

The Daughter's Will

The naked light bulb hanging above the table in the conference room reminded Roman of an interrogation room. Not that he had ever been in an interrogation room before; his only run-in with the law had involved his failure to clean up after his ex-girlfriend's poodle in Central Park over three years ago—hardly the type of thing for which people were dragged into stations and questioned. No, beyond that Roman didn't have so much as a parking ticket to his name, but he had seen enough crime dramas over the years (*Law and Order* being his favorite) for the image to spring to mind just now.

Charles Prescinilli said there had once been a decorative glass covering for the bulb but that one of his clients, angry at learning that her husband had left her nothing, had thrown her stiletto and cracked it. According to the stout lawyer, that had happened years ago. He had just never replaced it. "Why bother?" he'd asked when pressed. "Probably some other woman come in here and throw her shoe at the new one. What's the point then?" Roman doubted that was the real reason, though. It was too unlikely, and he always preferred to look at things from a practical standpoint. In his eyes, Mr. Prescinilli had just been too lazy (or cheap) to replace it.

"There really was nothing else."

The words brought Roman back from his daydream, and he let the front legs of his chair come crashing back to the floor. The sudden noise focused every eye on him, and he shifted uneasily under the stares of the three women. Looking from one gaze to the next, he was unsure whose eyes were the hardest to meet.

The first pair of eyes belonged to his wife, Rhea. Her golden hair should have been grey, but she had it dyed every three weeks. She hated looking old, though Roman could see nothing too wrong with it; it was simply the way things were. She had never understood that part of him. He often wondered what had possessed him to marry her in the first place. But beside what had led to their eventual union, more confusing still was the reason she still wore a golden band on her ring finger and he on his. She had no biological connection to either of the other two women seated at the table.

The first of his daughters, Hannah, he'd had with a young philosophy student three years after his marriage to Rhea. The young girl had panicked at being an unwed mother and had begged Roman to take the child. Logically, he was the better choice for the parent, with a family and a stable income. The young student had forfeited her maternal rights, and little Hannah had come to live with him. Rhea never voiced a word of objection, though she had gone and had her own child by another man. What a fine tangle that had been. His other daughter, Aurora, had come about in much the same way, though, thankfully, that time his wife had done nothing more than thin her lips as the second child that was not hers came to live with them. The two girls (he still thought of them as girls even though they were both long out of college) shared only his blood, but at the moment, they could have been twins for all the similarity in the icy stares they offered him.

He was unsure of what he was supposed to do—he wasn't even quite aware of what he had done wrong in the first place. Mr. Prescinilli looked around the room uneasily and cleared his throat nervously. Of course, all that did was shift their eyes back to him. He blanched.

"This has to be a mistake. She wouldn't do this." That was Rhea. She couldn't see it. Sara *could* do it, and she had. But still, Roman could see where his wife's frustration was coming from. Sara had been her daughter, their daughter. She had only the remotest of connections to the other girls, but in the end, that didn't appear to have mattered.

Roman glanced down at the paper sitting in the middle of the table, the source of this mess. It was Sara's will, stamped with an image of an apple, and all it said was that she had left everything to the woman that she had "loved the most."

"I assure you, this is no mistake." Mr. Prescinilli shifted in his seat, trying to sit up straighter. He was clearly striving for every inch of authority he possessed. Roman didn't blame him. This had to be unlike anything he had ever done before.

A silence stretched out over the table like a thick woolen blanket, pressing down on everyone. Roman had to fight to keep himself from gulping desperately for air as if he might run out. Now that was illogical. He made himself breathe normally.

Almost as illogical, he mused, as why Rhea had never left him. He was hers, she had said. "I'll be damned if I let some little tramp take my husband from me." Those had been her exact words, as if she blamed only the women and not him. She had tried to get back at him of course, like with her pregnancy trick, but everything she had done had been petty and pointless. Well, maybe not the time she had gotten pregnant, he amended, but everything else had been.

Abruptly, he realized everyone was staring at him again, though this time expectation was in all of their eyes. Frantically, he sought back in his memory for the last thing said, which had been, apparently, directed at him. Nope. There was nothing for it. He had no idea what they wanted.

The door opened then, and a young man, an assistant by the look of him, entered the room with a stack of folders. Mr. Prescinilli looked up at him, clearly relieved at the interruption, but everyone else ignored him, the three women keeping their eyes fixed firmly on Roman.

"You choose," Rhea said with the voice of someone disapproving of having to repeat herself.

That sent warning bells off on Roman's head, but he didn't need them. It was a bad idea. Choosing between his wife and his two illegitimate daughters, he was sure to make one friend and two enemies, and he could see no happy outcome in him for that. He shook his head.

"You choose," Rhea said again, and this time the other two nodded. The assistant leaned down to whisper into Mr. Prescinilli's ear.

This was quickly getting out of hand. If anything, their eyes had all intensified, though Roman had not thought that to be possible. There had to be some other solution, one that didn't result in him suffering for the rest of his life due to this one decision. He cast his gaze desperately around the room, looking for something, anything.

The assistant straightened, and began to walk back to the door, the lone bulb casting his shadow ahead of him on the door. Yes, that was the way. "Wait," Roman called.

The man stopped, uncertain, his outstretched hand frozen only inches from the door knob. He turned around slowly. "Yes?"

Roman pushed the papers toward him. "There is a decision for you to make."

The assistant looked to Mr. Prescinilli who nodded, clearly wanting to be done with this oddity, and picked up the papers. His eyes widened as he read what was written, He looked up at the three women, and gulped nervously.

Roman felt the gazes shift from him to the assistant, and it felt as if a weight had been lifted off of his shoulders.

The three women began to smile sweetly.

The assistant began to shake.