

TRIPLE 9 SLEUTHS

DANGEROUS MESSAGE



MARANNA CHAN

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TRIPLE 9 SLEUTHS

DANGEROUS MESSAGE



MARANNA CHAN



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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 1

For my awesome editor, Ruth
You are the one that made it all happen

NG LING LING

EXI: THE REBEL

She was anxious, negative and suspicious of others.

*As she was highly sensitive and defensive,
she disparaged and berated others around her.*

She questioned authority and was divisive.

She joined a violent gang and lapsed into alcoholism.

She blamed others for her problems.

She paid for her sins.

CHAPTER 1

“THEY WERE SPIES!” Stacy exclaimed. She was sitting at the dining table at Corey’s house doing her homework when a thought came to her suddenly. Corey Lam and Stacy Rodriguez were so different in looks and personality—bespectacled Corey was shy and mousy, while Stacy was lively and tall—yet they had been best friends since kindergarten.

The Pollutant Standards Index had reached above 300 and the National Environment Agency had advised everybody to stay indoors. Corey had closed all the windows and switched on the air-conditioning. Stacy had come over as her one-room flat had no air-conditioner and she felt suffocated with no ventilation. The Lams’ home reminded her of a little cottage. Its yellow walls, teak furniture, soft comfy sofa, and pictures on the wall were in stark contrast to her own home, which could, at best, be described as eclectic.

“Who were spies?” Colton Lam asked as he came back to the dining table with drinks and snacks.

Colton was Corey's brother. They were born in the same year; Colton in January and Corey in December. They were not only in the same school, but also in the same class. Snowy, Colton's white Scottish terrier, was bouncing up and down next to him with his tongue sticking out. He could smell food!

"Her parents," Corey explained. "Stacy thinks they were spies."

"Just think about it. Both are missing. Both!" Stacy stressed. "I watched this American TV series where a man's parents were both missing, and you know why?"

"They were spies?" Colton asked.

"They were spies!" Stacy emphasised.

"Like the 'double O seven' kind?" Colton asked, munching on a chip.

"I wouldn't know. Spies are secretive. But I figured they left me with Nana and disappeared to protect me. If they stuck around, I could've been killed! It was getting too dangerous!" Stacy said as she popped a chip in her mouth and gave one to Snowy as well. He was such a cute puppy that the kids couldn't deny him anything.

"And why would anyone want to kill you?" Corey asked.

"It may not have been about me. Someone might have wanted something important from my parents and I could've easily been kidnapped. Maybe they had some top secret government information," Stacy speculated.

Stacy had been brought up by her maternal grandmother who said that Stacy's mother, Cybil, had died of lupus. However, Stacy had recently found out that Cybil had not died but had been missing for ten years. As for Stacy's father, she had never known his identity till recently, when clues led her to suspect that he could be Samuel Oei, the famous motivational speaker.

"That's wildly imaginative. You see, this is an example of what happens to a person when they watch too much television. They can't tell fantasy from reality," Corey remarked.

"But if that theory gives you comfort in any way, I say, go for it," Colton said.

"I wonder if there's any way to find out if I'm right?" Stacy asked.

"You mean, is there a database of secret agents that thirteen-year-olds like us can access?" Corey asked. "I'm guessing it's a no?"

"You're guessing?" Colton chipped in.

“Corey, you’re some sort of genius, aren’t you? Can’t you hack into some database?” Stacy asked.

“No, I don’t know how to do that. Besides, it’s illegal! I’m not doing anything illegal,” Corey said and started coughing.

“Not even to help your poor friend find her long-lost parents?” Stacy asked with a pout.

“Not even to help my poor friend find her long-lost parents,” Corey answered.

“Cold-hearted!” Stacy huffed.

“Hey, we have been helping you already! We asked Aunt Kathy to see if your DNA matched Mr Oei’s, didn’t we?” Corey said. Stacy had confronted Samuel Oei at the Children’s Museum a few weeks ago, but he revealed that his brother, Stanley, had been dating Stacy’s mother Cybil, not him. To be sure, Stacy had collected some of Mr Oei’s blood from his wound to do a DNA test.

Stacy recalled Aunt Kathy explaining the test results to her over the phone: “Well, some of the segments from your DNA and Samuel Oei’s DNA are identical. Some short matching segments may just be coincidental. But the statistical analysis of the segments you share with

Samuel Oei and the length of those segments tell us that Samuel Oei isn’t your father.”

