Think of me

Lois Blommestein

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I love you, dad.

Prologue

The ticking of the clock is the only sound I hear. I pull the zipper of my cardigan higher, covering the last bit of exposed skin. My mother says I should spend more time in the sun to get a "healthy" complexion. The last thing I want is a "healthy glow." It's mid-September, and most people are complaining that they didn't have a proper summer this year. I haven't had a good summer in years—but do you hear me complaining about it?

I hear my psychologist's voice in the hallway. She's late, and I don't like that. I scratch at my face and feel a scab come loose, causing the small wound to start bleeding again. My mother finds it annoying when I do that. But what does she expect? Should I take a pair of scissors or a knife to my leg instead? Yes, I often scratch my face until it's raw, and there are visible scars—but if that's the worst of it, then what? I know she has my best interests at heart, but there are some things she simply cannot understand. Eva has been my psychologist for a few years now, and from the very beginning, I've felt a sense of trust and comfort with her. I don't think she's very old; she certainly looks young. I know very little about her private life, while she knows almost everything about me. I've always struggled to open up. I'm an introverted twenty-year-old girl with long brown hair and brown eyes—nothing more, nothing less. So why was I chosen? I still wonder about that.

What was so special about me? I don't know. All I know is that I've felt like absolute shit for years, because of what he did to me. I don't want to think of his name—doing so only brings

back terrible memories. It's the flashbacks that I still struggle with—the ones that send me into a state of total panic.
Eva sits down across from me and asks how I'm doing. I know she means well, and that it's her job to ask, but it's such an obvious question. Why else would I be talking to someone? For fun? Is there anyone with PTSD who thinks, 'Gee, let me have a nice, pleasant chat with a psychologist about the things someone else did to me—the very things that make me wake up screaming every single night?'
No.
The worst part is that everyone thinks he's absolutely wonderful. He's a darling to the general public, but it's all just a façade. Beneath that charming exterior lies a monster. Only I know that—and so does he.
And I'm certain I'm not the only one.
I've already had a few EMDR sessions, and I know that afterward, I'll be completely shattered—my face will show the toll, and all I'll be able to do is cry. But I want to keep going; I have a goal, and that is to come out of this stronger. He thinks he's safe, but he isn't.
'Today, I'd like to talk about your very first day. You mentioned that when you were eighteen, you had a part-time job as a cleaner.'
I nod, waiting to hear what else Eva has to say. There's a device on the table—a sort of bar—that lights up as soon as we begin the session. I have to recount what happened while keeping my eyes fixed on it. Eva tells me I'm safe, that nothing can happen to me. My heart rate spikes as I tell her about the first time Ties Verduyn couldn't keep his hands to himself. I start to cry as I recount how he cornered me in his house, placed his hands on my breasts, and pushed my knees apart. A shiver runs through

my body when I recall his breath against my ear, whispering the words: ‘Think of me.’

1.

Thursday, December 16

Amsterdam Vice and Sex Crimes Unit

Demi Lachten

While Chris Rea sings about driving home for Christmas, Demi is also getting ready to wrap up her workday. She's managed to get a lot done: reports have been submitted and are now being reviewed by the Public Prosecution Service, and various suspects and victims have been interviewed. Demi takes a final sip of her coffee, realizes it's gone cold, and sets the cup aside with a grimace. That's how it often goes in this line of work—you make a cup of coffee, only for a hundred other tasks to intervene, leaving you to forget you'd even poured one in the first place. Demi looks up and sees some of her colleagues gathering their things, ready to head home. Sitting across from her is Luuk Min, her regular partner and, by now, her rock and trusted confidant. Over the past few years, they've worked on numerous sex crime cases—each one more horrific than the last. This job isn't for everyone, yet Demi wouldn't have it any other way. There's a sense of satisfaction in hearing a judge's verdict, even if the sentence often feels lenient given what the victims have endured—they are left with a life sentence, while the perpetrator might only serve a few years behind bars.

