

ORANGE

(The Color of Sunset)

(Novel)

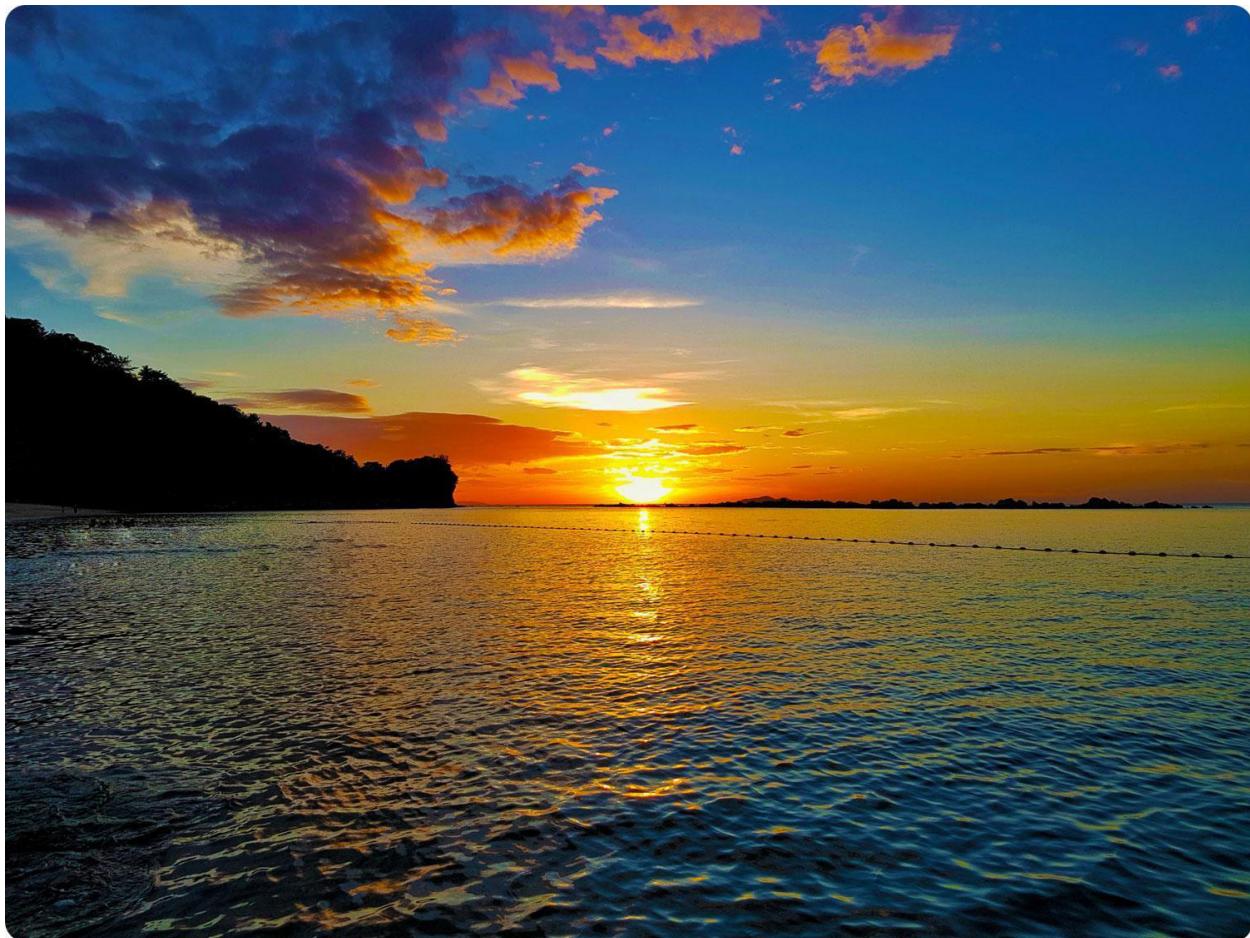
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Orange

The color of sunset.

One moment here, next moment gone. Just like that. Just like us.



DEDICATION

To my Dearest Friend.

See, I am listening!

And they are, too.

We love You.

.....

And to

Saint Therese of Lisieux

Thank you for showing us

The Little Way.

Synopsis

When Filipino American Cris and rural beauty Anna are drawn into a ten-day whirlwind romance, their short summer together unfolds as a love story for the Philippines, and years later, blossoms into a love story for God.

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PROLOGUE

The parking lot was empty on a Saturday; all the office folk weren't at work. She had this 'on-the-job-training' interview at the Orient Square in Ortigas, Manila, and I was picking her up. Her interview was done—thank god; I'd been waiting since forever—and we were making our way across the sandy, rock-strewn parking lot.

She was whining all over the place about the interview, telling me how the lady she talked to was ridiculously formal. "Hello? Just hire me?" she wanted to tell her. "You'll just make me gofer this and gofer that, make you coffee, and dump me away in some long-forgotten cubicle, just so I'd pass my practicum."

And then, she went on about this sale at the Shangri-La Mall. "It is *awesome*, honey! They're cleaning out their old footwear stock, so the prices are *so cheap*! We really, *really* have to go!"

Sure, it was a good deal—if you considered eight thousand bucks for these things you'd just *step on* as cheap. Not to mention that *whopping* fifteen percent discount, of course.

I was okay with hanging around the mall. But about *that* particular sale? Jesus, give me a break! That shop's been on sale for *months*! Clear the inventory whatever. I swear, my girlfriend was as gullible with all these sale stints like some kid who believed in some *midnight fairy* giving you money for all your dead teeth.

So we were walking across the parking lot when strong winds suddenly blew, making all the dirt around us fly into the air for several moments. When the whirlwind died, I put an arm around her waist and said, "That was pretty cool, huh?"

She straightened out her hair. "Cool? You mean, getting dirt in your face? That is so not cool, honey."

"No, I meant the whirlwind."

"What whirlwind?"

I rolled my eyes. "The one that just passed? All that stuff flying all over the place? Anyway, that got me thinking about love stories."

"*Love stories?* Like a whirlwind romance thing?"

"Well, yeah, but I have my own interpretation." I reached into my pocket for a cigarette. "You see, before you fall in love, you're like the leaves around this parking lot, worlds apart and all. And then, love happens, the whirlwind, and you're swept up from where you were. You're all caught up in the moment, your thoughts and emotions spinning around like mad! And when it ends, you settle back down to the real world. After that, you've got the memory of that whirlwind in your head. If you were a leaf in this parking lot, you'll remember that short span of time when you were—even for just a few seconds—closer to the skies."

What I said was *totally* poetic.

"But honey," she said, "short love's nothing but a fling-thing."

I frowned. "What about Romeo and Juliet? You'd call what they had some kind of one-night stand?"

She beamed. "You are *so* correct! They get married, and Romeo has sex with Juliet for just one night! The next day, she dies on him. So Romeo kills himself. And then, Juliet like, you know, dies again—this time for real..." She thought to herself. "That is so tragic, honey."

Well... I guess the way her brain worked was tragic, too?

We then reached the car.

"Cris?" she said as I cleared the alarm.

"What." I lit my cigarette.

"A sale is like a love story, too."

I looked at her and said nothing.

"Because it's short and everything, and people like me get really caught up in it, right?"

Jesus. "Cher? Just get in the damned car."

1: CRIS - Third World Republic

It was the first year of the new millennium, and my last summer at the De La Salle University. I just graduated, but *technical errors* stopped me from marching. Not that I cared. I just wanted to be done with that degree. Actually, Dad wanted me to take that Economics program. You see, *I* wanted business management, but *he* wanted something pre-law so I'd be a lawyer, just like him.

And that sucked, of course. Dad was some *senator* here in the Philippines, and honestly, he threw his weight around too much, so he wanted me to do things *his* way. Maybe he thought he was such big news, with people always ogling at him, hanging on and following every frickin' damned word he said.

Anyway, I was just bumming around that summer, so Dad took me with him to Villa Nuñez, a vacation house we had in Ilocos Norte, this province way up north in this country. So here was this 20-hectare mass of thick foliage, coconut trees, and... you know, it may have actually housed a few *insurgents* from that local peasant army? Them and their little straw hats, *nipa* huts, and sniper guns veiled somewhere in those bushes. Well, I figured it was insurrectionist territory, given how close we were to those rebel-infested Cordillera Mountains.

Actually, Villa Nuñez was okay... I guess. From MacArthur Highway was this narrow dirt road snaking through the shrubbery and ending up at our vacation house. Our lodge, located on a hillside beach, had satellite TV, centralized AC, and... that's all, really. There were no phone lines, no Internet, or anything close to modern technology.

I doubted I'd get a signal on my cellphone. Cher, my girl back in Manila, had no way of reaching me. Not that it mattered. Honestly, I was getting sick of her. If she were also from the US, I'd bet you she'd be blonde. Beauty, but no brains. It's like God put everything up front but forgot about her noodle.

Villa Nuñez was fine, but three weeks in that place would drive you nuts! Sure, the beach was a short walk down the hill, and there was this dock to go fishing and a wavebreaker for snorkeling. But I wasn't really into that stuff.

So there I was, on vacation mandated by the Philippine Senate. Dad always took his work home and thought I was part of his Third World Republic.

2: CRIS - Summer Pastime

DAY 1 of 10

I had a bodyguard and driver called Timo, this massive six-footer with a receding hairline, complemented by these Ray-Bans he always wore. He could eat a whole damned cow and had a ridiculously high tolerance for alcohol. When he was in the army, he killed over twenty men, mostly those farmland rebels you'd find all over the provinces. He's some kind of a beast, that one, that's for sure.

But one thing I liked about him was that he sort of had his morals in place, like how he never did dumb things like join some ex-para-whatnot-militia group that'd go power-tripping, carnapping, kidnapping, or whatever.

He also talked funny with his thick *Visayan*-region accent and muddled-up English. Then again, who am I to laugh. I couldn't speak Filipino like, at all. Well, sure, Mom was American, but Dad was Filipino, but when our family left this country in the mid-80s, we went to New York and stayed there until the late '90s, so I grew up without practicing the language.

