



"It's the most wonderful time of the
year for all, including criminals."

DECK THE HALLS

VOLUME ONE

A CHRISTMAS-THEMED
CRIME FICTION ANTHOLOGY

MARK MANALANG | YEYET SORIANO
JOHN LAWRENCE VILORIA CALANO
ALLEN ALLANIGUE | TINA ALFONSO
SHAYNE A. MARTINEZ | DAN C. DE GUZMAN

D E D I C A T I O N

To all underrated and promising
authors who deserve to be published
by **REAL** publishers.



Deck The Halls Volume 1: A Christmas-Themed Crime Fiction Anthology

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Authors: Mark Manalang, Yeyet Soriano, John Lawrence Viloria Calano, Allene Allanigue, Tina Alfonso, Shayne A. Martinez, Dan C. De Guzman

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A PAPERKAT BOOKS ANTHOLOGY

DECK THE HALLS

VOLUME ONE

A CRIME FICTION ANTHOLOGY

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IT'S THE MOST WONDERFUL TIME OF THE YEAR FOR ALL — INCLUDING CRIMINALS



Following the huge success of our **#PaskoNaNaman** and **#DystopiaManila** books, we present **Deck The Halls**, a Christmas-themed crime fiction anthology book project!

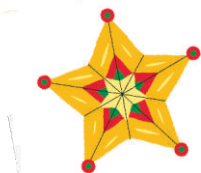
It's a two-volume collection of one-shot stories that include the following requirements:

1. A contemporary crime fiction story
2. It must be set in the Philippines during the Christmas season

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WHO WROTE AND SIGNED
THEIR STORIES WITH PAPERKAT BOOKS**



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Murder de Aguinaldo

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Stifled Carol

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The Case of Happy Jesus

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The girl wiped her face and looked at her surprise guest. “Santa Claus, seriously? Isn’t it too early for you to dress up and climb into houses?” her soft voice rang clearly from the other side.

True enough, Nick wore a Santa hat to cover his flat top hair, goggles to hide his round eyes, a white mask to hide his chiseled jaws in place of a fake beard, and a red jumpsuit. He thought that he could do his heists in a themed get-up to give himself a bit of notoriety. But this...

“What, you want me to get in character too?” he replied flatly. “Sorry for coming too early, even if Christmas is just a few weeks away. Ho, ho, ho,” he added. “Like that?”

“Try harder,” the girl said blankly. “You don’t even have a pot belly or a beard. “And you don’t have your bag and you didn’t sneak in from a chimney...”

“Because you don’t have a chimney!” he snapped. “But this door, I can—”

Excerpt

Saint Nicholas Myra

By Mark Manalang

SAINT NICHOLAS MYRA

By Mark Manalang

Nick took a deep breath as he climbed the mansion's gate. He propped himself up, relieved that his gloves didn't slip on his way up the walls. He adjusted his backpack and looked around.

Every December, there are people who leave their homes to spend Christmas abroad or in the provinces. Some of them are careless enough to leave their houses unprotected. These types of houses are what *akyat-babay*—home invasion burglars—love to target.

The mansion Nick was looking at was his third hit for the night. The first one, a bungalow, hid a small collection of jewelry and thousands in cash. The second was an apartment unit that yielded a high-end cellphone and a gaming console, the very same that he had been lusting for.

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The third one, a two-story Spanish-style mansion in Santa Ana, Manila, looked the most promising of all. The place was said to be the home of a wealthy but eccentric celebrity who loved women and luxuries. A guy like him who flaunted his opulence definitely kept a few treasures.

The place surely had some sort of security system. The ground floor and the garden had no guard dogs. The surveillance cameras on the ground floor were easy to spot. On the other hand, the mansion was dull and dimly lit, unlike the neighboring houses that have set up their Christmas lights and decorations.

Nick decided to play it safe. His first destination would be the second floor.

He was tall for a 26-year-old man, about 5 feet 8 inches. He had ample athletic ability that he acquired from gym workouts and kickboxing. He could do parkour and jump high, and he was proud of his strong legs. Scaling walls and roofs comes easy for him.

The verandah was clear of obstacles, and the entrance looked easy to lockpick. A rich guy would have guarded his belongings under lock and key, but this house's security was too lax. But Nick knew that meant two things: the owner was an idiot, or a guard or caretaker was somewhere around.

Just as Nick was about to force his way in, his ears picked up a strange sound.

Someone was crying. And inside the mansion, to boot.

* * *

Nick found his target, a room with a verandah near the left side of

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the mansion. The verandah was otherwise reachable by ladder. Heavy plastic drapes covered the room's double sliding glass door. He pulled open the drapes, and was startled by what greeted him.

"Ah!" a female voice yelped.

Nick felt his chest pound as the sight of the room came into full view. In the dimly lit room was a girl with round-shaped brown eyes, silky hair, a diamond-shaped face, a pale complexion, and small lips. She was hugging her small, slender body tightly with a white blanket that covered everything but her shoulders.

The girl wiped her face and looked at her surprise guest. "Santa Claus, seriously? Isn't it too early for you to dress up and climb into houses?" her soft voice rang clearly from the other side.

True enough, Nick wore a Santa hat to cover his flat top hair, goggles to hide his round eyes, a white mask to hide his chiseled jaws in place of a fake beard, and a red jumpsuit. He thought that he could do his heists in a themed get-up to give himself a bit of notoriety. But this...

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"Try harder," the girl said blankly. "You don't even have a pot belly or a beard. And you don't have your bag and you didn't sneak in from a chimney..."

"Because you don't have a chimney!" he snapped. "But this door, I can—"

"Don't!" the girl half-yelled, panicking. "Even if you can, don't open the door..."

Nick had figured out the kind of lock used on the door. But the

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second she advised him against it, he realized that unlocking that door could cause problems.

“Since I’m already here,” he continued, “is there something you want for Christmas?”

“What do I even... Ugh...” The girl held back her tongue and hung her head. She walked closer and touched the glass at the part where Nick was standing.

Just then, the blast of a car’s horn echoed from outside the mansion. Nick dropped face down at the verandah, while the girl fell on her knees, perhaps in shock or out of fear.

“All right, I’ll visit you again,” he whispered aloud. “Think of what you’ll wish for until then!”

“W-What?” she gasped. She slammed her hands on the glass door, this time panicking fully.

Nick moved close to the glass door near her face. “You better watch out! You better not cry! You better not pout, because I’m in town!”

He quickly jumped off the verandah and ran off into the darkness.

* * *

Nick grumbled as he sat in front of his computer. His last heist was a snafu: he stayed too long inside that mansion, he looted nothing, and there was an eyewitness too.

He took apart the action camera on his Santa hat and heaved a relieved sigh. These things were expensive, but he needed the camera for his exploits. Nick began to review the contents. Save for that last job, his heists at that bungalow and the apartment went smoothly and

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without a hitch.

It was the mansion—and that girl—that worried Nick.

He paused the video at a point where the girl was in full view. She was an Asian beauty, for lack of a better term. She looked quite young, and her body, covered only with a blanket, exuded an adult charm. One would say that she may be a sexy actress or an image model.

But Nick had bigger things to think of other than the girl's beauty. "Now what do I do about this?" he thought aloud.

* * *

A viral video spread online that day. It was a first-person POV of an *akyat-bahay* heist. The video showed the façade of a bungalow, followed by the voiceless perpetrator dismantling its locks and raiding the master bedroom.

Some netizens claimed the video was scripted. Others guessed that it was a stunt video, noting the perp was able to move stealthily, and that they could traverse walls and roofs with just parkour. There were others who simply thought of the video as the work of some sort of attention seeker.

However, this was not the first video of its kind. The uploader had six more videos, all taken throughout the Christmas season. It was, in a way, a seasonal criminal boasting of his exploits.

* * *

Nick nimbly jumped off the fence and looked up at a three-story apartment. Above him was the home of a local politician who was in

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the papers for having made a deal with some businessmen for big bucks. The politician and his family had left for a Christmas vacation. They had locked the doors and windows, but then again, a skilled burglar could break their way in with ample preparation. And break his way in was what Nick did.

As he slipped through the crowd, Nick wondered how long will it take until Filipinos started investing in home security systems. At the same time, he thought of that mansion, and the kind of security system its owner had employed. Especially since there was a girl detained inside.

Nick found himself back on the main road, amid the hustle and bustle of people doing their holiday shopping. Christmas-themed songs played all around him, and the flickering lights shone as if to usher in the holiday spirit. He wondered if she knew Christmas is coming soon, thinking of the girl again.

* * *

Nick was in high spirits as he climbed his way to that mansion verandah again. The night before, he broke into a businessman's apartment unit and divested its safe of about a million pesos in cash. Incidentally, inside the apartment were some high-powered weapons in a box, as well as a small stash of drugs. He called the cops and told them about the contraband before escaping.

"You're here again, Santa Claus?" the pale girl asked in a hushed voice. She was standing by the double sliding door when he opened the drapes. Thankfully, she was wearing clothes this time. A silk camisole and shorts, but still.

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“I promised I’ll be back,” Nick replied happily. “Are you happy to see me?”

The girl gave him a suspicious gaze. “Are you?”

Nick’s smile faded. “Sorry,” he then said. “You definitely don’t believe in Santa Claus, do you?”

“You’re not Santa Claus in the first place,” she haughtily replied. “I’m turning 18 on December 25. I already learned Santa Claus is not real when I was a child. I still believe in Christmas, but...”

Nick felt bothered by the sudden change in her voice. “Why isn’t this place in a holiday mood, anyway? Isn’t anyone playing Christmas songs, at least? Don’t you have a TV, or a radio, or internet with you?” he asked.

The girl shook her head.

“Were you grounded? Are you under isolation? Are you sick?” Nick scratched his head in annoyance as the girl hugged her knees and began to cry. *What’s going on in this mansion?* he thought.

Long after the girl’s crying subsided, Nick sat down and faced her. “You already know by now what I am, don’t you?” he asked.

“If you want to rob this house, you’ll have a hard time,” she said. “You’re lucky that nobody else is around. What kind of houses have you been targeting before this, huh?”

Finally, a chance to break the ice.

“My first hit was the house of a small town lottery operator, about a year ago...” he began.

* * *

A set of viral videos came out that week. It was the same heists as

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before, but this time, various kinds of contraband were shown being taken out of their hiding places.

At this point, the police started to take notice, not only because house thefts were widespread during the Christmas season, but because the victims were people suspected of illegal activity and had been tipped off to the authorities.

Investigators began to wonder if the tipster and the *akyat-bahay* burglar were the same.

* * *

How many times have I been in this verandah? Nick asked himself as he jumped off the railing and knocked on the glass door. A knock rang from the other side in reply, and as soon as he opened the drapes, the pale girl was standing by the door, as if anticipating his arrival.

He sat down and leaned on the door as he fixed his Santa hat, and the girl followed suit, with the lamp in her room plugged closer.

The two have been meeting more frequently since the night Nick talked about his *akyat-bahay* career. Soon enough, she started asking about his other experiences and the things she missed in the outside world. He was not knowledgeable about news or showbiz, but he had a lot of stories for her.

The other night, the girl finally told Nick her name: Hannah.

“Tonight, I slipped into an actor’s house to check if he was being naughty or nice,” Nick said. “I found drugs in his bedroom, so I called the cops on him.”

“Did you leave coal on his bed?” Hannah asked excitedly.

“Coal?” Nick asked back, puzzled.

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“You’re still playing Santa Claus, but you didn’t leave him coal. Santa Claus leaves coal for bad children, doesn’t he?”

“Giving coal is outdated,” he said, half-grumbling. “Nowadays you report bad people to the cops. Sure, there are rotten people among the cops, but they get punished too, one way or the other.”

“But the fact remains that Santa Claus punishes evil, right?”

Hannah’s sudden question made Nick think. His instincts told him that either she was referring to his own crimes, or her circumstances.

“Hey, Santa,” Hannah then asked, “why do you bother to visit me? Why are you caring for me? Why do you worry for me?”

“Why are you asking that?” Nick said. “I’m Santa Claus. And you haven’t told me your wish.”

Hannah leaned on the door and dropped to her knees. “You can’t fulfill my wish,” she said with a bitter tone. “There’s no point in you coming for me here.”

Nick knelt before the girl and placed his hand on the part of the glass where her face was. “Hannah,” he asked worriedly, “Why are you locked up in this mansion? Who are you, re—”

The sound of the gate opening quickly startled Nick. He closed the drapes and jumped down before sneaking his way to the front wall. As soon as the passenger was ushered out of the vehicle, he slipped past the gate before running off.

* * *

The blonde man withdrew his hand from the girl’s trembling body, and chuckled as he loosened the cloth bonds on her arms and

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legs. He parted her unkempt hair and grabbed her chin before forcing a kiss. Her soft sobbing mixed with the man's lecherous laugh.

"How wonderful that you'll be mine on Christmas Day, Hannah. You will be the greatest gift."

The blonde man fixed his suit, which concealed his large, ripped features. The girl cried as she turned to her side, covering her body with the blanket.

"Your parents were fools," he continued. "Selling their shares at the Diamond Group of Companies to me would cost them so little, but they prioritized your welfare and placed them under your name. All I have to do now is legally make you mine and transfer everything you own to me."

Two bodyguards in suits entered the bedroom. "Boss, it seems someone has been moving around the mansion," one said.

"Don't bother," the blonde man replied with a sneer. "This mansion is well-maintained, of course, the house help will be moving around. Nobody will find the girl here. Until her birthday, at least."

"Also, just a while ago, there was a guy in a Santa costume running to and fro outside the gate," another bodyguard said.

"Probably one of those carolers. Tell the maids to give them money and shoo them away." Without another word, he walked out of the bedroom.

The girl kept silent as her humiliating ordeal ended. She was alone again, until that man decides to assuage his thirst, or he does away with her for good. And then on Christmas...

* * *

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Nick dashed out of the house and jumped into a nearby alley. He was sure that the surroundings were safe, and there was a door where he could slip unnoticed. But just as he left, a group of carolers started singing outside the gate. Fearing that his theft might be discovered early, he bolted out as fast as he could.

He had emptied a box of jewelry in one of the bedrooms, and uncovered a few sachets of drugs hidden in a drawer. He made sure to take them out and catch them on video before leaving.

The sounds of traffic and Christmas music couldn't shake off the uneasy feeling in Nick's chest. He couldn't forget the sight of Hannah in despair.

"I can't stand it," he mumbled.

* * *

It was the week before Christmas, but the mansion remained devoid of Christmas cheer. Nick had already gotten used to sneaking in and out, but the thought of Hannah being harmed inside that mansion bothered him so much.

Nick did not knock at the glass door this time. He slowly opened the drapes... and closed them again with his face covered.

A few seconds later, Hannah appeared before the glass door, clutching a blanket. "Santa, what the hell are you doing here?" she asked with a mix of surprise and anger.

Nick grimly looked at the girl. "I want to know the truth, Hannah," he said. "What's happening here?"

"You shouldn't even be here. If you're caught, he'll kill you."

"No. I didn't want to force my intentions onto you, but now I

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know I should interfere. I can't stand seeing you locked up here and in danger, yet you never told me why you're in this mansion in the first place. Even so... Even so...!"

Hannah pressed her forehead against the glass door as she leaned toward Nick. "Even if you can, you can't save me... Please, just get out of here," she said as her voice slowly broke down.

"Why, Hannah? At least tell me why!"

"Because he will kill my family! He will take everything we have! As long as I'm within his grasp, my family will be safe! So please, don't come here again. For your safety and mine, please!"

Nick couldn't reply. Hannah was pushing him away, yet she stood close to him in tears and clawed at the glass door, as if she was desperately reaching out for him. He could only reciprocate her gesture: he placed his hands on hers and pressed his forehead at the glass to which she did the same.

For a few moments, the space they shared between the glass door felt like a sanctuary.

It was then that she spoke out. "Christmas, my birthday... I want to celebrate my birthday. I want to celebrate with my family. I want to see my family. I want to be free again. I want to... I..."

Several voices suddenly burst from the ground floor, followed by the frantic movement of footsteps. "*Did you guys hear something? Is it from upstairs? Is someone patrolling outside? Has somebody warned the boss?*" the chatter spread out.

Nick looked up at Hannah, his gaze meeting hers.

"I'll grant your wish this Christmas. I told you, didn't I? You better watch out, you better not cry, you better not pout! So, dry your tears. I'm coming back for you!"

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* * *

The blonde man kicked the door open and stormed into Hannah's bedroom with three of his bodyguards. He found Hannah wrapped in her blanket, sobbing as she knelt near the glass door.

He dashed into the double glass door and tore it open before parting the drapes. As soon as he reached the edge of the verandah, he looked left and right, surveying the mansion's surroundings.

Nothing.

As soon as the bodyguards reported their statuses, the blonde man went back into the bedroom. He looked at Hannah, who was trembling at a corner, and then at the sliding door.

"I... broke the lock," he muttered.

* * *

Unknown to Hannah, Nick stayed in the mansion that night, even as the armed bodyguards swept the premises and the lights burst open all over the place. Before he left, he caught a glimpse of a muscular blonde man, whom he guessed to be the mansion owner and the one tormenting Hannah. He also saw how he tore those sliding doors open.

An image from his memories appeared. There was a popular fighter on TV who was blonde, tall, and heavily built, and was an expert in wrestling. That man also had an exhibition video where he tore a log in two with his bare hands.

The moment his phone browser showed the result he needed, his hair stood on end and he felt a chill up his spine.

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“Marik Markopoulos? That monster is Marik?”

Nick realized that Hannah’s situation had become more curious. *Why is Marik Markopoulos detaining her? What happened between them? How did he get involved with Hannah?*

Most importantly, who is Hannah?

Nick had the urge to run to the police and tell them about the mansion. Then again, he discovered this during his *akyat-bahay* stint, and if the cops dig deeper, he will be the one who’ll be thrown in jail.

No, there’s that one guy...

A few hours later, Nick was standing in front of a publishing house in Mandaluyong. A baby-faced young man with glaring black eyes walked out to meet him.

“Thanks for agreeing to meet me,” Nick said. “My name’s Nicholas Myra, and I have a scoop for you. But if you want to make a story out of it, I will need your help. You see, I happened to meet a captive girl.”

* * *

Hannah Esquivel. That was the name of the girl in the mansion. She went missing five weeks ago in an apparent kidnapping in Pasay City. Her parents, affluent businessmen in the construction business, have been informed of Hannah’s current whereabouts, and agreed to disclose what happened to the investigative reporter who met with Nick.

Marik Markopoulos, an MMA fighter of Greek-Filipino descent, publicly declared a crush on Hannah and proposed to marry into the

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family. But not only was she a minor, but he was deep in debt, and there were rumors that he dealt drugs with an international crime syndicate.

Investigators deduced that the syndicate gave Marik the brilliant idea of marrying Hannah and claiming the Esquivel family's wealth on the grounds of being her husband. But to close the deal, he must wed her on December 25, when she becomes of legal age. Marik nevertheless gave Hannah's parents an ultimatum: give him their shares immediately or else he will make that wedding happen.

The police have been searching for Hannah to prevent Marik's forced takeover, but they have failed so far. That was until that reporter gave them Nick's videos.

The investigators found new information about Marik and the mansion. On Christmas Eve, he will hold a party with several suspected members of the syndicate. And one of the highlights of the party was a Christmas wedding.

* * *

December 24, Christmas Eve

The usually drab mansion was lively and in good spirits tonight. Christmas music played all around. Various personalities moved around in their own groups—eating, drinking, or chatting idly. Inside the mansion were several other guests huddled in the guest rooms, enjoying their stashes of drugs. Meanwhile, a few other guests were being welcomed at the gate.

