

# *Under the Mango Tree*

By Anthony Stovold

## Copyright © 2026 Anthony Stovold

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, transmitted, or distributed in any form or by any means — electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise — without the prior written permission of the copyright holder, except for brief quotations used in reviews or other non-commercial critical works as permitted by copyright law.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organisations, places, events, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or deceased, or to real events is entirely coincidental, except where historical facts or publicly documented events have been incorporated as part of the narrative.

The author has made every reasonable effort to ensure the historical information contained within this book is accurate at the time of publication. Any errors or omissions remain the responsibility of the author.

First published in 2026.

**Author:** Anthony Stovold

For information about the author and forthcoming titles, visit:

[www.peter-anthony.co.uk](http://www.peter-anthony.co.uk)

## Prologue

Some places carry their history openly. Others conceal it beneath ordinary lives, waiting for chance to uncover what time has carefully hidden.

Long before Peter first arrived in the quiet barangay of La Victoria, before the mango tree spread its broad canopy across the garden, and before the house became a family home, events had unfolded that would leave traces no one recognised at the time. Decades passed. Children grew up. Neighbours came and went. Seasons turned with reassuring regularity.

Yet the past has a habit of lingering.

Sometimes it survives in an old photograph. Sometimes in a forgotten letter. And sometimes it waits beneath the ground itself, unnoticed until an ordinary day becomes anything but ordinary.

This is where the story begins.

# Contents

<i>Chapter One</i>	<i>Beneath the Mango Tree</i>
<i>Chapter Two</i>	<i>What was kept</i>
<i>Chapter Three</i>	<i>Threads Across the Sea</i>
<i>Chapter Four</i>	<i>The Departure</i>
<i>Chapter Five</i>	<i>Farnborough: Signatures on Wood</i>
<i>Chapter Six</i>	<i>Cahors</i>
<i>Chapter Seven</i>	<i>The Vineyard Supper</i>
<i>Chapter Eight</i>	<i>Unsent Letters</i>
<i>Chapter Nine</i>	<i>California Bound</i>
<i>Chapter Ten</i>	<i>Shared Horizons</i>
<i>Chapter Eleven</i>	<i>The Meeting of Generations</i>
<i>Chapter Twelve</i>	<i>The Weight of Roots</i>
<i>Chapter Thirteen</i>	<i>The Journey</i>

## *Chapter One – Beneath the Mango Tree*

The mango tree had always been there, at the edge of the garden, its wide branches stretching like arms toward the sky. To Letecia, it was more than just a tree. It was a witness, a confidant, a quiet guardian that had shaded her childhood and listened to secrets she dared not tell anyone else.

On this particular morning, as the sun rose and spilled gold over the leaves, Letecia sat cross-legged beneath its canopy. She unzipped the worn leather journal she carried everywhere, not her own, but her father's with Jasic written on the front, from his welding days. She had read his words so many times she knew them by heart.

"Life has surprised me," one page said. "At seventy-five, when I thought my life was coming to its end..." , but it gave me Alma, and then you, my little miracle. If you are reading this one day, know that you were the ultimate gift."

Her fingers lingered on the ink, faded but steady. She closed her eyes, imagining his voice. She had been only nine when he passed, too young to hold clear memories. What she knew of him came from her mother's stories, from photographs, from this journal, and from the mango tree, where she always felt closest to him.

"Munchi! Breakfast!" her mother's voice called from the kitchen.

A smile tugged at Letecia's lips. She would never outgrow that nickname, not in Alma's eyes. Her father had given it to her first, laughing that she was small like a Munchkin in the old Wizard of Oz film he'd loved. Even now, at twenty-one, tall and graceful, Alma still used it as if it were stitched into her soul.

"Coming, Mum!" Letecia replied, though she did not move just yet.

She pressed her palm against the rough bark of the tree. "I'm twenty-one now, Daddy," she whispered. "And I think I need to know more. About you. About where I come from. About the lives you lived before me."

The breeze stirred the branches. To anyone else, it was just the morning wind. To Letecia, it felt like an answer.

Inside, Alma had set out pan de sal and coffee, her hair tied back in its usual neat bun. She smiled as her daughter came in, the same smile that had steadied her through years of both joy and hardship.

"You were with the tree again," Alma said knowingly. "Always my Munchi."

Letecia laughed softly, reaching for bread. "Mum, I'm twenty-one. You don't have to call me that anymore."

"You'll always be my Munchi," Alma said, touching her hand. "And his too. He loved that name."

The words warmed Letecia's chest. "It feels like he's there,

Mum. In the tree, in the journal. Like he's listening."

Alma's eyes softened. "He would be proud of you. He always said you were his miracle."

"Mum..." Letecia hesitated, lowering her voice. "You've told me about him here, the pub in England, the years in France. But I want to see it. I want to... I don't know, follow the threads he left behind."

Alma's smile faltered just slightly, though her gaze remained gentle. "It's a big world, anak," Alma said softly. "And it isn't always kind."

"I know." Letecia leaned forward, her voice steady now. "But it's part of me. France, England, even America. I need to see it for myself. For him. For me."

Alma studied her daughter carefully. After a long moment, she rose and went to the cupboard. From the bottom shelf, hidden at the back, she brought out a wooden box. She set it carefully on the table.

"These were his things," Alma said quietly. "Letters, documents. I was waiting for the right time. Maybe... maybe that time is now."

Letecia's heart thudded. She drew the box closer and lifted the lid. Inside, she saw envelopes yellowed with age, handwriting both familiar and foreign. Some bore stamps from France, others from England, and still others from decades long

before she was born.

As she sorted through them, one bundle caught her attention, tied neatly with string, the paper brittle with time. Alma's eyes softened as she noticed.

"Those," Alma said, her voice lower now, "came from even further back. They were written by your Grandfather's parents, to your Grandfather and his wife. Some are from 1933, before the war. Some from after. They were passed down, and eventually, they came to me. He wanted you to have them one day."

Letecia touched the fragile bundle with reverence. She could almost feel the weight of years between the lines.

Her gaze returned to the box, to the letters, to the faint scent of old paper that seemed to carry with it voices of people she had never met but who had shaped her blood and the path she had been given.

It was addressed to her grandfather, K. S. Rawlins, British Air Commission, New York, USA, dated 1st December 1940.

## *Chapter Two – What was kept*

The wooden box sat in front of her on the kitchen table, its contents spilling a faint scent of dust and history into the air.

Letecia ran her fingers along the edges of the yellowed envelopes, each one like a sealed door waiting to be opened.

Alma busied herself at the sink, humming softly, though her eyes kept darting toward her daughter as if gauging how much to say and when.

Letecia chose one at random, an envelope postmarked Farnborough, Hampshire, 1939. The handwriting was formal, steady, almost elegant, with ink that had faded to a deep sepia.

She read aloud, stumbling slightly over the careful script:

“My dear Kenneth,

I trust this letter finds you in good health across the ocean. We were glad to hear that you arrived safely and that matters are settling as expected.

The house feels quieter without you, though we keep ourselves occupied. As you will already know, we have been at war with Germany since the third of September. Being so close to the aerodrome here at Farnborough naturally gives one pause for thought, but there is little to be gained by dwelling on such things, and we carry on as usual.

On the domestic front, I was obliged to replace the sash cord on the front room window last week, it having finally given way. While doing so, I discovered your grandfather’s signature inside the frame, left there many years ago. I added my own beneath it, with the date, much as he once did. It occurred to me that one day, when the cord fails again and you find yourself making the same repair, you may wish to add your name in turn.

Your mother is out this afternoon with Mrs Davies from next door. I do not expect her back for some time, as the two of them can talk for England once they have found a pot of tea.

It is a comfort to know that the house stands much as it always has, quietly holding its own record of those who have passed through it. Never doubt, my dear boy, that it remains yours, and in time, will pass to those who come after you.

Take care of yourself and do not worry on our account. We manage well enough.

With all affection,  
Dad

*Mother adds her love. She hopes you are eating properly and keeping warm. Do write when you are able.*

Letecia set the letter down gently, her fingertips tracing the uneven edge of the paper. The ink had faded to the colour of weak tea, yet the words carried an intimacy that time could not erase. She could almost hear the careful scratch of the pen, the weight of distance in each stroke.

In the box, beneath the bundle tied with faded blue ribbon, lay another envelope, its paper thinner, the handwriting more hurried. She lifted it carefully, noticing how the pages inside were folded and refolded, as if read many times over. A faint scent of dust and lavender rose as she opened it.

The date, 1942, written in a hand she did not recognise,

caught her eye: "Bethesda, Washington D.C."

She began to read.

"Dear Mother,

I hope this letter finds you and Father in good health. I trust that you are managing as best you can under present conditions, and that the house has come through the winter without too much trouble.

I am glad to report that all is well with us. Doreen was safely delivered of our second daughter last month. We have named her Suzanne, and little Gillian is very taken with her new sister, following her about with great seriousness.

We have been moved once more, this time from Wisconsin to Bethesda, just outside Washington. I am now attached to the British Purchasing Commission, assisting with the acquisition of American supplies. The work keeps me occupied, and while it is far from home, it feels useful.

Though we are spared the air raids here, the war is never far from mind. News travels quickly, and one feels the weight of events even at a distance. I think often of England, and of Farnborough in particular.

Please give my love to Father. Tell him I think of the house more often than I expected, and hope it stands as steadily as ever.

With all my love,

Kenneth

Letecia turned the final page, running her fingers along the worn crease where the paper had been folded and unfolded countless times. The edges were brittle now, the ink softened by age and handling. She thought about the hands that had once held these pages, the waiting they represented, the long gaps between words sent and words received

With Alma beside her, Munchi leaned closer, studying the postmarks and the curious black stamp across the flap.

"Why are some of the letters opened before they were sent to Grandfather in America?" she asked, pointing at the strip fixed across the envelope. "It says, 'Opened by Examiner 5670.'"

Alma nodded. "It was wartime, sweetheart. Letters going overseas were checked sometimes. They wanted to be sure nothing was written that shouldn't be."

Munchi traced the number with her fingertip. "So someone read them?"

"Yes," Alma said. "But they still went. That mattered."

They looked again at the envelopes spread across the table. Several bore the same heavy paper seals across their flaps, 'Opened by Examiner 5292,' 'Examiner 6894.' The glue had long since dried, the paper stiff and yellowed, still doing its quiet job decades later.

The label, white and stubborn, had stood the test of time. Its bold lettering looked almost defiant beside the delicate loops of handwriting on the envelope.

Letecia ran her thumb along the rough paper seal. It felt oddly official, impersonal, an intrusion preserved in glue and ink. She pictured the censors at their desks, reading other people's words in silence, deciding what could cross an ocean and what must remain behind.

"These," she murmured, "were the quiet casualties of war, letters that had to give up their privacy before they could find their way home."

Munchi watched as her mother began to close the box, tying the faded ribbon once more.

Around them, the afternoon light filtered through the window, warm and still. Dust motes drifted above the papers like tiny fragments of memory.

Letecia sat back, resting her hand on the lid.

For the first time, she realised that her family's past was not just held in memory, but in ink and paper, in words that had crossed oceans and outlived wars, in envelopes scarred by time yet stubborn enough to survive it.

"Mum," she asked quietly, "when did Grandad return from the U.S.A.?"

"He returned in late 1945, but from Germany, he had been

sent there from the USA," Alma said. " I think your Grandmother and her daughters returned earlier, their house was at 18 Lammas Road. He'd bought it before the war, in 1937."

"But I thought Daddy was born in Maidenhead?"

