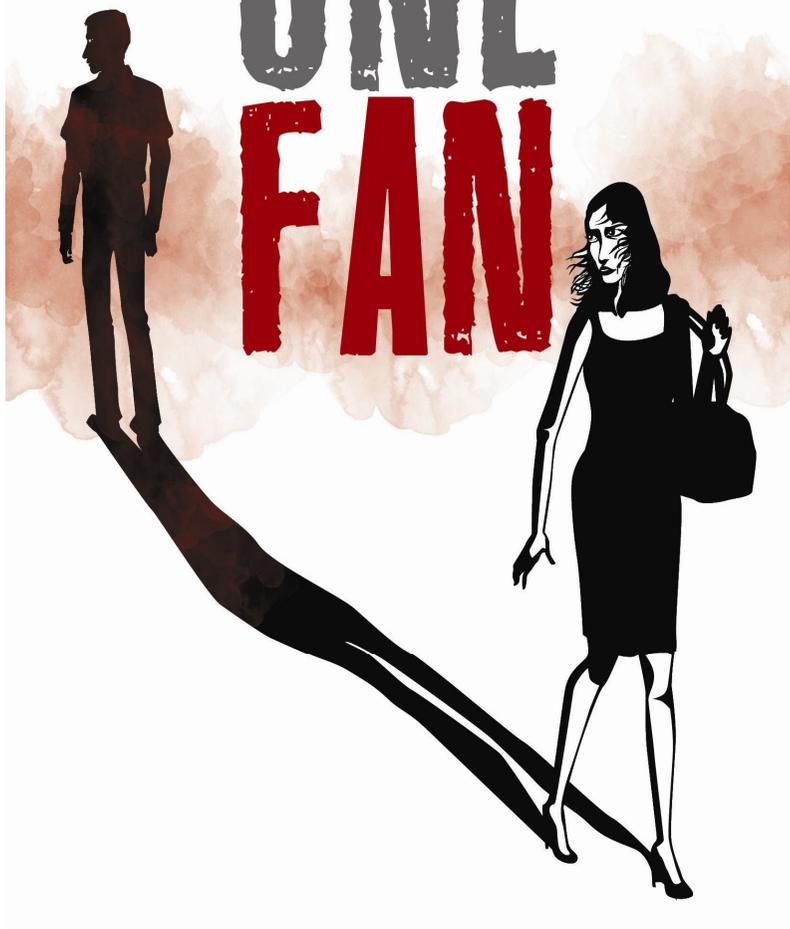


ISSA BACSA

NUMBER  
ONE  
FAN



## **Be careful on what you wish for...**

A dream came true for Regine Sta. Maria as she debuts as a news anchor for the evening news. After the newscast, she received a bouquet of flowers and a phone call from someone who calls himself her Number One Fan. His message: make him number one or else, someone will die. The next day, she dismissed it as a mere prank.

After a week, the police found her Journalism professor dead. She realized that Number One Fan proved his threat. Journalists start to die one by one and Regine had to guess who Number One Fan is. But how if her only clue was the tune of *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*?

This is a work of fiction. Characters, places, and events are products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, and business establishments is coincidental.

Number One Fan

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## CHAPTER 1

---

A BOUQUET OF RED ROSES SURPRISED ME when I arrived at my table. Colleagues at the newsroom teased that I already have a fan. Some even said that Alex would get jealous.

“Oh, I’m betting that came from Alex,” I heard Nitz Henson said. “That’s his way of saying Happy Valentine and Congratulations to Regine.”

Nitz sported a short hair, wore plain t-shirt and jeans that made anyone wonder of her sexual preference. Despite her relationship with Patrick, a police officer, gender issues about her continue.

I have known our Executive Producer since high school. We even went to the same university, but took different courses. She graduated A.B. Mass Communications and I graduated A.B. Journalism. After graduation, she worked behind the camera, and I as a news reporter here at Royale Broadcasting Network.

“I doubt it,” Lor Kagaoan, our gay TV director said. “I don’t think Alex sent that. Sometimes, he could be Mr. Scrooge personified. Maybe there is another admirer Regine just would not like us to know.”

Lor laughed and looked like a jolly old Santa with his beard and moustache that covered his Spanish features.

“If I received something like that from Jojo, of course, not flowers,” he continued, “that would be so sweet.”

His dreamy eyes flashed having been head over heels with his live-in partner for five years.

