

THE PULL OF GRAVITY . By Brett Battles

## CHAPTER ONE

I couldn't help feeling a sense of failure. On the surface, I'd accomplished what I'd come back to the Philippines to do. The sale of my stake in a bar in Angeles City had been finalized three days ago. Sure, the money wasn't exactly what I'd hoped, but when is it ever? I was just glad to get it over with. With the bar sold, presumably my last tie to the Philippines was gone.

But Nicky Valenti, one of my ex-pat friends who still lived there, said something the night before I was supposed to leave Angeles and the islands forever that changed my plans. "I hear Isabel's on Boracay," he told me. That was it. One small nugget dropped into a larger conversation about nothing. I didn't ask who he heard this from, or even if the information was reliable.

The truth was, in the few days I'd been back in Angeles, I'd found myself glancing into the faces of the girls as they passed me on the street, wondering if I might spot Isabel Reyes. When I didn't, I felt a sense of relief. Three years earlier, she'd returned to her home province. Maybe, just maybe, she'd stayed. It would have been the best thing for her. But if Nicky was right, she hadn't stayed. Instead, she'd come back to the life.

It was the money, most likely. Or perhaps life back home had become unbearable. Probably both. Whatever the reason, my heart sank a little knowing she was working again. Yet, selfishly, I couldn't also help but feel that maybe I'd be able to find the answers to the questions that still plagued me, and that the memories I lived with every day might finally be put to rest.

If Isabel was on Boracay Island, I had to find her.

After I said goodbye to Nicky, I went back to my hotel room and made a call to Bangkok.

"I need to stay a little longer," I said into my cell phone. "A few days. Maybe a week at most."

"Of course," Natt told me. She didn't sound surprised.

When I was through explaining to her what had transpired while I was in Angeles, she said, "Take as long as you need. It's okay."

"You know I have to do this," I said.

"I know. I want you to. Don't worry about me."

“I always worry about you.”

“I know that, too.” I could almost hear her smiling through the phone.

“*Phom rak khun,*” I said.

“I love you, too.”

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I left the following morning for Boracay.

For the next three days I looked for Isabel without success. Though the island wasn't that large, there were plenty of opportunities for us to miss each other. My search could have gone on for weeks, and the results would have been the same, but I just couldn't bring myself to give up. Not yet.

Two more days, I decided. If I couldn't find her by then, I'd know it just wasn't meant to be.

A day and a half later I was tired and depressed and annoyed at my continued failure. Instead of searching the streets again, I decided I needed a break and went for a quick dip in the ocean. The water was warm and inviting, and I felt my stress drop a notch. I swam for twenty minutes, then stretched out on the beach, and absently flipped through the pages of a magazine I'd taken from my hotel. My mind finally began to accept that it was time to stop this fruitless search and go home.

I guess that was why, as I watched the beautiful girl walk down the shore toward me, that I didn't realize it was Isabel until she walked past.

An avalanche of memories cascaded through my mind. Isabel at the bar. Isabel, Larry and I on a shopping trip to Manila. Larry and I playing pool down at The Eight Ball.

By the time I recovered, she'd picked a spot not twenty feet away and laid out a towel. She wasn't alone, of course. There was a guy with her, another member of the Fat White Guys Brigade. He put his towel on the beach next to hers. Instead of sitting, he kind of half fell on his ass, grunting loudly as he did. When he talked to her, I couldn't make out the words but I detected an accent. German, maybe, or Dutch.

After a few minutes, Isabel, lying on her stomach with her chin propped up on her hands, began casually looking around the beach. No doubt she was checking to see if there was anyone around she knew. Her eyes paused on me for a second. I probably looked vaguely familiar, but when she couldn't place me, she continued on.

It wasn't surprising. We hadn't seen each other since she left Angeles. Back then, I was also

a member of the brigade. The Jay Bradley that Isabel knew was an obese slob who thought he was “just a little heavy.” His hair was a brown bush that always needed a trim. Sometimes he shaved, sometimes he didn’t. And then there was his uniform: dark blue cargo shorts that reached below his knees, and a T-shirt, either black or maroon. That former Jay had a dozen T-shirts of each color and three pairs of the shorts.

That was Philippine Jay. Three years gone and good riddance.

By the time Isabel glanced at me that afternoon, I’d lost nearly eighty pounds. My hair was shorter, too. Close-cropped and a hell of a lot more gray. Yet even with the gray, I looked younger. I’d been working out, and, for the first time in nearly forty years, I was in shape. As far as wardrobe, Bangkok Jay had no maroon or black T-shirts, and the only shorts he wore were khaki.

But Isabel looked nearly unchanged. A few years older, sure, but when you were talking about going from twenty-three to twenty-six, that really didn’t mean much. Her thick, black hair was about the same length as I remembered, reaching just below her shoulder blades. She was around five foot three and slim as ever. Her skin *was* a few shades darker than I recalled, but living so close to the beach now undoubtedly accounted for that.

