

We promised each other forever...  
Until he let his pride ruin us.

# Sebastian.

VAN DEN BOSCH  
BOOK SIX

AUTHOR OF BLOSSOM IN WINTER  
**MELANIE MARTINS**

**SEBASTIAN.**

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VAN DEN BOSCH

MELANIE MARTINS

VAN DEN BOSCH BOOK 6

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*To all of you, my dear readers.  
Thank you.*

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Also By Melanie Martins

About the Author



*Don't forget to join my Facebook Group where I share teasers, release dates,  
and answer all your questions!*

## READING ORDER

While you don't need to have read the *Blossom in Winter* series to start this book, we recommend the following order to get the very best reading experience:

### **Blossom in Winter (Petra & Alex's story)**

A forbidden, age-gap romance between a young, finance heiress and her dad's business partner who also happens to be her godfather. A taboo read filled with twists, mystery, power games and much more!

1. [Blossom in Winter](#)
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### **Van den Bosch**

This series follows members of the Van den Bosch family as they fall in love with someone they shouldn't.

1. [Roxanne](#).
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*Julia*

IT'S BEEN ONLY HALF an hour since Mom left to speak with Sebastian, but the lack of updates is turning me into a nervous wreck. She should be arriving and confronting Sebastian any minute now. My mind goes into overdrive, and I can't help but wonder if I should have gone with her, even if I'd have just stayed in the car. What if my presence would have been the deciding factor between him coming to the wedding or not?

It's easy for my thoughts to spiral, but I can't let that happen today. It's Andries's wedding, after all. It's not in any way my son's fault that this is happening, and I want to be there for him, especially with his father refusing to attend.

I mean, if I'm being honest with myself, it might be partly Andries's fault, but he didn't do it maliciously. He just happened to fall for the one woman that would make his father furious.

Everyone—except my mother—seems to forget that Sebastian isn't just Andries's father. He's my husband too, and the vows we made to each other should be standing strong right now. Instead, he's being enormously stubborn and is focused more on his pride and family legacy than the feelings of his son and wife.

I miss Seb, even if he made me angry enough to move out and stay with Mom. I miss him terribly. I've envisioned this day, this moment, countless times. In every fantasy, Sebastian was at my side for the wedding of our oldest child. Not having him here is tearing me apart.

Shaking my head to dispel my thoughts, I stand from where I'm sitting on the edge of my bed and smooth down my clothes, tilting my head to the ceiling. I have to get over this, for Andries if nothing else. I also have to have faith that my mother will be able to deliver my message and convince my husband to attend. Forcing his hand is not my idea of a romantic, warm family reunion, but at this point, what else can I possibly do?

Seb has his demons, things that he wants to hide from the world at all costs, and if I have to use those things to manipulate him, so be it. Anything for my children. Anything.

The clock chimes, prompting a sigh from me. It's time for breakfast, and it being a planned event for today, I can't miss it to hide away in the room. If I'm making all these sacrifices for my son, then I'm not going to do anything in half measures.

So after a few minutes, I leave my room and find myself in the grand formal dining room. This room is reserved for important events only, and Andries's wedding certainly qualifies. It's adorned with exquisite chandeliers cascading from the high, intricately designed ceiling, and the morning sunlight pours through large, opulent windows, casting a warm glow upon the elegant breakfast table that stretches the length of the room. Even today's breakfast feels special, with the table adorned with crisp, ivory tablecloths and delicate lace runners, elevating the usually casual meal.

At the center of it all, a magnificent floral arrangement stands tall, boasting an array of vibrant blooms that perfume the air with their sweet scent and combine with the savory smell of the food. The colors perfectly complement the wedding's theme, and again I'm impressed at how quickly my mother and her team have managed to put together a wedding that looks like it should have taken years to plan. She's had decades to perfect her craft as a woman of society, but it still takes me off guard just how well executed this rather rushed event is.

Polished silverware gleams, meticulously arranged on either side of fine china plates adorned with intricate gold patterns. Glistening crystal glasses are currently being filled with the finest champagnes and sparkling juices, quickly swept up by the breakfast guests and raised to their lips. We're all going to need some champagne to start this morning, I think, so I waste no time taking my own seat and helping myself to a freshly poured mimosa.

Seated at the head of the table, the radiant groom and bride are completely engrossed in each other. Roxanne isn't the match I'd have chosen

for my son, but he takes after Seb and I in the regard that his choice of partner isn't exactly fitting in the eyes of society. We had it rough too, at first, but never anything like what Andries and Roxanne have faced. Still, I'm putting aside my feelings on the pairing once again and fake a smile when my son looks in my direction. At least he seems happy. That's all that matters, right now at least.

Roxanne's family is seated to one side, nearest to the bride, and my family is more spread out around the table. At Andries's elbow is Dan, and next to him, Elise. My sweet daughter looks happy too, leaning on Dan and appearing more relaxed than she has in weeks now that she's admitted to both herself and the world that she loves him. Alex and his wife, Petra, arms full with their twins, are further down the table, but when Alex spots me, he excuses himself and heads over to sit next to me.

"Don't feel obligated to keep me company," I tell him as he slides into the chair to my right. "It looks like your wife has her hands full."

"She's a professional at this point." He laughs, and I roll my eyes. Petra annoys me with her mere existence, but considering my son is marrying a former escort today, I will be a little less sour about my brother's very young wife. One family scandal at a time is about all I can handle these days, and Petra is old news next to Sebastian being gone and Roxie's former choice of employment.

God, is it too early to switch to whiskey? I don't know if plain champagne and orange juice is going to cut it today. I've only got a few hours till the ceremony, and it sounds better and better by the minute to just be drunk the entire time.

"Jules, you know I love you, right?" Alex asks, and before I can say anything, he adds, "Because you look a little rough—and I say that out of love."

I huff a sad laugh. "Yeah, well, I'm sure you can guess the reason."

Alex bumps me with his shoulder. "Do you want me to go and drag Sebastian's ass here? Or *gently* convince him. Whichever you prefer."

Amusement cracks through the veil of my sorrow, but only a little. "That's okay, Alex. Mom already went."

My brother's eyes go wide, and he reaches for a glass of champagne, same as me. He tilts the glass back, drinking most of it in one go before responding. "That's...certainly something I didn't expect."

He isn't wrong, but in my heart I'm glad that it's Mom that went. There's

no reason to waste time with half measures like sending Alex or even Elise. My mother is the nuclear option, but Sebastian is acting in such a ridiculous way that he's left me little choice. We don't have time for anything less.

I shrug a shoulder at Alex's comment, picking at the pastry and fruit that I've piled onto my plate during the discussion. I'm not hungry, but I need something to soak up some of the alcohol. "I think at this point Mom has finally accepted that Seb is here to stay, and you know how she is. Anything for us."

Alex's eyes drift to his wife. "Finally accepted, huh? Think she's going to take decades to get over Petra too?"

"I don't have an answer for you, Alex. Maybe she's softened a little with time, but I doubt it."

Alex crosses his arms and leans back in his chair. "Well, let's hope that she's still got enough of an edge to convince your husband at least. Be honest with me, do you really think that you'll be able to get him to attend the wedding? When I spoke to him last he was adamant that it wasn't going to happen."

I think about the message that I sent with my mother, and how intense it is. "I think so, yeah. I haven't given him much of a choice."

My brother raises an eyebrow, looking unconvinced. "Okay, well, I guess you know him better than anyone else. I hope he does, for your and Andries's sakes, at least."

Looking down the table at my son, and the unfiltered joy on his face, I feel my heart lurch in my chest. All of this...my heartache, the hard decision I've had to make, the reality that I'm putting my marriage on the line...it's all for my son. For all of my children, really, to show that I will love them no matter what they do or who they choose to live their lives with. "Yeah, I hope so too...but I think he will show up. I've made myself very, very clear. He just needs time."

His eyes harden, and he nods once, understanding without words that I've chosen to make a very, very difficult decision. Alex isn't a stranger to doing hard things in order to keep his family together and strong, even when it means he himself has to suffer. So, in that sense, I am not alone. But that doesn't make me feel any less miserable.

"What can I do?" Alex asks, and I honestly don't know what to tell him. I can feel the urge to cry building inside of me, but there is no way in hell that I can give in to something like that right now.

I want a lot of things, actually, but none of them that Alex can provide. I want the embrace of my husband, to bury my face in his neck and smell his spicy cologne and feel the warmth that comes with what I thought was his unwavering support. I want to convince him to accept Roxanne ages ago, before things ever spun out of control like they have. I want to go back and tell Andries from the very beginning that he is free to love whoever he wants to love, but I've messed it all up. Only recently have I been able to start to turn things around, to do the right thing, but it may be too late for me. I might have healed things with my son, but in the process, lost my husband.

Drifting in my own thoughts, I forget that Alex has asked me a question until I come back to reality and see that he's still staring at me, looking more concerned than ever now. I sigh, swirling my mimosa in its glass and watching the bubbles burst within.

"Ah, Alex. There isn't anything. I've made my own bed here, and now I have no choice but to lie in it."

He leans closer to me. Lowering his voice, he says, "Go sit with your children. Talk to them. Maybe that will make you feel better."

"No," I tell him, shaking my head. "I'll be doing plenty of that soon, anyway." I look around the table at all the smiling, happy faces, and realize that I'm the only one who must look miserable. Roxanne's mother looks ready to ignite with happiness, but then there's me, and I know that my joy is muted.

What is it about weddings for my family and the unhappiness that it always seems to bring mothers? I think back to my own wedding day, and the happiness I felt that was still tinged with sadness because of my own mother's misery. She's my ally and confidant today, but back then, she was anything but. Everyone was happy for me on that special day—everyone except Mom. Now, here I am at my own son's wedding, happy for him but miserable at the lack of Sebastian's company. I know that if he was here he'd be angry and disappointed, just like Mom was all those years ago.

The two of them really do have a lot in common, my husband and my mother—both of them opposed their child's wedding, and both of them were completely incapable of hiding it.

Sensing that Alex doesn't want to leave me like this, I give him a small smile. "You know what might lift my spirits? Bring me one of your beautiful babies to hold."



\* \* \*

After breakfast, I leave everyone behind, craving some solitude before the ceremony. Being around all of the happy guests is almost too much for my sanity. I gravitate towards the smaller garden on the right side of the estate, a brief walk from where the ceremony and reception will take place.

Here, memories of my childhood flood my mind. These meticulously designed grounds have been my playground and sanctuary since I was a little girl. The air is filled with the sweet fragrance of blooming flowers, and the gentle murmur of a fountain adds to the tranquil atmosphere.

Tall hedges and topiaries create a sense of seclusion, just as they did when I used to play hide-and-seek with my brother. Marble statues stand among the lush greenery, reminding me of stories we used to imagine with them all those years ago.

The path leads me to a grand gazebo where I used to sit, dreaming of a future beyond this estate. I got that beautiful life that I'd always hoped for, only to now watch it all start to slip through my fingers.

It's only a few minutes before I hear a voice that disturbs my contemplation.

"Mom?" Andries's voice, tinged with concern and uncertainty, calls from behind. "Are you okay?"

"Of course. Join me," I reply, trying to sound composed even as my heart flutters with emotions. In seconds, the tall form of my oldest son appears beside me, looking every bit the dashing groom-to-be in his tailored suit, sans jacket.

He approaches me with that familiar warm smile, and I can't help but feel a surge of maternal pride. My darling son, about to embark on a new chapter of his life, and I want nothing more than to support him fully. Even if it's costing me dearly.

"How are you coping with everything?" he asks gently, his clear blue eyes studying my face for any sign of distress.

Turning, I reach out to touch his cheek, wanting to reassure him. "Don't worry about me, my love. I'll be fine." But will I truly be fine? The turmoil inside me feels like a tempest, threatening to unravel the composure I've struggled to maintain. But his parents' dramatics should be the last thing Andries is concerned about on his special day.

Brows drawing together, he apologizes for his father's absence, his voice

tinged with guilt. “I’m so sorry about Dad, Mom. I wish he would understand...but I guess I’ve been wishing that for awhile now, huh?”

I wave him over to the seats inside the gazebo. Today is perfect for a wedding, being wonderfully warm and sunny, but I’m tired of standing.

*Maybe I’m just tired in general*, I think.

“It’s not your fault, my love,” I whisper, suppressing the pang of sadness at the fractures that are spreading throughout our entire family, ready to shatter it completely like a dropped vase on a marble floor. “Your wedding day should be about celebrating you and Roxanne and your love for one another, not the past.”

My entire being, body and mind, ache knowing that this beautiful day is marred by Sebastian’s refusal to bless the union. Karl’s face floats through my thoughts, and my stomach rolls. I thought time would heal old wounds, but it seems like we are destined to carry this heavy burden forever.

Andries opens his mouth to protest, instinctively wanting to act as the peacekeeper, and it reminds me of the way he would act with his siblings as a child. I hold up my hand, stopping him before he starts. Enough misery for Andries. Sebastian has caused him quite enough.

Trying to redirect the conversation away from the melancholy that looms, I inquire about their post-wedding plans. “Hush, now. Let’s talk about happier things. Do you have any destination in mind for your honeymoon?” My tone comes off more animated than usual, a clear indication of my despair to focus on anything but my husband. How much longer is Mom going to be gone, talking to him?

Andries brightens up, his excitement contagious. “Yes. We’re thinking of going to Sardinia for a week. Do all the newly-wed, tourist things, you know? It seemed like the perfect destination for our first days as a married couple.” He sounds sort of dreamy, as if he’s still in disbelief that he’s hours away from being a married man. If everything wasn’t in so much turmoil, I might even laugh.

As Andries continues to chat about their plans, my mind drifts back to the past. I remember a time when Sebastian and I were inseparable, our love stronger than any adversity. Now, the chasm between us seems insurmountable. I force myself to push those thoughts aside, since today is about celebrating the love between Andries and Roxanne. My mother’s estate might be adorned for a celebration that represents a new chapter in our eldest child’s life, but it feels empty without Sebastian.

I hope Andries can't see the cracks in my facade, but I know he's perceptive. I wish for his happiness more than anything, and I pray that my own pain won't overshadow his joy on this momentous occasion. The path of motherhood is filled with triumphs and trials, and today is no exception as I navigate this intricate dance.

As Andries talks about their upcoming honeymoon, my heart lightens momentarily, finding solace thinking of his happiness. "I'm glad you're looking forward to the honeymoon," I say, attempting to sound upbeat despite the heaviness lurking in the depths of my thoughts.

Andries smiles, and I even see a hint of color high in his cheeks. "Yeah... I really am. It will be good to have the time alone to relax before my classes start back up."

I think over my next set of words carefully, wanting to be diplomatic and not insulting to my future daughter-in-law.

"Now that Roxanne is, eh... not working anymore, what is she going to do with all her spare time during your school hours?"

He sits up a little straighter, excited. "She's actually writing a memoir. Roxie is really enthusiastic about the entire thing. Maybe her next big calling in life will be as an author, who knows?"

Roxanne's plan to work on her memoir piques my curiosity. "A memoir?" I inquire, hoping to learn more about my future daughter-in-law. There is an obvious distance and awkwardness between her and I, and I'm desperate for anything that might help me connect. "What is it about specifically?"

Andries smiles, his eyes glowing with admiration for the woman he loves. "It's about her time as an escort, and then a madam, Mom," he tells me, his enthusiasm palpable. "She wants to share her experiences, the ups and downs of the industry, and shed light on the challenges faced by people like herself." He speaks as if he's reading off a script, and I realize this must be exactly what Roxanne told him to say when people ask about the book.

My heart sinks at the idea. Roxanne's former career is exactly what has caused all the trouble with Sebastian. Well...Roxanne's former career and the fact that Karl was a client of hers and her escort agency. It's exactly why she ended up in the media, dragging Andries and all of our family along with her by association. I truly hoped that we were finished dealing with all of that, but now my son tells me she's about to bring it all back to the present with this memoir. The thought of Roxanne sharing intimate details about her past fills me with a mix of discomfort and concern.

“Don't you think she should leave the past in the past?” I can't help but ask, my voice tinged with unease. “A memoir, telling the whole world about what she did...” my words trail off, fearing that I may have overstepped a boundary, but I can't help voicing my genuine concern.

Andries looks annoyed, his love for Roxanne evident in the way he defends her aspirations. It's clear to me that this isn't the first time he's had to explain and justify this memoir and the fact that it will make her past very, very public. “She believes it will be enlightening for people to understand the reality of the industry. She already has a publisher interested in her story, and she's determined to share her truth.”

I try to mask my disappointment, my heart aching at the idea of my son's future wife revealing all the explicit parts of her past. But I must respect their choices...even though I'm positive Sebastian will be absolutely apoplectic when he finds out about the memoir. Hopefully I can keep it all under wraps until he's calmed down and our marriage is back to normal.

“Oh, of course,” I manage to say, mustering a smile. “It's her decision, after all....”

My heart still drums with unease as the idea of Roxanne's memoir lingers in my mind like a persistent shadow. I can't shake the discomfort it brings, and I find myself needing to know more. Gathering my courage, I decide to broach the subject further with Andries even though I can feel the frustration emanating off of him. I wonder just how much pushback the two of them have gotten about this idea.

“Will she publish the memoir under her real name or use a pen name?” I ask cautiously, trying to sound casual while my mind races.

Andries's brow furrows slightly, but he replies nonetheless, “Her real name. She's proud of the company she built up and sold for a good chunk of money. She wants to own her past, Mom.”

*Her real name.* The words echo in my mind, heightening my concerns. I understand Roxanne's desire to embrace her past, but the thought of her being so exposed worries me. “Andries, please,” I implore gently, turning myself fully towards him. “I don't mean to meddle, but could you ask her to remove any mention of our family from the memoir? Including Elise and your father.”

Andries's reaction surprises me; his anger flares up instantly and he lets out a loud sigh. “Why are you trying to protect him after everything he's done?” he asks, his voice edged with hurt.

I take a deep breath, trying to maintain my composure. “He is your father, Andries. I know that Roxanne is proud of the life she built and has no shame about it, but things are different when it involves our family name. You know this.”

Andries looks torn, caught between his loyalty to Roxanne and his love for me and, I assume, his siblings. His father...well, that’s a different story. “But Mom, this is Roxanne's choice. Not any of ours.”

“I know, my dear,” I say softly, reaching out to touch his hand. “And I respect her right to tell it. But character assassination, even unintentional, could lead to legal troubles.”

He sighs, his eyes filled with conflict. “I don't want to ask her to change anything. This is important to her.”

I still have more to say, and I really want a promise that he will at least attempt to have our names left out of Roxanne’s book, but Andries holds up a hand before I can say anything. “Don’t. Let’s change the subject before this becomes an argument.”

Feeling tangled up with nowhere to go, I can’t do anything but agree. “That’s fine with me.”

“Speaking of lawsuits, thank you for everything. I'm glad the prosecutor dropped the charges against Roxie.”

I know how much the charges against his future wife have been hanging over them, and it must feel incredible to have all of that pressure gone. It must be nice. I wish I could find some peace, too. Before I have a chance to respond, though, Andries continues, his attention shifting to Karl, the man that has so royally messed things up for every one of us. “Are they coming after Karl? After all, he's the one who orchestrated the whole thing.”

He’s not going to like my answer, but I give him the truth anyway. “I don't think Gabi will go after anyone from what I understand.”

I had to pull in some major favors to get everything dropped against Roxie, and I had hoped that it’d be the last I had to hear about all of that mess. Apparently not.

Andries isn't satisfied with my answer, and I can understand why. He throws up his hands in exasperation. “So we're gonna let that piece of shit get away with it? Again?” His tone is louder than before, as if rage is building in him like a bonfire. “He's a criminal, not to mention a fucking rapist and should be in jail. But instead, he’s still the head of a department at Dad’s company and plotting behind our backs to ruin my fiancée's hard work at the

same time.”

His words cut deep, and I can't deny the truth in them. Karl's actions have caused irreparable damage, and the thought of him roaming free, untouchable, gnaws at my conscience.

“If you want to talk to Gabi, she's attending the wedding, so feel free to bring all of that up to her. There isn't really anything I can do on my end, dear.” I have no idea if Gabi will really consider pursuing Karl, but it's worth a shot.

Andries relaxes a bit, looking intrigued. “Is she coming? Mom, please, speak to her then. She will listen to you. We need Karl behind bars.” The urgency in his voice tugs at my heartstrings.

I sigh, torn between the desire to help my son and the reality of the intricate web of relationships surrounding us. I'd love to never hear Karl's name again for the rest of my life, yet here he is, creeping up again to ruin things.

“I will see what I can do,” I tell him, hoping that my words will offer him some reassurance.

Andries's expression clears, gratitude washing away any lingering anger he is holding. In an irresistible, impulsive moment, I pull Andries into a hug, holding him close. “If you ever need anything, you know I'm here.” My voice is low and soft, hoping that my unwavering support will be a source of strength for him during these trying times.

He hugs me back, and I feel a breath of true happiness in it. As we embrace, I feel the weight of our family's troubles, the struggles we face being such public figures navigating our private issues. But through it all, one thing remains clear: the fierce love that binds us together, even in the face of adversity. And with that love, I will do whatever it takes to protect and stand by my children, guiding them through anything that might stand in their way.

All I can do is hope that Sebastian will be by my side for all of it. I don't know if I'm strong enough to do it all alone.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see someone approaching through the gardens, and it puts me on edge. I relax some as the figure materializes into my mother's butler, Stuart, announcing her return.

My heart flutters with a mixture of anticipation and anxiety. She's back, which means that plan I had for Sebastian has been officially carried out. But what takes my breath away is the additional news he delivers with his hands folded behind his back: “And Mr. Van den Bosch is also here.”

I'm stunned, silent. It worked? Did my plan really work? I'm both relieved and more anxious than ever. There is no way that my husband is taking kindly to the bomb I had my mother drop on him.

Next to me, Andries's surprise mirrors my own. Disbelief is etched on his handsome face, which looks so much like his fathers, when he says, "What?" He looks over at me, his eyes wide. "Dad's here? Don't tell me he came for the ceremony...."

I swallow, desire to see Seb and throw myself into his arms warring with the darker want to slap him across his face for daring to embarrass me like this by not showing up until the very last minute. For all that Sebastian van den Bosch is worried about public appearances, he sure isn't caring much about the appearance of our marriage.

"I'm not exactly sure," I tell him truthfully, taking his hand in mine to reassure him...and myself. "I'll go find out, okay? I'm sure you have a ton of things to do before the ceremony."

I can see my son hesitating, not wanting to leave me alone. I push him away, trying to be playful, at least for appearances. "Go. Get out of here. I'll see you at the ceremony."

"Okay, Mom." Andries starts to go, but pauses, leaning down to kiss me on the cheek. My goodness, when did my sweet boy get so tall? "Thank you again. For everything."

I mean every bit of it when I tell him, "Anything for you."

I excuse myself from the gardens and make my way back inside, where I find Mom waiting for me. There's a tension in the air, thick and palpable, as if the mansion itself senses the storm brewing within its walls.

"Welcome home, Mom," I greet, as I reach her. "Did it...go well?"

She shrugs one thin shoulder, but her expression is clouded. "As well as could be expected, really. For God's sake, Julia, even now I question why you decided that man was the one for you." Waving towards the left wing of the house, she adds, "I brought someone back with me, as requested. He's waiting for you in the petit salon."

I don't say anything else to her, my husband's presence calling to me like a siren. As I step inside the salon, I find Sebastian standing there, dressed impeccably with his salt-and-pepper hair combed back from his face. My heart thunders in my chest, a cacophony of emotions swirling in my mind. It's been so long since we've been in the same room together like this, and now, with Andries's wedding unfolding around us, the atmosphere is electric with

unresolved conflict.

He breaks the silence with a reminiscence that sends shivers down my spine. Turning to face me, he says, “Do you remember when we plotted against your mom with Alex? It was exactly here in this room that we won against her.” His gaze lingers with a tinge of nostalgia. “And now twenty-two years later, you are using your mom and all her devices against me. Boy, times have changed, haven't they?”

His words cut deep, reminding me of a past when we were united, conspiring against Mom for our love. But time has twisted the trajectory of our lives, and the once-fervent bond we shared now feels complicated beyond measure.

“I never wanted it to come to this,” I respond, my voice wavering with a blend of sorrow and determination. “But things have changed. You know this.”

Sebastian's eyes soften as he studies me, a glimmer of the man I once knew shining through. “I understand,” he says, his voice tinged with a hint of regret. “We've both made choices, Julia. That's why we are here, right now. Because of your choice to send Margaret, threatening that—”

I scoff, crossing my arms, barely believing what I'm hearing coming from his mouth. “You are responsible for this, Sebastian! If you had less hatred in you, less pride, then maybe we could come around and be happy like before. But no—for some reason, you can't—”

Sebastian's voice is low, almost a whisper, as he cuts me off, “Our son's getting married to my brother's whore, Julia. In what world...in what fucking universe would I be okay with that? No man would!”

My frustration bubbles up, but I take a deep breath, trying to maintain my composure. “We've spoken about this a thousand times by now.”

“And yet, you don't seem to give a damn.” He rubs his temples, seemingly lost in thought. “The fact that you'd go as far as revealing such a personal secret that you promised twenty-two years ago to never speak of clearly shows how separated from this marriage, and the commitment that comes with it, you have really become.”

“Me?” I ask, totally incredulous. Pointing my index finger at him, I can't help the emotions in my voice. “*You* are the one who has been failing me, Sebastian! *You* are the one who wants to skip your oldest son's wedding. I just wanted you to be present and—”

We can't seem to let one another finish a thought, the time we've spent



apart leaving us with so much unsaid.

“Against my own will? For what? The fucking picture? So that you can pat yourself on the back while looking at it and living in some fantasyland where we are one big happy fucking family? My downtrodden artist son and his whore wife?”

The hurt in his words cuts deep, but I can't back down. “No, Seb. I want you to be present because I hope one day you can look past the hate you have for that woman and see how happy your son is. When that day comes, you'll be glad you're in those pictures. You'll be glad that you were there for your son.”

Sebastian's eyes lock onto mine, and for a moment, I see a flicker of vulnerability before the wall of anger returns. It pains me to see him this way, to witness the bitterness that has consumed him for so long.

“I won't pretend that I didn't have my own strong reservations about Roxanne.” My voice's softer now, trying to reach out to him. “But for our son, I've set them aside. Can't you find it in your heart to do the same? To be there for him on this special day?”

He looks away, his jaw clenched. “It's not that simple, and you know it.”

With tears pricking at the corners of my eyes, I have to cross my arms and look away from my husband. Yes, I know it all too well. Our family's complicated history intertwines with resentments and misunderstandings that have been passed down through generations. The weight of tradition and pride pulls us in opposite directions, like it has many times before. Just never so intensely.

“I'm not asking you to forget the past. But we can't let it define our future. Andries deserves better than that. All of our kids do.”

Sebastian's expression softens slightly, but the battle within him remains evident. I can only hope that my words will someday penetrate the armor he has built around his heart. But I doubt it....

I hear him cursing quietly, and then he says, “Come here, woman.”

Swallowing hard, I approach him, feeling the lack of my husband's warmth in every step I take towards him. This is no moment of reconciliation, I realize. He doesn't want me close to hold me, or start to mend things. Yet, I still go, until I'm close enough to feel his breath on my face when he looks down at me.

We're mere inches apart, the weight of unspoken emotions floating around us like smoke. There's still a part of me that hopes he'll reach out and

take me in his arms, but those desires are dashed when Sebastian's words cut through the air like a sharp blade, leaving my heart aching. "Just to make it very clear, dear wife." His voice is acerbic; his eyes lock on mine, but there's no fondness in it. "The only reason why I'm here is because you forced my hand. That's it."

I try to keep my expression blank, not wanting him to know that he's crushed me entirely. "Okay. Fine."

Seb purses his lips, clearly expecting more of an argument from me. I won't give him the satisfaction. "When is the ceremony starting?"

"In about ninety minutes," I tell him, trying to maintain a sense of composure, though my voice quivers slightly.

"Great, I will see you around, then." With those words, my husband turns on his heel and walks away, leaving me standing there, feeling utterly lost. That's it? That's all he has for me...more hatred and disdain?

I've been hoping, desperately, that his presence here might signal a chance for us to mend our fractured relationship, to bridge the chasm that has grown between us over the past weeks. But instead, he makes it clear that he's only here because I threatened his precious legacy, not out of any desire to reconcile or rebuild our marriage.

A cold weight settles in my stomach as I consider that maybe, just maybe, threatening to reveal Karl's parentage just to force Sebastian to come here might have been the wrong move. Not to mention having my mom be the one to deliver the threat...no. No. He left me no choice. I did what I had to do.

The room suddenly feels suffocating, filled with the tension of unspoken words and unresolved conflicts. I thought the strength of our love for each other would keep Seb and I safe from such struggles. But it seems that even our commitment to one another can't shield us from the complexities of our children's choices and the ache of a broken marriage.

As I watch him walk away, a mix of rage and sorrow swirls inside me. Rage at his stubbornness, at his refusal to see beyond his own pain and bitterness. Sorrow for the love I know we both still have for each other, now buried beneath layers of hurt and regret.

Taking a deep breath, I try to compose myself before rejoining the preparations for the wedding. I can't let my personal turmoil overshadow this joyous occasion for Andries and Roxanne. They deserve a celebration filled with love and happiness, free from the dark shadow that Sebastian seems so determined to cast. I may have my own complaints at Roxanne Feng, but

she's marrying my son, and that means I'll do my best to shield them both.

Deep down, I know that ignoring my own emotions won't make them disappear. The wounds between Sebastian and me run deep, and I fear that unless we find a way to address them, they will continue to tear us apart, not just as a couple but as a family.

It's just a little over an hour until the ceremony, and my mind is filled with questions and doubts. Can our family heal from the scars of the past? Is there still a chance for Sebastian and I to find our way back to each other? I know the road ahead won't be easy, but I'm willing to do whatever it takes to save our family and rekindle the love that once bound us together, as long as he feels the same.

If Sebastian doesn't...or if he still refuses to attend...well...I'll just have to cross that bridge when I come to it. Right now, though, I need to get ready. My baby is getting ready to walk down the aisle.

*Sebastian*

LEAVING THE PETIT SALON BEHIND, I seek solace in the familiar surroundings of the billiard room. Tension has my spine stiff, and I feel like Julia's gaze is burning a hole through me as I walk away. Confronting her was harder than anticipated, with moments that tempted me to succumb to the parts of me yearning for reconciliation. But I managed to remain strong and resolute in my decision. The fact that Andries and his whore of a bride are under the same roof as I am right now, even if I can't see them, is enough of a reminder that I've got to stand my ground. Just knowing that the wedding is so close has me on edge.

I make it to the billiards room without Julia following me and blow out a breath of relief. The scent of polished wood and the soft glow of the crystal chandelier create an atmosphere of refinement and elegance in stark contrast to the sordid union that is about to happen. The weight of unresolved emotions still lingers, and I need a moment to collect my thoughts.

Reaching for my phone, I decide to text Alex, the only confidant I have in the delicate matter involving Karl. My fingers swiftly type out a message, and I take a seat in one of the red leather armchairs, waiting for my brother-in-law's arrival. It will be nice to at least talk to someone who understands the Karl situation, even if I know deep down that he's going to take Julia's side in this whole wedding matter.

I can't believe that my own wife is doing this to me. I've never felt betrayal like this in my entire life, and I certainly never thought I could be

this angry with her.

I hear the footsteps of someone in the hallway and turn to see a tall figure approaching. I expect to see Alex walking into the room for a game of billiards, but I sit up straighter when it becomes clear who has actually come to join me. It's not my brother-in-law who enters, but my own son. Andries looks tense, dressed in his wedding suit as he dons a carefully controlled expression. Alex must have put him up to this. His presence catches me off guard, and I struggle to hide the turmoil of my thoughts.

“Uncle Alex told me I’d find you here,” Andries confirms my suspicions; his tone is calm but there’s a hint of malice lurking underneath.

He is furious with me. I know my boy well enough to see it no matter how hard he tries to hide it.

I offer a smile, grateful that he came seeking me, sparing me from having to do so later. My heart softens as I look at him, all grown up in his suit, but I have to harden it immediately. This occasion will be tainted forever because of who he is choosing to marry. I will never have another first wedding for my first child, this is the only memory of this I will have with Andries—him marrying a former escort, and shattering our family in the process.

No matter what Andries thinks, she isn’t worth it. No woman would be, but especially not used goods like Roxanne Feng.

“Looks like Uncle Alex was right. Come in, son,” I invite, gesturing to the billiard table. “Let's have a game.”

His entire demeanor is cautious, like he thinks I’m going to lash out at him at any moment. Little does Andries know that he isn’t on the top of my list of enemies at the moment. Instead, his mother is hovering there, with Margaret and Roxanne near the top as well.

Still, Andries joins me without a word, accepting my invitation. He and I have a lot to talk about, even if he’s completely in the dark about it all. I had hoped to never share the truth about Karl with any of my children, but Julia has backed me into a corner. Too bad for her that I’d rather share my darkest secrets myself than have anyone else do it for me.

“You look great, son. That suit suits you,” I tell him, genuine pride shining through my words. I allow myself the indulgence of imagining that we are just father and son, enjoying a game happily before he weds a girl from a proper family that we all approve of. Hell, at this point, I’d even settle for a middle-class girl he met in school. Anything besides fucking Roxanne, the former madame.

Retrieving a billiard cue from the rack, I hand one to Andries. The polished wood of the cue feels familiar in my hands, offering a momentary distraction from the weight of the impending shit show that is looming. There's still a sliver of hope in me that Andries might change his mind at the last minute, but I'm beginning to see that the union might be inevitable.

As Andries accepts the cue, his question catches me off guard. "So, Dad, are you here to play billiards or to attend my wedding?"

I chuckle, attempting to lighten the mood. "Can't a man do both? Besides, your mom just informed me that the ceremony starts in about ninety minutes, so it looks like I've got a lot to get done in that short amount of time, right?"

Andries watches me carefully, grunting in response. Taking my place at the billiard table, I pause to survey the arrangement of the balls. I really have no intention of attending this damn wedding if I don't have to, but I'm just going to have to see how this talk with Andries plays out. With a steady hand, I line up my shot, focusing on the cue ball as I prepare to break the formation.

The click of the cue striking the white ball reverberates through the room, setting off a cascade of movement as the balls scatter across the table. Reds, yellows, and blacks intermingle, each collision with another color only separates them more. The initial shot echoes through the air, the clacking of balls merging with the soft ambiance of the room. A part of me relishes the simplicity of the game—a momentary escape from the complexities that weigh upon me. It's an opportunity to focus on the precision of each stroke rather than the intricate dynamics of everything else. Secret brothers, escort fiancées, and duplicitous wives...yes, I really do need this moment of calm right now.

But, even as I sink a ball into the pocket, a veil of unease lingers. This game of billiards mirrors the unpleasant game I'm being forced to play with my family these days. Each shot represents a delicate decision, a calculated move within the constraints of our strained relationships.

I steal a glance at Andries, observing the concentration etched on his face. In his eyes, I catch a glimpse of the uncertainty and anxiety, so similar to my own. Bound by blood and shared history, we both face challenges today, some of which Andries remains unaware of.

Well, that's about to change, all thanks to Julia and her meddling mother.

As the game progresses, a comfortable silence settles between us, at least for the moment. In the ebb and flow of our shots, it's all too easy to lose track of how bad things have become. I'd give anything to go back to when

something like this could just be a genuine moment between father and son.

My cue connects with the next ball, but my shot goes wide, missing its mark. I turn to Andries, a smirk playing at the corners of my lips. “Your turn, son. Let's see what you're made of.”

He takes his shot, sinking it easily. “What made you change your mind?” He questions as he lines up the next one. “I know you didn't come here of your own accord.”

I pause, choosing my words. “Your mom threatened to reveal a crucial family secret...”

Andries straightens, cue still in hand, and shoots me a suspicious stare. “What kind of secret, exactly?”

“One that would change everything. And she intended to tell none other than Karl,” I reply with emphasis. “She forced my hand to ensure her silence.”

The revelation hangs heavy in the air, adding a layer of tension to our conversation. Andries furrows his brows in confusion. “Karl? How does he fit into this?”

I sigh, my frustration evident. “I could tell you, but I'm not sure if you care enough about our family heritage and inheritance for me to risk it. Elise might, but you—”

Andries bristles. “Yes, I know, perfect Elise, the preferred heir, while I'm the disappointment.” He shakes his head, voice tinged with hurt. “You disowned me, Dad. Cut off my allowance.”

A bitter laugh escapes me. “And then you sought Oma Margaret's help, no?” My nerves fray, my tone sharper than intended. “God forbid you find yourself a job. You know, that's what normal people do when they need money.”

The room grows colder, the negative energy between us escalating. Andries all but slams his cue down on the billiards table and drags a hand over his face, trying to get his own rising anger under control before he speaks again. Like father, like son, I guess.

Andries's face reddens as he speaks again, signaling how he's feeling inside, even if he is trying to keep his tone even.

“Because you think it's easy to rebuild my life after being cast aside by my own parents? What job could I have even taken that would have been acceptable to you, huh? Everything's about image with you.”

My expression softens, regret swimming in my eyes. I'm well aware of

the challenges Andries has faced, the uphill battle he's fought since being cut off. He's done all this to himself, though. If only he'd left Roxanne behind, he could've been welcomed back. But his fixation on her has led us here, hours away from her becoming part of the fucking family—by marriage, at least. She will never be one of us as far as I'm concerned.

“I didn't mean it's easy,” My tone is softer, more empathetic to his case. My palms are sweaty as I work my way through this conversation. “You've navigated tough circumstances, but you've also made choices that haven't helped.”

Andries's anger begins to subside, replaced by a flicker of vulnerability. He looks upwards at the ceiling, and heaves a long sigh, before looking back at me. “I just want to be accepted. To be part of the family for who I am, not who you want me to be.”

My heart clenches at his words. I understand the yearning for acceptance, the desire to mend the fractures that have torn us apart. In that moment, I realize the depth of my own regrets and the urgent need to find a way back to my children. I think about my own father, and how my love for Julia threatened to ruin everything with him, and the endless pain it caused me.

But Julia was the oldest daughter of a well respected family, pursuing law school to become a judge, and a strong girl that had bloomed into a powerful woman. Roxanne is not fit to be compared to Julia in any sense of the word. A former escort, and a whore, play toy for my fucking bastard brother. My father had to accept Julia, and it was made easier because she was a good match for me. There is quite literally not a woman in the world who is worse for my son than Roxanne Feng.

My thoughts overwhelm me, and as the silence lingers, Andries's patience wears thin. His frustration becomes more evident with each passing moment. He continues to press me, his voice edged with determination. “What's going on with Karl, Dad? Is he finally going to face justice for his crimes?”

A part of me wants to share the truth, to alleviate his concerns and lay bare the secrets that have plagued our family. But another part of me hesitates, knowing that unveiling the truth will change things forever. The words I'm about to say can never be taken back.

“I don't know about that,” I respond, shrugging. I can tell that our game is over, so I put my cue away and dust off my hands. “That's something you should ask him.”

The evasiveness of my answer only fuels Andries's determination. He



faces me directly, his hand on my shoulder, forcibly halting me from turning away. His eyes search mine for answers, a silent demand for the truth. “I’m not going to ask Karl a damned thing. You’re going to tell me, right now. What secret did Mom want to tell Karl?”

My mouth is dry and my palms are sweating. Damn. This is harder than I thought it was going to be. Saying the truth about Karl aloud is something I haven’t done in over twenty years. Even thinking about it feels alien to me.

“Are you really sure about this union?” I ask, deflecting his question. God, if he just says he isn’t sure about this marriage, tells me that he has his doubts, I will move mountains to have this whole fucking ceremony shut down here and now. And then I won’t have to reveal anything about Karl, and everything can return to normal. Well, everything except my trust in Julia. “Is there really nothing that could make you change your mind?”

Andries’s eyes narrow, frustrated. “I’m pretty sure about it, yes,” he retorts, gesturing to the suit he’s wearing, his impatience palpable.

A wave of resignation washes over me as I realize that my son is resolute in his decision. I won’t be able to tear him away from Roxanne and this sham of a wedding, but at least I can take the upper hand back from Julia and cut her scheme off at the knees.

“Very well. Then I suppose it doesn’t matter.”

Andries withdraws his hand from my shoulder, and I feel a sense of detachment settling between us...a chasm that I’m not sure will ever truly be fixed. The opportunity to repair things, to be the complete and whole family that we have always been is slipping through my fingers. My next words will damn my wife in the eyes of our oldest son, but it has to be done. Julia did all of this, made all of this necessary, all the while knowing exactly who she has been dealing with.

Me. Her husband. Sebastian van den Bosch. I may be older and grayer these days, but I’ll be damned if I’m not just as dangerous as I’ve always been. With that in mind, I look right into my son’s eyes and ask, “What do you know about Karl exactly?”

He seems taken aback by my question at first, his brows drawn together in something resembling a frown, but then takes a moment to process it and think further. “Mom told me you have a great relationship with him because he’s one of the longest-serving employees at the company.” His words are tinged with confusion, but he continues, “And that it was Grandpa’s wish, before he died, that you keep an eye on him. Is that true?”

“It is true,” I confirm, giving him a nod. “I’ve known Karl for over twenty-two years. I recall that when my father had a heart attack, the first person to visit him after me was Karl, and he stayed there in the hospital room with me for hours. I know how you feel about him now, son, but he wasn’t always this way.”

Disbelief and anger ripple across my son’s face, and he huffs instantly at me. “And yet, the man you seem to have a deep admiration for raped Elise’s friend, Patricia, and is now trying to destroy my future wife’s reputation. Your future daughter-in-law, may I remind you, whether you want to admit it or not. So maybe you should look at Karl dragging our family’s name through the mud, not Roxanne.”

I sigh, the weight of the truth pressing upon me. “Yes, Andries, I know that he made many obvious, terrible mistakes, but—”

“Mistakes?” Andries interrupts, incredulous. “You call them mistakes? A mistake is breaking a vase or missing an appointment, not forcing yourself on an eighteen-year-old!”

I meet his gaze, holding firm despite the complexity of the situation. Nothing that my son is saying is false, even if he does tend to have a flair for the dramatics. But none of Karl’s crimes change the stark reality of what he is to me, even if Karl himself doesn’t know it.

I hold up a hand to cut Andries off, and his jaw snaps shut. “I know, but regardless of what he did, he’s still my brother.” My words cause my son to freeze, and they change everything, forever. “He just doesn’t know about it.”

The revelation hangs in the air, its weight settling upon us. Andries is stunned. I can just imagine how his mind must be racing to comprehend the magnitude of the news. I certainly remember how hard it hit me when I first was told the truth about Karl’s parentage.

“What?” he stammers, taking a few steps back, his mouth gaping at me. “You said your siblings died in a car explosion, so how...how can he be your brother?”

“You’re not wrong about that first part. My full-blooded siblings died in a car explosion.” I nod solemnly, thinking about the loved ones that I lost so many years ago, and the trauma of it all. They had been ripped away from me so violently that I still don’t think that I have ever truly healed. “But Karl is the bastard son of your grandpa. My Dad. Which makes him your uncle.”

“I’ll NEVER—” Andries explodes, but I hold up my hand a second time.

“I’m not finished. My father knew all along about Karl, but I didn’t know

until I was a grown man. And before your grandpa died, he made me swear to him to take care of Karl and look after him.” I pause for a moment, observing the distress in Andries’s face. “I don't know about you, but I don't want Karl to share the same surname as us. I didn’t back then, and now, considering the things both of us know he’s done, it’s even more important to ensure he is never linked to us in that way.”

Overwhelmed by the revelation, Andries walks away from the billiards table, sinking into an armchair. Words fail him as he grapples with the shattered illusions of our family history. The truth cuts through the facade of stability we have clung to for so long. I know exactly how he’s feeling, except back when I found out about Karl’s parentage, he was still a decent man. These days, he’s done some monstrous things, or at least been accused of them, and that must make this even harder for my son to swallow.

“I can't believe it,” he whispers in disbelief, his hands holding his face. “It can't be true.”

Reaching down, I place a comforting hand on his shoulder, a silent gesture of support. “I wish it wasn't true either. But it is. I’ve confirmed it in every possible way, and there’s no way to get away from the fact. All I can do is keep it a secret to protect all of you.”

Andries's eyes widen as it starts to dawn on him just how much this truth could ruin all of our lives, and even my children’s futures. “Who knows about it?” he asks, going pale.

I take a moment to collect my thoughts before answering. Andries is very, very shaken, which I expected, but it doesn’t make me feel any better about it. “Your mom, Uncle Alex, Oma Margaret, and...now you. If Karl ever discovers the truth, he will have a legitimate claim to my father’s inheritance. That includes the family estate where you and your siblings live, the company, and the family trust—along with the family name, of course.”

“Fuck, I can't believe Mom was ready to go as far as telling Karl about it,” Andries mutters, rubbing his hands over his face and sliding down further in his chair.

I offer a sympathetic nod, understanding all too well the turmoil he must be experiencing. “Well, now you know why I showed up at the last possible minute. That was your mother’s ultimatum—come or she was going to tell Karl everything.” When Andries blanches even more, I blow out a breath, squeezing his shoulder before letting go. “You look like you need a drink.”

He just nods, his mind still processing the whole revelation. “Damn right

I do.”

I make my way to the well-stocked wet bar, pouring a generous measure of whiskey into two glasses. The amber liquid glimmers in the dim light overhead.

Handing a glass to Andries, I watch him accept it, his hands trembling ever so slightly. He raises it to his lips and drinks the contents in one swift motion. I can see him wince at the burn of the alcohol, but he doesn't complain, simply sitting the empty glass on the side table next to him.

I observe my son, feeling guilt turning over and over inside of me no matter how much I try to ignore it. I guess that a father never quite gets over being forced to hurt his son, even when said son is being an absolute fool and it's for his own good. It's safe to say I had not anticipated this level of distress, and I wonder just how deeply this revelation has affected him. Maybe even enough to call off the wedding, but I doubt it. Luck is not on my side that much.

Andries's words hit me like a sudden gust of wind, the shakiness of his voice dissolving and being replaced by a stubborn resoluteness that reminds me of myself at his age. “I might not like you much these days, Dad, but I hate Karl on a cellular level,” he says, words dripping with disdain. “The fact Mom was about to give him so much leverage to destroy us is beyond absurd.”

I chuckle, but there is no mirth in it. “It is absurd, I agree.” A trace of bitterness seeps into my words. “I'm glad we can agree on that, at least. I suppose this secret is safe with you?”

“Of course,” Andries assures me as he stands and starts to straighten his suit. “And, um, thanks for telling me the truth. At least now it makes some sort of sense why you've been so kind and forgiving to him, even when he's clearly a piece of shit. You don't really have a choice in the matter, I guess.”

A mixture of emotions washes over me as I reflect on Andries's words. It's true, my relationship with Karl has always been complicated, a delicate dance between loyalty and resentment. Understanding the hidden truth brings clarity to my actions, the reasons behind my choices. Keeping Karl around at the family company must have made no sense to any of my children, but now at least one of them can share the burden of knowing why Karl will be attached to me until the day one of us dies.

I wish my father didn't ask me to watch over him, or I wish, at least, that I had the gut to decline. Little did I know back then that Karl would make me

regret that promise with his actions to the point where it nearly destroyed everything I've worked for.

"I've always tried to do what's best for our family," I tell him, my voice lower than usual. "Even when it seems like, from the outside, I'm trying to destroy it, instead."

Andries gazes at me, understanding in his eyes. It's a small step towards healing the rift that has divided us for so long. We may not have all the answers or solutions, but in this moment, we share a mutual understanding.

So...it's done. I've taken Julia's power, her only bargaining chip. I may have had to lay my darkest secret bare for my son, but at least I've won. Victory feels hollow today, knowing that Andries is still going through with the wedding, but it's better than letting Julia manipulate me for her own desires, using my father's dark past as the cornerstone of her plans.

"I'm glad we managed to have a chat before you go and get married to...well, your lovely fiancée." I manage to keep all of my many, many thoughts about Roxanne to myself which is another victory in itself. Andries is at least tolerating me right now, and I don't think that disparaging his bride will be the right decision to keep him so understanding.

"I appreciate that. You don't have to attend the ceremony. I get it. It's... it's all good if you don't want to be there." Andries clears his throat, shoving his hands in his pockets. Things are becoming awkward, now that the worst is out of the way. My son knows good and well that I have no interest in watching him wed a woman that I despise, even if he would prefer that I attend. At this point, though, I can't really tell whether Andries wants me there or not. His current state of neutrality might just be the relief of knowing that I'm not a total prick, sticking up for Karl for no reason.

Maybe this could have all been avoided if I'd have just confessed this to my oldest son sooner. He hasn't exactly made wise choices as he matured, which is why it never crossed my mind before Julia forced my hand. But maybe I underestimated Andries's maturity.

I pause for a moment, contemplating his words. "What about your mom's threat? Just because you know about Karl now doesn't mean she won't still follow through on telling him if I don't attend. That was the ultimatum she gave me."

Andries's jaw works, his stress evident. "I'll take care of that. She can't threaten you like that. But in exchange, all I ask is that you and Karl leave Roxanne and me in peace."

The request takes me by surprise, but I recognize the earnestness in my son's eyes. There's a part of me that is disappointed about Andries not asking me to attend, but I am also relieved. Watching him marry Roxanne might very well be the thing that kills me, from shame alone. Convincing Karl to leave my son and his new bride in peace shouldn't be too difficult—the man is easily manipulated, and my pockets are deep. “Fine by me. As long as I don't see her at any family gatherings.”

Andries nods, but he doesn't look thrilled. “That's easy for you to say. Mom will be beyond pissed if we don't show up for Christmas.”

A sigh escapes my lips, contemplating the repercussions of such a decision. The likelihood of my marriage surviving all this dwindles by the minute, but I don't dare tell Andries yet. Not when I still need him for one more thing. “That won't be a problem. I can always be the one not going.”

Andries winces, hearing the unspoken meaning of my words. “That would make things even worse. You should talk to Mom before you leave, so she understands where we all stand.”

There it is. The last thing I have to do to make sure that Julia keeps her mouth shut. I want her to know, in no uncertain terms, that I have won, and that going up against me is foolish at the best of times. There is no way in hell she's going to manipulate me with a threat to reveal the truth about Karl to the world. Now that Andries knows, he'll tear her apart for me if she still wants to follow through. Considering that his happiness is why Julia is trying to pull all these strings in the first place means that she more than likely won't go against our son's wishes.

“Actually,” I begin as I walk towards him. “I think it's best if we talk to her together, don't you think?”

*Julia*

EVERYONE IS GATHERING on the terrace for the cocktail hour before the ceremony begins, and I've just managed to compose myself long enough to get changed, as well as fix my hair and makeup. My hands are still shaking, but when I catch a glimpse of myself in a gold-framed mirror, I'm relieved to know that I look the part of the happy mother-of-the-groom.

My eyes scan the room, searching for familiar faces amidst the sea of gorgeously dressed guests. And there, amidst the crowd, I spot Hannah, my teenage daughter, with a bored and uninterested look on her face. To my astonishment she's wearing a beige, flowing dress that gives the impression she's two or three years older. Her brown hair is pushed back in an elegant ponytail, with just a few strands falling in front of her lovely face. Her make-up is more pronounced than usual, matching with the dress. She stands alongside Joris and Aleida, her younger siblings, who are eagerly soaking in the splendor of the occasion.

I approach them, a smile gracing my lips, but deep inside, my heart still carries the weight of the confrontation with Sebastian. The tension lingers, like an invisible thread binding my thoughts and emotions. It's difficult to shake off the heaviness, and I can only hope that my children won't sense the turmoil swirling within me.

"Mama!" the two younger children exclaim, and we all exchange hugs and cheek kisses; Aleida gushes over the simple silk sea-foam green dress I'm wearing, and I realize how much I've missed them.

“Go find your Oma,” I tell them, shooing them away playfully before turning to my older daughter. “Hannah, my darling.” My voice becomes warm at the sight of her. “I’m so glad you decided to join us today. I was sad when I heard you had stayed back with your father.”

She waves a hand dismissively. “Yeah, well, I wasn’t trying to avoid Andries or anything like that. Just keeping an eye on Dad. Plus, weddings aren’t really my thing.”

I reach forward and tuck a strand of her hair behind her ear, having to reach upwards with how tall she’s grown. “Yet here you are, looking beautiful as ever.”

At first Hannah brushes me off with her usual teenage annoyance, bringing her strand of hair back forward again; though her demeanor changes when she gets a good look at my face. Her eyes meet mine, sharp and perceptive, as if she can see through the facade I’ve carefully crafted. “Mom, is everything okay?”

I try to muster a reassuring smile, though I know it falls short of genuine. “Everything’s fine, sweetheart,” I reply, betraying a hint of unease. “Just a little tired, that’s all.”

Hannah’s gaze lingers on me, her intuition sharp as ever. She knows when something is amiss, when the veneer of composure cracks. And in this moment, she can see the fragments of my emotions peeking through.

She takes my hand and pulls me away until we find a quiet corner away from the bustling crowd. With a tender touch, she reaches out and takes my hand, her warmth and understanding a balm to my weary soul. Even my aloof, grumpy Hannah cares for me...loves me...so why can’t my husband?

“I can tell something’s bothering you, Mom.” Hannah keeps her voice low and discreet enough for only me to hear. “You don’t have to hide it from me.”

Tears well up in my eyes as I gaze at the beautiful soul before me. My daughter, wise beyond her years, with a depth of understanding that belies her youth. I take a deep breath, summoning the courage to share my burden with her.

“Fine. It’s your father,” I confess, barely above a whisper. “We had a disagreement earlier, and it’s been weighing heavily on me. But I’m sure you’ve picked up on that by now.”

Hannah’s grip tightens around my hand, a reassuring gesture that speaks volumes. “I’m here for you, Mom, okay?”



I'm about to pull her into a hug, even though I know she will hate it, when a tall, broad-shouldered man passes by, giving the two of us a brief wave and a brilliant smile. It takes me a second to recognize Johan, but now that I think about it, I remember Andries mentioning that he'd invited him to the ceremony—He was on his bachelor trip after all. Hannah blushes instantly, her hand falling away from mine, distracted.

*Oh, Hannah. Of all men to have a crush on...*

A smile breaks through my sorrow. "Go ahead, honey."

Surprised, she looks back at me. "Huh? What?"

"Johan. Go ahead and mingle. I'll be fine."

She blinks a few times. "A-are you sure?"

"Definitely." I pat her on the cheek. "There's someone else here I wanted to talk to before the ceremony, anyway."

Hannah hesitates for only a second before she mutters a quick, "Thanks Mom, love you," and disappears into the crowd.

I watch her go, amused, before leaving the secluded corner in search of a specific wedding guest. Amidst the lively chatter and the clinking of glasses, I make my way through the crowd, seeking out Gabi, my trusted, bubbly friend, who just so happens to be the prosecutor handling the whole Roxanne cabaret scandal. I'm so happy she accepted my invitation to attend the wedding. It'd be the perfect occasion for her to meet Andries and Roxanne after that unfortunate arrest. When I finally find her, she's standing near the grand staircase, talking to some acquaintances.

"Gabi!" I exclaim, a genuine grin gracing my lips as I approach her. "I'm so happy you came."

"Wouldn't miss it for the world." She laughs, kissing me on the cheek as the other people she was speaking to disperse.

It's truly so nice to see her. It reminds me of happier times in my life. Once we're alone, I lower my voice to tell her, "I can't thank you enough for everything you've done."

"Of course, Julia," she replies, stroking my arm out of affection. "I knew something was off with the case against Roxanne, anyway. We're making progress on it, and there's a new suspect we're looking into."

My heart skips a beat at her words. "Who?"

My friend bites her bottom lip, like she doesn't want to say anything. She looks around the room first, before leaning closer to me. "It's, eh, Karl Townsend, a top employee at your husband's company. We think he might

actually be the mastermind behind everything. I'm sure you know who I'm talking about."

The realization sends a shiver down my spine, for it hits far too close to home. "Oh, yes. I know him."

"What do you want me to do with this information?" Gabi asks, taking me by surprise. The weight of the decision rests heavily upon me, and I hesitate to make any rash moves.

"I—I'm not sure, Gabi. Part of me wants that man gone once and for all. But...I think I need to talk to Sebastian before I say anything for sure."

Gabi's gaze softens, a glimmer of understanding in her eyes. "Sure. Let's discuss it later," she suggests, her words laced with empathy. "I don't want to cause you any stress before your son's wedding."

I nod in agreement, relieved to have a temporary respite from the mounting pressures of the investigation. I don't tell her that I'm already under so much stress that it's almost inconceivable—there's no reason to burden Gabi with my relationship woes.

"So, where is the groom?" Gabi asks, looking around the terrace. "I know we aren't supposed to see Roxanne yet, but I figured he'd be making his rounds."

Before I can respond, Stuart, the ever-present butler, appears by my side, delivering a message from Andries. "He wants to talk to you in the billiard room, ma'am."

It's an unexpected request, and I'm both curious and apprehensive. I tell Gabi that I'll see her after the ceremony, ignoring the confused look she gives me. There's simply no time to explain all of this to her.

I follow Stuart's lead, my pace quickening as I make my way to the billiard room. I enter, stumbling to a stop when I see that both my son and my husband are waiting for me. The unfamiliar sight of Andries and Sebastian standing together catches me off guard. What could they possibly be discussing, and why did Andries want me here?

I approach them cautiously, my eyes scanning their faces for any hints of their intentions. The tension in the room is palpable, and I can't help but wonder what lies beneath the surface of their conversation. Is it a moment of reconciliation or is there a storm brewing on the horizon?

Not wanting them to see that I'm shaken, I cross my arms and shoot them a suspicious look. "What are you two scheming?"

"I know about Karl," Andries says abruptly, interrupting my inquiry

about their secretive conversation. “And I also know you forced Dad to come here by threatening him to reveal the truth about Karl’s parentage to him.”

The revelation leaves me so stunned that I freeze in place, unable to move or say anything. The fact that my actions have been exposed to my son by none other than my husband himself makes my stomach flip.

Before I can even open my mouth, Andries continues with a resolute tone, challenging my loyalty. “What side are you on, Mom? Do you really want Karl to have a claim to our inheritance?”

His accusation hits me like a blow. I struggle to find the right words, to defend my actions while acknowledging the potential consequences.

“I didn’t want to force your dad to come,” I tell him, determined to show him my perspective. “I wanted him to be present *willingly*, to witness your wedding, Andries! And he was so dead set on not coming so I did—”

Andries’s gaze remains unwavering, his eyes challenging my sincerity. The weight of his disappointment crushes me to the core. “Mom. It’s his right not to come if he doesn’t want to.”

I’m shocked. How did Andries go from bitter and pissed off about his dad not attending to accepting it without question?

“I know this is difficult for you,” he continues, and it’s all I can do not to clench my teeth with how annoyed I am.

Actually, I’m not annoyed. I’m furious. Sebastian, lounging like a king in a leather loveseat, is behind this change of heart. Now, I can see his ruse clearly. He’s trying to ruin me in the eyes of our son for revenge.

Sebastian’s smug demeanor radiates from him as he leisurely takes a sip of whiskey, positioned on the couch like a self-proclaimed victor. His arrogant confidence only serves to fuel my anger, igniting a fire within me that refuses to be extinguished. This is not the time for his triumphant stance; it’s a time for unity and family. It’s his own damn fault if he refuses to see that!

Gabi’s words filter back through my mind, telling me that Karl is now their main suspect and that they believe he’s behind everything. Maybe that’s my way through all of this—pitting our family against Karl as a united front. And then, hopefully, getting rid of him for good.

“Andries, open your eyes,” I plead, my voice trembling with desperation. “Your father has always mired himself in conflict, choosing war over reconciliation. But for the sake of our family and your wedding, can’t we find a way to put aside our differences and come together?”

My son's gaze is guarded, his doubt evident. "Mom, I won't ignore the fact that you've been my ally—"

Sebastian interrupts, a self-satisfied smirk playing at the corners of his lips, as he directs his words towards me. "Here we go again. Keeping up appearances, that's always been your forte, Julia," he sneers, before taking another sip of his drink. "It seems you've become just like your mother, all too eager to maintain the façade."

His words strike a nerve, fueling the fire within me. I refuse to be reduced to a mere pawn in his game, playing by his rules. No matter what my husband says, this isn't about public appearances or the opinions of others. It's about us. It has always been about us, hasn't it? God, where did we go so wrong?

As I swallow past the lump in my throat, Andries sighs before declaring, "Mom, Dad isn't going to attend the wedding, and you're just going to have to deal with it. I won't have you using my wedding as an excuse to reveal Karl's parentage to the world."

Sebastian rises from the couch, his eyes fixed on mine. There is a flicker of uncertainty on his face when he meets my eyes fully—perhaps he sees the determination inside of me. Or maybe he sees beyond all that, to the core of me, and the love I still hold for him even now. But then he catches sight of Andries again, and the sarcastic mask comes over his expression once more.

"Julia, darling," Sebastian all but purrs, a cruel mockery of how sweet he can be to me when he wants to. "I'm afraid you're just going to have to deal with the eventual rumors on your own. You're more than welcome to solve that problem by telling everyone that we're separated and that you're living here, if you want."

Red clouds my vision. Everything Sebastian has just said is just a thinly veiled reference to something I never thought we would ever mention—divorce. How dare he?

I can't help the tears forming at the corner of my eyes, and pointing a finger at him, I shout, "You are a fucking monster!" I'm so angry and so hurt that I can't control my volume. "After everything I've done for you, for our family..." I shake my head.

Sebastian's eyes narrow, his face contorting. "I'm not the one who shattered your trust," he fires back, his words biting. "But you did. That letter revealed your true nature, your deceit."

Andries stands awkwardly in front of us, and sensing the escalating tension between his dad and me, he interjects, "Mom, the ceremony is about

to begin. I'm just going to leave the two of you alone...don't take too long."

"Andries—" I try to call when he passes by us in direction to the door, but Sebastian growls a firm,

"Don't, Julia."

I feel like the floor is falling out from underneath me. How has all of this gone so wrong, so quickly? As Andries leaves, I'm left standing with my heart pounding and my mind swirling furiously with all the thoughts that I can't shut out. The realization hits me like a tidal wave—Sebastian's true intentions were to divulge that secret to Andries, to turn him against me. That's why he came. Not to see his son be married, not to be with me during this milestone with our oldest child. Certainly not to mend the wounds that we have given one another.

No, Sebastian came all the way here with my mother, just to cut me down and poison my son's previous allegiance with me.

"All I wanted was for you to be present at your own son's wedding," I tell him, now that it's just the two of us.

Sebastian's smug demeanor remains firmly in place as he retorts, "A selfish wish, perhaps. Even our son agrees."

I feel the weight of his words, the sting of his accusations. It's as if he has rewritten our history, turning me into the villain and himself into the victim. But I know the truth. I have seen the obsession that consumed him, the plotting and scheming with Karl against Roxanne. His allegiance was with Karl, not with our family—and it still is. I can see that now.

"Are you planning to go back and support Karl now?" I question, incredulous, as I cross my arms in displeasure. "Is it where your loyalty lies? With a man who sought to destroy us?"

Sebastian's expression remains unchanged, his stoicism lingering like a poisonous cloud. "In just five minutes, I managed to reconcile with our son." His words, delivered with such arrogance and superiority, make me huff in response. "He understands my perspective and respects it. It's truly remarkable that my own wife cannot seem to comprehend that."

"He reconciled with you because you only gave him half truths. I'm sure you didn't tell Andries the part where you worked with Karl to try and take down Roxanne and her business. Maybe his opinion would be different if he knew that. Yet, I didn't throw you under the bus, did I?" Sebastian is silent, so I push on. "Do you know why I kept quiet? Because I'm not lying about my fucking intentions, Seb! I want us to be a united front. A whole family."

“Can you blame me, though? I never wanted Karl’s whore to marry our son,” Sebastian sneers, his words dripping with disdain. “I’ve made that clear to you time and time again. But no, you can’t sympathize with my perspective, can you? Poor Julia, left to face the wedding alone. What a tragedy.”

“I’ve had enough of your games.” My voice is filled with exhaustion, and I start pacing around the room, distancing myself from him as I process my thoughts. Then turning to face him, I say, “You’ve made our lives a living hell, both mine and Elise’s. She calls me constantly, in tears, to tell me about your scheming. Your selfishness and obsession have torn this family apart.”

Sebastian persists, his words full of a self-assured arrogance. “I’m sure Elise would be just as understanding as her brother if she knew the truth. See, Julia? I *can* stand my ground, say my piece, and turn the kids to my side if I want to. Just like you love to do.”

Silence hangs in the air as I contemplate his words, my mind racing with conflicting emotions. So he knows how to manipulate the narrative—that’s nothing new. He’s just never leveraged that particular talent against me, his own wife, before.

