

PLOT

Emily moved to New York with dreams of becoming a successful accountant. Just as her career was taking off, she lost her job and ended up juggling three part-time gigs while being dumped by her boyfriend. Her life seemed to spiral further downward until she met a handsome stranger, whom she shared a date and a kiss with.

Heading back to Manila for her best friend Bon's wedding, Emily is shocked to discover that the stranger was none other than Joshua—Bon's older brother whom Emily hadn't seen in a decade.

Fate brings Emily and Joshua back to Manila for the wedding, where Emily learns her ex, Rob, is bringing a date. To save face, she lies about having one too. Meanwhile, Joshua is fed up with his mother's endless matchmaking. They strike a deal to pretend they're dating until they return to New York. As their charade unfolds, sparks begin to fly. But could there be something real between them?

TAGALOG 101

While the entirety of this book is written in English, the characters refer to each other using Filipino terms that reflect their hierarchy of relationships. Here are the terms used throughout and their meanings:

Kuya (ku-ya): Used to address an older brother or a male figure older than the speaker, conveying respect and affection.

Ate (A-te): Used to address an older sister or a female figure older than the speaker, also expressing respect and warmth.

Tita (Ti-ta): Refers to an aunt or an older woman who is a close family friend, often seen as a nurturing and respected figure.

Tito (Ti-to): Refers to an uncle or an older man who is a close family friend, known for his wisdom and guidance.

Lola (Lo-la): Refers to a grandmother, conveying love, wisdom, and the warmth of familial bonds.

Lolo (Lo-lo): Refers to a grandfather, symbolizing strength, wisdom, and the traditions of the family.

PROLOGUE: Emily

Ten years ago

I don't exactly remember when these escapades started. But ever since my father died last year, I had trouble connecting to reality. My dad was one of the closest people in my life. He was my rock, he was my everything. He was the reason we were provided with a comfortable life. And ever since he left, I found it harder and harder to accept that version of reality. The one without him. I felt like I needed to have an escape just to avoid that he wasn't here anymore. Most of the time, I'd just read books and immerse myself in different worlds. Also, at fourteen, there's really not much I could do anyway.

However, today, my mother was visiting a distant relative and she brought my sister with her. I had to stay behind because I couldn't miss three days of school. She put me under the care of my best friend Bonbon's parents,

who live right next door. Bon's parents weren't the strict type, so she always snuck out to meet with her boyfriend Greg. She offered to take me with her tonight but I refused, thinking I'd be better off sitting in her room, reading my dog-eared copy of Anne of Green Gables. Like Anne Shirley, my imagination runs quite wild, and I often prefer it to reality most of the time.

As I was midway through the scene where Anne meets Matthew Cuthbert at the train station, I stopped. There's no way I am spending my evening alone in a room that isn't even mine. I texted Bon to ask where she was but I didn't get a reply even after minutes. Which meant that she was busy making out with her boyfriend since that is the only logical explanation for Bonbon to be away from cell phone.

I saw how she snuck out. Just outside her room was the door to their balcony at the back of their house. From there, Bon climbed down the ladder that her parents had no idea she bribed her brother to install there. From their backyard, it was easy to get out. I contemplated even sneaking out at all because I had no idea where to go. But even the thought of uncertainty was more appealing than normalcy at the moment.

I made mental notes of all the steps. I was halfway through the ladder when I felt it wobble. Shit. This can't be good. What's worse is that I could hear voices in the backyard, just by the pool. I could see their silhouettes and I think they're cuddling—or maybe kissing—by the pool. I couldn't tell who they were but I knew it wasn't Bon. She wouldn't dare do that in her own home. I didn't have time to figure out who they were since I focused on getting down safely. I knew I wasn't visible from this position but I had to land properly to avoid any detection. The ladder was now wobbling harder, and I saw that the top was not secured anymore. I forgot to put my weight on my front so the ladder could stay leaning against the wall. And now, since I was already panicking, I shifted more of my weight behind me, and that caused the ladder to follow my body. I let go of the ladder before it could crush me so I fell on their bushes. It was quiet enough for Bon's parents not to hear but I'm sure whoever was in the backyard felt my crash.

"Oh my god!" I heard a woman squeal. It wasn't a voice I was familiar with and I'm not sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing. I was clutching my knees when I saw her approach. She was tall and slender, with long black hair that flowed to her waist. She was tan and she was beautiful. She looked like a modern day Pocahontas. "Are you okay?!" She asked. I had no idea who this pretty girl was, but she seemed nice. She extended her hand to help me up, so I took it. Once I was upright, I straightened my thick-framed glasses and looked around.

"What the hell, Emily?" A guy emerged from behind the pretty girl. It was Bonbon's older brother, Joshua. She must be his girlfriend and they were the ones cuddling by the pool. Well this night was more awkward than I thought. "What were you doing, exactly?"

"I was attempting to sneak out." I admitted. There's no point in denying now. "Go ahead, rat me out."

"If I rat you out, I would also rat Bon out. And she saved my ass from sneaking out when I was in high school too. So, I'll keep my mouth shut." Joshua said. I nodded. "By the way, this is Jeanine, my girlfriend. She'd help you clean those wounds out." He said. Joshua was usually annoying and always teasing, but I guess he matured a bit now. He was, after all, leaving tomorrow to study in New York.

"Come on, Emily." Jeanine said. She seemed like such a nice person, I didn't want to ruin her evening. This is probably the last time they're going to see each other and I ruin it with my clumsiness.

"No, no. It's fine. I can handle it. It doesn't even hurt anyway." I said.

"Are you sure?" Jeanine asked.

In total honesty, my wounds did hurt. I think I scraped my skin off somewhere from all those branches. But I also didn't want to impose on anyone. My father was the only person I could count on, everyone else around me seemed to count on me. And while Jeanine was nice, I wasn't comfortable. So I tried to play it off as casually as I could. After a few more are-you-sures, I left them and cleansed my wounds inside.

After I was all patched up (update: I did scrape off some skin on my leg), I subtly went out of the front door, and out of the house. I spent the evening wandering around the neighborhood aimlessly, discovering that this was a nice reprieve. As I strolled, I imagined what it would be like to walk around a place that wasn't home, where nobody knew who I was. Where I wasn't the clumsy neighbor. Or the girl who lost her father. Where no one would give me pity looks and polite smiles. A place where I could pretend that my life was fine, even when it was nowhere near it.

CHAPTER ONE: Emily

Present day

If you told me two months ago that I would be making coffee and singing in local clubs instead of climbing my way up the corporate ladder, I wouldn't have believed you. I would've told you to shove it because there was just no way that I left the Philippines, fresh off becoming a registered accountant (ranking seventh in the national exams too), only to end up juggling three part-time jobs in New York City. No way.

But life has a funny way of kicking you (me) in the face. In just two years, I got my certification as a UCPA (a US accountant), moved to New York, started working in a freaking Wall Street company, moved into my own apartment, moved out, resigned from said job, and got cheated on by my long term boyfriend. My two years consisted of events that people usually go through in a lifetime.

Why did I resign? Because for some insane reason that HR and my bosses don't seem to believe, I have self worth. Or at least that's what I tell myself as I get a large latte order for "Hugh Jass". I wish I could roll my eyes. Just this once. I pray to the espresso gods that my manager Frank wasn't looking just so I could make a snarky comment about this order. But just as I was thinking it, my eyes met Frank's—peeking from the staff room as if telling me to suck it up and think about my responsibilities, my needs, and my bills. After resigning, my salary dropped significantly, and I had trouble making ends meet. And a very specific bill that's been haunting me was my rent. Jenny has been a really amazing person lately. I was her roommate for about a year before I moved out to go to my own apartment since my new salary could finally afford it. But due to unforeseen circumstances, I begged her to take me back. She wasn't smug. She wasn't intrusive. She didn't even ask questions. She just took me back with open arms and even offered to give me the first month for free.

But while there are pure hearted people such as Jenny, there are also losers who think giving funny names in a cafe is amusing. As I hand over the coffee, I plaster on a smile. "Enjoy your latte, Hugh Jass." I said, my voice chirpy and upbeat, even though inside I feel anything but. The teenage boy and his friends snickered as they got their orders. Ugh. There is no way that servers are being paid enough to deal with this bullshit.

And of course, there were also assholes like Rob, my boyfriend of three years, whom I Facetimed last night only to catch him cheating. There was a lady in his bed—his coworker who was "just a friend". He did not deny it. He did not apologize. He'd simply said that it's been going on for a year. That a long distance relationship was bound to fail anyway. And that he wished me well. And that was that.

When it was time for my lunch break, I slipped out the back door and checked my phone. I had a message from Bon, asking to call her immediately. I smiled a little since it reminded me of my flight back home in two weeks. I'm planning to stay in Manila for a week, with Bonbon's wedding and catching up with my family.

