

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*?

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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

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.”

The woman on the other line was silent for a moment. Then she blurted out.

“You are an ungrateful brute!” she shouted over the phone. “Is this the price of letting you live with us and treating you like a true brother?”

That memory made him smile while watching Regine from that vantage point. So far, he liked the gradual progress of his plans.

After a few minutes, he guessed that it was time to go. He went out of the car and walked towards the compound to observe Regine more closely. In his haste, he did not notice and bumped into someone.

“Oops, I’m sorry,” he said to an old man.

THE COLD WIND OF FEBRUARY NIGHT BLEW and provided a welcoming chill under a clear, starry sky. But when I noticed a haggard-looking man standing outside the perimeter fence, the chill had changed.

He wore a denim jacket over a white t-shirt and a worn-out denim pants. The man looked fifty to fifty five years old if I considered his physique. Something scary about the way he stared at me. Yet, I felt something familiar with him that brought goose bumps on my skin.

Who is he?

CHAPTER 3

INSTINCT TOLD ME to hurry. Thoughts running in my head made me calling for the guard. When we returned, the stranger had gone.

"He was standing there," I said pointing where I last saw him.

"It is usual that fans stand up there and peek," Castro said, "especially when celebrities come in and out here at the main lobby. Most likely, he's one of your fans, ma'am."

"Thanks, anyway," I said dismissing the thought of a fan, more so, Number One Fan.

Was he the prank caller that I talked to earlier?

The disturbing scene in the past flashed in my mind again. The shouts, the cries, and the man I saw carrying a bloody knife.

Why was everything in vivid detail except for his face?

"Hi!" someone greeted that yanked me back.

"I'm sorry. I didn't intend to scare you," said David Lim.

"It's okay. I'm fine," I said, recovering from the surprise.

"Are you waiting for someone?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm waiting for Alex."

I have to accept the inevitable, I would be dealing with David Lim starting today until the rest of my career here with RMBN.

Try to be civil with him, Regine, just for the sake of being civil...

“Ah, Alex Joven,” David said. “How is he? Where is he now?”

“He’s a field reporter in DZQR,” I replied.

“It seems that you have a Valentine date with Alex,” he said. “The flowers on your desk this evening might have come from him. That’s what I’ve heard inside the newsroom awhile ago.”

I noticed that his eyes looked green with envy.

Was he jealous?

“Ah, yes,” I answered. “But I don’t think the flowers came from Alex. The card said it came from someone who calls himself Number One Fan. Weird, don’t you think?”

“Would you know from where it came from?” he asked.

“According to the guard, it was from Flower King,” I answered.

David nodded, thinking of something.

“It could be from Alex disguised as a prank,” he said and smiled at me.

“No, I don’t think so,” I said.

“How long have you been dating?”

“A couple of months now,” I said. “Alex has changed a lot since college.”

I intended to change my tone to show him that I have moved on. Yet, at the back of my mind, memories kept on coming back every time I see David.

David and I came were college classmates while Alex came from another section. Comparing the two, Alex looked more handsome than David. Alex took after his late father, an American soldier assigned in Clark Air Base in Pampanga. David was pure Chinese, quiet, intelligent, and dresses well. These qualities strengthened his charisma and made him handsome in his own way. They both grew up together and only drifted apart during college.

“How about your sister, Joyce, how is she?” he asked.

“She’s now in her sophomore year,” I replied. “She’s taking up Nursing and a working student, too.”

“Well, that’s good to know,” he said.

“How about your sister, Caths, how is she?” I asked.
“Perhaps she’s now married and has children.”

“Caths married a Chinese-American businessman. They’re often out of the country,” David replied. “They travel a lot to Asian countries and the U.S., managing their import-export business. Until now, they do not have children. It seems like they’re not planning to have one.”

He changed the topic of our conversation to something trivial. He asked questions to catch up with some classmates and common friends. Since we would be working together, I should let myself be comfortable around David Lim.

We talked for a few more minutes and were in the middle of our conversation when Alex arrived.

“Sorry, I’m late,” he said gasping for breath, “caught up in traffic. Have you been waiting for too long?”

I turned and faced Alex. People would mistake Alex for an actor rather than a field reporter. Towering at five feet nine inches, fair-skinned and well built, who would not think so?

“Hi, Alex,” I said. “David and I were just catching up.”

“Hello, Alex,” David said. “Long time no see, bro.”

“Yes,” said Alex. “It’s been years, bro.”

They shook hands, just like two fraternity brothers meeting along the way. We continued talking outside the lobby for a few more minutes.

“Alright,” said David. “I’ll go ahead. See you tomorrow.”

“Okay, bro,” said Alex smiling and tapped David’s shoulder. “Just give my regards to Caths.”

After David left, Alex turned to me and asked, “Is he courting you again?”

“No,” I replied. “Don’t tell me, you’re jealous. Besides, that was long time ago.”

“I am not jealous,” he said. “I just remembered the reason why you separated. Adele was my girlfriend that time, remember?”

“Alex, I’ve said it has been a long time,” I reassured him. “It hurt us, I know. Right now, the wounds in me have healed. Besides, Adele died many years ago and you have also moved on.”

“But then, I thought, Metro M Group took David from Channel 7 and brought him here,” Alex said. “Maybe they want to stir things up. Maybe they want to use you.”

“You sounded like Nitz,” I observed. “Both of you warned me to be careful with David. We have been college friends and I don’t see anything wrong with him.”

“See? Even Nitz has the same thoughts on him,” he said.

I ignored Alex’s statement. I could not consider David as someone as bad or scheming even if we had an awful separation way back then.

In the first place, why did David have to return to my life?

I just wished that we did not cross our path after college.

I turned and saw the stranger, the old man I saw earlier, staring at me once again. I called Alex’s attention.

“Alex, do you see that old man standing at three o’clock?” I asked and gave him the direction where to look.

Alex pretended not to notice the man as he put his arms around my shoulder and whispered to my ear.

“I saw him. Why?”

“I saw him earlier staring at me,” I replied. “Then he left when I called the guard. I do not know if it was a coincidence or not, but remember I told you earlier that I received a prank call? I was just thinking...”

“Shh... that’s enough,” he cut me off and put his index finger on my mouth. “Let’s go now and eat. We will just discuss this later then I will bring you home afterwards. What do you think?”

“Sounds like a plan,” I smiled.

ALEX PULLED OUT A CHAIR for me and I sat down. I looked around the restaurant full of customers. Alex managed to reserve a table for a pre-Valentine dinner to surprise me.

I heard of the recently opened 24-hour restaurant that boasts of international and local cuisine. It has a deli and wine shop in front so no one would notice the restaurant inside. But once inside the dining area, people would feel transported back to nature. Indoor plants filled the interiors. A fountain

flowed on one wall. The sound of flowing water and the instrumental music provided the ambiance. The tall bamboo fence shielded the view of neighboring establishments outside. You would never feel that you were in a middle of a bustling city. No wonder people rave about this restaurant. It felt so Zen.

“Nice place they have here,” I said.

“I’m glad you liked it,” Alex said as he sat down.

He signaled a waiter to come. The waiter gave each of us the menu. I looked at what they had to offer and found it too pricey. I hoped it would be worth it.

“Would you order for me please? It’s my first time here and I don’t have any idea on their specialty,” I said to Alex as I put the menu down on the table.

“Okay,” he said.

He gave the waiter our orders and turned to me to ask if I prefer any wine.

“You know that I don’t drink much,” I replied.

He smiled and turned to the waiter.

“Red wine for the lady, it goes well with the food.”

We talked after the waiter had left. I tried not to talk about the flowers and the prank call I received earlier. Every now and then, Alex would insinuate the status of our relationship.

“Regine, we have been dating for months now and I...,” he said as he reached for my hand on the table.

I stared at his hand on mine and continued his statement for him.

“Are you asking for my true feelings for you?” I asked.

“Yes,” he replied. “I want to make sure that I have a special place in your heart and David is no longer there.”

I bowed my head and bit my upper lip. Everybody, including Alex, knew that David was my first love. I had relationships after that but now that David returned to my life, something rocked the boat somehow. I do not know how to say it without hurting Alex.

“I’m happy when I’m with you,” I said as I faced him and smiled. “I have moved on, Alex, although I cannot forget

David. Every time I see him, some memories come back to life.”

Alex and I were silent for a few seconds.

“Can we just go on one day at a time?” I asked, breaking the silence. “Enjoy every moment together.”

He nodded. “If that’s what you want.”

I smiled at him. He squeezed my hand.

After a few minutes, our appetizers came. Alex ordered a salad mix of red beets, crabmeat, bacon, mustard, quail eggs, and black-eyed peas croutons. I savored the salad and kept silent while listening to Alex’s stories about his work. He seemed to enjoy his job at a new company.

Then our soups came. Alex ordered for us pea and mint soup with bacon crisps and cheddar cheese. Between servings, we would discuss about our careers.

“It was a dream come true awhile ago,” I said, referring to my debut at the six o’clock newscast. “I never thought that I would be filling in for Alma, who is my idol. I just have to work hard to come up with Management’s expectations.”

“Good for you,” he said. “Me? I still have to carve a name for myself.”

“With your good looks, everyone remembers your name as Alex Joven, the handsomest news reporter,” I said.

He chuckled and tilted his head.

“Hmm, not the way I expected to,” he said as he put down his spoon. “I want my capabilities as a reporter known, not just my looks.”

We went on further to talk about his career at DZQR. He might have missed working in Royale. He kept comparing the big difference between Royale and a single radio station with a limited audience.

“Why not use the social media?” I suggested as I finish my soup. “Everybody is doing it.”

“I know,” Alex said. “But not everybody online would click ‘Like’ for an unknown radio station like DZQR Quality Radio. I tried suggesting to them to go on air on a cable TV channel but they said there’s no budget for it.”

After a few minutes, the main course came. A big serving of grilled beef with shallots and roasted tomatoes, potato chips and mushrooms landed in front of me. Again, between servings, we talked about friends and classmates.

I have to admit, Alex's charisma worked on me. I fell for him. In my mind, I kept on comparing him to David because they were best friends and Alex won in points.

Chocolate pecan nut tart and marmalade ice cream topped with pecan brittle and orange syrup capped our dinner. Something in the orange marmalade reminded me of David. He liked oranges and preferred anything citrus.

As if in a trance, I mentioned to Alex the whole incident about the prank call and the bouquet of red roses during dessert.

"And speaking of flowers," he said as he signaled the waiter.

A waiter came and handed him a bouquet of roses.

"Here are twelve roses for you," he said as he handed to me the bouquet. "They are in red, pink, and white --- your favorite colors."

"Wow, they're beautiful!" I said. "Thank you."

I looked for a card tucked into it but there was none, typical of Alex.

"You're welcome. Happy Valentine," I heard Alex said and held my hand.

NUMBER ONE FAN ENJOYED THE VIEW inside the cozy restaurant. He already ordered his dessert and a cup of brewed coffee and saw familiar people when the waiter left.

"How interesting," he thought to himself. "Is it a coincidence that Regine Sta. Maria and Professor Jose Luis Anacleto III are here?"

Each of his future victims dined with someone. He smiled to himself as he reviewed the next steps of his grand plan.

CHAPTER 4

WE ARRIVED HOME at past eleven o' clock. My sister Joyce and I inherited from our parents' a 50's style bungalow that maintained it well. Two steps up led to the *narra* door. It opened to a living room with a red orange L-shaped couch to match the shiny wooden floor. An open shelf served as a divider between the living and dining rooms. The dining table had a glass top that pressed an avocado green tablecloth. On the right, two bedroom doors faced each other and a bathroom stood between. The kitchen opened beside the bedroom door on the left. A counter top divided the kitchen and the dining area.

Joyce has not arrived yet when we entered the house. She worked as a part-time crew in a pizza parlor after her classes.

"Come in," I said to Alex. "Want another cup of coffee?"

"Sure," he said.

We went straight to the dining table and Alex sat on a chair. I took two cups from the kitchen and began making instant coffee for us.

"I still couldn't get over that prank call," I said as I put on coffee granules to each cup.

"That's just a prank call, Regine," Alex said.

"Then how could you explain the man who was standing there at the fence earlier?" I asked while putting in some creamer in each cup.

“It was just a coincidence,” he reasoned out. “Just don’t think about it.”

“And would you also consider it a coincidence seeing David at the restaurant, too?” I asked while putting in sugar and hot water.

I handed him his cup of coffee and sat on a chair beside him as I stirred my cup.

“He was with Professor Anacleto,” he said while stirring his cup of coffee. “Remember, it was Professor Anacleto who led the negotiations of the merger. They may be discussing something else ... we don’t know...”

I did not reply. The haunting memory eighteen years ago entered my mind again.

“Is there anything wrong?” he asked after taking a sip. “You seem so quiet.”

“Oh, nothing,” I said as I shook my head. “I just remembered something.”

I took a sip of my coffee as I tried to cast away that memory. I just could not tell anyone what happened that fateful day, not even to Joyce, to David, or to Alex.

“Come on, tell me,” Alex said as he held my hand.

His grip on my hand relieved me of my fears. He leaned to me and whispered something to my ear.

“I love you, Regine,” he said. “I’ll always be here for you.”

I smiled back and whispered, “Alex...”

He put his finger on my chin and let me face him. He brushed his lips on mine as he wrapped his arms around me. I put my hands on his shoulders and tried to push him away. But he was strong when he kissed my lips with passion that I could not resist. In a few seconds, I felt comfortable in his arms as well as his kisses.

The door opened and Joyce came in.

“Good evening,” I heard her say.

Alex and I turned and looked at her. I felt Alex hands releasing me as they stared and smiled at each other. I put my hands down.

“You’re much better than the evening,” he said smiling.

Joyce did not smile and went straight to her room.

As soon as I heard her door close, I said, "You flatter women too much."

"I do not," he said. "To tell you the truth, you're the most beautiful because you're the eldest sister." Alex winked at me and sipped his coffee.

ALEX LEFT PAST MIDNIGHT. I sat by the window and stared at the dark, starry sky. At some part of the metropolis, fireworks lit up for the Chinese New Year. Chinese New Year and Valentine's Day occurred in the same week.

Romance and fireworks together would be a good coincidence.

The memory of our dinner and the haunting memory eighteen years ago played in my mind. The sumptuous food mixed with the images of Baby Joyce beside me. The flowers Alex gave me distracted the shouts I have heard. His kiss and embrace melted the image of the bloody knife that killed my mother. Alex's charismatic face kept on appearing when I tried to remember the murderer.

I noticed Joyce standing at a distance. At eighteen, Joyce stood taller, her skin much fairer, and her slim body emphasized her curves. We were half sisters that grew up without our respective fathers.

"Something happened between you and Alex?" she asked.

"None," I replied. "He just kissed me when you saw us. We just arrived from a dinner date."

"I don't buy that," she said with sarcasm. "You're here with him alone and nothing happened?"

"I said, we just arrived before you came," I reiterated.

"Humph, you'd better stop pretending," she said. "I wonder if the public knows the other side of a famous news reporter like you."

Then she went inside the bathroom. I do not know why Joyce sounded that way.

Was it her way of teenage rebellion? Does she not like Alex as my boyfriend?

CHAPTER 5

A MAN IN A BLACK SPORTS JACKET DROVE the car to Fairview, Quezon City. He turned on the voice recorder he held and spoke while driving at a slow speed.

“I, Jose Luis Anacleto III, a professor and journalist, bids goodbye to this world. To you Belinda, my wife, please forgive me. I know it is Valentine’s Day but I cannot bear my problems anymore. I am doing this so as not to cause you more inconvenience. To my children, Beth and Bobby, I love you, too. Take care of your mother. Again, I’m sorry.”

He stopped the recorder. He turned to a vacant lot in Regalado Avenue and parked the black Mitsubishi Lancer.

A hardware store celebrated its Chinese New Year several meters away. The place was quiet, the sun has not risen yet, and only a few vehicles passed by.

He attached the silencer to his gun and tightened it.

At that time of dawn, most people were still asleep. A few celebrated the Chinese New Year with their traditional dragon dance before opening their stores. No one would have heard a gunshot.

MY BOSS SUMMONED ME when I reported to work the next day.

“Yes, Mr. Borja, you called for me?” I said as I entered the office of the head of News and Current Affairs.

I wore a black blazer over a white blouse with small red prints. It matched my pair of black pants, a pair of red shoes and accessories that had to go with Valentine's Day and Chinese New Year.

"Have a seat, Miss Sta. Maria," said Mr. Ponciano Borja.

At fifty-five years old, his hair started to thin. His double-vision eyeglasses covered his chinky eyes. Metro M Group appointed him to lead the new RMBN News and Current Affairs department. His fame as a newspaper columnist and broadcaster from another network made him get that spot.

The Executive Offices occupied the second floor. It took me ten minutes to walk from our studio cum newsroom at the basement to Mr. Borja's office. Thick, dark-colored curtains covered the glass panel windows. It blocked the view of the city but contained the cold air from the air conditioning unit. His desk looked organized despite piles of paper works on top. Plaques and trophies decorated the shelf behind him. We both sat on a chair across each other.

"I've learned that you have an ongoing relationship with a news reporter from another network," he said.

"Yes, sir," I admitted. "He's Alex Joven, former field reporter of Royale Radio before Metro took over. He's a college classmate as well and we have been dating months ago."

How did he know that?

His face changed upon hearing my answer.

"I see," he said.

"Is there a problem with that, Mr. Borja?" I asked.

"You see, Regine," he said as he lay back on his chair.

"We need to raise our ratings. I have learned that he is one of those former employees and he is coming here most of the time to see you. There might be some details that he could get from you or from his acquaintances here that should not be."

"I see what you mean, Sir," I said. "You're speaking of confidentiality."

"That's exactly my point," he said. "As much as possible, we don't want others find out our plans here, especially from a competitor."

I did not speak.

Who could have mentioned this information to Mr. Borja?

“I’m not meddling with your relationship, Regine,” continued Mr. Borja. “But see to it that confidentiality is still your top priority.”

“DAVID, WAIT,” I called when I saw him in the hallway after my brief meeting with Mr. Borja.

He wore jeans and t-shirt when I saw him stop on his tracks. He looked smart in his casual wear, something that reminded me why I liked him before.

Few people passed by the well-lit hallway from the Executive Suites going down the studio. David stood in front of a lighted poster of an upcoming TV drama series that reminded me of our past.

“Hi, Regine, good morning,” he greeted. “You look nice today.”

“I want to ask you something,” I said and ignored his comment. “Did you tell someone about Alex and me?”

“Yes,” he nodded. “Last night, I met Mr. Borja at Starbucks after I left you guys. I remembered mentioning the two of you. Why?”

“So that explains it,” I said, avoiding his stare.

“Is there any problem?” he asked.

“None,” I said. “I was just wondering... because Mr. Borja cautioned me about Alex coming over here since he is no longer connected with RMBN.”

“I do not see anything wrong with your relationship with Alex,” David said. “Maybe Mr. Borja was just exaggerating. Do not worry about it. I know him. Management kept on pressuring him to raise our ratings, and our revenues.”

He stopped for a while and continued, “But, in my opinion, I would suggest that you be careful with Alex.”

I stared at him.

“You do not know him... yet,” he continued.

His change of tone sounded like a warning.

“I knew him since grade school,” he continued. “We were classmates, he had childhood sweetheart, and you know what happened to Adele. After Adele died, Alex has changed a lot. I am not saying anything bad about him, it’s just that...”

“Thank you for your concern, David,” I interrupted. “I’ll think about what you’ve said.”

“So you’d better be careful, Regine, maybe they will just use you. I don’t trust David Lim,” said Nitz.

“I’m not jealous... Then, I thought, Metro M Group took David from Channel 7 and brought him here. Maybe they want to stir things up,” said Alex.

“I’m not meddling with your relationship, Regine. But see to it that confidentiality is still your top priority,” said Mr. Borja.

With three persons saying these to me, should I be cautious with David Lim?

I FOUND ANOTHER BOUQUET OF ROSES on my desk with a small card. I read the card and it came from David greeting me on Valentine’s Day. The bouquet of flowers sent last night still sat there beside it but I kept the card in my locked drawer.

I opened my drawer, took the card, and compared it with the card from David. Although the card didn’t have a sign of what store it came from, both bouquets came from one shop: Flower King. I saw a phone number at David’s card and I dialed it. But, I only heard a continuous busy tone from Flower King.

EVERYTHING WENT NORMAL the whole day, in fact, the prank caller never called back.

After the newscast, I met Alex at the lobby that night. He kissed me on the cheek and put his arms around my shoulders as we walked towards his car.

“How was your day?” he asked while walking.

He parked his car at the visitor's area and I have noticed from afar that it got dirty after seeing it last night. Yet I did not mind, maybe Alex came from a far place for an assignment.

"I've been busy the whole day," I replied.

The meeting with Mr. Borja early that morning came back to mind.

"Is there anything wrong? It seems you're lost in a trance again," he said as he opened the door for me.

"Oh, it's nothing," I replied as I was about to enter the car. "I just remembered what Mr. Borja said this morning about you."

"What about it?" he asked.

He went around the car towards the driver's door. I waited for him to get inside.

"You know how managers could be paranoid sometimes," I said as I settled inside his car. "David mentioned us to Mr. Borja last night when they met at Starbucks."

"David met Mr. Borja last night? I thought he was with Prof. Anacleto," Alex said as he settled on the driver's seat as well.

"David told me that he met Mr. Borja and Prof. Anacleto at Starbucks before that dinner," I said as I clipped on the seat belt. "Anyway, Mr. Borja remembered you as one of those former employees. So he advised me to be careful and not to jeopardize confidentiality and all those stuffs."

"Ah, okay. I understand," he said as he started the engine. "Mr. Borja has a point, although that shouldn't prevent us from seeing each other, right?"

I put my hand on his right hand, smiled, and shook my head.

CHAPTER 6

A WEEK HAS PASSED since I received that prank call from someone who called himself my Number One Fan. So, I concluded it was just that: a simple joke. In fact, I forgot to call back Flower King to ask about the roses sent to me. Everything went normal the whole week.

Monday morning, I delivered a flash report about the death of my Journalism professor. The floor director gave me the signal to start.

“From the newsroom of Royale Metro Broadcasting Network Channel 3, I am Regine Sta. Maria. After a week of searching, police found the body of veteran columnist and professor, Jose Luis Anacleto III. Witnesses found the body inside his vehicle at about eight o’clock this morning. A foul smell coming from an abandoned car parked in a vacant lot prompted witnesses to report this to the authorities. They found a black Mitsubishi Lancer parked in a vacant lot along Regalado Avenue in Fairview, Quezon City. Initial investigation showed Anacleto committed suicide inside his car using his own gun. He also left an audio recording as a suicide note. More updates of this news at six o’clock on RMBN, *Royale Metro Balita Ngayon*. Good afternoon.”

I felt sad with that news as I handed the lapel microphone and the copy of the news report to the production assistant.

Professor Jose Luis Anacleto III mentored me with my thesis. He even gave me a recommendation letter to go with

my job application in case employers need character references. He prided his students who were successful in the media --- David, Abet, Alex, Leah Edades, me, and others. I wondered why he committed suicide despite his success as a journalist and publisher of *The Philippine Daily*.

Metro M Group of Companies bought the bankrupt broadsheet *The Philippine Daily* a year before. That time, competition between radio and television stations including cable TV channels was intense. Ratings of Royale Broadcasting Network dropped and its revenue started to dip. The company struggled to lift its ratings but few advertisements came in.

So, Dominador “Butch” Roxas, Jr., the network’s CEO, announced his shares of stocks were on sale. Then, Alfonso Chua’s Metro M Group of Companies came to the rescue. I remembered reporting that on TV months ago.

Many changes in the policies and programming of the station happened as soon as Metro took over. The company re-organized, some people volunteered to resign, and some positions retrenched.

Has this something to do with the buyout of The Philippine Daily by Metro M Group?

Prof. Anacleto led the negotiations between Royale and Metro after the said buyout. The merger happened more than a month now and everything seemed all right.

Why would he commit suicide then?

After the news flash, I saw a bouquet of red roses on my table again. I immediately took the card and read it:

To a good newscaster,

Congratulations! Our evening news is one week now and it is rating. More power to you.

*Still your fan,
David*

I did not know what to think. When I turned David’s workstation at the other end of the newsroom, I saw him smiling at me. I intended to approach him but my phone rang.

“RMBN News, good afternoon,” I greeted.

“Aren’t you surprised by Professor Anacleto’s death?”

Number One Fan asked on the other line.

His laughter made the hair on my skin rise.

“What do you mean?” I asked while looking at David who was on the phone, too, his back facing me.

“Did we discuss before that you’re going to make me Number One?” he asked. “Well, this is it. Let’s start the ball rolling, man!”

“It was a suicide, right?” I asked.

A sudden thought entered my mind. I looked down on my desk and took the cards from Flower King.

“Wait... did you kill him?” I asked.

“Maybe you should ask yourself why he died,” he said.

I just heard a click and a dial tone after that.

CHAPTER 7

WHO IS NUMBER ONE FAN? Could it be David? Or could it be the old man I saw looking at me that night?

I looked at David's workstation but he had gone.

Did he send me that mysterious note last week?

I immediately went to his table. But I never expected to see my photograph lying on his desk.

Where did he get that?

Then someone tapped my shoulder that yanked me back.

"Sorry," said David. "I didn't mean to surprise you. You're becoming too jumpy."

I could not speak, still recovering from the shock.

"If you're here to thank me for the flowers, you're welcome," he said and winked at me.

I just nodded and smiled. I could not help but stare at my picture on his table.

"By the way," said David as he picked my photo, "may I have your autograph? I asked for this copy from the IT Department. They said that this would be your picture on our new website. It looks nice. May I have this as a souvenir?"

He handed me my picture and his sign pen.

What is it with David that I could not say no to him? Was it because we had a beautiful relationship back then?

"It's been years, I know," he continued. "I just want something to remember you by."

I signed my picture and returned them to him. I was about to return to my seat when I remembered to ask him my true purpose.

“How about those flowers...” I was about to ask him.

“Those sent to you last Monday?” David finished my question. “How I wish those came from me. I never sent those. I sent you flowers, though, on Tuesday, Valentine’s Day.”

I went back to my workstation wondering how David guessed what was in my mind.

Was he just being defensive? Was he hiding something from me?

“FLOWER KING, GOOD AFTERNOON, this is Jules speaking,” answered someone on the other line.

“Hello, Jules, good afternoon. This is Regine Sta. Maria of RMBN,” I greeted. “May I speak with the owner or manager of the flower shop, please?”

“I’m the owner and manager, how may I help you?” he asked.

“Hi! I would like to ask if you have any record of who sent me flowers last Monday night,” I said as I tapped the pencil that I was holding on my notepad. “The security guard said that it came from your shop.”

“Let me check,” he said. “One moment, please.”

“Thank you,” I said as he put me on hold.

“Who is this again?” he asked.

“This is Regine Sta. Maria of RMBN.”

“Oh, you’re the reporter,” he said. “One moment, please. Your name is familiar and I’ve seen that name here.”

I heard rustling of paper over the phone. Maybe he was looking on his record book. I prayed for a positive answer.

“Last Monday night, you said?” he asked again.

“Yes.”

“Here, two dozens of red roses.”

“May I know who ordered those?” I asked.

“The name written here was just N. O. Fan and the address entered was Quezon City. That’s all,” he said.

“Do you remember how he looked like?” I asked again hoping to get a clue.

“Hmm, wait a minute,” Jules said thinking. “There were many customers that day, yet one of them stood out because he was the only one riding a motorcycle.”

“Motorcycle,” I repeated to myself.

“Ah,” said Jules, as he seemed to remember something. “He was the handsome man wearing a black sports jacket and shades. He was in a hurry that time. He ordered and settled the bill immediately and gave a card, and instructed my staff to send the flowers to the TV station by six o’clock.”

“The card, was that from your shop?” I asked, remembering that it has no phone number of the flower shop on it.

“No,” Jules answered on the other line. “My staff said that he gave a gift card to go with the flowers instead.”

“I see,” I said thinking about it.

“And someone also ordered red roses the next day, February 14,” Jules continued as I heard some rustling of paper over the phone. “The name here is David Lim.”

I already knew that. David admitted that information.

“And this morning, ma’am,” Jules continued. “A handsome man wearing a black sports jacket and shades ordered flowers. The name written on this record is David Lim.”

I felt cold water poured over me when I heard David’s name after the flower shop manager described him.

“Do you think that David Lim and the one who ordered last Monday was just one and the same person?” I asked.

“Hmm...,” he said thinking again. “Maybe because they both have the same built and height. I could not remember the man who ordered last Monday. As I have said, we were busy that time. I think they were just the same person because both of them ordered two dozens of red roses on a Monday and delivered to your office. Is that his habit, sending you roses every Monday? It is so sweet of him.”

I did not know if I would smile at his last two statements.

“Thank you for that information, Jules,” I said.

“You’re welcome.”