I shook my head and took his teasing aside.

“You’re starting again, Lor,” I said. “Maybe, Nitz is right. These flowers might have come from Alex to congratulate me tonight.”

I stared at the flowers. I finally had my moment an hour ago during the six o'clock newscast. The lights and camera focused on me for almost an hour as I stood on a raised stage. I looked at the TV monitor beside the camera. It showed that I looked taller in my maroon outfit. My four feet ten inches height and small frame changed on screen. The blouse, the calf-length skirt, and the high-heeled shoes worked. The make-up artist had done a good job on my hair and face. I looked younger than my actual age of twenty-eight; not bad as a replacement for someone as beautiful and Number One as my idol and Chief Correspondent, Alma Perez-Roxas.

Aside from my debut as news anchor, it also launched the network’s use of augmented reality or virtual presence technology. Having the Metro M Group of Companies, one of the country’s biggest conglomerates, taking over Royale Broadcasting Network had its benefits. Viewers could see the 3D image of news correspondent Abet Fortunato reporting the news to me. Newscasts became dynamic and real time to keep up with the trends, ratings, and competition.

“With Police Senior Inspector Noel Carrillo on the helm, the public hope that crime investigations will be resolved faster,” concluded the tall and chubby reporter. “Reporting live here at Camp Crame, Quezon City, I’m Abet Fortunato; back to you, Regine.”

“Thank you, Abet Fortunato reporting live from Quezon City,” I said and smiled back at him.

Abet nodded in acknowledgement, his eyes turned into slits as he smiled, and then his image vanished.

Talking to someone’s hologram could be creepy. Yet, virtual presence technology brought the impossible possible. Good thing I was not the only person inside the studio.

The renovated newsroom stood behind me. Enclosed in a circular pod, it looked like a war room on TV with people going back and forth, and staff sitting in front of their computers. Beside me, too, stood David Lim, the famous newscaster pirated from another station.

“And that’s what we have gathered for our news tonight,” I started my closing spiel. “Your DZRR Royale Radio News anchor, Regine Sta. Maria, is now on TV.”

That statement served as a cue for David who looked taller in his five feet eight inches medium frame. His black coat, tie, and eyeglasses brought out his Filipino-Chinese features. He looked smart, respectable and handsome on screen. His confidence showed on camera, a professional in delivering news.

“And on behalf of RMBN Channel 3 news team, I am David Lim. Thank you, until the next edition of RMBN, *Royale Metro Balita Ngayon*. Good evening.”

The stage lights dimmed and the news’ theme song played on air. People behind the cameras started packing up upon seeing the commercial break on screen. David and I removed our own lapel microphones as a production assistant approached us for those.

“You did well, Regine,” David said as he handed to the production assistant his lapel microphone.

“Thanks, David,” I smiled. “Sorry awhile ago, I got nervous at the beginning.”

“It’s nothing,” he said. “There will always be a first time in everything. Congratulations by the way on your first day as TV news anchor. I’m happy to work with you again.”

The production assistant had left when David offered a handshake. I smiled as I shook his hand for a moment. Then I removed the grip on my hand and avoided his gaze.

For the first time after eight years, I felt uncomfortable with David. I could not get past the hurt. Some days I thought I have moved on. Yet, the pain still lurked beneath the surface of my heart.

Ever since David transferred to Royale Metro Broadcasting Network, I tried my best to avoid him. I might

have forgiven him; but I could not forget what happened eight years ago. I saw him locked in an embrace and kissed someone's girl on the lips. The hurt I felt that time made me run away, avoiding him until now.

"I'm not yet used to the new format and technology. Kind of scary, isn't it?" I said as I tried to dispel that sad memory off my mind.

"You'll get used to it," David said. "Don't you like it? Look around you."

"Yes, it's awesome. We're thankful for Metro M Group for what's happening, David," I said. "But please understand, it is not easy for us to accept the sudden changes since Metro took over."

That comment might have hurt him. Metro M Group hired David. Thus, he qualified as one of the sudden changes.

The flowers that lay in front of me just reaffirmed my resolve to move on with Alex, David's childhood friend.

Alex Joven and I have been news reporters for Royale Radio. We started going out during the time when rumors of Metro M Group taking over leaked out. He left the company right after the merger.

I glanced at David's desk and saw him staring at me so I smiled back.

