

## **The Adopted Healthy Baby**

### **(Synopsis)**

Mediocre chemistry assistant professor Howell has to be tenured this semester or he will lose his teaching job with the implementation of the K-12 which forces their university to streamline its faculty roster by not renewing contractual faculty members and only keeping the tenured ones. He already fulfilled all requirements to get his tenure except for a published work in a reputable refereed journal. Since he has been one of the “babies” – even called “the adopted healthy baby” – of their institute’s professor emeritus, he is confident that he can depend on her help. Unfortunately, she dies.

With his mother in a coma, his younger sister dropping out of college, spending whole days just staring at a wall, and his older brother recently losing his wife and is left to take care of their three children, Howell cannot afford to lose his job. Out of desperation, he remembers that the professor emeritus left an unpublished research paper in one of the drawers of a metal filing cabinet, he attempts to steal it and publish it under his own name. He finds out that the drawer is locked and the key is left with the most righteous professor of their institute.

Howell must now persuade the righteous professor to give him the key to the locked drawer. But the righteous professor has other things in mind.

## **The Adopted Healthy Baby**

### **Characters:**

**Mila**, late 50s, Chemistry professor

**Howell**, late 20s, Chemistry assistant professor, very fat, gay

*Mila's office. There are two desks: one near the door, and one near the window. The desk near the door is Mila's desk. Her bag – big hand bag which carries folders and large envelopes – is on the desk. The other desk is filled with piles of papers – some are in folders and envelopes, while some are loose sheets. Howell's bag is on this desk with several books, and picture frames. An old metal filing cabinet with four drawers stands next to the desk. Beside it is a book shelf filled with thick Chemistry books. Towards the end of the office is a sink with a counter. The sink is flanked by an old refrigerator and a little plastic rack with plates, glasses, cups, spoons, forks, and folded hand towels. A small prototype coffee roaster and an old, big thermos are on the sink's counter.*

*There are boxes all over the floor. Some of them are empty and some of them are filled with books, bounded manuscripts, papers in folders and envelopes. Mila is placing the things on the desk near the window in the empty boxes. Howell is trying to open the locked topmost drawer of the filing cabinet. The other three drawers are already open.*

Howell: We won't be able to carry this out if all the drawers are not empty, Ma'am.  
(Tries to carry the filing cabinet) Look, Ma'am. It's really heavy. My fats and muscles combined won't be able to carry this out.

Mila: We'll ask the janitors to help us.

Howell: They're in the auditorium.

Mila: We only need a few minutes.

Howell: There's a stage play, Ma'am.

Mila: The play can go on for a few minutes without them.

Howell: They're doubling as technicians.

Mila: Then we'll have to carry everything out ourselves.

Howell: You'll just hurt yourself, Ma'am.

Mila: I'm not a weakling.

Howell: But your floor is too shiny. (*Fixes his hair while using the floor as a mirror*) It's too shiny, it can double as a mirror. My God! I can see my open pores.

Mila: You're exaggerating.

Howell: It's really shiny, Ma'am. And shiny floors are slippery.

Mila: We'll ask the students at the lobby to help us then.

Howell: There may not be any student loitering at the lobby at this hour, Ma'am.

Mila: It's the finals week, Howell. Some of them are conducting study groups at the lobby.

Howell: What if they're watching the play?

Mila: They're Chemistry majors, Howell.

Howell: Chemistry majors are not banned from watching stage plays, Ma'am.

Mila: Yes. But they should be studying for their finals instead of watching a play.

Howell: What if they were required to watch the play?

Mila: Why would they be required to watch a play in the finals week?

Howell: For the 20 pesos per ticket cut, Ma'am. Even Ma'am Cora, our very own Institute director requires students to watch plays. Ma'am Cora got nine thousand last sem. That was just for one play alone. Four sections of large class. She was even thankful for doing it. She was able to pay for her granddaughter's therapy, she said. The one with ADHD, remember? The little girl in pig tails

who barged in here, dragging her big rag doll while singing (*imitates the child*)  
“So darling, darling, stand by me! Oh stand by me! Oh stand, stand by me, stand  
by me!”

Mila: She was singing Cora’s favourite song.

Howell: (*Continues running around and singing*) “Whenever you’re in trouble, won’t  
you stand by me, oh stand by me, oh stand now, stand by me.” (*He deliberately  
slips.*) You don’t want to be like her.

Mila: Of course I don’t want to have ADHD.

Howell: I mean, you don’t want to slip like her, Ma’am.

Mila: That’s why we’ll ask help from those students who may be conducting study  
groups at the lobby.

Howell: (*Stands up, approaches Mila*) The little girl is under therapy now. Thanks to her  
grandmother who required her classes to watch a play.

Mila: Cora’s always been corruptible.

Howell: She’s just being compassionate, Ma’am.

Mila: Requiring Chemistry classes to watch a play? That’s not being compassionate.  
That’s being greedy with the 20 pesos per ticket cut.

