

From the author of the Sampaguita Series



THE SECRET OF DEREK GUERRERO

"A crime story for the
otaku in all of us"

MARK MANALANG

*To everyone who has yet to write
their own romance*

The Secret of Derek Guerrero

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Mark Manalang

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Telfax: +63 2 77483551

Mobile Number: +63 905 2160836

Email: kceustaquio@gmail.com

Website: www.paperkatbooks.com



Editing, Cover Design, and Inside Layout: Kath C. Eustaquio-Derla

Manalang, Mark

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1 : Love Is War	5
Chapter 2 : Meeting You Wasn't A Coincidence	15
Chapter 3 : From The Time Our Eyes Met, To The Time We Looked Away	27
Chapter 4 : A Little Bit, Step By Step	36
Chapter 5 : Fight For Your Justice	45
Chapter 6 : Come Over Here If You Want To Fall In Love	61
Chapter 7 : Just Believe In Your Earnest Feeling	73
Chapter 8 : To Reach You	84
Chapter 9 : With Tightened Fists	96
Chapter 10 : I Sing For You	105
Chapter 11 : Though I Accept I'll Be Constantly Ridiculed	116
Chapter 12 : An Unbalanced Kiss	129
Chapter 13 : I Don't Need Voices Of Praise Or Applause	137
Chapter 14 : By Longing, Light, And Rhythm, I Want To Be Spellbound	147
Chapter 15 : Surely, Man Was Born To Defend The One He Loves	156
Chapter 16 : A Puzzle Making No Progress	166
Chapter 17 : A Man's Path, A Beastly Path	174

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter18 : Just How Thick Are These Walls? **184**

Chapter19 : What Shines On An Empty Heart **194**

Chapter 20 : 'Arigatou' **203**

Chapter 21 : Strong Bonds Speak To The Things
You Love **215**

Chapter 22 : The Scar of Romance **226**

Chapter 23 : Love, Don't Disappear **234**

Chapter 24 : Confused Memories **245**

Chapter 25 : How Many Tears Must Be Shed
Before We Can Become Honest? **255**

Chapter 26 : Because Of Your Love,
Even The Sky Collapses **264**

Chapter 27 : Quest For Love, Quest For Dreams,
Quest For All Truth **274**

Chapter 28 : I Miss You **280**

Epilogue: Try Again **282**

Acknowledgment **284**

About The Author **286**

CHAPTER 1

LOVE IS WAR

Derek Guerrero knew that he would never see his novel on the bestsellers list, and he was staring at the reason right now.

A month had passed since the final installment of his *Deadlines* novel series was released in bookstores. The series, which was about a journalist who moonlights as a private investigator, was an independently published work that he wrote for several years in an attempt to try out a career in fiction.

By the time he closed the series, he had gained a small following as a crime author, and the final volume was surprisingly well-received. Somehow, his work was recognized by crime and suspense enthusiasts, and he garnered a small, loyal audience. However, his popularity could only go so far. He was being blocked by a formidable, unconquerable wall. And just recently, he decided to scale that wall.

A Month Ago

“Shall I write a romance story?” Derek said plainly to the old man shuffling a pile of documents on his desk.

Frank Castellano, the 60-year-old publisher and editor-in-chief of the publishing company Inbox Publications, shook his graying head. “No way, Derek, anything but that,” he snapped. “Just because romance novels are popular nowadays doesn’t mean I’m letting you jump into the bandwagon.”

“C’mon, Frank, it’s not that I can’t do it,” the reporter grumbled. “If it

CHAPTER 1

pleases you, I'll write you a manuscript in a month or two."

The elderly publisher slumped on his desk, ignoring the stack of papers about to suffocate him. "Listen here, Derek," he said as he wiped his wide forehead and thin cheeks, "Picking up a new genre out of the blue is career suicide. How long did it take you to cough out your *Deadlines* series? Five years?"

"You think I can't write romance, do you?"

"Pray tell me why I should let you do this one, then!"

"There's more to love than what's in the media. It's not just sweet words and cute gestures. These people need to understand how love works in real life. An outsider like me who's not looking at the world with rose-colored glasses can surely write something that hits home, something that's close to what love actually feels."

