



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

DECK THE HALLS

VOLUME TWO

A CHRISTMAS-THEMED
CRIME FICTION ANTHOLOGY

KADI SERAFICA | FELISA ORDEP
JOHANNA L LEE | ARA LAROSA
RJ T. VARGAS | ALFREDO FIGUEROA
RICHMOND CAMERO

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 2 : A Christmas-Themed Crime Fiction Anthology

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Authors: Kadi Serafica, Felisa Ordep, Johanna L Lee, Ara Larosa, RJ T. Vargas, Alfredo Figueroa, Richmond Camero

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A PAPERKAT BOOKS 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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**CONGRATS TO THE AUTHORS
WHO WROTE AND SIGNED
THEIR STORIES WITH PAPERKAT BOOKS**



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Alamat Presents The Case Of The Headless Boldstar

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Christmas Note

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The Illustrados

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Ponce grunted and crossed his arms. “So, what brought you out of retirement?”

Del Pilar smiled. “Want to know something, Ponce?”

“What?”

“In this line of work, you never really retire.”

Ponce smiled. “It’s good to have you back.”

“What now?” Ponce asked. “Jose Mari Chan was our best bet.”

Del Pilar looked at Ponce and Rizal intently. “I admire your bravery, but let me remind you: the *Ilustrados* have a code. We steal for glory, fame, and money. But we don’t harm people. Ever.”

Ponce nodded, his eyes filled with guilt.

Del Pilar noticed him. “That’s fine, Ponce. That’s why I came here to stop you,” he said.

“Do you have any more bright ideas in your mind?” Rizal asked.

“Of course,” del Pilar said, grinning devilishly. “We’ll steal *Paskuhan* itself.”

Excerpt

The Ilustrados

By Richmond Camero

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ALAMAT PRESENTS: THE CASE OF THE HEADLESS BOLDSTAR

By Kadi Serafica

My name is Inspector Federico Magat. There is an ongoing bet in our department about how our careers will end. Mine had been heavily slanted towards dying in the hands of a criminal. After years of service, I got my walking papers today for handling the wrong case at the wrong time. The powerful higher-ups needed to distance themselves from all the fuck-up. So,

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they elected me as a sacrificial lamb and blamed me for everything. Turned out, politics ended my career. I wonder if anybody won the office bet.

I passed by a mirror today and saw a man who looked 20 years older. His shoulders had slumped from poring over documents and re-reading case files. His hair was thinning and gray. His once sharp eyes were now red-rimmed. I wasn't always like this. Seeing too much suffering does *that* to a man.

I am happy to report that a good chunk of the cases that passed by my desk earned convictions and brought much-needed closure to the families left behind. But one case stumped me. It also engineered my downfall. Like a mountain, her severed head towered above every crime in my file cabinet. I still don't understand it. I don't think I ever will. It languishes with other cold cases and there, I hope, it will stay.

It happened last Christmas. Bombarded the airwaves for weeks. I'm sure you have heard of it. I was the lead investigator in the infamous case of the headless boldstar.

* * *

We begin in Ermita. It was 12:23 in the morning of December 24th. A grisly murder woke up Metro Manila. Any other crime, even good old murder, will pass under the radar of this seething metropolis. But two tasty elements elevated this curious crime: the victim's identity and the way she was killed.

Mayora had been breathing down my neck since the news broke out. She wanted this case closed before the year ends. It was her first Christmas after winning a hotly contested election. Politicians, they

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ask for the world but provide you with very little to do the job. In times like this, I get a ‘consultant’ to help speed things up. His name, as far as I know, is Juan dela Krus. That’s K-R-U-S. He’s a known lowlife, spends most of his day selling *anting-antings* in his home/shop along Paterno Street near Quiapo Church. He pretends to talk to ghosts and cashes in when his ‘consultations’ prove true. I reckon he has deep connections. I guess it’s better to pretend to be a ghost whisperer than reveal yourself as a rat and be haunted by a chiv in every dark alley.

I had a newly stationed sergeant pick him up. Police Master Sargent Tesoro is smart but doesn’t know when to shut up. They arrived just in time as I finished my fourth stick of cigarette.

Juan dela Krus greeted me with a wide smile, his mouthful of filed triangular teeth reflecting the police lights as he stepped out of the vehicle. Krus wore dark sunglasses paired with an immaculate suit and tie as if he came to cosplay. His left hand had seven rings on it. He admired the 46-floor condominium. Stark gray and titanic, it was built behind Luneta Park. Much like the victim, this condo caused quite a controversy.

A mob of fans, mostly male, had surrounded the building. Behind them were paparazzi and their news trucks covering the crime. Squeezing the grisly murder for all the views they could get. Uniformed personnel cut a swathe through them, making a way for the ‘consultant’. “Why this many, this early?” Krus asked.

Sergeant Tesoro opened a small notebook. “The victim is Aisha Saaduddin. You might have heard of her, a rising sexy star named Ayesha.”

I shook hands with Krus, escorted them inside the building, and ran point from there. “Next-door neighbor, Andy Chu, saw her door

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was open. The neighbor admitted to knowing the victim lives next door and had been looking for an opportunity to talk to her. Asked her to appear on his vlog. He might not get another chance so when he saw the door open, he uploaded the live video on Tikitik as he entered the unit. Figured it would make it impossible for the victim to say ‘no’. That’s when he saw the pool of blood and the headless body on the bed. It went viral before we could contain it.”

“Ah, she’s one of those internet-famous teens?” Krus nodded to another policeman, who tipped an imaginary hat. We rode the elevator.

“She’s 21. The victim began vlogging at the height of the pandemic. Quickly gained notoriety and followers for ‘accidentally’ showing off her body. She’s never without a scarf around her neck. The victim’s a Maranao, from Marawi. The scarf might be a cultural thing. Got 43 million followers on Tikitik before this new streaming site StarFlix snatched her for a three-movie deal. Her first movie launched StarFlix. *Ituloy mo, Sir* was watched 51 million times in its first month.”

Tesoro added, “She had this sex scene where she was wearing nothing but a red scarf...”

Krus smiled like a shark. “And I assume you watched it for research purposes?” Sergeant Tesoro blushed.

I handed Krus a cup of coffee. It was lukewarm. “Pardon, I know you like ‘em hot.”

“I can work with that,” said Krus. Bubbles appeared on the coffee as if simmering. As I said, this guy is all theatrics. He downed the now piping-hot coffee in one go.

The elevator stopped on the 20th floor. Krus dropped the

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steaming empty cup in a garbage bin as he exited the elevator.

A throng of police officers averted their eyes as our trio passed by. Some, those who knew Krus and the legend around the man, exited the hallway as he entered. A policeman with a pockmarked face mouthed to Sergeant Tesoro, "...*espiritista*."

"Where is the body?" asked the consultant.

"Forensic delivered it to the morgue after running the grid at the crime scene," I said and entered the victim's condo unit.

Sergeant Tesoro stopped at the door. Krus invited him, "You want to see what I do? Then come inside, Tesoro. And close the door behind you."

The 'consultant' looked around. His beady eyes scanned every nook and cranny, taking his sweet time. There was a large hand-drawn portrait of Ayesha on one wall and a *sarimanok* painting on the opposite side. No other personal touches.

"She didn't stay here often?" asked Krus.

He is smart. In another life, he could have been an excellent investigator. I bet that brain works overtime to keep him alive in his current lifestyle.

Sergeant Tesoro checked his notebook. "The victim acquired the place three months ago. Right after her movie launched."

"Tail end of the pandemic, not much time to shop." Krus approached a corner. A water stain in the shape of a rectangle was on top of the table, but no aquarium. "What happened here?"

I answered, "Perpetrator moved the aquarium to the bathroom and killed her pet snails before moving on to her."

Tesoro opened his mouth to add some rubbish, "No one does that unless they're psycho."

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I gave him a death stare, hoping that would shut him up. I was so wrong. “It’s too early to make assumptions at this point of the investigation.”

“Anything else unusual in the bathroom?” asked the ‘consultant’.

“Nothing stands out. She took multiple vitamin supplements, including iron. Pulled her medical record, and she had iron deficiency going back years.”

We had been going around it. Krus knew I had been avoiding it. He likes to make people squirm before diving in. “How was she killed, Magat?”

“*Putá*, you have to bring me there, didn’t you?”

He smiled like a shark. “I can’t help unless I know all the details. You know that. Empathy for the horrific is a gift, Magat. It makes you very good at your job.”

“Then you better enter the bedroom.” A murky glass wall separated the *sala* and the victim’s bedroom. I opened the door and led Krus and Sergeant Tesoro inside.

The bed had turned dark red, almost black. A pool of coagulated blood surrounded the bed. It looked like an altar. “I keep forgetting how much blood we carry and then something like this comes up, and it makes me wish we bring back the electric chair for monsters who—”

“Oh, shit!” Tesoro ran to the bathroom hurling vomit along the way.

Krus laughed. “Close the door, will you?”

Whenever I look at these crimes, I can ‘enter the scene’ based on all available data. It feels like was there. It allows me to see things others often miss. Some goddamn gift.

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I closed my eyes to ‘enter the scene.’ The blood-soaked bed turned stark white. I found the beautiful Ayesha lying on it, her noise-canceling headphones on her head, rock n’ roll at full blast. “It happened on the bed. The victim was lying on her stomach. She had her headphones on. She was alive when her throat was sliced. Her blood spilled on the bed. The perpetrator continued the cut around the victim’s cervical vertebra—her neck bone, separating muscles but keeping the entire vertebra intact—”

“And the murder weapon?” cut in Krus, his hand on my shoulder.

“We have teams spread out checking garbage bins and asking around. No luck yet. It’s weapons, plural. The perpetrator used a surgical blade to cut around the neck, sliced open her back, and with bone-cutting tools, severed her spine and head from the body. Clean-cut everywhere. Someone with surgical experience must have done this. We found the head with the spine still attached under the bed. The perpetrator should be covered in blood but if you look around, you will find that there are no footprints exiting the room. Teams are getting CCTV footage from the surrounding establishments. Hopefully, we catch something, but it may take a while.”

The consultant stared at the blood-soaked bed.

“Krus, I’ve seen shit, but not like this. She was practically the same age as my daughter,” I added.

Sergeant Tesoro left the bathroom to join us. He wiped his wet face and hand with a checkered hanky. He fished for his cellphone. “Our tech says they checked the CCTV footage covering the hallway to this unit, and no one entered or exited in the last 48 hours except for the victim and Mr. Andy Chu, who found the body. This looks like a serial killer to me. Just saying.”

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My vision dimmed. I grabbed Tesoro by the jaw. “Kid, that is not the kind of thing you suggest without proof! We have the fucking paparazzi outside salivating to scoop the most sensational gossip. If your ‘just saying’ gets out of this room, our next 72 hours will be a living nightmare. So shut your trap!”

Krus pulled me off a paler Tesoro. “You can shoot him later. I can lend you a gun. But we have a more pressing matter. Let me do my thing and no loud noises.”

I asked, “Her body is at the morgue. Don’t they follow it?”

“Victims of violent murders usually haunt the place where they died. They tend to return to the scene after we have cleaned it up. They make themselves forget what happened. I don’t sense her right now. But I can force her to come back.”

Tesoro exclaimed, “What?! This consultant is a ghost hunter?!”

“Shut your trap, boy,” I suggested. “I don’t believe in this mumbo-jumbo either, but this man, ludicrous as he is, delivers results.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence. I’ll need a box of chalk and lots of salt.”

We moved to the *sala*. Krus drew circles with symbols on the floor and walls. I knew the drill. I asked for every officer’s phone. No pictures of any kind. We exited the unit as the interconnected seals spread. Satisfied, Krus drew a final circle in the middle out of salt.

“Come inside, but don’t step on the lines and keep quiet. Let’s give it 10 minutes,” he announced to the now-packed room.

I marked for time. Krus has done this multiple times. I cannot explain how it happens, but when it does, I feel the room get colder, shadows get sharper, then he starts talking to something only he can see.

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“Aren’t you going to scream stuff in Latin?” asked Tesoro. A couple of police officers nodded behind him.

“Or I can write it on the seal. There are too many languages and one wrong intonation could mean something else in a different language and muck the spell,” said Krus.

“Times up,” I announced. “I don’t feel any ghost.”

Krus scratched his shaven head. “Me either. Means two things. Either she moved on, but that’s farfetched, or her soul found a vessel.”

“Meaning...”

“Meaning...he’s full of shit,” said Tesoro.

The temperature in the room shot up. I found myself wiping sweat off my forehead inside an air-conditioned room. It was almost as if steam was coming off of Krus. He stormed out of the room. “Unless something else comes up, Magat, I can’t help you,” he said.

I spewed a litany of colorful words to Tesoro, then followed the consultant. I slipped in as the elevator door closed. “He’s a kid. Doesn’t know what he’s saying.” Krus punched the basement button on the elevator. “You should check on that anger of yours.”

“Why do people keep telling me that?” whined the consultant.

“Why do you think? My advice comes from a place of care. You do a lot of shady stuff, but I know deep down you have a good heart. You once told me you care for this city. Prove it, help me.”

The elevator opened, and a taxi driver, *Mang* Teresito, was waiting for Krus. The cab driver practically chauffeured Krus around the city. I escorted him to the vehicle and opened the door for him. Still huffing and puffing, he lowered the window of the cab and said, “Come by the shop tomorrow.” The cab rolled away.

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I hardly slept. In the brief moments I dozed off, I was transported back to the bedroom. This time holding Ayesha's hand as she lay in bed and the gruesome kill happens again. But in this dream, I could not look behind me. All I could see was her hand gripping mine and her fear as the butchering begins.

I knocked on the door of Juan dela Krus' shop called Alamat Variety Store at 11 o'clock in the morning. Jessica Navarro, a teen Juan dela Krus recently adopted, greeted me. She wore a large t-shirt with a print of Peque Gallaga's *Magic Temple* movie poster. The kid was hauntingly beautiful. One day, someday, she could ask men to do anything for her and they would do it without question. From the looks of it, she already knew that.

"You're not here to buy *anting-anting*. So why are you here?" she pouted.

"I'm here—"

"—I'll go wake him up!" Jess cut me mid-sentence and pulled me inside the shop, through a door behind the cashier, and into their house proper. It looked bigger from the inside.

I sat on a couch, and Jess opened a can of homemade chocolate chip cookies. "I'll be coming with you guys on the investigation. Could be valuable there, you know."

I found myself nodding. She high-fived me, then left to wake up Krus. Weird kid.

Juan dela Krus sauntered to the *sala* wearing the same clothes from yesterday. Jess brewed three cups of café latte on an industrial-grade espresso machine, their only expensive equipment in the house.

"Good news, Krus, I'm coming with you. Inspector Magat said so," the kid said. I don't remember giving her my name. Like Father

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like daughter, I guess.

Krus stretched. “You can’t. This is a murder investigation. Could be dangerous.”

Jess served three cups of steaming latte. “A beautiful woman was murdered. Who else would be more motivated to solve this than another one? *Sino-sino pa ba ang magtutulungan, edi kami-kami rin!*”

Krus replied, “You’re just bored, and I know what you’re doing.”

Jess, as if slighted, answered, “I’m just an innocent teen who wants to do good, and here you are, accusing me—”

“You were fleecing drug lords when I found you.”

That was nine months ago! A lot happened since then,” Jess rolled her eyes. “Anywhooo, you can’t say no, and I’ll be coming with you two to solve the murder.”

“How about Plywood? Who will take care of your brother while we’re gone?”

Her eyes turned to slits. “Helsing will be coming over. I got everything covered. I’m coming with you. Drink up, then nod your head.”

Krus took his seat. Raised a finger before I could speak, then gulped the coffee.

“As I was saying to your daughter here, we had another development. The body is missing. Someone took it from the morgue early this morning. We are looking for possible suspects, and this guy stands out.”

I passed a bunch of pictures taken from a social media site. “Japar Mama-o. He used multiple accounts to harass the victim in the past. He once commented this on her live video. It’s in Maranao but translated as, ‘you’re a *mapiyatao* and this is what you do? You dishonor your body.’ It got weirder from there. Three months ago, Japar

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Mama-o waited for her in front of her old address and threw pig innards as she returned from a night of drinking. The incident forced her to move residence. Being Muslim, they don't eat pork and this is doubly insulting. The victim reported it but didn't press charges. Japar resides in Quezon City and we have people looking for him for questioning."

"*Mapiyatao* means pure blood or royal blooded. I had a Maranao teacher once. Don't ask Jess."

Jessica Navarro pouted. "I already called *Mang* Teresito. He'll be picking us up after he drops off his passenger. Just in time for me to change costume."

* * *

I rode *Mang* Teresito's taxi with a pair of cosplayers in dark suits and wraparound sunglasses. They discussed the case in gruff American accents. The 'crime' turned out to be more complicated. The duo, it turned out, were cyborgs from the future who moonlighted as Russian spies and were secretly members of *Men in Black*. And the case was somehow connected to a cover-up for an alien invasion. I followed the conversation and even I didn't understand how it got there. The driver, *Mang* Teresito, enjoyed the theatrics. I didn't dare sleep.

The morgue was unusually cold. My 'new consultant' kept asking the staff to lower the temperature to 'beach weather'. Not getting her way, Jess lost interest. She found the mortuary stretches at the far end of the morgue and opened them one by one.

The forensic pathologist arrived, screaming at her. So the kid did the next best thing, ask irritating questions: "I wanna believe you..."

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doctor, if that is even what you are. How can you prove to us that you are qualified to do whatever it is you do around here?"

"What?! Who is this kid, anyway? I've been doing this for four decades. I'm a fellow at Johns Hopkins!"

She walked around the doctor, then removed her sunglasses to better look him in the eye. "Prove you studied there. Or are you all talk, Mister Pacis?"

"My diploma is on the wall. All my awards are there."

"Jess, stop playing with the doctor," said Krus.

Jess nodded thoughtfully, "Okay, doctor. You may proceed." A feeling of being trapped and cornered evaporated in the room.

He moved to the other side, avoiding Jess, who returned to inspecting mortuary equipment.

"We finished the autopsy at 4:20 in the morning. We found unusual cutting patterns. You see, our muscles are bundled together like strings tied together. That's why when you cut chicken meat, you see the muscle strings. The cut made on the victim was on the tendons, the fibers that connect bone and muscle. Hard cut to maintain even for a professional. A complete medical team with the best doctors will be hard-pressed to perform it in the window we have."

Krus nodded thoughtfully.

I asked, "Did the perpetrator break the door of the morgue?"

"Doesn't look like it. Forensic has gone through to check for fingerprints. Might take a day or two with it being holiday and all."

Jess called Krus over, she whispered, "We have to solve this quickly. Why did you think I invited Helsing over?"

"To look after your brother."

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“Not just that! We’ll be having *noche buena*. Mercy and Big Boi will be coming over. So do your best! Also, I volunteered us for ice cream and soju.”

Krus nodded and returned to the coroner. “Anything else unusual from the crime scene?”

Dr. Pacis exclaimed, “Yes! Some of the blood was from the victim. But the majority were from pigs, at least three. Most of her blood was still in her body when we autopsied her.” Somehow, knowing she was dead when she was butchered made it a little better. But why use pig blood?

Dr. Pacis added, “We also found snail slime all over her body.”

Krus smiled like a shark. “We’re done here.” He turned around and exited the morgue.

Mang Teresito was waiting for us. At the insistence of my consultants, we ate at Takai, a Michelin-star Japanese restaurant, paid for by the City of Manila. They ate like kings.

Our late lunch ended at 4:00 p.m. Krus called a number and put his phone on speaker. Jess and *Mang* Teresito watched as they drank their expensive *sumiyaki* coffee.

“Helsi! How’s Plywood?! Tell the kid we will be home before nine.”

“He’s fine. Playing with my dog Tali. Why did you call?”

“I need a favor. Can you log in to my account at the... You know, the-app-that-must-not-be-named. Login name is krus and password is KAMPILAN48, all caps.”

“You are calling from a phone. You can do that on your phone. And you can’t just throw your name and password. Someone could be listening!”

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“I don’t have it on my phone. It’s on my computer. That ‘someone’ is us, assume we are always listening. That’s what I do. Shout out to Jamal, I want a raise!”

“Okay. Okay. Doing it. Login error.”

“Did you type it exactly as I told you?”

“Yes! All caps.”

“Do the caps lock as I do.”

“Hold shift?” Helsing asked. “Okay, I’m in. What do you need me to check?”

“Do a search on *Kampon* for these parameters; Maranao, headless, and snail.”

“Oh, you found a rare one. Last recorded sighting was in 1892. *Kalibadut*.”

The call ended with no one else the wiser. “Magat, tell your men to call off the hunt for Japar Mama-o. Let’s go solve this case.”

We returned to the cab and headed to Tondo, Manila. We waited at Pier 4 North Port Passenger Terminal. It was packed. Mostly families with children and mothers wearing hijab. These people would spend their Christmas floating on a boat. It was sad, even though most of them don’t celebrate Christmas.