Howell: She wasn’t only thinking about her granddaughter. She was also trying to help  
the theatre students.

Mila: She never cared about theatre or its majors. She was in it for the money.

Howell: So what, Ma’am? She earns, they earn. Everybody’s happy.

Mila: It’s not right.

Howell: Because there’s money involved?

Mila: Yes. The plays staged here have nothing to do with Chemistry. Chemistry

teachers require their students to watch those plays because they get a cut for each ticket they sell. They don't even talk about those plays in class or in our meetings.

Howell: But there's no damage done, Ma'am. The students are not complaining.

Mila: Because they're given bonus points.

Howell: From writing reaction papers and appreciating theatre.

Mila: We're talking of Chemistry classes, Howell. Even bonuses should have something to do with Chemistry.

*(Beat. Mila continues boxing things. Howell starts boxing things, too.)*

Howell: Now I understand why people call you rigid.

Mila: Because I always do the right thing.

Howell: Your formal complaint against Ma'am Cora was dismissed by the Dean.

Mila: Dean Ramos also requires his classes to watch plays.

Howell: In support of theatre.

Mila: He's a statistician.

Howell: Anyone can support theatre.

Mila: He's also doing it for the money.

Howell: What if the money he gets helps in waking his wife up from her coma?

Mila: It still won't make it right.

Howell: Ma'am Mendoza required her classes, too.

Mila: She always had a soft heart. Those theatre students must have shed a tear or two.

Howell: You did not file any complaint against her.

Mila: Because she didn't do it for the money.

Howell: It becomes right then when it's done out of pity.

Mila: *(Looks at Howell for a while)* I'm not falling for your pity party, Howell. I know

what you want. I'm not giving you the key.

Howell: She's dead, Ma'am. No one is going to use her research. I'm the only one who needs it. It's hand written. The only copy. I'll publish it under my name. No one will ever know but us. Please, Ma'am. Give me the key.

Mila: I won't allow you, Howell. That drawer is to remain locked. Now, why don't you go to the lobby and see if there are students loitering there?

*(Beat. Howell goes out. Mila continues boxing things. Her cell phone rings. Its ringing tone is an ordinary one taken from the common list of ringing tones in cell phones. Mila gets her cell phone from her bag. She answers the call.)*

Mila: Hello? Yes, Dad ... No, we're still boxing Ma'am Mendoza's things ... Yes, but Val texted he's still caught in the traffic. An hour more, maybe ... No, Benjie is not with me. He's still in the lab ... He can't force organometallics to catalyse even if it's for his thesis ... No, don't wait for us. You have to take your medicines by seven. Eat your dinner now ... Don't start with your fish bone story. You haven't had a fish bone pulled from your throat since Benjie was born ... No, Val won't join us for dinner. It's a three-hour drive. He has to start back home after he gets his mother's stuff ... I don't know about Howell ... Now, stop with your excuses, Dad. We'll have meat once your arteries are de-clogged ... Of course I won't bend. I don't care if you hate fish. It's what's good for you now. And I already told Manang to spy on you. So don't you dare go out to have meat. *(Laughs a little)* She'll drag you back to the house with all the might of her sumo wrestler weight ... Dad, Dad, listen. You know I have to keep you alive 'til we visit Mabel and Marnie at Texas next year. We'll take Benjie with us then show them where they were all conceived ... *(Laughs a little)* Now don't be coy, Dad. Come on. Have fish for dinner, take your

medicines, I'll be home in an hour. Bye, Dad.

*(Mila terminates the call, returns her cell phone to her bag. She tries to carry the filing cabinet.*

*She gives up after two attempts. Then, she starts pushing it. Howell enters.)*

Howell: Just three students.

Mila: Three is fine.

Howell: All girls.

Mila: *(Pushes the filing cabinet)* We don't need to carry this after all.

Howell: The girls said they're going to a party.

Mila: It's a party, Howell. They can be a little late.

Howell: They were also required.

Mila: Even attending parties are required now?

Howell: Dean Ramos required them.

Mila: He must be desperate.

Howell: Do you know how much does it cost to keep someone who's in a coma alive, Ma'am?

Mila: I know about your mother, Howell.

Howell: But do you know how much I pay for just to keep her alive?

Mila: You're not the only one who has –

Howell: Where will I get the money when I lose my job?

Mila: You want to keep your mother alive by doing something wrong.

Howell: What choice do I have?

Mila: Find another job. Find two jobs if that's what it takes.

Howell: I've been teaching here for ten years now.

Mila: Then find another teaching job.

Howell: Schools aren't hiring now.

Mila: There are other jobs.

Howell: Teaching Chemistry is the only thing I know.

*(Mila does not reply. She continues boxing things. Howell tries to pull the topmost drawer of the filing cabinet once more.)*

Mila: You're wasting your time. That's an old filing cabinet. Things were different before. Things were built to outlive their owners. That cabinet is durable because it's strong. No amount of pulling can make you open that locked drawer.

Howell: Give me the key, then.