"And you being an outsider is exactly why I can't let you write romance!" the publisher retorted. "Love stories are supposed to make people feel good, to make them watch in adoration as people fall in love. They're supposed to inspire positive, uplifting feelings; meaning, the joys, the pains, the giddy feelings of being with someone. They don't need your objectivity. These people need to dream of love!"

"It's true that romance stories follow a formula and a set of tropes. But I can play with them, subvert them, make readers understand love differently. I know I can make that story."

"Tell me, then, what love story are you going to write about?"

Derek paused. "Look, that's why I'm informing you that I'm going to write one," he replied nonchalantly.

Frank slammed his hands on the table and threw his beret at the reporter. "Goddamn it, Derek!" he growled. "What's the point of this conversation if you don't have a story to pitch to me in the first place?"

The reporter sighed aloud and threw his hands in the air. "All right, all right!" he harrumphed. "I'll get you your plot and outline first thing in the morning. I'll make you a love story that can rival the bestsellers out there!"

CHAPTER 1

Frank leaned on his table and glared at the reporter. “On second thought, you don’t have to write anything after all.”

Derek hissed. “Now, what?”

“That one, back when we were publishing that anthology...”

“Over my dead body, Frank.”

—

Romance, a mainstream literary genre, with new stories churned out by hundreds of writers, all following a simple formula. Boy meets girl. Couples falling in love, sharing passionate moments, conquering the odds together. Basically, people experiencing love.

The fiction section of Fully Booked BGC was filled with teenagers, and Derek understood that their attention was at the most popular title on the shelves.

He had heard much about *Falling in Love with You is a Crime*, an action-romance novel previously published in Library, a popular online fiction platform. It was written by a certain Kim Velasquez. *Of course, it was a girl*, he thought.

The story focused on a student who fell in love with a criminal. The anime-style cover showed a young girl being embraced by a handsome gangster wielding a gun. It registered about a million hits and a bunch of reviews in Library before a publisher picked it up, and now that it’s in book form, it’s selling like hotcakes among teenage girls, he heard.

So what makes this story so great? Derek wondered.

He approached the shelf, ignoring the teenagers glancing in his direction. They have mobbed the shelves, seemingly to browse the shelves for buying or reading, but most likely just to see which of their favorite Library authors have books on sale. They looked to him like typical high schoolers or college freshmen, sporting trendy casual wear by the way they showed skin or painted their faces with makeup. Their choices of

CHAPTER 1

areas to window-shop hinted what type of readers they were—innocent, wide-eyed, easily enchanted by the prospect of experiencing fiction-like romance.

On the other hand, he was only 31, but people mistake him for an older guy, with his brown, disheveled hair, glaring black eyes, medium built, and closely shaved babyface. It didn't help that he dressed casually, favoring a jacket with jeans and sneakers over formal clothes, unlike other professionals his age.

He was the oddball in the group of readers flocking the bestselling book, but it didn't matter to him.

Derek picked up a browsing copy and read the blurb.

"When Emma Singson stumbled upon a shooting incident, she never knew her involvement with the gunman would change her life. Basti Romero was a criminal, a gangster hunted from all sides. But a kind gesture from Emma would leave a lasting impression on him. As their encounters grow more frequent and dangerous, can Emma help Basti find redemption, and perhaps a chance to open up each other's hearts to the possibility of love?"

He's no authority in romance, Derek admitted. He's a crime writer, for starters. But he's also a journalist, and a bookworm in his own right, and years of reading have exposed him to probably all kinds of stories. And with this, he's had enough.

"What's with the sour face?"

Derek's attention moved to the sweet voice addressing him. Standing near the shelf was a petite, young girl with long, ponytailed black hair, and smooth pinkish cheeks. She wore a gray knitted sweater that ended right above her thighs, and she carried a copy of the book wrapped in plastic. Her brown eyes glinted naughtily behind her thick round glasses. She looked like a teenager, probably in her early 20s.

"I thought you were studying it intently," the young girl addressed him again. "To be honest, I didn't know older men like you would appreciate romance."

CHAPTER 1

“Who the heck are you?” Derek asked dryly.

“I saw that *Falling in Love with You is a Crime* is finally out,” she replied. “It’s a dream come true to see that story as a printed book, you know?”

“Yeah, it got printed just because it got, like, a million or so likes online, right?”

“Hey, don’t be such a downer! It is a good story after all!”

