

TRIPLE O SLEUTHS

DANGEROUS LIMELIGHT



MARANNA CHAN

PRAISE FOR THE TRIPLE NINE SLEUTHS SERIES

“The books are full of excitement. Triple Nine Sleuths is the best detective series I have ever read. I can’t wait for the next book!”—Michelle, 11

“The books are thrilling and the characters are hilarious. I think everyone should read them.”
—Regina, 13

“I couldn’t take my eyes off the book. The author describes the action so well that when I read the part about the murder case, I could really imagine the scene playing in my head. If anyone is looking for a good local mystery series, I would definitely recommend the Triple Nine Sleuths series.”
—Anna, 11

“I got so inspired reading the series that I want to be an author when I grow up, just like Maranna Chan.”—Andrea, 10

Also in the series:

DANGEROUS DESPAIR

DANGEROUS ISLAND

DANGEROUS SCHEMES

DANGEROUS MESSAGE

DANGEROUS CONSPIRACY

DANGEROUS DISAPPEARANCE

DANGEROUS SYMBOL

DANGEROUS REVELATIONS

TRIPLE 9 SLEUTHS

DANGEROUS LIMELIGHT



MARANNA CHAN



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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters,
places, and incidents either are the product
of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.
Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead,
events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

First Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

For Matthew,
my husband and friend

CYBIL RODRIGUEZ

DYO: THE EMOTIONAL PERSON

She used flattery to gain love.

She did things for others in order to feel needed.

*She had problems with possessiveness and had
become increasingly manipulative, controlling and jealous.*

*Her anger exploded over simple misunderstandings
and she resorted to hypochondria to gain sympathy.*

She paid for her sins.

CHAPTER 1

“COREY!” STACY RODRIGUEZ, a tanned Eurasian girl with long wavy hair, wearing a white and blue school uniform, called out to her friend. She waved frantically from the school gate to Corey, a short, mousy-looking Chinese girl with thick black-rimmed goggle-like glasses and braces. The first day of school was over. Stacy and Corey were going to spend the afternoon together at Corey’s home, which was only a ten minute walk away from school.

“Have you seen that?” Stacy asked Corey, looking a little amused. She pointed to a brightly coloured banner which had been hung on the green wire fence just next to the ugly school gate. The gate was supposed to be green in colour as well but the paint had peeled off, revealing rust and a previous coat of grey paint underneath. Yucks! Stacy was never touching the school gate again, not even leaning on it. She swore she had seen some bird poop on it too.

On the wire fence hung a banner with a picture

of a pretty girl with bright big shiny eyes and a sweet smile. Corey didn't know what the big deal was with that banner until she saw the words on it and her name in bold red: "Yuan Hwa Primary School Congratulates PSLE Top Scorer Cordelia Lam Suet Ling". Yuan Hwa Primary School was next to its secondary school. They shared the same main entrance. Corey's round eyes nearly popped out of their sockets and she immediately felt the blood rush to her cheeks and her ears started to burn. She was turning red!

"Oh no!" Corey's jaw dropped. "But... but that's not me!" She pointed to the picture of an improved Corey.

"It is," Stacy said, cocking her head to one side, "without the braces, glasses and wow, that hair!"

"My Ma photoshopped me!" Corey was mortified.

"Hey, you're actually quite pretty, you know. We should give you a makeover." Stacy's almond-shaped eyes lit up. Stacy had disliked anything girly until the boy she had had her first crush on remarked she was like a boy herself. Stacy had paid more attention to her appearance from then on and had let her hair grow out.

"No, I don't look like that. She even made my eyes bigger," Corey protested.

"No, your eyes do look like that. Or at least they would if you would stop squinting all the time," Stacy pointed out.

"I just want to dig myself a hole and hide inside," Corey said to herself. Stacy was the biggest reason why Corey was in Yuan Hwa Secondary School. The girls had been the best of friends since childhood. They lived a block apart from each other and had always met at the same playground since they had learned to walk and run. Corey, who was an introverted sort of girl, was too shy to make new friends. She had felt it would simply be too daunting to start again by herself in a new school.

"Why? This is great! This is a big moment for you. You should relish it, bask in all the glory," Stacy encouraged her.

"I'm uncomfortable with all the attention," Corey muttered. She should have intentionally made more mistakes in the exam. But she had been afraid that Stacy would do really well, because she had finally taken the PSLE seriously and really studied. After all, it was the big exam that would determine which secondary school they would go on to. Corey had a rare gift that she had

carefully concealed from others because she didn't want people to think she was a freak. She could remember everything she read if she understood it. For example, she could recite a whole Geronimo Stilton book that she had read once through but she could not do the same with some of her secondary school textbooks because there were words in those that she did not know. When she was in Primary One, her teacher had made her stand up in class and had everyone clap when she scored full marks on a test. It had made her blush so embarrassingly that she swore it would never happen again. Ever since then, Corey had always intentionally made mistakes in her tests and exams so that she would never be first again. However, she decided not to add in any mistakes for her PSLE exams. That way, in case Stacy surprised everyone and did so well that she got into one of those prestigious girls' schools that she aspired to go to, Corey could go there too.