MY PEN STOPPED WRITING every time my eyes glanced at the red roses on my table that came from David. Thoughts circled inside my mind.

If Number One Fan killed Professor Anacleto, then I have an exclusive. But I needed to talk to Number One Fan.

“Please, call again,” I prayed while staring at the phone. Still the phone kept silent.

Now that I am a news anchor, Management might grant me my own TV program. I could feature the death of Professor Anacleto and the prank caller who wanted to be Number One in a TV documentary. Then we would all shine --- Number One Fan, the program, the station, and me. When that happens, I could regain the respect of my grandfather.

“RMBN NEWS, GOOD AFTERNOON,” I greeted as I picked up the receiver.

“How are you, Regine?” asked Number One Fan. “Aren’t you guilty of what happened to your favorite Journalism professor?”

I looked at David’s workstation. He was not there.

“I don’t understand,” I said. “The initial findings said it was suicide. Yet by the tone of your speech, it seems like you killed him. And I don’t have anything to do with it.”

“Didn’t I say before if you told someone about me or what we have talked about someone will die? Remember?”

“How did you know I told someone?” I asked. “You saw me talking to someone?”

Number One Fan laughed.

His laughter terrified me. I tried to remember the persons I saw at the restaurant that evening. I have noticed nothing suspicious.

Or was I engrossed talking to Alex not to notice it? Wait a minute; David was dining with Prof. Anacleto that night!

“You told something to Alex, am I correct?” he asked.

“Okay, I admit,” I said. “I told Alex about your call last Monday.”

“See? I’m right. You just could not shut your big mouth,” Number One Fan said over the phone. “Didn’t we agree that when you say something about me or what we talked about, someone will die?”

I was speechless.

“Did something happen between you and Alex that night?”

“What did you say?” I asked.

“I saw you and Alex enter your house. What could a man and a woman do inside the house if they’re all alone?”

“You have followed us there?” I asked.

I could not believe that Number One Fan followed us until my house.

“I just want to know if something SEXUAL happened...,” he said.

“You don’t have any business with my personal life.”

“IF YOU DO NOT WANT TO ADMIT IT, it’s okay,” said Number One Fan as he talked on his cell phone. “Let’s change the topic. How old is Joyce?”

“Do not include my sister here,” Regine said on the other line.

“Why don’t you answer my question? Have you forgotten that I’ll be the one interviewing you?” he laughed.

“I want to know why you killed Professor Anacleto,” Regine said.

“Relax, Regine,” Number One Fan said. “We’ll come to that later. Answer my question first, how old is your half sister, Joyce?”

He heard Regine sighed and answered, “Eighteen,” on the other line.

“She is taking up Nursing, isn’t it?” he asked. “Did you know what her subject is right now?”

“No,” she answered.

“It seems you’re not close as sisters, why?” Number One Fan asked.

“It’s our problem, not yours,” Regine said. “Stay away from her, please.”

“Just imagine if her subject is P.E. and it is swimming,” said Number One Fan.

He put his other hand on the V of his pants, preventing an accumulating desire.

“She’s beautiful and sexy in her one-piece swimsuit,” he continued and whistled. “Maybe, she’s sexier if she’s wearing a two-piece swimsuit... or better yet, if naked.”

“Whoever you are, please, I beg you,” Regine said on the other line. “Do not touch my sister. Do not involve her in this.”

“I will not touch your sister if you follow my instructions. Is that understood?” Number One Fan said.

“Promise, I will not tell anybody.”

“That should be the case,” he said. “Because if you tell the media what we’ve been talking about, someone will die after Anacleto.”

Regine kept silent on the other line.

“I’ll give you a clue,” he continued. “Let’s see if you are intelligent, Regine: tan-tan/ tan-tan/ tan-tan-tan.”

Number One Fan ended the call.

I REALIZED how Number One Fan could be that scheming. He followed me from the TV station, to the restaurant, up to my house. Now, he followed my half sister.

Moreover, he sang the tune of *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*. I repeated the nursery rhyme inside my head. Star... up above the world... looked up... idol... famous...

Famous journalists like Professor Anacleto.

Who would be Number One Fan’s next victim?

CHAPTER 8

I RAN TO MY DESK to answer the phone that kept on ringing.

“I called earlier but no one was answering,” Alex said when I picked up his call that afternoon.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I just arrived here at my desk. I was talking to Mr. Borja awhile ago,” I said as I settled on my seat. “I have to explain to him that I needed a phone unit with caller ID. But the IT Department said that there are no more available phone units with screen on them. They still have to get more phone units. Also, Voice over Internet Protocol on all computers brought by the transition and merger has not yet completed. Mr. Borja issued a memo this afternoon to have all my calls screened and monitored for the mean time.”

“Is that so? Well, that’s good,” he said. “At least, the prank caller would not bother you anymore.”

“Yeah,” I said as I remembered Number One Fan’s threat.

“By the way, the reason why I called,” Alex continued. “I’ll not be able to fetch you tonight. I have to cover some event down south.”

“Oh, it’s okay,” I said but then remembered something when he said south. “Alex, can you do me a favor?”

“What is it?” he asked.

“If you have time, since you’re on your way south, could you fetch Joyce at school and drop her off to work?” I asked. “I just want her to be safe. That’s all.”

“No problem, I will fetch her for you,” he said.

“Thanks, Alex.”

“You’re welcome,” he said. “You take care, okay?”

“I will,” I said. “Bye. Take care, too.”

I heard David said something as I put down the phone.

“That’s sweet,” said David.

I tried to hide my surprise and smiled at him.

Why was he here? Did he hear us talk?

“If you have not requested Mr. Borja about the caller ID, I wouldn’t know that the prank caller was serious,” he said.

“Well, it’s just normal for us journalists to have those kinds of callers, isn’t it?” I asked back. “There’s nothing wrong with my suggestion.”

Why did he use the term “stalker”?

“I agree,” he said. “I used to receive those kinds of calls before. Was the stalker threatening you?”

“No,” I answered and observed his reactions.

I did not want him to know that I was starting to suspect him.

“Was it a man or a woman?” he asked again.

“A man,” I replied. “He has this peculiar deep voice whenever he talks over the phone.”

“Was he saying obscenities?”

“No. It seems like he would just like to play tricks on me,” I said. “Remember when I told you that he just wanted to be Number One?”

“Yes, I remember,” he nodded.

A gap of silence came between us.

“Regine, I just want to help,” he said. “If ever he calls again, just let me know.”

“Thanks, David,” I said.

Why are you concerned? Are you the prank caller?

A FEW HOURS after the evening newscast, I went straight out of the RMBN Compound and saw the stranger again staring at me. He wore the same outfit, denim jacket over white t-shirt, denim pants and worn rubber shoes. I got inside a cab that was waiting for a passenger.

“Where to, ma’am?” asked the driver.

“Cubao, 15th Avenue,” I said as I locked the door.

The cab drove off and I looked back to see if the stranger followed me with his stare.

He did. Yet something in his deep-set eyes said that I should not fear him.

“MISS, CAN I HAVE ONE PREPAID SIM CARD?”

asked Number One Fan.

He pointed to the vendor what he wanted.

Only a few minutes left before the shopping mall’s closing time, thus the few customers. The woman opened the glass cabinet, took the SIM Pack, and handed it to him.

Number One Fan noticed someone familiar approaching. He gave his money to the vendor and left immediately taking the new SIM pack with him.

“Sir, your change!” called the vendor.

Number One Fan did not turn back.

Anyway, the vendor thought that the mall would be closing, no more customers might be coming, and she could steal the change.

THE TAXI STOPPED in front of our house and I dropped off after paying the driver. I saw my childhood friend and neighbor, Patrick, at his gate across our house.

When the taxi left, he greeted and approached me. SPO3 Patrick Dagulo stood five feet ten inches tall enclosed in a large frame. Skinhead and brown-skinned, wore black-rimmed eyeglasses over a well-pointed nose covering his black eyes. Tonight, he looked handsome when shaved.

“Good evening, best friend,” he said.

“Hi, Patrolman,” I greeted.

Ever since Patrick entered the police academy, I started calling him Patrolman instead. He graduated B.S. Criminology and after passing the board examinations, he entered the academy. He started from the ranks inside the Criminal Investigation and Detection Group. He also took up law and hoped to finish his degree next year.

“I saw your boyfriend and Joyce awhile ago,” he said.

“I asked Alex to fetch Joyce from school,” I replied. “No date with Nitz tonight?”

He smiled and said, “I just arrived from her apartment. We had dinner earlier.”

“Ah, I see,” I said.

“By the way,” he said, “I would like to ask you something.”

“What is it?”

“You know Ka Luis Anacleto, right?” he asked.

Other people refer to him as Ka Luis; a term for someone respected and trusted journalist and public servant.

“Yes, he was my professor back in college,” I replied. “I reported on TV this afternoon that he committed suicide inside his car. Are you investigating his case?”

“Yes,” he replied. “My boss assigned me to his investigating team.”

“Any update you want to share with me?” I asked.

I remembered using my connection with Patrick whenever I needed leads and updates on some news I covered before. We have this kind of working partnership that worked both ways for us.

“Want to discuss this over a cup of coffee?” he asked.

“Sure,” I said.

He led me to his gate and let me in to the porch. He pulled up a chair for me. Thermos, mugs, bottles of instant coffee, creamer, and sugar sat on a rolling tray.

“Thanks,” I said as I sat down and put my bag on top of the garden table.

“Here, help yourself,” he said. “I don’t know your taste.”

I smiled, as I look a mug and started making my own instant coffee. He, too, made himself a mug of black coffee.

“This won’t take long,” Patrick said. “I just want you to know that your professor did not commit suicide. Someone killed him.”

I already knew that. I did not think it would be wise to tell him about what Number One Fan yet.

“How did you know?” I asked while stirring my coffee.

“We found the voice recorder inside the car,” Patrick said. “We listened to it and Mrs. Anacleto believed that it was not his voice.”

“So you mean the murderer faked the suicide note or recording?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said. “Also, initial autopsy result revealed that something hit him on the back of his head. Ballistics report showed that the killer used a silencer but we couldn’t find the silencer inside the car or within the area.”

“When did he exactly die?” I asked before I sipped my coffee.

“Somewhere between late night Monday or Tuesday early morning,” he said as he sipped his coffee.

I put down my mug.

“Wait a minute,” I said as I remembered something. “I saw Prof. Anacleto dining with David Lim at the restaurant that Monday night. Alex and I saw them. So it must be after that.”

“What time was that?” he asked.

“About 10:30 to 11:00 p.m. I guess,” I replied.

“Thanks for that tip,” Patrick replied as he put down his mug on the table. “At least we could narrow down the exact time of his murder. Would you know what time did he leave the restaurant?”

“No,” I shook my head. “Alex and I went ahead. We passed by their table and greeted them.”

“So the last person who saw him alive was David,” Patrick said.

I drew a deep breath and looked up the sky.

Why was it that David's name kept on popping up on situations like these?

"I'd better ask David Lim then," he said. "Does he still remember me?"

"I think so," I said as I remembered how our relationships were back then.

We were college freshman; David and Patrick courted me then. I chose David over Patrick because what I felt for Patrick was more of a brother and friend. I do not want to destroy that friendship because of romance. Thinking about it now, it turned out to be better. Patrick remained my best friend. David remained as my ex-boyfriend. I do not know if both of them felt something against each other after all these years.

Something in my peripheral vision made me turn towards our house. I saw Joyce staring out the window. She might have seen us.

Patrick might have seen Joyce, too, as he turned his head on the same direction.

"Well, I'd better lead you to your house," he said. "It's getting cold. I will update you soon. If you have any leads, let me know."

"Sure, Patrolman," I said as I stood up. "Thanks for the information and for the coffee."

I SAW JOYCE SITTING on the sofa, looking out at the window when I came in. She did not turn when I entered the house.

"You did not go to work?" I asked.

"I felt sick," she said.

"Did Alex pick you up at school?"

"Yes," she replied. "He said that you asked him to fetch me because you're concerned that something might happen to me."

It seemed that she was not happy with it.

"I do not know if I'll tell you this or not," I said.

"Is it about your prank caller?" she cut me off. "Alex already told me about it."

“It’s something serious, Joyce,” I said. “He followed us from the restaurant until here last week. Earlier this afternoon, I think he followed you at school. He said something about your P.E. class. That’s the reason I asked Alex a favor.”

“Whatever...” Joyce shrugged off and turned to go.

“It seems like you don’t like Alex for my boyfriend,” I said.

Joyce turned to me, “Isn’t it obvious?”

“He’s a classmate in college, I’ve known him for so long, and so what’s wrong?”

“I just felt you’re not for each other,” she said. “I would rather prefer David or Patrick for you.”

NUMBER ONE FAN PARKED his motorcycle near the RMBN Compound. He pretended fixing something. At the side of his vision, he saw a gray Toyota Corolla going out of the compound. He knew that it was Ka Poncing Borja’s car. There was no doubt about it. The head of News and Current Affairs usually leaves late, around nine o’clock or so but never earlier. He saw Poncing Borja pulled down the window and waved to the security guard on duty. Number One Fan found that strange.

“His driver might have taken a day off,” he said to himself. “I must change my strategy then. I should do it now while he has no driver.”

He saw Mr. Borja pulled up the window and turned right towards Tomas Morato Avenue.

“Go ahead, Ka Poncing, that will be your last goodbye,” he whispered.

He had observed for the last few days that Mr. Borja has the habit of passing by Starbucks before going home in New Manila, Quezon City. He stood up, pretended that he had fixed his motorcycle and got on. He took time to put on his helmet, and his gloves before starting the engine.

He drove off and followed the car. As he turned to Tomas Morato Avenue, he increased his speed. By the time the car

almost reached Starbucks, he blocked the Toyota Corolla. Thus, Borja's vehicle halted on its brakes.

Number One Fan immediately drew his gun and fired shots at the driver's seat then he sped off to E. Rodriguez, Sr. Avenue towards New Manila.

MY CELL PHONE RANG. I looked at the screen to check from whom it came from. An unknown number flashed so I pressed on the button.

"Hello?" I greeted.

"Regine, David here," he said on the other line. "I have a bad news for you."

"What's that?" I asked as I straightened up my sitting position.

"Mr. Borja was ambushed awhile ago," David said over the phone. "He was dead on the spot."

"What?" I replied. "Where was he ambushed?"

"It happened several blocks away from RMBN, in front of Starbucks."

"Are you there?" I asked David.

"Yes, and I'll go back to the newsroom to do the flash report," he replied.

I went straight to my room and lay down on the bed. I saved David's cell phone number.

I enumerated the things that occurred throughout the day from my first meeting with Mr. Borja up to David's call that evening. I tried to search for a possible connection, hoping to generate a suspicion on who Number One Fan was.

I sent a text message to Patrick informing him of Mr. Borja's ambush. He replied that he knew that, too. He was on his way to report to his boss, Senior Inspector Carrillo, to conduct some investigations.

Would it be okay if I tell Patrick about my suspicion about Number One Fan?

REPORTERS CROWDED Senior Inspector Noel Carrillo. He does not look his age of forty-five and no lines showed on his face. His tall, athletic built brought out more charisma and confidence; the same confidence that demanded equal respect to him, to his position, and to the institution. His team started investigating the ambush that killed Ponciano Borja, head of News and Current Affairs of RMBN.

“We do not have a suspect yet,” Senior Inspector Carrillo said to the reporters. “Two journalists have died already. We are still looking into an angle that a serial killer is gunning down journalists and broadcasters.”

“Sir, is it true that the death of Professor Jose Luis Anacleto III was not suicide as earlier reported?” Number One Fan asked as a reporter, after he returned to the crime scene.

P S/Insp. Carrillo looked at him. He recognized him and smiled.

“The suspect in Ka Luis Anacleto's death staged his murder to look like a suicide. Here in this ambush, the victim, Ka Poncing Borja, died on the spot near his office.”

“Are these cases related?” asked another journalist.

“It’s possible, since both victims were members of the media.”

“I should be careful, then. They should never suspect me,” Number One Fan kept that thought to himself.

CHAPTER 9

THE NEXT DAY, David and I walked towards the conference room at the second floor for an emergency meeting. I noticed that both of us wore brown. I wore a long brown dress while he donned a light brown long-sleeved polo and dark brown pants.

“By the way, I saw Alex yesterday,” David said.

“Where did you see him?” I asked.

“I saw him at the mall, together with your sister, Joyce.”

“Ah, yes,” I remembered. “I asked Alex a favor to fetch Joyce from her school for me.”

“Joyce is getting more beautiful than the last time I saw her,” David said. “If I can’t have her elder sister back, could I court Joyce one of these days?”

I looked at him and did not reply.

David smiled and winked at me.

“I was only joking,” he said and turned towards the door.

I stood silent. The timing of his remark made me think.

Does his joke mean anything?

Our new boss, Rodolfo Echaves, presided the meeting. He succeeded Mr. Borja as the head of News and Current Affairs. He was about fifty years old, a former broadcaster of Royale Broadcasting Network. Better known as Ka Rudy, I knew him when I started as a field reporter on the radio, and he served as my mentor.

The meeting covered many things including the sudden death of Mr. Borja. Then it moved on to the Management's plan for the News and Current Affairs.

I observed David as I listened to the discussions. At times, we stared at each other. Different thoughts played in my mind every time I glanced at him.

Could he be Number One Fan? Would I tell Patrick what I know and suspect?

After the meeting, I approached Ka Rudy. David approached him, too.

"Ka Rudy, can I have a minute of your time?" I asked.

I looked at David. He just smiled at me and it seemed that he would like to speak to Ka Rudy, too.

"In private, if you may," I added.

Were you planning to stop me, David?

"YOU HAVE A GOOD MATERIAL THERE," said Ka Rudy as he leaned back to his swivel chair.

His office was much smaller than Mr. Borja's. The drawn curtains showed the view of the city. His desk was full of paper works and disorganized; amazing how he could manage to remember where he put things.

"Go ahead, put it on black and white, and I'll take it to Management for their final approval."

"Thanks, Ka Rudy," I said as I stood up from my seat.

I felt relieved after I proposed a TV documentary about the deaths of Prof. Anacleto and Mr. Borja. It went in the line of a serial killer that targets journalists and broadcasters. But I did not mention the calls I received from Number One Fan. I just told Ka Rudy that a TV documentary might make it to the ratings.

"So the last time you talked to Mr. Borja was yesterday afternoon about your request for a caller ID," said Ka Rudy.

"Yes, because I told him that I received a nasty prank call last week," I replied.

"Ah, no wonder he issued a memo yesterday to track all incoming calls here."

“Yes, Sir,” I said.

“Did the prank caller threaten you?” Ka Rudy asked.

“No, Sir,” I lied. “As I’ve said, those were just a prank call I received in one night.”

“Go ahead,” Ka Rudy said. “You can pursue that plan. Let’s see if it will rate.”

“Thank you, Sir,” I said as I was about to leave.

“Try to make it your best shot, Regine,” Ka Rudy said.

“Management has a nice plan for you... career-wise.”

I nodded and smiled, thinking what that “nice plan” could be.

“Just cooperate with us and you’ll see,” Ka Rudy continued.

I TRIED TO BE CONSISTENT in my statements with the PNP-CIDG investigating the ambush of Mr. Borja. I received no calls from Number One Fan. Yet I had that feeling he had something to do with the crime. I tried to be careful not to commit a slip of the tongue, afraid to mention my conversations with that mysterious caller.

Police S/Insp. Noel Carrillo was already a familiar figure here at RMBN. He had been our frequent resource person in some police investigations. He called all the employees who met with Mr. Borja yesterday. David and I were one of them. He conducted the interrogation inside the conference room.

I went in for my turn and I saw another police officer beside him, another familiar figure, my best friend, SPO3 Patrick Dagulo.

“Hi! Good afternoon, Inspector,” I greeted.

“Good afternoon, Regine,” he greeted and shook my hand. “Here is my assistant, Dagul.”

“We know each other, Boss,” Patrick said and smiled at me.

His nickname not only came from his last name but also from his tall and large frame built. If he wore casual attire, anyone would mistake him for a professional wrestler and not a police officer.

“Sit down, Regine. How are you?” P S/Insp. Carrillo asked.

“I’m doing fine, Sir,” I replied as I sat down on a chair across them.

“All right, we’ll start Miss Sta. Maria,” P S/Insp. Carrillo said. “Will you tell us what happened yesterday when you went to meet Mr. Ponciano Borja?”

“I talked to him sometime between two thirty to three o’clock in the afternoon,” I said. “I requested for a new phone unit, those with caller ID screen. My phone unit was old and has no screen so I would not know who was calling. The IT department said that VOIP implementation and replacement of old phone units would take some time. Those are just one of the things they have to do right after the merger.”

“Why did you request for a caller ID?” asked Carrillo.

I looked at Patrick who stared at me as he waited for my reply. He held a pen and his notepad was ever ready to accept his notes.

“Ah,” I thought of what to answer. “It was because I received a prank call last week. It was just one of those annoying calls, but it was nothing. I thought I’d better request one because it might happen again in the future.”

“When was this exactly, Miss Sta. Maria?” Carrillo asked again.

“Monday last week,” I answered. “But it only happened once.”

“Can you tell us about that prank call?” Patrick asked. “Nitz mentioned that incident in passing last week when we met.”

I looked at them and noticed that I got their attention and curiosity already. I have to be careful not to divulge more than necessary.

“Monday evening was my first day to do the evening newscast,” I started. “After that, I received a bouquet of roses with a card. Written on the card was a message that said ‘Congratulations, you’re now a newscaster. Make me Number One. From your Number One Fan.’”

“And yes, I told Nitz Henson about it,” I continued as I looked at Patrick.

“And after you have received the flowers, what happened?”

“I received a phone call from a man who identified himself as Number One Fan,” I said.

“And what did he say?” Carrillo asked.

“He asked if I received the flowers he sent,” I replied while staring at Patrick. “So I asked who he was, he said just call him Number One Fan and gave a devilish laugh that sounded terrifying. I seldom receive these kinds of calls. I even asked if that was Patrick, or Alex, or Abet Fortunato.”

“Why?” Carrillo asked.

“I thought they were just playing a joke on me,” I said.

“How could I play a joke on you?” asked Patrick.

“Yeah, I remembered you were celebrating Inspector Carrillo’s promotion,” I said. “I asked if that was you and the caller said, ‘Wrong, guess again.’ I asked if that was Alex or Abet. But he said he was not. I thought that it was a joke because it did not happen again since then.”

At that point, I decided not to divulge more.

“Maybe the caller just wanted to annoy me,” I continued. “People see me reporting on the streets rather than being in front of the camera most of the time. A dissatisfied fan might do that.”

The two police officers looked at each other and nodded.

“Did you notice anything with Mr. Borja that day?” Carrillo asked again.

“Nothing much,” I replied. “Often times he would greet us, congratulate us; give us advice while doing his rounds.”

“Anything more you would like to add?” Carrillo asked.

I shook my head.

“Wait,” Patrick said. “You received the call Monday evening just before you and Alex saw Ka Luis and David at the restaurant, right?”

“Yes, that’s right,” I said. “I remember Alex called me to say that he’ll be late in fetching me up here. Then Alex,

David, and I talked outside the lobby for a few minutes then David left earlier.”

“What time was that?” Carrillo asked sensing that he could connect the two deaths with my statement.

“Around nine o’clock, I guess,” I said.

“Who came first at the restaurant, you and Alex or Ka Luis and David?” Patrick asked.

“I didn’t notice them,” I said. “I saw them when Alex and I were about to leave the restaurant.”

“So you’re positive that it was David Lim who last saw Ka Luis alive?” Carrillo asked.

I nodded. I saw the two stared at each other.

“Did you notice anything strange with David?” Carrillo asked.

I kept silent. At that point, my mind and heart tugged each other.

“Regine,” I heard Patrick said. “We have two dead journalists. We may or may not connect this prank call with their deaths but it can lead us to something.”

“As I always tell my men,” Inspector Carrillo said, “there’s no such thing as coincidences in crime.”

Coincidences! That was happening around me.

I sighed.

“None,” I lied. “I think Prof. Anacleto brought David here at RMBN.”

I looked at them and they looked at each other.

“Well, thank you, Regine, for your cooperation,” Carrillo said as he stood up and shook my hand once again. “By the way, I saw Alex Joven last night. Patrick mentioned that Alex is no longer connected here. Is it true?”

“Yes, he’s now with DZQR, Quality Radio,” I said. “Did he cover the ambush, too?”

“Yes,” Patrick said. “We saw him together with David.”

I remembered David told me about the ambush first. Again, he was there when things like these happen.

Why?

AFTER INSPECTOR CARRILLO AND PATRICK HAD LEFT, David treated me for lunch. I agreed for old time's sake and he couldn't take no for an answer. We went to a fine dining restaurant near RMBN, the same restaurant where Alex and I went a week ago. This time, only a few customers dined in. I could not help but think of the possibility that David is Number One Fan.

"Were you also interrogated by Inspector Carrillo?" David asked as we ate our lunch.

"Yes," I replied. "I was one of those who've met with Mr. Borja that afternoon hours before the ambush."

I took a bite of pasta and could not help but observe his actions.

"Have you told him about the prank caller?" he asked.

Surprised with that question, I remembered the way he knew about it when I told Mr. Borja about my request for a caller ID.

"Ah, yes, I mentioned that," I said. "I said that the prank caller just annoyed me for a night and nothing serious."

"I hope so," he said.

"You were also interrogated, right?" I asked.

He nodded.

"Yes," he said. "I told them what I knew."

"May I ask why you were there?" I asked remembering what Patrick had said earlier. "I mean, you were there to cover Mr. Borja's ambush."

"I was at Starbucks with some friends when it happened," I said. "Although I didn't see the actual shooting, my friends and I just heard the gunshots and saw the commotion after."

"Did you see Alex that night?" I asked.

"Yes," he said. "He was there to cover the news for DZQR."

Most of our conversations during lunch went trivial. Sometimes we would discuss a topic at length just like before until I asked about Adele.

"I hope you don't mind if I brought this up," I said. "Why did Adele commit suicide?"

David stared at me and shook his head.

“I don’t know,” he replied. “But Alex kept on telling everyone that she committed suicide because of me.”

“Why?” I asked. “I saw you two kissing. After a few days she died. What happened?”

David bowed and shook his head.

“I tried to explain to you that nothing happened between us,” he said. “She kissed me first. You didn’t want to listen. I understand. You saw us in an uncompromising position.”

I did not reply. I admit I did not listen to his explanations.

“I kept on telling Adele,” he continued, “that I love you. So I have to reject her.”

“Reject her?” I repeated. “You rejected her? You hurt her feeling that’s why she committed suicide.”

“Blame me if you want,” David said. “Anyway, I’m already guilty as charged before I could state my case.”

“What about Alex?” I asked. “Did Adele break off her relationship with him?”

“I don’t know,” David said. “Why don’t you ask Alex?”

“Well, Alex said that they were in a relationship when that happened. Every time I bring out Adele, he didn’t want to discuss about it.”

WHEN I GOT BACK to my workstation after lunch, I saw a new email in my Inbox. I clicked on it to open and found this:

To: regine_stamaria@rmbn.com

From: numberonefan@sexwitheveryone.com

[Add to Address Book]

Re: Hello!

Cc:

[Reply] [Forward] [Delete] [Move]

Psst... This is my email address. Sssh... Do not tell this to anyone. Send me your plan on how to make me famous at this address. Make no mistake... If you do not want this to happen, (see attached picture.)

Attachment: joyce1.jpg (585KB)

I clicked on the attachment to view the picture. The photograph seemed X-rated and dark. I could not believe in what I saw. It showed Joyce naked and having sex with an unidentified man.

CHAPTER 10

“OH, MY GOD! What was he thinking?” I whispered.

I tried to zoom the picture in to view the details but the photograph became pixelated. With innovative technologies, these kinds of pictures could find their way on the internet.

After a few minutes, the phone rang.

“RMBN News, good afternoon,” I greeted as I picked up the phone.

“Hello! How are you?” I heard a familiar voice on the other line.

My eyes glowed as I smiled to greet him.

“Hi, Alex!” I greeted. “I’m fine.”

“How’s your day so far?” he asked.

“Busy,” I sighed.

“No one pissing you off like a prank caller?” he asked.

“None,” I said shaking my head while staring at Number One Fan’s email on my computer monitor.

“I’ll pick you up later, okay?” Alex said.

“Okay. I will wait for you.”

“REGINE, WHERE IS YOUR PROPOSAL?” Ka Rudy asked when he passed by our newsroom.

“I’m still finalizing it, Ka Rudy,” I replied. “I’ll submit it within the day.”

I turned to my computer. I immediately opened my email account. No reply from Number One Fan appeared in my inbox. I started typing:

*To: numberonefan@sexwitheveryone.com
From: regine_stamaria@rmbn.com
Re: Proposal
Cc:
[Reply] [Forward] [Delete] [Move]*

I need to submit the proposal now. If you have any revisions or comments just say so.

