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"Julia?" [1]

Even after saying that name out loud, Amelie still couldn't believe that this woman was standing right in front of her.

Because this woman was her older sister.

Julia Ashford was four years older than Amelie and was treated as an unfortunate stain to the Ashford family. Not by her own parents, of course, but by Richard Clark's family, because once the girls' parents died, it was the Clarks who took them in to make sure they would get a proper education and secure the future desired by their late parents. And, of course, themselves.

Julia, however, didn't really want that future; or anything else that Mr. and Mrs. Clark wanted to force upon her. She had a rebellious soul ever since she was a kid and she didn't like it when someone tried to oppress her freedom. [2]

Therefore, when Julia turned seven years old, Mrs. Clark, tired of all the trouble the girl had been creating, decided to send her to a boarding

school abroad in hopes that living away from the comfort of her usual surroundings would finally make her learn her place.

Unfortunately for the Clarks, it wasn't her surroundings that made her act like that; it was their very family. And thus, once Julia turned sixteen, she finally realized that she had enough of the forced life she was having; she dropped out of school and ran away from the family with the people who, as she thought, understood her better.

Amelie hasn't heard from or about her ever since. And even though she had attempted to look for her sister dozens of times, all her efforts proved to be futile. It seemed that Julia didn't want to be found, even by her.

But now, due to some bizarre twist of fate, after so many years apart, her sister was standing right in front of her and it almost felt like Amelie was looking at her own reflection.

Indeed, Julia, just like her sister Amelie, was a spitting image of their late mother: her light brown hair was barely reaching her shoulders, she always liked to tuck it behind her ears even

though some strands still refused to stay in place. Her brown eyes had a light-green gradient mixed in, which made it difficult to understand what color her eyes really were at first glance.

Julia's features were a little sharper than her younger sister's, making it easier to discern that she was older; but the thing that set them apart the most was Julia's body--she got their father's height, making her more than a head taller than Amelie, and well-developed frame, indicating that she was not a stranger to athletic activities.

A simple black pantsuit she was wearing made her look too serious and even a little intimidating.

"What... What are you doing here?"

Amelie could barely form a few words as she was still recovering from the shock of this unexpected encounter and it seemed that Julia was battling with the same issue. She parted her lips but nothing came out of her mouth. She really had no idea whether anything she could say right now would be good enough; no matter how simple or reasonable it might be.

Nevertheless, Julia had to say something,

therefore, letting out a short exhale, she stretched her lips into an almost invisible smile and finally replied,

"I am sorry about your divorce, Amelie. I can't say that I am not happy, after all, you know how I feel about that family, but... Yeah, I am sorry. He had no right to treat you like that." 1

Amelie felt a slight pang of sorrow frightening her chest. "So... you know what happened?"

Julia nodded. "Liam told me everything."

Her sister, too, curled her lips into a somewhat bitter smile. "So I guess it means you have been in contact with him for a while now. I had no idea you were back. I had no idea about anything."

Julia shook her head in an attempt to let her sister know that there was not a single bit of her fault in any of that.

"Liam Bennett reached out to me first. I don't know how he found me; frankly, I didn't even know who he was or how he was related to you until we actually met. I was touched by what he said to me, you know," she offered Amelie a

bigger smile this time and continued, "he told me everything and asked me to come back because he was convinced that you would need the support of someone whom you consider your real family.

He told me he wanted to marry you, so I couldn't understand why he thought that his support was not enough, but... Well, I guess that was just his attempt to help you feel more comfortable. It seems that he understands your circumstances very well." 2

She paused, hoping that Amelie would say something in return, but her sister remained speechless. Julia didn't really blame her for that--no matter what she had to say, it wouldn't magically erase the years of separation caused by her selfishness and yet, she still wanted to let her know that even though she didn't know how to properly show it, she still cared for her.

"I wasn't sure whether seeing you so soon after your divorce would actually do you any good," she started again, "Although I left that world behind, I still know that its rules hardly ever change. With all the stress and scandals in your life... I wanted to make sure that my presence

would not harm you instead."

Amelie took a deep inhale and realized that she had been holding her breath all this time and now she was beginning to feel lightheaded. Julia's words were reasonable and she was happy to hear that she tried to be careful, but that alone was not important to her.

"I wouldn't care what others would think about me or... you. To be completely honest with you, I am not even sure a lot of them would remember that the Ashford family had another daughter."

Julia couldn't suppress a hearty chuckle that escaped her chest once she heard those words--Amelie was probably absolutely right, and truthfully, Julia preferred it that way, but it still sounded a little sad.

Amelie realized how it sounded to her sister but decided to dismiss it; instead, she went for the question that had been bothering her ever since the two of them faced each other just a few minutes ago.

"So... What are you doing here, in this mansion?"

"Uhm..." Julia began somewhat awkwardly as if

not sure what kind of answer would be safe enough to still keep their conversation light. "Liam hired my... people to replace his current security team. Security--well, services resembling it, too--is something I have been working with for the last decade."

"Security?" Amelie repeated, her eyes widening.

There was nothing really strange about her sister working in such a field, however, now that she heard her say that, a distant memory pushed through the depth of forgotten details inside her mind.

'There was this one time when I thought I found Julie's whereabouts but when I read the file on the person who was supposedly her, that woman was known to be working for one of the mafia somewhere in the Italian suburbs... I decided to not dive into it further because I couldn't believe that my sister, despite her wild and unruly nature, would end up being a criminal.'

The woman standing before her right now, however, did have that quality about her: something distinctly dangerous and warning; and perhaps it was really a part of an intricate

blend of reasons why Julia had not been able to see her sister for so long.

'Security...' Amelie now repeated that word inwardly, "I don't want to make any dangerous assumptions, especially since it concerns Liam as well, but I don't want to pry either. I guess nothing bad will come out of it if I leave it alone for the time being."

"I am happy that you're back, Julia," she finally said out loud, another light smile dancing upon her lips, "And I hope we will be seeing each other more often from now on."

Her words evoked a long moment of awkward silence linger between them. Both Julia and Amelie were molded into reserved and even a little cold people, thus, neither was sure how to properly show their emotions in situations like this. Especially Julia.

Silent seconds were passing by and they realized that standing like that was beginning to simply look weird. Julia decided to speak first.

"I see you were on your way to see your husband. I will let you go in first, it must be important. My thing can wait until later anyway."

"No, you must be here regarding work, so--"

"It's fine," Julia interrupted her with another subtle smile. "See you around, Amelie."

She waved her hand at Amelie rather shyly, then turned around and took a few steps before pausing again and offering her sister one last smile. "I am glad to be back too."

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