Marik Markopoulos stood proudly as he sipped his whisky and

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watched over the festivities. He wore a red Santa-themed suit jacket, black pants, and a Santa hat to top his blonde hair.

“Working with the Diamond Ring was a good idea, after all,” Marik said to a companion. “Their connections are powerful, and the cops can’t touch me. Even if they did, their leaders can easily sweep things under the rug. That’s why I can openly hold a Christmas party like this without problems.”

“The syndicate’s having a leadership change soon,” the companion replied. “If you get their attention, you can surely get a good position in their ranks.”

“That’s why I need to get those Diamond Group shares. That’ll come true in a short while, once I marry my new girl. She’ll be my key to the good life. Too bad she’s still a minor, at least until midnight!” Marik said with a boisterous laugh.

* * *

Nick watched the party from a hidden corner on the mansion grounds. He had donned his Santa-style jumpsuit, and carried a Santa bag filled with lockpicking items for his infiltration. After hearing that the police are launching an operation at Marik’s mansion, he thought he should save Hannah separately in case things go south and that beast takes her away.

His destination was the bedroom where Hannah was being held. Or so he thought.

The moment Nick noticed that the drapes covering the bedroom from the outside were gone, he knew that Hannah had been moved to another location. *So where is she being held now?*

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“So there really is a wedding happening tonight?” Nick overheard a guest.

“Yeah, they’re setting up the master bedroom and paid a judge to officiate a ceremony,” another said. “I heard the bride-to-be is already waiting in there. Talk about getting straight to the action!”

“Hey, you think we could take a peek at who the bride is?”

“Nah, it’s an enclosed space. They locked it because Marik is keeping the girl’s identity a secret. Well, if you can fit in the ventilation shaft there and slip in like Santa Claus , why not?”

Aba.

* * *

Nick chewed on an hors d’oeuvre as he crawled into the mansion’s ventilation shafts. It was the first time he broke into a house blind. Luckily, he learned about the ventilation shafts and the main pathways, namely, the mansion lobby, the guest room at the right wing, and the master bedroom at the left.

He could feel the heat emanating from the right and center, which means the master bedroom mustn’t be in use yet. That made the network of vents in the left wing his best path toward Hannah.

In a few minutes, Nick had reached his destination in the left wing.

He quickly checked his watch. Quarter to twelve, it said.

* * *

Hannah grimly stared at the door of the master bedroom. The

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room had been decorated with flowers and curtains, and the bed was lined up with luxurious sheets and rose petals. Video cameras surrounded the bed. Candles have been lit in various places. She could also smell the scent of flowers from an air freshener somewhere.

She was kneeling on the bed, which had been moved to the center of the room. Her hands and legs were restrained with flimsy chains.

Marik will hold his wedding ceremony right when the clock strikes twelve. He will then have his way with her, in front of his sick guests, no less. Once he was done with her, he would go after her family, and every asset and peso under their name will become legally his.

Hannah couldn't bear to imagine the disgrace that will befall her and her family. However, there was no hope for her to escape or be rescued.

Unless...

BUMP. BUMP. RUMBLE. RUMBLE. BUMP.

A slim man in a Santa costume popped out of the ventilation shaft in the master bedroom. "Ho, ho, ho," he greeted her.

* * *

Nick barricaded the bedroom and made quick work of Hannah's chains. As soon as her limbs were freed, he rolled a blanket and stuffed it into his bag.

"Climb through the shaft," he told Hannah. "We'll escape through the back. The police will be here—"

"Aren't you going to say something first?" Hannah asked.

Nick was startled as Hannah addressed him with a teasing tone. It

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didn't help that she was wearing lace underwear, a garter belt and stockings, and a white bridal veil.

"Uh, Merry Christmas? Happy birthday? Look, it's 12:01 a.m. already, we gotta—"

The scent of roses filled Nick's senses as Hannah grabbed him and assaulted his lips.

* * *

"Where is she? Where's that bitch?! Find her, find her now!"

Marik's enraged roars rocked the mansion, followed by the breaking of glass and furniture. The guests moved out of his way as he smashed his way into every room. But no matter where he or his bodyguards looked, she was gone.

"Outside! Look outside!" The mansion gate opened quickly as the fighter commanded his men to spread out. But just before he could step out, a barricade of cars with headlights pointed at them blocked their path. Elsewhere, the shifting of boots and the cocking of firearms echoed as armed men in black uniforms appeared above the walls.

A tall, dark-skinned policeman with short hair walked to the front. He raised the special NBI ID tied on his lanyard. "Marik Markopoulos, you and everyone else here," he said, "you're under arrest."

* * *

"So, is it over?" Nick asked.

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"Yeah, you did well in getting her out of that mansion," the reporter said over the phone on loudspeaker. "Marik and his posse were arrested, and Gene and the operatives were able to collect a bunch of contraband. I'm just curious, you were a kickboxer... If things went wrong, do you think you could beat a wrestler like Marik?"

"Maybe. But that wasn't what I was after."

"That's good. How's Hannah?"

"She's okay. She just wanted to greet the sunrise. It's her first day out, and on Christmas Day too."

"Not to mention it's her birthday. Well, you two take your time. Oh, and don't worry about you getting exposed. I asked Gene to arrange a deal for you. It will be a good chance to start over. But in exchange, let me hear more about your story."

"Yeah, sure. Thanks, Derek."

As Nick ended the call, he wrapped the blanket tightly around himself and Hannah, who was leaning on his shoulder.

"What are you going to do now, Santa?" Hanna asked, half-asleep. "You can't go back to burglary anymore, and you better not."

"I don't know," Nick said. "Maybe I could start a gym, or work as a fitness instructor. Maybe I could get a security job. Or I could go to college. I have a lot of things to do."

"You could make a career out of climbing walls and chimneys, Santa."

"Sports, huh? By the way, stop calling me Santa. My name's Nick. Nicholas Myra."

Hannah chuckled. "Nicholas Myra? That sounds like the real name of Santa Claus. Saint Nicholas of Myra, that's who Santa was based on."

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Nick sighed aloud and gazed upon the orange-blue horizon. The view of the morning sky above Manila Bay was breathtaking.

“Shall we head out now?” he soon asked. “Your parents are waiting for you.”

“Nuh-huh,” Hannah replied. “I’m an adult now. First, I wanna eat tempura, and then see a movie and walk around the mall for a bit. After that, I’d like to bring my parents out and then watch the sunset with them here. And then, later tonight...”

“Before you can even eat out, we better change your clothes. I can’t let you walk around like that.”

“In that case, your place, then?”

“Yes, yes. I’ll get you some clothes, then we go out as planned.”

Hannah chuckled softly before snuggling on Nick’s shoulder again.

“Merry Christmas, Santa,” she whispered.



ABOUT

THE AUTHOR



Mark Manalang takes pride in his career as a journalist, working for various print and broadcast companies since he graduated from the University of the Philippines Baguio. He is currently a news writer for a government news website.

Outside the journalism field, Mark takes up food blogging, crime fiction, and poetry, and indulging in anime in his spare time. His inspirations for writing are Anthony Bourdain and Snoopy.

DECK THE HALLS

THE MARITES BRIGADE

***THE CASE
OF THE
CHRISTMAS
PAN-TREE***

By Yeyet Soriano

1.

It was early December 2022, and people were looking forward to the first normal Christmas after a pandemic caused a drawn-out lockdown period and loads of restrictions. In Green Forest Village, an exclusive subdivision that straddled three zip codes, the excitement was palpable as Christmas decorations started lighting up houses months ago, when Jose Marie Chan's voice started crooning his Christmas songs and filled the airwaves.

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In the middle of one afternoon, at Rufi's *Sari-Sari* Store, two masked seniors sat around nose-deep in their respective gadgets.

"I don't get it." Ben Nidoy squinted at his large screen iPad, a gift from his daughter, holding it a foot from his lemon-yellow-mask-covered face to see clearly. At 71, he found it harder and harder to get up from his bed or stand up from whatever chair he was sitting on. But once he was up, he was active, alert, and healthy.

A grunt came from the other side of the store. Ben turned to the owner of the store, Rufino Soriano, his neighbor and, though a decade younger, his best friend from the past lockdown years.

"Why are all these people dancing around in skimpy clothing?" Ben swiped through TikTok videos posted on Facebook.

"Well, for the views and the reactions like yours. They do it for the likes, comments, and some make a living out of that," Rufino answered. Out of habit, and for safety, both men still wore masks and practiced social distancing.

"I could never understand how people could make a living filming themselves." Ben continued to scroll through his iPad, his reading glasses dangerously perched at the tip of his nose. "What is our world coming to?"

"The world has moved on." Rufino's eyes were bright and twinkling. "And at a faster rate than a lot of us can keep up with."

"Speak for yourself," Ben whispered and returned to his scrolling. For a few minutes, the two men sat in complete but comfortable silence.

* * *

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“*Mang* Rufi, do you have yellow pad and ballpens?”

Rufino looked up from his laptop. Through the storefront grilles, Risa’s big curious eyes smiled up at him over her golden LV-logo-embellished face mask.

“I do. How many do you need?” Rufino asked.

“One pad and one each black, blue, and red ballpens *po*,” Risa answered. In her early forties, Risa’s pixie cut made her look a decade younger. She dressed younger too. She wore a white statement t-shirt and denim shorts over her black sneakers.

“What is your *Ate* Patsy up to?” Rufino asked, his eyes smiling over the mask.

“She’s been writing a lot these days *po*, but right now, she’s out spending some time with her kids and grandkids.” Risa was the live-in maid or *kasambahay* of a widow in her fifties, Patsy Santillan, an independently published writer.

“Ah... That’s good,” Rufi exclaimed.

As Rufino prepared her order, his eyes picked up movement on the street. Sure enough, one more figure neared the store.

“Hello, *Mang* Rufi! Two 1.5 liters of Coke *po*,” Seni cheerfully said as she made eye contact with Risa, who sat on the bench outside the store. Seni wore a light blue cloth facemask. She sat on another bench, right across from Risa.

Twenty years younger than Risa, Seni’s taller physique and similar attire made them look almost the same age. Seni wore a red t-shirt over denim shorts and white sneakers. Her medium-length hair was tied up in a ponytail. Like Risa, Seni also worked as a *kasambahay* in the village.

Rufino turned to Ben knowingly. Rufino motioned his head

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towards the direction of his house gate which opened audibly, and a third figure joined Risa and Seni. It was Marian, Rufino's *kasambahay*. Ben then moved his head around when the sound of his house gate opening reached them. A fourth figure, Teresing, Ben's *kasambahay*, joined the three ladies in front of the store.

"The meeting of the MaRiTTeS Brigade has come to order!" Rufi said under his breath. Ben laughed softly as the two men sat back, relaxed, basking in the wonder of the MaRiTTeS Brigade in action.

2.

"What's new from yesterday?" Marian considered herself to be the group's leader, since they normally met on her turf, so she always kicked off their daily mid-afternoon meet-up. In her mid-forties and supporting five kids in the province, Marian has been working as a *kasambahay* for Rufino for more than 10 years. She wore a no-nonsense gray shirt over loose shorts, flip-flops, and a black mask. Her hair was tied up in a messy bun at the top of her head.

"You know the family in Phase 5 with the high school honor student son?" Risa asked.

Everyone nodded. Rufino stopped what he was doing and listened.

"He was caught getting high with some friends!"

"Oh my, where were they caught?" Marian asked.

"He was caught when he got home high as a kite. He said he came from a party at his childhood friend's house in Phase 2," Risa answered.

The women made disapproving noises.

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Ben stood up slowly. “In the seventies, smoking pot was so prevalent and accepted that everyone I knew had done it at least once. It was a rite of passage.”

“You too, *Kuya*?” Teresing asked.

In her mid-thirties, Teresing took care of Ben’s home as well as his menagerie of pets: a Pomeranian, a Siamese Cat, three turtles, five fish, and two lovebirds. She had been Ben’s *kasambahay* for almost five years since he moved to the village. Even though she just came out of the house, she was wearing bright pink leggings, matching flip-flops, and a figure-hugging top. A hot pink mask completed her look.

“Well, I was cool, so yes,” Ben answered proudly. “But that was a very different time and we were a different generation. As a grandfather now, I would whoop my grandkids’ backsides if I caught them doing this now!”

“I was never cool,” Rufino answered with a smile.

“Always by the book, huh?” Ben joked. “So, what happened to the kids?”

“They were all grounded, but they’re trying to keep it quiet.”

“Except nothing gets past the MaRiTēS Brigade!” Rufino proclaimed proudly. The women grinned, loving their group name.

Teresing stood up suddenly. “I have bigger news.”

Everyone turned to her.

“You know the **Team Taylor-Jones Christmas Pan-Tree** that got internally launched two days ago for the planning committee and volunteers? There’s supposed to be a major public launch on the 16th, the first day of *Simbang Gabi*.”

“Yes, of course, we were all there during the launch!” Risa blurted out and turned red when she realized Ben and Rufino were there.

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They all gave some excuses to their bosses when they attended the launch at the clubhouse.

“What about it?” Marian swiftly asked, trying to speed the discussion along.

“I heard that it’s no longer pushing through,” Teresing replied.

Gabe Taylor-Jones was a Fil-Am basketball superstar who married movie star Shay de Leon. Together, they produced three adorable kids and their family videos had become viral. So even when Gabe retired from basketball and Shay retired from making rom-com movies, they continued to rake in the endorsement deals as the perfect embodiment of a mixed-race family in the Philippines.

“*Kuya* Arthur said the same when he came back from his daily bike ride this morning,” Seni said, her eyes sparkling when she talked about her handsome and athletically built boss. Teresing, Marian, and Risa all sighed together.

“Well,” Teresing continued. “The reason for the cancellation is that some people in our village have complained about getting sick from the loot bags given out during the planning launch. But they’re trying to make it hush-hush because it will reflect poorly on our village.”

Rufi’s eyes twinkled. “That is not good.”

“Not good, but why do you look happy?” Ben exclaimed. “I know that look! You’re itching to get to the bottom of this, aren’t you?”

“How many people got sick?” Rufino asked.

“There were five,” Seni said. “*Kuya* Arthur said that they experienced vomiting, palpitations, dizziness, and drowsiness.”

“That doesn’t sound like food poisoning to me,” Ben noted.

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Rufino smiled. “What was in the loot bag?”

Marian rushed back into their home and came back breathless with a small paper bag embellished with the official Team Taylor-Jones family picture logo and a big Christmas tree background.

Marian took out the contents and laid them on the ledge. A juice drink, a milk drink, some healthy chips, a small bag of cookies, and a brownie wrapped in plastic held together by a sticker with the family picture logo.

“Has anyone of you consumed anything from your loot bags?” Rufino asked.

“I ate the brownie—it was delicious—they said it was personally baked by Ma’am Shay! And then I gave the drinks and chips to *Kuya* Arthur’s kids, and the cookies to my *pangga*...” Seni blushed at the mention of her boyfriend.

“How are they now?” Ben asked.

“None of them got sick, *salamat sa Diyos*!” Seni crossed herself.

“I ate the brownie, but I was saving the rest to show my friends and family on my day off next weekend,” Risa answered. “I didn’t feel anything after.”

All eyes were on Teresing next.

“Umm...” Teresing mumbled, looking at Ben.

Ben was silent, and then, “*Ay Dios Mio!* The *merienda* we shared yesterday, it was from your loot bag???”

“*Opo*... But neither of us got sick.”

“What did you consume, Ben?” Rufino asked, suddenly concerned.

“The juice and the chips.”

“I ate the brownie and the milk,” Teresing said.

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“Interesting,” Rufino answered.

“Oh no!” Seni exclaimed suddenly.

Everyone’s eyes were on her.

“I was going to share some sad news,” Seni said. “*Aling* Laura, in Phase 4, Nurse Sharon’s mother? She fell down the stairs in their house and she was DOA at the hospital last night.”

“Oh, that is sad!” Ben exclaimed.

“Wait, why did you say ‘oh no’?” Rufino asked.

“Nurse Sharon attended the launch... What if...” Seni trailed off.

“Ah... This seems like a job for the MaRiTeS Brigade!” Rufino announced.

“For real *po*?” Marian asked, excited.

Rufino paused as if thinking very deeply. The ladies and Ben waited with bated breath for Rufino’s answer.

“Yes,” Rufino finally said. “As before, get all the information you can about the launch and *Aling* Laura’s death. They may be connected. I am also interested in the kids’ pot session. Find out more about that.”

“Updates on GC *po*?” Teresing asked.

“Yes.”

3.

MaRiTeS Brigade Group Chat

Seni: Spoke to the *kasambahay* who lives across from *Aling* Laura’s house. She talked to *Aling* Laura’s *kasambahay*.

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Risa: And?

Seni: Nurse Sharon took home a loot bag, and *Aling* Laura ate the brownie and drank the juice!

Rufi: The plot thickens. What about the other people who got sick?

Teresing: Two were hospitalized the night of the launch but got released early the next day. The other three got better after a good rest.

Rufi: How old were the ones who were hospitalized?

Marian: One was past 50 and the other one was mid-20s but with asthma.

Rufi: And the other three?

Teresing: Between teens and early 30s.

Risa: I found out something very interesting about the pot session.

Ben, Rufi, Marian, Seni, Teresing: What?

Risa: Five kids were involved. One was the honor student. One was his childhood friend who goes to a rival school. Two were the childhood friend's classmates. One was a common friend from an international school.

Ben: Still waiting for the interesting part.

Risa: One of the rival school students has an older brother. The older brother was one of the five who got sick from the Christmas Pan-Tree launch!

Rufi: Interesting, indeed. Looks like these three events are all tied together.

Ben: Or maybe just a big coincidence!

Rufi: 😊

Ben: Rufi, what are you up to?

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Rufi: MaRiTes Brigade, keep on digging, please. Anything and everything you can find out about these three cases.

Ben: Cases? You love this, don't you?

Rufi: 😊

Teresing: 😊

Marian: 😊

Risa: 😊

Seni: 🤔

Ben: Teresing, come here and teach me how to do that smiley thing!

4.

In the afternoon of the next day, the MaRiTes Brigade met again.

“What have we found out?” Rufi asked.

Risa stood. “The student with the older brother who got sick was grounded so he wasn’t allowed to attend the Christmas Pan-Tree launch. His older brother covered for him and got sick after he came home.”

Teresing stood. “Most of the five who got sick ate the brownie and milk.”

Marian stood. “Same with *Aling* Laura—at least the brownie.”

Seni stood. “But there is something wrong...”

Rufino turned to her. “What is wrong, Seni?”

“The ones who got sick went down on Sunday night right after the launch. *Aling* Laura had her accident on Monday night.”

“Maybe she just ate the brownie and the juice the next day?”

“Maybe,” Seni said, but she didn’t look convinced. “I need to go

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back to my *kasambahay* friend.”

“It’s always good to reconfirm everything you’ve heard or been told,” Rufino agreed.

“Okay *po*,” Seni answered.

5.

“Thank you for meeting me.” Rufino sat across Gabe Taylor-Jones in the latter’s living room.

“It’s been crazy around here as you probably know,” Gabe smiled tightly, his face showing the stress of the past few days. “Shay and the kids went to her mother’s house to get away from this mess.” He leaned forward. “But when you said you could help shed light on what happened, I was intrigued. I’ve heard whispers about you, your past, and some other cases you may have helped solve recently.”

Rufino smiled. “Word about me most likely is exaggerated. Let’s talk about what happened. Can you relate the series of events leading up to the time you found out about the people getting sick?”