"You know, that was okay when you were a kid in primary school, but now you're grown up," Stacy reminded her.

"Doesn't change anything... I'm still me," Corey croaked.

"You are so socially inept," Stacy said.

"Corey!" Colton called out as he approached the girls. "Hey, did you see that banner?" He laughed. Colton was Corey's brother. He was in the same school year as Corey because though he was eleven months older, he was born the same year Corey was—he in January and Corey in December. They were brother and sister but they only shared the same round eyes. Colton looked more like Pa—he had a squarish face and high cheekbones—while Corey looked like Ma, with her small oval-shaped face with a high forehead.

"Oh, did you already know about the banner?" Corey asked.

"Yeah. I saw Ma doing up your picture." Colton laughed. "My sister's a pinup girl!" He was actually proud of his sister for doing so well in her exam.

The three kids started walking away from the old school building to go home.

Corey, Stacy and Colton made their way to the HDB block that had recently been painted a bright cobalt blue and chartreuse. Stacy thought the colour combination was so gaudy, it was painful to look at. Everything had changed after the government's

upgrading of public housing had recently reached their neighbourhood. Even the kids' favourite haunt, the playground, had been totally revamped. Colton missed the old one. The new playground had three levels with a slide at each level. There was a plastic canopy on the highest level that was designed to look like huge leaves, giving the new playground a jungle theme. It was nice and new but there were no more swings. The kids had wonderful childhood memories of the old playground with swings and they missed it. What was most annoying was the sign that said the new playground was for children aged five to twelve. Corey, Colton and Stacy were approaching thirteen.

As they walked up the stairs and along the wide empty corridor that led to the siblings' home, a horrible smell hit them. The girls knew that smell. They would never forget it. They had once encountered it while at Stacy's home.

Stacy lived in a one-room flat with her grandmother. She was born out of wedlock and her mother had died of lupus when Stacy was only three years old. She had never known who her father was and always wondered about him.

An elderly neighbour had died a few days ago in Stacy's block and nobody had known about it. That same smell had lingered for days even after the body was removed. It was a million times worse than the stench of putrefied fish and rotten eggs put together.

Stacy and Corey looked at each other and said in unison, "That's the smell of a dead body!"

The smell got stronger as they walked toward Corey and Colton's flat.

"It's coming from Auntie Cordelia's," Corey's voice rose. Stacy looked puzzled. "Auntie Cordelia?"

Colton nodded. "Yes," he said, "our mom liked the name so much that she named this one Cordelia when she was born." He pointed to his sister.

Corey felt the name Cordelia never quite suited her. It was an elegant name and Corey was anything but elegant. It suited Auntie Cordelia better—she frightened Corey most of the time, with her piercing looks and articulate words. Corey much preferred her nickname even though Ma had at first opposed it, saying it was a boy's name. But it had stuck.

"She used to live on the thirteenth floor with her parents till she moved just next to us two years ago,"

Corey said. The flat looked the way it usually did when Auntie Cordelia was out—the door and sliding windows were all closed.

“Maybe we should knock first?” Corey suggested with her fingers pinching her nostrils.

“And then what? Are you expecting the decomposed corpse to answer the door?” Stacy gibed, making Colton laugh.

“Maybe she has become one of the living dead,” Colton joked. He and Stacy both started to stretch their arms out and made zombie sounds and pretended to grab and bite Corey.

“Stop that! How can you both goof around with that smell in the air?” Corey asked, her fingers still pinching her nostrils. Colton and Stacy did the same.

The trio tried to slide open the windows but they were locked. Corey noticed the green iron rod gate was not padlocked.

“Maybe we should call the police?” Colton asked.

“I don’t know if they would believe us. We’re just kids. They might think we’re pulling a prank,” Corey said. “I think we should call Ma.”

Colton called Ma at work and told her that there was

a terrible stinky smell coming from Auntie Cordelia’s flat and that Stacy was sure it was from a dead body. Ma said she would call the police and told the kids to go home and stay indoors.

The police arrived at Auntie Cordelia’s flat in less than ten minutes. There was an Indian policewoman and a Malay policeman. Both were in uniform. The policewoman had her hair in a severe bun and wore a constipated look on her face. The ends of her lips turned down and she had a perpetual frown on her face. She did not look like a happy person at all. She wore a name tag that said “Rani Veerasamy” and she had three chevrons pointing downward on her shoulder. She was Sergeant Rani. The policeman’s name tag said “Faris”. He was young and looked like he was fresh from the police academy. His eyes sparkled with excitement, as if this was his first day on an important job. Unlike Sergeant Rani, he had only two chevrons on his shoulder, making him a corporal. Once he had a whiff of the dead body, Corporal Faris’ face turned green from the repulsive smell. Sergeant Rani got on a walkie-talkie. Corporal Faris asked the kids if their parents were home. He was friendly and had an easy smile.