"Emily!" Bon said from the other line as she answered from the first ring. "My brother is on the same flight as you. I didn't know until today because he only calls when he feels like it." She said, annoyance obvious in her tone. "I heard he got a rental car here so I told him to bring you with him. I gave him your number so he could contact you."

Bonbon's brother Joshua also lived in Manhattan. He was an engineer in their uncle's construction company. He actually lived in New York since he was nineteen. Studied engineering in—wait for it—Cornell. Bonbon and I were only fourteen when he left, but we had enough memories with Josh to last us a lifetime. He was our designated babysitter and chaperone wherever we went. He was like a big brother to me, too.

"Thanks, Bonbon. See you in two weeks!" I said.

"See you, you big shot Wall Street queen!" I only managed a silent chuckle as she said those words.

It's been a month since I resigned and I haven't told anyone in Manila yet. Every time my family and friends would ask for photos or stories about what happened to my day, I always tell them that Wall Street was as chaotic as Leo Di Caprio painted it to be. That I couldn't even find two seconds to snap a photo. Sometimes, when I feel like I've been making too many excuses, I would slip on a corporate attire and stand near buildings, or attempt to enter the lobby, and take mirror selfies. Other times I would arrange my home desk to make it look more professional. Yes, my life has reached an incomprehensible low. My rock bottom.

The right and sensible thing to do would just to live back in Manila and be an accountant there. I would probably land a solid job since I ranked at the national exams. But I had such big dreams for myself, none of which involved living in the same place I grew up in, with tainted memories of my late father. I had a glimpse of that dream. To go back would mean to give up. To admit my situation would admit defeat. So I kept it from everyone back home. I just felt like if they thought I was still successful here, I could convince myself that maybe I still could be.

With only twenty minutes left in my break, I checked my emails. Still no interview invites from the gazillion job applications I filed in the previous month. Which is unsurprising, because the only reason why I got hired at Titan Financial Group in the first place was because of my father's connection with a director there—a director who took Ben David's side when things got messy. I couldn't blame him, though. I was the new employee who's been there for ten months and Ben was tenured and quite important. Other than the fact that I am a UCPA, as is every other job applicant, I have nothing to give me leverage.

I sighed and saw that there were a couple of emails from my independent clients. Since resigning from the corporate world, I found solace in practicing my profession as a freelance accountant. Filing tax returns, preparing financial statements, and managing bookkeeping for individuals and small businesses became my focus when I wasn't working shifts at the club. Those hours were my redemption, moments when I could engage my mind and feel a sense of purpose.

I never looked down on service workers or entertainers; in fact, I often found their work more demanding than dealing with taxes. The meticulousness required in accounting provided me with a different kind of challenge—one that I thrived on.

I'd always imagined myself as an accountant. Most kids dream of professions they encounter on a regular basis, like doctors or teachers. For me, it was always about puzzling through numbers. My mother used to joke that I could count before I could crawl. Coming to the city, it seemed like those childhood dreams were finally within reach. Until they weren't.

I was about to put my phone back when I saw a new email pop up. It was one of the jobs I applied for. Oh my god. I stood up, ready to celebrate, when I opened the email and saw the words "We regret to inform you...".

And that was it. The last straw for today. I just couldn't handle it anymore. I walked a few feet away from the cafe and let loose. I threw a full-blown tantrum. Yup. Good ol' stomping, screaming, and squirming. I cursed Ben Davids, the reason for my sudden resignation. I cursed The Man. I cursed Hugh Jass. I cursed Rob. I cursed the entire universe for good measure.

I tried to keep my outburst to a solid minute since I would need my voice for my second job later tonight—singing in an acoustic club. Screaming feels cathartic but it's also hard on the vocal cords. When I was satisfied that I had at least let off a little bit of steam, I straightened my apron and grabbed my lunch.

Or at least that's what I planned to do before I realized I wasn't alone.

CHAPTER TWO: Emily

"I didn't know adults still threw tantrums." A deep male voice said behind me. No. It wasn't possible that someone heard me. The construction site beside the cafe should've muted my desperation. I turned around and saw a man emerging from a giant tree. He was probably a construction worker since he had on faded jeans, a white shirt, and a reflector vest.

He was tall. Like, really tall. He had a sleeve tattoo on his right arm but I could sense that it extended to his body somewhere. His short black hair was tousled, strands sticking to his forehead from sweat, suggesting he had just finished something physically demanding. His muscles were defined, and not even a utilitarian reflector vest could hide that he was ripped to shreds. He had a rugged charm about him, and made him decent-looking. No, scratch that. Man was attractive as hell.

"Sorry, I—I didn't know..." I said, unsure of how I could justify my outburst.

"That there are workers in a construction site?" He said, amusement noted in every word. He was strolling toward me now, displaying an overwhelming aura of arrogance. I take it back. Not *that* attractive. He stopped just in front of me, looking down despite the fact that I was standing on an elevated space and he was not.

"No, just... I didn't know there were lurkers in here." I said.

"Lurker? Ouch." He said, feigning clutching his heart. "I'd like to think of myself as an innocent observant bystander."

"Is that what you call it?" I shrugged. "I was thinking somewhere along the lines of a local eavesdropper." He smirked. "Well, if the entertainment just comes naturally, how could I help it?"

"Do you always listen in on conversations?" I asked, taking a seat on one of the benches near the back entrance. I opened my sandwich and started eating. "Sorry, hungry." I said. I only had a few minutes left, I can't risk it.

"First of all, that wasn't a conversation." He said, making his way beside me on the bench. "And no, I only listen when it's as riveting as yours." He added. "What got you all worked up anyway?"

"Yeah right. Like I'm going to divulge my problems to a stranger." I said.

"You did just scream them out to the entire back alley." He said, pointing to the space where I had my tantrum minutes ago.

"Touche. How much did you hear?" I asked.

"I heard you cursing out a big butt, a guy named Ben, and the universe." He said and I can't help but chuckle. In fact, I chuckled so hard I almost choked on my sandwich. I coughed relentlessly as the guy beside me handed me an open water bottle. "Don't die before you tell me all about it, please."

"How about you tell me what you make of it?" I said, humoring him.

"Very well." He said, rubbing his chin in a mock representation of thinking. "Did you, by any chance, witness Ben's big butt and you cursed the universe because you'll never see it again?"

I laughed and shook my head. "No, no." I said. "Let's just say Ben was an old co-worker who made my life hell, and Hugh Jass," I spelled it out letter by letter, "was a fake name I had to shout at the counter earlier." I rolled my eyes as I remembered. "And lastly, the universe, well, it hates me. So I maybe hate it back."

"Sounds like you've had quite the day," he said, a sympathetic smile playing on his lips.

"Yeah, you could say that," I replied with a sigh. "And you? Ever have one of those days where nothing goes right?"

"More often than I'd like to admit," he said, shrugging. "But I've never been pranked into calling out for a Hugh Jass, so you've got me beat there."

I laughed, already feeling a tad bit lighter. "Well, don't lose hope just yet."

He grinned, the kind that made my stomach drop. "Though, I must say, you've definitely made the day more interesting." Dammit stop smiling, I might melt into a pile of goop.

"Glad I could help," I said with a wry smile. "And thanks for the water. You saved me from a very embarrassing death-by-sandwich situation." I stood up and straightened out my apron. He stood up, too, and suddenly I felt a lot shorter since we're standing at the same level. I come up to his shoulders, but I am also five foot four, so it's not really surprising. "I have to go back. More big butts to attend to." I said.

"Okay," He said. "Next time you need a tantrum audience or help in a sandwich emergency, you know where to find me." He gestured to the construction site a few feet away.

"Thanks. And when you want to throw in a cappuccino order for a Phil McGroin or something, I'll gladly take it." I said and he laughed.

"Will that earn me a coveted spot in your tantrum session?" He asked.

"Definitely." I grinned. "Seriously, though. Bye. And thanks. You're not such a bad lurker after all." I said.

"High praise," he said, giving me a mock bow. "I'll take it." He smiled, the most perfect smile I've ever seen on a human being before. I can't help but wonder why he's working his ass off here and not just posing for a Calvin Klein billboard.

With that, I waved and turned my back to return to the cafe. *Okay, Universe, maybe I forgive you a bit for now.*

CHAPTER THREE: Joshua

She walked away, fixing her hair and adjusting her visor. I have to admit, the girl was pretty. Even when she wasn't trying, she had that kind of beauty that probably got her free drinks and meals from strangers. If I'm being honest with myself, I approached her because of her looks. Is it a crime to be attracted to tantrum-throwing ladies? I hope not.

