

CHAPTER *One*

*S*amarra Recio was not usually bold and fearless. Ni hindi siya kumpiyansa sa sarili niyang ganda. She hated that she almost didn't tan, and so she must be the palest creature in this island resort, in the middle of summer.

She didn't think she was sexy enough either. Bakit ba kasi itong manipis na button down shirt ang naisuot niya? But she paired it with denim shorts that showed off her legs that she now worries might be too toned and athletic-looking.

And her shoulder-length wavy hair in a messy ponytail...

Kung ikukumpara sa mga babaeng nasa bar na iyon ay tiyak na standout siya—sa kakulangan ng

ganda. Almost all the women in the room sported a gorgeous tan, fantastic hair, ample breasts, and glowing, pretty faces she could only dream of. Lugmok na ang self-confidence niya, pero hindi pa rin niya magawang basta pakawalan ang pagkakataong ito.

After all, Oliver Filart, despite all the ogling he got from practically every woman in that bar, was still alone and nursing his drink. Abala ito sa kung ano sa cellphone nito, at sa dulo ng bar counter talaga nakapuwesto. Parang wala din itong pakialam sa magandang bartender na kulang na lang ay tumuwad sa harap nito o tuluyan nang alisin ang bikini top, mapansin lang. The two seats next to him were empty, and it seemed like nobody was brave enough to come near.

Kaya sa kabila ng matinding panlalait sa sariling hitsura, at sa kabila ng kaba ay natagpuan pa rin ni Sam ang sarili na mabagal na naglalakad palapit dito. Hindi pa rin niya alam kung ano ang sasabihin, kahit sa isip niya ay kay dami niyon.

She was, after all, a huge, major Oliver Filart fangirl.

The man, at the young age of twenty-six, was already a four-time *Palanca* winner. Ang isa doon ay

nakuha nito noong nasa college pa, ang iba ay para sa tatlong literary fiction novels nito na ang dalawa ay nakarating pa sa *New York Times* bestselling list.

Nasa hotel room niya ang isang libro nito, sana ay nadala niya. Excuse din sana iyon ng paglapit niya. Pero sino naman ang mag-aakalang makikita niya si Oliver dito? Boracay never seemed like his type of place.

If he was trying to keep up with his still unverified reputation of being a vicious womanizer, then he's not doing a good job. Ni wala ngang lumalapit dito. O baka hindi lang niya napansin? Maybe he's not in the mood, or maybe he's waiting for his girlfriend?

Oh no! Paano kung may hinihintay pala ito? Pero ramdam na ni Sam na tila pinapanood siya ng karamihan, at abot-kamay na niya ang bar stool sa tabi ni Oliver. Huli na para umatras. O-order na lang ulit siya ng inumin.

She didn't have to talk to him, right? Naupo siya sa tabi ng binata na hindi man lang siya tiningnan. He was still busy on his cellphone. Um-order siya ng margarita slush bago pasimpleng tiningnan kung ano ang pinagkakaabalahan ng lalaki.

He was reading an ebook. And based on the familiar text she saw, she knew instantly it was one

of her favorites, too.

“*The New York Trilogy* by Paul Auster,” bulalas ni Sam bago pa napigilan ang sarili. Napansin niyang nahigit ng katabi ang hininga, nagulat marahil. “I’m sorry, I... uhm...” Ninenerbyos na napakapit siya sa bar counter.

“I didn’t mean to pry.” Huminga siya nang malalim, nakamasid sa profile ni Oliver na nanatiling nakatutok ang mga mata sa screen ng cellphone nito. “I am a fan of yours. Nasa hotel room ko ang isang libro mo. Hindi ko alam na makikita kita dito... but I... I just have to tell you how brilliant and amazing you are that in everything you wrote, one can feel your love and passion for the written word... kahit napaka-angsty o sarcastic ng characters o kahit panay ang mura ng narrator. I have never been in any of those wicked, messed up situations as your protagonists, but your writing spoke to me... I am in love with it,” dere-derechong sabi ng dalaga, talo pa ang dam na biglang nabuksan.

Nabibingi na siya sa tindi ng kaba at lakas ng pagkabog ng dibdib nang matapos, at halos hindi na narinig ang kung anumang sinabi ng bartender nang ibaba nito ang kanyang order.

“I’m sorry...” Hinawakan ni Sam ang tall glass ng

inumin. “I’m going now. Tha—”

Bago pa niya nagawang maiangat ang isang kamay na nakahawak sa gilid ng counter, naipatong na ni Oliver ang sariling kamay doon. His big, rough, warm hand covered hers, as his eyes searched her face. Those famous puppy dog hazel eyes that graced each back cover of his books, in a small photo where he looked like he was weary about having his picture taken.

His eyes were golden tonight, and they kept her in place in a look that was a mix of amusement and intensity.

“Bakit ka aalis?” Nanatiling hawak nito ang kamay niya. “May kasama ka ba?”

Umiling siya. “Nasabi ko na ang gusto kong sabihin.”

Umangat ang isang kilay ni Oliver. “And that’s it?”

Umarko din ang kilay niya. “You wanted more words to fan your ego?”

His lips curved into a smile. “First sentence mo pa nga lang, parang tornado na ang ginawa sa ego ko. I have never met anyone who can tell I was reading Auster by sneaking a peek on a page. If you say anything more, my a*s would be flying back

to Manila.” He grinned. “And no one has ever said those to me.”

“Hindi ka ba nagbabasa ng reviews ng mga gawa mo? Always five out of five stars, or at least an A. Laging highly recommended,” hindi makapaniwalang saad ni Sam, pilit na binabalewala na hawak pa rin nito ang kanyang kamay.

And he had smoothly turned it over, her palm facing up, his fingers now twined with hers.

“They were critics, professionals... I appreciate that they liked my work but not exactly the ones I aim to please.”

“Oh, I am sure you’ve heard plenty from other fans.” She sipped from her drink. “Baka hindi mo lang matandaan sa dami. Kung kaya ko lang ang malalaking crowd at may tiyaga ako sa pilahan, baka sumugod na rin ako sa book signing events mo. Then, I can show you proof.” Goodness, her nerves were making her talk too much!

Nangingiting napailing ito. “My memory is pretty good at sigurado akong wala pa akong narinig na gaya ng sinabi mo.”

“Then, what have you heard?”

“Stuff that are flattering but didn’t really have anything to do with my books and writing,” tila

biglang nahiyang sabi ni Oliver, bago sumulyap sa cellphone na ini-off nito at ibinulsa.

“Oh...” tumatangong sabi ni Sam. Muli siyang sumimsim sa inumin. “I think I know... pero hindi ba iyon okay sa ego mo?”

“I’m a writer, not a rockstar.” Nangunot ang noo nito. “What is your name?”

“Importante ba iyon?” Hinila ni Sam ang kamay mula dito. Nagsisimula na niyang magustuhan ang pakiramdam na hawak iyon ni Oliver. Hindi iyon tama, dahil wala siyang inaasahang iba mula dito. Kung mayroon man, imposibleng mangyari iyon.

Did she really just admit that to herself?

“Well, I’d like to be able to address you properly, since I wanted to make a point.” Hindi nawawala ang ngiti nito. It was friendly, at ease, and just a bit unnerving.

