

# Manila Marriage App

## 1

With ten minutes to kill before my flight boarded, I reached into my purse for the letter from Dr. Timothy Flynn. Smoothing the creased page, I read the words emailed a few weeks before:

*Miss Callahan,*

*The marriage application you submitted has been approved. You will be happy to know you passed scrutiny on all five sections with commendable marks. I am particularly pleased with the informative answers you furnished on the essay questions (section four), and the fact that you have read numerous books in the past year—even if most of them were fiction—has unquestionably placed you ahead of the rest of the applicants.*

*Your PhD in computer science indicates that you are likely intelligent and gifted in several fields of study. I have urgent need of such a partner, one who possesses a keen mind, and a rational outlook on life. I will not put up with shallow, brainless women.*

*By return email, please inform me of when you are available to come to Pacific Rim Theological Seminary, where I am the church history professor and academic dean. Sometime in May would be best for me, but June or July will also be suitable as I am on sabbatical until the end of the summer. I feel a period of two weeks would be a good length of time for us to evaluate each other.*

*I look forward to meeting you at your earliest convenience to discuss the next step in finding a mutually*

*beneficial arrangement for the two of us. A round-trip, first-class airline ticket will be forthcoming when you have made your plans.*

*Blessings in Christ Jesus,*

*Dr. Timothy Flynn*

*P.S. The photograph you attached of yourself is satisfactory, although as per the application instructions, I will also require a picture of your mother. If you would be so kind as to bring one with you, it would be appreciated.*

Phew. The letter had me shaking my head to think men like that still existed, but most of his letter made me squirm—which brought up the question *what was I thinking?* I pulled Dr. Flynn's picture out of the side pocket of my purse and angled it so the light fell full on his face. OK, so maybe his leading man good looks softened the bite of his words—a little. He was one of the finest specimens of manhood I'd ever had the privilege to behold. Nonetheless...Timmy-boy was a first-rate, sexist jerk. Stealing one last look at the photo, I stuffed it back in my purse.

Wasn't it time to leave yet? I peeked at my travel companion, Imelda de la Rosa, the mother of my baby sister, Brianna's, husband. I'd heard good things about her over the years, but this was the first chance I'd had to meet her.

Imelda raised her perfectly shaped eyebrows and squeezed my arm. "Shay, they called for first-class ticket holders. You ready?"

Yeah, I was ready, though I still couldn't figure out how a seminary professor could afford to spring for first class. Either he was desperate, or he wanted to impress me. While I considered those implications, we boarded the jet. I followed Imelda to our high-priced seats in the front section of the plane, the melodic notes

of Chopin's *Sonata Number Two* wafting in the background. To top it off, a flight attendant drifted over with a tray of mouth-watering canapés. My satisfied smile split into a wide grin. Now this was the way to travel.

"Shay, dear? Could you help me stow my bag, please? I can't quite reach." My sunny new companion couldn't have topped five feet, while I, on the other hand, had grown much taller.

"Sure. Happy to." I placed her bag next to mine in the roomy overhead compartment. The plane left the ground as gently as a puff of air, creamy clouds floating past in a bright blue sky. After accepting a soft pillow from another attendant, Imelda cocked her head and asked the question I'd been waiting for. "So...your sister told me you were flying halfway around the world to marry a perfect stranger. Knowing what a jokester Brianna is, I knew she must be messing with me. What's the real story?"

"That *is* the real story. Brianna wasn't kidding."

"Shay, you can't be serious." Imelda knit her brow and shook a breath mint into her mouth.

"Yep. As serious as an overdrawn bank account. I filled out an honest-to-goodness marriage application, and here I am flying over the Pacific. Apparently, I'm Dr. Timothy Flynn's frontrunner." Did that sound as bizarre as I thought it did? With a touch of defiance, I fixed my gaze on her. "I bet you think that's stupid, huh?"

"You've never met this guy, and you know next to nothing about him. I'm sure you have your reasons, but why would a pretty girl like you want to marry a man you're not in love with?" Her short dove-gray curls, the exact color of my favorite pair of flannel

pajamas, bobbed with a shake of her head.

"It isn't about love. Yes, I know this story's straight out of the Wild West mail order bride handbook, and I have often questioned my sanity..." *What in the world was I doing flying to meet a complete stranger 10,000 miles from home?* But then, I figured, *why not?* A little excitement would be good for me.

With her almond-shaped eyes and flawless skin, it was hard to guess Imelda's age, but she acted like the kindly granny she was. She put a warm, comforting hand on my shoulder. "Love has everything to do with marriage, but nevertheless, I do envy you. If I were your age, I might do the same thing myself. So tell me. How did you learn about this mysterious man?"

Now that was a story. I kicked off my new shoes and crossed my ankles. "It all started as kind of a lark. A couple of weeks ago, Brianna dropped by after one of her church services, and I made us lunch. As usual, I was busy working and she, also as usual, was lounging at the kitchen table reading some Christian magazine. While I was busy roasting a chicken and mashing the potatoes, she found a small advertisement in the classified section. A missionary was searching for a wife, and he invited interested women to fill out an application."

