work outside of Chinatown. It was safer to labor in anonymity among people who looked like him.



Curiosity soon overcame apprehension as Eli walked through a street unlike any in the Stingaree district. Golden dragons clung to each streetlamp, their forepaws clutching hexagonal lanterns, tails curled around the verdigris pole. The lamps were topped by red pagoda shades whose brass bells tinkled faintly in the breeze. Filigreed balconies and intricately carved cornices of the buildings on either side of the street provided a pretty frame for the clear blue sky. However desperate he felt, it was still going to be a beautiful day. *If only Lucinda could see this.*

Further along, Eli turned the corner on Stockton where produce stores bustled with activity. Men brushed past him on the sidewalk, their muttering

softened by oblique vowels and shushing sounds. Women picked over grocery bins of cabbages, bitter melons, and onions. Eventually he arrived at a tiny dumpling shop, whose proprietor tended a counter lined with domed bamboo baskets.

Eli pointed to the nearest steamer and chose a fist-sized pork bun. There was nowhere to sit inside, so he ate as he walked. Leaving Lucinda that night had gouged a wound in his heart. *Would she hate me less if I had told her everything?* He swallowed hard. *Better she didn't know.*

Voices raised in animated Tagalog interrupted Eli's musings. Up ahead, two Filipinos were having an animated debate. "The Bolo Puncher could beat Living Doll, easy." The taller one waved a newspaper at his friend. "I watched him fight in LA and—*Bam! Bam! Bam!* just like that—" he mimed three right upper cuts in quick succession, "—the white guy went down."

"Kalokohan! If the Living Doll were still alive, he'd knock the Bolo Puncher out like this!" The bald one threw a one-two punch.

"Gandang umaga po," Eli greeted the pair. "Sounds like you watch a lot of boxing matches."

"More fun to watch than the cockfights, that's for sure." The taller one tucked the newspaper and squinted at Eli. "Never seen you around here. You new to San Francisco?"

"Just got here. Call me Eli." He extended a hand. "Pasensya na, I didn't mean to interrupt, Manong—"

"Del." The shorter man intercepted Eli's hand and shook it vigorously. "This here's Crisostomo," Del jerked his head at his taller friend.

"Nice to meet you both."

"Where are you from, back in the islands?" Manong Del asked.

"I grew up in Manila."

"Ahh, city boy." Crisostomo clapped a hand on Eli's shoulder. "I grew up in Intramuros."

“Then maybe you can help a fellow Manileño. I’m looking for work. Do you know anyone who needs an extra hand?”

“Tough time to be looking for jobs.” Crisostomo sucked on his teeth, thinking.

“Stay and wait with us until that place opens,” Del nodded at the Luzon Barbershop on the corner. “Everyone comes here on Saturday. Maybe one of them can help you.”

Eli nodded his thanks and stood to one side, half-listening to the two men argue over boxing. From the slant of sunlight, he estimated it to be just past eight in the morning. Lucinda would still be asleep. The Manila Musikeros played their last song at midnight, and between counting out dance ticket stubs to get paid and walking home, she rarely got to bed before two a.m.

Eli couldn’t remember the last time he’d slept in a bed. A week on the run had worn him down. Since leaving San Diego, he had slept little and eaten less, anxiously watching his money trickle away with every meal and rest stop. He’d pawned his suit, shoes, and fedora in Los Angeles. That money had sustained him so far, but he was down to his last dollars. It was dangerous to linger in San Francisco, but he needed to make more money, if only to buy a thicker coat before continuing north.

If he could make it to Seattle without getting caught, he would send word to Lucinda. *But will she agree to meet me there?*

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CHAPTER 30

Saturday night at the Rizal Dance Hall: olive-skinned men in Macintosh suits, blue-eyed blondes in silk and rouge. Love sold for a dime lasts the length of a song, except for the couple dancing for keeps. Eli catches Lucinda's eye and she steps away from the row of women, drawn by an unseen thread. Limbs notching smooth as tongue and groove, they start to move as one to the first sighing chords of a Billie Holiday song.

Eli danced in the alley, arm curved around phantom shoulders, fingers cradling an invisible palm, humming the song to the girl he lost.

"Hoy, Eli, break's over." Botong, the short-order cook, poked his head out the kitchen door. "Get back in here."

"Coming." Eli looked up at the sliver of sky caught between the two buildings and wished he could fly away. His first week of work at Luzon Diner made him feel as though he were drowning in gray dishwater. He wondered which lucky kabayan was strutting around in his Macintosh suit and shoes. All he had left from his dance hall life were memories: the songs in his head, the rhythm in his feet, the scent of Lucinda, warm in his arms.

"I saw you dancing out there, bro." Botong watched Eli stack dishes in the sink. "With those moves, you should be in a stage show or something. How'd you learn to dance like that?"

"I watched a lot of movies," Eli said. The cook's admiration somehow made him feel worse. As Eli scrubbed, he brooded over the missteps that had led to this sink. So many things he should and shouldn't have done. *I should have left town as soon as Hiro fired me. I should have given up*

trying to elope with Lucinda. I shouldn't have taken that free drink from Sal. I should have known better.

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CHAPTER 31

Dear Paloma,

I am sorry for not writing back sooner. Your letter reached me in the middle of the lettuce harvest. I lost my job in August, so I left San Diego to find more work. Money is tight. I am sorry I cannot send any right now. I hope to reach Seattle by December. If I find a job, I will send money home for Christmas. You cannot imagine how big America is. I wonder if that is a blessing or a curse.

Please pray for me, Ate Paloma. Pray that I find a better place to live in this country. I hope to have happier news in my next letter.

Ingat,

Elias

Eli folded the sheet into an envelope and carefully wrote his sister's address in Manila. He didn't know when the letter would reach Paloma. Now that he was a fugitive, mailing a letter had become much more complicated. On the way to work, he would leave the letter with Manolo, a janitor at the Chinese Theater. Over lunch break, Manolo would walk Eli's letter over to the Sir Francis Drake Hotel, where his cousin Delfin worked as a bellboy. It was easy enough for Delfin to slip the letter into the stack of guests' outgoing mail. The route was circuitous, but it spared Eli a trip to the post office, where he feared they'd hung a wanted poster with his face plastered on it.

Eli had befriended the garrulous cousins soon after he arrived in Chinatown. Since none of them could afford the city's dance halls, they shared whatever they could scrounge from their various jobs: leftover fried rice from Luzon Diner; an umbrella left at the Chinese theater; newspapers discarded by guests of the Sir Francis Drake hotel. Eli had been too tired to read a day-old copy of the *Los Angeles Times* that Delfin had given him the

night before. As he tidied the room, he picked it up off the floor and glanced at the headlines.

Speedy Dado beats Joe Tei Ken for Bantamweight Title; President Roosevelt declares Philippines a Commonwealth. Whatever a "commonwealth" was, Eli hoped it would help get his sister a raise at the American-founded school she'd worked at for years.

He flipped idly through the paper until a small article in the back pages snagged his attention: *Manhunt for Dance Hall Shooter Heads North.* Dread traced a cold finger down Eli's spine as he read.

San Diego police continue to search for the killer of Amado Barrios, shot dead at the Rizal Dance Hall on September 22. A search of farms in Salinas and Fresno has produced evidence suggesting the shooter has fled north. Inspector Neal Moynihan confirmed that he and fellow officers interrogated dance hall patrons in Fresno and Stockton. "We will search as far north as Mendocino, if necessary," Moynihan stated.

The newspaper was dated October 17, 1934. Yesterday. The detectives would have reached San Francisco by now.

Heart pounding, Eli reached deep under his cot, poking past old clothes and newspapers to retrieve a dented coffee can. He poured its contents out on the cot and counted fifteen dollars in cash and change: all the money he'd saved in the last three weeks. It would run out before he reached Washington State, but he figured he had just enough to get him out of California.

Should I leave now or would that look suspicious? Eli thought himself lucky to land the dishwasher's job until he realized his boss pandered to policemen. Whenever an officer from the Chinatown Squad ate at the diner, Mr. Severino insisted on picking up the tab.

"Feeding you well is the least I can do," Mr. Severino would declare as he waved away the policeman's cash. He was sure to call the cops as soon as he discovered Eli was fleeing the law.

I'll quit on Friday night, after getting paid for the week. The more money he had, the farther he could flee. Policemen rarely came to the diner in the evening. Taking his pay at the end of Friday's shift and not showing up on Saturday would cut the risk of Mr. Severino snitching on him.

Eli planned his escape as he slipped on shoes. First thing Saturday morning, he'd visit Luzon Barber shop, where Filipinos gathered to for haircuts and gossip. Several migrant workers came by so regularly, they had their mail delivered to the barbershop. One of them was bound to know who was driving north for the apple harvest in Yakima and how he might join them.

The hallway clock tolled the hour of eight. Ponciano, the night watchman who split the room's rent with Eli, would be arriving soon to claim his turn on the bed. Eli smoothed out the threadbare blanket and straightened the flattened pillow, preparing the bed for its next occupant. A new show had premiered the night before. Big events like that kept Manolo working so late that he slept at the theater.

Eli stuffed the cash into a small canvas pouch, knotted its drawstrings around a belt loop, then slid it into his trouser pocket. Paloma had sewn the pouch as a farewell present.

"Tie it to your belt to keep your money safe." Paloma pressed it into his palm, her eyes brimming with tears. Eli waved away her concern at the time, only to lose his first week's wages to a pickpocket in Stockton. He'd used the money pouch ever since.

Eli smiled sadly at the thought of his sister. He planned to keep his predicament secret from Paloma and Lucinda until he'd found a way out of it. But was that even possible?

Already weary from a day just begun, Eli stepped quickly through the dim narrow corridor of the flophouse. Its walls were so thin he could hear other boarders snoring behind the doors on either side. He held his breath as he sped down a flight of stairs that reeked of cigarette smoke and piss, then

carefully opened the back door to an alley that led to Stockton Street. Before he stepped out to the main thoroughfare, he pulled his newsboy cap low over his forehead, trained his gaze on the sidewalk, then joined the thin stream of pedestrians: mothers prodding their children to school, grocers pushing vegetable carts, men in dark suits and fedoras, an aging beggar. Chinatown had given him shelter in anonymity these past weeks, yet he yearned for his feckless taxi dance hall life. He missed the afternoons at the barbershop, his Macintosh suit, Kiko and his band. Above all, he missed Lucinda.

Once again, the memory of their last argument twisted a knife in his gut. *Does she think I had something to do with Amado's murder?*

Manolo was smoking by the Chinese Theater's back door when Eli walked into the alley. A pronounced stoop and hooded eyes made him look decades older than his 25 years.

"You're up early. Going somewhere?"

"You mean I'm *still* up." Manolo dropped the cigarette and ground it under his heel.

"The only place I want to go is bed."

"Late night?"

"Bad enough the damn plays run till midnight." Manolo hitched up his pants. "But last night was the director's birthday, so the cast threw him a party. The noise kept me up till all hours."

"Did they at least offer you a drink?" Eli pulled the letter out of his pocket.

"One shot. And that wasn't any fun because all their jokes were in Cantonese. So I go to the broom closet and try to get some sleep, and what do I find? Two bit players, making whoopee on my cot."

Eli chuckled. "Must have been some show."

"Who knows? I didn't stick around for the finale." Manolo spat at a roach scurrying past his foot. "Now I got to go clean up their mess. I heard

someone vomiting offstage a coupl'a hours ago. Hangovers are the worst, no?"

"Can't say I remember." Eli pulled the letter out of his coat pocket. "Could you hand this to Delfin when you get home? "

"No problem, bro." Manolo stuck the letter in his coat pocket. "Listen, Delfin and I are off on Sunday night. Want to shoot some pool? The manager at Bonifacio Billiards owes me a favor; said if we came early, we could play one game free."

"Salamat, but I got other plans. Please make sure Delfin puts that letter in the hotel mail. I don't know when I'll have time to write Paloma again." At this rate, Eli didn't know if he would ever see Manolo again.

He clapped Manolo on the shoulder and hurried away, dread circling like a vulture overhead.

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CHAPTER 32

Eli was drying dishes in the kitchen that afternoon when the sound of unfamiliar voices drew him to the curtained doorway. Through the sliver of space between fabric and doorframe, he saw two Americans chatting with Mr. Severino. The older, heavy-set one said Eli's surname, mispronouncing it the way Americans with their stubborn tongues inevitably did: *May-tah.* As he said Eli's name, the tall, thin one held up a newspaper, pointing at one corner of the page. It was Amado's dance hall ad.

You will be famous when the ad comes out! Amado had whispered when Eli and Lucinda struck a pose for the photographer.

Stepping slow and soft, Eli backed away from the curtain, slipped off his apron and ducked out the back door. He sprinted up the alley and was about to turn on Clay Street when someone yelled his name. *RUN.*

Eli tore down the road, startling schoolgirls with waist-long braids clustered outside the Chinese YWCA, then veered right on Stockton Street, hoping to lose his pursuers in the crowd of shoppers. Terrified as he was of getting caught, he was oddly exhilarated by this all-out dash down city streets after weeks spent in hiding.

He zigzagged around women strolling on the narrow sidewalk, vaulted over a pallet of rice sacks, and swerved around the fruit bin just beyond. A sweep of his arm toppled the pyramid of tangerines, letting loose an avalanche that tripped up the cops in hot pursuit. As he reached the end of the block, Eli glanced over his shoulder and grinned to see the Americans tangled in a knot of indignant shopkeepers.

But now his legs had begun to ache, and every breath rasped down his throat like a serrated knife. He summoned a final burst of energy and raced down Grant Street, careening past the row of stores in search of somewhere to hide. Two possibilities stood on the far corner: to his right, a pagoda-like building under whose scarlet eaves lay a warren of souvenir stores; to his left, the thick brick buttresses of Old Saint Mary's Cathedral.

Eli made a panicked calculation: a priest would more likely show compassion than any shopkeeper. He scrambled up the steps and pushed the heavy front door open.

It took a moment for his eyes to adjust from the bright afternoon sunlight to the dim church, but the deep silence inside was a relief after the cacophony outdoors. Above him soared a vaulted ceiling from which hung large white pendant lamps. Dark oak pews lined either side of the central aisle, which ended at an elaborate altar.

Though Eli had never been to this cathedral, he surmised it was merely a larger version of his neighborhood church back in Manila. Eli's aunt had compelled him to serve as a sacristan, and he'd spent many childhood Sundays at church. He guessed the door by the altar exited to the priest's quarters. He could hide there.

Ducking into the shadow of large side pillars, he scurried toward the nave, then froze at the sound of rustling from within the confessional.

A tall figure emerged from the booth.

Eli recoiled from what appeared to be a ghost, only to realize it was an American priest in a soutane. Eli had served at his last mass a decade earlier, but still felt intimidated by clergymen, more so by this one, whose skin was pale to the point of phosphorescence.

"O Diyos," he gasped.

"You must never speak the name of the Lord in vain, son," the priest chided, a bemused smile softening his spectral face. "Did you come for confession?"

“No, Father, I need—” Eli paused. *How do I beg for sanctuary*? “Please, help—”

The door burst open; Eli dove to the floor.

A police officer ran in, pausing to cock his pistol as the priest strode toward the central aisle, long robes swishing against the wooden benches.

“What is the meaning of this? Put that away. You cannot bear arms in this house of God. I will not allow it.”

“Beg pardon, Father, we’re chasing a fugitive.” The policeman lowered his gun. “I’m pretty sure he ran in here. Did you see him?”

Jimmy Wheeler dashed inside before the priest could reply. “Ketch, don’t shoot!”

“Will one of you tell me what is going on?” The priest cast a thunderous glare at both men.

The policeman pulled out his badge. “Stephen Ketch, homicide inspector, San Diego Police. Are you the parish priest?”

“Yes, I took over the parish last year. Father Callahan.” The priest frowned at Jimmy. “Where’s your badge, young man?”

“I don’t have one,” Jimmy said. “My name is Jimmy Wheeler, I’m a reporter for the *San Diego Evening Tribune*.”

“Reporting on what?” Father Callahan folded his arms across his chest.

“Homicide,” Ketch said. “Oriental gunned down in a San Diego dance hall last month.”

“You’re searching for the killer?”

“You read about the Rizal Dance Hall murder in the papers?”

“I care only about news that concerns this parish, Officer Ketch. There’s quite enough trouble in Chinatown to keep me busy.”

“There’s just no trusting Orientals is there?” Ketch said, shaking his head. “The suspected shooter is Filipino. We’ve set up a dragnet and searched every farm, skid row, and Chinatown from San Diego all the way up the coast.”

“And you believe the gunman is in this church?”

“Didn’t someone run in here just now?”

Father Callahan ignored the question. “You’re welcome to look around, but only after you show me a search warrant.”

Officer Ketch huffed. “What in the Sam Hill do you need a search warrant for?”

“I’m well within my rights to ask for one—” the priest said.

The door swung open again and another policeman rushed in, followed by an older man, limping to catch up. “Ketch, did you find him?”

“As I live and breathe, Nick Wheeler.” Father Callahan raised an eyebrow. “I thought they took you off the Chinatown Squad.”

Nick strode up to them, panting. “They did. Offered to lend a hand, seein’ as my kid brother followed these officers up from San Diego. Jimmy works for the *Tribune.* He’ll do anything for a scoop.”

Eli crouched in the confessional listening to the police officers argue with the priest, unsure what to do. Suddenly a memory flashed neon through his terrified mind: *Twenty-two-year-old Fermin Tobera was shot dead by white rioters as he hid in a closet. I can’t make that same mistake.*

Cold sweat beaded on Eli’s forehead as he crawled up the side aisle toward the apse. He spotted a door beyond a large pedestal of flowers by the altar. He straightened up to sprint the last few yards but was knocked to the ground by someone tackling him from behind.

“Over here,” the man hollered. His breath was hot on Eli’s neck as he muttered, “Lie still and you won’t get hurt. They’re about to arrest you for killing Amado Barrios.”

Eli gasped. “I never meant to—”

“What the hell, Jimmy.” Nick reached them first. “Who asked you to play the hero?”

“Ease up on the kid.” Inspector Moynihan limped up to them. “When my bum knee gave out, I gave him leave to grab the perp.”

“That was some tackle, my boy.” Moynihan pulled Jimmy up and stepped on Eli’s shoulder, pinning him to the floor.

“I can’t breathe,” Eli squirmed beneath Moynihan’s foot. “Get off me, I can’t breathe.”

“Plenty other things you won’t be able to do in the Big House,” Moynihan stooped to clamp handcuffs round Eli’s wrists, then hauled him to his feet. “Ketch, get the car.”

Eli scowled at his captors; a bruise swelled purple on his cheekbone.

“Are you sure you have the right man?” Father Callahan asked. “How do you know he doesn’t belong to one of the Chinatown tongs?”

“Goddamnit, I’m not Chinese,” Eli muttered.

Moynihan smacked the back of Eli’s head. “Watch your tone, boy. Not his fault all you Orientals look alike.” Moynihan nodded apologetically at the priest. “This here’s Eli Mata, prime suspect in the Rizal Dance Hall murder.”

“I didn’t do it,” Eli growled.

“Tell that to the judge.” Moynihan tightened his grip on Eli’s arm.

“I suppose you have much to report on now, young man.” Father Callahan nodded at Jimmy. “How did you persuade these inspectors fellows to give you a ride in their squad car?”

“I didn’t. I took the bus,” Jimmy said. “Thought I might as well pay a visit to Mother. She’s never forgiven me for moving to San Diego.”

Minutes later, Ketch returned to handcuff Eli.

“Wait up, I’m coming with you.” Jimmy strode after them.

Ketch opened the car door and shoved Eli in so suddenly that his forehead banged into the rim.

“Aray, ‘tangina naman,” Eli swore.

“Shut up,” Ketch barked. “Not another word. We got a long ride ahead of us.”

Jimmy waited, pad and pen in hand until Ketch shut the door. “Mind if I ask Eli a few questions before you head out? I promised my editor a scoop.”

“Sorry, kid.” Ketch leaned against the door. “Inspector Moynihan gets to interrogate him first.”

“C’mon, you gotta give me something,” Jimmy pleaded. “I’ll be in hot water if I don’t call in my story today.”

“Fine. Write how you chased this monkey through Chinatown and jumped him in church.” Ketch chuckled. “That’ll make a helluva headline.”

Jimmy knew better than to argue with the police officer. As he stepped away from the squad car, he cursed his brother’s lousy timing. If Nick had come just a few seconds later, Eli could have given Jimmy the scoop he needed. “*I never meant to . . .*” Eli had begun to say. Was it possible Eli never meant to shoot Amado? Could the murder be nothing more than an accident?

Jimmy stared at the captive slumped in the back seat with mixed emotions. Eli looked more like a frightened teenager than the dandy in the Rizal Dance Hall ad. *He’s just a kid. Could he really be a killer?*

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CHAPTER 33

Eli sat in the back of the car, wrists chafed raw by the handcuffs, cheek and forehead bruised. They'd left San Francisco at dawn, Ketch at the wheel, Moynihan riding shotgun. The men would chat occasionally, but Eli could not hear them over the drone of the engine.

The scent of chicken poop filled the car whenever they drove past strawberry fields. Eli looked at the farmworkers hunched over the dry soil, their backs rising and falling like so many hens pecking for worms. *They're as damned as I am.* The stoop labor had been so monotonous, he was almost grateful he might never again return to the fields.

When he tired of staring out the window, Eli leaned forward to stretch his back and ease the pinch of the cuffs on his wrists. Breakfast had been a cup of cold bitter coffee before they got in the car. Several hours later, his belly was empty but his bladder was uncomfortably full.

"Inspector Moynihan? I need to go to the bathroom."

"You gotta hold it." Moynihan looked over his shoulder. "You can go the next time we stop for gas."

By the time Ketch pulled into a gas station on the outskirts of Salinas, Eli's bladder was about to explode.

"Gas up." Moynihan nodded at Ketch. "I'll get us sandwiches and take him to the restroom over there." He kept a tight grip on Eli's arm and walked him to the diner across the street. "Look, Mata. Here's the deal: I take the cuffs off so you can piss. If you make a run for it, I shoot you dead, got it?"

Eli nodded.

By then, it was nearly two in the afternoon, and the place was empty but for a frizzy-haired waitress doing a crossword puzzle by the cash register. Her welcoming smile vanished when she saw Eli.

“Didn’t you see the sign out front?” She set a hand on her hip. “No Filipinos or dogs allowed.”

Eli flinched. He’d seen such signs so many times, they no longer set him off.

“How’d you know he’s Filipino?” Moynihan asked.

“Seen enough of their kind around town. They live in camps and work the farms just like the Okies. Troublemakers, the lot of them, always threatening to strike before the harvest. Don’t even get me started on the sluts they hire for those dance halls.” The waitress glanced at Eli’s handcuffs. “Glad you got this one all tied up. I wouldn’t give him a glass of water, never mind lunch.”

“This one won’t make any trouble, ma’am,” Moynihan pulled his coat back just enough to show her the gun in his shoulder holster. “I guarantee it.”

“Oh my.” The waiters gave the detective a coy look. “You a bounty hunter or something?”

“Inspector Moynihan, San Diego Police.” He jerked a thumb at Eli. “This here’s a fugitive. Nabbed him in San Francisco. He just needs to use the facilities before we drive back to San Diego.”

She spit her gum into a paper napkin. “The *fuh-ci-lit-eez*—” she stretched out each syllable of the fancy word “—are off limits to monkeys.”

Eli bit back a retort and stared fixedly at the apple pie set on the counter.

“He can piss by the trees out back.” She fluttered fingers at Moynihan. “You, of course, are welcome to use the restroom. Care to order lunch while you’re here?”

“Don’t mind if I do,” said Moynihan. “Could you fix me three ham and cheese sandwiches to go, while I take him outside?” He nudged Eli. “Let’s

go.”

As they turned to leave, the waitress called out. “Mind if I ask what you nabbed him for? Was it rape? Burglary?” She raised a penciled eyebrow and curled thin lips around the word, “Murder?”

“I’m not at liberty to say, ma’am.” Moynihan winked. “Just slap together those sandwiches, would you please? We need to be on our way.”

A ragged row of sycamore trees separated the diner’s back lot from a lettuce field. Several hundred yards away, harvesters were making their slow, bobbing crawl to the opposite end of the field. Their voices drifted on the afternoon breeze, just loud enough for Eli to discern the familiar cadence of their speech.

Kabayan.

Moynihan walked Eli up to the nearest tree then wheeled him around, so they stood chest to chest. “This is as good a spot as any.” The detective kept firm hold on Eli’s arm with one hand and unbuckled his belt with the other.

“What are you—” Eli jerked away, but Moynihan stomped on his toes, anchoring him in place.

“Putangina,” Eli cried out in pain.

“Shut up, or I’ll clock you.” Moynihan unbuttoned Eli’s trousers. “Now, squat.”

“What for?” Eli glared at the detective. “You said you’d take the handcuffs off so I could piss.”

“Like hell I’m uncuffing you out here.” Moynihan spat. “If you made a run for it, I’d have to shoot; I’m not hauling a dead perp back to San Diego. Now do as I say and *squat.*” Moynihan hooked a thumb into Eli’s belt loop and yanked.

As pants and underwear crumpled to his knees, a fathomless dread came over Eli. The same autumn wind that lifted the farmworkers’ laughter across the fields lashed his thighs and scrotum. He’d heard how gringos dragged

kabayan from bunkhouses, bars, and dance halls to be shot or lynched. *Will I be the next nameless body rotting in the field?*

“I haven’t got all day, Mata.” Moynihan pulled out his pistol and pressed it to the vein pulsing on Eli’s forehead. “Pee like a girl now, or hold it till we get back to San Diego. You decide.”

Eli lowered himself awkwardly, hobbled by his handcuffs and the gun tracing his descent. Seething, he stared at Moynihan’s scuffed brogues and urinated as weeds prickled his buttocks.

“You done?” Moynihan grabbed Eli by the armpits and yanked him back up.

“No, wait!” Eli felt piss slither down his thighs and into his socks. As the detective buttoned up his stained trousers, Eli looked back at the Filipinos. The farmworkers had reached the opposite end. At least they were too far away to see.

Moynihan took Eli back to the squad car then strolled back to the diner.