“I wanna know how that kind of love story ever got the attention of a publisher in the first place,” Derek said, looking away at the girl. “Seriously, readers may like a feel-good romance like what’s in here, but this story’s got a ways to go!”

The girl shuffled towards the reporter and glared at him. “Hey, what do you mean by that?” she grumbled. “You can’t just hate a story that sweet and exciting! Or maybe you’re just not into romance after all?”

“You wanna know?” he shot back with a sneer. “For starters, this so-called criminal looks like an overdressed bum, or one of those hip-hop wannabes. The girl’s too sweet and innocent that she looks spineless.”

The girl was taken aback by Derek’s comment. “S—spineless?!”

“You can’t just handwave the guy not having a visible record. She’s dating a gangster, a hardened criminal! She witnessed him shooting somebody in cold blood, and he did not worry about her ratting on him to the cops? Does this author know how criminals work? Not to mention all she did was tie a handkerchief on his wounded arm, and they suddenly felt attracted to each other?”

“W—what’s so wrong about a criminal falling in love at first sight? At least she’s drawing out something good in him! Love makes people good after all!”

“How could they conveniently engage in romantic scenes almost every single time they meet? How could he follow her around like some sort of bodyguard, much more rent the school gym to hold a romantic dinner for her? That’s stalking! And this grammar—who edited this?”

“It was lifted straight out of Library! They wanted it to look exactly

CHAPTER 1

like how it was posted online! And...and...there's nothing wrong with the couple! Anyone would like to experience something romantic like that! It's every girl's dream to fall in love with someone tough and rough on the edges and...and...uh..."

Derek's face slightly softened as he looked at the girl. Her shoulders were shaking. Her voice had grown louder and more frantic. She was nearly in tears, and she wiped her cheeks every now and then.

"That story is great, I tell you!" she whimpered. "It...it got a million likes and readers are saying how cute and romantic it is...and...it took so long to finish and perfect. And I...I...It's all right for them to fall in love, right? They just...I just..."

By then, a small crowd was gathering around the two. Derek realized that at first glance, it looked like he's bullying the poor girl.

He drew a long sigh and approached the crying girl. With a small, forced smile, he patted her head and offered her a handkerchief. Of course, she's not accepting it.

"Look, I don't mean to criticize your favorite book like that," he said. "It's just, well... it just needs a lot of work. And...well, romance doesn't always work that way, you know?"

"But...but I really thought it was a great love story!" she retorted in tears. "How could you say such a thing? Everyone...everyone can fall in love! I believe so too, and I...I...uh..."

"Hey! What the hell did you do to our friend, you creep?!"

Derek noticed two girls approaching them. The crying girl ran towards the two, sobbing and wiping her cheeks.

"How could you say such hurtful things?" one of the girls, a tall teen, asked in an angry tone. "You don't look like you're into romance, so what gives you the right to criticize it?"

"Yeah, you don't understand what a best-selling novel is like!" the other girl butted in.

"You don't just go dissing other people's work!" the tall teen

CHAPTER 1

continued, interrupting their companion. “Don’t talk like you’re so good! I bet you can’t write a romance novel that can get lots of readers like...”

Derek could feel his veins explode. Right there and then, he picked up a copy of the book, stormed to a nearby counter, paid for it, and walked back towards the group of girls.

“See now, I bought the book,” Derek said in a tired voice. “I’m gonna read it and savor it, but if I see something wrong, I will rip it apart as any reader should. Fair enough?”

Just as he was about to turn away, he felt a tug at his jacket. It was that crying girl.

“Now, what?”

The young girl was looking straight at him with reddened eyes. Her lips were trembling, and her gaze was becoming unsettling by the second.

Derek decided to break the ice. “Really sorry about being too harsh on that story,” he told her. “But that’s how the industry works. Trust me. I hope that author doesn’t get discouraged from writing just because of some tough criticism. But I have to say—”

The girl’s answer came in the form of a thick book slamming Derek’s cranium.

—

“I’m gonna write a romance novel.”

Derek’s post on his author page caught his followers off guard. In a few minutes, his post was overflowing with questions and protests. Some were dumbfounded by his move. Others were curious as to what sort of romance story he would write, or whether he would inject a romantic angle in his next story. A few feared he was—as his publisher, Frank, said—jumping into the bandwagon.

Derek sneered at the inquiries about his newest venture. “How many of you have bought my book anyway to judge how I work?” he grumbled.

