

1

“Lock and load. Go, go, go!”

Alerto ang mga mata ni Jake habang naglalakad sa gitna ng disyerto. Nasa misyon sila para pigilan ang mga kalaban sa pagbomba ng aircraft nilang nag-crash. It was their only means of communicating with their command center so they could ask for backup. Kailangan nila ng panibagong aircraft para makaalis sila sa lugar na iyon. They were behind enemy lines.

Humigpit ang hawak niya sa dalang armas. Rinig niya ang yabag ng anim na kasamahan na nakasunod sa kanya at tuluy-tuloy ang maingat niyang paglalakad. Nanlaki ang mga mata niya nang may matanaw sa di-kalayuan.

“Enemy spotted!” sigaw niya. Kinalabit niya ang sub machine gun at kasabay niyang nagpapatok ang mga kasamahan.

“I see the delivery boy!” narinig niya mula sa suot na radio headset.

“Boom,” aniya nang tamaan ang tagabitbit ng bomba na tinutukoy nito.

“I will guard the bomb,” deklara ng isa sa mga kasamahan niya at lumapit sa bomba.

“Follow me. Uh-oh! Sniper in the open, sniper in the open!”

Somebody get rid of that bastard,” utos niya na hindi iyon magawa nang mag-isa dahil hindi aabutin ng range ng baril na hawak niya.

“I got it!” salo ng isa pa niyang kasama.

Natanaw niya ang aircraft na kailangan nilang marating at napangiti. “Cover me!”

“Roger that!”

“Affirmative!” sabay-sabay na sagot ng mga ito.

Lakad-takbo ang ginawa niya hanggang sa marating ang kalahati ng black hawk na bumagsak at mabilis na pumasok. Natigil ang paghakbang niya nang sumalubong sa kanya ang isa sa mga kalaban na nasa control booth mismo katabi ng pakay nila. Nakatutok ang baril nito sa kanya.

“Shit!”

Sunud-sunod na putok ang narinig niya at kita niya ang pagtalsik ng dugo sa kanyang katawan bago tuluyang bumagsak.

“Terrorists win!”

Pabalyang tinanggal niya ang headset at ibinalibag iyon sa lamesa habang nakatingin pa rin sa monitor ng computer. “God damn it!”

“Boring game,” umiiling na sabi ni Eugene habang inaalis ang sarili nitong headset. Ang character nito ang pumatay sa kanya.

Mag-iisang oras na silang naglalaro ng *Counter-Strike* ay hindi pa rin niya matalo ang empleyado ng lolo niya.

“I’ve been playing this thing for years. Bakit di pa rin ako manalo sa ’yo?” nakataas ang sulok ng labing angil niya sa lalaki.

“Real experience counts, Apo.”

Napalingon siya sa bagong pasok, his grandfather. Puti na ang lahat ng buhok nito, yet his stance was that of a man in his late forties. Age didn’t seem to bother him. At sixty-three, there was youthfulness that glowed in his lolo’s eyes. Sa abuelo lamang niya nakita ang ganoong zest sa buhay.

Ang lolo niyang si Francis Walker, retired American Marine, ay nakapangasawa ng Filipina. Matagal nang namatay ang lola niya. Pero bago pa man iyon ay divorced na ang mga ito. And for that reason alone, his father hated the old man.

Jake’s father believed that the only thing that mattered to Francis was his job. Kung bibigyan lang siguro ito ng assignment sa field ay hindi ito aalis sa trabaho. But he was offered a desk job. At dahil doon ay pinili nitong magretiro at manatili sa Pilipinas.

And Jake was on a month-long vacation after his stint in a Navy ship. At pagkatapos ma-reject sa *Navy SEALs*.

“I have experience,” pakli niya at nilingon si Eugene na nakangisi sa kanya.

“Washing dishes and painting ships? Jake, you know those

don't count.”

Napailing siya, umabot ng sigarilyo sa desk at sinindihan iyon. “I’m trying out again next month. Had they told me earlier na hindi ako papasa, di hindi na sana ako nag-aksaya ng halos isang taon sa training nila. Man, they rejected me on the final training phase. I could have been here for a whole year instead of cramming my break in a month!” reklamo niya at bumuga ng usok.

“If you weren’t nodding off during training hours or bringing girls to your quarters, you could be on a mission right now,” his grandfather interrupted.

Napalunok siya at lumikot ang mga mata. “How did you even know about that?”

