

Chapter One

She couldn't believe she's really here.

Gianna couldn't stop her gaze from devouring the chrome polished walls, the dark wood, the vibrant red and blue splashes in metal glass. The stainless steel bar, tables, chairs, and stools reflected the bright sharp lights, amplifying the pulsing beat of the disco lights. Pinigilan niya ang sariling kurutin ang mga pisngi, pero hindi niya napigilang ngumiti na parang tanga habang parang mabibingi siya sa pagpintig ng musika.

"Having fun?" pasigaw na tanong ni Monique sa kanyang tabi sa ibabaw ng dumadagundong na tugtog.

Having fun? Was her friend serious? She was having the time of her life!

"Yes!" She couldn't stop herself from giggling.

Inikot niya ang tingin sa buong club. *Hellion* was packed to the brim. Puno ng mga nagsasayaw na katawan ang dance floor at ang suspended walkway sa gitna ng club. May bouncer sa magkabilang bahagi ng open iron stairway paakyat sa second level. Puno rin iyon ng tao, nakasiksik sa mga rails at sumasayaw sa mabigat na pulso ng musika. May bar din siguro sa second floor.

"You haven't finished your drink yet!" sulsol ni Monique.



Namimilog ang mga matang binalingan ni Gianna ang hawak na cocktail. Vodka martini. An authentic vodka martini. My God, she's really going to drink! Gusto niyang tumawa na parang batang nakahawak ng kanyang unang *Barbie*. She should take a picture and post it on *Facebook*! She used to stalk her classmates' *Facebook* accounts, and they always had pictures of food and places they'd gone to on their timeline. Ngayon ay magagawa na rin niya iyon. She could have her own *Facebook* account now, too!

"Girl, ano ka ba? Kung tingnan mo 'yang martini mo parang Holy Grail, ah!"

Oh, if only Monique knew. She was so happy to hold her first vodka martini in this sweaty, hot and loud club, she could weep for days.

"Cheers!" Itinaas ni Gianna ang kanyang cocktail at walang sabi na tinungga ang laman noon.

"Girl, ano ka ba! Hindi 'yan tinutungga nang ganyan!" Mabilis na hinagod ni Monique ang kanyang likod habang para siyang hihikain sa pag-ubo. "Hina-hinay lang!"

"I'm okay!" she squeaked. Her eyes watered and her throat burned. That thing tasted like shit. She couldn't help the dopey grin.

Her first vodka martini!

"Let's dance! Congratulations on your new job!" Hinila siya ng kasama papunta sa gitna ng dance floor.

Napalibutan siya ng init, musika, at mga katawan. Monique raised her hands and jumped up and down.

She had never danced in a club before. She had never been inside a club before, period. But almost all the knowledge in the world was just a few keystrokes away, thanks to the Internet. She had watched countless club

dancing tutorials on the net, and had practiced a lot since she was a teenager. The fist pump, the jumping fist pump, the side to side, slow grind, the Shakira dance, the Beyoncé dance, et cetera. Now she could confidently declare she knew how to dance like a pro.

Thank you, YouTube, madamdamin niyang usal sa sarili.

Pumintig ang musika sa kanyang tainga, sa kanyang dugo, at para siyang malulunod sa ingay at init. Malayang gumalaw ang katawan ni Gianne, ang kanyang ulo, ang balakang.

Freedom.

This hard, uninhibited dancing was a metaphorical ode to her newfound freedom. Everything melted away and it was just her and the hard, pounding music. The beat of the drum pumped through her veins, the harsh, electric guitar singing in her ears. The soft fabric of her dress slid sinuously against her curves, adding sexual heat to her already flushed skin. She wore four-inch heels. She had never worn anything like these outside their house before. And here, dancing in stiletto and in a tight, bright pink mini dress, Gianna felt giddy.

Alive. Free.

“Girl, you can dance!” komento ni Monique sa kanyang tabi. “Oh, my, nine o’clock, a really hot guy’s staring at us! No! Don’t look at him! Mahahalata niya tayo!”

“Oh, yes, sorry!”

That was close! Muntik na niyang mabali ang isa sa mga cardinal rules ng boy-girl interaction. When scoping a guy, subtlety was of utmost importance. Bawal ang derechang pagtitig, pasimple lang dapat. She observed that from her college classmates, too.



Inianggulo niya ang katawan habang patuloy pa rin sa pagsabay sa dagundong ng musika.

