

An Island Long Ago

Prologue: 1913

It was that time of day when the arsonistic sun rendered the inhabitants of the small island listless—all but two. Seated at his desk, rifling through the stack of papers piled neatly on top, Father Miguel peered over the edge of his wire-rimmed glasses at the intruders who wrestled their way over the threshold. The priest was not surprised as he had heard the loud wailing crackle through the heated stillness long before the pair entered the room. He knew them well.

“Here, you take her.” Flora shoved the struggling child, who fell at the priest’s feet. “She has been a curse on our family since she was born. She’s been nothing but bad luck. *Bad luck!*”

As he looked down at the child thrown at his feet, the priest’s throat tightened, remembering his promise to her mother eight years earlier. He reached to steady the struggling little girl, but Adella resisted his advance.

She crawled forward and wrapped her arms around her grandmother’s legs in one last attempt to plead her case. “Please, I promise to be good. Don’t send me away,” she cried, burying her head deep into the old woman’s skirt. “I’ll sweep, clean, and pick more mangoes than you can believe. I will be good. Please, please, please, don’t send me away.”

The old woman wrenched the child away as Adella struggled to hang on. “Get away from me. You dishonor the family. You should never have been born.” Muddling her native Ilonggo tongue with Spanish, she continued, “I should have listened to kasabihan ng mga matatanda. You are malas and the cause of our misfortune.”

Father Miguel frowned. Spanish colonization had brought about a new Roman Catholic majority in the Philippines. This new religion was the assimilation of local social customs into religious observances. Filipinos embraced Catholicism with little resistance because church rituals related to their everyday concerns about livelihood, prosperity, healing, and safety. Baptism with holy water, prayers to God for good fortune, and the “touch and feel” presence of statues of saints and sacred relics fed into their local beliefs. This new religion was tenuous, deeply rooted in local lore and superstition.

Invisible spirits were responsible for both good and bad events—poor harvests, illness, bad luck. Filipinos exploited these spirits to discourage bad behavior in their children. When Catholicism offered no explanation or solution for their dire circumstances, the natives believed they could appease the spirits and restore balance.

The old woman stared at her confessor. She had been a saint to put up with the bastard child of her only daughter this long. “Maybe I should not bother Father Miguel at all.” She jerked Adella to her feet and gave her the evil eye. “I will take you to Pugot Mamu instead,” she announced menacingly.

The little girl’s eyes filled with terror. Flora often threatened to send her young charge away to that dreaded place where all bad girls were banished. This ominous site was the home of Pugot Mamu, a grotesque being without a head whose unending hunger for children was

notorious. His neck served as a colossal, carnivorous void into which children were mercilessly fed.

Adella convulsed at the thought of being torn apart and devoured by the razor-edged, tooth-filled opening. The unknown terrified her. Anywhere would be better than *that* place.

The frightened child fought desperately for the comfort of the familiar—the pile of rags she slept on in the back room of her grandmother’s mansion, or the sari-sari where she spent most of her waking hours. The sari-sari was her refuge. And although Adella was treated as an outcast, she took solace in the familiar faces of the villagers who gathered there.

Located in the heart of a small village on the outskirts of the City of Iloilo on the island of Panay in the Philippine Islands, the sari-sari was a one-stop convenience shop filled with fresh-picked fruits and vegetables, herbs, cigarettes, cleaning supplies, and bolts of colorful cloth and threads. It was a gathering place for the locals. A single purchase from the cigarette jar was justification enough for the men to ooze their way outside the small shanty and occupy the entrance benches shaded from the blistering heat of the unrelenting sun. There, they would spend the time smoking their one purchase while the women thrashed out the latest local gossip.

After school, the children would organize into two groups to play agawan base. The more fortunate ones had enough coins to buy snacks and drinks to quench their thirst. Although Adella was not a part of this crowd, she was familiar with their faces and looked forward to sneaking a peek at their game. She would hurry through her chores of arranging guavas and mangoes in their crates, filling jars with cigarettes and candies, and sweeping the floor. When she heard the small groups gather, the friendless girl would slip to the outside wall and watch.

The sari-sari provided the perfect arena. The two large acacia trees framing the small shop were designated bases. Adella got caught up in the excitement as the members of one team left the base to run and try to catch members of the other team or steal the opponent’s base. They were unaware of their most ardent fan. As an outcast, the children viewed her with contempt and did not talk to her. Adella was okay with that. She had nothing to say.

The villagers went out of their way to avoid the little girl, ignoring the abuse. They did not want a confrontation with her grandmother. Flora knew all the gossip and was in a position to use it against anyone who might question her motives. She wasn’t respected as much as feared. At the sari-sari, she was quick to express her opinion and to mock anyone who might think otherwise. Her dismissal of her granddaughter was adopted by those who frequented the shop. The children were not blind to the treatment and thought it permission to treat Adella as the outcast she was. Flora did not discourage them.

At Father Miguel’s insistence, Adella attended the parochial school where he could check on her well-being. He was forever disappointed. The child was always dirty, barefoot, her hair tangled. She was quiet in a defiant sort of way, and she never looked anyone in the eyes. She had learned to ignore the whispers about her questionable parentage, knowing any reaction would land her in front of Sister Felicia, whose outbursts were epic compared to Flora’s.

After school, Adella would head for the sari-sari to complete her chores. The children taunted, and on occasion, threw stones at her. The poor girl was prone to retaliate in kind. Father

Miguel intervened when he could. It was a small island, and he knew her behavior fanned the flames of Flora's rage, which she often unloaded in the confessional. He felt helpless and overcome with guilt that he could not do more to protect Teresa's child.

When words weren't enough, Flora would force her unruly granddaughter into a small bamboo crate intended as a holding cage for fighting dogs. She then would hoist it up over the limb of a nearby acacia tree and leave her for hours without food or water. Thankful for the solitude, the small child would lay on her back looking at the limbs of the tree whose branches provided shade from the unpitying sun.

From up high, Adella squinted to see the white sanded beach and the clear blue water that lazily overflowed onto its shores and disappeared into the sand. On the other side of the Iloilo Strait, she could see the mountainous outline of Guimaras Island. It reminded her of a giant green-jade rock. Sometimes when the colors of the water and sky merged, she was not sure if the island jutted from the sea or hung from the sky.

At times, when the wind rocked the cage, Adella would close her eyes to the cooling sensation and fantasize herself immersed in the body of water just out of her reach. Her throat would get so parched that breathing was sometimes unbearable. She did not know love, and she dared not the thought of her parents. They were the cause of her misfortune. Her grandmother said so.

Iloilo's natural harbor provided safe anchorage for ships. From her perch, Adella saw dark-skinned Filipino laborers loading sugarcane and mangoes onto colossal cargo vessels. She saw crowds of paraws making their way across the strait, sails flapping, bringing day-trippers to Iloilo and taking others away. With the capacity to carry no more than two or three passengers at a time, the vessels made their way back and forth from the nearby islands four to five times a day.

Adella recognized the barefoot crews who walked across the double riggers to the water's edge and stepped in, pulling their small crafts onto the sandy beach so passengers could disembark without getting their feet wet. Held captive and in need of human contact, she had even given them names.

There was Carlos, who always wore the traditional salakot made of reeds to shield him from the sun. She never saw his face, which was shaded by the wide brim. Carlos couldn't do enough for his commuters, including carrying them to dry land to keep the damp sand from clinging to their shoes. For his chivalrous behavior, he was richly rewarded with tips.

Bogabo was a small boy, maybe ten or twelve years old. He shamelessly wore only a loincloth draped between his legs and tucked around the waist. His dark-brown body glistened as he effortlessly glided barefoot across the outriggers. When the small craft was aground, Adella often saw him sitting on one of the outriggers, snacking on lumpia. After he finished the treat, she could count on him licking his hands and fingers, as was his habit, and taking a swig from the canteen he had stowed in the bow of the boat.

Cabasa was the bully. He was always shouting to the others in his native Tagalog and waving his hands as if they might not hear him otherwise.

Sometimes, her gaze fell closer to home.

Once, she saw a tall blanco with sandy hair walk through the courtyard to the mansion's front door. She heard her grandmother and the stranger yelling, then the door slamming shut. The blanco staggered to a nearby tree and began wailing without thought as to who might witness his anguish. Adella had never seen a man cry before. Perhaps her grandmother had mashed his fingers when she slammed the door. She cringed. That had happened to her once.

A sudden burst of wind rocked her crate, and Adella quickly ducked out of sight of the stranger. Startled by the movement, the blanco glanced up. All he saw was an empty cage nudged by a whirl of fleeting wind. As he turned to leave, Adella saw him linger and pick two white blossoms from one of the many sampaguita bushes that graced the property.

From time to time, the hapless girl would catch a glimpse of Father Miguel disembarking from the ferry that transported passengers to and from Manila. He was a head taller than most, and if there was any doubt as to his identity, she got confirmation from the long black soutane and the black satchel he always carried. He had long ago traded his cappello for the more practical woven reed hats worn by the local villagers.

As the parish priest, Father Miguel's ties were with the archdiocese in Manila, and his duties took him to the bigger island of Luzon, where he would stay for several days before returning to Iloilo. He always returned in time for Sunday Mass. That was the one day Flora would make her granddaughter wash and change into a clean dress. She would make her way down the street with Adella trailing behind and deposit the girl at the back of the church while the matriarch made her way to the front pews reserved for the Ilustrados.

The sorrowful priest looked down at the innocent child groveling at her grandmother's feet. He thought of Teresa and how he had failed her. While Flora ranted on about Teresa not following the path to sisterhood, he planted his elbows on his desk, rested his forehead in his hand, and closed his eyes, begging forgiveness for his role in the scene unfolding before him.

My sweet Teresa, this is all my fault. My love for you, jealousy, and cowardliness for not intervening in this innocent child's care have brought us to this. I know now, but too late, that ours was a love born of friendship. Forgive me.

His inner confession was interrupted.

"Did you hear me?" Flora glared at the priest, who blinked from his trance. "I said I made a pact with God!"

Having had enough of the woman's pious, self-gratifying attitude, Father Miguel sprung from his chair and slammed his fists on his desk. "You made a pact with the devil!" He circled his desk and grabbed Adella, keeping her from running after Flora, who stormed out like a tsunami sucking in the ocean, leaving behind a clutterless shore and silence.

Convinced that the little girl would be better off without her grandmother, Father Miguel sighed heavily. He realized now it was hopeless. Flora would never forgive Teresa and would never grow to love her only grandchild. Just the opposite—Adella was a constant reminder of the daughter who had betrayed her.

In the morning, he would take the child with him to Manila. A friend of his at San Augustin Church ran an orphanage for girls. There, Adella would be safe from Flora's rantings.

Chapter 1

CHANG AND MARIA (1800s)

Flora was a *mestiza de sangley*, the daughter of a Chinese/Spanish union. As a Spanish colony, the citizens of the Philippine Islands were ranked by the Spanish caste system based on race and recorded on birth certificates. It also specified status and taxation ranks. *Sangleys* were required to pay four times the base tax, while *blancos*—those born in the Philippines of pure Spanish descent—paid no tax.

Under Spanish rule, the colony's trade and industry were conducted, for the most part, by the Chinese, while British merchants controlled exports. At the turn of the nineteenth century, Flora's grandfather, a Chinese immigrant, had amassed a small fortune as a merchant broker, a trade he passed on to his seven sons. The youngest, Chang, kept track of the increasing demand for sugar in Europe and was inclined to shift his family's investment from the lucrative trade industry to sugar production. When he was met with resistance from his brothers, he set out on his own with plans to take advantage of the world's insatiable appetite for the sweet life.

In 1834, Chang converted to Catholicism to escape the prejudice that existed towards his kind. Subsequently, he sought out and formed a relationship with a failing plantation owner. The farmer was of Spanish descent with a modest-sized tract of land and an eighteen-year-old daughter, Maria. For their mutual benefit, the farmer agreed to a marriage between Chang and his daughter. In return, her father would receive a yearly stipend for the use of the land and forgo the customary dowry. The Spanish colonial caste system was suspicious of Chinese denizens, at best, and restricted their right to land ownership and geographical mobility. For Chang, the union with a *blanco* would dilute the Chinese disposition, while money would grease any dubious transaction.

Chang spent the first years learning all he could from the farmer. His break came when American bankers opened a branch in Iloilo to give crop loans to sugar planters. Taking advantage of the opportunity, the ambitious entrepreneur expanded his plantation in the deep jungle of the western portion of Guimaras Island, where abundant labor could be turned into—or coerced into—doing fieldwork for low wages. Chang constructed several large buildings to house a labor force large enough to meet the high demand for sugar in the world market. As landlord, he required every productive family member residing in the hacienda to render service, regardless of age or gender.

Most native planters continued to export raw cane, depending on foreigners for the last step in the manufacturing process. Chang sought to purchase machinery from the continent in easy installments and became responsible for converting the cane to sugar as well. Through hard work and shrewd investments, Chang developed one of the island's largest and most profitable sugar haciendas, landing contracts with some of the more prominent exporters of the white gold. Across the Iloilo Strait at the port city, Iloilo, he built several large warehouses. When he wasn't at the hacienda, he could be found at the docks.

Chang spared no expense for the stately mansion he built on Iloilo. Inside, a wide mahogany staircase wound its way to the airy second floor, where the windows could be opened to let in light and air. Shutters were used to redirect the sunlight and to protect the glass from monsoon winds and rain. The doors and floors were made of narra, a dark hardwood chocked with well-defined knot clusters. Elegant lounge chairs graced the sitting area where hand-drawn friezes decorated the walls. It was here that Chang lavishly entertained bankers and other high-level officials. It was a symbiotic relationship. They counted on his generosity; he relied on them to look the other way, given any indiscretion.

When he wasn't entertaining, the sugar mogul spent most of his time at the hacienda across the strait. It provided both physical security and a stable, well-disciplined labor force capable of toiling in the tropical heat.

Chang had three healthy sons. The eldest was continuing higher education at a university in Spain. At the same time, the two younger teenagers remained at home under the tutelage of the local Jesuits. Maria was basically ignored. Theirs was a marriage of convenience. Maria bore his sons, and he provided the financing that secured her elite status among the locals.

Life was good—for Chang.

There was no room for love. Chang's *raison d'être* was money, the power it bought, and his progeny. Given that, it was no surprise that he met the news of Maria's pregnancy as a tribute to his prowess and a testament to his virility. Chang strutted around the hacienda. Just when he thought life couldn't get any better, his wife, now forty years of age, was pregnant with his fourth son.

Maria spent her time alone at their mansion in Iloilo and was tended to by a live-in housekeeper, with a midwife nearby. Now in her final months of pregnancy, the nearly menopausal woman struggled, but it was not all physical. She was irritable all the time and had no interest in the baby. There were times the hapless woman hoped it would be born dead. By the time she went into labor, Maria was drowning in a deep depression. When Chang got news from the midwife, he left the hacienda and sailed across the strait for Iloilo.

After twelve hours, Maria still had not delivered. Her struggle was long and arduous. During the next two hours, Chang walked in and out of the darkened room as if he were inspecting the progress of one of his hands. The unborn was malpositioned, and the midwife had to perform manual rotation to save both mother and child. The expectant father happened into the room as the baby was pulled from the birth canal.

It was a girl.

Chang left without a word and went back to the hacienda. He had no need for a daughter.

Flora was born in 1856 to an apathetic mother and a disappointed father.

Chang was driven economically, and any sexual relationship with his wife was to fulfill his need for sons to help him amass an empire. He had no physical need for sex. Maria had borne him three sons during the first years of their marriage. After her third son, she became withdrawn. Chang's lack of emotional support further added to her feelings of hopelessness as she sank deeper into a state of depression. Maria had no interest in sex and struggled with

experiencing any pleasure in life. As the years passed, he blamed her for not having more sons. After all, he had done his part in mounting her whenever the need arose without as much as a word. She was his property.

Now, she had betrayed him by bearing a daughter.

Chang had no further need for a wife or a girl child. He never again stepped foot in his mansion in Iloilo, and his wife never went back to the hacienda. Maria recovered physically, but mentally, she was broken. Gradually, the ailing woman began having panic attacks when leaving the house. Over time, she developed a severe case of agoraphobia which left her self-confined within her own four walls. She spent the rest of her life in the mansion in Iloilo in a state of disconnect, showing no interest in her little girl, who was wet-nursed by an indifferent Filipino woman who had, several months prior, given birth to her twelfth child.

Chapter 2

FLORA (1856-1870s)

Flora grew up under the care of a family of maids who patronized her but cared little for her well-being. She spent her early years between the hacienda and the mansion in Iloilo, where her mother was self-confined. There was no communication between her two parents. Flora's trips to the hacienda became less frequent as she grew into her teens. When she did visit, she came under the scrutiny of her goal-oriented father. Her brothers, who were clueless about how to behave toward a sister they hardly knew, ignored her.

Chang viewed his daughter's visits as an interruption in his daily routine and would pointedly ask the purpose of her stay.

"I just want to see if you would like a ride around the hacienda with me. I have a new horse," Flora said on one such visit, hoping to get his attention.

Looking up from over the shoulder of his youngest son, Chang was annoyed by the distraction. "Do you have nothing better to do than gallivanting around?"

Disappointed, she eyed him warily and bit her lower lip to distract herself from the emotional pain of feeling insignificant.

He noticed with indifference. "I spend all day making sure you have a sizable dowry so that someday you will marry well. Go." He dismissed her with a wave of his hand. As she left, Chang looked at his young son, who had lost his concentration and stopped writing. "Dowries! That is why you do not want daughters," he warned.

Chang's only daughter was virtually ignored, while her brothers were groomed to take over the family business. They were privately tutored at the hacienda. With the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, travel to Spain became quicker, easier, and more affordable. Like many wealthy Filipinos, Chang took advantage of it by seeking higher education for his sons in Spain. When they passed the test for advanced studies, his sons traveled to Madrid and Barcelona to further their education.

While her father and brothers made the trek to Europe on many occasions, Flora was destined never to step foot off the islands. Chang believed that education for a girl was indulgent and that higher learning would put Flora at risk as a dutiful wife. He had no plans for further enlightenment for his daughter outside the Jesuit-run school in Iloilo.

The town of Iloilo had two primary schools—one for boys and one for girls. Under Spanish colonial rule, education was accessible to the locals. Jesuit Father Francis tutored the girls. Spanish was compulsory, and he taught Latin with an emphasis on the teachings of the Catholic Church. For the girls, mathematics and science were neglected.

Every weekday morning, Flora, accompanied by a maid, would make her way to the one-room structure that shored up the north side of the town's cathedral.

Father Francis was there long before the girls. He would sit at his desk at the front of the classroom without looking up as his students assembled and took their seats. Only when the

church bell rang to signal the hour did his stern, tanned face, framed by white hair, tilt upwards, his steel-gray eyes fixed in such a way that every child thought he was looking directly at her. Those steely eyes were companions to the ears that heard their confessions week after week. Thus, the residents of his classroom started every morning with a feeling of guilt that could only be alleviated in the obligatory confessional booth where it all began.

As a missionary, Father Francis had come to the Philippines ready to conquer the world for Christ. Satan's kingdom had to be vanquished. By preaching the catechism, administering the sacraments, and introducing liturgical practices, he was convinced that he was presenting the absolute and total truth. The good Jesuit took his task of catechismal instruction to heart, but was clueless when it came to socialization—especially of the fairer sex. As a result, the girls were left unsupervised and vulnerable to peer pressure.

It didn't take Flora long to find that her family's wealth afforded her more than just comfort. Her sense of style, good looks, and social standing made it easy to manipulate the girls in her clique. They sneered at their less fortunate classmates and made fun of their simple clothes. Some of the disadvantaged girls attached themselves to Flora and were rewarded with little trinkets and sweet treats they were not privy to at home. As a way of exerting her control, Flora would single out a girl for ridicule and incite others in her group to act out aggressively. Smugly, she would sit back and watch the show.

A poor but promising student, Anna, was one of her favorite targets.

"Know it all," the bully would chastise Anna for raising her hand. "It doesn't matter what you know—you're still a peasant and will always wear those ugly bakya," she mocked, making fun of the girl's wooden clogs.

Another time, Flora put her foot out, and Anna tripped on her way to the blackboard. A chorus of giggles rose as the poor girl lost her balance and landed on the floor.

Father Francis looked up over his glasses. "Shhh," was all he said. The well-intentioned priest had no clue what the ruckus was about. All too often, he dismissed the bullying tactics used by the girls as normal social interactions.

Flora's viciousness was indiscriminate, and the girls in her clique adopted her behavior for fear of retaliation. She would randomly pick and choose members of her group and exclude others without real reason—only that they were not good enough to be included. This popularity game caused even the girls who knew better to go along with her power play for fear of being singled out and cast from the group.

Clueless, Father Francis never disciplined Flora for her behavior.

Money was readily available, more so after her mother died when her daughter was twelve. Flora used it to her advantage. She would threaten the staff with dismissal if they did not part with the money budgeted for her care and the mansion's upkeep. The unconscionable young woman donated large sums to the local parish, which assured her the front pew at Sunday Mass. Her donations were solely to enrich her status and not for any empathy she might have for the cause. The truth was, she despised the less fortunate. She was a product of the colonial caste

system. As the daughter of a wealthy hacienda planter, she held an elevated status which she readily manipulated without conscience to fulfill her need for attention.

All were subject to her manipulation—except for one person.

Agnes Reyes was the daughter of a wealthy textile merchant. Her father was Spanish and married to a Filipino woman. Although Flora's family had acquired more wealth, Agnes's birthright put her ahead in the caste system of which Flora was bitterly aware. It was not her social status that stoked the fire of hatred, but the close-knit family relationship that surrounded the girl. Sometimes, Agnes's father would take her to school on his way to the docks. Flora would see him dismount and lift his daughter from the saddle regally. He would bend down to talk to her and always hugged her before leaving. This display of affection, which Chang's daughter was denied, stirred feelings of resentment.

Flora was further incensed when Agnes did not show interest in joining her little social group. Instead, she was friendly to everyone and tended to champion those less fortunate. Agnes had everything Flora wanted—position, a doting father, and the respect of the villagers. Agnes was kind. Her heart was with the villagers of Iloilo. At school, the conscientious girl would share her lunch with the less fortunate and berate bullies for picking on the smaller children. Agnes had earned, in her own right, the respect of her classmates.

The young girl was not aware of Flora's animosity towards her and ignored any gossip that might have suggested such. Her indifference fueled Flora's hatred, which she took out on anyone remotely in Agnes's favor. Not wanting to warrant the group's wrath, the girls tended to avoid Agnes. Even this *laisse-faire* behavior did not seem to bother her perceived nemesis and gave Flora little satisfaction.

As they grew into their teens, Flora's attention shifted to the opposite sex. Her high cheekbones and almond-shaped eyes framed by long, dark lashes captivated the local boys. It didn't take her long to realize that there was another group she could more easily manipulate. None were above her reproach, and all were under her spell. When the boys were allowed to socialize with the girls, she would seek out couples and inject herself into the equation, instigating jealousy in one and fervor in the other.

Casually, she would ask, "Juan, didn't I see you walking with Patricia yesterday?" And, just as casually, she would walk away and watch the couple from a distance.

After school, the students would gather at the nearby sari-sari, one of the many owned by Flora's family. It was close to the water, where an occasional wind would whip through the island and crack the impenetrable tropical heat, creating a fleeting moment of corporal salvation. Flora and her flock would commandeer the space under the palm overhang of the small shop, where the salacious wind flirted with their skirts, shamelessly revealing their legs. Inevitably, the group gossip would turn to boys—more specifically, the Rodriguez brothers.

The Rodriguez family was one of the more prominent families in Iloilo. Ignacio Rodriguez had four coming-of-age sons he hoped would someday take over his lucrative textile and export business. His eldest, Ramon, had left for Spain to continue his studies at the university, while the two youngest ones, Paolo and Diego, were also expected to apply for the

university when the time was right. Ignacio's second son, Sergio, was not interested in his father's business or continuing education.

Sergio was simple-minded and happiest on the island, surrounded by his family. He had developed a close bond with Marcos, who managed the local sari-sari, which had become his second home. At first, the old man would ask him to lift a heavy box or reach for something from a shelf. As time passed, Sergio began looking forward to helping Marcos after school. The young man loved chatting with Marcos and the locals who hung around the small shop. When he was not busy, Sergio would think of Ramon. He missed his older brother. At the same time, he looked forward to recess, when his younger brothers showed up at the shop with a group of friends. He was included in their circle and enjoyed the camaraderie.

Like all the young boys, Sergio had an eye for Flora. After school, she would go down to the little store with her friends. They would stroll seductively past the group of virgin, wanderlust boys, aware of the stir they created. At the counter, Flora would bat her long lashes at Sergio. He liked her—she smelled like sampaguitas, a sweetly scented tropical flower also known as Philippine Jasmine.

“Hi, Flora,” he would greet her eagerly.

Flora would always engage him in conversation, glancing over to make sure his brothers were within earshot. Once in a while, they would join in. Sergio was a done deal—her target was the aloof Ramon, who was currently away at the university, or maybe one of the other brothers. Flora couldn't decide which of the brothers was the most handsome. She was set on elevating her status by someday marrying one of them. In the meantime, she was content with the attention they all showered on her. There was no competition in her mind—they were hers for the taking.

Chapter 3

GROWING TENSIONS (1872)

It was closing in on the festival of Our Lady of Candles. On February second, the city of Jaro sparkled as it readied for the feast of the patroness of Western Visayas, one of the three main island groups of the Philippines. The town was the largest of Iloilo's districts and served as the primary port for the Spanish. Many of the Spanish traders married Filipino natives and settled there. The majority of the families from the province of Iloilo came from Jaro.

The Spanish influence was reflected in the city's architecture that adorned the crowded streets and the surrounding courtyard mansions. The central plaza hosted the Jaro Cathedral with its attached Palasyo, home of the archbishop. In a small niche near the apex of the cathedral's central spire was the limestone statue of Our Lady of Candles.

According to locals, the statue appeared in 1587 when fishermen stumbled upon it abandoned in the Iloilo River. Initially, the weight of the figure proved too much for the men to bear. However, once the decision was made to transport the statue to Jaro, it mysteriously became lighter and more manageable. The sculpture portrayed Mary and the infant Jesus, both clutching candles in their right hands. Adorned with crowns, mother and son stood tall, with the child Jesus holding an orb and cross in His left hand. The natives firmly believed that the statue originated from a heavenly realm, and its presence served as a protective guardian for the islands and bestowed good fortune upon its people.

The festival was a thanksgiving for the good harvest and prosperity the patroness had showered on them for the past year. Filipinos from the whole country make the trek to Jaro. The archbishop kick-started the festivities with a High Mass in honor of the Patroness. After Mass, mania reigned!

The merriment began with the coronation of the fiesta queen from one of the prominent Filipino families; rose to a crescendo with a parade down the crowded main street; surfaced at a cockfight at the Iloilo Coliseum, where aficionados from all over the Philippines converged; and ebbed at night with a fireworks display competition.

In 1872, Flora was the fiesta queen.

As the organizers and VIPs paraded down the main street with the fiesta queen perched atop a float decorated with white and yellow flowers and supported by four men, Flora smiled and waved. She searched the crowd for Ramon. The newly-crowned queen had heard that the eldest Rodriguez brother had returned from Spain to visit with his family. She had flirted with him before he left and exacted a promise that he would return.

"You will come back?" Flora had enticed Ramon by closing in on his personal space. When she saw the look of desire creep across his face, she stepped back. "I'll wait for you—but not too long," she said teasingly, tossing her head to the side as her hair followed seductively across her face.

That was two years ago. Now, Flora panned the crowd in vain.

After the parade, she pushed past the swarm of well-wishers who wanted to greet the fiesta queen. In frenzy, she made her way through the throng of partygoers in search of her prey. She was sure he was there. When, at last, she caught sight of Ramon, her heart quickened as she rushed to his side. She didn't register that he was preoccupied.

"I've been looking all over for you," she interrupted excitedly. "Did you see the parade? I'm fiesta queen. Did you see me?" The infatuated girl tugged at his shirt sleeve to get his attention.

It took a second for him to recognize the intruder, but before he could answer, Flora noticed Agnes. "I thought you were at the university in Spain."

Agnes smiled and laced her arms around Ramon. "I was," she said happily. "We came back to announce our engagement."

Ramon smiled down at his wife-to-be. There was no mistaking his feelings toward her.

The fiesta queen's face hardened, her nostrils flared, and her eyes narrowed. She'd never liked Agnes, and seeing her happy next to Ramon did not sync with Flora's reality. *Engagement? No! He loves me. He promised me he would come back.* The jilted girl eyed her nemesis with contempt—she was not one to be overlooked. *How could he love her over me? She's dull, and I'm way prettier,* she reasoned.

The couple smiled, unaware of the animosity their announcement had triggered. Flora struggled to make herself breathe. She could not endure another second. At that moment, Sergio happened by.

"There you are." Flora grabbed him by the arm, catching Sergio off guard, and pulled him into the mob of merrymakers. She had to get away to make sense of what she had just heard.

Unaware of her motive and flattered that she had singled him out, Sergio took her hand, twirled her around, and began dancing in the street with wild abandon.

"Marry me!" Flora shouted over the chaos, loud enough for Ramon to hear.

Sergio's heart stopped. Never in his wildest dreams would he have dared hope that his feelings for her were reciprocated. Happily, he pulled her closer and wrapped his arms around her.

Flora cringed. Looking over his shoulder, she was disappointed to see Ramon and Agnes deep in earnest conversation. They had not witnessed the performance she had so shamelessly enacted at Sergio's expense.

Flora was unaware of the tension underlying the gala. Ramon and Agnes were discussing the incident that had occurred just two weeks prior when Spanish authorities charged three Filipino priests with leading a military mutiny at an arsenal in Cavite.

The couple was caught up in the ranks of the growing new social class known as the Ilustrados, often referred to as the "rich intelligentsia" because many were the children of wealthy landowners. Despite their wealth and education, the Ilustrados were still considered by the Spaniards to be inferior. As a result, the increasing number of educated Filipinos championed new ideas about government and society. They wanted reform—to be considered equal to their

Spanish counterparts. A small but growing number of Ilustrados wanted more. They advocated for revolution—independence from Spain altogether.

The Cavite mutiny was in response to the harsh rule of the newly appointed Spanish governor, who was determined to squash any hint of reformist or nationalistic movement in the Philippines. Ramon feared for his brother, Paolo, who had just finished law school and had set up practice in Manila, less than thirty miles from Cavite. He was further concerned that there was talk of execution by the Spanish authorities.

“I can’t believe it, Agnes. Execution?” Ramon ran his fingers through his dark hair in frustration.

Although sympathetic to the idea of reform, Ramon feared an execution would fuel the growing flames of nationalism by revolution. He was happy that he could share his thoughts with Agnes. She understood. Her year abroad in Spain had exposed her to the ideals of the American, French, and other revolutions, including Spanish liberalism. She was acutely aware that these new ideas threatened the existing social order, which the friars and colonial authorities found dangerous.

“Be careful, my love.” Agnes reached up and placed her forefinger over his lips. “These are dangerous times. Not everyone can be trusted.”

A week later, after a brief trial, the three priests were found guilty of complicity with the rebels at Cavite and were publicly executed. As Ramon had feared, their martyrdom sparked a wave of anti-Spanish sentiment and a call for independence among a somewhat less privileged class. The ensuing tension served as an excuse for renewed Spanish repression. Prominent Filipinos, priests, professionals, and businessmen were arrested on trumped-up charges and sentenced to prison, death, or exile.

Paolo, who was new in Manila, kept a low profile. His years of study in Madrid had exposed him to the Propaganda Movement, a literary campaign organized and carried on by Filipinos who had escaped exile and other reform-minded refugees. The pacifists fought aggressively for reform and rejected the more radical idea of an armed revolution. They wanted the Philippines to be acknowledged as a province of Spain and represented in the Spanish courts as equals.

Paolo championed reform and wanted to be involved. Any political change was most likely to originate in the bustling city of Manila, home to merchants, traders, and other profiteers from the lucrative galleon trade. The town was also a strategic point of spiritual and territorial conquest by the Spanish. After graduation, Paolo set up practice on the main island, where many like-minded Filipinos had relocated. His liberal ideas and his move to the Tagalog region concerned his father.

The Rodriguez family, born in the Philippines, was of Spanish descent, placing them at the top rung of the social ladder. As such, they acquired great wealth and influence. Unlike their European-educated children who wanted to be on the same level as the ruling Spaniards, Ignacio, like many heads of wealthy families in Iloilo, was inclined to maintaining status quo.

Occupied by her upcoming nuptials, Flora dismissed the political crack dividing the archipelago as insignificant. With Paolo in Manila and Diego in Madrid, Flora's dream of marrying one of the Rodriguez brothers rested with Sergio. Although she didn't love him, she needed to save face. Agnes had humiliated her by winning over Ramon, and she needed to send the message that she couldn't care less. Flora had convinced herself and Chang that her marriage into the Rodriguez family would be of political and economic value. Acutely aware of the limitations imposed on him by the caste system, Chang agreed to their marriage. In addition to a large sum of money, the manipulative woman persuaded her father to throw in the chain of sari-saris and the mansion on Iloilo as her dowry.

Chang no longer entertained at the mansion and was glad to rid himself of the shops that required more bookkeeping than they were worth. But, more than that, he was rid of the daughter whom he regarded as a money pit—he made out well. Ambitious and self-centered, Flora wanted more and was willing to bide her time. She wanted what her brothers had—recognition from their father.

She was acutely aware of Chang's annoyance with his sons. The eldest had married a Spanish woman he met at the University in Barcelona. They'd decided to make their home in Spain. Chang had disowned his second son, who had become addicted to smoking opium, which was especially popular among the Philippine Chinese community. The youngest son worked closely with his father. But with three daughters, he had yet to sire a male child.

With that in mind, Flora mapped out her future as Mrs. Rodriguez. She was confident Chang would favor her once she bore him grandsons. Where her brothers failed him, she would triumph. Her sons would go to the best universities and work with their grandfather on the hacienda.

The Catholic ceremony included Mass and lasted nearly an hour. Sergio couldn't believe his good fortune when his bride walked down the aisle towards him in a full-length, lavishly embroidered dress with oversized butterfly sleeves. She was beautiful—her thick, black hair was twisted around the back of her head and anchored on top by a large, decorative comb, over which rested an elaborately tatted white silk veil. As the father of the bride, Chang was obliged to participate in the wedding, but afterward, as friends and family gathered around the newlyweds, he slipped away. He did not attend the lavish reception his money had afforded.

Except for Flora, Chang's absence went unnoticed.

Sergio was in a celebratory mood as he held his bride close during their first dance as husband and wife while onlookers applauded the happy couple. After a seven-course meal, much wine, dance, and song, the crowd dwindled to his brothers and a few close friends when the newlyweds made their way up the stairs. Egged on by the hoopla of the small group, Sergio lifted and swung his prize off her feet and in through the open door of their honeymoon suite. Once out of sight, Flora wrenched from his grasp. Without a word, she hurried into the small dressing room and slammed the door.

Alone, Flora leaned against the wall for support. It took all her strength to choke back the tears of disappointment that her father had not attended the reception. She would show him! Suddenly in a manic state, the distraught woman all but tore off her wedding dress.

Sergio knew little of the ways of women and was not sure what to think of his bride's disappearance. After a long wait, Flora swung the door open. She stood naked.

"Just don't stand there!" she blurted impatiently as she helped him struggle out of his clothes. Flora was keen on getting pregnant.

Sergio's thoughts were not about any progeny as he willingly acquiesced to her demand. That night, their bodies burned hot—his with desire and hers, fire.

Flora's mindset on bearing sons became an obsession, only to be heightened when she learned that Agnes was with child. She was determined, engaging Sergio every night. It was loveless sex, and Sergio found himself confiding in his old friend Marcus at the sari-sari.

Marcus had worked at the small shop for a long time and knew the children who congregated there. He watched as they grew and was aware of Flora's manipulative ways. He was cautious—Sergio was now his boss. "Give her time. She'll come around once she is with child," was all the advice Marcus could offer the bewildered young man.

A year after their union, Agnes and Ramon announced the birth of their son. Five months later, Flora gave birth. On hearing the cries of her newborn, she smiled. A boy, she thought, her prize after so long.

"It's a girl!" Sergio announced with joy.

Flora jolted up and looked over at the naked baby, then fell back in disbelief.

The midwife signaled to the new father to leave the room. "She needs time."

Alone in the darkened room, Flora shoved her head into her pillow and screamed. There were no tears. "No! No! No!" she wailed repeatedly, as if she said it loud and long enough, it would be so. In frenzy, she began punching at the pillow. Having spent her last drop of adrenaline and weakened by childbirth, the disheartened woman collapsed into a state of unconsciousness.

Sometime later, Flora awoke to find Sergio sitting at her bedside, arms wrapped around their newborn daughter. "What shall we name her?" he asked of his wife.

Flora shifted her weight, facing away from Sergio. "Go away," she moaned.

He frowned and put his hand on her shoulder. "Our daughter is beautiful. We will have sons," he promised.

Why not a son? she thought. *I attend Mass every Sunday, participate in all the church-sponsored festivals, and donate large sums of money to locally sponsored charities.* Suddenly, in an epiphany, it came to her.

"Of course!" she whispered half to herself as she bolted upright. *Her daughter would be her gift to God.* She promised God that she would groom her child for the cloistered life of a nun. And, in return, He would bless her with many sons.

In a manic state, Flora lifted from her depression. In her mind, a bargain was struck! “Teresa,” she whispered. Her daughter would be worthy of her namesake, a Spanish noblewoman canonized by Pope Gregory.

“Her name is Teresa.”

Chapter 4

TERESA AND CARLOS (late 1800s)

Less than twelve months after Teresa was born, Flora gave birth to a son, then two more sons in the next three years. She made good on her promise. Flora paraded her daughter and sons to Mass every Sunday and holy day of obligation. She arranged for extra catechismal studies for Teresa, preparing her daughter for a life of prayer. The priests and nuns commended her. Her daughter was a saintly child, and her devotion to the church was notable. Teresa did as was expected, believing that her calling as a nun was ordained by God, Himself.

Ramon and Agnes maintained a close relationship with Sergio and his children. It was a small town, and they lived in close proximity. Although Agnes's home was open to all, Flora remained aloof and rarely visited. The children, however, spent much of their time together after school. The cousins were close-knit. They were always making plans and sealing them with their special way of piling hands on top of one another, then shouting, "All for one and one for all." They called themselves "The Six Musketeers" from their favorite story, *The Three Musketeers*.

"Let's make a promise to go together and study at the university in Madrid," said Ernesto, the oldest of Flora's sons, one lazy afternoon as they walked home from school. He stopped and held out his hand, palm down.

"Promise," responded his brothers, Andrew and Virgilio. They piled their hands on top of Ernesto's, followed by their cousins, Lorenzo and Jose.

Teresa laid her hand on top. "Me too."

They looked at her in disbelief. "Girls don't go to the university; besides, you are going to be a nun."

For the first time, Teresa felt left out. It didn't seem fair. Not wanting them to see her cry, she ran towards the creek, plopped down, and wailed out loud.

"This is my creek, you know."

Teresa suddenly quit wailing, looked up at the dark-skinned, barefoot boy, and frowned. He was about her age, fourteen or fifteen years old, taller than most Filipinos, and a bit too cocky for the troubled girl. Carlos had seen her before at school during recess but never had reason to talk with her.

"Leave me alone." Teresa had run along a dirt road and the dust left her face streaked with tears.

"Can't," he said. "This is my creek."

"What makes you say that?" she asked, bothered and curious at the same time.

"Because I live right there," he replied, pointing to a modest, adobe-built house with a clay tile roof nestled among brightly colored blooms of purples, pinks, and yellows. He walked towards the house. "Come on. You might as well, since you came this far." He beckoned.

She followed, both curious and unsure. *All this is perhaps folly—perhaps insanity!*

He led her to the house only to be met at the door by a petite, dark-skinned Filipino woman. Her black hair was hidden beneath the brightly covered scarf she had wrapped around her head, and her bare feet peeked out from under her tattered skirt.

The strange boy glanced back at Teresa's tear-streaked face. "My mama doesn't allow tears, so wipe your eyes." He grabbed a small towel drying on the line outside the house and handed it to her.

His mother smiled at the two. "You're late," she said to her son. "I have made you some turon, and they are still warm. You can share them with your...friend?" she asked, turning her attention to the little girl for confirmation.

"My name is Teresa."

"Carlos, get some water for Teresa."

While Carlos went to fetch water from the nearby well, his mother led the girl into her house. Once she was seated at the table, the woman turned and opened the cupboard door. "My name is Anna. I've seen you at church with your family. I used to go to school with your mother." She turned back with two plates in her hand. "I'm sure she doesn't even remember me," the woman reminisced. "She was beautiful, your mother."

Anna smiled at her visitor just as Carlos returned with cool water from the well.

Teresa did not refuse the water or the sweet, crunchy treat that his mother had made. They ate in silence. The young girl was baffled as she looked around at the many bottles and cans of all different sizes. Various plants and herbs were growing in pots, and there were baskets of sorted and dried flowers, leaves, and seeds.

Anna caught Teresa's puzzled look. "I'm a healer," the woman explained. "These are medicinal flowers and herbs that grow around here. Carlos helps me find them. Some, I grow."

"Those are peppers," Teresa recognized, pointing to a potted plant with slim, elongated red pods.

"Cayenne pepper, to be exact," Anna explained. "I grind them into a powder and mix it with peppermint oil. It's good for rubbing on sore, achy joints to relieve pain. There are other uses for it too." Carlos's mother pointed out the countless dried leaves and flowers. She explained their many uses, like reducing fever and pain, easing stomach ailments, and restoring energy.

Teresa was a captive audience, and Anna took notice.

"Would you like to go with Carlos and me to look for some of these plants?"

Teresa nodded, wide-eyed with anticipation. It sounded like an adventure.

Realizing the sun was nearing the horizon, Anna turned to her son. "It's getting late. Walk Teresa home and come right back."

The boy jumped to his feet and beckoned to his new friend with a nod. He was eager that she returned home before her parents started to worry, for fear they might forbid her from visiting again.

On their way to Teresa's house, Carlos asked, "What were you crying about?"

The girl had forgotten about her despair. After a brief moment, the feeling of being brushed aside returned. “My brothers and cousins are going to study at the university in Madrid. I can’t go because I’m a girl,” she lamented. “That just doesn’t seem fair.”

“My mama says don’t expect fair and you won’t ever be disappointed,” Carlos replied. It worked for him.

Teresa shrugged. She wanted fair.

Carlos walked her to the courtyard of the stately mansion where she lived. It was a sharp contrast from the little adobe house she had just left.

“I’ll see you at school tomorrow.” With that being said, Carlos turned and left. Teresa watched until he disappeared from sight.

The next day at school, during recess, the boys broke into two groups to play soccer. Teresa’s brothers and cousins loved the sport and excelled at it. As expected, two of them were elected captains. They were obliged to build their opposing teams from the group of boys vying for a coveted position and hoping to get the attention of one of the popular Rodriguez cousins.

Carlos didn’t have a father or brothers to challenge him, so he never had any use for sports. Instead, he spent his recess time indoors reading. On this particular day, he went outdoors to meet up with his newfound friend.

Teresa saw him first and waved. “I’m on my way to confession. Are you going to play soccer?”

“No. I’m going to find a shady spot and read. I’m in the middle of this book.” He held up *The Three Musketeers*.

“Oh, that’s my favorite story. My aunt used to read it to us.” She headed towards the chapel as they chatted. “I have to go now.” Teresa shivered as she disappeared into the shadows of the looming doorway.

In the darkened, tight space of the confessional box, to fulfill the obligation to confess her sins, she was prone to exaggerating any misdeed or thinking that might in some way be offensive to God. For her efforts, she was given the minimal penance of reciting one Our Father and three Hail Marys.

Meanwhile, Carlos found a shady spot outside, read until recess was over, then caught up with Teresa walking back towards the schoolhouse. Teresa spent her time in catechismal studies; he spent his time reading. Neither had anyone they could really talk to.

“I’m going with my mama tomorrow to pick some banaba leaves. Do you want to come?” he asked.

“I have to ask Papa.” She hesitated. No one had ever taken an interest in her, and she wanted to make this happen. “Yes. Tomorrow morning, I will meet you at the creek.”

Carlos stood there as his new friend hurried away, not sure if she had to ask her father’s permission or if she, in fact, had just said yes, she would be there.

The next day was Saturday, when Sergio and his brood would spend the afternoon with his brother’s family. On this day, he gave permission for Teresa to visit with her new friend and his mother. The boys were young teenagers and had lost interest in sharing their conversations

with a girl. His daughter needed a distraction from her studies, and he was happy to see that she had found it. He knew Anna from church and was satisfied that Teresa would be well-chaperoned.

The next afternoon when the family set out to visit with Lorenzo and Agnes, Teresa broke from the pack and followed the creek to Anna's front door. Carlos was waiting. "You're going to need this," he said as he handed her an empty basket. Anna joined them and the trio ventured out along the creek path into the dense forest.

"These woods are full of banaba trees. See these little purple and pink flowers?" Anna held them in her hands, then pointed to several stumps. "Those trees were cut for furniture making." She knelt down and began digging up the roots of the young growth surrounding the stumps. "These roots are good for stomach ailments. I'll dig these while you and Carlos gather the leaves. I can use them to make a tea that is good for honey urine."

Teresa laughed at the name. "What's honey urine?"

Anna explained that when someone came to her complaining of excessive thirst and urination, she would test by setting out a sample of the urine. If ants came to it, then she would give them banaba leaves to steep as tea and recommend that they quit using white sugar in their diet.

As the years passed, Teresa began spending more of her spare time with Anna and Carlos. Her brother and cousins were spending more time playing soccer and reveling in the group of female admirers who clapped and cheered at their exploits on the field—and off.

While the now Five Musketeers were driven by their developing hormones, Teresa was becoming more independent. From Anna, she learned where to find certain plants, which to use for healing, and which were poisonous. She learned to dry and grind leaves into powder and how to extract essential oils from flowers.