My phone rang suddenly and my sister's face lit up my screen. I sighed as Bon talked—like a damn machine gun—on the other line. "Bon, I heard you the first time. And the second time. And I also heard you now." I said to my annoying little sister. Well, little is a wrong way to put it. For starters, she's tall. Probably about five foot nine. And she's already twenty five and about to get married in two weeks. But she will always be little to me. As for the annoying part, she's honestly probably still annoying to everyone else. She was so loud and so talkative I couldn't imagine how I survived being in the same home all those years ago.

"But I know you. You space out." Bon said from the other line. It's evening in Manila, and she's probably about to sleep. But I had only sent her my flight details today since I was too busy these past few weeks. She called immediately after I sent the screenshots of my flight details. I've been living in New York for a decade and I haven't visited the Philippines since the pandemic. It's been hectic with work lately, with my uncle gearing up for retirement and preparing to leave me his construction company.

"I understood you loud and clear." I said. She was bombarding me to call her friend Emily—who was also living here in New York—and give her a ride back home once we both arrive in Manila. Emily lived in the same neighborhood and grew up in front of my very eyes. She and Bon spent every single day of their lives glued together and I always had the unfortunate task of looking out for them. From babysitting them to driving them around. But I never saw Emily again since I moved here. All I knew was that she's an accountant somewhere here in Manhattan. I saved her number in my contact list to be sure. "I will call Emily. See you in two weeks. Now please, shut your mouth and close your eyes. I could see your eyebags from here."

"Ass." She said as she hung up. I chuckled quietly and stored my phone back in my pocket as I finished the rest of my lunch.

I'm currently overseeing one of the priority projects around this area in New York. We're building a new commercial center and the deadlines are getting closer and we're getting delayed. My uncle's impending retirement meant I had to step up and prove I was ready to take over. The construction business was demanding, but I owed it to him for trusting me with his legacy. Taking over his company was no small feat. It meant long hours, endless meetings, site works, and the weight of expectations. Sometimes, I wondered if I was ready for it all. But then I remembered why I had moved to New York in the first place—to build a life for myself, to take on challenges and grow. This was just another step in that journey.

My life changed when my uncle offered to take me to New York to study engineering at Cornell. It wasn't only an opportunity for a good career, it was also an opportunity to get out of our house. I felt bad leaving Bon behind, but she had always been so optimistic about everything that I don't think she even cared if I left.

My phone buzzed with a text from Tanya. I met her at a club last week, and we agreed to see each other again today.

Tanya: Can't wait for tonight. We can go to the club near my place. ;)

Tanya and I were kindred spirits—we both vowed off commitments and embraced the beauty of singlehood in all its glory. I've always maintained casual relationships all my life but I'm always upfront about this with the women I date. It's usually just for a night, and then we part ways, no strings attached. I've made it a point to never go on a second date because that usually involves talking a lot about personal stuff, and I'm just not ready for all that emotion. Of course I only go into it if the women I'm seeing are on the same page. I respect their boundaries, just as I expect them to respect mine. I never impose my beliefs on anyone, nor do I allow their expectations to dictate my choices. This approach has kept my life uncomplicated and my heart unburdened.

That's the reason why, even when I enjoyed it, I probably will never see the tantrum girl again. Based on a single conversation, I could already tell that she was not like Tanya and me. She had that aura of someone who'd make me feel things. And feelings and me just don't go well together. It would be dangerous territory to see her again.

My date asked to meet at the bar instead of the club she insisted on for dinner. According to Tanya, the music in this bar was amazing. Apparently, the acoustic sets were something to behold. I'm not exactly a fan of acoustic music. Or music, in general. I know it's weird, but I usually just listen to whatever's on the radio and don't exactly have a preference. For me, music has always been more of a background noise, something to fill the silence rather than something to enjoy.

When I was a kid, my parents always fought a lot. My dad's alcohol issues and my mom's overworking were a volatile mix. They're fine now since they're both old and my dad quit drinking and my mom retired. But back then,

their shouting matches were relentless, echoing through the house with a ferocity that left scars deeper than I'd like to admit. I can still hear their voices, sharp and bitter, cutting through the air like knives.

In those moments, my sister and I would retreat to my room, seeking refuge from the storm. We would close the door, huddling together on my bed, and I would turn on the radio, blasting music as loud as I could. It wasn't about enjoying the music; it was about survival. Music was a shield, a way to drown out the terror and find a semblance of peace amid the turmoil. It was our escape, our sanctuary.

Even now, as an adult, I find it hard to listen to music without those memories surfacing. It's like a trigger, a direct link to the past. So, I've never developed a real taste for it. I just let the radio play whatever is popular, letting the tunes wash over me without really listening.

As we entered the bar, though, all my thoughts about music flew out the window as I heard the most beautiful voice I've ever heard in my life.

I looked at the stage to see the source of the wonderful voice and there she was. The tantrum-throwing barista from this morning. But this time, she traded her aprons and visor for a strapless black dress. She had her hair down and I noticed that it was wavy and was long enough to reach her elbows. She was, again, really pretty, but in this setting, as the spotlight illuminates her face and her skin, she looked ethereal.

For a moment, I was captivated by her performance (and admittedly, her face).

"Okay, Josh, you're practically drooling." Tanya said, snapping me back to reality. Right. Tanya. Date. I turned my attention back to her, feeling a bit embarrassed. Tanya's eyes were twinkling with amusement, clearly having noticed my distraction.

"Sorry," I muttered, trying to focus on the conversation. But it was hard to tear my gaze away from the stage. I tried to engage in small talk, nodding and responding as Tanya spoke, but my thoughts kept drifting back to the music and the singer.

As the song came to an end, the bar erupted into applause, and I joined in, clapping enthusiastically. "...don't you think?" Tanya said after the applause. Shit. I wasn't really paying attention to her. I looked at her, trying to dig into my brain to conjure any residual conversation piece I might have heard this evening.

"You haven't been listening to me, have you?" Tanya said.

"I'm sorry." I said, genuinely feeling terrible for wasting her time.

"Because of her? The singer?" She said. Was I that obvious? There's probably no point in denying it if she witnessed me gawking. I didn't say anything but simply made a quiet nod.

"I figured that the moment we sat down. I instantly regretted bringing you here." She chuckled, trying to brush it off as something light and not the disrespect that it was. "But seriously, though, let's just do us both a favor and end this date, shall we? I already called my friend and she's on her way."

"I really am sorry, Tanya." I said. I apologized again, feeling a mix of guilt and embarrassment. "I don't usually become distracted like this."

"It's cute, really." Tanya said. "In fact you made me wonder if I wanted to change my ways. Maybe it's not so bad to have someone become so undone and distracted because of me, for a change." She said.

"It's not cute. And I'm not undone. I'm just... curious, that's all. Because I saw her this morning working a different job and now she's here. That's all, really." Lie. That's not all. I am inexplicably drawn to this woman and I've known it since this morning.

"Just talk to the damn girl, Joshua." She said. "My friend's here." At first I hesitated to stand, thinking of a way to salvage the evening somehow. But Tanya said again, "Really, Joshua. It's fine. It's a first date, it's allowed to

be terrible. And frankly, we both know there wasn't going to be a second. Now go because my friend really is right here." She said as her friend emerged from the shadows, waving frantically at her.

I stood up and walked outside, the cool night air a welcome relief from the awkwardness that had settled at the table. It would be a bad idea to talk to the girl again. I enjoyed our banter too much this morning, and the easy flow of our conversation had been a pleasant surprise. But talking to her again tonight—especially after being so blatantly distracted by her—was not part of my keeping-it-casual stance. Nope, I needed to stick to my principles. So I'm going home.

But then as I started walking, I saw her emerge from the bar. Her black dress was draped in sweaters now—something more casual but equally beautiful. Her hair blowing gently on her back. I sighed. Because as I learned today, this girl could throw all my rational thoughts out the window. And again, against my better judgment, I walk up and talk to her.

CHAPTER FOUR: Emily

It was open mic day, so I only had to sing three songs then I could leave. Which would give me ample time to pack. I caught up on extra shifts in the cafe and the club since I'd be gone for a week. My accounting gig, on the other hand, can continue even when I am in Manila so I pushed it aside for the past few days.

While everyone in the club was busy ordering, I was busy setting up the acoustics. I ended up singing five songs, because one gentleman and one lady gave tips that were bigger than my entire daily rate. By the time I finished with *Can't Help Falling In Love*, (it was the generous lady and her husband's anniversary. Imagine being lucky enough to splurge on tips AND have a loving husband.) I put a sweater and a thick coat over my black dress. New York in April isn't exactly thick coat-level cold, but I wore one anyway. Since my skin is used to humidity and tropical winds, I shiver the minute the temperature drops from 20 degrees celsius.

As I made my way out of the bar, I bumped into a giant figure. I looked up to apologize but ended up with wide eyes instead.