Stacy’s heart had dropped, but Aunt Kathy quickly added, “Samuel Oei is not your father, but he is somehow related to you. The values on both autosomal genetic markers reveal a high probability that Samuel Oei and you shared an ancestor.” That was enough evidence for Stacy to believe that Samuel Oei’s brother, Stanley, was indeed her father. However, Stanley Oei had also been missing for ten years, just like Stacy’s mother!

“Yes, and I am eternally grateful to your aunt,” Stacy said. “How is she doing?”

“She’s taking her time to look for a job so Grandma is staying with her for two weeks,” Colton said. Colton missed his grandma and her cooking. Snowy missed her too as he was left alone in the house when the kids went off to school and their parents went off to work.

“You know, I was wondering why Mr Oei denied he was related to you,” Corey asked.

“I think the Oei family was opposed to Cybil’s relationship with Stanley. I sensed that from what Mr Oei said,” Stacy explained. She remembered the exact words Mr Oei had used. They had stabbed her heart.

He had implied that her mother was an opportunistic gold-digger. She didn't know much about her parents and it haunted her that they were missing. What could have happened to them? She wished she knew.

"I googled the Oeis. They own many businesses. Samuel Oei's Learning Technologies Group is only one of them. Their main business is the real estate company, One Estate Investments. Mr Oei's mother, Elizabeth Oei, is a well-known socialite," Colton explained.

"Did you find out anything about my father, Stanley Oei?" Stacy asked.

"Not much. Someone said that younger son Stanley kept a low profile and speculated that he had migrated," Colton explained.

"How did you find that out on the Internet?" Stacy asked. She had googled the Oeis too, but had not dug up anything.

"I joined some online discussion groups and asked around," Colton asked.

"Then we must take everything with a pinch of salt. It's purely gossip!" Corey interjected and started coughing again.

"You know, I dreamt that they were married. It

was so real, like it was more a memory than a dream," Stacy said.

"Could be wishful thinking," Corey said.

Colton's phone buzzed. He frowned as he checked it.

"Who's that?" Corey asked her brother.

"It's from Auntie Lee's property agent. Ever since I texted him about Auntie Lee's flat, he has been sending me updates sporadically about flats available for sale around the estate," Colton explained.

Auntie Lee was an elderly lady whom everyone believed had hurled herself out of her flat because of depression. Colton suspected otherwise and investigated the case. Auntie Lee's daughter-in-law had mentioned that the old lady was selling her flat. Colton had called her property agent to verify if it was true.

"Why don't you tell him you're not interested any more?" Stacy asked. Colton and the girls had helped the police to crack that case months ago.

"Oh, but this message was sent to me by mistake. It says: 'Can't meet up. Have to be at albeit. Meet you when I'm done.'" Colton showed the message to Corey.

"Just delete it," Stacy said.

CHAPTER 2

“THEY FOUND A body dumped at Peirce Reservoir!” Pa announced, looking up from his newspapers. “Poor fellow! So young, only in his thirties, and had a promising career. He was a property agent. He looks quite familiar, huh?” He showed the picture of the deceased to Ma. It was a Saturday and the Lams were having breakfast together as a family. Corey loved the smell of fresh coffee and toast at the dining table. Colton was slurping down his half-boiled eggs.

“Hey! I recognise him! He always stuffed flyers through our gate!” Ma exclaimed. “What’s his name?”

“Png Yong Teck,” Pa read out as he sipped his coffee.

“No, that’s not it,” Ma thought for a while. The name was on the tip of her tongue. “Png. Something Png. Starts with ‘A’. Alan, no Alvin, Alson?”

“Anson Png,” Corey said. The memory of the flyers, with the picture of the agent and his number, burst into her eidetic memory. She could even remember every transacted price listed.

“Anson Png?” Colton perked up. That was the property agent that had been selling Auntie Lee’s flat! “I received a text message from him four days ago!” Colton said as he whipped out his phone and scrolled through his messages to look for it.

“They found his body yesterday evening but it says here that he had been dead for three days,” Pa said.

“So, he died the day that he sent me the message?” Colton said, shuddering.

“Why are you getting messages from a property agent?” Ma was curious.

“I texted him a few months back to find out if Auntie Lee was selling her flat. He’s been sending me messages about the flats that are up for sale in our estate ever since. Oh no! I’ve deleted it!” He was upset with himself. What had the message said?

Corey read Colton’s mind. “Anson said he was going to be at ‘albeit’. Where’s that?” she asked with a quizzical frown.