At home, overshadowed by her brothers, Teresa felt unseen and unheard. Carlos listened to her, laughed with her—not at her. She could poke fun at him, and he would pay her back in kind. Teresa loved her brothers and cousins, but was a girl among five boys. There were no expectations with Anna and Carlos, who did not dismiss her views because she was a girl.

Frequently, the trio would play a game to see who could spot and identify the most birds from a book Anna kept at the house. The wetlands were loaded with all species and colors.

"You can learn a lot about life from watching birds," Anna told them. "Notice that they are always aware of their surroundings," she pointed out. "When something is not right, they fly away. They sing to each other. They perch when they need to rest. When they leave, they let go of the branch they are sitting on and don't look back. See that kingfisher?" Anna pointed to a small, yellow-bellied, gray-blue bird with a bright orange beak. "He preens to keep his feathers in the best flying position. Birds are always prepared for anything." She pinched Teresa's cheek and smiled. "Life is full of surprises."

The young girl appreciated Anna's anecdotes and Carlos's sense of humor. They were loud and straightforward. In contrast, when her uncles Paolo and Diego visited, they talked in undertones with their brothers. She always wondered what kind of secrets they were hiding.

It was a time of political unrest. Spanish colonialism considered Filipinos as second-class citizens. A movement calling for reform within the government, giving Filipinos equal status to their counterpart Spanish citizens, was gaining a foothold. The anti-Spanish sentiment had gained ground in 1887 with the publication of José Rizal's novel, *Touch Me Not*, which exposed to the world the injustices imposed on Filipinos under the Spanish colonial regime. Diego had smuggled a copy into Iloilo and gave it to Ramon.

"I have heard him speak, and I have to tell you that as one of the leaders of the growing Propaganda Movement in Madrid, Rizal will be a major force in bringing about reform in our country," Diego explained with excitement.

Ramon and Agnes secretly sympathized with the growing reform movement. Still, they were hesitant to jeopardize their financial and social standing in the community. Many wealthy landowners in Iloilo, like Ramon, benefited from the current economic and political state of affairs. Talk of reform, or the more radical notion of revolution, was dangerous. They lived at a time when many Filipinos were arrested for possible rebellion and deported to Spanish penal colonies. Given that, they were careful to navigate within the boundaries of the current social climate.

At family gatherings, the adults would break away from the children. Their discussions would invariably lead to the political environment in which they found themselves. Paolo would visit often to join them; it was a three-hour ferry ride from the main island. After graduation, Diego remained in Spain at the university as a professor of law. His visits were less frequent.

Teresa was a young teenager now. Her cousins' interests were soccer and girls. They were not interested in having her tag along. Besides, it would be unseemly for her to run around with a pack of teenage boys. Some of their friends inquired about Teresa, but her brothers would let them know she was off-limits. "Leave it! She's planning on becoming a nun."

Indeed, most of Teresa's time was spent preparing herself for the convent—a life her mother had committed her to. When she wasn't studying, her free time was spent with Anna and Carlos.

On those hot days when the menacing sun scorched everything in its path, she and Carlos would take off their shoes and walk through the cool creek water. On one such day, he ventured into a deep eddy and immersed himself. Teresa looked on as he splashed around in the swirling pool.

"Jump in!"

The air was stifling hot, and it didn't take much coaxing to lure her into the pool. They lingered, enjoying the break from the sweltering sun.

Teresa was the first to exit. Carlos fell silent and watched as she wrung the water from her clothes and pressed it from her long, black hair.

Satisfied that she would dry off quickly in the heat, Teresa headed for home. "I've got to go!" she yelled back at her friend, who made no attempt to get out of the water. "I'll see you at school tomorrow."

Seeing her walk away, Carlos snapped from his trance and jumped to the bank. “Wait! Wait!” he begged. Dripping with water, he scampered to her side and grabbed her hand. “Teresa...” The enamored boy took a deep breath and held it.

“What’s the matter?” Teresa had never seen him look so serious. “Are you okay?”

“I was just wondering...” He hesitated. “Do you think we could be... er, friends?”

Teresa laughed. “Of course. We are now, silly. You’re my best friend.”

“No! I mean, will you be my *girlfriend*?” he clarified.

“Carlos, I told you I was going to be a nun. They don’t have boyfriends.” She scoffed at the ridiculous notion.

Not to be disappointed, Carlos thought for a moment. “Okay,” he mused. “Listen. If you go into the convent, then I will become a priest. In that way, we will always be the best of friends.”

Teresa stopped and turned towards her companion. “I like that. And my first confession with you would be that I let you talk me into taking a dip in the cool water, which made me late for catechism!” She laughed.

Carlos watched as she turned and skipped away, leaving him behind. Right there and then, his fate was sealed along with that of his friend.

“It’s a promise,” he half-whispered to himself as Teresa hurried out of sight.

Chapter 5

TERESA'S BETRAYAL (1891)

It was a time of prosperity for the port city of Iloilo. Except for a handful, the city's residents were ignorant of the mounting political disconnect between the Spanish government and the local citizens. Ironically, most of the noise came from the crowded city of Manila—the control center of government and church. As a result, the people of Western Visayas dismissed the tension as a Tagalog problem rather than an Ilonggo one.

Ramon's eldest son, Lorenzo, and his nephew, Ernesto, were studying abroad. Carlos was at the university in Barcelona studying theology. Ramon's younger son, Jose, and Flora's two younger boys, Andrew and Virgilio, were looking forward to joining them in another year or two. Teresa, now seventeen, remained faithful to the life her mother had envisioned and was a novice at the nearby convent.

The Franciscan order was not cloistered. Theirs was a life dedicated to God through ministering to the people of the community. Teresa spent her days tending to the sick and poor. She used her knowledge of medicinal herbs to relieve pain and suffering. At times, she would consult with Anna for remedies. The young novice became engrossed in the study of Western medicine and began to feel strongly about becoming a doctor. She was a fan of Louis Pasteur and Joseph Lister. She insisted on boiling water, washing hands, and maintaining a clean environment. Her success with the integration of the more advanced teachings of the West with local medicinal herbs did not go unnoticed. She soon became known as a healer, and the locals sought her out.

At a time when women were expected to take on roles as nurses and midwives, Teresa was reluctant to discuss her desire to become a doctor. She was aware that prejudice against her sex was a barrier to her pursuing a career in medicine, but she also had to face her mother, who had pushed her towards taking her vows since birth. Teresa was hesitant—she had doubts that she could fight the war on two fronts.

Only to Mother Cecilia did she express her desire.

When it came time to take her vows of chastity, celibacy, and obedience to the Catholic Church, Teresa expressed her reservations to her confidante. The wise nun had spent many hours counseling the novice and was not surprised. She did not question the girl's devotion to the church and its teachings, but agreed that God was calling her in another direction. "My child, follow your heart," Mother Cecelia counseled Teresa as she left the convent gates for the last time.

Teresa dreaded telling her mother that she would not be taking her vows.

Flora was headed to post a letter to her sons, who had recently enrolled at the university in Spain. She was surprised and confused to see her daughter come through the door. Teresa was, likewise, startled. She was deep in thought when she came close to bumping into her mother.

Unable to fathom her visit, Flora cried out, “Teresa! What are you doing here, and why are you dressed like that?”

Teresa was not in the traditional novice habit and veil. There was no sugarcoating what she had to say. “Mama, I can’t take my vows,” the anxious woman blurted out. “I want to go to the university and study medicine.”

A feeling of doom enveloped Flora. She had made a pact with God. “You ungrateful girl!” Flora lashed out, grabbing her daughter by the arms and shaking her. “You will stay and take your vows as promised!”

“But that was *your* promise, Mama, not mine!” Teresa tore from her mother and ran from the house in tears.

Mother Cecelia interceded and convinced Flora that Teresa’s pursuit of the study of medicine *was* a godly cause. She placated her by promising that, later, should she be so inclined, Teresa could still take her vows.

Up to this point, everything Flora had envisioned had come to pass. Disappointed in his own sons, Chang had readily acknowledged his grandsons. He involved them in his affairs once they could read and perform basic mathematics. Their mother accompanied them to the hacienda—a reminder to Chang that they were *her* sons. Ernesto had just returned from the University of Madrid, cutting his education short to help his aging grandfather. He spent most of his time at the hacienda working side by side with Chang, now in his sixties. The old man had developed a fondness for his grandson, who was currently managing most of his affairs.

Flora’s two younger sons and their two cousins made it to the University of Madrid, fulfilling the pact they had made years ago when they were children. Teresa enlisted their support to convince their mother that her best education would be at the same university. They explained in a letter to Flora that it was the first university in the world to grant doctorate degrees to female students and that she would live in a nearby convent under the scrutiny of the nuns. At the university, she would get her initial education in medicine and then intern at one of the local hospitals. They promised to chaperone her during her stay.

Flora reluctantly consented. It was hard for her to say no to her sons. They were ecstatic when Teresa wrote that she had passed the exam and would be joining them at the University of Madrid. She wasted no time in booking passage without the help of her mother. Flora had no intention of encouraging her daughter, who had dared to defy her.

It was Mother Cecelia who accompanied Teresa to the port. She had arranged for her prodigy to stay close to the university at a convent. “Give this letter to the Mother Superior when you arrive. I know her. She will be able to help you navigate the prejudices you are sure to encounter.” She gave Teresa a hug and slipped the letter into her carrying bag. “You can trust her,” Mother Cecelia assured the young girl as she turned and shuffled away. Teresa frowned as she watched a light breeze wrap its way around the nun’s black habit and veil, revealing an alarmingly fragile figure.

The young adventurer was now alone at the helm of a journey into uncharted waters. It was her journey. Her choice. Her life. She took a deep breath and navigated her way up the

plank, jibing and tacking to avoid the stream of passengers, crew members, and visitors fighting for the right of way. She never looked back.

Aboard the steamer, Teresa occupied one of several suites of rooms on the upper deck reserved for first-class cabin passengers. In the dining room, food was plentiful, and she had access to the smoking room, library, and saloon. Her favorite pastime was promenading the deck, whetted by the ocean air and the never-ending, bottomless sea.

She was delighted when the steamer entered the Suez Canal. It took about forty hours to navigate the approximately 110 miles from the Red Sea entrance to the Mediterranean Sea exit. There were no locks since the Mediterranean Sea and the Red Sea's Gulf of Suez had approximately the same water level. However, the canal was only 300 feet wide and did not permit two-way traffic. Passing bays were built every five to six miles to allow ships to pass each other. Teresa loved when they slipped into one of the bays. She would watch the other boat pass, wondering what goods were being transported and reflecting on their importance. The passing bays, themselves, held little interest, as the banks were stacked high with stone and cement cladding and steel piling for protection against the ever-threatening erosion.

To her, the canal looked more like a wide river. During the day, Teresa scoured the landscape. There was the Sinai Desert with its ever-shifting sand dunes. Now and then, she would catch a glimpse of one of the deserted company towns established along the route, abandoned when Egypt, under pressure from the British, banned the use of unpaid *corvée* labor for the upkeep of roads, bridges, and dikes. Her eyes traced the never-ending railroad tracks along the canal route to accommodate the large dredging and excavation machines that had replaced *corvée* labor to finish the canal.

After the two-week voyage, Teresa disembarked from the ship. She was overpowered by embraces from her two brothers and cousins. They fought for her attention, talking over each other in their excitement. Only when they settled in the train for Madrid did they turn the conversation over to Teresa. It was a happy reunion.

"How is Mama?" her youngest brother, Virgilio, inquired. "I know this wasn't easy for her—or you, for that matter."

Teresa was overcome with guilt at the thought of her mother. "Do you think it was selfish of me?"

There was a concerted, "No!"

When their train pulled into the newly renovated Atocha railway station in Madrid, Teresa was wide-eyed at the expanse of the structure. She had never seen such a display of wrought iron, steel, and glass. The building's design incorporated a style predominantly of wrought iron. The platforms were partly covered by a steel and glass roof in the form of an inverted hull shored up by two brick buildings on either side.

Outside the train station, they boarded a horse-drawn carriage, which made its way through the winding asphalted streets of Madrid, crisscrossed with rails to accommodate the city's trolleys. Overhead, both electric and trolley wires were strung along utility poles lining the streets, fighting for their piece of sky.

Teresa was dropped off at the convent to unpack and catch up on some much-needed sleep. She was warmly greeted by the nuns, who showed her to her room with a single bed and bureau for her clothes. The stark white walls were bare except for a single crucifix above the head of the bed. After unpacking, the weary traveler laid down for a brief nap and awoke just in time to join the sisters for evening prayers.

As promised, the now Four Musketeers returned the following day to escort Teresa to the university, where she could get her class assignments. Afterward, the four men took her to see the sights of Spain's capital and the largest city it had to offer. With its winding streets, Madrid was a city of contrasts, preserving its old, overcrowded center, which was surrounded by the more recently constructed palaces, convents, churches, and public buildings. Alive with students from all over the world, the city supported an around-the-clock lifestyle encouraged by its late-night restaurants and beer houses. People came to taste famous foods like tapas, paella, and octopus.

Teresa thrived in this new metropolis with its liberal and bourgeois character, open to influences from the rest of Europe and filled with theaters, cafés, and newspapers.

The four men took turns as her escort. The newcomer's daily routine was to go from the convent to the university, where Teresa would spend most of her day. On some afternoons, she would join her escort in lectures and discussions hosted by members of the Propaganda Movement. Here, Rizal was influential in exposing the state of colonialism in the Philippines. His books encouraged debates over reform within the current Spanish rule versus nationalism by revolution. A passion for reform and revolution blossomed side by side in this liberal atmosphere.

Teresa came to understand that the reluctance she experienced among native Filipinos to trust medical assistance from their Spanish colonizers could be traced to the disparity of the existing caste system. She knew that as a doctor of Western medicine, she would have to confront the entrenched prejudices of both the colonizers and native Filipinos in order to overcome these barriers.

Chapter 6

CHALLENGES AND CONFLICTS (1892-1897)

Rizal was quite approachable and spent many hours discussing with the Rodriguez cousins the state of affairs in the Philippines and the ongoing oppression and harsh treatment of the laboring class. A doctor himself, Rizal encouraged Teresa, on her return home, to create an environment where the native Filipinos felt heard, valued, and empowered in their own healthcare decisions.

As a vocal reformist, Rizal was heavily scrutinized by Spanish colonial rule. Nevertheless, he chose to return to the Philippines in 1892, feeling he needed to be in the country to effect change. On arrival, he pledged loyalty to Spain while advocating for nonviolent reform by establishing La Liga Filipina, an organization Paolo was quick to endorse.

Officials, however, were not pleased.

“Agnes, it says here that Rizal was exiled. That doesn’t seem real.”

Ramon was torn. Although he and Agnes sympathized with their children and secretly advocated for reform to be recognized as equals to their Spanish counterparts, they couldn’t dismiss the fact that the family prospered under the current Spanish rule.

Looking over her husband’s shoulder, Agnes perused the paper Paolo had brought with him from Manila. She frowned. The news was troubling. As with the Cavite mutiny, the Spanish authorities had overreacted and arrested Rizal. After a brief trial alleging that officers had found “subversive leaflets” in his luggage, the La Liga Filipina organizer had been deported to an island in the south.

The backlash would mean more scrutiny from Spanish authorities, fueling the more radical idea of an armed revolution over Rizal’s hope for nonviolent reform.

Without Rizal at the helm and in exile, La Liga quickly folded, making way for a secret society called Katipunan. The goal of its members was, as Agnes had feared, far more radical— independence from Spain through an armed revolution. Unbeknownst to him, Rizal was made honorary president to invoke his followers’ sympathies.

Using Rizal’s popularity as a cry for war, unity, and liberty, the Katipunan, led by Andrés Bonifacio obtained an overwhelming number of members and attracted the lower classes.

Over the next four years, rumors of the secret society circulated, but they were never substantiated.

“Did you hear about the Katipunan?” Virgilio was out of breath when he came to escort his sister from the university.

Teresa shook her head. She had heard the rumors about a secret organization in Manila, but now it was confirmed. The discovery of a locker containing a dagger, the rules of the society,

and other corroborating documents had led to the arrest of some 500 prominent men on charges of illegal association and treason.

Andrew and Jose soon joined Teresa and Virgilio. The streets of Madrid were abuzz with the news as more students gathered. The discovery was a significant turning point. The arrests resulted in the recruitment of many conservative Filipinos who favored reform to the side of nationalism via revolution.

Encouraged by Bonifacio to revolt, membership of the Katipunan grew.

In Manila, Paolo was alarmed at the rate by which the revolution took hold. As a pacifist, he continued to advocate for change without bloodshed. He kept Ramon and Agnes informed on the political scenario in the Tagalog region. Although the revolution had yet to make its way to Iloilo, they knew it was only a matter of time before the city would be put to the test.

Their world had grown smaller since their days at the university. Ramon and Agnes's energies were tasked with raising a family and protecting their financial interests. In their eyes, Bonifacio was a troublemaker. Their hero, Rizal, who'd refused to endorse an armed revolution, had spent four years in exile, where he practiced medicine. At the time the Katipunan was discovered, Rizal, to prove his loyalty to Spain, was on his way to Cuba to serve as a doctor in the Spanish army.

A few weeks after the society's discovery on August 30, 1896, Bonifacio, along with a troop of Katipuneros, attacked a powder depot near the capital city of Manila. They were forced to retreat when Spanish reinforcements arrived, outnumbering them and equipped with superior weapons. As a lesson, fifty-seven of the captured revolutionaries were summarily tried and executed.

News of the battle and ensuing executions reverberated throughout the Philippines, gaining support for the revolution as the Katipuneros continued their fight on the other islands of the archipelago, liberating towns one by one.

The Ilonggos reacted quickly to the violence in the Tagalog region. The officials of Iloilo, Jaro, and several other towns passed resolutions condemning the rebellion and pledging loyalty to Spain. They organized a battalion of 500 soldiers to fight for the colonial government. Among the volunteers was Ernesto. Like many of the Ilonggo volunteers, he joined in suppressing what he believed to be a Tagalog rebellion."

"You are just going to let him go?" Flora challenged her father.

Chang stared at his daughter. "If these rebels win, do you think they are going to buy you pretty dresses from Paris or provide you with maids?" he asked. "You are nothing without my money. These rebels want to destroy what I have built, what your sons will inherit, what you fail to appreciate." Angered and short of breath, the ailing Chang dropped into a nearby chair and dismissed his daughter with a wave of his hand.

Furious, Flora stormed from the room. In Ernesto's absence, she would lose the ability to manipulate her father. Her other two sons were in Madrid. She had no one else to appeal to except Father Miguel, who had just returned home after four years at the university in Barcelona and two years at the seminary.

The priest was in the sacristy getting ready to perform a baptism when Flora burst through the closed door. “My son is volunteering to go to war. I need you to tell him his duty is here, taking over the business for his grandfather, who is in poor health.”

Father Miguel had only been in Iloilo for two weeks and was already consumed by Flora’s rants and demands. As a major contributor to the church, she expected to be heard.

“Nice to see you, too, Flora,” he responded.

Flora ignored his sarcasm and went on about Ernesto joining the Ilonggo volunteers.

“Flora, I do not have the power to stop your son, but I will pray for him... and you,” he added. “Now, I have a baptism to perform.” Abruptly, he turned his attention to the small group gathering around the proud parents holding their sleeping infant daughter.

Not accustomed to being ignored, Flora stormed from the room.

After four months of intense training, the Ilonggo volunteers left Iloilo amid a parade and much fanfare. Ernesto was quiet as the rowdy celebrants toasted their venture to join their Spanish counterparts in the Tagalog region. A lot had happened within that timeframe. Rizal had been apprehended on the ship to Cuba, returned to the Philippines, and tried as the mastermind of the uprising that took place near Manila. A military court found him guilty of treason and had sentenced him to execution by firing squad.

Fearful of a public mutiny, the Spanish executed Rizal an hour earlier than scheduled. Moments before his execution by a squad of Filipino soldiers of the Spanish Army, a backup force of regular Spanish Army troops stood ready to shoot the executioners should they fail to obey orders.

Ernesto was concerned for his uncle Paolo, who was sympathetic to Rizal’s petition for reform within the current Spanish rule. He and his father met the man once when they visited Paolo at his home in Manila. Rizal had clearly abhorred Bonifacio’s talk of revolution leading Ernesto to seriously question the court’s decision that found him a traitor to Spain and the mastermind of the uprising. It had only been a month since the execution, and Ernesto was marching out with his fellow Ilonggo volunteers, his allegiance in serious jeopardy.

In Manila, Paolo realized that Spain had no plan of pacifying the islanders—they were intent on setting an example, and Rizal was their scapegoat. With the turn of events, he questioned that Bonafacio might be right—a total break from Spain was the only way to put an end to the caste system that defined Filipinos as less than the citizens of Spain. With all hopes of reform abandoned, Paolo paced, worried that his nephew was fighting a lost cause.

Teresa, entering her fourth year at the university, was facing her own challenges.

Although the practice of medicine was advancing, acceptance of female physicians was sorely lacking. The men merely tolerated her presence in the classroom. Now, after three years, she was eligible to apply for an internship as a doctor at one of the surrounding hospitals.

The promising intern was ridiculed by her classmates, who were threatened by a woman entering a field defined by men. As one administrator put it, “What are you? Twenty-three or twenty-four? It’s too bad you wasted your productive years pursuing a foolish idea when you should have been content being married and raising a family. It is not God’s way. Now, at your age, you would be lucky if a widower would have you.” That was the prevailing attitude. Most females were considered old maids if they weren’t married by their twentieth birthday.

In spite of the hostile environment, Teresa persisted. With the help of the nuns at the convent, she was granted an internship at La Maternité under the condition that she interned as a student midwife, not a physician. Hence, she began her training, fulfilling her obligations and absorbing as much as she could from the attending physicians.

At home, as the Katipuneros continued their fight, remnants of the colonial caste system sparked growing friction among the rebel factions. Bonifacio came from the lower middle class. Leaders from the upper class were irritated with what they regarded as Bonifacio’s attitude of superiority. As a result, an election was held and Emilio Aguinaldo took his oath of office as president. Bonifacio alleged the election was fraudulent and attempted to establish his own rebel government. As a result, the embittered man was arrested and found guilty of sedition and treason. Bonifacio was executed by a firing squad on May 10, 1897.

After the execution, Aguinaldo retreated to the mountains in the Bulacan Province and established the Republic of Biak-na-Bato. The mountain hideaway, with its network of caves and winding rivers, provided natural defensive properties for the rebels who engaged in ambushes and hit-and-run sabotage to fight the larger and better-equipped Spanish forces.

Despite their ideal surroundings, less than six months after the republic was founded, the poorly equipped rebels found themselves at a significant disadvantage.

In December 1897, the Spanish and the insurgents signed the Biak-na-Bato Pact, ending the Philippine Revolution.

According to the Pact, the Spanish government granted Aguinaldo and his collaborators amnesty and financial compensation. In exchange, the revolutionary forces agreed to relinquish their firearms while their leaders would go into exile in Hong Kong.

“I’m glad it’s over, and Ernesto will be coming home,” Sergio confided to his brother as they sat out on the veranda sipping lambanong, a coconut wine.

They didn’t debate the political impact of the treaty for fear of rousing Flora, who, like most Ilonggos, was unyielding in her support of Spain. Her motivation was pure selfishness. She was comfortable and lacked the ability to empathize with those less fortunate. And, although she

had objected to Ernesto joining the volunteers, she did not hesitate to use that fact to her advantage.

Chapter 7

NEW YEAR (1898)

It was New Year's Eve when news of the Pact of Biak-na Bato settlement and Ernesto's survival reached Madrid. Teresa had finished her two-year internship and planned to go home to Iloilo with Andrew. Virgilio had another year of study.

"Come on, Teresa. We have a lot to celebrate! We've finished our studies and are heading home, Ernesto is alive, and the pact—can you believe it! All is good," Andrew rambled on.

"You said it. We are going home. After six years, I have to organize and pack. I don't have time to spend celebrating," Teresa objected.

"Teresa, it's New Year's Eve!" he reminded her again. "You have no excuse not to join us," Andrew persisted. "We're leaving for Iloilo in two months. You have plenty of time to pack. It's time to celebrate – Madrid style. I promise you'll have fun."

Not taking no for an answer, Andrew grabbed his sister by the shoulders and looked directly into her eyes. "You can't use school as an excuse. You've graduated. You can't use packing as an excuse. You have two months!"

She squirmed as his grip tightened.

"Virgilio and I will pick you up this evening for dinner. It will be a late night," he warned. "And let the sisters know you won't be back for breakfast." Before she could object, Andrew shoved the paper bag he was carrying into her hands.

"What's this?" she asked as her brother turned to leave.

"It's from all of us. Wear it tonight for good luck." He laughed as he boarded the carriage.

Once in her room, Teresa reached inside the bag and pulled out a red chemise. *Good luck?* she thought with a smile.

In Spain, during the Middle Ages, the color red was associated with witches and devils. Therefore, anyone wearing such was of questionable character. As time passed, many people came to believe that red represented life and blood—that was how it became a symbol of good luck. However, due to the past reputation of the color, people felt obliged to hide it beneath their clothes, hence the tradition of wearing red underwear for good luck on New Year's Eve. Tradition also dictated that the garment must be a gift from someone else.

Teresa had never worn anything so risqué before. She loved it and secretly hated that she had to hide it under her dress.

That evening, her brothers escorted her to a chauffeur-driven automobile. They were met at the Gran Hotel Inglés by two of their lady friends from the university and Jose. The hotel was as splendid a building as any Teresa had ever seen. It had an elevator to the guest rooms, a bathroom on each floor, lighting, and steam heating. It even had its own restaurant on the ground floor!

“Did you wear it?” they asked.

Teresa gave a slight nod.

“Come on. Prove it!”

To encourage her, the two girls accompanying them lifted their skirts, exposing the edges of their red pantaloons. It seemed innocent enough. Teresa pulled at the neck of her dress, revealing just a peek of the red. They all started to laugh and cheer.

The group made their way to the hotel’s spacious restaurant, which was packed with over 200 guests ready to welcome in the new year. Teresa delighted in the festive atmosphere.

“On New Year’s Eve, we drink cava—but *only* at the end of the evening,” the sommelier advised. “Cava is to us Spanish what champagne is to the French.”

After a four-course dinner, the waiter addressed the group. “In Madrid, it’s not what you drink at midnight on New Year’s Eve that matters most, but what you eat.” He presented each with a dish of a dozen green grapes. “Each grape represents good luck for each month of the coming year. But,” he cautioned, “one must be eaten with each of the twelve strokes as the clock strikes midnight.”

As the time neared, the maître d’ signaled the seconds before midnight. The countdown went fast—one grape for each *dong* of the bell atop a clock tower in Madrid’s central Puerta del Sol square. When the twelve dongs finished and the last of the grapes had been swallowed, the crowd cheered and raised their glasses of cava to toast the new year as pieces of turrón were passed around. There was music and dancing, cheers and cheek kisses, and the cava flowed freely.

With each passing hour, the merriment gradually waned, losing its fervor.

“What time is it, anyway?” Teresa asked, for the first time aware that most of the crowd had thinned to a few stragglers.

Jose lifted his head. “Five-ish,” he muttered, then returned it to the same position on the table.

A disgustingly cheerful voice jolted them awake. “Time to do hot chocolate and churros!” Before them stood a waiter in a starched white shirt and black bowtie—awake, alert, and in good humor. He brought fried dough crullers and a bowl of rich hot chocolate syrup for dipping, which he ceremoniously placed on the table.

Hours later, the sun high in the sky, Teresa was dropped off at the convent. Sister Anne met her at the door and ushered the carefree woman to her room out of sight of the other nuns. “You are a mess!” Sister Anne scolded as she helped the party girl out of her clothes and into bed. “And where did you get this?” she asked, holding up the red chemise.

Teresa didn’t answer. She was already fast asleep.

Later, the nun brought the suffering woman a cup of tea with fennel, aniseed, and nettle to counter the effects of the cava.

Though it had been some time ago, the good sister recalled her own past New Year’s Eve celebrations in Madrid and smiled.

Chapter 8

SAYING GOODBYE (1898)

It was now the second week in February. Teresa was busy getting ready for the voyage home. She had made many friends in Madrid and was going to miss them. Virgilio and Diego accompanied her and Andrew to the port. Jose planned to meet them later.

“Take these.” Diego gave her a packet of letters. One he had written to Ramon and Agnes, another to Sergio, one to Ernesto, and the last to Lorenzo, who had completed his studies the year before and returned home.

These were precarious times, and families and friends exchanged letters via personal envoy rather than general post for fear of falling into the wrong hands. Virgilio also slipped her envelopes addressed to his parents and one to Ernesto.

“Oh, Virgilio,” Teresa said, wrapping her arms around her little brother. She couldn’t bear the thought of him alone in Madrid. But it was more than that.

Clouds suddenly formed and darkened the sky as the space around them stilled. A feeling of doom smothered her as she gasped for air.

“I’m having trouble saying goodbye. I fear I may not see you again. Tell me I’m wrong,” she pleaded.

Virgilio laughed and cupped his hands around her sister’s face, damp from spent tears. He flooded her with kisses on her eyes, her nose, her cheeks, and her lips. “I promise I won’t die until I see your beautiful face again, big sister,” he teased.

“That’s a promise,” the tearful woman reminded him as she boarded the ship.

Once underway, passengers dispersed to their cabins. Alone on deck, Teresa watched until the port was no more. She remembered her excitement leaving Iloilo—it had been a “hazardous adventure.” This time, it was different. She was leaving behind a city she had grown to love and many friends. Teresa shivered when she thought of her little brother all alone. *It’s only for another year*, she reminded herself.

Agnes and Ramon were at the pier when the steamer made its way to the port of Iloilo. It had been six years. Her aunt and uncle had made the trip to Madrid twice to visit Diego, their sons, their niece, and nephews. Flora had never left Iloilo, although Virgilio and Andrew had made the trip back home once. Teresa’s schedule at the university and the hospital had not permitted her such luxury. Hence, she had not seen her parents at all in six years.

Agnes hugged her niece. She regarded the young woman as one of her own and was happy that she had returned home. She turned to her nephew. “Andrew, what a handsome young man!” she said as she hugged him.

Andrew cringed at the attention.

After catching up with family matters, their conversation broadened.

“Since you were at sea, you probably didn’t hear about the explosion of the American warship in Havana Harbor.” Agnes told them what she had read, and they listened with interest.

Teresa and Andrew were aware that the Americans had been sympathetic toward Cuba's ongoing fight for independence from Spanish rule. The USS *Maine* had been sent to the harbor to protect the Americans' interests and show support for the revolutionaries. The massive explosion sank the battleship in Cuba's Havana Harbor, killing 260 of its American crew. A US Naval Court of Inquiry was appointed to investigate the cause. However, most Americans had no reservations about Spain's involvement.

Once they exhausted their conversation regarding the Spanish-American tensions, they turned to the subject of the Pact of Biak-na-Bato and Aguinaldo's exile to China just the month before.

"Ernesto. Is he home yet?" Teresa asked.

Agnes informed her that Flora and Sergio had received a letter from him. The Ilonggo volunteers were regrouping and would be returning home by April. *One month*. Teresa started the countdown in her head.

Their conversation was cut short by their arrival at the mansion. A servant helped Ramon and Andrew unload their luggage as Flora came to greet them.

"Mama, I'm so happy to be home!" Teresa cried out as she hugged her mother.

Flora remained reserved. "It's been a long time." She still had not come to terms with her daughter's decision not to take her final vows. "Andrew, your grandfather is anxious to see you," she said, dismissing Teresa as she hugged her son. "He's been struggling in Ernesto's absence and is anxious for you to help him with his business affairs until your brother returns."

Silence overcame them as they thought of the war, missing Ernesto, and the horrors he might have witnessed. The stillness was interrupted as Sergio rushed in.

He gave his daughter a big hug and kiss, then held her in front of him. "My, you have grown into a beautiful young woman." He was so proud of his children.

Once inside, Teresa pulled the letters from her bag and handed them to her parents. Flora took them and divvied them out. Letters were rare, and although the recipients were anxious to read them, they stowed their treasures away to read at a later time. The six engaged in friendly chitchat before Ramon and Agnes bade goodbye.

"Your rooms have been prepared. You might want to rest up before dinner," Flora said, cutting off any plans the two might have made for the evening.

That night, Teresa and Andrew dined alone with their parents, who were eager to hear about Virgilio and to share their good news about Ernesto's homecoming. They were, at present, under Spanish rule. With Ernesto still in harm's way, talk about the existing political situation was avoided.

Teresa left early the next day to meet with Mother Cecilia at the convent and, later, to secure an interview at the local hospital for employment as a nurse and midwife. She had also wanted to see if Carlos was back in town. Reaching out to her dear friend was on her to-do list.

However noble her intention, when she met up with Mother Cecilia, Teresa was immediately recruited into ministering to the community stricken with dengue fever. Her to-do list was, for the moment, abandoned.

Carlos was unaware that his friend had returned until he ran into Andrew a month later.

“Andrew!”

It took Andrew a few seconds to recognize Carlos, who stood in a long black soutane complemented by a red sash and a white clerical collar. “Father Miguel now,” he explained sheepishly as they shook hands.

Andrew was overwhelmed. He had not kept up with Teresa’s friend. “I thought you were at the seminary in Barcelona.”

“Been back two years now. I understand you were in Madrid.”

Andrew nodded.

“How long have you been back?”

“Teresa and I have been home a month now.”

At the thought of Teresa, the priest froze. *Why did she not come to see me?*

“I’m celebrating Mass this Sunday. Why don’t you join me?” he invited after regaining his composure. “And bring Teresa. We have a lot of catching up to do.”

“We’ll see you then,” Andrew promised.

After Mass, celebrants wishing to hobnob with the priest crowded him. Distracted, Father Miguel greeted them as he searched the crowd for Teresa. He had begun Mass without having found her, and only when she made her way to the altar for communion did he see his friend. She nodded and smiled. At the sight of her, his heartbeat picked up speed. In spite of that, he was able to maintain self-control.

Teresa waited as the priest thanked his parishioners, intent on engaging in idle chitchat. He was a head taller than most of the crowd, and it was easy for Teresa to see him glance up at her from time to time to assure her that he would be there.

The crowd thinned, and Father Miguel finally made his way to where Teresa was waiting. He was still annoyed that she had been home an entire month and had not sought him out.

“I just, by chance, found out you were back!” she explained as she threw her arms around her friend, giving him a sincere hug. “Carlos—uh, Father Miguel. I will have to get used to that!” Teresa laughed. “It suits you.”

Of course. The priest relaxed at the thought. *She didn’t know me as Father Miguel. She couldn’t have known I had returned.*

“Oh, I have missed you so much! Tell me everything!” Teresa gave her friend another hug.

They found a bench under the shade of a large ylang-ylang tree drooping with fragrant yellow flowers. Carlos talked about Barcelona, his studies at the university, and his residence at the seminary. He kept it light, and she laughed at his antics.

“That’s enough about me.” He looked seriously at Teresa, his demeanor changing. “I see you did not take your vows.”

She failed to recognize the change in tone.

“I couldn’t. Your mother opened up a whole new world to me. It was a difficult decision, but Mother Cecelia agreed that God was calling me in another direction.”

Father Miguel was quiet, remembering that one of the first things he did upon his arrival in Iloilo was to seek out Teresa at the convent. He had not kept up with his friend—the seminary had strict rules about communication with the outside world. When he inquired at the convent, he was disappointed to find that Teresa had not taken her vows, but instead, had gone to Madrid to study medicine.

In silence, he recalled that fateful day—Teresa with sopping wet hair and his promise: *If you are going to the convent, then I will become a priest. In that way, we will always be the best of friends.* Father Miguel’s disappointment turned to anger. He had kept his promise, but Teresa had not.

He chastised himself. His feelings were unbecoming of a priest.

“You are a man first,” Father Miguel’s confessor had later explained. “This is God’s way of testing you.”

“You were children,” his mother had said matter-of-factly. She scoffed at the idea that they could be more than friends. “Besides, I think she will make a fine healer. And there’s no reason you can’t continue your friendship. You were friends before—you are friends still.”

Chapter 9

A FORCE TO RECKON WITH (1898)

Finally, after two years and having established a distinguished combat record for themselves, the Ilonggo volunteers returned home. Because of their loyalty to Spain, the city of Iloilo was honored with the title of *Muy Noble* (Most Noble) by Royal Decree.

The citizens of Iloilo greeted the homecoming of the Ilonggo volunteers in April of 1898 with much fanfare. Sergio and Ramon got caught up in the celebration as they searched the parade and then the crowded streets for Ernesto, but he was nowhere to be found.

Little did they know, upon reaching the city, Ernesto had been sickened by the fanfare. He broke from the cheering crowd and headed for home. As soon as he reached his room, he tore off his uniform and filled a wash basin. The disillusioned soldier couldn't get the stench off fast enough! He had witnessed firsthand the cruelties Filipinos suffered under the hand of the Spanish Army, and he was no longer a supporter of Spanish colonialism.

Hours later, the brothers found him. Ernesto was sitting out on the veranda with a drink in his hand. They poured themselves a glass, sat quietly next to the returning hero, and let him unburden the last fifteen months.

"Papa, I'm not proud of the past year," Ernesto confessed.

Sergio tried to comfort his son. "It's war."

"But I did nothing to stop the murder of innocents," he insisted, running his hands through his dark hair before clasping them behind his neck. The repentant son leaned back in his chair, rested his head on his clasped hands, and closed his eyes. The faces of women and children silently screaming invaded the quiet he so desperately longed for.

When Flora faced her brooding son, she refused to hear him out. She had no political agenda. The unsympathetic woman was solely loyal to maintaining the status quo. She did not want to hear any talk that might disrupt her way of life. Flora continued to berate Ernesto. "You're home. Tomorrow, you will go to the hacienda and forget about this nonsense."

Sergio, however, was sympathetic to his son's feelings. Abruptly, he got up from his chair. "Ernesto, Ramon... let's go and get a drink." He glared at his wife as the three men left the house.

Teresa, who sat quietly on the veranda, excused herself and walked upstairs to her bedroom without another word. It didn't feel like peace.

The next day, Ernesto headed for the hacienda. There, he occupied his mind with work. Except for Chang, he isolated himself from the outside world.

In addition to helping Mother Cecilia with her ministry, Teresa found employment as a nurse and midwife at the local hospital. As was the plight of any war, the victorious return of the Ilonggo volunteers included many young, injured men. In most cases, the family was responsible for the day-to-day care of their loved one, adding to the already overcrowded hospital. Teresa spent her days in the infirmary, going home exhausted.

A week after the Ilonggo volunteers' homecoming and two months after the USS *Maine* incident, on April 21, 1898, the United States declared war against Spain for humanitarian reasons. The explosion aboard the USS *Maine* had served as the catalyst. Many in Congress and the majority of the American people expressed little doubt that Spain was responsible.

That same morning, Ernesto, alarmed that his grandfather was not in his study, opened the door to Chang's bedroom and found that he had died in his sleep.

Teresa was in the infirmary when Andrew approached, and in a low voice, told her Chang was dead. Although she had had little contact with her grandfather, she was saddened for Ernesto. Since his return, her brother had retreated to the hacienda and buried himself in work. His only contact was Chang. Excused from her duties, she made her way with Andrew to Guimaras. When they arrived at the hacienda, Flora was already there—already in charge. She stood over Ernesto, who had just slipped some papers into a large envelope. She looked up. Her face showed no emotion.

"Mama." Teresa went to put her arms around her mother, who waved her off.

"The funeral is tomorrow." It was clear she did not want sympathy from anyone.

Teresa turned her attention to Ernesto, whose eyes were swollen from crying. "I'm so sorry. I know you're going to miss him," she said as she hugged her brother.

After the funeral, Flora stayed on at the hacienda with Ernesto and Andrew to put papers in order and to lay claim that she was now head of the family. Ernesto was relieved that his mother had taken charge. She almost seemed to relish the idea. There was nothing more Teresa could do but return to Iloilo and maintain the mansion until Flora returned.

On her return to the city, Teresa learned that an American fleet under the command of Commodore George Dewey had sailed into Manila harbor and destroyed the small armada of Spanish ships anchored there. The plan was to weaken Spain by destroying her fleet in the Philippines. Paolo heard the booming of guns from the deck of the warships and watched as black smoke cycloned upwards and faded into the once blue, now gray, sky. With the war in their backyard, he could only hope that the US would sympathize with their cause.

The Pact of Biak-na-Bato was short-lived. With no intention to pay up fully or grant reforms, Spain paid less than half the money promised to the exiled leaders. Filipino prisoners released on amnesty were subsequently rearrested on trumped-up charges, and over 200 men were executed.

On the other side, the arms surrendered to the Spanish by the rebels consisted of old or broken rifles and pistols, and guns made of bamboo and wrapped in metal. Small bands of insurgents, distrustful of Spanish promises, kept their arms. During their exile, Aguinaldo and his leaders used the amnesty money to smuggle food, medicine, and weapons to their comrades in the Philippines and established diplomatic relations with Australia, Japan, and the US.

With the declaration of war, Aguinaldo saw the possibility that the Philippines might achieve its independence. He made an informal alliance with the US, committing his troops to support America in its fight against Spain. The US sought the help of the rebels because a sizable

number of revolutionary soldiers, including a large force in Manila itself, were readily accessible.

Encouraged by American diplomats, Aguinaldo returned to the Philippines on the Navy ship USS *McCulloch* to continue the battle for Philippine independence. He arrived at Cavite aboard the warship a month after the United States defeated the Spanish in the Battle of Manila Bay. Even before landing, the exiled leader caught a glimpse of the wreckage of the Spanish fleet and Dewey's ships that blockaded the Spanish port.

Inspired by his return, many members of the Propaganda Movement joined ranks with the revolutionaries in the Philippines. Paolo, too, had abandoned all hope of reform. With the execution of Rizal, he no longer believed that reform within the existing Spanish rule made sense. He was further encouraged by the support of the United States. With America as an ally, he felt their fight for independence was assured.

Upon hearing the news, Andrew informed his brother of his intentions to join the revolutionaries. Ernesto confided in him his experience as an Ilonggo volunteer and his guilt in standing by while the Spanish troops ransacked and burned villages, killing Filipinos at will. He admitted that there were atrocities even he dared not speak aloud.

"You have no idea what you are getting yourself into," Ernesto warned. "War is ugly—it will change you forever. You will leave here strong and determined to fight an enemy. You think Spain is the enemy? Think again. Fear, hunger, heat, mosquitoes, dysentery, disease—they all fight for that title. And in the end, the mirror reflects your worst fear—you have won the competition! War carves out those ideals, hopes, and dreams to which you aspire and fills the hole with terror, inhumanity, and nightmares. You make excuses for your actions, but deep down inside, you carry a fetal monster and live with the fear of it awakening." He cupped his thumb under his jaw and bit down on his index and middle fingers, staring off into the distance. "In war, there are no heroes. After the first battle, the first scream of agony, the first step on ground that runs red with the blood of friends and enemy alike, you no longer fight to live—you fight because you are already dead." Ernesto rambled on, knowing that nothing he could say would keep his brother from pursuing the path he had envisioned for himself. Manhood, glory, freedom—how could experience compete with that?

The war-weary man was sitting in the chair Chang had occupied when he ran the company. Andrew remembered his grandfather looking up from his work when they entered, irritated by the interruption. His brother, in contrast, welcomed the distraction. Since Chang's recent death, Ernesto had poured all his waking hours into the business. He filled every gap of every minute with briefs and numbers and minute details for fear that any lapse would trigger the nightmares that robbed him of sleep.

"Your youth and feelings of invincibility will keep you from making sense of what I am saying," he admitted sadly. "Be careful. We are still under Spanish rule." With tears in his eyes, Ernesto got up from his chair and hugged his brother. "I will miss you."

"You can't go," Teresa pleaded when Andrew told her of his plans.

Overhearing her son's plans, Flora raced downstairs. She forbade Andrew from committing to the fight. "You are not going!" She looked to Sergio for support.

Sergio was torn. Events were happening and allegiances were changing too fast! It had been a mere two months since the Ilonggo volunteers returned to a welcomed homecoming. His son, Ernesto, had yet to come to terms with the atrocities he'd witnessed during their fifteen months of fighting. Now, Andrew was intent on taking up arms against the very force his brother had defended! Sergio knew he could not sway his determined son.

"You are putting your family at risk. Let somebody else do the fighting!" Flora screeched in a last-ditch effort to persuade her son. "Virgilio's in Madrid and Ernesto's at the hacienda. Who's going to be here for me?"

Andrew turned to his father. "Papa, I must do this."

Sergio nodded with tears in his eyes. "I know, son. God be with you." He hugged his son ever so dear. "I'll deal with your mother," he whispered.

Flora was livid. In her house, her word was never questioned.

"What will people *think*?" Flora poked at Sergio. "Don't you *dare* speak of this to *anyone*!" she warned.

Iloilo was still under Spanish rule. Should his defect get out, the family would come under scrutiny, and Flora would lose her standing in the community.

Incensed, she watched as Andrew made his way toward his uncle's home and then retreated to her bedroom in silence. She was angry, not because he was going into harm's way, but because he dared to go against her wishes—just like Teresa before him. This was her daughter's fault.

It never occurred to Flora that she might not see her son again.

Andrew met up with his cousins, who had already committed to joining the fight. They, too, met with resistance. It wasn't that Agnes and Ramon didn't understand their cause. Early on, they had been exposed to liberal views during their years at the university in Madrid. But the fire they'd had when they were young had been smothered by the demands of everyday living. They prospered under colonial rule. Now, they wanted to protect their children and all they had worked for. They were deeply vested in the status quo, and they did not trust their own sentiments, no matter how noble they might be. They feared for their sons and Andrew. But in the end, they had no choice but to let them go.