Jess and Krus roamed the pier, checking every face in the crowd. Jess motioned for us and pointed to a young woman in a corner. She wore a plain black niqab over an abaya. The headgear had a small opening for her eyes. When I caught it, I knew it was her. Ayesha. She panicked. Ayesha grabbed a gym bag lying beside her and ran. Krus and Jessica cornered her. The girl approached Ayesha. Her touch seemed to calm her down. They talked. Eventually, the kid waved us to them. That was how I found myself at a table, sitting opposite

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the victim of the murder I was investigating.

“I grew up wanting to be a star. I only see them on TV and they are amazing and their lives, the little that we see in gossip columns and celebrity news, look magical. They say if you love what you’re doing, then you will never work a day in your life. I looked at their lives, their adventures, and parties, and I said to myself, I want that. I thought it was fun being a celebrity. Didn’t know it could be exhausting when everyone thinks they know you,” Ayesha said.

“Suddenly, I couldn’t go out because when people saw me, they would talk to me and follow me around,” she continued. “I had to keep changing numbers because I would get calls at all hours of the day. It had gotten too big. I just wanna go home. I wanted it all to be over, but I knew there was no reset button. As a celebrity, I have responsibilities and if I disappear, fans will keep looking. They will find me.” She shook her head.

“But if you died, no one will look for you,” summarized Jess. She hugged Ayesha. “You poor thing. Note to self, cancel plans to become Daniel Padilla’s girlfriend.”

“Is it really you? Are you okay?!” I asked.

She untied the niqab and removed the veil. I would recognize that face anywhere. She fixed her scarf automatically. I could see a stitch jutting from her autopsy. The wound was barely visible. “Jess said you are investigating my...death. I’m sorry for what this would cost you.”

I didn’t understand it at the time that I will lose my job because of this case.

Juan dela Krus removed his cheap sunglasses and punched through one of the lenses. He handed it to Ayesha. “Wear this on your person when you get off in Iligan. Someone will give you a new

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identity and ID. We will find a way to get you access to all the money you earned. But Ayesha can't return to the limelight. You understand? No pictures, especially videos."

She nodded her head vigorously. I looked around, fearing the surrounding crowd would recognize her. "Don't worry. Everyone is too busy minding their own business," assured Jess. Weirdly enough, no one bothered us.

"How are you alive?" I asked.

Juan dela Krus squeezed my shoulder. "We have allowed you to go as far as we can. You already know more than most will ever know. But this is where you get off."

He meant it. I could see it in his eyes. I had never seen Krus like this. Not even when he was angry. He escorted me to the cab and had *Mang* Teresito bring me home.

* * *

I never heard from or heard anything about Ayesha after that. I kept an eye on the news and social media, but she never popped up again. No fan sighting, nothing. Dr. Pacis' findings were stricken from the record. Turned out, the evidence was contaminated. Ayesha's case remains open to this day. No new leads. Mayora's rage and the public backlash that followed were devastating. There was a meme of a headless chicken running around holding Mayora's head that became viral. As the lead investigator, they forced me to retire quietly after the dust settled.

But like a dog with a bone, I never let go.

I uncovered a couple of things. I was able to deduce our eventful

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meeting at North Port with Ayesha. If she faked her murder, she chose an excellent date. December 24th is chaotic and has a thin roster of law enforcement. It also falls on a Monday, when a ferry with a once-a-week trip to Marawi via Iligan is available at eight o'clock in the evening. With the hustle and bustle of the holidays, she could get lost in the crowd. It was probably how Krus knew that we would find her at the pier.

Andy Chu, the person who found the body, disappeared. She could have been Ayesha's accomplice. Japar Mama-o had a solid alibi—he was at a *barangay* Christmas party hogging the karaoke on the night of the murder. Forensic didn't find any evidence of breaking into the morgue. But there was a missing gym bag. Some clothes from the other corpse at the morgue also disappeared.

With all that I have accumulated, I see three possibilities.

First, Ayesha was killed and Krus had me meet an impostor. This doesn't make sense because he doesn't get paid unless the case is closed. Why go through all that trouble?

The second possibility is, Ayesha was not killed and the person I met was *really* her. Was the elaborate detective work we followed, a cover-up? But for what and for whom? Ayesha claimed she wanted out of being a celebrity. Who would throw that amount of money and influence to make everything go away? If this was true, the conspiracy is so high up our mayor, Dr. Pacis, and my police chief could be all in on it.

The last and most impossible scenario is that Ayesha did get her head chopped off, she was autopsied, and I did meet her on the pier. For this hypothesis, I only have a low-life's friendship and inherent goodness as proof.

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As a retirement gift, Krus sent me to the National Library, and there he was again. My forced retirement was hushed, but he knew about it. He pointed me to a recording from a research conducted by teachers from Diliman in the 60s when they tried to collate the various mythologies around the country.

I had an inspector who can converse in Maranao translate it for me.

Interviewer: Tell us about this kind of creature.

Elder: When I was around seven, my great-grandfather told me that his brother married a woman from the family of a mananaggal. Not the kind that you know. Here, they rub their body with slime. The snails are hard to come by now, but they were everywhere when I was a kid. They detach their head and spine and fly about. When human, they have a scar along their necks. Makes it easy to identify them. What's the name again? Yes, kalibadut. We call them kalibadut.

That word sounded familiar.

The entire case flashed before my eyes then settled to that faraway call when we ate at a Japanese restaurant.

Oh, you found a rare one. Last recorded sighting was in 1892. Kalibadut.

“Oh, my god. Krus was not pretending... The ghosts, the magic, the monsters... They're all true!”

The room spun as my heart raced.



ABOUT

THE AUTHOR



Kadi Serafica has a growing collection of books on the supernatural, occult, *anting-anting*, and mythology. He created the *Alamat Character Archetype* in an attempt to organize all mythologies, and connect them all while keeping the lens Filipino. His *Alamat* anthology is the culmination of his desire to promote Filipino myth, culture, and folklore.

He often replies to messages sent to his Facebook page Kadi Serafica.

LAST CHRISTMAS

By Felisa Ordep

A cool December breeze flows through the open windows of the office. The sun radiates a warm glow as it slowly hides behind the *narra* trees. It is going to be sunset soon.

“Sir?”

There is a buzzer in Colonel Martinez’s spacious office. Located in the drawer behind his desk, it is connected to the adjacent room where a bell emits a soft ring every time it is pressed. Today, the ringing bell effectively overpowers the Filipino Christmas carol playing on Captain Norbesa’s phone.

The Captain is the only person present in the adjacent office. He just ordered the duty personnel to buy *lechon* and *wagyu* steak for their group *noche buena*. They are the unfortunate ones working the night shift later—monitoring the news or waiting for national security problems that may or may not come. As a bachelor with no one to spend on, he did not mind adding his personal money just to ensure they can have their sumptuous feast tonight.

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The Captain stands across the Colonel's desk after politely knocking twice. He is just four days in on the job, but he is not surprised his boss is still working a day before Christmas. Stories about Colonel Martinez being a workaholic are plentiful. As the Group Commander of their Military Intelligence Group or MIG, Colonel Martinez leads one of the intelligence units of the Armed Forces of the Philippines tasked to go after enemies of the state. On some occasions, they even support Philippine National Police operations against organized crime and other high-value targets.

At 43 years old, the Colonel is one of the oldest commanders among the different MIGs scattered throughout the archipelago. He has been there, done that, and is due for more prestigious posts with lighter workloads but he has requested to stay a bit longer. The mastermind behind numerous high-profile captures, he is a legend in intelligence circles even outside the military. The media and the public do not know him, and that was by design. But he takes pride in being recognized by those who matter, his higher-ups and counterparts. A photo on the wall shows the President of the Philippines shaking his hand during a special awarding ceremony to celebrate his successful exploits. His wife and two little boys beam in the background.

A dark-skinned and short man, the Colonel always wears a serious face when at the office. However, his demeanor can rapidly shift to produce big smiles when required to win the hearts and minds of constituents and potential informants. Considered a gray man who can easily disappear, he is hardly memorable in any room unless pointed out—the ideal master of spies.

Expressionless, the Colonel ends the call. He places his cellphone beside their new family photo, taken during the MIG's Christmas

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party last week together with the families of his men. His wife of 19 years was disappointed with his news, but she's used to it and understands that service comes first before family. His two sons, eight and nine years old, will be waiting and crying for him when they find out later that night. He'll just have to make it up to them.

"Colonel?" the Captain asks again.

The Group Commander finally looks up, somewhat surprised as the Captain is not the usual duty enlisted personnel. "Good. It's you, Captain," the Colonel says. "Tell the men to get ready. We received a tip for a high-priority target. This will happen tonight. Briefing in one hour. Then we leave immediately."

"There are only a few of us here..." the Captain starts and regrets it immediately.

"Yes, tell all of them to come back. No Christmas." The Colonel stares hard at him. "We're soldiers. They know that. Their families know that. You're supposed to know that," he says calmly.

* * *

Pretty soon, the officers and enlisted personnel start arriving wearing all sorts of holiday clothes. Some were on their way to various family gatherings when they received both the call and text message ordering them to immediately head to the office. Most of them left behind frustrated wives and crying children. The chatter starts.

"Where were you when you got the call?"

"I was at the bus terminal about to leave for the province to visit my parents. You?"

"At the hospital. We thought an early celebration might be good

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for Mama and the kids. She's been confined for two weeks already."

Someone brings out the food Captain Norbesa ordered earlier. The aroma fills the room as the soldiers leave their seats to grab some of the already-chopped meats.

"Well, this is the least they can do. Much better than just the usual spaghetti and chicken for night duty personnel."

Someone speaks up, "This is supposed to be for the night duty team? I might consider volunteering next time!"

The MIG office is just a normal government-looking compound with one floor. Aside from the fact that there is no huge sign announcing what it is to passers-by, no one can really guess it is a base for specially trained intelligence operatives handpicked from the Army, Navy, and Air Force branches of the Philippine military. Surrounded by the usual wrought iron fence with a simple green gate, it has one guard assigned to check and let vehicles in or out. To civilians passing by, it could be an accounting office that barely has the budget for the beautification of its premises. It has enough space at the back for parking and always has an assortment of sedans, vans, and motorcycles.

The inside is even more unremarkable. Almost every room is furnished with the standard wooden office tables and steel filing cabinets. Multiple flatscreen TVs, muted most of the time, are set on news channels 24 hours a day. Whiteboards fill the rest of the available space on the walls. With colored tape used to partition columns and rows, each board represents details about schedules, vehicles, state of readiness, supplies, etc. An old poster, which hangs near the entrance, says "The Walls Have Ears."

Amazingly, everyone is complete by the one-hour mark. Long

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and frowning faces fill the briefing room for having their vacation interrupted. Some continue to eat while others are texting messages back home, offering additional apologies or making alternative plans.

The assembled group appears more like a bunch of civilian men coming together to celebrate a birthday. No one was in uniform. Two officers have hair reaching their collars. One sergeant has his long hair tied behind his back. No one is sporting the stereotypical shaved whitewalls and flat tops. Nothing screamed “military” on any of them. They are just a collection of ordinary-looking men who are about to bring down one of the country’s most wanted fugitives in four hours.

“Thank you all for coming at such short notice,” the Colonel’s booming voice declares as he enters the room. “As you were,” he tells them as his men try to rise from their seats out of respect.

Colonel Martinez did not graduate from the famed Philippine Military Academy. He rose from the bottom as he was originally an enlisted personnel. His superiors recommended that he attend the Officer Candidate School when they saw officer potential in him. Despite not being a “PMAer”, he breezed through his promotions and put himself on the fast track. He achieved this not from sucking up to the brass or the old boys club, but from plain and simple results—he got the job done, even the ones no one wanted.

As a former enlisted personnel, he had a lot to prove at the beginning so he did just that. He performed his duties excellently, spent his free time with his family, and stayed away from the usual temptations of an officer on the rise. He works well with the enlisted because he used to be one of them. The whispers in the headquarters gossip vine is that he will be a general soon, one of the youngest ever.

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“We received intelligence from an asset a little more than an hour ago. The target today is no other than former Major Antonio Manatoc, codename Welder.”

The mood in the room changes immediately. Cheers and whistles erupt from the same frowning faces which now have become smiles. Someone happily pounds his table. They have been trying to find this high-value target for the past three years. After so many false alarms and millions of taxpayers’ money spent on failed operations, headquarters is getting impatient.

The Colonel patiently waits for the noise to die down, but he does not celebrate with them. “Our asset said the Target visits his family every year for Christmas. They change location each time and Welder stays for less than 20 minutes. This year, today, we know both the exact location and the exact time he will arrive.” He pauses to let those details sink in. It does not go unnoticed that he, the Group Commander, is conducting the briefing himself. No notes. No fancy PowerPoint slides. This is urgent.

“Sir, how reliable is the source of this intelligence?” asks Captain Norbesa, much to the annoyance of the others.

The Colonel looks around the room for a few seconds. “The asset and the information are 100% solid.”

No one utters a sound. They all wait for the Colonel to reveal who the asset is. All of them in the room have top-secret clearance after all. All of them, except Captain Norbesa, have worked together on numerous classified operations that will never see the light of day.

The Colonel ignores their anticipation and inquisitive looks. He does not mention a name, not even a codename for the asset. For the next 30 minutes, he proceeds to provide details about the operation.

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He personally distributes maps, which he photocopied himself, and his handwritten notes. He discusses team and individual assignments. Vehicles, routes, and alternative routes are designated. Radio frequencies, backup frequencies, and call signs are announced.

Some officers give some input, and the Colonel graciously incorporates them into the plan. They know their commander appreciates thinking operatives over robotic foot soldiers.

“The Target will be alone. He will probably be armed so we must make sure he sees overwhelming force immediately from the arresting team. He is brave but not stupid. No mistakes, gentlemen. He is elusive as hell. We get this one chance.” He looks at one of his officers, “Major, you will be the tactical team leader on site.”

“Yes, Sir. I will personally update you.”

“No. I will join you and observe. Captain Norbesa will accompany me in the command center so he can see how we do things.”

Some of the officers steal glances at each other.

“If there are no more questions, get ready. The chain of command, all the way to GHQ has been informed. They wish us luck. This will be a good Christmas gift for everyone. Make it happen.”

“YES SIR!” is the enthusiastic reply from everyone.

“Sir, a slight problem.” The newly assigned team leader has been quietly making calls and texting on his cellphone throughout the briefing. But no one minded because they all knew what he is doing given the limited time they have. “Our PNP friends also have a major operation right now. They can only send two people. We have worked with both, and they are reliable. But just two.” He smiles. “I guess we’ll have full control to execute this operation.”

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The Colonel does not share his excitement but nods. “Put their two people in the arresting team but you will call the shots, not them. As usual, the police will get the credit for this if we succeed. But everyone who matters will know it was us. If this mission fails, those same people will also know it was us. Get going.”

With that, the whirlwind of mission preparation starts.

Weapons, encrypted radios, and surveillance equipment are distributed. Vehicles are inspected by the motor pool team. Most of the men change into less conspicuous but still holiday-appropriate attire. They conduct operations all the time. Sometimes, the mission is a success. A few times, a failure. A lot of times, nothing happens because the target or asset does not show up for unknown reasons. This is just normal life in their line of business.

* * *

“The men are ready, Sir,” a soldier tells the Group Commander who is reviewing some documents in his office. He picks up his shoulder holster with his 9mm Beretta pistol and puts it on. He grabs and wears a faded denim jacket on the way out, effectively hiding the weapon strapped to his body. The Colonel now looks like someone’s uncle coming over for a family get-together.

He looks at his assembled troops and convoy outside. Most of the men are already inside the vehicles. It is not necessary to do an inspection—he has trained them hard and well. They all know what to do even without him. His driver, a veteran sergeant of the Marawi siege, pulls up in his official car. The Colonel gets in and they lead the vehicles out.

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The convoy of four cars, two vans, and one silver owner-type jeep exits the MIG compound followed by two motorcycles. The lone guard at the gate stands at attention and salutes all of them as they pass.

After a few hundred meters, the vehicles take different but pre-determined routes. Three of the cars and one motorcycle exit the military camp through a normally closed gate. A quick phone call to the camp's security office earlier ensured their quick passage there. The other vehicles proceed through the main gate where two turn left upon exiting and the rest turn right. Anyone trying to follow them or even watching overhead by drone, will find it extra difficult to conclude they are all going to the same location.

* * *

“He’s the boss. He does not have to tell you shit,” the Team Leader tells Captain Norbesa after leaving the military camp. “If the Colonel says the intel is solid then it is. He did not reach this position by being careless.”

“I should be quietly watching a movie on our big TV at the office by now. And you guys should be having fun with your wife and kids. At home!” Captain Norbesa says, half-jokingly.

The Team Leader takes a deep breath and looks at him. “We may have been classmates in PMA, and I vouched for you to the boss even though you are fresh from intelligence school, but never let me or any of our boys hear you whining about a mission ever again. Or I will personally recommend to the Colonel that you be relieved immediately!”

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They both stay quiet after the reprimand. It is just the two of them in the car since they are carrying several huge pieces of electronic equipment. Traffic slows to a crawl due to last-minute shopping. They both watch the twinkling lights wrapped around houses and business establishments.

A young boy taps on the window and starts singing *Jingle Bells* while shaking a rusty can filled with pebbles. Captain Norbesa gives him some coins from the dashboard and waves him away.

“Hey! You should have let him finish the song. I want my money back!” the Team Leader says, lightening the mood.

They still have a full night ahead of them.

* * *

They arrive at the target location with plenty of time to spare. The rest of the group, including the Colonel, are coming on foot having parked in different places outside to avoid suspicion. They will arrive at different times, too, for the same reason. It would have been easier if the compound had those basements with multiple entrances and exits.

The location is a mid-rise condominium complex with eight buildings, four on each side with a single road leading from the main guardhouse to the other end of the complex. A two-story clubhouse, where the admin office is located, towers over the main gate. The clubhouse is covered with lighted *parols* and flickering red and green lights hanging from the roof and nearby trees.

A choir can be heard singing outside the compound.

Captain Norbesa looks around and sees their civilian-clothed

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police counterpart entering the Security Office at the clubhouse. He had just met the man the other day as part of his orientation. The policeman and his companion, whom he has not seen yet, thought it was better to go straight to the target location than the MIG office.

He recalls watching movies highlighting pissing contests between the police and military. But so far, he has heard nothing but praises and respect about the PNP unit partnered with them. He was told the police commander and the Colonel go way back and are best buddies.

“Get an update from him before the Colonel arrives,” the Team Leader tells the Captain, nodding in the direction of the Security Office.

Normally, they have days, sometimes even weeks, of preparation and surveillance before they execute something like this. They would actually rent a unit or two and live there to let the residents get used to seeing them. Sometimes they even make friends. Not today. This was a hot lead. If they do not do this tonight, they might never see Welder again in a long time.

The Captain peeks at the Security Office’s window and watches the policeman and security chief shake hands. He decides to wait outside. He does not need to let these private security guards know his identity or get a hint that he is not with the PNP.

The policeman is surprised to see him waiting outside but immediately flashes a grin.

“Thanks for letting us party with you tonight,” the cop says enthusiastically. The Captain laughs, half for show to anyone watching them and the other half because the cop was the first cheerful person he has met tonight.

It is the standard operating procedure for the PNP to make

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arrests, even if the MIG's asset, intelligence, and military fugitive that make all this possible. The military provides the intel and the police slaps the handcuffs and gets on the news. Everyone happy.

"Everything's fine. The security chief is a former policeman. He'll keep his mouth shut and tell his men to stay away from us and the area. Very professional too. Asked all the right questions and even demanded to see the warrant. He lightened up when I showed it to him. Told us we have to pay for the units we will be occupying. Haha, I'm billing you guys for those!" the policeman says.

Damn these cops! "And how about our intel on the condo unit, its occupants, and the rest of the floor?" asks Captain Norbesa.

"Confirmed. They arrived yesterday. No dogs to ruin the moment. Most of the neighbors are away on vacation. There are two units with senior citizens who usually sleep early, holiday or not. My partner will talk to them now."

Captain Norbesa is going through a mental list. "CCTV?"

"The two cameras on the floor will be turned off when we give the signal. So nothing will be recorded in their system. I understand your tech guy will be watching their CCTV monitors." The PNP personnel is enjoying this quiz bee with the new guy.

"I didn't see any security monitors in the office."

"That's a problem. They have a weird setup. The CCTV room is in Basement Two of the building. Our radios or even cellphones will experience transmission problems," admits the policeman.

"No worries. We now have a mini repeater we can temporarily install to ensure smooth reception for the radios. I'll inform our tech guy. Thanks for letting me know. Better now than to discover it later during radio check." Captain Norbesa smiles when he mentions the

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technological gizmo. He knows the PNP does not have it yet.

