

# Chapter

# One

“Hi, Emily!”  
Malawak na ngumiti si Emily at nilingon ang bumati sa kanya, si Jack. Pinsan ito ng classmate niyang si Therese at nakilala niya nang dumalo siya sa birthday party ng kaklase.

“Hi, Jack. Kumusta?” aniyang nilinga ang nakaparadang mga sasakyan sa di-kalayuan, hinahanap ang kotse ng ina. Araw-araw siya nitong sinusundo sa university.

“Ayos lang. Hinihintay ko si Therese, nagpapasundo ulit. Ikaw, kumusta?” tanong ng binatang hindi maalis-alis ang paningin sa kanya.

“Okay lang. Napapadalas yata ang pagsundo mo

kay Therese? Baka masanay siya, maging tagasundo ka na talaga,” biro niya.

“Yun na nga ang nangyayari. Pero ayos lang, araw-araw naman kitang makikita.”

Friendly siyang muling napangiti. Jack didn't look bad. May pagka-loner lang ang dating nito at kahit friendly ito sa kanya, alam niyang hindi ito komportable sa harap ng maraming tao.

“That's sweet, Jack,” sagot ni Emily at muling hinanap sa paligid ang kotse ng ina at nakita niya nga ito. But by the look on her mother's face, alam na niya kaagad na hindi ito masaya sa nakikita. And she knew exactly why. “Sige, Jack, mauna na ako. It's nice to see you... Palabas na rin si Therese.”

“Hey, sabay ka na lang sa amin. I'll take you home...” habol nito. There was an edge of desperation in his voice and she hated that she had to turn him down.

“I'm sorry, Mom's here. Siya ang sundo ko. But thanks for the offer...”

“Can I see you some time, at least? For a dinner maybe?”

She smiled politely. “Sure, I'll see you soon, okay? I need to go. 'Bye!” At tuluyan na siyang naglakad patungo sa kotse ng kanyang ina.

Alam ni Emily na hindi dapat siya umoo sa paanyaya ni Jack. Alam din niyang sa panliligaw mauuwi ang pag-aya nitong lumabas. But she just didn't have the heart to say no to him, lalo at alam niyang nag-ipon pa ito ng lakas ng loob para lang maaya siya. As far as she was concerned, Jack was a nice guy and she would love to have him as a friend.

“Who was that, Emily?” agad na bungad ng kanyang inang si Beth pagkapasok pa lamang niya sa sasakyan.

“Jack Ramirez, Mommy, pinsan ng classmate kong si Therese. Remember, I attended her birthday party last month?”

“So, why was he talking to you?” tanong uli nito matapos siyang halikan. “Anything of importance?”

Napailing siya. “Not really, sinusundo niya si Therese and he saw me so he said ‘hi’... and he asked me out.”

“And you said no, right?” mabilis nitong saad at minaniobra na ang sasakyan.

“I actually said yes, mukhang mabait naman siya.”

“Well, you'll have to cancel then,” balewalang pahayag nito at saglit siyang nilingon.

Napailing si Emily. “You can't protect me forever, Mom. Next week lang ay ga-graduate na ako. I will

have my own life and you should learn to let me make my own decisions.” Noon pa man ay overprotective na sa kanya ang ina. Sinisi niya iyon sa katotohanang mag-isa lang siya nitong pinalaki.

Anak siya ni Beth sa pagkadalaga at ni minsan ay hindi ito nagpakasal. At dahil doon ay buhos ang atensyon nito sa kanya. She was a stage mother. She would decide what Emily would wear everyday, made sure that her daughter was well and healthy. Ni hindi siya nito pinapayagang maglaro noon kahit sa bakuran nila sa takot na madapa siya, masugatan at magkapeklat.

“I think it’s time I tell you your future, Emily. I didn’t take care of you all throughout para lang hayaan kang gumawa ng maling desisyon pagdating ng panahon.”

Puzzled, she looked at her mother. “What do you mean?”

Muli ay saglit siya nitong pinasadahan ng tingin. “You’re meeting your fiancé tonight, Emily.”

Mataman niyang pinagmasdan ang ina na tutok na ang atensyon sa pagmamaneho. Hindi niya malaman kung matatawa o magagalit sa sinabi nito. Surely, Beth was kidding? Paanong bigla siyang nagkaroon ng fiancé gayong wala naman siyang boyfriend? She never

had a boyfriend, as a matter of fact. And that was because of her mother's disapproval of everyone.

