

ESCAPE TO LOVE

By Mayumi Cruz

CHAPTER 1

“Why, oh why, did I allow Fred to take the car?” Megan muttered, reprimanding herself.

She carefully stepped over a puddle of water as she walked toward the waiting shed to flag a taxi. It was past midnight and the heavy rain hasn't stopped since early this evening. The wet streets of Bonifacio Global City in Taguig were half asleep with just a handful of people and vehicles going to and fro.

Normally, being a pluviophile, she would have relished the battering rain. But not presently, when she was all dressed up in a silver sequined Vera Wang gown and Jimmy Choo stilettos, coming from a charity event hosted by her friend, Melanie Stockton. She hugged her Alexander McQueen beige overcoat to her body with one hand as the other steadied the useless tiny umbrella, borrowed from the hotel concierge, over her head. Her french bun was still in place, although wisps of hair managed to escape from both sides of her head. Her feet were wet now, and if not for the thick overcoat, she would have been drenched.

Her thoughts went back to Fred, her driver. Instantly, she was ashamed for her moment of regret in letting him have the car. She knew her driver needed the car more than her when she saw how worried he was, getting a call for help earlier from his cancer-stricken wife in Cavite.

Her heart went out to him and his family who had been struggling with the sickness for almost a year now. Fred didn't want to leave her in the middle of the night at the charity event. But it was she who insisted that he take her car so he can be with his wife as soon as possible, assuring him that she will get home safely by riding with her friend. Besides, even if Fred did not take the car, it's not that she'd drive the car.

Oh, she knew how to drive. But after the *accident*, she just hadn't found the nerve to do so.

Megan had been out of circulation and on hiatus from the outside world for the past year after the tragedy which claimed the lives of her grandparents. Her grief over their death drove her to turn hermit, refusing to come out of the mansion.

Never had she felt more alone than when she lost them. They were all she had. She had not known her parents. Her mother died giving birth to her. Her irresponsible father abandoned her to the hands of her maternal grandparents who brought her up in a sheltered, comfortably wealthy life, which meant mostly attending charity events and being glamorous while struggling to avoid the harsh public eye. Megan shut herself from the outside world, too aggrieved over the death of the old couple.

But time really had a way of healing even the deepest wounds. Eventually, she realized she had to pick herself up and live again. With her grandparents' death, she became the sole majority stockholder and CEO of Montecillo Industries, a software development company with diversified business units in publishing, construction and real estate, having a net worth of \$2.1 billion. People's lives—their employees and laborers—depended on her. As the chairperson of her corporation's Board of Trustees, it occurred to her that it was selfish of her to let the Board members do all the work, however efficient the businesses seemed to be running for the past year.

For the past week, she had gotten out of her bed, dressed up in her most professional attire, and to everyone's surprise, attended the Board meetings instead of merely talking to them through phone as she had done for the past months. She spent whole days signing contracts that had been left waiting, talking to the members of the Board, and basically keeping abreast of what was happening to her businesses. At the end of the week, she breathed a sigh of relief at learning that all was truly going well. Her grandfather had wisely picked the members of the Board who all shared a high sense of integrity and astute business acumen.

Tonight, she had accepted Melanie's invitation to her charity event for the benefit of children with Down syndrome. The first few hours, Megan was entertained. It was, after all, her first night

out after a year. But at half past ten in the evening, she wanted to go home and rest her tired feet and aching body. She would have left with Fred, her driver, but one look at his stricken face and she knew she had to let go of him for his wife's sake.

Without her driver, she thought she would have the patience to wait for her friend to take her home. But when she saw Melanie has no immediate plans of leaving when the clock struck midnight, she silently, surreptitiously walked out of the ballroom, leaving a message for her at the hotel reception desk. She declined the concierge's offer to book her in Uber, wanting to feel independent by flagging a taxi for a change.

Arriving at the waiting shed, Megan saw she was all alone. She felt a cold chill. As luck would have it, there were no taxis in sight. It had been a long time since she had walked alone, and at an ungodly hour such as now. The flickering yellow light above the nearby lamp post made the place all the more frightening.

"I should have accepted the concierge's offer to get me an Uber ride," she muttered. Struggling to keep herself from being soaked wet from the harsh rain, she tried to shake off from her mind Melanie's horrid tales of rapists, murderers, and riding-in-tandem shooters. It wasn't easy, considering that almost their entire conversation that evening was all about the violent crimes happening around the Metro.

Suddenly, she heard a loud noise behind her. As she turned around to look at it, a big splash of muddy water struck her face. Startled, she was knocked off balance, causing her to slump down on the sidewalk, butt first.

"Oww!" She let out a loud, unladylike shriek, more out of surprise than of anything else, causing her umbrella to be thrown aside. Trying to gather her thoughts, she shook her soaked head as she laid crumpled and dripping on the pavement.