Ketch shoved Eli back into the car, then reached for his handcuffed wrists. “I’m taking these off so’s you can eat proper, but if you give me any trouble, they go right back on, y’hear?” Sticking the cuffs in his back pocket, the policeman rolled the window down an inch, then shut the door.

Eli rubbed the chaffed skin on his wrists. After all that had transpired, he almost looked forward to the safety of a jail cell.

Minutes later, Moynihan passed Eli a sandwich through the window then joined his partner to lean against the hood of the car. Eli turned away from the window, pretending indifference as he eavesdropped.

“Think he’ll hang?” Ketch asked.

“Maybe, maybe not,” Moynihan replied. “If he does, you’d better hope we don’t get picked to drive him back north. Executions only happen in San Quentin. He’d have to wait on death row up there.”

“Wouldn’t that be something,” Ketch spoke through a mouthful of ham. “San Francisco’s all right, but it’s way too cold. The drive alone could kill

you.”

“You don’t know the half of it.” Moynihan stopped chewing. “When I worked in San Francisco, another cop and I had to run perps up to San Quentin. Got to know the prison warden pretty well. Poor fella managed all the executions, and lemme tell you, they’re no walk in the park. He said it took two years to boil and stretch rope, to make sure there’d be no bounce in the hanging. Day before an execution, they’d do a dry run with a sandbag that weighed the same as the guy on death row.”

“Why’s it so complicated?” Ketch licked mayonnaise off his thumb. “All’s you need to do is kick the stool ’n let ’em dangle. I hear that’s how Klansmen lynch Mexicans.”

“That right? I didn’t figure you to be a—”

“Nah, I had nothin’ to do with that.” Ketch chuckled. “But my buddy across the street, Dwayne Kendall, his folks belonged. Anytime something happened, he’d come over and tell me. Once, we tried to sneak into that hall the Klansmen have on Idaho Street—you know, over by Meade? They kicked us out, on account of we were only 12 years old, but Dwayne’s uncle said we could join ’em in a few years. But by then I was training to be a cop.”

“It’s pretty much the same work, but at least cops get paid.” Moynihan sucked on his teeth.

“Yeah, but just the same . . .” Ketch squinted into the afternoon sun. “The Klan gets a bad rap. The Kendalls were just regular folk. Our families sat next to each other every Sunday at the Blessed Sacrament.”

“Just regular folk, eh?” Moynihan took another bite of his sandwich and chewed thoughtfully. “Even so, the Klan’s got nothing on San Quentin. It’s precision work, this hanging business. If the drop’s too short, the fella’s neck doesn’t break straightaway. Takes a half hour or longer for him to suffocate. Face swells up, body starts jerking, sometimes shits his pants.

Meantime, the five friends he's invited to say goodbye, they have to sit there and . . ."

"Damn, if they have to watch that," Ketch said.

"That ain't even the worst of it. If the drop's too deep, the noose snaps the head right off." Moynihan brushed breadcrumbs off his coat. "Then you got a bigger mess to deal with."

"Jesus." Ketch glanced behind him at Eli. "Can't say I envy the guy."

Eli pretended not to have heard, but every nerve in his body was tingling like a newly struck match. Apart from Kiko, Lucinda, and Wings, he couldn't think of two more people to invite to his execution. *Would Lucinda even show up?* He couldn't bear to wonder.

One thing was certain: Somewhere in San Quentin, they were stretching rope.

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CHAPTER 34

The screech of complaining metal jolted Eli out of a dreamless sleep. Groaning, he rolled on his side to face the wall. It had taken him hours to fall asleep on this first night in the San Diego prison. The last thing he needed was a cellmate. The thud of a body crumpling to the floor suggested the newcomer was in no condition to talk.

Eli looked back and saw a man in a brown suit sprawled on the floor. One of his sleeves was ripped open at the armpit. His combover had fallen askew, and pomade-stiff strands fanned above one ear like the spines of a sea urchin. He smelled like a brewery.

"Ay, puta," the man swore, then startled when he spotted Eli staring at him from the cot. "Guard! Guard! Why you have to lock me up with a hoodlum? Don't I get my own cell?"

"Stop whining. This ain't the Ritz," the guard snorted, and turned to leave.

"Wait!" The man rolled to his knees and grabbed the bars of the cell. "How long do I have to stay here?"

"Until you sober up. Don't do anything stupid." The guard's footsteps faded away, leaving the cellmates in a fetid silence.

"Kumusta, kabayan." Eli sat up. "Looks like you had a busy night."

"You mean someone got busy on *me*." The man swabbed his forehead with a pocket square, patting gingerly around the bruise that purpled his cheekbone.

"My name's Eli Mata. What's yours?"

"Dennis. Dennis Mesina."

“Tagasaan ka sa atin?” Eli asked. *Where are you from?* It was the question Filipinos asked whenever they met in America, as a shortcut to forging alliances, to finding distant kin, or simply sharing memories of their faraway home.

“Taal, Batangas.” Dennis stared at the dingy walls as though that distant province lay just beyond them. “We moved to Laguna just before Taal erupted in 1911.”

“I wasn’t even born when that happened. Mama told me volcano rained ash all the way to Manila,” Eli said. “What’re you in for?”

“Public disorder, fighting in a bar, arguing with a policeman, ewan ko ba . . .” Dennis rearranged batons of hair over his shiny pate. “You know how it is. Cops think us dance hall customers are hoodlums. When did dancing become a crime? Tangina naman.” The oath sounded more like a lament.

“I used to go dancing at the Rizal. Worked like a dog all week so I could dance with my girl on the weekend.” Shutting his eyes, Eli remembered Lucinda’s pale cheek pressed to his, the scent of orange blossoms in her hair.

“Those girls are something, aren’t they?” Dennis clicked his tongue. “I danced with all of them.”

“Who did you like best?” Eli recalled his nights at the Rizal, flirting with Lucinda and her glamorous friends. “I knew all of them.”

“Tay muna, give me a minute.” Dennis stretched his legs, and leaned back on the cell’s bars. “There was Consuelo, with the bright red lips; Angelica and her pale blue eyes; Vanessa the strawberry blonde; and *ahhh* —” he sighed, “—the last girl I danced with, that one was my favorite. It was like dancing with a butterfly, she was so light on her feet.”

“What was her name?” Eli asked.

“Lucinda.” Her name rolled out like a song in Dennis’s beer-graveled baritone.

Eli's eyes narrowed. The thought of his girl in the arms of this buffoon in a cheap suit sparked a long simmering rage. "You danced with Lucinda?"

"You bet I did. The other dancers were fine, but Lucinda, *ahhh*, that girl was memorable." Dennis smiled up at the ceiling, eyes half closed. "If the night turned out differently, I'd have—"

His sentence was cut short as Eli lunged at him and slammed him flat on the floor.

"Tarantado ka, that's *my* girl you're talking about." Eli clamped tight on Dennis's neck, his face twisted with rage.

"Patawarin," Dennis gasped an apology. "Please, kabayan—"

Countryman. The word stopped Eli cold. He shoved Dennis aside and sat back on his heels. A vein throbbed in his forehead.

Dennis scooted to the opposite corner. "I'm sorry, okay? How was I supposed to know she was your girl? All we did was dance, no hanky-panky, I swear."

"You must have done something bad to get kicked out of the dance hall." Eli glared at Dennis. "Benny's a good guy."

"What Benny? The bouncer's name was Sal," Dennis frowned. "Sal cheated me out of my last dance. When I complained, he kicked me out."

"Were you too drunk to remember which dance hall you were at? What is this—" Eli paused when he noticed the clove-scented grease Dennis's pomade had left on his hands. He rubbed them dry distractedly on his pee-stained pants. "Like I said, you're all mixed up. Benny's the bouncer at the Rizal. Sal tends bar at the Velvet Café."

"I know." Dennis spoke slowly, as though to a dim-witted child. "I danced with Lucinda at the Velvet Café."

"You're drunker than I thought." Eli shook his head. "Lucinda doesn't dance at the Velvet Café."

"She was dancing there last night."

"She works for Mamie Savage? When did she leave the Rizal?"

“How should I know?” Dennis said. “This is my first week in San Diego. I came down to work the harvest, y’know? Just my bad luck I get thrown out of the first dance hall I visit.”

“That wasn’t bad luck. That was Sal, giving you the bum’s rush. Wanna know what real bad luck is? Being Filipino in America.” Eli’s shoulders sagged under the weight of new worries. *Why did Lucinda leave the Rizal? Did Kiko suspect she was involved? Had Sal blackmailed her into working for Mamie?*

“You okay, kabayan?” Dennis asked. “You look like you seen a ghost.”

“Not a ghost.” Eli’s mind was spinning. *I may not survive, but I have to save Lucinda.* “At least, not yet.”

“You’re talking crazy.” Dennis loosened his tie. “What’re you in here for?”

Eli stared at him for a long moment. “I fell in love with the wrong girl.”

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Interview notes, Jimmy Wheeler*, San Diego Evening Tribune* Reporter

Kiko: *We lost a lot of customers after Amado was shot. Our customers were spooked. The newspaper stories made Amado look like a gangster. The worst ones suggested our dance hall was a front for a bordello—can you imagine?*

Dolores: *Sure, some girls went fishing, got their dates to spring for dinner, groceries, maybe a new coat. Not me, honey. I never slept with a guy for money.*

Benny: *I felt bad when Lucinda quit and went over to the Velvet Café, you know? She was our biggest draw. Never thought we'd see her again. Who knew Eli's arrest would bring her back to us?*

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CHAPTER 35

DANCE HALL KILLER CAUGHT

The *Evening Tribune* headline popped out from the newsstand. Lucinda quickly bought a copy. *San Diego police apprehended dance hall shooter Eli Mata at Old Saint Mary's Cathedral in San Francisco on Thursday . . .*

With rising dread, Lucinda read how Eli led the cops on a mad dash through Chinatown. She saw the article's byline: Jimmy Wheeler. *Oh, for God's sake—did he actually follow the cops up the coast?*

In truth, after Jimmy's first story on the Amado's murder appeared, she'd bought a copy of the *Tribune* every day and scoured every page for news about Eli. Every day that passed without news of his arrest fueled her hope that he'd escaped to Washington State, maybe even found a cannery job in Alaska.

But now the worst had happened. *At least he went peacefully.*

Lucinda and Eli had read about Bonnie and Clyde's violent death by ambush one long ago weekend in May. That day, she'd persuaded Eli to delay his return to the farm and they'd walked to Balboa Park with a fresh loaf of bread, some cheese, and the Sunday paper. *Just like an old married couple on a picnic,* Eli had teased. Nestled behind a tree that hid them from passersby, they pored over bloody photos of the gangster lovers. Their Ford Deluxe was so riddled with bullet holes, it looked like a colander with wheels.

"Jesus Christ," Eli muttered. "I thought they only did that to colored folk."

“Don’t be silly, dancing isn’t against the law.” Lucinda nibbled on warm sourdough. “Nothing bad ever happens at the Rizal.”

How wrong I was. Blinking back tears, Lucinda tucked the newspaper under her arm and continued down Market Street. As she reached the corner of Sixth and Market, “Puttin’ on the Ritz” broke through the fog of her despair. The jaunty swing song poured out of the Rizal Dance Hall’s second floor windows, flooding her with nostalgia. She missed Benny and Kiko’s old-fashioned gallantry, missed bantering with Oscarito and bumming cigarettes from Pepe. Still, pride stopped her from begging for her old job.

Too late for regret. As Lucinda walked the last three blocks to the Velvet Café, she wondered how she could possibly turn on the charm for random men that night, when the only man she cared for was Eli. Pinching her cheeks to raise some color, Lucinda pushed the Velvet Café’s door open.

Sal and Mamie huddled close, reading a newspaper spread across the bar.

“Well, well, well. Look who came early to work . . .” Sal’s smirk reminded Lucinda of a childhood tormentor, a boy from the next farm who’d once waved a dead squirrel at her.

Look what I killed with my slingshot, Lucy! It’s too small to cook, so I’m throwing it to the dogs.

She shook off the memory. “I prefer to come before the dressing room fills up, that’s all.”

“I like a girl who takes her job seriously.” Mamie winked. “In fact, we were just talking about you.”

“Good things, I hope?”

“That depends on what you think of Eli Mata.” Sal held up the newspaper they’d been reading. This tabloid’s headline was more lurid than the one in the *Evening Tribune*: *SHOOTER NABBED IN CHURCH.*

Lucinda ignored Sal’s leering grin and leveled a calm gaze at Mamie. “I s’pose I’d be more worried if they also found the gun.”

“Says here, they did,” Sal said. “Some hobo found it while rooting around the rubbish bin for food. Cops think it belongs to Eli.”

Jimmy had told Lucinda about the gun weeks ago. Sal was baiting her, but she refused to back down. “How would they know if Eli even owned a gun? He spent all his money on dance tickets.”

“You would know how Eli spent his money wouldn’t you, darling?” Mamie picked up her cigarette, whose long silver holder made it look like a fairy’s wand. “A little bird told me the two of you were a couple.”

“How did you . . .” Lucinda faltered. “We broke up the night Amado died.”

“Such lousy timing. If he dumped you, you should be suspicious,” Mamie said. “And if you were the one who left, I’d say you dodged a bullet.”

She and the bartender traded looks and laughed.

What if it was just a rotten coincidence? Lucinda tamped down her rising anger. “How did the police even know what Eli looked like? I haven’t seen any wanted posters at the post office, have you?”

Again, Sal’s cruel smirk. “Like they say, it pays to advertise.” Sal reached under the bar and handed another newspaper to Lucinda.

Lucinda’s heart skipped a beat when she saw the ad that had been Amado’s pride and joy. There she was, arched like the crescent moon in a perilous dip, Eli handsome as a matinee idol.

“Amado’s ad came out once a month, in just one Filipino newspaper. Who told the cops where to find it?” she demanded.

Sal leaned an elbow on the bar. “Remember Jimmy, the reporter—bad suit, worse dancer? When he kept asking questions, I showed him this ad. He must’ve passed the tip along to his buddies at the police station.”

There it was: Sal’s dead squirrel.

Lucinda was winding up to start a full-blown fight when the evening’s first customers strolled into the bar. She put on her workaday half-smile but

startled when one of the men patted her rump as he passed.

She swung around to slap him when a warning look from Mamie stopped her.

“Tignan mo—what did I tell you?” the customer grinned at his friend. “Come early and you get the pick of the lot.”

“Indeed, you get to buy the first dance with my best girl,” Mamie said, pouring on her practiced charm. “Most fellows wait all night to take Lucinda for a spin. Shall we start you off with a drink? I promise you won’t lose your place in line.”

“What can I pour you, kabayan?” Sal beckoned them to the bar.

“Excuse me, I need to powder my nose,” Lucinda said, smiling through gritted teeth as she walked to the ballroom. Who could have known the dance hall ad would aid in Eli’s arrest? If Sal had used Jimmy as a pawn, she was determined to do the same. She was no longer a child; she would not be bullied again.

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CHAPTER 36

As dusk fell on Saturday, Lucinda waited for Jimmy outside the *Evening Tribune*'s building. She was determined to extract every last detail about Eli's arrest before he wrote it down for the rest of the world to read. She could have saved time by going inside and asking for him but suspected she would cause a scene in her flashy taxi dancer frock and showgirl make-up. *If he doesn't come out soon, I'll be late for work*. Sal and Mamie be damned, this was more important.

The night before, she'd danced nonstop until the last song ended at 2 a.m., until her cheeks ached from smiling and her toes begged mercy. Rizal Dance Hall regulars who came to the café for a nightcap left the bar to dance with her.

Her patience was eventually rewarded when Jimmy trudged out of the building shortly before seven, staring into the middle distance, oblivious to the world. Unaware that he was being watched, he looked up at the evening sky and inhaled the crisp October air. Lucinda had never seen such an exhausted man. Everything drooped—from his rounded shoulders and rumpled shirt, down to his sagging trousers. She wrinkled her nose. He smelled as stale as he looked. Had he not written such terrible articles, Lucinda would almost have felt sorry for him. Almost.

"Welcome back, Wheeler."

Startling at the sound of Lucinda's voice, Jimmy wheeled around to see her clutching a rolled-up newspaper like a club.

"I read your story about Eli's arrest in San Francisco. Sal tells me he gave you that dance hall ad, that maybe you passed it on to the cops. Is that

how they found him?" Lucinda pointed the newspaper at him. "I knew you were a reporter. I didn't think you'd be a snitch."

"Give the cops credit for doing their job. They questioned folks at pool halls, gambling dens, barbershops. Found copies of that Filipino newspaper everywhere."

For a moment, Lucinda was speechless. It was too risky for women to venture into these male enclaves, let alone ones run by colored folk. *There's got to be another way.*

"You've got an in with Moynihan. Persuade him to let me see Eli. We need to talk."

"You're asking for the moon." Dark shadows hung like bruises beneath Jimmy's eyes. "Inspector Moynihan won't let me interview Eli."

"Why the hell not? Could you at least find out if they set bail? I've got some money saved up, maybe—" Lucinda bit her lip. "He's not going to hang, is he?"

"No one knows what'll happen until he goes to trial."

"It says you were with the cops when they arrested Eli; you wrote that here, didn't you? Didn't you?" Lucinda shook the paper.

"I was just doing my job," Jimmy sighed. "Aren't we all just trying to do our jobs?"

Lucinda stared at the reporter and relented. "Tell me what happened. Please."

"I wrote everything down in that article."

"The way you wrote everything down in the first article?" Lucinda scoffed. "You're holding out on me. I want the whole story."

"Walk with me." Jimmy turned his back on Market Street. They strolled in silence until they came to the darkened office buildings that marked the start of the business district.

"The way I wrote it in that article . . . it didn't exactly happen like that." Jimmy kept his eyes on the pavement. "While the cops were talking to the

priest, I spotted Eli sneaking beyond the church pews, so I tackled him. Moynihan made me leave that part out. He didn't want folks to know some cub reporter collared the perp."

"*You* caught him?" Lucinda's voice sharpened. "Why, I—"

"You ought to thank me, that's what you ought to do," Jimmy snapped. "If I weren't lying on top of Eli, the cops would've shot him."

Lucinda grabbed Jimmy's sleeve. "Did he say he shot Amado?"

"No."

"Do you believe him?"

"Doesn't matter what I believe. Without witnesses to say different, Eli's the only suspect. Unless someone else turns up, he's going to trial. The man's accused of murder. Best he can hope for is a life sentence, and the worst—" Jimmy wearily shook his head.

"There's got to be a way to prove Eli didn't do it," Lucinda insisted.

"Call me when you find it. Now if you'll excuse me, I gotta get back to work." Jimmy sidestepped Lucinda and turned back the way they'd come.

"Not so fast." Lucinda caught up to him. "Did those cops find out how Eli got that pistol they found in the trash bin?"

"No." Jimmy kept walking. "Why do you ask?"

"Because Eli didn't own a gun." Lucinda blocked Jimmy's path. "We were saving up to move to Seattle. Eli spent every spare dime on dance tickets. When Eli lost his job, money got tight. He stopped coming to the Rizal in August. If he couldn't afford dance tickets, how the hell could he buy a gun?"

Jimmy frowned. "Are you suggesting someone else shot Amado?"

"I'm suggesting Eli didn't have a gun," Lucinda said.

Jimmy thought for a moment. "Answer me this. You say it couldn't have been Eli, but who else would want Amado dead?"

"Not anyone at the Rizal," Lucinda said. "Maybe it's a coincidence, but Mamie's better off now that Amado's dead, that's for damn sure."

“How do you mean?” Jimmy asked.

“Business is booming at the Velvet Café. After Amado was killed, a lot of the Rizal’s regulars moved over to the Velvet Café. Some of them even invited dancers from the Rizal join them for drinks.” Lucinda sighed. “That never happened while Amado was alive. He didn’t allow his taxi dancers to date customers.”

“Why did Amado care where you went after hours?”

“Amado said he wanted to protect our morals, but I knew he only cared about money. Those Filipinos blew their week’s wages on Friday and Saturday nights, and Amado wanted them to spend it all on dancing at his place. The Rizal closes at midnight, but the Velvet Café stays open till 2 a.m. If fellas spent all their money on Mamie’s booze Friday night, there’d be nothing left for dance tickets on Saturday. That’s why Amado kept us from going to the Velvet Café after work. ‘Why help Mamie sell more drinks?’ he said. He fired anyone who broke the rules.”

“And did you all follow the rules?” Jimmy raised his eyebrows.

“Most of us did. But when two of his girls quit to dance at the Velvet Café, Amado threw a fit.” Lucinda smiled at the memory. “He was so mad, he wouldn’t even let them say goodbye to the rest of us. It was like he thought quitting was contagious.”

“But you left too, didn’t you?”

Lucinda stared at her shoes. “I couldn’t work there after Benny accused Eli of being involved in Amado’s murder.” She shrugged, offering Jimmy a sad smile.

Jimmy rocked back and forth on his heels. “I suppose Mamie must be tickled pink with all those customers coming over from the Rizal.”

“To hear her crow over the till you’d think she’d won the lottery.” Lucinda looked back at Market Street. Men were already gathering under neon signs like moths drawn to a bawdy flame.

“It may just be a coincidence that Mamie’s business picked up after the shooting.” Jimmy gave Lucinda a worried look. “That’s not reason enough to suggest she had something to do with Amado’s murder. I write about facts, not happenstance.”

“Well, then.” Lucinda lifted her chin, defiant. “I’ll work on getting you facts if you work on getting me in to see Eli. Deal?”

“Deal.”

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CHAPTER 37

Lucinda woke up gasping, drenched in cold sweat. She'd been chasing a shadowy figure through a labyrinth, come close enough to hear his ragged breath, reached out for his sleeve—then the sound of a car backfiring cut short her pursuit. She'd had the same dream many times since Eli had left. She'd never once caught the phantom. She howled frustration into her pillow, wishing the morning away.

In her bones she knew what the dream meant. *I've lost Eli*.

Lucinda curled into a ball, pushing away the impulse to weep. There was no time for tears.

Think. Did Mamie have anything to do with Amado's murder? If she did, why would she pin it on Eli? How had he crossed her? Only Eli could tell her.

The night before, Jimmy had made her promise to wait until he could arrange for her to see Eli in jail, but patience had never been Lucinda's strong suit. Perhaps she could visit with the pretext of delivering a present. *I'll tell the cops I just want to give him some cigarettes or chocolate*. *Surely they wouldn't turn me away*.

Energized by this new errand, she rolled out of bed and chose a gray shirtdress from her closet. It wasn't as flattering as her dance hall clothes, but its starched white collar and long sleeves made it modest enough for Sunday morning. Prim enough for a visit to church. Or prison.

She came downstairs to find Mrs. Moderow in the kitchen.

"Oh hello, Lucinda." The widow peered at the younger woman through narrow spectacles. "You're looking a bit pale. Would you like a cup of tea?

I just brewed a fresh pot."

"Thank you, ma'am, but I need to be on my way." Lucinda poked a finger under her collar and scratched. She was unaccustomed to wearing necklines this high; they made her itch.

"Best you stay out of the house. I'd hate to pass my cold on to you." Mrs. Moderow blew her nose on a tissue, then tucked it into her woolen sleeve. "Perhaps you could stop by the drugstore and get me a packet of Luden's Cough Drops?"

"Of course. Which flavor would you like—honey-licorice, lemon, or menthol?" Guilt over lying to the landlady about her job made Lucinda extra eager to please.

"You're a dear for asking. Menthol should clear this up straightaway. Do let me know how much I owe when you get back."

"Don't worry about it, Mrs. Moderow. It's the least I can do."



Lucinda strode down the block, composing the little speech she hoped would persuade Eli's jailers to let her see Eli. She turned at the sound of running footsteps.

"Miss Lucinda, wait up!"

Lucinda turned to see a skinny Filipino, hurrying to catch up with her. He was not much taller than she was, and too many washings had faded his thin coat and trousers to an indeterminate shade of gray.

"Do I know you?" she asked, ignoring his outstretched hand.

"I'm sorry, we have never met." His grin revealed teeth crammed so tight, they pushed against each other like buckled tiles. "I am Wings, Eli's friend. The one who works at the Sun Café."

Lucinda looked him over. His shabby clothes were a far cry from the stylish suits worn by Filipinos she danced with.

"How do you know Eli?"

“We grew up together. Do you have time to talk?”

Lucinda paused, torn by conflicting urges. On any other day she would have readily agreed to chat, but she was desperate to see Eli. “You can tell me about his childhood next time, I’m on an urgent errand.”

She turned to go, but Wings tugged at her sleeve. “Please, Miss Lucinda. I have a message for you from Eli.”

“You’re lying.” Lucinda yanked her arm away. “Eli’s in jail. Even I haven’t seen him yet. How did you get the cops to let you in?”

“They didn’t. Got word from this fella, Dennis Mesina. He came to looking for me at the Sun Café the other day. Said he was arrested for starting a fistfight at the Velvet Café Friday night. Cops threw him into Eli’s jail cell. He said he was dancing with you when Sal started the fight. Surely you remember him.”

“Sure, I remember Dennis.” Lucinda paused. “Lousy dancer, but sweet. Poor guy was no match for Sal.”

The scuffle was the dreadful finale of an unusually hectic night. Lucinda had been dancing nonstop for hours when Dennis strolled in from the bar. By then, it was past one in the morning and even the perkiest dancers had begun to wilt.

Dennis reeked of beer, but he plodded along to the rhythm, kept off her toes and never once made a pass. A nice drunk.

Over the years, Lucinda had learned that mediocre hoofers like Dennis were the easiest way to pass the night: They were more grateful than the showoffs and less chatty since they had to count their steps. She’d felt genuinely sorry for Dennis when Sal lit into him.

“What do you mean? I got one dance left,” Dennis insisted. He looked at Lucinda. “Isn’t that right, sweetheart?”

“How many tickets did he give you, Lucinda?” Sal glowered at Dennis.

“How the hell should I know? He handed me a bunch and I put ’em away without counting,” Lucinda said irritably. The café was due to close in

a few minutes, and she wanted nothing more than to go home and soak her feet.

“Look—” she gave Dennis a conciliatory smile. “The band’s about to play their last song, I don’t have time to count all the stubs in my stocking, so let’s just assume you gave me that last ticket. That okay with you, Sal?”

“I never assume anything.” Sal growled. “You know the rules. If he wants another dance, he’s gotta pay for it. Pony up,” Sal stuck his palm out.