I guess the most shocking thing to me was that she was showing a lot of skin. The Isabel I knew wouldn’t have been caught dead outside in a bikini. But here on the beautiful Boracay beach she was wearing a white two-piece suit that only covered what it was supposed to.

It wasn’t that I hadn’t seen her in a bikini before. She’d often worn one inside the bar, but that was work. Outside the bar, it had been strictly one-piece suits if she decided to swim in public at all.

Her face was still her best feature. Larry once told me every time he looked at her, time stopped. I told him he was full of shit, but I knew what he meant. She had large, dark eyes, with lids that seemed to open only halfway. And when she smiled, her whole face lit up.

Yet there was something different about her now. Her...softness was gone. Well, maybe not softness, exactly. Her innocence. That was it. Her innocence had been wiped away. She looked harder now, had more of an edge. And my guess was that when she smiled these days, it was most likely calculated and lacked the spontaneity Larry had loved. It wasn’t much of a stretch to guess what had triggered the change.

Seeing her, I knew now more than ever that she and I needed to talk. Because Larry was

dead, and the dead lived only through the memories of their friends and family. Larry had no family, and as far as I knew, Isabel and I were his only close friends.

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I continued to read my magazine while keeping an eye on Isabel and her European friend. I should have realized before I came back to the Philippines that Boracay would be the obvious location to find her. It had always been her favorite place. The first time she came here was with Larry, of course. I had been on that trip, too, though I wasn't the important one.

Around four o'clock, I caught movement out of the corner of my eye. By this point I'd finished with the magazine and was absently watching a couple of kids playing in the surf. I glanced in Isabel's direction. She and her foreigner friend were folding up their towels, finished with their afternoon in the sun. After a few moments, they headed back the way they'd come.

Once they were far enough away, I pushed myself to my feet, gave my towel a quick shake, then pulled on my T-shirt and followed.

Not too far up the beach, they turned into the White Sands Resort. I'd stayed there myself once. The small resort was designed so guests didn't feel like they were staying at any old hotel. Individual grass-roofed "huts" surrounded a central main building and swimming pool—the perfect place to bring your family, wife, or new Filipina girlfriend.

I closed the gap a little and followed them past the pool, toward the huts to the right of the main building. At number 23, the fat guy unlocked the door and they went inside.

I made my way back to the bar next to the pool and ordered a Coke. I wasn't sure what I should do next. After all, I couldn't just walk up, knock on their door and ask, "Can Isabel come out and talk?"

When I'd been sitting alone in my hotel room in Angeles, finding Isabel seemed like the hard part. But now that I *had* found her, I realized the talking would be the most difficult. Would she really want to revisit a past she'd probably spent the last few years trying to forget? Just because I'd been unable to dull the memories didn't mean she'd been having the same problem. Was it even fair of me to put her through that?

As I put my empty glass back down on the bar, I'd all but decided my being here was a mistake. *Let her live her life, and you go on living yours, buddy.*

I put a hundred pesos in the cup on the bar in front of me and left.

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The next morning I woke thinking about home. If I left Boracay by noon, I could catch a flight out of Manila that evening. I had a new life in Thailand, and I was anxious to get back to it. I could actually wake up in my own bed tomorrow. A phone call to Thai Airways confirmed there was a flight that night with a few seats available. But when the operator asked if I wanted to purchase a ticket, I hesitated.

As much as I wanted to be done with the Philippines, I knew if I didn't at least try to talk to Isabel, I never would be. And that wouldn't be fair to my new life, to Natt. Instead of booking a flight for that night, I made a reservation for one leaving two days later. *That should be enough time*, I thought, to find her, to talk to her. Assuming, of course, she'd talk to me.

I'd lived in the Philippines for six years, all in Angeles City. For a while, I had planned on spending the rest of my life there. But things changed.

I changed.

So I escaped while I had the opportunity, because if I hadn't, I would still be one of the old, fat, dumb white guys. Or, rather, older and fatter and dumber...and drunker.

Bangkok was my home now. I'd found a wife there. We owned a couple of struggling English-style pubs. We were even talking about having a child. I had begun to regain myself, as much as I could, anyway.

When I got the call about the offer for my stake in the bar, I talked about it with my wife. Natt knew what my life had been like in the Philippines. She knew what I used to do. I'd told her everything before we got married. So, though it probably shouldn't have, it surprised me when she said I should return to the island and finalize the deal. When I then suggested she come with me, she kissed me and said one of us needed to stay and take care of the business. What she was really saying was, "You need to go on your own. Do what you need to do, then come back to me whole."

