


my  
FATE   
ACCORDING  
to the  
BUTTERFLY

by  
GAIL D.  
VILLARUEVA



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In one week Sabrina will be eleven-years-old and she would really like to get her estranged parents and her older sister Nadine together for the celebration, especially since the black butterfly landing on her locket has convinced her that she is going to die; Sabrina and her friend Pepper come up with a bucket list, and enlist Nadine's help—but aspiring reporter Nadine is working on a story about the Philippines' war on drugs, and she has uncovered something that may endanger them all, and prove the butterfly is indeed a harbinger of death in Manila.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## **An Utterly Impossible Task**

SUNDAY

IF YOU SEE THE BUTTERFLY, somebody you know will die.

Or has already died. My dad wasn't clear. He just said if the Butterfly lands on something of yours, you should expect Death to come knocking at your door.



“Butterflies again?”

That's my *ate*, my big sister, Nadine. She doesn't believe in the Butterfly.

Well, Ate Nadine doesn't believe *anything* Dad says.

“You’ve got this entire park to inspire you, and you pick those pesky little things,” she continues, sitting beside me. Ate Nadine tosses her silver notebook on the picnic table. “I swear, Sab. This obsession needs to stop.”

It’s a little after one in the afternoon—the time of the day when the humid, sweltering heat of Metro Manila is most unforgiving. Ate Nadine and I are wearing similar tank tops and denim shorts, but hers look fresh and clean. Mine, on the other hand, are icky with sweat and smeared with oil pastel.

“I’m not obsessed.” I flip my painting over, hiding it from her sight.

Thing is, I do love to draw and paint butterflies. But I never color them black, nor do I make them bigger than an inch or two. Okay, maybe I *am* obsessed with drawing other kinds of butterflies, since I can’t bring myself to draw *the* Butterfly.

Dad described the Butterfly as being as black as a starless night sky. It’s a giant compared to your garden-variety moth—probably even bigger than my hand. Its dark, mysterious vibe is beautiful and sinister at the same time. A perfect inspiration for a newbie artist like me.

Still, I can't get myself to create anything remotely resembling my father's Butterfly. Call me superstitious, but no way am I making art that might bring bad luck to our family.

"Stop being so melodramatic. It's not like I can't un-flip your painting." Ate Nadine rolls her eyes. "Let me see."

I study my sister. We have the same bronze skin, flat nose, and small, dark brown eyes. But her black hair cascades on her shoulders in soft waves, and mine hangs from my head like a dull wig. I have skinny arms, and she has curves. During my insecure moments, I think of her as an upgraded version of me. On days like this one, however, I look up to Ate Nadine.

I'm pretty sure I managed to capture the view of a bug from the ground. Still, I want to know my sister's opinion, so I push the artwork across the table.

"It's fine, but you need to add more shadows behind the blades of grass. Right now, it looks like a picture frame of fake leaves," Ate Nadine says in a brisk manner. She's harsh, but I'll take it. I'm lucky she has time to look at my work at all.

Ever since my sister went off to college and started writing for the school paper, I barely see her. She often comes home late on school nights. On weekends she's cooped up in her

room with the music blasting so loud the floor vibrates in the hallway. When I *do* see Ate Nadine, she's either typing away on her laptop or bickering with someone on the phone.

I thought she'd have time for me now, since it's summer. Then Ate Nadine got this internship with a national paper, and it just got worse.

"I love how you blended the blue hues for the sky here," she continues. "The butterflies' colors pop out nicely, but if you put more—"

"I think it's pretty," says a chirpy voice behind me. I look over my shoulder and find myself staring at the bright blue eyes of my best friend, Pepper Lemmington. "I love the details on those butterflies. You make them look so real."

Ate Nadine snorts. "You think everything Sab paints is pretty."

I beam at my friend. If Ate Nadine is my harshest critic, Pepper is my greatest cheerleader. She's been my best friend since first grade, when she and her dad moved permanently to the Philippines from the United States.

"True." Pepper shrugs. "Still—"

*CREEENG!*

There's a loud ring coming from Ate Nadine's shorts pocket. She hands me back my work and answers her cell phone. "Hello? Yes, this is she. You mean the one that went viral? Yes, ma'am, I wrote it. Uh-huh . . ."

So much for my art critique. Whenever her internship mentor calls, Ate drops everything, including me.

She's right though. The lighting and shadows on my painting do need fixing.

I smooth down the edges of my artwork. The oil pastels leave green-and-blue smudges on my fingers, as well as a distinct smell I find most comforting. Waxy, but with a hint of something like face powder. I create a thin black outline beneath a leaf and use the tip of my index finger to blend it in.