"He was," Alma said. "Daddy's family were living at Lammas Road since 1937. Your father was born in 1947."

She smiled faintly, then added, "Your father never stayed still for long."

She went on, her voice steady now. "His parents sent him to boarding school. When he left, he trained as a hotel manager so he could join his sister, Gillian, at the family hotel in Cornwall. It was there your sister Rachel was born."

"When she was five," Alma continued, more softly, "her mother took her to California. That's where she lives now, with two children of her own."

Her voice faltered. "Rachel's mother, your father's first wife, died of cancer. She chose to end her suffering under California's End of Life Option Act. Gillian stayed in touch. She said the pain was very bad at the end."

Alma paused, then looked at her daughter. "Rachel was born in 1971, long before you. Your father always hoped the two of you would meet. Life didn't make that easy."

"Mum," Letecia asked, "the house in Farnborough, is it still there?"

Alma nodded. "The family owned it for more than a hundred years. Your father used to tell me about repairing a sash cord in the front window. When he opened the frame, he found his grandfather's signature, then his father's, left there when they'd done the same job. So he added his own. Three generations, quietly marking time."

"Yes. Great grandfather mentioned it in a letter I read. What else is there?" Letecia murmured, her curiosity no longer containable.

She lifted a thicker bundle, postmarked Cahors, France, early 1990s. The handwriting was quicker, more relaxed, full of affection.

"Dear Peter,

You asked me to keep an eye on St Martin, so I thought I'd write and tell you how things stand.

Olivier is doing well here. The farm suits him. He works hard, complains when it rains, complains when it doesn't, and still manages to smile at the end of the day. That's usually a good sign.

It has not been easy, but he has taken to it with the quiet stubbornness of someone who grew up with open fields under his feet. The land responds to him. I think you would have liked seeing that.

He sometimes says his family's roots stretch a long way, England, France, places beyond, but that they all belong to the same tree. That sounds like Olivier talking.

We keep an eye on him here. You don't need to worry.

Write when you can.

Phil"

Letecia looked up. "Olivier?"

Alma nodded. "Your half-brother. He was born in Cahors, France. You haven't met him either."

Letecia leaned back, the weight of it settling in. England. France. America. Half-siblings she had never known. Generations leaving marks in window frames, tending vineyards, crossing oceans in search of something better.

Her father's life was no longer a single line, but a web, stretching across decades and continents. And she sat at its centre now, the letters in her hands like a map.

"Mum," she said, surprised by the steadiness of her own voice, "I need to see it all. Farnborough. Cahors. California. I need to meet them."

Alma reached across the table and took her hand. "I knew this day would come," she said. "Your father believed you would carry the family forward. Just promise me one thing, anak. Always come home."

"Always," Letecia said. Then, more quietly, "But first, I have to follow the letters."

She turned back to the box, her heart quickening with the knowledge that her journey, her real journey, had begun.

### *Chapter Three – Threads Across the Sea*

The letters had taken root in her mind. Even as she helped Alma sweep the veranda, feed the chickens, or walked through the village, Letecia carried them in her thoughts like a heartbeat. Farnborough. Cahors. California. Places that were more than names, they were pieces of her, scattered across oceans and decades.

That night, she sat again beneath the mango tree, the journal open in her lap, the bundle of letters beside her. The crickets sang in the grass, and the warm air smelled faintly of guava and woodsmoke.

She flipped through her father's journal until she found the page she had marked the day before:

"If you ever wonder who you are, Munchi, remember that you are not only of one place. You carry England, France, and the Philippines in your blood, and America in your kin.

You come from me, and you'll go on longer than I ever could."

The words seemed to lift off the page, threading themselves into her chest.

"Munchi," Alma's voice called softly from the veranda. "Are you dreaming again under that tree?"

"Not dreaming, Mum," Letecia answered, rising to her feet and brushing dust from her skirt. "Planning."

The next morning, over breakfast, Letecia spread the letters across the table. Shafts of sunlight fell across the paper, turning the faded ink to gold. She had sorted them carefully by place: "Farnborough", "Cahors", "California". Each bundle was tied neatly with string, like little parcels of destiny waiting to be opened.

"I want to go," she said suddenly. The words tumbled out before she could soften them. "I want to follow these threads, start with England, then France, and finally... California."

Alma set down her cup with deliberate care. Her face remained calm, but her eyes searched her daughter's.

"You are still young, anak," she said gently. "The world is wide. Travel takes money, strength, courage."

"I'm twenty-one now," Letecia said. "I've come into the trust. The one Father set up... how long ago was it?"

"Sixteen years," Alma replied softly. "Yes. It's yours now."

Letecia nodded, then paused. "Where did it come from, Mum?"

Alma looked past her, toward the empty chair by the table. For a moment it felt as though he might still be there, laptop open, notebook beside it, pages crowded with arrows and half-finished thoughts. He used to work late, the room lit only by the glow of the screen, stopping now and then to scribble something down as if afraid the idea might escape him.

"Your father was a complicated man," she said quietly. "He built websites, but they never brought in much. So he began writing instead. About his life. About me. About you. He liked the idea that words could keep earning their keep, even when he no longer could."

A small smile crossed her face.

"Later, he became interested in a different kind of money. Bitcoin, he called it. Money without a country, only rules. That appealed to him. He never trusted banks much, but he trusted ideas. Especially ones that promised independence."

She traced the rim of her cup, thoughtful.

"He read endlessly. Tested things carefully. In time he found a way of working with it, something he called arbitrage trading.

He partnered with a firm that handled the technical side. Once it proved reliable, he directed the returns straight into your trust.”

Alma looked up at her daughter then.

“Not as a gamble,” she said. “As a way of keeping doors open. So that when you were ready, you wouldn’t have to choose safety over curiosity. You’d be able to go where your questions took you.”

Letecia felt the weight of that settle, not the money itself, but the permission inside it.

Letecia was quiet for a moment, then spoke softly. “Mum... while I was looking through the box, I came across something else.” She reached into her satchel and unfolded a creased document, its edges yellowed with time. “It’s a divorce certificate. It says Daddy was married to an American woman, and that he lived in Indiana for a while. Is that true?”

Alma’s hand froze around her cup. For a moment she said nothing. Then, with a long sigh, she nodded.

“Yes, it’s true,” she said quietly. “It was long before we met. He was very young, and it ended in divorce. He never spoke of it much, it made him uneasy, your father had a very full life but he carried those years inside him, as people do with the parts of their past they can’t quite forget.”

Letecia studied her mother’s face, then the papers scattered across the table.

"I think he meant for me to find these," she said. "All of them. Maybe this was his way of trusting me with it."

Alma reached across and took her daughter's hand, her grip steady.

"Then maybe it's time you stop putting them back in the box," she said.

The words hung between them.

"Go," Alma said finally. "You'll learn more out there than you ever will sitting here."

But before you go, we need some more rice!

On her way back, she stopped at a small shop and bought a world map, folding it carefully into her bag. That night, she spread it on her bed, pinning it flat with books at the corners. She marked three places with a red pen: Farnborough. Cahors. California.

Three dots on a vast canvas. Three threads across the sea.

The days that followed took on a different quality. Nothing outward had changed, yet everything felt altered. Letecia still rose early, still helped Alma with the small rituals of the house, sweeping the veranda, feeding the chickens, walking to the shop for rice or oil. But each task now carried a sense of counting, as though she were quietly measuring how many times she would do these things before leaving.

As she rinsed her hands beneath the steady stream of water,

Letecia became aware of how settled her life was here, how little effort it took to be held by it. Leaving would not mean hardship, she knew, but it would mean surrendering the comfort of the known.

In Farnborough, she imagined streets of familiar houses, their pasts unreadable from the outside. In Cahors, she pictured vineyards and stone walls warmed by a different sun. In Cahors, she pictured vineyards and stone walls warmed by a different sun. California remained the vaguest of all, a place shaped more by absence than certainty.

At night, Alma noticed the change. Her daughter sat longer with her thoughts, quieter, more watchful. Sometimes she would take the letters out again, not to read them closely, but simply to hold them, as if reassurance might seep through the paper into her hands.

"You don't have to go all at once," Alma said one evening, as they folded laundry together. "You can take your time."

"I know," Letecia replied. "But if I don't start, I think I'll never stop wondering."

Alma nodded. She understood that kind of restlessness. She had lived with it herself, in different forms, at different times. Wanting her daughter close and wanting her free were two feelings that sat uneasily together in her chest.

Later that week, Letecia took the journal back under the mango tree. She read not for facts this time, but for tone. For

the pauses between sentences. For what her father had chosen not to explain. The margins were full of small notes, reminders to himself, fragments of thought that never became paragraphs. She realised then that even in writing, he had been circling something, never quite naming it.

The tree above her dropped a leaf at her feet. She picked it up, turning it over in her fingers. It was imperfect, spotted, already beginning to curl at the edges. Still part of the whole, even as it fell away.

That night, she packed and unpacked her bag twice, not because she needed to, but because it made the idea real. Clothes, shoes, the journal, the letters wrapped carefully in cloth. She placed them in order, then took them out again, as if testing how it felt to let go.

Sleep came slowly. Her mind moved ahead of her, walking streets she had never seen, standing in rooms where her father had once stood, touching walls that still carried his absence. She wondered who she would be when she returned, and whether returning would ever mean quite the same thing again.

By morning, hesitation had settled into something firmer.

Letecia folded the map and slipped it back into her bag, smoothing it once more as if sealing the decision. Farnborough first. Then Cahors. California last. Some places, she sensed, needed distance before they could be faced.

Outside, the mango tree stood as it always had, unmoved,

patient.

"I'll be back," she said aloud, unsure whether she was speaking to the tree, the house, or the life she was leaving for a while.

The leaves shifted softly in the breeze.

That night, she lay on her bed with the map spread beside her, tracing the red marks until her eyes blurred. For the first time, she felt her father not only beneath the mango tree, but somewhere beyond it too, standing in places she had yet to see.

She spoke quietly, as if the darkness itself might listen.

"I'm coming, Daddy. I need to see where you stood."

And with that, the decision stopped being something she carried in silence.

It had begun to move.

### *Chapter Four – The Departure*

The morning of her departure arrived sooner than she expected. The days before it had blurred into preparation, documents arranged, savings counted, tickets booked, a small suitcase packed and repacked until it held only what mattered. And yet, as dawn broke and the first rooster called, it all felt sudden.

The mango tree stood at the edge of the garden, its leaves heavy with dew. Letecia paused beneath it, resting her palm

against the bark.

“Keep watch over Mum while I’m gone,” she said quietly. “And keep watch over me too.”

The leaves stirred lightly in the morning air.

At the bus station, Alma held her hand longer than usual. Around them, families embraced, students jostled with bags, workers called out last instructions, but Letecia saw only her mother’s face.

“Munchi,” Alma said, steadying her voice, “I am proud of you. Your father would be proud too. This need to go, it runs in your blood. But remember what I told you. Always come back.”

“I will, Mum,” Letecia said. “I’ll call. I’ll write. You won’t lose me.”

Alma slipped something small into her hand, a folded photograph, soft at the edges. It showed her father smiling beneath the mango tree, Alma beside him, Letecia still a baby in his arms.

“Carry us with you,” Alma said. “When the world feels too large, look at this.”

Letecia tucked the photograph into her journal, her eyes burning. She hugged her mother tightly, memorising the familiar scent of coconut oil, the warmth of her shoulder, the heartbeat she had known all her life.

The bus horn sounded. The driver waved. The moment broke.

She climbed aboard without looking back.

