

Blackmail

No one made the slightest sound. Each one harbored their thoughts to themselves because of the immense terror that gnawed at them inside. The knowing glances that the four college classmates shared fed the agony that gripped that cabin on the shores of the lake, hidden among the larch trees.

“No one is going to say anything?” Javier asked nervously, unable to avoid biting his lower lip.

“This cannot be happening. I thought this was in the past. Two years have passed.” Clemente grabbed his straight hair as he walked in circles.

“Can you calm down a bit?” Sergio exclaimed, with a voice much more relaxed than the rest. “We are going to solve it.” He leaned back in the green leather chair, raising his feet.

“How can you be so calm? Do you realize that someone knows what we did?” Javier asked desperately. “Or is there only room in your head for alcohol and women?”

“Look, I suggest you keep your mouth shut.”

“Stop arguing and let's fix this, please,” added Pedro, the wise man of the group.

Pedro went over to his backpack and took out a piece of paper, which he laid on the table. Each one looked at the writing, trying to read what was inside.

"I know what they did and they are going to pay for it," Clemente read aloud.

"That's completely impossible," Javier exclaimed, shaking his head quickly. “No one, absolutely no one, was in the cabin that day. It was just us. It is impossible that someone saw us.”

“Unless someone has broken the pact and opened their mouth,” Sergio said, as he took a sip of his drink.

“Are we going to distrust each other now?” Clemente asked, with an ironic tone.

“Because, if that’s so, everything goes to hell.”

“None of us benefit if the truth comes out, so let’s stop implying stupid theories.”

Pedro picked up Sergio's glass and threw it into the kitchen sink “Has anyone else received any of these threats?”

Silence grants the points, as the saying goes, since no one answered the question immediately, but somehow or another, they expected to see who was going to be the brave one to raise their voices and admit what fate was in store for them.

"Two days ago, I received a letter addressed to me, without a sender," said Clemente, as if he did not want to acknowledge it to them. “When I opened it, there was a photo... of Andrés” He stopped and bit his nails. “And a note that said *‘the truth will be known very soon.’*”

Tension was in the air, trapped within those wooden walls, desperately searching for a way to escape.

“Any idea who it might be?” Sergio asked angrily.

“Maybe Andrés's ex-girlfriend?” Javier suggested.

“Martina? There’s no way. She never doubted what happened,” he answered, sure of himself.

“Anyone who had known Andrés well could have doubted,” Pedro answered Clemente with a serious face. “But we can't rule out anything.”

Suddenly, Sergio picked up his phone and read a text message from an unknown number, "*Neither power nor money will save you from jail, friend of the year.*" After he pronounced the last sentence, Clemente straightened up and began to walk from one side to the other, without stopping. Meanwhile, Javier hid his face in his hands, sinking into

despair. Pedro slowly approached Sergio's cell phone to confirm if the user who had sent the anonymous message could be called, but there was no response.

The four friends began to slowly sink into the memories that their minds harbored from that night. An innocent party that promised to be fun and friendly ended up becoming the nightmare that would haunt them forever.

"We should have told the truth at first," Javier said suddenly, his forehead covered in sweat.

"Don't you think it's too late for regrets? And this should have already been prescribed; it has been a long time," argued Sergio, who stood out for being the most relaxed of the four, the one who constantly came up with ideas to do the weekend and who never lasted more than a week with the same girlfriend.

"At least five years are needed for a simple crime to prescribe and as everyone knows... ours was not a simple crime" explained Pedro, thanks to his knowledge as a second-year law student.

"Clemente, why don't you talk to your father? Let him hire a private detective and find out who is doing this to us," Javier asked, on the verge of a mental breakdown.

Clemente's father was the prime minister of the current government. A powerful man with many contacts, but who also carried a public image that he had to take care of at all costs.

"No! No way I will ask him for help," he answered. "My father would kill me if he found out that someone else knew about this. He has helped us enough."

"And what if they are just threats? Maybe that person has no proof at all and is trying to drive us crazy to make a mistake."

"Pedro..." Javier answered fearfully "I think he may have proof."

