

Prologue

Primm, Nevada
P Sixty songs, two rest stops, and over three hours later, *UIN* Special Agent Tempest Villonco raised a fist in the air and did a little happy, victorious dance in the driver's seat. Mag-a-alas siete na ng gabi at kalalampas pa lang niya ng state line na naghihiwalay sa California at Nevada, at ngayon ay nasa bayan na ng Primm, na forty-five minutes na lang ang layo sa tunay na destinasyon niya—ang Las Vegas.

Tatlo at kalahating oras na rin siyang nagda-drive, na nagsimula sa downtown Los Angeles. Dalawang beses siyang huminto para magpahinga sandali at uminom dahil kahit September na at

patapos ang summer ay napakainit pa rin. Halos puro disyerto ang dinaanan niya at hanggang ngayon ay puro cactus pa rin ang mga nakikita niya. But she just passed the Primm welcome sign and was feeling more optimistic.

Pinakiramdaman ni Tempest ang sarili kung nagugutom ba. Isang double burger, large order ng well-done french fries at strawberry milkshake lang mula sa *In 'N Out* ang laman ng tiyan niya habang nagda-drive.

She looked straight ahead. May nakikita na siyang mga bahay at maliliit na building. Malapit na siya sa town proper. Siguro ay maggo-grocery na lang siya ng ilang makakain sa hotel na naghihintay sa kanya sa Las Vegas.

Huminga siya nang malalim, bago tiningnan ang speedometer. Sakto lang at hindi lampas sa limit ang pagpapatakbo niya pero bakit parang sinusundan yata siya ng highway patrol unit? Nangunot ang noo ng dalaga habang minamasdan sa rear view mirror ang dalawang naka-motor na bukas ang headlights kahit maliwanag pa. May kasunod ding sedan ang mga ito, na mas dapat bantayan dahil mabilis magpatakbo.

Still, it looked like she was the one that was

about to be apprehended. Nag-focus si Tempest sa mga papalapit at pilit inaninaw ang plaka ng mga ito. The car was unmarked, but she could clearly see those in the big bikes. Nang sa wakas ay nasa tabi na niya ang mga naka-motor ay sumenyas ang mga ito na huminto siya.

Kinapa ni Tempest ang service gun na nasa holster sa kanyang baywang. Siniguro din niyang nasa bulsa ng light jacket niya ang ID at badge bago binagalan ang pagpapatakbo hanggang sa tuluyang inihinto ang sasakyan.

She rolled the window down. “Good evening, officer,” kalmadong bati niya kahit naiinis dahil hindi halos makita ang mukha ng mga ito dahil sa suot na helmet. “Would you mind telling me first what was my violation?”

“Step out of the car, ma’am,” tila nang-iinis pang sabi ng unipormadong lalaking naka-motor sa halip na sagutin ang tanong niya.

Umarko ang isang kilay niya. “I am with the *UIN* and I need to know first why I even need to step out.”

Tumingin lang ang lalaki sa kasama nito, na tila nananadya pang ipinakita na may dala itong baril. *Sh*t.*

Hindi siya takot, pero kailangan niyang maging

maingat.

“Step out, ma’am,” ulit pa ng lalaki.

Napapabuntung-hiningang lumabas na si Tempest, at pinagpag ang kanyang slacks bago dumerecho ng tayo.

“Hands behind your head,” utos muli ng lalaki. His voice sounded rough, but he also sounded young. Baka kaedad lang niya ang mga ito.

“Now, why would I do that?” nagpipilit pa ring magpakahinahong tanong niya.

Sa halip na sumagot ay tinutukan siya ng baril ng lalaki. Automatic ang pagagalaw ng kamay ng dalaga at nahugot din ang kanyang *Sig Sauer M11* sabay tutok niyon sa lalaking nasa harap niya. She quickly assessed the situation. But before she could come up with a stalling tactic, something cold and hard hit the back of her head. A searing pain tore through her, along with what seemed like a sting in her arm, before everything went black.



Lake Mead, Nevada

“I’ve never seen a man look so beautiful, and so enthralled by the sunset.”

Napapitlag si Tristan sa narinig, at nahihiyang ngumiti sa katabi. Hindi naman mukhang na-offend

ang magandang babaeng kasama niya sa loob ng nakalipas na linggo sa road trip na ito na nag-umpisa sa Boston, Massachusetts. He had never been out on a road trip with a woman, and the past seven days had been one of the happiest and most content he'd ever been. It's not simply because he'd spent the past several days driving and discovering the country that had been his home for the past five years, but more because of who he was with.

He never thought that on the first time he actually thought of filing for vacation leave, he would be spending most of it with the beautiful and brilliant Dr. Kirsten Reeves. Lampas dalawang buwan pa lang niya itong nakikilala, at recently pa lang sila medyo nagiging intimate physically, pero nararamdaman na niya, at umaasa siyang makakasama niya ito nang mas matagal pa. Maybe even for a lifetime.

Iyon ang naiisip niya habang minamasdan ang paglubog ng araw sa mula sa isa sa mga viewing decks ng Hoover Dam sa Lake Mead, ang unang bayan paglampas ng state line na naghihiwalay sa Arizona at Nevada. Tatlung minuto na lang at mararating na nila ang huling destinasyon nila sa road trip na ito—ang Las Vegas.

“Let's go?” tanong ni Tristan sa babae at

inakbayan ito.

“Had enough of the sunset?” nakangiting tanong nito na nagpagiya sa kanya patungo sa parking area, kung saan tatlong sasakyan na lang ang natitira kabilang ang Navigator ni Kirsten na gamit nila.

“I’ll never have enough of the sunset, you know that.” He grinned. Palagi siyang tinutukso ni Kirsten dahil parang wala daw siyang takot aminin na gusto niya ang maraming bagay na sa tingin ng iba ay corny o emasculating like museum hopping, sunsets, long walks on the beach, and serenades. He admits to being nerdy that way, pero hindi rin naman siya nasanay na magpanggap para maging cool. He always thought anyone could tell how geeky he is from a mile away, so why hide it?

He’s also shy and a bit reserved, kaya nagulat siya na malamang interesado rin pala si Kirsten sa kanya. They met on a convention about forensic technology and innovations a couple of months ago, bonded over coffee and desserts on the last day of the convention, and had been regularly going out on dates since.

Matanda ito sa kanya nang limang taon pero hindi naging hadlang iyon para magkasundo sila. Both of them are science nerds and passionate about

their respective jobs. He's a trained investigator and assistant director of the Pathology Department of *UIN Boston*, while Kirsten is a research fellow and instructor at *Boston University*. Isa itong biochemist and consultant din sa ilang drug companies sa North America. Tristan considered himself very lucky that a woman of her caliber actually wanted to be with him. Sana, sana nga si Kirsten na ang para sa kanya.