*Can these be from David?*

I read the little card tucked in with the flowers:

*"To my No. 1 reporter,*

*Congratulations! The radio field reporter is now a TV newscaster. Why don't you make me Number One?*

*From your Number One Fan"*

*Who would send me this kind of message? Alex? It could be possible. But Alex does not use an alias nor write anything whenever he gives me something.*

Again, I glanced back at David, still staring and smiling at me. I turned and stared at the flowers.

*It would be impossible that these would come from David. Why not? He was a former boyfriend. Yet, why would he send that kind of message?*

I flipped the card over and looked for signs where it could come from but it showed no indications.

A ring from my telephone jolted me by surprise. I put down the card on my desk and lifted the receiver to answer the call.

“RMBN News, good evening,” I greeted with a smile.

“Regine Sta. Maria, please,” said the man on the other line.

He had a deep voice that I could not recognize.

“Speaking,” I replied. “May I know who is on the line?”

“Good evening, Regine,” greeted the caller. “Have you received the flowers I sent you?”

“Who is this?” I asked.

“Your Number One Fan,” the caller replied then laughed.

Something sinister in his laughter made a chilling tingle down my spine. My smile faded. My mind ran a list of names that could do this to me. I dismissed it as a prank and stared on the card lying on my table.

“Who are you?” I asked. “Why don’t you just tell me your name?”

“You do not need to know who I am,” he replied. “Just promise me that you’ll make me famous. Make me Number One in the whole country. Understood?”

The caller roared like a demon. He sounded crazy, like a mad man on the loose. He did not seem to sound like Alex.

“Patrick, is that you?” I asked.

I thought that my friend would just want to surprise me. I remembered how he surprised Nitz with flowers on her birthday a few weeks ago.

*But then again, why would Patrick do this to me?*

“No,” the prank caller laughed. “Guess again.”

“Alex, don’t play tricks on me. Cut it out,” I said thinking that he might be Alex.

“Wrong,” he said, still laughing. “Guess again.”

“You definitely don’t sound like Abet, so whoever you are,” I sighed and tried to remain calm. “I don’t have time for this kind of talk. Sorry, but goodbye.”

I put down the phone. My eyes turned to David’s workstation and saw him put down the phone, too.

*Was that a coincidence?*

Patrick, being a police officer, told me before that in crime and investigation, there is no such a thing as coincidence. I bowed my head, buried my face in my palm, and gave a deep breath. I shook my head in disbelief. A stranger sent me flowers and called just to say he wanted to be famous.

*Was it a prank or a possible threat?*

Eighteen years ago, I woke up from the shouts outside my room. My baby sister, Joyce, slept beside me. I went out to check what happened. As I opened the door, I saw a man came out from my mother’s room just across mine. He carried a bloody knife. My aunt shouted and asked me to go back to my room. I followed her as instructed, locked the door behind me, and lay down beside Joyce, shaking in fear. The baby might have sensed the commotion outside and cried. I patted my hand on her thigh to calm her down. Everything seemed vivid in my mind except for the man’s face.

*Why could not I remember his appearance? Why did this memory enter my mind just like that? Was it payback time?*

For many years, I kept on asking relatives who killed my mother and stepfather. My father, Engr. Benjamin Sta. Maria died while working in an oil field during the Gulf Crisis. I heard them mention the name Ben. The court ordered the killer’s detention in Iwahig, a penal colony outside Metro Manila.

*But what if he escaped? Would he go after me?*

My grandfather, Sultan Ahmed Jamal Pagayawan, made it clear to us that we should never know the details behind my mother’s death. He said it was for my own sake. His words became rules. Since then I remained estranged from the Lanao culture and tradition of my grandfather’s royalty that I once saw. Even if I already had established contacts due to my

profession, any information about my mother's death and her killer led me to dead ends. My grandfather's influence might have extended its arms in all agencies.

The old phone unit rang again. I let it rang. It did not have a caller ID. The thought that it might be Alex entered my mind. David had gone when I answered the call.

"RMBN News, good evening," I greeted.

"Will you make me Number One?" asked the prank caller on the other line.

"Who are you?" I asked as I raised my voice a little higher. "What do you want?"

"You're inquisitive, Regine," he said. "You really are a reporter. Just call me Number One Fan from now on. I want you to make me famous in the whole country if not in the world. Is that okay?"

I heard him snickered on the other line.

"How can I make you famous if I do not know what your real name is and if I could not interview you well?" I challenged.