The ride to Jetafe and the ferry passed through open countryside. Rice paddies reflected the sky, carabao grazed by the roadside, children waved as the bus rumbled past. Letecia pressed her forehead to the window, storing the images away.

After the ferry crossing to Cebu, night had fallen. At the airport, neon lights flickered, announcements echoed in several languages, travellers hurried with luggage and purpose. Sitting at the gate, waiting for her flight to Shanghai before the long onward journey to London, she felt the weight of what she was carrying.

She opened her father's journal once more.

"Do not be afraid of beginnings, Munchi," he had written. "They are only doors opening. Step through them."

The boarding call came. She rose, holding her pass tightly, and walked toward the gate.

Later, as the plane lifted into the night, the lights of Cebu falling away beneath her, emotion caught in her throat. Somewhere below, her mother would be returning home. The mango tree would still be standing in the garden.

Ahead lay England, Farnborough, the house with names hidden in its window frame, the first place where her questions would begin to take shape.

She closed her eyes, the engines steady around her.

"I'm coming, Daddy," she whispered. "It won't be long now."

The aircraft turned west, and the world opened.

### *Chapter Five – Farnborough: Signatures on Wood*

The cold struck first.

After hours sealed in recycled warmth, the air at Heathrow felt sharp and wet, as if England announced itself through the skin before the mind could catch up. Rain slicked the tarmac under low cloud, not dramatic, just persistent. Voices around her were clipped and precise, consonants cutting cleanly through the air.

Letecia pulled her jacket tighter and followed the stream of travellers through passport control.

When her turn came, she stepped up to the automatic gate, placed her passport where indicated, and looked into the camera.

A click.

The gate slid open.

She was in England.

The train south carried her past hedgerows and winter fields, villages of red brick and slate roofs passing in quiet succession.

Everything felt contained, ordered, older than it looked. She watched drizzle blur the view and wondered how many people had travelled this same line without ever leaving the country, how many lives had unfolded within a few counties and never needed more.

Farnborough station was modest. A short platform, a clock marking the hour, the smell of damp wool and diesel. She stepped down with her small suitcase and her father's journal held close.

The bed-and-breakfast was only a few streets away, run by an older couple who moved with the unhurried ease of people who had lived their lives in one place. Mrs Andrews answered the door with a practical smile, taking in Letecia's damp hair and uncertain stance.

"My name is Letecia," she said. "I booked a room from the Philippines."

"Yes indeed, my love," Mrs Andrews replied at once. "Please, come in out of the rain."

That evening passed quietly. A simple supper, the soft murmur of the television through the floorboards, rain tapping steadily at the windows. England, she thought, did not rush its evenings.

The next morning, over breakfast, Letecia mentioned why she had come.

"I'm trying to find an old family address," she said, almost casually. "The name is Rawlins."

Mrs Andrews paused, her cup midway to her lips. "There've been Rawlins around here a long time," she said. "If it's property you're after, the records office will be your best bet."

As Letecia left, Mrs Andrews pressed an umbrella into her hand.

"You'll want this," she said kindly. "Weather's set in."

"Thank you," Letecia replied, surprised again by the gesture.

The records office was housed in a low brick building set back from the road, its windows clouded with age rather than dirt. Inside, the air smelled faintly of paper and polish, the kind of place where time was filed away rather than spent.

A bell on the counter rang softly when Letecia pushed the door open.

The clerk looked up from his desk, a man with thinning hair and wire-framed glasses, his cardigan buttoned despite the warmth of the room.

"Yes?" he said, not unkindly.

"I'm trying to trace an old family address," Letecia explained. "The name is Rawlins."

Something shifted in his expression, not surprise exactly, but recognition. He turned to a tall shelf behind him and drew down

a heavy ledger, its spine cracked from use.

“Rawlins,” he murmured, running a finger down the page. “Yes... here we are.”

He angled the book toward her, as if sharing a confidence rather than a record.

“Church Circle. Property held by the family for some considerable time.”

Her breath caught before she could stop it.

“It’s still standing,” he added, closing the ledger carefully. “I can’t tell you who lives there now, but the address hasn’t changed.”

He wrote it out slowly on a slip of paper and slid it across the counter.

Letecia folded it at once, tucking it into her pocket as if it might vanish if left exposed. “Thank you.”

Outside, the rain had softened to a mist. She stood for a moment on the pavement, the paper warm against her palm.

England, she realised, did not give answers loudly.

It simply made room for them.

Church Circle lay only a short walk away.

The house revealed itself without ceremony. A two-storey red-brick semi, its lines softened by time, ivy creeping along one wall. The sash window at the front faced the street squarely, as it must have done for generations.

Letecia stopped at the gate.

This was not where her father had lived as an adult. That had been Lammas Road. But this was older than that, when he was a child. This was the place he had spoken of with a different weight in his voice, the one that carried history rather than memory.

She stood there longer than she meant to.

Finally, she walked up the narrow path and knocked.

The woman who opened the door regarded her for a moment, curious, but not guarded.

"Yes?"

"My name is Letecia," she said. "I believe the Rawlins family once lived here. I was told there might be markings on one of the window frames."

The woman's expression shifted slightly, as if a memory had been nudged awake.

"Rawlins," she repeated. "Yes... come in."

Inside, the house smelled faintly of polish and old wood.

Nothing had been altered beyond what was necessary; the place felt cared for rather than changed. She led Letecia into the front room and stopped by the sash window.

“It’s been repaired more than once over the years,” she said, resting a hand on the frame. “But some things were never removed.”

With a little effort, she loosened the inner strip and eased it free.

Letecia leaned in.

There, faint but unmistakable, were names written directly onto the timber. The ink had softened with time, but the strokes were still legible — confident, deliberate.

Two older signatures, with a date.

A S Rawlins 1899

K S Rawlins 1938

And beneath them, clearer than the rest:

P. A. Rawlins 1978

Her breath caught.

“That’s my father, my grandfather and great grandfather” she said quietly.

The woman nodded, as if this confirmed something she had already suspected.

“Then you’ve come to the right place.”

Letecia traced the writing with her fingertips, feeling where the pen had pressed harder, where the hand had paused before finishing a letter. Three men, separated by generations, each choosing the same small, hidden place to say \*I was here\*.

Outside, the rain continued its steady fall.

Inside, time seemed to fold back on itself.

The woman introduced herself as Mrs Eames and moved about the room with the quiet assurance of someone who understood that houses remember. When she returned with a small tin of oil and a rag to clean the frame, Letecia realised she was touching more than wood.

“When I bought the house,” Mrs Eames said, working carefully, “I promised I wouldn’t remove the names. People like to leave something behind. It felt wrong to take that away.”

Letecia stepped back from the window, her chest tight, the sense of arrival deeper than she had expected.

Mrs Eames watched her for a moment, then nodded, as if deciding something.

“There’s more,” she said. “You should see what’s upstairs.”

The attic was reached by a narrow staircase. The air changed

as soon as they climbed, cooler, dustier, carrying the faint smell of old paper and dry wood. Light filtered in through a small window at the gable end, falling across trunks, suitcases, and a row of objects that had clearly not been touched in years.

Gas masks from the war, never used, hung from the wall, their rubber faces dulled with age. Nearby were ration books, folded maps, and bundles of letters tied with string.

"Most of this was already here when I bought the house," Mrs Eames said. "I didn't feel it was mine to throw away."

Letecia knelt beside one of the trunks and lifted the lid. Inside were photographs, carefully wrapped, some loose, some tucked into envelopes.

Black-and-white faces stared back at her. A young boy standing stiffly in a garden she recognised at once, Church Circle. He could not have been more than fourteen. There were others: a man and woman seated formally, her grandparents, looking solemn and composed in the way people once did for photographs, as if the moment itself carried weight.

"This must be your grandfather," Mrs Eames said, indicating the boy. "The name Rawlins appears on the back of several of these."

Letecia nodded. "K. S. Rawlins. He was born in 1912."

She turned another photograph over. A date: 1926.

From the trunk came letters too, many of them. Some bore

American postmarks, others British. A few were stamped and resealed, their flaps marked Opened by Examiner.

Her fingers paused on one addressed to a military unit, the handwriting tight and formal. She did not read it aloud, but the name and date were unmistakable.

Germany. 1945.

Her throat tightened.

"They followed him everywhere," Mrs Eames said quietly. "The family, I mean. Even when he was far away."

Letecia swallowed. She thought of her grandfather sent to America in 1940, of letters written home to his parents, of another posting later, this one closer to the ruins of Europe.

At the bottom of the trunk lay a thin leather-bound notebook. Tucked inside it, folded small and worn soft with handling, was a scrap of paper.

She opened it carefully.

For when I pass, keep the window for me.

P. Rawlins, 1978

Letecia pressed the paper to her lips without thinking.

It did not feel like a message meant to explain anything.

It felt like permission.

She left Farnborough that evening carrying more than she had arrived with: a photograph, a scrap of handwriting, and the certainty that she belonged to something larger than herself.

On the train back to London, she unfolded her map and drew a small star beside Farnborough.

One down. Two to go.

Next, Cahors.

And far away, beneath the mango tree, Alma would be waiting.

## *Chapter Six – Cahors*

Leaving Farnborough felt quieter than arriving. There was no ceremony this time, just a suitcase zipped, a door closed gently behind her, and a final glance down a street that had already begun to fold back into ordinary life.

London swallowed her quickly.

Underground trains, station announcements, the press of bodies moving with quiet urgency, everyone seeming to know exactly where they were going. By the time Letecia surfaced near King's Cross, she felt wrung out, as though the city had taken her measure and moved on.

She booked a small Airbnb for the night. Nothing special. A narrow room, a kettle, a bed by the window. What she needed

was rest, and time to catch her breath. She lay awake for a while, replaying the house in Farnborough, the window frame, the names written into wood. England had given her what it meant to give. There was no need to hurry.

In the morning, she packed quietly and walked back toward St Pancras. Instead of grabbing something on the concourse, she decided she would eat on the train. It felt right to sit still for a while and watch the country move away from her.

The train slipped out of London without drama. Brick softened into fields, then into something flatter, wider, less contained. Letecia watched England recede through the window, surprised by how quietly it let her go.

She ate breakfast in the dining car, coffee too strong, bread still warm, and realised she was hungry in a way that had nothing to do with food. England had given her weight: names, dates, wood and ink and proof. She had come looking for certainty and found something firmer, heavier.

Paris arrived without asking what she intended to do with it.

She stepped onto the platform and was struck not by beauty but by movement. People crossing in all directions, voices overlapping, no one pausing long enough to explain themselves. It felt neither welcoming nor hostile, simply uninterested. She liked that.

She did not go sightseeing. She walked instead. A river, a narrow street, a bakery window she didn't enter. She bought

nothing she couldn't carry and kept her hands in her pockets, touching the folded papers there as if checking they were still real.

By late afternoon she sat on a low stone wall by the Seine, watching boats slide past without urgency. For the first time since leaving home, she did not think about where she was going next.

England had been about "where she came from."

France, she sensed, would be about "what had grown."

When she stood to leave, she felt lighter, not because she had lost anything, but because she no longer needed to hold it so tightly.

That evening, as the train carried her south, vineyards began to replace rooftops. The land opened. The light softened. Letecia rested her head against the glass and allowed herself, finally, not to plan.

When the train finally pulled into Cahors, she stepped onto the platform with a nervous, fluttering heart.

This was not just another place on her map. This was where her half-brother lived.

She had written to him weeks before, explaining who she was, attaching copies of letters and a few photographs their father had taken. He had not replied. The silence had stayed with her, a quiet doubt she carried from England to France: what

if he wanted nothing to do with her? What if her arrival reopened wounds rather than healed them?