Her friend was right; nakatitig nga sa kanila ang isang guwapong lalaki. Kahit sa madilim na club at magaslaw na mga ilaw, halatang brown ang buhok nito. Sigurado rin siyang mamula-mula ang kulay ng balat nito tanda ng banyaga nitong lahi.

“Come on! Balik tayo sa table natin para mas makalapit siya!” Tumango si Gianna at inilista sa kanyang mental diary ang sinabi ng kaibigan. *Club Rule #14: Kapag nasa club at may guwapong lalaking nakatingin, kailangang bumalik sa table para makalapit ang nasabing guwapong lalaki.*

She couldn't stop giggling. Oh, this was so fun! Choices, actions, reactions, consequences. They were better than the storyboards for the computer games she had developed.

Umupo sila ng kaibigan at pasimple nitong hinawi ang mahabang buhok. Nauhaw siya at pinagpawisan na rin, pero okay lang sa kanya. It felt good.

Naramdaman ni Gianna ang paglapit ng lalaki sa kanyang likuran, at reflexive na nanigas ang kanyang katawan. Pero mabilis siyang umiling sa sarili. She had to stop getting jumpy.

“Having fun, ladies?”

Tumaas ang sulok ng labi ni Monique sa isang mapang-akit na ngiti. She wished she could smile that prettily, too. But never fear, she could always practice at home.

“Yes, the club's great,” nakangiting sagot ng kanyang kasama.

“Is this your first time here? I don't believe I've ever seen you here before.”

“Yes, it is!” her friend chirped. “We’re celebrating my friend’s new job.”

“Well, then, the drinks on me.” Umupo ang lalaki sa tabi ni Monique at itinaas ang kamay para palapitin ang isang waitress.

Up-close, mas guwapo ito. Mestisuhin. Tama siya, may pagka-brown ang buhok ng estranghero at halata ang banyaga nitong lahi sa anggulo ng mukha.

“My friend owns this club,” nakangiting hayag nito.

Namilog ang mga mata ng kanyang kaibigan. “Your friend did a great job. This place is awesome.”

“It’s a family business. I’m Miko Ivanov.”

“Monique Castro, and this is my friend Gianna Torres.”

Ngumiti ang lalaki at bumaling sa kanya. “If you don’t mind sharing, what’s the new job?”

One month ago, she would have never talked to a stranger, much less tell them anything about her personal life. Sa loob ng mahigit labing tatlong taon, siniguro nila ng kanyang mama na hindi sila magiging malapit sa kahit na sino. But it was different now.

“Programmer Analyst,” sagot niya rito, at gusto niyang mag-fist pump sa kanyang first ever guy conversation sa loob ng isang club. That was so going to her diary. Milestone iyon.

“Wow, pangmatalino, ah!” nakangiting komento ni Miko. “But pardon my ignorance, what does that do?”

“It primarily deals with analysis, design, and programming. It also involves testing, debugging, and documentation of programs to solve medium to complex business problems.”

“Sounds cool. Beauty and brains.” Binalingan nito si



Monique. "And you?"

"Mine's not so exciting. I work in HR."

Ibinaba ng isang waitress ang ilang martini glasses sa harapan nila. Dinampot ni Gianna ang isang baso, pero hindi kagaya kanina, unti-unti niyang sinimsim iyon. Ngumiti siya sa sarili. That was better.

"Oh! I love this song!" Halos tumalbog si Monique sa upuan sa excitement nito.

"I believe that's an invitation to dance." Suwabeng tumayo si Miko at inabot ang kamay kay Monique at sa kanya.

Napakurap siya at maang na napatitig sa kamay nito. Oh. My. God. A handsome guy was asking her to dance! Magpa-palpitata yata siya.

Pero bumungisngis lang siya sa sarili. Nah. He was just being nice. Maaaring non-existent ang social life niya nitong nakaraang labing tatlong taon, pero hindi siya ganoon katanga pagdating sa social etiquette. Hindi talaga siya gustong isayaw ni Miko. He was just asking her out of courtesy. It's just a polite form of social interaction.

Ngumiti siya kina Miko at Monique. "Thank you, but it's okay, you two can—"

"Come on, girl!" Hinila siya ng kaibigan sa kabila ng kanyang protesta.

"But—"

Pinandilatan siya nito at awtomatikong tumikom ang mga labi ni Gianna. She bit her lip and smiled. Monique was really nice. Ayaw siya nitong ma-out of place. That's another form of social norm, too. And the thought warmed her chest. She never had many friends. Her last real friend was when she was twelve years old, before she and her

mother ran away from her father.