Number One Fan continued laughing on the other line.

"Regine, you don't need to interview me. I might even interview you. What do you say?"

I sighed.

"Please, I'm not playing games with you."

"Will you make me Number One or not?" he threatened.

"No!" I answered and put down the phone.

After a few seconds, the phone rang again. I let it rang. It did not stop ringing. Furious, I lifted the receiver again.

"Will you stop bugging me?" I shouted.

"Easy... easy," answered a familiar voice on the other line. "It's Alex. Are you arguing with someone?"

"Were you the one who called earlier?" I asked instead.

"No," he said on the other line. "Is there something wrong, Regine?"

"I'm sorry, Alex," I apologized after heaving a sigh of relief. "I just received a prank call from someone who calls himself Number One Fan. He already called twice awhile ago and it pissed me off."

“Ah, no wonder your line was busy a few minutes back,” he said. “I’m stuck in traffic right now and might be late in picking you up tonight. Would that be okay?”

“No problem,” I said smiling. “I’ll just wait for you at the lobby.”

*NUMBER ONE FAN WAITED for Regine Sta. Maria to answer the call. After a few rings, he heard a woman's voice on the other line.*

*"RMBN News, good evening. Regine Sta. Maria speaking," the woman greeted.*

*"Your line became busy," he answered. "Who were you talking to?"*

*"It's you again?" Regine said on the other line.*

*"Was it Alex Joven?" he asked and gave a devilish grin. "It is Valentine season and I assume you have a date with him."*

*He picked up a photograph of Regine Sta. Maria and Alex Joven. It showed them standing with Alex's arms placed over Regine's shoulder during a Christmas Party. Number One Fan laughed at Regine's silence.*

*"Regine, Regine...", he said. "I also do my research. Alex is courting you, am I right? He is a news reporter like you. When Metro M Group of Companies took over Royale Broadcasting Network, he left. Where is he now? In an unknown AM radio station, DZQR, am I right?"*

*Then he laughed.*

*"What do you want from me?" Regine asked on the other line.*

*"What have you told Alex so far?" he asked.*

*"What's wrong if I told him that I have a prank caller like you?"*

*"Now, now... don't you ever tell anyone, not even Alex or any of your friends about me or what we have talked about. Is that understood?"*

*He put the photograph beside a small knife on the table. He took the knife and started playing with it while talking over the phone.*

*“How will you be famous if I don’t speak?” challenged Regine.*

*“I will tell you what to say and when to say it. Understood?”*

*“And who are you to dictate things to me?”*

*“I’m the one you’re going to follow, Regine. You have to obey my orders.”*

*“And what if I refuse?”*

*“You have no choice,” he said.*

*He lifted the knife higher and aimed at the photograph.*

*“Once I’ve learned that you told anyone about me,”*

*Number One Fan continued, “someone close to you is going to die. Do you understand?”*

*Number One Fan put down his hand and the knife hit the picture, exactly on Alex’s face.*

## CHAPTER 2

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INSIDE THE LADIES' ROOM, Nitz and I stood in front of the mirror. It resembled that of a five-star hotel. Accent lights shone on marble tiles. An overhead air freshener sprayed every fifteen minutes. Liquid soaps, lotion, hand sanitizer lined the sink. A roll of paper towel stood beside an automatic hand dryer. Cubicles of lavatory matched that of a deluxe suite.

"It's okay with me if Management wanted to change our newscast format," said Nitz while putting powder on her face. "What I don't like is they have to pirate someone like David Lim whose talent fee is so high than any of the veteran news anchors here in Royale. Do you know that his talent fee is almost as high as Alma Perez-Roxas?"

"We cannot do anything about it, Nitz," I said as I combed my hair. "People from Metro are now the gods. Alma is semi-retired now as our chief correspondent. She's enjoying her married bliss with the company President. David Lim is the closest thing that could fill her popularity status."

"They could have chosen other news anchors that we have," Nitz said. "These guys from Metro changed everything here!"

"Nitz, the key word there is popularity," I reasoned out. "You and Management kept on rallying that popularity translates to high ratings. On top of that, the changes in

technology they're bringing in are so overwhelming. It's awesome."

"Yeah, right," said Nitz getting a lipstick from her backpack. "But that's beside the point. I do not know how they knew about your past relationship with David. They are now making you THE LOVE TEAM of the evening newscast because both of you looked good together on camera. Whoever suggested newscast to be like showbiz should be shot at."