* * *

“Oscar One to Bravo Five, male subject approaching the gate. Height and build are similar to Welder. No visual on face or hair.”

Oscar One, which stands for Observer One, is situated on the rooftop of a 15-story building across the condominium. He has full view of the approach to the entrance of the compound as well as the lobby.

One thing they like about this mission is, for once, most of the physical elements are simple. With possible violations of the building fire code, the building has no fire escape and its entrance and exit are one and the same. They do not need too many people to watch alternate routes.

“Bravo Five to Oscar One, I see him. Check for companions or a tail.” Bravo Five is the Team Leader’s call sign. It is highly possible that the Target has his own security following behind even though the intelligence said there is none. A tail, one or more people from another law enforcement agency following the target, is also a possibility. It is a rare occurrence, but it has happened before, much to everyone’s frustration.

“Negative. There is no one there.”

“This is Oscar Three. I confirm. His back is clear. No surprises,” says the soldier operating the tiny and silent drone now flying over the area. He is inside one of the vans parked a block away.

“Roger that. Oscar Two, standby at the lobby,” orders Bravo Five.

Two beeps are heard over the radio. That was Oscar Two

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signaling he heard the transmission but cannot talk. He is wearing a food delivery uniform. On the signal, he crosses the lobby after pretending to wait for a tenant to get the ordered food from him. He has an almost invisible wireless earpiece hidden in his ear. He has one job.

In a precise and calculated move, Oscar Two starts walking and reaches the lobby entrance just as the suspected target reaches it. This is not Oscar Two's first rodeo.

Faking politeness with poor judgment, Oscar Two partially opens the door without stepping back. For good measure, he prevents the door from fully opening by blocking it with his left foot. The suspected target looks at him in gratitude then slight irritation as he is forced to squeeze himself through the gap, his face coming to within inches of Oscar Two's seemingly innocent smile.

"Merry Christmas, Sir!" Oscar Two cheerfully tells the man, holding some bills and his cellphone for his supposed next delivery. He seems like someone hoping to get a random tip from drunk or overly generous residents just because it is the holiday season.

No major acting was actually necessary from Oscar Two. He is a real food delivery courier during his off days. It is good extra money, especially with the tips. He also gets to scout certain areas that may be hard to infiltrate for their standard operations.

When he gets to his motorcycle, also clearly fitted with the green food courier delivery bag, he sends a text message. "Confirmed. That is Welder." Then he drives away for several blocks and buys 20 sticks of pork barbeques from a stall in the street. He then joins Oscar One, sufficiently supplied for their rooftop *noche buena*.

Bravo Five watches the additional surveillance monitors in the

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basement. The building security chief is there but, out of professional courtesy, stays in the adjacent room watching videos on his phone. His new policeman friend gifted the chief earlier with some hard liquor and a huge holiday gift basket to keep him happy.

* * *

“Have you regained visual?” asks Bravo Five.

“Negative, Sir. Trying to fix the problem. Wait! We have visual.”

The screen flickers and shows a colored image of the living room. Rented or not, the unit is beautifully dressed for Christmas. A highly decorated floor-to-ceiling Christmas tree is in the corner. Lighted winter villages line a shelf against the wall. On the other side, a huge flatscreen TV displays a video of a fireplace complete with music and a crackling fire. A little boy around the age of seven, wearing a Santa hat, tries to dance to the tune as the mother laughs and claps along.

A tiny camera with a sensitive microphone was earlier placed through the ceiling allowing them to hear the playful squeal of the boy as mother and child continue their merrymaking.

Everyone in the tactical command post listens to the holiday cheer in the living room.

The male subject enters the unit. He sees the woman and the little boy, and he relaxes.

“Papa! Papa!” shouts the little boy as he runs toward his father with outstretched arms. The Target catches and lifts him toward the ceiling before setting him down on a nearby table.

“Oh, you have grown so big, young man!” The suspected target removes his hat exposing his ears and a slightly balding head. His low-

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pitch voice is clear and recognizable through the microphone.

Bravo Five needs to be sure. “What does the Voice Box say?”

They glance at the small device connected to both their laptop and camera microphone.

“Eighty-two percent match,” replies the military tech guy operating the device.

Nicknamed “Voice Box” because no one could memorize all the numbers and letters tied to its official name, it is the latest gadgetry they have for voice analysis and identification. Anything higher than 80% coupled with visual confirmations gives them all the validation they need.

“Are we sure that person is not a decoy?” asks Bravo Five.

This is technically an unnecessary question given all the checks they have made. But the question has to be asked and answered. A few operations before were blown after the arresting teams moved in too early, only to discover the person they were trying to arrest was a sacrificial lamb made to look like the target and sent ahead just to test if he would be arrested or not.

“Definitely not a decoy,” another officer confirms.

“Okay! That’s really him then,” concludes Bravo Five.

“All units. Standby. Standby,” says the Team Leader on the radio, alerting everyone they will execute in a few seconds.

Behind three closed doors, beside and across the Target’s unit, are members of the arresting team waiting to pounce on Welder. They are still wearing civilian clothes but with black jackets. The word “POLICE” is emblazoned at the back and front even though they are mostly military. Everyone is equipped with radios attached to earpieces.

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The Colonel, who has been quietly watching from the beginning, suddenly reaches for the radio in the Team Leader's hand, "Break! Break! This is Charlie Six. All units, hold positions. I repeat—hold positions." Charlie Six is the Group Commander's callsign. Even the policemen there knew who it was.

Everyone in the room turns to stare at the Colonel in surprise. This does not happen. It has never happened. Group Commander or not, he just interrupted a tactical operation within seconds of execution.

Silence.

The Colonel places the radio on the table in front of the astonished Team Leader. An explanation is not given. He just continues observing the monitor showing the family reunion.

They watch as Welder hugs his wife. He then hands out beautifully wrapped gifts from the backpack he is carrying.

The clock is ticking.

Welder only stays for 20 minutes according to the intelligence source.

It was decided earlier that the best place of arrest was inside the unit. Fewer options for escape. Fewer onlookers and possible trouble. No sense scaring people during the holidays.

Five minutes remain.

Welder kneels on the floor and hugs the little boy again who is now clutching the blue and white penguin he just received as a gift. He gives his wife a kiss and hugs her tightly for a long time. He stands, turns his head, and looks up directly at the hidden camera the MIG surveillance experts painstakingly installed that night.

"Oh shit, he knows we're here! That we're watching this whole

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time!” someone says in the command center.

“Colonel, we have to go now,” Bravo Five says.

The Target slowly nods at the camera. He stops his wife with a wave as she tries to show him out the door. He smiles at her. The wife crouches behind the little boy and wraps an arm around him. She wipes her eye as they complete a final wave to a loved one they rarely see.

Then the Target exits the unit. When the door closes behind him, Welder stops and raises his arms above his head.

The Team Leader turns to his Group Commander this time, “Colonel?”

“Proceed,” the Group Commander says.

“All units, go go go,” the Team Leader calmly speaks into his radio.

They watch on the monitor as doors swing open, and members of the arresting team led by the friendly policeman come pouring out, guns drawn. Quietly.

“Why did you do that, Sir? Why did you wait?” asks Captain Norbesa after the Team Leader leaves to meet their latest catch. If his PMA classmate had been there, he would have received another scolding for his impertinence to the Colonel by questioning his judgment.

The Colonel answers softly as if to himself, “Just because we cannot attend *Misa De Gallo* or be with our loved ones now, doesn’t mean we cannot celebrate Christmas.” He stands up. “Well, I’m going home to my family. As for you, make sure the paperwork gets done properly. Guarantee the prisoner is transported securely to the police station. Go with them if you have to. I’ll see you later at the office.”

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As the Colonel emerges from the building, three police cars with flashing lights, thankfully the loud sirens are off, come rushing in. As expected, they are there to show themselves and be able to say they helped capture one of the country's most wanted men. The Colonel hastens his pace toward his car to escape the media cameras and onlookers he was sure are arriving soon.

* * *

It is already 2:30 a.m. The Colonel's cellphone gives out a chime.

He opens the new text message.

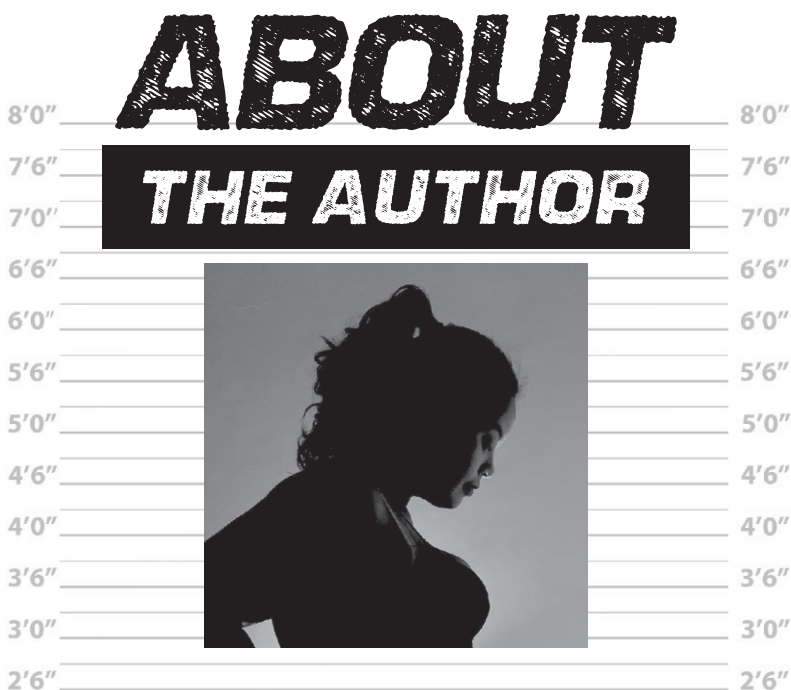
"Sir, thank you for letting our boy spend that short time with his father."

He deletes the message. "Merry Christmas," the Colonel whispers.

He then goes inside his house, now dark and quiet, with its occupants already asleep.



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Felisa Ordep is an entrepreneur and a consultant. She has a lot of stories. Most are real but some are made up, except all of them are just in her head. She is a student of life but graduated as a management major from a university along Katipunan Avenue. She has experience in burglary, qualified theft, and armed robbery—as a victim, of course.

She spends a lot of her time thinking, planning, and celebrating Christmas.

For the rest of the non-Christmas year, she enjoys reading novels, watching rom-coms, and sitting in a park to watch the grass grow. She hates to travel but loves the books that bring her around the world and even the universe.

This is the first time in her life to write a short story for publication, a clear testament to the magical powers of PaperKat Books' All-In Self-Publishing and Mentoring Program.

PUNISHING THE SHREW

By Johanna L Lee

1. CAPTIVITY

It was pitch black. She wasn't even sure if her eyes were open. She blinked several times. Had she gone blind? She squinted, trying to focus on the darkness that surrounded her. She tried to move her neck. She yelped at the sharp pain in her shoulders.

What the fuck?

She had no recollection of doing anything strenuous at the gym. She didn't recall lifting anything heavy at work. Why was her body aching?

She stood up, only to lose balance. Her forehead met the edge of a hard object before toppling on the hard floor. She cried. She tried to soothe the pain, only to find her wrists constrained behind her back.

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She squirmed; her feet were bound as well. Her heart pounded hard as she started to understand her situation.

“Hello? Where am I?” Her eyes teared up. She could feel the coarse fabric of her blindfold dampen. “Answer me!” Only the echo of her voice answered her back.

She wriggled her eyebrows, twitched the apples of her cheeks, and blinked constantly to shift the blindfold off her face. She managed to lift the material off one eye. She waited for her eyes to adjust. Lights from the outside spilled through the narrow slats of wood that covered a small window at the top part of the wall. She could only make out the edges of what seemed to be crates and boxes stacked underneath that dim light.

She strained her ears to listen to her surroundings. Perhaps she can get a clue to her whereabouts. All she could hear was the sound of water dripping on metal.

“Where am I?!” She grimaced, noticing how sore her lower lip was. Rubbing her dry lips together, she could feel that they were plump. Her tongue touched the swollen part, and she could taste the saltiness of blood.

Her heart started pounding. Where was she? Who did this to her? How did someone like her end up in a place like this?

Clenching her jaws, she bellowed, “Whoever you are, you’d better let me go! Do you know who I am?” she growled through clenched teeth. “I am Yulia Madrigal!”

The darkness and silence didn’t care who she was. She was alone, wallowing in her tears. Yulia squealed at the sharp sting that shot her wrist as she struggled to free herself from the rope that bound them.

Come on! Think!

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Not far from her right side was a stack of wooden pallets. She squirmed her way toward them, grunting and yelping at every painful movement she made.

“Shit!” Yulia wriggled herself into position until her back was against the pallets. She rubbed the rope against the edge of the wood, using it like a blunt knife. It didn’t take long before she gave up. The scraping against her wrists was unbearable!

“You asshole! Let me go!” Her voice reverberated against the walls. “You are messing with Yulia Madrigal!”

Like a defeated soldier, her head went limp against the pallets. “I am Yulia Madrigal,” she whispered. “I am—”

How did she end up like this?

2. CELEBRATION

Christmas songs blared through a small Bluetooth speaker sitting in the middle of a buffet table. Festive shades of red and green splashed across the disposable tablecloth covering a trestle table set near the back wall. Cute poinsettia flowers adorned the serviettes that alternated between the stack of red paper plates, and the silver plastic cutlery laid next to it. A tower of green plastic tumblers sat next to the disposable punch bowls, while an assortment of dishes served in aluminum foil trays was strategically lined around it.

“Make way for my famous lasagna!” a sultry and deep voice announced, holding a foil tray. A chorus of cheers greeted her as she entered the doors of The House of Madrigal.

“Miss Ana!” Natty greeted the statuesque woman who arrived.

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“You came.” She gestured to the tray. “Let me take that,” Natty offered.

Ana passed the tray to her. “Thanks, darling.” Bobbing her head towards her companion, “I brought two trays!”

“Merry Christmas, Natty,” he greeted her, holding up the other tray.

“Max! You’re here too!” She walked over to the buffet table and set each tray at both ends. Then, pointing at the food, Natty said, “Come eat! Everyone brought something.”

“I’ll pass,” Max declined. Pointing upwards with one hand and tapping his belly with the other, “I need to reserve some space for our party upstairs.”

“Same,” Ana chimed in. “I’ll quickly say ‘hi’ to the people upstairs, then I have to be elsewhere.”

Natty nodded. Max is from the real estate business up on the fourteenth floor of the twenty-story office building they work at. She smiled, pleased with the fact that he and Ana seemed to be going out a lot. Just a couple of months ago, when he learned that Ana was transsexual, she was afraid that it would be the end of a possible happily ever after for the gorgeous co-owner of the fashion house. She highly respected Ana and she wished nothing more than for her to find the true love she deserved.

In fact, everyone in the office loved and respected Ana—even the reputable Building Bitch, Yulia Madrigal. No one understood how she managed to control Yulia. Whenever she was busy screaming and berating the staff with insults, all Ana needed to do was clear her throat, or say her name in a warning tone, and Yulia would mellow down.

Natty remembered a story from one of their former designers,

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Neri Cadlaon. She said their friendship went all the way since they were in high school. Unlike Ana, Yulia didn't come from a rich family. In fact, it was Ana who always saved her whenever she was in a financial pickle because her parents were struggling to make ends meet.

Neri said that Yulia wasn't such an insufferable and stingy bitch back then. She began morphing into the devil incarnate that she was now when her designs were starting to get noticed.

Must have been scared to be poor again, Natty thought.

When her business and popularity skyrocketed, Yulia became more ambitious. She wanted The House of Madrigal to look the part of a glamorous fashion brand, which meant moving the business from the small boutique shop to a bigger location with more staff. But she couldn't do it with her resources alone. That was where Ana came in. A *fashionista* and designer herself, she partnered up with Yulia. Though Ana owned more of the company's shares, Yulia held the reigns.

"This is quite a setup," Ana drawled as she looked around the office.

Natty snapped out of her thoughts. "It's what we could come up with at short notice."

Ana felt a pinch in her heart. For a Staff Christmas Party, it was rather dismal. The seamstresses were still running the sewing machines to meet their deadlines. The clerks were behind their laptops.

It's two days before Christmas for goodness' sake! Ana thought.

These ladies should be home with their families, preparing for Christmas Eve. They should be at the malls, shopping. They should

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be buried in Christmas wrappers and sticky tape, wrapping presents. They shouldn't be at work!

Ana couldn't help but feel guilty. She should have done more to convince Yulia to allow their staff to take that day off as well.

"The 23rd is not a public holiday!" Yulia snapped. "I'm already giving them the Monday off—"

"Yulia, it's Christmas! Don't you think they deserve those extra days with their loved ones?"

"We're already behind with the New Year's collection," she complained. "I can't afford to lose a day!"

If they weren't behind their New Year's collection, Ana would have asserted herself more and had her way.

Ana pulled Natty in for a hug. "I'm so sorry, darling. I wish I could have done more."

"Don't worry, Miss Ana," Natty reassured her. "Besides, we have yummy food."

Apart from the buffet table, the Christmas tunes, and the four-foot-tall Christmas tree at the other end, there were no other decorations. "I could have, at least, given you a decent Christmas party," she lamented.

"We're fine, Miss Ana," Natty insisted. "It's better this way. Super easy cleanup!" she exclaimed, making a swooping gesture.

"And quick to hide the evidence!" Max added. "Imagine if she walks in on your unauthorized party... Even Santa's balls would fall off when he feels her wrath!" His eyes inadvertently strayed toward the heaping pile of presents under the tree. "Wow! You're generous with your exchange gifts."

"I almost forgot. There's a gift that has your name on it!" Natty

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jogged towards the tree and picked up a small gift bag. She proffered it to Ana.

“Thank you! This is so sweet!” She pulled out the small box from inside the bag. She flipped it open. “Oh, my!” Her eyes widened at the sight of a beautiful sunflower brooch, encrusted with Swarovski crystals. “This is quite extravagant! I don’t think I can accept this. You shouldn’t be spending—”

Natty shook her head vigorously. “It’s not from me, Miss Ana!”

“No?” She turned the gift bag around in search of a gift tag. No card, except a round sticker with a stylized letter Y. She frowned. “From Yulia?”

Max was perplexed as well. The gifts under the tree seemed to have the same sticker plastered on them. Aware of the number of staff working there, the number of boxes under the tree didn’t seem to add up. “They’re all from Yulia? No joke?”

Ana slowly turned to Natty. “Umm... When was the last time you saw Yulia?”

3. SPECULATION

Yulia did not know which felt worse—the aching of her shoulders and the sting of her injuries, or the churning of her stomach. Being locked in this dark and dismal room, she had lost her sense of time. For all she knew, she may not have eaten for days. But what she was more interested in was how she got here and who did it.

Yulia strained her memory.

It was Wednesday. She came to the office and her morning was

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immediately ruined upon seeing the wrong fabric delivered.

She screamed at Natty, her PA. “Didn’t you check before the delivery person left?” She remembered how much she yelled at her until she cried. She enjoyed squeezing a tear out of that incompetent girl! If she didn’t feel so sorry for the fact that she had to send money to her family in Biliran, she would have fired her ages ago.

She sent Natty to return the wrong delivery and pick up what they ordered. She did as she was told but came back empty-handed. Natty misunderstood her instructions. Yulia swore that after the holidays, she would be terminating her employment!

Yulia went to the supplier herself during lunch. She grabbed a sandwich but never had time to eat it. She went back to the office, only to leave again to go to the bank.

The bank. That was the last she remembered. She drew out a substantial amount for the staff’s stupid Christmas bonus.

Shit! I’ve been robbed and kidnapped! That made a lot of sense. They followed me to the bank. Took my money and brought me here to try to extort more!

“If it’s money you want, you got it! Just let me go! I promise, I won’t tell anyone. Please! It’s the holidays!”

She made another attempt to loosen the ropes by rubbing them against the pallets behind her, tolerating the pain in her shoulder. “Damn!” How badly did they beat her up to drag her here?

“I swear, you provoke the wrong person, and they could beat you up!”

She instantly stopped what she was doing, remembering Ana’s words. It wasn’t the first time Ana had said that. She warned her every time that if she continued treating people the way she did, someone would eventually beat her up.

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Is that it? Is that why I'm here?

Yulia was convinced that she was in this predicament because someone was out to get her. But who? She had crossed so many people. The staff at The House of Madrigal alone could be potential suspects. She thought long and hard.

Natty came to her office one day. "Ma'am Yulia?" her PA asked.

"What do you want?" she snapped.

"I was hoping to file for annual leave this Christmas. It's been a while since I went home. My little brother is starring in his school's Christmas program. He really wants me to be there to watch."

She glared at her. "You know Christmas is the busiest time for us! How inconsiderate can you be?"

"But Ma'am Yulia, it's Christmas—"

"I know it's Christmas! We can't afford to have any staff down. What don't you understand? You can take your leave after, but not at that time!"