The phone on her desk rings. It's 5:30 PM, and Marco is expecting her at a restaurant in an hour to celebrate their wedding anniversary. There was a time when they could barely

stand the sight of each other, but thanks to a lot of talking and couples therapy, they managed to turn things around—and not a day goes by that she regrets it.
Luuk shoots her an inquiring look, as if to ask: 'Are you going to answer that?'
With slight reluctance, Demi picks up the phone and leans back. 'Demi Lachten, Sex Crimes Unit.'
'There's a woman here who wants to speak with you.'
'Who is it? I didn't think I had any more appointments scheduled.'
Luuk asks what's going on. She ignores him and turns away so she doesn't have to look at him. She can tell from the receptionist's tone that this is serious.
'I'll be right there.'
Demi hangs up and looks at Luuk, who is already gathering his things.
'Everything okay?'
'No idea. There's a woman waiting—she wants to talk to me.'
Luuk frowns. 'And you have no idea who it is?'
'Nope. You head on home; I'll take care of this.'
'What about your date night?'
'I'll let Marco know I might be a little late. He's used to that by now.'
Luuk sits back down, saying he'll wait for her. Demi walks through the building and sees through the windows that it's raining—or maybe it's sleet; it's hard to tell. It's been threatening all day, with dark clouds hanging in the sky. It's dark outside now. There are a few Christmas trees set up in the building, intended to create a more pleasant work atmosphere. As the reception desk comes into view, she sees a woman's back. Demi can't see her face yet, but the woman's posture suggests a lack of confidence—her shoulders are slumped, and

she's visibly scratching at her face. She's wearing jeans and a long black coat with a hood. Her shoes are worn-out, as if she makes no effort to dress fashionably. It is as if the woman senses Demi watching her; she turns around and looks straight at her.
'Are you Demi Lachten?'
The fact that the woman knows her full name catches Demi by surprise. Demi steps toward her, offering her hand. With some hesitation, the woman takes it.
'Roos Stapper.'
Her grip is neither firm nor limp—rather, it feels uncertain.
'What can I do for you, Roos?'
'I want to report a sexual assault.'
It is immediately clear to Demi that being in the police station is difficult for Roos. She keeps scratching at her face—a nervous tic, perhaps one she isn't even aware of. She glances around warily, as if danger might be lurking very close by. Demi suggests moving to a quieter room so they can talk; Roos agrees and follows her. They enter an interview room, where Roos sits down hesitantly. She has medium-length brown hair that falls over her shoulders. She keeps looking toward the door, as if she'd prefer to bolt right then and there.
'Shall I leave the door open?' Demi asks.
'Please.'
'Would you like something to drink?'
'No, that's alright.'
Demi is certain that this woman didn't come to her by chance—though she can't quite put her finger on why. Demi sends a message to Marco to let him know she'll be late, and another to Luuk, explaining that she's about to speak with Roos and sharing her location. Luuk replies immediately, saying he'll come over to provide support. Demi sits down across from

Roos and leans back, maintaining a bit of distance; she knows that victims often feel uncomfortable when someone sits too close to them. ‘Roos, you’re safe here; nothing can happen to you. May I ask if you know who did this to you?’
Roos closes her eyes, visibly withdrawing, before managing to compose herself. The name emerges as a whisper.
‘Who did you say?’
This time, she says it more loudly: ‘Ties Verduyn.’

2.

Thursday, December 16

Amsterdam Vice Squad

Roos Stapper

It's cold in the small room where she intends to question me. I keep my coat on, yet I can still feel my body trembling—or perhaps it's fear. Ties's voice rushes through me again, and I try to shut it out. To him, I was his sweet, little scaredy-cat.
I don't want to think about him—not now. I want him to know that I'm taking back control. Judging by the look on her face, Demi is shocked.
'Ties Verduyn, the comedian?'
'Yes.'
My hand moves instinctively to my nose, where I pick at a scab. Noticing Demi's questioning glance, I quickly place my hands in my lap. It's as if my mother is watching me; her look of disapproval makes me feel insecure. Am I doing the right thing? Is it too late to turn back? And what if she doesn't believe me? I jump when a tall man suddenly appears in the doorway, and I slide my chair back. There's nowhere to go—he's blocking my only exit. I want to scream, to shout that it was all a mistake, but I remain frozen in place. The man looks from Demi to me, then steps into the interrogation room. Sweat beads on my forehead; I'm certain it's written all over my face—the fact that I'm terrified.