Oliver had been looking at her eyes, at her face. At kanina pa niya gustong maglaho sa kinauupuan. “It’s... it’s Samarra.”

“That’s a cool name.” Napatangu-tango ito. “Well, Samarra, I was just about to tell you that much as writers like being appreciated, they’d really rather hear people say something about their work and not about... er, other things that really had nothing

to do with it.”

Kahit malalam ang ilaw sa bar ay pansin niya ang pamumula nito. Tall, formidable, very goodlooking literary genius Oliver Filart blushed as if he's not even used to being complimented on his looks.

“Seryoso ka?” Hindi siya makapaniwala. “What normal guy doesn't like having women throwing themselves at their feet? Nakita ko ‘yung videos n'ung mga book signing events mo, ‘yung comments sa *Facebook* page, ‘yung mga tweets tungkol sa iyo. Ang daming ‘I Love You’ ang daming ‘Marry Me, Oliver!’ or ‘Ang guwapo mo, Oliver!’ Ayaw mo n'un?”

He smiled ruefully. “A little, not a lot.”

“Your reputation says otherwise.”

“And what reputation is that?” His eyes narrowed.

“That you're doing the rounds... you love women, but you also have the tendency to break their hearts.” Alam niyang dapat ay huminto na siya sa pinagsasabi, pero mukhang may halong pampatayang ang ininom niya. At parang ine-encourage din siya ng tingin ni Oliver na sabihin lang niya kung ano ang gusto niyang sabihin.

“Well, hindi nila alam ang buong kuwento.”

“It is true then?”

“The I love women part? Of course. What normal guy doesn’t love women?” Ikiniling nito ang ulo at mataman siyang minasdan.

“Bakit mo ako tinitingnan nang ganyan?” Sinubukan ni Sam na hilahin muli ang kamay, pero hindi niya magawa. His grip wasn’t tight, but she felt weak against how good it felt.

“Tinitingnan na ano?”

“Na parang ang ganda ng nakikita mo?”

Nangunot muli ang noo nito. “Have you even looked in the mirror?” Inilapit nito ang mukha. “If you haven’t yet or if you refuse to believe what you saw, then I am confirming it. It is true. You are beautiful.”

“Dude...” She laughed nervously. “Kung may gusto kang patunayan sa claim mo tungkol sa reputasyon mo, ang daming magaganda dito. You want me to choose for you?”

“What are you talking about?” Hindi nito inaalís ang tingin sa kanya, nagtataka.

“Hello, nasa isang island resort po tayo where anything can happen. And people do things with abandon.” Kahit nagwawala na ang puso sa kaba ay pinanatili din ni Sam ang tingin kay Oliver. He didn’t even look tipsy. He smelled so good, and

he was looking at her, leaning so close like he was enthralled by her presence.

Yeah right, Sam.

“Your point is?” he prompted, then gently squeezed her hand for emphasis.

“Sigurado akong isa sa mga babae sa bar na ito na kanina ka pa tinitingnan at malamang ngayon ay gusto na akong bitayin, isa sa mga tumitili sa book signing events mo, o nagsasabi sa comments o tweets ng... ng—” *Oh sh*t, what was I about to tell him? Ano ba?* Kailangan na niyang umalis sa tabi nito!

“Ng ano?” tanong nito.

“Never mind. Kailangan ko nang umalis.”

“Alas diez pa lang... on a Friday night. May imi-meet ka ba?” His gaze held her in place.

“Wala. Ikaw ang baka may hinihintay.”

Umiling ito. “Wala. Believe it or not, I came here to watch people. And to catch up on my reading. Research, too.”

“For a new book?”

He smiled. “Maybe.” Then, he waggled his fingers to tell her she’s not off the hook yet. “So, ano ‘yung sinasabi mo kanina na isa sa mga narito ang posibleng nasa book signing event o nag-post o nag-tweet? Ng ano?”

Napangiwi si Sam. “Come on, Oliver..”

“Ikaw ang nag-umpisa. Mukhang kahit sinabi mong fan ka ng gawa ko, hindi ka naman impressed sa reputasyon ko.”

“Do you really care about what I think of your reputation?”

Makahulugan ang ngiting isinagot ni Oliver. “Maybe.” He pursed his lips. “So ano na ‘yung sasabihin mo dapat? Come on, I want to hear it. And what you have to say about it.” Noon niya naramdaman ang pagbitaw nito sa kamay niyang nakahawak sa counter, para marahang maglandas paakyat sa kanyang braso. His hand stopped by her elbow, and stayed. Tila nakaalalay ito na hindi mawari.

“You said your memory is good, so you must have heard it. At base sa tingin sa iyo ng mga babae dito, tiyak na isa sa kanila ang nagsabi na niyon.”

His eyes stayed on hers, his hand on her elbow moved slightly. “And that is?”

“*Take me to bed, Oliver,*” she said, her hands moved up to make quotation marks in the air.

Nangislap ang mga mata nito. “And you’re not one of them, right?”

Ilang segundong nakatitig lang siya sa kausap.

Kanina pa hindi inaalis ni Oliver ang tingin sa kanya, at alam niyang kaunting galaw lang ay malalaman nito kung nagsisinungaling siya o hindi. She was never a good liar. His thumb began to absently make small circles on that space above her elbow and it sent shivers through her.

How was he this close? Why couldn't he keep his hands off her? His eyes? Was he, by any chance, trying to seduce her?

“Samarra?” untag ni Oliver. Noon niya napansing nawala na ang ngiti nito.

Napakurap siya. “What made you think I'm not one of them?” mahinang sabi niya, bago sinubukang lumayo at aktong bababa na sa kinauupuan ngunit naagapan siya ng katabi.

“What made you think I will just let you get away, Samarra?” he asked when she turned to meet his eyes again.

Nag-init ang kanyang pisngi. “What do you want, Oliver?”

“I should ask you that, you're the one who disrupted me from my reading.” A corner of his lips turned up.

“I'm sorry.”

“Don't be. I don't mind.” Habang hindi pa rin siya

pinapakawalan ay kinuha nito ang wallet sa bulsa at iniabot sa bartender ng pera. “Let’s go.”

“W-where are we going?”

“Where do you want to go?”

“Puwedeng sagutin mo muna ang tanong ko?” medyo naiinis nang sabi ng babae habang marahang iginigiya ni Oliver palabas ng bar.

He chuckled. “Hindi ko alam, actually. Ang sigurado lang ako, ayoko pang umalis ka.” Tumingala ito sa kalangitan, napangiti sa malaking buwan. “Hey, full moon.”

“Iyan siguro ang dahilan ng kabaliwan mong ito ngayon.” Napailing si Sam.

Bumaling muli sa kanya ang mga mata ng katabi. “What is wrong with you?” May pag-aalala sa tono nito. “Oh... I get it. Nahiihiya kang kasama ako? Is it my reputation?” Lumamlam ang mga mata ng lalaki.

“Oliver, it’s the other way around.” Bahagya siyang natawa. “Look at you and look at me.” Muli niyang hinila ang braso. “Thank you. It was nice talking to you tonight pero sobra na ito. Okay lang ako, really.” Napayuko siya. “Good night.” Nagsimula na siyang maglakad palayo, pabalik sa hotel. Gusto niyang magpapadyak nang maramdamang sumusunod si Oliver.

“Oliver, what are you doing?” hindi lumilingong tanong niya.