*To: regine_stamaria@rmbn.com
From: numberonefan@sexwitheveryone.com
Re: Re: Proposal
Cc:
[Reply] [Forward] [Delete] [Move]*

Do not rush me! I revised it all. This is what you have to submit. I love you... because I am your Number One Fan. 😊

P.S.: If you do not believe that Joyce was in that picture, here is another one. Enjoy!

Attachment: proposal.doc (12.6 KB); joyce_boyfriend.jpg (12 KB)

I downloaded the proposal first and had it printed. After printing, I went back to look at the other attachment. The filename made me think of Joyce's relationship. I clicked on the attachment and saw the picture.

The photograph showed Joyce and an unidentified man in cunnilingus.

I immediately sent a text message to Joyce and asked her boyfriend's name. I got an instant reply from her.

“Sis, I don’t have a boyfriend right now,” she replied via text message. “Why did you ask?”

“I just received disturbing photographs of you having sex,” I answered.

“What? Could you please send me the pictures?” she texted.

I sent her the two pictures via MMS. After a few minutes, I got a reply.

“Sis, it’s obvious that it came from a pornographic video site and the girl was just a look-alike,” she replied. “What is this all about?”

“I think the prank caller is playing tricks on me again,” I replied. “We will discuss about this later. Be careful, Sis.”

I ASKED HELP from a good friend, a senior editor and cinematographer, an expert in photography.

“Can you check if these pictures manipulated or not?” I asked Boy Valdez.

Eduardo “Boy” Valdez looked serious at his age of late thirties and his hair started to thin. His dark-skinned hands moved the mouse to view the pictures I sent him via email.

“I couldn’t say,” he said as he stared at the monitor. “It may be yes, it may be no.”

“If I return to you after a few days, would you tell me by then if it is authentic or not?” I asked.

“Let me try,” as he stared at the photograph. “I saw something peculiar but I have to check further.”

I COULD NOT CONCENTRATE on reading Number One Fan’s proposal. I tried to cast away from my mind those pictures. Yet, I have to review the proposal before giving it to Ka Rudy.

I wondered if Number One Fan read my proposal and changed everything. His well-written proposal had no typographical errors. It looked like Number One Fan might have graduated in Journalism or Mass Communications.

Program Proposal

“Behind the Crimes” will be a weekly, 30-minute News and Current Affairs production. It features documentary of sensational and mysterious crimes in the country. The recent deaths of Professor Jose Luis Anacleto III and Ponciano Borja suspects a serial killer. A serial killer who attacks members of the media is something new and controversial.

The proposed host for the show is Regine Sta. Maria. She established a record of accomplishment as a field reporter and became a news anchor. Each week she will have a new topic and updates on the previous episodes until the police identify and catch the serial killer.

We will have no trouble in finding guests. PNP Senior Inspector Noel Carrillo is currently handling the two cases. He will be the special guest or consultant. It could be possible that he will co-host, too as he can shed light on the progress of the investigations.

Initial episode tackles the two deaths mentioned. Police could not definitely say that one killer committed these crimes. Besides, we want to feature a profile of probable suspects. We may explore their lives with their biographies, which may help in solving the cases.

Common Foods Philippines and Barako Mama Café have committed as major sponsors. Other potential sponsors also exist within our broadcast area.

Production costs would be minimal. Episodes are “taped as live” on Thursday evenings at Studio 5. Three cameras will operate --- one reserved for tabletop close-ups of exhibits.

Nitz Henson and Lor Kagaoan would be the producer and director respectively. Our initial season would run for 13 episodes or less until the police catch the serial killer.

The interviewees would appear without compensation. But the sponsors have indicated that they would give gifts in exchange for on air acknowledgments.

The proposed time slot is Saturday night, 10:30 P.M. Right now "Where In the World?" (which concludes February 25) occupies that slot. The final decision on this would be up to Programming.

The show has three segments:

Segment #1 – Introduction of the guest; overview of the day's topics with a brief look at footage and exhibits. (about 8 minutes)

Commercial gap 1 (about 3 minutes)

Segment #2 – In depth discussion of the topic/s, voice over on re-enactment of the crimes, footages of interviews, etc. (about 8 minutes)

Commercial gap 2 (about 3 minutes)

Segment #3 – Wrap up of discussion and conclusion. Setting an expectation and providing an update on the previous episode/s, if any. (about 8 minutes)

We would have the option of going to four segments separated by three commercial gaps. This will depend on the increase in advertisements.

Production will contact Police S/Insp. Noel Carrillo about doing a special guest appearance for the show. If he agrees to co-host "Behind the Crimes", we would prefer him to be

under exclusive contract with us for the duration of the series. He has agreed in principle to be part of "Behind the Crimes."

I noticed something written at the next page. It was a list of names.

Director: LorKagaoan

Producer: Nitz Henson

Writer and Host: Regine Sta. Maria

Editor: James Santiago

Cameraman: Boy Valdez

Sound Technician: Wally Pascual

Number One Fan knew these people.

Was he an employee here at RMBN? Was he from News and Current Affairs? Why would he submit his proposal along with the names? How would I explain this to Ka Rudy and to Management that someone dictated this to me? Also, why did he assume that Inspector Carrillo would accept the role as co-host?

NITZ TOUCHED MY SHOULDERS when she approached me at my desk.

"What is this that I've heard that you proposed a TV documentary?" she asked as she took a vacant chair and sat beside me.

"I just told Ka Rudy... it's just a documentary about the deaths of Prof. Anacleto and Mr. Borja," I said. "If it clicked, then it will become a weekly crime documentary show. Wait, how did you know?"

"I was talking to Ka Rudy awhile ago," she said. "And he wanted me to be the Executive Producer of your show."

"Really? Wow!" I embraced Nitz with delight. "Thank you, best friend."

"Okay, okay," Nitz yielded. "So I am now on search for our staff just in case this goes on production."

I gave her a gleeful grin to show my excitement in the progress of my plan.

“And a special contact with PNP and NBI as resources,” Nitz continued. “I have to ask Patrick’s help.”

“Oh, can we ask Inspector Carrillo, too?” I asked. “He’s the one who investigates the case of Mr. Borja, right?”

“Hmm... that’s possible,” Nitz said. “But with him handling the cases right now, he might be busy. Let’s see.”

“Is it okay if I talk to him?” I asked. “I may ask for Patrick’s help.”

“Sure, no problem,” she said. “You’ll just inform them of the plan but I’ll do the dealing, okay?”

I have noticed something on Nitz as she kept on moving her hand.

I took her hand and held it.

“Wait,” I said. “What’s this?”

I stared at a ring on her finger.

“Oh, this,” she said. “It is a post-Valentine gift from Patrick.”

“Is this an engagement ring?” I asked.

“He proposed,” Nitz whispered. “And I said ‘yes’.”

“Oh, my God!” I whispered. “I’m so happy for the two of you.”

I gave Nitz a hug.

“When’s the wedding?” I asked.

“Next year,” Nitz said. “Patrick ordered to have you as my maid of honor.”

“How will I refuse?” I said. “Both of you are my closest friends.”

“SIR, IF IT’S NOT TOO MUCH TO ASK,” said SG Arnel Castro as he might have recognized Number One Fan. “Is it possible for you to move your car over there? You’re no longer allowed to park here.”

“And why?” asked Number One Fan, beginning to lose his temper.

He had been temperamental since this morning at work.

“This area is already reserved for Management and its visitors,” answered the guard. “The parking assignments have changed recently.”

“And where should I park then?” Number One Fan asked back.

“There,” the guard said pointing to a specific direction. “Somewhere near the employees’ entrance.”

“That’s too far,” Number One Fan complained. “Can I just park here for awhile? I’ll be back in less than fifteen minutes.”

“Sorry sir, it can’t be,” the guard replied. “We just received orders from Management.”

So Number One Fan followed and parked the car farther near the employees’ entrance. He went out of the car and walked back towards the lobby. He saw someone familiar who parked in the reserved parking area so he called out the roaming guard’s attention.

“Why did you let him park there?” asked Number One Fan. “I thought that’s reserved for Management?”

“He’s Management’s visitor,” the guard answered.

“No, he’s not!” Number One Fan shouted. “I knew him; he’s from the IT Department!”

“That’s what they told me over the radio, Sir,” the guard said. “So I let him park here. Do not be angry with me. I’m just doing my job.”

Little did Number One Fan knew, the Management’s visitor the guard referred to was a retrenched IT executive.

IT WAS PAST SEVEN O’CLOCK in the evening. SG Castro’s shift had ended. He entered the men’s CR first, followed by Number One Fan. Both went to the male urinal. Then SG Castro went to the sink to wash his hands. After a few minutes, Number One Fan strangled the guard with a necktie. The guard tried to fight back but Number One Fan was taller and stronger. Number One Fan tightened the necktie on the guard’s neck until he could not breathe and passed out. Number One Fan pulled him into the corner. He

checked his pulse, and tightened the necktie more to look like the guard committed a suicide. Then he went back to face the mirror, took off his gloves, then put them on his pocket. He checked himself at the mirror one last time and left.

I SAW ALEX AND DAVID TALKING when I went out of the lobby. It seemed that they were in a heated discussion.

“Don’t threaten me, David. I know what I’m doing,” I heard Alex said. “Don’t forget, David. Everybody knows you’re the reason of Adele’s suicide and suspected on your parents’ death.”

“Alex!” I called out.

The two men stopped their conversation and looked at me.

“Hi, Regine!” Alex greeted and he immediately put his arms around my shoulders. “Let’s go.”

“Did I interrupt you two?” I asked as I looked at them one after the other.

“No,” Alex immediately said in a firm voice. “Until next time, bro.”

“Enjoy your evening,” said David as he tapped Alex’s shoulder.

I turned to David and we stared at each other.

“Let’s go,” I heard Alex again as he tugged my shoulders.

I felt that David’s stare followed us as Alex and I went to the parking lot.

“What were you talking about?” I asked Alex while walking. “I’ve heard something about Adele and his parents.”

“Nothing,” he said. “We’re just catching up on some things...”

“Like?”

“It’s something between us,” he said.

SELDOM DO WE SISTERS SAT DOWN TOGETHER for a snack, much more for a meal. So when I got home late at night after a date with Alex, I shared with Joyce of a cake

Alex and I bought. We dined on the table and I sliced the cake for us.

“Tell me the truth, Joyce,” I said as I handed to her a slice of Dulce de Leche. “Are you in a relationship right now?”

“No, Sis,” she answered as she took the plate from me and started to taste the cake. “You know I’m trying to maintain my grades and working at the same time. How can I squeeze in having a relationship?”

“I’m not preventing you to have a relationship with someone,” I said as I started making myself my last cup of coffee for the night. “And if ever you’re with a guy, try to be careful. I just don’t want you to be...”

“I know, right?” Joyce cut me off as she waved her fork in the air. “Those pictures were disturbing. And you know that it’s not me.”

“I’ve also asked an expert to check it for me,” I said as I continued preparing my coffee. “I’m hoping that it’s not you.”

“Why? What if it was me?” she asked as she stopped eating and looked at me.

I stared at her and shook my head.

“I don’t know... I really don’t know,” I said.

CHAPTER 11

“YOU SEEM SO HAPPY,” said David the next morning in the newsroom. “It seems that you and Alex enjoyed your date last night.”

My smile reached up to my ears upon hearing his comment.

“Yeah,” I said.

“Well, that’s good,” he said.

There was a gap of silence between us.

“By the way,” David started to bridge the gap. “Did you know that something happened here last night?”

“No. What was that?” I asked.

“Are you familiar with Castro, the security guard?” he asked.

I nodded as I remembered the guard who always greets me whenever we meet.

“Someone found him dead in the men’s room last night,” he said.

“What?” I exclaimed. “What happened?”

It never occurred to me that someone friendly like SG Castro would be gone too soon.

“After you and Alex left, I went to the car repair shop to claim my vehicle,” David said. “I went back here to get some of my things I left behind. There was already a commotion at the lobby and few people said that the guard died in the men’s room.”

Why was David in location whenever someone dies?

“REGINE, MANAGEMENT DISAPPROVED YOUR PROPOSAL,” said Ka Rudy when he called me to his office one morning.

I huffed and bowed my head. My hand held the edge of my seat, clenched, cold, and sweaty.

I knew it. Number One Fan wrote it, not I. I should not have followed him.

“The concept was okay,” he continued as I heard his swivel chair squeaked as he moved. “But Mr. Dizon of Programming wanted some revisions in the format.”

“What kind of revisions, Sir?” I asked.

“Change the format into something more unique, more appealing to today’s viewers,” Ka Rudy said. “You know what I mean, don’t you?”

I nodded as Ka Rudy got up and sat across me.

“Regine, I know you can do better than this,” he said. “In fact, I couldn’t believe you wrote that proposal. It does not seem so. Go ahead and revise it immediately. I already requested for a time slot for that.”

All I could do was answer, “Yes, Sir.”

I RETURNED to my desk and opened my Inbox. I saw an email from Number One Fan:

To: regine_stamaria@rmbn.com

From: numberonefan@sexwitheveryone.com

Re: Follow up

Cc:

[Reply] [Forward] [Delete] [Move]

*How is my proposal? Did they like my masterpiece?
Finally, I have a TV show that will set the trend of Philippine
broadcasting.*

“How dare you!” I whispered to myself as I read Number One Fan’s email. “Management disapproved it because of you! I won’t allow you to destroy my reputation just like that.”

I clicked on the Reply button and began typing a message.

To: numberonefan@sexwitheveryone.com

From: regine_stamaria@rmbn.com

Re: Follow up

Cc:

[Reply] [Forward] [Delete] [Move]

Programming disapproved your proposal. They want a different format. I will revise it myself. Thanks anyway.

Then I clicked the Send button and logged out of the internet.

THE PHONE RANG while I revised the proposal. I lifted the receiver and answered the call.

“RMBN News, good morning,” I greeted.

“Wow, no more monitoring of calls,” Number One Fan scoffed. “After all, the one who issued the memo is now dead. You should have seen how I ambushed him. It was perfect!”

“Please, don’t disturb me,” I pleaded. “I have a deadline.”

I peeked at David’s table and saw him talking on the phone and holding a piece of paper.

“I just read your email,” said Number One Fan. “Send me your revisions now.”

“No,” I said. “This is my TV show.”

“Is that so?” threatened Number One Fan. “Then get ready, Miss Sta. Maria.”

“I’m not afraid of you, Number One Fan,” I replied, “whoever you are.”

I just heard a click as his answer.

CHAPTER 12

I REVISED THE PROPOSAL down to one page. I kept it plain and simple. I modified the format into something that looked like an independent short film instead of a crime documentary. With the viewers' changing tastes, I thought that this would be most likely approach.

I sent the revised proposal to Ka Rudy via email first thing the next day. After an hour, he called.

"Mr. Dizon has approved your proposal," he said over the phone. "We will keep the original title, and I already gave Nitz Henson the go signal. Your team may start brainstorming. Consider this as a priority project. Congratulations, Regine!"

NUMBER ONE FAN DIALLED A NUMBER and heard it rang.

A female voice answered the call, maybe a secretary.

"RMBN, Mr. Dizon's office. Jenna speaking, how may I help you?"

"Hi, Jenna," Number One Fan said changing his voice a little. "Is Mr. Dizon there? I'm about to meet him today."

"I'm sorry, sir. Mr. Dizon already went out for his luncheon meeting. Is this Mr. Filomeno?"

"Yeah," Number One Fan replied.

He smiled that the secretary assumed him as the one Mr. Dizon's appointment for that day.

"Sir, he's on his way to Gloria Maris Restaurant along Timog Avenue. He'll meet you there for lunch," the secretary said.

"Thank you for that information, Jenna," Number One said as he put down the phone.

FROM A VANTAGE POINT, he saw the white Honda CRV get out of the RMBN Compound and saw Mr. Dizon driving. He started his motorcycle and followed the vehicle. It reached Gloria Maris Seafood Restaurant along Timog Avenue.

Manuelito Dizon, in his mid-fifties, tall, thick hair, and used to be athletic, went inside the restaurant. Someone inside the restaurant stood up and met him. They sat on a table and started to order their lunch. Number One Fan waited outside, and took a vantage point where he could observe Dizon from the outside.

After an hour or so, he saw Dizon stood up and shook the man's hand. It signaled him to move fast. He approached the white Honda CRV and with a strange lock pick that he held; he opened its door and entered the vehicle. He would be waiting for Dizon inside the van.

Dizon entered the van, and as he started the engine, Number One Fan pointed his gun at Dizon's nape. Dizon froze and looked at the rear view mirror.

"Drive to your house in Antipolo," said Number One Fan. "Don't ever make a mistake or else you'll die."

"How did you get in here?" Dizon asked while looking in the rear view mirror. "What do you want from me?"

"Be quiet!" Number One Fan said as he stuck the end of his gun to Dizon's nape deeper. "Just obey my orders, understood?"

"What have I done to you?" Manuelito Dizon asked as he started the engine.

"You don't need to know..."

"Did you kill Ka Poncing Borja?" he asked while he started to steer the wheel.

*“What if I told you I did?” Number One Fan answered.
“Did you also kill the security guard?”
“Stop asking questions! Just drive!”*

“ON BEHALF OF REGINE STA. MARIA and of all the staff of RMBN Channel 3 News and Current Affairs, I am David Lim. Thank you, until the next edition of RMBN, *Royale Metro Balita Ngayon*. Good night.”

I removed my lapel microphone once I heard the theme song played on air. I glanced at David and smiled at him.

“It’s seven o’clock and I have a date,” I said to him.

We left the stage together and I saw Alex and Ka Rudy behind the camera, both came in towards the latter part of the newscast.

“Hi!” I greeted Alex. “How did you get in here?”

“I gave Ka Rudy a short visit,” he said. “He said he would drop by here so I went with him. He said it was okay.”

“I have good news for you,” I told him with excitement. “I now have a TV program. I thought they would disapprove it, but I submitted my revisions on time.”

“Great! I’m proud of you,” said Alex and kissed me on the cheeks. “Let’s celebrate.”

“Ka Rudy,” David called. “Is there any news on Mr. Dizon?”

“Nothing yet,” Ka Rudy replied. “I’m getting worried as well.”

“Why? What happened?” Alex asked me.

“Mr. Dizon has been missing since this afternoon,” I said. “He didn’t show up on all his appointments after lunch. Ka Rudy was able to talk to him earlier this morning. We haven’t solved the death of Mr. Borja, and now, here is Mr. Dizon missing.”

“There, Regine,” David said. “You have something to tackle on your pilot episode.”

I stared at David.

What does he mean by that?

CHAPTER 13

THE NEXT DAY, I saw another email from Number One Fan in my inbox. I clicked on it to read.

To: regine_stamaria@rmbn.com
From: numberonefan@sexwitheveryone.com
Re: lie low
Cc:
[Reply] [Forward] [Delete] [Move]

I will wait for your program's pilot episode. I will not disturb you for a while. In the mean time, enjoy the pictures.

There were so many attachments in Number One Fan's email. Among these was a picture of a naked man, blindfolded, and tortured. The filename was Alex_torture.jpg.

The man does not look like Alex to me. What are these?

The files were Joyce_PE1.jpg and two more attachments.

I clicked on the next photographs. These were Joyce's picture swimming in her PE class. Also, two pictures of Joyce having sex with a man.

I still could not recognize who the man was. Nor I could not determine if Number One Fan manipulated the photo to look like Joyce or not.

The last three were my pictures walking out of the lobby taken from a hidden camera.

Was Number One Fan following me wherever I go?

I ALSO RECEIVED AN EMAIL from Boy Valdez about the photos I asked him to scrutinize. He said in his email that someone manipulated the photos based on a few pixilation he saw. I felt relieved.

During the day, I saw him dropped by the newsroom and called him to my workstation.

“How about these pictures?” I asked when I showed him my pictures going out of the lobby. “Were these from our CCTV?”

“No,” Boy replied. “He just added the date and time to look like from a CCTV. From the looks of it, someone took a photo of you without your knowledge using a cell phone.”

I took a deep breath and shook my head. Boy might have noticed my actions.

“Is there something wrong, Regine?” he asked.

“Not that I’m worried about,” I said. “Someone is just crazy to play tricks on me.”

“KA RUDY, MAY I HAVE A WORD with you?” I asked when I entered his office.

This time, he had transferred to Mr. Borja’s office. As expected, he drew the curtain to the side, exposing the glass window overlooking the city. Aside from many plaques and trophies, photos of his family and grandchildren, adorned the shelf behind him.

“Sure. Have a seat,” said Ka Rudy.

I closed the door behind me and sat down across Ka Rudy.

“Anything I can help you?” he asked.

“I do not know where to start, Sir.”

“Well, start from the top.”

I took a deep breath and started telling him the story about the prank caller. I tried not to mention sensitive details that can put everyone in harm’s way. I also hid my suspicions and

observed Ka Rudy's expression. I concluded the story with the last email I received this morning.

"I'm not so sure if I have to mention about the prank call or not," I said.

"That's good, Regine," said Ka Rudy. "You have a potential top rating show in your hands. Go ahead and feature the prank caller in your pilot episode."

"But, Sir, viewers may think I'm making this up," I said. "Also, we already have the pilot episode planned."

"Let it be," said Ka Rudy. "I'll tell Nitz to put that plan aside."

He stood up from his seat and started walking back and forth, thinking of more ideas.

"Why not play with your prank caller?" Ka Rudy suggested. "Follow his orders to the letter. Who knows? You might catch him in the act."

I just listened to what Ka Rudy had to say.

Why did Ka Rudy react that way? Possible harm does not bother him. What if Ka Rudy was behind all these? Was David his accomplice? Come to think of it, Ka Rudy succeeded Mr. Borja. But what would be between Ka Rudy and Prof. Anacleto?

"And if the viewers liked it," he continued, "everybody will shine. Not only you, the program, News and Current Affairs, RMBN, and but also the prank caller. That's what he wants, right?"

Was this what Nitz meant of the things I have to be careful of?

CHAPTER 14

I WENT TO CAMP CRAME to talk to Patrick and Police S/Insp. Carrillo. I already set this appointment a week ago.

As I waited for them in the latter's office, I saw a framed news article on the table and took it. Then I heard Patrick entered the room.

"Regine," he said, "make yourself at home. He will be here in a while."

"Thanks, Patrolman," I said. "I hope you don't mind me reading this."

"That was his first case when he entered PNP," Patrick said. "According to him, until now, that case is still unsolved."

"Until now?" I asked.

"Although the main suspect is now dead, Boss said that the case still bothers him."

I read the article:

"A 9-year old boy survived the shooting of an unidentified suspect. According to DJ (not his real name), he found his parents, Nimfa and PO3 Danilo Ortiz dead. Both were shot at the head while sleeping. According to the child, someone might have entered their house and shoot his parents. Because of DJ's tendency to cover himself with a blanket while sleeping, the suspect might not have noticed him. DJ said he woke up upon hearing a gunshot and saw a masked man going out of their room. According to PO1 Noel Carrillo, DJ was

speechless and trembling with fear when he found the child inside the room. Neighbors said they heard gunshots so they called the police but no one noticed a man coming from the victim's house. Because it happened at dawn and a child only as witness, police suspected that robbery and burglary were the motives. Some amount of money, a few appliances, and the service firearm of PO3 Ortiz were missing."

I looked at the date. It happened in December 1993, the same year my parents died.

The memories of the faceless killer holding a bloody knife and my aunt's shouts haunted me again.

"Is there something wrong?"

I jolted back to reality when I heard P S/Insp. Carrillo came in.

I shook my head.

"Good afternoon, Inspector," I greeted. "The reason why I'm here, I would like to request for your help."

"Dagul already mentioned that to me in passing," he said as he sat down on his chair.

"Sorry if I have to tell him in advance," Patrick said. "I know you wanted to tell him the project yourself."

"No problem, Patrolman," I said. "You're my best friend and I think I have Nitz's and your support on this."

"Give us the details, Miss Sta. Maria," said Inspector Carrillo. "Dagul, prepare us coffee."

"Yes, Sir," Patrick said as he went to the coffee tray at the corner.

"I'll be having a TV program that would tackle on the deaths of Prof. Anacleto and Mr. Borja. The deaths are under investigation by your team," I said.

"That would be no problem," the senior officer said. "We could be partners in solving these cases."

"Really?" I said. "I was thinking you might be too busy..."

"Ka Luis and Ka Poncing were my friends, too," said Carrillo. "And as a police officer handling these cases, I would like to be hands-on in its investigation."

“Thank you, Inspector,” I said. “By the way, Nitz Henson will call you up about the contract, stuff like that.”

“Just let her come here and we’ll discuss that. You’re the host of that program, right?”

“Yes, and at the same time, the head writer.”

“Oh, good! At least, we’ll just be dealing with you on some sensitive details.”

Patrick returned, pushing the coffee tray near us.

“Here, help yourself,” he said as he pointed the biscuits and cups of coffee on the tray.

“Thanks, Patrick,” I said.

“How about the prank caller, did he call you back?” Patrick asked.

I stopped to think.

If I was able to tell the story to Ka Rudy, then I should tell the same to them.

So I decided right there and then to tell the same story, leaving out the sensitive details first. It is not that I distrust Inspector Carrillo, but he might be Ka Rudy's possible accomplice. Moreover, Patrick may be in danger.

“So, you’re suspecting David Lim and the strange man you saw that evening?” Patrick asked.

“Well, I don’t want to point a finger to David; I don’t have enough evidence to prove it. As for the strange man, I don’t know, he’s creepy.”

“Could you describe to me the strange man?” asked Patrick.

So I described the old man as best as I could to both of them. Inspector Carrillo asked me to talk to a cartographer so they could have a composite image of the stranger.

“You have to send us the emails of this Number One Fan,” Carrillo added. “We have to trace where it’s coming from. We’ll ask NBI for help, if necessary.”

“Also, those pictures,” Patrick added. “Include all attachments.”

“Use the card you told me,” Carrillo said. “Show that Number One Fan exists.”

“Would that be too dangerous?” I asked.

“Rudy Echaves is right when he said to go with Number One Fan’s wishes,” Carrillo said. “He wants to be Number One, then give it to him.”

After a few minutes, I started asking them about the details on Prof. Anacleto and Mr. Borja’s death.

“Our theory is right,” Patrick said. “The suspect used a silencer. There were marks found in the gun to prove it.”

“But the silencer was not found in the car, right?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said. “The suspect might have taken it. There is something curious about that angle. How did the suspect know what kind of gun Ka Luis has?”

“Also,” Carrillo interrupted, “I’ve asked Belinda, Mrs. Anacleto, about Ka Luis’ gun. She said that he doesn’t have a silencer or any other gun accessories.”

“Then, it’s possible that the suspect knows Ka Luis that well,” I said.

“Well, with those details you gave us about Number One Fan, we can come up with something,” Patrick said.

“We’ll be exchanging information, Regine,” said Carrillo. “Trust us. We will do our best to solve these cases and to help your TV show. By the way, I’d suggest that you refrain from telling some details to anyone, even to your sister or to your boyfriend.”

I looked at them, one after the other.

“That way, we can narrow down and pin point who Number One Fan is,” he added.

CHAPTER 15

THE NEXT DAY, Number One Fan watched TV. He lay on the sofa with an ice-cold beer in one hand. A news flash showed on screen.

“From the newsroom of RMBN Channel 3, I am Regine Sta. Maria. Police found the body of the missing RMBN Channel 3 Director for TV Programming, Manuelito Dizon. Police found his body in a remote, mountainous area in Antipolo, Rizal after four days of searching. Investigators suspect that his car fell on a cliff beside a narrow, winding road. Police are still determining if there was a foul play or was it an accident...”

The TV screen showed a video of police officers and rescuers lifting a covered body from a grassy area.

“Regine, until now you haven’t got any clue...” Number One Fan whispered.

He took the remote control and turned off the television. He took his cell phone and dialed a number.

“MISS REGINE, TELEPHONE, direct line,” I heard the production assistant said.

Nitz hired a fresh graduate as our production assistant and researcher. Her name was Trina and from our alma mater. She was cute, small, and chubby like someone fresh from high

school. No one would think that she was twenty-one and graduated from college.

“Thanks, Trina,” I said as I lifted the receiver. “RMBN News, good afternoon.”

“Do you miss me?” Number One Fan asked on the other line.

“I thought you’re lying low?” I asked as I looked at the other end of the newsroom.

David was there, speaking on the phone, too.

“Let’s just say, I’m getting bored with the progress of your TV show.”

“Don’t worry; the pilot episode will be this Saturday night.”

EVERYBODY ANTICIPATED THE INITIAL TELECAST of my TV program. I watched it at home.

“Good evening, I am Regine Sta. Maria reporting *Behind the Crimes*. In our first presentation, we will discuss the mysterious deaths of four people. Two of them were veteran columnists, one was a network executive, and the other was a security guard. We will recount the story from beginning to end. We will unearth every motive and possibilities. We will not leave anything *Behind the Crimes*.”