Two more policemen arrived on the scene with a lock cutter and a crowbar. They instructed the corporal to keep Corey, Stacy and Colton in the siblings' flat. Corporal Faris was polite when he asked the kids to go indoors. He stood at their door, as if guarding them.

Colton looked through the peephole. "They are taking out their arms! Eh? They're knocking on the door first."

Corey gave Stacy a look. Yeah, the living dead would come open the door.

"If someone was in, it would save them the trouble of breaking in, right?" Stacy said.

"If someone was in, that person would probably be the murderer who didn't know what to do with a corpse," Colton reasoned.

"I bet even the murderer wouldn't be able to live with that smell," Corey said under her breath.

"They are breaking in now." Colton reported what he saw.

The policemen all went into Auntie Cordelia's flat. They barricaded the entrance with a long blue and white plastic strip that said "POLICE LINE DO NOT CROSS."

Colton opened his front door just a tiny bit so they could peek out but the smell hit them immediately.

"Whoa!" Colton quickly closed the door. But the friends' curiosity got the better of them so they opened the door again while pinching their nostrils. They couldn't see much from their angle. Sergeant Rani glared at them each time they peeked out. They closed the door and took turns to look through the peephole. But when Sergeant Rani wasn't in the corridor, they opened the door again.

"I much prefer the other policeman," Corey said.

"Yea, he's so cute too. Saw his name: Faris," Stacy added. "Cute" was her vocabulary for handsome.

"Woo hoo! Stacy and the policeman, K-I-S-S-I-N-G," Colton teased.

"Ew! He's so much older. He could be my father!" Stacy looked repulsed.

"He looks very young to me. I'd say he should be in his early twenties," Corey said. She thought he was "cute" too.

More policemen came, some in plain clothes. Colton, who watched many police dramas on TV, knew they had to be from the Criminal Investigation

Department, or CID. Some wore dark blue vests that said “FORENSICS” on the back. Colton explained to the girls what they did, like finding fingerprints and finding out what was used to murder the victim. He was very excited. It was like his favourite Hong Kong television dramas were coming to life right before his eyes. After hearing a barrage of clicking from cameras going off, they finally saw a black body bag being carried away.

But the smell still lingered.

CHAPTER 2

THE LAM RESIDENCE was filled with potpourri. Ma had even bought an air freshener that sprayed automatically every few minutes. Even then, the unpleasant smell lingered like a stain that could not be washed out.

“I can still smell that,” Pa grunted over breakfast. He was a practical but grumpy sort of person who showed his concern for his family by nagging at them.

“I read that the smell of cigar smoke is strong enough to overpower it,” Colton said.

“No, I don’t think I’ll have that with teenagers in my house. Man, what you kids can come up with!” Pa exclaimed.

“I’m getting Grandma to come stay here while your Pa and I are in China,” Ma informed the kids as she sipped her tea. Ma and Pa were up early this morning because they had to catch a flight. Ma was worried because of what had happened next door. “Or should I stay and have Pa go on his own?” She frowned as if considering a huge dilemma.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MARANNA CHAN has spent much of her life in children's education. She has been a director for a Montessori school and a trainer in phonics and speech and drama. She has also worked as a course developer for English enrichment programmes for secondary school students. But her greatest passion is entertaining and sharing her imagination with children through her stories. In her free time, Maranna stays up late watching back-to-back episodes of crime investigation television series. The *Triple Nine Sleuths* series is her debut writing effort. You can visit her website at tripleninesleuths.wordpress.com.

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Next in the series...

DANGEROUS DESPAIR

An elderly woman falls to her death from a high-rise flat. Everyone believes it is a tragic suicide but Colton is convinced it is a murder. A culprit with murky intentions may be on the loose and as the Triple Nine Sleuths investigate, danger strikes closer and closer to home...

DANGEROUS ISLAND

Corey, Colton and Stacy attend a holiday camp on St John's Island and explore an old house with new friends. But when Corey and Colton's Aunt Kathy is blamed for a colleague's death at the Tropical Marine Science Institute, the Triple Nine Sleuths must rush to her rescue. Can they clear her name before the camp ends?

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“If Alfred Hitchcock’s Three Investigators were reincarnated as Singaporeans, they’d be the Triple Nine Sleuths.”—*The Sunday Times*



THREE ORDINARY TEENAGERS—
COLTON, COREY AND STACY—BECOME
RELUCTANTLY DRAWN INTO A WORLD
OF CRIME, CONSPIRACY AND INTRIGUE
WHEN STACY BEGINS TO SEARCH FOR THE
TRUTH BEHIND HER MOTHER’S DEATH.

Corey, Colton and Stacy are in for a foul surprise: a decomposing body is found in the neighbourhood. Is it a natural death? Or a devious murder? The Triple Nine Sleuths’ desire for truth leads to a frantic search for clues. As patterns emerge, shy Corey fears she could be the next victim. Can the Triple Nine Sleuths convince the police of their theory and stop the killer in time?

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