Imelda's eyes sparkled with merriment. "My! Now, that is extraordinary."

"After Brianna and I quit laughing, she said, 'Why don't you check it out? You fit the criteria. You're female, single, between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-five, and you're a Christian.'"

My sister was right about my being thirty-one and single, but the Christian part was iffy. I wasn't sure where God and I stood. Sure, I'd given my naïve ten-

year-old heart to Jesus, but by the time I'd hit college, I'd grown out of that childishness. Still, I was good at faking it. I knew all the right words and phrases from listening to my churchy little sister.

I shifted a bit to face my captive audience. "Then that darling sister of mine had the nerve to remind me I clearly didn't have any prospects, I wasn't getting any younger, and I hadn't been on a date in months—all of which is true. What could it hurt to apply? I figured it was probably a gag, anyway. And that's how it started."

Imelda rested her elbow on the armrest and her chin on her palm. "But aren't you afraid this guy might turn out to be a psycho killer or something?"

Her kindhearted concern touched me. "Not really. He's legit. He sent me a list of several references, including one from an old professor at Yale, and another from his seminary president. Everyone I called spouted effusive praise for Dr. Flynn. And there was a short, but sweet, bio on his social media page, not to mention some eye-catching photographs. He's gorgeous. The fact that he's the elusive tall, dark, and handsome, with the most spectacular silver-gray eyes, made the decision pretty simple."

I caught my new buddy bouncing those curls again.

"Why not? I have weeks of vacation time coming and I've been longing to do something exciting. Besides, at home, it's just Clark and me. It was easy to get away." Not to mention it could be a blast taking this man down a peg or two. He needed a big-time attitude adjustment, and I was just the woman to give it to him. If only I'd had the opportunity with my last boyfriend...

“Who’s Clark?”

“My black and white tuxedo cat. Short for Clark Kent. He’s the only super man I’ve got.” I raised my hands in a shrug.

An attendant wheeled the beverage cart down the aisle, stopping next to a yawning Imelda. “What can I get you both?” Her pleasing, musical voice exuded cheerfulness. With her slim tan skirt, vibrant flowered scarf, and sensible heels, she was the perfect flight attendant.

Imelda asked for cranberry juice, and I ordered a much needed rum and Coke. The generous attendant handed me a cup of ice and the entire can of cola. What I really wanted was extra rum. I poured the rum and soda into the plastic cup, swirled the ice around the fizzy liquid, and took a long swallow. Next, I needed something sweet. I dug in my purse and grabbed a fresh package of chocolate crème cookies—I was never without something chocolate. I offered Imelda a cookie.

Her eyes shone at the sight of the treat. She helped herself, nibbled the edges, and licked her cookie-coated lips. “Please, go on with your story. What I’m wondering, though, is what if you don’t care for him?”

“Dr. Flynn is expecting me for two weeks, but I can leave any time.” I caught Imelda gazing at me askance. “Don’t worry. I’m a big girl. I’ll be fine.”

At least I hoped I would be. I’d been trying to still my restless heart since I left my apartment in Maryland that morning. I didn’t tend toward anxiety disorders, but who wouldn’t be nervous?

“I’m dying to know what questions he asked you.” Imelda’s faint laugh lines crinkled at the edges. “Did he sound nice in his letters?”

Now how was I going to answer that? Some of his questions were so chauvinistic they'd raised my hackles. That was one of the reasons I was determined to do this. I didn't plan to marry the sexist hunk, and it might serve him right if I jetted in, enjoyed an invigorating two-week vacation, and jetted out again. I didn't even have to kiss him—although I might want to, if he was as hot as that picture.

A tiny pang of guilt crept up on me. Maybe I was being unfair, and maybe I'd end up giving him his money back, but, at least, I'd experience a new part of the planet, see some sights, and maybe buy some gifts for my family. Nudging away the twinge of remorse, I pulled another cookie out of the cellophane, and ran my tongue around the smooth white center—pure sugar bliss.

"The first few questions were what you might expect—my age, where I live, my background, and if I was a good, traditional Christian woman." Hey, I believed in God, so I didn't feel too bad bending the truth. "Some of the other questions made me laugh. My favorites were 'Is your weight commensurate to your height?' I must say, I had to give him credit for not asking the exact poundage. In his 'deal-breakers' section, he asked if the applicant was partial to NASCAR or professional wrestling. I was tempted to tell him I was a champion mud wrestler who raced souped-up vehicles on the weekends."

Imelda's tinkling laugh reminded me of a wind chime in a gentle breeze. Lovely. I wish my laugh had that delicate feminine sound. Mine boomed—more akin to an air horn. At least that was Brianna's assertion. Sisters could be so caring and supportive.

"I wish you luck. If this whole thing doesn't turn

out to be as wonderful as you hope, you can always stay with me.”

Aww. What a kind offer. If everyone was as nice, we’d all be in good shape. “Now tell me about you. Brianna told me you grew up in Quezon City on the island of Luzon, and you go back every couple years to visit your family.”