CHAPTER 16

MONDAY MORNING, when I arrived at my desk, a bouquet of red roses lay on my table. I took the card and read it:

*Dear Regine ---
Congratulations on your
TV program. You have made it!
Treat me as your No. 1 Fan.
--- David*

The hairs on my skin stood up upon reading “No. 1 Fan”. I looked around to see if David was inside the newsroom but he was not there.

“Miss Regine, Ka Rudy wants to speak with you at his office,” called Trina.

I MET DAVID near Ka Rudy’s office. I saw him coming from there.

If I suspect David as Number One Fan, then it is possible to relate Ka Rudy into this?

“Hi, Regine. Good morning,” greeted David. “Did you receive the flowers I sent you?”

I nodded and smiled.

Wait that was also what Number One Fan said the first time I received the flowers!

“Ah, yes. Thanks,” I smiled.
“You’re welcome,” he said.

“CONTRATULATIONS, REGINE,” greeted Ka Rudy when I entered his office. “We got high ratings for the pilot episode last Saturday.”

According to the reports I have been hearing, our initial telecast received 37% in TNS ratings last Saturday. RMBN acquired the services of the Taylor Nelson Sofres, a world-famous market research company.

“Thank you, Sir,” I said as I sat down across the table.

“I have received many phone calls and they all praised the show. Even Mr. Butch Roxas and his wife Alma liked it.”

“Really?” I said upon hearing Alma’s name.

It felt good on me that someone I idolized liked my fruits of labor. Yet, despite the good news, my mind started to suspect the man I considered my mentor.

“If these ratings continue to trend for the next few weeks or months,” Ka Rudy continued, “you and your staff will receive incentives.”

Why do I have this feeling that there was something in Ka Rudy’s words?

BEHIND THE CRIMES had its own office a week before it started airing. My workstation transferred there.

Brainstorming sessions and production meetings for the next episodes happen every Mondays and Tuesday. We have a conference room within the newsroom. All staff were present.

“Hi!” I greeted. “Congratulations, everyone! We had high ratings last Saturday.”

“Have you read Leah Edades’ column in The Philippine Daily?” asked one of the staff. “It was a nice review.”

Lor Kagaoan, the program’s director, came in.

“Hello everyone!” he greeted.

“Hi, Direk!” greeted everyone.

“Hi, Regine,” he greeted me and kissed me on the cheek.
“Where is Nitz?”

“She’s with Ka Rudy for a short meeting,” I answered.

With the list of names given by Number One Fan in his proposal, the names of Lor, Nitz and mine included came true. I was not sure if Number One Fan would know that Management did not include the other names.

The meeting started with each giving comments about the pilot episode. Then it went through the brainstorming and planning for the next episode.

AFTER A FEW HOURS, my cell phone vibrated. We were in a middle of discussion when I saw that someone was calling from an unknown number.

“Excuse me,” I stood up and went out towards the door.
“Hello?” I greeted as I went out of the conference room to answer the call.

“I’ll just give my comment on the pilot episode,” said Number One Fan on the other line.

“And what do you say?” I asked.

“First, it’s nice to know that Nitz and Lor were included. I’m not angry. I’ll accept the other who filled in the slots I suggested. Second, you played safe,” he said. “You did not tell the viewers that their deaths were all connected. Although I liked the manner you mentioned Number One Fan. Now, people are becoming scared of stalkers.”

“Look, the police and even I don’t have enough evidence that will show they were all related to you. Although it is probable,” I replied.

“That’s because I’m good. I don’t leave any trace.”

“And what do you want me to do? Praise you?”

“Isn’t it that you agreed to make me Number One?” he challenged. “Why don’t you tell them about me?”

“Would you think viewers would believe that?” I said.
“They might even say that I’m making this Number One Fan issue up to sensationalize things...”

“Hmm, probably,” Number One Fan laughed. “Let me give you a suggestion for your next episode. Try to connect all four murders. Let’s see if you’re intelligent.”

“We already have something lined up for the next episode,” I said.

“You should have a follow up on your next episode until my arrest, that is, IF they’ll be able to catch me.”

He laughed again.

“Guess who’ll die next if you’re not going to do what I’ve said: *tan-tan/ tan-tan/ tan-tan-tan.*”

I heard the phone clicked.

I WENT OUT OF THE LADIES’ ROOM and straight to the lobby where Alex waited for me after the early evening newscast. I met a janitor whom I assumed was just new as I only saw him that night.

“Good evening, ma’am,” greeted the janitor while mopping the floor.

“Good evening,” I replied and looked at him.

I felt something familiar. Surprised, I saw him again. The new janitor was the stranger who stared at me that Monday night when I first received the roses and the prank call. He cut and tinted his hair black, well-shaven, and looked good in his uniform. He left and went straight to the storage room to return the mop he held.

What was his connection to the prank caller? How did he get in here?

CHAPTER 17

THE NEXT DAY, I went to Camp Crame to meet with P S/Insp. Carrillo and to shoot some parts of the interview included in the episode. Before we started, we talked about the updates on the four murders.

“We’ve discovered something,” said Inspector Carrillo. “Ballistics report of the recovered bullets that killed Anacleto, Borja, and Dizon were all the same. It is possible that it came from one gun.”

I told him about the tune of *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star* which Number One Fan sang before ending his call.

“He wanted to target famous journalists and broadcasters...,” he said.

“But what about the security guard?” I asked. “He said to connect all four murders.”

“The death of the security guard was just incidental,” he said. “He might have killed him for his other personal reason.”

“Or it may be not related to the three,” I said. “What about the stranger that I’ve mentioned? I saw him last night now dressed as a janitor, employed by a contractor.”

“I’ll ask Dagul to check on that,” he said.

Patrick came in and handed a piece of paper to Inspector Carrillo.

“Sir,” he said as he handed the paper. “It’s positive that Number One Fan used RMBN’s Wi-Fi connection on all his emails to Regine.”

“So it could be possible that he’s an employee who has access to the wireless internet connection,” Carrillo said.

“I’ve already advised RMBN’s IT Department to change its password immediately,” said Patrick. “That way, Number One Fan, if he’s a former employee, would no longer use the wireless connection.”

That amazed me. Number One Fan was that scheming.

BEHIND THE CRIMES RECEIVED high ratings for two consecutive episodes. Because of this, advertisements came in especially on its time slot. Even other stations followed suit in coming up with crime documentary programs like it. But as they said, nothing beats the original.

The program paved way for public vigilance and anti-crime, non-government organizations increased in number. Government created different task forces for every sensational crime. Security gadgets like CCTV cameras and phone caller IDs became in demand. Even telecommunications companies offered David and me to become endorsers. I thought everything was coming up roses.

SATURDAY NIGHT. Number One Fan watched the third episode of Regine Sta. Maria’s Behind the Crimes.

“Good evening. I am Regine Sta. Maria, reporting Behind the Crimes. Tonight, we will connect the deaths of Jose Luis Anacleto III, Ponciano Borja, and Manuelito Dizon. We will recount the story from beginning to end. We will unearth every motive and possibilities. We will not leave anything Behind the Crimes.”

“So, you’ve discovered something,” Number One Fan whispered. “Let’s see.”

A young woman stood in front of the TV, blocking Number One Fan’s view. She started to undress herself.

“I didn’t agree not to report for work today to be with you just to watch TV,” she said while undressing. “I should be earning tonight.”

“Don’t worry,” said Number One Fan. “I’ll pay you double, with tip and service charge if you want. Let me just finish the program.”

“What is it with that woman that I don’t have?” she asked.

“Relax, don’t be jealous,” he said. “We agreed to the plan, right? Let me just exact my revenge and you will see. They will fall down on their knees pleading for mercy.”

The young woman, now naked, went straight to Number One Fan and straddled on him. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him on the lips with demanding lust. She felt that he responded to his own weakness. She knew that she was the only one who could give him that kind of carnal satisfaction.

I WATCHED the third episode of Behind the Crimes and at the same time waited for Joyce. I became worried when the clock has struck midnight and Joyce was not yet home. Things kept running inside my head.

Was Joyce in danger? Was Number One Fan following her?

I could not sleep until she came home past one o’clock in the morning.

“Where have you been?” I asked.

“Just hanged out with my friends after work,” she said as she went straight to her room.

“Just a minute,” I said. “Could you please sit down and let’s talk?”

“What for?” she asked. “Could we just talk tomorrow? I’m tired and sleepy.”

“I said, sit down,” I commanded.

Joyce stopped for a moment then went to the dining table and took a chair.

“Joyce, I’ve been telling you to stay safe,” I said.

“I am safe,” she replied. “Nothing happened to me while I was outside of this house.”

“You can never tell...”

“There you go again, Sis!” she interrupted. “You and your suspicions about this stalker are making you paranoid. We don’t even know if he’s real or you’re just making this up.”

“Joyce, I’m not joking,” I said. “That stalker is real. What if he grabbed you outside and asked for anything... or worse, kills you without any reason at all?”

Joyce stood up and went to her room.

“I’m not yet done with you,” I said.

“I’m here. I am safe. Don’t worry,” she said walking towards her room. “I can take care of myself.”

She slammed the door.

CHAPTER 18

THE NEXT FEW DAYS, Joyce did not speak to me and went out to school without uttering a word that Monday morning.

I was already not in the mood to take another misgiving. When I arrived at the office, someone took my telephone unit. They said that it was already up for replacement.

“And what will I use for today?” I asked.

“You can use mine,” said one of my colleagues. “IT said that your new phone unit will be in here tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” I repeated. “So I don’t have a phone unit for a day. That’s nice.”

They might have sensed my sarcasm and have warned the others not to bother me at all. Everyone knew my once in a blue moon temper.

“HI!” GREETED DAVID when he saw me.

I was reading my notes for the six o’clock evening newscast that night.

I did not respond so he said, “Hey, the famous Regine Sta. Maria is becoming snobbish.”

“David, please,” I said. “Stop it.”

David may not have heard what I have said.

“Hey, come on, smile,” he said. “Your show is rating high and you seem not happy.”

“Can you do me a favor?” I asked. “I’m upset since this morning and I want to be alone.”

“Oh, upset, huh?” he said. “Is your prank caller pestering you again?”

“David, please...” I pleaded.

“Have I done something wrong?” he asked.

“None,” I replied. “It’s just that I want you to get off my back.”

David might have misconstrued what I have said.

“You know, Regine,” he said changing his tone. “Ever since I came here in RMBN, everyone was so aloof to me. I thought you were my friend. But there you are, also avoiding me. I’m trying to be friends with everyone here, but everyone treat me as a stranger, an enemy.”

I did not speak.

“Then,” he continued, “you claimed you have a prank caller. Then these murders happened. Then you have your own TV show, and now you are on top. Maybe, just maybe, they’re all coincidences...”

“They’re not coincidences!” I shouted back. “If you don’t believe me, it’s fine. But please, back off!”

Both of us stunned. I could not believe I said that to him.

“Okay, fine,” he said and left me alone.

“GOOD EVENING. I AM DAVID LIM, with Regine Sta. Maria for RMBN, *Royale Metro Balita Ngayon*. In our headlines...”

I tried not to show on camera my upset. Whenever David would look at me, I would avoid his stare. I did not speak to him even after the newscast.

I HAVE MET THE NEW JANITOR AGAIN at the corridor near the ladies’ room. I left right after the newscast and passed by the ladies’ room to freshen up.

“Good evening, ma’am,” he greeted me while mopping the floor.

I nodded and smiled. I stopped and called him.

“Excuse me,” I said. “What’s your name?”

“Jorge Morales, ma’am,” he answered smiling at me.

“Are you new here?” I asked.

“Yes, ma’am,” he replied, nodding.

“Were you the one who I saw at the fence one night?” I asked again. “How did you get in here?”

“The guard told me that there was a job opening in the recruitment agency nearby so I applied for janitor here. I wanted to work here.”

“I see,” I nodded.

I turned and walked towards the lobby when I heard him say:

“By the way, ma’am, I’m your Number One Fan.”

I looked back at him, wondering.

What does he mean by that?

“YOU’VE BEEN SO SILENT,” said Alex while dined at a fast food restaurant. “What’s wrong?”

“I just had a bad day,” I replied, trying to finish my sandwich. “I was upset the whole day. I shouted at David awhile ago.”

He might have sensed that I do not have the appetite to eat a full dinner. He took my hand, squeezed it, and put it on his chest.

“What did he do to you?” he asked.

“Maybe he wanted to talk to me but I shouted at him to back off.”

“I’m here and I love you,” he said. “Would that help ease your feelings?”

I smiled. Sometimes, I wondered if he was sincere.

After Adele’s suicide, Alex, David, and I drifted apart. We only saw each other again in our work as professional journalists.

“Is there anything wrong?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I said, trying to avoid his stare.
“Whenever I see you and David, I would remember Adele; memories back in college come to my mind...”

“You still love David, don’t you?” Alex asked.

I could not answer his question. I could feel his jealousy. I do not know how to answer it.

First love never dies. Yet I have to move on. They say, “To forgive and forget”. How could I forgive if I do not forget?

“No, I don’t have that feeling any longer,” I said. “It’s just that I’m trying to move on but the past keeps on haunting me. Don’t you have that kind of feeling?”

Alex shook his head as he put his arms around my shoulder.

“I always make sure that my past would not hinder my present and my future,” he said.

CHAPTER 19

THE NEXT DAY, my cell phone rang when I entered the News and Current Affairs department.

“Hello, Regine speaking,” I greeted.

“Get out of there and stay outside the lobby,” ordered Number One Fan.

I placed my things on my desk and went out again. As soon as I went out of the lobby, I glanced at my surroundings looking for a suspicious looking man. My cell phone rang again.

“Hello?” I answered.

“Go further to your right, near the end of the lobby, where I can see you in full view,” Number One Fan instructed.

“Where are you?” I asked while looking around.

“Secret.”

NUMBER ONE FAN SAT INSIDE HIS CAR, talking on his cell phone. No one could see him from the outside because of the tinted car windows. But inside, he could see Regine Sta. Maria standing outside the lobby of RMBN.

“When you started consulting with the police, security measures around you heightened once again.”

“Believe me,” Regine said over the phone, “I never mentioned anything about our conversation.”

“I don’t believe you. Now, even everyone in the News Department is under surveillance. I could not move. I’ve decided to lie low again.”

“Look, I have a proposal for you,” Regine said.

“What is it?” he asked. “It might put me in danger.”

“You’ll like this, I’m sure,” I said. “We will do a live interview, one on one, on air. You may say everything you like this Saturday.”

Number One Fan thought of the idea for a moment.

“No,” he said. “You’ll be recording my voice, and the police and NBI would be somewhere lurking to attack.”

“No, I’ll ask Management for approval,” I said. “I’ll talk to Ka Rudy Echaves just to make you agree. You want to be famous and Number One, right?”

“Let me think about that.”

“REGINE, THAT WOULD BE TOO DANGEROUS,” said Nitz before sipping her coffee and puffing a smoke.

“That’s right,” said Lor, “what if he didn’t call? We can’t risk that on air.”

The three of us had coffee inside our office discussing the about plans for the next episode this Saturday.

“I just want him to admit his crimes on air,” I said, playing with my cell phone like a nervous wreck. “I just want to prove to everyone that Number One Fan, the prank caller, is real.”

“Okay, you’ll have him admit on air, but he doesn’t want it recorded,” said Nitz, “that’s ridiculous!”

“There must be a way,” I said as I put down my cell phone on the table in frustration.

“Let’s better change topic, let’s feature another story this Saturday,” said Nitz.

AFTER THAT MEETING with Nitz and Lor, I opened my emails and I got another one from Number One Fan.

To: regine_stamaria@rmbn.com
From: numberonefan@sexwitheveryone.com
Re: interview
Cc:
[Reply] [Forward] [Delete] [Move]

Please send me your questions via email now. Wait for my next email tomorrow.

I felt Hope came to my side when I read his email. Nitz and Lor had left the office fifteen minutes ago. I immediately typed a list of possible questions for Number One Fan. After listing down questions that would fill in half an hour interview, I sent it to Number One Fan right away.

I RECEIVED A CALL FROM ALEX that afternoon.

“Hi, Regine,” greeted Alex over the phone.

“Hi, you called early,” I said as I looked at the clock.

It was past two o’clock in the afternoon. He used to call at around five o’clock before the newscast.

“I’m going to Mindoro,” he said. “I have a new assignment down there for me to cover.”

“When will you be back?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I’ll call you whenever I can.”

“Okay,” I said. “Just take care.”

“You, too,” he replied. “How’s your day so far?”

“Number One Fan called and I proposed to him an interview,” I said. “He hasn’t agreed with it yet.”

“You’d better be careful,” he said. “It could spell danger. I’m not there to protect you.”

DAVID REMOVED HIS LAPEL MICROPHONE right after the newscast.

“I’ve heard you wanted to go live this Saturday,” he said.

“Ka Rudy told me that Nitz told him of your plan but she disapproved it.”

“It was just a plan,” I said not expecting his statement. “It might not push through. Nitz and Lor didn’t like the idea.”

“They’re right,” he said. “It’s dangerous and we can’t tell what will happen on air.”

I looked at David.

“What do you mean?”

“Regine, I want to be your friend again,” he said. “I want to help you. You can’t just put yourself as bait.”

“Thanks, David,” I said. “Sorry about last night. I was just upset.”

“I understand,” he said. “Alex is lucky to have you.”

I smiled.

“We’re just starting with our relationship. You, too, should be looking for someone.”

David shook his head.

“I’m not sure if I’m still ready for love to happen again. Although I tried to look around.”

To: regine_stamaria@rmbn.com

From: numberonefan@sexwitheveryone.com

Re: script

Cc:

[Reply] [Forward] [Delete] [Move]

Attached is the script I wrote for your third episode. Make sure that you will air that on Saturday. Please wait for the audio file I will be sending soon.

Attachment: scriptko.doc (810KB)

I downloaded the document and opened it. It was a well-written script from Number One Fan. I printed it and read it once again. With the looks of it, he knows documentary and news features writing. But Nitz and Lor may not approve it.

I DISCUSSED Number One Fan's audio file with Nitz and Lor. I just received it via email a few minutes ago, half an hour after he sent the script.

"We can't do it," said Lor. "It's too self serving."

"But this is HIS voice, I knew it's him, so it could be that credible," I said. "I heard the first part of it, and it's his voice."

"Regine, not everyone would believe it," said Nitz. "Have you listened to the whole audio file?"

"I just received it a few minutes ago, it's ten minutes long. I just listened to the first part which was an introduction about him."

"See? It's a one-sided material!" Lor exclaimed.

"How about if we feature this at the last segment as follow-up on the first two episodes?" I asked. "It's only a ten-minute audio."

NITZ AND LOR AGREED to have the last segment devoted to the follow-up on the first three episodes. I only have an hour to get things done. I have read Number One Fan's script and checked on things that I could include in the episode.

The answers were not in a chronological order so I kept on going back and forth with the script. I took my copy of the questionnaire that I sent as my guide plus a pen and paper to list down other details.

"He insulted me. I decided that I would prove to everyone that I am not that. I want to prove to all that I am not dumb. I am not a good for nothing," Number One Fan said in the audio.

"Blame yourself, Regine. You requested for a caller ID. So Mr. Borja issued a memo to monitor all incoming calls instead."

I wrote down his motive: personal vendetta.

Number One Fan made the voice recording slower and distorted. I was certain that it was him.

“To kill those people who belittle me, those who stand in my way because they need to learn a lesson. It is payback time!” he said.

I tried to remember the events that surrounded the murders and Number One Fan’s prank call. The audio file was ten minutes and I only have a few minutes left before the deadline. I scanned the script for anything that would catch my attention and worth including in my writing. I read in the script that he admitted he killed Mr. Dizon but he did not write the motive there. I turned on the audio and played it to look for something that would enlighten me on the matter.

Play. Fast forward. Play. Rewind. Play. I stopped until I heard the name Dizon.

“Simple, Dizon was a fool! He disapproved my proposal just like that!” Number One Fan said.

I could not believe what she heard on the audio recording.

“So I thought it would be right for me to kill them both. Yes, I killed my parents. I shot them,” Number One Fan said.

I remembered that the police suspected David of shooting his parents inside their grocery store. But since there was no solid evidence, they cleared him on the case. Until now, the killer was not identified or caught. I remembered what I overheard from Alex one night.

Was David the Number One Fan?

I read the script and found something interesting. Number One Fan admitted that he also killed the security guard Arnel Castro. I remembered it was David who told me about Castro’s death. I went back to the audio file.

Fast forward. Play. Rewind a little bit. Play. No part in the recording mentioned the name Castro. I repeated the process. Play. Rewind a little bit. Play.

“...this guard showed how moron he was. He said that it was a reserved parking space for Management. But when I went back, I saw someone parked his car there but he is not from Management. That jerk! I channeled my anger to him. Poor security guard! It was his fault.”

What was the connection between the security guard and *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*? He was not a journalist or broadcaster, but he was a contractor here in the network.

“Why is it that your clue is *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*?” Number One Fan repeated my question. “What? (laughs) *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*? (still laughing) I thought Regine you are intelligent enough to guess it (laughs). It seems that I am more intelligent than you are (laughs). Oh well, we’d better stop this.”

I stopped the recording and decided to take a short break and went to the ladies’ room.

After taking a break, I went back to my workstation. I went the other way around, passing by the TV Production area to walk a little bit longer while thinking of my last question. As I passed the TV Production area, the TV was on and at that hour, a children’s educational program was on air.

“A, B, C, D, E, F, G...” the children sang the *Alphabet Song*.

Something struck me; it made me froze for a second. I did not realize that it WAS possible! The tunes of *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star* and the *Alphabet Song* were the same!

So I ran back to my workstation and started to look on my notes.

Anacleto... Borja... Castro... Dizon... Oh, my God! It is the alphabet! The next victim was someone whose last name starts with E!

CHAPTER 20

“GOOD EVENING. I am Regine Sta. Maria, reporting Behind the Crimes. Tonight, we will show you the events that led to the Makati Bank massacre...”

Number One Fan took the remote control and turned off the TV. He threw the remote control and kicked the table, tumbling it down. Empty bottles of beer crashed and other breakable things fell broken on the floor.

“Stop it!” shouted the young woman seated on the bed. “Would you just calm down?”

“You shut up!” Number One Fan shouted at her.

“Sometimes you have to realize that not everything you wished for will be given to you,” she said.

He went near her and pulled her hair.

“Ouch!” she said. “Please don’t hurt me.”

The young woman realized that Number One Fan would not listen to her. It means another tortuous episode in her life -- physical and verbal abuse. So far, the only way to pacify him would be to give in to his wishes. But she was not in the mood to be his sexual object that night.

I WATCHED the TV alone. I kept on looking at my cell phone hoping that Number One Fan would call me because we did not follow his script. As I have told him in my last email, I would feature him in the last segment that only lasted for less

than eight minutes. I have not received any message from him since the show started and I got worried.

Joyce arrived from her part-time job and still wore her work uniform. She looked haggard.

“I thought you’re asleep,” she said when she came in.

“I couldn’t sleep so I decided to watch TV,” I said. “Have you eaten?”

“Yeah,” I heard her answer as she went towards her room.

“Are you okay?” I asked, raising my voice a little bit for her to hear.

“I’m okay, Sis,” she replied. “I’m going to bed. Good night.”

I heard she locked her door.

CHAPTER 21

“MISS REGINE, TELEPHONE, direct line,” called Trina, the production assistant.

It was Monday morning once again and I got my first call at our office.

“Thanks, Trina,” I said as I picked up the receiver. “RMBN News, good morning.”

“You bitch!” said Number One Fan. “Why did you mangle my script?”

“I didn’t,” I answered. “We couldn’t use your script. It was too self-serving, one-sided, and too long for a thirty minute program. Be thankful that I featured you at the last segment. They already find you too irritating.”

“Who are THEY?”

“You don’t need to know,” I said.

“Does everybody in News and Current Affairs unfair?”

“Stop the drama, I know what’s next. Letter E, am I right?”

“So, you’re able to get it, huh? Okay, shoot!”

I just heard the sound of a click.

I IMMEDIATELY THOUGHT of the possible persons in RMBN whose last names begin with E. I listed them down. I listed seven of them that I knew and three of them are in News

and Current Affairs. I have this gut feeling that the next victim would be Ka Rudy: Rodolfo Echaves.

I needed to warn him. I went to his office but he was not there. His secretary said that he went out for a meeting and he will be back after lunch. I sent him a text message, thinking that he would reply. But he did not. I tried to call his cell phone.

“The subscriber you have dialed is outside of the coverage area or has turned his unit off,” said the recorded message.

I tried to contact Inspector Carrillo and Patrick. They, too, needed to know this. Unfortunately, they were out of town according to a staff in Camp Crame.

Patrick returned my call after a few minutes and I told him the pattern I discovered.

“Okay, thanks Regine,” he said. “I’ll relay this information to Boss right away. Meanwhile, get hold of Ka Rudy.”

NUMBER ONE FAN FOLLOWED the car with plate number TAS 369. The old Toyota Corolla stopped in front of a restaurant along Tomas Morato Avenue. He stopped, too, at a distance. He saw the person who got off the car: Ka Rudy Echaves. He waited for Ka Rudy to get in the restaurant.

After a few minutes, he went out and approached Ka Rudy’s car. He glanced around to see if anyone would notice him. At around 10:30 a.m., few walked around; it seemed not yet the time to be busy at the restaurant strip of Quezon City. He bent down and attached something under the car. A time bomb was set to explode after nine hours from then.

I HAD BEEN RETURNING to Ka Rudy’s office to check if he has returned. When he arrived, I could not get hold of his attention. He had been talking to many people in and out of the network.

“MISS REGINE, PHONE!” shouted Trina.

“RMBN News, good morning,” I greeted as I picked up the receiver.

“Hi! It is I, Alex. Just arrived from Mindoro, how are you?”

“Busy, going crazy,” I answered.

“Relax,” he said. “I’ll be bringing some delicacies for you when I come back.”

“Thanks,” I said.

“You sound like you’re not in the mood.”

“I’m sorry, Alex. I’m just tensed, that’s all.”

“Okay, I understand. I will be picking you up earlier than usual. I’ll just drop by the office to report.”

“Sure, see you later. Take care.”

“You too.”

WHEN I RETURNED to Ka Rudy’s office, I saw David speaking with him. They both went out of the office.

“Hi!” greeted David. “Congratulations! You had high ratings last Saturday.”

I did not reply, instead, I said, “Ka Rudy, may I speak with you?”

“Hi, Regine,” said Ka Rudy. “I have a meeting with Mr. Butch Roxas in five minutes. You may just return later.”

He went straight to the elevator. He pushed a button that would lead him to Mr. Roxas’ office.

“By the way, David,” he called. “Don’t forget our appointment, okay?”

“Yes, Sir,” David said.

“What appointment?” I turned to David.

“Secret,” he said and winked at me.

I DID NOT RECEIVE any phone call from Number One Fan. I became worried. It was almost seven o’clock and we are about to end our newscast. I have not had spoken to Ka Rudy

yet. I tried to sense what David was up to. I was restless but I do not have to look like one on camera.

After the newscast, David took off his lapel microphone immediately.

“I have to go ahead,” he said. “Ka Rudy and I have an appointment.”

An alarm sounded in my head. I needed to warn Ka Rudy first. I took off my lapel microphone and ran to Ka Rudy’s office. He was there talking to someone over the phone. As he put down the receiver, he stood up going to the door.

“Sir, wait,” I said.

“Yes, Regine. It seems you wanted to talk to me since this morning. You should have sent me an email instead.”

“It’s about the prank caller,” I said.

Then David came, “Ka Rudy, shall we go now?”

“Can we discuss this tomorrow?” asked Ka Rudy. “David and I have an appointment in Makati.”

“Time is running out, Ka Rudy. I need to tell you about...”

“Let’s go, David,” said Ka Rudy.

It looked like he did not hear what I have said.

The three of us went out of the News and Current Affairs department. I could not get in to the discussion as David and Ka Rudy were talking.

“Hope we wouldn’t be late,” Ka Rudy said.

“I hope there’s no traffic along EDSA,” David said. “But I know an alternative route, though.”

“Just wait here,” Ka Rudy said. “I’ll just go to the men’s room.”

Ka Rudy left us alone at the corridor.

“What do you want to tell him?” David asked.

“It’s just something between Ka Rudy and me,” I said.

I saw the new janitor, Jorge Morales, passed by. He was holding a broom and dustpan and started sweeping the floor from a corner.

Then Ka Rudy returned.

“Let’s go,” said Ka Rudy. “Oh, Regine, you’re still here.”

“Yes, Sir,” I said. “As I’ve mentioned earlier, I discovered a pattern of the prank caller.”

“What pattern are you talking about?” Ka Rudy asked.

“Do you still remember that tune, *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*?” I continued. “I was wrong. It should be the *Alphabet Song*.”

We already reached outside the lobby. We should have gone down the steps towards the driveway when Ka Rudy stopped and turned to me.

“Wait, David,” he said. “Give me five minutes. What do you mean *Alphabet Song*?”

