

The Sun King's Man



PRELUDE

*De Haan, Belgian coast,
early morning of January 2, present time*

The seaside village of De Haan and the rural Wolsberg were like a big and a tiny sun, lighting their own little cosmoses in a bigger universe. The first was a coastal resort, built around 1900 for the wealthy and beautiful of Belgium's Belle Epoque. Its Art Nouveau architecture was stunning, but Julia Devereaux's heart throbbed with nostalgia at the thought of little Wolsberg in the hills of the German Eifel, where she had first met Tim de St. Clere and his thousand-year-old family castle.

When returning from church in downtown De Haan, Julia scurried past shops but slowed to a stop in front of a shoe store. She spied the price of a pair of pink moccasins, and she caught herself in a reflection in the glass.

A thirty-two-year-old stuffed bear, she thought, gazing at herself. The multiple layers of winter clothes flattened her curved hips yet gave her rather modest breasts an interesting volume. *Would she look that way, if pregnant?*

Julia pulled off her fashionable wool cap and let her long black hair flow freely around her shoulders. "Better!" she breathed out, unbuttoning the collar of her beige overcoat and pulling out her shawl, a gray-and-white-patterned garment of brushed silk she only wore to church.

It was a fine, clear winter day and, although the sun stood low, agreeably warm for the season. There was an exotic aura around her fine chin, the full lips and the slightly tanned skin, Tim once had said, and he adored her slim body...

"Beware of such thoughts!" hissed the voice of religious conscience in her mind, but an angelic whisper from the realms of natural inclination countered, *"Don't! Head for Love!"*

Julia shoved the hands in her pockets and crossed a boulevard, passed an antique tram station, then turned right and walked along a street lined with lime trees and hundred-year-old holiday homes. Two more crossings, then six houses down to the left, and she would reach *Mon Plaisir*, Tim's 1930s rented cottage.

During the morning mass, which her atheist boyfriend had, of course, not deigned to attend, Julia had not understood one word of the Flemish priest's sermon. She nevertheless had prayed with closed eyes, and teeth pressed together so hard, she feared her gums might start bleeding.

Julia prayed paternosters three times a day, and whenever at leisure. Why did God not reveal His intentions and show her the solution for her romantic dilemma? She was in love with Tim—a good man who treated her well, however, the issue of a church marriage with an unapologetic atheist might be too big an obstacle.

Eight months earlier, Julia's superior had sent her to Wolsberg, not as a delegate for the Brussels Archives, but as her replacement to personally hand over an urgent, private message. She dutifully had carried the letter to Wolsberg, thus warning Baron Timothée de St. Clere about the imminent danger of a reckless crook. The existence of a medieval horde was recorded in the St. Clere family lore, and the crook, after stumbling onto an ancient document which hinted to the precise location, had started a treasure chase. The letter warned St. Clere that the man would not shy away from using violence to lay his hands on the long-lost gold.

The intense visit triggered Julia and Tim's complicated love affair, and the start of a roller-coaster chase after the legendary

cache. They unearthed nothing, except for a serious lover's argument and a four-week communication blackout with Tim.

"Cuckoo," Tim called, and waved from the garden, seeing Julia arrive.

"Coo-coo," she echoed from afar. She slowed a bit after realizing she had been bouncing along the road like an eager squirrel.

"Nine months since we met," Julia said after a heartwarming embrace. "And today's your birthday!"

"Nine months that feel like nine days," Tim said with an impish grin. "I won't tell you how thirty-seven years feel, though. I just wish I'd known you years earlier."

Julia sighed, remembering how fast she had fallen in love with the charming man, who still was so young at heart. However, the silver streaks on his temples had invaded his chestnut hair and glistened in the sunlight—a gray discoloration that had widened since they'd found each other. The jaws of fate had devoured Tim's baronial inheritance and mauled a sizable chunk off his self-confidence.

Another flash of reminiscence brought a slight quiver in her stomach. The infamous day, when treasure hunters had broken into Castle Wolsberg by way of a ruse, the crook and his praetorians had combed the long-vaulted hall, the old kitchen, the yellow, red, green, and blue reception rooms, then Tim's library with its red velvet chairs and curtains on the first floor.