"Mama, when asked, just say we are away on a business trip or went to Madrid to visit Uncle Diego." Lorenzo assured his family that his brother and cousin's absence would go unnoticed. Virgilio was at the university in Madrid. He and Jose had frequent causes for business dealings outside Iloilo. Andrew had reason to stay at the hacienda, helping Ernesto carry on the business left by his grandfather.

Lorenzo was Agnes and Ramon's firstborn. His brother and cousins looked to him as their spokesperson, not because he was the oldest of the group, but because he was a born leader. Lorenzo spoke passionately and had the courage to fight for his beliefs. He was quick to make decisions when action was called for and just as quick to back down when circumstance dictated.

Agnes and Ramon were in tears as they bade their sons and nephew goodbye, not knowing if they would ever see them again. All this was done with the utmost secrecy in the prospering town of Iloilo, where Spanish rule went unchallenged.

Unbeknownst to them, a similar scene was taking place at the far end of the Suez Canal. With the declaration of US involvement, Virgilio decided to join others from the Propaganda Movement in their fight for independence.

“There is a group leaving tomorrow for Manila to join Aguinaldo,” Virgilio announced to his uncle. “I am going.”

Virgilio had studied law at the university and had aspirations of being involved in setting up legislation for the new republic. Freedom meant self-government and a chance to run for office, which was not possible under Spanish rule. He planned to join his uncle Paolo, who was already established in Manila.

Diego sat back in his chair and shook his head. “I’m proud of you, but do not tell anyone of your plans. You cannot post a letter to your parents. Iloilo is still in support of the existing government. Should authorities find out about your involvement, your parents will be at risk.”

“I know,” Virgilio acknowledged. “I’ve written a letter to Mama and Papa and one to Teresa, and was hoping you could find a way to get it to them.” With that said, he handed his letters to his uncle for safekeeping. “I will be leaving tomorrow, so let’s celebrate to our victory.”

Virgilio led the way to the nearest ale house, where many students frequented. There, they met up with other merry-makers bound for the Philippines with the promise of a new independent state.

Instead of somber, they were in a celebratory mood. They were young and invincible, oblivious of the sacrifices they might have to make in their fight for independence. The US involvement had assured them of victory.

The next day, Virgilio left for Manila, along with a group of over 100 supporters of the Propaganda Movement. They went without fanfare by private vessel, lest they be detained. Their liberal views were not supported by Madrid’s mainstream citizens, whose young men made up the majority of the more than 50,000 *Cazadores* the Spanish government had sent to the Philippines, along with several artillery, cavalry, engineer, and supporting units. The locals were not privy to the plight of the colonists. They did not understand the liberal views adopted by the students and many of their professors.

It was a luxury the citizens of Madrid could not afford.

Chapter 10

CEASE FIRE (1898)

In their war against Spain, the US commanders planned to occupy Manila, the enemy's colonial capital. It was a plan of convenience, not of any sympathy for the struggling Filipinos. In their eyes, Manila was enemy territory. American regulars who sailed with Dewey established a beachhead south of Manila at Cavite—Aguinaldo's hometown.

Andrew and his cousins made their way to the big island of Luzon to join the Tagalog revolutionaries. They had promised their parents they would try to find out how their uncle Paolo was faring. Since the American attack against the Spanish armada in Manila Bay, they were uncertain of his fate.

When the cousins arrived in Cavite, they were met by a patrol of American soldiers who immediately, upon seeing the trio, aimed their rifles. "Halt!"

The three of them raised their arms.

"We have come to join you in your fight against Spain." Lorenzo cautiously lowered his arms and stepped forward.

The leader nodded his head, and the soldiers withdrew their rifles. "Your camp is north." The leader pointed down the road they were already on. "You best hurry along."

The cousins had never met an American before and were confused by their stand-offish attitude.

"They didn't seem very friendly," Lorenzo observed as they walked away.

"It's war. What did you expect?" Andrew offered.

Jose laughed. "Did you see the sweat running down their faces?" It was the hot, dry season—the trio was used to the equatorial heat. They found the Americans' discomfort amusing.

When they arrived at the camp, Aguinaldo's men surrounded the intruders. "Where have you come from?" The Tagalog revolutionaries were suspicious of the Ilonggos.

A student of the Propaganda Movement happened by and intervened. "The men are restless," he apologized. "I'm Franco."

Franco, a Tagalog, had been educated in Barcelona, where he'd joined the movement. He, too, was encouraged by the American involvement.

"The Americans want us to wait for reinforcements," Franco informed them. "This has caused some unrest—they want action." He nodded towards the army of revolutionary fighters who, with nothing to do, were beginning to group and fight amongst themselves. Lorenzo understood.

The Philippines was an archipelago of over 7,000 islands and over seventy dialects. That, in itself, is breeding ground for prejudice and misunderstanding. Strife between the Tagalog-speaking Filipinos and the Ilonggo-speaking Filipinos intensified when the Spaniards attempted to monopolize and control the trade routes by requiring by law that all goods be routed through

Manila. The city flourished, and the majority of merchants, bankers, clergy, and government officials learned to speak Tagalog. As a result, the Tagalog city dwellers began to look down on the Ilonggo-speaking Filipinos. The Ilonggos, on the other hand, saw the Tagalogs as living in their little overcrowded, decadent city, not caring what was happening elsewhere in the Philippines.

With the army becoming increasingly restless, Aguinaldo was no longer willing to wait for American reinforcements. The next day, the insurgents went on the offensive. Within weeks, the 12,000 revolutionary fighters had pushed the Spanish back to Manila, trapping 35,000 of their soldiers until American troop reinforcements could arrive.

The revolutionaries were jubilant with their conquest and declared the Philippines' independence in Cavite with much fanfare. The celebration included a parade and a marching band. Shouts and cheers were deafening as Aguinaldo unfurled the Filipino flag he had brought back from exile in Hong Kong.

“Viva Independencia! Fuera España! Viva Libertad!”

Among the merrymakers were Andrew and his cousins. They had not received a scratch during the two weeks of fighting and were celebrating their good fortune as well. “Here’s to victory!” They raised their glasses of lambanog, a vodka-like coconut drink made in the Quezon Province, in a toast.

The next morning led to a hot and lazy afternoon. Most of the voluntary army was sleeping off the celebration of the night before. Except for a few rumblings, pockets of raised voices, and mosquitoes buzzing, all-out boredom invaded the camp. The same lethargy crept through the US campsite, where their army also lay idle, waiting for reinforcements from America to take Manila.

In contrast, Aguinaldo was on the move. He issued a decree which replaced the dictatorial government with a revolutionary government. An election subsequently proclaimed him president of the Philippines. As president, Aguinaldo presented surrender terms to the Spanish governor of the Philippines, Basilio Augustín, who refused them initially, believing Spain would send in reinforcement troops to end the blockade.

When the Spanish parliament learned of Augustín’s attempt to negotiate the surrender of the army to Filipinos under Aguinaldo, they were infuriated and relieved him of his duties. The new governor, Jáudenes, refused to recognize Aguinaldo’s authority and began negotiations with the invading Americans.

The fighting continued for another two months before the US and Spanish diplomats agreed on a cease-fire. The truce dictated that the United States would occupy the city and harbor of Manila until the peace conference reached a final agreement on the fate of the Philippines. Under these conditions, and to keep the Filipinos at bay, Governor Jáudenes suggested that he surrender the city to the Americans after a short “mock” battle.

The plan agreed to was that Dewey would bombard only abandoned structures on the southern outskirts of Manila. Upon hearing the bombardment, Spanish forces would withdraw.

Once a believable show of battle had been made, Dewey would signal, “Do you surrender?” at which point the Spanish would hoist a white flag and formally surrender to US forces.

Although the revolutionary forces had carried out the bulk of the fighting up to this point, Aguinaldo was ordered to keep his men outside of Manila while American troops marched into the city, where the Spanish surrendered to the Americans. Paolo was among the handful of Filipino diplomats who welcomed the American soldiers. Regrettably, he soon realized the freedom he had envisioned for his country differed from the one the negotiating parties shared.

Under the cease-fire agreement, the Americans agreed to bar the revolutionaries from entering Manila until both parties had formalized the peace treaty terms. Aguinaldo was warned that any attempt by his army to enter the city would be met with force. American forces guarded the city’s perimeter against any move by the Philippine military. As a result, the relationship between the Americans and the Filipinos began to deteriorate.

After their defeat, Spain transferred the capital of the Spanish East Indies to Iloilo. General Diego Ríos retreated from Manila with his troops to the “Most Noble” city to await the terms of the Spanish-American peace treaty. Cheering Filipino citizens lined the streets as the general and his brigade exited the town for the last time. Paolo watched quietly, concerned for his family in Spain’s newly appointed first city. He did not cheer. With Filipino troops barred from entering Manila, he did not feel like celebrating.

News of the “mock” battle had not reached Iloilo. As a result, city officials were surprised and confused when Ríos, atop his horse and followed by his army of Spanish soldiers, paraded through the city.

“What’s going on?” Agnes questioned her husband as a crowd of people started pushing and shoving, making their way to the city center.

“Stay here. I’ll run ahead and find out,” Ramon said, leaving Agnes behind.

Ramon soon returned, breathless. “There is a cease-fire. According to the terms, the United States is to occupy Manila while negotiating the final details of the peace agreement. Spain has declared Iloilo City as the new capital of the Philippines until the treaty conditions are settled.”

Agnes bit her lower lip, unable to comprehend the significance. “Does the cease-fire mean our sons and Andrew will be coming home? Is the war over?”

“We can only hope,” Ramon replied.

On the outskirts of Manila, Lorenzo was impatient to find out if his uncle had survived the siege and if he was well. He, Jose, and Andrew decided they might try again to find out. As they approached the guards posted at the road leading to the city, the soldiers took a menacing stance and raised their rifles.

The sergeant signaled his men to stand down and took two steps forward. “Did you not get the message? Filipinos are not allowed into the city. Now get!”

“My uncle lives in the city. We want to speak with him. To see if he is still alive,” Lorenzo said as he stepped forward.

“I don’t give a damn. Our orders are to keep you monkeys out. Now get!” The sergeant pushed him back.

Lorenzo lunged at the guard, but Andrew and Jose held him back. “Let’s get out of here!”

The Americans jeered and one of them flipped a half-smoked cigarette as the retreating trio left.

Back at camp, the revolutionaries were becoming increasingly resentful. Tensions flared between the Americans and Filipinos as the Spanish-American peace talks dragged on. In Spain, Diego took the cease-fire as an opportunity to set sail for Iloilo to visit his family and tell them Virgilio’s news. He was unaware of the tension that was building in Manila.

When he arrived in Iloilo, Diego was not surprised that his nephews had also joined in their fight for independence. While in Madrid, they had become active in the Propaganda Movement. He delivered Virgilio’s letters as he had promised three months earlier.

That Virgilio had joined was a shock to all of them.

Upon reading her letter, tears streamed down Teresa’s face. *...Big sister, don’t worry, I promised you I will look upon your beautiful face again. I always keep my promises.*

Teresa was hopeful that the truce would bring her brothers home.

Later, Diego told them what he knew. He was convinced that with the cease-fire between Spain and the US, it would be only a matter of formality that the Philippines would be rid of the Spanish colonial regime. Unlike Paolo, who found it problematic, his brother shrugged off the issue that Filipino troops were not allowed in Manila as a condition of the cease-fire. “That’s just the Spanish flaunting what little power they have left.”

While the Spanish and Americans negotiated the terms in a neutral setting, Aguinaldo was stirring up support. He was anxious to secure all the districts he could before the conditions for peace were settled.

Chapter 11

CONDITIONS OF SURRENDER (1898-1899)

By the time the negotiations were finalized, practically the whole island of Panay was under revolutionary authority. Only the city and port of Iloilo held out, as they safeguarded Ríos's Spanish troops. Nearly three months after his arrival, the formal signing of the Treaty of Paris on December twelfth ended the Spanish-American War. As expected, Ríos surrendered Iloilo and sailed away to Spain twelve days later.

The next morning, on Christmas Day, the liberating army staged a triumphal parade into Iloilo City, Spain's last capital in the Philippines. Thousands of people crowded both sides of the street to celebrate. Most were crying with joy, shouting, "Viva Independencia! Viva Libertad!"

Sergio was there with his brothers and Agnes, searching the crowd littered with soldiers returning home. He and Ramon had not heard from their sons in the nearly six months since they'd left to fight with the Americans.

"Mama! Papa!" came shouts of joy as Jose and Lorenzo ran to embrace their parents.

Sergio looked through the crowd, expecting to see his son. As his sight settled on his nephews, he saw the joy drain from their faces. In that instant, his eyes registered what his brain could not. Sergio was overcome with vertigo as silence overtook the crowd that had slowed to a snail's pace. He grabbed the arm of his nephew. "Andrew?"

Jose paled, grief-stricken, as he looked at his uncle.

"Andrew?" Tears running down his face, Sergio braced himself for what he knew to be true.

Jose shook his head slowly as he struggled to hold back tears. Agnes let out a loud wail.

Her sons helped Sergio to the ground as his knees began to buckle. He was deaf to the merriment surrounding him. Sergio's grief was unbearable as he rocked back and forth, screaming silently, unable to breathe.

At a loss for words, Jose looked at his brother, who shrugged his shoulders in despair. It was a scene of contrasts. All around were merrymakers oblivious to the pain in their midst.

Flora was inconsolable. Her sorrow manifested itself as rage. She attacked Sergio for giving his blessings, Agnes because she had cowardly sons, Jose and Lorenzo for not dying, and most of all, Teresa, who had brought this curse upon the family. In a manic state, she barricaded herself in her room. Father Miguel was summoned.

Upon hearing the voice of her confessor, Flora allowed him in the room. From outside the closed door, the family could hear her raging. Father Miguel remained silent. He knew there was nothing he could say that would comfort her.

"I'll go tell Teresa," Jose volunteered, anxious to remove himself from the pain and manifested madness.

Teresa was at the convent ministering to injured soldiers who had just returned home—the unseen, as Ernesto called them.

Jose sought her out. “It’s Andrew.” From his tear-stained face and grievous demeanor, she knew at once that her brother had been killed. Without a word, she ran to Jose, embraced her cousin, and they both broke into uncontrollable sobbing.

“Is there any word on Virgilio?” she asked tearfully, hopeful that he would assure her that her little brother was alive and well.

Jose stiffened in shock. It had never occurred to him that his younger cousin would join the fighting. “I didn’t know,” he confessed as he stoically tightened his grip on Teresa, whose legs buckled from under her. He needed her support as much as she needed his.

Once she composed herself, Teresa hurried home with Jose by her side to be with her parents. She was met by her father, who wept openly. Agnes, Ramon, and her cousins surrounded her in tears. From above, she could hear her mother’s ranting.

“Father Miguel’s up there with her,” Agnes said tearfully as Teresa mounted the stairs.

Teresa opened the door a crack and peeked in. “Mama?” she whispered.

When Flora saw her daughter, she went into a rage. “Get out of my house! You have brought this upon us. Was it too little to ask that you become a nun? You ungrateful girl. You have caused your brother’s death! He was worth a dozen of you!”

Father Miguel looked on in despair. He fought the urge to run and embrace Teresa, shielding her from the ranting of the prostrated woman.

“Get out!” she shouted at her only daughter.

The priest tried to reason with her, but Flora was unmovable.

“Please, Mama,” Teresa begged as her mother coiled from her touch.

Helplessly, Father Miguel looked over at his friend. Not only had she lost her brother, but her mother as well. Teresa’s eyes were red and swollen. Overwhelmed by her brother’s death and her mother’s words, the poor girl struggled to stay upright, and her mind could not comprehend the voices surrounding her. The priest steadied Teresa and guided her from the room. Sergio stayed with Flora while Agnes and Ramon ushered the grieving Teresa to their home.

Unfortunately, the newly-found freedom of the Ilonggos was premature. The signing of the Treaty of Paris resulted in Spain relinquishing Cuba and ceding all of the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Guam to the United States.

Two weeks after the treaty was signed, the American army, with about 3,000 troops and two ships, sailed to Iloilo under the command of Brigadier General Marcus Miller, who was instructed to take possession of the island and prevent “lawlessness.” When Miller’s amphibious force neared the island, an army of 6,000 Filipinos refused them permission to land. The commanding colonel returned his men to the transport ship.

Lorenzo and Jose looked on as the landing party retreated.

“They’ll be back,” Lorenzo predicted.

The flotilla lay in anchor as Miller waited for orders on how to proceed. During the standoff, the first Philippine Republic was formally established on January 23, 1899, with

Aguinaldo as president. Not surprisingly, the US refused to recognize Aguinaldo's authority, and tensions between the Aguinaldo government and the US Army in the Philippines began to build.

Many Filipinos felt betrayed.

Within two weeks of his inauguration, hostilities broke out between Aguinaldo's troops and the US. While the Filipino forces viewed the conflict as a continuation of their struggle for independence, the US government regarded it as a rebellion.

At the same time, tensions continued to mount from the standoff in Iloilo. Agnes and Ramon sat in the shade of their terrace overlooking the menacing flotilla adrift in the Guimaras Strait. As they contemplated their fate, Lorenzo interrupted their thoughts as he hurriedly traversed the courtyard, his uncle trailing behind.

"We just heard there was fighting in Manila. Aguinaldo has publicly announced that the Americans should be treated as enemies," Lorenzo said breathlessly. In response to their lack of reaction, he matched their gaze, the fleet of gray a sharp contrast to the surrounding tropical sunset. "I'm afraid we may be attacked at any time."

Agnes felt vulnerable and confused. Her sons and nephew had joined the revolutionary army to fight alongside the Americans. Andrew had given his life. Now, they were fighting their American ally. Nothing made sense anymore. "We were naïve in thinking reform could right the tyranny of colonial rule. Do you think the Americans will be more tolerant than the Spanish?" Agnes asked.

"Don't think like that," Ramon scolded his wife. He brushed his lips against her forehead as he got up and poured a drink for himself, his brother, and Lorenzo. Ramon quietly returned to his chair and sat back, looking around the courtyard. As a boy, he had climbed the nearby banaba tree and hid there, spooking unsuspecting passersby. He remembered a time when the family had gotten together, and Agnes would read aloud passages from *The Three Musketeers*.

Looking out at the flotilla, he imagined it a scene from one of the Musketeers' hazardous adventures. He frowned. Was it the flotilla that seemed surreal, or was it Agnes turning the pages of her treasured book? He was lost in his own debate when Sergio butted in, forcing a reality check.

"I don't think the Americans will back away this time," he insisted, referring to the retreat of the previous landing party two months prior. "We may be in this alone. There is discord between the Tagalogs and Ilonggo revolutionaries. This standoff has them on edge. Many of the Tagalogs have deserted, and I expect others will follow." Sergio spoke from firsthand knowledge. He had been spending most of his time at the sari-sari, a favorite hangout for the troops.

A week later, based on Miller's assessment of the situation, US headquarters issued an order to attack. In the early hours, the American flotilla ended the standoff and open-fired on Iloilo. Confusion reigned as the ground trembled with the impact of the overhead shells that showered the city. The explosions and flames from burning buildings lit the sky, a manifestation of the burning inferno below.

The bombardment damaged buildings, and in the chaos, vandalism, destruction, and slaughter abound. As Sergio had predicted, only a handful of men were willing to take up arms to defend Iloilo. The retreating Tagalog troops deserted the central part of the city, ablaze and reduced to ashes. Abandoned, the citizens were left defenseless.

Luckily, Ramon's estate was out of range of the incoming bombardment. "Stay here. I'm going to get Sergio and Flora," Ramon instructed his wife. He kissed her hands before leaving. "It's going to be okay."

He looked about for some reassurance. There were several frightened servants huddled at the far end of the room. Among them was his trusted overseer. "Bolo, keep them safe. I'll be back," he promised.

Bolo stepped from the pack and nodded.

Jose and Lorenzo were among the 6,000 men who had held their ground against Miller's landing party a month earlier. When the bombardment started, they made their way through the ensuing chaos, dodging bullets, rioters, and flames from the burning structures. They ran into their father just as he reached Flora's house. Sergio was dragging the resistant Flora from their home.

Lorenzo threw his screaming aunt over his shoulder and ran out, accompanied by the other men. "The Americans are shelling the city, and your house is within striking range," Lorenzo apologized in a voice loud enough to be heard over the chaos as the men escorted Sergio and the reluctant Flora to safety.

Agnes was waiting. She and Bolo helped the hysterical Flora into the house. Sergio looked on helplessly. He had lost one son, and a hole in his heart awaited the fate of the other. Thank goodness Ernesto was at the hacienda, out of harm's way.

"She's going to be okay," Ramon comforted his brother.

Once they were safe inside, Lorenzo ran back out. "Stay here," he instructed Jose. "Don't let anyone in. Shoot if you have to." He thrust into his brother's hands a Spanish M93 bayonet rifle issued to him when he joined the revolution. "I'll be back," he promised.

Seeing the rifle made it all real. Agnes began crying and begged Lorenzo to stay.

"Mama, the best way we can all be safe is to know what we are dealing with. I will be back." He gave his mother a quick hug before braving his way through the inferno.

Within an hour, Lorenzo returned, his swarthy face stained with black soot and his once-white shirt in tatters from the falling cinder, revealing a muscular torso. He was out of breath, and his skin glistened with perspiration as he led a small group of Ilonggo soldiers and a handful of women and children caught in the melee into the courtyard.

Without hesitation, Teresa and Agnes ushered the distraught civilians inside. The children, crying and wide-eyed with fright, clung to their mother's skirts. The adults remained mute from the shock of it all and did what they were told, devoid of any emotion.

"There's rioting and looting everywhere. No one is safe," Lorenzo warned his family. "The Tagalog deserters are setting fire to all of Iloilo."

Jose, who had just wiped the grime from his face, joined his brother and a handful of Ilonggo soldiers who positioned themselves around the perimeter of the courtyard, rifles readied. Teresa and Ramon dodged in and out of the house, filling the men's canteens and giving them some bread and any food they had available. Many had not eaten since the night before.

The sun was midway up the sky when the riotous deserters made their way to the courtyard. The tattered group, emboldened by its numbers, was met by Lorenzo. He recognized one of the rebels. It was Franco, a man who fought by his side against the Spanish. They exchanged a few words, then after a friendly handshake, the leader beckoned to the small band of men. They left without a word, the house intact.

With the city smoldering, ground forces led by Miller landed and captured Iloilo with no loss of American lives. He placed sentinels to restore order and to protect what remained of the townspeople's property. Two British warships in the roadstead sent boats ashore and landed a party of marines in an effort to save foreign assets. The United Kingdom had a consulate and vital business interests in Iloilo.

As gunshots came less frequently and the shouting quieted down, the civilians cautiously came out of hiding one by one. Disheartened, Lorenzo and Jose ditched their uniforms and joined their family in making the best of the situation. They made their way through the gathering crowd to assess the damage and the conditions of their surrender.

Chapter 12

A NEW CIVIL ORDER (1899-1903)

Ramon and his sons were convinced that absolute independence without any control or protection from some established political power was premature and doomed to disaster. Many of the large landowners and best-educated Ilonggos were in agreement. The aggravating factor for many of the Ilonggos was the dictatorial attitude and brutal conduct of the Tagalog revolutionary troops during the Iloilo campaigns, which had left them embittered.

While resistance from the insurgents continued, the Rodriguez family, who had seen the futility of fighting the Americans, sought their cooperation in rebuilding their city instead. Four months after the attack on Iloilo, on June 2, 1899, the Aguinaldo government officially declared war against the American forces in the Philippines.

At first, the US Army found the poorly armed and organized rebels no match and repeatedly beat them in battle. As a result, Aguinaldo abandoned head-on conflicts and resorted to the guerrilla warfare tactics that had served him and his men so well against the Spanish. The revolutionaries discarded their ragged uniforms and blended into the general population, defeating the ill-prepared Americans through a series of ambushes, reprisals, and patrol actions in the unfamiliar jungles.

The guerrilla tactics and the unfamiliar and threatening tropical environment took a toll on the psyches of the American soldiers.

Determined to end the war, the appointed military commander of the Philippines, General Arthur MacArthur, authorized a small force of American soldiers disguised as prisoners of war to venture deep into enemy territory and capture Aguinaldo. They were aided by a small group of Filipinos loyal to the Americans and who begrudged the insurgent Tagalog troops.

In March 1901, Aguinaldo was captured. The news was greeted with excitement by the American public, who had grown weary of the conflict. A month after his capture, Aguinaldo issued a proclamation calling for the rebels to surrender their arms and accept American sovereignty. President Roosevelt granted amnesty to all Filipinos who had participated in the insurrection and proclaimed the Philippine conflict officially over.

The transfer of power from the military to a temporary government in 1901 began Filipino involvement in the provisional system. Paolo emerged as a leader in negotiating the terms for the interim government. A handful of *Ilustrados*—the wealthiest and most educated members of the Filipino elite—accepted positions in the new administration.

When American officials set up the occupational forces in Iloilo, General Martin Delgado accepted the position of governor of the Province of Iloilo. Delgado relied on advice from his close friend, Ramon, to represent the city in establishing a new civil order. Working closely with the occupying Americans, Delgado began mobilizing to colonize anew Iloilo City and the province. Given their position, Ramon and his sons in Iloilo and Paolo in Manila became mediators between the Filipino people and the governing Americans. The family's influence, as

well as their pocketbooks, grew. They were able to influence the building of hospitals, clinics, and educational institutions.

The US Army elite Corps of Engineers was tasked with surveying a number of camps and overseeing the construction of a wharf at Camp Jossman on the nearby Guimaras Island, where Ernesto managed the family estate. The men dug and raked mountains, dumped boulders of rocks, and scraped hillsides on Guimaras and the surrounding islands, building piers, sea walls, and roads.

Sprouting villages developed alongside the newly laid roads of crushed stone. A new lifestyle was emerging. Soldiers and villagers on both sides of the strait crossed the narrow waterway on the ubiquitous paraws. The more resourceful owners added small motors, which conserved their energy zapped by the cold-hearted sun. These paraws-turned-pump boats made their way back and forth from the nearby islands with passengers eager to trade, sell, and buy.

Sergio had rebuilt the sari-sari, which had been destroyed during the American attack, and spent most of his time there. Now that American forces occupied the nearby island of Guimaras, the sari-sari thrived as American soldiers made their way across the strait to buy fresh fruits and souvenirs to send home. Barter trade with American ships in the Iloilo Strait was busy and alive. The Americans were loud and often impolite, justifying the anti-American sentiments that lingered among the residents of the city.

Sergio found solace at the sari-sari. It reminded him of those lazy, uncomplicated days when Flora would flirt his way. Since she had banned Teresa from their home, he had little reason to hang around the mansion. He mourned the loss of Andrew and Virgilio, missing in action since the Battle of Manila, and treasured what little time he had with his daughter, Teresa visited the sari sari when she was not at the infirmary and occasionally helped him at the counter.

Family money was abundant, but Sergio's only hold to the past was the sari-sari. Teresa understood, but she was concerned for his well-being. Sergio had lost weight, and, at times, even on the hottest of days, she would find him wearing two shirts to keep warm. "Papa, let Ernesto find you someone to run the store," she would beg her father. Sergio would dismiss her concerns with a wave of his hand.

Teresa visited the sari-sari whenever she could to check on her father's welfare. When there, she took over behind the counter, filling orders and answering questions. It gave her a break from the dismal environment of the infirmary. She loved engaging customers in conversation. Many were surprised that she spoke fluent English and were more than happy to converse with her.

On occasion, not knowing she spoke English, American soldiers would make lewd remarks. She ignored their comments and advances. Feeling smug, they would pay for their purchases and leave. For the most part, they were harmless. But that was not always the case.

"That will be two pesos." Teresa took the coins. She had seen the tall, sandy-haired stranger before. Although he always dressed in civilian shorts and a loose-fitting button-down shirt, his GI haircut gave him away. The soldier always bought the same thing—lumpia, a banana, and coconut juice.

“Thank you.” He smiled at Teresa. He had seen her in the shop several times. She kept her hair pulled back and anchored with a comb. He wondered how long it was as he took his purchase and headed out.

Teresa sighed as her eyes followed him out the door and into the street—*there was something about him*.

The spell was suddenly shattered when a large, hairy arm reached out and grabbed Teresa’s hand. “Hey, sweet thing, what’cha doin’ after work?”

Repulsed, Teresa wrenched her hand from his grasp.

Two of his comrades hooted. “I think that’s a no,” one of them laughed at his expense.

Sergio, upon hearing the ruckus, walked into view. Although he was a head shorter, Teresa’s father stood tall. He looked the intruders straight in the eyes. “That’ll be five pesos,” he said, nodding at the pile of goods the men had placed on the counter.

There was a brief silence as the three gauged the shopkeeper’s intimidating stance.

“C’mon, Moose! We don’t want any trouble. Let’s get out of here.” One of the three tugged at the leader, who turned and stormed from the shop, abandoning the merchandise they had gathered.

Teresa had encountered their kind before, but never had one touched her. She crossed her arms in an attempt to stifle the shiver that crept up her spine.

Sergio frowned. The encounter visibly shook her. Worried, he braced his daughter’s shoulders. “They’re gone.”

She took a deep breath and gave him a reassuring smile, “I’m okay, Papa.”

After helping her father for a few more hours, Teresa put the thought of the unpleasant encounter behind her. She smiled at her father as she packed a basket for her departure. “I’m okay,” she reassured him again.

Since her banishment, the defiant daughter had been staying at the convent where Mother Cecelia had given her room and board. In return, she was available at all hours if a difficult birth or trauma required her level of expertise. Sometimes, she would bring the nuns overripe fruits and vegetables from the sari-sari.

On this day, Teresa made a detour instead of heading straight to the convent. She was going to pay her friend, Anna, a visit. She carried a basket filled with dried banana leaves, bitter melon, sour oranges, and garlic cloves. As Teresa approached the creek, she heard the breaking of branches and loud overtures coming from behind the dense thicket.

Three American soldiers appeared. She recognized them. They had been in the shop earlier. The leader was a towering bully with deep, menacing eyes framed by thickly arched brows and a scar across his Neanderthal jaw. Teresa remembered when he grabbed her hand, and a shudder overcame her.

The defenseless young woman’s heart raced, her mouth went dry, and her breathing quickened. She felt sweat dribble down her back as her dilated eyes, on high alert, searched for an escape route.

“Hey, don’t run, sweet thing. We just want to give you a little taste of America’s best,” one of the soldiers taunted.

She was terrified as the leader stepped forward, and the other two circled around her. Teresa froze, dropping her basket, the contents scattering as it hit the ground.

Before she could budge, a towering figure rushed between her and the Neanderthal. He stood his ground without a word, daring the three to make a move.

“Come on! Let’s get out of here!” Moose shouted to his comrades, who didn’t need more of an excuse to scamper away.

In a panic, Teresa turned and ran. Her rescuer watched as she ran to a house, barely visible through the dense forest, and disappeared through the door. He frowned, then picked up her abandoned basket and gathered its contents strewn across the ground. He had seen her before.

“You’re shaking,” Anna observed as she pulled the frightened girl inside and shut and barred the door. Whatever it was that had frightened Teresa was not coming in without a fight. She helped her friend, who was clearly in distress, to a chair and retrieved a gun from under her mattress.

A short time lapsed in unsettling silence. Whatever had spooked Teresa was no longer a threat. Anna turned to put on a pot of water for calming tea when a knock on the door claimed what little composure her friend had mustered.

“Don’t open that door!” Teresa shouted.

Anna peeked out the window. She saw an American standing there with Teresa’s basket. “What do you want?” Anna asked in a demanding tone.

“The young lady dropped her basket. I just want to make sure she is alright.”

“She’s fine. Put the basket on the doorstep and leave.”

The stranger did as he was told.

Chapter 13

TO THE RESCUE (1903)

In March of 1903, Captain Richard Manners arrived on the Island of Guimaras aboard the USS *Logan* to join the regiment at Camp Jossman, which was the base for the 19th infantry and two battalions of Filipino scouts. He was in charge of the surveying crew.

When he was off duty, Rich would make his way to Iloilo with his binoculars and camera. He was an amateur ornithologist and trekked the island's wetlands, which provided a safe haven for countless species of migratory birds. Rich hoped to capture photos of as many different species as possible. He kept a diary where he cataloged and painstakingly identified their diverse colors and features. On one such outing, Rich observed the three menacing men with his binoculars and hurried to the young woman's rescue. He knew the troublemakers.

The next day at Camp Jossman, the captain summoned the three bullies.

"Yes, sir!" They stood at attention.

Rich looked up from his paperwork. "Yesterday, what were you planning on doing if I hadn't come upon you?"

"We were just having fun, sir!"

Rich waved his hand for them to stop. "Well, today, you are going to really enjoy yourself," he addressed the first to talk. "Starting today, you will report for KP duty for a full week." After a brief pause, his eyes rested on the two who remained silent. The captain shook his head slowly and heaved a heavy sigh. "Since you seem to enjoy each other's company, you two can join him."

There was a silence in the room as the three troublemakers contemplated their fate.

"Dismissed!"

The three turned to leave.

"Oh, and you are not to leave Guimaras for the duration of your stay. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir!" they responded in unison. It was clear from the threatening look on the captain's face that he was serious.

After they left, Rich stepped from behind his desk to stretch his legs. As he looked out the open window, he trusted their restriction to Guimaras would solve any problem of retaliation.

Teresa's rescuer returned to his bird-watching trips, stopping at the sari-sari for provisions, hoping to find the girl he saw at the creek. After two weeks with no glimpse of her, he mustered the courage to knock on Anna's door.

Anna came from behind the house. She carried a basket filled with lemongrass she had just harvested. "Can I help you?"

He turned, and she recognized him as the stranger who had retrieved Teresa's basket, and, after Teresa told her story, as her friend's savior.

"I just wanted to see if your friend is okay," he replied.

"She had a fright, but she's a strong woman and will get over it," Anna reassured him.

Rich persisted. “I haven’t seen her at the sari-sari and didn’t want to inquire for fear of alarming the proprietor.”

“That’s Sergio, her father,” Anna informed him with a warm smile. His thoughtfulness reminded her of Carlos’s father—a merchant sailor lost at sea. She noticed the beads of sweat on his forehead and the wet stains under the arms of his shirt. “It’s hot out here.” Anna moved past him and opened the door, inviting him in.

“Thank you, but I just wanted to make sure she was okay. Will you tell her that those men will not bother her again?”

Anna nodded. As he turned to walk away, she asked, “Did you see the red-tailed tropicbird?”

Rich looked at her with surprise. Anna had caught him off guard.

“I noticed your binoculars and tripod. Figured you were bird-watching,” she explained.

He acknowledged that he was an amateur at best and was looking to photograph and identify as many as he could.

“The tropicbird is rarely seen around here,” she added. “You might want to head that way,” she said, pointing toward the Guimaras Strait to the east.

“Thank you.” Rich smiled and headed in the direction she had indicated. He had walked about a half mile into the thicket when he heard cackling calls. He looked up and saw several white birds circling overhead. There was no mistaking that they were tropicbirds with their framed black eyes, red beaks, and tails sporting long red plumes twice as long as their bodies. He sought out the largest and steadied his camera on a tripod to capture it upon landing. When he was satisfied, he packed up his equipment and headed for the base.

The following weekend, he stopped, as usual, at the sari-sari, and he was disappointed to see that the young girl was again absent. After getting supplies, Rich made his way back to Anna’s house and knocked on the door.

She recognized him and opened it with a smile. “Come in!”

Upon entering, he recognized her visitor. “I’m sorry to interrupt,” he apologized as he stood awkwardly in the doorway, looking at Teresa.

“Nonsense, come on in.” Anna interrupted his gaze. “This is Teresa.”

“Hi.” He acknowledged the visitor nervously as he stepped inside, laying his tripod and knapsack on the floor next to the door. He stood there without saying a word, clueless about what to do with his hands now that they were free of their burdens.

Teresa broke the silence. “Thank you for coming to my rescue.” She smiled and fixed her eyes on her hero. She remembered him from the sari-sari. He was kind.

Silence ensued. Rich had a lot to say but didn’t know where to start. Teresa was new to the feelings this man stirred inside her and didn’t know what to say.

“Ahem!” Anna broke the spell.

Rich snapped to. “Oh! I came to give you these,” he explained, bending down and rummaging through his knapsack. From a folder, he pulled out several photos of the red-tailed tropicbird. He stood by as Anna and Teresa commented on his skill.

“These are beautiful!” Teresa remarked, looking up at the photographer.

Rich was captivated by the vision in front of him, rendered speechless by her large almond-shaped eyes, flawless milky skin, and long black hair that framed her face and trailed down her back.

Anna sensed this was more than a “hello, how are you?” conversation. “Stay and have tea with us,” she offered.

Rich, who was in no hurry to leave, did not budge. He nodded. “If it’s no bother.”

Anna pulled up a chair. “Sit.”

Once formalities were exchanged, it was an effortless conversation. The three of them spent over an hour getting to know one another.

“I’m from Oklahoma,” he answered their question. “I was born in Ireland. My parents moved to New York when I was nine years old. They had planned to live with my father’s uncle, who immigrated there the year before. Within months of their arrival, the president officially proclaimed the Unassigned Lands Act open to settlement in 1889,” Rich continued. “My parents packed their bags, along with my uncle, and headed west, where they laid claim to 160 acres of unsettled land. And we’ve been there ever since.”

“They just *gave* it to them? All that land?” Anna asked incredulously.

He nodded. “Uh-huh.”

When Rich slapped at a mosquito that landed on his neck, Anna got up from her chair, rummaged through the many containers on a nearby table, and handed him a bottle. “It’s lemon eucalyptus oil,” she explained. “Rub it on your skin to keep the mosquitoes away.”

He did as he was told.

Teresa used the distraction as an excuse to leave. She stood and picked up her basket, filled with freshly harvested bitter melon from Anna’s garden. Rich looked quizzically at the basket filled with green cucumber-like vegetables with gnarly skin.

She answered Rich’s question before he had a chance to ask. “I have to go now. I promised Mother Cecelia I would bring her some of what you might call wild cucumber.”

He looked over at Anna. “I need to go too. I hope I haven’t overstayed my welcome.”

“Never,” Anna scolded as he picked up his knapsack and tripod. “You are welcome anytime.”

He handed her back the bottle of eucalyptus oil. “Thank you.”

“Keep it,” she offered.

Rich was happy to oblige and slipped it into his knapsack as he raced Teresa to the door. Opening it for her, he asked boldly, “Do you mind if I escort you?”

It was a grand gesture. Teresa was not used to that kind of attention. “Thank you,” rolled from her mouth before she could think of a reason to object. Unconsciously, she took her free hand and tucked her hair behind her ears, away from her face.

Anna watched as they left. She raised her eyebrows at her friend's gesture. Was Teresa *flirting*? She smiled knowingly.

Walking Teresa to the convent, Rich went mute while his mind actively entertained a steady stream of scenarios. His jaw tightened when he thought of her being terrorized by his men. "They won't bother you again," he said, breaking the silence.

Teresa was lost in her own thoughts. "I'm sorry. What did you say?"

They were a block from the convent.

"I said we're here." He shifted his knapsack, bravely took her hand, and walked her to the door, where Mother Cecelia met them.

"Teresa." The nun took the basket from her friend's arm and let her gaze rest on the tall stranger. "Invite your friend in out of the sun."

Rich panicked. "Oh, no." He was embarrassed, certain that the nun sensed his feelings for Teresa. "I have to get back to Camp Jossman. It's getting late." He looked at the uncooperative sun, higher up on the horizon than he had hoped.

On his way back to the base, the flustered man chastised himself for his abrupt departure. He hoped they would not think him disrespectful.

That night and all the next day, he could not get Teresa out of his mind. His preoccupation did not go unnoticed.

"Rich?"

Rich startled. "Huh?"

"You're not hearing what I said." Chad, his friend since high school and now a fellow officer, was used to his moody friend. They had joined the United States Military Academy in West Point, where they'd majored in engineering. After graduation, they joined the US Corps of Engineers and were soon deployed to the Philippines.

"Your attention is elsewhere," Chad pointed out. He leaned against the wall and crossed his arms in amusement. "Are you going to tell me about her or not?"

"What makes you think it's a her?" Rich challenged his friend.

Chad smirked. "Okay, a him then."

"Go to hell!"

Chad chuckled, uncrossed his arms, and pulled up a chair facing his friend across his wide oak desk strewn with papers and maps. "Not until you tell me all about your mystery woman."

Rich's inquisitive friend had married his high school sweetheart soon after graduating from the military academy. They had a daughter, now three.

Rich was a catch for any woman, but he preferred birds. The women he had dated had all back-stepped after their first tromp through the woods in search of some elusive species of birds. Mosquitoes, flies, and thorns ripping at their sweaty clothes—not their idea of romance.

Chad had never seen his friend like this. Rich was distracted to the point that his work suffered. "You're smitten!" he gloated.

Rich was anxious for an excuse to tell someone. “I won’t lie to you,” he admitted, then told his friend about Teresa. “I’m going to marry her,” he said quite seriously.

“No, you’re not! You’ve only just met her,” Chad objected.

“Let me ask you a question.” Rich wished to enlighten his friend. “When did you know Kathy was the one?”

“That’s easy. After our first date,” Chad replied without hesitation. “But I didn’t *marry* her then,” he reminded his friend.

“And why didn’t you ask her to marry you then?” Rich insisted.

“Because I had no means of support—no job, no money. Christ, I was in high school, living with my parents!”

“Precisely!” Rich exclaimed. “I have the means. I have a job. I’m not in high school. And I don’t still live with my parents! Case closed!”

Chad couldn’t argue with that.

That weekend, Rich packed up his gear and headed across the strait. When he got to the sari-sari, he was pleasantly surprised. “Teresa!” he cried, happy to see her.

Teresa looked up and smiled. Her heart quickened. She stopped filling baskets with mangoes and walked towards her new friend. She was happy to see him—the fact was, she had been *hoping* to see him.

Sergio glanced at his daughter’s flushed face and smiled to himself.

“Going bird-watching?” she asked.

“I was on my way to Anna’s. She was kind enough to point me in the right direction one time. Perhaps you might know where the cockatoo or the fairy bluebird or the hornbill might be found,” he answered. “It sure would be easier than tromping around the wetlands until lucking upon one.” Rich pulled out a map of the island and looked over at Sergio. “May I?” At his nod, the amateur birder spread it over the counter.

The trio poured over the map. Teresa circled an area where she had seen a kalaw. The kalaw, also known as the rufous hornbill, was coveted for its tropical colors and could be quite hard to find.

“There’s a small creek here.” She pointed. “Once you cross it, head east. “She looked up at Rich and paused. “It might be better if I showed you,” she offered without thought.

What am I doing? She started to rescind her offer, but he was quick to respond.

“Thank you. I would love that!” Rich saw a brief moment of panic fly across her face and gave her an out. “That is, if it isn’t too much trouble.”

Teresa looked at her father, who was standing protectively nearby. “Papa, I’m sorry—this is Rich. He is a friend of mine and Anna’s.” She added her friend’s name to validate their friendship.

Sergio studied the tall, sandy-haired stranger. He had seen Rich before. Now he had a name.

The young woman had not told her father of her episode in the woods. She did not want to worry him. Standing out of Sergio's sight, Teresa shook her head. Rich understood.

"Your daughter has been helping me find birds." Rich knew he sounded ridiculous, so he went on to explain. "Bird-watching." He held up his tripod. "I take pictures of them," he said, blundering into the abyss he had dug for himself.

Sergio let him ramble on, entertained by Rich's attempt to hide his true purpose—to spend time with his daughter. *I wonder if Teresa knows*, he thought over the prattle as he looked at his daughter for any sign that might give her away.

Rich suddenly realized that Sergio and Teresa were staring at him as if some alien had dropped in and asked for directions. He stopped talking. Silence followed. Sergio was amused, Teresa relieved.

Having made a fool of himself, Rich blurted, "Sir, I would like your permission to court your daughter." As soon as it came out, Rich regretted his words.

Both father and daughter were rendered speechless.

Rich's throat went dry as he swallowed hard to clear it. "That didn't come out right," he apologized.

"That you are bird-watching? Or that you want to court my daughter?" Sergio teased. He had guessed Rich's intentions all along. Judging by Teresa's flushed face and her brazen offer to accompany him on his search, her father sensed the feeling was mutual.

At a loss for words, Rich looked at Teresa for help. He hoped to find a telltale sign that she felt the same way, but Teresa was deep in her own thoughts about what Rich had said. She was stunned—*he wants to court me?* His words were unexpected and made her giddy—a pleasant but new sensation for her.

Embarrassed and assuming the worst, Rich hiked his knapsack over his shoulder and turned to leave.

"Wait!" Teresa pleaded.

They both looked over at Sergio, who nodded.

Her father watched as they left. His daughter deserved happiness.

Chapter 14

TERESA AND RICH (1904)

Teresa took Rich on a thirty-minute hike through the wetlands. They heard the whoosh of long wings overhead before catching a glimpse of one of the largest birds in the area. It was most positively a kalaw with its black-feathered body, white tail, neck and bib adorned in rust-colored feathers, and a large, curved, bright red-orange beak capped with a protruding casque.

Rich was delighted. He set up his tripod and snapped several photos.

“Don’t move.” He snapped a picture of Teresa.

No one had ever taken a picture of her before. She blushed, remembering the pictures he had taken of the red tailed tropicbird. They were beautiful. That he wanted a photo of her made her feel beautiful, too. *Was she?*

Rich sat on the ground and cleared a space for her. They rested, listening to the bird’s loud echoing croaks, and watched the male feed his partner through a slit in the sealed nest hidden between the tree’s branches. It seemed surreal.

Rich was the first to speak. “It’s so peaceful here.”

Teresa nodded and smiled. “I love this place. When I was in Madrid, I missed it so much.” She casually leaned back on one elbow, eyes on Rich.

“Thank you for bringing me here.” Rich was sincere. “The truth is, I wanted to spend some time alone with you.” He reached out and touched her arm. “You must know how I feel about you.”

Every nerve in Teresa’s body stirred. Startled, she bolted to a sitting position, shivering from his touch.