Actually, I didn't see the sense in having a bodyguard. I mean, who in the world was I to actually *have* one? But Daddy's orders were law. Still, Timo was good to have around, and given how long I'd be in this *Ilocos*, he'd probably be my new best friend.

IT WAS only my third day at Villa Nuñez, and I was so miserable I wanted to kill myself. I was sick of my stupid old PlayStation, and Dad was getting all "Let's hang out, son, just you and me!" So after lunch, Timo and I took my

black, bulletproof Expedition and fled from the rest house. Timo suggested we head out to this place called Bangui, a small town up north.

During the trip, I thought about this *Bangui* and pictured some backwater village of mud huts and bungalows. Well, that's what 'provincial' sounded like to me. But when Timo said Bangui was a *fishing village*, my imagination went *wild!* I thought of dilapidated docks by the sea, stinky, fly-infested wet markets, and shabby hovels with leggy fishermen inside of them. If it were that bad, we'd be so out of that little seaside village in no time.

We began descending this hill. An archway etched with '*Mabuhay! Bangui*' loomed ahead. I slouched on my seat and smoked a cigarette. We entered this valley where the village was located.

The town wasn't as bad as I thought. You got shabby shanties here and there, and a couple of dark and wrinkly locals walking all over the place. But you also had these upscale homes fit for some upscale subdivision in Manila. I swear, this rich and poor disparity thing was chronic; it *infested* its way up to the furthest reaches of the Philippine Islands!

Bangui didn't seem like a fishing village. I didn't see crummy docks or wet markets, nor any fish stalls or people hauling nets with dead marine life. Maybe they hid that stuff somewhere in town, away from the main highway, like some dark secret you wouldn't show the world.

We reached this place called a *poblacion*, the town center, I figured, and there were these dudes hanging around this park. One of them spat on the ground as we passed by. I guess these were the angry local layabouts whose rural dreams spanned as far as rural opportunity. There were also these provincial kids running around this amphitheater, all smiles and laughter with their fun little game of chase.

Timo pointed out the Municipal Hall, a building of white walls and red roofing, and said I should introduce myself to the mayor. But I wasn't up for rubbing elbows with the local hotshot. In fact, I wanted the opposite; I thought of hanging around one of these more humble establishments around town. It was kind of an immersion trip—my little moment in Bangui. I told Timo to look for the most run-down place he could find.

We stopped by this eatery and left the car. I frowned at the name of the place—*Memories Today*. What in the world was *that* supposed to mean?

When we stepped inside, I realized Timo really did his job—this place, hands-down, was *totally* run-down! It had a rusty tin roof supported by half-decaying wood, and concrete block walls mashed up with dried chunks of cement. Scattered around were these tacky plastic tables and wobbly plastic chairs, and on one end of the eatery was a counter of gunk-filled tin pots—and I honestly wondered if it had some cockroach stewing in its stuff and drowning in the muck.

An old and wrinkly crone by the counter smiled at us and said, "Oy."

We took a table in one corner. Timo pulled out a deck of cards from his pocket. "Play *Pusoy Dos*, Cris?" I nodded and told him to get two beers. When our drinks arrived, we began our game of cards.

"Your papa," Timo said, "sleeping well in the house."

"Sure," I replied. "You know it's *his* vacation, Timo, not mine." I grinned at him. I was going to whack the man's deck with my diamond flush.

"It is wonderful day for *siesta*," he continued, "under coconut tree with mango juice."

Right. A wonderful day. Here we were at some shanty home, it was a scorching summer afternoon, and that wall fan wiggling away in the corner wasn't helping any.

I narrowed my eyes at Timo. "So, what've you got?"

He placed down a straight flush and instantly won the game.

I frowned at him. He laughed and shuffled the cards. "So, Cris, you now play *Pusoy Dos* and is new pastime in the province?"

"I don't know, Timo. I'll find my pastime soon enough."

An hour later, we ran out of cigarettes. I walked up to the old lady at the counter.

"Hey. You got cigarettes?" I said.

"*Ania?*" she said in return.

I paused. What in the world was *Ania*? I couldn't speak Filipino, but I understood most of it. And this old lady wasn't talking to me in Filipino. It was probably Ilocano, the region's local dialect.

"Filipino only, okay?" I said.

"*Ania?*"

I rolled my eyes. "Never mind. I want cigarettes."

She knitted her brows.

"Marlboro!" I made the motions of puffing a cigarette.

She nodded but said something else. "*Mano ti kayatmo?*"

"Mano what? Can't you speak Filipino? Or English?"

"*Saan ka a maawatan, ading. Mano ti kayatmo?*"

Well, jesus christ, I couldn't understand a frickin' damned word she was saying! "I said one pack of Marlboros, just one *pack*!"

"*Pak?!*" she exclaimed and started laughing like I'd just said a joke.

And then, from behind me came another woman's voice:

"*Kayatna ti sangapakete a sigarilio. Marlboro, Manang.*"

I turned around—and got the surprise of my life.

There was a young woman standing behind me, and she was so damned pretty I was stunned! You would *never* find this kind of pretty in some god-knows-where town! She looked *completely* out of place in this dilapidated eatery!

She had long, raven black hair that fell past her shoulders. Her gaze was silent, piercing, with those sly set of dark eyes. She had a small nose and mouth, perfectly matching her pretty face. She was dressed in a light blue t-shirt labelled ATENEO, A.M.D.G., white denim shorts, and light brown sandals.

God. She was *beautiful!*

"Hey..." I mumbled to her.

She didn't reply and just looked at me. She withdrew a little, crossed her arms, and eyed me from head to toe. She then gave the old lady a very pretty smile. They hugged, exchanged words in that funky dialect, and then she cried out in delight and hugged the old lady once more.

I swear, I could *not* take my eyes off this young woman! She was sleek and exotic like a Ferrari you just *had* to look, and take another look, and another, and so would everyone else! I was totally scoping her out—her body, her curves, her long sexy legs...

"*Talaga a kitkitaennaka, Anna*," the old lady said. "*Dayta guapo unay nga agtutubo...*"

I shifted my eyes from the young woman's legs to her face. She was frowning at me.

"So that's what you want?" she said. "One pack of Marlboros?"

Perfect *English*. Amazing!

"Right." I grinned. "You're not from around here, are you?"

She said nothing and simply looked at me. I was about to speak, but she nodded toward the counter. "Your poison's ready."

I took the cigarettes and faced the old lady. "*This is one pack of Marlboros*." I shook my head and put them in my pocket.

I turned to the young woman. "So, you mentioned..."

She was already out the door.

"Wait!" I chased after her.

"*Oy!*" the old woman shouted, "*Saanka pay a nagbayad!*"

I ignored her and hurried out the door.

"Hey, wait up!" I called out to the girl.

She turned and looked at me silently.

I finally caught up with her. "Hi," I said, panting a little, because of that poison I always smoked. "I'm just surprised seeing someone like you here."

She raised her eyebrows slightly. "Why?"

"Because you look so, you know... out of place?"

"I look out of place?" She narrowed her eyes. "Maybe *you* look out of place, not me."

Well, well. What do we have here...

"I guess so." I smiled. "I'm not *from* here, obviously."

She looked at my car plate. PHILIPPINE SENATE. She looked at me.

"I'm Cris, by the way. Cris Trinidad."

People would then typically ask about my surname, and then what country my mom was from, and *then* they'd associate my last name with Senator Trinidad, my father. But this girl didn't. She just nodded a little, turned away, and said, "Look, I have to..."

"Cris?" Timo suddenly called out from the eatery. "You're okay?"

I raised my hand, signaling everything was cool—so far. I wanted to see where this was headed. I faced the girl once more.

And man, could she stare! She had this deep, unnerving gaze that'd make anyone feel real conscious. I bet most guys would've avoided her eyes.

But I wasn't just any guy. I stared back.

"Don't go just yet," I then said. "Why don't you join my friend and me for a few drinks? Want a Coke? A beer? Anything?"

She measured me up for several moments. She then folded her arms. "No. I'm not interested."

And then, she just stood there, looking at me, waiting for my reply.

I grinned. "Come on. It isn't every day I meet the local village heartthrob, you know."

Her eyes widened, and her mouth slightly opened. I wanted to laugh at that eyes-wide stupefied look on her face, but I kept my mouth shut.

"Your friend," she said, knitting her brows again. "The one by the table with the cards? He doesn't look friendly."

"He'll be friendly—if you hang with me."

She rolled her eyes. "Listen, whoever you are—I have to go."

"I told you, my name's Cris. And you are..." I looked at the shirt label upon the shapely curves of her breasts. "From Ateneo? Or... maybe you're just wearing that shirt?"

She scowled at me, crossed her arms again, and didn't answer.

"What's your name?"

She was silent for a moment. "Anna."

"Anna..." I wistfully replied.

Suddenly, I had this really weird, out-of-nowhere thought—I began imagining what she'd be like in bed. Why was I getting this feeling she'd be awesome... like totally *wild* and awesome! Unlike Cher... all quiet, passive, never game for anything more than just...

"Hello? Can I go now?" she said.

I snapped out of my daydream. "No, wait. What about that sex?"

Did I just say *sex*!?

"*What*!?" she replied, and man was she pissed off!

Jesus christ! "I meant the drink! You know—sex on the beach? Or a margarita? We can, like... have that. On the beach... you know..."

She said nothing.

I cleared my throat. "So... my treat? I'll even throw in some... uh... food? If you want."

"Like you can stomach it."

"What?"

She gave me a smirk.

Who does she think she is? I wanted to smirk back at her face and say, "Whatever," and just leave. Instead, I said something really stupid.

"Well, I sure as hell can stomach *you*."

Right after, I wanted to shoot myself! She was about to react, but I didn't give her time. "I mean, all this stuff I'm doing takes guts, so I can, uh... stomach it... you know... Stomach, guts..." *Shit*. Talk about a state of verbal panic! I've never thrown so many stupid lines in thirty seconds!