Could it be Natty? Just because I didn't approve her leave? How shallow can she be?

But Natty was a dumb girl! She couldn't have pulled off something like this. Plus, she was skinny. *She wouldn't even have the strength to lay a finger on me, let alone drag me!*

Then there was Linda, her embroiderer. She had caught her taking home office supplies. When she confronted her about it, her excuse was that money was tight and her kids needed school supplies.

"Fuck that! I'm not responsible for your children's school supplies!" she bellowed loud enough for the whole office to hear.

"I'm sorry, Ma'am Yulia. My husband got injured at the factory, so he had no work for some time."

"And how is that my problem? It's not my fault that your husband wasn't

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careful!"

Of all her staff, Linda was the one who was in need the most. She was the one who would benefit from her misfortune. But Linda was busy training the new embroiderer when she left. When would she have the time to get out of the office to abduct her?

She could have hired someone. Yulia shook her head. She had no funds to buy school supplies, let alone afford to hire goons. But just because Linda couldn't afford to hire any help, it didn't mean she wasn't a possible suspect.

Whoever did this had to have the brains, the brawn, and the money to kidnap Yulia Madrigal.

She gasped. "Fucking bitch!"

Ana had all the above! She was clever enough to plan something like this. She had the strength to carry her like a rag doll if she had to. She used to be a man after all! And if she didn't want her manicured hands to get dirty, she had the money and connections to do this.

Anger churned within her. Yulia never felt so betrayed. They were best friends! Yes, she had been an awful human being and Ana always attempted to get her in line, but to punish her to this extent was unforgivable. Was this meant to teach her a lesson?

"You'll be sorry when I get out of here!" Yulia was more determined to free herself. After investing more painful minutes trying to cut through the ropes with the wooden pallet's edges, she gave up. If they tied her wrists to the front, it would have been easier. Then she remembered a scene from one of the crime shows she watched. The hostage victim managed to push his bound arms from his back to his front by pulling them from underneath his legs. Yulia winced at the idea. *That'll hurt, but I don't have a choice.*

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She carefully dropped on her sides. She pulled her knees to her chest, curling herself into a tight ball. She cried at the pain. She stretched her arms so she could push her bound wrists underneath her butt.

“Fuck!” she screamed as she managed to get past her butt and stopped underneath her thighs. She rolled on her back. This position was excruciating. With her legs pressing against her stomach and her knees over her face, she had difficulty breathing. She shifted her face to her side and took several deep breaths. “I can do this!”

She pushed her arms more until her wrists were close to her ankles. *Just a little bit more.* The joints in her shoulders were burning, but she couldn’t give up now that she was close. She bent one leg, unhooking it from her wrists.

“Yes!” she cheered as that leg dropped to the floor, releasing the pressure on one side of her hip. “One more.” Unhooking the remaining leg proved to be easier. With her wrists finally in front of her, Yulia flicked the blindfold off her head. Lying flat on her back, she panted for breath. She wasn’t out of danger yet, but things should be easier from here.

4. SUSPICION

“She’s not answering!” Ana growled her frustrations.

Max tapped her on the shoulder when they got into the elevator. “Yulia could just be busy. I mean, there are times when you don’t hear from her for a week. I know the gifts are odd—”

“It’s totally out of character! She’s never this generous,” Ana

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argued. “She doesn’t even buy expensive gifts for her own family. You would think that having money would make her generous, but no. Success turned that woman into a miser and a horrible human being!”

The elevator doors opened to the fourteenth floor and Max stepped out. He turned around and saw Ana back on the phone. “Coming?”

She stepped out. “You go ahead. I’ll follow.”

The other end answered.

“Hi, Auntie... Is Yulia there?” Ana asked, and the furrows between her forehead tightened. “No, she’s not with me... Oh... Okay...” She stayed on the line a bit longer. “Please tell her to call me when she gets home.”

She looked up and Max was still standing with her, waiting. “I have to go. Sorry, say ‘hi’ to your colleagues for me.” She pressed the elevator buttons. “Enjoy your Christmas party.”

“Woah, woah, woah!” He saw the disconcerted expression on her face. Ana was on the verge of tears.

“I’m really worried, Max. Her mom said she hasn’t been home for three days. They thought Yulia was with me. I need to go to the police!”

“I’ll come with you!”

5. PLEA

The knots around her feet were tight. Yulia had already broken several nails and she could already feel blisters forming on her fingertips; she couldn’t untie the ropes. She searched around for something useful—any tool of some sort. The wooden pallets were

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useless. Her attention turned to the small opening. The boxes and crates that were piled underneath it looked sturdy. If she could climb over them, she could escape. On the other side of the room was a metal staircase leading to a metal ramp. There was a door there. The bastard who kidnapped her must have dragged her down those steps while she was unconscious, which explained her bruised body and possibly broken shoulder.

Yulia reached for the ropes around her ankles again, feeling more determined to free herself. She pried through the tight knot, and when it seemed that she may have had a breakthrough she heard the door click. She held her breath.

A beam of light spilled through as the door opened, and quickly disappeared when the figure in a dark hoodie shut the door.

“Who are you? Why did you take me here?”

The person didn’t answer. The sound of the steps was light. Judging the clacking of the shoes against the metal stairs, she knew the person was wearing heels.

“Ana,” Yulia whispered.

The person came closer. Yulia squinted to get a better view of her captor. The hoodie she wore was oversized so it was difficult to make out her built, but she knew the person didn’t match Ana’s height.

“Who are you?”

In spite of the shakiness of her voice, she tried to sound brave. “Are you after money? You want to teach me a lesson?” If she wasn’t bound so tight and her aching body didn’t compromise her movements, she might have been able to attack and defend herself. But no. Yulia sat on the ground, helpless.

She heard the person scoff and hissed in a quiet, raspy voice,

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“You’re nothing but a piece of shit.”

That pissed Yulia off. “You bitch! You won’t get away with this! You messed with the wrong person!” She wriggled to get up but lost her balance.

Seeing her topple on the floor set the woman in hysterics.

Realizing the pathetic state she was in, Yulia forced herself to calm down. She was in no position to antagonize her captor. “I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I’m tired and I’m scared. Please, I just want to go home... I-I can pay you. Let me go and I promise you’ll get your money. I’ll—”

The woman laid a plate of food in front of her and turned her back.

Yulia stared at the plate. It was hard to make out what was on it, but it smelled good. She shook her head. “Please let me go. Let’s make a deal. I’ll do anything.”

The woman scoffed again. “Eat!” she ordered, maintaining the throaty sound of her voice. She started walking up the stairs.

Yulia knew begging was futile. The woman wasn’t interested. “Tell me what you’re planning to do with me.”

“Just fucking eat!” she repeated as she opened the door.

Yulia looked at the food. “How am I supposed to eat this? My hands are tied, you moron!”

“Like a dog!” the woman screeched before slamming the door behind her.

Goosebumps formed on Yulia’s skin. The rage in her voice made her blood run cold. She was so frightened. She wondered if she had the same effect on the people around her.

No! I can’t be that bad, can I? Though she liked being feared. She

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liked the power she held when people scrambled at her beck and call. *But this woman...* Yulia shuddered. This woman sounded like she could kill her.

The pangs of her hunger hit her. She shifted closer to the plate. She carefully lifted the paper plate. She could smell pasta and barbecue. She leaned forward and took a bite from whatever was on the edge.

Lasagna.

“Ana!”

6. PUZZLE

Ana stared at the brooch. She had wanted a sunflower brooch for a long time but could never find the right one. Maybe, for once, Yulia did pay attention and bought this for her.

“Let’s think for a moment,” Max suggested as he drove through the Makati traffic. “Do you think that maybe because she’s horrible to everyone, she decided to make up for it and bought everyone gifts? Maybe she wanted to be nice for once.”

She arched an eyebrow. “Why haven’t we heard from her? Or give the gifts in person?”

Max shrugged. “Maybe she’s embarrassed and didn’t want to break character.”

“It just doesn’t add up, Max.” She twirled the brooch between her fingers. “Natty said she found the gifts in a big box in her office.”

“So?”

“One, if Yulia does buy presents in bulk, it will not be in her office,” she pointed out. “Two, if she did have them in her minimalist-

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style office, I would've seen it immediately. Three, nothing is taken out of Yulia's office without her permission!"

Max glanced at the brooch. "That is pretty."

Ana smiled. "It is, isn't it?" She proffered it to him. "Look, it even has a little bee!"

Max admired every detail. "Maybe Yulia told Natty to take the boxes..." he stopped mid-sentence. There was something familiar about the brooch. It was like he had seen it somewhere before. "Oh, shit!"

7. CONFRONTATION

Ana and Max came charging back to The House of Madrigal.

"Miss Ana!" everyone cheered.

The mood was much livelier than when they left earlier. The seamstresses were away from their machines and were mingling over food and drinks. Some were dancing and singing off-tune with the Christmas music that continued to play.

"You're back!" Natty cheered.

Ana walked past Natty and beelined to the computer behind the reception console. She pressed a key on the keyboard and the monitor came alive. As expected, it was locked. She stepped aside. "Unlock your computer," she demanded Natty.

"M-Miss Ana?" Natty stammered.

"Unlock your computer now."

Natty was quick to oblige. "Is there a file you need?"

Ana was quick to shove Natty aside as soon as her computer was

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unlocked. Ana opened her browser and checked her browsing history. There was a long list of online shopping websites. She clicked on the most recent website she visited. It was a shop that sold perfumes and make-up, and it seemed that she was still logged on. She viewed the order history.

“W-What are you doing?” Natty tried to see past Ana who was completely blocking her monitor.

Ana clicked on another website. The first page showed dazzling pieces of jewelry. Her heart started pumping. Again, Natty was still logged on to the site. She went to her order history. She thought she was going to faint the moment she saw a photo of her brooch. Ana clasped her hands to keep them from shaking. She turned to face Natty who looked perplexed. “Where is Yulia?”

“M-Miss—” Natty was taken aback by how Ana was glaring at her. “I don’t know—”

Ana took a step forward. Her eyes narrowed. “Where is Yulia!” she hollered, loud enough to silence the whole office.

Natty shook her head vigorously. “I’m sorry, I don’t—” She gasped as Ana lunged towards her.

Ana grabbed Natty by the throat, her nails digging into her neck. “Answer me, Natty. You know very well I have the strength to hurt you.” Her lips curved into a sardonic smile. “Really, really hurt you!”

8. RESCUE

Yulia’s blistered fingers continued to fiddle through the rope. Using the acrylic nail on her thumb, she jimmied through the loops.

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After some perseverance, the knot finally came loose, and the rest of the other knots followed. Her feet were finally free. She shook her legs to get the blood flowing.

Using her arms as leverage, she stood up, screaming in the process as the pain shot through her shoulders. She staggered toward the stairs. She gave up trying to free her wrists. All she wanted was to get out of there. Without a second thought, she started scaling up the steps. She was halfway up when she heard the door jiggle. She rushed back down. In her hurry, she missed a step and fell on the floor. She screamed.

The doors swung open.

The lights flickered on. Yulia squinted through her tears as the bright light flooded the room.

“Yulia!”

Yulia was confused at hearing Ana’s frantic cry for help. Was the bitch pretending to rescue her?

Ana and Max rushed down the steps. “Quick, Max! Help her!”

Max immediately worked on the ropes that bound Yulia’s wrists. “Are you okay?”

“Do I look like I’m okay?!” she snapped.

Ana crouched over. She was close to tears to see the welts and bruises on Yulia’s face. “Oh, you poor thing!”

She turned to Ana. “You fucking bitch! I know you’re responsible for this!”

The accusation surprised Ana. She glared at her friend. “You ungrateful asshole! I’m here to save you, and you accuse me?” She smacked her friend right across the shoulders.

Yulia howled. “Fuck!”

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“I was so worried!” She smacked her on the shoulder again.

Max held Ana back. “Calm down!”

Ana stood up. “Get this ingrate out of here!”

Yulia sobbed. “You didn’t do this?”

Ana threw her an incredulous stare. “What the crazy fuck made you think I did this to you?”

9. REVELATION

Yulia was seated on one of the sofas at the building’s lobby. All that time, she was being held captive at their office building’s basement. As it turned out, she did go back to the office after her trip to the bank. Natty waited for her at the parking lot and bashed her unconscious before dragging her to the basement. *So, the dumb bitch did have the strength to lay a finger on me and drag me to that filthy room.*

“Ma’am Yulia, water.” Linda approached her with a cup.

She smiled. “Thank you.”

Max approached them. “The ambulance will be here soon.”

The elevators opened and two policemen came out, escorting Natty out to the lobby. Briefly, they made eye contact. Natty frowned and bowed her head.

Yulia shook her head. “I should have fired her a long time ago.”

“We’ll make sure she stays a long time in jail,” Ana said, her voice laced with contempt.

“How did you know it was her?” Yulia asked.

Ana gestured to Max. “Thank Max’s infatuation with me.” She giggled.

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He laughed with her. “I was trying to get a chance to meet her,” he began. “You were in Hong Kong.” He beamed at Ana. “That was the day she gave me your schedule.”

“How is that relevant?” Yulia interrupted.

“It’s relevant because when she pulled Ana’s schedule from her computer, the first thing I saw on her screen was her online shopping,” he explained. “And that brooch was on the shopping cart.”

“And she used your credit card to pay for it.”

Yulia’s mouth flew open. “How did she get my credit card?”

“Max also saw a photocopy of your credit card on her desk that day before she quickly hid it away,” Ana answered.

“I did,” Max confirmed.

Yulia’s body was ready to crash from exhaustion and the shock of her ordeal was beginning to take a toll on her.

“Are you going to be all right, hun?” Ana asked with concern, stroking her friend’s disheveled hair.

Yulia nodded and smiled.

They all fell silent.

“See? What did I tell you?” Ana broke the silence. “Provoke the wrong person and they could beat you up.”



ABOUT

THE AUTHOR



Johanna L Lee is a registered author with the National Book Development Board - Philippines. She's a romance writer based in Western Australia who also dabbles in the paranormal genre, and writes poetry and random essays. Her writing journey began at a young age. Her first novel was published at the age of 19 by Bookware Publishing Inc., under their My Special Valentine imprint. Johanna released four titles with them since. Apart from being an author, she's a wife, momma, and an employment consultant.

CHRISTMAS NOTE

By Ara Larosa

See you on December 25. I have a gift for you. Someone left a note on his desk again. He had been receiving the same note for 10 consecutive days.

“Why would Santa waste his time on me?” Jason Romero asked out loud with a chuckle. He kept the notes inside his drawer for comparison—each one had the same text and was written on a green, round-shaped stationery. He already asked his paralegal, Kristoff, and almost everyone in the office about the note. But nobody knew who his avid sender could be.

Being a Deputy State Prosecutor, he meets various people in his office daily. Prank or threat, he had no idea who could be sending him notes every day.

“Today is November 23. Let’s wait for December 25, sir,” Kristoff beamed as he placed the coffee on the desk. “You could have an admirer in our office.”

“I already survived that stage,” Jason replied. “I would rather

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consider this as a silly prank than a threat. Besides, the font used is Comic Sans.” Both of them laughed.

“Hello!” someone cut in.

“Oh, Ma’am Arabella...” Kristoff smiled nervously.

“Keith, that name is wrapped with bad memories. Just call me Abby,” the woman rolled her eyes and gave him a forced smile. Kristoff, who also goes by the nickname Keith, apologized and excused himself quickly.

“You’ve been receiving notes?” Abby teased Jason.

“You’ve heard everything again? You’re good at eavesdropping,” he said, annoyed. He went back to his desk and started scanning some files. “Don’t worry about those notes. So, what brings you here?” he asked, serious this time.

“I brought you some lunch,” she winked as she handed a paper bag to him. “I cooked your favorite meal.”

“Damn, I know why you’re really here,” he shook his head. “I haven’t forgotten that tonight is Harold and Marife’s wedding.”

“Aww, you guessed it right! Pick me up at the office, okay?” Abby said excitedly, giving him a huge hug.

Abby has been a fan of Harold and Marife for a long time. She never missed any of the celebrity couple’s appearances, what more their wedding. She feels fortunate because, as an entertainment editor for a lifestyle magazine, she has full access to meet and greet her favorite celebrities. Fangirling is also a part of her job.

Harold Monsanto is a TV and movie director while his fiancée, Marife, is a high school teacher turned TV educational show host. Marife becomes Abby’s instant favorite because they’re both from Legazpi City.

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“By the way, Harold offered me a job to host the reality show Christmas La-Lovah! It’s about helping couples whose marriages are on the rocks. It’s exciting, right?” she told Jason happily, but she noticed that he was looking at his *Daily Schedule Board* and was mumbling something.

“Fine, you’re not listening again,” she frowned.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I heard you. I just remembered that I have a meeting 15 minutes from now. Can we just talk about this later? And I think you should go to the wedding ahead of me. The Secretary of Justice will meet me for dinner tonight, something important, but I promise that I will show up at the reception,” he smiled apologetically.

“Yeah, as always,” she said. Her smile faded. He chuckled as he kissed her quickly.

“Sweetie, you know the nature of my work. Good for you that you can leave your office earlier but for me, I even stay up until nine o’clock,” he sighed.

“Or midnight,” she added as she pulled away from him. “So, I’ll get going. Hope to see you later.” She walked away without waiting for his response.

Jason and Abby have been married for 16 years. After their college graduation, they immediately tied the knot. But because they’re both busy with their careers, they remain childless. Even if they live under the same roof, sometimes, days pass without them seeing each other because of their work schedules. They would also travel to different countries separately.

That was why when Abby went to Harold and Marife’s wedding ceremony at the Manila Cathedral, she couldn’t help but cry as she recalled the past and how they used to be. She gently dabbed the sides

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of her eyes with a tissue to suppress her tears. The ceremony was intimate and heartwarming. She could feel Harold and Marife's sincerity toward each other. Harold was just Marife's childhood crush and they met again in December 2020. They found love amid the pandemic. In their interviews, you can easily see that they are fond of each other, and that their love is real. Abby wished that Harold and Marife's fondness for one another will not run dry, just like what's happening between her and Jason.

* * *

The wedding reception was held at a five-star hotel near Roxas Boulevard. Abby arrived but Jason was not yet around. To forget how disappointed she was, she mingled with the other guests as they arrive at the venue. After a while, she finally received a message from Jason that he was on his way to meet her. But she didn't reply. She went to the cocktail corner while waiting for the newlyweds. She asked for her favorite drink.

"Hey, beautiful," someone interrupted her fleeting thoughts. "That peach long gown suits you."

She was surprised to see Ferdie Galang, her childhood friend and persistent suitor before. He is already a CEO of a big real estate company in the country. He walked closer to her with his usual arrogant nature. "Nice choice of wine," he commented with a spark in his eyes. She just smiled back, not saying anything.

"Harold and Marife met each other in their younger years, just like us. It's just so sad that we didn't end up together like them," Ferdie suddenly said. She glared at him, surprised by his statement,

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then laughed mockingly.

“Was there ever a time that we dated? It was just a one-sided affair that dwells in your imagination. I guess you just need to work things out with your wife. You’re joining the reality show with her. That’s your chance,” Abby said, as she shook her head in disgust.

“I joined because I knew you will be the host. You’re aware that my marriage with Cyrene is purely business,” Ferdie leaned closer. “Well, I always have you in my heart and I will wait for you forever. Aside from that, I know Jason is not giving you much time. Look, where is he right now? He can’t even attend events with you. This is not the first time that he left you...”

“Stop it. I don’t need any recap. Besides, not being here doesn’t mean that he loves me less. If I were you, Ferdie, I will just keep myself focused on my career and family,” Abby said calmly, then she excused herself. But Ferdie held her arm.

“See you in the reality show,” he whispered.

“I may quit,” she rolled her eyes.

“Don’t run away from me, Arabella. I know that you want me,” he said as he caressed her back. He even brushed her ear with his lips. Annoyed, Abby pushed him away. Ferdie smiled mischievously, but his smile faded when he saw someone standing right behind them.

“Oh, hi Jason,” Ferdie greeted coolly.

“Stay away from my wife,” Jason shot back with a vicious grin. Abby immediately walked toward him, her face with a trace of relief.

“Let’s go,” she whispered as he clung to his arm.

“I’m just entertaining her while you’re not around,” Ferdie chuckled.

“You have to be an actor then,” Jason replied.

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“Come on, don’t ever listen to anything he says,” Abby pulled her husband towards the exit.

* * *

“What was that? Why were you so close to him?” Jason asked when they were inside the car on their way home.

“He was the one who approached me. I didn’t even know that he would show up. He wasn’t at the ceremony,” Abby reasoned, feeling flustered.

“It seemed like he was flirting.”

“I don’t care. I’m just disappointed right now that I wasn’t able to wait for Harold and Marife’s arrival at the reception just because of him,” she said.