"It's only your second time in Vegas, right? How about we hit the Luxor first? I have a friend who would happily—*sh*t!*"

Mabilis ang mga pangyayari. May mga humila sa kanila ni Kirsten dahilan upang mapaghiwalay sila. Tinawag ni Tristan ang pangalan nito at sinubukang pumalag sa kung sinumang nakahawak sa mga braso niya pero may inilapat sa dibdib niya. There was a strong surge of electricity, and heat and a piercing pain, and he was soon doubled over, blindly reaching for Kirsten, calling out her name. Kasunod niyon ay tila may tumusok sa braso niya, at huli na para umiwas siya.

Sinubukan pa rin niyang maghanap ng makakapitan para makatayo, pero mas nanaig ang matinding pagkahilo at unti-unting pagdilim ng kanyang paningin.

CHAPTER *One*

*N*agising si Tempest na parang hung over, na walang maalala, na lasing na ewan. Ang sigurado lang siya ay umaga na, base sa namulatang liwanag ng sikat ng araw mula sa puwesto niya. Nakaharap siya sa nakabukas na drapes, kung saan kita ang... kalangitan? *What?*

Floor-to-ceiling ang salaming bintana, na may dalawang metro ang layo sa kanya. Nasaan siya? Kumurap-kurap siya at pinakiramdaman ang sarili. She lay on her side. She felt heavy and sore. Malamig ang aircon sa kuwarto... *kuwarto? What?*

Malamig pero may nararamdaman siyang init sa ilang bahagi ng kanyang katawan, lalo na sa bandang likod. Her heart tripled as realization slowly dawned

on her.

One, judging from what she could see so far, she must be in a hotel room designed for royalty, or rockstars, or pampered heiresses. The high ceilings, the four-poster bed, the super soft sheets and pillows... and they even smelled expensive!

Two, *umaga na. Ano ang nangyari nang nagdaang gabi? Nasaan siya at paano siya napunta dito?*

Three, she was naked. *Oh. My. God.* Kahit hindi naman siya lamigin ay parang nanuot bigla sa buto niya ang ginaw, na agad napawi nang humigpit pa ang yakap ng... *yakap nino?* Napasinghap si Tempest nang mapansin ang brasong nakapaikot sa kanyang baywang, ang kamay na nasa dibdib niya. Big, beautiful hands deftly cupped her right breast and... *what?*

Pilit siyang gumalaw, at napangiwi. Ganito siguro ang pakiramdam ng nakipag-spar kay Pacman, kung sinapian ng masamang espiritu ang boxing champ at hindi naawang magpakawala ng left hook. Her body felt sore, especially the lower part... *sh*t!*

Aatakehin na yata siya sa puso sa mga natutuklasan. So she was apparently spooned up

against someone with beautiful piano player hands, who held her as if he didn't want to let go, and who was also now sporting a mighty morning erection, based on the hot and hard... thing she could feel behind her, gently pressed on her thigh.

*Where the f*ck am I?* She took a deep breath, then slowly rolled on her stomach, fighting the urge to curse some more. Hindi niya alam kung maiiyak o magwawala sa galit. Pero mas nananaig sa kanya ngayon ang magkahalong ang innate curiosity niya bilang investigator.

God, was she forced? Pinakiramdaman niyang muli ang sarili. She didn't feel like she was forced, or even hurt in any way. Pakiramdam lang niya ay lalagnatin siya na di mawari. And, she actually felt sated.

Ganito ang pakiramdam niya matapos ang ilang rounds ng hand-to-hand combat refresher niya, o matapos ang isang one-hour hike, or zumba session. Still, since she's not sure yet what exactly happened and couldn't remember much from the past night save from that time she was apprehended at the highway.

OMG. Isa kaya ito sa mga humarang sa kanya kagabi? Noon niya lubusang tiningnan ang katabi.

Hindi ito maputi gaya ng mga lalaki sa highway. This mas beside her had gorgeous olive skin, broad shoulders, a long lean frame that was half-covered by the sheets... and a face that can only be described as... well, unconventionally pretty. No, beautiful.

That is despite the nasty bruise on his right cheek and a swollen upper lip, which had a tiny cut. May bukol din ito sa itaas na parte ng noo. May nagkalat ding pasa sa balikat at mga braso nito. But still... he's beautiful.

She had never used that word on any man but that's the only thing that would come to mind as she looked at the one beside her. His closed eyes had thick, long lashes, the prominent nose scrunched a bit in irritation, then relaxed as his full lips heaved a sigh. Mukhang nananaginip pa ito. His head turned to the right, giving her a better view of the chiseled jawline, the cleft chin and oh... those plump lips that were now just a few inches from hers.

And she just looked at him, mesmerized inspite of herself.

Wait, I am lying here naked and obviously sated from whatever I did with this guy last night, and I don't even know how it all happened, yet I am allowing myself to be mesmesrized?

Minasdan niyang muli ang katabi. Napaka-inosente nitong tingnan habang natutulog. At paanong nagagawa nitong matulog nang mahimbing matapos ang nangyari kagabi kung ano man iyon? Lumayo siya nang kaunti, bago tinapik sa mukha ang katabi. “Hey...”

Ni hindi siya sigurado sa nationality nito. He looked like he had mixed lineage. He didn't look like the typical American, if ever there is such a thing. Hindi ito maputi. Hindi rin naman kayumanggi. “Hey...” ulit ni Tempest, tinapik uli ito sa pisngi.

Geez, how can a man's skin be this soft? Even with a few stubbles, his facial skin still felt smooth. “Hoy... ya... yo!” Anong lengguwahe ba ang gagamitin niya? “Hey, gorgeous,” halos bulong niya, at bahagyang napangiti. “Gising na.”

“Hmm?” he hummed softly, the sound coming out of him low and sensual. Bakit parang maliban sa sitwasyon nila ay wala pa rin siyang nakikitang mali sa lalaking ito?

“Wake up... umaga na.” Bahala na kung maiintindihan nito iyon. “It's already... yay!” Napasinghap si Tempest nang muling dumako ang kamay nito sa kanyang dibdib. His left hand slipped up her right breast, cupped and caressed before he

gently squeezed it. *Man, that feels good. But...*

Napapikit siya, bago muling umatras, sabay hinampas nang malakas ang kamay ng lalaki. Halos kasabay niyon ang pagsipa niya sa binti nito.

His eyes flew open, disoriented. “Huh? What...?” and in pain. “Aaaww, not again...” Napaatras din ito habang inaaninaw siya. Napaatras din siyang muli, hindi inaalís ang tingin dito habang iniisip kung ano ang susunod na gagawin. Kakaatras nila ay sabay pa silang nahulog sa kama.

And it was no ordinary bed. Halos isang metro yata ang taas niyon mula sa sahig, na mabuti na lang at carpeted. Sabay pa silang napamura. Well, actually, siya lang. The man actually called out to God.

She struggled to get up while rubbing her hips. Ipinatong niya ang mga braso sa kama at napu-frustrate na iniunan ang ulo doon. *Dear God, when will I wake up?*

“Are you okay? Tempest?”

Napaangat muli ang ulo niya. “Kilala mo ako? I mean, you know my name.”