“Kung babalik ka na sa hotel mo, eh di babalik na din ako.”

She sighed. Hindi na siya muling nagtanong.

“I’m staying at the *Azure*. Room 515.”

*Sh*t*. Napahinto si Sam. Hindi niya alam kung babalik ba muna sa bar at hihintaying tantanan siya ni Oliver.

It’s not that she didn’t want him. She does... she’s curious and she loved how his hands felt on hers, how his gaze made her feel warm all over, how...
Damn it!

“I mean, just in case you change your mind,” narinig niyang dagdag ni Oliver. May pag-aalinlangan sa boses nito, at halata din ang kaba. “What the hell...” Napabuntung-hininga ito. “I... That doesn’t sound quite right. I was not implying that you were... since you said earlier... I... I mean...” he stammered.

Samarra bit her lower lip. Nilingon niya si Oliver at bahagyang nagulat sa nakitang magkahalong pag-aalala at kaba nito. He towered over her but his expression was that of someone who just shrunk to the ground.

Nag-aalangan ang ngiti nito. “Good night, Samarra.”

Huminga siya nang malalaim, bago nagpatuloy ng paglalakad. “I am staying in the same hotel, Oliver.” Sumulyap siya dito. “Room 514.”

CHAPTER *Two*

The first kiss came after an hour or so, while Oliver was in the middle of telling her about his favourite book written by a female author, and all Samarra could think about was how his words were like spells being chanted to lure her closer, instead of explaining why that particular book was his favorite. Matalas ang memorya niya, pero sa bawat segundong lumilipas na nakikinig siya kay Oliver ay tila walang nagtatagal sa mga naa-absorb niya.

“There is this Kafka quote that goes like, ‘we ought to read only the kind of books that wound or stab us... we need books that affect us like a disaster, that grieve us deeply, like the death of someone we loved

more than ourselves, like being banished into forests far from everyone, like a suicide.' Iyon mismo ang kayang gawin ng mga sinulat niya. You know what I am talking about, Sam. Hindi lang naman paraan ng pagtakas ang pagbabasa, o libangan. Gaya ng pakikinig sa sinasabi ng iba, dapat may kakayahan din siyang iparamdam 'yung mga ayaw mo sanang maramdaman, pero dapat."

Nakatayo sila sa gilid ng balcony ng corner suite nito, na katabi lang ng kuwarto niya. Magkaharap sila at parehong bahagyang nakasandal ang gilid ng kanilang mga katawan sa balustre. His hand rested firmly on top of her hand that held onto the railings, while the other absently caressed her left arm, drew figure 8s and circles as he spoke.

"Well, I guess suicide's not exactly included, but..." Bahagya itong ngumiti. "When someone else's words were able to make you feel by just reading them, I guess that takes literature to a whole new level... at kakaunti lang ang writers na kayang gumawa ng ganoon. Gusto ko ring magawa iyon, gusto kong maniwala na nagawa ko iyon kahit papaano dahil sa narating ko... at hindi ko naisip na nagawa ko iyon talaga until..." Napayuko ito, bago muli siyang minasdan na tila nahihiya. "Until you

told me earlier.”

“Shut up.” bulong ni Sam.

He blinked. “What?”

“Seryoso ka ba d’yan sa pinagsasabi mo, Oliver?” Humakbang pa siya palapit dito, halos magdikit na ang kanilang mga katawan. “Is that how you lure your women to your bed... by being bashful and self-conscious? By looking at them like a lost puppy?”

“I am not...” Napaawang ang labi nito, tila hindi alam kung ano pa ang sasabihin. “Hindi ko alam kung bakit ganito ako kakomportableng sabihin ito sa iyo ngayon, Sam.” Nagpatuloy sa tila pagdo-drawing sa braso niya ang isang kamay nito. “O kung bakit narito pa rin tayo ngayon, kung bakit ayoko pang matapos ang gabing ito.”

“Relax, hindi mo kailangang magpaliwanag.” Her lips inched closer to his. “Although I really, really love hearing you talk in that voice...” Her heart pounded against her chest. Hindi niya alam kung saan nanggagaling ang tapang niya. Three margaritas and her inhibitions were out of the window.

He visibly swallowed. His eyes darted from her hooded ones, to her slightly parted lips. “How many drinks have you had, Sam?” tanong nito.

“Three margaritas. Ice blended.”

“At ano ang pakiramdam mo ngayon? Are you dizzy? Do you feel numb?”

Umiling siya. “I feel perfect.” Umakyat ang mga kamay niya sa balikat nito. “Bakit?”

His eyes darkened. “Dahil ayokong nasa impluwensya ka ng kahit na ano. I want you to remember every tiny detail.” Pumaikot ang mga braso nito sa kanya, habang hindi bumibitaw ng tingin.

“Remember... what?” Her heart must have moved up to her ear. Parang nabibingi na siya sa lakas at bilis ng pagtibok niyon. Ngunit dama niya ang init na nagmumula kay Oliver na halos yakap na siya at ang marahang pag-alalay nito sa kanyang likod.

His smile before his face inched closer more than told her anything. Hindi na niya alam kung sino ang nauna, o kung paano nag-umpisa, maliban sa may tatlong segundo munang naghinang ang kanilang mga mata, tila naninigurado kung dapat ba silang magpatuloy, bago nagtagpo ang kanilang mga labi.

The kiss was gentle and tentative only for a split second, then their mouths opened up to take in each other's breath, to tease and to taste. Para iyong naging pagpapatuloy ng usapan kanina, parang sa halik na

iyon nila sinasabi ang kanina pa nila parehong iniisip pero hindi alam kung paano ipapahayag.

Before this, she only knew this man through his writings. She fell in love with his words, and now she's practically making love with his mouth. What he wrote made her discover other lives and other worlds, but at that moment, his hands were the ones doing a thorough exploration of her body.

She felt like a book being written, a story unfolding as he expertly peeled off her clothes, as her body slowly became acquainted with his while she also took off his clothes with shaky hands.

May naalala siyang interview kay Oliver kung saan sinabi nitong sa tuwing nasa kalagitnaan ng pagsusulat, pakiramdam daw nito ay nasa isang mahabang biyahe ito. A long haul flight to be exact.

It was like flying, with air pockets and turbulence and that fear of not landing... the excitement and anticipation of arriving, and breathing in the air of this strange place... that quiet contentment of knowing that you're finally there.

Hindi siya writer. Wala pa siyang natapos ni short story sa buong buhay niya. Pero alam na niya ngayon kung ano mismo ang pakiramdam ng sinabing iyon ni Oliver. As their now naked bodies

made way to his king size bed, she felt her soul taking flight, welcoming whatever it might be like in the vast open skies.

Bawat bahagi ng kanyang katawan ay tumutugon, nagre-react sa bawat segundong lumilipas at sa bawat halik, bawat hawak. She had never felt anything like this... heck, she hadn't even done this with anyone. Oliver was both gentle and intense and his every kiss and touch made her feel so desired. Her body literally hummed with pleasure as lips and hands loved every inch of her. His kisses and movements were hurried, as if he couldn't wait to get to a certain place.

Kailanman ay hindi pumasok sa isip niyang mali ito, dahil wala sa anuman sa nangyayari simula kanina ang nagpadama sa kanya ng ganoon.

