

# 1

The director's room was clean, cool, spacious and even homey. Kahit siguro pagpaplano ng counter-attack sa mga bansang umaagaw sa mga yaman ng Pilipinas ang gawin doon ay hindi pa rin gaanong masi-stress ang kahit na sino. One just had to listen to the soothing sound of falling, flowing water in the tiered mini-fountain in the corner, or look at the huge Pre-Raphaelite painting of a garden and brook that dominated one wall and everything, even an impending terrorist attack would seem irrelevant.

Unfortunately for Agent Calwyn Muralla, walang epekto sa kanya ang dapat ay komportableng atmosphere sa opisina ng kanilang director. Ang karaniwan ay maaliwalas na mukha nito ay sobrang seryoso ngayon. The sixty-three year-old balding man looked stern, reminiscent of those strict grade school and high school principals who could reduce her to meekness and silence.

Iyon mismo ang pakiramdam niya ngayon. Para silang nasa principal's office dahil sa lalaking nakaupo kalahating metro ang layo sa kanya. Gaya niya ay nakalapat din sa kandungan nito ang mga kamay, at

tila maamong tupang nakatingin kay Director Malvar.

She never thought she'd ever be in the same room with this man again. God, even with that cut lip, a bruise on his left cheek and a darkening around his right eye, she's sure he left a trail of women that dropped dead left and right when he made his way from his house to here. Paanong nangyaring kahit mukhang na-torture ay ang guwapo pa rin ng lalaking ito?

Pigil na pigil ang dalaga na kagatin ang lower lip niya. Sumasakit na rin ang leeg niya dahil ang hirap tumingin sa guwapong katabi na hindi iyon napapansin ni Director Malvar. Kahit papaano ay naging bearable ang kalahating oras na sermon at kung anumang nakatakdang parusa sa kanya dahil sa lalaking ka-jamming niyang mabibigyan ng disciplinary action ngayon.

“This is the second time you attacked a suspect, Agent Greer. It doesn't matter if all evidence point to him as the perpetrator or if he continues to insult the victims and even mock the arresting officers, you are not supposed to try and beat him to death,” napapabuntung-hiningang sabi ng director nila bago tumingin naman sa kanya.

“Agent Muralla, how many times do I have to

remind you that as part of the Hostage Rescue Team, you are supposed to take and follow orders from your leader? Panglimang reklamo na ito sa iyo ng insubordination and I regret to tell you that this time, you won't just be suspended without pay.”

“Are you... am I being fired, Sir?” Seriously, ngayon lang siya kinabahan. Hindi siya natatakot na sagut-sagutin at kuwestyunin ang mga desisyon ng mayabang nilang team leader sa Mobile Unit ng HRT, pero ngayon, nagsi-sink in sa kanya ang posibilidad na matanggal sa trabaho dahil sa pagiging pasaway niya.

But that Agent Capron was an as\*hole! For her, that team leader sucked.

“Now, why would I do that?” Nangunot ang noo ng nakatatandang lalaki. “Sa tingin mo ba ay wala ka nang kapasidad para magpatuloy bilang U16, Agent Muralla?” tukoy nito sa tawag sa agents ng *United Intelligence Network* o *UIN* na kinabibilangan nila.

Umiling siya. “No, Sir. I love my job. I just don't love my superior.”

Napabuntung-hininga muli ang director. Bumaling naman ito sa tahimik na lalaking guwapo kahit nagulpi. “Agent Greer?”

“Yes, Sir?” alanganing tanong nito. His voice was a bit scratchy, but he still sounded so good. Naalala pa niya kung paanong tila may hypnotic quality ang mababa at buong-buo nitong boses kapag nagsasalita noon during student council meetings.

“Do you have anything to say about yourself?” tanong ni Director Malvar.

Maxwell shook his head. “No, Sir. I was wrong and willing to go through the consequences of what I did,” mahinahong sabi nito, matapang na sinasalubong ang tingin ng director.

*I love you, Maxwell!* Boses iyon ng malanding parte ng utak ni Calwyn na may dalang pompoms at tuma-tumbling papunta sa matipunong balikat ni Agent Maxwell Greer.

Everybody had secrets, and her dirty little secret was that she—a badass helicopter pilot and *UIN* Manila’s go-to girl for everything that had to do with weapons—had been nursing a long-term crush on one of their top criminal psychologists and investigation specialists, Maxwell Greer.

As in simula pa noong college at maging kaklase niya ito sa German at French subjects nila. Ka-batch niya ito, magkaiba lang ang major nila. Sa sobrang

pagkagusto niya kay Maxwell ay sumali siya sa dalawang organization kung saan ito ang leader—sa student government at sa Readers’ Club. Kung hindi lang niya hate ang basketball ay baka sumali na rin siya sa varsity team upang makita lang ito, kahit naging close naman sila noon.

Sa tatlong taong itinagal niya bilang isa sa mga field agents ng *United Intelligence Network* ay nakilala na siyang astig, matapang, walang sinasanto at one of the boys. She was also really good at what she did.

Calwyn was a genius who finished college at the age of eighteen, had a masters’ degree in Systems Engineering, completed an aeronautics course and a licensed pilot before she turned twenty-five and entered *UIN*. Well-respected naman siya at walang sinuman ang maaaring kumuwestyon sa galing at dedikasyon niya sa trabaho. Maikli lang talaga ang kanyang pasensya lalo na sa mga kasamahang walang paggalang sa equality at karapatan ng mga babae.

Ergo, for the past three years, she had been suspended four times. Pulos dahil sa insubordination.

Ano kaya ang parusa niya ngayon?