‘Take it easy, Roos. This is my colleague, Luuk. Luuk, this is Roos Stapper.’
As if sensing that getting too close would only be counterproductive, he doesn’t approach me to offer his hand. Why is he here? I don’t want to tell my story to a man. My experience with men hasn’t exactly been rosy. Luuk keeps his distance, standing on the other side of the small room and leaving the door open—as if he, too, senses that I’m on the verge of bolting. I dare to take a closer look at him, and what I see puts me a bit more at ease. He’s clearly the older of the two, with the first signs of gray in his hair and fine lines around his eyes. Have they been working together for a long time? I glance back at my hands and see that they’re still trembling.
‘Shall we start at the beginning, Roos?’ Demi asks.
It’s clear she’s trying to hold my attention, to keep my mind off the man in the room. He has his hands in his pockets, checks his watch every now and then, and makes a point of not looking directly at me. I look at Demi and nod.
‘It’s a long story.’
‘The fact that you’re willing to share your story at all is a huge achievement. Not everyone is capable of that—so you’ve already taken the first step.’
‘I was so hesitant. I still am. What if he hurts me again?’
Involuntarily, I’m reminded of his hands on my body—like pins that just keep pricking. I’ve been telling myself not to cry, but my body has other ideas. I hear Demi ask Luuk to get me a glass of water. I wipe away the warm tears and, out of the corner of my eye, watch him walk away.
‘Sorry,’ I whisper.
‘No—you never have to apologize. Roos, I don’t know exactly what happened, but I can see how deeply it affects you.’
I look at Demi and nod. ‘He has to be stopped. I—’

The man enters, handing the glass first to Demi, who then passes it to me. Not wanting to seem ungrateful, I take a small sip. I look at Luuk and thank him. He likely means well, yet my body remains torn—unsure whether I should flee or stay.
'How do you know Ties Verduyn?' Demi asks.
I see the confusion on Luuk's face.
'You mean the comedian?'
I nod and take another sip of the water. I feel it slide down my esophagus into my stomach, and I realize I've barely eaten anything today. The tension has made it impossible to keep anything down.
'Two years ago, I had a part-time job as a cleaner, and I worked there twice a week.'
I can see the question marks forming above their heads; their minds are clearly racing. I just need to say it—to get it over with and let them take it from here. I've rehearsed this so many times in my head, but saying it out loud is an entirely different thing. It feels like standing completely exposed. No one—except for me, Ties, and my mother—knows what happened, and it's time for him to feel the pain and fear I've endured.
'I am accusing Ties Verduyn of sexual assault, rape, and false imprisonment.'

3.

Friday, December 17

Café The Butterfly

Ties Verduyn

There's nothing like a refreshing beer and a plate of snacks to kick off the weekend. I'm clearly not the only one who thinks so; the café is already bustling. I'm waiting for my friend and manager, Waldemar Venen. I smile at a group of girls, pretending not to notice them taking photos of me. One of them reminds me of someone, though I'm fairly certain it isn't her—or is it? I take a sip of my beer and jump slightly when I feel a hand on my shoulder.

'Easy, man. It's just me. A guilty conscience, perhaps?'

Waldemar sits down opposite me—a pity, as it blocks my view of the girls. I shift my chair a bit to the left. Waldemar raises an eyebrow but says nothing, picking up the beer menu instead.

'Off to a good start, I see.'

'Yeah, I've got something to celebrate.'

Not many people know yet, but my new show is all but sold out. It's taking off like a rocket—helped, no doubt, by the fact that I hosted last year's New Year's Eve special, which earned me plenty of praise. Sure, there were a few sourpusses who complained it was too crude, or that it focused too much on politics and women. Fortunately, the vast majority of the feedback was positive, which allowed me to set up this new show—and the tickets have been flying off the shelves.

Waldemar and I still have a few final details to iron out; in a few weeks, a new tour across the Netherlands begins. I did notice that my popularity on social media shot up immediately, and I began receiving more and more invitations to appear on various TV shows. This only fueled the demand for tickets, so I know I'm set for the next few years.

As a result, my girlfriend, Ruby, and my little daughter, Zoë, can have everything their hearts desire. My heart swells—it practically bursts—when I think of her tiny hands and feet back when she was just born. It was a difficult labor for Ruby, ending in a C-section, but I still find her absolutely beautiful. She brought a miracle into this world, and Zoë is already on the verge of walking, even though she's only ten months old. Is that fast? I have no idea what the average is. What I do know is that I can't—and don't want to—live without the two of them. Sure, the attention from beautiful women is a nice perk and incredibly flattering, but I don't need anyone else.