CHAPTER 1

He looked at his copy of *Falling in Love with You is a Crime*, which he had bought by impulse. Whether it's because he wanted to appease that girl, or as a subtle way to learn the ropes of romance writing, he couldn't tell.

He thought of that young girl who defended that book, trembling before him as tears formed in her eyes. Somehow he felt guilty for bullying her and her favorite author. Maybe he should apologize to her if they meet again. It might be a chance to make her face the music too.

Derek drew a long sigh as he opened his laptop and browsed the folders. He soon settled on one of them and clicked on a video inside. Soon, his head bobbed from left to right as the upbeat opening theme of the show on the screen filled his room.

It felt like a good time for a rewatch.

The young girl slammed her bedroom door and threw her bag onto her bed. She had mostly calmed down after that scene at the bookstore, but she couldn't get her mind off that rude fellow who badmouthed the newly released *Falling in Love with You is a Crime*. She had been a fan of indie works, including those from the online platform Library. She knew the appeal of mainstream fiction, especially those of the best-selling works of international authors, but she found indie fiction more expressive, less constrained, and thus more than, if not just as, enticing to read as those in bookstores.

She knew how difficult it is for indie works to break into the mainstream, and if not for Library, something like *Falling in Love with You is a Crime* would never get published. It was, after all, one of the online platform's greatest gems, at least at the time it was finished. *So what's that bastard's right to bad-mouth my story?* she whimpered internally.

Her gaze fell on the message that popped up on her smartphone.

CHAPTER 1

"Taping's extended. I'll call you over some other time."

She sighed as she slumped on her bed and opened the Library app on her phone. The screen soon showed a bookmarked story, which was on its seemingly last, chapter.

"I'm hitting the big league starting tomorrow," she said aloud. "If I pull this off right, *Falling in Love with You is a Crime* is going big time. I'll make sure I'll get a good impression."

The police finished cordoning the bungalow just as a squad entered carrying heavy tools. The wooden house was one of the oldest along Visayas Avenue in Quezon City, but it was showing signs of collapse.

In the living room, a young investigator watched as forensics pried open a large couch. As soon as the agents were done, he looked at the items they dug up and set up a video chat on his cellphone.

"So, what did forensics find, Gene?" the young man on the other end of the line asked.

"It's just as you told me," the agent replied. "We got the victim's chopped-up remains stuffed in a chair. It's like a jigsaw puzzle here. There's a note here too...It says '*Ranpo Kitan*'. Whatever it is."

"How could they do this? Damn, Mr. Romero was one of the best journalists in the country. Is this, like, an extra-judicial killing? A vigilante move? Politically motivated? You think this has something to do with his career change?"

"Can't say. More importantly, this elaborate set-up proves this is a copycat crime, just like the previous ones. But something bugs me about this MO," the agent said.

"I know. And those other notes...There must be a clue about why they were targeted."

CHAPTER 1

The cop glanced around as forensics left the scene. “Dennis, can you hook up with Inbox Publications? There’s a guy there that I’ll need help from. If there’s someone who knows crime and mystery, it’s gotta be him. His name’s Derek Guerrero.”



CHAPTER 2

MEETING YOU WASN'T A COINCIDENCE

Frank nearly spilled his coffee when he opened his door the next day. It was seven in the morning, and Derek was already there, snoozing on his table.

He grabbed Derek's shoulders and rocked him violently. "Wake up, wake up, you fool," he snarled. "I didn't ask you to get this gung-ho. Get off my table, will you?"

Derek grumbled for a few moments before moving to a couch.

"About that project of yours," the publisher then said, "I figured I can't stop you from doing what you want, being one of my most hardworking writers and all, but I can't let you venture into a suicide mission."

Derek shook his head.

"That's why I'm setting you up with a fellow author," he continued. "You observe her work, get tips, learn the ropes, and then set out to make your future bestseller."

"Her?" Derek asked, half-drowsily.

"She's one of the latest best-selling romance authors around. She may be young, but she will help you gain a lot of new insight. I'll let you see for yourself why people like her work. Ever heard of Kim Velasquez?"

Derek sat up, surprised. "You mean the one who wrote that crime-

CHAPTER 2

romance thing? Of course, but—”

“Good!” the publisher cut Derek in mid-sentence. “This’ll make working together easier for both of you. Come in, dear,” Frank called out.