“The disciplinary committee has decided to temporarily remove you from your respective

divisions and move you to Serial Crimes. You will be working with a huge team composed of experts from *UIN*, and several members of the local police. First meeting ninyo mamayang hapon para pag-usapan ang gagawin sa isang ongoing na kaso kasama ng binuong task force.” Pareho silang binigyan ni Director Malvar ng set ng mga susi.

“Sa loob ng tatlong buwan ay may counselling sessions din kayo with Dr. Alegria,” tukoy nito sa resident psychiatrist—yes, psychiatrist talaga at hindi lang basta psychologist. “At para masigurong hindi kayo papalya sa sessions ay mag-oopisina muna kayo sa basement, sa tapat ng office niya.”

“What?” bulalas ni Calwyn, napatingin tuloy siya kay Maxwell na nakatingin din sa kanya. *Oh, my God, those hazel green eyes! Bakit ba ako tumingin?*

“Yes, Agent Muralla?” Umarko ang isang kilay ng director. “Oras na siguro para maranasan mo naman kung paano ang nasa regular na opisina. Baka may mabago sa pananaw at attitude mo.”

She pursed her lips.

Napailing lang ito. “Well, that’s it. I will see both of you later this afternoon for the meeting. I will have someone deliver some documents to your office as

soon as the copies are made.”

Resigned na tumayo na siya. Well, at least, magiging magkatrabaho pala sila ni Maxwell. Tumingin siya sa lalaki. Tahimik na nilalaru-laro lang nito ang susi. Masakit pa siguro ang nabugbog dito kaya hindi gaanong nagsasalita. *Poor baby!*

Tumayo na rin ang binata. Magkasunod silang humakbang na papunta sa pinto, ngunit noon naman may naalala si Director Malvar.

“I am also assigning both of you to work with a partner in all the cases.”

Pareho lang silang nakatingin ni Maxwell sa napapanot nilang big boss. “And who that may be, Sir?” she was almost afraid to ask.

Director Malvar smiled. “You’ll be working with each other.”

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“Are you really okay with this, Calwyn?”

Muntik nang mabitawan ng dalaga ang hawak na susi nang makapasok sila sa kanilang bagong temporary office, sa malamig na basement ng *UIN* building sa North Avenue, Quezon City. Even if they walked side by side from the director’s office in the

fourth floor, they never said a word to each other. Busy siya sa pagkalma sa nagwawalang heartbeat, sa erratic na paghinga, sa adrenaline rush at raging hormones niya dahil sa excitement sa mga nangyayari.

Simula nang maging agent siya sa *UIN* ay hindi pa niya nasubukang mapirmi sa isang lugar. Opisina nang maituturing ang alinman sa dalawang helicopter na pinapalipad niya, ang mga ilalim ng puno, humvees, roving vehicles at kahit anong lugar na tinigilan nila nang lampas sa dalawang oras. Masyadong action-packed ang trabaho niya para tumigil sa isang lugar maliban na lang kung matutulog na siya.

Just the thought of working with the only man she ever really got into, in the cold six by four basement office was making her feel things she'd never even paid attention to in years. Wala pa yatang limang beses niya itong nakita sa loob ng nakalipas na tatlong taon, at ang mga pagkakataong iyon ay panay malayuan pa.

*Maxwell Greer... always the unattainable, unreachable one.*

Wait, did he just call her 'Calwyn'? As in ang first name niya at hindi Muralla o Agent Muralla o Pilot?

"Calwyn." This time ay may kasamang paghawak



sa balikat ang pagtawag ni Maxwell. May na-detect din siyang magkahalong pagtataka at pag-aalala sa boses nito.

Ang init din ng kamay nitong ramdam kahit sa t-shirt at *UIN* jacket niya.

“I hope you’re not claustrophobic. Wala man lang bintana dito. May nabanggit ba si Director Malvar kung dating extension ito ng morgue? Check out those shelves and cabinets.” He tapped her shoulder. “Too f\*cking clean and sterile.”

Maxwell was talking to her! *Come on, Calwyn, magsalita ka! Nasa debating club ka noong college at grad school, kaya mong makipagbangayan sa radio kapag nasa ere ka at matapang ka ring sagut-sagutin ang buwisit na team leader mo. This is Maxwell Greer and even if he makes your knees weak with that oh-so-sexy voice, you know you can talk to him, right? You even shared a history together. Come on, you know he doesn’t bite.*

*Wait, maybe that’s not such a bad idea. You know, if he bites...* Nakagat niya ang dila sa naisip.

“Calwyn, you know if you think this is not a good idea—”

“I like it,” she blurted out, then turned to face

him, and nearly bumped her nose into one of those broad shoulders. Hindi niya inakalang ganoon pala kalapit si Maxwell sa kanya. “I mean... this office...” Napakurap siya rito. “I’m not... claustrophobic.” Ang bango! Hindi na niya napigilang mapasinghot.

Magaang na hinawakan siya nito sa magkabilang braso. “May allergy ka ba? This place smells like... *Lysol.*”

*You smell good. Like mint and citrus and the fresh morning air... after a rainy night.* “Okay lang, hindi ako allergic.”

Nakatingin lang si Maxwell sa kanya. Ilang segundong bahagyang nangungunot ang noo nito bago unti-unting naging mas relaxed ang guwapong mukha. She wanted to reach up and trace her fingers around those piercing deep-set eyes that changed colors depending on the lighting and whatever shade he was wearing. Isusunod niyang paglandasin ang mga daliri pababa sa ilong na dati pa niya gustong pisilin. She had always thought they were the perfect, Roman kind. And then his squarish jaw with the day-old stubbles... even that nasty bruise looked nice on him.

Then those lips... how could a man’s lips look so darn enticing? *Shit, Calwyn! Maxwell is looking at you,*

*too, Obvious ka na! Lumayo ka na diyan bago pa kung ano ang maisip mong gawin. Stop looking at his lips!*

Okay, titingin na lang siya sa buhok nito. Clean cut, a bit wavy and looked so soft. Right now, a few strands fell across his forehead, just lightly touching the rim of his glasses.