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Contrary to popular belief back on Fields Avenue in Angeles City, Isabel and I never slept together. Our relationship wasn't like that. In truth, there was something about her that reminded me of Lily, my stepdaughter—former stepdaughter, that is. Lily had been the best part of my marriage to Maureen. It had hurt her so much when her mother and I divorced that she had to be pried off me the day I said goodbye. It still hurt *me* every time I thought about that.

The normal age for girls to start work in the bars along Fields was eighteen, but Isabel

arrived in Angeles at the ancient age of twenty-one. I think it was her smile that reminded me most of Lily, that and her innocence. I guess that's why I took her under my wing. For the first several months, I was able to steer her away from anything too harmful. Until Larry showed up.

On Boracay the next morning, I ate breakfast around eight a.m. at the small hotel where I was staying, then set out to find Isabel. When I arrived at the White Sands Resort, I did a quick walk-through of all the common areas but there was no sign of her or her friend. I guess I didn't expect it to be that easy, but I had hoped.

I ordered a tall glass of orange juice from the outside bar and took a seat next to the pool, hoping Isabel and her date would make an appearance. By then, it was after nine a.m., and half a dozen others were eating in the restaurant. As was my habit since arriving on the island, I was wearing my swimsuit under my shorts, so after I finished my juice, I decided to go for a dip.

It was sometime during my sixth or seventh lap when I saw Isabel's friend walk by. At first I thought he was alone, but a moment later, one of the hotel staff followed, lugging a large suitcase. No Isabel. I pulled myself out of the water, toweled off quickly, threw on my shirt and shorts, then made my way after him.

The fat man was in the final process of checking out when I caught up to him. I recognized his accent now—Dutch. And this close to him, I realized I'd seen him before. His name was Henrik or Hendrik or something like that. He used to be a once-or-twice-a-year visitor to Angeles, and I assumed he still was. Like many of the regular visitors, I had bought him a few beers back in the day. But while I knew who he was, there was no way he would recognize me.

As he turned to leave, I took an innocent step to the side, blocking his way.

"Excuse me," he said.

"Oh, sorry," I said. As I stepped out of his way, our eyes met. "Aren't you...? Yeah." I grinned. "You're the guy who was with that real beauty last night."

He returned my grin, but said nothing.

"You leave her sleeping back in the room?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Just checked out."

I nodded in comprehension. "There's always the next trip, right?"

"Right."

He headed for the front door.

"Hey," I called out just before he exited. "You mind letting me know where you found her?"

He stopped and looked back, grinning again. “Angie’s,” he told me. “Her name is Crystal.”

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I knew exactly where Angie’s was. It wasn’t really a go-go bar. They didn’t officially have those on the island. It was just a bar that happened to be frequented by girls who’d go home with a guy for the right price. If Isabel had indeed returned to the life, it would be the logical place to find her. I had actually paid Angie’s a visit the first night I arrived but Isabel hadn’t been there. It looked like I’d be making another visit.

By Angeles standards, the place came in on the low end of the scale. Small, unpolished, even dirty. When I walked in, the latest pop-music crap blared from several speakers mounted on the walls. The only other person present was the bartender, a woman who looked to be in her thirties, with hot pink lipstick and her hair in pigtails in an attempt to look younger. To me it only made her look sad. A former dancer, no doubt, forced to move on to other duties.

I sat on a stool toward the middle of the bar and ordered a San Miguel Light. I didn’t drink that often anymore, but I didn’t want to look out of place.

“Nice bar,” I said, after she put the bottle in front of me.

Just like Angeles, there was an insulated beer holder wrapped around the bottom of the bottle and a napkin wrapped around the open top. The idea was to use the napkin to wipe off the lip of the bottle before taking your first drink.

“Your first time here?” she asked as she began stacking glasses on the back bar.

“A buddy told me about it. Thought I’d check it out.” I raised my bottle and took a drink.

“You have lots of fun here. Don’t worry,” she said. “Girls come out soon.”

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Daisy.”

“Not a very Filipina name.”

She looked over her shoulder at me and smiled, then returned to her work.

“I’m Jay.”

“Hi, Jay.”

Letting her work in silence for a bit, I sipped my beer and took in the room. The walls looked as though they hadn’t been painted in years. Whatever the original color was, I had no idea, but now they were an unappealing water-stain brown.

“Is it always this quiet?” I asked.

“Don’t worry. More people be here soon.”

True to her prediction, two girls appeared in the doorway at the back of the bar. They looked at me and smiled, but after a second they disappeared the way they’d come.

I took another drink, finishing off my beer, then put the bottle on the bar. Empties had a very distinctive sound when they knocked against something solid. As I’d hoped, Daisy turned toward me almost immediately.

“You want another?” she asked.

“That would be great.”

She brought me a new bottle.

“My friend told me about a girl he met here,” I said. “What was her name? Christine, Christa, something like that.”

