

CHROMA HEARTS

By Mayumi Cruz

CHAPTER 1

Eight Weeks Ago

Time's up.

From the darkest corner of the tiny room, I exhaled a long, weary sigh. The ear-splitting screams have died down to soft whimpers, thank goodness. Whereas moments ago, my eardrums had almost exploded at the high-pitched cries interspersed with wild laughter and grunts, now the pounding sensation inside my ears was all but gone. The faint sounds which drifted to me now were like the piercing meows of a gasping, frightened furball.

Flashes of snow white fur, emerald eyes, and a black, broom-like tail invaded my mind. Toby. Our pet cat. One look at him at an animal shelter and it was love at first sight. He was perfection. We brought him home. Fed him. Put him to bed. Tickled his chin. Played with him. Took care of him. Gave him everything a cat can ever want. Then he just went up and about and knocked up a passing feline who came from nowhere. Next thing I knew, Toby had installed her inside my house, revolting belly and all. I didn't want her. I didn't want the kittens that were growing inside her. I only wanted Toby. Just Toby.

I fished out again my vintage pocket watch, flicked it open and glanced at the time. It had been almost thirty minutes. Surely, they were done now? How long did they have to keep at this? Were they not getting tired? I shuddered in disgust.

Standing up from my seat, I made sure my face is hidden, swallowed under my black hood. Once again, as I have done many times over the past hour, I curled my nose, hating the smell of liquor, cigarettes, and bad breath. The old, rusty air-conditioning unit served to intensify the horrible stench instead of covering it. The room was illuminated only by the light coming from under the bathroom door to my left. But even in the darkness, I was able to make out their shadowy figures.

I rapped my knuckles three times on the wall. They abruptly stopped. They turned their covered heads at me in unison. I was reminded of the movie with hooded figures performing a dark ritual. They cleared a path at the center, giving me a glimpse of what

they have done. As if I wanted to see the result of their hard work. Of course, I didn't. I only stayed to make sure they got to do it right. Just the way I wanted to.

I made a T sign out of my two hands. I hoped they couldn't see the dark blue nitrile medical gloves I had on. It was too dark anyway. It took them a full minute to comprehend what I was trying to say. I rolled my eyes. So much for smart. At least they had their uses.

I waited as they grudgingly stood up, one by one, cursing, adjusting themselves. For a moment there, I wanted to yell. What's with the fuss? Weren't they given only thirty minutes to do the job? I already paid them, didn't I? I stopped myself. What can you expect from bums? Lazy, good-for-nothing, smelly, scum of the earth. At least, they obeyed my strict instruction to make sure the black hoods I bought for them stayed snugly over their shaved heads. I would have puked if I saw their asses.

Yes. Scum. Oh, well. I took comfort that in a few minutes, the world will be rid of three of them.

And one other, now made abominable.

Of course, they didn't know that.

Unseen by them, my left hand gripped my gun firmly, finger on the trigger. I have already checked it a few times while they were busy doing the job, zoning out the deafening din. The silencer was tightly fit on the barrel. There were enough bullets to down ten men, and I intend to use them all. I was counting on the month-long training I underwent at a gun range near my home. Not to brag, but my instructor said I have a good, steady hand, evidenced by a very impressive record of hitting the head in paper targets. Surely, at this distance, just three or four feet away, I won't miss?

But wait. My eyes widened. What was that I hear? sirens. Loud and wailing. Tires. Screeching, squealing, the crunch of gravel. Lights. Blinking, multi-colored, coming from outside, filtering through the windows of the dark room, lighting it up like the dancing, dizzying lights of a crowded, full-packed nightclub. Angry, rasping voices over a loudspeaker, forcefully barking orders to surrender.

The police.

My heart palpitated to dangerous heights.

How could they have traced us here in this secluded resort in such a short time? I found this place up a small hill in Baras, a largely underdeveloped municipality in Rizal province, a one-and-a-half-hour drive from Makati City. When I chanced upon it on the

internet, I thought it was perfect for my plan. It fit my requirements. The place was remote, the kind where cheating husbands and flesh-hungry politicians do their thing. Set on top of a low hill, hidden from the main road by towering mango trees and with only a total of three private, small rooms around its single, egg-shaped pool. The best part? Each room had a back door leading downslope.

How did the police accurately find us? And then it clicked. Of course. How did I forget that? The car had a GPS. They could have tracked it easily with that device I myself bought. I should have used another car. Damn. Why did I miss that?

But there was no time castigating myself. All around me, the morons were shouting, running back and forth around the small room, panicking. One of them grabbed a wooden chair, throwing it violently at the wall. Crashing hard, it broke into a few jagged pieces. He picked up a leg, wielded it, bellowing he will never surrender, he will never go to jail again. The others foolishly followed suit. Dumb, stupid idiots. Didn't they know they can't win over the police and their guns?

Gun. I stared at the gun in my hand. Struck by a wild idea, I fished out my handkerchief and wiped off my fingerprints from it. Placing it on the floor, I kicked it towards the three men. It bumped the heel of the tallest one. He yelped in surprise. He picked it up, turned it over and scrutinized it like it was an object of wonder, before pointing it and firing it. The bullet shattered the glass, and a cry of pain was heard from outside. Who could have known he'd hit someone?

The response was immediate. Wild gunfire ensued. Bullets broke through the room, hitting flesh, spilling blood. Screams of pain. Screams of rage. Screams of panic. My gun returned fire, because what else was there to do? And of course, the police retaliated, unmindful of who their bullets would hit. It was like watching a Western movie. Unbelievable.