I feel my phone vibrate, see that it's Ruby, and text her to say I'm in a meeting. She ignores that and calls again. Has something happened to Zoë? She wouldn't call me otherwise. I tell Waldemar I need to take this call and head toward the restroom. The smell of urine makes me feel nauseous, but I try to ignore it and answer the phone.

'Where are you?'

I can hear the panic in her voice. Something is very wrong—I can tell immediately.

'In a meeting with Waldemar,' I say, leaning against the sink. 'Is something wrong with Zoë?'

'No—with you.'

I frown. What kind of nonsense is this? Is she joking? 'Ruby, there's nothing wrong with me, I promise.'

'There are police on the doorstep.'

The panic is no longer just audible; I can feel it surging through my entire body. Is someone dead? If it's my mother, I need to get to her right away. I know she hasn't been doing well lately, but I had no idea things would take such a turn, so quickly.
'They want to talk to you about something.'
I start to get angry. Why is she being so vague? Why won't she just say what's going on? Someone walks into the restrooms, sees me standing there, and hesitates—unsure whether to use the urinal while I'm present.
'Jesus, Ruby. Just tell me.'
'It's about Roos.'
For a split second, I don't know what to say. I know exactly who Roos is—but why are the police involved?
The ground falls away beneath me when my girlfriend says the next words: 'She's accusing you of sexual assault, Ties.'

4.

Saturday, December 18

The Stapper family home

Roos Stapper

He knows. He knows I went to the police. As I stand in the shower, scrubbing my skin for the fourth time, I can still feel him. Will I ever be rid of this sensation? I highly doubt it. It feels as though the nightmare just keeps getting worse. I try to focus on the music filling the bathroom and sink to the floor, my wet hair clinging to my face. Pink's voice fills the space—it's meant to help me think about something else, but it doesn't work.

My mind drifts back to when we first met—to the smile in Ties' eyes, that unmistakable twinkle—on a Friday afternoon as I stood on his doorstep. Of course, I knew who he was; I'd seen him perform on television before. I just hadn't realized he lived so close by, here in Amsterdam, in a large house. The company I was working for had sent me, and I felt a thrill at the prospect of knocking on the door of a famous Dutch celebrity. On the other hand, I saw it simply as a job—a way to earn some extra cash, as I was keen to travel. America had been on my bucket list for a long time.

I told Ties about this—about how I was saving up—when he insisted I join him for a cup of tea during my cleaning shift. He pulled his chair a little closer and placed his hand on my arm. At the time, I sensed no danger; I was too caught up in my own

enthusiastic storytelling. He came across as a nice guy—calm and sociable. He told me I could ask him for anything—if I needed something, or if an item had run out or gone missing.
'I'd be happy to take you along sometime.'
Instinctively, I pulled back, took a sip of my tea, and shook my head vigorously.
'To America? No, I couldn't possibly accept that.'
'Oh, come on! You really have to see it. New York is honestly the coolest place on earth. I've been five times already, and the sixth time, I'm taking you with me.'
In his eyes, I could see that he truly believed I would go with him to a foreign country—and he was a stranger to me, too, even though I felt comfortable in his presence.
I tucked my hair behind my ear, finished my tea, and stood up. Offering a kind, polite smile, I picked up my cup and carried it to the kitchen. Ties also got up and headed back to his study, leaving me to vacuum and mop the living room. When I finished, I noticed a fifty-euro note lying on the dining table, accompanied by a short note. Not realizing it was meant for me, I left it where it was. The next time I came over to clean, Ties explained that the extra money was for me—to help with a trip to America. I tried to refuse, but he insisted. Ties was at least ten or fifteen years older than me and quite handsome; it was easy to see why women might fall at his feet. I didn't feel that way, though—I was only there to work.
Ties was always cracking jokes, the atmosphere was pleasant, and he asked if I'd help him host a party, offering me a chance to earn a little extra.

Memories can drive you crazy; they play tricks on you. What actually happened, and what didn't? I sink onto my bed, which creaks under my weight, and look around as I let the towel

slide from my body. It isn't cold in my bedroom, yet I feel shivers running all over me. Reaching toward my nightstand, I pull open a drawer and take out a notebook. I've likely read it hundreds of times; as I begin to flip through the pages, the realization hits me—there's no turning back. My story is going to be heard, and it will be judged by everyone. It terrifies me. I don't know what will happen—I can't see into the future—but I do know that what lies ahead is incredibly uncertain and frightening. I know I have people in my corner, like my mother and Demi Lachten. I haven't told Demi everything yet—I just couldn't—but I know I'll have to, for the sake of the official report. I am certain that I will go through with it, that I will have to hand over the notebook I'm holding, and that my story will be read by many. I don't like casting people in a bad light—that's just not who I am, and it never has been—but it's time for the Netherlands to find out who the real Ties Verduyn is.