“Hmm... sa tingin ko, alam ko na kung ano ang issue mo.”

She blinked. Hala, gaano katagal na siyang nakatingin kay Maxwell? Bakit hawak pa rin siya nito? Bakit ang lapit nila?

“Hindi pa rin ako nagbe-breakfast. Do you want to order something from the cafeteria?” he asked.

Why were they still standing this close? Bakit hindi siya nagsasalita?

Mukhang galit sa guwapo ang nanapak kay Maxwell, naisip niya habang patuloy na minamasdan ang mukha nito. Hindi lang basta pasa kundi may half-inch marahil ang cut sa kaliwang pisngi nito. The cut in his luscious lower lip was still a bit swollen... and that darkening around one of his stunning hazel green eyes...

“Calwyn, did you even hear anything I’ve said

since we got here?” Pinisil nito ang magkabilang braso niya at inilapit pa ang mukha.

“Ha?” Nanatiling nakatingin lang siya rito, iniisip kung ano ang sasabihin. Kailangan niyang magsalita! Iyong may sense.

He smiled. “Hi, partner.”

*Partner.* She had never worked with a partner, ever. At sa kauna-unahang pagkakataon na magtatrabaho siyang may palagiang kasama, ay ang ultimate crush pa ang naibigay sa kanya! Hindi parusa ang tawag dito kundi... reward!

“Hi...” she whispered. “Agent Greer...” She bit her lip. “Partner.” This time, hindi na niya napigilang mapangiti.

Imposibleng mapigilan dahil sobrang kinikilig na siya. Mabuti na lang at naisasalba pa ng sistema niya kahit papaano ang astig-no-nonsense side niya.

“And I heard every word. Masyado lang akong na-amaze dito sa...” Iginala ng dalaga ang tingin sa opisinang kahit medyo mukhang laboratory dahil sa stainless steel file cabinets at shelves ay maayos namang tingnan.

“First time, you know.” She smiled back at

Maxwell. “Hindi ako claustrophobic. Hindi rin ako allergic sa amoy ng *Lysol*. At lalong hindi ko iniisip na this is a bad idea.” She paused, dagling nakaramdam ng kaba. “Do you? Think it’s a bad idea to be working with me, I mean?”

“Not at all.” He looked amused. “I am actually relieved I will be working with a familiar face. And a brilliant one at that. Been awhile, Calwyn. Kailan ba tayo huling nagkita?”

*Ouch! Pumupunta ako dito kapag general assembly, kapag Christmas party o anniversary, at nakikita kita. You always look good in a suit or tux. I was always there... Wait, ano pa ba ang bago? Not that he was a snob or anything, but the bad part about her secret was that this man didn’t seem to find her attractive. When they used to hang out before, did he even give her a double take, ever?*

“Yeah...” sa halip ay nasabi na lang niya. “Been awhile.”

“I have always worked alone. Hindi ko alam kung paano ang may partner. Pero sinisiguro ko sa iyo ngayon na walang leader o follower sa ating dalawa. We will be equals. If you ever feel I am being an as\*hole, please just tell me,” dere-derechong sabi ni Maxwell na hindi inaalís ang tingin sa kanya. He

was also still holding her close. “Okay?”

Tumango siya. Iniisip pa lang niya kung ano ang sasabihin nang marinig ang pagkatok sa pinto. Para siyang inalisan ng komportableng jacket nang bumitaw si Maxwell at lumayo upang buksan ang pinto. It was one of the interns holding a stack of folders and envelopes. Nang umalis ang intern at isara ng binata ang pinto ay lumapit itong muli sa kanya.

“I guess our partnership officially starts now,” he grinned.

*And I am not quite sure if I look forward to or dread working with you... partner.*

## 2

Mission briefing na pala ang meeting kinahapunan at hindi basta-basta diskusyon tungkol sa kaso. Mabuti na lang at napag-aralan nang husto ang file habang hinihintay na tawagin sa meeting. May tatlumpu siguro sila sa boardroom, sa pangunguna ng head ng Serial Crimes Division na si Agent Lake Herrera.

Maxwell kept gazing at the woman like a lovesick puppy since she, the beautiful agent-in-charge, started talking. Kung hindi lang panay ang bulong ni Maxwell ng mga comments nito tungkol sa kaso ay baka umusok na ang bumbunan ni Calwyn sa selos.

Ang mga tipo pa man din ni Agent Herrera ang mga naging girlfriend ni Maxwell dati.

“Anyway, we will start tonight. We have the cars and the equipment ready and all we need is another pair of decoys, for the team that will be stationed in Alabang. Fortunately, Director Malvar informed me about the latest additions to our team of experts.” Nakangiting tumingin sa gawi nila si Agent Herrera, nangingislap ang mga mata nito sa excitement na parang hindi ito aaktong decoy rin mamaya at malalagay sa panganib ang buhay.

Nagkatinginan sila ni Maxwell. Criminal psychologist ito habang intelligence analyst at ballistics expert siya bukod sa pagiging pilot. Tama ba ang narinig niyang may undercover work sila mamaya?

Indeed, there was no such thing as an ordinary day or night when you're a U16.

Maxwell breathed deeply before he raised his hand. "Agent Herrera."

"Yes?" Itinaas din ng babae ang isang kamay nito, dahilan upang matahimik ang ibang naroon.

"I believe you've made some misjudgments in the profile of the carjackers," umpisa ng binata, nangungunot ang noo habang mabilis na binubuklat ang hawak na album ng crime scene photos. Nagsimula itong maglakad papunta sa harap.

