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"Forget it, Kai." Ingrid waved her hand before wiping her tears and forcing a smile. "It's no use talking about it. Besides, I've already accepted my fate." "Tell me, Ingrid," he insisted. "I will help you."

"Yes, Ingrid," added Josephine. "We'll both do."

Ingrid gazed at Josephine for several moments before deciding to trust them. "Kai, do you remember Dog?"

Kai nodded. "Of course I do. He's the dropout who used to collect protection fees from his victims outside the school gates, isn't he? He even gave me a kick that I haven't forgotten."

"That's the man I'm marrying," Ingrid murmured in a small voice. her head hung dejectedly.

"What?" Kai shouted, his eyes widening with rage. "He's a degenerate who did not even graduate middle school! How did Aunt Sarah allow you to marry him?" Though Josephine did not know Dog, she already had a negative impression of him painted in her mind's eye from the way the others were talking about him. This girl is beautiful and vivacious. She deserves to marry somebody better than that unsavory-sounding fellow.

Ingrid began crying again as she recounted to Kai her tale of woe.

When she was done, Kai turned blue with rage and slammed a fist down on the table, crushing it instantly into powder. "How dare he!" Josephine shouted.

As it turned out, Dog did not explore different career opportunities after his expulsion. As the rate of industrialization in Horington exploded in recent years, inhabitants of the numerous villages around the area had required a nudge to cooperate given the large investments dumped into Avenport for property development. Due to a combination of high stakes, impatient investors. and tight project deadlines, Dog, who had secured a contracting apprenticeship and worked his way to make a name for himself in Avenport, had put his bullying skills to good use in a secondary aspect of his job.

Aside from his actual contracting engagements, Dog had negotiated agreements with the developers who were anxious to expedite the demolition.

As soon as construction for the day ended, Dog would bring the very same men to the occasional stubborn residents who rebelled against the developers' terms and beat them into submission, often succeeding in coercing them into agreeing to a lower rate than what was originally offered. As his reputation spread, residents of Avenport began to steer clear of Dog.

Taking a fancy to his schoolmate, Ingrid, he came to the school one day and blackmailed the principal to expel her. Then, he threatened Ingrid with her parents in exchange for her promise to marry him, albeit out of fear.

Dog was also in charge of recommending the valuation of properties for approval.

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In an attempt to curry favor with his future in-laws, he valued Ingrid's family's house for a million, and their entire village to be slightly higher than the market rate. As a result, their village viewed Dog with an impression of benevolence that would have stood starkly at odds with any allegations Ingrid might make. As a result, Ingrid could only suffer in silence.

"D*mn it!" Kai muttered through gritted teeth, his eyes flashing dangerously.

He would not have cared if Dog was going to marry any other girl, as incidents of local thugs collaborating with developers occurred wherever urbanization occurred. I can't intervene every time that happens. I'm not a missionary! But when it comes to Ingrid, there is no way in hell I'll allow Dog to do as he pleases with her!

"Please don't act rashly, Kai!" begged Ingrid. "I've already made my peace with it. Dog has a group of men under his command, you know. I'd heard that he even has ties to the underground king of Horington. Those people commit murders without batting an eye! I can't let you bear that kind of risk for me." "Are you referring to Tommy Lewis?" Kai asked.

Ingrid thought hard for a moment. "That sounds about right. I just heard Dog mention that name once in passing."

"Leave it to me, Ingrid. I'll get you out of this marriage and sign you up for university in Horington. You need a diploma, at the very least." "Kai, I-" Ingrid began.

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"Trust him, Ingrid. He's going to handle it." Josephine interrupted Ingrid and took her by the hand.

Ingrid fell silent without attempting to press her point, having already given up. The sky was beginning to turn dark when Hannah returned.

"I hope you're hungry, Kai," she announced. "We're heading over to Aunt Sarah's. Ingrid's fiancé is buying dinner!"

"Dog?" Kai asked, perking up at once.

Hannah was taken aback by her son's audacity but recovered quickly. "Doug's not the same boy as he used to be," she warned. "He's a big shot now. Don't call him

that when you see him, it's rude."
"What else am I supposed to call him? When I see him, I'm going to-"

"Aunt Hannah," Ingrid interrupted. "Please tell my mother that we will be right over."

"See you all over there. Hurry, please. We mustn't keep him waiting." Without another word, Hannah turned on the spot and left.