His eyes widened, then blinked, then lit up. Ginaya nito ang pagkakalagay ng braso niya sa kama. Ini-stretch nito ang mahahabang braso at pilit inaabot ang kamay niya. “Sinabi mo sa akin

ang pangalan mo kagabi.” Sandaling nangunot ang noo nito. “Man, I don’t really meet a lot of Filipino who would talk to me in the language, pasensya na kung ang sama ng tunog.”

Hindi alam ni Tempest kung matutuwa o maiinis o mahihiya.

“You don’t remember my name, do you? Or last night?” parang nalungkot bigla na tanong ng lalaki habang matamang nakatingin sa kanya.

Umiling siya. “Hindi ko alam. Parang alam ko, parang may naaalala ako pero magulo. Masakit din ang ulo ko at parang may humahalukay. Hindi ko alam kung bakit para akong nag-hike sa Grand Canyon nang ilang oras pagkatapos ay nagpa-deep tissue massage. I feel so sore.” She winced as she tried to stand.

“Ang malinaw na naaalala ko lang, ay may tatlong lalaking humarang sa akin sa highway malapit sa town proper ng Primm, bandang alas siete ng gabi. I thought they were trying to arrest me for some state traffic violation, but then while I was quizzing them about it, politely at that, someone took out a gun. So, naglabas din ako ng baril. Pero may humampas na sa ulo ko, at hindi ko na maalala ang kasunod.”

Halos hindi kumukurap ang lalaki habang nakatingin sa kanya, pagkatapos ay iginala nito ang tingin sa napakalaking kuwarto na puwede yatang ipasok dito ang studio unit niya sa Sampaloc, Manila.

They were in the bedroom area of an opulent suite. Mula sa kama ay kita nila ang isang magarang living room set, na may bar sa isang sulok. May sliding door patungo sa balcony sa tabi niyon. May four-piece dining set, kitchen counter, at malaking refrigerator sa isang sulok din. Ilang metro naman mula sa kama ay isang nakabukas na pinto na patungo sa banyo, na sigurado siya ngayong kasinglaki ng tirahan niya sa Pilipinas.

The interiors were minimalistic, but elegant and homey. Mukha ring mahal ang presyo ng suite na ito. Bakit sila narito?

“Do you own or rent this place?” tanong niya sa lalaki.

“I don’t even know how the f*ck we ended up here.” Apologetic ito nang tumingin sa kanya. “I’m sorry, Tempest. Wala ka talagang ibang naalala?”

Umiling siya. “Enlighten me.”

He bit his lower lip... his luscious lower lip. Then he seemed to have caught himself. Iniabot nito ang isang kamay, para mahawakan din ang kamay niyang

nakapatong sa kama. “Hi, I am Special Agent Tristan Astrudillo... I have my ID with me.” Lumignon ito na parang may hinahanap habang hawak pa rin ang kamay niya. “Dala ko iyon, nasa jacket ko ang ID at badge... hindi ko lang alam kung nasaan.” His eyes pleaded for her to believe him.

“You’re *FBI*? *CIA*?” Hindi niya alam kung bakit bigla siyang kinabahan.

“*UIN*.” parang nahihiya pang sagot nito. “I’m U16.”

Napapikit ang dalaga, sabay yuko nang magdilal ng mga mata. “I am Special Agent Tempest Villonco from *UIN* Manila.”

He gasped, then, “Did you say... men apprehended you in the highway?” mahinang tanong ni Tristan.

Walang salitang tumango siya.

“Did you... feel any prickling, or stinging sensation in your arm before you passed out, after you were hit with a gun?”

Nag-angat siya ng tingin. “Paano mo nalaman?” tiningnan niya ang kaliwang braso. Ganoon din ang ginawa ni Tristan. Sabay pa nilang ipinakita ang marka malapit sa hugpungan niyon. Parang pantal na namumula.

“Damn it,” naiinis na sabi nito, sabay tayo.

Nanlaki ang mga mata niya sa tumambad na itsura nito. There were more bruise and bite marks all over his chest, arms and shoulders. And he was, well, still fully erect.

Argh, bakit ko tinitingnan?

Hinila ni Tempest ang kumot at ibinalot iyon sa sarili pagtayo niya. *Aray... my gulay, may katabi ba kaming Kama Sutra book o instructional video kagabi? Ginawa ba namin lahat?*

“I’m sorry. Sh*t.” Namumula na si Tristan habang hawak ang isang malaking unan na ginawa nitong pantakip sa katawan. Yakap nito iyon habang nahihiyang nakatingin sa kanya. A king-size bed was between them as they stood looking at each other, both feeling awkward and confused.

Huminga siya nang malalim. Kakaiba ang sitwasyon nila pero hindi sila dapat magpadala sa kalituhan. “So, posibleng konektado ang mga nangyari sa atin... kahapon?” Nahagip ng tingin ni Tempest ang isang gadget sa nightstand. It was an *iPod Nano*. It says *Hotel 33 E-Concierge* on the lock screen. Nakalagay din doon na Sabado na.

Pagtingin niya kay Tristan ay may hawak din itong kapareho ng hawak niya. “We were also attacked last night at around seven.” Napayuko ito.

“We?” Tumaas ang isang kilay niya.

He sighed. “Kirsten, my girlfriend... ex.” Napailing ito, bago nasapo ang ulo. Tumalikod si Tristan, hawak pa rin ang unan na hindi naman natatakpan ang likod ng katawan. Tempest got an eyeful of his well-defined butt. *Hello, Mr. Perfect. Are you even real?*

“Tristan?” tanong niya, at muling naupo sa kama. “Sit down.” Tinapik niya ng espasyo sa tabi.

Nilingon siya ng lalaki. His eyes were misty. *Great, I even have a broken-hearted man with me.*

Malungkot na naupo ito sa tabi niya. “I am trying to remember everything... from the time I regained consciousness here.... I know it was here. Baka two hours na ang lumipas simula noon.” Isinandal nito ang ulo sa headboard at napapikit. “I woke up in the couch. That one.” Itinuro nito ang sectional sofa sa sala. “May nag-abot sa akin ng maiinom. Some cold drink, parang lemonade na matamis na mapait.” Napabuga ito ng hangin. “Ininom ko dahil uhaw na uhaw ako.” Tumingin ito sa kanya. “Aside from thirst, I also felt somewhat numb, and... like I am floating. Like there were no other thoughts in my brain. And yet... I looked for Kirsten. I asked for her.

“Tinanong ko ‘yung nag-abot sa akin ng

mainom. He must be in his forties, a Latino. He's with two women. There were others here, hindi ko rin maalala ang itsura nila. Ang naisip ko lang ay si Kirsten dahil siya ang huling kasama ko, dahil ang boses niya ang huling narinig ko bago ako nawalan ng malay sa parking area sa... sa Hoover Dam, in Lake Mead." Napailing ito. "May nag-abot sa akin ng phone. Kirsten was on the other line and she was apologizing." He hung his head. "She said I was only used to get the *UIN* information about the case we're pursuing against *Pan Pharmaceuticals*, and that they needed those to know what will be their next step after... sh*t! Damn it.." nasapo nito ang ulo. "I was so stupid. So f*cking stupid."