“I’m so s-s-sorry,” Rich stuttered. “I didn’t mean to be forward.” He cursed himself for being such a lummo. Her presence rendered him stupid—it seemed he was always apologizing.

“Shh...” Teresa whispered, looking directly into his eyes. “Touch me again.”

With some trepidation, he reached out and touched her face ever so lightly. Teresa closed her eyes. She felt the sensation again. This time, the enraptured woman did not object. She opened her eyes, reached over, and touched his face in return. *Such a beautiful face*, she thought, as she studied the man with hair the color of sand and eyes the color of the blue-green ocean that caressed its way up the sandy shore.

Still cautious, Rich brushed her cheek with his lips. She didn’t object. He moved closer and cradled her face with both hands. He kissed her lips and she responded. He wrapped his arms around her. Together, they created their own world where time was irrelevant. In their world, she had known Rich forever.

Finally, Rich broke the spell. “It’s getting late.”

Reality sent a chill through Teresa. Rich looked over at her and smiled. She was glowing. It was no earthly alchemist who had affected her transformation. This felt right. “Let’s get married,” Rich blurted out. “Next weekend.”

Teresa laughed. “Are you always this spontaneous?”

“Only when I’m around you.”

Teresa thought a moment. It felt right. She laughed softly at the idea of her getting married, then nodded. “Let’s talk to Father Miguel—tomorrow,” she promised.

On the way home, Teresa confessed that she was nearing thirty.

“I’m twenty-five,” he laughed. “And besides,” he said teasingly, “I’m liking older women more,” he stopped and kissed her lips, “and more,” he kissed her again, “and more.” He kissed her a third time.

He escorted his intended to the convent door. She turned her head when he leaned in to kiss her goodbye. Teresa put her finger to her lips to quiet him. She giggled in a flirty way. She had never flirted before. *Was it instinct?* She wasn’t sure, but it didn’t feel wrong.

The next morning, Rich met up with Teresa after Mass. She had seen Father Miguel in the sacristy earlier and asked for a meeting. Rich respected her position and kept his distance, even though he wanted to shout out to every passerby that he was marrying this beautiful woman.

At the rectory where Father Miguel resided, they were greeted by a Filipino deacon who ushered them to the good father’s office. The priest had expected Teresa to be alone. He was surprised when she entered, accompanied by a tall, tanned American in a red-printed shirt and khaki shorts.

“Father Miguel,” she greeted her friend. “This is Rich.”

Teresa was radiant, and the priest knew immediately that Rich occupied the place in her heart that he had long ago carved out for himself.

This is not happening, he thought as he reluctantly shook Rich’s hand. That she had not taken her vows was a disappointment. That she had something far more meaningful with the man enraged Father Miguel. He resented that she had replaced him with Rich—no, not replaced. He realized in that moment that he had never been there at all. He had never felt this kind of jealousy before. His thoughts were unbecoming of a priest, and he blamed Teresa.

“Give me a second.” The priest hurriedly left the room. He had to control his anger. She had betrayed him, and now she was flaunting Rich in front of him. In anger, he punched at the cold stone wall, bloodying his knuckles and knocking a crucifix to the floor.

The deacon, upon hearing the crash, came to his aid.

“I tripped and fell,” Father Miguel explained.

Although there was no obstacle that he could possibly have tripped on, the deacon accepted his explanation without question and brought a pan of water for him to wash the blood off his knuckles.

The priest needed time. With his back to his assistant, Father Miguel closed his eyes in anguish. “Will you please bring my guests some tea and tell them I will be with them in a minute?”

Once he had composed himself, Father Miguel returned.

“Your hand,” Teresa noted as she instinctively examined his injured hand. She frowned and looked at her friend’s face. She saw pain, but she misunderstood its source.

“A slight accident. It’s okay.” Father Miguel pulled his hand away and hid it behind him.

He seemed irritated at the attention, so Teresa changed the subject. “Rich and I want you to marry us.”

The priest looked at the couple. This was the last thing he wanted to hear. He was living his worst nightmare and needed a way out. He stared at the unsuspecting man. “Are you Catholic?” he drilled Rich.

“My parents are, but I was never baptized.”

Father Miguel looked over at Teresa. She understood the implication. “You know I can’t marry you,” he scolded.

Rich stepped forward. “I’ll get baptized,” he proposed.

“Not so fast!” Father Miguel snapped. Now he had the upper hand. “You will have to attend catechism first, and then I will have to approve your baptism.”

“Carlos... I’m sorry,” Teresa apologized for being too familiar. “Please marry us. He ships out in less than a month. We need a marriage certificate if I am to go with him,” she pleaded.

“I’m sorry. I can’t. My schedule is full, and I don’t have time to tutor your friend.”

The deacon poked his head in the doorway and beckoned to the priest.

“Now, if you will excuse me, I have a baptism to perform.” Father Miguel left them standing there.

Rich turned to Teresa. “What just happened?”

She shrugged. She was as perplexed at Father Miguel’s lack of empathy as he.

When they were outside, Rich offered a solution. “Let’s concentrate on getting a marriage certificate. I promise you I will make it right once we get stateside.”

It was a compromise Teresa was willing to make.

Under Spanish colonialism, Catholicism had been the religion of the state. The occupying American government had implemented the separation of church and state and encouraged Protestantism within the archipelago. This meant that there might be other churches willing to recognize their union.

After a few inquiries, Rich led Teresa to a simple bamboo chapel. The vicar in charge listened to their story and agreed to marry them the following Saturday when Rich was off duty.

The next day, after working with his surveying crew, Rich put in his request for a three-day pass and then headed to the local market. He was getting married and had to find a ring.

The proprietor of the shop greeted Rich as if he were an old friend. "I've been waiting for you," said the old jeweler. He had a head of thick, white hair, and his long, white beard faded into the white kimono draped over his tall, thin frame.

"I'm here to buy a ring," Rich replied as he searched the display.

"That's all?" the vision in white asked as if he were expecting more.

Rich nodded. It didn't take long to find a gold band. He planned to upgrade it when he got back to Oklahoma. After he paid for his purchase, the proprietor watched the soldier expectantly as he headed for the door.

On his way out of the shop, a ray of light reflected off an object, catching Rich's attention. In the corner of the open showcase was an ivory comb. It was delicately carved with a large rose in the middle and vines running along the edge. He thought of Teresa's thick, black hair.

The old jeweler smiled as the young man took the comb and laid it on the counter. "Ah, this is one of a kind!" he said, picking it up and presenting it back to Rich. "The rose still reigns as the ultimate symbol of love, passion, and hope."

Rich turned it over, examining the comb and reading the etching along its edge. Puzzled, he looked up at the proprietor. "*Meant to be?*"

"For sure," the jeweler promised. "The comb has been waiting for its owner to come along for a very long time." He retrieved it from Rich's hand and wrapped it in parcel paper. As he handed the wrapped package to Rich, he leaned in closer. "Give this comb to your true love, and should you ever be separated, it will always lead her back to you."

Rich was aware of the animistic character of the Filipino people, who believed that supernatural forces existed in nature and sometimes in inanimate objects. "Thank you," he said as he took the package. It was a romantic notion, and he smiled at the sincerity of the elderly man's words.

As Rich walked away, the old jeweler shook his head sadly, knowing of the heartaches yet to come. "Don't despair, my friend," he whispered to the disappearing figure. "The comb will not fail you."

The first thing on Teresa's list was to tell her father the good news. In spite of her happiness, Teresa winced when she saw him. Sergio looked tired and pale. "Papa, I'm going to have Ernesto get you help. You cannot do this kind of work anymore."

"Sí! Sí! Sí!" Sergio mocked. "I am not as young as I used to be, but I can still manage this store. Ernesto has someone managing the rest. Besides, I like doing this. It makes me feel good, and Ramon comes by every day for a shot." Sergio kept a bottle of imported whiskey

under the counter for such occasions. He looked suspiciously at his daughter. She was radiant. “I think you might have good news for me?”

“What makes you say that?” she teased.

Sergio smiled. “A father knows.”

“Oh, Papa!” Teresa cried. “I am so very happy!”

Sergio spent the afternoon hours with his daughter. He had never seen Teresa so animated and was satisfied that Rich was right for her. Although he felt sad that their plans would take her to America, at the same time, he knew in his heart it was a good decision for her.

He reminisced. “I remembered how scared I was when I first held you. You were so tiny, and the world was so big. I was afraid you would get lost in it, but you didn’t. You always knew where you were going and how to get home. I will tell your mama the good news.”

“No. Let me tell Mama myself.”

“I will go with you,” Sergio offered. He was afraid Flora would go off on one of her tirades, as she often did when she was not in control of events.

“No, Papa, I must do this myself, but not today.” She wasn’t sure how Flora would react, and this was her happy day. Today, she wanted to share her happiness with Anna.

Before she left, Sergio took his daughter’s hands. “You were, and still are, my baby girl. I want you to know you have my blessings. I am so happy for you.”

Teresa left and made her way past the creek to her friend, who was not in the least surprised. Anna was not insensitive to her son’s feelings for the girl, but Teresa was like a daughter to her, and she could not conceive of her and Carlos as more than playmates.

“This coming up Saturday?”

Teresa nodded.

“So soon?”

“Nothing seems real, Anna,” Teresa confessed. “I’ve never felt like this, and it feels right!”

Anna’s eyes did not deceive her. Teresa was a woman in love. “So have you picked out a dress?”

Everything had happened so quickly that Teresa had not given any thought as to what she would wear. She shrugged her shoulders as if it was not worth worrying about.

“Of course, you haven’t.” Anna picked up on her lack of interest as she removed pots and plants from the top of a nearby trunk that served as a table. “It’s been a while,” she said as she began rummaging through the chest until she found what she was looking for. “Try this on,” Anna ordered. It was an ornately tatted, full-length dress that fit over a simple white slip.

Teresa gasped. “Anna?”

“I never got to wear it.” Her eyes teared up. “Carlo’s father was lost at sea.”

Teresa embraced her friend. She understood her sorrow.

Anna broke away and held the dress up against Teresa. “My dear friend, would you do me the honor of wearing it?”

Anna spent the next two days letting out the hem of her dress and fitting it to Teresa. “It’s perfect.” Anna clasped her hands when Teresa modeled the dress. “I can’t wait to see Rich’s face when he sees you in it!” Her mood changed to somber. “Have you told your mother yet?”

“I tried, but she slammed the door before I could get a word out,” Teresa lamented. “She doesn’t want to see me, ever.”

Anna comforted her friend. She knew firsthand how cruel Flora could be. “We all have our own journey. And besides, the rest of your family and I will be there,” the older woman said to cheer her up.

That Saturday, Rich got up early and nudged Chad. “Get up!”

It was one of those rare days when a cool breeze winged its way from the nearby mountain and circled capriciously around the island, while overhead, picturesque clouds provided shade from the fiery sun with no intention of dumping their contents. It was truly perfect.

Teresa met them as they were getting out of the small sailing craft. Rich wore a locally tailored white tunic made of thin fabric. It had a Chinese collar and was elaborately decorated with white work embroidery in traditional patterns.

“Teresa, meet my friend Chad. He’s here as my best man.”

“I can see now why Rich is so infatuated with you.” Chad kissed her hand and gave his friend a nod as a sign of approval.

“I didn’t sleep last night,” Rich whispered when he was within earshot of Teresa.

She smiled—she hadn’t either.

They met at the chapel where Sergio, Ernesto, Agnes, and Ramon, along with their sons, waited. They chatted idly with Rich and his friend while Anna helped Teresa into her wedding dress. She anchored Teresa’s hair with a comb and decorated it with sampaguitas she had picked that morning from a nearby bush laden with the starry white blooms.

The wedding party was delighted when Sergio walked his daughter up the narrow path strewn with white petals. They had never seen Teresa so beautiful and so happy.

It was a simple ceremony held outdoors under the shade of a cluster of banyan trees with eye-catching aerial roots surrounded by the sampaguita bushes that Anna had earlier robbed of some of their sweet-smelling white blooms.

After a brief reception, courtesy of the vicar’s wife, the wedding party paraded behind the bride and groom as they made their way to a small craft Chad had waiting to take them across the strait. Their friends had decorated it with white sampaguitas and ribbons. Chad had packed a bottle of champagne in precious ice that he had confiscated from the mess hall’s kitchen, along with two glasses.

Rich hugged his best man. “Thank you.”

As they approached the paraw beached on the shore. Rich removed his shoes. Sergio watched as the groom ceremoniously carried his only daughter to the awaiting craft. He looked up at Ernesto, who rested his hand on his father's shoulder.

Once aboard, Anna handed Teresa a black satchel with her clothes. The small group waved and noisily cheered as the small craft was launched into the water.

"I have rented a one-room house on Guimaras, close to camp. It's small," Rich apologized, "but we will be together for three days before I have to return to base."

"My dear husband..." Teresa hesitated. "I like that sound! My dear husband, as long as you fill that small space, it is space enough for me."

He pulled her close. "I've been waiting all my life to hold my wife and kiss her forehead—" he kissed her forehead, "—her cheeks—" he kissed each cheek, "—her lips." He lingered.

"We're here," the mariner interrupted them as he beached his craft.

A kalesa drawn by a single white horse waited by the side of the sandy path that led to the shore. The driver recognized Rich and waved as he approached to help the couple into the two-wheeled carriage. He smiled and nodded at Teresa. Once he had loaded Chad's box of treasures and Teresa's satchel into the carriage, he got behind the reins and urged the horse down the ever-winding and dusty road to Camp Jossman, passing newly sprung villages along the way.

The driver pulled up to a small cinder-block house in a village just outside the camp. Its roof was framed with bamboo poles tied together with a strong fishing line that supported the nipa-thatched roof with a two-foot overhang. It featured two large east/west windows framed with nipa-thatched shutters attached at the top of the windows and angling down for privacy and to give protection from the sun.

"Our first home," Rich announced as he turned his attention to helping Teresa out of the carriage.

The driver brought Chad's box to the door of the house and promptly left.

Holding her hand and carrying her satchel of belongings in the other, Rich opened the door and tossed the bag inside the tiny hut. "There is one tradition that is mandatory." He picked his bride up in his arms, carried her across the threshold, and laid her on the bed against the wall. "Be back." He kissed her and left.

Teresa looked around. The four walls, painted white, were bare. There were no curtains, and the shutters were cracked about six inches, allowing air to circulate. The bed, two chairs, and a small table completed the room.

Rich returned with the box of goodies Chad had packed for them. "And now..." He reached into the basket and took out the bottle of champagne, still cool even though most of the ice had melted. He unwrapped the two champagne flutes his friend had taken from the officers' dining area. Looking over at Teresa, Rich laughed. "He's thought of everything!"

The newlywed popped the cork, filled both glasses, and handed one to Teresa. "A toast." He clinked his glass against his bride's. "I know this is real because no dream would ever measure up to here and now and forever with you."

They sat on the bed with their backs against the wall and the bottle of champagne between them.

“Well, Mrs. Manners, are you ready to spend the rest of your life with your husband?”

Teresa smiled. “The rest of my life.” This felt right, and no earthly power could argue Teresa’s feelings.

He wrapped his arms around her, and Teresa found herself in another world where there were no rules. She longed to breathe, and he was air. Her every other heartbeat was his. Together, they created their own magical space somewhere between dreaming and reality.

That night, their burning bodies were cooled by a gentle breeze that swept through the cracked shutters, courtesy of the nearby Guimaras Strait.

The next morning, Rich got up and rummaged through his duffle bag before handing Teresa a small box.

“What is this?” she asked.

Rich climbed into the bed next to her. “Open it.”

She gasped when she saw the elaborately decorated ivory comb. “It’s beautiful,” Teresa said as she swept her hair back and anchored it.

“No, *you’re* beautiful,” Rich corrected as he leaned in and gently removed the comb, her hair falling down over her shoulders. He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her face. He turned the comb so she could read the inscription.

“*Meant to be?*” Teresa asked.

“Why not? I’m here, thousands of miles from my home, on an island I never knew existed before now, with you, who was groomed for a cloistered life. We were destined to meet. The war, my tromp through the woods on that day, at that very time, would never have happened if we were not meant to be. Nothing else makes sense.”

Teresa giggled. “So you are saying the war happened in order to bring us together?”

“That’s as good an explanation as I have heard,” he admitted.

“We’re not *that* important,” she added, amused by his reasoning.

Rich lifted her chin and looked earnestly into her eyes. “I like to think we are.”

He’s serious, she thought. She smiled and snuggled close. She felt safe and loved.

The honeymoon over, Rich spent his first day back at the base making arrangements to bring his bride back to America. He was met with cynicism. It was typical for American soldiers, left on their own, to amuse themselves by visiting gambling houses, saloons, and houses of ill repute inhabited primarily by Chinese and Japanese women and Filipinos.

Although Teresa was considered a US national, Congress empowered the Bureau of Immigration to exclude people involved in prostitution and to deport prostitutes as well as procurers of prostitutes if they were immigrants too. The administrators were wary of Filipino women who were quick to marry soldiers. It was the Bureau of Immigration that Rich had to convince to let him bring Teresa to America.

The bureau investigators were relentless. “Do you know what you’re getting into? How did you meet? Can she speak English? Do you have a marriage certificate?”

Finally, after an hour of interrogation, he was informed that they would consider his request.

Rich clenched his teeth and leaned forward in his chair. “You do know we leave at the end of the month?”

The immigration officer, somewhat miffed, sighed, placed the paper he was writing atop a pile of similar requests, and rocked back in his chair, staring at the young officer in front of him. “There, I’ve given it top priority.”

Fighting the urge to wipe the smirk off the pen pusher’s face, Rich returned to duty, irritated at the man’s disregard for urgency. In a hurry, he brushed past Chad, who chased him down.

“Hey Rich, you nearly knocked me over! Want to tell me what’s going on?”

“I just talked with the immigration officer. I think he might be looking for reasons not to honor my request to bring Teresa stateside.”

“In order to deny it, they must have a very good reason.” Chad put a sympathetic hand on his friend’s shoulder. “Trust me, they’re just giving you a hard time.”

Two days later, Rich got the approval he was looking for.

That weekend, he rushed to catch up with Teresa to give her the good news. She was not in the cottage, but she had told him she had some things to take care of in Iloilo. He couldn’t wait for her to come home, so he requisitioned a horse and saddle and headed for the city.

The sari-sari was the nearest and first place to look. Sergio would know where she was. Rich hurried from the shore to the crowded marketplace. His pace slowed as he neared the small shop and noticed the thatched nipa shutter that covered the doorway was latched down.

This did not feel good.

Chapter 15

DEATH IN THE FAMILY (1904)

Rich ran to the vendor next door. “Where is Sergio? His shop is closed.”

“You don’t know?” the hunched-over, sun-wrinkled Filipino proprietor asked. *Everybody knew.* “Sergio died two days ago.”

The news put Rich into a tailspin. His happiness took a dive as grief surged to the forefront, only to be overtaken by panic. He needed to get to Teresa. *Why didn’t anyone tell me?*

In the Filipino culture, death was a significant event and a time when the family gathered to mourn and pray the rosary. Sergio was Teresa’s father, and Flora could not deny his daughter. Besides, she needed Teresa to help with the arrangements.

Rich ran to the mansion Chang had built long ago, where he knew Teresa would be. Father Miguel was standing outside on the veranda when he saw Rich at the same time as Teresa. Flora, whose back was facing the other way, saw a look of relief come over her daughter’s face—and something else. When she turned and saw the source of Teresa’s gaze, Flora approached Rich two steps ahead of Teresa.

“This is a *private* affair,” she announced abruptly.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” he said sincerely. “Sergio was a good friend to me.”

Flora seethed with resentment. “You will leave now.”

“I... I just want to speak with Teresa for one second,” he pleaded.

Teresa approached, but Flora held out her hand and barred her daughter’s way. “She’s in mourning. Go away.”

Teresa, with swollen eyes and a tear-stained face, nodded to Rich. “It’s okay.”

Father Miguel intervened. He walked Rich to the edge of the courtyard. “Give them time. They just buried Sergio this morning.”

Heartbroken that he could not be there to comfort his wife and grieving for the loss of his friend, Rich made his way back to the base.

He confided in Chad, who was sympathetic. He’d liked Sergio.

“I should be there with my wife. She needs me,” Rich reprimanded himself.

“This is a different culture. People grieve differently. Give them time.”

Rich settled down with a sigh. “You might be right.”

“Damn right! And besides, we have a problem.” Chad said, changing the subject. He spread a map over his desk while Rich looked over his shoulder. “There.” Chad pointed. “The surveyor was off by several degrees, and we have a hopping mad hacienda landlord.”

They spent the week re-surveying the land and relocating equipment in order to placate the irate proprietor. All the while, Rich’s mind was very much on his grieving wife.

That weekend, Chad accompanied Rich to the mansion. When he saw the estate, Chad let out a whistle. “You didn’t tell me she came from a wealthy family.”

“That’s not Teresa,” Rich snapped.

Flora saw them through the window and directed Teresa to the back kitchen to make her a cup of tea. She opened the door before they could step foot on the veranda. Looking past Chad, she addressed Rich. “She does not want to see you,” Flora announced.

Alarmed, Rich took a stand. “I need to see Teresa. I know she wants to see me.”

“She is in mourning. Her father was everything to her. Now leave!”

“I want to see my wife now!” Rich snapped.

Flora was taken aback. *His wife? When did that happen? Why wasn’t I told?* “She doesn’t want to see you!” Flora screamed, incensed that her daughter might have found some happiness at her expense.

“I don’t believe you. We love each other. I want to hear it from her,” Rich insisted, and took a step forward.

Flora’s eyes flashed. “Leave us alone!” She backed into the open door and slammed it in the faces of the two strangers. With mounting fury, she hurried to the kitchen to assure herself that Teresa had not witnessed the confrontation. The angry woman promised herself that her daughter would never see that man again.

Sensing Rich’s state of mind, Chad grabbed his arm. “Let’s go.”

Rich pulled from his grasp and headed towards the rectory, where he could talk to Father Miguel.

The priest listened. “Give me a chance to talk with them once everyone calms down,” he advised. “I will get word to you.”

“I’ll give you your chance,” he warned Father Miguel, “but I *will* be back for my wife.” There was no room for compromise in the tone of his voice.

Father Miguel was angered by the way Rich had talked to him and that he had referred to Teresa as his wife. He looked over at Chad. “Take your friend home,” the priest ordered in an unwavering voice.

After they left, Father Miguel made his way over to see Teresa. “Rich came over today. He wants to see you.”

“When?” she asked, looking over at her mother. “I was here all day.”

“I thought it best that he gives us time to grieve. Sergio *was* your father.” Flora glared at her daughter, daring her to object.

“Oh, Mama, my heart bleeds.” Teresa knelt beside her mother and took her hand.

Flora pulled back. The priest reached out to support and steady his confused friend.

Flora attacked Father Miguel. “And you! When did I give *you* permission to marry my daughter?”

This time, Teresa came to his rescue. “He didn’t. We were married by a minister outside of the church.”

Flora smirked. “Then you are not married in the eyes of God. You are no more than a whore!” Her mother was relentless and unforgiving. Not only did her daughter not take her vows, she was living in sin, and she would pay for her transgressions. “Leave us!” she yelled at Father Miguel, who was just now realizing what he had done by not marrying his friend.

He looked over at the distraught woman and realized, all too late, that his love for Teresa had been misguided. *Will she ever forgive me?* He did love her with all his heart, but she was his dearest friend, and he had been possessive of their friendship.

“Go, now!” Flora screeched at the priest. Teresa was in her custody, and the vengeful woman did not want his interference.

“It’s okay, Carlos.” Teresa gave him permission to leave.

His eyes rested on Flora. In vain, he opened his mouth to say something. After a moment of fighting for words, he turned abruptly and stormed from the house.

As soon as the priest left, Teresa made her way to her room and started packing her clothes while her mother stood in the doorway with her arms crossed. “Mama, I love you, but I must be with my husband. I am very sorry, but I must go.”

“You know as well as I do that the church does not recognize your marriage.” Flora sneered. “You are an ungrateful girl, and you will stay here until I say you can go.” The older woman was incensed. Teresa was the cause of everything that had happened since she’d broken her promise to take her vows. She would pay.

Flora backed out of the room and locked the door behind her.

Alarmed, her unsuspecting daughter began shaking the knob, then banging on the door. “Mama, let me out, please!” she begged until exhausted, at which point she flung herself on the bed and cried into the wee hours of the morning.

Meanwhile, Rich did not wait for a message from Father Miguel. Every day, he spent sun up to sun down standing outside the mansion, waiting for Teresa to come out. Chad and his friends covered for him at work.

Flora, seething, watched the lovelorn man from the window, vowing that Teresa would never see him again.

In the evenings, Chad would come and drag his reluctant friend back to base. They would meet up at the officers’ club with fellow comrades, who stood by as Rich drowned his sorrows.

The night before their departure, they watched anxiously as their friend became increasingly agitated. Rich was not a heavy drinker, so he got sloppy drunk after two or three drinks.

“Let’s go. You’ve had enough!” Chad helped his friend to the barracks.

Once in his room, Rich, in frenzy, started throwing clothes into his duffle bag.

“What the hell are you doing?”

“We ship out in the morning,” Rich reminded his friend. “And I’m not going back without her,” he shouted, dragging his over-stuffed duffle bag towards the door.

Chad barred the door. “You’re not going anywhere!”

There was a scuffle.

“If you leave, that’s desertion,” Chad reminded him. “They will court-martial you for treason and likely shoot you for that!”

Rich was irrational and continued to dodge Chad’s attempts to keep him from leaving. With no other recourse, Chad punched his friend on the chin and knocked him out.

“Sorry, pal,” he said, looking at Rich passed out on the floor. He shifted his gaze to his buddies who had witnessed the altercation. “Don’t stand there—call the MPs. He got drunk and hit a fellow officer. I think a night or two in the brig will bring him to his senses.”

Not long after, Rich began to stir and felt the sting on the right side of his face. “What the hell!” He staggered to his feet as the MPs arrived just in time to witness him throwing a punch at Chad.

The next afternoon, Rich woke with a whopper of a headache. He swung his feet over the side of the cot, and when they touched the floor without much of a stretch, he realized he was not in his own bed.

“Where the hell am I?” he half-whispered to himself. He looked around and at once recognized that he was in a cell. Confused, he dragged himself up and held tight to the bars as his head cleared. He remembered the punches flying, the MP whistles, and the rough treatment. He also remembered he needed to get to Teresa.

“Let me out of here!” he shouted, shaking the bars.

The commotion woke the half dozen inmates nursing hangovers after celebrating their voyage home.

“Shut the bloody hell up!”

The attending MP, rattled by the noise, came in. “Okay, guys, settle down.”

“I need out. Now!” Rich demanded.

“Well, well, well! What have we here?” The guard opened the gate to Rich’s cell and walked straight up to the demanding inmate, invading his space.

Rich looked at the face of the accosting sergeant and recognized the Neanderthal right away. “Get out of my face!” Rich demanded.

A wide, toothy grin spread over Moose’s face. He did not budge.

Rich started to swing, but it was no contest. The guards, alerted by the ruckus, charged in and pulled Moose off Rich, who continued to resist.

Rich had broken the sergeant’s nose, and the jailer was not happy about it. “You just brought yourself more time,” the Neanderthal swore as he left, headed to the infirmary while holding a handkerchief over his bloody nose.

“Let me out of here!” The unhappy inmate continued to rattle the bars.

“We will when we get stateside,” the guard left in charge promised. “Might as well sit back and behave, or I’ll be tempted to throw you overboard myself. Trust me. It’s a long swim to either coast.”

It was then that Rich realized he was already aboard the ship on the way home. His head began to swim. The hangover got the best of him, and he vomited on the jail floor.

“Aw, Rich. Why’d you go and do that?” the guard complained when he saw the mess.

With word that the ship had sailed, Flora released Teresa from her prison. “He left without you,” she gloated.

“I don’t believe you!” Teresa shouted. She ran from the house, took a paraw across the strait, and hitched a ride to the wharf. She looked out over the waterway. The base was silent. Not a ship in sight. It was then that reality packed a punch. She fell to her knees and began to wail.

A petite young woman with tangled, long, dark hair spoke up. “They do that. Tell us they love us. Promise to take us with them to America. Then leave.” She rubbed her hand down her visibly pregnant stomach.

Teresa stopped crying and stared at the woman. “Rich isn’t like that.”

“If that’s what you want to think. But the ending is the same.” The woman shrugged and stared over at the sea, dry-eyed, having come to terms with her own situation.

Chapter 16

ALONE (1904)

Teresa made her way to the hacienda on the island. Ernesto was happy to see his sister. At the same time, he was saddened by her story. He had met Rich and did not think him the type of man to abandon his wife.

“Dear sister, stay here. You need to think about yourself,” he offered. “And besides, I would love the company.” When she started to object, Ernesto cut her off. “Just for a little while. Please. You would be doing me a favor.”

Teresa nodded. She really had nowhere else to go.

A skeleton crew ran the hacienda. Ernesto had switched from growing sugarcane to the business of foreign trade. He allowed the families who had grown up on the hacienda to stay, but they had to find work elsewhere. Their living quarters were crowded and unsanitary, often two or three families in a room.

Ernesto gave Teresa permission to turn the two-room overseer’s house into an infirmary for the surrounding community. She was able to get much-needed supplies and medicine from the occupying Americans, whose doctors visited on a regular basis to advise her and to transport the sicker patients to other facilities.

In addition to the infirmary, Teresa made house calls as a midwife or in the case of an emergency. She had just returned from an early morning delivery when Dr. Stacy, a colonel in the US Army, pulled up in a horse-drawn ambulance. He was an older man, clean-shaven, with thick, white hair. Round, wire-rimmed glasses framed his blue eyes, which twinkled when he smiled. While medics unloaded medical supplies, the doctor accompanied Teresa to the dispensary, where she had admitted about a dozen patients. He examined all of them, agreeing with Teresa on the diagnoses and courses of treatment.

It was well into the afternoon when they were able to take a break. They made their way to the manor, where Ernesto joined them for a late lunch. The doctor noticed that Teresa did not have much of an appetite.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“I’m just a little tired,” Teresa admitted as she rose, then fainted.

Alarmed, Ernesto jumped to his sister’s aid and carried her to a nearby couch. By then, she had awakened.

Dr. Stacy looked at the weakened woman. “Ernesto, give me a few minutes with her.”

Ernesto nodded and left the room.

The concerned physician listened to her heart and lungs and palpated her abdomen. “Ernesto tells me you haven’t been eating breakfast lately. That’s enough to make anyone with your schedule to faint.” He hesitated. “But I don’t think that’s what’s going on here.” Dr. Stacy sat quietly next to where Teresa lay. She was a competent practitioner, and he had an idea she knew what was going on.

After an agonizing minute, Teresa broke down in tears.

“So you suspected?” he asked.

She nodded.

He moved beside her and put his hand on her shoulder. “Do you not want this baby?”

After Teresa told him her story, Dr. Stacy empathized. “You have been carrying a heavy load.”

“Thank you for listening.” Teresa said, no longer crying.

Dr. Stacy stood up and helped her to her feet. “Teresa,” he said in earnest, “you are at a crossroads and have many paths to choose from. Pick one—the sooner, the better,” he advised, looking directly at her over his glasses resting at the far end of his nose.

I will,” she promised. After brushing the wrinkles from her skirt, Teresa bent down and picked up her comb, which had loosened during her fainting episode. She saw the words *meant to be*, and renewed energy pulsed through her body as she anchored her hair in place. *Of course!* she thought to herself. At that very moment, she chose the path that was right for her.

With a deep breath, she stood poised.

The doctor nodded with a smile. “Ready?”

Teresa bravely returned his smile.

He walked to the door and opened it. “She is going to be okay,” he assured her brother without elaborating. “I’ll stop by next week to check on her.”

Ernesto’s housemaid entered on cue, carrying a tray with a teapot and two cups, and laid it on a nearby table. Ernesto nodded, and she left the room.

“Let’s have some tea and biscuits, then off to bed you go for much-needed sleep,” Teresa’s brother suggested.

Teresa watched as he poured two cups of tea in silence. He looked so much like Chang, but that’s where the similarities ended. Like their grandfather, Ernesto was driven not by financial gain but by the need to occupy his mind. He was guarded and showed little emotion, but he was not stingy. He talked little and never chitchatted. And sadly, he was alone.

“I’m pregnant,” Teresa broke the silence as she reached for the sugar.

Ernesto was at a loss for words. He struggled for a reason Rich had abandoned her. *Was it because she was pregnant?*

Teresa caught the look in her brother’s eyes and defended her husband. “Rich doesn’t know.” Sensing his inability to register a response, she touched his arm. “Be happy for me.”

That night, Teresa cried herself to sleep. She remembered the words of the woman at the pier. “*They do that. Tell us they love us. Promise to take us with them. Then leave.*”

Had she been right?

After returning stateside, Rich was given a six-month sentence for conduct unbecoming of an officer for punching Moose. From his cell, he wrote Teresa every week, and every day, Moose would gloat, “No mail,” then taunt, “Maybe she found another man.”

Rich learned to ignore the Neanderthal’s insults, but was concerned that Teresa had not answered his letters. He just *knew* Flora had something to do with that.

This time, he was wrong.

Moose was resentful of how Rich had humiliated him in front of his friends. To teach him a lesson, the Neanderthal would sift through the outgoing mail and destroy the letters his rival had written to Teresa.

When he was released, Rich’s first order of business was to return home to his ailing father. While they were in the Philippines, Rich and Chad’s fathers had both discovered that their land was rich in oil. Their fathers had incorporated and set up an office to manage and negotiate royalty rights for the four active wells, each producing about 100 barrels each day. The men planned to retire once their sons were ready to take over the company.

Now, Rich’s father was ill, and Chad was anxious for his friend’s return so they could get the business in order. On the train home, Rich decided to write to Father Miguel. By now, he was convinced Flora had intercepted his mail.

Teresa was in the infirmary going over some paperwork when she felt her first contraction. *It’s a little premature for that*, she thought. But with the second and third contractions, she realized she was in labor.

She called for Anita, a local midwife and healer. They had become good friends. Anita had taken most of the burden in running the dispensary from Teresa during her pregnancy to give the expectant mother time to rest. They both knew that having a first baby at thirty had its risks for both mother and child.

The bedroom door burst open. “What can I do?” Ernesto had heard of his sister’s impending delivery from one of the housemaids and ran to assist.

“Oh, Ernesto. Don’t look so worried.” Teresa laughed. “Come sit by me.” She patted the side of the bed.

He sat down. “I sent for Dr. Stacy and had Garcia go to Iloilo to let Father Miguel know you are in labor. I promised him,” Ernesto admitted.

Teresa had another contraction. Her pain unsettled Ernesto. He rose and made way for Anita, who hurried to her side.

“Her water broke,” the midwife informed Dr. Stacy as he entered the room.

He put his bag down and took out his stethoscope. Distracted by Ernesto’s pacing, the doctor eyed the distraught man. “Ernesto, go boil some water,” he ordered.

Relieved to be doing something, Ernesto left the room.

“Thank you.” Teresa smiled as he took her hand.

“Anything to get rid of him. I was afraid I would have two patients on my hands!”

Teresa giggled.

“Now, let’s see what’s going on here,” he said as he began to examine her. The doctor looked up at Anita, who stood next to her friend lying in bed.

She shook her head sadly. He acknowledged with a slight nod. Teresa’s contractions were getting weaker.

“Your baby’s in breech,” he said. “I’m going to have to turn him.”

Teresa nodded in pain.

Anita held her hands as the doctor turned the baby in utero. When finished, he looked at Teresa and nodded. “Done!”

Hearing Teresa’s screams, Ernesto stopped pacing and pounded on the hard adobe wall.

When Father Miguel showed up, they both paced outside her room, crossing each other’s path over and over.

In the next room, Dr. Stacy was worried. “You’ve got to push harder,” he insisted.

Teresa used all her strength to the point of collapse.

“Just one more—hard!”

This time, there was a loud cry from a voice that had not been heard before.

Chapter 17

IT'S A GIRL (1905-1910)

"It's a girl!" Dr. Stacy announced. The good doctor looked down at Teresa. "Sorry I called her a 'him' before."

She smiled weakly.

"You've got a fighter on your hands," he said, referring to the baby's stamina and loud cries. The doctor heaved a heavy sigh. He just wished he could say the same for the mother. He handed the baby to Anita, who wiped her down, wrapped her in a blanket, and laid her next to Teresa.

Ernesto and Father Miguel burst into the room when they heard the baby cry.

"Ernesto, you have a niece." Teresa smiled weakly as he kissed his sister on the forehead.

When she saw Father Miguel, Teresa extended her hand with a smile. In a weakened state, she reverted back to the name she was most familiar with. "Carlos, you're here."

After a brief visit, the doctor ushered them out of the room. He looked worried. Once outside the closed door, he confessed that Teresa was hemorrhaging and that there was little more that he could do. "I'm going to talk with her. You two stay here."

Dr. Stacy entered the room. The baby was lying beside Teresa, whose eyes were closed. Anita sat nearby, stifling back her tears.

"Teresa," the doctor whispered.

Teresa opened her eyes and saw the sorrow on his face. "Doctor, I know I don't have long."

He hung his head.

"You did all you could," Teresa tried to console him. "I need to speak with Father Miguel."

He nodded and opened the door. "Father Miguel."

The priest entered.

Teresa turned to the midwife. "Anita, I need to be alone with my confessor."

Father Miguel had a hard time holding back his tears as his friend shifted her gaze back to him.

"Carlos, we've been the best of friends. You have always been there for me. I need you to promise me something." He started to object, but Teresa cut him off. "Listen. I don't have much time." She grabbed his arm.

The strength of her grip shocked him. "Anything," he responded.

"I want you to promise that you will make sure my daughter is taken care of. Can you do that for me?"

"I promise."

Reassured, she let go of her grip and went limp.

Father Miguel broke down, sobbing uncontrollably as he witnessed life ebb from the only woman he ever loved.

Anita found a wet nurse for the baby while Ernesto made arrangements for his sister's burial on Guimaras.

The next day was Teresa's funeral. Ernesto, Dr. Stacy, and Anita were present. Ernesto had left word for his aunt and uncle, but hadn't heard back from them. Flora refused to come.

The next day after the funeral, Anita, carrying the newborn, accompanied Father Miguel and Ernesto to the mansion in Iloilo that Chang had built a generation ago. As grandmother, Flora was the closest kin and most logical choice to care for the baby.

"I want nothing to do with that bastard."

"You can't mean that, Flora. She's your granddaughter," the priest implored.

Dismissing Father Miguel, Flora looked up at her son. "I'm going to Manila, and I need to talk with you before I go. Now!"

Ernesto looked over at the priest and shrugged. He was at a loss for words. As he entered the house, Flora slammed the door in the good father's face.

"She's upset. She just lost a daughter," Father Miguel explained to the shocked Anita.

He led Anita to the home of Agnes and Ramon. He knew Agnes loved her niece like a daughter and would gladly care for the baby. Father Miguel met the grieving family, who had gathered at their place when they heard the news of Teresa's death. They avoided Flora. Since Sergio was no longer with them, she had made it clear they were not welcome.

"She's beautiful!" With tears running down her cheeks, Agnes held the sleeping newborn in her arms. "Of course. She's Teresa's baby, and I already love her," Agnes told Father Miguel when he asked her to take in the child.

The family gathered around the baby, who was beginning to stir.

"We need a wet nurse." She turned to her housekeeper, whose daughter had a five-month-old son. "Do you think Rita would mind?"

"She would be honored." The housekeeper hurried from the house to find her daughter.

Father Miguel was satisfied that the baby was in loving hands. As he left, he turned and asked, "What name do you want me to put on the birth certificate?"

"Now, what name would you like, little one?" Agnes asked the baby. After a few seconds, she cooed, "That's a great name!" Agnes looked at the priest. "She wants to be called Adella."

Father Miguel was saddened and exhausted when he returned to his room at the rectory. He thumbed through the mail on his desk, sighed, and opened the one Rich had written over a month ago.

I have written Teresa every week and have not heard from her. I suspect Flora has something to do with it.

“No doubt!” the priest mistakenly agreed as he stretched out on the bed and fell asleep. He would write Rich in the morning.

After her confrontation with the priest, Flora packed and boarded the ferry to Manila, where she spent time visiting friends, shopping, and enjoying the entertainment Manila had to offer. She returned to Iloilo eight months later.

Sipping tea in the drawing room, she overheard her housemaids chattering. “Oh, she’s a saint, that one.”

“And did you see that sweet face? Looks just like her mother.”

Flora walked into the kitchen. “Who’s a saint?” she demanded.

The two women looked up. “Señora Agnes,” her maid replied. “You should see her with that baby. She loves her so much.”

Flora became rigid, her eyes widening as she stared at the gossiping women in disbelief. She had forgotten about the baby.

Upon seeing her face, the maid apologized. “Oh, I’m sorry. I thought you knew.”

In a rage, Flora hurried from the kitchen, heading straight to Agnes’s house, and barged through the door.

Agnes was singing a lullaby to the sleepy baby cradled in her arms.

Flora snatched Adella from the startled woman. “You’re not going to win this one!” she promised as she ran out the door with the stirring bundle.

Agnes chased after her. “Flora, please!” she begged.

The agitated woman returned home, slammed the door, and locked it.

Agnes stayed out on the veranda for hours, pleading with Flora to give her back the baby, who was now crying with no one to comfort her.

Hearing Agnes’s pleas, the maid came to see what the disturbance was about.

“Find a wet nurse!” Flora ordered as she shoved the crying infant into her arms. “And shut her up!”

Agnes ran to Father Miguel for help. When he approached the mansion, he heard the baby wailing.

Flora opened the door a crack. “Tell Agnes to stay away.”

“Flora, let’s talk about this,” he said.

Knowing he wouldn’t be satisfied until he spoke his mind, Flora opened the door and let the priest in.

Later, he faced Agnes. “I’ve talked to her, and I’m afraid it’s useless,” he admitted to the sobbing woman. “Flora *is* her grandmother.”

Father Miguel felt helpless. His only hope was that Rich would read his letter and return for his daughter.

It took over a month for Rich to receive the priest's letter. He excitedly opened it, hoping to hear news of his beloved wife. It took him several seconds before he could comprehend.

Yesterday, we buried Teresa.

Rich was shocked and overwhelmed with grief. He yelled, lifted the front of his desk, and heaved it over. In his anguish, he failed to read the rest of the letter.

Upon hearing the commotion, the staff in Rich's office rushed in. There was his secretary, the chief surveyor, the financial officer, and Chad, who had an office next door.

Chad knelt next to his friend, who had collapsed on the floor.

"She's dead," he sobbed.

Saddened, Chad knew he was referring to Teresa. "Let's get you up." He helped Rich to his feet and walked him next door to his office. Before closing the door, he frowned at the onlookers. "See if you can clean up this mess." He would tell them Rich's story soon enough, but not now.

The staff righted the desk and picked up the papers strewn across the floor. They put all personal items in a box and stashed it so Rich could sort through them later.

In mourning, Rich spent his time trekking through the woods, listening to the birds. "*They sing to each other,*" he remembered Teresa saying.

It took Rich a week before he returned to work. Upon his return, the staff was respectful and gave him space. Unlike Chad, who was outgoing and approachable, Rich was a loner. They were not surprised when he poured himself into his work without acknowledging his loss or absence.

His secretary, Melanie, had been there since the beginning. She had been a classmate of Rich's, and at one time, they'd dated. It was a brief courtship. She'd ended it after he took her on one of his infamous bird-watching expeditions. Later, she had been insulted that he did not seem to be bothered and appeared almost relieved by their split-up.

After high school, she'd married an attorney. Her non-stop spending burdened their marriage, which eventually ended in divorce. Luckily for Melanie, Chad and Rich had been looking for a secretary at just the right time. With clients coming and going in a male-dominated industry, it didn't hurt to have an attractive woman at the front desk.

Melanie was tall and blue-eyed, with shoulder-length blonde hair that was cut in a fashionable bob. She spared no expense when it came to her wardrobe and was amply rewarded by lustful glances from the opposite sex.

Although she thrived on the attention given to her by men coming and going, she had set her eyes on Rich. Now, with Teresa out of the way, she had a chance. He was rich, handsome, and not distracted by children. On several occasions, she had succeeded in getting him to take

her out to dinner. He used this time to catch up on company ventures, and on the lighter side, office gossip. To her disappointment, he kept their conversations strictly business.

The company prospered, and in five years, Rich and Chad needed more office space. They felt that relocating to Oklahoma City would be wise because the airport would be closer. As they were packing for the move, Chad happened upon Rich's box that the staff had stored for him six years earlier.

Rich looked over at the container. "Toss it!"

Just in case his friend may have forgotten something important, Chad rummaged through it. He came across the letter Father Miguel had written after Teresa's death. Chad scanned it quickly. "Rich, did you read this letter from Father Miguel?" he asked.

Rich tensed and closed his eyes, remembering the day he opened the letter. He didn't want to be reminded. "I've read all I need to."

Chad looked up at his friend. "You have a daughter!"

Rich stiffened from the shock. "Give me that!" He grabbed the letter from Chad's hand and began reading it. "I have a daughter!" he shouted, sinking into a nearby chair.

With tears, he read it again. Father Miguel had written that he would leave the baby with Flora, who he assumed would care for her until Rich arrived.

Chapter 18
RICH'S DAUGHTER (1910-1913)

This time, Rich was determined not to let anything go wrong. He was going to bring his daughter home himself. He dropped what he was doing and began making travel arrangements to the Philippines.

"Make that passage for two. You're not going alone." Chad was adamant. "Melanie is more than capable of handling the move, and Kathy is available if she runs into any problems."

Although his wife did not work at the office, she was on top of their business affairs and was a valuable asset when it came to making business decisions. Kathy felt the trip for Rich was unnecessary. It made more sense for him to arrange for the child to be brought to the US, but Rich was unwavering. He did not trust Flora.

Concerned for their friend, Kathy agreed that Chad should accompany him. "It's just like you two to find some reason to get out of all this work," she teased.