As soon as her aunt disappeared around the bend further down the road, Ingrid turned around to face Kai. "All of them know nothing about this, especially my parents. I told them that it was voluntary so that they wouldn't worry." Kai marveled at his cousin's maturity as he gazed at her with pity. "Don't worry, Ingrid," he consoled whilst stroking her hair.

"Nobody will force you to do anything against your wishes anymore with me back here."

When everybody was at last ready, Kai drove the party over to Ingrid's house. A Toyota was hogging the middle of the road in an obnoxious fashion when they arrived. Leaning on the bonnet was a man with a gold necklace around his neck and gold rings on his fingers. A cigarette dangled from his lips as he was engaged in lively conversation with Kai's and Ingrid's parents.

Despite the years since they had been in school together, Kai recognized Dog at a glance. His eyes flashed menacingly.

"Please, Kai," whispered Ingrid, accurately deducing his grim expression. "Don't do anything rash."

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Kai gazed at Ingrid's fearful face for a long time before nodding resolutely. Dog turned to look as the party descended the Mercedes and smirked at the sight of Kai. "You look pretty frail for somebody who has spent the last three years in prison! Join me. Imagine the fearsome reputation you can establish with your tenure in prison!"

Kai glared coldly at Dog. "No thanks."

Dog's cheek twitched with annoyance at Kai's attitude, but when he caught a glimpse of Josephine walking behind Kai, his scowl dissolved into a lewd smile as his eyes swept up and down her body to her immense disgust. "I'm Doug Chance, miss. Pleased to meet you!" With the supposed air of a gentleman, Dog extended a hand adorned with golden rings. Josephine glared at him but did not say a word.

"This is Josephine, Kai's girlfriend." Afraid of incurring his wrath, Ingrid hurriedly filled the awkward silence by making the introduction.

Dog was not offended. Rather, he let out a chuckle as he clapped a hand on Kai's shoulder. "Not bad for managing to land this rich hottie as soon as you got out of prison!"

Dog did not bother to keep his voice down. As a result, pedestrians gazed curiously at Kai when they passed.

"We should get going," Ingrid said urgently as she clung to Kai's arm, anxious to avoid the possibility of the two men starting a brawl in the middle of the street. "The restaurant will run out of tables if we're late!"

"Impossible! There will always be a table at any restaurant in Avenport when I want to dine."

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Grabbing hold of Ingrid's hand, Dog dragged her toward his car. Despite being forcefully parted from her cousin, Ingrid did not cease her furious signals at Kai with her eyes as if to beg him not to lose his temper.

The party soon arrived downtown, barely recognizable from the developments over the past couple of years. Compared to before, there were many new restaurants on both sides of the road. Dog led the party to one of the biggest restaurants on the block which contained five stories.

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Dog pointed smugly at the building when all of them had gathered at the entrance. "This is the biggest restaurant in Avenport. Co-owned by yours truly!" Josephine took one look at the building and covered her lips to conceal her smile. "The one owned by my family is bigger," she whispered to Kai. "Is he actually proud of his pathetic square footage?"

Kai almost failed to stifle a laugh. I want to witness the true limits of his arrogance.

A waiter hurried forward at the sight of Dog's arrival. "Welcome, Dog!" "Have the biggest suite prepared for me," Dog commanded importantly. "As you can see, I'm hosting tonight."

The waiter hesitated. "That suite is occupied, Dog. If you had called ahead, we would not have-"

Smack!

Dog slapped the waiter across the face and stared fiercely at him. "Do I look like I need to make reservations? Kick whoever it is out of that suite! If you're not up for the task, get out of my way and find me somebody else who is!"

The waiter clutched his cheek as he sobbed, gazing up at Dog with eyes wide with terror.

"Let's take another suite instead, Doug," Ingrid suggested, feeling sorry for the waiter.

"That wouldn't do. I'm buying dinner for my in-laws today. We will be having the biggest suite!" I don't really care about that, to be honest. I just want to rub it in. "We can't, Dog!" the waiter whispered in alarm. "We can't kick the occupants out!"

"Who the hell are they?" Dog shouted at the waiter, raising his hand to strike the latter again. "Do I need to show up and kick them out myself?" Ingrid caught his arm before the blow struck.

The waiter recoiled backward in terror. "Mr. Larold Charleston and his company are currently the ones occupying that suite," he said in a trembling voice. Dog shuddered at the news. His demeanor changed abruptly.