“Is that what it has come to?” I finally respond, feeling resigned to my husband remaining so hateful. “Turning our children against each other, using them as pawns in your game? Is that the kind of father you want to be?”

Sebastian’s eyes meet mine, a flicker of uncertainty briefly crossing his face. The battle lines are drawn, and I refuse to back down. This is no longer about appearances or saving face. It’s about the very essence of our family, the bonds that should hold us together. I take a deep breath, summoning the courage to speak my truth. It’s time to reclaim my voice. Only then can we begin to heal and rebuild what has been broken.

“Your pride is blinding you, Seb.” My words echo across the room and my husband stands still on the other side of the billiard table, his expression just as guarded as before. I hope he can hear the love that still burns in my heart for him. For a brilliant second, I think he might crack. But no...Seb is just as firm as ever.

“I’m afraid your letter pulled the blindfold off for me.” His tone isn’t even angry or loud, just sad, tired and disappointed. He’s hurt, but more than that, he’s still bitter, and that’s much harder to overcome. He rakes his hand through his hair, blowing out a breath and looking away from my face for the

first time in a while. “Julia...I’m done here. I’ve said my piece.”

As Sebastian makes his way to the door, ready to leave the billiard room and our conversation, I feel a surge of urgency. I need him to understand the gravity of the situation, the potential danger lurking in the shadows.

“Wait! Gabi is here,” I interject, reaching out to halt his departure. “She’s asking what to do about Karl. He’s now their suspect number one.”

My husband stops in his tracks, thrown off the sudden change of subject. Sebastian’s frustration is palpable, his body tense with the weight of conflicting loyalties.

“What do you expect me to say here, Julia? You know I promised my dad before his death to watch out for Karl.”

“I know that,” I reply, my tone softened by empathy. “But we can’t ignore the evidence, Seb. If Karl is truly involved—”

“Why are you asking me what to do? You know what to do!” Sebastian interrupts, frustrated. The tension between us hangs heavily in the air, thick with unspoken grievances and unresolved conflicts. This push and pull is a familiar dance, a struggle for dominance in our fractured relationship. “Tell her that—”

Before he can say anything else, Stuart, the ever-faithful butler, glides into the room, his presence a welcome distraction from the intensity of our exchange.

“Excuse me, Mr. and Mrs. Van den Bosch,” Stuart announces, his tone always so prim and proper. “The ceremony is about to start. We kindly request your presence.”

I nod my appreciation to Stuart, silently grateful for his impeccable timing. The butler departs, leaving Sebastian and I alone again. The fire of the moment is lost after the interruption, and now things just feel...off.

I take a deep, quivering breath. What I’m about to ask requires me to put my pride aside, and be vulnerable, even though Seb has given me no reason to feel safe with him right now.

“Can’t you at least...join me for the ceremony?” I implore, my hand reaching out to touch his, seeking solace in his presence. “Please, Seb, you know how much it would mean to me. I can’t bear the thought of being there alone. Andries is your son too. This is our first child to get married.” I don’t try to hide the tears welling up in my eyes.

Sebastian’s face remains stoic, his features etched with cold detachment. He pulls his hand away from mine, severing the connection. “I’m afraid I

can't do that.”

His rejection crashes over me like a tidal wave, engulfing me in a whirlwind of despair. I feel my heart shatter into a million pieces, the ache spreading through every fiber of my being. How did we come to this? How did our love become so fractured, so irreparable?

Tears well up in my eyes as I gather the remnants of my shattered pride. “I'll never forgive you if you leave now,” I whisper, fraught with a mix of anger and sorrow.

He shakes his head once. Sebastian's resolve remains unyielding. “Andries forgave me, and one day, I pray that you will find it in your heart to forgive me too.”

Shaken beyond measure, I open my mouth to tell him to stop, but no words come out. My husband turns his back to me, his departure leaving an emptiness that reverberates through me like the rolling of thunder. As he walks away, disappearing into the grand hallway of the estate, I'm left standing here, the weight of his absence so incredibly heavy. The echoes of his rejection lingers, adding to the chasm I know has now opened between us.



*Julia*

I TAKE A DEEP BREATH, trying to steady my racing heart and quell the storm of emotions raging inside me. Sebastian's behavior has left me reeling, torn between anger and heartbreak. I had hoped that his arrival meant a chance to mend the fractures in our family, to put aside our longstanding grudges and grievances, if only for the sake of Andries's wedding day. I don't think I was asking much, especially from a man that I've loved for so long, but now... everything is up in the air. I don't know what's going to happen, but I do know that there is a pit in my stomach so deep that it feels endless.

Pride has always been Sebastian's shield, and he wields it now with unwavering determination. He refuses to budge, to let go of all the complicated emotions surrounding Karl and just try to be here for all of us—his real family...his wife and children. The people who really matter in his life. Seb is treating this like a victory, but I don't know how in the hell he can think he's won *anything*. Because of him, we're all losing. And he's so damned smug about all of it, that I wonder if he's hurting at all, even a little bit.

I miss him. I hate him. It's so complicated.

A gentle knock on the doorframe draws my attention, and I quickly compose myself, not wanting to show any vulnerability to whoever needs my attention now. Could it possibly be Sebastian? Did he change his mind and come back to apologize?

I pivot to face the doorway once more, and have to keep a blank

expression to hide the disappointment I feel when it's Elise standing there with her hands clasped together in front of her. "Come in, dear."

She enters, concern etched across her face as she takes in the turmoil that I struggle to conceal. I don't know what it is about this moment, but I'm briefly taken aback by what a beautiful, strong woman she's become. For a brief period of time, there was a streak of bitter resentment in my sweet Elise that colored her actions—no doubt put there by her father—but that's all gone now, and she's really come into her own.

In her eyes is nothing but love for me—and worry—and it's so hard not to confide every single thing I'm feeling to her. I can't burden her with my heartache, not on this day, when her brother's happiness should be our main concern. But since it's clearly not at the forefront of Seb's thoughts, I'll bear those emotions for both of us.

"Did I just see a ghost, or was that Dad in the hallway?" Elise asks, the warm golden light of the room glistening in her hair.

"No, it wasn't a ghost," I reply with a strained smile. "Although I think I'd have preferred a phantom at this point. Your father did come here, but only so he could make it abundantly clear that he won't be attending the wedding."

Elise's eyes widen in disbelief, mirroring my own emotions. "What the hell? He came all the way here just to rub that in your face? I'm so sorry, Mom. Should I talk to him? Maybe I can convince him to change his mind."

Her offer is touching, but I shake my head, my pride refusing to allow me to seek help. "No, darling, it's alright. He's made his decision, and we must respect it."

She snorts. "Ha. Accept it, maybe. But I'm not going to respect his stupid, selfish decision."

I sigh, glancing towards the empty doorway once more, finally having to acknowledge that my husband isn't going to come back and escort me to our oldest child's wedding. It's a moment I'll never get back, ever, but that doesn't mean I need to make anyone else suffer for it. Especially not my children. "Let's go, dear. We're running late as it is."

I'm thankful Elise doesn't push to know more, and simply links her arm with mine as we head towards the ceremony. I summon all the strength I can muster. My heart may be shattered, but I won't let anyone see my pain. I must ensure that Andries's wedding goes smoothly, that appearances are kept intact. If anyone asks me about Sebastian's absence, I'll have to stay calm,

composed, and give them a plausible answer. I'll have to find something—anything—as long as it's not the ugly truth.

With a deep breath, I put on a brave face, hoping that my facade is convincing enough. The weight of my emotions bears down on me, threatening to overwhelm, but I must soldier on. Today is about love and unity, about celebrating the union of two souls, and I won't let anything tarnish this precious moment. Not my own opinions about Roxanne Feng, not the fact that I've been living at my mother's house in my childhood bedroom while my adult son prepares to get married, and certainly not the fact that my husband has abandoned not only me, but our entire family, just because of his stupid, self centered pride...and of course, his secret half-brother.

God, my heart is racing! I can't completely push Seb out of my thoughts, but the reality of the moment is starting to override everything else. My baby, my Andries, is getting married, and right this very second I'm on my way to him so I can escort him down the aisle. With my head held high, I focus on just breathing, my mother's home passing by in a blur as Elise and I stride towards the front stairs where Andries will be waiting.

There he is. Tall, dressed in his impeccably tailored suit and his hair combed back, Andries looks so much like his father from behind that it makes my pulse stutter. Then he turns, and the sight of his profile brings him back to the present—my sweet baby boy's younger memories flashing before my eyes.

Stepping out onto the porch with Elise by my side, I'm almost vibrating with nervous anticipation. The sight below is breathtaking—the gardens, a verdant oasis, are adorned with fairy lights and cascading flowers, set the perfect stage for Andries's wedding. The white silk that flutters gently in the breeze, hanging in place of walls, softens the light of the sun, giving the entire ceremony an ethereal glow.

Looking at Andries makes me want to cry already, so, needing a breath, my gaze sweeps over the gathering guests. Everyone is stunning. The glint of jewelry as people turn and gesture to friends and family, and the happy peals of laughter steady me. No one would know that this wedding almost didn't happen, or that the entire thing was fraught with so much uncertainty. It looks...perfect. My mother and her team really pulled this off. It's just what I have always envisioned for Andries—simple and elegant.

Among the crowd, familiar faces like Gabi, Yara, and Maud stand out. My sisters, in the second row on Andries's side, have their heads bowed

together and are speaking in hushed voices, while Gabi is loud enough that I can hear her entire conversation from up here on the porch.

My mother, in the front row, exudes an air of regal poise, but I know her well enough to see the genuine emotion in her expression. She's cold when necessary, but she is happy for her grandson. Alex, sitting behind Mom, wears a distant expression that leaves me guessing at his thoughts, while Petra sits with her back ramrod straight next to him—probably uncomfortable being here among all of us. Too bad for her. She knew what she was getting into marrying Alex.

I catch Petra's gaze and exchange a polite nod. I wonder if she and any of the others have heard about the tumultuous encounter with Sebastian, if the whispers have already started circulating through the crowd like they always do. I don't think Petra is one for gossip, which is one of the few positives I see in the girl, but she's a rarity in upper-class families in that way. For many of us, secrets are worth their weight in gold, and frankly, I don't care if anyone talks about me. As long as they keep it to themselves until after the ceremony, that is.

With a deep breath, I try to push aside my worries and focus on happiness. The scent of jasmine wafts through the air, and the soft murmur of conversations creates a comforting hum.

I can do this. I *have* to do this.

Elise senses my apprehension and gently squeezes my hand, offering a reassuring smile. Her unwavering support gives me the strength to face whatever challenges may arise. We share a quiet moment of understanding, a connection between mother and daughter that transcends words. Now, the music begins to play, signaling the commencement of the ceremony. I send a silent plea to the universe to grant us this one day of blissful serenity. Let the focus be on love and joy, not on the cracks in our family's facade.

Placing my other hand on my son's shoulder, I connect with both of my oldest children at once, letting love radiate through me. Andries glances down, and while there's a sheen of sweat on his forehead, I believe I'm the only one who can see how nervous he really is.

"Ready, my love?" I ask.

"I feel like I might be sick," he confesses with a self-deprecating chuckle. "But yes, I'm ready."

I release Elise's hand as the seconds count down, moving closer to Andries as we prepare to make our entrance. My heart swells with pride and

love for my son. Despite all the challenges that threatened his relationship, he ensured that love prevailed.

“Are you okay, Mom?” he asks, his concern for me evident, and I give him a small smile, not wanting to burden him further with my own emotional turmoil.

“Don’t worry about me, my dear,” I whisper softly. “Today is your special day, and I’ll be just fine.”

Elise gracefully departs, leaving Andries and me to share a quiet moment. Drawing strength from his supportive presence, I reflect on our time together. He has always been the peacemaker, the eldest sibling, and a wonderful son. Andries taught me how to be a mother, and I can't help but marvel at the fine young man he has become.

He takes my hand and kisses it gently, before linking his arm with mine, and my heart is so full I feel like it might burst. Love...there is so much love here. I just need to remember that, even when my husband isn't beside me.

The music starts, and together, we begin our slow descent down the stairs and through the garden. I savor every single second. The lush greenery and fragrant blooms wait for us past this threshold, symbolizing the promise of new beginnings and the beauty of love's bloom.

I try not to think of my own wedding. I try *so hard*, and, of course, fail. But I hold back the tears and keep my smile in place, and that's all that matters.

Then we take our first steps, and every seated person turns to look. We reach the end of the aisle, and it just feels too soon, but this is it. Now I can't stop the tears from welling up in my eyes, but they are all for my son and his marriage. Andries and I share a heartfelt hug, a tender moment between mother and son. I feel a mixture of pride, joy, and wistfulness as I release him to wait for Roxanne. I silently pray for his happiness and a bright future with his new bride.

Taking my place beside my mother in the front row, I find comfort in her presence, knowing that she, too, knows what I'm going through. She was the one who I sent to fetch Sebastian in the first place, after all, for all the good it did me. I force my attention outwards, knowing that I will want to remember every detail of the wedding.

Dan exudes a magnetic charm as he strides down the aisle, and a genuine

smile dances across his handsome face. As the best man, his presence sets the tone for the procession, exuding unwavering support and camaraderie for his lifelong friend. The rest of the groomsmen, Johan included, follow suit thereafter.

Next, the bridesmaids grace the aisle, their dresses flowing in soft cascades of pastel hues. Roxanne's sister, Lili, is radiant in her happiness, her dress a delicate shade of lavender that complements her bright smile. Elise makes her way beside Lili, where she stands tall and graceful, her demeanor emanating quiet strength as she joins the bridal party. I meet her eyes, and she gives me a quick nod, as if to say, "*You're going to be okay, Mom.*" Roxanne's friends, in an array of delicate pastels reminiscent of the garden blooms, complete the enchanting picture.

Amidst the grandeur of the garden and the splendor of the ceremony, my heart aches with the absence of Sebastian. I must not be hiding my misery as well as I think I am because I feel my mother lay her hand over my two, which are clasped tightly in my lap. As always, she's here in my time of need. Her gentle squeeze of my hand is like a lifeline, grounding me amidst the swirl of emotions.

The guests hush in eager anticipation, their eyes locked on the doorway where the soon-to-be bride will appear any second. A gasp rolls over the crowd when she does, a bouquet that mirrors the soft colors of her bridesmaids dresses clasped in her hands, and her mother, Yao, on her arm.

Roxanne glides down the aisle in her exquisite qipao dress, and despite how I feel about the woman, there is no denying that she is simply stunning. Roxanne's beauty has always been striking, but today, her edges are softened. Yao is in an intricately detailed green qipao, but it's Roxanne's dress that has everyone entranced. The delicate fabric shimmers with an opalescent sheen, embracing her figure. The high collar accentuates the graceful length of her neck, while the intricate floral embroidery adorns the pristine white fabric, a symphony of delicate artistry that tells a story of love and her own heritage. Flowing sleeves add an air of elegance, lending her an almost otherworldly aura. This is the first time I've looked at her and seen what must have drawn Andries in like a moth to a flame. For all the drama that she's involved our family in, Roxanne is a rare beauty, and her confidence is undeniable.

As Roxanne moves towards Andries, her steps are light and sure, as if she is floating on a cloud, radiating a sense of serenity. The soft rays of the sun caress her like a halo, illuminating her and making her blonde hair glow.

Roxanne reaches the altar, where her eyes meet Andries's with a tender intensity. In that moment, it's as if the entire world fades away, leaving only the two of them in a world of their own. The affection between the two is palpable.

Andries has his eyes locked on Roxanne as if mesmerized by her very presence. His love for her shines brightly in his gaze, and I can see the depth of his devotion. Roxanne hands her bouquet to her mother, who sits in the front row on the side opposite to where I am, and the bride and groom join hands. It's a sight that warms my heart and reminds me of the day I walked down the aisle to meet Sebastian, united against the world, ready to face anything together.

A soft smile tugs at the corners of my lips. I can't help but reminisce about my own wedding day, the joy and excitement of beginning a new life with the man I loved. In that moment, nothing else mattered, and the world faded away as we exchanged our vows, promising to stand together through thick and thin. Such a stark change from today, where the two of us are pitted against each other, like enemies.

The ceremony proceeds, and I find myself caught in a bittersweet mix of emotions. Happiness for Andries and Roxanne, and yet, a lingering sadness over the fractured state of our own family. It's a reminder that love, while powerful, is also delicate, and must be nurtured and cherished to flourish.

When the officiant begins to speak, I feel one last surge of adrenaline—a desperate hope that Sebastian is here somewhere, hiding in the depth of the crowd. Surely he won't miss our son's wedding. Not my Seb, not the man that I've raised children with and loved for decades. He has to be here.

I look around, knowing that if I don't find him in the crowd, then it's officially too late, and that there is no getting this moment back. A lump forms in my throat when I don't find him; no matter how many times I look, even into the shadows near the house and on the balconies. They are all empty. Sebastian really didn't come. Not even in secret. Nothing in my life has ever disappointed me like this.

God, is this really it? Could our marriage really be over due to something like this? After all these years and everything we've been to?

I come back to the moment when I hear the officiant say, "...the couple has written their own vows, and will speak them now, starting with the bride."

Roxanne's voice is steady but filled with emotion as she begins, "Andries,

from the moment we met, you captivated my heart and soul. I told myself a million times not to love you, but it was too late. From that very first meeting, a part of me has always known that you were it for me. With you, I've found a love that knows no boundaries, a love that has brought light and meaning to every moment we share. We have faced so much, and met it all head on, coming through stronger than ever. Today, I stand here with you, ready to embrace a future filled with endless possibilities, knowing that our love will be the foundation that guides us through life's journey. I promise to cherish you, to support you in all your dreams, and to stand by your side through every triumph and trial that comes our way."

Andries's eyes glisten with tears of happiness as he responds, "Roxanne, you are my light in the darkness, my anchor in the storm, and eternal muse. You've shown me the true meaning of love, and I am forever grateful for the gift of your presence in my life. Today, I vow to love you unconditionally, to honor and respect you, and support you while you spread your wings. I promise to be your partner in all things, to hold your hand through the highs and lows, and to be the unwavering support you deserve."

With heartfelt promises exchanged, the couple then slip rings on each other's fingers, sealing their commitment in a tangible symbol of their adoration.

When they lean in to share their first kiss as a married couple, the garden comes alive with applause and cheers. The ceremony has touched the hearts of everyone present, and the joyous atmosphere envelops everyone like a tidal wave.

Among the clapping crowd, I catch my mother's knowing smile, as if she had predicted this very moment. I roll my eyes, but I hate that she gets to feel like she's been right all along right now. Of course I'm grateful for the support she has always offered, but it doesn't make all of this nonsense with Sebastian sting any less.

Deep down, I know that Mom has warned me about Sebastian over and over, and that I've been a fool to hope, up until the last second of the ceremony, that he'd show up. At least she isn't saying 'I told you so' out loud, which lets me retain at least an inkling of my pride.



*Julia*

THERE'S a flurry of activity after the ceremony concludes, and the bride and groom disappear while the reception begins. The staff quickly move around, holding trays of canapés and flutes of champagne and offering them to guests as they leave their seats to go and mingle. Meanwhile, the live orchestra switches from the slow melodies that played everyone down the aisle and starts the second part of the wedding with more upbeat songs.

The sprawling garden is dotted with over a dozen circular tables that are adorned with intricate floral arrangements, creating an enchanting backdrop for the ceremony. Under a magnificent white tent adorned with billowing drapery and twinkling lights, the ambiance is nothing short of magical. Delicate white petals and vines cascade gently from above, transforming the outdoor event into something reminiscent of a fairytale setting. Once again I'm impressed by what my mother has been able to pull together. I hope Andries recognizes just how blessed he is that his Oma is a master at staging incredible events.

Mother's picturesque garden that surrounds the tent is lush and in full bloom. Vibrant flowers of various hues burst forth from meticulously manicured beds, and towering trees offer a natural canopy, casting dappled sunlight upon the joyous gathering. The gentle breeze carries the scent of blossoms, weaving together with the scent of food that is beginning to be served.

Everything is perfect, and going off without a hitch. And yet, a tinge of

sorrow tugs at my heart as I glance around the gathering, searching once again for Sebastian's familiar face. It's almost an instinct at this point...every few minutes I can't stop myself from looking for him.

I'm acutely aware of the void left by his absence. To put it simply, I long for him to be here, to witness our son's special day, to share in this celebration with me and our family. Sebastian has proven to be more stubborn than I could have ever imagined and I find myself standing at a crossroads, unsure of how to mend what's broken.

While guests mingle, laughing and chatting, their words seem distant and muffled, as if my mind is trapped in a haze of conflict. I finish the drink in my hand, not even tasting it as it burns in my stomach, and place the glass on the tray of a passing server. I made it through the ceremony and I walked my son down the aisle, so my duties for the day are done. Maybe that's why I feel so incomplete and empty. Without a task, I'm just a wife without a husband. The mother of the groom without the father beside her.

Amidst the sea of faces, I catch sight of Alex, holding two glasses of champagne. Wordlessly, he hands me one champagne flute when he reaches me, and raises his glass in a toast.

"Congratulations, Jules," Alex says, his voice warm and reassuring. "Today is a day to celebrate. So stop frowning and drink."

"What in the world could you possibly be congratulating me for?" I ask right back.

"Well, to have walked your son down the aisle while your husband is off brooding somewhere must have taken a lot of strength of will," Alex replies, his tone laced with sympathy. "I'm sorry for his behavior. I really thought he'd have joined us for the ceremony."

I take a deep breath, trying to push back the tears that threaten to spill. "That's alright," I say, trying to sound nonchalant while I shrug one shoulder. "I can't force him to do what he doesn't want to. Plus, Andries is totally okay with him not attending, I guess. And today his is the only opinion that matters."

"It's crazy that he came all the way here and didn't attend." Alex looks at me intently, sensing the pain beneath my composed facade. "Have you seen him around, or did he leave the property entirely?"

"I don't know where he is," I admit, my voice trembling. "And no matter where he went, it doesn't change the fact that his behavior is totally unforgivable."

Alex places a comforting hand on my shoulder, offering me a reassuring squeeze. “Don't say that. I'm sure things will turn out okay.”

I want to believe his words, but the hurt runs deep, and I can't help but replay the hurtful conversation with Sebastian in my mind. The way he dismissed my plea for him to join us, his damned pride taking first place above all else—it all feels like a betrayal.

“I tried so hard to keep our family together,” I confide in Alex, my voice barely above a whisper. “I thought we could put our differences aside for this day, but he just won't let go of his anger about Roxanne...and other things.”

My brother looks at me with understanding in his eyes. “I know it's not easy, but remember, you have so many people here who love and support you.”

I raise my glass, attempting to muster a smile, but I still feel so heavy inside. “Thank you, Alex. It means a lot to have you here.”

His eyes meet mine and I sense the unspoken understanding between us. He knows the pain I'm feeling, the ache of a fractured family. Hell, some of the things that he's been through in his own marriage make my problems with Sebastian pale in comparison. Knowing that he survived all of the trauma on his own reminds me of the strength that resides within myself, the resilience I've honed as a mother.

“You've done a wonderful job raising Andries and Elise, as well as the younglings,” he continues, his words a balm to my wounded soul. “Look around, Julia. This entire wedding is an example of that. All of these people love and care about Andries enough to come to his wedding.”

My throat goes tight, and I take a deep breath to steady myself. My children, my pride and joy, are living proof to the love Sebastian and I once shared. Their happiness is my driving force, the reason I'll keep moving forward despite the pain in my heart. I know my brother means well, but damn...everything comes back around to Sebastian, and his absence.

“Things will turn out okay, Jules,” Alex repeats, trying to reassure me.

“You know, Seb came here only to tell me face-to-face that he won't be attending the wedding.” I tilt my champagne glass back, taking a long drink. “Knowing that, how can you say that things will be alright?”

My brother watches me empty my champagne glass and takes it from my hand, replacing it with the full one he had clearly intended for himself. I take it nonetheless and sip as he answers my question.

“I've seen the two of you make it through so many situations that would

have destroyed any other marriage, and yet you've survived. So, I think this is just an exceptionally large bump in the road. He can't be a stubborn prick forever, after all."

I huff a reluctant laugh. "We will see. He might prove us all wrong and be that way until the end of time."

A smile pulls at the corner of Alex's mouth, but then his voice is more serious when he tells me, "For the sake of you and your children, I hope that's not the case, Julia."

I feel vulnerable when I breathe, "Yeah, me too."

Alex pulls me into a hug when I finish his glass of champagne, and while he doesn't hold me tightly, he also doesn't complain about the wet spot my tears leave on his suit jacket when I pull away. That's what older brothers are for, after all—to be a shoulder to cry on.

\* \* \*

I've made my way over to a throng of guests, engaging in the most surface level conversation as possible to pass the time, simply waiting to see my son and his new wife before I'm free to lock myself in my room. The idea of shutting myself away makes me feel like a teenager again, but I'm past the point of caring. All the high emotions have me exhausted.

My sisters are hovering around here somewhere, but I don't want to rehash any of today's events with my husband. Letting my thoughts drift, I look through the crowd and spot Gabi talking to Elise and Dan. It's an odd combination, and I know there are only two things they could possibly be discussing—the case against Karl, or the charges that have been dropped against Roxanne.

Those cases and charges rank second on my list of things I'm tired of discussing this evening, but there's no avoiding it once Gabi catches sight of me. I may as well get it out of the way now. After excusing herself, she walks in my direction, her knowing eyes filled with concern.

"Why isn't Sebastian here?" she asks gently, as if aware of the storm of emotions swirling inside me. The question catches me off guard, since I was so sure we were going to have more legal talk. I look around quickly, hoping that no one else heard her, and motion my friend to leave the tent and go over to a more secluded part of the gardens.

We reach a small fountain, the tinkling of the water hopefully providing enough white noise to keep anyone from hearing our conversation. I sit on its concrete rim, and sigh. “He doesn't approve of the union, so he didn't want to attend.” The reality of the situation still feels surreal, and I find it hard to accept that the man I married could be so adamant in his disapproval of our son.

Gabi's empathy is evident as she replies, “That’s what I assumed. I’ve seen the lengths that Seb went to just to try and tarnish Roxanne’s reputation, so it’s no wonder he doesn’t want to admit defeat. Stupid, stubborn man.” Her words strike a chord within me, as they reveal the depth of Sebastian's determination to undermine this marriage. The thought of him going to such lengths to oppose Andries and Roxanne's union pains me deeply, and I regret being a part of it, even if my only role was to hide Sebastian's involvement from Andries.

My old friend lowers herself next to me as she speaks, sweeping her skirt out of the way as she does so. “Look, Julia,” Gabi continues, her tone becoming more serious and formal. “We’ve got quite a few people ready to testify against Karl if your son and daughter decide they want to get rid of him for good. This is a golden chance, I don’t know if we will ever have one like it again.”

The offer takes me by surprise, and my mind whirls with conflicting thoughts. Part of me yearns for closure, to sever the ties that bind our family to Karl's dark influence. But another part of me fears that pursuing this path will only deepen the chasm between Sebastian and us. We can never undo the truth of Karl’s parentage, all we can do is hope it stays concealed from him.

“That's what you were talking about with Elise?” I inquire, hoping to gain some insight into my daughter's involvement in this.

“Yes, she's aware of the entire situation since Sebastian was using her to spy on her brother,” Gabi reveals, and a sense of protectiveness surges within me. I never wanted my children to be pawns in our battles, and the fact that Sebastian used Elise to gather information only adds to my dismay.

“Oh, gosh, Gabi,” I sigh, my heart heavy with the weight of my choices. “Sebastian would rather drop this whole thing and leave it in the past. I don’t know what to do. I want Karl gone, more than you can ever know, but....” Even as I utter those words, doubt gnaws at me. What I want is clear—Karl out of our lives for good. On the other hand, I want my husband back, and I want him to be the man I’ve believed him to be through our whole marriage:

A loving, loyal, husband and father. If I go behind his back and eliminate Karl, it might lead to a divorce since that would mean Sebastian broke his father's deathbed promise.

Gabi's eyes widen with surprise. "Did you just say in the past? It's literally making headlines as we speak. Karl is a very public figure now. If you want, we can make sure he's dealt with," she suggests, her voice laced with conviction. Sometimes it still takes me off guard that my lighthearted friend is such a seasoned prosecutor. Though my currently turbulent emotions don't exactly align with my profession, it is what it is.

I find myself torn between the allure of putting an end to the case and the knowledge that Sebastian's loyalty to Karl runs deep. Leaning back on the fountain edge, I let out a heavy sigh. "I don't think you get it, Gabi. Sebastian is very protective of Karl...I'm almost positive he'd never want him put into prison. Let's just drop the case once and for all," I respond, trying to push away the turmoil bubbling within me.

Gabi's reassuring touch on my hand offers some comfort amidst the chaos. "I will leave it open for a few weeks, to give it time for the media frenzy to calm down." Her voice is gentle and understanding, just as familiar as it's always been. She's such a good friend to me. "Then you tell me if you still want to drop it."

"That would be great. Thank you, Gabi." I exhale in relief. At least this is one problem I don't need to worry about right this second.

"You're welcome. But can I ask you a question?" I nod, and Gabi continues, "Are you and Seb...well, are the two of you okay?"

Shifting our focus to the state of my relationship with Sebastian, the heaviness in my heart becomes almost suffocating. "No, we aren't okay," I admit, my voice tinged with sadness. There isn't anyone else in the world I would open up to right now, but Gabi has done so much for me lately that there is no way I can keep all of this from her. She deserves my honesty. "I moved out of the family house and came back here because of our recent arguments. It's obvious his loyalty now lies with Karl rather than with me..."

My friend's concern is palpable, and I appreciate her willingness to listen. She leans into me, shoulder to shoulder, just like we would on the benches back at college all those years ago. "Why is he so protective of Karl though?" she asks, curious. "Isn't he just an employee or something?"

I hesitate for a moment, my mind racing with conflicting thoughts. "Unfortunately, no. They are much closer than that. They are like...well, like

brothers, you know?” The weight of my words hangs in the air, the unspoken truth of their bond piercing my heart. Gabi has no idea that they aren’t just like brothers, that Karl and Sebastian are actually half brothers, and I have no intention of telling her, either. I just want to be as close to truthful with her as I can, and this is the best I can do.

It pains me to admit that their bond seems unbreakable, leaving me feeling like an outsider in my own marriage. How can it be this way when Karl himself doesn’t even know that he and Sebastian share a father? The realization is difficult to swallow, but I can’t deny the reality staring me in the face.

“Julia...” Gabi begins as she looks me in the eye. “I know the two of you have been married for ages, and you’ve got all these kids, but...”

As Gabi continues speaking, my gaze and my mind starts to drift. I’m still holding on to the thread of our conversation until I see two figures strolling through the garden, close enough together that it makes my hair stand on end. It’s Hannah, fifteen year old Hannah, walking with Johan. He has his hands stuffed in his pockets, his suit jacket gone and the top button of his shirt undone. Hannah has her head tilted back, laughing at something Johan says, before she goes back to giving him her full, rapt attention, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear absentmindedly. Oh, no. She’s flirting with him, and from my experience as a mother and a once-teenage girl, I can tell, without a doubt, that she’s totally smitten.

Gabi’s voice fades into the background while I grapple with a few different feelings all at the same time—proud of my daughter’s blossoming into a young woman yet concerned about the implications of her infatuation with Johan. He’s Elise’s first crush, and the idea of Hannah being drawn to him feels both awkward and unsettling. Their age difference wouldn’t be significant if they were both in their twenties, but Johan is too old for Hannah at this time in their lives, and I just don’t know how Elise will handle it. She seems completely happy with Dan, but it might still hurt her feelings to know her little sister had a thing for her first love.

Lost in my thoughts, I realize that I’ve been tuning out everything else when Gabi snaps her fingers and asks, slightly annoyed, “Julia? Are you even listening?”

Gabi’s voice brings me back to the present. I quickly refocus on our conversation, trying to push away the distractions that linger in my mind. “Yes, sorry. This day has just been a lot.”

She smiles understandingly, any annoyance quickly fading. "I bet! Your first child's wedding. It's a big occasion."

We continue to chat, but after a few minutes, my curiosity gets the better of me, and I glance over to check on Hannah and Johan once more. To my surprise, they have vanished from my sight. I wonder where they went and if everything is alright. Should I be concerned?

Deciding to search for them, I excuse myself from Gabi's company and head back to the white tent where the tables are arranged for the wedding reception. I scan the crowd, looking for any sign of Hannah and Johan, but they remain elusive.

Feeling a sense of urgency, I take out my phone and call Hannah, hoping she'll answer and assure me that everything is fine. However, there's no response, and anxiety begins to gnaw at me. I try to remain composed, telling myself that Hannah is a responsible and level-headed young woman. Still, the worry persists.

My eyes dart around the garden, trying to catch a glimpse of my daughter's familiar figure. The vibrant ambiance of the celebration seems to dim as my concern grows. I spot Elise and Dan standing in a loose circle with Lili and Robin, and make my way over to them, not even bothered that I'm interrupting.

"Have you four seen Hannah anywhere?" I ask, reluctant to mention Johan also being gone in front of Elise. If I'm just imagining things, and Hannah doesn't care about Johan at all, there's no reason to stir things up between the sisters.

I can't help but notice how they seem unfazed by my concern. Elise and Dan shake their heads, indicating they don't know Hannah's whereabouts either, and continue chatting with Lili and Robin. I'm tempted to press them further, but I don't want to spoil the festive atmosphere with my worries. I push down a wave of annoyance. Of course no one else is worried, Hannah is fifteen, not a child. She's able to take care of herself.

"Where could they be?" I mutter to myself, my mind racing with various scenarios. Have they simply wandered off to explore the beautiful gardens, or is there something more serious afoot? I try not to let my imagination run wild, but the uncertainty leaves me feeling on edge.

Taking a deep breath, I remind myself that Hannah is a responsible and capable young woman. She's grown into a mature and sensible individual, at least for her age, and I have to trust that she'll make the right decisions. It



isn't that I don't trust Hannah...it's more that I remember what young love feels like and how overpowering it feels, and all I can do right now is hope that she and Johan are behaving themselves. She is still underage, after all. As much as I am fond of Johan, I don't necessarily trust the allure of being young and at a wedding.

As a mother, I will always worry. It's just a fact of life. I worry about their safety, but also about their hearts.

Deciding to give them a little more time, I return to the main gathering area where the tables are set, awaiting the serving of food.

The guests around me are engaged in conversation, laughter, and celebration. I try to put on a smile, not wanting to draw attention to my concerns. Many congratulate me on my son's marriage, while others are clearly trying to decipher where it is that Sebastian could be.

Soon, Roxanne and Andries make their way through the crowd, and the atmosphere fills with excitement and applause. I join in, clapping and cheering for the newlyweds. The joyous energy of the moment is infectious, and for a brief moment, I'm able to forget my worries.

As the celebrations continue, I keep an eye out for any sign of Hannah and Johan. I feel a tug at my heartstrings, hoping they're having a good time and staying safe. I find myself glancing at my phone more frequently, hoping for a message or a call from Hannah, but the silence persists.

I try to remain composed, reminding myself that it's a happy occasion. My son and his wife are here at the table with me, and I know it's time to put Hannah out of my mind for the time being. Still, it's hard to shake off the nagging concern.

Andries and Roxanne both look thrilled, and even more than that, content. This has been a long race for them, and a grueling one, but now it is finished. They're officially married, and there's no way for the world to try and tear them apart anymore. It must be such a relief. They never take their hands or eyes off each other, keeping some sort of connection even as they greet and talk to all of the guests.

Finally, the newlyweds settle into their seats and everyone else does the same. Before the food can come out, though, Andries stands and holds his glass in the air. The reception goes quiet, everyone's attention focused on my son.

"Ladies and gentlemen, family and friends, I stand before you today with a heart brimming with gratitude and joy. Thank you all for being here, for

joining us in celebrating this momentous occasion and witnessing our union. First and foremost, I want to express my deepest gratitude to Oma Margaret for hosting this wonderful event at her estate.” Andries isn’t looking at anyone as he says this part of his toast I notice, and now that I look, I can see the placard at the empty seat next to me bears my mother’s name. She’s supposed to be here, but she isn’t... First Hannah and now Mom? Where the hell is everyone? Noticing her absence too, Andries switches his gaze back to the guests sitting in front of him, and continues his speech. “Oma has always been our family’s unwavering matriarch. Even when I felt like I had no one to turn to in this world, she was always there for me. I feel incredibly fortunate to have her in my life.”

The groom isn’t deterred, though, and turning to his left side, he says, “Next, I want to extend my heartfelt thanks to Yao, who has welcomed me into the family with open arms. Your warmth and kindness have made me feel like a part of the family from the very beginning, and I’m grateful for the acceptance you’ve shown me.”

Yao, who is sitting beside the bride, lowers her head in acknowledgement, her eyes misty. Roxanne reaches out to take her mother’s hand, leaning her head briefly on her shoulder.

“To my dear sister Elise and my steadfast friend, Dan, thank you for the amazing trip to Capri. It was an unforgettable experience, and I cherish the memories we made together. Your love and support mean the world to me, and I am grateful for everything you have done for me. I know I had my melancholy moments there in Capri, but Dan doesn’t call me the brooding poet for nothing.” Everyone laughs, especially Dan, and I see him covertly brush a tear from his eye when he thinks no one is looking.

“And now, I come to the one of the most important people in my life—my dear mom, Julia.” I startle when Andries says my name, looking up at my son with wide eyes while he continues. “You have been my rock, my confidante, and my biggest supporter throughout my life. Today, I’m reminded of the love and strength you’ve shown me, and I cherish the bond we share. I know things haven’t been easy, but you’ve sacrificed so much for me, even today, and I want you to know I will appreciate it forever. Mom, your unwavering love and guidance have shaped me into the man I am today, and I am honored to have you beside me on this special day.”

I’m overcome with emotion, my throat so tight I can barely speak. Andries pauses in his speech, reaching down to offer me a hand, which I take

happily. He wraps me in his arms so much taller than I am, and it's all I can do not to break down and weep openly in front of our entire family and all our friends.

His heartfelt words and the genuine love in his eyes bring tears to my own. "I love you, my dear boy," I whisper back, trying to compose myself as everyone applauds.

"Love you too, Mom," and I can tell that he's affected by all of this just as much. Although I didn't want to be the center of attention at all, it's worth it for this beautiful moment with my oldest child. From a tiny baby to this handsome, confident man, I've loved him unconditionally through every bit of his life.

Once Andries takes a drink of water to settle himself, he finishes his toast. "As we embark on this new chapter in our lives, I want to express my love and appreciation to each and every one of you. Your presence today means everything. I raise my glass to all of you, to the friendships and love that surround us, and to the bright future that lies ahead. Cheers!"

\* \* \*

Once toasts are finished and everyone has taken their seats, the servers begin to bring out the appetizers, which are plates of different croquettes and a fresh green salad. I can't help but pick at my food here and there, not feeling hungry in the slightest.

Considering excusing myself until dinner concludes, I'm about to stand when someone settles into the empty chair next to me. Turning, I see my mother effortlessly joining the conversation as if she hasn't been absent for half an hour.

"Where were you?" I whisper, trying not to draw undue attention. "You missed Andries's speech!"

"Don't worry," she replies with a serene smile, adjusting herself in her chair. "I'm sure someone recorded it. Besides, I caught the essence of it. He's such a wonderful young man."

"Mom, you were gone quite a while. Where did you go?"

"Just attending to a few things," she replies, sipping her champagne.

I frown, but we're too close to the bride and groom for me to interrogate her further. Mom is never just away; if she's disappeared, she's up to

something. However, I know better than to press her for more details now.

Deciding not to push further, I sigh inwardly and follow her lead, placing my white napkin back on my lap and resuming picking at the salad in front of me. Then I partake in casual conversation with her, discussing the wedding, the decor, and the splendid venue that has been made out of her family estate. Her answers are vague and nonchalant, leaving me to wonder what truly occupies her mind.

We continue our meal, and as the main course is served, my attention shifts to searching for Hannah and Johan. My maternal instincts are nagging at me. Johan might have been good for Elise, but for Hannah? It's worrisome.

My eyes scan around the venue, but all they can find is Aleida and Joris busy playing with their younger cousins at the kids' table. I try to focus on something else, like the conversation and laughter around me, the clinking of glasses, and the melodious music from the live orchestra. Yet, my mind keeps drifting back to my mother's uncharacteristic behavior and my missing teenage daughter.

All of a sudden, though, I spot Johan returning inside the tent, causing my heart to skip a beat.

He takes a seat beside Dan, and my eyes dart around the table, searching for Hannah. Elise is there, but the other chair is empty. Hannah is still nowhere to be found. A pang of worry grips my chest, and I can feel my anxiety rising.

I excuse myself from the table, giving a half-hearted smile to my son, Roxanne, and the guests around me. "Excuse me, everyone. I just need to check on something," I say, my voice strained.

I make a beeline for Johan, Elise, and Dan's table, trying to maintain a composed demeanor. "Hey, have any of you seen Hannah yet?" I ask, trying to sound casual even though my mind is racing with concern.

They all look up at me, and my heart sinks as I notice the genuine happiness in their eyes. Elise and Dan, wrapped up in each other's company, seem to be lost in their own world of a new relationship. Johan, on the other hand, appears relaxed and carefree, enjoying the night.

"No, I still haven't seen her," Elise replies, furrowing her brow. "She should be sitting here with us, though. That's strange."

I don't expect Elise or Dan to know where she is, though. So I turn to my target. "What about you, Johan? Have you seen Hannah anywhere?"

Johan seems a bit guarded in his response. "I think she went back inside

the house to go use the bathroom, but I'm not sure," he says, avoiding eye contact. I can't help but notice the way Elise sits up straighter in her chair, her eyes narrowing as she rakes them over Johan, like she knows something I don't. I file away that observation for later, when my oldest daughter and I can have a private conversation.

I nod, trying to hide my concern and not jump to conclusions. I don't quite believe him, but I haven't pinpointed why yet. "Okay, thanks." Giving Johan a polite smile, I turn to leave.

It's tempting to simply run back into the house, considering how much I want to put the mystery of Hannah's whereabouts to rest. But I control myself, walking back into the grand estate, casual and controlled. I can hear the sounds of the wedding reception still in full swing behind me, and how the air is filled with laughter and chatter among the twinkling lights. I feel such a sense of isolation among it all.

Once inside the hallway of the house, I pass by the living room and check the other nearby rooms, but there's no sign of her. As I near the staircase, I consider asking the staff if they've seen her, but I don't want to cause unnecessary commotion.

My mind races with worry, conjuring up all sorts of scenarios. What if something happened to her? What if she's hurt or lost? I try to push away the worst-case thoughts, reminding myself that my mother's estate is one of the safest places in the world for Hannah. She has to be here somewhere.

Then, as if guided by instinct, I follow a faint sound of voices back to the entrance, and finally find my daughter talking to one of her cousins. I stride towards her, my heart pounding from the relief of finding her safe. I try to mask my concern with a stern expression, which Hannah immediately takes note of when she hears my heels on the marble floor.

"Hannah! Finally! Where have you been?" I gush, hoping that my voice doesn't betray how worried I've been.

Hannah, looking annoyed and unapologetic, offers a typical teenage response. "I just went to the bathroom."

Worry is quickly replaced in my mind by exasperation. "Hannah, there are bathrooms designated outside specifically for the wedding. You didn't need to come all the way in here."

"Yeah, but they were full," she retorts, rolling her eyes dismissively.

Suppressing a sigh, I remind myself that she's only fifteen, prone to moments of rebelliousness. "Alright, just let someone know next time. We

were worried about you.”

Hannah lets out an impatient huff, clearly not in the mood for a lecture. “Yeah, yeah, I know. Sorry. Can we just get back to the party now?”

I clench my jaw, but I decide to let it go for now. There's no point in escalating the situation. “Fine, let's go,” I say, trying not to sound too frustrated.

As I walk with Hannah back outside, after saying our goodbyes to her cousin, I can't shake off the tension between us. Her responses are short and defensive, leaving me wondering what's really going on in her mind. I decide to take a chance. “So, how is Johan? I saw the two of you walking in the garden.”

When I inquire about Johan, her attitude changes, and she brushes it off as if it means nothing. But she can't fool me. I saw the way she looked at him, and it worries me. Hannah is still so young, and Johan is her sister's former crush—this could lead to more family issues, and I don't want that for any of us.

“Uh, he's fine, I guess? Why are you asking?”

I might as well address the issue head-on. “My love, I saw how smitten you were with him out there. You can be honest with me.”

She shrugs, aloof, pretending it's not a big deal. “He's fun to be around and to talk to, that's all. It's not like there's a ton of people to hang out with here anyway.”

I know there's more to it, and I gently press further. “He might be fun, but he also used to be Elise's crush, remember? She was very much in love with him.”

Hannah pauses, her expression softening a bit. “El moved on and is with Dan now. I'm sure she doesn't have feelings for Johan at this point. Her and Dan seem pretty serious.”

I nod, understanding her point. “I get that, but that doesn't mean you should flirt with him. It could complicate things.”

Hannah heaves a sigh in frustration. “I'm not flirting, Mom. We just get along well.”

As we continue walking, she changes the subject abruptly. “Is it true that you and Dad are gonna get a divorce?”

I'm taken aback by her question. “Who told you that?”

Her response is simple. “Elise.”

I look at my daughter out of the corner of my eye, and make the difficult

decision to be honest with her. I don't think she's been totally forthcoming with me about Johan, but maybe I can set the right example for her here and now. That doesn't make it any easier for me to say, though, and the words stick in my mouth even as I say them. "I'm thinking about it, yes. But don't worry, darling, we'll figure things out."

She surprises me by stopping in her tracks, hugging me quickly and squeezing tight. "Gosh, Mom, I'm so so sorry." She pulls away, straightening her dress, and I can see a hint of color in her cheeks. The hug was spontaneous, and I think it surprised her as much as it did me.

"What if you guys just take a break instead?" she asks.

My brows instantly lift in surprise at her odd question. "A break?"

"Yeah, like for a year or so, and then get back together," she explains.

I appreciate her concern and creativity in finding a solution, but every minute that Sebastian is absent from the reception is another reason for us to separate...another little bit of time that reminds me how little my husband must love me, to abandon me like this. "I'll talk to your dad about it. We'll see what happens. But I promise you, no matter what, everything will be alright."

I smile at Hannah, hoping to reassure her. It's evident that she's worried about the family, and I don't want her carrying that burden. She's still young, and she should be enjoying her brother's wedding without these heavy thoughts on her mind. The possibility of our family falling apart leaves me feeling like a failure as a mother, and having to explain it to Hannah only makes those feelings multiply.

I reach out to gently squeeze her arm, trying to convey love and support. "Hannah, I want you to know that no matter what happens, your dad and I will always be here for you. We will always love you, and our love for you will never change, no matter what."

Hannah blinks a few times, and then shrugs nonchalantly. "Oh, that's alright, I couldn't have cared less if you guys split up. Seriously, most of my friends don't even have married parents anyways. As long as I have Luna, I'm fine."

Her response catches me off guard, and I struggle to process her words. It's true that divorce is more common nowadays, and I know many families that navigate through it just fine. But to hear my daughter speak so casually about it makes me question if I've somehow failed to create a stable and secure environment for her. On one hand, I'm glad that she seems unfazed by

the idea of her father and me getting a divorce. It's a relief to know that she's not burdened with the weight of our marital issues; but on the other, I'm shaken that she's so aloof about it all.

"Luna? The guinea pig?" I ask, trying to understand what she means.

"Yeah, she's the best. If I ever move out, I want to take her with me," Hannah says, her tone sounding almost dreamy as she envisions her future living on her own.

I'm absolutely baffled by this response, and struggle to voice a response. "Well, Luna is a wonderful companion, and I'm sure she'd love to remain in your care. But remember, we are your family, and we love you. And we will always be here for you, no matter what."

Hannah gives me a small smile, and I can see a glimmer of her old self in her eyes. "I know, Mom. Thanks."

I pull her into a hug, the second in a span of five minutes, holding her close for a moment. My heart aches with the weight of the decisions we must make as a family, but right now, all I can do is be there for my daughter and remind her that she is loved unconditionally.

With that, Hannah pulls away and heads to her seat with Elise, Dan, and Johan. I return to my own place at the head table while my mind whirls with thoughts like a hurricane. The weight of the future presses down, threatening to suffocate any positivity that tries to rear its head inside of me. How did we come to this point? How does our love, once so strong and vibrant, now feel like a fragile thread on the verge of snapping?

My soul aches at the thought of my children caught in the crossfire of our crumbling marriage. Will they understand? Will they process it well? Hannah seems weirdly unbothered, but maybe her attitude is just a shield to protect herself from hurt. I wish I had all the answers, but right now, all I have are doubts and uncertainties.

Mom must sense my inner turmoil when I sit down next to her, because she immediately gives me her full attention. "Did you find my wayward granddaughter?"

"Ha, yes, I did. She was in the bathroom, apparently."

My mother raises one perfectly arched brow. "Oh? Do you believe that?"

I chuckle despite myself, wishing that my only problem in life was Hannah and her mysterious doings. "Maybe not one hundred percent, but I don't think she was getting into any trouble, so I'm not overly concerned."

I turn to my mom and take a deep breath, knowing what I have to ask, but



not wanting to. “Mom...? Listen, you don’t have to say yes, but can I stay here at home with you a little longer? I’m just not sure what the future holds right now.”

Mom doesn’t even seem surprised, only accepting. “Oh, my dear. You can stay here for as long as you want. You and the kids, if needed. Your bedroom will always be your bedroom,” she says, and I feel a surge of gratitude for her unwavering support. Her reassuring words offer a glimmer of comfort, a lifeline to hold onto amid the storm.

But still, I can't shake the feeling that I've let her down, that I've failed in some way. Admitting that she might be right—or that she was right so long ago about Seb—is not easy for me, but the burden of my decisions are inescapable, now.

So turning back to my mother, I playfully ask, “Aren’t you gonna say something like, ‘I told you so?’ You’ve teased me about this far less than I expected.”

She looks at me with a gentle, if amused, smile. “Well, my dear, I must say seeing you unhappy doesn’t bring me much joy. It never has,” she admits, before heaving a long, weary sigh. “Sometimes I wish I could be wrong when it comes to these sorts of things.”

“By things, you mean Sebastian, right? Or my own wedding?” I say, half-joking and half-serious, trying to lighten the mood even a little bit. The situation is far from humorous, but anyone can see the irony in it.

“Precisely,” she replies, her voice carrying a hint of solemnity. After a second, she must be able to read my miserable thoughts, and she frowns. “Darling, tonight is a night for celebration, not all these agonizing topics. Should we talk about something else?”

“Okay,” I relent. “We can try, at least. I just...” Inhaling slowly, I manage to keep my tone even. “I just so wish he could be here...”

“Well, he isn’t,” Mom says with a sense of finality. She briefly rests her hand on my cheek, making me look into her eyes. “But I am here. Men come and go, but I, as your mother, will always be here for you. Even when I disapprove firmly of your choices.”

“Like my wedding?” I ask again, but this time amusement threading on my tone, and Mom’s hand falls from my face as she sighs and laughs sadly.

“Yes, my love. Like your wedding.”

I take another sip of champagne, the bubbles fizzing in my mouth. Will we find a way to mend the fractures in our relationship, or will we drift

further apart? I wish I had the answers. Even just a single one to settle my soul at least a bit.

We eat, and the variety of dishes is impressive and delicious even when I have no appetite. There's food I'm more familiar with, and traditional Chinese cuisine, which Roxanne describes to me as each plate arrives.

Once the plates are cleared, I notice my mother wiping her hands delicately on her napkin and starting to stand. As she rises, the music comes to a stop, and the entire room turns their attention to her, ready to listen to what she has to say. Holding her glass of champagne, she begins, "I promise I'll be brief." Her voice carries a mix of warmth and wisdom as she addresses her grandson, Andries. "My dear grandson, thank you for your wonderful speech earlier today. It's a privilege and an honor to be hosting your wedding at my modest property." There's a touch of humor in her words, and the room fills with laughter. Mom then continues, "I know how hard it is when your child gets married, and all of the joyful and bittersweet things one feels. As a parent, you never quite feel mentally ready for it. You, my dear grandson, got married exactly at the same age as your mother did, so believe me, I know a thing or two about that." She glances over at me, and I can't help but smile. Despite our differences, my mother and I share a bond that runs deep. We've both experienced the joys and challenges of marriage, and I'm grateful that she's here with me. "Nevertheless, despite your disagreements with your mom, here she is at your side for one of the most important days of your life. Not everyone is like us, *but* we are family, and as family, we will always be there for each other. May the years ahead be filled with nothing but lasting love and happiness. To Roxanne & Andries."

I raise my glass along with the rest of the guests, but inside, everything seems to ache. I don't even try to stop myself from looking for Sebastian among the crowded tables one more time, even when I know in my heart that it's in vain. As I search the room, my heart sinks with every passing moment that Sebastian remains absent. The lively reception around me feels like a mocking facade, taunting me with its cheerful atmosphere while I am consumed by heartbreak and bitterness. How could he do this to our son, to me, to our family?

Mom's words, about family always being there for each other, now feel like hollow platitudes, a stark contrast to the reality of Sebastian's betrayal. His absence on this important day is a painful reminder of his disapproval and lack of support.

Anger surges within me, mingling with the heartbreak, creating a whirlwind of emotions that threatens to overwhelm me. I am torn between wanting him here and not wanting to see his face, to be reminded of his actions against me. The uncertainty of our future together fills me with resentment for the man that I love.

Deep down, I know that I deserve better than to be treated this way, and I am resolved to find the strength to confront that harsh reality. Like Mom said, family will always be there for one another, and in my moment of need, Sebastian is nowhere to be found. I can feel the change inside of me, love slowly bleeding away into bitterness, and a part of me feels certain that what he's done to me tonight is unforgivable.

*Julia*

I CAN'T KEEP FEELING sorry for myself. I know this. But still, the thought is tempting. This sort of misery has become almost comforting for me. Anything is better than the disappointed rage I felt when Sebastian left me alone in the billiards room earlier today.

The wine and champagne flow generously, adding a flush of warmth to the already jovial wedding. I've indulged quite a bit myself, and my head feels like it's full of cotton, my cheeks hot. I'm not sure what exactly I've said, but it makes my sister Yara laugh uproariously. The fact that I can't recall anything moment to moment lets me know that it's time to slow down.

So, I excuse myself and head to the bathroom, but the one outside is occupied. I huff, a little chagrined that Hannah was telling me the truth earlier. I was so sure that her bathroom-being-full excuse was a lie. Deciding not to wait, I walk inside the house. It's more familiar to me here anyway, and considering my current state, that's a good thing.

As I make my way through the hallways of my childhood home, I overhear some of the staff talking nearby—their voices echoing within my tipsy mind. Just like the multitude of halls and rooms here at my mother's estate, the staff is also well known to me. Some of them I've known for my entire life. I almost stop to greet them, feeling overly friendly, but now I pick up on their secretive tone and it gives me pause. They're in one of the smaller parlors, and I stop right outside the doorway so I can still hear them, but they can't see me. I'm not usually one to eavesdrop, but something is telling me

that what they're saying has to do with me.

When I'm immediately proven right, it makes my stomach turn. Clarissa, one of the maids, says, "Gosh, poor Julia, do you really think she's gonna get a divorce?"

Another voice, one I don't recognize from sound alone, chimes in. "I don't know, but it can't be an easy situation for the poor woman. If my husband would come all the way to the venue where the wedding of our son was being held, only to let me know he's not attending, I'd definitely hand him the paperwork. And maybe a slap to the face, too."

Their words hit me like a sudden gust of cold wind. My private turmoil is the topic of discussion among the staff, and it stings to know that even within the seemingly safe walls of my mother's home, I can't escape the whispers and speculations. Whether it's Gabi asking me to my face, or the maids talking behind my back, my name seems to be on everyone's tongue.

I take a moment to collect myself, suppressing the overwhelming emotions that threaten to spill out. I continue down the hallway, trying to shake off the sense of intrusion. Heartbreak, bitterness, and anger swirl within me, making it difficult to focus on anything else.

I rush into the bathroom, finally, seeking a moment of solitude to steady my thoughts. Where does the line in my marriage cross from a bad fight into inevitable divorce? I just don't know, even if everyone else in my life thinks that they do. What started as a ploy to scare him and make him realize my hurt has now taken an unexpected turn. Sebastian came all the way to the wedding to share his secret with Andries, effectively making him his ally—no matter how sweetly my son has treated me tonight, he isn't truly on my side. I never anticipated this outcome, which makes me a fool, I guess. Now I find myself hiding in the bathroom, feeling like I might be sick, wondering why in the hell I ever thought a dark family secret would be the right sort of leverage to wield. Even if I wanted to, that card has already been played, and I can never use it again without causing friction between me and Andries. After tenuous months where he didn't speak to me, I never want to get to that point with my son again. Ever.

Then there is Karl, the damn snake. The temptation to seek revenge against him, to have Gabi press charges against him for plotting the cabaret scandal that rocked the news cycle, is strong. Andries and Roxanne would love to see him behind bars for the pain he caused, even if Andries now knows that Karl is his secret uncle. God, that fact gives me the shivers of

disgust even now. But deep down, I know that going down that path won't solve our family's issues. It might make Andries and his bride happy, maybe even give them the feeling of vindication they deserve, but it will be akin to burning my marriage to the ground for good. No matter what an asshole Sebastian is being, I still don't want that. Not yet, at least.

It would be so easy, though. One text to Gabi, and Karl would be out of our lives for good. Almost without realizing what I'm doing, I pull out my phone, flirting with the idea of actually going through with it. Maybe Seb will forgive me if he takes into consideration how emotionally destroyed I am after having to face our son's wedding without him. But I don't consider the picture on my home-screen, and the second I see it, my heart drops to the floor. I see the picture of Sebastian and me on our last vacation in Lake Como...it wasn't even that long ago! Yet, it feels like a distant memory now, amid all the chaos and secrets. He was distracted, a big part of him occupied with mapping out the cabaret scandal that landed Roxanne to be detained for nearly an entire day, but there were good times, too. Times that reminded me of our youth...times that made me happy, and soothed my soul.

A part of me wants to call him, to pour out my heart and hope he will understand, but I know better. Maybe yesterday I would have believed that a heartfelt speech would turn the tides and bring him back to me, but after this afternoon in the billiards room? No. Never. Sebastian is a master manipulator, and he will use my vulnerability against me.

Taking a deep breath, I push away the urge. Instead, I resolve to stand strong and find a way to navigate this storm without him. My children need stability and assurance, not more drama. I can't let my emotions lead me astray. The thought, combined with the very real possibility that I'm on the road to a divorce from the man that I'm still so sure is my soulmate, is sobering.

In the bathroom mirror, I look at myself, tapping away the shadow of mascara my eyelashes have left on my cheeks from the tears that have threatened to fall. My vision swirls as I look at myself in the mirror, and it's the first time tonight that I've really considered how much I've had to drink. It helps me slow my previous, immediate desire to call Seb. I reapply my lipstick, and since I can't splash my face, I simply run freezing cold water over my manicured fingers until I feel like I have a hold of myself again.

As I leave the bathroom and rejoin the festivities, I put on a smile and try my best to be present. The celebration continues, and everyone seems to be

having a good time. Elise and Dan, sitting close together, radiate happiness, and Andries and Roxanne are beaming with love.

I look around the room, making a quick scan for Sebastian yet again, but he is nowhere to be found. Does he even care about the impact of his actions on our family? Does he not see the hurt and disappointment he's causing? I hope his pride is worth all of this, but I can't imagine that it is.

Anger simmers beneath the surface, but I push it away along with the sorrow, refusing to let it consume me. I think back on Mom's speech, seeking comfort in the reminder of family unity. Yet, the pain lingers, and I can't help but feel envious of the seemingly happy couples surrounding me. It's silly, but...if I had never loved Sebastian, this wedding wouldn't even be happening. Our love manifested this, and now it might be gone for good. With a determined exhale, I straighten my posture and push back my miserable thoughts. I won't let anyone see my pain.

Before I can step back into the venue fully, I notice Alex standing alone outside, talking on the phone. He exhales loudly when he hangs up, and his expression is enough to give me a pretty good idea about who the caller might be, so I approach him.

"Work call?" I ask, trying to sound casual.

"Not really," he responds, a hint of frustration in his voice.

I raise an eyebrow, intrigued. "Oh, so who was it?"

He hesitates for a moment before admitting, "I called Seb and asked him to come to the damned reception at least, and, um..." he rubs the back of his neck with his hand, "he declined. I've got no fucking idea why he's behaving the way he is, Ju... but I'm thinking of meeting up with him afterwards. I know it'll be too little too late for the wedding, but something has to be done."

My heart sinks at his words. It seems I can't escape the topic of Sebastian even when I want to. I wonder what he and Alex talked about, and whether Alex is mad at him or not.

If he's going to see my husband after the reception, maybe I should key Alex in on the fact that my own actions might have contributed to this situation. Hours ago, I'd have told him proudly, but the doubt is seeping in faster than ever.

"I know what his deal is," I confess, feeling a weight lift off my chest as I admit the truth to my brother. "I wrote Sebastian a letter forcing him to come to the ceremony or else I'd tell Karl the truth." Alex's mouth falls open, and I

scowl. “Don’t look at me like that, it was a last resort decision, and it blew up in my face anyway! Seb came here and revealed who Karl is to Andries. Needless to say, Andries was beyond pissed knowing I was ready to give any sort of leverage to Karl. I think the idea of being related to Karl, the man he hates the most in the world, was too much for Andries.”

Alex looks shocked by my confession, and I feel a twinge of guilt for putting Sebastian in such a difficult position. “Are you serious, Julia? You really threatened to tell Karl about his relations if Seb didn’t show?”

“And I might have threatened him with a divorce too...” I add, hoping Alex won't judge me too harshly. “If he didn’t do what I wanted...coming here for the wedding.”

“Well, now I understand his attitude a bit better,” he says with a sigh, dragging a hand over his face and groaning. “Now what the hell am I supposed to say to him?”

“I didn't think it'd come to this,” I admit, my voice trembling with emotion. “Alex, I panicked. I just wanted to make him realize how hurt I was, how betrayed I felt. But I never wanted things to end up like this.”

Alex places a reassuring hand on my shoulder. “I know, Jules. It's a tough situation, and emotions are running high. But maybe it's not too late to talk to him, to find a way to work things out.”

I look at him, grateful for his understanding. “You think so? After everything that's happened?”

He nods. “You and Sebastian have been through so much together. A marriage is never easy, and it takes work to make it last. Maybe you two just need some time and space to sort things out.”

I take a deep breath, feeling torn between my love for Sebastian and my frustration with our struggles. “I don't know, Alex. Part of me feels like I've had enough of this constant battle. But another part of me still loves him and wants to make it work.”

He offers a gentle smile. “Then maybe you should try talking to him without any threats or ultimatums. Just be honest and open with each other. That's the only way to find out if there's still a chance for your marriage.”

I consider his words, realizing that he might be right. Perhaps it’s time to put aside the anger and bitterness and have a genuine conversation with Sebastian. I know it won't be easy, but I owe it to myself and our family to at least try.

“Alright. I'll talk to him,” I say, determination in my voice. “One way or



the other, a conversation needs to happen.”

My brother pats me on the shoulder, before an odd expression crosses his face. “The poor bastard,” Alex chuckles, shaking his head.

Frowning, I cross my arms. “What do you mean?”

“Well, that Sebastian is finally figuring out that you’re the daughter of Margaret Van Dieren, is all. He might think he has the upper hand, but mark my words, I bet he’s scared shitless, too.”

An unexpected laugh escapes me, but before I can respond, the sounds of laughter and celebration from the wedding reception draw me away. Looking over, I see Andries and Roxanne heading towards the cake table, and the gathering of people around them. “Looks like it’s time for cake.”

Alex hums in agreement, and we walk back into the wedding tent before we can miss anything important. Once inside, Alex peels away, heading towards Petra, who is deeply engaged in conversation with Elise. It amuses me to see the two of them talking so effortlessly, but then it dawns on me that Elise is eighteen and Petra is twenty. She’s closer in age to her aunt than she is to Hannah. I can’t help but chuckle to myself, thinking about how the age gap between Sebastian and I was scandalous when we first got together, but Alex marrying Petra made the difference between Seb and I pale in comparison. Now they hold the title of couple with the biggest age gap in our family. I shake my head, marveling at how time flies and relationships evolve.

But as I watch Alex tenderly kiss his wife, the melancholy I’ve been avoiding comes back full force. Seeing the two of them reminds me of the sweet moments Sebastian and I used to share. But now, our relationship is crumbling, and the future seems uncertain. I sigh inwardly, wondering if we can ever recapture the love and connection we once had. Can things ever really be the same?

