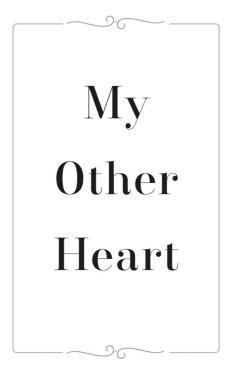
EMMA NANAMI STRENNER



# Emma Nanami Strenner

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#### VIKING

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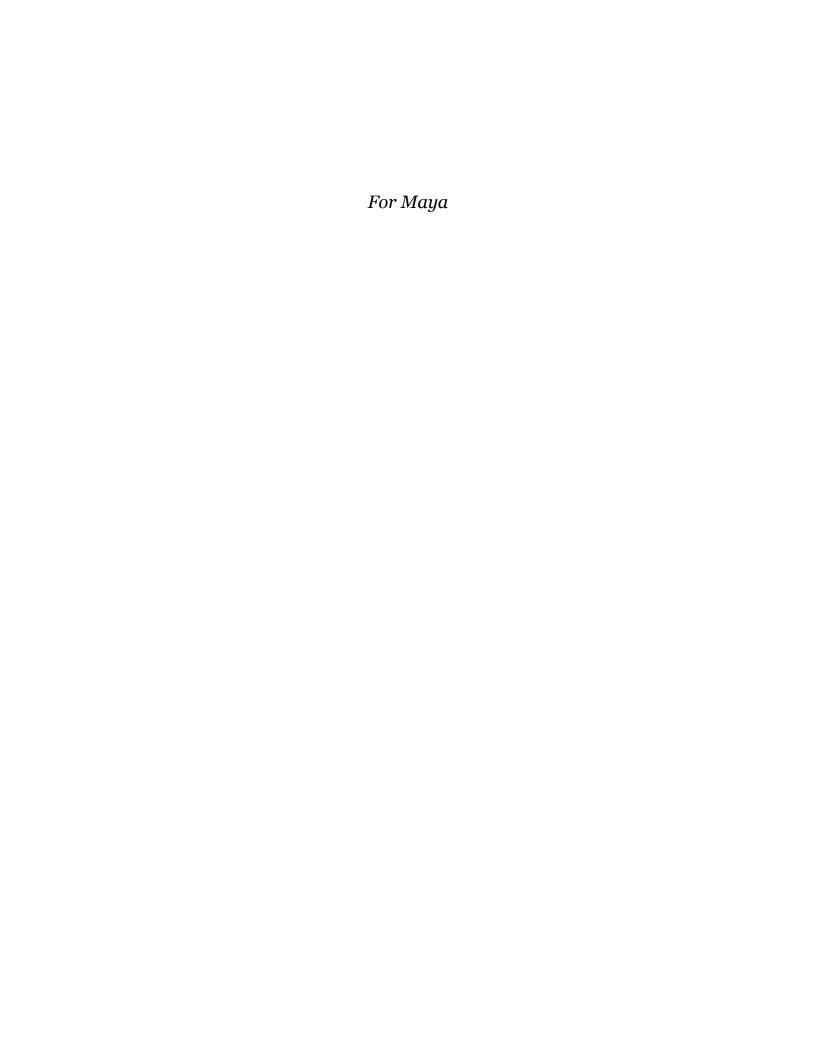
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Acknowledgments
About the Author



## Mimi

Philadelphia International Airport, 10:15 a.m., May 18, 1998

imi Truang did not yet know that her baby was gone. She sat back and closed her eyes, coffee in hand. It was still some time before they could board the connecting flight to Newark for their journey home to Saigon. Packing up last night had been difficult; Ngan had refused to sleep.