“Like hell I will. The lady said I could have one more dance, and I’m takin’ it.” As the band launched into the opening bars of its next song, Dennis turned his back on Sal and reached for Lucinda’s waist. Before he could take her hand, Sal shoved him so hard that they were both thrown off balance.

“Jesus Christ!” Lucinda pulled away from Dennis in time to avoid falling.

Dennis stumbled forward, then wheeled around with a speed surprising for a man of his girth. “Putangina—” he charged at the bouncer.

Sal’s fist glanced off Dennis’s shoulder but failed to halt his momentum, and both men fell heavily to the floor. Someone screamed, other couples backed away, and the music ended abruptly as musicians onstage lowered their instruments to watch.

Sal was a good twenty pounds lighter than his assailant, but sobriety was on his side. Using one leg for leverage, Sal flipped Dennis over on his back, knees pinning him down as he pummeled the older man. He’d have beaten Dennis senseless but for the hand that caught his raised fist.

“That’s enough, Sal.” Mamie Savage loomed over the two men. “Can’t you see the bozo’s fried? Hand him over to the cops outside and call it a night.”

“You lucked out, mister.” Sal got off Dennis. “I won’t let you off so easy next time.”

“A thousand apologies, gentlemen and ladies.” Mamie flashed a crocodile smile at the other patrons. “Last dance is on us to make up for this unfortunate interruption.” She snapped at the bandleader. “Hit it, Jose!”

As the band launched into “Stompin’ at the Savoy,” Sal hauled Dennis up by one sleeve, tearing it at the seam. “Get up.”

“Easy, Sal. Haven’t you done enough?” Lucinda scolded. She stooped to retrieve a pocket kerchief from the floor and handed it to Dennis. “I’m sorry it didn’t work out,” she murmured.

“What’re you apologizing for? He knows the rules. C’mon, shake a leg.” Sal nudged Dennis’s shoulder. “I bet the cops can find you somewhere to stay tonight.”

As Sal hustled the disheveled man away, Lucinda suddenly felt more alone than she had been since Eli left her.

Hearing that Dennis had seen Eli gave Lucinda a surge of hope that morning.

“You said Dennis had a message from Eli?” She passed a hand over her eyes, though whether she was blinded by the sunlight or the threat of tears, she couldn’t tell.

“He wants you to quit working at the Velvet Café. He doesn’t trust Sal, doesn’t like you dancing with drunks.” Wings shoved his hands into his pockets. “He said you should go back to the Rizal. You’ll be safer there.”

“I can handle drunks.” Lucinda rolled her eyes.

“If you say so,” Wings said. “Just the same, Eli doesn’t want you working so close to Sal. You’ve seen how he gets when he’s angry.”

“Sal can’t hurt me. Mamie wouldn’t let him.”

“Mamie?” Wings snorted. “She’s a piece of work.” He clenched his jaw, chewing on a thought.

“What do you mean?” Remembering her agreement with Jimmy, Lucinda turned alert. *Find out if Sal and Mamie had anything to do with Amado’s murder.*

“Nothing.” Wings rocked back on one heel, staring at his scuffed shoes. “Eli doesn’t trust either of them. Neither do I. I think you should quit.”

“Why should I care what you think?” Lucinda hooked a hand on one hip. “You don’t even know them. Eli never mentioned them before he left town, and I was the last person he saw.”

“No. you weren’t. I gave Eli a ride out of town.”

“You helped him escape?” Lucinda’s eyes widened, feeling suddenly grateful for the scrawny man. “Weren’t you afraid the cops would find out?”

Wings scanned the street, as if expecting a paddy wagon to careen around the corner at any moment. “He’s my oldest friend. I had to help him.”

“Eli is dear to me too, Wings.” Lucinda grabbed his arm, afraid he would bolt. “Tell me what happened the last time you saw him.”

“I can’t.” Wings tried to pull away, but Lucinda hung on.

A car pulled up alongside them and slowed down. The driver hooked his elbow over the open window and scowled at Wings. “He givin’ you any trouble, miss?”

“No, everything’s fine,” Lucinda’s heart began to pound. “I was just telling my friend here that church service starts at noon. We have just enough time to get there if we walk quickly—” she turned to Wings, a warning in her eyes, “—isn’t that right?” She nodded at the man in the car. “Go on now, we’ll be on our way shortly.”

“Suit yourself.” the man sounded skeptical, but he put his car in gear, then drove away.

“You’d have been in a real fix if I hadn’t put that guy off.” Lucinda tightened her grip on Wings’s arm. “You owe me. What exactly happened?”

“Eli turned up at my place the morning after Amado was shot,” Wings said. “He looked like he’d slept in dirt the night before, and his neck was

bloody. Said he had to leave town, and quick, but first he needed me to collect some money Mamie owed him for a job he did."

"How much did she owe him?" Lucinda's heart sank. "What did she hire him to do?"

"He didn't say." Wings raked fingers through his uncombed hair. "Must've been a big job because he said she owed him five hundred dollars."

Lucinda released Wing's arm, shocked. *Did Mamie pay Eli to murder Amado?* The thought lodged like a splinter in her heart. She felt suddenly vulnerable standing out on the bright sidewalk in her drab church lady dress, with a man who claimed to be Eli's friend.

"And did Mamie pay him?"

Wings shook his head. "He sent me to the Velvet Café to collect, but all she would give me was fifty bucks. See what I mean? It's like I kept telling him—white folk never keep their word."

"We're not all bad," Lucinda said, with little conviction.

"Maybe Mamie would've paid Eli in full if he went to the Velvet Café himself, but he was spooked. Said he had to leave right away. So, I drove him to San Juan Capistrano."

Lucinda rubbed her hot forehead. "I'm glad you told me."

"You won't tell Mamie or Sal will you?" Alarm crossed Wings's face.

"No, Wings, I won't. You have my word on that."

"And you'll quit dancing at Velvet Café, like Eli asked?" Wings fished a cigarette out of his pocket but left it unlit, rolling it between his fingers like a worry bead.

"Not till I find out why Mamie owes him so much money," Lucinda replied, new resolve stilling the tremor in her voice.

"Be careful, Miss Lucinda. Eli will never forgive me if something happened to you."

“I’ll be fine.” Lucinda smoothed down her gray skirt. “I’m more worried about what could happen to Eli. I need to see about getting him out of jail.”

“How you going to swing that?”

“I don’t know yet. Maybe my friend Jimmy can help figure it out.” She forced herself to smile at Wings. “I’ll look for you at the Sun Café, soon as I have any news.”

Lucinda hurried over to the *Evening Tribune*’s offices but was dismayed to find the doors locked. She’d forgotten the newspaper didn’t print a Sunday edition. She kicked herself for not finding out where Jimmy lived, nor even what diner he frequented.

There was only one other place she could think he might go on a slow Sunday, a place that was open all week. Maybe she would find him there. Turning on her heel, she headed for the police station.

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CHAPTER 38

Lucinda strode briskly into the station, heels clicking sharp on the wide terrazzo floor. Two officers glanced up as she passed, then returned to their muttered conversation. She had no idea where to begin looking for Jimmy but assumed one of them could tell her what to do. Cops were always telling people what to do.

"Can I help you, miss?" asked the duty officer. He stood at a dark wood podium that resembled Kiko's conductor stand, only twice as wide.

"I'm looking for someone." To her dismay, Lucinda couldn't remember the name of the detective who'd questioned her the night Amado was murdered. Only one name mattered to her. *Eli Mata*. Lucinda glanced down the hallway of doors that stretched to the left and right of the podium, wondering which one led to the jail cells. Eli was trapped somewhere in this cold building. She was determined to find him.

"Miss?"

"Pardon me," Lucinda put on her best taxi dancer smile, the one that drew men across a ballroom to pay for a minute in her arms. "I'm looking for the police officer who's investigating a murder."

"Which murder?" The officer harrumphed. He gripped the edges of his desk as though he were about to deliver a sermon. "There's the old lady stabbed in Kensington, the Chinaman drowned by the docks, the baby bludgeoned in his crib on Twenty-Sixth—"

"Stop, please," Lucinda said, holding up a hand. "Amado Barrios was shot dead at the Rizal Dance Hall last month. The story's been in the headlines for weeks. I'd like to talk to the officer investigating that case."

“That’d be Inspector Moynihan. He’s a regular celebrity now.” The officer beamed at her. “You one of them church ladies from the Purity League?”

“Goodness, no.” Lucinda grimaced at her dowdy dress. She’d been called many unpleasant things, but somehow *church lady* stung sharpest. “Why do you ask?”

“Yesterday, Mrs. Fitzgerald from the Purity League had her Filipino driver take a fresh baked apple pie to Inspector Moynihan.” His grin revealed tobacco-stained teeth. “You’d think he was handing over the crown jewels, he acted so uppity. Said the ladies wanted to thank Moynihan for nabbing the murderer.”

“How do they know he’s the murderer? There hasn’t even been a trial yet.”

“Whatever.” The officer puffed out his barrel chest. “Anyway, you’re out of luck. Moynihan doesn’t come in on Sunday.”

“Do you know where I might find him?”

“Nope,” the officer replied. He looked over his spectacles at the blotter on the podium, *tch-tch*ing as he ran a finger down the page.

Too late Lucinda realized that the officer would have been more forthcoming if she’d pretended to be a Purity League lady. She cleared her throat. “Well maybe you can help me find that reporter who’s been covering the case, Jimmy Wheeler. Tall, skinny, freckles? He writes for the *Evening Tribune*.”

“Yeah, I know him. Kid follows Moynihan around like a puppy.”

“Do you know where I might find him? Maybe he follows Inspector Moynihan around even on his day off.”

The officer sucked on his teeth, flipped pages on his blotter, and hummed a tuneless melody but avoided answering Lucinda’s question. She waited.

Finally, he looked up, annoyed she hadn’t left. “They sometimes have coffee at the Goodwill Café.” He leaned over the podium, close enough for Lucinda to see a lone gray hair curling out his left nostril. “Why’re you so interested in this case? You sweet on that killer?”

Lucinda cut a venomous look at him. “Have a good day, officer.” Not waiting for a reply, she stalked out of the police station.



Jimmy spent Sundays in a back booth of the Goodwill Café, drafting notes for his next article. Working in a warm room that smelled of coffee and thrummed with conversation kept him from feeling lonely on a day usually spent with family.

He was on his third cup of coffee when Lucinda walked in. He watched with rising trepidation as she surveyed the crowded diner, gaze flitting from table to table, until she landed on his. She strolled toward him, smiling as though she’d come late for a lunch date.

“How did you know I’d be here?” Jimmy asked, as she slid into the red banquette.

“I got my own sources.” She folded hands on the table. “We need to talk.”

“You never stop, do you? What now?”

Lucinda opened her mouth to speak but was interrupted by the rumble of her empty stomach. She blushed. “I’m sorry. I woke up late and skipped breakfast.”

“Lucky you tracked me down here.” Jimmy waved the waitress over.

“I can pay for my own lunch.” Lucinda ordered quickly then turned back to Jimmy. “What did Moynihan say about Eli? When can I visit?”

“Didn’t you just ask me about that last night? I’ll talk to Inspector Moynihan first thing Monday morning. First person Eli needs to talk to is a lawyer.”

“Ask Moynihan if I can see him right after that. I have news that could help Eli.” Lucinda quickly recounted Wings’s failed attempt to collect Eli’s money from Mamie. “Think about the headline: *Dance Hall Murder Conspiracy.* It could be your biggest scoop. Get me in to see Eli and I’ll get you all the details.”

Lucinda watched the reporter take notes on his pad. “Will you help me?”

“You’re a regular Nancy Drew, aren’t you?’

“Never heard of her,” Lucinda sniffed.

“Never mind,” Jimmy sighed. “The conspiracy theory would be a great angle, but only if you could prove it. It’s Wings’s word against Mamie’s. Who do you think a jury would believe—a Filipino or an American? You know Mamie. That woman could charm a snail out of its shell.”

“Eli’s no snail.” Lucinda smoothed a wayward curl. “Mamie must have done something to force his hand. Maybe Sal threatened him. It must have been something awful; Eli doesn’t scare easy.”

“Maybe, but he’s right about wanting you to quit working at the Velvet Café. If Mamie and Sal were involved in Amado’s murder, you don’t want them to find out you’ve been snooping around.”

“Have you gone off your rocker?” Lucinda narrowed her eyes at the reporter. “I can’t leave now. I need to find out if Mamie offered Eli money to kill Amado.”

“Did she really need to kill him, though? Aren’t there enough Filipinos to keep both dance halls busy?”

“Doesn’t matter. Mamie doesn’t want to share. Amado had better dancers and a better band, so most fellas came to the Rizal first.”

“I suppose that took a bite out of Mamie’s business,” Jimmy said.

“Sure it did. Now she’s got those customers and their cash to herself.”

“So, you really think she paid Eli to whack Amado? Even if she stiffed him, how does that help?” Jimmy put down his pen. “He’d hang for the

murder just the same."

"Except Mamie didn't pay him in full," Lucinda argued. "All she gave Wings was 50 lousy bucks. So maybe Eli didn't do the job right."

"Amado's *dead*, isn't he? I'd say he got the job done, all right."

Lucinda paused as the waitress set a tuna melt and a glass of soda on the table then went on. "But what if someone *else* had to do the job for him?" She jabbed the formica tabletop so hard, the ice in her soda clinked. "Maybe she didn't pay him in full because someone else shot Amado."

"No one said anything about another shooter."

"No one saw who came up to the lobby." Lucinda pushed her sandwich aside. "Nelly was asleep behind the coat check counter, the rest of us were in the ballroom. A bunch of hoods could've been in the lobby, and no one would have been the wiser." Lucinda's voice rose. A couple sitting at the next table glanced in their direction.

"Calm down, will you?" Jimmy slid the plate back in front of her. "Eat your sandwich and let me think."

Lucinda wolfed her sandwich down in quick angry gulps, stopping now and then for a slug of soda.

Jimmy scribbled notes, forehead sunk in the heel of one hand. "So far, we got a possible motive for Mamie and maybe another gunman which *maybe* adds up to a conspiracy. If we found enough evidence for Moynihan to arrest Mamie on that charge, Eli's lawyer could work that into his defense. If you're right, this would be a scoop—but how do I write this story without throwing you in the lurch? I worry about what Sal would do to you."

"I'll worry about Sal." Lucinda crossed forearms on the table. "So, what's the plan?"

"Jesus, you sound like my editor. I'll talk to Moynihan tomorrow morning. He'll know what to do," Jimmy began. "Then maybe we could talk to Eli's lawyer."

“You want to wait till tomorrow?” Lucinda’s tone was mutinous. “If we talk with Moynihan now, maybe he’ll let me see Eli today.”

“It’s Sunday, for crying out loud. Can’t a fella have one day of peace?”

“Doesn’t Eli deserve peace too?” Lucinda’s eyes blazed. “It may be your scoop for the *Tribune*, but my man’s life is on the line.”

Jimmy put his pen down. “Eli isn’t going anywhere anytime soon.”

“Fine. If you can’t help me, I’ll just do it myself.”

“Do what yourself?”

“Find more evidence.” With a swish of her skirt, Lucinda slid out of the booth. “Gotta get to work.”

“Don’t do anything foolish, now.” A look of alarm crossed Jimmy’s face.

“Foolish is letting Eli hang for a crime he didn’t commit. What time can I see Moynihan tomorrow?”

“Meet me in front of the station at nine.” Jimmy rubbed his forehead. “Please, Lucinda. Promise you’ll be careful.”

“I quit being careful when I fell for Eli. See you tomorrow.”

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CHAPTER 39

Lucinda strolled to the Velvet Café as the flaming sun sank into the bay. She'd prepared for that evening with the care of an assassin polishing his knives: kohl to give her eyes a feline tilt, rouge to flush her lips, and beneath her coat, a dress the color of twilight whose bugle beads grazed her shins.

She walked in on a gust of cold air.

"You're even earlier than usual," Sal said.

"I was at loose ends." Lucinda shrugged off her coat. "Figured I could use some company . . . or maybe just gin."

Lucinda slid onto a barstool and crossed her legs high on the thigh, the better to straighten her spine. She'd never paid much attention to the bar's bordello-like décor but tonight its scarlet walls felt oppressive. She suddenly remembered Amado face down in a pool of blood, red as the velvet drapes that for now concealed a view of Third Avenue. *A room the color of death*.

She nodded at the newspaper on the counter. "Is that yesterday's paper?"

"You guessed it. Looks like Eli's going to trial soon." He leaned an elbow on the bar and leered at her. "Think he'll hang?"

"Too soon to tell." Lucinda's shrug was indifferent, but her gaze could cut glass. "How about a drink?"

Sal smiled and slapped two shot glasses on the bar. "Gin, you said?"

"Make it a double. Neat." Lucinda perched her chin on one fist and offered a coquettish smile. She'd started a dangerous game; one she

believed Sal would lose.

Sal clinked his glass against hers. “What should we drink to?”

“Love. Death. Vindication. Take your pick.” Lucinda lifted her glass, tossed it back. The gin tore a seam down her throat. She curled her tongue around the last drop and nodded at Sal. “Hit me again.”

This time she dawdled, making small circles with her glass on the *Trib’s* front page.

“Watch it. That isn’t a damn coaster.” Sal slid the newspaper out from under her glass and folded it carefully on the console behind him.

“Why do you care?” Lucinda said. “Old newspapers are only good for wrapping fish.”

“Bull. *My* old newspaper helped catch a killer.” Sal grinned at Lucinda, the gap from his absent canine dark as a mouse hole in the wall of teeth. He downed a second shot of gin then waved the empty glass at Lucinda. “If I hadn’t tipped off that reporter, the cops would never have found Eli. Shouldn’t I have gotten a reward for that?”

Lucinda hid her disgust with a smile. “For showing Amado’s dance hall ad to some reporter? We sold twice as many tickets after it came out in the newspaper. Amado was so grateful he gave Eli another free month of dances.”

“Is that *all* Eli got for free?”

Lucinda’s anger rose like mercury in a thermometer. She doused it with another slug of gin. “Why do you ask, Sal? You *jealous*?”

Sal stared at her with an unblinking reptilian gaze. “What kind of fool d’you take me for? I know Eli wanted to marry you. He told me so himself.”

“When did he—when did you see Eli?” Lucinda caught her reflection in the mirrored shelves behind the bar: she’d turned so pale, her kohl-lined eyes looked like bruises. *Why would Eli confide in Sal?*

“I thought you knew.” Sal’s stare slithered up to meet Lucinda’s.

She sought courage in her shot glass but found it empty. “Eli didn’t tell me everything. I had to find out from someone else that Mamie owed him money for some job he did for her.”

Sal narrowed his eyes. “Where’d you hear that?”

“A little bird told me.” Lucinda knew she had reached perilous terrain, but the gin propelled her forward. “What could he possibly do that was worth $500?”

“That’s none of your business,” Sal said.

“Eli *is* my business. And I want to know why Mamie didn’t pay him what she owed,” Lucinda shoved her shot glass across the bar. “. . . Unless maybe if you filched his pay.”

“You little bitch.”

“That’s rich—a monkey calling me a bitch—” The moment the insult left her lips, Lucinda knew she’d gone too far.

Sal lunged for her just as the ballroom door swung open and Mamie strolled in. The sequins on her bodice shimmered like chain mail as she approached the bar.

“Am I interrupting something?” Mamie looked askance at Sal and Lucinda.

Lucinda exhaled, smoothing a curl that had come askew. Sal snapped a dish towel off its hook and began polishing the bar.

“We were just talking,” Lucinda said. That night Mamie smelled like an exotic forest: sandalwood, patchouli, and civet. She seized on the distraction. “Is that a new perfume you’re wearing, Mamie? It’s divine.”

“*Tabu.* It’s French. My ex-husband had it delivered yesterday.” Mamie held her wrist up to Lucinda’s nose. “I make him send me a bottle every year. Keeps him in his place.” She nodded at the bottle of gin. “I see you started the party without me.”

“Just having a drink before my shift begins. I’ll pick up the tab with tonight’s wages.”

“Attagirl.” Mamie looked over her shoulder at the sound of someone tapping out notes on a piano. “Lucinda, could you see if the band needs anything before they start their first set? I need to pull back these drapes.”

“Right away.” Lucinda all but ran to the ballroom. She remembered Wings’s warning. *Remember what Sal did to Dennis’s face.*

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CHAPTER 40

Mamie waited until the ballroom door shut behind Lucinda. “Darling, you looked fit to slit her throat.” She slipped a cigarette into its silver holder and cupped a hand over the Zippo lighter Sal held up. Pulling away, she stared at him through the gauze of smoke. “What happened?”

“I let on that Eli told me about their plan to elope. Now she knows he came here before Amado was shot.”

“I wish you’d been more discreet—”

“She thinks I snitched on Eli because I showed that reporter the dance hall ad.”

“Who cares what she thinks? One might argue you were simply helping the cops find a killer. Being a good citizen and all that.”

“Sure I was.” Sal cracked his knuckles. “But she also knows you stiffed Eli five hundred dollars for the job. What if she—”

“Who told her?” Mamie’s tone sharpened. “She hasn’t seen Eli since he was arrested, has she?”

“I don’t know. Maybe Eli told that reporter who was with the cops when they arrested him. Word travels.”

“Doesn’t matter. Eli’s their only suspect.” Mamie blew smoke at the pressed tin ceiling. “Perhaps we should watch the trial. We need a guilty verdict, but quick, to shut the Rizal down for good. Fellas like to dance more than they like to drink, and I need all of Amado’s business. If I don’t start making more money soon, I might as well move back to Oakland.”

“And leave me behind?” Sal asked.

“You know how it goes.” Mamie winked. “No money, no honey.”

“And if Lucinda messes with the trial?”

“Girls like that come a dime a dozen these days. She’s a runaway. If someone whacked her, nobody would notice.”

“Just say the word.”

“Soon, darling. Soon.”

While Benny routinely shut the ballroom doors at the Rizal when dancing commenced, Mamie kept hers open to the bar all night, believing the view would entice drinkers to buy dance tickets. *Give men a nibble and they’ll want the whole meal*. Dancing made her customers thirsty for beer and watching taxi dancers made them hunger for women; the cycle went on all night long.

As added bait, Mamie directed her dancers to smile at bar patrons as they twirled past the wide doorway. Each time Lucinda smiled toward the bar that night, she saw only Sal who stared as though he were keeping her in his cross-hairs. Fear played havoc with her rhythm; she tripped over her partners and banged into nearby couples.

Her trepidation increased when Mamie and Sal traded places midway through the night. It was part of their routine. Mamie coaxed the men at the bar to buy more drinks, while Sal kept drunks in the ballroom from getting rowdy.

Any other night, Lucinda would have been grateful for a bouncer’s protection; now Sal’s proximity unnerved her. *Wings and Jimmy were right. I should have left when I had the chance.*

After Sal ushered the remaining drunks out the door at 2 a.m., Lucinda found herself last in line to claim her wages. Mamie took an inordinately long time counting up Lucinda’s stubs. She plucked out fifty cents before handing over Lucinda’s pay. “For those drinks you had earlier.”

“Of course. I’ll be on my way now.” Lucinda sensed something was off. Sal was usually everywhere at this time, retrieving glasses from tables,

wiping down the bar. Tonight, he was nowhere to be seen. She fumbled with the buttons on her coat, anxiety rising.

“Where’s Sal?”

“I sent him upstairs for cigarettes.”

Lucinda suspected Mamie was lying. Was Sal waiting to ambush her outside? Sunday nights were usually slow in the Stingaree; by now the streets would be completely deserted. Most men headed back to the farms before midnight, since the harvest crews set out before dawn. If Sal came out of the shadows and took her for a ride, no one would be the wiser for it.

“Go on home now and get your beauty sleep.” Mamie looked slantwise at Lucinda. “It’s late. Things go bump in the night around in these parts . . . but you already know that don’t you, darling?”

That sounded like a threat, but Lucinda could find no reason to dally. The other girls had long left, and now she would have to walk home alone.

She glanced at the wall clock above the bar. It would be well past three by the time she got home if she walked fast. Sooner if she ran. Lucinda put on her cloche hat and pushed open the door.

She stepped out into the moonless night, just as the Velvet Café’s neon marquee flickered off. All the storefronts were shuttered and dark; the nearest streetlamp glowed dimly three blocks away. Lucinda knew the way home well enough to walk there in her sleep, but tonight, fear made her keenly sensitive to the slightest sound, the smallest movement in this city of shadows.

She strode briskly up Third toward Market Street, scanning every alley for the silhouette of Sal. If he gave chase, she’d be unable to outrun him in these high-heeled shoes. Could she at least fight back?

Remembering a bit of advice Dolores had once offered, Lucinda pulled a jeweled hatpin from her cloche and made a fist around the rhinestone butterfly so that its sharp end stuck out between her middle fingers like a small stiletto. Lucinda imagined stabbing Sal, his blood spraying out when

she opened a vein. *Could I do it?* She jabbed the night air with her makeshift dagger. To save her life, she would.

The clatter of bottles splintered the stillness and Lucinda wheeled around, hatpin raised and ready to strike. A stray cat leaped out of a rubbish bin across the street and skittered down the block. “Oh for God’s sake, get a hold of yourself.” She hurried onward.

Mist crept in from the bay, swaddling buildings and streetlamps in a damp, oceanic gauze. Soon it would completely obscure the streets and conceal a stalker. Fearing Sal lay in wait under the eaves of a store, she scurried along the very edge of the curb. She’d nearly reached Market Street when a car swerved around the corner and screeched to a stop in front of her. Blinded by the headlights, Lucinda flung an arm over her eyes, dropping the hatpin as she staggered back.

“Lord almighty,” Lucinda gasped, as she scanned the ground for her only weapon. She spotted something glittering in the street and lunged for it.

“Get away!” She backed away from the car waving the hatpin like a sword.

She heard a rustling from inside the car—*does Sal have a gun?* Without warning, its headlights flicked off. Lucinda’s heart stopped.

“Miss Lucinda, it’s me, Wings!” The driver stuck his head out the window. “I’ve been looking for you. Get in. I will take you home.”

Lucinda peered into the car’s window and recognized Eli’s friend. “Jesus Christ, you scared me half to death!” She slid into his car, slammed the door shut and rolled up the window. “Who told you I needed a ride?”