Umiling siya sa sarili at itinaboy ang malulungkot na alaala sa kanyang isipan. Enough of that. He couldn't hurt them anymore.

There is no fear now. Let go and just be free. I will love you unconditionally.

She found herself smiling as her body swayed to the pumping beat. *There is no fear now*, she thought to herself. Yes, no fears. They could let go. They were free.

Finally, they were free.

She closed her eyes, raised her arms, rolled her hips, swung her head to the primal pulse. The air felt thick and hot, the music loud and raw. Sweat trickled down her neck, between her breasts, across her back. Humapit na ang kanyang bestida sa katawan niya, pero wala siyang pakialam. It felt good to dance, to lose herself to the heat and sound.

Pero naramdaman niya ang pagdaloy ng mumunting kuryente sa kanyang likod. Parang pumintig sa init ang hangin, at tila may humaplos sa kanyang batok. It made her pulse leap, made her blood hum with a different kind of heat.

Wala sa sariling napamulat si Gianna, at napalingon sa direksyon kung saan nanggaling ang init.

At muntik na siyang matumba nang matagpuan ang sariling nakatitig sa pares ng madidilim na mata.

Come just as you are to me. Don't need apologies. Know that you are worthy.

May bumunggo sa kanya, patuloy sa pag-indayog ang mga katawan sa paligid niya, pero nanatili lang siyang nakatitig sa lalaking nakatitig din sa kanya.



I'll take your bad days with your good. Walk through the storm I would. I do it all because I love you, I love you.

He was...godlike. Beautiful. There was no other word for it. Chiseled jaw, sharp cheekbones, a patrician nose, a sculpted mouth, a pair of dark, intense eyes. Dark. Sensual. Decadent. Sinful. He was lust in human form.

And this oh so gorgeous guy was staring back at her.

Nanlaki ang mga mata ni Gianna nang makitang tumayo ang lalaki mula sa bar at naglakad palapit sa dance floor.

Oh my God...

He was so tall. And big, and oh so male.

She suddenly had an image of a lion stalking toward its prey. Dangerous, predatory, hungry.

Napaawang ang mga labi niya, at parang gustong umatras ng kanyang mga paa. Pero animo siya nanigas sa kanyang kinatatayuan.

He was definitely over six-feet, and every part of him seemed to have been chiseled to perfection. Golden skin over ripped muscles, dark hair, and equally dark eyes. His black shirt strained across his broad shoulders as he uncrossed his corded arms. His long, powerful legs ate up the distance, and she couldn't help but wonder, how could someone look so dangerous and delicious just by walking?

"Oh, I see my friend has spotted us," narinig niyang sambit ni Miko.

Friend? Nasa harapan na ni Gianna ang lalaki, tila isang panaginip na nagkatotoo.

And his big hands were already cupping her hips, drawing her into the hard length of his body. Something about the decisive, arrogant way he clasped her hips made

the simmering heat pulse thicker between her legs. He held her as if he had territorial rights to her; held her as if his name was tattooed on her skin. Private property of Mr. Tall, Dark and Dangerous. Dapat ay binuhay niyon ang lahat ng kanyang reflexive defense, pero natagpuan lang ni Gianna ang sariling malalim ang paghinga habang nakatitig sa binata.

Hormones, she told herself. It's all because of hormones.

The corners of his sinful lips curved and those dark eyes glittered like black diamonds. "Miko is too selfish hoarding two beautiful women all for himself." The hard, foreign accent sharpened the edges of his voice, and it felt like a rough caress across her heated skin.

He leaned down, his hot breath gusting over her ear. "Dmitri Markovic. You are?"

One of his hands had already glided up her back, pressing her close to the chiseled perfection of his chest. The heat of his body soaked her from the back and front, flushing her skin and making her dizzy.

"Gi...Gianna," nagawa niyang sabihin.

Nanatiling nakataas ang sulok ng mga labi ng estranghero, at hindi niya alam kung kinakabahan ba siya o nasasabik. Pareho siguro.

"Gianna," he drawled her name, stressing the letters as if he was savoring each sound. "God is gracious, yes?" he murmured, his fingers lightly rubbing her lower back.

"Yes," usal din niya, parang nanikip ang kanyang lalamunan at nahihirapan siyang huminga. Nahihilo siya sa lapit ng lalaki, sa pagdaiti ng mga daliri nito sa kanyang likuran at braso. Men like him should only exist



in fantasies, movies, books, and billboards. Hindi tama na may ganito kaguwapong lalaki sa totoong buhay. “How did you know?”