Gabe nodded. “So, as you know, we were launching the planning for the Christmas Pan-Tree which we wanted to open to the public starting December 16 up to Christmas Eve. The concept was similar to the community pantries during the pandemic. We would get donations, and people in need would be the recipients. Symbolically, we will use a huge Christmas Tree to contain representations of the donations, and the bags with the goods underneath the tree will be given away as gifts. Each family can get one bag which they can use for their *Noche Buena* meal.

“We’ve lined up the donors and we’ve identified the communities

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we will be helping out. One different community for each of the nine days leading up to Christmas. We also had all the promotions ready to go.”

“Let’s focus on what was in the loot bag and where they came from,” Rufino prodded.

“Ah yes, the loot bag,” Gabe sighed. “We had 50 in all, for the organizers and volunteers and some others. Most of what’s in the loot bag came from our sponsors. We checked the expiry dates and made sure none of them were tampered with.”

“Except?”

“Shay baked the brownies herself, to add a personal touch. She supervised the slicing and packaging very closely, down to the placement of the stickers.”

Gabe wiped the sweat off his forehead. “But, *Mang* Rufi, I ate from the batch she baked, even the kids! Nothing happened to us! It couldn’t have been because of what my wife baked!”

“You’re right. Because if it was, more people would have gotten sick. Right now, only five got sick and one died.”

“Oh, dear Lord, did we cause that death? All we wanted was to give back to the community since we’ve received blessings even when the pandemic struck...”

“That’s what we are trying to find out.”

“We tried to take back all of the loot bags once news of the sickness came out, but most have been consumed. Not to brag, but the goods we endorse are pretty good.”

“Your wife’s brownies were also completely consumed, except for the one that my *kasambahay* had which I asked to keep with me.”

“Yes.” Gabe’s eyes suddenly lit up. “I was able to get the loot bag

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back from one of those who got sick as well. I asked him to put back everything that wasn't consumed so we could get to the bottom of it. Thank God, he was a friend, and he didn't get *that* sick."

"Do you have it with you, and can I see it?"

Gabe went to another room and came back with the loot bag.

"May I?"

"Yes, *po*."

Rufino took out each of the items in the bag. An empty milk container, a full juice one, a half-empty chips bag, an unopened cookie bag, and a half-eaten brownie in its plastic wrapping.

Rufino took out Marian's loot bag and silently compared the contents. Gabe, fascinated, watched intently.

After a few minutes...

"Your logo, I assume anyone can copy it from online and create a similar sticker."

Gabe wrinkled his brow. "Well, yes. But also, we give away those stickers too during personal appearances."

Rufino grunted. "The plastic wrapping?"

"Generic. I think Shay just bought them from Lazada."

"They look similar at first glance, but at closer glance...the brownies your wife made have a different coloring and consistency from the brownies your friend who got sick consumed." Rufino smelled both. "Definitely smells differently as well. I have a hunch, but I would need a portion of this uneaten sample. If that's okay with you."

Gabe nodded. "Anything to help. We are trying to keep the police out of this, but with the death, we may not be able to do it for long. We contacted all those who got sick and paid for the hospitalizations and

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medicines. We need to see if we can help with the death as well. Thankfully, no one is reporting anything, and this whole thing has been contained within our village. Of course, our reputation is taking a beating on social media because of a lot of blind items.”

“Is there anyone who would want to hurt you or your family?”

“Well, we are famous, and we have a lot of endorsements, so yes, we do have our haters.”

“Any personal enemies?”

Gabe frowned. “I don’t think Shay has any personal enemies, and the kids are still kids. For myself, well, let’s see. Any one of those guys who hoped Shay would have married them. Any one of those guys who thought I stepped on during my basketball career. Any one of the girls I was with that I never took seriously. Or the guy I ratted out to our homeroom teacher in high school who never forgave me. Hell, even the school bully who used to beat me up in grade school who I then beat up when I had my growth spurt in high school.”

“You’re going to have to make a list with actual names,” Rufi said with a wry smile.

Gabe sighed.

6.

“My deepest condolences, *hija*,” Ben uttered as he and Teresing paid their respects to Nurse Sharon at her house.

Ben never met *Aling* Laura who never left her house, but Nurse Sharon was someone he had met a few times at the neighborhood market during weekends.

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“Thank you po, *Mang Ben*,” Sharon said, smiling sadly. “Hi, Teresing.”

Teresing smiled and said, “Condolence po.”

Sharon nodded. After a few minutes of polite conversation, Ben said, “*Hija*, I just have a question, I hope you don’t mind.”

“Okay po,” Sharon answered.

“Was the accident caused by the loot bag you got from the launch? You see, we are trying to make sense of what happened. We want to confirm if this is related or not.”

“I understand po. Well, I was at the launch and Mommy ate some of the items in the loot bag, but she had her accident the night after. She didn’t get sick the night she ate. I think people just put two and two together and linked the two.”

Ben nodded.

“Mommy wasn’t even supposed to be going up and down the stairs. But that day, she was looking for something and she might have thought it would be in my room. Our *kasambahay* was helping her out. I was at the hospital. According to *Manang*, the doorbell rang and it was a delivery guy who got lost.”

Sharon started shedding tears.

“*Manang* then heard the loud thud of Mommy falling down the stairs. She panicked when she saw Mommy’s body at the foot of the stairs. Thankfully, the delivery guy helped and some neighbors pitched in to get Mommy to the hospital where I worked. But she was already DOA.

“My last memory was of me hugging and kissing her goodbye that morning. Thank God we did not have our usual fight!”

Ben nodded.

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Sharon added, “I’m sorry, but believe me, I never really said there was a connection between my Mom’s accident and the launch. I didn’t even hear about what happened until after Mommy died.”

Ben and Teresing exchanged looks.

7.

“Okay, so let’s review what we know,” Rufino stated once Marian opened the MaRiTes Brigade meeting at the *sari-sari* store.

“*Aling* Laura’s death is not related to the Christmas Pan-Tree incident. It was a real accident as confirmed by both Nurse Sharon and their *kasambahay*,” Teresing declared.

“So sorry to confuse everyone with that!” Seni said, very apologetic.

“Don’t be sorry, Seni. What is the MaRiTes brigade’s motto?”

“Every piece of news is valid until otherwise disproved!” Seni declared.

“Exactly! We needed to look at that angle, and we were able to disprove it!”

“Thank you po, *Mang* Rufi,” Seni said softly.

“What else do we know?” Rufino asked the others.

“It was the brownies, definitely,” Marian firmly stated. “But only the brownies that got to the people who were sick.”

“Which means?”

“Five of the loot bags were deliberately tampered with where they switched the brownies with the tainted ones,” Ben answered.

“So that means it would have to be someone who had access to the loot bags between the time they were prepared by Miss Shay, to the

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time they were distributed,” Risa added.

“Did you narrow down the list of suspects, Rufi?” Ben asked, knowing Rufino had visited Gabe and had gotten a list.

“I have, but before that, may I ask what we know about the other case, the teens caught getting high?”

“It’s interesting because the honor student insisted he wasn’t doing drugs, but his Dad recognized the symptoms when he got home—the poor guy was tripping,” Risa said.

Rufino nodded. “Do we have the name of the owner of the house where the party was held?”

When Risa told him the name, Rufino smiled slightly.

* * *

“What are you doing here?”

Nestor Roldan was not happy to see Gabe outside his gate. With him was Rufino.

“Good evening, Mr. Roldan,” Rufino amicably introduced himself. “My name is Rufino Soriano. We want to talk to you about something very important.”

Nestor ignored him and turned to Gabe. “Gabe, are you going to accuse me of sabotaging your event? Because I had absolutely nothing to do with it, and it’s insulting that you are even thinking it is a possibility!”

Gabe stood face to face with the guy whose life he managed to ruin in high school because of an untrue accusation.

“Can we come in, Nes?” he asked.

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Nestor Roldan looked from Gabe to Rufino and then opened the gate.

“Is your son home, Mr. Roldan?” Rufino asked when they were in the living room.

“Yes, but why are you asking?”

“I heard that he and a couple of his friends were caught getting high a few days ago.”

Nestor looked at Gabe. “Does this bring back memories, Gabe? To when you told Miss Marcelo that I forced you to smoke pot?”

Gabe didn’t reply.

Nestor turned back to Rufino. “Yes, they were all grounded. What does this have to do with anything? They were just being boys.”

“Do you know how they got the weed?” Rufino asked.

“My son said he bought it from someone, but he promised not to do it again. He is a good boy, just hasn’t been the same since his Mom left us.”

“Do you know if they smoked it or...?” Rufino stopped when he saw a young man enter the living room.

“What’s *he* doing here, Dad?”

“Iñigo, manners,” Nestor warned.

“Manners don’t apply to him, right, Dad?”

“I’m sorry, he is not usually this discourteous.” Nestor smiled sheepishly.

“Hi, Iñigo. My name is Rufino Soriano.”

“I heard about you. You’re like this secret super investigator with mysterious connections. You’re just masquerading as a lowly *sari-sari* store owner.”

Rufino chuckled. “I’m afraid I am really just a *sari-sari* store

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owner.”

“And yet, you’re here to ask me some questions, so go figure.”

Rufino looked at Iñigo. The boy didn’t flinch.

“What’s going on?” Nestor asked.

“What’s going on, Dad, is that the guy who ruined your high school life by ratting to the teacher that you forced him to smoke pot, the guy who stole your first love and who ruined your idyllic existence in this village, is here in this house. And yet, you’re not mouthing off on him.”

Gabe stared at Nestor, who, in turn, eyed Iñigo.

“Son, what are you talking about?” Nestor asked.

Iñigo spoke harshly. “You always make these passive-aggressive comments about him whenever his name comes up. So, I did my research, and while they were hard to find, I did dig up your history. He is not our friend.”

“Wait... Did I—?”

“Yes, every time you got drunk, and you got drunk more often when Mom left.”

“I—son—Did...”

“We got high by eating weed brownies,” Iñigo faced Rufino. “To answer your question to my Dad earlier.”

“Did you replace five brownies from the loot bag with the weed brownies you bought?” Rufino asked point-blank.

“Son, you don’t have to answer that question,” Nestor quickly said, worried.

“I did not,” Iñigo answered. “I asked someone to do it.”

“Why?” Gabe asked.

“Isn’t it obvious? I wanted to get back at you for what you did to

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my Dad. It was a harmless prank, and we tested it first to make sure it wasn't going to permanently hurt anyone. One of my friends was a volunteer so he knew there were going to be brownies in the bag—he even knew what the packaging would look like.”

“I'm sorry,” Gabe turned to Nestor. “This all happened because I never apologized to you properly.”

“This all happened because you lied about my Dad,” Iñigo pointed out.

Gabe hung his head sadly. “I know, and I deeply regret it.”

“Are you going to report me?” Iñigo asked Gabe and Rufino.

9.

“Hey, Ruffi, is it true? The case is solved?” Ben asked.

“Yes,” Rufino answered, smiling.

“And you didn't tell us?” Ben complained.

“I'm testing out a theory,” Rufino said.

“MaRiTēS Brigade, what have you heard this morning?” Rufino asked the ladies.

“Ma'am Shay's first boyfriend lives in the village! It's Sir Nestor Roldan from Phase 2!” Marian excitedly shared.

“He was also Sir Gabe's high school batchmate and they had a falling out,” Teresing added.

“Sir Gabe accused Sir Nestor of involving him in a pot session when the truth was, he wasn't forced to do anything he didn't want to. It caused Sir Nestor to be suspended, which affected his academic standing,” Seni interjected.

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“So, Sir Gabe treated him badly at school, then married his first love, and then got famous and brought all the circus when the family moved to the village. Sir Nestor wasn’t happy at all,” Risa continued.

“Sir Nestor’s wife then ran away with her personal trainer and left him and their son two years ago,” Marian added.

“Sir Nestor then got depressed and drank a lot, and every time he got drunk, he would narrate how Sir Gabe ruined his life,” Teresing said.

“His son, Iñigo, did some research and realized Sir Gabe was the enemy of his father. In his hopes to avenge his father, Iñigo hatched the plan to play a major prank,” Seni stated.

“But he made sure it was safe, so he tested out the weed brownies himself with some friends, and then he asked one of them, the launch volunteer, to switch the brownies for five loot bags,” Risa continued.

“The friends got caught and they were all grounded, but the volunteer asked his brother instead to do the switching, saying it was a harmless prank and left out the fact that they were weed brownies,” Marian said.

“The brother didn’t seem that bright because not only did he agree to do the switch, he also managed to get one of the loot bags with the bogus brownies!” Teresing blurted.

“Sir Gabe decided not to press any charges—I mean how could he when it was a kid avenging his father because of Sir Gabe’s folly as a kid?” Seni remarked.

“Sir Gabe apologized to Sir Nestor for everything that happened. Sir Nestor apologized on behalf of his son, Iñigo. And Iñigo apologized to his Dad. But he still doesn’t like Sir Gabe,” Marian asserted.

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“Inigo is grounded for life... But I’m sure it will be lifted soon,” Risa added.

“The launch of the Christmas Pan-Tree is pushing through on the first day of *Simbang Gabi*!” Teresing declared.

“So, the Case of the Christmas Pan-Tree is solved!” Marian announced proudly.

“But there is more!” Teresing hastened to add.

Rufino, Ben, and the rest of the MaRiTēS Brigade members looked at her with bated breath.

“Rumor has it that the case was solved by a mysterious *sari-sari* store owner, his friend, and an elite network of informants!”

“The MaRiTēS Brigade!!!”



ABOUT

THE AUTHOR



Yeyet Soriano is a multigenre author who goes where the story leads her, whether it be contemporary romance, crime, or speculative fiction. Although she is a storyteller by heart, she is also a wife, a mother of three, and a Senior IT Solution Lead Manager supporting the Asia Pacific region for a major multinational company.

Her self-published works include *Turning Points*, *In My Dreams*, *The Retreat*, *Kate Finally*, *The Crime Circle* (“3B4U,” “Lost,” “Climb,” “Breathe”), and *In Tune*.

She has contributed to a number of anthologies. Her story “He Loves Me...Not” is included in *Heat*, a Southeast Asian anthology published by Fixi Novo. Her stories “Another First” and “Buddy System” are included in #romanceclass anthologies *Start Here* and *Summer Feels*, respectively. Her stories “Kate’s Retreat” and “The Army Trunk” are in the #HeistClub anthologies *The Secrets That We Keep* and *A Time for Heists*, respectively.

SINGULAR PISTOL

By John Lawrence Vilorio Calano

From the beginning of the month of Christmas or perhaps for so long that he can't remember, all Nathaniel could think about was dying. This coming week he would turn 17, though he didn't look forward to the event. In his mind, it meant nothing. Just another year added to his existence, and nothing more. Taking his own life seemed the most natural solution, he thought. However, he had been distracting himself by not thinking that way. For God's sake, he knew he had been trying hard these past days.

Nathaniel closed his eyes. Everything faded as his ears followed the music from the radio. He had instantly recognized the piece to be Felix Mendelssohn's *Hark The Herald Angels Sing*. There, he found himself once again, thinking about death.

Death, for him, was the easiest subject to discuss. Death is just a simple subject. And even in the face of death, after the darkness swallowed him whole in a stagnant void—everything will go on in

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an instant that even his death wouldn't matter to the Earth's existence or the universe. Time passes by, years go on. Likewise, the present world he knew will come to its edge—his thought, his soul, and even the things he does. His reality will stop. As simple as that. He would no longer exist—just as this world would no longer exist for him. Though, he couldn't fathom the idea of vanishing from the surface of the earth.

There was an actual event that led him to this point, but why does death need to interfere with this matter? And why does death have such a strong hand to carry him all these years? A simple question, yet he couldn't find a perfect answer.

He fell and later realized that he was lost in the dark pit—where no one will be there for him, even *himself*.

* * *

It was a cold night. Christmas carols can be heard everywhere as Filipinos celebrate the birth of Christ. Fireworks, round-shaped foods are on every table for everyone to partake. Filipinos believe that round-shaped foods served during this festive season can bring good luck, though, it has not been proven to be true. Still, the Christmas tradition remains.

As everyone smiled and celebrated, Nathaniel stayed in the corner of the room, watching fireworks explode in different colors from a window. Silence wrapped around him, as the night went on. Inside his bedroom, he sat on the floor as the darkness comforted him. Thinking of his failures in life, his mind collapsed into the void, stuck in this place that feels to be bending endlessly and creating an

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infinite suffocating loop.

“Nathaniel!”

He heard voices, almost far away, but still felt so close to him. Then suddenly, he heard a loud *bang!* It was fireworks.

“Nathaniel!”

He jumped, his heart pounding. Nathaniel looked at his mother who was calling him nonstop. It was time for dinner.

“Why are you up so early?” his father asked.

Nathaniel took his seat at the dining table, then started adding food to his plate. When his mom noticed that he wasn’t interested in the conversation, she said, “He already read the book I gave him this week,” in response to his husband’s question.

Mr. Richard turned his gaze to his wife, a question painted onto his face, and Ms. Lisa answered it proudly. “*Reset*. From the president of SHRM. I also gave him other books—some I forgot the titles, but one is a lifestyle book of a top CEO.”

“Ah yeah... All successful people are early birds,” Mr. Richard said, looking directly at Nathaniel.

“Some kids never learn, even if they are tough. But look at him, he applies it right away,” Ms. Lisa expressed.

“By the way, Rio is doing good in the academy. I remember, he’s poor and he doesn’t have any tutors. He also can’t participate in other extracurriculars. And still, he is better than you,” Mr. Richard said.

Ms. Lisa kept his eyes on Nathaniel, saying nothing. She was waiting to hear his son respond. But as she expected, none came out of his mouth. Nathaniel managed to focus on his breathing. His hands were both under the table, his right hand gripping the edge of his seat tightly. Without a word, Nathaniel stood up and grabbed the

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kitchen knife. In his horror, he felt that he was no longer in control of his body, and he might do something terrible.

Behind him, darkness formed, as if a hole had been created, consuming everything slowly. Red, thick as blood, started to ooze from the ceiling—like water from a faucet that someone forgot to turn off.

Grasping tightly, Nathaniel plunged the knife into Mr. Richard's stomach. He took it out again and stabbed his father in another spot. He repeated it over and over until Mr. Richard's body fell on the floor, oozing with blood. Despite that, Mr. Richard was still breathing, like a cat that doesn't fear death. Then, soon enough, Nathaniel heard Mr. Richard laughing obnoxiously.

Nathaniel stabbed him again—in the stomach and chest. But Mr. Richard continued laughing. Around his body, the blood gurgled, like a drain that was suddenly unplugged. A terrible convulsion wracked his body, and blood gushed out of his mouth. Mr. Richard collapsed on the floor, and Nathaniel felt the blood coming toward his feet.

Shocked, he dropped the knife, and it clattered on the floor as loudly as it could. Trembling in fear, he looked in Ms. Lisa's direction, but her mother continued eating dinner.

“Nathaniel, you can't continue like th—”

Her sentence was cut short when Nathaniel took the boning knife from Mr. Richard's plate and threw it directly at her head. Her body fell to the floor, creating a loud noise, like a suitcase falling from a high place. Nathaniel stood there steadily, feeling the air around him. He looked around, and everything came to a standstill. The AC continued to hum and the blood flowed, slowly and quietly spreading across the floor. He watched the scene in front of him again, his eyes resting

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nowhere. It felt like a movie was about to end and his audience was startled, furious, and emotionally destroyed with their mouths hanging open.

“Nathaniel!” Ms. Lisa called out.

Nathaniel pulled himself out of a trance, with both his hands still holding his seat tightly, making sure he wasn’t daydreaming again.