The door opened to reveal a young lady in a white blouse, a black skirt, and black heels. Her ebony hair was neatly tied in a ponytail, and her eyes shone with an exotic, greenish-brown hue.

“Good morning, Mr. Castellano, Mr. Guerrero,” the lady greeted with a sweet smile as she entered Frank’s office. “I’m glad to be of assistance to—”

Her expression grew sour the moment her gaze fell on Derek.

“You...?” was all Derek could say.

“No wonder you talk so harshly against romance writers,” Kim sneered. “You’re not even the type who appreciates romance in the first place!”

“You’re that fangirl?” Derek retorted.

“All you think of is your guns and motel scenes and stabbings,” Kim sneered. “So, what made you want to venture into romance? Your books must not be selling well, huh? ‘If you can’t beat them, join them,’ is that it?”

“Why, you—”

“You must’ve got so much murder in your head that you can’t appreciate how it is to be in love. I bet you’re even single right now!”

“Just because you published a hit doesn’t mean you’re all that great!” Derek retorted, raising his voice. “You’re just riding on something popular, but the truth is you have a long way to go as a writer! And for all I know, you’re the one who’s single!”

“I don’t want to hear that from a washed-up nobody such as you! And I’m not single!” Kim bit back.

“I don’t know how you managed to sell your book when all you have to back up your rep are your millions of likes and your cliché lines, but don’t expect me to adopt your writing style or your taste!”

CHAPTER 2

“Who said anything about wanting you to write like me? Even if you follow everything I teach you, I doubt you can follow my lead! Besides, I worked hard to be a writer, and I’m tougher than what you see now!”

“Yeah, tougher than the squealing kid at the bookstore!”

Frank slammed his table. “You two, that’s enough!” he yelled. “Let’s start over. Derek, this is Kim Velasquez, the author of *Falling in Love with You is a Crime*. Kim, this is my reporter and our resident novelist, Derek Guerrero.”

Derek sighed aloud and grudgingly shook Kim’s hand. Kim returned the handshake, scowling.

“Listen,” Frank continued, “Derek needs to learn how to write romance, and Kim needs to learn the ropes of being a professional writer. I know that you’re from different genres, but I want you two to share your individual expertise and help each other out.”

“I’m gonna play along, all right,” Derek grumbled, “but don’t expect me to write something sugary like what your bestseller here is writing!”

“Says the author who’s not in the best-selling list!” Kim bit back.

“I said, enough!” the publisher bellowed.

Derek sat back on the couch, crossing his legs as he looked straight at Kim. “All right, what exactly does this girl need my help on?” he asked in a deadpan voice.

“You know that *Falling in Love with You is a Crime* came out from a local publisher,” Frank replied in Kim’s stead. “Their management is planning to promote her to a mainstream international company, on the condition that she rewrite it into a more professional-looking work. So they had me recommend a professional writer who could mentor her.”

“But why me?” Derek mouthed the words, annoyed. “Was it because of *Deadlines*?”

“Because you are a professional writer, simple as that. The gist is you’re gonna help her prepare for the big league, so to speak, so you’re doing editing, proof-reading, the works.”

CHAPTER 2

“And I get mentoring from her on romance writing in exchange, correct?”

“You need a lot of fresh material, Derek, and she would be helpful, notwithstanding your differences. So please get along with her.”

“I don’t need any babysitting,” Kim butted in. “I just have to work with this guy and then teach him how to write romance, right?”

“And Kim,” the publisher continued, “Derek’s an editor too, so don’t take things too personally with him. Try to be patient with him, but keep him restrained since he’s always on the edge.”

“As long as she can keep up with me,” the reporter replied. “In that case, let’s get—”

“Whoa, slow down a bit, mister!” Kim yelled, stepping away from Derek.

“Now what?” Derek asked, annoyed.

“I have things to do with my life too! Let’s meet at three in the afternoon. There’s a nice coffee shop in Ermita that I visit often. You of all people should know about that place. They enshrined *Deadlines* there, after all.”

—

As soon as Derek left the office, Kim jumped at Frank and grabbed his shoulders, shaking them violently. “Mr. Cas—I mean...uncle, this isn’t what you promised me!” she yelled. “Don’t you realize who you just set me up with?”