Muli itong tumingin sa kanya. "She was a scientist, you know. I had to tell her about the cases involving *Pan Pharma* because I was also doing extensive research on the substances that were found in the toxicology results." He looked in pain. "I trusted her... so much. Pertinent naman ang mga ibinibigay niyang impormasyon sa akin. Nakatulong din siya. Hindi ko lang alam..." Napamura ito.

"What Tristan? Kirsten really had anything to do with what happened to us?" halos hindi humihingang tanong ni Tempest.

“Possibly.” Marahas na umiling ito. “No... no, I am sure of it. And this., itinaas nito ang isang braso, “is a way to get me as far away from... sh*t, ni hindi ko alam kung saan niya ako dapat ilayo. Kung paano akong naging sagabal sa kung anumang plano niya.”

Tempest looked at him intently. “I was actually here on unofficial business. May dinaluhan lang akong mandatory training course sa Buenos Aires nitong nakalipas na buwan. Dapat babalik na ako ng Manila, but my three high school friends who are now college professors and researchers based in Washington, asked to meet me here. May magaganap daw na convention ng mga biochemists at pharmaceutical companies at ilo-launch doon ang isang bagong uri ng gamot para sa ilang blood diseases. They told me those drugs have not been perfected yet, that they can cure but have certain dangerous effects when administered to those who don’t need it.” She paused. “And they were being used to perpetrate certain crimes when samples were leaked during the experimental stage.”

“What effects?” Tristan paled. Kita ang kaba at takot nito.

“Hallucinations, loss of inhibitions, heightened... sexual... drive.” Ramdam ni Tempest na nag-iinit

ang pisngi habang unti-unting lumilinaw sa kanya ang sitwasyon. “It seem like... we might have been injected with that drug, Tristan.”

Matagal na nakamasid lang sa kanya ang lalaki, bago, “I’m sorry.” Inabot nito ang kamay niya. “Kung nasa dugo pa natin ang itinurok sa atin kagabi, then kailangan nating magpunta sa hospital. Where are your friends? Kailangan natin silang makita.”

“Oh, my God.” Mga praning pa naman ang mga kaibigan niya. “I need to call them!” Hinila niya ang mga kamay kay Tristan at bumaba sa kama. Napamura siya nang maramdaman ang pananakit ng katawan nang ihakbang ang mga paa.

Nakita niya ang kanyang malaking backpack at medium-size luggage sa sala. Pareho niyang binuksan ang mga iyon at hinanap ang cellphone pero hindi niya makita. Inilabas na niya ang mga laman pero wala pa rin. Wala rin ang cellphone sa nagkalat niyang mga damit. Kahit ang mga underwear ay ipinagpag niya.

“I don’t remember finding a cellphone in your undies.”

“Shut up!” singhal niya kay Tristan na amused na nakatingin sa kanya. Nakatakip pa rin ang unan sa katawan nito. *Good Lord!* Isa pa iyon. She’d never

been in bed with a man before, and now she cannot even remember her first time!

Muli siyang naghalungkat. Itinaktak ni Tempest ang toiletry pouch at nahulog mula doon ang isa pang holster niya, kung saan naroon ang kanyang *Beretta M9*. “Aha!” But her ID and badge, her phone and her other gun were nowhere to be found.

“Damn it!” Tristan had also been looking through his stuff, at mukhang gaya niya ay may mga nawala rin dito. Natawa siya nang ilabas ng lalaki mula sa gym bag nito ang isang *Patrick Starr*-printed na flannel blanket. Nakarolyo iyon at mula doon ay lumabas ang naka-holster pang *Sig Sauer M11*.

“Well, at least may natira pa tayong service weapons.” Napailing si Tempest, bago sinimulang iligpit ang mga gamit. Inilagay niya sa isang paper bag ang mga nahubad kagabi at itinira ang ilang pamalit.

“You need to get tested, Tempest.” Tristan sat on the couch.

“Yes, I know. At ikaw din. Kailangan nating magmadali. Let’s both get decent, then tingnan natin kung may makikita tayong clues dito, have breakfast, then we will leave.” Tumayo siya dala ang mga damit.

“No, I mean, you should get tested for rape.” He

looked worried. “After talking to Kirsten, someone brought you in. Gising ka pero parang wala sa sarili. You were giggling and touching everything and everyone you got your hands on. You sat beside me and everyone else suddenly left. Hindi man lang ako nagtanong, I was busy looking at you, wondering who you were and why you’re acting like that. And then... and then....” Nasapo ni Tristan ang ulo. “God... I am not even sure if these are real memories. Baka iba pala ang nangyari. I mean, look at you....” Inabot nito ang isang braso niya. “I’m sorry I did those... and those....” He pointed to her collarbone. “That, too. Kung nagkataong pinilit pala kita, kung lalabas sa resulta ng tests na pinuwersa kita, then I am willing to turn myself in.” He gazed at her helplessly. “I’m sorry, Tempest.”

“I know my body, Tristan. I feel sore but aside from my head, nothing else hurts.” Tinapik niya ito sa balikat. “Magsa-shower lang ako, I’ll be quick.” She smiled, and was relieved knowing that it was a genuine one. Hahakbang na sana siya palayo pero hinuli ni Tristan ang kamay niya.

“I was your first.” He kissed the back of her fingers. “I am not sure if I was ever gentle. I think we started here.” He indicated the couch.

She felt her cheeks burn. “Pag-usapan natin ito mamaya, okay?” Hinila ni Tempest ang kamay at halos liparin na patungo sa bathroom kahit pagal pa rin ang pakiramdam.

So, she must have had drugged, wild, wanton sex with a gorgeous broken-hearted man, who’s also a *UIN* agent just very recently betrayed by some scientist... and they’re in this honeymoon suite for rockstars.

How on earth did she get herself in this mess?

CHAPTER *Two*

*A*los thirty minutes na nagbabad si Tempest sa bath tub, na may katabing basket ng samu't saring mamahaling bath oils, salts at creams. Amoy-cherry blossom na siya pagtayo upang tuyuin ang sarili sa harap ng malaking salamin.

She had never been one to really look at herself in the mirror. Ngayon ay hindi makapaniwalang nasa harap siya ng salamin wearing only a tiny striped panty she managed to put on while holding onto the counter. Hindi siya makapaniwalang may nabago na sa kanya.

Kahit noong engaged siya sa isang lalaking inakala niyang makakasama habambuhay ay hindi siya bumigay. She simply felt it wasn't right then. She

thought she'd wait for the wedding night.

It never came. The engagement was broken. She'd been alone since.

That was three years ago. Sino ang mag-aakalang ni hindi niya mapaghahandaan o mapag-iisipan ang first time niya?