Lalong natahimik ang mga kasama nila. Sa loob ng nakalipas na labinlimang araw ay anim na pareha na ang nabiktima ng gumagalang grupo ng nakamaskara at halatang well-prepared na carjackers. Halos wala kasing naiiwang trace ng pagkakakilanlan sa mga ito maliban sa marka ng mga sapatos. Pawang pinatay o malubhang nasugatan ang mga biktima at tinangay ang mga sasakyan.



Ang mga insidente ay naganap sa madidilim na bahagi ng kalye malapit sa dalawang high-end residential communities, isa sa Quezon City at isa sa Alabang.

Lahat ng mga biktima ay inatake habang nasa gitna ng maiinit na eksena sa sasakyan ng mga ito. Those either killed or severely injured were in various states of undress, had fresh bites and kissmarks. Halos lahat din sa mga ito ay magkayakap pa nang matagpuan sa mga bakanteng lote malapit sa kalye kung saan marahil nag-park ang mga ito.

Why couldn't those people just pay for a motel? Or wait to get home? Geez! Kasabay ng tanong na iyon ay naisip din ni Calwyn ang mga sinasabi ni Maxwell kanina pa. She couldn't help smiling. Nakangiting minasdan niya ito na nasa harap na at humihingi ng permiso kay Agent Herrera na ipaliwanag ang profile nito tungkol sa kaso.

“Despite the outward appearance, these attacks are not sexual in nature and are not random. Pinili ang mga naging biktima hindi dahil mga voyeur ang mga umatake, kundi dahil alam nila kung paanong mas madaling gulatin at mapananatili ang shock ng mga biktima kapag nahuli silang abala at nasa gitna ng maselang eksena.

“The brutal attacks do not reflect animalistic instincts but rather an effective way to instill terror in the victims, avoiding any resistance. Iyong kinuhang mga sasakyan, all six of them, were vehicles highly valued on the black market for parts,” pahayag ni Maxwell habang isa-isang ipinapakita ang ilang mga litrato for emphasis.

Nang tumingin ang binata sa gawi ni Calwyn ay nakangiting nag-double thumbs-up siya habang ang karamihan sa mga naroon ay nagbulungan.

Napatangu-tango si Agent Herrera habang ang leader naman ng local police team na kasama nila ay medyo duda pa. “At saan mo naman ibinase pa ang profile na ito, Agent Greer?”

“Just from the evidence on record, Sir,” sagot nito. “Bukod sa kung sino, saan at paano inatake ang mga biktima ay tiningnan na rin namin ng partner ko ang ilang reports tungkol sa iba pang nawawalang mga sasakyan. All six cars used by the assaulted victims, plus several other cars which fall into this category have been reported missing in the last two weeks, all owned by married men while on a night they were working late, visiting a friend or otherwise not at home.”

Hindi makapaniwala ang pulis. “Sinasabi mo ba

na may iba pang naging biktima rin pero—”

“Pero hindi na lang ini-report dahil nakaligtas naman ang mga nasa sasakyan at isa pa, nangyari din kasi ang insidente habang kasama nila ang mga babaeng hindi naman nila asawa,” Maxwell finished smartly. Tiningnan nito nang derecho ang pulis na nakilala ni Calwyn, ayon na rin sa description ni Maxwell habang nagkukuwentuhan sila kanina tungkol sa kani-kanyang violations.

The police officer was the one who told on Maxwell, at may embellishments pa ang kuwento. Subukan lang talaga ng pulis at ng team nito na pagtulungan si Maxwell at susugod talaga siya sa harap. Apparently, her partner had been getting into a lot of disagreement with the local police who picked on him because he was very good at what he did and too damn gorgeous for his own good.

Pero hindi ang pulis ang bumasag sa tensyonadong katahimikan na ilang segundong namayani sa meeting room, kundi si Director Malvar, na hindi nila namalayang nakapasok na pala.

“So, Agent Greer, provided your profile is accurate, which they often are, how would you approach this operation?” derechong tanong ng director nila, na kay Maxwell lang nakatingin at tila walang pakialam

sa iba pang naroon. Halatang naghahamon ito.

Tila hindi iyon inaasahan ng binata. Director Malvar rarely ever showed that he was on a particular side especially when it came to their operations. “Well, Sir, sisiguraduhin ko na ang mga sasakyang gagamitin ay saktong sa klaseng pinapaboran ng mga carjackers. Sa halip na basta kumuha lang ng pareha na tama ang pananamit at papasang may relasyon ay bibigyan ko rin sila ng instruction to... uh... look distracted inside the car.”

Matamang minasdan ito ng director nila. “You do realize that you and Agent Muralla are the other decoy pair we will use tonight, right?”

Gumuhit ang pag-aalangan sa mukha ni Maxwell. “Uh, yes, Sir.” Tumango ito, alangan pa rin.

“Good.” Tumingin si Director Malvar kina Agent Herrera at Lt. Gabito, ang leader ng kasama nilang mga miyembro ng local police, na agad namang tinapos na ang pagbibigay ng ilan pang detalye tungkol sa gagawin nila ngayong gabi. Bumalik na sa tabi niya si Maxwell, na tila nahulog sa malalim na pag-iisip.

“Agent Greer, are you okay?” hindi na nakatiis na tanong ni Calwyn. Tapos na ang briefing at palabas

na ang karamihan ay tahimik pa rin ito.

Sumulyap ito sa kanya. “I’m good.” Napailing ito. “Sorry, hindi ko lang ito inaasahan. I’ve been a decoy several times when I was still starting here. Pero ngayon lang talaga ako magtatrabaho na may iisang kasama lang at babae pa.” He smiled faintly. “I have no problem with you being a woman, but we’ll be forced into some very compromising situations. Are you okay with that?”

Na-touch naman si Calwyn dahil siya pa pala ang inaalala ni Maxwell. “Hey, don’t worry. Okay lang ako. Kaya natin ito.”