The haziness in my mind from earlier is all but gone, and I miss it. Plucking a glass from one of the passing servers, I watch Elise make her way back to Dan, and the sparks flying between the two. Lost in my thoughts, I absently sip my champagne, trying to distract myself from the growing sadness and tension. The music picks up, and I see Roxanne and Andries embracing near the cake table, whispering secrets only meant for each other, the beading on Roxanne’s dress catching the light and sparkling. It’s a beautiful sight, and I want to be happy for them. I *am* happy for them. Happy, but still wrapped up in my own issues, apparently. Why can’t I just let go for

one evening and deal with this all starting tomorrow?

“Is everything alright, dear?”

The voice gives me a start, but when I turn to see my mother, I give her a half-hearted smile. “I’m fine, Mom.”

But she knows me too well. “You don’t have to pretend with me, Julia. I can tell something is bothering you,” she says, her hand reaching for mine.

I take a moment to gather my thoughts before speaking. “More thoughts about my husband, of course. Knowing that he came all the way to the venue but didn’t attend the wedding. It’s...it’s unforgivable,” I admit, my quiet voice tinged with bitterness.

She squeezes my hand gently. “You’re right, it is.”

“I just can’t believe he would do this to us, to Andries,” I say, my voice breaking.

Mom gives me a knowing look. “Men like Sebastian don’t always think about the consequences of their actions. But you’re strong, Julia, and you have your family’s love and support. He can’t take that from you, not ever.”

I sigh and lean against her shoulder, trying to find some semblance of peace amidst the turmoil. “I know. I just wish things could have been different.”

“Sometimes life takes unexpected turns, and sometimes life takes the trash out for us, even when we don’t want to admit that it’s trash in the first place.”

The corner of my lip pulls up. *Trash*, huh? My mother’s flair for the dramatic has only gotten more intense with age.

Hand in hand, my mother and I join the cheers that fill the air as Roxanne and Andries cut the cake together. Behind my bright smile, so wide that it makes my cheeks ache, memories float to the surface of my mind again and again. Memories of my own wedding day, memories of holding Andries for the first time...all of my most beautiful moments, and Sebastian was beside me for every single one. I wish Sebastian were here to share this important moment with me, to add it to the collection of things we’ve shared as husband and wife, but he’s nowhere to be seen.

I join in the applause, congratulating the newlyweds. In the corner of my eye, I see Hannah and Johan standing together. Despite my previous talk with her, my stubborn teenage daughter seems to be unfazed. It frustrates me to no end. I can’t understand why she’s so insistent on spending time with her sister’s ex-crush. It’s like she’s deliberately trying to push my buttons. Hell,

maybe she is. Sweet and sour, that's my Hannah.

I take another sip of champagne, trying to numb the swirling emotions inside me, before I go and sit by myself for a moment and watch the happy couples dance together. The strains of a romantic song fill the air, reminding me of the days when Sebastian and I used to dance like that, lost in each other's arms. Just like the first night we met...the ballroom, the library, the feeling of fate when we swayed together.

I'm shaken from my reverie when Elise appears beside me, my mother and Dan next to her. "Mom, Oma is going to take a picture of us three. Get up."

I sigh internally, but rise anyway, smoothing my dress. "Of course, love."

Mom fumbles with Elise's phone, waving the three of us together. "Gather up."

Elise, Dan, and I huddle together, posing for the camera. I try to put on a smile, but Elise can see through me. She knows when something's bothering me, and I can tell she's concerned. Before Mom takes the picture, Elise leans over and kisses me on the cheek. I know my smile from the surprise bit of affection is genuine, and that it will make a lovely picture. My thoughtful Elise warms my heart.

"Are you okay?" she asks once the picture taking is done.

"I'm fine, sweetheart. Just thinking about how fast time flies, seeing you all grown up and Andries getting married. It's a mix of emotions, that's all."

"Well, you raised me well, Mom. Can't you see I'm perfect?" Elise jokes, before her tone becomes more serious. "I love you, and I'm so grateful for everything you've done for me."

Tears well up in my eyes at her sweet gesture and words. She's such a caring and thoughtful young woman, and I'm immensely proud of her.

"I love you too, darling. You're my rock, and I'm blessed to have you in my life."

"I'll always be here for you," she promises.

Then, like every other talk I've had tonight, the conversation turns to Sebastian. Elise asks if he's reached out, and I have to be honest with her.

"No, he hasn't. Not a single message or call."

She taps her finger against her mouth in thought. "Huh. I thought he'd at least check in after the ceremony."

"I don't know, El. Nothing about your father's behavior makes sense lately." I look above us, at the hanging flowers and twinkling lights, my chest

tight. “Truthfully, I want to call him and just figure out a way to make up. But I’m afraid it’s too late for all of that.”

Elise blows out a breath, annoyed by my words. “Mom, you're allowed to be hurt and upset. Don't blame yourself for expressing your feelings. Dad needs to take responsibility for his actions too.”

“I just wish he'd talk to me, even if we disagree. I don't want to lose him, but I can't keep living like this either.” I bite the inside of my cheek, torn between wanting to change the subject and getting more information from my daughter. If Seb hasn’t contacted me, maybe he’s reached out to his children. “Has he called or messaged you at all? You don’t have to tell me what he said....”

Elise frowns, clearly upset by her father's behavior. “Since the day he fired me, I haven't spoken to him either, really. It's like he doesn't care about us anymore, Mom. I don't see how you can fix things between the two of you when he’s acting so distant...and, frankly, like an asshole.”

“Watch your language,” I hiss, before exhaling in defeat. “He's still your dad, El.” My voice is tinged with sadness. “You can talk to him as your dad, not just as your mother’s husband or CEO of the company where you had an internship.”

Elise raises an eyebrow, a hint of frustration in her expression. “Really? When has Dad ever called me without some ulterior motive or agenda? I can't remember the last time he called just to check in and see how I'm doing. There was one night before Dan and I made things official that I thought he had gotten a clue and was going to act like my dad again and not like my boss, but it was just a one time thing, apparently.”

I can't deny the truth in her words, and it only adds to my heartbreak. I never imagined that our family could reach such a breaking point, and I feel lost and uncertain about how to move forward.

Elise wraps her arms around me, giving me a comforting hug. “I just want you to be happy, Mom. Whatever happens, know that I love you, and I'm here for you.”

I hug her back tightly. “Thank you, El. You and your siblings are the most important things in my life, and I'll do whatever it takes to protect and support you all.”

The evening goes on and the celebration continues. I can't shake off the feeling of emptiness that seems to take up every bit of me. It hurts knowing that Sebastian hasn't even bothered to reach out to our children, not even to

check on how they are doing on such an important day. It's as if he's completely detached himself from our family, and the pain of his absence is like an open wound. Oh well, he will regret it. I'm sure of it.

From afar, I notice Elise and Dan joining Andries and Roxanne who are walking with Aleida and Joris towards me. The six of them are striding in my direction, as if there are up to something.

“Let's take a family picture with the kids,” Andries comments once he reaches me.

Aleida and Joris are beaming with joy and I waste no time in raising from my seat to stand beside all of them and get ready for the picture.

The wedding photographer asks us to stand closer and so we do. Andries stands on my left and Elise on my right with their respective significant others on each side, while Aleida and Joris are all giddy in front of us. Finally a few shots are taken, and while I'm proud to capture those wonderful moments with my children, I so wish my husband would have been in those pictures.

*Julia*

THE LIGHTS GO LOW, coalescing over the dance floor in a warm spotlight. Hand in hand, my son and his wife enter the floor, joining together for their first dance. The music from the live orchestra swells, and the love between the newly married couple is obvious to everyone.

My mind is far away, and it takes me a second to realize the crowd is parting to let someone through to me. Suddenly, the butler, Stuart, appears, his expression serious.

He leans his head close to mine, so no one else can hear what he's saying. "Someone is outside the gates and wants to talk to you."

A spark of hope flickers within me. Could it be Sebastian finally coming to his senses? "Who?"

"He said his name is Kenneth, and that you know him," Stuart replies dryly, clearly unhappy about having to interrupt the wedding for this.

I groan internally, my eyes fluttering shut as I gather myself. Of course it's Kenneth, the notorious journalist from RTL who loves to target our family and paint us in a negative light. At this point, I wonder if the man has an obsession with us, considering how relentless he is.

"He also said he holds important information about your family, and that he's written an article about it that is ready to be released. Apparently he wanted to let you know before publication," Stuart explains, his face drawn in a scowl.

I ponder for a moment whether to let Kenneth in or speak to him outside.

I know how manipulative and ruthless he can be, and I don't want to give him the opportunity to twist my words or use any information against us. Plus, I can't imagine that Andries or Roxanne would be happy with me inviting a journalist to their wedding without even bothering to ask. Deciding it's best to keep our conversation away from prying eyes, I opt to speak to him outside.

With a last longing look towards my son and Roxanne, embracing during their dance, I give Stuart a small nod. "Let's go."

Stuart drives me to the gates in a golf car, and as I step outside the property, my eyes alight on Kenneth who stands tall before me, a smug grin on his face. I suppress the desire to tell him exactly how I feel, and instead motion the man to a corner outside the property, under a large tree that gives us a modicum of privacy. I can't believe that Kenneth is here, just to add on to my bad night. He revels in causing drama and controversy, and I can feel the tension rise within me. He's somehow everywhere, but we rarely see him coming. From the damned interview with Tess Hagen slandering me, the predatory interview with Petra at her mother's funeral, even Yara's affairs in St. Moritz, Kenneth has haunted us for years. Most recently, he's been like a shark that has scented blood when it comes to Roxanne's scandal. I wonder if that's why he's here tonight....

"Julia van den Bosch, what a pleasure to finally meet you in person," he greets, his voice dripping with insincerity.

I keep my composure and respond calmly, crossing my arms. "What do you want, Kenneth?"

Hi gives me nothing but a smile, his eyes gleaming with mischief. "Oh, just to have a little chat about your illustrious family and some *important* information I've come across."

I can't help but feel a surge of anger and frustration. Kenneth has always been relentless in his pursuit of sensational stories, no matter the cost to our family's reputation. From digging up past scandals to spinning innocent incidents into tabloid fodder, he has made a fortune by preying on our lives. I'm sure he makes so much from harassing us that he doesn't even bother with writing anything else anymore. Our family probably pays all this man's bills, and then some.

As he stands there, I can't help but see him as a vulture, ready to swoop in and exploit any vulnerability. But I know I must handle this situation carefully, as confronting him in anger could only fuel his appetite for controversy.

“Alright. I’m listening,” I tell him, steady but guarded.

Kenneth smirks, knowing he has the upper hand. “Well, it's quite interesting, really. You see, I was writing about your son’s wedding when one of my sources sends me a rather intriguing footage of your husband...” Kenneth is almost vibrating with glee, pulling out an iPad as he speaks.

My heart skips a beat. What could he possibly have on Sebastian? Certainly the issues between him and I haven’t gotten out into the real world yet, have they? It’s only been hours since our confrontation in the billiard room. I try to maintain my composure, not wanting to show any sign of weakness.

“He was spotted at a gentlemen’s club just two hours ago, indulging in some questionable behavior,” he continues, the excitement evident in his voice.

My mind races, and I fear the worst. I can't believe that Sebastian would do something to jeopardize our family’s reputation further, especially on such an important day. Does that mean Seb already went as far as cheating on me after our conversation? Kenneth has to be exaggerating, or maybe he’s managed to find footage of someone that looks enough like Sebastian that he might be able to push the story through. I've got to remember that Kenneth is known for exaggerating and manipulating stories for his own gain. I can't let him control the narrative and exploit our private lives for public consumption.

Summoning my courage, I ask, “And what do you intend to do with this footage?”

He grins, clearly relishing the drama he's creating. “Oh, I'm thinking of publishing it, of course. A little scandal always sells well,” he replies, the malice in his eyes sending a shiver down my spine. “I’ve already written the story to go along with it, too. My readers love to get as much details as they can, and I’m always more than happy to give them what they want.”

I take a deep breath, trying to keep my emotions in check. “And I assume you came here to give me a chance to respond before you publish it?”

Kenneth smirks again. “Well, I thought it was only fair to let you know what I have. You know how much I value your family's side of the story.” The sarcasm in his voice makes my skin crawl.

“I appreciate the ‘offer’, Kenneth, but I'm not interested in playing your little games.”

His eyes narrow, sensing my resistance. “Oh, come now, Julia. You know



how this works. Give me a good story, and I might just reconsider publishing this little video.”

I feel the urge to lash out at him, to tell him to leave us alone and stop exploiting our lives for his own gain. But I know that engaging with him in this way would only feed into his agenda.

Instead, I stand my ground and keep myself as stoic as possible. “I have nothing to say to you. You can do whatever you want with that footage, but I won't be part of your circus.”

One of his hands goes to his chest as he gasps, feigning outrage at my words. “I'm wounded. We could talk about this more at length, if you'd like. Why don't you invite me in for tea?”

“There are a lot of guests visiting today,” I snap right back, my eyes narrowed. “I guess your invitation got lost in the mail.”

“Ah, yes, the wedding of your oldest son. How is it going without Sebastian being present?”

“What do you want, at once?” I repeat, my patience wearing thin. “I've already told you I'm not getting involved.”

“How are you feeling without your husband here by your side for the wedding of your oldest son?” he repeats, ignoring my question. “That must be very painful for you. Do you want to make a comment about how Sebastian being gone makes you feel?”

I refuse to give him the satisfaction of a response, so I remain silent.

“Fine.” Kenneth sighs. “If you don't want to collaborate now, maybe you will once you see this.” He turns the iPad he's holding, and a video begins to play. My heart sinks as I see Sebastian and Karl sitting at a table in what looks like a private bar or maybe a fancy lounge in Amsterdam. The room is exquisite, with a luxurious surrounding, including dark wood paneling, leather furniture, and rich tapestries. The video was clearly taken without their knowledge, and I can feel the anger building up inside me. It's shaky camera phone footage, but it's obviously Sebastian, no matter how much I want to deny the truth.

I watch, unable to tear my eyes away, as Sebastian and Karl drink and talk. The camera pans around the establishment, showing other tables with waitresses dressed in provocative outfits. It looks like a gentlemen's club, just like Kenneth pointed out, and the scene is infuriating. The lights in the room are low, the music soft and sensual. When the camera pans around, I can see multiple tables, and many more scantily-dressed women working.

My stomach rolls as a waitress stops by their table, a filigree black mask covering her face and lingerie that matches. Her skin is pale and flawless, and her long legs are balanced on a pair of stiletto heels. She opens a bottle of champagne, all the visible parts of her bouncing alluringly with the motion, and fills the flutes on the table with the bubbling liquid.

The video abruptly ends, leaving us in silence, my pulse pounding in my ears. Kenneth's sinister grin widens as he watches my reaction. "Quite a compromising situation they're in, don't you think? Nothing better than being in a gentlemen's club surrounded by half-naked women while the heir of the family is getting married, huh? Should I assume that Sebastian doesn't approve of the union?"

My heart sinks at the sight of Sebastian with Karl, especially in such an inappropriate establishment. The pain is unbearable, and I can't help but feel humiliated at the thought of my family and staff seeing this video. I don't want anyone's pity.

I clench my fists, my emotions roiling. "So what's your plan?" I manage to ask, trying to keep my voice steady. "Release the footage and your damned article? So what? You've done worse to us before."

"Oh, the possibilities are endless," he gloats. "This could be the story of the year, a scandal that could make or break careers."

My mind races, trying to figure out how to handle this situation. I shouldn't let Kenneth use this video to hurt my family, but I'm also exhausted. And so hurt by what Sebastian has done, that I find it hard to summon the passion necessary to protect him. "You're enjoying this, aren't you? Hurting people just to boost your career." My anger seeps through the question and it leaves Kenneth even more amused.

"It's nothing personal, Julia, just business." He shrugs, unapologetic. "And this business has made me quite a little fortune."

I take a deep breath, trying to steady myself. "Why even come here if you've made up your mind, then? You're going to do whatever you want, anyway."

Kenneth's smile falters slightly, but he quickly regains his composure. "I just wanted to check first if there was any comment you wanted me to add on that story. But I've gathered that you are too busy with your son's wedding to bother with it."

I narrow my eyes at him, a question forming in the back of my head. "And what about Andries and Roxanne? Are you gonna be an asshole about

them too?”

He seems surprised, but collects himself quickly. “I’m writing a piece about your son’s wedding, yes—who’s attending, who’s not...but nothing misguided, I can assure you. All good PR for the young Andries. The truth is that little video puts me in a complicated position, so I came to you, instead. Given how helpful Andries has been lately, I was unsure whether or not to publish this video. On one hand, it’s his dad and this might go against our agreement, but on the other, it’s Karl...who I know your son hates,” Kenneth explains, sounding more sincere than usual. “He hates Karl so much that I can’t help but think he’d overlook his father being involved if it helped to make Karl look worse in the public eye.”

“Don’t you think you should talk to Andries himself, then?” I ask, trying to redirect Kenneth’s focus away from the video. “If you’re so worried about jeopardizing your deal.”

“Well, maybe, but it’s his wedding day today, and it’s your husband who’s in the video, so I assumed *you’d* have wanted to see what he’s doing while you are here alone,” Kenneth replies evenly, surprising me with his tone. It’s like he’s dropped the act of ruthless reporter, and is almost approachable all of the sudden. His response intrigues me, and I can’t help but wonder about the possible agreement between him and Andries. While Kenneth clearly came here to tease me with the video footage of my husband and maybe get a few inflammatory quotes from me, he seems to be rather careful about not wanting to piss off my son. Kenneth has never been this agreeable before, so maybe I should just play along.

I nod pensively, considering his words. An idea starts to form in my mind, and I decide to take a chance. “Okay, I understand that. Can you let me know if your source is still in there?”

He raises an eyebrow. “Sure,” Kenneth agrees, pulling out his phone to call his source.

While he’s on the phone, I feel a mix of anxiety and curiosity. What could possibly be happening inside that establishment right now? Part of me doesn’t want to know, but I can’t ignore the need for information.

“Okay, good. So tell me, do you know if Sebastian van den Bosch is still in there?” Kenneth speaks into the phone, and I lean in, eager to hear the response. As he listens to his source, Kenneth’s face lights up with excitement, as if he’s just stumbled upon an even juicier secret. “Are you sure about that...? Do you have her name...? Alright, thanks.”

Kenneth is so caught up in what he's just heard, it seems like he has forgotten that I'm right here. I clear my throat delicately, and he looks up from his phone, before finally hanging up.

"Well?" I ask, foot tapping in annoyance.

He seems hesitant to share the information with me, but my insistence pushes him to speak. Something about the way that the unscrupulous Kenneth doesn't seem thrilled to tell me what's going on gives me a pit in my stomach. It has to be something really bad I fear, and as soon as he starts talking, my worries are confirmed.

"He, ah, seems to have gone to another room with one of the ladies that work there." Kenneth rubs the back of his neck uncomfortably. If he wasn't such an ass, I might even feel bad for how awkward he's clearly feeling. "I'm not really sure what they went into the back for, but they usually go for lap dances, and more...."

My heart drops at the idea, and I can't even believe what I'm hearing. The day of our son's wedding, and Sebastian is involved in such behavior. It feels like a nightmare, and I struggle to process the information. Disgust, anger, and terrible sadness all fight for dominance inside me.

"Are you sure it was him?" I manage to ask, desperately hoping for some sort of denial.

"According to my source, yes. There might be a camera in the private room, so you can always go there and ask them to check," he says, crushing any hope I had of it being a misunderstanding.

I feel a whirlwind of emotions, from shock and anger to heartbreak and humiliation. How could he betray me like this? On such an important day for our family?

Before I can gather my thoughts, Kenneth continues, "You know, I have to wonder, Julia, your husband seems to have a pattern of questionable behaviors. From his involvement with Karl to this... has he always been like this?"

I can't bear to hear any more, and I cut him off. "Enough! Just leave."

I'm beyond devastated, my heart feeling like it's being torn apart. People might pity me for being married to such a man, but deep down, I know that this exposure might be the wake-up call Seb needs. And, if things go horribly and divorce really is on the horizon for us, this footage will absolutely protect my reputation.

My emotions are a whirlwind of conflicting feelings as I watch Kenneth

turning on his heels. “Kenneth, wait.”

He hadn’t gotten far, and quickly comes back, curiosity stamped on his features. “Yes?”

The words are hard to say, and they hang on my tongue like molasses. I can’t believe that I’m about to do this to my own husband, but he’s left me no choice at this point. “You know what? Feel free to publish that video. If he was a decent man, he’d have been here, not doing God knows what in that club.”

Kenneth nods, seemingly satisfied with my response. “Well, I’m really happy to have spoken to you. And, um, I’m sorry to have bothered you.” The sharp-tongued journalist is uncharacteristically uncomfortable.

Despite my emotional turmoil, I force a smile, trying to remain put together in front of this man. “I highly doubt that you’re sorry, but I don’t expect you to be.” Before Kenneth goes, I inhale deeply and muster the strength to ask one more favor. “Can you AirDrop me the video, please? It shouldn’t be a problem since you’re about to leak it anyway.”

Kenneth obliges and sends me the video. Once I have it, I thank him again, trying to sound polite. “I do appreciate you coming to speak to me before blowing this all wide open. Please, feel free to send me a link to the article about my son’s wedding once it’s published.”

“I will,” he responds, a hint of eagerness in his voice, already envisioning the headline and the attention it will bring.

I watch the man leave, heading to a waiting car parked further down the driveway. I release a breath as he goes, trying to let some of the tension bleed out, but it doesn’t work. I feel like a wire that has been wound too tightly, or a bomb about to explode. Starting to call Stuart to bring me back to the party, I pause. I can see the wedding tent in the distance, and decide that the walk will do me some good. I’m too full of nervous energy to just return as I am right now.

As I walk down the driveway, the tears on my face are like an unrelenting stream, my heartbreak too overwhelming to contain. How could Seb behave so shamelessly? Here I am, present at our son's wedding, celebrating a momentous occasion in our family's life, while he's off indulging in some sordid affair. The pain in me is unbearable, and I can't fathom how he could do this to me.

Sebastian used to be vehemently against any form of exploitation of women, condemning the objectification of others in any way. So, the thought

of him being in a club like that, surrounded by scantily clad women, is impossible to believe. Yet, I now have the proof of his actions right here on my phone. That place wasn't just a normal social club; it was undoubtedly designed to lure patrons with more enticing and illicit offerings.

I can't help but wonder how long this has been going on, how many times he's visited places like that behind my back. The trust I once had in him feels shattered, replaced by a deep sense of betrayal and hurt. My mind is flooded with questions, doubts, and painful images, making it hard to think straight.

My heels click on the concrete as I walk, and the weight of the situation bears down on me. The picturesque, familiar surroundings of the estate lose their beauty. The trees and fragrant gardens now seem like silent witnesses to my crumbling world. I miss my husband, and at the same time, hate him for making a fool out of me.

But I can't let this destroy me; I have to be strong, not just for myself but for my children. The thought of my family's reputation being dragged through the mud by the media, thanks to Kenneth's article and Sebastian's actions, makes me clench my fists out of frustration. I need to face this head-on, confront Seb, and decide what's best for my future and the future of our children.

With each step I take, the grief and misery that threatens to crush me is replaced by the knowledge that I have to fight. No matter how much it hurts, I know I need to face the truth and make some tough decisions. Our son's wedding day, something Sebastian and I have talked about ever since Andries was born, has become a turning point in my life. Not the type of turning point I expected, but one that will test my resilience and strength like never before.

I reach the tent, surrounded immediately by the sounds of the orchestra interspersed with laughter. There is only one person that I feel comfortable sharing all of this with, and it isn't too hard to find my brother, talking quietly to his wife with his son asleep on his shoulder. There's a patch of drool on his suit jacket, and it makes me smile.

He sees me out of the corner of his eye and turns. I wave him over, and thankfully, he doesn't hesitate, handing the baby to Petra and heading in my direction.

Once Alex gets close enough to me, his expression deepens, matching the severity of my pain. "What's up? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Well, I've certainly seen something that has upset me, that's for sure. I know why Sebastian didn't bother to come back here."

He furrows his brow. "What do you mean?"

"Come over here for a minute." The urge to confide in someone's too strong to resist. I pull him aside, away from the festivities, and show him the video I received from the journalist. Alex's jaw drops, the shock on his face mirrors the turmoil in my heart.

"Do you recognize the place, by any chance?" I ask, desperate for any clue that could shed light on Seb's behavior.

"Who gave you this?" Alex demands, ignoring my question, concern evident in his voice.

"A journalist," I tell him, knowing that Alex will immediately identify the reporter in question.

"For fuck's sake, don't tell me Kenneth is on our back again?" His frustration is palpable.

"It seems like it," I sigh, exhausted at the media's relentless intrusion into our lives. "He got the video from a source and asked me what to do with it. So at least he had the decency to ask before publishing it."

"And what did you tell him?" Alex presses, wanting to know the full extent of the damage control I attempted.

Annoyed, I throw my hands in the air. "Alex! Focus! Do you know the club, yes or no?"

"No, I have no idea, but what did you tell Kenneth?"

"I told him to do whatever he wanted," I fess up, feeling torn about my decision. Part of me wants Seb to face the consequences of his actions, but another part worries about the impact it will have on our family's reputation. I still love my husband, and I don't want him to suffer.

Without waiting for Alex's reaction, I find myself walking away, seeking solace in the gardens, away from the prying eyes of the wedding guests. I hear my brother say my name, but tears are pricking at the corners of my eyes again, and I just can't stand the idea of breaking down into sobs right in the middle of everyone at Andries's wedding. The emotions swirling inside me are too overwhelming to bear, and I need a moment of solitude to collect my thoughts.

I wander through the serene surroundings, my mind is a whirlwind of conflicting feelings. I'm torn between my desire for justice and my fear of the fallout that exposing Seb's actions will bring. The image of him in that inappropriate establishment, betraying not just me but our entire family, haunts me like a dark shadow.

But I can't let this define me. I can't allow Seb's actions to destroy everything we've built together. I need to find the strength to face this head-on, to make decisions that are best for me and my children. Especially if Sebastian refuses to do so. I wonder if he even considered what this will do to Andries and Elise's reputation? And if the shame of it will stick around long enough to affect our younger children?

Sebastian has made our marriage a battleground, and I can't back down now. I don't want to fight him, but he has messed things up so badly that there is nothing else for me to do. Finding a small stone bench around the same fountain where Gabi and I spoke earlier, I lower myself down and smooth my hands over my silky dress. Closing my eyes, I try to let the calm sounds of the fountain wash away the urgency of all the things I'm feeling so I can finish out the night.

I continue to sit in the garden, lost in my thoughts, until I feel a gentle touch on my shoulder. "Your brother told me I might find you here," Mom says softly, concern evident in her eyes.

I offer a weak smile and scoot over to make space for her beside me. She takes my hand in hers, and I find comfort in her touch. I look at my mother, and it's clear that Alex must have told her about the video. I feel like a little girl again, vulnerable and desperate for the comfort of my mom.

She wraps her arms around me, and I let myself cry for a moment, releasing the pent-up emotions that have been tearing me apart. The weight of betrayal and disappointment feels unbearable. I just feel so damned awful.

"I thought it'd never happen to me," I choke out, my voice trembling with sadness. "Our marriage was so beautiful...how could he do this to me?"

"Well, we don't know for sure what he did with the girl," Mom tries to console me, her words gentle. I know it must be hard for her, considering how much she herself hates Seb.

I shake my head, unable to hold back the truth any longer. "Mom, stop it. He went to a club with waitresses in lingerie and then went to a private room with one of them." The pain in my voice is raw and evident. "There's no question, and there's only one reason someone gets a private room with a dancer."

Her expression softens, and she pulls me into another hug. "I know how much it hurts," she says, her voice filled with empathy. "I'm here for whatever you need." She has always been a pillar of strength for our family, and I know I can rely on her to support me through this difficult time. I have



the briefest thought that I wish I were a little more like her—ruthless and strong when it's required. Instead, I'm weak.

But deep down, I also know that I need to confront Seb and address this issue directly. I can't let his actions go unnoticed, and I must find a way to navigate through the storm that has been unleashed. As I lean on my mother for support, I realize that I have a long road ahead of me. A long, miserable, heart-rending road.

*Sebastian*

IT'S ELEVEN P.M., but it feels so much later. So much has happened today that it feels almost impossible that it isn't even midnight yet. I step out of the car, shoving my hands into my pockets as I stride into the estate. Home, finally.

Before I can even take off my blazer, I'm met with the butler, who informs me of Alex's presence in the library. And when he sees the frown on my face, he quickly adds, "I was under the impression that Mr. Van Dieren is always allowed access to the home. He was dropping off the children, and wanted to wait to speak to you."

"Yes, that's right. I'll head over right now." Why did I even think I would be able to rest tonight without having to deal with more of my wife's dramatics?

"Of course, he's here to see me," I mutter to myself, making my way to the library, wondering what this impromptu meeting is all about.

I know he must hear me enter, but Alex doesn't immediately turn around. As I step into the library, I notice him scanning the bookshelves, reaching out to run his finger over the spine of a book here and there. I guess he's collecting his thoughts, but I'm exhausted, and I don't have time for mind games, even from one of my closest friends. Finally, he speaks, and his voice is quiet. I can't tell what he's feeling, he sounds so neutral. "It's here where you and Julia first met, isn't it?"

I glance at him, trying to maintain my composure despite the sinking feeling in my gut. "It is..." I tell him hesitantly. What is his point? "She was

hiding from the party we were at and found the library to hide in. It just so happens that I was also hiding here, and that's when we first saw one another."

Alex just hums. My mind is racing to find a way out of this confrontation. Alex is in the unenviable position of being Julia's brother while also being a close friend of mine. I'd never dream of asking him to pick sides, but if he did, there is no doubt in my mind that he would choose Julia. And the fact that I might lose my wife *and* one of my best friends is a fact that I am not ready to face.

Now, Alex turns, and the look on his face makes me pause. He's dead serious, and there's a note of anger in the way his mouth is turned down at the corners. He doesn't need to say a single thing, because I know exactly why he's here.

"Oh, c'mon, Alex." My frustration boils over. I can't stand this silent treatment. "Don't tell me you are mad because I didn't attend that circus. I already told everyone that I wouldn't go." I try to sound nonchalant, but my attempt at brushing off the conversation falls flat. The butler had delivered tea to the room before I arrived, so I move to the low serving table and pour cups for Alex and I, waving him over.

He joins me after a second, but Alex doesn't back down, his eyes piercing into mine. He looks into the cup of tea, breaking our silent staring contest and sighing heavily. "You are destroying everything beautiful that you and Julia have built together. You know, seeing the two of you overcome all the obstacles in your way is one of the reasons I decided to work things out with Petra, even when things weren't going well. Now, you're here throwing it all away for pride and that fucker Karl. You're really messing up here, Seb."

Alex's words cut like a knife, but I keep my expression controlled. I raise an eyebrow, feigning interest. "Oh, really?"

"Yes, really," Alex drawls, leaning back in his chair. "She was devastated when you didn't return during the wedding or the reception. I think she expected that you would have some sort of remorse at the last minute and appear, but you didn't. She's heartbroken, obviously."

I turn my face away, taking a drink of the streaming tea as if to distract myself from the truth that's unfolding—focusing instead on my tongue as it burns. "I told you I wouldn't go. Hell, I told everyone I wouldn't go. I don't know why this is so hard for her to understand." I know that I've hurt her deeply, and I fight back the guilt that is trying to creep in. "I'll talk to her in a

few days once she's calmer."

"Well, Seb, I really don't think that's going to go the way you think it will..." Alex trails off, and alarm bells start to go off in my head.

"Why?" I ask, pretending to be unaffected by his words even as I break out into a cold sweat.

Alex moves closer, his expression solemn. He sits his teacup on the table, and the sound of the ceramic on marble echoes in the room. "She knows you went to see Karl at some sort of strip club. And that you went somewhere more private with one of the girls..."

Like a bolt of lightning, a shiver shoots up my spine. Oh, shit. All the blood drains from my face as I realize my actions have been laid bare. There's no denying it now. "How does she know that? The club is quite private," I mutter, feeling cornered.

"Well, looks like they aren't banning smartphones inside like they used to," Alex retorts, his disappointment mirroring my own. "I can't believe you'd be so careless, Seb."

"They are still banning smartphones!" I protest, panic gripping my chest. "I swear they are..." Reality is sinking in faster than I can keep up with, and my head starts to pound. "What the fuck!" I press my hands against my face, frustration and panic bubbling inside me. "I can't believe this is happening. I never wanted to hurt her," I confess, the weight of my mistake crashing down upon me.

"It's a little late for that. She saw a video, there's nothing you can do or say to pretend otherwise. She has all the proof she needs."

"I only got a lap dance from that girl, that's all." I'm desperate to explain myself, regretting my choices so much that I can hardly breathe. "And it was Karl who insisted that it'd relax me. I was so pissed at Julia's letter, and—" Alex cuts me off with a stern look.

"Look, I don't care about your excuses, Seb. All I know is that things are reaching a point of no return. It's a despicable feeling to be cheated on, and I don't care how stressed or horrible my sister was. There's nothing to justify what you did. Do you even care about your marriage anymore?" Alex's words hit me like a punch to the gut, and I crumble under the gravity of my mistakes.

I grasp the extent of the pain I've caused Julia now, and I did that to her without even a second thought. I never wanted our marriage to break apart like this, but my foolish actions have brought us to the brink of destruction.

I've betrayed her trust, shattered the foundation of our love, and now I must face the consequences.

“Of course I do! But it's not that simple. Julia and I have been going through a rough patch, and I thought...I thought I could find solace in Karl's company,” I admit, my voice filled with remorse and regret. “She's been playing me, and I hate that.”

“And you sought that 'solace' in a strip club of all places?! Especially during a time like this?” Alex's tone grows sharper, his frustration evident. “You've made a mockery of your marriage. What were you thinking?”

I'm haunted by the image of Julia's heartbreak upon learning the truth. I know I've failed as a husband, and my heart aches with the knowledge of how much I've hurt her. “I wasn't thinking about anything but how pissed I was at Julia for her threats and how disgusted I was with my son marrying that escort. Is that what you want to hear? I'm an asshole. We all know it.”

To my surprise, Alex places a reassuring hand on my shoulder, attempting to offer support amid the chaos. “You're an asshole, yeah, but we all are sometimes. You messed up, and now you have to face the consequences. That's all there is to it.”

He's right. Julia has discovered what I was doing, I can't run away from this mess. “What am I supposed to do now?” I ask, my voice laden with desperation.

“You need to talk to her, apologize, and try to make things right.” Alex takes his hand off my shoulder and looks pensive for a moment. “Though, I'd wait until tomorrow to try. She's really pissed.”

I nod, my mistakes heavy on my shoulders. “I'll make things right.”

“I'm here for you, whether you're an asshole or not,” Alex reminds me. “But Julia is my sister. Don't mess this up. She deserves to hear the truth from you, no matter how difficult it may be.”

Torn between shame and remorse, I nod slowly, acknowledging the path I must take. I know that avoiding the situation won't make it disappear, and I must confront my mistakes head-on.

My brother-in-law hugs me quickly patting me hard on the back as a sign of reassurance. We say our goodbyes, and Alex leaves. As soon as he's gone, a sense of loneliness engulfs me. The once unshakeable foundation of my marriage now feels like quicksand beneath my feet.

All at once, the library and the memories it holds are too much for me. I can see the ghost of Julia in every corner of the room, and feel the love that

the two of us have shared year after year here. Dammit...it wasn't worth it. The lap dance just made me feel gross, not relaxed, even though I was still riding the adrenaline high of winning the argument against Julia. I got out of the wedding that I refused to attend, making me a man of my word, but at what cost?

The room is too much for me. I feel like I can't breathe. I exit at almost a jogging pace, leaving the barely touched tea behind, and seek the privacy of a hot shower, with water so hot it burns.

Afterwards, I lie in bed, unable to find peace in the darkness that surrounds me. It took no time at all for that video to get back to Julia. How is that even possible? I'm a semi-public figure, sure, but it isn't exactly unheard of for men like me to attend those sorts of clubs. It's never been anything I've been interested in, but I can't believe that my presence was interesting enough for someone to record it. Maybe Karl's bad reputation in the media is more prevalent than I thought, and he was the focus of the video. Who knows...it doesn't matter anyway, because the outcome is still the same. Guilt weighs heavily on my heart, and I can't shake the haunting image of Julia's devastated face when confronted with that damning footage.

I wonder how she's feeling now. Is she crying herself to sleep, or is she simmering with rage and disappointment? Has she shown Gabi? Her sisters? God...I'm sure she's shown fucking Margaret already. That makes my stomach sink. Of all the people I want to see my failings, Margaret is the very last. If Margaret has her way, Julia will be furious with me. I know I deserve every ounce of her wrath, and yet, I can't help but wish I could turn back time and erase my foolish mistakes.

Then there is the possibility...no, the *certainty* that at least my older children have seen the video. Andries and Elise will definitely be aware, and there's a good chance that Hannah has seen it too. Hannah lives online for the most part, so she's probably more connected than all my other children combined. The thought of them seeing that video terrifies me. How will they see their father now, knowing he indulged in such a scandalous affair on the day of their brother's wedding? I was supposed to be their role model, the one they looked up to, and now I've shattered that image.

Julia's inevitable disappointment in me cuts deep. I can't fathom how I allowed myself to betray the woman I love so dearly. My own weakness disgusts me, and I feel utterly lost.

I reach for my phone, tempted to call her and beg for forgiveness, but I

know she needs space to process everything. I hate myself for causing her pain, and yet, I understand that empty words won't heal the wounds I've inflicted. I allowed myself to be blinded by anger and frustration, seeking solace in the company of another woman. There is no one else to blame but myself, and that realization is crushing.

In the stillness of the night, I make a solemn vow to myself. I will do whatever it takes to earn back Julia's trust, to become the partner she deserves, and to be the father my children can be proud of. Redemption will not come easily, but I'm determined to walk the difficult path of self-improvement and growth.

The weight of my guilt and remorse is suffocating, and I know that mere apologies won't be enough. I must confront my own demons, face my insecurities, and my sense of self-worth. Only then can I hope to become the man Julia once fell in love with. As the night drags on, sleep eludes me. The road ahead is uncertain and daunting, but I'm committed to the journey of repairing our shattered marriage. I can only hope that time and effort will heal the wounds I've caused and that one day I may earn back the love and respect I've lost. But for now, I must face the consequences of my actions and begin the difficult process of rebuilding what I've destroyed.

*Sebastian*

SLEEP COMES FOR ME EVENTUALLY, but my rest is fitful and unsatisfying. Truthfully, I haven't slept well since Julia left, and the longer she's gone, the harder it is to fall asleep. The next morning, I wake up and head to the kitchen for breakfast. A part of me just wants to stay in bed until the afternoon, but it'd ruin my entire day to waste the morning hours like that.

So, I get dressed, comb through my hair and beard, and make my way downstairs and to the kitchen breakfast nook. To my surprise, Hannah is already up, which is unusual as she usually sleeps in during the summer holidays. Even stranger, she's dressed for the day, too, with her long dark hair straightened to a sheen. She's engrossed in texting someone on her phone, and doesn't even acknowledge me as I join her in the nook.

"Good morning," I greet, trying to start a conversation.

She glances up briefly, mutters a greeting, and continues eating her fruit and sipping her latte, clearly more interested in her phone.

"Hannah, hello? Can you hear me?" I can't help but feel a bit annoyed as I say, "Do you ever go a day without your phone glued to your hand?"

She slides me a look that says I'm getting on her nerves, but I don't care. I don't think a hello is too much to ask from my daughter. With a sigh, she flips her phone over and swallows a bite of fruit before putting on a sarcastic tone. "Good morning, Dad. How are you doing today?"

Despite knowing she's making fun of me, I smile at her effort. That's better. "I'm alright."



She watches me pour a glass of orange juice and join her at the table, putting her own fork down. Leaning back in her chair, she stares at me with her eyebrows raised.

“What are you looking at, Hannah?”

“Is there a reason you want me to stop texting my friends? You want to chat with me now, right? So I’m giving you what you want. Go ahead, let’s chat.”

I take a deep breath, realizing that I need to make an effort to connect with her. She has some sort of attitude, but I can’t tell if she’s actually mad or just an average teenage amount of annoyed. There’s a basket of freshly baked bread in the middle of the table, so I grab a slice, buttering it to keep myself busy while I talk. “Well, I’d like to know how the wedding was. Did you have a good time?”

She replies with a shrug, “Yeah, it was fine. Everyone seemed to enjoy themselves. Oh, and Oma Margaret gave a great speech.”

I resist the urge to bark out a sarcastic laugh at that. It figures that Margaret would be the talk of the evening. She always has had a knack at being the center of attention.

“I’m sure she did,” I respond, trying to keep the conversation going. “And how is Elise doing?”

Hannah rolls her eyes, clearly annoyed. She’s poking at her fruit with her fork, the latte growing cold on the table beside her. “She’s fine, I guess. Her and Dan are officially together now, if you didn’t know.”

Her words hit me hard, and I feel a wave of guilt wash over me. It’s true; I haven’t been the most attentive father lately, and I regret it deeply. “I knew she cared for him, yes, but not that they were actually together now. It’s just that work and everything else has been overwhelming lately.”

Hannah scoffs. “Work, as always. Is that why you didn’t bother to show up at Andries’s wedding? It’s not like it was important or anything.”

Her words sting, and I know I can’t defend my absence. “I had my reasons, Hannah. It’s complicated.”

“Yeah, I guess I’ll just have to take your word for it.” Hannah’s apparent apathy is even worse than if she was yelling at me.

In the quiet that stretches awkwardly, I try to return my attention to breakfast, but my mind is elsewhere. I can’t shake off the guilt and regret I feel for my actions. My thoughts wander to the video that Julia saw and how it might have affected the kids. I wonder if they saw it too and how it might

have shattered their image of me.

I hate to admit that I'm curious about the wedding, too, and how it went for my oldest son. "And how was Andries?"

She perks up a little at this. "Oh, he was having a blast. The time of his life really. Look."

She hands me her phone, and there's a video pulled up of Andries and Roxanne in front of a tall white wedding cake. They're laughing, wrapped up in each other, and I can sense the joy even through the phone screen. It guts me in a way I didn't expect. Maybe I should have reconsidered....

"They're going to Sardinia for their honeymoon, I think. I guess they really loved Italy and want to go back and explore more of it, but just the two of them this time," Hannah continues, taking the phone when I hand it back to her across the table.

"Of course, that makes sense." I don't know what else to say. I despise Roxanne, but I love my son, even if he infuriates me. I don't expect Hannah, as young as she is, to understand such a thing. But even if she doesn't get why I don't approve of the marriage, she is still probably hurt on her brother's behalf.

As the silence stretches on again, I try to find the right words to mend our strained relationship. "You know, it's almost your birthday," I venture, hoping to connect with her on a more personal level. "Do you have plans for your sweet sixteen? You can invite your friends over if you want."

Hannah looks up, surprised at the sudden change of subject. "Yeah, uh, I'm not sure what I'm gonna do. All I know is that I'm gonna go to a horse show in England mid-October."

This takes me totally off guard. Why in the world would this be her birthday plan? "A horse show? But you don't even care about horses," I respond, genuinely puzzled.

"Well, that's a good opportunity to start caring," she retorts, her tone slightly defensive.

"Hm. Alright, well, before that we can do something here with your friends." I can't help but feel a mix of emotions—pride for her independence and frustration at our lack of connection. Quick on her feet, Hannah doesn't let me have the upper hand in the conversation for long.

"Are you gonna invite yourself to my birthday party?" she asks, her tone laced with irritation.

"Don't tell me you're ashamed of your own father," I tease, wanting to

make her smile. It doesn't work, and the piece of melon I'm chewing suddenly tastes sour.

"Pops..." Hannah exhales slowly. "It's my birthday, you know? So even if I decide to do something here at home, it's just going to be for my friends and I, okay? You seemed fine not going to Andries's wedding, so I'm sure you'll do okay missing out on one birthday of mine."

I hold my hands up in defeat, ignoring the rejection I'm feeling from my own daughter. This is normal. She's growing up, so of course she feels this way. Trying to lighten the mood some, I ask, "I can at least be present for the cake, right?"

"If you're going to be part of it, then what about Mom?" she leans back, crossing her arms. "Is she gonna come over for my birthday while you are here too? Or are you two refusing to be around each other at all?"

"Well, I've got nothing against her," I tell her honestly. "This is still her home too, of course. If she wants to come to the party, of course she can."

But the truth is, I'm torn. I want to be present for Hannah's birthday, to be a part of her life, but I fear that my presence will only complicate things further. There's no way I'd leave my own estate just so Julia could be here by herself, but I know that I've done quite a lot recently that might cause her to avoid me at all costs.

Hannah seems satisfied with my answer, though. "Okay, cool. Well, speaking of Mom..." Hannah puts her elbows on the table, steepling her fingers. Her gaze is locked onto mine, seeking answers. "Are you guys really going to get a divorce?"

The question pierces through my heart, and I find it hard to form a coherent response. *Divorce?* The word hangs heavy in the air, a stark reminder of the crumbling state of our marriage. I never thought we'd reach this point, and now, facing my daughter's questioning eyes, I feel a sense of regret. I think about how it's been an entire week now that Julia has been gone...it's so easy to just pretend that she's on vacation and will be home any time, but then reality comes crashing back down on me at the worst times. Like this one.

"I...I don't know, Hannah," I admit, my voice laced with sadness. "Your mom and I are going through some tough times, and—"

"Like because you didn't show up at the wedding?" she interjects, her tone tinged with disappointment. "*Everyone* noticed you weren't there."

Her words hit home, and the guilt intensifies. My absence on such a

significant day for our family is a wound that won't easily heal. God, it meant so much to Julia. I struggle to find the right words to explain my actions, knowing deep down that there is no justification.

Before I can say anything, though, Hannah's phone begins to ring, providing her with an escape from the weight of the conversation. Her eyes light up when she sees the screen, and she quickly excuses herself to go take the call in private.

Sitting alone, it's much harder to ignore the mess that I've found myself in. When I close my eyes, I see the darkness of the club last night, and the woman who I didn't even know swaying seductively in front of me. I felt nothing, and it did the opposite of relaxing me. Not wanting to dwell, I focus back on my daughter, who left so quickly that I didn't even have time to say a word.

Hannah is so different from Elise and Andries. They would have never left the table for a call, and would have been embarrassed to have their phone ring out loud at the dinner table. Feeling irritated over Hannah's lack of manners, I finish my orange and notice that the house seems unusually quiet.

Alex brought the kids back last night...shouldn't they be up and getting ready for summer camp? Curious, I wipe my hands on my napkin and go in search of someone to ask. I pull the first maid I come across aside, and ask her where the children are this late in the morning.

"Summer camp is over, and school begins in two days," Claudia explains, looking at me oddly—her brows knit together.

I cringe internally. What kind of father has to get his kid's school schedule from the maid because he doesn't know anything about it? Apparently me.

"Arthur is up, though, and probably getting his bath with Floris," Claudia continues.

With no pressing engagements, I decide to pay my youngest son a visit. As I walk through the corridors, I can't help but reflect on the different dynamics with each of my children.

Hannah's attitude troubles me, but I know I need to address the issue delicately. She's at an age where she's asserting her independence, and I must find a way to connect with her without being overbearing. It's a fine balance to strike, and one that I'm still learning to navigate as a parent.

Reaching Arthur's room, I hear giggles and splashing from inside. I smile at the thought of my youngest son enjoying his bath time, the first genuine

smile of the day. Pushing open the door gently, I find Arthur in the bathtub, surrounded by floating rubber ducks, his eyes wide with excitement. His nanny is there too, seated on a stool next to the bathtub with a washcloth in her hand.

Floris looks up, and surprise is clear in her face. “Oh! Mr. Van den Bosch! I wasn’t expecting you. It’s usually Mrs. Julia who comes to check in.”

“Daddy!” he exclaims, a grin spreading across his face. “Look, ducks!”

I chuckle as I approach him. “Yes, I see them. They seem to be having quite the party in here.”

“Would you like to help with his bath?” Floris offers, holding out the cloth for me. “I can go get his clothes ready for the day if so.”

I swallow, hesitating before taking the wet rag from her hand. Why is this odd for me? I’ve raised five children before Arthur, and bathed all of them at one time or another. Then it hits me—I haven’t been hands on like this since the months when Julia was on maternity leave. That’s almost impossible for me to believe, but when I search my memories, I’m not happy to find that it’s the truth.

“Okay, I can do that.”

Floris leaves, smiling back at us as Arthur laughs, his innocent joy infectious. I crouch down beside the tub and offer him a playful splash. He giggles even more, enjoying the simple game we’re playing.

“How’s my little man today?” I ask, ruffling his wet hair.

“Good! Ducks are fun!” he replies, his enthusiasm evident.

As I watch him play, I feel a sense of peace wash over me, washing away the guilt I’m still feeling. We begin the bath time routine, and I pour water over Arthur’s head. He giggles, splashing water playfully. The room fills with his innocent laughter, and for a moment, all the worries and troubles of the outside world seem to vanish.

I watch him play with the floating toys, creating imaginary stories in his little world. We talk and laugh together, and I feel joy I haven’t experienced in a long time. I remember when Julia and I used to do this together, back when Arthur was just a baby. I can’t help but wonder if my lack of involvement in these simple yet meaningful moments has contributed to the distance between us.

I gently wash Arthur’s hair and back, and I realize that being present is crucial in nurturing a strong bond with my son. I’ve been so preoccupied with

work and other issues that I've lost sight of what truly matters. Arthur's bath time becomes an opportunity for me to reflect on my role as a husband and father. I make a silent promise to myself that I will do better, that I will be more present and involved in the lives of my children.

Once we finish the bath, I wrap Arthur in a fluffy towel, and he cuddles up to me. I feel a sense of contentment in this simple embrace. I help Arthur put his shorts and t-shirt on, with Floris helping along the way. I am shaken when a wave of regret washes over me. It's becoming increasingly evident that I haven't been as involved in the lives of my children as I should be. Arthur's sweet, loving disposition and his genuine excitement for the day ahead make me realize how much I've missed by being distant and preoccupied.

*Why did I let it come to this?* I wonder silently, glancing at Arthur's bright eyes. He's growing up so fast, and I can't help but feel like I've been absent for the most crucial moments of his life. Julia has always been the one to take care of him, to know his daily schedule, and now I feel like a stranger to my own son.

I turn my attention to Floris, eager to know what's on the schedule for Joris and Aleida. She informs me that they have a picnic in the park planned for the day, providing them with engaging activities and opportunities to socialize with other kids their age. I'm relieved to know that they're spending their time constructively, but at the same time, I feel useless for not knowing these details.

*I should have been more involved, asked them about their plans, shown interest in their lives,* I berate myself internally. Instead, I've been so consumed by my own problems that I've pushed them away.

I'm shaken out of my self-loathing when I hear Aleida and Joris's cheerful voices in the hallway. It's ridiculous, but I'm almost nervous to face them, especially after the harsh epiphanies I've just had about Arthur. Still, it's been a while since I've spent quality time with them, and I want to make the most of this opportunity to connect with my middle children.

I step out into the hallway, and their faces light up when they see me. "Hey there, kiddos," I greet them warmly, trying to hide any signs of the inner turmoil I'm feeling. "Are you all set for your day in the park?"

They nod eagerly, their eyes shining with enthusiasm. "Yes! We're super excited!" Aleida exclaims, bouncing on her toes.

"Well, have a fantastic time, and don't forget to make lots of new

friends,” I encourage them, ruffling Joris's hair and giving Aleida a playful wink. Their nanny stands nearby, looking slightly uncomfortable at my sudden presence. I can understand her apprehension; it's not every day that the children's father shows up unannounced to observe. “Thank you for taking such good care of them,” I say sincerely, hoping to put her at ease.

Maybe this was the wrong thing to say, though, because she looks even more confused. “O-of course, sir.”

After bidding farewell to Aleida and Joris as they head off to the park, I turn my attention to Arthur, who is happily engrossed in his play outside. I join him, watching him chase after butterflies with his giggles filling the air.

“Come here, buddy,” I say softly, holding out my hand. Arthur rushes over to me, and I pick him up, settling him on my hip. We walk to the rose gardens, and I'm immediately taken back to my own childhood with my mother moving serenely among the rows of roses. And then later, a much more somber memory—my own father tending the flowers as some sort of repentance to his dead wife.

“You know, your grandma Dina used to love these roses,” I tell him, pointing to the beautiful flowers that adorn the garden. Red, yellow, white, and pink blooms dot the dark green bushes, and as we walk, I pluck a butter yellow one for Arthur, quickly flicking off the thorns before handing it to him.

I show him around the garden, sharing memories of my mother and how she adored taking care of these roses. It's a bittersweet moment, reminiscing about the past while trying to create a meaningful connection with my youngest son.

“Your grandma would have loved seeing you here with her flowers,” I tell him, looking into Arthur's eyes. “You've got her spirit and her love for the little wonders of life.”

I continue to share stories with Arthur, Floris walking four or so feet behind us as we go. Being with him in the garden, surrounded by the beauty of nature, I realize that there's so much I've been missing out on in my pursuit of success and business matters.

I've got to be more present in my children's lives, cherish every precious moment, and create lasting memories with them. No more allowing work and other distractions to take precedence over the people who matter most. As important as my job is, I need to remember that the company is in a good place and that we are more than financially secure for the time being.

The hours of the day unfold, and I find myself fully immersed in the world of my youngest son. We play games, laugh together, and I even manage to coax some smiles and giggles from Arthur as we play hide-and-seek among the bushes.

“He’s such a happy boy,” I tell Floris, pushing my hands into the pockets of my jeans as I watch him run through the grass. “Not a care in the world. I wish life stayed that simple.”

Floris lets out a little laugh. “Oh, little Arthur has his moments of rebellion, I promise you that.”

Remembering the trouble that Andries used to get into—especially when he was older, with Dan at his side—I chuckle. “I believe you.”

I’m about to tell the nanny a story about my oldest son and the trouble he got into at the horse stables, when I feel my phone vibrating in my pocket. I excuse myself, leaving Arthur in the very capable hands of his nanny, and go to answer the call.

It’s Karl, and I consider not answering for a minute. He’s caused so much trouble for me lately, intentionally or not, that I’d like to ignore him for the day. But something tells me I need to hear whatever he has to say, so I answer.

My greeting is simple and straightforward. “Karl.”

“Sebastian,” he responds, sounding relieved that I answered. “How are you doing?”

Hearing Karl’s worried voice on the other end of the line, a sense of dread washes over me. “I’m good. Just home, enjoying my morning. Why?” I try to sound nonchalant, but my heart is pounding in my chest, fearing what he might say next.

“So...you haven't checked the news yet?” Karl’s tone is hesitant, as if he doesn't want to be the bearer of bad news.

My anxiety starts growing at his question. “What news?”

“Well, your PR manager is here beside me, and you are on speaker,” Karl says, and I hear Peter joining the call.

“Peter, what the heck is going on?” I demand, my voice tinged with panic.

“Morning sir,” Peter greets, and I can immediately tell that the man is exasperated, which doesn’t bode well for me. “Sorry that we have to get into this right away, but I just sent you a text with the link. I think it's best if you check for yourself.”



I quickly open my message app and find the link sent by Peter. My heart sinks as I see the article published by none other than Kenneth, the infamous reporter who seems to relish in portraying my family in a negative light. The headline reads, "*Sebastian Van den Bosch chooses to party instead of attending his own son's wedding.*"

I scroll through the article, and my worst fears are confirmed. There are pictures from the wedding, and the article spins a narrative of me not supporting my son's marriage and instead choosing to party with Karl at the club. The mention of Roxanne's past only adds fuel to the fire.

There is a photo of Margaret and Julia sitting together, holding hands, right next to a photo of Karl and I. To make it worse, I'm tilting a glass of champagne to my lips in the picture. The caption next to it states, "*With his absence, Sebastian Van den Bosch makes it clear that he doesn't support his oldest son's wedding to former escort and madam, Roxanne Feng, and would rather stay partying in Amsterdam with Karl Townsend.*"

I feel a wave of anger and frustration wash over me. This is not how it happened. I had my reasons for not attending the wedding, but they were personal and had nothing to do with siding with Karl. The media has always been ruthless when it comes to our family, but this time, it feels like they are determined to tear us apart.

"Seb, this is bad," Karl says, his voice tense.

I simply heave a long sigh as I try to remain in control of myself. "Yeah, it is."

Then Peter tells me that similar stories are being broadcasted through other news outlets. The situation is spiraling out of control, and I don't know how to contain it.

"Is there anything you want me to do about it?" Peter asks, his voice steady, but I can sense the concern underneath.

My heart pounds in my chest as I click on the video posted on RTL's Twitter account, hesitant yet unable to resist the urge to see what the world is saying about me. The video plays, and the shame I feel is so hot that I'm sure my face is bright red. There I am, on the screen, surrounded by women in lingerie inside that dimly lit club. It's like watching a nightmare unfold before my eyes, a nightmare that I can't wake up from.

The comments under the post are relentless, people speculating about my marriage, calling me a disgrace, an hypocrite for being in a club filled with women with similar career paths than Roxanne, and questioning my loyalty

to my family. I can't blame them; the evidence is right there for everyone to see. I let out a shuddering breath. Fuck. There is no coming back from something so public. I should have turned on my heels and left the club when I saw the waiting staff being exclusively composed of women in lingerie, but Karl had insisted it was the only place with a strict no smartphone policy and I let him get his way. We settled on a table, started to drink, and a few bottles later, that fucker paid one of the girls to take me for a lap dance. I was too drunk to realize what was happening until it all went down, but now it's done and there's no turning back.

Julia's face flashes in my mind, and I feel a pang of guilt. How could I have been so reckless, so careless with her feelings? She deserves better than this, better than a husband who would betray her trust in such a way. Even if she threw the first proverbial punch with her threats, it was nothing compared to actually going out and getting lap dances from a stranger.

I feel like a fool, a fool who has destroyed the most important thing in his life—his family. I never wanted this, never wanted to hurt the woman I love and the children I adore.

I close Twitter, unable to bear the weight of the public's judgment any longer. I know that this is just the beginning. The news will spread like wildfire, and soon, everyone will know about my mistakes. God, I'm so humiliated. How can I look my family in the eye knowing what I've done? How can I expect them to forgive me for my actions?

"Sebastian?" Peter repeats, louder this time, snapping me out of my miserable spiral.

"I don't know.... It's not company-related, so...um, I think we can just let this stupid tabloid nonsense die out," I respond, trying to downplay the seriousness of the situation.

"I understand, but have you thought about your children, though? They might get teased or receive snarky remarks at school because of all of this. It might be better to put out a statement as quickly as possible to get ahead of the punch," Peter points out, urging me to consider the impact.

"Well, Aleida and Joris start school in a few days, but their peers are way too young to even know who I am," I try to reassure myself more than Peter.

But Peter presses on, not letting me off the hook. "What about Andries and Elise?"

"Ah, those two will be fine. They are most likely having a blast at my expense," I say, attempting to appear nonchalant. I don't think it's working. I

can hear the way my voice shakes.

“And Hannah?” Peter continues, mentioning the one person in the family who tends to internalize her emotions.

“What about her?” I ask, trying to avoid facing the truth.

“Does she know already?” Peter inquires, making me think about Hannah, the quiet and reserved member of the family. I had just had breakfast with her, and her phone call before leaving the table lingers in my mind.

“I don’t know...I will talk to her,” I tell him, realizing that I can't avoid the conversation any longer. I know that Hannah is sensitive and perceptive; she won't easily brush off something like this.

Deep down, I'm terrified of how she'll react. Hannah has always been the one to keep her feelings to herself, and I fear that my actions might push her further away. She's already distant, and this could be the breaking point. As I hang up the phone, I feel a sense of unease settling over me. There's a sense of urgency in me, pushing me to talk to Hannah right away. I make my way back inside the house and head upstairs to her room. Approaching her door, I knock softly at first, hoping she'll hear me. When there's no response, I knock again, a bit more insistently.

“I need to talk to you,” I call out. I know she's inside, and my chest feels tight at the thought that she's already seen the video and is ignoring me because of it. When she still doesn't answer, I take a deep breath and pull out my smartphone. I hesitate for a moment before calling her, not knowing how she'll react. *I can't believe I have to do this.*

She picks up after a few rings, and I try to lighten the mood with a touch of sarcasm. “Your Highness, would you kindly open the door for your poor dad so he can have a word with you?”

Hannah laughs on the other end of the line and apologizes, saying she had her headphones on. A small part of me feels relieved that she seems to be in good spirits, but I know that the conversation ahead won't be easy.

When the door opens, she sheepishly says, “Sorry Pops,” and steps aside so I can follow behind her.

Hannah returns to her computer chair, shutting her MacBook and spinning the chair around to face me. “So what's up? Do you need something?”

“I just...well, wanted to know how you are doing,” I reply, my nerves getting the best of me.

“I'm good. Why?” she asks, a slight frown forming on her forehead as she

senses something amiss. “You know we just had breakfast together, right?”

I try to find the right words to say, but they seem to elude me, and I start pacing the room instead. My eyes inadvertently wander over the pictures adorning her walls, capturing moments from her childhood and adolescence. Memories flood my mind, reminding me of the times we used to share, the laughter and joy that once filled our home.

“Dad? Would you stop snooping around?” Hannah's voice pulls me out of my reverie.

“Alright, sorry,” I mutter, finally approaching her desk. I take a moment to study her face, which is a perfect blend of her mother's and mine.

She sighs, sensing the seriousness in the air. “What's going on? Just tell me.”

“Hannah, you know Mom and I are—” I begin, only to be cut off.

“Separated?” she interjects, her gaze steady.

I blink a few times, my brain trying to catch up with how aloof she sounds about the entire situation. I rub the back of my neck, telling her, “Eh, I was about to say not doing so well, but thank you for the reality check.”

“You're welcome,” she plays along, but her expression remains concerned. “And what about you and Mom?”

I take a deep breath, steeling myself for the difficult conversation ahead. “Well, you might find some news related to your old man on Twitter, and, eh—”

“Oh, that.” She waves her hand in the air dismissively. “I already got tagged in it. I've seen the entire thing at this point.”

I'm floored. “What? Who tagged you?” I ask, genuinely surprised.

“El,” she replies, referring to her sister Elise.

Great. Knowing that Elise has also been witness to my shame makes me feel even worse. “So your sister knows, then? And I assume through her, Dan knows, too.”

Hannah nods. “Yeah, she does. Andries too, probably. I noticed their names tagged right there along with mine.” Hannah's voice wavers slightly. “And most likely Mom, Oma, Alex, and everyone else in the family now knows why you couldn't be bothered to attend the wedding.”

The reality starts sinking in, and I decide to sit on the edge of Hannah's bed, my head spinning. Her room is dark and atmospheric, but I'm glad for the dim lighting with how badly my head is starting to pound. “Do you think she will forgive me?” I ask, my voice heavy with worry.

“Who? Mom?” Hannah just shrugs, her indifference stinging. “I don't know, maybe yes, maybe no. It's not my problem anyway.” She glances down at her smartphone, clearly eager to leave the room. “Well, I've got to go. Anything else you wanted to talk about?”

I watch as she moves to the mirror on the wall, applying lip gloss with a practiced hand. Hannah acts as if we're talking about the weather or a movie, not about the total dissolution of our family. I feel an overwhelming urge to reach out, to comfort her, but I hesitate. Our relationship has been strained, and I fear that any attempts at closeness might push her further away.

“Are you sure you're okay?” I ask, my concern slipping through despite my efforts to sound composed. “I...I know we don't talk very often, but—”

“Look, I'm fine,” she interrupts, not even bothering to meet my gaze. “Whatever happens, it's between you and Mom. It's really none of my business, alright? And I don't want it to be, either.”

I stand up and take a few steps closer, wanting to check on her more closely. Her behavior is so odd, considering how serious the topic is, that I can't stop myself from wanting to make sure she's okay.

“Is this some sort of facade you're putting on so I won't worry?” I press, my heart aching to bridge the gap between us.

She sighs at my question, her expression softening for a moment as she considers me. “I mean, it was evident in Lake Como that things weren't as perfect as you both try to pretend,” she admits, surprising me with her perceptiveness. “I'm not dumb, I know you both were just keeping the peace for the sake of the vacation. But it's fine. I told Mom the same thing—most of my friends' parents are divorced, and they seem to be doing okay.”

Hearing her candid words, I don't know what else to do. “Hannah, if you need anything, don't hesitate to let me know, okay?” I implore, desperate to reach out to her. “I know I haven't always been there for you, but now it's the holidays, and I've got more time. I want to be here for you.”

“I really appreciate it, but I've got to go now,” she says, avoiding my gaze once more as she makes her exit. “See ya later.”