Two days later, they traveled to Los Angeles, where they boarded a ship for the Philippines, leaving the task of moving in the capable hands of Kathy and their staff. After the week-long voyage, they docked at the port in Manila and took a ferry early the following day to Iloilo. Chad had wired ahead and arranged for a car and driver.

The mansion and courtyard were the same as they remembered. Rich walked through the yard, leaving Chad behind in the vehicle. When he knocked on the door, Flora was shocked to see him.

"I don't want to talk to you," she stated in a loud voice.

Before she could slam the door, Rich barred it open with his foot. "I don't want to argue with you, Flora. I've come for my daughter."

"She's dead! They're both dead!" Flora screamed, and slammed the door in his face.

In disbelief, Rich wailed and ran his hands through his hair. "It can't be! My beautiful wife and daughter—dead!" He sobbed out loud and stumbled down the stairs. Then, in anguish, Rich returned to the front door and began banging on it again. "Flora, answer the door. I'm not leaving until you do!"

Giving in to his threat, Flora cracked open the door, ready to slam it if he got violent.

"What was her name?"

She stared at the man and was struck dumb.

"Goddammit, Flora! What was her name? My daughter. What was my daughter's name?"

"Adella... Now go!" she demanded, and slammed the door in his face.

He staggered to the nearest tree for support and gasped as the name tunneled its way into his heart. *Adella, my baby girl.*

Upon seeing his friend in agony, Chad ran to his aid and helped him to the car. Rich stopped at one of the sampaguita bushes over-laden with flowers and picked two of the blossoms. They reminded him of Teresa and the daughter he never had the chance to hold. As he

slipped them into his shirt pocket, Rich's eyes were instinctively drawn to a motion high up in a nearby tree. He saw an empty cage hoisted high off the ground, rocking in the wind.

Chad distracted him with a tug, leading him toward the awaiting car.

"I need to see Father Miguel," Rich said as they climbed in.

The same deacon who had greeted Rich and Teresa years ago opened the door at the rectory. "Father Miguel is in Manila at the archdiocese. He won't be back for three more days," he informed them.

"We're going back to Manila anyway. We'll meet up with him there," Chad offered.

Rich agreed. The deacon assured them that they would have no problem getting an audience with the priest.

As they headed for the ferry, they had to fight their way through the crowd that had just disembarked. They did not see Father Miguel as he merged with the pack going in the opposite direction. A few steps after he passed the two friends, Father Miguel stopped and looked back. The crowd had engulfed them. The priest shrugged at the thought of seeing a familiar face, then continued on his way.

At the archdiocese in Manila, Rich was told that Father Miguel had left earlier than planned in order to spend time with his mother, who was taken ill.

Disappointed, the men boarded the next ship home.

After Rich left, Flora was enraged and took her anger out on Adella. If it was bad before, it was nearly unbearable now. Nothing was off-limits when it came to Teresa's child. Bad weather, sickness, and ill-cooked meals were enough to blame on the little girl's presence.

After two years of further abuse, a typhoon ripped through the town of Iloilo City and Jaro, destroying six of the sari-saris Flora's father had given as part of her dowry. Ernesto convinced his mother to sell off the stores, for which she was handsomely paid. In spite of that, Flora blamed Adella's presence for the storm and wanted her gone!

Ernesto spent most of his time on Guimaras and was not privy to the abuse his niece suffered under his mother. The few times he saw her, Adella was quiet, which he mistook for shyness. He knew his mother was harsh, but when she blamed the destruction brought on by the typhoon on Adella, he defended Teresa's child. "Mama, surely you don't believe that!" He felt sorry that he could not help the little girl cowering in the corner. That was the last time Ernesto saw his niece.

Without the sari-saris to occupy her time and Ernesto's return to Guimaras, Flora became more enraged at her daughter for defying her. With her husband dead, a son killed in action, and another missing in action, she reasoned that Adella, Teresa's offspring, was the root cause of all her misfortune. Determined to rid herself of this evil, the misguided woman dragged her bastard grandchild through the street to the church.

Father Miguel intervened, fed up with the woman's rantings and threats to send her granddaughter to Pugot Mamu. He realized the little girl was not safe in the care of her grandmother. Without Agnes, who had died during an outbreak of dengue fever, there was no one in the small town who would dare cross Flora. His only course of action was the San Augustin orphanage in Manila.

Still holding onto Adella to keep her from running after Flora, Father Miguel called out, "Sister Maria!"

Alerted by the ruckus, Sister Maria was just outside the door.

"Clean this child up and find her something to wear from the donation coffers. In the morning, I am taking her with me to Manila.

Adella resisted, but the nun held a firm grasp. She disapproved of the girl's impudence and gave her a hard pinch, to which Adella responded with a loud shriek.

The priest gave Sister Maria a disapproving glance. "Give her something to eat and get her to bed. And Sister," he added, "she might try to run away."

The nun nodded. She was forewarned.

Father Miguel walked the long hallway to his room. *How could he make this right?* The priest could not understand why Rich had not come for his daughter. He would try again. With a sigh, he sat down at his desk and began a letter to Rich imploring him to come. *Your daughter needs you.*

The priest could not have known that it would never be read by Rich.

Having finished the doomed letter, Father Miguel sealed it in an envelope and pulled another sheet from his stationary. *This letter is a formal request for transfer from the parish in Iloilo.*

When he had finished his request, Father Miguel heaved a heavy sigh and knelt at the altar beside his bed with his hands firmly clasped. He made the sign of the cross and began, "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. Please help me make this right." The priest was riddled with guilt—he had failed an innocent child, and more so, his promise to Teresa.

There was no sleep for him that night. Father Miguel knew what he had to do. The following day, he boarded the ferry to Manila carrying his worn black carpet bag with Adella in tow. He hoped Rich would respond to his letter and take his daughter home. The man just didn't seem like the kind to abandon his child.

The priest looked down at the little girl with concern. Her outward defiance had morphed into a deep sense of hopelessness. She was reticent and followed obediently. Father Miguel sensed that Sister Maria had a hand in this change of behavior. He quickly dismissed any thought of how she had managed the change. He didn't want to know. Sister Maria could be ruthless, given the circumstance.

They stood on the main deck as the ferry began to move. The priest looked down at the little girl. Adella fought back tears. She was determined not to cry.

“Adella, we are going to a place where you will be taken care of,” he said in a calming voice. “I think you will like it there.”

Adella did not respond. She stood at the back of the ferry and watched until the small island was no more. All around was water. The water had a soothing effect on her, and in some small way, she felt safe. She had never been on a ferry before, which piqued her curiosity and relieved her of her hopelessness.

Father Miguel reached into his black satchel. Without a word, he unwrapped a lumpia roll and offered it to her.

She ignored his gesture.

He shrugged and began to eat. “Mmm, this is really good.” He savored the treat, licked his fingers, and dove into his satchel for another roll. “You sure you don’t want this?”

She regretted refusing the rice Sister Maria had set out for her that morning. This time, Adella took his offering and devoured it in three bites.

“Want some water?” He held out the canteen.

The thirsty child grabbed it before he had time to retract his offer. The priest smiled to himself as she gulped it down.

Adella still had not uttered a word since they set sail. He sighed. It was a three-hour journey on the ferry to Manila. Father Miguel found a shady spot away from the hot sun and beckoned the little girl. She lay down on the blanket he spread before her and fell into a deep sleep.

He stretched out with his straw hat over his face. “Father, forgive me,” he muttered, then closed his eyes.

Loud clanging abruptly woke Adella from a much-needed sleep. The ferry had come alive. The rattling of chains amid the clamor of the shoremen alerted the passengers that they had reached their destination. In no time, commuters flooded the deck, eager to disembark.

Father Miguel looked down at the startled child. His heart ached. She looked so much like her mother. With Adella’s hand in his, they joined the crowd as it overflowed onto the plankway to solid ground. She kept up, two steps to his one stride.

When he saw the priest, the driver of a waiting automobile nodded and opened the door. Father Miguel threw his black bag on the far side of the back seat, turned around, and lifted Adella into the unoccupied space.

“Thank you, Eduardo,” he said to the driver as he swung the door shut and made his way to the passenger side of the car. The year was 1913, and although the automobile was a luxury only the rich could afford, a wealthy benefactor made his limousine and driver available to the local archdiocese.

“Adella, this is Eduardo,” he introduced. “Can you say hello?”

The little girl was still distrustful and did not reply.

Father Miguel looked at Eduardo and shrugged.

Adella had never ridden in an automobile or even a horse-drawn kalesa, for that matter. She watched in silence as they rode past buildings and crowds of people moving aimlessly in all directions. The chaos was heightened by the rumble of the automobile, the clanging of the street trolleys, the beeping of horns, and the intense confrontations between the owners of horse-drawn carts and the motor-driven vehicles over the right of way. They rode past the busy city onto a cobble-stoned road leading to a massive adobe-stone church flanked by twin bell towers. Its façade reminded Adella of the cathedral in Iloilo.

Eduardo pulled into the courtyard of the San Agustin Church. To the left of the church was the convent, a long, barracks-like building that also served as an orphanage for girls.

Father Miguel opened the back door and retrieved his carpet bag while Eduardo helped Adella out of the car.

“Thank you,” he said to the chauffeur. “I will let you know when I need you. I may not be going back to Iloilo.”

The church’s friar was watching from the cathedral’s entrance. “Father Miguel, I see you’ve brought a visitor.” He smiled and laid his hand on Adella’s head.

They entered the church, knelt, and made the sign of the cross. Father Miguel ushered Adella to a pew, where she sat while he met with the friar behind closed doors. The friar noted that his good friend was troubled. He wondered if the little girl he had brought with him was the source of his pain.

“Father Miguel,” he put his arm over his friend’s shoulders, “I will be happy to hear your confession.”

Relieved, the priest nodded. The confessional was his safe place. He knelt before the friar. “Bless me, Father, for I have sinned.”

The friar simply listened.

Chapter 19

ADELLA (1913-1919)

Adella felt comfort in the familiar ornate interior of intricate trompe l'oeil frescoes, gaudy Spanish furniture, paintings, statues, and candles in this place of worship, just like the church in Iloilo.

Her peace was short-lived.

Sister Mary Margaret happened by and saw the little girl sitting alone, dwarfed by the immense dome, surrounded by statues of saints and stained-glass windows.

"My name is Sister Mary Margaret. What's yours?" She startled Adella, who was deep in her own thoughts. "I'm sorry. Did I scare you?"

Adella cringed from her touch and looked away.

Unwavering, the nun slid into the space beside the guarded little girl. "Well, I like it here. So I think I'll just sit and keep you company. You don't mind, do you?"

Adella reminded Sister Mary Margaret of herself. Abandoned at a young age, she'd grown up on the streets of Manila, running with a pack of other orphans, begging, sometimes stealing, and sleeping wherever they could find shelter. In order to defend herself, she learned simple karate from one of the older boys in the pack, who boasted he was the offspring of a Japanese samurai.

At age ten, she had been apprehended, along with others in her pack, for stealing and resisting arrest. The local friar, still annoyed by the sting of her kick, acted as judge and jury. Along with the members of her group, she was to be beaten and thrown in prison.

By chance, Mother Catherine had been visiting her ailing father in a nearby city. When she saw the group of young offenders being hauled off to the local prison where they would be housed according to class and sex without regard to age or the seriousness of the crime, the good sister was outraged.

Unable to save them all, she'd snatched the youngest from the line. "Leave this little ruffian with me. I need a scrub girl for the convent. She is of the right age to train."

The friar looked at the determined face of Mother Catherine. Unlike most nuns who came from poor homes, the good nun came from a wealthy family. He was careful not to offend the daughter of the prominent factory owner who donated heavily to the church's coffers. "She is a wild one. I doubt you will be able to discipline her," the friar cautioned to discourage the nun while attempting to pull the child back from her.

"I have my ways," Mother Catherine assured him as she tugged the little girl from his grasp, led her to an awaiting automobile, shoved her inside, and slammed the door.

The friar, two steps behind, smacked the side of the car's door to frighten the young offender and get the nun's attention. "I pray she will not be a disappointment to you," he warned.

"Sister Mary Margaret!" This time, it was she who was startled!

Mother Catherine, accompanied by the friar and Father Miguel, roused her from her thoughts. The nun's superior looked down at her seated next to Adella. No one knew the circumstances of Mary Margaret's birth. Still, her fair skin and slanted almond-shaped eyes, framed by a long, triangular face and narrow nose, left no doubt that Chinese blood flowed through her veins.

Mother Catherine gave the nun one of her looks.

Sister Mary Margaret understood and readily obeyed. "I'm going." As she moved to get up, the good nun whispered in the frightened girl's ear, "Don't be afraid. She has a big heart." She exited the pew, knelt facing the altar, and made the sign of the cross before hurrying off.

Adella looked askance at Father Miguel, who filled the empty space where Sister Mary Margaret had been just minutes before. "Adella, this is Mother Catherine. She is going to take care of you. There are other girls here your age, and I'm sure you will make many friends."

The wary child watched as her self-appointed guardian exited the pew, knelt, made the sign of the cross, and walked out of the church. Alarmed that he was, in fact, leaving her, Adella ran from the church towards the priest and wrapped her arms around the only person who connected her to the known. "Please don't leave me," she pleaded, tightening her grip around his legs.

Mother Catherine placed a hand firmly on the little girl's shoulder as Father Miguel bent down on one knee and took her little hands. "I will be back every month to visit. I promise. Now, you have to promise me you will be a good girl and do what is asked of you. Can you do that?"

Adella didn't acknowledge. She just stood there stoically. She didn't resist Mother Catherine's firm grip as the little girl watched the priest get in the automobile and ride away. She didn't cry, either.

Mother Catherine led Adella down the somber walkway of the convent. The frightened child shivered as she walked down the long hallway with lofty, arched ceilings supported by gargoyle sentries poised to take a nose-dive on anyone who might challenge their dominion. She anxiously looked for an escape route as they passed through a large, castle-style arched door made of ornately carved wood panels held together by hand-forged iron hardware. Should it close, she was sure she'd be forever doomed.

Adella followed her into a large room with two long, wooden tables flanked on each side by backless benches occupied by the two dozen orphans who lived there. Sister Mary Margaret looked up as they entered and smiled.

"This is Adella," said Mother Catherine, gently pushing the hesitant newcomer to the forefront. "She will be staying with us. Do you think you can find a place for her at the table?"

Sister Mary Margaret took over from there. "So you *do* have a name." She bent to Adella's level, reminding her of their earlier meeting. "So nice to meet you, Adella." The sympathetic nun ushered Adella to a seat next to a dark-skinned girl about her age but much shorter. Adella had taken after her father and was much taller than other children her age. She was self-conscious about her height. Children, believing her older, poked fun at her for being slow.

“Nice to meet you, Adella. I’m Angelina.”

Adella dismissed the stranger, and Angelina wasn’t sure what to make of the new girl who wouldn’t talk. She looked to Sister Mary Margaret for answers.

“She’s just tired. Tomorrow, she will feel more like talking,” the nun assured the girl as she clapped her hands to quiet the chatter. “All right, children. Time for grace.”

In unison, they made the sign of the cross. “Thank you, God, for the food we are about to receive from Thy bounty...”

Adella said nothing and ate nothing during dinner. This did not escape Sister Mary Margaret. After eating their fill, the girls cleaned their dishes, wiped down the table, and made their way to the chapel for their evening prayers before retiring to the dorm.

“Adella, you take the bed next to Angelina.” The good sister led her charge to a small cot.

Adella obeyed and climbed into bed. She was worn listless from holding back tears, from being abandoned, from the unknown. She slept through the night, too weary to care.

Their day started at five a.m. The girls cleaned up, dressed, and went to the chapel for morning prayers.

Adella followed, lost in her own thoughts.

A gentle tug on her arm caught her attention. At first, she did not recognize Sister Mary Margaret. She was dressed in loose-fitting pants and a shirt, her head covered with a white bandana.

The nun led the little girl from the line to a small courtyard, turned, and bent to Adella’s level. “Hit me!” she demanded.

Adella was both agitated by her coarseness and confused.

“Go on, hit me!” the nun repeated, nudging her against the courtyard wall several times.

Adella turned, but the nun pulled her back.

In retaliation, Adella took a swing.

Sister Mary Margaret dodged her attack. “Missed!” The nun nudged her again.

This time, Adella let loose the tidal wave hidden behind her eyes and began hitting, kicking, and grabbing at the nun’s bandana.

At last, Sister Mary Margaret had reached the little girl. Relieved, she wrapped her arms around the struggling child and let her cry.

After Adella had quieted down, the nun handed her a pair of pants and a shirt. “Here, put these on.”

Worn out, Adella did as she was told without care.

“This world is not fair,” Sister Mary Margaret confided to the little girl. “When words won’t do, you need to know how to defend yourself.” The nun twirled, made a high jump, and gave a fast and powerful kick while suspended in the air. Sister Mary Margaret knew from experience that martial arts would give the little girl an outlet for the pent-up anger she harbored and instill a sense of control and self-confidence that Adella would need to navigate the world.

After an hour of instruction, she looked directly into her pupil’s eyes. “You must train both your body and your mind. Without this,” Sister Mary Margaret poked at her pupil’s head, “you are defenseless in a world of words. Now, change and join the other girls.”

Adella did as she was told.

Acknowledging a nod from Sister Mary Margaret, the teacher allowed the newcomer to slip into an empty seat in the back of the classroom. Except for Angelina, her late entrance and her absence from breakfast had gone unnoticed by her classmates.

Angelina tugged at her new friend’s sleeve. “I saved you a mango,” she whispered, slipping the sweet treat to Adella.

“Thank you.” Adella had worked up an appetite. She looked over at Angelina and smiled.

For the first time, Adella had someone she could call a friend.

From then on, after prayers and while the other girls were eating breakfast, Adella would meet with Sister Mary Margaret to continue her martial arts lessons. She would share what she learned with Angelina, who, in turn, brought her food from the breakfast table on their way to the classroom. They became inseparable.

The nuns taught the orphaned girls to read and write in English, with elements of history and geography included. Knowledge of the subject matter was a minor concern—three of the six teachers had not attended high school. In the classroom, the highest priorities were piety and strict discipline.

At sixteen, the girls were apprenticed as servants for four years, where they earned room and board and a small stipend. The intention was not to leave them too long at the orphanage in order to make room for other abandoned children.

The convent housed an infirmary, the girls’ dormitory, a dining hall, a chapel with a piano, a sewing room with two pedal-powered sewing machines, and a schoolroom with a small library. The dormitory was a long room flanked on both sides by a row of cots. Under each cot, the girls stored their personal possessions and a wash basin. The sisters taught them sewing so they might have a skill upon which to earn a living. The orphans were also given domestic tasks—skills they would need to carry on outside the convent.

Like every family, they had a set time for rising each morning. They began their day with community prayer and then breakfast. The girls took turns helping with the cooking and cleaning responsibilities. On occasion, the nuns gave them money to buy flour for bread, rice, and food

stock to make soup. Sometimes the orphans accompanied the sisters into the community and aided in their ministering to the sick.

Although there were doctors and hospitals in the area, most of the inhabitants were too poor to afford either. In other instances, the locals were suspicious of Western medicine and preferred healers who relied on medicinal herbs grown locally. Mindful of the local preference, the sisters were well-versed in medicinal herbs and their uses.

Adella found herself ministering to the sick, along with Sister Grace and Angelina. The locals recognized Sister Grace as a healer, and she was in much demand. Like Teresa, Adella became intrigued with the use of medicinal plants to treat illnesses and to relieve pain.

Sister Grace passed on her knowledge to Adella and Angelina, recognizing their penchant for the healing arts. The three maintained a small garden of medicinal plants, where they grew bitter melon used as a side dish to counter the effects of white sugar and tawa-tawa to treat asthma and other respiratory diseases.

To supplement their garden, they combed the nearby forests for plants that met their needs. On one occasion, Adella reached up to pick the bright red seeds of a vine that had wound its way around a tree and nearby shrubs.

Sister Grace gently tapped her hand. “Careful, that plant is called the rosary pea. Its seeds are beautiful, but it is extremely poisonous. Should you ever be in question of which plants are poisonous,” the nun enlightened, “look to the birds. If they eat it, it is not poisonous.”

Their mentor taught them how to make tea from banaba leaves to relieve stomach distress and from ginger root to treat flu-like symptoms. They ground the roots of the turmeric plant into powder, which they used to reduce symptoms of depression and arthritis.

In addition to locally grown flora, the marketplace provided them the opportunity to obtain plants not grown on the islands. They were always on the lookout for dried leaves from the foxglove, which was abundant in western Europe and used to slow and strengthen the heart.

Adella thrived in this environment. She had both Angelina and Father Miguel, who made good on his promise. The guilt-ridden priest had been granted his request for transfer from Iloilo to a nearby province on the big island. Every month during his visits to the archdiocese in Manila, he made his way to the convent to visit with Adella. From the very first visit, she made it clear that Angelina was to be included. Both girls looked forward to his stopovers. He always brought treats, and sometimes he would have Eduardo drive them to the local sari-sari, where the priest would treat them to a new drink called Coca-Cola. Eduardo would tell funny stories and make them laugh. They felt so special.

On one such visit, Father Miguel brought bad news. Eduardo had been taken ill and died. For seven years, he had accompanied the priest on his outings. The girls had grown fond of the man and were heartbroken. Once they had composed themselves, Father Miguel beckoned to his new driver, who was waiting nearby at a respectable distance.

“Adella, Angelina, this is Mateo, my new driver.”

Chapter 20

MATEO (1920)

Mateo stood about five feet eight inches—the average height for local men. He could easily get lost in a crowd with his dark-brown skin, straight black hair, and dark-brown eyes atop a short, wide nose. But he had an infectious smile that stretched from ear to ear, boasting pearly white teeth that made him stand out.

The priest had Mateo drive them to their favorite spot, where they spent some time reminiscing about Eduardo and getting to know his replacement. They learned that Mateo, too, was an orphan. He had been born in 1901, the same year the Philippine-American War ended, and was left on the doorstep of the local abbey. He was adopted by the family of a local priest who gave him their surname, Santiago. He had no idea of his parentage.

Mateo drove Father Miguel to the convent on his monthly trips. Soon, Adella found another reason to look forward to the priest's visits. After a half dozen such visits, Mateo got the courage to make the trip on his own. He found time to help Adella in the garden and to forage the nearby forests for medicinal herbs. He strolled with her through the market, carrying her grocery basket filled with her purchases.

At night, after his visits, she would sit up in bed with Angelina going over their day. Angelina would giggle at her friend. "I think he likes you."

Adella secretly hoped she was right.

Father Miguel and the good sisters were encouraged by their budding relationship. Adella and Angelina were approaching the age when the orphanage was obliged to let them go. Angelina had expressed her desire to become a nun, and the Sisters of Charity had accepted her in a nearby province.

Adella had adopted a spirit of independence and was inclined to live a life outside of the convent, where adherence to strict rules did not exist. Sister Grace suggested to Mother Catherine that the free-spirited girl would be a good candidate for the nursing school at the local hospital. There, she would get her training and have room and board.

Mother Catherine was hesitant—she was not so sure that was the path Adella was inclined to follow. She had seen how the girl looked forward to Mateo's visits and had hoped that Mateo would have made his intentions known by now.

She talked with Father Miguel during his next visit. "Adella is turning sixteen, and I can't house her much longer. I can petition the nursing school for admission, but I think she is sweet on Mateo. Regrettably, he has yet to make his intentions known," she confided.

"I'll talk to him," Father Miguel promised.

On his way to the port, the priest had a man-to-man talk with Mateo. The young man was not sure how Adella felt about him and did not want to appear forward. Father Miguel assured him that his affections were reciprocated and that he had the blessings of both Father Miguel and Mother Catherine to court her.

The next day, Mateo found Adella in the garden.

“Mateo, I’m so glad to see you! I’m going to the market and could use you to help me carry my basket.” As he took the basket, she chatted about Angelina’s plans to join the Sisters of Charity and her indecision about taking the exam for admission to the nursing school.

Following her lead, he stopped at a fruit stand. “Huh?” He jolted from the speech he was writing in his head.

“I said I need to find some lemons.” Adella looked over at Mateo and realized he had not heard a word she had said.

Caught off guard, he shifted his gaze to the ground, and she noticed a tremble in his hands.

“What’s the matter?” she inquired. “I know you well enough to know that something’s not right.”

“No! Nothing’s wrong.” He shrugged. That was the best he could do.

When they returned to the convent, he handed the basket to Adella and stood for a moment before leaving. Adella watched him walk away without a word.

After his visit, she confided to Angelina. “I don’t think he likes me anymore,” she cried. Neither of them had any idea about boys and concluded that he was a fool.

Angelina advised her friend to ignore him. “He’s not worth your time.”

Mateo was frustrated. He chastised himself that he couldn’t tell his heartthrob how he felt. The truth was, he couldn’t put it into words without sounding like an idiot. Not wanting to make a fool of himself, the forlorn young man stopped visiting altogether.

As the days passed, his absence confirmed that he was no longer interested, and Adella became disheartened.

The following month when he picked Father Miguel up from the ferry, the well-intended priest addressed Mateo with anticipation. “So, my friend, how’s the courting business going?”

“I couldn’t. I just couldn’t. Not then.” Mateo confessed to his mentor. “But,” he smiled, “I’ve been making plans, and now I can talk to her.” Mateo began to tell Father Miguel what he had been up to since his last visit.

The priest shook his head. “I’m proud of you. I do believe you can make it happen.”

They drove in silence, Mateo, nervous with anticipation.

When they arrived at the convent, Adella came to greet them alone. She explained that Angelina had recently left for the convent of the Sisters of Charity. “I’m missing her. She was my friend,” Adella lamented, glancing over at Mateo for a brief second. *He was my friend too*, she thought, and started to cry.

“Why don’t we go to the sari-sari for a Coca-Cola?” Mateo offered, mistaking the absence of Angelina as the cause for her tears.

Ignoring Mateo, she looked at Father Miguel. “I’m sorry, Father. Today is not a good day for me.” She turned and headed back towards the convent.

The young suitor was dumbfounded as he watched her retreat.

“You’re not going to get another chance,” Father Miguel warned the young man.

He had no choice. “Wait!”

Adella stopped and turned. It was Mateo.

The priest excused himself. “I have to talk to the friar for a minute.” He left the two standing there several feet apart.

Mateo took two steps forward. Adella was confused. She stood her ground as he closed the gap.

He stopped and slightly brushed her arm, causing her to shiver and cross her arms. “Look, I want to tell you what I have been doing since we last saw each other.”

“You’ve been gone a month. Why should I care what you were doing?” Considering how he left her, she wasn’t sure why he bothered.

“I’ve been to Antipolo. They need a bus driver there, and I went to apply for the job.” He stopped, waiting for some kind of reply, but Adella just stood there dumbfounded. *He’s leaving?*

He took her hand. She was too upset to resist. “I start next week.”

He waited. No response.

“And...I want you to come with me.”

Adella wasn’t sure if she’d heard him correctly or if it was simply her heart talking. She needed time to process.

Mateo filled the silence with fast talk. “I found a place outside the city. It’s small, but I think you’ll like it. I start work next week. The pay is good...”

“Yes, I’ll go with you,” she interrupted, relieved that he wanted her in his life.

“Wait! I’m not finished.” He was aware of the interruption, but was too nervous to have heard her words. “I have to ask. Will you marry me? I love you.”

He loves me! Adella stood there. She had never heard those words before. She swallowed hard as tears of joy filled her eyes. “Yes!” She nodded her head. “I will marry you.”

A sigh of relief passed Mateo’s lips. His posture shifted upright, and a self-congratulatory smile overtook his face. *That wasn’t so hard after all!*

Father Miguel and Mother Catherine watched from the church entrance like nervous parents. They recognized their cue and started towards the couple.

“So?” Father Miguel looked at their teary, smiling faces.

“We’re getting married,” Adella blurted out.

After hugs and a congratulatory conversation, Adella approached Father Miguel. “We would love it if you would marry us, Father.”

Pain and guilt gripped his heart. Adella was asking him for what he had denied her mother years ago. It gave him a slight sense of atonement that he could now do this for her daughter. “It would be my honor,” the priest replied with tears in his eyes. He embraced the two people he cared most for in the world.

The nuns and their charges were excited about the upcoming wedding—never mind that they had only one day to prepare! The kitchen and sewing room came alive as they went to work.

Sister Bernadette “borrowed” white drapes from the rectory for a dress. *It’s going to a good cause*, she rationalized. Sister Laurel was an excellent seamstress and set to work cutting

the cloth and designing a wedding dress befitting the most affluent bride. Sister Rosalie and two of the girls embroidered small, delicate, white flowers on the wide sleeves that characterized the traditional Filipino dress. The kitchen staff busied themselves making a cake they artfully decorated with confectionary roses.

The next morning, they were all in attendance at the wedding. Before him, Father Miguel could see Teresa. Although her daughter was taller and lighter in skin tone, with a few freckles across her nose, Adella had the same thick, black hair, almond-shaped eyes, and innocent smile. When she spoke, her voice was Teresa's.

"Teresa, I hope you are watching," he whispered to himself, looking skyward.

After a brief ceremony, the wedding party retired to the dining room, which was filled with all sorts of specially prepared food, of which the *pièce de résistance* was the cake. There, they shared anecdotes, laughter, tears, and many congratulatory wishes. It was truly a joyous affair.

All too soon, a bus drove up, loaded on the top and sides with unsold goods and newly purchased supplies from the weary commuters. The driver had told the dozen or so passengers they were going to take a little detour to pick up someone special. When they arrived at the convent, the nuns invited them all in to celebrate. The passengers were delighted.

After the last traveler had disembarked, the driver, Juan, looked back to make sure no one was left behind before he exited the bus.

Mateo embraced his friend. "This is my bride, Adella," he said proudly. "Adella, meet Juan, the owner of the bus and my new boss."

They didn't spend more than half an hour there, but the newly arrived guests had eaten their fill. They continued the celebration as they boarded the bus with cake in their hands. It was the last bus of the day headed to the mountain town of Antipolo, approximately fifteen miles east of Manila.

The newlyweds found a seat behind the driver. "I will be driving a bus just like this one," Mateo explained to Adella in a voice loud enough for the fellow passengers-turned-partygoers to hear. At a time when few knew how to drive, drivers were regarded a bit like local celebrities. The people of the small farming community relied on the bus to take them to the crowded city, where they would bring their goods to sell and purchase much-needed supplies.

Juan, a native Filipino, was about ten years older than his new driver. Three years prior, in 1917, he'd joined the Philippine National Guard to assist the United States during World War I. The Filipino people were loyal to their mother country. Life under the occupying Americans proved less harsh than under Spanish rule, in spite of the post-Philippine-American War restrictions. Just a year earlier, the United States had passed the Philippine Autonomy Act, officially proclaiming their commitment to grant independence to the colonists eventually.

Although the Great War necessitated putting independence on hold, the Filipino people united in supporting America's war efforts. When the war department called for a volunteer National Guard of 15,000, an overwhelming 25,000 men enlisted. Of the 25,000 recruits, only a handful ever saw action on the European front.

While he served in the National Guard, Juan learned to drive. When he was discharged, he had saved enough money to purchase a truck from the army surplus to start his bus service from Antipolo to Manila. A year later, to meet the growing demand, Juan purchased and recycled two additional trucks and added two barangay—farm to market—routes to Manila, picking up passengers on the road along the way. He re-configured the trucks with benches on either side, leaving a narrow space in the middle that often served as standing room to accommodate as many passengers as the bus could hold. There were open windows along the sides for ventilation, and the back was left open for easy passenger exit. The top and sides of the vehicle were made available for commuters to load their goods bound for the marketplace.

After many stops and starts, picking up and dropping off passengers, Juan finally arrived in front of the nipa hut his friend had rented and where the newlyweds got off the bus. Adella looked over at the cube-shaped house raised up on giant bamboo stilts with its steeply pitched roof made of fronds from the native nipa tree. Mateo pointed out that the stilts functioned as a barrier for pests and created a buffer for rising water during the monsoon season. The steeply pitched roof allowed rainwater to flow down quickly. On the east and west sides of the hut were large, thatched-awning windows held open by wooden rods to let in air and light. A small clearing outside functioned as the kitchen with a coal-burning stove for cooking.

Adella climbed the ladder and looked around the one room. It couldn't have been more than thirty feet square. The place was bare, with the exception of a white mosquito net that hung over a straw mat, taking up a third of the space. A gentle wind sashayed its way through the window to welcome her. The tall roof provided space for hot air to rise, creating a natural cooling effect as the breeze nudged the hot air upwards. At the convent, Adella had sometimes felt suffocated by the windowless walkways designed to navigate traffic from one room to the next. Here, she could hear the breeze winding through the overhead palms and smell the sweet fragrance of the ylang-ylang flowers gracing the half dozen trees surrounding the tiny hut.

She smiled at Mateo. She was home.

Chapter 21

ANTIPOLO (1920-1921)

Adella was no stranger to Antipolo, a known Catholic pilgrimage site. She and the other girls at the orphanage had made the trek every year with Mother Catherine to the Antipolo Cathedral, which housed the shrine to Our Lady of Peace and Good Voyage, also known as the Virgin of Antipolo.

On Mateo's first day of driving the bus, Adella woke up at dawn with him. He flashed a toothy grin at his bride of three days as she slipped a cup of tea into his hands and poured a cup for herself.

As they sat under the stilted hut, the sun rose and began to peek through the dense forest surrounding them, reminding Mateo that their honeymoon was over. He would be gone most of the day. Adella loaded him down with a sack filled with rice and fish. She also made sure he carried a canteen of water.

"I'll be back tonight," he reassured his wife.

But Adella did not need reassurance. She, too, had plans for the day. On her list was a visit to the convent. Sister Grace had written ahead and secured the sixteen-year-old work at the local infirmary. The charitable institution provided care and shelter for the ailing poor. At first, Mateo had been hesitant about his wife working outside the home. He relented when Adella promised that she would stay home once they had children.

She watched as her husband made his way down the dirt path to town, carrying the sack of food she had prepared for him the day before. Adella filled a pan with cool water drawn from the nearby community well to bathe. Once she had washed, she stepped into a plain orange skirt with a drawstring waist that drifted down to her ankles. She pulled over her head a white blouse with long sleeves and a cape-like collar with small white flowers embroidered along the edge. Once satisfied with her dress, the newlywed combed through her long, black hair, twisted it to the back, and anchored it with a comb.

It took about twenty minutes for Adella to walk through town to the church. She met Rosa, a pleasant Filipino woman, barely five feet tall, whose long, black hair was pulled back and hidden under a cone-shaped, stiffly starched nursing cap. Over her white uniform, she wore a white bibbed apron several inches shorter than her dress, the hem of which barely allowed her white shoes to peek from under.

"We are so happy to have you join us. Sister Grace had nothing but praise for you. Let me show you around."

The nurse led Adella to a long, crowded dormitory lit by sunlight streaming through large open windows. Cots spaced about five to six feet apart flanked both sides, affording the occupants little privacy.

"There are two such wards," Rosa said. "One for women and one for men. It will be your job to keep the area clean and well-aired to help prevent the rapid spread of dysentery and other

infectious diseases. We have no resident doctor, but are fortunate that the doctors from Clark Air Base visit several times a month. They bring much-needed supplies and medicine.”

After a brief tour of the buildings, Rosa led Adella outside to a barracks gifted to the church by the American army. Like the wards, the place was lit by sunlight through large open windows.

Rosa proudly pointed to the electric lights strung overhead. “We turn on the electric lights only after the sun goes down,” she explained.

Overhead fans turned leisurely, recycling the hot air and providing little relief. The men were lethargic from the sweltering heat. The only movement was an occasional swipe at a buzzing fly or mosquito. A row of cots lined the wall, each covered by a mosquito net. These beds were mostly empty. During the day, the men wandered the streets, and most returned in the evenings for meals and a bed.

“These men served in the war,” Rosa said in a low voice. She made no distinction between the Spanish-American and the Philippine-American wars. It made no difference. In her mind, they were one and the same. “They have no family and are destitute. They can’t survive on their own. We provide food and shelter,” she explained. “We consider them our family.”

Rosa led Adella to the dining room outside the barracks, where the men were waiting on one another. A short, dark-skinned Filipino man with one leg hobbled around on crutches gathering dishes to be cleaned. Another brought a glass of water to a comrade crying out for it.

“This is their dining room. Food is not allowed in the ward. We are short-staffed, so we encourage the more able-bodied men to assist in the care of those who have difficulty helping themselves,” Rosa explained. “It actually is quite therapeutic.”

They came to a table where a skeleton of a man with vacuous eyes set deep within hollowed sockets was sitting, bent over a bowl of rice. He held a spoon in his right hand but was at a loss of what to do with it. A small, wiry, bald Filipino man came to his rescue.

“Hi, Roberto,” the nurse greeted the man.

He flashed a toothless grin and nodded as he pulled up and sat on a chair next to the dazed man. Without a word, Roberto took the man’s hand holding the spoon and guided it to his mouth, which he opened, on cue, when the spoon touched his lips.

The women watched for a few moments as Roberto patiently fed his friend.

Rosa lowered her voice. “A local farmer found this man a week after the Battle of Manila. He was walking around naked with a head wound. Bandits must have stripped him of his clothes and personal possessions. We believe he was a soldier in Aguinaldo’s army, but we are not sure. He’s been here twenty years and hasn’t said a word. We call him ‘Sir.’ Roberto, here, has taken responsibility for his care.” She gave Roberto an appreciative smile. “Sir.” Rosa bent down to the man’s level. “I want you to meet someone,” she said.

Sir continued to stare ahead, opening his mouth when the spoon touched his lips.

Adella watched. After a moment of silence, she squatted to meet him eye to eye. “I’m happy to meet you, Sir.”

Upon hearing her voice, Sir's eyes lit up. He dropped his spoon and leaned towards the newcomer as if trying to remember a face, or maybe a voice from his past. He looked straight at Adella and blinked his eyes. "Te... Te... Te..." he stuttered as his eyes changed from vacuous to one of recognition.

Roberto and Rosa were dumbfounded.

"Oh my goodness!" Rosa exclaimed as her hand touched her cheek for a reality check.

"Te... Te... Te..." Sir reached for Adella.

She leaned in towards him.

He touched her face. "Te... Te... Teresa!" he blurted.

Adella smiled at the once-vibrant young man, now reduced to skin and bones. "My name is Adella. Who's Teresa?" she asked, hoping to stir some memory.

Sir tilted his head and stared as if trying to connect with the face in front of him. After a few seconds, he retreated back into his world with tears in his eyes.

Rosa looked at the perplexed young woman. "You must remind him of someone," she offered. "He has never uttered a sound before now."

Unable to engage him further, the women watched as Roberto edged the spoon to Sir's open mouth. After a few more minutes, they both stood to leave.

Sir studied Adella, who glanced back as she was leaving. "Te... Teresa," Sir insisted as she turned and walked away.

She did not hear him.

The next day, Adella found the bed vacant.

"He died during the night," Rosa said sadly. She looked at Adella. "I think, somehow, he was waiting for Teresa. You must have reminded him of her."

"You think?" Adella wondered aloud. "She must have meant a lot to him."

Chapter 22

THE LONG WAIT (1921-1935)

On her way home from the infirmary one evening, Adella was interrupted by an out-of-breath, barefoot Filipino man with rolled-up pant legs and an open, tattered shirt. He grabbed the startled woman by the arm. “You work at the infirmary, yes?”

She nodded. It was a small town—a newcomer would be certain gossip.

“Quick, my son fell off the roof. He’s hurt bad.” The man held on to her arm as he raced towards his injured son, dragging her with him.

“But I’m not a nurse or doctor,” she protested.

“You are all we have,” the distraught father insisted. He explained that the boy and his father had been mending their thatched roof when his son slipped and grabbed onto the frame on his way down, injuring himself.

His son, a small boy of about ten years old, was screaming and holding his injured left arm. It looked to Adella as if he might have dislocated his shoulder.

“Can you touch your fingers to your shoulder?”

The boy could not reach across to his right, uninjured shoulder. It would have to be manipulated back into place. She had seen Sister Grace do it several times.

“What’s your name?” she asked in a calm voice.

“Santos.”

“Well, Santos, you have dislocated your shoulder, and we will put it back where it belongs. Does that sound okay with you?”

He nodded bravely.

Adella saw the nearby plank they had used to move about on the roof. “Now I want you to lie face down on this plank.”

In that position, his entire arm hung straight down from the injured shoulder, not touching the ground.

She tied a gallon bucket to his wrist and began filling it with water. Santos started to relax as the bucket got heavier with water, realizing this procedure was not causing any additional pain. The muscles, too, relaxed until the head of the humerus dropped below the rim of the socket enough to snap back into place. There was a soft *pop* and sudden relief of pain.

“There!” Adella smiled. “That wasn’t so bad, was it?”

Santos shook his head as Adella eased the weight from his wrist and made a sling from her shawl for his injured arm.

For the first time, the heroine was aware that a small group of villagers had gathered. They were all smiles. Mateo was among them. One of the neighbors had seen him on his way home from work and led Mateo to where they had collected.

“I’m Gonzales,” Santos’s father introduced himself.

A petite woman with disheveled black hair and a stained apron brought a cup of tea for her son's healer and Mateo. As they were sipping their beverages, the crowd dispersed.

When they were ready to leave, Adella addressed her young patient. "Can you touch your fingers to your shoulder now?"

Santos reached and touched the opposite shoulder with his injured arm and smiled.

Gonzales gave Adella a large basket filled with bitter melon, mangos, and bananas. "Thank you," he insisted over Adella's objections.

A week later, Adella was outside firing up the coal stove when a woman approached. "You must be Adella." She smiled. "My name is Sophia. I want to thank you for fixing Santos's shoulder. I was away in Manila. My daughter just had her first baby."

Not knowing who the woman was, Adella gave her a blank look.

"Oh. I'm sorry. The locals call me a healer, but I am, in fact, a nurse."

Adella offered the woman some tea. They sat under the shade of the hut and spent time getting to know one another. Her new friend knew Rosa—they were both graduates of Union Mission Hospital in Iloilo.

"The villagers are wary of Western medicine and think of the infirmary as somewhere to go to die. In a way, they are right. They agree to be treated outside the home only when the symptoms are extreme. When the villagers started coming to me for medical attention, the doctors agreed that I could best help the community outside the infirmary. The staff is available and happy to advise and provide medicine." Sophia rose from her seat. "I'm getting older, and I need someone to help me out in the community. If you are willing, perhaps we can meet at the infirmary Monday. They have been promising me help, and you would be a perfect fit."

That Monday, Sophia arranged for them to meet with the heads of the infirmary. They decided that Adella's training under Sister Grace made her the perfect assistant for Sophia. Rosa was sad to see her new recruit reassigned, but agreed that she was needed more out in the community.

Adella accompanied Sophia as she made her rounds throughout Antipolo. It was only a short time before the small-town residents began to seek her help when the nurse was unavailable. They came to her with all types of symptoms, mishaps, complaints, and complicated births. Sophia encouraged her. "You know what to do. I'm close by if you need my help."

Adella never refused anyone. Grateful, they paid for her services with whatever they had in abundance—sometimes chickens, food, charcoal, even textiles. She accepted their offerings graciously.

Life was good. Juan had added two more buses and routes to the business and made Mateo a partner. But after two years of married life, Adella had yet to get pregnant.

"Adella, you are not yet twenty," Sophia reminded her as she rummaged around in the large satchel she always carried. The older woman eventually found what she was looking for.

“In the meantime, drink tea made from this.” She handed the envelope to Adella. “These grounds are from chaste berries to help regulate your natural cycle. And that is good for baby-making.” Sophia patted her friend’s hand as she got up to leave.

It worked! Several months later, Adella was with child. She bore a girl she named Angelina, after her best friend. Within a year, she had another girl. Angelina was four years old, and Bonita was three when Adella found she was pregnant with her third. Mya was born on December eighth. Mateo called her his Christmas baby. Next, finally, a boy, Miguel, whom they named after their dear friend. The following year came Christina.

The nipa hut served them well. They all slept under two large mosquito nets on straw mats. The older children slept under one, Adella and Mateo next to them with the baby. During the day, Adella would roll up the mats to make more room for the children to dress. Most of their activities were outdoors. In the mornings, Mateo would fire up the old wood-burning stove for Adella, who made a pot of rice to last the day. They did not have the luxury of running water. Drinking water came from a community well; they used a nearby creek for bathing and washing clothes.

Father Miguel would make his way up the dirt path to visit them at least four times a year. As he had years ago for Adella and Angelina, he bought the children sweet treats from the city. Although his visits were sporadic, Adella could count on him to make the annual pilgrimage to the shrine of Our Lady of Peace. Every April thirtieth, on the eve of May Day, he would join the thousands of devotees from metro Manila who spent the night traveling the fifteen miles on foot to the shrine to hear Mass at dawn. This practice was called *Alay Lakad*—literally, “walk offering.”

After Mass, he would join Adella and her family for a festive meal. Mateo would get up early to prepare lechon, a spit-roast whole pig served with liver sauce. He and Juan would spend the day turning the spit while arguing over the best way to prepare the sauce. The women would busy themselves preparing the traditional adobo with pork, chicken, or a combination of both. They would marinate the meat in vinegar, soy sauce, and garlic, then stew it until tender. A healthy serving of rice accompanied all dishes.

The priest was always there for Adella and Mateo. He baptized their children and celebrated birthdays and anniversaries. He was family, and now, she could hardly wait to tell him their good news. She was pregnant with her sixth child! It had come as a surprise. Christina was now five years old, and Adella, who had passed her thirtieth birthday, did not expect to have any more children.

With a growing family and now the new baby, Mateo had purchased a three-room adobe brick house on the outskirts of town. Outside the walls, on the north side of the house, was a “dirty kitchen” with a wood-burning stove, a sink, a long wood table with two benches on either side, and plenty of storage room. Piled high were wooden crates and boxes filled with recently brought vegetables, tools Mateo used for working on the bus and carpentry work around the house, fabric Adella stored for future sewing ventures—almost anything not in use at the moment could be found in the crates. Adella spent most of her time in the dirty kitchen cooking,

cutting Mateo's hair, sewing, sorting laundry, and cooking some more. It was the place where memories were made.