“No one. Just thought I should.” Wings gave her a sidelong glance as he pulled away from the curb. “Last time we talked, it sounded like you aimed to go after Sal. No one does that and lives to talk about it. When I got off work at Sun Café, I took Sweet Caroline out for a drive. Thought I’d check up on you.”

“Sweet Caroline?” Lucinda looked over her shoulder; the back seat was empty. “Is that your girl?”

“In my dreams,” Wings chuckled. “Caroline was a taxi dancer in San Francisco. Broke my heart *and* my wallet. So, I named my car after her.” He thumped the steering wheel. “Now Sweet Caroline goes where I tell her to go, instead of the other way around.”

“You’re a hoot.” Sighing with relief, Lucinda released the hatpin. She’d gripped it so tightly that the rhinestones had cut the skin of her palm. “Thanks for coming to get me. I thought Sal would jump me after tonight’s argument.”

“You sure you don’t want to go back to the Rizal?” Wings steered the car slowly through the heavy fog. “Benny would never punch a girl.”

“I would, if Kiko will have me.” Lucinda slumped against the car seat. “But first I need to talk that cop into letting me see Eli. I need to find out who really killed Amado.”

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CHAPTER 41

"Should've killed the bitch last night," Sal muttered. He lay on his cot and stared at the mold-stained ceiling of his bedroom above the Velvet Café. He could hear Mamie puttering around the bar downstairs, but he was in no rush to get up. The Velvet Café was closed on Monday night and he had the entire morning to brood. Not killing Lucinda wasn't the first time he'd regretted his lack of resolution.

Looking back on the decades-long journey that had taken him from a hardscrabble life in the islands to skid row in San Diego, Sal wondered if he'd been cursed by ambivalence. His very appearance suggested equivocation. On the other end of the ocean, he was a mestizo, the accidental spawn of a Filipino laundress and a Texan infantryman, one of thousands who had ravaged the countryside and its women during the Philippine-American war. On these shores, he was a half-bred bastard.

Young Sal realized early on that his mother had neither fortune nor the connections to advance his position in Manila. As soon as he came of age, Sal enlisted in the American Navy. Fate had dealt him a lousy hand of cards; the best he could do was play it at another table. But a short fuse and propensity for brawling led to his dishonorable discharge soon after his ship docked in San Diego.

Out of work and homeless in a foreign country, Sal scrambled to find work. He'd heard countless stories about the Stingaree's taxi dancers and, on the advice of one of his shipmates, headed straight for the Rizal Dance Hall. Because he could land a punch and use a fan knife with lethal facility, he believed he could easily land work as a bouncer.

But there was space for only one bouncer at the Rizal, and Benny had already claimed it. Put off by Sal's arrogance, Amado suggested he try his luck at the Velvet Café. Sal tromped over to the other dance hall, ready to punch the next person to reject him.

To his surprise, Mamie offered him a soft landing. She gave Sal an appraising look, hand on her hip and a saucy tilt to her chin.

"My, my," Mamie clucked approvingly. "I haven't seen such a good-looking mulatto since I left New Orleans,"

"Never been to New Orleans, but I bet I can mix a drink as good as any you'll find over there," Sal countered.

"Is that right? Where are you from?"

"Manila. I left the Navy a month ago. I'd stay in San Diego if I could find a job."

"Ahh, Filipino. I've always had a soft spot for men from the islands." Mamie poured him a shot of whiskey. "My father and uncle served in the army and spent five years over there civilizing the natives. I'd say they did their job right. Shall we drink a toast to the islands?"

On her second shot of whiskey, Mamie offered a second reason for her fondness of Filipinos: she'd dallied with more than a few. Each one had been uncommonly grateful, eager to please, and incredibly easy to manipulate.

"I must say, you're one of the palest Filipinos I've ever met. And your eyes, they're nearly as green as mine. Do you think your father was an American?" Mamie poured herself another drink.

"I know he was. Every time my mother beat me, she'd blame the damn gringo for giving her such a stubborn son." Sal remembered the slipper, the belt, the wooden spoon, the broom handle. *I'll beat your father's bad blood out of you if it's the last thing I do.* "She'd smack me for each of his three names. Whipped me so many times I should have gotten the damn name tattooed on my ass. Miles Rutherford Savage. What kind of name is that?"

Mamie gave him an odd look. “The kind of name my uncle had. What year were you born?”

“1904. You?”

“None of your damn business. Let’s just say I was a little girl by the time you showed up. Father and Uncle Miles sailed back from the islands in 1903.”

A moment of shock passed as each one considered the significance of this relation: Sal, newly hopeful that he’d land a job; Mamie, disappointed over losing a potential conquest.

“My mother didn’t even know she was pregnant till Miles Savage left Manila. When she began to show, her father kicked her out of the house. No one would marry a girl with a bastard child, let alone one fathered by the enemy.” Sal stared into his empty glass. “Till the day she died, she prayed he would come back to meet his son. Never happened.”

“Couldn’t have happened anyway.” Mamie refilled Sal’s glass. “Uncle Miles died of syphilis months after he came back from that war. Then the Spanish flu killed Father and Mother. So. It appears we are related.” Mamie raised her glass. “Welcome to the family, at least what’s left of it.”

She hired him that night.

Sal may have been infatuated with his cousin back then, but he was no romantic. If he’d learned anything from his mother’s ruinous fling, it was that to fall in love was to lay bare the underbelly, to expose the tender neck, to yearn for someone who might never love you back. Falling in love was a fool’s errand, and Sal had resolved to never be that stupid.

When Sal learned weeks earlier of Eli’s plan to elope with Lucinda, his first impulse was to grind those feckless dreams to dust. But not before he put the lovesick chump to good use.

Now how do we handle Lucinda? Sal yawned widely and rolled out of bed. Perhaps Mamie had ideas.

Sal walked downstairs and found Mamie at the bar dawdling over her usual breakfast of coffee and cigarettes.

“Good morning, love,” Mamie waved her cigarette holder at Sal.

“Someone’s in a good mood.” Sal slid onto a bar stool and lit his first cigarette of the day.

“Why shouldn’t I be? Eli’s about to be tried for murder. I’d bet good money he’ll hang.”

“Aren’t you worried about Lucinda?” Sal asked. “The girl’s been asking too many questions. I should have taken care of her last night.”

“Really, darling, why waste a bullet? No one cares about girls like Lucinda, least of all the stand-up members of a jury. They think dancers are a poor man’s whores. When you can’t buy the milking cow, you settle for a pint. That’s what she is, a pint of sour milk. What could she possibly say that could sway a jury?”

“Still . . .” Sal blew a stream of smoke at the mirror behind the bar. “That girl’s got a mind like a bear trap. She’ll do anything to save her man. She aims to find out why you offered Eli $500 for the job.”

“Very well. If the little hussy becomes a problem, you’re welcome to do what you think is necessary. You have such a way with the ladies, don’t you?”

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CHAPTER 42

A guard cuffed Eli's wrists to the chair arms before ushering a tall man into the room policemen used to interrogate suspects. The man set his briefcase on the table as if it were a chess board, then sat with an almost mechanical stiffness. Every part of the man appeared incapable of slouching: socks, collar, ears, and the ends of his short gray hair, which stood in a double cowlick.

"Elias Mata? Fenton Halliday, Esq., I'm the public defender assigned to your case." Halliday extended a hand, then noticed Eli's were chained to his chair.

"Guard, please remove my client's handcuffs." Halliday's tone was curt. He sounded to Eli like someone who was used to getting his way. This would be a good thing, if Halliday's way meant getting him acquitted.

After the prison guard had released Eli's wrists, Halliday started over.

"That's more like it. Pleased to meet you, Mr. Mata." He gave Eli's hand a firm shake.

Mr. Mata. No gringo had ever addressed him with such respect. Hope flickered in Eli's chest. "My parents were the only ones who called me Elias. Please, call me Eli."

"Very well, Eli. Before we anything, I must inform you that I wholly disapprove of dance halls, disapprove of men with questionable origins consorting with women of dubious morals. Be that as it may, I was assigned to represent you in court. To that end, I shall strive to resolve this case as quickly and with as little aggravation as possible. First, I will take your defendant's statement. After that, I will likely advise you to present a plea

of manslaughter. I have counseled defendants like yourself all the time—drunks, reckless drivers, husbands who beat their wives and occasionally killed them. While I endeavor to understand my clients' extenuating circumstances, I will admit I struggle to sympathize with them. Nevertheless, everyone has a right to legal counsel, and it is my job to provide it."

"Fair enough." Eli rubbed his chafed wrists.

Halliday took a folder from his briefcase. "Do you realize you've been front page news for weeks? For whatever reason, someone at the *Evening Tribune* has taken a keen interest in the murder you are alleged to have committed."

Eli sensed disapproval in the lawyer's voice. *How will this lawyer get me acquitted if he doesn't even believe I'm innocent?* He shifted in his seat, concealing his disappointment with nonchalance. "That word you used—*alleged.* Does 'alleged' mean they aren't sure I'm guilty?"

"That's what it means, yes. That's why we're going to trial."

Eli couldn't tell whether Halliday frowned because he was concerned or irritated. *He's concerned. Definitely concerned.* "What can I do to prove I am innocent?"

"You can start by providing your recollection of the incident," Halliday said. "I've read the papers and police reports, so now . . ." He pulled a legal pad from his briefcase and set it on the table. "Why don't you tell me what happened on the night of September 22?"

Eli stared silently at the yellow pad. He'd seen some of those headlines, most of them were lies. *Will this lawyer twist my words to make them match those police reports, those newspaper stories?*

Eli gave his lawyer a blank look. "I got nothing to say."

"I don't believe you have nothing to say. And if you want me to present a competent defense, you'd better level with me now." Halliday's tone was calm, if not quite reassuring.

“Why should I tell you anything? You already think I’m guilty, just like everyone else.” Eli leaned back. “If you’re on my side, why did you read the police reports before seeing me? Shouldn’t you have come to me first?”

Halliday pinched the narrow bridge of his nose, as if to stop a headache. Eli wondered what part of his own body he could pinch to stop an impending execution.

“Let’s start over.” Halliday sounded weary but resolute. “Were you or were you not at the Rizal Dance Hall on the night of September 22?” Halliday set pen to pad, waiting for Eli’s answer.

“I was.”

“And did you shoot Amado Barrios?”

“No.” Mata reached up to rub the long scar on his neck. “I mean, yes.”

“Well did you, or didn’t you?” Halliday’s eyebrows rose above the wire rims of his spectacles as he stared down the long slope of his nose at Eli. “I should tell you most of my clients immediately deny any wrongdoing. It’s a knee jerk reaction, even after I show them evidence proving otherwise. You on the other hand, seem almost ready to confess to murder. Are you?” Halliday leaned across the table. “What’s it going to be, Mata? Did you or did you not shoot Amado Barrios?”

“If I said I didn’t, would anyone believe me?” Eli looked at the red line of torn skin on his wrists.

“Don’t waste my time on hypotheticals, boy.” Halliday rapped his fountain pen on the table. “All I want to know is who killed that dance hall owner. After that, we can figure out how you will plea. Go on, now. Spit it out.”

Eli dragged a hand over his chapped lips and released a weary sigh. “I went to the Rizal just before midnight. I could not afford dance tickets, but I wanted to see a girl who worked there. I went upstairs to the lobby, but Amado would not let me into the ballroom. We began to argue and I—” His fingers feathered across his stubbled jaw.

“And you what?”

“I couldn’t . . . I didn’t—” Eli scraped off the scab on his neck to reveal a pink crescent of irritated flesh.

“Good lord, boy,” Halliday snapped. “Stop fussing with that wound and tell me what happened next.”

“I didn’t mean to pull the gun on him, but—I didn’t want to shoot, but he forced—.”

“Mr. Barrios did?”

“No . . . no!” Mata gripped the table’s edges. “I mean, yes.”

Halliday paused. “Why did you do it? Did you hold a grudge against Amado Barrios?”

“No. I just wanted to talk with Lucinda.”

“And he wouldn’t let you?” Halliday asked.

“Not without a dance ticket.”

“So, you couldn’t spare a dime for a dance ticket,” Halliday peered up from his pad, “but you had enough cash for a gun?”

“It wasn’t like that . . .”

“Then how was it?”

“I didn’t have to buy the gun.” Eli clenched his jaw, biting off each word. “Someone lent it to me.”

“Who?”

“Look, Lucinda works at the Velvet Café now. I’m afraid someone there might hurt her.” Mata met Halliday’s gaze. “If you promise to protect my girl, I’ll tell you what happened.”

“I cannot promise anything, but if you tell me the whole story, I can see what we can do to keep the girl safe,” Halliday said. “Let’s hear it.”

Eli pulled back his shoulders and sat nearly as straight as the lawyer in front of him. He shut his eyes and remembered how he and Lucinda had posed for that dance hall ad so long ago: Lucinda, soft in his arms, neck stretched long as a swan’s, arching her back over his arm in a low dip. She

was the silver moon to his dark sky, the dream from which he wished never to awaken.

I'm doing this for her.

"It's very simple." Eli clasped his hands. "I wanted to marry Lucinda. We were saving to move to Washington State where it isn't a crime, like it is here. But I lost my job at the farm and used up all my savings. When Mamie offered to pay me five hundred dollars to do this one job, how could I say no?"

"And what did you have to do to earn all that money?"

"Talk to Amado Barrios."

"Did she give you a gun to do it?"

"That, and a few shots of hootch to fire me up. Mamie's bartender Sal made me take the gun—'to make sure Amado listens'—he said." Eli exhaled long and slow. What did it matter if confessing led to the death penalty, when it was killing him to conceal what he'd done?

"Sal walked with me to the Rizal." Eli struggled to recount that conversation.

Sal, I don't know if I can do this.

Keep walking.

Can we just talk about this for a minute?

Don't be a goddamn pansy.

Eli felt the gun in his coat pocket, heavy as an anchor, dragging him down as he trudged up the stairs behind Sal. There was Amado getting up from his chair, arms spread to greet him. Suddenly they were arguing. Still, he hesitated. Then Sal poured a poisonous secret in his ear. A story so vile, he exploded in rage. The boom popped his eardrums, the recoil stung from wrist to shoulder, the sulfurous smell choked him. Amado face down in the lobby. Blood on his back. Blood on the floor. Blood on Eli's hands. Eli could never wash off the blood on his hands.

"It all happened so fast. Sal yelled to leave, and I ran down the stairs."

“What did you do with the gun?” Halliday’s pen was poised above the notepad.

“I don’t know. I dumped it in some alley.”

“To be clear, are you confessing that you shot Amado Barrios?” Halliday asked.

This is for Lucinda.

“Yes, I did. I killed Amado.”

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CHAPTER 43

Moynihan ushered Lucinda into a small windowless room furnished with a table and two stools, unadorned but for the pendant lamp above it.

"The guard will bring Eli in shortly." Moynihan raised a finger. "Remember our deal: Everything he says, you pass on to me."

Lucinda arched an eyebrow at the detective. "If I hear anything that helps Eli, I'll let you know."

"Don't get cozy. Half an hour is all you get." Moynihan shut the door behind him.

Lucinda perched on the stool, trying to calm her nerves. *I must look a fright.* With quick, jittery movements, she finger-combed her hair, smoothed her skirt over her lap, crossed then re-crossed her ankles. She wondered if she looked as awful as she felt.

The questions Moynihan instructed her to ask Eli made her uneasy. She dreaded the answers she might receive. *What if Eli really did shoot Amado? Could I love a murderer?* The pendant lamp cast a circle of light in the center of the table. She pulled away from it, feeling exposed. She pressed cold fingers to her flushed cheeks.

When is he coming? She was just about to get up and find someone to hurry things along when the other door opened and a prison guard led Eli in.

Lucinda stood up, shocked by his appearance. Lank hair fell across his forehead; dark shadows hung below his eyes. A sickle-shaped scar on his

neck looked raw enough to bleed. His manacled wrists were locked to a chain around his hips.

Most alarming was the way Eli stood: stooped as though someone had stuck a straw between his shoulder blades and sucked out his heart, deflating his chest and rounding his back.

Jail had aged him.

“Eli—” She rounded the table, arms spread for a hug.

“Stay back,” the guard barked, as he pushed Eli to sit. “Don’t you know the rules? You can’t touch him.”

Lucinda sat down. “Could we at least have some privacy?”

“Not a chance.” The guard backed off to the corner behind Eli, billy club at the ready.

“Eli honey, how are you?” Lucinda leaned across the table.

“I’ve been better.” Eli’s smile was mirthless; his eyes, filled with longing. “I miss you, Mahal.”

“I miss you too.” Lucinda ached to cup his cheek. “How are they treating you?”

“Worse than when I worked in the fields.” Eli shrugged. “Did Wings deliver my message? Did you quit dancing at the Velvet Café?”

“I’ll tell Mamie tonight.”

“Can’t you just leave?” He frowned. “That place isn’t safe.”

“Why are you so afraid of Mamie?”

“Mamie doesn’t scare me, Sal does. I’ve been thinking—maybe you should go on alone up to Seattle. You got money saved up, don’t you? You should leave now. Don’t worry about me.”

“Leave you in San Diego?” Lucinda stared at him, incredulous. “Not on your life, Eli. I’ll be at your trial every day until your lawyer proves you’re innocent. You *are* innocent, aren’t you, Eli?”

The shadows beneath Eli’s eyes deepened. He looked at her hands. “What do you think?’

“I don’t know what to think. Sweetheart, can’t you level with me?”

“It’s not that simple, Mahal.” Eli avoided her gaze. “I can’t say more because—” he jerked his head toward the guard.

“If you did nothing wrong, what’s the harm? Please, just tell me what happened.” Lucinda’s fingers inched across the table, knowing the man she loved lurked within this defeated shell. Her fingers stretched across the table.

“I said, no touching!” the guard barked.

Lucinda jerked away. Folding her hands on her lap, she leaned toward Eli.

“Wings said Mamie owes you five hundred dollars for some job,” she whispered. “Did that have anything to do with shooting Amado?”

Eli stared at the table. He leaned away as though an invisible wall was descending between them. “It’s more complicated than that.”

“I don’t care, just tell me the truth. Don’t you trust me?” Lucinda’s voice broke. “Don’t you love me anymore?”

“Of course I love you.” Eli’s voice was hoarse with grief. “But I have to keep you safe.”

“Eli, I *am* safe. You’re the one they aim to execute. Please let me help you.”

Eli sighed deeply. “If you promise to leave town today, I’ll tell you what I can.”

“Why would I abandon you now?” Lucinda’s eyes prickled with unshed tears. “What about us?”

“Forget about us.” Eli stared at the pool of light between them. “Make other plans. Save yourself.”

“Fine, I’ll leave town. Just please come clean with me.”

Eli clenched and unclenched his jaw. “When I went to the Rizal that night, I wasn’t alone.”

“Who were you with?”

“You don’t need to know.” Eli looked over his shoulder at the guard in the corner. “Take me back to my cell. We’re done here.” He turned back to Lucinda with his shadowed eyes. “Start packing. Don’t come back.”

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CHAPTER 44

After weeks of grieving, Kiko thought things had begun to settle down. While Benny followed the progress of the murder investigation obsessively, Kiko focused on keeping Amado's business alive.

That Monday afternoon, he stood at the podium, leafing through an assortment of songbooks in search of new ones to shorten into 90-minute-long arrangements. With Nelly doing her homework on a chair by the stage and Benny tidying up the dressing room, things felt almost normal.

He was surprised by the sound of the ballroom doors swinging open. The dance hall was closed on Mondays, and Benny usually dealt with unexpected visitors in the lobby.

Nelly scowled. "Look, Uncle Kiko." She pointed her pencil at Jimmy.

"That sure is a fancy pen you got there," Jimmy said.

"Fancy holder." Nelly pulled off one end and held it up. "See?"

Jimmy peered at the intricate pattern of grape leaves etched into the 4-inch-long silver tube. "Oh, do you know what that is? A cigarette holder."

"No, *pencil* holder." Nelly stuck it in her pocket. "Found it downstairs. Finders Keepers."

"That's right, child. Finders Keepers." Her impertinence pleased Kiko. He was glad Amado raised his daughter to be feisty; she would need it in this town. He raised eyebrows Jimmy. "Mr. Wheeler, what can we do for you now? Aren't you tired of writing about the dance hall?"

"I'm sorry to bother you again." Jimmy took off his cap. "If you could just spare a few minutes, I'd be much obliged."

“Benny? The *Tribune*’s reporter is here,” Kiko called to the open dressing room door.

“Again?” Benny walked into the ballroom. “Nelly, go finish your homework out in the lobby, will you?”

Nelly gathered up her pen and notebook and scampered away as Benny carried a chair from the dressing room and offered Jimmy the seat.

“Nelly was showing off her new toy.” Jimmy smiled at the child.

“You mean the cigarette holder?” Benny took Nelly’s seat. “She calls it her pencil wand.”

“Did you give it to her?” Jimmy asked.

“No. And neither did Amado. Must’ve belonged to one of our customers. They lose things here all the time. She believes she won it in this game she and her father used to play—Finders Keepers. Amado would leave small gifts all over the place for her to find. She’d tell him where she found it, and if she kept that place spic and span, he let her keep it as a prize. It was his way of getting her to help us clean up. Nelly found the cigarette holder the morning after he was shot. We didn’t have the heart to take it away.”

“How’s business been?”

“Not great.” Benny sighed. “On a good night, we sell half as many dances as we used to before Amado died and Lucinda left. That brick didn’t help . . .”

“What brick?” Jimmy’s eyes widened.

The bouncer frowned. “Not sure I want to tell you. The last thing I want is to read about it in the *Evening Tribune.”*

“We can talk off the record. Tell me what happened.”

Benny took out a pack of cigarettes, shook one out, and took his time lighting it as though he were weighing whether to trust him. He exhaled, smoke mingling with a heavy sigh.

“Last night just after we closed, someone pitched a brick through that window.” Benny gestured at the window closest to the dressing room door. The sheet he’d hung across it billowed in the breeze.

“Broken glass everywhere. *Go home, monkeys* written in chalk on the brick.

“At least it happened after our customers and band members had all left,” Kiko added. “The rest of us were out in the lobby, tallying up tickets so we could pay our girls. Benny ran in when he heard the crash. Imagine if this had happened while people were dancing. Someone could’ve gotten hurt.”

“Did you call the police?”

“And give them another reason to shut us down?” Benny scoffed. “They gave us enough trouble over Amado’s murder.”

“Any idea who might have done it?”

“No. And that’s just the half of it. Before Amado was shot, hooligans used to drive down Market Street on Friday night and pick fights with Filipinos standing around out front. We got used to that. But now it happens nearly every night of the week.”

“I’m sorry.” Jimmy shifted in his chair.

“You *should* be sorry, since it’s partly your fault,” Kiko said. “Before Amado was shot, the only ones who knew about the Rizal were our customers and folks who live in the Stingaree. The Chinese with their chop houses, the Japanese grocers, Creole Palace showgirls, Mexican bakers—we all got along. White folk living in their big houses uptown, they left us colored folk alone.”

“Then your stories made the front-page news, and suddenly the whole city started talking about this place.” Benny blew a stream of smoke at the paper lanterns overhead. “Those church ladies at the Purity League threw a fit over white girls dancing with Filipinos. I heard they made a petition and

sent it to Mayor Irones. And when folk like you get worked up about something—" he clicked his fingers, "—folk like *us* better watch out."

"But I thought writing about the murder would keep the investigation going," Jimmy said. "I didn't expect it would make things worse."

"Couldn't get any worse. Good old boys cuss at our customers every chance they get." Benny leaned forward. "They yell at our taxi dancers, too. Call 'em whores, honky-tonk floozies, Nigger lovers." He glanced at the broken window. "Nelly even got teased about it in school."

"What did they say?"

"That her father ran a cathouse," Kiko said.

'Tangina naman," Benny swore. "She'd never even heard that word until some wise ass classmate said it. When she came home asking what a cathouse was, Kiko and I had to make up a story; come up with some other meaning." The bouncer shook his head. "She's only six years old."

"You think she's ready for the trial?"

"As ready as she'll ever be," Kiko said. "We can't ignore a subpoena."

"With any luck, she won't miss too many days of school," Jimmy said.

"Too late. She hasn't gone to school since she slugged someone on the playground last week." Benny smiled grimly. "The principal wanted to expel her, but we beat her to it and pulled Nelly out."

"What was the fight about?"

"Some second grader asked Nelly why a colored girl like her had blonde hair. When Nelly said she didn't know, the little punk said she was brown on account of her father was a nigger. Nelly landed just one punch —" Benny swung his fist, smiling with obvious pride. "Gave him a bloody nose."

"Golly," Jimmy shook his head, impressed.

"Y'know, Amado and Kiko always helped Nelly with homework. But me?" Benny chuckled softly. "I taught that kid how to fight."

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CHAPTER 45

A half hour after Jimmy left, the street door banged open again.

"Who could it be this time?" Kiko asked.

Kiko and Benny perked up at the sound of Nelly's delighted squeal, followed by laughter.

Moments later, Lucinda burst into the ballroom, Nelly hoisted on her hip. She put the child down and whispered something, then shooed her out to the lobby and shut the door.

"Nelly can't hear this, but I need both of you to help me."

Kiko stared at Lucinda's wild eyes, the high color in her cheeks, the wind-tousled hair. He couldn't tell if fear or anger caused her to radiate with the nervous energy of a runaway horse. "My dear, why are you so agitated?"

"Because of Eli. I visited him in prison today."

"How is he?"

"Not doing well. Eli admitted he was here the night Amado died."

"Did he shoot Amado?" Benny asked.

"No, of course not," Lucinda said. "All he would say was that someone was with him when it happened."

"Who?" Kiko's head began to throb.

"He wouldn't say. He made me promise to leave San Diego before telling me anything at all, but I'll be damned if I leave town until I get him out of jail."

"How?" Benny looked skeptical

“Whoever was with Eli must have shot Amado. You need to help me find out who the other fella was.”

“If you don’t even know who was with Eli that night, how could you possibly prove he was the killer?” Kiko stepped offstage. “You’re chasing shadows, Lucinda.”

“The killer isn’t a shadow, and you have to help me find him. We need to ask folks in this neighborhood. Surely someone saw Eli walking up Market Street with someone that night.”