“It’s okay. You must avoid Ferdie. He bothered you before. He might cause you the same trouble again.”

“The problem is, he will be joining Christmas La-Lovah. And I am hosting it,” Abby said.

“Just quit the show!” he raised his voice a bit.

“But it’s a huge break. I have been dreaming of having my own TV show. I have been writing all these years. It’s time for growth,” she reasoned.

Jason stopped driving. He sighed and rested his back on the car seat, yet his grip on the steering wheel was tight.

“I can take care of myself. There are a lot of people in the show. He can’t harm me,” Abby assured her husband.

He closed his eyes and breathed heavily. He wanted to tell her about the case he was currently handling that involved Ferdie, but it

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was confidential. “So, it means you forgive him already?” he asked in annoyance.

“No. But he already stopped following me for years now and he will be joining the show with his wife. I was shocked that he acted that way a while ago. It was creepy. But still, no one and nothing can stop me from being on the show, unless I become pregnant... And I’m sure it’s not going to happen,” she said firmly, hoping that he would no longer oppose.

“Why do you say that it’s not going to happen? We’re both 37 and capable,” he frowned.

She glared at him, laughed out loud, and said, “We’re busy. We don’t usually see each other. The truth is, I feel like we are just roommates, friends living under one roof.

“It’s okay. I have accepted this setup for a long time,” Abby continued. “We will never have kids because we’re married to our careers.” She was smiling but she felt the pain in her words.

“I’m sorry, sweetie. Okay, if that’s what you want, you can join the show,” he forced a smile.

“Wow! Are you sure?” she asked, beaming.

“Yes, I won’t prevent you from doing what you want. I’m sure I made you sad for a long time,” he said. She reached to hug him.

“That’s true. But I understand. We can’t lose our careers. Anyway, thank you. I’m fine now,” she said as tears rolled down her cheeks. “I’m happy that you finally let me join the show,” she continued but she wished he could say more than that.

To her surprise, he cupped her chin and kissed her softly. It had been a long ago since he kissed her that way. Usually, she would always make the first move and got ignored most of the time. She closed her

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eyes and kissed him back. She wished that there could be more sweet moments like this.

“Do you want to go somewhere else? Let’s go to the resort you’ve been telling me about,” he suggested as he wiped her tears with his fingers. His phone rang but he switched it off instead.

“Wait, you mean the resort that I told you about years ago?” she asked in disbelief.

“Yes, I’m sorry that I kept you waiting,” he chuckled. “Do you want to go there now?”

“Now? But I am wearing a gown. I’m not prepared,” she said, but her smile was priceless. He just laughed in response.

“Sweetie, spontaneous travels are more exciting. Besides, you may not need to wear anything,” he grinned.

“Excuse me?”

“I mean you can wear anything. There are clothes shops out there,” he chuckled.

“Oh, I see,” she laughed, finally getting what he meant. “But what about that phone call? That might be important.”

“That can wait. Besides, I think I should be a rebel sometimes.”

“Wow!” Her eyes grew big in disbelief. “Sure! Let’s go there now.”

“Nice! Let’s go! It’s Saturday tomorrow, anyway.” He smiled then started driving again.

“What happened? Why are you suddenly doing this?” she asked.

“This is my way of apologizing to you. It’s also my advance Christmas gift for you. You’re right, we don’t spend much time together. I hope we can start today. We can unwind every weekend. Would that be all right?” he asked.

“Oh, yes! I would love that! Though I still go to work every

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Saturday... We can always travel as soon as I'm done," she beamed. She was ecstatic that he finally decided to spend time together.

"Deal," he smiled in response.

He could see how happy she was with his suggestion. But in the side mirror, he caught something unusual. He was just observing it while driving—a car had been tailing them.

* * *

"We'll take the suite," Jason told the receptionist.

Abby was speechless. She had been dreaming of staying at Amrisa Resort with Jason. Most of her celebrity friends gave dazzling reviews of this resort. And they were right, the place was like a piece of modern paradise. Knowing that this was an unexpected visit added to the thrill. The last time they went on vacation was 10 years ago. If they'd go out of town, it would be for a family gathering or reunion with their common friends.

"I hope you'll enjoy it! We will be here till Sunday," he beamed as he held her hand tightly. They headed toward the elevator.

"You have no idea how happy I am right now! I have work tomorrow but I won't be going. I'll just think of an excuse," she giggled.

"I can call them for you," he offered.

"Hmm, I think you're really up to something," she said with teasing eyes.

"Nope," he pouted. But before he could continue speaking, he saw a guy in a black hoodie jacket and face mask, standing by the main door. He seemed to be watching them until the elevator door

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closed.

“Love, why is it that I could feel someone is following us? I don’t know if I’m just paranoid,” she frowned.

“I think you’re just worried about Ferdie’s presence a while ago. Just relax, don’t let it spoil our vacation,” he said as he placed an arm around her. She responded by resting her head on his chest.

“Thanks.”

He wanted to tell her the truth that someone had been following them, but he didn’t want to ruin her mood. He knew he could handle it. He had to find out who was following them.

As they walked to their suite, he remembered a visit someone made to his office.

* * *

Three months ago

Ferdie dropped by Jason’s office without an appointment or even a call. It was almost 6:00 p.m. and nearly everyone had clocked out. Ferdie was quiet at first as he sat on the chair in front of Jason.

“Why are you here, Ferdie?” Jason asked for the third time. Ferdie glared at him, and his fists were clenched.

“Don’t act like you’re not aware, Jason. My employee was killed inside our office premises. I know that I’m one of your suspects,” he replied furiously.

“Have you been arrested? Why are you so defensive, Ferdie?” Jason chuckled.

“I am aware that your staff has been working on it. I know that

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the Secretary of Justice assigned you to investigate me. Better drop the case. I know you have a personal grudge against me, and you will do everything to put me down,” he warned.

“I appreciate your theory, but you must save that energy as soon as you get arrested. You have no right to react just yet,” Jason said calmly.

“Let me tell you this, if you won’t stop this crap, I will take Abby away from you!” he said.

Jason laughed out loud. “You’re unbelievable. Don’t tell me that you are still obsessed with her. That was in high school. And don’t you have a wife? Keep threatening me that way and I will divulge this whole conversation to your wife. I won’t be surprised if your staff call you a lunatic,” he said.

“What?! Don’t you ever make up stories!” Ferdie rose from his seat and grabbed both of Jason’s lapels.

“Reality hurts, doesn’t it?” Jason pushed him away.

“I’m not afraid of you. I will do everything to be close to Abby again!” he said angrily.

* * *

Back to present

Jason was a bit startled as he recalled his encounter with Ferdie. He tried not to dwell on it, but since he saw him talking to Abby again and someone had been following them, he couldn’t help but connect the circumstances.

He stood by the window, opened it, and observed the view

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outside to see if there was anything suspicious. The night view was peaceful, and the smell of the ocean was quite relaxing underneath the blanket of stars. He also realized that the moon was golden tonight. He recalled that it was all in the news earlier. He remembered how Abby loves the moon. She even painted it before.

“Love, are you all right?”

He finally heard Abby’s voice. “I was just watching the golden moon,” he answered, still looking up in the sky. “Come here, let’s take a photo of it!”

“Yeah, it’s beautiful. But I guess, I’m more beautiful,” she teased.

He chuckled as he turned to her. He was tongue-tied as he realized that she was completely naked in front of him. She drew closer to him with that seductive grin that he hadn’t seen for a long time.

“This is all you ever wanted, right?” Her eyes were inviting. “You’re wishing that I’d quit the show. Having kids is our least priority, but suddenly you’re doing this scheme,” she whispered and bit his ear. He pouted, not wanting to tell her that partly it was the reason.

“Sweetie, whether you get pregnant or not, you’ll still be in the reality show. You just can’t say no to Harold and Marife,” he said, planting playful kisses on her cheek down to her neck.

“I knew it!” she laughed. “But I am not complaining. You’re more important than anyone else.” She giggled as he started taking off his coat until the rest of his clothes piled up on the floor.

“Hmm, that’s nice to know,” he chuckled, as his lips found hers, kissing her hungrily. *I can’t lose you, Abby*, he thought.

* * *

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Back in college

“I still love you, Arabella.”

Arabella and Ferdie were at the university library. She didn’t expect that Ferdie would enroll in the same school. It was the first day of classes when she found out about it.

“How many times do I have to tell you that I can’t love you back?” Abby replied. “Ferdie, you’ve been courting me since high school, but I can’t be in a relationship with you. You’re just a friend.” She frowned and hoped that it would be the last time that she would see and talk to him.

“I won’t stop. I will not give up on you!” he said, his eyes filled with eagerness. “You’re mine!” He held her hands forcefully.

“You’re hurting me! Let go of me or I’ll scream!” she held back her tears.

“Tell me that you love me first!”

“No!!!”

* * *

Back to the present...

“Hey, Abby! Wake up!”

“Oh, that dream again...”

She was catching her breath. She looked at her husband and rested her head on his chest.

“What was that about?” he asked, stroking her hair.

“I think you’re right. I have to quit the show. Ferdie might cause

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trouble again,” she frowned and then told her husband about the dream she kept on having.

“If that’s what you want. Don’t worry, you’ll get more offers. You’re talented,” he grinned, assuring his wife.

“Hmm, don’t be so appreciative. I’m not used to it.” She laughed and then added, “I’m not even used to saying I love you.”

“You just said it,” he chuckled as he held her closer. “I love you.”

“Aha!” She laughed again and pinched his nose. “I love you. Okay, I’ll get up. Got to get some food,” she said as she reached for her gown. “Oh my, so I’m going to wear this again?” She frowned and put the gown down. She wrapped herself with a blanket instead and got back to bed.

“Don’t worry, I’ll go to the shop for you,” Jason said, laughing. He got up and put his clothes on. “Just wait here.”

“Fine. I’ll get used to that sweetness,” she smiled.

“You should!” he winked as he kissed her once more.

While heading to the elevator, his cell phone rang. “Yes, Kristoff?”

“Sir, I have some terrible news. Sir Ferdie’s wife was killed!” Kristoff said.

“What?! How did that happen?”

“I will send you the link to the news report. But for now, the authorities are searching for Sir Ferdie, but he cannot be found! The Secretary of Justice wants to meet with you, Sir. Someone told him that Sir Ferdie was at Harold and Marife’s wedding last night. Some of the guests saw you having a conversation with him,” Kristoff explained.

“Okay, I will meet with the secretary. I’ll call him today. Thanks,

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Kristoff,” Jason replied calmly.

However, before he could dial the secretary’s number, he received a text message: *See you on December 25. I have a gift for you.* He decided to reply, but he suddenly caught a glimpse of the suspicious-looking man that he saw last night when they arrived at the hotel. He was wearing the same black hoodie jacket and face mask. Jason slowly followed the guy, making sure that his facial expression and actions would leave the guy clueless that he was suspicious of him.

“Excuse me, could you please tell me where’s the souvenir shop?” Jason asked him calmly.

“Sorry, I don’t know where that is,” the guy answered, without looking at him directly. Jason could feel that he was really up to something.

“Why are you following me?” Jason asked, finally. He couldn’t help it. But he was prepared no matter what his reaction would be.

“Sorry, I don’t know what you’re talking about,” the guy shook his head, and then he started walking away. Jason followed him and the latter walked faster.

Sweetie, can you wait a little longer? Wear your gown first. I have to look for someone. This was the message he sent to Abby.

Then, he continued following the guy. While walking, he could hear his phone. Someone was calling, but he just couldn’t stop walking. He needed to find out who that guy could be. When he reached the pool area, he saw him walking toward a lady who was resting on a lounge chair. He began talking to the lady.

“You want to play games? Okay, I will observe you,” Jason murmured. He finally checked his phone and answered a call from his wife.

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“What’s the matter? Who are you looking for? You are making me nervous. Could you please hurry up? I heard that Cyrene was killed!” Abby’s voice was shaking over the phone.

“Calm down, Abby. Just stay inside the room. You will be safe there. I’m just here at the poolside observing someone. I just have to unmask this guy. I had a bad feeling about him,” he explained.

“A guy? You mean someone is areally following us? Fine, I won’t go anywhere. But I will call you again to make sure you’re okay,” she said.

“Sure,” he said. Then, he finally opened the link to the news story, regarding Cyrene’s murder. He learned that she was found dead inside their bathroom hours ago and the authorities are looking for Ferdie. The news lacked important details. He was about to call the Secretary of Justice but a message popped up again.

Follow me now. I have an advance Christmas gift for you.

His eyes grew bigger in horror after reading the message. It could be the same person sending him notes every day. When he saw the guy, he was holding his phone too. Their eyes met. The guy looked at Jason sharply.

Without hesitation, Jason went near him, but the guy started walking away again and began running. Jason ran after him. He was about to leave the hotel premises when he saw the guy by the main door talking to another person on a motorbike. As Jason went nearer, the guy punched the motorcyclist and stole the bike. Jason had no time to get his car from the parking area so he called a cab to follow the speeding motorist. Luckily, he was able to get one quickly. The taxi driver followed his instructions.

After several minutes, the guy stopped in front of a mansion and

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ran inside. But as Jason entered the mansion, the guy was nowhere to be found. The mansion was newly painted but there was no furniture inside. It was empty.

“Hello!” Jason shouted. His voice echoed loudly. He saw a spiral staircase and immediately went up. He saw an open room. As he entered, his jaw dropped. He shook in horror. He saw Ferdie on the bed, in a pool of his own blood. His body bore several stab wounds.

Jason couldn’t believe it! All the while he thought Ferdie was missing because he killed his wife. He didn’t expect to see him dead as well. Just then, he caught a paper enclosed in Ferdie’s hand. He quickly grabbed his handkerchief so he could retrieve it.

This is my Christmas gift for you, Jason. You hate him, right? I also hate him!

“Who are you?!” Jason shouted. He knew that guy was watching him from somewhere in the empty mansion.

“Jason...”

Jason heard a male voice behind him. He abruptly turned to find out who it was. “Kristoff?!” he asked in disbelief.

Kristoff laughed out loud. “I’m sorry, Prosecutor, but I must get justice by myself. All of you are a bunch of turtles! Fuck due process!” Kristoff yelled as he walked near Jason.

“Kristoff, I don’t understand. Why do you hate Ferdie?”

“My younger brother, Lloyd, was his employee. Ferdie killed Lloyd!” Kristoff cried. “He killed my only brother! He’s a monster!”

“Kristoff, you can’t be so sure. The case is still pending,” Jason said.

“Yes, because Ferdie talked to you, right? You hate him but you’re scared of him too! I am sure that he killed Lloyd because he confessed

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it to me! He didn't know that I'm Lloyd's brother," Kristoff replied.

"How come he confessed to you?"

"I asked him about it, of course, but he denied it at first. He even got mad. But I did my own investigation and found out that he was also madly in love with your wife, so I made his weakness the key to his downfall.

"I told him that Abby would have a drink with us in a bar, and he went there as well," Kristoff continued. "While waiting, I talked to him about Lloyd. I pretended to be Lloyd's enemy. Then, he confessed that he killed him because he stole money from him. Since then, I promised myself that I would have my revenge. Finally, this day arrived! He died with his wife! At least we're both happy. He could no longer steal Abby from you, and I finally got justice for my brother's death!" he laughed.

"What else did you do? Ferdie cannot be easily convinced to go with you for a drink by just mentioning Abby," Jason said, remembering Ferdie's actions towards Abby the other night and how Abby found it unusual.

"Relax, Prosecutor!" Kristoff said. "Why do I feel like we're enemies now?"

"Give me your phone!" Jason ordered him.

"Fine. You know me so well. Yes, I sent messages to Ferdie pretending that I was Abby! I was sweet to him. Okay, I edited photos of Abby and..."

Jason didn't let him finish speaking. He punched Kristoff repeatedly until he fell to the floor.

"I trusted you! You'll surely pay for this!" he said in anger. But Kristoff punched Jason's face and kicked him continuously. Kristoff

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grabbed a knife from his pocket and lunged at Jason. But before he could do something horrible, they both got distracted by the sound of police sirens from a distance. The next thing Jason saw was Kristoff running to escape.

* * *

Christmas finally came! Jason was thankful that he was feeling much better, especially since the police already had a tip where Kristoff was hiding. He knew that Kristoff would be caught in no time.

While resting on a couch in their living room, he saw a gift underneath the Christmas tree. His name was printed in huge capital letters. He chuckled as he grabbed it. There was a small envelope in it. He opened the card.

Jason, it's finally December 25. I could finally give you my gift.

He trembled. It might be Kristoff, threatening him again. He immediately went to the kitchen to check if Abby was doing fine. She was cooking something for breakfast. But Abby was not there!

"Abby!" he shouted. He went to their bedroom. He was shocked to see a large banner with the same message he had read a while ago.

"Kristoff! If you're here, come out now!" Jason screamed furiously.

"Jason, what are you talking about?" Abby asked. She just came out of the bathroom.

"Abby, Kristoff might be here. Look at that banner. I also got a note with the same content," he said anxiously.

"Oh, come on! Relax! It's just me. I wrote that note under the tree

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and also made this banner!” she explained.

“For goodness’ sake, Abby! This is a bad joke!” he sighed.

She hugged him and showered him with kisses on the cheek. “I’m sorry. But you have nothing to worry about, Kristoff was caught today. I wasn’t able to tell you because you were sleeping a while ago,” she smiled.

“Oh, that’s great news!” Jason said, embracing her tightly.

“I’m sorry if it was sort of a prank. But I have some greater news!” she said excitedly. “Go back to the living room and open your gift.”

“Oh, just say what’s in it,” he complained.

“I said go!” she pouted.

“Fine, come with me,” he said as he took her hand. As they reached the living room, Abby handed him the gift. He quickly opened it.

“Wow!” he exclaimed when he saw a positive pregnancy test inside the gift box.

“Merry Christmas, daddy!” Abby grinned. He turned speechless but tears of happiness welled in his eyes as he held her closer to him.

“Merry Christmas!”





Ara Despabiladeras-Larosa has been writing stories since she was 11 years old and from then on, she dreams of having her own published book. She is a registered author/writer with the National Book Development Board - Philippines. She is a co-author of PaperKat Books' *Quarantined Thoughts Volume 2, Pasko Na Naman (It's Christmastime Again)*, and *Dystopia Manila*. One of her short stories is included in *Meltdown India's* January 2021 issue. She is also one of the authors of *Swipe Right Volume IV Anthology*.

Ara loves joining writing contests. In fact, last July 2021, she won 7th place in a tragic love story-writing competition, making her winning piece a part of the anthology titled *The Fall of the Zodiac*. Just recently, she got 6th place in a writing contest sponsored by Writing Ethics & Stories Avenue (WESAPH). Because of this, her entry is included in their anthology book *The Colors of Love*.

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THE CHRISTMAS MAGIC OF LOVE AND RAIN

By RJ T. Vargas

“**A**nyone ready to share their interpretation of the poem? This is an easy one. Just use the Reader Response Theory.” Professor Rain Archangel was encouraging her students to recite. Everyone avoided eye contact so they wouldn’t get called. “As I mentioned, this literary theory pertains to the reader’s reaction to the literary text. That means all you have to do is give me your answers. No need to overthink, kids.”

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The silence inside the classroom was almost deafening, no one dared to speak. These students were not afraid of Professor Rain but most of them felt uncomfortable speaking in front of the class.

“No one? No volunteers? I’ll count to three. One... Two... Three. Hmm... Still no raised hands, huh? All right, then. Let’s call on Kate, Giona, and Arielle,” the professor called. “I haven’t heard from the three of you in the past weeks during class discussion.”

“Ma’am?! What is this ‘forced voluntary’ recitation you’re asking us to do? I’m not ready...because I’m SUPER ready! Excuse me for being shy seconds ago,” Kate exclaimed, blushing a bit.

Professor Rain breathed in and bit her tongue to stop herself from laughing. Kate is one of her most active students who support and raise her classmates’ spirits like a cheerleader.

“Your energy is always above the roof, Kate. So, what’s your interpretation of the poem?”

Kate stood up and started to explain, “The poem describes the lone little tree as the persona or the speaker. It’s like an abandoned child, longing for a family at Christmastime. Then the child finally has a home and is no longer left alone in the cold snowy night.”

Giona smiled as if something mysterious crossed her mind. She raised her hand and asked, “Miss Rain, may I add more to Kate’s answer?”

“Sure. Go ahead, Giona.”

“Her answer made me think of another interpretation. Finding the little tree is like letting their inner child free. Maybe because they’re too busy and stressed with their own lives that they only find their inner child again during Christmas,” Giona calmly explained.

Professor Rain grinned, impressed by her response. She recalled

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Giona as a silent observer but once she speaks, her insights are always thought-provoking.

“Miss? I’d love to share my idea too! May I?” the polite and timid Arielle joined the discussion.

“Feel free to do so, my dear.”