It was now September. Adella had not heard from Father Miguel since the festival four months ago. She was worried. While doing her chores, Adella found herself looking up, hoping to see the priest making his way up the dirt path. She recalled that he had seemed a bit overtaxed the last time she saw him. He'd laughed at her concern. "You did not walk fifteen miles last night. I have earned the right to look tired!"

Nevertheless, his prolonged absence concerned her.

Chapter 23

TERESA'S BOX (1935)

Father Miguel lay motionless in a sea of white linen, making the deep yellow of his face and hands more noticeable.

"Pancreatic cancer," the doctor had told him. There was no hope.

That was two months ago.

He was now sallow skin draped over bones. His abdomen was distended, and his feet were swollen. Father Paul waited patiently as the dying priest, in a trancelike state, searched for words.

His thoughts went back to a time of no worries, of Carlos wet, barefoot, and laughing.

"Teresa, wait for me!" He chased after his friend. It was a hot day, and they had strayed to a nearby stream to cool off rather than heading straight home.

"Can't wait." She ran ahead. "Mama will be mad. She's very strict that I go to evening vespers."

Father Miguel recalled his promise all those years ago. *"If you are going into the convent, then I will become a priest. We will be best friends forever."*

Father Paul touched the dying priest's hand, pulling him from his trance. He had come at his friend's request to hear his last confession.

In a weakened voice, Father Miguel began, "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned... I have loved, and I have hated."

It was late afternoon. Adella had just put the children down for a nap when she saw the figure in a black robe make his way up the dirt path, carrying a small box. Thinking it was Father Miguel, she ran to greet him. She had been worried for nothing.

But her optimism turned to dread when she did not recognize the man in priest's garbs and carrying a satchel.

She stopped as Father Paul slowly approached. "Father," she greeted him with some trepidation.

"Adella?" he asked with a solemn face.

She nodded, then started crying. She knew something was wrong.

"Let's go someplace where we can sit."

They found refuge from the grueling sun under a large abaca tree lording over their tiny home's roof.

Laying the satchel at his feet, the priest introduced himself before telling her what she already knew. "I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news," he said. Seeing Adella pale, Father Paul poured a glass of water for her to drink.

She took the offering gratefully and nodded toward the pitcher. "Please," she said.

Father Paul obediently filled a glass for himself.

There followed something more than silence—a void. Adella remembered that day so long ago when the little girl had pulled away from the good priest. Now, all she wanted to do was run and wrap her arms around him.

She tried to hold back her tears, but they had a mind of their own, flowing freely down her cheeks. "When?" she asked.

"Last week."

"Was he sick? Did he suffer?"

Father Paul spent time answering her questions and going over Father Miguel's last days. Finally, with a deep sigh, he took a box from the satchel and slid it toward Adella. "Father Miguel wanted me to give you this. And beg for your forgiveness."

Adella looked at the priest, puzzled.

"You will understand when you read the letter."

They did not see Mateo approach and were startled at his sudden appearance.

Seeing his wife's tear-stained face, Mateo frowned. He knew it was not good news that brought the priest to his home. "Hello, Father," he greeted, waiting for an explanation.

"You must be Mateo," the priest said, extending his hand.

Mateo looked at Father Paul with uncertainty.

"Father Miguel is dead," he said, answering the unspoken question.

Tears flooded Mateo's eyes. Father Miguel had become his close friend too. The grieving man put his arms around his distraught wife, who willingly surrendered.

"I was with him at the end," Father Paul explained to Mateo. "He wanted me to give this to Adella." He nudged the box on the ground, then looked at Adella. "The contents belonged to your mother. She wanted you to have them."

Their attention went to the box.

In the ensuing silence, Father Paul rose. "I will take my leave now. You have each other."

"Thank you," they said in unison as the priest left.

Adella watched in silence as Father Paul distanced himself, crossing paths with an old, bearded man in a white kimono, and disappeared from sight. Tearfully, Adella took a deep breath and opened the box. On top was a letter from Father Miguel. Mateo sat in silence as she tearfully read the letter to herself. In it, he described his childhood days with her mother and confessed his feelings towards Teresa and jealousy towards Rich.

Forgive me. I have failed you and am too much of a coward to face you in person. God has forgiven me. I pray that you might too.

She looked past Mateo. It was a lot to comprehend.

The children began to stir. She stopped Mateo from going to them. "I need a diversion right now," she explained. She handed the letter to him to read as she dried her tears with her skirt and went into the house.

Adella rolled up the mats they were napping on and ushered them outside to play. There, she stoked up the fire and began preparing dinner.

Having read the letter, Mateo got up and put his arms around his wife. They had both lost a dear friend.

After dinner, Adella tucked the children in for the night, sat down on a mat crossed-legged, and pulled the deserted box within her reach. She began to go over its contents as Mateo looked on.

There was a letter addressed to her mother from Rich in care of Father Miguel. The grieving woman opened the letter Teresa had never gotten the chance to read. Her eyes filled with tears as she looked up at her husband. “He loved her.”

She was puzzled when she came across a letter her mother had written towards the end of her pregnancy. Teresa was aware of the complications a woman her age might face during childbirth. She wanted her baby to know it was loved.

To my baby,

If you are reading this, I am no longer of this earth. I do not know if you are a boy or a girl, but I want you to know you are loved. I am sorry that I am not there to kiss you, to tuck you in at night, or to watch you grow into adulthood. Just know that somewhere between dreaming and reality, I am watching over you.

I am sure you will endure hard times—they build character. The good times present the opportunity to reflect on and appreciate your circumstances. You will require both if you are to develop any empathy—a most precious asset.

Thoreau said it best: “Could a better miracle take place than for us to look through each other’s eyes for an instant?”

Be well, and enjoy life. I wish for you the love your father and I shared.

Your mother,

Teresa

This time, she did not tear over. Adella looked up at her husband and smiled. “She loved me.”

Her fingers touched her closed mouth as she rifled through the box for the next item. She found her parents’ marriage certificate. They *were* married.

As she dove into the box again, Adella found a red chemise with a note pinned to it—*New Year’s Eve 1898, Madrid*. She sniffed away the tears and giggled, holding it up in front of her for Mateo to see.

Slowly, she emptied the box. At the bottom was a bulging envelope. Inside, she found the carved ivory comb Rich had given Teresa on the night of their marriage.

“It’s beautiful,” she gasped, holding it up for her husband to see.

“Looks like something is written on the back,” he noticed.

Turning the comb over, Adella read aloud, “*Meant to be*. I wonder what it means,” she said, looking up at her husband as if he would know.

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “Maybe it means that if Father Miguel hadn’t taken you to the orphanage in Manila and if someone hadn’t left me at the doorstep of that particular abbey, we would not have met. Since all those events did indeed happen—we were meant to be.”

Adella smiled at his simplicity. Looking over at her adoring husband, she thought of her sleeping children and the mother she never knew. She twisted her thick, black hair away from her face and anchored it with Teresa’s comb.

She was loved.

Chapter 24

THE STORM (1935-1941)

Antonio was born on November 15, 1935, on the inauguration day of the commonwealth government of the Philippines. The Philippine Independence Act of the United States established the commonwealth as a ten-year preparatory government before granting the islanders total independence.

Mateo was not aware of his son's birth. He had agreed to spend the week in Manila transporting high-level cabinet and military members to the steps of the courthouse through the crowd of 300,000 celebrants who swarmed the square and surrounding area to observe and be part of the pomp that issued in the new government.

Adella had not expected the birth for another two weeks, but with the first contractions, she summoned her friend Sophia. At thirty-three, the pregnant woman was not taking any chances. By the time her friend arrived, Adella had given birth. Sophia promptly checked over the mother and son and was happy to report they were both healthy. She stayed with her friend for the next two days, taking care of the children and looking after the newborn until Mateo returned.

"My freedom baby," Mateo claimed with pride as he held his son for the first time.

Life was good. At the end of the work day, Mateo would bring the money he earned and hand it over to Adella. She would put aside a small amount in a tin can, then spend the rest on food. When school started, she would use the money she'd saved to buy each of their children a box of crayons, a pad of paper, a pencil, and bakya—wooden shoes. In addition, Adella would buy enough material to make the children two outfits each. She sewed all their clothes on a sewing machine powered by a foot pedal.

Having been raised by the nuns, Adella insisted her family adopt the same regimen that served her so well as an orphan. At six o'clock every evening, the church bells rang out. That was when the children had to be home to pray the rosary with their parents. They would kneel on the floor and recite the prayers with their mother as she advanced the rosary beads between her fingers.

At bedtime, Adella, surrounded by her children, would weave tales about her childhood. She told them of her grandmother, Flora; her best friend, Angelina; how she met their father, Mateo; and of her mother, Teresa, and the precious comb that held her hair in place. Tears never failed the storyteller when she talked of Father Miguel and how much she missed him.

It was a peaceful time. The only fear the residents of the town had was wind and flooding caused by the typhoons that devastated the island and caused deadly mudslides. Inevitably, the islanders were always on alert for any signs of inclement weather.

One dark morning, Mateo was awakened by the loud howling of the wind. Alarmed, he quickly woke the household. "Get out of the house now!"

He and Adella frightened by the sudden onset of noise from splintering trees, rushing water, thunder, and powerful winds, rushed the children from their modest dwelling. The sudden storm was so noisy, they could barely hear each other as they ran to the schoolhouse for shelter.

“Quickly!” Mateo yelled. He heard a loud rumble and looked back in time to see the roof of their home being ripped off by the angry winds as the onslaught of water swirled madly through the stripped doorway and shattered windows.

A loud scream captured his attention. Mya had stumbled into a pothole and found herself in water up to her neck. Without missing a step, Mateo grabbed his struggling daughter by one arm, dragging her to safety.

They stayed at the shelter for a couple of days, sleeping on the floor and sharing whatever food they could find with their neighbors, who also sought asylum at the schoolhouse. When the winds died down and the water receded, the villagers ventured out to assess the wreckage left by the typhoon. Without hesitation, they began to rebuild. The damage was regarded as an unwelcome setback—just another day, albeit not a good one. They had seen worse.

Mateo and Adella’s home stood intact on its adobe concrete foundation. The roof was gone, as were the door and shutters. With the help of the community, they were able to raise a roof in no time. Rebuilding was a regular occurrence for the villagers during the summer monsoon season.

After a few days, the roads were cleared, and Mateo was off to work, as were his neighbors. Most of the landowners in Antipolo lived on small parcels of land that their families had owned for generations. They grew crops for their table and the market. They had to earn a living and had no time to waste on recovery. Minor repairs were enough until the monsoon season passed.

Although the weather was unpredictable, the villagers could count on December to bring favorable conditions. It was a time when farmers would reap the fruit of their labor, and the countryside boasted lush, green scenery. Given that sense of security, the inhabitants of Antipolo were unprepared for the terror that stormed their small town that December, disrupting the easygoing end-of-year atmosphere.

On December 8, 1941, the Japanese invaded the Philippines just ten hours after the attack on Pearl Harbor.

The morning began as usual.

“It’s unfair!” Bonita complained to her mother. “Angelina’s never going to marry, and I’m doomed to be an old maid.”

As was the custom, the eldest daughter was to marry first—or join the convent. Angelina was clear that she was not destined for life as a nun, and she was not yet ready to marry.

“I know Danny asked you to marry him!” Bonita accused her sister in a voice loud enough for her parents to hear.

“And I said no!” Angelina retorted. “I don’t love him.”

“*Love?*” Bonita couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “I can’t get married until you find *love? Really?* You would do that to me?”

The two were still bickering when they left for church. When the last of her brood was out the door, Adella felt Antonio's forehead—the fever had subsided. Breathing a sigh of relief, the worried mother poured herself a cup of tea, thankful for her baby's recovery and the alone time. She contemplated the fate of her two eldest daughters. It was true that she insisted the rash Bonita wait to marry until after her older sister had wed. Adella trusted her eldest daughter's instincts. Where Bonita was flirty and subject to changing her mind, Angelina was cautious and showed little interest in boys.

Adella's brooding was suddenly interrupted by panicked shouts. So much for a peaceful Sunday morning. She looked out the window of the small adobe house where she and Mateo lived with their six children. At first, the baffled woman thought it was an earthquake as the panicking crowd blanketed the street.

The villagers were used to the many earth tremors that occurred regularly, but this was no earthquake—it was a danger they had not encountered before and was far more nefarious.

She heard the unintelligible blaring of the megaphone before she spotted the military Jeep amidst the chaotic crowd fighting for the right of way. A Filipino police officer in a khaki uniform wearing a white helmet stood in the front passenger side, his left hand holding onto the front windshield frame for support while repeating the news through a megaphone he held in his right hand.

“The Japanese have landed. For your safety, head for the mountains.”

Mateo was at church with their five older children when Mass was interrupted by the local police bearing the same message. “The Japanese have landed and are headed this way. Go! Run to the mountains where you can hide.”

There was a stampede as everyone rushed from the church for safer ground. Antipolo was located on the slopes of the Sierra Madre Mountain range. The dense forests would provide refuge from an advancing enemy.

Seeing the chaotic rush to exit the church, Mateo paired his children and instructed them, “Hold hands and don't let go.” He herded them ahead of him as they ran towards the house.

In the stampede, Mya stumbled, letting go of Bonita's hand. Mateo swooped down and picked her up by the arm, all in the same stride. She most certainly would have been trampled had he not reacted quickly.

“Keep going,” he said to Angelina, who looked back just as he reunited Mya with her sister.

Meanwhile, Adella saw panic—people were screaming and crying, shoving others out of their way as they headed for safety in the dense forests. She heard the announcement as the soldier repeatedly shouted out the same words over and over, like a trapped animal circling the pen with no way out. The message itself was frightening enough, but the repetition was inciteful.

A chill overcame Adella as the panic outside crossed the threshold. *Where are my children?*

She had stayed home that morning with her youngest, five-year-old Antonio. The frightened woman scoured the crowd and spotted them with no trouble. The girls were wearing

bright yellow dresses she had sewn from remnants given to her by one of her patrons. She had made the dresses for Christmas, but the girls were impatient and insisted on wearing them to Mass that morning. She'd relented. After all, today was Mya's fourteenth birthday.

Adella spied them weaving in and out of the maddening crowd. Angelina held tight to Miguel while Mya, who'd recovered from her stumble, continued on with Bonita. Mateo dragged Christina as he herded them in front of him on their way home.

Adella ran and met up with them. Mateo repeated what she already knew. With the megaphone blaring in the background, Mateo grabbed Antonio from her arms in exchange for Christina as they joined the mayhem in search of safety.

Once the villagers reached the foot of the mountain and entered into the forest, they were overtaken by a shadowy silence as the dense, towering growth of the jungle blocked light from the glaring sun and robbed them of their voices. They shook with fear in the equatorial heat as the forest engulfed them in slow, surreal motion. It was midday. They waited for instructions from the megaphone, but they never came. The refugees stayed in the looming forest of the mountains until nightfall, when they heard whispers that it was safe to go back.

No one knew the origin of the whispers, and they didn't care. They needed an excuse to return to the comfort of their homes. The same crowd that had left Antipolo in a panic did not appear as hurried as they trepidly made their way back to the village. The night was uncannily quiet and dark. The throng thinned as the refugees silently peeled off to their respective homes.

That night, the villagers of Antipolo did not sleep—they *could* not sleep. Running footsteps and an occasional gunshot pierced through the quiet as the occupying American military men, aided by their Filipino counterparts, escaped to safety from the bombing in nearby Manila. They had been taken by surprise and were sorely outnumbered. During the ten-year transition period, the governing Filipinos were vested with a growing responsibility for defending the commonwealth's borders. As a result, the forces of the US Army had dwindled from a high of 125,000 troops to less than 20,000 men.

Having survived the night, the inhabitants cautiously stepped from their homes to appraise the status of their little village. The chaos had lifted, but not the uncertainty that surrounded them. They cautiously went about their day in silent, mounting hysteria, dreading the unknown.

Chapter 25

A NEW NORMAL (1941-1943)

Nearly three weeks after the invasion, General Douglas MacArthur moved the allied forces of American and Filipino troops from Manila to the Bataan Peninsula. Hoping to spare Manila from destruction, MacArthur abandoned all military efforts and declared the capital an “Open City,” expecting the opposing force to occupy, rather than destroy, Manila.

The Japanese army ignored the declaration and proceeded to bomb the city. Caught up in heavy fighting, Juan and Mateo stopped their service to Manila. After three months of intense resistance, the Japanese defeated the US troops in the Philippines, thus beginning the infamous march along the Bataan Peninsula. The Imperial army became ever more cruel as escaped soldiers went into hiding, and guerrilla warfare tactics aided by the US became more frequent and debilitating. To assume some semblance of order, the intruders established a military administration in Manila to govern the islands.

The villagers of Antipolo had become accustomed to the frequent searches and more embittered as their citizens were brutally tortured and killed. It wasn’t long before a brigade of Japanese soldiers invaded Antipolo entirely. The villagers, ordered from their homes, stood silent and watched as the intruders marched down the main street to the center of town.

“Bow!” an accosting soldier shouted in his native tongue.

Another dared, “Don’t look at me!”

Filipino interpreters repeated their orders. When the bystanders didn’t obey fast enough, the soldiers randomly singled out and beat the terrified victim with the butt of a bayonet. The villagers viewed the interpreters as collaborators. Indeed, many of them took on the demeanor of the occupying Japanese. They shoved at the villagers and pointed out troublemakers.

It didn’t take long before the residents knew what was expected of them. As soldiers passed, they bowed and averted their eyes. The commanding officer, a short, wiry Japanese man with slightly bowed legs and a sparse, Hitler-like mustache, commandeered the courthouse as their headquarters and settled in.

Mateo and Juan were singled out, along with their drivers. They were instructed to continue their routes to Manila. It was a new normal. All buses and carts were required to stop for inspection at designated Japanese stations set up in each of the villages along the way. The invaders were hunting down resistance fighters supported by the US, who provided operatives and equipment to assist in the highly effective guerrilla campaign. Japanese crackdowns on the guerilla were widespread and brutal. Resistance fighters were swiftly beheaded at the whim of the oppressors.

Antipolo became a refugee destination for many citizens from the capital city who fled Japanese scrutiny. The Filipinos remained loyal to the United States, partly because of the American guarantee of independence and because the Japanese had pressed large numbers of Filipinos into work details, and even forced young Filipino women into brothels.

Juan and Mateo cajoled with the enemy and looked the other way for the greater good. Little did the Japanese guards suspect that the pair were heavily involved in the resistance movement. To protect their families, they told no one of their involvement—not even their wives.

With the many inspection stops, it wasn't unusual for Mateo to return home late after the children had gone to bed. When her husband didn't return home one evening, Adella began to worry.

The morning had started out as usual. But when Mateo arrived at the first inspection station with his bus laden with goods for the marketplace, he was jerked from his seat by a Japanese soldier he did not recognize and knocked to the ground with the butt of the bully's rifle.

The intruders were suspicious that guerrilla fighters used the buses to relay messages and transport supplies. Through an interpreter, Mateo was informed that he had disobeyed a new directive not to place anything on the top or sides of the bus. Regardless that the new orders had only been issued minutes ago, the guard singled the driver out as an example for anyone who might dare to disobey.

"I don't know what you are talking about." Mateo repeatedly tried to explain that he was unaware of the new directive, to no avail. He was stripped of his shirt, kicked, and repeatedly slapped in the face with a rubber strap three inches wide. The horrified passengers and other drivers looked on helplessly. Bleeding and teetering in and out of consciousness, the poor man was dragged out into the grueling sun and made to stand without shade or water.

It was hours later that Juan was informed of his friend's situation. He hurried to the station and convinced the guards that his driver was ignorant of the new edict. Irritated by his heroics, they detained Juan for questioning while leaving Mateo helpless to find his way home.

The children were sleeping, and it was closing in on midnight when Adella, alerted by scratches at the door, peeked out the corner of the window. At first, she did not recognize her husband. Mateo had crawled up the steps naked, his sun burnt body a mess of blood and blisters, and his eyes were swollen shut. Angelina heard her mother's muffled cry and came to her aid. They helped Mateo onto a straw mattress. Angelina fetched some water while her mother cleaned the blood and grime off her father's injured body and covered it with some healing paste she had made.

When he could talk, Mateo explained what had happened. "I never want to see Japanese again!" He wept as Adella brought him water and a bowl of rice. Mateo had barely finished drinking when Juan barged through the door.

"We're going. Now!" the intruder shouted at his friend. He pulled Mateo to his feet and helped him to the door. At the doorway, Juan hesitated. Looking straight at the terrified woman, he announced, "Your husband is dead."

Adella understood.

Supported by Juan, the pair hurried to the foot of the mountain, where they were met by guerrillas and taken to safety. They had been exposed by a Filipino collaborator. A Japanese guard who had befriended them gave Juan a head start.

Alone and in a hostile environment, Adella was left with six children to fend for herself.

Food was her primary concern. Rice, a staple food on the islands, was scarce, as Japanese soldiers confiscated most of the harvest. To worsen the situation, army patrols would slaughter the farmers' carabao for meat. Carabao provided the necessary labor that allowed Filipino farmers to cultivate large tracts of land for rice and other staples to feed a large population. After the soldiers raped their harvest fields, the locals were allowed to forage for any crop left behind.

Adella kept her children indoors except for mornings when she and her brood set out and combed the abandoned land for rice and other edible foodstuffs.

The villagers were on the brink of starvation when in November 1943, a typhoon ripped through Manila and the surrounding farmlands, destroying most of the farmers' crops. The Japanese foot soldiers were not spared from the ensuing shortage. Adella hid the rice she'd gathered from soldiers begging for food and scouring the ground for cigarette butts.

With mounting guerrilla resistance in Manila, the Japanese military showed up in force several months later. It turned the already half-starved town of Antipolo into a garrison. They commandeered the church, which housed the villagers' cherished Our Lady of Safe Voyage statue, as an arsenal. To save the holy artifact, the head priest, with the help of a handful of parishioners, wrapped the figure in a thick woolen blanket, placed it in an empty petrol drum, and buried it nearby.

The unwelcomed guests commandeered public buildings and homes for their own use, turning their unwilling hosts out into the streets, homeless. To worsen the situation, they took possession of the schoolhouse and began carrying in their sick and wounded. Many were stricken with malaria, dysentery, dengue fever, and other communicable diseases that quickly spread to the starving population already suffering from a weakened immune system.

The Japanese entered homes at will, searching for American escapees and their Filipino allies. They took what they wanted and went unchallenged. Any resistance would get the protester beaten or even shot. The villagers' acquiescence was further enhanced by fear of Japanese spies who had blended in with the civilian population.

Adella watched as they rummaged and stripped her home and kitchen of all the wood chairs, tables, and crates, which they used for fuel.

Seeing the children, one of the intruders demanded, "Where's your husband?"

"He is dead," she answered.

With her home stripped and her children near starvation, Adella was on the verge of hysteria when a banging on the door alerted her. A short Japanese officer with round, protruding eyes entered, accompanied by a Filipino interpreter. He nodded at Adella and looked around as if he was looking to buy the house. He smiled and gave a nod of approval to the interpreter.

Adella understood. He wanted the place.

She broke down and began to wail aloud. "I'm alone with six children. Where do we go?" She lunged at the intruder and began beating on his chest. It wasn't much of a fight. Weakened from dehydration and lack of food, she sunk to the floor.

The officer began to speak in Japanese, but stopped mid-sentence and raised his hand, silencing the interpreter. Recognizing Adella's state of mind, he addressed her in English. "No! No! You don't understand. It's okay. We're not soldiers. We're doctors and nurses." His voice did not have the staccato beat she had come to expect of the demanding trespassers. It was somewhat soothing. And he spoke English.

She quieted. Sitting on the floor surrounded by her children, they watched as he walked to the door of one of the rooms.

"You can stay here," he offered. "We are eight. We will take the other two rooms." He looked over at the group of nurses and doctor who accompanied him. "One for supplies and one for sleeping."

They understood.

Adella looked up. She was grateful. "Thank you..." she paused, "doctor."

He frowned. The reluctant soldier had become hardened to the sneers and insulting gestures of the Filipino people. He had not heard "thank you" in a very long time. He did not feel worthy of her gratitude.

"You can call me Doc," he said in a stern voice that did not match his generous gesture.

Chapter 26

DOC (1943-1944)

Doc's real name was Kita Misawa, and he was born at the turn of the century in Nagasaki, Japan. After finishing medical school at the University of Tokyo, he immigrated to the US to continue his residency at the USCF School of Medicine. He lived on the edge of San Francisco's Chinatown with his US-born Japanese wife and their two young daughters. Just prior to Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, he received a telegram from his mother that his father was dying and that he was to return home immediately.

In Japan, it was not unusual for those dying to request that their adult children make end-of-life arrangements and decisions for them. As the eldest son, Kita was obliged to carry out his father's wishes. It would be his second visit to Japan in four years. The first had been a joyous occasion—introducing the family to his new bride three years earlier. This time, he would travel alone.

En route to the airport, Kita stopped at a newsstand and bought a *Life* magazine to read on the sixteen-hour plane ride to Tokyo. From there, he arranged to take the train to his parents' home in Nagasaki. Kita never made it to the train station. When he got off the plane, the doctor was seized by Japanese guards and forced into military service. The lives of Kita's parents rested on his compliance. Less than a week after his departure, the Imperial Army bombed Pearl Harbor.

The doctor first served on board a military ship stationed off the coast of Manchuria. When his ship was bombed, he was rescued and transferred to Antipolo. There he was regrouped with an intern just out of medical school and six nurses barely over twenty years of age. They were all war-worn. None of them had seen home since the war began two years ago.

Confined to a single room, Adella and her children left only to forage for food. At first, the nurses, who spoke only Japanese, huddled in a group and ignored them. Their only contact was when they were forced to share the one stove in silence. Their quiet needed translation, forcing them to become fluent in body language. In each other, they saw themselves—wary, disheartened, and in search of some shred of humanity. Over the stove, they began to share what little they had, and in their own quiet way, they became family.

Doc took the lead. Rising at dawn, he would leave with a bag and return with as much food and tea as he could beg from his fellow officers. He found pleasure in emptying the sack, one item at a time, showing the awaiting group what he had brought back, and then sharing it with whoever was present. After their stomachs were warmed with food watered down in its own broth, Doc and his entourage would depart for the schoolhouse to do what little they could for the wounded and the sick. Adella would leave with Mya, Miguel, and Christina to forage for food for the evenings. Angelina and Bonita were left to look after the house and to care for their little brother, Antonio.

The small group of friends never knew what they were going to eat—or *if* they were going to eat—from one day to the next.

One morning, Doc came back with a sack of flour. “Come! Come! I have something to show you!” he exclaimed as he proudly displayed the bag of flour.

The children clapped their hands at the promise of a feast. Adella set about making pancakes for all. They had just finished off the last bite when one of the nurses complained of severe stomach pains and began vomiting. When the second nurse came down with the same symptoms, Doc grabbed up Antonio and started sticking his fingers down the boy’s throat, instructing all to do the same to induce vomiting. The flour had been poisoned—a tactic the villagers sometimes used in retaliation for the cruelty the army inflicted upon them.

After that incident, Adella checked everything before cooking. She smelled, squeezed, and sampled. At first, it seemed precautionary, but soon, the obsessed woman began to suspect someone was trying to poison them. Doc noticed her change in behavior as she became more paranoid. Concerned, he tapped on the door to her room, which he had never entered without permission.

He cracked the door and peeked in. “Adella, I think you might be sick. If you will permit, I would like to examine you.”

Adella sat up on the bare mattress, surrounded by her children. “I think I know who’s trying to poison us.”

Doc frowned and nodded to the nurse who accompanied him. She ushered the children from the room. His suspicions were confirmed after palpating Adella’s enlarged abdomen, listening to her heart, and asking a few orienting questions. She had developed beriberi, a thiamine deficiency.

He pulled a small bottle of pills from his pocket, which he had put there in anticipation of his findings. He poured a glass of water from a nearby pitcher and handed it to Adella. “Take this.”

She did as she was told.

Doc sat on the floor cross-legged next to the mattress. “You are not getting enough vitamins from your food. I notice you spoon out the rice for your children, eating what little is left with the broth.”

Adella didn’t hear him. She had closed her eyes and drifted off.

Without further word, Doc got up and stormed from the house. He returned later with a bag of cooked rice and an egg he had begged from an officer. He filled a small bowl with about half a cup, leaving the nurses to divvy out the rest.

Adella heard the tap on the door and acknowledged Doc as he entered.

The concerned doctor handed her the bowl of rice and the egg. “Eat.”

Paranoia set in as Adella started to sniff the bowl.

Unable to contain himself, Doc yelled in frustration, “It is not poison! Eat it, damn you!”

Frightened and not used to that tone of voice from her friend, Adella did as she was told.

The following day, there was a significant improvement in Adella’s behavior.

Doc handed her another pill. Convinced that she was oriented enough to follow instructions, he gave her the bottle. "These are thiamine pills. Take one again tomorrow. After that, take a half pill every day until the bottle is empty."

Adella took the bottle and nodded. At half a pill per day, there was enough to last two weeks.

"You must eat your share. Your children will not survive without you," he warned as he left the room.

During those last months of the war, Doc held the group together. He entertained the children by telling them tales of Momotaro and other stories from his childhood. It was a welcome diversion. The whole household looked forward to evenings when he would spout tales that drowned their hunger pangs and kept nightmares at bay. They especially loved it when he thumbed through the pages of the *Life* magazine he'd picked up at the newsstand in America and kept hidden under his shirt.

"See that cowboy hat?" He pointed to the full-page ad featuring America's "singing cowboy" Gene Autry. "When I get home, I'm going to buy me a hat just like that!" He looked over at the laughing children, whose clothes were tattered from wear. "Maybe I'll buy you new clothes too."

Several times a week, Doc would leave for Manila. On those days, he would be late coming home and fall asleep from exhaustion. There were no stories on those nights.

One morning after his return, the good doctor tapped on the door. Mya opened it. He stood there with two nurses, each holding a large sack. They beckoned to the children.

"Line up," Doc said in a stern voice and in a misguided attempt at humor.

They had never heard him speak in that tone before and started to shiver from fear. Their sense of security was fragile and easily breached by a loud voice or a change in manner.

Doc realized his mistake and quickly tried to reassure them. "No! No! I'm not mad at you," he apologized.

In an effort to reassure them, the nurses started to giggle and clap their hands. The children responded. The women then reached into the sacks they carried and pulled out nurses' uniforms. They began holding them up against the children.

"For you," one of the nurses said in broken English.

They all laughed with glee. The girls thought the uniforms were the most beautiful dresses they had ever seen. Adella trimmed them to size and used the excess material to make shirts and pants for Miguel and Antonio. They were all so happy to change out of their rags.

As Christmas neared, Doc noticed that the children were being secretive. Behind the closed door, he heard giggles and whispering. That Christmas Eve, they gathered as usual.

"Close your eyes," Mya ordered as Doc entered the room.

Doc closed his eyes.

Miguel took his hand and led him to the center of the room. "Sit," he ordered.

Eyes still shut, Doc sat cross-legged on the floor. An object was placed in his lap.

"Now open," they giggled.

With eyes open, Doc lifted from his lap a cowboy hat Adella had woven from palm fronds that the children had gathered in secret. It took a few seconds for the gift to register. He had no words.

Mya took the hat from Doc's hands and placed it on his head. Breaking the silence, she observed, "You look just like a cowboy."

Doc began to cry. Amid the horrors of war, he had found family. For a brief moment in time, the small group of friends was able to suspend the carnage surrounding them and immerse themselves in their own make-believe world. But, as they were soon to find out, the steady beat of time had a way of exacting penance for stolen moments, no matter the circumstance.

Although Doc provided them a safe haven, Adella was fearful for her children, especially Angelina and Bonita, who she did not allow outside the house. The Imperial army provided military "comfort stations" for their troops. She had heard of young girls who were abducted from their homes, raped, and held as sex slaves.

One afternoon, long after Doc had left, there was a loud banging at the door. A Japanese officer pushed past Adella as she cracked it open. He crossed to the back room and beckoned his men to take Angelina and Bonita, who were cowering in a corner with their other siblings.

Adella flew into a rage. "Get out of my house!" she demanded.

The invading soldiers ignored the woman intent on saving her children. She grabbed one of them by the shirt and blocked the retaliating punch. As the officer approached her, she jumped high into the air and kicked him in the head, knocking him to the ground. Two guards quickly restrained her.

The hysterical woman, crying and screaming, watched as the officer tore the dresses off her two older daughters. "Please. I pray. They are just children," she begged, crawling to his feet.

Still seething from her display of defiance, the officer shoved her away with his foot. Her begging gave him a source of pleasure. He approached the tormented woman and held her head up by her hair. "I'm not greedy," he sneered as he addressed Adella, so close she could smell the garlic on his breath. "I only need one. It's your choice. Pick one." He looked back at her two daughters, shaking, crying, nearly nude.

Adella froze as the implication of what he had just proposed set in. "Please," she begged on her knees. "They're children. Have mercy."

The officer shoved her again with his foot. "Your choice. Pick one."

Adella objected, begging while hugging his pant leg. Overcome with anguish, the distraught woman vomited.

Disgusted, the officer signaled for his men to take both girls.

"Mama! Mama!" they both pleaded as two soldiers dragged them towards the door.

"Pick now, or I take them both."

"Angelina!" Adella choked as bile worked its way to her mouth.

A smug smile came over the officer's face as he indicated which one to release.

“Angelina. You are strong. Pray.” Her mother screamed in hysteria as the guard dragged her doomed daughter away and threw her in the back of a truck along with several other local girls.

“Angelina! Forgive me! Forgive me!” Adella cried, running after them.

In a last attempt to save her daughter, she grabbed the assaulting officer by the back of his shirt. He spun around and hit the tortured woman with the butt of his rifle, knocking her unconscious. He then retreated to the awaiting Jeep and drove off, followed by the truck.

Adella found it hard to breathe. She withered in pain and guilt and longed for her Angelina. She didn’t hear her children, who had gathered around her, pleading for her to wake up. Their mother was unresponsive. She could not face the nightmare that had escaped into her waking world.

Doc had just returned when he saw Adella’s children around their mother, trying to wake her. He dropped the sack he was carrying and ran to her aid. “What happened?” he asked Mya, who was nearest him.

“A Japanese soldier took Angelina away,” she answered between sobs.

Upon hearing his voice, Adella began to rouse. She grabbed at the neck of his shirt. “Angelina! Angelina! I want my daughter!” she cried hysterically.

He helped the prostrated woman to her feet. Once she got her balance, Adella broke from him and started to run, first to the street in search of her daughter, then towards the river.

“The children don’t need to see this,” he warned the nurses, who understood and ushered them inside the house. Doc ran after the guilt-ridden woman.

Adella ran to the river and proceeded to splash her way to the deep end. Doc got to her just as she was going under. He was forced to wrestle with her as he dragged the suicidal woman to the water’s edge.

The worried doctor suddenly felt a chill as the surrounding air lost its warmth. He wrapped his arms around his shivering friend. She had no energy left to fight. They were both soaked.

“Shh... shhh... shhh...” He rocked and cooed softly, even though the woman had not said a word.

In their struggle, Teresa’s comb had fallen to the ground. Doc picked it up and ran it through Adella’s wet hair, combing it away from her face. He rejected its inscription. *This is not happening! This is not meant to be!* Tears filled his eyes.

Adella stirred and began to struggle. Doc held her until exhausted; she buried her head in his shoulder and continued to cry. In desperate need of human touch, she wrapped her arms around him and held on so tight there was no space in their lungs for air. He did not resist. They needed each other to navigate the bowels of the nightmare that had engulfed them.

Jealous time had shattered their labored peace, demanding that they keep her steady pace.

Adella reacted quickly to reality. There was no solace for her without Angelina. She widened the distance between them as the pain of losing her daughter threatened to stop her heart.

Doc was the first to speak. “I promise I will find her for you.”

Chapter 27

THE SEARCH (1944)

After a sleepless night, Doc set out early the following day to Manila. He raised no suspicion. Twice a week, the good doctor made his way to the city to visit each of the three “comfort” stations to check for venereal diseases. He brought prophylactics, sulfa, and precious penicillin. While there, he instructed the soldiers on clean hygiene and the use of prophylactics as a preventive measure.

This time, he wanted something in return.

“Yesterday, I saw a truck pull up at the officers’ quarters,” a man reported at one of the stations. “Later, they brought us four new girls.”

“These girls,” Doc asked hopefully, “where are they now? Can you take me to them?”

He showed the doctor three girls huddled in a corner, barely dressed and whimpering.

“Do you know a girl named Angelina?” he asked. “She was taken yesterday.”

The girls were too traumatized to answer. They had been repeatedly raped and badly beaten.

Doc shuddered at the thought of Angelina’s fate. “You said there were four?” he asked the soldier.

“Yes. The fourth is dead.” The soldier took him to see the body of the fourth victim, whose badly beaten body was lying in a ditch and covered with flies. Kneeling, Doc held his breath as he swiped the long, black hair from the dead girl’s face. He wept. It wasn’t Angelina.

Doc continued his search.

At the last station, he learned that an officer had gone to Antipolo for the express purpose of picking up a half dozen new girls and had taken them to a “comfort” station exclusively for officers. The Imperial army had commandeered a hacienda on Guimaras Island for that purpose. Girls taken there were considered lucky. They were safe from the rampant venereal diseases spread by the common foot soldiers, and they were housed and fed.

With the hope that Doc would find and return her daughter, Adella found the strength to carry on. Miguel had trapped a handful of minnows in a small dam he built in a nearby stream. She was leaning over the stove stirring a pot of boiling water with a handful of rice and the minnows thrown in when Doc returned. Seeing that Angelina was not with him, Adella’s knees gave way.

Doc caught her before she reached the ground. “I’m so sorry.” In an effort to spare the children, he beckoned the nurses to take them inside.

Adella turned pale. She had no response.

Hoping to defuse the trapped hysteria, the doctor suggested, “Let’s walk.” He ushered her down the path. After a brief moment of silence, he elaborated. “Adella.” His voice was calm and slow. “Your daughter is alive.”

With that bit of news, Adella broke into tears. She was both grateful and sickened. She knew the rest of what he had to say would not be good. The hopeless woman struggled as she fought to erase the image of Angelina, alone and frightened.

Doc led Adella to a tree near the stream and sat her down. He sat next to her, grabbed her by the shoulders, and looked straight into her eyes. “I want you to remember that your children need you,” he stressed.

Ignoring him, Adella pleaded, “Where is she? I must go to her.”

He sighed and shook his head sadly. “Angelina was taken to Guimaras Island.”

Adella stopped breathing as she clawed at the ground beneath her.

Doc grabbed her hands. “There is a hacienda the Imperial army has commandeered as accommodations for officers only,” he continued. “I know it’s not much, but the officers don’t share their women for fear of the spread of venereal diseases. The girls are housed and fed. Listen to me!” He shook her. “She is alive!”

“It’s my fault—my choice. What did I do?” Adella wailed loudly.

“You didn’t do anything wrong. You had no choice.”

“I did. I let them take Angelina. I had a choice.”

Doc shook her. “You had *no* choice—those were *his* words. Do you understand? Those were *his* words. *You* had no choice!” In desperation, he kept shaking her. “What is *Bonita* going to do without you?” He waited for his words to sink in as he stressed the names of her remaining four children.

“What is *Mya* going to do without you?” He shook her.

“What is *Miguel* going to do without you?” He shook her again.

“What is *Christina* going to do without you?” And again.

“What is *Antonio* going to do without you?” And again.

Unable to contain himself any longer, Doc abruptly stood, walked to a nearby abaca tree, and leaned on it for support. Banging his head against the trunk, he whispered to himself, “What am *I* going to do without you?”

“Mama?” Bonita walked slowly as she approached her mother.

It was in that moment Adella resolved that no Japanese soldier would ever put his hands on any of her children again. She stood up and looked dry-eyed at Doc.

He gave a slight nod. “Go on. I’ll be back later.”

Doc needed time alone. If he were to survive, he needed to accept the reality that surrounded him and distance himself from any expectation that life would ever return to normal.

He watched as they turned and walked home, Adella’s arm around her daughter and Bonita’s head leaning on her mother’s shoulder.

Abducted from her home, Angelina found herself in the back of an army transport truck with five other young girls from the area. Their eyes were swollen from crying, and they were shivering with fear.

A Filipino interpreter took pity on the girls. “Don’t fight them. Some of them like it that way and will be even more cruel. You will survive this.”

After an hour’s drive, they arrived at the port in Manila. Angelina was singled out and dragged to the side of the road by her hair, where she was raped for all to see. When she fought back, her tormentor beat her with his fists until she was unconscious.

The next morning, Angelina and the other girls were transported via ferry to Guimaras Island.

Ernesto watched as they dragged the reluctant captives from the truck into the hacienda that had been commandeered by the Imperial army shortly after the invasion. Ernesto had been kept on to ensure the upkeep of the grounds. It hadn’t been his intent to stay, but Lorenzo had convinced his cousin that he could do more good in that position than in the field. Ernesto provided supplies and cover for guerrillas on the move. As custodian, he was in a position to pass on information spilled by unwitting Japanese officers to their unwilling consort. Several of the officers had sadistic streaks that often resulted in the death of a young girl. When the girls got pregnant, they were turned out in the street or beaten until they aborted.

Helpless, Ernesto watched as the new girls were forced to line up. When he caught a glimpse of Angelina, his heart skipped a beat. She was taller than Teresa, her skin darker and her nose wider. Still, something about her reminded him of his beloved sister.

The girl was quickly pulled out of line by a sadistic officer. It took a feat of strength for Ernesto not to interfere. Later, he saw her again. Body bruised, eyes swollen shut. He tried to engage her, but she remained mute, not out of fear, but with a resolve to survive.

Several months after Angelina’s abduction, Ernesto saw the officer dragging the poor girl towards the river where the floating bodies of some of the girls had been found. Although the discoveries were dismissed as suicide, Ernesto had suspected the sadistic man was the reason.

He ran into the hacienda and grabbed a bottle of whiskey he kept hidden. “Konnichiwa!” he yelled in a loud voice, holding up the bottle.

The officer stopped. A wide grin stretched across his poxed face as he turned his attention to the treat dangling in front of him.

Ernesto bowed politely and beckoned him to have a seat on a nearby bench. He could see Angelina’s battered body abandoned in the dense thicket. She was still alive. “Where are you taking that girl?” He nodded towards Angelina.

“She’s useless. I don’t need her anymore.”

“I need a kitchen helper,” Ernesto confessed. “How about I put her to work for me in exchange for this bottle?”

The officer greedily grabbed the bottle and left.

Before Ernesto could get to Angelina, the poor girl sat up and started vomiting. He frowned. He had seen it before—she was pregnant.

“I am not going to hurt you,” he said to the distraught young woman as he helped her into the kitchen, where the officers rarely went. He gave her a wet rag to clean her face.

She wiped her face while looking suspiciously at him. When he asked for her name, she remained mute.

Ernesto sighed. “I gave away a good bottle of whiskey. You can at least tell me your name.”

“Angelina.”

Angelina spent the remaining months of the war in the kitchen, sleeping at night behind the closed door of the pantry.

Chapter 28

THE EXODUS (1945)

The war rolled in like a tsunami, showing no mercy as it sucked in anyone or anything in its path. Now, as defeat after defeat fed its swell, the Japanese released their fury on the inhabitants of the archipelago, drowning any hope they might have to escape the turning tide.

In late February of 1945, the villagers of Antipolo saw a glow in the evening sky—the city of Manila was on fire. The Japanese army had set the fires in anticipation of the advancing American troops. A week later, planes swarmed over Antipolo. At first, the Japanese rejoiced. Their cries of joy turned to despair when they realized the aircraft they were seeing were of the Allied forces. In response, the Japanese destroyed the power plant and set fires, which raged through the village. The retreating soldiers, enraged by the Filipinos' loyalty to the Americans, began looting, raping, torturing, and murdering. They mutilated with bayonets and sabers. They shaved villagers' heads, tied their hands, and rammed bamboo poles through their bodies. Heads were severed and displayed atop poles for all to see. There was no end to the horrors inflicted upon the villagers.

More innocent civilians were slaughtered as the American army advanced on the city and began bombarding enemy positions. No place held by the Japanese was safe. The Imperial military began to scatter. They had no intention of standing their ground and fighting.

During the bombing, Doc ushered Adella and her children to a nearby foxhole for cover. Not saying a word, he returned and disappeared into the house. He was gone a while, and just when they thought him dead, they saw Doc standing in the doorway in full dress uniform. With his sword hanging from his belt and wearing the cowboy hat Adella had woven for him, he stood tall, without regard for the danger surrounding him.

When the bombing stopped, Adella and her children ran up to the stoic man. He was waiting to say goodbye.

"This is the beginning for you. The Americans will treat you well," he promised.

The children were all in tears.

"Here, let me show you," he said as he reached into his shirt and pulled out the worn *Life* magazine. Frantically, he flipped through the memorized pages until he found what he was looking for. "You know what I love?" he asked. "*This* is what I love." He pointed to a black-and-white picture with the American flag in the background. "America." He gave the magazine to Miguel. "You keep this."

As he headed from the house, Adella pleaded with him. "Stay, become one of us. You look like us. They will not know you are Japanese."

But Doc shook his head. "The Japanese are not like other people. To surrender would disgrace my family. There is only one way," he said, holding up the grenade the Japanese issued to their officers to avoid the shame of being taken prisoner.

He walked away quickly. He had gone a hundred feet when he turned for one last look.

Their pleas and tears were too much.

Doc ran back towards them in one final farewell gesture. With tears streaming down their faces, the honorable man wiped at Mya's tears and promised, "Tomorrow, those will be yesterday's tears."

As he was leaving for the second time, Adella grabbed his arm. "Stay," she pleaded as tears rolled down her cheeks.