Oliver kissed and touched her all over, and yet he seemed to have kept his arms around her. His back was pressed on the stacked pillows and her body covered his, arching and writhing in response to his maddening exploration. Her moans and sighs seemed to encourage him each time, and Samarra soon became too lost and overwhelmed by the intensity and pleasure of it all that she forgot it was her first.

Her loud gasp, and her death grip of his arm and shoulder made Oliver stiffen underneath her. His hands on her hips trembled as his eyes widened in a mix of confusion and awe. “Sam?” he breathed heavily. Marahang naglandas ang isang kamay nito paakyat sa kanyang likod. “You haven’t... done this before?”

Lalong nag-init ang pakiramdam niya. “Y-yes,” she gasped. Her eyes closed for a few seconds, realizing now how deeply he was buried inside of her, how it slowly felt good now as he filled her. “But don’t stop.” She shakily pulled him closer and pressed her lips to his. “You feel good.” She moved her hips tentatively, a sigh escaping from her lips as the action made her feel more what this was about, really.

Oliver gazed at her for a few seconds before he caught her lower lip in his, in a kiss that was gentler than their first. It was a kiss that must have been intended to make her temporarily forget, because in a matter of seconds she was underneath him, their bodies still joined. His body covered hers and he gently moved, barely breaking their kiss and touching her all over as he helped her find her groove. Until she was slowly meeting each thrust, until she was calling out his name, until he was

calling hers and telling her words that were prettier than the ones she read in his books.

She had never done this before, but she knew how he writes, and she knew how it felt to read a story that felt like something was being taken, a part was being given up...

She wondered, as her body gave in to that beautiful release, if it was her sanity or her heart or both.



Ilang minuto nang gising si Samarra pero hindi pa rin niya magawang bumangon. Alam niya kung nasaan siya, alam niya kung bakit, at naaalala ang kaliit-liitang detalye ng mga naganap nang nagdaang gabi. Wala siyang pinagsisisihan pero hindi niya ngayon alam kung handa ba siya sa maaaring mangyari ngayong umaga.

Naroon pa rin siya sa suite ni Oliver, pero wala ito nang magising siya. His scent lingered on his bed, on the sheets and on her body, along with tiny marks that could easily tell the whole world that she was thoroughly made love to.

Tila nawala ang pagka-disoriented niya sa naisip. They made love, not just sex. Last night was her first time but she knew for sure that wasn't just some run-

off-the-mill sex. Their first maybe a bit hurried but the next couple of times, Oliver made sure she felt and enjoyed every second. Her still blissfully sore body was proof.

Nasaan na kaya ito? Bakit hindi siya nito ginising? Unless... unless umalis muna ito at umaasa sigurong pagbalik ay wala na siya sa kuwarto nito.

Hindi alam ni Sam kung bakit parang nanlumo siya sa naisip. Last night was too beautiful and perfect to be just another one night stand. But who was she kidding? Ano ba ang alam niya sa mga ganitong bagay?

Kahit mabigat pa rin ang pakiramdam ay pinilit niyang bumangon. Napansin agad niyang maayos na nakatiklop ang mga damit niya sa wing chair na katabi ng kama. Kinuha niya iyon at nagtungo sa banyo para mag-ayos at magbihis. Binilisan niya dahil baka biglang dumating si Oliver. Hindi pa mandin niya alam kung anong oras ito umalis. It was past nine in the morning and he could be back any second now.

She was combing her hair away from her face as she opened the bathroom door when she heard the main door being opened. Sa gulat ay muli niya iyong naisara. Ilang sandaling kinalma niya ang

sarili bago muling hinawakan ang knob. Puwede namang hindi na sila magkibuan. If last night meant nothing then things shouldn't be so awkward. May limang araw pa siya dito sa Boracay. Baka puwede pa siyang makapagpalipat ng kuwarto sa ibang floor para mabawasan ang tsansa na magkita pa sila uli.

She heard shuffling in the room. Oliver seemed busy. Good. Binuksan niya ang pinto ng banyo at inihanda na ang sarili sa anumang maaaring sabihin ni Oliver.

Last night was beautiful, but this isn't bound to last.

You knew what it was, right? We're cool, right?

Whatever. Kunwari na lang ay wala siyang narinig. Sasabihin niyang okay lang at naiintindihan niya, at magpapaalam na agad.

But the inviting aroma of freshly brewed coffee and breakfast food greeted her senses the moment she opened the door. Nasa isang cart iyon na itinutulak ni Oliver patungo sa balcony, na napahinto nang makita siya.

Agad itong ngumiti. "Hey..." At bago pa siya nakagalaw ay nakalapit na ito sa kanya, naipaikot ang isang braso sa kanyang baywang at masuyo siyang hinagkan. The kiss lasted for several seconds

and he was even reluctant to break away from it. “Good morning,” he murmured, his eyes fixed on hers. Kinuha nito ang isang kamay niya at marahang iniupo siya sa kama.

“Stay there. Iaayos ko lang ito,” nakangiting sabi nito at itinuloy na ang pagtulak sa cart sa abalcony. May mesang pandalawahan na doon.

“Pakakainin mo pa ako ng breakfast?” hindi makapaniwalang tanong ni Samarra.

“Why not? Hindi ka ba nagugutom?”

“Puwede namang hindi.”

Noon napatingin muli sa kanya si Oliver. “Puwede ring oo.” Umarko ang isang kilay nito. “Did I not tell you I was not about to let you go, Sam?”

Napabuntung-hininga siya. “Umaga na.”

“So? You said you’d still be here for a week. Na solo ka dito. Na wala kang boyfriend.” Mataman siya nitong minasdan. “Mag-isa lang din ako dito. I don’t have a girlfriend.”

Bumalik ang kabang nararamdaman niya kanina. “What are you saying, Oliver?”

“Only a few truths about us...” He smiled, a bit uncertain this time. “I was also your first.”

“So? I did it willingly. Hindi naman kita inobligang kahit ano maliban sa... sa nangyari kagabi.” Nag-

init ang pisngi niya sa sinabi.

“I wish you would, though,” mahinang tugon nito.

“And why is that?” Napahawak siya sa bedpost.

“It must seem crazy, but I want to stay, to be with you longer than last night, longer than this very moment, Sam.” Humakbang ito palapit.

“Are you proposing a summer fling, Oliver?” sinalubong niya ang tingin nito. She expected him to wince, to squirm under her challenging gaze, but his eyes were so intent, full of quiet determination that she was the one who felt like melting under those hazel green orbs.

Inalis ni Oliver sa bedpost ang kamay niya, at kinuha ang isa pa. Marahang hinila siya nito patayo. “I don’t do flings.” Ngumiti ito, bago inilapit ang mukha sa kanya. He smelled of the fresh morning air, the sea and whatever his aftershave was. “It might be too soon for you, but you deserve more than this summer, Samarra.”

CHAPTER *Three*

S hindi alam ni Samarra kung matatawa o mapapailing sa nakitang itsura ni Oliver sa waiting area paglabas niya ng examination room. It was a fine Saturday morning on late June, almost two months since that summer night she met him. Wala sa plano niya si Oliver at hindi niya inaasahang totoo ang sinabi nitong gusto siyang makasama ng higit pa sa itinagal ng bakasyon nila sa Boracay.