"And don't you worry about David," I replied, ignoring Nitz's comment. "He's frank, well tactless sometimes, but he's good and kind. For me, it's okay if he acts around here like a superstar because he is."

"You'd better be careful, Regine," advised Nitz while putting on her lipstick. "Maybe they will just use you. I don't trust David Lim after hurting your feelings before."

"I'm not seeing a cause for concern, Nitz. We have known David since college."

I put my comb back in my bag and took my cologne. I thought of the earlier events --- the phone call, David's stares and smiles, the time we put the phone down at the same time.

*Were they connected?*

"Why are you so quiet? Is there something wrong?" Nitz asked.

Her question brought me back to my senses.

"None, I just received a prank call earlier," I said as I sprayed cologne on my body.

"Oh, don't get affected by it," she said and waved her hand to dispel the thought. "I used to get prank calls before. They were just that: mere prank. How about those flowers, from who were those?"

"That's what I was wondering, Nitz," I said, thinking of what I could and could not divulge to her. "Attached to it was a card signed by someone named Number One Fan. Then this prank call came."

"What did the prank caller say?" she asked.

"He asked if I received the flowers and read the attached card," I answered. "He had this terrifying laugh. There was

something scary about him. Then he asked me to make him famous, make him Number One. I found it weird.”

“Hmm, sounds weird alright,” she said.

“Yes, and so was David’s behavior,” I added.

“What do you mean?”

“I do not know if it was just coincidence or what,” I said as I was about to tell her my suspicion. “As I was talking to the prank caller earlier, I saw him talking on the phone, too. When I put down the phone, he also put down the phone. Was that a coincidence? Or was that something else?”

“See what I mean?” she said. “Having David Lim here in Channel 3 all the way from Channel 7 was something else.”

“Now, Nitz, you’re paranoia is becoming infectious,” I said.

“Call me paranoid. Or maybe it’s just the weird side of me,” she said. “Oh well, just don’t think about it. Do not mind me. Maybe that was just a prank call and it has nothing to do with David. Okay, my friend?”

Nitz gave me a kiss on the cheek before leaving. “Give my regards to Alex, will you?”

“Sure,” I said as I kissed her cheek. “Take care. Tell Patrick to drink moderately. His boss was promoted to Senior Inspector this afternoon and they might be celebrating.”

Nitz smiled back at me as she opened the door.

“That’s where I am going,” she said and left.

“GOOD EVENING, MA’AM,” the roaming security guard greeted me as I went out of the lobby.

Security Guard Arnel Castro stood five feet and eight inches. He had a smiling face that complemented his clean-cut hair, white uniform, and his two-way radio.

I nodded and smiled at him as I went straight out of the automatic sliding door.

The lobby displayed a revitalized Royale Metro Broadcasting Network. The gold-plated 10-foot logo had a golden crown above the letter R and a large M-shaped red dragon on it. A *Filipiniana*-themed mural painting done by a

National Artist surrounded the logo. The marble floor matched the furniture pieces made of *narra*.

I looked around checking if Alex had arrived or might be waiting outside the lobby for me. Yet, I did not see a sign of him. I thought I had better ask the guard something I remembered.

“Castro,” I called.

“Yes, ma’am,” he replied.

“Do you have a record where those flowers awhile ago came from?” I asked.

“Let me check, ma’am,” he said.

He went to the receptionist’s area where the receptionist on duty could hardly breathe from endless calls. He just took the visitors’ logbook and after a few moments, he showed me a logbook entry.

“Here it is,” he said. “The delivery boy from Flower King arrived at 6:05 p.m.”

“Thank you for that information,” I said as I went back outside the lobby.

*AT A DISTANCE, Number One Fan sat inside the car as he observed Regine Sta. Maria standing outside the lobby. He parked just outside the compound of Royale Metro Broadcasting Network. The car belonged to one of his victims. He smiled at the thought of it. His plans began to work well since he acquired the car from Catherine Lim-Go a few days ago.*

*“What do you want from me?” asked the rich woman over the phone.*

*“Half a million pesos,” he replied, “plus one of your cars.”*

*“Is this blackmail?” she asked.*

*Number One Fan laughed.*

*“I’ll give you two choices, Caths,” he said. “One, give me five hundred thousand pesos plus one of your cars. Or two, I will give a copy of our sex video to your husband.”*

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