An ominous shadow loomed over her. Hastily, she lifted her face up. The heavy rain splashed on her face, preventing her from seeing clearly. All she could make out was a blurred image of a

tall man standing over her. He evidently came from the motorcycle which skidded a few feet from her.

The man, wearing a black helmet and black leather jacket, stretched out his hands to her. She watched, paralyzed, as his gloved hands grasped both her arms.

Panicking, with all thoughts of violence and crime stories circling in her mind, Megan screamed, "No, no, please! Don't! Please don't hurt me!"

Hurriedly, she tried to get up. But her feet were slippery wet on her stilettos and the added weight of the man's hands caused her to slump back again. Only this time, she took the man down with her, his body covering hers.

Mortified, Megan started to scream again. But the man swiftly put his left hand over her mouth and hissed at her, his voice low and deep, "Miss! Miss, stop! I'm not doing anything to you! Don't scream!"

She mumbled from under his palm, which she felt was soft and smelling faintly of Bvlgari. Warily, the man removed his hand to let her speak.

Big mistake.

"You're a rapist! Help! Help, someone! Police!" she screamed shrilly.

She heard the man curse under his breath. Her screams were abruptly muffled as he clamped his hand back on her mouth.

In an irritated, ominous voice, he muttered, "I am not a rapist and I didn't mean you any harm, Miss. I wanted to say sorry and help you stand up because I almost ran you over when my motorbike skidded in the slippery road. But you instantly panicked, bringing us both down, and then here you are, thinking of all sorts of nonsense!"

Megan again mumbled her retort but the man did not remove his hand this time. He shook his head, saying in a firm voice, "I will not remove my hand until I'm assured you will not scream. Nod if you promise not to scream."

Seeing that there were still no people around them, and she wanted to get away as far as possible from under his warm body whose tingling effect on her she could not understand, she slowly nodded her wet head, her eyes blinking rapidly. The man promptly took his hand away. As soon as he did this, Megan pushed the man away from her with all her might. He fell back in a puddle of mud as she quickly stood up and placed a safe distance away from him.

She immediately screeched at him, frightened and cold. "It's your fault! You were driving too fast, without care for anyone. Look how drenched I am because of you. You almost ran me over. You almost killed me!"

The man stood up in one move. "Miss, I was not driving too fast. The road was really slippery because of the rain." Wiping off the thick mud plastered on his behind, he retaliated, clearly offended by her accusing words. "And what about you? It's almost morning. What are you thinking, walking the streets of BGC, dressed in a gown and in high heels, in this weather?"

Facing each other, they stood soaked in the rain, two people at odds with each other, refusing to accept the other's fault. All around them, the seemingly endless drizzle continued its heavy downpour, adding to the tension.

"So what?" Megan retorted. "It's none of your business! How dare you! You're the one who ran me over, and you have the nerve to criticize me?"

She stomped her foot in annoyance. The puddle of water just conveniently splashed upward, hitting her in the face. She was almost knocked off balance again, if not for his hand grasping her arm once more to steady her. Immediately, she shook it off furiously.

The man's lips curled, seeming to be delighted at her reaction and the consequent result of her childish action. Megan's body trembled in anger. Never had she felt so angry at anyone like this. "This man is so infuriating!" she thought. Her blood boiled. She, Megan Montecillo, the billionaire socialite, will not be a source of this man's entertainment! Yet vaguely, at the back of her heated mind, she noticed how his left dimple adoringly indented his left cheek when he smiled.

Smirking, the guy replied, "Okay. Do tell me, why are you still roving the streets at this hour? Wait. Ah, I know. Are you looking for a customer?"

She gasped, her eyes widening. This man was insane! She was being called a prostitute by a man she only met tonight? Her sense of pride soared to a scary high. Added to that, she was sure the man was enjoying seeing her in shambles. She felt herself in utter disadvantage, knowing her mascara was running a mess down her cheeks, her hair and dress were all muddy wet, while his face remained hidden from her, his mocking, curled lips the only visible part of him.

Her fists clenched as she spat angry words at him. "How dare you! I am not a call girl! I can sue you for libel! I will sue you in court!" She was now screaming at the top of her lungs amid the heavy rain, humiliated over her unglamorous appearance and livid with rage at the man who made no secret that he was making fun of her.

All of a sudden, she heard the loud roar of another motorcycle as it stopped just a few feet to her left. Turning, she saw two men riding on it. They were dressed like the man she was furious with: black leather outfits glistening in the rain, their black helmets covering their face. The man at the back calmly pulled out a gun from inside his jacket and pointed it at her.

Megan found herself looking directly at the black barrel of a gun aimed directly at her forehead. Paralyzed with terror at the sight of the bringer of death aimed straight between her eyes, she let the cold, hard rain pour over her and closed her eyes tightly shut.

She heard the gun went off and felt a sharp pain.

Then there was only darkness.