She'd finally succumbed as they'd approached the airport on the bus, closing her eyes and dropping like a heavy sack of rice on Mimi's lap at eight minutes past six that morning, exactly one hundred and four minutes after they had boarded the bus. Mimi's arm had lost all feeling as she held on to her child, trying not to drop her as a wave of fatigue dragged her along. It had taken a lot of energy to divert her daughter while she was awake. A one-year-old who had only just learned to walk wanted to explore everything. The old ladies seated across the aisle began the trip cooing over the cute, chubby baby. But after an hour, they started to tut at the crying. When Mimi's things fell from her bag into the aisle as she tried to find something to distract Ngan, she was met with a curt *Ma'am*, we need to keep the aisle clear, people might trip, okay? DO YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT I'M SAYING? Strangers always seemed to speak slower and louder when they got annoyed with her.

Check-in was equally hard. *Ma'am, please watch your child,* the man behind the counter had said, examining their passport photographs as Ngan slipped off the ledge of the conveyor belt that weighed her bags. Mimi tried to distract her, encouraged her to wave the bags goodbye, but the baby wanted to follow. The man behind the desk had the uncomfortable look

young people got around an infant or an old person: embarrassment at the lack of self-consciousness. It was the thing that parents loved most in their children in infancy and loathed most in their elderly parents.

• • •

MIMI WRAPPED HER arms around herself; muscle memory had taught her to make herself small and inconspicuous. The smell of weak American coffee floated up from the Styrofoam cup in her hand. She would never get used to this. When she first joined her sister, Cam, in Philadelphia two years before, they walked along Arch Street, outside Reading Terminal Market, sipping coffee in the brisk autumn air. *Dirt water*, they called the coffee. They guffawed and hooted at their joke. *Two cups of dirt water*, *please*. But when they became too loud, enjoying themselves too much, the sneers and looks would begin. So their jokes were kept private, spoken within their own four walls. Soon she'd be back home. *Café Sua Da* would be waiting. No more need for hushed voices. She sipped her dirt water and winced. As if in agreement, her daughter giggled from her "hiding place" beneath her seat, and Mimi felt small sticky fingers squeeze her ankles.

The hot liquid ran down her throat. There was still a day's traveling left before they would land on Vietnamese soil. Ngan's whining interrupted her thoughts, and she shuffled through her handbag and pulled out a cracker. Mimi leaned down and offered it into the space beneath her seat. Her daughter's plump hand took it quickly, and there was silence from her again. Now only the ambient noise of the airport and the muffled announcements interrupted her every thought. She patted her pocket to check for their passports and her remaining money and mentally subtracted the dollar fifty she'd spent on the coffee and milk. The oily smell of fast food lingered in the air. Next time she would remember to sit farther away from the restaurants. She looked at the grime and dirt on the floor and thought about Ngan's hands touching everything then going into her mouth. Mimi pulled a tissue

from her pocket, already soiled, and grabbed at Ngan's hands to wipe them. But Ngan pulled away quickly.

Mimi could never get used to the air in America: its taste, its smell, the way it felt on her skin. The cold was in her bones all the time, and the food gave her constipation or the opposite. America had been a storm in her stomach from the moment she arrived. She had never found peace. The shouting and the cursing she could tolerate; she rarely understood what was being said anyway. People said *fuck* a lot. And she couldn't understand why the fucking had to involve mothers. But the food offended her most. Bread like she'd never known. She missed the perfect crispness of a banh mi and the soft clouds of white dough inside it, the heady fragrance of the mint and coriander and chili in the air—the sweet saltiness of pork and rich pâté. Instead, there was only dirty oil and flaccid bread, noodles that were, in fact, not at all what they claimed to be. She wanted to take her child and get out of this place where she could not be understood, or considered, but always discarded instead. Her invisibility was a noose around her neck that tightened every day. Even now, as the time to leave edged closer, and Mimi's heart flipped at the thought of putting this fetid land behind her, people would look at her for only a millisecond before dismissal. She didn't count.