“You got off with a rocky start before this, is that what you’re saying?” the editor-in-chief replied, unperturbed.

“He dissed my work! He basically called my story ‘cheap’! He treated me as an amateur!” she said angrily.

“He is a fiction writer himself, and a good one too. That’s why I chose him to help you improve your story for publication. And I thought you’re suited to teach him your genre as well.”

CHAPTER 2

“That guy is my natural enemy! He can’t write romance! He’s stubborn and single-minded and macho and ungentlemanlike!” Kim continued to protest. “His mind is not ready for something gentle like love stories! At worst he’s probably good with bodice rippers or male fantasies and whatnot! I can’t mentor someone rotten like him!”

Frank shook off Kim’s hands. “How can you even tell he’s rotten?” he asked calmly. “Kim, Derek is a natural writer. He may look strange but he’s a professional through and through.”

The writer gave Frank a suspicious look. “Uncle, I’ll be the judge to that. Seriously though, are you sure this isn’t one of your matchmaking shenanigans? You understand that I have my own circumstances, right?”

Frank shook off Kim as he lit a cigarette. “Don’t be ridiculous,” he then said. “Derek needs guidance in romance, and you happened to need someone who’d guide you in your own work. Yours is a symbiotic relationship. That’s all there is to it.”

Kim continued to eye the editor-in-chief suspiciously. “Fine, Uncle, I’ll take your word for it,” she replied. “But I’ll keep an eye on him as well. I hope Derek is as good as you frame him to be.”

—

Derek stared at himself before the mirror in his apartment. He brushed his brown hair and dusted off his jacket to make sure he looked presentable.

He always spends time with people over coffee to discuss manuscripts, the news, scoops, and other publishing matters. Today is no different from a simple meet-up.

It’s the person he’s supposed to meet that he’s not comfortable with. Of all the people he would have to consult with, it had to be that girl from the bookstore. *What would he gain from a greenhorn like her? Shouldn’t he be working with one of the more seasoned romance writers out there?*

CHAPTER 2

Then again, Frank acknowledged Kim as the expert in this genre, as far as the best-selling lists are concerned, and she owes him for criticizing her work. Well, it was unsolicited criticism, but still.

"It's almost 3:00 PM," he grumbled aloud to himself and left his desk.

—

A frantic knock rapped at Frank's office. The door revealed a tall, stocky girl with a bob-cut hairstyle, round cheeks, and slanted black eyes behind thick eyeglasses. She was wearing a tracksuit, and she seemed to have just finished jogging somewhere.

"Hello, Chief!" Nancy Andres greeted the editor-in-chief in a cheerful tone. "Is Derek here?"

"No, Nancy, he already left, as you can see," Frank replied in a glum voice from his desk. "Weren't you supposed to finish your OJT under him next month?"

"Yeah, so I thought I'd tag along with Derek now so I can finish my hours early," Nancy said with a big grin as she entered the office, gym bag in tow. "Is he working on a new project?"

"That idiot wants to be a romance writer. I told him it's a bad idea, but you know how stubborn he is as a fictionist. That's why I paired him up with another writer."

Nancy sat near Frank's table, staring at the old man with sparkling eyes. "Hey Chief, you mean he's publishing his romance story soon? When's it coming out? C'mon, tell me!"

"Ask the man himself," Frank grumbled. "Who knows what he's up to? Maybe you can help me enlighten the idiot."

—

Wings Cafe was a popular coffee shop in Ermita, Manila. The two-

CHAPTER 2

story establishment was known for its selection of hot and cold drinks, pasta, and sandwiches. The 24-hour shop was filled with patrons every afternoon, many of which come from nearby offices and schools.

What makes Wings Cafe well-known was its collection of books. The shelves were filled with novels and anthologies by indie authors and writing groups. Writers were said to come here to hang out and discuss their works. It even hosted the launching of the books of a few indie novelists.

Derek started writing the *Deadlines* series while hanging out at Wings Cafe years ago and was one of its first customers. He even left a copy of his books when they got published. How strange, he thought, that he never noticed Kim hanging out there before.

Kim was already seated by a table outside the coffee shop when Derek arrived. “Finally!” she yelled in a sing-song voice. “You’re, like, ten minutes late!”

“This is not a business transaction,” he grumbled aloud as he took out his laptop. “You’re the one who agreed to meet me over coffee!”