The doomed doctor leaned into her and whispered in her ear, "Meant to be." With that said, he walked away for the last time.

After Doc left, the Japanese military police drove through the streets in Jeeps. "Go to the church now. Everybody!" they commanded over loudspeakers.

Adella instructed her children to carry what they could and hurry to the church. Mya grabbed the heavy, cast-iron rice pot with a swing handle and lid. There was chaos as everybody crowded into the church, which was surrounded by soldiers with machine guns. When they arrived, the nuns, who knew Adella well, beckoned her and her children to a small room for privacy from the panicky crowd. They stayed there all day without a clue as to their fate and with nothing to eat.

The soldiers were waiting for orders when there was a commotion outside. Rumor spread that the Japanese general in charge had been killed when the Americans bombed his car.

The soldiers guarding the church were without orders. In frenzy, they started clearing the church. "Everybody out!" they commanded.

The nuns and priests stayed on.

Once they got home, Adella realized her rice pot had been left behind. It was their lifeline—it held enough rice to feed her family and could withstand raging fires. It was indestructible.

"I'll go back for it," Mya offered.

Adella hesitated before allowing her daughter out of sight. "Go and come right back," she ordered.

At the church, the soldiers once again guarded the entrance. They were detaining the remaining two dozen or so hostages. There was still confusion as Mya slipped inside and found the pot. A soldier brandishing a machine gun barred the door on her way out. With the bit of Japanese she had learned, Mya pleaded with him to let her go, promising him she would return.

When Mya handed the pot over to her mother, she told her about the remaining hostages before turning to leave.

"Where are you going?" Adella asked.

"I promised the soldier that I would come back," Mya told her.

Her mother made it clear that this was one promise her daughter would *not* keep. Sensing danger, Adella gathered her children. "Carry what you can. When it gets dark, we are going to sneak out of here."

Adella and her brood escaped in the dark, walking along with many other villagers to the mountain and nearby towns. She learned later that the Japanese had massacred those left at the church.

As daylight approached, the fugitives saw black lumps along the road, which, upon closer inspection, turned out to be the bodies of Japanese soldiers covered by thousands of flies. Limbs, heads, and body parts were strewn everywhere. The looming air captured the stench from which there was no escape.

A frightened man with civilian clothes draped loosely over his cadaverous body approached them. "Please, save me," he begged. "I am not Japanese." He told them he was Korean and that the Japanese had forced him into their army.

Adella took pity on him. Afraid that the Filipinos might recognize him as a Japanese soldier and do him harm, she agreed to allow him to travel with them.

They soon came across a local colony of Manchurians. As the deserter had the same sallow skin, slanted eyes, and was taller than most Filipinos, he decided to remain with them. He bowed over and over as Adella continued on her journey. He couldn't thank her enough for her kindness.

Adella did not know where she was going. She only knew to follow the crowd. Bonita balanced a sack of rice on her head, and Mya dragged Antonio as they made their way towards a small mountain village. They were all tired, hungry, and sick when they came upon an open field. Their refuge lay just a quarter mile ahead.

It was then that the Americans started shooting. Adella could hear the bullets and feel the hot trails as they whizzed past in a high-pitched whine, seeking something solid to break their speed. Women and children were shot down as they zigzagged to dodge the bullets. Mya barely missed stepping on hot shrapnel.

In the chaos, a loud voice commanded attention. "Wave! Shout! Let them know we are not Japanese. We are Filipinos!"

The crowd, running towards the Americans, started waving and shouting. The shooting continued. In the ensuing panic, Adella and her children were all separated.

Mya found herself alone with Antonio on her back, running to escape the onslaught. When she saw a Jeep coming towards them, the men all in uniform, she thought they were Japanese and froze from fright.

A woman running alongside her intervened. "Don't be afraid," she said. "They are American. Follow the crowd. Your parents will find you—if they are alive."

Mya followed the crowd as the bullets finally stopped. Feeling safe and no longer able to carry him, she let Antonio slide from her back and walk beside her. As they got closer to the American camp, they could smell food cooking. It smelled like fresh bread. They were hungry and exhausted, but the promise of food was not enough. Mya could go no further. She collapsed by the side of the road.

Lying there, she searched the faces of the villagers passing by, hoping to find a familiar face. An American soldier came by, pulled her and Antonio to safety, and quietly sat on a fallen

log beside them. After a moment of silence, he reached into his pocket and offered them chewing gum. They were still scared, too scared to even look at him. They kept their heads down. The soldier sat there teary-eyed for several minutes. He eventually left without a word, leaving behind only the chewing gum.

Mya and Antonio were finally reunited with their family when Adella, following the crowd, happened upon them sitting there. What had been a thirty-minute ordeal seemed like an eternity. Their clothes were in tatters from the hot ash as they dodged shrapnel. In spite of that, they rejoiced to have survived the nightmare and found each other.

Together, they crossed the small river to a designated area out of harm's way. Once they crossed into the tiny village, Adella begged permission from a woman to stay with her children under the woman's stilted nipa hut. The entire family was so exhausted that they dropped to the ground and fell asleep, their hunger forgotten.

The next day, the woman told Adella, "Have your children get a bowl and go to the American camp. The soldiers will give them what they don't eat." She looked over at her three daughters. "You have daughters. They can do laundry for the soldiers and earn money."

And so it was; the girls would go into camp each day asking for laundry. The soldiers would pay them to wash their clothes or do little errands. Not all were kind. When approached for leftover food by the little ones, some of them would put their cigarettes out in their bowls. But the hungry children cleaned out the butts, eating what they could.

With news of the Japanese surrender in Baguio, Adella made the trek back to Antipolo with her brood, as did most of the villagers. She did not know if Mateo was alive or dead. It had been over two years since he left. All she knew was that he would look for her there.

The returning villagers found most of the town in ruins. After they had fled Antipolo, American planes had heavily bombarded the city for two days. The combined American and Filipino soldiers liberated the town after twelve more days of battle. For the first time in nearly four years, the American flag flew over the village.

Chapter 29

THE REUNION (1946)

The town of Antipolo had been destroyed. The villagers, overcome with grief, cried as they sifted through the rubble. Rows of olive-drab A-framed tents and makeshift barracks dotted the landscape. There was a hurried presence as soldiers were transferred in and out of camp. Army trucks and ambulances crowded the muddied streets.

Bonita, Mya, and Christina joined the many young girls making daily rounds to the camp, offering to do laundry or housekeeping or running small errands in exchange for money or food. They would enter the tents to pick up the laundry or to clean. Mya never did. She was too scared. Instead, she trailed behind. A few sympathetic soldiers recognized her hesitancy and carried their clothes out to her.

One day, while waiting for Bonita and Christina, who had disappeared into a tent to pick up laundry, Mya noticed an old man walking down the street with a sack on his back, twice his size and as heavy. She shaded her eyes and squinted. There was something familiar about him. As he neared, she let out a squeal and started to run. "Papa!"

Upon hearing her screams, Bonita and Christina dropped what they were doing. They joined their sister as their father dropped his backpack and raced toward his daughters.

When he'd arrived in Antipolo, Mateo had found that the retreating Japanese army had destroyed their home. Unable to find his family, he began visiting refugee camps and asking everyone he came into contact with if they knew the whereabouts of his wife and children. He did not know if they were dead or alive. Now, after more than two years without news, they had found each other.

The three girls surrounded their father, leading him to the camp, where their mother was bent over a wood stove. Adella was overcome by the sight of her long-lost husband. Hearing her screams, Miguel and Antonio ran to her aide. Mateo dropped his heavy backpack and tried to unite all his family in one embrace. Amid the tears of joy and much chatter, the absence of one voice was deafening.

Their happy reunion grew somber. "Where's Angelina?" Mateo asked, thinking she might be washing clothes or doing other chores.

Adella's face turned to stone. Without a word, she went indoors.

Mateo looked at his children, who had suddenly become mute, then turned and walked into the house, knowing that what he was about to discover would not be good.

He fought back tears. When he heard her story, Mateo tried to comfort his wife. "I should have been there for you."

Hearing his words, Adella suddenly felt anger towards her husband, who had, admittedly, abandoned her. She had forgotten the circumstances. She began beating on his chest. "You should have been there for us! Where were you when we needed you?" Her anger was raw.

Her energy spent, Adella leaned against the wall for support and closed her eyes. Her heart ached for Doc. He had been her rock. The distressed woman quickly dismissed any thought of the man who had been there when she needed him most. She straightened and wiped her tears, looking over at Antonio, who had crept in and begun to undo the heavy burden his father thought was worth enough to haul the distance home.

Grateful for the distraction, Mateo forced a smile and joined his son and Christina in unraveling the pack. It contained two parachutes he had found in the mountains as he journeyed home. The chute material was more than enough for Adella to make clothes for her family and shirts to sell to the American soldiers.

The following day, Mateo set out with his wife and sons to inspect their damaged home while their daughters went to the camp to pick up laundry. The foundation had withstood the fire, as had the four outer walls. When Adella saw the door frame where Doc had stood while the city was being bombarded, she fell to the ground in tears.

Misunderstanding her grief, Mateo promised, “We’ll rebuild. You’ll see. It’ll take no time.”

“Rebuild!?” Adella cried hysterically. “While you were up in the mountains playing soldier, you left me alone with six children to care for. We suffered hunger, pain, cruelty, and sickness. Do you know what the worst was? Uncertainty. Would we eat? Would we get sick or, worse—maybe not worse—die? Would there be a tomorrow? I prayed for a tomorrow, and many times, hoped my prayers would fall on deaf ears.”

The distraught man went to comfort his wife, but Adella pulled from his arms and ran towards the nearby stream. Bonita looked at her father accusingly and ran after her mother. Mateo did not follow. Reality had interrupted the happy reunion. Adella was not the woman he’d left behind, nor were his children—nor was he, for that matter. War had changed them, and he did not know how to make things right.

Mateo needed to find work to rebuild not only his house but his relationship with the family he had been forced to leave behind. It didn’t take him long to convince the city leaders to sanction a bus route to Manila. Mateo resumed his course with a bus provided by the US army to carry civilians, necessary to revitalize the war-worn economy. He missed his friend, Juan, who had died of dengue fever.

With money from his job and his daughters’ laundry business, the family began the job of rebuilding.

Twice a week, Bonita, Mya, and Christina would make their way to the camp the occupying Americans called home. The girls could count on repeat business as the soldiers came to know them. They would carry their soiled laundry to a nearby stream. There, they met up with the other girls doing laundry. Using a bar of soap, the women would scrub the clothes on a corrugated washboard, then place them on a large, flat stone and beat repeatedly with a bat-sized stick until the dirt and stains were gone. They would then rinse and spread the now-clean clothes on top of large stones and tall bushes to dry.

The stream was a noisy place, as playful children jumped in and out of the water. It was also a place of gossip. On occasion, spying soldiers would hide in the bushes and grab at them. When Bonita complained, one of the girls responded, “I’ll give anything to the Americans. They saved us.” That sentiment was shared by many. Some resisted their advancements, but politely. For the most part, the soldiers would laugh and linger without going further.

There were reports, however, of mischief, and the girls were always on their guard. One day, while carrying clean laundry, two soldiers jumped from behind nearby shrubs, startling Mya and Bonita. The men smiled menacingly. “Come on. We’re not going to hurt you.”

The sisters started walking faster. As their pursuers gained on them, they dropped their laundry baskets and began running out of fear.

“You don’t want to go there.” A stern voice stopped the soldiers in their tracks. The menacing intruders ran from the scene, as did the sisters.

Eddie Wright relaxed his fists and watched the fleeing girls. War changed men—pacifists became heroes, and bullies cowered at the first sight of blood. It was insane. In the name of brotherhood, any behavior was tolerated because the men saw in each other what they, themselves, were capable of. Eddie did not want to be there.

The unsung hero asked around for anyone who could identify the girls. Once he had the information, he knew what he had to do.

The next day, he showed up at their house with a friend carrying a guitar. Eddie was taller than his friend, and his tan was the same light brown as his hair. Dark eyes buried deep in their sockets peered from within a long, thin face that sported heavy stubble of two days’ growth. Eddie felt a need to apologize to the girls for his fellow soldiers’ lewd behavior. He wanted them to feel safe.

Melvin, with his guitar strapped across his shoulder, had no motive. His guitar was his only connection to home. The slight, pimply faced lad who looked younger than his twenty-three years shadowed Eddie as he approached the door.

“Sir, your daughters were frightened yesterday by two men in my unit. I want to apologize for their behavior.”

Mateo looked over at Mya and Bonita, who recognized their savior. Their father nodded. The two men appeared harmless.

“I’m sorry about yesterday. Are you okay?” Eddie asked the girls. He introduced himself and told them he was from Texas.

After befriending them, the two men visited often. Melvin would pick at his guitar, and Eddie would teach them American songs. Bonita had a beautiful soprano voice and loved duets with her new friend. Sometimes the lyrics made no sense to the girls.

“What’s an apple?” Bonita asked, referring to the song, “Don’t Sit Under The Apple Tree.”

Eddie soon found himself walking the girls home and sometimes helping carry their clean laundry. Bonita liked Eddie, but he liked her more.

“I bought you a present,” the enamored man announced one day. Bonita looked confused as he handed her a shiny red something. “It’s an apple,” he explained in answer to her puzzled look. “Take a bite.”

Regrettably for Eddie, his budding romance was doomed. The young soldier received transfer orders to Okinawa. While Melvin strummed on his guitar, Eddie crooned, “I’ll be seeing you in all the old familiar places...”

The last time Bonita saw him, Eddie was crammed inside a transport bus. He saw her carrying laundry and started yelling and waving. His buddies had to restrain him from jumping out and going AWOL. Bonita smiled and waved, unaware of the anguish her friend was feeling.

Soon, he began writing to Bonita in care of Melvin, who would deliver the letters to her.

He wrote that he loved her. *Please answer. I will come back.*

Bonita never answered. He never returned.

Before the war, Mya had always been daddy’s girl. Mateo favored his Christmas baby, and she was quick to take advantage of his indulgence. The war had changed everything. Her father had been gone, and her mother’s priority was their survival. Mya, now seventeen, was a mere four feet eleven inches tall and underdeveloped. She felt overshadowed by Bonita; even Christina, who was two years younger, had started developing breasts. The overlooked girl was jealous of the attention Eddie showered on Bonita and resentful of the interest the soldiers gave Bonita when they went to camp asking for work. Next to her sisters, she was invisible.

Sergeant Ian Southerland was a favorite of the women. The tall, lanky American with short, wavy, brown hair was an avid stamp collector. They usually found him bent over a makeshift desk of plywood atop several crates. Spread on top were dozens of stamps from all over the world. In his hand, he carried a magnifying glass he used to peruse postmarks and check hinges for imperfections.

The sergeant’s concentration was interrupted when he heard the women giggle. Ian glanced up with mercury-blue eyes that were cool in contrast to his ruddy complexion, compliments of his Scottish ancestry. He stopped what he was doing and smiled, averting his attention to the small group of women who gathered. He had a way of making each of them feel special. And indeed, there was jealousy among the girls for his attention.

They waited expectantly as he pulled his footlocker from under his cot and handed each girl some candy he had stowed away expressly for that purpose. He glanced up. It was the first time he noticed the small figure standing outside his tent. Ian reached out with an offering of candy. Mya cowered.

He enticed her. “I have laundry. Do you want?”

The mute-struck girl looked around. Seeing he was talking to her, she nodded.

“What’s your name?” the stranger asked.

“Mya,” she answered shyly.

“How old are you, Mya?”

“Fourteen.”

Bonita stepped from the small group. “No, she’s not. She’s seventeen!”

Mya was so taken aback by the stranger's attention that she had forgotten her age. It had been four years since the war began. There were no birthday celebrations, no weekends, and no time of day. They were never early. They were never late.

Seventeen? Suddenly, Mya didn't feel like a little girl anymore. She was seventeen, and one of the many young women charmed by this handsome young soldier. Unleashed, her hormones sent a thrill through her body that she had never felt before.

Ian was indiscriminate and flirted with all the young women. Mya was no exception. He beckoned her closer and gave her his coveted laundry. The young girl was so smitten, she washed and starched everything. When she returned with the newly ironed and stiffly starched clothes, his eyes twinkled in amusement—even his underwear was stiffly starched!

"Are your parents living?" he asked.

When she answered, he engaged her in conversation. Mya was emboldened. She had a lot to say to the flattering stranger.

"Can I be your laundry girl?" she asked as she was leaving.

"As long as you don't use starch."

After she left, one of Ian's tent mates reprimanded the womanizer. "Hey, Sarg. Why don't you leave that one alone? She's too naïve and just not your type."

Ian looked over at his friend and smirked. The challenge was on.

When Mya returned from the river the next day, her mother told her that a really nice American had come to see her. He brought soap, rice, and whiskey, which he drank with her father. From that day on, Ian became a frequent visitor. He always brought food, supplies, and whiskey, which he drank with Mateo. He brought laundry for Mya, and on occasion, would share a Coke with her.

"You are beautiful," he would tell her because that's what she wanted to hear.

Mya was flattered. No one had ever said that to her before, and she found herself looking forward to his visits. The infatuated girl took credit for the food and supplies he brought. After all, it was she he came to visit. When Ian engaged Bonita in conversation, Mya, overcome with jealousy, would interrupt their talk.

Her behavior did not go unnoticed.

Adella saw the way her daughter acted in the young soldier's presence and soon became suspicious of his "bribes." "Mya, you are not to be alone with Ian. You are too young and inexperienced."

Not wanting to hear the rantings of an overprotective mother, Ian talked the love-stricken girl into leaving home for good. He moved her into a one-room house next to the camp. The house had no running water, so he showered and shaved at camp. Sometimes, the thoughtless man slept there too. Her lover came and went without explanation, often leaving Mya alone with his laundry.

Ian liked having Mya at his beck and call. Unbridled, he continued to flirt with other women, and when they were not amenable to a one-night stand, he always had Mya. He liked the girl, but she was just too needy.

When nearly a month had passed, Mya, basically ignored, began having second thoughts about her decision to run off with the handsome stranger. Her mother hadn't forgotten. One night, Ian returned to the house with scratches on his face and arms.

Adella, who had been relentless in her search, had found him. "I want my daughter back!" She clawed at him and thrust Mya's birth certificate into his hands, not wanting Mya to face the disgrace of living with an unmarried man. "See to it that you marry her." The hysterical woman had lost one daughter. She was not going to let the same thing happen to Mya.

Aware that her mother could carry through with her threat to speak with his commanding officer, Ian approached Mya. "Your mother wants us married," he said roughly. "Let's go." He grabbed her hand and dragged her to the nearest justice of the peace.

Looking at the young girl before him, the judge addressed Mya, "How old are you?"

"In two weeks, she'll be eighteen," Ian answered. Condescendingly, he plopped the birth certificate her mother had given him on the judge's desk.

The judge dismissed it. "Even if you tell me she's fifteen, I won't believe you."

Indignant, Ian left with Mya trailing behind. He ushered her into a small, wooden church. Mya had never been inside a Protestant church before. Used to the grandiose architecture of the Spanish cathedrals, she thought that maybe the Japanese had destroyed the statues of saints and the Virgin.

Ian's patronizing behavior had not served him well with the judge, so this time, he spoke of love, commitment, and family. The pastor agreed to marry them. When Ian slipped the ring onto her finger, it was way too big. He had bought it under duress and had not paid attention to the size. Mya started to giggle—she could fit two fingers through it!

Repulsed by her childish outburst, Ian shook his head in disbelief and growled, "I'm taking you home."

When they got to the center of town, the newlywed soldier spotted Adella walking in the street, balancing a bucket of water on her head. He took the pail, laid it on the ground, and roared, "I married her. Here's the marriage certificate." He shoved it into her hand and left.

At a complete loss, Mya looked at her mother, then her husband, as he hurried away from both of them. Good riddance. Ian had no intention of seeing either of them again.

Chapter 30

FAR AWAY (1946-1949)

Angelina was full-term when the Japanese surrendered. She stayed on at the hacienda until the baby, a boy, was delivered. It was love at first sight. Angelina's motherly instincts overtook any hesitation she might have had to care for him. She named him Ernesto after her dear friend.

The young mother stayed at the hacienda, gaining strength. She felt safe there. However, she missed her family. As soon as she was strong enough, Angelina admitted to her benefactor that she needed to search for her family on the big island.

Ernesto had grown fond of his charge and the baby, now five months old. She resisted his pleas to stay. The night before she left, he gave Angelina a large envelope with money and a banknote. "I have put some money in a British bank account for you and Ernie. Promise me if you need anything, you will let me help."

The next morning, Ernesto watched in sorrow as she boarded the ferry. Angelina was the daughter he never had. He watched as the ferry grew smaller and then disappeared over the horizon.

Once Angelina found herself on dry land, she caught a bus to Antipolo. The new mother ignored the faces of her fellow passengers who, upon seeing Ernie, passed judgment on his parentage, regardless of circumstance. His angled, narrow eyes dominated the upper third of his round face, leaving no doubt that Japanese blood pulsed through his veins.

"Mama!"

Adella turned. Her heart quickened as she heard the voice of the daughter she thought was dead.

"Angelina!" Dazed, Adella put her hand to her beating heart and steadied herself. It had been over a year since Angelina's abduction. "You're really here!" she cried, pulling her daughter to her and touching her face. She was not her little girl anymore. She seemed more womanly. But, there was more. In spite of what she had endured, Angelina appeared composed—almost triumphant.

Upon hearing their mother's screams, the rest of the family gathered. In their excitement at seeing their sister, they failed to notice the baby strapped to Angelina's back.

The merriment stirred the sleeping child, who began to wail. Everyone fell silent as they fought to deny the sound of a baby's cry. Mateo was the first to move and helped his daughter remove the infant from her back. Ernie wiggled and squealed with delight as the man freed him from his constraints. The scene turned to glee as everyone gathered 'round the giggling child.

Seeing the baby, Adella remained frozen.

"Mama?" Angelina begged, aware of her mother's anguish. "He is innocent. I love him. He is *my* son!"

Without a word, the ashen woman went into the house.

With tears in her eyes, Angelina looked at her father.

Mateo handed the baby over to his distraught daughter. “Let me talk to her.” He went inside.

Ernie started to giggle and reach into Christina’s hair. He now had their attention. Angelina smiled through her tears as her siblings crowded the two, trying to amuse their nephew.

Inside, Adella found it hard to breathe. Earlier that day, Mya had told her mother that she was pregnant.

“Do you love him?” Adella had asked, referring to Ian.

“I think I do. I really miss him.”

“Then go to him. He’s your husband and the father of this child.”

With the news of Mya’s pregnancy and now Angelina’s return, Adella had difficulty processing the baby before her. “How could she bring *his* bastard into this house?” she complained tearfully to Mateo, referring to the Japanese officer who had raped her daughter.

Mateo tried to reason with his wife. “She’s our daughter. That is her choice. It is her baby—our first grandchild. There is nothing to forgive. But if you can’t forgive yourself, you will lose her forever.”

Adella understood. She emerged from the house and embraced her daughter. “God is good. You’re home,” she said. There was no mention of the baby.

The following day, Mya was off to the camp to tell her unsuspecting husband *her* good news. When she got to the house they shared, she found Ian in bed with another girl from the village.

She flew into a rage. “Get out of my house! This is *my* husband!”

The bewildered girl grabbed her clothes and left.

Ian just looked at his irate wife. He had not seen Mya since he left her with her mother nearly two months ago. She had lost that little girl’s innocence and appeared more womanly than before. He liked that she was jealous. “I missed you,” He crooned.

“I’m pregnant!”

Ian had not planned on taking Mya back to America when he was transferred home. A baby did not change his plans. He did not object when she moved back in with him either. To him, she was a commodity. *The baby? Well, that was her problem!*

The man easily manipulated Mya. In her mind, the baby would bind him to her. As her stomach started to swell, she became increasingly jealous of his time spent away from her. There were nights he didn’t come home at all.

When Mya went into labor, she was taken to the nearby army hospital, where she delivered a healthy baby girl. Everyone was shocked. The baby’s dark hair was in contrast to her fair skin, and she had her father’s mercury-blue eyes. Everyone who saw her could not help but compare the baby to her dark Filipino mother. April was a beautiful Americano.

Ian strutted proudly as everyone complimented him on his daughter. As her mother, Mya made the most of her elevated status and visited her parents often to show off her baby girl and give Adella a chance to fuss over her beautiful granddaughter. On the bus, curious passengers would wonder at the woman carrying a fair-skinned baby and conclude that she was its caretaker.

Once, an older man sitting next to her waved his hands over April's eyes. "Can she see?" He had never seen such blue eyes before.

Offended, Mya distanced herself. "Of course, she can see!"

A year later, Bonita, who had married a local boy, gave birth to a daughter, and Adella quickly fell in love with this baby as well.

Her mother's preference for her granddaughters over her grandson did not go unnoticed by Angelina.

She had used some of the money from Ernesto to buy a house nearby in hopes that her mother would grow to love and accept her grandson. As time passed, it became increasingly apparent to Angelina that her mother could not forgive her son for being born. Her heart ached when she heard her mother boast about her granddaughters.

One day, April grabbed a toy from Ernie. He proceeded to object, pulling at her hair. Adella smacked the two-year-old's hand and violently shook him. "Bad boy!"

Witnessing the confrontation, Angelina picked up her son. "He's an innocent, Mama. I love my son, and you have made your feelings toward him clear. I love you, Mama, but I cannot live like this." She left in tears.

Angelina made up her mind. She was immigrating to the US. In America, her son would not carry the stigma of his birth. She crossed the ferry to Guimaras, where Ernesto was happy to see them but sad they were moving so far away. His pleas for her to stay were useless. Before they left, Ernesto had his friend, a newspaper photographer, take a picture of him, Angelina, and Ernie.

Angelina departed on a ferry to Manila the following week, where she boarded a ship bound for Los Angeles. Before she left, Ernesto gave her a copy of the photo and made sure she had enough money in her bank account to live. He promised he would visit, but he never did.

Soon after Angelina sailed for America, Mya discovered she was pregnant with her second child. April was two years old when her sister was born, another fair-skinned baby with blue eyes. Unlike her sister, who had thick dark hair, Matilda's was blonde and curly. With a heightened sense of self-importance, Mya frequented the village where her parents lived to show off her beautiful blanco daughters. Ian rarely visited.

Tired of the pressures of fatherhood and from his in-laws, Ian put in a transfer for home. He had no intention of leaving his fair-skinned daughters to be raised by Filipinos. The following month, Ian boarded the ship home with his wife and two daughters.

On the trip to the port, Adella held tight to Matilda. Before Mya boarded the boat, Adella surrendered her granddaughter and took the ivory comb from her hair. "I have nothing else to give you. Remember me," she said as she weaved Teresa's comb through her daughter's long, black hair.

A slight breeze swept Adella's unfettered hair across her tear-stained face as she watched her daughter walk up the plank for the last time. Mya stood on the deck of the army transport ship pulling in its anchor, about to sail away. Her tearful family waved as the vessel eased from the dock. They looked so small from where she stood. The crowd quickly dispersed, leaving a lone figure who watched the ship until it faded into the sunset. A tear rolled down the old jeweler's face for the young mother whose life journey was about to take her through rough waters.

Mya, with high expectations, carried eighteen-month-old Matilda on her hip. At the same time, two-and-a-half-year-old April held tight to her mother's skirt as she followed the crowd to their quarters. They were going to America, where the streets were paved with gold.

Chapter 31

A STRANGE NEW WORLD (1949)

It was a two-week journey aboard the ship. Husbands were not allowed to be with their families except during dining hours. Mya, alone with April and Matilda, made friends with other Filipino women as their children played. They found comfort speaking in their native tongue. Though they had been taught to read and speak English in school, at home, they spoke Tagalog. As a consequence, the young women spoke English with a heavy island accent. In addition, they had difficulty understanding the fast-talking Americans.

The women spent their time thumbing through fashion magazines and styling each other's hair in the current American bob. At bedtime, they set their hair in pin curls, then brushed it out in the morning for a fuller, curly "Betty Grable" look. The women pointed out pictures of clothes and shoes they would buy once they landed on American soil. They were confident that they would want for nothing in their new homeland. They were the chosen ones.

When the ship finally docked in San Francisco, Mya got her first glimpse of America. The unfamiliar sounds of cars passing, horns honking, street cars clanging, fog horns blasting, and seagulls cawing overhead assaulted her ears. She shivered and wrapped her shawl around Matilda as they exited the ramp. Ian carried their older daughter. It was overcast and drizzling, the air chilled to the bone. Mya didn't know the air could get that cold. She tilted her head skyward. *Where was the sun?*

Mya watched as her friends made their way through the crowd into the arms of awaiting families. Smiles and tears and shouts of joy surrounded them. But Ian's family was not there. She looked over at her husband. He shrugged and hailed a cab.

They settled into a two-bedroom apartment for the week while Ian was processed for his new assignment in the state of Virginia. Mya stayed within the confines of their apartment with the two girls while her husband left early to report for duty. He would return late in the afternoons and take his family out for dinner.

After eating, Ian would leave Mya and the girls at the apartment and drink with his buddies. Alone, Mya would lie awake, trying to identify the strange noises outside their building. She trembled when they sounded like guns firing, reminding her of the war years. She had gotten good at estimating the distance of bombs dropping and knowing when to take cover by the frequency of their shrill, and she found these strange noises too close for comfort. They made her heart race with terror as her mind sought shelter in the dark. For the first time in her life, she felt alone.

After his orders were processed, Ian bought a used car for transportation from San Francisco to his new post in Virginia. He stopped at a pawn shop on the drive out of San Francisco.

"Give me your jewelry," he demanded his wife.

Mya was at a loss.

“It’s for the money we need to drive cross-country.” When she hesitated, he scoffed. “What? Did you think money grows on trees?”

Mya turned over all her jewelry—earrings, gold bracelets, chains, and her wedding band. It was her wedding band that she hesitated to part with. It somehow legitimized her being there. When she handed the ring over, she broke down in tears. It wasn’t how she had imagined. *Where were the streets of gold?*

To Mya, the road trip seemed endless. She hadn’t known America was so big and the landscape so varied. The ever-changing scenery raced past her window, mile after mile—first, the shore with palm trees, then sandy deserts, grass prairies, tall pine forests, and mountain passes. Ian drove, stopping only for gas and short naps in the car, picking up food from roadside stands and gas stations. The closer he got to his destination, the more agitated he became. Mya closed her eyes and held tight to her children as he drove recklessly through winding mountain passes.

To stay awake, her reckless husband used a Benzedrine inhaler. Drugged and without sleep, he became delirious—driving on the wrong side of the road, talking to buddies shot up during the war. Mya panicked. Ian wasn’t making any sense, and his driving was becoming more erratic.

She yelled loudly and hit at him to get his attention. “Stop! Stop! You’re talking to the devil!” she screamed.

He jolted awake, veered to the side of the road, put the car in park just before his head fell forward onto the steering wheel, and passed out. Unable to wake him, the frightened woman reached over and turned off the engine. While Ian snored off the effects of the Benzedrine, she huddled in the back seat of the car with her two girls, wrapped in a woolen army-issued blanket. Mya had never been this terrified, even in the worst days of the war. Here, she was alone with no one to share the nightmare that had escaped the dark to haunt her waking hours.

Ian had grown up in the hills of Tennessee. His father, a farmer, relied on making moonshine to survive the bad years when supply outweighed demand. He learned that low-value corn crops could be turned into high-value whiskey. The Eighteenth Amendment made it illegal to make, sell, or ship the coveted liquid for mass production and consumption. It was never a crime to consume alcohol during Prohibition. As a result, Ian’s father enjoyed a steady clientele stream of law-abiding townspeople.

The appeal of Prohibition by the Twenty-First Amendment in 1933 had prompted the Alcoholic Beverage Commission officers to redefine the distillation and selling of illegal alcohol not as a criminal offense but as a tax violation. The farmers-turned-moonshiners did not intend on paying taxes now, after years of evading the law. Ian helped his father avoid the revenuers by frequently moving their still deeper into the Tennessee hills.

His father was often drunk and abusive to his wife and children. Families in the rural South formed their own protective circle where drunken fights and battered wives and children were the norm. Women were submissive and subservient to the men in their lives. Ian's father exerted complete control over his wife and children. Any sign of independence or defiance warranted severe beatings. Members of the community ignored blackened eyes and prolonged absences from school. It was none of their business.

Having had his share of beatings, Ian left home at sixteen. He joined the Civilian Conservation Corps to escape his father's abuse. It was there that he was assigned to bunk with Joe Stillman. After his first day of working in the hot sun since daybreak, Ian returned to the bunkhouse, his face sun burnt and his shirt sopping with sweat.

"The shower's in the main house," Joe offered.

The main house was a log cabin that housed the foremen and cooks. It had a large living area with a long, wooden table flanked by two benches. This was where the men ate and where they met for their daily assignments.

When Ian returned from his shower, he saw Joe bent over a table looking at stamps with a magnifying glass. "What are you doing?" he asked.

Joe looked up. "This is my stamp collection. I'm checking the hinges," he said. "See this stamp from Norway?" Joe pointed to a black stamp with a white image of what looked like a lion sporting a crown and holding a hatchet-like weapon with its paws. "This symbol represents the coat of arms of Norway. Here." He pointed to Norway on the map that adorned the wall. After a brief history lesson, Joe pointed to the piles of stamps lying on the table. "I'm planning on seeing the world."

Ian got caught up in his new friend's dreams and soon started his own collection. Together, they shared, swapped, bought, and sold stamps with other philatelists.

On his seventeenth birthday, Ian enlisted in the army, along with his friend. They were going to see the world. Their first tour of duty was in the Philippines. They were there less than a year when the Japanese invaded the island. With the help of their Filipino counterparts, they were able to evade capture. Not content with just surviving, they joined other Americans and formed resistance groups recognized by the US Military. Initially relegated to an intelligence-gathering role, these groups eventually became more active and aggressive. They were an integral part of the American re-conquest of the country.

During his stint in the Philippines, Ian bought a 100-acre farm in Virginia, sight unseen. He destroyed any reconciliation with his father when he moved his mother and siblings to the farm, away from the abuse.

This would be his first visit to the sanctuary. As he drove up the mile-long dirt road, Mya saw a large colonial-style house surrounded by acres of cleared land. A tin-roofed barn sat in the back, away from the home, where Ian's mother, two sisters, and a brother-in-law lived. It was quiet, and the air chilled as they got closer. Mya shivered.

No one came out to greet them. Ian drove to the side entrance, where he got out of the car and entered the house. Mya waited anxiously to meet her new family. After an hour in the cold

with only the army blanket to keep them warm, Ian returned alone. Without a word, he grabbed the suitcases and led Mya and the girls through the kitchen entrance of the house.

Mya was greeted with silence as the house occupants sat at the kitchen table, staring at the dark-skinned woman and her daughters. No one got up.

“Hi,” Mya said meekly.

Ignoring her attempt at conversation, Connie, Ian’s youngest sister, observed, “Thank goodness your children look like you, Ian.” She then turned her back on the intruders as Ian led his wife and daughters to a small bedroom.

It had been four years since the war ended. The country was still divided over Roosevelt’s executive order that had relocated over 110,000 Japanese Americans from the West Coast to internment camps, and the Supreme Court’s decision that rescinded it. It was not just the Japanese Americans who suffered prejudicial profiling. Many in the rural areas of the South did not differentiate the Japanese from other Pacific Islanders. They believed the “Yellow Menace” was a danger to Western civilization, and viewed them as culturally backward and racially inferior.

It was in this atmosphere that Mya found herself.

Later, when Ian led his wife and girls to the kitchen to get them something to eat, they found that the family had already retired for the night.

“I’ll be leaving early,” he said as he rummaged through the refrigerator for food. He was scheduled to report to duty the next day.

“Please don’t leave me here,” Mya begged.

Ian laughed. “I’ll be back in time for supper.”

But he did not return that evening. After reporting to duty, he stopped at the NCO club for a drink. It wasn’t long before he got into a drunken fistfight and was hauled off to the stockade for three days.

Mya overheard Ian’s sister and mother talking about it. “That’s Ian for you—leaving us here to take care of his bastards.”

Alarmed, Mya asked, “What happened?”

Connie turned and gave Mya a condescending frown. “Are you spying on us? We were *not* talking to you.”

Mya was demoralized. She would have to spend the next three days alone with these unfriendly people.

At mealtimes, she ate in the kitchen while the rest of the family sat at the dining room table. They had set aside separate dishes for Mya, which were not to be washed with theirs. More disheartening was that they separated her from her children. Her daughters ate in the dining room with the rest of the family. Mya could see them at the table. April would glance over at her mother without a word. Connie soon noticed the eye contact between mother and daughter and shifted seating, blocking their view.

Mya was alone. She missed her family and daydreamed of being home in the Philippines, where the family dinner table was laden with rice, pork, chicken, and sweet desserts that took second place to the chatter that surrounded them.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of the fly swatter against the table. “What are you standing around for?” her mother-in-law scolded.

Because they lived miles from the nearest town, meals consisted of whatever was grown locally, mainly corn, boiled potatoes, and cabbage—a diet Mya had trouble digesting. She suffered silently with severe stomach pains. Mya did not stand up to these people. They had threatened to take her babies and send her back to the Philippines. During the war, survival had been dodging bullets and bombs. Here, there was no dodging the demoralizing ricochet of ignorance and prejudice.

On the third morning, the abandoned woman woke with anticipation. Ian was coming home. It was evening when the door finally opened. She jumped from behind the kitchen door and ran right into her husband’s arms. She held on tightly while crying. He just laughed, but Mya felt safe and rescued.

The next morning, after Ian’s oldest sister and brother-in-law left for work and hearing the car drive away, the hopeful wife headed to the kitchen, confident that everything would be different. She was going to make breakfast for her family. As she reached for a clean glass—not for herself, but for Ian—Connie brought the fly swatter down on the counter.

“How dare you touch those glasses! You know better. Nothing has changed because Ian is here.”

Mya dropped the glass, shattering it.

Sitting at the kitchen table, Ian heard the exchange. “So *this* is the way you have been treating my wife?”

The words between Ian and his sister escalated. Upon hearing the commotion, his mother entered and joined in. They shouted at each other, and his mother threatened him with an iron frying pan while Connie said she would shoot him.

Mya ran in front of her husband, crying, “Please, stop. Don’t hurt him!”

Connie and her mother looked at her with disdain, then at Ian. When Ian did not reprimand his wife, his sister sneered at him. “Let’s get out of here, Mom,” she said with contempt as she ushered her mother from the room.

April and Matilda, who had been standing in the doorway, ran up to their mother. They, too, were crying. It took a while for Mya to stop shaking. She had never experienced this type of violence in a family.

Angry, Ian packed his family up and left. They spent that night in a hotel. The following day, he made housing arrangements for them on the base. Mya felt a sense of relief as she looked around the empty two-bedroom house allotted to them by the army. It was identical to the other houses lining the street on both sides, but this was her home now. There were no fly swatters to duck. No shouting. No spying. Her girls and husband were all she had in this strange, new, and unfriendly world.

Mya began to make sandwiches from the small amount of groceries they had bought at a nearby convenience store. She heard giggles coming from the next room. When she peeked in, she found Ian on all fours playing with his daughters.

Mya smiled—maybe God was listening after all.

Chapter 32

THE CAMP FOLLOWERS (1949-1963)

The next morning, after her husband left, there was a knock on the door. Thinking it was Ian, Mya ran to open it. She found herself looking at a stranger.

“Hi. I’m Sally from next door,” the woman said as she walked past Mya into the kitchen and set a large basket on the kitchen counter. “Whew! That was heavy.”

April and Matilda watched along with their bewildered mother as the intruder started taking food from the basket.

“I bought some cereal and milk. You like that?” she said to the girls as her eyes searched the kitchen countertops. “No bowls? No problem. We’ll use these cups.” The talkative woman bought out paper cups and plates. She put the cereal into the cups and added milk, gave them to the girls, then turned her attention to Mya and smiled. “Welcome to the neighborhood!” Sally took out a thermos of hot coffee and arranged cinnamon buns on a plate. She poured a cup of coffee and handed it to Mya. “Cream and sugar are on the counter. I like mine black.” She nodded towards the girls sitting on the floor eating. “I have four. They are all in school right now. I know how it is to move around—I’ve been a ‘camp follower’ for fifteen years. We’re all in the same boat.”

“Same boat?” Mya wasn’t sure she had heard right.

Sally laughed. “Yes—we’re all army wives,” she explained. “You’ll meet the rest of us soon enough.”

The tall stranger, whose blonde hair was pulled back and tied into a ponytail by a red scarf, was the first American to show Mya any kindness. Unable to comprehend the gesture, Mya broke down.

Misunderstanding her tears, Sally put her arms around her new neighbor. “Don’t worry. Nobody hates moving more than I do. Trust me, don’t you worry about a thing. I’ll help you get settled. A bus circles the base during the day. You should have no trouble getting around.”

When the tears stopped, Mya introduced herself to the woman who had taken over. “I’m Mya.”

They had barely finished their coffee when they heard a knock at the door. Sally opened the door and clapped her hands. “Furniture!”

After the movers left, Mya’s new friend looked around. “Standard issue,” she said as she helped her newcomer arrange the newly delivered furniture. She noticed that Mya had bought next to nothing with her. “I have extra linens and blankets,” Sally offered, then picked up the phone. “Denise, I’m here with our new neighbor, Mya. Do you have extra cookware or dishes lying around? Maybe a pillow or two?” She smiled and nodded. “See you in a bit.”

Mya and the girls followed Sally to her house next door. When they returned with blankets and linens, they were met by Denise. The trio made the beds and put away the pots, pans, and glasses Denise had bought.

“Enough work!” Denise declared as Linda, another neighbor, showed up with a bag of groceries.

“Knock, Knock!” she announced as she entered the house. “Sandwiches, anyone?”

The three women chattered as they ate. The conversation drifted to Mya and her experience during the war.

Linda sympathized. “It must have been terrifying for you. Ralph was stationed in the Philippines. He sent me back to the States before the war.” Her voice lowered as her eyes swelled with tears. “The war changed him. He is not the same man I married.”

The silence that followed was interrupted by a screech outside as the school bus came to a halt, and the excited voices of children filled the air. Thankful for the reprieve, the women started to stir.

“It’s past three!” Sally was the first to get up. She ushered Mya and the other women outside to their awaiting children. April and Matilda followed. After a moment of introductions and pleasantries, the women left for home.

“Tomorrow, we’ll take the bus, and I’ll show you around,” Sally promised.

Mya watched her newfound friends as they walked down the street to their respective homes. Once inside, she looked around. Tables and chairs and beds and an indoor kitchen and bathroom! She smiled at her daughters. She was used to sharing a small room with her six siblings. This was a palace! For the first time, she felt a sense of hope. “Daddy will be home soon,” Mya told her girls.

She straightened the chairs, wiped the countertops, and fluffed the pillows—they were so soft! She wanted things to be perfect for Ian. There was little food in the house, just crumbs left over from the welcoming committee, so when he arrived, Ian took them grocery shopping. Mya had never seen so much food in any one place before. They loaded the cart. She bought a large bag of rice and prepared a feast. It was the first time in a long while that she had food agreeable to her stomach. That night, she waited for Ian to tell her how beautiful she was and how much he loved her. He used to, but he was different here. *Is it me?* she thought. *What did I do wrong?*

The optimism she felt earlier was shattered.

With the help of the camp followers, Mya soon learned to navigate her new surroundings. She was part of an exclusive group of army wives. They supported each other in a male-dominated environment where caring for the children and homemaking was a full-time job. Wives were discouraged from working outside the home if it interfered with their wifely duties.

There were good days. Ian had commandeered the dining room for his precious collection. The dining table was strewn with stamps, and a large world map hung on the wall. He spent time with his girls, pointing on the map the country each stamp represented. He would identify monarchs and local heroes and tell their stories. Mya learned, along with her daughters, that the world was a much bigger place than she had ever imagined.

But the idyllic family gatherings were overshadowed by the occasional bad times. Ian suffered bouts of anxiety, sleeplessness, and depression. The war had left him scarred, and he turned to alcohol for temporary relief.

It happened on weekends when he didn't have to report for morning duty. For the most part, he would sit at the table and brood over friends he'd lost during the war. There were times of rage, and Mya was the nearest target. She had come to expect the abuse. In the mornings, when the effects of alcohol wore off, and he saw the damage he'd inflicted—the black eyes, bruises—he was genuinely sorry and begged her forgiveness.

It was always her fault. "I get so jealous when another man looks at you." She was always the instigator. Once he made it clear it was her fault, he would apologize, then compliment her with the words she needed to hear. "I love you so much. You know I can't live without you."

She felt guilty that she was the cause of such outrage and willingly accepted responsibility for her part in invoking such behavior. It was during these make-up times that he was approachable, and she felt loved and needed, making excuses for his Jekyll-Hyde behavior, bearing most of the responsibility, and neglecting her own needs. She had become his enabler.

The days were getting shorter and colder. One early morning in November, Mya began screaming hysterically as she ran to get her girls.

"What's going on?" Ian asked, running from the bedroom in his shorts and T-shirt.

"Bombs! We're under attack! Ashes are falling everywhere!" She huddled the frightened girls close.

Ian looked outside and started to laugh. "Mya, those aren't ashes—it's snowing!"

The stunned woman stopped and stared as her laughing husband walked toward the door.

"No!" she screamed. "Don't open that door!"

Their daughters were caught up in the hysteria.

"Here." He opened the door.

Nothing happened.

"Look." He grabbed his wife's arm and dragged her to the opening. The ground was a blanket of newly fallen snow. He made a snowball, took a bite, and placed it into Mya's reluctant hand.

"It's cold," she observed as her fingers wrapped around the icy ball.

"It's snow," Ian corrected.

Sensing the danger was over, April, dressed in a long nightgown and barefoot, pushed her way past her mother. She bent down and picked up a handful of the white stuff, and looked over at her smiling dad. The girls laughed with glee as they reached up to catch the flying flakes.