“Greer, Muralla, puwede na kayong umuwi muna para maghanda,” sabi ni Agent Herrera, kasunod ang kapwa team leader nito na si Agent Sawyer De Marco. “Magkita-kita tayong lahat sa main parking area bandang alas siete mamaya.” It was only four in the afternoon.

Nagkatinginan sila ni Maxwell, at sabay pang napatango. Kanina pa napapansin ni Calwyn na parang ang dali para sa kanila ang makapag-adjust sa rhythm ng isa’t isa. Na parang magkaibigan silang muli. Sa loob ng ilang oras na pagsasama sa opisina ay tila kaya na nila muling magpalitan ng mensahe sa pamamagitan ng mga tingin at body language.

Kapwa sila tahimik habang pabalik sa opisina upang kunin ang mga gamit nila. Sabay na rin silang lumabas at nagpunta sa parking area.

“So, later?” He looked wary. Nasa tapat na sila ng SUV nito. Ang auto niya ay nasa bandang dulo pa.

“Yup. Agahan na lang natin mamaya so we can talk pa.” Kumaway siya at nagpaalam na rin dito. Kung hindi lang siya nag-aalalang makita ni Maxwell ay baka tumaun-talon pa siya pabalik sa kanyang sasakyan.

She knew now, she was looking forward to being distracted inside a parked vehicle in a dark secluded area with him later.

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Agent Calwyn Muralla wore a dress. It was cherry red, knee-length and hugged her trim, toned body like second skin. Nakasuot din ito ng high-heeled peep-toe shoes na dahilan upang mas magkaroon ng bounce ang bawat paghakbang nito. Her short, wavy hair were brushed away from her oval face, her subtle makeup highlighted its angles, and her blood red lips were curved into a mischievous smile as she walked toward him.

*Damn! When did she ever get this stunning?*

Sa tuwing maririnig o mababasa niya ang pangalang Calwyn Muralla, ang naaalala niya lagi ay ang naging kaibigan at kapwa niya *magna cum laude* noong mag-graduate sa college, na legendary ang eidetic memory at speed-reading abilities. Napaka-unassuming nito, pero henyo naman. She was the youngest in their batch but also the smartest. Maganda na ito dati pa, kahit hindi mahilig mag-ayos.

Maxwell just didn't imagine she would be this breathtaking. And they would have to make out, maybe even simulate sex later in the cramped backseat of a car just to catch those vicious carjackers.

Napahinga siya nang malalim bago marahang tinapik ang hood ng vintage *Ford* sedan na kinasasandalan habang hinihintay na tuluyang makalapit si Calwyn. Humanda siyang pumito sa sandaling huminto ang babae sa harap niya, pero naunahan siya nito.

His gorgeous partner actually let out a wolf whistle as she regarded him from head to toe before looking at the car appreciatively. "Hindi ko alam kung saan ako titingin. Whew!" Pinaypayan nito ang sarili na parang naiinitan.

Natawa siya. Calwyn was quite a character. She was rarely bashful, never demure, would always say

what's on her mind, just a bit awkward but endearing. It was easy to fall for her, only if he wasn't—

“Where did they get this? Sayang kung babasagin lang pala mamaya.” Hinimas pa nito ang hood ng sasakyan.

Napatingin siya sa kamay nito. “Autobody lang naman ang mukhang vintage. This one's a decoy, too.”

“Oh...” Napatango ito. “A fake *1967 Mustang GTA V8...*” She tapped on the hood. “Nice.”

Hindi makapaniwalang napangiti si Maxwell sa tinuran nito. She was even knowledgeable of the car's lineage and potential! “I think I just got very turned on. A woman who knows her cars. Nice,” pangagaya niya sa tono nito bago ipinagbukas ito ng pinto sa passenger seat. “Get in, sexy.”

Umarko ang isang kilay ni Calwyn, halatang nagustuhan ang sinabi niya. Nang pareho na silang nasa loob ay inilabas nito mula sa purse ang dalawang set ng communication device. Hindi nito inaalis ang tingin sa kanya habang ito na mismo ang nagkakabit ng earpiece at microphone na sinlaki lang yata ng butones sa kanang tainga niya at lapel ng jacket.

“This car is bugged, may camera din daw sa bubong. We can communicate with the entire team



through these.” She fixed the gadgets one last time before moving away. “Ready for some action, partner?” she winked.

Napakurap siya. Ganito pa rin ba talaga si Calwyn? Ayaw niyang mag-assume pero masyado itong komportable sa kanya, taliwas sa naririnig niyang pagiging no-nonsense, seryoso, astig at brusko nito. He may not see her a lot but there were talks. There were even questions regarding her gender preference. “Action, huh?” Lumington siya saglit sa backseat. “They should have given us an SUV.. more room.”

Natawa ito. “Hindi ba mas madaling pagalawin ito? You know, when we both have to move?”

Nakatingin lang siya sa magandang kausap. Nagniningning ang mga mata nito. “Move?” He didn’t quite get it at first, until... *Oh, shit! Move, indeed.* “You okay with it?”

“Come on, partner. We’re U16s, we’re professionals.” Nakangisi na ito. “Is that going to be a problem?”

*Is it?* Bakit ba siya nag-aalala? “No.” Hinarap na niyang muli ang manibela. “No.” He started the engine.

“Ang sabi, maging discreet lang daw tayo.” napapailing pang sabi ni Calwyn na parang aliw na aliw sa sitwasyon nila. “If we will try to move the car with what we’re about to pretend to do, paano kaya iyon?”

Napabuga siya ng hangin. “We’ll see about that later... partner.”