“Crystal?” Daisy asked.

“That could have been it.”

She smiled. “She’s here. Come out in a little bit.”

Ten minutes passed, and I was joined at the bar by two Brits who looked paler than I thought humans could get. We exchanged hellos and they started talking to each other about their plans for the evening. A moment later, the girls finally started coming out.

There were ten of them, all but two dressed in short, Hawaiian-print wrap skirts and red bikini tops. The other two wore white shirts unbuttoned to mid-chest and short black skirts. From experience, I knew these last were the waitresses and the other girls the dancers.

I picked out Isabel almost immediately. She was a dancer, and by far the best-looking of the bunch. I wasn’t the only one who noticed. The two Brits gestured in her direction and whispered to each other.

I called the bartender over. “Which one is Crystal?” I asked.

Daisy looked past me until she spotted Isabel. “That’s her,” she said, pointing. “You want me to call her over?”

“Please.”

“Crystal,” Daisy called out. Because of the loud music, she had to do it twice before Isabel looked over. When she did, Daisy pointed at me.

Isabel gave me a quick look, then affixed what I guessed was a working smile on her face and headed over. When she was only a couple of feet away, she hesitated for a split second before

continuing toward me. I could feel the two Brits looking in our direction, undoubtedly cursing themselves for not moving more quickly.

Isabel didn't stop until her leg rubbed against mine.

"Hello," she said. She held her hand out to me, and we shook. "I'm Crystal."

Her voice was almost exactly as I remembered it. Soft and kind. But there was also an edge to it now that hadn't been there when I knew her before, a phoniness. She'd become hardened, and I was just another potential money source, a random guy in a long line of faceless, nameless men who represented nothing more than cash and the passage of time.

"Hi, Isabel," I said. "It's Jay."

I could feel her stiffen as I said her real name, then she stepped away from me. Her eyes searched my face, looking for something recognizable.

"Jay," she finally said, her voice so low I could barely hear her.

As she took another step backward, tears began welling in her eyes and she subconsciously raised an arm to cover her bikini top. She tried to say something, but nothing passed her lips. Not quite the greeting I expected.

"You look good," I said, keeping my tone light.

I could see the woman she'd become struggling to reassert herself, the hardened bar girl immune to almost anything. But I knew her before, when she was just Isabel Reyes straight from the provinces. There was no immunity to what I represented. After a moment, she realized this, too. She let out a sudden, violent sob as tears streaked down her cheeks, then she turned and ran for the back door.

## CHAPTER TWO

My memory of when I first met Larry was more his than mine. It was a story he liked to tell when he visited and others were around. It had happened at The Pit Stop, out by the pool.

Meeting Isabel, though, I remembered with complete clarity.

It was a Thursday night, Luau night at The Lounge, when all the girls were dressed in Hawaiian-print bikinis, Mai Tais were half off, and between five and seven p.m. we served a free buffet of pork, pineapple and papaya. Mariella was the one who brought Isabel into the bar. She was Isabel's cousin. Two months later, Mariella left to work at a different bar, but at that time she was still one of ours.

The Lounge wasn't the largest bar on Fields Avenue, but it wasn't the smallest, either. We had a five-foot-wide stage running down the center of the room, bar-style seating on all four sides, and cushioned booths along the right wall. The left side was dominated by the bar itself, manned on any given night by three to five female bartenders. The only male employees visible were Alphonso the busboy and me. It wasn't men the customers came in to see, after all.

The owner of The Lounge was an Aussie named Robbie Bainbridge, who only came to the Philippines about four times a year. The day-to-day operations were left to me, Tommy Wesson and Dandy Doug, The Lounge's three papasans. At least, that was the plan. In reality, I was the de facto bar manager, the other two guys more than happy to leave all the important decisions to me.

When Robbie bought the place, he decided to do a complete redesign, and had the interior done up in bright pinks and silvers. "Like lipstick in metal containers," he'd explained to me. "Sexy." The booths, the stool tops, and the padded rim around the bar were all covered in pink vinyl, while the stool legs, the poles on the stage, and the trim that ran along the top of the walls were all chrome.

As was the custom in bars along Fields, there was one other prominent chrome item in the room. A bell one foot in diameter hung from the ceiling in the front corner. The walls of the bar were mostly covered with mirrors, and the names of customers who'd rung the bell were painted on the surface—in our case—in fluorescent pink.

9/3/06 Harlan "Scooter" Stevens

9/5/06 The Twig Gang from Melbourne

9/5/06 John S. for Nelly

9/6/06 Mark and Susie, last night in Paradise

On and on the names went, taking up nearly two-thirds of the allotted wall space. For fifteen minutes or so, these bell ringers were the bar's most popular customers, because to ring it meant you were buying drinks for all the girls. Depending on the bar, the tab could run between 3500 and 5500 pesos, which at the time was about 60 or 70 U.S. dollars. It was a little pricey, but for that moment the ringer was king. The only one who probably felt better was the papasan because the profit margin was huge. That bell ringing was always music to my ears.