• • •

MIMI REACHED DOWN to place her cup on the floor but changed her mind as she remembered that Ngan's little hands would seek out the hot liquid. Instead, she got up and put the cup on the table two seats away. She sat down again and reached between her feet, her arms stretching under her. She didn't want to get on her knees, the floors were filthy, but she had accepted when they traveled that Ngan wouldn't understand this. She would wipe her down later in the bathroom, and rinse her arms. Americans and their poor hygiene, she thought. The stench of bleach was everywhere, but there was always an underlayer of filth. Nobody mopped their floors

properly here. Cam's landlord used to walk through their apartment with his shoes on, traipsing the dirt from the filthy streets across her clean floors.

Mimi waved her arms side to side, windshield wipers searching for her daughter's fleshy arm or leg. Mimi's armpits hurt from the awkward motion, so she got down onto her knees to pull Ngan out from under the seat.

Her child was gone.

# Act One



#### CHAPTER ONE



## Kit

Philadelphia, April 2015

o where are you from?" the Uber driver asked.

The cloying scent from the Black Ice air freshener sat in the back of Kit's throat. She could see the hairs coming out of his ears. She glanced at her watch.

"Here, I'm from Philly," she replied. Kit Herzog knew what he really wanted to know.

He looked at her in the rearview mirror. Their eyes met, then he set his gaze back on the road. There was another odor beneath the freshener: dirty hair or skin. She kept her hands on her lap, not wanting to touch any of the surfaces. A new song started to play on the radio.

"You know this tune?"

She nodded. "Teardrops" by Womack & Womack; her mother played it in the kitchen sometimes. She started to see signs for Roxborough. Not far to go now.

"Great song." He hummed.

She would be late for Sabrina, but at least Sabrina's mother would be out. Mrs. Chen worked a Saturday job and Sabrina was always at home alone.

"So hon, are you from Philly? You look, uh, I don't know, like there's somethin' else in there. Like, where are you *from* from, you know?"

Kit was asked this almost every time she met an adult outside of her family circle. Mr. Fischer, the new History teacher, got straight to the point at the beginning of the semester. "What is your ethnicity exactly, dear? Pan-Asian is it? Hawaiian? South American?" He had a habit of putting her on the spot, and she dreaded his class.

Her skin bristled at the thought that the ambiguity of her complexion and eye shape should become an open invitation for questioning. Cece Daley, with her long legs, platinum-blond hair, and cheerleading squad accolades would never be asked to explain her origins. "Daddy's from California and Mom is from Ambler, right here in Pennsylvania," she would probably say, unprompted. Kit had seen Cece in the Home Depot on weekends, calling her father "Daddy."

"So? What is it?" he persisted.

"What is what, Sir?" she asked, her voice sharp.

"What is your background, hon?"

There was no reason for her to hold this back. She could put him out of his misery in a few words. But she thought, Why should she explain? She was still stewing over the fight with her mother that morning, and the kiss with Dave in the basement the night before, and how he had said: "Hey, we're still keeping this between us, okay?" She wanted to get to the safety of Sabrina's bedroom. She wanted one of those jasmine teas Sabrina always made. They would watch a movie, talk late into the night—just the two of them, so they could really talk, unlike at her house on Gravers Lane, where she was always listening for the creaking floorboards announcing her mother's arrival.

"If you don't mind my asking, of course."

She thought, *Actually, I mind very much*.

"I'm adopted," she replied quietly.



"Tupperware...when I grow up, Kit, I'm going to invest in Tupperware." Sabrina sighed as she looked into the fridge. She stacked and unstacked plastic containers. "We have so many empty butter containers for leftovers. Does your mom do this? Probably not, I guess. I mean, look at this one. One dumpling. Why didn't someone just eat it? And Tupperware is cheap. You can go to Walmart and buy like a dozen sets for nothing." She shook her head, replaced the top of the butter container, and put it back in the fridge. "Oh! I found them," she said, her voice singing in happiness as she brought out a plate with a picture of penguins dancing on an iceberg. No dish in their home was the same, unlike Kit's house, where everything was a full set from Crate & Barrel.