Still, she carried the address she had found in one of the letters. A farmhouse, St Martin, in the village of Saint-Laurent-Lolmie, outside the town but according to the map it's name was now Lendou-en-Quercy.

She hired a small car and drove out, following narrow roads lined with plane trees whose branches met overhead to form a tunnel of light and shade.

When she turned down the lane toward the farmhouse, she slowed, her hands tightening on the wheel. The house was stone, pale and warm, with a tiled roof that seemed to lean into the sun. Vines crept up the walls, and a wooden swing swayed slightly in the breeze.

A man was working in the vines, his back bent, movements deliberate. His dark hair was shot with gray, his shoulders broad, his posture one of someone who knew the land deeply. When he straightened and turned, she saw his face.

There was no mistaking it: the same sharp nose, the same jawline, the same eyes as their father's, though more weathered, lined with years of sun.

Olivier.

She parked, her knees shaking, and stepped out. He watched her approach with guarded curiosity.

"Bonjour," she began, her French rusty but careful. "Je m'appelle Letecia. I'm... your sister."

His brow furrowed, and for a moment she thought he might laugh it off or turn away. But instead, he wiped his hands on his trousers and studied her.

"You came," he said at last, his voice low and tinged with a Lot accent.

"I wasn't sure you wanted me to," she admitted, her voice trembling.

He gave a small shrug, then motioned toward the house. "Come. We'll have coffee."

Inside, the farmhouse was cool and dim, smelling of stone and wood and the faint sweetness of preserved fruit. On the mantelpiece were photographs: a young boy on a plastic tricycle (Olivier as a child, she realized), their father smiling beside a tractor, a woman she assumed must be Olivier's mother, her face gentle and strong.

Olivier poured coffee into thick cups and set one before her. He sat across the table, hands folded, watching her with eyes that felt both foreign and familiar.

"So," he said, finally. "You are Munchi."

Her breath caught. "He told you?"

Olivier's lips curved in the faintest smile. "He wrote. Letters."

He said he wished you could see this place. That you would love the vines, the soil. That you were his joy, even though life had become... complicated."

The tension in her chest eased just a little. She sipped the coffee, strong, almost bitter, and felt tears sting her eyes.

"I thought you wouldn't want to meet me," she confessed.

"I didn't, at first," Olivier said honestly. "When your letter came, it was... strange. I felt like maybe you were a shadow of what he left behind. But then I thought, why punish a shadow for the shape it casts? You didn't ask for the distance. Neither did I."

Silence stretched between them, heavy and fragile. Letecia traced the rim of her cup, searching for words.

Finally, Olivier broke it. "Come. I'll show you the vines. If you're my sister, you should see what he loved."

They walked side by side into the vineyard, the rows stretching endlessly in neat green lines. Olivier explained the soil, chalk and clay, the lifeblood of Malbec grapes. He showed her the pruning, the careful way the vines were tied.

"He taught me this," Olivier said, running his fingers over a vine. "Said you must treat each plant as if it were family. Tend it, guide it, forgive its flaws. In return, it will give you wine that holds its own memory of the land."

Letecia touched the rough wood of a vine, imagining her

father's hands doing the same decades before. The vineyard was alive with history, each leaf bearing the marks of work, patience, and care .

As the sun dipped low, Olivier led her back toward the farmhouse. "Stay for supper," he said, almost gruffly, but with a kindness beneath it. "You've come a long way. You may as well hear the rest of what I know."

That evening, they sat beneath a tree in the yard with a bottle of Cahors wine between them. Olivier spoke of their father: his laughter, his stubbornness, the years of joy and frustration on the farm. Letecia listened, clutching every word like treasure.

When the stars began to appear, Olivier lifted his glass. "To the Rawlins family," he said. "Wherever they may be. And to you, Munchi."

Her heart swelled. For the first time since she'd begun this journey, she didn't feel like an intruder or a visitor. She felt anchored. Not finished, not complete, but no longer alone. Cahors had not answered every question, but it had given her something steadier, a place where her father had stood, and where part of her already belonged.

### *Chapter Seven – The Vineyard Supper*

The sun was already sliding behind the Lot Valley hills when Olivier lit the lantern that hung from the lowest branch of the old walnut tree. Its golden glow reached across the courtyard,

softening the edges of stone and vine. He set out a wooden table with care, two plates, a loaf of bread, a round of cheese, a dish of olives, and a bottle of deep red wine that shimmered in the lantern light like garnet.

Letecia sat, her body still humming from the day's discoveries. The fatigue of travel tugged at her bones, but her spirit buzzed with anticipation. This was not just supper. It felt like a kind of initiation.

"Cahors wine," Olivier said, pouring into her glass. "Strong, like the people. Heavy, sometimes stubborn." He smirked faintly. "Perhaps a little like our father."

They touched glasses. The wine was thick on her tongue, rich with fruit and earth. She closed her eyes to taste it fully, and for a moment, she could almost imagine her father sitting here years before, laughing, his arm slung across the back of a chair.

"This was his table?" she asked.

Olivier nodded. "Yes, it came from England. My mother and dad transported it, plus the furniture, in a lorry when they bought St Martin in, I think the year was 1987, before I was born. He would sit here after a long day in the vines. Sometimes he would talk too much; sometimes not at all. But always with a bottle."

They ate in companionable silence at first. The bread crackled under their hands, the cheese creamy and sharp. The olives were briny, their flavour cutting through the heaviness of the wine.

Finally, Olivier leaned back and studied her with quiet intensity. "You know," he said, "I wasn't sure if I wanted you here. But now... it feels right. Like a missing piece being put back in place."

Letecia swallowed hard, her throat tight. "I was afraid you'd reject me. That I'd just be... a reminder of something broken."

Olivier shook his head. "Broken? No. Complicated, yes. He made choices. Good ones. Bad ones." But you", he paused, tapping a finger against the table for emphasis "you are not a mistake. You are proof of his hope. Proof he kept believing in new beginnings, even when the past weighed heavy."

Tears blurred her eyes. She turned her face slightly, embarrassed, but Olivier reached across the table and covered her hand with his. His skin was calloused from years of work, but his touch was steady, grounding.

"He used to call you Munchi," Olivier said softly. "He told me once, in a letter, that you made him feel young again. That every time you laughed, he felt the weight of age lift. That's not a burden. That's a gift."

Her heart clenched. To hear the nickname spoken aloud here, in France, across this polished table, was like hearing an echo bounce between continents. It was as if her father were present, urging her to keep listening.

After supper, Olivier opened another bottle and leaned back, his gaze on the stars beginning to pierce the darkening sky.

"You know," he said, "I never left France. Even when things got hard, even when others told me there were better places to make a living, I stayed. I thought he had abandoned this land when he left. But now, seeing you here, I think he was trying to weave two lives together, not tear them apart."

Letecia tilted her head. "Do you regret staying?"

Olivier nodded toward the dark rows.

"Out there, you wait," he said. "You work, you wait, and if you're patient enough, something comes back to you."

He paused. "I suppose I'm like that."

Letecia smiled through her tears. "Maybe we both are."

### *Chapter Eight – Unsent Letters*

When the night had deepened, Olivier stood and fetched a small, worn cardboard box from inside the house. He set it on the table and opened it, revealing a handful of yellowed letters tied with string.

"These were his," Olivier said quietly. "Letters he wrote but never sent. I didn't understand why he kept them. Perhaps he was waiting for the right time."

He handed them to Letecia. "Now I think they were meant for you."

Her hands trembled as she untied the string.

The top letter was addressed simply:

For my daughter, someday.

The handwriting was firm, unmistakably her father's.

The date at the top read August 1995, decades before she had been born.

She unfolded the page and read:

If someone named Letecia ever reads this, then perhaps life has been kind enough to grant me a miracle. I don't yet know you, my child, only the idea of you. But I think of you often, in the quiet between paragraphs, when the sun dips behind the vines and the whole world feels unfinished.

I hope you will one day stand where I am standing now, feeling the warmth of this same light, hearing the same river whisper through the valley. I hope you will know that stories, like families, never truly end, they only pause until someone new begins to read them.

If you exist, then I am grateful beyond measure, because it means that love has survived me. And that, my dear Letecia, is all any writer or father could wish for.

Peter A. Rawlins

Letecia set the letter down gently, as if afraid the ink might smudge beneath her tears.

The vineyard around them was quiet, the vines rustling softly

under a silvered moon.

She whispered, "He wrote to me before I was even born."

Olivier nodded, his voice low. "Then he must have loved the future."

They sat together beneath the walnut tree until the lantern's flame guttered, speaking little, letting the silence do its work. The letters lay between them, fragile, miraculous proof that love could travel across not just oceans, but time itself.

In the hush of the vineyard night, surrounded by vines her father had once tended, Letecia felt something she had not expected to feel so soon.

Belonging.

That night, lying in the guest room at St Martin, the letters safe on the table beside her, she thought of her journey still ahead: to California, where another sister waited without knowing it. She thought of her mother in the Philippines.

The world was wide, but for the first time, the threads felt tied. The vines outside her window seemed to hum with it: the past and present grafted together, producing something new.

She stopped, wiping at her eyes. The room seemed to close in, the weight of absence and presence pressing down together.

Another letter spoke of Olivier:

"Your brother is strong, stubborn like the vines. He carries my

first French chapter, just as you carry my last. One day, I hope you will find him. You will see in his eyes the same light that runs in yours. Between you, perhaps, the pieces of me will fit together.”

And another, about his daughter in California:

“You may never meet her. She left for America so young. But if life is kind, and the oceans can be crossed, you will find her too. Tell her I loved her, though distance made it hard to show.”

The letters unfolded like a map, each page a waypoint pointing her toward connections she had not yet made.

When she finally emerged from the guest room, eyes swollen but heart strangely steady, Olivier was waiting in the kitchen with two mugs of coffee. He said nothing at first, just handed her one and nodded.

“You read them,” he said at last.

“Yes,” she whispered. “He wrote for me. For us.”

Olivier studied her face, then looked away toward the window where the vines stretched endlessly. “Then you carry him now,” he said.

She nodded, unable to speak, the truth of it resonating in her chest.

### *Chapter Nine – California Bound*

Dawn came quietly, the first light spilling over the vines like

watered gold. The air was cool, carrying the faint scent of pressed grapes and walnut leaves. Olivier stood by the gate as Letecia's small case bumped along the gravel path. Neither of them spoke at first. The silence had already learned the shape of farewell.

He reached out and adjusted the strap of her bag, a simple, almost paternal gesture.

"You have our father's way of leaving," he said softly. "No fuss. Just purpose."

Letecia smiled. "He travelled a lot, didn't he?"

Olivier nodded. "Yes. But he always left parts of himself behind. You've found a few of them now."

They walked slowly toward the car. The hills around Cahors were still wrapped in mist, the river Lot glinting faintly beyond the trees. From the terrace, the house looked half-asleep, shutters closed, the walnut tree standing watch.

At the gate, Olivier pressed a small envelope into her hand.

"For the flight," he said. "A letter from me this time. Not for your father's past, but for your future. Don't open it until you see the ocean."

She hugged him then, surprised by the strength in her own arms. "Thank you," she said. "For knowing him. For keeping him real."

Olivier smiled, something bright flickering behind his eyes. "Memories don't need guarding," he said. "They just need visiting. Promise you'll come back."

"I will."

As the car pulled away, she looked back. Olivier still stood by the gate, one hand raised, the other resting on the post. The vines stretched around him in pale rows, silvered with dew, a map of everything that had connected them for those few days.