On that particular night, just after Mariella introduced me to Isabel, a guy from Wisconsin got up and gave the bell a whack. As usual, all hell broke loose. The girls stopped what they were doing and turned their attention to their new best friend. Screams of delight, a lot of pointing and excited chatter ensued. Even the music blasting from the state-of-the-art speakers seemed louder.

I nodded to the bartenders to set up the rounds. At The Lounge we went with watered-down shots of tequila for the girls and a straight shot for the ringer. Once they started pouring, I went over and shook the hand of our next addition to the wall of fame.

"You're sure going to make a few friends here tonight," I told him as I pulled a small pad of paper and a pen out of my pocket and handed it to him. "Write down your name and what you want it to say on the wall." I smiled and pointed at where the list currently ended. "We'll get you up in a day or so."

"Cool," he said, grinning.

He was drunk, of course. Few people on Fields weren't by nine p.m., men or women. But he seemed sober enough to enjoy the moment, and I felt confident he'd remember it in the morning. I got his shirt size, and had Alphonso go in back and grab him one of our Lounge T-shirts. In the meantime, the girls were collecting their free shots and making their way over to Wisconsin to plant a kiss on his cheek, another one of our little Lounge customs.

As things started settling down again to a normal level of chaos, I returned to my usual

position at the far end of the bar near the back of the room. From there I could keep an eye on everything. I had Wilma, one of the bartenders, get me another San Miguel, and as I was taking my first sip, I noticed Mariella and Isabel standing at the other end of the bar. Isabel scanned the room, eyes wide in what could only be surprise, while Mariella spoke into her ear. Behind them on the bar were two empty shot glasses.

I had to laugh. Technically, since this was Mariella's night off, she shouldn't have been given a drink, and Isabel, someone I didn't know at that point and therefore not an employee, shouldn't have even been offered one.

Few at the bar could say no to Mariella, though. It wasn't that she was universally liked, rather the sense of entitlement she oozed intimidated the other girls. Her reputation was further boosted by the fact she was one of the lucky ones. She'd set her hooks in a foreigner deeply enough so that he sent her money every month. Not quite the jackpot of a guy who'd marry her and take her back to his country, but a close second. Mariella's "boyfriend" was an English guy who made it to the Philippines only once a year. She never told me how much she got from him, but the rumor was she received enough to not have to work in the bars anymore. One of the girls said he was even planning on buying Mariella a place of her own.

He was probably sitting in his office in Manchester or Cheltenham or London or wherever the hell he called home, thinking he'd created a new, better life for Mariella, that he'd freed her from the madness that was the scene in Angeles. Maybe he even thought she was going to college now, or a trade school at least. Anything that would have kept her from having to spread her legs for a living.

But guys like him just didn't get it. Once you fell into the life, it was hard to ever get out. It was better than a drug. The booze, the party, the adoration, the cash. So while Mr. England was thinking he'd "saved" Mariella, she was actually out almost every night, trawling for another guy she could add to her collection.

I don't mean to say some of the girls couldn't get out of the life. With the help of their foreign boyfriends, many did. Still, the sad truth was there were many more girls like Mariella there.

When she noticed I was looking at them, she smiled and motioned with her hands in a way that said, "Can we come over?"

I nodded, and a moment later they joined me. Mariella introduced her cousin as I took

another pull from my beer. There was no need to tell me why she had brought Isabel over. It was for a job. That's how it always was. Girls who worked in the bars would bring in relatives or girls they knew from back home, then they in turn would eventually bring in other girls. You get the idea.

I gave Isabel a once-over, and was immediately struck by her innocence. It almost made me tell her to go back to her province and get a shop job. Perhaps if I'd thought she would listen to me, I would have. But I knew the reality was that if I made the suggestion Mariella would have just taken her to another bar, and within a few days Isabel would've been working on Fields despite any attempt on my part to "save" her. So I fooled myself into believing that at least if she worked at The Lounge, her innocence wouldn't get ripped away so violently.

"What did you say your name was?" I asked.

"Her name is Isabel," Mariella said. "She's my cousin."

"You're looking for a job?"

"Yes. She is," Mariella answered.

"What kind of job? Bartender? Waitress? Door girl? Dancer?"

"Dancer, I think," Mariella said. "It's a good place to start."

I looked at Mariella. "Does she talk?"

Mariella moved a hand to her mouth and let out a little laugh. "Sorry, Papa Jay," she said, then turned to her cousin. "Tell him what you want to do."