"You gotta try these, they're so good." Sabrina placed the plate, which held two cakes, between them. The top of the pastry was carved with intricate ridges in the shape of a goat.

"Did your mom make these?" Kit asked, holding one carefully, cradling it in the cup of her hand like a small bird.

"Course not. We bought them in Chinatown."

"Your mom makes things sometimes. Those cute flowers out of the vegetables and stuff? She could have made it." Kit felt the heat rise to her face.

"I guess. These are mooncakes, my mom buys extra for the year on discount—she doesn't believe in sell-by dates. They're still good to eat though."

When she put the cake back down on the plate, Kit noticed that the edge of its soft casing had a dent. She felt her mouth curling down at the thought of an old cake, long past is expiry date. Sabrina returned with a knife to cut it in half.

"What's so great about this cake?"

"They're just totally different. Not like anything you get here, you know?"

"I don't get it," Kit muttered. But her friend hadn't heard her, and she wasn't appreciating the personal sacrifice Kit made to be there: the cab driver and his questions, the stench of Black Ice still on her clothes. She glanced at her phone; there were no messages from Dave.

Sabrina cut the mooncake in half, revealing the shiny, perfectly preserved shape of a heart layered in pink, yellow, and orange-red bean paste.

"Isn't it beautiful?"

Kit shrugged.

Sabrina pushed the plate over to her, offering her the first taste. Kit's mother had brought her up well; she should have eaten the first mouthful with relish and complimented her host. But she couldn't remember these lessons in that moment.

"I hate that red bean shit," Kit said.

Sabrina's features clouded with hurt. She looked like a girl in a manga comic book, a close-up of her face in the picture box with giant weepy eyes and a wobbly line for tears on the way.

"Don't have it, then," Sabrina retorted and forked a big portion into her mouth. The piece was too big, and Kit could see that Sabrina's pleasure had floated away like a child's bubble that had burst.

The meaningless hurt caused over a mooncake.

Kit looked at it and thought how she actually did want to try it, she wanted to taste something sweet. But this had always been their dynamic—Sabrina, the chirpy mouse who would edge too close to Kit's lair, where she would snap and snarl as Sabrina limped away. This was her nature against Sabrina's soft, accepting ways. She thought of the books she'd seen on her mother's bedside table, like *Nature vs. Nurture: The New Way to Parent*. Sabrina said that she was always taught by her mother, Lee Lee, to avoid taking risks at all costs and respect her elders. There was no other way in the Chen household; everything came back to these two rules. But Kit found other ways, and sometimes wondered why Sabrina didn't try to as well, even if the freedoms in her home were different. Maybe it was as simple as that, that her parents never enforced the same rules that Sabrina had to live by. Or maybe it just wasn't in Kit's nature to do as she was told.

"What's up with you? You're in a terrible mood," Sabrina asked, her tone cautious, as she poured their tea.

"Yeah, family lunch at the Harrisons' was annoying. Dave was there." Kit wanted to say more, about how he had asked to meet her the night before and they had fooled around in his den while his parents were out. But the words wouldn't come. Sabrina's kindness in spite of her own snappy remarks left her feeling guilty.

"You wanna talk about it?" Sabrina asked, pushing a steaming mug toward her. "I know you guys have some kind of understanding or whatever, but I'm here, I'm a good listener."

The balled-up jasmine leaves began to unfurl in the hot water.

"You think Dave is a racist?" Kit asked suddenly, dipping her finger into the liquid.

"What?"

"Nothing, never mind."

"I don't think so, Kit. I mean, he's dated different girls. He's in my political science class, and he's a liberal," Sabrina said.

"Yeah, I guess. I just don't understand why he is so weird about *us*, you know?"

Kit saw Sabrina searching for the right words to respond.

"I'm like the last person who understands guys. I kissed Seth Hartmann three times before I dumped him, and like, we were hardly even boyfriend and girlfriend..." Sabrina's voice trailed off.