Mila: I won't allow you to steal.

Howell: You were quiet the whole time.

Mila: You weren't stealing before.

Howell: About the other wrong things.

Mila: They weren't wrong.

Howell: An Educ. graduate of some far flung provincial college hired to teach Chemistry here. I wasn't even a Chem. major. I was an Educ. grad who had English for a major and Chemistry for a minor. And do you know why I got hired here? *(Does to Mila what he describes)* I knelt before Ma'am Mendoza and cried. "Ma'am! Please accept me! I have nowhere else to go! I don't even have money to go back to our province! We are so poor, Ma'am! Please accept me!" I hugged her waist. "Ma'am! Please pity me! Please pity me!"

Mila: *(Detaches herself from Howell)* Get hold of yourself, Howell.

Howell: I got in because of pity.

Mila: Ma'am Mendoza saw your potential in your teaching demo.

Howell: *(Stands up)* She used her influence as professor emeritus to get me in because

she pitied me. Everyone knew that.

Mila: She told me a different thing.

Howell: Because she knew you'd ask for qualifications instead of a sob story.

Mila: You already survived teaching here for ten years. She was right. You had potential.

Howell: *(Goes to his bag, gets lecture notes)* And you know how I survived? Because of her. Again. *(Gives lecture notes to Mila)* Look at my lecture notes. I knew nothing about Organic Chemistry. Even my students knew I knew nothing about it. They were bullying me in class, making fun of my incompetence. You heard about the complaints I got in the student eval. Ma'am Cora didn't want to renew me. But Ma'am Mendoza asked her to give me another sem. She promised to guide me.

Mila: And she guided you with these notes. Nothing wrong with that.

Howell: Read those notes, Ma'am. Read them thoroughly. They're not lecture notes. They are scripts. Ma'am Mendoza wrote me scripts. Even jokes and answers to questions students may raise are there. All I had to do was memorize those scripts, deliver them, and voila! They got me through years and years of student evaluations.

Mila: *(While browsing through the lecture notes)* These are but guides, Howell. Suggestions. Ways you can handle your classes.

Howell: She fed me everything.

Mila: You were still the one who faced your classes.

Howell: Everything I told them did not come from me.

Mila: She told you what to say but you were still the one who said those things. You were still the one who taught your students. Did she hold your classes for you?

Howell: She allowed me to own her words.

Mila: Lecture notes are different from a research paper.

Howell: But she was generous.

Mila: Not to the point of allowing you to publish her research output under your name.

Howell: But that's the only way for me to keep my job.

Mila: You only believe that because you refuse to look for other options.

Howell: *(Searches his bag)* Have you read the memo?

Mila: What memo?

Howell: *(Gets a memo from his bag, shows it to Mila)* They're streamlining now. K-12. They already got rid of the Filipino Department. Language Center? Ha! Just a way to quash the Filipino Department. Only the tenured Filipino professors were saved. I thought I'd be safe here in Chemistry. But look at Dean Ramos' memo. Only tenured faculty members are to remain next school year. I'm up for tenure this sem, Ma'am. But they're asking for a publication in a refereed journal. How can I get published? That journal which Ma'am Cora edits even rejected me.

Mila: Then submit to other journals.

Howell: I already did. It's the same thing. Rejection after rejection.

Mila: Fine tune your research.

Howell: I've been revising it for the whole year. One journal said it's not credible. Another said the conclusion is not valid. Ma'am Cora told me it's sophomoric, not even at par with an ordinary undergrad thesis. If Ma'am Mendoza didn't become bed-ridden this year, she would have fed me with a research paper, got me published, and I'll be done with my tenure.

Mila: She didn't give you the key, Howell. She gave it to me.

Howell: *(Kneels before Mila, cries)* That's why I'm begging you. Please, Ma'am. Have mercy on me. My mother is still in a coma. My younger sister dropped out of college. My older brother lost his wife. I'm taking care of him and his three children. I have no one to run to. All my relatives are poorer than me. This job is the only thing I have. This job is the only thing that can make us all survive. *(Embraces Mila's waist and sings)* "So darling, darling, stand by me! Oh stand by me! Oh stand, stand by me, stand by me!"

Mila: *(Distances herself from Howell)* Stop it, Howell. Stop it. You're making a fool of yourself.

Howell: *(Still on his knees)* You want me to sing a different song?

Mila: I want you to stop making a fool of yourself.

Howell: But that's how I've been surviving here, Ma'am. Being a fool. Making people laugh. Running errands. All these things, all these things belonging to Ma'am Mendoza, I was the one who transferred all of these down here. She had a lot of adopted babies here. But I was the only one she asked to carry all her things here.

Mila: She didn't trust her other babies with her things. She trusted you. You were her favourite, her adopted healthy baby.

Howell: And I wasn't her adopted healthy baby for nothing. *(Imitates Ma'am Mendoza while slowly getting up and going through her things)* "Kindly take this to the Dean's office, Howell ... Have these manuscripts bounded, Howell ... Please encode this for me ... Can you get me some water? ... Some food ... " And all I said was "yes, Ma'am ... yes, Ma'am ... yes, Ma'am."