"Can you say that again?"

"Your future has been decided the moment you were born. You're marrying my friend's son, Emily," walang anumang sagot ng nakatatandang babae.

Tuluyan nang napuno ng kaba ang kanyang dibdib. Deadpan ang mukha ng ina, wala siyang makitang rason para isiping nagbibiro ito.

"Mommy, I don't understand. Do you really think na papayag akong i-arrange ang buhay ko? You've been handling my life for as long as I can remember and it's not fair that you're trying to manipulate my future as well," mahinahon niyang saad.

Ni hindi niya napansing nakapasok na sa garahe ng kanilang bahay ang sasakyan nito. Beth didn't even answer her. Lumabas lang ito sa kotse at nagpatiuna na sa loob ng bahay.

"Mommy!" tawag niya rito at mabilis na sumunod. Naabutan niya ang inang kakaupo lang sa sofa.

"Kung sinabi ko ito sa 'yo noon, malamang ay nagrebelde ka na. At alam mong iyan ang huling bagay na gusto kong gawin mo."

"So, what now, Mom? I-expect mo na basta na lang akong susunod sa sasabihin mo? That I'll marry your

friend's son without a word?"

"Yes, because you are my daughter at pinalaki kita bilang masunuring bata. And I cannot be more proud of what you have become, Emily... You'll make a fabulous wife."

Pilit kinakalma ang sariling napabuga ng hangin ang dalaga. "Are you really serious? I... I don't even know what to say. And... and who is your friend? Why don't I know her?"

"She was my best friend until she married Raul, the only man I've ever loved. Raul was my boyfriend, and one day, Amanda came to me and confessed that she was pregnant with his child." The story sounded so ridiculously short considering the information inside it.

"S-so why do you want me to marry their son? You must hate them."

"I do," matigas nitong sagot, kita sa mga mata ang sakit na kahit minsan ay hindi niya nakita sa ina. "But my feelings don't matter, all that matters is *you*." Nilingon siya nito at iminuwestra na tumabi siya rito.

Emily slowly sat beside her.

"You see, Emily, Raul is a wealthy man. His family has always been rich. At alam mong walang sinabi ang mga magulang ko. Raul was perfect for me. He

is handsome, rich and I love him with all my heart.

My future was bright and I have imagined my perfect family with him. He could have been your father, Emily. At hindi sana tayo nakatira sa bahay na 'to. Hindi sana ako nagpapakaalipin sa boss ko."

"Mommy, maganda naman ang bahay natin..." She was saying the truth. It was a three-bedroom house at napakalaki niyon para sa kanilang dalawa ng ina. Even with their househelp around, kakalog-kalog pa rin sila sa bahay. And her mother's job wasn't bad, either. Secretary ito ni Alberto Choy, isang Chinese businessman na nagmamay-ari ng isang fastfood chain na sikat sa Maynila. So she didn't know what Beth was complaining about.

"Raul now owns the biggest software company in the Philippines, Emily. Well, his son does. They have transactions abroad as well and God knows how much they earn dito pa lang sa Pilipinas. Our house is nothing compared to Amanda's house. The life she's living now should've been mine and yours.

"I have been waiting all my life for this, Emily. And this is all for you." Sa pagkakataong ito, nanlambong ang mga mata ng nakatatandang babae at walang babalang umapaw ang awa sa kanyang puso.

Her mother had always been a strong woman.

At bilang lang sa kanyang mga daliri ang mga pagkakataong nakita niya itong mahina. And it wasn't a pleasant sight for her.

“So, ano ang mangyayari kapag nakasal kami?”

“Brandon is an only child. Siya ang ipinagbubuntis noon ni Amanda nang aminin niya sa akin ang lihim nilang relasyon ni Raul. So, si Brandon lang ang nag-iisang tagapagmana ng lahat ng pag-aari nila. Once you're married to him, you'll also be entitled to everything that Brandon has. At iyon lang ang gusto ko.

“Amanda is a sly woman. Noon pa man ay alam ko nang naiinggit siya sa relasyon namin ni Raul. She was really jealous dahil alam niya kung gaano ito kayaman. At dahil pareho kaming walang sinabi sa buhay, gusto niya akong malamangan. And she won. Inagaw niya ang buhay na dapat sana ay para sa naging anak namin ni Raul. And that would have been you,” mahabang paliwanag ni Beth.

“But I don't want any of their wealth. Mommy, masaya na ako sa kung ano ang meron tayo ngayon,” tangka niyang paliwanag.