"Barista *and* a club singer? Do you have a third job too, Tantrum?" The construction guy from earlier spoke. This time, he was wearing dark pants and a button down top rolled to his elbows. How is he not freezing?

"Not that it's any of your business—again—but yes I do." I said. I didn't really have to attend to my third job immediately but I needed the time to pack.

"Oh, let me guess. Are you a superhero by night? A secret agent? You seem like the type who thrives on chaos." he said with a grin. I rolled my eyes, walking past him, but he hopped in front of me, walking backwards instead. I stopped since I knew he would probably continue walking and risk bumping into every person we encounter.

I rolled my eyes, a half-smile tugging at my lips. "If you think that was thriving, I'd hate to imagine what you think of as struggling." I said. "Because, sir, chaos is not my idea of a good time."

He laughed, clearly enjoying this. "Maybe stand-up comedy is your thing. If it isn't already your third job, give it a try."

"Maybe I will, just so I can make jokes about annoying guys who can't mind their own business," I shot back.

"Damn," he said, stepping aside. "But seriously, you should put that on your resume. 'Expert at shutting down annoying guy's attempts at flirting.'"

Oh so this was flirting. It's been so long since I've been single, my radar couldn't grasp flirting even if it were spitting at me in the face. "Great idea. I'll be sure to give you a shoutout for the inspiration," I said, finally squeezing past him. He didn't leave but walked beside me instead.

"You're welcome. Wanna grab some late night dinner? I'm assuming you haven't eaten anything yet." He said, obviously at the precipice of asking me on a date.

I hesitated, standing at a crossroads of emotions and possibilities. Here I am, with a perfectly attractive guy who is flirting with me, but all I could think of was Rob. Stupid Rob, who took me for granted, assuming I'd always be there regardless of how he treated me. Stupid Rob, who callously cheated on me with a coworker, shattering the trust I'd invested in our relationship and any hope of a future one. Stupid Rob, who didn't even have the decency to apologize, and just gave me the worst breakup of my life. Ugh.

But then I realized something. Maybe, just maybe, I deserved more than the endless loop of hurt and betrayal that Rob had left me with. Perhaps tonight was an opportunity to break free from the chains of heartache, to reclaim a sense of joy and spontaneity that had been overshadowed for too long. I think I owed this to myself. Maybe I did deserve to have fun. Just this once, I thought.

"You know what? What the hell. Let's go get dinner, kind stranger." I said.

Since it was almost midnight, there weren't a lot of places open, so we ended up grabbing a burger at the 24/7 diner near Jenny's apartment.

"I've never done this before." I said as I took the first bite of my double cheeseburger.

"Eat a burger?" He said, confused.

"No. Get dinner with a random stranger who saw my outburst." I said.

"You should really stop calling me 'stranger', I'm—" He said.

"No, don't." I said. "Giving you a name would mean that this is real. And I'm sort of on a cloud today. Bad breakup, terrible jobs, and all that. And for tonight, I just want to be... somewhere else for a bit. So forgive me but I really want to keep calling you 'stranger'." I said, downing another bite.

I wasn't even sure if that made sense, but out-of-reality Emily didn't care what made sense, she only cared about herself. This escapade isn't new—I do this every time life throws me shit. No, I didn't grab dinner with strangers, but I whisked myself away to another dimension. When I was young, reading a book would do it for me. It had been enough as a reprieve from reality. But as I grew older, I wanted to experience them myself. For a few hours, I would pretend to be someone I'm not because any alternative is better than the real me. Real Emily was very careful and very responsible, very calculating. Out-of-reality Emily was carefree. I would usually attend support group discussions and fake my identity, Fight Club style. But there were only a handful of anxiety-related ones and I can't possibly attend them all. Occasionally, I'd venture to open mics or random bars, striking up conversations with strangers who didn't know the real me. But tonight was different – it was the first time I had agreed to dinner. And admitted my pretensions. And why did I shake it up tonight? Because Rob. Stupid, stupid Rob.

"I get that. And I respect that." He said. "If that's the case, I assume you don't want to talk about anything remotely connected to reality?"

"Yes. Exactly." I said, impressed that he did not think I was weird and just simply went on with it.

"Okay, no reality checks tonight" He said. "Cheers to the fake us." He raised his soda can and mock salute, and I clinked my glass of apple juice with it.

"How about a game?" He said. And I looked at him with raised eyebrows. "Two truths and a lie. You don't have to tell me which one's the lie if you don't want to. To preserve your whole out-of-reality plan."

"Okay. Sounds good." I said, taking another bite of my burger. "You go."

"Alright. I attempted to climb Mount Everest, I rescued a stray puppy from a burning building, and I can speak Japanese." He said.

"Puppy is the lie." I said, after contemplating.

"Nope. Japanese was the lie. The puppy story was actually quite the adventure." He said. And I guess I looked too surprised because he said, "What, don't I look like someone who rescues puppies for the sake of it?"

"Honestly, no." I said. When he chuckled, I said "My turn. One, I won a hot dog eating contest in college. Two, I accidentally crashed a quinceanera thinking it was my friend's costume party. Three, I went on a hiking trip in the Arizona desert."

"Hmm." He said. "Has to be the hot dog eating contest."

"Wrong. I still had the plaque displayed in my room. Quite proud of it, too, I ate twenty hotdogs in fifteen minutes." I said. "The lie was actually the hiking trip. Deadly allergic to dust."

"That sucks. Hiking is fun." He said.

"I do actually want to try it but my allergies would kill me."

"There are trails that aren't dusty, you know. Maybe one day, you can try them." He smiled. Still such an attractive smile.

We finished dinner going through whirlwinds of two truths and a lie. It's ironic how escaping from reality made both of us find out random facts about each other. I found out that he once locked himself out of his apartment wearing nothing but underwear. I'm not gonna lie that the thought of him standing in a hallway looking like that didn't send my imagination running wild. I also found out that he was sort of an adrenaline junkie, bungee jumping, scuba diving, all that.

When we reached my apartment, it was two in the morning. It was quiet and the only ones in the surroundings were those going home from nights at the bar. We were at the door when we stopped to say our goodbyes.

"I would invite you up, but I have a roommate and it's a small apartment." I said.

"That's okay. I like the mystery you gave our evening, Tantrum." He said. He stepped closer. This is probably the time where I should snap out of this escapade and be rational about how this evening should end. I should probably turn back...

"I have one more round for you," he said, his voice low and playful. "One, I've never been on a second date because I'm a casual type of guy. Two, I'm questioning everything I've ever believed about relationships." He paused, his gaze steady and sincere. "And three, I don't want to kiss you right now."

My heart raced in my chest as his words hung in the air. His proximity, his honesty—it was all intoxicating. Taking a breath, I decided to play along with our game of truths and half-truths. "One, I might never want to be in a relationship again," I countered softly. "Two, I'm dreading going back to my life as I know it." Pausing for a moment, I met his gaze squarely. "And three, I'm not attracted to you at all."

He leaned in, and I felt my breath catch. His hand gently brushed a strand of hair from my face, his touch warm and soft. My pulse quickened as he tilted his head, bringing his lips to mine.

The kiss started gently, a tentative brush of lips, but quickly deepened as we both leaned into it. His lips were warm and firm, moving against mine with a perfect balance of tenderness and urgency. I felt a shiver run down my spine as his hand cupped the back of my neck, pulling me closer.

Time seemed to stop. The world around us faded, leaving just the two of us in that moment. His other hand found my waist, holding me gently but firmly, anchoring me to him. I responded by wrapping my arms around his neck, losing myself in the sensation of the kiss, the taste of him, the heat that built between us.

When we finally pulled apart, we were both breathless, our foreheads resting against each other. His eyes were dark, filled with an intensity that matched my own.

I was suddenly very aware that we were in a public place, and this door beside us could open any minute.

"Wow," I whispered, unable to find any other words. I didn't want to say that, but it somehow escaped my thoughts and made its way to my mouth.

"Yeah," he murmured, his thumb lightly stroking my cheek. "I wasn't expecting that."

"Me neither," I admitted, my heart still racing.

He smiled, a warm, genuine smile that made my knees weak. "So, is this where the adventure ends?"

"For now," I said.

"Goodnight, Beautiful," he said, pressing one last, soft kiss to my cheek.

"Goodnight, you." I replied, watching as he walked away, a smile on my face and a flutter in my chest.

I have never kissed a stranger before. I have also never been kissed like that before. Part of me wanted to chase after him and wrap my arms around him again, but even I knew when to let Dreamland Emily go. It was back to reality, and the fact remains—I don't have a super hot boyfriend who kisses like he's a soldier going to war tomorrow. In fact I was starkly reminded that I am so very undeniably single. And honestly, I think I like it.