Although if circumstance were different, and if she were to base it only on first impressions and Tristan's devastating near-perfection, she thought he's a perfect candidate. Or the right choice. For what?

Minasdan niya ang sarili. Namumula at parang medyo namamaga pa ang labi niya. May ilang mumunting marka sa itaas ng kanyang braso, sa balikat at dibdib. They were marks on her wrists, on her waist. It was like she was thoroughly feasted on.

She turned and inspected her back. There were marks there also. *Gutom ba siya kagabi?* Bumaba ang tingin ni Tempest.

She pulled her bikinis a bit lower and gasped at the hand marks, that almost bruised her bottom. "Tristan!" sigaw niya. "Tristan Astrudillo!"

Narinig niyang may tumatakbo at may kumalabog pa sa labas. Tila sumabit pa sa kung saan ang mahahabang binti nito. "Yes?" he loudly

asked, breathless.

“Saan ka ba galing?” Lumapit siya sa pinto, habang tinutuyo ng towel ang buhok.

“Kitchen! I was preparing breakfast,” sagot nito. “What is it? Okay ka lang ba?” Worry was now evident in his voice.

Pinag-iisipan niya kung bubuksan ba ang pinto. “I had hand marks on my a*s, Tristan,” sa halip ay nasabi niya.

Natahimik ang kausap. She pressed her ear to the door. “Tristan?”

“I might have held onto you too tightly... while... you were... on top,” nag-aalangang sabi ng lalaki sa mahinang boses.

“I was on top?” hindi makapaniwalang bulalas niya, nag-iinit ang pisngi. “It was my—”

“It was the... second... no, third time we did it. Nagising ka nang madaling araw at ginising mo ako. You had me pinned on the bed. Geez, ang sakit pala pag hinawakan mo nang mahigpit. You have at least a brown belt in judo, don’t you?” tuluy-tuloy na sabi ni Tristan. “You even hit me while I was trying to get away from you. Ilang beses mo din akong itinulak. Tumama ako sa coffee table, sa night stand...”

Hindi pa rin niya alam kung ano ang iisipin sa

narinig pero malakas ang kutob niyang nangyari nga ang sinasabi ni Tristan. She had the tendency to be bossy and a go-getter when sober, much more when she's drunk, or in this case, drugged? May ilang kaibigan nang subconsciously ay nasaktan niya nang pisikal dahil sa kakulitan niya kapag lasing. Kaya nga iniwasan na niyang uminom.

“Where was our first time, Tristan?” hindi na mapigilang tanong ni Tempest.

“On the dining table.”

“What? Bakit doon?” halos sigaw niya.

“Ewan ko sa iyo. I tried to carry you to the bed pero sabi mo, gusto mo sa mesa. You said, and I quote, *Take me there or your nice, hot body will be piercing through that glass window. I swear I can do it.* Unquote. And then you punched me on the face, twice.”

*Sh*t.* Alam niyang kaya niyang sabihin at gawin iyon. “At natakot ka naman?”

“Para kasing gagawin mo nga at kaya mo. Nahilo kaya ako sa suntok mo. Besides, I may have been recently dumped but I was not suicidal.”

Her brow raised as she started putting on her jeans. “Gusto mo pang mabuhay para kay Kirsten?”

A beat, then. “No, para sa iyo.”

Napahinto ang dalaga sa pagsusuot naman sana ng kamiseta.

“I couldn’t leave you in that state, Tempest.”

Napabuntung-hininga siya uli. “Thank you, Tristan.”

Natawa ang kausap. “What are you thanking me for? You hardly remember anything from last night.”

Binuksan niya ang pinto. “Well, narito ka pa rin at hindi mo ako tinakbuhan...” Napangiti siya nang makitang napaatras sa gulat si Tristan. “Tapos...” Suminghot-singhot siya. “Ipinaghanda mo pa ako ng breakfast.” Bumalik ang tingin niya sa lalaki. *My, but you look good enough to eat and sustain me the whole day, Agent Astrudillo.*

“Tempest?” Humakbang ito palapit. “A-are you still drugged?” May takot sa boses nito.

Natawa siya. Sa halip na sagutin ang tanong ay iginalala niya ang tingin sa suite. Namangha siya sa nakita. “Naglinis at nagligpit ka pa. Geez, sobrang linis at ayos!” Nakita niya na pati ang kanilang mga bag ay maayos na nakapatong sa kama. Bumalik ang tingin niya kay Tristan. “Thank you... again.”

“You’re welcome.” He blinked. “Uh, magsa-shower din muna ako. Kumain ka na. I prepared pots of coffee and tea and a pitcher of orange juice, I

was not sure what you wanted. Then, toast and they have a stock of different types of cheese. Bacon and muffins too, delivered by the roving buffet. Can you believe that?” He smiled.

“Hihintayin kita. Sabay tayong mag-breakfast.”

“Tempest, you don’t have to. It’s—”

“Sabay tayong kakain, okay?” Pinanlakihan niya ito ng mata. “Besides, mag-aayos pa ako at magtutuyo ng hair. That will take at least ten minutes.”

“O-okay,” tila nasindak na sagot ni Tristan. “I’ll be quick.”

“Take your time,” she said sweetly. Hahakbang na sana siya papunta sa kama nang muli siyang pumihit paharap kay Tristan na hawak pa rin ang pinto ng banyo. “And Tristan?”

“Yes?” He turned slowly.

“I am sober. I don’t think I’m still under the influence of that mind-altering drug.” Nakangising iginalala niya ang tingin sa kabuuan nito. He visibly shivered. “Otherwise, we’d still be in bed right now... or kitchen counter, or against the w—”

“Later, Tempest!” Parang bulang nawala ito sa paningin niya, sabay sara ng pinto ng bathroom.



Pasado ala-una na ng hapon at nagugutom na si

Tristan, pero nangingibabaw ang pag-aalala niya kay Tempest na nasa examination room pa din. Tapos na siya sa mga tests more than an hour ago. Nasa balsa na ng jacket ang ilang maliliit na vials ng blood samples at slides na ipapadala niya sa *UIN* Boston laboratories dahil maliban sa traces ng alcohol at iron ay wala nang iba pang nakita sa dugo niya.

He was worried about Tempest. He was drunk, maybe partly drugged, and he knew Tempest was not herself also but still...

Nasapo ni Tristan ang noo. Hindi niya alam kung ano ang iisipin. Ang sigurado lang siya ay hindi niya basta iiwan si Tempest ngayon. Kailangang makabuo sila ng plano upang mapanagot ang mga may gawa nito. Wala silang pakialam kung mangangahulugan iyon na kailangan din niyang kasuhan si Kirsten. That woman never loved him anyway. At nangdamay pa ito!

Tempest only wanted to expose people who were behind a potentially dangerous drug, and he thought he was going to spend the next two weeks with a woman he thought could be the one. How wrong he was.

“Agent Astrudillo.”

Kalalabas lang ng doktor at nurse na tumingin

kay Tempest. Nasa pagitan nito ang dalaga na namumungay na ang mga mata.