* * *

As the clouds moved in the sky, cars followed, and people walked. Nathaniel, who went by his nickname Nathan, continued to move and kept pace with the steps of other people walking. As he walked, he heard several Christmas carols and saw yuletide decoration everywhere.

He soon arrived at the gate of his school. He smiled at the guard, then swiped his ID and the guard let him in. Knowing that the security cameras were on him, he walked straight down the hall, his broad back erect. He was wearing a school uniform today with a gray parka, blue jeans, and white basketball shoes. He carried his regular backpack. Once again, he walked towards the hall where students were walking quite frantically, perhaps going to the school gym.

“I thought you wouldn’t make it. Anyway, are you going? Let’s go!” said one of his school friends.

Nathaniel shrugged his head, “You go first, I have something else to do.” He lied. He didn’t have anything to do. He was just not interested in the play, though part of him wanted to come and see this surprise gift from the principal.

Nathaniel went backstage to the gym and readied his pistol,

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careful not to make a sound. He then took his seat and waited for the perfect moment to shoot his target.

“Hello? Umm... Hello! So, everyone is here?” the student speaker asked.

Everyone cheered in response.

“That’s it? Louder!”

And they shouted harder. Although the speaker seemed not satisfied with the audience’s cheers. Once again he said, “LOUDER!” This time, the students put their lungs to work, shouting as loudly as they could.

“Christmas is a miracle! Today we celebrate Christ’s birth. For He is our savior. Let’s bow our heads and pray to God.”

They say if you are good at something, never do it for free. Here he was, standing, putting all his attention on that one person he was ordered to murder. Nathaniel doesn’t just do *this* for entertainment or because he is a bad person. But because *this* is his life. He was born to do *this* thing. He was chosen to end someone’s life because they do bad deeds.

And then, it was a moment of truth. A horrific bang echoed in the gymnasium. A teacher looked up, paying attention to the person who was slowly losing his balance and falling to the ground. Silence filled the gym, with everyone alarmed and scared that someone was shot dead. No voice was heard, all of them remained quiet and still like statues with eyes wide open, mouths shut. Nathaniel took this as a sign that his job here was done. He fixed his Walther hybrid, put it back together in its original form, and placed it inside a black case.

As he walked out, he heard the students shout in fear, as they began to process what happened just minutes ago. Nathaniel carefully

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put the case somewhere along the hallway. Then, a strange man glanced at him and picked up the case. As if nothing happened, the man went on his way. And so did Nathaniel.

* * *

The place was so clean that it seemed to be shining. The house had that Spanish style, very old-fashioned but still quite good to look at. And yet, it seemed as if it was a dead place—as if everyone who lived here were dead souls.

The house stood atop a steep slope in a fashionable neighborhood. When Nathaniel reached the top of the slope, he noticed some cats walking around the place, as if they had been living there for a long time. The streets up here were narrow and crooked, and only a few cars could be seen driving around. The tall trees gave the house a gloomy feel, and time seemed to slow down when you step inside. Whether you are from the Philippines or not, most people don't know this place exists. The house has been here for several decades and yet, to most people's surprise, no one knows this place exists. Now that it was Christmas, the place seemed dramatically colder—with birds building nests and cicadas crying, irritating his ears.

Nathaniel pressed the button at the gate and stated his name on the intercom. Then, he flashed a tiny smile toward the overhead camera. The iron gate slowly opened, and once he was inside, it closed behind him. As always, he walked across the garden and headed for the front door.

It was not his first time to lay eyes on this place. And yet, it felt like the first. He looked around, amazed all over again by the interior's

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juxtaposition of contemporary glass and steel, and the soft south seas blue and gold wallpaper.

“We haven’t done anything wrong,” said the woman who was coming out from one of the doors and walking towards Nathaniel.

She looked at him, then offered a seat that Nathaniel gladly took. Nathaniel shook his head and in a strained voice said, he heard the woman say, “There’s nothing wrong with a human paying for his sin.”

The woman handed him an envelope, Nathaniel took it and saw Polaroid photographs inside. He placed them on the table in a row, like unlucky tarot cards. They were close-up shots of a young woman’s body: her back, breasts, buttocks, hands, and legs. Each body part bore marks of violence in the form of lurid welts caused by, almost certainly, a belt. Her skin was marked with what looked like cigarette burns. Nathaniel found himself scowling. He had seen photos like this in the past, but none as bad.

“You haven’t seen these before, have you?” the woman asked after dropping the call.

Nathaniel shook his head in silence.

“And this one, her head,” the woman said, pointing to a photo. The moment he looked at it, Nathaniel felt as if his digestive system was churning its way out of his body. The woman’s head was smashed, almost unrecognizable as if it had been hammered multiple times.

“This woman was Ms. Leo. She was from a poor family, a single mother who was raising two children aged ten and six,” she spoke softly. “Aren’t you going to ask what happened to her children?”

Even if Nathaniel asks, he already knew what happened to them. He couldn’t even paint the misery that the children endured. Still, he

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asked, and she replied, “The six-year-old kid was beaten with a hammer, his face blurred in blood. He was an unrecognizable being. Both of his legs were deformed. His neck was broken. The theory is that they twisted it before they left him. He was found beside their bed.”

“The other one, Madame?”

“Well, the same. However, he was ten years old, so I’m not surprised to find out that he was tied at their roof, like a wet shirt waiting to dry to be worn,” said the woman.

“How can these people sleep at night when they’re capable of doing these things?” he asked, gathering the photos and returning them inside the envelope. “We can’t let anyone get away with doing something like this.” Nathaniel gritted his teeth. “Don’t you agree?”

“I certainly do,” said the woman.

“We did the right thing,” she said. “We always do.” She left her chair and walked toward one of the cabinets in a corner of the living room. Nathaniel’s gaze followed her but saw nothing more unusual. “Thank you for coming to see me,” the woman said, “I appreciate your efforts.”

This seemed to signal the end of their interview. Nathaniel stood. The air outside was chilling and fresh with the smell of trees and grass. He continued walking toward the gate, leaving everything behind, even his memory of those miserable lives. He kept his feet moving, watching a cat play along with a fellow. He let out a laugh and continued walking. This was the real world. Normal, nothing too extravagant, and time flowed normally. Although, he knew to himself that even in this world, he would never become a normal part of it.

He went back to the school, though everything looked

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normal—as if the shooting earlier didn’t happen at all—people here have always been like this, turning a blind eye to a situation that they know is horrible. Perhaps the minister just covered it up, taking the time to clean so that news would not spread throughout the university. But what about the students who witnessed it? Maybe they were forced to go back home, or to the hospital to deal with the trauma.

Nathaniel wasn’t the only one participating in this kind of creative economy. The person over there, the one sitting on the edge with the other students, the one giving Christmas presents to his two friends. Nathaniel knew what was inside the box: cigarettes. His brother owns a cigarette factory—he takes them to school and sells them.

From a distance, another student wearing a pink sweater was walking with her friends. Just by looking at her, people would think she was from an elite class. However, to support her life and to buy unnecessary luxuries, she works as a part-timer in a club and sells her naked body to old rich men.

That girl, and the other one, then the other one. They all sleep with a teacher.

And so, he wasn’t the only student-villain here.

The bell rang and the students walked to their rooms, including Nathaniel. Everyone sat at their desks when the supreme students, along with the dean’s listers, entered the room, their faces giving off the same energy: bored, firm, and overflowing with ego. They slowly approached the other students, and asked them to give their consent to open their bags and put their belongings on top of their desks.

In the other room, Nathaniel picked up his notebook, set aside

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his pistol, and took out his pens. He started to write what the professor was saying. As he took down notes, Nathaniel's phone vibrated. He looked around then took his cell phone from his pants. He saw a message from a number only, no names.

"The psycho dean is here.

He's checking important belongings."

He looked at the message in shock and looked down at his desk where his pistol was kept. His heart skipped a beat, as he read the text again.

"He's almost done in here.

Your class will be next."

Nathaniel squeezed his hands as he made a plan in his mind. He gazed at everyone, and just then, the images from the Polaroid photos earlier came back to him. He couldn't think of any other thing, but an image came to his mind.

Nathaniel picked up the pencil on his desk and slowly brought it closer to his face. He swallowed deeply as he let out a deep breath. He brought the pencil closer to his mouth until it reached his throat.

Things around him started to become blurry as if he was being pulled deeper into the ocean. His teacher's voice was getting farther and farther away while the pencil in his mouth was almost completely gone.

He started to feel dizzy, and the only thing he could hear was the sound of his gurgling until his system started to pump. He then gripped his desk tightly, then realized that he had vomited. Attention was turned to him, and the teacher immediately went to his side and rubbed his back.

"Are you okay?" the teacher asked worriedly.

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“No. Can I go to the bathroom?” Nathaniel responded while still feeling the bitter taste in his mouth.

“Sure. Sure,” the teacher nervously removed his hand from Nathaniel’s back.

Nathaniel wasted no time. He took his bag as he walked out of the classroom. Still, his mind was stuck in circles. Although, he tried hard to gain consciousness and focus on making his steps straight before the dean could enter the room. When Nathaniel finally left the class, the dean, along with his minions, was now a few meters away from where he was standing. Nathaniel hurriedly took the stairs and squeezed his hands as hard as he could to stop his heart from beating too fast.

The supreme students did their job, but when the dean noticed the empty seat, he directly asked their advisor where the student went. The advisor said the student got sick and had to go to the bathroom.

When Nathaniel came out of the bathroom, he took out his cellphone to respond to the message he received earlier.

“Hoy!”

Nathaniel looked around and his eyes widened when he saw the dean. He walked away, faster than usual. The dean followed him, though Nathaniel had already reached the door. After Nathaniel got out, he sensed the silhouette of the dean following him. He ran faster, and when he looked behind, he saw that the dean was catching up to him fast.

Nathaniel mingled with a group of students and followed in their footsteps, but it didn’t take long for him to leave this cover when he realized they were going to the basketball court. Annoyed, he stomped his foot and went in the other direction. However, when he

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found another group of students to blend into, he saw the dean there. He squeezed his hands hard again, sweat forming on his forehead as he gritted his teeth. He then stared at his knees, looked up, and said, “Shit!”

Nathaniel decided to go to the basketball court and went straight backstage. He opened the door and went inside. He was surprised to see several people doing their “business”. He immediately walked away from the door and breathed a sigh of relief. Though, his smile slowly faded from his lip when a teacher asked him, “Why are you here?”

Nathaniel bit his lower lip and ran towards whatever place his feet took him until he reached a dead end. The teacher and the dean were heading toward where he was standing. Nathaniel just laughed at his situation and then slapped himself. But before he could think of doing something else, he heard the fire alarm ring. Then his phone beeped.

“Section AB. Computer Lab, ” said the text message.

* * *

“So, you got caught?” Nathaniel asked.

“Of course, idiot! There’s a CCTV. No, in fact, there are CCTVs everywhere,” said a guy, his informant, whose body was well developed, although he wasn’t especially tall. Like Nathaniel, he was wearing a school uniform with their school logo embroidered on his shirt’s pocket.

One glance told Nathaniel that this guy goes to the gym most of the time, which was his area of expertise. Though sometimes he

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would go to car racing contests in a not-well-known city to protect his image, especially his parents'. He sure didn't look like a weapons expert.

Truth be told, this really guy was an expert. He could use weapons effectively when the need arises. Once, Nathaniel saw how this guy worked—he could separate your limbs in a matter of seconds; he could bare his fangs and become more vicious. But he was ordinarily calm, cool, and even intellectual. His name was Agustin James, and people called him AJ for short. Nathaniel and AJ were standing on the terrace, looking down at everyone.

"I heard a man died in our gymnasium," AJ said. Nathaniel nodded. "Do you think people really deserve this?"

"Of course, when humans sin, they must pay for it. Isn't that our job?" Nathaniel asked him coldly. "Anyway, now that your parents found out that you started the fire alarm, what will you do?"

"I can fix my mess," AJ answered. "Do you see that guy over there? The guy who's sitting alone at the far end of the AD section," AJ pointed to that man covered in despair and who was also wearing a Santa Claus costume.

"So, what then?"

"He hadn't paid his tuition. He would soon lose his dorm and allowance," AJ answered.

He paused for a while then looked at Nathaniel and asked, "Should you recruit him?" A smirk appeared on his lips. "Madame would be proud," he added.

AJ pointed to the man again and continued, "They say he would just stand there as people pass by. What do you think he's thinking about? He must be scared, lonely."

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Nathaniel approached a chair and sat down. He took two deep breaths, switched the circuits of his brain to thinking, and then took something from his bag. He threw it to AJ who gave him a “what is this” look.

“Merry Christmas,” Nathaniel said before leaving.

AJ watched Nathaniel disappear from his sight before opening the gift. He unwrapped it hurriedly but also gently. A smile formed on his face after seeing a Santa Claus luminous crystal ball music box. He started twisting the lever and enjoyed the musical notes of *Jingle Bells*.

Nathaniel went down the stairs, his eyes still focused on the guy wearing the Santa Claus costume. But before he could start talking, a loud bang echoed, like a signal of judgment. Fear erupted across the university.

Just then, the guy wearing a Santa Claus costume pointed his gun at the other running students—some were trembling in fear, some couldn’t stand up, and some dead.

While all of this was happening, the music box continued to play *Jingle Bells* as AJ watched the entire show. He would glance at his wristwatch every now and then, as if waiting for the right time to strike. But he made a discussion earlier that he would not interfere. Though he found himself going down the stairs as everyone ran for their life. Nathaniel, on the other hand, was looking at the sky, watching the birds fly away because of the loud gunshots.

And then blood gushed from his mouth. He completely lost his sight as well as his hearing. It seemed that everything gradually disappeared, and just like that, he completely fell into deep darkness.



ABOUT

THE AUTHOR



John Lawrence Vilorio Calano or J. Lawrence is an author who hides in the form of his fur babies—not ready to reveal himself. Though, truth be told, he isn't a photogenic person.

During the day, he mostly paints, studies, reads, or writes. He usually reads a wide range of subjects. Furthermore, he likes listening to podcasts, particularly those about productivity. He would like to one day sell his novels and be published as a best-selling author, not just locally but also internationally.

MURDER DE AGUINALDO

By Allene Allanigue

The laptop bag on my back gets heavier by the minute. Clutching the long brown envelope under my pit, I stand outside the condo building under the late afternoon sun, waiting for Dr. July. He drives a navy blue, old Lancer box-type model. The sound of its engine matches its look, and he knows that I dread riding in his car. Not because of the humiliation of being seen inside that rusty vehicle that makes a good candidate for the junk shop, but because being inside it gives me that constant anxiety about whether it can last another mile. I told him I could just book a Grab taxi to the Bureau, but he insisted we go together.

My boss is known to many as Dr. July, and it's funny because he wasn't born in July as you might think. He was born in August. His name is Julius Rosales. He's not a medical doctor, he holds two Ph.D. degrees in clinical psych and forensic psych which he both earned at a

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university in the United States. He chose to come back to the Philippines and teach here and that was how I got acquainted with him. He was my professor in social psych during my undergrad, and I was later assigned to him to be my adviser when I wrote my thesis about the escapees of a cult in Tarlac.

The cult in Tarlac was a monastic movement founded in the 70s by Fr. Delos Santos, an expelled Catholic priest. He recruited his first followers while he was teaching at a private all-girls Catholic university in Manila. One day, his students left their parents goodbye letters stating that they would devote their lives to following the teachings of Fr. Delos Santos in pursuance of the holy path and disappeared with him into a cloistered community.

When I applied to grad school intending to follow Dr. July's footsteps, he provided me with a recommendation letter which worked a great deal to my advantage. Since then, I started taking on freelance tasks with him. Most of them involved psych assessment from the clients of his clinic to the clients he evaluates for legal cases. We've known each other for 13 years, and now that I have my license, he has hired me full-time to his private practice clinic as a junior psychologist.

I look at the time on my phone. He said he would be here in five minutes, and that was nearly half an hour ago. As I click my tongue in annoyance, his car finally arrives, chugging like those trains operated by coals you see in black-and-white movies. Its metal door handle has loosened and is broken so he has to reach for the passenger door to unlock and unlatch it from the inside. I remove my backpack, get in the seat, place the bag on the car floor with the brown envelope on my lap, and fasten my seat belt.

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Right then, he knows I'm annoyed at his being late, and he tosses a packed sandwich to me from the back seat. "My wife prepared this for you," he says.

The sandwich is nicely wrapped with a napkin and neatly placed inside a zip-lock sandwich bag. Then he shows me his sandwich, the one he's eating right now, which is only wrapped with bathroom tissue and doesn't have lettuce in it.

"She's playing favorites again," he adds.

"You can't blame her because if I were her, between us, I will be my favorite too."

I unwrap the napkin. The tuna filling is thicker in my sandwich that he has to look to compare it with his. He grunts in annoyance and drives instead. Dr. July and his wife never had a child, and if they had one, they would probably be around my age. Perhaps, this explains why the couple has grown so much affection for me as the years went by.

I bite my sandwich and as I chew, I ask him, "So they really got him, the leader?"

"He turned himself in at six in the morning after the eighth kill was committed."

"There's an eighth kill?"

"Not on the news yet."

"I figure. You know that the social media have dubbed the killings as *Murder de Aguinaldo*?"

"After Emilio Aguinaldo?"

"No, they're likening it to *Misa de Aguinaldo*," I explain.

Misa de Aguinaldo is the nine dawn masses, locally known as *Simbang Gabi*, leading to Christmas Day. In the Philippines, Christmas

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presents are also referred to as *aguinaldo*. The public has dubbed the killings as *Murder de Aguinaldo* (gift murder) because every person who has been killed was a politician that had been involved in graft and corruption cases.

This connection among the victims was established on December 18th when the police arrested an alleged member of a religious group called Instruments of Lord's Vengeance or ILV. The member came out to the public admitting that the first three killings were carried out by them. Social media users tell the government and media to stop calling the slain politicians as victims and, instead, hail these murders as a Christmas present to the country. What do people watch on Netflix these days?

I can't blame them, though. I myself have watched all 15 seasons of *Criminal Minds*. I had a phase where I was fascinated with serial killers and cult leaders, bought books of their biographies and watched their biopics. I also wrote a paper for class about criminals with murder cases. But when I interviewed inmates, they were not as mind-blowing as fiction books or psych thriller movies made them appear to be. I haven't met a murderer who collected trophies from their victims or cult leaders who drove their members to collective suicide.

Not to bore you or anything, okay, but the ones I've met all grew up in an environment where violence is normal in everyday life. They weren't handsome, often they have some missing teeth. They weren't manipulative, charismatic, and intelligent like the glorified Ted Bundy. Most of them didn't even complete their elementary education and were scarce in life. As for cults, it can be quite tricky here because Filipinos are religious by nature, so people can be easily polarized and

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think in dichotomy. Like, if you don't belong to religious denominations or groups, conservatives might automatically think you have turned to the dark side.

With his known expertise in cults, Dr. July was tapped by the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) right away, and he dragged me along to work on the case.

ILV first made its group known to the public at the beginning of the year. They 'liquidated' a mayor in a small town and exposed the corrupt practices at the town's hall. That incident wasn't taken seriously by the media, and the government attributed the murder to the increasing killings by the armed wing of the communist rebel group in the area. This seemed to have offended ILV, and that following month, in a neighboring town, they liquidated a high-profile leader of an armed wing group that bombed a school and killed dozens of innocent children and teachers. Killing the armed wing leader was ILV's attempt to make a stance that they're not on anyone's side but the Lord's. That news broke nationwide and people started to take the religious group seriously.