"In no absolute way did you kiss a stranger." Haley said. Haley, with her twin sister Kate, Bonbon, and I are on a three-way video call at two in the morning—two in the afternoon in Manila.

"I did. I know, it was stupid." I said, rubbing my temple.

"It's great, Em. You deserve it." Bon said. "It's normal post-breakup behavior. As long as you don't make a habit out of kissing strangers, you're good. Cut yourself some slack." She said.

"She's right, you know." Kate said. Haley smacked her arm.

"What do you mean, she's right? Have you kissed a stranger?" She said, eyeing her sister.

"Right. Because I, never-had-a-boyfriend Kate, had the capacity to do that." Kate rolled her eyes. "I simply meant that Bon was right that Emily should cut herself some slack. Rob was an idiot and we all agree." She said.

"Speaking of," Bon interjected. She was eating some cup noodles while on her desk at home. "The whole village has shunned him permanently. There's a we-hate-Rob club. We have jackets and everything." She chuckled.

"You don't." I said. "And please, don't make this a big deal. I know it is. I mean, I imagined my life with him. But really, right now, it's so exhausting to even think about. And such terrible timing too. I can feel all the neighbors' eyes on me. Ugh." I said. If there's one thing I didn't miss about home, it's my nosy neighbors. We lived in a village where everyone was close and everyone knew each other growing up. Where I met Rob and where Bon met Ryan.

"Of course there will be eyes on you, Em. But they will be pity eyes." Haley said.

"Ugh that's worse!" I said.

"I honestly overheard Manang Linda say the other day, the day we all found out, that she knew Emily's life was too perfect to be true." Bon laughed. "I overheard her, and told her to mind her own business. Emily was still living a perfect life, probably more now that he's not around." I chuckled with her. Bon has always been the kind of person who spoke her mind. We all admired that about her. Which was why I felt terrible about lying to her. My life is far from perfect. So, so far.

"Anyway, you're not the only one who should be worried about the neighbors. Bon, I heard your brother has gotten really cute." Haley said.

“Ugh, disgusting.” Bon made a face. “If by cute, you meant he now looked like a goon, then fine.” She said. “And please, Hale, you did not hear that. You were the one who started the rumor.”

“Why?” I asked.

“I saw Bon talking to him one time, and oh my god, he was so hot.” Haley said. “Incredibly hot—like tan Henry Cavill hot.”

“Excuse my sister, she’s been reading a lot of Sarah J Maas lately and thinks all men should be tan, muscled, and tatted up to look the least bit attractive.” Kate said.

“I’m not gonna apologize for that.” Haley said. “Give him wings and I’m down on my knees.”

We all laughed and Bon said, “Enough about my brother. Emily, you really do deserve to slack off every once in a while, you know. Loosen up and have fun a bit.

“That’s exactly what I did, Bon. And now I regret it.” I said.

“Why do you regret it?” Kate asked. “Have you heard from him again? The stranger you kissed?”

“No. And that’s exactly why I regret it.” I said. “Because now I can’t redeem myself. He probably thought I was the kind of person who usually does things like that. But no. That was the one time I didn’t do something calculated.” Of course I leave out all my escapades where I pretend to be a different person.

“And what’s so bad about that?” Haley said. “You can go to that construction site and tell him, but you don’t have to do that, Em. Maybe it’s okay that you do the casual thing for now. You’ve been tied up with Rob ever since and now you deserve to fly, hun.” She said.

“As overly cheesy as it is, I agree with Haley.” Bon said.

Two weeks flew by so fast. I had spent the next few days doubling up on my shifts and catching up on clients so I’d have enough money when I go back home for Bon’s wedding. Her brother Joshua also hasn’t contacted me yet, but that’s okay. I’m sure I could find my way home once I’m there.

Each day was a blur of coffee orders and office documents, the steady rhythm of work keeping me anchored. The cafe’s constant hum provided a strange comfort, a distraction from the thoughts that would otherwise consume me. Occasionally, I’d catch myself thinking about that night, the stranger’s warm smile and the brief escape from reality. It was a pleasant memory, but one that I knew I couldn’t dwell on for too long.

As the day of my flight approached, I packed my bags with a mix of excitement and anxiety. I was ready to leave behind the daily grind and immerse myself in the warmth of old friendships and familiar faces, even for just a short while. I may be confused, hurt, misdirected for now, but at least I would be home.

CHAPTER FIVE: Emily

Taylor swift was wrong. Karma was not the breeze in my hair on a weekend. Karma was the breeze in my hair on a Monday as I waited for another taxi because the one I’m in broke down on the way to the airport. I’m not even surprised by my misfortune anymore. I am genuinely convinced that someone was stabbing my voodoo doll to death and maybe this was a little bit of torture before the big blow. My flight leaves in two hours and I was still twenty minutes away. I waited for cabs but no one stopped for me. I was about to lose all hope until one cab finally did.

“JFK?” The driver asked after rolling his windows down. When I nodded he proceeded to put my bags in the trunk and said, “There’s another passenger, same destination.”

I would have appreciated it if he told me that before loading my bags, but I didn't mind as long as I got to the airport on time. When I entered the cab, I paid no heed to my co-passenger. Not until he spoke.

"Hey, where are you off to?" That familiar voice said. No, this isn't possible.

I turned my attention to my left to see that this was, in fact, possible. There with a grin on his face was the same guy I encountered twice in the past two weeks and the same guy I made out with for one escaping night. He was wearing a black shirt and dark jeans, with a hoodie over it. He had on a baseball cap that showed a portion of his hair on his forehead.

"Hey. Look at you, already part of my reality." I muttered. I wasn't supposed to ask him why he hadn't come back for me, right? That would be weird considering I was the one who requested to remain nameless for the sake of mystery. But somehow a little part of me expected him to show up at the cafe or at the club. I am such a loser, he probably doesn't remember me. Does he?

He chuckled and took a look at my printed itinerary. "No way. Manila too? That's where I'm headed." He said. He took off his baseball cap and ruffled his hair.

"You're from the Philippines?" I asked.

"Yup. Grew up there. Moved here when I was nineteen. I usually come home for holidays but it's my sister's wedding in five days so I figured I'd stay longer." He said. "Which reminds me, I have to call her friend since we'd be riding together, Excuse me." He pulled out his phone to dial a number.

Wait a minute. *I'm* off to Manila for a wedding in five days. And I was supposed to receive a call from Bonbon's brother about the ride home. And Bonbon's brother lives in Manhattan. And he's an engineer who's probably heavily involved in construction... And then I gasped as my phone rang at the same time I realized who I was sitting next to. He looked at me with a confused look, then he looked at his phone, then back to me. Holy fuck, no. No no no no.

"Hold up. Are you Joshua—Bonbon's brother Joshua?" I breathed. I honestly didn't recognize him. I looked for any indication that he was the Joshua we grew up with but I couldn't find anything. I knew he lived in the US, but I never really thought about Joshua Santiago since he left the neighborhood ten years ago. Back then, he was tall, lanky, and fair-skinned. Now, he's a giant man with defined muscles and a deep tan.

"Emily?" Joshua doesn't remember me either. I guess I don't blame him. I've changed a lot since I was fourteen. My hair, for instance, used to be short and jet black. But when I moved here, I started to dye it light brown and let it grow to my elbows.

"Yup. It's me. Emily." His eyes grew wide as the realization set in. Holy shit. I gushed about this kiss to Bon, Haley, and Kate. I explained it all in detail. Not knowing it was Bon's brother. I can't believe I kissed Joshua Santiago. Joshua, who spent the most of his teenage life babysitting me and Bon. Joshua, whom I saw as an extension of my family. This is bad. Oh shitballs, this is terrible.

"No way. Emily Rodriguez? The weird kid with the dust allergy?" He said. I guess decades aren't enough to change a person's behavior. Joshua may have been a responsible older brother, but like most older brothers, he was teasing and rude and downright annoying. "I'm kidding. I meant to say, Emily Rodriguez—my sister's weird best friend who basically lived in our house."

"I can't believe this. I can't believe this. Oh my god we kissed. I cannot believe I enjoyed a kiss with Bonbon's brother." I said. "I should have known. I shouldn't have let loose. Holy shit I can't believe this." I said, my breathing heavy.

I looked over at him and he was... surprisingly calm. "How are you not freaking out?!" I said.

"First of all, thanks, I'm glad you enjoyed our kiss." He held a hand over his heart as he replied with a sarcastic smile. And there, in his smile, I saw it. Remnants of the boy I once knew—the same mischievous glint in his eyes, the same lopsided grin. Time had transformed us both, but some things hadn't changed at all. "Second of all, why would I freak out? It was a good kiss but it was just a single kiss, Em. I'm sure you've had more meaningful nights with other strangers."