Not finding the hoped-for clue to the treasure, they also had searched the half-dozen dozen bedrooms and even the sprawling domestic quarters, injuring Tim's elderly housekeeper in their brutal passage.

"Marietta's still not getting in touch?" Julia asked, almost to herself.

Tim gave an embarrassed shake of the head. "No."

As a result of his egotistic approach to his disastrous financial situation, Tim had ignored Marietta's advice and sold the

castle through a real estate agency with disastrous results.

Angered beyond belief, Tim's poor old maid had left him after a lifetime of faithful service to the St. Clere's. Julia felt sure he could still apologize and heal the damage—after all Marietta had practically raised him.

After one failed attempt to reach her by phone, Tim had refused to try to contact her again. It had also been Tim's stubborn refusal to even make one small step toward active Catholicism that had rendered Julia's plans for marriage unthinkable. In the end he had proposed, though, but what could Julia have done but refuse. Atheism and stubbornness—maybe hers was nothing but a rebound relationship that followed the break-up between Tim and his ex-fiancée, Blanche?

She blinked to the sun, praying, and wishing for a sign—any sign.

“Want to know what I dreamed last night?” Julia asked, who leaned against the garden fence after taking a long breath.

“It was a harsh winter in the late sixteen-hundreds,” she added without waiting for an answer. “I watched your ancestor Quentin and his valet strap the stolen treasure to their saddles and bail off into icy fog—”

“A nightmare!” Tim laughed, pulling off his gardening gloves. “I love your sensitive dreams about my forebears.”

Was this meant honestly, or sarcasm? Julia shot Tim an annoyed look while sensing her blood pressure rise. “Next, I was Antonia, Quentin's wife—a disheveled baroness kneeling on the flagstones of Castle Wolsberg. I scrubbed stone after dirty flagstone until pain seared through my hands and knees and then I crept across the hall, crying over our children's poor future.”

Just then, Julia knelt to greet Patsy, Tim's black Labrador, and Ginger, a red-furred Corgi, who came running around the house from the back garden.

“I often wondered how the St. Clere offspring survived after the confiscation of Quentin's estate,” she said, her pulse calming as she petted Tim's dogs. “Do you think they had to work

the skin off their bones?”

Tim pressed his lips together. “It’s a fact that Antonia and the children suffered after Quentin’s disappearance, despite all personal inconveniences, and lived on in the castle after Quentin’s condemnation by the king. To this day, I cannot believe my ancestor committed treason and then abandoned his family to misery! That’s *my* eternal nightmare, and I need to crack its secret!”

“But historical documents confirm Quentin and Nicklaus decamped with a chest of Louis XIV’s gold. I’ll promise you fireworks and champagne if you prove they didn’t.”

Julia rose and took Tim by the arm to stroll to the cottage entrance.

“Come to think of last year’s Viking treasure disaster, how can you even consider another hunt, now after seventeenth century gold—only because you discovered these supposed geographic coordinates on an old family jewel?” Julia sighed. “Best, you quit chasing ghosts and let dust grow over Quentin’s stolen treasure story.”

“Never—I’m fed up sticking my head in the sand. Wherever the truth hides, I’ll find it.” Tim shook off Julia’s arm.

“Finding Louis’s gold among Quentin’s possessions would confirm his betrayal,” she said when Tim ignored her statement. “Tomorrow we’ll pack and move to the gamekeeper’s cottage, the last piece of Wolsberg I own,” he said.

Julia shook her head.

“I’ll restore the little house”—Tim inhaled—“with the funds that remain from the castle sale. The locals shall see of which stock a de St. Clere is bred.”

“At least play it safe and prepare for running into a fulminating deception. The truth might open a book you’d rather keep sealed in chains, and you might need to face shame when you learn why your ancestor lost his family honor.” Julia fumed when Tim’s shoulders rose and dropped.