To me, it was clear that they're not just a mere religious group, they're a cult. I began to follow their stories since, digging for whatever information I could find about the members or the leader, but all I could find were claims and theories from social media users. While joining a cult isn't illegal, members who have committed criminal acts that the cult has told them to do—murders, in this case—should face criminal charges and be brought to court.

However, they are extremely careful and elusive. No member has ever been caught by the police, not even come close. The members who carry out the "liquidation" are like phantoms, neither seen nor

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heard, and they only communicate by leaving a note with the body after each kill. I have photos of their notes on my tablet. About seven proven kills so far, prior to the series of killings dubbed as *Murder de Aguinaldo*. There have been copycat killings from individuals and groups, but it's always easy to tell which ones are carried out by ILV, and the copycat killers are always caught and jailed.

All the notes are handwritten in a script, like a doctor's prescription that only the good eyes of a pharmacist could read. The handwriting is intelligible, and someone who has a basic understanding of graphology—which, by the way, is considered by many as a mere pseudoscience—can easily surmise that the person is methodical, with extreme attention—or perhaps, obsession—to details.

The wordings I find suggestive that the leader is educated, or at least has reached college. There is fluency in the choice of words that are indicative of an average, or perhaps, above average IQ. There is clarity in the presentation of his thoughts—extremely persuasive and compassionately empathizing that it's almost scary to read as you'll find yourself agreeing with the points stated why they kill. I mean, who wouldn't want those who commit atrocities to be punished in a country where the justice system is designed and implemented to serve only the rich, the powerful, and the privileged?

The notes are all signed by the ILV leader, also known as The Second Son. His real name and identity remain unknown. In Dr. July's estimate, ILV must have been existing for at least a decade now, and the leader could be anywhere between the ages of 40 and 50. But something tells me he's much younger. Perhaps, it's the way how the younger generation, like me, resonates with his ideology. Some

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even took it to the extreme and formed a whole online cult in the worship of his cult. It is scary, and scarier because of the tremendous support they get from people who think that the world must be fair and just.

In the absence of adequate information, Dr. July and I have to fill the cult's identity and background with working theories. The leader has extreme religious preoccupations, he must be charismatic, which allows him to recruit followers and proliferate his archaic beliefs to them. But this is where the similarities between our theories stop.

Dr. July thinks that this group is a new armed wing of the communist party, taking advantage of the followers' faith and loyalty to The Second Son. They easily gather sympathy from people's hatred for the government. He said that communist rebels are often clothed in the robe of humanism, and they are no different from greedy politicians.

While I take his theory as a possibility, I'm inclined to think this cult operates on its own. And the reason why they carry out flawless executions is that they have loyal followers from those who work in law enforcement that strongly share the faith enough to keep a blind eye on—or perhaps, even cover up—their acts of killing.

The real mystery is the leader, The Second Son, and why he calls himself such. Why did he form this religious group? Is it to take matters of justice into his own hands? To avenge on behalf of the Lord? What makes him believe he is the Lord's Second Chosen One after Jesus Christ?

The member who came out on the 18th didn't commit the killings. He introduced himself as The Messenger, and his mission for making himself known to the public was to warn about the next

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killings. He said that The Second Son was giving these corrupt politicians a second chance. They have a list of names and the billions they stole down to the last centavo. If these politicians would issue a public apology and return all the funds they stole from the public treasury, they'll be spared. If not, they might be next. The police detained him, and they were soon able to identify the man as 21-year-old Fernan Matias.

Fernan was last seen by his parents nine years ago when he was 12 years old. His mother was interviewed by the media who supplied the information. They were from an extremely poor family who lived in the streets of Manila in a makeshift tent. He was a timid kid who helped the family earn by scavenging the streets, picking up empty plastic and glass bottles and cans along the University Belt, and selling them to junk shops. Despite the poverty, Fernan dreamed of having a better life. He attended a public school in his tattered only pair of uniform and mismatched slippers, one a size larger than the other, carrying his notebooks in a small sack of rice, knowing that education was the only way they could get out of poverty.

That year, the family lost one of the children, Fernan's younger brother whom he was closest to. They didn't have money for treatment so they had to solicit funds from various government offices. They waited and waited, but the infection had already spread to the kid's brain, taking his life. And one day, Fernan went to school and never went back to the makeshift tent. He was never seen since.

His mother stated that the 21-year-old Fernan was almost unrecognizable. She couldn't believe how he carried himself like a young, educated man in his plain white long-sleeved polo, black pants, and polished leather shoes. He looked like a typical college student

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with his hair neatly brushed, wearing glasses, and he had this compassionate but stern expression on his face.

When Dr. July and I interviewed The Messenger, he neither confirmed nor denied that he was Fernan Matias. He only said that he had been baptized by The Second Son, and he shall be called The Messenger and by no other names. All the other questions he dodged by saying that our questions will be answered at the right time, and everyone must prepare for The Second Son will be revealed soon.

Since The Messenger's announcement, there has been an outpour of returned funds from various politicians who wished not to be named. Some departments issued apologies but without owning up to accountability, attributing the faults to fund mismanagement by staff, claiming that they were pressured or blackmailed by another politician or businessman, or blaming it on the suppliers of the overpriced procured items in their office, etc.

* * *

The letter T in the Christmas season stands for traffic jams. We spend another 15 minutes stuck in traffic from Philippine General Hospital (PGH) to NBI when these two compounds are only next to each other. Blame the many stop lights along Taft Avenue, and the people carrying Christmas shopping bags crossing the streets, getting in and out of jeeps at random stops.

I turn to Dr. July with the obvious question, "Why do you think The Second Son turned himself in today?"

"It can be a decoy, a fake one. Cult leaders don't show themselves to the public like this."

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“But what if he’s the real one?”

“That’s for us to find out.”

ILV has killed seven big politicians at dawn each day in the last seven days. We have yet to know the identity of the eighth one. NBI asked for our assistance in determining the possible next targets of this group by profiling the recent victims. So far, we’ve been failing to do so. We’ve narrowed the potential targets to at least 31 politicians from the current Congress alone, but since two of the killings held seats from the previous Congress and other Department agencies, we should be looking beyond this current term. Determining the potential targets is like looking not for a needle, but for hay in a haystack of deeply embedded corruption in this country.

Honestly, Dr. July and I are quite lost, drifting afloat at sea. Our education and specialized training bear little significance, like arm floaters that are already deflating.

“There must be a reason at least why he made Fernan go public,” I tell him.

“To warn these corrupt politicians and force them to return whatever they stole.”

“That, yes. But why does it have to be Fernan? Why not other ILV members?”

“Fernan can just be any other disposable ILV member to him.”

“He’s The Messenger. I have a feeling he could be his right-hand man or something.”

“Hmm,” Dr. July knits his brows, thinking. “But cults don’t operate like that. And if Fernan were his most trusted member, he would be the last person we’d encounter to get to The Second Son, not the first.”

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“Yeah, but we don’t exactly know yet how this group operates from the inside. They might be an entirely different thing.”

“I get what you mean but one thing is for sure, they are a cult that is led by a delusional leader with so much authority and influence over his members that he’s able to weaponize them to liquidate people.”

“Yes, he is. We have established that. But I don’t know,” I trail off, grappling to put my ruminations into a comprehensible thought. “There are people who run for positions in the government that are extremely delusional about themselves too. They think they could make great contributions, but their ideas have no solid foundation and their logic can be terribly misguided. Worse, they have supporters that further feed these delusions. And once they’re seated, once they possess that power, their priorities shift to personal gain.”

“No, personal gain has always been their priority,” Dr. July corrects me. “Their selfish intentions are garbed with pretentious public service, and people are conditioned to think they are at the mercy of these politicians.”

“So they’re just different sides of the same coin.”

“That’s not news flash anymore.” He turns to me and says, “And we are those intellectual elitists who think we know everything.”

That remark annoys me. “True we might not know everything, but we know better.”

“Sure,” he cackles. “My wife feels sorry that you have been dragged into this mess when the clinic is supposed to be on holiday break until January 3rd.”

“I have nothing to do anyway.”

“She asks if you’d want to spend Christmas Eve with us.”

It’s not a lie, I really have nothing to do. No friends to meet. My

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parents are celebrating the holidays with my older brother in Canada. I broke up with my ex-boyfriend six months ago and he's now already engaged to another woman. Screw him! I will be spending the holidays alone and it's okay! I just wish there will be no work like this so I can have every second of this holiday to rest and recharge myself. Because come New Year, there will be an influx of clients calling to seek and schedule therapy sessions at the clinic.

I like to call post-New Year the peak therapy season. Because this is the period when people crash down from the high and short-lived holiday happiness. Christmas nostalgia can be so disorienting. Some people are forced to meet family members or relatives they dislike. Some have spent all their savings buying expensive presents, not because they wanted to, but because it's an indicator that they have achieved a certain success in life. As for me, it can be lonely to be friendless and detached, but there's freedom from the pressure of adhering to the absurdities of life.

Finally, the car enters the NBI gate—they already know Dr. July's car—and there's a parking space reserved for us. We get off the car. We're both dressed up in jeans, long-sleeved shirts, and running shoes. You know, we have to be always ready in case we'll be put in a situation where we'll need to run for our life.

Two of their security staff are already waiting in the parking lot. They check my laptop bag and Dr. July's brown leather messenger bag. Then they usher us inside, then upstairs to the room where they temporarily detain The Second Son.

It is a small room with a desk and two chairs. There's a folding bed in a corner where the man is lying on his side, his back against the door. His hands are cuffed. There's a one-way mirror on one of the

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walls of the room. As I enter the room alone with a security, Dr. July will be watching us from behind the mirror.

If this man were just a low-profile criminal or a pickpocket, the police would've taken the man on his shirt collar, forced him up on his feet, and cursed at him. They would've snarled at him with threats, telling him to cooperate or he'd end up someplace else. But it seems that they're afraid of him too. They calmly raise him to his feet, and when he turns, there is no swollen cheekbone or stains of blood on his face. They didn't beat him up like they always do to alleged criminals they detain.

He is assisted to sit on the monobloc chair in front of the table made of plastic and metal. They uncuff one of his hands and cuff it to the metal base of the table.

It doesn't frighten me anymore. He looks so frail from being detained. I sit on the chair across his and let the security leave. They are supposed to stay with me inside because that's the protocol, but I tell them instead to keep watch at the door in case. I need to talk with him alone. They oblige but without guilt-tripping me that they'd get fired because of me.

To be clear, I'm not taking any side here. I neither have that interest to help the police because some are corrupt themselves nor empathize with delusional messianic cult leaders who indoctrinate their members to kill.

"May I know your name?" he asks in a gentle tone. From his looks and the sound of his voice, my theory that he must be much younger is right.

"I'm Lena Lagos, a junior psychologist—"

"Psychologist? You must be mistaken to think that I am insane."

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I only smile because that's what crazy people always say. But I also believe that he's sane, he only has a convoluted perception of himself and the world. I ask, "Do you know why you're here?"

"It's the Lord's plan that I am here," he says. Looking me in the eyes, he adds, "It must be His plan that you be here today, too."

I'll be lying if I say that what he just said doesn't scare me. It does a bit. But I'm always quick to push things aside and focus, "You see, it's not normal to kill people."

"Normal," he repeats, bouncing back the word to me. "What does normal mean? There is no normal or abnormal in the eyes of the Lord, there is only good and evil. And we do not kill, it's the Lord's sixth commandment: *Thou shalt not kill*."

"Then what do you call the act that your group commits?"

"We liquidate."

"Enlighten me."

He shakes his head. "You must understand that I cannot enlighten you, only the Lord can."

"Surely you can if you're His Second Son."

"Do you believe in the Lord, Lena?"

"I do, but I'm not a devotee."

"Ah," he exclaims. "Then you must know Christ, His First Son—"

"His *only* Son."

"I respect your *opinion*, Lena. The Lord has His own ways to make His people understand. You'll understand it when the time comes. But suppose I am speaking of His truth that I am His Second Son, what will you make of it?"

"I'll ask why is there a need for a second one."

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“He sent Christ to atone for the sins of humanity, that was His mission. As for me, He has given me another mission.”

“Which is?”

“Christ is to atone as I am to avenge.”

“The Lord says vengeance is His.”

“Lena, the Lord has His own ways. It is I who He chose to carry out His vengeance. We do not call ourselves Christians, because we are given a different mission.”

At this point, I want to laugh because I quickly think of Marvel’s The Avengers, but I keep it to myself. I have to suspend all existing notions I have so I can begin to adapt to his line of thought and logic. So I can perceive things how he perceives them. I ask him, “Can you tell me how the Lord decided to choose you as The Second Son?”

“I ran away from this destiny for so long when I was a kid. But if it is His will, it will be.”

“You’ve known it since you were a kid?”

He nods. “I have no father, my mother was always sick since I could remember. I always go to church to pray for her whenever she was in critical condition in the hospital. He always makes my mother well after I pray. I was 17 when the Lord fully healed her of her pain by taking her, and that was when the Lord made me fully realize His plans. He had to take my mother away to make His mission for me known.”

Seventeen years old. I take note of it and mentally I begin calculating how many years might have passed since. He looks to be in his late 20s to me or early 30s. His mother died more or less a decade ago. I’m sure Dr. July is taking note of this, he must identify the specific year when his mother died, because it might be the key to the recent series of

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killings and we'll figure out exactly who will be the next target. I attempt to ask him, "When did your mother die?"

"On Christmas Eve."

"You are killing politicians to avenge your mother's death" I ask, but sound more like giving a remark.

He smiles and shakes his head, "Selfishness has no place in my heart. It is the Lord's will to take their lives."

"Your mission is to avenge. But these politicians have corruption cases, not murder cases—"

"You must understand that corruption is murder."

"How so?"

"Lena, the Lord has gifted you with intellect. You must know the answer to your question."

"I'm afraid that our conversation has gone out of my head."

"You are afraid of me," he observes.

"No, I simply don't want to talk nonsense."

"What about it that you can't understand?" His voice rises and he leans forward. I can almost see veins of anger on his temples and neck. "Stealing from public treasury is murder when the money you steal could have instead bought starving and dying families their food! The money used instead to send children in poverty-stricken communities to schools!" He stands up this time, crouching to me and he completely loses it. "The money that was supposed to fund public hospitals and make healthcare more accessible to the poorest of the poor so that there will be no longer another orphaned kid because their parent was not accommodated by a hospital for the lack of money!"

Now, that frightens me. The security rushes inside the room to

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push him back to his seat and calm me. I am taken out of the room, heart pounding against my chest, thoughts racing fast, cold sweat on my face.

“Are you okay?” One of the security asks me.

“I need to talk to Dr. July.”

They bring me to the room on the other side where Dr. July is. He is sitting there with the profile of the eighth victim. He gestures to me to get inside quickly as he says, “Good job, Lena. I think we now know where to start looking.”

I sit at the table and open my laptop. With only the names, it is difficult to determine the reason behind the series of these eight killings because most of them had been involved in many other corruption cases together. Now, I do a quick search of corruption-related articles every year that came out on Christmas Eve.

And bingo! Year 2013. Christmas Eve. The Free Dialysis Coverage Scam was on the news. The hundreds of overpriced dialysis machines that were purchased in bulk were supposed to be distributed to government hospitals but only a quarter was distributed. Most of them were sold to private hospitals. Billions of money were pocketed. I check the names of the politicians involved. There are nine of them. And eight of the names are those that have been liquidated. I tilt the laptop screen to show it to Dr. July.

“ILV really planned it carefully,” he says after reading the name of the only one alive on the list. “Politicians just get shuffled around government offices and everyone suddenly has amnesia that they have been involved in corruption. I saw this official’s name is on the scheduled list to talk to him.”

“This is a bold move. This means he wants to witness this official

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liquidated with his own eyes.”

“Or, he wants to liquidate this person with his own hands. After all, it is personal.”

“What do we do?”

Dr. July falls silent, thinking to himself. Then he turns to me and whispers, “Lena, what if you were right? What if he turned himself in because he has strong supporters from the law enforcement that arranged all of this? What if, right as we speak, the security outside that door were members of ILV making sure their mission would be carried out tomorrow at dawn?”

I stand and look through the mirror. I watch The Second Son returning to the folding bed to rest. He lies down on his side and crouches to a fetal position like a newborn as he closes his eyes.

The line that separates a villain and a hero has long been blurred. Or perhaps, such a line never existed at all.



ABOUT

THE AUTHOR



Professionally working as a psychologist and psychometrician, Allene Allanigue likes writing stories that attempt to bring light to human conditions. Having faith in the power of storytelling, she uses her background and knowledge to challenge people's preconceived notions and facilitate empathic understanding through writing. In any genre she writes, she tackles psychological and existential concerns to encourage self-reflection toward healing and inspire change for a better society. She hopes that her stories can reach many people someday.

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THE CHRISTMAS PARTY

By Tina Alfonso

The coffee shop on the morning of December 1st was filled with the excitement of the Christmas season. Colorful and glittering decorations had been put up in every nook. Christmas jazz played softly. It was a busy day for Jenny as people lined up for their morning joes, lively chatting about the demands of their *manitas* and *manitos*.

“Hey Jenny, our company’s Christmas party is on Saturday, December 10. You’re invited. You will come, won’t you?” Maja asked as she approached the counter.

They had become close friends since Maja always gets her coffee from Jenny. The café where she worked was on the ground floor of a low-rise building in Pasig housing a small start-up company.

“Hmm, I don’t know,” Jenny mulled over the invitation while preparing Maja’s usual order.

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Since she had known her, Maja always get a tall cafe latte. They started getting friendly when Jenny accidentally gave her a cafe mocha that Maja politely returned. Jenny had urged Maja to try other drinks but Maja, grinning, only replied, “Loyalty is always rewarded.”

“Isn’t it embarrassing for me? I’m not even an employee of your company,” she said as she handed Maja her coffee.

Maja waved her off. “Don’t worry about it. Most of us know you. We’ve been ordering coffee from you for years! Besides, you can come as my guest,” she assured Jenny.

Jenny smiled. The truth was she was thrilled to be invited to this party. Some of the customers raved about how fun this party is. Also, everyone gets freebies at the end.

* * *

Jenny fixed her hair as she walked the empty hallway leading to the party venue. She was worried that she was dressed too plainly for the event. She had on a sleeveless, brown dress paired with low-heeled red shoes. A glossy, black sling bag that she purchased during the early Christmas sale at SM Megamall completed her outfit. Even when she knew several people there, she can’t help wondering, “What if no one talks to me?” as she pushed the glass doors leading to the garden.

The party was held in the spacious garden at the back of the building. Small, brilliant lights adorned the trees and shrubs. At the center was a round pool filled with several Koi fish. On one side stood the buffet table filled with savory finger food. Small, tall tables where people can mingle while they eat were all over the garden.

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How lovely this place is, Jenny thought and smiled. The party was already underway when she arrived at 9:00 p.m. She looked around to find a familiar face and saw Ryan, an up-and-coming middle manager who graduated from Ateneo. At the café, Ryan orders his coffee impatiently and lets her know by asking every minute “Is mine done?” He was conversing in low tones with two other executive-looking people, obviously talking about business. Jenny pursed her lips. *Can’t join their group*, she thought.

At this time, the glass door swung open, and Maja entered, still putting on her blazer. She ran a hand through her shoulder-length hair and had a quick check of her black dress. Then she spotted Jenny and broke into a big, happy smile. “I’m glad you came!” she said upon reaching her.

“Couldn’t pass all those free food,” Jenny said, gesturing toward the buffet table.