“Doctor Hollman.” Nilapitan niya ang mga ito, pero direcho ang tingin niya kay Tempest. Marahang hinila niya ito sa tabi niya at inakbayan.

“Agent Villonco said she will explain the results to you later, but I just have to assure you as well that you shouldn’t worry about having committed a crime,” nakakaunawang saad ng doktora. “We will forward a copy of the report to your respective offices later. If you have other concerns, feel free to contact me. Agent Villonco has my details.” Sumulyap ito sa katabi niya, bago nagpaalam muli at iniwan sila.

Mahigpit na hinawakan siya ni Tempest sa braso. “You can breathe now, Tristan,” mahinang anito.

“I really want to,” he whispered. Relieved siya pero hindi pa rin maalis ang pag-aalala.

“I wish I can wipe that guilt off your face.” She sighed, then gently led him towards the hallway. Nakahawak pa rin ito sa braso niya. “Halos apat na oras din iyon, Tristan. I have never been poked and prodded that way. It was invasive. I now understand rape victims more and wanted to kill those bastard who committed such a thing.” Napahikab ito. “Sorry.”

“Gusto mo sa hotel muna tayo? Or you want to

eat first?”

“Puwedeng sa hotel na rin tayo mag-lunch, may mga stock naman yata ng pagkain d’un.” Napailing ito. “Magpapahinga ako sandali then mamayang dinner, imi-meet natin ang mga kaibigan ko. Nag-text na sila at safe pa naman daw. They’re still looking for a place where we can stay.”

Napatango si Tristan. Bago nagtungo sa hospital ay bumili muna sila ng tig-isang cellphones, tinawagan ang *UIN* upang mag-request ng bagong IDs, badges, set ng service weapons at allowance para sa isasagawang imbestigasyon sa mga susunod na araw.

Kaninang umaga habang nangongolekta ng trace evidence sa suite ay tatlong hidden camera at apat na listening devices ang nakuha niya. Mayroon ding *Louis Vuitton* pouch sa bar na naglalaman ng ten thousand dollars cash, na marahil ay sinadyang iwan para sa kanila. Sa E-Concierge naman nila nalamang naka-book sila for ten days sa suite under the names George and Katherine Hale, at fully paid na. Nagkasundo silang huwag kanselahin ang natitirang araw nila sa hotel.

They thought they could still come back in the suite from time to time to check on things and

hopefully, gather more evidence to expose whoever did this to them.

“Tristan, are you okay?”

Huh? “I’m fine, Tempest.” He smiled weakly.

“Iniisip mo ba siya?” Matamang nakatingin ang babae sa kanya. Nasa lobby na sila ng hospital.

“Sino?” Nangunot ang noo niya.

Bahagyang natawa ito. “Okay lang na masaktan kung iyon ang nararamdaman mo.” Napailing ito. “Kirsten deliberately hurt you. May mga dahilan kaya niya iyon nagawa pero hindi justified. Nobody deserves to get hurt just because they happen to be... convenient.”

Pinisil niya ang balikat ng dalaga. “I may have thought of her, but not really because of the reason you just gave me. Mas concerned ako na nadamay ka.” Mataman niya itong minasdan. “You do understand that you will be stuck with me until next week, right?”

“Yes, and I am fine with it,” she assured him.

“I wouldn’t just let you go, anyway,” he softly said.

Natawa ito. “Alam mo, Tristan, kung naiba lang siguro ang sitwasyon, baka kung ano na ang inisip ko sa mga pinagsasabi mo. Iba ’yang mga hirit mo eh. Konti na lang kikiligin na ako.”

Tinitigan lang niya ito. “Are you okay, Tempest? Because you know, there is nothing wrong with... feeling. Galit ka? Nasaktan? Hindi mo kailangang itago for my benefit. I should have exercised more control.”

Umarko ang isang kilay ng dalaga. “If you did, you’d be dead by now. Or seriously injured.” Ikiniling nito ang ulo. “You’re right. May background nga ako sa judo at aikido. Nasa varsity team ako n’ung college.”

“The doctor who examined me earlier couldn’t believe it was a woman who caused this...” He showed her his arms and pointed at his face and neck.

“And that is why you should stop feeling guilty,” giit nito.

“It was your... I was your first, Tempest,” he whispered. He still could not get over that fact. He had never been anyone’s first.

Ilang segundong nakatingin lang ang babae, bago napatango. “Well, Tristan. Think of it this way. I am in my late twenties, and you might have saved me from any possible reproductive ailment caused by a lack of sexual activity during my prime birthing years. Baka nga ginawan mo pa ako ng pabor. Sure, hindi ko rin naisip na ganito ang magiging first time

ko, pero base sa nakita nating ebidensya, I guess my body was sated enough. I might have enjoyed it. And you did not force me, okay?” Marahang tinapik nito ang pisngi niya.

“Maybe I will cry about it at some point, but at least I know that my first was with this great guy who was willing to go to jail and would never abandon me, even if he can...” She leaned up and gently kissed him on the cheek. “Smile, Tristan.”

“I won’t leave you, Tempest.” Hinuli niya ang kamay nito, hindi inaalis ang tingin sa magandang mukha ng babaeng wala pang twenty four hours niyang nakikilala.

Hindi pangkaraniwan ang pagtatagpo ng landas nila. Kakaiba din ang dahilan kung bakit kailangan nilang magsama ngayon. At alam niyang sa sandaling matapos ang dapat nilang gawin ay maghihiwalay din sila.

Pero sa kauna-unahang pagkakataon simula kagabi, ay alam niyang may dahilan muli para ngumiti siya.

CHAPTER *Three*

*W*alang anumang expectations si Tristan sa tatlong kaibigan ni Tempest na imi-meet nila for dinner maliban sa marahil ay panay matatalinong tao ang mga ito. They were classmates, good friends and co-members of their high school alma mater's Science club, she told him. They were the four youngest members and naturally gravitated towards each other. Sa iisang university rin nag-college dahil lahat sila ay nakatanggap ng scholarship doon.

Nahiwalay lang si Tempest sa tatlong kaibigan nang mag-migrate sa San Diego, California ang pamilya ng mga ito, pero nanatili ang komunikasyon. All of them have somehow gone into law enforcement

and public service and have been seeking each other's help during difficult cases.

Ito siguro ang pinakamahirap, at marahil ay pinakamalaking kasong kailangang kaharapin ng apat, dahil bukod sa malalaking kumpanya ang kalaban nila ay maaaring may pagtatangka rin sa buhay ni Tempest, at sa kanya.

But first, Tristan had to note that not only did Tempest has a trio of geniuses for friends, but they're goodlooking fellows as well. Sa cafe sa isang hotel sa labas ng Las Vegas strip sila nagkita-kita, at at kahit wala namang ginagawa ang tatlo ay tila nabulabog ang mga naroon, lalo na ang mga kababaihan.

“Drew, Simon and Philip. And before you ask—yes, they're triplets.”

