

The Secret Box

Elizabeth Aguilar

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This modern romance features characters with darker edges even as it delivers a message of second chances and hope.

In *The Secret Box*, a debut romance by Elizabeth Aguilar, youthful missteps haunt Elizabeth Agustín, a thirty-two-year-old Filipina investment banker in search of stability. With elegant settings that reveal the lifestyle of Manila's powerful business figures, the novel depicts how privilege and the rejection of ease spur Elizabeth to turn from her elite upbringing toward her own definition of a meaningful life.

The heart of the plot rests in Elizabeth's reunion with a past lover, Rolando (now a successful CEO), without either admitting to their liaison more than a decade earlier. Tension builds through Rolando's struggle to win an annulment from his first wife, and through Elizabeth's initial reluctance to deepen her relationship with him. The dramatic explanation for Elizabeth's first encounter with Rolando unfolds in rapid strokes, though it is suggested as a critical juncture in her character's development.

Occasional shifts in the narration—from Elizabeth's first-person view to third-person exchanges between Rolando and his lawyer, which Elizabeth wouldn't be privy to—come across as a ready means for relaying information. The tendency to state emotions and key elements of the story through extensive dialogue instead of through subtle scenes also lends the work a transparent quality. More finely developed features include sumptuous descriptions of interiors as well as passages on Philippine culture, history, and cityscapes. Elizabeth's childhood home is particularly well drawn, capturing a sheltered, manicured existence.

Despite the intense focus on Elizabeth and Rolando's blissful courtship, the book wisely leaves room for darker edges in both characters. Rolando, for instance, causes Elizabeth to consider his more imposing, possibly manipulative moments: "I didn't understand why I could not stand firm on any decision when it came to Rolando. He was always so persistent in his pleas that in the end I would submit to what he wanted and feel guilty if I didn't." Elizabeth is drawn as a capable woman whose outer confidence and independent success sometimes bristle at the compromises of a romantic relationship.

A modern romance on second chances, *The Secret Box* takes a few tragic twists. The one with promise—Elizabeth's too-late realization that her father loved her even with his authoritative ways—is left to the backstory. Still, with its emphasis on moving forward, forgiving one's own mistakes, and working toward the benefit of others, the novel's ultimate message is one of hope.

KAREN RIGBY (November 13, 2014)

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