Letecia touched the envelope in her lap, feeling its slight weight, another voice waiting.

The vineyards slipped away on the train, but the letters stayed warm in her bag, as if alive. Hours later, as the plane lifted over Toulouse, she pressed her forehead to the window. Fields gave way to water, the sea opening beneath the wing.

Only then did she open the envelope.

Inside was a single page, Olivier's handwriting neat and deliberate.

When you see the ocean, remember this: we are all made of journeys. Some begin before we are born. Others continue after we are gone. Our father understood that. Now you do too.

Travel well, Letecia. When you return, the vines will remember you.

She folded the letter carefully and slipped it into her journal.

Paris was only a brief pause. Then the plane lifted again, climbing into pale cloud, carrying her west.

San Francisco met her with glare and motion. Sunlight bounced hard off glass and concrete. The air tasted of salt and fuel. Everything felt larger than life, louder, less patient. It was thrilling and unsettling all at once.

At arrivals, she hesitated. In her pocket was a number Olivier had tracked down for her, written carefully on a scrap of paper.

Rachel Rawlins. Sausalito.

Her hand shook as she dialed.

"Hello?" The voice was cautious, older.

"Is this Rachel?" Letecia asked.

"Yes. Who's calling?"

She swallowed. "My name is Letecia. I think we share the same father."

There was a long silence. Then a sound, half laugh, half breath breaking.

"My God," Rachel said softly. "After all these years."

They agreed to meet two days later, north of Oakland. The bus ride carried Letecia through farmland and low hills, fog rolling in from the Pacific. With every mile, her chest tightened.

Rachel was waiting when she arrived. Tall, silver-haired, her

eyes unmistakable.

They stood facing each other for a moment, uncertain. Then Rachel stepped forward and wrapped her arms around her.

"You're real," she whispered. "All this time, and you're real."

"So are you," Letecia said, holding on.

That evening, they sat in Rachel's kitchen overlooking the Bay. Wine stood open on the table. Letecia laid out the letters, spoke of Alma, of the mango tree, of Olivier and the vines.

Rachel listened, tears tracking quietly down her face.

"I have two children," she said after a while. "A son and a daughter. They know about their grandfather, but not much more than that."

She hesitated, then smiled faintly. "My daughter, Renne, would have loved him. She's about your age, maybe a little older now. Strong-willed. Curious. I think you'll meet her one day."

The name settled in Letecia's mind, not as information, but as a presence.

"He wanted us to find each other," Rachel said, touching the letters. "Even if he couldn't manage it himself."

Later, Letecia stood on the balcony, the Golden Gate Bridge glowing red through the fog. Behind her, Rachel moved quietly in the kitchen, humming without realising it.

The ocean breathed below. The city shimmered. Somewhere far away, Alma would be waking beneath the mango tree.

Letecia felt it then, not an ending, but an opening. Not inheritance, but permission.

The fragments were gathered. What came next would be her own.

### *Chapter Ten – Shared Horizons*

The morning in San Francisco broke cool and misted, the fog rolling in from the Pacific like a soft quilt settling over the city. Letecia stood on Rachel's balcony, pulling her sweater closer, watching the Golden Gate Bridge fade in and out of white.

She could still feel the imprint of Rachel's embrace from the night before. For months she had imagined this meeting, wondered whether it would feel awkward or guarded, whether they would circle one another politely like strangers. Instead it had been immediate, almost overwhelming, as if something unspoken had recognised itself before either of them could think.

Rachel stepped out beside her, handing over a mug of coffee.

"It never gets old," she said, nodding toward the bridge. "Every morning I look at it and think, there's another day I didn't expect to have."

Letecia smiled, warming her hands around the cup. "It's

beautiful. So different from home.”

“Different,” Rachel said, thoughtful now. “Not better. I want to hear about your home. About your mother. The mango tree. About him.”

They spent the morning at the kitchen table, papers and photographs spread between them. Rachel brought out albums, their pages thick and yellowed, filled with sepia faces and stiff poses. Cornwall came first, then California. In one photograph, her father stood young and unsure, holding Rachel’s small hand.

“He was barely more than a boy himself,” Rachel said quietly. “I don’t think I ever knew him the way you did.” Letecia showed her photos from her phone. Alma smiling in the garden. Her father seated beneath the mango tree. A tiny Letecia, still called Munchi, cradled in her mother’s arms. Rachel leaned closer, blinking back tears.

That afternoon they drove north along the coast. The Pacific hurled itself against jagged cliffs, gulls crying overhead, the sky a sharp, endless blue. They stopped at a lookout, standing shoulder to shoulder as the wind tugged at their hair.

“Do you know why I stayed here?” Rachel asked suddenly.

Letecia shook her head.

“Because it felt far enough,” Rachel said. “Far enough from England, from him, from the girl I was when everything broke

apart. I thought distance would fix it." She gave a small, humourless laugh. "It didn't."

She turned toward Letecia. "The letters you brought, they did more than I expected. They didn't excuse anything. But they softened something I've carried for years."

Letecia slipped her hand into Rachel's. "Maybe forgiveness doesn't mean forgetting. Maybe it just means we stop carrying it alone."

Rachel studied her for a moment, then nodded. "You sound like him when you say things like that."

That evening they sat on the balcony again. Letecia opened the bottle of Cahors wine Olivier had sent with her. Rachel sniffed the cork, amused.

"Our brother knows his wine," she said, taking a sip. "It tastes like earth and sunlight."

"Like family," Letecia said.

Rachel raised her glass. "To family then, in all its complicated forms."

They drank as the fog rolled back over the bay and the city lights blurred into soft halos. Two women, bound not by shared childhood but by shared blood, sat together and began the careful work of becoming sisters.

Later, lying awake in the guest room, Letecia thought of the

map her father had drawn for her without ever knowing it. The Philippines. England. France. America. Each place had given her something of him, but more than that, each had given her a way of understanding herself.

She realised then that the journey was never about completing her father's life. It was about learning how to live her own with all of it inside her.

Outside, the ocean breathed steadily. Bridges vanished into fog and reappeared again. Somewhere far away, a mango tree stood waiting.

And for the first time, the future felt wide rather than empty.

### *Chapter Eleven – The Meeting of Generations*

The return flight felt shorter this time, as if the jet stream itself had bent to the urgency in Letecia's heart. She sat by the window, her forehead resting against the glass, watching the Pacific's endless blue give way to scattered clouds and the shimmer of islands below.

In her lap lay a folded piece of paper, Rachel's note, written in that familiar looping hand.

Not goodbye. Just until next time. And next time, I'll come to you.

The words settled in her chest like a promise she was still learning how to hold.

When the plane dipped toward Cebu, the light turned molten. The sea below glittered with silver streaks of boats, the city unfolding toward the horizon. The wheels touched down with a muted thud. Around her, passengers stirred, voices tumbling together in Bisaya, Tagalog, and English, the sound of arrival.

By the time she cleared customs and found the van to the pier, the light was already fading. Cebu's evening heat clung to her skin, the air thick with diesel, sea salt, and the sweetness of roasted peanuts from a nearby stall.

The ferry to Bohol was boarding when she arrived. She found a seat on the open deck and watched the last of the daylight dissolve into the water. The sea was calm, darkening to green-black as the moon rose, its reflection shivering across the surface.

The crossing took just over an hour. When the ferry eased into Getafe, it was around half past seven. The port buzzed with evening life, tricycles idling, voices calling out destinations, the clatter of crates being unloaded.

She climbed into a van bound for Trinidad and let herself sink into the seat as the engine growled into motion. The road wound through villages lit by bare bulbs and shopfronts still open, the night warm and alive with sound. From Trinidad, she transferred to a waiting tricycle, the driver nodding when she gave her name, as if he already knew where she belonged.

The final stretch was quiet. The road narrowed, the houses thinning, the darkness deepening beneath coconut palms. When the tricycle turned off it was just before ten.

And there it was.

The house stood softly lit, familiar and unchanged. The mango tree spread its branches wide, leaves whispering in the night air. Fruit hung heavy, pale shapes against the dark, as if the tree itself were keeping watch.

For a moment, Letecia remained seated, her bag at her feet, listening to the ticking of the cooling engine and the distant chorus of insects.

She was home.

The house. The painted walls. The wriggled tin roof. And the mango tree, wide-armed and patient, spreading its shade across the yard. Its branches were heavy with fruit, leaves whispering in the breeze as if they had been waiting for her.

She had been gone four months, long enough for everything to feel the same, and not the same at all.

Inside the house, Alma moved quietly, as if noise itself might disturb the moment. She had been ready since late afternoon, then ready again after sunset, and then ready in a different way altogether as night settled fully around the house.

She had reheated the pancit twice and finally turned the flame low, covering it so it would not dry out. The lumpia waited

on a plate by the stove, crisp and cooling. On the table she set mango slices in a shallow bowl, their sweetness filling the room.

"She'll be tired," Alma murmured to herself, straightening a plate that was already straight. "She'll be hungry."

Outside, the mango tree stood dark against the sky, its leaves barely stirring. Alma stepped to the doorway and looked down the road, listening. At night, sound travelled differently. A dog barked somewhere far off. A motorbike passed, then faded. Not her.

She checked the time again. Nearly ten.

This was the hardest part, she thought. Not the letting go, not the weeks apart, but the waiting when the return was close enough to touch and still just out of reach.

She sat for a moment, hands folded in her lap, then rose again, unable to stay still. She brushed a speck of dust from the floor, wiped her hands on a towel, and went back to the door.

Then she heard it.

The low, uneven sound of a tricycle engine easing off the main road. The brief crunch of gravel. A pause.

Alma's breath caught.

She stepped outside just as it pulled up. In the dim light, she saw a familiar shape rise from the seat, a suitcase lifted carefully down, a figure standing still for a heartbeat beneath the mango

tree.

“Letecia,” she said, softly at first, afraid to break the moment.

Her daughter turned.

The distance between them vanished in seconds. Alma crossed the yard and wrapped her arms around her, holding her tightly, as if anchoring her back into place. Letecia’s body was warm, real, travel-worn, her hair carrying the faint scent of salt and foreign air.

“I’m home, Mum,” Letecia whispered.

Alma pressed her cheek against her daughter’s temple, eyes closing. “Yes,” she said. “You are.”

Above them, the mango tree rustled gently, as it always did, indifferent to journeys and faithful to returns.

Inside, the house felt smaller than she remembered, not cramped, but gathered. Alma set Letecia’s suitcase by the wall and pushed a chair back from the table.

“Sit,” she said. “Eat a little. You’ll feel better.”

Letecia did as she was told, the fatigue suddenly catching up with her. The food was simple, but it grounded her. Rice, pancit, mango. Familiar tastes after weeks of foreign air.

For a while they spoke only of practical things, the ferry, the road, the heat in Cebu, the way travel always took more out of you than you expected. Alma watched her closely as she ate, as

if memorising her all over again.

Then, quietly, Alma asked, "Did you find what you were looking for?"

Letecia hesitated. She thought of the signatures in the wood, the vines in Cahors, Rachel's face in the fog.

And she thought of one letter she had not spoken about yet.

"I found things I didn't know how to ask about," she said slowly. "A letter sent to my grandfather. It was addressed to him at a camp in Germany, after the German surrender in May 1945."

Alma nodded, as if this did not surprise her.

"Your father was like that too," she said. "Important things done quietly."

Letecia looked up. "I think that's where it started. The not-talking. The keeping things folded away."

Alma reached for her hand. "And now?"

Letecia answered without thinking. "Now I know it wasn't absence. It was inheritance."