She replied, her voice rising, "I am not thirsty, I am not hungry, I am *NOT interested*, and I *said*, I have to go—*okay?!*"

And then, she just stood there again, waiting.

I narrowed my eyes at her and smiled. She frowned at me and said nothing. We stared at each other for several moments.

"Well, what's stopping you, Anna?" I nodded to the road behind her. "Go."

Her expression faltered. I maintained the gaze. A smile played on her lips. She turned and walked away.

I watched her leave, the breeze upon her long dark hair. My eyes moved from her sexy waist, down to her curves and hips, to her long, shapely legs.

She turned at the corner, glanced at me, and disappeared from sight.

I returned to the eatery and sat across Timo.

"What was that?" he said as he shuffled the cards.

I smiled. "Timo? I just found my new summer pastime in the province."

"What is pastime?"

I arranged my cards. "Anna."

3: ANNA - Their Finest Daughter

I was seated on my bed, tapping on my notebook, and marking out today's to-do list. Finish unpacking, checked. Sort giveaway schoolbooks from those to keep, checked. Tally store inventory, unchecked; that would have to wait for tomorrow.

I rubbed my eyes and glanced at the clock on my desk—two minutes past twelve. I stretched and slumped into the sheets.

That fifteen-hour bus ride from Manila earlier was grueling. But once I passed Laoag City, fatigue left me as I gazed upon the rural scenery. The long stretches of green-golden fields and gently rolling hills, the vast expanse of the coastline, and the shimmering deep-blue sea—as this panorama swept by, a wave of nostalgia coursed through me.

Beautiful Ilocos Norte.

I turned to one side and closed my eyes. But I wasn't tired. Despite that long bus ride, I was up and about. I then recalled that boy I met earlier at Manang Auring's. What was his name again? Tristan? Tris? Christian...

It was *Cris*. How could I forget? That *very* attractive young American guy—whose seemingly nice and friendly boy-next-door demeanor barely masked what I sensed was actually veiled, deep-seated arrogance. Nonetheless, he struck me as quite intelligent, and despite himself, he even seemed kind... I recalled his eyes—his soft, muted, brown eyes, and how he looked at me, his gentle gaze constantly upon me... I recalled his lighthearted chuckle, and that open, honest way he smiled...

I shook my head. *Hello, Anna. Didn't you feel he was also a jerk? How could he not be...* I removed him from my thoughts and left my bed. I curled up on my window-side chair and stared into the night.

Here in the province, the evenings were tranquil, serene; my thoughts could wander endlessly into the night. In Manila, I couldn't sit by my window and let my thoughts wander, for they'd wander straight into a red brick wall that lay one meter away.

In the city, I lived in a dormitory jammed between buildings. Every day, I'd hear neighbors hurl profanities at each other, walk the streets as *kanto boys* whistled at me, and bear the rush hour commute with jeepneys spewing black smoke at people who actually *paid them* for that service.

In my hometown, there were no screaming neighbors, no buildings crammed like Metro Rail commuters, and no black shrouds of respiratory death looming across the horizon at six A.M. All around me was the stillness and calm of a long summer night.

I was born in the province. My father was a shipman and returned home for only a few weeks before heading back to sea. My memories of him were as distant as the oceans he traveled all those years. And although I grew up with Mother for a time, I eventually left my hometown when I was ten, for Mother had me move with my aunt to Manila to better my education.

The big city was difficult at first. My classmates called me names like *promdi* because I was from the province. And while they were brought to and fetched from school in fancy cars, I had to take public transportation. They had all the latest toys, while I had only a few dolls to my name. I despised them for having so much, for I had too little.

Yet I learned to *cope*. As those little girls enjoyed their dollhouses, *I* concentrated on my studies.

I graduated at the top of my class and earned a scholarship from Poveda Institucion Teresiana, where I easily won my peers' respect due to my academic skill. Moreover, high school was when I learned all about boys.

Boys. I smiled.

Although I had many admirers and suitors, I never had a boyfriend, at least during those years. Given my priorities, I had little time for little boys.

Nonetheless, high school wasn't simply about studies, boys, and breaking hearts. It was also when life forced upon me one of its most drastic, unexpected lessons.

I came home from school one day and received a phone call from the hospital—my aunt had been involved in a car accident. She did not survive. Suddenly, I was alone in the big city! I had no other relatives who'd take me in and support me! I panicked and fled to Bangui that same night.

My mother was furious! She scolded me for leaving without any care for my aunt and schooling, and dragged me back to Manila. She stayed during my aunt's wake and also made arrangements for my new dormitory. The night before she left, she said to me, "Life will test you, hurt you, and make you cry. But remember—these tests are *gifts*. Your aunt is gone, but she left you her final gift: A chance to be strong and independent. Take this, Anna. One day, you'll be rewarded."

She then left Manila, and I spent three days in my new dorm room, crying. I remembered my aunt, who tried to give me everything I needed. Now, she was gone. I also remembered my mother—her words, how safe I felt in her arms—but she left me, too. I then realized Mother was right. This was my aunt's final gift. I *had* to take it.

The next morning, I went to class. That was a turning point in my life. When I finished high school, I was the model student: Class President, head of

the Debate Team, and an honorary member of two exclusive and prestigious interscholastic academic guilds. Plus, I graduated with the highest of grades—the *best* and brightest of my graduating batch. Mother was right.

I was then offered numerous scholarships to several top colleges in Manila. I chose the Ateneo de Manila University, for I was awarded the Merit Scholarship. Not only was my education free, but a generous stipend likewise very much helped me with my day-to-day living.

And now, after four years, I received my diploma along with one of the University's highest honors—*Magna Cum Laude*.

Mother was very proud of me. Word spread fast of her daughter's academic achievements. Soon all of Bangui knew of my success. "Anna," the townsfolk said, "when you take your place in this world, always remember your roots. Tell everyone where you're from, so they'll know what outstanding children we Ilocanos have."

Indeed, I'd make them proud.

I was going to be their finest daughter.

A ROOSTER crowed in the distance. I snapped out of my reverie. I checked my clock. It was four minutes past one. I returned to bed and began a short prayer, thanking God for all His guidance, all His support. From my earliest days in my village's small school, to those years in high school and college, where I was taught more about Him—where I met Him in my heart and asked Him to be my *Dearest Friend*—and finally up to that moment I took my high honors within the great halls of the best university in the country.

After my prayer, I let my thoughts wander as I drifted off to sleep. I pictured the farmers who tilled the rich green fields of the province, the

Cordilleras looming behind them. I thought of fishermen who pushed their small *bangkas* to the sea, and how they'd pull in their nets at sunset, rich with the ocean's yield. I heard the laughter of children as they ran around the *poblacion*'s little park, their eyes sparkling with carefree innocence.

I smiled at these thoughts, and once more, I thanked God for taking me home.

4: ANNA - I'll Break Your Heart

DAY 2 of 10

The roosters woke me up at six-forty. I made my bed and walked to the mirror. After studying my face and brushing my hair, I turned to my room. In one corner was my suitcase; its contents were already stored in my closet. My desk was uncluttered, unlike yesterday when it was a mess of books. I shifted my eyes to my glass-framed award hanging on the wall, and above it, my Holy Cross. I smiled and left my room.

After a shower, I headed downstairs, where Mother had already prepared breakfast. She sat across the table as we ate and asked me what my plans were for the day. I smiled and told her I was tending to her convenience store in San Lorenzo, Bangui's *poblacion*. "Get some rest, Mama. You're losing weight because you're working too hard."

It was my mother's friends who, years ago, suggested she put up a shop. At the time, my father had recently died, and Mother was mourning, so her friends hoped a new store would keep her busy, instead of her dwelling on her husband's passing. Mother initially didn't like the idea, but her friends pooled money and established a network of suppliers for her. She finally agreed and invested in the store's construction.

That was *Bayanihan*, an occasional tradition in the province. People grouped resources to help a friend in need, without expecting anything in return.

In Manila, however, people were selfish, always pulling each other down to get ahead. I was well aware of this reality, and I conformed to this societal

norm—in the city, that is. If I got ahead, yet hurt others in the process? Too bad.

That guy I met yesterday, Cris—I'm sure he kept to this mentality, too. One look at him said it all: "Me", "What *I* want," and "To hell with the rest of *you* people."

IT WAS a slow day at the store. Occasionally, someone would step in for a purchase. I didn't know all their names, but I knew their faces well enough. It was easy to tell apart locals from outsiders. Take Cris, for instance: His annoying American twang, his somewhat offhand remarks, that semi-patronizing look he gave everything and everyone—a bona fide airheaded *foreigner* who'd look at a native swine and wonder what kind of *dog* it was.

It was twenty past three in the afternoon. I was curled up on a chair behind the counter, extremely absorbed with Colleen McCullough's *Caesar*, a novel I bought before I left Manila.

As I flipped a page, the door chimes sounded, and a tricycle zoomed by outside.

"Well, well," said a familiar voice. "So we meet again."

I looked up from my book.

Of course—Cris. I smiled inwardly.

He was well built and stood at around five feet ten, about four inches taller than me. His short, dark brown hair lay in a slight yet oddly appealing disarray. He looked upon me steadily—his gentle eyes soft, yet his gaze long and deep, it'd so easily pierce any incautious woman's heart. His profile was sharp and handsome; his nose and mouth were perfectly complemented by a finely chiseled jawline.

He walked to the counter, leaned on it, and looked around. "Easy Purchase," he said, nodding a little. That was the name of Mother's shop. His eyes ran upon the shelves, the white roofing, the fan spinning slowly above us. "Is all this yours?"

"What's your name again?" I said.

He feigned shock. "You *actually* forgot my name?" He shook his head. "Well, I certainly didn't forget yours, *Anna*."

I said nothing and stared at him instead. It was a habit—staring at boys. Especially *stupid* ones. And once they flinched and avoided my eyes, I already had the upper hand.

But *this* boy didn't look away. When he saw me staring, he stared back.

"It's Cris. Remember? How many times have I told you—Cris Trinidad."