“You’re talking about the Stingaree on Friday night.” Benny looked dubious. “There must have been hundreds of men on Market Street.”

“None of them had anything to gain Amado’s death, but you know who did? Mamie Savage. Business is booming over at the Velvet Café. I think she might have put a hit on Amado.”

“I could see that.” Benny gave Kiko a knowing look. “We figured most of our regulars moved over to Mamie’s joint because Amado’s murder was malas—it brought bad luck to the Rizal.”

“It’s more than bad luck,” Lucinda continued. “I ran into a friend of Eli’s the other day. Wings said Eli showed up at his place the morning after Amado was shot. Asked Wings to collect $500 from Mamie for some job he’d done.”

“That sounds like blood money.” The throbbing in Kiko’s head spread to his chest. “But how could she have given him so much . . .”

“But she didn’t. All she gave Wings was fifty bucks. Maybe she didn’t pay in full because Eli messed up on the job. What if that job was to shoot Amado, and someone else had to do it for him? What if that someone else was Sal?”

“I’d sooner believe Sal was the killer, that’s for sure.” Benny mused.

“But what can we do?” Kiko folded arms across his chest. “The trial is in two days.”

“I know we don’t have much time, but if we could just find someone who saw Eli come in with Sal . . .” She turned pleading eyes on Kiko.

“I say we start looking right now,” Benny said.

Kiko remembered the promise he’d made to Eli’s sister Paloma. “If we lock Nelly inside, I suppose she’s as safe here as she would be at home. But let’s be quick about it.”



The setting sun torched the sky, turning clouds every shade of pink as Kiko, Benny, and Lucinda set off to question shopkeepers, newsboys, and hobos along Market Street. To save time, they split up; Lucinda strolled toward the docks, a route that passed Velvet Café’s block.

As shadows deepened, Lucinda threw herself into the endeavor, patiently repeating questions to Chinese waiters whose English was sparse, holding up a copy of the dance hall ad for the Japanese grocer to peer at, squatting to chat with a beggar slumped on the sidewalk.

She had just passed the Velvet Café’s pulsing red neon marquee on Third Avenue when someone grabbed her from behind and dragged her into a trash-strewn alley. The setting sun’s fingers didn’t reach into the foul-smelling corridor, but it was light enough for Lucinda to recognize the bartender’s scowl.

“What the hell, Sal. Let me go!” Lucinda fought to break free of the choke hold, but he slammed her against the wall so hard it left her breathless. He held a blade to the vein pulsing rapidly in her throat.

“D’you know how easy it would be to slit your neck? Easy as sticking a steak knife into vanilla pudding.” He raised the knife to her jaw. “Or maybe I could slice that pretty cheek? I could make it so that no man would ever want to kiss you again, least of all Eli. What do you think? Fillet the cheek or slit the neck?”

“Why are you doing this?” Lucinda strained to breathe.

“Wrong question, Lucy. You should ask, why *shouldn’t* I be doing this? Why shouldn’t I protect myself when you nose around the Stingaree, making it look like Mamie and I had something to do with Amado’s murder?”

“Eli wouldn’t have shot Amado. Someone put him up to it.”

“And you think we did? Is that how you thank Mamie for giving you a job?” He poked the blade’s tip into the soft hollow of flesh beneath her jaw, pressing just hard enough to draw a bead of blood.

Lucinda gasped. “Please, Sal . . .”

Suddenly the knife flew out of Sal’s hand, and he was on the ground, Benny standing over him ready to strike again.

“What kind of bugoy pulls a knife on a girl?” Benny swiped up Sal’s knife and punched him repeatedly, continuing even after Sal passed out.

Lucinda grabbed his arm. “Stop, Benny. You’ll kill him.”

“I’d be doing a public service.” Benny shook off Lucinda’s hand but stepped aside.

A crowd of onlookers filled the mouth of the alley.

“Hoy Benny, when’re you getting back in the ring?” someone hollered.

“When pigs fly,” Benny yelled back. He examined Lucinda’s neck.

“Looks like a flesh wound. You’re lucky I saw you before he dug in. Let’s go back to the Rizal. Maybe Kiko has news.”

Benny took Lucinda’s elbow and led her away. “You need to move into our place tonight. There’s no telling what Sal will do when he comes to.”

“Thanks, Benny.” Lucinda touched the cut on her neck and winced. “Mamie would fire me anyway when she hears what you did to Sal.”

Kiko greeted them at the door of the Rizal, jittery with nervous excitement. “Where have you been? I found a witness.”

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THE TRIAL

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Interview notes, Jimmy Wheeler, *San Diego Evening Tribune* Reporter

Kiko: *We closed the dance hall Tuesday night to let our musicians and dancers rest before the trial began on Wednesday. Every one of them showed up.*

Dolores: *I thought Lucinda would leave town after Sal knifed her, but even he couldn't scare her away from Eli.*

Chino: *Word on the street was these church ladies from the Purity League plan to raise such a fuss over this trial that Mayor Irones will shut the dance hall down. I took the day off and went down to the courthouse to watch the fireworks.*

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CHAPTER 46

The first day of the Rizal Dance Hall murder trial drew an unusually large and varied crowd of spectators. A clutch of matrons huddled together on one side of the courthouse's wide steps, faces pale as the marble columns, gunmetal skirts rippling in the breeze. In the middle of their tight circle stood a tall man with a mane of steel-gray hair, an aquiline nose and the air of a captain steering his ship through rough waters.

Opposite that group stood Benny, Kiko, and the Manila Musikeros spiffy in Macintosh suits, silk neckties, and fedoras: Saturday night finery that all but glowed in the sallow sunlight. The men stood protectively around Amado's daughter, who wore a crisp blue pinafore. Tucked into her pocket was the ornately carved silver tube she'd won at the last Finders Keepers match she'd played with her father.

The dance hall contingent swelled with the arrival of the taxi dancers, whose bright frocks and vivid makeup stood in sharp contrast to the pallid gray wall of Purity League matrons.

"Lucinda!" Nelly ran down the steps and flung herself into Lucinda's arms.

The loud vroom of a car ruptured morning calm. Lucinda jerked Nelly back from the street just as a silver Chevrolet rolled up.

A Filipino driver in a chauffeur's cap and black suit stepped out and stood by the passenger door. He winked surreptitiously at the dance hall throng then opened the car door.

A middle-aged lady slid out and squinted at the dancers and musicians. It was Mrs. Fitzgerald, who'd baked a pie for Inspector Moynihan.

“Honorato, who invited the circus?”

“I believe they work at the Rizal Dance Hall, ma’am,” Honorato said.

“Even worse than a circus.” The woman shook her head.

“Mrs. Fitzgerald, may I watch the trial after I park the car? That way I’ll know when it ends and can run out to bring around the car for you.”

Mrs. Fitzgerald pressed a lace kerchief to her temple and nodded. “I suppose there’s no harm as long as you sit in the back row. Best you learn how justice is served in this country.” She waved at Reverend Pierce and her fellow matrons and ascended the stairs.

Lucinda was following the other dancers into the courthouse when Jimmy hurried up the street with the *Trib*’s photographer.

“What are you doing here? You said you’d lay low until the trial was over.”

“And miss Eli’s first day in court?” Lucinda nodded toward the Purity League matrons. “Those women are praying for conviction. Someone needs to stick up for him.”



Lucinda’s initial apprehension was overcome by wonder when she entered the wood-paneled courtroom. A low oak railing separated the public seating gallery from the business end of the courtroom. In front of the judge’s bench stood a smaller desk at which the court deputy sat. Beside him, the bespectacled court reporter stretched her fingers across the keys of the stenotype machine as though it were a tiny piano. A bailiff stood to the left of the judge’s perch, watching people file in.

Kiko led his group to the benches on the left side of the courtroom. Lucinda took a seat in the front row beside Benny. The Purity League ladies and their minister settled into the benches across the aisle.

No one noticed a couple quietly enter the courtroom. Mamie stood in the aisle by the last-row seats and smiled at a reporter until he offered her

his seat. She squeezed up against the next journalist to make space for Sal.

Sal looked askance at the other spectators. He hadn't been around this many white people since he'd served in the Navy. "What're we doing here?"

"Making sure Eli gets what he deserves," Mamie whispered. "Sit tight and listen."

The remaining pews quickly filled with men bearing notepads or boxy Speed Graphic press cameras. Jimmy's *Evening Tribune* articles had caught the attention of newsrooms up the coast, and reporters from Orange County and Los Angeles had driven down, eager for a scoop.

Sitting behind Lucinda, Jimmy noted a stark division in the audience: On one side of the gallery sat the Purity League ladies, grim and gray as storm clouds; on the other, the Rizal's taxi dancers and musicians, a kaleidoscope of frocks and suits.

"Looks just like a damn wedding party," Jimmy muttered. A door by the jury box opened. "And here comes the groom."

Eli had been allowed to wash his face and shave before the trial, but the looseness of his shirt and slacks accentuated a newly gaunt build.

"Eli," she said, waving to catch his attention.

Eli startled to see her.

"Pay no mind to the folks in the gallery," the bailiff said. "We're about to begin." He directed Eli to the table where Fenton Halliday waited, sitting ramrod straight, notepad, pen and spectacles arranged in a row before him.

District Attorney Thomas Whelan and his deputy Mahedy, both in dark suits, entered and sat down at the table to the right of Eli and Halliday. Lucinda recognized them from photos in the latest *Tribune* articles. These were the men who wanted Eli to hang.

"All rise," the court deputy declared. Judge Lloyd Griffin entered the courtroom, tall and distinguished in black robes, his long basset hound face framed by horn-rimmed glasses.

“Here we go.” Jimmy pulled out his notebook.

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Interview notes, Jimmy Wheeler*, San Diego Evening Tribune* **Reporter**

Dolores: *They shouldn't have put Nelly on the stand. Poor child was so nervous she kept playing with a cigarette holder! It must have belonged to Amado.*

Kiko: *Nelly didn't tell us anything we didn't already know. Benny on the other hand, gave them an earful when he took the stand.*

Benny: *All I did was spell it out for the jurors. If we can't marry white girls, at least we can dance with them.*

Chino: *I was right about to leave when Eli's buddy Wings took the stand. Who knew all hell would break loose when he testified?*

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CHAPTER 47

"Your Honor, I'd like to summon our next witness for the defense: Wilfredo Genoza. Also known as Wings Genoza."

Wings stepped out of a side door and grinned at Eli and his friends in the gallery. His smile faded when he saw Sal and Mamie in back.

Fenton Halliday waited till Wings was seated in the witness stand then strode up to the witness stand, brisk as a drill sergeant. "Mr. Genoza, are you acquainted with the defendant, Eli Mata?"

"Yes, sir," Wings replied. "We grew up together in Manila, but I enlisted in the Navy. I got to San Diego before Eli."

Halliday gestured at the defendant. "Having known Eli Mata for so long, could you describe your friend's character? Did Eli have a temper? Did he get into fights?"

"Oh no, Eli's a lover, not a fighter." This drew laughter from the dance hall spectators; even Eli cracked a smile. The Purity League ladies looked constipated.

"What makes you say that?" Halliday asked.

"Eli loved to dance at the Rizal Dance Hall. Never wasted a penny on gambling or hootch."

"Was there a particular dancer Eli favored?"

"He was sweet on Lucinda."

"And did anyone know Eli and Lucinda were seeing each other?"

"Oh, no. Amado didn't allow his dancers to date customers."

"Why not?"

“He didn’t want anyone to think he ran some other kind of business.” Wings squirmed in his seat. “You know, where the girls offered other services.”

“Do you mean . . .” Halliday paused for a beat, “. . . a bordello?”

“Just as we suspected,” Martha Richards declared, turning to look at the other church ladies. “The truth will out!”

“The Rizal is a *dance* hall! How dare you suggest—” Kiko stood, knuckles white on the wood banister.

“Order in the court, I say, order!” Judge Griffin pounded his gavel. “If you cannot conduct yourself appropriately, I will have you all expelled.”

Halliday waited till the room had gone quiet. “Thank you, Your Honor. So was the Rizal Dance Hall in fact a house of ill repute?”

“No. But some like to say it was.” Wings looked pointedly at the Purity League women. “Amado sold dances, nothing else. Fact is, when he caught one of his dancers dating a customer, he fired her on the spot.”

“Sounds harsh.” Halliday’s gaze drifted toward the Purity League ladies.

“Better than having a mob burn down your joint, like they did in Watson-ville,” Wings said, shrugging.

“What about Eli and Lucinda? How did they get around that rule?”

“You got to ask them.”

“I intend to. Tell me, when was the last time you saw Mr. Mata?”

“Eli showed up the morning after Amado was shot. Said he needed a ride out of town.”

“Is that right?” Halliday leaned his hand on the witness stand rail. “How did he look that day?”

“Terrible. Like he hadn’t slept in years. He had a wound.” Wings touched the side of his neck. “Like he’d cut himself, shaving . . .”

“Did he tell you why he needed to leave town?”

“Said he’d gotten in trouble, that’s all.”

“Did he mention Amado Barrios or the Rizal Dance Hall?”

“No.”

“Did he ask you to do anything else for him?” Halliday asked.

“Yes.” Wings glanced at Mamie and Sal and tugged at his collar. “Eli sent me to the Velvet Café to collect some money. Said Mamie Savage owed him five hundred dollars for a job.”

Halliday let out a low whistle. “Must have been some job. And did Mamie pay?”

“She wouldn’t even come out to see me.” Wings made a sour face. “She sent Sal out with Eli’s pay. He said all Mamie owed was a lousy fifty bucks because Eli bungled the job.”

“Did Sal say what that job was?”

“No. But get this: On my way to the Velvet, I saw all these cops outside the Rizal. I asked someone about it and he told me Amado’d been shot dead the night before. Later, I get to thinking about Eli’s five hundred dollars and why Sal only coughed up fifty bucks . . .” his voice trailed off.

“And?” Halliday urged.

Wings glanced at Eli. A look of understanding passed between the two friends. “I wondered if Mamie offered Eli five hundred dollars to whack Amado . . . but then she paid only fifty because Sal pulled the trigger.”

A moment stunned silence, shattered by a roar from the gallery.

“Putangina, you lying son of a bitch!” Sal charged up the aisle, face contorted with rage. As he breached the front row, Sal tripped over Benny’s outstretched foot, fingers thwacking the banister door as he fell to the floor.

“Bailiff, arrest that man!” Judge Griffin slammed his gavel, the sound echoing like gunshot. “Search him for concealed weapons.”

As the bailiff and deputy rushed over, Benny nudged Kiko. “A step in time saves lives, yah?”

“Got that right,” Kiko chuckled softly.

The court officer pulled Sal to his feet and led him out of the courtroom in handcuffs as the bailiff held up an innocuous looking gadget that looked like two bars bound by a hinge.

“Your Honor, I found this strapped to his leg.”

“What in the Sam Hill is that?” Judge Griffin peered over his spectacles at the odd object.

“Balisong,” Oscarito whispered to Kiko. The word traveled down the row of musicians like a sinister refrain.

As he examined the mysterious gadget, the bailiff slipped off a latch. Instantly, the rods fanned open to reveal a razor-edged knife. “It’s an Oriental switchblade!”

The Purity League women abandoned all decorum, their whispers swarming like wasps as they gestured indignantly at the weapon.

“Though I walk through the valley of shadow and death, I fear no evil, for You are with me . . .” Reverend Pierce intoned to the querulous women.

Judge Griffin stood abruptly, gavel raised like a cudgel. “Scripture and switchblades in my courtroom? Unconscionable! Court will go into recess until one o’clock this afternoon. Halliday and Whelan, in my chambers, *now*.” Hammering the gavel down with a loud thunk, Judge Griffin stalked out of the courtroom.

Halliday hurried back to Eli, who had risen from his chair, pale with shock.

“Whose side are you on?” Eli hissed. “Are you trying to get me hanged?”

“Quite the opposite.” Halliday cracked a smile. “Before this happened, I couldn’t have put Sal or Mamie on the witness stand for lack of probable cause. Now I can.”

“What’s to stop Sal from skipping town and killing Lucinda on his way out?”

“That’s unlikely. Bringing a weapon to court is a crime that’ll keep him in jail long enough for Lucinda to leave San Diego.” Halliday snapped his briefcase shut. “Assuming that’s what she wants to do.”

“I hope you’re right,” Eli replied as the bailiff escorted him out of the courtroom.

While other reporters surged forward hoping to interview the two lawyers, Jimmy went the other way, to the lobby where the *Tribune*’s photographer was waiting. “Shake a leg, Bob—we gotta find Mamie.”

Running downstairs to the first-floor vestibule, Jimmy spotted Inspector Moynihan lighting a cigarette for Mamie. Her maroon coat dress seemed subdued enough for a day in court, but the cloud of platinum hair and a cigarette holder half as long as her forearm made clear she wasn’t one of the Purity League ladies.

“Aren’t you a sight for sore eyes!” Jimmy panted as he caught up to her.

“You talking to me or the cop?” Mamie’s scarlet lips funneled smoke in Jimmy’s eyes. “You’re that reporter from the *Evening Tribune,* aren’t you?”

“Yes ma’am. I was hoping we could chat.”

“Over lunch? I was about to grab a bite when Inspector Moynihan here accosted me.” She gave the detective a sly smile. “What are you hungry for?”

Moynihan set a hand on his hip, his jacket flaring open to reveal a shoulder holster. “I’ll get you a sandwich, but I can’t allow you to leave the premises, Ms. Savage. Both lawyers will want to talk to you about that stunt your bartender pulled.”

“I’m afraid all the liquor he swills has pickled his brain. Half the time he makes no sense.” She flicked ash on the terrazzo floor and winked at Jimmy. “None of those Filipinos do.”

“Not even Wings Genoza?” Jimmy asked. “What did you think of his claim that you hired Eli to murder Amado Barrios?”

“Nonsense. Do I look like a gangster’s moll?” Mamie asked. “I never even met the man.”

“How about a nice smile, ma’am?” Bob positioned his camera for a shot.

“Hold your horses, hon.” Mamie pivoted and bent her elbow, angling the cigarette so that the silver holder drew an elegant line alongside her cheek. “I insist you take my good side.”

Jimmy ignored the slow tramp of people coming down the marble stairs on the other end of the lobby. “Mind if I ask a few more questions?”

“Not right now, Jimmy.” Moynihan took Mamie’s elbow. “I need to take a statement from Ms. Savage. We’re taking her and the bartender over to the station.”

“On what charges?” Mamie jerked away but couldn’t shake off Moynihan’s grip.

“Your bartender took a concealed weapon into court. That’s a misdemeanor. And after that last witness testified, I’m sure the DA or Halliday will have questions for you.” Glancing at Jimmy, he added, “Keep an eye on the redhead, will you? I got my hands full with this one.”

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CHAPTER 48

Judge Griffin wasted no time with civilities when the two lawyers entered his chambers. “What just happened out there, Halliday?”

“Your Honor, I had no idea Mr. Genoza’s testimony would provoke such an intense response from that other Filipino,” Halliday said.

“So you say.” Whelan frowned. “For God’s sake, Halliday—this was an open and shut case. We have the murder weapon, a plausible motive, and a suspect. I expected to reach a verdict by week’s end. Why the hell did you have to stir the pot?”

“All you have on my client is circumstantial evidence. Have you considered the possibility that someone else stood to gain from killing Amado Barrios?” Halliday gazed coolly at Whelan. “Why would Mamie Savage offer my client five hundred dollars? Why did Sal pay Eli only fifty?”

“That’s hearsay. How do you know she offered him any money at all?”

“The only way to find out is to put her on the stand.” Halliday looked at Judge Griffin. “Your Honor, Mr. Genoza opened the door. I’d like to walk through it.”

Judge Griffin took off his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Are you building the case for a murder conspiracy?”

“Filipinos do not have the intelligence to conspire,” Whelan blustered. “Do you have any idea how many governors general we’ve sent to those damn islands since Spain handed them over in ’98? I’ve lost count! And to what end? Are they any closer to governing themselves?”

Halliday offered a grim smile. “It’s far easier to conspire to commit murder than to create a democracy.”

“What makes you think the conspiracy angle is worth pursuing, Halliday?” Judge Griffin leaned back against his desk.

“My client’s account suggests that possibility.” Halliday said. “If he is telling the truth, we might have to call new trials for Ms. Savage and her bartender. Why settle for the bird in hand, when you can snag two more in the bush?”

Judge Griffin thought for a moment, then nodded. “I’ll allow it.”

“God almighty.” Whelan flushed. “Folks have been obsessed with crime in the Stingaree since the *Evening Tribune* turned this murder into a front-page story. I got word from City Hall that I’m to pay special attention to this trial. Mayor Irones wants to clean up the Stingaree district before the World Fair opens next year.”

“Then let’s give the mayor what he wants, shall we?” Judge Griffin smoothed out his robes. “Halliday, go ahead and put the bartender and the blonde on the stand.”

“One moment, Your Honor.” Whelan turned to Halliday. “The alleged conspiracy works only if your client admits that’s how the murder went down. Will you put Mata on the stand?”

“Of course.”

“Deal.”

“Excellent. Skirmish resolved.” Judge Griffin straightened his spectacles. “On to the war.”

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CHAPTER 49

Eli turned unbelieving eyes on Halliday as the bailiff led Sal into the courtroom. “You sure you know what you’re doing?”

“Sal’s temper is his Achilles heel. I intend to take full advantage of that.” Halliday stood, poised like a conductor about to command an orchestra.

As the bartender was sworn in, Eli looked over his shoulder and locked eyes with Lucinda sitting in the front row between Kiko and Benny. Wordlessly, she raised her hand to her heart.

Across the aisle, Felicity Fitzgerald caught Lucinda’s gesture and frowned at Martha Richards. “That hussy is beyond redemption.”

“She’ll change her tune when he’s sent to the gallows,” came the whispered reply.

“Mr. Bacos, could you please tell us how you came to know Eli Mata?” Halliday’s tone was pleasant, his smile benign.

“I tend bar at the Velvet Café.” Sal fixed his gaze on Eli. “Sometimes he came late at night. I talk to everyone who orders drinks.”

“Did you know about the job Mamie Savage hired him to do?”

“You got to ask her about that.”

“I intend to. Mr. Bacos, where were you on September 22, the night Amado Barrios was gunned down?” Halliday took a step closer to the witness stand, intentionally blocking Sal’s view of Eli.

Sal worked his jaw, as though gnawing on his reply. “I was at the Velvet Café that night, tending bar as usual.”

Quick as a metronome, Halliday threw out the next several questions.

“Can anyone vouch for that?”

“Sure, ask Mamie.”

“Did you tend bar all night?”

“I stepped out for a break.”

“Did you speak with anyone on your break?”

“I don’t remember.”

“Try.” Halliday folded his arms.

“I stood outside the front door. Maybe I talked to fellows on the street.”

“How long were you outside, and at what time?”

“Your Honor, counsel is badgering the witness.” Whelan rose from his desk.

“Sustained.” Judge Griffin raised an eyebrow at Halliday. “Let’s not belabor the point, counselor. Move on.”

“All right, then. Did you see Eli at all that night?” Halliday asked.

“I don’t remember. Lots of men come to the Velvet Café on Saturday night.”

Halliday shifted tracks. “Did you go to the Rizal Dance Hall at any time that night?”

“No.”

“Too busy to recall that as well?” Halliday cocked an eyebrow. “Let’s assume you were too busy to recall everything you did on Saturday night. Surely you can recall what you did the next day.” Halliday rested his long fingers on the witness stand railing. “The Velvet Café is closed on Sunday morning, yes?”

Sal nodded, a scowl darkening his face.

“Please speak up for everyone to hear.” Halliday’s tone remained pleasant but firm.

“Yes. Velvet Café is closed Sunday mornings.”

“In that case, Wings Genoza must have been one of your only visitors that day. Am I right, Mr. Bacos?”

“I remember he stopped by. What about it?”

“I ask because Wings Genoza testified earlier today that he went to the Velvet Café to collect five hundred dollars Mamie Savage owed Eli for a job. But here’s what I find most confusing.” Halliday propped an elbow on the railing. “Last I heard, farm work pays a dollar a day.” Halliday glanced back at the spectator’s gallery and saw Filipinos nod and exchange knowing looks.

“Now, Mr. Bacos, did Mamie Savage happen to own a farm?” Halliday smiled at the witness, but his eyes were cold.

“Of course not,” Sal snorted.

“I didn’t think so.” Halliday looked at the jury. “In that case, what sort of job could Eli have done to earn five hundred dollars?”

“I never heard Mamie offer Eli that much money.” Sweat beaded along Sal’s hairline. “Wings just said that to save his friend.”

“But you did give Wings fifty dollars that day, correct?” Halliday’s tone sharpened.

“Yes.” Sal tensed up against the back of the chair as Halliday leaned further forward.

“Fifty dollars is still quite a bit of money, isn’t it, Mr. Bacos? Could you please tell the court—” Halliday took a step back, allowing Sal a view of Eli and the crowded gallery, “—what did Mamie pay Eli fifty dollars *for*?”

“Like I said, I don’t know. Look, I see what you’re trying to do.” Sal leaned forward finger stabbing the space between him and the lawyer. “You want to me to snitch on Mamie and say she hired him to shoot Amado, but I won’t do it, you can’t make me.”

“Well then, what about you, Mr. Bacos?” Halliday’s voice rose above the buzz of whispered conversations in the gallery. “Did *you* shoot Amado Barrios?”

“Sinabi ko na nga ba—I knew it was Sal!” Benny said loudly.

“Objection! The witness is not on trial for murder!” DA Whelan stood once more quivering with rage.

“Sustained. I will remind spectators to be quiet.” Judge Griffin rapped his gavel, looking sternly at Halliday. “I’ve given you enough rope, Counselor. Watch that you don’t hang yourself.”

“Nothing further.” Halliday nodded at the district attorney. “He’s all yours.”

Whelan offered Sal a conciliatory smile as he approached the witness stand. “How about we leave off talking about Eli for the moment, Mr. Bacos. Before Wings Genoza came to see you at the Velvet Café, had you ever spoken to him?”

“I saw him around the Stingaree.”

“Now you claim Mr. Genoza lied about that money Mamie Savage promised Eli. Why would Mr. Genoza lie about that?”

“He’d say anything to help his buddy.” Sal narrowed his eyes at the DA.