In the commotion, the morons forgot about me. For once, I was grateful for their pea brains. They didn't notice as I dropped on all fours and slowly crawled to my right towards the back door, bullets flying over my hooded head. I passed by the bed, ignoring the scared, muffled snuffles of the huddled figure on it. The door loomed ahead, a few inches next to the bedside table. Just a bit more.

Finally, I reached up for the knob, twisting it, then sliding my hand down to the bottom rail to open the door slightly, trying not to draw attention to me. I looked back over my

shoulders and saw only one man standing. He was crunched, peering over the sill. In his hand, he clutched my gun, avoiding the bullets raining in around him, around us. It looked as though he had no plans of surrendering. Beside him, his two companions laid dead. Not my fault anymore. I gave them my gun, didn't I?

I started to crawl my way out the door when I was abruptly pulled back. A shiver of fear coursed through me. Was I being held back by the remaining scum? Why was I being held back? Who was holding me back?

Dreadfully, I glanced backward. The fool was still there, cowering. I frowned, wriggling my body. There was something else pulling at me. I dropped my eyes to my left side, and my eyes widened.

A couple of feet away from me, my vintage full hunter pocket watch laid on the floor, its chain caught around the table's foot, the other end of it clipped to my belt. It must have slipped out, most probably when I was crawling. Carefully, I started to unclip the chain from my belt so I can untangle the other end and pull the watch back to me. I didn't want it to snap and break. This was my very precious, rare find in a thrift shop many years ago. Its former owner was the son of a marine who fought in the first World War, making this piece an artifact of considerable value. It would fetch a large amount if I decided to sell it.

Bullets were still pouring haphazardly into the room. The man by the window stumbled backward, his back falling flat on the floor with a loud thud. Another bullet zoomed above my head, followed by a spree of shots. I heard a groan from the direction of the bed. Hurriedly, I finished loosening the chain around the table's foot and was starting to pull it, when suddenly, a bloodied, half-naked body dropped to the floor beside me.

Cold fear gripped me. I was afraid to move. The body was just a foot away from me. It was clearly on the point of death, struggling hard to breathe. Sprawled on the floor, neck angled awkwardly to the left, its face was covered with stringy, thick hair with only an eye barely visible, half-closed, glassy.

I held my breath as trembling, blood-streaked fingers groped and fumbled aimlessly, nearly missing my hand. Slowly, I shifted myself out of its way. To my horror, its fingertips found and grasped my watch instead. The bronze outer casing with the embossed anchor design glinted under the flashes of blaring car lights.

Realizing its find, the eye snapped fully open, its pupil dilating. I stifled a gasp. It focused its vision on the watch, which was literally under its nose. Shaking, blood-

smear'd fingers tip-toed over the surface of the watch's casing, then slid up and down over the raised outline of the anchor, carefully, almost reverently. As if committing it to memory.

Suddenly, the eye shifted its line of vision. It flickered beyond the watch. It focused on me.

I almost had a heart attack.

It was looking directly at me.

It recognized me.

Or not.

Of course not! It cannot see me. It wouldn't recognize me. My head was covered with a hood. My face was hidden by darkness. Struggling to calm my wildly thumping heart, I leaned further backward, just to make sure.

Suddenly, generous blood coughed out of the person's mouth, followed by shallow, labored breaths. The sound of dying. I almost shouted with joy. Dreadful wheezing. Ragged groaning. A short grunt, much like an animal being slaughtered. And then, stillness.

Dead at last.

I yanked my watch. It was full of blood. I hated blood. I dug into my pocket and took out my handkerchief. I wiped the blood off feverishly. I was doing a good job at it too, when the front door was whacked forcibly, repeatedly, its hinges almost breaking loose. It was only then that I noticed the shooting had stopped. The police were trying to get inside the room.

Scrambling to my feet, I opened the back door, stumbling outside. I closed it just as I heard the front door crash down with a deafening bang. Without looking back, I ran.

The darkness of the night and the trees shielded me. I ran fast, down the narrow, rugged path of the rocky hill to an off the beaten road, sliding a few times down. But I got up, kept on, panting, stumbling, and running again. At last, I came upon my car at the foot of the hill, parked and concealed by tall, wild grass. I slid inside, shaking off dirt from my pants and fired up the engine.

About a kilometer away, I put my foot down on the brake. I got out and roamed my eyes around. The night was pitch black with only the sound of chirping, local crickets for company. The mountain range loomed tall, dark, and formidable all around me. I didn't

wait long. The sound waves reflected by the towering summits were carried to my ears by the wind. Echoes drifted, persisted for some time: “Sir! They’re all dead, sir!” “No one’s alive!” “All clear!”

Well, how about that? The police did all the work for me. I’ve been told their motto was to serve and protect and did they deliver! They served me by killing off the people I was planning to eliminate from my life, and they protected me by getting all the credit for doing it.

Pulling down the hood from my head, I slid back inside and stared at myself at the overhead mirror to find my hair was a mess. I grimaced. I hated mess. Removing the gloves carefully, I wrapped them in old newspaper, reminding myself to dispose of them later. I ran my fingers through my hair for some semblance of order. My watch told me the time, and I grinned. I was right on schedule. I didn’t have to drive like crazy to catch my flight.

I was already safely and comfortably seated inside the plane when I realized I was missing something.