“You’re never supposed to make a lady wait,” she replied with a smirk. “It’s a basic rule on a date!”

“A date, huh...Fine, as the person who asked for this favor, I apologize.”

Kim was 28 years old, but she looked like a teenager by the way she wore her hurriedly ponytailed hair, sneakers, pink blouse, and jeans. This was a far cry from how she looked this morning, and probably in her book launchings—prim, confident, and adult-like in smart casual clothes. She even ditched her contacts—he thought she had exotic, greenish-brown eyes—and instead wore thick glasses, which made the dreamy hue of her eyes stand out.

This teenybopper is one of the most popular romance writers in the market, he reminded himself. And now he, an older author, is undergoing consultation with her, and she is at his mercy at the same time as her

CHAPTER 2

editor. It's a two-way duel.

Derek handed Kim a thumb drive. "Now then," he began, "I reviewed the technical bits of your novel, and I've added the necessary corrections. You should be able to work on them on your own. We have a lot to talk about content-wise, so I want to hear how you conceptualized your story."

Kim inserted the thumb drive into her laptop and opened the manuscript file. Her lips curled into a frown as she read the corrections. Every single page was marked with notes, crossed-out words, and erasures written in red font. There were a bunch of comments on some of the scenes too.

"Geez, you're harsh, aren't you?" she muttered. "But I'm impressed you're able to read through this in such a short time. And to think I was confident with how I wrote everything."

"Didn't you have this beta-read?" Derek asked. "You should have asked someone to check your grammar and stuff. You just typed down everything on the fly, did you?"

"It's not that...I asked a few fellow writers from the forum to read it, and they all liked the story and how it was written. Are you just being unforgiving? Or did you hate my story that much?"

"My preferences have nothing to do with my corrections. Like I told you, the story of Emma and her relationship with Basti is unrealistic. I have to admit, they're still plausible as long as circumstances allow it, but you wrote them as if a *deus ex machina* is letting them have their way."

"Why not? The setting and the mood were ideal, which is why those two could become so close since Day 1. It's like, destiny and love at first sight at work."

Derek paused at the girl's remark. "Love at first sight is a myth," he said. "You may get attracted by someone's looks, and you may have that uneasy feeling of interest or concern for them, but that isn't necessarily love."

CHAPTER 2

Kim pouted at the crime writer's answer. "Oh, c'mon! Just play along, will you? Everyone dreams of finding someone they could fall in love with instantly. I mean, even a hardened criminal can have someone who'd like them."

"If he looks like Cesar Montano or Robin Padilla, maybe."

"Besides, there are girls who are attracted to people doing brave things for them. People love those who go the extra mile and face risks for their sake."

"Perhaps the same could be said about all relationships. But in the end, the result is far from reality, much less like what's in your story."

"What about it?"

"You just have to highlight that criminal's soft spot to induce a connection, did you? Just to make sure a relationship with your protagonist could work, right? Even those off-character moments just to let them have a *kilig* moment?"

Kim sighed deeply and closed the manuscript file. "It's not bad to give a criminal some sort of redeeming quality."

"Criminals don't open up to people that easily. Basti pointed a gun on Emma's head the first time they met, after all. At the end of the day, they're just mutually benefiting from each other's presence. Apart from that, he can't trust anyone who can compromise his safety. Besides, I can tell. I worked with these kinds of people," Derek said.

"Maybe you just don't trust them enough to believe they can fall in love," Kim replied. "Just like what happened between Basti and Emma."

Derek said nothing.

—

Kim stared at her laptop screen as she read the corrections Derek made on her manuscript. Just as she expected, he went short of trashing *Falling in Love with You is a Crime*, but it turned out he was constructive and

CHAPTER 2

objective. A far cry from how he chewed on romance earlier at Wings, but still.

He was a journalist, she heard, and he had written *Deadlines* based on his experiences. His story, in turn, got a good amount of attention in the indie writing community. But he looked like he was lacking in the field of human interaction because his bluntness is the type who would push away others. At worst, he has no inkling of how love works.

So why am I working with this kind of guy again? Kim asked herself.

She began to read off the new chat messages from her phone. Her friends at the university, who had previously defended her from Derek, learned she was working alongside him and were now asking about what kind of person he was and how he should be dealt with.