"Nice." Pepper nods in approval. "It's so much better now."

"*Ahh-teh Nah-deen!*" I call, waving my painting like a flag to catch my sister's attention. "I'm done. What do you think?"

"I don't think they get it on campus, but the main distributor is definitely nearby. Uh-huh. Maybe. There aren't any famous politicians who went to San Jose Pignatelli College. The school would publicize it if someone did. Yes, I understand. A byline? Oh my g— Yes, ma'am. I'll find as much evidence as

I can. You can count on me,” Ate Nadine says to the person on the phone. As Nadine stands up she throws me a look so deadly I jump and knock my things off the table.

“She’s just busy.” Pepper helps me put the oil pastels back into the box. I avoid her gaze, but I can feel the pity in her eyes. “I’m sure Ate Nadine will make it up to you on your birthday.”

“I doubt she’ll even remember.” I say it more roughly than I intend to.

Mom’s in Singapore for a conference, and there’s a chance she won’t make it back in time for my eleventh birthday next Sunday. I thought it would be okay. Mom’s boyfriend is taking care of us, and Ate Nadine has to keep Pepper and me company while he’s at work.

Kind of like today. But even though Ate Nadine’s just a few feet away, her mind is obviously elsewhere.

“I wish Dad were here.” I stuff the wax-crayon case in my backpack, zipping it closed. “He’s weird, but at least he’s fun.”

Ate Nadine continues to pace under the mango tree with the phone on her ear. I try to hear what she’s saying, but the words mean nothing to me.

“Come on.” Pepper glances at the park entrance. Nannies and dog walkers are coming in for afternoon playtime. Pepper



and I quicken our steps. We claim the swings at the corner of the park before anyone else does.

I hold the chains tightly, balancing myself on the hanging seat. My breath goes out in quick intervals, almost as fast as the thumping in my chest. I'm on the brink of an asthma attack.

Pepper clucks her tongue and reaches behind me. From my backpack, she brings out the inhaler, which I grab with shaking fingers. I press the metal canister, spraying medicine into my mouth. It leaves a bitter aftertaste, but it stops my asthma from going any further.

"You should keep that thing near," my friend says, helping me wiggle out of the backpack. She zips it closed and tosses it on the grass. "Chill out, Sab. It's your birthday next week. If I were the one turning eleven, I'd be more excited."

Easy for her to say. Pepper has her family to celebrate it with—my own mom probably can't even make it to mine. And now, I wouldn't be surprised if my sister won't be able to either.

"What do you want to do for your birthday anyway? We can start planning it!" Pepper kicks at the ground and swings, her brown hair trailing behind her.

Pepper could have a career as a tween model if she wanted to—girls who have a light complexion usually do. With her

blue eyes and creamy-white skin, she's the most beautiful ten-year-old I know.

Ate Nadine said that I think of Pepper this way because I'm a product of colonial mentality. "When Spain colonized the Philippines, they made sure we remember they're better than we are. They had this whole tax system where rich white Spaniards paid little. We paid more even though we did more of the work, just because we're brown," she explained. "Our American colonizers weren't any better. Sure, we got more rights and education and all that. But the mentality remained the same—white is beautiful, brown is not."

My sister tends to sound like a boring history book if you make the mistake of asking her to explain something. I just know my friend's pretty, prettier than I'll ever dream to be.

My hand reaches for the locket on my chest as I start to answer Pepper, but I grasp air instead. I never take the locket off except to shower—I can't believe I forgot to put it back on this morning. It was from Dad. Unlike Ate Nadine, I value his gifts and actually use them. I let out a long sigh. "Birthday brunch at Lola Cordia's Garden Resort would be great."

Pepper stops swinging. "Your dead grandma's resort? The one your papa inherited?"

“Yeah.” I wince. Maybe it’s a cultural thing, that Pepper’s more blunt and honest than any of my Filipino classmates. So, I just try to understand her.

“Your papa’s there. *And* Wendell. Ate Nadine—”

“I know.” I follow her lead and slow down my swing. Ate Nadine would rather drop dead than spend a second in Dad’s company. But Pepper’s brilliant. Nothing is impossible with her. “Can you come up with a plan to get Ate Nadine to come?”

“That’s a tall order, Sab. Your sister’s really stubborn.” Pepper takes a lock of her brown hair and twirls it around a finger. “Don’t worry. I’ll think of something.”

Great.

Pepper’s biting her lower lip. I don’t see her do that often, but when I do, it worries me. Because it almost always means she’s worried too.

I force myself to smile as my sister heads our way. If Pepper isn’t sure she can come up with a plan, I might as well accept this birthday reunion isn’t happening. Ate Nadine will never speak to Dad, and that’s just the way it is.