They have shared more nights together since, even if they'd both been back to their respective jobs. She as a research staff at the *House of Representatives* and he as a professor at his college alma mater. Sa umpisa ay hindi niya alam kung papaano mag-a-

adjust. Since she graduated from college and started working two years ago, she was pretty much used to living away from her parents who opted to retire in their home province of Pangasinan. Nag-asawana rin ang mga kapatid niya at mag-isa lang siya sa maliit nilang bahay sa Quezon City.

She'd never ever had a boyfriend. She had suitors but didn't believe in the concept of courtship. She was a romantic who dreamt she would meet the one unexpectedly. She just never imagined that that person would literally be someone from a dream.

Oliver Filart is her first boyfriend, and now she stood a few meters from him after a meeting and consultation he himself arranged because he wanted to know if she might be carrying their child.

“What...” Ibinaba nito ang binabasang magazine at tumayo. Magkahalo ang kaba, pananabik at pag-aalala sa magagandang mga mata.

Umiling siya. “I told you.” Negative. Hindi siya buntis. Pero aaminin niyang nakakatuwang isipin na baka makuha ng maaring maging anak nila ang mga mata ni Oliver. Those cat-like eyes that changes colors depending on the lighting condition, the shade of his clothes or his emotions.

With those eyes, Oliver had never been able to

hide anything from her. Not that he ever attempted to. Ito na yata ang pinakatapat na taong nakilala niya. Bilang manunulat ay inaasahan niyang moody ito at mahirap intindihin, pero mas madali pa itong basahin kaysa sa mga libro nito.

At first, he was overwhelmed by his sincerity and the amount of trust he has in her, but within the past two months, she had gotten used to it. She wouldn't have him any other way. "Kakausapin daw tayo ni Doctor Raymundo," sabi niya sabay sulyap sa pinanggalingang hallway.

Tahimik na nilapitan siya ni Oliver, hinagkan sa sentido bago sumabay sa kanyang maglakad patungo sa opisina ng doctor. His one hand rested on her lower back, like it always did whenever they walk side by side.

Pagpasok ay agad silang pinaupo ni Doctor Joan Raymundo, na hindi na nagpaliguy-ligoy pa. "Samarra is not pregnant, but her health still needs more attention. Ang madalas na pagkahilo, pagiging madaling mapagod o antukin sa araw at pamumutla niya ay dala ng anemia." Kay Oliver ito nakatingin.

"She also said she started her post grad studies recently and had been lacking sleep, kaya sa pagkain niya binabawi ang kakulangang iyon." Bumaling sa

kanya ang doktora. “I am providing you with a diet plan aside from the vitamins. Don’t worry, hindi mo naman kailangang i-deprive ang sarili mo.” Ngumiti ito. “But you are young and needs to take better care of yourself, especially if you also plan to be a mother soon.”

Napatingin siya kay Oliver, na unti-unti nang nagre-relax ang mukha. “And she also needs to get more sleep, right? At least eight hours?”

“Oh, at least six or seven will do. Basta dire-direcho lang. The diet and vitamins are supposed to help you sleep better also.” May inilabas itong packet na sinlaki ng bond paper na tila may ilang maninipis na libro at brochure sa loob at ibinigay sa kanya. “Aside from that, wala namang ibang problema. Your body is healthy and ready for chid-bearing. Hindi pa nga lang siguro sa ngayon. Don’t feel any pressure. Mga bata pa kayo. Enjoy being together as much as you can.”

Oliver is now looking at her with a naughty glint in his eyes. Tila tuwang-tuwa ito sa tuwing mapagkakamalan na kasal na sila. Excited din ito nang malamang delayed siya at pinakyaw yata ang pregnancy test kits sa drugstore. Ito pa ang makulit na ulit-ulitin niya ang tests at talagang napunta pa

sa bahay niya isang umaga para tingnan din ang resulta. Kundi pa niya ito binato ng kahon ay hindi siya titigilan. But he still scheduled this appointment just to be really sure.

Sa isang supermarket ang derecho nila matapos manggaling sa hospital. Para itong batang excited na pinuno ng cartons at containers ng fruit juices, dairy products, prutas at gulay ang cart niya. Nakipag-unahan pa ito sa pagbabayad. Hindi rin siya nito hinayaang magbitbit ng kahit na ano.

“Oliver, I am not pregnant. Walang sinabi ang doktor na bawal akong magbuhat.” Pilit niyang kinuha ang isang paper bag habang pabalik sila sa sasakyan nito.

He turned to her wordlessly, his lips pursed. His eyes were also doing that hurt puppy thing. And she was always powerless to resist. “I will cook lunch, dinner and I will make sure you will sleep early tonight. May assignments ka ba? Ako na lang ang gagawa,” sabi nito habang inilalagay sa backseat ang mga pinamili.

“Sino ang nag-imbita sa iyong tumambay sa bahay ko ngayong weekend?” Umarko ang isang kilay ni Sam.

“I never needed an invitation.” He smirked as

they both settled in the car.

It was true, though. May ilang mga damit na nga sa bahay niya si Oliver. Madalas ay ipinagluluto siya nito, minsan ay ipinaglaba pa nang magkatrangkaso siya. Malayung-malayo sa kung anumang pinangarap at inasahan niya sa magiging unang pakikipagrelasyon ang mayroon sila ni Oliver sa loob ng nakalipas na halos dalawang buwan. Theirs was intense, giddy, passionate and felt more like being married to her one true love than simply being boyfriend-girlfriend.

Whenever he would tell her he loves her, she's always reduced to tears. His spoken words move her more than any book he's written.



“Ooopps, tama na iyan.” Tinapik ni Oliver ang hita niya, bago kinuha ang remote control sa kamay niya at ini-off ang TV, sa kalagitnaan ng end credits ng *Ranma ½* episode na ikaapat na sa napanood nila matapos ang dinner. Ilang weekend na rin niyang mina-marathon ang anime series na sinubaybayan niya noong nasa grade school siya.

“Dude, alas nueve pa lang. I usually do six episodes every Saturday,” protesta niya at sinubukang bawiin ang remote.

Pero mabilis na nailayo iyon ni Oliver, na tumayo na rin. “Come and get it then.” He grinned evilly before lifting his shirt and acted as if he was about to shove the gadget down his pants.

“Oliver, kadiri ka!” asar na binato niya ito ng throw pillow. Tinawanan lang siya ng binata bago inilagay sa isang vase ang remote. Kinuha nito ang kamay niya at marahan siyang hinila patayo. “Time to rest, babe.”

“Right.” Nagdududang minasdan niya ito.

“Parang may iba kang binabalak, ah.” He wagged his brows at her, then laughed when she glared at him. “I would love to say yes to whatever it is you have in mind, but...” Marahang itinulak siya nito patungo sa pinto ng kanyang kuwarto. “You need to get used to sleeping this early.” Ito na ang nagbukas ng pinto. “Get in. I’ll just prepare your milk.”

Ilang segundong hindi makapaniwalang minasdan lang niya ito. Even after what he had seen and experienced so far, the simplest, tiniest things Oliver do for her could still surprise her.

He came in the room holding a mug of warm milk mixed with a teaspoon of honey minutes after. Hindi siya palainom ng gatas, pero wala siyang choice kundi ubusin ang nasa mug dahil sa

paghahamong nakikita sa mga mata ni Oliver. Nang maubos niya iyon ay nakataas ang isang kilay niya nang ibaba sa nightstand ang mug.