The next text message on her phone sounded apologetic. **"Still at taping, socials will be next. It's a private engagement, and I'm sure you'll be busy at school tomorrow, so I'll see you as soon as I'm free. Chat with you later."**

Kim could only smile wryly. She understood the lifestyle of socialites, after all. "It's okay, I know," she said out loud. "Hang in there, okay?"

She began to type out, as if venting at her textmate, her recent encounter with a rude, judgmental man who criticized her work, and whom she now had to work with so her novel could make it into the mainstream.

—

It was nearly midnight when Derek returned home, leaving Kim at Wings to work on the rest of his reporter duties. Kim said she had school the next morning, so they decided to end their talk for the day. He thought at first to check Kim's work again and do some writing of his own, but he ultimately decided it was useless to stay up too long for that.

I can't work with her like this, he thought. My biases are showing.

CHAPTER 2

A chat notification appeared on his laptop's browser. "The Onii-chans are still up, huh," Derek mumbled to himself. He began to backread through the messages. Tonight seemed to be a chaotic time in the chat group. "Someone is asking for a rewatch of *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure: Stardust Crusaders*," he read. "*Love Live Sunshine* just ended, and then there's another asking for a copy of the recent *Love, Chunibyou, and Other Delusions* movie."

There was another message from someone gushing over Saber from *Fate/Stay Night* and some voluptuous demon chick named Momo Deviluke. Another user was posting screenshots of *Card Captor Sakura: Clear Card* and Season 2 of *Overlord*.

Doc: Hey, is Derek online yet?

The first to address him was the self-proclaimed leader of the chat group. Derek grinned to himself and began typing.

Derek: I'm here, Doc. What have you guys been up to?

Rance: Are you really gonna write romance, man? I've got some titles here that could inspire you!

Kirov: All your titles are *ecchi*, Rance. Derek, you sure you're not just bandwagoning? We know you're more into crime stuff.

Derek: Is it that bad? I'm not just riding into something popular. It's just that, well, I thought I could write something different. As for titles, I ended up liking *Toradora*, actually, and I'm done with *Kimi ni Todoke*. Now I thought I'd rewatch—

Kirov: That one again? Is that your standard for romance writing? Or is it because that's your favorite anime?

Doc: Anyway, we've all seen your work, and your viewpoints of this and that, so feel free to let us rip you apart like always. You've got a lot of *senpais*. Why not consult them?

Kurama: Speaking of *senpais*, you know Larry Romero, the columnist who's teaching literature? I saw his column about *Deadlines*. Weren't you taking tips from him before?"

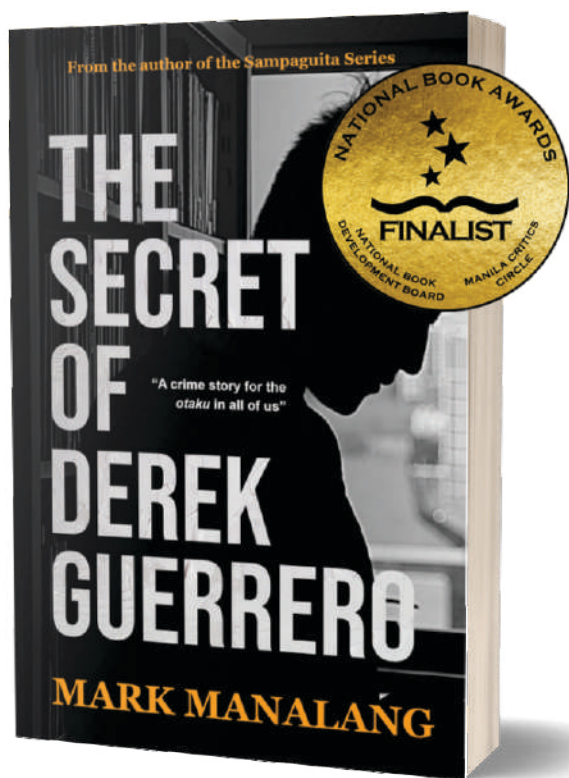
CHAPTER 2

Shikikan: Larry Romero? You mean the author of that conspiracy theory book about international gangs in Manila? That was one thrilling title!”

Derek: Yeah. I asked him for advice about the stories I’m writing. Did you hear something about him?

Kurama: Well, the news from work is that he’s dead.





END OF TEASER

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