Javier slid his cell phone over the table, so that everyone could see what he just blurted out, while the fingers of his left hand went directly to his mouth as a self-reflection. The device showed images of Javier together with a man in a black jacket, looking haggard, possibly due to nicotine addiction. Both were talking in the first photographs, until Javier handed him a brown package in a suspicious way.

“You are an idiot!” Clemente shouted angrily after he looked at the screen.

“It was the only time I made a transaction in a public space; I swear.” He took a couple of steps, back with his hands outstretched in defense.

“Javier ... for these things, we had agreed that it had to be inside the bar, not at the exit, where the whole city can watch you!” Clemente pushed him hard, causing him to fall to the ground.

"Enough," said Sergio, pushing Clemente aside, while Pedro picked up Javier, who was shaking in fear.

“Can you think for a moment with a cool head? There is not enough evidence to incriminate us” explained Pedro serenely, but with a certain concern.

"But they do check the drug," said Clemente.

The atmosphere became even more tense than before. The glances did not cease; each tried to find a haven of peace in the eyes of the others, but none were successful. They knew that the situation was turning negative and that was something that no one could hide. The regrets were not long in coming, nor were the reproaches, blaming each other for the mistakes of the past.

The four inseparable friends from school, those who seemed to be brothers despite not sharing the same blood, whose families shared lunches and celebrations together, now looked at each other with distrust and fell down in the dark.

"I thought that when we entered the university, we would be able to forget about all this," Sergio said, overwhelmed, showing a mask that had not been discovered before.

"I always knew that I would never be able to forget about that; how is it that you can?" Pedro asked with an anguished face, that denoted a deep sadness "He was our friend..."

"It wasn't our fault," Sergio replied quickly, getting up from his seat, gesturing authoritatively. "We were not responsible for what happened to Andrés."

"At least we could have told the truth," Javier responded suddenly, with a fearful tone of voice.

"Right now, you would be in jail if we had told the truth." Sergio placed his face intimidatingly close to him "We had a life ahead of us, dreams and aspirations, while Andrés did not. Sorry for saying it like that, but we did what we had to do, even if you don't want to accept it."

"It is true. My father's career would have been destroyed in a second. No university would have accepted us. We have to be realistic," said Clemente.

"Have you even thought, for a second, about his family? They believe that their son committed suicide," Pedro responded furiously, due to the great closeness that he had with Andrés. They were both the most responsible of the five.

Andrés came from a middle-class family. However, thanks to a soccer scholarship, which Pedro himself had helped him get when they met playing a friendly match, he was able to study at the same school as them.

"I'm sorry for his parents, but if they find out what really happened, it won't give them much peace either," Sergio said, after a long pause.

"At least they would know," Pedro argued.

“Okay!” Clemente yelled. “If that is what you want, let's go to the police station and admit everything. Let's admit that our friend, Andrés López, never committed suicide and that we were the ones who took care of making it seem so.” His face hardened. “But forget about your current lives because the only thing you will see for the next long years will be the iron bars in your cells ... or perhaps, we will end up dead.”

Clemente's words perpetuated in a profound and dominating way, causing each one to begin to go back to the scene where it all happened; there on the same floor of logs that they were stepping on. Two years ago, Clemente's father had granted him the lake house after much begging and many tantrums, as well as a little help from his mother, because she was the golden child in her eyes. It was supposed to be a weekend of friends there to sunbathe, swim in the pool, and drink like there was no tomorrow. However, the plans did not go as expected.

After a long day riding the jet skis and enjoying nature, the vices began to appear as soon as the moon was rising. Alcohol bottles flooded the kitchen, and glasses only lasted seconds with liquid in them, but things would soon reach another level. Suddenly, Sergio took, out of his suitcase, a bag full of pills of different colors, which he showed them to the others with great joy.

“The fun is here!” He showed them off, with a smile from ear to ear.

“You are a genius.” Javier congratulated him, excited.

“But... Sergio, why did you bring them?” Pedro rolled his eyes “They are supposed to be sold, not consumed.”

“It's true,” Andrés said, interfering. “We made a promise and we should keep it. This is serious; we have to be cautious.”