"I know, I know. But hey, this is your summer, right? And then we have college. We are going to *live*!" Kit forced a false cheeriness to her voice, but underneath she wanted to cry.

"Do you think so? I really hope so. I'm so ready for high school to be over," she replied in almost a whisper.

For the first time in weeks Kit shifted her gaze away from her problems with Dave and noticed that Sabrina looked tired. Something was weighing on her friend. She tried to remember what Sabrina usually did on weekends, but she realized with some surprise that she always assumed her friend was

studying or waiting for Kit to invite her over. It never occurred to Kit that Sabrina's life extended beyond her blue row house, her studies, and Kit herself. She looked around the kitchen and saw Sabrina's Dell laptop nestled and shut on top of the side counter. The stickers on the cover had started to fade. The pile of *kawaii* Japanese corgis looking over their backsides now looked like a fluffy cloud, but the Keith Haring dancing figures and the "So Fetch" and "Hacker Inside" stickers still retained their original colors. Kit remembered how happy Sabrina had been when Kit had brought them back for her from her vacation to San Francisco the year before.

"What's up, Rina?"

As Sabrina looked up at Kit, an expression of surprise passed behind her friend's eyes.

"Oh, I'm just trying to work through some stuff, you know, end-of-year things."

"Talk to me." Kit leaned forward. She remembered how her mother would do this when she wanted to encourage her to open up, and Kit congratulated herself for being so sensitive to her friend's needs.

Sabrina took a breath and closed her eyes for a moment, as though she were about to jump into a cold pool.

"I'm trying to figure out how I can get to China before college. I want to go visit my family. Or at least see this place I'm supposedly from."

This wasn't what Kit had expected to hear. It took her a moment to take it in, until thought after thought tumbled out, one after the other.

"What do you mean? Like this year? For real?"

"Well, yeah, I mean I gotta do it soon. I haven't really talked to my mom about it yet. You know how she can be. I've been saving up money from tutoring and babysitting jobs. I think I'm going to have enough by the end of July."

Kit nodded. She did know how Sabrina's mom could be. Kit's usual exasperation with her own mother would disappear the moment she saw Lee Lee Chen with Sabrina, enforcing her rigid rules that often made no sense to Kit at all. It was in these moments that she allowed herself to be grateful for

her adoption by a nice, liberal, upper-middle-class Pennsylvania family. The kind of parents who would let her stay out late because her friends were. The kind of parents who congratulated her for simply trying even though she achieved mediocre grades and showed no real promise in sport. *You got your dad's hand-eye coordination, that's for sure*, her father joked. She was relieved that they allowed her to experiment with her clothes when she started to care about how she was dressed, and even helped her shorten the hem of her school uniform skirt. She was thankful that they bought her a cell phone at almost the exact same time that all her other classmates got them. Sabrina was never given such freedoms.

And somewhere deep in the recesses of Kit's mind were thoughts that never passed her lips. She was happy that her life was nothing like Sabrina's. She didn't dare consider how it might be to be raised by a mother like Lee Lee Chen. She thought of all the parties Sabrina had missed because her mother did not believe in socializing outside of school hours, or the times that a trend for a certain water bottle or backpack had swept through the girls in her class and Sabrina had looked on, with the same old items she had started school with that year.

Don't you ever just want to say no? Kit wanted to ask Sabrina, but she knew her friend well enough to know she never would. They were built differently.

"If I save and work these summer jobs for the first month, and get going with the passport application, I might be able to visit for two weeks in August. Just before college starts. Even if I don't manage to go to Mom's exact birthplace, I could see some of China. I could see the land, listen to the people. Travel, finally. You know what I mean?"

"Why do you want to go so much though? Like, do you even know the people you'd have to stay with? And what if you hate it there? And you're on your own?" The moment Kit said it, she felt foolish.

"I guess that's the whole point. I don't know anything about what to expect. That's the part that's exciting to me. It's about knowing where you're from. Where you belong. *You* know what that feels like, of all people."