“What were you doing when Mr. Genoza came to the Velvet Café?”

“Having a smoke. Sure could use a smoke now.”

“You can have one as soon as you’re done answering questions,” Whelan assured him.

“Yeah? Well, I hope that bailiff gives back my cigarette pack,” Sal huffed. “I don’t want to lose another cigarette holder. Paid a pretty penny for a new one.”

Jimmy looked up from his notepad. *A lost cigarette holder?* Heart thumping, he scribbled on a fresh page, tore it off the pad, and passed it to Lucinda, who read it, leaned over the spectator’s railing and gave it to Halliday.

Jimmy held his breath as Halliday unfolded the note.

Compare Sal’s cigarette holder to the one Nelly was playing with on the stand.

Halliday whispered in Eli’s ear.

After failing to elicit more than monosyllabic answers from Sal, the district attorney gave up on his cross-examination.

“Do the people have any other witnesses they would like to call to the stand?” Judge Griffin asked.

“Not at this moment,” DA Whelan looked at Halliday. “Have at it.”

Halliday considered his options. He wanted to investigate the information on the note passed to him, but could he risk irritating Judge Griffin by asking for a recess? *In for a penny, in for a pound*, his favorite law school professor liked to say. “Your Honor, the unexpected emergence of two new witnesses for the defense is a fortuitous development. However, it leaves me no time to prepare for the direct examination of Mamie Savage. If it pleases the court, I’d like to request a brief recess to assemble my notes.”

“This is most irregular,” Judge Griffin steepled fingers beneath his long chin. “On the other hand, these proceedings have been most irregular. Very well then. I’ll allow a thirty-minute recess.”

“Court will be in recess until three o’clock,” the court deputy intoned as Judge Griffin rose to leave and the bailiff came for Eli.

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CHAPTER 50

"Mr. Halliday?"

Halliday turned to see a pretty redhead, flanked by two Filipinos and a gangly, freckle-faced young man with unruly hair, notepad in hand.

"I didn't mean to be forward when I passed you that note. I'm Lucinda Lane."

"Ah, *that* Lucinda." Halliday smiled. "How can I help you?"

"I thought I could help *you*," Lucinda said. "You'll have better luck getting Nelly to talk if you let me come along with you. She trusts me."

"I'm afraid that constitutes a conflict of interest, since you are romantically involved with the defendant," Halliday said.

"Then let me or Benny go in with you when you speak to Nelly. We're her uncles."

Halliday studied the bespectacled Filipino. In that black three-piece suit and walking stick, he could have passed for either a professor or an undertaker. "We're the only family she has now."

"Does the child live with you?" Halliday asked.

"Yes, she does. I'm Kiko Moran, I lead the band at the Rizal Dance Hall, and of course you know Benny from the witness stand. We lived with Amado and—" Kiko looked at his hands. "We live with just Nelly now."

"If I may interrupt, Mr. Halliday, I wrote that note about the cigarette holder." Freckle Face shook Halliday's hand. "Name's Jimmy Wheeler. I scooped the dance hall murder for the *Evening Tribune* and have covered it ever since. I saw Nelly playing with the cigarette holder at the Rizal Dance

Hall and again on the witness stand. May I listen in when you chat with her?”

Halliday stared at them for a long moment, contemplating the tragic circumstance that had brought together such an odd assemblage. “Thank you for the note, but until I determine what these cigarette holders have to do with the case, I think you should hold off writing about them. On the other hand, I agree that the child must feel reassured. Mr. Moran, please come with me.”



Nelly swung her legs on a too-tall chair, chin perched on her hands as she sat at a table in a plain windowless room. She wondered how long she’d have to wait there. She’d eaten the cheese sandwich and cookie Mrs. Aron had given her at lunch. Bored, the little girl watched the plump secretary knit a fuzzy mauve scarf and tried to identify the song she was humming.

Nelly stuck out her tongue and tried to touch her nose, but soon tired of that game. She pulled out her silver pencil holder. “May I have a pencil?”

“I’m not supposed to leave you alone, dear,” Mrs. Aron murmured, winding yarn over her needles. “Someone is coming soon to sit with you while I go on my coffee break. I’ll bring you a pencil when I return.”

Nelly pouted. Now she was both bored *and* annoyed. “Soon” could mean anything from five minutes to an hour. Just then, the door swung open. Her Uncle Kiko came in with one of the lawyers in the courtroom that morning. The nice one who sat beside Eli.

“Can we go home now?” Nelly tucked the silver tube into her pinafore pocket.

“Mrs. Aron, could we have a moment alone with the child?” Halliday asked.

“Certainly.” Mrs. Aron gathered her knitting and shut the door behind her.

Kiko came around the table to sit beside Nelly. “Sweetpea, this Mr. Halliday, Eli’s lawyer. He wants to ask about that pencil holder you found after your father died. Could you please show it to Mr. Halliday?”

Her uncle spoke with the special *please and thank you* tone he put on whenever he wanted to persuade her to do something.

“Why?” Nelly frowned up at the lawyer. She rolled the tube between her fingers inside her pocket.

“I promise I’ll give it back.” Mr. Halliday raised a hand like a Boy Scout. “I just want to see if it looks like this one I have.” He pulled a tube from his breast pocket.

Intrigued, she held up out her pencil holder.

The tubes were identical in length and sported the same twisted rope motif along the rim.

“Who gave you that, Nelly?” Mr. Halliday sat down in front of her.

“Papa. I won Finders Keepers.”

“Finders Keepers?” Halliday threw a questioning look at Kiko.

Kiko smiled sadly. “It’s a game Amado came up with to get Nelly to help clean the dance hall. He hid trinkets around the dance hall for her to find while she tidied up.”

“I keep everything I find. Finders Keepers!” Nelly declared. “Once I found a lollipop behind the coat check table. A yo-yo under the piano.” She held up the silver tube like a tiny trophy. “This was the best prize.”

“Where did you find it, Nelly?” Halliday put his cigarette holder on the table.

“Downstairs, under the step.”

“Why didn’t you show this to the police?” Halliday asked Kiko.

“The cops stopped coming around after they took Amado’s body to the morgue. Between taking care of Nelly and running the dance hall, Benny and I had barely time to sleep, let alone visit the police station.” Kiko

stroked Nelly's hair. "She was so happy when she found the pencil holder. We didn't have the heart to take it away."

"I see." Halliday contemplated the silver tubes. "Nelly, may I borrow your Finders Keepers prize and show it to the judge?"

Nelly pouted.

Kiko lowered his head to gaze into Nelly's green eyes. "Remember what we said about sharing? Mr. Halliday just wants to show it to the judge." His voice dropped to a whisper. "It would make Lucinda so happy."

"Mr. Moran, it isn't—"

"Shh." Kiko held a finger to his lips. "Let her decide."

Nelly twirled a golden curl around her finger, frowning. Finally, she nudged the cigarette holder toward Halliday.

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CHAPTER 51

Everyone, including Judge Griffin, sat up when Mamie Savage walked into the courtroom, platinum bouffant bobbing, hips swinging to the metronome click of her heels.

An Orange County reporter in the row behind Jimmy muttered, “How’d Mae West get mixed up in this?”

Jimmy looked back and grinned. “Mamie’s no movie star, but she puts on a good show.”

Across the aisle, whispers rippled like a malicious breeze through the Purity League ladies.

“My goodness, she’s just like us.” Charlotte Crivelli gasped, mesmerized.

“I can assure you, that woman will never be *like us*.” Martha Richards sniffed. “Only harlots wear that much rouge, and hair of that color does not occur in the natural world.”

“Jezebel in the flesh,” Reverend Pierce said, transfixed.

As he watched Mamie being sworn in, Fenton Halliday remembered a favorite adage of a law school mentor: *Be careful what you wish for, you might get it.* Halliday had gotten the break he’d hoped for, but it looked like he’d have to work doubly hard to extract useful testimony from her. The jurors stared at Mami with expressions that ranged from bewilderment to open admiration. They were plumbers, farmers, accountants and clerks, schoolteachers. Nine men, three women, all of them white. They’d be more inclined to sympathize with a fellow American, no matter how risqué her appearance, than with Halliday’s Filipino defendant.

“Watch that she doesn’t tangle you up, Mr. Halliday,” Eli said. “Mamie spins a pretty web.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time a woman’s tried.” The shadow of a smile passed over Halliday’s face as he stood up. In high school, he’d played the first violin; as a lawyer, he prepared for each trial as meticulously as he used to rehearse for each performance. This was going to be some opening night.

“Good afternoon, Miss Savage.” He approached the witness stand but paused midway, stymied by her perfume.

“Call me Mamie.” She crossed her legs, flashing shapely ankles.

“Very well, Mamie. Were you acquainted with Amado Barrios?”

“I knew *of* him, since we both managed dance halls.” She pursed scarlet lips. “Pity he died the way he did.”

“I hear you were fierce competitors. Did you ever argue with him over business?”

“Never. We ran our dance halls differently, that’s all.” Mamie smiled at her rapt spectators. “Like they say, there’s more than one way to skin a cat.”

“Where were you on the night he was murdered?”

“At the Velvet Café. I throw a swell party on the weekend.” She winked at the jurors. “You should come visit. First dance is on me.”

The male jurors laughed. The married ones fiddled with their wedding bands.

“That’s very generous, but let’s focus on Amado’s murder.” Halliday clasped his hands. “Was your bartender Sal Bacos with you that night?”

“Of course. Sal was busy pouring drinks, like he always does.”

Over the next half hour, Halliday and Mamie lobbed questions and answers back and forth like tennis balls. As he’d feared, Mamie proved to be a wily opponent.

“I know what you’re getting at, Mr. Halliday. You want folks to think I’m a ruthless businesswoman.” Mamie looked at the lawyer slantwise.

“Truth is, my divorce left me nearly penniless. I moved here to make a fresh start; worked day and night to turn the Velvet Café into the finest dance hall in the Stingaree. I give my customers the time of their lives, six nights a week, every week of the year.”

She gave the jurors a coy look. “That’s not a crime, is it?”

“Are you saying you had nothing to do with the conspiracy to murder Amado Barrios?” Halliday stood by the jury box. He could tell the male jurors were falling for her charm.

“None whatsoever.” Mamie slowly recrossed her legs, raising her skirt a tad higher than necessary to flash a creamy shin.

“Then please explain why you offered Eli Mata $500 for a job.”

“Goodness, the Velvet Café barely makes that much money in a month!” Mamie fanned herself with her fingers. “Why on earth would I offer a month’s profits to anyone?”

“Please answer the question.”

“Well, I—I did pay Eli fifty dollars to talk Amado into letting his dancers come over to the Velvet Café after they got off work at the Rizal. But on my mother-in-law’s grave—may she someday rest in peace—I swear I never offered five hundred dollars.” Mamie winked at the jury.

“Liar!” Eli jumped up, livid. “You offered me five hundred dollars to shoot Amado.”

Pandemonium broke out in the courtroom. Judge Griffin banged his gavel with such ferocity that the sounding block flew off his desk like a hockey puck, narrowly missing the court stenographer’s forehead. As one Purity League member fainted dead away, Reverend Pierce leapt to his feet, pointing at Eli. “Here we see the wages of sin!”

“Eli, sit down!” Lucinda leaned over the oak railing, afraid the bailiff would shoot him.

Halliday grabbed Eli before he could charge the witness stand. “Calm down. You’re not helping your case.”

“Don’t you see she’s lying?” Eli raged. “She’ll let me hang before she told the truth.”

“My heavens,” Mamie said. “These Orientals just cannot control themselves, can they?”

“Mr. Halliday, if you cannot restrain your client, I will hold you both in contempt,” Judge Griffin thundered.

“I apologize, Your Honor,” Halliday pushed Eli back in his chair. “It will not happen again.”

“See that it doesn’t.” Judge Griffin sat down. “If everyone will just calm down, we can move forward.”

It was time to play his trump card. Halliday pulled a silver cigarette holder out of his pocket and held it up. “Mamie, would you please tell me if this belongs to you?”

Mamie peered at the silver tube. “No. Mine are at least twice that long. Only men use holders that short. I gave one like that to my bartender Sal.”

“Why would your bartender need this?” Halliday asked. “Seems like an unnecessary affectation.”

“I insisted he use it to keep tobacco stains off his fingers. Can’t have a bartender mixing drinks with discolored fingers now, can we?”

“I suppose not.” Halliday raised the cigarette holder for the courtroom’s eyes. “The bailiff found this holder in Sal Bacos’s pocket after he was taken into custody for bringing a weapon into a federal building.”

“No harm in that—Sal enjoys a good smoke.” Mamie clucked her tongue. “Now, if I’d known he was fool enough to bring a knife to the courthouse, I’d have given that boy a good spanking.”

Several male jurors chuckled. Mamie was stealing the show. Halliday was determined to steal it right back.

“Earlier on the stand, Mr. Bacos said he’d misplaced one other cigarette holder. By some strange coincidence, Nelly Barrios found one in the dance hall a few days after her father was murdered—” like a magician pulling a

rabbit out of a hat, Halliday took Nelly's Finders Keepers prize out of his waist pocket, lifting the silver tube high for all to see. He held the first one up beside it. "That's odd—these look almost identical. Could this second one be the cigarette holder your bartender lost?"

"Yes!" Eli slammed his palm on the table.

Once again, the courtroom exploded in a cacophony of shock, peppered by the furious drumbeat of Judge Griffin's gavel.

"Objection!" Whelan jumped up, purple with indignation. "The defense cannot introduce new evidence without letting me review it first! You can't blindside the prosecution like that, Halliday, I won't stand for it!"

"Sustained. Counsel, I'll have those two cigarette holders." Judge Griffin glowered at Halliday. "Why didn't you submit these items to the court as evidence?"

"I only learned about them while the court was in recess this afternoon," Halliday began.

"That's no excuse." Judge Griffin turned to the jurors. "I direct you to leave these cigarette holders out of your deliberations. Counsel for the defense failed to follow proper procedure when he presented them to the court. Consequently, they are inadmissible as evidence."

"How can jurors pretend they didn't see those cigarette holders?" Benny nudged Kiko.

"White folk do it all time," Kiko muttered. "They can pretend not to see a kabayan they hung from a tree; how hard could it be for them to un-see a damn cigarette holder?"

Lucinda had had enough. While Whelan and Halliday bickered with the judge, she pulled out her hatpin, half rose from her seat and took quick aim. The hatpin soared across the few yards that separated the gallery from the witness stand, grazed Mamie's cheek, struck the wall behind the witness stand and rolled under the podium, where it would lie undetected for the next fifty years.

A new commotion at the front of the courtroom interrupted Benny's reply.

"She fainted!" Felicity Fitzgerald pointed at the witness stand.

Indeed, Mamie lay slumped back against the chair, scarlet lips slack, cheeks pale as her nimbus of hair.

"Bailiff, fetch smelling salts and revive the witness." Judge Griffin commanded.

"Your Honor, these cheap shenanigans are a stain on our profession." Whelan sputtered. "The defense counsel has confused your courtroom with a vaudeville stage."

"I merely asked a question," Halliday replied testily. "Who knew she possessed such a delicate constitution?"

"Enough!" Judge Griffin threw up his arms. "Court is adjourned until 9 o'clock tomorrow morning."

Judge Griffin turned weary eyes on the agitated spectators. "Ladies and gentlemen, we are done for the day. I urge each of you to consider whether you possess the forbearance to deal with—" he gestured wearily at Mamie, "—with much more of this tomorrow. Court is adjourned."

"All rise." The bailiff bellowed.

Mamie cracked open one eye to see the courtroom empty out. If there was one lesson she'd learned from gambling, it was to quit while she was ahead.

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CHAPTER 52

"Your Honor, may I speak with you?" Halliday hurried after Judge Griffin.

"I'd like a word as well, Your Honor," As Whelan caught up to Halliday he muttered, "I can think of a few choice words for you, counsel."

"Come on in, then," Judge Griffin waved the lawyers into his office. "I'll need a moment to recover from these high jinks." He pulled a cigar from a box on his desk and took his time sucking it to life as the lawyers settled into the leather armchairs opposite his desk.

"All that talk about cigarette holders got me jonesing for a smoke. My wife wants me to give it up." Judge Griffin exhaled luxuriously. "Not today, woman, not today."

He leaned against his desk and looked at Halliday. "Now then, counsel, what did you hope to accomplish with that stunt—a mistrial? You knew those cigarette holders had to be entered into evidence before presenting them in court."

"Apologies, Your Honor, but I received the tip about the cigarette holder in the middle of Bacos's testimony," Halliday said. "I had to act on it while we had Miss Savage in custody."

"Must I remind you those two witnesses aren't on trial?" Whelan snapped.

"They could be, if you bring charges against them." Judge Griffin set down his cigar. "You might as well do that, now that Halliday's questions

have raised reasonable cause. Meantime, there's no stopping the train we're on. We must see this first trial through to the finish."

"You realize that after today, Mamie Savage will insist on consulting an attorney before I cross-examine her?" Whelan scowled at Halliday. "Trade the bird in hand for two in the bush, you said. How the hell do I grab those two birds, now that you've set the bush afire?!"

Halliday squared his shoulders. "Had I not presented this new evidence, you'd have sent my client to the gallows and let the other conspirators off scot-free."

"How dare you impugn my judgment?" Whelan stood suddenly, fists clenched.

"Come now, Thomas, settle down." Judge Griffin said. "Go ahead and file a complaint in municipal court against Mamie Savage and her bartender. Set the gears in motion for a new trial. Maybe their public defender can persuade them to cop a plea."

"Do that, and you'll be free of the jury," Halliday added. "Judge Griffin can rule on the verdict, and we'll have this case wrapped up by Thanksgiving."

"Don't tell me how to do my job, Halliday." Whelan sat back down in a huff. "I'm not letting your client off the hook."

"I gave you my word Eli Mata would take the stand, and I will make good on that promise. I'll put him on the stand tomorrow morning. His testimony should all but clinch your case against the other two conspirators." Halliday straightened his bowtie. "Look, Whelan, I'm no more a champion of colored men than you are. But fair is fair. I won't let my client take the fall for murder if those two put him up to it."

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CHAPTER 53

"Miss Lane, would you please tell the court how you knew Mr. Eli Mata?" The lawyer's tone was grave but kind, like a mortuary director speaking to a new widow.

"I met him at the Rizal Dance Hall, where I work."

"Was he a regular patron of the dance hall?"

"Yes."

"And was that as far as your relationship went?" The lawyer's gaze was searching.

"Not exactly." Lucinda clasped her hands tight on her lap. *There is no shame in loving Eli.* "Over time, we . . . developed feelings for each other. We talked about moving to Washington State, where it isn't a crime for couples like us to get married."

Multiple conversation simmered in the gallery; pale fingers feathered across disapproving mouths.

"Order in the court." Judge Griffin rapped his gavel.

Halliday turned his back on the spectators. "Did you see Eli Mata at the Rizal Dance Hall on September 22?"

Lucinda looked at her hands. "No sir, I did not."

"Did you find that concerning at the time?"

"No. I knew Eli had lost his job and couldn't afford to buy dance tickets anymore."

"Did you see Eli at all that night?" Halliday stepped up to the witness stand.

“Yes, but much later. After Amado was shot.” Lucinda took a deep breath. “The police made us stay to answer questions, so it was long past midnight by the time I left the dance hall. I was walking up Market Street when Eli pulled me into an alley.”

“Could you describe his mood? Was he calm, agitated, angry?”

Halliday’s stare made Lucinda feel like a moth pinned to a shadow box, unable to breath. “Eli was really upset. He said he had to leave town right away. I would gladly have gone with you, Eli.” She looked straight at him, unable to say the rest aloud. *I would have followed you to the ends of the earth, if only you’d asked.*

Whispers from the gallery rose like a cicada cloud, only to be silenced by the rapping of Judge Griffin’s gavel. “Counsel, this is a trial, not a soap opera. Please direct your witness to refrain from addressing the defendant.”

Halliday cleared his throat. “Ms. Lane, please just answer my questions. Did Eli tell you where he was going?”

“No. It sounded like he was leaving me for good.”

“And you never imagined he’d been involved in Amado Barrios’s murder?”

“No. He never even mentioned Amado.” She looked at the jury. “Eli’s not a killer, I know him. Mamie and Sal framed him and—”

“Objection, Your Honor.” Whelan stood up. “This is pure speculation.”

“Sustained.” Judge Griffin looked at Lucinda. “Young lady, please contain yourself.”

Lucinda bit back her retort. *I can’t. Not when Eli’s life is on the line.*

Halliday lowered his voice. “If you want to help Eli, please just answer my questions.”

“Then ask better questions.” Anger crawled up Lucinda’s arms like fire ants. “Why don’t you ask me how Sal held a knife to my throat because I was asking folks in the Stingaree if they’d seen him with Eli that night? If he had nothing to do with Amado’s murder, why would he threaten me?”

“Objection.” Whelan slammed both palms on the table. “Now the witness is badgering counsel!”

“You’ve been warned, Halliday. Wrap it up before I cite your witness for contempt.” Judge Griffin cast a stern gaze at Lucinda. “Young lady, you’re treading on very thin ice.”

“I apologize Your Honor.” Halliday took a step back. “No further questions.”

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CHAPTER 54

Morning sunlight poured in through the large windows on the left side of the courtroom as Eli took his seat beside his lawyer.

"Are you ready?" Halliday noticed his client's bloodshot eyes.

Eli blinked at Halliday's blue bowtie, perched like a butterfly upon the lawyer's collar. "Ready as I'll ever be." Somewhere behind him sat Lucinda, for whose love he had chosen to walk this harsh road. *What will she think of me, after I testify?*

"Your Honor, I would like to call Eli Mata to the stand." Halliday lowered his voice. "Rise, Eli. It's time."

The courtroom fell silent as Eli strode toward the witness stand. He'd never minded it when people watched him dance with Lucinda at the Rizal, but today, the stares of lawyers, journalists, and jurors felt oppressive.

From the witness stand, he saw spectators crammed so tightly that many sat with a permanent shrug, shoulders scrunched to squeeze onto the bench. He was surprised to see the young reporter who'd tackled him in church; the man sat behind the Manila Musikeros and the Rizal's taxi dancers, one long leg stretched out in aisle to relieve his cramped position. Other men with notepads stood along the back wall, lips gone slack from the lack of cigarettes, eyes hungry for a story. *My story*.

Eli blocked them all out to focus on the one person who mattered. Lucinda sat in the front row between Kiko and Benny, wearing the dress he loved best, a fluttery-sleeved frock in dusty pink: He remembered telling her one day long ago that it was his Tia Remedios's favorite shade of pink, *ashes of rose*. A fitting color, for he was about to burn everything down.

The dance began. Eli responded to Halliday's questions in a daze, the sum of his life reduced to items on a grocery list. *Born in the Philippine islands, June 12, 1914; eleventh grade; single; farmworker; dishwasher; unemployed.*

"Mr. Mata, what was the nature of your relationship with Amado Barrios?"

"I knew him mostly through Lucinda. She sold a lot of dance tickets for him. If he knew I wanted to take his best girl away, he'd have banned me from the Rizal."

"Is that why you kept your affair secret?" Halliday asked.

"Yes. But after I lost my job, I sold my hat, my suit, my shoes to pay for food. In the end, I couldn't even spare a dime to dance with my girl."

Filipinos in the gallery traded knowing glances. At some point, each one had endured the same fraught days between jobs, struggling to decide how to stretch those last coins.

"Why didn't you just leave San Diego and seek work elsewhere?"

"I wanted to take Lucinda with me." Eli clenched his jaw. "That was the plan."

He locked eyes with Lucinda and saw the longing in hers. *I must memorize that look before it disappears.*

Halliday's voice cut through his reverie.

"Mr. Mata, did you hear my question? Where were you on the night of September 22?"

"The Velvet Café. Mamie Savage wanted to see me."

"Did you go anywhere else after that?"

Eli hesitated for the briefest moment. "Yes. The Rizal Dance Hall."

Lucinda bit her lip. Around her, murmurs rumbled like low thunder.

"Now then. In your own words, could you describe the events leading up to Amado Barrios's death?"

Eli bowed his head briefly. *This is where I lose her.* When he raised his head, he looked at Lucinda, as if speaking only to her.

“I went to the Velvet Café to see about some job Mamie wanted me to do. That was around 11:30.” He described the whiskey Sal had poured, the pistol Sal had forced him to carry.

“When Sal Bacos handed you that gun, did you know he wanted you to kill Amado Barrios?” Halliday’s matter of fact tone sounded like a schoolmaster quizzing a student.

“If I’d known that was his plan, I’d have left right then.”

“So what did Sal say the gun was for?”

“He said it would ensure Amado treated us with respect.” Eli shut his eyes to the memory. “I didn’t intend to pull it out at all, I swear.”

“And yet you did?”

“Sal forced me to when he and Amado began arguing. Even then I wouldn’t have pulled the trigger, not when Amado had his back turned to me.”

“Then why did you?”

“Sal said something terrible just then,” Eli rubbed his eyes. “It made me so angry I didn’t think, I couldn’t stop—”

“What exactly did Sal say to provoke you?”

Eli shifted in his seat, reluctant to say the foul secret out loud.

“The witness is directed to answer counsel’s question,” Judge Griffin looked down at Eli.

Eli sighed. *Too late to turn back.*

“He said Amado raped Lucinda.”

Eli looked once more at Lucinda. Her eyes glistened with tears, but she met Eli’s gaze. Held it.

“After you shot Amado, why didn’t you report Sal to the police?” Halliday gestured at Lucinda, pale as the waning moon amid the Filipinos who flanked her.

“Sal would slit his own mother’s throat if she crossed him. I had to protect my girl.”

“I can imagine any man in your position would feel the same.” Halliday scanned the jurors faces for signs of sympathy but found none. “After you left the dance hall, where did you go?”

“Saturday night is a fiesta in the Stingaree.” Eli rubbed the scab on his neck. “I needed to find somewhere to hide.”

Although speaking that night felt like tearing the scab of an old wound, Eli strove to reconstruct every detail.

Minutes after midnight, Eli ran out into the crowds of Filipinos who stood around Market Street. Sal was nowhere to be seen. Clamping a hand over his bloody neck, he dove into the sea of suits, hoping no one would recognize him.