“Well, I like the idea of the little tree symbolizing all the joyful but distant memories that people remember during Christmas. Like sipping a big cup of hot chocolate with marshmallows and sprinkles on top. Carolers everywhere. Staying up late until midnight to watch Santa Claus come down the chimney. A sweet Christmas date with a former lover, or a daughter’s last living memory of her late father who never failed to give her wonderful Christmas gifts.”

Professor Rain nodded in agreement. Arielle often amused her with her love for storytelling.

“I am amazed by how the three of you came up with different interpretations. Reader Response Theory allows you to be more creative than other literary theories that require you to use different focal lenses.”

The literature professor had completely lost track of time. Her class was the students’ last subject for the day and they were all immersed in talking about the different memories they have of Christmas.

“I had no idea it was already 4:12 p.m. I apologize for the extra 12 minutes. Class dismissed. I’ll probably send a reminder in our group chat for additional readings next week.”

As soon as Professor Rain stepped outside the room, Kate, Giona, and Arielle left too.

“Wanna race? I bet you’ll lose again this time, haha!” Kate challenged.

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“How dare you insult me? I’ve been practicing, you know,” Giona said proudly, raising her eyebrows.

While the two were making fun of each other, Arielle got a head start, “Last one to reach the flag pole buys ice cream!!!”

Kate and Giona raced down the stairs, skipping steps and sliding on rails. As expected, Arielle reached the flag pole first. Kate got there second, she used her long arms to reach for the pole before Giona could. The girls continued laughing, teasing Giona to get them their favorite ice cream.

Catching her breath, Kate asked, “Hey, do you know if Miss Rain has a boyfriend or family of her own?”

“Now that I think about it, she does seem intriguing... I mean, she never tells us anything about herself,” Arielle answered. “Although she might be strict at times, she is very kind too.”

Giona added, “Her mysterious personality does make our Literature class more interesting and engaging. But I also can’t help but wonder, ‘Who is Miss Rain when she’s not teaching?’”

“I’m here at the meeting place. Where are you? I hope you’re not backing out of our deal.”

“Not at all, Leader Rain. You know me. I keep my word. I’d rather break my bones than betray the Class-S Aura Manipulator of Blacksmith Society.”

“I don’t like compliments. I want results and actions.”

Rain got off the phone. She hates wasting her time. She went directly to an abandoned warehouse after her Literature class to meet

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a trainee member of their underground club. She was already an hour late for their meeting but the trainee still wasn't there.

She also despised the fact that traffic had been worse in the past few days. Cars build up on the roads in a country where mass transportation is a major headache, especially during the holiday season.

Another 30 minutes passed before the trainee member arrived.

"Leader Rain, everything you asked for is in this laptop. I made sure to upgrade it to the latest operating system, that's why it took me longer."

"Your service is not needed anymore. I won't even bother to know your name... weak soul." Rain looked straight into the trainee's eyes and strangled him, reciting an esoteric chant that summons all of her powerful auras to inflict deliberate curses.

"You have a weak soul. Because of your illegitimate blood, your biological parents abandoned you. You have never been wanted since your birth. Every woman you loved wholeheartedly only took advantage of your gullibility and desperation to be accepted," Rain said.

The nameless trainee member was terrified and hallucinating. He couldn't shout for help out of shock.

"Now, you bring that same shallow and useless desperation to Blacksmith Society. **YOU DERAILED OUR PLANS FOR WEEKS BECAUSE OF YOUR STUPIDITY!!!!**"

Rain's left eye turned snake-like, and her body emanated a black and crimson aura. "**DESTROY YOURSELF, WEAK SOUL! NEVER DISTURB US AGAIN!**"

She let go of the trainee member, disgusted that she needed to

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strangle him to make her curses more powerful. When she was done, she took out a bottle of isopropyl alcohol from her bag and sprayed it all over her hands.

Rain left the place as if nothing happened. She booked a cab to accomplish her next task before the day ended.

The trainee member was found lifeless that night. The police officers and detectives refused to provide any information to the media. They were too stunned to talk about how horrible the body was discovered or what the potential cause of death was.

They refused to believe it was self-inflicted, even though a suicide note was found next to the lifeless body.

* * *

“Rain, sweetie!” The handsome high-profile assassin embraced her as she entered his condo.

“I’m sorry it took longer than I promised to finish him off,” Rain apologized.

The ambiance of the place was so cozy and warm. She glanced around and smiled when she saw how vibrant everything was. She adored the different sizes of Santa Claus sculptures, including a gingerbread guy and a little drummer boy. She also noticed the unfinished decorations on a 6-foot-tall Christmas tree.

He opened his laptop to find the playlist he made for Rain. It was a collection of joyful Christmas songs she loved singing out loud. They have a long history in the underground society. She feels secure with him although they both have normalized murder in their own ways.

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“When did you come back?” Rain asked gently, wrapping her arms around his neck and slowly pinning him to bed.

“I missed you...” he sweetly whispered in her ears.

Rain knew what her mission was. She needed to get things done, even if it meant seducing him with her body first.

The high-profile assassin dozed off a few hours later. She quietly moved away from the bed and started looking for the document she needed to recover before he wakes up.

While looking for the document, she found a folder. She couldn't believe what she was seeing. The file contained information about the daughters of a politician, a tycoon, and a multimillionaire celebrity. What surprised her were the images of her students—Kate, Giona, and Arielle.

Her icy cold heart sank, paralyzed by some kind of fear foreign to her emotions while on a killing spree as an aura manipulator.

The photos of the three adorable kids made her remember the remarkable and innocent students in her Literature class—the only remaining activity and people that make her feel like a normal human being. They stop her from being a complete psychopath and help her resist the uncontrollable urge to use her esoteric powers to harm elders and children.

Rain couldn't think clearly anymore. She was afraid of losing them. Without a doubt, she knew what was more important in her heart.

She went back to the high-profile assassin but she couldn't attack him directly.. Rain summoned her aura manipulation powers again. Her left eye turned snake-like.

“This world is too underwhelming and boring for a powerful and

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strong assassin like you,” she whispered. “It’s no longer worthwhile. Your power is too great for these irrelevant beings. Go to the dimension where you truly belong.”

Now that he was under her spell, she figured it was the right time. She pulled out her knife and plunged it directly into his heart.

“I... I’m sorry. I didn’t want to kill you—you’ve been so kind to me, and maybe, because I’ve fallen in love with you too. But please forgive me. I did what I believe is best for everyone.”

* * *

“Miss Rain, here are our group term paper topics!” Kate handed over their subject proposal.

“We thought a lot about what you told us last week. You said our dynamics worked well in mythology, fairy tales, or fantasy genres,” Giona reminded her.

“And also, you were right. We do better with magical genres than just limiting ourselves to romance, comedy, and drama,” Arielle added.

“Great job! I know I made the right decision in putting the three of you in one group. It’s always better to think outside the box than stick to what you believe is easy or popular,” Rain gave her three favorite kids a warm smile while discreetly plotting her next move. “All your topics are good but I think you’ll do best with this one: *Analyzing the Parallelism of Philippine Mythology Deities to the Selected Contemporary Socio-Political Filipino Figures.*”

“MISS MA’AM!! Why *naman ganyan*? I can’t believe we worked hard on giving you 10 topics just for you to choose the most difficult

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one. We even thought of that at the last minute!” Kate exclaimed in disbelief. She seemed to want their professor to select a different one.

“Miss, don’t you want to consider the proposed topics we have for the fairy tale genre?” Giona pleaded.

Arielle, overcome with her emotions, asked, “Is that your final decision, Miss Rain? We exerted more effort thinking about the other topics. It’s ironic how the least expected topic we came up with was the one you chose.”

Rain suddenly remembered the folder she saw. She knew her three students’ lives were in danger. The thought of seeing their names and faces in the folder of a seasoned assassin indicated that someone wanted the task done quietly and perfectly. She wouldn’t allow anyone to lay a finger on them...even if it meant doing everything herself. She had no idea what awaits her, but she had chosen her fate.

“Choosing the most difficult topic would push you to work harder. You’ll trust and rely on one another more, and spend more time together,” she whispered.

Without her students knowing, Rain cast a protective spell on them using her aura manipulation skills. It has both offense and defense elements. It never crossed Rain’s mind that she would use the protection spell not only on herself but also on people she deeply cares about.

Her double life as Professor Rain was her only way to resist completely submitting to the dark demonic side. She didn’t expect to develop feelings for these kids. She treated them as her children and she was ready to defend them with all her might.

* * *

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Rain spent the next few weeks searching for answers using her own network and resources. She must discover who hired the high-profile assassin to murder her three students. These kids changed everything in her life. It was now simple for her to refuse a million-dollar deal to assassinate targets. Rain needed the money, but she was running out of time to protect her students.

Her protective spell would only work at its strongest as long as Kate, Arielle, and Giona worked together on their group term paper. *A person standing alone can be attacked and defeated, but two can stand back-to-back and conquer. Three are even better, for a cord of three strands is not easily broken*, she thought.

As soon as they're done, Rain won't be able to give them enough protection anymore whether it's against physical attacks by assassins or other paranormal ways like what she does best.

In her solo quests, she had drawn more enemies than allies. But she doesn't mind. Kate, Giona, and Arielle's lives are now more important to her than anything else. She realized she was prepared to give up her power, connections, and reputation as the Class-S Aura Manipulator of their underground group, Blacksmith Society, to save them. Not long after, Rain discovered the mastermind behind the secret operation of killing her students. And the reason? To give a painful warning to their fathers.

"December 9th," she sighed. "This will be my final mission."

She needs to say goodbye to her wicked aura manipulator side after this. Whether she kills or isolates herself from society is a decision she needs to make once she has accomplished her ultimate assignment.

* * *

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Rain used her connections and network to gain access to the top criminal lords' exclusive party. She disguised herself as a highly paid sex worker for an escort service valued at Php100,000 per client. Her years of experience shooting targets included the wealthy and powerful members of the underground society—drug lords, kidnap for ransom kingpins, sex and human trafficking bosses—name it, and she'll probably give you a long list of people she had murdered.

She looked around the hotel's function room as soon as she walked in. Videos of Filipino Christmas traditions such as caroling, *Misa de Gallo*, and *Noche Buena* were playing on the state-of-the-art LED projection displays. Rain gazed around the buffet section to see if there was someone suspicious nearby who may have poison or drugs on them. *Lechon*, *puto bumbong*, and *bibingka* were some of the delectable party foods served on the table. The staff and ushers were all dressed as elves and Santa Claus. The high-tech sound system blasted Christmas songs from Filipino and foreign artists.

Rain was only seeking one guy, but he was not an easy opponent. She could get killed, chopped up, and thrown into Manila Bay if she makes one wrong move. She knows the spine-chilling ending of the individuals who stood up to the syndicate leader who hired the high-profile assassin to end Kate, Giona, and Arielle's lives. His signature method of sending his message to enemies includes torturing and executing the most important people in their lives. Unfortunately, Rain's three students are daughters of people who had no idea they had provoked a demon.

She cannot afford any distractions in her plans. If she fails to murder her target, it will be as if she signed the death certificates of the three kids she had grown to love.

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“Failure is not an option. I need to finish him today,” Rain reminded herself calmly.

She finally spotted the syndicate leader after an hour of snooping around at this VIP party. She began to chant silently, unleashing her manipulative powers by exuding sexual energy. The men surrounding her were overcome with lust and couldn’t stop staring at Rain. A few of them approached her, but she just shrugged them off. She eventually made it to the syndicate leader and fully engaged her seductress aura till he turned toward her. He smirked and wrapped his arm around Rain’s waist. In front of everyone, she kissed him with their tongues touching. She placed her hands on his chest and slightly pushed him away.

“I like you. Do you want to have fun tonight?” she temptingly asked.

Like a gullible sheep slowly falling into the trap of a wolf, the syndicate leader agreed, held her hand, and pulled her away from the party crowd. The sexual tension between them was so strong they both needed to release it in the most intense way.

Rain smirked proudly as they walked down the hallway toward the syndicate leader’s penthouse hotel room. It was a walk in the park from there for her—a muscle memory. After all, no one had ever broken free from her aura manipulation.

It didn’t take her long to satisfy the syndicate leader’s sexual urges. Now, in his most vulnerable state, Rain delivered her most painful mental and emotional torture using her powers of manipulation.

“You shall have endless nightmares about everyone you abused, tormented, raped, and murdered,” she chanted. “You’ll experience all

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the grief, pain, desperation, hopelessness, and rage you brought upon the families of your victims. You'll wish it would end soon for hell would be a better place than what you're about to go through."

She saved her most horrifying spell for her ultimate mission: to make sure that this syndicate leader never wakes up but will not be declared clinically dead. She trapped his soul in a dimension between the living and the dead, making his ordeal truly worse than death.

After performing her spell, she gasped for air and regained her composure. She took her phone from her pocket and checked her class group chat. She saw messages from Kate, Giona, and Arielle. They wanted to know what Professor Rain Archangel's favorite fictional books were.

She broke down in tears of relief and gratitude. "It is finished. You're all safe now, kids..." she said out loud.

Never in her 32 years of living secretly with humans did she experience such a profound emotion—even more powerful than her spells. Rain's heart is finally at peace knowing Kate, Giona, and Arielle are safe from the syndicate leader's wicked plans. "*Salamat mga bata. Mahal na mahal ko kayo.*"

She would never forget the reassuring feeling of unconditional love. It was the perfect ending for the evil aura manipulation era of her life. Rain smiled... and cried all through the night.

* * *

"Thank you so much for the past months we've been together. I'm sorry for leaving you so soon. My family needs me to handle a private matter. I... I'm afraid I can't return to class anymore."

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Everyone was surprised when Professor Rain Archangel made a big announcement a few weeks before the semester ends.

“My substitute professor is more experienced and has been around longer in the academe. You’ll learn a lot from him,” she continued.

Kate exclaimed, “Miss Ma’am, no matter how amazing he is, you’re still our favorite!”

“Yup! That’s right. I never felt bored in your class!” said Giona.

Arielle added, “I’ll miss how you inspired me to widen my imagination during discussions...”

The other students couldn’t hide their sadness at the unexpected news. Rain didn’t want to see them cry. After all, this should be a happy goodbye.

“Before I go, I’d like to give each one of you a special gift. But promise me that you will only open it on December 25th, Christmas Day. I’m not sure if you’ll keep your promise but consider this a test of your integrity and honesty. That’s the final lesson I want to leave with you.”

* * *

The following week after leaving the school, Rain surrendered to an old friend who was now a respected director at a government agency. They cut ties after she felt betrayed when they decided to part ways in the past.

“I wanted to save you, Rain. You destroyed not just yourself, but also others you believed deserved to die. What made you change your mind and turn yourself in now?” the director asked.

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“Can I ask you for a favor? Consider this my last wish before I die inside the maximum security,” Rain pleaded to her estranged friend.

“What is it?”

Rain handed her a folder. It contained information and images of Kate, Giona, and Arielle.

“Please keep these three kids safe. They’re the reason I’m giving up now. I want to pay for my horrifying sins to honor my memory with them. Instead of killing myself, I feel that living longer would be a better punishment than death. That’s what I deserve for watching people suffer as I killed them ruthlessly.”

* * *

Christmas Day finally arrived.

Kate, Giona, and Arielle were thrilled to start their video call meeting at nine o’clock in the morning. They promised to open Professor Rain Archangel’s gifts during their online meeting after she left for abroad to be with her family (at least that’s what they thought).

“Are you ready? I waited a long time for this! No matter how much I wanted to open it. I don’t want to let myself down and fail Miss Ma’am’s final test,” Kate said excitedly.

“I’m sure I won’t guess it right even if I think of every possible present Miss Rain might give us,” Giona added.

“My gut tells me it’s so special that she didn’t buy it. Instead, she made it for us!” Arielle said.

“All right, you guys. It’s time!” said Kate.

“One... Two... Three!!!” the trio shrieked in unison as the sounds of tearing gift wrappers overlapped.

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They all got the same book—*The Magic of Your Dreams*—and when they opened it, there was a long, personal message for each of them on the first page. Professor Rain Archangel self-published this book with just three copies remaining. She chose to give these to them because she believed in their potential to achieve more in life after college as long as they believe in their dreams too.

“Fire is my courageous power!” Kate declared loudly and proudly.

“Air is freedom—my genuine alignment!” Giona said gently.

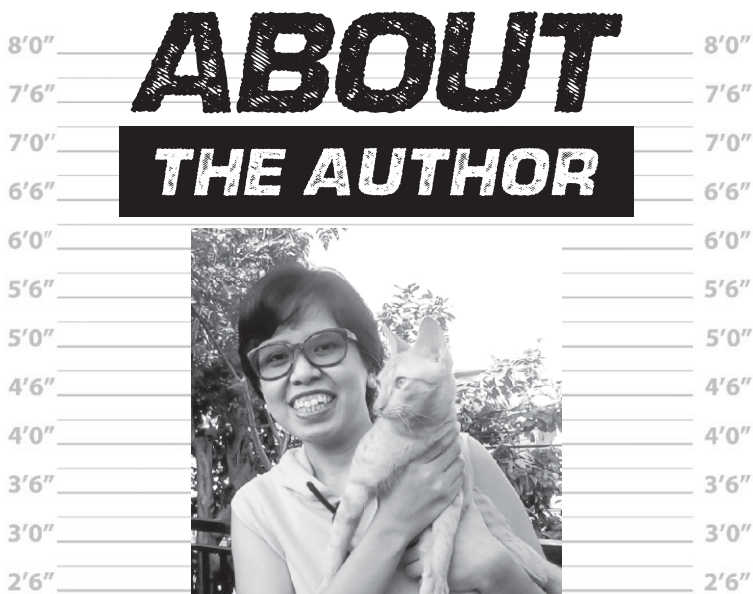
“Water is my magical prowess!” Arielle exclaimed happily to herself.

The professor’s message all ended with this line: *Abracadabra means ‘I create as I speak.’ So, kids, I pray that all of your dreams will come true!*

In their heads, they could hear Rain’s voice saying these words with visions of their promised future, overflowing with sparkle and magic, fulfilled.



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In her early 30s, she finally achieved her definition of success and happiness. She’s on her way to fulfilling more dreams and this time, it includes supporting other people’s dreams too. She lives by the mantra “What’s meant for you will never pass you.” That’s why she isn’t pressured with her own life journey. It’s better to attract joy and luck than chase them, after all.

To say that writing is her passion is an understatement. It’s her bread and butter and her God-given gift. Writing and storytelling are her zones of genius.

PORTRAITS AND SILHOUETTES UNDER THE CHRISTMAS LIGHTS

By Alfredo Figueroa

It is a day like no other, the streets are half-empty—gone are the peddlers selling items from street foods to red *ampaw* envelopes. On the way to the office, Maya imagines the faces of all her officemates from the day before. She is trying to recall any sign of anxiety or guilt hidden deep in the recesses of their feigned revelry. She needs to uncover the identity of a man who was present yesterday. She is deep into her thoughts when she runs into Rona, her officemate.

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“Don’t you scare me because I’m already scared,” Maya pleads, surprised at Rona’s sudden emergence from a street corner.

It is the 25th of December—Christmas day—a time for families to gather at home. But instead, here they are, reporting to the office of United Alliance Bank. One of their clients filed a complaint about the missing forty thousand dollars in their company account. The corporate client is demanding its immediate return, but per bank records, everything was in order. There were three foreign outward remittances the client ordered that day, each one amounting to forty thousand dollars. The second remittance came in almost simultaneously with the third, but the client insisted that only two were theirs. Therefore, several employees were called to the office to investigate the anomaly...on Christmas Day.

“Fuck! I can’t wait to discover the bastard who has the tenacity to pull this off! I have worked so hard on my job and suddenly...this!” Rona growls. “Now, we are all suspects of the crime, implicated because all transactions are passed to us when they are verified and approved already. Not my fault. Promise, if this fraudster gets caught, I will grill his balls and add them to my pasta this New Year’s Eve!”

“I agree with you. But what if it’s a girl?” Maya asks.

“Then I’ll make a cup of milk tea out of her boobs!” Rona is a tactless, big-mouth, seasoned teller at United Alliance Bank.

She’s right. If the transaction already passed approval, she’s off the hook and I remain answerable for the fiasco, Maya thinks. *Fuck!*

As the head of the branch operation, Maya is responsible if there are any lapses found. She’s sure that it’s going to be her head on the chopping board. *Bullshit! My 20 years of service could go down the drain.*

Maya soon discovers the third instruction was highly suspicious.

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The instruction was sent via fax five minutes before the cut-off time, affording little time to review. It was sent at a time when everyone was already busy in their merrymaking. The staff assigned to confirm the instruction admitted that she could hardly hear the person on the other line because of the party noise.

It's either she or the client who made the error. She could be confirming two remittance instructions since the details are almost identical, except for the beneficiary's account details, Maya believes.