"Andrés." Clemente approached him and wrapped his right arm around him. "The idea of selling was so that we wouldn't have to depend on our parents, giving us our luxuries and so you could pay for college, but... you can't sell without trying first, right?" He smiled mischievously. "There are no parents; it's just the five of us, and it's our last summer before going to college. So, open your mouth and enjoy it." He took a tablet and placed it on his tongue, without Andrés being able to refuse.

All the members did the same, unconsciously making what would be one of the worst mistakes of their lives. After a long and happy revelry, in which laughter and fun abounded for long hours, the sun appeared the next day, to bring the consequences of their actions. Little by little, they woke up, accompanied by terrible headaches and extreme thirst.

"I don't think I've ever had a hangover like that," Sergio complained, settling on the sofa.

"Imagine the one that Andrés is going to have," Javier mocked. "He had never tried anything before."

"He hasn't woken up yet. I think he's going to sleep all morning," said Clemente.

"We better wake him up so he can sleep in one of the beds. He is going to break his back lying on the floor," suggested Pedro, approaching his friend, who was face down on the red carpet in the main room, although when he tried to lift him, something caught his attention. Andrés did not react to the calls of his name, or Pedro's movements. "Hey, Andrés. Help me a little, you're not very light."

"Just let him sleep on the floor. He needs to rest," Sergio added, with his usual calm.

"He doesn't wake up," replied Pedro, concerned, "Andrés! Do you hear me? Please, say something!"

"Calm down, man," Clemente exclaimed. "This is how it is when one consumes for the first time."

Pedro patted him on the cheeks to wake him up, but Andres's eyes remained closed. Suddenly, the most feared thought crossed Pedro's brain, causing his heart to race from one moment to the next, and his mouth to go dry. The tips of his index and middle fingers were placed at the level of Andres's neck, on the Adam's apple very carefully, so that Pedro could feel his pulse, but unfortunately, he could not find it.

"He doesn't have a pulse ..." he stammered, scared. "I can't feel it!" cried Pedro, anguished, trying to give him cardiopulmonary resuscitation with his hands.

"What are you talking about?" Clemente urged, approaching him so that he can do it himself. "I can't feel it, either..." he whispered, his face pale.

"No, no. Stop saying stupid things. He's just sleeping," Javier interrupted, with a nervous laugh.

"Can you understand that he doesn't breathe?! Call an ambulance! How much did he consume last night?" Pedro asked, distressed, while he kept trying to revive him.

"The same as us," answered Sergio, scared, without being able to divert his gaze from Andrés's face "Maybe a few more..."

"I told you it was a bad idea that we gave him so many!" Clemente was enraged.

The discussions increased the deep fear they felt at that moment, making a monster grow that consumed them inside and that would divert them from the right path. Pedro maintained the compressions without giving up for long minutes, until Javier stopped him, holding him in his arms to face reality.

Silence stole the leadership of the story, becoming the defense weapon of each one. Neither had the strength or courage to articulate a word. Their minds sailed through dark seas, where the light was dimming more and more; panic and despair flourished.

"You have to call the police," said Pedro, breaking the secrecy. He got up from the floor and walked over to the counter to take his cell phone.

"Wait." Clemente unexpectedly stood in front of him. "We cannot do that..."

"What do you mean? We have to call them for sure" Pedro brushed him off uneasily, wiping away the tear that fell on his cheekbone.

"And what are you going to tell them? 'Hey, our best friend just died of an overdose while we were sleeping?' Or, better yet, tell them that the drug that caused the overdose is the same drug we trafficked." Clemente looks at him defiantly.

The last sentence exploded like a bomb in everyone's reasoning, showing a possible scenario they hadn't considered before.

"Clemente is right," Sergio supported him suddenly. "If we tell the truth, we have a lot to lose."

"Are you serious?" Pedro couldn't believe what he was hearing "The person lying there is Andrés...our best friend."

"And you don't know how much it hurts me that this happened." Sergio's voice trembled. "But, at this moment, we have to watch over us." He paused. "Either we end up in jail for drug trafficking, or our boss kills us before we can even get there."

"Sergio...please. Wake up. Listen to what you are saying. Javier?" Pedro looked at him; he was sitting in a corner, with his legs and arms against his chest. "Can you help me?"