“I’m retired, not dead. I still have connections,” walang anuman nitong sagot at nagsindi rin ng sigarilyo. Naupo ito sa sofa malapit sa kanila bago muling nagsalita. “You still have over a week. May mga plano ka ba?”

“Yeah,” mabilis niyang tugon. “I’ve been dating this girl—”

“You mean *these girls*,” sambot ni Eugene.

He shot Eugene a deadly look. “When did I—?”

“You keep on shuffling girls in your bedroom, a different girl every night, Jake. I have eyes.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” patay-malisya niyang sagot at nilingon ang abuelo. Nakataas ang dalawang kilay ng matanda sa kanya.

Pagkuwa’y tumayo ito. “Come with me, Jake.” At nagpatiuna na itong lumabas.

“You’re a dead man,” asar niyang banta kay Eugene na nakakaloko ang ngiti sa kanya.

Pinakatitigan ni Agatha ang nakapaskil sa bulletin board. Paulit-ulit niyang pinadaan ang hintuturo sa pangalan ng banda nila. Hindi pa rin siya makapaniwala. Pagkuwa’y dahan-dahang gumuhit ang matamis na ngiti sa kanyang labi.

“My God, kami ang tutugtog sa acquaintance party,” naibulong niya sa sarili at mabilis na hinanap ng mga mata ang mga kabanda sa hallway na puno ng estudyanteng paroo’t parito.

Nagkandahaba ang leeg niya, ayaw umalis sa kinatatayuan sa takot na maglaho ang nakapaskil sa bulletin board bago iyon maipakita sa mga kabanda. Ngunit sa halip na isa sa mga ito ang makita niya ay isang matangkad na lalaki ang nahagip ng kanyang mga mata. Her eyes narrowed to slits. Sandali siyang natigilan.

It was Jake. She had seen the man every day for the past five days. At sa tuwing makikita niya ang guwapo nitong mukha ay hindi niya maiwasang matigilan at pagmasdan ito. His eyes

were so brown they were almost golden. And they always seemed to gleam with life. Ang matangos nitong ilong ay bumagay sa manipis at mapupula nitong labi. The guy had reddish skin, it could be considered tan. Parang natural na maputi ito at nababad lang sa araw.

She was sure that he was not Filipino, not pure Filipino anyway. Pero hindi rin ito iyong tipikal na kalahating Kano at kalahating Pinoy. There was more to him than the rugged good looks. At least, that was what she wanted to believe. His was the kind of face that one could see on glossy mags that advertised expensive shaving creams and colognes for men. At mula nang mag-transfer ito sa unibersidad nila, wala pa siyang nakilalang kolehiyala na hindi pa nahuhumaling dito. Parang lahat ay kagaya niyang napapatingin at binabantayan ang kilos nito.

Just like now. Naglalakad ito sa gitna ng hallway. His dark brown wavy hair was tied back on his nape at may ilang hiblang naligaw sa pisngi nito. Wearing a white shirt that looked overused, black jeans and black bulky boots, the man was perfection. Nakapamulsa ang isa nitong kamay at hindi niya maiwasang pansinin ang braso nito. It looked hard and strong and... warm. Natigilan siya.

Kailan pa siya nagkaroon ng ganoong perception sa lalaki? Kailan pa naging ganoon ang awareness level niya kay Jake? At ilang ulit na ba siyang nagdesisyon na tigilan na ang pagtitig dito sa tuwing nahuhuli ito ng kanyang mga mata? The last thing she

wanted was to be one of those girls na halos i-display ang suot na underwear para lang mapansin nito.

Not that those girls needed to go to that length. Jake was always friendly, especially with the female population. Iyon ang obserbasyon niya. Marami na kaagad itong kaibigan sa maikling panahon nito sa unibersidad. And most of his *friends* were girls, beautiful girls. This led her to conclude that he was the classic playboy. At iyon ang dahilan kung bakit ayaw na sana niya itong pag-aksayahan ng panahon, kahit tingnan man lang. Pero sa malas ay hindi pa niya iyon magawa.

Nang makita niyang papalapit sa gawi niya si Jake ay pumihit siya at ibinalik ang atensyon sa bulletin board. Hindi na siya sasali sa mga babaeng nakasunod ang tingin dito.

“Well, excuse me! Guys should be the ones eyeing me. Not the other way around,” nakataas ang kilay niyang bulong sa sarili habang pinipilit intindihin ang iba pang nakapaskil sa board.

Amazing. Their band’s name was still there.

Napangisi siya.

“Talking to yourself?”