“I’ll definitely eat a lot tonight, traffic in EDSA made me hungry,” Maja said.

They made their way to the buffet table and started pointing food to the servers. Just then, small and chubby Belle joined their line chatting with two other employees.

“Then dogs ran after them and they had no time to put on their pants!” they heard Belle say, laughing loudly.

At the café, Belle orders a different drink every day. She said it makes her day exciting not knowing what she’ll have that day. But it takes her 10 minutes every time to decide which one to order, carefully assessing the pros and cons of each coffee. Belle turned to them. “Hey guys, Vanessa is going to speak later. She said she will be announcing something. Do you know what that is?”

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Vanessa is the beautiful but ruthless boss of this start-up EdTech company. She evokes admiration due to her accomplishments and risk-taking personality. Almost all her employees had taken a beating from her at one time or another. Everyone is cautious around her and if possible, they try to get out of her way.

Jenny only met her once. Tall and confident, heads turned toward her when she entered the café. At the counter, she looked at Jenny intently, assessing her. Then her red lips parted into a smile and she ordered a tall americano. Jenny could feel Vanessa's eyes watching her every move as she prepared her coffee. When she handed the coffee to her, Vanessa smirked and said, "Classic." Jenny always wondered what she meant by that.

"Vanessa and her games," Maja said, annoyed. The three of them brought their plates to a table near the Koi pool. "I'm sure it will be about her again!" she added.

Belle had noticed Ryan and filled them in on the latest office gossip. "Ryan's and Vanessa's families used to be friends. They had a falling out when Ryan's family had a legal battle against Vanessa's family over a large, beach front land in La Union. Vanessa's family won," she whispered.

Just then, Lorna whizzed past them in a hurry. "Lorna, come join us!" Belle called her.

Lorna came back. "I'm late! Vanessa wants these new shoes an hour ago. Sorry girls!" She picked up a barbeque from Belle's plate and hurriedly left.

"Poor Lorna. She's looking more like a slave than an executive secretary. Vanessa's really making her work for every penny of her salary," Maja said, shaking her head.

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“And you know what,” Belle’s face lit up at the act of sharing a juicy secret, “Vanessa required her to stay at work one time making her miss her daughter’s graduation.” Both Jenny and Maja shook their heads in disgust.

At ten o’clock in the evening, a man took the mike from the podium and said, “Good evening guests! We are just waiting for Vanessa, our CEO, to welcome you all before we start this party.” Some people in the crowd checked their phones for the time.

Suddenly, the garden door burst open, and Lorna came out screaming, “Help! Vanessa’s been murdered!”

* * *

Inside Vanessa’s office, her lifeless body lay on the floor, her back to them. A pool of blood gathered around her upper body.

A policeman was interrogating Lorna. “I was delivering her things when I saw her on the floor...dead,” she said flatly, obviously in shock.

Another policeman who has been inspecting the body stood up and said to the first, “She’s been stabbed. One on the back which made her fall. She might have been pushed also. Then, her neck was slashed which killed her. The problem is I can’t find the knife.”

Jenny, Belle, and Maja looked at each other, their eyes full of questions. Jenny felt nauseous and covered her mouth. She pulled Maja away from the room. She had to pull Maja thrice to finally leave the gruesome scene.

* * *

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The week after Vanessa's death, the café was full of employees theorizing who could have killed her and why. Some said Vanessa was a victim of a scorned lover, an angry rival, or a disgruntled employee. One thing was for sure though, the killer could be one of them. The guard said that the building was closed to visitors at the start of the party. Earlier that day, it was widely known that the CCTV had crashed. Jenny kept her ears open as she served coffee.

On Tuesday, Belle and Maja were at the café. They asked Jenny to join them for a while during her break.

"He did it!" Belle looked at Paulo who was sitting three tables away from them. Paulo is the cute and boyish programmer who has a lot of girls vying for his attention.

"He may have a string of girls behind him, but Vanessa pulled a number on him. She took a liking to him, and they were an item for a while. But she dumped him when a hunky client got interested in her. Manly hotness beats boyish charm, I guess," Belle said.

Belle looked them both in the eyes and added, "Some say he was so heartbroken that they heard him crying in the CR for three days!"

Maja interrupted her, "Or it could be you, Belle."

"Why?" Jenny asked, raising her eyebrows.

"Remember when Vanessa insulted you in front of everyone because of a minor mistake you made? She even threatened to fire you," Maja revealed, looking straight at Belle with a glint in her eyes.

Belle's face turned beet red.

When Belle and Maja left the café, Jenny continued to watch Paulo who was working on his laptop. Paulo always adds cinnamon to his coffee and buys a stick of honey to go with it, never white sugar. Jenny didn't ask but she thought it must be for health reasons. He

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noticed her watching and smiled at her, exposing his dimples. *That part where he is irresistible is true*, she agreed.

* * *

The afternoon of the following Thursday was a slow one with the cafe nearly empty. Maja chatted with Jenny as she prepared her favorite cold drink—Strawberry Frappuccino.

“Vanessa had it in for her. She insulted and hurt a lot of people. The police might have a tough time identifying her killer,” Maja reflected. “I have been victimized by her, too. She promised me this promotion for months. I have already posted it on Facebook and people have congratulated me on it. But then on the day itself, she announced a different name! And to think I bought a new dress for the occasion. Everyone was looking at me. It was humiliating!” Maja was holding down the fork that came with her cheesecake tightly, almost cutting the paper on the tray.

“Why did she promote another person?” Jenny asked, appalled, as she handed the Frappuccino to Maja.

“She said... She. Changed. Her. Mind.” Maja replied slowly, emphasizing every word. It was clear that Maja was upset. Jenny felt that a wrong or irritating move from her will throw Maja over the edge.

Suddenly, Paulo appeared at the counter. His charming smile seemed to lighten the moment.

“Hi, Jenny. I’d like a cup of brewed coffee please, for takeaway,” he said. He paused then added, “By the way, are you free on Sunday? I’d like to invite you for coffee in another café.” He grinned.

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Jenny felt pleased and warm all over. “That’s a great idea, Paulo. Yes, I’d like that,” she said.

After Paulo left, Maja eyed Jenny closely. “I’d stay away from him if I were you. Belle is right about him being a chick boy, you know,” she warned.

“How can you be so sure?” Jenny asked doubtfully. She still couldn’t believe Paulo was interested in her.

“I’ve worked with him before.”

Jenny was already excited for her Sunday date with Paulo to care about Maja’s warnings. “I might give him a chance, though. I have a tiny bit of crush on him,” she admitted, giggling.

* * *

To prepare for her date with Paulo, Jenny decided to do some shopping at the nearby mall. While perusing the racks of clothes at a shop, she bumped into Lorna.

“Oh, hi Lorna! I didn’t know you also shop here.”

“Hi, Jenny! Yes, I’m just looking for something for my daughter,” Lorna said, smiling after recognizing her. Lorna doesn’t drink coffee but buys the half-off priced pastries at the end of the day for her daughter.

“I see. What happened to the murder investigation? Do they have any suspects? Have they found the knife?” Jenny decided to take this opportunity to catch up on the investigation.

“The police interviewed all of us already, but haven’t arrested anyone. The knife is still missing,” Lorna said, taking out a dress from the racks and looking it over.

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“Who’s your boss now that Vanessa’s gone?” Jenny asked.

“I’ve been reassigned to Sir Ryan. He’s now our CEO,” Lorna replied. She looked at Jenny, smirking. “Who would know he’ll benefit from this tragedy?”

“Yeah. Must be a complete change from Vanessa? I heard she really gave you a hard time.”

“Oh, that woman is cruel, I tell you, cruel!” Lorna’s eyes squinted and her jaw was very tense. “Sometimes I even thought of...”

Jenny waited for what Lorna was going to say, but the executive secretary noticed and dropped the subject. She excused herself. “My daughter is waiting for me. I better hurry home. Nice talking to you, Jenny,” she said.

As Jenny watched Lorna walk away, she wondered if Lorna had had enough of Vanessa’s ruthless demands and decided to take matters into her own hands.

* * *

On Sunday morning, Paulo and Jenny decided to meet in front of their building. Paulo took her to an Italian restaurant in Antipolo with a spectacular view of the metro. Jenny welcomed the fresh air and green nature around her.

“This is a nice place,” she said, smiling at Paulo. They were enjoying their coffee at the end of their meal.

“I thought you’d like it. A change from our busy city life,” Paulo smiled back, his dimples reappearing. Paulo reached out for her hand. “I’d like to get to know you more, Jenny.”

Jenny thought about Paulo’s supposed fling with Vanessa and

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before she could stop herself, she said, “I want to know more about you, too. Maybe you can tell me about your past relationships.”

Paulo cleared his throat. “I used to date someone in my former office... Karen. We connected instantly and enjoyed each other’s company. But it ended badly.”

“How come?” She was curious.

Paulo looked away, toward the tiny buildings in the distance. Then he turned to his coffee before facing Jenny. “There was a third party. Jealousy. Office romances never work out.”

Jenny could feel the pain in his voice.

On their way home, as she glanced at Paulo in the driver’s seat of his car, Jenny thought that in his alleged affair with Vanessa, there was another guy as well. Is he capable of hurting someone out of jealousy and bitterness? Maybe two heartaches in a row had done it for him.

* * *

It was Monday. Maja entered the café and saw Paulo holding Jenny’s hands at the counter as she gave him his change.

“Hey, Jenny, my usual please,” she said.

Upon seeing her, Paulo immediately withdrew his hand. “I’ll see you later,” he told Jenny.

“Oh. Don’t bother. I’m going to close the café late in the evening,” Jenny replied, a silly smile still on her lips.

Maja looked at Paulo as he walked away and then at Jenny. “What’s going on?” she asked.

“Well, we kind of hit it over the weekend,” Jenny shyly admitted.

Maja’s eyes rounded. “Really? Isn’t that way too fast?”

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“We have this instant connection. It just felt right to me,” Jenny said.

Maja took her coffee. “Well, watch your step, dear,” she said nonchalantly and left.

* * *

During mid-afternoon, Ryan angrily marched into the café, moving some of the chairs and tables out of the way. He banged the coffee he ordered 30 minutes ago on the counter, spilling some of its contents.

“Jenny, I found a spider in my coffee. I nearly spilled it on important documents! What kind of business are you guys running here?” he nearly shouted.

Jenny was embarrassed. “I’m very sorry, Sir Ryan. I’ll replace it with another cup,” she replied anxiously.

When he got his new cup, Ryan looked at Jenny with a warning and said, “I hope you do your job properly. You wouldn’t want to be the next to go, would you?”

After Ryan left, as she was pouring out his coffee on the sink with the dead spider swimming in it, Jenny thought that she didn’t know Ryan had such a bad temper. If a spider in his coffee can get him worked up like that, how much more an upscale lot in the tourist haven of La Union that he lost to Vanessa’s family?

* * *

The customers in the evening left one by one until only Belle

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remained. She ordered a slice of their Christmas chocolate cake to go. As Jenny wrapped it up, she asked, “Did the police find Vanessa’s killer yet?”

“They haven’t got a clue!” Belle said. Then she whispered, “Did you know that in Paulo’s previous company, there was an employee who was also murdered?”

“Really?” Jenny prodded Belle for more information.

Belle looked behind her. “I think her name was Karen. Curiously, the killer has not been identified to this day.”

When Belle left, Jenny mulled over this information. Circumstantial evidence points toward Paulo as Vanessa’s killer. This latest revelation showed a fatal pattern of Paulo: he was present in both murders! He definitely had a motive as a spurned lover. Her heart sank.

At 10:00 p.m., Jenny switched off the lights in the café’s main dining area, leaving the lights on at the counter and the kitchen at the back. She heard the door open and a hooded person entered.

“I’m sorry but we’re closed,” she called out.

The hooded figure moved forward until the light revealed the person’s face.

“Oh, it’s you,” Jenny said, surprised. “Why did you come back?”

“I came back for you,” Maja said, her voice had a strange note to it.

Then she smiled and showed Jenny a knife in her hand.

“Maja, are you okay?” Jenny asked, confused.

Maja laughed. “Can’t you tell what this knife is for, Jenny?”

Instinctively, Jenny said, “Vanessa’s murder weapon.”

Just then, as it dawned on her that Maja is the killer, she bolted

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toward the kitchen to escape, but Maja ran after her. The kitchen has a large, steel, center table. They were on opposite ends of the table.

“Maja, why are you doing this?!” Jenny screamed.

Maja looked at her with eyes full of hate. “For years, I have begged Paulo to love me. I’ll even settle for just a tiny bit of affection. But he got annoyed with me. He told me there was absolutely no chance we would be together.

“So, I decided to remove the girls he used to be crazy about!” Maja continued. “First, it was Karen from our previous company. Next was that arrogant bitch Vanessa. I enjoyed pushing this knife through her pathetic body. And my third victim will be, guess who, you!”

Maja snickered then her face turned spiteful again. “We could have been friends longer if you haven’t told me about your stupid crush on Paulo. Wrong move, BFF!”

Maja ran toward Jenny, but she scrambled out of the kitchen to the main café door. Suddenly, Jenny hit a chair and fell on her back. Maja reached her, sat on top of her, and aimed the knife at her heart.

Jenny pleaded, “Maja, you need help. Stop!”

Jenny closed her eyes.

A swift punch hit Maja and she toppled away from Jenny unconscious. Paulo was standing next to Jenny. As he helped Jenny up, Paulo asked, “Jenny, are you okay? I thought I’ll come back to take you home since it’s already late. I’m glad I did.”

Jenny sobbed on Paulo’s shoulder and told him what happened.

Paulo looked over at Maja’s limp body.

“Yes, I have my doubts about Maja, too,” he told Jenny. “Karen’s killer was never discovered. But I can’t prove anything without any

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evidence.”

The police arrived minutes later and arrested Maja. “This is the missing knife,” they confirmed.

Maja looked at Paulo and Jenny angrily while she was being led to the police car. As they watched the car drive away from the building, Jenny felt Paulo’s reassuring hand on her shoulder.

“You can never really know what demons haunt the people close to you,” Jenny said sadly, shaking her head.

Meanwhile, the shrubs in front of the building twinkled with red and green Christmas lights, and a passing car with windows open played a famous Christmas song.

“Give love on Christmas day...”



ABOUT

THE AUTHOR



On most days, Tina Alfonso is an economist who writes about how countries can recover from the pandemic and other economic woes. In her private time, she is a lover of art and literature. She enjoys hanging out in bookstores, perusing the delectable buffet of books. It gives her joy to spot a sought-after novel hidden among the stacks of books in a Booksale outlet.

Following her literary idols, she writes stories and creates quirky characters and awkward situations. Needless to say, she also loves to watch movies. She is currently studying poetry as another form of self-expression.

She is deeply concerned about the environmental destruction due to climate change and pollution. In the future, these themes will be featured in her work.

STIFLED CAROL

By Shayne A. Martinez

“**H**elp! Please help my sister!”

The deafening cry of a little girl disrupts the crowded ongoing *Misa de Gallo*, making churchgoers that are standing at the back turn their attention to the distressed girl instead of the homily.

The little girl is covered with dried mud and strands of grass from head to toe. She even has some scratches on her arms if you look very closely. By the looks of it, she might have fallen, or worse, someone tried to attack her but she managed to escape.

People start to calm her down and try to ask her some questions, but she can't seem to speak. She is crying frantically, she's even having hiccups that show how long she's been in that trauma. After a few seconds of being surrounded by people, the girl collapses.

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The kid's face is recognized by some people, and they give more attention to the kid. Murmurs occupy the whole place as they try to figure out what is happening.

"Someone call her parents! Someone call the police!"

* * *

One hour ago...

"Thank you, thank you! *Ang babait ninyo*, thank you!"

Two girls sang in delight as they were handed a few coins for the Christmas carol they performed in front of a random house. The homeowners and their children clapped their hands as the song ended.

"Whose children are you?" the housewife asked. "Is she your sibling?" she turned to the bigger girl and nodded when the latter replied with a small smile and raised eyebrows for confirmation. The smaller girl enthusiastically came forward to introduce herself.

"We are siblings. This is my *Ate* Bella and I'm Jhing. We are children of Rosita and Lando Reyes. Our house is just a few blocks away from here."

"Oh, Rosita? Is she the one who does the laundry?"

The kids nodded in reply.

"How old are you, kids?" the woman asked.

"I'm 15, and my sister is seven," Bella respectfully responded.

The housewife nodded and even pinched the right cheek of the younger sibling. "She's so cute! Well then, take care on your way home. It might rain soon and it's getting late."

The moment the door closed, Jhing giggled next to her big sister

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as she counted their money while walking near the road. Bella, on the other hand, couldn't stop smirking beside her sister.

She feels annoyed that every time they go out, her little sister always gets the attention, just like now. She is the one who sings the carols passionately while Jhing only plays the tambourine made up of metal bottle caps.

Bella believes that she practically does the work, but her cute little sister gets all the praise. One small piece of proof that most people do prefer and admire looks before skills.

Since she cannot change the world's mentality, Bella thinks of taking advantage of the situation, especially now that she needs money to buy a new pair of sandals for her mother as a replacement for the one she accidentally broke yesterday. If it wasn't for that, she would have not asked Jhing to do this caroling again.

The last time Bella came with her sister to do her first-ever caroling experience was a disaster. Jhing didn't even know what to sing! And her tambourine playing? The rhythm was off and the tempo kept changing. But despite the bad performance, they were paid mostly with paper bills than coins all because—guess what—her little sister is cute. Bella thought that if she went alone and gave the same, poor performance her little sister gave, people wouldn't even bother to open the door. Real talk.

"Yeah, I am babysitting my little sister right now," Bella said, talking to someone on her phone. "I will call you again tomorrow morning. We promised to complete the nine *Misa de Gallo* this year. I want my wish to come true, and this is my biggest backup for *it* to happen."

"You can have your wish come true if you go to church to pray?"

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Really?” Jhing asked innocently, eavesdropping on her big sister’s phone call.

Bella looked at her sister and gestured to keep quiet, and then she went on with her call as they walked.

A while later, they came across their cousin Andrew and his friends going in the other direction. They seemed to be in a rush and not in good mood. They could even hear some cursing from his friends and Bella overheard one of them talking on the phone about checkpoints.

Bella showed disgust the moment she saw one of his cousin’s friends—Leo—who started courting her a few days ago. They go to the same school and he is one year older than her. He even gave her a gift when they had a Christmas party in school. Except for the fact that he is his cousin’s friend, Bella doesn’t know anything about him at all—a total stranger.

“*Kuya!*” Jhing waved at her cousin cheerfully and the latter waved back.

Andrew looked at his wristwatch. “Don’t be late! It’s almost seven o’clock, your mother will scold you if you take too long going back home!” he yelled from the opposite side of the road. “Bella, take care of your little sister, okay?” he continued, turning his attention to her.

The two girls nodded and went on walking. Jhing started talking gibberish, humming now and then while jiggling her DIY tambourine. The little girl’s habit annoyed Bella so much she even tried to walk faster than her. This made the little girl almost run out of breath trying to catch up with her big sister.

“How much is it now, *Ate* Bella?” Jhing curiously asked. Her eyes sparkled seeing a lot of coins in her sister’s palm.

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“We have 60 pesos in total. I don’t think this is enough,” Bella answered. “Should we go to one more house before we head home?” She felt her little sister grab the side of her shirt but she brushed it off.

“I want to go home now, *Ate*. I feel kind of hungry now,” Jhing said, with puppy eyes. “Papa must be on his way home now.”

“So?” Bella squinted her eyes.

“He promised me that he will buy fried chicken for dinner. He said I can eat as much as I want.”