He sprinted toward smaller deserted streets, trying in vain to outrun the swarm of thoughts that dogged him. *How could Amado have done this? Why didn’t Lucinda tell me? Could I ever bear to ask her?*

He spotted a dustbin in the alley by a shuttered diner. He looked up and down the deserted street then tossed Sal’s pistol into it.

Just then, the headlights of an approaching car swept up the road. Eli froze. *Are the cops already searching for me*? He ducked into the next alley and found a nook between discarded apple crates. He sank to the ground, hugging knees to chest to keep warm. With nowhere to run, stuck there to hide, Eli allowed the liquor to catch up with him. He didn’t know how long he slept curled like a snail, but when he awakened, his throat was parched, and he was desperate to see Lucinda.

Eli circled back to Market Street, empty but for a few drunks snoring in the shadow of doorways. The yeasty aroma of Sunday loaves wafted from the nearby Anchor Bakery and soothed his troubled mind. He’d walked Lucinda home this way a hundred times before; she was bound to come along. All he had to do was wait.

“Yesterday, Wings Genoza testified that you sent him to the Velvet Café to collect your pay for the job.” Halliday’s voice brought Eli back to the courtroom. “Why didn’t you just leave town?”

“Because I had done my job.”

“Killing Amado?”

“No. Mamie said I just needed to speak with Amado. I would never have hurt him if Sal hadn’t told me what he did to Lucinda.”

“Are you saying you shot Amado Barrios because he violated the woman you loved—what we call a crime of passion?”

Lucinda stared fixedly at Eli. Reporters and photographers in the back of the room craned to see the dancer. A wave of murmurs threatened to disrupt Halliday’s line of questioning.

Judge Griffin rapped his gavel. “Mr. Mata, I’d like to hear you answer that question.”

Eli sighed. “Yes.”

“Nothing further.” Halliday nodded at the DA as he walked back to the defense table. “He’s all yours.”

DA Whelan buttoned his jacket and sauntered onto the floor. “Mr. Mata, let’s go back to the night Amado Barrios was murdered. You waited for Lucinda Lane because you wanted to speak to her, yes?”

Whelan’s gaze reminded Eli of the look a butcher gave a pig before he slit its throat: contempt hidden under the thinnest rind of pity. “Yes, sir, I did.”

“Did you tell her what had happened back at the dance hall?”

“No. I didn’t want her to know I had anything to do with Amado’s murder.”

“But you did, didn’t you? You just admitted to it.”

“Sal said bringing the gun was part of the job.”

“And you wanted all five hundred dollars?” The DA snorted. “I’ll wager no one in this courtroom makes that much in a month, let alone in one

night. Why would Mamie pay you that much just to talk with someone?”

“Sal said Mamie figured she’d make that money back in a couple months, once Amado let his dancers take their dates for drinks at the Velvet Café.”

“So, you took this job to pay for more dances?”

“I took it for love.” Whispers rippled through the courtroom. “But I didn’t want to be lynched for loving a white girl. We planned to move to Washington State, where it’s legal to marry. But moving costs money. More money than either of us had.” He looked at his hands. “I hadn’t worked in weeks, so when Mamie offered me a job, I took it.”

“And the job involved killing Amado?”

“No.” Eli scowled. “Weren’t you listening?”

“You don’t get to ask questions here, Mata. The fact is you went into the Rizal Dance Hall with a gun. When you left, Amado Barrios was dead.”

“But Sal made me pull the trigger.” Eli turned to the jurors. “Don’t you see? Mamie and Sal planned to murder Amado all along. Why aren’t they on trial?”

“That’s not for you to decide, is it, boy?”

Eli remembered what Halliday had told him the night before: “The best we can hope for is a life sentence.” If that meant a life without Lucinda, he had nothing to lose. *Enough of this bullshit.*

“Don’t call me ‘boy.’” Eli’s voice was dead calm. “You look down on a man like me, on all of us—” Eli nodded toward the Filipinos in the spectator gallery, “—because we don’t look like you, and we work for pennies. But you’re wrong. We’re just like you—we dream about having good jobs, homes, families.”

The sharp rap of a gavel cut Eli’s tirade short.

“That will be enough, Mr. Mata.” Judge Griffin looked down at Eli. “I won’t have you riling up trouble in my courtroom.”

“The nerve of that boy!” Felicity Fitzgerald hissed. “Who does he think he—”

“That goes for you too, madame!” Judge Griffin pointed his gavel toward the Purity League women.

“Step off your soapbox, Mata. We’re not on trial, you are.” Whelan’s gaze was withering. “No further questions.”

“Your Honor, may I request a brief recess to prepare for my closing argument?” Halliday rose from the defendant’s table.

“Granted. The time is now 11:30 a.m. We will resume this hearing at two this afternoon.” Even Judge Griffin looked relieved as he stood to leave.



Lucinda had barely stepped out of the courtroom when she was blinded by the flash of cameras.

“Miss Lane, did you know that Eli Mata planned to murder your boss for money?”

“No, I—” Lucinda put up her hand defensively against the barrage of flashbulbs from other press cameras, as reporters jostled for a chance to interview her.

“What’s a pretty girl like you doing, dancing with Filipinos?”

“You’d rather date that monkey than one of us?” The reporter’s question drew scattered laughter from his colleagues.

“For crying out loud, leave the lady alone.” Jimmy took Lucinda’s elbow and led her away from the reporters. “She did nothing wrong.”

“That’s no lady,” Felicity Fitzgerald whispered to Martha Richards.

“Let’s pray she sees the error of her ways when her beaux is sent to the gallows.” Martha clutched her purse to her chest, cringing as the crowd of Filipinos jostled past her. “Come along now, we mustn’t let the riffraff separate us from Reverend Pierce.”

As though he'd heard his name, Reverend Pierce turned at the top of the stairs, looking back to check on his flock. "Ladies, perhaps we should get lunch while the court is in recess."

"And catch stomach flu in a Stingaree chop house?" Felicity touched a kerchief to her narrow nostrils. "Help me find my chauffeur. The restaurants uptown are more to our standards."

Food was far from Eli's mind as the bailiff led him back to the holding cell.

"I'm sorry I lost my temper, Mr. Halliday." Eli faced the lawyer as the bailiff locked the cell door. "Those questions, I couldn't just . . ."

"No need to apologize." Halliday stood as stiffly erect as ever, but his gaze was kind. "When a man is pushed that hard, he must push back."

"Do you think the jurors see it that way?"

"Probably not. But I'm glad you said your piece." Halliday straightened his bowtie. "Now I must prepare mine."

"Could I see Lucinda while court is in recess?"

"I shall try to arrange that later." Halliday offered a sad smile. "I suspect you will have plenty of time for visits after this trial is over."

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CHAPTER 55

District Attorney Whelan presented his closing arguments with the calm, sober demeanor of an elder statesman. He stood before the judge and listed each piece of evidence. Here was the county coroner's report, the murder weapon found in the alley, Sal Bacos's testimony, Eli's attempt to escape the law.

"Given the facts, I am confident that you will find Eli Mata guilty of murdering Amado Barrios that fateful night in September." Whelan swept his hand in the direction of the defendant's table. "Perhaps Mata did not intend to shoot Mr. Barrios. Perhaps he did so only because, as he claims, Sal Bacos provoked him. Even if that were true, Mata must nevertheless be found guilty because of what's known as the natural and probable consequences doctrine. In other words, when Eli Mata anticipated he would argue with Amado Barrios, and took a pistol to guarantee he would win the argument, murder was a natural and probable consequence."

Eli sank into his chair as though he'd been sucker punched. Halliday had warned that the DA would base his argument on this point, but he saw nothing natural or probable about taking the full blame for a crime he didn't intend to commit.

Whelan smiled. "I trust that you will give this murderer the verdict he deserves."

As the DA returned to his desk, Halliday stood. Years of experience had taught him how to read a jury and thereby discern even the slightest possibility that any of them might be swayed by his final argument. The odds did not look good. The best he could hope for was a hung jury.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, the district attorney has asked you all to decide whether Eli Mata should be blamed for the murder of Amado Barrios. But indulge me for a moment and try viewing this situation in a different light.” He walked up to the jury stand and set both hands on the railing. “Consider this a story about love and survival.”

“Eli Mata took the job Mamie offered because he needed the money to move to Washington State, so that he could legally marry the woman he loved.” Halliday sought compassion among the dozen faces before him. He found none but pressed on.

“I suppose there are those among you who disapprove of a Filipino marrying one of our own. But consider Eli Mata’s conundrum. Here was a man with no family, far from his native land, a man whose only relief from an arduous life was a night at the Rizal Dance Hall. A day of hard labor in the farms paid him a dollar, every dance cost him a dime. After paying for food or shelter, Eli spent the rest of his meager earnings on a few moments with this woman.”

Halliday scanned the male jurors. “I don’t know about you gentlemen, but when I wooed the woman who is now my wife, I did the same thing. My hard-earned money went to dinner and flowers, our currency of courtship. Passion does not come cheap, does it?”

Some of the jurors nodded.

“I ask that you put yourselves in Eli Mata’s shoes. Imagine your sun rises and sets around this one woman, but that money—or the lack of it—prevents you from remaining in her orbit. What would you do to be with her again?” Halliday spread his arms toward the jurors, as though he hoped one would toss him an answer.

“Eli Mata never intended to kill Amado Barrios that night.” Halliday glanced at Eli. “Yes, he fired the fatal shot, but he did so in the heat of the moment. That does not make him a murderer. If you accept Eli’s account,

you must believe that he acted not because of innate evil, but because of intense love."

"Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I urge you to consider that Eli Mata is no more than a man who loved Lucinda Lane with such intensity that he shot the man who defiled her. He acted without thinking, but also without malice. At that crucial moment, Eli Mata acted out of love. And love is not a crime."

Charlotte Crivelli leaned toward Felicity. "I might almost agree with that argument if that boy wasn't colored."

"Bite your tongue," Felicity hissed. "You forget why we came in the first place."

"Your Honor, I believe that closing argument merits a rebuttal," DA Whelan said.

Judge Griffin rested his chin on steepled fingers. "Very well, counsel. Have at it."

Whelan rose from his seat and buttoned up his suit. As he approached the jury box, he studied the faces the dozen men and women.

"I commend Mr. Halliday for trying to persuade you to see murder through rose-colored lenses. He'd like you to believe that Eli Mata acted as he did because of his love for a taxi dancer. And while that may be partly true, it's not the whole truth."

"What Mr. Halliday conveniently left out is that what is at issue today is not Eli Mata's ill-advised love affair, but the murder of Amado Barrios."

"Some of you might wonder: Why should we care if one Filipino kills another? The victim was himself a man of dubious morals, a man who ran a dance hall that exploited American girls in the flower of their youth. My dear jurors, it is for precisely that reason that we must insist justice be served. If the law cannot defend the least of our sisters, how can it protect the best of us?"

Whelan gestured toward Reverend Pierce and the Purity League ladies. “Some of those gathered in this courtroom have toiled for years to rid our fine city of its gambling dens, dance halls, and bars. Now it is time for you to take up the struggle. Find Eli Mata guilty of murder. Prove that criminal behavior can never be justified—not by material need nor by love. Men like Eli Mata are clearly not like us. But if they are to live in this great country, we must insist they abide by the laws of civilized society.”

Bowing slightly to the jurors, Whelan strode back to his desk.

“What happens now?” Eli leaned toward Halliday as he watched the DA gather his papers.

“The hardest part, I’m afraid,” Halliday sighed. “Now, we wait.”

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CHAPTER 56

“Elias Mata, what do you have to say for yourself?” Mrs. McCleave leaned forward on her desk, arms framing her prodigious bosom as she stared at the 9-year-old slouched before her in the empty classroom. His knees were scuffed, his hair rumpled. The other students had gone home, but she’d held him back to make up for the school time he’d missed that morning. “Well, then? Why were you an hour late for school again?”

“My aunt needed my help.” Eli hung his head. If only he could kick off the shoes that pinched his toes and run barefoot all the way home. That morning it was so hot that he’d waded in the shallows of the Pasig River before going to school. Catching tadpoles was much more fun than reading *Pepe and Pilar* stories in Mrs. McCleave’s class.

“Look at me when I talk to you.” The teacher’s voice sharpened. “Your sister Paloma always comes on time. Matter of fact, she comes early. How is it that your aunt never asks for her help?”

Eli stared at the chalkboard beyond Mrs. McCleave’s shoulder and improvised. “Because only I can help her.”

A knock on the door interrupted the lie.

“Mrs. McCleave, was my brother naughty again?” A girl, tall and slender as young bamboo, stood in the doorway. Apart from a fine layer of chalk dust on her long skirt and fingers, she looked no worse for wear from a full day of teaching the first graders.

Eli flashed a grateful smile at his older sister. Paloma would get him out of this fix. All the American teachers admired Paloma’s unusual command

of English. Mrs. McCleave was already grooming the 17-year-old for a career in the classroom.

“Unfortunately, today’s problem is tardiness.” Mrs. McCleave took off her spectacles and rubbed her eyes. “You come an hour early every morning to prepare the classroom, don’t you, Paloma? Perhaps you should start taking Elias along to make sure he’s never late. You shouldn’t have to be your brother’s keeper, but there doesn’t seem to be any other solution.”

“No trouble at all, Mrs. McCleave. I’ll make sure Elias stays on the straight and narrow path.” Paloma draped an arm around her brother’s shoulder and squeezed him so hard, he winced. Under her breath she hissed, “Lagot ka—you’re in big trouble now. Auntie won’t let you off so easy when she hears about this.”



“It’s time.”

The jurors filed back into the courtroom. The murmuring in the gallery faded away as musicians, dancers, and church ladies alike stared at the jurors. From Sal’s murderous tantrum to Mamie’s dead faint, the trial had felt more thrilling than the Cyclone Racer in Long Beach. Now they leaned forward, gripping their knees like handlebars as the car cranked slowly up the roller-coaster tracks of this final slope.

“Will the defendant please rise?” Judge Griffin’s face was blank as a prison wall. “Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, have you reached a verdict?”

“Yes, Your Honor, we have.” The jury foreman handed a slip of paper to the court clerk.

“What say you?” The judge looked as though he already knew the answer.

The court clerk held up the sheet of paper. “We, the jury, find the defendant Elias Mata guilty of murder in the second degree.”

Eli took a deep breath and held it. The men with their notepads, the pasty-faced matrons with pursed lips, those people were all waiting for him to crumble. He would not give them that, even though the verdict sliced clean through his guts. The whispers started up immediately, a murder of crows encircling his carcass. Eli lowered his gaze, listening to every word.

“But what about the bartender who put him up to shooting that dance hall owner?” Charlotte asked. “Shouldn’t he take some of the blame?”

“Heaven’s sake, Charlotte, whose side are you on anyway?” Felicity frowned irritably at the younger matron. “Does this mean he’ll hang?”

“Let’s not be greedy,” Martha replied. “The verdict will make front page headlines tomorrow and we will storm city hall, newspapers in hand. God willing, the Stingaree shall be clean of these hoodlums before the World Fair opens next May.”

Across the aisle, Jimmy scribbled furiously in his notepad, noting the matrons’ venomous exchange. He couldn’t make out what the Filipinos said, for they had reverted to their own language, but guessed from the harsh grate of their voices that they too were conflicted by the verdict, for very different reasons. In the row directly ahead of him, Kiko and Benny sat on either side of Lucinda. The men bent toward her as she released a low moan, copper curls trembling.

“The court thanks the ladies and gentlemen for the jury for your service. You are all excused.” As the jurors filed out of courtroom, Judge Griffin turned his gaze on Eli. “Now then, Mr. Mata. We shall schedule a hearing to discuss your sentence within a month. Until then, you shall remain in custody.”

A pause of seeming calm fell upon the courtroom as spectators waited for the judge to leave. Before he could stand, a cry splintered the silence.

“No. You can’t keep him in jail.” Lucinda flung herself against the railing, fingers spread wide as she reached out for Eli. “We will fight this, Eli.”

Eli turned, but Halliday's firm grip on his forearm kept him from taking Lucinda's hand.

"Don't. You'll only make things worse," Halliday muttered. "I'll make sure you see her before they take you away."

"Heavens. How long must we endure these histrionics?" Martha Richards huffed at Reverend Pierce as Judge Griffin rapped his gavel.

"I'm afraid that girl is beyond redemption," Reverend Pierce removed his spectacles and sighed.

"Madam, please. Contain yourself." Judge Griffin sputtered, as spectators in the back rows craned forward to watch. "There is no call for this outburst."

"There is no call for this *verdict*." Lucinda pounded the wooden railing. "Mamie and Sal planned Amado's murder. Why didn't you convict *them*?"

"How dare you," Whelan stood, shaking with indignation. "Your Honor, are you going to let this hussy disrespect the court?"

"If I said it once, I've said it a million times. I will not tolerate hysterics in my courtroom." Judge Griffin pointed his gavel at Lucinda. "Bailiff, remove that woman immediately."

"No need, Your Honor. We will go." Benny hooked an arm across Lucinda's shoulders, gently prying her off the bar.

"In fact, why don't you *all* go. Justice has been served in the matter of the people versus Eli Mata." Judge Griffin rapped his gavel. "Court is adjourned."

Kiko and Benny held Lucinda back, allowing the other spectators to leave ahead of them. Jimmy trailed the exiting spectators, then looked back at the two lovers, separated by little more than an oak railing and the law. A good reporter would have stayed to see what happened next. A good man would allow them to grieve in private. Slipping his notepad into his coat pocket, Jimmy turned on his heel and walked out.

Lucinda watched Eli shake hands with his lawyer before the bailiff led him back to his cell.

Eli looked back just then and met her gaze, an ocean of sorrow in his eyes. Before he could speak, Halliday intervened. “Miss Lane, let me see about having you visit Eli this evening. Those reporters outside are ravenous for a story, so you and your companions should wait here while I fetch Nelly. I’m sure the child is eager to go home with her uncles. It’s been a very long day.”

“Thank you, Mr. Halliday,” Kiko patted Lucinda’s shoulder. “It has been a long day for us all.”

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CHAPTER 57

Eli, followed the prison guard and Halliday into the small room where Lucinda sat behind a table. Had it only been a week since he'd last seen her in that same cramped space? This was much harder than staring at Lucinda from the witness stand, with lawyers, a bailiff, and a court stenographer filling the breach. Now she sat a scant arm's length away. Nothing more than a table stood between them, and yet it was clear they would be separated forever.

"Milton, my friend, mind taking off those handcuffs?" Halliday looked hopefully at the guard, a gaunt figure of indeterminate age whose face was creased as melted candle wax.

"That's against the rules, Mr. Halliday. You know that."

"Surely you can relax those rules. Do you really think this young lady would pull a fast one, with you standing guard in the corner? Look at her. She's no more than a child."

Eli held his breath as the guard considered the request. Halliday was right: After tears had washed away her make-up, Lucinda looked like a schoolgirl.

The guard cast a skeptical glance at her.

"Have a heart, Milton. My client has just been sentenced to life. Would it kill you to let him say a proper goodbye to his girl before they take him to the big house?"

"All right, then. But no funny business, y'hear, miss?"

Lucinda nodded, eyes downcast.

Milton fished a key out of his pocket and unlocked Eli's handcuffs. "No touching. Talk all you want, but if you so much as try to hold hands, you're outta here, you got that?"

"Got it." Rubbing his wrists, Eli took the seat opposite Lucinda. The guard retreated to the corner, one hand on his service pistol.

Eli looked across the table at her. Up close, he noticed the shadows beneath her eyes, the pallor of her cheeks, her nails, bitten down to the quick.

Halliday sat straight as a goal post between the couple and set his briefcase flat on the table, a low but unmistakable barrier. "Now then, Miss Lane. I realize this guilty verdict upset you, but it was the best we could hope for."

Eli dropped his head in his hands. It had been hard to swallow when Halliday told him this the night before, harder still to watch Lucinda fight it now.

"You can't be serious." Lucinda said. "How is it fair that Eli does life for firing a gun, while the two cons who put him up to it go free?"

"Believe me, they won't," Halliday assured her. "The DA plans to file charges against them first thing tomorrow morning. He's already asked Judge Griffin to issue a warrant for Mamie's arrest."

"What about Sal?" Eli raised his head, hope brightening his weary eyes.

Halliday allowed himself a small, triumphant smile. "If you recall, he's already in jail for bringing a concealed weapon to court."

"Ahh, the balisong."

"Is that what you call it? Yes, the switchblade. Unless he owns more than one, I suspect it's the same knife he used on you." Halliday gestured at Eli's neck. "You must stop picking at that scab. Let the wound heal."

"Never mind about me. I just want to make sure Lucinda will be safe until you bring Mamie and Sal to trial."

“The DA will ensure Judge Griffin issues the warrants before Sal is released. As for Mamie, she doesn’t look like the sort to get her own hands dirty with murder. That’s what Sal and you were for.” Halliday directed his attention to Lucinda. “Just the same, I urge you to stay away from the Velvet Café.”

“I quit days ago.” She lay a small hand on Halliday’s briefcase. “But if Eli’s testimony helps convict those two, can’t you get his sentence reduced?”

“I’m afraid it doesn’t work that way,” Halliday said. “Eli’s testimony on the witness stand gave the DA enough information to file charges against those two. Whelan’s unlikely to cut any deals now that he has what he needs.”

“Why did you put Eli on the stand instead of cutting a deal?” Lucinda glared at Halliday.

“Without testifying, Eli could have gotten the death penalty. Exposing the murder conspiracy was the only way we could prove he wouldn’t have killed Amado without Sal egging him on.”

A single tear traced the line of Lucinda’s cheek and fell to her clasped hands. “Why did you do it, Eli?”

“After what Sal told me, how could I not?” Eli ran a hand through his hair and sighed. “Why didn’t you tell me yourself?”

“I didn’t want it to spoil what you and I had.” Lucinda looked away, wrestling with remorse. Eli had been forced to expose most of her sordid past to an entire courtroom of strangers that day. Sitting in this small quiet room now with her beloved, the most shameful secret would be hers alone to reveal. Her voice dropped to a toneless whisper.

“Besides, what Amado did to me . . . my father had been doing since I was 12.” She shut her eyes to this ancient pain. “It’s why I ran away from home. By the time I got to San Diego, my money was gone. I was fifteen,

and desperate for work. Amado offered me a job. But first he wanted to make sure I could be held by a man . . .”

Eli’s face crumpled. “But how many . . .”

“I told Dolores about the first time. She pulled him aside right then. Threatened to call the cops and get the dance hall shut if he came after me again. Maybe one of the other girls Amado hurt went to work for Mamie and told Sal.”

Lucinda’s eyes brimmed with tears as she gazed at Eli, defiant.

“Maybe it was a good thing you shot Amado. Maybe he deserved to die.”

For once, Halliday was at a loss for words. He cleared his throat and looked at the two young people with suddenly moist eyes. “I’m sorry for forcing you to bring up Lucinda’s assault on the stand, Eli. I thought the jurors might look more kindly on you.”

Anger flashed in Eli’s eyes. “Why would they? Bad enough for a Filipino to want to marry Lucinda, but to have another one rape her . . .”

“Oh Eli,” Lucinda’s voice cracked. “I never meant for you to find out, especially not from Sal.”

“It doesn’t matter now, does it?” Eli’s voice reached across the table like a caress. “But maybe you could do me a favor. Please, could you write my sister Paloma about what happened?”

“Don’t you think she’d rather hear from you?” Lucinda dabbed at her eyes. “She doesn’t even know me.”

“I wrote Paloma about you, just around Christmas last year.” Eli smiled at the memory of that giddy time, when everything seemed possible with Lucinda at his side.

Lucinda embraced Eli with her gaze, whispering as though they were the only two people in the room. “Remember that ad Amado made us pose for? It came out in the papers just before Christmas, didn’t it, Eli?”

“How could I forget.” Eli passed a hand over his hair, smiling. “I cut the first ad out and sent it along with my letter. I wanted Paloma to know I’d found a nice girl, the one I hoped to marry. If my parents were still alive, they would have been happy too.”

The prison guard harrumphed, shoes creaking as he shifted in the corner.

“But now you must tell her the wedding is canceled. Please, Lucinda, could you do that for me?”

“I’d do anything for you, *Mahal*.”

Eli chuckled sadly. “One day you’ll learn how to say it right.”

“Practice makes perfect,” Lucinda leaned forward with limpid eyes, as Eli’s fingers reached across Halliday’s briefcase.

“What’d I say about no touching?” the prison guard barked.

“Settle down, Milton. No harm done to my briefcase.” Dropping his lawyerly detachment, Halliday looked at Lucinda with genuine sympathy. “Ms. Lane, do you know anything about music?”

“I hear it every night at work.”

“Then perhaps you know what a coda is.”

“Not a clue.”

“The coda is the last part of a song. It’s the last ribbon of music that lingers in your mind, long after the band stops playing. I think Eli wants you to write a coda for him. Something to help his sister remember the best part of his life in America. I suppose that part was you.”

Lucinda lifted her chin and sat up, her back as straight as Halliday’s. “Maybe that’s true, Mr. Halliday. But when I write Eli’s sister, it won’t be to compose a—what did you call it—a *coda.*” She made a face. “Eli and I, we’re not done yet. I aim to keep the music playing till we can be together again.”

“Whatever do you mean?”

“They got dance halls in San Francisco, don’t they? When they send Eli up to San Quentin, that’s where I’m headed. It’ll be easier to visit him every week.” Lucinda turned to Eli, the glimmer of a smile brightening her face. “Tell me where to send that letter, love. I’ll put it in the mail tomorrow.”

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PALOMA

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CHAPTER 58

Manila, 1935

"Eloisa, what do you have?"

"I have a ball."

"Mario, what do you have?"

"I have a dog."

The call and response session of second graders practicing English echoed through the school hall to the principal's office, where Paloma Mata sat at her desk, going through her mail. She enjoyed this first hour of relative peace before making the rounds of the elementary school. Here was a notice from Harvey Bordner, the American superintendent of the city's public schools, a newly arrived, week-old copy of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and one letter addressed to her in handwriting she did not recognize. Intrigued, she opened that envelope first, to find two pages and an article clipped from a San Diego newspaper.