And that was like a punch to the gut. Of course it was so on-brand for me to think the kiss meant much more than it did. He was right, though. He was a stranger at the time. I had fun. And we should leave that memory behind. And I shouldn't probably correct him if he thinks I've had meaningful nights with strangers. Maybe it would be better for me to just let him think that.

"I told Bon and the others about that kiss, though. But I won't tell them it was you. It would be too weird, I suppose." I said.

"Why?" He asked. "Not that I'm thrilled about the idea of Bon knowing about it, but I honestly don't mind. I'm thirty and while I'm five years older than you, you're not exactly too young to make decisions for yourself." He said.

He had such a laid back perspective about things, I wonder what it felt like to have a mind as calm and collected. Imagine not having to go through a gazillion thoughts before doing anything. Or not having to visit every possible outcome when deciding on something. Must be nice.

"I have a question, though," he said, shaking his head as if trying to reconcile the memory with the present. And then he was silent, as if he were thinking about something. And then he looked at me with narrow eyes. "Isn't Emily supposed to be a big-shot Wall Street accountant?" Shit. I forgot about the whole facade. He saw me not just in one job, but two. There's no way I could lie myself out of this one.

I sighed. "Well, Emily was a big-shot Wall Street accountant for ten months until the universe decided her talents were better suited for working with espresso machines. It has also been a month since she was out of job but she hasn't told anyone in Manila to spare herself of any judgment, so she's begging you not to rat her out."

He laughed, a sound that was surprisingly warm. "Respect, Em. Your secret's safe with me. By the way, your third job... Do you freelance? As an accountant?" He said. "I wasn't stalking you, but I could see headers of financial reports just now in that transparent bag you're holding."

I nodded, relieved by his understanding. "Yeah, freelance accounting keeps me busy between shifts. It's not Wall Street, but it helps pay the bills."

Joshua nodded and I crossed my arms and looked out the window, trying to ignore the bubbling frustration. The ride to the airport felt like an eternity, punctuated by Joshua's occasional attempts at conversation. His voice was like nails on a chalkboard—reminding me of my stupid decisions.

I was always the organized type, the one who calculated every angle before doing something. But my escapades were where I usually leave that behind. And now it came back to bite me in the ass.

When we arrived, he paid for the cab fare and ignored my attempt to split it. "Since you're between jobs right now, I got this, Tantrum." He said with a wink. I rolled my eyes and went out of the cab.

"Bye." I said casually after hauling my luggage to the cart.

"Don't want to stay with me?" He said playfully.

"Oh god, no." I said. "I literally need time away from you before I have to see you every day." He laughed at this and waved at me as I walked into the airport.

As I navigated through the bustling terminal, I couldn't shake off the irritation. I was supposed to be excited about this trip, a chance to reconnect with my roots and celebrate my best friend's wedding. My best friend, whose brother held my best kept secret.

That's fine. I can shake this off. I will simply keep my distance from anything that may ruin the next week.

Once I was done checking my bags, I scanned the snack options near the boarding gate. With about fifteen minutes before the gates opened, I opted for a tuna sandwich and a lemon soda. Finding a quiet bench, I settled down to eat in solitude.

I booked this flight two months ago during a seat sale. I distinctly remember that I was working late and took a break to Facetime with Rob. We were both gushing over Bon and Ryan's engagement when I got a notification that the flight I've been tracking was at an all-time low. So I booked it immediately. Rob was so happy we would finally see each other. Now, sitting alone with my sandwich, I couldn't help but wonder how genuine his happiness had been. How sincere were his declarations of love and longing, knowing all the while that he was involved with someone else? How could he tell me he loved me and stay on the phone with me for hours? And also, what kind of girl would willingly be a third party to an otherwise stable monogamous relationship?

The truth stung, slicing through the haze of memories like a knife. Moments shared, plans made, and promises exchanged—all tainted now by betrayal. I stared at the half-eaten sandwich in my hands, its taste suddenly bland. The lemon soda offered a brief, sharp tang on my tongue, a stark contrast to the heaviness weighing on my heart. Swallowing hard, I pushed aside thoughts of Rob and tried to focus on the trip ahead. Manila awaited, offering a temporary escape from the tangled emotions and shattered trust.

As I boarded the plane, I couldn't help but reflect on how strange life could be. Just when I thought I was escaping reality for a night, reality had a way of catching up. I wonder when reality will finally be better than my escape.

CHAPTER SIX: Joshua

Yes, I am a terrible human being. Write that on my headstone when I die, which is probably soon because jumping out of this plane would be easier than stopping myself from walking over to seat 22F and kissing the girl seated there. The girl who also happened to be my younger sister's best friend.

I've been avoiding her—Emily, dammit—for the past two weeks since we kissed. Because her face kept replaying in my head when we pulled away. I admit I was also in a frenzy because, holy shit, that kiss was incredible. It felt... out of this world. Which was the whole point of our entire evening. When she suggested that we keep it anonymous, I didn't know if I should feel good or bad. Good, because it would maintain the whole casual thing. Bad, because for some reason that I can't understand, I want to know her.

And now I do know her. In fact, I have known her for decades. And I don't know where I stand now. My thoughts are a jumbled mess. I'm normally a very thorough, very calculating person. But Emily is making it so hard for me to be that way.

After finding out that she was Emily, I thought it would remove any attraction I had for her. But nope. If anything, my attraction is now mixed with an overwhelming need to protect her at all costs. Because not only do I think she's beautiful, but I already instantly care about her. I used to always look out for her (and Bon). I would fight off her bullies, drive her around, teach her homework, hell, I even chaperoned her first date when she was thirteen. Back then, all of it seemed like a task I had to do because I was the responsible older brother for both of them. But now... I don't know where it puts me.

Earlier, during the cab ride, I tried my absolute hardest to seem calm and nonchalant. I didn't want to scare her off. She was already freaking out that she kissed her best friend's brother. I couldn't care less about that fact, by the way. I wholeheartedly do not care if the whole population of Magnolia Heights—our tight-knit childhood village—

found out I kissed Emily Rodriguez. It would cause a neighborhood gossip train, we would probably be the topic of dinner conversations, but I don't care about that. Emily, obviously, does. She cares a lot. So I had to lie to her. I told her that it was just a single kiss and insinuated that it shouldn't mean anything. Even when it was all I thought about these past two weeks. But that seemed to calm her down as she realized that she should not think too much into it.

I made a resolution to keep my distance while we're in Manila. Being in close proximity to her may not be the easiest challenge, but I can handle it. I will simply lay low and be completely busy with other stuff.

As I put on my airpods to once again distract myself from my own thoughts, I didn't just play one of the ready-made playlists on Spotify. I searched for "Can't Help Falling In Love" and listened to all the different versions—none of which came close to hers.

Once we arrived in Manila, I went to get my rental car immediately after baggage claim. It smelled terrible, so I sprayed a bit of my cologne on the passenger seat since I'll be taking Emily with me. I was trying to call her but I think her phone's still on airplane mode, so I drove to the exit and scanned around for her.

And there she was. She ditched the sweatshirt and just wore a tank top and sweatpants. Her hair was up in a giant bun. She was holding her phone—which I assume is now available to call—and was scrunching her eyebrows as she concentrated on typing. I wonder what was wrong.

Thankfully, she was standing exactly at the pick-up point, so I drove carefully until I could reach her.

CHAPTER SEVEN: Emily

When I got to Manila and switched off my phone's airplane mode, the notifications came flooding in: a Facebook reminder that I had an event in two days—Bonita and Ryan's Nuptials, an Instagram notification of a few story likes, and four messages—one from my mom, one from Bon, one from a service provider welcoming me to the Philippines, and one from an unknown number. The text preview already made my heart do a weird somersault and made me nauseous. So I opened the entire text.

Unknown Number: Hey, Emily. It's Rob. I heard you're flying in for the wedding. Safe flight and see you there.

Oh god of course he's gonna be at the wedding. Why didn't I realize that Rob was Ryan's brother, and probably spent more time with Bon in the last three years? Ugh. I tried to compose myself and replied.

Me: Hey. See you there.

A minute later, my phone dinged again and we started texting.

Rob: I hope it won't be weird between us.

Me: Why would it be weird? (I wanted to add: because you're a cheating asshole? but I chose peace today.)

Rob: Because I kinda sorta have a date.

Great, just great. The guy who broke my heart is bringing a date to the wedding I promised myself I'd enjoy for my best friend. The day I swore I wouldn't let thoughts of him ruin. The day I wanted to reclaim for myself, free of any lingering heartbreak. And maybe it's anger, ego, or just plain pettiness, but I'm not proud of what I did next. Part of me wanted to scream at the universe for its twisted sense of humor. Part of me wanted to ignore his messages, to

block his number and pretend he didn't exist. But a bigger part of me, the part that still ached from his betrayal, needed to prove that I had moved on too. That I wasn't the same girl he left behind. So, I lied.