I looked away, feigning indifference towards his name, wondering nonetheless about *Trinidad*... a Filipino surname. But why did he look like that—caucasian? Yet also somewhat Asian. And what was his relation to the Philippine senator? Because his car plate...

"So Anna," Cris continued, "you own this place?"

I glanced at him. "Yes," I answered, and shifted my eyes to my book. I wasn't going to prolong this conversation with his 'Why are you here? Where's your father, your mother? How long will you be in town?'

"No, you don't," he replied. "Your *mommy* owns this place."

I stopped reading and looked at him.

He raised his eyebrows and smiled.

I frowned. "And who told you that?"

"Oh, the people. You know—small sleepy town, everybody knows everybody." He looked away. "It wasn't all that hard to find you."

What a disturbing line. In fact, I recall hearing those words from a movie. Was that *Psycho*? *Silence of the Lambs*?

"Really now," I said. "What else did they tell you?"

A smile played on his lips. His eyes locked onto mine. "Well, they can say whatever they want, right? You see, *I'd* rather get to know you *myself*." With that smug grin, he turned away, put his hands behind his back, and looked around the store like a tourist.

With his back turned to me, I had time to take a closer look at him. He wore a loose t-shirt with the imprint NATURAL, tucked in under a pair of Armani jeans. His trim waistline was in perfect proportion to his broad set of shoulders. Given his height, his boyish yet good-looking face, and his excellent physique, Cris was very attractive—if you were the shallow type. As for his attitude—that made him even more interesting. A smug little foreigner in my hometown... I smiled and studied him further.

He continued exploring the shelves. I resumed reading my book. He then returned to me with a pair of six-pack beers. I ignored him.

He placed the six-packs on the counter. "Is that *Caesar* you're reading?"

The title was all over the cover, wasn't it? "Yes," I said, my eyes never leaving the pages.

"That's a super thick book! What is it, five hundred thousand pages long?" He bent over to take a closer look. I wanted to pull away; instead, I just kept silent.

"Julius Caesar," he said, leaning back. "You should read *Caesar's Women*. It's written by the same author."

I looked at him. "You've read her books?"

"Maybe." He smiled. "You know, Caesar wasn't just some warmongering Roman general. He was also quite a rock star—in bed."

I raised my eyebrows. "In *bed*!?" I scowled. "I'm sorry, *why* are you even telling me this!?"

He paused, slightly taken aback by my tone. "I... figured maybe you didn't know that? Well... now you know... I guess?"

I maintained my gaze, shook my head, and returned to my book. This little boy and his dirty little mind... I nonetheless started to wonder whether this novel *Caesar* had those juicy little bedroom scenes as well... I stopped myself from smiling.

He tapped one of the six-packs. "So, am I just walking away with these, or are you going to charge me."

I put down my book and took care of his order. When I was done, I looked at him and was about to ask for payment, but he was silently studying me.

"What," I said.

"You're really pretty, you know that?"

I gave him a smirk. "Three hundred twenty?" I stuck out my hand for the money.

"Let's have some dinner when you're done here."

"Let's... *what*?" I retracted my hand.

"I'm asking you out." He grinned. "This isn't the first time a guy's asked you out, right?"

I rolled my eyes and reached for my book.

"What'll it be?" he asked.

"I said, three hundred twenty pesos."

"What, for the date?"

I frowned at him. "Why in the world should I go out with you!"

"Because..." He started gauging me, assessing my mood. I made sure he read *extreme* displeasure all over my face!

"Because *what!*" Glare at him, Anna! Look him in the eye! Show him you'd rather jump off a cliff than date him!

"Well, because..." He was stammering. My expression was working wonders.

He finally found his words. "Well, what should I do? Pass by and say, 'Hey, Anna. From yesterday, right? This is your store? Now, how cool is that, us meeting again 'by chance!' By the way, got any beer?' And then, I'd swing by tomorrow and say, 'Hey, Anna! I forgot to get trash bags for home yesterday. How are you?' And then, I'd return the day after and say, 'Anna, got any pickup lines I could use on you? Because I kind of ran out.' Is that what you want?"

Pickup lines. How mildly funny. I gave him an equally mild smile.

He wasn't smiling at all. He seemed very serious! "Listen, I asked you a simple question—hang out with me, okay?"

"And I asked you a simple question—*why*."

"Jesus, are you still there? Fine! Well, why *not!*"

"Don't give me that. Answer my question!"

"No, I asked you first, so you answer me first."

I narrowed my eyes. Now that was stupid, Cris. What are we, twelve?

I nonetheless looked away and gave the impression I was considering his offer. The truth, however, was that I didn't know what to say.

If I told him about... No. He likely wouldn't care about him and ask me out regardless. And if I told him I wasn't into boys? An amusing thought, but that wouldn't work. He'd be more intrigued and ask my would-be girlfriend out as well.

"What'll it be, Anna?"

I was considering every angle of this situation. I could say yes, agree to meet him in an extremely faraway place, but not show up. Or what if...

He sighed in exasperation. "What, you think we'll fall in love and then I'll *break your heart*?! What's wrong with you!"

I looked at him in complete surprise. Where on earth did *that* come from! Who does he think he is!

"We're just hanging out," he continued. "What a big frickin' deal."

So, that's what this was all about, wasn't it...

"Fine," I said.

He smiled. "See? That wasn't so hard now, was it?"

I smiled back but didn't reply.

He paid for his beers and took the bag. "I'll be back at six."

I nodded.

"Later, Anna."

He left the store, the chimes sounding lightly at the entrance. My eyes followed him as he walked away.

Let's see who breaks whose heart, Cris.

5: CRIS - Little Miss Perfect

I couldn't believe this backwater beachside eatery Anna brought me to. It was so backwatered it didn't even have a name! It could've been a resto-bar, a billiards hall, or a slaughterhouse, and you'd have never known.

I picked her up at six, and she said we could have dinner at this seafood place. I wasn't so keen on that, so I suggested McDonald's. She looked at me like I just said a joke. Well, yeah, it was a joke. McDonald's, here in *this* little nook in the Philippines? No way.

She said we were going to Pagudpud, some nearby town. "Pagudpud's one of the country's lesser-known secrets," she told me. It was some kind of 'Boracay Beach of the North' because of its awesome white sand shorelines. Well, if that were the case, I was totally down with scoping the place out.

So we entered the nameless eatery, this open-air, beachside restaurant made of your standard provincial stuff—cement blocks, scrappy wood, corroded tin roof. It had bamboo tables held by rusty nails, and these shaky little benches that'd probably collapse the minute anyone sat on them. On one corner was a bar with this old radio salvaged from World War 2, and some schmaltzy love song was crackling off in pure treble from its small speakers. Behind the bar was a room of blackened walls and charcoal braziers, and working away were these equally blackened-up muscle-bound dudes wearing sweaty tank tops, tattered jeans, and these flowery little aprons around their waists. I figured that room was the kitchen, not the local blacksmith.

Anna ordered something called *Dalag*, *Dinengdeng*, and rice. I ordered a beer. Minutes later, the waitress returned and shocked the hell out of me when

she held up a living, flapping fish right to my face! She said something to Anna in Ilocano, and Anna nodded.

Were we going to *eat* that thing?! I completely lost my appetite! Anna said it was the freshest seafood you could ever find. Well, she could have it. No way was I eating that doomed animal.

All this aside, however, the view was actually pretty good. You could watch the sunset from where we were. "If you traveled in a straight line from here," Anna said, "you'd end up in Hong Kong." Well, that was interesting. I bet if Cher heard that, she'd jump into one of those little canoes by the beach, paddle her way to Hong Kong, and go *shopping*.

Our orders arrived. Anna started eating. I stared at the fish—and it stared right back at me. Why didn't these people remove its damned *head* for crying out loud! Here was this thing that had, just minutes ago, fought for dear life right in front of me. And now, here it was again before me, dead.

And burned.

And then, the *Dinengdeng* arrived. It looked like *Sinigang*, this Filipino dish I liked. But this stuff was way alien to me. Anna said it was an Ilocano specialty, so I should try it. I didn't want her to think I was some weak-gutted wuss, so I forked out this leaf-like thing from the broth and took a taste. Honestly, it wasn't bad. It was just... different. I took a small serving.

Anna looked real cute while she ate, taking teeny bits of fish and rice every minute or so. She wore a loose ponytail, and a few strands of her hair fell on her cheeks and neck. She noticed me staring. "Have some," she said and nodded toward the fish. I swear, it nodded back.

"I'm not hungry." Actually, I was. But no way was I eating that incinerated carcass. I lit a cigarette instead.

She had this slight grin on her face. She took a bite of her fish and looked at me while munching on her food. She motioned to the waitress. "Want some water, Cris?"

"No, I'm fine."

"That's right. Water here is unfiltered. You probably have a weak stomach."

I scowled. "I don't have a weak stomach."

She chuckled and returned to eating. We said nothing for several moments. Waves lapped upon the nearby shore.

"Aside from your mom," I then said, "who else are you with here in the province?"

"No one."

"Where's your boyfriend?"

She shrugged. "Where's yours?"

"She's in Manila."

Anna glanced at me but said nothing.

"What about your dad?" I asked.

"He's dead." She gutted the fish.

"I'm... sorry to hear that."

She said nothing like she didn't care, and just ate her meal.

I took a drag of my cigarette and turned to the sunset. The horizon was a vibrant shade of red and yellow, merging and filtering into the darkening sky.

"So," she said, "you're on vacation, obviously. Who are you with?"

"Just me, my dad, these security guys. And you know Timo. We've also got household helpers who cook and clean."

She nodded. "What about your mom? Did she stay behind?"

"She's... not here."

"Why not?"

I didn't answer. Anna looked at me. I just sipped my beer. She studied me for a moment and then thought to herself.

I turned to the horizon and noticed how the colors had shifted in so short a time.

I asked what she was doing in the province when she looked like she came from the city. She told me about her elementary years, moving to Manila, her return visits to Ilocos during the holidays and summer. She also told me about her academic honors. I was impressed.