\* \* \*

I eat lunch in a daze, taking the sandwich out to the terrace to enjoy, but I barely taste it. As I sit on the terrace, lost in my thoughts and plans to

reconnect with Hannah, little Arthur toddles over to me, his eyes bright and curious. He tugs at my sleeve, seeking my attention, and I turn to him with a small smile.

“Daddy, what are you doing?” he asks, his innocent voice filling the air.

I reach down to pat his head affectionately. “Oh, just thinking, buddy,” I reply, the weight of the situation with Hannah momentarily forgotten as I focus on my youngest son.

He tilts his head, his big blue eyes studying me intently. “About what?”

I consider how to explain my emotions to a three-year-old, knowing he might not fully understand. “Well, you know how sometimes grown-ups have things on their minds, and they need some time to figure them out?”

Arthur nods solemnly, a thoughtful expression crossing his cherubic face. “Like when I can't decide which toy to play with,” he offers, trying to relate in his own way. I chuckle softly at his analogy, marveling at how perceptive he can be despite his young age. “Yes, exactly like that.”

The sun shines brightly and a gentle breeze rustles the leaves of the surrounding trees. Floris soon joins Arthur and I at the small table, bringing lemonade for the group. My son seems to be happier than ever sipping on lemonade and enjoying the beautiful summer morning while he kicks his little legs.

Oh, to be so carefree. My sweet, happy boy.

Floris watches me observing my son, her warm smile faltering slightly when she notices my troubled expression. “Sir, is everything alright?”

I pour myself a glass of lemonade, the refreshing taste a nice distraction. “I feel like a total stranger talking to my daughter,” I finally admit, my eyes flickering back to her face. “I know that’s probably oversharing, but you asked, so I’m just being honest.”

“You mean Hannah?” Floris folds her hands in her lap, listening intently.

I nod, my mind filled with thoughts of my daughter, Hannah. At nearly sixteen, she's at an age where communication with her father might not be high on her list of priorities. But that doesn't stop the ache in my heart. I've always prided myself on being a good father, but lately, it seems like I'm losing touch with all of my children. Especially the three oldest.

Floris offers a sympathetic smile, her experienced eyes conveying understanding. “Teenagers can be quite challenging, especially when it comes to opening up to their parents.”

“I know, but it's hard for me to accept that,” I reply, my mind filled with

memories of the close bond I once shared with them all. “With Andries and Elise, I always knew their interests—Andries has always loved reading books and fencing, and Elise’s passionate about horse riding and nature. But when it comes to Hannah, I feel like I’m grasping at straws.”

Floris hums thoughtfully, and I’m a bit surprised at what a good listener the nanny is. and how easy it is to open up to her.

“She’s always so reserved and secretive around me,” I continue, gauging for her reaction. “I don’t know anything about her life anymore, and it’s tearing me apart.”

Floris reaches out, placing a reassuring hand on my shoulder. “It’s not uncommon for teenagers to withdraw a bit during this stage of their lives,” she offers gently. “But that doesn’t mean you can’t try to reconnect with her. What about having a nice lunch together? Or dinner?”

I laugh sardonically. “Actually we just had breakfast, and guess what? Five minutes later she was leaving to go and talk on the phone. I don’t even know who she was talking to, but apparently they were more important than me.”

“Maybe at a restaurant then?” Floris suggests, her caring tone offering a glimmer of hope. “It would be frowned upon for her to be on her phone the entire time you’re there.”

I consider her words carefully, the idea of a one-on-one meal with Hannah, sans phone, holds a certain appeal. “You’re right,” I finally say, feeling a renewed sense of determination. “That might be a better option. I’m sure she’s got a favorite restaurant she’d love to go to, or we can even try something new.”

Floris nods encouragingly. “Yes and it will create a more intimate setting, away from the distractions of home.”

“That’s a great idea, Floris, thank you—” I pause, my phone vibrating in my pocket. “Excuse me.”

It’s Alex messaging me, and he just has a simple question: *Did you call your wife yet? Andries and Elise just saw the video on the news. You should really call Julia.*

With one look back at Arthur enjoying his summery drink, I head back inside and walk into my study. I need some privacy for this, and my study is one of the only places I can guarantee I’ll be left alone.

Pouring a glass of whiskey, I lower myself into the red leather chair in front of the fireplace and groan. I can’t avoid this call, but I don’t think I’m

ready for it, either. Still, I know I have to call Julia, to face the consequences of my actions, but I'm unsure of what to say. Sipping the whiskey, I hope it will give me the courage I need for this difficult conversation. Taking a deep breath, I dial her number and put the phone on speaker, preparing myself for the inevitable confrontation.

After a few tense moments, Julia finally answers with a cold and distant tone. "Yes?"

Hearing her speak throws me through a loop, and for a minute I forget how to breathe. "Julia...I, um, I don't know what to say, except I'm sorry," I stammer, the words catching in my throat. "I'm sorry for the news and public humiliation. I'm..." It's all so difficult to talk, and without seeing her face, I don't even know if she's listening. "Can we talk face to face about this? It feels so hard talking like this without seeing you."

Julia ignores my plea, and seems to have other things at the forefront of her mind. "Did you cheat on me with her?" she asks, her voice tinged with hurt and anger.

"With who?" I reply, taken aback by her accusation.

"Don't play dumb," my wife snaps, her tone unforgiving. "The girl you went with to the private room."

My stomach sinks at her question. "I swear I just got a lap dance, that's all," I quickly explain, desperate to make her understand. "It was Karl's idea, he's the one who paid the girl and pushed me to go with her into that room. I had already drank quite a lot to forget the fight we got into, and—"

"Oh, for fuck's sake, enough with your excuses," Julia interrupts, frustrated.

"Julia, I swear there was nothing more than a lap dance," I insist, dragging a hand through my hair. "I made a mistake, and I deeply regret it."

She huffs a sarcastic laugh, but behind it, there is a world of hurt. "You'd promised me you wouldn't go back to a club on your own," she says, her voice trembling with emotion. "I just...I don't know. You betrayed me."

Her words pierce through me like a dagger, and I feel regret and sorrow wash over me like an incoming tide. I had promised her I wouldn't go back to a private club since the incident with her brother and Jan's daughter, and yet I broke that, betraying her trust and love

When Julia speaks again, her voice is so small. "What happened to us, Sebastian? We used to be so happy, so united."

A part of me wants to tell her that we still are united, if only she would



just come home. But I know that isn't what she wants to hear. Julia wants the truth, always, so I'll give it to her. "I guess it all started when our son decided to get married to that woman."

"Yes, well, be that as it may...it's done. Andries and Roxanne are officially married. The papers have been signed, and there's nothing you can do about it. Maybe now you can start moving on." Julia sounds almost resigned.

The silence hangs heavy in the air, and I can feel the pressure of her disappointment. "I'm deeply hurt, Sebastian," she adds after some time, her voice trembling with emotion. "And I don't think you realize how hurt I am."

"I do, I just...fuck, you gave me an impossible ultimatum, and had your mother, of all people, deliver it! You literally betrayed me first, Julia. I was so mad at you for blackmailing me. Who does that?" I retort, my negativity boiling over. I want her back, I love her more than life, but Julia can't honestly believe that I'm the only one that has done anything wrong in this situation.

Affronted, Julia hisses, "Don't even start! I won't let you ruin my day. I'm hanging up."

Her words are cold, and I know in a flash that I'm about to lose this chance to talk to her. "Julia, wait—I, um, is there anything I can do for you to forgive me?" I ask desperately, not wanting to let her go. "I want to try, Julia. I really do."

"Yes...there is one thing." She snuffles, and the sound almost breaks me. "Attend our son's wedding—which you did not do. Goodbye, Sebastian."

Before I can ask her to please stay on the line, she's hung up. I'm left standing here, reeling from the short, awful conversation we just had. Sure, I got to skip the wedding, but the cost for it was just too damned high. No matter how much I hate Roxanne, I love Julia more. I should have found a way to make things work out for my wife, even if that meant escorting her to a wedding that I considered an outright disaster.

I sink down on the chair, guilt and remorse crushing me. Somewhere along the way, we lost each other, and now it feels like there's no way back.

I take a deep breath, steadying myself. I know I need to do something, anything, to make amends. But what can I do now? Julia's hurt runs deep, and I'm not sure if anything I say or do will be enough to heal the wounds I've caused.

I decide to reach out to Alex, hoping he can offer some guidance or

comfort. As I dial his number, I can't help but feel a sense of vulnerability, something I'm not used to showing. After a few rings, he answers.

"Hey, are you still at your mom's place?" I ask, trying not to feel hopeful.

"Yep, we are flying back in tomorrow. Why?" Alex replies.

I take a second, trying to find the right words. "I spoke to Julia, but, um.... She seems really hurt. I don't know if she's already talking to a lawyer for the divorce or not, but can you, I don't know, give her a little push in the right direction? I want her to come home. Put in a good word for me."

"I don't think she's hired a lawyer yet. I think for now, the best is to wait a few more days, let Andries and Roxanne go to Sardinia, and things should get better," Alex advises. "Julia feels bitter every time she looks at them, I think, because she's reminded of how you skipped the wedding. Once they're out of sight, and out of mind, I bet she'll be more receptive."

I nod, grateful for his insight. "How is he?" I ask, changing the subject to my oldest son.

"Happy." Alex's response is simple, but there is so much depth to that word. Andries is *happy*. I wish I could say the same. "They are lounging by the pool with Dan and Elise, and I think Hannah is on her way over."

This brings me up short. "Hannah? Well, she doesn't waste time. I saw her less than an hour ago."

My brother-in-law seems unbothered by this. "It's good for them to spend time together."

"Yeah, you're probably right," I have to admit, but I'm also afraid that Hannah left just to get away from me. "Alex, do you think my children hate me? I mean, at least I know the youngest don't, but those three..." I trail off, filled with uncertainty.

"You made your bed, Seb...I mean, you are making their mom pretty miserable right now. You can't blame them. But they're basically still kids. Things can change in an instant when you're that young."

He's right, of course. My actions have consequences, not just for me and Julia, but for our children as well. Hurting Julia also meant hurting the kids. I feel a deep sense of remorse in knowing that I've let them down as a father.

"What am I supposed to do?" I ask, feeling lost and desperate for a way to make things right.

"Seriously, wait a few days, I don't think there's much more you can do now. If you try to force yourself into the narrative, you're just going to upset her more."

“I guess. It’s just...hard. I want to talk to her, even though I know she despises me right now....” I swallow past the lump in my throat and look up at the ceiling as I change the subject. “Um, hey, so, before you go back to New York, we should visit Jan. It’s been awhile.”

*Julia*

TO MY SURPRISE, I managed to sleep some after the reception. Enough, at least, that I'm not a zombie today. The atmosphere of the estate is so much more relaxed, as if the wedding being finished has let off a ton of pressure, and everyone is all the more happy for it.

Lunch is soon, and it's being set up outside today. I head out early to have some time alone, being bathed in the warm embrace of the sun's golden rays. The table, adorned with fine china and crystal glasses, stands ready for the upcoming meal. Meanwhile the lavish pool area lies adjacent, where laughter and splashes echo through the air, painting a picture of carefree joy.

Gin and tonic in hand, I slide my sunglasses into place and let out a long breath. I'm still torn up inside, but it's impossible to not relax, at least a little, on a day like this. I close my eyes, relaxing back into the chair and letting it all wash over me.

"Mrs. Julia, Ms. Hannah has arrived," Stuart announces, and I crack one eye to look at him. "She's on her way to the pool."

"Have her come and see me first," I tell him, and he nods in response, leaving to get her.

Hannah, dressed in a gauzy black coverup with a bikini of the same color underneath, appears a few minutes later. I greet her with an affectionate hug, surprised that she made it back here so early after the wedding. It would have made more sense for her to just sleep over, but I don't question it. She's clearly excited, and when I notice her eyes darting to the pool over and over,

it's not hard to guess why.

Hannah's obvious infatuation about Johan brings a hint of amusement to me, but beneath it lies a mother's concern. We've already established that not only is he too old for her, but he's also her sister's ex, and therefore, should be off limits. But Hannah shows so little interest in anything that I hate to discourage the friendship that is blooming between the two. So I don't say anything...and I won't, as long as they remain just friends.

"Thanks for joining us, love," I tell her as she pulls away from the embrace.

"Of course!" Hannah's response is oddly bright, at least for her. "It sounded like a good time."

"Sure it did," I laugh to myself. "Lunch will be ready in twenty minutes. Go say hi to Johan. He's over by the pool if you're wondering."

She's already turned around to go to the pool when she hears me, and she whips around, bristling. "I wasn't wondering!" She scampers off to the pool, and leaves me to my thoughts for some time.

"Out here all by yourself, hm?"

I turn to see my mother, eyes hidden by her large sunglasses, exiting the house and coming to join me. She lets out a sigh as she sits, leaving both her cell phone and a leather notebook on the side table next to us.

"Hannah just left to go to the pool, actually," I tell her, lounging back once more. "I guess everyone else is more interesting than her mother."

Mom makes a tusk sound. "Oh, let her be a teenager, Julia. You were young too, once."

I hadn't been interested in boys at fifteen, and I thought Hannah was like me in that way, but the way she's taken interest in Johan has changed my mind. I guess my daughter just needed the right boy to be interested in, even if, in my opinion, he's the wrong choice. I mean, Johan's handsome, successful, and comes from a royal bloodline...but maybe it's just a harmless crush. I guess only time will tell.

I smirk, mouth pulling up at the corner. "Yes, and you certainly didn't make it easy on me at Hannah's age, so don't be a hypocrite." I watch as she picks up the notebook again, flipping through the pages. "What are you up to?"

"Just doing a little research. What is your schedule in the upcoming week, dear? Are you free any mornings?"

"Wednesday is my free morning, as I'm sure you're aware." I don't like

to think about the near future, knowing I will most likely continue living here instead of the Van den Bosch estate which has been my home for decades now.

Mom doesn't pick up on my melancholy, though, and seems almost chipper as she continues. "Oh, good. I just spoke to Eveline, and we've got a solid case. I'm pretty sure with this public humiliation and him displaying his betrayal to the public, you can get a generous alimony."

She announces this so matter-of-factly that it takes my brain some time to catch up to what she's saying. "Wait. Eveline? Who's that?" I ask, confused by this sudden mention of a case.

"Your new divorce attorney," Mom replies, as if it's an entirely normal thing to discuss during a family lunch.

My mouth hangs open. This is all happening too fast. I haven't even started to think about beginning the process of a divorce, even though it is a lingering possibility in my mind. "Mom, there's no—"

She waves her hand dismissively, refusing to let me complain. "I'm just checking around. It's only good policy to know where you stand."

My protest apparently means nothing. I can't help but sigh inwardly at my mother's relentless pragmatism. With her sharp eyes always assessing the situation, Mom might be right. She's a very protective mother, and at times, also a dangerous one. The reputation she has built is impressive, but sometimes it's a little much being her daughter. She acts so quickly and so decisively that it hardly gives me time to think. As we make our way to the table, I can't shake the feeling that this lunch might not be as carefree as it seems. Beneath the smiles and laughter, hidden currents of tension run among us. I brace myself for what's to come, hoping that we can find a path to understanding and harmony.

Mom waves a staff member over, and in less than a minute, they're pouring her a glass of chilled white wine, condensation fogging the glass. "I still can't believe he went to get a lap dance from some random woman. The absolute nerve of that man! You did well to allow that Kenneth to publish the story. It's a good weapon," she points out, her eyes gleaming with shrewdness.

"Wait a second, I'm not done talking about this *Eveline*." My head is spinning. Everything is moving too fast. "I don't really want to get a divorce, Mom. I just told him that because I wanted him to change for the better."

My mother sighs in clear exasperation. She presses one hand to her

forehead, the other still clutching her wine glass.

“Julia, wake up! He isn't changing. You are just fooling yourself here. Did he attend Andries's wedding despite you threatening him with divorce?” I shake my head in response. “See? He won't change. There is no way that he didn't see how hurt you were when I brought him back here, and he still went through with everything, just to come out the winner. The best thing is to get ready. It's quick and easy to get a divorce nowadays. Eveline told me you can get divorced in just four weeks!” She leans closer to me, and pulls her glasses down just enough so I can see her eyes. “Julia, this could all be done in a month. The hard part is going to be getting Sebastian to agree on some sort of divorce settlement, which is why we need Eveline, and why we need to be the first ones to strike.”

I'm absolutely floored by the amount of thought she's put into this, and I can barely keep up. But when I really parse through her words, they do make sense...but still. I'm not ready to give up this quickly.

“I-I don't think we shall start talking about settlements and attorneys,” I babble in protest, picking up my gin and tonic to take a drink. I don't notice that my hands are shaking until I hear the ice clinking against the glass.

Mom is hearing it, though. “Oh, for god's sake, how much more disrespect are you going to tolerate from him?” she shoots back, her frustration evident. “On the wedding day of your oldest child, your husband was getting a lap dance from a stripper. Wake up, my dear. He might have been a good man at one time, but that ship has long since sailed. When someone shows you who they are, believe them.”

Mom's blunt words hit me like a cold shower. Deep down, I know she's right. I've been hoping for change, but perhaps it's time to face the reality of our crumbling marriage. Is my marriage a gilded cage that I'm simply content in? Have I been fooling myself this entire time?

“But, Mom, what about the kids?” I finally manage to utter, my voice trembling with uncertainty. “They will be devastated if we get a divorce. I mean, my goodness, we have six children. How in the world are we supposed to navigate both a separation and shared parenting?”

Mom gives me a sympathetic look, her gaze softened for a moment. “I know, dear, but sometimes staying together for the kids isn't the best solution. Andries and Elise are grown, and Hannah is nearly there. But it's not healthy for the younger three to grow up in such an environment, either. Plus they'll always have their nanny to help you out when you need an extra hand.”

I nod, feeling a heavy weight on my shoulders. She's right, as always. The children deserve a happy and stable home, not one filled with tension and deceit. But the thought of uprooting their lives, breaking the family apart, feels like an insurmountable task.

“I just don't know if I can do it, Mom. I don't know if I can go through with a divorce,” I admit, tears welling up in my eyes.

Mom reaches out and squeezes my hand reassuringly. “You are stronger than you think, Julia. You have faced difficult challenges before and come out victorious. You can do this too.”

Her words offer some comfort, but the fear of the unknown still grips me. The thought of starting over, of facing life without my husband, is both terrifying and exhilarating. We've never had what I would consider a fairytale marriage, but still...this is not something I ever saw for us, not even in my nightmares. My mind drifts back to happier times—the joyous family vacations, the laughter around the dinner table, the love we once shared. But now, all I feel is a void, a chasm.

“Julia, darling, you don't have to make any decisions right away,” Mom says, her tone gentle. “But having Eveline on our side for when you do decide really is the best thing you could possibly do. Please trust me on this.”

I exhale slowly. Okay...I don't have to make any rash decisions today. That makes me feel a little bit better. I can take the time I need to figure things out, to confront my feelings and make the best choice for myself and my children.

As the afternoon sun bathes the terrace in a golden glow, I find myself lost in my thoughts, wondering if there's a way to salvage what's left of our family, or if it's time to let go and embrace a new chapter of life, one that's uncertain...and oh so lonely.

Gosh, I miss Seb so bad. I'd even accept an argument with him if it gave me a reason to hear his voice.

While I consider everything, a basket of freshly baked bread and a bowl of aromatic olive oil are brought to the table. Mom effortlessly dips a piece into the oil, her actions graceful and poised. Meanwhile, I keep my black frames on, trying to shield myself from the intensity of the situation. Sipping on my gin, I can feel the tension building in my shoulders, but I try to maintain my composure.

“He's just so blinded by his pride and arrogance,” I muse, voicing my frustration with Sebastian.



“Well, that's what we call irreconcilable differences,” Mom replies calmly, wiping her fingers on her napkin.

“You sound happy,” I point out, trying to make sense of her seemingly nonchalant demeanor. “I'm sure you've held out for something like this for a long time.”

“Don't be silly, Julia. Whether you believe it or not, I just want the best for you. I'm simply afraid Sebastian is having some serious mid-life crisis, and...”

Something about her tone sets me off. “Oh Mom, stop it. It's because I threatened him that he's behaving like that,” I interject, my emotions getting the better of me. “Maybe my letter was too much.”

“Not at all. It was adequate given how he was behaving,” Mom says, her support evident. Support, and something else...maybe amusement? I don't know what in the world she could find funny, but I've long since accepted that trying to decipher her thoughts and feelings is a useless endeavor.

“Did you read it?” I inquire, curious about her perspective of my letter. I had felt like the right thing to do at first, writing it, but I've since come to feel regret about the terrible threat that I included, desperate to get the upper hand.

“Sebastian showed it to me during our ride back here.” She pauses, taking a long drink of her wine and laughing softly. “I was actually impressed at how bold you were. That didn't seem like you. I know that isn't what you want to hear, but there's a time and place to be fierce, and Sebastian trying to skip his son's wedding definitely qualified.”

“I might have been bold, but it didn't work out in my favor. Obviously.”

Mom opens her mouth like she wants to say something, but stops herself, changing tactics. “Well, that is true, but you gave it your best shot. Shall I schedule a meeting with Eveline for you to at least get to know your options? She's very good and has handled very high-profile cases. There is truly no one more qualified to handle your possible divorce.”

Being so pushy usually would make me deny my mother just on principle but I can't deny that her suggestion brings both apprehension and curiosity. Eveline represents a path I never thought I would consider. The mere thought of ending my marriage, a chapter that seemed destined to last a lifetime, fills me with a sense of loss. But this is my mother, one of the sharpest, shrewdest women to ever live. She keeps society wrapped around her finger, and wields the power that she's gained over her life like a weapon. I would trust her with almost anything, so why should this be any different?

Torn in two different directions, I sigh. “I don't know, Mom. This whole situation feels overwhelming,” I tell her, my fingers tracing the rim of my gin glass. “I never imagined I'd be in this position.”

Mom nods sympathetically, fingernails tapping on her glass. “I know, darling. But sometimes life throws unexpected challenges our way. The important thing is to face them head-on and make decisions that are best for you.”

As Stuart, the butler, approaches us, I'm momentarily distracted from my swirling thoughts. “Should I tell everyone lunch is served, Lady Margaret?”

“Oh, yes, please,” Mom replies, giving him a gracious nod. As Stuart departs to announce the meal, Mom seizes the moment to press me further on the matter of Eveline. “Listen, my love, I've talked to Eveline at length this morning and told her I would give her an answer as soon as possible. She has a very full schedule, as you can imagine. What do you say?”

“Why not, I can at least talk to her,” I concede, attempting to sound more resolved than I actually feel. The idea of discussing the intricacies of my crumbling marriage with a complete stranger feels daunting, but perhaps it's a necessary step towards clarity and understanding my options.

Her eyes gleam with a hint of satisfaction. “Good, it's best to be well-informed. You're just considering your options, that's all, but we want to make sure you have the very best representation if worst comes to worst.”

I manage a weak smile, grateful for my mother's support, yet my heart remains heavy with uncertainty. As the rest of the family begins to gather for lunch, the joyful chatter around the table contrasts sharply with the turmoil in my mind. I feel a profound sense of disconnection, as though I'm observing this scene from afar, rather than being fully present.

The rest of the family joins us at the table, and I keep quiet while I observe the dynamics between my children and their partners. Andries and Roxanne appear blissfully happy, their hands intertwined, sharing tender glances that remind me of the early days of my marriage with Sebastian. Elise and Dan's playful banter brings a smile to my face, and I'm filled with nostalgia, remembering the carefree years of my own youth.

I notice Hannah's proximity to Johan, and I fight not to roll my eyes. My daughter is growing up, and as much as I want to protect her from heartache and disappointment, I know that she must forge her own path in matters of the heart. Still, it's hard to ignore the tiny spark of concern that flares within me. Johan, to his credit, seems equally interested in what she's saying while

also keeping a respectful distance from her.

Just as the family settles into their seats, my brother Alex joins us, accompanied by Petra and their two children. I'm glad for his presence. Alex, at least, knows the ins and outs of the situation I'm in right now, and there is no judgment from him. I don't have to school my expressions or watch what I say as carefully around him.

After making sure that his family is settled, Alex turns to me and nonchalantly says, "Once I leave here I'm actually heading over to Jan's with Sebastian. Would you like to join me?"

His question throws me off. "Oh. Well...thank you, but I have no intention of seeing him anytime soon. Especially with a crowd of people around us."

Alex nods in understanding. "I get it. I didn't think that you would go, but I wanted to make sure you had the choice. Take all the time you need, Jules. We're here for you, no matter what."

"Thanks. You've done so much for me lately. I appreciate it so much."

"It's not a problem. But...is there any message you'd like to relay to Sebastian?"

I take a moment to gather my thoughts before answering, fully aware of the gravity of my words. "You may tell him," I begin, my voice firm yet tinged with vulnerability, "that I'm having a meeting with one of the best divorce attorneys in the country. If he wants to save whatever is left of us, he should throw his pride out of the window and change his tune once and for all."

My brother seems shocked at first. I guess Mom didn't fill him in on the whole Eveline situation. Alex lets out a heavy sigh, and I see the worry etched on his face. "I don't think this is going to work out the way you think it will, Julia," he admits, his tone filled with genuine concern. "Seb believes you betrayed him first with that letter. Dropping some vague threat about a divorce attorney is just going to put him right back on the offensive. I know he's feeling a little regret right now, and you don't want to squander that."

Everyone around us is starting on the salad course, their chatter drowning out my conversation. I can see Petra shooting glances our way, but she doesn't interrupt. "What exactly was I supposed to do, Alex? He'd have never even come over if I hadn't done that," I retort, feeling cornered.

"Okay, so you got him to come here. How did that go for you?" Alex raises an eyebrow, and I can feel myself clenching my jaw. "Maybe it would

have been for the better if he didn't come at all. The only thing you got out of it was another argument."

He's right, but I hate that he is. I spread my napkin over my lap with an annoyed flick of my wrist, watching Alex swirl the whiskey he ordered. "But—"

"No buts, Jules. Let him be. He didn't want to attend, and that's okay. You can't force people to do things they don't want to. When you do, you end up in the situation you're in right now—much worse than it was before he showed up yesterday."

The urge to continue to argue my side is strong, but deep down, I know that my letter was a desperate move to salvage any chances of Sebastian attending the wedding by my side. I had hoped that by giving him an ultimatum, he'd realize how truly important Andries's wedding was to me. Instead, it seems to have pushed him further away.

"It was his oldest child's wedding, for God's sake. His pride went above the happiness of his family. There's no denying that." Sadness wells in me. The realization of how far we've drifted apart is painful to acknowledge, but it's pointless to deny my feelings around Alex...and Mom, for that matter. They know me too well.

"I know. I'm just trying to help," Alex says, putting a comforting hand over mine. "You know I care about you both."

"Just tell him about the attorney. Make it seem like a secret that you weren't supposed to tell him, so he doesn't know that it's coming from me." It's another idea that I'm not sure will play out the way I want it, but perhaps this approach will break through the walls he's built around himself.

"I'll do my best, Jules," Alex replies, his gaze filled with brotherly affection. "And remember, I'm here for you, no matter what happens."

Alex's attention is pulled away by his tiny daughter, and I take that as my cue to actually eat. I haven't had an appetite in days, but making myself sick from hunger isn't going to help anything. Everything is fresh and tastes of summer. The lunch continues, and I watch as Mom speaks up. "This is so lovely, everyone. It's sad to think that when summer ends this place is going to feel so empty."

"Don't worry, Oma, we will visit you often," Andries assures her, and Roxanne nods in agreement. "It's really peaceful here."

"Thank you, my dear. It is," Mom acknowledges, leaning back as she scans around the outdoors. "It's like a little piece of heaven."

The next person to speak surprises me. “Thank you for having me, Lady Margaret,” Johan adds. “I really appreciate the hospitality. It’s been such an enjoyable stay.”

“You’re welcome, my dear. You are almost like family at this point, anyway.” Her mouth quirks up as she says this, and she’s giving Hannah a suspicious glance. My daughter, who is sitting right by Johan, looks at her Oma with big eyes.

While we eat, my thoughts keep drifting back to the conversation I had with Alex earlier. Is there any hope of saving my marriage with Sebastian? I know he feels betrayed by my letter, but what choice did I have? I wanted him to change, to prioritize his family over his pride and arrogance.

But Alex is right, maybe I can’t force him to do something he doesn’t want to do. Perhaps it’s time for me to accept that our marriage has run its course, and it’s time to move on. Maybe meeting with the divorce attorney, is the right step for me.

I finish off my gin, waving my hand for the server to bring me another. I’m trying to push away the uncertainty and pain that’s been consuming me. I need to be strong, even if that feels like the most difficult thing in the world right now.

Lunch continues, and I try my best to engage in the conversation, but my mind keeps wandering back to the looming decision ahead. The happiness that is apparent all around me is such a contrast to everything that I’m going through. It’s almost surreal how life can be so beautiful yet so complicated at the same time.

In the midst of all this, I steal glances at Hannah and Johan. I can’t afford any more surprises. It figures that my mother would be the one to know more than I do about their relationship. She seems to have eyes and ears in every corner of the world.

\* \* \*

After lunch, I try to relax and enjoy the remaining hours of the afternoon with my children by the pool. The summer heat embraces us, and the clear blue sky stretches endlessly above. It’s a picture-perfect day, and I try to make that the main focus of my life right now. I watch as Andries climbs out of the pool, toweling his hair off. Once he spots me, he comes in my direction,

settling down in the lounge chair next to me. He looks so happy. I can't remember the last time that I've seen him smile like he has the past two days. No matter what I think of Roxanne, I'm grateful that she makes him feel so wonderful.

"It's an amazing day today, isn't it?" I remark, keeping the topics light.

"You bet," my son replies, but I can sense that there's something else on his mind, and I brace myself for the question that I know is coming.

"Mom...did you speak to Dad about that video?" Andries asks finally once he gets the nerve to do so.

I sigh, sitting up a little straighter. "I did, sweetheart. Don't worry about it." I'd really love to dismiss the topic, but I know that he won't be so easily placated.

"Of course I worry. I never thought he'd go to a club with Karl on my wedding day. Fuck...." He drags a hand through his damp hair, heaving a long sigh. "After everything that Karl has done to us, I can't believe he's still on his side, despite their connection," Andries vents, frustration lacing his words. He sounds almost as disappointed as I feel.

"I know, it's sad, isn't it?" I wonder if he is regretting the way he sided with his father in the billiards room yesterday.

My son doesn't hold back, though. "Sad? It's pathetic." He's clearly hurt by his father's actions, and I can't blame him. It's hard to watch my children grapple with the fallout of our failing marriage and the out of character actions of their father.

I lean towards my son, patting him on the cheek as if he's just a little boy. To me, he still is, in a way. "You're right, but there's nothing to be done about it now. It's already happened, and he can't take it back. Don't dwell on it, love. There is so much happiness for you to experience right now."

Andries looks like he has more to say, but I'm relieved when he shifts the topic to a more positive note, sharing news about Roxanne's memoir. "I spoke to Roxanne, by the way. Her memoir is already with her editor, and it turns out she was using pseudonyms for everyone all along. It was Elise who had requested her to do so a long time ago. Oh, but there's nothing in there that involves our family anyways. Just Karl, but he obviously isn't family."

I'm surprised by this revelation, but a sense of relief washes over me. The thought of our private family matters being exposed in Roxanne's memoir was unsettling. Now I feel a glimmer of peace, knowing there's nothing about us in it.

“That’s wonderful. Do you know when it's going to be published?” I inquire, grateful for Andries' involvement in the situation, even if it was his sister that managed to get everything handled.

“November fourteenth is when her publishing day is set for,” he informs me, his tone laced with pride. “You are obviously invited to the event. Dad won’t be there, so you don’t have to worry about that. He and Roxanne aren’t exactly friendly....”

“Thanks for the invitation,” I tell him, touched by his thoughtfulness. I cherish the bond I have with my son, just like I do with all my children. But Andries was my first, and that makes our connection different. Not that I love any of my children more than the others, but it was Andries who taught me how to be a mother.

With a playful glint in my eye, I lower my sunglasses to look at him and ask, “So? How does it feel to be a married man?”

Andries chuckles, shaking his head. “Not all that different, really. I'm just getting used to it. It feels weird calling Roxanne my wife. Weird in a good way.”

Nostalgia tugs at my heart as I recall my early days of marriage with Sebastian. The sweetness of new love and the excitement of building a life together are memories I hold dear.

“Well, I hope you'll have a better marriage than mine.” Saying the words feels so bittersweet that it makes my chest ache.

Andries reaches out for my hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze. “I'm sure you and Dad will work it out.” His unwavering faith in our relationship catches me off guard, and I can’t help but smile at his kind words. “This is a bad moment, sure, but I can’t imagine you two being apart. It hasn’t all been bad, after all.”

“I hope you’re right, my love,” I sigh, leaning back in my lounge chair and watching fluffy white clouds meander across the sky. “I really do.”

*Sebastian*

I TAKE my own car to Jan's, enjoying the feeling of the road beneath my wheels and my foot on the pedal. I've been seeking out anything that occupies my mind, even for a little bit—at least it gives me some time to forget about what everyone thinks of me right now.

It's not an exaggeration to say that I've spent decades crafting my image as a successful CEO and family man, only for it all to be undone by fucking Kenneth and his article in the span of a day. I'm glad that my father isn't around to see this.

The news of the gossip article about me and the club incident has left me feeling humiliated and exposed. My reputation is tarnished, and I find myself fixating on how Julia and the rest of the family must see me now. I can all too easily imagine her face, and the look in her beautiful eyes, when she first saw the video. We've only spoken once since then, but her disappointment cut deep. I wish I could take back my foolish actions. But the damage is done, and I fear that it may be irreparable now.

I was so adamant about winning the fight about Andries's wedding that I was too blind to see the damage said fight was causing.

Seeing Jan might help me feel better, but I'm not sure. He's my closest friend outside of Alex, and while Alex has done an incredible job of being as neutral as can be expected, it might be helpful to get the opinion of someone else. Jan went through a very public divorce just two years ago, and the whole affair was an enormous spectacle, destroying his good name and



causing him immense pain. But right now, in the midst of my own public dramatics, he seems like the perfect confidant—one who can empathize with separations, public humiliation, and the agonizing fallout.

His estate is like a time capsule, and it takes me back to a younger, simpler time in my life. The grand mansion stands proudly amidst thick forest, while the pristine lake glistens in the afternoon light.

As soon as I pull my car into place, I'm greeted by the sight of my old friend dressed in a relaxed linen shirt and Bermudas, fully embracing the warmth of the summer day. He waves me over enthusiastically, and once I reach him, embraces me.

"It's been too long!" he exclaims, slapping me on the back.

"I couldn't agree more."

We make our way to the terrace, where a refreshing glass of white wine awaits me—the perfect choice for such a serene setting. Jan is drinking the same, and we both find comfortable seats for the rather involved task of catching up.

We exchange the expected niceties, but I think we both know that there are much deeper things that we want to talk about. Jan wastes no time in addressing the elephant in the room—the infamous video published by RTL that has set tongues wagging and my life spinning out of control. It's hard to escape the relentless reach of social media.

"So," he starts, leaning forward to get closer to me. "I saw that gossip article about you."

A sigh escapes my lips. As much as I don't want to talk about this anymore, I also know it will be good to get it all out on the table. "Yeah, you and everyone else in the world, it seems."

"It's not like I sought it out, I promise. My oldest son sent it to me." Jan shrugs, before taking a sip from his glass. "It's all rubbish anyway. I know that better than anyone."

I laugh, but there's no humor in it. "Rubbish or not, it's ruining my life. My wife wholeheartedly believes that I'm an irredeemable asshole, and even if I know myself that it's all bullshit, it isn't going to help me get her back."

In his reassuring manner, Jan leans back in his chair and offers his sage advice. "Give her some time, Seb. You and Julia will be back to your old selves by Christmas. It's crucial to focus on the long-term view. Will this little incident still matter in a few months? Probably not."

Part of me wants to believe Jan's words, to find comfort in the possibility

of a reconciliation. But I think that he may be downplaying the seriousness of things a bit. To think that we'll be completely over what I've done by Christmas really is a lot to ask for. How can I convince Julia to forgive me for such a public betrayal?

Jan is waiting for a response, and it's been too long since we've seen each other in person to squander this time. "You know, it's sort of funny that I'm here taking the advice of a divorced man on how to save my marriage," I joke, throwing a smirk in his direction.

A soft chuckle escapes Jan's lips, lightening the mood. "Very true. Not sure I should be the one giving advice on saving a marriage, considering my own track record."

Despite the levity, I sense the undercurrent of truth in his words. Jan's own experience with divorce gives him a unique perspective on the fragility of relationships. Yet, he managed to emerge from that painful journey with newfound wisdom. Needing some liquid courage before I bare my soul, I drain my glass of wine, which Jan quickly refills for me. I take a deep breath, and begin saying some things that are very hard to admit.

"But in all honesty, I spoke yesterday with my oldest son, Andries, before he got married, and we got on the subject of Christmas time. He didn't say that he didn't want to see me, but it was clear that he was still going to put Roxanne first."

Jan opens his mouth to comment, but I hold a hand up to stop him. "I know what you're going to say about her being his wife, but that doesn't take the sting out of it. It's either Roxanne or I at the family table at this point. And I think Julia will rather have her new daughter-in-law than me. How do I just accept that? How do I live with the fact that a former escort has taken precedence over me, the father and husband? It's just infuriating."

Jan nods in understanding. He's giving me his full attention, even though this is dissolving from a quest for advice into a pure rant. Or a venting session, I guess. Either way, I'm glad to have someone that will lend an ear.

"I understand it's a tough situation," he replies, his voice calming. "But you've got to accept that Roxanne is now part of the family, whether you like it or not. Julia loves Andries, and by extension, she cares for Roxanne too." Now it's Jan who stops me when I try to speak. "Wait. Yes, I know that she's the former escort of your friend Karl, and I'm familiar with what that means for her reputation. It doesn't change anything. Roxanne Feng is now your son's wife and your daughter-in-law, no matter how you feel about it."

His words hit me like a punch to the gut. I take another sip of wine, trying to swallow down the bitterness I feel towards Roxanne, the woman who had seemingly divided my family. Hearing her name followed by *son's wife* and *daughter-in-law* makes me nauseous.

I shoot to my feet and pace, nervous energy coursing through me. "God, the idea of it is just insufferable."

"It's natural to feel that way, Seb," he says, offering a compassionate smile. "But people change, and sometimes, we have to make room for new connections in our lives. For the sake of your family, try to find some common ground with Roxanne. If Andries loves her, so can you."

His advice feels like an impossible task. I've been so hurt by recent events that I can't see beyond my own pain. Yet, Jan's wisdom has always guided me through tough times, and I know he speaks from experience.

"I just...I feel so betrayed," I confess, all the complicated feelings raging through me. "Betrayed by everyone in that family—my wife, my oldest son, my oldest daughter. Everyone just sided with Roxanne, and it's disheartening to see how little loyalty they have towards me."

Jan's gaze softens, and he stands too, placing a reassuring hand on my shoulder. "Change is inevitable. Your family is growing, and dynamics are shifting. But that doesn't mean they love you any less. They just need time to adapt to the changes."

"I've always given them everything they wanted," I lament miserably, letting my face fall into my open hands. "If Julia wanted to travel to Vienna for an opera, I made it happen. If Elise wanted a new horse, I spared no expense. Andries wanted to fence, and I provided the best training money could buy." My voice cracks with emotion, and I take a moment to compose myself before continuing. "I've always put my family first, but what has Roxanne done for them? Nothing. Literally nothing."

"Listen, I get that, more than you know. That's just life, my dear friend. We give our wives and children the world, only for them to become ungrateful brats." Jan's harsh words surprise me, but it also lets me know how much he understands my frustration. "It's natural to feel hurt and overlooked, but sometimes, we have to step back and let others take the spotlight. Roxanne is now part of your family, and it's important to support your son in his choices. Even if everyone is, like I said, being a brat."

"That's easier said than done," I reply, my pride warring with the love I feel for my son.

“Of course it is.” He pauses, a side smile forming on his lips. “But you're strong, Seb. You've faced challenges before, and you've always come out on top. This is no different.”

We're interrupted when the butler arrives. He announces Alex's arrival, and I'm genuinely pleased that he made it. Alex and Jan greet each other with warm hugs, and as we settle on the terrace, Jan offers Alex a glass of wine to mirror the ones he and I have already been drinking. The summer breeze dances through the trees, and with Alex here, it really does feel more like the good old days than ever.

“Look at us, three old men, back together again!” Jan laughs, holding his glass into the air, ready to make a toast. “To lifelong friendships.”

“To lifelong friendships,” Alex and I echo, and we all drink.

We all find our seats again, and Jan turns to Alex. “How are the kids doing? And your wife, Petra, isn't it?”

“Everyone is well. Petra is delighted to be back in Europe for the summer,” Alex tells him, a clear expression of love passing over his face when he talks about his family. “Twins are a constant challenge, but one that we both adore, of course.”

“At least someone is living the dream,” Jan jests, causing me to snort. “Meanwhile, Sebastian and I are over here, talking about our woes.”

As we engage in conversation, I struggle to push aside the nagging unease and just enjoy the afternoon as it fades into the evening. We drink, switching from Chardonnay to barrel-aged scotch when the sun starts setting low.

Jan tells us about how his life has changed since his divorce, and the steps he's taken to find joy and meaning in life again. His ex-wife had made the terrible accusation that he had been violent toward her, and that allowed her to get more money from him along with making sure the public was wholly on her side—even though that wasn't the truth behind closed doors. My old friend is more resilient than I could have imagined, and it's inspiring to know that there is happiness and hope on the other side of something as awful as a divorce. My stomach twists and churns when I consider truly divorcing Julia...she's mine, and I am hers. There is no future that I've ever imagined without her. But...if Jan can survive it, so can I. I just desperately hope it never comes to that.

My brother-in-law doesn't have much to say about relationship issues, even though I know his own marriage has had its share of trials and tribulations. Instead, he regales us with stories about his twins and his wife's

new gallery. Suddenly, Alex changes the subject, and drops a bombshell that shatters any semblance of calmness.

“Sebastian...look, I shouldn’t be telling you this, but I can’t pretend that I’m in the dark about it.” He pauses for a beat, before taking another sip of his drink. “Contrary to what I thought, my sister has been speaking to a divorce attorney.” He rubs the back of his neck, clearly in discomfort to be talking about such a delicate matter. “A very talented one, I believe.”

My heart lurches, and anxiety washes over me like a tidal wave. A divorce attorney? The words echo in my mind, and the implications are staggering. The mere thought of losing Julia, my life partner, sends shivers down my spine. Could this really be true? “Surely you aren’t serious.”

Alex cringes. “Sorry, Seb, but I’m afraid I am. I think they are getting ready to present a settlement agreement to you as well.”

Holy shit. Julia is actually serious about this divorce business. Serious enough that she’s already started down that path. “How do you know that?” I manage to ask, my voice coming out raspy through my tight throat.

“I overheard her talking with Mom at lunch,” Alex explains, his tone sympathetic.

Of course, my mother-in-law, Margaret, would be involved. She's never been one to shy away from meddling, and her influence on Julia can be overwhelming. Is she pushing Julia towards a decision she might not be ready for?

“That’s no surprise. I’m sure Margaret is pushing her to get this so-called settlement ready sooner rather than later.”

I tilt my head back and swallow the entire glass of scotch, the rich, complex flavors wasted on me right now. I go to pour more, but Jan takes the bottle, pouring a small amount for me and putting the cork back in the dark green bottle.

“Easy, friend. I don’t know if I’m in good enough shape to carry you to the bathroom if you make yourself sick.”

I resume my pacing, the scotch doing nothing but burning in my stomach and making it more difficult for me to speak. The anxious energy in me has reached a fever pitch, and I feel like I could run a marathon right now, if only to get away from the truth of all of this. To get away from the idea of Julia leaving me for good....

“If you really want my sister back,” Alex says, breaking the silence that has started to overtake us. “I think you really need to change your allegiance

from Karl to your family, and that also includes your new daughter-in-law.” Alex comes close, leaning forward so only I can hear the last thing he has to say. “Karl might be your half-brother, but Julia is your wife, and Andries, your son.”

I nod, Alex's words sinking in. He's right; I've been too preoccupied with Karl and his affairs, neglecting my own family in the process. Julia and Andries deserve better from me. “I thought Julia would just forgive me once the wedding was behind her,” I admit, still trying to process everything. “But I could have never believed she would speak to a lawyer the next day.”

“Sometimes, actions have consequences we can't predict,” Alex offers, his voice compassionate. “But now that you know, you can anticipate what her next move is going to be. And we can work to change her mind. I'm sure she hasn't made it up completely yet.”

His words are a glimmer of hope amidst the chaos of my thoughts. I must act quickly and earnestly if I want to salvage our marriage. “What about the lap dance? Do you think she's gonna forgive me?” I inquire, my voice betraying my worry.

Alex shrugs, a gesture that offers little reassurance. “I hope so,” he says, his tone uncertain. “She has to accept that it was just a lap dance, and nothing more, and I think she will be able to get past it—even though it was a shitty thing to do, which you know by now.”

“I'll figure this out. I'm not going to give up, not yet,” I tell them, and Jan stands up to pat me on the shoulder once more.

“Good,” Jan rumbles, and Alex nods in agreement. “Now, let's get something to eat before we are more alcohol than blood.”

*Sebastian*

A WEEK HAS PASSED, and the summer season is now over. The once vibrant atmosphere of warm days and lazy afternoons has given way to a sense of somberness as early September arrives, marking the end of the carefree days and the return to work. I find myself back in my office, surrounded by the familiar sights and sounds of business as usual. But despite the semblance of normalcy, the memories of that humiliating gossip article still linger in my mind like a dark cloud.

I never imagined that a night out with Karl would turn into a scandal that would be incessantly splashed across tabloids and social media platforms. I can't shake the feeling of betrayal, not only from the supposedly-private club who made it all too easy for those who leaked the video and stories, but also by Karl, my friend and half-brother. He should have known better than to involve us all in such a reckless and embarrassing situation. Considering the fact that Karl has found himself in hot water for his behavior over and over again, I should've realized that any plan that he made was going to be a bad idea. I was so blinded by my disgust about Andries's wedding and the adrenaline rush from winning the argument with Julia, that I didn't even think. Now, all I can do is think about it, even when I'd give anything to forget and move on.

As I sit at my desk, trying to focus on the tasks at hand, a knock on my office door startles me. Unsurprisingly, It's Karl himself, and I reluctantly invite him in. He hovers in the doorway at first, and I find myself looking for

the similarities between the two of us like I have so many times. Karl has zero clue that he's my father's son, and if I have it my way, he never will. But that doesn't stop me from comparing the shapes of our noses, our hairlines, and the lines at the corners of our eyes. I see my father in my own face as I age, and seeing some of the same parts of him in Karl disturbs me.

I've never wanted him to know who his father really is. It would destroy everything I've worked for, and take away from my children via the inheritance and company I'll be able to leave them. Yet, there have been times that I've wondered if, had Karl known who he was, he would have turned out to be a better man. In some ways, he is successful, but when it comes to morality and the choices he makes regarding women...there's a lot left to be desired. It's too late now, though, and there is nothing to be done.

He is waiting for me to say something, so I let out a long breath and wave my hand towards the chair on the other side of my desk. Normally he wouldn't have even hesitated about entering my office and speaking to me like an old friend, but I'm sure he knows all the problems his little idea to go to that club has caused me. "Come in, Karl. Have a seat. What can I do for you?"

He lowers himself into the chair, and has trouble meeting my gaze. "I'm so sorry, Seb. I had no idea someone would be able capture that moment. That club is notoriously private, with a strict no phone policy."

"Yeah, it's been quite a mess. But we'll handle it," I reply, trying to maintain a facade of composure. I don't want to appear weak in front of this man.

Inside, however, I'm far from fine. The public humiliation and the strain on my marriage have taken a toll on me. I can't sleep at night, constantly replaying that dreadful night in my head. The laughter, the music, and the champagne now feel like a haunting nightmare.

"That's good. Something else will make headlines soon enough and what we did will be forgotten." Karl relaxes now, thinking that any ill will I might have had towards him is now gone. Too bad it's not.

When I don't say anything, he taps his fingers on the arm of his chair, changing the subject. "Now that the charges against Roxanne have been dropped, are they going to find someone else to take the fall?" Karl inquires, no doubt thinking of himself as the next suspect in line.

"I'm sure Julia will handle it," I respond.

Karl doesn't look so sure. "Even after everything that happened? You still



think she will clear the way for me?”

“Yeah, I do.” This is another lie. I have no idea what Julia will do, and I think it will all depend on how she’s feeling about me when the opportunity arises. But I don’t need to tell Karl that. “She’ll more than likely have the prosecutor drop whatever evidence they have that leads to you.”

Julia, my wife, is a strong and determined woman. If she has any hope of us getting back together, she will try her best to shield me from any further consequences...at least I think so. I know how her mind works, and she knows well that things that damage my image also damage the image of our family. A part of me feels guilty for putting her in such a difficult position, but the other part of me knows that I have to use every option available to me if I ever want to recover from the lap dance scandal.

Karl seems to melt into his chair, his relief so strong that it’s almost visible. “Thank goodness. I really thought this might be the thing that takes me down. Your family connections really saved me a lot of trouble.”

The fact that he’s so happy, even knowing that Julia is as angry with me as she is, really pisses me off. Karl gave me barely two sentences to apologize for the scandal that he dragged me into, but his demeanor changes immediately when he finds out that Julia can save his ass. As long as he comes out clean on the other side, it seems like he has zero issue using other people. Other people like my wife.

He’s oblivious to what I’m feeling, though, and stands up to leave, stopping mid stretch to tell me, “Hey, eh, I’m having lunch with clients later. You should come.”

“I don’t know...” Being out in public again with Karl doesn’t exactly sound like the best idea right now.

Karl is insistent, though. “It will be good for clients to see you in person and being totally entrenched in company work. You want them to see you as the CEO, not the man in the gossip columns, you know what I mean?”

I hate that he’s right. I scrub my hands over my face and beard, stalling, before I finally have to accept the invitation. “Okay, yeah. I’ll go.”

Satisfied, Karl leaves, and I’m alone once more. Drumming my fingers on the dark wooden desk, I waste away minutes contemplating the conversation with Karl. He seemed pleased with my response, but now that he’s gone, a realization is hitting me like a ton of bricks; Karl knows I’ve always had his back, and I’ve instinctively done his bidding without question. I’ve gone above and beyond to keep Karl comfortable and out of trouble,

because of the promise I made to my father. Not only that...I did everything for him because it lessened the chances of him ever finding out who his father really was. All it'd take would be a court requesting a DNA sample to charge or eliminate Karl from having committed a crime for our dark family secret to be blown wide open.

For years, it has worked, even if it has been incredibly difficult and distasteful at times. But now, if I want my family back, I need to change my allegiance, just as Alex suggested. I need to change my allegiance, but the cost of doing so is daunting.

Julia and the kids are everything to me, and I can't let my pride and arrogance ruin what we have built together. Roxanne is now part of the family, and I must accept her, regardless of my feelings about her past. I don't have to like her, and I don't think I ever will, but I have to get over the fact that she now holds a permanent spot in my family. And my family's happiness should come before anything else.

Deep down, I know I've made mistakes, but I hope it's not too late to make amends. I need to show Julia that I can change, that I'm willing to put our family first, and that I'm truly sorry for what happened at Andries's wedding. I must make her understand that I'll never let my ego come before our love again. First, though, I have to do some self reflection to make sure that I really mean it.

As I take a deep breath, a plan starts forming in my mind. I will speak to Julia, not as the successful businessman she's known for so long, but as the vulnerable man who loves her with all his heart. I'll be honest, open, and willing to change for the sake of our family. No more prioritizing Karl's wishes over my family's needs. It's time to prove to Julia that she means the world to me. It won't be easy, but I'm determined to show her that I'm capable of change.

\* \* \*

Drowning in paperwork and correspondence that has built up over the summer break, I almost miss the start of the meeting that is clearly written on my schedule. I'd really like it to just be a day where I can reacquaint myself with being back at work, but apparently we're all getting thrown right in the deep end. It's fine...it isn't like I have done this job for the better part of my

life or anything. I'm used to it at this point.

The energy in the meeting room is jovial, everyone refreshed from the time off. All of the joking and chatter slows down when I enter, though, and I know it's because they all know about the article about Karl and I. Karl, to his credit, looks totally unbothered—he's already sitting, talking animatedly with the man beside him. If my own employees want to treat me differently because of some puff piece, then so be it. I'm not about to bring it up.

I take my seat at the head of the long table and notice that one of the assistants has already placed bottles of still spring water on the surface in front of each chair, so I take mine, cracking the seal and taking a drink. Everyone else takes this as a sign that we're getting ready to start, and finds their seats, too. Papers shuffle, people murmur amongst themselves, and finally everyone is ready to begin.

The financial department goes first, and I'm just relieved that I don't have to be the first one to speak. Right now, I just want to observe all my employees to see how much has changed since I saw them last. The problem is, I keep glancing at the empty chair beside me where Elise used to sit. It's the only empty seat, and I notice that no one bothered to take it, either. There are a few glances that notice the absence of my daughter, but it isn't mentioned.

I hate that she's not here. The realization that I dismissed her because she chose family over Karl hits me hard. Elise and I were given the same test—she passed, I failed. There is a healthy amount of self-loathing inside of me for this, but at the same time, I'm proud of my girl. Respect for my daughter surges within me, wondering how she's coping with her second year in college. My mind drifts back to the past, reminiscing about the precious moments when my children were young and the family felt complete. Regret washes over me for not cherishing those times enough, for not realizing the true value of family unity and loyalty.

Thoughts of Julia flood my mind—the woman I love, the woman I've hurt. Memories of our beautiful moments together, the laughter, love, and passion, engulf me. I miss her warm smile, the way her eyes used to light up when I entered the room. But now, a wall stands between us, and I'm unsure how to break it down.

Change is necessary; I know that much at least. I must prioritize my family above all else. The allure of everything that Karl offered me that fateful night—alcohol, beautiful women, and the respect of said beautiful

women, was all too easy to fall for. I neglected my family in pursuit of more, blind to the fact that true satisfaction lies in the love and support of those who genuinely care for me.

The ache in my heart grows as I face the possibility of losing Julia and my children, left alone in a world where material possessions mean nothing without love and family. I know Julia deserves better, a husband who cherishes her, who stands by her in good times and bad, who puts family above all else. I have to prove myself to her, to show that I can change, that I can become the man she needs me to be.

“Mr. Van den Bosch?” The head of the financial department speaks up. I come back to the present with a jolt, realizing that he’s finished his presentation and is looking to me for comments.

“Thank you, everything looks to be on track,” I tell him, even though I have zero clue what the man was saying. He seems satisfied, though, and sits down. The head of the community outreach department stands, clears the slides from the previous presentation, and begins his own.

I guess I should pay attention this time. With a deep sigh, I pick up my pen and turn the pages in the packet that has been prepared for me. It’s going to be a long afternoon.

\* \* \*

Following the meeting, Karl meets me outside, and we take a car together to the restaurant. He’s very talkative, as if we haven’t been through hell for the past week, but I keep my answers short. He’s booked a table at Bolenius, but it doesn’t matter to me where we go. This is all for image, and nothing more.

We arrive, and I close my eyes for just a second, centering myself and making sure that I’m fully back in the identity of the savvy CEO of Van den Bosch industries, not the tragic fallen family man. There are two men, clients of Karl’s, waiting for us in the lobby. He greets them quickly, shaking hands and patting them jovially on the arms. I shove my hands into my pockets and look around. The lighting is soft, and the decor modern but quiet enough that it’s fitting for a business lunch. Once Karl is finished, I also greet our clients with a warm smile, hoping to make a positive impression.

Karl, as usual, takes the lead, confidently guiding us to our reserved table. His charm and charisma are on full display, and I remember how much of an

asset he's been to our company, all the way back to when my father was CEO. He has always been good at schmoozing clients, and today is no exception.

One of the clients glances around and to my biggest surprise, asks Karl, "Oh, where's the intern? Elise, wasn't it? She used to come with you, right?"

I know Karl is about to explain that Elise no longer works at Van den Bosch Industries, but something inside me stops him. Instead, I step in and reply, "She's taking a few days off. She'll be back soon."

The men nod, seemingly satisfied with my response, and we proceed to our table. But as we walk, I notice the hushed whispers from the other diners, curious about our presence. It's clear that the gossip article has taken its toll, and people are talking about my family's situation.

"Looks like we're becoming the main attraction," Karl remarks with a hint of amusement, but I'm far from amused. The unwanted attention only adds to my growing stress.

I don't have anything to say to him, so I just stay silent. Karl frowns in my direction after a second, but doesn't seem bothered for more than a minute. The menus are handed to us once we sit, and I glance over the innovative dishes, trying to focus on the present moment. Karl enthusiastically suggests some of the chef's specialties, his mood contagious.

I try to engage in small talk with the clients, but my mind is still preoccupied. I'm here at lunch with the very man that is making my life so chaotic. Still, the idea of cutting him out of my favor makes my stomach churn. I know there will be consequences for it, but there's nothing else to be done.

I take a deep breath, trying to push aside the conflicting thoughts in my head. Today is about the clients and sealing the deal.

Everyone else is discussing mundane subjects, and Karl seems to be the one participating the most in it. My thoughts drift back to Elise and the rest of my family. I regret not defending Elise's choice when she decided to stand by the family, instead of choosing Karl's side. At the time, I had been so angry with her that it had blinded me to what I was really doing. I've spent so much of my life wanting Andries to take over the company once I retire, but all of this time, Elise has been waiting to take up the mantle instead.

The server approaches, and I order the chef's signature dish, trying to appear engaged in the culinary experience.

"Good choice!" Karl commends me, a smile pulling at his lips. "The

mushroom risotto is one of the best things on the menu, I promise you.”

I don't respond to Karl's comment besides a grunt, and again, I can tell that he doesn't know why I'm being so distant. Every road of thought leads back to Elise. Damn. I'm not going to be able to let this go until I do something. Glancing over at Karl and the two clients, I confirm that they are busy talking among themselves, before I reach for my phone and discreetly send my oldest daughter a text, “*Are you available at 3 p.m.? I need to talk to you.*”

It's only 1 p.m. now, so this gives her plenty of time to decide and respond. She always has her phone on her, so I shouldn't have to wait long to know if she will give me the time of day.

Of course, I'm wrong in this instance. Elise is clearly reluctant to speak to me. The lunch carries on, but there's no reply from her as the minutes drag into an hour. I subtly check my phone, over and over, for any updates from her. Still nothing. I can't help but feel anxious about our relationship. I don't want her to think I'm using her to gain favor or to manipulate her in any way. I genuinely want to repair our bond and make amends for my past mistakes. Concern gnaws at me, and as soon as I finish the meal, I excuse myself from the table.

Once outside, I make a quick call to my PA, Paula, asking her to find out Elise's schedule for the afternoon and if she can make time for a meeting.

“Are you saying you want me to call the university and ask them to give me private information about a student?” She sounds reluctant, and when she says it like that, I can't exactly blame her.

“I know it's short notice, but it's urgent,” I insist. Paula remains silent, mulling the request over, so I add, “I know you can work wonders.”

She sighs heavily, but I am her boss, after all. “Okay, sir. I will see what I can do.”

It's better than nothing. While waiting for my PA's response, my mind drifts to memories of better times with Elise—the laughter, the shared moments of joy, hunting with her, and the father-daughter bond we once shared. Having her work with me, being my right hand, had made me proud in ways I didn't even realized before.

“Sorry about that,” I announce when I make my way back to the table. The two clients look up, but they are uninterested in whatever I have to say, clearly wrapped up in whatever tale Karl was regaling them with.

“Not a problem,” Karl assures me, adding, in a quieter voice once I sit,

“Is everything okay, Seb?”

I barely look at him, lying through my teeth, “Yes, don’t worry, I just had to take a personal call.”

The meal concludes, and everyone seems full and content. Once the server brings the check to the table, I'm about to take the initiative and treat my clients as usual, a gesture I've always upheld. Even when a client invites me out and not the other way around, I make sure to pay, just to make a point that they are our estimated client after all. However, when we're presented with the payment terminal, Karl swiftly places his employee card down, ignoring the fact I'm already pulling mine out. I feel an immediate surge of frustration and irritation at this subtle display of ignoring me.

I quickly place my hand on the terminal, preventing Karl from reaching it. With a stern glare, I say, “I've got this,” and hand over my own card to complete the payment.

In that moment, it becomes painfully clear that Karl was seizing the opportunity to behave as if he has more status at the company than he really does. It's partially my fault since I've been so distracted, and he's been like the host of this lunch meeting the entire time, not me. That is all well and good, but Karl trying to pay when I was already pulling my card out is a step too far. Somehow, this little situation seems like a good reflection of the power dynamics between us.

The atmosphere at the table changes in an instant, from laid back to awkward. Karl retreats without hesitation, but there is a look on his face that I'm not familiar with. He's not angry, or embarrassed, but maybe...entitled? I understand that these are his clients, but Karl is also the one who invited me out with them this afternoon. He could have played boss all on his own had he not insisted I come. Could he have invited me just to give me the smallest taste of humiliation? Displaying to his clients that he's above me somehow?

*No, I'm thinking about this too deeply.*

It has to just be an oversight. Karl won't ever try to challenge me like that, especially with how I've gone beyond to ensure that he excels and stays out of trouble.

Outside, in front of the restaurant, I tell Karl to just take the car back, and that I will follow behind. Once he's gone, and I've bid the clients farewell, I call my personal driver and arrange a ride. As the afternoon sun casts long

shadows across the city, I find myself still anxiously awaiting a response from Elise. It's been over an hour since I first text her, so I decide to contact Paula once again for an update.

"Any word from Elise?" I inquire, trying to keep my voice steady.

"I was just about to call you," Paula begins, before pausing for a beat. "She's on her way and will meet you in your office."

I blink a few times, surprised. "Really? How did you even know—"

She laughs softly. "All I did was call your daughter and speak to her myself. She doesn't seem to love the idea of coming, but I made sure to be as convincing as possible. So she'll be here."

Grateful for Paula's efficiency, I manage to chuckle, "Thank you, Paula. You always know how to get things done."

With a renewed sense of purpose, I make my way to my office to face the inevitable conversation with my daughter. Paula greets me in person when I get back to the office, and she stands, coming over to brush my shoulders off and straighten my tie. "I don't think that she has much time, so keep things succinct. I tried to get some water or tea, but she wasn't interested. I think she's nervous."

This makes me smile, but sadly. I've never wanted to make my daughter nervous, not once in my entire life. But here we are, and this problem is totally of my making. "Well, she isn't the only one, so it should work out."

As I approach the door, I take a deep breath, preparing myself for what might be a tense and emotional encounter. Inside, I find Elise standing composedly before me. My first urge is to pull her into a hug, but the tightness in her expression tells me that it might not be the best idea. Her appearance exudes a mix of casual elegance and professional poise—beige chinos, a crisp Oxford white shirt, comfortable tennis shoes, and her chestnut hair pulled back into a neat ponytail.

"You look like you're ready to get back to work," I remark, trying to break the ice.

Elise's expression remains guarded, her eyes wary as she responds, "I only came here because Paula begged me to. What do you want?"

My heart sinks slightly at her curt tone, realizing that rebuilding our strained relationship won't be an easy task. However, I refuse to back down and decide to approach the conversation with a hint of levity.

"Hello, darling daughter, good to see you too," I reply, mustering a gentle smile. Elise doesn't seem pleased with the sarcasm. The air in the room feels



tense, and I motion towards the couch, inviting her to sit. “Please, um, have a seat,” I say, hoping to create a more relaxed atmosphere.

We go to the couch, and seeing how cold and distant Elise is, I try to start with an apology. “First off, I want to apologize for firing you the other day. I...well, I’ve been a brute. These past few weeks, though, have really been an eye opener for me.”

Without missing a beat, Elise asks, “Is this because of the divorce? Are you trying to win me over so that you’ve at least one child on your side?”

“Of course not.” Frustrated, I drag a hand through my hair, heaving a sigh. “Christ, this isn’t for some judicial battle. I...I shouldn’t have pushed you away. You’ve always been such a good daughter and employee, and when things got ugly, you stood up to me and kept your loyalty towards the family. And that’s...that’s something I admire.”

She raises an eyebrow in suspicion. “Do you mean something you are incapable of doing?”

My shoulders slump slightly, and I lower my voice before saying, “Things are more complicated than they seem, El. I’ve got so many wheels turning all at the same time that I can barely keep up.”

Elise exhales slowly, crossing her legs and looking past me out at the spectacular view of the city that my office offers.