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"Mr. Charleston is having his dinner here, you say? Why didn't you mention that earlier? Send me the bill for their suite. And while you're at it, get the next largest suite ready for me and my party!"

It became evident to his party that Dog was frightened of Larold.

The waiter nodded and sent another waiter to get rid of the diners in the second-largest suite.

Soon, the cursing voices of the expelled patrons drifted down to the lobby from up the stairs. As they appeared at the landing, they were revealed to be a group of large, round-bellied men.

"What kind of d*mn service is this?" yelled one. "How dare they kick us out before we're done with our dinner!"

"You're right," seethed another. "I have half a mind to bring my men and demolish this place!"

"I wonder who the idiot thinks he is to have us displaced," a third wondered aloud. The men marched down the stairs, escorted by a simpering waiter. Their faces were red from their furious discourse.

When they arrived at the lobby, the men turned deathly pale as they recognized the figure in the middle. "Dog!" they cried, scurrying forward in greeting. "I am the idiot who had you displaced!" Dog roared as he aimed a kick at each of the men who passed, mumbling apologies as they did so. "Nothing else to say, eh? I'd thought so!"

After yelling himself hoarse at them, he waved an arm dismissively. "Get out of my sight."

Looking immensely relieved, the large men scampered away like mice.

As soon as their suite was ready, Dog and his party were led upstairs by one of the waiters.

After taking their seats, Dog shoved the menus toward his guests carelessly. "My

treat today. Order whatever you want!"

"Kai, Josephine," added Ingrid, "please feel free to order anything you might like."

Unlike her fiancé, she placed the menus carefully before Kai and Josephine.

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"That's right." Dog nodded approvingly as he waved a hand with the heavy golden watch. "They must have starved you in prison, Kai. Eat up! You need some meat back on your bones."

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Kai smiled good-naturedly. "This place wouldn't have what I want."

Dog scowled. "What do you mean? This is the biggest restaurant in Avenport!

They even have the rarest Sauvignon Blanc if you so desire! What is it that you want?"

"I'm not fond of white wine," Kai said with a contemptuous glance at the wine list. "I only drink Romanée-Conti or nothing at all."

Dog frowned. "What the hell is that?"

In spite of herself, Josephine laughed at Dog's expression. Kai, on the other hand, remained silent with an enigmatic smile as he awaited Dog's response. Still frowning, Dog turned to the waiter beside him. "What was that wine he mentioned? Do you have any on hand?"

The waiter shook his head. "We don't carry red wine here."

"So it's a bottle of red, is it? What kind of person would drink that kind of swill?" Dog scorned in disdain before turning once more to the waiter. "Get out there and find some. Buy several bottles."

As he spoke, Dog extracted a wad of cash from his wallet and let it fall onto the table with a smack.

The waiter merely stared at the stack and waited expectantly.

"Did you not hear me?" Dog fumed. "I told you to get out and buy us some wine!" "It's not enough, Dog," the waiter whispered.

"How much could a bottle of red cost?" Dog asked scornfully. "Here is another five thousand!"

As he spoke, Dog slammed another wad of cash onto the table.

The waiter remained still as a statue. Dog lost his temper and aimed a vicious kick at the waiter's shins.

"It really isn't enough, Dog!" the waiter whimpered in pain.

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"Do you think I was born yesterday?" Dog bellowed as he rose to his feet. "You're going to pocket some for yourself, aren't you?"

"Enough." Kai felt the need to intervene. "This wine isn't available in Avenport. And the waiter's right. A single bottle of Romanée-Conti costs three-hundred thousand."

"What! Three-hundred thousand?" Dog roared, thunderstruck. "You, drinking a bottle of wine that costs that much? With what money? Everybody knows that you just got out of prison. Do you think that renting a Mercedes and hiring an escort makes you look rich? If you weren't Ingrid's cousin, I would have kicked you out of Avenport."

Josephine's expression grew cold at the mention of the word "escort".

"Calm yourself, Kai." Sarah stood up and faced him. "Nobody is making you feel bad about being an ex-convict. We're all family here, there's no need to act tough in front of us. You need to be more realistic and settle down with an honest job instead of boasting about drinking expensive wine. What nonsense are you talking about, anyway? There is no wine in the world worth that much. Don't be ridiculous."