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Heto sila ngayon, sa masikip na backseat ng fake vintage *Mustang*. Kahit na ini-adjust na nila palayo ang front seats upang mas lumuwang ang espasyo ay hindi pa rin iyon sapat. Maxwell was six feet tall, Calwyn was five-feet five. They were both long-limbed and didn’t know how else to move to do what they’re supposed to do but still be alert to reach for their weapons just in case. Siniguro nilang madali nilang maaabot ang kani-kanyang baril habang nagpapanggap na abala sa isang mainit na eksena.

His holster was just behind her left hip and hers was in the small of his back, under his light jacket. They wrestled around trying to find a comfortable position while they waited.

Alam nilang nakikinig sa kanila ang surveillance crew na nakaposisyon within fifty meters at

nagpipiyesta sa naririnig na usapan nila. Too bad, walang camera para masaksihan ng mga ito kung ano na ang nangyayari sa loob ng sasakyan.

“Maxwell!” asar nang sabi niya rito. “Why don’t you just relax? Kanina mo pa ako tinutulak! Mahuhulog na ako dito!”

“Sorry, Cal. Try moving your leg here... Shit! Huwag diyan,” tila gulat na sabi nito nang i-adjust niya ang binti. Her leg must have bumped into his thigh.

“Sorry. Ayan, okay na?” Hindi ito kumibo. “Maxwell? How does that feel?”

Hindi gaanong makita ni Calwyn kung paano ang itsura ng kasama. Ang bahagyang pangingslap mula sa mga mata nito at sa suot na wristwatch lang ang naaninaw niya sa madilim na backseat. Nagtaka pa siya na parang strained ang boses nito nang sumagot. “Uh... okay, galaw ka uli palapit. Pero dahan-dahan lang... please.”

Sinunod naman niya ang sinabi nito. He shifted closer as she kept her one arm around his back. Magkaharap sila sa backseat at nakapaikot ang mga braso sa isa’t isa. Kanina pa siya hirap mag-focus nang husto dahil bukod sa ang bango ni Maxwell ay ang

init din ng katawan nito. His hands also shook a bit as he held her. And when she moved, just now, a low moan escaped from his lovely mouth.

*Oh, my God!*

They were so close. Huminga siya nang malalim. Ano na ngayon? Halos hindi naman yata nila napapagalaw ang sasakyan. Paano magiging obvious sa carjackers ang ayos nila? Hindi gaanong tinted ang mga bintana pero paano nila makukuha ang atensyon, kung nasaan man sa ngayon ang mga ito? They assumed those people had lookouts, and people who gave tips about potential victims. Paano kaya ang itsura ng sasakyan nila five, ten meters away? Tinapik niya sa likod si Maxwell.

“Parang may mali,” she sighed. “Let me lay back close to here...” Ang sandalan naman ang tinapik niya bago humiga habang marahang hinihila ito palapit. “Like this... and you can get on top... pero medyo dito ka naman sa gilid para hindi tayo magkasakitan dito.”

His voice tightened “Calwyn, I... I don’t think this is a good idea.”

Hindi niya pinansin ang sinabi nito. “Abot mo ba ang baril mo?” Napasinghap siya nang maramdaman ang kamay nitong nangangapa sa likod niya. “You’re

shaking, Maxwell. Okay ka lang? And your gun's lower down."

"Got it!" sabi ni Maxwell. "Wait, maybe if I move my hips just a bit..." Napamura ito, kasunod ang tila paghahabol ng paghinga.

"Maxwell, okay ka lang?" nag-aalalang tanong ni Calwyn, pilit binabalewala ang nararamdaman. Goodness, their legs were practically a tangled heap, and she could feel a certain... part of him poking her thigh. Nalilis na rin tiyak ang damit niya at kung mas maliwanag lang siguro, baka may naghe-hello na ngayon sa mababang neckline ng dress niya.

Muli ay hindi sumagot ang binata.

"Maxwell? Ano na? Okay na ba itong ayos natin?" She could feel him so close. Their chests were almost touching, his arms were on either side of her, holding her in place and he was... well, she could feel him now straddling her thigh.

"Huh?" sagot nito na tila nagising mula sa trance. "Okay na. Everything is just where it needs to be."

# 3

Hindi alam ni Maxwell kung paano pang galaw ang gagawin para masigurong mame-maintain nila ni Calwyn ang cover nila habang iniingatan ding huwag masyadong makompromiso. He also wouldn't want to attract another disciplinary action upon the both of them. The backseat might be cramped, but it did not in any way stop him from reacting to his beautiful partner.

He wondered if it was really possible for Calwyn to ignore just how close and intimate they were now? Kahit yakap siya nito ay nakapako pa rin ang atensyon ng babae sa bintana sa likuran niya, binabantayan kung may papalapit nang carjacker.

Ang mga kamay nito ay nasa likod niya pa rin, nakahanda sa pagkuha sa baril nito sa sandaling bigyan sila ng signal. Her fingertips relaxed on his lower back. It was just her fingertips, but the soft, warm feel was too intense it occupied the whole of his brain except the small corner that reminded him he's on duty.

Paano nagagawa ni Calwyn na maging ganito ka-relaxed? Magkadikit na ang kanilang mga katawan.

Sa ilang sandali lang ay kakailanganin nilang mas magdikit pa, kung posible man iyon, upang palapitin ang mga carjackers. He could barely contain himself, and the strain of staying still while on top and so close to his hot partner was too much.

She was so soft, so warm, so damn fragrant. He shook lightly as her breath touched the side of his face. Ibaling lang niya nang bahagya ang mukha ay tiyak na magtatagpo na ang kanilang mga labi.

Even if it was going to be unintentional, he knew it would be a mistake. May iba pang paraan para maging mas convincing ang cover nila. Pero hindi na niya magawang makapag-isip nang husto.