“Mom is deeply hurt, which I’m sure you already know. Complicated or not, your little rendezvous with a stripper while she was there supporting Andries at his wedding, alone, shattered her heart.”

Shaken, I clear my throat. “Elise, I—”

My daughter holds up a hand to stop me. “I’m not finished. You disappointed everyone, just like Oma knew you would.”

God, more talk about Margaret. I know without a doubt that she’s been waiting all this time for me to slip up, and now that I have, she’s going to be like a shark with blood in the water. “I know, El. I know better than you can ever understand, but I need your help. I want to make things right.”

Elise remains cautious, though, not wanting to be drawn into the dance of manipulation that is so common in our world. “I don’t want to be a pawn in your game. You’ve already used me before, and I’m not going to make the mistake of falling for something like that again.”

“No, no. Of course not. That’s not what you’re here for,” I reassure her, my voice tinged with sincerity. “I truly want to mend our fractured bond and rebuild the trust between us.”

Shifting on the couch to face me fully, Elise looks intently at me, her expression determined. “Well, if you want to make things right, then fire Karl once and for all. Get rid of him, Dad.”

I sigh, knowing this isn't a simple decision. “You know I can't do that, not right now, at least,” I respond, trying to explain my predicament. “Clients like him, and he's a great asset to the company. The amount of clients that belong to him and him alone is astronomical. We'd be slashing our profits drastically if I just fired him out of the blue.”

Elise instantly puffs at me in return. “See? It's all about the company, isn't it?” she hisses, slapping her hands on her knees in frustration. “That man has caused so much trouble and pain for us, and still you are defending him. Protecting him, even! Where was that protection for Roxanne and Andries when the press was tearing them apart?”

I stand up, feeling torn and conflicted. Just like at Jan's, I find myself pacing, anxious and unsure. “If he goes, I can't be the cause of it,” I admit, realizing that letting go of Karl might expose things that I'm just not willing to have come to light. “What you're saying isn't wrong, but I just don't know how to do it.”

My daughter pauses for a moment and seems to be thinking something through. “Gabi has found some evidence against him,” she announces. “It's worth letting her do her job, don't you think? You can always pretend she did it against your will.”

Gabi. The only person that knows just as much about the trials that Julia and I have faced—other than Alex—is her. While I can't imagine she's much of a fan of mine these days, her loyalty to Julia is surely intact.

“Evidence, huh?” I rub my chin with my hand in thought. That just might work. “Hm. Fine, yes. Let's allow Gabi to do her job, then.” Karl will be pissed, no doubt about it, but as Elise said so well, I can always pretend I did my best to save him.

*Julia*

THE WEEKEND SUNLIGHT filters through the grand oak trees that line my mother's estate, casting dappled patterns of gold and green upon the manicured lawns. The lingering fatigue from a demanding week as a judge at the court of appeal begins to loosen its grip on my shoulders as I step out of the sleek sedan and inhale the crisp, lavender-scented air.

Mother had her staff set up a table in the gardens for lunch today, and I expected it to be an intimate affair between her and I. To my surprise, though, I see that it's a large table that has been brought out—four seats instead of two.

While I approach, Clarissa is busying herself with a tablecloth, her nimble fingers securing it with a flourish as if preparing for an extravagant soirée and not a quick repast in the middle of the day. But it's the extra place settings that catch my attention, making me curious, and a little on guard. Two empty chairs stand sentinel, waiting to be occupied by unknown persons. There are definitely people that I would rather not be interacting with right now, and while I don't think that my mother would try and pull something over on me, I don't ever assume to understand what she does, or why.

"Are we having guests today?" I inquire, my voice soft yet tinged with a note of uncertainty.

Clarissa pauses, her eyes meeting mine. "It seems so, m'am, but I don't know who."

As I take a seat at the table, the sun's warm embrace soothing my skin, I

find myself lost in thought. Who could these mystery guests be?

Clarissa serves tea, not even needing to ask what I want or how I take it since she's been with the family for decades now. I'm early, and Mom hasn't arrived yet, but it's a nice enough afternoon that I don't mind. I continue to sip my tea, the tranquility of the estate wrapping around me like a cherished quilt. This is home, and no matter how chaotic other parts of my life may be, nothing can ever change that.

Yet...Sebastian's estate, the one we raised our children at, is also home. The idea that I might have to cut ties with the place that I love so much makes me feel so desolate that I have to push the thought away. It's too soon, too raw, to really consider yet.

I center myself back in the moment with some effort, and force myself to relax. The breeze rustles the leaves in a gentle murmur, but the soft sound is interrupted by the rumble of wheels on the concrete driveway. Emerald green and gleaming in the afternoon light, a vintage car pulls around to the front of the estate.

My eyebrows lift in surprise as the car comes to a halt, revealing its occupants. Dan steps out first, walking around to the passenger side of the car and offering his hand to Elise, who climbs out after him. A smile blooms on my lips as I rise from my seat, the pulse of happiness quickening in my veins at the sight of their familiar faces.

"Well, what a delightful surprise," I exclaim as the couple walks over.

"Hi, Mom," Elise greets me with a vibrant smile, her eyes twinkling with an energy that lights up the air around her.

I wrap her in a quick hug, before greeting Dan just as warmly. "To what do I owe this pleasant surprise?"

"Can't we just come and have lunch with you?" Elise laughs, taking her own seat when Dan pulls it out for her. I give her a doubtful look, and my daughter sighs. "Okay, fine. Oma Margaret told me the horses were ready to go for a ride today, so we came by."

The corners of my lips quirk into a playful expression. "Oh, nice to know it was because of the horses and not to pay a visit to your dear mom."

"Oh, enough bickering, you two."

We all turn to see Mom approaching, her kaftan floating behind her as she walks. There's a mojito in her hand already, and I'm a bit envious, my fingernails tapping on the ceramic of my teacup.

"Yes, Mom," I say with a quick chuckle while at the same moment, Elise

and Dan echo, “Yes, ma’am.”

As the four of us settle in for lunch, the atmosphere is punctuated by the clinking of silverware and the intermittent laughter that dances like fireflies in the air. Amidst the delicate bites and shared anecdotes, it's Elise who breaks the news that casts a shadow over our gathering. Her words, delivered with hesitation and resolve, causes everyone to stop and pay attention to her.

“I spoke to Dad a few days ago,” she begins, her gaze fixed on her plate for a fleeting moment before lifting to meet my eyes. “He seemed quite worried that you're considering a divorce. He’s...I don’t know...different? More humble, almost, except I don’t know if the word humble could ever really be used to describe Dad.”

The news lands like a stone dropped into still waters, causing ripples of mixed emotions to radiate through the space between us. It’s been nice pretending for these short hours that nothing is wrong, that Sebastian and I aren’t on the verge of divorce, but apparently that respite is over.

“Anyway, we spoke for a bit, and he’s okay with letting Gabi do her job and going after Karl,” Elise continues, her voice steady despite the weight of her words. The name Karl brings with it a wave of negativity so strong that it makes my stomach flip. I know my daughter is waiting for an answer, but I don’t have one for her. Thinking about my husband, and his secret half-brother, renders me speechless.

A pause follows, a momentary silence in which the unspoken thoughts loom between us.

Dan's voice then rises, breaking the awkwardness. “Yeah...Sebastian even invited Elise to be an intern at the company again, but she declined. It seems like he’s starting to come back to his normal self, at least a little bit.”

This surprises me; working with her father, taking over as the head of Van den Bosch Industries when Sebastian retires, has been Elise’s number one dream for so long. Even when there was still the possibility that Andries would take Sebastian’s spot and not El, everyone could see that it was really El who had the drive and the fire to make things happen. When Andries bowed out and Elise took the internship, she was so happy. Seeing the way she slowly lost passion for the job she had worked for has been killing me. I guess I just always assumed that her departure from the internship was only temporary, but hearing that she rejected the offer is a shock.

“You really turned down the opportunity to go back?” I ask her, sitting my fork down.

Elise's voice resonates with resolve. "Yeah, with Karl still there, and the media scandal that he managed to land himself right in the middle of, I told Dad that I at least needed a few months to decide before coming back. I have no interest in being there just to run interference with the press, you know?"

I reach over and place my hand over one of my daughter's, giving it a quick squeeze. She might not be saying it out loud, but I know that decision couldn't have been easy for her. I'm sure, just like I do, that she would love for things to just go back to normal. "That's fair. I understand."

My mind maneuvers through a maze of feelings as the lunch continues. There is a brief moment of satisfaction when I consider that I'm now good to tell Gabi that she's free to bring charges against Karl. In reality, though, it sort of feels like a hollow victory. I don't think Seb has suddenly changed his mind and decided that I'm right. He's been so manipulative that I can't help but see his willingness to work with Gabi as just another ploy. In fact, his sudden change of heart, his willingness to cooperate, feels more like a strategic maneuver than a genuine transformation. The inkling that he might be merely using this newfound stance to get the kids back on his side instead of mine makes me uneasy. As easy as it'd be to vocalize this, trying to sway Elise in my direction would be no better than what I believe Seb is doing right now. And on the off chance he's being genuine, I can't risk coming off as a bitter and angry wife if he's really trying to be better. That will just make the older kids come to resent me in the future.

"Well, that's great that you and your dad are finally talking again," I offer with a small smile, even if it is forced.

There's an awkward moment after I speak, and I fill the time by spearing salad with my fork and trying to enjoy the lunch. I'm annoyed that Sebastian isn't even here but he already managed to ruin this little moment of peace that I've carved out for myself. Even the fresh fruit and vegetables in the salad taste bland and unenjoyable to me.

Before anyone can change the topic to happier, lighter things, my mother's voice pierces through the air, her words ringing with a sharpness that cuts through the veneer of politeness. "As nice as it is that Sebastian is deciding to be less of an insufferable man, I'm sure he's only doing this because he knows you talked to a divorce attorney."

A pause follows, the weight of her observation settling heavily over the table. Mom's unwavering perceptiveness has always been a double-edged sword—comforting in its accuracy yet sharp enough to slice through even the

most carefully guarded facade. Her words, though harsh, hold an element of truth that I can't deny.

Elise and Dan can't deny it either. Dan, especially, is feeling uncomfortable, turning in his seat to look away from the rest of us just slightly and taking a long drink of the Perrier he's been served. I can tell my daughter's boyfriend isn't interested in getting too deeply into this very personal family conversation, and I can't say that I blame him. I'd like to escape too, if it was an option.

Mom must see the way Elise's face grays at the mention of the divorce attorney, and I notice the way her shoulder's soften as she changes her tone to try and comfort her granddaughter. It's almost amusing, the fact that I know my mother would burn the world to the ground for any of her children or grandchildren. She might hate my husband, but nothing matters more to Mom than family does.

"But good on you, El," she quickly adds. "I'm happy for you, truly. Sebastian might be a constant disappointment to me, but at least he's acting like a father again. You and your siblings deserve only the best, love."

"Thanks, Oma," Elise responds with a sigh, but I can tell that she's still wounded. I think anyone, child or not, would be disturbed hearing their parents mention divorce. Poor Elise. Maybe we can get everything reconciled before I have to cause my children anymore pain in the quest of trying to figure out my marriage. A sense of pride blooms for Elise, for her courage in facing her father and for the semblance of reconciliation she has forged. And yet, beneath it all, the churning currents of uncertainty remain, casting shadows over what was supposed to be a pleasant lunch.

"Let's talk about something else," I say suddenly, pasting on yet another fake smile and looking around to meet everyone's eyes. "You and Dan are going riding today, right? How long are you planning on staying out?"

Elise lets out a long breath, some of her tension going with it. I'm not the only one happy to have the subject change. Without pause, she launches into the conversation about which horse she plans on taking from the stable, and which one she thinks will be the best fit for Dan. Easy as that, the veil of sadness that has been draped over us starts to dissipate, and I feel like I can feel the sun on my shoulders once more unhindered.

\* \* \*

Lunch ends, and the afternoon stretches on, casting elongated shadows across the verdant gardens below me. Mom and I have moved to the lounge chairs by the pool, giving Elise and Dan some privacy to stroll through the gardens hand in hand. The gentle breeze carries with it the delicate scent of blooming flowers, a fragrant reminder of the beauty that flourishes in this idyllic corner of the world. I can almost pretend, sitting here, tea in hand with my mother beside me, that everything is okay.

The exterior calm I project barely hides the storm that rages within me. My thoughts swirl like leaves caught in a whirlwind, carried away by a torrent of emotions that refuse to be contained. The revelation of Sebastian's sudden compliance, his uncharacteristic willingness to cooperate, remains a puzzle with pieces that refuse to fit together. A nauseating memory resurfaces—a fragment of a moment that has left a dark mark on my consciousness.

The image of Sebastian and a faceless woman who sways above him, nearly nude haunts me. It's a scene that I have replayed in my mind countless times. The hushed whispers of doubts have only grown louder, suspicions that seep into my thoughts like ink staining parchment. Is it possible that this fleeting encounter was more than just a casual moment of indulgence? Or was it something deeper...a sign of how disconnected from our marriage Sebastian really is? I know that Karl was the architect of the encounter, but Seb still accepted. Karl being involved can't erase his liability.

I shakily sip the tea in my hand, hoping the herbs can settle my stomach. God, seeing Sebastian over and over again with that woman dancing on him claws at my mind. The idea that he accepted a lap dance—an act of abandon that feels irreconcilable with the man I once thought I knew—still cuts me just as deeply as it did the first moment I learnt about it. It leaves me wondering if the cracks in our marriage are deeper than I've dared to admit.

Mom's voice pulls me from the depths of my reverie, her words a gentle intrusion that ripples through my thoughts. "Darling, are you alright?" she inquires, concern lacing her tone.

I look up, offering her a small grin, even if I'm sure that my mother, of all people, is observant enough to see through it. "Yes, eh, just lost in thought."

Her gaze lingers on me, her eyes searching for something just beyond the surface. But I've mastered the art of concealing my emotions, burying them beneath a veneer of composure. The truth, the roiling sea of uncertainty that churns within me, remains hidden behind a mask of calm. If it were anyone



else besides Mom, I might get away with the ruse.

“Lost in thought about that *man*, I’m sure,” she huffs. “Really, Julia, it’s a waste of time to worry about him so much. Whatever is going to happen is unavoidable now. You might as well just play the game that has been laid out and not agonize over it so much.”

The laugh that comes out of me is bitter. “That’s easier said than done, you know.”

Mom’s undeterred. “Well, Eveline will have the settlement ready for you by next week. That should make you feel a little better at least.”

My breath catches in my throat as her words wash over me, carrying with them the gravity of the choices that lie ahead. I’ve gone back and forth with this decision a thousand times now. Letting my mother talk to Eveline had eased some of my worry, but made other parts of it that much worse. I shift uneasily in my seat, grappling with the reality of the path I have to walk, whether I want to or not.

“Mom...I...” my voice falters.

“You what, Julia?” Her gaze locks onto mine, a steely resolve gleaming in her eyes. “Are you going to forgive him just because he’s using Elise to show off what a good man he is now? He just realized he has gone too far and now he’s using the children. You’re a judge for goodness sake. You know good and well how things play out, and how important it is to have the best attorney on your side. And Eveline is the very best.”

The truth in her words is a double-edged sword. The realization that Sebastian’s newfound devotion to fatherhood might be nothing more than a veneer to mask his own transgressions strikes at the core of my emotions. And yet, there’s a part of me—a part that clings to the remnants of our love story—that struggles to accept that we’re really at the point that someone like Eveline is necessary.

“I know, Mom,” I murmur, looking away from her and out at the gardens once more. “I just think it’s too early to officially file the paperwork. We’ve only been separated for a few weeks after over twenty years together!”

A sigh escapes her lips, heavy with resignation. “Yes, of course. But at least it’s done and ready if we need it.”

“I’m so tired of talking about this.” I sit my teacup on the side table with a clatter and drag a hand through my hair. “It’s like, besides work, it feels like my life revolves around Sebastian’s nonsense and nothing else. I’m exhausted.”

“Oh, darling,” Mom’s voice goes warm, the cold sensibility she’s been speaking with fading. “Of course. I’m sorry if I’m putting too much pressure on you about everything. I just want it to be as painless as possible if you do end up needing to divorce.”

It’d be a lie to say that her insistence that I hire Eveline hasn’t worn me down some, but I also understand where she’s coming from. Though her hatred of Seb since the beginning of our relationship does make it all the more frustrating that she’s been so insistent. “It’s fine. I might just ignore it all if everyone doesn’t keep bringing it up, so maybe it’s a blessing in disguise.”

“Possibly,” Mom concedes, pulling her kaftan around herself a little tighter. “I know you aren’t saying it out loud, but you’re still hoping to reconcile, aren’t you?”

There’s no point in lying. I shrug one shoulder, knowing that it isn’t the answer she wants to hear. “Yes.”

Mother hums in annoyance, but keeps the bitterest of her opinions to herself, for which I’m thankful. “Well, I guess that’s to be expected. I’d have hoped after all these years that that man’s grip on you would have lessened some. But it seems you’re just as devoted as ever.”

“It’s a surprise to me too, honestly,” I laugh sardonically. “If someone had told me that Sebastian was going to pull all the nonsense that he has, I’d have assured him that I would be long gone. Yet, here I am, still unable to make a choice.” A lump starts to build in my throat, and the urge to flee the conversation suddenly hits me hard. “Mom, is Pablo here?”

She turns to me, surprised at the sudden pivot in subjects. “Of course, he must be at the stables, getting the horses ready. Why?” Mom’s curiosity seeps through her words.

I meet her gaze, quietly determined to salvage the rest of the day. “Can you send Elise and Dan to meet me at the stable in ten minutes? I’m going to go inside and change.”

\* \* \*

Just a few minutes later, I’m standing in front of my closet, feeling a mix of nostalgia and excitement. It feels like stepping into a time capsule when I see my old riding clothes: the blouse, breeches, and riding boots that used to be

my second skin during a time in my life where I was freer to ride whenever I wanted.

With a hint of trepidation, I pick up the blouse. The fabric is soft, and I can almost feel the wind on my face as I ride through open fields. The breeches still fit surprisingly well, hugging my form like an old friend. And the boots, only slightly worn and weathered but still polished to a mirror shine, cradle my feet.

Looking down at myself, I can't help but smile. It's like reconnecting with a part of me that's been tucked away for too long. The memories flood back—the laughter, the freedom, the bond with the horses. I'm transported back to a time when life felt simpler, when challenges could be left behind with each gallop.

Sure, the clothes might be a bit of a throwback, but honestly, they're making me feel pretty damn good right now. It's like slipping into a piece of my history...a piece that fits as snugly as it did back then. The years have been kind to my body at least, and there's a certain pride in realizing that the woman in the mirror is still the same one who used to ride with the wind in her hair and a heart full of dreams.

I can't help but be excited for the ride ahead. Elise and Dan, horses, and a chance to relive some of those moments—it's like reconnecting with a part of myself that I've missed. And yeah, I might be older, but I'm sure I can keep up.

With a final wink to the mirror, I turn away and head to the stables, the anticipation bubbling up inside me. It's not often I get to do something novel, but this certainly counts. I'm on a mission to find my old companion, my favorite mare—a beautiful gray dapple named Star. She's the one who's carried me through countless adventures, her spirit mirroring my own, regal but secretly lighthearted.

And there she is, nestled in her stall, her dappled coat like a canvas painted with shades of gray and white. I lean against the doorframe, a soft smile curving my lips as I take her in. She's aged, like we all have, but there's an enduring elegance about her. Her eyes, wise and gentle, meet mine, and in that moment, it's like we're picking up a conversation that was never truly paused.

“Hey there, old girl,” I murmur, my voice full of fondness and affection. I step closer, her welcoming gaze never leaving mine. Her ears flick forward, as if she's acknowledging my presence. It's a silent understanding that spans

the years between us.

Reaching to the mare, her muzzle stretches out, her breath warm against my hand. I offer my palm, and she nuzzles it gently, a gesture that tugs at my heartstrings. There's a bond between us, like there is every horse and rider that have known each other for years. I stroke her velvety nose, feeling the faint tickle of whiskers against my skin.

"It's good to see you, girl," I confess, my words soft as a whisper. Star shifts her weight, leaning into my touch, as if sharing the sentiment. It's as if we're reliving all the times we've had. The gallops through open fields, the quiet rides that felt like a secret shared between kindred spirits...Star and I have been through quite a bit together.

It isn't like I haven't visited her while I've been staying with Mom, but there's a difference between a short visit and an actual trail ride, which is what we have planned today.

"Ready for a ride, old friend?" I ask her with a playful glint in my eye.

Her response is a soft whicker, a sound that seems to say, "Always."

It's a promise—a promise of shared moments, of laughter, of feeling that unique blend of freedom and connection that only comes when you're on the back of a horse you trust implicitly.

With a final pat and a lingering gaze, I leave her stall, searching for Pablo to have him get Star saddled up. To my surprise, I come across the young man already heading over to her stall, my dark leather saddle in his arms. He tips his head to me and I return the gesture.

"Your mom told me you wanted to go for a ride. Your daughter is already in the right wing of the stable," he calls behind his shoulder.

"Thanks Pablo," I reply back, now on a mission to find my daughter, knowing that Star is in good hands and will be ready for me shortly.

The sound of approaching footsteps and a burst of laughter catches my attention, and I turn to see Elise and Dan making their way towards me. Elise moves with a confident grace, her every step echoing her years as a serious rider. Her horse, a spirited chestnut named Ember that she has by the lead, exudes the same fire as its name suggests—a perfect match for Elise's skill and determination.

Dan, on the other hand, approaches with a touch of uncertainty, his posture revealing that riding is more of a leisure activity for him. The paint gelding, named Rusty, that Elise has chosen for him embodies a calm and gentle presence. He's a steadfast companion that understands its rider's less

frequent encounters with the saddle. My mouth quirks up seeing Elise's choice for her boyfriend—a part of me expected that she would pair him with a horse that was a bit more spirited, just for laughs. If she's being this considerate, then Dan really must be on her good side lately.

“Hey, Mom!” Elise chirps, her eyes bright with excitement as she joins me. “Are you gonna go with us for a ride?”

My heart warms, and a genuine smile tugs at my lips. “Yes, I haven't seriously ridden a horse for years, but since you came here to ride, so I want to do it with you.”

Elise's hug envelops me in a cocoon of affection, bridging the gap between mother and daughter. “Gosh! I'm even more excited now.”

Dan offers a friendly smile, a little eager and a little nervous, all at the same time. “Ready for a ride, Julia?”

I chuckle, stretching my arms above my head. “As ready as I'll ever be. And Star seems eager to stretch her legs, too.”

Like mentioning her name summons her, Pablo rounds the corner, leading my mare with him. Elise's gaze lingers on Star, a fondness on her pretty face. “Star still looks amazing. You two are going to have a blast.”

Pablo finishes saddling up Star, and I step forward, my hand finding its place on her neck. “You ready, girl?” I whisper, feeling the connection between us as tangible as the leather beneath my fingers.

As I get ready to mount Star, I spare a glance at Elise and Dan. Elise's confidence radiates like a beacon, her posture already indicating a deep connection with her horse. And then there's Dan, his determination evident in the way he steadies himself for the ride ahead.

Ember, fiery and spirited, paws the ground with a restless energy that mirrors Elise's excitement. Rusty, calm and steady, stands as a reassuring presence for Dan. Reassuring...and maybe a bit boring. But there's nothing wrong with that.

“We're all set,” Peter announces, giving Star's saddle a final adjustment.

I meet Elise's gaze, and we share a knowing smile—a silent exchange of love. And as I swing into the saddle, the world seems to fall into place, the past merging with the present. Star and I are a team, a pair of old friends.

Turning my gaze toward Pablo, I grab his attention before he can disappear to continue his daily tasks. “Pablo, could you take a picture of us?”

“Oh, yes! That's such a good idea!” Elise gushes. “Let's go out into the sun and get a really good one.”

The sun is shining as we ride our horses out of the stables, a rush of excitement tingling through me. Star moves beneath me with a comfortable rhythm. Elise, on Ember, is all smiles beside me. “This is so awesome, Mom,” she says, her enthusiasm infectious. “I didn’t even think to invite you, but I’m glad you invited yourself.”

I glance at her, matching her grin. “Absolutely,” I reply, feeling a surge of happiness for this simple joy.

Dan trails behind us on Rusty. He's focused on the ride, determination evident in his posture. It's clear that this is more of a casual ride for him, a chance to unwind and enjoy the moment. When we find a picturesque spot in the gardens, Elise pulls out her phone. “Pablo, can you snap that pic of us on this?”

Pablo gives a thumbs-up and lines up the shot. Star’s reins rest comfortably in my hand as we pose. The camera clicks, freezing this moment in time—a snapshot of us, two generations of riders.

“Got it!” Pablo exclaims, and Elise's phone lights up with the captured memory.

I breathe a sigh of satisfaction, my heart feeling light. This photo is a reminder of the good times, the laughter, the connection with our horses, and the bond we share as a family.

“Nice one, Elise.” My voice's filled with affection when she comes close, leaning over to show me the picture.

As we continue our ride, we leave the gardens and head for the forest path. The wind whispers through the trees, broken up by the sound of hooves on the packed dirt. In this moment, I'm grateful for the simplicity of riding, for the shared experience, and for the reminder that life's best moments are often the ones where we're connected to each other and the world around us.

When we get deeper into the woods, the air carries the fragrant perfume of wildflowers, mingling with the earthy aroma of damp soil. Light from above dances through the leaves in patches of gold, casting dappled shadows on the path before us. It really is lovely out here. The distant call of a bird, the whisper of leaves stirred by a passing breeze, and the occasional rustle of unseen creatures, all weaving a serenade that resonates with the rhythm of life.

While the three of us navigate the forest track, I steal glances at my daughter and her boyfriend. Elise’s joy is palpable, etched in the curve of her smile and the radiant sparkle in her eyes. Dan, too, seems immersed in the

moment, listening to what Elise has to say like her words are the most important thing he's ever heard.

And then there's me—the woman in the middle of her own emotional turmoil, trying to escape it for a moment with this ride. The horses carry us forward, and the trail of my thoughts follows a different trajectory. I find myself retracing the steps that brought me here—the choices, the sacrifices, and the heartaches. My marriage, once the cornerstone of my world, now stands on a precipice, its future uncertain and fragile.

And yet, despite the looming shadows that dance at the edges of my consciousness, I'm struck by an overwhelming sense of gratitude. Gratitude for the winding path that led me to this point, for the moments that unfolded in its wake. It's a bittersweet realization—that even in the midst of turmoil, my journey has yielded the most beautiful fruits: my children.

Again, I turn to watch as Elise's laughter mingles with the sound of the forest, her joy a testament to the resilience of youth. She's not carrying the weight of having turned down her father's internship, or her parents' possible divorce. She's just here, living life as it happens. I want to be more like her in my daily life, because in this moment, it's easy to let go—to release the weight of expectations and simply be.

With Elise and Dan riding alongside me, laughter and conversation flowing effortlessly, I'm hit with a sudden realization: If I had the chance to do it all over again, marriage, mistakes, and all, I'd do it just to have my incredible children. They've been the true treasures of my journey, the source of countless joys and proud moments.

Looking back, there were days when my relationship with Sebastian felt like navigating a maze. But the laughter, the shared dreams, the early mornings and late nights—it's all part of the intricate mosaic that brought us here. I miss him...and admitting that, I'm struck by another truth: I'd do it again just to relive those happy moments, even if they were always leading us here.

The wind ruffles my hair, and I let out a soft sigh. It's surprising, really. Despite the ups and downs, the twists and turns, I can't deny that I still love him. Maybe not in the same way, because we aren't the same people that we were, but there's a warmth in my heart that refuses to fade.

I miss my husband, and I love him. I refuse to be ashamed of it, even if I should be.

“Everything okay, Mom?” Elise calls out, breaking me out of my reverie.

I glance at her and offer a reassuring smile. “Yeah, just lost in thought.” She chuckles. “You're not the only one. Riding has a way of doing that.”

Dan joins in, a playful grin on his face. “We're a trio of daydreamers. Too bad our favorite daydreamer, Andries, isn't here to partake.”

We share a laugh, the sound blending seamlessly with the surroundings. I steal another glance at my daughter, her features softened by the sunlight. She's a perfect blend of her father and I. It's strange how life takes unexpected turns, how time can reshape relationships and priorities.

As we continue our ride, I can't help but hope that, in the end, we'll find a way to fit together again, Sebastian and I. Maybe, just maybe, there's a chance for us to forge a new path together, one that respects the journey we've taken together while allowing us to move forward. Or maybe I'll end up signing divorce papers with Eveline. At this point, I have no idea how this all will play out.

Star's strides are a steady reminder that life keeps moving, that change is inevitable. And as I ride on, I allow myself to be surrounded by the beauty of the moment. I'm reminded that there's a unique kind of peace in embracing the imperfections, in cherishing the memories, and in hoping for a future where the threads of our lives find a way to weave together once more.



*Sebastian*

IT'S the middle of the week, but without Julia here, I'm starting to realize just how sheltered I've been from the chaotic nature of these mornings. I can hear the kids downstairs getting ready for school, but instead of ignoring the sounds and getting ready for work, I decide to descend the stairs and join them.

As a new day begins, it brings with it the usual mix of routines and changes. The kitchen is bustling with activity as the younger ones—Joris, Aleida, and Arthur—eat their breakfast, while Hannah is still upstairs, requiring more privacy than the others. Even though I'm trying to be more present with my kids, I watch them with a sense of detachment, my thoughts wandering as they move about.

This home that I've lived my entire life in, once a part of who I am, now feels different, touched by the absence of Julia. Her departure has left its mark, creating a sort of void in the familiar surroundings that used to define my world. I've always been sure of my path, relying on confidence and determination to guide me. Not so much anymore.

I spend some time playing with the younger three, helping the nanny get them ready, and before I know it, they're heading out the door, and I'm alone again, with a significant amount of time before I need to leave for the office. I find Hannah in the dining room on her own, eating a sparse breakfast and scrolling through her phone at the same time. I realize it's been a while since we had quality time together without phones or any other distraction. Hannah

barely looks up when I enter, just giving me a quick nod, which irks me. It's so damned hard to get her full attention these days. Maybe now it's a good time to invite her out for a meal like I had discussed with Floris.

*She's just a kid, I remind myself. They're all addicted to their phones.*

"Hannah," I say, making her look up at me once more. "How about we go out to dinner tomorrow night?"

She rolls her eyes, a clear expression of teenage indifference, and responds sarcastically, "Can't I just say no?"

I can't help but grin at her response, an intertwining of amusement and slight frustration. "I mean, I guess you could if you really wanted to. But I seem to remember you wanting to go on some trip to England next month to be with Johan. So maybe it would be a good idea to stay on your dad's good side, right?" I counter. If she's anything like Elise was, prompting her with an enticing incentive might be effective.

Surprise flits across her face briefly. "How do you even know it was to meet up with him?"

I respond with a knowing look, lowering myself into a chair a few spaces away from her hand waving towards one of the servers for coffee. "I have my ways." Hannah's gaze is withering, so I add, "Look, I'm not just teasing you. I want to spend an evening with my daughter where we can have actual conversations. Is that so bad?"

A sigh laden with resignation escapes her. "Alright, fine. But can we just have dinner at home?"

Her request catches me off guard. "You don't want to go out somewhere in Amsterdam? We can go anywhere you want. Name the location, and I'll make it happen."

"Well, not to be rude, Dad, but...I'd rather avoid being seen with you in public."

Her honesty takes me aback, a mixture of shock and hurt swirling within me. "You don't want to be seen with me in public? Why's that?" Unconsciously, I rub the spot above my heart on my chest, trying to ease my wounded pride.

Hannah's explanation is straightforward, forcing me to confront a perspective I hadn't fully considered. "Your image isn't great right now, especially with Karl's scandal and you being seen with him at that club. It's just not a good look for me. And you've always told me to be careful about who I hang out with, right?"

Her words leave me momentarily speechless, a tinge of irony settling in. Hannah's candidness compels me to face the vulnerabilities beneath my facade. The server brings my espresso, and I forgo any cream this time around. The bitterness of it suits the situation right now just fine.

*What a clever little thing she is*, I think, laughing internally at the corner that I've backed myself into. *She takes after me more than I thought*.

"Alright," I concede once I've had a drink. "You've got me there. We'll have dinner at home then. Is 8 p.m. okay?"

Hannah's response is swift, signaling the end of our conversation. "Sounds good. Gotta run. See you later, Pops."

Her leaving is like flipping a chapter, a sign that our family's vibe has shifted, power shuffled around. Seeing her go, I'm chewing over her candid words—kind of a reminder that behind my confidence, there's vulnerability lurking, waiting to be acknowledged.

I need to get out of this stuffy dining room. I grab my espresso and stride towards the terrace, sinking down into a lounge chair and letting the morning sun warm my face. Out here, I'm taking a breather from the swirl of thoughts. Morning light is making the grounds look fresh and new, a cool contrast to my frustrated thoughts. I don't think I could be any more chagrined than I am right now, hearing the advice I've given my children repeated back at me, *against* me. There is some pride in the fact that they listened when I spoke to them, but this isn't exactly how I pictured them taking my advice.

Hannah not wanting to be seen with me in public still stabs at me—a jab that shows my perfectly crafted image isn't fooling everyone. My public face, once my anchor, is now holding the baggage of poor choices and allegiances. Elise making a similar move is just the nail in the coffin. The proof that I've fucked up, maybe so badly that it can never be fixed, is right in front of my face. But at least Hannah agreed to have dinner with me here at home. It's better than nothing...thankfully she's not against spending time with her old man altogether.

It'd be easy to blame this all on Karl, who played a big role in my downfall, but there is no way to deny that this mess is my fault more than anything. My insistence to keep Karl close and taken care of, combined with my bitterness towards Roxanne, has sidetracked me. Now the only way to move forward is to be done with Karl, regardless of the promise I made to my father. I just hope I'm strong enough to go through with it. Confidence wavers, and my armor gets some cracks. Standing on the edge of losing my

family, I'm forced to face all the truths I've buried.

I've done difficult things in my life, some so difficult that I didn't think I'd survive them, but none of those things have led me down such a razor's edge as this hopefully temporary separation with Julia has. I've made all the wrong choices so far, and I feel like if I don't get it right from here on out, I'll never have a chance to be with her again.

And that simply isn't an option.

\* \* \*

It's going to be a half day for me at work today, because more important things are being put into motion. A few text messages were all it took to get the ball rolling, and when the ten o'clock hour comes around, the butler approaches me on the terrace to let me know that my guest has arrived.

I was unsure at first if Gabi would even give me the time of day, considering the fact that she's been Julia's friend for decades, but apparently she's open to hearing me out at least. I meet her in the library, where she strides in with an aura of authority in her presence—her short blond hair pushed back and sporting a racy black leather jacket. Our exchanges begin with surface-level pleasantries, masking the underlying tension that fuels our meeting.

I've known Gabi as long as I've known Julia, and seeing the stiffness in her as she talks to me is so strange that it borders on hurtful. She's just doing her job, though, and I know that I haven't exactly made it easy for her. Maybe we can change that now.

"Let's cut to the chase," I tell her finally, unable to stomach any more small talk. "I want my wife back, and that's the only reason I'm going through all of this. I'll work with you, Gabi, but you have to make sure that everything can only be traced back to Karl—not me or my company, okay? And Karl can't know anything about my involvement with you."

Gabi's eyes meet mine, revealing little of her thoughts. "As far as I know, the testimonials point towards Karl, not you." Her voice stays neutral, just like her demeanor.

It should be reassuring, but it isn't. My paranoia is too strong, and Karl is so publicly connected to me and Van den Bosch industries that I just can't see any way it doesn't affect me down the line. A sense of unease creeps into

my expression as I consider the possibility of Karl implicating me. “What if Karl claims he was just following my orders?” I ask, my apprehension evident. “I’m his boss, after all. It would be a convenient excuse.”

Her blonde eyebrows raise, and she leans back in the plush chair, folding her hands in her lap. “Was he?”

*Shit.* What exactly am I supposed to say to that? I struggle to come up with an answer that doesn’t make me sound like a terrible person, and my pause is marked by a realization—Karl’s potential to become a liability. “Look, Gabi...just make sure any of my involvement stays discreet. He can never know that I have anything to do with all of this, okay?”

“That’s a lot easier said than done, Seb. You’ve gotten yourself into the web of this whole scandal and it’s going to be almost impossible to get you untangled.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose between my fingers and exhale slowly. “It just can’t come back to me. If it does, then why am I even doing this?”

She doesn’t look thrilled, but Gabi bites her tongue. I would hate to have to lie like that against her, but it’s not an exaggeration when I say Karl can never know of my involvement. I know Gabi doesn’t understand, but I’m not about to let her in our family secret, either.

“I’ll see what I can do. For Julia, though. Not you.”

Her words are a clear reminder where most people stand with me nowadays, but I simply give her a nod in return, keeping those thoughts to myself. “Thanks.”

Gabi stands up, ready to leave the library but for some reason, stops midway.

“Out of curiosity, why are you so protective of him?” The probing question strikes me hard.

I take a deep breath, before deciding to open up about the complex tangle of loyalties that tie me to Karl. “Karl was my father’s protégé. And I promised my dad on his deathbed I’d take care of him.” The weight of that commitment resonates in my words. “So far I’ve managed to keep that promise. Until now.”

She blows out a quick laugh, her mocking tone a clear contrast with the seriousness of the moment. “Surely your father never instructed you to protect him if he was breaking the law.” When I don’t answer back, she then adds, “Or did he?”

Silence envelops the room, punctuated by the echoes of my inner conflict.

“Fine, I won't breathe a word to Karl about your involvement,” Gabi eventually concedes, offering a measure of reassurance. “But be prepared for the possibility that he might drag you down. If I were you, I'd strike a deal with him so he keeps his mouth shut.”

Gratitude washes over me as her words settle in. “I know. Thanks for the heads-up.”

With the topic apparently over, Gabi nods once, a small smile settling on her face. But while some might see friendliness, all I can see is pity.

*Julia*

IT'S another night in my childhood bedroom, and another morning waking up without my husband or the sounds of my children giggling as they prepare for the day. Every time I wake up here there is a pit in my stomach considering everything I'm missing.

Even then, it's not as painful as the times, in the middle of the night, when I reach over in the dark to feel for Sebastian and find nothing but an empty space waiting for me instead.

There's nothing to be done about it though, at least not right now, but I do make a mental note to arrange for the younger kids to swing by and visit me over the next weekend. The silence of my mother's estate is a hard contrast to what I'm used to. After my shower and daily preparations, I force my thoughts to be silent and make my way downstairs to have a light breakfast. Instead of the dining room, I move to the breakfast bar in the kitchen itself. I'm engrossed in my meal when my mom bursts in, her excitement palpable.

"Oh my gosh!" she exclaims, her tone brimming with urgency as she makes her way in. "Have you seen the news today?"

I raise an eyebrow, setting down my coffee. "No, I haven't."

Mom hurries over to the small television in the corner of the nook, fumbling for the remote and clicking on the morning news. The screen flickers to life, revealing the latest headlines. My attention narrows on the unfolding report—it's about Karl's arrest orchestrated by Gabi and the police. The news anchor details how Karl is being accused of planting drugs and

paying dancers to incriminate Roxanne. Being portrayed as the mastermind behind the cabaret's scandal won't be good for his image, and might finally lead to his downfall once and for all.

A mixture of shock and disbelief courses through me as I watch the screen. Karl, the looming figure who had managed to both haunt our family and evade consequences for so long, is now facing accountability. The irony isn't lost on me—Sebastian, who has been entangled in Karl's schemes, has seemingly allowed his half-brother to face the consequences of his actions and take the fall in full despite his father's final wish. There's no denying that my husband played some part in these schemes, but I can't say that I'm not happy about Karl taking the fall. It must have been unbelievably hard to incriminate his own blood, though. Could this be a sign that Seb is truly willing to change, to make amends?

Mom's voice breaks through my reverie, pulling me back to the present moment. "Who would have thought that Seb would finally let his brother face accountability for his actions, huh?" she muses, sounding slightly surprised. "Looks like he really *is* afraid of losing you."

A part of me wants to just bask in this moment and the victory that I have gained over Karl. Sebastian damned him for me. I hope Karl thinks about it every day for the rest of his life.

While I'm fantasizing, my mom's tone shifts, bringing me back to the present and the practical matters that need attention. "Speaking of losing you, we have a meeting with Eveline today about the settlement agreement," she adds, her tone more businesslike. "Don't forget it's at 11 a.m."

As I nod in acknowledgment, my mind continues to process the news, the implications of Karl's arrest reverberating through my thoughts. The intricate workings of my marriage, the undercurrents of change, and the ever-present questions about Seb's motivations—they all converge in this moment, leaving me with a sense of uncertainty about the days ahead.

\* \* \*

Mom's driver takes us into Amsterdam, and my stress levels are rising with each passing mile. Oh, I don't want to do this. I *really* don't want to do this. But I've already made the commitment, and my mother is right about one thing—if things still go sideways, even after Karl's arrest, having Eveline on



my side will be imperative.

My mother tries to talk to me on the long drive over, chattering about things that I know she has no interest in, for the sole purpose of distracting and relaxing me. It isn't working, but I appreciate the effort. I'd rather be left alone to really consider what I'm about to do, but it is what it is. Maybe once this all gets started I'll be glad to have her by my side. Only time will tell.

Eveline's office welcomes us with the scent of essential oils floating through the air. She's on one of the last floors of one of a newer high-rise downtown, and the modern aesthetic of the outside is echoed within as well. Outside of a floor to ceiling window in the lobby, the city skyline stretches beyond, a backdrop that I'm all too familiar with.

Eveline, confident in her sharp dark green suit, greets us. Her handshake reassures me, at least a little, but it's still odd knowing that this woman is here to help navigate what I would have considered a nightmare just months ago.

"Hello Julia. Margaret. Nice to see you both," she says, a genuine smile lifting the corner of her lips.

"Thanks for finding time for us," I respond, not really knowing what else to say. It's not like I really want to be here, but I know Eveline is a busy woman, so I do appreciate her making room in her schedule for me.

We settle into sleek chairs, her desk the focal point. Since this is the first time we've been in the same room together, Eveline steepled her fingers and launches into dialogue on what exactly I should expect. Her explanations touch on alimony, asset division, and the heart-wrenching topic of custody. Fingers tracing the armrests of my chair restlessly, I absorb her words as they map our new reality.

"The Van den Bosch property, which you've told me is the main house," Eveline continues, her voice measured as she takes her notes and a pen, "for Sebastian to keep it, he'll need to transfer fifty percent of its worth to you."

My heart sinks into my stomach. I want to tell her that I don't want the money. That property—our home—has been in Sebastian's family for generations. It's the last home he shared with his mother and siblings. Although it has been our home too, that can never equate to the memories that *he* has inside of those walls.

The fact that all of this seems so foreign to me is almost laughable. The law is my bread and butter. I'm a judge, so I shouldn't need explanations from Eveline, but the surrealism of this being *my own* divorce makes me feel

like I know nothing at all. Something that I should understand inside and out is like a different language in my ears.

The reality of my own settlement hangs before me, almost surreal in its presence. It's as if the life I've known is slipping through my fingers, replaced by a script I never thought I'd have to read.

The air in the office feels charged, my mother leaning forward in her chair while I try my best to disappear into mine. I really should be paying attention, but my eyes move around the pictures and knick knacks on Eveline's desk instead. For as much as she costs, it's absurd that I'm so distracted.

I'm shaken out of my daydreams when Eveline says my name. "Julia?"

I snap back to sitting up straight. "Yes?"

Eveline's gaze is focused, her demeanor both empathetic and pragmatic. "What about infidelity? Do you think that your husband has ever been unfaithful?" Her question cuts through the tension, opening a door to a realm I'd rather keep closed. She knows the answer, of course, given how viral Sebastian's little escapade to that club was.

I take a moment to consider her query. The weight of Sebastian's actions resurfaces—the echoes of his choices reverberating within me. "Well," I begin, my voice steady but ran through with bitterness. "As I'm sure you know, it's basically public record that he was at a gentlemen's club with Karl on our son's wedding day."

Eveline's fingers dance across her tablet as she takes notes, her focus never wavering.

"The source even told Kenneth he went to get a lap dance in a private room," I add, the words leaving a foul taste in my mouth.

As I speak, Eveline's eyes flicker with understanding, her ability to read between the lines evident. Her next words, however, hold the promise of a strategic advantage. "Hm. Yes, I did know that, but I think we can do better than just a phone video. We should be able to retrieve the footage from the security camera in that private dance room."

A surge of adrenaline courses through me, both nauseating and thrilling. "Really?" I inquire, my eagerness palpable.

Eveline nods. "Of course. There's a big difference between one single lap dance and a lot of the other things that can go on in those private rooms. While it might not carry substantial weight in a court of law, in the context of settlement negotiations, it can be a powerful tool."

I find myself nodding, the implications of her words sinking in. The lap dance video, once a symbol of betrayal, now transforms into a potential card to play in this intricate game of separation. My fingers tap lightly against the desk, a nervous energy accompanying the shift in our conversation.

Legalese and the desire for division mask the remains of a common life—a past that cannot be cleanly erased. Marriage. Love. Children. My mind wanders to my youngest three, and how all of this has already interrupted their daily lives so much. And it has the potential to get even worse.

My thoughts flashback to that day—the whispers, the rumors. Images of Sebastian at the gentlemen's club with Karl on our son's wedding day. Me standing outside with Kenneth, being shown the video. The memory of him getting a lap dance in a private room resurfaces, unwelcome and vivid. My heartbeat quickens as the mental images invade my mind, a mix of hurt and anger rising to the surface.

And now Eveline drops the bomb that there might be the actual footage of his betrayal, more damaging and scandalous than all the rest. Could anyone else have caught wind of that video? Kenneth, perhaps? The idea that someone might be holding onto that footage, waiting for the opportune moment to unleash it on the world, sends a shiver down my spine. The public humiliation, the scrutiny—it's a nightmare scenario that clenches at my gut. I can only hope that no one else has their hands on that damning evidence.

The conversation shifts again, and my mother's voice draws me back. “Well, that settlement sounds wonderful, Eveline.” Her words break through my thoughts. “When do you think we should approach Sebastian about it? I wasn't sure if there was maybe a reason you might want us to hold off.”

Eveline responds, “Given the news that hit this morning about his employee, I guess we can schedule something for next week? Maybe next Tuesday?”

“Sounds perfect,” Mom replies, her confidence clean cut and clear.

Eveline's gaze shifts to me, and she speaks with a tone of clarity. “Julia, just to make it clear, this settlement can be either for divorce or for a legal separation. It's important that you understand where both of you stand when it comes to the custody of your children and division of the property. Divorces like this can get very ugly, and I just don't want you to feel blindsided.”

“I understand. Thank you for everything, Eveline.” Once everything is said and done, we all stand and I straighten my dress, giving her a nod. “We'll talk to you next week.”

Exiting the building, the weight of the impending conversation with Sebastian hangs heavy. A small café offers a brief respite, and I let my mother lead me over to one of the outdoor tables beneath a large blue umbrella. It's quiet, and I manage to find a moment of peace, but it doesn't last. The surroundings are cozy, but my mind is anything but at ease.

In just a matter of days, we'll be approaching Sebastian about the divorce agreement. The gravity of that decision is inescapable. The television mounted on the café wall, which I can see through the store front window, broadcasts the news of the day—Karl's arrest. Oh how I hate the way that Karl's presence looms over my life. All of our lives, really, from the very day I learned of his true parentage.

Well, I guess my mother knew first, didn't she? I look at her out of the corner of my eye, perusing the menu, and wonder how many years she knew about Karl before telling me.

Mom notices me soon enough. "You're staring at me like you might burn a hole through me, dear. What is it?"

"It's just...it's so weird to be talking to a divorce attorney. I never thought this would happen to me." A server wanders over, and I let Mother order for us both. I'm beyond caring at this point. "I know you've always felt negatively about Sebastian, but we were a perfect match, Mom. We were so in love. This isn't supposed to happen to people like us."

My mother's response is matter-of-fact, a touch of wisdom in her words. "Ah, well, one must always be ready for the worst. Sometimes you can't even trust your heart, but luckily, you're a smart girl. We'll get through."

As I sip my vanilla, almond milk cappuccino, I mull over her words. I followed my heart into Sebastian's arms all those years ago, and until recently, I considered it one of the smartest things I've ever done in my entire life. How did the wheels fall off so quickly?

I sit my ceramic cup down when I feel my phone vibrating on the table beside me. I quickly answer the call, a smile forming as Andries's name illuminates the screen. "Hey honeymooner," I greet, my voice infused with warmth and affection.

My son wastes no time in greetings though. "Gosh, why didn't you tell me Karl was finally arrested?" Andries's excitement resonates through the phone.

I let out a soft chuckle, leaning back against the cafe chair. "Oh, darling, I didn't want to bother you. Aren't you in Sardinia right now?"

Andries's enthusiasm remains unabated. "Yeah, but still. That's the best

wedding present I could have ever hoped for. It was you who gave Gabi the okay, wasn't it?"

I nibble at my thumb nail, considering how much to share with Andries. I might as well give him the truth, though. "Well, actually it was your dad. Elise convinced him to do it, apparently."

There's a short silence while my son processes what I've said. When he finally speaks, there's a note of awe in his voice. "Wow," he utters, his surprise echoing down the line. "Is this for real? Have you spoken to him recently?"

My fingers toy with a loose strand of my hair as I consider my response. "No, I haven't. Have you?"

There's another moment of hesitation on his end. "Not really. Hannah texted me and said Dad wanted to take her out to her favorite restaurant or something, but she refused. I bet that really pissed him off," Andries discloses with a quick chuckle. "I think he's trying to regain everyone's trust."

I nod, my thoughts swirling as I process his words. "Mm, well, be that as it may, he knows I'm talking to a divorce attorney. So I assume he's trying to be nicer to everyone because of the possible custody battle that we might have to go through."

"Oh shit. I thought he was doing it because he genuinely cared." I can almost picture Andries's expression, his brow furrowing as he speaks.

"Well, maybe he does. Now that he's about to lose everyone." As much as Sebastian has frustrated and betrayed me, I still have no desire to talk negatively about him to our children. Especially Andries, with whom Seb's relationship is so fragile.

Andries sighs, and I can hear seagulls in the background. "Yeah, well, it shouldn't get to this point for him to care, though. We've been basically begging him to come around, so it's frustrating that he waited until he's about to lose everything to do the right thing."

As I fidget with a leaf that has fallen on the table, I try to make sure that my next words offer solace. "I know, darling. Your dad took us for granted for far too long. But no matter what, we will all always have each other."

"That's true." There's a small pause before he proceeds, "I love you, Mom. Whatever your choice, you've got my support—and Roxanne's, too."

His unwavering loyalty is a source of comfort as I lean into the cushioned seat. "Thank you, dear. Well, enjoy Sardinia, and we'll speak later."

After I end the call, I feel a range of emotions. The flaws in our family are

reflected in Andries's perspective like a mirror, but his unfailing support instills a comforting warmth. The road I'm starting is complicated, but the bond I have with my kids gives me the fortitude I need to do it—no matter how this whole thing ends up.

*Sebastian*

GOING into work today is like walking into a firestorm. Charges have been pressed against Karl officially, and the atmosphere is charged with frenzy. The press buzzes like a swarm of bees, their questions and cameras suffocating me. It's utter chaos.

Once I make it inside the building, dodging press and journalists, I find myself in the midst of another storm—this time within the confines of my office. Peter, our PR manager, is waiting for me before I even arrive, tapping his foot with anxious energy. I pass him by, refusing to get into all of this before I've even sat down.

Once I'm seated, I wave my hand, indicating that Peter can start. He launches into his speech immediately. "Seb, we need to decide how Van den Bosch industries will respond to this situation. The press is hungry for a statement."

I lean back in my chair, fingers drumming a rhythm on my desk, while the weight of responsibility settles upon my shoulders. "Let's issue a press release that's somewhat neutral," I tell him, my voice measured. "Something like, '*Whatever charges the prosecutor has against Karl Townsend, Van den Bosch Industries will respect the due process.*'"

Peter's eyebrows shoot up, and I can practically see the wheels turning in his mind. "Are you sure about that, Seb? Shouldn't we take a stand against these allegations? Show our support for Karl? I mean, that's what we've always done in the past."

I consider his words, but ultimately decide to stick with my original plan. “That’s true, we’ve helped Karl navigate various challenges in the past, but this time, we stay neutral.”

The surprise on Peter's face is clear. His expectation of a fiery stance against the allegations, like I’ve always offered in the past, clashes with my measured response. “Neutral? But Seb, won't that give the impression that we're distancing ourselves from him?”

I recline in my chair, my fingers steepled beneath my chin. “We've always extended our support to Karl before, and yet, he’s still finding himself in trouble. It almost feels like he’s taken our support for granted,” I explain, causing Peter to soften his expression in understanding. “Given the gravity of these charges, it's important for the company to respect the due process and let the legal system run its course.”

Peter nods slowly, absorbing my words. “Got it. A neutral stance it is, then.”

We hammer out some of the fine details, but Peter leaves soon enough. I’m glad that this hurdle is done. Telling Peter to let Karl take the fall on his own felt like ashes pouring from my mouth, but there’s nothing else I can do at this point. I know I’m breaking my promise to my father, our father, but I don’t think Dad would have ever expected Karl to turn out the way he has. When Dad passed, Karl was a competent family man. Now he’s a womanizer with a penchant for trouble, and because I’ve always protected him, he hasn’t been checked in a long time. That’s all over now.

After lunch, I find myself absorbed in the daily whirlwind of meetings and decisions that define my existence. Usually I would hate days like this, when I barely get the chance to breathe, but today I’m thankful for anything that keeps me too busy to think.

As I settle into my office after lunch, my phone buzzes with a new message—a series of images from a familiar source. My private investigator's work is quick, efficient, and it delivers results. I open the message to find a sequence of photographs. The pictures show Julia and Margaret walking into an Amsterdam law firm, which raises a lot of question marks. Would this be to meet the infamous divorce attorney? How does this affect the course of our relationship going forward? My eyes linger on the images as I examine the small details—their body language and the nuanced gestures that could shed light on their intentions.

I go through the pictures and a queasy feeling settles in my stomach. My



chest feels tight...is Julia really moving forward with the divorce? The realization is a frightening one because it serves as a reminder that our dynamic is altering in ways that I can't fully control.

A divorce attorney...fine. The truth of it all is obvious. She was most likely there to start the paperwork for our legal separation. I can't deny it, no matter how sick it's making me feel. I need to speak to her before it's too late. I reach for my phone and take a long breath before dialing Julia's number, the gentle ring of the phone resonating in my ear. A wave of anticipation and dread rushes through me as the call connects. Anticipation because of how much I miss her, dread because of what I fear she might confirm—that she's really moving forward with the divorce.

All the fear is for nothing, though The call goes to voicemail. I exhale slowly, leaving a message as the tone prompts me to speak. "Hey, Julia," I begin, my voice steady despite the turmoil within me. "I...I just wanted to talk. Can we meet in person? Whenever you're available, just let me know. It's important."

The seconds stretch as I end the call, my gaze fixed on the screen. The message is concise, but I second guess what I've said a hundred times. I'm not sure what response I'm hoping for—whether it's understanding, reassurance, or the chance to bridge the growing chasm between us.

Setting my phone down, I settle back in my chair. The office around me feels distant and empty, not at all like the place that used to be my father's that I've now made my own. It might as well be four empty, white walls.

I know that sooner or later, I'll have to face whatever Julia and Margaret have been planning. Her mother is a strong influence, but I've managed to win over her once before. I just hope I haven't damaged my marriage to the point that Julia chooses Margaret over me this time.

Damn! Even thinking about this makes me want to scream my rage to the ceiling. I love Julia. I don't know if I can live without her, but if I don't respect her agency, I'll lose her no matter what.

\* \* \*

The trip back home seems especially drawn out as I still feel the effects of today's events. Flexing my hands on the steering wheel, I hit the gas harder than I should, pushing the limit of the sports car until it's taking corners hard

enough to throw me to the side. I can't outrun all of this shit going on in my life, though, no matter how hard I try.

The calmness of being home washes over me when I cross the threshold of the familiar entrance—a sharp contrast to the regular buzzing activity that used to fill these halls. For once, I wish it was loud and chaotic.

In the empty breezeway, I take off my blazer and hand it to the waiting butler, pulling out my phone just to check any messages I might have missed during the ride back home.

My eyebrows rise to my hairline when I see that “#KarlTownsend” is one of the top trending searches on Twitter. Allowing myself a few seconds of scrolling through the posts, I'm relieved to see that my name and the family business isn't explicitly mentioned, but I know good and well that at least some of the articles won't be so kind. I stop while I'm ahead, closing the app and pocketing the phone once more.

Walking through the halls, I head towards my bedroom to change for dinner. The idea of dinner at home is a rarity these days, a tradition that has all but disappeared along with my wife. Julia's departure has rewritten the rhythms of our household, and everyone has adjusted. Everyone except me, of course. After all, Hannah's absence in the evenings is almost constant, her outings with friends having become a regular occurrence. Joris and Aleida follow their own routines, their nanny guiding them through the motions of the evening. And then there's Arthur, the youngest, unburdened by schedules or conventions, eating whenever his whims dictate.

Tonight I'm not eating alone, though. Tonight is different. As the clock inches closer to 7:30, I've made a request to the cook—make Hannah's favorite meal so me and my daughter can have dinner together. It's a simple gesture, but at least it's something for me to look forward to. After I change and make my way outside, I see that a small setup is taking shape on the terrace. It's an attempt, perhaps a feeble one, to connect with Hannah.

The evening air holds a hint of chill, but nothing that a patio heater doesn't take care of. I find myself outside a few minutes before the time, waiting for her. She's late, but then again, aren't all teenagers? Amused and maybe just a touch annoyed, I sit at the table and wait.

The door opens at ten past the hour, and Hannah steps out. Her demeanor is a mixture of reserve and distance; it has a detached air that makes me realize how quickly time has passed. Gone is the sweet, if shy little girl Hannah once was. Now, she exudes the casualness of a teenager, which is a

defense I am all too familiar with. I've already raised two of them, after all.

"Hey," I greet her with a warm tone, trying to keep things light. "You're fashionably late."

She offers a half-smile, a glimmer of her former self peeking through the facade. "Better late than never, right?"

I stand and pull out a chair for her, gesturing to the table that holds all the food the staff has brought out, still steaming. "Your favorite dinner is served."

Her gaze flickers to the table, a moment of hesitation before she sits. "Thanks," she murmurs, her guarded exterior still in place.

Before she got here, I dismissed the staff, wanting to just have some privacy with my daughter and myself. So instead of waiting for someone else to do it, I pour her a glass of water, the sound of it filling the silence that hovers between us. "I thought we could spend some time together tonight. Just us."

She picks up her fork, her focus on her food as if it holds the answers she's searching for. "Yeah, I know. So...what's there to talk about?"

I take a deep breath, my own guard lowering, and lean slightly forward, my elbows resting on the edge of the table, before I begin. "I know things haven't been easy, and I take my share of the blame for that. But I want you to know that I'm trying to make things right."

Hannah's gaze meets mine, looking skeptical. As if annoyed by my answer, she leans back on the chair, her arms crossing over her chest. "Why now?"

I pause, collecting my thoughts and choosing my words carefully. "Because I've realized that I've taken our family for granted, and I don't want to lose any more time. You and your siblings are everything to me, and I want to be a better father."

Her guard softens slightly, a hint of vulnerability seeping through. "Yeah, well..." She lets her words trail off, as if thinking something through. "It's gonna take you more than a dinner, Pops."

I nod in agreement. "You're right. I know it'll take time, it's all about rebuilding trust, about showing you that I'm here for you, no matter what."

Hannah takes a bite of her food, her expression just as thoughtful. "Actions speak louder than words."

I reach across the table, placing my hand over hers briefly before pulling away. "I know, and I'm committed to proving that to you."

The silence that follows is filled with unspoken emotions—a conversation held not just in words, but in the space between us.

As the night unfolds, I'm acutely aware of the steps I need to take to mend what's broken. Things have gotten pretty heavy rather quickly, so I switch back to something less serious before she bolts. "How's eleventh grade treating you so far?" I ask, a genuine curiosity underlying my words. "Are you enjoying it?"

Hannah offers a faint smile, her guarded demeanor easing a fraction. "It's okay, I guess. Starting junior year has been interesting, to say the least..."

I take a sip of my drink, giving her space to share. "Interesting, huh? Tell me more."

Hannah hesitates for a moment, then takes a sip of her water, as if buying time. It's clear she's grappling with whether to open up or not, which intrigues me even more. "Well, today was pretty intense," she finally admits.

I can't help but frown at her words before leaning in, my gaze focused on her. "What do you mean intense? What happened?"

Hannah's fingers trace the rim of her glass, her gaze momentarily locked on the water. "It's just... with all the news about you and Karl lately...It's been everywhere. And now, with him getting arrested... people talk, you know."

I nod in understanding, empathy for her situation evident in my expression. "I know it's not easy, especially with our name being so public. But I'm working hard to make sure a scandal like that won't ever happen again."

She lets out a dry chuckle, a hint of bitterness underlying her words. "Yeah, right. A bit too late for that. The thing is I never signed up for that kind of attention. I became the most popular girl at school for all the wrong reasons."

My throat feels tight, thinking about all these unintended consequences that I've caused. It's never what I intended, and I feel ignorant for not seeing the inevitability of it. "Hannah, if any of your classmates bother you or make you uncomfortable because of this, I want you to tell me. You can always trust me to help and support you."

Hannah looks thoughtful, pushing a piece of roasted potato across her plate. "It's not that. It's just...knowing that I'm being judged solely because I'm your daughter," she confesses, her tone tinged with frustration. "Everyone puts on this polite front, even the teachers, but it's just a facade because

they're scared of you or whatever. When they think I'm not paying attention, I can hear the whispers, the comments behind my back, the teasing.... It's something you can't really understand.”

I shake my head, seeing her perspective even as I wish I could shield her from such harsh scrutiny. “That’s not true. I can see how that must feel incredibly isolating. I never thought it would come to this point.” There’s a hint of regret lacing my words. “But I'm trying to do better now, and hopefully, soon enough, there will be no more scandals involving Karl or me.”

Hannah continues to toy with her food, her gaze focused on the plate before her. She looks up at me, uncertain. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course,” I reply, my attention fully on her.

Her words come out hesitantly, revealing her concerns. “Are you being nice just because you're afraid of losing us in a custody battle or something?”

I'm taken aback by the question, my brows furrowing in surprise. “Of course not.” My voice’s firm and sincere. “Why would you think that?”

Hannah lets out a small sigh, her gaze flickering up to the sky as she continues. “A friend of mine had an absent dad, and when her parents filed for divorce, he suddenly became super nice and present, probably to get the kids to side with him in court. I’m not saying you’re seriously absent, but there have been times...never mind. I guess I’m just on edge.”

I understand the skepticism, the lingering doubts that can arise from such experiences, so I lower my voice and say, “I promise you, Hannah, my intentions are genuine. I'm not doing this to manipulate you or to make you say nice things about me in court. I just realized that you've been living your life almost like an adult, and I haven't caught up with you for a while. I want to be here for you. And for Joris, Aleida, and Arthur, too, but they’re still young, so it’s different with them, you know?”

When Hannah replies, there's a hint of relief in her eyes. “Well, that's because you always expected Mom or Nanny Floris to handle that part,” she teases, taking a small bite of her food. “But seriously, I appreciate the effort.”

“I know, and I genuinely am trying to do better now.”

We share a moment of quiet understanding, the ambiance of the early fall night wrapping around us as we continue to eat.

Hannah chose an herb roasted chicken and buttery roasted potatoes, and now that the awkward part of our conversation has finished, she eats happily. Between bites, I bring up a topic that will for sure cheer her up. “So, any

update about your birthday party? Have you thought about what you want to do before heading to England?”

She considers for a moment before responding. “Yeah, a small dinner with a few friends would be nice. But let's skip the whole 'invite the entire school' thing that Princess Elise did.”

I chuckle at her reference to Elise's extravagant parties. “Alright, a more intimate gathering it is. Now, how about this—can I at least show up for the cake, or would you be too embarrassed to have your old man there?”

Hannah rolls her eyes, feigning exasperation. “Oh, come on, Dad. Do you really have to?”

“Why not? It's your sweet sixteen, after all. Can't I just be there for the cake?”

She heaves a loud sigh, clearly displeased by the idea. “Alright, but just the cake. And Mom needs to be present too, then.”

“Sure, I don't have any issues with that.” Of course the idea of Julia being home, celebrating her birthday with us, makes me feel both intensely anxious and happy, but I don't burden my daughter with that.