“No, no, no. You kids are not getting into this. Corey is still getting her panic attacks after that debacle at the Children’s Museum,” Ma said. “And I don’t want you kids gallivanting about with the haze going on.”

“The haze isn’t serious any more,” Colton said. “The PSI has gone down to 91.”

“Ninety-one is still bad. It’s just that we have had it above 300 so we start thinking 91 is fine but it isn’t,” Ma said.

“I know! It could be Albeit Road!” Corey said as she looked for the road name in the street directory on her smartphone. Colton did the same.

“Could you both please stop fiddling with your phones? I swear I’m going to ban Candy Crushing in my house if you are constantly sticking your noses in your phones! This is so unhealthy!” Ma nagged.

“I’m not Candy Crushing, Ma! I’m looking for Albeit Road,” Colton said, “or Albeit Street, or Albert Avenue.”

“I don’t play Candy Crush,” Corey said and started coughing again. “And stop asking me for tickets, Colton!”

“I’m levelling up very fast. There’s no one ahead of me. I am the Candy Crush King!” Colton gloated.

“If only you’d be more competitive and take pride in your studies, instead of a silly game!” Ma exclaimed.

“But, you play too, don’t you?” Pa asked Ma. “You are at level 56.”

Ma was a bit embarrassed and quickly added, “But

I play in a balanced way. I stop when there are more important things to do.”

“You stop when you run out of lives, Ma,” Colton added and laughed at his mother. He looked at his game and found Ma’s profile picture on level 56, just like Pa had said.

“Don’t be cheeky,” Ma said and tried to smack Colton’s head, but he dodged in time. Corey started feeling breathless again. She took out a paper bag and breathed into it slowly. Ma looked at her with concern. “I think you need to see the doctor again, Corey. I’m concerned that your panic attacks are starting up once more.”

“No, Ma, I’m fine. I can control it. It’s all in the mind,” Corey said, breathing heavily. She was worried that she would be prescribed antidepressants and the medication would impair her ability to think clearly.

“Don’t you guys have to go already?” Colton reminded his parents.

“Yes, we’re going. Don’t forget Snowy’s appointment with his dog groomer.” Ma gulped down the rest of her coffee, kissed her kids and left for work with Pa. They ran an education centre together and they had classes on Saturday.

“Back to Candy Crush!” Colton sniggered as he went back to his phone. “Hey, Anson Png was playing Candy Crush too!”

“You have him on Facebook?” Corey asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe he found me on Facebook? I get Candy Crush notifications from him,” Colton said.

“I hate those Candy Crush invites! They are so annoying!” Corey said. “There is neither an Albeit Road nor an Albeit Avenue. Maybe he meant to say he was going to Albert’s? Perhaps he had a friend by that name?”

“I’ll look at his Facebook contacts to find out,” Colton said as he looked through Anson Png’s Facebook page. “No. No one called Albert.”

“Maybe we should tell Corporal Faris about the message and let the police figure it out. It could be an important clue,” Corey said. She dialled his number and waited, but the corporal didn’t pick up. Perhaps he was on duty.

Colton and Corey decided it would be best to look for Corporal Faris at the police station. Corey called Stacy and filled her in. Stacy had just gotten out of bed but said she could be ready in ten minutes. Corey told

her they would leave Snowy at the groomer’s and meet her at the police station.

“What are you doing? Still playing Candy Crush?” Corey asked her brother who had become silent all of a sudden.

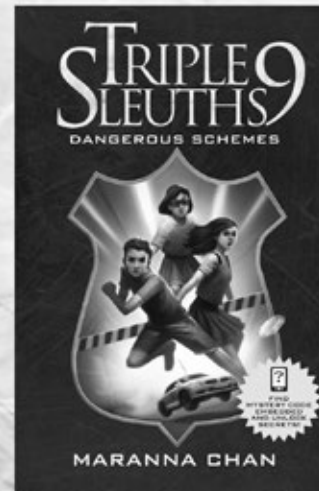
“No. I’m taking snapshots of all of Anson’s contacts. I want to do this before his account gets deleted. It just dawned on me that if he knew the perpetrator, one of these people could be the murderer!” Colton said.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Maranna Chan is a full-time writer with a background in education, having taught children of various ages, ranging from preschoolers to secondary school students. Maranna enjoys studying human behaviour and figuring out the personality types of those around her. A wife, and a mother to a young child and two hamsters, Maranna loves staying up late to watch back-to-back episodes of her favourite criminal investigation television series. That, she justifies, is for research.

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