"That's enough, Kai. Your aunt is right," Hannah said sharply at the sight of her sister's displeasure.

"You need to keep an eye on Kai, Hannah," Sarah sighed. "I've helped raise my nephew. I know him and there's nothing he can hide from me. This isn't him. Prison has made him lose his way. Now that he's finally out, I'd say we try to keep him from going back. Since the development of our city is currently booming, the mass demolition on the way would definitely need good, strong men like him. Talk some sense into Kai. Help him find an honest job to marry a wife and raise a son. It's not too late to lead an honest life."

"We'll talk about it later," Hannah said curtly, getting tired of the conversation. "Everybody knows what they want? Let's summon the waiter."

Not long after that, the table creaked from bearing the combined weight of the dishes and several bottles of white wine. Dog behaved ostentatiously as he waited for the others to raise their glasses to him, pretending to be pleasantly surprised each time he received a toast.

"By the way, Dog," said Sarah suddenly. "Who is this Mr. Charleston?"

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"Oh, he's a big shot," described Dog airily. "Nothing happens in Avenport without his approval. Even property valuations depend on his signature. He is the one who has been providing me with contracts."

Sarah was still concerned about Kai's employment status. "He sounds like an important man. Can you see if Mr. Charleston can find Kai a job? He's going to be your cousin-in-law, after all."

Dog gazed scathingly at Kai. "I would refuse to lift a finger to help him for his attitude tonight.

For Ingrid's sake, I will put in a word with Mr. Charleston."

Turning away with disgust, he picked up his glass of wine. "I'm going over to toast to Mr. Charleston's good health. Help yourselves!"

Kai's family and Ingrid's family were the only ones remaining in the suite after Dog disappeared.

"I mean well despite the harshness of my words, Kai," Sarah continued, sighing softly as she did so. "As your parents are no longer employed, you are now the man of the house. If you're not going to buck up, who will your parents rely upon? What's the point of coming back with a rental car and girlfriend? Are appearances really that important to you? Everybody in the village knows that you're fresh out of prison. They'll disrespect you even more when they see through your little charade!"

"Aunt Sarah, I-"

"What the hell are you talking about, Mom?" Ingrid snapped indignantly. "Josephine is Kai's girlfriend. A rental! Listen to yourself. You've been buying into Dog's rubbish."

I am certain that Josephine is not rented by Kai for appearance's sake. No escort would dress up in luxury brands and gift me a priceless pair of earrings. Dog is the one who is in denial!

"Josephine really is Kai's girlfriend, Sarah," Hannah reminded her sister. "We all know that as a fact."

Surrounded by overwhelming convictions, Sarah became at a loss for words. All she could do was grin sheepishly at Josephine who returned the smile without a trace of offense taken. Kai's aunt only wants the best for him. I'm sure she didn't mean to direct her malice at me.

"I hope that landing such an excellent girl will encourage you to work harder, Kai," began Sarah again, changing tact at light speed. "I'd heard from your mother that you've remained unemployed this entire time. If Doug manages to secure a job for you, promise me that you'll give it your best shot. I know this isn't Horington, but you'll still have an opportunity to rise. This town isn't going to stop expanding in a hurry."

"I am well aware of all that, Aunt Sarah," said Kai gently. "Now's not the time to be discussing me. There's something about Ingrid you should know."

It's time to tell them.

"What about Ingrid?" Sarah leaned in curiously.

"Stop, Kai!" Ingrid turned pale with fright.

Kai ignored her. Instead, he looked straight into his aunt's eyes. "Ingrid is only nineteen, Aunt Sarah. She's too young to marry."

"Don't even remind me about it," Sarah sighed. "The silly girl is the one who wanted to drop out. What else is she good for aside from marriage? The fate of women is the same everywhere. Village or city, it makes no difference! Get an education, or get married."

"That's not true." Kai took a deep breath. "Dog had been causing trouble at the school and forced the principal to expel Ingrid. What's more, he used you, Ingrid's parents, as leverage to force her to agree to marry him. Shouldn't you already know by now the type of person he is?"

All of them were taken aback by Kai's shocking proclamation. Even his own stared at Ingrid, horror-struck.

"Is that true, Ingrid?" Sarah asked in a quavering voice.

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"Stay out of it, Mom!" cried Ingrid helplessly. "By this point, it doesn't matter whether or not it's true."