“Ka Rudy, Number One Fan killed Anacleto, Borja, Castro, and Dizon in that particular order.”

“And do you mean that I’m the next one?”

“It’s possible.”

“Of all people here in RMBN, why me?”

“You are the one who is close to me whose last name starts with letter E.”

“And what would be your basis?”

“Just a hunch, sir.”

“Excuse me, Ka Rudy,” David interrupted. “I received a text message from our contact. He is on his way now, we’d better go. Regine, we’re sorry, but we have to go.”

“You’re right,” Ka Rudy said. “We’d better discuss this tomorrow, Regine.”

Frustration welled up inside me.

“If you don’t want to believe me, it’s fine. Enjoy your evening, gentlemen,” I said and turned back to the lobby.

I heard an explosion that made me shout and went down on the floor. I turned towards the driveway to look where the explosion came from. I saw a car burning. It was Ka Rudy’s car. Ka Rudy and David sprawled on the driveway. Then I heard shouts and a familiar voice.

“Regine!” shouted Alex.

I stood up and looked for him. I saw him getting into the crowd as he approached me.

“Alex!”

“Oh my God! I thought there was something that happened to you,” he said.

“Alex, I’m afraid,” I cried. “This couldn’t be happening.”

“Shh... don’t cry. Let’s go.”

People started to crowd. Security personnel scrambled at the lobby. Some shouted to call the police. Everything seemed in chaos. Yet, the new janitor, Jorge Morales, stood there, watching everything. I could not help but to be suspicious.

Ka Rudy and David approached us. Both of them were not hurt.

“Regine, are you alright?” asked David.

I just stared at him and did not reply.

“*Hija*, thank you,” said Ka Rudy. “Thank you for saving my life.”

I still could not utter a word because of the shock. I just looked at them --- David, Ka Rudy, Alex and Jorge Morales whom I saw leaving the lobby.

Whom will I trust now?

I shook my head and cried on Alex’s shoulders.

CHAPTER 22

I SAT ON A CHAIR inside the conference room with Police S/Insp. Carrillo and Patrick in front of me. Patrick wrote on his notepad while listening to us.

“Regine,” said Carrillo. “This time, you have to cooperate.”

I looked at the air conditioning unit and saw that the thermostat was set to high cool.

Was I shaking because it is cold? Or was it because of the shock?

“How did you know that Ka Rudy’s car will explode?” Carrillo asked.

I still could not speak. I buried my face into my palms.
If only I could erase that from my memory.

I saw Patrick took another chair and sat across me.

“I understand your situation you’re in, Regine,” Patrick said as he held my hands. “But things are getting worse.”

“I know,” I said. “I’m getting worried. Number One Fan knows that I have been talking to you. And everyone who’s close to me gets killed.”

“Don’t worry, we will assure your security,” said Carrillo. “You’re the only key to this mysterious serial killer.”

“Number One Fan is too cunning,” I said. “He knows all my moves.”

“Let him threaten you,” Patrick said. “We can outsmart him somehow. We’ll just catch him on the act.”

I stared at them.

Patrick continued to hold my hand.

“All you need to do is tell us everything you know,” said my best friend.

ALEX AND I REACHED HOME BY MIDNIGHT. He kept me company after the explosion and interrogation. The police asked him, too, about what he saw.

“Come in,” I said. “Would you like a cup of coffee?”

“Sure,” he said. “Less sugar, without cream.”

“I hope this problem will end,” I said as I prepared coffee for both of us.

Joyce went out of her bedroom.

“I just arrived from work,” she said. “And congratulations, Sister, you’re in the news again. Everybody in the pizza parlor was talking about you.”

I did not answer.

“By the way,” she continued. “I don’t have class on Wednesday. Tomorrow, after class, I’ll go with my classmate and we’ll stay at their house overnight.”

“Can you not beg off?” I asked. “You know that the situation is dangerous.”

“It’s only you who gets affected,” she said. “Don’t force that to me.”

“Joyce, I’m serious,” I said. “Haven’t you seen on TV what happened? I might even let you stop with your part-time job at nights.”

“No way!” she shouted. “I’m enjoying my part-time job and I need money. I don’t care what happened to you this evening and I’ll go to my classmate’s overnight party whether you like it or not.”

She turned back towards her room and slammed the door.

“Joyce, come back here!”

“Let her,” Alex said as I felt his hand on my forearm. “I don’t think something is going to happen to her. She’ll be safe with her classmates.”

“Can you not understand?” I turned to Alex. “We’re in danger. Number One Fan can kill anyone.”

“That Number One Fan would not threaten you anymore,” he said. “With the security measures the police had given you, he couldn’t make a move, not right now.”

CHAPTER 23

THE NEXT MORNING, I met David along the hallway. He wore a long-sleeved tribenized shirt with a striped necktie. Dark gray suited him well. I assumed that he and Ka Rudy set another appointment that day.

“Good morning,” he greeted and stopped in front of me.

“Good morning,” I greeted back.

We walked together towards the News and Current Affairs department.

“How are you after what happened last night?” he asked while walking.

“I’m fine,” I answered.

“I’m sorry about yesterday,” he said. “We should have believed you.”

“It’s alright. It was a good thing nothing happened to Ka Rudy.”

“I wish I could help you.”

We reached the entrance of News and Current Affairs. I stopped and looked at him.

How could he be of help when I am suspecting him? What was with David that he looked too meek and I could not resist him? Could he be hiding his ulterior motive?

“I know it’s hard for you to trust me,” he said. “I came from another channel and you haven’t forgiven me. Also, Management gave me a TV show, so in a way, we are competitors. But I want you to be my friend, again.”

I nodded and smiled. I couldn't help but to repeat his word "again" in my head.

"I have to go, David," I said. "We'll be having a meeting in a short while."

BEHIND THE CRIMES or BTC had three episodes already and they rated high. I featured recent, sensational crimes and became a sensational TV host.

I entered the BTC office and saw Trina alone, reading a newspaper.

"Where is everybody?" I asked.

"Direk Lor will be late," she said. "He said that there's traffic along EDSA. Miss Nitz is with Ka Rudy."

"Where are the others? Do they know we have an emergency meeting today?"

"They are at the canteen having brunch. They knew about the meeting."

I looked at the clock. It was past ten o'clock.

"IT WILL BE YOUR BIRTHDAY next week. So this Saturday, we'll have the last segment dedicated to you," said Nitz.

She sipped her third mug of coffee and puffed her fifth cigarette for the day.

"Nitz, it doesn't fit," I said. "A crime documentary with a birthday special looks ridiculous."

"Viewers also deserve a breather like a birthday special or any segment that would tackle on light topics," said Lor.

He nibbled on watermelon seeds.

"I agree, Miss Regine," said one of the staff. "Let us interview your family for your fans to know who you are."

"You don't have parents anymore, right?" asked another staff.

"Yes, so you can't interview any living relatives," I said. "Besides, Joyce and I have been living together away from other relatives."

“How about your grandfather?” asked Nitz.

“Push your luck to have him in an interview,” I said.

“You know that I’ve been estranged to him. I do not like the idea of a birthday special. I’ll just treat you to a restaurant if you like.”

“Why?” asked Lor.

“I don’t know, Direk,” I answered. “I feel that there’s something that will happen...”

I stopped to think to what I have said.

“Oh, speaking of birthday,” said Trina, “I think you left this last night, Miss Regine.”

She stood up and went to the cabinet to take out something from there.

“I saw this on your desk when I arrived this morning. I just hid it here in the cabinet so as not to lose it.”

She placed a plastic bag with a box in it on the table, in front of me.

“I don’t remember leaving anything here,” I said as I peeked into the plastic bag.

I took out a box wrapped in a birthday gift wrapper.

“Oh, a birthday gift,” said Lor.

I read the message written on the wrapper:

To: Miss Regine Sta. Maria

Happy Birthday!

From: Your #1 Fan

I immediately dropped the box at the table’s center.

“Don’t you ever touch that box!” I shouted.

CHAPTER 24

EVERYBODY STOOD UP and went away from the table.

“Oh, my God! What’s that?” asked Nitz.

“Call the guards,” I ordered. “Quick!”

One male staff went out of the office and ran to call security personnel. We stood there, frozen to our places, staring at the box.

“I don’t think that’s a bomb,” said Lor, but his voice was quivering. “What if that’s a real gift for you?”

“We couldn’t be so sure, Direk,” I said.

The male staff returned with someone from Security. I knew him by the name: SG Lucero.

“There, Lucero,” said the male staff pointing to the wrapped gift on the table. “That’s the suspected bomb. It might have come from Miss Regine’s prank caller.”

The security guard observed the box on the table and inspected it.

“Sir, ma’am, please wait outside and I’ll radio our security officer,” Lucero said.

We left the room as instructed. I heard him call over the radio:

“Sierra Oscar, Serra Oscar, Lucero here. Over.”

“Go ahead, Lucero,” answered another man over the radio.

“Eyeball suspected bomb here at Beta Tango Charlie. Over.”

EMPLOYEES WAITED OUTSIDE the building. Because of the bomb scare that happened in our office, they obliged to evacuate the premises. They started to talk as they observed the members of the PNP Bomb Squad went out of the lobby, carrying the wrapped box.

A man went to the open driveway, far from us and from the parked cars. All were afraid of him, as he alone could be hurt in the process. Someone tapped on my shoulder.

“Are you alright?” asked David.

I did not answer. I felt his hands on my shoulders and tried to turn me to him.

“I think it would be better if we leave this place,” he said. “Let’s have coffee or something...”

“Thanks, David,” I said. “I’m okay. I wanted to see this myself.”

“I’m worried about you,” he said. “We’re not yet done with the investigation of Ka Rudy’s car explosion and then this. You’ve been through a lot of stress.”

I did not reply to his concerns. He might be making this up so I could divert my suspicion from him.

“I’m fine, David,” I said.

I looked around and saw the janitor, Jorge Morales, standing not far from us, observing the Bomb Disposal Team. He smiled and left, leaving me thinking.

With a careful motion, the police officer tore the wrapper from the box. He told his team that the box measured seven inches wide, six inches long, and four inches deep. He removed the wrapper, exposing a gift pack. He opened the gift pack and exposed bottles of cologne, lotion, shower gel, and hand soap. They lay on a crumpled pad of perfumed tissue paper. He inspected beneath the tissue paper. It contained nothing. It was a gift pack after all. He stood up and approached Inspector Carrillo.

I overheard their dialogue:

“What is it?” asked Inspector Carrillo.

“Negative, Sir,” said the police officer. “It’s a gift pack for Miss Sta. Maria.”

“Bring that to the laboratory,” the inspector ordered. “Get all fingerprints including that on the gift wrap.”

“COME IN, REGINE,” said Ka Rudy when I came to his office that afternoon. “Have a seat.”

“Thank you, Sir,” I said as I sat down on a chair across him.

“How are you?” asked Ka Rudy.

I gave a deep sigh and shook my head.

“I don’t know now what to do,” I answered. “Number One Fan is coming into my nerves. I looked so foolish a while ago. It was a shame!”

“Don’t mind it,” said Ka Rudy. “The PNP and the NBI are doing their job well. You’ll survive this problem.”

I nodded.

“I hope so.”

“By the way, I spoke with Nitz awhile ago,” he said.

“Your program continues to have good ratings and reviews. Advertisements kept coming in, too. Management is happy so as a reward and birthday gift, they’re giving you something special.”

He opened his drawer and took something from it. He handed me a set of car keys.

“Accept this,” he said. “The Honda CRV is waiting for you at the parking lot.”

I do not know if I will accept the key or not. I just stared at the car keys.

“Get used to it, Regine,” said Ka Rudy smiling. “Welcome to the club of achievers.”

I smiled. Yet my mind thought of something else as he put the car keys to my hand.

What does he mean by this? Was this a part of success I dreamed of?

I have heard some successful newscasters and reporters received lavish gifts from Management. Now that I have received one, I could not believe it was happening.

“The reason why I called you is your new assignment,” Ka Rudy said. “Management asked me to create at the soonest time possible a TV talk show.”

“Talk show?” I repeated.

“Yes, it is a different talk show. It’s about the House of Representatives.”

I stopped to think.

“You see, Regine,” explained Ka Rudy. “The cable channel covers the Senate most of the time. They receive high ratings especially when senators debate over controversial topics on the floor. Why not cover the House? I think that would be a good idea. I already talked to Cory Florentino to produce the show. And I want you to write the concept paper and co-host the show.”

“Co-host?” I repeated.

“Yes, since we’re going to cover the House, we need a Congressman to host it,” said Ka Rudy. “Congressman Joey Guillermo will be your co-host. Both of you look good on camera.”

I knew Congressman Guillermo. He was still single at forty, son of a former senator and scion of a reputable political clan.

“Why did you stop, Ka Rudy?” I asked.

“Nothing. I was just thinking, both of you are single and look good off cam.”

I smiled and shook my head.

“Just joking,” he said.

“How about *Behind the Crimes*?” I asked.

“I see, you’re becoming attached to your show,” he said. “You will leave *Behind the Crimes* to concentrate on the talk show. Management wants you to be famous as a political commentator rather than documenting crimes. You see?”

Was that how fast people disregard things you have worked hard for?

“And who will replace me in *Behind the Crimes*?” I asked.

“I am thinking of Abet Fortunato. He also deserves a good break.”

“And what is this that I’ve heard you’re moving the time slot of *Behind the Crimes* to give way for David’s new show?”

“Yes, that's true. These new shows will happen simultaneously. You see, Regine, News and Current Affairs team tries to do its best to come up with good TV shows.”

I could not reply any more. I could not believe that they were able to change the programming in just a short time. RMBN must have been desperate to increase its ratings to survive.

Ka Rudy stood up from his seat and went to my back. He held my shoulders and said,

“So how does it feel to be Number One?” he asked.
“Happy birthday, *hija*.”

CHAPTER 25

I ASKED ALEX TO DRIVE the new Honda CRV. He arrived at our house around eight in the morning. We had breakfast together. Joyce already left for school earlier.

“Management has been too gallant to give you a new car for your birthday,” he said as he started the engine.

“I agree,” I said. “If it is a reward for *Behind the Crimes*, then they should have given a service car for the staff instead.”

“Is that the reason why you suspected Ka Rudy?” he asked as we left our house.

“Ever since he asked me to prepare the proposal for *Behind the Crimes*, and until now, his movements were suspicious.”

“How about David?”

“I saw him many times whenever I was talking to Number One Fan; he was on the phone, too,” I said. “He admitted that he took a picture of me from IT and he sent me flowers and the card said: “consider him as my Number One Fan.”

Alex nodded upon hearing my statements.

“How about that new janitor that you’re talking about?” he asked.

“Remember the man I pointed to you one night?” I asked. “I saw him as the janitor after a few days. Not only that, during the bomb scare, I saw him there at the lobby smiling then he left. He’s suspicious.”

“I see,” he nodded as he focused on his driving.

A newspaper boy sold dailies amidst the traffic. Alex signaled him to come over.

“Philippine Daily,” Alex said as he handed him a twenty-peso bill.

The newspaper boy handed him the paper and gave Alex his change. He handed me the newspaper and asked.

“Have you told this to the police?”

“Some of them,” I said. “I haven’t had the time to discuss this in full with Inspector Carrillo and Patrick.”

“Better be careful in telling things to Inspector Carrillo,” Alex said. “He may be Ka Rudy’s man. If you do not suspect Ka Rudy, it would be better. But no.”

We reached Timog Avenue and Alex was about to turn.

“I’ll just park this car and I’ll take a cab to DZQR.”

“You’d better bring this van,” I said. “Just pick me up after the newscast. I’m not going anywhere anyway.”

Alex looked at me.

“Are you sure it’s okay?” he asked.

I smiled and I bid goodbye when we reached the RMBN entrance gate.

“It’s fine with me, Alex. Bye. See you later,” I said.

I leaned to him and gave him a kiss.

A CUT ARTICLE from *The Philippine Daily* pasted on a bond paper lay on my desk. It has a small Post-it attached to it.

Miss Regine ---

FYI.

--- Trina

I read the article and saw the date. It was today. I should have opened the newspaper a while ago inside the car.

In My Opinion

By Leah Edades

Moro-Moro in RMBN Channel 3?

A series of weird events happened inside Royale Metro Broadcasting Network (RMBN) Channel 3. Recently, the car of Ka Rudy Echaves, the new head of RMBN News and Current Affairs, exploded. Yesterday, a bomb scare occurred inside the office of the TV program, Behind the Crimes, hosted by Regine Sta. Maria. Before those events, someone ambushed PoncingBorja. A security guard committed suicide inside the men's CR. Manuelito Dizon was allegedly salvaged. It was also coincidental that the death of our publisher Jose Luis Anacleto III happened before all these. Could it be a staged play or Moro-Moro by RMBN? Why did I ask?

Butch Roxas' Royale Broadcasting Network started to lose income and almost gone bankrupt. They did all measures to raise the ratings of their programs. Programs kept on changing formats hoping to find the right formula for steady viewership and ratings. Yet they failed. Channel 3 ranked number four (with Channels 2, 7, and 5 consistently sharing the top 3 spots) according to the surveys. So Roxas sold half of his shares to Alfonso Chua's Metro M Group of Companies. The network felt good after a financial blood transfusion. That was the biggest buy out this year, reaching more than P20 billion. The buyout also resulted in retrenchment of employees and reorganization within the network. It surprised all the members of the media.

Then The Philippine Daily publisher Jose Luis Anacleto III died, Borja and Dizon followed. Then bomb threats inside RMBN happened. Also, the TV program of Regine Sta. Maria Behind the Crimes was worth noticing. She featured in her show that her prank caller committed the mysterious deaths. How could we believe in such a tale? The PNP and NBI does not have enough evidence to prove this theory. Is RMBN Management covering up something? Just asking.

I COULD NOT BELIEVE in what I have read. I've known Leah Edades as a college classmate. She should have

called me to ask or verify information. I shook my head in disbelief.

I went to Ka Rudy's office to discuss this matter and met David along the hallway.

"Hi!" he greeted. "Have you read Leah Edades' article?"

"Yeah, that's why I wanted to talk to Ka Rudy," I said.

"To be honest, I don't agree with what she wrote," he said. "Believe me, this is not a staged play."

I just stared at David.

CHAPTER 26

A FEW DAYS AFTER READING LEAH'S ARTICLE, I found myself sitting inside the conference room. I took the remote control and turned on the TV. David delivered the flash report that noon instead of me. I just could not bear delivering the news myself.

“From the newsroom of Royale Metro Broadcasting Network Channel 3, I am David Lim. The police arrested Jorge Morales let him explain about the gift he sent to Regine Sta. Maria last Monday. Morales is a janitor working here in RMBN Channel 3. Investigators found his finger prints on the gift wrapper that people suspected as a bomb. Morales admitted that he left the gift on Regine Sta. Maria's desk early Monday morning. The wrapped gift caused a bomb scare in the whole RMBN compound.

Authorities say that his fingerprints matched an ex-convict named Benjamin Sta. Maria. President Benigno Aquino III granted an Executive Clemency to old prisoners which included Sta. Maria last July 2010. According to police records, Benjamin Sta. Maria committed second-degree homicide that killed his common-law wife Raya Pagayawan, and her lover Angelito Robles in December 1993. Pagayawan was the daughter of Sultan of Lanao and Bangsamoro leader, Sultan Ahmed Jamal Pagayawan, and mother of RMBN newscaster Regine Sta. Maria.”

That news broke my heart to pieces.

I WENT TO CAMP CRAME and talked to Inspector Carrillo and Patrick that evening. They waited for me to discuss the issue.

“Do you think Jorge Morales is our serial killer?” I asked.

“I don’t think so,” Carrillo said. “He admitted that the gift came from him but he denied all the murders. He does not know Ka Luis, KaPoncing, and Mr. Dizon. He knew Arnel Castro and we’re still verifying if he could have killed the security guard.”

“Which we doubt,” said Patrick. “The emails sent to you used RMBN’s Wi-Fi connection. Jorge Morales doesn’t have a computer or an access to it. We also searched the place he stayed in Manila.”

“Have you found something?” I asked.

“He rents a room in Quiapo,” Patrick continued. “We found your pictures and cut articles from newspapers and magazines. He admitted that he had been following your career to the point that he claims to be your Number One Fan.”

I heard that phrase again. I could not go on thinking that I suspected my own father.

“Sit down, Regine,” said Inspector Carrillo. “I need to tell you something.”

I sat down on the chair he offered.

“Dagul,” he called. “Could you get us some coffee, please?”

“Yes, Sir,” Patrick answered and left.

He returned with a tray of three mugs of brewed coffee, a bowl of sugar, and creamer.

“Have some coffee,” Inspector Carrillo said. “We have something to tell you.”

I took a teaspoon and scooped sugar and creamer and mixed them in my coffee. I took a sip and asked.

“What else have you unearthed about Jorge Morales? Oh, Benjamin Sta. Maria I should say.”

“What do you know about that story?” Carrillo asked.

I stopped. For the first time, a non-relative asked me about what happened eighteen years ago.

“That memory kept on haunting me ever since,” I started. “Joyce was still a baby and we were sleeping in my room. I woke up with the shouts I heard. So I went to the door and opened it. I saw a man holding a bloody knife but I could not remember his face. I heard my aunt shouted and told me to get back to the room and lock the door. After that, they told me that man killed my mother and stepfather. But they said that the killer was in Iwahig Penal Colony. Also, they told me that my father died in Saudi Arabia.”

“They might have a good reason to tell you that,” Carrillo said. “Do you know why he killed your mother?”

I shook my head.

“No. They never told me that. My grandfather had instructed everyone in the family not to tell me or to know my father.”

“I understand. Then let me fill you in,” Inspector Carrillo said. “Do you still remember me?”

I looked at him and shook his head.

“I don’t think so,” I said.

“I was one of the police who investigated that case back in 1993,” he said. “I remember you as the ten-year old girl crying and shivering in fear. You kept on saying that a man held a bloody knife but you can’t remember his face.”

I remembered he was the kind police officer who kept on giving me a biscuit whenever he asked me a question about my mother’s death. I smiled and nodded. No wonder, I trusted him.

“Now you remember,” he said smiling. “According to the story, your mother was pregnant with you when your father left for Saudi Arabia. His contract as an engineer should have been eight years. But with the Gulf Crisis that happened that time, his employer decided to keep his contract for two more years. He came home in 1993 and never told your mother. He wanted to surprise you both only to learn that your mother had an affair with your stepfather and gave birth to a child. He killed your mother and stepfather out of rage.”

I could not speak. I tried to digest what he had said. That was new to me. My relatives did not tell me about this.

Inspector Carrillo took the framed article on his table.

“Your mother’s death and this case happened in 1993 within the same week. I was happy that I closed your mother’s case easily but not this one.”

“Can I see him?” I asked. “I mean, can I see my father?”

“Sure,” he said. “Dagul will lead you there.”

POLICE DETAINED AND INTERROGATED Jorge Morales a.k.a. Benjamin Sta. Maria at Camp Crame about the serial murders and the foiled bomb threat. With the course of the investigation, it showed that he intended to give me a gift and had no connection with the crimes whatsoever. Authorities considered filing charges against him for fictitious name and concealing true identity under Title four, Chapter two, Section one, Article 178 of the Revised Penal Code. Since he committed a crime under parole, he had to go back to his cell to serve his sentence.

I sat down on a chair and waited for him in the room. The door opened and he entered with a police officer as his escort. The police officer left and told me that he will just wait outside the door.

My father sat across me and smiled.

“Gege,” he said.

I remembered that relatives used to call me by that nickname. I do not know why they chose that for me.

As I looked at my father, I remembered the long distance calls I had as a child, asking him to send me toys and dresses every occasion. Then I remembered the man holding a bloody knife.

“How are you?” I asked.

“I’m doing fine,” he said. “Thanks to your friend policeman, they treated me well here.”

“I already asked for a lawyer to help us with your case,” I said.

“Thanks, my child,” he said. “But I don’t think I would need that.”

I stared at him.

“I’m ready to get back to the cell,” he said. “Now that I’ve seen you, and talked to you face to face like this.”

I kept silent.

“Are you mad at me?” he asked. “Are you mad at me for killing your mother?”

I bowed my head, hiding the tears from his gaze. I shook my head.

“I don’t know what to say,” I said. “It is only now that I knew the whole story. Aunt Flor and the other relatives never told me about it.”

“Will you forgive me?” he asked again.

I could not say a word.

He took my hands and held it tight. I bowed my head and cried.

HE DECIDED TO DROP OFF FROM THE CAB and walk towards his house. He looked around while walking.

“Where to, Sir?” asked the cab driver earlier at the airport.

“Cubao, Quezon City,” he said. “Along 15th Avenue.”

While on the cab, he kept on asking the driver the names of the buildings that were new to him.

“It’s been a while,” he said to the driver.

When they reached Cubao, he instructed the driver to go straight P. Tuazon Boulevard and turn left at 15th Avenue.

“15th Avenue is already a one-way street, Sir,” the cab driver said. “We’ll just go straight to Aurora Boulevard and turn right from there.”

He realized that too much has changed in his hometown as he continued walking towards his house. He inherited the bungalow from his parents. Before he went to Saudi Arabia, he let his wife and his wife’s cousin to live there.

He thought that his wife and daughter, now ten years old, would be surprised to see him. They do not know he was coming.

Upon reaching the gate, he saw his wife's cousin. She, too, was surprised to see him. He noticed that she does not want him to enter the gate. She fidgeted a lot.

"What is wrong, Flor?" he asked. "Aren't you surprised to see me?"

"Raya is not here," she said, holding on the gate. "She went out with her daughters."

"Daughters?" he asked. "I only have one daughter with her."

Flor froze in fear and realized her slip up.

His gut feeling told him to open the gate. He pushed Flor aside and entered the house.

Flor followed him inside.

"No one is in," she said. "I'm all alone."

"Raya!" he called out his wife's name but there came no answer.

He entered the living room and saw that nothing much has changed inside the house. He went straight to the bedroom he knew and knocked at the door.

The door opened and saw his wife.

"Ben!" his wife exclaimed.

"Raya!" he said.

He saw a man lying on the bed, sleeping. Out of anger, he went to the kitchen and grabbed the first thing he saw, a kitchen knife. He rushed back to the room and rage took over him with that sight of infidelity. He started stabbing her wife's lover and accidentally stabbed Raya who kept on preventing him.

He heard Flor shouting in fear outside the room. When he got out of the room, he saw a ten-year old child came out of the other room.

"Gege, get back into your room!" shouted Flor.

As soon as he heard her daughter's nickname, he realized what he had done.

He surrendered himself to the police that afternoon.

“PLEASE FORGIVE ME,” I heard my father say.

I wiped off the tears that flowed down my cheeks.

“I never thought that we would meet this way,” I said.

“As soon as I got my Executive Clemency, I went back to our house and saw you there with your half-sister,” he continued. “I wanted to come near you so I followed you to the TV station where you work. I tried to look for a job inside the station but because of my criminal record, no employment agency could give me a job. So I paid someone in Recto to create a new name and some IDs for me.”

“So you were the one who stood outside the fence one night?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said. “I saw you called the guard. I might have frightened you.”

“You spent your savings to have someone fix your IDs just to get a job inside RMBN?”

“That’s the only way I can get near you, my child.”

Tears fell down my cheeks as I remembered the nights I saw him cleaning the hallway. I realized how he suffered much not seeing me and when he had the chance, he couldn’t get near me.

“When I was in jail,” he continued, “your Aunt Flor gave me a visit. I told her that I wanted to see you.”

FLOR SHOOK HER HEAD and said, “That couldn’t happen, Ben.”

“Why?” Benjamin asked.

“The Sultan has ordered not to show Gege to you. You know Uncle Ahmed, his words are the rules.”

“Where is she?” I asked.

“Gege is under my care now. Uncle Ahmed instructed me to take care of the children. We are still staying at that house in Cubao. Don’t worry, Ben, I’ll take care of Gege.”

“Flor, is it true that Raya doesn’t love me anymore?” he asked.

“You stayed in Saudi for too long,” Flor replied. “Eight years of contract plus two years extension left her lonely. Young and liberated as she was and despite our disapproval, she fell in love with a married man. Angelito and his wife were not divorced. Raya agreed to be his kept mistress and got pregnant. When Uncle Ahmed learned about it, he disowned Raya and Gege became estranged with her grandfather.”

“Flor, will you do me a favor?”

“What is it?”

“If ever Gege asked about me, tell her, and let everyone know, that I died in Saudi Arabia. Tell her that I had an accident in the oil refinery.”

“You want me to lie to your daughter?”

“Yes, I beg you to tell her that. And if she asked who killed her mother, tell her that the killer had died in jail.”

Flor kept silent.

“They will transfer me to Iwahig soon,” he said. “I might die there before my sentence ends.”

“SO IT WAS YOU WHO PLANNED that I should not know who you are or who killed Mama?” I asked.

He nodded.

“I thought it was Lolo,” I said.

“Your Lolo might have thought what I thought about that time,” my father said. “Flor kept her promise until her death. I am thankful.”