Mila: You resented the small favours she asked you?

Howell: I did not resent them, Ma'am. I'm just telling you that no one here took me

seriously. Not Dean Ramos, not Ma'am Cora, not you, and not even Ma'am Mendoza. All of you are nice to me because you think that I'm nice. Funny at times. (*Stands on top of one of the desks and sings and dances with much gusto*) "So darling, darling, stand by me! Oh stand by me! Oh stand, stand by me, stand by me!" (*Goes down from the desk*) Do you know how many times Ma'am Cora and our other colleagues asked me to entertain them whenever they felt bored?

Mila: Howell, that's just your way of getting along with our colleagues.

Howell: I'm so funny that they allowed me to take my master's in some diploma mill.

Mila: Ma'am Mendoza wanted you to study here.

Howell: But I begged her. I had to study near our house so I can take care of my mother. Her health was already declining during that time. It wasn't the whole truth, Ma'am. I was scared. I knew I wasn't too bright.

Mila: Point is, you still earned a master's degree.

Howell: From a diploma mill!

Mila: You still earned it.

Howell: Ma'am Mendoza got her Ph.D. from Cornell, you got yours from Texas, Ma'am Cora got hers from Australia, our colleagues are lining up at the Office of International Linkages to get scholarships abroad. Tell me, Ma'am. Was it right to allow me to get my master's from some obscure college you haven't even heard of?

Mila: The university welcomes different philosophies, different perspectives coming from different schools. Including those coming from what you label as obscure colleges.

Howell: My thesis is garbage.

Mila: Don't say that.

Howell: That's why I couldn't get any of its part published.

Mila: Howell, listen now. Yes, you are nice. You're funny. People here know that. But you're one of Ma'am Mendoza's adopted babies. She didn't take just about anyone under her wings. Cora is not one of her adopted babies. She found her lacking in brilliance. She only chose the brilliant ones. She used to say, "birds of the same feather flock together." She didn't want to flock with the mediocre. She chose you for even if you haven't realized it yet, you are brilliant.

*(Howell searches through some of the boxes. Mila continues boxing things. Howell then goes to the book shelf, looks for a particular book. He finds it, gets the book from the shelf and shows it to Mila.)*

Howell: Remember this?

Mila: *(Opens the book)* Oh, yes. Lipase-catalysed irreversible transesterifications. Ma'am Mendoza was so proud of this.

Howell: Authored by her other babies, Owen and Ritzel. Remember them?

Mila: Yes, I do. *(Takes one of the framed pictures from the desk near the window, shows it to Howell)* This is Owen, right? He was really skinny then. And this is Ritzel? The one who resigned after calling Cora a leech sucking the dean's ass in one of the faculty meetings?

Howell: *(Takes the book)* They authored this. On their own. Mere instructors at that time. But they were already able to author a book.

Mila: *(Still looking at the picture)* Your office at the third floor was really nice. Ma'am Mendoza used to tell me she kept on decorating it with you. She really loved it there. Third floor. Big windows. Lots of fresh air. Far from the noise of the students who loiter the lobby. Diabetes could be so cruel. If her right leg did not

get amputated, she would have loved to stay in your office instead of transferring here.

Howell: You're not listening, Ma'am.

Mila: Your contemporaries were able to author a book when they were still instructors. Now, it's your time to get published. As simple as that.

Howell: Owen and Ritzel, they're really brilliant. You, Ma'am. You're Ma'am Mendoza's adopted baby, too. And no one will question your brilliance. But me? I'm just nice and funny.

Mila: For someone your size, you keep on belittling yourself.

Howell: But it's true, Ma'am. She never saw any brilliance in me. Birds of the same feather flock together. Yes, I also heard her say that. Several times, Ma'am. And each time I'd ask her what kind of feather she saw on me, she'd just laugh and say –

Mila: Yours is the most special.

Howell: She told you?

Mila: Yes. Several times.

Howell: Then you know it's not the feather of brilliance?

Mila: A different kind of brilliance. Not the brainy type. But more special. The reason why she gave me the key.

*(Beat. Mila goes to the refrigerator, opens its door and takes a pitcher of water. She takes a glass from the plastic rack and pours water in it. Howell goes back to boxing things from the book shelf.)*

Howell: She didn't want me to transfer all these books here. She said they should stay in our office so I could read them all.

Mila: If you're thirsty I have cold water and orange juice here.

Howell: *(Skims through the pages of a book)* I tried reading each one of these.

Mila: Or maybe you want coffee?

Howell: I didn't understand any of these books.

Mila: You're a funny guy, Howell. Self-pity doesn't suit you.

*(Mila starts roasting coffee beans in the prototype coffee roaster. The sound from the roaster catches Howell's attention. He approaches the roaster.)*

Howell: Is this Sir Ben's roaster?

Mila: Just a prototype.