"Okay, in the house!" their father ordered when he saw his daughters shivering. "It's cold out. Back inside!"

With chattering teeth, April and Matilda gladly obeyed.

"After breakfast, we'll put on something warm and build a snowman. What do you think, April? You and your sister want to help me build a snowman?"

"Yeah!" They clapped their hands with glee, even though they weren't sure what he was talking about. It sounded like fun.

Later, Ian took them outside and taught them how to make a snowball. “Now put it on the ground and roll it like this.” They watched as he rolled the ball in the snow, making it bigger and bigger. “Okay, your turn.”

With their father’s help, they rolled three good-sized snowballs and stacked them on top of each other. They found two twigs for the arms, coal for the eyes, and a carrot for the nose.

Their first snowman!

The next day, Ian bought home a sled. That weekend, he took them sledding down small hills. Afterward, they all enjoyed a cup of hot chocolate. Even Mya seemed to warm to the frozen winter land.

It had been nearly seven months since they’d moved onto the army base. The uprooted woman had acclimated to her surroundings with the help of her new friends. She enjoyed the camaraderie of the camp followers. After their husbands left for duty and the school bus driver shifted gears, the camp followers waved goodbye to their children and gathered in the street for their morning “welfare check.” They depended on each other in an environment with no childcare support, counseling, or orientation programs.

The winter cold waned, and the days began to get longer as the sun lingered, melting the snow and giving rise to daffodils and early spring crocuses. Where blankets of white covered the fields, now a rainbow of hues dotted the landscape. Mya welcomed the transformation.

That summer, Sally informed the group that her husband was being transferred to a base in Germany. Mya was devastated. Sally was the first friend she ever had in America. The group helped their friend pack, watched silently as the movers removed boxes from the house, and cried when she and her family drove away.

Soon after that, another newbie moved in, and not long afterward, Ian was transferred. Over the next fifteen years, the family moved every two to three years. She and her children learned to adapt to the demands of army life, adjusting to new places and making new friends with every move. And, as always, Ian set up a room for his precious stamp collection. Matilda was outgoing and enjoyed the adventure of moving and meeting new people. Her older sister didn’t make friends easily. April quickly learned the pain of leaving behind those she cared about.

Ian got drunk more and more often. He was haunted by the war. The fright and anxiety brought about by the explosion of enemy shells and mines and seeing maimed or dead comrades persisted. The mornings after, filled with regret, he would apologize profusely—*it was the alcohol*. His promise not to drink would last months until some trigger brought him back to the watering hole. It would take another two decades before his condition was given a name—post-traumatic stress disorder.

April was entering her junior year in high school when Ian was transferred to Fort Sill, Oklahoma. After three years, he announced his retirement and his intention to return to *his* farm in Virginia after April’s graduation. Her grades were good, and she received a full scholarship at a nearby nursing school. She had wanted to go to medical school, but at a time when women

were less than 9% of the total US medical school enrollment, she was unable to secure the funds for her education.

The new graduate helped her mother and sister pack. April planned to help them settle in and then move back to Oklahoma in the fall when school started. Ian and April took turns driving the 1,200-plus miles to Virginia.

When they arrived, Ian was oblivious to the cool reception shown by his family. His sister and brother-in-law were forced to give up the master bedroom. Resentful, they moved to a nearby town. That first week, Ian was in good spirits and sat around at night drinking with his family, reminiscing about old times. Mya withdrew as her old feelings of insecurity and social inequality surfaced. April noticed the change in her mother and her father, who was drinking more and becoming more reckless. She worried about their welfare and her little sister.

Her fears were soon validated. Driving home after a night out and listening to Bobby Vee crooning “The Night Has a Thousand Eyes” over the radio, Ian found himself back in the Philippines. He gripped the steering wheel—he didn’t want to be there.

“Hey, Joe.” Ian patted his friend on the back. “I’ll take point.”

Shirts wet with sweat from hacking their way through the jungle foliage, the patrol slowed for Ian to pass, replacing his friend at point. Joe gave him a thumbs-up. They had gone a mere 100 feet when Ian spotted the sniper.

“Down!” he yelled as he ducked and took aim.

Multiple gunshots rang through the air, hitting their target.

“One less Jap!” Ian boasted as he stood and turned towards his friend.

Upon seeing his buddy’s lifeless body, his mind froze and his mouth locked open. Joe’s head was unrecognizable. The sniper’s bullet had whizzed by Ian, only to hit his best friend.

“Why?” Ian cried out. His agonizing question reverberated throughout the dense jungle. Point was the most exposed position in a combat military formation. “That was my bullet!”

Ian wiped his eyes with his sleeve. When he looked up, the hallucinating man saw the sniper. “Not this time!” he roared. Ian stepped on the gas and hit the tree at sixty miles per hour.

April was overcome with dread when she saw the police car with its red lights flashing in the driveway.

“It was an accident,” the officer reported. “Alcohol and speed.”

Chapter 33

HAPPENSTANCE (1963-1965)

After the funeral, the family gathered at the house. April caught sight of Connie moving Mya's things from the master bedroom. "What are you doing?" April asked as she ushered her mother into the space her parents had occupied.

"I'm moving into this room. Mya can have mine," Connie informed her.

"No, you're not!" April exclaimed, incensed by the lack of respect.

"You don't know?" Connie asked with a smirk. "Your dad left this property to Mother. She has graciously agreed to allow Mya and you girls to stay on."

April looked at the deed her aunt held out. When Ian had purchased the land, he'd named his mother the beneficiary. He'd never thought to change it. "Don't bother," she said, then turned to her sister, whose eyes were red from crying. "Matilda, pack your things. We're going home."

A smile came over her sister's face. "Yes!"

No one came outside to see them off as April ushered Matilda and her mother into the car and drove away. Back in Oklahoma, friends welcomed the teary travelers. Although their friends said they could stay in their home as long as they needed, April knew they were being gracious, and she should make plans to move into their own place as quickly as possible.

Mya, meanwhile, was lost in grief. She had never held down a job, and now she was left penniless with two children. She relied on April for support. All they had of any value was Ian's precious stamp collection, which he had left in a nearby storage unit until they had settled.

The next day, April drove with her mother to the unit. Ian had collected and cataloged thousands of stamps from all over the world. As they rummaged through twenty years of collecting, the destitute women found letters from other philatelists whom Ian had traded, bought, and sold from. April phoned one of his contacts to see if he might want to buy the collection.

The man was sorry to hear of Ian's passing. "Your father's collection is worth a lot of money. It's out of my league. Why don't you put it up for auction?"

April had no idea her father's collection was worth that much. With the proceeds, Mya was able to purchase a modest house with money left over. April helped her mother get a housekeeping job at the local hospital where she was attending classes. Matilda continued her last year at the high school she had attended since she was a freshman. April picked up a few shifts as a nurse's aide during the weekends. Together, they made ends meet.

In 1965, April received her degree three years after Ian's death. At April's graduation, Mya removed the comb from her hair and weaved it into her daughter's, just as her mother had done to her twenty years before. "I have nothing else to give you," she cried.

Neither of them noticed the figure in white amidst the crowd of well-wishers.

Rich was now in his eighties and spent most of his time with his dear friend, Chad. After his return from Philippines, Rich was inconsolable. He had lost his wife, and a daughter he never knew. He threw himself into his work and spent his leisure trekking the dense forest on his estate. Five years later Melanie had tired of Rich's inability to pick up on her advances and left the firm.

Chad had remained steadfast, and Rich became an integral member of his family. He was there at christenings and birthdays of his friend's grandchildren and great-grandchildren. When Kathy died of breast cancer ten years prior, Rich insisted that Chad move in with him. There was ample room for both of them and the live-in valet who helped manage the estate.

Rich found solace strolling through the nearby forest, cataloging and taking photos of birds in the wild. On one such outing, he stepped into a pothole that had formed during the torrential downpour the week before and fell. His ankle was swollen, bruised, and painful. A quick x-ray showed that the injured man had not broken any bones but had twisted his ankle.

"You have a bad sprain and will need time for it to heal before bearing weight on it. Ice will help with the pain and swelling," the orthopedic doctor instructed. "Try to keep your leg propped above the level of your heart." Noticing Rich's impatience, he warned, "Walking or weight bearing too soon may slow healing or cause further damage. It may take as long as three weeks." He wrapped Rich's ankle in a protective brace. "I'll have a physical therapist bring you some crutches and instruct you on how to use them."

"Good! Then I can get out of here!" the injured man replied impatiently.

"One more day!" Rich's primary doctor announced him as he entered the room. He nodded as the orthopedic doctor left. "Your heart rate is a little erratic. I want to schedule a stress test in the morning. If all is clear, you can go."

"Come on, Jim," Rich complained.

"You want to be ahead of any problem or wait until it becomes symptomatic?"

"You're right," Rich conceded. "One more day."

"I'll schedule it for early morning," he said as he exited the room.

Rich had just picked up the phone to call Chad when the nurse entered his room. Upon seeing her, his heart started to race—he thought he recognized her.

April looked up and smiled. "Good morning, Mr. Manners. I'm Miss Southerland. You're not going to need this anymore," she said as she disconnected the IV tubing and turned to remove the empty bottle from the pole.

Rich's heart picked up again when he saw the ivory comb that anchored her hair up in a twist. "That comb..." he stuttered.

Hearing stress in his voice, she turned and noticed the color had drained from his face. "Are you okay?" April asked.

"That comb." He pointed to her hair.

She reached up and touched the comb at the back of her head. "This?"

“Yes. Where did you get it?” he asked shakily.

“My mother gave it to me.”

“Can I see it?” He reached out his hand.

April frowned. “Mr. Manners,” she said politely, ignoring his request, “I have to pass out meds. I’ll be back later to check in on you.”

As she turned to leave, Rich uttered aloud, “Meant to be.”

The woman in white stopped and turned, facing her patient. “How did you know that?”

Rich closed his eyes. *He knew it! Teresa’s comb!* “How did your mother get the comb?”

He had her attention as her curiosity built. “My grandmother gave it to her when she left the Philippines.”

The visibly shaken patient closed his eyes. “What’s her name?”

“Who? My grandmother?”

“Yes, your grandmother. Who else are we talking about?” he asked impatiently.

“Her name is Adella,” she replied, not wishing to agitate him further.

At the realization that his daughter was still alive, Rich lost control and started to sob out loud. He clearly remembered Flora’s words—“*They’re both dead!*” He grabbed the phone from the bedside table and threw it across the room. “Damn you, Flora! What have you done?”

“Do you want me to get the doctor?” April asked, completely confused and unable to assess the situation.

The regretful man grabbed April’s hand and kissed it. “No.” He sniffed back tears.

She quickly withdrew her hand and gave Rich a tissue from his nightstand. “I’ll get the doctor.”

Rich looked up. She had Teresa’s nose, almond-shaped eyes, and thick, black hair. Except that her eyes were piercing blue and her skin fair, there was no doubt Teresa’s blood ran through her veins.

“No... I’m sorry,” he apologized for grabbing her hand. “When you have time, I have a story to tell you.”

April felt sorry for her patient. “I love stories. I’ll be back after I finish making rounds,” she promised.

Rich was relieved to have some alone time before telling his visitor all he knew. When she returned, he hesitated. “Before I begin, tell me about your grandmother, Adella.”

“There isn’t much to tell. She was sent to an orphanage when she was eight years old. She remembers her grandmother, but she never knew her mother, who died just after childbirth. Her father was an American soldier.”

The thought of Teresa dying alone pierced his heart. “Teresa,” Rich choked.

“That was my great-grandmother’s name. How do you know that?”

April listened attentively as the man began to tell his incredible story. It fit with what she had been told. After a brief silence, she questioned, “That makes you my great-grandfather?”

Unable to speak, Rich nodded.

“That’s a lot to take in—for both of us,” April said. It was nearing the end of her shift. “I have to go into report now. I’ll be back tomorrow. I can hardly wait to tell Mom your story.” Before she left the room, she hesitated, then took the comb from her hair, put it into Rich’s hand, and folded his fingers over it. “Keep it for tonight.”

When she got home, April told her mother about her encounter with Rich. Mya found it hard to believe. She knew her grandmother’s name was Teresa and that she had married an American soldier, but Adella believed her father had abandoned her.

How sad, Mya thought, and how different their lives might have been if it weren’t for Flora.

Rich fingered the comb he had so long ago given to his new bride. *Damn you, Flora! Where was Father Miguel?*

He would never know about the doomed letter Father Miguel had written with the name of the orphanage where the priest had placed his daughter. Melanie had come into the office early that morning and was sorting through the mail when she came across Father Miguel’s letter. Despite knowing it was personal, she opened it. Her mouth dropped. *Your daughter needs you.*

She remembered when Rich returned from the Philippines two years prior, devastated by the news of his daughter’s death. It consumed him, and she had little chance of getting his attention. Lately, Melanie sensed that he was trusting her more and might be open to a relationship. She had no intention of letting anything stand in her way of the prize. *He thinks his daughter is dead—let her stay that way!* Melanie promptly destroyed the letter.

Turning the comb over in his hand, Rich was lost in thought of “what might have been” when a noise startled him. “Huh?”

“I said, what is that?” Sean, Chad’s great-grandson, had brought him a gym bag with a fresh set of clothes.

Rich looked up. “This is my life.” He told his young friend about his unexpected encounter.

“Come on, Poppy,” Sean argued. “What do you know about this girl? You’re way too trustful.”

“No doubt, she’s my great-granddaughter,” Rich insisted.

“Your daughter died at birth. Remember? This girl can’t be related to you.” Sean did not want to see Poppy disappointed. “If you insist on this line of thinking, let me hire a private detective before taking this any further.”

Rich dismissed the notion with a flick of his hand.

“I’m not taking ‘no’ for an answer.”

“Do whatever you need to in order to be comfortable. I already know the truth.” Rich dismissed Sean’s suspicions. He knew what Flora had been capable of.

The young man left the bag of clothes with Rich. “I’ll pick you up in the morning after your test,” he said as he left. Maybe his great-grandfather would be able to sort this out.

“Good morning, Mr. Manners,” April greeted as she entered his room the next morning.

“You’re going to have to stop calling me Mr. Manners—I’m your great-grandfather, remember?”

“Well, what do you want me to call you? Your Greatness?” she teased.

“Oh, I don’t know.” Rich hesitated. “How about Poppy? That’s what everyone I love calls me.”

April thought a second, then smiled. “I like that.”

They talked for a few minutes about how his story matched up with Mya’s account and about her reaction to her newfound grandfather.

“I think it’s your daughter you are going to have problems with. She thinks you abandoned her.”

Rich thought back to that day and Flora’s words. *How could I have been so naïve to let her manipulate me like that?*

April returned to her duties, promising to see Rich before he left. When she returned, April overheard the young man whose back was to her.

“He’ll find out everything you need to know about this girl and her family,” he said, turning Teresa’s comb over in his hands, scrutinizing it.

Rich looked up, and upon seeing his nurse, smiled. “April!”

April walked up to his visitor and took Teresa’s comb from Sean’s hands. “I believe that’s mine,” she said curtly. She then anchored it in her hair as the young man looked on helplessly.

His reaction wasn’t different from any other man who came across April. Her almond-shaped blue eyes, bordered by long lashes and offset by thick, black hair, which she wore pulled back in a twist, left him spellbound. He was at a loss for words.

Amused by his sudden silence, Rich made the introduction. “Sean, I want you to meet my great-granddaughter.” He looked at April and explained. “He is the great-grandson of my dearest friend.”

She was still annoyed at what she had overheard and was not impressed.

“*Poppy*,” she stressed for the young man’s benefit, “are you ready to go now? I’ll wheel you out.”

He slid into the wheelchair she had bought with her.

April turned to Sean. “Why don’t you get the car? We’ll be down in a minute.”

Sean looked over at Rich, who nodded. Irritated by her brusque attitude and sorry that she had overheard him—and thought the worst of him—Sean left without a word.

“You weren’t very nice,” Rich observed.

“He deserved it,” she said, defending herself.

Rich was in agreement. Trust did not come easy to Sean, and he made it clear that he was not going to let this girl take advantage of his family’s close friend.

“No. He’s right,” she admitted. “Before this goes any further, I also want to be certain before I tell my grandmother about you. I do not want her emotional over a coincidence.”

Rich knew it was a matter of formality, but he acquiesced. “In the meantime, how about I take you and Mya out for lunch? I would like to meet my granddaughter.”

The next day, April and her mother met with Rich at a local café for brunch. After a brief conversation, Rich pulled out his wallet and took out the picture he had taken of Teresa.

Mya became teary-eyed. “She looks a lot like my mother when she was younger.”

“Mom, remember? We’re going to wait until the detective finishes his report.”

Mya nodded. “Of course.”

Meanwhile, in Los Angeles, Angelina answered the knock at her door. “Yes?”

The detective, Robert Lowry, introduced himself and told her of Rich’s search for his long-lost family. It had been twenty years, and she was anxious to hear about her family, so she invited him in.

As he entered, the hallway wall was dedicated to annual school photos of Ernie and home photos of him and his friends. Robert studied the pictures.

“My son,” she answered his unasked question.

The detective followed her into the living room.

“Please, sit.” Angelina indicated with her hand, then sat opposite him, eager for news of her family.

After Robert told her all that he had found, he sat while she told her story of the war in the Philippines, her mother’s failure to accept Ernie, and her decision to immigrate to America, where she and her half-Japanese son would not be judged.

She closed her eyes, remembering her voyage to the US and the friends she made along the way.

Chapter 34

ANGELINA'S STORY (1948-1965)

At the port in Manila, Angelina fought her way up the plank on the ship bound for America. There was no one to see her and Ernie off.

Aboard the ship, Angelina was surrounded by Filipino women—young mothers and brides lucky enough to have captured the heart of an American soldier. There was much chatter and giggling among the girls. A post-war hysteria left the women void of any empathy. The hollow was filled with a sense of smugness as a result of the flip-flop in their circumstance. They clung to each other for moral support and assurance that the bandage over the wounds they suffered during the conflict would not suddenly rip open, exposing their vulnerability.

One look at Ernie, and there was no mistaking his Japanese heritage. He was a reminder of *whence upon a time*. To feed their underlying suspicions, the group began to speculate. Gossip was brutal—Angelina was consort to a Japanese general, she was a spy for the enemy, she dined on meat and fruit while her countrymen starved...

Both mother and child were shunned.

The gossip was not so much malicious on the part of the women, but rather, it served their need for social bonding and as a target to vent their anxiety. Their target's sordid past exonerated them of survivor's guilt and gave them a sense of impunity.

At dinner, Angelina sat at the end of a long table with Ernie. The women and their children lined both sides, spacing themselves far from the traitor and her telltale son.

The shunned woman promised herself that she would never let anything happen to her innocent baby. Isolated, she questioned her decision to leave. The poor girl grabbed at Ernie's outstretched hands and kissed them. "Nobody's going to hurt you," she whispered.

That evening, with no land in sight, Angelina stood with Ernie on deck. She watched the sea and occasional white caps surrender to the threatening abyss.

"What a sweet baby boy."

Startled, she turned and faced a towering redhead with freckles across her nose. Her untamed hair was pulled back from her face and danced wildly in the wind. With her hand shielding the setting sun from her eyes, the stranger introduced herself. "My name is Nancy."

Overprotective, Angelina picked Ernie up and held him close to her. She had a difficult time separating her own unspeakable experience from her fears for her child's safety.

Nancy recognized the young mother's hesitancy and backed up a step. She looked over at the group of gossiping women and frowned. "Don't let them bother you."

The intruder was standing next to them, silently looking out at sea, when Ernie reached past his mother in an attempt to grab hold of the stranger's unruly red hair.

Nancy smiled. "You have the most beautiful and sweet baby boy," she said as she bent over and tweaked Ernie's nose.

He giggled and grabbed at her hair again.

That bought a smile to his mother's face. "I'm Angelina."

"And the little guy?"

"Ernie."

The stranger was from Los Angeles, and was the daughter of college professors. Her father taught history, and her mother sociology. After receiving her degree in philosophy from UCLA, Nancy had joined the teaching staff at Seattle Pacific College in the Philippines. She loved the idea of traveling to faraway places and immersing herself in the local culture.

Less than a year after her arrival, though, the Japanese invaded the island. Nancy was on a week-long sabbatical hiking in the dense forests of the island with Lani and Elm children of a Filipino educator she had befriended. They knew something was amiss when they heard planes overhead. Elm recognized the aircraft as Japanese.

Not knowing what was happening but sensing it was not good, they cut their adventure short and headed cautiously homeward. That night, they set up camp near a small stream. They were awakened in the early morning hours by screaming. Quietly, the trio had peeked behind the thicket toward the screams. They saw a woman naked on the ground, struggling in terror as she was being raped. Bodies of several children and a male adult lay beheaded. The screaming suddenly ceased when the accosting Japanese soldier slashed his victim's throat with his bayonet.

Lani put her hand over Nancy's mouth to muffle her scream. Shaking, they backed from the horror they had just witnessed. The bloody scene left them speechless as they cautiously made their way through the forest. When they reached their home, they were met by Lani's father. "You are not safe here," he warned Nancy. The day after the invasion, all US citizens had been quickly evacuated, but Nancy was left behind.

The teacher led the stranded girl to a nearby abandoned cave. The next eighteen months were filled with fear as the young refugee, imprisoned for her own protection, heard and saw nothing of the outside world except for news from her protectors. As the year progressed, food became scarce. Elm had joined the resistance fighters. Lani and her father visited when it was safe and shared what little food they had.

Their worst fears were realized when Nancy heard yelling and heavy footsteps. She backed against the wall as the Japanese soldiers broke through the entrance of the cave. She was punched across the jaw for resisting and dragged outside, where she saw Lani crying hysterically—her friend had been forced to watch as her father was beheaded just a few feet from where the poor girl stood.

Lani was thrown in a transport truck headed for Mandaluyong, just outside Manila, where the Women's Correctional Institution was housed. Nancy was taken to the University of Santo Tomas, which was converted into an internment camp for prisoners of war, and where sixty-four American Army and eleven Navy nurses were being held. To ease her mind regarding the fate of her friend and the brutality she had witnessed, Nancy kept busy as a volunteer at the make-shift hospital. For the next two years, she witnessed war-begotten atrocities and faced starvation and the threat of falling prey to the many diseases that ravished her weakened immune system.

When the Philippines was liberated from Japanese control in 1945, Nancy was repatriated, along with the seventy-seven nurses with whom she had formed an attachment. The nurses were not given the downtime needed to restore their mental health. They were interviewed as war heroes, paraded in front of large crowds of well-wishers, and sat photo ops with movie stars. While they were sought after as celebrities, Nancy faded into the safety net of obscurity. Surrounded by family and friends, she was able to recover from the emotional trauma she had endured, but thoughts of Lani and Elm haunted her.

With the help of the Red Cross, she learned that Lani had survived her ordeal. The two friends reconnected with letters. Her years as a prisoner of war left Lani on the brink of starvation, which affected her overall health.

Nancy was now returning home after spending a month at her friend's bedside, where she died of consumption.

The war had left both women shattered. For the rest of the voyage, Nancy and Angelina kept each other company, exchanging stories. Together, they cried, laughed, played games, and sang songs with little Ernie.

When the ship docked, they were greeted by Nancy's parents. After hearing that she had arranged temporary lodging in a nearby hotel, they insisted, "You and Ernie are coming home with us."

Angelina's eyes teared over as she followed her new friends to their home in Los Angeles. She was not alone anymore. They had insisted that she stay with them while she acclimated to her new environment.

During the war, the Los Angeles Port of Embarkation shipped more than 700,000 troops and sailors abroad to battle zones. At the end of the war, the port saw a final surge of activity as troops began returning home in large numbers. Many of the returning soldiers and sailors opted to stay in Los Angeles with their Filipino wives. Although there were pockets of racial tension and prejudice, many of the city residents viewed Filipinos as loyal allies in the war. As a result, Angelina found acceptance in the community. The large Filipino population, along with Filipino churches and family-owned businesses, gave her a sense of belonging.

Nancy and her parents became close friends. Nancy taught her to drive. Her parents tutored Angelina for the entrance exam to UCLA, and they helped her find a home outside the UCLA campus, where she took up courses in psychology and eventually earned her degree. After earning a doctorate, she was accepted as a professor of psychology at her alma mater.

Angelina's priority was to create a loving and stable home environment for her son. She channeled her energy into shielding Ernie from negative influences and providing him with a sense of security and stability. Ernie went to parochial school where he excelled. When he graduated from high school, Angelina, Nancy, and her parents sat proudly as the young man gave his Valedictorian speech.

Angelina's eyes teared as she recalled the day her son left home for the first time. He had been accepted at the University of California in San Francisco. Although it was only a six hour road trip, it might as well have been on the other side of the world.

Robert's concerned voice pulled Angelina from her thoughts. "I've stirred up a lot of memories today. I'm sorry if they upset you." He reached over and touched her shoulder. "Are you okay?"

Angelina nodded with a smile. He seemed genuinely concerned.

Robert looked at his watch and rose. "It's getting late. I'm sorry to have taken up so much of your time."

Angelina followed him to the door. Outside, he hesitated and turned to face his hostess. "I haven't eaten, and I know you haven't either. Let me take you out to dinner."

Angelina's life was Ernie and her teaching at UCLA. Ernie had just finished medical school and was starting his residency. Until this very moment, she hadn't realized she was lonely.

"I'll get my coat."

Chapter 35

KARMA (1965)

Making up for lost time, Rich talked to his granddaughter and April on a regular basis. A month had passed when Mya received the phone call they were all waiting for. April was at work.

“Good news, Mya. It’s just as I said.” Rich paused a moment and choked back tears. He had not expected this happy moment would bring to surface the loss that he had endured. It was bittersweet.

Mya had gotten to know the man and was thrilled to find out he was, indeed, her grandfather. Unlike Rich, who had been haunted by “what ifs,” she had never entertained the thought of a grandfather, and the news was pure joy.

“I would like to see all of the family. Do you think you might be able to get Matilda to come?”

Up to this point, Rich had yet to meet Mya’s younger daughter.

That weekend, Mya and her girls met at Rich’s house. There was so much happiness as they spent time getting to know the oldest, newest member of the family. The doorbell interrupted their reunion.

April opened the door to find Sean, who stood speechless in the doorway. “Let me guess,” she said in a sarcastic voice. “You’re his bodyguard now?”

“Be nice,” Rich scolded his granddaughter as he walked past her and opened the door wide, ushering in Sean and another visitor. “I have a surprise for you, Mya.”

“Angelina!” Mya jumped up and ran to her sister in tears.

After hugs and kisses and introductions, they settled down.

“You still look the same. I’d know you anywhere!” Mya said.

When Rich had found out she was living in Los Angeles, he’d had Angelina flown in for the reunion. He listened as his two granddaughters chatted about their memories. They laughed. They cried. Angelina filled them in on the last twenty years of her life in Los Angeles.

When Mya asked about Ernie, Angelina told her that he had just started his residency at the University of California San Francisco School of Medicine and couldn’t make the trip.

“Here, I have pictures of him.” She pulled out a small album from the oversized purse she had bought with her for the reunion.

Mya thumbed through the album with Rich looking over her shoulder.

When she came to a picture of Angelina with an older man holding Ernie, Rich was dumbfounded. “That’s Ernesto!” He pointed to the photo they had taken with Ernesto before Angelina left for the US.

Angelina was puzzled. “How do *you* know his name?”

The room grew quiet.

“My sweet girl, that is your great-uncle—he was Teresa’s brother.”

Tears overflowed Angelina's eyes. "My uncle?"

For the first time, Angelina told her family about how Ernesto had saved her. In Los Angeles, she headed up a small rape crisis group and was used to telling her story, but this audience was different. It was personal and cathartic. Everyone was reduced to tears at the thought that Ernesto would never know that he had saved Teresa's granddaughter—his great-niece.

Angelina reached over and touched Rich's hand. "Thank you—for my uncle." She looked back at her sister. "You would have loved him."

Grateful, April turned to Sean, who was standing there looking on. "Thank you for bringing Angelina to us."

Embarrassed about taking credit, Sean confessed, "It wasn't my idea. Thank Rich."

April misunderstood his attitude and shrugged him off. She was annoyed by his lack of empathy.

Sean sensed her irritation. "That didn't come out right," he admitted.

"You're right on that one." April turned her attention back to the group.

"Listen up," Rich called for their attention. "Let's pick a date when you all can get away. I'll charter a plane to take us to the Philippines. I want to finally get to hug my daughter."

Nearing the end of the sixteen-hour flight from Los Angeles, the passengers looked out the window of the plane and down at the blue-green paisley swirl of islands and water. The flight attendant's voice faded as each drifted into their own thoughts.

Mya hadn't slept during the flight. Although she kept up with her mother via post three or four times a year, it had been twenty long years since she had seen her family. Her stomach flip-flopped at the thought of seeing them again.

April and Matilda were both happy for their mother. They had no memory of their early years on the island and were content to just get off the plane.

Angelina choked back tears. Ernie had felt it best that he did not go, instead giving his mother and grandmother time to heal. Angelina was proud of her son and wished he was with them.

Rich looked around at his girls. He remembered the old jeweler—"*Give this comb to your true love, and should you ever be separated, it will always lead her back to you.*"

While a lot had happened over the past few months, a lot would never change.

Sean was there to support his friend. Growing up, Rich had always been there for him, and Sean was not about to let him make this trip alone.

Adella and Mateo, and another dozen family members, waited anxiously as the plane taxied to a stop.

Mya was taken aback at how old her parents looked. Adella's black hair was now gray, as was Mateo's, whose gait was slower. There were tears and loud wailing as Mya and her daughters were enveloped by her awaiting family.

Adella couldn't control her emotions when she saw Angelina. She held tightly to her daughter, sobbing uncontrollably.

Rich stood by with Sean and watched.

Once the excitement of the reunion had quieted, Mya took Rich's arm and led him to Adella. "Poppy, this is your daughter."

Everyone fell silent as the two gave each other a compulsory hug.

Adella was stand-offish. She believed that he hadn't tried hard enough to find her. *If he really wanted to, he would have found me*, she reasoned.

Rich, who had found it easy to bond with Mya and her daughters and Angelina and Ernie, had difficulty imagining this grown woman as his and Teresa's child.

The group gathered at a hotel in Manila. They spent the next day getting to know one another again, swapping photos, taking photos, and telling stories. There was much laughter, and an occasional tear was spent.

Rich had promised Angelina a trip to Guimaras. While there, he suggested crossing the strait to Iloilo so he could show the girls where Teresa had lived. He invited Adella along.

While the small group toured the hacienda on Guimaras, Angelina took Adella aside and told her story about Ernesto, who had saved her and Ernie.

Adella cried. She could not be more remorseful for the way she had treated Angelina's innocent son. For the first time, she asked about Ernie.

The group kept a respectful distance while the two reconnected.

On Iloilo, the mansion was within walking distance from the shore. Sean was concerned for Rich in the tropical heat and handed him a bottle of water.

"I'm not going to let anything happen to him," April reproached him, miffed at herself for not thinking to bring along a bottle of water.

Sean shrugged. "I'm sure you won't."

April chastised herself. *Why do I feel like I have to compete with Sean for Rich's attention? After all, I am his great-granddaughter.*

When the group approached the courtyard, they found the mansion abandoned in disrepair, the windows boarded up.

Adella shivered, remembering Flora and the first eight years of her life.

The group fell silent as Rich climbed the rickety steps to the door of the mansion and looked sadly around.

On his way back, Adella watched Rich stop at a nearby sampaguita bush and pluck two white flowers. Her memory of the blanco she saw years ago came rushing back. *He did come for me!*

“Papa!” She ran up to Rich, crying, threw her arms around him, and held him tightly. “You did come for me. I saw you.”

On the plane home, Sean and Matilda went over some of the photos they had taken. April looked on wistfully. Their conversation was easy and their laughter contagious as they passed a few notable ones to Mya, who passed them to Rich. April was jealous of her sister’s easygoing nature.

Sean looked over at April. Afraid he would see her as vulnerable, she fluffed her pillow, buried her head, and closed her eyes. It was going to be a long flight.

Ernie, a favorite of his cousins, was waiting for them when the plane landed in Los Angeles. He was tall and fair like Rich. A strong jaw line anchored his elongated face, and above his thin, straight nose peered almond-shaped eyes that slanted upwards. Ernie was quick-witted and fun to be around. The young man was eager to hear about the reunion.

When Angelina told him his grandmother had asked about him, Ernie tapped her shoulder lightly. “See? I told you she would come around.”

Once in the van, Ernie announced, “Robert has a reservation at Salt’s for brunch. I hope everybody’s hungry. I’m starved.”

Ernie liked having Robert around. He made his mother smile—a lot! Angelina looked forward to talking with her sister on the phone about their dates. If any of the family called and Robert was present, he would always say hi. When the small group arrived, Robert held out his hand to Angelina. “Tell me everything.” The man wasn’t particularly handsome, of average height and thinning brown hair, and atop his aquiline nose rested a pair of rectangular, tortoise-colored glasses. But Angelina loved his energy, his kindness, and his non-judgmental attitude.

After brunch, and later, a light dinner. The weary travelers spent the night at Angelina’s home before boarding a plane to Oklahoma the next day.

Once home, Sean confessed to Rich that he hadn’t been able to connect with April.

Rich smiled. “I noticed the tension between you two. You like her, don’t you?”

“Doesn’t matter. I don’t think she has a very good opinion of me,” he lamented. “I open my mouth, and nothing I say comes out right. I feel so stupid.”

“I was like that.” Rich smiled, remembering his first encounter with Teresa’s father. “Stupid is better than nothing. Why don’t you ask her out for dinner? That way, you can get to know each other.”

Sean shook his head slowly. “I doubt she’ll go out with me.”

“Let’s put it this way,” Rich reasoned. “I’m a hundred percent sure she won’t go out with you if you don’t ask.”

Of course, Poppy was right. *But how was he to get in touch with her?* April had had no reason to give Sean her phone number, and it would appear presumptuous of him to ask Rich. He was hesitant to knock on her door. Her mother or sister might answer. There was only one alternative left.

April, you have a visitor, Deanna announced, then looked askew at the unexpected caller. As unit clerk, it was her job to stay on top of the latest gossip in their hospital wing. Until now, April had managed to escape her scrutiny.

“What are you doing here?” April asked, surprised to see Sean at her workplace.

“Can we go somewhere to talk?” He felt uncomfortable around the small audience that had gathered.

April nodded. She was annoyed by her coworkers, who assumed that she was in a romantic relationship with the handsome young man. Sean had timed his visit with the end of her shift, which April was happy to take advantage of. “Wait here while I get my purse and car keys.”

He waited under the watchful eyes of her friends, who appeared amused at his discomfort. When she returned, Sean followed her into an empty elevator.

“So, what is it we *need* to talk about?” she asked.

Nervously, he chewed on the side of his mouth. April had put him on the defensive.

The uncooperative woman reached past him to push the elevator button to the lobby. The door closed.

“I didn’t mean we *needed* to talk,” he confessed with an exasperated sigh. “You always misunderstand what I say.”

“Well, that’s a good way to start a conversation,” she snapped, looking directly at him.

He appeared vulnerable, and April immediately regretted her curtness.

The door opened. She slowed as he followed her toward the parking lot.

Sean took a deep breath. It was now or never. “I’d like to start over again. Do you want to go out with me?” He winced. That hadn’t come out the way he wanted it to, either.

She stopped suddenly and turned. “And why would I want to go out with you?”

Now face to face, he hesitated. “To watch me grovel?”

April grinned and bit her lower lip in a flirtatious manner. “That, I would enjoy.”

“Great!” Relieved, Sean headed up the opposite ramp towards his car.

“Sean!” April yelled.

The poor man stopped. *Has she changed her mind?* He turned.

“When?”

“Huh?”

“You just asked me out! When?”

“Are you hungry?” the emboldened suitor asked.

April nodded.

“Then, how about now?”

Sean couldn't believe how easy it was to talk to April. They laughed and reminisced. He told her how Rich and his great-grandfather had taken him under their wings at an early age. His grandfather was now CEO of the family business, and his own father pursued other interests. Disappointed, Chad and Rich had designated Sean their prodigy, grooming him to eventually take over the family business.

April confessed how much Rich meant to her family. This was the first time she had seen her mother happy since her father's death four years ago.

When they were done eating, he followed her home in his car. It was late, and April was still in her white uniform when he walked her to the door.

“Let's do this again,” he said.

“When?”

“Is tomorrow too soon?”

“It's a date! I have the weekend off.” April couldn't believe how eager she sounded.

Sean smiled. “Great! I'll pick you up for breakfast. And later, if you're free for lunch. How about dinner?”

Eight months later, Rich walked in on Sean pacing his living room floor.

“When did you know Teresa was the one?” Sean asked his friend.

“It was love at first sight.” Rich looked at his prodigy and smiled knowingly. “I hoped you would eventually figure out what most of us have known all along—you love her.” There was no mistaking that they were talking about April.

“I do. And I want to marry her,” Sean admitted.

Rich was congratulating him when Chad entered the room. “What did I miss?”

“Your great-grandson wants to marry my great-granddaughter!”

Chad pulled a twenty-dollar bill from his pocket and handed it to Rich while Sean looked on with a puzzled look. “Rich bet me twenty dollars that you would ask for April's hand within the year,” his great-grandfather confessed.

Sean just shook his head. He couldn't even be mad about that one.

Sean was nervous when he entered the jewelry shop accompanied by Chad and Rich. The manager looked on as the two older men argued over which ring best suited April. Sean ignored

their bickering and picked out one neither had championed. In the end, they all agreed it was perfect.

That weekend, Sean paced while “the greats” offered their advice freely.

“Get down on one knee,” Chad suggested.

Sean voiced his doubts.

Rich agreed with his longtime friend. “Trust us. Girls like that.”

The young man wasn’t so sure.

Sean picked April up at the airport. She had been in Los Angeles visiting Angelina and Ernie. Though she’d had a great time, she had missed him and was happy to be back. Sean barely heard her as she chatted away while they waited for her luggage.

April noticed he was distracted. “What’s wrong? You’re awfully quiet.”

“I missed you terribly,” he confessed.

April pulled him to her and kissed him passionately. “I missed you too.”

Sean hesitated, then got down on one knee right in the middle of the airport. “Will you marry me?”

He hadn’t planned on asking her there, and he didn’t even have the ring. But he truly missed her and was overcome by her reception. Travelers around them shifted their gaze from the luggage carousel to the young lovers.

April grabbed the poor man by the arm and dragged him away from the prying eyes. She couldn’t believe what had just happened. “*What* are you doing?” she scolded. “What if I had said no in front of all those people? You would have been humiliated!”

“Is that a yes?” he asked hopefully.

She pulled him further around the corner from the few eavesdroppers left. She looked directly into his eyes and, without a word, reached up around his neck and kissed him long and passionately. “That’s a yes.”

Six months later, Chad’s great-grandson and Rich’s great-granddaughter were married.

When it came time for her vows, April took a deep breath and looked into her groom’s eyes. “My dearest Sean,” she began. She spoke from the heart, telling her soon-to-be husband and all their witnesses just how much she loved him, how much better her world was with him in it. Before she wrapped up, she squeezed his hands. “Your great-grandfather stood next to my great-grandfather over fifty years ago when he married Teresa.”

Her eyes teared as she looked over and nodded at the two friends sitting in the front pew. “You were witness to our beginning.”

Her eyes then locked on Sean’s for confirmation. “We were meant to be.”

EPILOGUE

A year and a half after their wedding, April and Sean announced the birth of their baby girl, Teresa. Rich doted on Teresa's namesake. When she could walk, he would take Teresa out to see the birds. "Who loves you?"

The little girl would always reply, "Poppy loves me."

He would smile and pinch her cheek. "And don't you forget it."

When she was three, he dropped his spoon.

"That's dirty." She picked it up from the floor, put it in the sink, and then returned with a clean one.

She would remind him to wear a sweater when it was chilly outside and not go outside in the rain. "You'll catch a cold."

He soon started calling her "Miss Manners."

A few years later, April had just picked Teresa up from kindergarten when she heard the phone ringing as she entered the house. It was Sean.

"It's Poppy. Meet me at the hospital."

When she arrived with Teresa in tow, she saw him talking to the doctor. His eyes were red from crying. Rich had suffered a major stroke, and he was unresponsive.

April entered the room and saw her mother holding his hand. Mya had promised Rich homemade chicken adobo that day. When she went to his house that afternoon, she had found him lying on the kitchen floor and called for an ambulance. The doctor thought he might have suffered a stroke early that morning.

"Mama, you're tired. Go home. Sean and I will stay." April hugged her mother.

Teresa climbed up on the bed and snuggled close to Poppy before falling asleep while her parents sat vigil.

It was late when the doctor poked his head into the room. Sean watched over his daughter while April left to talk with the doctor.

When she returned, she took a deep breath, not wanting to speak the words. "There's nothing we can do," she whispered in a strained voice.

Sean put his arms around his wife. They were both heartbroken.

Hearing their whispers, Teresa woke.

"We're going home to get a good night's sleep so we can see Poppy in the morning," Sean whispered to his daughter.

Teresa looked over at her great-great-grandfather lying motionless on the hospital bed. "Poppy loves me."

"And don't you forget it," her father reminded her as he lifted her from the bed.

Halfway down the hall, April stopped. "Wait here," she instructed as she hurried back to Rich's room. April removed Teresa's comb from her hair, put it into Rich's hand, and wrapped his flaccid fingers around it. She bent down and kissed his forehead. "I love you, Poppy."

Sometime in the wee hours of the morning, Rich stirred to the sweet fragrance of sampaguitas flooding the room. The scent filled him with longing and hope.

He opened his eyes. “Teresa! It’s been a long time.”

She smiled lovingly at Rich. “It was only yesterday.”

In the dimly lit room, they watched silently as a figure in white materialized and approached the bed, lifting the covers. When the old jeweler found what he was looking for, he slipped Teresa’s comb into the deep pockets of his Heavenly robe. “Good job,” he whispered, then vanished, leaving them alone again.

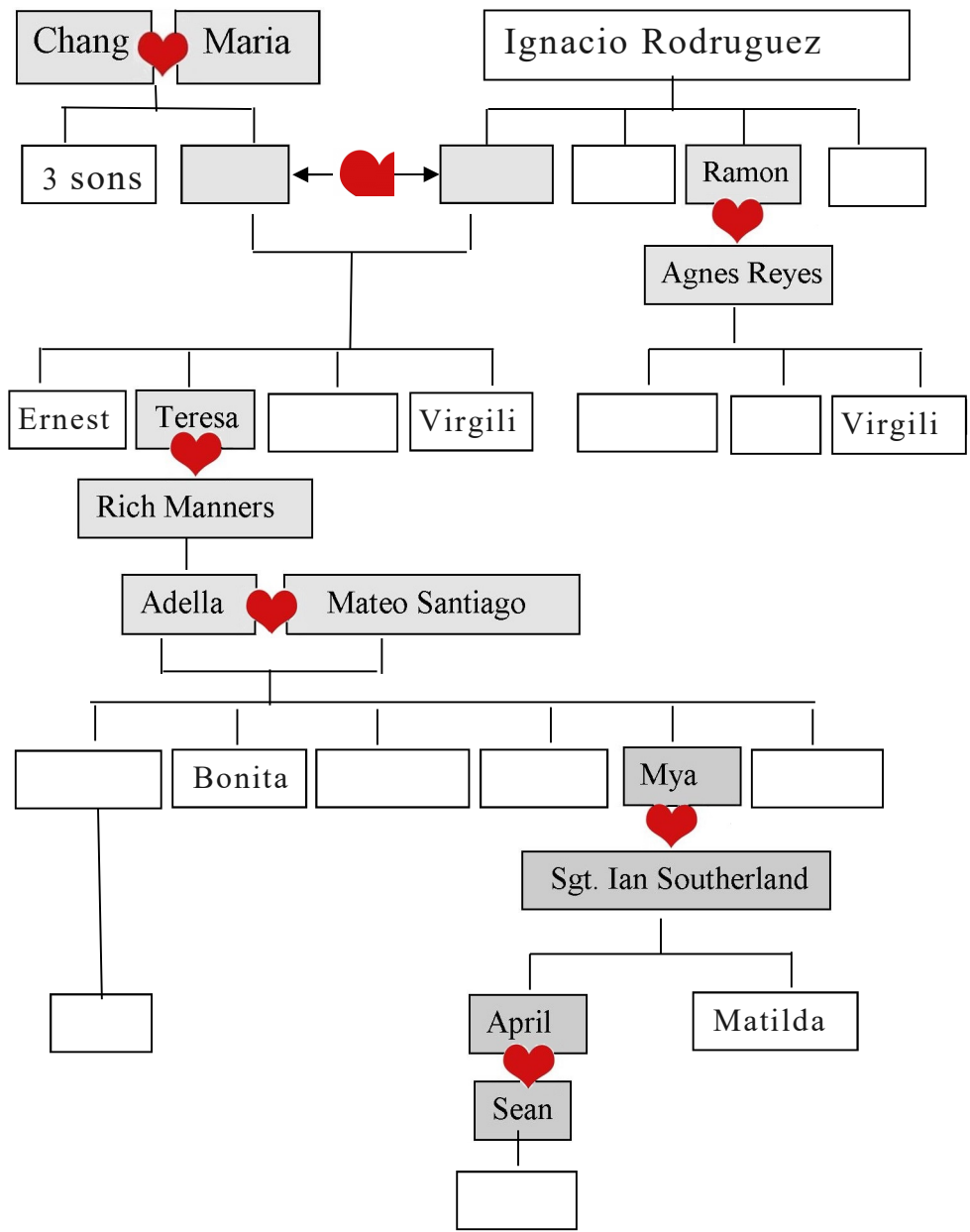
Time sped counterclockwise, rewinding at warp speed. In the end, Rich had no regrets—he was without pain and out of time.

“You ready?” his young bride asked.

Rich nodded.

Teresa bent over, kissed him on the lips, and transported him Home.

Chang/Rodruiguez Family Tree



 = married couple