Isabel, who had yet to look me in the eyes, glanced up quickly then returned her gaze to the floor. "I would like to be a dancer," she said in a quiet voice.

"Have you ever danced before?"

She looked at me again, this time holding my gaze for almost two seconds before shaking her head and looking away.

"I've been working with her," Mariella jumped in. "Teaching her a few moves. Explaining to her how the job works."

"Really?" I said. I put a finger under Isabel's chin and lifted her face up. "Why don't you tell me how you think things work here?"

At first I thought she wasn't going to say anything, but finally she spoke, her voice stronger than before. "I dance. Like them," she said, nodding toward the stage where a dozen girls were gyrating with varying degrees of enthusiasm to the music. "If a customer wants to talk to me, I

go sit with them.” I removed my finger from under her chin, but she continued to look at me. “If they buy me a drink, I get half the money. If they want to take me out of the bar, they pay bar fine and I get a share of that. If they want to give me a tip, it’s all mine.”

My eyes narrowed. “How old are you?”

“Twenty-one.”

“So you’re not a cherry girl?” I asked. Cherry girl was a term that meant pretty much what it sounded like—a girl who hadn’t had sex and, therefore, wouldn’t go all the way with a customer. Occasionally, it also meant a girl who might have had sex but not for pay.

Isabel’s eyes flicked over at Mariella, then back at me. “No. Not a cherry girl.”

“Of course not,” Mariella jumped in again. “She know how to boom-boom good.”

“Bullshit,” I said. I got up quickly and walked around the corner into the men’s room to take a piss. As I was in the middle of things, Mariella walked in.

“Okay,” she said. “Maybe she is a cherry girl, but her family needs money, *di ba?* She’ll be good worker. She won’t cause you problems. Come on, Papa Jay, you know she’ll be popular.”

“Can I finish peeing, please?” I asked.

“Sure, sure. We wait for you at the bar.”

Alone again, I zipped up, then washed my hands in the sink. Mariella was right. Isabel would be very popular. I knew that the moment I saw her. There were different levels of beauty on Fields, and Isabel would be right there near the top. Depending on how she adapted, she had the chance of becoming a superstar.

I wasn’t surprised when I walked back out into the bar and found two guys talking to Mariella and Isabel. I was even less surprised when it appeared both of the guys seemed more interested in Isabel than her cousin. Mariella at first appeared proud of this, but then, when neither of the guys answered one of her questions, she looked confused, then angry. I was the only one who noticed, though. A moment later she was happy, professional Mariella again.

I watched for a few more seconds, then walked up and told Isabel’s admirers I needed to talk to the girls. The guys seemed annoyed, but once they realized I was the papasan, and I offered them a round on the house, they backed down. I then moved the girls to a quieter portion of the bar.

“You can’t start until you have your papers,” I said to Isabel.

“We’ll go tomorrow,” Mariella said. “Get everything done.”

“We’ll start you next week,” I said. “Wednesday okay?”

Both of the girls nodded.

“A hundred pesos a day, plus your share of lady drinks and EWRs.”

Isabel looked confused.

“Early work release,” Mariella explained. “Same as bar fine.”

“Thank you,” Isabel said. “Thank you so much.”

“Are you staying with Mariella?”

“Only for now,” Mariella said. “Once she meets some of the girls I think it would be good for her to move in with them. Make new friends, *di ba?*”

More likely Mariella didn’t want her pretty cousin cramping her style. I smiled and said, “Okay.”

“Thank you, Papa Jay,” Mariella said.

“Thank you, Papa Jay,” Isabel echoed.

They headed for the door, but before they got there one of Mariella’s friends ran up and started talking to her.

“Isabel,” I called out. She turned and looked back at me. “I just want you to know you don’t have to go out on a bar fine with anyone if you don’t want to. And even if you do, you don’t have to boom-boom.”

There was relief in the smile she gave me. “Thank you,” she mouthed.

That had been six years earlier. It was almost as if it was a story from someone else’s life. Philippine Jay’s, not mine.

Almost.

### CHAPTER THREE

I found Isabel huddled on the floor in a back room at Angie's. Though I'd never been in this particular room before, the surroundings were familiar. It was a changing room, lit by two bare bulbs hanging from the ceiling, and littered with piles of clothes and shoes. The only furnishings were three well-worn chairs and a chipped full-length mirror that leaned against the wall next to the door.

"What are you doing? You can't be in here." The voice came from behind me. I glanced over my shoulder and saw another Filipina who was probably the unofficial mamasan.

Customers were never allowed in the back. I knew this rule only too well, but at that moment I didn't care.

Ignoring the question, I moved quickly across the room and knelt next to Isabel. "It's okay. It's only me," I said softly.

"I call the police if you don't leave now!" the mamasan yelled.

I whipped my head around, and glared at her, my face hard as stone. "Then call them."