Wala sa oras na napalunok siya at walang poise na binalingan ang nagsalita. Parang tinakasan ng bait na napaatras siya nang malingunan si Jake. He was... smiling. Well, grinning was more like it. Ang mga matang bahagyang natatakpan ng buhok nito

ay nakatutok sa kanya.

Seeing him up close, Agatha thought her heart would break free from her chest. Mas guwapo pala ito sa malapitan. His brusque aura was so powerful. Sandali siyang natanga sa kinatatayuan. She could smell his manly scent. She had always thought na pare-pareho ang amoy ng pabango ng mga lalaki but she stood corrected. There was something about his smell that was so magnetic and sweet and... weakening.

Parang nahalata nito ang panghihina niya. Kumislap ang mga mata nito at kinagat ang pang-ibabang labi, tanda ng pagpipigil nitong tumawa.

“I asked if you were talking to yourself,” anito.

“No, I-I wasn’t...” She laughed nervously. “Why would I...” Pinaikot niya pa ang mga mata as if to tell him that his assumption was ridiculous. Pero nakita niyang wala itong balak maniwala kaya umamin na lang siya. “Yes.”

“I thought so. Care to tell me instead?” He grinned again.

“It’s really...” tumikhim siya, “none of your business. Why are you even talking to me?” derecho niyang tanong, pilit itinutuwid ang pag-iisip.

She was used to crowds. She could not remember experiencing stage fright. Performer siya, kailangan ang lakas ng loob sa pagtugtog. Pero dahil lang sa lalaking ito ay nininerbiyos

siya nang todo na daig pa niya ang nasa grand arena.

Sa halip na pumormal ito sa pagtataray niya ay nakangiti nitong inilipat ang paningin sa bulletin board. “Banda n’yo ’yan, di ba?” Nakatingin ito sa papel na binabasa niya kanina.

She was surprised. “Paano mo alam?”

“Nanood ako n’ung audition. I personally think you’re the best. Your bandmates are okay, too.” Kumindat ito.

Her stupid heart beat swiftly. Naramdaman niyang nag-init ang mukha niya.

“Thanks. ’Bye,” nagmamadali niyang paalam. She didn’t like the unfamiliar feeling that seemed to hit her in the solar plexus.

“I’ll see you around!” pahabol pa nito.

Hindi na niya ito nilingon at tuloy-tuloy na sa field kung saan madalas na nakatambay sina Ben, Christian at John—her bandmates.

“Tayo ang napili for the acquaintance party!” tili niya malayo pa lang.

“Just as I expected,” ani John na itim na itim ang eyebags at namumula ang mga mata.

“Ano’ng nangyari sa ’yo?” taka niyang tanong dito.

“May sariling gig ’yan kagabi.” Si Ben ang sumagot at proud

na ngumiti. “Sakto. Makakapagyabang tayo sa mga freshmen sa acquaintance party. We’ll show ’em how to rock.”

“Hindi lang freshmen, ”Tol. Juniors and seniors are way hotter, hindi pa clingy,” susog ni Christian at inabot ang gitarang nasa damuhan. Nag-umpisa itong tumugtog.

Nasa second year college siya habang ang mga ito ay graduating. Taga-College of Music ang tatlo, while she was taking up Political Science katulad ng gusto ng kanyang ama.

“I-re-review pa nila ang mga tutugtugin natin. Kailangan nating mag-practice everyday bago ang party,” paalala niya at inagaw ang gitara kay Christian.

“Ang sakit ng ulo ko,” nakapikit na reklamo ni John habang sapo ang noo.

“Hindi mo naman kailangang pakisamahan ang mga ’yun. You just do your job and that’s it,” natatawang saad ni Ben. Alam niyang nakikinig ito sa pagtugtog niya.

“Speaking of jobs, I have to attend to mine,” ani Christian na tumayo na. “Kita na lang tayo mamayang gabi kina Rojane.”

Tumango siya. Rojane was a senior student at isa sa pinakasikat sa campus nila. Beauty queen, university sweetheart, her daddy’s own little princess—laging malaking event ang birthday ng dalaga. Every cool person was invited at alam niyang kung hindi siya miyembro ng banda ay malabo siyang maimbita.

She was cool, yes, and far from ugly. But she was not Rojane's crowd. And off stage, she was just an ordinary girl.

“See ya!” maikli niyang paalam kay Christian at hinarap na ang dalawang naiwan. “What’s this?” Pinahulaan niya ang tinutugtog.

Sandaling tumahimik ang dalawa para makinig.

“Super Mario,” ani Ben, parang sasabog ang imaginary timer.

Nagtawanan silang tatlo.