“Have you thought that I would somehow find the truth?”

“At least, you were spared of the shame while you were growing up. Imagine if you grew up knowing I killed your own mother, my wife that I loved most.”

“PAPA, HOW DID YOU AND MAMA MEET?” I asked when I put down two cups of coffee on the table for us.

I asked permission from Inspector Carrillo to have an hour with my father and he granted it.

“Both of us were studying at the university here in Manila,” he started as he sipped his coffee. “I took up Engineering and she took up A.B. Literature. She transferred from A.B. Political Science because she didn’t want to take up Law.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Unlike the rest of her family, she was not interested in politics. Besides, she hated the rigid traditions of royalty. We met in a basketball game. We chose her to be the muse of our varsity basketball team where I belonged.”

“You play basketball?”

“Yes, I was the team’s point guard. Since then, your mother and I started going out. I never knew that she was a Muslim princess until I heard the news that she scandalized her family.”

“Scandal?”

“Your mother’s modern ways created a stir in conservative Lanao province. Raya wore slacks, shorts, miniskirts, swimsuits, ladies here in Manila wore in those days. We walked hand in hand in public. Your grandfather’s assistants saw us play basketball at the gym and volleyball at the beach. I never thought that they have been watching us.”

I laughed at the thought of it. Joyce might have taken our mother’s rebellious ways.

“When I got her pregnant,” my father continued. “I had to face your grandfather. I promised to marry her so I tried my best to pass the board exam and work immediately. Your mother risked losing her throne. She was most happy as a wife and mother. Unfortunately, I...”

“Papa, don’t blame yourself,” I said and held his hand.

A TAXI CAB STOPPED in front of Leah Edades. She opened the door and took the back seat.

“Ortigas,” she said to the driver.

“Where in Ortigas, ma’am?” asked Number One Fan disguised as a driver.

“At Cityland along Ortigas Avenue,” she answered.

Number One Fan drove off. He looked at the rear view mirror to observe his passenger. He turned the air conditioner's thermostat higher, and adjusted the louver and air vent to her direction. He took a canister and sprayed it behind his seat.

Leah looked tired from work and she did not notice anything. She fell asleep inside the cab.

Once asleep, Number One Fan drove down south, along the South Luzon Expressway going to Cavite. He took an exit among those toll gates that enter Cavite and searched for a dark, isolated road. He was able to find one, bordering Tagaytay City and Mendez. He parked the cab near amongst the trees. Leah was still asleep.

He tied Leah's hands behind her and gagged her mouth with a handkerchief. Looking at the former classmate, Number One Fan decided to undress her.

She woke up when she felt that someone was already over her body. She was already naked and Number One Fan was raping her. She tried to get away from him but she couldn't. She couldn't move her limbs.

"I didn't like what you wrote about Regine Sta. Maria," Number One Fan whispered. "I wanted to be famous just like her that's why I'm doing these murders. And because you're getting in my way, you'll die."

Leah was in tears, out of fear and pain. She seemed to be pleading but she couldn't speak.

"But before I could kill you, let me taste you first," Number One Fan smiled. "Don't you know that I have a crush on you back in college?"

He continued his sexual advances until he came and climaxed. After that, he tied Leah's feet but she was still naked at the back seat. He didn't take off the handkerchief from her mouth. He put on his clothes back and went to get his gun. He attached the silencer and aimed the gun at her.

I WENT HOME LATE that night and saw Joyce waiting for me in the living room, looking out of the window.

"I'm waiting for you," she said.

"Why? Is there something wrong?" I asked as I closed the door behind me.

"Why did you not tell me the truth?" she asked.

"What are you talking about?" I asked as I put down my bag on the sofa.

"I've heard the news this afternoon," she said. "He was your father. He killed my parents."

"He killed my mother, too," I said. "It's more painful for me to know the truth. He is my father."

"Your father did not return here as he promised," Joyce said.

"Because there was a Gulf Crisis going on," I said. "His employer decided to extend his contract. He returned to surprise us only to see our mother's infidelity."

"That's not true!" Joyce shouted.

"It is true!" I shouted back. "It's the truth that our relatives kept from us, especially from me! If there was someone to blame, it would be our mother..."

"Don't blame her!"

"They should have been married!" I shouted.

"Are you saying that I shouldn't even be born?"

I froze. I shouldn't have said it. I didn't mean to hurt my sister.

Joyce turned away and went inside her room. I heard her slam the door.

CHAPTER 27

WITH THE ARREST OF JORGE MORALES a.k.a. Benjamin Sta. Maria, the suspicion on Number One Fan's identity continued pointing at David. When I've heard the news of Leah Edades' death over the radio, I knew that Number One Fan just continued his ABC murders. I knew Number One Fan had read Leah's article on the newspaper and might have pissed him off. I thought of who will be next, letter F.

But who in News and Current Affairs?

I know three persons whose last names start with F. Abet Fortunato is one of them. He has been my good friend since college and Management wanted him to replace me in BTC. I need to warn Abet.

"Abet, you're aware of what's happening to me, right?" I asked while we had coffee at the cafeteria.

"You mean the prank call and those murders?" he replied.

"Yes," I answered.

He nodded and said, "If you are here to warn me, it's okay. I'm going to be just fine. I'll take care, as well. I'm in the look out."

"Thanks, Abet. Nitz said you'll start taping on Thursday."

Abet took my advice even though he hadn't started taping yet for *Behind the Crimes* until Thursday.

“NICE PLACE YOU HAVE HERE,” Number One Fan said as he entered Abet’s condominium unit. “Are you renting this place?”

“I availed of their rent-to-own plan,” Abet said. “The terms are much better with their in-house financing.”

Abet offered Number One Fan a cold can of beer and he took out from the refrigerator some food and heated them inside the microwave oven.

After a few rounds of beer and empty plates, Abet went to the bathroom.

Number One Fan observed the studio type unit.

He asked permission to use the bathroom, too. He took that opportunity to open Abet’s bottle of capsules from his medicine cabinet. He took six capsules and opened them. He inserted a powdered poison inside the capsule and sealed it back. Then returned the six capsules back into the bottle. He shook the bottle and returned it to its place.

UNFORTUNATELY, ABET’S LAUDRYWOMAN FOUND HIM DEAD in his apartment Thursday morning. According to her, Abet didn’t wake up from his sleep.

Initial investigation showed that Abet had a heart attack. Later on, autopsy report revealed traces of poison in his stomach and blood. So Inspector Carrillo ordered to get all his food and medications for examination. Police discovered six capsules of his maintenance medicine for high blood pressure tampered.

BECAUSE OF ABET’S DEATH, Management decided to let me continue hosting *Behind the Crimes*. Number One Fan called and told me how happy he was.

“At least, they know what I want to happen,” he said.

“Did you kill Abet?” I asked.

“What do you think?” he asked back. “Do you think I would agree to replace you? No, I want you to be the host of *Behind the Crimes*. You are going to make me Number One,

not Abet. Although I know Abet was a good police beat reporter.”

“Just as what I’ve suspected,” I sighed.

“Good,” he said. “You’re getting better with this game. But you still couldn’t catch me.”

He laughed. “You even had your father arrested.”

“Did you use my father in your plans?” I asked.

“No,” he replied. “I don’t even know that he is your father. But he’s a good distraction though.”

“Is Congressman Guillermo next?” I asked.

“Secret,” Number One Fan laughed and sang. “*Tan-tan/ tan-tan/ tan-tan-tan!*”

And I heard the sound of a soft click after that.

CHAPTER 28

THE FIRST PLANNING SESSION started out late. Congressman Joey Guillermo came an hour after one o'clock in the afternoon. It would be our first meeting about the new talk show about the House of Representatives entitled *Plate Number 8*. These members of the Congress use an official vehicle that bore that plate number.

During the break, I talked to Congressman Guillermo.

"Congressman, you might have learned about the serial killer, right?" I asked.

He nodded. "Yes, I'm aware of it. It's in the news."

"So you know that anyone close to me can get killed?"

"Does that include me?" he asked.

"It's possible," I said. "We're working on a TV show that he might not like. He killed Abet Fortunato because he didn't want me to leave my show."

"So you're warning me to take all the necessary precautions."

"There's nothing wrong in trying, right?"

"Hmm... you have a point."

CATHS LIM-GO CHECKED IN a hotel that weekend. She received a call from Number One Fan asking for a meeting. She couldn't let him go into her house in Quezon City so she decided to meet somewhere else.

They met in the hotel's café. But Number One Fan insisted that they go to her hotel room.

"Caths, we can't talk here," Number One Fan said. "What if your husband's friends or acquaintances would see us here? They don't know me and they may think you're seeing someone else."

She sighed and agreed. There was something in his smile that she couldn't refuse. She went upstairs first and waited for him. When she heard the knock on the door, she opened it and let Number One Fan in.

"Why did you request this meeting?" she asked. "I thought everything is over."

"I need more money," Number One Fan said as he entered the room and observed the surroundings.

"I've already given you half a million pesos," she said. "Isn't that enough?"

"Well, I thought it was enough but I was wrong," he said. "I need more. Anyway, I still have another copy of the video which I can send to your husband right away."

"Don't tell me, you made many copies of it."

"But of course. I'm not that dumb to destroy a piece of good evidence."

"You, liar!"

Caths started to pound Number One Fan with her fists. But he was much stronger, pushing her aside with too much force. Caths fell on the floor, bumping her head on the edge of a table. Number One Fan took a lamp stand and pounced it on Cath's head until she laid unconscious, dead.

He put on his gloves and took a cloth. He wiped the lamp stand to remove his fingerprints. Then he toppled down some things on the table to look that a burglary took place. He searched for some valuables inside the hotel room. He took some pieces of authentic jewelry and put it in his backpack. He also took cash of different denominations, and small electronic gadgets. He tried to search for Cath's copy of the video but he couldn't find it. He already spent more time than what was necessary so he left and locked the door.

CHAPTER 29

“MY CONDOLENCES, DAVID,” I said when I came to Cath’s wake.

Cath’s remains lay in state in one of the finest funeral rooms of Arlington Memorial Chapel.

“Thanks,” David said.

I went to view Cath’s remains and offered a short prayer for the repose of her soul. David stood beside me.

“I’ve heard the news this morning,” I said. “What did the investigators say?”

“There was no forced entry, so it means that Caths knew her killer.”

“Any motives?” I asked.

“Robbery is one,” David said. “Pieces of jewelry, cash, laptop, and cell phone were missing.”

“Any suspect?”

“None as of the moment,” he said. “They still have to check their CCTV cameras for possible identification.”

*“I THOUGHT YOU LOVE ME,” cried the young woman.
“But you don’t. You keep on hurting me.”*

“Stop that,” said Number One Fan.

“You still love her. Do I look like her?”

“I said stop it,” Number One Fan warned her.

“I don’t think I look like her,” continued the young woman. “But every time you stare at me like that, it seems that you see her in me.”

“How many times do I have to tell you to stop?” Number One Fan shouted at her.

“Go ahead, hurt me!” the young woman shouted back at him. “Do it the way you hurt her! I’m not your former girlfriend! And it hurts me because every time you look at me, I felt that you’re looking at her. You’re sick! You’re insane! And I don’t love you anymore!”

Number One Fan slapped her face and pushed her to lie down on the bed. He was in rage and he’s channeling his anger to this young, helpless woman with his hands.

And later, he would regret everything he’d done. He would ask for her forgiveness. Another cycle begins...

CHAPTER 30

“I LOOKED LIKE A FOOL!” shouted Congressman Guillermo at me when we met inside the conference room.

Discussion of the proposed talk show about the House of Representatives would start in a few minutes.

“Everybody is already calling me a paranoid now,” he continued.

“Well, I didn’t mean to,” I said. “If you don’t believe it, go ahead. In the first place, I didn’t propose the talk show with you. It was Management’s idea, not mine.”

“It was my idea,” he said. “And you should be thinking about this, Regine. Look what you could become instead of concentrating on BTC.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“You’re related to Sultan Pagayawan, right?” he asked back.

“What does my grandfather have to do with this?” I asked.

“The Bangsamoro peace talks, Regine,” he said. “We have to get his full support and cooperation. And you’re going to get it for me.”

“So you’re going to use me?” I asked.

“That’s right,” he replied.

“Look, I haven’t seen my grandfather since my mother died,” I said.

“Then look for ways to get in touch with him,” he said. “I know that you’re the key to his heart. The President is eager to

have this peace talks and I'm going to serve this to Malacañang on a silver platter.”

I GOT HOME FIRST before Joyce. When she arrived past eleven o'clock in the evening, I noticed a bruise on her left arm.

“What happened to you?” I asked as I pointed out the bruise.

“Nothing,” she said. “I bumped into something at work.”

“Nothing?” I said as I approached her.

I saw a small cut on her lips.

“And what's that?” I pointed at her lips.

“As I've said, I bumped into something big, hurting my arm and lips,” she said.

“Were you crying?” I asked again.

She shook her head and walked away. Upon entering her room, she locked the door.

CHAPTER 31

NITZ, LOR, AND I WERE DISCUSSING the next episode for *Behind the Crimes*. Now that Abet died, I resumed the hosting and writing job.

“Inspector Carrillo said that Number One Fan did those crimes and continued the ABC murders,” I said.

“So let’s review,” Lor said. “He killed Leah because...?”

“He didn’t like what she wrote in *The Philippine Daily*,” I answered. “She died Friday night, the day it went out on paper, remember?”

“And how about Abet?” he asked.

“He knew that Abet would be replacing me here in *Behind the Crimes*,” I said. “Number One Fan admitted it during his last phone call.”

“So that’s E and F for us. What about G?” he asked. “Are you sure it’s Congressman Joey Guillermo?”

“That’s what I’m thinking...” I said.

“I don’t think so,” said Nitz. “Come on, Regine, think. Who is Catherine Lim-Go to you?”

“She was David’s sister,” I said. “Okay, granting that we are suspecting someone here, why would he kill Caths?”

“Blackmail,” said Nitz. “Believe me, Regine, Caths Lim-Go is letter G and not Congressman Guillermo.”

“How sure are you?” asked Lor.

“Patrick gave me a DVD, a sex video involving Caths,” Nitz said. “I haven’t seen it in full, because I want to watch it

with you, guys. I'm looking here in my bag but I think I left it at my apartment."

Nitz stood up and carried her bag.

"You're leaving?" asked Lor.

"I'll be back, you need to watch it, Regine. It's better that you we see it first before I say anything else."

"HOW ARE YOU, NITZ?" Number One Fan asked.

"Hi! Why are you here?" she asked. "I thought you're at work."

"It doesn't matter where I should be," he said. "I would like to know what is that you're holding."

"Oh, this one?" she asked as she raised her hand holding a compact disk. "It's a DVD," Nitz said.

"Of what video?" Number One Fan asked. "May I ask who gave that to you?"

"Look, we know that as journalists we don't reveal our sources," she said.

"Have you seen that video?" he asked.

"Just a part of it, and I'm not sure if you're the man in the video. That's why I need to ask Regine," Nitz said. "And how dare you use my best friend like that?"

"What have you come up with?" he asked.

"Inspector Carrillo's team found this on Cath's safety deposit box," Nitz said. "A courier envelope with a Post-it stuck on it contained it. The message, which I believe was in your handwriting, led the police to suspect a blackmail."

"So it was Inspector Carrillo who gave that to you?" Number One Fan asked.

"It was Patrick, and I asked for it," Nitz said. "I'll show this to Regine. She should know this. She should know about your true identity."

"No!" Number One Fan said and took the DVD from her hand.

Nitz grabbed the DVD, preventing it to slip from her hand. Number One Fan slapped Nitz on the face and fell down the floor. He took his gun out and shot Nitz once at her head.

CHAPTER 32

I DON'T KNOW WHY David always get the news first. He told me the news about Nitz's death over the phone.

"It can't be," I said while shaking my head. "We were just discussing our next episode and she's about to give me something. That's why she went back to her apartment."

"Do you know what she's going to give you?" he asked.

"Something about what Patrick gave to her, a DVD," I replied.

"I see," he said.

ALEX AND I DISCUSSED his own "theories" on the murders.

"David was there when I picked you up at the lobby," he said. "He left earlier than us; he might have followed us to the restaurant, and to your house. Of course, he knows where you live; he was your ex-boyfriend. Then Anacleto died. Why? He said he was just thanking him, returning him a favor, which was a good alibi."

"Then why would he kill Borja when Metro appointed both of them?" I asked.

"Hmm... because he didn't like the idea of monitoring your phone calls," he said. "Then you said he admitted that he killed the guard because of the parking."

"Dizon?" I asked.

“Hey, remember, Dizon rejected the proposal at first,” he said.

“Yeah, you’re right. But how about Ka Rudy?” I asked.

“Remember, they have an appointment that night,” Alex said. “He wants him to be there inside the car but you prevented them. You know about Leah, she wrote an article and he didn’t like it. Abet, he knew he will replace you in BTC.”

“But why Caths, his sister?” I asked.

“Because you already knew that it was Congressman Guillermo who would be next. And they might have a sibling fight we don’t even know.”

“Then it’s Nitz Henson, but who will be letter I?”

CHAPTER 33

“YOU’RE LATE AGAIN,” said his immediate manager. His manager is short, dark, and bald. A moustache suited his serious face that demands respect.

“Traffic,” Number One Fan said.

“As usual, you’re number one reason. Any more original than that?” his manager asked with sarcasm.

“I’m doing my job, Boss,” he said.

“What do you mean doing your job?” his manager asked back. “You didn’t show up in our meeting yesterday. They’re trying to call you but you’re out of reach. What’s the matter with you?”

“I’m busy with some personal affairs that only I can do,” Number One Fan said.

“I have been fair and patient with you but you have abused our working relationship.”

HE DROPPED OFF HIS CAR, went behind it and took a gallon of gasoline from the trunk. He looked around to see if someone watched. No one. It’s still too early for an afternoon rush in a remote area like Tanay, Rizal.

He approached the parked Toyota Innova. There he left Jose Ignacio, a known broadcaster, unconscious. Number One Fan poured the kerosene on the vehicle and left the empty

gallon underneath it. He moved further away, lit a cigarette and threw it towards the vehicle to catch fire.

He immediately ran away, but the car exploded that made him fall to the ground. He crawled away towards his car. Upon reaching his car, he immediately went in and removed his jacket. He noticed that he had some scratches and a few wounds.

People started to crowd and some tried to extinguish the fire. He waited until the commotion died down and left without anyone noticing him.

“HELLO, REGINE? It’s Alex,” he said over the phone.

“Where are you?” I asked. “I was waiting for your call.”

“Sorry about that. I am here at the ER,” he said.

“ER? Where? Why? What happened to you?” I asked.

“I had an accident,” he replied.

“What?”

“I fell on my motorcycle. Thank God, I was wearing a helmet.”

“How did it happen?” I asked.

“A speeding car almost hit me,” he said. “I lost my balance and fell when I made a slight turn.”

“Were you hurt?”

“Don’t worry, these are just a few cuts.”

“Were you able to get the car’s plate number?” I asked.

“No, the car was too fast,” he said. “And you be careful, that stalker has already followed me.”

JOYCE HASN’T ARRIVED YET that night. I called her cell phone but no one answered. I became worried. Then a text message came.

“Sister, Joyce here. I couldn’t use my cell phone. I just borrowed this from someone so please don’t reply to this number. I’m okay. I’m staying with a classmate. I just need to be alone and sort things out. I just broke up with my boyfriend. I’ll explain everything to you when I return.”

So she has a boyfriend and she lied to me. Now, who is that man? Could it be that Joyce is Number One Fan's girlfriend?

"If I can't have her elder sister back, could I court Joyce one of these days?" David said that to me before.

LOR, PATRICK, AND I were at the last night of Nitz's wake. Her burial would be the next day, Sunday morning.

"Joyce left," I told them.

"Why? What's the reason?" Lor asked.

"She said that she wants to be alone," I answered. "She broke up with her boyfriend. She lied to me. She told me that she was not in a relationship but she's admitting it now."

"Maybe, she doesn't want you to know at first," Patrick said.

"There's something curious about it," I said. "Number One Fan sent me some pictures of Joyce having sex with an unidentified man. I was thinking what if Number One Fan could be Joyce's boyfriend?"

"Don't you recognize the man's face on the picture?" Patrick asked.

"No. It was dark," I said. "Besides, Boy Valdez said that it was somehow manipulated. Remember those attachments?"

"Yes, and even our photography experts say that someone manipulated those photos," Patrick said.

"Do you have a copy of it that we could see?" Lor asked.

"Wait, let me check if I still have it here in my cell phone," I said looking for it on my cell phone. "I remembered sending the pictures to Joyce via MMS."

I saw the pictures and showed these to them.

"Yes, it's dark," said Lor. "Even I can't recognize the man."

"Also, I remembered David telling me that she saw how beautiful Joyce is," I said. "He joked that if he couldn't have me back, was it okay if he courted Joyce."

"Would you know where Alex is right now?" Patrick asked after returning my cell phone.

“He had an accident yesterday afternoon,” I answered.
“He said he’ll be coming here. Why did you ask?”

“You’re suspecting David, right?” Patrick asked.

“Somehow, yes. Why?” I asked back.

“Don’t you ever suspect Alex?” Patrick asked again.

I couldn’t believe what I’ve heard from him. I shook my head.

“No, I don’t think so,” I said. “Our relationship is much okay. He’s sweet, caring, and at times, demonstrative. There were times he gets jealous but there were no signs of him that could raise any suspicion.”

Just then, Alex arrived and joined us. He sat beside me and kept me company until the wee hours of the morning. He showed to us the scratches, bruises and wounds he got during his motorcycle accident as he related his story.

Lor, Patrick and I had decided earlier to stay there until Nitz’s funeral but Alex insisted that we leave instead.

“Alex, Nitz was my best friend,” I reasoned out. “I want to stay until the funeral tomorrow morning.”

“It’s unsafe, Regine,” he said. “Your Number One Fan has been striking those people much closer to you. Can’t you see?”

I sighed and gave up arguing with Alex. Since then Lor, Patrick, and I had no time to speak with each other about Patrick’s suspicion on Alex. But I saw Patrick and Lor talking and from time to time and looked at our direction. Alex was there beside me all the time until we left past midnight.

ALEX AND I WERE LATE for Nitz’s funeral the next day. I felt upset with Alex already but I tried to hide it from the others especially to Patrick and Lor. Alex had kept me by his side every time I tried to get near Patrick and Lor.

After the funeral, Patrick and Lor immediately left. A common friend told me that they haven’t rested since last night. Alex brought me home and Joyce has not returned yet.

CHAPTER 34

I JUST LEARNED FROM TRINA that Number One Fan shot Lor early the next morning. Jojo, Lor's partner, rushed him to the hospital. I visited Lor and met Jojo.

“How is he?” I asked Jojo when I entered the room.

“He just returned from the Recovery Room,” he said.

Handsome, tall, and fair-skinned Fil-Am, Jojo became a bit actor after joining a reality TV show six years ago.

“The doctor said that they took two bullets from his chest.”

According to Jojo, a police officer would be coming over to their apartment to provide them security. Patrick suspected that Lor would be the next victim. The police officer arrived. Then he went out to buy some food for the guest. It might be the time Number One Fan shot Lor.

We noticed that Lor's fingers moved and his eyes opened. Jojo and I approached his bedside.

“Lor,” Jojo said. “Regine is here.”

“Lor,” I said. “How are you?”

“Regine...” Lor said in a weak voice. “D-David... D-David...”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“David is...”

“Did David shoot you?” I asked.

Lor shook his head.

“David is the...”

“Number One Fan?” I asked again.

Lor didn't answer. He breathed in effort.

“Let him rest,” Jojo said.

So we sat on the couch near his bed.

“What does he want to say?” I asked Jojo.

“Last night, he told me that he feared for his life and David would be next,” he said. “He added that he had to tell you about it. I don't know what he meant by 'next'.”

“Next? Next victim? Wait, I don't think so. Maybe he said that David shot him.”

“No, David did not shoot him,” said Jojo.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes,” said Jojo. “His exact words were ‘David did not shoot me, he's next, tell Regine.’”

“How could that be?” I asked.

Then the monitor gave a different buzzing sound. Jojo and I stood up and saw Lor's heartbeat weakening.

“You'd better call the nurse,” I told Jojo.

So Jojo pressed the intercom switch and a nurse answered.

“Nurse, come quick! Something's happening to Lor.”

A nurse entered the room after a few seconds and when she saw Lor's condition, she pressed the intercom switch and said, “Code 66! Code 66!”

After a few seconds, doctors and nurses came into the room, carrying an emergency cart with them. A nurse attached a defibrillator to Lor and another gave a dose of emergency medicines to his IV line. Another nurse told us to leave the room.

Jojo and I waited at the corridor but after a few minutes the doctors went out of the room together with Sorrow and Death.

“REGINE, PATRICK HERE,” I heard him said over the phone. “Would you know where Alex is?”

“He might be in DZQR, he hasn't called me yet,” I said. “Why? Is there a problem?”

“His manager is dead,” Patrick said. “The remains that we found in a burned AUV last Friday was Joe Ignacio’s.”

“Last Friday?” I asked. “Alex called me last Friday afternoon and said he was almost hit by a speeding car. He showed us his wounds during Nitz’s wake, remember?”

“Yes, we were able to verify that story,” he said. “But where is he now?”

“I don’t know.”

“Let me know if you have seen or talked to Alex, is that clear?”

“Yes, Patrick,” I replied. “Any update on Lor’s case?”

“I’m on my way to Camp Crame. If ever there is, I haven’t read it,” he said. “How’s Lor in the hospital?”

“He just died,” I said. “I’m still here at the hospital with Jojo, his partner. We’re arranging matters here like death certificate, and all those stuffs.”

“Oh,” he said and I heard him sigh. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Patrick, there was something that Jojo said. David did not shoot Lor,” I continued.

“Yes, that’s true,” said Patrick. “It can’t be David because I was with David at his condominium this morning when I got the call from Jojo. I’m sorry to disappoint you, Regine. David is not Number One Fan as you suspected.”

“Then who is he?” I asked.

I CALLED DAVID’S CELL PHONE number. I heard it rang.

“Hello, Regine,” said a familiar voice. “You thought that David is I?”

I heard Number One Fan laugh.

“David is here as my hostage,” he said.

“What do you mean hostage?” I asked. “Where is David?”

“I told you, he’s my hostage,” Number One Fan said. “You don’t believe me? Okay, here he is.”

I heard someone muffling.

“Is that David?” I asked.

“If you don’t want to believe me,” Number One Fan said, “come to his condominium unit here in Makati. But make sure you’re the only one who will come. Don’t tell anyone or else, David will die.”

“Okay, just give me David’s address and I’ll be on my way.”

I TRIED TO CALL Patrick but his line was busy. I sent him a text message that Number One Fan had David as his hostage. I couldn’t afford to wait another minute so I went to David’s condominium in Makati. When I arrived at the lobby of BenCab building, the security guard asked me.

“Where to, ma’am?” he asked.

“David Lim’s unit, 1410,” I said.

“One moment please,” he said and dialed a number on his intercom. “Sir David? You have a guest here, one moment...”

The guard covered the receiver and asked for my name.

“Regine Sta. Maria,” I said.

“Her name is Regine Sta. Maria, Sir,” the guard said over the intercom. “You may go now to his unit. The elevator is at the right side.”

“Thank you,” I said and immediately went to the right side hallway towards the elevator. I was the only one who entered the lift so I pressed the button number 14. The elevator lifted and stopped. It was quiet when the door opened. I looked for Unit 1410 and when I found it, I pressed the doorbell.

The door opened. I saw David on the couch, his hands tied behind his back, a handkerchief gagged his mouth, and it has blood on it, too.

“David!” I cried as I approached him and untied the handkerchief on his mouth.

Then I felt something cold and hard pressed on my left temple.

“It’s good that you came here alone,” said Number One Fan.

I heard a familiar voice so I turned my head to see who spoke.

CHAPTER 35

“ALEX?”

“Surprised?”

“You are Number One Fan?” I asked.

Alex laughed and pulled me towards him. The tightness of his grip on my arm hurt me.

“Ouch! Alex let me go!” I said as I struggled to let go of his hand.

“Please, Alex, do not hurt her!” shouted David. “You’re exacting revenge against me, so do it to me, and not to her!”

What does he mean by Alex’s vengeance?

Alex pushed me to sit down beside David and he started to tie my hands behind me.

“Bro, I know you’re smart,” Alex said while tying my hands with a rope. “You’re wiser than me. So why will I direct my revenge to you when I know you’ll just get the clues immediately? So I directed my revenge to your precious Regine, who is not that smart we think she is. Wasn’t that painful, David?”

What does he mean by “precious”? Does David still love me?

“How could you do this to us?” I asked.

“I just looked for a good timing,” Alex said to me. “And since you’re unsuspecting, I could say that I’m more intelligent than you.”

Alex laughed hard. “Am I right, David?”

“But why? What have we done wrong?” I asked.