"Magna Cum Laude?" I said. "You sure don't look like one of those hardcore academic types."

"You shouldn't judge a book by its cover, Cris."

"I know. You really shouldn't."

She looked at me funny after I said that.

She was done with her meal and started fixing up. "Tell me about your girlfriend."

Well, I didn't feel like talking about Cher any more than my family. "She's pretty, she's nice, she's harmless. She's into shopping here, swank bar there, partying around, and having fun. But I want someone with more to give, more personality, more... you know..."

"Depth?" Anna suggested.

"There you go. *Depth*. Someone like that." Someone like *you*, I wanted to tell her. But I wasn't up for that kind of talk anymore.

"So you want someone who's got the brains *and* the looks to match." Her eyes never left mine. "You think you have what it takes to get her?"

I shrugged. "Sure. I guess."

"Really." A smile played on her lips. "What do you have to offer?"

"Well, I... all that politician's kid *whatever* aside, I'm not one of *those* kinds of bad kids, you know? I'm just... I don't know..."

"So you're a good kid. This good-looking guy of mixed foreign ancestry, who's also charming, intelligent, *and* from a rich and powerful family." She smiled slyly. "You seem to have it all, don't you?"

I knitted my brows.

"So it's the perfect guy looking for the perfect girl." She turned away. "Good luck."

"Oh yeah? And who said I had to go find her when she's right here? A very pretty face, a sharp mind, one hell of a body. The *perfect* woman, wouldn't you agree? Or is something actually very *wrong* with her?" I looked into her eyes. "What do you think—*Anna*."

Our eyes locked for several seconds. Her face was completely devoid of emotion. She then smirked. "Like I said—good luck." She looked away. "You'll *need* it."

Whatever. I took another sip of my beer.

She was looking at the sunset.

"Nice, huh?" I asked her.

She didn't reply. So, calling her 'Little Miss Perfect' pissed her off after all.

I shook my head. I guess I shouldn't have insulted her like that. She started it—but I didn't have to continue it, trolling her with trash talk like a goddamned jerk. I figured a change of topic would help, so I thought about her collegiate awards thing, her university, and all the stuff they taught there.

"Hey, what was your course in Ateneo?"

"BS BA," she replied, her eyes never leaving the horizon.

A business course... Well, we had her program in La Salle, too. And that was exactly the course I wanted, were it not for Dad.

"A Magna graduate in Business Administration?" I nodded. "That's awesome. That'll get you far."

She scoffed that off. *"Labels.* Your car says SENATE, doesn't it? That'll get you far."

I looked at her. She was smiling to herself, with another one of those self-satisfied smirks on her face again.

Jesus, what was her problem! Did she want me to *beg* for forgiveness, because I called her this 'something's wrong with you' broken-down girl?!

"You're from La Salle, right?" she said. "Maybe that's why I don't like you at all. La Salle is my university's rival school."

"Is it. Rival whatever, any school's just a frickin' damned school."

"True. But I know others from La Salle. They're good students, so it's obvious they're from a school with an *excellent* standard of education, right?"

"I guess. Why?"

"Just wondering—" she looked away. "What ever happened to *you*."

I have *had it* with her insults! Here I was trying to genuinely compliment her for her academic stuff, but she just wouldn't stop!

"Fine! So I'm the worthless no one who couldn't even graduate!"

My outburst surprised her a little. "Hey, it was a joke."

It was a *stupid* fucking joke!

She started studying me again. Well, let Miss High-Flyer with her scholastic brilliance think about everything I *failed* in college! I did *not* give a rat's ass about her opinions! I downed what was left of my beer and ordered another.

That's when I noticed three guys seated across the room. They were looking at me, and I didn't like the way they stared. On impulse, I stared back.

Anna was looking at those guys as well. She nodded at them and raised a hand in greeting.

"Friends of yours?" I asked her.

"Yes." She looked at me. "The one with the red bandana is Michael. He's very protective of his friends. People don't mess with him. Or his friends."

The waitress brought me my beer. I took a sip and thought about all the shit Anna threw at me. So I was such a failure? Some useless little rich kid who couldn't even march for graduation? Well, here's to being the asshole she thought I was!

I took another look at those guys. The one named Michael was the sorriest-looking poser I ever saw. That ridiculous bandana he wore made him look like some over-the-top *action hero* straight out of the silver screen. His two

goons looked like farmhand idiots who couldn't even spell their own names. The guy and his goons continued staring. I scoffed at them and turned away.

Anna was *not* happy about what I was doing. "Hey—I wasn't kidding about what I said."

I ignored her and faced the boys once more. I sipped my beer and gave them another screw-you kind of look before turning away.

"Are you trying to pick a fight?" she said.

I didn't reply.

"Cris, this isn't impressing me at all."

And whoever said anything about impressing *her*? I swear, this girl; she was so assuming! I had nothing to prove to anyone—especially to some full-of-herself campus heartthrob!

She was at a loss for words. So, her little plan backfired on her, didn't it? 'What happened to you in La Salle' my ass!

She shifted her eyes to look behind me. It was Mr. Action Hero and his thugs.

"Michael," she said, faking a smile. She stood and kissed his cheek. They started talking in Ilocano.

Michael then faced me. "*Asinno daytoy? Ti baro nga Amerikano a nobiom?*"

She glanced at me. "*Maysa nga Amerikano, nalawag.*"

He looked at me. "*Nalawag...*" he slowly replied.

She motioned to me. "Cris, this is Michael."

I rose from my seat. He was slightly shorter than me. His gaze was deep and intense, just like Anna's. Stubble outlined his jawline, making him look all

rough and tough. But I'd break this unshaven meathead if he had a tongue as sharp as that friend of his.

"Hey," I muttered, my eyes never leaving his.

"Ey," he said in return, studying me. "*Agsasaoka kadi iti Ilocano?*"

Anna cut in. "*Michael, Onaks 'yan. English laeng. Ngem maawatanna ti Filipino.*"

He chuckled, shaking his head, shifting his language to Filipino. "Of course. I'm sorry." He smiled at me warmly. "Welcome, friend. I'm Michael." He offered a handshake.

I looked at his hand. I looked at him. I said nothing.

Michael's smile faltered. He retracted his hand. And then, he tried to smile again. "I... do thank you for visiting our province. As you can see, we have very nice beaches, our mountains are not far, and we even have our small barrios, but... they are somewhat poor, our little villages..." He glanced at Anna and smiled. She smiled back.

He continued, "And you are very lucky. Of all people, it is Anna who is showing you around our..."

"Why?" I said. "What's that to *you*?"

He hesitated. "Brother—we are just simple people who live here. But Anna is one of us, we look up to her, and we are very proud of her. All we ask is you take care of..."

"What *I* am doing with her is none of your goddamned business!" I leaned toward him. "Or do you have a problem with that?"

He stared at me, incredulous.

I grinned at him. That's right, farm boy. Take it.

"Ania ta?!" he said. "What in the world did I do to you!"

"Michael," Anna said. "Don't."

"Haan!" he shot back at her. "Siaasi a kinablaawak! But this arrogant foreigner! Ammona kadi no siasino..."

"Michael," Anna repeated. "Haanen."

He glared at me for a moment, and then looked at Anna. He controlled himself, stepped back, and said nothing.

Anna scowled at me. "I want to go home now." She started walking away.

I looked at Michael. "Later, *promdi*."

Anna stopped in her tracks and turned to me, her eyes flashing with anger. I was about to ask her, "What?" but she continued to the counter in angry strides.

We were about to pay the bill. She pulled out a money clip from her pocket. "That was stupid, Cris. What were you doing back there!"

"Your little goon-friend started it!"

She looked at me. "How did he even start it? He was trying to be *nice*!"

"Yeah, that manipulative little douchebag and all his flowery 'Welcome to our beautiful yet miserable rural town whatever!' Did you *see* how he was glaring at me before he walked over?"

"So that's what this is? Two boys bickering over stupid little things? You'll risk a bloody nose or more just because he looked at you the wrong way?!"

I was about to reply, but she cut me off. "I told you, 'Do *not* mess with him!' But no! You outright *provoked* him! Do you have any idea what almost happened back there?!"

I shook my head. "Fine. I'm sorry. Let's just drop it, okay?"

She was fumbling with her clip, trying to pull out some money.

"Don't worry," I said. "I'll pay the bill."

"No. You had two beers. I had a meal. I'll pay for it."

"Really, it's nothing." I reached for my wallet.

She glared at me. "I said, I'll pay for it!"

From behind us, Michael called out, "*Oy Anna. Ipakitam iti dayta a ganggannaet no siasinotayo a talaga.*"

I pointed at him. "Stop pussyfooting around your frickin' dialect! You want to tell me something, why don't you just say it straight!"

"I said *STOP IT!!!*" Anna shouted and *slapped* my arm away!

Michael and his gang guffawed! Other locals burst out in laughter as well.

Anna slammed the money on the counter and stormed out of the eatery.

I turned to Michael and his group. They were looking at me, chuckling and shaking their heads. Everyone was staring at me, laughing at me. "Look at him," their eyes seemed to say. "That guileless, lost and stupid *foreigner*, all shamed-faced and cut down to size by one of ours." I just stood there for a moment, all alone in the middle of this nameless, goddamned eatery.

I sighed, turned away, and left the beachside restaurant.

6: CRIS - I'll Wait for You

We didn't talk much for the first several minutes of the drive. Anna occasionally told me where to go, and I'd just nod and drive on, my eyes on the road and the dark countryside.

"You know," I said, breaking the silence, "this is the last place I'd like to be in should my car break down."

She didn't reply.

"There are no lamp posts, no emergency booths, nothing. If I get a flat tire, I swear, I'll have a panic attack and die."

"I'm sure you would," she muttered.

I rolled my eyes. Well, if *she*'s still going on bitching about whatever, never mind then.

I lit a cigarette and opened my window. I was only into my third puff when she said, "I'd appreciate it if you didn't smoke in the car."

Jesus christ, the *nerve* of this woman! This was *my* goddamned car for crying out loud!