Howell: Your husband is a genius.

Mila: You sent your sister to check on this last week.

Howell: Hilda was raving about this. She said it's perfect for small scale roasting, perfect for a small coffee shop.

Mila: She said she wanted to have one.

Howell: And that Sir Ben's introducing this to the market.

Mila: Yes, he's calling it Benjie's roaster.

Howell: And what about Marnie and Mabel?

Mila: What about them?

Howell: Sir Ben's naming this after your youngest child. Marnie and Mabel may get jealous.

Mila: Oh, they'll have their own products named after them.

Howell: Because they're brilliant.

Mila: What do you mean?

Howell: They're both pursuing their Ph.Ds at Texas A&M, where you and Sir Ben both got yours. Marnie was summa. Mabel was magna. And Benjie ...

Mila: Benjie is extended. You can say it. I'm not ashamed of it.

Howell: You're favouring your weakest child.

Mila: We don't consider him weak.

Howell: But compared to his sisters –

Mila: We don't practice favouritism, Howell.

Howell: Then you're not like Ma'am Mendoza.

Mila: She didn't play favourites, too.

Howell: But she did, Ma'am. She did.

Mila: Val was a year ahead of me at Philippine Science. Vito was a year younger. I did not recall them mentioning that their mother was playing favourites.

*(Howell goes to the desk near the window. He gets the framed picture Mila showed him a while ago.)*

Howell: And then there's Vic, the black sheep.

Mila: *(Approaches Howell, looks at the picture)* She didn't call him black sheep.

Howell: But she wanted to.

Mila: How could you have known that?

Howell: Only his picture was on her desk. See? *(Points at the picture)* That's him, right? She talked about Val and Vito. How proud she was of the two. She even showed me the news clipping she framed. The one in the business section where Val was mentioned as Unilab's new VP. And Vito. Who won't be proud of Vito? Topped the med board, became one of the few neurosurgeons in the country. She hang the framed news clip about Vito topping the med board on the wall behind her desk. Framed news clippings for the two. And just a framed picture of Vic. He's her black sheep, Ma'am.

Mila: You're over reading her actions.

Howell: But it's true! Vic is already in his forties. And still he is –

Mila: Trying to find himself.

Howell: As a call center agent?

Mila: What's wrong with being a call center agent?

Howell: Would you allow Benjie to be one?

Mila: If that's what he wants.

Howell: *(Takes cell phone from his pocket)* Do you have a Facebook account?

Mila: Marnie wants me to open one.

Howell: *(Uses his cell phone)* We're friends on FB.

Mila: Friends?

Howell: It means I can access her wall. There's a wall you know, on FB. Anyway, here's her wall, where she posts her thoughts. *(Shows cell phone to Mila.)*

Mila: She already told me about this.

Howell: *(Reads from the cell phone)* "Call center agent, hmmm. Worth trying. But my mom won't let me. Hehe Mothers know best."

Mila: She already got the Fulbright grant when she told me she wanted to try working in a call center.

Howell: That's it, Ma'am. Fulbright grant versus working in a call center. You chose the Fulbright grant for her. If Ma'am Mendoza had her way, she'd choose a Fulbright grant over working in a call center for Vic.

Mila: Howell, as parents we are not dictatorial. I never even encouraged my children to take Chemistry. I used to tease my husband. "Dad, our children like me more. They're all into Chemistry. No one took engineering. No one followed your footsteps."

Howell: But you'll always help Benjie.

Mila: In whatever way I can. He's my son. I'll help him even from my grave.

Howell: Just like Ma'am Mendoza.

Mila: Parents help their children, Howell.

Howell: She was still paying for Vic's house rent.

Mila: You wouldn't know that.

Howell: Oh I know for a fact, Ma'am. She asked me to deposit the checks a couple of times.

Mila: All right. You win. So Ma'am Mendoza's been helping Vic 'til the day she died. So she may have considered him a black sheep for the longest time. So I may find myself helping Benjie 'til I die. So he may not be an achiever like his sisters. Parents do not abandon their weakest child. Parents help the weakest most.

Howell: Exactly! (*Gets the book authored by his friends*) And unlike Owen and Ritzel, I don't and won't have this. Owen is already teaching at the National University of Singapore. Ritzel is taking her post doctorate at Luxembourg. And nice, funny me is still here, trying to get published, trying to get tenured, trying not to lose his job. Don't you see it, Ma'am? I'm the weakest. And as you said, parents help the weakest most.

Mila: I'm not your parent.

Howell: Ma'am! My God! You know I didn't mean that. I'm Ma'am Mendoza's adopted healthy baby. She's my surrogate mother in the university. She'd want to help me the most. I'm her weakest adopted baby. Give me the key, Ma'am. She'd want that. She'd want me to get her research paper. She'd want me to use it, publish it under my name and solve my problems. If you want, I can just be co-author. I'd still have her name there. I won't own it totally. Just give me the key, Ma'am. Please, give me the key.