“Good girl. And for that, you get a reward.” He grinned, as he gently nudged her to make space for him on her bed. Matamang minamasdan niya ito, habang papabilis ang tibok ng kanyang puso sa magkahalong kaba at antisipasyon. They’d made love many times and yet everytime they’re in the same bed, she still quivered with excitement as if awaiting their first.

“What are you doing, Oliver?” tanong ni Sam nang pumaikot ang isang braso nito sa kanya.

Pero may inabot lang pala ito sa isa pang mesa sa tabi ng kama, sa gawi niya. Something from the pile of books there. “Babasahan kita.” Napangisi ito. “What were you thinking?”

Nag-iinit ang pisnging hinampas niya ito sa braso.

“Not tonight, babe. Or I will keep you up for hours.” He kissed her lightly on the lips before pulling himself up the headboard as he opened the book to a marked page on *Norwegian Wood* by Haruki Murakami, and began reading.

Siniguro nitong ganoong kaaga din siya

makakatulog nang ilan pang mga gabi. Minsan ay sa bahay na niya ito natutulog, minsan ay umaalis din ito pagkapikit niya at umuuwi sa condo nito sa San Juan. On some nights, she stayed at his house, like this rainy Friday. Inabutan na sila ng ulan paglabas pa lang nila ng restaurant sa isang mall sa Ortigas kung saan sila nag-dinner. Binabaha na ang mga daan at matindi na ang traffic. She insisted on staying at his place instead and he made no objections, but an apology.

“I actually planned to get a lot of writing done tonight so I can spend the whole weekend with you... so, uhm... okay lang kung tutulugan mo ako. I can read to you, though.”

“Oliver, okay lang.” Nangingiting hinawakan niya ito sa braso habang nagda-drive ito pauwi. “Ito ‘yung sinimulan mo last year na hindi mo matapustapos kahit nai-outline mo na, di ba? It would be a dream come true to watch you at work.” She gently squeezed his arm. “I’d like to see your soul in flight,” pagku-quote niya sa interview nito.

He groaned. “No soul would want to go anywhere if you’re in the room,” mahinang sabi nito habang tutok ang tingin sa daan.



Oliver's laptop was in a console-like table a couple of meters away from his king size bed, in the bedroom that was almost equal to the entire floor area of her family's modest bungalow. Nasa pinakataas na palapag iyon ng twelve-storey Georgian building na pag-aari ng adoptive parents ni Oliver na nakabase na sa Germany. The room had huge windows, and from her position on his big bed, she felt so close to the night sky that occasionally flashed each time lightning would strike.

Pinatay na nila ang mga ilaw at ang natitira na lang ay ang mga lamps sa magkabilang nightstands. Nainom na niya ang gatas na tinimpla nito at nabasahan na rin siya ni Oliver ng ilang chapters sa bagong libro ni Neil Gaiman hanggang sa ipikit niya ang mga mata.

He thought she was asleep, but she only pretended so he could start writing already. Shirtless and clad only in his pajama bottoms, Oliver was a sight to behold as he typed away in his laptop. Suot nito ang salamin sa mga mata at tutok sa ginagawa, papalit-palit ang ekspresyon sa mukha, paiba-iba ang ritmo ng tunog ng pagtipa nito sa keyboard, at parang doon pa lang ay nababasa na niya ang sinusulat nito.

“Go to sleep, Samarra.” hindi nag-aangat ng tinging sabi nito. “Stop trying to lure me to that bed.”

“I am not—”

“I feel like it, anyway.” He smiled, then looked right at her, before resuming his work.

Naiiling na tinalikuran niya ito, at ipinikit na ang mga mata, hanggang sa tila naging lullabye na niya ang naririnig na marahang pagtipa.

Nagising siya kinabukasan habang nagsisimula pa lang lumiwanag ang kalangitan. Malamig ang hanging nagmumula sa nakabukas na bintana, at nililipad na ang mga kurtina. She thought about asking Oliver to close the windows because she was getting cold when she noticed he’s not on the bed. His scent was on the sheets, anyway, and his side still felt warm.

Napabuntung-hininga si Sam. Mabuti naman at nakatulog siguro iyon kahit papaano. Pero nasaan ito ngayon? Pagtingin niya sa oras sa cellphone ay mag-aalas seis pa lang ng umaga. Bumangon siya at tinungo ang bintana upang isara iyon. Habang pabalik sa kama ay napansin niyang naka-on pa ang laptop ni Oliver, at ni hindi pa iyon naka-sleep mode.

“Oliver?” she called out, then looked towards the bathroom but its door was open, the lights

closed. Umatras siya pabalik sa mesa kung saan naroon ang laptop. *Just a peek*, she thought. She knew the gist to this new novel he was writing but she wanted to know how much progress he'd made so far. Madalas sabihin ni Oliver na gustung-gusto na nito iyong tapusin, ngunit tila wala itong drive o sipag o motivation na gawin iyon.

Well, let's see, my dear gorgeous favorite writer... Nakangiting naupo si Sam, umaasang mae-encounter ang kahit isa sa mga characters na naikuwento ni Oliver. Sa halip ay pangalan niya ang nabasa sa screen. *What?*

It was the beginning of a letter... to her.

Dear Sam,

If you're reading this, it means I actually worked up the courage to give it to you, so good for me ;) I guess you know me well enough by now that you're pretty much used, and maybe annoyed at how I would go on and on about how hard its been for me to write lately... and how you brought it all back. I am writing again. ;)

I would like to do that instead, I'd rather have you slap me repeatedly for being downright irritating than finding myself in this place again,

unable to do something I love.

This is for you, Sam. It should be easy, but I was wrong.

I have just been struck with the realization that this is the hardest thing I ever had to write. I am not even sure if I should.

There is no easy way to say this so I'll just say it...

Pero bago pa nakapag-scroll down ay narinig na niya ang papalapit na mga yabag. Agad niyang iniwan ang laptop, nahiga sa kama at ibinalik ang sarili sa naalalang posisyon niya kanina nang magising. Her heart thumped as she thought about what she just read... what did he want to tell her? There was no indication there whether it was a good news or bad news. Pero kinakabahan pa rin siya, o nae-excite?

Naramdaman ni Sam ang paglundo ng kama nang maupo si Oliver, Kinuha nito ang kamay niya at masuyong hinagkan iyon. He followed an imaginary line from her palm to the length of her arms, his lips soft, moist, warm and sensual as the kiss went up to her shoulder, to her neck, to her jaw and finally, to her waiting mouth.

Napasinghap ito nang bigla niyang hawakan

sa braso habang nakapikit pa rin ang kanyang mga mata, at tugunin ang halik nito. The kiss went on until they both had to stop, breathless and looked at each other's twinkling eyes.

“Good morning, Oliver,” nakangiting bati niya, halos hindi kumukurap habang nakatitig dito. His thick hair was unruly, he had day-old stubbles and his sleepy eyes and sensual lips hovering this close was enough to make any girl lose herself, even for a few seconds. Gusto niya itong tanungin, gusto niyang ipagtapat na kanina pa siya gising at nakita niya ang sulat nito para sa kanya, pero pinawi iyon nang muling pagdampi ng halik nito kasunod ang pagtitig na tila minememorya ang bawat parte ng kanyang mukha.