Regardless, I took one last puff and ditched the stick; it tasted like paper, anyhow. I closed up the window and drove on without saying a word.

All this silence soon started getting to me, so I decided to play a CD. But Anna had the same thing in mind. We reached for the player at the same time, and my fingers brushed against hers. It was awkward and funny, but I didn't smile. "Just press that button to start it," I told her.

"Never mind." She retracted her hand. "Why are you so quiet?"

Did she even have to ask? I was quiet because I was driving home this *Ice Queen* who dissed me the entire evening *and* told me to ditch my cigarette when it was *my* own frickin' car! What did she expect me to do, cartwheels of joy?

"I don't understand why you got upset in the restaurant," I said.

"You don't understand? Are you really that dense, Cris?"

I stared at the road.

"I told you to stay away from Michael. But did you listen? No! You had to act like some *tough guy*." She shook her head and turned away. "Boys."

Boys whatever. Girls would never understand why.

She was about to say something, but I spoke ahead. "I don't want to talk about it."

She was silent for a while. "Fine," she then said.

I switched on the CD player. Slow rock music started to play.

As I drove, I realized I should at least try to salvage what I could from this, even if it was a date from hell. "Look, about what happened..."

"I thought you didn't want to talk about it."

"Well, I'd like to talk about it now, if that's okay with you."

"Fine. Talk."

"About what happened with bandana boy—I'm sorry." Man, if she thought I was sorry, wait until I got back at Michael. He was going to be real sorry after I was through with him.

"People steer clear of Michael," she said. "But he's not a bad person. He is my friend, one of my *closest* friends. I used to always help him with his homework when we were younger, because he struggled so much in school."

"Who *doesn't* struggle in school?" I said. "Some kids even flunk out."

Like me, for instance.

"Michael *did* stop going to school," Anna said. "So I went to his house and found him sitting by a tree, pulling on the grass, looking far and away. He said he couldn't go to school anymore because... his family didn't have enough money..." She shook her head. "What would *you* know. You have no idea what people here go through."

Well, what I *did* know was that it's the same, stupid old story of some impoverished little farm boy, now compensating himself by trying to look big.

"Typical," I then said.

She frowned at me. "*Typical?*"

Jesus, I had to stop yapping away like that lest my big mouth got me into even more trouble. "It's typical—how life throws you curveballs like that. And yeah, we're poor, we're needy, whatever. But we've got something, *anything*, right? So we take what we've got, be it something great or inconsequential, and we *use it* to make things better."

"Take what you have, and use it?" She chuckled dryly. "Easy for *you* to say—being this rich kid who has a lot."

Well, we can't ever win against this woman now, can we? I decided not to reply. We were silent for a while.

I then looked at her. She was thinking to herself, staring out the window, watching the dark landscape pass by. I studied her profile—her nose, her lips, how the air-conditioner blew lightly on her long, black hair.

She suddenly turned to me. I averted my gaze to the highway.

"Keep your eyes on the road, Cris. Please, do not get me *killed*."

Jesus. I drove on without saying another word. We soon arrived at her place.

Anna lived in one of those better-class homes around town. It had a low fence of white-coated bars, and behind was a small, well-tended garden. Her two-storied house was of creamed-colored bricks and red-tiled roofing.

I looked at her. She was watching me silently. She then turned away and removed her seat buckle. "Thanks. It was fun."

What, the date? It was a disaster!

She was about to open the door.

"Anna, wait."

She turned to me. "You want to ask me out again?"

I studied her, confused by what she just said. She was eyeing me steadily with a sharp and steely gaze.

"Fine," she said. "Meet me at my store tomorrow noon."

"What?"

"I'm asking you out." She leaned closer. "This isn't the first time a girl's asked you out, right?"

I studied her. "That's it? Just like that?"

"Would you rather we not see each other anymore?"

"No. But..."

"But what?" She knitted her brows.

"I don't understand... Why are you suddenly... Earlier on, you were all..."

"Cris, it's simple: Meet me tomorrow—yes or no! But if you're going to read between the lines and *analyze* everything, forget it!" She opened the door. The Expedition's interior lights instantly switched on.

"Okay, I'll be there."

She paused, her back to me, yet I could almost picture that smug grin all over her face. "You see? That wasn't so hard now—" she turned to me. "*Was it.*"

I looked away and said nothing.

She was likewise silent for several moments.

"So be there—" she then said, this time more softly. She turned away. "—I'll wait for you."

She left the car and closed the door. The lights slowly faded away.

When she was gone, I sat back and thought to myself, alone again, in silence and the dark.

7: CRIS - Good and Right

It was a long trip back home. I wasn't up for any music or driving fast; I just moved along the empty highway, all that dark landscape around me. It wasn't about Anna, how bad the evening was, or how she was obviously playing me. Then again, all her taunts really hit hard and got me thinking about my life.

I reached the gates of Villa Nuñez and drove through the narrow dirt road until I got to the rest house. As I left the Expedition, Timo came out of the driver's quarters and asked me how things went. I told him about Michael. He said I should be more careful around these parts. I told him to stop acting like a goddamned nanny.

But it's true some peasants defected over to those rebel groups. Dad told me that happened when the marginalized were pushed too far. Michael didn't seem like one of those people. Sure, he was some rural-poor farm boy, but he didn't strike me as one of those extremist, ideological whatevers. Still, I guess I should watch myself better, in case I came across any of those marginalized, angry, insurrectionists.

I told Timo about the beers in the Expedition, the ones I bought from Anna's store. He and the others could take them. I didn't want them anymore.

MY ROOM was silent. I was staring at the sliver of smoke rising from the ashtray, my mood dipping by the minute. I turned to my laptop and watched the screensaver photos fade by.

Me, with all tipsy-smiling Cher, partying away at some random bar somewhere... Me, unsmiling, with Dad, black and green graduation togas everywhere, the DLSU logo behind us... Me, in some recent highbrow event in Manila, with all these other rich kids decked out in their suits, smug and smiling, wine glasses in hand...

I shook my head and closed the laptop.

I WAS in the living room, staring blankly at the widescreen, PlayStation in front of me. Music was pounding; lights pulsated from the tube! I reached for the remote and shut the system—

The entire room was suddenly dark and absolutely still.

I went to the bar, took a shot of Black Label, and headed to the veranda overlooking the beach. With the whiskey in hand, I opened the glass sliding doors and stepped into the night.

It was breezy and somewhat chilly, even if it was summer. There were a few stars shining above, and scattered clouds slowly glided across the darkened sky. I looked to the horizon and recalled how, just hours before, it was a collage of all those fiery colors. Now, it was black and dull.

I opened a pack of cigarettes and smoked a stick. It still tasted crappy, but I smoked it anyway.

I then thought about Anna, her mannerisms, her remarks, all that nasty stuff she said to me. Despite her insults and how she treated me like dirt, I somehow just... *felt* she was not a bad person. That, deep inside, she was actually a really *good* person...

I sighed. Well, maybe next time, it'd work out better. Maybe—if I stopped acting like a jerk.

I took another drag of my cigarette. I swear, it really tasted terrible. I took one last puff and threw it away. I wanted to ditch that stupid old habit really soon. I took a shot of whiskey and stared into the night.

I started thinking about what I'd do now that college was over. Dad had everything planned out. "It's all taken care of, Cris," he'd always say. When I was threatened with suspension because I was caught cheating in class, Dad said, "It's all taken care of." When I beat up some guy at a party because he bumped my shoulder and made me spill my drink on my shirt, Dad picked me up at the police station and said, "It's all taken care of." When I got into a car accident with that stupid, raging lawyer who threatened to sue me to hell, Dad told me over the phone, "It's all taken care of."

And just last week, he asked me what I wanted to do now that I graduated. I said I didn't know. He nodded and said, "Okay, so you will work with me at the firm. It's all taken care of." But I didn't want to work with him. I wanted to do what *I* wanted to do! And that only made things worse because I had absolutely no idea what I really wanted!

Honestly, I wanted to do something clean and *good*. But that wouldn't work. Not in *this* country. The minute you did what was right, everything would conspire to make it go wrong. Good and right wasn't tolerated in the Third World. It was either shot down and buried, or exported and lost overseas.

I had downed a quarter of the Black Label by the time I left the veranda. I closed the sliding doors and saw the posh, modern living room all draped in shadows and gloom—those sprawling sofas, that fully-loaded top-end bar, that widescreen television and PlayStation by those large windows overlooking the dark sea. It was terrible. I swear—seeing that large, upscale, frickin' *empty* room all swathed up in nothing but shadows could've made me cry.

I stumbled around in the dark until I finally got to my room. I locked the door and collapsed into my beanbag. I wanted to switch on my mini-component

and play some music, but another thought struck me, sinking my mood even further.

Last month, Dad told me he put money in my account. "Summer allowance," he said, from some local-based project he received. I checked my ATM and saw I had an extra five hundred thousand bucks. I wanted to withdraw the money, throw it all at Dad's face, and say, "You think I need your money? I don't need your fucking *dirty* money!" Still, I took some of the dough, bought a new computer and wardrobe, and that stupid mini-component I was staring at right now. And that pointless, super-expensive stereo system was *mocking* me! I was succumbing to a life I did *not* want!

I had half the mind to go to Dad's room and tell him I wanted to go back to New York. I was done with this miserable, corrupted, good-for-nothing Philippines! But I didn't go to his bedroom. I just stayed in my room and drank more whiskey. I switched on my mini-component and played it real loud. Maybe it'd piss Dad off, he'd knock on my door, and ask what the hell was going on. And then, I'd tell him everything.

But Dad didn't wake up. He's a very heavy sleeper. You could throw the Senator into a goddamned swimming pool and he *still* wouldn't wake up!

By then, I was totally wasted. I crawled from my beanbag to the stereo and turned it off. I couldn't even get to bed and just lay sprawled on the floor.

As I drifted off to sleep, I started thinking about Mom, recalling what she told me way back, when we were all together as a family, halfway around the world. "Your dad's homeland, that faraway beautiful country, *your* country... Remember why you are there, Cris... Always... remember... *why*..."