Me: So do I. Not weird at all :)

Rob: Oh great. Can't wait to meet him.

Okay. So now I just have to come up with a last minute reason why my date couldn't make it, hoping Rob won't see right through me. Fever? An allergy? Ugh.

"What's with the face, Tantrum Em?" Someone said through the driver's seat of the car that pulled up in front of me. Unsurprisingly, it was Joshua.

"How do you know where I am?" I asked, ignoring his question.

"Where else could you be? Now come take a seat. I'll take care of your luggage." He said.

I was about to decline simply out of frustration from everything that's happening to me, but then I thought about taxi fares and Manila traffic and sketchy roads. So I agreed to ride with Josh. Once we loaded my bags into the car, he asked, "So seriously, Emily. What is with the face of terror?"

"Like I'm gonna tell you." I said.

"Come on, tell me. I won't spill." He said, making a zipping motion over his mouth. He drove off to Magnolia Heights, which was, according to the virtual map, two hours away.

"Fine. Just promise you won't get all judge-y."

"I'll try." He smiled at the road.

"Alright. So you know Rob, right?" I started. "What am I saying, of course you know Rob." Rob and Joshua were friends back in the day. He's still older than Rob but they did a lot of things together. I think. Rob and I never really talked about Joshua so I just assumed they also fell out of touch over the years.

"Well yeah. You're together, right?" He said. "Oh, wait, you said weeks ago that you had a bad breakup. Was that with Rob?"

I nodded. "Yup he's my ex-boyfriend now." I said, and Joshua did a quick look at me, eyebrows raised and eyes wide with disbelief. "Cheated on me for a year. I found out because while we were video chatting, there was someone on his bed. He didn't even deny it, that ass, just admitted that it's been going on for a year and then broke up with me." I shrugged.

"How-" Josh started. "How could anyone cheat on you? You're..." He sighed. "Nevermind, what's the problem?"

"Were you going to say I was amazing and beautiful and all that?" I said jokingly to lighten the mood. I could feel the wave of emotions shower over me so I had to distract myself.

"I was going to say you're scary when you're angry." He said. "So what's the problem?"

We were at a stoplight, so I handed him my phone and let him read the conversation. "That's the problem." I said.

"I don't see an issue. Just introduce your date, I guess." He said.

"That is the issue, dumbass. I don't have one." I said. And then it was eerily silent. And of all things to do, Joshua laughed. For a solid minute.

"So you invented a boyfriend? To save face? So high school, Emily." He said.

"What's high school is you, an old man, teasing me. Now I just need to fake an illness or something so my 'boyfriend' won't be able to attend at the last minute. What could be a reasonable excuse?" I said, thinking out loud.

“Are you asking me to help you lie your way out of another lie you already made?” Josh said. “Sorry, I’m already keeping my mouth shut about that other lie about your job... Geez, Emily,” he said, as if realizing that I was a big fat liar.

“Shut up, I’m not asking you to do anything. I’m just brainstorming here. Unless you want to pretend to be my boyfriend for a week.” I said before I even had a chance to think about it. What in the world was that suggestion? That couldn’t happen. No. Rob was, in all aspects, perfect. He was a top student, kind to the neighbors, he was a lawyer who gave free legal advice. All that golden boy stuff. And Joshua was, well, the opposite. I can’t just jump from Rob to Joshua, that’s like switching from eating perfect omelets to just drinking raw egg yolks. The neighborhood would go crazy. And I couldn’t convince them that someone like Joshua fell for someone like me. Yup. Terrible idea.

Before Josh could reply, though, his phone rang. It was connected to the car bluetooth so I saw that it was his mom. He answered on loudspeaker.

“Hey, Josh. Where are you? Will you be here by dinner?” His mom asked.

“Yup. I’ll be there by then.” I said.

“Great. There’s this girl I’d love for you to meet. She is a wonderful lady and—” His mom rambled on about how great this potential girl was but Josh was simply rolling his eyes and shaking his head.

“Ma, no. I don’t need another one of your matchmaking games.” He said.

“The only time I will stop my matchmaking games, my son, is when you manage to make a match for yourself. Until then, you’re going to have to bear with me.” His mom said firmly. “If you don’t like Leana, there are other girls I could introduce you to.”

“No, you won’t.” Josh said.

“I told you, Josh. Unless you already have a girlfriend—”

“I do.” Josh said. Oh. I guess with looks, financial independence, and a sense of humor, it’s impossible for him not to have one. I don’t know why but I felt something dip in my stomach at the revelation. Oh my god, did he have one when we kissed in front of my apartment? I didn’t want to be some skank who ruined a good relationship. I would never wish that on anyone else.

“Oh that’s wonderful! Why haven’t you introduced her? And is your girlfriend not attending your own sister’s wedding?” She said. “Tell her to fly here, we’ll add her to the guest list.”

Joshua rubbed his temples and stayed silent for a few seconds, as if thinking about what to say next. I get it. Filipino moms are a lot to take in. Tell them the wrong thing and it will be used against you for all eternity. What I don’t get, though, was when he said “No need. She’s already here.” I looked at the backseat, then suddenly realized that of course he won’t let his girlfriend sit at the back while I’m here. Did he mean that she was also in the Philippines? I guess not all long distance relationships were doomed to fail.

It was Bonbon who replied, apparently Joshua was also on loudspeaker. “So you’re bringing your new girlfriend to my wedding and you didn’t bother to tell me? The bride??” She was freaking out.

Joshua took a deep breath. He seemed to be absorbing the current situation. “I didn’t think I needed to. She’s already on the guest list.” Joshua said. Now I’m even more confused. How can she be on the guest list if they haven’t met her? And I guess I wasn’t the only one confused because Bonbon said the exact same thing as I was thinking it.

“Actually you already know her.” Joshua said. He glanced at me, then closed his eyes, and said “She’s your very own maid of honor.” Sorry what? *I’m* Bonbon’s maid of honor. How can he say that his girlfriend was—wait. He’s looking at me now. He’s mouthing the word ‘please’. And then realization struck. My mouth hung open as I figured out that I’m the one he’s talking about. No no no. “It’s Emily.” He said in a final breath. Whatintheactualfuck. I flicked him

in his arm. I was about to do it again when he held my outstretched hand and held it in his fist, dodging every attempt I had to pinch him or something. I gave up and just stared at him incredulously. This can't be happening. I can't keep up with lying about my job then lying about my relationship.

"WHAT?" Bon shouted. "NO. She never told m—" Her mother cut her off.

"That's wonderful news, honey. Everyone here will be thrilled. We even had a bet that you two will hit it off someday ever since Emily moved to Manhattan." They what? Joshua and I exchanged looks, both confused as to why we were the subjects of our neighborhood's betting games.

"Kiss Em for me." She said. "See you both here!" And then she hung up. Well that was weird. I expected her to get all riled up and get mad or something. I am, after all, her daughter's best friend. I used to go into their house all the time and Bon would come in ours. To me, Joshua was this annoying older brother that always made fun of me. Didn't they see it that way too? I shook my head to bring myself back to reality. I looked at Joshua, his eyes were fixated on the road but he was waiting for the silence to break. So I did.

"Okay what were you saying about inventing a fake relationship just five minutes ago? What was it? So high school?" I mocked.

"Shut up, Emily Rose." He said. I was surprised he remembered my second name but I didn't make a big deal of it. He seemed to notice though, so he said "We need to strategize."

"Oh so now, it's a *we*?" I teased. "You were the one who name-dropped me. I was going to make my imaginary boyfriend disappear. So the way I see it, it's a 'you' problem, Santiago."

"So what are you gonna do? Deny that you're my girlfriend then invent another relationship where your boyfriend mysteriously disappears?" He said, and as he said it I already knew he was right. "Because that's sooo believable."

"Ugh. Fine. How do we do this? Do we lie to your mom and Rob? How about the others?" I asked. "How about my mom?" And then I gasped. "Omg, how about Bonbon?" I could already imagine Bonbon's face when I tell her that I've been lying to her about being in a relationship with her brother. She was not someone who liked to be out of the radar with these things.

"I suggest we lie to everyone in this country. We're only staying for a few days after all." He said. "So we put on a show, go back to New York, and get out of each other's hair."

"Sounds like a plan." I said, extending my hand.

"Mighty good one, thanks to me." He shook my hand in one firm handshake.

"We might want to rethink Bonbon though. There's no way for her to believe that I snagged you without telling her." I said. "She has to know."

He thought about this for a while, I'm not sure why he was taking his time. But after a few minutes, he said "Fine. Bonbon can know." He agreed. And as if the universe called on his sister, Bon's name appeared on the car screen.