“We have nothing, Emily! Lumaki kang nakukuha lahat ng gusto mo hindi dahil may pera tayo, kundi dahil sinikap kong ibigay iyon kahit magmakaawa na



ako sa panghihiram ng pera. I did my best to provide for everything you need because I know you deserve the best. You are my motivation. Kung hindi ko inisip ang kapakanan mo, matagal na tayong nalugmok sa utang. I've done things that I'm ashamed of even thinking of para sa 'yo, para maging komportable ka."

"You've been borrowing money?" hindi makapaniwala niyang anas. Never in her wildest dream had she thought that her mother had been silently borrowing money just for her.

"So now it's your turn to look after yourself," pagbalewala nito sa kanyang sinabi. "And the best way to do that is to do as I say. Marry Brandon Martinez, Emily..."

Ilang ulit siyang huminga nang maluwa bago lito pa ring hinarap ang ina. "At paano n'yo naisip na gugustuhin niya akong pakasalan?"

"It's a promise Amanda made. Raul knows it, too. They promised they'd make sure you kids end up with each other the moment you were born. Naroon sila sa ospital nang ipinanganak kita. Amanda found you so beautiful, naipangako niyang kung gugustuhin ko ay ipapakasal niya si Brandon sa iyo pagdating ng panahon..."

"You see, I didn't even like your father, Emily. Mula

noong naghiwalay kami ni Raul ay pinabayaan ko ang sarili ko. I dated men that I didn't even like hanggang sa mabuntis ako. That was my wake-up call, I thought it wasn't fair for you. Hindi mo kasalanan ang mga nangyari sa akin at hindi ka dapat magdusa dahil doon.

“Kaya pinangako ko sa sarili ko na hinding-hindi na ako titingin pa sa ibang lalaki, I wanted to dedicate my life to you. Kaya nang sinabi iyon ni Amanda, I thought it was a sure way to secure your future. So I agreed. And even though I hated them,” tumiimbagang ito, “I went on pretending like everything was okay, para lang hindi nila makalimutan ang ipinangako nila noong ipinanganak ka.”

“Mommy...” She was speechless.

“You are the love of my life, Emily, and I want the best for you.”

Her defenses were melting, pero may biglang pumasok sa isip niya na nagpakabog sa kanyang dibdib. “May pinaplano ka bang gawin sa oras na magpakasal nga ako?”

Umiling-iling si Beth. “No, I still hate them but our story is over. This is all about you... Gusto kong makitang namumuhay ka nang masaya, masagana. I don't ever want you to experience the hardship I've

been through, Emily. It will break my heart all over again.”

Emily sighed heavily. Ramdam niya ang katotohanan sa mga salita ng kanyang ina, at gusto niyang maiyak sa pagmamahal na hindi man nito maayos na naipapakita sa kanya ay halata namang nag-uumapaw sa puso nito.

Napayuko siya, tanda ng pagsuko. She could never resist her mother.

“Go to your room, my love. Inihanda ko na ang isusuot mong damit, nasa kama mo... Take a shower and tell me once you're dressed so I can do your hair. They will be here in about two hours,” anito at masuyo siyang hinalikan.

Tahimik siyang tumango. Tumayo na siya at nagtungo sa hagdanan. Hindi niya sigurado kung ano ang mararamdaman. Masyadong nakakabigla ang pangyayari para tuluyang ma-digest ng kanyang utak ang nalaman. Few moments ago, she had just said yes to going out with someone, and now she was about to meet the man she was supposed to spend the rest of her life with.

Brandon. Brandon Martinez. Of course she'd heard of him, pero ni minsan ay hindi pa niya ito nakita. Kilala lang niya ito dahil matunog ang

pangalan ng lalaki sa Internet world. He was a popular bachelor being the vice chairman of *Optimum*, ang pinakamalaking software company sa Pilipinas na nagde-develop at nagma-market ng mga software at hardware para sa mga computers. The quality stickers with *Optimum* logos could be found in most of the laptops, computers and all other devices. Nagpapatunay lamang iyon kung gaano ka-succesful ang kompanyang sinimulan ng ama nito.

But other than her brief knowledge of the company, she knew nothing else. At ang isipin pa lamang ang pagsuong niya sa mundo ng isang estranghero ay halos manghina na ang kanyang tuhod. But surely, her mother wouldn't push her into danger, would she?

Emily was confused. All she could do was hope that this Brandon Martinez would at least turn up to be a decent man.