We finish our meal in a comfortable silence, the atmosphere between us considerably lighter than it was when we first sat down. The setting sun casts a warm golden hue over the terrace, and I can't help but feel a sense of relief that our conversation took a positive turn. As the evening settles around us, it's a reminder that amidst the challenges we face, there's still room for connection, understanding, and even a touch of lightheartedness.

Just as she finishes, her phone emits a soft ping, and she casually picks it up. Her attention shifts to the message that flashes on her screen. Her laughter rings out, carrying a sense of amusement that catches my curiosity. I'm almost positive I know who she's texting, and while I approve of the man overall, I don't know how I feel about him casually talking to my teenage daughter.

So I interject, my fatherly instincts kicking in. “Hannah, I get that you're excited about going to England to meet Johan in three weeks, but can you promise me you'll both behave?”

At first she freezes like a deer in the headlights, but after she gets ahold of herself again, she raises an eyebrow at my comment. “What exactly are you implying? That I'm going to run wild and sleep with him?”

Now it's me who's shocked, and said shock rips through me like a lightning bolt. I choke on a bite of potato, gulping water. Once I'm done

coughing, I clear my throat, my intention to have a serious talk momentarily thrown off balance by her straightforward response. “Well, you’re turning sixteen, so....”

Setting down her utensils, Hannah fixes me with an expression that clearly reads, ‘What the fuck, Dad?’. Her arms are crossed in a defiant gesture that needs no words.

I pause, then continue with caution, trying my damndest to not stumble over my words. “Stop looking at me like that. You seem to be getting along with him quite well. Was it him who just messaged you? Or was I mistaken?”

“Seriously, Dad, you're being so nosy.” Her tone’s a mix of amusement and mock exasperation.

Leaning forward slightly, I can't help but to point out, “I know, but you're fifteen, about to turn sixteen, and he's already in his twenties. You can't blame me for being a bit concerned.”

Groaning, she responds, “Dad, Johan is just a friend, and he's still very much in love with Elise, I can promise you that. He actually bought those tickets for her originally. But since she's with Dan now, she asked him to take me along instead, like a birthday gift or something.”

Oh. Well...that makes more sense, and does make me feel a little bit better. At least Johan isn't buying tickets for fifteen year old Hannah directly. I admit my ignorance with a nod. “I didn't know that.”

Hannah looks pleased that she managed to pull one over on me, a mischievous grin tugging at her lips. “Johan is a perfect gentleman, so you have nothing to worry about.”

“I know, and that's why I'm letting you go on that trip on your own.” A sudden thought occurs me, turning perplexed. “Aren't you going to be bored, though? You never really took any interest in horses.”

She shrugs nonchalantly. “El is going to give me a crash course before I go, so I don't end up looking like a complete novice at the show.”

It's obvious Hannah is going because she enjoys Johan's company and most likely has a crush on him. I just hope it remains as innocent as she portrays it to be.

Halfway through the dessert, my phone rings, pulling my attention away from the dinner table. Hannah doesn't even look up from her chocolate mousse and iPhone, just dismissing me with a wave that might annoy me at any other time. But right now, I have a feeling that this is a call I need to take.

Checking the caller ID, I see that it's none other than Julia herself. As

much as I want to stay present with Hannah, I know this is a chance that I might not get again. My wife hasn't exactly been patient with me, not that I blame her. I offer my daughter a quick apology and excuse myself, rising from the table and heading to the library where I can have some privacy to talk.

"Julia, thank you for calling back," I tell her, my voice carrying a mix of relief and anticipation as I put the phone to my ear.

Her response is curt, brimming with a touch of hostility. "I'm just returning your call. What do you want?"

Shutting the door to the library, I take a breath, my heart pounding in my chest as I prepare to have this crucial conversation. "I wanted us to talk... Can we meet face to face? I miss you and—"

Julia's voice cuts me off, sharp and unforgiving. "You should've thought about that before spending the evening with a stripper instead of attending your son's wedding."

My stomach sinks at her words, all of my mistakes crashing down on me. I drag a hand down my face, overcome. "Julia...fuck...are you seriously going to divorce me?"

A bitter laugh escapes her. "You really believed I was bluffing, huh? You didn't take me seriously, and you thought you could just play games with me. Well, Seb, I've had enough of bending over backward to make your life easier and for you to always get your way."

My voice trembles as I try to hold back my emotions. I have so much to tell her, and no time to do so. "That doesn't answer my question. Is divorce really what you want?"

Her response is heavy with resignation. "You forced my hand on this. I've been a loyal wife to you for so many years, moved parts of my life around to fit yours at every turn, and when I really needed you, you abandoned me. You didn't like Roxanne so much that getting back at her was worth burning our family to the ground."

Struck by her words, I can't even find any of my own, so I remain silent, while my wife speaks up again. "Is there anything else you wanted to talk to me about?"

Taking a steadying breath, I push forward. "I know you have divorce papers ready for me to sign."

I'm not sure without being able to see her, but I think her quick inhale indicates surprise. "Oh, I see news travel fast. Well, that's good. There's less



for me to explain, then.” My heart aches at the distance between us, but Julia presses on. “Are you available next week for us to discuss the settlement? I’m bringing my lawyer, so you might want to bring yours too.”

*No! No, no, and no!* My thoughts race as I pace the room. I can’t shake the feeling that this might be the last chance to salvage something from the wreckage of our relationship, and if we’re stuck in the room with lawyers and no way to connect with one another, everything might be lost.

I lean against the bookshelf in the library, absorbing the weight of her words as they cut through the distance between us.

“This isn’t you, Julia,” I blurt, unable to hold back how angry and upset this is all making me. “I’m sure it’s your mom pushing you to do it. Let’s talk without lawyers, please. I’m confident we can find a solution if you just give me a chance. Give *us* a chance.”

Her tone remains sharp, but there’s a hint of vulnerability in her words. “The solution was you coming to the wedding of our son, which you didn’t, and went to get a lap dance instead.”

Guilt and regret twist in my chest, and I take a deep breath before responding. “I know! Fuck, Julia, don’t you think I know that? I hurt you, and I’m so damn sorry...I want to do better. I can be better! Can we just talk one last time face-to-face without lawyers?”

Her hesitation is so clear that I can almost see the look on her face, brows drawn together as she chews on her bottom lip. When she finally answers, I can sense the internal struggle in her voice. “I...I don’t know, Seb...I think we’ve said pretty much everything.”

Desperation pushes me to make a final plea. “If you want to divorce me, fine. I’ll sign the papers for you. But please, just give me one last chance to make it right. Just one.”

The silence that follows is heavy, and I hold my breath as I wait for her response. Finally, she lets out a sigh. With that, I’m sure she’ll oblige. “I will think about it...I...I’ve got to go now. Good evening, Sebastian.”

I shut my eyes tight, letting the last words fill my ears. I might just be imagining things, and it might just be wishful thinking, but I think that three little unspoken words hang in the air.

So, silently, I return the same unsaid words. *I love you too.* Then I exhale slowly, and say, “Good evening, Julia.”

As I hang up the phone, I’m left with a renewed determination to fight for what’s left of our fractured connection. Julia feels farther from me than ever

before, but I'm also more determined than I've ever been.

I can't shake the feeling that time is slipping through my fingers. With a heavy heart, I make my way to the ornate globe in the corner of the library.

Gently, I twist the globe, revealing a hidden compartment beneath. Inside lies a small, well-stocked bar. My fingers graze over the collection of spirits, and I choose a bottle of aged scotch. Pouring a generous double shot, I lift the glass to the light and watch the amber liquid catch the glow.

Taking the glass in hand, I walk to the window that overlooks the sprawling estate. The moonlight casts a soft glow over the gardens, and I find solace in the stillness of the night. Taking a sip of the scotch, its warmth spreads through me, providing a temporary reprieve from the turbulence that has just occurred.

I lean against the windowsill, gazing out at the expanse before me. Thoughts of Julia flood my mind—the way her eyes used to light up when she smiled, the sound of her laughter that could fill a room. I yearn for those moments, the connection we shared before everything unraveled.

My kids, too, occupy my thoughts. Hannah's budding independence, Joris and Aleida's boundless energy, and little Arthur's innocent curiosity—all reminders of the life we have built, the life that seems incomplete without Julia by my side.

When I take another sip, I imagine a different path, one where I prioritize my family over the business empire I've worked so hard on. I envision moments spent together, simple joys that have become elusive in the chaos of my ambitions. If Julia comes back, I would do things differently. I will change the way I've lived, the choices I've made, in a heartbeat.

The scotch warms my insides, but it can't dispel the ache in my chest. It's an ache that longs for reconciliation. I down the rest of the drink anyway, the burn of the alcohol barely registering.

When a tiredness washes over me out of nowhere, I place the glass on a nearby table and turn away from the window. Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath, summoning the strength to face whatever lies ahead. My resolve is unwavering—I'll do whatever it takes to bring my family back together.

*Whatever it takes*, I tell myself, over and over. *Whatever it takes*.

*Julia*

IT'S BEEN HOURS, but the weight of the phone call is still pressing against my thoughts. I've picked up my iPhone so many times now, considering the idea of texting Sebastian a final answer, but never really going through with it. I suppose I just don't know what to say.

I've turned into bed early after a long, indulgent bubble bath and a few chapters of a book that I can't recall the name of. The need for a good night's sleep is eating away at me, but it's just been restful nights for the past few weeks. Again, I've got my phone in my hand, but I force myself to drop it on the nightstand, wanting to resist the temptation to call Sebastian again just to hear his voice. As I do, my eyes catch a glimpse of the photograph tucked in the corner of the nightstand—a memory frozen in time.

I pick it up, my fingers tracing over the faded edges. It's a snapshot from over two decades ago, a photo of the night Seb and I first met, dancing at a grand ball. The smiles on our faces seem distant now, replaced by the complexities that life has woven between us. For a moment, I let myself get lost in the past, in the simplicity of our connection back then.

Gosh, I was so enamored with him from the very first moment I laid eyes on him. At that point in my life, I had never wanted anything as much as I wanted Sebastian Van den Bosch, and I was ready to burn it all down just to have him. Nothing was going to hold me back, not even my mother. I could never wish that we had never met, not with our wonderful children, but a part of me wonders if this would all be easier if I hadn't had such a strong

connection to him from the start.

Closing my eyes, I allow myself a moment to get lost in the memory of that dance, of Sebastian's hands on my waist, long before the weight of the world was on our shoulders...but the ringing of my phone pulls me back to the present. It's Gabi calling, and I have a pretty good idea why. I answer the call, my voice steady despite how vulnerable I still feel from looking at the picture from our first dance.

"Hey, Gabi."

"Julia, I hope I'm not catching you at a bad time." Gabi's tone is professional, even more proof that this isn't a personal call.

"No, not at all. What's up?" I reply, trying to keep the apprehension out of my voice. "Did you manage to get it?"

She lets out a long breath. "Yeah, Jules, I did. You owe me a big one. The club didn't want to give an inch."

"They didn't know who they were messing with, though." I laugh slightly, knowing that anyone that goes up against Gabi is bound to lose.

"Ha! You're right there. They tried every excuse in the book. First they said they didn't have cameras inside the private rooms. I told them that I already knew that was a lie, and then they backtracked and tried to claim that, while they did have a camera, that night's recording was conveniently missing."

Despite how dire this situation is, I can't help but feel a tiny thread of amusement, crossing my legs and leaning back against my headboard. "Wow. Amateurs."

"Seriously. I had to stop myself from laughing. They kept running me around in circles and I had to threaten to start arresting the bastards if they didn't cough up the copy." My friend is quiet for a moment, and when she speaks again, there's a little more of my friend and less of the prosecutor in the words. "Are you really sure you want to watch it?"

Apprehension courses through me. I'm almost at the point of no return. "Yes, I do. And Gabi...?"

"Yeah?"

Swallowing hard, I make myself ask the question I've been dreading, trying hard to keep my voice from faltering as I do so. "Did you watch it too?"

"Well, I had to confirm it was him." And just from the tone of her voice, I know that whatever I'm about to see is going to hurt me. Terribly. When I

don't reply for a second, Gabi continues, "You know how important this is. I had to make sure it was legitimate."

"I know." I sigh, my eyes fluttering closed. So, whatever I'm about to witness, my best friend has seen it, too. Even if Sebastian and I reconcile, she will know what he's done and how far he went with that stripper, forever.

It hurts and is humiliating, but a small part of me is glad that there is someone else in the world that knows exactly what I'm going through. At least I will never have to explain my actions to her.

"Thank you. Really, thank you for everything you've done," I tell her with genuine gratitude.

"You're welcome, Jules. Anything for you. I'm sure we'll talk later." She then pauses for a beat before adding, "Don't hesitate to call me if you need to, okay? Not as the case prosecutor. As your friend."

I know that I won't call her. The embarrassment will burn too badly, I'm sure of it, but I appreciate the offer nonetheless. "Okay. I will."

As I wait for the video to arrive, my heart starts to race. The weight of the evidence I'm about to see in this video, of the reality it represents, is settling upon me. My husband's betrayal is now tangible, captured on tape, and it's a truth that can't be ignored. I know that watching it will be painful, a reminder that our marriage is in shambles and that I see no clear path to put it back together. Yet, I also know that facing this truth head-on is necessary.

Most of all, I know it's going to be bad. If it was innocuous, with Sebastian just sitting there and letting the stripper dance, then Gabi would have just said that. The fact that she didn't give any details and is sending me the video instead tells me everything I need to know...he must have done more than just sit there and watch. My husband, my Sebastian, did something unforgivable with an exotic dancer, and I'm about to see it with my own two eyes.

When the video finally arrives on my phone, I take a deep breath and press play. The scene unfolds before me, and I watch as the man who I've always loved more than I thought possible engages in a behavior that has the potential to tear us apart forever. Images flash across the screen, a stark contrast to the memories of our early years together that the photograph on my nightstand evokes.

It's him. He's sitting there, casual yet detached, while a scantily clad dancer engages in conversation with him. There's a surprising familiarity in their interaction, a connection that stirs a knot of unease in my stomach. I

know it's just part of the stripper's job to behave like she already knows her customer, but that doesn't make me feel any better. This is not a time where I am logical...not at all. The dancer seems to genuinely enjoy his company, her laughter ringing out, joyful compared to the heaviness I feel inside.

Then the dance begins—a spectacle that's meant to titillate, to entertain. My husband sits there while the dancer moves sensually around him. It's a routine, rehearsed and choreographed, but that doesn't take the sting out of it. Not at all. Her clothes come off, piece by piece. Her bra goes first, and the second it's gone she rubs her breasts all over him, swaying and dipping low so they almost brush on his face before she stands straight again and continues to remove the last few things that she's wearing. Thigh high pantyhose go next, one by one. The stripper places one delicate foot on the chair between Sebastian's legs and rolls the fishnet stocking down, and then switches legs to do the other. Finally, she shimmies out of her panties, her nude body glowing in the dark champagne room. Seeing a naked woman so close to my husband, *touching* him, makes my stomach turn. I press my hands against my belly unconsciously, as if the pressure will keep me from getting sick.

I desperately hope that this is the end of it, but of course it isn't. The stripper turns around so her back is to Seb, and she sensually slides down his body like that, until her bare ass is on his groin. She takes his hands and brings them around her body to hold her hips and it takes everything in me not to toss the phone against the nearest wall. Seb seems still, but doesn't pull away. I don't know if I've ever felt more hate towards him than I do right now. Combined with the love that is also still living inside me, nothing makes sense.

As the dance progresses, the dancer's movements become more intimate, her hands guiding him, her body turning in his grip. She takes his hand once more and pulls his thumb into her mouth, dragging the wet digit down her body and finally sliding it between her legs, over her pussy in a move so brazen that I forget to breathe.

I pause the video, pressing the back of my hand against my mouth so I don't get sick. There's a glass for water at my bedside and a small covered pitcher, and my hands shake so hard when I pour myself some that water sloshes over and onto my silk sheets. I can't stop shaking.

I don't know if I can watch the rest. I certainly don't want to, but I've come this far I might as well finish the last few minutes. It can't get much

worse. I unpause the video and watch the lap dance continue, a stupid smile on Sebastian's face as the stripper leans in to kiss his neck. She does a few more sensual moves, and like a final act before finishing her little show, I watch something that brings a fresh wave of pain, something I never thought a dancer would even dare to do. The dancer presses her mouth against his, and I watch as they kiss. His lips on hers, a fervor that betrays the previous detachment he was trying to show.

Tears gather in my eyes as I witness this betrayal. It's not just the physical act itself, but the sexuality and the intimacy—the raw connection between them—that cuts deep. How could he have allowed himself to cross this line, to be so consumed by lust that he would engage in such an intimate exchange with a dancer?

It's almost comical how ironic it all is. The same man who once vilified Roxanne for her profession is now engaged in the very behavior he condemned. The hypocrisy of it all stings. Sebastian's smug celebration at that club with Karl was a celebration of spurning Roxanne *because she used to be an escort*. But here he is, on my screen, engaging with a stripper that I'm almost positive would engage in escort services if Sebastian had simply asked. How did his mind even let him do that? How was he not aware of how stupid it would make him look, getting a lap dance as a way to reward himself for refusing to witness his son marry a former madam?

With a heavy heart, I wipe away my tears and take a deep breath. The show is over, and Sebastian is on his feet again as he hands her a tip before leaving the room, but I feel horrible nonetheless. Now there are no more secrets, and no more unanswered questions. I know everything that he did with that stripper, and now I have to live with it. But at least it's better than not knowing. *Maybe*.

The way I'm hurting right now is beyond anything I've ever imagined, so maybe I'm wrong and blissful ignorance would have been the better choice. It's too late now, though.

A surge of loneliness hits me out of nowhere, so strong that it takes my breath away. I don't want to be by myself, and there's only one other person in this home right now that I can call. Feeling a mix of emotions—anger, hurt, and vulnerability—I dial my mom's number, my heart still aching from what I've just witnessed. She answers after a couple of rings, and I can hear the concern in her voice as she asks if everything is okay.

There is a lump in my throat that is so large that it's hard to speak. "I just

saw the video..." my voice's trembling with the weight of my emotions. "The lap dance video...."

My mom senses the turmoil in my words, understanding what I'm referencing, and responds gently, "Oh, darling. I'm so sorry. Where are you right now?"

My throat tightens even more as I fight back tears. "In my bedroom."

"I'll come up there." She sounds so soothing and comforting. "Give me just one moment, love."

Minutes later, there's a soft knock on my bedroom door, and Mom enters. She goes and sits down on the edge of my bed, smoothing out the duvet as she does so. Without a word, she wraps her arms around me in a tight embrace. It's the kind of hug that holds reassurance, love, and understanding all at once. In this moment, I'm grateful for her presence, for her ability to be here when I need her the most. Having her here right now confirms that I made the right choice coming back here to live during the separation and not a hotel. It would be hell to be by myself.

"Thank you for being here, Mom. Thank you." I'm taller than my mother, but right now, I feel so small and being held by her makes me feel like a child, safe in her mother's arms.

"Always, dear," she whispers, stroking my hair. "You don't have to share this with anyone else. And certainly not with the kids."

Her words bring a sense of relief. I hadn't even considered sharing that horrible recording with any of the children, but she's right. There's no reason I should ever need to. I have her, and Gabi, who know the entire truth of the situation, and that will have to be enough. I can count on my mom to provide a place where I can be vulnerable without judgment or pressure.

Pulling out of the embrace, I exhale slowly. "He called me again today." She looks surprised, but I continue, "He wanted me to give him a second chance...after everything he has done..." I chuckle, head shaking at his delusional request. "I'm not even sure I can face him without wanting to kill him. I thought I was angry about him missing the wedding, but this is an entirely different level of anger."

With a gentle smile, she says, "We can always put off that meeting, Julia. Take all the time you need."

As I lie back against the headboard again, I let my thoughts wander, contemplating the way men have continued to fail women in my family, over and over again. Not just us, either, but so many other women I know. It



seems absurd that this is all so common. “I sometimes wonder if it's some kind of universal destiny for married women to be let down by their husbands. There's so much cheating everywhere I turn that it almost becomes expected at this point.”

She ponders my words before responding, sliding closer to me on the bed so I can lay my head on her shoulder. “I'd like to believe there are men out there who don't follow that pattern. Maybe your son, maybe Alex...all we can do is hope that we've influenced them enough to be the best sort of men.”

I let out a humorless chuckle, a hint of bitterness lacing my voice. “Yeah, well, the jerk managed to fit quite the scandal into our son's wedding day. That asshole. It wasn't enough to skip the wedding, he had to humiliate me in the process.”

My mom's tone shifts, becoming pragmatic as she addresses the practical matters at hand. “We've got the divorce agreement all set. It's up to you now whether to move forward with it or not.”

Sighing, I twist the sheets in my fingers restlessly. “I wish it were that easy, Mom.”

“It can be, dear. Just let Eveline handle it.”

“No, I don't mean logistically. Emotionally. Even now I'm still not ready to make the call. I'm terrified that I'll decide to leave him in a fit of anger or decide to take him back when I'm feeling nostalgic and then realize that I've made a terrible mistake.”

“You don't have to make that decision now, Julia. I just thought that knowing the option was available might bring you some comfort. But for now...” she slides off the bed, flipping the sheets up once she's back on her feet, “you should get some rest. You've been through so much and I'm sure you're exhausted.”

Her words resonate within me as I nestle under the sheets, seeking a sense of comfort. She tucks the sheets around me, her touch a soothing balm to my frayed emotions. Leaning in, she places a soft kiss on my forehead, just like when I was a little girl, her love palpable in the gesture. “Remember, no matter what, I love you, my sweet girl.”

Touched by her unwavering support, my voice is soft as I reply, “Thank you, Mom.”

With a final stroke of my hair, she stands to turn the lights off. “Good night, Jules.”

“Good night.”

*Sebastian*

ANOTHER WEEK HAS DRAGGED ON, each day feeling like an eternity, and Julia's silence continues to echo in my mind. Her promise to mull over my proposal hangs in the void, leaving me in a state of suspended anticipation. It's like living in a limbo of uncertainty, torn between wanting to contact her again to speed things up and letting her have her time and space so she can approach me when she's ready.

In my office, I take a much-needed breather. My thoughts are in a complete tangle. The news about Karl's arrest still reverberates through the company, like shockwaves affecting not just the business but also the vibe among our colleagues. He's posted bail and is back at work today while waiting for his first court appearance, but there's no denying that everyone treats him differently now. A lot differently.

There's a knock at the door, even though I've told my assistant that I'm not to be bothered for the next fifteen minutes. There is only a short list of people that I will speak to at any time, and I have a suspicion about which one it is that is making my PA interrupt me right now.

"Mr. Van den Bosch, I hate to interrupt, but something's come up," she informs me.

My focus snaps back to her, curiosity piqued. "Go on."

"Karl Townsend wants to see you, and he says it's pretty urgent."

Knowing there's no way I can avoid him for much longer, I wave my hand in the air, and say, "Go ahead and send him in, then. I'll probably take

lunch after he leaves.”

Once the assistant leaves, I consider what exactly it is Karl might want to talk about. Just like I all but knew it was him that had come to talk, I also have a pretty good idea of what might bring him to my office. Van den Bosh industries, and by association, myself, have gotten Karl out of so much trouble over the years that it’s ridiculous. No doubt it was a shock to him to be arrested and not have me posting bail for him as soon as possible. Now, I haven’t contacted him to offer help for the upcoming fines or trial, so he’s more than likely starting to get nervous. There’s nothing to be done, though. I’ve made the decision to stand by my wife and family, and I’m sticking to it.

An unwelcome thought sneaks in—*He’s your family too, technically. Dad would be so disappointed.*

No. I can’t think this way. There is nothing but regret and heartache down that path. My father is dead, but Julia and my children are alive and I want us all to be a family again. If that means sacrificing Karl for the greater good, then so be it.

Karl walks in, trying to wear a confident face, but I know him well enough to see the dip in his shoulders and the way that the lines on his face are more pronounced. He’s been stressed out, severely. I offer a nod of acknowledgement, gesturing for him to take a seat.

“Good to see you, Karl. How have you been holding up?” I start, my tone veiled with feigned empathy. I can’t let him know how I’m truly feeling, or he’ll catch on to how willing I am to let him be arrested and face charges. Karl, for all his flaws, is still the best salesman in the company and has dozens of high ranking clients attached to him. As long as Karl is still reporting for work, I have no interest in ostracizing him until the last possible moment.

He lets out a heavy sigh, his shoulders slumping slightly as he takes a sit in front of me. “It’s been a roller coaster, Seb. I appreciate you taking the time to talk.”

I lean back slightly, a hint of sympathy in my eyes. “Of course. We’ve been through a lot together. You know you can count on me if there’s something that you need to discuss. I’ll always lend an ear.”

His gaze drops momentarily, and I almost feel bad for what I’ve done. That is, until he opens his mouth and his tone is full of annoyance and frustration. “Seb, you know Julia and I might not be on the best terms right now, but I never expected her to throw me to the wolves like this for some

sort of revenge. You've got to tell her to stop. I'm not part of your marriage and it's not right to make me the scapegoat."

I nod solemnly, trying to balance my act of concern. "I understand. Unfortunately, things have spiraled quite a bit since then. My wife doesn't even speak to me anymore."

Despite my statement being true, Karl's lack of patience with the situation is clear. "That doesn't remove the fact that the prosecutor has pressed charges against me, Seb. And let me tell you, I'm toasted if I can't find a way out of this mess. I need help, and I thought maybe you could talk to Gabi. I don't expect things to just disappear into thin air, but I thought you could ask her to let me take a plea deal. I'm willing to pay for a good settlement, a fine, anything she wants. I just want to avoid jail time and a trial."

I lean forward, adopting a contemplative posture. "The thing is, Gabi's Julia's friend, not exactly in my circle of influence. My hands are tied there."

Karl's gaze narrows, desperation mingling with his words. "Then talk to Julia. Convince her to put in a word with Gabi. Any amount that is within my power to pay, I will. I just can't end up behind bars."

I exhale, a touch of resignation seeping into my tone. "As I said earlier, Julia and I aren't exactly on speaking terms right now. She's already got a divorce attorney in the picture. Her and I are only husband and wife on paper, and barely that at the moment. I haven't even seen her in weeks."

Karl's disappointment is evident as he lets out a frustrated exhale, his gaze darting down to his lap. "Damn. That complicates things." He looks back at me, and I can see him warring with the desire to push me harder and the knowledge that this is a moment to be sympathetic, not pushy. Karl has very little time before all hell breaks loose for him, but he can't exactly abandon the man who is supposed to be his oldest friend in his time of need. Finally, Karl settles on empathy. "Do you really think that she's going to divorce you?"

I shrug, pushing down the panic that arises anytime the word 'divorce' is brought up. It's too horrible of a fate to be real. "I don't know. Maybe. I thought that her and I would be together forever, that we were soulmates, but I've fucked things up really bad." I catch Karl's gaze and hold it. "She found out about the lap dance, as you know. It was all over the news."

Uncomfortable, Karl stands up and starts pacing the office, a contemplative expression on his face, until he stops at the window overlooking Amsterdam and lets out a long breath. "Shit, Sebastian. I'm so

sorry. If there's anything I can do...."

I chuckle, but there's no humor to be found in the sound. "There's nothing, just like there's nothing I can do to help you out at this point."

Silence settles in for a moment, the weight of our predicaments heavy in the air. Karl gazes out the window, his eyes scanning the city's skyline as if seeking answers in the landscape.

"It's a breathtaking view," he comments, a somber note to his voice. "One that I might not be enjoying for much longer if I end up behind bars."

Standing, I stride over to stand next to the man that I'm supposed to be taking care of at all costs. The man that I'll see put behind bars. "Did the prosecutor give you a timeframe for the sentencing if you are found guilty?"

Karl nods, his expression grim. "Up to ten years, but they mentioned that we might be able to reach a deal for around five."

That's a hell of a long time. Even five years is enough to make my stomach flip flop inside of me. I can't even imagine. My brows furrow in contemplation. "Mandatory jail time?"

Karl's response is regretful. "Can't escape it, according to them."

My hand instinctively rests on his shoulder, a gesture of empathy as my words carry genuine remorse. For all the bad that he's done, and all the bullshit he's put me through, he has still been my friend. And, in the depths of my mind, my half-brother. "I'm truly sorry, Karl. I wish there were more I could do."

"Me too, Sebastian." Karl meets my gaze, a sense of camaraderie between us that has deep roots. "After all these years, you're more than just a friend, Seb. You're like a brother to me."

The mention of brotherhood sends a pang through me, a mix of nostalgia and regret surging within. Karl has no idea how close to the truth he really is. It would be so easy to just tell him, right here and now, but the repercussions of such a thing are unimaginable.

"Take all the time you need. You may even take a break from work if it helps."

"I appreciate it," Karl says with a somber nod, patting me on the shoulder and turning to leave. His departure signals the end of our conversation. Not only that, but it's the end of me being a crutch for Karl when he needs it most. From now on, he's going to have to stand on his own two feet and clean up his own messes.

As the door closes behind Karl, his footsteps fading into the distance, I'm

left alone in the now-silent room. The heaviness of his words lingers, mingling with my own thoughts that just won't be silent. The choice I face seems insurmountable—to sacrifice a long-standing friendship for a chance at redemption with Julia, or to protect my own interests at the company and keep my father's legacy alive by shielding Karl once more.

I turn back to the window, gazing out at the cityscape that stretches beyond. The view that once brought solace now feels like a reflection of the tangled mess my life has become. Even if this last effort in having Karl arrested doesn't bring Julia back, it will be a clear sign to my two oldest that I am on their side now, and ready to right my wrongs by having Karl put away. Andries and Elise's faces flash before me, their gratitude for my supposed sacrifice is a faint glimmer of hope amidst everything else. It's enough to keep me going, but I still hate every minute of this disaster.

But can I truly rely on their gratitude alone to feel whole again? Is being whole even possible without the gnawing uncertainty that claws at me? There are no guarantees in matters of the heart. Even as I wrestle with these thoughts, a deep ache pulses within me—a longing for Julia, for the life we once had.

I sit at my desk, the chair creaking under the weight of my contemplation. The decision I face is more than just a matter of strategy; it's a reflection of who I am, of the values I hold dear. I've always prided myself on my loyalty and my sense of duty, but now those principles seem to clash, leaving me adrift in uncharted waters.

Leaning back, my fingers intertwined behind my head, I close my eyes for a moment. The memory of Julia's smile, the warmth of her touch, and the laughter that used to fill our home flood my senses. I wonder if it's too late to rewrite our story, to rebuild what's been torn apart.

My phone buzzes, pulling me from my reverie. It's my personal assistant informing me that my two afternoon meetings have been rescheduled for tomorrow. The sudden free time feels like a gift, an opportunity to escape the suffocating confines of my office.

But where do I even want to go? These days, it's nothing but home and the office. On a whim, I pull out my phone and dial Julia's number, hoping beyond hope that she will take even a second to speak with me. Part of me knows that she's not going to answer, but my heart still drops when the call goes straight to voicemail, and I'm met with the sound of her voice—a voice I've known so intimately, yet now it feels like a distant memory.

“Hey, Julia, it's me...” I begin, my voice betraying the tumultuous thoughts racing through my mind. “I, um, I just spoke to Karl. It looks like he's going to get five years in jail at the least. You didn't call back, not even to schedule that appointment with your divorce attorney. Is everything alright?” I pause, words hanging in the air, not knowing what else to say when I could talk to her for hours if she'd just give me the chance. The silence on the other end feels deafening, a stark reminder of the growing distance between us. I close my eyes, my fingers tapping nervously on the surface of my desk. “Just...call me when you get the chance, okay? Any hour of the day. I'll answer.”

Hanging up feels like a physical blow, an admittance of defeat. Why won't she just fucking call!? I'd take her disappointment, her anger, her hatred, anything is better than this radio silence. But that's all she'll give me right now. Silence.

I lean back in my chair, rubbing my temples as I contemplate my next move. Should I keep trying to reach out to her, to bridge the chasm that has opened between us? Or should I accept that perhaps it's time to face the inevitable—that our paths have diverged too far to be reconciled? That she's going to go through with the divorce without even giving me a chance to talk to her?

I can't be in this fucking office anymore. I need some air, some space, anything but these four walls. I inform my personal assistant that I'll be stepping out and will return after lunch. The need for a moment of solitude is pressing, an urgency that I can't ignore. I exit my office, the door closing behind me with a soft click, and make my way to the parking lot.

The drive to the park where I proposed to Julia twenty-two years ago is a familiar route, etched permanently into my memory like the lines on a map. As I park the car and step out, a rush of nostalgia washes over me. The surroundings seem both familiar and distant, as if frozen in time.

The park hasn't undergone significant changes over the years. There are a few new trails, and the trees have grown taller, their branches reaching for the sky, but it's just as enchanting as before. It's as if Mother Nature herself has embraced the passage of time, while I remain suspended in a moment that feels like a lifetime ago.

I walk along the path that leads to the spot where I once knelt and offered Julia a ring, my heart heavy with the weight of the years that have passed since then. The sound of birds chirping and leaves rustling in the gentle

breeze creates a serene backdrop. Did it look like this back then, or were there more clouds in the sky? I cherish the memory so much that all I ever remember is it being perfect. It could have been a hurricane for all I cared, as long as Julia told me yes.

My footsteps slow as I approach the familiar bench, the place where Julia and I had sat for hours, lost in conversation, dreams, and promises. I take a seat, the wood slightly weathered by time, and exhale louder than usual. The memories flood back, each one a reminder of what once was.

I close my eyes, allowing the sounds of nature to envelop me. For a brief moment, it's as if time stands still, and I'm transported back to a time when the future held infinite possibilities. I can almost hear her laughter, see the way her eyes would light up when she looked at me.

But reality soon crashes back, a wave of regret and longing sweeping over me. The present is a far cry from the idyllic past we once shared. The distance between us feels impossible to conquer, and the mistakes I've made have cast a shadow over the love that once burned so brightly.

I lean back against the bench, my fingers tracing the grains of wood absentmindedly. There's a heaviness in my chest, an ache that refuses to subside. I wish I could turn back time, rewrite the latest chapters of our story with a different ending—one where I didn't let her slip away. One where I wasn't such an absolute fuck up.

Noticing that the docks are unoccupied, I make my way over and take a seat. The weathered wood under me creaks softly as I settle in, the familiar sensation triggering memories of countless moments spent in this very spot. It's a quiet haven by the water's edge, a place where conversations and contemplations have unfolded over the years.

My mind takes me back to that first time we sat here together, Julia and I. It was a different era, a time when the only thing that mattered in the world was one another. We spoke of her parents' divorce, and the parallel of it almost burns. There was no way in hell I could have ever thought that our lives would take a similar turn.

As I gaze out at the water, the ripples reflecting the golden hues of the afternoon sun, the guilt I've been trying to suppress resurfaces with an overwhelming force. I've never felt remorse like this...never. The worst part of it is that, while most of that remorse is over Julia and the kids, there is also the unavoidable remorse knowing how disappointed my father would be knowing that I've abandoned Karl. Again, I try to tell myself that Dad could



have never anticipated how Karl would turn out and how foul some of his actions would be, but it just doesn't help. That if he knew the man Karl would become, he would have never wanted that promise from me.

But my dad is still dead, and I still promised him I'd take care of Karl before he died. There's no way to take it back or show him how things really are now, so I just have to live with not just being a bad husband and father, but also an oath-breaker. It makes me question what I've even done right in this life.

My thoughts focus on Karl himself, and I can't help but wonder if he brought me to that club with a calculated intention. Was he purposefully leading me down a path of temptation, getting me wasted knowing that I would succumb to the lap dance, and using it as leverage against me later? The thought gnaws at me. He has to know the disdain I have for sex workers and exotic dancers—I've definitely expressed this opinion to him when he got in trouble with the media for using escorts—so why did he choose to take me to a gentlemen's club if not to get me drunk enough that I would discard my boundaries.

I consider telling all of this to my wife, but I don't know how she would react to me trying to push at least some of the blame off on someone else. Maybe Julia wants me to own my mistake unflinchingly. All I can do is try.

Julia's continued silence amplifies my unease. Each passing moment without her response feels like an eternity. I find myself yearning for her presence, for the familiar sound of her voice, and the way she would challenge and comfort me all at once. I can almost hear her laughter being carried in by the wind, like I've heard it so many times before right here in this very spit.

Picking up a small pebble, I toss it out into the water, watching the rings spread out once it sinks beneath the surface. What am I even doing here alone? It isn't helping me think about moving forward, instead just making me feel mired in the past.

Knowing that it might be a mistake, and that it might make me seem weak, I still decide to send a message to my wife. Maybe seeing this place will get through to her. I take a photo of the serene lake, its tranquil surface reflecting the afternoon sun, and type the following words: "*This place is not the same without you.*" It's a simple message in principle, but it holds the weight of my longing and my regret.

I hit send, watching the message disappear into the digital realm, placing

the phone back into my pocket and leaning back on my hands with a sigh. No reason to watch the screen for an answer—Julia isn't going to respond. These days, she never does.

*Julia*

LUNCH DOESN'T LAST ALL that long before I need to be back in the courtroom, so I try to be quick walking through the familiar halls of the court of appeals, my steps echoing in the quiet corridor. It's lunchtime, and I'm making my way to the canteen, my mind preoccupied with the cases and discussions that have filled my morning. The fluorescent lights above cast a stark brightness against the cream-colored walls, and the faint murmur of conversations drift from nearby offices.

Being late isn't acceptable, but I'm starving, so skipping lunch isn't going to work, either. As I reach for my phone to check the time, a soft ping interrupts the rhythm of my steps. I glance at the screen, and my heart skips a beat as I see the notification: a text from Sebastian. The sight of his name brings a mix of feelings—primarily curiosity and a hint of trepidation. He's supposed to be giving me space, but there's no denying that I've left him hanging after agreeing to at least consider meeting up before we sit down to discuss the divorce with an attorney. So I guess it's not a surprise that he's texting me, but that doesn't make it feel like any less of an electrical shock.

With a swipe of my thumb, I unlock my phone and open the message. And there it is, accompanied by a picture of the lake...*our* lake. The same lake where he proposed to me all those years ago. The image is breathtaking—a serene expanse of water framed by trees and the distant mountains. The memory rushes back, vivid and bittersweet, pulling me into its embrace.

I stop mid-step, my surroundings fading into the background as I immerse

myself in the photo. It's as if time has momentarily halted, and I'm transported back to that moment—the warmth of the sun on my skin, the soft rustle of leaves, the look in his eyes as he got down on one knee.

A wistful smile tugs at my lips as I reminisce about that day—the love that had shone in his gaze, the vulnerability that had tugged at my heart. The lake had been our sanctuary, a place where we had shared dreams, hopes, and promises for the future.

I trace my finger over the image, and it feels like it all happened just yesterday, not years ago. The happiness, the ache, the longing...I lived and breathed for Sebastian back then. Knowing that we would be married, that he'd be mine forever, was all I ever wanted. I've never said yes to anything as quickly as I did his proposal, and tears had rolled down my cheeks as he swept me into his arms and kissed me hard. Of course he'd be at that lake today; the lake had witnessed our journey, from our first date to the present moment. It has seen the highs and lows, the laughter and tears, the love and the hurt.

Standing there, lost in thought, the bustling activity of the court around me seems distant, almost surreal. The memories come flooding back, a cascade of moments that have shaped us and our relationship. The message from Sebastian and the picture of the lake are a silent reminder of what we once were, what we could have been if only he had let go of his hate of Roxanne and his loyalty remained with our family. If only he hadn't accepted a lap dance from a stripper and had the audacity to touch her, all during the same stretch of hours that Andries was getting married. That infamous video will haunt me for a long, long time.

I take a deep breath, forcing myself to settle down. Here is not the place to be reliving these moments, and even if it was, I don't have the time to dwell on the past. With a final glance at the photo, I slide my phone back into my pocket and continue on my way to the canteen. The noise of my colleagues chatting and the clatter of trays fill the area once I arrive. It's a familiar scene, a slice of normalcy amidst the craziness that's been going on lately.

As always, there are a few heads that turn my way, and a few whispers shared that I'm positive are about me. So be it, it's not like it's something I can stop. I'm well aware that my personal life isn't exactly a secret around here. News spreads faster than wildfire, and thanks to Karl's antics and subsequent arrest, my marital struggles are probably at the forefront of

everyone's office gossip. I've managed to keep my head up and ignore all of it, so work hasn't been too difficult. Truthfully, it's been a good escape from the chaotic nature of my personal life.

I order my meal and take the Caesar salad to one of the tables, lowering myself into the seat. Pulling out my phone, I tell myself that I'm just checking the time again, but before I know it I've got Sebastian's message open again, staring at the picture and feeling my chest get tighter. Damn him for interrupting the few quiet moments that I have.

Texting him back shouldn't even be a consideration, but I still type the message, over and over again before deleting it each time. Connecting with him is so tempting that it's almost like an addiction. All I want to do is be with him, but when I think about doing so, I want to rage at him, too. Nothing makes sense, not even my own wants and desires. God, I'm so sick of this. I just want things to go back to normal...except normal isn't a thing for us anymore. At least not the old normal. Things have changed. We've changed. And a simple photo and message can't erase the hurt and frustration that's accumulated over time. Still, I can't help but wonder if he's sincere, if he truly wants to find common ground.

I put down my phone and take a sip of my drink, mulling over what exactly I'm supposed to do next. He seemed to be honest in his intentions when he asked to meet up, but I can't help but wonder if he just plans to use the pull that I'm sure he knows he still has on me to get me to agree to reconcile. Chewing a bite of the salad, I consider if this lake picture is a sincere effort of reaching out, or is it just Sebastian planting the seeds that he thinks will bloom into forgiveness? Does he even deserve forgiveness?

With a sigh, I tuck my phone away a second time and return to my lunch. The court staff's canteen buzzes with energy, a microcosm of the world outside these walls. I take another bite of my salad, lost in thought as I weigh my options. The past is just that—the past. And while a photo might remind me of what was, it can't change the present or predict the future.

Just as I'm about to finish my meal, which hasn't been nearly as relaxing as I hoped, I hear a kind, familiar voice speak up.

“May I sit?”

Looking up, my eyes align on Alice, a seasoned judge with a wealth of experience under her belt. I nod, making room for her as she settles across from me, tray in hand. She settles into the chair across from me, and as she starts eating, there's a comfortable silence between us. The clinking of cutlery

against plates and the low murmur of conversations blend together, creating a backdrop for our interaction.

Alice speaks first, keeping the conversation light and easy. “I’m glad they finally got fish today. I was getting really tired of eating meat every day. It makes me so groggy to eat such a heavy meal at lunch.”

I chuckle, gesturing to my own salad. “Tell me about it. I always feel like I need a nap after those heavy lunches.”

She laughs, her eyes crinkling at the corners. “Exactly. I mean, we’re supposed to be working, not dozing off at our desks.”

Nodding, I tell her, “You’ve got a point. Lighter meals definitely make the afternoons more productive.”

Alice takes a bite of her fish and nods in agreement. “So, how’s your day going so far? Any interesting cases on the docket?”

I take a moment to swallow my food before replying. “Oh, you know how it is—never a dull moment in the world of appeals. I’ve been knee-deep in briefs and arguments since morning.”

She shakes her head in mock sympathy. “Ah, the glamorous life of a judge. Well, I can’t complain either. I’ve been deciphering contracts and legal jargon all day. It’s like learning a whole new language sometimes, even when you’ve been doing it as long as I have. Sometimes I feel like I see the same cases over and over again, and other times I still manage to be totally blindsided. At least it keeps things interesting.”

I grin, nodding at her. “I understand that all too well. I can’t even count the amount of times that I’ve had to look something up in a case that I’ve never heard of before just so I don’t look like a fool. Social media has made things a lot more complicated, too.”

Alice hums in agreement, and I’m surprised to realize that the camaraderie of our shared experiences brings a sense of comfort. Alice takes another bite of her fish before speaking again. “You know, sometimes I envy those TV shows where judges issue verdicts in an hour. If only it were that simple in real life.”

“Oh, don’t we all? But then again, those shows never capture the hours of research, the endless debates, and the mountain of paperwork.” Sighing, I sip at my drink again. “Or the terrible attitudes we have to deal with.”

Alice’s eyes twinkle with amusement. “True. It’s a good thing we’ve got each other to commiserate with. Speaking of which, how are you holding up?”

I pause, my fork mid-air. Her question isn't just about work, I can tell. It's about everything—the divorce, the scandal, the life I'm trying to navigate while balancing work and everything outside of it. I meet her gaze, appreciating the genuine concern in her eyes.

“It's been a rollercoaster, to be honest,” I admit, before heaving a long sigh. “But I'm taking it one day at a time. I've got a feeling the ride isn't over yet.”

Alice reaches across the table and places her hand on mine. It's a simple gesture, but it speaks volumes. “You're strong, Julia. Whatever comes your way, I know you'll handle it with grace.”

I offer her a grateful smile, feeling a sense of solidarity in her words. “Thank you, Alice. That means a lot.”

As we continue our lunch, the conversation flows effortlessly regarding work, life, and everything in between. It's nice to be reminded that there's a support system right here within these walls. I've leaned on my mother, my older children, my brother, and Gabi so much that I tend to forget that there are other people I can turn to as well. Sometimes an unbiased opinion from someone more separated from the situation is priceless.

Alice continues between bites. “I know it's hard. We might deal with divorces every day, but when it comes to our own, we are never really prepared, are we?”

Her observation strikes a chord. Has Alice been through a divorce, too? I'm a little embarrassed to admit to myself that I have no idea what her romantic life entails, especially when she's here reaching out to comfort me about mine. My family has always been more in the spotlight than others, but that's no excuse. I let out a soft sigh of acknowledgment.

“No, I guess we never are. It's hard to accept it,” I admit, my voice betraying a hint of vulnerability that I hadn't intended. “I haven't even found the courage to give him the papers to sign, you know? They're all worked up and ready to go, and I'm undoubtedly going to get a good split of the assets, but none of that matters to me compared to...you know, losing my marriage....”

Alice's gaze is understanding, and she takes a sip of water before offering me a knowing smile. Her next words are laden with experience and empathy. “Sometimes never serving those papers is a form of courage, too—just in having the courage to be honest with yourself and what you value the most.”

Her quiet admission resonates deeply. There's a pause, a shared

understanding that transcends our roles as colleagues. Alice's eyes hold a wealth of understanding, and as I meet her gaze, I feel a connection that goes beyond our professional interactions. So she has experienced something similar, and instead of going forward with the split, she reconciled, if I'm reading between the lines of her confession correctly. Alice loved her husband and her marriage enough to figure it out, even when they were on the brink.

“There’s no right or wrong here, Julia,” she assures me, her words a balm to my uncertainty. “If you truly believe the marriage isn’t able to be recovered, then I’m sure you’ll find the courage in your heart to put an end to it. But if your heart believes there’s a way you and your husband can work it out...” She lets her words trail off, her gaze facing mine. “Just don’t let others make the decision for you.”

Her wisdom, wrapped in a simple yet profound sentiment, pierces through my thoughts. There are so many opinions and expectations being placed on me, most of them out of love, that it’s started to warp my perception of what I really want. I’ve been basing so much of my choices on what I think Mom, the kids, even Alex, might think is best. But what do *I* think is best? What do I want? How much does my marriage mean to me, and is it enough to forgive the transgressions that Sebastian has committed? I need some more time to think those things over, but one thing is clear—the path forward remains my own to navigate.

“Thank you, Alice,” I say, sincerity lacing my words. The weight that had settled on my shoulders seems to lift at least a little bit, replaced by a renewed sense of clarity. “I truly appreciate it.”

As our chat continues, I find myself grateful for this unexpected connection, a shared moment of vulnerability and understanding. Just a few simple words, woman to woman, are enough to make me see things much more clearly.

Leaving the lunch table behind, I seek refuge in my office. Things might be easier for me to see now, but that adds its own complications. I’m starting to realize that I haven’t let myself truly consider fixing things with Sebastian because I know how negatively so many people will view it, especially with the scandal still fresh in the public’s mind.

Sitting in my leather office chair, I close my eyes and inhale deeply, attempting to steady my racing thoughts. Just as a semblance of calm settles over me, my phone emits a familiar buzz. Glancing at the screen, I see Gabi's



name illuminated. I almost ignore it, wanting time to try and center myself, but there's always that chance that whatever she needs is going to be urgent. Without wasting a second, I answer the call, my voice cautious yet welcoming, "Hey, how are you?"

Gabi's urgency is palpable through the phone, and she fails to even answer my greeting question. "I've got something to tell you."

My heart skips a beat, my pulse quickening. "What's going on?"

"Karl's taking a different approach," Gabi explains, her words delivered with a sense of gravity. "He wants to go to court, claiming that Sebastian orchestrated the whole thing, including planting the drugs at the cabaret. I just finished a meeting with his lawyer, and it's a total shock. He's putting himself at risk for a lot more time behind bars just to get back at Sebastian."

The revelation hits me like a wave crashing against the shore, my mind struggling to process this unexpected twist. "Wait, seriously? Court? I thought he'd rather make a deal with you."

"Me too," Gabi confirms. "But that was before he hired that attorney. They went for a totally different approach. One that involves throwing your husband to the wolves. I wanted you to hear it from me before you heard it somewhere else. I didn't want you to be blindsided...and before you ask, no, I don't know if there's any truth to it or not. All I know is that he's insisting that Seb was pulling the strings behind the scenes. This could go really, really bad for your husband."

Frustration and a bone deep exhaustion wells up within me. "Another layer to this mess. Just when I thought it couldn't get any worse. Now it's a nightmare...."

Gabi's voice carries empathy as she responds, "I know it's overwhelming. And, you know, with Seb missing the wedding, Karl's using that as some sort of proof of motive."

A sigh escapes me, heavy with skepticism. "Gabi, I can't believe Seb would stoop so low as to orchestrate this entire debacle. He's been more petty than I ever thought him capable, but planting drugs? That's an entirely new low."

Gabi is understanding, but the seriousness of it all never leaves her voice "I hear you. It's just that Seb might need legal help soon. He's going to want to find the best defense attorney that he possibly can and be ready to head this thing off before Karl manages to get the upper hand."

Gratitude fills my voice as I respond, "Thank you for letting me know."

This really messes everything up, but you've probably saved me from a mental breakdown with the forewarning."

"Any time, Jules. And please take care of yourself, okay?"

I try, and fail, to sound positive. "I will."

I hang up, leaning back in the chair and contemplating the recent developments. The first order of business is to inform my secretary that my next trial will need to be postponed. Next, I shift my focus to the message Seb had sent me a mere fifty minutes ago. Has it really only been a less than an hour? It seems so much longer. After a moment's consideration, I decide to take the initiative and dial his number. If he's still at the lake, it might be the perfect chance for me to kill two birds with one stone—we can talk about the divorce papers like he wanted, and I can warn him about everything that Gabi just told me.

As the phone rings, I feel both uncertainty building within me, alongside an undeniable anticipation. When his voice finally answers, I find myself relieved, but I waste no time, asking him, "Are you still there at the lake?"

"Hello to you too, Julia." Seb's response is prompt, his curiosity evident in his tone. "I am. Why?"

Gathering my thoughts, I choose my words carefully. "I've received some news. I think it's best if we meet in person. Can we talk at the lake?"

A moment of pause follows, but I think we both know that there's no way he'll deny me—not after waiting so long for this chance. Finally, Seb agrees. "Sure. I'll wait for you."

With a sense of determination, I end the call. I gather my belongings, and remind myself that it's time to confront the truth, no matter how painful it may be. I can do this. I might not want to, but I can, and will, confront all the things I've been avoiding and figure this out.

\* \* \*

As I arrive at the lake, my heart is beating so hard that I'm afraid it's going to burst out of my chest. The walk to the docks, where he's waiting for me, isn't long, but it feels like an eternity. There are at least five times that I consider turning around and going back to work, but I force myself to put one foot in front of the other.

And then there's the part of me that just wants to run the distance and

throw myself into his arms. I ignore that part. It's a selfish desire that will do neither of us any good, but that doesn't stop me from wanting it terribly.

Finally, I make it to my destination, listening to the water lap against the shore line. There he stands, Sebastian, my husband, the father of my children, and the source of both my joy and pain. The sight of him stirs a mix of conflicting feelings within me, an oncoming tide that I struggle to contain.

I haven't seen him since our argument before the wedding, and now all I want is to unleash my anger, to scream at him for his thoughtlessness and reckless actions. The wound he inflicted on our relationship still stings, and the urge to let him know my hurt is strong. But then, there's a different yearning, a longing to close the distance between us, to embrace the man I once loved so deeply, not after a frantic, restless run like I wanted to before, but slowly. A lingering embrace that shows him how much I've missed him without words.

My mind snaps from one extreme to the other, torn between the desire to kiss him, to taste his lips again, and the impulse to simply ignore him, to preserve what little dignity remains. And of course, there's a sharp impulse to just slap him as hard as I can across his bearded face, to make him share even a portion of the pain that he's made me feel.

I want to shake him, to make him understand the ways that he's broken me and the consequences of his choices. And yet, the more I look at his handsome, beloved face, the urge to seek solace in his arms is so strong I have to clench my fists to keep control of myself. Maybe if I hold him tight enough, time could reverse its course...but that's just a fanciful thought. He and I are here, now, and we have to face our demons.

In the end, I choose none of these extremes. Instead, I maintain a cautious distance, a physical representation of the emotional barriers I've built. Our gaze meets, and for a moment, I see a reflection of my own conflicted feelings in his eyes. But words elude me, the weight of our history leaving me both speechless and overwhelmed.

As we stand there, a palpable tension lingers in the air, heavy with unspoken words and unresolved problems, wants, and desires. The lake, once a place of serene memories, is now the backdrop for something much more bleak.

Seb's voice breaks the silence, sounding almost miserable. "I never thought you'd actually come here."

"Neither did I," I admit, my own voice betraying a hint of vulnerability. I

clench my teeth, annoyed that I've given him even a peek into my thoughts. I want to be a wall of stone.

The distance between us feels like an unspoken agreement, a boundary neither of us dares to cross. It's as if the space between our bodies mirrors the emotional chasm that has grown between us over time. I find myself stealing a glance around the surroundings, taking in the familiarity of the place while also acknowledging the undeniable changes that have occurred. "It's a bit different, for sure," I comment, my words carefully chosen. "But still beautiful."

Seb's agreement comes readily, his response sweetly nostalgic. "Definitely. Quite beautiful."

However, I am quick to dispel any softer notions that might arise. "Seb, this isn't a romantic date where we mend our issues or whatever you think this is," I tell him, my tone firm. "I just came to let you know that Karl intends to throw you under the bus in court for the whole cabaret scandal. He hired a hell of a defense attorney and that's the strategy they are going for. I just worry our kids will see their father being publicly shamed once more in the news cycle."

Seb's posture goes rigid. He's surprised, but not completely shocked. He must have anticipated Karl's betrayal on the horizon. "Was it Gabi who told you that?" he inquires curiously.

I nod, confirming his suspicion. Despite the distance, despite the pain, there's a shared responsibility that binds us —the welfare of our children. He might not approve of everything that they do, which I understand, but he is their protector just as much as I am.

"What a bastard," Seb seethes, his anger whipping through him. "He's the one who knew about the cabaret and the girls. I swear I was confiding in him that I didn't want that wedding to happen, and he told me he had a plan. That's all. He pitched me the whole thing, like it was a scheme that he had in his back pocket just waiting to use. He seemed almost giddy to set everything into motion."

My eyebrows knit together, and I cross my arms, putting my weight on one hip as I examine my husband's face, looking for any hint of lies or deception. "And you agreed to it because you were just so desperate to destroy your son's now wife's reputation that you would turn to someone like Karl. Someone who has already been in the media for disgusting things recently, and that's the person you trusted. Sebastian, how could you let your

hatred get the better of you like that, let it taint your judgment to the point you made such idiotic choices?”

He looks horrendously guilty as he continues, and Seb looks so stricken that I almost feel bad for him. “He took care of everything. I told him I wouldn't interfere. I thought...that if I let him figure it all out on his own, there was no way that it would come back to me, you know?”

A bitter laugh escapes my lips. “Well, good luck convincing the court of your innocence.”

The tension between us simmers, our words cutting through the air like a knife. It's a surreal scenario—standing in this familiar park, discussing the impending legal battle, a far cry from the dreams we once shared.

Seb's frustration boils over, and he explodes with an expletive-laden outburst, looking up at the sky for a moment. “Fuck, I thought hoped he'd just sign the damn settlement. I never thought he'd do all of this!”

His anger is tangible, but I can't let it sway my resolve. I meet his gaze, my tone unwavering. “Do you realize how serious this is, Seb? You can face jail time. From a highly regarded, successful CEO and beloved husband to a disgraceful criminal. Your hate caused you to take this blind leap into the unknown, and look at where it landed you.”

He huffs at my statement. “You think I don't know how serious this is? I'm well aware, and yes, if you're wondering, I'm regretting *all* of it.” Seb's clenched fists and furrowed brow reveal the internal battle he's grappling with. And as his words escape him, a determination takes root. “I'm going to fix this.”

His resolve, though determined, is overshadowed by the immense mess he's entangled himself in. My heart aches—anger, sadness, and an unexpected pang of concern for the man who was once my partner in life.

“How?” I can't help the edge of despair that creeps into my voice. I need answers, some glimmer of hope to cling to in this mess. “Explain to me how, Sebastian, because I'm just not seeing a way out now. I can't figure out a single way to escape this trap.”

Sebastian's face tenses, but he keeps his resolve and tone steady. “There are options. I can offer to take a settlement with Gabi. I can pay a fine, whatever they need from me.”

I shake my head, strands of my hair breaking free from the updo that I coaxed it into early this morning. “But if Karl goes to court, it's the judge that will decide, and I doubt they'll spare you while throwing the book at him. It's

not like you just get to decide you're taking a fine instead. It's not your choice."

He inhales deeply. "I wasn't involved in the planning. He spoke to all the drug dealers and—"

My interruption is sharp, driven by frustration and anger. "You need a lawyer for this. I'm here just to give you a heads-up."

There's a charged silence between us, the unsaid words hanging heavy in the air. And then, Seb's voice cracks, a fragile thread of emotion. "And what about us?"

I look at him, and feel the oceans of distance between us. Our history, our love, our heartache—all of it swirls within me. The silence stretches, both of us suspended in a moment that holds a history that I've cherished. I know it's the same for him, too.

Finally, I break it with a quiet admission that holds a world of hurt. "I saw the video." When his eyes go wide, I lick my lips and continue. "*All of it*, Seb. The entire lap dance, the touching, and kiss at the end. What an hypocrite you are. Hating on Roxanne for her line of work for you then to cheat on me with someone who does a similar job."

Seb's gaze searches mine, desperately looking for the damage that the video has done, and for any hope that might still be left. I stand my ground, but there are tears in my eyes, and a tremor in my shoulders. There's no way I can pretend to be unaffected by all of this.

His next words are hollow, as if he's just as lost as I am. "I know you are mad at me and you have every right to be." Seb's voice wavers, and I catch a glimpse of his eyes watering. He averts his gaze, fixing it on the tranquil surface of the lake. "But, um, do you think we are beyond repair? Is divorce the only solution?"

Sebastian is vulnerable, the armor that he usually wraps around himself long gone.

"You hurt us deeply," I begin slowly, making sure that he's aware that I know I played a part in this too, however small it might be compared to his. "I know I shouldn't have used that family secret against you, especially when it involves someone who's now turning on you. But what happened in that club...I..." my words trail off as I try to fight the emotion building within.

His eyes drop to the ground, shame evident in his posture. He starts to speak, words heavy with remorse. "I was consumed by rage and anger that day. I...I don't have any excuse, and I'll take the blame. I felt betrayed that

you would use such a private secret against me. I let myself drown in alcohol, and then one thing led to another..." Sebastian stops, looking away and trying his best to gather himself before continuing. I can see how much pain he's in, but I find it hard to be sympathetic, considering he brought it all on himself. "I'm not like your dad, Julia. I never had an affair with anyone, never had any relations with anyone else in twenty-two years. That lap dance was a one-time mistake. A mistake that will never ever happen again."

I remain silent, not knowing what to say. It might have been a one time mistake, but one time mistakes end relationships all the time. Seb steps closer, his voice a quiet plea as he reaches for something he hopes might still be salvageable. "Do you think you can find it in you to forgive me?"

Meeting his gaze, I let a small sigh escape. The emotions I've kept under lock and key threaten to surge forward. As I look into his eyes, I see his burning, soul-deep and the remnants of the trust we once shared. It's complicated, more so now than ever, but the rawness of his words touches something in me.

"Maybe one day," I tell him, my eyes on his. "But not today."

His nod is a silent acknowledgment of my sentiment. Sebastian is clearly disappointed, but resigned, too, as if he already knew what was going to happen.

"I'm still processing what you did," I continue, keeping my tone even. "You shattered my trust into a thousand pieces and I just don't know if there is any way you can put them back together."

"I understand that, but...do you really want to divorce me?" he asks tentatively, like the word 'divorce' hurts physically to say. The question feels like a stab in the heart, but it shouldn't, considering I've been the one taking the steps toward a legal separation. I guess it's just different, hearing it from my husband.

"A part of me wants to," I admit, the sadness evident in my tone. "But another part just wishes for the simplicity of the past. I want what we had before you became so consumed with your hatred of Roxanne. I know you think she's the thing that ruined us, but you have to know that it's your actions that caused all this harm, Seb. Not her."

Seb's gaze remains fixed on mine, his eyes holding a mix of yearning and desperation. "What if that was possible?" he ventures, his voice hopeful. "What if we can work on our marriage? Repair what has been broken?"

A wistful smile tugs at my lips, overshadowed by reality. "Maybe."

Despite my answer, the bitterness of the past events are sacked against him. “If, of course, you manage to avoid ending up in jail first.” It's a half-hearted attempt at humor, and it doesn't exactly land the way I want it to.

I can't be here anymore, though. It's just too painful, seeing him there on the dock with our lake behind him. This was the wrong place to have this conversation, I realize. I hope I haven't tainted the good memories with this negative one now. Just as I'm about to turn away, Seb's hand gently closes around mine, halting my movement. “Julia?” His voice is a soft, desperate plea.

I look back at him, heart pounding, every cell in my body just wanting to fold myself against him. “Yes?”

“Can I...hug you?”

Oh no. This is exactly what I've been trying to avoid. I don't know if I'll be able to hang on to my resolve if we touch, but when I look at his face and see the naked vulnerability and need there, I simply can't deny him. With a hesitant nod, I give my consent.

His arms encircle me, pulling me close. The embrace is firm, but his shirt is soft against my cheek, his smell familiar and so wonderful. I can feel his heart beating quickly against mine, and his breath in my hair. As he holds me, I allow a few silent tears to escape, rolling down my cheek and dripping onto my blouse; I don't even bother wiping them away. I just want to let all of this sink in.

“I'm so sorry,” he whispers, gentle but remorseful. “You'll never know how sorry I am.”



*Sebastian*

THE VAN DEN BOSCH INDUSTRIES' building feels different today, which sounds bizarre, considering I spend so much of my life here. There's a melancholy hanging over me that I just can't shake. Coming here to meet with Karl and his attorney is unavoidable, but I've had a bad feeling about it all morning. After all, if his strategy consists of throwing me under the bus, I don't see how we can continue being friends or even how he can keep his job. Now, that negativity is manifesting by clouding my mind as I walk through the lobby area of the building.

It's impossible not to reflect on my humble beginnings here. My first day as an intern, working under my father's watchful eye. The office, at the time impressive, would now appear almost quaint, outdated compared to its current modern aesthetic. Still, reflecting on the way it used to be makes my chest tight.

God, was it all really so long ago? I can vividly recall the long hours, the tireless dedication, all driven by my unwavering ambition to make my father proud. Those days were filled with so many pivotal moments—the day I earned my first promotion, a defining achievement that had me standing taller in my suit, grateful for the opportunities I'd been given, and resolute in my determination to continue the family legacy. An admirable heir, a son to be proud of, an older brother to look up to...I'd give almost anything to go back and wear those monikers again.

There's a somber note to this journey down memory lane. The day of my

family's funeral, thrusting me into the role of CEO, the very position I occupy today. The weight of that responsibility was immense, and I knew that my every decision would shape the company's future. Struggling with my new position of power and my love for Julia that, at the time, was still problematic, made every day feel like some exhausting hell.

Not so much different from right now.

At one point, not too long ago, I saw myself handing my position over to Andries when he would be ready. That...is never going to happen, and I'm okay with it now, even if I wasn't in the beginning. Now I see Elise stepping into my position, the first female CEO of Van den Bosch Industries, brilliant and beautiful. My daughter will be perfect for the position—if everything gets straightened out and she decides to come back to work, that is.

I shake my head, hitting the button for the elevator. Thinking about the future is too self indulgent. I need to stick to what's happening right now—my meeting with Karl. It isn't a showdown, necessarily...I still hope we can resolve things peacefully. But there's always a risk with things like this, and I need to keep my head in the game.