The woman, a little fireplug who had to be pushing fifty, turned and rattled off something in Tagalog to one of the girls standing behind her. After so much time, my command of the local tongue was rusty, but I knew she never mentioned police. After she finished, the girl turned and pushed her way through a group of other girls who'd apparently also been following us.

"Isabel," I said, returning my attention to her. "It's just Jay. I'm not going to hurt you."

"I know who you are," she sobbed.

The mamasan fired off another string of Tagalog, this time directed at Isabel. Rusty or not, I was able to pick up a little. "What does this *something something* want?" Her meaning would have been clear even if I hadn't understood any of it. She was blaming Isabel for my presence.

I turned back to her, willing myself to remember the right words, then said with authority, "*Police ako. Umalis ka dyan.*" Basically I told her I was with the police and to leave us the hell alone. It was a handy phrase, and one of the first bits of Tagalog I'd learned when I started working in the Philippines.

I was sure she didn't buy it. I looked about as Filipino as the pope, but she was smart enough

not to take a chance. She gave me one last glare then turned and left, pulling the door closed behind her.

Isabel, still huddled in the corner, was looking at me now. There was no fear in her eyes. What I saw was shame.

I guess I should have expected her reaction. Even though our whole history together had been spent in and around bars just like Angie's, it didn't matter. I wasn't just her former papasan, I was her past. I was someone who'd known she'd gotten out of the game, a member of her surrogate family, for God's sake. And I'd just walked in and found her working at a bar again.

I held out a hand, careful not to actually touch her. "It's okay," I said. "I'm your friend, remember? I'm just happy to see you."

Maybe it was that last thing that did it, or maybe she just had more shame than she could bear on her own. Instead of taking my hand, she fell into me, wrapping her arms around my neck, and burying her head in my shoulder. The sobs and tears started again, only this time the surprise of being discovered was gone. These were tears of resignation.

When her crying subsided again, I asked, "Where are your clothes?"

She nodded toward a pair of jeans and a black T-shirt folded neatly against the wall and sitting beside an expensive-looking pair of shoes. It was in the small things that the girls tried to retain some of their dignity.

"Why don't you put them on?" I said.

Though I'd seen her nude at The Lounge hundreds of times before, I turned my back as she changed. This wasn't The Lounge, and we weren't those people anymore.

"I'm ready," she said in a voice stronger than I had expected.

I turned around and smiled, then held out my hand. "Let's go."

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The mamasan and most of the girls were standing in the hallway as we left. There were two new arrivals with them—scrawny, unsmiling Filipino guys trying to look tough. I could have taken either of them easily, maybe even both together, but as it turned out, I didn't need to worry. The mamasan shouted a question in Tagalog, then Isabel said something that sent a murmur through the dancers gathered behind Mama. There was another exchange between the older woman and Isabel. Then, after a tense moment of silence, the mamasan let out a sigh of exasperation, then turned and pushed the girls out of her way as she stomped off toward the bar.

The girls that remained parted as I led Isabel in the same direction. Several giggled as we passed. One touched Isabel on the shoulder, and asked her in English, “Are you going to be okay?”

“I’ll be okay,” Isabel said.

As we entered the main room, I could see the mamasan standing near the bar. She pretended to not even notice us as we walked toward the exit.

“Sorry if I got you in trouble,” I said as I opened the front door.

“I can handle it,” Isabel replied. She slipped outside and I followed.

It was early still, barely seven p.m., but the sky was already growing dark.

“Are you hungry?” I asked.

She shrugged and leaned against me. The ordeal of seeing me again had weakened her. To a casual observer, she probably looked like my girlfriend for the evening. I certainly wasn’t the only Western guy with a beautiful Filipina on his arm.

“How about some spaghetti?” I suggested. It had once been her favorite food.

She smiled, real this time, or as real as she could muster. Still, some habits were hard to break, and instead of saying yes, she said, “It’s up to you.”

• • •

I took her to The Rendezvous, one of several Italian restaurants on the island. There were few customers, so we had our choice of tables.

Now that she was sitting across from me, I didn’t know what to say. Though I knew a lot about Isabel and Larry’s time together, I’d only been a tangential player in their story. It was my desire to know the rest that had taken me back to Boracay, back to Isabel, but did I have any right asking her about it?

Finally, I just said, “Feeling better?”

She sighed, then took a sip of the wine we’d ordered before she answered. “Maybe I cannot go back to Angie’s.”

I smiled. “You know how mamasans are. Tell her you’ll slip her a few extra pesos from your next date and she’ll forget everything.”

I’d been trying to make light of the moment, but it wasn’t the right thing to say. The second I alluded to her profession, I could see her pulling back into her shell.

“Hey, don’t worry about it. I’m your ‘big bro,’ remember?” I said, using one of the names

she used to call me.