Damn these years of forced celibacy! Damn that f\*cked up criminal who made him lose his temper! Damn this assignment! Huminga siya nang malalim, pinipilit niyang kalmahin ang sarili. Pero hindi na rin napigil ang panginginig niya dala ng pagod at frustration na rin siguro.

Calwyn must have thought he was shaking because it was too cold inside the car, and it was, but the heat coming from their bodies was enough to keep him warm. Hindi na rin niya nagawang pigilan ang babae nang hapitin pa siya nito palapit, hanggang sa tuluyang mawala na ang distansya ng malamig na

hangin sa pagitan nila.

“Okay na ba ito? Malamig pa?” she asked innocently. He shook harder trying to deal with the hormonal onslaught she was instigating. Muli ay inakala ng partner niya na hindi pa sapat ang yakap nito kaya pati ang mga binti ay ipinaikot sa kanya.

She then started to rub against him, and that’s when she finally noticed his aroused state. Kahit hindi gaanong maaninaw sa dilim ay alam niyang nanlalaki ang mga mata nito. Baka naisip din ni Calwyn, na lumayo nang bahagya, pero huli na ang lahat.

*It’s time.*

Maxwell heard a voice scream in his earpiece to watch out. To move with caution and keep his eyes open because it was coming. Ang nagsasalita ay ang isa sa mga police officers na nasa surveillance team. Narinig din marahil iyon ni Calwyn dahil napamura ito at humigpit ang kapit sa kanya, kasabay ang paghawak nito sa baril.

Ganoon din ang ginawa niya habang alertong nakatingin sa bintana. With the conscious control gone, his hips began to push into his partner, of their own accord.

“Maxwell, what the hell do you—” hindi



makapaniwalang bulalas nito.

“Shh... nandiyan na sila.”

Nakuha naman agad ni Calwyn ang ibig niyang sabihin. Bumaba ang isang kamay nito sa likod niya habang maingat nitong iniaangat ang sarili. He knew she must be focusing on the window as well, but she still moved along with him, meeting his thrusts, making sure the car would shake with their pretend passionate lovemaking. Hindi makapaniwalang naibaling tuloy ni Maxwell ang mukha, dahilan upang tuluyang magtagpo ang mga labi nila.

God, her lips felt so good, so hot, so sweet and...

Calwyn was moving her lips against his, and that's when he realized that yes, they were kissing now and no matter how he knew they shouldn't, he just couldn't move away.

Pareho silang nakahawak sa kani-kanyang baril, ngunit pareho rin nilang yakap ang isa't isa. Their bodies continued moving against each other, as if they were both trying to feel more. Her thigh rubbed against his erection, he moaned through their kiss, then she bit his lower lip.

“God, Calwyn...” he breathed as he pulled away a bit. “We can't—”

Hindi na niya natapos ang sasabihin dahil automatic na silang naghiwalay kasabay ang malakas na paghampas sa mga bintana ng sasakyan. Alertong binuksan nila ang mga pinto at iniumang ang baril sa mga umaatake, na parehong nagulat.

Maliksing nahagip ni Calwyn ang kamay ng isa sa mga nakamaskarang carjacker, na may suot ding leather gloves. “U16!” she announced, then yanked the attacker’s hand inside the car while she pointed the gun to his face.

Nabitawan nito ang hawak na baseball bat kaya mabilis iyong naiposas ni Calwyn.

Si Maxwell naman ay nagawang patamaan sa balikat ang isa pang umatake, dahilan upang bumagsak ito sa lupa. Nagkatinginan sila ni Calwyn bago sabay nang bumaba ng sasakyan.

Sa sandaling pagka-distract nilang iyon, nagawang tumakbo ng isa pang nakaposas na carjacker upang tumakas. Hinabol ito ni Calwyn habang tinawagan naman niya ang surveillance team na puntahan na sila at tingnan din kung may iba pang kasama ang mga umatake.

Pinosasan din muna ni Maxwell ang lalaking lugmok pa sa lupa bago humabol kay Calwyn.

She had followed the assailant uphill as he ran into a wooded area. Huminto ito sa isang clearing, iniisip marahil kung saang direksyon pa maaaring pumunta ang salarin. Mula sa kinalalagyan ay kita ni Maxwell na nagtatago lang sa isang shrub sa bandang kanan ang lalaki at hindi iyon napansin ng partner niya. Napamura siya nang makitang may hawak na baril ang nakaposas nitong mga kamay, at nakatutok iyon kay Calwyn.

Too short of breath from the uphill sprint to shout a warning, he pulled Calwyn down from behind and covered her with his body while firing at the attacker. Noon naman dumating ang reinforcement nila at tuluyang hinuli ang sugatang mga salarin.

Habol ni Maxwell ang paghinga habang minamasdan ang mga kasamahan na bitbit ang suspect pabalik sa main road. As he relaxed, he realized he was lying across Calwyn who was flat on her back, flushed and stunned by the shootout. Kumakabog ang dibdib niya habang marahang iniaangat ang sarili palayo, at tinutulungan itong makatayo.

“I’m sorry.” Pinagpag niya ang mga dumikit na lupa at dahon sa balat at damit nito. “Are you okay?”

She just stared at him, her eyes widening in awe

and disbelief. “You saved me.”

Napakurap siya. “No, Calwyn. Ginawa ko lang ang trabaho ko. Natin. Naiintindihan ko kung bakit hindi mo agad napansin ’yung isa, pero hindi rin natin dapat basta balewalain na nagawa mong habulin hanggang dito ang isang iyon in high heels and look at you, you’re not even breathless...” He was babbling. He had to keep talking, or he would be so distracted by the look in his partner’s eyes right now.