"I... I..." he stammered, scared "I think they are right. The boss would never forgive us for a scandal like this, especially if he relates it to his business."

"My father's political career would be over," added Clemente. "And, well, not to mention ours... if we didn't end up in prison or dead, no university would want four drug dealers with a dead friend."

Pedro only observed them, without commenting, seeing how the people whom he considered his family became complete strangers.

"I really can't believe it," Pedro shook his head in denial. "What do you intend to do?"

The thoughts of the three were immediately synchronized, generating an almost invincible complicity.

"We will make it appear as a suicide." Clemente threw his shoulders back, as if to give conviction to his words "And we will take this secret to the grave."

The plan was carried out with three votes to one. Pedro under the loneliness and nostalgia, had no choice but to give in and stick to the idea, despite the fact that he would transform into the shadow that would haunt him like a conviction.

The two leaders entrusted Javier to be in charge of writing a farewell note, due to his vast experience falsifying signatures and letters to excuse himself from attending classes, or to request money from the bank without the authorization of his parents. On the other hand, Sergio transferred part of the drugs that he had brought to the cabin to Andrés' suitcase, while the rest were buried in the backyard of the cabin. Clemente devised the alibi that they were going to hand over to the police after they were notified, making them believe that Andrés had been going through a severe depression that could be linked to the

inability to pay for higher education, which eventually would have led him to take the drastic decision to ingest a sufficient quantity of amphetamines to suppress his pain.

“Let's stop having regrets; the sooner we do that, the better it will be.” Clemente interrupted the regression suddenly, causing everyone to abandon their hidden memories. “What’s done is done. You don't have to keep stirring up the past. Now, you have to concentrate on finding the extortionist.”

After that impromptu meeting, the threats did not stop, despite his great attempts to halt them. It got to the point that, a few months later, the four friends found themselves on the edge of the abyss, when they unexpectedly received a summons to court for the case of Andrés López. They thought that the day would never come when they would have to get to that point, where they would have to wear their best suits and ties, escorted by the best lawyers in the country, in order to hide and lie once more about the trip to the lake house.

The trial began at the assigned time, punctual as the judge himself, who appeared with a rather thick folder under his arm. Andres's family was sitting in the back seats, with an aura of concern that could be seen from afar and broken hearts that had yet to heal.

“Please, take a seat,” ordered the magistrate, addressing the entire audience in the room. “We begin the oral trial in the case of Andrés López. The first witness, Clemente Echeverría, is called to the stand.”

Everyone's gazes quickly fell on Clemente, causing his chest to constrict and his breath to hit. He got up and buttoned his jacket while trying to maintain his composure, staring in awe at that dais, where the power of the law would fall on his shoulders.

“Do you solemnly swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?” An officer asked him.

“I swear,” he answered seriously.

“Is it true that you were present on July 11, 2018, along with Javier La Torre, Sergio Campos and Pedro Larraín, when Andrés López committed suicide?” asked the prosecutor in the case.

"Unfortunately, yes." His pulse quickened, but it wasn't reflected on his face.

“Do you confirm that it was a suicide?”

The question made Clemente extremely uncomfortable, as he did not expect to receive it. Nonetheless, he focused his concentration on the questions and answers he had practiced with his attorneys prior to the trial and adhered to them.

"Yes, I confirm it," Clemente answered, convinced, without moving the slightest muscle in his body.

“So, how would you explain this video?” The prosecutor frowned.

The prosecutor took a remote control that he had on his table and turned on a screen, on which he could see the group of friends at the lake house a couple of months ago. The video showed the exact moment where Clemente admitted that, together with his three companions, he had made Andrés' death look like a suicide.

“Mr. Echeverría? I remind you that you are under oath,” pressed the prosecutor.

Clemente was paralyzed. His skin prickled, and his body temperature soared through the roof. He felt that the air had become stagnant in his lungs, and his mind had gone unusually blank. The rest of the members could not hide their surprise when they saw the recording. Everyone--except one, Pedro, who dropped his head back, looking at the sky relieved, feeling that he could breathe for the first time after two long years.