Mila: I'll make you a cup of coffee.

*(Mila goes to the roaster and starts making coffee.)*

Howell: *(Exasperated)* Ma'am! Please understand! I'm not like Owen who immediately got a scholarship at NUS. Not like Ritzel who stormed out of this university, and then got a grant from Ford. I can't apply for scholarships. My grades are not impressive. I did not even graduate from a prestigious school. There's no future for me in the academe once they kick me out of this university.

Mila: *(Approaches Howell with a cup of coffee)* Try this. The beans are from Batangas.

Howell: You know what your problem is, Ma'am? You don't listen. People call you rigid for you don't listen to anyone. I'm even surprised how Ma'am Mendoza endured having you for an officemate. I told her to choose another office here in the first floor. Any other office. You think you were assigned to this big office with its own sink and a refrigerator because people here love you? No one likes you, Ma'am. They say you're a difficult person. No one wants to deal with you. No one wants to be your officemate. They assigned you to this office, at the farthest end of the first floor so they won't see you. I even offered to carry Ma'am Mendoza to the third floor, to our office, every single day when her right leg was amputated so she wouldn't have to share this office with you. And I wasn't the only one who offered her that. There were others. Even her babies don't like you. You don't know anything about compassion. You don't have the ability to pity anyone. You just don't listen! *(Gets the cup, throws it on the floor.)*

*(Beat. Mila and Howell stare at each other. After a while, Mila starts to pick up the pieces of the broken cup.)*

Mila: If this were a stage play, your rant may have ended with me bitch slapping your face. *(Laughs a little)* I'm also capable of using expletives. I can listen to people. I have feelings too.

Howell: *(Gets a grip of himself)* I'm sorry, Ma'am. *(Starts picking up the pieces of the broken up)* I'm just so desperate. You don't understand how desperate I am. *(Slumps on the floor and cries)*

Mila: *(Continues picking the pieces of the broken cup)* I know how desperate you are. I'm not naïve. *(Takes the pieces of the broken cup to the sink, gets a hand towel from the rack and wipes the spilled coffee off the floor)* I know poverty. We didn't start off rich, you know. My parents were both illiterate. They sold fish at the market. Ben's parents were poor too. Both public elementary school teachers. It wasn't easy for both of us. We were the eldest. He had six siblings. I had four. I don't know how we were able to send them all to school with our measly salary from this university. But we did. We succeeded. And we did not need to steal.

Howell: *(Still crying)* I tried, Ma'am. I tried.

Mila: *(Takes the hand towel to the sink, opens the refrigerator's door and gets a pitcher of cold water. She pours the water in a glass and takes the glass of water to Howell)* Here, have some water.

Howell: *(Takes the glass and drinks up)* Hilda. My sister. She dropped out of college. She said she wanted to stay with our mother in the hospital. I thought she wanted to take care of her. But I caught her, several times. She was staring at a wall. She was standing in front of a wall. And she was just staring at it. I shook her, even slapped her face. She said she didn't remember anything. She didn't know why she was staring at the wall.

Mila: She seemed all right when she was here last week.

Howell: There was this coffee shop in our province. The only coffee shop we knew. We'd pass by the coffee shop when we were kids. We'd stare at the glass door. We'd see people in nice clothes, sipping their coffee, eating cakes. They looked so relaxed and happy. Then the guard would shoo us away, like flies with his cudgel as his fly swatter. Hilda would cry. "I just want to look inside! I just want to look!" I'd promise her that someday, I'll work hard and will give her a coffee shop. She'll have her own coffee shop. She would stop crying. I told her last week. I already have the money. She can have her own coffee shop. She believed me. After she took a look at your husband's coffee roaster, she never stared at the wall anymore.

Mila: But do you really have the money?

Howell: I can't even buy the smallest tube of pore minimizing cream.

Mila: She'll be more devastated if she'll find out the truth.

Howell: That's why I cannot lose my job, Ma'am. Once I get tenured, I can apply for a loan. I'll use the money as capital for a small coffee shop. With your husband's roaster, I'll have a chance to keep my sister's sanity.

Mila: And your mother?

Howell: The hospital allows promissory letters from faculty members here.

Mila: You'll bury yourself in debts.

Howell: If I lose my job here, I'd rather be buried literally. I'd rather die.

*(Howell cries once more. Mila takes the glass to the sink. She looks at the prototype coffee roaster.)*

Mila: You know, I can just give this to you.

Howell: Thank you, Ma'am. But I need more.

Mila: I can ask Cora to help you get published.

Howell: *(Gets up, goes to the filing cabinet)* When she rejected my research, I told her I was conducting another one. Something that will help us battle the El Niño.

Mila: That sounds promising.

Howell: Evaporation suppressants.

Mila: *(Gets excited, approaches Howell)* That's nice, Howell. Imagine how the insufficiency of irrigation water has always been a major constraint to crop production. Even if we collect rainfall in reservoirs, evaporation rates in reservoir areas are so high especially during the dry season that it would be nice to come up with evaporation suppressants to improve the value of our reservoirs. Howell, you're a genius.