Hindi magkakamukha ang tatlo. They were all tall and had the same skin color as his, but they had different haircuts and facial features. What they had in common was their sharp, inquisitive, dark eyes, and even if the three men greeted him warmly, he detected a hint of suspicion in the way they looked at him. Hindi naman niya masisisi ang mga ito.

“We got you a place.” Inilagay ni Drew sa mesa ang isang envelop at dalawang keycards. “Just two blocks from here, at this apartment complex. Corner

unit, fully furnished. Isa lang ang bedroom pero may malaking couch sa living room. I think it can be converted into a bed so bahala na kayong mag-usap.”

“We’ve stocked it with groceries and supplies. Nandito ang receipts,” dagdag ni Philip sabay turo sa envelop.

“And here is everything you need to know about the drug that they gave you, pati na ang tungkol sa mga taong involved sa pag-manufacture niyan. The convention starts tomorrow, whole day, and we’re still working on how to get passes.” Simon slid a small, thin flash disk drive across the table. “Of course, you cannot go as yourselves.”

Tumango siya. “We’ll talk about our cover and discuss it with you. Then we will write our initial reports and clear that up with the *UIN* later.”

Minasdan siya ng tatlo. Mas relaxed na ang anyo at tila mas nagtitiwala na. “Nariyan din ang nakuha naming impormasyon tungkol kay Dr. Kirsten Reeves.” Ilang segundong nag-alangang magpatuloy si Philip, “What exactly do you know about him, Agent Astrudillo?”

“Tristan,” he breathed. “Call me Tristan, please.” Sumulyap siya kay Tempest, na bahagyang nangungunot ang noong nakatingin sa mga kaibigan

nito. She gently squeezed his hand reassuringly.

“What about Kirsten?” tanong niya. Hindi na siya susubok idepensa ang sarili. He knew he’d been too guillible, and trusting.

“Her real name is Elizabeth Melloni.” Simon looked grim. “She is more than connected to some of the biggest shareholders of *Pan Pharma*, and also the infamous mob family.” Humina ang boses nito. “Lahat ng dapat ninyong malaman ay naka-save dyan.” He nodded at the flash disk.

Nakatingin lang siya sa tatlo, tahimik na nagpapasalamat na hindi patronizing at lalong hindi nagpapakita ng awa ang mga ito. Hindi niya inaasahan ang narinig, pero hindi na rin naman siya nagtaka pa. Matapos ang mga nangyari nitong nakalipas na beinte cuatro oras, he only expected for things to somehow get worse.

He felt Tempest inch closer. Her hand was still on his lap. He held onto it tighter.

“We should go. May mga kailangan pa kaming asikasuhin for our respective jobs.” Drew stood up. Sumunod dito ang mga kapatid.

Tumayo na rin sila. “Guess we should go also. It’s been a long day. Hindi rin naman kami gaanong nakapagpahinga kanina dahil ininspeksyon din

namin ang suite at tinawagan pa ang mga immediate superiors namin.”

“Medyo nahihilo at minsan ay disoriented pa ako.” Tempest held out the flash disk. “May formula ba dito para sa antidote?”

Philip smiled. “Iyon mismo ang isa sa ipa-follow up namin ngayong gabi.” He reached out to pat Tempest on the shoulder. “Mas maging alerto na lang kayo, okay?”

Natawa siya. “Funny you should say that.” He shook his head. The irony. He’d been called a loser many times in his life but this is probably the first time he wanted a big bold tattoo of it in his forehead.

“It would have been difficult to tell if Kirsten was a fraud or not, man,” nakakaunawang sabi ni Simon. “Base sa naikuwento ninyo sa amin, mukhang pinlano talaga ang lahat. I mean, I am with the bureau and I know I would have fallen for her myself.”

“Hindi pa rin nagbabago ang taste mo, Simon?” Tempest rolled her eyes. “Tall, busty, brunette...”

“Wala namang dahilan para baguhin ko.” Nakangising minasdan nito ang katabi niya. “It’s been three years. I assume hindi mo na type ang mga matatangkad at kulay papel na mga chinito?”

Tempest glared at him. Tristan looked at her curiously. Maliban sa nangyari kagabi ay wala pa silang gaanong napag-uusapan tungkol sa isa't isa.

“Huwag ka nang babalik sa dati mong type, utang na loob. Ang hirap makinig habang ngumangawa sa phone dahil lang sa mga walang kuwentang nanakit sa iyo.” Nailing na hinila ni Drew si Tempest at niyakap. May kung anong ibinulong ito sa babae na dahilan para mamula ito, pagkatapos ay natawa.

Hindi maintindihan ni Tristan kung bakit parang hindi niya nagustuhan ang nakikita. Niyakap din ng dalawa pa nitong kaibigan si Tempest bago siya binalingan ng mga ito at muling kinamayan.

“Ikaw na ang bahala sa kanya, Agent Astrudillo.”

“Alam naming kaya niyang alagaan ang sarili niya. She is perfectly capable but you two have to work this case together.”

“She’s been through so much before this. Please, let this be the one where she finally gets what she deserves. Those bastards need to go to jail.”

“Guys!” protesta ni Tempest. “I was drugged and did things I wasn’t supposed to and couldn’t remember pero buhay pa ako.” She sighed. “I’ll be fine. Huwag n’yo akong masyadong intindihin. Clearly, may kaso tayong dapat kaharapin ngayon

at hindi lang ito basta tungkol sa amin ni Tristan.”
Tumingin ito sa kanya.

He smiled, then stepped closer. Makahulugang nagkatinginan ng tatlo.

“May mga buhay nang nawala na posibleng dahil sa pesteng in-inject sa amin. At hindi na dapat madagdagan pa iyon. So, let’s just focus on that, okay?”

Marahang tumango ang tatlo. “If you say so, Tempest.” Sumaludo si Philip sa kanila, habang ang dalawa pa ay kumaway at nagpaalam na rin. They agreed to stay in touch if anything new comes up.

Tahimik na minasdan nila ang tatlo hanggang sa makasakay ang mga ito sa dalang rental car.

“Are you sure about this, Tristan? Puwede ka pang mag-back out kung sa tingin mo may conflicts of interest dahil sa naging ugnayan ninyo ni Kirsten, or whoever she was. Naiintindihan ko. Ang pag-iimbestiga naman talaga ang ipinunta ko rito. You were supposed to be on vacation.”

Hindi makapaniwalang minasdan niya ang babae. “Are you seriously suggesting I back out of this case, Tempest? Because I was supposed to be on vacation? Paano mong naisip man lang na gugustuhin kong gawin iyon?”

“Hindi ka naman kasing-tanga ko na hindi na sinubukang tumakas nang may nagpapanggap na taga-highway patrol group na pinapahinto ako kahit wala naman akong traffic violation.” Napayuko ito. “I was a sharp shooter, Tristan. I was a f*cking judo black belter. I was supposedly honored for my outstanding work with *UIN* Manila pero ang magpapatumba lang pala sa akin ay tatlong goons na nagpanggap na pulis.”