I trusted you, that's one.

“Ask David,” Alex said.

I turned to David. He had bruises on his face and blood on his lips.

“Regine,” he said. “I’m sorry that you’re involved in this.”

“Do you still remember, Regine, when you pleaded to Number One Fan not to involve Joyce and me?” Alex asked. “It’s the same case with David. He would not let this happen to you. So when he learned about my whole plan, he tried to stop me. He called Patrick over here this morning even though you’re suspecting him as Number One Fan.”

He laughed loud.

“So you knew about this?” I asked David.

David nodded.

“When I saw Alex’s car one night when he fetched you,” David said. “I recognized it as one of Cath’s vehicles so I asked him about it. He said that he bought it from Caths. I think that was the time you saw us in a heated discussion and stopped when you called out Alex’s name.”

“ALEX?” DAVID CALLED.

Alex turned and saw David approaching.

“David, I was just waiting for Regine,” Alex said.

“It looks like you have a date,” David said. “You’re coming here more often to fetch her every night.”

“Yup,” Alex said and tapped David’s shoulders. “I’ll go ahead, bro.”

“Wait,” David said.

“What is it?” Alex asked.

“That car looks familiar,” David said. “I’ve seen that before at Cath’s.”

“Let’s just say, I bought it from Caths,” Alex said. “Paid a handsome down payment and she agreed on my monthly terms.”

“I see. Are you sure that you have clean intentions on Regine?” David asked.

Alex smiled.

“What do you think of me?” Alex asked.

“Look, Alex,” David said. “I knew you since elementary. I don’t want anything bad to happen with Regine. You know how much I love her.”

“Bro, I’ll not hurt her,” Alex said. “Trust me. I’ll not repeat what you’ve done to her before.”

“How many times do I have to tell you that I never loved Adele?” David asked. “I knew how much you loved Adele. If there was someone to blame in this whole mess, it was Adele.”

“Don’t involve the dead into this!” Alex shouted.

“I’m warning you, Alex,” David said. “The moment I learn about any evil intentions against Regine...”

“Don’t threaten me, David. I know what I’m doing,” Alex said. “Don’t forget, everybody knows you’re the reason of Adele’s suicide. Also, you’re suspected on your parents’ death.”

“Alex!” they heard Regine called.

“That was also the night when Castro died in the men’s CR,” David said.

I was silent.

“When I asked Caths about the car, she said Alex borrowed it but she couldn’t say when he would return it. Because of conflicting statements from them, I started to suspect something,” David continued.

“Are you telling me that you started suspecting Alex before?” I asked.

David nodded.

“When Inspector Carrillo called me one day to ask about Prof. Anacleto, I told him that I was expecting that they would call me. I was one of those who last saw Ka Luis alive,” he continued his story.

“I told Inspector Carrillo that I invited Prof. Anacleto for dinner. It was long overdue. You know by now that it was Prof. Anacleto who offered the post in RMBN being the chief

negotiator of the merger. I invited him for dinner, my treat, because I wanted to repay his kindness.”

“What do you mean?”

“And since my work with RMBN was good, I decided to call and thank him. He was not just a college professor, I considered him as one of my mentors. During our dinner, he mentioned that Alex visited him weeks before the merger. But he didn’t mention what they’ve talked about. So when I saw Alex together with Joyce, holding hands inside the mall, I thought something must be going on,” David said.

I remembered David mentioned that he saw Alex and Joyce at the mall.

“Isn’t it that one time I asked you to fetch Joyce at school?” I asked Alex. “She didn’t report to work that night. That was also the night Mr. Borja’s ambush. Inspector Carrillo and Patrick mentioned to me that they say you both there. Were you there covering the news?”

“Of course, I have to be there,” Alex said. “That’s my beat.”

“After buying a gift at the mall, I went back to Starbucks to meet some friends there. We were having coffee when we heard shots.”

“So you killed Mr. Borja and went back to the scene to cover the news?” I asked Alex.

“Yes.”

Alex laughed. Everything became clear to me now.

DAVID’S CONDOMINIUM measured twenty square meters and furnished in blue and black motif. He had a dining table, a bed, a couch, and a kitchen. The view on the window overlooked the metropolis. Patrick just left that morning to check on him.

After a few minutes, someone knocked at the door. Thinking that Patrick returned, David opened the door. But he saw Alex instead.

“Why are you here?” David asked.

“I know what you’re planning. I just wanted to stop you,” Alex said.

“You’re Number One Fan, right?”

“You’re smart, David. You guess it right. Until now, Regine doesn’t have a clue about it. That’s why I want to stop you.”

“Stop it, Alex. You’ve killed many people already, including my sister.”

“It’s only right for me to include Caths.”

“Even Joyce, you’ve used her.”

“It’s only right that I use her.”

“You’re sick, Alex. You’re doing all these just to exact revenge on me?”

“You already have everything, David. You have everything I wanted in life: the talent, the popularity, and the women! That’s why I wanted everything back, because I deserve it, too. You took them away from me, including Adele!”

“I didn’t take Adele from you. She was the one who professed her love for me. You know from the start that I love Regine ever since. That day, when Regine saw us, Adele admitted that you have been hurting her. She also admitted your almost incestuous relationship. Alex, Adele was your stepsister.”

“It’s not true that I hurt her. You’re just saying that because you wanted Adele, too, and you saw us making love in your bedroom.”

“No, I was never envious of you. You intended to go into my bedroom with her thinking that I would get jealous. But no. You are just insecure.”

Alex pointed his gun at David.

“Get inside, don’t make a mistake or else I’ll blow your head off.”

I REMEMBERED the audio file Number One Fan sent me via email.

“So it was you who sent me that audio file?” I asked Alex.

“Yes,” he said.

“You killed Professor Anacleto because he insulted you?” I asked.

“Let me tell you the whole story.”

ALEX CAME HOME that night, depressed. He put a plastic bag of cooked Cantonese style noodles on the table. Then he lighted a candle in front of Adele’s photograph on top of his cabinet.

“It’s your death anniversary, my love,” he said.

The six o’clock newscast aired on TV that time. News of the merger was on the headlines. Retrenched, he lost his job. He just arrived from Ka Luis’ office in the hope that the professor would help him.

“Sorry, I can’t accept you,” Luis Anacleto said.

He wore Barong Tagalog and looked too respectable at his age of 56. Metro M Group appointed him as publisher of The Philippine Daily. They also appointed him as the chief negotiator for the merger with Royale Broadcasting Network.

“First, we don’t have any job openings for your qualifications,” he continued. “Second, you haven’t changed since the last time I saw you.”

“Sir, I’m doing my best,” Alex said. “Please give me another chance to prove myself.”

“Until now, you’re still struggling. And yet, look, nothing is happening. Do you know why? It is because you’re too proud. You lack discipline, you lack creativity, and you lack this.”

Professor Anacleto pointed to his temples.

“You’re nothing compared to David Lim and other classmates!”

“Sir, I didn’t come here to be insulted. I was just looking for a job.”

“I am just telling you the truth. And I have nothing to give you. I’m sorry. You may go. Goodbye.”

He came home depressed. It was Adele's death anniversary. He bought her favorite Cantonese noodles from a noodle house in Binondo.

While he ate, he thought on how to get even with everyone who thought of him as inept and dumb.

Someone knocked on the door.

"Who is it?" he asked.

"It's me," a girl answered.

Alex stood up and opened the door. The young woman entered the room.

"It's dark in here," she said.

"Didn't go to school again?" he asked as he turned on the light switch.

"No, I don't feel like coming to work even," she said. "Is it okay if I stay here for awhile?"

He smiled and nodded.

"Sure," he answered.

He observed the tall, beautiful and sexy young lady who just turned eighteen. His depression turned into lust and he thought of a bright idea.

"Come," he said. "Let's eat."

"AND WHO WAS THAT GIRL?" I asked.

"I think I know who it is," David said.

"Shut up!" Alex said and pointed the gun at David.

"Don't tell her yet, I want to surprise her."

I was about to say something but David's cell phone rang.

CHAPTER 36

ALEX POINTED THE GUN at David while the latter answered the phone.

“Yes?” David said, pretended to be sick. “Yeah. Sorry. I can’t report to work. I’m sick. I wasn’t able to call you. Tell everyone, please. You may ask Regine to anchor the newscast alone. I think she can do it. Is she? Oh, I see. Well, I can’t come. I’m sorry. Thanks for calling. Bye.”

“Good,” Alex said as he put down David’s cell phone on the table.

My cell phone rang this time. It was inside my bag. Alex took my bag and looked for it.

“Call coming from Congressman Joey Guillermo,” he said looking at the screen.

“Oh, I remember, I have a meeting with him tonight after the newscast,” I said.

“Answer it,” Alex said as he put the cell phone on my ear and pointed the gun at me with his other hand.

“Hello, Congressman,” I said, trying to sound calm. “Yes, I know. I just came from the hospital. I’m sure you know already that Lor’s dead. Yes, I’ll try to be there. I’m just caught in traffic. Thanks. Bye.”

Alex took my cell phone and noticed something.

“A message from Patrick,” he said.

He read the message and then looked at me.

“Why did you tell him that I got David?” he growled.

He went at the glass window and peeked through the dark curtains, trying to look for signs of the authorities down below. His mood has changed into a bit of panic.

My cell phone rang again, and this time it was Inspector Carrillo. Alex gave me my cell phone and put it on my ear.

“Don’t tell anything about your whereabouts,” he whispered.

“Hello, Inspector,” I said, trying to remain calm. “I just came from the hospital and I’m caught in traffic. David’s condominium near Rockwell which is not far from where I am right now. Why? Oh, I see. Yes, I told Patrick about it...”

Alex pulled the phone off my ear and pressed the button.

“Don’t tell him that!” he said.

Then another ring from David’s cell phone, this time it came from Ka Rudy. Tired of pretending, Alex took the cell phone and answered it.

"Hello, Ka Rudy. Good morning," Alex said. "No, I'm not David. This is Number One Fan talking to you. You know Regine's Number One Fan, right? How are you? Good. This is the chance I've been waiting for. Tell your boss, Butch Roxas, that I have David Lim and Regine Sta. Maria as hostages. Just follow my instructions and I will not hurt them both. And please tell the police to back off!"

Alex put down the phone on the table.

“Damn!” he said.

David and I remained silent.

“So the car came from Caths,” I broke the ice with David.

“It was blackmail,” David said.

“Shut up!” Alex shouted and pointed the gun at us.

“Okay, I’ll tell you what happened.”

NUMBER ONE FAN STOPPED his motorcycle and disguised himself as a messenger. He stood in front of a big house in Green Meadows Subdivision in Quezon City. It was Catherine Lim-Go’s address. The lucky rich woman married a Chinese-American businessman.

He carried a courier envelope to the gate. He pressed the doorbell. A uniformed housemaid opened the gate for him.

“Package for Mrs. Catherine Lim-Go,” he said.

The maid received the package and signed on something as a receipt.

He went back to his motorcycle and looked at his watch: ten o’clock in the morning. He started the engine and left.

Number One Fan could have imagined what happened when Caths received the package. It was a sealed document envelope and labeled only with her name. Caths could have opened it immediately and saw a DVD with a Post-it stuck to it. Written on the unsigned note:

“Watch this now. I’ll call you later.”

Cath’s might have gone to her room and turned on the TV and DVD player. She inserted the DVD and sat on her bed while waiting for it to play.

He could have imagined Cath’s reaction when she saw herself in the video taken many years ago. It was back in their old house in Binondo, Manila.

They were in college then. She might have remembered the incident. She came inside his room. Talked to him and seduced him. She was not aware of a video camera he had set up on his bedside table that had turned on. The whole video almost lasted an hour or so. No cuts, no editing.

Number One Fan called Caths after an hour.

“Hello?” Caths answered the phone.

“Have you seen the video?” Number One Fan asked.

“How could you do this to me?” she asked.

“Answer my question, Caths. Have you seen the video in full?”

“Yes, I saw it, you brute!” she raised her voice that sounded like crying.

“Come on, Caths. You wanted it, right? You’re the one who came into my room.”

“What do you want from me?” she asked.

“Give me half a million plus one of your cars.”

“Is this blackmail?”

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

“You are an ungrateful brute! Is this the price of letting you live with us and treating you like a true brother?”

“IS THAT WHY YOU KILLED HER?” David asked.

“Look, I still needed money so I went back to her to ask for more funds. She hesitated so I threatened her that I’ll give another copy to her husband. Then she started hurting me so I fought back. She fell on the floor and died.”

“She received hard blows on the head, Alex,” David said. “You may have hit her something.”

“Oh, yes, the lamp stand,” he said. “I hit her head with that.”

Alex laughed.

“She deserved it, David. Your sister was a bitch. But a good fucking bitch, she was.”

“So you took the pieces of jewelry, cash and laptop,” I said remembering the details of that incident.

“Yes,” Alex replied.

“But you failed to find the DVD, right?” David asked.

“That’s right,” Alex said. “She might have hidden it in one of her safes.”

“When the police found out that video, they showed it to me at Camp Crame. Nitz was there, too.”

“So that’s why Nitz said the motive was blackmail,” I said.

“Patrick gave the video to her for you to watch,” David said.

“But I got to Nitz first,” Alex said. “Sorry, Regine, I have to kill your best friend rather than having that DVD land into your hands.”

“Where’s that DVD now?” I started to cry remembering Nitz.

“Back to the original source.”

Alex laughed as he pulled out the DVD from his backpack.

“But what about Abet? Why did you kill him?”

“Because he’ll be replacing you,” Alex said. “And since we’re also friends, I knew just how to kill him.”

“You tampered his medications,” I said. “How could you do that to an innocent guy like him?”

“They are what you call collateral damage, Regine,” Alex said. “You have to sacrifice a pawn in chess. Am I right, chess players?”

Alex laughed. He knew that David and I first met in a chess game where I defeated David for the first time. David was a member of the varsity chess team. Abet Fortunato, a common friend back in college, dared me to challenge David. Abet knew how I played chess. I remembered telling him my grandfather taught me the game. So David and I played one round and he lost via checkmate. Since then, David started courting me, becoming my first boyfriend. Abet told me about it many months later that he promised himself that he would love the girl who could defeat him in a game of chess.

“I thought chess players are intelligent,” Alex said. “But why couldn’t you figure it out, Regine?”

I held that thought for a moment. My desire of popularity and regaining my grandfather’s trust blinded the suspicion on Alex. What a fool I’ve been!

“Did you shoot Lor?” I asked.

“I have to,” Alex said. “When I saw you, Lor, and Patrick discussing about Nitz’s death, I knew that they were already suspecting me. So I made sure I stayed at your side that night. Patrick was good enough to send a cop to guard Lor but I went ahead and shot Lor before the police officer came.

I recounted all the victims Alex killed in his madness. A for Anacleto; B for Borja; C for Castro...

“Wait, you said you were not supposed to kill that security guard. But because of your temper, you killed him. Who should be letter C?” I asked.

“Secret,” Alex said then laughed.

“I think it should be Mr. Carandang, the new AM radio station manager who served his retrenchment.”

“You’re right!” Alex laughed.

Then I enumerated the names inside my head: D for Dizon; E for Echaves but became Edades; F for Fortunato; G for Go; H for Henson...

“Who’s letter I?” I asked.

“Have you not heard of Joe Ignacio’s death?” asked David.

“Patrick told me about it awhile ago,” I said. “Isn’t he your boss, Alex?”

Alex nodded and smiled.

“But why?” I asked.

“I don’t like him,” he said.

Then I thought of letter J.

“Were you telling the truth when you called me to tell that you’re in an emergency room?” I asked.

“Hmm... sort of,” Alex said. “When Joe Ignacio’s car exploded, I fell to the ground and bruised myself. Got a few cuts that needed a nurse’s healing touch.”

I took a deep breath. Everything seemed an almost completed jigsaw puzzle to me.

“But why did you not kill Patrick or Inspector Carrillo?” I asked.

“No, I want to play games with them, especially Inspector Carrillo.”

Alex laughed as he turned on the TV. Alma Perez-Roxas gave the flash report that noon.

“Good afternoon. I’m Alma Perez-Roxas for the News Flash at Noon. At this moment, a serial killer holds two members of the media. Number One Fan, a serial killer of broadcasters and journalists, took David Lim and Regine Sta. Maria as hostages. Lim and Sta. Maria are news anchors for RMBN Channel 3. Until now, police are still verifying the identity of Number One Fan who first known as Regine Sta. Maria’s prank caller...”

“See? I’m now on TV,” Alex said to us. “I’m Number One.”

Alex laughed.

“That’s what you wanted, right?” I asked.

CONGRESSMAN GUILLERMO CALLED my cell phone number. Alex answered the phone. It sounded like the lawmaker volunteered to be a negotiator for our safe release.

“I’m not your friend, Congressman,” we heard Alex say. “Oh, is that so? Well, you know, I voted for you last election. I’m from the second district of Quezon City. Yes, yes. So, you want to talk to me face to face? Well, yeah. I’ll let you come over here, but assure me that there will be no police, NBI, SWAT or whatever, okay? I’ll give you the address. Write this down. Oh, you know the address? Good. Where are you coming from? Okay, be here in an hour or else, Regine will die.”

ALEX LEFT THE TV ON. After a few minutes, Alma Perez-Roxas gave an update:

“From RMBN newsroom, this is Alma Perez-Roxas reporting. Quezon City Second District Congressman Joey Guillermo volunteered as negotiator for the safe release of David Lim and Regine Sta. Maria. He is on his way to David Lim’s condominium in Makati. So far, Number One Fan, identified as Alex Joven, was a former news reporter of Royale Broadcasting Network. He has not demanded anything yet in exchange of the safety of the hostages...”

AFTER ALMOST AN HOUR, someone knocked on the door. Alex let Congressman Joey Guillermo in and tied the congressman’s hands before he let the latter sit down beside me.

“I’m here to negotiate with you,” the lawmaker said.

He wore a designer labeled polo shirt and slacks. He made his move to earn good points among the viewers and possible voters.

“You said you wanted to be Number One, right?” he said to Alex.

“Yes,” Alex said while tying the congressman’s feet with a rope. “Tell them I want an interview. I want everyone to know why I wanted to be Number One, my story, everything! But first, tell them to bring my girlfriend, Joyce Robles here.”

“What?” I asked. “Joyce is your girlfriend?”

Alex laughed.

“Wasn’t that a big surprise?”

Congressman Guillermo told on air via cell phone about Alex’s demands.

“First, bring Joyce Robles, Regine Sta. Maria’s sister, here. Other demands will follow,” said Joey Guillermo in a calm, authoritative tone.

CHAPTER 37

WHILE WE WERE WAITING for Joyce, Alex asked Congressman Guillermo.

“I’ve heard you’re having a talk show with Regine here,” Alex said. “Why?”

“You are aware that a cable channel features the Senate most of the time,” Congressman Guillermo said. “So I suggested to my friend Butch Roxas of having a show that showcases the House of Representatives.”

“What are your motives, Congressman?” Alex asked again. “There is something more behind that move.”

“What do you mean?” said the lawmaker smiling.

“I’m sure, you’re seeking re-election,” Alex said. “You want an exposure without people accusing you of electioneering or premature campaigning. There is an ulterior motive than that. What do you think, Regine?”

I could not answer. I knew this topic would lead to something.

“There’s nothing to it, honest,” said Congressman Guillermo.

“What are you trying to drive at, Alex?” asked David.

“Why don’t you tell them, Congressman Jose Guillermo, Jr.? Son of Senator Jose Guillermo, Sr. and grandson of Vice-President Jose Ricardo Guillermo. Tell them what you wanted to achieve. Tell them why you chose Regine Sta. Maria to be your co-host.”

“What?” the congressional representative asked. “RMBN management chose Regine.”

“Liar!” shouted Alex. “Tell me the truth!”

Alex pointed the gun at us.

“Congressman, it would be better if we follow his instructions,” I said.

“Okay,” Congressman Guillermo took a deep breath. “The government wanted to start another round of peace talks with the Bangsamoro. I learned that the Sultan of Lanao is Regine’s grandfather. If I can have Regine in the show, we can show the public that we are serious in promoting peace and order. I believe she can convince her grandfather to agree with the proposed amendments. Especially those I’ve included in the bilateral agreement.”

“See?” Alex turned to me. “I’ve told you, they are going to use you, Regine.”

“I already knew that,” I said. “He told me that before.”

Then we heard Alma Perez-Roxas returned for an update on TV. Alex took David’s cell phone and called the station. He demanded to be on air.

“Are we on air now?” asked Alex.

“Yes, Alex,” answered Alma on air.

There was a slight feedback that Alex took the remote control and toned down the TV volume.

“I want Joyce Robles to be here now,” Alex demanded.

“We’re still looking for her whereabouts, Alex,” Alma said. “How are David, Regine, and Congressman Guillermo doing?”

“They’re fine,” Alex said. “Also, put Ka Rudy with you on air. I want to ask him something.”

We saw Alma’s surprised look on her face as she looked at the side. Then she nodded as if someone signaled something to her.

“Okay, he will be here with me in a moment,” Alma said.

“Would you request the SWAT team, NBI, and police to back off?” Alex demanded. “I’m looking at the window and they seem to be on a stand-by. Tell the Chief of Police to let these men out of the site, NOW!”

Then we saw Ka Rudy seated beside Alma on TV.

“Ka Rudy, good afternoon,” Alex said. “I’m going to ask you something.”

“Sure, go ahead, Alex,” Ka Rudy said.

“To whom it came from the Honda CRV you gave to Regine for her birthday?” Alex asked on air.

Ka Rudy took the question with surprise.

“Ah, Management decided to give Regine an incentive for the success of her show,” Ka Rudy answered. “A birthday gift, and at the same time, token of appreciation.”

Ka Rudy managed to smile on camera.

“Wrong,” Alex said. “I don’t think that’s the real reason. Don’t be too prudent not to admit that it was a sort of a bribe.”

“Please, Alex, stop that,” I pleaded. “That’s not true.”

“Shut up, Regine!” Alex shouted. “I’m the one talking here. Now, Ka Rudy, tell me, why did Management decide to give Regine a new show?”

“Ah, Management wants her as a political commentator rather than a crime reporter,” Ka Rudy answered. “You see, Alex, Management thought of it as a career move for Regine.”

“I don’t buy that!” Alex shouted. “Congressman Guillermo admitted to us awhile ago the real reason. Why don’t you tell that on air?”

“Alex, calm down,” Alma said. “Ka Rudy will answer those questions later.”

“No! I want those answers now,” Alex demanded. “Ka Rudy, who bought that vehicle?”

“I don’t know,” Ka Rudy said. “Management just instructed me to give the Honda CRV to Regine.”

“Are you sure you don’t know?” Alex said.

“Yes, that’s true,” Ka Rudy said.

“I’m pointing the gun at Regine right now, Ka Rudy,” Alex said on air. “Are you sure you’re telling me the truth?”

“Yes, I’m telling you the truth,” Ka Rudy said.

Alex shot the vase behind me and it shattered into pieces. Viewers might have heard the gunshot.

“Alex, what’s that?” Alma asked.

“I just shot someone,” Alex said on air. “Guess who?”

“Okay, I admit!” Congressman Guillermo shouted. “I was the one who bought the car for Regine.”

Alex laughed. Viewers heard it on air.

“See? Our good Congressman will admit something on air,” Alex said. “Here, Congressman, tell them.”

Alex put the cell phone on Congressman Joey Guillermo’s ear.

He admitted on air that the Honda CRV I got on my birthday came from him as a bribe for me to agree to co-host the show with him.

Alex took the cell phone and talked again on air.

“Now, I demand that you get in touch with Regine’s grandfather. Get this peace talks done and over with. Or else, you’ll have a dead Princess Regina in a few minutes!”

CONGRESSMAN GUILLERMO SEATED ON MY LEFT, his hands and feet tied with a thick rope. A handkerchief gagged his mouth. On my right seated David, his hands and feet tied, and a handkerchief hanged around his neck. Three of us sat on the sofa.

After an hour, Joyce arrived. She wore a striped t-shirt and denim jumper. Those clothes seemed borrowed from a friend because I haven’t seen those clothes on her before.

“Joyce,” I said. “Where have you been?”

Joyce just looked at me but did not say a word. She turned to Alex instead.

“Alex,” she said. “Don’t hurt them, please. Just surrender, that’s all. If you want, just take me with you.”

“Don’t tell me what to do,” Alex said. “You did a good job.”

“Wait, what do you mean, Alex?” I asked.

“Sister, I’m sorry,” Joyce answered. “I was Alex’s accomplice. He is my boyfriend. He just pretended to court you to be your boyfriend to exact revenge. He planned everything.”

“Shut up!” Alex shouted at her and was about to slap Joyce.

“Okay, just hurt me if you want!” Joyce shouted back.
“Hurt me the way you hurt Adele.”

“I didn’t hurt Adele,” Alex said. “I loved Adele. And I love you, too.”

“Yes, you loved Adele. You loved her too much that you killed her out of your jealousy!” Joyce shouted. “I’m not Adele, Alex. I realized that I was just reminding you of her. So I decided to leave and went away.”

“Where did you go?” Alex said.

Joyce did not answer.

“Answer me!” Alex shouted as he tugged her arms.

“To Patrick, to Inspector Carrillo!” Joyce shouted back. “I can’t stand it any longer, Alex. I have to tell everything to the police.”

“WHAT BRINGS YOU HERE?” Patrick asked when Joyce arrived at Camp Crame.

“I have to tell you something,” Joyce said.

Patrick led her to his desk.

“Have a seat,” Patrick said. “Care for soda or anything?”

“Cold bottled water would be fine,” she said.

Patrick went to the refrigerator at the corner and took a bottle of cold water. He returned to his desk. After giving her the bottle, he asked, “So what is it that you want to tell me?”

“I have to tell you about my boyfriend,” Joyce said.

Patrick observed Joyce. She seemed serious. He noticed a few bruises on her lips and arms.

“Is he hurting you?” Patrick asked.

Joyce nodded.

“Then I should refer you to the Women’s Desk...”

“No, Patrick,” Joyce interrupted. “I need to speak with you and to your boss... It’s about my sister... about her Number One Fan.”

“Come here,” he said and led her to Inspector Carrillo’s office.

"You'd better stay here. I'll just call Inspector Carrillo," Patrick instructed.

While Joyce waited inside Inspector Carrillo's office, she saw the framed article on the table and read it.

Then Patrick and Inspector Carrillo came in. After a few brief introductions, Joyce pointed on the framed article.

"I think I've seen that article somewhere," she said to Inspector Carrillo.

"This one?" asked Inspector Carrillo. "It was my first case. Until now, I couldn't get it off my mind. The kid's real father, who was the main suspect, had died. But I felt something was missing in that story. Where have you seen it?"

"My boyfriend has a copy of that," Joyce said. "He kept it in his photo album. He said that it was about the death of his parents."

"So your boyfriend is DJ, the kid mentioned in that article. What is your boyfriend's real name again?" he asked.

"His name is Alex Joven," Joyce answered.

Patrick and Inspector Carrillo looked at each other.

"Alex Joven is your boyfriend?" Patrick repeated the information. "I thought Alex was Regine's boyfriend."

"My sister introduced me to him on my eighteenth birthday," Joyce started to tell her story. "Since he was my sister's college classmate and friend, my sister invited him to my party. I had a crush on him, he was handsome but I couldn't tell my sister. He must have noticed it so he started courting me. We went out for dates unknown to my sister."

Patrick heaved a deep sigh.

"What has Regine got to do with this?" he asked.

"One day," Joyce continued. "I didn't feel like going to school and work that I decided to spend the time in his rented room. Alex told me of his plan to revenge on people who had hurt him. It entailed him to pretend to court my sister. I had to pretend I didn't know the plan. I supplied some information to Alex if ever my sister would tell me something about her work. At first, it was thrilling. Then later on, it went crazy. He's getting insane. I don't know what to do. If he knew that I went here, he'll kill me or my sister, or even David Lim."

“Where is Alex right now?” asked Inspector Carrillo. Joyce shook her head.

“I left my sister Friday night,” she said. “I went to a classmate and stayed there to get away from Alex. I don’t know where he is.”

The two police officers looked at each other.

“He’s armed, he has a gun,” Joyce said. “He mentioned to me before that he was using his stepfather’s gun.”

“Dagul, could you get the old file about the death of SPO2 Danilo Ortiz in 1993,” ordered Carrillo. “Let me know the details of his service firearm.”

“Yes, Sir,” Patrick answered and left.

A few minutes later, he returned holding the file in his hands.

“Sir, according to this report, PNP issued a Magnum 0.45 to SPO2 Ortiz but he was never issued a silencer,” Patrick said.

“But it is possible that Alex may have bought that later on,” Carrillo said.

“SO INSPECTOR CARRILLO NOW KNOWS that I killed my parents,” Alex said, thinking aloud.

He stood up and peeped at the window to see where the authorities located.