“We’re part-Italian, part-Russian. Gianna is an Italian name.”

Tumango siya, at marahang humugot ng hininga. Pinagsisihan niya iyon. Nanuot sa kanyang ilong ang mainit at mabangong amoy ng lalaki. Wild trees, drenched forest, smoked wood. Strong, deep, earthy.

Nanuyo ang mga labi ni Gianna at hindi niya napigilang basain iyon ng kanyang dila. Bumaba ang tingin ni Dmitri sa kanyang bibig, at tila bumigat ang talukap ng mga mata nito.

“Dmitri,” aniya, pilit pinagagana ang utak. “Earth lover, the follower of Demeter, the Greek goddess of earth.”

Umangat ang mga kilay ng kaharap, tila hindi inaasahan na alam din niya ang ibig sabihin ng pangalan nito. Pagkatapos ay sumilay ang isang malapad na ngisi sa tila nililok nitong mga labi. And just like that, his hard features morphed from purely handsome to devastatingly lethal.

Oh, God...

“Yes. How did you know?”

“Greek mythology,” anas ni Gianna, saka pinilig ang ulo para paglinawin ang isipan. Kapag hindi siya nag-ingat, baka magsimula siyang maglaway sa harapan nito. “It’s also a common Russian name.”

Lumawak lalo ang ngiti ni Dmitri, at lalo iyong naging mapanganib sa kanyang puso. “You wound me, Gianna. I thought Dmitri was rather unique.”

“For a non-Russian, it probably is. But if you look at



books and movies, the name Dmitri is a very common name for Russian characters.”

“Ah, movies. It’s a very poor reference for reality, is it not?”

Bumuka ang bibig niya pero itinikom din. Tila naaliw ang binata sa reaksyon niya, at maikli itong tumawa.

“I was just joking,” alo nito.

“I know.”

Tama ito. He probably thought she was a dork.

Naramdaman ng dalaga ang marahang paghaplos ng mga daliri ni Dmitri sa kanyang pisngi, at lumipad paakyat ang tingin niya rito.

“Hello,” he murmured. “I think I just lost you for a minute. Where have you been?”

Napakagat-labi si Gianna at nahihiyang napangiti rito. Hindi pa siya masyadong sanay sa social interaction, at madalas ay lumilipad ang isipan niya. “I’m sorry, I was just thinking of something. I—”

“Gianna!” Yumakap si Monique sa isang braso niya at nakangising sumandal sa kanya. “I’m thirsty, wanna get some drinks again?”

Tumatawang inakbayan ito ni Miko, na nakangising bumaling din sa kanila. Parehong pawisan ang dalawa, at noon lang niya napansing maharot pa rin ang galaw ng mga katawan sa paligid nila. Pero sila ni Dmitri, kanina pa bumagal ang sayaw.

“She dances like a monster,” nakangising kantiyaw ni Miko. “Talagang mauuhaw ’to sa pagsayaw.”

Nag-hair flip lang si Monique at parang batang nagtatalon. “Come on, we need to hydrate, that’s very important!” Pagewang-gewang nitong hinila si Miko



pabalik sa table nila.

“She needs water,” wala sa sariling komento ni Gianna. “Alcohol is a diuretic, and it can make her thirstier. Which will make her drink more alcohol, which will in turn only make her thirstier. Then, she will have a hell of a hangover tomorrow.” Itinaas niya ang titig kay Dmitri at nakitang nakangiti ito sa kanya. Bumalik ang kunot-noo niya at napalabi siya. “What?”

“Diuretics. I don’t think I’ve ever heard that word before.”

“It’s any substance that increase the loss of water and salt from the body usually through production of urine.”

Lalong lumawak ang ngiti nito. “Let me guess, you’re a medical student?”

“No, I’m a programmer.”

“Ah, you’re just very smart, then.”

“Not really. I just like reading.”

Tumawa ang lalaki at umiling na para bang may sinabi siyang nakakakiliting joke. She bit her lip. Was he making fun of her?

Lumawak ang ngiti nito nang makita ang pagsimangot niya. “Come, let’s get your friend some water so she won’t get dehydrated due to the diuretic effects of alcohol.”

“You’re making fun of me.”

“No. Yes.” He chuckled and shook his head. “I’m just teasing you, Gianna. Come on.” Hinagip nito ang kamay niya at hinila siya pabalik sa mesa nila.