“Has all that ruminating about betrayal rotted your mind?” Julia said. Her voice grated. “You haven’t been talking much else since last October. Sometimes I even catch you daydreaming about the old story. Why not return to the present, instead of chasing vain dreams of renewed family pride.”

A frightening earnestness ground into Tim’s face when he halted, ten yards from the cottage door. “Do you realize,” he said, “you’re telling me why I should *not* abandon my quest. Recalling my ancestor’s misfortune by putting me inside his skin, again and again, keeps it alive. I can sense Quentin facing the dilemma, taking courage, and fighting adversity... He made me his advocate.”

“You mean, I’m the devil’s advocate,” Julia said. She could not resist to shake her head once more.

Tim grinned. “I’m a stiff-necked bulldog chewing on a bone, I know. But the transcendence of values between men and eras gives me the motivation to live in Quentin’s time and shoes. If you would make my coat of arms yours, darling, you might come to understand this search for truth and honor.”

There was an awkward, prolonged silence as Julia struggled to find a response that wouldn’t ruin their fragile reconciliation.

She jumped when Tim suddenly grabbed her and squeezed her waist. “I love you nonetheless,” he said, laughing.

“Stop being childish! I’d rather stay single than marry without a church ceremony.”

Julia was six years younger than Tim, but for her being out of wedlock was a loss of time. Her old-fashioned heart craved marriage but would never concede to an atheist’s ceremony. No God, no deal!

Clouds darkened the sky and the wind rose. Julia teased her rebellious strands of long black hair into a bun. “What’s that matter of honor about, anyway? Do you worry you won’t solve it before starting a family, or is this just another vain chase after family glory and gold?”

“Honey,” Tim said, “let’s not start an argument. If you listened more to your heart than following the Bible rules like a

blind sheep, you might see—”

“All right! Let’s discuss marriage with calm and composure. I’ll start with a fact and a question: One: I won’t marry without a religious ceremony. Two: Do you promise our kids will be baptized?” Julia’s words left her mouth trembling in her excitement.

Tim scratched the side of his neck. “Well... I’m not opposed to having our eventual children baptized, but I cannot marry you in a church wedding. You know I never lie. I do not believe in godly punishment for lying, but I don’t want to lose my moral integrity. It’ll never work that way, I’m afraid.”

“Then...” Julia’s determined mind boiled for a solution. She stood between Tim and the house, her mouth dry, and casting an almost defeated look toward the street. On the evergreen hedge which surrounded the cottage garden, birds of different color and breed sat on the same twig, joyously chattering. The idea flashed like an electric shock. “Unitarians!” Julia exclaimed.

“Er... What?” Tim asked with knotted brows.

“We’ll find a Unitarian Universalist church and minister. They do not assert a specific creed or belief and their liberal philosophy is more search for truth and meaning than religion. You wouldn’t need to step beyond your principles, whilst I can have my church ceremony. We can have slightly different vows as well.”

“Hm... All right, good... I mean excellent. It’ll still be a church, but I heard that fellowship is composed by theists, and atheists like me. You’re a genius, my darling future wife!”

For the first time during Julia’s stay in De Haan, the view of Tim’s plumb little cottage, with its crumbling white façade and faded-red entrance and garage doors, reflected a sense of weightlessness, of home. All of a sudden, she felt as glad as a lark and as hungry as a wolf and, with her mood stoked-up, rejoicing at the idea of the savory anniversary lunch she had reserved for Tim. And then, there was the funny-checkered, *Very British* cap she had found as a present... Julia’s cheeks glowed with content when she flung her arms around his neck and clung to him for a long moment.

While glancing over Tim's shoulder, she took in how the sun pierced the clouds, like a celebration to the victory of concord, and the morning air took on a delightful glimmering haze. Birds chirped from the trees, roofs, and hedges while Patsy's and Ginger's joyful barking added to Julia's newfound happiness.

Tim grinned when he released her arms and pecked Julia's brow. He was humming while she let him precede her toward the door.

For one glorious moment everything was perfect in the best of worlds.

Then Tim was shot.