But Maya observed another suspicious circumstance. The third instruction came out clean—the fax paper was well cut. Ordinarily, fax paper bears on its edge the fax number of the sending party, this one did not. Maya keeps her observation to herself, but she is already shriveling inside. *Could it be an inside job?*

She must act fast to protect the interest of the bank and the evidence that may lead to the culprit. But her boss, the branch manager, is nagging her every five minutes to solve the case.

“How did it happen?” the branch manager asks when they arrive at the bank.

“Sir, I was on lunch break at the time, and I did not expect any more incoming instructions as it was already late,” Maya answers.

The computer report is clear. The transaction was approved by her boss, the branch manager. He is agitated, arguing that operation people are the ones responsible to establish if the transaction is in order and that his action is simply routine. He reasons that the transactions submitted to him for approval are assumed “good to go” and verified. He wants Maya pinned for the lapse. He isn’t there to help unravel the mystery, instead, he is there to look for his way out and is shadowing Maya’s every move. Perhaps, like her, he is

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suspicious that it was an inside job, and Maya is not exempt from being a suspect.

* * *

The day before the incident...

Hanging beside an office desk, a sign reads: *Life is an echo. What you send out comes back. What you sow, you reap. What you give, you get. What you see in others, exists in you.* It's a quote from American author Zig Ziglar.

Signs or stickers containing similar quotes or Bible verses are common in the workplaces of United Alliance Bank employees—with most of them asking for protection and guidance at work. It's a tedious job that requires attention to detail and errors come at a cost. But for Maya, the branch operations head, the quotations are also applicable in other aspects of life.

Maya is a respected bank operations officer who is known for her strictness and eye for detail. She has two personalities: strict-but-fair bank officer during office hours and crazy bitch outside of work. It is the latter personality that makes her hit it off with Rona.

"Override please..." yelled the teller.

"One moment," Maya hung up the phone.

It was the last working day before the Christmas break and excitement was very much in the air. It was a busy day for the staff. There were the usual incessant phone calls, inquiries, complaints, deadlines, and, of course, the numerous transactions and Christmas parties to attend. Moreover, the staff also had to deal with a loud boss constantly interfering with operations.

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“Is this Telegraphic Transfer funded? They’re already short in funds. Request the client to swap part of his yen or euro account for dollars. Make it quick. Cut-off time is 15 minutes from now,” Maya said.

“Ma’am, they are requesting an extension. Their signatories are still out on lunch break—” replied Jasmine, the person in charge of the confirmation.

“—and I have not taken my lunch yet and it is almost two o’clock. What are they eating, a whole roasted pig? It’s been two hours already and we’re still waiting for their action. Tell them to rush it or their TT couldn’t be processed today,” Maya retorted.

Billy, the bank manager approached. “Shoot it out now, I’ll cover your ass audit time,” he said.

“Sir, it’s the computer system. It wouldn’t allow approval without funds to cover,” Maya reasoned.

“Then be creative. Do something. We cannot lose a big client for the simple reason that their signatories are not available when you already talked to their people. Do the conversion now and I’ll have it signed by them tomorrow.”

“But sir...”

“No but! If you want the branch to meet its quota this year, you must bend the rules a little. Competition is stiff. Do you know how hard it is to solicit new clients? Besides, if the branch meets its target, we will all benefit. You may even get your long-awaited promotion.” Billy walked away to avoid arguments.

Witch, why can’t she just resign? She’s already old anyway. She would never become a manager with that sure-footed attitude! Life is all about risk, Billy mumbled in his head.

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That darned queen! Does he know what he's asking of me? I am supposed to be the policewoman to guard the assets of this bank, and he's asking me to collude with him if only to accommodate his client's whims? Maya thought.

Billy loves to show off his authority to his clients and will not hesitate to berate his staff in public, but he has weaknesses. Billy pretends to be straight whenever one of his VIP clients is around—Army General Roman Manuel.

“Yes, sir,” Billy could only say on all of General Manuel’s requests however irregular it may seem.

From a domineering boss, Billy turns into a subservient sheep when in the presence of his VIP client. General Manuel belongs to the branch’s top 20 clients. He has a poker face and a deep voice. Whenever he visits the bank, he is always in a hurry.

“Coffee, sir?” Billy asked.

“No, just hand me my money so I can go,” General Manuel replied.

“Yes, sir. My teller is already preparing the cash and she will deliver it to you here.”

“Make sure it is all clean bills, not the crumpled ones.”

“Yes, sir. I made sure of that. Thank you, sir,” he added as the general left.

General Manuel is a long-time client of the branch that Billy inherited from his predecessor, but Billy made a mistake once and regrets it to this day. Billy used to be the general’s confidant when it comes to money matters. He invited Billy many times to his golf tournaments, but the latter always declined, afraid that his effeminate side would show. But to show that he appreciated the general’s gesture, Billy invited him to dinner once. Billy’s mistake was he didn’t

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bring a staff member with him. After all, he is harsh to his staff, who could he bring? He did invite a manager from another branch to the dinner, but his plus one backed out at the last minute.

Billy and the general ended up having dinner together at Nayon Restaurant. With just the two of them and complete with singing waiters serenading them, they ended up looking like a couple and it made the general uncomfortable. You could almost taste the awkwardness in the air that General Manuel walked out of the restaurant without saying a word, not even a ‘thank you’.

“Bye, sir. Nice to have served you...” Billy uttered his usual spiel after the teller handed the cash to the general. However, his words fell on deaf ears.

“Validation number one. What you sow, you reap,” Maya blurted as soon as she was out of earshot. She was secretly beaming. *It’s what you call karma*, Maya added in her head.

After the general left, Billy felt all eyes were on him. “Work, work, work...” he jeered, and everyone bowed their heads as if they didn’t see what just transpired.

“Sir, just want to let you know that I would be here only until the end of this month. I am resigning, effective January 16. But since I still have unspent vacation leave, I am already going on terminal leave,” said Maya.

Billy was surprised but didn’t want to show emotion. Their past decisions led them to collide many times and he had dreamed of this moment many times. *At last*, he secretly said in relief.

“Why didn’t you mention this to me before?” Billy asked.

“Sir, now’s the only time I mentioned it because you just arrived the other day from your trip abroad.”

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“And what would you be doing after retirement?”

“I’m not retiring, sir. I’m moving to the other bank next to this office,” Maya replied.

“What?” Billy’s high-pitch voice echoed up to the high heavens, attracting everyone’s attention. “Have you given this a good thought?” he asked.

Billy suddenly realized how Maya had become their client’s favorite go-to person at the bank, especially those who encounter problems with their accounts. Her moving to a competitor bank next door could possibly influence their decision on where to place their money.

No...no! This can't be real, Billy tried to calm himself down. *Come on, Billy. This witch is in operations and has no say in marketing anyway. It's not her turf.*

“Well, I guess there is nothing I can do since you already made your decision. Good luck. You’ll have a lot of learning and unlearning to do once you sit there. I’m sure they have a different setup when it comes to operation,” Billy said.

“Actually, I am offered the position of branch manager, sir.”

Billy was even more shocked. *Aw heck! And you'll be pirating my clients when my quota next year is increased by 20%! You must be kidding!*

But Billy is good at hiding his feelings, so he faked it and said, “Wow! Good for you, congratulations.” Then he turned around and smirked, not minding the CCTV camera.

That afternoon Maya randomly reviewed the CCTV footage as part of her tasks and saw Billy’s real reaction.

Haha! So you are threatened after all. Good for you. Maya smiled.

* * *

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Back to the present...

Finally, the initial investigation is over and United Alliance Bank Head office is informed of the incident. They immediately send an audit team to validate the investigation and dig deeper.

Meanwhile, Maya pushes with her resignation but her benefits are placed on hold until she is cleared. Billy is forced to go on leave pending an investigation of the case. Since he represents United Alliance Bank when he approved the transaction despite its irregularity, United Alliance Bank had no choice but to pay the client.

In a parallel investigation done by a private security agency the bank hired, they learned that Billy keeps a “boy toy” and that he is living with him in a rented, flashy, high-rise condominium unit in Makati. But that doesn’t make him the culprit, instead, it makes him look like the suspect in the fraud. For now, he is charged with gross negligence.

“Well, I’m new here. I can resign any time without worrying about losing my retirement benefits or anything,” Billy laments.

Jasmine, the staff who confirmed the instruction is a new hire and still on probationary status. She is a modern-day Muslim and hails from Basilan. She moved to Taguig City in Metro Manila when she was in college. The course she took in college, HRM, is not even business-related. But because she has a beautiful face, the bank thought she can become a client magnet and hired her. Background investigation reveals she has a brother killed in a military operation in their province, and this prompted her parents to send her off to Manila for safety.

“Could her family have a link to a terrorist group? Maybe she was

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planted in the bank to look for weaknesses in the system to defraud it?” asked one of the members of the security agency team.

The head of the investigation team thinks it’s impossible. Jasmine is a newbie and still learning the ropes of banking. Unless she has a cohort, somebody who knows the ins and outs of banking, she’s an unlikely suspect. But something puzzles them about the fraud; why send the money abroad if the culprit is in Manila? The remittance instruction says “for further credit” to an account in Morocco under a foreigner’s name. Morocco is largely a Muslim country and, somehow, it seems to connect the dots. Jasmine’s possible motive, they conclude, is avenging her brother’s death and the money is meant to finance the terrorist group’s activities.

“That is inconclusive and discriminatory,” raised the head of the investigation team. “It’s all circumstantial evidence that wouldn’t stand scrutiny of the court. We have to find hard evidence. Meantime, let us just keep an eye on her.”

Jasmine files her resignation after the incident. She makes a promise to herself never to apply to any bank again. The CCTV footage shows her passing the faxed instruction to the janitor, *Kuya* Joel, who then walked out of the CCTV’s coverage area. When he returned, he handed her a folder.

They discover that Joel has common roots with Jasmine. His parents are also from Mindanao, and they speak the same local dialect. It’s also the reason why Jasmine and Joel get along easily. This common ground has even allowed Jasmine to exploit his kindness, making Joel file documents when maintenance workers are not allowed to do so. But Joel seems to enjoy Jasmine’s sometimes abusive behavior because he’s secretly infatuated with her. However, he never

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tells her this as he is afraid of being ridiculed due to their perceived gap in social status.

“Hi Joel, I saw you the day before Christmas at Quezon City,” a male messenger on a motorbike greets him.

Joel ignores the messenger; he knows what he’s up to. He just needs a springboard to start a conversation with Jasmine and work from there to get close to her. Just another guy smitten by Jasmine’s beauty.

“What were you doing there, Joel?” Rona chimes in.

“I delivered a Christmas gift to one of Boss Billy’s clients,” the janitor replies.

“Aww, but you told us you’re going to Makati that day. If you told us you’re going to Quezon City, I could have asked you to send my Christmas gift to my *inaanak* Buboy, Mariel’s kid. Mariel is a former staff here. She moved to our Quezon City branch a few months ago.”

“But their branch is out of my way,” Joel reasons.

“Anyway, who’s the client you met that day?” insists Rona.

“I can’t remember her name,” Joel replies. “I had a lot of errands that day.”

“Hmm, that’s weird,” Rona says. “You have a photographic memory, that I know. I just can’t imagine a client from Quezon City opening an account in Pasay.”

“Good point,” Maya adds, hearing Rona’s comment. She has started to suspect that Billy may have intentionally allowed the lapse to pass his scrutiny for a purpose. He has a wide network. Who knows, he might even have relatives in Morocco.

As for Joel, he isn’t your typical janitor. He may dress shabbily because of the uniform provided by the agency, but he is smart. He

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can easily memorize clients' telephone numbers, account information, and other details. He can even recognize people by their names even if they only meet once. He knows how to use computer programs like Microsoft Word Document, Microsoft Excel, and God knows what else. Sometimes, the bank's staff asks him to assist in preparing simple documents, including a Christmas gift list for their clients using the bank's computer.

Not known to many, Joel is a graduate of a science high school. He also attended the country's top university and could have been their boss if not for his rebellious instinct during his younger years. Joel lost his mother to prolonged illness while his dad was busy womanizing. Like many young people, he rebelled and dropped out of school.

Rona and Joel are best buddies at work. Aside from Maya, Rona thinks that Joel is one of the most reliable people in her workplace. He never lets her down. Joel has a good sense of humor and is well-liked by the branch's employees. Rona doesn't want to think that Joel had a hand in the fake fund transfer. However, it is possible. Joel forgetting the name of the client he delivered a gift to is strange, and it intrigues her.

But new findings show otherwise. The investigation team found that the faxed instruction came from a commercial photocopy and fax services stall located along the roadsides in Quezon City. Unfortunately, however, the stall doesn't have a CCTV.

Rona becomes edgy and starts to get paranoid. She notices that Joel is slowly distancing himself from her. Perhaps because she is too talkative and spontaneous in asking questions that may cause him spill the beans.

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And then, there is another angle the investigators are looking into. It involves 25-year-old security guard Alvarez. Good-looking, muscled, and sun-tanned, Alvarez never reports to duty without his hair combed neatly. He was once spotted carrying Maya's groceries at an exclusive members-only supermarket in Alabang, Muntinlupa.

It is highly unlikely that Maya and Alvarez accidentally ran into each other and being a gentleman, Alvarez offered to carry Maya's groceries. The place is a high-end supermarket and they doubt that someone like Alvarez would be shopping there. Meeting at that place is doubtful too. Alvarez lives in Tondo while Maya lives in Cavite. The distance alone, not to mention the traffic, makes the connection more unlikely.

Both the bank's staff and clients tease Alvarez, aka The Hunk, a lot. They would often say that women passing by stop to look at him. They often comment that he should be in showbiz.

Maya, on the other hand, is in her late thirties and a liberal-minded person. She openly shares that she wants a child but doesn't want to be married. She's very outspoken, explicitly telling people that the guy needs to be good-looking to improve their would-be child's genes. It's either she is joking or downright serious in her demands. Apart from that, everybody knows that when outside of work, Maya can be wild, but they assume it's all for the sake of fun.

The investigators agree that it's an interesting angle, but they cannot establish a motive. Lifestyle checks of Maya and Alvarez show no unusual or big acquisitions and purchases. Plus, their routines remain the same. Unless, of course, they're both good at hiding, Maya is a seasoned operations professional and knows exactly how the investigation would go. She could have guided Alvarez on how to

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conduct himself to avoid suspicions.

Who could be the culprit? Who is Judas in their office?

* * *

Finally, it's December 29, the last business day of the year and everybody pretends everything is normal inside the office. Rona, with her usual big mouth, teases that she misses the client's representative, Missy, because of her outlandish outfits.

"Didn't you know? The company fired Missy a month ago," a co-employee remarks.

"What?! But she's been hanging out here even on weeks prior to Christmas. Well, except for the last day and she didn't mention anything about it," Rona replies.

"Well, they found out that she's been duping the company by switching the buying and selling rates of foreign currencies that the company traded," the co-employee reveals.

"Gosh, but isn't she the niece of the company's owner? Where is she now?"

"We heard she moved out of her rented apartment in Quezon City and went abroad to marry her Moroccan boyfriend. She became head over heels for this Moroccan guy she met on Facebook, and we heard she is the one financing their wedding. You know women, once they step into their thirties, they start to panic because of their biological clocks."

"Aww, shit!"

"And oh, her best friend Mau, the one who confirmed the fax instruction, was also fired after the holidays. They found out that

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they're in connivance."

"That's double shit!" Rona wails.

Everyone within earshot couldn't believe what they just heard.

Wow! Here we are, almost on the verge of killing each other and suspecting everyone, and still, we failed to think that the culprit could be from the client's side!

Maya thinks to herself.

All because we think inside the box! We are so focused on policies and procedures just because we are afraid to offend the client and tell them that the error could be from their side of the fence.

That day, the case has been deemed closed. The client reverted the money paid to them by the bank with a lengthy letter of apology and personal visits by its president. Its owner didn't want his Filipina wife's niece to be charged in court and their company name dragged into the mess.

"We didn't know the name of her Moroccan boyfriend," the company president shares. "We didn't care about her personal life until somebody in the office remembers her mention his name."

"Glad it's over," Maya sighs.

* * *

At last, it's New Year's Eve and everyone is at home and at peace with their families and loved ones. Rona, feeling uneasy with the reality of returning to the office without her best friend Maya, calls the latter on Facebook Messenger. Rona asks her friend to tell her the real reason why she's transferring to another bank. Maya admits that it's because of her relationship with Alvarez.

"It's not actually because of Boss Billy with his sometimes

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irrational behavior, I can handle him. I made the move because I want to spare Alvarez the odds of being ridiculed every time he is with me, and also partly to avoid a conflict of interest. I am always transparent with our relationship if anyone asks. But, at the same time, I want to be discrete about it. I believe that it is something between us and it doesn't need to be flaunted in public."

"Wow, I'm blown away," Rona gasps.

"Where are you, anyway?" Maya asks.

"Somewhere remote with poor signal."

"All right. Happy New Year."

That night, inside Maya's apartment, she and Alvarez are spending their first New Years' Eve together.

"Harder. Faster. Harder..." Maya insists.

"Umm, sweetheart, that's all I got."

They are cooking *ube halaya* and Maya wants Alvarez to put those muscles to work by stirring the mixture harder and faster. This Filipino dessert is a favorite during *Media Noche*. Filipinos believe that preparing sticky foods during the holidays will keep the family together as well. Maya wishes that the same goes for partners and couples.

At midnight, the night sky lights up with a fireworks display and everyone goes out into the streets to celebrate.

"Happy New Year, sweetheart," Alvarez whispers.

"Happy New Year, babe..." Maya chuckles before they are interrupted by a telephone call.

"Where the heck are you at this fucking hour? I've been calling you for like forever, but you're not picking up! Listen, I'll be home tomorrow. Our regiment is pulled out of Basilan, and we'll be landing

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at the Villamor Air Base tomorrow at nineteen hundred hours. I expect you to be there. Copy that?”

It’s Alvarez’s wife, Private First Class Gabriella. She’s an active soldier in the field under the wings of General Manuel.

“Yes, sweetheart,” Alvarez answers. “Yes, I’ll be there. Yes, I’ll prepare that... Yes, understood.”

Patay kang Maya ka! Maya gulps. She knows Alvarez is married but he told her that they are no longer on good terms and that she has already left him for good. She did not know they have reconciled and she is coming home.

* * *

Before the New Year break...

Jasmine, the newbie, found solace in the arms of Joel. She confided in him that her brother was on neither side of the warring parties; he just got caught in the crossfire between government soldiers and a terrorist group hiding in their place.

Jasmine eventually resigned and moved to work at a high-end hotel as a kitchen associate. She now calls Joel by his first name, dropping the prefix *kuya*. Jasmine admitted to being impressed by Joel’s ability and neatness in the workplace. He cut documents in uniform sizes before filing them. That explained the missing print mark showing the origin of the fax instruction.

Meanwhile, Rona still couldn’t believe Joel can’t remember the name of the client in Quezon City when she asked him the second time.

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“Rona *naman*, how can I mention to you her name in front of many clients and not cause laughter, especially from those who don’t understand other cultures? It’s not fair to her. She’s Thai and is married to a Korean. Her name is Phut(r)a Mo Tae.”

Rona giggled. “Are you making this up?”

“No, check the record. It’s really her name.”

“Well, I admire you for your sensitivity. You’re right. If you said the name out loud, I would have laughed too. Shame on me.”

Meanwhile, after a long thought, Billy filed his resignation before the bank management committee could deliberate on his case. That way, his record remained untarnished but before that, he got into another trouble—his boy toy turned out to be the rebellious nephew of General Manuel and the latter invited him to dinner at his reclusive mansion in Cavite.

“I’m sorry, sir, but my car broke down,” Billy tried to make an excuse.

“I’ll have my driver pick you up,” the general commanded.

“I’m sorry, sir, but I have another commitment on the said date.”

“All right Billy, I can wait. When are you available?”

“Sir I would like to inform you that I’m no longer with the bank. I’ve already resigned.”

“It’s okay Billy,” the general replied. “Let’s say it’s for old times’ sake. No other excuses, I hope.”

Billy was on the verge of panic. *What am I going to say? What am I going to do? Dear life, must this be the end?*

* * *

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Back to the present...

Meanwhile, while everyone is with their families welcoming the New Year, Rona is in Turkey. Away from common Filipino tourist destinations such as Hong Kong and Singapore, Rona is enjoying her time in Istanbul.

Across the street from her hotel, she looks at an electronic billboard screen that shows an advertisement with the words “*Information is Power*”.

Rona is on a three-day vacation that her Moroccan brother-in-law Muhammad Amir arranged for her. Coincidentally, Muhammad Amir is also the name of Missy’s fiancé.

“Wow, my stint in theatre acting during college really pays off,” Rona tells herself. “I love your boyfriend’s name, Missy. Thanks for sharing the info.”

Rona sips her tea and enjoys her spicy pasta. She couldn’t help but smile while listening to a song playing on her phone. It’s from her favorite boy band, Blue.

And the song title? *Guilty*.