And then, all that *shit* happened—and I had nothing left but *questions!* All those same old questions I *never* found answers to! *WHY* did that have to happen? Why couldn't I change things? Why the hell didn't *he!*

But I was too drunk to get mad, too drunk to cry.

As these thoughts about Mom circled in my head, I curled up on the floor, closed my eyes, and fell asleep.

8: ANNA - Playing Games

DAY 4 of 10

It was a sweltering day. I sluggishly rose from my seat and pointed the stand fan in my direction. Why did I volunteer for today's manning of the store? If I were at home, I'd be in Mother's air-conditioned room. But here I was, dying in the heat. I slumped on my chair and fanned myself with a cardboard.

Although I dressed lightly, my tank top and short shorts did little to ease my discomfort. I frowned, tied my hair in a ponytail, and tried to resume my book.

My mind soon wandered to yesterday's events. Cris stood me up. I waited all afternoon, but he never came around. I had everything set: A beach outing, a walk around town, a visit to the view deck to watch the sunset. It wasn't anything romantic; it was a calculated plan. That boy needed a lesson. *I* was going to give it to him.

Nonetheless, he intrigued me. His occasionally blunt yet funny remarks, the way he spoke, the way he smiled... My god, Cris was *very* attractive. What I'd give to be with him... and how far was I willing to go? I'd certainly have some fun with him. I was sure he'd enjoy me, too...

Then again, he stood me up. No one *ever* stood me up.

He'd definitely pay for that.

I was about to return to my novel when the door chimes sounded.

And speaking of the devil—Cris. I put down my book and glared at him.

He had a rueful smile on his face. "Hey..."

Although I was mad, I couldn't help noticing what he was wearing. He had a pair of sunglasses on top of his head and wore a white tank top with long armholes extending to his waist. The words '*Boracay—Nice it up. Live it up!*' were spelled out in front with playful lettering. Denim shorts and sandals completed his attire.

I took another look at his tank top's armholes. His lower torso was smooth and trim. I discerned the contours of abdominal muscles from the edges of the fabric. I scrutinized him further and began imagining what he'd look like without his shirt...

Suddenly, I realized I was staring too much! I immediately looked away, desperately hoping he didn't notice me staring!

"Anna, about yesterday..."

When he spoke, however, all my fantasies vanished. I closed my eyes and summed up my frustrations from the previous day. I opened my eyes and looked daggers at him.

"Where were you?" I said.

"I'm sorry, but..."

"You're sorry?"

He avoided my eyes. "Yes."

"And?"

Silence.

"What's your stupid excuse, Cris?"

"I just... I had a few problems at home."

"Like what?"

"Well, it's kind of personal..."

"Is it." I left the counter and went straight to him. "Do you know how much trouble I *personally* went through yesterday? I made reservations at Saud Beach!" That was a lie. I made no such reservations. "I even bought food from the market to cook for us!" Another lie.

"I'm sorry, Anna."

"What games are you trying to play here?"

"I'm not playing any games."

No games, was it? Now, it was time to play *mine*.

I faked a sigh and lowered my tone. "What happened to you?"

"I just... It was a rough night. When I got home, I..."

"Forget it. Just don't ever do that to me again."

He looked at me. "That's it? Apology accepted?"

I paused. Did I forgive him too soon? "Cris, I don't want to hear your excuses."

He nodded, thankful. "Okay."

I looked out the door of my shop. "Who else are you with?"

"No one, just me."

"Good."

"Good? Why?"

Careless words, Anna. This had to be played *real* smooth. "Good, because we can still head out and spend some time together."

His face lit up. "Great!"

"But I need to run some errands before that."

"That's fine. You need any help?"

"I have to get my fruits order in another town. But I also have to work on some numbers here." I looked at him. "Do you know *why* I have to do these things?"

He said nothing.

"Because *someone* threw me off my schedule yesterday!" I knitted my brows and paused for effect. "So, I don't know what to do, Cris."

"Then I'll get your stuff."

It was *exactly* what I wanted to hear. "Cris... no. That's my responsibility, not yours. I won't let..."

"Anna, I want to make up for yesterday."

"But it's a far drive. You'll have to go there, come back, and then..."

"Look—" he cut me off with a frown. "I said, I'll do it, okay?"

Stupid boy. Throwing me a frown? I'll give you something to *really* frown about!

"Fine," I said. "The town's called Pasuquin, and it's an hour's drive from here. Head south along MacArthur and you'll reach the town center and marketplace. Look for *Aida's Store*, and tell her I sent you. She'll give you five sets of bananas, three watermelons, and twelve ripe mangoes."

I jotted everything down and handed him the paper.

He skimmed the instructions. "I won't get lost, right?"

He most certainly would. As if *Aida's Store* even existed. "No, you won't. Just stick to the main highway." If he veered off-course, crashed into a tree, or got abducted by insurgents, it'd be perfectly fine with me. "You can't miss it." I smiled.

"Got it. Meet you here when I'm done."

"You do that."

Five minutes after he left, I started fixing up the shop. I then stepped out of Easy Purchase, padlocked the door, and closed the store for the rest of the afternoon.

As I walked home, I smiled in contentment.

Enjoy your bananas, Cris.

9: ANNA - Shattered Glass

I had just finished reading several chapters of *Caesar*. My clock said it was seven; dinner would be ready soon. I walked to the mirror, brushed my hair, and examined my face. As I studied myself, I suddenly thought of Cris.

What happened to him? Did he enjoy his trip to Pasuquin? What did he do when he found my store was closed? You took too long, Cris. I'm sorry, I couldn't wait.

I turned to one side and looked at my figure. Was I gaining weight? I felt a little bloated. It didn't look like I was getting fat, but I had to make sure. I removed my shirt and studied myself further. There was no sign of weight gain. Nonetheless, I'd take more walks to and from the store. No more tricycle rides. And doing so would save me money.

Maybe I was getting my period. That'd explain my bloated feeling, and why Cris irritated me so much. Regardless, PMS or not, that boy deserved what he got.

I stared at my face, squinting, frowning, smiling, going through my various expressions. What did people see when they looked at me? Was I really that pretty? Cris surely knew many other attractive girls in Manila. How did I measure up?

I shook my head and turned from the mirror.

As I wore my shirt, Mother knocked on my door. "Freshen up and come downstairs, Anna."

I decided on a quick shower before dinner. I was starving!

I FINISHED my bath and was brushing my hair while heading downstairs. Suddenly, I froze in my tracks.

Cris was in the living room!

My god! Here he was, in my house, sitting on my TV chair, talking to my mother!

A flurry of emotions coursed through me. One was surprise—I was elated, *thrilled* he actually made it into my home! Another was embarrassment following the trick I played on him this afternoon. Yet another was anger—an invasion of privacy, my home, *my* TV chair!

I withdrew my emotions and feigned indifference.

Cris and Mother saw me and rose from their seats. Mother smiled. "Your friend is here, and he brought dinner! So sweet of him, don't you think?"

Already charming my mother, I see. I looked at him.

"Hey, Anna." He bent down, lifted a basket, and grinned. "I have your fruits with me, too."

I crossed my arms, looked away, and stopped myself from smiling.

What a guy.

CRIS BROUGHT with him a feast—grilled steak, fried fish, boiled corn and vegetables, and garlic rice. Mother asked where he got the food. He said it was from Villa Nuñez. "I was in the area," he explained, "near Pasuquin." He gave me a sideward glance.

He asked her if she liked the food. Mother nodded a little too eagerly. He asked me if I was enjoying the meal. "It's fine," I replied and looked at my steak.

It was so *succulent!* Were it not for Cris, I'd finish two pieces myself! But he'd think I was a pig, so I stopped myself.

Mother was delighted with him. Her eyes were beaming, and she was quick to build up my image.

"You know, Cris, even before my daughter finished her thesis, many big companies were already recruiting her."

"I'm sure," he replied. "She's not only smart; she's also very pretty."

I frowned at him. How tactless. All those words, in front of my mother. I looked at her and was surprised she was actually buying it!

"Anna was always an achiever," she said.

He nodded. "She's got direction—another reason why I like her. I really like her a lot, honestly."

How could anyone be so *blunt!*

"There's so much to like," Mother said. "She deserves someone who has much to offer. At least more than what Michael could give."

My god! Cris's shameless indiscretion was infecting my mother!

"Mama!" I called out.

She smiled at me.

I turned to Cris. He had a pleasantly surprised look on his face. "Michael?"

I rolled my eyes back to my mother. She chuckled and patted my hand. "He was Anna's first boyfriend. She was fifteen. Or was that sixteen?"

I stared at my plate. Seventeen. But I didn't clarify that. I wasn't participating in this discussion.

She shrugged. "Anyway, I found out through one of my friends."

"Right," Cris said. "A small town has no secrets."

With tattletales like Mother and her group, this town would definitely run out of secrets.

"Michael was also Anna's closest childhood friend," Mother said, "so everyone thought they'd end up together. But the ways of the city are very different from our small town. I knew Anna would outgrow him. And so she did."

And so they thought. I sliced a piece of steak.

"Besides," Mother carried on, "I had hoped my daughter would be a good influence on him. But Michael insisted on being with his other friends. I became very worried when even Anna started joining them. But she always had to eventually go back to Manila. And for this, I was glad."

Giving away my love life was one thing, but this was getting out of hand. I anticipated my mother's next words, in case I needed to stop her.

"I'm glad my daughter left him," Mother said. "She deserves someone better. A good man. Someone who can take care of her."

That's right—a good man who would take care of me. I looked at Cris. How far was *this one* willing to go to actually *do that...*

"She's a handful," Mother continued. "She's extremely willful and independent, and she oftentimes surprises me with what she does." Mother thought to herself. "Maybe that's because she grew up alone in the city. Because her father and I forced her to live there, all by herself."

Everyone was silent.