Howell: But I don't know what hydrogenolysis to use to synthesize hexadecanol.

Mila: Continue researching on it.

Howell: You really think I came up with that idea on my own? I don't know anything about evaporation suppressants. *(Pulls the topmost drawer)* Everything is in here. Here!

Mila: You can start researching on the idea.

Howell: I'm an idiot, Ma'am. You really want to hear that, don't you? I'm not like you who repeatedly got published in the American Journal of Chemistry. *(Pulls one of the filing cabinet's drawers, gets sheets of paper and reads topmost sheet, throws the sheets of paper in the air, then gets more sheets of paper and repeats the process)* Enol esters as acylating reagents ... glycerol derivatives ... carboxylic acids ... sucrose-organic acid units ... cross-linked enzyme aggregates of lipase ... *(Pulls the whole drawer and harshly empties all its contents on the floor)* I tried to study them all. *(Goes to the book shelf, gets*

*books and throws them all on the floor*) I read and read and read. And the only research output I came up with was that garbage of a thesis which received a passing mark because they liked the food I served them during my defence!

*(Beat. Howell and Mila sit on different chairs, not looking at each other.)*

Mila: Howell –

Howell: Sorry, Ma'am.

Mila: You depended so much on Ma'am Mendoza.

Howell: She never failed me.

Mila: She was bed-ridden, losing her eyesight, joking about still feeling her amputated right leg, and she was still thinking of you.

Howell: She knew I was desperate.

Mila: When Val and his brothers decided to confine her in the hospital, they only wanted family members, relatives, and very close friends to see her. She looked so fragile in her bed, I thought the air could break her body into pieces. She said she wanted her friends to visit her, her babies, but she didn't want to argue with her children.

Howell: I wanted to visit her.

Mila: Her children didn't know you. She mentioned you to them but all they wanted were people they knew. Val called me up, told me about his mother's condition. He asked me to see her for I'm the only one they knew here.

Howell: Because you went to Philippine Science High School with them.

Mila: Yes. And so I went to the hospital. We talked about a lot of things. Where our college is going, where our institute is headed to, Dean Ramos, Cora, you. She was concerned about you. She wanted to help you. She mentioned about the research she did. The one on evaporation suppressants.

Howell: You knew all along.

Mila: She did not discuss it with anyone. She did not even ask for a grant or any sort of funding. She conducted the research on her own, funded it from her own pocket.

Howell: But she mentioned it to me. I remember she was so excited when she came to our office. She was holding a manila envelope close to her chest, still panting from having climbed three floors, she told me, “Howell, I was right. Writing with your hands is better than typing. I did it. Evaporation suppressants from locally available components. You’ll encode this someday, ok?” Then she placed the manila envelope inside that drawer and locked it.

Mila: She said you kept on asking her about that research, even after she transferred here.

Howell: I was honest with her. I told her about my desperation. I told her it was the only way I could get published.

Mila: What did she say?

Howell: That she’ll give me the key to the drawer.

Mila: And you were surprised when I told you I have it.

Howell: I was scared, Ma’am. If it had been Ma’am Cora, or even Dean Ramos, I knew I had a chance. But you, Ma’am. I even entertained thoughts of murdering you.

Mila: *(Gets key from her bag)* I don’t want to die for this.

Howell: I wouldn’t murder you, Ma’am.

Mila: *(Approaches Howell)* She showed me this key, then she said, “Mila, give this to Howell.”

Howell: *(Turns to Mila)* She did?

Mila: She wanted you to have this. She wanted you to have her research paper. Use

it, solve your problems. Anyway, she'll ask you to encode it if she were still with us.

Howell: I used to encode for her. She never liked using computers. Lectures, exams, syllabi, letters, researches, everything was hand written.

Mila: But not the one on evaporation suppressants.

Howell: She said you didn't want me to encode it for her.

Mila: Because she already told me about your request.

Howell: But she wanted me to have it.

Mila: Yes, she did.

Howell: Then give me the key, Ma'am.

Mila: Tell me first, why she called you her adopted healthy baby.

Howell: *(Stands up)* Isn't it obvious?

Mila: She wasn't referring to your size.

Howell: Then what was she referring to?

Mila: Your heart.

*(Beat. Mila gets the framed pictures, looks at them one by one. Howell approaches Mila.)*

Howell: The key, Ma'am. Please.

Mila: Even if I tell on you after you get it published, I won't have any proof that you stole it. Would I, Howell?

Howell: Just this once, Ma'am. I promise you, just this once.

Mila: She never said you were brilliant in Chemistry. *(Picks up one picture frame)* She used to say you were miles behind Owen and Ritzel. But you were her favourite.

Howell: I need to get the manuscript before Val arrives.

Mila: Don't you want to know why you were her favourite adopted baby?

Howell: I'm nice and funny. I already know that.