She expected a return greeting, but instead she got a shaky: “I love you, Sam.”

CHAPTER *Four*

*H*abang nakikipagbuno pa sa malaking golf umbrella ay lumabas na si Samarra upang puntahan si Oliver na nakasandal sa sasakyan nito sa labas. Itim na kapote lang ang suot nito at walang payong, gayong kanina pa walang hinto ang pagbuhos ng ulan. Malakas na din ang hangin kaya mahigpit ang hawak niya sa payong habang binubuksan ang gate.

“Get inside, babe. Ano’ng nangyari sa iyo? Gusto mo ng coffee? Hot choco? Nag-dinner ka na ba?” sunud-sunod na tanong niya.

“Let’s stay here,” sabi nito, bahagya lang ang ngiti sa kanya.

Humakbang siya palapit kay Oliver, humawak

sa braso nito at tumingayad nang konti para mahagkan ito sa labi. His lips were as cool as the stormy weather, but he kissed her back anyway. His hand held her waist before he pulled away. “Sam, I need to tell you something.” He let go of her waist but his eyes remained on hers.

“Hindi ba puwedeng sa loob na tayo mag-usap? Ang lamig eh.” Hinawakan niya itong muli sa braso pero iniwas iyon ni Oliver.

He sighed. His smile had completely faded. “Sandali lang ito. Hindi rin naman ako magtatagal.”

Minasdan ito ni Samarra. Noong Martes pa sila huling nagkita dahil naging abala si Oliver sa mid-term exams sa pinagtuturuan nitong unibersidad, habang siya ay naging toxic din ang case load dahil sa sunud-sunod na hearing sa kongreso. They still talked regularly on the phone. They even spent a good two hours straight talking last night.

Their last conversation was through text just hours ago, when they checked on each other. Signal number 2 sa Metro Manila at kay lakas ng hangin at ulan. They both decided they'd stay home, and even without really talking about it, she knew Oliver would show up at her doorstep on Saturday morning... wait, it was almost Saturday.

What was it that he wanted to tell her that won't wait until morning? Why won't he get inside? Kadalasan ay halos akyatin pa ni Oliver ang bakod nila makita lang siya agad.

Napabuntung-hininga si Sam. "Fine. What is it?"

Oliver closed his eyes for a second, then: "I'm leaving."

"Leaving?" ulit niya, nangungunot ang noo, at nagsisimula nang kabahan. "For what?"

"Munich," sagot nito.

"Oh..." Nnapatango siya. Doon kasi nakabase ang mga magulang ni Oliver. "Is everything okay? Ayos lang ba ang parents mo?"

He sighed. "Yeah... ayos naman."

"Good, then. So, kailan ka aalis?"

Napayuko ito saglit, bago muling sinalubong ang mga mata niya. "Tomorrow. My flight is at six-forty in the morning to be exact."

Muli ay ilang sandaling tahimik niyang minasdan si Oliver. Hindi niya alam kung tama ang narinig. "You're leaving in less than seven hours..." She took a deep breath.

"I'm sorry." Napailing ito. "I actually planned not to tell you."

Hindi makapaniwalang napasinghap si Samarra.

“Why...”

“But I thought...” he sighed. “I’m sorry, Samarra. But I really... I don’t know how to be with you right now.”

“What?” bulalas niya. “Anong hindi mo alam? Oliver, you have been with me for three months. Halos araw-araw tayong magkasama. We were more than okay! Ano ‘yang pinagsasabi mo?” dere-derechong sabi niya. “What is going on? Can you give me an excuse that’s not as sh*tty as the one you just told me?”

Oliver just kept looking at her, and that was when she noticed that his eyes were as cold as the wind that was now penetrating her skin as it blew on her filmy old shirt and pajamas. Those couldn’t be his eyes.

“You want a less sh*tty excuse, Samarra?” he stepped into her space, his eyes darkening. “Well, here it is. It’s over. I am leaving tomorrow and I am not sure if I will be back. Whatever we had officially ends tonight. It’s been good, thanks.” Umatras ito, at hinawakan ang pinto ng sasakyan.

Hindi niya alam kung ano ang sasabihin, Bumuka ang labi niya pero walang lumabas na salita doon. Halos mamuti na ang mga kamay niya sa

higpit ng hawak sa payong. Nanginginig siya hindi lang sa ginaw kundi dahil sa pagkagulat at hindi pagkapaniwala.

She wanted to ask why, but what difference would it make? He's leaving.

"I should go. Pumasok ka na at sobrang lakas na ng ulan."

"Eh ano ngayon sa iyo kung malunod ako sa pesteng ulan na 'to?" mahinang tanong ni Sam, puno ng hinanakit ang boses. "It's over, right?" Her voice broke. *Sh*t*. "You're not supposed to care anymore."

He just shrugged. "Fine. Suit yourself." He got in the car, and quickly started the engine. Nanatili siyang nakatayo sa labas ng gate, nakamasid kay Oliver na parang tila hinihintay pa niya kung bigla siyang magigising na nasa kama niya. Baka panaginip lang ito.

But the air just got colder, the winds got stronger, and the rain was pouring in torrents. Her grip on the umbrella tightened as she kept her eyes on Oliver. Was she really willing him to turn around, get out of the car and stay?

Pero isang sulyap lang ang natanggap niya mula dito. Isang sulyap kasabay ang saglit na pagkaway bago nito pinatakbo ang sasakyan.

Mas pinili pa talaga nitong sugurin ang bagyo, at lumayo kaysa ang manatili sa tabi niya.



Four years and three months later...

“Are you sure about this, Agent Filart? I am aware of your credentials and you would be really useful as head of one of the divisions.” Agent Phoenix Soler, head of the Violent Crimes Division of the *United Intelligence Network* – Manila swiped his card and the heavy bulletproof glass doors opened to a vast hallway lined with stainless steel lockers on both sides. Oliver tried to keep his mind off the shower area that he knew was at the end of the hallway. Humigpit ang hawak niya sa dalang backpack at pilit ipinako ang atensyon sa kausap kahit malapit na siyang bumigay sa antok.

“I’m sure, Agent Soler. I’d really rather have a less toxic work load here for a year or so,” simpleng sagot niya sabay ngiti sa kasama. Hindi niya alam kung bakit kahit halatang sincere at maayos naman ang pakikitungo ng head agent na natokang sumalubong at mag-assist sa kanya ay tila mainit ang dugo niya dito. Phoenix seemed like a really cool guy, but he just could not find it within him to be that friendly.

Maybe he’s just tired. Afterall, he went to the local

UIN office straight from the airport. Dalawampu't apat na oras din siyang nasa biyahe na nag-umpisa sa Johannesburg, sa South Africa. Dalawang beses ang stop over, at dalawang beses ding nagkaroon ng flight delays. He hated flying and was craving a cold shower and at least ten hours of sleep.

"I am assigning you to work with a partner. She is one of the best we have," patuloy ni Phoenix.

That got his attention. "She?" Kinusot niya ang mga mata. "Not that I have any problem working with a woman."

Napangiti si Phoenix, at hindi nakaligtas kay Oliver ang fondness sa ngiting iyon. The man looked almost wistful.

The head agent was a goodlooking fellow, the kind that probably had ladies swooning over him. He wondered if maybe he had a thing for his would-be-partner. Hmm.