My skin feels fragile and stings as I pull on a simple black shirt. I'm neither short nor tall; I'm just average. Just as I finish getting dressed, I hear my mother coming up the stairs. By now, she knows that I often shower twice a day and use a fresh towel each time, which means extra loads of laundry frequently need to be done. I try to help her with the housework, but often I can't—I simply don't have the energy. If I'm lucky, I manage to get two or three hours of sleep a night. Often, I lie on the sofa like a dead little bird, staring at the television, and drift into a restless sleep. I hear the washing machine running, and I startle awake when I hear the ringtone of my phone. I see the phone number—it's Demi. My heart rate spikes. I can feel that she isn't calling for no reason. I answer, but immediately regret it. I don't want to hear any news, even though I know it's inevitable.

‘Hi Roos, it’s Demi. Am I disturbing you?’
I know she wants to help me—that it’s her job to put me at ease.
‘No,’ I stammer.
‘I’d like to talk to you about your statement. Would it be possible for you to come in on Monday morning at ten o’clock?’
‘Yes, that’s fine.’
If I want Ties to be stopped, I have to do this. The conversation will be recorded; they’ll want every detail, and I’ll have to provide evidence if I want him to be punished. I start to feel unclean again; I scratch at my face and try to hold back the tears. I don’t want to tell them about the terrible pain when he forced himself upon me—about how I couldn’t stop him. I lay my head on my pillow and close my eyes.
Ties’s voice keeps me awake and on guard.

5.

Saturday, December 18

Sex Crimes Unit Meeting Room

Luuk Min

Luuk rests his hand on the file containing the report filed by Roos Stapper. Roos's account is incomplete, yet it leaves him with an uneasy feeling—a sensation he cannot quite put into words. He could still picture the way the victim cringed whenever he so much as glanced in her direction. She was clearly traumatized—he was certain of that—but he needed the full picture.

He knows for a fact that this will not be an easy case. So far, only Demi has spoken with her; he has merely observed from a safe distance. But he knows the time will come when he, too, will have to talk to Roos.

He was supposed to be home by now, with his wife and two children, but instead, they have to prepare for the formal statement from Roos.

Demi sets down two cups of coffee and sits beside him, offering a wry smile.

'What are you thinking about?' she asks.

She picks up the file and opens it, taking a sip of her coffee.

'I want to speak with Roos—alone.'

A frown crosses her face. 'I'm not sure that's wise. You saw how she reacted.'

‘Exactly for that reason. Ties denies all the allegations. What’s true, and what isn’t?’

He thinks back to the moment they stood on the doorstep of Ties’s home—to the expression on his girlfriend’s face, as she realized the gravity of the situation. They were invited inside to wait for Ties. The panic in her eyes was unmistakable, and Luuk could well imagine what must have been going through her mind: Ties—a rapist? No, that can’t be true. My dear boyfriend wouldn’t do something like that; he’s good to us, takes care of our family—he simply couldn’t be a monster. What most people don’t realize is that, nine times out of ten, an abuser is someone the victim knows. While there are, of course, perpetrators who target random strangers, the statistics speak for themselves. Ties and Roos knew each other, and it’s clear from looking at Roos that something terrible has happened to her. Was Ties Verduyn truly responsible? They would need to speak with him, as well as his family and friends. The investigation would not be easy; without concrete evidence, the case would be dismissed immediately. That was something Luuk couldn’t allow—whoever had hurt Roos, it was vital that the right person be held accountable.

Victims of abuse may remain silent for years, held back by fear, shame, or guilt. Very few go to the police immediately following an assault. Luuk recalled a case they had once handled: a serial rapist who had been active in the city for years, operating unchecked until they finally picked up his trail. He would never forget the phone call that changed his life forever—the moment he was told that his niece, Anna, had been raped by an unknown assailant. The final victim, Alexandra Braza, was one of the bravest people he had ever encountered, despite the trauma she endured. She was determined to find out who had broken into her apartment in