Letecia paused, chopsticks hovering mid-air. "I found pieces," she said carefully.

"Not answers. But... confirmation."

Alma nodded. She understood that kind of truth.

"And Rachel?" she asked.

"She's real," Letecia said, a small smile forming. "She's strong. Complicated. Like him." She hesitated, then added, "She kept things. Letters. Photos. She never stopped carrying him, even when she was angry."

Alma exhaled slowly. "Anger is easier than forgetting."

They sat in silence for a moment, the night sounds pressing gently against the walls. Somewhere, a gecko clicked. The mango leaves brushed the roof.

"Olivier sends his love," Letecia said. "He said the vines would remember me."

Alma smiled at that. "Your father liked to believe places remembered people."

"He was right," Letecia replied softly.

Alma reached across the table and rested her hand over her daughter's. "You don't have to carry all of this at once, anak. Roots take time. Even strong ones."

Letecia squeezed her hand. "I know. But I think... I'm ready now. Not to leave. Just to understand where I'm standing."

Alma nodded, satisfied. "Then sleep. Tomorrow, the house will still be here."

## *Chapter Twelve – The Weight of Roots*

A month passed like the slow drift of clouds across a bright sky.

Letecia's days found their rhythm again. Each morning she rose early, the rooster's cry weaving into the hum of insects and the chatter of neighbours starting their day. She taught English and reading at the small school that was just down the road, her students bright-eyed and barefoot, their notebooks smelling faintly of sun.

In the afternoons she helped Alma at the market, arranging tomatoes, wrapping fish, greeting everyone with that half-smile that had once belonged to her father.

They laughed more easily now. The house had the sound of life again, clattering pots, a radio playing love songs, a baby goat tethered near the steps.

The mango tree had begun to bear again, its fruits fat and green, promising sweetness. When the wind rose at night, the branches whispered against the roof like a mother soothing a restless child.

Sometimes, after supper, Letecia would sit beneath it and write in her notebook, letters she never sent. To Rachel. To her father. To herself.

One evening Alma found her there, barefoot, the lamplight spilling across the grass.

"You think too much, anak," Alma said softly. "Let the heart rest."

Letecia smiled. "It's resting, Mum. Just remembering."

They sat together in silence, the sky turning deep indigo, fireflies beginning to blink in the branches. Somewhere far off, thunder rolled, the first hint of the coming rain.

When the monsoon broke a few days later, it came like a baptism, hard, cleansing, unstoppable. The world turned silver with rain. The roof drummed, the garden steamed, the air filled with that sharp green scent of wet leaves and soil.

By the time the storm passed, the mango tree stood gleaming, its trunk dark, its roots drinking deep. Everything felt washed clean.

The rains had been gone a month when the letter arrived.

It came folded in a blue envelope, its handwriting instantly familiar. Letecia held it for a long time before opening it, her thumb tracing the postmark, "San Francisco".

*"My promise still stands. I would like to visit, if I'm welcome.*

*With love,  
Rachel."*

She showed the letter to Alma that evening. Her mother's eyes softened.

"She's family," Alma said. "If she wants to see where you come from, she should come."

And so, one quiet afternoon near the end of August, the jeepney pulled up at the gate.

The air was warm and still. Cicadas hummed. A foreign woman stepped down, tall, silver hair pulled back, a shawl draped loosely around her shoulders despite the heat. She paused, looking at the house, the tree, the woman and daughter waiting in the yard.

Letecia walked forward first. The world seemed to shrink to the crunch of gravel beneath her sandals. When she stopped, the two women stood face to face, one framed by years of distance, the other by memories she'd never quite been able to bury.

"You came," Letecia said.

Rachel nodded. "I promised I would."

Behind them, Alma had risen from her chair. For a moment she hesitated, then came forward, wiping her hands on her apron. The scent of cooked rice and lemongrass followed her.

The three of them stood beneath the mango tree, its leaves whispering overhead, the light shifting gold through green.

Rachel reached into her bag and brought out a small photograph, faded, creased, the edges worn smooth by years of keeping. It showed a Peter beneath the same tree, a baby in his arms, the joy on his face unmistakable.

"I kept this," she said. "All these years. He wanted you both to have it."

Alma's breath caught; Letecia's fingers trembled as she took

the photo. The past, once scattered across oceans and time, seemed to draw itself together in that single image.

For a long while, none of them spoke. The wind stirred the mango leaves, scattering light across their faces.

Then Alma said quietly, "Come inside. You must be tired. There's food."

Rachel smiled, small, grateful, a little uncertain. "Thank you."

They walked together into the house, three women bound not by blood alone, but by love, loss, and the man who had given each of them a piece of his heart.

From the doorway, Letecia glanced back. The mango tree stood solid in the fading light, its branches full of ripening fruit. She thought of the photograph in her hand, of the child her father had held, of the new life waiting still ahead of her, a life that would, one day, give that tree new shade to shelter.

And as the first stars blinked awake above La Victoria, she smiled, a small, quiet smile of belonging.

Days loosened their grip, as they sometimes do in places where time listens more than it insists. What began as a visit became, quietly, a shared life, meals taken together, mornings unhurried, the house learning a new rhythm with three women under its roof.

Morning light came softly to La Victoria, as if it had drifted all night across the Camotes Sea and only now found a place to

rest. The sky was pale and full of promise, the kind of sky that meant the heat would rise but the leaves would never lose their shine. Rachel woke to it slowly, listening to a world that was new to her, roosters, distant laughter, the hiss of oil in Alma's kitchen.

She had been in the house three days. At first she had moved through it carefully, as if afraid to disturb the dust of someone else's memories. But there was no dust here; Alma kept every corner bright. Even the air felt tended, carrying the scent of mango blossoms and soap.

Letecia had given her the small room near the back, the one that opened onto the garden. A woven mat, a bamboo chair, a single shelf lined with shells and old schoolbooks. At night the geckos chattered above the window. Rachel found their company oddly comforting.

That morning she joined the others on the veranda for coffee. Alma's coffee was strong and sweet, served in enamel cups with edges chipped smooth by years of use. The three women sat in a triangle of easy quiet, watching the world wake.

"You sleep well?" Alma asked.

"Yes. The air here feels alive," Rachel said. "Even the rain sounds different."

"It's the same rain every day," Alma smiled. "Only our hearts change."

Letecia laughed softly, and the sound loosened something inside Rachel. The younger woman looked at home again, barefoot, her hair tied with a strip of cloth, a small smudge of flour on her cheek from helping with breakfast.

After they ate, Rachel followed Alma to the garden. The older woman showed her the small patch of herbs, the young papaya tree leaning against a post, the line of bamboo where the wind sang in low notes. They worked together pulling weeds, the earth warm and damp beneath their hands.

“You had gardens like this in your place?” Alma asked.

“Not like this,” Rachel said. “In San Francisco the soil is thin, and the fog keeps it cold. Things grow, but they don’t sing.”

Alma looked up, smiling. “Here, even weeds sing.”

Later, Letecia walked with Rachel to the school. Children ran past, calling her name, their laughter quick and high. Rachel watched them, saw how the teachers smiled when they greeted Letecia, how easily she belonged. It filled her with quiet pride and a pang she couldn’t name.

At the school gate she said, “You make them happy.”

“They make me alive,” Letecia replied. “When I was away, I forgot how full the world can sound.”

They lingered a moment, the hum of the town around them—the grind of tricycles, the smell of fried banana, a radio playing a song about lost love that somehow sounded joyful.

Rachel felt the island pressing close: its warmth, its noise, its forgiveness. Nothing here seemed to need perfection; everything was allowed simply to be.

That evening the three of them ate under the mango tree. Alma brought out rice, fried fish, and a bowl of mango slices glistening like coins in the lamplight. A faint breeze stirred the branches above, scattering the scent of fruit and rain.

"To your coming," Alma said, raising her glass of calamansi juice.

"To being here," Rachel answered, and touched her glass to theirs.

The moment held. In the dark beyond the light, frogs began their chorus. The air smelled of earth and sweet smoke from someone's cooking fire. Rachel felt a peace she hadn't expected, an ease that came not from belonging but from being accepted anyway.

When the lamp was turned down and they drifted toward their rooms, she paused at the doorway, looking back. The mango tree loomed against the stars, a shape older than any of them. Its leaves whispered as if telling her to listen carefully: Everything grows here, if you let it.

Days slipped past like water through grass, one bright, humid morning flowing easily into the next. The island seemed always half-awake, breathing through its leaves. Rachel learned to move with that rhythm.

In the early hours she and Alma often walked the short path to inspect the garden. The air was thick with the scent of damp soil and cassava leaves. Children called greetings on their way to school; dogs stretched and yawned. Rachel had never known mornings so unhurried.

“Slow is not lazy,” Alma told her one day, seeing the foreigner’s tentative pace. “Slow means you give time for things to love you back.”

Rachel nodded, smiling. She was learning. At first she had filled her notebook with plans, times, flights, errands. Now she used it for sketches: the curve of the coastline, the way the mango roots coiled like sleeping serpents, Alma’s hands shelling beans. Each drawing felt like a small prayer.

In the afternoons the three women worked together around the house. Letecia mended uniforms, Alma wove pandan leaves into mats, Rachel sat nearby, sewing loose hems or simply listening. When rain came it arrived without warning, as if the sky had turned playful. They would laugh, move everything inside, and wait out the downpour while Alma told stories, about her cousin who could climb a coconut tree faster than a monkey, about the typhoon that once blew the mango bare and yet could not kill it.

One evening Letecia brought out an old guitar. Its varnish was cracked, but the strings still held their tune. She sang softly at first, Tagalog songs Rachel did not know but could feel in her

chest. Then Rachel joined her, humming the tune of a folk song from her own coast. The two melodies tangled, imperfect but beautiful.

Alma clapped her hands. "Ah! The mango likes that."

They all laughed.

Later, when the others had gone to bed, Rachel stayed on the veranda, notebook open on her knees. Fireflies blinked in the garden. She wrote a single line before closing the book:

Home is not a place; it is the people who let you rest.

The following day they went to market together. The road wound through rice fields that glittered like mirrors, dotted with egrets. Letecia drove; Alma sat beside her; Rachel rode in the back of the small car, scarf tied around her hair. Vendors at the market called out prices for fish, mangoes, pineapples. Rachel wandered through the crush, loving the noise, the bargaining, the smell of everything, brine and sugar and sweat.

At one stall she found bright cloth patterned with flowers. She bought a few metres and handed the money to a girl barely ten years old, who counted it solemnly.

"For a dress?" the girl asked.

"For memory," Rachel said.

When they returned home that evening, the sky broke open again. Rain hammered the tin roof; gutters overflowed. Letecia

laughed, catching water in a bucket to wash dishes later. Rachel stood at the doorway, mesmerized by the way the world could disappear in silver curtains and yet remain calm underneath. Alma came up beside her.

"You see? It never dies here," she said. "The green always comes back. Even after we think it is gone."

Rachel nodded, her throat tight. She thought of San Francisco's fog, of years spent keeping busy so she would not feel the quiet ache of loss. Here the ache was gentler, softened by the sound of rain and the steady pulse of life around her.

That night she dreamed of the mango tree as it had been years ago, when he, Letecia's father, her own lost love, had stood beneath it laughing, the baby in his arms. In the dream he looked up at her and said only, "See how it grows."

She woke before dawn, heart full but light. From outside came the first call of a rooster, the rustle of leaves. The house was still. She knew then that she would have to leave soon; she could feel the pull of the other side of the world, the life waiting there.