"It is very easy to misunderstand my daughter," Mother then said. "Some may think Anna is a spoiled single child, that she's self-centered, inconsiderate, too liberated because she is a city girl, or do not upset her because she can be very destructive and cruel. Well... they do not know her at all. Who are *they* to say anything about my daughter?"

"I'm sure she's not *that* bad," Cris said.

Mother chuckled. "Are you sure?"

Cris studied her for a moment and then glanced at me.

Mother nodded. "But yes, Anna has something very good to give from within her. Maybe you'll be lucky, Cris, and she will give this to you. But, as her mother, I recommend she first give this to herself."

"What are you talking about, Mama? Give myself what?"

She looked at me. "For a very bright girl, these very simple things you still don't understand. How can you give to others, when you barely have enough for yourself?"

"Barely enough for myself?" I scowled. "Stop being so cryptic, Ma! Give *what*?"

"*Love*, Anna. How simple. You want to give love to others? Do you think you have done enough to love *yourself*?"

DINNER WAS over. Cris volunteered to help wash the dishes. Mother smiled and volunteered me as well. She thanked Cris for the meal and went to her room upstairs.

"Impressive," I said as we began washing the plates.

"What is?"

"Your gimmick. You managed to get into my home, sit on my TV chair, and even have dinner here. You even saw a very private family moment when Mother started criticizing me—again."

He studied me. "So... I did a good thing, or bad?"

I glanced at him but said nothing. Take a *wild* guess, Cris. I went back to cleaning the dishes.

He was silent for a moment. He then shrugged. "Well, I guess you're really starting to fall in love with me."

I looked at him. "*What?* Of course not!"

He looked at me. "So... you'd rather love *yourself*?"

I knitted my brows, looked away, and washed the dishes. I wasn't falling for this.

He chuckled. "Listen, what I'm saying is, why are you acting this way? If I meant nothing to you, you'd be like, 'whatever,' and wouldn't care. But here you are, acting so... I don't know... *defensive*."

"Defensive? Since when?"

"Since forever! Like you're always guarding yourself against everything. First of all, just look at your mom—why on earth did you think she was criticizing you earlier?"

"What didn't you understand? The part where she called me selfish, stubborn, destructive, and cruel?"

"She never said that! She said the others called..."

"What would *you* know!" I snapped, my tone rising.

He backed off. "Fine, I'm sorry. That's between you and her. Let's talk about *me*, then. Look at how you act towards me, like I'm some kind of adversary you're all fenced up against. Just look at that wild goose chase you made me go through this afternoon. That's..."

"I'm sorry. I was wrong." Yes. Looking back, it was a bad joke.

"No, it's okay. You were pissed off, so I get it."

At least he easily forgave people.

"Still," he proceeded, "it's like you're always trying to get one step ahead of me, reading why I'd do this, studying why I'd do that. It's like you're in some kind of *chess game*, strategizing how to..."

"Okay then—give me one specific time I was defensive." I looked at him.

"Like... this afternoon, when you..."

"Cris? About this afternoon—didn't you just say you 'get it?' But now, you suddenly *don't*?! Why don't you make up your mind! Or better yet—*think harder!*"

He sighed. "Anna, I don't keep track of who did what wrong or..."

"You don't keep track? So you have no basis; you have *nothing!* Yet here you are, accusing me of being, what was that—*defensive?*" I shook my head and returned to the plates.

"Yeah. Because you are."

"Fine. I'm defensive. Happy?"

"And you love me."

"Sure, I love you. Now, please stop talking and clean the dishes."

"Come on. There's nothing to guard against, okay? I'm just being me, and simply me."

Me, me, me. It's all about *me*.

"Anna, just..."

"Cris. I already have you figured out. Why? Because you are simply *you!* You act, I watch. You speak, I listen. Show me something, I look. And this basic observation tells me who you really are."

"But..."

"And that's all there is to know!" I resumed scrubbing the plates.

He tried to control his growing exasperation. "Okay. So I threw a lot of crap that first time we went out. And the next day I flake, which was totally fucking stupid of..."

"Will you please stop swearing?"

"I'm sorry. Fine, so I screwed up. I guess I hardly did anything right. But I'm trying..."

"And stop using that 'poor me, I always mess up' *pity-me* approach. It's *pathetic*."

"What?" His voice was broken, hurting. "But I'm not... Anna, just give me another chance."

"Why?"

"Well... Because I..."

"Because *what!*" I interrupted him. "Can't you say it straight? How will we ever understand each other if you don't tell me what you want to say!"

He rolled his eyes. "Jesus."

"I said, stop swearing! And if you can't help it because, 'Oh, this is who I am, Anna!' really Cris, please—spare me your *westernized* profanity."

He shook his head. "I'm sorry. I just can't help it sometimes."

I refused to comment on his flimsy words.

"Anna, just let me in."

"I did. And you stood me up."

"I know, but..."

"*Me!* Of all people."

"Look..."

"I *am* looking, Cris! If you have anything else to say, then *say it!*"

He was silent.

I narrowed my eyes. "You see? Once again—*nothing*." I scoffed at him, returned to the dishes, and tried not to smile.

What now, Cris? How far were you willing to go—for *me!*

He stared at me for several moments. "Fine! So it's hopeless! I'll just finish this stuff, and I am leaving you alone for good!"

I glanced at him. He angrily slotted a plate onto the rack. I looked away and was suddenly confused. Wait... that's it? He's giving up?! He wasn't going to fight for this? He wasn't going to fight for *me*!?

You are *not* turning your back on me, Cris! I am not yet done with you! *Think*, Anna, do something, regain *control*. Bait him, lure him back—before you end up *losing* him! Before he walks out the...

Glass shattered! I jumped and was jolted from my thoughts! A plate had slipped from the rack and crashed on the floor.

Cris and I stared at the broken glass. He then shook his head, got on his knees, and began picking up the shattered plate. I watched for several moments as he quietly gathered the broken pieces.

I then began to realize I was being too harsh. I believed he could do it; he gave it his best, but I pushed him too far... I should cut him some slack; I should give him another chance.

And he was right—he intimidated me, I didn't want him to hurt me, I was being too defensive...

I wanted to apologize for mocking him, for playing my games. Instead, I got on my knees and helped him.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled.

"It's okay, Cris. It's just a plate."

Together, now, we picked up the broken pieces in silence. I then got a broom and swept the remaining bits. He resumed cleaning the dishes.

"I'll be more careful this time," he said with a weak smile.

I glanced at him and smiled back. I'll be more careful as well, Cris.

And I am sorry, too.

AFTER WE finished washing the dishes, I walked Cris to the gate.

"Thanks for dinner," I said. "It was really good, especially the steak."

"I'm glad you liked it. And thanks as well for, you know... letting me in."

I smiled. "My mother let you in, not me."

He smiled back. "Right."

He took a cigarette from his pocket and lit a stick. I watched him as he smoked.

"I hate smokers," I then said.

He looked at me. "Really? So that makes me an exception. Because you love me."

I chuckled. "Cris, please. Stop it."

"Why do you hate smokers?"

"Because."

"Because?" He grinned. "You should complete your sentences, you know. How will we ever understand each other if you don't say what you want to say?"

I smiled. He was *mirroring* me, too... Interesting.

"Because Cris, my father died of a heart attack. He smoked too much."

Cris nodded and thought to himself.

"Actually," he then said, "I can quit if I really want to."

"Sure. I believe you."

"Seriously, Anna. Just you wait."

I swept away the smoke with my hand. "If you quit, people close to you will appreciate it. Like your girlfriend."

He scowled. "I doubt I'd stop all because of her."

I doubted that as well.

"Then think about the people you care about," I said. "Your future family, your kids."

"No," he replied. "I won't think of them when I quit. If I stop, I'm doing it for me."

I paused for a moment. Doing it for you, and *you* alone? I liked that...

Cris took another puff. We were silent for a while.

"Hey," he then said, "since I've been to your place, you should visit mine."

I raised my eyebrows a little. "So, you're asking me out again?" I was suddenly aware of my words. I scolded myself silently. No more games, Anna.

"Well, sure..." he replied. "If you'd like that."

I more than just *liked* that. "That's fine, Cris."

"When are you free?"

"Tomorrow," I said. "Morning," I added.

"Okay. Breakfast sounds good."

"No. I meant... I'll be free starting tomorrow morning."

"So... you're good the whole day?" He started smiling.

I hesitated; I was already lowering my guard. "Yes, the whole day."

"Great... I'll have something planned out."

Good. He'd make the agenda. Tomorrow, I'd take everything in stride.

"It's actually a beach house," he continued. "So dress in... whatever you want?" He grinned.

A day at the beach... I'd finally see what lay under his tank top...

"And if you liked the food this evening, we've got more," he said.

That's right. *More...* I wondered if what lay under his shirt would be even yummier... I started to smile.

"Why the smile, Anna?"

"Nothing." Read my mind, Cris. I smiled at him even more.

"Okay... So... I guess I'll pick you up at nine then?"

"You'll *pick me up*—" I looked into his eyes. "At nine?"

He held the gaze. "Why, you want sooner?"

We stared at each other for several moments. He wasn't letting up the gaze. I started to smile... And then—I wanted to laugh with *delight!*

I looked away, bit my lip, and stopped myself from smiling.

"Anna."

I cleared my throat. "What?"

"May I kiss you goodnight?"

God, he was so fast.

It was so *thrilling!*

"No," I replied. "You stink!" I frowned at his cigarette.

He rolled his eyes and chuckled. "Fine, fine."

"Cris, really. Smoking is bad, so please stop. Do it for you."

He studied me for a few seconds. "Do it for you?" He nodded. "We'll see."

He then smiled. "So, goodnight then."

"Goodnight."

As I returned to my house, I was nothing but smiles.

Tomorrow, Cris would be in for a treat.

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*** *Dear Reader of Orange,* ***

Thank you very much for reading "Orange, the Color of Sunset."

You have gone through the Prologue up to Chapter 9, the seemingly shallow "summer romance fluff." That was the calm before the storm. The "fling-thing" phase is over; from hereon, the story will pivot *hard*.

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Thank you once again for reading these sample chapters of Orange!