She smiled a little at that. “What was it they used to say back in Angeles?” she asked. ““You can take the girl out of the bar...’ Something like that?”

““You can take the girl out of the bar, but you can’t take the bar out of the girl.””

“I guess I’m proof you can’t even take the girl out of the bar.”

She flashed me another smile, but I could see tears gathering at the corners of her eyes again. I could have lied to her, and told her she wasn’t like that, but she would have known I wasn’t telling the truth.

“So then why are you working again?”

She snorted. “Why does any girl work at a bar?”

“Because the dancing outfits are so cute?”

She picked up her napkin and threw it at me, laughing a little as she did so. “You’re crazy.”

“A little bit,” I said, falling into a scripted banter we’d played out many times years ago.

“More than a little bit,” she replied, following suit.

“Then someone better come take me away, because I’m not going to change.”

We both laughed loudly, causing several customers to look over.

“See how you are?” she said. It was a playful phrase bar girls used all the time, only I’d never heard it come out of Isabel’s mouth before.

I reached over and placed my hand on top of hers. “It’s really good to see you, Isabel.”

She looked at me, her face suddenly serious again. “It’s really good to see you, too, big bro.”

• • •

“No wonder you’re so skinny,” she said when we finished eating. In the same amount of time she managed to put away half a basket of bread and a large plate of spaghetti and meatballs, I only finished half of my penne arrabbiata.

I smiled, “You were pretty hungry.”

“No lunch today,” she explained.

I put some money on the table, and we left.

“What now?” she asked as we stepped into the warm Philippine evening.

“Thought maybe we’d go over to my hotel.”

She looked at me with a mixture of surprise and confusion.

“Just to talk, baby sis.” I held up my left hand. “I’m a married man now.”

“What?” she asked as she hit me on the shoulder as hard as she could. “I thought that was just something to keep the girls from falling in love with you.”

“Nope. The real thing.”

“Let me see.”

She grabbed at my hand before I even had a chance to hold it out again, then she bent down to take a close look at the band that circled my finger.

“White gold?” she asked, looking up at me.

I nodded.

She turned her attention back to the ring. “The design looks Asian.”

“Thai,” I said.

“Thai?” She sounded like she didn’t understand me.

“My wife is Thai.”

“Ah,” she said knowingly. “A bar girl.”

“No. A businesswoman.” Natt had never been a bar girl.

We walked in silence, Isabel seemingly lost in thought. After a while, she said, “Why you married a Thai girl? Why not Filipina?”

I shrugged. “She was the one I fell in love with.”

True enough, but there was more to it than that. Like my desire when I moved away from the islands to get everything Filipino out of my system, so that maybe I’d live past my sixtieth birthday. The Philippines had been like a drug that sucked me in and numbed my senses. I didn’t trust myself to break the habit any other way than cold turkey.

My answer seemed to satisfy her, though, and we walked on quietly for a few more blocks.

As we approached my hotel, a playful smile creased her face. “So where is she?”

“Who?”

“Your wife.”

“At home,” I said. “In Bangkok.”

“Bangkok?” she said surprised. “How long you been there?”

“A few years.”

She considered this for a moment. “This wife, does she know you are here?”

“Of course she does.”

“But does she know why?”

I laughed, and said yes.

She stopped and looked at me, eyes wide. “Your wife let you come here to have sex with Filipinas?”

I gently pushed on her shoulder to get us moving again. “I’m not here to have sex with Filipinas.”

It was her turn to laugh. And why not? She’d seen thousands of men come through Angeles and now Boracay, all of them, to one extent or another, arriving with the common goal of getting laid.

“If not boom-boom, then why did you come here?” she asked.

Boom-boom was bar girl slang for sex. I hadn’t heard it in over two years, and it made me pause a second before answering. “Business,” I told her.

She looked at me, raising her eyebrows. I explained how I had tried to sell my share in The Lounge before I’d moved away, but with no luck. It wasn’t until recently that I’d finally received a decent enough offer.

At the hotel, I took her over to the bar that overlooked the beach, and bought a bottle of wine. We situated ourselves at a table as far away from everyone else as possible. I could feel memories and feelings and habits from the years I had spent in Angeles straining to reassert themselves. But I had boxed them up pretty tight, so even if there was a slip here and there, I knew I could keep them in check.

We talked for a while about life on Boracay, how it was different than living in her province, and definitely different than her life in Angeles. We didn’t touch on her job except in the most general terms.

When we were halfway through the bottle, she said, “You said you were here on business. That explains Angeles, but...are you in Boracay on business, too?”

Just beyond the bar, the waves crashed rhythmically on the beach. Out on the sea, I could see the lights of a ship heading back to the main island. I watched for several seconds as they dipped and rose through the swells before I turned back to Isabel.

“No,” I told her. “I came here to find you.”