“Of course, you’re the favorite child. That’s already a given,” she replied with curled lips. “You’re the princess, the cute one, the baby.”

“I’m not a baby anymore,” Jhing protested and stopped walking, but Bella seemed unbothered and just kept walking.

“I saw a simple pair of shoes at the nearby mall that costs 100 pesos,” she changed the topic before she starts to get more annoyed. Her little sister won’t get the point of her sneering statements anyway.

“Is it nice?” Jhing asked innocently.

Bella nodded and looked up while trying to remember what she saw at the mall. It even drew a smile to her face imagining how the shoes will fit her mother’s feet.

“If the next house gives us at least 20 pesos, then we don’t have to go caroling tomorrow. I still have an extra 20 from my school allowance,” Bella said. It seemed like she was talking to her little sister, but she was just thinking out loud.

“Why do I even have to go? I am not the one who broke Mama’s sandals anyway,” Jhing said, irritated.

The little girl looked around and walked closer to her older sibling. “It’s dark already, *Ate*,” Jhing continued. Mother must be looking for us already. I think that’s enough to buy a gift for *Nanay*.”

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Bella chuckled sarcastically. “You have no idea how much the goods are these days.”

“But *Ate*—”

“One last house and we’re going back home. Unless you want me to take the 50 pesos you received yesterday at your Christmas party.”

“Hey, you can’t do that! That’s mine!”

“Then let’s go. If you don’t want to come, go back alone.”

“You’re so mean,” Jhing started crying, which made Bella more annoyed that she tried to walk faster than her sister again.

They were walking away from the direction of their home and reached the area where the houses were farther from each other. Street lights here kept switching on and off, and it made Jhing feel more afraid to go on.

“Let’s head back now, *Ate*. Please,” She ran toward Bella and grabbed her arms. The little girl tried to stop Bella from taking another step forward. “It’s getting creepier here. I don’t like this place.”

Bella stopped walking and looked at her younger sibling. She just noticed how anxious she looked next to her. A feeling of guilt rushed over her when she noticed her expression. The little girl was practically hugging her arms now and she could feel her racing heartbeat. As an older sibling, she should not let her sister feel this way.

She let go a deep sigh and knelt to calm her little sister. “All right, let’s go home. I’m sorry.”

Just when they were about to turn their backs, they bumped into a man. It was *Mang* Berto, known to be the village drunkard. He was walking unsteadily, with his shirt hanging on his shoulders. Under the

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flickering lights of the street lamps, the two sisters felt fear just seeing the man's face. Jhing held her sister's hand tightly and they instantly took a step back as the man started to walk toward them.

"Hey, kids. Where are you heading?" the man reeked of alcohol as he approached the two girls. "I will walk you home, it's dark here."

The moment his hand landed on Bella's shoulder, the two sprinted farther away as they screamed at the top of their lungs. They didn't even look back in fear that he was going to catch up with them. They decided to stop when a *balut* vendor passed by them. The man said something, but their heartbeats felt louder they couldn't hear clearly.

Bella was bowing her head and holding her knees with both of her hands as she tried to recover from running. Jhing was standing straight, catching her breath and feeling her heartbeat, realizing that they were now farther away from home. Bella looked around trying to recognize the place, but all she could see were tall grass and a split road—the left road that leads to the exit of their *barangay* and the right road that leads to an inner, more isolated part of their *barangay* with fewer houses. She looked back and all she saw was an empty road, with the flickering street lights and the back of that *balut* vendor who was gradually going farther away from them.

"*Ate*, where are we?" Jhing asked.

Bella wanted to give her sister a reassuring answer because by the way she asked that question, it seemed that the little girl knew they were farther from home now. It seemed darker and they couldn't see the road clearer. However, she could see the church from a distance.

Being the older one, Bella is responsible for her sister. She felt guilty for dragging her into this situation. She knew the areas in their

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barangay, but she has never tried to venture this far at night for the simple reason that their parents don't allow them to loiter at night.

"We are still here in our *barangay*, don't worry. I know *Kuya* Andrew's house is just around here somewhere. If we walk a little more, we'll reach the *barangay* hall and that church," Bella told her little sister.

Just when they were about to walk on, the flashing lights behind them made them stop. It was coming from the headlights of a van approaching them fast. Shortly, the van stopped beside them. The siblings both stretched their lips and their eyes shone brightly after seeing the familiar vehicle. It looked exactly like the van their *Kuya* Andrew owns. They thought someone would offer them a ride and they could be home just in time for dinner.

Then, the van's side door opened and their bright faces turned blue when they saw unfamiliar faces—not even the same faces they saw with their cousin earlier. Bella instinctively hid her sister behind her back when, suddenly, two arms grabbed her and forcefully covered her mouth and nose with a handkerchief. The sisters screamed. Jhing tried to pull her struggling sister away from the man but she was too small. Another man came out and pulled Jhing inside the van. The predators panicked when someone nearby shouted.

"Hey! What are you doing?!" the voice of an unknown man from a distance shouted. He ran towards the commotion across the street. "Hey!" he repeated.

"Help us! *Ate* Bella!" Jhing called her big sister's name at the top of her lungs.

Seeing her little sister being dragged inside the van, Bella kicked the guy who was holding her sister. The perpetrator lost his grip on

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Jhing and the little girl rolled down to the drainage ditch. With the unknown man quickly approaching from behind, the kidnappers decided to leave the little kid. The side door closed and the van accelerated away from that place.

The vehicle was filled with darkness and stifled cries. Bella's heartbeat was racing and she was frozen in fear, especially when she couldn't hear her little sister's cries anymore. As much as she wanted to protect her sister, she couldn't let go of the arms of the man who grabbed her. She felt dizzy from the scent of the handkerchief being pressed against almost half of her face.

* * *

Jhing was unconscious after she fell off the car that took her sister. The moment she opened her eyes, she screamed at the figure of a man who was kneeling next to her.

"It's okay, you're safe," the man said, holding his hands up reassuring the kid that he meant no harm.

"My *ate* was taken by the car!" Jhing cried even louder. "Please help her!"

The man nodded, "I called for help. I called your cousin Andrew as well. But can you ride behind me on my bicycle? The church is nearby."

* * *

Bella opened her eyes and all she saw was darkness. Her mouth was gagged with cloth, and she immediately tried to take it out. It took

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her a while to realize that what happened earlier was not a dream and this was happening. She remembered her sister and the last seconds that she saw her before Jhing fell out of the car and rolled off to the side of the road. She prayed that her little sister is in safe hands. She couldn't explain the heaviness in her chest—it made her want to scream and cry loudly to take out the pain and anger growing inside.

She could feel her head aching and her arms hurting. Her face felt heavy and she could tell that her left eye was swollen because she couldn't open her left eyelid widely. She felt cold and only realized that she was naked when she felt itchy from the grass beneath her. She tried to move but her private part was hurting as well.

In a flash, she remembered how three men grabbed her by the hair and dragged her out of the vehicle. She tried to scream and fight back, but they also punched her in the stomach and face. She couldn't fight back as the three men pressed her down to the ground and undressed her.

One of the men put his weight on top of her. He made a disgusting sound and a creepy laugh, like a rabid dog. His face went closer to hers; she felt his lips and nose almost touching her cheeks. That was when she knocked him in the face using her head. The man had no time to dodge. In retaliation, he gave her another blow on the right side of her face, leaving her unconscious.

Bella touched her right head after remembering that thought. She now noticed the hot liquid-like sweat dripping on her face. *Must be blood*, she thought.

She tried to get up, hugging her injured body, but her mind felt more impaired. She knew what happened to her. And she couldn't think how she would function normally again after this incident. She

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also couldn't forgive herself for causing this trauma to her sister.

Her body was in pain, and so were her heart and soul. Her guilt was eating her whole for not putting her sister's feelings and safety first. She should've been a good role model for her. She should've listened to her and not her selfishness. She shouldn't have been mean to her. She had already accepted deep inside that this might be her last night alive. It could be the end for her when they threw another blow to her head.

"Hello!" she started yelling. "Help! Please, help me! Anybody, please!"

Every minute that passed without help was like a nightmare. She was paranoid, afraid that the bad people will come back again. She was freezing, her breathing was faster than usual.

"Bella!"

She heard the voice of someone calling her name from a distance. It was far away from where she was, but she could hear it. She tried to stop herself from breathing heavily so she could hear it again, convincing herself that she was not just hallucinating.

"Bella! Are you here?"

There it is again, she thought. She managed to crawl to get out of the tall bushes that surrounded her. "I'm here! Please! I'm here!"

"Bella? Bella! I can hear you! Keep shouting, I'm coming!"

"Help me! I'm here!" She gathered all her energy to shout with all her might. After a few exchanges of yelling, a man finally reached where she was.

"Bella! Thank God!" The man immediately took off his jacket and made her wear it after seeing her condition. "We thought we lost you." The man immediately dialed his phone informing the

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authorities that he had found her. They had been searching for her everywhere after they caught the van at the checkpoint. The van belonged to her cousin Andrew and was stolen by the people who assaulted her.

They were in a dark area, but she could tell who the man was. Now that he was closer, it was easy to recognize the owner of the voice... It was Leo.

“Help is on the way. Your sister is safe now too, so don’t worry.”

The last part made Bella’s heart flutter and she released a sigh of relief. Her reflexes immediately made her hug Leo, and on his shoulders, she cried her heart out. “Thank you very much! Thank God, that’s all I wanted to hear!”

After a few minutes, an ambulance and a *barangay* patrol car reached their location. The first people to come out of the patrol car were her parents and her little sister Jhing. No words came out of her mouth as her family approached her with hugs and tears. She was thankful that her sister was safe and reunited with her parents. Bella felt ashamed to face her parents, but felt at peace being next to them.

“I’m sorry, *Ate*, it’s my fault,” Jhing said while crying. “I was selfish. I didn’t agree to give you my 50 pesos to buy the gift!”

Bella sobbed and hugged her sister the tightest.

“I’m so sorry, Jhing! I’m so happy you’re safe.”



ABOUT

THE AUTHOR



Shayne A. Martinez is a 35-year-old poet and writer from the province of Oriental Mindoro who currently resides in Bahrain as an OFW. She writes different literary pieces such as novels, essays, poems, and short stories. Shayne is most comfortable writing romance, comedy, and slice-of-life stories.

She is a proud and active member of various writing communities such as Definitely Filipino Bloggers Inc. (DFBI) and Stary Writing (Dreame) to name a few. She is also one of the authors who contributed a literary piece to *Dystopia Manila*, a sci-fi anthology book under PaperKat Books.

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THE CASE OF HAPPY JESUS

By Dan C. De Guzman

“Hey Eve, there is someone here who wants to talk to you.”

SPO2 Evelyn Ibañez was currently finishing putting the glittery letters together to complete the word ‘Christmas’ on the large white wall of their office at Precinct 22 when one of the officers called her. There was an uneasiness on his face, as if he was reluctant to even disturb her.

“Who is it, Marquez?”

SPO2 Jayce Marquez paused for a second as he tried to calculate

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the right words to say to his comrade who is known for being hot-headed. Evelyn is the type of officer who doesn't want her time to get wasted, especially by trivialities. She might be a beautiful lady in a ponytail, but her personality is sometimes more like a gung-ho type; the one who always shoots first before questions.

That is the reason why she is always tagged as the one and only *Amazona* of their precinct, much to her annoyance.

And you don't want to mess up her mood now that it's only a day before Christmas—her favorite holiday and the only time of the year that she takes a vacation leave.

“Remember the one who sent us that obviously edited song of Jose Mari Chan's *Christmas in Our Hearts*? The one who claimed that it's a warning message? Well, the sender is here. But don't worry, I'll handle it for you...” SPO2 Marquez quickly followed his words with a promise that the visitor wouldn't disturb her while she was busy decorating their office, but Evelyn shot back a glare at him instead.

“Why don't you let him come in so we can talk?” she asked.

“Err... I thought you don't want to get disturbed when you are decorating our wall,” SPO2 Marquez reasoned out. He got pretty nervous quickly when he saw one of her brows suddenly rise, a tell-tale sign that she is getting irritated.

“It's fine. There is something I also want to confirm about that recording he sent,” Evelyn replied as she finished putting clear tape on the last letter of the decors they bought from Divisoria.

SPO2 Marquez then ushered the visitor inside the office. This unexpectedly created a small commotion in their precinct as the other police officers, including their prisoners, couldn't help but whisper among themselves loudly while unintentionally pointing their fingers

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or lips toward the man who was once a widely known icon in the world of social media.

“Mr. Psi? What the hell is that man doing here?”

Voices around the precinct echoed back and forth as they looked at the 30- year-old bespectacled man donning a white wool polo shirt and black trousers as if he came straight from a corporate meeting. With his mestizo skin, the black rings around his eyes are too obvious for people not to notice. But he still looks rather handsome, even with his troubled expression and thin physique that show he lacks exercise.

“I am sorry for the disturbance, ma’am,” the man that goes by the moniker Mr. Psi greeted Evelyn with a weak smile and a bow.

Mr. Psi is one of those online *espiritistas* that manage to gain notoriety thanks to his online videos that circulated all over Facebook and YouTube. He posted several videos of alleged séances where he communicated with the spirits of the dead as per request by his client.

His tools of the trade are unique among the other online medium that are slowly gaining followers on social media. Instead of an Ouija Board or other paranormal paraphernalia, he uses his laptop where the spirits are said to communicate by either typing a word on it or playing a song on the said device.

Mr. Psi gained a massive following but suddenly, he stopped posting videos and completely shut down all of his social media accounts. He became unsearchable and, even though not active, keyboard warriors still refused to let him rest. He became a trending topic for almost a year before they finally quit and jumped into another person or object worth the bandwagon.

“I’ll be frank with you, ma’am. I will not leave this precinct without making you believe that what I sent to you is real,” Mr. Psi

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said, looking straight into Evelyn's eyes.

"Good luck, *brad*," SPO2 Marquez gave Mr. Psi a gentle nudge on his side as a warning. Evelyn was looking at the visitor with her brows all twisted and her lips twitching and Mr. Psi didn't have any idea what this meant.

"Mr. Psi or should I say, Ibarra Tolentino. How can you possibly make me believe in that recording you sent when, in fact, it's been known by many that your methods are questionable? We are not kids anymore to believe in ghosts," Evelyn replied coldly while also glaring intensely at Mr. Psi.

"I know it's hard to believe. I can't blame you if you believe those debunking videos they made to smear my name but please, I am begging you. That recording is true and I know he is back!" A sudden rise in the voice of Ibarra made Evelyn react furiously for she knew what Ibarra was referring to.

"That psycho is already presumed dead, Mr. Tolentino. He will not murder any children anymore. That I can assure you," Evelyn shot back as she was about to turn her back away from Ibarra.

Evelyn still recalls that day when they finally cornered the well-known serial killer Jesus Bartolome in Pasig City in the middle of the night. That man, who was known as *Boy Puso*, was proof that humankind is capable of becoming a walking, breathing evil.

Boy Puso was among the most wanted criminals who nearly killed more than 20 children and probably more since there were several cases of missing children left unsolved. They believed the cases were connected to the modus of *Boy Puso*. His method was to befriend children in public places while disguising himself in different costumes and attire. Sometimes he would wear a mascot costume and

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try to play with little children who were either left unattended by their parents or were just completely alone. He would then take them somewhere, far away from the prying eyes, and into his van where he would orchestrate a bloody butchery on the poor kids.

Boy Puso loved the attention. Like every other deranged mind who is bent on criminal activities, it drives them to glee when they see other people's reaction to their masterpiece tainted with macabre and fueled by pure, devilish tendencies. To attain this, *Boy Puso* always left the bodies of his victims naked with gaping holes in their chests where the hearts should be. The bodies were filled with stab wounds and slashes, as well as signs of sexual assault that made his work more horrendous. *Boy Puso* left these corpses in places where they would be easy to spot such as parks or in the middle of roads.

Evelyn handled that case personally and it almost drove her nuts until they got a chance to track *Boy Puso* and the said mad killer was shot by one of her police officers. But he managed to jump right into the Pasig River and never resurfaced again. The police didn't conduct any search operation because the bullet wounds inflicted on him were said to be fatal.

And now, after a year of no missing children reports, Evelyn was talking to a man who claims he can communicate with the dead; and one of the dead souls told this medium that the serial killer will strike again tomorrow, on Christmas Day.

"Officer Evelyn... Officer Evelyn, wait!" Ibarra grabbed Evelyn's hand as she was about to leave, but the already mad officer replied with a big left straight onto his face.

Everyone in the precinct closed their eyes as a reflex action, and some looked painfully at the sight of Ibarra's body on the floor with

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his lips already swollen, bruised, and bloody. They wanted to intervene, but they didn't want to get dragged into the mess and be the next punching bag of the fuming mad officer.

"Don't touch me, *gago!* I won't buy your stupid proof. Get the hell out of here!" Evelyn yelled.

But Ibarra, though he was about to cry from the pain, stood up and looked straight at Evelyn with his determined brown eyes. Tears were already rolling down his cheeks but he didn't mind them as he continued pleading with the officer.

"That recording was made during one of my séances, when I contacted my daughter, Angela. God knows how I miss her, officer. She was the only thing I had but she's gone now because of that piece of shit killer.

"That song is her favorite," Ibarra continued. "She played it non-stop when Christmas is near, officer. She played it on her laptop all day and all night. I promise I will never do any séances anymore after what the online trolls did to me that made me shut down my channel, but I can't... I just can't spend this Christmas without even talking to my daughter. I miss her so badly, officer.

"But when I contacted her, she gave this message. What do you expect me to do? I don't want any people to experience the nightmare I suffered. I want to stop that madman, officer, and I know it is only you who can help me with this. So, please... I am begging you..." Ibara pleaded.

Everyone went silent after hearing the heartbreaking story of Ibarra who was sobbing uncontrollably without any qualms about what the people around him would say.

"Goddamn it," Evelyn cursed silently. She was also moved by that

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narrative coming from Ibarra. She felt sorry all of a sudden for punching him without even making him explain himself. “You did it again, Evelyn,” she told herself.

Evelyn walked back and forth before speaking again, “All right. Stop crying, Mr. Tolentino. Here is my deal then, I will help you with your request but I need to confirm something. I still don’t buy your séance thing, so here is my condition. Contact your daughter right here, right now. Let us see if she will tell the same thing.”

“All right. I will.”

The officers were shocked by what Evelyn said. Most of them don’t believe that *espiritista* stuff. Hell, they even make fun of it whenever they watch his videos. But here they are, about to witness firsthand how this man will contact the dead spirit.

“Come on, Eve. It’s Christmas, not Halloween!” one of the officers complained.

Though they are reluctant, some are secretly afraid of activities involving ghosts and spirits, but they will not openly tell it to their comrades out of fear of smearing their machismo.

“We will do your séance in my office,” Evelyn added. “SPO2 Marquez and SPO1 Geneva will accompany us to ensure no trickery or mumbo-jumbo will happen in your séance.”

“Ah, shit here we go again,” SPO2 Marquez muttered as Evelyn motioned him to join them at her office.

The setup for the séance was easy; all Ibarra needed was a laptop or a PC that Evelyn readily offered. The *espiritista* then asked to switch off the lights as he started lighting the candles he brought. Then he proceeded to pray the Latin version of the *Lord’s Prayer* he called *Pater Noster* as he placed the photo of his dead daughter on the PC’s

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keyboard. He prayed for about three minutes non-stop with an eloquent, deep voice. His eyes were closed but from time to time, he opened them to look at the photo of Angela.

“Angela...sweetie...are you there? It’s dad. Can you hear me?”