ABOUT

THE AUTHOR



Alfredo “Fred” Figueroa is a photo hobbyist by day and a storyteller by night. He wrote and self-published the book *Signals of Transcendence*, *The Snake Island Experience*, and contributed stories to several anthologies including *A Journey Through Eight Realms* and *We are Watching Vol VI*.

Fred is a member of the Alpha Camera Club. He enjoys taking photographs and when not busy, experiments with oil painting.

THE ILUSTRADOS

By Richmond Camero

Ponce was staring at the television, its screen still black and powered off. He was waiting for his colleague—maybe his friend, too, with all the missions they shared—to arrive. As long as he was doing this crazy job of theirs, he would always be called “Ponce” and not his real name. Same with his two other friends and their aliases.

Now, the screen mocked him with no ideas about their next heist.

Ponce heard keys clinking, and instinctively, his head swiveled toward the door. He kept his ass glued to the couch and smirked. He knew it was Rizal outside. The doorknob turned, and the external door was opened. Another door was installed inside with two more locks with different keys. Ponce appreciated the layers of security, but he wondered how useful that would be if they would need to escape. And as much as he wanted to upgrade the archaic locks into digital, he felt safer with those metal bolts. Digital devices could always be

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hacked, and he knew several tech-savvy criminals other than him.

Two more clicks and Rizal was inside. He walked toward Ponce and said, “Man, I hate those locks.” He rolled his muscled shoulders as if it really brought him agony.

Ponce shrugged. “I’m still not used to it, but I’m not complaining,” he said.

“Give me a few more months, and I’ll take that down,” Rizal said. “Be right back. Let me grab a beer.” He walked to the kitchen without waiting for Ponce’s response.

Ponce raised his eyebrows. “And when did you start drinking beer?”

“If it’s organic and has zero calories, why would I deprive myself?” Rizal opened the bottle with his bare hands and took a swig. “Want some?”

“I’ll pass,” Ponce said, massaging his temples. “I have to think, and you should, too.”

Rizal appeared in front of Ponce. “We’ll think of something. We always do.” He sat beside Ponce and took the television’s remote control.

Ponce raised his right hand. “Don’t—”

But before Ponce could finish, Rizal had already pressed the power button. Rizal smiled and asked, “What are you so scared of?”

The news blared, showing the faces of Ponce, Rizal, and del Pilar, their third member.

“Will the *Ilustrados* appear this year?” The lady newscaster on the television asked. “It’s almost Christmas, and we haven’t heard from these gentlemen thieves and their incredible heists. Is this the last time we’ll be seeing them? Have they all retired? Watch out—”

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Ponce snatched the remote from Rizal and turned off the television.

“Oh,” Rizal said, his eyes turning to Ponce. “That’s why.”

Ponce sighed. “They had a one-hour special about us, showing our previous escapades. I wonder why those channels would do that. Featuring thieves.”

“Maybe we’re just *that* great,” Rizal said, emptying his bottle of organic beer.

Ponce smirked in response. That, he couldn’t deny. For four years, the Ilustrados had made a name stealing priceless and absurd objects—the *Spoliarium* in the National Museum and the Time Sculpture statue in SM Megamall, among others. Nobody can top that, and the three of them were proud of their work.

Except now, they were only two.

Del Pilar retired, saying he wanted to live a sober life. Since then, Ponce and Rizal couldn’t figure out what they would do next. Ponce was the tech guy, Rizal was the muscle, and del Pilar was the mind, in charge of the heist’s planning and logistics. Without the mind, how could they function?

“We have to do it,” Rizal said, disturbing Ponce’s musings.

Ponce nodded, his thoughts still a swamp of useless ideas.

“Do you want to do it?” Rizal asked.

“I do,” Ponce answered without hesitation, and he knew it to be true. Despite their predicament, he enjoyed their dangerous escapades. He believed enough in the Ilustrados to stay. “What do we do now?”

Rizal smiled. “I have an idea.”

Ponce’s eyes lit up. “That’s gotta be brilliant.”

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“Oh yes, it is.”

“Now, let’s put those muscles to good use.”

Rizal thought for a moment. “Do you know that globe? In Mall of Asia?”

Ponce rolled his eyes. “Stop. Don’t say anything more.”

“I’m serious!” Rizal said.

“I am, too.”

“You said you wanted ideas.”

“Just the sensible ones.”

Rizal held Ponce’s shoulders. “But it’ll be amazing.”

“Like how they reported that the globe was stolen and it’s just for show?” Ponce sighed. “Give me something else.”

Rizal was quiet for a few moments, then he said. “I know now.”

“Shoot,” Ponce said, still pessimistic.

“The *Paskuhan* is coming up,” Rizal said.

That sounded sensible to Ponce. “You mean the one at the University of Santo Tomas?”

Rizal nodded. “Saw an ad earlier. Lots of singers and bands. Do you know who’ll be the main attraction?”

“Who?”

“Jose Mari Chan.”

Ponce thought for a moment. Was this their breakthrough? “You mean you want us to kidnap him,” he said.

Rizal hesitated. “Well, sort of. He’s the Christmas national treasure. Who else can top that?”

“But we’re not kidnappers. We’re thieves,” Ponce said, waving his hand. “That’s not how the *Ilustrados* work.”

Rizal shrugged. “Desperate times. Besides, we won’t harm him.”

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“And what do you want us to do after we got him?”

“We’ll ask for ransom. Or we can set him free after 12 days. We’ll tell the people he’s a gift from us.”

Ponce was thinking, the gears in his head moving into place. “Give me a sec,” he said. He walked to a nearby desk and took his laptop. Ponce turned it on and looked into information on Jose Mari Chan. In the background, he started running a script that would scrape targeted news and social media sites for any mention of their target celebrity.

“What do you have?” Rizal asked, peeking from behind him.

“Give it time to make the magic work,” Ponce replied.

After two minutes, Ponce has several data on Jose Mari Chan. He started with social media first because that’s where the juicy things come from. “Look. He has a reservation in this fancy restaurant in BGC. It’s three days from now,” he said.

“What’s the restaurant?” Rizal asked.

“It’s Brunch at Majorka’s.”

“Oh, that’s fancy. Serves good steak and mashed potatoes.”

“You’ve tried that?” Ponce asked.

“Just once,” Rizal said. “Have to treat myself sometimes.”

Ponce returned to the laptop screen. Were they really going to do it? Rizal was right that they were desperate. Maybe, this was the only way to go.

Ponce looked at Rizal and said, “All right, here’s the plan.”

* * *

Detective Frederick “Ricky” Manahan watched the feature on the

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Ilustrados with a frown. He couldn't believe that anyone would sensationalize these thieves, considering the conservative nature of the country.

What he cared about was that he was newly assigned to the Ilustrados case.

Ricky shifted in the chair in his office, his desk littered with papers and notes on the members of the Ilustrados. There were only a few, and Ricky wasn't happy with that. If only the previous detectives assigned to the case were competitive.

Case in point, Detective Gerald Uy had a ton of experience. He was good in the field, and his deductive reasoning was close to becoming art. Maybe it was his declining age or lack of passion, but in the past four years, he never made it close to the Ilustrados.

Ricky brought out a pack of Marlboro from his pocket, took a stick of cigarette, and placed it between his teeth. He chewed on it while thinking.

The Ilustrados would do something before the year ends. He was sure of it. Those criminals were the same. Narcissistic. Always wanting to put on a show. They had to feed their ego. Even if the Ilustrados were portraying themselves as gentlemen, if one would strip them off their fancy suits and ties, they would still be criminals—bones and flesh.

Ricky flicked the cigarette—still unlit—on top of his desk. It landed on a laminated ID, identifying him as security in *Paskuhan* and giving him authority and full access to the event.

The Ilustrados would do something soon. He could feel it.

* * *

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Three days after their planning at the Ilustrados' hideout, Ponce was in the backroom of Brunch at Majorka's. Before he entered the kitchen, he swiped his fake ID card to log in for the day. It beeped, and he was in. Ponce had hacked into the restaurant's database to insert a new entry for his and Rizal's profiles.

"Good morning," Ponce greeted the other staff as he put on his uniform. "Busy day today, huh?"

The others responded with nervous smiles and a bit of pride, too. Ponce was glad that no one questioned his presence and identity. He walked out of the kitchen, noticing that several people were dining that afternoon.

Orders were called, and he responded, retrieving the food from the kitchen and serving them without missing a beat. The Ilustrados were good with their disguises. It was one easy and cheap way to blend in, and it helped them accomplish their missions.

While serving, Ponce noticed Rizal by the door, posing as a security guard. The big guy nodded to him, his face impassive. Ponce gave him a quick nod as if greeting a colleague and continued with his tasks.

Even if he was in disguise, he couldn't help but appreciate the food he served. The steak was mouthwatering, and even the salad looked appetizing, topped with crispy catfish.

Rizal cleared his throat loud enough for Ponce to hear.

Ponce looked up as Rizal opened the door for Jose Mari Chan. He entered the restaurant, greeting the staff. The host then took him to his table.

Ponce looked around, noting that the person he was meeting with was not yet here. He took a deep breath to calm his nerves. The plan

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was to tail Jose Mari Chan after his meeting to find out more information about him. That would help them decide on their next plan during the *Paskuhan*. He continued his duties as the other staff attended to their guests.

After a few moments, another guest arrived at the restaurant. Ponce didn't see who it was as he was called back to the kitchen to serve Jose Mari Chan's appetizer. He took the plate of mushroom soup with bacon bits and walked toward his table.

When Ponce arrived, he almost dropped the tray from his hand.

The man sitting in front of Jose Mari Chan was del Pilar.

Ponce managed to regain his composure as he served the mushroom soup. Surprise and anger bubbled in his chest, and he tried to avoid looking at del Pilar.

"Excuse me," del Pilar said.

Ponce flinched. "Yes, sir?" He asked, forcing a smile.

"Do you have a restroom here?"

"Just go straight, then left," Ponce replied.

"I'll be right back, Mr. Chan," del Pilar said, standing up.

Ponce noticed a subtle movement in del Pilar's eyes, telling Ponce to follow him. He returned the tray to the kitchen before walking toward the men's restroom. He paused in front of the door and took a deep breath before he entered.

As soon as he entered, del Pilar was already on to him.

"What the hell are you thinking?" del Pilar asked with furrowed brows.

"The prodigal son has returned," Ponce said, ignoring his question.

Del Pilar was pacing. "Have you thought this through? It was

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Rizal's idea, wasn't it?"

"Maybe. Why do you care?"

"There are so many holes in this plan," del Pilar said, shaking his head. "Are you this desperate?"

"You don't get to ask the questions here, del Pilar."

"And you don't tell me what to do."

Both of them were panting, their stares sharp enough to pierce the skin.

After a few moments, del Pilar broke the tension. "I'm sorry," he said, his shoulders dropping.

Ponce grunted and crossed his arms. "So, what brought you out of retirement?"

Del Pilar smiled. "Want to know something, Ponce?"

"What?"

"In this line of work, you never really retire."

Ponce smiled. "It's good to have you back."

At that moment, the door opened. Ponce and del Pilar were immediately on the defensive, but they relaxed when they saw that it was Rizal.

"It is you!" Rizal exclaimed, bearhugging del Pilar and almost lifting him to the ground.

"Good to see you, Rizal," del Pilar said between breaths.

"What now?" Ponce asked. "Jose Mari Chan was our best bet."

Del Pilar looked at Ponce and Rizal intently. "I admire your bravery, but let me remind you, the Ilustrados have a code. We steal for glory, fame, and money. But we don't harm people. Ever."

Ponce nodded, his eyes filled with guilt.

Del Pilar noticed him. "That's fine, Ponce. That's why I came here

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to stop you,” he said.

“Do you have any more bright ideas in your mind?” Rizal asked.

“Of course,” del Pilar said, grinning devilishly. “We’ll steal *Paskuhan* itself.”

* * *

Detective Ricky was walking around the UST open grounds. Many people were already waiting for the *Paskuhan* program to start. Yet, he was not deterred. He didn’t have to pay attention to everyone.

He just needed to think like those *Ilustrados*.

Ricky was wearing civilian clothes that night in order to blend in with the crowd. The stage was lit up with moving spotlights while loud music was playing. A tall structure was covered with cloth beside the stage, which Ricky assumed was a giant Christmas tree.

What could possibly attract the *Ilustrados* to this event?

Ricky made his way backstage, weaving through a group of people. A security personnel stopped him by the entrance in the backstage area. With a flick of his ID, he was allowed to get through.

Performers and the event staff bustled through the cramped space backstage. Tents were set up, presumably hiding the star performers of the night. Ricky studied the faces of the passing people around him. None of them resembled the *Ilustrados*. He wondered where they could be hiding.

One of the tent’s flaps was open, and it caught his attention.

Ricky’s instincts flared, and he walked toward the tent. He slipped inside. There were cardboard boxes stacked in front of him. In one corner, there were racks of clothes. A pile of what looked like Christ-

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mas props was also stacked. It looked like this was only a stockroom.

“Good evening, detective.”

Ricky spun around, and he almost fell. A man in a tuxedo and a top hat was in front of him. What caught him off guard was his mask. It was like the comedy masks used in theater shows, two slits for the eyes and the third one for the mouth curved into a bizarre smile. Those slits didn’t show any skin of whoever was underneath. It was just black.

Ricky regained his composure. “And who might you be?”

“A performer. A showman. A thief sometimes, but always a gentleman.” The mystery man’s hands hovered in front of his mask. He unclipped it and slowly revealed his face. “And above all, an Ilustrado.”

“Del Pilar,” Ricky said.

“Detective Frederick Manahan,” del Pilar replied. “I’m very much delighted to make your acquaintance.”

“I couldn’t say the same.”

Del Pilar scoffed. “Just give it a minute and you’ll warm up to me.”

“Whatever you’re planning tonight, it’s not going to happen,” Ricky said.

“You’re brave and blunt,” del Pilar said. “Not like the previous detective assigned to hunt us.”

Ricky remained silent as his hand slowly made its way to the pistol hidden in his back pocket.

“If I were you, I’m not going to do that,” another voice said from behind Ricky. He looked around and came face-to-face with two men with the same clothes as del Pilar but without the masks.

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“When did you...?” Ricky asked, lost for words.

“Appear? Hide?” Ponce asked.

Rizal held out his hand, asking for Ricky’s gun. Too stunned to do anything else, the detective surrendered it. Rizal dismantled the weapon with his huge hands and threw it in one of the boxes.

“If I may suggest, dear detective,” del Pilar said. “Just relax and enjoy the show.”

Ponce and Rizal walked beside del Pilar as the three of them put on their masks. Then they walked toward the tent’s flap, leaving Ricky behind them.

Ricky finally let out the breath he was holding, his heart pounding. That was embarrassing. He lost this duel, but he didn’t lose the fight yet. Ricky needed to spoil the Ilustrados’ plan. He needed to stop *Paskuhan*.

* * *

“Are you all excited for tonight?” the host on the stage started, and the crowd roared in response. The cold wind could not dampen their high spirits.

“Before we start our program, we’ll first light our giant Christmas tree,” the host announced. The spotlights swiveled to the covered structure near the stage.

“Let’s begin the countdown!” the host said as the LED wall on the stage showed “10”. The crowd counted down with each second expiring.

“Three! Two! One!”

The cloth covering the Christmas tree was lifted.

DECK THE HALLS

Except, what was underneath wasn't a Christmas tree.

It was a cylindrical structure of LED panels. The operators below the structure were frantic as they scrambled to figure out what was happening.

"Uhm. It looks like we're having technical difficulties," the host said.

Detective Ricky walked to the stage and snatched the microphone from the host. "I have an important announcement to make," he said. "I'm sorry to break the news to you, but the *Ilustrados*—"

The sound from the microphone was cut off. Ricky tapped the microphone several times, but it wasn't working.

Suddenly, the cylindrical LED panel lit up, its white screen illuminating the stage. In response, the crowd cheered despite their confusion. Black pixels slowly appeared on the screen until they formed into a black quill—the symbol for the *Ilustrados*.

Three men appeared, harnessed to the scaffoldings. They wore tuxedos, top hats, and masks. Slowly, they descended on the stage.

"Thank you for introducing us, Detective Ricky," del Pilar said through the sound system, his voice reverberating through the grounds. "We are the *Ilustrados*, and we're here to steal Christmas."

The sound of strings, brass, and orchestra boomed from the speakers as fireworks brought colors to the dark sky. The crowd watched in awe, shouting and clapping their hands.

Ricky looked around, confused by the sudden loud sounds. When he turned behind him, the *Ilustrados* were already gone. Security started to make their way through where Ricky was, but as they went up the stairs, at least 20 people wearing tuxedos and masks

DECK THE HALLS

walked onto the stage as if on cue.

“What the hell is happening?” Ricky asked.

The music and fireworks lasted for 10 minutes, ending with a firework so big that it almost covered the sky above the open grounds. The cylindrical LED structure lit up, and above it stood the three Ilustrados.

“Thank you, everyone!” del Pilar shouted. “That wraps up this year’s *Paskuhan*.” Smoke emerged from beneath their feet, and in a blink of an eye, they were gone.

* * *

“This year’s *Paskuhan* was made more exciting with the Ilustrados’ visit,” the newscaster on the television screen said.

It was a day after the *Paskuhan* heist, and del Pilar, Ponce, and Rizal were back in their condominium hideout, watching the news.

“Can you believe that?” Ponce said. “She made it sound like we made the *Paskuhan* better.”

“Your light show sure did,” del Pilar said. Ponce was the one responsible for installing the LED panels and designing the 10-minute show. It was almost impossible to do it under wraps in such a short time, but he managed to do it.

“Hey, I had my hands dirty for those, too,” Rizal commented.

Partly, he was right. He literally carried most of the equipment they used. He also managed to blend in with the event security, which helped them navigate the grounds better.

Ponce looked at del Pilar. “If it weren’t for you, we wouldn’t be able to do this,” he said.

DECK THE HALLS

Del Pilar smiled. “No, if it weren’t for me, you’ll be in custody for kidnapping Jose Mari Chan.”

Ponce laughed, but he knew del Pilar was right. After all, he was the mastermind of that night’s show. He came up with the idea of recruiting decoys as well, taking advantage of their fame.

“So, what’s next for us?” Rizal asked.

“You’re not retiring again, are you?” Ponce asked del Pilar.

“Retirement is not in my vocabulary,” del Pilar replied. He stretched his arms and said, “I’ll think of something. One thing’s for sure, though.”

Ponce and Rizal waited.

Del Pilar grinned. “The Ilustrados are back.”



ABOUT

THE AUTHOR



Richmond Camero tells stories from the fantasy and science fiction genres. He builds worlds inspired by anime, video games, books, and his experiences in real life. He molds characters from different ethnic backgrounds with diverse traits and larger-than-life goals.

Richmond has been working in the IT industry since 2010 and does his writing during his free time. He likes to read fiction and self-help books. He lives in the quiet town of Bulacan, Philippines.

ABOUT THE BOOK INSPIRATION

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,

ABOUT THE BOOK INSPIRATION

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.

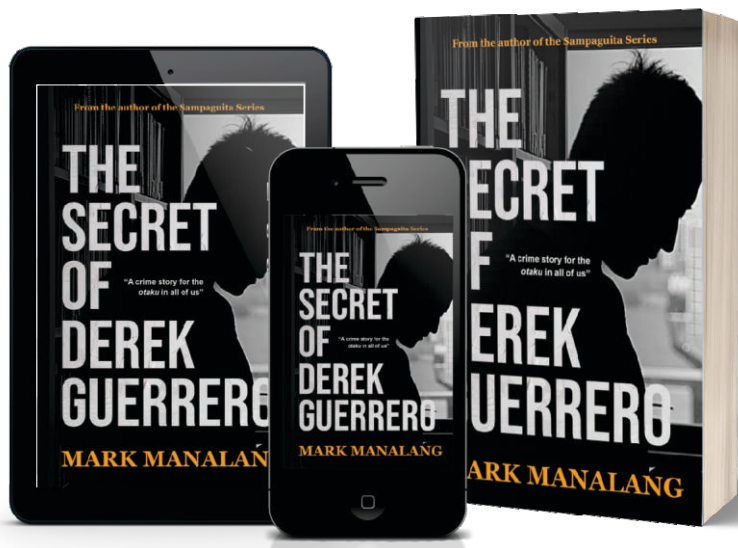
ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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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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.

It is headed by Kath C. Eustaquio-Derla, the Head of Publishing and a registered author, editor, layout artist, book designer, book printer, and book publisher with the **National Book Development Board – Philippines** (booksphilippines.gov.ph). We offer end-to-end self-publishing services to aspiring Filipino authors.

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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.

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neighborhood “Marites-es”; a murder *de aguinaldo*;
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during Christmas parties; *espiritistas* solving cases
that have gone cold; a stealth operation
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with Yuletide-themed crime fiction stories that will
keep you up until Christmas morning.

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