As I get inside the lift that will take me all the way up to my floor, I take a deep breath, letting the memories of the past and the aspirations for the future fall away. I have to be present in every sense of the world. There's no room for weakness, no time for me to be indecisive. Getting Karl to accept the plea deal is one of the final things I have to do in my mission to save my family. I don't know whether it will be enough to get Julia to take me back but damn...I have to try.

Stepping onto the hallway and in direction to the boardroom where the meeting with Karl and his attorney will be held, my thoughts churn with worry and a sense of urgency that's difficult to shake. Karl's decision to go to court instead of accepting Gabi's settlement agreement is a grave concern, one that threatens to unravel everything. He wants me to suffer, I know that. I'm not a fool. Maybe it makes things feel more justified for him if I go down, too, but I don't have any plans on granting that wish.

I've always been fiercely protective of Van den Bosch Industries—knowing it's not just a company, but a legacy that's meant to be passed down through generations. I've strived to make my father proud, and now, I want to ensure my children, particularly Elise, have the opportunity to lead it into the future. It's a responsibility I take seriously, one that's been etched into my soul since my first day as an intern in this very building.

The risk of losing my job in court and going to prison is a thought that chills me to the core. Everything I've built, all of my accomplishments, hang in the balance. If Karl throws me under the bus, it could posit not only financial ruin but also the destruction of the Van den Bosch legacy I've worked tirelessly to protect. It doesn't matter if Karl and I share blood. He isn't part of this family, not really, and I refuse to give any part of my accomplishments over to him.

But there's another fear that gnaws at me, one that cuts deeper than the prospect of losing the company. It's the fear of Karl discovering the truth, the secret that my father carried to his grave and one that I am bound by honor and legacy to carry to my own. Karl is my half-brother, a fact known only to a select few, a secret that has the power to shatter the delicate equilibrium we've maintained for years. The scandal of it would be insurmountable, and it might mean that Karl is owed some of my father's legacy—inheritance, stakes in the company, I'm not sure. But I'll be damned if he gets it.

For the sake of the company, for the future of my children, I must convince Karl to take the plea deal. It's the only way to avoid the risk of exposing the truth and protect what truly matters. The weight of this decision, the fate of Van den Bosch Industries, and the preservation of our family's legacy rests on my shoulders. Potentially, at this very meeting.

To my astonishment, as I step inside the boardroom, I'm met with an unexpected sight. Karl is already seated at the table, flanked by his attorney. The tension in the room thickens as our eyes lock, and it's hard to ignore the feeling of betrayal that simmers beneath the surface. I didn't expect him to show his face, not with his new threat of taking me down with him in the courts. I guess he's not a coward, at least, but I can't say that the sight of him doesn't fill me with a sick sort of anger.

My mind drifts back to a time when Karl and I were younger, when he and I were in our thirties, full of dreams and aspirations. Back then, he was genuinely in love with life, grateful for every opportunity our father had provided. I remember the pride I felt watching him grow, seeing the potential in him.

But things have changed drastically. Karl's life took a different turn, marred by divorces, womanizing, and a general descent into the kind of person I've always tried not to be. I wonder if things would have been different if he'd known the truth about our father, about the legacy he was born into. Could that knowledge have steered him towards a better path? It's a

question that haunts me, even now.

Still, I wouldn't trade a change in Karl for my own children's inheritance. Letting him become who he has become was a necessary sacrifice.

Fortunately, my attorney doesn't take long to arrive, for which I'm grateful. As we take our respective seats and exchange formal greetings with Karl and his lawyer, I feel a profound sadness for the brother he once was and the things that lay in the future for him. Our destinies have diverged so dramatically, and it's clear that any hope of reconciliation is a distant dream. The weight of our shared history, both the known and the hidden, hangs heavily in the room, suffocating the air between us.

After settling into my chair, my own attorney beside me, Karl's lawyer scrutinizes the legal documents spread across the polished oak table silently, but my own lawyer is motionless as he waits for things to commence. Karl doesn't look nervous, even though I think that he should. He looks indifferent—aloof, even. I wonder if it's just a mask, or if he really has so little emotion for this entire situation.

“So, Karl,” I begin, unable to keep this silent charade going. My body's tight with restrained frustration, but I have got to get this out of my chest. “How come you haven't signed the settlement the prosecutor gave you? Five years isn't that much time, and by then, everything would be forgotten.”

Karl responds with a casual shrug, as though the prospect of serving time in prison is nothing more than a minor inconvenience. “Well, that was the idea before consulting my attorney. But he figures that it isn't fair for me to go down alone, and the more that we talked about it, the more I agreed. It isn't fair.”

“Karl, come on,” I try to lighten my tone, to put him more at ease if possible. “I didn't know she had a cabaret, I didn't place the drugs there, I didn't do any of it. What justice is there in making me suffer for things I didn't do? It would just weigh on you, not make you feel any better. You're a better man than that.”

Karl laughs out loud at this: one loud bark that holds no humor. “Both of us know better than that, Seb. Neither of us are good men. I think your little foray with that stripper proved that.”

The audacity of his statement nearly leaves me speechless. I can feel my temper flaring, threatening to erupt in a torrent of anger. I take a deep breath, attempting to maintain composure. I didn't anticipate Karl's stubbornness, especially after all we've been through.

I turn to my attorney, silently urging him to intervene and resolve this deadlock. My lead attorney, a seasoned professional with a knack for negotiating, senses my mounting frustration. He takes over, his words calculated and persuasive, seeking to break through Karl's unwavering stance.

All I can hear is blood rushing in my ears, leaving me with my thoughts once more. Dwelling on hypotheticals is a futile exercise at this point. The choices Karl and I have made, our respective paths in life, have brought us to this precarious juncture. Except...that isn't the whole truth. It was my father's choices, and Karl's mother's choices, that set this whole thing in motion. I wonder if either of them would consider their little affair worth it if they could see where it has led their sons now.

As the negotiation drags on, I'm more anxious than ever about Karl discovering our hidden lineage. My father's dying wish was for the truth to remain buried, and it's a responsibility I've carried with unwavering resolve. If I want this company to remain a legacy for my children, led by Elise, I must convince Karl to accept the plea deal. It's the only way to protect our family's name and the empire we've built. This thought plays on repeat in my head, constantly, over and over again. I have to find a way to make this work.

The negotiations in the boardroom continue to escalate, and it's becoming increasingly clear that Karl is determined to drag me down with him. My attorney attempts to steer the conversation toward a more amicable resolution.

"My client is prepared to bargain with you, Karl." My lawyer speaks in a controlled and courteous manner. "If you agree to the settlement and plead guilty to the accusations made against you, he can provide you with a very significant indemnity. You wouldn't even need to work anymore."

Karl's lawyer is just as determined to have it his way. "My client won't serve his prison sentence by himself. If he falls, Sebastian falls with him," he responds, echoing what Karl had said previously.

Despite my attorney's attempts to take control of the situation, I feel compelled to speak up once more. There's an underlying belief, perhaps irrational, that there exists a connection between Karl and me, a bond that might compel him to reconsider.

"I'm sure there's *something* you want, Karl," I suggest, searching for the answer in his dark, brown eyes. "Something I can provide in exchange for ending this ordeal. Let's find a way to make all of this go away."

My attorney shoots me a stern look, a silent plea to let him handle the

negotiations. The energy in the room crackles as Karl's audacious proposal hangs in the air. Karl's attorney leans back in his chair and looks at his client, raising his eyebrows at Karl and giving him the opportunity to speak.

Karl remains resolute, his eyes locked onto mine as if he's daring me to challenge him. "I'm not interested in more money, Seb. Five years is a long time in jail and no money can buy me the time I will lose there," he says, his tone even and resolute. His determination sends a shiver down my spine. Fuck, why won't he crack? Does he have any idea the amount of money I would gift him right now to make this go away?

My attorney steps in, trying to coax Karl with the prospect of a reduced sentence. "I'm sure we can talk to the prosecutor and get you only two years behind bars, three maximum, and then do the rest in home detention."

I steal a glance at Karl, trying to gauge his reaction, but his expression remains inscrutable.

"And, in exchange, my client agrees to give you two million euros," my attorney adds, looking at both Karl and his own attorney, searching for an hint of reaction in their gaze. But the duo remains just as stoic. "It's a very generous offer. One million per year you spend behind bars."

After long seconds, Karl sighs and shakes his head. "I already told the both of you that I'm not interested in money."

My jaw works as I respond, "So what the hell do you want then, Karl?"

"If you can reduce it to two years in jail and the rest in home arrest with the prosecutor, as your lawyer says, I can do that," he tells me, his voice steady.

I sit forward, more than ready to agree to this, but he isn't done.

Not by a long shot.

"In exchange for leaving you out of this, Seb, once I'm done serving my time...I want to be named CEO of the company." Karl's proposition slices through my thoughts like a dagger. The room becomes an echo chamber of silence as his demand hangs in the air, all at once shifting the balance of power.

"What?" I snap in disbelief, my jaw dropping as I absorb the gravity of his request. I can hardly believe what I'm hearing. The idea of Karl assuming the role of CEO of Van den Bosch Industries is not only preposterous but a direct threat to everything I've strived for.

"You can become chairman," Karl continues, as if this is a reasonable proposition. "Just like your father did when you took over." My anger surges,

eclipsing any doubt or hesitation. I can't let this happen. "I think it's totally doable and a fair deal."

"You are totally out of your mind!" I exclaim, outraged. Was this deal his attorney's idea? In what world would I ever consider handing my position over to Karl? Absolutely not. It's an impossibility.

I can't sit still. Karl's ridiculous demand to become CEO gnaws at me, and I find myself jumping out of my seat, pacing the boardroom, hands clenching and unclenching. Like an out of control teenager, I want to hit something, break it under my fists until I feel in control again.

"I don't see why. I'm the head of sales, I've poured over two decades of my life into this company, mastering every facet of it, helping it grow." While I'm burning of rage inside, Karl sounds completely calm, hands folded on the table in front of him as he continues trying to rationalize his outrageous request.

My patience wears thin, and fire simmers beneath my skin. "This company, Van den Bosch Industries, is a family legacy. The CEO position is reserved for a Van den Bosch—my birthright. I've dedicated my life to this business, Karl. So no, I won't be agreeing to that nonsense."

But what Karl utters next sends a chilling shiver down my spine and freeze instantly.

"Ah yes, a family legacy..." Karl starts, his tone filled with irony. "Speaking of which..." he leans back in his chair, a sly grin forming on his lips. "You wouldn't object to a little blood test, would you?"

I halt in my tracks, stunned by his audacity. A blood test? How in the world could he have any inkling of the secret of his paternity? I've kept it close to my chest for decades. Now, the only living people who know about it are Karl's mother, Margaret, Julia, Alex, Andries, and myself.

Karl's attorney seizes upon the moment of silence in the room, his fingers drumming nervously on the polished table. "My client has reason to believe that you two might share more than just a business relationship. He suspects you share the same bloodline."

As the seconds tick away, I realize that this moment could reshape not only the company but also the foundations of my life. I've spent so many years protecting this secret that having it out in the open air makes my stomach roll. I pause in my pacing, gripping the back of one of the leather chairs as tightly as I can, trying to keep myself in check. It feels like the room is spinning.

Then, like a strike of lightning, the panic that his words brought disappears, replaced by something much more powerful. Fury surges within me, and I can't hold back any longer. "You're out of your damn mind! You son of a bitch! Don't even try that shit on me! Just because my dad treated you well doesn't mean—"

My words crash against Karl and his attorney, but before I can unleash my full anger, my own attorney interjects, seeking to defuse the explosive situation. "Calm down, Seb! There's no need for that kind of language. Let's not escalate this unnecessarily. Besides, maybe Karl has something to offer in this role."

Karl, once more wearing a smug expression, nods slowly. "Exactly. If you want me to take the fall and go to jail while you continue living the high life, then make me CEO in return. Give me a handsome compensation package, toss in some equity, and we can strike a deal."

What the fuck is he thinking? Five years behind bars, and then he waltzes back into the company as CEO, reaping the rewards of my years of dedication and hard work? It's preposterous. This isn't just about me; it's about the future of Van den Bosch Industries, the legacy my father entrusted to me. Handing the reins to a criminal like Karl would shatter our reputation and jeopardize everything I've worked for, not to mention the inevitable backlash from Elise and the rest of the family.

And now my attorney is starting to agree with him...what in the hell is happening to me right now? This is the worst possible deal, and I can't believe anyone in this room is even considering it. I'm painfully aware that I'm cornered, faced with an excruciating choice: betray my principles and the Van den Bosch legacy or let Karl's recklessness destroy everything we hold dear.

*Maybe something terrible can happen to him in jail*, a sinister inner voice suggests. But no, I can't do that, as much as I hate him right now, I can't hurt the man that has always been there for me. He's the only sibling I've got left, for better or for worse. I might be able to reconcile letting him go to jail, but having him killed? It'd destroy any semblance of honoring my father's last wishes completely.

"What if you become COO? Or chief commercial officer?" I offer, barely masking my frustration. God, this can't be real. Even forcing the words out of my mouth is a struggle.

Karl remains implacable, looking calm and collected, his eyes locked



onto mine. “No, that won’t work. I want the top role. That’s not negotiable.”

A wry, bitter laugh escapes my lips. “And if I refuse, I assume we’ve got to go to court, and you’ll tell the judge I’m your accomplice? You’re a joke, Karl. All these years we’ve known each other...”

Sensing that this is more personal than they imagined, I can see the attorneys fidgeting out of the corner of my eyes. Karl’s idly taps his pen on the legal pad in front of him, creating an irritating rhythm. Meanwhile, mine shuffles papers on the table, his jaw tight. We’ve gone far off the rails, but it’s too late to take any of it back now.

“I’ll tell them the honest truth. You were the one who urged me to sabotage Roxanne’s cabaret in order to harm her reputation. You hired me to end your son’s engagement to her because you wanted to, not because I forced your hand. All I want is for you to own the things you did, Sebastian, with you right alongside me,” Karl points out, his voice sinister and low.

I’m so tense that the muscles in my legs are aching. I pull a chair out and all but throw myself into it, gripping the edge of the conference table, my knuckles turning white. This is a nightmare, and there’s no waking up. I can’t even look at Karl, my own fucking brother, right now, knowing how easy it was for him to betray me again and again. He’s so willing to take everything from me, just for his own personal gain.

Karl’s demand rings in my ears like a never-ending warning of disaster. Make criminal, disgraced Karl Townsend CEO...it’s a bargain that drags me into the void like an anchor.

“When do we need to give you an answer?” My attorney’s words are measured, his face a stoic mask of professionalism. I can tell he’s trying to gauge my reaction, searching for any sign of me losing my cool once more.

Karl’s attorney reclines in his chair, a twisted grin of satisfaction playing on his lips. He’s reveling in this moment, enjoying my discomfort. “Before the first hearing, which is scheduled for next week,” he responds, his tone dripping with self-assuredness. “If we get a deal by then, Karl will keep Sebastian out of the story and assume full responsibility.”

“Fine. Very well. We’ll be in touch.” My attorney extends a hand to Karl’s attorney, a diplomatic gesture of goodwill. They shake hands, but behind my back, my clenched fists tell a different story.

Finally, they’re leaving. I don’t realize I’ve been holding my breath until they are finally gone. Rising, I walk slowly, feeling twice my age, as I look out the large windows overlooking Amsterdam. The cityscape below is just a

chaotic blur.

Once they are gone, my attorney closes the door behind him, and finally breaks the silence. I can feel the intensity of his words before they even hit me. "I know how terrible this all sounds."

Terrible doesn't even begin to cover it. It's the kind of deal that could ruin everything. How can I go to my wife, my kids, and tell them that I've given up everything that is supposed to be the family's inheritance, without a real fight? They will never be able to look at me the same. "It's the worst deal ever, you mean. I can't accept that...."

The mere thought of it makes my blood boil. Meekly stepping aside to allow Karl, of all people, to ascend to the highest office in our company? It's so wrong that it almost makes me laugh. I don't think I could look a single board member in the eye if I did something that stupid, that out of character. So, I stand here, my back rigid, my jaw clenched, torn between having my name dragged through the mud in court or turning over the company.

My attorney's voice pierces through my inner turmoil again. "So you'd rather go to court and get jail time? Come on, Sebastian, I know you're trying to reconcile things with your wife, and going to jail is not going to help you in any way. You'd basically be losing the company then, too. If you let Karl be CEO, at least you'll still get to be on the board and chairman...."

It's a horrifying prospect, and I shudder at the idea. Jail is a place where no Van den Bosch should ever set foot. But the alternative is a bitter, humiliating pill to swallow.

"Maybe I won't..." I mutter under my breath, my mind racing with a thousand scenarios and consequences.

My attorney's words are pragmatic, devoid of the emotional turmoil churning within me. "Unlikely. You have a strong motive, and you are very close to Karl. I'm pretty sure he's got evidence that you were involved in that crime or else they wouldn't have made the threat in the first place. Plus, your reputation in the media isn't exactly rosy right now."

Fuck...he's not wrong, as much as I hate to admit it. There's the text messages I sent to Elise, that alone will show that I was quite aware of what was going on. It's true; my proximity to Karl during those fateful events gives him ample ammunition to drag me down with him. He's ready to bring me crashing down, but for what? I've protected him so many times, he had to have known that it wouldn't last forever.

I let out a bitter, humorless laugh. "So what do you suggest? That I make

him, a convicted criminal CEO?”

“I understand that’s not an easy decision...but you have to make one. And we don’t have much time.”

I sigh, a deep, gut-wrenching sigh that seems to echo through the room. The weight of the decision is a crushing burden, and I know there's no easy way out. “I need some time alone.”

With that said, my attorney nods in understanding, and quietly leaves the room, turning on his heels without saying another word.

Alone in this room, my mind is a storm, raging as I think about my family's future. The heritage I have a responsibility to preserve, and the dreadful secret I've kept for so long.

How long has Karl been harboring this suspicion about sharing the same father with me? It's a question that gnaws at my mind like a relentless parasite, digging deeper with each passing second. Had he always coveted the CEO position, waiting for the right moment to strike? I find myself drowning in a sea of questions, and I can't seem to catch my breath.

So...what do I do? What are my options? I take a seat again and close my eyes, breathing deeply. If I can just have some time to think, just some peace, maybe I can untangle all of this mess.

The first option is unacceptable—simply giving in to Karl’s demands. It’s the easiest option to preserve my reputation and keep my name out of the media. It also keeps my connection with Karl and his crime to a minimum, but people aren’t stupid. After he’s released, and I turn the CEO position over to him, the world will know I made some sort of deal with him. There’s no other way I would turn the company over to someone like him, half-brother or not.

I could just let Karl force me into court, and face prison time. Like Karl, I likely would only serve a short time before being released for good behavior. It’s wild that this is the most palatable option right now, but a few years in prison to keep Karl quiet...it might just be worth it. But who will be the CEO while I’m gone? Jail isn’t an option either.

On the other hand, though, there’s no guarantee that he won’t simply wait until he’s out of jail to expose me. It would be too late for me to be charged with anything, but it might just destroy my family completely to be torn apart in the media like that.

Blackmail like this isn’t something I’m unfamiliar with in general, but it’s something I’ve never had aimed at myself. This thought makes me pause, and

I sit up straighter, opening my eyes. Normally, there'd be no way in hell I'd consider it but...maybe I have someone that can get me out of trouble closer than I think: the woman I still suspect killed my mother and siblings—my mother-in-law, Margaret van Dieren. She's the most ruthless, cunning person I know.

Fuck...it's such a crazy idea that it just might work! Asking Margaret for help will feel like paying in blood, but at this point, the people Margaret hurt are long gone. Julia and our children are still here, and Margaret will do anything to protect them. Anything. And I'm pretty sure that includes helping me.

The thought of reaching out to that woman, of all people, fills me with a profound sense of dread. She's one of the few individuals in this world I can honestly say I despise. Everything she does, every word that leaves her mouth, chills me. I don't trust her, but damn...she is effective.

A cold realization dawns upon me. If Karl is a snake, then I need an even bigger snake by my side. Someone who can navigate the darkest alleys of power, who knows how to strike when it matters most. Margaret, in all her malevolence, is that cobra lurking in the shadows, ready and willing to devour those standing in her way. So all I have to do is put Karl Townsend in her way.

I'm horrified by the idea of relying on her, but desperate times call for desperate measures. The weight of Karl's betrayal, the threat to my family's legacy—it's all too much for me to bear alone. In a world where loyalty is a luxury, I need an ally who's willing to play the game as ruthlessly as Karl.

Whether Margaret likes it or not, her daughter is my wife, and her grandchildren are my children. Helping me is helping them. Which means she'll do it. If I have to dance with the devil herself to ensure my family's future, then so be it.

Dialing her number, I wait for her to answer with my heart in my throat. When she does, her greeting is cool and smooth. "Sebastian. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I can't say over the phone. Can you meet me at the estate library at six?"

There's a surprised pause, but she recovers quickly. "You sound serious, so yes, I'll be there. Have tea ready."

\* \* \*

A few hours later, and I find myself sitting across from my mother-in-law in the library, the very same room she blackmailed my father years ago. The heavy, ornate curtains are drawn, filtering the afternoon sunlight to a dim, eerie glow. This feels like a conversation that should be hidden from the world.

The room exudes an air of old-world opulence, with mahogany bookshelves lined with leather-bound volumes, antique furniture, and oil paintings of stern-looking ancestors hanging on the walls. In the winter, with the fireplace lit and a glass of port in my hand, it's one of my favorite places to unwind. Now, though, it's a battleground.

A silver tea platter sits on a polished mahogany table between us. Margaret, always one for power plays, arrived before me, deliberately attempting to set the tone that she's the one in control. But I'm all too familiar with her manipulations, and it won't work on me this time. I stop for a moment, taking in Margaret's presence. Time has only made her appear more dangerous, her sharp features and piercing eyes telling tales of years spent mastering the art of power. Her face is more lined than it was back then, when she threatened my father, but each one of those lines only marks more time that she's been able to get smarter, and more effective at what she does.

I dismiss the butler and serve my mother-in-law tea myself. After handing her the cup, she gestures for me to take a seat in an armchair, while she herself settles gracefully on the couch. Silently telling me where to sit in my own home...this woman will never cease to grate on my every nerve.

The subdued lighting casts intriguing shadows across her face, making her appear even more formidable. I comply and sit, trying not to reveal the discomfort I feel being in such close quarters with her.

"I'm quite surprised of all the people you would want to talk to, you chose me," Margaret points out, a sly smile playing on her lips.

I reciprocate with a faint, ironic smile of my own. "I surprised myself by calling you, too. It wasn't a decision that I took lightly, I promise you that."

The silence hangs for a moment, heavy with unspoken memories and dislike. I take a sip of the tea, its warmth providing some comfort. Entangling myself with Margaret isn't exactly an enjoyable experience, but I know her and what drives her. Karl has proven, quite rapidly, to be a mystery.

Better the enemy you know, I guess.

I'm running out of options and time. It's a strange twist of fate that brings me to this point, seeking assistance from Margaret, but I'm thankful that she

answered my summons.

I break the silence, finally sharing the weight of my troubles with her. “I had a meeting with Karl today. As you probably know, Gabi pressed charges against him and gave him the option to sign a settlement giving him five years behind bars, but Karl intends going to court and drag me along instead. He’s determined not to go down alone.”

Margaret listens intently, her gaze fixed on me. It's unsettling how her demeanor can shift from jovial to calculating in an instant.

“Yes, Julia mentioned that charges were being filed. Did you try talking to him?” she inquires, her tone betraying a hint of curiosity. “The two of you have historically been close, from what I recall.”

“I did, yes,” I say, hesitating briefly before continuing. “In order for him to change his tune regarding that settlement, he wants to become CEO once he gets out of jail. He also mentioned he wanted to do a blood test to find out if we are related. It seems like he’s suspicious that we share the same father. Do you have anything to do with that, Margaret?”

She leans back, sitting her teacup down on the side table with a clatter and steepling her fingers thoughtfully. “I do not,” she responds, her eyes locked onto mine. “There is nothing for me to gain in making that knowledge public. What I do know, though, is that his mother knows who the father is, so it's very likely that it was her who told him. It was asinine for Johannes to believe that a mother would keep that secret from her son forever.” She tilts her head to the side thoughtfully. “But, I guess he proved that he was a fool anyway, getting himself into that position in the first place. So it’s no wonder he was silly enough to believe her.”

I feel a knot tighten in my chest. Karl's suspicion about our shared lineage is a dangerous variable in an already complicated situation. As I look at Margaret, it's clear that whatever her intentions may be, she is holding cards...but she isn't the one that clued Karl in. She's telling the truth.

“Can we not use this opportunity to speak badly about my father? It serves no purpose.” My agitation bubbles over as I stand to pace the room, my teacup clinking softly against the mahogany table as I set it down. My hands, once composed, now clasp behind my back as I struggle to convey the urgency of the situation.

“Fine by me,” she mutters before bringing the cup up to her lips to give another sip.

“The thing is,” I begin, lowering my voice as I take a seat beside

Margaret on the plush couch. Leaning closer, I feel a sense of desperation creeping in. What I'm about to ask her...there's no coming back from it. "I assume you know how to make people disappear without a trace."

Margaret arches one impeccably groomed eyebrow, her gaze locked onto me, unwavering. "And why would you think that?"

Grief rolls over me, unexpected in its intensity, as I remember the tragedy I've long suspected Margaret orchestrated. "Well, no one ever managed to uncover who tampered with my car," I admit, trying to hold the decades-old devastation of loss inside. "So I presume you're familiar with the right people for such a task, considering that you've pulled it off before."

A delicate, mocking laugh escapes Margaret's lips, aggravating me further. She finds amusement in my suffering, as if my pain is a mere joke. "Oh Sebastian, you really still believe that I'm guilty of orchestrating the car explosion?"

"There's no one else who could have been behind it," I reply right back. A headache is starting to build behind my eyes at her denial.

Margaret's amusement fades, replaced by a stark seriousness. "While I have made people disappear out of thin air, I can assure you the car accident that took the life of your siblings and Mother wasn't of my doing."

I look at Margaret, trying to decipher what I see here in the dim light. She's *still* denying it...it's hard to stomach. After all these years she can't even offer me the truth. Her denial about the car incident is frustrating, but I can't shake the feeling that she might know more than she's letting on.

"Why are you lying? I'm not going to go and report you to the police," I tell her, trying to sound as honest as I can. "If that had been my plan, why wouldn't I have done it back when the accident first occurred?"

She shakes her head slowly, always poised. "I'm not the one in denial here. I can assure you it wasn't me."

The headache grows, the pressure behind my eyes getting harder to bear with each passing second. "So if it wasn't you, then who would go to such extremes?" I ask, trying to piece together the puzzle.

Margaret leans in closer, her eyes never leaving mine. God, it's hard to imagine that this woman is the mother of my kind, loving Julia. "Well...let's think of who might have something to gain by murdering you, dear." As I mull over her statement, she keeps quiet for a moment, leaning back on the couch, her eyes still on me. "Maybe someone who might want to become CEO at Van den Bosch Industries?"

I pause, my mind racing to catch up with the revelation. “Wait...you aren't saying that Karl would have tried to kill me all those years ago?” The eventual scenario sounds totally improbable, but the mere thought of it sends shockwaves through me.

“As I said before, it wasn't me,” Margaret replies calmly. “But Karl knew you were going out of the country and obviously knew which car you drove. If he already knew back then about his true lineage, then removing you would make him—”

I finish her sentence, frozen with disbelief. “The oldest son.”

The weight of that revelation hits me like a ton of bricks. Karl, my friend, my half-brother, was willing to go to such lengths to secure his position in the company. Shaken doesn't even begin to describe what I'm feeling right now. It's almost impossible to believe that being the oldest child of Johannes Van den Bosch would have meant so much to Karl that he would try to kill me. And if that's the truth, that means the bond that we've formed over the years is nothing but a lie.

It also means that, in my heart, I've been blaming my mother-in-law for murders that she didn't commit...but that's a problem for another time.

“See? It wasn't that hard to get there,” Margaret says, her words laced with a touch of amusement.

Despite how horrible the idea of Karl being the killer is, I'm a little in awe at the twisted logic of it all. “But even if he had become the oldest son, he could've never gotten the title and estate, right? I mean, he is a bastard child—never recognized by my father.” I try to reason, desperately clinging to some semblance of normalcy.

Margaret's response is chilling in how clear cut it is. “As far as I know, that changed with the Nobility Act of 1994. Now, even children born out of wedlock can inherit nobility titles.”

The room feels like it's spinning, just like it did back at the office. I rub my hand over my chest, distantly wondering how many more shocks my heart can take today. Karl, my half-brother, could have legitimately changed his surname and claimed his rightful place in our family. That changes...a lot of things. And it makes Karl even more dangerous than he was before.

Struggling to come to terms with the magnitude of what it implies, I close my eyes and pinch the bridge of my nose, hoping to ward off the migraine that now seems imminent. “So, hold on, you mean he could've really changed his surname and been recognized as the legitimate heir to the Van den Bosch



estate, our nobility title, and the company itself?”

“I'm afraid so,” Margaret confirms.

My mind races, trying to piece together this intricate puzzle. Could Karl's desperation to become CEO have driven him to these extremes? Was he willing to eliminate me to secure his place as the heir? The truth is more convoluted and sinister than anything I could have ever imagined. Compared to something that dark, Margaret suddenly seems less diabolical. The real enemy might have been right in front of me all along.

“He was so close to my dad back then,” I muse aloud. “Hell...maybe you are right...maybe he knew all along about his true lineage despite everyone thinking otherwise. But why would he keep it to himself for so long?”

Margaret, always two steps ahead it seems, calmly offers her explanation. “Well, because that would give him motive to be suspect number one in that car explosion, don't you think?”

Her words hang heavy in the air as I rise once more to pace the room, my hands buried deep in my pockets. It all makes sense, the pieces fitting together seamlessly, but I can't help but recall memories of Karl and me throughout the years. I remember the way he looked up to my father, the bond they shared, and how he was always a part of the big decisions at the company. The memory of Karl being the first one to visit my dad after his heart attack, right beside me at his hospital bed, where I later made a solemn promise to my father to take care of Karl. I've always thought of that one gesture, coming to see my father when he was so ill, as a sign that deep down, Karl is a good man. But if Margaret is right, then that visit wasn't kindhearted. It was just more manipulation...just another tactic to try and replace me when the time came.

God, I don't know how much longer I can do this. How many times can a single man get his heart torn from his chest before it just becomes too much? I feel like I'm falling apart inside, my emotions threatening to consume me. But I can't afford to show weakness in front of Margaret. I must maintain my composure. She already hates me, and I don't want to give her the satisfaction of knowing that Julia chose a weak man for a husband after all.

“But what proof do we have? This is a theory at best,” I finally say, expressing my doubts, more to myself than anyone else.

Margaret, sipping her tea, takes a moment to ponder the situation. Her sharp, calculating eyes sweep the room as she formulates her response. Then, with an air of quiet certainty, she offers a potential lead. “Did Johannes sign

any sort of deals with Ms. Townsend? I'm pretty sure he must have done so."

I recall the countless hours my father spent in this very room, conducting business deals and safeguarding family secrets. "Eh, I assume he did," I tell her slowly, the gears in my mind turning over. "But he never told me where that document is. Why would he?"

"Men are creatures of habit, my dear." Margaret finishes her tea and stands, straightening her skirt. "Johannes might have placed it somewhere he believed was hidden, but there will be record of it somewhere. All you have to do is look. If I were you, I'd call your father's attorney and ask him, he must know where that document is. Find it, and you shall find some answers. For now, though, I'm going to take my leave, if there isn't anything else you need from me, that is."

A million things could be said right now. Margaret didn't kill my mother, brother, and sister. All these years...no. There isn't time to delve into that right now. Later, once things with Karl are settled.

"No Margaret...that will be all. Ah...thank you—" I start, but she holds up her manicured hand.

"Don't. We'll talk soon, Sebastian. Have a good evening."

After Margaret's departure, I'm left with a sense of urgency that pulses through my veins. Time is of the essence, and every moment counts. Margaret was correct in her point that my father was a creature of habit, and as such, there is one man that he would always speak to before drawing up legal documents or other things of that nature. He doesn't work for us anymore, but Willem was a devoted employee for many years. If anyone knows where the agreement between my dad and Karl's mother would be, it's him.

With a deep breath, I retrieve my phone and dial Willem's number. It's a long shot, but it's all I have to go on. The retired family attorney is about to become an unwitting participant in this twisted game, and I can hear his surprise as he answers my call.

"Sebastian, my boy, it's been ages. I hope everything is alright." Willem's warm, familiar voice carries a hint of curiosity.

"I need your help, Willem," I tell him straight away, my tone as determined as ever.

"Of course. What can I do for you?"

"I really need to know where the settlement agreement my father signed with Karl's mother is located."

A stunned silence fills the line for a moment, and I can almost picture the old attorney's raised eyebrows. "How did you—"

"Please, Willem," I interject, firm but pleading. "This is important, and time is running out. Where is it?"

After a reluctant sigh, Willem relents. He guides me step by step, over the phone, to the back of the library to my father's old wooden desk. As I stand before the heavy, imposing thing, I feel like I'm on the precipice of something that might finally shift the tides in my favor. I follow Willem's instructions to press the concealed button under the lip of the desk, and there is a thunk as the bottom left drawer unlocks.

With a soft click, the previously locked drawer slides open with the slightest pull. It reveals a file, neatly arranged and tucked away for decades. My heart pounds as I retrieve it, its contents more significant than I could have ever imagined.

"Well, I'll be damned...."

I open the file, and my eyes immediately fixate on the paternity test conducted in 1973—a time when Karl was likely just a helpless infant. The results are irrefutable, showing a staggering 99% match between Johannes and the baby. I never had any doubt about him being my brother after my father confirmed it, but if I did, this document would settle the matter completely.

As I continue to peruse the document, my heart sinks. The settlement details a financial arrangement: monthly payments from my father to Karl's mother, support for Karl's upbringing and education, and direct mentorship within the Van den Bosch business empire to secure his future fortune. In return, she and Karl are to renounce any claims to the noble title of Count and the Van den Bosch inheritance...and of course, keep his paternity a secret. Forever.

The truth rolls over me as I process everything that I'm reading. My father, a man I revered and looked up to my entire life, had orchestrated this elaborate ruse to secure Karl's future—a future that would have inevitably collided with mine. I've been, for decades now, a pawn in a game that began long before my time.

I can't help but voice my incredulity as I stare at the legal document before me. "Is this even legal, Willem? I've never seen an agreement like this in my life."

Willem's response is measured. "More or less," he admits with a sigh. "It

was a different time, Sebastian.”

Saying my goodbyes to our former lawyer, I close the file, a sense of melancholy mingling with the bitterness of betrayal. The secrets of my family, the choices made by my father, and the dark intentions hidden behind this document loom over me. There is no turning back now; the past has resurfaced, and the consequences are inescapable. If Karl had succeeded in eliminating me, he'd have undoubtedly risen through the ranks, poised to claim the coveted CEO position, and then claim everything he's entitled to thanks to that new nobility act I wasn't even aware of.

Pouring myself the glass of port that I fantasized about earlier, I call the butler to light the fire so I can settle down in front of it. Staring into the flames, I work at mentally connecting the dots. I contemplate the pivotal question that now hovers in my thoughts like a shadow: when did Karl discover the truth about his lineage? How long has he known that we are brothers?

More importantly, how could he know that we are related, and still seek to betray me so completely? Taking a long drink, I sigh, closing my eyes. It's been a long day, and now it's clearly going to be an even longer week.

*Sebastian*

THE HOME IS MODEST, but large, and frankly, quite lovely. From the street, far down the long driveway, it doesn't look as big as it really is. This Dutch farmhouse boasts a steeply pitched gable roof covered in clay tiles. Ivy gracefully adorns its aged brick walls, while a white picket fence encircles the property, full of old-world charm. Lavender-hued wisteria vines climb the walls, and trees covered with heavy foliage dip to obscure part of the building from view. Wide, elegant windows with wooden shutters illuminate the interior, complementing the soothing pastel hue of the facade. A stone pathway guides visitors to the wooden front door, adorned with potted flowers.

A maid, dressed in a pale blue uniform dress, greets me at the gate as if she is expecting me. My eye is keen, though, and I see the security cameras hidden in the eaves of the roof, identical to the ones stowed away out of sight in the trees at the front of the driveway. I'm not surprised that Karl would have a security system setup for his mother like this. She might be the only person in the world that he really cares about, if his recent behavior towards me and the revelation from Margaret is any indication.

"This way, Mr. Van den Bosch," the housekeeper gestures, opening the gate for me. Again, it's not unexpected that they already know who I am. Lately I've been in the news more than I've ever wanted to be, and my face has become pretty well known.

Plus, I'm sure Karl's mother has kept tabs on her son's brother/boss,

especially since his good fortune has rested on my shoulders for so long.

I follow the maid down the stone path, my hands shoved in my pockets, as she leads me to the back of the home. There, in the garden, wearing a yellow apron and matching gardening gloves, is Karl's mother. The woman, who looks to be in her seventies, is bent over just slightly pruning a flowering rhododendron, a large sun hat shielding her lined face. There's a quick catch in my chest—why is this woman still here, enjoying her golden years gardening, while my mother never got the chance? I shake my head to dispel the thought, and rock back on my heels as the maid announces my arrival.

“Ms Townsend, Sebastian van den Bosch is here to see you,” the maid chirps, as she stands beside me, a few feet behind her employer.

Lilian Townsend straightens, and tuns slowly to face us, her eyes wide in surprise as she removes her hat. “Oh, well now, this is certainly unexpected.” Although I came here without letting her know, there's some sarcasm in her tone as if she knew that sooner or later I would pay her a visit.

“Sorry to interrupt your afternoon, Ms. Townsend. Do you have some time? I only want to talk.”

She hesitates, looking me up and down, but finally gives a single nod. “Of course. Let's take this inside, shall we?”

Lilian passes me, moving to the backdoor and opening it with her maid following close behind. The older woman speaks quickly to the younger maid, low enough that I can't hear, and the maid departs quickly.

“Tea?” Lilian asks as I enter the charming kitchen with her. There are famed pictures of her and Karl on the wall, but no one else appears in the photos.

“Ah, yes,” I tell her after a second, as I remain standing by the doorway. “You have a nice home.”

She inclines her head, a small smile forming at the corner of her lips. “Thank you, dear. Karl bought it for me a little over twenty-two years ago.”

Politeness sours in me, and I can't help but say, “I know. Our father gave him a big fat bonus.”

Lilian putters about the kitchen, heating the tea kettle and pouring the steaming water into two large, white mugs. “Ah, so I assume you know all about the deal I made with Johannes?” She doesn't bother looking at me as she speaks. I'm not the only one who is already running out of social decorum, it seems. Given how silent I remain, she gives me a quick glance over her shoulder before returning to her tea preparation. “You look quite a

bit like him, you know. Much more than Karl.”

“Fitting since I’m his heir,” I drone, unamused by the veiled compliment. “And yes, I know about the deal. I’m sure that Karl does, too. My only question is, how long has he known?”

Lilian stiffens, but she doesn’t stop working, keeping her hands busy. I keep my distance for now, hovering in the doorway still.

“I’m afraid that it’s none of your business,” the older woman sniffs, still busying herself by the kitchen counter.

“Well, I’m afraid it *is* my business.” Now I approach her, and I know she can hear my footsteps on the polished wood floor. It’s clear her posture stiffens ever so slightly. “As I’m sure you’ve seen on television, the prosecutor has pressed charges against your son and he might go to jail for a long, long time.”

I watch a shudder roll over her shoulders, but her tone is just as cool as before. “Karl told me that he had a way to get out of facing any jail time and—”

I take her shoulder in my hand, feeling her bird like bones and being gentle yet firm as I force her to turn. To Lilian’s credit, she doesn’t look frightened of me. Instead, I see worry for her son on her face.

“We also have evidence that he was the one who killed my family,” I tell her, letting no anger or accusation filter through my voice. I want her to hear nothing but the cold, hard truth of it all.

Her hand flies to her chest as she gasps, “What? I beg your pardon!?”

“I think you heard me loud and clear, Ms. Townsend.”

“My son is not a murderer!” she insists, a flush coming to her cheeks as she takes a step back, releasing herself from my grip.

“I’m afraid that you’re wrong on that front.” I give one step in her direction, observing attentively her expression as it falls. I know I have her full attention now, and that she won’t turn away again.

She takes her mug in her hand, clicking her long, petal pink nails on the ceramic. Maybe to hide the fact that she’s shaking now, and I can hear the clink of one of her gold rings on the cup, too. Lilian ponders what I’ve just told her, keeping her lips pursed in a thin line, but offering me nothing. She dunks the teabag in the water and sips immediately, not even waiting long enough for the tea to permeate.

Knowing that she’s ready to listen, I continue, “The prosecutor can get him twenty years for the homicide of my family. It all depends on if you want

to cooperate with me or not.”

She makes a clicking sound with her tongue, waving a quivering hand dismissively. “What do I have anything to do with that? Why me? Why don’t you just talk to him?”

“That’s simple,” I tell her, taking my own tea mug in my hands. “Karl is in trouble and can’t see the forest for the trees. I think we both know that he is an intelligent man, but can make rash decisions. His anger has blinded him. I’m hoping his mom might be a little wiser.”

Sighing softly, she leans her weight on the counter behind her, sipping her tea once more. “About that, you’re not wrong.” Lilian thinks, and I give her time, walking the perimeter of the kitchen and looking at the pictures on the walls once more. There’s one picture of Karl as a boy, taken from a distance, that reminds me of Andries, and I turn away from it quickly. Family resemblance is not something I want to consider right now.

Finally, she speaks up, her voice almost quivering. “What do you want from me?”

“The truth. That’s all, Ms. Townsend.” She looks confused, so I clarify, “When did you tell your son the identity of his father?”

Lilian ponders a bit further, visibly undecided. “If I tell you, will you promise to keep Karl out of trouble?”

“I will,” I lie, but I keep my face just as stoic and she seems to believe it.

“Goodness, it’s so odd even talking about this out loud. It’s been a lifetime ago, you understand, so bear with me.” Lilian looks pale, and her free hand hovers nervously around her throat, but she tells me what I need to know. “I didn’t tell him. I never planned on doing so, whether you believe me or not. Karl found the agreement I signed with Johannes. I don’t know why he went to my room, or when, but he found those papers along with the paternity test we had done when he was a baby. Is that all?”

“When did he confront you about it, then?” Lilian turns her face away, clearly not wanting to answer. I grind my teeth, annoyed at her reluctance, but I have to remind myself that she’s an elderly woman who probably thought she’d never have to talk about these things again. I give her time, but seconds drag into minutes and my patience runs thin. I don’t mean to raise my voice, but I do. “Lilian, when!?”

“No need to yell.” She swallows, blowing out a breath. “Twenty-two years ago, right around the time when he gifted me this house. But he promised me that he would never tell you that he knew, and that he would



never go after your fortune. That was all part of the agreement I signed with Johannes and his attorney and we've always honored it."

"It's true that he hasn't gone after the Van den Bosch fortune, but he went after me. And he's still doing so to this day."

She's clearly upset, the corners of her mouth pulling down and her lower lip quivering, but no tears appear in Lilian's eyes. "Say what you want, but I'm sure my son is innocent."

Things are reaching a fever pitch, my temper brewing and Lilian looking ready to flee. This isn't how I wanted things to go, so I close my eyes and force myself to breathe deeply through my nose, exhaling slowly until the thrumming of my blood in my ears lessens and anger fades. It might have taken some convincing, but she's giving me everything I'm asking for so far. I can be kind to an old woman...I'm not a fucking monster.

There are other things I want to know from this woman that don't pertain at all to what's going on between Karl and I. She tore my parent's marriage apart from the inside...but in my world, affairs are almost expected for men of my father's standing. He never stopped loving my mother—his grief after her death proved that—but sleeping with Lilian produced Karl and that single decision is still threatening to destroy the family all these years later. But these questions don't piss me off like the ones pertaining to Karl and the court case, they just make me sad. Sad and extremely curious. Unfortunately, today my curiosity is getting the better of me.

"I know I shouldn't ask you that, but did you and my dad...you know..." I cough, feeling flustered and unable to finish the sentence.

Luckily, Lilian seems to know exactly what I'm asking. "Continue the affair?"

"Yes, something like that."

She shakes her head, gray curls bouncing. "No, your dad was very clear that we would never see each other again after the settlement had been signed." A far away look comes into her eyes. "It was nothing but a night gone wrong. I was just young and stupid."

It helps...a little bit, at least. "Thank you for telling me that, Lilian, I truly appreciate the honesty."

Lilian sets her teacup down and clasps her hands in front of her, that faraway look dissolving into the misty presence of tears. "What is going to happen to my son, Sebastian? Is he really going to jail?"

Internally, I cringe. I don't know what I expected to find here, but I didn't

anticipate a loving, devoted mother, and that was my mistake. Seeing how much Lilian obviously cares for Karl makes a little seed of guilt bloom in my stomach, but not enough to make me regret how I'm handling things.

“Yes, but it will only be five years, and more than likely he will serve half of it at home under house arrest.”

“Five years might not seem much to you, but at my age...” Lilian trails off.

Here's that guilty feeling again, but I push it away once more. “Listen, Lilian. I need you to persuade him not to go to court and to accept the deal we had made with the prosecutor. It's what will be best for everyone.”

Lilian frowns in confusion. “What deal was that, exactly?”

Now I'm the one taken off guard at her question. “He didn't tell you?”

Lilian shakes her head again, and there isn't a hint of subterfuge about her. She truly doesn't know. Hell...I didn't want to be the one to break this news to her, but here we are. “Your son wants to take over the company, Ms. Townsend. My family's company. And when I told him that only a Van den Bosch could take over that role, he told me he could do a blood test and prove that he, indeed, is one too. That's how I found out that he knew about his lineage. It was...a shock, to say the least.”

Her gasp is soft, and sad. “Oh, no. He promised me to never ever tell you about it and to honor the deal I made with Johannes...”

“Well, it sounds like he broke his promise.”

She opens her mouth to speak, but before any words come out, there is a knock at the door. It's brief, and I hear the maid scurrying in the other room to try and answer it, but the door creaks open before she can make it there.

“Mom?” a deep voice calls from the front of the house.

Lilian's head jerks towards the kitchen entryway, her hands once more fluttering around her throat anxiously. We both know who has arrived, and his timing is abysmal.

Karl enters the kitchen at a relaxed saunter, but when he sees me, his entire demeanor changes. Shock is the first thing he feels, staggering back a step and blinking a few times as if to make sure that it's really me. Then, when he's sure, he turns red with anger.

“What the hell are you doing here?” he demands, standing by the doorframe, before giving a few more steps towards us. “Did you come here to threaten my mom?”

Thankfully, Lilian has composed herself and makes her way over to her

son, standing on her toes to kiss him on the cheek. “Relax, dear. We were just talking. Sebastian knows, Karl. And he knows because you broke your promise.”

Karl’s face goes blank, the redness from his earlier rage bleeding away and leaving him pale. He looks like a deer in the headlights, frozen. “Mom... can you give Sebastian and I a moment alone?”

She hums in consideration, but after looking the two of us over and deciding that there is no violence about to occur in her kitchen, Lilian nods, wiping her hands on a tea towel. “I suppose. The both of you behave, you understand?”

Lilian leaves, and Karl looks chastised, almost like a little kid, and I have to suppress a laugh. It serves him right, the asshole.

Once we’re alone, though, the energy shifts, and everything now feels almost painfully awkward. Time stretches, and I can’t help but watch the way Karl shifts from foot to foot, totally adrift in this situation. It seems like I’m going to have to be the one to bear the weight of all of this and control the flow of the conversation once more. “I can’t believe that you pretended, for twenty-two damn years, that you didn’t know we were brothers.”

Karl just shrugs in return, making a genuine effort at looking nonplussed. “I promised Mom I’d never raise any suspicion,” Karl says, pausing for a beat as he mulls over his next set of words. “And to be honest, I didn’t know if you knew it or not. You have always treated me as a friend, but never as a brother. I never got invited to attend any of your family events, so I assumed you didn’t know.” His tone is tinged with a bitterness over everything, which annoys me.

“You really expected I’d invite you to family events? Like family dinners? Weddings? Funerals?” I chuckle at the whole thing, head shaking at his own delusion. “You were invited to a few funerals, if I remember correctly.”

“You know what I mean,” he fumes, clearly upset. “I didn’t want you to call it from the rooftops that I was your brother, but you could have done something, *anything*, to treat me a little more like family...to make me feel welcome.”

“Why would I do that?” I ask, totally shocked at his thought process. “When all you have ever wanted was to become CEO and get rid of me? Isn’t that the truth, Karl?” I bite back.

“It just...” Karl heaves a long sigh, rolling his eyes to look at the ceiling,

like he doesn't want to look me in the eye as he complains. Yet his tone isn't aggressive like mine, quite the contrary. "I did so much for the company; I worked on the expansion, on recruiting business partners all around the world, even from China..." He shrugs self-consciously, shoving his hands in his pockets.

"So you did your job? *And?* What am I supposed to glean from that?"

"I did so much more than you have ever done." His awkwardness shifts to angry frustration. "I thought maybe one day I'd get the recognition that I deserve. I worked so hard for it...and yet, since the death of our dad you've become distant, treating me with a coldness that wasn't there before. I thought you were just grieving and needed some space. That was until I noticed people getting promoted right and left, while I remained at the very same job for years."

I scoff. "What the hell are you talking about? You became the head of national sales just last year. I even invited you over to the estate, like you just said you wanted."

"Oh for fuck's sake!" Karl's tether on his own temper snaps, and his face twists in rage. "If it wasn't for your son pitching you the role of head of global sales, I'd have never been promoted to anything else after that. I've worked for you for decades...by now, I should have been C-level, Seb, not a fucking head of a sales department!"

Things start to clear up for me as he rages on. "So that's what this is all about? Revenge against me for not promoting you to C-level?"

He barks a cruel laugh. "Call it whatever you want, Sebastian. The time for negotiations about my place at the company, and in your family, is long passed. There's a price to pay now if you want to save yourself."

"Oh, and that price is my title of CEO? My birthright? Do you think you're the only one that's worked hard? The only one that suffered? I lost my family, my father—"

"He was my father too, you know." Karl bites out the words, and they make me snap my jaw shut. He's not wrong, but I refuse to consider that he might have shared in even a fraction of the grief I've felt.

I let my voice lower now, though, lacing it with at least a little bit of empathy. "Be that as it may, I can't nominate a criminal as the CEO, Karl."

Karl shakes his head, heaving a long sigh at my response. "Then I'm afraid we are going to share the same cell, *brother.*"

I'm done with this. Done wasting my time with this conversation, and

done trying to talk to someone who refuses to listen. If I'm right, and Karl took most of my family from me, then I don't owe him a damn thing. "Maybe we will. That's yet to be seen, but I'm sure we'll find out soon."

With that, I leave. There's nothing else to be discussed. I pass Lilian on the way out, thanking her for her hospitality, and striding down the driveway to my car before Karl can get his second wind and restart the argument.

The only thing to do now is get Gabi on my side and convince her that there is a real reason to press charges against Karl for the homicide of my mother, sister, and brother. All I'm lacking is evidence, and if I manage to find some, it will change everything.

Back in the car, I start the ignition and pull away, getting a mile or so down the road when my phone rings over the Bluetooth connection. I answer the call, pressing the button to pick up on the steering wheel, and my butler's voice comes over the sound system.

"Sir, I thought you might want to know that your wife is here to see the children. I wanted to give you a forewarning in case you wanted to talk to her."

This information gives me a little bit of light on this dark, miserable day. There's no better time to fill her in on everything that I know, and the prospect of seeing Julia makes me feel warmer inside than I have in days. "Yes, in fact, I do want to speak to her. Please tell her that I'd like to have dinner with her...I have news that I think she will be very interested in."

*Julia*

BEING HOME IS...STRANGE, to say the least, but not nearly as strange as I thought it would be. It's heartbreaking, of course, but at the same time, there is an odd sort of comfort in knowing that I can walk through these doors and be here without panicking and fleeing.

I'm being dramatic...nothing could ever make me afraid to be at the place that I've lived and made my own for so many years. But there is one fear, of course, and that's running into my husband. I came to see the kids, but there's a little piece of me that is excited to see him too, even if I shouldn't be.

So when I realize he isn't here, my stomach drops, and I can't hide the disappointment on my face, so much so that Aleida pulls on my dress and asks, "Mommy, are you okay?"

I force a smile on, leaning down to kiss the soft hair on the crown of her head. "Of course, sweet girl. I've just got a little bit of a bellyache, is all."

We go outside to play in the sunshine, Arthur's little hand held in mine as the older kids rush out into the grass. Hannah is already there, stretched out on the lounge in leggings and a crop top, soaking in the early autumn warmth while it sticks around.

Joris and Aleida blow past her into the yard, and I smile when the teen holds her hand up, without even glancing from her phone, and both younger kids give her a passing high five as they run. Hannah is a good sister, even if she wants to pretend otherwise.

I pull a chair up next to Hannah, the legs of it scraping against the stone

patio, and take a seat while Arthur gathers his rolling car and truck toys, displaying them to me one by one before rolling them happily around in a game all of his own.

“How was your week, love?” I ask Hannah, reaching down to let my hand linger in Arthur’s soft baby hair.

“You’d know if you were here,” Hannah grumbles, pulling her sunglasses down just enough to see me.

“You’re welcome to come and stay at your Oma’s estate too, you know,” I remind her, my tone mirroring hers. “It’d be a bit of a drive to school, but I’m sure her driver doesn’t mind.”

She snorts, settling back to her lounging position and raising her phone again. “Oh yeah, because leaving all my belongings behind to come hang out with you sounds like the best time ever.”

I hide a smirk, knowing that beneath her typical teenage attitude, my daughter really does miss me. This is just her way of letting me know. I return to speaking with Arthur, letting him tell me everything he can about his game, his day, and anything else on his little mind. Gosh, I miss being here so much. He already looks bigger, and I’ve only been gone for a few weeks. How much of my children’s lives will I miss if I force a divorce and have to co-parent with Sebastian? The thought makes my stomach roll, and I really do have a belly ache now.

“Where’s your father?” I ask Hannah out of nowhere, and my daughter shrugs.

“No clue.”

Sighing, I lean back and close my eyes. “I was sure he was going to be here.”

Hannah hums but doesn’t say anything, typing something on her phone and pretty much ignoring me. I can’t help but want to pry more, but it is a waste of time. My two oldest kids are already deep in the web of drama that Sebastian has forced us into...there’s no reason to get Hannah stuck as well.

Five or so minutes later, I hear the sound of the glass door opening and the click of the butler’s heels on the stone. He approaches and clears his throat, getting my full attention before speaking. “Ma’am, Mr. Van den Bosch would like to invite you to stay for dinner.”

I narrow my eyes, annoyed. “Invite me for dinner in my own home?”

The butler’s face pales, clearly panicked at my indignation. “I do not think he meant any ill will, ma’am. He simply said he’d like to have dinner

together, and that he'd like to share some news with you if you are available."

Some news, huh? That certainly piques my interest. It's not like I have anything to do tonight, and that part of me that wanted so much to see Seb is jumping with joy. "Ah...okay. Yes, I will stay for dinner, then."

He bows slightly. "Very well. Ms. Hannah, will you-?"

"I will be out," she says quickly, before standing up and going back inside. "Don't set a place for me. I'm going to study with some friends."

So it will just be me and my husband, and the younger kids. This will be...interesting. My mouth goes dry, and I swallow to ease it. It's just dinner. Not a date or some occasion for Sebastian to win me over, but just a family dinner to share some news with me.

Still, my anticipation is fierce, and I stand to make my way out into the gardens to play with Joris and Aleida. Maybe running with them, laughing and fooling around, will help the time pass quicker.

Soon enough, I hear the faint sound of a car arriving at the front of the estate, and my pulse kicks up. The nanny comes out now to collect the kids for their own dinner rituals and to help with any homework they may have. She leaves with Arthur on her hip, but not before I give him a kiss on his round cheek and hug the two older kids. I miss them so much that I feel physically pained.

And then Sebastian is here, dressed casually in jeans and a button up white shirt—three of the buttons undone at his neck. His sleeves are rolled up, the summer tan on his skin only just starting to fade, and when I raise my eyes to his face, my heart squeezes in my chest. I've missed him so much, and from the look on his face, he's affected by the distance between us just as powerfully. I think back to letting him embrace me by the lake, and how letting him wrap me in my arms felt like coming home.

God, I'm so ready for this separation to end. Please, please let my husband do the right thing, so we can finally go back to normal.

"Julia..." his voice is thick with emotion, his gaze piercing through mine. "It's nice to see you. Thank you for staying."

"It's fine, it's just dinner, after all." I'm not sure who I'm trying to convince...him, or me.

"Indeed..." Sebastian looks away, rubbing the back of his neck. "Eh... would you join me in the library? Dinner isn't quite ready and I really need to talk to you. It's important."



I agree, and follow my husband through our home to the library. Once we get there, the reminder that this room is where we first met two decades ago brings back a sense of nostalgia that I wasn't expecting. I sink down onto the couch in front of the fireplace, and after a breath of hesitation, Sebastian sits next to me. We aren't touching, but besides the hug, this is the closest we've been in so long.

"So..." I start, my pulse steadily rising as I turn my body towards him. "I heard Mom came here to see you?"

Sebastian raises his eyebrows, but doesn't seem overly surprised that my mother has kept me in the loop. We share nearly everything, after all, and I'm living with her. It's not a difficult connection to make. "Yes, she did. We had quite a few things to talk about."

Crossing my legs, I nod, my focus on him. "Okay...and I'm assuming it's related to whatever it is you want to share with me?"

Sebastian exhales slowly, closing his eyes for a long moment, and I start to feel a tiny spark of concern. Whatever he wants to tell me is difficult for him to say, and Sebastian and I, up until a few months ago, didn't really keep secrets from one another.

"Seb?" I prompt, and he opens his eyes, meeting mine with a stony expression.

"Your mother and I came to a rare agreement. We believe that it was Karl who hired someone to put the bomb in my car twenty-two years ago. With your mom's help, I put all the pieces together, and it just makes sense. Karl killed my mother and siblings."

The words hang in the air, heavier than any statement I might have imagined him making. I was so sure Sebastian wanted me to stay for dinner so we could discuss our marriage more...but this? This is something else entirely. This is world changing for all of us.

Finally I manage to catch my breath enough to speak. "*Karl?* Why in the world would he do that? You two were so close back then."

"It turns out," Sebastian begins, his voice laced with bitterness. "That he already knew he was my brother all those years ago. So taking me out would have made him the oldest son—the man that my father would hand the reins to when he was ready to retire."

Everything he's saying makes so much sense, but it's hard for me to wrap my mind around all of it this quickly. "Do you really think he would have gone so far as to kill you just to take your place in the company?"

Sebastian nods. "Yes. In the company...and in the family."

Shaking my head, I rake a hand through my hair, full of nervous energy all of the sudden. "Okay...say that you and Mom are right. Even if it was him, what evidence do you have?"

"That's where things get tough," he admits, his head cocking on the side as he mulls over his next set of words. "We only have the theory at this point, not the evidence. However...I'm fairly sure that this is something we can...work on."

I'm not following and shoot him a frown. "Elaborate, please."

"Think about it, Jules." My husband leans towards me now, the passion in his voice evident. "The thing is we only need to pretend we've got some sort of strong evidence pointing that it was him, and he'll more than likely fold. All I want for him is to sign the goddamn settlement, do five years in jail, and I'll even make sure he still has a position at the company once he's out. A non-executive position, of course."

I hold up a hand, my mind racing. "Wait a second. I'm still processing all of this 'Karl is the killer' theory that you've just laid at my feet, but I have to ask....why the hell can't he just be fired from the company once and for all? He's ruining all of our lives, Seb."

"Julia, it's not that simple..."

I huff out a humorless laugh. "Sebastian, come on. How is it not that simple? He's always in the news for charges pressed against him and for trials, constantly! He's a convicted rapist, for goodness sakes."

My husband shakes his head, as if I'm still not understanding his point. "I know, I know...but he's got leverage, as you know, and I have no interest in having Karl drag me to court. He's a vindictive asshole, Jules, and he won't rest until he's had his revenge...if I boot him from the company completely, that is. He's going to need a job once he's out, and if I provide him one, that should be incentive enough for him to leave me and the rest of the family alone."

What he's saying makes sense, even if it makes me nervous to even consider. "You're banking a lot on just an assumption, Seb."

"All I need for him to sign that settlement is to make him think that I've got evidence against him for a much bigger crime...a crime that can get him twenty years behind bars, as opposed to five."

Manipulations like this go against everything that I've ever stood for as a judge...but I will do anything for my family. Just like Sebastian will. "What

do you want me to do, then?”

“Just speak to Gabi about it. I’m sure she’d be happy to help.”

I shake my head. “Gabi won’t go as far as faking evidence. This is her career on the line, you know.”

“I’m not asking her to fake evidence,” Sebastian assures me. “Instead, I think she should reopen the case about the murder of my family with this new piece of information. If I recall correctly, her father was pretty involved in the case back then. I’m sure she can find something in his notes or paperwork that can be traced back to Karl, now that we know that’s the direction we should be looking in.”

I look away from my husband at the cold, empty fireplace, pondering what he’s asked me. “Fine, I will help you, but in exchange, you have to agree to never ever side against your family again. Do you hear me?” I fix him with a cold gaze. “It’s because of you and your petty decisions that we are all in this mess today.”

“I know.” Sebastian heaves a long sigh, his eyes dropping to his lap as I sense the disappointment mounting on him. “I was fucking blind, Jules. Karl fed me lies and played into my fears. All the while he was just making sure to turn me against my family to manipulate me better, I—” he cuts off, clearly taken aback by his emotional turmoil. “I was so damned stupid. I fired Elise when she was the only true ally I had in the snake pit my own company has become.”

The urge to surge forward and hold him is strong, but I resist, keeping my distance. “I’m glad you finally opened your eyes.” The energy between us is shifting, becoming warmer, so I change the subject back to the charges. “We do need some kind of evidence to scare Karl enough to comply. I’ll arrange a meeting with Gabi to see what her father gathered and if it can be traced back to him.”

Relief comes over Sebastian’s face, making the stress lines around his mouth fade. “Thank you so much, Julia, I...” He reaches out towards me, but I hold up a hand to stop him, not yet ready to take that step in our reconciliation...even if I want to.

“Don’t thank me yet. We’ll see if our plan works.”

Sebastian doesn’t seem satisfied with me rebuking him, and I’m afraid that I won’t be strong enough to tell him to stop if he reaches for me again. I want him so much.

Before I can make any decisions that I might regret later, the butler

knocks on the library door, making us both jump.

“Dinner is ready,” he announces.

Seb looks sheepish as he stands, offering me his hand. “I guess we should go join the kids.”

“Yeah.” I accept his hand, and his smile returns. “Let's go.”

Our relationship isn't fully fixed yet, but we're slowly coming together. The next few days are going to be important to the success of the family as a whole, and I have to be ready. For now, though, it will be nice to have dinner with the kids and my husband for the first time in a while. I'm looking forward to it so much.

The table is set, and the nanny brings Aleida, Joris and Arthur to the table. Hannah, to my surprise, is already there, and she rolls her eyes when she sees me.

“My friends canceled,” she tells me, as if I needed some justification for her presence. “Which is why I'm here.”

“You are more than welcome to have dinner with us, love,” I tell her gently, before going around the table to kiss my three younger children on the cheek and then, despite her protests, Hannah as well. “Just like old times, eh?”

Living with my mother has been nice in some ways, but it's things like this that I've missed terribly. I barely pay attention to what food is served, watching my family instead and drinking in the normal day to day things that I've missed. It's clear that Hannah and Sebastian have gotten closer with him being the only parent home, and she tells him about her day without even being prompted. It's not until halfway through the meal that I realize she hasn't even brought her phone to the dinner table, when usually, it doesn't ever leave her hand.

Dinner ends, and the younger three are ushered off while Hannah tells us goodnight before taking herself back to her rooms. Just like that, Sebastian and I are alone again, full of a delicious dinner and more relaxed around each other than we've been in ages.

He leaves his seat, walks around the table to stand in front of me and extending his hand for me to take it, he whispers softly, “Join me on the terrace. I have a bottle of ice wine from a client chilling. Share it with me.”

I shouldn't...not with how emotionally charged everything has been, but the offer sounds too delicious to resist it. “Alright, but just one glass.” I take his hand, and rise from my seat, before following him outside.