The computer remained static, without anything noticeable both on its screen and keyboard. Ibarra then called Angela once more.

Just when Evelyn was about to open the lights and officially conclude Ibarra as bogus, a chilling draft made her skin crawl. The AC in her room was turned off and the window was shut tight. Suddenly, everyone started palpitating inside the very quiet room, making all three officers uneasy.

“*Putchá...*”

Then the media player in Evelyn’s PC popped open. It played an old song in a somewhat odd fashion wherein you could hear the music but the lyrics were muted except for the words “Hello” and “Daddy”.

“It’s real. It’s Goddamn real!” SPO2 Marquez’s teeth were already rattling as he felt the sudden coldness in the room.

“*Anak*, can you send me again your message last time? I have here people who can help me. Let them hear your message now.”

A few seconds passed before another song suddenly played on the PC. This time, it was everyone’s favorite Christmas song by Jose Mari Chan, the one that always becomes viral during the yuletide season in the Philippines.

Yet just like the first song played by Angela to communicate, this one had muted lyrics, save from some of the words that contained the message that Angela wanted to relay.

“...boys and girls...hearts...Christmas tree...
tomorrow...happy...Jesus...”

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These words were repeated for the entire duration of the song, like a broken record. No one tapped the keyboard or even moved the mouse the whole time the song was playing. The PC remained untouched and it left the three officers finally believing entirely in the claims of Ibarra. Although each of them, including Evelyn, couldn't help but feel a chill run down their spines when they realized that Ibarra can really talk with the dead.

"Do you need any other proof, ma'am?" Ibarra asked after he put out the candle to end the séance.

"That's one big scare, Mr. Tolentino. All right, you have my word. I'll help you and your daughter."

"But Eve, I don't get it. What does the message say?" SPO2 Marquez asked while scratching his head.

Evelyn sighed while doing a facepalm. "That's what you get when you are not taking seriously the detective sessions we are doing," she answered.

"Allow me to explain it, sir." Ibarra volunteered. "I know this is puzzling but if you will connect the words, it's about an event happening tomorrow, on Christmas Day, where there will be a lot of little boys and girls. I have a strong feeling that the words 'hearts' and 'happy Jesus' point to none other than *Boy Puso*."

"There is one event tomorrow where we expect to have a lot of boys and girls. The Kids Bazaar in Cubao. Apparently, there is a giant Christmas tree there to be lit. And I bet *Boy Puso* will be there and do something awful in that damn tree..." Evelyn added grimly. She again recalled the terrifying past antics of *Boy Puso* that turned Christmas-time in Manila into something like a creepy slasher film.

If the child killer were indeed alive and back, and if they could

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stop him before he manages to nab an unsuspecting child, then Christmas won't be tainted by blood and gore this year.

* * *

At around eight o'clock in the evening, the lower ground floor of a mall in Cubao was filled with so many people—families, friends, and lovers. Since it was Christmastime, the place was filled with overjoyed children roaming the bazaar with stores offering a lot of toys. The bazaar area was closed off and vehicles were not allowed to enter the venue. The organizers expected around 5,000 people will visit the bazaar. And somewhere in the crowd was a madman who was hellbent on killing again.

Evelyn, together with his men, spread out around the area to ensure that they can pinpoint quickly anyone who gives a suspicious vibe. There were even police officers in plain clothes stationed at the entrance and exit of the area, carefully monitoring every individual who comes in and out.

It had been an hour of watching and waiting, and much to the dismay of other officers, they couldn't find anyone who seems to match the appearance of *Boy Puso*.

"We saw mascots and cosplayers, Eve. But all of them are negative," SPO2 Marquez's voice was heard from the intercom. He sounded dubious even though he witnessed Ibarra's séance.

"Keep on checking, Marquez," Evelyn replied while also monitoring the area that was now getting more jam-packed with so many people who were completely unaware of the killer on the loose; one who prey on kids who might accidentally get lost and separated

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from their parents.

“But what do we actually need to check? The message is still vague, you know,” SPO2 Marquez responded with a slight irritation in his voice.

The police officer’s words made sense; the message relayed by Angela didn’t provide them a hint that something will happen here at the bazaar. They were still clueless about how to spot *Boy Puso*.

“Just keep looking Marquez, goddamn it!” Evelyn quickly ended the line with a pissed look on her face.

“Is everything okay, ma’am?” Ibarra asked. Based on Evelyn’s expression, it seemed that the search for the infamous serial killer was still negative. Ibarra was carrying the Frappuccinos he ordered and gave the Matcha-flavored one to Evelyn.

“Don’t call me ‘ma’am’, Ibarra. It’s too formal. Evelyn will do,” she replied with a sigh. She sipped her Frappe before answering Ibarra. They were seated on a bench beside the coffee stall. “My men can’t still find the bastard. They are having a hard time, to be honest. We have no idea what *Boy Puso*’s appearance is now knowing he has a knack for disguise.”

“I am sorry if Angela’s message is quite vague still,” Ibarra said meekly. “Communicating with spirits does have some barriers much like how the communication of the living works. Though the dead spirit can relay a message, there is no hundred percent assurance that the message will be clear and accurate. It is up to the medium or *espiritistas* and how he or she can make sense of it. This is also the reason why many actually find dealing with spirits in séance a bit hard, verging on nonsense and seemingly unreliable.”

“Relax. It’s not your fault. We will find that bastard, so cheer up,”

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Evelyn smiled at Ibarra who looked surprised. He thought the hot-headed officer didn't even know to console or even smile.

"Can I ask something, Ibarra?"

"Sure, ma'am... I mean, Evelyn."

"When did you learn that you can talk with spirits?"

Ibarra knew that Evelyn was just asking this question to calm him down. He had been too nervous the moment they arrived at this mall in Cubao. He couldn't even hide his shaking hands and trembling voice whenever Evelyn asked him for other details.

But he welcomed and appreciated the fact the officer was trying to help him in her own way even if they had a rough start yesterday. Half of his face was still aching from the punch he received from her hardened fist.

"One time, out of humor, I asked my wife if she could talk with her dead relative, who it would be. She answered her mother. Then I made this whole set up with candles and an Ouija board and invited her to have a séance. I called the name of her mother with a picture of her flashing on the screen of my laptop. I knew my wife will get angry if I was just pulling her leg that time and I was ready for it, to be honest. But to our surprise, the keyboard of my laptop typed a word on its own as I called her mother's name. It was damn scary, Evelyn, so I promised that I won't do it again."

"Yet you became quite famous as Mr. Psi who helps people by communicating with the dead. What made you change your mind then?"

Ibarra paused and then smiled, but it was the kind of sad smile of a man. "When my wife died from cancer, I suddenly had this urge to communicate with her through a séance. Her death was untimely and

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honestly, I couldn't accept it at that time. So, I conducted a séance and I finally managed to talk to her. How happy I was at that moment! Even though my dear wife was gone, I was able to connect with her. At that time, I was starting to see that my ability go beyond just scaring the shit out of other people. Perhaps I can help them by making them experience what I felt when I talked to Margaret, my wife, from the other side. That's when Mr. Psi was born."

Suddenly, Ibarra's eyes became blurry as he sipped his Frappe and continued his story.

"It was all good before. I helped so many people without knowing that it made me that damn popular. One time, a meet-and-greet event was held so people could personally converse with me. You know, like a fan meeting their idol. I never thought it would be so hectic that day that I failed to look over my daughter whom I brought to the event. I only realized that she was gone when the event ended. The day after... I heard the news... And...and..."

Evelyn put her hand on Ibarra's shoulder as he began to sob. The memory of his daughter began to haunt him as Christmas songs started playing.

"I saw Angela's body. Naked. Wounded. Her heart was missing. She was there hanging in one of those barriers in Manila Bay."

"I am sorry, Ibarra. I am sorry."

Evelyn had no choice but to hug Ibarra to comfort him; she honestly didn't how to comfort someone who was breaking down in front of her. When it comes to her men, a coffee or a cigarette will do. But right now, Evelyn knew that the only thing that might console a man like Ibarra is for him to feel that he is not alone. That someone is there for him to feel also his pain.

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“Damn it, I hope no one will see what I’ve done,” she said to herself as she tapped Ibarra’s back and then released him from her embrace.

Just then, Ibarra’s expression changed. His eyes were focused on something nearby.

“Hey, is there a problem? I hope you didn’t get hurt from that embrace,” Evelyn said, blushing. But Ibarra didn’t reply, instead, he slowly walked toward something or someone with wide eyes open and trembling hands.

“Hey... Ibarra don’t make that kind of face.”

Then suddenly, the *espiritista* ran, making Evelyn curse loudly. She left her unfinished Frappe to follow him. Evelyn never thought that with his thin frame, Ibarra could actually run that fast. It became more problematic since the wall of people was getting thicker, slowing her down. She didn’t want to accidentally hurt someone if she charged on.

“Ibarra! IBARRA! Where are you going?” Evelyn had no idea what was going on. With the sudden erratic behavior, she was starting to think that the man might have become too unstable after all those years of getting in touch with ghosts and spirits. She had this urge to call her men to stop the search for *Boy Puso*, thinking Ibarra might have a few loose screws in his head and all the things he said to them was nothing but a madman’s babble.

Evelyn ran toward the entrance which she guessed Ibarra went. She saw something near the parking space—two figures wrestling on the ground violently. No one could see them because they were partially blocked by a green UV van. The man who was getting beaten to a pulp on the ground was Ibarra. The one on top of him was

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holding a Swiss army knife. He looked like Jesus Christ; long tunic, shawl, beard, long hair. And he was smiling, as he was about to drive the knife straight into Ibarra's chest.

“STOP RIGHT THERE, YOU SCUM!”

Evelyn's instinct controlled her entire action as she took off her Glock 7 from her holster hiding under a denim jacket. She fired a single shot in the direction of the man who looked like Jesus Christ. The bullet perfectly hit the hand of Ibarra's assailant which made him drop the knife and scream in pain. Immediately, his smile shifted into one hellish agony. The sound of the gun quickly caught the attention of the crowd, creating a wave of palpable terror and chaos.

Evelyn dashed forward as the man dressed as Jesus Christ was about attack Ibarra again. This time, though wincing in pain, his left hand now held another bladed weapon. But Evelyn quickly disarmed him by hitting him on the head with her gun and arm-locking him.

“WHO ARE YOU, YOU FUCKING BASTARD? WHY ARE YOU ATTACKING HIM?”

“Evelyn! That's Jesus Bartolome! That's him!” Ibarra said, almost out of breath. There was a trail of blood running down his face.

Evelyn looked at the assailant and quickly removed the fake beard and the wig. And there she saw the face of the bastard that she had been trying to catch for so long; it was the face of the devil under the guise of a man who knew nothing but to satisfy his desire of inflicting pain on those innocent children.

Jesus was about to smile again but Evelyn already gave him a clean right straight to his face. It immediately knocked him out, complete with broken teeth and a mouth bleeding profusely.

“Finally... Finally...” Evelyn sighed with relief as she hand-

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cuffed Jesus Bartolome aka *Boy Pisso*—something that she had been dreaming of since the case of missing children was given to her.

When her men arrived, they opened the green UV man which they suspected to be the getaway vehicle of Jesus. Although they expected nothing but the worse, all of them look appalled upon seeing a child inside the van bounded in thick duct tapes with a gag on her mouth. Tears and mucus smeared all over her face. The bruises all over her body indicated that she struggled to get away from Jesus.

“Good gracious! This man was about to butcher this poor girl. If we failed to catch him...” SPO2 Marquez commented as they unbound the girl.

After a while, the girl’s parents arrived at the crime scene. Both of them were crying out loud when they saw their daughter, though harmed, still alive. The reunion was nothing but a tender moment that made everyone at the bazaar feel glad and thankful that their Christmas was saved from turning into a nightmare caused by a man named Jesus Bartolome—a person who shared a first name with one of the most benevolent figures in human history but he was, in fact, the complete anti-thesis.

“Correction, Marquez. It was Ibarra who caught him,” Evelyn said. “But how did you spot him?” Evelyn now eyed Ibarra curiously while smiling as she tended the wounds on the child’s face with their first aid kit.

“I...don’t know, Evelyn. But when you embraced me, I think a sudden flash of thought came to me. I realized that we missed something from Angela’s message. When she said ‘happy Jesus’, at first I thought she was referring to Jesus being happy because he will get to kill another kid again. But when I saw a man at the bazaar

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cosplaying Jesus Christ and wearing that odd smile on his face, my gut told me follow him quickly. The rest is what you saw when I caught him and he suddenly attacked me.”

“Oh... So you two had a sweet moment, huh? That confirms what PO2 Belmonte said when she saw the two of you hugging.” SPO2 Marquez’s teasing elicited laughter from Evelyn’s men.

“SHUT UP!” Evelyn shouted at them with her face all red.

Ibarra joined in the laughter. He let out a hearty chuckle that he thought he will never be able to do this Christmas.

“By the way, Ibarra, I know you are not into those séances anymore after all that happened but, I think we might need your ability in some of our cases. Would you mind if I ask for your help sometime?” Evelyn asked when the laughter finally died down and her men were doing their own thing.

“Why, yes. I am glad to be of service, Evelyn. That is if you are not scared of ghosts,” Ibarra replied jokingly.

He was expecting Evelyn to punch him again in the face but to his surprise, the tough-as-nails policewoman gave him a sweet smile instead.

“Not bad, Ibarra. Not bad,” she said as the two laughed together, relishing the yuletide season with peace in their hearts.



ABOUT

THE AUTHOR



Daniel C. De Guzman is an aspiring writer from the province of Tarlac. Currently, he is working as a university lecturer and writing some stories and poems every now and then. He is the author of the books *Ang Huling Sagrada* and *Beautiful Blasphemy*. Some of his works became part of various anthologies such *Librerya1: Dark Files*, *Bangkang PAPEL Volumes 1* and 2, and UP College of Arts and Science's *The Reflective Practitioner Volume 5 Journal*. He also runs a weekly Wattpad series called *Folklores at Neon Light*, which features different stories about a modern take on mythological beings in the Philippines.

Even if he is not a dancer, he busies himself posting trivia and lore about the ancient gods from the Philippines in his TikTok account, *godsandlorePH*. Daniel also loves metal music.

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ABOUT THE INSPIRATION

Deck The Halls is produced in collaboration
with the crime fiction novel
The Secret of Derek Guerrero
by Mark Manalang



IS THIS COINCIDENCE...

Derek Guerrero wants to write romance, a far cry from his action-packed, dramatic crime series. To accomplish his goal,

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he collaborates with young and spunky best-selling romance author Kim Velasquez. Despite their differences, Derek and Kim find a common bond: a love for anime and a yearning to understand what romance truly is.

...OR IS THIS FATE?

When a series of anime-themed murders strikes in the metropolis, Derek's resolve is put to the test, for every clue is leading to a painful secret from his past. Complicating matters is a jealous lover who would stop at nothing to possess Kim, even at the cost of her career.

To stop the murders and protect Kim's slowly-breaking heart, Derek will have to confront his past and unmask his unknown enemies, all while learning to acknowledge his growing feelings for Kim...who just might have something to do with his secret.

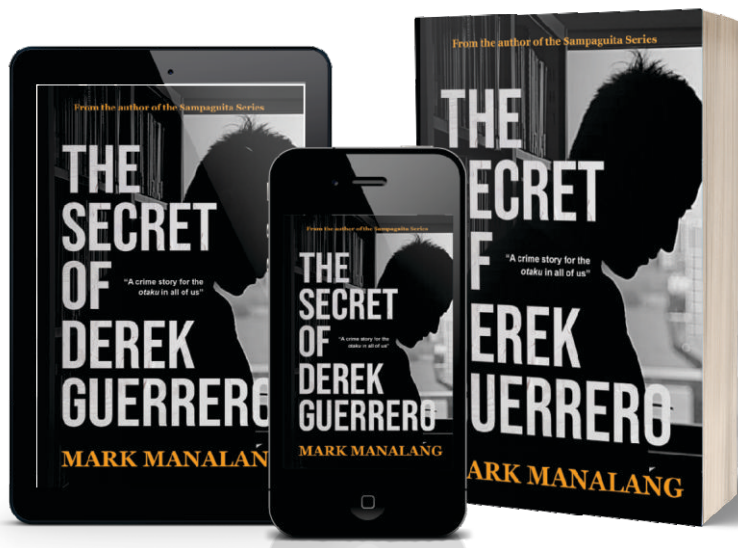
ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Mark Manalang takes pride in his career as a journalist, working for various print and broadcast companies since he graduated from the University of the Philippines Baguio. He is currently a news writer for a government news website. Outside the journalism field, Mark takes up food blogging, crime fiction and poetry, and indulging in anime in his spare time. His inspirations for writing are Anthony Bourdain and Snoopy.

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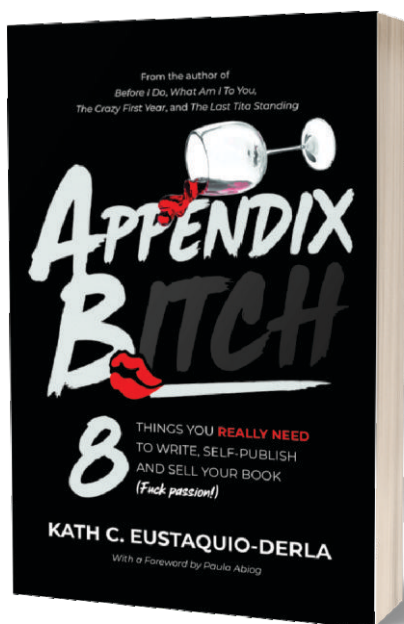
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HS Grafik Print was founded in 1983 as a design-and-print company. In 2020, we added publishing services and became a design-print-publish company. **PaperKat Books (PKB)** is the publishing arm of HS Grafik Print.

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ABOUT THE MENTOR

Kath believes that anyone can write a book.

But you need a plan.

Fuck passion.



Kath C. Eustaquio-Derla is a registered author, editor, layout artist, book designer, book printer, and book publisher with the National Book Development Board - Philippines. She wears many hats but her favorite is being the COO (child of owner, #truestory) of her family's design-print-publish business **HS Grafik Print** with nearly 40 years of industry experience.

As a second-generation printer, Kath founded and heads **PaperKat Books**, the publishing arm that offers writing, mentoring, and publishing programs for aspiring book authors.

Kath is named Marketing in Asia's 70 Rising Personalities On LinkedIn Philippines, Writing Hacks Academy's Top 35 Filipino Coaches Aspiring Writers And Entrepreneurs Should Follow In 2021, and VB Consulting and Connected Women's 100 Most Influential Filipino Women on LinkedIn (2021).

Kath is the founder and editor-in-chief of **PaperKatalogue, The Magazine**, the first online and social media magazine for and by indie authors. She also founded and heads **Story Factory**, a long-term partnership project that allows non-industry writers to pitch their storylines and/or concepts to producers and directors for film and/or TV adaptations.

We made a list, checked it twice,
and discovered some of the most promising
Filipino crime fiction authors in our circles.

A burglar with a heart; a crime-solving bunch of
neighborhood “Marites-es”; a murder *de aguinaldo*;
bitchy bosses getting abducted and/or murdered
during Christmas parties; *espiritistas* solving cases
that have gone cold; a stealth operation
on Christmas Eve; and more...

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keep you up until Christmas morning.

ABOUT THE PUBLISHER

HS Grafik Print was founded in 1983 as a design-and-print company.
In 2020, we added publishing services and became a design-print-
publish company. PaperKat Books (PKB) is the publishing arm
of HS Grafik Print offering end-to-end publishing services.



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