Dance Hall Gangster Gets Life in the Slammer—The children's voices faded away as Paloma read the article with growing dread. She would have dismissed the story as a cruel hoax, but for the mug shot of Elias posted beneath the headlines. Paloma read on, stifling a sob with her hand. She touched her brother's face, as though Eli could feel her caress. No larger than a postage stamp and dampened by tears, the photo smeared her finger with newsprint.

How could this have happened? Her brother had been an indifferent student at best, but that didn't make him a criminal. ". . . *Mata is serving a*

life sentence in San Quentin."

Paloma stifled a cry with her hand. The man who'd kidnapped and murdered the Lindbergh baby in America had gotten a life sentence. His trial had dominated the headlines for weeks, even in Manila. Did Eli's sin rise to the same level as that of this baby killer?

"Miss Paloma. Is anything the matter?" Her assistant Araceli stood at the door of her office. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"No, not a ghost." Paloma forced a smile. "Araceli, would you mind tending to the teachers' needs this morning? Something has come up, and I must run an urgent errand."

"Happy to do it, ma'am." Araceli smiled brightly.

"Salamat," Paloma thanked her assistant. "I expect to be back by noon."

Purse tucked under her arm, Paloma strode out of the school, thoughts racing ahead of her steps. What was the quickest way to get to Mrs. McCleave's home? It would be cheaper to take the tranvia, but the electric trolley ran through General Luna Street, several blocks away. In Manila's sticky heat, even the shortest walk would turn her neat bun and starched white shirtdress into a sweaty mess. She needed to look her very best when she asked her old mentor for help. If she'd learned one thing from years of working with the Thomasites, it was that desperation made white folk uncomfortable. Americans much preferred trading favors with equals. Wasn't that the whole point of democracy?

But am I truly their equal? Paloma quickly shook off the hesitation. She was among the first Filipino principals—the only female one—appointed to head a public school in Manila. She'd graduated at the top of her class, and hers was the school Americans showed off whenever a visiting bureaucrat wanted to know: *How have the natives applied themselves to our educational standards?* She could certainly pass for equal.

Kitty corner to the school stood the Manila Cathedral, which drew a steady stream of horse drawn carriages, bearing parishioners to mass. If a

karomata was good enough to transport the faithful to the house of God, it was good enough to take her to Mrs. McCleave's home. Paloma darted across the street, dodged a Model T, and unwittingly stepped into the path of an approaching-carriage. The startled pony whinnied, stomping its hooves.

"Naku po!" The coachman pulled on the reins. "Watch where you're going."

"No time, I need a ride," She waited for him to clap the foot-long cap of woven straw upon his wheel then grabbed it to hoist herself up into the back seat.

"Where do you need to go, Señora?"

"Señorita. Mamang kutsero, please take me quickly to Herran. I'm going to a house two doors down from Panaderia Molo. Do you know that bakery?"

"I buy my pan de sal there every morning."

As the karomata lurched forward, Paloma strove to compose a plea compelling enough to stir Mrs. McCleave's sympathy. If there was a chance in hell of getting her brother out of prison, the American would help her find it.

Paloma's friend and mentor had stopped teaching years ago after her husband landed a plum job managing the Pavilion Room at the Army Navy Club by Manila Bay. Visiting foreign dignitaries were often feted at the majestic white edifice, whose elegant restaurant offered dinner and a full orchestra for the dancing that followed. Paloma herself had never stepped foot in the club, for it was only open to officers of the United States Armed Forces and a select group of American businessmen. The only Filipinos allowed into Army Navy Club were the cooks, custodians, and waiters who served the all-white clientele.

The photos Paloma had seen in newspaper society pages made clear that Ted McCleave's job gave him and his wife access to the wealthiest, most

powerful people in the Commonwealth government. Perhaps one of them could help Elias.

The karomata rolled past Intramuros's thick stone ramparts, leaving the walled city behind and heading for the wide expanse of Luneta Park, where Paloma and Elias had played as children.She remembered sitting cross-legged on the grass with her brother late one afternoon, a lifetime ago. Elias had pointed at the sun as it sank below coral-hued clouds. "When I grow up, I want to sail to the other side of the sun and see America."

What had her little brother seen over there, that turned him into a murderer?

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CHAPTER 59

A barefoot houseboy in a white polo shirt and pressed khaki shorts ushered Paloma through Mrs. McCleave's airy living room and out to the lanai. Rachel McCleave sat at a wicker table, beyond which rose a wall bedecked with green ferns. Her blonde hair had faded to gray, but she let it fall to her shoulders in loose waves, in the manner of a younger woman. At her houseboy's murmured announcement, she looked up from her newspaper and smiled.

"Why Paloma, what a lovely surprise! It's been too long." Mrs. McCleave rose and touched cheeks with Paloma, squeezing her forearms affectionately. Years of fine dining at the Army Navy Club had added a matronly heft to Mrs. McCleave's figure, but she moved with the energy of a much younger woman.

"Gerardo, would you bring another cup of coffee for our guest?" She waved Paloma into the seat across from hers. "Please, make yourself at home."

As Paloma sat down, Mrs. McCleave leaned forward with a conspiratorial smile. "Isn't Monday morning a tad early to play hooky?"

"If only it were that simple." Paloma pulled the envelope from her purse and handed her friend the newspaper clipping.

She watched Mrs. McCleave read, glad she'd had the foresight to separate the article from Lucinda's letter, with its earnest promise to visit Elias in San Quentin every week. She recalled the first time Elias had written about Lucinda a year ago. The advertisement Elias had attached to that note had a photograph that made them both look impossibly glamorous.

Like actors in a Hollywood musical, if Hollywood ever cast Filipinos as leading men.

She would avoid mentioning Lucinda's letter until she'd won Mrs. McCleave's unconditional support. No telling what Mrs. McCleave would think of Eli's American fiancée.

"Good heavens, Paloma. I am so sorry this has fallen in your lap." Mrs. McCleave took off her spectacles and handed back the clipping. "Eli may not have been my best student, but he didn't have a mean bone in his body."

"Then you agree that he shouldn't be in prison?"

"That's not what I said. There must have been some reason the judge handed out that sentence."

"But you read the article, it says he shot that man in a fit of passion—"

"We don't know what other evidence was presented at the trial." Mrs. McCleave paused as her houseboy poured coffee for Paloma. "There are many things about our legal system I myself cannot understand."

Stir sugar and cream into your cup. Sip coffee and wait for your host to continue. Paloma knew this was the polite thing to do. But this letter was over two weeks old, and her brother had been in prison for even longer than that. She could not waste time on politeness.

"You taught your students to speak out against injustice, ma'am. You said that was the American way." Paloma felt heat rising to her temples. She took a deep breath. "I believe my brother's sentence is unjust, and I would like to do something about it."

"What exactly do you plan to do?"

"I shall compose an appeal to the American High Commissioner. Perhaps he could send it to the official who decides on these cases, someone who can get Elias out of prison and deport him. I can tell from Elias's letters that Americans don't much care for Filipinos. I'm sure they'll be only too happy to be rid of at least one of us."

“Funny that you should mention that. Now that the Philippines is on its way to becoming an independent country, I’ve heard talk of sending Filipinos back from California and Hawaii. Of course, I don’t know if that includes criminals.”

“One newspaper article is all we have. I cannot know what happened that night to cause Elias to shoot a man. One thing I know for certain: My brother is not a murderer.” Paloma caught Mrs. McCleave’s gaze. “The papers had a photo of you and your husband with Commissioner Murphy at the Army Navy Club’s Christmas ball. Would you consider passing my letter to him?”

“But this is madness.” Mrs. McCleave leaned back in her chair, face creased with worry. “Frank Murphy is the High Commissioner of the Philippines. He has no jurisdiction over California’s state penitentiary.”

Paloma refused to be put off. “The Philippines might as well be another state in America, I’ve heard enough people say that. Surely Mr. Murphy would know how to reach California’s governor. They are practically equals.” *That word again. Did “equal” apply only to Americans?* Paloma raised her cup, though she had no desire to drink. “I would deliver the letter myself, but . . .”

Mrs. McCleave shrugged, smiling apologetically. “My husband and I don’t agree with the Army Navy Club’s rules, but we must, perforce, abide by them. Tradition is a near impenetrable wall.”

“The only wall I care about is the one that imprisons my brother.” Paloma raised her chin. “Please, ma’am. You guided me through my career, and I have repaid you by devoting my life to education. I ask you now for this one tremendous favor. Will you help Elias?”

Wicker creaked as Mrs. McCleave crossed and recrossed her legs, smoothing her skirt over her knees. Paloma waited patiently, hoping her mentor would relent. Mrs. McCleave and her fellow Thomasites had raised

her to believe in American ideals, on the concept of fairness and justice for all. *Was that all just talk?*

Finally, Mrs. McCleave looked up at her. “Mr. Murphy is attending a banquet at the club, first Saturday in August. I can’t make any promises, but if you give me that letter before then, I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thank you, ma’am. I cannot tell you how much this means to me.” Paloma took a long sip of coffee, surprised she’d been thirsty all this time.

Paloma spent most of 1935 muddling through her daily principal’s duties. These days, she felt as though her life were split into two picture shows: a talkie in which she performed every day in Manila at a school loud with the sound of children’s laughter, and the other, a silent film she watched through Lucinda’s dispatches from San Francisco.

Lucinda’s first letter had inspired Paloma to strike up a regular correspondence with the young American. The mostly cheerful missives described her weekend visits to San Quentin and sometimes enclosed articles on Mamie and Sal’s murder trial, stories Jimmy clipped and mailed to Lucinda as soon they were published in the *Evening Tribune.*

Eli was serving his fifth month at San Quentin when Paloma received some heartening news: *Savage and Bacos Get Life for Dance Hall Murder.* As if she’d anticipated Paloma’s fear that Sal would exact revenge on Eli for snitching on him, Lucinda scribbled a quick note:

Eli says most prison guards are meaner than convicts. If Sal tried any funny business, the guards would beat him so badly, he’d likely die before serving out his sentence.

Cold comfort was better than none.

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CHAPTER 60

San Diego, July, 1935

"Hello, Jimmy? Have you read the papers today?" A woman's voice crackled through phone at the *Evening Tribune*. Jimmy had never received a call from a woman at work, let alone a long-distance call.

"Of course, I read the papers—I work for *The Trib!*" Jimmy sputtered. "Is that you, Lucinda?'

"Who else would call you at work—your mother?" Lucinda laughed.

"*Harrumph.*" Earl, the newsroom editor walked up to his secretary's desk, where Jimmy had been summoned to take the call. "I hope you're chatting up a source for your next story, Jimmy."

"Yes, of course, Mr. Hughes." Jimmy cupped a hand over the receiver and half turned away from his editor. "Is there some big story up in San Francisco I need to know about?"

"Something called the Repatriation Act for Filipinos just got signed into the law. It's in all the Filipino papers. The fellas I dance with at the Starlight Ballroom wouldn't stop talking about it."

"Some other reporter wrote up that article on the tenth." Jimmy scoured his memory for the article he'd read a week earlier. "Something about offering free passage back to the Philippines—"

"Do you think Eli could take them up on that offer?"

"I wouldn't bet on it, Lucinda. There's the small matter of that life sentence he's serving . . ."

“Doesn’t matter. I’ve already written Eli’s sister Paloma about it.”

Jimmy could hear the familiar stubbornness through the crackle of phone static. No point wasting any breath trying to argue her out of it. “Look, if all it took to spring him from the big house was your determination, Eli would be a free man.”

“Just you wait, Jimmy. Just you wait.”



Ironically, Paloma heard of the Filipino Repatriation Act weeks before Lucinda’s letter about it arrived. A mere day after being signed into law, it made headlines in Manila newspapers, provoking heated discussions in certain circles over the bait and switch proposition to send expatriate Filipinos home permanently.

Who cares if they’re offering a one-way ticket, Paloma thought, as she scribbled yet another draft of her letter to the High Commissioner. *After everything Elias has been through, he wouldn’t want to stay in California anyway.*

But how could she craft an argument strong enough to compel the High Commissioner to request her brother’s release from prison? She chewed on the tip of her pencil, thinking. Would banishing her brother from the land of milk and honey constitute punishment as severe as a life in prison? To hear Americans grumble about the difficulties of living in Manila, it was worse. And if regaining his freedom required Eli to renounce the American dream and the woman he loved, then so be it.

Frowning with concentration, she began to write.

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CHAPTER 61

Manila, July 1935

Dear Mr. Murphy,

I am writing to appeal to your sense of justice and compassion . . .

Mrs. McCleave watched the American High Commissioner read Paloma's letter as the Twentieth Infantry Band drew couples to the dance floor for the first song of the night. She had seized the opportunity to corner Frank Murphy while her husband chatted up British diplomats at the far end of the Pavilion.

The High Commissioner sipped his scotch and gave her an arch look. "And how are you acquainted with the young lady who wrote this letter?"

"Paloma was a star pupil at my first school, back in my Thomasite years. I was struck by her native intelligence and took her under my wing. Now she is the principal of that school. Best success story of my career." Mrs. McCleave toasted herself and took a long sip of sherry.

"A regular little brown American, isn't she." Murphy chuckled.

"One of the best. Pity her brother didn't do as well."

"No surprise. The average Filipino has neither the intellect nor the discipline to succeed on our side of the Pacific." He leaned in close enough for Mrs. McCleave to smell the bourbon on his breath. "But don't quote me on that."

“My lips are sealed.” Mrs. McCleave smiled, but her gaze was sharp enough to cut glass. “Now what do you make of that letter?”

Murphy finished off his scotch and smacked his lips. “You’re in luck. Ever since the Tydings-McDuffie Act turned the Philippines into a Commonwealth, folks have been lobbying to staunch the flow of Filipinos pouring into the US. It’s hard enough for Americans to find jobs in this Depression, we don’t need competition from outsiders.”

“What do they propose to do? Raise a wall across the Pacific?”

Murphy threw his head back and laughed. “If I didn’t know you to be a teetotaler, I’d say that was the liquor talking just now. No, it’d be easier to send those buggers back. Congress just passed the Filipino Repatriation Act into law. And your little protégée here wants us to use it on her brother. Hold on now,” Murphy waved down a passing waiter. “I’ll have more of that good bourbon, boy.”

“Could you help her do this?” Mrs. McCleave asked, watching the white-gloved waiter pour a finger of liquor into Murphy’s glass.

“The Immigration Bureau sent press releases to Filipino newspapers published Stateside and tacked notices in all their usual haunts—pool halls, dance clubs, barbershops. I’m told there haven’t been many takers.”

Murphy paused for a sip, thin lips pinching the rim of his glass. “Of course, we can’t force anyone to repatriate, but this girl’s brother in San Quentin—he doesn’t have much choice, does he?”

“Do you think they’d release Elias and let him come home on that Repatriation law? After all, he only killed another Filipino.”

“If it were up to me, I’d put him on the first ship. No sense spending taxpayer dollars on that wastrel’s board and lodging.”

“So, you’ll help?”

The High Commissioner smiled at the matron looking at him with the earnestness of a schoolgirl. “I’m visiting Sacramento at the end of the month to have a chat with Governor Merriam. I need to see if he can

estimate on how many Filipinos he can deport. Adding one more to the total can't hurt. Although the sad truth is, ultimately, his problems become mine."

Murphy tucked the letter into his dinner jacket. "I'll see what I can do."

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CHAPTER 62

San Francisco, July 1935

While Paloma prayed every day for the release of her brother, Lucinda committed to the covenant of patience. Apart from her evenings at the Starlight Ballroom, she led a frugal, almost cloistered life, darning torn hems, getting shoes re-soled, ignoring the siren call of Chinatown's bazaars. Every dollar not spent on rent or food was put in a nest egg in preparation for Eli's release. She had no idea if or when that day would come, but she filled her hope chest with cash as she waited. She kept her promise to Eli and continued to write Paloma, though her chatty letters avoided any mention of his alarming gauntness, the unexplained limp, the blackened eye.

An Indian summer had fallen upon San Francisco when Lucinda received an unexpected visitor at her front door.

"Kiko! What are you doing here?" She flung her arms around the bandleader, nearly knocking him off his feet. "I heard you were forced to close the Rizal when they cleaned up the Stingaree. Damn the World Fair! If I were in San Diego, I'd have smacked those church bitches clear to kingdom come."

Overcome with nostalgia, she squeezed him again. "Have you and Benny moved Nelly to San Francisco?"

"Stockton, actually. Rent's cheaper there, and Nelly likes her new school. It's a sad coincidence, but I play the piano now at this place called the Rizal Social Club." Kiko nodded at the street. "Walk with me?"

“Of course.” Lucinda grabbed her coat from the hook by the door and shrugged it on. “I’d invite you in, but my landlady’s terribly strict about visitors. The last one kicked me out of the room I rented in San Diego as soon as she saw my picture in the *Evening Tribune*.”

They walked through Chinatown, enjoying a few moments of companionable silence. Lucinda sneaked glances at the bandleader, secretly flattered he’d come all this way to see her. Silver glistened in Kiko’s hair, but he still walked with the precise gait of a schoolmaster leading a file of students. “I miss everyone from the Rizal, you know. Nelly most of all.”

“Perhaps I’ll bring her with me next time. This isn’t exactly a social visit.”

Kiko pulled a thick envelope bound with string from his coat pocket and handed it to her. “Benny and I thought you should have this.”

Lucinda peered inside the envelope and gasped. “God almighty, there must be hundreds of dollars in here. What did you do—rob a bank?”

Kiko shook his head. “Amado didn’t trust banks. When we were packing up to move, I found a box under his bed. Nearly seven hundred dollars in small bills, stacked beneath an ad for ocean liner schedules.”

“His going-home money,” Lucinda whispered.

“More than enough to buy first class passage for him and Nelly.” Kiko paused to take off his glasses. “I knew he put a little money away at the end of every week. All those years we ran the Rizal Dance Hall he was saving up for a visit. He’d have gone home last Christmas but for . . .” Kiko swallowed hard, unable control the sudden shudder that wracked his narrow frame.

Lucinda stroked Kiko’s shoulder and waited for his breathing to calm. Finally, he squinted up at the sunlight. The wrought iron balconies overhead cast lacy shadows on his face. “He’s been dead nearly a year, but even now I think he’s just in the other room.”

“I remember Amado every time the band plays that song he and Nelly liked to sing—‘My Baby Just Cares for Me.’” Lucinda linked arms with Kiko and nudged him to resume walking. “Are you sure you want to give me this? “

“Dead sure. I know this money will never make up for the harm he caused you but . . .” When Kiko looked at Lucinda again, she noticed how grief had aged him. “If we had only known.”

“It would have killed me if you knew. I’m grateful you even thought to give me this. Don’t you want to save some for Nelly?”

“We’re keeping the bulk of it for her. I don’t think Nelly will ever visit the islands anyway. If Benny or I took her, we’d never be allowed to return. The Immigration Department’s been posting ads everywhere about the Repatriation deal: free passage to the Philippines. The catch is, it’s a one-way ticket. How stupid do they think Filipinos are?” Kiko scoffed. “We’re here to stay.”

They paused in front of a curio shop. “Benny and I decided you should have what Amado would have spent on Nelly’s fare. We thought you deserved it for helping us through the murder trial. If you hadn’t kept after Wings and that reporter, Mamie and Sal might never have been convicted. I only wish Eli didn’t have to go to the big house.” Kiko cast a sidelong glance at her. “Like they say: win some, lose some.”

“That remains to be seen.” Lucinda clutched the envelope of cash to her chest. She could feel her heart pulsing against the brown paper. “If only I could buy Eli his freedom with this . . .”

“Never mind Eli—use the money to buy *yourself* a new life.” If Kiko had learned one thing from years working at the Rizal, it was there was nothing more sad than an old taxi dancer. Men moved on to younger girls as soon as their looks began to fade. Suddenly, they had to do more than just dance to reel them back in—much more than any decent lady should have

to do. He'd seen it happen. Kiko squeezed her hand. "You don't have to be a dime-a-dance girl for the rest of your life. Go, while the going is good."

"I'll go only when Eli can come with me."

"Ay pobrecita. Hope springs eternal in a lover's heart."



By October, Paloma had nearly given up hope of ever seeing her brother again. That is, until she looked up from her desk to see Mrs. McCleave at the door.

"Merry Christmas, Paloma."

"You're two months early."

Mrs. McCleave waved a large brown envelope at her triumphantly. "Consider this an early present."

Paloma's heart began to pound as she pulled out the letter and ran her fingers over the nubby imprint of the Great Seal of California, skimming through the blessed words, "*By the order of Governor Frank Merriam . . . remanded to the Immigration and Naturalization Service . . . for immediate deportation . . .*"

She looked up at Mrs. McCleave, unable to speak.

"With any luck, your brother will be home in time for Christmas."

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CHAPTER 63

Lucinda shivered in the stiff morning breeze as she and Jimmy watched Fenton Halliday converse with the immigration officer who'd brought Eli to the dock. Eli's suit hung like laundry drying on his withered frame, but he stood calm and dignified next to his lawyer, who had driven to San Francisco to manage his release and deportation. Following Halliday's strict instructions, Lucinda kept a good distance away and refrained from trying to catch Eli's eye.

"Thanks for coming," she smiled up at Jimmy. "You didn't have to drive all the way up from San Diego to see Eli off."

"Wouldn't have missed this for the world." Jimmy raised his coat collar against the wind. "My editor let me have a couple days off on the promise of another scoop."

"You're not going to write about me and Eli, are you?"

"Just Eli." Jimmy watched Halliday sign documents on a clipboard that the immigration officer handed him. "The governor doesn't usually spring lifers out of San Quentin. In fact, this is probably the first time he's done it. It may be the last."

A gaggle of Americans in elegant coats momentarily obscured Lucinda's view of Eli and his lawyer. The well-heeled passengers sauntered across the docks, swaddled in fur stoles and cigarette smoke. They chattered loudly about their travels, the names of foreign ports rolling off their tongues like pearls.

"Rich tourists." Jimmy rolled his eyes. "At least Eli won't have to deal with them in steerage. I bet those swells will dine at the captain's table all

the way to Asia."

"Wouldn't it be grand to travel first class?" Lucinda looked wistful. "I hear they have dances in the ballroom every night."

"Rings on her fingers, bells on her toes, she will have music wherever she goes," Jimmy half-sang the childhood rhyme.

"You talking about me?"

"Who else?" Jimmy smiled. "You could have started out fresh anywhere in this country with the money Kiko gave you."

"Kiko told me to buy a new life with it. To quit being a taxi dancer. To go while the going was good."

The Americans wandered up the gangway, and Eli came back into view. He was holding a small valise. He too seemed ready to leave.

Jimmy bid farewell too softly for Lucinda to hear. "The going is good right now."

He watched Eli turn to meet Lucinda's gaze, saw her smile at him as a flower smiles at the sun. His throat caught on a fragment of poetry, but he could not recall the phrase. It did not matter.

This moment between Eli and Lucinda, this is poetry too.

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EPILOGUE

Manila, December 1935

A paper star glows soft next to Capiz shell-paned windows, slid open to the cool December air. Outside, the children on the street laugh and chatter in a language Lucinda cannot understand. In time, she hopes she will learn it. She perches on the edge of the wicker chair, looking around a room filled with Eli's childhood. The upright piano his mother once played. The wedding photo of his parents above it. The long white table runner his Tia Remedios crocheted.

None of it is familiar, but she already feels at home.

At one end of the room, Paloma is laying down silverware at a table laden with Eli's favorite food: a steaming tureen of pansit molo soup, a wedge of queso de bola, and a pyramid of rice cakes swaddled in banana leaf, fragrant with anise. A bowl of apples sits off to one side in honor of the American, but everyone agrees mangoes are sweeter.

Eli crouches by the radio in the corner, fiddling with the dial until he finds the right station. At once the chorus of one of their favorite songs fills the room. Eli stands and begins to sing along.

"Sige na," Paloma claps. "Show me how you and Lucinda danced in America."

Eli crosses the living room and smiles at his new bride. "They're playing our song, Mahal. May I have this dance?"

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Marivi Soliven has authored eighteen books, taught creative writing at the University of the Philippines and the University of California San Diego and was admitted to the Hedgebrook Writer-in-Residence Program in 2012. Her debut novel *The Mango Bride* won the 2011 Grand Prize at the Palanca Awards, the Philippine counterpart of the Pulitzer Prize. Additionally, two of her books for children were awarded silver medals at the 1991 and 1993 Palanca Awards. The film adaptation of her story “Pandemic Bread” has screened at film festivals across the country. Marivi writes and works as a Filipino interpreter in San Diego, California.

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FICTION

TAXI DANCER

"If we can't marry white girls, we can at least dance with them." In response to Depression-era California laws that criminalized interracial marriage, Filipinos established taxi dance halls where they could mingle with American women. When Filipino farmworker Eli and American taxi dancer Lucinda fall in love, they hope to move to Washington State where they can legally wed. Their plans are derailed when Eli is arrested for the shooting death of a dance hall owner. As Lucinda fights to exonerate Eli, she uncovers a murder conspiracy orchestrated by Mamie Savage, a rival dance hall owner and Sal, her Filipino bartender. The capital punishment trial brings to light abhorrent secrets concealed by the conspirators, the victim, and Lucinda herself. Inspired by true events in San Diego's Stingaree district.

"In *Taxi Dancer,* Marivi Soliven has crafted a riveting tale that explores the taboos and risks of interracial love, set in the sizzling hot—and often dangerous—world of Depression-era dance halls. I was on the edge of my seat until the final, satisfying page."

—Jennifer Coburn, author of *USA Today* bestseller *Girls of the Glimmer Factory*

"Welcome to the electrifying underworld of California's Depression-era taxi dance halls, where a dance could cost you a dime, a chance at romance, or a bullet in your back. Filipinos dressed to the nines, vying for 'the prettiest girls you've ever seen,' this page-turner from Marivi Soliven conjures the circumstances of living at the seams of pleasure, folly, hard edginess, and danger. What a breathtaking ride to read through it!"

—Rick Bonus, Professor of American Ethnic Studies, Univ. of Washington

"Marivi Soliven brings to life the Filipino dance halls in 1930s California in this action-packed novel that follows the dramatic love story between two young working-class immigrants. From her ground-breaking novel, *The Mango Bride,* and now *Taxi Dancer,* Soliven establishes herself as one of the finest historical novelists working today in documenting the Filipino community in the United States."

—Naomi Hirahara, author of the Mary Higgins Clark award–winning novel *Clark and Division*

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