The terrace is lovely, surrounded by lush plants and flowers, and the breeze is warm. We sit together on one of the plush couches and enjoy the view and the sweet dessert wine. We watch the stars slowly move across the sky as minutes turn into hours, and the sweet, heavy wine disappears glass by glass from the bottle.

“Everyone is growing up so fast,” Seb tells me after a sip. “Hannah is a young woman now. Almost turning sixteen. How did that happen?”

“Time does fly, indeed. I still remember Arthur being unable to walk and now he runs like he’s training for a marathon,” I tell him with a little bit of a laugh. “Hannah has always been headstrong and independent. That hasn’t changed, at least.”

“True. She’s doing a dinner with friends here at home for her birthday, and we mere mortals are even allowed to be present for the cake. How lucky are we, right?” His sarcastic humor makes me laugh, and casually, Sebastian loops his arm around my shoulder. It might be the wine, or the romantic aura of the evening, but I lay my head on his shoulder without a second thought, a smile on my face.

“I’ve missed this, Jules,” I hear him, saying in a low voice. “Terribly.”

I take a moment to think about my next set of word but I decide to tell him the truth without holding back. “Well...this is how it used to be before Karl got the best of you.” Despite my honest statement, Sebastian doesn’t flinch and remains just as close as before, listening attentively. “Then you pulled away from everyone. You became fixated on revenge, Seb, and by proxy, you stopped loving us the way you should.”

He lets out a deep sigh, his arm tightening around my shoulder. “I’ve realized that now, Jules. I’m so damned sorry. But I can’t go back and fix the past.”

I can feel the sadness in his voice, and I know he’s telling the truth. There is a part of me that is angry at him still for how he treated us all, but the rest of me is desperate to make everything better.

“Let’s not talk about Karl right now. He’s robbed enough of our time,” I tell him, as I tilt my head up to meet his gaze. “I noticed Hannah wasn’t texting at dinner and was even talking to you. That’s new.”

He chuckles, his lips turning upwards. “Yeah. To both of our surprises, we get along.”

“That’s quite impressive,” I admit, feeling quite proud of him. “I’ve always thought she was going to be the toughest of our kids to connect with,

yet here we are, and you've managed it." Growing quieter, I then add, "I'm glad you two are getting on well. Maybe that can be the silver lining to these last terrible few months."

Sebastian seems like he's going to respond in kind, but something comes over him, a desperation clouding his features. "Julia, I don't want to talk about Karl or Hannah anymore. I want to talk about us."

"Sebastian, I—"

"Life isn't the same without you here," he blurts out, words thick with sadness and grief. "Please come back. Let's make it work between us."

"I'm still having nightmares about that lap dance, Seb," I find myself saying, before I finish up my glass. The alcohol seems to make every thought rolling right out of my mouth. "I wish I never saw that video in the first place."

"I swear on everything you want, Julia, that it won't happen again." His words are delivered with not only deep conviction but also with a severity I wasn't expecting. "The only person I want to be with is you. You are my everything."

Before I can sway into him, letting him hold me the way I crave, I jump to my feet and make a show of checking my watch. I haven't noticed how much the wine has affected me until I'm on my feet, feeling unsteady. "I should get going," I tell him stumbling back a few steps. "It's getting late."

Sebastian stands too, grabbing my elbow in a gentle grip, only holding me steady and nothing more. "Sweetheart, it's already late and you've been drinking. Don't you want to just stay and sleep here? It's your house too, you know."

I pause for a moment, thinking over his proposition. The long ride back to my mother's while drunk sounds both dangerous and miserable. "Fine, but I'm staying in the guest bedroom."

Sebastian's clearly disappointed, but he respects my choice and just nods in return. "Of course. I will get it ready for you. Let's go."

I loop my arm through his, letting my husband take some of my weight so I don't stumble all that much. He puts his other arm around my waist, but I don't mind. It's sort of nice, touching him like this, knowing that he isn't going to push his luck with me.

Once we're in the guest bedroom, I lean against the dresser, watching Sebastian taking a new flat sheet out of the chest at the end of the bed, spreading it out.

“The bed isn't ready?” I ask, surprised. It looks made to me.

“There's no flat sheet on it. Just the comforter, which is way too warm for September,” Sebastian says, looking out of his element.

I watch, amused, as he pulls the comforter off and struggles to fold it small enough to fit back in the chest. Once he gets it sort of folded and put away, he starts trying to put the sheet on, but the bed is just too wide for him to do it alone. I don't offer to help, though—just continue watching with my grin getting wider and wider.

“Seb,” I say finally before I burst out laughing. “Can't you just get Claudia or Edward to do this?”

He blows out a frustrated breath. “They are all already asleep. It's almost midnight. I'm not going to bother them over something so silly.”

“Fine,” I hobble over, the room tilting only slightly, to help him with the sheet. He's not as tipsy as I am, but he's been drinking too, and after a long effort, we get the sheet on together.

Once it's on, Seb steps back to look at our handiwork. “Are you sure this is okay for you? I can sleep here, and you can stay in the main bedroom.”

I shake my head, hair flying, “No, no. This is good for me.”

“Okay, well...” Seb doesn't know quite what to do with himself, but he clearly doesn't want to leave me yet, either. He paces around the room, opening the wardrobe. “You have fresh towels here...and some toiletries, too. Do you, ah...want to get something from our bedroom to wear to bed?”

One side of my mouth quirks up, and I look at him from under my lashes. “I will sleep naked, I think.”

His eyes go wide for a second, and then his lids lower and he looks at me intently as he reaches out to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear, a smile forming on his lips. “You are so cute when you drink.”

There are a million thoughts going through my head, a million things I want to do, but I just smile in return instead. Sebastian sighs, and leans in, quickly kissing my forehead and murmuring. “Goodnight, Julia.”

I'm left swaying on my feet again when he releases me to head towards the door, but I grab his wrist to stop him. “Wait.”

This time it's Sebastian that stumbles as I pull him in, pecking him on the lips, chaste but meaningfully. When he doesn't complain, I hold the kiss, letting my arms go around his neck as I do. It reminds me of something...I search my mind for the memory, and it hits me like a truck, all at once—our very first kiss on the canals, back when we were still so young, and it makes

my heart ache.

Finally, my husband groans and pulls away. "I've got to go, Julia."

But I don't release him, kissing him again, just the same. "I miss you."

He puts his hands on my shoulders and breaks the kiss again, but doesn't actually push me away. "That's the alcohol talking, and you know it."

Now I chuckle, pressing my forehead to his. "No, I really do miss you." It's so easy to kiss him again like this, so I do. "Your smell, the touch of your lips, the way you kiss me, hold me..." Again I press my lips to his, exhaling as I do. It's like I'm helpless to keep repeating the same motion...over and over....

"Jules," he groans, his lips moving against mine. "I don't want us to do something you might regret tomorrow."

I already know what he means, but I tease, "Like what?"

In that instant, Sebastian slams his mouth against mine, initiating a kiss that is so much deeper and more intense than I have dared so far. My thoughts clear in a snap, and everything in me focuses in on one single thing—needing Sebastian.

I dig my hands into his hair as he rests his on my hips, holding me so close that we're body to body. I'm not thinking of tomorrow, or the fact that I should stop. Instead, all I can think about is the sensation of his lips against mine and the feel of his hot tongue.

Our breathing is rough and loud when the kiss breaks, and Sebastian is staring down at me with lust blown eyes. "Fuck, I want you."

"You have me," I tell him, pulling the door shut and leaving us in the dark. Sebastian's familiar, beloved face is illuminated only by the moonlight coming in through the open windows.

He presses his body against mine and kisses me again, making me moan as he grinds against me. My husband walks us backwards towards the bed, and we fall onto it together. He kisses me like he needs me to live, and his hands roam over my body, tugging my dress up until he can slide his hands up and under the fabric, touching my bare skin.

My back arches up, and I can't stop the low moan that slips from my lips. It feels so good to have him touch me this way again, it's been too long.

I can't let this be the end. I want him so much, I need him, and I have to have him. I reach for the button on his jeans, undoing it and unzipping them in record time. Sebastian breaks the kiss, but his lips are still on my skin, kissing a trail down my jawline and neck as he rids me of my dress.



He removes my bra with practiced movements, hands plumping my breasts and fingers teasing my nipples to hardness. I whisper his name over and over, arching into his touch, and his kisses start a trail down my neck and collarbone.

My hands fumble with the hem of his shirt, pushing it up his muscled torso and revealing the abs underneath.

“Julia,” Seb's voice is low, rough against me. “You're so fucking beautiful. I've missed you so much.”

I whimper as his hands cup my breasts, thumbs teasing my nipples with increasing roughness. “I've missed you too.”

Neither of us dare to say it out loud and break the spell, but I know he loves me. He's showing me, in the way he kisses my skin and the reverent touches. We are speaking a language that we've forgotten how to speak but are relearning the words together.

Sebastian's hand is hot between my thighs, fingers parting my pussy lips and sliding inside. I cry out and arch my back, grinding down on his fingers as his thumb finds my clit, rubbing circles just like he knows that's what I want.

“Baby, I love the sounds you make,” he groans, his gaze filled with lust. “Show me how much you want me.”

I'm panting, my body rocking against his hand. His thumb rubs against my clit harder and faster, his fingers thrusting in and out of me in a steady rhythm. I'm climbing higher and higher, pleasure coursing through my body as Sebastian touches me.

When my orgasm hits, it's sudden and hard, making me throw my head back and cry out. He kisses and sucks at my breasts as his fingers keep working my body, prolonging the pleasure.

When it's done, Sebastian sits up, pulling me up with him so he can get my panties off. When he pushes me back down onto the bed, he takes a second to pull his shirt over his head and remove his pants. His cock is rock hard and twitching, a drop of precum already dripping from the tip. My pussy is soaked, and the sheets beneath me are wet with it.

He leans down to kiss me, and the heat of his body above mine is so comforting. Our mouths are locked in a deep, passionate kiss, tongues exploring and hands tracing muscles and curves, when Sebastian enters me.

I gasp against his lips, pleasure overwhelming me, and his arms come down on either side of my head, holding him up so that he doesn't crush me

with his weight.

I wrap my legs around his waist, and he curses, thrusting in and out, slowly at first. "Fuck, Jules, I've missed you so much."

"Me too," I breathe, kissing his shoulder. "Please, fuck me. Make love to me."

"I will."

We move together, his hips thrusting and my body rocking, our lips finding each other again and again. We're not in a rush, and we want to enjoy this moment; the pleasure building slowly but steadily between us.

Sebastian's thrusts speed up, and I can feel myself getting closer to the edge. My pussy clenches around his cock, and his groan is low and desperate.

"Fuck, baby, I'm so close." He gently grips my hair, forcing me to look into his eyes. "You want me to come inside you?"

"Seb, please don't stop!"

Our movements are erratic now, desperate for the climax that is almost upon us. Sebastian's hand slips between our bodies, finding my clit and rubbing it in rough circles.

My orgasm hits, and I arch my back and cry out, nails raking down his back. The pain only seems to drive him closer to the edge, and with a few more powerful thrusts, he comes, his seed flooding me.

He groans my name and collapses on top of me, spent and sweaty. I don't mind his weight, and the warmth of his body on mine. It feels nice, and I stroke his hair gently as our breathing returns to normal.

Eventually, Sebastian moves, rolling off of me and lying down beside me.

"You're incredible, Julia," He pauses for a beat to catch his breath, his gaze observing me fully. "So damned beautiful."

"And you're handsome, husband." I tell him, kissing him softly. "Thank you, Seb. I needed this."

"So did I," He agrees, pulling me close and kissing my forehead. I don't mind that we're both sweaty, smelling of sex. It feels good. Right. For the first time in ages, I feel whole and safe. There is still the threat of Karl and the truth of what he has done in the past hanging over us, but together, I'm sure we can conquer any challenge.

I fall asleep feeling happy and hopeful, snuggled against my husband's warm body. Just like when he held me by the lake, this feels like coming home. It feels right. I never want to go back to living without it...without Sebastian.

*Sebastian*

WAKING up feels different this morning than it has for over a month now. It's warmer under the blankets, and there's that comforting feeling of not being alone.

This isn't my bed, though. And I should've woken up alone. So what's going on?

The first indication that something is up is that I'm naked. But as I come to full wakefulness and roll over, the sight of Julia's sleep-mussed hair and flushed, peaceful slumbering face makes my heart skip a beat.

Damn, that's right. She spent the night in our guest room, and up until the very last minute, the assumption was that she'd sleep alone. Then she grabbed my wrist to keep me close, and any reservations I had melted away, making me totally unable to resist her.

God, just look at her...she's so damned beautiful. The memories of what we did eight or so hours before start to filter back in, and I feel myself growing hard already. It had been far too long since I'd heard her gasp my name like that, or felt her shudder in my arms. There won't be a gap like that again.

I swear on everything I am as a man that I'll make everything right. I'm so close to sending Karl to jail and fading into obscurity in the public eye. Once Karl is gone, I'll focus every ounce of my energy on Julia and my family. The scandals are over. I've learned my lesson, and then some.

There's no clock on the bedside table here in the guest room, and God

only knows where my phone is. Judging by the position of the sun through the curtains, it's still quite early. Maybe I can sneak out and have coffee ready for Julia when she wakes up... it might cut down on the awkwardness if I'm not naked in bed beside her after a night of drinking.

Hell...it was only one bottle of wine split between us. Surely it wasn't just the alcohol leading her to bed with me? There's a thread of anxious guilt thinking she might regret what happened, but there's nothing to be done about it now. She was more than willing, and I know she wanted me. All I can hope now is that she still does and doesn't pull away even more now that we've slept together for the first time in so long.

Sliding out from under the sheets, I find my discarded jeans and try to pull them on quietly, cringing when I hear Julia shifting around in the bed. I hold my breath, but right before I can button them up, I hear her murmur something with a little chuckle.

"Leaving now won't make me forget what we did last night."

Damn, I think. So much for being sneaky.

I finish buttoning my pants and slowly turn to see my wife sitting up in bed, the sheet clutched around her chest. She's even more lovely like this, with the morning light catching the halo of her hair, and it's difficult not to just crawl back into bed with her and pull her warm body against mine. Without these damn jeans, of course.

"I didn't mean to wake you; I'm sorry," I tell her, rubbing the back of my neck, embarrassed at being caught leaving. It's not that I don't want to face her...it's just that I'm afraid of a possible confrontation and the potential regret she might feel. "Can you stay for breakfast, at least?"

Her smile blooms slowly, and to my greatest surprise, she simply says, "Yeah, I'd like that."

Okay...so far so good. She looks...content. Happy, even. "Great. I'll tell Claudia."

\* \* \*

After getting dressed in last night's attire, Julia and I head to the kitchen in silence, an awkward tension between us. We settle down to eat at the breakfast table. Claudia places two steaming cups of coffee in front of each of us when suddenly Hannah strolls in wearing her school uniform.

She stutters to a stop upon seeing her mother, looks up from her phone, and raises one accusatory eyebrow. “Oh, welcome back, Mom.”

My wife avoids our daughter’s gaze and sips her coffee, embarrassed, and I have to stifle a laugh.

Hannah settles right in front of her, a growing smirk on her face as she notices that her mom is wearing the same clothes as yesterday. I can see Hannah’s working on some quip to throw at her mom, but I shoot her a glare that reads, “Don’t you dare,” and my daughter just swallows her remark.

After setting her cup down and pushing her waffle around her plate, Julia clears her throat and decides she can’t ignore Hannah forever. “So, Hannah, your birthday is right around the corner. Are you excited?”

She shrugs, unbothered. “Sort of, I guess... Dad has insisted on being present for the cake, so if you want to join, you are welcome to.”

Julia laughs sarcastically. “Oh, how thoughtful of you to allow your parents to attend your birthday party.”

Despite the brief blip of discomfort, having breakfast with Julia is wonderful. Hell, anything normal we do is wonderful. I miss these domestic moments so much that, if I think about it too hard, I have to catch my breath. Just having her close, across the table, laughing with the kids and looking happy for the first time in so long... I wish she weren’t leaving.

But before I know it, breakfast is being cleared off the table, and it’s time for my wife to return to her mother’s estate. She stands, smoothing her clothes, and looks at me expectedly. I sigh, knowing I have to be a gentleman. I can’t force her to stay, and begging isn’t in my character.

I hold out my arm for her, and she joins me, her expression soft and loving as I walk her to her car. She looks around, as if she isn’t ready to leave, but her legs carry her forward, and soon, we’re in front of the black sedan. Julia leans against me, not fully, but just enough that I feel her weight and know that it’s intentional.

Looking down at her, the impulse to taste her mouth is strong. I had my lips and tongue on almost every inch of her last night, so it seems bizarre to be so cautious today. But I don’t want to mess things up, not when we’ve made so much progress.

So, despite what I want to do, I tilt her head up towards me with a finger under her chin and gently kiss her cheek. Her smile grows when I pull back, telling me I made the right choice.

Breaking the silence, I ask, “Once everything has been settled with Karl,

would you... consider moving back in and giving me another chance?”

She pauses, tilting her head to the side as she considers my offer. Finally, she says, “If you get rid of Karl for good and accept Roxanne as part of the family, then maybe. But until then, it’s best we stay apart.”

Coffee and waffles sour in my stomach at the mention of both Roxanne and Karl, but I keep a straight face. I’d do anything for Julia, and while I’m already in the process of cutting Karl out of my life, I haven’t come to terms with the fact that Roxanne is now my daughter-in-law. I don’t think I will ever be okay with it, but I’ve made so many mistakes just to try to remove the woman from our lives that they far eclipse any sins she may have committed in the past.

Roxanne Feng, my daughter-in-law. Alright. I can do that. It’s a bitter pill, but I can swallow it.

I drag my knuckles down Julia’s cheek and give her a single nod. “Okay. I guess I can work on that.”

*Sebastian*

IT'S BEEN a few days since Julia stayed at the house overnight, and I feel as though everything has been in some sort of stasis. Nothing has changed, nothing has moved forward...but at least nothing has moved backwards, either. I've been growing more and more restless with the constant lack of movement, but it could be worse, so I try to put it out of my mind and focus on running my business and being the best father that I can be.

Today, I'm in the middle of a meeting when my phone buzzes, and I quickly glance at the caller ID. Gabi's name flashes on the screen. It's unusual for her to call during business hours, so I know it must be important. I apologize to my colleagues and step out of the conference room, making my way to my office.

Once inside, I close the door behind me and answer the call. "Gabi. Good to hear from you."

There's a brief pause on the other end before Gabi's voice comes through. "Sebastian, I wanted to let you know that I'm reopening the case regarding the homicide of your family." Her tone is formal, laced with her usual seriousness, but it's what she says next that catches me off guard. "We've found good enough reason to reexamine the evidence regarding the car bomb that killed them."

I lean against my desk, my heart sinking at the mention of that tragic incident. Then, there is a ray of hope that comes through at the idea of getting justice. "Really? Gabi, that's...incredible. You have my full support and I will

do whatever you need to make this easier for you.”

“I’m not doing this on a whim, Seb, which I’m sure you know.” Gabi sighs, sounding stressed, but determined. “New evidence has come to light, and I believe it’s crucial to revisit this case.” Despite her professionalism, I know perfectly well that is thanks to Julia herself that Gabi has reopened the case so quickly. If I’d have talked to her myself, I’m not sure if I could have been so persuasive. “I want to bring closure to you and your family.”

I can't help but feel a pang of sadness, fighting against the wave of memories linked to the case Gabi is speaking of. I’ve never expected to find justice for my family, to make things right, and now the chance is here. To make things even better, the sole reason I had Julia speak to Gabi about reopening the investigation about my mother and sibling’s deaths, is that solving the case will also put Karl behind bars for many, many years. But remembering still hurts. I think it always will. Shutting my eyes, I press two fingers between the bridge of my nose and focus on my breathing for a moment.

“Seb, are you there?”

“Yes, sorry. I appreciate your dedication, Gabi. It's just...I don't mean to sound so shocked. This is exactly what I wanted. It's just...the memories....”

“I understand, but we might finally get some answers.”

Sinking into my leather office chair, I tell her, “As Julia told you, I have a suspicion that it might be Karl Townsend behind it all. Given everything that's happened lately, it wouldn't surprise me. It just makes sense.”

“That's why I need your cooperation,” Gabi continues. “Send me all the phone bills and any transactions made from Karl's employee card during that time. We need to piece this puzzle together.”

I drum my fingers on the desk, deep in thought. “I'll get you everything you need. Thanks for doing this.”

There's another long pause on the line before Gabi speaks again. “You should thank your wife, too. I'm doing it for her.”

*Julia.* My heart tightens at the thought of her. She's been through so much, and I can't bear to see her suffer, just like I can't bear the thought of us being separated much longer. This case will be the last push, and with Karl in prison, we will finally be free of him and the dark cloud that he brings with him, constantly hanging over our family. “Thanks, Gabi. I'll be in touch with the records that you asked for.”

“Take care, Seb,” Gabi says before we both hang up.



As I sit at my desk, I'm filled with a mix of emotions—a heavy, nostalgic grief, but also anticipation now that I know Gabi is moving forward, and fear that it might still all fall apart. It's time to uncover the truth, not only for myself but for Julia and the memories of the family I lost so long ago.

Taking Gabi's advice, I pick up my phone and quickly type out a text message to Julia, my fingers dancing across the screen as I express my gratitude. *Just spoke to Gabi. Thank you so much for this. I owe you one! X.*

Sending the message, I lean back in my chair, my mind filled with a whirlwind of thoughts. Maybe I should take the rest of the day off so I can focus on retrieving all the documents Gabi needs. After all, I'm not sure how I'm supposed to continue working with all of this on the horizon.

\* \* \*

A week later, as I'm preparing for the day, I hear my phone ringing from the other room. For some reason, a rush of adrenaline hits me—a gut feeling telling me this is a call I want to take.

I momentarily abandon tying my tie and head to the bedside table to retrieve the ringing device. I expect it to be someone from work, or maybe Hannah needing something before class, but no. It's Gabi. My instincts were right.

I had provided everything she requested—phone bills and transactions over twenty years old, which were quite challenging to locate—and haven't heard from her since. Every piece of evidence she discovers is crucial. If she's found something substantial, our ordeal with Karl might soon be over.

Picking up the phone, I hear Gabi start speaking before I can even offer her a greeting. "Sebastian, I've got news," she says, a hint of excitement evident. "Can you make it to my office around 2 p.m.?"

Without hesitation, I agree, and make a mental note to ask Paula to clear my afternoon. Hanging up, urgency consumes me. Could this be the breakthrough moment? With a sigh, I continue my morning routine, mentally counting down the hours until our meeting.

The day drags on, but finally, 2 p.m. arrives, and I find myself at Gabi's office building. After informing the receptionist of my arrival, I'm directed to a meeting room. As I enter, I find Julia waiting there, much to my pleasant surprise. Gabi hadn't mentioned she'd be joining, but her presence

immediately offers a sense of comfort.

“Oh, Julia,” I say, momentarily lost for words as I approach her. “What a surprise.”

Her lips curl into a gentle smile, her eyes reflecting both hope and concern. “Gabi told me she had an appointment with you today. I thought it’d be a good idea to join in and be here for you.” Her warm voice is a reminder of what I’m fighting for, and lost in her gaze all I can do is thank my lucky star to have such a kind woman beside me despite all I’ve put her through.

Without further words, I pull her into a deep hug, letting the weight of the moment sink in as I take in her familiar scent. “You did well.”

Moments later, Gabi walks in, a determined aura about her, accompanied by a team of professionals. If they’re with Gabi, I trust them implicitly.

Taking charge, Gabi motions to her team, preparing to introduce them before delving into the heart of the matter.

“Sebastian, Julia, allow me to introduce you to the brilliant minds who have been working tirelessly on this case to find answers in the shortest time possible.” She starts with Dr. Martinson, a seasoned pathologist. Next is Helen, the digital forensics expert, who did much of the heavy lifting when it came to tracking down old, nearly forgotten records from Karl’s past. Then, there’s Ian, the demolitions expert. Gabi explains that anytime explosives are involved, he’s the one she chooses to investigate.

I’m pleased to greet each of them, knowing that unraveling a case over two decades old is a daunting task. Any progress feels miraculous, and Gabi calling this meeting suggests we might be onto something significant.

Gabi looks at us after she finishes with introductions, and there’s a glimmer in her eyes. “Now that you’ve met everyone, I can tell you that we really believe we’re closing in on some answers. In fact, we’re so close that I didn’t want to proceed any further without discussing it with both of you in person.”

She takes her place at the head of the table, switches off the overhead lights, and connects a sleek silver laptop to the projector system. Instantly, her desktop screen appears on the projector, and she pulls up a slideshow that details just what she’s been working on with her team.

“Thank you both for coming,” Gabi begins as we all take our seats. “This case is close to my heart, not just because Julia is my best friend, but also because this mystery haunted my father when he worked as a prosecutor. Solving this case will be the highlight of my career.”

She pauses, clicking a button on her laptop, and the screen displays a timeline.

“Let’s start with the explosion, which happened during your ill-fated trip to Hungary, a seemingly ordinary family visit to Johannes's brother's estate for a company-sponsored hunt. That idyllic day took a catastrophic turn. Sebastian, as you know, you lent your vintage car to your brother, who had been asking to borrow it for ages.”

A shudder runs down my spine, but I nod and listen as Gabi reviews her notes. Noticing my unease, Julia rubs my back affectionately, a comforting gesture during the revisit of the worst day of my life.

“Of course, Karl had no idea your brother would drive it. So he, or whoever planted the bomb, presumed you would be the one starting the vehicle after the hunting trip.” Gabi's eyes flicker with empathy as she continues, “The case had long been considered unsolvable, a grim chapter in our lives, especially yours, Seb.”

“But as we all know, Gabi doesn’t back down from a challenge,” Helen, the forensics expert, adds, lightening the mood a bit.

The prosecutor offers a slight grin before continuing. “I embarked on a mission to revisit the original case files and all of the old notes taken at the scene. They were meticulously detailed, with several details that caught my attention. However, the old surveillance tapes from the estate were more intriguing.”

I lean forward in my seat. “We were told there wasn’t anything on those tapes.”

Gabi nods. “Yes, that's correct. There is literally nothing on the tapes from the crucial hours. The security cameras were deliberately disconnected between 1 and 3 AM. Ample time to tamper with your car.”

As Gabi delves deeper into the enigma, the emerging narrative becomes clearer. “Karl Townsend, who was also in Hungary at the time, would've needed someone to do his dirty work. That's why I needed his old phone records and a record of his transactions on his company card. In the company's archives, I found a more comprehensive record of his calls. As I sifted through them, a particular number kept surfacing around the time of the trip to Hungary. After some investigation, Helen discovered the number belonged to a notorious bomb-maker, known in the system but never convicted. He hasn’t been active in over a decade, but he would have been in his prime around the time we suspect Karl hired him.”

I can't help but raise my brows at the revelation. "Of course Karl would use the company's phone. He was a salesman; making regular calls was part of his job. We never suspected him, so there was no way anyone could've noticed."

"To confirm my suspicions," Gabi continues, her voice filled with confidence, "I reached out to forensic metallurgy experts to re-examine the bomb fragments preserved from the scene. They identified traces of a rare metal alloy unique to explosives crafted by the same bomb-maker we linked to that phone number."

A collective realization dawns. Gabi has done it. Despite the obstacles and the time since the crime, she's unearthed the evidence we needed.

"I also reviewed his employee credit card statements. Among them, I discovered several large payments made around the time of the bombing. These transactions went to a now-defunct shell company owned by none other than our bomb-maker."

"Damn," I murmur, realizing Karl even used company funds to orchestrate the attack. "My dad trusted him implicitly. I bet Karl had no spending limit on that card."

The room falls silent as we absorb the implications.

"The bomb-maker, now retired, was tracked down and questioned," Gabi continues, showing a profile photo on screen, though withholding his name. "While he couldn't recall specifics, he remembered a job—paid in full by a man with a deep voice and a unique Dutch-British accent. Sound like Karl, doesn't it?"

My mouth dries up, and all I manage is a nod. Dr. Martinson passes me a bottle of water, which I gratefully accept.

"The bomb-maker confirmed he never saw the client's face. However, the client had an uncanny knowledge about the Van den Bosch family. He specified the bomb should explode outside the estate, suggesting a vested interest in preserving it," Gabi says, glancing at her notes. "And that's precisely what happened—the car exploded seven minutes after your brother started it, right outside the estate."

The weight of the revelation is almost suffocating in the dimly lit meeting room. I feel Julia's hand, discreetly searching for mine beneath the table. It's a lifeline to hold on to, and it settles me. She calms me, like she always does, my sweet Julia.

Gabi continues, detailing evidence and insights, but her voice fades into

the background. The only thought echoing in my mind is Karl's betrayal. The man I'd supported and trusted was the one behind my family's murder. The path ahead is clear: Karl needs to face the consequences.

The presentation wraps up, and, sensing the need for privacy, Gabi requests that everyone except Julia and me vacate the room. Alone with Gabi, I feel a surge of gratitude for her unwavering dedication to uncovering the truth so quickly.

"I believe we should pursue more than just a settlement, given the overwhelming evidence," Gabi asserts, sitting down. "Murder is a far more severe charge than tampering with evidence."

She's right...this has changed everything. We've gone so far beyond sabotaging Roxanne's cabaret and career that it hardly even feels related. A settlement, regardless of the amount, will never heal the wounds inflicted on our family. I've waited far too long to see justice served, and to me, money is no object.

"All I know," I reply with conviction as I lean forward, "is that I want him behind bars, to leave us in peace. You can assign him as many years as the law permits. I simply want him gone, from our family and my company, for good."

Gabi nods. "I'm confident we've got him pinned, Seb. We should go to court with this evidence. We can get him a life sentence."

A surge of fear courses through me at the mere thought of facing Karl in a courtroom battle. His cunning and vindictive nature are like ticking time bombs. "If we do that, Karl is going to exact revenge on me," I interject, my voice laced with unease. "Or worse, on all of us. We know what he is capable of. And the media frenzy...." I shake my head.

Despite my visible objection, Gabi remains steadfast. "He will be kept in custody. He won't go anywhere. But I think he's far too dangerous for him to receive a temporary prison sentence. This evidence demonstrates that he is a criminal mastermind, capable of orchestrating a murder while maintaining a facade of normalcy. I mean, for God's sake, he was hunting with you, with *loaded rifles*, at your uncle's estate, knowing that your car was rigged to explode minutes after it was started. We're lucky he didn't also organize a last minute hunting accident. The man is a monster."

"I'm acutely aware of the potential pitfalls that lie ahead, but a trial will take far too long," I assert, knowing all too well the months this trial will take for him to be convicted. "The lawyer he's hired is a shark, and it's not worth

the risk. We should aim for a settlement that aims for a long prison time.”

Gabi taps her finger on her lips as she thinks, drawing her eyebrows together. Finally, she suggests, “I’ll drop the charges related to the cabaret scandal and we’ll focus solely on the murder case to make sure the trial starts as soon as possible. How does that sound?”

My apprehension deepens, knowing she’s so damn focused going for a trial. Of course, a public trial will give her all the accolades that she dreams of. Being publicly recognized as the prosecutor who finally brought justice to a criminal case thought as unsolvable would be a huge boost in her career. Unfortunately, publicity is the last thing I want.

“But the media will discover that he’s my half-brother if we do that. I can’t let that happen. Everything we do needs to be kept private.”

Julia, her thoughtful gaze piercing through the tension, offers a compromise. “What if we negotiate for a thirty-year prison sentence with probation and home detention? That way, we ensure he never poses a threat to society again.”

Gabi’s eyes go down to the table as she ponders her options, and while it’s obvious she would rather drag Karl to court and expose to the media and the whole country all the evidence they’ve gathered against him, I think she knows better.

“Gabi,” Julia sighs, exhausted but determined to see this through. “You know just as well as I do how agonizing the court process can be. We need to strike a deal with him now.”

“I guess I’m just confused…” She looks between Julia and I, and I have a feeling she knows we’re still holding hands under the table. “I thought that you wanted justice for your family’s deaths, but now you’re fine letting him just settle for a shorter sentence and not face a proper trial and public humiliation? This is the biggest case of the decade.”

Exhaling slowly, I explain, “A trial will take months, and it won’t bring my family back; a settlement ensuring he goes to jail is good for us.”

With that, Gabi finally seems to concede, despite the disappointment plastered on her face. “Alright,” she says, her commitment unwavering, “I will see what I can do.”

Julia and I seem to exhale collectively as Gabi’s decision settles in.

“Thank you for everything,” I tell the prosecutor, standing to embrace her, sinking all the gratitude that I can muster into my words. “You’ve saved me, Gabi.”

I feel her shoulder shake as she chuckles. “Just doing my job, Sebastian. And like I said before, thank your wife. We both know that I started digging into this for her.”

Once everything is said and done, Julia and I leave the meeting room, and I take the chance to hold her hand again, reveling in the feeling of being joined to her and the way it centers me. Julia, though, senses the turmoil churning within me, and gently asks, “How are you doing after all of that, Seb?”

I open up to her, revealing the depths of my turmoil. “I always thought Margaret would have been the one behind the murder of my mom and siblings, not the man I so cherished and protected until a few weeks ago,” I confess, feeling the crushing weight of betrayal pressing down upon me. “Don’t hate me, Jules, but I was so sure it was your mother. All the signs pointed to her, with our tumultuous courtship that was happening at the same time. Now I just feel like an asshole for having thought that for so long when she’s been innocent...” I pause, letting the reality wash over me. “Innocent of those murders, at least. I don’t doubt that your mother has committed one or two in her life.”

Julia watches me, her face brightening as she listens. She can see how profoundly this revelation has shaken me to my core, and with genuine concern, she offers her support.

“Sebastian,” she begins softly, her hand still in mine, “do you want me to come home with you? We can talk about all of this together.”

I feel a deep sense of peace at that thought, and agree readily. “I would love that.” Leaning forward, I press a gentle kiss to her forehead, my voice filled with sincerity. “Thank you for being here with me, Julia. You have no idea how important this is to me. How important *you* are to me.”

She responds with a hint of playfulness, a fleeting tease to break up the tension and closes the small gap between us, her lips softly whispering. “This time, I’m just staying for a few hours, not for the night.”

I can’t help but smile at her quip. “It’s your home too. Why wouldn’t you stay?”

“Because we are still separated,” she points out, a touch of realism squeezing my heart.

“Well, technically, there’s no rule saying you can’t stay over even if we are separated.” I can’t help the smile forming at the corner of my lips, and

Julia sees it.

“Shush, you!” She nudges me in return, her eyes drawn together in a frown. “I’ll stay for dinner at the most, but that’s it.”

After everything that we’ve just found out, I don’t want to spend the night alone. But for now, I’ll let her think she’s won. “Fine, fine, as you wish.”



*Julia*

I WAKE WITH A START, disoriented by my unfamiliar surroundings. The soft morning light filters through the curtains, casting a warm glow on the room. The muffled sound of a ringing phone pierces the stillness, and for a brief moment, I struggle to identify the source—then it hits me. It's not my phone; it's Sebastian's.

Sebastian's phone? Why would his phone be in my room...oh. Oh no. Not again. A rush of mortification washes over me as I realize where I am—once again, in the guest bedroom of the house that was once ours...well, technically, still is. How did I end up here, tangled in sheets, sharing the same space with him once more? I had vowed to maintain some distance, to give us both time to heal. Yet, here I am, caught up in bed with him, once more.

I watch him as he stirs, totally unbothered by seeing me beside him. He then reaches for his phone and answers with a husky voice. "It's Gabi," Feeling vulnerable, yet curious, I prop myself up on my elbows, pulling the sheet up to my chest. My gaze never leaves him as I suggest, "Put it on speaker." Seb complies, and before he can even speak, Gabi's voice fills the room, delivering news that shakes both of us to our core.

"The motherfucker finally pleaded guilty and accepted the settlement!" Gabi crows triumphantly, sounding much too chipper for it not even being eight in the morning. But then her words filter through my sleep-addled brain, and I can hardly believe my ears. The shock of it all leaves me momentarily speechless. Sebastian's eyes meet mine, and we share a

profound moment of astonishment and relief.

“Really? For how many years?” I manage to ask, my voice laced with disbelief.

“Fifteen years, half in prison and half at home,” Gabi confirms. “I think the fact his mom could find out via the media that her precious baby is a murderer if we go to court was the deciding factor for him. Karl’s appearance in the media doesn’t seem to matter to him all that much, but to mommy dearest is apparently a different story.”

Shock doesn’t even begin to describe how I feel, but my husband finds his words first. Seb’s voice carries a determined edge, though it’s shaky. “Gabi, is Karl still around?”

“Eh, yes, I believe so. He’s finishing up with his lawyers in the interrogation room right now.”

Sebastian sits up even straighter, his back flush with the headboard. “Can you go back in and put me on speaker, please?”

She pauses, surprised, but agrees, “Sure, give me just one second.” Gabi’s heels click against the floor, creating an audible backdrop to her movements over the phone. I watch as Seb’s face tightens, preparing himself for what’s to come. Gabi’s voice returns, her steps stopping as a creaky door is heard swinging open. “Karl, Seb would like to have a word with you. You are on speaker, Seb.”

My husband’s words come out like a final verdict, delivered with icy confidence, belying the whirlwind of emotions I know must be simmering beneath the surface. “Karl, you are fired,” he declares, his voice not too loud, but with a finality to it that chills me. “Good luck in jail.” Then Sebastian ends the call with a touch of his finger on the phone screen. Once it’s silent, he slumps down, blowing out a massive breath.

In the aftermath, a surreal stillness settles over us. Seb’s voice is a mix of giddy disbelief and relief, trembling slightly. “This is it. He finally signed the damn settlement. We managed to get rid of him.” I can’t help but muse on the improbable turn of events. “I never thought this would be possible. It doesn’t even feel real.” He doesn’t respond to me at first, and when I notice Seb’s pensiveness, I reach out to him, laying the palm of my hand on the warm skin of his shoulder. “Hey...are you okay?”

His response is tinged with regret and bitterness. And, of course, grief. “Yeah, it’s just...I can’t believe I gave him so much of my time, attention, loyalty while that fucker had killed my family. I cared for him, Julia. I really

did. I don't know if it was ever the love I should have had for him as a brother, but still..." Shuffling closer, I lay my head on his shoulder in place of my hand and loop my arms around his body, offering him the comfort of my touch as well as words of solace. I will never be able to understand what he's going through, but I can still be here for him. "Seb, you can't change the past. At least we managed to get rid of him and see his true nature. Better late than never, don't you think?"

While he remains quiet, I hope he's able to find some peace in my words. "True," I finally hear him saying after a long minute of silence. He then raises his head, and swiftly changes the subject to something much more romantic. "I really like this, don't you?" He then takes my hand in his and gives it a kiss. "Waking up next to the person you love. It's such a simple thing, yet I missed it terribly." My lips twist upwards at his kind words, a real balm to our wounded past. "Yes, I do like it." I lean in and press my lips against his for a quick peck, tasting the sweetness of our night on them. "I like this very much." There's a small pause as we simply enjoy each other's company. The stress of everything over the last few weeks melts away as we lay, warm from one another's body heat.

"Shall we have dinner tonight and celebrate with the kids?"

Maybe I shouldn't consent...but hell, I'm already naked in bed with him for the second time without intending to be. Dinner sounds wonderful. Especially if it means I get to make up some quality time I've missed with the kids. "Fine..." I trail off, sounding resigned but the corner of my mouth quirks up. "Why not."

In that instant, Seb leans in just enough to press a chaste kiss to my lips. "Thank you for being here, Jules," he says, his voice low and warm. "I don't deserve you." I cock my head to the side, containing a chuckle. "Now that's true, but you've been making some good progress."

\* \* \*

Even though I didn't want to go and would have preferred lounging in bed with my husband all morning, I still have a job to do and a few appeals to review. So I crawl out of bed, shower, and go to work, so full of feelings that I can barely concentrate on anything except on the sweet victory against Karl. As I think deeper about it, I can't even imagine how Sebastian must be

feeling inside; siding with the man who killed his beloved ones over his own wife and family is a tragic lesson my husband might never recover from. I guess only time will tell.

In between appeals, I take a moment to call Mom and to let her know about Karl's settlement. She's happy for us, of course, but I can't help but wonder if a part of her isn't a bit disappointed that I didn't go forward with the divorce papers. Does she think I'm being weak? In that instant, Alice's words replay in mind, "*Sometimes never serving those papers is a form of courage, too. The courage to be honest with yourself and what you value the most.*" The truth is Sebastian and I might have been separated for over a month, but to me, it feels like an eternity.

*I really hope he learned his lesson once and for all, I think to myself.*

Now, though, it's finally time for the celebration. I wonder what Sebastian has managed to pull together in such a short amount of time. It doesn't matter what it is, though...I'm excited. Giddy, even. It's been so nice to be home, truly home, even for the few scant hours I've spent at the estate. The picturesque countryside surroundings never fail to soothe my weary soul. The golden rays of the late afternoon sun cast a warm, inviting glow over the estate, setting the perfect stage for whatever awaits. I park inside the garage and hurry up to make my way upstairs.

Stepping inside the hallway, I'm welcomed by Edward, the butler, who leads me to the dining room. As I cross the threshold, I'm immediately struck by the sight of a gorgeously set dining table. It's like something out of a magazine shoot, complete with fine china, crystal glasses, and fresh flowers that practically burst with vibrant colors. I count the seats and notice there are ten in total, which piques my curiosity to no end. Even if the younger kids are joining us, the number of seats seems excessive.

Suddenly, Sebastian himself is standing before me, beaming with a mixture of excitement and a hint of mischief. He wraps me in a warm hug that feels like home. With a flourish of his hand, a flute of Champagne appears in my hand as if by magic, and I gladly take a sip. The tiny bubbles dance on my tongue, teasing my senses.

"This is lovely," I tell him, laughing as he bends down to kiss my cheek. "But it's a lot for just a small family celebration, don't you think?"

"I'm not done with the surprises," he tells me, words ghosting over the

shell of my ear. “Come on, let’s go.”

He takes me by the shoulders and turns me around before opening the double sliding doors that lead to the living room. Just as he says, the real surprise isn't Seb's warm embrace; it's what I see behind him. Beyond my husband, Andries and Roxanne are standing in the middle of the room, engaged in lively conversation with Elise and Dan, glasses in hand.

Shaking my head, I'm convinced I must have missed something because this is nothing short of miraculous. To have Andries and Roxanne here, knowing that my husband must have invited them...I'm speechless. Sebastian has extended an olive branch, and it feels as though the curtain of old grievances has finally been lifted.

I can't help myself—I throw myself into Sebastian's arms, my eyes welling up with tears of gratitude as he squeezes me tightly. “Thank you for this,” I whisper, my voice choked with emotion. It's not just about tonight; it's about the promise of a better tomorrow.

While squeezing me tight, I feel Seb's lips brushing against my earlobe. “I love you so much, Julia.”

I look him in the eye, my knuckles stroking his cheek tenderly, and I echo his sentiment. “I love you too, Seb.”

Our moment is interrupted by laughter and animated chatter around us. It feels like a scene from a feel-good movie. They all walk over to greet me, and conversations buzz with a sense of joy and newfound unity.

I turn to Andries and Roxanne, who are now close enough to chat. “You two certainly know how to make a surprise entrance,” I tease, raising an eyebrow playfully.

Andries chuckles, his eyes warm with sincerity. “Well, we couldn't resist Dad's invitation. Especially now that we're back from our trip. I figured he had either finally lost his mind or was sincerely wanting to reconcile. I'm glad to see it's the latter.”

Roxanne chimes in with a grin. “And it's about time we put the past behind us. Not that I was the one holding out...”

Andries gives his wife an exasperated look just as Sebastian joins in, his arms wrapping around my waist. “Let's toast to new beginnings.”

Waving Elise and Dan over, we all raise our glasses, the clinking of crystal echoing through the room. The painful tension of the past has been replaced by a sense of belonging and acceptance, and I can't help but feel this is the start of something beautiful.

I catch our butler's eye and gesture to him. “Hey, Edward, would you mind taking a photo to capture the moment?”

With a nod and a knowing smile, he steps forward, and I hand him my iPhone. “Of course, ma’am.”

As the camera clicks and flashes, our smiles and laughter freeze in time, forever capturing the joy of this remarkable, healing evening. It's a new chapter in our lives, filled with love, laughter, and the promise of a brighter future for all of us.

**ONE WEEK LATER...**

*Hannah*

I SLOUCH in the plush backseat of the family car, pulling at the hem of my henley shirt and looking out the window. I can't deny that I feel stupid about being nervous, but there's nothing I can do to change it. There's this buzz of excitement zipping through my veins because today, yes today, finally, I'm going to England to watch the Horse Show with none other than Johan Bentinck himself. I can barely sit still thinking about it.

While I don't want to admit it to my parents, the past few days have been quite nice. After all, having them living under the same roof again is such a big relief, even if the lovesick looks they keep giving each other make me want to gag. It's a return to normalcy, and for me, that's enough.

Now, it's just me and the family driver, on my way to fly out to meet Johan. At first I wasn't expecting that Mom and Pops would let me go on my own, but I guess sixteen is sort of a milestone age, so I'm glad they did. Plus, they don't have any reason not to trust me. It's not like they know about my stash of precious things, or Johan's and my little moment at my brother's wedding...

Someone knows about that moment, though, and she's calling me right now. My heartbeat kicks up into overdrive.

Oma Margaret's contact flashes across the screen as it rings, and there's nothing else for me to do but answer it, even if I don't want to. My voice is loaded with fake enthusiasm when I finally pick up. "Hi Oma, what a pleasant surprise."



“I’m sure it is,” she drawls. No pleasantries here. Oma dives right in, her voice as crisp and commanding as ever. “I assume you’re on your way to the airport?”

“Yeah, I am...” I mutter, the anticipation of the trip still lingering in my voice.

“Great, a trusted chauffeur will meet you on the tarmac once you land and will drive you to the address,” she informs me, her tone leaving no room for negotiation.

Groaning, I can’t help but muster a bit of defiance. “Do I *really* have to do this?”

Without missing a beat, she shoots back, “It costs you nothing to go there on my behalf. I kept my mouth shut about that little incident of yours, Ms. Hannah, so now you get to pay me back.”

I heave a dramatic sigh, shoulders slumping with the weight of her expectation. “Yes, Oma. I know.”

“Good. Keep me updated once you’re done with it,” she chirps with finality and ends the call.

The line is dead when I utter my next sentence. “Alright, I will.”

So here I am, a week into being sixteen, and it turns out, I’m still fated to be the unwilling pawn in Oma’s mysterious games. Life just keeps getting better and better. But hey, at least I’ve got the horse show to look forward to with Johan once my little errand is done.

Not that I even care about horses. But I do care about him.

A deep, mortifying sigh escapes me as I replay that cringe-worthy moment that Oma just had to bring up in my mind. How did I even end up in that situation? Oh yeah, by being the world’s best tour guide of Oma’s mansion. It wasn’t just an excuse to be alone with Johan. Or maybe it was... but no one needs to know that.

We were having a blast, just joking around as I showed him the ins and outs of the place. Then things took an unexpected turn when we were in Oma’s office. Amidst our usual banter, Johan swiped my phone and held it high above his head, trying to show off our height difference.

There I was, hopping and jumping, making the most ridiculous attempts to snatch my phone back. We were both laughing so hard that I thought my ribs would ache the next day. And then, for a split second, I let my guard down. There was this...moment when I thought maybe, just maybe, Johan might actually feel something for me.

Not just that. It was a moment when he had been just about to kiss me. I wasn't sure at first, but now I'm certain that kissing was his intention. Even considering it makes me flush hot.

My legs had hit the back of that darn desk, and the world came crashing down. My brain had stuttered to a stop when Johan hovered over me, his height suddenly going from frustrating to irresistibly attractive. We were so close that there were only inches between our bodies, and his breath brushed my face as he leaned down, tilting his head just so as his hand came up to cup my jaw....

That's precisely when Oma Margaret chose to make her grand entrance. Talk about impeccable timing. I slam the door on the memory, not wanting to relive that humiliation all over again. It was that moment that's got me caught up in running weird errands for Oma, but I guess it could be worse. At least she didn't tell my parents.

\* \* \*

At the airport, I board the jet Pops's PA so candidly booked for me and settle into one of the leather seats. In minutes, and with nothing else to do to pass time, I find myself lost in the digital abyss of my phone's photo gallery. My fingers glide across the screen, taking me back in time to that wedding—the day when my whole world seemed to be spinning faster than ever before.

The selfies with Johan, taken during our secret exploration of Oma's office, bring a playful smile to my lips. Those mischievous, stolen minutes were the highlight of the event. But my curiosity veers toward a peculiar image among the bunch—a photograph I snuck of my grandmother's desk.

In that unexpected moment of voyeurism, I realize that on the desk lies a series of printed photographs featuring a mysterious woman, probably in her mid-sixties. They are candid shots, as though taken by a sneaky paparazzo or a cunning private investigator. This enigmatic woman is walking the streets of a quaint little town, unaware that she was the subject of covert surveillance. My interest deepens immediately on seeing the pictures, but that isn't all.

Beside these images is an unassuming envelope, labeled with a simple "Amelia, 8/22."

Margaret, my ever-elusive grandmother, has stubbornly refused to

divulge any information about the woman featured in those photos. Despite my relentless inquiries, all I've received in return is silence. And so, here I am, with a mission laid out before me—to visit an address where I might find this enigmatic Amelia and deliver the message that Margaret Van Dieren is looking for her.

While the plane soars through the sky, I wonder what awaits me on this trip. I have an idea of what I would like it to lead to, and it has a lot less to do with Amelia, and a lot more to do with Johan. It's this thought that lulls me into a short sleep, allowing the time in the air to pass in a mere instant.

Once the private jet touches down in Birmingham and the engines whir down, I gather my belongings and prepare to disembark. A surge of excitement courses through me—not for the cryptic visit with Amelia, but for everything that comes after that.

As I step out onto the tarmac, my eyes instantly scan the area until they land on Johan himself standing with the chauffeur Oma sent. The sight of him sends a jolt of surprise through me; after all, he wasn't supposed to be here! Yet, here he stands, looking tall and confident, and wearing that effortlessly charming smile that I love so much. My heart flutters in response which is beyond ridiculous. Gosh. How pathetic.

I approach him, hefting my backpack over my shoulder, and trying to maintain an air of nonchalance. "I thought we were supposed to meet later."

He grins, his bright blue eyes twinkling at me. "Well, the chauffeur picked me up before heading here. Seems like your grandmother wanted you to have some company."

My heart warms at the thought that Oma, in her own cryptic way, arranged for Johan to accompany me on this mysterious journey. Maybe she's not as heartless as she appears when it comes to my potential romance. Or maybe she just knows how much I value his presence.

Opening the rear door for me, Johan then steps aside and extends a hand to help me get in, while saying with a posh accent, "Welcome to England, Ms. Hannah."

Chuckling at his behavior, I can't help but shake my head, and get inside the car in one swift movement. He closes the door behind me and then gets in from the other side, sitting beside me. The chauffeur greets me and I take a second to realize that he's sitting on the left where the steering wheel is.

With Johan by my side, the upcoming adventure seems a little less daunting. I offer him a grateful smile when the car starts moving, silently acknowledging that this journey just became a tad more bearable.

“Did your grandmother tell you where we are heading?” Johan asks, breaking our comfortable silence.

I take a moment, thinking about the answer. “Um, to some old town called Stratford-something...?”

Upon hearing me, Johan’s face brightens up with a chuckle. “Stratford-upon-Avon, you mean?”

His mocking voice causes me to smack his arm in annoyance, which makes him laugh even more.

“Stop making fun of me,” I tell him despite being just as humored. “It’s my first time in England. I don’t know the name by heart.”

“Don’t worry, I’m here to remind you.” He winks at me, his usual playfulness causing my lips to twist upwards into a smile. The truth is, I could go anywhere with Johan by my side; no matter how long the drive is, he’d always find a way to make it entertaining.

“Did you know it’s Shakespeare’s birthplace?” he asks out of nowhere, his tone laced with palpable excitement.

I raise my eyebrows, quite surprised about it. “Really?”

“Yep, it’s a beautiful town. You’re gonna love it.”

An hour later, the driver announces that we’re finally arriving at our destination. I look out of the window, my eyes taking in the picturesque countryside, and the old town coming into view ahead of us, which feels like something out of a dream. The charming Stratford-upon-Avon town, with its cobblestone streets, pleasant canals, and quaint half-timbered houses, makes me wonder if I’ve stepped onto a movie set or into a storybook. It’s like being in a time capsule where history speaks through every brick and cobblestone. The car turns left and right, and after passing through the town center, we continue a bit farther into the countryside, until we finally stop and park in front of an adorable cottage, surrounded with lush green gardens. I can’t help but think it’s the kind of place where they film those swoon-worthy period dramas. The ivy-draped walls and the thatched roof give it an air of authenticity that’s positively enchanting.

Our chauffeur, the embodiment of professionalism, holds the car door open for me. Stepping onto the cobblestone path, I sneak a glance at Johan. Having him here adds a dash of excitement to this whole adventure, despite

its peculiar nature. My heartbeat quickens slightly. Why does he have to be so cute?

Approaching the cottage door, I ring the bell, and after waiting just a few seconds, it creaks open to reveal a sweet elderly lady. She exudes warmth and kindness, quite the opposite of Oma Margaret.

“Erm, good afternoon. I’m looking for Amelia van Lynden. I came here on behalf of my grandmother, Margaret van Dieren. She’s looking for her.”

The elderly lady lets out a long sigh, her face falling a bit. “Oh dear, Amelia moved out just two days ago.”

A sharp disappointment settles inside me when she delivers the news, but I quickly ask, “Do you know where I can find her by any chance?”

“I’m afraid not. Amelia left without saying a word.” Her voice is as pleasant as her smile, and to my surprise, she then adds, “But, she left something for your grandmother.”

Curiosity bubbles inside me as she disappears briefly inside the house and returns with a carefully wrapped package which she hands to me. My intrigue intensifies as I hold the mysterious package in my hands—what could this all mean? And why did my grandmother send Johan with me on this adventure?

We bid the woman goodbye, and once she closes the door on us, Johan and I walk away, trying to find a private place to open the infamous package. The river murmurs close by, so we head that way, finding a small bench to sit. Perched by the tranquil River Avon, the parcel safely cradled in my lap, I can’t deny that I’m excited to see what’s inside. My desire to take and to keep rear their head, but I push them away. This is not the time for all of that.

“Go ahead,” Johan prods as he nudges me. “You should be the one to open it.”

“O-okay,” I breathe, not even sure why I’m nervous. As I fumble with the delicate wrapping, I notice Johan's gaze focused on my face, which sends a little shiver through me. He flashes a gentle smile, and I can't help but feel my cheeks burning. *Girl, focus!*

To my astonishment, under the wrappings is an antique music box. It’s exquisite enough to take my breath away. The hand-painted box, its colors still vivid despite its age, is nothing short of spectacular. It’s delicate but full of character, and it seems to be intact. I open the lid slowly, and a haunting, beautiful melody floats through the air around us, making my skin rise in goosebumps.

The tune from another era fills the air with an enchanting ambiance, and it

makes the rest of the world seem to fade away. My gaze drifts to Johan, and I'm almost afraid to admit to myself how glad I am that he's here with me.

"This is so fascinating..." I say as I continue to observe the antique object, my fingers tracing over every little detail. I love collecting odd objects, and this one is definitely one of those I'd love to keep to myself. Beneath the box itself, I find a clasp under my touch. I turn the box upside down, and pulling the clasp, it unlocks the base of the box, allowing me to remove it. After removing the base completely, I put my fingers inside the box, finding not only the back of the musical mechanism, but also a folded note. My jaw drops once I unfold the paper, finding inside a message. The handwriting is elegant and sophisticated, leading me to believe it's from Amelia herself. My curiosity burns brighter as I read her words, which reveal a cryptic tale of hidden circumstances that forced her into hiding.

*"Margie, I knew you'll come searching for me, but I'm afraid it isn't yet the right time to meet.*

*Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them.*

*The right time and place shall come for us to be reunited again, I promise.*

*Until then, keep the music box safe for me. And remember our childhood melody, dear sister. It carries more weight than you might realize."*

What the heck? Oma Margaret has got a sister? How come she's never told us about her? Does Mom even know? Maybe that's why she wanted me to come here. A secret for a secret, I guess. Johan and I exchange glances, questions mirrored in each other's eyes.

"Now that is interesting," Johan says as he peers over to re-read something in the note.

"What?"

He puts a finger under the second paragraph. "It's a quote from Shakespeare." Then pulling his iPhone out, he types something in it, before turning the screen towards me. "It's from Twelfth Night, a play. This quote appears in a letter written by Maria who pretends to be Olivia to trick Malvolio in order for him to make a fool of himself which leads to his downfall."

I frown, wondering what does it have anything to do with Amelia's message. "And? Maybe she just wrote it because she wants to indicate that she's working on something great."

“Or maybe that quote has got another meaning, something linked to the trick Maria pulled on Malvolio.”

I huff at his observation. “I think you are reading too much into it. Amelia is just pointing out that she can’t meet Oma Margaret right now, but will once the time is right.”

“But why the random Shakespearean quote, then?” Johan insists.

I shrug, unable to give him a proper answer. “I don’t know, maybe Oma Margaret knows about it.”

Johan nods pensively, before asking, “Okay, maybe you should call her, then?”

His question gives me pause and I wonder if it’s appropriate calling Oma right now or not. But, after all, she told me to give her some update about my little errand once I was done. Decided, I pick up my iPhone, make the call, and put it on speakers once she answers the line.

“Oma?”

“Did you find her?” she asks instantly, the urgency evident in her tone. No time for greetings, I guess.

“Eh, well, she’s gone, unfortunately, but she left a music box along with a note for you.” I hold the phone in my hand, giving a few glances at Johan, who’s sitting beside me and listening just as eagerly.

“What does the note say?”

I read the letter out loud for Oma who once I finish, exhales loudly on the other side of the line.

“I hope my little secret is safe with you, Hannah.” Her tone is cold and suspicious. “No one needs to know about Amelia. Are we understood?”

“Sure....” Then putting on my most innocent voice, I ask, “Um, do you know why she included that Shakespeare’s quote?”

To our surprise, Oma doesn’t answer immediately, there’s a few beats of silence before she finally says, “I do yes. It’s not about the play itself, but what happened to us when Malvolio said those words out loud.” Unfortunately no further explanation whatsoever is given, and Oma quickly changes the subject. “Thank you for doing this for me, Hannah, please bring the music box back with you. We will meet upon your return from England.”

Seeing the disappointment in Johan’s face, I summon the courage to inquire further. “Can we know a bit more about what happened to you and Amelia? Did you two go to watch that play together and something happened there?”

“One day,” Oma answers back, her tone guarded. “Have a good one, Hannah, and thank you again.”

The call ends, and Johan and I are left totally speechless, still processing everything Oma told us.

“This was the weirdest call I have ever had with her,” I tell him, still processing everything. “And that’s saying something.”

“Hopefully you will learn more when you get back.” We exchange a smile, before Johan continues to ruminate. “This Amelia seems a very enigmatic character. If you want, I can do my own little investigation about her.”

My brows lift in surprise. “Really?”

“Of course,” Johan replies, nudging me playfully. “And thank you for trusting me enough for sharing this family secret with me.”

My heartbeat quickens at his warm voice, blood pumping through my veins.

This little investigation into Amelia might be the beginning of a thrilling mystery, one that might just bring us closer together. All of a sudden, though, we are interrupted by the sound of rustling leaves caused by someone approaching. We raise our heads immediately, and find nonetheless than the driver himself, his posture filled with nervous energy.

“Ms. Hannah, I think it’s best we keep going,” the driver says in a low, discreet voice as he strides in our direction, his tone setting off alarm bells in my head.

“What’s wrong?” I ask right back, while standing up at the same time as Johan does.

Once the man gets close enough to us, his posture becomes very much protective as if he’s no longer a simple chauffeur but a body guard tasked to escort us safely back to the car. He starts gesturing us the way, while keeping himself close to us for protection.

His whole behavior causes my heartbeat to rise steadily but Johan and I follow him, and we rush back to get inside the car. The lack of answers from the driver as we hurry isn’t helping.

Once we are both inside the car, and the driver sits in front, I notice how he not only locks the doors immediately, but also how quickly he turns the engine on and hits the road. As we drive away, the car filled with nervous tension, the driver remains glancing at the rear view mirror from time to time, which doesn’t ease me.



“What’s going on?” I ask again, my patience wearing thin.

“I...” the man seems to struggle to come up with words, and I raise my eyebrows at him in return. “Well, my apologies for the sudden interruption, but I think we were being followed.”

“Followed?” Johan repeats, his voice filled with shock. “By who?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know, sir.” Despite his fingers squeezing firmly on the steering wheel and his eyes being focused on the road, the chauffeur seems to be thinking something through. “If I may, would it be okay for me to escort you at the horse show?”

“You mean coming with us inside?” Now I’m the one who is in shock.

The driver looks at me from the rear view mirror and says, “I just want to make sure you’ll be all right inside, Miss.”

“I’m sure I will,” I tell him, my tone firm and decisive. “You have nothing to worry about; the event has plenty of security.”

He ponders for a moment, looks again in the rearview mirror, and gives a long sigh. “Fine, but I will wait for you outside. If anything goes wrong, please just call and I will join you.”

“Why are you saying we were being followed?” Johan asks, shifting in his seat.

“I, well, I saw two men passing by the car while you were by the river. They seemed very much intrigued and interested in seeing the car and my party waiting. At first, I thought they were just curious passers-by, but the way they behaved wasn’t much of my liking so I decided it was best to go.”

Johan leans back against his leather seat, exhaling loudly in return. “Maybe it was nothing. But good call. Better safe than sorry.”

“Thank you, sir.” The driver nods once, his face always so serious as he keeps his eyes steadily on the road ahead.

Johan then turns to face me, his eyes staring right at mine, but doesn’t say anything. It’s like he’s just staring to piss me off.

After a while, I finally ask, “What?”

“It’s getting dangerous hanging out with you, Ms. Hannah,” he points out in a tease.

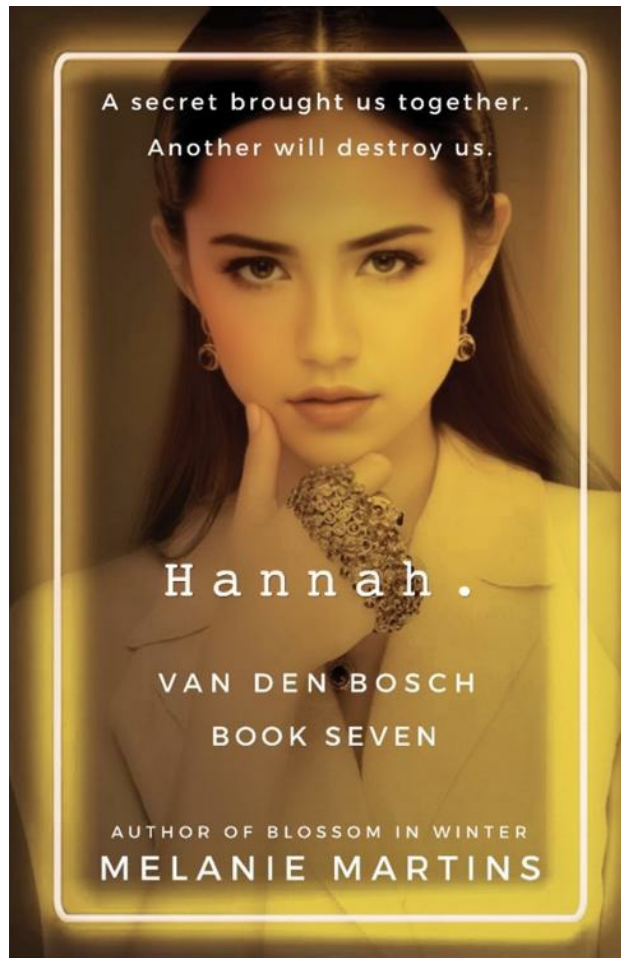
I can’t help but huff at his comment. “Would you rather not?”

There’s a mischievous smile forming at the corners of his lips, but he doesn’t answer my question, maybe it’s because we are so caught up in each other’s eyes that he’s speechless.

After a few moments of silence, though, he leans slightly closer to me, his

lips almost brushing my ear, when I hear him whispering, “I like taking risks.”

THE STORY CONTINUES IN  
HANNAH.



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Melanie Martins writes forbidden love stories laced with thrillers, morally gray characters, controversies, and erotism. She believes unconditional love is human's biggest superpower along with kindness and gratitude. When she is not behind her laptop writing, she can be found globetrotting, reading, daydreaming, and sharing her adventures on social media such as [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [TikTok](#), and [Goodreads](#).

Born in France and raised in Portugal, she has traveled to over 70 countries and continues doing so in her free time.

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