"*Kuya*." She said, "I know Em is also there so can you two please explain!" She screeched.

Joshua tapped my arm and pointed to the screen, "You got this, lovebunch." He whispered. I scowled at him as he said, louder this time, "Emily will explain. Go ahead, Em." I chose my next words very carefully.

"Okay, Bon. Are there people there with you? Who can hear you?" I asked, making sure.

"No. I'm alone. Why?" She asked, genuine curiosity etched in her voice.

"Because it's not real. We're faking it." I sighed.

She gasped so loud I think she used up all her air. "You vile monsters. I knew it." She said. "WHY THOUGH?"

“Because Rob texted to tell me he hoped it wouldn’t be weird that he brought a date. So I said I too had a date. Then your mom was berating Joshua with girlfriend introductions so he said he also already had one. Really, we’re just helping each other out for a few days.” I said. “You cannot tell a single soul, Bon.”

“What rom-com rabbit hole did you two jump into?” Bonbon said. After a few moments of silence, she said. “But you know what? I like it. It would look good at my wedding if my best friend and my brother were with each other. Yes. I’m all for this mess.” She said, convincing herself that this was a good idea.

“Oh my god I can’t wait to see how you’d pull this off.” Bon said. “Bye, lovebirds. See you in a few.” She made kissing noises and hung up the phone.

I looked at Joshua. Then the map on the car screen. We were now only an hour away. “Okay, Joshua. How can we be a convincing couple?” I asked.

“How hard can it be? I’ll just hold your hand and whisper funny things to make you laugh every once in a while.” He said.

“Is it that easy? What funny things will you tell me? You gotta practice. I have to find you funny and not just annoyingly tolerable.” I said.

He glanced at me, a playful smirk on his lips. He said, “I’m pretty sure I can come up with impromptu observations. Throw in maybe a line or five about Rob’s alarmingly receding hairline.”

I snorted. “You are mean.” I said.

“And you are laughing. Challenge completed.” He smiled. “Lighten up, Em. Don’t overthink it. We’ll pull this off.”

I nodded. “True. Just remember, we need to be natural. No over-the-top PDA, but enough to convince everyone. And we need to have our story straight.”

“Agreed. We met in New York, started dating a few months ago. It’s still new, but we’re really into each other,” Joshua said, outlining the plan.

“And we’ve kept it quiet because we didn’t want to make a big deal out of it until we knew it was serious, with you being a thousand years older than me.” I added.

He rolled his eyes but he nodded. “Now sit back and admire your five-day-boyfriend’s charm, babe.” He winked.

I rolled my eyes at him and looked out the window. We sat in comfortable silence for the remainder of the ride, with just a few personal questions here and there, the reality of our situation sinking in. It was crazy, but we had the history (sort of) and the determination to make it work. For now, that should be enough.

CHAPTER EIGHT: Joshua

So, in an attempt to lay low and keep my distance, I have managed to get into a fake relationship with Emily. Yes, I absolutely deserve a smack to the head. Human hearts should have an off switch so they won’t interfere with our rational thinking. It’s like trying to navigate a minefield with a blindfold on, knowing full well that one wrong step could blow everything up.

I just completely despise my mother in that aspect. I don’t know why she’s so adamant about finding me a wife. It’s like she has this unwavering belief that everyone needs to be paired off to be happy. She parades potential matches in front of me like it’s some kind of twisted game show. She probably thinks she’s doing me a favor, but it feels more like she’s pushing me into a pit. It’s almost as if she’s forgotten how scarred I was after growing up

witnessing their marriage. The constant fighting, the shouting matches that seemed to echo through the walls at all hours of the night—it was like living in a war zone.

Their marriage was a battlefield, and I was the collateral damage. My father's drinking and my mother's workaholicism created a toxic environment that left me wary of any kind of romantic entanglement. I've tried to block out those memories, but they still linger in the corners of my mind, reminding me why I've sworn off anything resembling a committed relationship. My mother might have rewritten history in her head, convinced herself that everything turned out fine in the end because they eventually made peace. But for me, the scars run too deep.

I don't know what kind of spell she put on Bon to make her believe in love, but I won't fall for that shit. Bon, my ever-optimistic younger sister, somehow emerged from the same wreckage with her faith in love intact. She's the poster child for resilience, always seeing the silver lining in every cloud. It's like she's determined to prove that our parents' dysfunctional relationship didn't ruin us. She talks about love as if it's some magical cure-all, but I can't help but see it as a ticking time bomb.

And now, here I am, roped into this ridiculous charade with Emily, all because I couldn't come up with a better plan to get my mother off my back. It's ironic, really. In trying to avoid one trap, I've fallen headfirst into another. Emily's presence complicates things in ways I never anticipated. She's smart, beautiful, and way too good for this mess. The kiss we shared two weeks ago keeps replaying in my mind, making it impossible to keep things strictly business.

I glance at Emily. She was resting her head against the window, looking out at the passing landscape. I wonder what she's thinking about. "What's going on in your head, Em?" I asked, giving in to the temptation.

"I'm thinking of what will happen once we get there. People will judge me!" She said, turning to face me with a look of genuine terror.

"Why in the world would they judge you?" I asked, completely baffled.

"Because! You're... you!" She blurted out, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. She said it like it was a fact and that I should have understood immediately. But I had no idea, so I just looked at her in confusion. She continued, "You're Joshua Santiago. Neighborhood bad boy. Serial playboy. Ditches school, sneaks out at night, brings a different girl home every week. Even back then when you were a teenager and weren't... this," She made a circle in the air pointing to my body. "You always had a way with women. And trouble." She said. Damn. I guess I never really cared what the neighbors thought and just lived my casual-dating life out loud.

I opened my mouth to respond, but Emily wasn't done. "And I'm Emily. Valedictorian Emily, never-went-home-after-midnight Emily, kind and responsible Emily, only-had-one-serious-boyfriend Emily..." She trailed off and sighed. "And New York accountant Emily." She fell silent, staring at her hands. "I guess I'm not who they think I am after all."

"Are you done?" I asked gently. She looked at me and nodded in defeat. "It's an honor, Emily, to get a glimpse of your overthinking brain." I teased, trying to lighten the mood. "But I don't understand why you care so much about what these people think about you."

She sighed again, a long, weary exhale. "It's not just about what they think. It's about living up to this perfect image they have of me. I feel like it's the only thing I have going on for me." She said.

We were near the village now, and we were currently halted by a stop sign, so I took the opportunity to really look at her. Emily was fidgeting with her hands, as if she wanted to say more but was debating if she should. She tucked her hair behind her ear, her fingers trembling slightly, and I could see that she was looking down at her hands. The sun was setting, casting a red-orange glow that illuminated her face. In this light, her hair looked almost blonde, and her profile was bathed in a soft, golden hue. So beautiful. Damn it.

I suddenly got the urge to hurt everyone who made Emily feel like she had to conform. Our neighborhood is nosy, like most close communities are. But they don't have any right to make this girl doubt herself. Again, this is probably an older brother feeling an overwhelming need to protect her.

"Em," I said softly, "you are so much more than the image people have of you. You're intelligent, kind, and strong. I know because I've seen all those Emilys you mentioned but I also saw tantrum-throwing Emily and incredible-singer Emily and working-three-jobs Emily." And incredible-kisser Emily who I really want to meet again this very moment. Thank god I stopped myself from saying that out loud. "And honestly, I prefer them to the perfect one you mentioned."

The car behind me honked and I realized that the light had turned green and I was still staring at Em. I quickly continued to drive but I kept stealing glances at her.

She looked at me, her eyes reflecting the setting sun's glow, and a small smile formed on her lips. "You really mean that?" She asked. Please stop smiling like that, it's haunting me.

"Every word," I assured her.

Emily's smile grew a bit wider (damn her), and she took a deep breath. "Thanks." She said. And then she's back to her usual demeanor. "So what's our plan?"

"We show them how you've charmed the neighborhood bad boy." I said, not entirely sure if I'm joking. Emily swatted my arm playfully.

Our old neighborhood was in an upscale village with relatively large houses. And ours was visible now. Em said everyone was at our place since my mom cooked a feast for our arrival. As I parked in front of our home, I looked at Emily again, and said. "Let's just wing it and I'll take the lead. Again, don't overthink it, Em." As she looked at me I realized that Emily has another small mole on her chin, and a few freckles on her arms. I also realized that her hair had lighter highlights. And that her lips were plump and pink and they looked heavenly.

Emily must have noticed me staring because she cleared her throat and said, with the most sarcastic smile in the world, "All right, you ready, sugarplum?"

"As ready as you are, sweet pea." I said. And then she smiled one more time. And as I smiled back, I realized one more thing: I really, truly, am screwed.