"I didn't think you would, especially with this one." Magkasabay pa nilang itinulak ang double doors sa malawak na gym. "She teaches hand-to-hand combat every Tuesday and Friday afternoons to rookie agents." Phoenix looked straight ahead. Ilang metro ang layo sa kanila ay may isang grupong tila katatapos nga lang ng training. May labinlimang

agents siguro ang ngayon ay kanya-kanyang ligpit na ng gamit habang ang iba ay kausap ang isang babaeng maganda ang tayo at pangangatawan.

She had on a light pink loose shirt, gray yoga pants and white trainers. May malapad na headband sa buhok nitong medyo nagulo na. Nakatagilid ito sa kanila pero kahit ilang taon na ang nagdaan ay hinding-hindi niya makakalimutan ang profile na iyon.

She's a *UIN* agent now?

“And there she is, the one in pink,” narinig niyang sabi ni Phoenix nang huminto sila may dalawang metro mula sa babae. Noon naman ito napatingin sa kanila at agad napangiti nang makita si Phoenix, na saglit na naglaho din nang makita kung sino ang kasama ng head agent.

Samarra usually wore her heart on her sleeves. One could easily read her emotions, could almost guess what she was thinking but he's not sure he's looking at the same woman now. Sa bilis ng pagpapalit ng ekspresyon sa mukha nito ay hindi na niya natiyak kung naalala ba siya nito. Kung may dating man ang presensya niya ngayon dito ay hindi niya alam.

Not that it matters... oh, what the hell.

He thought about her all these years, and even wondered for the past twenty-four hours during the long haul flights, if he would see her again.

Hindi lang niya inasahang agad iyong mangyayari.

Dahil doon ay hindi na niya halos narinig at namalayan nang ipakilala na sila ni Phoenix sa isa't isa. Nakatingin lang siya kay Samarra, pilit inalam kung ano talaga ang reaksiyon o iniisip nito ngayon. He must have seemed so out of it because the other man nudged him.

“Oh, um... uh, sorry.” Napakurap si Oliver. “Nice to meet you, Agent Recio.” Tinanggap niya ang pakikipagkamay ng babae. Her handshake was firm and abrupt, and she let go even before he thought of squeezing her hand, or twining their fingers like he always did before.

“Likewise. I only found out this morning that I will be working with you and did a bit of research,” salat sa emosyong saad ng babae. “It’s an honor.”

He smiled. “I wish I can say that I knew anything about your work here so far but...” Sumulyap siya kay Phoenix, na nakatutok ang mga mata kay Samarra. “He hasn’t said much but Agent Soler seems to really think highly of you.”

Umarko ang isang kilay ng babae. “Really.” Pero napangiti naman ito nang tumingin din kay Phoenix.

Pakiramdam ni Oliver ay may nakakasaksi siya ng isang masamang panaginip. May dalawang ruler siguro ang layo nina Phoenix at Samarra pero hindi rin maikakaila kung ano ang mayroon ang mga ito para sa isa’t isa. He knew chemistry when he sees one. Heck, he had written about it. He had even felt it with her... then and maybe until now judging from how he wanted to squirm right there as he watched the silent exchange between the two agents.

He felt like the third wheel. “Uh...” he cleared his throat. “I’m looking forward to working with you, Agent Recio.”

“Same here, Agent.” May pagtataka sa tingin ni Samarra pero kung may nais man itong itanong ay sinarili na nito iyon. Muli itong bumaling kay Phoenix. “I’ll meet you at the lobby in an hour?”

Phoenix nodded with a smile. “Yes. Could be earlier. Sandali lang naman daw ‘yung meeting sabi ni Director Malvar.” Tinapik nito sa braso si Samarra, bago sumaludo naman sa kanya. “Mauna na ako. See you around, Agent Filart.” Iyon lang at tumalikod na ito.

Huminga siya nang malalim. Hinintay niyang

tuluyang makalabas ng gym si Phoenix bago muling minasdan si Samarra na hawak na ang gym bag nito at isang malaking tuwalya.

“Well, This is unexpected,” umpisa ni Oliver. Unti-unti nang napapawi ang pagka-shock at hindi pagkapaniwala.

“Yeah.,” sang-ayon nito, matamang nakatingin sa kanya. “Ang alam ko lang, magiging agent-in-charge ako at may makaka-partner from a field office abroad.” One brow shot up. “I just didn’t realize it was you.”

“Is that going to be a problem?” humakbang pa siya palapit dito. This was still Samarra, only better. Bumagay dito ang maikling buhok, mas na-highlight ang mga anggulo ng heart-shaped na mukha. She also exuded more confidence and a quiet authority. He couldn’t help feeling proud at what she had become.

“What?” nangungunot ang noong tanong nito.

“What what?” takang balik niya.

“You were smiling at something..”

“Oh...” Lalo siyang napangiti. “Just happy to see you, Samarra.”

“Really.” Hindi ito kumbinsido, o ingrained na siguro sa mga *UIN* agents na hindi basta nagtitiwala

sa sinasabi ng kahit na sino, kahit katrabaho pa.

“I knew you could be a lot of things but I never realized being an investigator would be one of them.” Pinagala niya ang mga mata sa kabuuan nito. She even had better posture now. Her skin, although still pale, was glowing. She looked so fit and strong. Hindi na siya magugulat kung malalaman niyang kaya siya nitong ihagis pabalik sa kahit alin sa mga bansang pinanggalingan niya.

“I’d say the same for you. So...” Halatang may nais muli itong sabihin pero piniling huwag na lang. Sa halip ay naglakad na ito paatras. “So, I will see you tomorrow. Maaga ang meeting natin with the assistant directors and division heads.”

“Speaking of division heads...” Hindi siya partikular na nakikialam sa affairs ng iba pero hindi niya alam kung bakit hirap siyang paniwalaan ang napansin kanina. “You and Agent Soler... you’re dating?”

Hindi na kailangang sumagot ni Samarra. Agad itong namula. “None of your business, Agent Filart.” Tinalikuran na siya nito at mabilis na naglakad patungo sa direksyon ng shower area.

Sumunod si Oliver. “Isn’t that against agency protocols, though?”

Hindi dito kumibo agad, tuloy lang sa paglalakad.
Ito na rin ang nagtulak pabukas ng pinto.

“So, you’re hitting the showers?”

“What’s it to you, Filart?”

“Magsa-shower din ako. Want to save water? With me?” He grinned.

Noon napahinto si Samarra at hinarap siya. Bumuka ang labi nito, ngunit walang salitang lumabas doon. Kahit namumula ito at nangingislap ang mga mata dala ng emosyong tila pinipilit itago, ay naglapat pa rin ang labi nito at nailing na minasdan siya.

“I don’t know what your deal is, Agent Filart. But I suggest that whatever it is you’re trying to do, stop it. It’s unnecessary, it’s unwelcome, it’s unprofessional. Based on what I’ve read you’ve had years of extensive and significant, even stellar experience. Iyon lang ang inaasahan ko, wala nang iba.” Napailing ito. “Tomorrow, Agent.” Then, she pushed open the door to the women’s locker area.

Oliver was left standing in the middle of the hallway, looking at the closed door, feeling wide awake now, and wondering why the hell her words somehow hurt.