Still, there was another day yet, one more to live in this house that had let her in.

Rachel spent her last morning in La Victoria trying to memorise the small things. The smell of rice steaming in the kitchen, the low coo of doves in the eaves, the way Alma hummed when she worked. She walked slowly through the yard,

touching the fence posts, the rough bark of the mango tree, the cool tin of the water pump handle. Everywhere there were traces of life that would go on without her.

Letecia came out carrying a bundle of clean washing, bright shirts and school uniforms fluttering from her arms. "You'll miss your plane if we don't get moving soon," she said, smiling.

"I'll miss more than the plane," Rachel answered.

They both laughed, but their voices were soft.

Inside, Alma had packed a small parcel of food for the trip: rice wrapped in banana leaves, a boiled egg, two slices of mango, a piece of cassava cake. "You'll get hungry before the ferry," she said, pressing the bundle into Rachel's hands.

Rachel hugged her. "You've taken care of me as if I were your own."

"You were someone's," Alma said. "That's enough."

They left just after sunrise. The road was still wet from a night shower; water glimmered in the ruts like strips of sky. Mist hung low over the fields, and the car smelled faintly of salt and damp bamboo.

For a while no one spoke. They passed children walking to school, a man driving a carabao cart loaded with firewood, a group of women washing clothes at a creek. Life was going on

exactly as it always had, indifferent to partings.

At a bend in the road they stopped. From there the land sloped down to the sea, the view opening wide, palms, scattered houses, the faint glint of boats heading toward the northern port.

"Take a last look," Alma said gently.

Rachel stepped out. The air was heavy with the scent of wet earth and flowering vines. She looked until the image fixed itself inside her: the line of green hills, the smoke rising from morning fires, the shimmer of water. It was not a grand landscape, but it felt holy in its ordinariness.

Back in the car, Letecia reached over and squeezed her hand. "You'll come again."

"Yes," Rachel said. "But even if I didn't, I'd still be here."

The town was already busy when they arrived. Vans and tricycles crowded the small terminal, drivers shouting destinations, roosters crowing from woven cages. A vendor sold plastic cups of sweet coffee; another, fried banana on sticks. Rachel liked the noise of it, the way everything seemed alive and unselfconscious.

They parked near the line of waiting vans. A young man loaded her suitcase on the roof rack. The driver nodded when Rachel handed him a few pesos more than required.

"Salamat, Ma'am," he said, grinning.

Letecia and Alma stood beside her in the shade of a flowering tree. The van's engine coughed, then settled to a low rumble.

"This isn't goodbye," Letecia said, echoing the words Rachel herself had once spoken at an airport far away.

Rachel smiled. "Just until next time."

She hugged them both, the familiar warmth of Alma's embrace, the trembling strength in Letecia's arms. Then she climbed into the van. Through the open window she saw Alma wipe her eyes with the edge of her apron, saw Letecia raise her hand in a small wave.

The van pulled away, weaving through the crowd, then turned toward the north. Rachel twisted to look back until the house roofs and mango trees were lost behind the bend.

The drive to the port took an hour. The road hugged the coastline; the sea shone like hammered metal under the sun. When the van reached the ferry pier, Rachel stepped out and breathed the salt air. She could see the ferry already loading passengers, men with crates of chickens, women balancing baskets on their heads, children darting between them. She joined the line, ticket in hand.

As the ferry pulled away from the dock, Rachel stood by the rail. The island receded slowly, green to the edge of the water, endless and alive. She thought of the mango tree standing in its yard, the sound of Alma's laughter, the feel of Letecia's hand. The world beyond the horizon waited, but for the first time in

years she did not hurry toward it.

The ferry groaned and steadied itself on the wide channel between the islands. Rachel found a seat on the open deck beneath a frayed blue awning. Around her, families clustered close together, mothers cradling sleeping children, men talking over plastic cups of instant coffee, a boy holding a cardboard box that chirped with tiny chicks. The sea wind pressed against her face, soft and salted.

Bohol dwindled behind her, its coastline folding into the haze. She kept her eyes on that green blur until it was only a line between sky and water. The smell of fuel mixed with seaweed and dried fish, a scent she knew she would never forget.

She opened her bag and touched the small gifts inside: a string of woven bracelets from Alma, a folded piece of batik cloth that Letecia had slipped in with a note, and the photograph of the man beneath the mango tree. For a moment she feared the wind might take it from her, so she pressed it against her heart.

When the ferry docked at Cebu, the passengers surged forward in a tide of noise. Rachel followed, her steps slow. She moved through the terminal, took the taxi to the airport, and waited for her flight. It was late afternoon now; the air shimmered with heat, and she could still taste the sweetness of mango on her tongue from Alma's packed breakfast.

On the plane, she sat by the window again. The engines

roared, and the island below fell away, a patchwork of palms and rivers, then only blue water and cloud. She watched until there was nothing left to see.

Hours later, somewhere over the Pacific, the cabin lights dimmed. Most passengers slept, their faces turned toward dreams. Rachel couldn't. She opened her notebook, its pages already heavy with sketches and small lines of thought, and began to write.

*My dear Letecia,*

*I keep seeing the tree when I close my eyes. The way the light moved through its leaves, the sound it made at night. I did not expect it to stay with me like this, but it has.*

*Thank you for letting me be there. I didn't come looking for answers or forgiveness. I think I only wanted to remember him as he really was, and somehow, through you and your mother, I did. The house, the rain, the quiet meals, the laughter that came without effort, it all feels carried with me now.*

*Please tell Alma that her kindness settled me more than she knows. And that her mangoes truly are the sweetest I have ever tasted.*

*Watching you, I realised something I had not understood before. Nothing is ever finished in the way we think it is. Things change shape, they move on, but they don't disappear. You helped me see that.*

*I am older now, and I won't pretend beginnings come easily. But because of you, I believe in them again.*

*With love,*

*Rachel*

She closed the book, rested her head against the window, and watched the stars sliding past the wing. The ocean below

was invisible, but she could almost hear it breathing. Somewhere far away, dawn would already be touching Bohol again, lighting the leaves of the mango tree.

Back in La Victoria, two weeks later, the letter arrived in the post office of the next town, tied with twine among parcels of soap and canned milk. The postman handed it to Alma when he came through the market, and she passed it to Letecia that evening.

They read it together on the veranda. Alma smiled at the mention of her mangoes; Letecia folded the pages carefully and tucked them into her notebook. Outside, the air was thick with the scent of blossoms. Fireflies winked among the roots of the tree.

Letecia looked up at the dark canopy, hearing again Rachel's words about beginnings. The world around her felt still, as if waiting. Somewhere beyond the fields a baby cried, a dog answered, a rooster called to the moon. Life, unending, renewing itself in small, ordinary miracles.

She closed her eyes and whispered, "Salamat."

The leaves moved as if answering. A mango, not yet ripe, fell to the ground with a soft thud. Letecia smiled, went inside, and began to write her reply.

*Dear Rachel,*

*Your letter found me in the evening, when the air was still and*

*the tree was talking to itself. I read it slowly, then again. Some things take time to land.*

*I'm glad the house stayed with you. I think it wanted to. And I'm glad you saw him here, not as a memory that hurts, but as something gentle that could still be held.*

*Mum smiled when I told her what you wrote. She said sweetness travels best when it's shared.*

*I don't know yet what comes next for me, but I feel steadier than I did before I left. As if the ground has learned my weight again.*

*You're welcome here, always. The tree will remember you.*

*With love,*

*Letecia*

When Paolo finally took her hand one evening beneath the mango tree, the world did not spin or thunder. It simply settled around them, as if the island had been waiting for this quiet agreement.

They spoke of small plans, a motorbike, a house someday near the school, but mostly they spoke of the present: the smell of wet soil, the sound of children playing beyond the fence, the wind moving through the leaves above them.

By the time the rains came again, Letecia knew she was carrying new life.

Paolo stayed as long as he could, working in nearby towns, returning on weekends when repairs were needed in Talibon or farther east. He promised he would be back before the child was born, and no one in the village doubted his word.

There was no gossip, no surprise, only Alma's laugh and the quick bustle of women bringing cloth and advice.

"Another branch for the tree," they said, and meant it as a blessing.

Rachel's next parcel arrived wrapped in brown paper: a knitted blanket the colour of the Pacific, a silver rattle shaped like a shell, a note in her looping hand.

"I can almost hear the rain on your roof when I close my eyes.

Keep the child close to the tree; it will teach her how to grow straight."

Letecia pressed the letter to her chest. For a long time she sat beneath the mango leaves, the wind moving through her hair, the scent of earth and beginnings heavy in the air.

The labour began at dusk, thunder rolling far out toward the sea. Neighbours gathered quickly—one fetched the midwife, another boiled water. Alma moved like a tide, calm and certain.

Rain fell just as the child's cry broke through the night, clear and strong, full of the island's breath.

"Welcome, little one," Alma whispered, laying the baby on

Letecia's chest.

The infant's hair was dark and soft. Her tiny hand closed around Letecia's finger and did not let go.

They named her Munchi, after the pet name her father had once used for Letecia herself, a word that meant affection and playfulness and, in their home, everything good.

The months that followed were gentle. Paolo returned whenever work allowed, carrying toys he had carved from driftwood. Munchi grew quickly, her laughter echoing through the yard. She took her first steps beneath the mango tree, reaching for the lowest branch as though the island itself were calling her upward.

Rachel kept writing, her letters travelling with the postman's bicycle, stories of San Francisco fog and gulls that stole food from her window. Each envelope carried the faint scent of another sea.

When one arrived saying she hoped to visit again before the next mango season, Alma smiled.

"She will want to see the child."

"Yes," Letecia said, watching Munchi chase a butterfly across the yard. "And Munchi will want to see her."

They looked at the little girl, at the green world still shimmering with rain, and knew another circle was forming beneath the tree.

The mango tree had fruited twice since the night of Munchi's birth.

Each season Letecia and Alma laid old sacks beneath its shade to catch the ripest fruit, and the smell of sugar and sap filled the yard for days. The tree had grown heavier, its branches thicker, bending low as if drawn toward the life beneath it.

Munchi toddled under the canopy, her small feet dusted red with clay. Sometimes she would stop and stare up into the leaves, as though listening; then she would giggle and point, and Alma would say, "The tree is whispering secrets to her."

Life in La Victoria moved in its easy rhythm.

Letecia taught, Alma kept the house, Paolo came and went with his repair work, and letters from San Francisco arrived every few months.

Rachel wrote of concerts she had attended, of jasmine blooming in her small garden, of how she kept a photograph of the three of them, taken beneath the mango tree, on her desk. In every letter she asked about the child.

"Is she walking? Does she still smile in her sleep? Does she like music?"

When Munchi turned one, a larger envelope arrived.

Inside was a plane ticket and a note.

"If the seas are kind, I will come when the mangoes turn yellow again."

She arrived on a morning soaked in sunlight.

A van stopped at the edge of the lane, and Letecia saw her through the glare, silver hair, a wide straw hat, a cloth bag clutched to her chest. Munchi was on the veranda, banging a wooden spoon against a tin bowl. The sound made Rachel laugh before she even reached the gate.

Alma hurried down the steps and embraced her.

"You found the way back," she said.

"I followed the smell of mango," Rachel replied, and the three of them laughed.

The house seemed to inhale as Rachel stepped inside: the same furniture polished to a dull glow, the same woven mats, the same view of the tree bending slightly toward the sea. But there was a new life beating through it now, quick and restless.

Munchi watched the stranger with solemn curiosity.