“No, Maxwell.” Humakbang ito palapit. “I was so used to being the one who would put myself out there to protect and save others. Hindi ko alam kung ano ang pakiramdam ng ganito...” She shook her head, her curls bounced, then fell across one side of her face. Calwyn looked even more beautiful under the moonlight, her eyes shone as she looked at him. “Thank you.” Tuluyan na nitong tinawid ang distansya sa pagitan nila. Mahigpit siya nitong niyakap, bahagyang nanginginig.

Napapabuntung-hiningang tinapik niya ang likod nito, pagkatapos ay marahang hinawakan sa magkabilang braso ang partner niya upang ilayo ito.

He then took off his jacket and draped it on her shoulders. “Kailangan na nating bumalik sa labas.” Tumango siya sa direksyon ng main road.

Bahagyang nangunot ang noo ni Calwyn bago nagsimula na ring maglakad. Tahimik sila habang binabagtas ang trail palabas, pababa sa kalsada. Ang naririnig lang ay ang tunog ng kuliglig, ang click ng pagsasaayos ni Calwyn ng baril nito. Nang marating nila ang main road ay naghihintay na ang van na magdadala sa kanila pabalik sa headquarters.

He was not that clueless. He noticed when Calwyn kept looking at him. That's why before they got off the vehicle when they reached *UIN*, he met her eyes and said, "We should talk later... partner."

"Hindi ka ba gutom? How about coffee? Tea? I have this collection of different tea blends, bigay ng brother ko. You have to try the chocolate Earl Grey—"

"Calwyn, I'm fine," agaw ni Maxwell sa sasabihin pa sana ng dalaga. He sighed, then stuck his hands on the pockets of his jeans. "We can talk here."

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Umarko ang isang kilay niya. "Okay." Dumako ang tingin niya sa kalapit na bench, sa maliit na landscaped garden na naghihiwalay sa malaking bahay ng may-ari ng compound at sa pinauupahan nitong four-storey apartment building sa Visayas Avenue. "Doon tayo."

Tahimik silang naupo sa bench. Halata ang tensyon ni Maxwell at tila siniguro nitong may espasyo sa pagitan nila. He sighed, then looked at her intently as he said, “I’m sorry about what happened earlier.”

Takang minasdan ito ni Calwyn. “Sorry about what? We were doing a job, Maxwell. Hindi ka dapat mag-sorry. And I have been through much worse. Naitulak na ako palabas ng helicopter, natutukan at nahampas ng baril, nasipa ng mismong mga kasamahan ko and believe me, they’re all still alive.” Napailing siya. “Occupational hazard, I guess.”

Nangunot ang noo nito. “We could have faked having sex in the backseat of that car without getting that close, Calwyn.”

“Either way, we still have to be too close to make it more convincing. Hindi ako offended, Maxwell. Wala akong nararamdaman na na-violate ako or anything like that.”

Ipinatong niya ang kamay sa kamay nitong nakalapat sa bench at marahan iyong tinapik. She loved his hands, they were big and had long fingers, rough yet warm and comforting. Gusto niya ang pakiramdam ng mga kamay na iyon habang hawak siya kanina.

“Well, kung wala kang naramdaman, ako meron.” Binawi ni Maxwell ang kamay nito. He looked distraught. He shook his head as if trying to get rid of certain thoughts. But he still met her eyes. “Don’t act like you didn’t feel it, Calwyn. We were so close. Hindi ko nga alam kung bakit o paano mo nagagawang balewalain iyon.”

Napatango siya. “Ah, yes. I felt that.” She smiled. “But I was too focused on the window. Saka under the circumstances, okay lang din iyon dahil mas naging convincing ang ginawa natin. You saw how those bastards didn’t waste time. As soon as the car shook, they attacked.” She bit the inside of her cheek. Dama niya ang pag-iinit ng kanyang mga pisngi. Naalala pa niya ang pakiramdam ng katawan ni Maxwell, ang paggagalaw nito, ng bawat pagtatagpo at sandaling paglalayo ng kanilang mga katawan upang lalo lang muling magkalapit.

“We kissed, Calwyn,” mahinang sambit nito. “That was not supposed to happen.”

“Eh, nangyari na,” she shrugged. “Okay lang iyon, partner. Mission accomplished naman.”

“You kissed me back.” His eyes bore into hers. Calwyn almost flinched. Tila nang-aakusa ang tingin ni Maxwell, parang sinisisi siya na di mawari. “It

was... an accident, Calwyn. Hindi ko sinasadya iyon. It felt good to kiss you but I had to stop, then you kissed me back.”

Napasinghap siya. Kulang na lang ay sabihin ng binata na alam nito ang nararamdaman niya. Fine, so she took advantage of the situation... well, sort of. She had to admit that as much as she didn't have any prior experience, the feel of his body moving against her felt so good. So good that if only nobody smashed the car window, she would have ripped his clothes off.

“Well, nangyari na,” sa wakas ay nasabi niya. “Kalimutan na lang natin.”

Ilang segundong nakamasid lang ito, na tila sinusukat ang sinseridad ng sinabi niya. “And we shouldn't let anything like that happen again, Calwyn.”

Minasdan niya ang kaharap. Masyadong seryoso at resolute ang tono ni Maxwell at pinapakaba siya niyon. Galit ba ito? Masyado na ba siyang obvious? “Well... okay...” she nodded slowly.

“I'm sorry. I just feel bad about it. That kiss was a mistake.” Napabuga ito ng hangin. “Dapat mas nag-ingat pa ako. I shouldn't...” Napailing ito.



*Hot Pursuits - Sachi Bliss*

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“Maxwell, it’s okay. Kalimutan na natin at maging mas maingat na lang next time.”

Tumayo ito. “I sure hope there won’t be any next time that would put us in that kind of situation.”

Napatayo na rin siya. “What?”

Maxwell faced her, his expression weary. “I feel guilty, Calwyn. There is someone, and I am in love with her.”