“It wasn’t your fault, Tempest!” Pigil niya ang pagtaas ng boses. “What the hell?”

“Siguro kung naging mas alerto ako—”

“That’s it.” Ipinaikot ni Tristan ang isang braso sa dalaga. “Umuwi na tayo. Kailangan mong magpahinga.”

“Hindi ko sinasabi ito dahil pagod ako.” Hindi naman ito nagprotesta nang igiya niya sa sidewalk para umpisahan na nila ang paglalakad patungo sa tutuluyan nilang apartment.

“And besides,” patuloy ni Tempest, “kailangan pa nating pag-aralan iyang mga ibinigay na impormasyon ng tatlo. Gagawa pa tayo ng report, makikipag-usap pa tayo sa mga boss natin.”

“Fine. But I am not backing out of this case Tempest.” matigas na pahayag niya. “Walang conflict

of interest dahil apparently wala naman talagang namagitan sa amin ni Kirsten Reeves dahil hindi pala siya nag-e-exist.” Napabuga siya ng hangin. “Naging tanga at pabaya ako, but as much as I want to, I will not blame myself for this. And neither should you.”

Natahimik si Tempest. Tinapik niya ang balikat nito.

“We’ll fight this together, Tempest. Don’t ask me to leave because I won’t, okay?”

Sa wakas ay tiningnan siya muli ng babae. “Okay.” She smiled weakly.



Tempest couldn’t remember if she ever had a butt fetish but she might just be developing one now.

Lumaki siyang ni hindi man lang gaanong binibigyan ng atensyon kung ano ang itsura ng nakikilala. Basta mabait at alam niyang hindi siya hinuhusgahan ay okay na sa kanya. Kaya hindi niya maintindihan dati kung bakit pinagchichismisan siya sa school dahil sa pagiging malapit sa triplets. She later figured it was because many girls found the three very attractive, while she only cared that they treated her like an equal.

Hindi rin niya maintindihan kung bakit nilait

siya ng mga kaibigan at kapamilya ng dalawang ex-boyfriends, who belonged to well off families. The family of her first boyfriend was so used to seeing models and beauty queens, while the other, aside from cheating on her, easily dumped her because she was not Chinese.

She saw the heart first in most people she met over the years, and was grateful that she had been around particularly kind, gentle hearts when she joined the *UIN*. Para sa kanya ay napakababaw kung ituturing na espesyal at nakaaangat sa iba ang isang tao dahil lang sa itsura nito. She probably never really stopped long enough to consider one's appearance except if she's profiling a criminal.

Although Tristan could definitely go to jail with his dangerous good looks alone.

Pasado alas nueve na ng umaga at nakabihis na siya, handa na para sa buong araw ng paglilibot na may kahalong pag-iimbestiga sa Las Vegas Strip. They needed to be as seen as the tourists they wanted the locals to believe them to be, as the newly wed couple seeking adventure and fun during their week-long vacation.

Their cover names? Jack and Jill Hill.

Siya ang pinapili ni Tristan ng pangalan. He

clearly wanted to make her feel that he considered her an equal and wouldn't try to be all macho and protective on her, which she appreciated.

She appreciated it as much as she did the view before her right this moment.

Napangisi si Tempest. Nakatalikod si Tristan, at may kausap sa cellphone nito. His right hand was on his hips, and he bent slightly as if looking at something outside the window. His snug fitting jeans hugged his rounded, tight butt perfectly and he'd never seen a man's rear that looked this good. Gusto niyang lumapit at tampalin iyon, o pisilin. *Sh*t.*

"She's here, man. We should go," paalam ni Tristan sa kausap nito sabay lingon sa kanya, at base sa magkahalong pagkagulat at pamumula nito ay alam na ng lalaki kung saan siya nakatingin. "Saw something you like, Mrs. Hill?"

Makahulugang nginitian lang niya ito. "Who was that?"

"The three musketeers. Before that, I spoke to someone at Accounting about our allowance," nakangiting sagot ng binata. "Let's go?" Kinuha nito ang isang navy blue body bag sa coffee table. Naroon ang kanilang camera, ang mga laman ng envelop na ibinigay ng triplets kagabi pati na ang flash disk.

“Ano ang sabi n’ung tatlo?” Pinanood niya ang lalaki habang ina-adjust ang makapal na strap ng bag. Mukhang hindi ito sanay sa ganoon. “And why are you wearing... that shirt?”

Bumaba ang tingin nito sa suot. “Ano’ng mali sa shirt ko?”

“It’s bright orange.” Nilapitan niya ito. “Let’s go.” Hinawakan niya si Tristan at hinila na papunta sa pinto.

“Wait, ayaw mo ba ng orange?”

She bit her lip. She didn’t really know why she ‘complained’ about the orange shirt. Pero bihira din siyang makakita ng lalaking nagsusuot ng orange at binabagayan niyon. Tristan actually made orange look good. “I like it, Tristan. You look good in it, actually.”

Tinitigan lang siya ng binata. “Kumusta ang pakiramdam mo? Hindi ka ba nahihilo? Nasusuka?” Dinama nito ang noo niya. “We should have slept earlier.” He sighed. Matapos kasing basahin ang impormasyon na ibinigay ng tatlo ay ilang oras pa silang nag-usap tungkol sa kani-kaniyang buhay at mas kinilala ang isa’t isa.

She’d never had an easier time talking to anyone the way she did with Tristan, at mukhang ganoon

din ito sa kanya. May ilang pagkakataong parang nahihiya itong mag-share, pero kalaunan ay nag-open din ito. He really was one adorable, lovable nerd. Naiinis tuloy siya sa mga babaeng pinaglaruan lang ito simula noong high school at maging noong college, all because he was nerdy and awkward.

“Look at this.” He held up his index finger in front of her face and began to slowly move it from side to side. Sinundan naman niya iyon ng tingin, bago hinuli.

“Okay lang ako, Tristan. I am not going into shock. It is me.” Tinaasan niya ito ng kilay. “It’s the orange shirt comment, isn’t it? Or because you caught me checking out you’re a*s?” Hinila niya ang handbar ng pinto. “Nabasa mo naman ‘yung research tungkol sa *anoetic histamine*, di ba? Twelve hours lang ang epekto ng standard dosage niyon. Another twelve hours para tuluyang ma-flush out sa sistema ang gamot.”

Hindi pa rin nawawala ang pag-aalala sa mga mata nito. “May masakit pa ba sa iyo? We might have to do a lot of walking today.”

Binitawan niya ang kamay ng lalaki. “I’m fine, Tristan. Believe me. Tara na.”

“Okay, s’abi mo eh,” he finally conceded, and

stepped out. His hand lay flat on her back as they walked. It felt good.

Sa kabila ng kawalan ng kasiguruhan at panganib na maaring dala ng pinaplano nilang gawin sa mga susunod na araw, pakiramdam niya ay hindi siya natatakot o kinakabahan man lang. Somehow, with this man she's only known for less than forty-eight hours, Tempest felt safe and secure.