Rachel crouched and held out a small carved bird she had brought from San Francisco. The baby stared, then reached forward, her tiny hand closing around the toy. When she looked up again she smiled, a bright, sudden smile that made Rachel catch her breath.

"She remembers you," Alma said, though of course the child

could not.

Rachel stayed for a week.

She helped Alma cook, walked with Letecia to the market, learned how to cradle Munchi against her hip. At night they sat outside while Paolo told stories of his travels, how the sea turned black near Jagna, how fishermen read the stars. Rachel listened, sometimes speaking, sometimes only watching the lamplight move across their faces.

One afternoon she and Letecia took Munchi to the river where children bathed and women washed clothes. The baby splashed her hands in the water, squealing at the cold. Rachel lifted her high and kissed her cheek. The smell of the child, milk, soap, sunlight, filled her senses.

"I never had this," she said quietly.

"You have it now," Letecia answered.

The words settled between them, simple and true.

On her last evening they sat beneath the mango tree while fireflies blinked in the grass. Rachel held Munchi on her lap; the child tugged at the silver chain around her neck and laughed.

"You'll spoil her," Alma teased.

"That's allowed for grandmothers," Rachel said, half joking, half claiming it.

They talked until the lamps burned low. At some point Paolo

brought his guitar and played a tune that wound itself through the night air. Rachel closed her eyes and thought how the sound of strings and the rustle of leaves were not so different, both were the music of things that grow.

“Have you seen this?”.

Rachel studied the picture for a long time. “Show me where this was taken,” she said. “I’d like to see the sea where everything first began.”

A few mornings later, Paolo loaded the car, folding chair, picnic basket, toys for Munchi, now almost three years old. He checked the tyres twice, humming as he worked. “It’s a

long drive, but the road’s good these days,” he said. The plan was simple: a family day trip, Rachel’s chance to see where Letecia had spent the first months of her life when the island was still recovering from the great storm of decades before.

The sky was soft with early light when they left La Victoria. Coconut trees cast long shadows across the fields; the air smelled of salt and morning fires. Munchi sat on Rachel’s lap in the back seat, clutching her carved bird. The child’s chatter filled the car until she finally drifted to sleep.

As they drove eastward, the landscape opened into a different Bohol, rolling hills, glimpses of the sea between palms, roadside stalls selling mangoes and corn. Letecia pointed to the horizon. “Beyond those hills is Anda. We lived there almost two years after the typhoon. No power in La Victoria then, the lines

were down for months.”

They reached Anda by mid morning. The sea was calm, the colour of blue glass; the waves lapped gently against the shore, nothing like the wild surf Rachel remembered from Cornwall long ago. “Here, the sea breathes instead of roars,” she said.

The road curved following the coast, past small cafés and shops, until they came to a white-painted church, San Isidro Labrador, its bells shining in the sun. Across the street stood the house Letecia’s family had once rented: two stories, weathered shutters, a veranda shaded by bougainvillea. The church courtyard was busy; Sunday mass had just ended, and families spilled out, laughing, children chasing each other between the pews.

Rachel could almost see another time overlaid on the present: the house dimly lit by lanterns, a younger Letecia cradled inside, the faint hum of a distant barge keeping the town alive.

They drove down the track to the coast, to Amun Ini Beach Resort & Spa, where Fred, the owner, still ran things much as he always had. The place was modern now, a sweep of chalets with verandas overlooking the sea, a bright restaurant, and a pool that shimmered turquoise in the light. Fred came out to greet them, tall and grinning, hair gone white but eyes sharp as ever.

“Well, if it isn’t Teacher Letecia!” he said, shaking her hand. “And this must be little Munchi. Welcome back! We still have

your names on our old guest list from the typhoon days.”

He turned to Rachel. “You must be the visitor from far away. I’ve heard about you too.”

They all laughed, and Fred insisted they stay for lunch.

The restaurant overlooked the beach. They ate grilled fish and rice, mango salad, and cold calamansi juice. The wind smelled of salt and flowering vines. While they ate, Fred told how Power Barge 104 had finally restored electricity to the island at the end of 2021, feeding Tagbilaran City through to Ubay first. “We were lucky in Anda,” he said. “We had the barge’s line, so we got lights early. Your village in La Victoria, outside our district, had to wait months. That’s why you moved here, remember?”

Letecia nodded. “We could see the barge’s glow from the beach, but we couldn’t hear it. Too far up the coast. Only the lights at night, like a ship anchored among the stars.”

Paolo smiled. “You see? Even electricity leaves its traces.”

After lunch they walked along the white sand. The water was clear and still; small boats floated offshore, their hulls reflected perfectly.

Munchi ran ahead, leaving tiny footprints in the damp sand.

Rachel followed slowly, each step taken with quiet attention.

“This sea,” she said, “knows how to wait.”

Fred came down with a camera and took a photograph of

them all, Letecia, Paolo, Munchi, and Rachel, standing at the edge of the tide.

"For your album," he said. "A moment worth keeping."

They spent the afternoon swimming in the shallows, then rested by the pool while Munchi slept on a towel in the shade.

Later they stopped in town to visit Joachim , the German who had married a Filipina and opened a small bar-restaurant near the plaza.

He recognised Letecia immediately. "The teacher who danced with my wife during the fiesta!" he exclaimed. "And this little one, your copy!"

He brought out iced tea and banana fritters, laughing as they caught up on two decades of stories.

The drive back began as the sun slipped toward the horizon. Anda glowed gold, its houses neat against the hills, the sea turning copper and violet. Munchi slept again in Rachel's arms, her breath warm and even. When they reached the top of the last ridge, Rachel looked back.

The beach was already in shadow, the church bell ringing faintly.

The town lights flickered on, gentle and steady, the same power that had once come from the barge, now long replaced by quiet lines strung across the hills.

She thought of that barge, of the years when the hum of its engines meant survival, and of the people who had built lives around its gift of light. "Even far away, I think I'll hear that hum sometimes," she said softly.

Paolo smiled from the driver's seat. "It's still out there," he said. "We just don't need to listen as hard."

They drove the rest of the way home in silence, the road smooth under the tyres, the sky slowly darkening to indigo. Behind them, Anda receded into the dusk, a place of beginnings, still bright in memory.

The message came first as a *ping* on Letecia's phone. The name on the screen read Olivier St Martin, and the preview line said simply, *The vines are full again.*

When she opened it, a photograph followed: long rows of green climbing the hill above the River Lot, sunlight falling across a stone house.

Then his note, written in careful English:

"The grapes survived the frost. If she is able, bring Rachel while they are still green and the little one who carries her smile."

Rachel read it twice, then smiled. "He still writes like a farmer," she said.

Paolo, who was fitting the mosquito net over Munchi's cot, looked up. "Then we should go while the vines are green."

Alma listened from the doorway, leaning on her stick. "You go," she said. "The mango tree will miss you, but I'll sit with it while you're away."

She handed Munchi a small pouch of dried mango seeds. "Take these. For luck, and to remind the French what sweetness is."

### *Chapter Thirteen - The Journey*

They flew from Cebu through Paris to Toulouse, and then

drove north.

Rachel slept most of the way, waking to the change in light, not tropical gold but a softer, pearly glow that made the land seem older.

The roads were smooth; the fields, precise. Letecia watched in wonder. "No stray dogs, no karaoke," she whispered, half disappointed.

Munchi pressed her face to the window. "It smells like grapes," she said.

Rachel laughed. "That's because it is."

When they reached St Martin, the sun was sliding behind the hills.

Olivier stood at the gate, tall and weathered, his straw hat tilted back.

He lifted Rachel off her feet in a hug that smelled of soil and wine.

"Welcome home, sister," he said.

The farmhouse was stone and cool, the air inside tasting faintly of oak barrels and bread.

Olivier's wife, Claire, kissed them all on both cheeks.

Her son Lucas carried the bags upstairs.

Outside, vines rolled down to the river, and beyond them the roofs of Cahors caught the evening light.

That night they ate on the terrace, roast duck, warm bread,

beans in olive oil, and wine dark as ink.

Munchi sipped water from a crystal glass and announced, "It tastes like grapes without noise."

Everyone laughed.

Later, while fireflies blinked in the lavender, Rachel whispered to Letecia, "It feels strange, the air smells of dust and fruit, but it hums the same song as Bohol, only in another language."

Morning began with the sound of tractors and doves. Munchi ran between the vines, her shoes turning purple from fallen grapes.

Letecia helped Claire bake; Paolo and Lucas repaired a fence by the road.

Rachel sat with her sketchbook, drawing the way the light moved over the hills.

Every evening, when the air cooled, she video-called Alma.

The signal crackled, and Alma's face appeared, framed by the old mango tree.

"How's France?" she asked.

"Too tidy," Rachel said. "No TukTuk, no karaoke."

Alma chuckled. "Then sing there instead."

Behind her, neighbours waved, the barangay loudspeaker calling the next day's market news.

By late September the vines were heavy. Olivier's workers arrived, and the picking began, laughter, music, and baskets of grapes.

Letecia joined them, her hands sticky with juice. Paolo lifted Munchi so she could drop grapes into the vat, her giggles ringing over the fields.

Someone handed Rachel a glass of young wine; she held it up, watching sunlight filter through its crimson heart.

That night they held a small celebration.

Fred from Anda sent a video message on Messenger, he and his wife waving from the resort, the sea calm behind them.

"Drink one for us!" he shouted over the sound of surf. Rachel laughed until tears ran down her cheeks.

Later she sat with Olivier under the old plane tree.

"You've made a good life, sister," he said.

She looked toward the farmhouse, where Letecia was putting Munchi to bed.

"I just followed where love grew," she said.

### *Chapter Fourteen - The Farewell*

The last days passed gently.

Rachel tired easily now; her sketchbook lay open beside her bed, half-finished drawings of vines and one of the mango tree back home.

She wrote short messages to Alma and Fred but never sent them.

One morning she did not wake.

The note found on her table read:

Light travels farther than we think. Tell them I'm already home.

Olivier held a small service at the vineyard chapel.

They sang quietly; even the wind seemed to stand still among the vines.

Her ashes were divided, half buried beneath a young vine, half given to Letecia to carry back across the world.

### *Epilogue – Under the Mango Tree*

The flight home was long but kind.

Munchi slept with her head on Letecia's lap, the pouch of ashes wrapped in cloth on the seat beside them.

When they landed in Cebu, the air felt thick and alive again, the smell of salt and dust, the noise of children, tricycles, and phones chiming with new messages.

By the time they reached La Victoria, evening had fallen.

Alma waited by the gate, leaning on her stick, a phone glowing faintly in her hand.

"I followed you all the way on Facebook," she said, smiling through tears.

"You looked like angels in those vineyards."

The next morning they gathered under the mango tree.

The earth was soft from rain.

Letecia opened the pouch, and Munchi poured a handful of ashes into the soil.

Paolo planted a small sapling beside the old roots, a new mango tree for those who would follow.” .

Alma whispered a blessing in Bisaya:

“May the roots find each other under the earth. May every leaf remember her name.”

Afterwards they sat quietly.

A soft wind moved through the leaves; somewhere a phone chimed, and Alma laughed.

“Even she’s sending a message,” she said.

In the evening, Letecia hung one of Rachel’s sketches on the wall, the vineyard under a full moon.

That night, before sleep, Munchi took her mother’s phone and played an old voice message: Rachel’s voice, clear and calm, saying,

“Listen to the rain, it sounds the same everywhere.”

Outside, the mango leaves stirred.

The phone screen dimmed, but the sound lingered, blending with the wind, the frogs, and the heartbeat of the island.

Under the mango tree, the world felt whole again.