“You killed Adele, didn’t you?” asked David. “You kept on telling us that your parents died while you were asleep. That’s why we adopted you and let you stay in our house. We treated you as family. But what have you done? You kept telling that Adele committed suicide but you killed her and appeared to be a suicide, just what you did with Prof. Anacleto.”

“Shut up!” Alex shouted at David. “Okay, I admit, I killed her. I didn’t intend to. I loved her.”

DURING THE HEIGHT OF A TYPHOON, it rained hard and almost no vehicle passed by due to poor visibility. No pedestrian walked on the street except for Adele and Alex.

Adele ran away from Alex. Heavy rains wet them. Adele's face was wet with rain and tears. She heard Alex calling her and she would not want to look back.

"Adele!" called Alex. "Wait!"

She continued running until she reached the middle of the bridge. Alex caught up, grabbed her arm, and pulled her.

"Let me go!" Adele wept. "I don't want it anymore! I'm sick and tired of it!"

"Adele, listen," Alex pleaded.

"How many times do I have to tell you that I don't love you anymore? It's over between us, stepbrother."

"Is that what you want to happen?" asked Alex.

"Yes! I do not want to get hurt again."

Alex tightened the grip on Adele's arm and tugged her.

"Let me go, it hurts!" shouted Adele.

"Tell me that you love me..."

"I don't love you! I couldn't love the man who strikes me when he's jealous. You're too insecure of David!"

"You know that I love you and I don't want any competition," Alex said.

"I'm not your toy!" Adele said.

"Just you and I, Adele, remember that."

"My heart cries out for David Lim. I know how much he loves his girlfriend but I'm going to go after him. I want to be in Regine's place."

Alex put his hands on Adele's neck and started to choke her.

"Undo what you have said!" Alex shouted.

Adele tried to remove his hands from her neck but Alex was strong. Until she gasped for breath and leaned over the bridge's railing. Adele could not stand it any longer. Her face turned blue and she had lost consciousness.

Alex let go of his hands and let Adele fall into the gushing water at the height of the storm.

“OH MY GOD,” I said. “What a crime of passion.”

“They found her body floating along Pasig River,” David said. “Her body was already in the early stages of decomposition that autopsy report could not verify a foul play.”

“I told you, it was an accident,” Alex said.

“You choked her to death,” David said.

“Because she kept on saying your name, David. You know that I loved her. You don’t know anything!”

Alex put back the handkerchief on David’s mouth. He pulled him from our seat and he put his arms around his neck. They went to the window to show the police that he used David as his shield. After observing the snipers’ positions, he pulled the curtain back to cover the glass window and returned to our seat. He pulled down the handkerchief from David’s mouth.

“What do you mean I don’t know?” David asked. “Alex, while you were killing your victims, you showed the truth behind Adele’s death, your parents’ and mine!”

“Stop that!” Alex said.

“You shot my parents, didn’t you?” David asked.

“Yes!” Out of anger, Alex shot David on the shoulder.

Joyce and I shouted upon hearing the shot.

Joyce approached us and helped David with his wound.

“Alex, stop!” I shouted. “I remembered you mentioned that you killed your parents in that audio file you sent me.”

“Oh yes, I admitted that,” Alex said as he turned to me.

“But did you kill David’s parents?” I asked.

“My parents asked Alex to leave when they learned of the incident,” David said struggling with pain. “Since then, our relationship as best friends became strained.”

“How did your parents know about it?” I asked.

“Caths told my mother,” David said. “That was the time Alex started harassing her about the video. One day, while my parents were in our grocery store someone shouted ‘hold up’. My parents were at the counter and Caths was in the stock room. According to witnesses, the criminal pointed the gun at

my parents and asked for the money. My father drew a gun. The suspect immediately shot him and then my mother. He took the money from the cash register and left.”

“But the police also suspected you, right?” I asked.

“Because I was not there when it happened. It was a weekend and we’re supposed to help in the grocery. But the police cleared me after verifying my alibi.”

“Are you okay?” I asked.

David nodded. Blood flowed from his wound.

“Yes, I’m okay,” he said.

“Alex, look at what you’ve done,” she said as she untied the handkerchief from his neck to serve as a good tourniquet for David’s wound.

“It’s good that you are here,” Alex said to her. “Please, Joyce, don’t leave me again.”

“Let them go, Alex,” Joyce said.

Alex did not listen to her.

“I thought you love me. You said that you love me. But why did you leave me just like that?” Alex asked.

“You know the reason,” Joyce said as she tied the handkerchief. It served as tourniquet to prevent severe bleeding from David’s shoulder. “I can’t go on pretending to be Adele for you. I can’t go on pretending to my sister that we’re not in a relationship.”

“Have I told you that you make me insane?” Alex said. “I’m crazy for you. Do you think I am joking? Why do you not believe me?”

“Alex, we’ve been playing this vicious cycle over and over. I think you need psychiatric help,” Joyce said.

“What do you mean I need help? I am sane. I know what I am doing. Let us get married. After this, we will run away. We will go places, wherever you want. Just be with me.”

“I’m sorry, Alex,” Joyce said. “I can’t. I can’t go on with this kind of relationship. I don’t want to be hurt anymore just because of your baseless jealousy and insecurities!”

“Then, here’s to you!” shouted Alex as he aimed a shot on our heads.

CHAPTER 38

MY REFLEX REACTED. I thought it was I who got shot. Blood splattered on my face and body and I saw the lifeless body of Congressman Guillermo beside me. I closed my eyes, turned to David, and put my head on his shoulder. I never realized that Alex could be this demon-possessed.

“Alex! Why did you kill him?” I heard Joyce. “You’re insane!”

“Don’t you understand?” Alex shouted as he approached Joyce and faced her. “If you just said that you still love me, you would not see that Congressman dead!”

“Alex, surrender, please,” David said, breathing in effort. “I’m asking this as your brother.”

“It’s you, David!” he pulled David up by the collar. “You’re the root cause of it all! You destroyed my life!”

“I didn’t destroy your life,” David answered back. “You chose it to be that way. After your parents died, we took you into our family. We were brothers then, remember? It was you who destroyed our trust!”

Alex raised his hand, about to slap David’s face when Joyce prevented him.

“Okay, Alex, I’ll return to you. Just stop hurting them!” Joyce shouted.

“What did you say?” Alex turned to Joyce, and pushed David to the sofa.

“I’ll go back to you,” Joyce said as she put her hands on his shoulders. “We’ll start all over again. Just don’t hurt them, please. They love each other.”

She sat between David and me. She hugged me tight and cried on my shoulders.

“I’m sorry, Sis,” Joyce cried. “But I have to go with Alex. That’s the only way he would stop.”

I leaned my head on her and cried.

“Do you love Regine?” I heard Alex ask David.

“I do,” I heard David answered. “That’s why I wanted to stop you from the moment I’ve learned about this whole thing. I let her suspect me that I’m Number One Fan just to prove that I love her until now. Not even a single moment that feeling changed.”

I looked at David who stared at back at me. He breathed heavy and looked tired and beaten.

“How about you, Regine, do you still love him?” Alex turned to me.

My heart tore into pieces. I fell for Alex but my true feelings for David resurfaced from the sea of emotions. Despite the wrong, I still have some feelings for David hanging on, rooted deep in my heart.

Alex used me to get even with David. Congressman Guillermo used me to get what he aimed for. They used me. Friends had warned me of that.

“Why did you use me, Alex?” I asked, crying.

“You thought I love you?” he asked. “I’m sorry, Regine, but I have to do this. It was all part of the plan.”

IT ALL CAME BACK TO HIM NOW as he saw Joyce crying on Regine’s shoulder.

“You chose it to be that way,” David’s voice sounded inside his head.

His choices, good or bad, led him here all along. He kept on blaming David for his misfortunes.

“After your parents died, we took you into our family,” he remembered.

Alex, a.k.a. Number One Fan, killed his own parents out of frustration and anger. Then the Lims took him into their household. Yet, even with them, he felt he does not belong.

“We were brothers then, remember?”

David shared everything to him. But he wanted more. He wanted everything. Intelligence, wealth, charisma, girls, and opportunities came easy to David.

“Why did I have to be a second rate?” Alex asked himself.

“Sometimes you have to realize that not everything you wished for will be given to you,” he remembered what Joyce had said.

A brief sexual encounter with Caths changed everything.

“How could you do this to me?” he remembered what Caths had asked. “You are an ungrateful brute! Is this the price of letting you live with us and treating you like a true brother?”

“It was you who destroyed our trust!” David said inside his head.

“I don’t love you!” he heard Adele. “I couldn’t love the man who strikes me when he’s jealous. You’re too insecure of David!”

“I’m sorry,” Joyce cried on Regine’s shoulders. “But I have to go with him. That’s the only way he would stop.”

Him, that was he. Joyce would go with him but that didn’t mean she loved him.

Tears welled up in his eyes. He saw the trophies and plaques displayed on David’s shelf. He went to the shelf and lifted each trophy to read each citation. After putting down the last award David received, he swept all those with his hands. Some fell on the floor broken except for a small picture frame that remained on the right side of the shelf.

“Alex, no!” shouted Joyce. “Those are not yours!”

“It’s okay, Joyce,” David said almost like a whisper.

“Those are just things...”

Things. Those were just things.

David found contentment and he had not. He had fulfilled all that he desired but was not contented at all. That maybe was the difference. Again, he had lost this game to David.

Alex picked the small frame that remained on the shelf and looked at it. He snickered and threw the frame to Regine and David. It was Regine's picture with an autograph mounted on a beautiful mat and framed in exquisite wood.

"...I love her until now. Not even a single moment that feeling changed."

ALEX APPROACHED THE TV set and watched the live coverage. The three of us stared at the photograph Alex threw which was lying on the floor.

I saw my autograph and it brought me back to the day when David asked for my picture. I looked up at Alex.

He was standing in front of the TV, smiled at his close-up photograph flashed on screen.

"We're back, live on air. For those who just tuned in, I'm Alma Perez-Roxas, giving you updates on a one-man standoff..." said Alma on air.

"One-man standoff..." he repeated then laughed.

He felt the elation from his few hours of fame.

"Thank you, Regine," he said as he turned to me. "It's nice working with you. Thank you for making me Number One."

Alex came near the window and turned to us.

"Joyce," he said. "Remember this: I love you as much as I loved Adele."

He turned to the glass window.

"I am Number One!" he shouted as he pulled the curtain sideways exposing him.

From the side of my vision, the glass window shattered. Alex fell on the floor with a gunshot wound on his forehead. It came from a sniper located across the building.

Joyce and I shouted at the same time. But, I did not hear David. When I looked at him, he was already unconscious.

"David," I called.

“Alex!” I heard Joyce cried.

She went immediately to Alex’s side and wept.

“Alex...”

I never saw my younger sister cry like this. She must have loved Alex so much, much more than I do. I saw her hand moved towards Alex’s hand.

Sensing what Joyce would do next, I said, “Joyce, I love you, my sister. Please don’t do that.”

She looked at me and cried as she tried to remove the gun from Alex’s hand.

“Sister, I can’t forgive myself for what happened to you and David. I’m so sorry.”

“No, Joyce. Don’t do that,” I said.

But she never listened to me. She pointed the gun to her right temple and pulled the trigger.

“No!” I shouted at the horrific sight. “Joyce!”

I felt weak when I saw Joyce’s body fell on top of Alex. I wept in despair seeing all four unconscious persons around me. I heard a loud bang on the door and saw Patrick and his team entered before my vision turned black.

CHAPTER 39

THE FLUORESCENT LIGHT on a white ceiling flashed before me when I opened my eyes. I tried to get up and looked around. With the sliding dividers that separate each bed, I assumed I was inside an Emergency Room.

A nurse approached me and smiled.

“Good evening,” she greeted. “How do you feel?”

“Where am I?” I asked.

“Makati Medical Center,” she said. “You were unconscious when the police brought you here. You’ve been sleeping for hours.”

“How about David Lim?” I asked.

“David Lim is in the ICU and still unstable.”

I looked at her but couldn’t utter a word.

“By the way, your grandfather called,” the nurse continued. “He instructed me to tell you that they had cremated your sister's remains.”

I nodded in acknowledgment. My grandfather might have taken the initiative to take over my responsibilities on Joyce. He might have instructed some of his loyal assistants to do these things for me.

TWO DAYS AFTER THE HOSTAGE TAKING, my grandfather sent his servants to assist me. I woke up early that morning as I have a scheduled flight to Marawi City. They

assisted me in my bath and in dressing. Wherever I went, a retinue led by a governess trailed not far behind me.

My royal rank prevented me to get rid of this kind of slavery. Tradition and obligation required me to don my royal clothes. A *malong*, a tubular piece of cloth, draped over an *abirta*, a blouse of velvet made with a V-neck and three quarter length sleeves. Gold buttons decorated it. I also wore rings, bracelets and earrings of gold. They wrapped my head with a turban-like *kombong* made of colored muslin over which thin, film of lace draped. As I looked at myself in the mirror, I noticed that I had Muslim features. My forehead, nose, and chin definitely came from my mother's Muslim line.

I ARRIVED at the Ninoy Aquino International Airport Terminal 2. There, I met Saad, my grandfather's loyal assistant.

Saad stood short at five feet three inches. In his mid-fifties, his gray hair started to show. He bowed in front of me when I arrived.

"Good morning, my princess," he greeted me.

"Hello, Saad. How are you?" I greeted him back.

"I'm doing fine, my princess," he replied as he stood up straight. "I'm glad to see you again."

I smiled as he took my hand and led me to the plane. Every Muslim that I passed by would bow down as we walked. Everybody bowed down again until I sat on my seat. I have been out of touch with this tradition for years since my mother's pregnancy with Joyce.

The republican government prohibited the granting of titles of nobility to Filipino citizens. The state does not recognize the sultanate system. Yet, the Philippine Constitution includes a state policy to protect the rich cultural heritage of indigenous people, including the Muslims. The sultanate system in Lanao continues despite its non-recognition and disregard by the Philippine government. Ironic, isn't it?

The plane took off at exactly 5:55 a.m. I took that opportunity to catch sleep on the plane. We arrived at Cagayan de Oro City at 7:30 a.m. Then a car brought me to my grandfather's hometown in Marawi City. His Royal Highness Sultan Ahmed Jamal Pagayawan, the crowned Sultan of Lanao del Sur, invited me to attend his 85th birthday celebration.

The car stopped at the plaza facing the Lake Lanao where the celebration took place. I could hear the music playing and people had gathered already.

Saad went out of the car and opened the door for me. I went out of the car and someone had already prepared an umbrella to shield me from the sunlight.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we acknowledge the presence of Princess Regina Aliya JemahPagayawan; daughter of the late Princess Raya Sitti Pagayawan; and granddaughter of His Royal Highness Sultan Ahmed Jamal Pagayawan."

People clapped and cheered as I walked up the stage. I saw my grandfather seated at the center, proud and regal as any royalty could be. I went straight to him, knelt and bowed in front of him. I closed my eyes as tears started to fall. I longed for him after all these years. Then I felt his hands on my shoulders and motioned me to stand up.

"Stand up, my Princess," he said.

So I stood up and looked at him teary eyed.

"Thank you for accepting my invitation," he said.

"I should be the one thanking you, Lolo," I said. "I thought I would never see you again."

He pulled me closer to him and gave me a hug. We locked in each other's embrace as I have heard cheers from the crowd. They did not see that we shed tears of joy.

THE *KALILANG*, although a rare event nowadays, usually lasts a day. It would be difficult to match the color, excitement, and variety of activities. It started with a procession of dignitaries, members of the royalty, and their retinue, dressed in their finest traditional clothes. Parasol

bearers held sequined and bejeweled umbrellas that displayed the royalty's respective ranks.

Different performances followed. The main highlight of the festivities ushered when the *Samolayan* – the highest form of Islamic décor – entered Lake Lanao. The float depicts a colorful grand banca decorated with lavish royal banners – making it a real sight to behold.

An evening of instrumental music featured the beating of *kagandang* drums. It also included performances on the *kulintang*, a set of brass gongs set out in xylophone fashion. There were ceremonial dances, too. The highlight was the *kambaoika*, a sort of contest among singers, chanters, and poets. They recite improvised poetic compositions that capped the festivities of the *Kalilang*.

AFTER THE CELEBRATION, my grandfather took me to his house. I remember the time I spent on this house as a child. The retinue of servants that followed me, the pampering I received, and the food they served me from time to time. For a brief moment in my life, I experienced being a real princess.

I was about five or six years old then. We used to walk around the village together, telling stories while walking. A retinue of servants followed us wherever we went.

We used to play checkers and chess together. He said that I have to master these games because it was like ruling a kingdom.

“When can I be a princess, Lolo?” I asked as I took my turn on chess.

“Someday, soon,” he answered as he thought of his next move.

Then he moved the queen diagonally to the left and landed on h1.

“Check,” he said.

I picked up the rook to move, but I decided to move the king instead. My grandfather slapped my hand.

“Touch move!” he said.

“When can I ever win against you?” I whined.

He laughed and scrubbed the top of my head with his hand.

“Why are you smiling?” I heard my grandfather say that made me return to reality.

“Nothing,” I said. “I remembered the days when we used to play chess.”

My grandfather led me to the room I remembered belonged to my mother. As we entered the room, I saw framed pictures and articles of me hanging on the walls.

“Have you thought that I have forgotten you?” he asked. “Not a single moment.”

“Then why...”

“As the sultan, I should set an example to the people,” he interrupted. “Your mother created a stir and scandal. I should punish her according to our tradition. But that doesn’t mean I don’t love you. In my heart, you will always be my little princess.”

“These,” he pointed out the frames that hang on the wall, “remind me of you. I kept them here because you are Raya’s daughter. When I have learned that you graduated in college and became a news reporter, I was proud of you. I always watch the news just to see you. Look at you, you’re famous.”

My heart and lips smiled. I never thought that I would hear those words from my grandfather.

“That hostage taking was tragic,” my grandfather continued. “That politician even used you to influence me on the peace talks.”

I heard him sigh. I knew that would be another story.

Right after our hostage, my grandfather immediately called Malacañang to have the talks grinding. Government had planned the peace talks before. It had not pushed through because of some differences between the government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). There have been more than twenty rounds of negotiations since 2003.

During the hostage taking, the media called my grandfather and asked about the peace talks between the government and the Bangsamoro. According to him, the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) failed to

come up with the expectations of previous administrations and the Muslims. Some Muslims felt dissociated by the system and continued to express their grievances through the barrel of a gun.

Both parties hoped that this agreement would create a new political entity. It deserves a name that symbolizes and honors the struggles of our forebears in Mindanao.

“Lolo, have you forgiven my father?” I asked.

He bowed his head and then looked at me.

“There’s nothing that could be done to have Raya back,” he said. “Your mother chose that path that led her to Death’s door. I have understood Benjamin’s actions. I admired him. I know he is a good man. I have forgiven him. When you return to Manila, please tell him that.”

CHAPTER 40

BEFORE I TOOK THE 7:45 A.M. FLIGHT back to Manila, I received a text message from Patrick that he would meet me at the airport.

Patrick drove me home and while inside his car, I told him about my grandfather's message for my father.

"Would you like to drop by his detention cell?" Patrick asked.

"If that's not too much to ask," I said.

So he accompanied me to Camp Crame. The court already scheduled my father's transfer to Iwahig next week where he would serve the rest of his sentence.

After a few exchange of pleasantries with my father, I dialed my grandfather's mobile number and talked to him. After a few minutes, I gave the cell phone to Papa.

Papa accepted my cell phone and spoke to my grandfather for a few minutes.

Tears of joy fell from my eyes as I saw him talking to my grandfather for the first time after so many years. I wiped my tears and held my father's other hand.

Papa squeezed my hand and smiled at me.

I smiled back at him. I decided to make most of the remaining time for us.

"How is David?" he asked after his call.

"He's still in the hospital," I replied.

“I’ve learned about your relationship with him and Alex,” Papa said. “Patrick filled me in some details after I’ve seen the hostage taking on TV.”

I nodded in silence. I would not know how to tell my father about my affairs of the heart due to feeling of uneasiness, because of the long estrangement. Yet, I felt I should tell him because he is my family.

“I do believe you still love David,” he said as we sat beside each other. “And because you love him, what happened eight years ago has cut too deep in your heart that your forgiveness was not that easy.”

I looked at him and nodded. Then he took my hand and held it with his hands.

“Every time you remember what he did, you just have to remember that you have forgiven him in principle,” he continued. “But as you fight for forgiveness, you realize that you are fighting for him, and for your love, because he’s that precious to you.”

Those words from my father filled my heart. He might have sensed that it took me too long to move on and realize that I still love David. I gave him a hug and cried on his shoulders.

“That’s how I felt for your mother, too,” he said as he caressed my hair.

PATRICK AND I MADE IT ON TIME for the taping of the final episode of *Behind the Crimes*. We went straight to Studio 5 to meet Police S/Insp. Carrillo there. The staff decided to tape it like a talk show this time, giving a post mortem of all the crimes Alex committed as Number One Fan.

With Nitz and Lor gone, Cory Florentino took over Nitz’s position and someone new took over the directorial job.

“I thought you wouldn’t make it,” Inspector Carrillo said as he gave me a hug. “How was your trip?”

“I had a good time, Inspector,” I said. “I was able to reunite with my grandfather.”

“Okay, Princess Regina, let’s start taping,” said the floor director, tapping my shoulder.

“Stop calling me princess,” I laughed at the floor director. “We’re here in Manila.”

“Hey, come on,” the floor director said smiling. “It’s only rare for me to rub elbows with a true royal blood.”

“To be honest, you deserve to be a princess,” Patrick said as he escorted me to the set.

IT FELT LIKE DEJA VU when I did the six o’clock evening newscast. The studio looked the same as if nothing happened. Management made some changes in the newscast’s format since after our hostage. The tablet computer I held replaced Teleprompters and paper in relaying news. Whatever icon I touched on my tablet showed on the big screen behind me. Each segment of the newscast had its own icon on the tablet’s desktop. I felt transported into a new dimension of futuristic, digital, yet real time newscast.

“And that’s what we have gathered for our news tonight, I’m Regine Sta. Maria,” I started my closing spiel.

“And on behalf of David Lim who is still recuperating at the hospital, and the RMBN Channel 3 news team, I am Alma Perez-Roxas. 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.

Alma and I removed our own lapel microphones as a production assistant approached us for those.

“You did well, Regine,” Alma said.

She handed the production assistant her lapel microphone and tablet computer.

“Thanks, Alma,” I smiled.

I felt elated that moment. Words like that coming from someone I idolize made me high. Another dream come true for me to share the stage with Alma; she as my idol and I as her Number One Fan.

“Welcome back,” she said. “Congratulations by the way on the success of *Behind the Crimes*. I’m happy to work with you again.”

“It has been a pleasure working with you,” I said.

“Will you be visiting David after this?” she asked.

“Yes,” I replied.

“Send him my regards,” she said. “When he comes back, I can finally take a rest.”

The production assistant whispered something to Alma. She turned her head and saw her husband behind the camera.

“I’ll go ahead,” she said. “You’ve come a long way, my dear. I’m proud and happy for you.”

I smiled and held her hand.

“Thank you,” I said. “And take care.”

“I will.”

Alma hugged me, kissed me on the cheeks, and left. She approached Mr. Roxas and kissed him. Both of them went out of the studio together.

I REACHED THE HOSPITAL past eight o’ clock. I dropped by the grocery store after my evening newscast. Friends told me that David transferred into a private room after staying in the ICU for a few days.

I dropped off the cab and looked up at the dark, starry sky.

Twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are...

No wind blew on that hot summer night. Everything seemed like before, except better.

The exposé about the late Congressman Joey Guillermo’s bribery brought up issues of corruption in the media one after the other. Not only from RMBN but also to other networks as well. Right after the hostage crisis, I immediately returned the vehicle to RMBN.

People lined up to the elevator so I decided to use the stairs. I went up carrying a bag of oranges for David. I knocked at the door upon reaching room 318.

“Come in,” I heard a male voice answered.

I opened the door and entered the room.

“Hi,” I greeted. “Good evening.”

David was alone on his bed, looking at his tablet computer. He had bandage over his right shoulder, a few bruises on his face, and a bottle of intravenous fluid connected to his left hand.

“Hi,” David greeted back. “Come in. I’m glad you came.”

“How are you?” I asked as I approached the side table.

“I’m okay,” he answered. “I might still stay here for a few days more.”

“Who is looking after you?” I asked as I looked around the room for signs of a companion.

“My brother in-law just left,” he said. “I have a private duty nurse round the clock and she’s just there at the nurse’s station.”

I smiled. At least I knew that someone looked after his needs now that his sister had gone.

“I brought you some oranges,” I said as I put them on the side table. “I know these are your favorite.”

“Thanks,” he smiled. “How was your taping by the way?”

“It went well,” I replied. “Senior Inspector Carrillo and Patrick gave an in-depth analysis of everything. It seemed fit for a final episode.”

“Congratulations!” said David. “*Behind the Crimes* was a success.”

“Thanks,” I said.

“I’m looking forward to work with you in *Plate Number 8*” he said.

Management had decided that David and I would host the talk show about the Congressmen whose official vehicle bore the plate number eight.

“Ka Rudy offered me the show this afternoon. So instead of another congressman, I’ll take Joey Guillermo’s place.”

I smiled. The thought of working together with David gave me a new hope, a new start.

“Are you playing chess?” I asked looking at his tablet computer.

“Oh this?” he pointed to it. “I’m just playing alone. I have been here for a few hours and I already find the TV boring. Do you mind playing with me?”

I smiled and remembered our first meeting, and our first game.

“No, I don’t mind,” I said. “Just like the old times.”

“Sit down here,” he said as he moved and gave me a space to sit on.

“Who’s white?” I asked.

“Ladies first,” he said.

I sat down beside him and faced his tablet. I started with a Ruy Lopez opening, moving the pawn to e4.

David put his pawn on e5.

“I wanted to apologize,” I said while putting the knight on f3. “I’m sorry if I doubted you. I even suspected you as Number One Fan.”

“That’s nothing,” he said while he placed his knight on c6. “I’m sorry for Joyce and Alex.”

I stopped when I heard their names again.

“I couldn’t believe that Alex would do that,” I said while I placed my bishop on b5.

“He made his revenge against me through you,” he said as his right hand took my hand. “That’s why I’m sorry, Regine. You shouldn’t have been used.”

“I would say that he wanted to take revenge on me, too,” I replied not minding his hand on mine. “He saw his dreams in me, dreams he wasn’t able to reach himself.”

“Well, at least now he’s in...” David stopped in his sentence. “I’m not even sure if he’s in peace right now.”

“And so is Joyce,” I said as I put my other hand on his.

“Don’t blame yourself on what happened to your sister,” he said as he looked at me. “She chose to love someone whom she doesn’t know too well.”

I bowed my head, stared at the tablet sitting on David’s lap. It seemed that our game would not continue.

“I miss her,” I whispered.

Tears welled in my eyes and started to flow down.

“I know it’s lonely,” said David as he put his hand on my chin and moved my head to face him. “But your grandfather is still there for you, Princess Regina Aliya Jemah Pagayawan Sta. Maria.”

He wiped the tears off my cheek with his finger.

I smiled as I looked at his face that I once admired.

“How was your trip to Marawi?” he asked and held my hand again.

“It was fine,” I said. “My grandfather and I were able to patch things up. And so were he and Papa.”

“That’s good,” he said. “By the way, where are your servants?”

He looked around and smiled.

“Stop it,” I pinched his side, smiling. “I don’t have servants here. It’s only in Marawi that I could be treated like that.”

“I wasn’t able to witness that,” he said as he tried to put his left arm around me.

“You’ll be able to see one, soon,” I said as I moved the IV line aside. “In the next few months or so, I’ll bring you there if ever I’ll be invited again. That’s a promise.”

He held my hand and kissed it.

“Well, I guess I’d better be going after this,” David said as he straightened up.

“You’re leaving?” I asked.

“No. I’m thinking of a long vacation and...”

“Will you be back?” I interrupted.

“I’m just going for a vacation. Do not worry, I’ll be back.”

I looked at his eyes, the same eyes that melted my heart many years ago.

“You want me to stay?” he asked.

I nodded and then hugged him. I felt his arms wrapped around me as I cried on his shoulders.

“I want you to stay,” I said.

“I’ll stay beside you, my princess,” I heard him say.

He lifted my chin, wiped the tears off my cheeks again, and kissed me on the lips.

“And I’ll always be your Number One Fan.”

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Issa N. Uycoco-Bacsa is a working mom, freelance writer, and novelist. She resigned from practicing Medical Technology and Nursing in 1999 to pursue creative writing. She attended screenwriting workshops and joined contests since then. In 2000, her screenplay "*Sa Likod ng Puting Uniporme*" (*Behind the White Uniform*) won Honorable Mention (Finalist) award. This honor landed her a job at Star Cinema/ABS-CBN Films, Inc. A year and a half later, she started writing Filipino romance novels, comics, and a column for a Filipino tabloid. She now resides in Quezon City, Philippines with her husband and daughter. *Number One Fan* is her first English novel.