Imelda described the beauty of her native land and gushed over her grandchildren’s exploits. She’d been planning this trip for months. How lucky was I that she was willing to come with me on my adventure? Brianna, two years my junior, called it a “God-thing.” I considered it a happy coincidence.

A few hours later, we feasted on lobster tails slathered in drawn butter and super-moist banana cake. Stuffed to bursting, we luxuriated in our comfy first-class chairs as the flight attendant passed out steamy hot towels. I could get used to this!

“Be back in a minute, honey.” Imelda moved out of her seat and into the aisle.

When she returned, she pointed toward the restroom. “There’s no one in line if you need to go up front.”

Thankful for the information, I slid by and started up the aisle. The first class lavatory was immense compared to the shoeboxes in coach—my usual mode of travel. I peered into the mirror, and two red-rimmed, sleep-deprived eyes gazed back. Overall, though, not bad considering. I splashed some cold water on my cheeks and brushed out my seat-flattened hair.

As I made my way back down the walkway, I made eye contact with a weary young mother. She gave me a feeble wave as she balanced a fussy baby in



the crook of her left arm. The poor woman was doing her best to quiet the baby while struggling to eat her cold, half-eaten entrée.

Taking pity on the harried mom, I paused to assist. Who could resist a snuggly little baby?—especially one with such pretty, golden-brown skin. “Need some help?”

“Oh!” Relief flooded her features. “Could you hold her for a minute while I finish this off? Every time I try to take a bite, Malaya starts to cry.”

“Sure. I have a nephew her age back in the States. Babies are cute, but they sure can be exhausting, huh? Hand her over.” I loved playing auntie to my middle sister’s little boy, Ethan, and I was proud to say he adored his Aunt Shay-Shay. Whenever Lily needed a break, I was there. I couldn’t get enough of that boy.

The mother handed off Malaya. Holding the babe close, I shifted my hips back and forth to rock her. She smelled like powder mixed with the slightest whiff of mashed peas. As I stared into the kid’s deep brown eyes, a smile lit up her face. Right before she spit up—on my expensive new blouse—and my sophisticated linen shoes.

I’d been right about the peas.

Mom screeched in horror, fumbled in her diaper bag for a clean cloth, and tried to sop up the mess oozing down my neck.

“Hey, don’t worry. That’s what babies do.” I gave the child back to her mom and scraped regurgitated baby food off my blouse. Next, I tried scrubbing off the blobs of goop on my shoes to no avail. Great. I’d spent hours seeking the perfect pair.

Mom sniffled, and a sheen of tears glistened. Now I’d gone and done it. I’d made her cry. Malaya couldn’t

help it if peas didn't agree with her. The putrid vegetables didn't agree with me either. I schooled my expression to dispel any possible hint of annoyance. "Really. It's OK. Give me another cloth and that precious baby of yours and, please, finish your meal."

Her chin stopped trembling and, this time, she pushed a terrycloth bib into my hand and tucked into her meal.

"Go on, now. Eat up." Holding the adorable baby once again, I cooed and cuddled. It didn't take long for the lobster to disappear, and Malaya rested once again in mama's arms.

My sodden blouse and ruined shoes were beyond repair. There was no way to make pricey pea-green sling-backs presentable. Besides being unsalvageable, my left shoe squished. I had a change of clothes in my carry-on, thank goodness.

To my dismay, inside the small bag I found a partially open shampoo bottle, a pair of soapy Nike's, two drenched shirts, and wet, dappled blue jeans. At the very bottom, I felt one dry top—my fuchsia cartoon character nightshirt. It was better than nothing, and would have to do.

Heading back toward the lavatory to change, I spotted our considerate flight attendant signaling me. She'd witnessed the entire debacle. Disappearing into the cockpit, she returned in triumph with a pair of red flip-flops. Men's flip-flops. "The captain sends his compliments," she announced with delight.

They were way too big, and hardly a positive fashion statement, but I'd take what I could get and be grateful for it. I thanked her, and scuffled back down the aisle to a softly snoring Imelda. With her head tilted to the side, she exuded cuteness.

Back in my seat, I grabbed the crime novel I'd been reading and tried in vain to finish chapter two. It was no use. Abandoning the book, I concentrated my attention on the spectacular glow of the sunset outside the window. The sun pitched into the water with the speed of time lapse photography and, in short order, the lights dimmed, a sure indication it was time to snooze. With nothing to distract me from my reveries, my insides were jumping like a grasshopper on amphetamines. I did my best to relax, envisioning bubbling brooks and fields of wildflowers.

Several sleepless hours later, the engines throttled back, and the plane began its descent. The seatbelt sign chimed, and the loud speaker crackled. "Ladies and gentlemen, this is Captain Tomás. We've begun our approach and will be touching down at Ninoy Aquino International Airport in approximately ten minutes. Please fasten your seatbelts and stow your tray tables. The temperature outside is a humid ninety-seven degrees with no chance of rain." He paused to take a breath. How many hundreds of times had he made this speech before? Some people had all the fun. "Thank you for flying with Philippine Airlines and welcome to Manila. Please enjoy your stay."