Matamang nakatingin si Jake sa tatlong estudyante na nagtatawanan sa field. His eyes were particularly watching the girl in blue jeans and white sleeveless top with long straight hair. Halos natatakpan ng bangs nito ang isa nitong mata habang kumakanta ito at naggigitara. Her honeyed skin glistened against the sun and from his position, he could clearly see the tip of her well-shaped nose and perfectly curved body.

Beautiful.

Napailing siya, naalala kung paano siya napunta sa lugar na iyon.

“I think it’s time you do me a favor, Jake. This might help you too,” simula ng kanyang lolo na nakaupo sa likod ng desk habang siya ay nakasandal sa hamba ng pinto ng opisina nito.

“How?” he asked. “And what favor?”

Nakatingin ang lolo niya sa folder na nasa desk nito kahit nang magsalita. “I want you to work undercover for me.”

“Seriously?” bulalas niya na tuluyang lumapit dito.

Alam niyang nang magretiro ang matanda ay bumuo ito ng detective and security agency sa Pilipinas. Isa si Eugene sa mga tao nito.

Francis Walker loved his job. No, Jake would say that the old man was obsessed with covert operations. Heto nga at retirado na ay ganoong klase pa rin ng trabaho ang inaatupag. Maybe it was the reason why he wanted to be a soldier too. Or perhaps it was the need to have... a purpose. Gusto niyang magkaroon ng ganoong klase ng dedikasyon sa isang bagay—something to believe in, to fight for.

His age didn't really worry him. Pero ngayon niya aaminin na tama ang abuelo. Experience mattered. At wala siyang background na maipagmamalaki sa undercover missions. Paano nito naisip na isabak siya sa field work?

And wait, wasn't he on vacation?

“Lolo—”

“You're nineteen, your charm and good looks will only make it all too easy for you to pose as a college bum. And your job is simply to collect intel. How hard can that be? No need for guns or

combat action.”

“Maybe I prefer guns, Lolo,” medyo bored niyang sagot. Honestly? Magpapanggap siyang college boy? That is so... lame.

“I know you’re very skilled, Jake. Otherwise you wouldn’t have passed the SEAL’s selection process. But you’re also bored. Might as well make good use of what’s left of your vacation. Instead of bringing home random girls—”

“You’re right. I’m bored. What information do I need to get?” putol niya.

Ngumiti ito, iniabot sa kanya ang folder. “College student, that’s your cover. Gather information about drug dealings inside that university and we’ll do the rest.” Nagkibit-balikat ito. “This is amateur work, Jake. Wala lang akong batang tao para gumawa nito, so, I hand-picked you. You’ll be doing me a great favor dahil kaibigan ko ang may-ari ng unibersidad. That’s why I accepted this project. So, are you going to take it?”

“I’m not sure if I should, Gramps.” Naupo siya sa tabi ng desk nito. “This isn’t exactly what I want.”

“Do you really wanna be a Navy SEAL? Or do you just want it because I forced you to?”

“We both know that you can’t force me to do anything I don’t want,” mabilis niyang pakli. “I accept.”

He grew up listening to his grandfather’s stories during his

military days and it was the glimmer of excitement in the old man's eyes that made him dream of becoming a soldier. Kahit ngayon, kapag tinitingnan niya ito, wala siyang mabakas ni katiting na pagsisisi sa mukha nito, sa mga mata nito, kahit ang trabaho nito ang dahilan ng paghihiwalay nito at ng kanyang lola. Francis believed he was born to serve his country and he stood by his decision. Jake needed that kind of conviction.

He wanted to wake up someday in his pyjamas, balding hair and smile without regrets, re-live how he spent his younger days doing what he loved most in the world—military work. This was his calling. And he would follow his dreams.

“Then, let's get you briefed.” Kumindat pa ito sa kanya.

This was a good way to get ready sa nalalapit niyang enlistment ulit sa Navy. Tumango-tango siya, kinukumbinsi ang sariling walang kahirap-hirap niyang magagawa ang trabaho.

“You're coming tonight, right?”

Bumalik ang diwa niya sa kasalukuyan sa pagkarinig sa boses ng isang babae. Nang tingnan niya ang pinanggalingan ng tinig ay nakita niya si Rojane. She was the first girl in the campus to introduce herself to him. And she was an eye candy too. His lips curved into a smile.

“Of course, Hon. Should I bring something?”

Rojane smiled sweetly. “Just bring your sexy self... it's

Guns And Caprices - Jade Anne Franco

enough," bulong nito sa tainga niya.