Mila: *(Takes Howell's hand)* When Cora met a car accident you visited her in the hospital, performed her favourite song to cheer her up after her operation.

Howell: I was just trying to help.

Mila: When Dean Ramos' wife first went into a coma, you went around the campus, knocking at every faculty office's door, asking for donations.

Howell: There's nothing wrong with that.

Mila: I'm not saying it's wrong. What I'm saying is that you have a good heart, Howell. Ma'am Mendoza saw that in you. To her your heart is pure. So pure that she believed it is healthy. And that's the brilliant feather she wanted to flock with.

Howell: I'll still honor her as the co-author of the research, Ma'am. I'm not going to steal it completely.

Mila: Owen and Ritzel offered you to be co-author of their book. But you refused. Ma'am Mendoza heard you say that you cannot stomach taking credit for something you did not do. That was the exact time Howell, when you became her favourite adopted baby. That was the exact time when she thought of calling you her adopted healthy baby.

*(Beat. Howell sits on the chair once more. Mila continues boxing things.)*

Howell: How would I know there'd be such a thing as K-12? That schools won't hire teachers for a time? That my mother will slide into a coma? That Hilda will snap. That my sister-in-law will die and leave my brother depressed? That I'll have to take care of my nephews? That I have to take care of all of them?

Mila: You were able to resist the temptation once, Howell. You can resist it again. You're a good person. Remember that.

Howell: Last week, at her burial. I was so ashamed. I no longer knew if I was crying because she was being buried or because I thought my last chance of getting published was being buried with her.

Mila: Then I told you about the key.

Howell: You didn't tell me she wanted me to have it.

Mila: I wanted to prevent you from doing the wrong thing.

Howell: I know what I'm going to do is wrong, Ma'am. I know it's dishonest, maybe even a crime. But there's K-12, schools are not hiring teachers. There's my tenure. Hilda. My mother. My older brother and his motherless children.

Mila: You're making them dependent on you in as much as Ma'am Mendoza made you dependent on her.

Howell: *(Approaches Mila)* Just give me the key, Ma'am. She wanted me to have it. It's not yours, it's mine. *(Grabs Mila's arm)* Now give me the key.

*(Howell tries to get the key from Mila's hand, Mila fights him. Mila slips, she falls on the floor.*

*Howell continues to take the key from her. Mila continues to fight him. Mila's cell phone rings.*

*Hearing it makes them stop wrestling each other. Beat. Howell stands up. Mila goes to her bag, gets her cell phone. The key is still with her.)*

Mila: *(Talking over her cell phone)* Hello? Yes, Val ... No, don't park at the back. There's a new parking lot in front of the building. We're on the left wing ... No, not near the lab. They did some renovations. Just park in front and I'll fetch you there . . . Yes, I'm on my way now. *(Terminates the call, faces Howell as she fixes herself)* You know why Benjie got extended?

*(Howell does not reply.)*

Mila: He plagiarized for his thesis. I was the one who told his panellists. He plagiarized my dissertation. My very own son, a plagiarist. I couldn't stomach

it. I even told his panellists that I'd understand if he got expelled. But Ma'am Mendoza was his adviser. She whose heart easily pitied anyone. She said expelling him was too harsh. She talked to his panellists and they agreed that they'll fail him on his thesis and will write unfinished experiment as reason. When I say I always do the right thing, I mean that, Howell.

Howell: But there are people, Ma'am who –

Mila: I don't care about motivations. As you say, people call me rigid.

Howell: How about compassion, Ma'am? A little understanding?

Mila: My moral compass is clear. Right or wrong. Nothing in between. I don't care if I'm not well liked. I know I have a lot of enemies. But I'll still file complaints against people who are doing the wrong things. *(Approaches the filing cabinet)* And I thought I could prevent one from committing a mistake. But I may be wrong. *(Places the key on top of the filing cabinet)* You are right. This key is yours. Use it, open the drawer. Get the manuscript. Publish it and seize to be the adopted healthy baby Ma'am Mendoza was so proud of. Or you may ignore the key, continue boxing her things, wait for me and Val.

Howell: You're really giving it to me?

Mila: I'm giving you a choice.

Howell: You have faith in me.

Mila: I realized that at the end of the day, doing the right or the wrong thing is a matter of choice. Who am I to prevent you from doing what you want? I'm just a Chemistry professor. I can do nothing.

*(Beat. Mila leaves. Howell looks at the key for a while. He takes it and uses it to open the locked drawer. After several attempts, he still couldn't open the drawer. He throws the key.)*

Howell: That witch! She gave me the wrong key!

*(Howell repeatedly kicks the cabinet, shakes it, then hits it hard with his hands. Out of frustration, he grabs things from the desk and pounce them on the drawer's lock. His cell phone rings, it's ringing tone is "Stand By Me." He takes his cell phone from his pocket, looks at the caller ID, throws his cell phone on the desk. He continues to kick, hit, and shake the filing cabinet. He screams. Lights fade out as the song "Stand By Me" from Howell's cell phone gets louder.)*

END